

Rigoletto

Music by Giuseppe Verdi • Libretto by Francesco Maria Piave
Text based on Victor Hugo's *Le roi s'amuse*

Study Guide to the Opera



Stage set for the 1851 premiere of Verdi's opera, *Rigoletto* (Act 1, Scene 2)

Changing the Names to Protect the Guilty!

Adapted from an
essay by Jill Leahy

During Verdi's early years, Italy was not a unified country. The Italian peninsula comprised many kingdoms and states; many were feuding and many others were under French or Austrian occupation. When Verdi received a commission from Venice in 1850 to compose an opera for the *Teatro La Fenice*, he knew his work would have to pass a review by the Austrian censors who looked for immoral as well as seditious content. Even so, he chose a Victor Hugo play from 1832, *Le roi s'amuse*, which was closed by censors in Paris after its first performance. The story depicted attempted murder of a king, rape, adultery, disrespect for religion, and criticism of royalty—all scandalous subjects.

When Verdi suggested the subject to the librettist, Francesco-Maria Piave, he told Verdi that the character of Triboulet the court jester was "one of the greatest creations to be found in theatre of all countries and all times." A libretto in Venice in the 1850s required approval by the theater management, mayor of the city, police, and Department of Public Order. For *Rigoletto*, Piave and Verdi did countless rewrites before the libretto was approved.

The final version was greatly altered from the Victor Hugo play: the King in the play became a Duke in the opera (although some say the Duke was recognizable as Vincenzo I Gonzaga, the Duke of Mantua), the entire setting was changed from France to the little known Duchy in Italy, the characters' names were all changed (Triboulet became Rigoletto—from the French *rigoler*, to make fun of), and the title of the opera changed from *La Maledizione* to, ultimately, *Rigoletto*. Even with all the changes, audiences loved this opera. Maybe it's because people enjoy seeing how far the "mighty" can fall. By 1852, *Rigoletto* had premiered in all of Italy's major cities and today it is one of the most-performed operas in the world.

Giuseppe Verdi Quotes:

I prefer to remain what I am, that is to say, a peasant from Roncole.

I conceived Rigoletto without arias, without finales, as an unbroken chain of duets.

I have striven for perfection, it has always eluded me, but I surely had an obligation to make one more try.

I never expect to do better than the Quartet, "Bella figlia dell'amore."

Rigoletto Synopsis

ACT I

Scene 1 The Duke of Mantua is in his club, boasting to Borsa, one of his courtiers, about his success with women. He proceeds to flirt with the Countess Ceprano, while his jester, Rigoletto, cruelly mocks her husband. (“**Questo o quella**”) Meanwhile, another courtier, Marullo, tells his friends of a surprising discovery: he has heard that Rigoletto has a mistress hidden away at home. Rigoletto continues to taunt the Count, who retaliates by arranging a midnight meeting to extract his revenge on the jester.

An elderly nobleman, Count Monterone, enters and denounces the Duke’s treatment of his daughter. He curses the Duke and when mocked by Rigoletto, Monterone turns on him and curses him as well. The curse strikes terror on Rigoletto, for the woman he lives with is not his mistress, but his daughter.



Scene 2 Brooding over Monterone’s curse, Rigoletto returns to the home he shares with his daughter, Gilda, hiding her away from the licentiousness that takes place at the Duke’s club. On his way home, he is confronted by Sparafucile, a professional assassin, who offers him his services. Rigoletto sends him away, but then muses on the parallels between their professions.

Gilda greets her father, and begins to ask him questions about their family and background, which he refuses to answer. Determined to protect Gilda, he forbids her to leave their home, except to attend church. He also warns Gilda’s nurse, Giovanna, not to allow anyone to enter the house while he is out. Unbeknownst to him, Giovanna has already allowed the Duke, in disguise, to enter their house.

