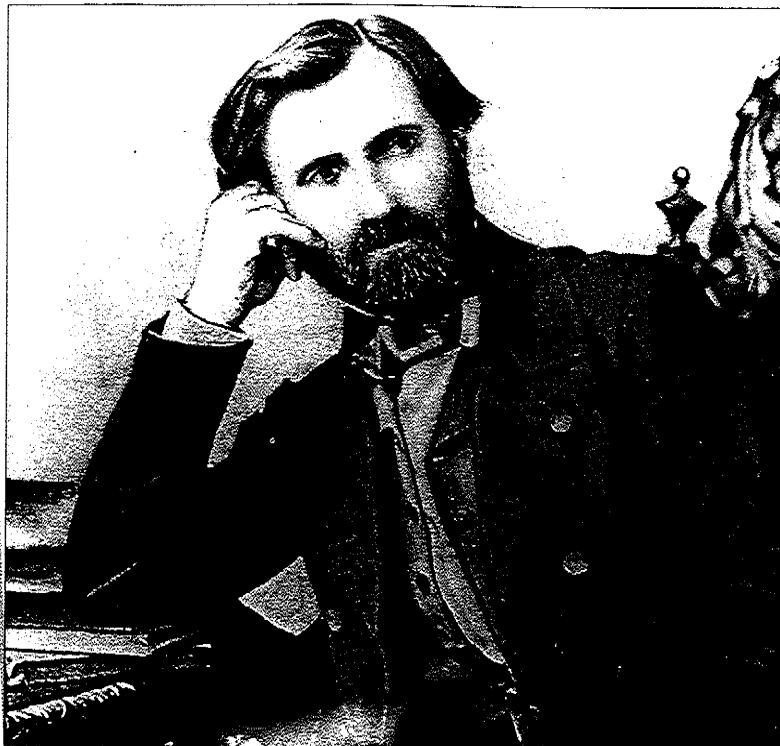


VERDI
RIGOLETTO
JAMES LEVINE





GIUSEPPE VERDI



GIUSEPPE VERDI
(1813-1901)

RIGOLETTO

MELODRAMMA IN TRE ATTI · OPERA IN THREE ACTS
OPER IN DREI AKTEN · OPÉRA EN TROIS ACTES

Libretto/Livret: Francesco Maria Piave

THE METROPOLITAN OPERA
ORCHESTRA AND CHORUS

Chorus Master/Choreinstudierung/Chef des chœurs/
Maestro del coro: RAYMOND HUGHES

Musical Assistance/Musikalische Assistenz/Assistance
musicale/Assistente musicale: JANE BAKKEN KLAVITER

JAMES LEVINE

Première: Venice, Teatro La Fenice, 11 March 1851

Uraufführung: Venedig, Teatro La Fenice, 11. März 1851

Création: Venise, Théâtre La Fenice, le 11 mars 1851

Prima rappresentazione: Venezia, Teatro La Fenice, 11 marzo 1851



VLADIMIR CHERNOV

Photo: Lisa Kohler

VERDI'S "RIGOLETTO"
In pursuit of the perfect dramatic experience

JAMES HEPOKOSKI

The politically charged years during and immediately following the failed Italian revolutions of 1848 and 1849 found Verdi still caught up in the grinding gears of the "opera business". Now in his mid-30s, he was pushing his career – scarcely a decade old – to what he hoped would be its peak. This meant continuing to turn out new compositions at a furious pace, one or two a year. The main works of this period, Verdi's 14th to 19th operas, were *La battaglia di Legnano* (Rome, 1849), *Luisa Miller* (Naples, 1849), *Stiffelio* (Trieste, 1850), *Rigoletto* (Venice, 1851), *Il trovatore* (Rome, 1853) and *La traviata* (Venice, 1853).

For Verdi, this was a time of artistic transformation. He had come to develop a disdain for the operatically comfortable or merely "normal". His career was now to be built on ever-stronger dramatic effects: impact opera conceived as a flow of tense moments delivered with the force of body blows. Verdi was pursuing what he regarded as the ideal of pure *dramma*: the perfect, unrelenting, totally gripping dramatic experience.

In all this, *Rigoletto*, written for Venice's Teatro La Fenice, was the watershed work. Indeed, in

1855, four years after its premiere, Verdi still considered it "my best opera". Here, in addition to creating a theatre piece brimming over with unforgettable melodies and compelling situations, he also had stepped across several aesthetic lines – those of "Romantic" boldness, compositional mastery, and sheer dramatic force and compression.

