

Verdi's 'Il Trovatore': Sublime Love vs. Revenge

Giuseppe Verdi's *Il Trovatore* was performed at the Kennedy Center by the Washington National Opera on Nov. 11, 2004, more than 151 years after its first performance in Rome on Jan. 19, 1853. *Il Trovatore* is part of a trilogy of operas composed by Verdi in his "middle" period, which includes *Rigoletto* (1851) and *La Traviata* (1853). Like *Rigoletto*, *Il Trovatore* demonstrates the tragic consequences of a mentality based on revenge, and like *La Traviata* it emphasizes the alternative sublime quality of selfless love, as developed by the German dramatist Friedrich Schiller.

The opera is based on an 1836 drama about the Spanish civil war of 1412, by the Spanish playwright Antonio Garcia Gutierrez. It is clear that Verdi is polemicizing in *Il Trovatore* against the bestial mentality of the Spanish Inquisition, even though the action of the opera is dated prior to the establishment of the Spanish Inquisition in the later Fifteenth century.

The death without an heir of King Martin I of Aragon on May 31, 1409 created the conditions for civil war. Among the claimants to the throne were the King's nephew Fernando de Antequera, King of Castile, and Jaime de Aragon, Count of Urgel, son of Martin's first cousin and also husband of his half-sister. Fernando was chosen King by the Aragonese parliament, and the Count of Urgel launched an unsuccessful rebellion to press his claims to the throne. In the opera, the leader of the royal forces is Count di Luna, and Manrico, a gypsy troubadour from the mountains of Biscay, is among the commanders of Urgel's rebellion.

Desire for Revenge

In this historical context, the plot of the opera is defined by a desire for revenge on the part of two characters, Count di Luna



Driven by the desire for revenge: Roberto Servile as Count di Luna, Elena Manistina as Azucena.

and the gypsy, Azucena, which ultimately overwhelms all of leading characters.

Many years earlier, Azucena's mother was burned at the stake for allegedly bewitching the Count's younger brother Garzia. Charged by her mother to avenge her death, Azucena abducted Garzia, but, in confusion, she murdered her own son by mistake. Thus Manrico, whom Azucena has raised as her son, is in fact Garzia, Count di Luna's brother, whose death he, in turn, is pledged to avenge.

The unknowing brothers Manrico and di Luna become rivals for the love of Leonora, the Queen's lady-in-waiting. But Leonora loves Manrico alone.

At the end of the play, Azucena is captured and identified as the gypsy who had abducted Garzia. She in turn reveals that she is the mother of the rebel leader, Manrico.

Manrico learns that di Luna is about to burn Azucena alive, rushes to her defense, and is captured. His betrothed Leonora decides to free him, by offering herself to di Luna, and then committing suicide once Manrico has escaped. But

Manrico refuses to flee, because he believes Leonora has betrayed him by "selling" her love for his freedom. As she dies from the self-inflicted poison, Manrico realizes the extent of her love for him. The Count arrives, realizes that Leonora has deceived him, and orders Manrico's beheading. Azucena, forced to watch, reveals the truth to him: "You have killed your brother."

Role of Leonora

When the original librettist Salvatore Cammarano died before completing the libretto, he was replaced by Leone Emanuele Bardare, among whose tasks was an expansion of the role of Leonora. Under Verdi's supervision, her cantabile "Tacea la notte" and

the cavatina, "Di tale amor," originally cut, were restored, and additional lines were written for her in the *Miserere*.

Verdi's Leonora is reminiscent of Beethoven's Leonore in the opera *Fidelio* (1805). While Beethoven's Leonore succeeds in freeing her husband, Florestan, from the evil Pizarro, Verdi's Leonora is not successful, but she shares the same quality of sublime love as Beethoven's character. In Act III, Scene 2, Manrico says to her "Nothing but love, sublime love ["Amor, sublime amore"], must speak to your heart."

Leonora's aria, "D'amor sull'ali rosee," in Act IV, is also reminiscent of "Abscheulicher! Wo eilst du hin?" sung by Beethoven's Leonore in Act I, Scene 5, in which she sings; "Come, Hope . . . O come . . . I follow the inner drive, I falter not, the duty of true married love strengthens me." In *Il Trovatore*, Leonora sings: "On the rosy wings of love fly, my anguished sigh, and comfort the wary mind of the unhappy prisoner. Like a breath of hope fly to his cell, awaken him to the memories, to the dreams of love."

Washington National Opera/Karin Cooper

In the Washington National Opera performance, Leonora, sung by the Bulgarian soprano Krassimira Stoyanova, really came alive with this aria.

