

Synopsis

Act I

At a party in his palace, the Duke of Mantua boasts of his way with women. He dances with the Countess Ceprano, and his hunchbacked jester, Rigoletto, mocks the countess's enraged but helpless husband. The courtier Marullo bursts in with the latest gossip: Rigoletto is suspected of keeping a young mistress in his home. The jester, unaware of the courtiers' talk, continues to taunt Ceprano, who plots with the others to punish the duke. Monterone, an elderly nobleman, forces his way into the crowd to denounce the duke for seducing his daughter and is viciously ridiculed by Rigoletto. Monterone is arrested and curses Rigoletto.

Rigoletto hurries home, disturbed by Monterone's curse. He encounters Sparafucile, a professional assassin, who offers his services. The jester reflects that his own tongue is as sharp as the murderer's dagger. Rigoletto enters his house and warmly greets his daughter, Gilda. Afraid for the girl's safety, he warns her nurse, Giovanna, not to let anyone into the house. When the jester leaves, the duke appears and bribes Giovanna, who lets him into the garden. He declares his love for Gilda, who has secretly admired him at church, and tells her he is a poor student. After he leaves, she tenderly thinks of her newfound love before going to bed. The courtiers gather outside the garden intending to abduct Rigoletto's "mistress." Meeting the jester, they quickly change their story and fool him into wearing a blindfold and holding a ladder against his own garden wall; then they carry off Gilda. Rigoletto, rushing into the house, realizes his daughter is gone and collapses as he remembers Monterone's curse.

Intermission

Act I

In his palace, the duke is distraught about the abduction of Gilda. When the courtiers return and tell him the story of how they took the girl from Rigoletto's house and left her in the duke's chamber, the duke hurries off to the conquest. Rigoletto enters, looking for Gilda. The courtiers are astonished to find out that she is his daughter rather than his mistress, but prevent him from storming into the duke's chamber. The jester violently accuses them of cruelty, then asks for compassion. Gilda appears and runs in shame to her father, who orders the others to leave. Alone with Rigoletto, Gilda tells him of the duke's courtship, then of her abduction. When Monterone passes by on his way to execution, the jester swears that both he and the old man will be avenged. Gilda begs her father to forgive the duke.

Intermission

Act III

Rigoletto and Gilda arrive at an inn on the outskirts of Mantua where Sparafucile and his sister Maddalena live. Inside, the duke laughs at the fickleness of women. Gilda and Rigoletto watch through the window as the duke amuses himself with Maddalena. The jester sends Gilda off to Verona disguised as a boy and pays Sparafucile to murder the duke. Gilda returns to overhear Maddalena urge her brother to spare the handsome stranger and kill the hunchback instead. Sparafucile refuses to murder Rigoletto but agrees to kill the next stranger who comes to the inn so that he will be able to produce a dead body. Gilda decides to sacrifice herself for the duke. She knocks at the door and is stabbed. Rigoletto returns to claim the body, which he assumes is the duke's. As he gloats over the sack Sparafucile has given him, he hears his supposed victim singing in the distance. Frantically tearing open the sack, he finds his daughter, who dies asking his forgiveness. Horrified, Rigoletto remembers Monterone's curse.



Rigoletto on Demand

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In Focus

Giuseppe Verdi

Rigoletto

Premiere: Teatro La Fenice, Venice, 1851

A dramatic journey of undeniable force, *Rigoletto* commands the respect of critics, performers, and audiences alike. It was immensely popular from its premiere—from even before its premiere, according to accounts of the buzz that surrounded the initial rehearsals—and remains fresh and powerful to this day. The story is one of the most accessible in opera, based on a controversial Victor Hugo drama whose full dramatic implications only became apparent when transformed by Verdi's musical genius. *Rigoletto* is the tale of an outsider—a hunchbacked jester—who struggles to balance the dueling elements of beauty and evil that exist in his life. Written during the most fertile period of Verdi's artistic life, the opera resonates with a Shakespearean universality.

