

LESSON PLAN

IL TROVATORE (The Troubadour)

An Italian opera in four acts

Composed by Giuseppe Verdi

Libretto by Salvatore Cammarano

What to look for at a live performance?

OBJECTIVES

Students can:

- Describe how a live theatrical performance is different from a book or film
- Explain the audience's role in a live performance.
- Analyze the production for clues about characters traits, relationships and develop a plan for analyzing some component of the production
- Respond to the production using these developed criteria.
- Compare and contrast forms of storytelling—books, TV and live performance
- Discuss how watching an opera is different from these other forms of storytelling because it is a live performance.
- Brainstorm some of the elements that make a live opera performance different from any other types of live performance. For example; the singers are not using any amplification, there is a conductor, etc.
- Examine how a live performance is not complete until the audience experiences it.
- Discuss how the audience's behavior at a live performance impacts the performers.
- Identify some of the theatrical skills needed to make a live production (for example: a singer needs to use her voice—this includes diction, projection and tone, she also uses her body—gesture, shape and energy).
- From this analysis, develop a rubric to critique the elements of the live performance.
- While watching the performance, make mental or written notes to include in a critical analysis of the opera.
- After the performance, write or discuss observations of the production
- Share this critical analysis in small groups and with teachers.

About the Opera, *Il trovatore*

The opera is based upon a very popular play of the same title, written by Antonio Garcia Gutierrez. Giuseppe Verdi was the composer of the opera and the librettist was Salvatore Cammarano. Verdi contacted Cammarano and suggested the story as a sequel to his last opera, *Rigoletto*. Cammarano changed the five-act play into a four-act opera libretto. He amplified the story of the old Gypsy, Azucena, and wove it into a more chilling tale of revenge and impossible love. The opera was first performed in 1853.

The Story

The opera is set in Spain in the 15th century during a revolution

Characters (in order of vocal appearance) along with voice types

Ferrando, an old Captain, bass

Leonora, a lady in waiting to the queen, soprano

Manrico, a troubadour, tenor

Count di Luna, baritone

Azucena, an old gypsy, mezzo soprano

Ines, a lady in waiting for Leonora, mezzo soprano

Ruiz, Manrico's aide, tenor

A chorus of soldiers, gypsies and nuns

Background

Spain in the 15th Century: Count di Luna and Manrico, a troubadour are both in love with the same woman, Leonora. They are also on opposite sides of a war. Manrico was raised by a mysterious gypsy, Azucena, whose own mother was burned at the stake by the Count's father for enchanting his young son. This young child was mysteriously abducted soon after the old gypsy was burned to death.

The Story

ACT ONE

The Duel

Scene I. Count di Luna's palace of Aliaferia

At the battlements a regiment of soldiers and servants are told the story of the old Count de Luna by his trusty Captain, Ferrando. He retells the events that led to the loss of the Count's young child. The old captain recalls that a servant girl came upon an old gypsy woman whispering incantations over the newborn, second son of the count. Soon after, the child fell ill and the villagers confronted the old woman who pleaded that she was only reading the baby's horoscope. The villagers lit a pyre of fire and burned the gypsy woman at the stake. Ferrando tells the men that the count died soon after from a broken heart but believed until his last moment that his younger son was still alive. He recalls that the old count begged his older son to continue to look for the child. Ferrando believes he would

know the gypsy who stole the child if he saw her again. He then warns his men that the old woman still lives as a creature of the night who will come for vengeance.

Scene II, A Garden in the palace

Leonora's lady in waiting, Ines wants her to come inside the castle. But, Leonora's love for a young man she saw at the jousting tournament makes her linger in the garden hoping he will come back to serenade her with his lute. After they exit, the Count di Luna, desperately in love with Leonora, appears in the garden to woo her. Just then, lute music is heard from offstage and Leonora re-enters to be with her beloved troubadour, Manrico. The Count and Manrico draw swords. Leonora faints as the two men disappear to fight.

ACT TWO

The Gypsy

Scene I. A Gypsy Encampment

A band of gypsies sing of the gypsy life and the gypsy women they love. They hammer on their anvils as they sharpen swords. Azucena, an old gypsy remembers holding her baby and watching her mother burn at the pyre. When the gypsies leave, she tells her son Manrico the story of her mother's death cry for vengeance. She retells how she crept into the child's room to steal the Count's son. With both children in her arms, Azucena rekindled the pyre, and threw her own child into the fire by mistake. Manrico is baffled... is he the Count's lost son? She retracts her story reminding him that she walked through the battlefields looking for him to heal his wounds. She scorns Manrico for not killing his enemy Count di Luna. She recalls that Manrico battled the count and yet could not kill him at the critical moment. Azucena makes him swear on his sword that if he ever gets the opportunity, he will kill di Luna. They are interrupted by the news that: Manrico is to defend the Castle of Castellor for the rebellion and Leonora, thinking he is dead, will pledge herself to the convent. Manrico leaves to save Leonora.