After Rigoletto bids his daughter farewell, Gilda confesses to Giovanna that she is in love with a young man who has been following her home every day after church. On hearing this, the Duke appears and declares his love for Gilda, identifying himself as Gualtier Maldè, a penniless student. Hearing footsteps, he rushes off, leaving Gilda thinking lovingly of his name. (“**Caro nome che il mio cor**”)

The courtiers appear, masked and ready to abduct Rigoletto’s supposed mistress. He surprises them by returning, but Marullo convinces him that they are planning to abduct the Countess Ceprano who lives nearby. Rigoletto falls into their trap, unwittingly permitting himself to be blindfolded. Gilda cries out to her father as she is carried off. Becoming suspicious, Rigoletto tears off the blindfold, realizes Gilda is gone and cries, ‘Ah, the curse!’

Intermission

Act 2

The Duke laments the loss of Gilda but when he is told of the abduction, he rejoices that she is now at his club. Rigoletto returns, searching for his daughter. His denunciation of the courtiers’ treachery dissolves into a bereft father’s pleading. Left alone with Rigoletto, Gilda confesses that she is in love with the Duke and begs her father to forgive him. As Monterone is led to his execution, Rigoletto swears that they both will be avenged.

Act 3

Rigoletto has brought Gilda to Sparafucile to prove her lover’s faithlessness. As they lurk in the darkness, the Duke enters, in disguise. After proclaiming the fickleness of women, (“**La donna è mobile**”) he showers attentions on Maddalena, the assassin’s sister, as Rigoletto tries to comfort his despairing daughter. (QUARTET: “**Bella figlia dell'amore**”) He orders her to disguise

herself as a boy and meet him in Verona. After striking a bargain with Sparafucile for the Duke's murder, Rigoletto departs.

Gilda returns in her disguise in time to overhear Maddalena begging her brother to spare the handsome stranger's life. Sparafucile agrees to deceive Rigoletto by substituting the corpse of the next person who appears. Having returned determined to sacrifice herself so the Duke may live, Gilda becomes Sparafucile's next victim.

At the stroke of midnight, Rigoletto pays the assassin and reserves for himself the satisfaction of throwing the sack containing his enemy's corpse into the river. After he hears the Duke's voice in the distance, he opens the sack and finds his daughter instead of the Duke. The despairing Rigoletto cries out once more, 'Ah, the curse!'

— Courtesy Elio Bucky

An iconic opera quartet: "Bella figlia dell'amore"

Sung by the Duke, Maddalena, Gilda, Rigoletto

The most iconic opera quartet in the standard repertoire is "Bella figlia dell'amore" from Act 3 of Giuseppe Verdi's *Rigoletto*.

The composer was very proud to create music for four characters expressing different emotions simultaneously. The quartet is actually a double duet: one duet is between father and daughter, Rigoletto and Gilda, the other duet is

between the Duke and the flirting Maddalena. Each of the characters is given a musical identity—the Duke begins with an ardent melody as he woos Maddalena. She laughingly puts him off. Watching outside, Gilda sees the Duke's faithlessness and has a sobbing figure in her vocal line. Rigoletto urges revenge.

The story of *Rigoletto* was based on Victor Hugo's 1832 play, *Le roi s'amuse*, which had been banned in France. Hugo resented his play being transformed into an Italian opera and considered it plagiarism (there were no copyright restrictions against this at the time). However, when Hugo attended a performance of the opera in Paris, he marveled at the way Verdi's music in the quartet allowed the emotions of the four different characters to be heard together and distinguished clearly from each other at the same time. Hugo wished that he could achieve such an effect in a spoken drama. Verdi's brilliant piece of music portrayed seduction, teasing, despair, and vengeful anger all at once, an effect only possible in opera.



"Bella figlia dell'amore" scene, depicted by Roberto Focosi in an early edition of the vocal score

Characters

Tragic triangle of love and hate

Rigoletto

baritone

[ree-goh-LEH-toh]

A hunchback jester in the Duke's court. A widower, he adores his daughter, Gilda, but hates the Duke and his courtiers.

Gilda

[JEEL-dah]

soprano

Rigoletto's daughter, whom the Duke fancies. Rigoletto keeps her hidden at home, looked after by her nurse, Giovanna. Gilda is only seen outside when she goes to church.

Duke of Mantua

tenor

A handsome, charming, unfaithful womanizer. Introduces himself to Gilda as "Gaultier Maldè".