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 repertoire. His role in Italy's cultural and political development has made him an icon in his native country. Francesco Maria Piave (1810–1876), Verdi's librettist for *Rigoletto*, collaborated with him on ten works, including *Ernani*, *La Traviata*, *La Forza del Destino*, and the original versions of *Macbeth* and *Simon Boccanegra*.

The Setting

Victor Hugo's 1832 play *Le Roi s'Amuse* (*The King Amuses Himself*), set at the court of King François I of France (circa 1520), is a blatant depiction of depraved authority. In adapting it, Verdi and Piave fought incessantly with the Italian censors in a well-documented battle. It makes for interesting reading, particularly in revealing what Verdi found important in the story and what he considered superfluous. Though Verdi had no love of royalty and favored a republic, he was not a proletarian ideologue like Hugo, and he tended to view people more as individuals than as representatives of classes. He was content, with Piave's deft juggling, to set the opera at the non-royal Renaissance court of Mantua and to change all the names but held firm on other issues in the story, such as the curse that is the catalyst of the drama. Although the Duke remains unnamed, he was modeled on history's Vincenzo Gonzaga (1562–1612). The Gonzaga family motto—"Forse che sì, forse che no" ("Maybe yes, maybe no")—provides an interesting insight into some of the Duke's cavalier pronouncements. In Michael Mayer's Met production, the action unfolds in Las Vegas in 1960, a time and place with surprising parallels to the decadent world of Verdi's original setting.

In Focus

The Music

Rigoletto contains a wealth of melody, including one that is among the world's most famous: the tenor's jaunty "La donna è mobile." The opera's familiar arias—"Questa o quella" and "Caro nome," for example—are also rich with character insight and dramatic development. The heart of the score, though, lies in its fast-moving subtleties and apt dramatic touches. The baritone's solos, "Pari siamo" (Act I) and "Cortigiani, vil razza dannata" (Act II), are epic scenes telescoped to less than ten minutes each. The celebrated father-daughter duets also reflect Verdi's overall design. Rigoletto sings of his protective love for Gilda in Act I in a spun-out phrase of simple, honest melody, while her music decorates his. In their subsequent scene in Act II, Gilda's music (and, by implication, her life) is similarly intertwined with that of Rigoletto, until finally her melody breaks away as she strives to declare her adolescent independence. The famous quartet "Bella figlia dell'amore" (Act III) is an ingenious musical analysis of the diverging reactions of four characters in the same moment: The Duke's music rises with urgency and impatience, Gilda's droops with disappointment, Rigoletto's remains measured and paternal, while the promiscuous Maddalena is all over the place. In the context of the opera, the merely lovely music becomes inspired drama.

Met History

Met audiences first heard *Rigoletto* within a month of the company's inaugural performance, on November 16, 1883. The 1903–04 season opened with the company debut of Enrico Caruso as the Duke—a role that he went on to sing to sing 38 times before his premature death in 1921. The opera's title role was identified for many years with Italian baritone Giuseppe De Luca, who gave 96 performances between 1916 and 1940. Other notable Met *Rigolettos* have included Leonard Warren (1943–59), Robert Merrill (1952–72), and Cornell MacNeil (who surpassed De Luca's record with a record 102 appearances between 1959 and 1980). A new production in 1951, with Warren in the title role and Hilde Güden as Gilda, in her first Met appearance, also featured the company debut of designer Eugene Berman. Audience favorite Roberta Peters sang Gilda 88 times between 1951 and 1985—more than any soprano in Met history. In 1977, John Dexter directed a new production, which starred Sherrill Milnes, Ileana Cotrubas, Plácido Domingo, Isola Jones, and Justino Díaz. A new staging by Otto Schenk premiered in 1989 with June Anderson in her Met debut as Gilda, Luciano Pavarotti as the Duke, and Leo Nucci as Rigoletto. The current production, by Michael Mayer, opened in January 2013, with Michele Mariotti conducting Željko Lučić, Diana Damrau, and Piotr Beczała. In subsequent seasons, this production has also featured performances by George Gagnidze and Dmitri Hvorostovsky in the title role; Lisette Oropesa, Olga Peretyatko, Sonya Yoncheva, and Nadine Sierra (the latter two in their Met debuts) as Gilda; and Vittorio Grigolo, Matthew Polenzani, Stephen Costello, and Joseph Calleja as the Duke.

