

GIUSEPPE VERDI

# Rigoletto

A Guide for Educators

The Metropolitan  
Opera





# Rigoletto

With just a few carefully chosen dramatic elements—a splendid royal palace as the site of debauchery and crime, a noble duke as a lascivious tyrant, and a court comedian as the emotional epicenter of a heartbreaking tale—Giuseppe Verdi’s brilliant, blood-soaked *Rigoletto* turned the 19th-century social order on its head. Written during an era when revolutions roiled Europe and age-old absolute monarchies teetered on the brink of extinction, both Verdi’s opera and the Victor Hugo play that inspired it met with official censorship and condemnation. Yet as Verdi well knew, the very plot points that so infuriated the authorities (such as a nobleman’s shameless savagery and a humble jester’s murderous revenge) also lent the story an undeniable narrative flair. “*Rigoletto* would be one of the greatest works of modern theater—if only the police would allow it,” Verdi wrote to his librettist, Francesco Maria Piave, a year before the opera’s premiere. History would soon prove Verdi right: Ever since its wildly successful opening night, *Rigoletto* has been one of the most beloved operas of all time.

For Bartlett Sher, director of a new production at the Met this season, *Rigoletto* is a story of power and corruption—and the disastrous consequences of allowing autocratic tendencies to go unchecked. To fully explore the work as a political parable, Sher has transposed the story from 16th-century Mantua to the brief period of democracy in Germany between the two world wars. The Weimar Republic, as this period was known, was an era of both tremendous artistic output and profound political instability, as the ongoing traumas of World War I, the economic effects of rampant inflation, and the terrifying rise of fascism seeped into every facet of daily life. Sher also sees in this period—and in Verdi’s story—a cautionary tale for us today. “My invocation of the Weimar Republic is not necessarily meant to draw a direct parallel to now,” Sher says. “But at a time when democracy feels threatened, lessons from history are very valuable.”

This guide takes Sher’s “lessons from history” as its mandate. Using *Rigoletto* as an interdisciplinary lens, it focuses on three distinct time periods and the political and artistic movements that defined them: the middle of the 19th century (when the opera premiered), the interwar period in Europe (when Sher’s production is set), and the world in which we now live. By delving into *Rigoletto*’s music, drama, and design, this guide will forge interdisciplinary classroom connections, inspire critical thinking, and invite students to understand this work as both a historical artifact and a work of art that remains pertinent today.



KELSEY



FEOLA



BECZALA



MASTRONI



ABRAHAMYAN

## THE WORK

An opera in **three acts, sung in Italian**

Music by **Giuseppe Verdi**

Libretto by **Francesco Maria Piave**

Based on the play ***Le Roi s'Amuse*** by **Victor Hugo**

First performed **March 11, 1851**, at the **Teatro La Fenice**, Venice

## PRODUCTION

**Bartlett Sher**  
Production

**Michael Yeargan**  
Set Designer

**Catherine Zuber**  
Costume Designer

**Donald Holder**  
Lighting Designer

## PERFORMANCE

*The Met: Live in HD*  
January 29, 2022

**Rosa Feola**  
Gilda

**Varduhi Abrahamyan**  
Maddalena

**Piotr Beczala**  
Duke of Mantua

**Quinn Kelsey**  
Rigoletto

**Andrea Mastroni**  
Sparafucile

**Daniele Rustioni**  
Conductor

In cooperation with Staatsoper Berlin

Production a gift of  
C. Graham Berwind, III –  
Director, Spring Point Partners, LLC;  
Gamma Fisher Foundation,  
Marshalltown, Iowa; and  
Mr. and Mrs. Paul Montrone

*HD Live in Schools* is supported through  
a partnership with the New York City  
Department of Education.

---

# Opera in the Classroom

The Metropolitan Opera Educator Guides offer a creative, interdisciplinary introduction to opera. Designed to complement existing classroom curricula in music, the humanities, STEM fields, and the arts, these guides will help young viewers confidently engage with opera whether or not they have prior experience with the art form.

On the following pages, you'll find an array of materials designed to encourage critical thinking, deepen background knowledge, and empower students to engage with *Rigoletto*. These materials can be used in classrooms and/or via remote-learning platforms, and they can be mixed and matched to suit your students' individual academic needs.

Above all, this guide is intended to help students explore *Rigoletto* through their own experiences and ideas. The diverse perspectives that your students bring to opera make the art form infinitely richer, and we hope that your students will experience opera as a space where their confidence can grow and their curiosity can flourish.

## WHAT'S IN THIS GUIDE:

**Philosophical Chairs:** A series of questions that introduce the opera's main themes while sparking creativity and encouraging debate

**Who's Who in *Rigoletto*:** An introduction to the opera's main characters

**Synopsis:** The opera's plot

**The Source:** Information about the literary sources and/or historical events that inspired the opera

**Timelines:** Timelines connecting the opera to events in world history

**Deep Dives:** Interdisciplinary essays offering additional information and context

**Active Exploration:** Classroom-ready activities connecting the opera to topics in music, the humanities, STEM, and the arts

## THROUGHOUT THE GUIDE, YOU'LL ALSO FIND:

**Critical Inquiries:** Questions and thought experiments designed to foster careful thinking

**Fun Facts:** Entertaining tidbits about *Rigoletto*

## CURRICULAR CONNECTIONS

**This guide invites students to explore the opera through:**

World History  
Politics  
Drama  
Literature  
Visual Arts  
Gender Studies  
Critical Thinking  
Social and Emotional Learning

---

# Philosophical Chairs

Philosophical Chairs is an activity designed to foster critical thinking, active inquiry, and respectful dialogue among students. To play, participants agree or disagree with a series of statements, but the game doesn't end there. The most crucial element is what happens next: Participants discuss their points of view and can switch sides if their opinions change during the discussion. (For more tips on using Philosophical Chairs in a classroom or via a remote-learning platform, see the activity description in your Google Drive.)

