

RIGOLETTO FRAMED BY ITALIAN ROMANTICISM

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“Ch’hai du nuovo, buffon?”¹ Actually, nothing is new for him. He is as he has always been, namely, in a very basic sense a court jester by profession, a doting father in his private life. There are, of course, many attenuating factors that contribute to his becoming a tragic figure by the end of the opera, not least a nasty streak in his character that allies him with the villainous, together with an extraordinary capacity for profound suffering that brings him on a par with the heroic. So, for the purposes of this essay, the question should really be re-phrased, and one could ask: what is new about, rather than for, both Rigoletto and *Rigoletto*?

In Search of Romanticism

Romanticism has always intimated a unique association between thinkers and the people, the nation at large. Put differently, it is a special mirror image of ‘democracy’ in the broadest meaning of that term, one that can be located in literature.... In this democratised meaning, romanticism can never be found in Italy.²

The works of the nineteenth-century thinker Antonio Gramsci might come across, at best, as a strange point of departure from which to embark on an investigation, as it were, of the querulous subject of Verdi’s association with the *Risorgimento* and his eventual depiction of Rigoletto as a contemporary paradigm for the late-Romantic hero. This is so because Gramsci was openly averse to opera and throughout his life he never seemed to find anything kind to write about Verdi. That said, however, he was visionary with regard to a comprehensive engagement with culture’s place in Italy of the nineteenth century, a vision made even clearer for its animosity towards Verdi.

Gramsci’s philosophy made a case for preferring a type of popular literature that would ask for an introspective and contemplative style of absorption by the individual reader, a style that was distinctly opposed to the collective experience of a raucous audience in an opera house. He therefore saw the popular appeal that opera carried in his time as both a replacement and an obstacle to the progress of his preferred mode of Romantic feeling. He was intensely suspicious of the operatic genre. This was partly because he could sense an association between the operatic aria, with its grand gesture and hyperbolic rhetoric, and the oratorical style that he invariably acquainted with fascist speeches. In his *Prison Notebooks*, he speaks sadly of the operatic taste of what he calls “the popular man”, who in perusing poetry is only looking out for childish rhymes and “hammering of metrical stresses” that are generally found in popular oratory.³ Gramsci asserts that this desire to be carried away by the hyperbolic (by which he understands ‘the operatic’) countered forcibly the attempt to form what he labels a “national-popular”⁴ type of literary production, and which was also detrimental to the creation of a genuine popular Romanticism. This diagnosis, if it can be called that, especially the argument Gramsci makes about connecting the Romantic with the national, could articulate the more complex matter of Verdi’s own position as a composer with Romantic ideals, as it crosses the boundaries with the *Risorgimento*. It needs to be said that an important strand of critical scholarship has claimed Verdi as a champion of both popular style and a more sophisticated and refined high-art fashion that was prevalent in Northern Europe. More recent critical debate finds the first of these two points of view to be largely unjustified.

It can be said without fear or prejudice that Italy did not go through a volcanic Romantic movement as England or Germany had done. However, it did engage in passionate debates about Romanticism. Perhaps the more volatile discussions occurred between 1816 and 1818, in reaction to Madame de Staël’s appeal to introduce to Italian writers as well as readers translations of works by important German and French writers. This, argued de Staël, would help widen the cultural horizons of Italy. These disputes were nothing if not polemical, and they concentrated on issues that were being hotly debated in both France and Germany, namely, the place that literature, as an imitation of life, should have in the world, the implementation and influence of mythology, and the relevance and significance of the Aristotelian dramatic unities.

That said, however, the debates that took place in Italy differed from those heating up elsewhere in two important ways. In the first place, those writing and publishing pamphlets were clearly preoccupied with matters of national selfhood, an attitude that could be gleaned from tropes they brought as examples. Together with the surmised references they made to the Romantic pantheon comprised of Goethe, the Schlegel brothers, and more – a range of Romantic ideologists invariably with north Europe – they also quote as paradigms their own national Dante, Petrarca, Ariosto, sublimating these great poets to any honorary Romantic status, as it were. These apologists also betray a somewhat bewildering disposition

towards certain qualities of Classicism, a desire to walk the fine line between ancient styles and more contemporary ones. This matter becomes even more significant in a discussion about operatic Romanticism. Therefore, while one of Italy's greatest writers, Alessandro Manzoni, debated in favour of discarding plots inspired by mythology and engaging instead with subject matter gleaned from everyday life (eventually leading to *verismo* in opera), he remained neutral with regard to the Romantic belief in creative originality, permitting the notion that Classical tropes could in fact be attractive. In 1823, he wrote that he wished to disengage from Romantic dogma, asserting that Romanticism "was a heated topic some time ago, but nowadays it is forgotten".⁵

