



Rigoletto Giuseppe Verdi

The background

Hunchbacks

In the autumn of 1830 Victor Hugo bought himself a large bottle of ink, locked away his jacket (so he would not be tempted to go out) and sat down to write *The Hunchback of Notre Dame*. The novel came out the next year and got terrible reviews which, luckily for Hugo, the public totally ignored. Indeed the book was so successful that Hugo realised there was money in hunchbacks and, a year later, he created another one.

This was Triboulet, the king's jester in the play, *Le Roi s'amuse* (The King amuses himself). Unfortunately, the king in the title mostly amused himself as a rapist, and Hugo got another set of bad reviews. More importantly, the actual French King had nearly been assassinated a couple of days before and the authorities were not amused by a play that showed a King Behaving Badly; straight after the first night the police stepped in and banned the show. It stayed banned in France for fifty years. However, during that time, Triboulet became very well known in Europe, not in Hugo's play, but in an Italian opera – and not under his own name, but as 'Rigoletto'.

Triboulet's fortunes (and name) changed in 1850 when Giuseppe Verdi, stuck for an opera to put on in Venice, had an inspiration. He wrote to his librettist, Francesco Piave: "I was going over several subjects when *Le Roi s'amuse* came into my mind like a flash of lightning, and I said – 'Yes, by God, that would be a winner!'"

Verdi was right; *Rigoletto* (as the opera came to be called) was a winner and has never been out of the repertory since.

A violent society

Le Roi s'amuse had been set in France, at the time of Francis I, but in rewriting the show for Italy Verdi found he had to make some changes. 1848 had been a year of revolution all over Europe. Kingdoms had tottered and authority was jittery; nobody was going to allow a depraved *king* to be the central character of an opera.

Every theatre that put on *Rigoletto* made the same demand, the king must be turned into a duke and the opera set in an obscure bit of the past. In Venice the opera was called *Rigoletto* and set in 16th-century Mantua, in Naples it became *Clara di Perth* (Scotland was a distant and glamorous place for the Italians), while Bologna and Rome saw the show as *Viscardello*.

However one thing never changed – the atmosphere. The opera describes a closed society ruled by one man. Everything depends on him, everybody takes their tone from him and, as he is depraved, the whole society is rotten. Mantua (or wherever) is a place dominated by violence and fear. There is only one honest man in the show, Sparafucile, a foreigner – and he is a hit man. ENO have changed the setting again, to New York in the 1950's. Jonathan Miller, the director of ENO's *Rigoletto*, was struck by how similar the New York Mafia families were to Verdi's Mantuan court, and he decided to set the opera in gangland. The ENO cast had a lot of fun learning how to be New York hoods. They watched special screenings of *The Godfather*, as Miller pointed out the way the American Italians shot their cuffs, slicked their hair and poured slugs of whiskey. The whole macho culture seemed to fit *Rigoletto* like a glove

The Story

Party time

The opera starts with a sombre theme in the brass and woodwind. This is the 'curse' theme; you hear it more and more as the opera develops, but here, at the beginning, you forget it immediately as the curtain rises on a noisy party. We are in a Mafia-controlled bar, everybody is very cool, in the style of the 1950's, and the 'Duke' (clearly a gangster boss) is drinking down at the front of the stage.

He is boasting about a pretty girl he's followed home from Mass, but the entrance of Ceprano and his wife distracts him. Ceprano's wife is extremely attractive and the Duke swings into his first aria, 'Every woman is equally lovely.' The easy tune gives us his character: pleasure-loving, shallow and cynical.

The joker

Ceprano realises that the Duke is taking an interest in his wife and, though he can't do much about it, he is furious as he hears the bar tender, Rigoletto, encouraging the boss's fancy. Rigoletto is a hunchback and clearly a joker (you'll notice his flashing bow tie) but his jokes are merely malicious. Here he tells the Duke to 'eliminate' Ceprano if he gets in the way.

Ceprano moves across the stage, to mutter threats of vengeance in (comparative) safety, and is joined by the other gangsters. They all hate Rigoletto.

To their delight they realise they have a weapon to hand. Marullo has followed Rigoletto home and found that he's keeping a woman. The others are amazed (and disgusted) to think the hunchback has a lover, and decide to kidnap her.

