

The Pescadero Opera Society presents

Rigoletto



Music by Giuseppe Verdi
Libretto by Francesco Maria Piave

Based on Victor Hugo's play
"Le Roi s'amuse"

Opera in Three Acts

Setting: Mantua, Italy and vicinity
Time: The 16th Century

Characters

The Duke of Mantua (tenor) Plácido Domingo
Rigoletto, the Duke's court jester (baritone).....Cornell MacNeil
Gilda, his daughter (soprano)..... Ileana Cotrubas
Sparafucile, an assassin (bass).....Justino Díaz
Maddalena, his sister (contralto)..... Isola Jones
Giovanna, Gilda's governess (mezzo-soprano)..... Ariel Bybee
The Count of Monterone, a Noble (baritone)John Cheek
Marullo, a nobleman (bass).....Robert Goodloe
Borsa Matteo, a courtier (tenor).....James Atherton
The Count of Ceprano, a Noble (bass)..... Philip Booth
the Countess of Ceprano, his wife (mezzo-soprano)Loretta di Franco
Court Usher (bass)Peter Sliker
Page of the Duchess (mezzo-soprano)..... Alma Jean Smith

Conducted by James Levine
The Metropolitan Opera Orchestra and Chorus

Première performance on March 11, 1851 at La Fenice in Venice, Italy

Synopsis

Act I

Scene 1: A room in the Duke's palace

A ball is being held in the Duke's palace. The Duke and Borsa enter from the rear. The Duke sings of a life of pleasure with as many women as possible. They talk about an unknown beauty whom the Duke has seen at church. He says that he will pursue the adventure to the end, although a mysterious man visits her nightly.

Among a group of his guests the Duke sees the married Countess Ceprano, with whom he has been wooing quite openly, in spite of her husband's visible annoyance. The dashing gallant cares nothing about what anyone may think of his escapades.

The Duke's hunchbacked court jester, Rigoletto, enters the room. He is in cap and bells, and carries the jester's bauble. He mocks the husbands of the ladies to whom the Duke is paying attention, and advises the Duke to get rid of them by prison or death. The immediate object of his satire is Count Ceprano, who is watching his wife, as she is being led off on the Duke's arm. Rigoletto then goes out looking for other victims.

Marullo joins the nobles. He tells them that Rigoletto, despite his hump, has a mistress. The statement makes a visible hostile impression upon Count Ceprano. The nobles, after hearing yet another remark from the jester, admonish against his bitter tongue. The Count suggests that they meet the following night to take revenge on the hunchback for the gibes that they have had to endure.

The aged Count Monterone enters. He says that his daughter has been dishonored by the Duke, and denounces him before the whole assembly. The Count's arrest is ordered by the Duke. Rigoletto cruelly mocks the aged Count until the old noble not only denounces him, but calls down upon him a father's curse. Monterone is then led off by soldiers. Rigoletto appears terror-stricken by what the Count had just said. The lively music again breaks in.

Scene 2: The courtyard of Rigoletto's house



Later that night, in a remote part of the city, Rigoletto approaches his house thinking of the Count's curse. His thoughts are interrupted by the appearance of Sparafucile, an assassin-for-hire, who offers Rigoletto his services, should they be needed, in putting enemies out of the way — and his charges are reasonable.

Rigoletto tells him that he has no immediate need of him, but inquires where he can be found. Rigoletto then contemplates the similarities between the two of them — Sparafucile kills men with his sword, and Rigoletto stab his victims

using “a tongue of malice.”

Rigoletto still dwells on Monterone’s curse — a father’s curse, pronounced upon him — a father to whom his daughter is a jewel. He refers to it, even as he unlocks the door that leads to his house. His daughter, Gilda, warmly throws her arms around him.

Rigoletto, who he has been keeping Gilda in strict seclusion and hidden from society, cautions his daughter about going out. She says she never ventures beyond the courtyard except to go to church. He grieves over the death of his wife, Gilda’s mother, who left her to his care while she was still an infant. He charges her governess, Giovanna, to carefully guard her. Gilda, knowing nothing of her father’s occupation, attempts to dispel his fears.



Rigoletto hears footsteps in the street and goes out through the door of the courtyard to see who may be there. As the door swings out, the Duke, in the guise of a student, conceals himself behind it. He then slips into the courtyard, tosses a purse to Giovanna, and hides in the shadow of the tree. Rigoletto reappears briefly to say good-bye to Gilda and to again warn Giovanna to guard her carefully.