Each topic statement is deliberately open-ended yet ties into a number of themes present in *Rigoletto*—including the cruel complexities of young love, the possible pitfalls of revenge, and the terrible destructive power of bullying and other forms of abuse. Set the stage for this conversation mindfully. Offer students a brief overview of the opera's plot, setting, and context, and remind them how to build a safe space for productive conversation. Some of the topics might be confusing or hard—that's okay! As you and your students explore and learn about *Rigoletto*, you can return to these statements: What do they have to do with the opera's story? How might these questions help us explore the opera's story, history, and themes?

Keep in mind that the *process* of this activity is just as important as the statements themselves. Philosophical Chairs is designed to nurture civil dialogue, and students should be encouraged to listen actively, honor one another's contributions, and show respect for a diversity of opinions and ideas.

## THE STATEMENTS

- Flirting is harmless.
- Relationships ought to be kept secret.
- Gossip is harmless.
- Words can be as sharp (and as destructive) as daggers.
- Women are fickle.
- Self-sacrifice is noble.
- Curses are real.
- Bribery leads to corruption.
- Vengeance is always justified.
- Everyone has a moral compass.
- Your conscience will always protect you.
- Leaders ought to live moral lives.
- Ignoring your conscience leads to bad habits.

# Who's Who in *Rigoletto*

| CHARACTER  | PRONUNCIATION                                   | VOICE TYPE             | THE LOWDOWN   |
|--|---|------------------------|---|
| <b>Rigoletto</b><br>A court jester                           | <i>ree-goh-LET-toh</i>                          | Baritone               | Born a hunchback, Rigoletto has always been teased. Now a bitter and cynical adult, he has learned to defend himself against people's cruelty by making jokes about everyone else. His one source of joy and happiness is his daughter, Gilda.                  |
| <b>Gilda</b><br>Rigoletto's daughter                         | <i>JEEL-dah</i>                                 | Soprano                | Rigoletto is terrified that someone will mistreat his daughter, so he keeps Gilda locked away at home. She leaves the house only to go to church—which is where she meets and falls fatefully in love with Gualtier Maldè (who is really the Duke in disguise). |
| <b>Duke of Mantua</b>  |   | Tenor                  | Cruel and lecherous, the Duke uses women, throws them away, and never looks back. Rigoletto typically laughs at the Duke's dalliances, but when the Duke seduces Gilda, Rigoletto plans a brutal revenge.   |
| <b>Sparafucile and Maddalena</b><br>A hit man and his sister | <i>spah-rah-foo-CHEE-leh / mahd-dah-LEH-nah</i> | Bass and mezzo-soprano | After hearing how the Duke has mistreated his daughter, Rigoletto hires Sparafucile to kill the Duke. Unfortunately, this plan will tragically backfire.  |
| <b>Monterone</b><br>A wealthy nobleman                       | <i>mohn-teh-ROH-neh</i>                         | Bass                   | Monterone is the father of a young woman seduced by the Duke. When Rigoletto makes fun of the grieving father's shame and embarrassment, Monterone curses the jester.   |



RIGOLETTO



GILDA



DUKE OF MANTUA



SPARAFUCILE  
AND  
MADDALENA



MONTERONE

# Synopsis

**ACT I** *Germany, during the era of the Weimar Republic.* In the great hall of his lavish palace, the Duke boasts about his luck with the ladies. No woman is off-limits as far as he is concerned, and lately he has taken to flirting with the Countess Ceprano, the wife of one of his best friends. Rigoletto, the court jester, mercilessly teases the Countess's jilted husband. The Duke's courtiers enjoy Rigoletto's jokes, but they do not think of him as a friend. Instead, they cruelly laugh at him behind his back and mock his physical deformities. Ceprano wants to get back at Rigoletto for his insults, so he and his fellow courtiers decide to kidnap the woman they've seen in Rigoletto's apartment,



whom they assume to be Rigoletto's mistress. All of a sudden, Monterone, a wealthy nobleman, forces his way into the crowd and accuses the Duke of seducing his daughter. When Rigoletto responds to Monterone's fury with his typical jokes, Monterone curses him, wishing Rigoletto to suffer the same pain and embarrassment he is feeling. The Duke's men arrest Monterone and drag him away.

That night, after the party, Rigoletto thinks about Monterone's curse. A solitary figure introduces himself to Rigoletto: It is Sparafucile, a hit man, who tells Rigoletto he can "make problems disappear." Rigoletto returns home, thinking about Sparafucile's offer.



*Rigoletto's home.* In fact, the woman who lives in Rigoletto's apartment is not his mistress. She's his daughter, Gilda. Rigoletto is terrified that something will happen to Gilda, so he has asked her to stay home and not venture out. Gilda agrees to this rule, promising that she will leave home only to go to church. What Gilda doesn't tell her father is that she has recently fallen in love with a young man she saw while praying.

The Duke appears at the apartment, and Gilda instantly recognizes him as the young man from the church. He introduces himself as a poor student named Gualtier Maldè (*gwahl-tee-YEHR mahl-DEH*) and declares his love for Gilda. Unaware that the sensitive young man is actually the cruel Duke in disguise, Gilda is overjoyed.

Meanwhile, the Duke's courtiers have gathered outside Rigoletto's home to kidnap his "mistress." When Rigoletto arrives, they say they are abducting the Countess Ceprano and ask Rigoletto to help. The courtiers blindfold Rigoletto, who holds a ladder for them as they kidnap Gilda. When Rigoletto discovers that his daughter has been taken, he is horrified and heartbroken. He wonders if this tragedy has anything to do with Monterone's curse.