Characters who introduce conflict

Sparafucile

bass

[spah-rah-foo-CHEE-leh]

A professional assassin.

Maddalena

contralto

[mah-dah-LAY-nah]

Sparafucile's sister, who helps him with one of his assassinations.

Count Monterone

baritone

[mohn-teh-ROH-neh]

Casts a curse on the Duke for seducing his daughter and on Rigoletto for mocking him.

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Marullo [mah-ROOL-loh]

bass

Borsa [BOHR-sah]

tenor

Courtiers

Count Ceprano [cheh-PRAH-noh]

bass

A guest at the Duke's party who vows revenge when the Duke flirts with his wife.

Countess Ceprano

soprano

Giovanna [joh-VAH-nah]

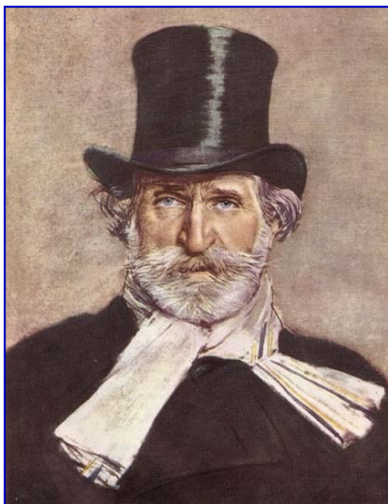
mezzo-soprano

Gilda's nurse

Court Usher

Page

Chorus of townspeople

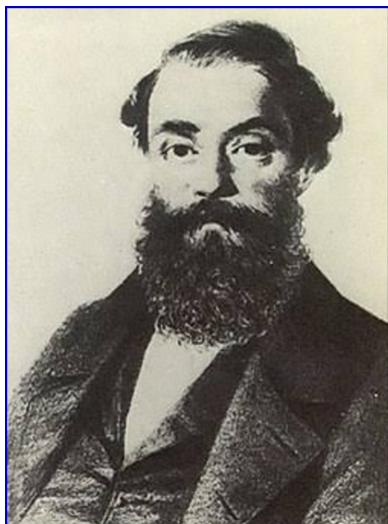


Giuseppe Fortunino Francesco Verdi
1813–1901

The myth of Verdi as the *Risorgimento's* composer also led to claims that the slogan "Viva VERDI!" was used throughout Italy to secretly call for *Vittorio Emanuele Re D'Italia* (Victor Emmanuel King of Italy) to assume the throne.

maschera, La forza del destino, Don Carlos, Aida, and Otello. Despite problems with the Austrian censors who controlled northern Italian theaters at the time, Verdi's 16th opera, *Rigoletto*, became an operatic masterpiece.

For years, Verdi lived on a humble farm and accumulated some 2,500 acres of land. What most attracted him was the earth itself. He sowed corn and wheat, planted trees, and worked in the fields until he was exhausted; he was obsessed with redeeming *brutta natura*. During the years of political struggle within Italy, Verdi used his music to express the struggles of the Italian people for independence. In 1861, Verdi was elected to the Italian parliament after Italy became a unified nation. When he died in 1901, thousands of people blocked the streets of Milan and the entire country went into mourning.



Francesco Maria Piave
1810–1876

Meet the Composer

Born near Busseto, **Giuseppe Verdi** is one of Italy's most beloved composers, but he took a circuitous route to learning composition. His musical talent began to shine when he was young, so when he was not admitted to the Milan Conservatory, he continued his private studies and ultimately wrote many successful operas that were performed in all of the major Italian and European theaters. His operas include familiar names: *Nabucco, Macbeth, Il trovatore, La traviata, Simon Boccanegra, Un ballo in*

Meet the Librettist

Born in Murano in the lagoon of Venice, during the brief Napoleonic Kingdom of Italy, **Francesco Maria Piave** was an Italian opera librettist. He is most known for his work with Verdi, for whom he wrote ten libretti, including *Rigoletto* and *La traviata*. Often referred to as "a theatrical jack-of-all-trades", Piave was an ardent Italian patriot, a journalist, a translator, and the resident poet and stage manager at *La Fenice* in Venice.

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