Scene II. In front of the Convent

The Count and his men wait to kidnap Leonora outside the convent. As she enters, the nuns welcome her into the sisterhood. Di Luna and his men reveal themselves, but Manrico and his men arrive in time to save her and overpower the Count and his men. Manrico and Leonora escape together.

ACT THREE

The Gypsy Son

Scene I. Count di Luna's palace of Aliaferia

Azucena is captured by the Count's men. Ferrando recognizes her as the gypsy who took di Luna's child many years ago. Count di Luna orders her to be burned at the stake. She cries out for her son Manrico and di Luna realizes he has his enemy's mother as bait to capture Manrico.

Scene II. The recently occupied castle of Castellor

Leonora and Manrico's wedding in the castle of Castellor is interrupted by Ruiz announcing that Azucena had been captured by di Luna. Manrico sends Leonora to safety and rallies his men for a battle.

ACT FOUR

The Execution

Scene I. Outside the prison walls where Manrico is held

Leonora comes to beg for the release of Manrico who has been captured by di Luna. Outside the wall of the prison she hears Manrico playing his lute and singing goodbye to her as other prisoners sing a *Miserere*.

Now fearless, Leonora finds di Luna and promises to give herself to him in exchange for Manrico's freedom. The Count agrees, but she secretly drinks poison from her ring. When he returns, di Luna wants what he is promised.

Scene II. In the prison

Azucena and Manrico are held together in a dungeon. She awakes from a nightmare and is rocked back to sleep by Manrico's lullaby to her. Leonora arrives to free him, but Manrico scorns her for the price she has paid for his freedom. Leonora begs him to leave as the poison takes hold. Only then does he realize what Leonora has done. She has paid the ultimate price for her Manrico. Hiding in the shadows, di Luna witnesses all of this and orders Manrico burned at the stake. Azucena awakes from her sleep and reveals to the Count that he has just murdered his brother.

About the Composer

Giuseppe Verdi (1813-1901) is the most famous Italian opera composer of the 19th century. His operas are performed more than any other composer in the world. It is probably because he was a great musical story teller and could help an audience understand the details of character through purely musical means.

Verdi also was an excellent story teller, creating complex and tragic situations for characters in his operas. Verdi was born to a merchant family. His father quickly realized that his son was a talented musician and encouraged him toward a career in music.

Verdi married Margherita Barezzi in 1836. Both of their children, a girl and boy, died before they were two years old. Then Margherita died while Verdi was composing his second opera, a comedy, which was judged a failure. Verdi was devastated and planned to give up composing. But his next opera *Nabucco* was a great success and he became well known throughout Europe and America for

his work. Verdi threw himself into his career, composing new operas and then directing them throughout Italy. Verdi called this time in his life his “years in the galleys”. The “years in the galleys” culminated in three of Verdi’s most popular operas presented from 1851-53. They are *Rigoletto*, *Il trovatore* and *La traviata*. Each of the stories are compelling, the characters are complex, heroic and graceful. Verdi’s range of composing for the stage was solidified. These three operas, written in quick succession, established Verdi as the greatest composer of his time.

Verdi fell in love with Giuseppina Strepponi, a former singer who had performed in many of his operas. They become inseparable and finally married in 1859. In addition to composing and directing, Verdi was an active member of local politics and was elected as a senator to the national parliament in 1862. Verdi’s later works include: *La forza del destino* (1865), *Don Carlos* (1867), *Aida* (1871), a Requiem written for his friend the poet Manzoni (1874-5), *Otello* (1886), and *Falstaff* (1893) which was only his second comedy and his last opera. Verdi and Strepponi retired to Milan where they were popular citizens. Verdi died in 1901 and 28,000 people honored him at his funeral.

Il trovatore

Lesson plan

Interpreting a character’s point of view: An examination of Azucena

PRIOR KNOWLEDGE

The story of *Il trovatore* is sometimes considered silly by modern audiences. How could a woman throw the wrong baby in the fire? Maybe she didn’t.

OBJECTIVES

Students will:

- Listen for key words in the libretto that give us clues to themes in the opera.
- Look closely at the story for interpretation of the character Azucena.
- Explore Azucena’s internal and external conflicts.
- Compare her to another famous Verdi character for clues.

