



GIUSEPPE VERDI
RIGOLETTO
by
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Docent

**OPERA GUILD OF
ROCHESTER**

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Giuseppe Verdi (1813-1901)

Rigoletto

Melodramma in three acts
Libretto by Francesco Maria Piave
based on the play Le Roi s'amuse by Victor Hugo

Premiere: Teatro La Fenice, Venice, 1851

Live from the Met 7 November 1977

Conductor: *James Levine*

Metropolitan Opera Chorus

Chorus Master: *David Stivender*

CAST:

Il Duca di Mantova	<i>Placido Domingo</i>
Rigoletto, his court jester	<i>Cornell Macneil</i>
Gilda, his daughter	<i>Ileana Contrubas</i>
Sparafucile, a villain	<i>Justino Diaz</i>
Maddalena, his sister	<i>Isola Jones</i>
Giovanna, Gilda's nurse	<i>Ariel Bybee</i>

Il Conte di Monterone	<i>John Cheek</i>
Marullo, a nobleman	<i>Robert Goodloe</i>
Borsa Matteo, a courtier	<i>James Atherton</i>
Il Conte di Ceprano	<i>Philip Booth</i>
La Contessa di Ceprano	<i>Loretta di Franco</i>
Usher	<i>Peter Sliker</i>
Page of the Duchess	<i>Alma Jean Smith</i>

It is appropriate to begin our Guild Opera Lecture Series tonight with a presentation on Giuseppe Verdi, whose 200th birthday anniversary is being celebrated in this year 2013, and whose operas are being performed in

many opera houses in the world.

Giuseppe Verdi was born on October 9, 1813 in Le Roncole near Busseto, he died in 1901 at the age of 88, after having composed a total of 28 operas. He composed his first 13 operas by 1849, but it was between 1850 and 1853, when Verdi created his three most enduring works:

Rigoletto, Il Trovatore and La Traviata

These are the three operas where he introduced more enigmatic roles: characters who are both hostile and loving, heroes and outcasts. *Rigoletto*, *Azucena* and *Violetta* are, as a matter of fact, musical portraits that develop individually as their drama unfolds.

These three operas are also considered Verdi's best, thanks to the level of maturity the composer had reached in creating scenes which heightened the dramatic effect with exceptional orchestration and most beautiful melodies.

As for *Rigoletto*, the whole opera is a journey of undeniable force that commands the respect of critics, performers and audiences alike. It has been immensely popular from the day of its triumphant premiere in 1851, as the tale of an outsider, a hunchbacked jester, who struggles to balance the dueling elements of beauty and evil that exist in life. Taken from a controversial play Victor Hugo had published in 1832, the dramatic implications of the play became real only when transformed by Verdi's musical genius into the opera.

Victor Hugo himself had made a comment when he heard the quartet "*Bella figlia dell'amore*" in Act III, as he wrote: "*If I could only make four characters in my plays speak at the same time, and have the audience grasp the words and the sentiments, I would obtain the same effect.*"

We must also remember that in all his operas Verdi demanded that his librettists always find the exact '*parola scenica*' that is, the right '*stage word,*' in order to underline the acoustical value rather than the syntactical value of the word. The melody is a very important component of the sound of the word, and then the musical and dramatic content are reconciled.

When Verdi read Hugo's play "*Le roi s'amuse*" ("*The King amuses himself*") he found that "*the subject was grand, immense, and there is a character that is one of the greatest creations that the theatre can boast of, in any country and in all history.*" But from the play to the opera Verdi had to make some changes both with the settings and with the names of the characters; because the plot dealt with a scandalous topic and the Austrian censors would not allow it to be performed in Venice. The original title of the opera, *La Maledizione* was not accepted by the censors, so it was changed to *Rigoletto*, and the setting moved to the

Renaissance Court of the Duke of Mantua, instead of the royal France of King Francis I. But even with a new title and a different setting, the opera shows how Verdi held firm on other main issues in the story: the protagonist visible deformity, the father-daughter relationship and a curse that is the catalyst of the drama.

Rigoletto, the hunchback jester in the court of the Duke of Mantua, is known for his verbal abuse of the indiscreet love life of the Duke. His harsh life is warmed only by his unconditional love for his daughter Gilda, whom he protects by keeping her in hiding.

He visits her in secret, so nobody knows that he has a child, and everybody thinks that she is his mistress.

Act I

In his court the Duke remarks that he has been seeing secretly a beautiful young woman, he has even followed her to and from her home, where she is often visited by a mysterious man, but he is now also flirting with the Countess Ceprano in front of her helpless husband, while Rigoletto makes fun of him. The scene is interrupted by Count Monterone who crashes the party and accuses the Duke of having dishonored his daughter. Rigoletto mocks also Monterone's

fatherly outrage; and while he is being arrested, under orders of the Duke, Monterone swears vengeance by cursing both the Duke and Rigoletto, who in turn is terrified by this curse.

