

Virginia
Opera

Presents

RIGOLETTO

Composed by:

Giuseppe Verdi



Study Guide
2010-2011 Season

2010-2011 SEASON

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Premiere

Teatro La Fenice, Venice, 11 March 1851.

Cast of Characters

The Duke of Mantua	tenor
Rigoletto, court jester	baritone
Gilda, his daughter	soprano
Giovanna, Gilda's nurse	mezzo-soprano
Sparafucile, an assassin for hire	bass
Maddalena, his sister	contralto
Count Monterone	baritone
Count Ceprano, courtier	bass
Countess Ceprano, his wife	mezzo-soprano
Marullo, courtier	baritone
Borsa, courtier	tenor

Noblemen, walk-on parts: Ladies, pages, and halberdiers

Plot Synopsis and Musical Highlights

The opera takes place in Mantua in the sixteenth century.

Act 1, scene 1

A festive ball is taking place at the ducal court in Mantua; several different dance tunes are heard. The Duke speaks of his amorous adventures, in the manner of a Don Giovanni, who also saw a masked ball as an ideal opportunity for seduction. The Duke's desire for the moment is set on the Countess Ceprano. He explains in his tuneful manner ("Questa o quella"), that he is not bound to one woman.

As the Duke joins the Countess, Rigoletto, his court jester, who entertains the Duke with his venomous tongue, mocks the jealous husband, Count Ceprano. Meanwhile, Marullo whispers to his fellow courtiers, all of who despise Rigoletto, that the hunchback has a secret sweetheart. They plan a long-desired revenge against Rigoletto, who feels secure under the protection of the Duke.

Monterone enters. His daughter is among the Duke's conquests. For the first time since the opera began, the dance music ceases. Rigoletto heavily mocks Monterone. Monterone levels a father's curse against Rigoletto, which terrifies him, for he too is a loving father, a situation that no one at court realizes. Monterone is arrested and led away, repeating his curse.

Act 1, scene 2

Rigoletto is returning home, with the curse still vivid in his memory (the first music example is heard again). His house stands in a garden surrounded by a wall, for security; one can see the second floor from the street. A corner of Ceprano's palace can be seen on the other side of the street. As Rigoletto is unlocking the door leading into his garden, Sparafucile, who announces that he is an assassin for hire and offers his services, approaches him. He suggests that Rigoletto might have a rival for the girl who lives in his house.

Sparafucile describes how his sister, Maddalena, lures prospective victims to their house, to be met with death by stabbing. Rigoletto is horrified and refuses Sparafucile's offer, but makes sure he can locate the assassin if need be. Alone, Rigoletto sings one of Verdi's great baritone soliloquies, in style somewhere between recitative and aria, "Pari siamo" (We are equals), in which he ruminates that he destroys with his tongue and Sparafucile with his sword. Rigoletto curses his deformity, which has left him bitter and forced him to make his living by making the Duke laugh at the misfortune of others.

As he enters his garden, however, his mood changes dramatically. His beloved daughter, Gilda, who has until very recently been in a convent, greets him and they sing a duet, "Figlia!--Mio Padre!" (Daughter!--My Father!)

Gilda begs for information about their family, such as what her father does for a living. He avoids such questions, and speaks lovingly of her dead mother.

Gilda attempts to console him and he tells her that she is his sole loved one on earth.

Rigoletto tells the nurse Giovanna to take great care to protect his daughter. He is interrupted by a noise at the gate. He opens the gate to look out and the Duke of Mantua, disguised as a poor student, slips in, unnoticed by either Rigoletto or Gilda. Throwing a purse to Giovanna; the Duke hides. Rigoletto continues imploring Giovanna to watch carefully over his daughter and then leaves.

Gilda begins telling her nurse about the young man who has been following her on her way to church. The Duke, who in fact is this very young man, motions to Giovanna to leave. She does and he approaches Gilda singing a soaring love melody, which turns into a duet between him and Gilda.

Giovanna interrupts them, however, for she has heard voice in the street. The Duke sings a fervent farewell and departs.

Gilda is in a state of rapture; going up to her room, she repeats the name of her lover, “Gualtier Maldé,” to recitative, followed by the aria “Caro nome” (Dear name), which, with its intricate coloratura, projects Gilda’s feelings about love. The falling melodic line and the rests after each opening syllable give the music a rapt, dream-like quality.

