

2024|25 SEASON

Rigoletto Keynotes

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Rigoletto is an opera full of objectively bad people. Everywhere on stage there's a philandering Duke, a vengeful clown, a mercenary murderer, and a whole bunch of lackeys who would like nothing better than to fan the flames of conflict. Gilda, the single character who demonstrates a consistent sense of goodness, (spoiler alert!) is the one who dies.

So, what is this opera doing in a season themed around our better selves? Is programming a tragic opera this season a harbinger that we're all doomed?

To answer the first question, we must search the stage for transient moments of humanity between the spectacles of vice.

The title character presents a facade of jaded, clownish hatred, but his humanity reveals itself where his daughter is concerned. He is a loving father whose care often manifests in contorted forms, including barring his daughter Gilda from the wider world due to his own experiences as a social outcast. In Act II, it is hard not to be moved by an unmistakable outpouring of fatherly love as he pleads to be reunited with his daughter after she's been kidnapped. He is briefly transformed from despondent jester to earnest protector for his beloved child.

Another glimmer of humanity is found in Gilda, who plays out a firm sense of empathy and compassion that consequently she has the will to act upon. Often mistaken by audiences and fellow opera characters as naive, Gilda makes her compassionate choices with a keen awareness of how her actions affect those she loves. In the most basic interpretation,

Gilda's compassion manifests in self-sacrifice to preserve the life of the Duke, her traitorous lover. However, in a compelling alternate reading of her actions, Gilda's self-sacrifice stems from a deeper connection – her relationship with her father. She knows the consequences to her father's life should the Duke be murdered on his orders, so from Gilda's deeply religious perspective, she sacrifices herself to protect her father's soul from divine judgement. In either case, like her father, she is moved by love for another person.

We see from *Rigoletto* and Gilda that a path to our better selves lies in drawing strength from the threads of family and relationships.

Now to the broader question: are we all doomed? Mercifully, life is not a tragic

opera, but the genre reflects the personal journeys we might take. In the corrupt and inequitable society in which *Rigoletto* finds himself, his fatherly love mutates into a plot to kill the man who has wronged his daughter. In her world, Gilda's only recourse to protect and care for the ones she loves is self-sacrifice.

How do we foster a society, outside the bounds of an opera, where humanity and compassion are not co-opted for spite and further violence? As our real lives continue to take on strife of operatic proportions, let us use *Rigoletto* simultaneously as a reminder of the deep humanity that comes from our most cherished relationships and as a foil for the world we wish to create.

ALEX CHEN



Rigoletto stage model by James Rotondo.

Verdi and *Rigoletto*

By the early 1850s Giuseppe Verdi was nearing forty years of age and had been a professional opera composer for well over a decade. His works were presented in all the major houses in Italy – with additional premières in London and Paris (1847) – and his reputation was sufficient to guarantee that his more successful operas would be produced virtually throughout the operatic world (in the eight years following its première in 1842 Verdi's first smash success, *Nabucco*, was heard and seen in, among other centres, Vienna, Lisbon, Barcelona, Berlin, Paris, Hamburg, New York, and Buenos Aires). Always a shrewd negotiator, Verdi ensured that he would be handsomely remunerated for his work; his earnings allowed him to become a landowner and later a successful farmer.

However, his contract with the publishing house Ricordi demanded a great deal of their composer in return – at least one opera was produced each year between 1839 and 1851, and Verdi felt he was not always free to select dramatic subject matter that aligned with his artistic vision. Later he was to refer to these as his “galley years,” a period in his professional life that brought him renown and success but kept him yoked to contractual obligations. Success was not without its frustrations.

