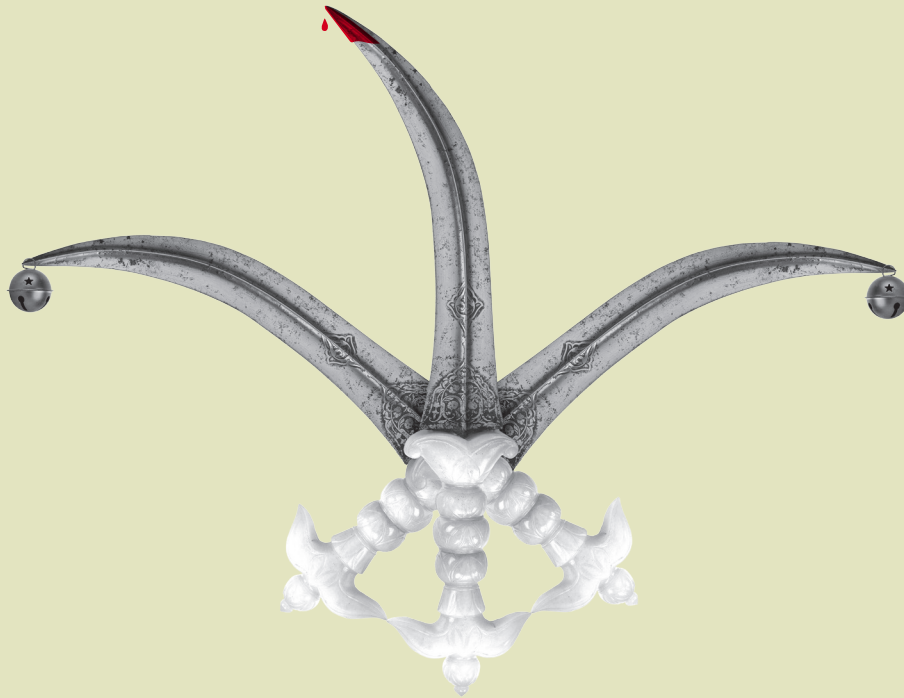




*Verdi's*

# RIG LETTO



MARCH 3, 7, 9, 11, 2018

In-Depth Guide by Stu Lewis

**LYRIC OPERA**  
KANSAS CITY



## Introduction

“You never saw the frowns on the faces of the jugglers and clowns/When they all did their tricks for you” -- thus wrote the American troubadour Bob Dylan, and while his words were intended in another context, they might well have applied to the operatic stage prior to the 1850's. For while servants and members of the economic lower class have played a prominent role in opera since its beginnings, the notion that such people could have emotional lives worthy of tragic opera was a relatively radical idea when Verdi and Francesco Maria Piave, his librettist, sat down to write *Rigoletto*. Mozart has sometimes been praised for his democratic ideas, but while all three of his collaborations with Lorenzo Da Ponte feature servants and/or peasants, the music they sing is always lighter than that assigned to the more socially advantaged characters. The title of *The Marriage of Figaro* may include the name of a servant, but at the end our emotions are focused on the reconciliation of the Count and Countess.

Although *Rigoletto* is attached to the court of an obscure Italian duchy, his role as court jester classifies him as a servant (albeit one who is sufficiently well paid to have his own servant at home). Yet Verdi referred to Triboulet, the character in the original dramatic version, as a “creation worthy of Shakespeare,” and he endows him with such a deep sense of humanity that despite his flaws audiences consistently find him to be one of the great tragic heroes of the operatic stage. Seattle Opera General Director Speight Jenkins (see bibliography) has referred to *Rigoletto* as “basically evil” and self-deceptive, a character whom we are deceived into pitying because of the power of the music and the acting skills of the numerous baritones who have portrayed him on the

operatic stage. However, it is hard to believe that both audiences and singers could be so consistently deceived. It would be more accurate to say that Verdi saw something in the character that he was able to embody so skillfully in the music that we are forced to feel the emotions that Verdi wanted us to experience.

Various theatre critics have remarked that the image of the remorseful villain, so central to classical tragedy (such as Shakespeare's *Macbeth*), is at odds with reality, and that in real life murderers generally show remorse only when they are caught. The power of a play such as *Macbeth* is that the author shows us how we would feel if we did what Macbeth did. The same could be said of *Rigoletto*, who represents for us the inner conflicts of a man who must compromise his integrity at work in order to keep alive the one true thing in his life, his single-parent household (Certainly many corporate executives can sympathize with his plight).