The courtiers have assembled on the street and can see Gilda by the light of the candle she carries. They assume that Gilda is Rigoletto’s love and have come to abduct her. Rigoletto returns and the music tells us that he is still tortured by the curse. Marullo tells him they have come to abduct Ceprano’s wife. He covers Rigoletto’s eyes and ears, telling him he should be masked, and Rigoletto is made to hold the ladder for his own daughter’s abduction. Rigoletto, finally tired of holding the ladder, tears off the mask, only to find his house open and Gilda gone. Remembering the curse, he falls senseless to the ground.

Act 2

The Duke enters the antechamber of his suite at the palace. He is greatly disturbed, for he had returned to Gilda’s house and found her gone. He is tortured by thoughts of what can have happened to her. He sings his only full-blown aria in the opera, “Parmi veder le lagrime” (Are you weeping in loneliness?), showing that he had true feelings for Gilda.

The courtiers come to tell him of their revenge against Rigoletto, informing him they have brought Gilda to the palace. The Duke’s mood changes radically. Filled with joyous anticipation, he enters his apartments; the courtiers are mystified by his behavior.

Rigoletto appears and is mocked by the courtiers, but he tries to appear nonchalant, all the while looking for signs of his daughter.

Eventually Rigoletto realizes that Gilda is with the Duke in his apartments. He tries to force his way in but is prevented from doing so by the courtiers. Furiously he turns on them, calling them a “damned vile race,” but then ends up pleading with them.

Suddenly the door opens and a disheveled Gilda runs into her father’s arms. Rigoletto commands the courtiers to leave then listens as Gilda relates to him how she met the Duke (who she thought was a poor student) at church. This encounter between father and daughter is extremely painful for both of them, as Rigoletto finds out his

daughter has been defiled and Gilda discovers that her father is a court jester at the ducal court.

Gilda's aria turns into a duet as Rigoletto tries to console his daughter.

Monterone is led past them under guard and Rigoletto, in a violent cabaletta to his duet with Gilda, threatens him with revenge, despite Gilda's pleading for forgiveness.

Act 3

Rigoletto and Gilda are seen looking through a crack in the wall of Sparafucile's house, located on the banks of the Mincio River. The Duke enters, ordering wine and a room, singing of his thoughts on the fickleness of women in one of the greatest hit tunes in all opera.

Maddalena, Sparafucile's sister, joins the Duke, and the two join together in mutual seduction. Gilda, watching from outside, is shattered by the Duke's unfaithfulness. Rigoletto joins in, singing of vengeance, making this a quartet of four dissimilar musical lines.

Rigoletto tells Gilda to precede him to Verona, wearing male clothing ready for her at home. A fierce storm is brewing and just before its outbreak, Sparafucile comes out of the house where Rigoletto pays him the customary half the fee for the assassination. Rigoletto is to return at midnight to pay the other half and to receive the body, which he himself wants to throw into the river.

The storm approaches; thunder, lightning, and moaning of the wind are heard. Verdi suggests the moaning with male voices humming a chromatic line.

The Duke is shown to a bedroom where he lies down, singing his favorite tune. Maddalena is sent to take his sword. She has, however, developed an affection for him and begs her brother not to harm him. Gilda, dressed in male riding habit, has meanwhile reappeared and hears Maddalena and Sparafucile bargaining for the Duke's life. As the storm rises in intensity, Sparafucile agrees that the Duke may live if someone whose body can be substituted arrives before midnight. Gilda, asking God's forgiveness, determines to substitute her life for the Duke's.

She enters the house. Sparafucile stabs her as the storm reaches its climax. The lamp inside the house is extinguished, the darkness now interrupted only by lightning flashes. As the storm subsides slightly, Rigoletto returns and at the stroke of midnight receives a sack from Sparafucile. He is preparing to throw the sack into the river when the voice of the Duke is heard in the distance, singing "La donna è mobile." Rigoletto frantically opens the sack and by a flash of lightning recognizes the body as that of his daughter. Dying, Gilda confesses her sacrifice and asks her father's forgiveness. She promises to pray for him in heaven.

With his lifeless daughter in his arms, Rigoletto cries out "The Curse" as he collapses over Gilda's body.