**ACT II** *The Duke's palace.* Alone in his chambers, the Duke reflects on his encounter with Gilda and wonders if he might actually love her. Soon his courtiers arrive. They laugh as they tell him how they kidnapped Rigoletto's "mistress" and left her in the Duke's bedroom. The Duke realizes it is Gilda

#### **A BRIEF GUIDE TO OPERATIC VOICE TYPES:**

**SOPRANO** the highest-pitched voice, normally used for female characters; some children can also sing in the soprano range

**MEZZO-SOPRANO** the voice lying between the soprano and the contralto (from the Italian word "mezzo," meaning "middle")

**CONTRALTO** the lowest voice range associated with female characters (also called alto)

**TENOR** the highest common voice type for male characters

**BARITONE** the voice below the tenor and above the bass

**BASS** the lowest voice type



and hurries off to see her. Rigoletto enters, looking for Gilda. When he reveals that she is actually his daughter, the courtiers are surprised. Nevertheless, they refuse to help Rigoletto find her. Soon, Gilda appears, disheveled and deeply traumatized. She tells Rigoletto how the Duke wooed her, and of her abduction by his men. Monterone is brought into the palace to be executed. In the commotion, Rigoletto quietly vows to take revenge on the Duke.



**ACT III** *The outskirts of town.* Despite everything that has happened, Gilda still loves the Duke. Rigoletto, by contrast, knows that the Duke is a scoundrel. Wanting Gilda to see what the Duke is really like, Rigoletto brings her to the seedy inn where Sparafucile lives with his sister, Maddalena. They watch through a window as the Duke shamelessly flirts with Maddalena. Gilda is heartbroken. Rigoletto begs his daughter to disguise herself in men's clothing and leave town, saying it is no longer safe for her to remain. After she leaves, Rigoletto hires Sparafucile to murder the Duke. He grimly looks forward to dumping the Duke's dead body in the river.

As storm clouds gather in the night sky, Gilda, worried for the Duke's safety, returns to the inn. From outside, she overhears Maddalena urging her brother to spare the Duke and kill Rigoletto instead. Sparafucile refuses to kill Rigoletto, but he says that if he can find another body to give Rigoletto in the Duke's place, he will save the Duke's life. Gilda decides that she will sacrifice herself to provide the body Sparafucile needs. Disguised as a man, she knocks on the door and says she is a traveler looking for shelter from the storm. Sparafucile stabs Gilda and ties up her body in a bag for Rigoletto to collect. When Rigoletto arrives, he naturally assumes that the limp body in the bag is the Duke's. He gloats over his revenge ... until he hears the Duke singing inside the inn. Horror-stricken, Rigoletto opens the bag to find his own daughter, fatally wounded. Gilda asks her father to forgive her and the Duke, then dies in his arms. Mad with grief, Rigoletto declares that Monterone's curse has come true.

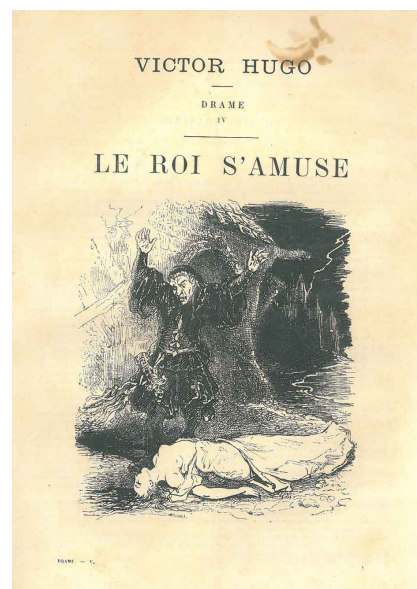


# The Source

## THE PLAY *LE ROI S'AMUSE* BY VICTOR HUGO

The novels, plays, and short stories of French writer Victor Hugo are inseparable from the politics of his day. Born in 1802, Hugo lived through a dizzying series of revolutions and political upheavals in France. He would also endure a 19-year exile for his political views. Hugo was a staunch liberal dedicated to a secular, democratic, egalitarian France, an ideal which is readily discernible in his novels *The Hunchback of Notre Dame* (a tale of love and redemption set amidst the cruelties of the medieval inquisition) and *Les Misérables* (in which a merciless police inspector tenaciously pursues a reformed convict while young revolutionaries find love and death on the Parisian barricades). *Le Roi s'Amuse* (*The King Amuses Himself*) is less well known than Hugo's epic novels, yet it, too, clearly reflects Hugo's political leanings, featuring a villainous king so deeply corrupted by his own power that he will stop at nothing to get what he wants. The play premiered in 1832, two years after the overthrow of the absolutist Bourbon monarchy and the establishment of a constitutional monarchy in France. Yet even the new, relatively liberal government found Hugo's depraved king to be an unforgivable insult to the throne, and the play was banned the morning after its premiere. Hugo fought hard to have the ban lifted, but to no avail; *Le Roi s'Amuse* would not be performed again for 50 years.

Fortunately, the ban on performances of Hugo's play did not extend to its dissemination in published form, and *Le Roi s'Amuse*—its popularity bolstered, no doubt, by its notoriety—enjoyed relatively wide distribution. One of the many readers impressed by this irresistibly gritty drama was Giuseppe Verdi, who in 1850 called it “the greatest story of modern times.” Unfortunately, the censors in Venice, where the new opera was scheduled to be performed, were less enthusiastic about Hugo's work. Citing the “disgusting immorality” of the plot, they threatened to ban Verdi's opera unless the story were rewritten to cast the Duke in a more favorable light. Verdi responded that he would rather scrap the project entirely than adopt such an illogical adaptation: Without the Duke's tyrannical absolutism and unrepentant lasciviousness, Gilda's rape and Rigoletto's ill-fated revenge would make no sense. The Venetian censors finally backed down. Rigoletto went forward as planned, and the result is now one of the most iconic operas of all time.