Nevertheless, *Rigoletto* is one of the darkest tragedies in the repertoire, a story without heroes. As such, it strikes us as surprisingly modern, accustomed as we are to anti-heroes and nihilistic endings. It is the sort of story David Mamet would be proud to write.

There is a love interest in *Rigoletto*, but it is not a romance. It is rather the obsessive love of a father for his daughter. The father-daughter relationship is central to a number of Verdi operas in addition to this one: *Aida* and *Simon Boccanegra*, to name a couple. In *La Traviata* Giorgio Germont is willing to sacrifice his son's happiness for that of his daughter, and in a tender duet with Violetta he effectively "adopts" her as a surrogate daughter. Was this focus on father-

daughter relationships based on a sense of loss at the death of Verdi's own children? Might one or more of the abandoned out-of-wedlock children of his lover, Giuseppina Strepponi, have been his? We can only speculate.

At the time that he composed *Rigoletto* and for many years thereafter, Verdi had contemplated an opera based on Shakespeare's *King Lear*, and opera fans have always wondered with regret what the result might have been. As various critics have pointed out, *Rigoletto* shares many characteristics with *King Lear*: the relationship of a ruler with a jester, a court in a state of degeneration, a man whose foolish and irrational actions lead to the death of the one good thing in his life – the love of a faithful daughter. Perhaps the reason that Verdi never set *King Lear* to music was that he looked back on *Rigoletto*, a tragedy centering on a flawed man “more sinned against than sinning,” and realized he had already done so.

### **The Characters**

The Duke of Mantua, tenor: An amoral, corrupt, absolute ruler with the charisma often associated with Italian tenors; women find him attractive, and vice versa.

Rigoletto (Ree-go-LET-toe) baritone: The court jester, a hunchback, who has allowed himself to be corrupted by the perverted values of the court.

Count Ceprano (Cheh-PRAH-no) bass: a nobleman

Countess Ceprano, mezzo-soprano: Ceprano's wife, one of the Duke's sexual conquests

Count Monterone (Mahn-te-ROWN-eh) baritone: A nobleman, whose daughter has been seduced and abandoned by the Duke.

Sparafucile (spa-rah-foo-CHEEL-eh) bass: A freelance hit man

Borsa (BORE-sa) tenor: A courtier

Marullo (Ma-ROOL-low) baritone: A courtier

Gilda (JEEL-dah) soprano: Rigoletto's daughter, an impressionable teenager who has led a sheltered life

Giovanna (Joh-VAHN-nah) mezzo-soprano: Hired to look after Gilda

Maddalena (Mahd-dah-LEY-nah) mezzo-soprano: Sparafucile's sister and partner in crime; quite likely a prostitute as well

## **The Story**

### **Act 1, scene 1**

Before the curtain opens we hear a somber horn-dominated motif in the orchestra. Though brief, this prelude serves an important function for the narrative. The first scene consists of a joyous party, yet by means of this motif Verdi has the orchestra tell us not to be fooled. The gaiety is merely a facade covering the sinister activities of the court, and the play is not a comedy of manners but a tragedy. The motif which dominates these opening bars will later be associated with the "curse."

The curtain opens on a party already in progress at the Duke's palace. An on-stage band plays a tinny melody that contrasts sharply with the opera's rich orchestration. The Duke and his courtier Borsa are already in mid-conversation about a mysterious young woman the Duke had his eye on. (We will later learn that the young woman is Gilda, Rigoletto's daughter). Yet his concern of her does not keep him from noticing the beauty of Count Ceprano's wife. Borsa suggests that the Duke could be treading on dangerous ground, but the Duke tells him he has no qualms in such matters. The Duke then sings a brief, lively aria "Questo o quella" ("This one or that one"), in which he explains his philosophy of love: every woman has unique charms and he cannot therefore limit himself to one. Furthermore, love can exist only where there is freedom. This idea is, of course, not uncommon. Don Giovanni, in the Mozart-Da Ponte opera, expressed a similar view. But given the one-sidedness of the "liberty" the Duke espouses, his expressions come across as cynical, not liberating.

The Duke begins to flirt openly with the countess, and Rigoletto takes advantage of the opportunity to ridicule the unfortunate husband (Knowing which side his bread is buttered on, he always takes the Duke's side against the other members of the court, a trait which has made him quite unpopular). Out of Rigoletto's earshot, Marullo arrives and announces that Rigoletto has a mistress. Meanwhile, Rigoletto makes several suggestions to the Duke as to how he should get rid of Ceprano, to the point where even the Duke feels he has gone too far. Ceprano, knowing that many others in the court have borne the jester's insults, invites them to get revenge the next day.