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

To some current sensibilities, Verdi's *Rigoletto*, popular and tuneful as it is, seems to epitomize the rarified, almost circus world of nineteenth-century Italian opera, and a world of purely exotic entertainment outside the realm of everyday existence. Yet nothing could be further from the truth; if the subject matter of *Rigoletto* were not of immense relevance, why else would Verdi have had to fight an epic battle with the censor over its production? *Rigoletto*, with its hunchback court jester, its philandering tenor singing great "pop" tunes, its heroine ending up dead in a sack, is one of the most revolutionary, inflammatory operas ever written. The subject and its treatment reflect a basic shift in aesthetic philosophy from the strictures of eighteenth-century drama: whereas the latter demanded the morally uplifting *lieto fine* (happy ending), however artificially contrived, the focus is now on the darker side of existence--the ugly, the twisted, the deformed and grotesque. These were the very features that Verdi was specifically looking for in an opera libretto in the early 1850s.

In addition to the bizarre, Verdi, as an Italian humanist, wanted plots with rounded characters, showing real people with human foibles displaying a wide range of emotions. The plays of Shakespeare were a good source for this. In 1847, a few years before composing *Rigoletto*, Verdi had set *Macbeth* to music and was to end his estimable career several decades later with *Otello* (1887) and *Falstaff* (1893), the culmination, respectively, of centuries of Italian tragic and comic opera. Along the way he worked on and had intermittent hopes for--but eventually abandoned--an operatic *King Lear*. The distinguished Verdi scholar, Julian Budden, suggests that *Rigoletto*, with its court setting and complex father-daughter relationship, was in part a kind of substitute for *Lear*.

In addition to Shakespeare, contemporary authors whose works provided Verdi with the kinds of subjects he sought included Schiller (*I Masnadieri*; *Giovanna d'Arco*), Lord Byron (*I Due Foscari*), and, above all, the firebrand French playwright Victor Hugo. Hugo's importance to the Romantic Movement in France and indeed throughout Europe, and his specific importance to Italian Romantic opera, was profound. His play *Hernani* of 1830, which Verdi set as an opera in 1844, included scenes of violence and death on stage, a radical departure for drama at that time. Its use of language was considered to be beneath the dignity of tragedy and Hugo insisted that drama must include realistic portrayals of grotesque behavior, reflecting man's basic animal nature. Imagine then, Verdi's excitement upon discovering Hugo's verse melodrama, *Le Roi s'amuse* (The King is Entertained), which had opened one night in Paris in 1832 and was closed down by the authorities the very next day, not to be given in that city again for fifty years: this was just what the composer had been looking for. All the elements of the grotesque, the ugly, all the possibilities for tragic human interaction--a hunchback buffoon who is at once scathingly cruel yet passionately tender towards his daughter, a libertine monarch, a lurid assassin, a father's curse--were in place.

Upon receiving a commission to write an opera for Venice's Teatro La Fenice for early 1851 (the premiere, postponed, was finally given in March), Verdi wrote to his Venetian librettist, Francesco Maria Piave, on 28 April 1850:

I have in mind a subject that would be one of the
Greatest creations of the modern theater if the police would
Only allow it. . . .The subject is grand, immense and there is
A character in it who is one of the greatest creations that the
Theater of all countries and all times can boast. The subject
Is *Le Roi s'amuse* and the character is Triboulet [whom Verdi
ultimately named Rigoletto]. . . .P. S. As soon as you get this
Letter put on your skates; run about the city and find someone
Of influence to get us permission to do *Le Roi s'amuse*.

From this letter it is evident that Verdi was aware of the great problem with the censors that such a subject would pose. In the current political climate of turmoil and agitation for Italian unity, with large parts of Italy chafing either under foreign or papal domination, artistic censorship was an inescapable fact of life and not likely to be soon relaxed. Nearly every one of Verdi's operas up to this point had entailed a struggle with the censors, either political (as with *I Lombardi* and *Attila*, both thinly-veiled allegories of Italy's struggles against foreign tyranny, as was *Nabucco*) or religious (as with *Giovanna D'Arco* and *Stiffelio*). The fact that *Le Roi s'amuse* was based on the escapades of an actual French monarch, the profligate Francis I, who is shown as a wanton womanizer right on stage, planning to abduct a courtier's wife, entrapping a virtuous young girl, drinking in a sleazy tavern with his inferiors, made it categorically unacceptable to the rulers of Austrian-dominated Venetia. Piave himself strongly objected to the matter of the sack; it was considered the height of bad taste and remained a sticking-point with the censor until Verdi's will ultimately prevail.

