

Rigoletto

by Carol Crocca

Rigoletto (1851) was the first of the three operas Verdi composed in the middle of his career which have remained beloved staples of the repertoire, the others being *Il trovatore* (1853) and *La Traviata* (1853). It was a clear break with the past, in the fluidity with which it moves from recitativo to aria, in its structure conceived with the scene as the most important unit, and its emphasis on duets. As many musical geniuses have done, Verdi took the forms he inherited and shaped them to his own purposes, with increasing freedom as his composing life progressed, abandoning them when he was inspired to do so. Verdi himself considered *Rigoletto* a landmark in his career, saying in a letter to Antonio Somma, future librettist of *Un ballo in maschera*,

[T]he best subject as regards theatrical effect that I've ever set to music. It has powerful situations, variety, excitement, pathos...Rigoletto's fears, Gilda's passion, etc., etc., which make for many excellent dramatic moments, among others the scene of the quartet which as regards effect will remain one of the best our theatre can boast.

Budden, Julian. *The Operas of Verdi*, Vol. 1, pp .483-484.

As usual, Verdi expressed his thoughts with reference to the dramatic effectiveness of his choices; he rarely, if ever, spoke of theory, or of composing approaches in abstract terms. When asked by a fellow deputy in the Italian parliament,

When you are composing one of your stupendous pieces of music, how does the idea present itself to your mind? Do you work out the main theme first and then add an accompaniment to it, and then afterward consider the nature of the accompaniment, whether it shall be for flutes or violins and so forth?

Verdi replied,

No, no, no. The idea comes complete, and above all I feel the color of which you speak, whether it should be for flutes, violins and so forth. My difficulty is in writing down the musical thought quickly enough to capture it in its integrity just as it comes to my mind.

Martin, George, *Verdi, His Music, Life and Times*, p. 414.

The public has never wavered in its approval of *Rigoletto*. Initially the critics did not agree – there were no entrance arias, and no *concertanto* finales (ensembles at the end of acts), as tradition required - a tribute to Verdi's originality and dramatic sense.

It also had a lot of difficulty with the censors. The opera is based on Victor Hugo's play, *Le roi s'amuse* (*The King Amuses Himself*), which was banned in Paris after one showing. The Military Governor of Venice, the city for which Verdi was to compose an

opera for the Carnival season, had forbidden the play to be given, with or without changes. It depicted the monarch in a very bad light, frequenting taverns, abducting courtiers' wives, and seducing a very young and innocent girl; it included a scene in which, gloating, the king produces the key to the bedroom in which the courtiers have put Gilda and enters laughing with the clear purpose of ravishing her. The deposit of Gilda's body in a sack was also considered shocking, as was the deformity and ugly nature of Rigoletto himself. Through it all, Verdi fought for the retention of his ideas.

As to the suggestion that the Duke (as he became) be irreproachable, he wrote,

[If that were the case] the courtiers' anger with Triboulet [Rigoletto's character in the play] makes no sense. ... The Duke must be an utter libertine; otherwise there is no reason why Triboulet should be afraid to let his daughter out of concealment and therefore the drama is impossible...

As to the sack:

Take away the sack and it is most unlikely that the Triboulet should speak for half an hour before a flash of lightening shows it to be the body of his daughter.

And as to the hunchbacked protagonist:

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. I chose the subject precisely because of these qualities, and if these original features are removed I cannot write the music.

Budden, Julian *The Operas of Verdi*, Vol. 1, pp. 480-481.

After prolonged negotiations and discussions, Verdi agreed to change the venue from the court of France to an independent duchy in France or Italy, to omit the scene with the key to the bedchamber, to change the names of the characters, to have the duke enticed to the scene at the tavern by a ruse, and was given discretion as to the final scene with the dying Gilda. Practically, the premiere of the opera was postponed to allow time for these changes.

Today, the opera is considered a masterpiece. In the words of one noted critic and chronicler of Verdi's work:

*To emphasize the technical innovation in Rigoletto, however, is to do the opera an injustice. What is remarkable about the work is its sustained level of inspiration. As in its companion operas, *La traviata* and *Il trovatore*, an uncanny psychological acumen is allied with a wonderfully spontaneous outpouring of melody, a gift shared only by Mozart and Schubert.*

Osborne, Charles, *The Complete Operas of Verdi*, p.237.