### FUN FACT

Verdi originally hoped to give his opera the same name as Victor Hugo's play, *The King Amuses Himself*. When this title was rejected, he suggested *La Maledizione* (*The Curse*), before finally deciding to name the opera after its quasi-protagonist.

---

# Timeline

## THE CREATION OF *RIGOLETTO*

### 1802

Victor Hugo is born in the French city of Besançon, 13 years after the beginning of the French Revolution and two years before Napoleon Bonaparte crowns himself Emperor of France.

### 1813

Giuseppe Verdi is born on October 9 or 10 (the exact date is uncertain) in Roncole, a tiny Italian village near Parma. Verdi's parents are innkeepers with no musical training, yet they soon recognize their son's prodigious talents. He will receive his first music lessons at the age of three.

### 1814

Following a series of bruising military defeats, Napoleon abdicates his throne, and the Bourbon dynasty once again takes power. Napoleon will make a brazen comeback the following year, but after his decisive loss at the Battle of Waterloo a few months later, the French government seems to be securely in Bourbon hands.

### 1822

Verdi, only nine years old, is hired to play organ at San Michele, a beautiful church across the street from his parents' inn. But Roncole's limited musical life falls far short of Verdi's needs, and he soon moves to the nearby city of Busseto to continue his musical studies.

### 1830

Once again, revolution breaks out in France. The Bourbon king is replaced by a constitutional monarchy.

### 1832

Verdi moves to Milan, the operatic capital of Italy. He hopes to study at the Milan Conservatory, but his application is rejected for bureaucratic reasons. (Ironically, the conservatory will officially be renamed "The Giuseppe Verdi Conservatory" after the composer's death.)

On November 22, Victor Hugo's play *Le Roi s'Amuse* premieres in Paris. Its success is short-lived: Deemed overly antagonistic to the crown, the play is banned the morning after its premiere.

### 1839

Verdi's first opera premieres at the Teatro alla Scala, Milan's most famous opera house. The opera is successful enough that Bartolomeo Merelli, the impresario in charge of La Scala, signs Verdi to a contract for three more operas.

### 1840

In stark contrast to the successes of 1839, 1840 is one of the worst years of Verdi's life. His wife dies on June 18, and his second opera is a total flop.

### 1842

On March 9, La Scala hosts the premiere of Verdi's third opera, *Nabucco*. It is an extraordinary hit. Singing the powerhouse role of the anti-hero Abigaille is Giuseppina Strepponi, a riveting young soprano who will become the love of Verdi's life. *Nabucco*'s success launches a period of extraordinary productivity for Verdi: Between 1844 and 1849, he will compose no fewer than 11 operas.

### 1847

Verdi moves to Paris and begins living with Strepponi.

### 1848

Revolutions break out across Europe, sweeping through Germany, Denmark, Belgium, Ireland, and the sprawling Austro-Hungarian Empire. In France, the constitutional monarchy is overthrown, and a new republic is established. In northern Italy, uprisings in Milan and Venice drive out the ruling Austrian army. When the Austrians retake the cities a few months later, however, they institute a brutal crackdown on free speech and politically motivated art.





## 1849

Verdi returns to Busseto, bringing Strepponi with him. In September, he expresses interest in writing an opera based on *Le Roi s'amuse*.

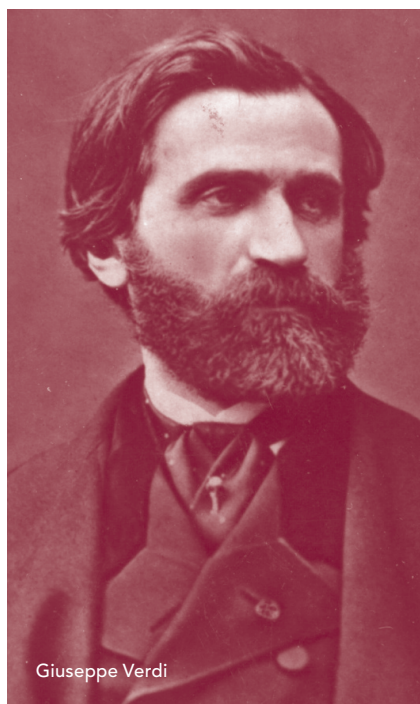
## 1850

Verdi hopes to stage the new opera, which he has named *Rigoletto*, in Venice. Unfortunately, the city is once again under the control of the absolutist Austrian monarchy and the conservative censors find Hugo's story "obscene" and "immoral." Verdi must fight tooth and nail to bring the opera to the stage.

## 1851

*Rigoletto* finally premieres at Venice's Teatro La Fenice on March 11. It is a phenomenal success.

Back in Paris, the president of the French Republic seizes power in a bloody coup d'état. As an outspoken critic of the regime, Hugo must flee the country. He remains in exile, first in Belgium and then in the Channel Islands, until 1870.



## 1858

For centuries, the region now known as Italy has been a political patchwork of tiny city states, principalities, and duchies. Yet citizens and political thinkers across the peninsula have begun to imagine a unified Italy free from foreign domination. Victor Emmanuel II, King of Sardinia, is tapped as a potential leader of the prospective country, and Verdi's name is employed as a handy acronym for the hopeful phrase "Vittorio Emanuele, Re d'Italia" (Victor Emmanuel, King of Italy).

## 1861

Italy is finally unified. At the behest of the new prime minister, Camillo Cavour, Verdi enters the Italian parliament. He will serve until 1865.

