

REVIEWS

Verdi's 'Il Trovatore': Sublime Love vs. Revenge

Giuseppe Verdi's *Il Trovatore* was performed at the Kennedy Center by the Washington National Opera on Nov. 11, 2004, more than 151 years after its first performance in Rome on Jan. 19, 1853. *Il Trovatore* is part of a trilogy of operas composed by Verdi in his "middle" period, which includes *Rigoletto* (1851) and *La Traviata* (1853). Like *Rigoletto*, *Il Trovatore* demonstrates the tragic consequences of a mentality based on revenge, and like *La Traviata* it emphasizes the alternative sublime quality of selfless love, as developed by the German dramatist Friedrich Schiller.

The opera is based on an 1836 drama about the Spanish civil war of 1412, by the Spanish playwright Antonio Garcia Gutierrez. It is clear that Verdi is polemicizing in *Il Trovatore* against the bestial mentality of the Spanish Inquisition, even though the action of the opera is dated prior to the establishment of the Spanish Inquisition in the later Fifteenth century.

The death without an heir of King Martin I of Aragon on May 31, 1409 created the conditions for civil war. Among the claimants to the throne were the King's nephew Fernando de Antequera, King of Castile, and Jaime de Aragon, Count of Urgel, son of Martin's first cousin and also husband of his half-sister. Fernando was chosen King by the Aragonese parliament, and the Count of Urgel launched an unsuccessful rebellion to press his claims to the throne. In the opera, the leader of the royal forces is Count di Luna, and Manrico, a gypsy troubadour from the mountains of Biscay, is among the commanders of Urgel's rebellion.

Desire for Revenge

In this historical context, the plot of the opera is defined by a desire for revenge on the part of two characters, Count di Luna



Driven by the desire for revenge: Roberto Servile as Count di Luna, Elena Manistina as Azucena.

Washington National Opera/Karin Cooper

and the gypsy, Azucena, which ultimately overwhelms all of leading characters.

Many years earlier, Azucena's mother was burned at the stake for allegedly bewitching the Count's younger brother Garzia. Charged by her mother to avenge her death, Azucena abducted Garzia, but, in confusion, she murdered her own son by mistake. Thus Manrico, whom Azucena has raised as her son, is in fact Garzia, Count di Luna's brother, whose death he, in turn, is pledged to avenge.

The unknowing brothers Manrico and di Luna become rivals for the love of Leonora, the Queen's lady-in-waiting. But Leonora loves Manrico alone.

At the end of the play, Azucena is captured and identified as the gypsy who had abducted Garzia. She in turn reveals that she is the mother of the rebel leader, Manrico.

Manrico learns that di Luna is about to burn Azucena alive, rushes to her defense, and is captured. His betrothed Leonora decides to free him, by offering herself to di Luna, and then committing suicide once Manrico has escaped. But

Manrico refuses to flee, because he believes Leonora has betrayed him by "selling" her love for his freedom. As she dies from the self-inflicted poison, Manrico realizes the extent of her love for him. The Count arrives, realizes that Leonora has deceived him, and orders Manrico's beheading. Azucena, forced to watch, reveals the truth to him: "You have killed your brother."

Role of Leonora

When the original librettist Salvatore Cammarano died before completing the libretto, he was replaced by Leone Emanuele Bardare, among whose tasks was an expansion of the role of Leonora. Under Verdi's supervision, her cantabile "Tacea la notte" and

the cavatina, "Di tale amor," originally cut, were restored, and additional lines were written for her in the *Miserere*.

Verdi's Leonora is reminiscent of Beethoven's Leonore in the opera *Fidelio* (1805). While Beethoven's Leonore succeeds in freeing her husband, Florestan, from the evil Pizarro, Verdi's Leonora is not successful, but she shares the same quality of sublime love as Beethoven's character. In Act III, Scene 2, Manrico says to her "Nothing but love, sublime love ["Amor, sublime amore"], must speak to your heart."