Program Note

As with Beethoven, Verdi's body of work is often divided by contemporary commentators into three artistic periods. In the first, stretching from 1839 to 1850, Verdi was at his most prolific, quickly completing 15 operas that established him with audiences of the time as one of the world's leading opera composers and the successor to Bellini, Donizetti, and Rossini, all of whom had recently died or retired. The towering masterpieces that guaranteed Verdi's position alongside opera's few all-time great composers, however, did not appear until the second and third periods of his career, marked by a significant break away from, or at least a highly innovative re-interpretation of, the traditional forms and expectations of Italian opera, to which his early works had mostly adhered. Keeping with the Beethoven analogy, *Rigoletto* was Verdi's "Eroica," marking the beginning of the composer's middle period and clearly surpassing in originality and achievement all of his previous work. At its 1851 premiere and throughout the ensuing 13-performance run at Venice's Teatro La Fenice, *Rigoletto* was an enormous success, and it traveled quickly from there. By 1855, the opera had been produced throughout Italy, across Europe, and as far afield as New York, Havana, and Montevideo, Uruguay. This international success, combined with the premieres of *Il Trovatore* and *La Traviata*—which followed close on *Rigoletto*'s heels in 1853—put to rest any remaining doubt regarding Verdi's operatic primacy.

But despite *Rigoletto*'s eventual success, it was very nearly killed before its birth, needing something of a political miracle just to see the light of day. After receiving the commission from La Fenice, Verdi—an ardent humanist, democrat, and patriot who longed for Italy to be free from the autocratic rule of France and Austria—turned to an uncomfortable source of inspiration: a play by Victor Hugo called *Le Roi s'Amuse* ("The King Amuses Himself"). Scathing and bleak, it centers on the amorous exploits of the historical French king François I and the downfall of his physically deformed and morally corrupt jester Triboulet, who encourages and makes light of the king's lechery. The hunchbacked antihero ultimately reaps the poisonous crop he has sown when François discovers and rapes his sheltered daughter, whom he has hidden away from the corruption of the court. Worse yet, in a botched attempt to arrange the king's murder in revenge, Triboulet causes instead the death of his own daughter.

Naturally, Austrian censors (who had jurisdiction over northern Italy, most of which was a province of the Habsburg Empire at the time) were not impressed with Verdi and librettist Francesco Maria Piave's work. Three months before the scheduled premiere, the administration of La Fenice received a letter from the authorities expressing the regional governor's disappointment that Verdi and Piave "should not have chosen a more worthy vehicle to display their talents than the revolting immorality and obscene triviality of *La Maledizione* [*The Curse*, *Rigoletto*'s original title]." The letter communicated that any performance of the opera was absolutely forbidden and instructed that no one's time be wasted

Program Note

with protestations or appeals. Luckily, this last directive was ignored, and after extensive revisions to the work's setting and its characters' identities—the scene moved from the French court to Mantua, King François became the local duke, Triboulet became Rigoletto, and so on—the newly titled *Rigoletto* won its approval for performance from a censor who, by a crucial twist of fate, was an opera lover and an admirer of Verdi's work.

Though the play's political bent surely played its part in attracting Verdi's attention, it was the emotional, psychological, and narrative power of *Le Roi s'Amuse*, and the depth and inherent contradiction of Triboulet's character, that most appealed to Verdi, an intensely intellectual and extremely well-read man for whom literature, poetry, and drama held as much significance as music. (The collection of authors on whose work he based his operas reads like a cross-section of history's great writers: Hugo, Byron, Schiller, Voltaire, and most of all, Shakespeare, a formative influence and continual source of inspiration for Verdi, who claimed to have read and re-read the playwright's works since childhood.) It is therefore hard to overestimate the composer's level of admiration for Hugo's play, which he described in a letter to Piave as "one of the greatest creations of modern theatre. The story is great, immense, and includes a character who is one of the greatest creations that the theatres of all nations and all times will boast. ... Triboulet is a creation worthy of Shakespeare."

