

GIUSEPPE VERDI

THE MASTER OF THE HUMAN VOICE

In the world of opera, Giuseppe Verdi (1813–1901) stands as a giant. His works are known and loved all over the world. They were huge hits in his own lifetime, as they still are today: Wikipedia counted 2,586 performances of 28 different Verdi operas worldwide in the last 5 years alone, putting him comfortably at the head of the 'most performed' league table.

One author summarises the reason of this enduring fame and popularity as 'Verdi has the ability to dream up glorious melodies with an innate understanding of the human voice, to express himself directly, to understand how the theatre works, and to score with technical brilliance, colour and originality'.



In Harwood's play, Reggie echoes this in a key passage when he says (Act 2, Scene 1): 'We, all of us living in this house were born with a musical gift. Ours was the singular ability to lift our voices in song. ... What harm is there in pretending to recapture what we once were ... on the birthday of one of the greatest composers of the human voice who ever lived?'

THE QUARTET FROM RIGOLETTO

The Quartet from Rigoletto, which becomes the climax of the play, demonstrates the attributes of Verdi's art triumphantly. It is one of the reasons why Rigoletto (premiered in Venice 1851) turned Verdi into *the* superstar opera composer, a success he followed through quickly with two more masterpieces: 'Il Trovatore' and 'La Traviata'.



The Rigoletto Quartet is sung by the four key characters: Reggie as 'The Duke' (an alpha male and woman chasing Tenor), Cissy as 'Maddalena' (a coquette Mezzo, the current target of the Duke), Jean as 'Gilda' (a Soprano, Rigoletto's tragic daughter, who has been seduced by the Duke and finds that she has been betrayed - though she continues loving him) and Wilf as 'Rigoletto' (a Baritone, the court jester and motor behind many of the Duke's misdeeds, for which a curse has been laid on him by another injured father).

The Quartet is an intricate musical depiction of the four personalities and their overlapping agendas: Each of the four voices in the quartet is beautifully tuned to its character's role. But the four parts also come to depict a change in those characters' relationships with one another: the Duke dominates at first but by the end succumbs to Maddalena's tough-minded critique. Gilda's part, expressing disillusionment, ends by conveying her inability to even listen to her father's vengeful plan to punish the Duke.

THE OPERA'S STORY

It was Verdi who chose the 1832 French play by Victor Hugo, 'Le roi s'amuse', as the basis for the opera's libretto, authored by Francesco Maria Piave. He later held it to be the best of all scripts he had ever set. The play itself, depicting the libertine life at a renaissance court, had been banned from performance in France, ostensibly because of its immoral content, in reality because of the unflattering picture it painted of a historical French monarch, the renaissance king Francois I. Verdi and Piave anticipated similar problems with the

ensorship elsewhere, but successfully circumvented that by turning the king of France into an anonymous 16th century Duke of Mantua, toning down some of the scenes and changing the names of all the characters. Thus, not only was the opera staged successfully all over Europe, but ironically also ran to more than 100 performances in France while the ban on Victor Hugo's play was still in place!

While the libretto follows Hugo's play very closely, the music adds a deeper dimension. It allows the Quartet to foreshadow the tragic outcome of the opera's story in a poignant way: The Duke, whose vengeful death at the hands of an assassin is plotted by Rigoletto, will get away scot-free, aided by Maddalena. Instead, Gilda will sacrifice her own life to save that of the Duke. And Rigoletto will suffer the fulfilment of the curse laid on him, ending the opera in despair, bent over the dead body of his beloved daughter.

Victor Hugo saw the opera and appears to have been impressed by the Quartet. It prompted from him the somewhat backhanded compliment 'If I could only make four characters in my plays speak at the same time, and have the audience grasp the words and the sentiments, I would obtain the very same effect.'

VERDI, HIS WORKS, AND THE ITALIAN POLITICS OF HIS TIME

In the early and mid- eighteen hundreds, authoritarian regimes everywhere in Europe battled for control over their populace. Italy was divided into many separate states whose regimes were not only authoritarian, but in their majority also headed by foreign dynasties, the most prominent being Habsburg-Austria. Stories in literary works, especially plays and operas, would be seen as politically subversive and dangerous if they contained a critique of figures of authority, of the state and its representatives, or of the church, such that frequently a battle of wits developed over what could be published and what not. This was the context in which several of Verdi's operatic works managed to express his support for political change in Italy without falling foul of the censor. They include 'La Battaglia di Legnano', as well as 'Nabucco', 'Attila' and 'I Lombardi'.

