giuseppe verdi’s
RIGOLETTO
January 26 & 28, 2018
Valentine Theatre
The Curse Vengeance Brings
Student Night at the Opera: Wednesday, January 24, 2018
James Meena, Conductor
Tomer Zvulun, Director

Toledo Opera
Student Night at the Opera
Wednesday, January 24
7:00 PM
Valentine Theatre
The Story and Characters

the long story short
An intriguing story of an unrestrained Duke, his court jester, the jester’s daughter, and a curse which envelops them all in tragedy.

the characters
Rigoletto - a hunchback, the Duke’s jester
Gilda - his beautiful daughter
The Duke of Mantua - a licentious nobleman
Sparafucile - the local assassin
Maddalena - his sister
Count Monterone - a courtier
Matteo Borsa - a courtier
Count Ceprano - a nobleman
Countess Ceprano - a noblewoman
Giovanna - Gilda’s nurse
Marullo - a courtier
Duchess - a noblewoman
Court Usher - a courtier

where & when
16th century Mantua

From “Rigoletto: A Revolution in Opera”

“Another way Verdi reworked the forms of Italian opera, was the way he repeatedly interrupts a scene to give the audience a foretaste of what’s to come. In the opening scene, the chorus is interrupted by Monterone’s appearance and curse, which abruptly changes the tone of the scene—thus heightening the crucial point of the drama. In the second scene, the duet between Rigoletto and Gilda is interrupted by the furtive arrival of the Duke, who, in turn, is interrupted in his wooing of Gilda by a noise outside which turns out to be the footsteps of the courtiers who have come to abduct Gilda. Her single aria is interrupted by their comments, which serve to tighten the drama. All this overlapping of scenes and characters gives a sense of urgency and propulsiveness to the storytelling.”

(Paul Thomason, August 16, 2004)
The Action

**ACT I** At his palace, the Duke boasts of his way with women. He flirts with the wife of Ceprano, one of his courtiers, while Rigoletto, the Duke’s hunchbacked jester, mocks the enraged husband. Marullo, another one of the Duke’s courtiers, bursts in with the latest court gossip: Rigoletto is keeping a young mistress at his place. Unaware of this, Rigoletto continues to taunt Ceprano, who plots with the others to punish Rigoletto for his insults. Monterone, a nobleman, forces his way into the crowd to denounce the Duke for seducing his daughter and is viciously ridiculed by Rigoletto. Monterone is arrested and places a curse on Rigoletto.

Rigoletto is disturbed by Monterone’s curse. He encounters Sparafucile, an assassin, who offers his services. Rigoletto reflects that his own tongue is as sharp as the murderer’s knife. Arriving at home, he warmly greets his daughter, Gilda. Fearing for the girl’s safety, he warns her nurse, Giovanna, not to let anyone in. When Rigoletto leaves, the Duke appears and bribes Giovanna, who lets him meet Gilda whom he’s seen in church. He declares his love for her and tells her he is a poor student. After he has left, Gilda tenderly reflects on her newfound love. The Duke’s entourage gathers nearby, intending to abduct Rigoletto’s “mistress.” When Rigoletto arrives, surprising them, they convince him they are abducting the Countess Ceprano and enlist his aid in their scheme. Successfully deceiving Rigoletto, they kidnap Gilda. When Rigoletto discovers that his daughter has been taken, he collapses as he remembers Monterone’s curse.

**INTERMISSION**

**ACT II** The Duke, having returned to Rigoletto’s house expecting to complete his conquest of Gilda, has found the house deserted. Distraught, he expresses, for a moment, a tenderness for the young girl. When his entourage returns and tells him the story of how they abducted a girl from Rigoletto’s apartment and left her in the Duke’s bedroom, he realizes it is Gilda and hurries off to her. Rigoletto enters, looking for Gilda. The entourage is astonished to find out that she is his daughter rather than his mistress, but they prevent him from storming into the Duke’s bedroom. Rigoletto violently denounces them for their cruelty, then asks for compassion. Gilda exits the Duke’s room. She tells Rigoletto of the Duke’s courtship, her abduction, and her deflowering by the Duke. Monterone is brought in to be killed by the Duke’s men, and Rigoletto swears that both he and the nobleman will be avenged. Gilda begs her father to forgive the Duke.