Verdi's situation began to change in 1850 with a commission from Le Fenice, Venice, to compose a new opera. During his time in Paris, the composer had acquainted himself with a contemporary play by Victor Hugo, a play so scandalous and controversial that it was banned immediately after its 1832 première (not to be presented publicly in France again for fifty years). Both Verdi and his librettist Francesco Maria Piave realized that getting permission from the Venetian censors to stage such a work would be a supreme challenge (which it was), but Verdi's instinct for a story that could be turned into an effective piece of music theatre was second to none, and he prevailed. In the composer's own words: “The subject is grand, immense, and there is a character that is one of the greatest creations that the theatre can boast of, in any country and in all history.”

Victor Hugo's play *Le roi s'amuse* became an opera by Giuseppe Verdi, *Rigoletto*, and a spectacular success it was and remains.

But the early 1850s would bring Verdi two more spectacular successes: *Il Trovatore* and *La traviata* – both in 1853 (and the latter also based on a contemporary and controversial French play). As these three works were produced and embraced throughout the world, Verdi was at last able to liberate himself from the “galley,” as he was now financially independent enough to accept only projects he believed in, to select colleagues that met his exacting standards, and even to examine performance venues applying for permission to produce his works, to ensure they were up to the task. It is telling that among the sixteen Verdi operas produced before the 1850s and this fabulous trio of masterpieces, only a very few are produced today with any regularity. Every one of Verdi's works created afterwards – when his financial independence afforded him the freedom to choose his own texts and to cogitate and ruminate about his musical treatment of them – is not only an enduring part of the standard repertoire, but each one also represents developments in Verdi's evolution as a composer of opera, of music drama.

As a young composer Verdi inherited a long-standing tradition culminating in the late 18th- and early 19th-century tradition of Italian opera convention known as *bel canto*. The focus on the human voice (thus the declaimer of the words) as the most expressive element in Italian music theatre, with the orchestra functioning as an accompanist, is paramount to that tradition, and Verdi never entirely abandoned it. He did, however, recognize that in many ways this tradition had become threadbare – especially the structure that allowed the story – comic or dramatic – to be told lurchingly through a series of self-contained solo arias designed to encourage applause for star singers. By the time Verdi embraced the gift of *Rigoletto*, he was more than ready to design a structure and create a style uniquely suited to this particular story and this particular cast of characters.

From the beginning, Verdi gives us a Prelude rather than an Overture – a piece of orchestral music intrinsically related to the drama and leading directly to the first scene. As with *La traviata*, this opera begins at a party, and the orchestra gets all the tunes – the conversation is whispered and confidential, but it is necessary that we understand it so that we comprehend the plot (i.e., watch the surtitles).

Four outstanding examples of Verdi's ingenuity and theatrical savoir-faire:

1) Gilda sings her only aria, "Caro nome," expressing her infatuation with the impoverished student who has professed love to her – first, the rests inserted in between syllables of words (a no-no in bel canto singing) create a dramatic effect; these rests between syllables portray her breathless infatuation with her new-found lover.

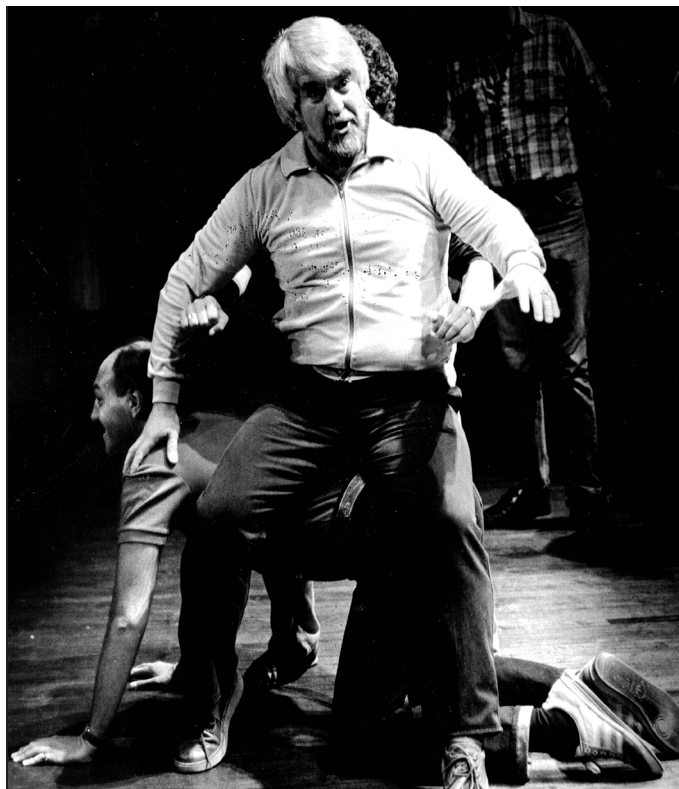
2) Gilda's solo number does not end in the conventional bel canto manner with a high note and a brilliant orchestral cadence: in fact, she finished her aria very quietly while other characters are making their presence known. Clearly Verdi wants the dramatic intensity to build and the action to continue without the interruption of applause – an approach to dramatic structure the composer will continue to cultivate the rest of his career, culminating in *Otello* and *Falstaff*.