Suddenly, the mood changes. Monterone, whose daughter is one of the Duke's many sexual conquests, enters to protest the way she has been treated. In a plot point that got somewhat lost in the transition from stage play to opera, Monterone had been sentenced to death for plotting against the duke but was spared because of the Duke's lust for the daughter (Rigoletto makes a veiled reference to this in this scene, but it is not fully explained).

Monterone has been called the "moral center" of the opera; however, he is not nearly so noble in the original drama. His speech represents a form of "aria" that Verdi pioneered and developed to perfection: it is more declamation than melody, yet it has tremendous power that no spoken dialogue could ever convey. Angered even more by Rigoletto's insults, Monterone curses both him and the Duke. While the Duke and the others are merely offended, Rigoletto is horrified by the curse as the curtain falls.

## **Scene 2**

The scene shifts to a street outside of Rigoletto's house, as Rigoletto is walking home. He is still shaken from the curse, and he will become more obsessed by it as the story continues. This theme is so central to the opera that Verdi's original working title was *La Maledizione* (The Curse). In a strangely surreal confrontation, reinforced by an almost romantic melody in the string section, he is approached by Sparafucile, an assassin-for-hire who is advertising his services. As Rigoletto tells him to go, repeating the word "va" ("go") five times, Sparafucile repeats his name twice to be sure Rigoletto won't forget.

Left alone on stage, Rigoletto sings the remarkable “Pari siamo” (“We are alike”), a number which author Julian Budden (see bibliography) has called a “recitative which has all the formal strength of an aria.” Note how Rigoletto seamlessly alternates between a sort of recitative (sung speech) and melody; note also the interruption in the flow as he pauses again to reflect on the curse. Rigoletto compares himself to Sparafucile, realizing that his tongue is as dangerous as the latter's knife. He also expresses his frustration at being a jester, an occupation thrust upon him because of his physical deformity. As he reaches his door, however, he is reminded of the one good thing in his life – his daughter, Gilda.

In one of the many sudden mood shifts in this opera, the music becomes light and joyful as Gilda comes out of the house to greet her father. Rigoletto has made sure that she leads a sheltered life under the careful guard of the maid Giovanna. He has been so secretive that Gilda does not even know his name. They sing a tender duet, in which Rigoletto tells her again about her mother, who died when Gilda was too young to remember her (the cause of death is never mentioned). Yet even in this tender moment, Rigoletto is so obsessed with keeping her sheltered that he constantly breaks the mood to interrogate both her and Giovanna. Finally, he sings a tender song to Giovanna, imploring her to protect his precious “flower,” and Gilda chimes in with her appreciation of his concern.

As soon as Rigoletto leaves, however, the Duke, in disguise, comes on the scene having secretly bribed Giovanna to allow him to enter the courtyard. In any event, Gilda has already noticed the duke and become attracted to him, and she has no objection to his entering the courtyard contrary to



her father's instructions. Having overheard Gilda telling Giovanna that she would prefer a poor lover to a rich one, he introduces himself as the poor student Gualtier Malde. The Duke expresses his feelings in a brief aria "E il sol dell'anima" ("It is the Light of my Soul"), which dissolves into a duet, concluding with a sprightly farewell scene with several "addio's," as they keep saying goodbye though neither wants to leave.

Finally, the Duke takes his leave, and Gilda is left alone to sing "Caro nome" ("Dear name"), one of Verdi's best-known soprano arias. While some object to this aria as a mere showpiece for a singer's coloratura skills (elaborate vocal acrobatics), one which brings the action to a halt, Verdi actually blends it skillfully into the drama. First, we need to notice the sense of irony. The aria is a meditation on the loved one's name, similar to "Maria" in *West Side Story*, to cite a familiar example; yet the name she is singing about is not her beloved's real name, which serves to underscore her naiveté. Moreover, the aria concludes on an ominous note, as we hear the courtiers in the background gathering to kidnap her.

There follows a scene that would be comical if the consequences were not so dire. The courtiers have decided to get their revenge not only by kidnapping the woman they believe to be Rigoletto's mistress but also to make Rigoletto himself an unwitting partner to the abduction by blindfolding him and convincing him he is actually in front of the house of his neighbor, Ceprano. To the bouncy tune "Zitti, zitti" ("Quickly, Quickly") they take Gilda away. The orchestra creates an almost unbearable sense of tension, as a single phrase is repeated over and over, each series of notes higher pitched than the last, as Rigoletto removes his blindfold and realizes the

deception. In despair, he cries out “La maledizione” as the curtain falls.