Although Piave assured Verdi that the subject had been cleared by the authorities, a letter from the Military Governor, Cavalier de Gorzkowski, arrived in December of 1850, "absolutely forbidding" this opera, deeming the subject one of "revolting immorality and obscene triviality." Piave obligingly set out to "fix" the objectionable features of the libretto--which included not only the sack, but the unflattering portrayal of a monarch and Rigoletto's hump on his back--and succeeded, in Verdi's eyes, not only in emasculating the drama but making utter nonsense of it. The composer eloquently argued that

With that sack removed, it is impossible that Tribouletto
[The name was still evolving] would talk for half an hour to a
Corpse, before a flash of lightning reveals it to be his daughter...
If anyone says to me that I can leave my musical notes as
They are for this new plot, I reply that I do not understand this
Kind of thinking, and I say frankly that my music, whether
Beautiful or ugly, is never written in a vacuum. . . .
To sum up, an original, powerful drama has been turned
Into something ordinary and cold. . . .My artistic conscience will
Not allow me to set this libretto to music.

A compromise was eventually affected through the usual operatic formula of shifting the locale and period and changing the names of the characters. The venue was changed from the court of France to an Italian duchy, specifically Mantua; Blanche (‘white’) became Gilda (‘gilded’), Triboulet/Triboletto became Rigoletto, from the French “rigoler,” to laugh, and Francis I became the Duke of Mantua who, although not mentioned specifically by name, was probably intended to be Vincenzo Gonzaga, the infamous sixteenth-century patron of Monteverdi and Titian, Piave admitting that “by now everyone knows who was ruling at that time.” The body in the sack was allowed but Hugo’s scene in which the King unlocks Blanche’s bedchamber with a key in order to join her within, was forbidden. Lest anyone think that the transformation of Hugo’s melodrama into opera lessened or obscured its salubrious impact, quite the opposite was true. In speaking of the shock value of *Rigoletto* when it was first produced, the early twentieth-century Verdi scholar Francis Toye noted that it “is all very difficult for us to understand and realize, but it must be understood and realized if we are to appreciate the impact made by *Rigoletto* on the operatic world, an impact driven further by *La Traviata* two years later, because *La Traviata* was considered the very quintessence of eroticism and licentiousness. Clandestine lovers used to slip away to hear it, very much as they later went to hear *Tristan und Isolde*.” Hugo himself, although normally disapproving of operatic treatments of his works, eventually conceded that Verdi’s *Rigoletto* had certainly done *Le Roi s’amuse* no great harm and in fact in a few respects was superior to the play. He probably also approved of the fact that a rather large part of the libretto was a translation into Italian of Hugo’s own words.

Not only was the choice of topic revolutionary for 1850, but Verdi’s musical setting reflected great advances in his musical style, so much so that *Rigoletto* was an achievement of which Verdi was proud for the remainder of his days. He considered it to be a landmark in his career and thus in the history of Italian opera, writing to Antonio Somma (the librettist of *Un Ballo in Maschera*, 1859) that it was “the best subject as regards theatrical effect that I have ever set to music. It has powerful situations, variety, excitement, pathos.” Variety is an important word here. One of Hugo’s tenets was that drama should, in the Shakespearean manner, be a mixture of comedy and tragedy. Verdians usually point to *Un Ballo in Maschera*, written nearly a decade after *Rigoletto*, as the opera in which the composer began to make an obvious attempt to accommodate both the comic and the tragic; in this sense it is often likened to Mozart’s *Don Giovanni*. Yet *Rigoletto*, while predominantly tragic (as is *Un Ballo*), has the same mixture of light and darkness. The entire first scene, for example, is cast in the language of eighteenth-century opera buffa, as are parts of *Un Ballo*. It is noteworthy that both operas treat profligate, frivolous monarchs based on real figures, that both plots concern assassination (successful in *Ballo*), and that it was these two, out of all his operas, that caused Verdi by far the greatest problems with the censors.