Juxtaposed against the output of Verdi, the very notion that Romanticism was outdated by 1823 seems at best bewildering. However, a similar idea is implied in a work that is often seen as arguably the model for establishing a Romantic cycle in the production of opera in Italy. This is *Filosofia della Musica* (1836) by Giuseppe Mazzini. Mazzini regarded the term Romanticism in largely a degrading way, acquainting it with self-reliance and the poet's personal anguished attempt to flee from tradition. When he places a dubious honour on Gioachino Rossini, heaping praise on him for having "achieved in music what romanticism achieved in literature", he was furthering the case for an type of reform in opera that would fly in the face of Romanticism, more particularly it would move beyond Italian opera's penchant for *bel canto* and vocal embellishment – characteristics that Mazzini regarded as embodiments of excess, individualism, and total lack of social awareness.⁶ Mazzini would advise artists and composers to substitute these individualistic traits with a novel musical style that would depend on such strategies as giving a fuller role to choruses, enriching the musical texture with more colour, and presenting more accurate characterisation. This latter idea would be put into practice by creating leitmotifs that would invariably be associated with leading characters, an idea that would be developed to its fullest capacity by Wagner a few decades later.

In retrospect, Mazzini's advice to transcend the boundaries of Romanticism were premature, not least because the brand is usually attached to such composers as Weber or Berlioz. Arguably, the opera produced in the first decades of the nineteenth century in Italy is not made of the same experimental qualities, formally or harmonically, of its French or German counterparts. Italian composers regarded Romanticism with a less formal doctrinal attitude than either the French or Germans did, seeking elements of it extremely selectively in individual works rather than in the collective output of their times.

Rossini implemented the Ossianic style in his rarely performed but ravishing *La donna del lago* (1816), and Bellini endowed his *Il Pirata* of 1827 with more than a gentle dose of gothic elements. Donizetti managed to shock the censorship board in Milan by reworking Victor Hugo in his *Lucrezia Borgia* six years later.⁷ Yet, these isolated experiments were not emulated. All three composers maintained a largely conservative style which depended on predictable structures for their arias coupled with vocal pyrotechnics.

Verdi was also tempted to be more adventurous, following Romantic intuition in his early career. This is clear in his *Ernani*, first performed in 1844, a Victor Hugo story about a hero of French Romanticism, and also Shakespeare in *Macbeth* which was first produced in 1847.⁸ He was also attracted by Byron with his setting of *I due Foscari* of 1844. Here, ironically, Verdi heeded the advice meted out by Mazzini by experimenting with a cycle of leitmotifs in the arias he wrote for the leading singers. Yet, these examples are exceptions. Verdi resorts to musical strategies that stress a sort of Classical sense of equilibrium and contrast, which overpower any Romantic blurring of structure. This may be because in his early works Verdi seems to be keen on topics that concentrate on ideological, religious and political conflict between opposing national factions. These are forums in which direct confrontation is spelt out, demanding articulate, robust musical engagement, almost pleading for symbolical decoding with regard to Austrian sovereignty over Italy.

Examples abound. His 1842 masterpiece, *Nabucco*, together with *I Lombardi alla prima Crociata* a year later both deal with bitter religious dispute. The similarly bellicose *Giovanna d'Arca* of 1845, and in 1846 *Attila* foreground Boadicean women warriors, brandishing swords and expelling invaders in a style that recalls Marianne, the French emblem of nationhood.⁹ It could arguably be ascertained that *La Battaglia di Legnano* of 1849 is the only Verdi opera composed with the specific purpose of celebrating victories connected with the *Risorgimento*.¹⁰ Here, he steers away from explicit historical statement, concentrating rather on the personal torments of his leading singers, irrevocably chained in the conventional love triangle.

