



Rethinking the
Elements of
Melodrama:

Verdi's Innovative Vision in

RIGOLETTO

Master of the theater that he was, Verdi liked to recall a childhood incident in which real life seemed to trump the most hair-raising effects imagined for the stage. At the local church in his native village of Roncole, young Verdi found his attention naturally drawn to the music he heard during worship services. One day, while serving as an altar boy, he became so distracted from his duties that the priest celebrating Mass kicked him. The boy went tumbling down the steps of the altar and, humiliated by this abuse, at once muttered a curse that the priest be struck down by lightning. The vindictive wish became reality eight years later when the offending cleric was instantly killed by a thunderbolt.

As an illustration of the apparent effectiveness of a curse—all the more alarming for being unforeseen—this episode might have found itself right at home in Verdi’s operatic universe. The device of the curse (along with its corollary, revenge) is, after all, as commonplace in nineteenth-century opera as the elaborate car chases meant to set the pulse pumping in blockbuster action films. Curses in one form or another figure prominently throughout Verdi’s operas. Think of the early breakthrough work *Nabucco* (which actually dramatizes a moment of divine retribution in the

poser’s development and is moreover based on a play originally conceived by Hugo as forming a kind of diptych together with *Le roi s’amuse*. Both plays (and operas) center on the relationship between a parent and a child, culminating in the death of the latter unwittingly caused by the former’s desire for vengeance. *Lucrece Borgia*, Hugo explained, shows an instance of “maternity purifying moral deformity,” while with the hapless hunchbacked jester we observe “paternity sanctifying physical deformity.”

It’s not difficult to imagine the deep impression Donizetti’s opera must have left on the young Verdi, who was a student in Milan when *Lucrezia Borgia* premiered. By 1850 Verdi had settled on Hugo’s companion play as an operatic subject. “Oh, *Le roi s’amuse* is the greatest subject and perhaps the greatest drama of modern times,” he wrote. “Triboulet [Hugo’s name for the jester] is a creation worthy of Shakespeare!! Just like *Ernani* it’s a subject that cannot fail.”

And indeed it did not. Both of these Hugo-inspired operas scored enormous successes with the public from the start. *Rigoletto* in particular has long enjoyed a special status in the composer’s canon, since it is generally regarded as Verdi’s first achievement of his mature mastery.

“The entire story is in that curse.”
—Giuseppe Verdi

form of a lightning bolt), *Macbeth*, with its collective imprecation against Duncan’s murderer, the gypsy curse of *Il Trovatore*, or *Simon Boccanegra*’s thrilling Council Chamber finale.

In some cases, curses even function as major characters. The dying Marquis’s curse against his daughter Leonora becomes a concrete emblem of the abstract force contained in the title of *La forza del destino*. And Verdi’s two operatic settings of plays by Victor Hugo rely on a call for vengeance whose mood Verdi establishes in riveting musical terms: the fatal oath that the old man Silva compels his rival to swear in *Ernani* (essentially a curse) and the *maledizione* after which Verdi even considered naming his seventeenth opera, which premiered 161 years ago as *Rigoletto*.

Not by coincidence, both of these Hugo-based operas marked major turning points in Verdi’s evolution as an artist. The plays on which they were based served as vehicles for the groundbreaking Romanticism of Hugo and his followers, also providing dramatic templates for leading composers during this period of aesthetic transition. An operatic version of *Hernani* appeared as early as 1834, and Bellini had seriously thought about setting it as well. Donizetti’s 1833 opera *Lucrezia Borgia* represents an important step in its com-

While the audience’s first response was overwhelmingly enthusiastic, Verdi expert Julian Budden points out that the critics were all over the map, describing the new opera by turns as confusingly experimental and as an archaic throwback to the era of Mozart (shades of *Don Giovanni* are particularly evident). These various assessments only underlined the essentially paradoxical nature of Verdi’s creation. Opening with a scene in the light-hearted idiom of opera buffa, *Rigoletto* uses comic elements not for “relief” but to engender irony and thus intensify one of the bleakest, most relentlessly tragic visions in any of the composer’s operas. The innovation achieved by *Rigoletto*, observes Budden, is not a matter of “making a clean break with the past. The elements are in themselves mostly traditional, but they are fused together in a new and exciting way”—as in the dissolution of clear markers between formally separated vocal numbers (arias, duets, etc.) and plot-advancing recitatives, or the absence of grand ensembles for each act’s finale.

The composer’s treatment of the curse might similarly be seen as a signature of the opera’s innovative rethinking of tradition. By itself, the curse that Monterone invokes is thoroughly conventional in spirit. Opera historian Gilles de Van homes in on the formula for the curse as Verdi inherited it from contemporary operatic conven-

tion. Because the curse “assumes, implicitly or explicitly, the agency of God, the judge par excellence, it is almost always pronounced by paternal figures whose actual situation as father...confers the right to invoke divine aid.” At the same time, the curse “often takes on a solemn, public character and gives rise to majestic scenes.”

In contrast to this almost ritualistically public moment, one of the most innovative scenes of *Rigoletto* involves the jester’s soul-baring monologue to the courtiers tormenting him while, ever the performer, he attempts to suit his pitch to the audience, moving from simulated indifference to wrath to appeals for pity. And it is precisely at this point that Rigoletto’s disgraced situation has come to resemble that of the outraged Monterone, powerless to protect his daughter from the Duke’s predations. Meanwhile, the opera’s other passages of greatest emotional intensity unfold within the private sphere, often as secret or “overheard” exchanges between characters.