**ACT III** Rigoletto brings Gilda to a seedy pub on the outskirts of town where Sparafucile and his sister Maddalena live. The Duke appears, and Gilda and Rigoletto watch him through the window as he amuses himself with Maddalena. Rigoletto tells his distraught daughter to leave town disguised as a man and, after she leaves, pays Sparafucile to murder the Duke. Gilda returns to overhear Maddalena urge her brother to spare the Duke and kill Rigoletto instead. Sparafucile refuses but agrees to kill the next person to arrive at the pub, so that he will be able to produce a dead body for Rigoletto. Gilda decides to sacrifice herself for the Duke. Her plan succeeds and Sparafucile and Maddalena put her body in a sack. Rigoletto returns, and assuming the body is the corpse of the Duke, gloats over his revenge. But when he hears the Duke singing inside the pub, he realizes he has been duped. He quickly removes the hood covering the head of the body in the sack and is horrified to find it has been masking the identity of his dying daughter. Gilda dies asking her father’s forgiveness and Rigoletto realizes Monterone’s curse has been fulfilled.
The Background

“would the police allow rigoletto?”

In 1850, Verdi wrote to his librettist, Francesco Maria Pave, I have in mind a subject that would be one of the greatest creations of the modern theatre if only the police would allow it. ... The subject is grand, immense and there’s a character in it who is one of the greatest creations that the theatre of all countries and all times can boast. The subject is Le roi's s'amuse and the character I'm speaking about is Triboulet. ... Run about the city and find someone of influence to get us permission to do Le roi s'amuse. ...

Verdi was already anticipating the difficulties he would have with the censors. Indeed, it is a wonder Rigoletto ever made it to the stage.

Verdi chose as his subject the play Le roi s'amuse (The King Amuses Himself) by Victor Hugo, which had opened in Paris two decades previously, in 1832, played for one night, and been promptly banned as obscene and politically subversive. The play was based on the life of the French King Francis I, who had been safely dead since 1547. However, Hugo’s King Francis was a little too much like the King, Louis-Phillipe, who had survived an assassination attempt just before the play opened. The censors were not amused and shut the play down. Despite a lawsuit by the furious playwright, the ban on performances remained in place for fifty years, even though the printed version of the play was available. It was not until November 22, 1882, that Le roi s'amuse could finally be seen in Paris - a quarter century after Verdi's Rigoletto first played Paris - a fact that did not amuse Victor Hugo.

Verdi clearly knew he was asking for trouble when he selected Le roi s'amuse as the subject of an opera. Just as clearly, he was deeply attached to the subject, in particular, to his hunchbacked jester, whom he considered a creation worthy of Shakespeare!

There were so many ways in which it was sure to offend the censors. The story was politically unacceptable: it depicted a king behaving badly and the attempted assassination of that king; it was morally shocking, dealing as it did with rape, adultery, suicide, and the theme of curses and vengeance.

Verdi composed the opera, originally titled La Maledizone (The Curse), in only six weeks as a commission for the Teatro La Fenice, which was in Austrian-controlled Venice. But the opera's premiere had to be postponed while Verdi and Piave waged a battle with the censors. A libretto in Venice required approval from the theatre manager, the mayor of the city, and the Austrian Department of Public Order.

When the libretto was submitted to the Department of Public Order in the fall of 1850, the response was extremely negative: His excellency the Military Governor Gorzkowski ... deplores the fact that the poet Piave and the great maestro Verdi have not been able to find any scope for their talents other than the repulsive immorality and obscene triviality of the plot of the libretto titled La Maledizione ... The aforesaid Excellency has thus seen fit to ban the performance absolutely.

The censors objected to the portrayal of the king as evil; to the fact that the king’s antagonist was a lowly court jester - and a hunchbacked one at that; to the decadence of court life; to the seduction of the heroine; they even objected to the body in the sack. Verdi was prepared to negotiate, but only to a point; he
instructed Piave not to change the characters, the plot, the dramatic situation. He was adamant that the sack and the hump had to stay.

Of the censors’ directive to remove the sack he wrote, What difference did the sack make to the police? Are they afraid of the effect it has? ... If you take away the sack, it is unlikely that Trabullo would talk for half an hour to a corpse, without having a flash of lightning show him that it is his daughter.

He insisted on Rigoletto’s deformity: “A hunchback who sings? Why not? ... 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.”

After two rewrites and a lot of haggling, helped somewhat by Verdi’s international reputation, a compromise was reached. The French King Francis I morphed into the Italian Duke of Mantua; the hunchback Triboulet became Rigoletto; the other characters’ names were changed. Verdi got to keep the hump and the sack.

