

Verdi's *Rigoletto*

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These study materials are produced for use with the Bob Jones University Opera Association's production of *Rigoletto*.

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Bob Jones University Opera Association's 1997 *Rigoletto*

Background and Accomplishment

When Giuseppe Verdi wrote *Rigoletto* in 1850, he was already a leading composer of Italian opera.

Verdi found the story that was to become the libretto of *Rigoletto* in a French play by Victor Hugo, *The King Amuses Himself*. The composer considered Hugo's rich characterization of the hunchbacked jester named Triboulet "a creation worthy of Shakespeare." Francesco Maria Piave wrote the libretto based on Hugo's drama, changing the name Triboulet to Rigoletto.

Before Verdi had ever composed the opera, censors decided that it could not be performed publicly because the story dealt with the wickedness of a French king. The authorities thought that an opera that revealed evil in a royal personage might stir up the public against their own monarchs.

Verdi held fast to the idea, however, and after a period of deadlock between the composer and the censors, the police commissioner of

Venice suggested that the French king in Hugo's play be changed to an Italian duke in Verdi's opera.

The plan caught on. Verdi made the required changes and completed the score in only 40 days. The opera premiered in Venice on March 11, 1851.

In seeking a way to balance the interests of drama with those of music in *Rigoletto*, Verdi accelerated Hugo's plot and tightened his own operatic form. His aim was to achieve compression and flow.

The opera begins with an unconventional, shorter prelude than was usual in Verdi's day. It is made up of thematic musical motifs rather than aria excerpts.

Verdi also eliminated the traditional entrance aria for each principal singer, regarding it as empty vocal display that adds nothing to the progress of the plot. He also wanted to discourage the disruption created by applause from the audience.

In fact, he conceived of the work as largely substituting ensemble singing for traditional arias to insure flow and continuity. It features duets and a brilliantly conceived quartet in the final act.

To enrich the drama with music, Verdi composed a number of recurring motifs which unify the action for the audience as well as add

resonances of meaning. Some are associated with specific characters.

For example, the duke sings the melody “La donna e mobile” (“Woman is changeable”) three times in the final act, and it carries a different shade of meaning each time. The song is ironic as well, for it is the duke, not women, who is fickle.

First it is a song of flirtation and seduction which reveals the duke’s lustful intentions. Verdi uses dance rhythms to suggest that the frivolous duke loves the party life.

He sings it again as he is weary, falling asleep in Sparafucile’s inn. As he drifts off to the strains of “Woman is changeable,” it seems that such distorted thinking is part of his subconscious.

Finally, he sings the same song again offstage at the very end of the opera, this time to very sinister effect. The duke’s song becomes the means by which Rigoletto learns that the evil seducer still lives. He has not, after all, realized vengeance against his enemy. Then all the horror of the jester’s own ways falls on his head at once.

Rigoletto is both musically and dramatically a very tightly knit opera. It also demonstrates the composer’s ability to turn stock characters into fully realistic ones through the medium of music.

Verdi certainly succeeded in transforming a stage play into a gripping opera that has known tremendous success since it was first performed over 160 years ago.



Giuseppe Verdi in 1899 photograph

Rigoletto Plot: The Long of It

Rigoletto is set in 16th century Mantua, a northern province of Italy.

Act I, Scene 1

As courtiers dance in the palace, the Duke of Mantua enters, conversing with his friend Borsa about a beautiful girl he met while he was wandering about in disguise. The duke does not know her name, but he secretly followed her home and knows where she lives.

Admiring a lady of the court, the duke admits that all beautiful women are the same to him; no one means more than any other.

When the duke leaves the gathering with Countess Ceprano, Rigoletto mocks her husband, who goes out after his wife with Rigoletto following him.

The courtier Marullo tells the assembly that the jester has a secret sweetheart hidden away in another part of town.

Rigoletto and the duke return, and the jester becomes so insulting to the courtiers that the duke warns him to amend his contemptuous manner, or he may live to regret it.

The elderly Count Monterone enters and denounces the duke for having dishonored his daughter.

When Rigoletto begins to taunt the old man, Monterone calls down a horrible curse on the heads of both the duke and his jester. Rigoletto is smitten with fear as the duke sends Monterone off to prison.

Act I, Scene 2

On his way home Rigoletto encounters a stranger in a long, dark cloak. Sparafucile approaches to inquire if the jester would like to employ an assassin to rid himself of an enemy. Rigoletto learns that the cloaked figure can be found at this very spot every evening.

As Rigoletto enters the courtyard of his home, he is met by his daughter, the beautiful Gilda, whom he keeps locked away lest his enemies discover and harm her. Giovanna, an old matron, keeps watch over her.

Rigoletto hears a noise outside the wall. When he opens the door to investigate, a man sneaks into the courtyard. The duke in disguise quickly bribes Giovanna to be quiet and then hides behind a tree.

Rigoletto returns and cautions Giovanna never to open the door. Then he bids Gilda farewell.

Having overheard Rigoletto’s remarks, the duke discerns his identity and the existence of his daughter.

After her father leaves, Gilda confesses to Giovanna that she has a troubled conscience because lately a young man has been following her to church. Giovanna warns Gilda that her father will put a stop to the matter.

Then the duke reveals himself to Gilda, who recognizes him as the very young man she has just spoken of.

After Giovanna leaves the couple alone, the duke pledges his love to Gilda, saying he is a poor student named Walter Malde.

Giovanna returns to report that someone is in the street. The duke escapes through the terrace door, leaving Gilda alone with her dreams of love.

In the street a group of courtiers gather, among them Count Ceprano, Borsa, and Marullo. They spy on Gilda and conclude that she is Rigoletto's secret sweetheart.

