

Verdi's *Don Carlos*

by Rosa Pisaturo

In the middle of the 19th century, the center of opera changed from Italy to Paris. Paris now had better orchestras, more money devoted to opera production, improved staging, more rehearsal time, and, not least, better remuneration for composers and singers. Rossini, Bellini, Donizetti and Verdi all composed operas for Paris. These operas could be in Italian, for there was a theater devoted to Italian opera, but in order to be in the mainstream of the Parisian opera culture, they had to conform to the standard of the French Grand Opera, i.e., in French, on noble and/or historic themes, grandly staged, in five acts, and include a ballet.

Verdi wrote *Les vepres siciliennes* (1855) and *Don Carlos* directly for Paris, and he revised several other works to conform to the Parisian standard. *Don Carlos*, his 28th opera, was composed to a French language libretto based on the dramatic play *Don Carlos* by Friedrich Schiller, and premiered at the Paris Opera on March 11, 1867. (A revised version in Italian premiered at La Scala, Milan, in 1884.)

At its full length, *Don Carlos* contains close to four hours of music and is Verdi's longest opera. It requires superb music direction, intricate staging and a cast with big, gorgeous voices and unflagging stamina.

A blend of personal passions and political intrigue, the opera is gripping from beginning to end and it is definitely the grandest and most complex of Verdi's operas.

The story takes place in the mid 1500's, at the time of the Spanish Inquisition. In 1556 the Emperor Charles V had abdicated, celebrated his own funeral and retired in the Monastery of San Jeronimo at Just. His son Philip II is now on the throne.

With the war going badly between Spain and France, King Philip decides to buy peace by marrying Elisabetta of Valois, the daughter of King Henry II of France. But since her youth Elisabetta has been promised to Philip's son, Don Carlos, who loves her deeply. As the son turns against his father, the royals become pawns in a game by religious extremists and the Spanish Inquisition, with the Grand Inquisitor dominating over all.

One must keep in mind the philosophical message of moral values in Schiller's drama, and pay attention on how well Verdi took into the libretto and the music the feelings and the contrasting passions of each character. The whole opera is a complex web of power, religion and politics. It deals with the complexity of each character's human emotions, with the ideals

and the struggles in their relationships, all under the fearsome power of the Catholic Church which at the end determines everyone's fate, even the royals.

**Don Carlo is the Prince on the edge of madness. Perhaps haunted by his grandfather, the Emperor Charles V, he is unhappy and full of anguish. His love for Elisabetta, who is his stepmother, is all consuming and self-centered. Don Carlo's weakness is somehow strengthened in his passionate friendship with Rodrigo, a good man, a great friend.

**Rodrigo, a political hero, believes in a better world, in the nobility of mankind and the needs of others. He is prepared to sacrifice all for his friend Don Carlo.

**King Philip is a lonely, torn man, tortured by jealousy, and surrounded by selfish courtiers. He recognizes in Rodrigo the honest man who holds up to him the truth of his oppressed existence, as he is surrounded by the crushing force of the Inquisition. King Philip sees in Rodrigo the son that Carlo cannot be to him - the relationship with his son has been poisoned by his marriage to Elisabetta. Even as King, he cannot overcome the force of the Inquisition and he loses both his son and Rodrigo.

**Elisabetta, the French Princess, gives up Don Carlo when she is given as a bride to his father, King Philip; this is her duty, even if she loves Carlo.

**The Princess of Eboli, an aristocrat in the Spanish court, is mistress to King Philip and at the same time deeply in love with Don Carlo. It is a love that leads her to betray her Queen, an act that will seal Don Carlo's fate and that she will bitterly regret.

The opera ends at the cloister of the Monastery where it began. Carlo is hiding from the king and the Inquisitors near the tomb of his grandfather the Emperor Charles V. Elisabetta is also there, invoking the spirit of the Emperor and recalling her first meeting with Carlo. The two of them speak tenderly of Rodrigo, and they take a solemn farewell, hoping to meet in a better world.

King Philip and the Inquisitor have heard them. They come forward, so the King can reclaim his wife and deliver his son to the Inquisition. Carlo retreats towards the tomb of his grandfather and the audience witnesses an enigmatic conclusion. The gates of the tomb open, and an unidentified figure appears, dressed as a monk and wearing the Emperor's crown. He covers Carlo with his mantle and takes him into the cloister. The end of the opera leaves the audience confused as to what has happened. Some synopses claim that the gates of the cloister open and Don Carlo is drawn inside to safety. The unfortunate Don Carlo has faced conflicts between love and loyalty; between duty and honor; between friendship and family; between faith and personal ideals. But unlike the other characters, Carlo never resigns himself to reality. He finds no way to cope with the complicated world around him and in conclusion the music lets us know that, one way or another, he is leaving the world.

Verdi took all of the story's complexities and confusions and left us a great grand opera: a drama with a complicated plot, with personal, political and theological conflicts, and a climactic, if ambiguous, ending.