## **Act II**

As the curtain rises, the Duke is alone in his palace, longing for Gilda, aware of her capture but unaware that the kidnappers had intended to bring her to him. He sings a plaintive aria consisting of a lengthy introduction and the melodious “Parmi veder le lagrime” (“I seem to see the tears”), imagining that when she was being kidnapped she would have called to him for help. While not as well known as “La donna è mobile,” this aria represents Italian tenor singing at its best – a broad, expansive melody giving the singer ample opportunity to call attention to himself and his suffering.

One of the more controversial aspects of this opera is how the Duke is to be portrayed. Is he simply a cynical libertine taking advantage of his charisma and power over women, or is he a true romantic? Since soliloquies are intended to show us a character’s true emotions, this scene argues against the former interpretation. Perhaps each woman he encounters strikes him as being his one true love, and the fact that he apparently cannot have her only heightens his yearning. Like an immature child, he believes that the next amour is the one that will bring him happiness, even as he realizes that he will never make a lifetime commitment.

The Duke’s anguish, however, is short-lived. The courtiers rush in and explain that they have brought Gilda to the palace. In what is in effect a continuation of the earlier aria, a fast section which follows the slow introduction, the Duke expresses his anticipation of his forthcoming encounter with her and goes

off to the bed chamber. Does the Duke rape Gilda, or is their union consensual? While Hugo's play seems to suggest the former, Verdi and Piave leave some room for doubt and even seem to lean toward the idea that Gilda was seduced by the Duke's charm rather than being physically overpowered.

The scene that follows provides an excellent example of Verdi's mastery of the art of integrating music and drama. Rigoletto enters, looking for Gilda, but he needs to mask his feelings in front of the courtiers. Though his heart is breaking, he sings a series of nonsense syllables to a deceptively light melody ("la-ra, la-ra"), but the façade is soon broken as he announces, over a dramatic chord in the orchestra, that the woman whom he now realizes is with the Duke is not his mistress but his daughter. Though taken aback at first, the courtiers are still unsympathetic. Discarding his pretended nonchalance, Rigoletto pleads with the courtiers to return his daughter to him, begging for pity and reminding them that she is all he has in the world. As unsympathetic as Rigoletto may come across on the printed page, it is hard not to sympathize with him when we hear this music, in which Verdi seems to have poured out all of the love he felt for his own daughter who died in infancy. Suddenly, Gilda rushes out of the Duke's room and into her father's arms. The courtiers decide to leave them alone for a while. In a tender duet, Rigoletto tries to comfort his remorseful daughter.

They are interrupted by the appearance of a group of soldiers, leading Monterone off to prison. Monterone pauses to comment bitterly on the fact that his curse has had no effect on the Duke. As he leaves, however, Rigoletto announces that he will be the avenger. The duet between Gilda and Rigoletto now continues; note the similarity in structure to the tenor aria

which began the act: slow section, interruption, and fast section. “*Si, vendetta*” (“Yes, revenge”) Rigoletto sings, as Gilda begs him to show mercy to her handsome lover. This is not a duet of equals, for while Rigoletto has the first chorus to himself, he repeatedly interrupts Gilda’s pleas. Their voices rise to a crescendo as the curtain falls.

### **Act III**

The final act of this opera is a study in musical contrasts. While Verdi knew how to make music soar, he also recognized the value of silence. A number of verbal exchanges in this act consist of a sort of musical declamation, not exactly recitative but not exactly melodic either. Orchestral accompaniment is kept to a minimum. Such a technique is used in the opening dialogue, as Rigoletto meets Gilda outside of an inn and tells her that he will prove that her supposed beloved is unfaithful to her.

Through a crack in the wall, they observe the Duke, in disguise, enter the inn and ask for a room and some wine. The Duke then sings the big “hit song” from this opera, “*La donna e mobile*” (“Woman is fickle”). Apparently, he is supposed to be singing aloud, not speaking or soliloquizing. It is said that Verdi was so aware of this aria’s potential hit status that he kept it from the tenor in the initial production as long as he could and then swore the cast to secrecy, lest it become popular before the premiere and lead to charges that he had merely appropriated an old folk song. How ironic that the philandering Duke expresses his view that women are the fickle sex! Here the Duke presents his philosophy. In the words of writer Joseph Kestner (see bibliography), “By any conventional moral code, the Duke is immoral, but he despises all codes, for

there is not love without absolute freedom. He is not immoral from his perspective, since in the world as he grasps it there is no morality. Instead, he is that truly shocking figure, the amoral anarchist, recognizing no code, acknowledging no responsibility."