The essential factor of Verdi’s *Rigoletto* is that it is a musical drama based on strongly contrasting dualities on all levels. A contradiction exists within *Rigoletto* himself: he is a character who displays both wit and wickedness (in his case the two are often inextricable), overwhelming paternal tenderness and bitter cynicism.

A hunchback who sings? [wrote Verdi]. Why not? . . .

Will it be effective? I do not know. . . . To me there is something
Really fine in representing on stage this character outwardly so
Ugly and ridiculous, inwardly so impassioned and full of love.
I chose the subject precisely because of these qualities and if
These original features are removed I cannot write the music.
(14 December 1850)

Verdi perfectly captures Rigoletto's complex nature in the music. He is a character who is unable to sustain any one mood--and thus musical style--for very long. If he begins a scene in a tender manner he becomes agitated and the reverse also occurs. A notable example is the great Act 2 scene, "Cortigiani, vil razza dannata" (You vile, damnable race of courtiers), when Rigoletto is frantically searching for the abducted Gilda at court. He begins in a scathing manner to agitated string accompaniment, but in the course of the through-composed scene the character of the music changes gradually but completely, until, by the end, Rigoletto is supplicating the courtiers to intimate orchestral textures. The musical forms used in the opera, rather than consisting of a preponderance of set arias and ensembles in the Rossinian and Bellinian tradition to which Verdi was heir, instead grows out of the psychology and emotions of the characters and is projected in a series of duets, or interactions, between characters. The dramatic flow is never impeded, the opening ballroom scene being a case in point. Here the party music continues unabated in the orchestra--as at a real ball--while the drama of the curse is played out against it in *parlando* vocal delivery, a device that establishes the violent contrasts found throughout the work, from frivolity to tragedy.

The only full-blown *scena ed aria* of the old-fashioned type is given to the Duke (the tenor), at the opening of Act 2. Normally this character sings irreverent tunes--such as "Questa o quella" and the infamous "La donna è mobile"--displaying his philandering attitude towards women. Such is not the case in this scene, however. In the slow aria of the scene, "Parmi veder le lagrime," he speaks of his genuine love for Gilda, whom he believes is irretrievably lost to him. She is the only woman for whom he has ever had these feelings; thus, no character in *Rigoletto* is one-dimensional, the callous Duke himself suffers, too. And it is entirely appropriate in operatic tradition that the tenor, who is often the altruistic young lover of opera of this period, should sing in Bellinian adagio style of his ideal yet unattainable love for the young soprano heroine.

There are, however, certainly showpieces in the score and some of the most ingratiating tunes ever to appear in Italian opera, yet these, too, are integrated into the drama and grow out of the action and fluctuating emotions. Think of the dramatic sting, the heart-stopping effect, of that most trivial of all tunes, "La donna è mobile," as it is heard in the distance by Rigoletto as he is dragging the sack down to the river with his daughter's body in it, thinking that it is the Duke's body as intended. Gilda's Act 1 aria, "Caro nome," for all its virtuosic demands, is not intended as a showstopper, but as a young girl's heartfelt response to a young man's declaration of love. David Kimball points out that Gilda, who does not come of age until the very end of the opera (ironically, just before her death), demonstrates her youth and immaturity by virtue of the fact that she mostly "only flourishes [note how she decorates the lines in the duets with her father, for example], only becomes musically articulate, in communion with those she

loves.” Kept prisoner by her father because of his deep, overprotective love for her, Gilda is truly a songbird in a gilded cage.

Rigoletto is an opera of musical interaction. When, in 1852, Borsi wanted to add an extra aria for his wife, Teresa de Giuli, to perform in *Rigoletto*, Verdi replied: “Let me say that I conceived *Rigoletto* almost without arias, without finales, but only an unending string of duets. . . .” As one listens, it seems to be so, and that is only one of the myriad unusual aspects about this most revolutionary yet enduring of Italian operas.

About the Composer

Giuseppe Verdi was born in the small village of Le Roncole, Italy. His parents belonged to middle-class families of landowners and traders, not the illiterate peasant class from which Verdi later liked to present himself. Carlo Verdi was enthusiastic about his son's education: even before the age of ten, Giuseppe studied with local teachers, received an old spinet as a gift from his father, and was made the town's official organist. He also entered the *ginnasio* to study humanities and began formal music lessons with the director of the local Philharmonic Society. Antonio Barrezzi, a wealthy merchant and musician, recognized Verdi's musical talent and became his patron, providing financial support and encouragement for many years. With his aid, Verdi applied to the Milan Conservatory, but was refused, partly because he was past the entering age, but mostly for his unorthodox piano technique. Instead, Verdi became the pupil of the *maestro certatore* at La Scala. Although he referred to himself as largely self-taught, Verdi's early educational opportunities proved otherwise.

