

Synopsis

Act I: Love

Luisa, daughter of an old soldier, is in love with a young man she knows as Carlo, but who is actually Rodolfo, the son of the local lord, Count Walter. The two lovers proclaim undying fidelity, but Miller, Luisa's father, is dubious. His fears are confirmed when Walter's retainer, Wurm, who also loves Luisa and hopes to marry her, reveals Rodolfo's identity.

In his castle, Walter, informed of Rodolfo's love for a commoner, resolves to end their relationship. Instead, he hopes to have his son marry a widowed duchess, Federica. When Rodolfo is alone with Federica, he reveals that he loves another, but the duchess, who has been infatuated with him since childhood, refuses to break their engagement.

Back in the village, Miller tells Luisa that Rodolfo has deceived her and is about to contract a wealthy marriage. The young man, however, comes to plead his sincerity. When Walter storms in and insults Luisa, Miller defends her. The count orders both Luisa and her father consigned to prison, but Rodolfo secures their freedom by threatening to reveal how his father, with Wurm's assistance, murdered his cousin to gain his present position.

Act II: The Intrigue

Luisa learns that her father has been jailed for insulting Walter. Wurm appears and tells her that the only way she can save Miller is to write a letter confessing that she never loved Rodolfo and sought him only for his rank and wealth, while her true love was for Wurm. He then compels her to go to the castle and declare her love for him before the duchess.

At the castle, Wurm presents Luisa's letter to Walter, and the two plot to send it to Rodolfo. Wurm then brings in Luisa. Goaded with threats by Wurm and Walter against her father, she professes her love for Wurm to Federica. Rodolfo receives Luisa's letter. In despair, he is about to attack Wurm when Walter persuades him that marrying Federica will be the best way for him to avenge Luisa's treachery.

Act III: The Poison

Miller, who has been released from prison, tries to comfort Luisa. The two agree to leave the village the next day. As Luisa prays, Rodolfo enters and pours a vial of poison into a glass. He confronts Luisa with the letter. When she cannot deny that she wrote it, Rodolfo asks her to pour him a drink; when he says that it tastes bitter, she swallows some too. Rodolfo tells Luisa that the cup was poisoned, and she, released from her vow, tells him the truth. She collapses in her father's arms. When Wurm and Walter arrive, Rodolfo kills Wurm before succumbing to the poison himself.

—*Courtesy of OPERA NEWS*

Giuseppe Verdi

Luisa Miller

Premiere: Teatro di San Carlo, Naples, 1849

Luisa Miller represents a transitional moment in Giuseppe Verdi's unparalleled career. While incorporating some of the youthful vitality that had made Verdi an international sensation, the opera also looks forward to the dramaturgical discipline and sophistication of the composer's middle period. The story, which is refreshingly free of subplots or complex political commentary, derives from the 1784 drama *Kabale und Liebe* (*Intrigue and Love*) by Friedrich von Schiller—a tragedy focusing on issues of justice and struggles between classes. Verdi and his librettist, Salvatore Cammarano, dispensed with much of the political intrigue and focused on love. The result is an opera about real people rather than archetypes or high-minded concepts. As with many of Verdi's masterpieces, *Luisa Miller* centers on the bond between a father and his daughter as they stand together against a hostile world. Much of the dramatic and psychological acumen that would define the mature Verdi is already fully apparent in this earlier work. It is an opera very much like its title character—one that impresses with genuine virtues rather than superficial flattery.

The Creators

In a remarkable career spanning six decades in the theater, Giuseppe Verdi (1813–1901) composed 28 operas, at least half of which are at the core of today's repertory. In addition to his mastery of the genre, Verdi's role in Italy's cultural and political development has made him a national treasure in his native country. Salvatore Cammarano (1801–1852) was a playwright and one of the foremost librettists of his day. He created several libretti for Donizetti, including *Lucia di Lammermoor* (1835), as well as *La Battaglia di Legnano* (1849) and *Il Trovatore* (1853) for Verdi. Cammarano adapted his libretto for *Luisa Miller* from a play by the great German author and philosopher Friedrich von Schiller (1759–1805), a hugely influential figure in literature and beyond. His writings especially resonated with musicians throughout the 19th century, and many operas were based on his dramas (most notably, Rossini's *Guillaume Tell* and Verdi's *Don Carlos*), while his poem "An die Freude" ("Ode to Joy") provided the text for the fourth movement of Beethoven's *Symphony No. 9*.

