Synopsis

Act I: The Duel

Count di Luna is obsessed with Leonora, a young noblewoman in the queen's service, who does not return his love. Outside the royal residence, his soldiers keep watch at night. They have heard an unknown troubadour serenading Leonora, and the jealous count is determined to capture and punish him. To keep his troops awake, the captain, Ferrando, recounts the terrible story of a gypsy woman who was burned at the stake years ago for bewitching the count's infant brother. The gypsy's daughter then took revenge by kidnapping the boy and throwing him into the flames where her mother had died. The charred skeleton of a baby was discovered there, and di Luna's father died of grief soon after. The gypsy's daughter disappeared without a trace, but di Luna has sworn to find her.

In the palace gardens, Leonora confides in her companion Ines that she is in love with a mysterious man she met before the outbreak of the war and that he is the troubadour who serenades her each night. After they have left, Count di Luna appears, looking for Leonora. When she hears the troubadour's song in the darkness, Leonora rushes out to greet her beloved but mistakenly embraces di Luna. The troubadour reveals his true identity: He is Manrico, leader of the partisan rebel forces. Furious, the count challenges him to fight to the death.

Act II: The Gypsy

During the duel, Manrico overpowered the count, but some instinct stopped him from killing his rival. The war has raged on. Manrico was badly wounded, but his mother, the gypsy Azucena, has nursed him back to health in a camp in the mountains.

A band of gypsies gathers at their mountain hideout. Azucena is the woman for whom di Luna has been searching. Her life is scarred by the memory of her mother's death and the terrible revenge she exacted. Manrico, who has never heard the full story, is determined to finally know the truth. Azucena tells him how she stole the older count's infant son but, in her manic rage, accidentally murdered her own child instead. When Manrico demands to know who he truly is, Azucena is evasive: All that matters is the mother's love she has shown him all his life and that he does not fail to take revenge on the house of di Luna. A messenger arrives with news that Leonora, believing that Manrico has fallen in battle and hoping to escape di Luna's grasp, is entering a convent. Azucena pleads with Manrico to stay, but he resolves to go to her immediately.

Di Luna arrives at the convent with his troops to take Leonora by force, but his attempt to seize her is foiled when Manrico and his men attack. In the ensuing chaos, the lovers escape.

Act III: The Gypsy's Son

Di Luna has laid siege to the fortress where Manrico has taken refuge with Leonora. Soon, soldiers bring in Azucena, whom Ferrando and his men have captured wandering nearby. When she hears di Luna's name, her reaction arouses suspicion, and Ferrando recognizes her as the murderer of the count's brother. Azucena cries out to Manrico to rescue her, and di Luna realizes that he now has his enemy in his hands. He orders a pyre built for Azucena before the walls of the fortress.

Inside the castle, Manrico and Leonora are preparing to be married. She is frightened, but he assures her of his love even in the face of death. When news of Azucena's capture arrives, Manrico summons his forces and prepares to attack.

Act IV: The Execution

Manrico's army has been defeated, and he and Azucena are being held captive in di Luna's castle. Leonora has escaped and now comes to the prison to pray for Manrico's salvation. When di Luna orders the execution of Manrico and Azucena at sunrise, Leonora offers herself to the count in return for her lover's life; however, she secretly takes a slow-acting poison, sealing her fate.

In their cell, Manrico tries to comfort Azucena, who is terrified of the stake and the fire that await her. Leonora appears, telling Manrico that he is saved and urging him to escape. Understanding that she has promised herself to di Luna, he denounces her and refuses to flee. But the poison is already taking effect, and Leonora dies in his arms, just as di Luna arrives. He sends Manrico to his execution. Azucena cries out that her mother is avenged: di Luna has killed his own brother.