As soon as Rigoletto has gone, the Duke appears. He overhears Gilda confessing to her governess, Giovanna, that she feels guilty for not having told her father about a student she had met at the church. She adds that she would love him even more if he were poor.

Just as she declares her love, the Duke steps out of the shadows, motions to Giovanna to retire and throws himself at Gilda’s feet, proclaiming his love for her. She resists at first and then asks for his name. The Duke hesitantly calls himself Gualtier Maldé. Hearing sounds and, fearing that her father has returned, they quickly repeat their vows of love to each other, and Gilda sends the Duke away.

When he has gone, Gilda, musing upon the name, lights a candle and climbs the stairs to her room. She tenderly expresses her heart’s first romance in the famous aria, “Cara nome.”

Quietly through the darkness Marullo, Ceprano, Borsa, and other nobles and courtiers enter outside the walled garden. They are intent upon seeking revenge for the gibes Rigoletto has aimed at them. The hostile noblemen, believing Gilda to be the jester’s mistress, make plans to abduct the helpless girl.

At that moment Rigoletto himself appears. They tell him that they have come to abduct the Countess Ceprano and bring her to the Duke’s palace. Marullo quickly pulls out the keys to Ceprano’s house, which were passed to him by the Count. In the darkness he holds them out to Rigoletto, whose suspicions become allayed because he can feel the Ceprano crest in bas-relief on the keys. He volunteers to aid in the escapade.

Marullo gives Rigoletto a mask and, as if to fasten it securely, ties it with a handkerchief, which he passes over the piercings for the eyes. Rigoletto, confused, holds a ladder against what he believes to be the wall of Ceprano’s house. The abductors climb Rigoletto’s own wall and enter his house. They gag, seize and carry Gilda away, with the aid of her own father. They make their exit from the courtyard but, in their hurry, fail to observe that the scarf has fluttered from their precious burden.

Rigoletto is left alone in the darkness and silence. He tears off his mask. The door to his courtyard is open. Before him lies Gilda’s scarf. He rushes into the house and into her room.

Realizing that it was in fact his own daughter he had helped to abduct, Rigoletto remembers Count Monterone's curse and collapses.

Act II

The Duke's Palace



The Duke returns to Rigoletto's house and finds it empty. He is concerned that Gilda has disappeared. Marullo and the other noblemen then enter and inform him that they have abducted Rigoletto's mistress. By their description, he recognizes it to be Gilda. He learns from the courtiers that they have brought her to the palace. He rushes off to the room where she is being held.

Rigoletto enters the palace room singing. He knows that his daughter is here and has come to search for her. He is also aware that he is in the presence of those who took advantage of him in aiding in the abduction the night before. He knows that, in order to find his daughter, he must appear light-hearted, ask clever questions, and be diplomatic. The courtiers now make sport with Rigoletto.

Finally, Rigoletto admits that he is in fact seeking his daughter and asks the courtiers to return her to him. He then turns begins hurling abuse upon them. The men beat up Rigoletto after he attempts to run into the room where Gilda is being held. A door opens and Gilda rushes in, begging her father to send the people away. He orders the courtiers out of sight with a sense of outrage. The men leave the room, believing that Rigoletto has gone mad.

Father and daughter are alone. Rigoletto strives to comfort her. Gilda tells him of the handsome youth who followed her from church. She tells of their meeting, his pretence that he was a poor student, when, in reality, he was the Duke. Then she describes to her father what had happened to her in the palace, and to whose chamber she was taken after her abduction. It is from there she has just come. Rigoletto demands vengeance against the Duke, while Gilda pleads for him.

At this moment Rigoletto is again reminded of Monterone's curse. Count Monterone, surrounded by guards, is conducted through the apartment to the prison, where he is to be executed for denouncing the Duke. Rigoletto vows vengeance upon the betrayer of his daughter. Gilda, fearing for the life of the Duke, pleads with her father to pardon him.

Act III

A street outside an inn



It is night. The scene shows a desolate spot on the banks of the Mincio River. On the right, with its front to the audience, is a house two stories high, in a very dilapidated state, but still used as an inn. The doors and walls are so full of crevices that whatever is going on within can be seen from without.

Standing outside the inn are Rigoletto and Gilda. She cannot banish the image of her despoiler from her heart. The hunchback has brought her to the inn to prove to her the faithlessness of the Duke. She sees him in the garb of a soldier coming along the city wall. He enters the inn and calls for wine and a room for

the night. Shuffling a pack of cards, which he finds on the table, and pouring out the wine, he sings the famous aria, “Donna è mobile” (Fickle is woman fair).