For this lesson you will need:

The synopsis of *Il trovatore* and a timeline of the Roma or The Gypsies

Review the story of *Il trovatore* and look at the history of the Roma or Gypsies and the timeline of Gypsies in Europe in this guide. Listen to musical selections with particular attention to the words. The translation is “*avenge me*”. The librettist uses this phrase again and again. Why do you imagine it is used so frequently? Imagine you are a refugee in a foreign country. Every action taken by members of your community are closely watched and punished harshly by the local officials. Beliefs, religion, social activities and music from your culture are

considered wicked. If you are caught practicing any of these things, you could be put to death. Imagine that a member of your own family was put to death for one of these practices and their last words to you were “avenge me”. You take this oath very seriously. Brainstorm what you might do to avenge your family member. To what lengths would you go for vengeance? What are the things that keep you from attaining your goal? Are you conflicted by your decision?

Think back to the character of Azucena. She slipped into the room of the young count and stole his child. She stood in front of the pyre where her mother had cried for vengeance. Then Azucena threw her own child into the flames. Was it just confusion, madness and grief, or did she have another scheme in mind? Plot out the rest of the story from Azucena’s point of view with the students and include decisions the character must make through the course of the story.

Please include some of the following moments in the opera:

- Explain to the class why Azucena admits to Manrico that she isn’t his mother and then retracts her story in Act 2, sc II.
- Examine why Azucena confesses a great deal of information to Ferrando and The Count when she is being held at the Palace in Act 3, sc I. but never mentions that Manrico might be di Luna’s brother to the Count.
- Justify why Azucena waits until Manrico is dead to tell di Luna that they were brothers. Look at Verdi’s opera *Rigoletto*. He wrote *Rigoletto* just before *Il trovatore*, during his “years in the galleys” period.
- How is the character of Rigoletto similar to Azucena?
- What do they both gain?
- What motivates them?
- What have they both lost?
- What physical and psychological characteristics do they share?

Debrief

When you attend the performance of *Il trovatore*, watch for choices the singer playing Azucena makes as she interprets the role. How does this compare to what you constructed for your interpretation of her character?

The timeline of the Roma tells a story of people who have been excluded for generations throughout the world. Investigate their status since 1945.

Il trovatore

A time line of The Roma or Gypsies in Europe

The Roma are a nomadic group, whose origin is possibly Egypt and India. Since their arrival in Europe they have been enslaved, outlawed and murdered. They have a variety of names including: Roma, gypsy or Gitano. But this name is not connected to the country Romania or Rome, Italy.

1300

Romani groups begin to be enslaved in southeast Europe.

1445

Prince Vlad Dracul of Wallachia transports some 12,000 persons "who looked like *Egyptians*" from Bulgaria for slave labor.

15th Century

(Giuseppe Verdi sets his opera Il trovatore in Spain, during this time of social unrest.)

1499

Medina del Campo in Spain orders *Gitanos* to find a trade and master, and to cease traveling with other *Gitanos*, within sixty days. Punishment for failure to obey is 100 lashes and banishment. Repeat offences are punished by amputation of ears, sixty days in chains, and banishment. Third-time offenders become the slaves of those who capture them.

1505

Roma are recorded in Scotland, probably from Spain.

1560

The Archbishop of the Swedish Lutheran Church forbids priests to have any dealings with Roma. Their children are not to be christened and their dead not to be buried.

Early 17th century

Spanish legislation becomes harsher, forbidding *Gitanos* from dealing in horses. The local populace is given permission to form armed groups to pursue *Gitanos*.

1745

Gitanos in Spain must settle in assigned places within two weeks. The punishment for failure is execution. "It is legal to fire upon them to take their life." The Churches no longer provide asylum. Armed troops are ordered to comb the countryside for Roma in hiding.

Early 1800s

"Gypsy hunts" become a common and popular sport in Germany.

1830

Authorities in Nordhausen, Germany remove Roma children from their families for fostering with non-Roma.

1885

Roma are excluded by United States immigration policy; many are returned to Europe.

1909

Recommendations from a "Gypsy policy conference" in Hungary include the confiscation of animals and carts, and permanent branding for identification.

1934

Roma in Germany are selected for transfer to camps for processing, which includes sterilization by injection or castration. Over the next three years, these camps will be established at Dachau, Dieselstrasse, Sachsenhausen, Marzahn and Vennhausen.

1940

At Buchenwald, 250 Romani children are used as guinea-pigs to test Zyklon-B gas crystals.

1933-45

Up to 1,500,000 Sinti and Roma are killed in Europe by the Nazi regime.

Romanticism

Today when someone says the word *romance*, most people think of sweethearts, gushy poetry, roses and boxes of chocolate. Romanticism was an artistic, political and social movement which became popular during the end of the 18th century. Romanticism was a reaction to the Enlightenment. Proponents of Enlightenment believed in reason above all things, and art as well as nature should be put into proportion and rationalized. The advocates of Romanticism believed in the value of intuition, and the awe inspiring power of nature. They believed that people were only complete when they saw themselves as a part of nature.