As Friedrich Schiller writes, the feeling of the sublime is a combination of woefulness and joyfulness, which results from the decision to embrace a moral principle even in the face of great misfortune, including death. The capacity to make such a decision establishes that man has within him a moral capacity independent of all sensuous emotions, and that this moral capacity defines his true nature as a human being.

In this opera, where the dynamic of revenge leading ineluctably to death otherwise dominates the action, the sublime love of Leonora for Manrico, and his for her, proves that man's free will is not destroyed even in the face of death. Both Leonora and Manrico say at various moments that they are willing to die for their love. In Act I, in "Di tale amor che dirsi," Leonora sings: "Either I shall live for him, or for him I shall die!" And in Act IV, she sings: "Rather than live as another's, I chose to die as your love!"

Manrico (played by the American tenor, Carl Tanner), after referencing "sublime love," sings in Act III, Scene 2,

"Ah, si, ben mio": "Ah, yes, my love, in being yours, in knowing that you are mine, my soul will now be braver, my arm stronger. But if on my page of fate it be written that I must die on the enemy's sword, with my last breath my thoughts will be of you; for me, death will only mean that I await you in heaven."

The Beast-Man

Were it not for this quality of sublime love as portrayed through the development of the role of Leonora, the action of the opera would merely culminate in death. The civil war is not waged by Urgel and the forces led by Manrico on the basis of an explicitly republican conception. Neither Manrico nor Leonora dies fighting for political freedom. The main dynamic of the opera is triggered by the superstitious belief that the old gypsy mother of Azucena bewitched Garzia. Even though Azucena has told him that he is the Count's brother, Manrico does not use this knowledge to thwart what is otherwise inevitable.

Azucena, played beautifully by the Russian mezzo-soprano Elena Manistina, driven by her mother's desire for revenge and love for her adopted son, Manrico, achieves the former only

through the sacrifice of the latter. She too could have told Count di Luna that Manrico was his brother, and thus eliminated the Count's prime reason for seeking revenge.

The Count himself, played by the Italian baritone Roberto Servile, is a true ego-driven Beast-man, consumed by "jealous love," "injured pride," and "seething rage." In Act II, Scene 2, when the Count plots to abduct Leonora before she enters a convent, he sings: "Not even a rival God would oppose my love. Not even a God, my lady, can take you from me now!" When, in Act IV, Leonora asks him to show mercy for Manrico, he sings: "My only God is vengeance." And when he contemplates the execution of Manrico, like the Grand Inquisitor he sings: "Ah, if only I might find some crueler death for the rogue! In a thousand fearful agonies, make hundredfold his death."

But at the end of the opera, it is the Count himself who suffers the "cruellest death" of all. As Schiller writes in his *Philosophical Letters*: "Love is the co-governing citizen of a blossoming free state, egoism a despot in a ravaged creation."

—William F. Wertz, Jr.

'Rigoletto': Verdi's Education of the Emotions

On March 11, 1851, the composer Giuseppe Verdi presented his new opera *Rigoletto* to an astonished audience in Venice, Italy. This musical masterpiece, which the composer himself described as "revolutionary," continues to be one of the most often performed operas in the world, and rightly so.

In *Rigoletto*, Verdi created a new conception of operatic construction, in which his masterful use of poetic and musical irony succeeded in achieving what Friedrich Schiller called for in his essay on "Theater as a Moral Institution"—the transformation of the audience, who leave the theater in an elevated state of mind, reflecting on the off-stage implications of the action presented on-stage.

In October 2004, Detroit's Michigan Opera Theater (MOT) attempted a credible performance of this Verdi master-



Disguised as a student, the Duke (Scott Piper) approaches Gilda (Rosana Lamosa).

Michigan Opera Theater/Photos by Christopher Barbeau

piece, with two different casts, drawn from many nations, both directed by Italian stage director Mario Corradi. The setting and costumes accurately portrayed the Sixteenth-century Court of Mantua, and the voices, including those of the younger singers, succeeded in adequately conveying the emotional conflicts in the various characters. In fact, some of the singers excelled in making transparent the dramatic shifts in character, as when the Duke appears to be genuinely moved by Gilda, or when Rigoletto, in first singing of his treasured daughter, expresses true fatherly love.

Despite such positive features, however, the performance's flaws ultimately rendered it a disappointment. The problem lies, overall, in the director's inability to distinguish between the original, Classical intent of the composer Verdi, and the modernist, Romantic gimmicks inserted into the work under the delusion that they will make the production more accessible to an audience today.

