



Verdi's *Il Trovatore*

A word of advice: If you're going to throw the baby into a fire, make sure you have the right baby. Trust me on this one – the wrong one will lead to disaster!

OK, sorry to be so morbid, but as you probably know by now, that's the basic premise of Verdi's *Il Trovatore* (*The Troubadour*). *Trovatore* is the poster child of 19th century extravagant, turgid and not infrequently morbid Romantic melodrama. It's turgid even by Verdian standards. It also marks a turning point in Verdi's operatic paradigm.

Trovatore is one of Verdi's "Big Three," (the other two being *La Traviata* and *Rigoletto*.) All three were composed and premiered between 1851 and 1853. Musicologists and literary scholars seem to like dividing an artist's work into three periods, which are usually ingeniously named "Early," "Middle," and "Late." In Verdi's case, the Big Three mark the transition between his Early Period, when he worked so hard to establish himself, and his Middle Period, when his musical voice was consummately developed and he was fully enthroned as Italy's leading composer.

In his Early Period, he followed the conventions of early 19th century Romantic opera, a genre defined by Rossini, Bellini and Donizetti. Later, Verdi would redefine Italian opera in two ways: replacing the turgid melodrama of his predecessors with more profound and coherent drama, and creating a far more sophisticated musical framework. So, *Trovatore* is transitional: Verdi uses a traditional melodramatic plot but sets it to some of the finest "new" music – as good as any he would ever write.

The Verdi scholar William Berger, in his illuminating survey *Verdi with a Vengeance*, says of *Trovatore*,

This is the opera your parents warned you about. *Il trovatore* is wild, uninhibited, and relentlessly intense. It could only have been written by Verdi, and only at one point in his career.

Trovatore was wildly successful at its premiere and has remained so ever since. It is one of the most frequently performed operas, worldwide. It is the 11th most popular opera at the Met, having been performed 637 times between its Met premiere in 1883 and 2013. But Berger goes

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on to say, “Not that its popularity has helped its reputation. *Trovatore* is the Rodney Dangerfield of operas – immensely popular but it gets no respect.”

The original source of the libretto was a play written by a Spaniard, Antonio García Gutiérrez, born 1813, died 1884 (note: born the same year as Verdi). Gutiérrez was educated as a physician but was more interested in the theater. Residing in Madrid, he made a meager living as a translator and playwright. He finally reached some fame with the production of his play, *El Trovador* (yes, it means just what you think) in 1836. *El Trovador* was a typical example of the Spanish Romantic era; Verdi scholar Julian Budden described the play as "a high-flown, sprawling melodrama flamboyantly defiant of the Aristotelian unities, packed with all manner of fantastic and bizarre incident." In other words, just about perfect for Verdi's conception of his opera.

Verdi read the play and decided he just had to set it. He sent it to one of his favorite librettists, Salvatore Cammarano, who got straight to work on it. Cammarano finished the first two acts, along with the lyrics of some of the better arias, but sadly, died before completing it. Verdi passed the unfinished libretto to another librettist, Leone Emanuele Bardare, along with some new ideas and that's the version we have today.

The opera's premiere in Rome in 1853 was a smash hit. Verdi had already become a titan of opera in Italy as well as the rest of the world. The extravagant melodrama and the monumental score that Verdi provided for it perfectly suited 19th century Italy; taken as a whole, it still does to this day.

Berger acknowledges that *Trovatore* is easy to ridicule: “Apparently, the first thing a newcomer to the world of opera must learn is to laugh at *Trovatore*.” But this is unjust, he continues, and persuasively enumerates its many admirable qualities. He concludes: “... *Trovatore* can turn even the most jaded audience on its head. It is time to stop apologizing for *Trovatore* and start apologizing to it. It is as modern and urgent as anything written since.”

Enjoy!

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