In late January, 1851, Piave wrote, For the last five days, I have been running around like the devil from the government to the police, to the Commando di Piazza, to the Presidenza, I assure you that by the time this is over I shall be a real athlete. Two days later he was able to say, Te Deum Laudamus! Gloria in Excelsis Deo! Alleluja Alleluja! At last ... our Rigoletto returned ... safe and sound, with no broken bones and no amputation.

The opera opened on March 11, 1851, and was a great success. By the next day the Duke’s impudent aria La Donna è mobile, was heard on the streets of Venice; it remains one of the most instantly recognizable tunes in all opera. Ironically, the censors’ insistence on changing the setting from France to Italy gave the opera a local context, with which the audience could more readily identify.

Rigoletto soon travelled all over Europe and abroad, to enthusiastic audiences. It reached London in 1853, New York and Buenos Aires in 1855, Paris in 1857; it opened the new Cairo opera house in 1869, and was presented by the Metropolitan Opera in its first season in 1883.
World History

events surrounding verdi’s world

Giuseppe Fortunino Francesco Verdi born 1813
Napoleon abdicates and is exiled 1814
Rossini’s “Barber of Seville” premieres in Rome 1816
New York Stock Exchange is founded 1817
Charles Graham patents false teeth 1822
Beethoven’s 9th Symphony premieres in Vienna 1824
Statue of Liberty presented to U.S. in Paris 1831
Rossini’s “William Tell” premieres in Paris 1839
Bellini’s “Norma” premieres in Milan 1842
Tennessee enacts 1st prohibition law in U.S. 1838
New York Philharmonic’s 1st concert 1847
Charlotte Bronte’s “Jane Eyre” published 1851
1st class at U.S. Naval Academy graduates 1854
National Association of Baseball Players founded 1857
Battle of Gettysburg 1863
Lincoln assassinated by John Wilkes Booth 1865
Alcott’s “Little Women” published in U.S. 1868
Verdi’s “Aida” premieres in Cairo 1871
1st recorded hockey game (Montreal) 1875
G&S’ “HMS Pinafore” premieres in London 1878
Building of Panama Canal begins 1880
Battle of Gettysburg 1881
1st world series game 1884
Vincent van Gogh cuts off left ear 1888
Nabisco invents “Cream of Wheat” 1890
Ibsen’s “Hedda Gabler” premieres in Oslo 1891
Ellis Island (NYC) opens as immigration depot 1893
Michael Owens of Toledo patents glass-blowing machine 1895
Queen Victoria dies 1901
Verdi dies 1901
The Music

... I conceived Rigoletto without arias, without finales, as a long string of duets, because this was how I wanted it.

Giuseppe Verdi

Verdi himself called Rigoletto “revolutionary” in form and style and considered it his best opera. With Rigoletto, he departed from the traditions of the 18th and 19th century Italian opera and focused on the interaction between characters, creating a continuous dramatic whole rather than a series of story-telling bits interrupted by songs that did more to show off the singer’s talents than to advance the drama.

Rather than solo arias, Verdi wrote much of Rigoletto as duets, again spotlighting the relations between character and reinforcing the tight connection between the drama and the music.

This doesn’t mean there aren’t a few hit songs that can be performed in recital as well as on the opera stage. Gilda’s “Caro nome” is a lovely thing, in which she rhapsodizes on the beloved (though fictional) name of the man she has fallen for.

The Duke’s “La donna è mobile” is also a recital favorite, an unforgettable tune that is familiar even to people who know little of opera. This flippant little ditty takes on a horrible irony within the opera, as it is the cue to Rigoletto that the body he is dragging triumphantly toward the river is not that of the Duke. The Russian composer Igor Stravinsky said that “La donna è mobile” contains more substance and true invention than all of Wagner’s massive four-opera Ring Cycle.

The other great masterpiece in the opera is the magnificent quartet, with the Duke, Maddalena, Gilda, and Rigoletto expressing their individual emotions of passion, amusement, grief, and rage. Victor Hugo, author of the play on which the opera was based, said of the quartet, This is marvellous, simply marvellous! Ah, if I only could in my play make four people talk simultaneously in a way the public would understand the words and varying sentiments.

Verdi himself said: I never expect to do better than the quartet. Many consider it the finest piece of ensemble writing in all of opera.