The aria concludes with a little musical joke. Wishing to avoid the show-stopping calls for encores which were not uncommon in opera houses at the time, Verdi has the orchestra sound the opening chords, suggesting that an encore is to follow, and then abruptly changes direction.

Maddalena, Sparafucile's sister, enters. The Duke tells her that he had met her some time ago and had deliberately tracked her down. This reminds us of the way in which he met Gilda, but he does not know that he has been led into a trap, as Rigoletto has taken out a contract on his life. He and Maddalena banter playfully, as Gilda looks on in horror. All of this leads up to the famous quartet, which the Duke begins with the lyrical "*Belle figlia dell'amore*" (Pretty daughter of love). Maddalena counters with a lilting, mocking reply, as Gilda sings of her broken heart and Rigoletto tells her that tears won't help and that he will seek revenge. Here is a perfect example of the unique way in which music can express things mere words cannot. There would be no way that our minds could absorb the thoughts of four different people all speaking at once, yet we can sense the contrasting emotions when four people sing different melodies. The blending of the voices with the precision of a string quartet while retaining the uniqueness of each character's voice is an act of pure genius.

Rigoletto then tells Gilda to leave and is approached by Sparafucile, who asks for the required fifty percent of his fee in

advance. The orchestra hints at an impending storm. Throughout much of the remainder of this act, rumblings of the storm will be heard in the background, sometimes accompanied by humming from an offstage chorus. The Duke asks to be led to his room, apparently expecting that Maddalena will join him, though he soon drifts off to sleep, singing snatches of "*La donna è mobile*," with the clarinet picking up the melody when he is too tired to continue. Maddalena, as have so many other women, has fallen for the Duke, and she asks her brother to spare him, killing Rigoletto instead, if necessary. With ironic humor, Sparafucile tells her that he cannot bring himself to break the honor of the assassin's code.

There then follows a wonderful example of Verdi's effective use of contrast, a trio as violent as the quartet was lyrical. The structure of each of the two verses is identical: each of the three participants singing eight bars of the same melody, followed by the joining of the voices to a contrasting melody. Sparafucile tells Maddalena that if a stranger should come before midnight, he will kill him instead. She replies that no one will be out on such a night. Gilda, meanwhile, has returned to the scene dressed in masculine attire, and she indicates she is willing to die to save her lover. There is a break in the melody. As the storm grows more intense, Gilda knocks on the door and asks for lodging. We then return to the trio. Maddalena tells him to hurry and kill the stranger, Sparafucile tells her to open the door, and Gilda, in Christ-like fashion, asks God to forgive the assassins. Gilda enters, and as the trio concludes, Sparafucile stabs her.

Rigoletto returns. Sparafucile has put the body in a sack and offers to dispose of it, but Rigoletto says he would prefer to

handle it himself. Sparafucile goes inside, locking the door behind him. Gloating over his revenge, Rigoletto is startled to hear the strains of “*La donna è mobile*” coming from offstage. In a moment reminiscent of Act I, the music builds to virtually unbearable tension as Rigoletto opens the sack and discovers his daughter, not yet dead but barely clinging to life. He tries to save her but realizes it is too late. He is heartbroken, but Gilda assures him that she will soon be in heaven and will be reunited with her mother. She dies in his arms, and as the orchestra sounds the opera’s final chords he exclaims, “*Ah! La maledizione!*”

Some critics have argued that in blaming Monterone’s curse, Rigoletto is trying to deny responsibility for his actions, for in the original play Triboulet had proclaimed, “I have killed my daughter.” But I believe Rigoletto realizes that the curse has no supernatural power. The Duke, after all, has emerged unscathed. Instead, Rigoletto here recognizes that the curse is actually just retribution for his own corruption. The Duke is merely an amoral force of nature, but Rigoletto has a conscience, and he knows that he must bear the guilt for his part in the evils of the court. As 18<sup>th</sup> century British statesman and political thinker Edmund Burke once observed, “All that is necessary for the triumph of evil is that good men do nothing.”