## 1901

Verdi dies on January 27. The funeral is small, in accordance with the composer's wishes, but a public memorial procession through the streets of Milan is attended by thousands. Verdi is mourned as a national hero: just one man, yet a towering figure who embodied the political aspirations and artistic pride of an entire country.

# Deep Dive

## CLOWNING AROUND

Jester, clown, comedian: Rigoletto's title can vary. Yet no matter how his job is described, Verdi's hero always embodies the literary archetype of the "fool," a catch-all term for characters who provide comic relief for other people in the story—and who are typically anything but foolish. The fool has been a staple of literature and drama for centuries, and understanding this complex literary figure will deepen our appreciation of both Verdi's opera and the deeply tragic "fool" at the story's heart.

In a royal court, the jester held an oddly privileged position. As someone who rubbed shoulders with the court's most powerful people, the jester was a court insider with access to all the juiciest gossip. At the same

the nonsensical ramblings of a fool, jesters could speak truth to power with remarkable liberty. As long as their remarks were couched in the clothing of comedy, jesters could (at least in theory) say anything they wanted without fearing punishment. In fact, we still see this idea today at events such as the White House Correspondents' Association dinner, when comedians are invited to insult the president and powerful cabinet members to their faces.

### CRITICAL INQUIRY

Can you think of any other jesters or fools you have read about in literature (or seen in plays/movies/etc.)? Can you think of any characters that play a similar role in a story, even though they might not be a literal jester?



Rigoletto, the court comedian, banters with the Duke.

time, the jester was clearly an outsider. With their colorful costumes, jesters were easy to differentiate from everyone else at court. More subtly, the way jesters spoke—with poems, puns, and even songs—made it clear that they thought and conversed on a different level than the people around them.

The content of the jester's speech was also unusual. Since anything a jester said could be dismissed as merely

It might seem that jesters enjoyed a plum position: Hired to make people laugh, they might have lived a life of gaiety and contentment free from the usual stressors of life in an absolutist regime. Yet the jester's job had a decidedly darker aspect. Perpetually viewed as different, jesters were frequently subject to ridicule and spite. This was especially true if they had a deformity or disability. For instance, Rigoletto, a hunchback, is a lightning rod for not only casual contempt from the Duke's friends (such as jeers and insults) but also the unimaginably cruel "joke" of Gilda's kidnapping.

Rigoletto, then, is a comedian, but his life is anything but comic. Both Verdi and Hugo realized that this ironic juxtaposition of happiness and sorrow would make their story of love, hatred, and revenge all the more powerful. Verdi was right when he observed that Hugo's play was one of the greatest dramas of the modern age. For when the clown onstage removes a smiling mask to reveal his own bitter tears, the whole audience will likely weep along with him.



# Deep Dive

## DODGING THE CENSOR'S PEN

*Rigoletto* is one of Verdi's most famous operas, but the opera we know and love today could easily have looked and sounded very different. At every step of the creative process, Verdi was forced to battle with the censors in Venice (where the opera premiered) to preserve the essential qualities of Hugo's cynical play. Initially, the Venetian authorities forbade Verdi from writing an opera based on *Le Roi s'Amuse*; later, the subject was only approved with significant modifications to the setting and the characters. Yet while Verdi's troubles with *Rigoletto* were perhaps unusually pronounced, the truth is that for Italian composers in the early to mid-1800s, censorship was a fact of life. Operas were censored for the same reason that all kinds of theater were: Authorities worried that certain subjects would spread dangerous ideas among the public, undermining the social order of the day.

One particularly touchy topic was the unflattering representation of royalty. This was especially true in the years after the French Revolution, when the monarchs of Europe suddenly understood the precarity of their positions and began to view their subjects with fear. Italy was no exception, and in the decades before Italian unification in 1861, the various states that existed on the peninsula—among them the Kingdom of the Two Sicilies with its capital in Naples; the Papal States, ruled by the Pope from Rome; and the Hapsburg Empire, which controlled much of Northern Italy, including Milan and Venice—tried their utmost to suppress the kind of revolutionary sentiments that might lead to an uprising. “Immorality,” broadly conceived, was also a standard reason for required revisions, with crime, blasphemy, and sexual transgression among the most common targets of the censor's pen. Between an unethical and philandering ruler on the one hand and premeditated homicide on the other, *Le Roi s'Amuse* and *Rigoletto* managed to

offend censors on both these counts, and one can see why the story was never going to be an easy sell.

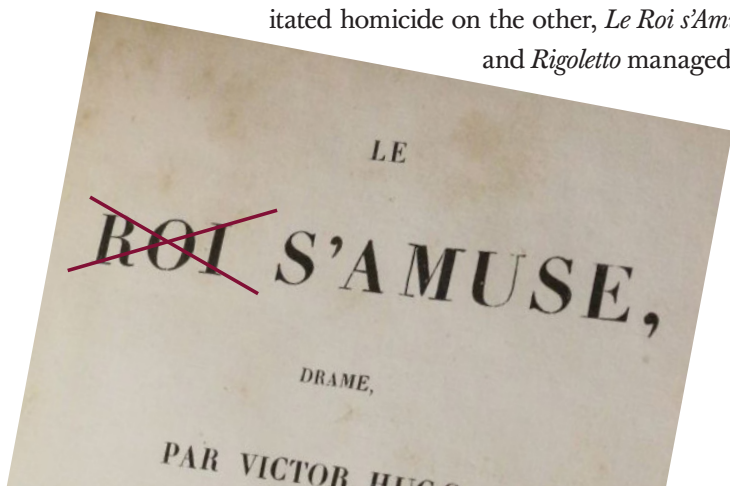
Censorship occurred at various stages in the opera-writing process. Subjects were vetted in advance by the managers of a given theater and by the police; the libretto itself, once written, also needed official approval.