The genius of Verdi's transformation of Hugo's spoken drama into *Rigoletto*—and indeed of the stylistic step forward represented by this first work of Verdi's second creative period—is the closeness of music, text, and action. Form and content are streamlined and treated fluidly so that neither the drama nor the music is distorted to fit the other, but rather the two are woven into a single organic whole. In the case of *Rigoletto*, this makes for a grim, vicious, and powerfully effective work, an opera noir in which the tension never flags and no respite is provided from the disturbing arc of the plot. Verdi and Piave have stripped Hugo's story and characters down to their bare essentials. From the opening scene—in which Monterone spits out his curse at a man so depraved that he would taunt an anguished father unable to protect his daughter—to the final scenes—in which Rigoletto himself tastes the impotence and torment of that very same situation and worse—not a single word of text or note of music is wasted. This is not a cathartic tragedy or a tale of noble sacrifice. There are no admirable characters here, no moral lesson, no redemption, and no silver lining. There is only a merciless depiction of the dark side of society.

With his music, Verdi takes all of this and makes it human, creating the psychological and emotional dimension that is mostly absent from the minimalist, clear-eyed text. Largely abandoning the predictable alternating structure of recitative, aria, and ensemble numbers, Verdi instead drives constantly forward in an arioso-like mixture of the three, relying mostly on passages for two or more characters that flow seamlessly together. Trimming the fat of virtuoso vocal

display, he strives for naturalness of expression. Consequently, what solo numbers there are must be handled by the performers with tasteful understatement to avoid seeming out of place and stalling the crucial momentum. As Verdi himself explained in response to a request for an additional showpiece aria for the soprano who first sang Gilda, “any new number would be superfluous ... [and] would make no effect without the right time and place. ... My intention was that *Rigoletto* should be one long series of duets, without arias and finales, because that is how I felt it. If anyone replies, ‘But you could have done this or that or the other,’ I can only say, ‘That may be, but I did not know how to do any better.’” It comes as no surprise, therefore, that *Rigoletto*’s finest moment is the ingenious Act III quartet, combining the work’s emotional high point with its musical one and achieving a level of perfection matched by few other passages in all of opera.

One is also constantly amazed by Verdi’s inventiveness and ability to unmistakably conjure his desired emotions and impressions while leaving them unspoken. Through evocative scoring (the chorus’s imitation of wind during the storm in Act III), thematic manipulation (the curse leitmotif that is established in the opera’s very first measures and lurks beneath each of its character’s realizations of their fate), and pitch-perfect character painting (the very nature of each personality revealed by their music), Verdi’s score communicates subliminally with the listener. In Act II, for example, “while [Rigoletto] sings and moves us to pity,” musicologist Vincent Godefroy observes, “the orchestra is commenting on his daughter’s experience behind the locked door. ... Concentrate on the orchestra and you will hear the rape of Gilda.” Of similar genius is the treatment of “La donna è mobile,” by far the most frequently excerpted bit of *Rigoletto*. So carefree and charmingly tongue-in-cheek on its own, Verdi’s jaunty little tune is positively slimy in context, and when its distant strains return in the final scene to transform Rigoletto’s bloodthirsty gloating to horrible dread, the effect is viscerally sickening. These musical masterstrokes, resonating with the listener on a subconscious and primal level, ensure that even in our desensitized modern world, *Rigoletto* will never lose its power to send audiences home feeling profoundly impressed, mentally unsettled, and most likely a bit queasy.

—Jay Goodwin

Jay Goodwin is the Met’s Editorial Director.