Synopsis

Act I

SCENE 1 Reception room in the royal palace in Stockholm

SCENE 2 Madame Arvidsson's den

Act II

The gallows outside of town

Act III

SCENE 1 Count Anckarström's house

SCENE 2 The king's study

SCENE 3 The ballroom in the royal palace

Act I

Stockholm, Sweden. Courtiers await an audience with King Gustavo III, including a group of conspirators led by Counts Horn and Ribbing. The king enters. He notices the name of Amelia, wife of his secretary and friend, Count Anckarström, on the guest list for a masked ball, and thinks about his secret love for her. Left alone with Gustavo, Anckarström warns the king of a conspiracy against him, but Gustavo ignores the threat. The young page Oscar tells the king about the fortuneteller Madame Ulrica Arvidsson, who has been accused of witchcraft and is to be banished. Deciding to see for himself, the king arranges for his court to pay her an incognito visit.

In a building by the port, Madame Arvidsson invokes prophetic spirits and tells the sailor Cristiano that he will soon become wealthy and receive a promotion. The king, who has arrived in disguise, slips money and papers into Cristiano's pockets. When the sailor discovers his good fortune, everybody praises Madame Arvidsson's abilities. Gustavo hides as she sends her visitors away to admit Amelia, who is tormented by her love for the king and asks for help. Madame Arvidsson tells her that she must gather a magic herb after dark. When Amelia leaves, Gustavo decides to follow her that night. Oscar and members of the court enter, and the king asks Madame Arvidsson to read his palm. She tells him that he will die by the hand of a friend. Gustavo laughs at the prophecy and demands to know the name of the assassin. Madame Arvidsson replies that it will be the first person that shakes his hand. When Anckarström rushes in Gustavo clasps his hand saying that the oracle has been disproved since Anckarström is his most loyal friend. Recognizing their king, the crowd cheers him as the conspirators grumble their discontent.

Act II

That night at the gallows, Amelia, who has followed Madame Arvidsson's advice to find the herb, expresses her hope that she will be freed of her love for the king. When Gustavo appears, she asks him to leave, but ultimately they admit their love for each other. Amelia hides her face when Anckarström suddenly appears, warning the king that assassins are nearby. Gustavo makes Anckarström promise to escort the woman back to the city without lifting her veil, then escapes. Finding Anckarström instead of their intended victim, the conspirators make ironic remarks about his veiled companion. When Amelia realizes that her husband will fight rather than break his promise to Gustavo, she drops her veil to save him. The conspirators are amused and make fun of Anckarström for his embarrassing situation. Anckarström, shocked by the king's betrayal and his wife's seeming infidelity, asks Horn and Ribbing to come to his house the next morning.

Act III

In his apartment, Anckarström threatens to kill Amelia. She asks to see their young son before she dies. After she has left, Anckarström declares that is it the king he should seek vengeance on, not Amelia. Horn and Ribbing arrive, and Anckarström tells them that he will join the conspirators. The men decide to draw lots to determine who will kill the king, and Anckarström forces his wife to choose from the slips of paper. When his own name comes up he is overjoyed. Oscar enters, bringing an invitation to the masked ball. As the assassins welcome this chance to execute their plan, Amelia decides to warn the king.

Gustavo, alone in his study, resolves to renounce his love and to send Amelia and Anckarström to Finland. Oscar brings an anonymous letter warning him of the murder plot, but the king refuses to be intimidated and leaves for the masquerade. In the ballroom, Anckarström tries to learn from Oscar what costume the king is wearing. The page answers evasively but finally reveals Gustavo's disguise. Amelia and the king meet, and she repeats her warning. Refusing to leave, he declares his love one more time and tells her that he is sending her away with her husband. As the lovers say goodbye, Anckarström stabs the king. The dying Gustavo forgives his murderer and admits that he loved Amelia but assures Anckarström that his wife is innocent. The crowd praises the king's goodness and generosity.