The most controversial aspect of *Rigoletto's* preparation and first performances was its subject matter. It put formerly unacceptable images onto the operatic stage: a hunchbacked court jester as the central figure; a pervading atmosphere of sordid libertinism and cynical irony leading to the abduction and rape of the jester's daughter; the hiring of an assassin to redress the balance; and so on. Throughout the planning phase, Verdi's main concern was to get the libretto past the Venetian censors. The opera's compositional history is intertwined with challenges, negotiations and compromises with *la censura*, represented at first by the theatre directors and later, more ominously, by the Venetian police. In the end Verdi got most – though not all – of what he had originally hoped for.

The opera's literary source, Victor Hugo's *Le Roi s'amuse*, already had something of a reputation: in 1832 the Parisian authorities had closed it down after only one performance. Verdi knew the play only as a published work, and he first mentioned it in his correspondence in September 1849: "a beautiful *dramma* with stupendous confrontations!" The topic resurfaced a half-year later, in April 1850, in a letter to his Venetian librettist, Piave, as they were searching for a subject for his newly commissioned opera. "The topic is large, immense", wrote Verdi, "and it has a character who is one of the greatest creations of whom the theatre of any country and any time might boast...[the buffoon] *Triboulet*." And in early May 1850, again to Piave: "*Le Roi s'amuse* is the greatest topic and perhaps the greatest drama of modern times. *Triboulet* is a creation worthy of Shakespeare!!... It is a subject that cannot fail." Because so much of the drama unfolds from the curse that the aggrieved Saint-Vallier (the opera's Monterone) directs early on at Triboulet (Rigoletto), Verdi decided to call the proposed work *La maledizione* (The Curse), and it was under that title that much of the opera was planned.

Serious work on the libretto began in August and lasted through October. Piave visited Verdi's home in Busseto to collaborate on the project, and for the time being the two fended off looming challenges from nervous Venetian censors. But *La maledizione* was not the only thing on Verdi's mind: in the late summer and early autumn, he and Piave were also rushing

to complete *Stiffelio*, which would receive its premiere in Trieste on 16 November. *Stiffelio* and *Rigoletto* are complementary works, conceptualized almost simultaneously. One early (discarded) setting of Rigoletto's words from Act I, scene 2, "Ah, veglia, o donna, questo fiore", for example, appears in the sketches for *Stiffelio* (which have only fairly recently been made available). Even more striking, an early version of Gilda's "Caro nome" melody exists in the *Stiffelio* sketches as one of several vigorous, marchlike themes considered for the cabaletta of Lina's aria in Act II. (Its sketch-text: "Dunque perdere volete / Questa misera infelice!" – "So then, you wish to destroy / This unhappy, miserable one!")

As for *Rigoletto* itself, Verdi turned to its composition after the premiere of *Stiffelio*. He drafted the opera in just under three months, from late November 1850 through mid-February 1851, thus taking only a few weeks to compose each act. During this period, as a result of censorship issues brought up by the Venetian police, the libretto underwent a metamorphosis from *La maledizione* to *Rigoletto*: among other changes, Hugo's original King Francis I of France, Triboulet, Blanche and Saltabadil (in the first libretto, Il Re, Triboulet, Bianca and Saltabadile) became the Duke of Mantua (Vincenzo I^o di Gonzaga), Rigoletto, Gilda and Sparafucile. On 19 February Verdi arrived in Venice to supervise the rehearsals. Within two weeks he had also orchestrated the entire work and composed its Prelude.

The premiere of *Rigoletto* took place on 11 March 1851. From the beginning it was welcomed by the public, although some critics continued to voice objections to the subject. As late as 1859, Abramo Basevi, normally a sympathetic Verdi commentator, complained that Hugo's plot "humbles virtue and exalts vice" and that it was unsettling to encounter "a deformed man as the protagonist of a *melodramma*", something only explicable "when we consider the present state of the deprivation of our taste, which causes our souls to seek out disgusting stimuli as amusements, similar to the manner in which paralytic limbs, in order to twitch once again, are drawn to strong electric shocks."

We may no longer share Basevi's moralistic disapproval, but shock and strangeness are to the point. In *Rigoletto* Verdi had set out to defamiliarize the mid-century opera experience. Those acquainted with standard opera conventions will find them brilliantly twisted out of shape here – elided, crazed or turned grotesque. "O rabbia! esser difforme, esser buffone!" howls Rigoletto in his famous "Pari siamo" monologue in Act I, scene 2 – "I rage at my monstrous form, my cap and bells" – and this compelling image of deformation spreads to the structural underpinnings of the work itself, to the immense profit of the unfolding *dramma*.