Romantic art usually includes the following:

- Folk art, folk music and folk traditions, particularly referencing medieval times.
- Heroes and heroines who value custom and honor above all else.
- Geography that informs a natural order of economy and society.
- Characters returning to nature.
- Stories filled with passion, horror and trepidation.

Verdi's *Il trovatore* and Romanticism

Romanticism was at its height in the mid-19th century and Verdi was the leading Romantic composer of his time. His selection of the popular play *Il trovatore* as an

operatic subject reflected his appetite for stories created with a passionate, wild-eyed landscape in mind.

Verdi and his librettist Cammarano used a variety of romantic conventions to their advantage in the opera. For example the young Manrico is the idealistic poor son of a Gypsy fighting on the losing side of a revolution. This makes him a perfect Romantic hero...passionate, poetic and a musician who can serenade his beloved as well. The beautiful Leonora sees Manrico only once and is instantly in love. They exchange a single glance and then she pledges to die for him. She is also a Romantic character, choosing the convent over a compromised marriage.

Leonora is at her most noble when she tricks di Luna into a false promise of marriage and then drinks poison from the ring on her finger. She would rather die with honor than compromise her pledge to Manrico. Verdi and Cammarano allow Manrico and Leonora to be together only briefly onstage. They spend much of their time in the opera longing to return to each other or grieving for the loss of their beloved. Verdi and Cammarano also use nighttime or moonlight to frame this romantic story. Ferrando's tale of the gypsy woman frightens the soldier even more when the clocks chime midnight. The gypsies are leaving for their jobs before dawn when Azucena begins her terrible story. The Count plots to capture Leonora as she makes her way to the convent at dusk. Finally, as Manrico is sent to the pyre by di Luna, the sun rises.

Take a closer look at Romanticism

Look again at this study guide, there are many lute players depicted in it. Would they fit the definition of Romantic? Please explain why.

Look again at the history of the Roma. These people have no home or country to call their own. They use their intuitive skills to tell fortunes and read horoscopes. Do they fit the definition of Romantic? Please defend your answer. Look at the following pages which provide information about Troubadours, Verdi's music and the history of rings. Discuss why each of these would fit the definition of Romantic.

Troubadours

The troubadours became popular in the 11th and 12th century in Europe. They were originally French itinerant crusaders, kings and other noblemen who had been stripped of their land and status by the Pope. Their romantic song/poems extolled the perfection of courtly love with unattainable women who were either virgins or married to other men. They also created songs depicting stories from the crusades. Their tradition spread to Italy and Spain in the 13th century.

Troubadours songs were generally played on lutes. In *Il trovatore*, Manrico plays the lute twice, once when he is wooing Leonora in the garden and later when he is singing good-bye to her in prison. Listen for the harp as it imitates the sound of

the lute. The harp is set up backstage near the singer who plays Manrico so it sounds like he is actually playing the lute.

Music

Verdi's composing of *Il trovatore* reflects the height of 19th century opera music. Azucena's music has a dance like—feeling. It is all written in 3/4 time in order to capture the “gypsy dance” spirit. It also makes the audience feel the movement and madness inside each of Azucena's arias. As the opera progresses, even Leonora's music takes on this 3/4 meter. Her character becomes locked into a decision to free Manrico, so her music becomes more rhythmically like Azucena's. Verdi wanted the audience to sense Azucena's vengeance in the piece through the music.

The Origin of Rings

The oldest ring story dates back to Prometheus. Prometheus had given mankind fire and as a punishment, he was condemned to be chained to the Caucasus mountains for eternity. The God Jove was lenient and allowed Prometheus freedom if he agreed to wear a small chain around his finger with a stone from the Caucasus mountains.

The History of Poison Rings

Poison rings were a small hinged box attached to a ring base which could open to reveal a small compartment. Women kept prayers and poison in the box. Ladies of high status knew that either the poison or the prayers would get them out of the most difficult situations.

During the 14th and 15th centuries the study of poison had become extremely fashionable. The Italian Queen Catherine De Medici's own interest in the subject made it very fashionable in society to study the art of poison. What better way for a nobleman to raise his own status than to do away with the competition? Leonora's poison of choice was probably a mixture of caustic lime, bitter almonds, powdered glass and honey. This was then shaped into a pill small enough to fit into her ring with its secret compartment.

We at Toledo Opera love to get letters from students to hear what they have to say in their own words. A letter-writing lesson might be an appropriate class assignment at this point. Some or all of these letters can be mailed to us. Also, if any students would like to write fan letters directly to one of the performers, we would be happy to pass them along.

Our mailing address is:

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