### CRITICAL INQUIRY

Look up some books, songs, plays, movies, or other forms of entertainment that have been banned in your own country or state. Are you surprised by what you find?

Censors could demand alterations to specific words or lines, modifications to characters, the excision of specific arias or choruses, or even the rewriting of entire acts. But sometimes censorship was imposed at a later stage, after the dress rehearsal, or even after the first performance. In these cases, composers had to be able to rewrite or adapt their music in a hurry. Prior to Verdi, composers frequently reused numbers from their back catalog to fill the gaps in a censored opera; numbers that had previously fallen prey to censorship could also be reused in later works, with new words and new dramatic scenario. Given the unending demand for new works in Italian opera houses and the speed with which Italian composers were expected to write their music, this habit of reuse made good artistic, economic, and practical sense.

On the other hand, censorship in Italian opera was never consistent. A libretto rejected by the censor in Venice might be accepted by the authorities in Rome, while an opera staged in Milan might be banned in Naples. For this reason, it seems likely that Verdi knew exactly what kind of trouble the censors might cause him when he decided to adapt Hugo's play—and also that he had a decent chance of writing the *Rigoletto* he wanted anyway.



# Deep Dive

## STORMY WEATHER

Act III of *Rigoletto* features one of the most memorable musical moments in all of Verdi's oeuvre: The hit man Sparafucile is arguing with his sister and accomplice, Maddalena, who wants to spare the Duke's life. Sparafucile has no particular grudge against the Duke, but he needs to deliver a body to Rigoletto by the end of the night, and where could he possibly find another person to murder on a dark and stormy evening like this? And then comes a knock at the door ... just the wind, surely. But no: There it is again! And so Sparafucile and Maddalena prepare to welcome the new "guest" who will take the Duke's place, while Gilda prepares to make the ultimate sacrifice. As Gilda crosses the threshold to meet her bloody fate, the thunderstorm passes directly overhead, punctuating the characters' lines with orchestral flashes of lightning and crashes of thunder.

Storms like this one have a long pedigree in literature, theater, and opera. Powerful symbols of rage, spite, and fear, they often appear at especially charged narrative moments, as though the heavens themselves were horrified by the human (or supernatural) misdeeds taking place on Earth. In William Shakespeare's *Macbeth*, the Three Witches who confront Macbeth at the beginning of the play are accompanied by thunder and lightning, befitting their status as agents of hell. On the operatic stage,

Carl Maria von Weber's *Der Freischütz* (1821) features a famous scene set in the Wolf's Glen, where the Devil assists the protagonist in casting seven magic bullets. The stage directions for the Wolf's Glen—not somewhere you'd want to be after dark—call for not one but two thunderstorms approaching from opposite directions. Outside of the theater, too, there is a tradition of tempestuous music. Particularly after the modern symphony orchestra developed toward the end of the 18th century,

### CRITICAL INQUIRY

If you could create the soundtrack for a storm sequence, what kinds of sound effects would you want to use? Would you focus on standard musical instruments? Would you use non-musical objects to create sounds? Or would you use a combination of instruments and other objects?

composers were taken with the idea of representing such extreme weather with musical means alone. Ludwig van Beethoven led the way in his Sixth Symphony (1808), nicknamed the "Pastoral": The idyllic mood of the third movement is abruptly cut off by a powerful storm in the fourth.

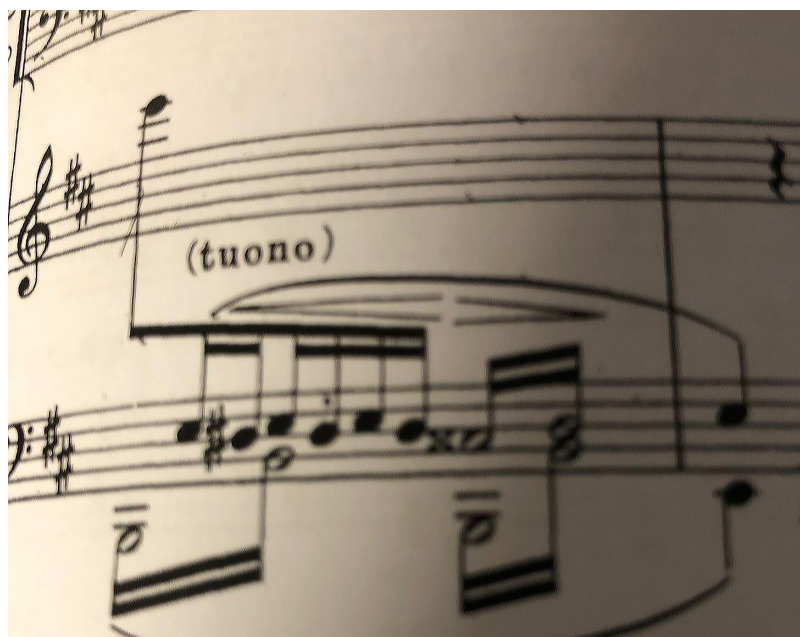
Yet the most direct predecessor to *Rigoletto*'s Act III storm may well be Gioachino Rossini's overture to *Guillaume Tell* (1829), which features a particularly well-known storm depiction. Rossini's overture makes use of several musical techniques that are highly characteristic of orchestral thunderstorms. Rising wind is rendered with nervous tremolo (trembling) strings, while short, sharp staccato notes in the flutes depict the isolated raindrops that precede the storm proper. The fury of the storm itself requires rolling strikes on the timpani and bass drum to represent thunder; this percussive roar is augmented by the brass instruments (especially trombones) playing at full throttle. Rapidly descending chromatic musical





lines (filling in all the gaps between the notes of the scale) suggest lightning strikes and driving rain. Such techniques, albeit slightly modernized, are recognizable even in more recent music, such as the “Storm” interlude from Benjamin Britten’s opera *Peter Grimes* (1942).