Over the course of his long career Verdi moved away from the traditional “number opera” (an opera with a lot of individual musical “numbers” such as solos, duets, and trios) to a coherent “through-composed” whole, where the dramatic texture takes precedence over show-stopping numbers. Rigoletto is an early step in this process; Verdi’s last three operas, Aida, Otello, and Falstaff, are in the more modern through-composed idiom. Richard Wagner, born the same year as Verdi, followed a similar development as a composer. Through-composed operas with their tighter dramatic construction became prevalent in the 20th century in the hands of composers such as Richard Strauss and Benjamin Britten.
In *Rigoletto*, Verdi “focused on the interaction between characters, creating a continuous dramatic whole...” Explore the plot and two of the characters by completing a chart for the jester Rigoletto and one for his daughter Gilda.

### Rigoletto

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### Gilda

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Verdi was passionately committed to creating an opera telling the story of Victor Hugo’s play, *Le roi s’amuse*. What play, novel, historical or current event would you be passionate about telling through the art form of opera?

**The story I want to tell**

**Why would an opera be a good way to tell the story?** (refer to What is Opera? below.)

**Obstacles you might encounter**

In 1850, Verdi had to worry about the Austrian censors who had the power to ban his opera or stop it from being produced in Venice which was then ruled by Austria. Today, what would you have to worry about?

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**what is opera?**

Opera is a theatrical drama or comedy told in music through powerful, unamplified voices. Opera combines several art forms—vocal and instrumental music, theater, drama, visual art and often dance—into one complete theatrical experience. When successfully produced, an opera’s directing, singing, acting, stage setting, lighting, conducting, and orchestral playing will create an unforgettable spectacle that can move audiences to tears or elation—or both.

**The Basic Elements of Opera**

**Singing Is the Primary Method of Expression**

The most defining aspect of opera is that the majority of lines are sung instead of spoken. The characters express their thoughts and feelings in song rather than speech. Because it usually takes longer to sing something than to say it, however, the action may sometimes seem slower than in a play. Occasionally, even in an opera, characters may speak rather than sing, but the vast majority of lines will be sung.

**Opera Combines Many Different Art Forms**

Much of the excitement of opera comes from its use of multiple art forms. Opera combines singing, acting, orchestral music, poetry, dance, mime, theatrical scenery, costumes and lighting in a unique art form all its own. The word “opera” itself is an Italian word derived from the Latin word “opus,” which means work (as in work of art).

**An Opera Tells a Story**

As in a play, opera is performed on a stage with scenery, props and lighting, by actors wearing costumes, make-up and wigs to create a specific character, time, and place. While the actors sing their lines they are accompanied by a piano, small instrumental ensemble, or even a full orchestra, that may be either to the side of the stage or beneath the stage in the orchestra “pit.” Opera stories come from many different sources: mythology, the Bible, fairy tales, literary classics and history. Operas may be about mythological gods, historic heroes, royalty, or ordinary people from the past or present. The words sung in an opera are written down in a libretto (Italian for “little book”). The libretto is sometimes sung in a language other than English, depending on the nationality of the composer and librettist (the author of the libretto).

**The Music in an Opera Reflects the Mood and Events in the Story**

The addition of music to telling a story tends to greatly increase the emotional intensity of a performance. Even if you cannot understand the words being sung, the music provides many clues. It reflects a character’s feelings; it hints at a turn in the plot; it may even describe an event (a storm, for example). If something sad or frightening is about to happen, you may hear a warning in the music before the action takes place.
Background/Objective

After seeing the opera Rigoletto, take time to reflect on your experience. Use this sheet as a template to gather your thoughts and structure your review.

Send your classes’ reviews to lovialdinger@toledoopera.org by February 9 and have excerpts posted on the Toledo Opera website!

Questions

1) How would you rate your experience at the opera?

1 2 3 4 5

Not very good . . . Really great!

2) What surprised you about the opera?

________________________________________________________

________________________________________________________

3) What did you like and why?

________________________________________________________

________________________________________________________

4) What didn’t you like and why?

________________________________________________________

________________________________________________________

5) How would you describe the production to someone who did not see it?

________________________________________________________

________________________________________________________

6) What did you think of the singers?

________________________________________________________

________________________________________________________

7) Do you think Rigoletto should be called one of the “greatest operas of all time”?

________________________________________________________

________________________________________________________

With these ideas in mind, craft a 500 word, balanced review of the opera. Include both the good and the bad through constructive criticism. Give your review a perspective. Reviews are more personal than essays. By the end of a successful review, the reader should be able to understand your experience and point of view. The reader should be able to discern if he or she would like to go to the opera. Turn in your review to your teacher and have him or her send it in to be published on the Toledo Opera website.