The inn is that of the assassin, Sparafucile. With him lives his sister, Maddalena, a handsome young gypsy woman, who lures men to the inn, there to be robbed — or killed, if there is more money to be had for murder than robbery. Sparafucile is seen within, cleaning his belt and sharpening his sword.

Rigoletto makes Gilda realize that the Duke is attempting to seduce Sparafucile’s sister, Maddalena. Rigoletto bargains with the assassin, who is ready to murder his guest for money, and offers him 20 scudi for killing the Duke.

With falling darkness, a thunderstorm approaches. The Duke is determined to remain in the house. Sparafucile assigns him the ground floor sleeping quarters. At a signal from Sparafucile, Maddalena joins the Duke in his room. He presses his love upon her. With professional coyness she pretends to repulse him. This leads to the famous quartet, with its dramatic interpretation of four different emotions. The Duke begins the quartet. Maddalena joins in by coyly mocking him. Gilda’s voice next falls upon the night with despairing accents. Finally, Rigoletto’s threats of vengeance are heard.

After the quartet, Sparafucile comes out and receives from Rigoletto half of his fee to murder the Duke, the balance to be paid when the body, in a sack, is delivered to the hunchback. Sparafucile offers to throw the sack into the river, but Rigoletto wants the grim satisfaction of doing that deed himself.

Satisfied that Gilda has seen enough of the Duke’s faithlessness, Rigoletto sends her home and, for safety, orders his daughter to put on a man’s clothes and leave for Verona, telling her that he plans to join her there later. He then also leaves.

A storm now gathers. There are flashes of lightning with distant rumblings of thunder. The wind moans. The Duke has gone to his room, after whispering a few words to Maddalena. He lays down his hat and sword, throws himself on the bed and sings a few snatches of “Donna è mobile.” In a short time he falls asleep.

Maddalena below, stands by the table. Sparafucile finishes the contents of the bottle left by

the Duke. Both remain silent for awhile. The storm is now at its height. Lightning plays vividly across the sky, thunder crashes, wind howls, rain falls in torrents.

As a clock strikes the half-hour, Gilda returns to the inn in male attire. Through the crevices in the wall of the house Gilda can hear Maddalena pleading with Sparafucile to spare the Duke's life. Maddalena pleads yet more urgently. Sparafucile says that he will give the handsome youth one desperate chance for life and makes a deal with his sister: should any other man arrive at the inn before midnight, that man will be killed in place of the Duke, put in the sack and thrown into the river.

Determined to save the Duke, Gilda decides to sacrifice her life for his. Gilda knocks on the door. There is a moment of surprised suspense within. Maddalena opens the door. Gilda enters and, for a moment, one senses her form in the darkness. There is a half-stifled outcry — then all is buried in silence and gloom.

The storm is abating. The rain has ceased, the lightning becomes fitful, the thunder distant and intermittent. At midnight Rigoletto returns to the inn. He knocks on the door. Sparafucile drags out the sack, receives the balance of his money from Rigoletto, and retires into the house.

The night has cleared. Rigoletto rejoices in his triumph. Weighing the sack down with stones, he is about to cast it into the river when he hears the voice of the Duke singing a reprise of his “La donna è mobile” aria. Bewildered, Rigoletto rips open the sack. To his despair, he finds his mortally wounded daughter. For a moment, Gilda revives, declaring that she is glad to die for her beloved. She then dies in her father's arms. Rigoletto's wildest fear materializes, and he cries out in horror, “The curse!” The music of Monterone's curse upon the ribald jester, now bending over the corpse of his own despoiled daughter, resounds in the orchestra.

Giuseppe Verdi

Born in Le Roncole, Duchy of Parma, October 10, 1813; died in Milan, January 27, 1901



Giuseppe Verdi was born into a family of small landowners and taverners. When he was seven he helped the local church organist; at 12 he studied with the organist at the main church in nearby Busseto, becoming his assistant in 1829. Verdi already had several compositions to his credit. In 1832 he was sent to Milan, but was refused a place at the conservatory. He studied with Vincenzo Lavigna, composer and former La Scala musician. In 1835, he returned to Busseto where he was passed over as *maestro di cappella*. He became the town music master in 1836, and married his patron's daughter, Margherita Barezzi. They had two children who both died in infancy.