Collectively known as the 'risorgimento' ('re-rising') of Italy, the political changes of the time were pursued by a variety of players. The overarching aim was unification of the country in one Italian-ruled state. Verdi, like many, believed that this would result in a radical republic, but others were intent on securing a monarchic system (which is what eventually happened). The ebb and flow of the conflict was complex and dominated Italian public life for much of Verdi's time. The armed struggle of the republicans was repeatedly unsuccessful, and the reprisals of the various regimes led to a repressive mood dominating the country.

But lyrical music has the ability to undercut authority and to project feelings otherwise un-expressable: Verdi's great achievement was that, through his music, he 'gave a voice to the hope and struggle of the people and wept and loved for all' as one Italian author has put it.

Having taken more distance from the republican position after a failed revolutionary attempt in 1849, in 1861, when the Italian unification finally succeeded, Verdi briefly became a reluctant member of parliament. But the chemistry of political life was not for him. Instead, he continued to strive for the ideals of peace and humanity, primarily through his works, palpably so in 'Simone Boccanegra' and 'Don Carlos' as well as in his famous Requiem. And his 'Va Pensiero' chorus from 'Nabucco', sung by the Israelites captive in Babylon, is still part of the Italian DNA: It was spontaneously sung by the people at the news of Verdi's death and has become a second Italian national anthem.

QUARTET TEXT AND ENGLISH TRANSLATION:

DUCA

Bella figlia dell'amore,
schiavo son dei vezzi tuoi;
con un detto sol tu puoi
le mie pene consolar.
Vieni e senti del mio core
il frequente palpitar.
Con un detto, ecc.

MADDALENA

Ah! ah! rido ben di core,
che tai baie costan poco...

GILDA

Ah, così parlar d'amore...

MADDALENA

...quanto valga il vostro gioco,
mel credete, so apprezzar.

GILDA

...a me l'infame ho udito!

RIGOLETTO (*a Gilda*)

Taci, il piangere non vale, ecc.

GILDA

Infelice cor tradito,
per angoscia non scoppiar.

MADDALENA

Son avvezza, bel signore,
ad un simile scherzar,
mio bel signor!

DUCA

Con un detto sol tu puoi
le mie pene consolar.

GILDA

Infelice cor tradito,
per angoscia non scoppiar, ecc.

MADDALENA

Ah! Ah! Rido ben di core!
Che tai baie costan poco, ecc.

DUCA

Bella figlia dell'amore,
schiavo son de' vezzi tuoi, ecc.

RIGOLETTO (*a Gilda*)

Ch'ei mentiva sei sicura.
Taci, e mia sarà la cura
la vendetta d'affrettar.
Pronta fia, sarà fatale,
io saprollo fulminar, ecc.
M'odi! Ritorna a casa.
Oro prendi, un destriero,
una veste viril che t'apprestai,
e per Verona parti.
Sarovi io pur doman.

DUKE

Fairest daughter of love,
I am a slave to your charms;
with but a single word you could
relieve my every pain.
Come, touch my breast and feel
how my heart is racing.
With but a single word, etc.

MADDALENA

Ah! Ah! That really makes me laugh;
talk like that is cheap enough...

GILDA

Ah, these are the loving words...

MADDALENA

...believe me, I know exactly
what such play-acting is worth!

GILDA

...the scoundrel spoke once to me!

RIGOLETTO (*to Gilda*)

Hush, weeping can do no good, etc.

GILDA

O wretched heart betrayed,
do not break for sorrow.

MADDALENA

I, my fine sir, am quite accustomed
to foolish jokes like this,
my fine sir!

DUKE

With but a single word you could
relieve my every pain.

GILDA

O wretched heart betrayed,
do not break for sorrow, etc.

MADDALENA

Ah! Ah! That really makes me laugh;
talk like that is cheap enough, etc.

DUKE

Fairest daughter of love,
I am a slave to your charms, etc.

RIGOLETTO (*to Gilda*)

You are now convinced he was lying.
Hush, and leave it up to me
to hasten our revenge.
It will be quick, it will be deadly,
I know how to deal with him.
Listen to me, go home.
Take some money and a horse,
put on the men's clothes I provided,
then leave at once for Verona.
I shall meet you there tomorrow.