Verdi expressed diverse political opinions in private, fluctuating between the pitfalls that inevitably come with an extraordinary career and those relating to the anguish brought about by aspirations for Italian nationhood. At the start of his career, he was able to cater to Austrian whims when that served him well professionally. Suffice it to say that in 1836 he wrote a cantata in honour of the new Austrian Emperor, Ferdinand I, apart from inserting a dedication to Austrian duchesses who were living in Milano on the frontispiece of two early works. Verdi's most explicit advocacy of the *Risorgimento* can perhaps be identified in the early months of 1848. This coincided with the expulsion of the Austrians from Lombardia and the Veneto and the fleeing of Pope from Rome. This left the city ready to be governed, albeit briefly, but a trio of rebels amongst whom was Mazzini. Verdi was in Paris when all this happened, and he faced significant inconvenience in going back to Milan when news of this rebellion reached him there. He expressed his elation in words that would eventually fit easily in a Pieve libretto:

Honour to these heroes! Honour to all Italy, which is now truly great! The hour of her liberation is here; be sure of that. The people want it: and when the people want it, there is no absolute power that can resist.... You talk to me about music! What has got into you? Do you think that I want to bother myself now with notes, with sounds? There cannot be any music welcome to Italian ears in 1848 except the music of the cannon! I would not write a note for all the money in the world: I would feel immense remorse at using up music-paper, which is so good for making shells.¹¹

Instead of manning the barricades or shoving manuscripts down the throats of rifles, instead Verdi wrote the *Inno popolare* on a well-known poem by Mazzini. Verdi sent the finished work to Mazzini, writing that he had done his best to "be as endearing to the people and as easy as it was possible for me to be". He also desired that the *Inno* would "be sung on the fields of Lombardia accompanied to the music emanating from the cannon".¹² Sadly, this did not happen, for by the time Mazzini had received the manuscript the Austrians had got help from France. The Italian rebels retreated, hardly needing a new anthem to propel them forward in their attempt to overthrow foreign rule.

This reversal of fortune taught the *Risorgimento* rebels a lesson. They became more practical and logical, entering into an alliance with Vittorio Emanuele II. This was a move that undermined the popular rebellion. It was natural that opting for compromise and consensus disenchanting the more diehard rebels. However, it is more likely to be accident rather than design that made Verdi disengage himself from politically-based topics at around this time, opting rather for domestic subject matter that inspired him in French drama. While the composer surely experienced political disappointment himself, his own private situation, namely, increasing income and professional security, together with living in Paris for more extended periods of time, were in all probability more relevant. In fact, throughout the 1850s he only composed one opera which depicts a repressed country struggling against a foreign despotic ruler. This is *Les vêpres siciliennes* of 1855. Even so, the opera resists deciding on any one outcome and takes no side in the dispute. It ends by having everyone killed in an outrageous massacre in the opera's final moments.¹³ More than ten years later, *Don Carlos* reconfigures his own youthful patriotic enthusiasm through the work's weary but likeable depiction of Marquis de Posa's utopian aspirations to transform the world.¹⁴

Yet, there is infinitely more than Posa that contributes to the political climate in *Don Carlos*. This opera brings together a collective repertoire of ideas that Verdi harboured towards politics: it is literally a polyphonic metalanguage that acts as Verdi's own personal statement. Every leading singer in the opera, at one point or another, articulates political opinion, and all are given equal prominence musically and dramatically so that no one opinion emerges more powerful than another.

However, meanwhile, Verdi had been busy composing and he gave to the world what are arguably musical gems in the shape of *Rigoletto*, *Il Trovatore*, and *La Traviata*. These three operas, albeit different from each other, share a common feature: moving away from his concern about an oppressed nation, Verdi now focuses on the oppression of the individual.

From *Le roi s'amuse* to *Rigoletto*

I find particularly beautiful the representation of the character, externally deformed and ridiculous and internally impassioned and full of love.¹⁵

Verdi entered into an excited correspondence with his librettist Francesco Maria Piave on 28 April 1850, writing that "The subject is grand, immense, and there is a character in it who is one of the greatest

creations that the theatre of all countries and all time can boast. The subject is *Le roi s'amuse* and the character I'm speaking about is Triboulet¹⁶. The famous Venetian *Teatro La Fenice* had commissioned the composer to write a new opera and the intriguing subject of Hugo's hunchback, Triboulet, had engaged his creative imagination.