Verdi had begun an opera and tried to arrange a performance in Parma or Milan, but was unsuccessful. He had some songs published and decided to settle in Milan in 1839 where his *Oberto* was accepted at La Scala, and further operas were commissioned. His next opera, *Un Giorno di Regno*, failed totally. His wife, Margherita, died during its composition.

Verdi nearly gave up, but was excited by the libretto of *Nabucco* and, in 1842, saw its successful production, which carried his reputation across Italy, Europe and the United States over the next five years. *Nabucco* was followed by *I Lombardi alla Prima Crociata*, which was also with marked political overtones, and again was well received.

Much opera of this period had political themes, and Verdi's gift for stirring melody and tragic and heroic situations struck a chord in an Italy struggling for freedom and unity, causes with which Verdi was sympathetic.

Now began the period Verdi later called his "years in the galleys," with a long and demanding series of operas to compose and (usually) direct, in the main Italian centers and abroad. They included *Ernani*, *Macbeth*, *Luisa Miller* and eight others, from 1844-1850 (with a pause in 1846 when his health gave way). He took great care over the choice of topics and the detailed planning of his librettos. In *Ernani* he established his basic vocal types early— the vigorous, determined baritone, the ardent, courageous but sometimes despairing tenor, the severe bass.

The "galley years" had their climax in the three great popular operas of 1851-1853. First among them was *Rigoletto*, produced in Venice after having trouble with the censors, a recurring theme for Verdi. It was a huge success. No less successful in Rome was the more direct *Il Trovatore*, at the beginning of 1853. Six weeks later *La Traviata*, the most personal and intimate of Verdi's operas. Though it was a failure in Venice, after some revisions it was favorably received the following year at a different Venetian theater. With the dark drama of the one, the heroics of the second and the grace and pathos of the third, Verdi had shown an extraordinarily wide and expressive range.

Later in 1853 he went to Paris with soprano, Giuseppina Strepponi, to prepare *Les Vêpres Siciliennes* for the Paris Opéra, where it was given in 1855 with modest success. Verdi had been living with her for several years, and they eventually married in 1859. Verdi remained there for a time in order to defend his rights in face of the piracies of the Théâtre des Italiens and to deal with translations of some of his operas. The next opera was the somber *Simon Boccanegra*, a drama about love and politics in medieval Genoa, given in Venice. Plans for *Un Ballo in Maschera*, about the assassination of a Swedish king, in Naples were called off because of the censors and it was given instead in Rome in 1859.

Verdi was involved in political activity at this time, as representative of Busseto (where he lived) in the provincial parliament; later, pressed by Cavour, he was elected to the national parliament, and ultimately became a senator. In 1862 *La Forza del Destino* had its premiere at St. Petersburg. A revised *Macbeth* was given in Paris in 1865, but his most important work for the French capital was *Don Carlos*, a grand opera, was given in 1867 and several times revised for later, Italian revivals.

Verdi returned to Italy, to live at Genoa. In 1870 he began work on *Aida*, which premiered in 1871 in the Cairo Opera House, to mark the opening of the Suez Canal (Verdi was not present). Verdi was ready to give up opera. In 1879 the composer-poet Boito and the publisher Ricordi prevailed upon Verdi to write another opera, *Otello*. Working slowly, although he was very occupied with revisions of earlier operas, Verdi completed it in 1886. Two years later he embarked on *Falstaff*, another Shakespeare work — his first comedy since the beginning of his career, with a score whose wit and lightness betray the hand of a serene master. This last opera had its premiere in 1893. Still to come was a set of *Quattro Pezzi Sacri*, although Verdi was a non-believer.

Verdi spent his last years in Milan — rich, authoritarian but charitable, much visited, revered and honored. When he died on January 27, 1901, at the age of 87, over 28,000 people lined the streets for his funeral.

Rigoletto

Rigoletto was written and instrumented, under the prompting of managerial necessity, in only forty days, and premiered in Venice on March 11, 1851. It did not take the fancy of the public at first, but ultimately won its way to popularity. *Rigoletto* is the earliest of the Verdi operas which have retained their place in public favor. It has become a staple of the standard operatic repertoire, listed as number nine on Opera America's 20 most-performed operas in North America.