The curse

The dance band strikes up and the party is just about to get going, when a bass voice is heard outside, demanding to see the Duke. This is Monterone (a rival boss) who enters slowly and impressively and denounces the Duke for having seduced his daughter. Nobody is particularly impressed, except Rigoletto, who sends the old man up. Suddenly Monterone turns, and in a magnificent outburst, curses both him and the Duke.

The Duke's only response is to order his arrest, but Rigoletto (to our surprise) is horrified. Monterone is marched off stage, to the jeers of the chorus: "You dared to provoke us, your hopes are all through, Your curse will be fatal to no-one but you."

The hit man

The next scene is set in a New York back street. Dark-voiced clarinets, bassoons and lower strings set the scene; it is night and Rigoletto is walking home, still unnerved by Monterone's curse. A sinister figure emerges from the shadows and approaches the hunchback. His name is Sparafucile and he is accompanied by ominous sounds from the orchestra – muted cello and double bass – but his conversation (given its subject matter) is surprisingly matter of fact. Does Rigoletto need his services? He is an assassin, and he's noticed that Rigoletto has a rival. Clearly he has seen somebody lurking round Rigoletto's house.

Rigoletto is not interested. Instead he asks Sparafucile how he conducts his business. Sparafucile says that he gets half the money, in cash, before a hit – the rest later. He can strike in public or down at his bar; there he has an attractive sister whom he uses as a decoy.

Rigoletto alone

Rigoletto puts him on hold and dismisses him. Alone he breaks into a bitter meditation on his life; he is just like Sparafucile: *he* kills men with his tongue, the hit man, Sparafucile, kills with his dagger. Rigoletto's solo is in recitative, that is the musical line follows the ordinary patterns of speech, but it always seems about to break into melody and, as he opens his gate, the music brightens. "Here," he says, "I am a changed man... "

Gilda

A sudden burst from the orchestra brings on the heroine, Gilda, and we realise at once that she is *not* his mistress, but his daughter. They sing the first of their three duets. There is one in each act, and in each one Verdi describes their relationship with immense tenderness. However, you will notice an imbalance. Rigoletto's one redeeming feature is his love for his daughter, but it is a love that is almost an obsession. Gilda is aware of this and, though she loves her father, in this ENO staging she gently pushes him back.

We discover from their dialogue that she has only just come up from the country, that she is kept close at home – only leaving to go to Mass – and that she knows neither her family name, nor her own mother. Rigoletto recalls his dead wife, the angel who loved him in spite of his deformity, but he is harassed by the idea that somebody has seen Gilda. He questions her, has anybody followed her home from Mass? No, says Gilda – though she confesses in an aside that she is lying. Rigoletto begs their attendant, Giovanna, to guard the girl carefully when, hearing a noise, he runs out to check the street.

The 'student'

As he opens the gate to his house the Duke, disguised as a student, slips in. Rigoletto is right to be worried; we now discover that Gilda is the girl that the Duke has seen at Mass and that she has innocently encouraged him. Giovanna, much less innocently, accepts a bribe, and leaves the two of them together. The Duke tells Gilda that he is a student, Gualtier Malde, and that he loves her. He is interrupted by the sound of Ceprano and his men surrounding the house and makes a swift exit. Left alone, Gilda sings her aria "Dearest name of my first love" which she barely has time to finish before the gangsters close in.

The kidnap

The rest of the act is taken up with her kidnap; a difficult moment to stage. The chorus enter singing a nervous staccato chorus, but you can't help thinking, there are 20 of those guys, and one girl, what are they worried about?

Rigoletto blunders into the ones guarding the street. They fool him into thinking they are abducting Ceprano's wife (who appears to live next door). They give him a mask and get him to hold the ladder for them, and it is not until he hears the cries of Gilda offstage that he realises something has gone wrong. He tears off the mask to discover it contains a blindfold as well and rushes into his house. When he re-appears he is speechless with horror. All he can say is "The old man cursed me!" before he faints.

The rape

With all the main characters in place the opera moves swiftly through the next two acts. Gilda is brought to the Duke's place where he rapes her, her father being forcibly restrained in an outer room. One of the gangsters, Marullo, says almost involuntarily, "Poor little Rigoletto" and indeed the hunchback's humiliation is painful to watch. He begs the gangsters to let him rescue the girl, but it is not until he reveals that she is his daughter that he gets a reaction.