Together with many others, Verdi was acquainted with the novels of the famous French playwright Victor Hugo who had created arguably the most well-known hunchback in fiction, namely, Quasimodo. In fact, Verdi had already refashioned Hugo's drama, *Hernani* into his opera *Ernani* which had been given its first performance again at *La Fenice* in March 1844.

In that same year Verdi had spoken of his curiosity in yet another Hugo work, this time *Le roi s'amuse* which had been published in 1832. In fact, he had compiled a list in his *Copialettere* of potential topics for opera transcription, and this play featured amongst a host of other subjects.¹⁷ Verdi had first spoken to the directors of another famous opera house, this time the *Teatro San Carlo* of Naples, about a possible production of his new opera based on Hugo's play. This theatre had as its resident librettist the very famous Salvatore Cammarano with whom Verdi had collaborated in his early operas, most notably, *La Battaglia di Legnano* and *Luisa Milleri*, both produced in 1849. These two operas, together with *Alzira* of 1845, were all produced at the *Teatro Argentina* in Rome.

We should now consider the new opera libretto. This opera will be produced immediately after Easter. For things to run smoothly, Cammarano should be able to give me the first drafts by the time *Luisa Miller* will be premiered, at the end of October. I will depart from Naples and it would be ideal for me to have the libretto with me so that I will start writing the opera. Please recommend to Cammarano the subject of Hugo's *Le roi s'amuse*.¹⁸

However, Verdi had a change of heart and managed to work his way out of his obligations towards the *San Carlo*. It is not exactly known why Verdi released himself from the commission. However, allegedly, Cammarano was not happy about potential matters concerning censorship of the topic. Also, Verdi had heeded the counsel of a close acquaintance, Cesare De Sanctis, who had warned him of the enormous difficulties the composer would face were he to produce an opera dealing with the subject of a hunchback and a depraved King in Naples.¹⁹ Whatever the reasons for this change of mind and heart, Verdi was thankful at being released from his contract. He put pen to paper about the matter to Tito Ricordi, his publisher, in a letter dated 31 January 1850:

As for the other opera I was to write for Naples, I luckily found a way to free myself, disgusted by the infamous behaviour of the management and direction; nevertheless, since we had already decided on the subject with Cammarano, I will write it all the same and, I hope, it will be finished in four or five months. I will give this score willingly to you, leaving you the charge of having it staged by the end of November of this year [1850], in one of the major theatres of Italy.²⁰

Despite the fact that this letter attests to Verdi's desire to pursue working with his librettist, by the end of February of the same year the correspondence about the subject ceases. Instead, the two men started discussing and drafting Shakespeare's *King Lear*. However, Verdi did not let go of Hugo's text, and by the end of April 1850 he had secured a new commission from *La Fenice*. Immediately, he started speaking about the project with the librettist Piave.

Verdi had known Piave as a most efficient proof reader for well-known publishers in Milano. Despite the fact that the future librettist had also engaged with writing poetry in his free time, he had never pursued this activity professionally until he met Verdi.²¹ However, he had drafted a libretto based on yet a different Hugo drama, this time *Cromwell*. In fact, one of the directors at *La Fenice*, had brought this fact to Verdi's attention in 1843, asking the composer whether he was interested in setting it to music. Verdi replied immediately, writing that

Cromwell, from what I know of it historically, is a most interesting topic but, as with everything else, it all depends on how one treats it. I do not have the pleasure of being acquainted with Mr Piave, but if you convince me that he is an excellent poet who also has knowledge of music and theatre, then, I humbly ask you to forward him the letter enclosed with mine.²²

The collaboration between Piave and Verdi materialised with *Ernani* rather than with *Cromwell*. *Ernani* premiered at *La Fenice* in 1844. This heralded the first of no fewer than ten productions that Verdi and Piave worked on together. It was during their sixth project, namely, *Stiffelio* of 1850 that the topic

of Hugo's *Le roi s'amuse* was brought up again. After its first production on 22 November 1832 at the famous *Comédie Française*, Hugo's play was censored and banned from being produced again in France. Hugo was accused of portraying "François I of France as a depraved, lustful monarch whose court-clown, Triboulet, helps and encourages him in his debauchery".²³