When Rigoletto appears, they tell him that they are about to carry off the wife of Count Ceprano, who lives across the street from Rigoletto. They put a mask on the jester and dupe him into holding the ladder while they carry Gilda, bound and gagged, from her home.

After they leave, Rigoletto discovers Gilda's scarf in the street and realizes he has been tricked. He cries bitterly.

Act II

In a room of the palace the next morning, the duke is disturbed because Gilda has disappeared. The courtiers arrive to boast about their tricking Rigoletto the night before and announce that they have brought the abducted girl to the palace.

After the duke exits to find Gilda, Rigoletto comes in, looking for some sign of his daughter but not mentioning his plight. When at last he demands to know her whereabouts, the courtiers realize that the woman they have abducted is his daughter.

They mock the jester when he discovers that Gilda is locked in an inner room with the duke. At last she bursts forth and runs into her father's arms. She then gives a pathetic account of the duke's courtship and deception.

On his way to prison, old Monterone passes through the room, where he complains that his curse has not yet fallen on the duke. Rigoletto responds, "Vengeance is near."

Act III

Outside an old inn near the river, Rigoletto promises Gilda that he will have revenge against the duke. Gilda, however, believes that the duke truly loves her.

Looking into the inn through a crack, both father and daughter see the duke inside, disguised in military uniform. He converses with Sparafucile, the innkeeper and assassin.

Sparafucile leaves his sister Maddalena with the duke alone and steps outside to speak with Rigoletto. Gilda then sees for herself that the duke is false as he flirts with Maddalena. Her heart is broken.

Rigoletto sends his daughter home and then hires Sparafucile to kill the duke, paying him half his fee and promising the rest when the body is delivered.

Later that night in the midst of a storm, Gilda returns disguised as a man. She overhears Maddalena and Sparafucile discussing the plan to murder the duke. Since Maddalena is herself now attracted to him, she pleads with her brother to spare him. Sparafucile agrees that if another man enters the inn whom he may kill and pass off as the duke, he will spare the object of his sister's affections.

Gilda resolves to give her life to save the man she loves, even though he has deceived and betrayed her.

At midnight, after the storm has receded, Rigoletto knocks at the door of the inn. Sparafucile hands a large sack to him, collects the rest of his fee, and goes back inside.

As he is taking the sack to the river, Rigoletto hears a voice singing and realizes that the duke still lives.

Rigoletto opens the sack to find the dying Gilda inside, pleading for his forgiveness. The jester cries, "Ah, the curse!" and faints beside his daughter's body.



Pen drawing of a jester by Anton Möller, dated 1605

Rigoletto Plot: The Short of It

The hunchback Rigoletto serves as jester to the corrupt, debauched Duke of Mantua. He has a beautiful young daughter, Gilda, whom he has hidden away so his enemies will not know of her existence or harm her.

Rigoletto does not know, however, that the duke in disguise is already pursuing Gilda as his lady love.

As a prank on Rigoletto, the duke's wicked courtiers abduct Gilda, thinking she is the jester's secret mistress.

After Gilda has been defiled and then released by the duke, Rigoletto vows he will have vengeance. He hires the assassin Sparafucile to kill the duke.

But Rigoletto is tragically foiled once again.

his play, "The jester [is] struck down by Providence in exactly the same manner as" Monterone is destroyed by the duke and Rigoletto.

But the irony of Monterone's curse goes even deeper, for the jester is duped into assisting with Gilda's abduction. Later when he pursues vengeance against the duke, Rigoletto lays a trap that ironically ensnares his own beloved daughter.

Gilda is a victim of both the duke's and her father's wickedness. Her only shortcoming is falling in love with a depraved man. After being corrupted by the duke, she gives herself to be stabbed in his stead, becoming the sole physical casualty of the plot.

But even death itself cannot compare to the misery the living Rigoletto suffers as the curtain falls. The hunchback's convincing demonstration of paternal love at last makes him the object of pity rather than hate.

The duke altogether escapes justice, for **Rigoletto** is the jester's tragedy. In a sense, the duke has been both the object of the jester's moral corruption and the instrument by which Rigoletto is brought low.

Rigoletto remarks to Sparafucile concerning the duke, "He is Crime; I am Punishment." The jester's intent is that he will punish the duke for his crime against Gilda.

But, recalled after the final twist of plot, the line becomes powerfully ironic, for it refers to Rigoletto's own fate: the duke becomes the criminal through whom Rigoletto is himself punished.

Crime and Punishment in **Rigoletto**

Verdi's original title for **Rigoletto** was *La Maledizione*, or **The Curse**. The whole plot evolves from Count Monterone's curse in scene one.

Although it is uttered against the duke and Rigoletto, the curse actually falls on Rigoletto alone. It is the curse of a father upon another father.

In all the world the hated Rigoletto loves nothing or no one except Gilda, his beautiful and pure daughter.

In the figure of the hunchback, playwright Victor Hugo created a type character whose outer deformity is a reflection of his inner depravity.

Verdi and Piave humanized Rigoletto, however. Their jester has become embittered by his ugly, misshapen figure. It is the indignity of being a laughingstock that causes him to mock and insult the entire court.

The courtiers, in turn, hate Rigoletto for his twisted wit and cruel tongue. But because he is protected by the duke, they cannot strike back at him.

Another way Rigoletto manifests his viciousness is by inciting the duke to evil. In a sense, the hunchback has two proteges: While he instructs his daughter in virtue, he urges the duke on in his vice.

Ironically, the very man whom Rigoletto prompts to seduce other men's wives and daughters becomes the undoing of the jester's own daughter. Victor Hugo writes about the plot and characterization of



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