The Setting

The opera was originally set during the first half of the 17th century in the Tyrolean Alps (now part of Austria), which reflects the Germanic source of the

drama. The non-Mediterranean setting is also typical of an interest in Northern Europe that was a hallmark of the Romantics and other artists of the early 19th century. The Met's current production updates the setting to rural England in the era of the work's composition.

The Music

As the opera represents a pivotal moment in Verdi's career, so the score itself has aspects of both the rough vitality of his early works and the refinement of his middle career. Passionate melody is on full display throughout the score, nowhere more than in the tenor's ravishing Act II aria "Quando le sere al placido." But there are departures from the norms of Italian opera as well: The overture, often heard in concerts, is built on a single theme rather than being a collection of tunes from the opera. Some commentators see it as an homage to—and a declaration of equality with—the great German symphonic composers. Yet the music is pure Verdi, especially in its power to delineate characters. The rare duet for two basses in Act II reflects the preponderance of lower voices (two basses, a baritone, and a mezzo-soprano in addition to the tenor and soprano) found throughout the score. It is against these dark sounds that the high tessitura of Luisa's soprano takes on an additional sense of lightness and purity. Her impassioned "Tu puniscimi, o Signore," filled with pianissimo high notes, is a choice example of her music expressing the luminescence of her character. The characters' sharply etched vocal outlines are especially apparent in the striking ensemble that concludes Act II, Scene 2, which includes absolutely no orchestral accompaniment whatsoever.

Met History

Luisa Miller premiered at the Met in December 1929 with an exceptional cast that featured Rosa Ponselle, Giacomo Lauri-Volpi, and Giuseppe De Luca, conducted by Tullio Serafin, in a production by Joseph Urban. The opera was then considered a Verdian obscurity, and even the high-profile singers and production only garnered an additional five performances before being retired the following year. A new production in 1968, with Montserrat Caballé, Richard Tucker, Sherrill Milnes, and Giorgio Tozzi, conducted by Thomas Schippers and directed by Nathaniel Merrill, was therefore something of a revelation for Met audiences. It received 17 performances in that season alone. The opera has appeared in seven subsequent seasons, with such stars as Renata Scotto and Katia Ricciarelli (Luisa); Carlo Bergonzi, José Carreras, Plácido Domingo, and Luciano Pavarotti (Rodolfo); Cornell MacNeil and Leo Nucci (Miller); and Paul Plishka and James Morris (Wurm) taking on the principal roles. The current production, by Elijah Moshinsky, premiered during the 2001–02 season, with Marina Mescheriakova as Luisa and Neil Shicoff as Rodolfo.

Program Note

The genesis of *Luisa Miller* is unusually complex, even for Verdi. His obligation to write another opera for Naples's Teatro di San Carlo began with an arrangement in 1844 between his publisher Giulio Ricordi and the San Carlo management. Verdi clearly planned for one opera only (*Alzira* in 1845), but Ricordi exceeded his mandate and arranged for two. Verdi rejected the proposal outright, but Ricordi kept trying. Further negotiations for Verdi to send a score for a second opera were derailed when management insisted on his presence in Naples, and the irksome protracted arguments resumed. "If you cannot succeed [in freeing me from the contract]," Verdi wrote to Ricordi in December 1847, "I will write this most cursed opera for Naples." Declarations to the Neapolitans that the contract was void did Verdi no good, especially after threats of litigation from the theater against librettist Salvatore Cammarano that he would be held solely (and financially) responsible. Verdi, in what musicologist Jeffrey Kallberg calls "a masterpiece of gruff sympathy," wrote back a capitulation and began searching for a subject—this in the midst of fashioning the libretto for *La Battaglia di Legnano* with Cammarano as well. Complications abounded.