### **Giuseppe Verdi**

Ask any sizeable group of opera fans to name the greatest composer of all time and you are sure to get a variety of answers, but it is equally certain that if you ask that same group to name the four greatest opera composers they will quickly arrive at a consensus: Mozart, Wagner, Puccini, and, of course, Verdi. How dominant was Verdi in his day? Consider this—

during Verdi's long and illustrious career, virtually no other Italian composer produced a work that is still performed with regularity today. (Puccini's first big hit, *Manon Lescaut*, actually predates Verdi's last opera, *Falstaff*, by eight days. Poncielli's *La Giocanda* could be cited as an exception, but that work is more often praised than performed.) During Verdi's lifetime, the second most popular composer was Mercandente, who today is barely a footnote in the annals of Italian opera.

Giuseppe Verdi was born in 1813 in the small Italian village of Roncole, now part of Italy but then under French control. His musical talents were recognized at a young age, and he soon moved to nearby Busseto to pursue his music studies under the watchful eye of an arts patron named Antonio Barezzi. As was the case with Mozart, Verdi's close involvement with a family led to romance with a pretty young member of that family, and Verdi soon fell in love with Barezzi's daughter Margherita, whom he eventually married. But during a few tumultuous years (1838-1840) Verdi's life was to turn tragic, with the deaths of his two young children and then his wife, all to disease. All this happened about the time that the first of his twenty-six operas, *Oberto*, appeared with moderate success.

Verdi's attempt to write a comedy, *Un giorno di regno*, despite his heartbreak, was less successful, and he was about to give up opera composing when a friend virtually thrust a libretto at him and forced him to take it home to read. The story, set in the Biblical time of the Babylonian Exile, contained one number which haunted Verdi's imagination – a chorus of Israelite exiles longing for their homeland. Thus was born *Nabucco*, which was to become a major success, and the rest is history. The aforementioned chorus was called “*Va, Pensiero*,” (“Go, thought”) and the audience understood that Verdi was not



thinking about the ancient Hebrews but rather about the still unformed Italian nation, suffering under the rule of various foreign powers.

In 1843 Verdi was introduced to Piave, the librettist who was to play a major role in his career. Together they created nine operas, including *Macbeth*, *Ernani*, *La traviata*, and, of course, *Rigoletto*. Though Verdi constantly requested revisions of the text, he eventually developed a deep friendship with the off-beleaguered wordsmith.

During the 1840s, Verdi composed several operas, most of which he realized were not his best work, as economic necessity forced him to write more quickly than he would have liked. He sometimes referred to these as his “galley years.” Many of these operas are virtually unknown except to Verdi specialists.

Shortly before commencing work on *Rigoletto*, Verdi reconnected with soprano Giuseppina Strepponi, who had starred in his operas earlier but had recently retired from the stage due to voice problems. She was to become the second love of his life, and the couple began living together shortly afterward, though they scandalized their neighbors by avoiding the marriage altar for over a decade. Although Strepponi had lived a disreputable life prior to their meeting (having given birth to and abandoned a number of out-of-wedlock children, by various fathers), Verdi insisted that the members of his household treat her with the same respect they would a wife. There has been much speculation about the reasons why Verdi chose not to tie the knot for so many years, given the mores of the time. The most likely answer is that he was afraid that he might be required to assume financial responsibility for the

children. Strepponi is generally believed to be the model for Verdi's most famous "fallen woman," Violetta in *La traviata*.

Throughout his career Verdi had to deal with government censors, who feared anything that might arouse political unrest or general immorality. Hugo's *Le Roi S'Amuse*, upon which *Rigoletto* was based, was suspect on both counts. Though set in a foreign country, the subject of an immoral ruler and an attempted attack on his life was deemed too controversial – hence the change to an obscure duchy and the changed names of the characters. (Censors have never been accused of being too bright, and Verdi himself often commented on the irrational nature of some of the requested changes.) Similarly, some years later, the setting of *A Masked Ball*, which dealt with the assassination of a Swedish king, was moved to Boston.

*Rigoletto*, which premiered March 11, 1851, marked a major turning point in Verdi's growth as a composer. Never before, with the possible exception of Wagner's music dramas, had an opera so perfectly integrated music and text, and while the work which followed, *Il Trovatore*, seems somewhat old fashioned by comparison, the die had been cast. Next came *La traviata*, a near-perfect example of musical story telling, and throughout the remainder of his career Verdi was to focus on the dramatic possibilities of a text, not on opportunities for vocal display.

