



*GIUSEPPE VERDI*

# *Don Carlo*

*by*

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*Docent*

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# *OPERA GUILD OF ROCHESTER*

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*Giuseppe Verdi (1813-1901)*

# *DON CARLO*

*Opera in three acts*

*Libretto by Joseph Méry and Camille Du Locle  
based on the dramatic play by Friedrich Schiller*

*Italian translation by Achille de Lauzières and Angelo  
Zanardini*

*Premiere: Salle Le Peletier, Paris Opéra, March 1867*

Between 1855 and 1870, Giuseppe Verdi devoted himself to providing works conforming to the Parisian operatic standard, which demanded spectacular dramas on subjects of high seriousness in five acts with a *ballet*.

**Don Carlos**, Verdi's 28<sup>th</sup> opera, is a five-act grand opera to a French language libretto, based on the dramatic play *Don Carlos* by Friedrich Schiller. It premiered at the Paris Opera on March 11, 1867.

The first Italian version as **Don Carlo** was given in Bologna also in 1867, but over the following twenty years, cuts and additions were made to the opera, resulting in over 40 versions. All these versions

now allow directors and conductors to choose any of them, depending on their interpretation and length preference.

No other Verdi opera exists in so many versions.

At its full length, **Don Carlo** contains close to four hours of music and it is Verdi's longest opera.

The opera is a massive undertaking of a grandiose masterpiece which requires superb music direction, intricate staging and a cast with big, gorgeous voices and unflagging stamina.

This 1983 production has them all. A blend of personal passions and political intrigue, the opera runs gripping from beginning to end and it is definitely the grandest and most complex of Verdi's operas.

The story takes place in the mid 1500's, at the time of the Spanish Inquisition. In 1556 the Emperor Charles V abdicated, had celebrated his own funeral and had retired in the Monastery of San Jeronimo at Yuste. His son Philip II is now on the throne. With the war going badly between Spain and France, King Philip decides to buy peace by marrying Elisabetta of Valois, the daughter of King Henry II of France. But since her youth, Elisabetta had been promised to Philip's son, Don Carlo, who loves her deeply. As the son turns against his father, the royals become pawns in a game run by religious extremists and the Spanish Inquisition, with the Grand Inquisitor dominating over all.

**Act I** starts in the forest of Fontainebleau, where Don Carlo and Elisabetta are singing of their love. The happiness is short lived as the Spanish delegation makes the announcement that King Henry II has now promised his daughter to Don Carlo's father, King Philip. (Chap. 8) This political machinery crushes both Carlo and Elisabetta, but she accepts with dignity for the sake of peace, while Carlo is broken and in despair.

Carlo's childhood friend, Rodrigo, joins Don Carlo to comfort him. In the famous friendship duet, "Dio, che nell'alma infondere" Carlo confesses that he is consumed by love for his father's wife, while Rodrigo advises him to focus his thoughts on the suffering of the oppressed Flemish people. While he two friends vow to live and die together, Philip and Elisabetta are renewing their vow before the gates of Charles V's tomb. (Chap. 13)

After the wedding here is a secret request by Rodrigo for Elisabetta to have an audience with Carlo; he is suffering great emotional pain and the King is ignoring him. Elisabetta agrees to see him. In the court, meanwhile, one of the Queen's Ladies, the Princess of Eboli, who also loves Carlo, thinks that he might be in love with her. When Carlo arrives, it is obvious that Eboli is not the one he wants. The duet of the next three arias between Carlo and Elisabetta is all about their love, their untenable situation, the pain of their dilemma. For them to be together, Carlo would have to kill his father and take his stepmother to the altar. (Chaps. 18, 19, 20)

The whole court is troubled, even the King is a torn, lonely man, surrounded by courtiers and ministers who work to their own advantage; not one honest man among them.



In the next scene, as he is talking to Rodrigo, the King is impressed by his loyalty and honesty. As he shares with Rodrigo how tortured he is by his suspicions of Elisabetta, he appoints him to be his personal counselor and asks him to carefully keep an eye on Elisabetta, but at the same time warns him to stay clear of the Grand Inquisitor. (Chap. 25)

**Act II** It is night and Carlo is in the Queen's Gardens because he received an anonymous note from a woman who wants to meet him at midnight. Carlo believes it is Elisabetta, and when she appears, he pours out his love for her. The woman who arrives covered with a mask is instead Eboli, who is overjoyed until she removes the mask and learns that Carlo is in love with his stepmother, the Queen. As the mistake is revealed, a very angry Eboli threatens to tell the King everything.