Verdi's loyal collaborator began by suggesting various subjects for the new opera, starting with *Amore e Raggio*, an Italian translation and adaptation of Schiller's third drama, *Kabale und Liebe*. The last and finest of Schiller's plays in prose, it is a scathing indictment of society under absolutist rule. The arch-villain of the piece—the prince of a small state—never appears on stage at all, his tyranny disseminated instead through high-placed officials, such as the president of the state council whose son, Major Ferdinand Walter, is in love with Luise Miller, the daughter of a music master. It is her innocent goodness that is destroyed by greed and lust, both for power and Luise's youthful body; when Lady Milford, the prince's mistress, tries to make Luise give Ferdinand up, the young woman's shining spirit impels the older woman to leave the corrupt court. In his early plays, a somewhat word-drunk Schiller could spew torrents of rhetoric, but *Kabale und Liebe* is made of sterner stuff. Verdi would later be disappointed when his librettist dispensed with a commanding diva role for Lady Milford, a passionate woman determined to help the prince's oppressed subjects. But the strict Neapolitan censors would never have allowed a character of such dubious sexual morality, whatever her innate nobility, to appear on stage.

Initially, though, the composer wanted something else altogether. "To me," Verdi wrote, "it seems that in a vast theater like San Carlo, if there is not some element of the grandiose, the spectacular, something is missing." Deeply affected by the revolutionary events sweeping across Europe in 1848, the composer proposed an opera on *The Siege of Florence*, based on a novel by Francesco Guerrazzi about the fall of the Florentine republic in 1529–1530. Verdi wanted his operatic subjects to be "Italian and free," as close to history as possible, and he considered Francesco Ferruccio, who died at the Battle of Gavinana, to be "a

gigantic character, one of the greatest martyrs of Italian liberty." Canceling his existing contract with the Paris Opéra over the lack of a libretto, he set to work on what was planned as a grandly patriotic opera, but with a mixture of comedy and tragedy in the Shakespearean manner. But the censors would not have it and rejected the synopsis: "Because the subject is inopportune, given the current circumstances in Italy, and most of all in Florence, it is being returned to the management." Cammarano immediately recommended *Amore e Raggio* again, imploring Verdi "not to overstep certain boundaries, so as not to smash into new obstacles." After examining adaptations of Schiller's play by Alexandre Dumas père in Paris and various Italian stage versions, Cammarano produced a prose draft to which the composer responded with his customary savvy suggestions: He mourned the loss of the second prima donna he wanted (Lady Milford in addition to Luisa), requested something other than the customary stretta finale (in which the music becomes faster and faster) for the first act, and asked for a comic aspect to Wurm ("worm" in German, and a suitable name for the villainous underling of Count Walter). The comedic character Verdi wanted did not arrive until the frivolous Franciscan friar Fra Melitone in *La Forza del Destino* (1862), but there was much else in the early drafts of the libretto for *Luisa Miller* to please him.

With that, work commenced in earnest, and Verdi began to compose as soon as Cammarano sent him the first bits of text. The working process is fascinating to trace, one good example being the two men wrestling with different ideas about the structure of the second act. Cammarano envisioned an aria for Luisa, a solo quartet, and an aria for Rodolfo, while Verdi wanted a duet for Luisa and Wurm, another for Wurm and Walter, the quartet, an aria for Rodolfo, and "then something else well suited for the end of an act." One can see that Cammarano was more of a minimalist, with Verdi the maximilist. After the usual complex negotiations were done, the two men together provided the second act with a chorus; a scena and aria ("Tu puniscimi, o Signore") for Luisa; a recitative, scena, and duet for Walter and Wurm ("L'alto retaggio non ho bramato"); a quartet for Luisa, Federica, Walter, and Wurm ("Presentarti alla Duchessa"); and a scena and aria for Rodolfo ("Quando le sere al placido"). The six weeks from mid-August 1849 to the end of September were a period of intense work, with sketches followed by part of the skeleton score even before Verdi left for Naples in October. In keeping with the complications of this chapter of Verdi's life, even the journey was problematic, including a period of quarantine in Rome due to a cholera outbreak. The Teatro di San Carlo's financial difficulties caused yet another contretemps before work could resume after the quarantine was over and the money was flowing once again. The progress to a completed full score required a massive number of revisions and alterations, transpositions and changes of wording. Nothing about this work came easily. Verdi, for example,

often altered Cammarano's word-choices to more vivid locutions. Where Cammarano wrote for Miller "Ei m'ha spezzato il cor" in Act I, Scene 4 of the libretto, Verdi's character sings "Ei m'ha squarciato il cor." The difference is between the more pedestrian "breaking a heart" and "rending a heart."