Perhaps the most celebrated distortions of standard procedures occur at the opening of that second scene. Here we encounter the eerie Rigoletto-Sparafucile dialogue-duet, which bears no resemblance to standard Italian duet-patterns: like the characters that sing it, this duet

exists outside the law. This is followed by Rigoletto's "Pari siamo" monologue, one of his defining utterances, although it is not an aria at all, but a dramatically heightened, isolated recitative. Immediately after this shadowy, illicit monologue, the sudden bright-light effect of Gilda bursting out of his home to embrace him – the normal world rung forth in more standard operatic language – could not be more striking.

Similar incongruities also occur on a larger scale. Only once in the opera did Verdi write a generic double-aria (the standard aria form featuring two songs, a slow cabaletta followed by a vigorous, repeated cabaletta): the Duke's aria at the beginning of Act II. But its very normality is just the point: the first act has already established the character's libertinism (early on we learn that his truer voice is one of flippant strophic songs, not formal arias), and we are thus invited to perceive this generic, second-act aria through a lens of high irony.

Other characters occasionally begin what promise to be double-arias – Gilda's "Caro nome" and Rigoletto's heartrending "Cortigiani, vil razza dannata" are obviously cantabiles (first movements) – but once concluded, the rush of events pulls them away from their expected, complementary cabalettas: instead, they are swept into the onsets of succeeding, dramatic duets. Such things intensify the telescoped density so characteristic of the opera.

Perhaps the most astonishing feature of *Rigoletto* is Verdi's dramatic treatment of sound

itself: sound as an elemental, prerational phenomenon. Throughout the opera Verdi scatters small, telling sonic gestures – motives, rhythms, chords, timbres – that establish intuitive relationships among themselves. Each has a palpability and presence that is virtually physical. Not only do such things bind together the whole, they also give the entire work a unique “color”, or *tinta*, as Verdi called it. On the smallest scale, for example, one might notice the rhythmic resonances between the beginning and ending of the Gilda-Rigoletto duet in Act II: the stunned Rigoletto absorbs the obsessive, “pathetic” triplets of Gilda’s narrative, “Tutte le feste al tempo”, and recasts them as the defiant revenge-triplets in the cabaletta, “Sì, vendetta”.

The most powerful of these recurring sonic images is Rigoletto’s memory of Monterone’s Curse (“Quel vecchio maledivami!”), the foreboding threshold through which we pass at the opening of the Prelude. This motive is articulated in various ways in Act I (in which the curse is uttered) and haunts Rigoletto – and us – for the remainder of the opera. Once heard, its effect is unerasable: everything that we subsequently experience is filtered through our memory of it. This puts a heightened edge of dramatic banality, for example, on the comic-opera language of Act I, scene 1, and it casts a nearly unbearable irony on the supposed love music of much of Act I, scene 2, keeping us aware that we know things about “Gualtier Maldè” (and the

real world) that the naive Gilda does not.

But the Curse’s impact is not fully felt until the catastrophic final act – surely one of the greatest acts in opera. Here, in effect, Verdi refracts the earlier Curse Motive into six related, “psychological” sound-images, each playing its part in a mounting nightmare. Two are identified with the Duke’s role in the working-out of the curse: “La donna è mobile” and the stylishly insincere “Bella figlia dell’amore”. Four others conjure up the gathering-storm backdrop: the repetitively pulsing open fifths (low strings plus high oboe), first heard after the Quarter; the growling-thunder tremolo in the low strings; the unnerving flicker of lightning in the flute and piccolo; and the spectral, chromatic humming of offstage voices. With an extraordinary ear also for the theatrical effect of emptiness and silence, Verdi circulates these sound-images throughout the act, cutting across the formal numbers. Throughout, his timing is impeccable: each motivic appearance is perfectly placed. At the very end – after Gilda’s death – Verdi recenters the scattered or “refracted” sound-images back into the Curse Motive for Rigoletto’s curtain line, which echoes that at the end of Act I: “Ah! la maledizione!” Here the dramatic fist lifted up and poised with single-minded intensity during the preceding acts finally comes down with crushing force. As Verdi had insisted to Piave even in the early stages of libretto planning, “Let me repeat: the entire subject resides in that curse.”



CHERYL STUDER

Photo: Tom Specht