Rodrigo shows up, and realizes that he has to save his friend. At first he tries to silence Eboli, but then quickly he thinks of another plan. He asks Carlo to give him any secret or incriminating papers he may be carrying with him and takes them for safe-keeping. ( Chaps. 2, 3, 4)

The next scene, which I had to skip for restrictions of time, takes place in a big square, where crowds have gathered to honor King Philip and to witness an *auto-da-fé*, the public ceremonial burning of heretics by the Inquisition. It is a splendid and grandiose scene which shows the mighty power of punishment of the Catholic Church. Carlo has a rash confrontation with his father for refusing to send him to govern Flanders. He draws his sword on the King and is led away to prison, while an angelic mysterious voice is heard, as it promises divine peace to the tortured heretics. (Chap. 7)

One must keep in mind the philosophical message of moral values in Schiller's drama, and pay attention on how well Verdi took into the libretto and the music the feelings and the contrasting passions of each character. The whole opera is a complex web of power, religion and politics. It deals with the complexity of each character's human emotions, with the ideals and the struggles in their relationships, all under the fearsome power of the Catholic Church which at the end determines everyone's fate, even the royals.

\*\*Don Carlo is the Prince on the edge of madness.

Perhaps haunted by his grandfather, the Emperor Charles V, he is unhappy and full of anguish. His love for Elisabetta, who is his stepmother, after all, is all consuming and self-centered.

Don Carlo's weakness is somehow strengthened in his passionate friendship with Rodrigo, a good man, a great friend.

\*\*Rodrigo, a political hero, believes in a better world, in the nobility of mankind and the needs of others. He is prepared to sacrifice all for his friend Don Carlo.

\*\*King Philip is a lonely, torn man, tortured by jealousy, and surrounded by selfish courtiers. He recognizes in Rodrigo the honest man who holds up to him the truth of his oppressed existence, as he is surrounded by the crushing force of the Inquisition. King Philip sees in Rodrigo the son that Carlo cannot be to him, after all the relationship with his son has been poisoned by his marriage to Elisabetta. Even as King, he cannot overcome the force of the Inquisition and he loses both his son and Rodrigo.

\*\*Elisabetta, the French Princess, gives up Don Carlo when she is given as a bride to his father, King Philip, this is her duty, even if she loves Carlo.

\*\*The Princess of Eboli, an aristocrat in the Spanish court, is mistress to King Philip and at the same time deeply in love with Don Carlo. It is a love that leads her to betray her Queen, an act that will seal Don Carlo's fate and that she will bitterly regret.

As **Act III** begins, King Philip reflects on all his problems. Elisabetta does not love him, his son Carlo is in prison for treason, and the Grand Inquisitor, who thinks that Carlo should die, demands also that Rodrigo as a traitor must be executed. In a dramatic confrontation, Philip refuses to hand him over and is warned that even a King can suffer at the hands of the Inquisition.

The famous quartet of Elisabetta, Philip, Rodrigo and Eboli, “*Ah! Sii maledetto, sospetto fatale*” is where we see four profoundly different sets of emotions on display. Elisabetta is distressed because her jewelry box has been stolen, the King, who has it, opens it, finds a portrait of Carlo and accuses her of adultery. She is now lamenting her unhappy life in this unfriendly country, when Rodrigo realizes that the queen has been abandoned by everyone and decides that it is time to take action. Eboli, who is showing signs of guilt, will soon confess that she stole the box and gave it to Philip. She also admits being the king’s mistress, and begs for Elisabetta’s mercy. The queen tells her to choose either the convent or the exile. (Chaps. 13, 14)

The ultimate gesture of friendship is delivered when Rodrigo comes to Carlo's cell to tell him not to worry. The incriminating, secret papers Carlo gave him earlier have been found on him. He is now a traitor and has to die. As they are talking, a shot is fired and Rodrigo falls. With his death he has now saved Carlo's life. King Philip arrives to free his son, but finds Rodrigo dead, leans over his body and sadly sings "*Who will give this man back to me?*" (Chaps. 18,19)

The opera ends at the cloister of the Monastery where it began. Carlo is hiding near the tomb of his grandfather the Emperor Charles V, Elisabetta is also there, invoking the spirit of the Emperor and recalling her first meeting with Carlo. The two of them speak tenderly of Rodrigo and they take a solemn farewell, hoping to meet in a better world.

King Philip and the Inquisitor have heard them. They come forward, so the King can reclaim his wife and deliver his son to the Inquisition. Carlo retreats towards the tomb of his grandfather and the audience witnesses an enigmatic, most perplexing conclusion. The gates of the tomb open, an unidentified figure appears, dressed as a monk and wearing the Emperor's crown. He covers Carlo with his mantel and takes him into the cloister.  
(Chaps. 21, 24)

The end of the opera leaves the audience bewildered and wondering what the heck just happened. Some synopses claim that the gates of the cloister open and Don Carlo is drawn inside to safety. The unfortunate



Don Carlo has faced nearly every inner conflict – between love and loyalty; between duty and honor; between friendship and family; between faith and personal ideals. Unlike any other character, Carlo never resigns himself to reality. He finds no way to cope with the complicated world around him and in conclusion the music lets us know that one way or another he is leaving that world. At the end Carlo is as bewildered as the audience, so the end probably does not matter. Verdi took all of the story's complexities and confusions and left us a great grand opera. A drama with a complicated plot, weaving together any number of personal, political and theological conflicts and wrapping them all up in a climatic ending.