

Rigoletto

Opera in 3 acts by Giuseppe Verdi

libretto by Francesco Maria Piave

based on the play *Le roi s'amuse* ["The King Amuses Himself"] of 1832
by Victor Hugo (1802-1885)

First performance: Venice, Teatro La Fenice, 11 March 1851

Characters:

The Duke of Mantua [=King Francis I of France of the Hugo play] – Tenor
Rigoletto, the duke's jester, portrayed as a hunchback (i.e., a sufferer from kyphosis; the character is equivalent to Triboulet of the Hugo play, which was written one year after Hugo's novel *The Hunchback of Notre Dame*); the jester's distinctive name was coined by the librettist Piave as an adaptation of the name of the principal character in the comedy *Rigoletti, ou Le dernier des fous* ["Rigoletti, or The Last of the Fools"] by Jules-Édouard Alboize de Pujol (1832); the name is derived from the French word *rigolo* (which means "amusing" or "funny") - Baritone
Gilda, the jester's daughter [=Blanche of the Hugo play] – Soprano
Sparafucile, a professional assassin [=Saltabadil of the Hugo play] – Bass
Maddalena, Sparafucile's sister [=Maguelonne of the Hugo play] – Contralto
Giovanna, Gilda's chaperone [=Dame Berarde of the Hugo play] – Mezzo-soprano
Count Ceprano [=Monsieur de Cossé of the Hugo play] – Bass
Countess Ceprano [=Madame de Cossé of the Hugo play] – Mezzo-soprano
Matteo Borsa, a courtier [=Monsieur de La Tour Landry of the Hugo play] - Tenor
Count Monterone [in the Hugo play, the equivalent character is Monsieur de Saint Vallier, father of Diane de Poitiers, a powerful courtier during the reigns of Francis I and Henry II, also long-time mistress of the latter] – Baritone
Marullo, a courtier [=Monsieur de Pienne of the Hugo play] – Baritone
A court usher – Bass
Page of the Duchess of Mantua – Mezzo-soprano

Courtiers, servants

Setting – the play of Victor Hugo is set at the court of King Francis I of France (r. 1515-1547), a glamorous *bon vivant* who was famed for his womanizing, in many ways a companion historical figure to Henry VIII of England (r. 1509-1547); certain clues in the play point to a timeframe shortly after 1530, when Francis married his second wife Eleanor of Austria; in 1850, at the time when Verdi became interested in adapting the Hugo play, the territories surrounding Venice were ruled by the Austrian Empire; the Austrian censors refused to permit a king to be portrayed in a manner as unflattering as in the Hugo play; as a result, the librettist Piave came up with the idea of switching the setting to the Duchy of Mantua, a political unit that existed in the era of Francis I, but was long defunct by the mid-nineteenth century; the Austrian censors were satisfied that the altered setting with an unspecified Duke of Mantua would not be offensive to modern rulers; members of the Gonzaga family ruled Mantua between 1328 and 1708, but they did not acquire the title "Duke of Mantua" until 1530; it is difficult to identify the first Duke of Mantua, Federico II (r. 1530-1540) with the persona of the duke in Verdi's *Rigoletto*, and that is also true of

most of his successors; the reign of Duke Vincenzo I (1587-1612), however, was marked by cultural brilliance, extravagant expenditure on court entertainments, and a string of mistresses that could be interpreted as an approximation of the court culture of Francis I; still, there is no evidence to suggest that the librettist Piave was thinking specifically of Vincenzo when he adapted the Hugo play; traditional staging of the opera, including the first staging, does not employ costuming compatible with fashions of the early sixteenth century that would be appropriate for the reign of Francis I, rather costumes appropriate for the late 16th century more in line with the fashions favored by the last rulers of the Valois dynasty of France (which died out in 1589).