After completing his studies in 1835, Verdi was appointed *maestro di musica* in Busseto near his native town. He held the post for three years, also marrying Barrezzi's daughter, composing and giving private lessons. Verdi soon wrote his first opera, *Oberto*, and began a professional career marked by continual rounds of negotiations with theaters and librettists, and intense periods of composition and preparation for the direction and production of his work. Tragedy struck with the deaths of his wife and two children. Both children died in infancy and his wife from encephalitis. Their death caused him to nearly renounce composition altogether. However, *Nabucco*, his next premiere, was an unprecedented success. In what is referred to as his "galley slave" years (1842-1853), Verdi arduously wrote sixteen operas—an average of one every nine months. *Rigoletto*, *Il Trovatore*, and *La Traviata* written in the end of this period soon became the cornerstones of the Italian operatic repertory.

Verdi's accumulated wealth granted him greater artistic freedom; in the second half of his life, he would only compose eight more operas. He spent most of his time away from the theater, now married to his life-long companion and former soprano, Giuseppina Strepponi. In 1859 the public honored Verdi's patriotism in taking his name to spell out Vittorio Emanuele Re D'Italia, king of the newly-united independent Italy.

Although many of Verdi's operas had disappeared from the repertory by the time of his death in 1901, he had nevertheless become a profound artistic symbol of Italy's achievement of statehood. It is said that while carrying his remains to their final resting place, thousands of mourners sang a rendition of his chorus from *Nabucco*, an opera written some sixty years earlier. "Va pensiero" could still express contemporary feelings and further demonstrated the extent to which Verdi's music had been assimilated into the Italian consciousness.

Verdi and the Effects of Censorship

When distant powers rule a territory where the native inhabitants resent the foreign domination, the leaders of these distant powers usually resort to oppressive policies such as censorship to prevent their subjects from expressing their opinions for fear that revolution would result from organized opposition. Italians of the nineteenth century were victims of censorship imposed by oppressive powers including the Austrians, the Roman Catholic Church and the Kingdom of Naples. Censors were employed to examine all written material available to the public as well as artistic works to be presented in the realm and to remove the offensive pieces from circulation. If the censors objected to an opera, they notified the police who in turn contacted the impresario at the theater in question. The impresario usually asked the composer of the suspect opera to make the changes in the work dictated by the censors in order to avoid further trouble from the police and financial disaster due to the cancellation of a production.

Throughout his life, Verdi was plagued by the censor's dictatorial judgements. Verdi's first great success at La Scala was *Nabucco*. The censors permitted the production without interference, but were surprised when the third act chorus, "Va pensiero," stirred up the anti-Austrian patriotism of the Milanese public. As a result, Verdi's next opera at La Scala, *I Lombardi*, was scrutinized by the Austrian officials. For the first time, Verdi was confronted by the disapproval of the censors. The Archbishop of Milan objected to the baptism of a Saracen which takes place in stage, calling it a sacrilege to show a sacrament in the theater. The police believed the plot, which included a crusade led by the Pope, to closely resemble a recent proposal for the unification of Italy under the Pope.

Verdi was furious that the political and religious authorities dared interfere with a work of art and refused to appear at a meeting with the chief of police. The Maestro insisted that *I Lombardi* be given as composed or not at all. Fortunately, Merelli, the impresario of La Scala knew that Torresani, the chief of police, was a great opera lover. Merelli told him Verdi's determination to have his opera performed intact. Torresani agreed, but required one change. When the soprano prayed to the Virgin, she had to sing "Salve Maria" rather than "Ave Maria." *I Lombardi* premiered on February 7, 1843, and stirred the Italian public into a nationalistic furor which justified all the fears of the Austrian officials. Verdi's next great success, *Ernani*, naturally attracted the attention of the censors. Although no major revisions were demanded, the officials required that the name be changed. *Ernani* was alternately known as *Elvira d' Argona*, *Il Proscritto* and *Il Corsar di Venezia*. The premieres of both *La battaglia di Legnano* and *Stiffelio* were also delayed due to the interference of censors.