Verdi, however, was not only a composer. He was an Italian patriot deeply concerned with the future of a "nation" which throughout much of his life was actually a conglomeration of several separate states linked only by geographical proximity and linguistic ties. However, Verdi became active in the "*Risorgimento*," a movement calling for the establishment of an

Italian nation. There was no concerted revolution, however; rather, there were a series of revolutionary outbreaks, generally unsuccessful, until the French, guided by their own self interest, helped set in motion the events which would create the conditions leading to Garibaldi's military endeavors which finally established an Italian kingdom. Because of the role of his music had played in supporting this movement, Verdi was selected to serve in the Italian parliament, which he did briefly, though he played largely a ceremonial role. Several of his operas reflect the goals of the *Risorgimento*—the “*Va, pensiero*” chorus from *Nabucco*, the “*Patria oppressa*” from *Macbeth*, cries of “*Viva Italia*” in *La battaglia di Legnano*, and a scene in *Simon Boccanegra* in which the title character admonishes his senate that their loyalty must be to Italy, not Venice.

Though Verdi attempted to retire to his estate in later years, he nevertheless produced some of his most sophisticated work during that time, beginning with the *Requiem* mass, in memory of the Italian patriotic author Alessandro Manzoni, which remains his only non-operatic work of note. In 1887 and 1893, respectively, he was drawn out of retirement when he was put in touch with librettist/composer Arrigo Boito and given the opportunity to compose two additional operas to works of his favorite playwright, William Shakespeare, a writer whose greatness was not widely recognized in Italy. Both *Otello* and *Falstaff* were instant hits.

In his final years, Verdi devoted much of his time to the establishment of a retirement home for opera singers, an institution which stands to this day. He died in January, 1901, and while he had asked for a simple funeral, when his body (along with Strepponi's) was transferred to Rome the following

month, a national day of mourning was declared and mourners lined the streets. Spontaneously, they joined together to sing the song which had first united them in love of Italy—  
“*Va, pensiero.*”

### **The Story Tellers**

Like all great opera composers, Verdi recognized the importance of a good story as the basis for a successful opera. With the possible exception of Benjamin Britten, no other opera composer was as concerned with mining the world's great literature as a source for such stories. Works by Schiller and Shakespeare (three operas each), Byron, Voltaire, and Dumas fils all served as inspiration for Verdi's music. In composing *Rigloletto*, Verdi returned to the works of Victor Hugo, whose *Hernani* had served as the basis for Verdi's own *Ernani* some years later.

Victor Hugo (1802-1885) was one of the leading French writers of the nineteenth century. Growing up in relatively impoverished circumstances—his life as a poor student may have been reflected in the character of Marius in *Les Misérables*—he eventually became one of the leaders of the French Romantic movement. He opposed the formal classicism of the predecessors, who had made a firm demarcation between tragedy and comedy, and insisted that tragic and comic elements could co-exist in a single work, much as they do in real life. His model for such a theory was none other than Shakespeare. He frequently created characters who were essentially outsiders in the society in which they lived and who sometimes fought valiantly against that society. In our own day, his works have continued to inspire composers such as Alan

Menken (*The Hunchback of Notre Dame*) and Claude-Michel Schonberg (*Les Misérables*).

While a few librettos—such as *Pelleas and Melisande*, *Salome*, and *A Midsummer Night's Dream*—have been created simply by applying a blue pencil to existing literary texts, the process of converting a story or play into a text suitable for opera usually requires a skilled librettist. While Verdi worked with a number of librettists, none was more important to his career than Francesco Mario Piave (1810-1876). Besides his work for several other composers of the day, Piave contributed the libretti for eight Verdi operas, among them *Rigoletto*, *Ernani*, *La Forza del Destino*, and *Macbeth*. The two men were drawn to each other not only by their respect for each other's work but by a common sense of Italian patriotism. In contrast to the practice we are accustomed to in Broadway musical theatre, the relationship between librettist and composer is rarely one of equals, and Verdi always kept the upper hand in the relationship. Yet he had great respect for Piave's sense of theatre, and only Piave's illness and early death caused Verdi to search for other librettists late in his career.

### **Rigoletto and the Verdi Style**

Not only is *Rigoletto* a great work in its own right, but it is also a pivotal work in the history of opera, marking a quantum leap in the art of musical drama. Never before music and human drama been so skillfully integrated in a single work, and it was Verdi's first bid for operatic immortality. (*Macbeth* first appeared in 1847, but the version most performed today is Verdi's 1865 revision.)

Prior to 1851, opera had, for the most part, been focused on

big “numbers,” primarily solo arias. In Germany, Wagner had begun experimenting with a new form he called “music drama,” but his emphasis was almost entirely on mythological subjects. Perhaps Verdi protested too much against claims that his music was influenced by Wagner’s but it is clear that even if such influence existed, Verdi was charting his own course.