Leonora's aria, "D'amor sull'ali rosee," in Act IV, is also reminiscent of "Abscheulicher! Wo eilst du hin?" sung by Beethoven's Leonore in Act I, Scene 5, in which she sings; "Come, Hope . . . O come . . . I follow the inner drive, I falter not, the duty of true married love strengthens me." In *Il Trovatore*, Leonora sings: "On the rosy wings of love fly, my anguished sigh, and comfort the wary mind of the unhappy prisoner. Like a breath of hope fly to his cell, awaken him to the memories, to the dreams of love."

In the Washington National Opera performance, Leonora, sung by the Bulgarian soprano Krassimira Stoyanova, really came alive with this aria.

As Friedrich Schiller writes, the feeling of the sublime is a combination of woefulness and joyfulness, which results from the decision to embrace a moral principle even in the face of great misfortune, including death. The capacity to make such a decision establishes that man has within him a moral capacity independent of all sensuous emotions, and that this moral capacity defines his true nature as a human being.

In this opera, where the dynamic of revenge leading ineluctably to death otherwise dominates the action, the sublime love of Leonora for Manrico, and his for her, proves that man's free will is not destroyed even in the face of death. Both Leonora and Manrico say at various moments that they are willing to die for their love. In Act I, in "Di tale amor che dirsi," Leonora sings: "Either I shall live for him, or for him I shall die!" And in Act IV, she sings: "Rather than live as another's, I chose to die as your love!"

Manrico (played by the American tenor, Carl Tanner), after referencing "sublime love," sings in Act III, Scene 2,

"Ah, si, ben mio": "Ah, yes, my love, in being yours, in knowing that you are mine, my soul will now be braver, my arm stronger. But if on my page of fate it be written that I must die on the enemy's sword, with my last breath my thoughts will be of you; for me, death will only mean that I await you in heaven."

The Beast-Man

Were it not for this quality of sublime love as portrayed through the development of the role of Leonora, the action of the opera would merely culminate in death. The civil war is not waged by Urgel and the forces led by Manrico on the basis of an explicitly republican conception. Neither Manrico nor Leonora dies fighting for political freedom. The main dynamic of the opera is triggered by the superstitious belief that the old gypsy mother of Azucena bewitched Garzia. Even though Azucena has told him that he is the Count's brother, Manrico does not use this knowledge to thwart what is otherwise inevitable.

Azucena, played beautifully by the Russian mezzo-soprano Elena Manistina, driven by her mother's desire for revenge and love for her adopted son, Manrico, achieves the former only

through the sacrifice of the latter. She too could have told Count di Luna that Manrico was his brother, and thus eliminated the Count's prime reason for seeking revenge.

The Count himself, played by the Italian baritone Roberto Servile, is a true ego-driven Beast-man, consumed by "jealous love," "injured pride," and "seething rage." In Act II, Scene 2, when the Count plots to abduct Leonora before she enters a convent, he sings: "Not even a rival God would oppose my love. Not even a God, my lady, can take you from me now!" When, in Act IV, Leonora asks him to show mercy for Manrico, he sings: "My only God is vengeance." And when he contemplates the execution of Manrico, like the Grand Inquisitor he sings: "Ah, if only I might find some crueler death for the rogue! In a thousand fearful agonies, make hundredfold his death."

But at the end of the opera, it is the Count himself who suffers the "cruellest death" of all. As Schiller writes in his *Philosophical Letters*: "Love is the co-governing citizen of a blossoming free state, egoism a despot in a ravaged creation."

—William F. Wertz, Jr.

'Rigoletto': Verdi's Education of the Emotions

On March 11, 1851, the composer Giuseppe Verdi presented his new opera *Rigoletto* to an astonished audience in Venice, Italy. This musical masterpiece, which the composer himself described as "revolutionary," continues to be one of the most often performed operas in the world, and rightly so.

In *Rigoletto*, Verdi created a new conception of operatic construction, in which his masterful use of poetic and musical irony succeeded in achieving what Friedrich Schiller called for in his essay on "Theater as a Moral Institution"—the transformation of the audience, who leave the theater in an elevated state of mind, reflecting on the off-stage implications of the action presented on-stage.

In October 2004, Detroit's Michigan Opera Theater (MOT) attempted a credible performance of this Verdi master-



Disguised as a student, the Duke (Scott Piper) approaches Gilda (Rosana Lamosa).

Michigan Opera Theater/Photos by Christopher Barbeau