Republican vs. Oligarchy

Verdi was inspired by Victor Hugo's 1832 play *Le Roi S'amuse* (*The King Amuses Himself*), which portrayed a real king, Francis I of France (1494-1547) as a libertine, whose amusement was raping every wife and daughter he could get his hands on, including those of his political opponents. As in the play, the opera centers around a "father's curse" pronounced against the libertine and his accomplice, a vicious court jester (Rigoletto), by the father of one of their young victims.

Verdi's desire to set this play to music dates back to his first reading of it in 1844, and when the opportunity arose in the year 1850, he seized it. He wrote to his librettist, Francesco Maria Piave, "Oh, *Le Roi S'amuse* is the greatest plot, and perhaps the greatest drama of modern times. [The jester] Tribolet is a creation worthy of Shakespeare!! . . . It is a subject that cannot fail! . . . Now, reviewing several subjects again, when—like a bolt of lightning, like an inspiration—I thought of *Le Roi S'amuse*, I said the same thing, Yes, by God, that's the right one!"

Verdi knew that the play had been banned after its premiere, so he instructed Piave: "Turn Venice upside down to make the censors permit this subject."

After months of battles with the Hapsburg censors, who refused to permit the stage depiction of a degenerate oligarch, and also tried to emasculate the opera by eliminating most of its dramatic ironies, Verdi, who was already famous as Italy's national composer, threatened to withdraw the work entirely. The censors negotiated, but it was Verdi who won the day. The names and location were changed, but the original idea, with all its passion, was to be performed as he wrote it.

The opera premiered only two years after the orchestrated 1848-49 revolutions in Europe, in which Lord Palmerston's agent Giuseppe Mazzini deployed his gangs to invade, sack, and then rule sections of Rome and the Papal States, terrorizing the population in the name of "liberty."¹ Most Italian intellectuals and patriots, who had been hopeful about Mazzini, broke with him when they saw his agenda and method of Jacobin fascism. But the problem remained: How would Italy, then a conglomerate of feudal kingdoms and Papal States, be transformed into a unified, nation-state republic?

Verdi took leadership, addressing that question directly with the production of *Rigoletto*, by portraying the paradoxes implicit in the education of the emotions to create a population capable of self-government. Such education—as opposed to Romantic moralizing—occurs in what Lyndon LaRouche identifies as the "complex domain," and not in the realm of the senses.

Story of the Opera

Rigoletto (sung by Chen-Ye Yuan, baritone) is the serpent-tongued, hunchbacked jester in the court of the lecherous young Duke of Mantua (Scott Piper, tenor), who assists the Duke to pursue his sexual exploits, but is seized by terror when Count Monterone (Donald Hartmann, bass-baritone), the father of one of the Duke's victims, pronounces a curse on the pair for their crimes.

Rigoletto fears the curse because he is, in secret, himself a loving father, who is desperately attempting to protect his daughter Gilda (Rosana Lamosa, soprano) from the Duke's licentiousness. He permits Gilda to leave the house only to go to church, but she is seen and

approached by the Duke. Gilda falls in love, believing the disguised Duke to be a poor student.

When the Duke's courtiers discover a young woman living at Rigoletto's house, they assume her to be the jester's mistress. In an act of revenge to repay Rigoletto's many insults, they trick him into assisting them in kidnapping Gilda for the Duke. She is seduced, and Rigoletto plans revenge.

Gilda continues to believe in the Duke's love, but Rigoletto is determined to prove otherwise. He arranges for her to leave the city disguised as a boy, but not before he has exposed the Duke for what he truly is. Thus, Rigoletto brings Gilda to the tavern of the assassin Sparafucile (Buruk Bigili, bass), whom he has hired to avenge Gilda's seduction by killing the Duke. Inside, they witness Sparafucile's sister Maddalena (Tracie Luck, mezzo-soprano) offering the Duke her favors, as he sings to her of love.

Later, under pressure from Maddalena, Sparafucile agrees to spare the Duke, but only if he can substitute another dead body to deliver to Rigoletto. When the disguised Gilda overhears this, she decides to sacrifice herself for love. She is stabbed, stuffed into a sack, and delivered to her unsuspecting father.

In the end, as Rigoletto gloats over his revenge, he discovers to his horror that it is his wounded daughter in the sack. Gilda sings of her love for the Duke, and of meeting her mother in heaven. She dies, and the curse is fulfilled.