Rigoletto created an unprecedented controversy. The composer received word from the impresario at La Fenice (Venice) that the Austrian Military Governor had rejected the libretto and decreed that the premiere "must be absolutely forbidden". Negotiations followed between the secretary of the Military Governor and Piave, the librettist. Verdi characteristically refused to participate in the meetings although the

proposals for changes were submitted to him for his opinion. The composer agreed to change name of the ruler from Francis I, King of France to a Duke, but insisted, “If the names are to be altered, the locality must be altered, too”.

Verdi’s wishes prevailed and *Rigoletto* premiered on March 11, 1851 with great success. Soon after its premier the opera was seen throughout Italy (with various titles order to bypass local censors) and received over one hundred performances during its first season in Paris.

of the country's folk music and legends. Composers such as Aaron Copland, Douglas Moore, Carlisle Floyd, Howard Hanson, and Robert Ward have all crafted operas that have been presented throughout the world to great success. Today, composers John Adams, Philip Glass, and John Corigliano enjoy success both at home and abroad and are credited with the infusion of new life into an art form, which continues to evolve even as it approaches its fifth century.



The Operatic Voice

A true (and brief) definition of the “operatic” voice is a difficult proposition. Many believe the voice is “born,” while just as many hold to the belief that the voice is “trained.” The truth lies somewhere between the two. Voices that can sustain the demands required by the operatic repertoire do have many things in common. First and foremost is a strong physical technique that allows the singer to sustain long phrases through the control of both the inhalation and exhalation of breath. Secondly, the voice (regardless of its size) must maintain a resonance in both the head (mouth, sinuses) and chest cavities. The Italian word “*squillo*” (squeal) is used to describe the brilliant tone required to penetrate the full symphony orchestra that accompanies the singers. Finally, all voices are defined by both the actual voice “type” and the selection of repertoire for which the voice is ideally suited.

Within the five major voice types (*Soprano, Mezzo-Soprano, Tenor, Baritone, Bass*) there is a further delineation into categories (*Coloratura, Lyric, Spinto, Dramatic*) which help to define each particular instrument. The *Coloratura* is the highest within each voice type whose extended upper range is complimented by extreme flexibility. The *Lyric* is the most common of the “types.” This instrument is recognized more for the exceptional beauty of its tone rather than its power or range. The *Spinto* is a voice which combines the beauty of a lyric with the weight and power of a *Dramatic*, which is the most “powerful” of the voices. The *Dramatic* instrument is characterized by the combination of both incredible volume and “steely” intensity.

While the definition presented in the preceding paragraph may seem clearly outlined, many voices combine qualities from each category, thus carving an unique niche in operatic history. Just as each person is different from the next, so is each voice. Throughout her career Maria Callas defied categorization as she performed and recorded roles associated with each category in the soprano voice type. Joan Sutherland as well can be heard in recordings of soprano roles as diverse as the coloratura Gilda in *Rigoletto* to the dramatic Turandot in *Turandot*. Below is a very brief outline of voice types and categories with roles usually associated with the individual voice type.

	<i>Coloratura</i>	<i>Lyric</i>	<i>Spinto</i>	<i>Dramatic</i>
Soprano	Norina (Don Pasquale) Gilda (Rigoletto) Lucia (Lucia di Lammermoor)	Liu (Turandot) Mimi (La Bohème) Pamina (Magic Flute)	Tosca (Tosca) Amelia (A Masked Ball) Leonora (Il Trovatore)	Turandot (Turandot) Norma (Norma) Elektra (Elektra)
Mezzo-Soprano	Rosina (Barber of Seville) Angelina (La Cenerentola) Dorabella (Cosi fan tutte)	Carmen (Carmen) Charlotte (Werther) Giulietta (Hoffmann)	Santuzza (Cavalleria) Adalgisa (Norma) The Composer (Ariadne auf Naxos)	Azucena (Il Trovatore) Ulrica (A Masked Ball) Herodias (Salome)