Giuseppe Verdi

Un Ballo in Maschera

Premiere: Teatro Apollo, Rome, 1859

Un Ballo in Maschera, one of Verdi's mature operas written between the "trilogy" of *Rigoletto*, *La Traviata*, and *Il Trovatore* and his final works, is a superb drama about the fatal intersection of love and politics. The central story element is plain and direct. A king is in love with his best friend's wife. The husband suspects that his wife has been unfaithful and he decides to kill the king at a masked ball. The story came from history—Sweden's King Gustav III met his death at the hands of a political enemy during a masked ball at the Stockholm Opera House in 1792. French dramatist Eugène Scribe (who also provided the libretto to Verdi's *Les Vêpres Siciliennes*) had written the first operatic version of this historical event for composer François Auber, whose work, *Gustave III*, had been given in Paris in 1833. Scribe's version added the twist of a love triangle, and despite his poetic license with the facts, a number of curious details from the historical story made their way into the libretto: a medium named Ulrica Arvidsson (or Arfvidsson) warned the king about an assassination; he received an anonymous note alerting him of a plot on his life; and the conspirators identified the king by a pink ribbon on the cape of his costume.

The Creators

Giuseppe Verdi (1813–1901) created 28 operas in a remarkable career spanning six decades in the theater. His role in Italy's cultural and political development has made him an icon in his native country. Antonio Somma (1809–1864) was a lawyer, playwright, and theater manager. Verdi did not write another opera with him, although he kept Somma busy working on a libretto based on *King Lear*, a project that was never completed.

The Setting

This opera suffered from the interference of censors of the Kingdom of Naples, who objected to the depiction of a royal assassination on the stage. Somma offered a revised libretto, moving the action to colonial Boston. When the censors demanded still more changes, Verdi abandoned his contract with the theater and took the piece to Rome (just ahead of the police and a lawsuit), where he managed to have the opera produced with Somma's revisions. The Boston setting, despite its odd incongruities, became the opera's standard version well into the second half of the 20th century. In recent years, the original Swedish setting has often been restored, as in the previous and the current Met productions.

The Music

The score of *Ballo* is remarkable for its economy and beautiful melodic expression. In addition to supporting the singers, the orchestra adds its own commentary: the repeating chords in the ballroom scene that ends the opera are a masterpiece of tension mounting beneath an elegant veneer. All of the leading roles have solos that are among Verdi's best. Among them are the soprano's haunting "Morrò, ma prima in grazia" in the first scene of Act III, followed by the great baritone aria "Eri tu." The tenor has several spotlight solos, ranging in tone from the deliberately showy "Di' tu, se fedele" in Act I to the introspection of the extended study scene in Act III. This opera also features two voice types infrequently used by Verdi, a contralto for the fortuneteller Madame Arvidsson and a coloratura soprano as the page Oscar (in what is also unusual for Verdi, a trouser role). Some of the most remarkable passages of the score, however, are given to multiple voices: the love duet in Act II is perhaps Verdi's most overtly passionate; the Act I ensemble, "E scherzo od è follia," is built on contrasting layers of eeriness, fear, and nonchalance. The unforgettable, subdued laughing chorus at the end of Act II drips with sneering disdain. Act III's ingenious opening scene builds from a solo narrative to a quintet in which the various emotions of the protagonists—guilt, revenge, and giddy anticipation of the upcoming masked ball—merge into a single extraordinary stream of music.

Un Ballo in Maschera at the Met

The opera was first heard at the Met in 1889, sung in German and starring Lilli Lehmann. Arturo Toscanini conducted a new production in 1913 with the unbeatable trio of Emmy Destinn, Enrico Caruso, and Pasquale Amato. Another production was unveiled on opening night 1940, featuring Zinka Milanov (who performed the role of Amelia 30 times through 1956) and Jussi Björling. Marian Anderson sang Ulrica eight times in 1955 and 1956, effectively ending the color barrier for African-American singers at the Met. A new production in 1962 marked the company debut of Nello Santi, conducting Leonie Rysanek, Carlo Bergonzi (33 performances as Riccardo/Gustavo through 1983), and Robert Merrill (56 performances as Renato/Anckarström from 1955 to 1976). In 1980, Giuseppe Patanè conducted a new staging by Elijah Moshinsky, with the leading roles sung by Katia Ricciarelli, Luciano Pavarotti (31 performances as Riccardo/Gustavo through 1997), and Louis Quilico. Pavarotti also starred in the 1990 premiere of Piero Faggioni's production, opposite Aprile Millo, Elena Obraztsova, and Juan Pons, with James Levine on the podium. Other notable appearances over the past decades include sopranos Martina Arroyo, Montserrat Caballé, Leontyne Price, and Deborah Voigt; mezzo-soprano Florence Quivar; tenors Jan Peerce, Richard Tucker, and Plácido Domingo; and baritones Sherrill Milnes and Leo Nucci. David Alden's production, conducted by Fabio Luisi, opened in November 2012, with Sondra Radvanovsky, Dolora Zajick, Marcelo Álvarez, and Dmitri Hvorostovsky leading the cast.