Father and daughter

Gilda is pushed on stage and the chorus allow themselves to be ordered away by Rigoletto, who suddenly grows in moral authority and dignity. Father and daughter are alone and reach each other in another extended duet. Gilda tells him the whole sorry tale as Rigoletto comforts her. They are interrupted

by Monterone, pacing through the Bar, under guard (and presumably about to be assassinated). He has the full orchestra accompanying him (as usual) and reflects bitterly that his curse has proved useless. "Old man, you are mistaken," cries Rigoletto, "you shall be revenged!" He picks up a gun and the act ends with a furious duet; Rigoletto swearing to have vengeance and Gilda revealing that, in spite of everything, she still loves the Duke.

The waterfront

The last act takes us to a poverty stricken waterfront and Sparafucile's Bar. Gilda and Rigoletto enter, barely able to talk to each other. "You love him?" says Rigoletto, "Always" replies Gilda. Rigoletto insists that she approach the bar – to see just what sort of man her lover is.

The ENO staging is particularly good here. In traditional productions the bar normally looks like a crazy potting shed and it is very difficult to work out how Gilda can see what is going on. She normally has to peer through gaps in the planks. But the ENO bar has a huge glass front. Everything is extremely visible and, at this moment, the Duke, disguised as a GI, enters and calls for some wine.

Flirtation

He finds a juke box and punches out the opera's hit number, "Women abandon us." ENO are rather proud of this prop – and you will hear the orchestra imitate the lurch of a juke box as they play the opening bar. The refrain, "What is a woman, Why should men care?" tells Gilda exactly what sort of man her lover is and the entrance of Sparafucile's sister (Maddalena) shortly afterwards, completes the good work.

The deal

As the Duke flirts with the girl Sparafucile slips out and asks Rigoletto if he wants the Duke killed now, (Sparafucile does not know who his victim is, he still thinks of him as Rigoletto's rival). Rigoletto says he'll give orders later. Sparafucile slides away and the scene is set for one of the greatest moments in *Rigoletto* - the Quartet.

The quartet

The quartet opens with the Duke singing solo, "If you want a faithful lover." As the other voices join in you will hear that everybody's music is different. The Duke's solo is ardent and exaggerated (after all he doesn't mean it), while Maddalena's line chatters and laughs as she repulses him. Gilda expresses her pain in short breathless phrases but, as the quartet develops, we hear her voice rising over the others as she realises she is still in love. Rigoletto, thinking only of vengeance, stays firmly down in the bass.

The set up

Sparafucile returns and Rigoletto gives him half the money to kill the Duke, Sparafucile says he'll put the body in a sack and tip it in the river, but Rigoletto says, no, he wants to do that himself and exits. He tells Gilda to disguise herself in male costume so that she can leave town safely.

Meanwhile things are moving. The weather has turned stormy and the Duke has retired to bed. Maddalena, who has a soft spot for a handsome man, begs her brother to spare him and Gilda (dressed as a man) creeps near the bar to listen in.

The murder

Sparafucile is offended at the thought of cheating a client but agrees that if somebody turns up before midnight, he'll kill him instead. (Rigoletto is unlikely to look in the sack.) Gilda promptly knocks at the door. As she does so the storm reaches its height and we can just hear the Duke singing "Women abandon us" up in his room. Maddalena lets Gilda in and, as the thunder cracks, Sparafucile knifes her.

Self sacrifice

Gilda's action is prompted by sheer love. She is the only person in the opera who is not tainted by evil atmosphere of Mantua and who knows that, outside, there is a freer, saner, world. Unfortunately, the only means of escape for her is death. Rigoletto appears for the body of his victim. Sparafucile wheels it in, in a sack and, to our horror, Rigoletto gloats over the corpse. His fiendish delight comes to an abrupt halt as he hears the Duke singing inside the house. He opens the sack.

The curse

There he finds his daughter. She is dying and she and her father sing a last duet. Gilda leads us away from her sordid death as she sings of Heaven, and of joining her mother. Flutes and high violins accompany her, while Rigoletto sings brokenly, "Oh, do not die..." But of course he cannot save her and, as she dies, he falls on the body, crying, "The old man cursed me!" There has been no way out of the box – the Duke has won.

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