<i>Tenor</i>	Count Almaviva (Barber of Seville) Don Ottavio (Don Giovanni) Ferrando (Così fan tutte)	Alfredo (La Traviata) Rodolfo (La Bohème) Tamino (Magic Flute)	Calaf (Turandot) Pollione (Norma) Cavaradossi (Tosca)	Dick Johnson (Fanciulla) Don Jose (Carmen) Otello (Otello)
<i>Baritone</i>	Figaro (Barber of Seville) Count Almavira (Le nozze di Figaro) Dr. Malatesta (Don Pasquale)	Marcello (La Bohème) Don Giovanni (Don Giovanni) Sharpless (Madama Butterfly)	Verdi Baritone Germont (La Traviata) Di Luna (Il Trovatore) Rigoletto (Rigoletto)	Scarpia (Tosca) Jochanaan (Salome) Jack Rance (Fanciulla)
<i>Bass</i>	Bartolo (Barber of Seville) Don Magnifico (Cenerentola) Dr. Dulcamara (Elixir of Love)	Leporello (Don Giovanni) Colline (La Bohème) Figaro (Marriage of Figaro)	Buffo Bass Don Pasquale (Don Pasquale) Don Alfonso (Così fan tutte)	Basso Cantate Oroveso (Norma) Timur (Turandot) Sarastro (Magic Flute)

Opera Production

Opera is created by the combination of myriad art forms. First and foremost are the actors who portray characters by revealing their thoughts and emotions through the singing voice. The next very important component is a full symphony orchestra that accompanies the singing actors and actresses, helping them to portray the full range of emotions possible in the operatic format. The orchestra performs in an area in front of the singers called the orchestra pit while the singers perform on the open area called the stage. Wigs, costumes, sets and specialized lighting further enhance these performances, all of which are designed, created, and executed by a team of highly trained artisans.

The creation of an opera begins with a dramatic scenario crafted by a playwright or dramaturg who alone or with a librettist fashions the script or libretto that contains the words the artists will sing. Working in tandem, the composer and librettist team up to create a cohesive musical drama in which the music and words work together to express the emotions revealed in the story. Following the completion of their work, the composer and librettist entrust their new work to a conductor who with a team of assistants (repetiteurs) assumes responsibility for the musical preparation of the work. The conductor collaborates with a stage director (responsible for the visual component) in order to bring a performance of the new piece to life on the stage. The stage director and conductor form the creative spearhead for the new composition while assembling a design team which will take charge of the actual physical production.

Set designers, lighting designers, costume designers, wig and makeup designers and even choreographers must all be brought “on board” to participate in the creation of the new production. The set designer combines the skills of both an artist and an architect using “blueprint” plans to design the actual physical set which will reside on the stage, recreating the physical setting required by the storyline. These blueprints are turned over to a team of carpenters who are specially trained in the art of stage carpentry. Following the actual building of the set, painters following instructions from the set designers’ original plans paint the set. As the set is assembled on the stage, the lighting designer works with a team of electricians to throw light onto both the stage and the set in an atmospheric as well as practical way. Using specialized lighting instruments, colored gels and a state of the art computer, the designer along with the stage director create a “lighting plot” by writing “lighting cues” which are stored in the computer and used during the actual performance of the opera.

During this production period, the costume designer in consultation with the stage director has designed appropriate clothing for the singing actors and actresses to wear. These designs are fashioned into patterns and crafted by a team of highly skilled artisans called cutters, stitchers, and sewers. Each costume is specially made for each singer using his/her individual measurements. The wig and makeup designer, working with the costume designer, designs and creates wigs which will complement both the costume and the singer as well as represent historically accurate “period” fashions.

As the actual performance date approaches, rehearsals are held on the newly crafted set, combined with costumes, lights, and orchestra in order to ensure a cohesive performance that will be both dramatically and musically satisfying to the assembled audience.



Discussion Questions

1. Verdi based his opera on a play by Victor Hugo about the French king, Francis I. The story had to be approved by censors and had to be changed to get their approval. What was objectionable about the story and why?
2. What is the effect of censorship on art and literature?
3. What is the contrasting nature of the character of Rigoletto?
4. How does Verdi use the literary device of irony in the story of Rigoletto?
5. How does Verdi achieve the sound of the violent storm in Act 3 using the orchestra and men's voices?
6. How does the famous quartet in Act 3 demonstrate how different characters can express their separate emotions while singing simultaneously?