Synopsis

Act I

Scene 1 (Introduzione) – a grand hall in the palace of the Duke of Mantua

A lavish court ball is in progress. The duke enters with one of his courtiers, Matteo Borsa, and tells him about a beautiful girl he has seen in church. He knows where she lives, but he does not know her name. He has been following her around, but she is unaware. Borsa tries to direct his attention to Countess Ceprano, one of the beautiful ladies at the ball. He approaches her and expresses his regret that she will be leaving the court for the countryside soon. He takes her by the arm and escorts her out. Count Ceprano has been watching the two, and he is ridiculed by the jester Rigoletto, who points out to him how powerless he is to stop the duke from paying attention to his wife.

Rigoletto goes off stage while another courtier, Marullo enters. He tells the other courtiers, all of whom despise Rigoletto for his incessant mockery of their behavior, that he has learned that Rigoletto has a mistress. Marullo and the others find this thought quite amusing, given Rigoletto's repugnant appearance. (In fact, Marullo is mistaken; it turns out later that the beautiful girl seen entering Rigoletto's house is actually his daughter). The duke soon returns, followed by Rigoletto, who suggests that the duke should kidnap Countess Ceprano and assassinate her husband in order to initiate an affair with her. Even the unscrupulous duke is shocked by this idea and advises Rigoletto to be more cautious. Rigoletto's audacity prompts Borsa, Marullo, and the other courtiers to vow revenge.

Quite suddenly, the gaiety of the party is interrupted when the aged Count Monterone bursts in. He has arrived to denounce the moral degeneracy of the duke, who has seduced his daughter. Rigoletto ridicules the count, but he continues his denunciation until the duke orders his arrest. Monterone responds by putting curses on both the duke and Rigoletto. In Rigoletto's case, the curse is proclaimed as the special curse of a father. Rigoletto becomes terrified.

Scene 2 – a dark alley in Mantua at night

Rigoletto walks down the alley, still haunted by Monterone's curse. Just before he enters the walled courtyard of his house, he is approached by the professional assassin Sparafucile, who offers his services. Rigoletto tells him that he has no immediate use for an assassin but makes certain that he learns his name and finds out where he can be found. When Sparafucile leaves, Rigoletto reflects on the way that he himself is an assassin with his tongue instead of a sword (i.e., a character assassin). He complains bitterly of the misfortune of his physical deformity and

his work as a court jester; he envies and despises the courtiers that he ridicules to amuse the duke. It is also clear that he is obsessed with the curse of Count Monterone.

When Rigoletto unlocks the door to his house, he finds his daughter Gilda coming out to greet him. They embrace tenderly. After Rigoletto cautions her never to leave the house, she reassures him by telling him that she leaves it only to go to church. Gilda is anxious to learn more about her origins. (The libretto never explains exactly what she has been doing for the many years before she recently showed up at Rigoletto's house). She knows nothing about Rigoletto's family or birthplace - not even his real name. She also knows nothing about her mother. Rigoletto refuses to tell her anything except that he loved her mother very much before she died. Ever watchful, Rigoletto instructs Giovanna, her chaperone, to guard her carefully. As Rigoletto gives Giovanna instructions, he opens the courtyard door and goes into the alley. Just as he does so, the duke enters the courtyard stealthily. He gives some money to Giovanna as a bribe for her silence, then hides behind a tree. Rigoletto returns and asks Giovanna if she and Gilda have ever been followed to church. Giovanna says no. Rigoletto orders the door to the courtyard to be locked at all times. Rigoletto then leaves, with the duke still in the courtyard.

But Gilda is stricken with guilt. She did not tell her father that a young man had been following her from church. She tells Giovanna that she has fallen in love with him. The duke steps out, asks Giovanna to leave, and throws himself at Gilda's feet. He tells her that he is just a poor student named Gualtier Maldè, but before they can talk much more, Giovanna tells them that she has heard footsteps outside. Gilda tells Giovanna to lead the duke out through the terrace, but before they leave, they declare their love. Once alone, Gilda reflects on her beloved and retires upstairs to her room.