Verdi draws on all these techniques for the storm scene in *Rigoletto*, while also linking the musical effects to the unfolding drama in an especially striking way. Most of the action in this scene takes place inside Sparafucile’s inn, so Verdi crafted the music to make it sound like we are hearing a storm from within the building (unlike the fully outdoor thunderstorm in the *Guillaume Tell* overture). While Maddalena and Sparafucile argue, flashes of forked lightning appear as broken chords in the high winds—but quietly, as though flickering through rain-soaked windows. And Verdi comes up with a clever means of depicting the wind, with the chorus singing eerie rising and falling figures in close harmony, as though the wind were howling through the cracks of the ramshackle building. Only when the door is opened for Gilda, at the moment of highest dramatic tension, does the storm reach its peak. Both musically and thematically, it is all the more powerful for having withheld its fury until the last moment.



#### **FUN FACT**

Act III of *Rigoletto* features one of the best-known melodies in all of opera: “La donna è mobile.” The tune has been used in countless advertisements, including ads for Italian cuisine (everything from tomato paste to restaurant chains), body spray, scrubbing bubbles, and chocolate chip cookies—as well as two different Super Bowl ads for Doritos. It has also been featured in movie, television, and videogame soundtracks, such as *The Sopranos*, *Rocky Balboa*, *Holmes & Watson*, and *Grand Theft Auto*.

# Timeline

## THE WEIMAR REPUBLIC

“My setting for *Rigoletto* reflects what I see in the opera as pre-fascist conditions,” says director Bartlett Sher. “It’s about an autocratic duke who abuses his power. He marshals forces that allow him to enjoy this power without any kind of restrictions. So I placed the opera in Weimar Germany, the period between World War I and World War II, where the conditions for a nascent fascism were all in place.” Since its creation, artists, audiences, and censors have all understood *Rigoletto* to be a profoundly political work of art. Yet to understand Sher’s decision to place this story in the Weimar Republic, it’s worth reviewing the major sociopolitical events that defined interwar Germany—and considering the many small steps that ultimately led the country into the horrors of Nazism and World War II.

### 1918

**November 9** Following several weeks of nationwide protests, Kaiser Wilhelm II of Germany abdicates the throne.

**November 11** The First World War ends at 11AM. The war has been catastrophic. Across Europe, 15 million people are dead.

Germany alone is left with two million orphans, one million widows, and one million people with war-related disabilities.

While some Germans are relieved that the war is over, many others are ashamed by the loss. Almost immediately, conspiracy theories begin to spread blaming Jews, communists, and other minorities for Germany’s defeat.

### 1919

**January to August** With Wilhelm’s abdication, Germany is in need of a new government. Berlin, the capital, is still roiled by protests, so politicians head to the bucolic town of Weimar to draft a new constitution. The constitution, which guarantees freedom of speech, equality

for men and women, and universal suffrage, is finalized on August 11. The Weimar Republic, so named for the town where the constitution was crafted, begins.

Many Germans are excited about their new democracy, but two groups are furious about the new governmental structure. One group is the traditional conservatives, including business and church leaders, who are appalled by the Republic’s labor-friendly laws and liberal social mores. The other group is a right-wing collection of nationalists and fascists; this group will soon coalesce into the Nazi Party.

**April to June** In the meantime, delegates from the Allied forces meet

with German delegates in the French town of Versailles to hammer out a peace treaty. By the time the treaty is finalized, Germany has lost one seventh of its prewar territory and been demilitarized. Most onerous of all, Germany is forced to assume sole financial responsibility for the war. Germany will not finish paying this debt until 1987.

### 1923

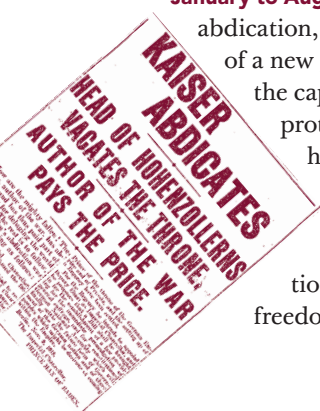
Desperate to prop up the national economy after the end of the war, the German government has been printing huge amounts of paper money, walloping the country with rampant hyperinflation. By November, when the government prints its first trillion-mark bank note, the exchange rate is more than four trillion marks per dollar.

On November 15, the government institutes a new currency (the Rentenmark, equal to one billion old imperial marks) to try to stabilize the economy. The measure works, and over the next few



### CRITICAL INQUIRY

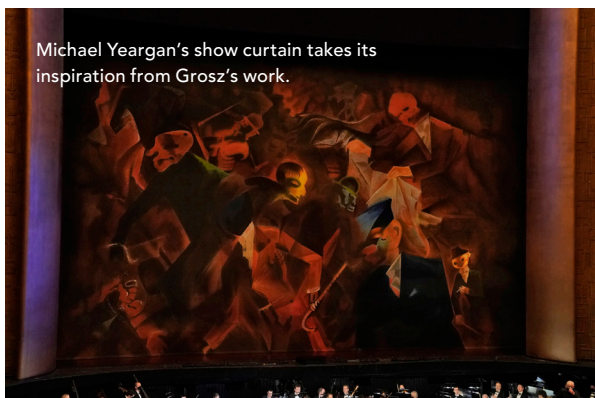
Merriam-Webster defines *fascism* as “a political philosophy, movement, or regime ... that exalts nation and often race above the individual and that stands for a centralized autocratic government headed by a dictatorial leader.” Based on this definition, why do you think Bartlett Sher sees “pre-fascist conditions” in *Rigoletto*? What about the Duke’s behavior and the behavior of those around him might enable fascism to take hold?