Verdi's approach to opera evolved throughout the 1840s, with *Luisa Miller* arriving at a portentous time in the arc of his career. In the earlier works, such as *Oberto* (1839) and *I Lombardi* (1843), Verdi engages at times in emphasis without depth, a two-dimensional grandeur, but in *I Due Foscari* (1844), he wanted something "delicate and full of pathos," more streamlined in form, with more sophisticated orchestration, and even themes associated with specific characters. In addition, the essentially static Rossinian forms that Verdi inherited, such as the gran duetto (grand duet), are made dynamic, their action unfolding progressively. He realized early that new dramatic concepts had to come from outside Italy, hence his attraction to Shakespeare (*Macbeth*, 1847), Byron (*Il Corsaro*, 1848), and Schiller (*I Masnadieri*, 1847), and he was decisively influenced by French grand opera, with its refined orchestration, larger harmonic palette, and distinctively French musical forms, such as the strophic aria with refrain and the ternary aria (*Jérusalem* of 1847, an adaptation of *I Lombardi*, was his first opera for Paris). In *Luisa Miller*, there is one foreshadowing after another of his middle-period masterpieces to follow in the 1850s, beginning with an astonishing overture whose thematic development and chromaticism are noteworthy. We can hear Parisian influence in Rodolfo's exquisite andante aria "Quando le sere al placido" at the end of Act II, with its clarinet arpeggios, broken chords for the strings, and the gorgeous harmonic shift at the climactic high point, although the cabaletta (fast, concluding aria), "L'ara, o l'avello apprestami," is much more conventional. And the entire third act sets a new standard in Verdian opera in its sensitive scoring, its flexibility with regard to form, and its balance of the lyrical and the dramatic.

Finally, after more than a month of rehearsals, *Luisa Miller* had its premiere on December 8, 1849, with Marietta Gazzaniga as Luisa, Settimio Malvezzi as Rodolfo, Achille De Bassini (one of Verdi's favorite "noble baritones") as Miller, Antonio Selva as Walter, and Marco Arati as Wurm. Because of the 1848–49 revolutions, there were fewer music periodicals to review the production, and Vincenzo Torelli, writing for the Neapolitan *L'omnibus*, disliked the work. He objected to Verdi's emphasis on "the science of music"—the chromatic harmonies and tonal adventurism that thrill modern audiences were not to his taste—and accused Verdi, of all people, of a lack of patriotism in turning to French and German sources of inspiration. The plot, he declared, was old-fashioned, and while he praised certain numbers, such as the Act III duet for Luisa and Miller, he, unbelievably, found the melody for "Quando le sere al placido" to be "cold and without effect." Only the reviewer for Ricordi's *Gazzetta*

musicale di Milano praised De Bassini's singing and the instrumental writing. All of Verdi's fears that he would have difficulty finding favor with the Neapolitan public came true, and his response was bitter: "Imbeciles, all of them! Do they believe that with these loathsome plots they can prevent the opera, if it is good, from touring the musical world?"

And indeed, Verdi's belief that his work was good and would find sympathetic listeners was vindicated. *Luisa Miller* immediately made its way into circulation—Rome, Milan, Modena, Trieste, Venice, Parma, Genoa, and Paris. Whatever the difficulties of bringing this opera into being and getting it onstage, Verdi was finally able to admit that *Luisa Miller* was a piece "which ... I love very much!"—a sentiment shared by all devotees of the composer's works.

—Susan Youens

Susan Youens is the J. W. Van Gorkom Professor of Music at the University of Notre Dame and has written eight books on the music of Franz Schubert and Hugo Wolf.