Borsa, Marullo, Count Ceprano, and other of the duke's courtiers have gathered outside the courtyard. They believe mistakenly that Gilda is Rigoletto's mistress, and they want to abduct her in revenge for all of Rigoletto's personal attacks on them. When they see Rigoletto, they fool him into believing that they are actually going to abduct Countess Ceprano, just as he jokingly recommended in the first scene. They tell him that he will be complicit in the plot, and to help these plans along, they place a mask over his eyes. This renders him completely blind, but he thinks he cannot see just because the alley is so dark. The courtiers climb up the wall beneath Gilda's bedroom. They grab her, and she screams for help, but Rigoletto is still fooled into thinking it is Countess Ceprano. Rigoletto suddenly removes his mask and realizes that he had been blindfolded. He runs through the open door of the courtyard and sees Gilda's scarf dropped on the ground. Then he realizes what has happened and acknowledges that the curse has started to take effect.

Act II

a salon in the ducal palace

The duke is alone and upset about the abduction of his beloved. He returned to her house, found the door open, and the premises deserted. He thinks of revenge and feels deep regret for not being available to assist her when she needed him.

The courtiers enter and tell him their version of what happened at Rigoletto's house, still under the misapprehension that Gilda is his mistress. From what they say, he knows that Gilda is safe in their hands. Rigoletto enters certain that his daughter is somewhere in the ducal palace. He

tries to gather clues about her whereabouts but is unsuccessful. A page enters with a message from the duchess but is told that the duke cannot be disturbed. Rigoletto suspects that he does not want to be disturbed because he wants to spend time with his daughter. He finally tells the courtiers that the woman they abducted was his daughter, not his mistress, then pleads with them to tell him where she is. The gesture is not needed. Suddenly, a door opens, and Gilda enters. Rigoletto embraces her and orders the courtiers to leave.

Now alone with her father, Gilda tells him the story of her first meeting with the duke and her abduction. Rigoletto promises that they will leave the place that has proved so traumatic to them both. At that moment, Count Monterone is led through the room on his way to prison. Stopping in front of a portrait of the duke, he remarks that he cursed this seducer, but that he still does as he pleases as if nothing had happened. Rigoletto vows revenge on the duke, but his daughter, who is still in love with the duke, begs her father to forgive him.

Act III

at a ramshackle inn on the banks of the river Mincio

At night, Rigoletto and Gilda are shown outside the inn where the assassin Sparafucile lives. Gilda is still pleading with her father to spare the duke. Rigoletto invites her to look inside a crack in a wall. She sees the duke, disguised as a cavalry officer, enter the inn and ask Sparafucile for a room. He orders wine and complains about the fickleness of women. Sparafucile approaches Rigoletto and tells him that the duke is inside. In response, Rigoletto tells the assassin that he will return later to settle arrangements. Sparafucile's sister Maddalena, who was used to lure the duke to the inn, enters the room where he is drinking, and he starts to flirt with her. Gilda overhears what they say to each other and is devastated at his betrayal. A quartet follows in which the duke continues to flirt with Maddalena, while at the same time (from outside), Gilda muses on the duke's betrayal and Rigoletto savors the prospect of revenge.

Rigoletto sends Gilda away with the instruction to change into male clothing and leave for Verona. (No reason is given to explain the instruction about changing clothing.) Sparafucile returns and receives ten gold coins from Rigoletto with the promise of ten more when the assassination is completed. Sparafucile proposes to dump the corpse into the river, but Rigoletto insists that he would like to do that himself. The first rumblings of a storm are heard in the background. Maddalena regrets the part she is taking and urges the duke to leave at once. He refuses, however, and Sparafucile leads him to the hayloft where he is to spend the night.

The storm intensifies as Gilda re-appears in male costume. At the same crack in the wall as before, she hears Maddalena plead for the life of the duke. Sparafucile agrees to spare him should a stranger call at the inn before midnight. He intends to murder the stranger and put his body in a sack to turn it over to Rigoletto. Gilda's reaction is to resolve to sacrifice herself to save the life of the man she still loves. Maddalena lets her inside the inn, whereupon a loud clash of thunder drowns out her screams when Sparafucile plunges a dagger into her body.