Breakthrough in Musical Composition

Verdi employed new musical discoveries in this opera, which contribute to the power of the drama. He discarded the "set piece" form of structured recitative, aria, duet, trio, and opera finale, in favor of real dramatic action, which moved primarily through what Verdi called "an endless series of duets." These duets and ensembles heighten the conflicts among the characters, each of whom is increasingly differentiated by distinct orchestral colors and musical ideas. The density of poetic and musical paradoxes intensifies as the various combinations of *bel canto* voices sing against one another their contrasting passions and plans.

The remarkable duet between Rigo-

letto and Sparafucile, where the assassin is introduced, is just one example of Verdi's creative interweaving of voice and orchestra. Most of the melody line is sung by the orchestra, as the duet, which is really a dialogue between two low men's voices, plants the seeds for the action to come, while directly leading into Rigoletto's reflection on his own awful fate.

Verdi used an all-male chorus, which in this production was quite good, led by its three soloists, Marullo (Michael Mayes, baritone), Matteo Borsa (Torrance Blaisdell, tenor), and Count Ceperano (James Patterson, bass). There were particularly effective moments—for example, when they discover that Gilda is not Rigoletto's mistress, but his daughter, in an ensemble with the horrified jester. The male chorus also has a “non-vocal” part in this opera, which Verdi developed as a feature of his expanded use of differentiated orchestration: the chorus, with orchestra, together portray the terrible storm in the last act.

Verdi's musical continuity from overture to concluding note, his varied orchestral coloration, and his less-formal scene structure, weaving seamlessly through the thread of the tragic action, evoke profound emotions in the listener, as the mind digests the paradoxes posed of revenge, honor, hypocrisy, love, the “curse,” and, more generally implied, the issues of leadership in social relations and society in general.

Music Is Heard in the Mind

Verdi understood that the communication of ideas occurs only in the domain of cognition. If this fundamental idea is not understood, then sensual effects will be substituted in place of true poetic ironies, and the unfortunate result will be to change the intent of the composition itself.

In the MOT production, this flaw was evident right from the outset. As the overture began, the curtain rose to reveal the acting-out of scenes on both sides of the stage, designed to show the audience what had happened *before* the opera's actual opening! There was no singing, of course, during this instrumental introduction, but obviously, if Verdi had thought such scenes were necessary, then he surely would have called for them in the score.



The jester Rigoletto (Chen-Ye Yuan, right) plots with the assassin Sparafucile (Buruk Bigili).

Michigan Opera Theater/Photos by Christopher Barbeau

Although including pantomime like this during the overture is an increasingly popular practice among some opera companies, it is an unwarranted addition that reflects more than just “poetic license” on the part of the director. The underlying axiomatic assumption guiding such an addition (assuming that no malicious perversion is intended) is, that the audience must be constantly bombarded with visual and other effects, to be able to understand the action of the performance.

One could raise many details of this performance for criticism, including the balance between the orchestra and the singers, or the preference to change Rigoletto from a deformed hunchback with two conflicting sides to his soul, into a jester whose deformity is not real, but only an affectation of his adopted persona. But all these problems stem from a Romantic reading of what Verdi intended, rather than the Classical idea, which defines the purpose of art not as entertainment, but as that which elevates the mind to the level of the sublime.

In this performance, the most blatant denial of this power of the mind appeared in the final act quartet, where Rigoletto and Gilda peer inside the tavern, as Gilda's beloved Duke seduces the assassin's sister Maddalena. Four different voice species, soprano, mezzo-soprano (Verdi had a contralto), tenor, and baritone express their very different

emotions in completely different musical lines, which are nonetheless heard as a unity. It is one of the most phenomenal vocal quartets ever composed.

Unfortunately, the power of that music was severely blunted, as was the impact of the beautiful mezzo voice in the quartet, by the MOT's *insane* decision to have Maddalena act out performing oral sex on the Duke at the start of the piece! The “pathos” which Verdi insisted not be written out by the censors, was virtually written out here, by writing *in* such an absurd, “sensual” effect.

To sum up: What might have been an enjoyable performance was undermined by the director's unnecessary changes and additions to Verdi's carefully conceived and composed masterpiece. Verdi created *Rigoletto* from the standpoint of uplifting and transforming his audience, with the aim of creating an Italian citizenry and nation. Without that concept clearly in mind for today's performances, the music, even when well sung, is reduced to sensual experiences, not ideas—and that would have made *maestro* Verdi very angry.

—Susan W. Bowen

1. See “Lord Palmerston's Multicultural Human Zoo,” Proceedings of the Schiller Institute/I.C.L.C. Conference, Feb. 19-20, 1994, *Executive Intelligence Review*, April 15, 1994 (Vol. 21, No. 16). The Proceedings are posted on the Schiller Institute website at www.schillerinstitute.org.