Program Note

One of Giuseppe Verdi's favorite projects during the 1850s—and indeed through most of the rest of his life—was an operatic adaptation of Shakespeare's *King Lear*. It was an idea the composer had long cherished, but—pragmatic man that he was, and wise in the ways of the Italian theater—he knew it would not be an easy opera to cast, and he was prepared to wait for the unusual, ideal occasion. Perhaps not surprisingly, it never came. In the meantime, in the spring of 1855, Verdi wrote to Antonio Somma, the lawyer–playwright who had been working on the *Lear* libretto, and asked him for suggestions for a less demanding and ambitious project: "Could you find another story for me, which you would then write at your leisure? A story that is beautiful, original, interesting, with beautiful situations, and impassioned: passions above all!"

Somma first suggested Matthew Lewis's then-famous novel *The Monk*, but Verdi rejected it: "I want a story of feelings, not a spectacle." And before the librettist could find anything suitable, Verdi himself settled on a story: the assassination of the Swedish king Gustav III. Beautiful, interesting, impassioned, yes; but hardly original. Eugène Scribe had written the first operatic version of the historical event for François Auber, whose work, *Gustave III*, had been given in Paris in 1833. Ten years later the same story had served Saverio Mercadante for *Il Reggente*, the libretto considerably refashioned by the Neapolitan Salvatore Cammarano, Verdi's respected collaborator for *Luisa Miller* and *Il Trovatore*.

Somma obediently set to work, though he asked one favor of Verdi: "If you don't mind, I would like to remain anonymous…. Thus I will write with greater freedom." The poet at that time wanted to keep out of the public eye; a few years before, in 1848–49, he had participated actively in the rebellion against the Austrians in Venice, and he was under police surveillance. Naturally, he wanted to avoid putting his name on a libretto involving the killing of a monarch.

When he learned that Verdi was going to compose the opera for Naples, Somma may well have foreseen that the subject would encounter difficulties with the stern censors of the Bourbon regime there. As, in fact, it did. In October of 1857, when work had been in progress for some weeks, Verdi sent an outline of the libretto to Vincenzo Torelli, the San Carlo secretary, for submission to the authorities. Early in November the subject was firmly rejected. Verdi had come up against censorship almost from the outset of his career, and some of his most enduring works—among them *Nabucco*, *Rigoletto*, and *La Traviata*—had come into being only after bouts, even pitched battles, with the political authorities.

At first Verdi did not take the rejection seriously. He imagined a few concessions on his part would resolve the problem, and he wrote to Torelli: "It won't be difficult to transfer the setting elsewhere and change the names…. Too bad! To have to renounce the elegance of a court like that of Gustave III… Poor poets and poor composers!"

So he began by altering the opera's title, calling it *La Vendetta in Domino* (or, "Revenge in [a Domino] Disguise"). This, however, was not enough. In fact—as the San Carlo management carefully refrained from telling Verdi—the authorities were opposed to the subject in any form. Finally, as a special favor to the composer, they sent him a list of required, indispensable changes. Verdi responded in an angry letter to Somma: "I'm in a sea of troubles!" He went on to list the demands the authorities had made if the opera was to be saved at all: the king had to be a private gentleman, not a sovereign of any kind; the wife of Count Anckarström was to become his sister; there would be no ball; there would be no drawing of lots for the privilege of killing the protagonist; and there would be no murder on stage.

It's hard to imagine what the opera we know as *Un Ballo in Maschera* might have been if Verdi had been made of less stern stuff. But worse was to come. When Verdi rejected these demands, the Neapolitans found a poet of their own, who confected a new libretto to fit Verdi's music. Titled *Adelia degli Adimari*, it was a cumbersome tale of Guelphs and Ghibellines, in which Oscar was not a page but a warrior, and Gustavo disguised himself not as a fisherman but as a hunter, making his barcarole completely incongruous.