Above all, Verdi conceived of operas in terms of entire scenes. While he did not do away with arias (at least until *Falstaff*), he first developed the scene and then included arias where they could advance the drama. He felt no compulsion to give each principal an individual aria to sing; in *Rigoletto*, for example, Sparafucile and Maddelena sing only in ensemble numbers and Gilda has only one solo. “Good or bad,” Verdi remarked, “my music is not just written casually for any situation; I try to give it a character appropriate to the drama.” While working on his next opera *Il Trovatore*, he wrote “If only in opera there could be no cavatinas, no duets, no trios, no choruses, no finales, etc. and only the whole opera could be, so to speak, all one number, I should find that sensible and right.” In *Rigoletto*, there is frequently no clear demarcation between arias and dialogue. Verdi even worried that beautiful music could detract from the drama. When casting *Macbeth*, he complained that the soprano assigned to the role of Lady Macbeth sang too beautifully, thereby detracting from the drama.

Verdi also believed that operas should have a tight dramatic structure. He was not fond of the French grand opera style, with its sprawling structure and spectacle and mandatory ballet numbers. Some of his works were originally composed for the French stage, but they were rewritten and tightened up for

Italian consumption and are usually performed today in the Italian versions.

While Verdi, unlike Wagner, never let the orchestra become more important than the singer, he made major advances in his use of the orchestra as a commentator on the action. Though at times the orchestra just plays a sort of “oom-pah” accompaniment (as in “*La donna è mobile*”) there are many subtleties to be found emanating from the pit in *Rigoletto* and the operas which were to follow. Frequently the orchestra punctuates the dialogue much as we are used to hearing in film scores. In fact, while Wagner is often cited as the primary influence on the classic American film score, some of the credit probably belongs to Verdi as well.

As a composer of opera, Verdi was especially conscious of the way that the human voice could express itself. He had such a distinct way of writing for the voice that many singers today specialize in his operas, and the description “Verdi baritone” or “Verdi soprano” is a rather common appellation.

For the soprano, Verdi developed a style of music requiring a deeper resonance and a full-chested sound, to replace the coloratura “songbirds” of an earlier day. Gilda, in *Rigoletto*, actually represents the older style, which is an exception to this general rule. Sometimes he did not make a clear demarcation between the two; singers have often commented that the role of Violetta, in *La traviata*, is especially difficult because it requires a coloratura in Act I and a dramatic soprano in Act IV.

The Verdi mezzo-soprano (lower voice than a soprano) is also given a fuller, heavier tone than earlier mezzos. In fact, Verdi appears to have made a major contribution to the

development of the mezzo as a distinct voice type as opposed to sopranos with low notes. Earlier composers apparently did not make a sharp distinction between the two voice types. For example, we sometimes speak of Rossini mezzos, but sopranos often take on the same roles as mezzos in Rossini's operas.

Despite these developments, however, Verdi was primarily a guys' composer and seems to have preferred the masculine voice as much as Richard Strauss preferred the female voice. Though the character of the Duke is despicable, in many ways he is the prototype for the Italian romantic tenor, a type that has dominated our image of the opera singer. Verdi is largely responsible for the fact that such a disproportionate number of opera's superstars have been tenors, down to the recent Three Tenors phenomenon. The Verdi tenor typically has enough vocal agility and high notes to excite our imaginations and exhibits a sense of bravura that draws us to him against our will. The tenors generally get the best melodies, such as "*La donna è mobile*" in this opera.

Verdi's most serious music, however, generally goes to the lower voiced singers, the baritones and basses. Occasionally such singers are outright villains, such as Sparafucile in this opera or Iago in *Otello*. More often, however, they represent the voice of maturity. Baritones are often father figures or figures of authority. Because they carry so much of the drama, Verdi's scores frequently require them to sing in a slightly higher pitch than in the works of other composers.

In his later years Verdi was regarded as old-fashioned and dated by many Italians, but a vital new style of music did not arise in Italy until he had left the scene. And even when he finally retired for good, the "*verismo*" (realistic) composers who



followed him picked up where he had left off. The somewhat self-indulgent romantic tenor and the deeply resonant dramatic soprano of the *verismo* period are the direct descendants of the Verdi prototypes, though the baritones and basses seemed to lose some ground. Some may feel that the *verismo* composers, especially Puccini, surpassed Verdi in subtlety of orchestral effects and the integration of music and drama, but they have to admit that these later composers got where they did by standing on Verdi's shoulders.

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