3) The Duke's Canzone: Verdi deliberately called this very conventional song a canzone – its style (regular phrasing, popular dance-like meter, generic accompaniment) marks it as a "pop" song – which it became as soon as the audience exited the theatre in 1851.

4) The Quartet – perhaps the greatest example of a composer's ability to portray the emotional response of four characters to a single dramatic event in all opera. And accompanied very sparsely.

This idea of creating a fluid unfolding of drama will become a trademark of later Verdi works, but it begins with *Rigoletto* – and the liberation of Verdi.

ROBERT HOLLISTON



Bernard Turgeon in rehearsal for *Rigoletto* 83/84, Pacific Opera Victoria, photo by Lech Janaszak



John Avery as *Rigoletto* in *Rigoletto*, Pacific Opera Victoria 2006, a co-production with Orchestra London

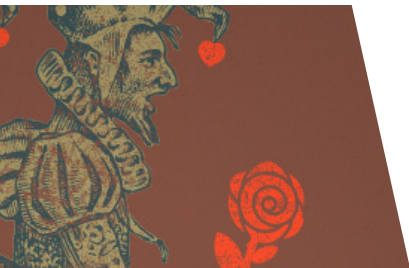
Upcoming Events



GRYPHON TRIO *ECHO: MEMORIES OF THE WORLD* | MAY 29

7:30 PM | McPherson Playhouse

A co-presentation of the Victoria Symphony and Pacific Opera Victoria. Join the Gryphon Trio, Marion Newman, and Cheri Maracle for *ECHO*—a powerful multimedia performance blending music, video, and spoken word to amplify submerged histories. Created by Indigenous and non-Indigenous artists, it's a moving journey through memory, relationship, and respect.



RIGOLETTO REVELRY | APRIL 9 – MAY 1

Online at Hibid.ca

In *Rigoletto*, every decision changes a life—your bid can change the future of opera. Join us for Rigoletto Revelry, an online auction supporting opera in our community! Bid on exciting packages and one-of-a-kind items on Hibid, with select items on display at the Royal Theatre during *Rigoletto*.



FRAGMENTS: MICAH SCHROEDER & FRANCES ARMSTRONG IN RECITAL | MAY 5

7:30 PM | The Baumann Centre

Fragments is more than a musical recital—it's a shared journey through sound, memory, and connection. Presented by two artists with roots in British Columbia, this program weaves together pieces that reflect fragments of heritage, personal stories, and the universal resonance of music.



OPERA 101 | MAY 9 – MAY 10

4:00 PM & 2:00 PM | The Baumann Centre

When opera meets clown! Dame Charlotte and Sir Peter, a duo of clown-musicians, set out to introduce and celebrate opera with wit and talent. But as words tangle and misunderstandings multiply, the talk transforms into a playful, music-filled adventure full of laughter, learning, and clever puns.

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Pacific Opera Victoria works and creates on the traditional lands of the *lək'wənjən* speaking people, now known as the Songhees and Esquimalt Nations.