In the end, Verdi—who had arrived in Naples as his contract stipulated—was threatened with jail. He managed to get out of the city, with his score in his suitcase, only by promising to come back the following year. Actually, it was not until 1872 that he returned to the city.

Instead, the next season, he was in Rome, where the censors were a bit more accommodating: the papal authorities worried less about regicide and more about other immoralities. After further discussions and revisions, the opera was allowed, but as Verdi wrote the taxed Somma, "The locale should be moved outside of Europe. What would you say to North America at the time of the English domination?"

And so Gustavo became Riccardo, and the brilliant royal court was moved from Stockholm to Boston. In all this, Verdi was able to save what most mattered to him: the sparkling atmosphere around the fun-loving, romantic ruler, including the pert page; the undercurrent of superstition and fatalism that acts as contrast to the superficial frivolity; the baritone's intense private drama as friendship turns to hate and jealousy to murderous vengeance. And, central to all, the thwarted love, culminating in the tormented duet, where expressions of total devotion are punctuated by urgent pleas for renunciation, all in a context of guilt and mortal fear. (The current Met production restores both the original setting and the historical names.)

The late Massimo Mila, one of Italy's most acute and original music critics, in his book on the composer refers to *Un Ballo in Maschera* as Verdi's great love poem and actually mentions it in the same breath with Wagner's *Tristan*. Certainly, to the modern unprejudiced listener, the two operas are on the same plane of greatness; and there is no doubt that both are focused on love. But the intense obsessiveness of the Wagnerian pair—trapped, enclosed in their passion—is in interesting contrast with the love of Gustavo and Amelia, which is only rarely seen divorced from its social context. This is a love between responsible people. And it prompted one of Verdi's richest and most varied scores. The surge of passion begins to swell with Gustavo's first aria (an aside, it must be remembered; a confidence to the audience, as the ruler ignores his court). After the conflict of the duet, there are two inner conflicts of the two lovers, the paired renunciations. And for every nuance of emotion the composer finds one of his musical hues, those *tinte* that were his essential ingredients.

The bigger musical picture sets chorus against principals, basso conspiracy against the coloratura loyalty of the page. The minor characters—the faithful sailor, the half-crazed but honest and concerned soothsayer—are secondary only in the length of their music, not in their significance. And the real mariner, Cristiano, makes another contrast with the feigned seaman of Gustavo himself.

Somma, whose successfully performed plays demonstrate a real theatrical gift, in this assignment was little more than the versifier of the composer's ideas, like Piave before and after him and like most Verdi librettists until Boito. But Somma had at least one idea of his own. In a letter written fairly early in their collaboration, he suggested to Verdi that the soprano's part be enhanced. She should have a whole scene to herself, he wrote: "I would shift [after the opening scene] to her boudoir. Thus the audience would make her acquaintance there, before the witch's kitchen. This boudoir, if you like, has…at the back a loggia open over a vast horizon…. Amelia, seated on the loggia, is playing her harp and singing a song that refers generically to the desires of a loving heart."

The librettist had a more conventional mind than Verdi, who sensibly rejected this pedestrian idea; and so our introduction to Amelia happens as the composer envisioned it: rapid, essential. Amelia—and the opera—come straight to the point. Still, there is nothing in the whole opera that is not essential. Verdi is not single-minded. The focal conflict is given a three-dimensional context: power inspires Anckarström's loyal devotion as subject as well as friend. But it also inspires envy and hatred. And the sweet, silvery line of Oscar's adolescent affection is balanced by the dark, bass interjections of the conspirators. There is also laughter in the opera: the hero's incredulous chuckles at the dire prophecies of the soothsayer, and the conspirators' cruel hilarity at the predicament of Anckarström and Amelia. In his correspondence with his librettists, Verdi frequently asked them to introduce some humor—black, bitter humor—into the starkest, most relentless scenes.

In *Ballo* the situations the characters find themselves in can shift abruptly; and the characters themselves can change. This is an opera of transformations, and perhaps, after all the various versions of the title, the final one is the best, for the opera is a dance of death. The players twice in the course of the story are required to don fancy disguises. They are all used to masks, and when they put them aside, or when a veil falls and reveals a truth, reality proves to be unbearable.

—*William Weaver*