Giuseppe Verdi

Il Trovatore

Premiere: Teatro Apollo, Rome, 1853

Verdi's turbulent tragedy of four characters caught in a web of family ties, politics, and love is a mainstay of the operatic repertory. The score is as melodic as it is energetic, with infectious tunes that are not easily forgotten. The vigorous music accompanies a dark and disturbing tale that revels in many of the most extreme expressions of Romanticism, including violent shifts in tone, unlikely coincidences, and characters who are impelled by raw emotion rather than cool logic. The opera lives in a borderland between madness and reality, not perfectly at home in either realm. For anyone who truly immerses himself in its shadowy world, *Il Trovatore* provides an experience that is uniquely thrilling, even within the world of Romantic Italian opera.

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 an icon in his native country. Salvadore 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* and *Luisa Miller* (both 1849) for Verdi. He died before the premiere of *Il Trovatore*, leaving the libretto to be completed by Leone Emanuele Bardare (1820–after 1874), a fellow writer. The Spanish dramatist Antonio García Gutiérrez (1813–1884) wrote the play *El Trovador* (1836) at the age of 22. He never again equaled that success, although his *Simón Bocanegra* (1843) also attracted attention and inspired another of Verdi's operas.

The Setting

The opera was originally set in northern Spain in the early 15th century, during a time of prolonged civil war. Audiences of the Romantic era understood civil war as a sort of societal schizophrenia, in which shifting fortunes and conflicted loyalties could easily tear apart individuals and communities, both physically and psychologically. For the Met's production of *Il Trovatore*, director Sir David McVicar has set the action during the Peninsular War (1808–1814), when Spain and its allies were fighting the forces of Napoleon.

The Music

Verdi's score for *Il Trovatore* perfectly expresses the extreme nature of the drama at hand. Throughout the opera, the use of melody is as uninhibited—and as disturbed—as the emotions of the protagonists. Much of the score is written in uneven meters (such as 3/4 or 6/8), and even the sections that are set in common 4/4 time have vigorous counter-rhythms fighting against any sense of symmetry. Examples include the underlying three-beat "death rattle" in the "Miserere" scene in Act IV and the triplet accompaniment to the baritone's great romance "Il balen del suo sorriso" in Act II. In addition to this rhythmic stress, the score makes heavy use of off-beat percussion (most famously in the case of the familiar "Anvil Chorus" in Act II) and trills (including one that crescendos over four bars in the mezzo-soprano's "Stride la vampa" in Act II), all of which contributes to the ambience of an off-kilter world. Beyond the rhythmic irregularities, Verdi uses minor keys for almost all of the main arias. In an unusual twist, the aforementioned solo of the sinister baritone character is in a foursquare major key. Each of the four principal characters needs to sing memorably in diverse styles, often going directly from one to another. The soprano, for example, follows the delicate "D'amor sull'ali rosee" in Act IV with her full-voiced solo in the "Miserere." Similarly, the tenor's role includes the famously vigorous call to arms "Di quella pira" that concludes Act III. Directly before this, however, he has to sing the tender and romantic "Ah, sì, ben mio," which is as challenging in its own, more subtle way.

Met History

Some of the most formidable singers in Met history have appeared in *Il Trovatore*. The early decades saw such memorable artists as Emma Eames, Louise Homer, Enrico Caruso, and Giuseppe De Luca. Over the following years, some of the stars included Giovanni Martinelli, Bruna Castagna, Leonard Warren, Robert Merrill, and, notably, Zinka Milanov (in 49 performances between 1937 and 1957). Martina Arroyo, Aprile Millo, Grace Bumbry, Mignon Dunn, James McCracken, and Cornell MacNeil made more recent appearances. *Il Trovatore* has also been the occasion of several notable milestones in Met history: A new production, unveiled for Opening Night in 1959, featured Fausto Cleva conducting Antonietta Stella, Carlo Bergonzi, Warren, and Giulietta Simionato in her Met debut. Two years later, it saw the first appearances of Leontyne Price and Franco Corelli. The 1976–77 season opened with the debut of Gianandrea Gavazzeni conducting Renata Scotto, Shirley Verrett, Luciano Pavarotti, and Matteo Manuguerra. Joan Sutherland sang Leonora in ten performances, conducted by Richard Bonynge, all during November and December of 1987, including her final Met performance. Opening Night of the 1988–89 season featured Eva Marton, Fiorenza Cossotto, Pavarotti, and Sherrill Milnes. Sir David McVicar's production had its premiere in 2009, with Sondra Radvanovsky, Dolora Zajick, Marcelo Álvarez, and Dmitri Hvorostovsky singing the lead roles, conducted by Gianandrea Noseda.