As many a commentator has remarked, the curse itself is actually superfluous in the sense that the entire mechanism for the tragedy is already independently in place. No “supernatural” explanation is needed for the Duke of Mantua’s hedonistic behavior, which adds Gilda to his list of victims, or for Rigoletto’s bitter response and consequent plotting for revenge. The tragic outcome that seems to “fulfill” the curse results from the choices

each of the principals makes in accordance with their personalities, while the Duke himself gets off unscathed.

Verdi, however, uses the curse not as a hackneyed plot device but to focus on the psychological effect it has on the jester. Its implications ripple across the entire opera from the moment Monterone pronounces the curse: a refrain that sheds new light on Rigoletto each time it recurs. In fact the first music we hear, dominating the Prelude, is the darkly insistent dotted-rhythm monotone of the motif that will be associated with the curse. Yet, as Budden notes, this musical signature stands not so much for the curse per se as for Rigoletto’s recollection of it immediately afterward. Verdi’s brilliantly effective choice as a musical dramatist is to play up the character’s *perception* of its power and significance. “The entire story is in that curse,” wrote the composer, but what makes his opera so riveting is the way in which the curse is internalized and interpreted.

The curse, in other words, becomes a pithy symbol for *Rigoletto*—for what Verdi considered the opera’s unique *tinta* or color. Through the curse he centers our attention on the essential *dualism* underpinning this paradoxical work. It is as an outraged father that Monterone is driven to issue his call for justice: initially he has come to accuse the Duke of defiling his daughter. In his capacity as court jester, Rigoletto mocks and goads the old count, who then includes



Costume sketches of (L to R) Sparafucile, Gilda, and the Duke of Mantua by Constance Hoffman for our current production.

the jester in his curse against the Duke. But an instant shock of recognition grips Rigoletto, for his one secret solace is his own daughter, Gilda. Precisely this contradictory aspect, which defines Rigoletto's personality, fascinated Verdi: "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."

In Hugo's play Triboulet displays an even viler demeanor than that of the operatic jester, pointing up the dramatically incongruous aspect of "the king's buffoon" as simultaneously being a father who loves too much. "His greatest fear is that [his daughter] may fall into evil, since being evil himself he knows what suffering it causes," wrote Hugo. "He has trained his king in vice but has brought up his daughter in virtue...."

From Verdi's point of view, what was especially revelatory in Hugo's controversial dramaturgy was its seemingly contradictory mixture of the grotesque and the lofty, cynicism and sincerity. It's difficult today to appreciate just how revolutionary this fusion was. A fundamental impetus for the new Romantic movement, this mixture of the high and low was significantly inspired by the fresh enthusiasm for Shakespeare that had only begun to spread in France and Italy. Both the promiscuous mixture of styles and the psychologically penetrating richness of Shakespeare's plays provided Verdi with a model for his own innovative thinking with regard to the conventions of Italian opera. His version of *Macbeth* was of course not the first operatic adaptation of the Bard, but it did mark, as Budden observes, "the first Italian opera which attempts to reflect the spirit of Shakespeare." Yet the playwright's works were still such a novelty in Italy that Verdi had not even seen a production of *Macbeth* by the time his opera was staged in 1847.

Verdi associated Hugo's misfortunate jester and the curse that haunts him with an audaciously Shakespearean conflation of opposites—and thus with the sort of topic from which he could extract maximal potential for music drama. Even more, he found ways in *Rigoletto* to use his orchestra to provide the unspoken, "obscene" narrative so essential here. As the jester delivers his monologue to the courtiers, observes author Vincent Godefroy, "while he sings and moves us to pity, the orchestra is commenting on his daugh-



Baritone Lawrence Tibbett sang the title role of *Rigoletto* in five San Francisco Opera seasons

ter's experience behind the locked door....concentrate on the orchestra and you will hear the rape of Gilda."

The opera's paradoxes ultimately pivot around the curse, making the agent of evil also its victim but also turning Rigoletto into a doppelgänger for Monterone, much as he recognizes his disturbing kinship with the assassin Sparafucile: He thinks the curse has already worked its full effect on him when Gilda is disgraced and in turn sets about his own plan of revenge against the Duke. The curse by its nature is also immune to the plea for *pietà* voiced by Gilda. Mercy is the curse's opposite, and it is her untarnished love for the Duke—even against the evidence of his behavior in the final act—that leads her willingly to her own destruction. Gilda has been sheltered from the world by her father, but her emergence from innocence into experience is not a "fall." Verdi's music in the final duet emphasizes how her loving act of independence offers a positive counterpart to

Rigoletto's vision of the world as a mirror of his deformity, a merciless reality whose inherently malignant pattern has only been reinforced by Monterone's curse.

What Gilles de Van terms "the grammar of melodrama"—the mechanisms of cursing and the longing for revenge—becomes, in Verdi's hands, the engine for an opera whose swiftly paced momentum anticipates the epiphanies enabled by cinematic narrative. The more you peel back in the topsy-turvy world of *Rigoletto*, the more clearly you see how Verdi has refashioned or even overturned stereotypes. The storm sequence in the final act is not merely atmospheric but accelerates the plot, while the comic spirit that characterizes the Duke as a pleasure-loving libertine gains extraordinary dramatic impact from the contexts in which Verdi situates it. Rigoletto's most-famous tune, "La donna è mobile," as seductive as the Duke himself, is deceptively self-standing but in fact begins with a false start and never quite ends: Its final recurrence elicits a terrifying frisson from Rigoletto similar to that caused by Monterone and his curse. This time, though, the jester's sudden reversal from gloating to horror is complete. ❁

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