In 1850 Verdi was commissioned to write a new opera by the La Fenice Opera House in Venice. At that time he was already a well-known composer with a degree of freedom in choosing the works he would prefer to set to music. Verdi soon stumbled upon Victor Hugo's play, *Le roi s'amuse*, a play which depicted a king as an immoral and cynical womanizer, something that was not accepted in Europe during the Restoration period. The play was highly controversial, and Hugo himself had already had trouble with censorship in France, which had banned productions of his play after its first performance nearly twenty years earlier (and would continue to ban it for another thirty years). Austria at that time directly controlled much of Northern Italy, the work came before the Austrian Board of Censors.

From the beginning, Verdi was aware of the risks, as was his librettist, Francesco Piave. Therefore, to avoid any political and copyright complications, Piave laid the scene in Mantua and changed the title to *Viscardello*. Rumors started to spread that Austrian censorship was going to forbid the production, so the action of the opera was moved from the royal court of France to a duchy of France or Italy, and the characters were renamed. The title was changed as well, which the composer secretly called *The Malediction* (The Curse).

Due to the high risk of unauthorized copying, Verdi demanded the maximum secrecy from all his singers and musicians. The young tenor, Raffaele Mirate, who played the Duke, was forced to swear he would not sing, or even whistle, "La donna è mobile." To make quite sure that the public did not get wind of this arresting melody, Verdi did not put it on paper until within a few hours before the performance. The opening was a complete triumph, especially the Duke's cynical aria, "La donna è mobile," which was long hummed, sung and played ad nauseum. Soon all Venice was mad over it; and the men, they say, sang it in the streets into the ears of the women.

Felice Varesi, who played the original Rigoletto, was really uncomfortable with the false hump he had to wear. He was so uncertain that, even though he was quite an experienced singer, that he had a panic attack when he was about to go on stage. Verdi, immediately realizing that he was paralyzed, roughly pushed him onto the stage, so he appeared with a clumsy tumble. The audience, thinking it was a gag, was very amused.

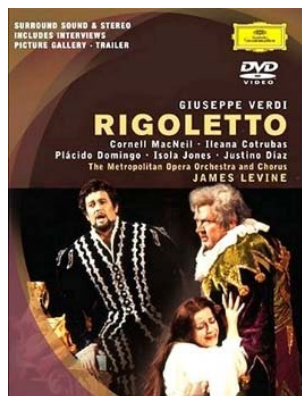
Musically, *Rigoletto* marked immense progress in Verdi's style, with instrumentation having more significance than mere accompaniment. The vocal score contained many effective passages, such as Gilda's love song, "Caro Nome," and the Duke's light-hearted aria, "La donna e mobile," so full of elegant ease, and striking in rhythm. The magnificent quartet, sung by Rigoletto, Gilda, the Duke and Maddalena, is often remarked upon by critics as combining the most diverse emotions into a powerful ensemble. Even today it is considered the finest piece of concerted music in Italian opera. Here, and in other places, Verdi reached a level of art which he had never before attained, and which, he did not touch again until twenty years later in *Aida*.

There are several reasons for *Rigoletto's* enduring popularity: (1) It is based upon a most effective play by Victor Hugo, *Le Roi s'Amuse*. (2) The jester in the play, which was one of Edwin Booth's great roles, is a vital, centralizing force in the opera. (3) Caruso made his sensational debut

at the Metropolitan in November 23, 1903 as the volatile Duke. (4) Famous sopranos, such as Nellie Melba and Luisa Tetrazzini, sang the role of Gilda, a role no coloratura soprano could afford to be without in their repertoire.

***Rigoletto*: The DVD (1977)**

Starring Plácido Domingo, Cornell MacNeil and Ileana Cotrubas



This terrific Met production of *Rigoletto* is big, vibrant and impressive. The sets and costumes are very beautiful to look at. It has a peerless cast and conductor, all at the height of their powers. Domingo is in top vocal form, plus he looks as if he could slay the ladies as well as any Duke. Unfortunately, he does not take the optional high “D” in the cabaletta, “Possente Amore,” — the only two tenors to attempt that note on record are Luciano Pavarotti and Alfredo Kraus. James Levine, by the way, makes the traditional cut of the second verse.

Ileana Cotrubas is an unmitigated success — as fine an actress as you are likely to see on an opera stage. She offers an extraordinary dramatic interpretation of the doomed Gilda. In the tradition of Callas, she seems to inhabit her character, both physically and emotionally. Cornell MacNeil, nearing the end of his career, is very hard to put down. His vocalism is rarely beautiful, and his acting is inconsistent — one moment he is as wooden as a mannequin, the next, insightful and moving. If there is a weak link in this production, it’s in MacNeil’s *Rigoletto*, but he also has several moments of brilliance.