As the storm abates, Rigoletto returns to the inn to collect the duke's body. Sparafucile produces a sack with a body inside and receives the remainder of his payment. Rigoletto begins to drag the sack to the river but hears the duke's voice in the background. When he opens the sack, he finds his beloved Gilda inside, still alive, but close to death. They sing a tender farewell before Gilda expires. At the moment of her death, Rigoletto proclaims the fulfillment of the curse of Count Monterone.

The Musical Numbers in

Rigoletto

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(1851)

No. 1 – Preludio

Act I

No. 2 – Introduzione (=Scene 1)

(Scene 2:)

No. 3 – Duetto: Rigoletto e Sparafucile

No. 4 – Scena e Duetto: Gilda e Rigoletto

No. 5 – Scena e Duetto: Gilda e Duca

No. 6 – Scena ed Aria: Gilda
(placement of the aria “Caro nome che il mio cor”)

No. 7 – Scena e Coro: Finale Primo

Act II

No. 8 – Scena ed Aria: Duca

No. 9 – Scena ed Aria: Rigoletto

No. 10 – Scena e Duetto: Gilda e Rigoletto

Act III

No. 11 – Scena e Canzone: Duca
(placement of the song “La donna è mobile”)

No. 12 – Quartetto: Gilda, Maddalena, Duca e Rigoletto

No. 13 – Scena, Terzetto e Tempesta: Gilda, Maddalena e Sparafucile

No. 14 – Scena e Duetto finale: Gilda e Rigoletto

Giuseppe Verdi:

“Gualtier Maldè/Caro nome che il mio cor”

No. 6 (Scene and Aria for Gilda)

from

Rigoletto (1851)

In Act I, the Duke of Mantua has just told Gilda that his name is Gualtier Maldè after he finally gets to meet her after following her in and out of church for some time. He gives her a false name, because he thinks that she will be more sympathetic to him if she believes that he is a commoner like herself. Gilda is just as attracted to the duke as he is to her, and she is delighted to have a name to match to the handsome young man she has seen paying attention to her from afar.

(Gilda gazes through the door out of which the duke has just left)

Scene:

Gualtier Maldè ... nome di lui sì amato,
Ti scolpisci nel cor innamorato.

Gualtier Maldè ... the name of the man I love so
much,
You are engraved on my lovestruck heart.

Aria:

Che nome che il mio cor
Festi primo palpar,
Le delizie dell'amor
Mi dêi sempre rammentar!

What a name that first made
My heart tremble,
You must always remind me
Of the pleasures of love!

Col pensiero il mio desir
A te sempre volerà,
E fin l'ultimo sospir,
Caro nome, tuo sarà.

In my thoughts my desire
Will always fly to you,
And with my last sigh
I will utter that beloved name.

Giuseppe Verdi:

“La donna è mobile”

Canzone (Song) for the Duke of Mantua from Act III of *Rigoletto* (1851)

(an excerpt from No. 11 of the score of the opera)

In Act III, the Duke of Mantua has traveled to a rustic tavern on the banks of the river Mincio in disguise as a cavalry officer to enjoy an evening of drinking and philandering incognito. Rigoletto and Gilda listen to him sing a song about the fickleness of women from a hole in the wall. Gilda, in love with the duke, is shocked at his faithlessness toward her. From the same song, her father Rigoletto finds further justification for his plans to murder the duke for his evil behavior.

Canzone:

(Verse 1)

La donna è mobile
Qual piuma al vento,
Muta d'accento
E di pensier.

Woman is as flighty
As a feather in the wind,
Empty of words
And of thoughts.

Sempre un amabile
Leggiadro viso,
In pianto o in riso,
È menzognero.

Always a lovable
Pretty face,
But whether weeping or smiling,
She is deceitful.

(Verse 2)

È sempre misero
Chi a lei s'affrida,
Chi le confida,
Mal cauto il core!

He is always miserable
Who trusts her
Or confides in her,
His heart is broken!

Pur mai non sentesi
Felice appieno
Chi su quel seno,
Non liba amore!

But no man can ever
Be fully happy,
Unless he sips love
On that breast!