## THE WEIMAR REPUBLIC: ONE ARTIST'S PERSPECTIVE

The set design of the Met's new *Rigoletto* was deeply influenced by the art of the Weimar era—and set designer Michael Yeargan drew particular inspiration from the work of the German painter George Grosz. Born Georg Groß in Berlin in 1893, the artist volunteered for World War I in 1914. Yet unlike many of his fellow painters, he was never enthusiastic about the military engagement, and by 1916, he had developed such a strong anti-nationalist sentiment that he changed his name to make it less German, adopting the Anglicized "George" and the Hungarian-inspired spelling "Grosz."

Throughout the 1920s, Grosz made a name for himself with extraordinarily detailed—and often caustically sardonic—caricatures of the people of the Weimar Republic. Some works, like *The Eclipse of the Sun* (1926),



Michael Yeargan's show curtain takes its inspiration from Grosz's work.

depict real-life military and political leaders with outlandish features and surrounded by the imagery of death. Others, like *The Pillars of Society* (1926) offered mordant portraits of the kinds of "upstanding citizens" who had led Germany into war or who were now supposedly helping the young Republic while allowing fascism to slowly take over the country; yet a third category of images, like the tragic skeletons in *Pimps of Death* (1919), are melancholy reminders of the citizens whose lives had been forever altered by the ravages of war. To the modern observer, these caricatures may seem bizarre or exaggerated, but for Grosz's German contemporaries, their depictions of real-life people, events, and ideas were obvious.

"George Grosz's cartoons seem to us not satires but realistic reportage," the philosopher and writer Hannah Arendt later wrote. "We knew those types; they were all around us."

As one of the foremost artists of the Weimar era, Grosz's influence on Sher and Yeargan's production could have been simply aesthetic. In an opera about an ill-used jester, however, Grosz's unflinching, often sympathetic portrayals of those who have been forgotten or mistreated by society have additional resonance. Indeed, *Rigoletto* himself could well take his place in Grosz's lineup of Weimar-era outsiders: A man driven by cruelty, callousness, and a lifetime of bullying to a tragic act of desperation and revenge.

years, Germans will enjoy relative prosperity. Unfortunately, the new currency is also accompanied by strict austerity measures, including a rollback of social security and labor laws, that will prove disastrous when the economy once again takes a turn for the worse.

### 1929

**October 29** A sudden stock market crash in the United States sparks the Great Depression. Germany's still-fragile economy is deeply affected by the downturn, and soon one third of the German workforce is unemployed.

Unfortunately, these dire economic circumstances provide ample fodder for the right-wing parties, including the Nazis, that have long been dissatisfied with the Weimar Republic.

### 1932

Over the course of the year, Germany holds no fewer than three major elections. Yet these attempts to establish a government capable of dealing with the ongoing economic disaster bear little fruit: No single party gets a majority, and establishing a government depends on building a coalition between parties. The traditional

conservatives see their chance to overturn the Republic. Confident that they can control the upstart fascists, they decide to join forces with the Nazis and agree to make Adolf Hitler chancellor. It is a Faustian bargain that will have horrific consequences for the future.

### 1933

**January 30** Hitler assumes control of the German government. The Weimar Republic—and the era of political and social progress it represented—is over, to be replaced by the terror, destruction, and genocide of the Third Reich.



---

# Active Exploration

The following activities will help familiarize your students with the plot of *Rigoletto*, forge connections between a variety of classroom subjects, and encourage creative responses to the opera. They are designed to be accessible to a wide array of ages and experience levels.

## A SPINNING QUARTET

Sharpen your students' listening skills with a detailed dive into the famous quartet from Act III of *Rigoletto*. Draw students' attention to the four individual lines, and ask them to think about how the music and text work together to express each character's feelings. Finally, invite students to create a colorful paper spinner inspired by the quartet and Bartlett Sher's turntable stage.

## PICTURE PLOT STATUES

Introduce students to a selection of words and ideas from Weimar-era Berlin—hedonism, agitprop, die neue Frau, cabaret, talkies, and Ringvereine—and ask them to research these words individually or in groups. Ask them to reflect: Based on your research, why might Bartlett Sher have decided to set *Rigoletto* in Germany in the 1920s? Finally, invite students to use their research and what they know about *Rigoletto*'s plot to craft an evolved statue performance.

## EXPRESS YOURSELF

Study some of George Grosz's Expressionist caricatures. Then invite your students to create their own Expressionist portraits, thinking about how exaggerated or distorted features might reflect the subject's personality. Tip: Use a very long paintbrush (tape a paintbrush to the end of a yard stick or other long stick) to help get a distorted, Expressionistic result.

## COMMON CORE STRANDS

**This guide directly supports the following ELA-Literacy Common Core Strands:**

### **CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.9-10.11**

Interpret, analyze, and evaluate narratives, poetry, and drama, aesthetically and ethically by making connections to: other texts, ideas, cultural perspectives, eras, personal events and situations.

### **CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W.8.7**

Conduct short research projects to answer a question (including a self-generated question), drawing on several sources and generating additional related, focused questions that allow for multiple avenues of exploration.

### **CCSS.ELA-Literacy.SL.8.2a**

Use experience and knowledge of language and logic, as well as culture, to think analytically, address problems creatively, and advocate persuasively.

### **CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RI.8.7**

Evaluate the advantages and disadvantages of using different mediums (e.g., print or digital text, video, multimedia) to present a particular topic or idea.