- Cornell MacNeil, who sings the role of Rigoletto, had made his debut in the opera in 1959 and kept this role central to his career. He did 102 performances until 1985. In 1977 he was near the end of his career, but his stage presence here is still very powerful and he does some really excellent acting with his body especially in Acts two and three.

- John Creek has been defined one of the best Monterone for his somber, noble stage presence (he seems miles taller than Rigoletto) and his booming bass is frightening enough in his curse to make Rigoletto tremble.
(Chap. 4,5)

In the next scene Rigoletto sings of his protective love for Gilda in the most celebrated father-daughter duet. The theme of parental love is found in many of Verdi's operas: *Nabucco*, *Aida*, *Simon Boccanegra*, and *Traviata*, but the composer never outlined it more deeply than in *Rigoletto*.

It is a relationship that Verdi himself never had a chance to enjoy, if we point out his personal tragedies of having lost a sister as a young boy and then two children and his wife as a grown man.

The father-daughter relationship is the heart of the opera. The two are the only carefully drawn characters and musically the interaction between them has a quality of passionate intensity. But this overly protective and loving father is also a man full of hate and his Gilda is eventually destroyed as a result of Rigoletto's own anger and bitterness.

- Ileana Cotrubas in this performance portrays a touching Gilda who matures into a woman as she is ready to sacrifice anything for love. It's tragic and beautiful at the same time. (Chp. 8,9)

As Rigoletto leaves, now the Duke arrives to declare his love for Gilda. Disguised as a poor student, he gives her a false name; she realizes that she is truly in love with this young man. After he leaves, she adoringly ponders the false name he gave her, in the well-known aria, "Caro nome." (Chp.11,12,13)

This 1977 performance at the Met is an excellent production of this great opera with wonderful singing on all accounts. Singing the role of the Duke, we also have a youthful looking and sounding Placido Domingo, whose acting is superb, who is in top vocal form and could not give us a better performance.

As plans had been made to abduct Rigoletto's 'mistress', Rigoletto is told that it is the Countess Cipriano who is being abducted and he helps in the abduction. But soon after, deceived, he finds out that they have taken his Gilda and despairs while remembering Monterone's curse. (Chapt. 15)

Act II

The Duke is told about the abduction and that the lady is in his rooms; having understood that it is Gilda they have taken, he hurries off to be with her.

Shortly after Rigoletto arrives to look for his daughter. The abductors also realize that the 'mistress' is Gilda, Rigoletto's daughter, they try

to hold him back, but Rigoletto violently denounces them for their cruelty and asks for compassion in the famous aria "Cortigiani, vil razza dannata" (Chap. 17,18,19,20,21)

Gilda comes out crying and runs in shame to her father to confess the Duke's courtship and seduction in the great aria "Tutte le feste al tempio." This part is a testimony of Gilda's development from a child to a woman. In her confession, her childish voice is gone, her expressive power has deepened and her vocal character matured. The impact she makes on her father with her powerful force of expression is such that in Rigoletto's mind his sorrow now turns to revenge. (Chap. 23)

Later Monterone appears as he is being taken away to prison, and Rigoletto now swears that both of them will be avenged. (Chp. 25)

Act III

Rigoletto, who has paid the hitman Sparafucile to kill the Duke, goes with Gilda to a tavern where Sparafucile's sister Maddalena lures his victims. The Duke is there trying to seduce Maddalena with the world's most famous aria "La donna è mobile." Rigoletto and Gilda are watching through a window. What follows is now the famous quartet "Bella figlia dell'amore," an ingenious musical analysis of the diverging reactions of four characters through distinctive rhythmic, melodic and harmonic

patterns. It is one of the most powerful operatic ensembles ever composed. In the quartet the Duke's music rises with urgency and impatience, Gilda's droops with disappointment, Rigoletto's remains measured and paternal, while the promiscuous Maddalena is literally all over the place. In the context of the opera, the merely lovely music becomes inspired drama. (Chap. 27,29)

Rigoletto tells Gilda to wear some men's clothing, so they can leave the city without being noticed.

Sparafucile is set to kill the Duke and to give his body to Rigoletto at midnight. It is a stormy night.

Gilda, dressed as a man, goes back to the tavern, where she overhears Maddalena telling her brother to spare the Duke's life because she likes him. They both agree to kill instead the next visitor who comes to the door. Gilda decides to sacrifice herself for the Duke, knocks at the door and, as she enters, she is stabbed. The body is handed over to Rigoletto, who thinks that his revenge is complete. Then, he hears the Duke singing in the distance, he opens the sack only to find out that it is his own daughter dying. Rigoletto cries, as he remembers Monterone's curse, which now has been fulfilled. (Chp.31,32,33,34)