Program Note

Perhaps no opera by Giuseppe Verdi presents a greater contrast between the splendor of its music and the garishness of its plot than *Il Trovatore*. Some of the composer's most ravishing arias and ensembles flood through the piece, often one after the other, enhanced by an array of stunning choral effects. The libretto, by Salvadore Cammarano, is based on the Spanish melodrama *El Trovador* by Antonio García Gutiérrez and involves the gypsy Azucena, who, after her mother has been burned alive by a count on suspicion of being a witch, snatches the count's infant son and hurls him into the still-burning pyre in revenge. Only after the child has been consumed by the flames does she discover that she has burned her own son by mistake. She raises the count's missing baby as her own, naming him Manrico and keeping his identity secret, both from him and from his brother—and enemy in love and war—Count di Luna, older son of the man who killed her mother. At the end of the opera, Azucena finally achieves her vengeance when di Luna beheads his own brother, not knowing who he is. The amount of tragic blundering in the story, including that of the heroine, Leonora, who instigates a duel by throwing herself at the wrong suitor, has made *Il Trovatore* the butt of much satire, from Gilbert and Sullivan's *H.M.S. Pinafore* to the Marx Brothers' *A Night at the Opera*, but the stark horror of the original is worthy of Sophocles or Aeschylus. For good reason, scholars have declared *Il Trovatore* to be more Greek than Shakespearean.

Azucena is characterized by Count di Luna and his entourage as a "filthy gypsy," but Verdi was impressed by her—as he often was by underdogs and oppressed people—and originally intended to call the opera *La Zingara* (*The Gypsy*). He may as well have, for Azucena steals every scene in which she appears and manipulates all of her clueless adversaries, even as she drifts in and out of a fantasy world—the mountains and open air of happier days. She is not "mad," Verdi told his librettist, only "oppressed," inhabiting a twilight zone between clarity and incoherence, memory and the present, calculation and impulsivity.

We are not allowed to dwell for long on the plot's twists and turns. The backstory unfolds in terse narrations by the army captain Ferrando, Azucena, and Count di Luna, and the opera then moves on with the inexorable ferocity of a tornado. The manner of its composition—Verdi wrote it largely in a single feverish month after pondering the story for two years—reflects the piece itself. Cammarano, who died suddenly just before completing the libretto (to be replaced by Leone Emanuele Bardare), was known for distilling sprawling material, but Verdi pushed for ever more incisiveness. Few details are provided regarding the 15th-century civil war that serves as the opera's backdrop. Recitatives are scant, as are orchestral interludes, though the orchestra does paint some of Verdi's most seductive colors, especially in the woodwinds. Little time is given to fleshing out the character of Leonora, the out-of-nowhere heroine who exists as an object of love and torment. Her suffering is solipsistic and self-enclosed; even in moments of overt anguish, as in her prison aria, she

vows to keep her torment to herself so as not to agitate her beloved troubadour, Manrico (though he loves, abuses, or abandons her as he pleases.) Count di Luna is given no time to ponder the enormity of what he has done in the final catastrophic scene, as the curtain crashes down just after he realizes he has executed his brother. Azucena gets her revenge, relays the news to her dead mother in a single sentence, and that's that. There is no denouement and seemingly no moral other than to be sure to properly identify a baby before throwing him into a fire.

Throughout the opera, Verdi's drives the drama forward with some of his most action-packed and thrillingly complex ensemble numbers, characterized by radical musical compression. Different dramas unfold simultaneously, requiring the audience to expand its ears: Act I's "Anima mia!," which Cammarano originally conceived as separate verses for three characters, is condensed into a single turbulent trio; "E deggio e posso crederlo?," the chaotic fight scene that ends Act II, combines solos, duets, and trios in a dramatic layer cake, with Manrico appearing miraculously like another ghost, Leonora wondering if she is dreaming, and Manrico sparing the Count's life as a preternatural agency stays his hand; and Act IV's "Miserere d'un'alma" juxtaposes ominously tolling bells, a solemn chorus, an agitated solo by a terrified Leonora, and a floating "Addio, Leonore" from Manrico's distant offstage voice, on the wings of an angelic harp. In these densely packed scenes, Verdi distributes disparate elements into separate spaces and volume levels, often bringing them together at the cadence for a spine-tingling climax.

The story was criticized for including "too many dead people," but its bizarre and uncanny elements were one reason the opera was such a huge success at its 1853 premiere and afterward. The Gothic thrillers of E.T.A. Hoffman, Charles Maturin, Sir Walter Scott, Edgar Allan Poe, Sheridan Le Fanu, and others were sweeping the continent, and *Il Trovatore* is a classic specimen of the genre: a tale that builds inexorably, from rumors of ghostly apparitions (Ferrando's narration) through revelations of a terrible secret from the past (Azucena's first aria) to a supernatural agency revealing itself (the ghostly staying of Manrico's hand) and a climax in which the avenging spirit, whether imagined or real, is triumphant. Cammarano wanted to tone down or cut the story's most outré scenes, but Verdi would have none of it. "If we cannot do our opera with all the bizarre quality of the play" he said, "we'd better give up."

Opening with sinister rolling timpani and ending with shuddering strings, Verdi's score enhances the darkness of the libretto, especially in Azucena's music, which inhabits a different world—usually one of minor keys and short, jabbing phrases—than that of the court. In "Condotta ell'era in ceppi" (Act II), her bloodcurdling tale opens with a relentless waltz, rising to a searing climax with her mother's remembered cry of "Mi vendica!" ("Avenge me!"), which provides the motivation for all that follows. In "Madre, non dormi?" (Act IV), she

visualizes her mother's hair burning and her eyes popping from her head as she burned at the stake.

In these scenes, some of the most harrowing Verdi ever wrote, sound is in touch with sense. Yet much of the music, in typical Verdi fashion, exists on its own plane, quite apart from what is happening on stage. Count di Luna is boastful, abusive, and power-mad (like Nabucco, he declares himself to be God), but we forget all this when he sings his tender love aria, "Il balen del suo sorriso." Leonora soars through the piece with some of Verdi's most passionate love music, including "Tacea la notte placida," with its evocation of a paradise on earth; "D'amore sull' ali rosee," with impossible high notes caressed by delicate winds; and "Perché piangete?," in which she anticipates Wagner's Isolde in her desire to unite with her lover in death. "Words cannot express the passion I feel," she complains, but Verdi's music expresses it for her. This is a world of pure emotion in which words are mere shorthand.

The great tenor Enrico Caruso famously remarked that all you need to present *Il Trovatore* is the four greatest singers in the world. The opera is notorious for its daunting bel canto lines and treacherous high notes, which singers are expected to sing even when those notes are not specified. By now, for example, it's customary for the tenor to end Act III's "Di quella pira" on a high C, though music historians insist it is historically incorrect to end the aria on a high note. From the beginning, these difficulties have created excitement for fans and anxiety for singers and their coaches. When a mentee of Maria Callas botched a difficult passage, she defended herself by saying it was "a cry of despair." Callas shot back, "It's not a cry of despair, it's a B-flat." Even in Verdi's world of raw emotion, the notes must be right, and in a score this difficult, with the stakes so high, that challenge provides as much drama as the plots for vengeance and shape-shifting ghosts.

—Jack Sullivan

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