Therefore, it was with some trepidation that Verdi corresponded with Piave at the end of April 1850, proposing the notorious topic for consideration. In the course of that same correspondence, Verdi demanded that Piave gets authorisation from the censors with regard to Hugo's drama as a libretto. He wrote: "The moment you get this letter, get moving. Look all over the city and seek someone who can influence the censors to sanction Hugo's *Le roi s'amuse* for our libretto. Hurry and don't sleep."²⁴ Piave guaranteed that the censors would approve the subject. However, Verdi was still worried about getting permission and he wrote to Piave again on 224 August of the same year:

I am now seriously suspecting that permission will not be granted to use *Le roi s'amuse*, and this will be a source of great embarrassment for my career. Piave reassured me that permission would be forthcoming and, believing him, I have already spent a great deal of time studying the drama and thinking deeply about it, together with having ideas forming in my mind, orchestral colour, and so much else. In fact, I can safely say that the more unpleasant and laborious part of the job is already done.²⁵

Yet, despite his serious apprehensions, Verdi did not stop composing his opera while still waiting for permission to use the very libretto he was working on. He also sent warning missives to Piave:

At this point do not allow yourself to make any alterations to the libretto: don't change anything in the characters, the topic, the circumstances or the situations. If it is only a word or two then you may change [...]. However, ensure that you do not touch the episode where Francesco [the Duke] enters the home of Saltabadiil [Sparafucile]. If you remove this, the drama goes. I also ask you to leave the scene of the sack containing Gilda's dead body. This will not concern the police at all for it is not their business to deal with dramatic effect.²⁶

However, not all went well. Verdi was beyond consoling when news of the prohibition of his libretto reached him on 1 December 1850. He put the blame on Piave. In the meantime, he had changed the title from *Le roi s'amuse* to *La maledizione*.

This has made me distraught and thrown me in despair. It is all too late for me to change and focus on another libretto. Time is too short and it would be impossible for me to have another opera ready for the winter season.²⁷

Piave desperately tried to make amends to find some way out of the crisis. Changing the title from *La maledizione* was one option; somehow the new one sounded less derogatory. He also decided to remove a few elements from the libretto that could have come across as objectionable. Among these elements there were the deformity of the court jester and the sack that held the dead girl's body at the end. Verdi was incandescent with rage. "I don't have time to waste on this new version. I have read through it quickly and evidence shows that, drafted in this new way it has lost all character and relevance. The situations lack passion and are uninspiring".²⁸ At the end, the composer only conceded that both the location and the names of the characters could, actually, be altered. This would appease the censors for as long as the despot remained in power the libretto would never be sanctioned in its original version. Without this imposition, the magnificent scene of Monterone's curse, which was so potent and intense in the original draft, would lose its impetus and dramatic relevance. Also, Verdi insisted that the ruler (whether Prince or Duke it did not really matter) must be a philanderer. Otherwise, the plot would greatly weaken for the jester would have no reason to keep his daughter away from the lecherous eyes of the ruler. Verdi was also adamant about keeping the tavern as the location where the ruler's meeting with his lover takes place, and was uncompromising about using the sack to hide Rigoletto's dying daughter in.

I am also aware that they want to refrain from presenting the jester as an ugly and deformed man. Why? They will say how can a hunchback sing? I will say, why cannot a hunchback sing? I find it very humane and beautiful to present this character who, to all appearances is deformed and silly but who is internally as human as you and I and equally full of love and passion. I want him like this for all these virtues and if these are removed I will not set the libretto to music.²⁹

In a last desperate attempt to save the project, Piave met Guglielmo Brenna (the influential person who could weigh in with the censors), and took him to Busseto to arrange a meeting with Verdi. After much deliberation, the trio came up with a draft agreement which they hoped would be sanctioned by the

censors. In this agreement, the three men wrote that the action and location of the opera would be changed from the Court of France to an independent Duchy somewhere else. Also, although the names of the characters and the period in which the story occurs could be altered, the original qualities pertaining to the character of Hugo's drama would be kept. They also agreed that the episode which sees the Duke using the key to gain access to the kidnapped Gilda would be substituted by another scene. "Te Deum laudamus! Gloria in excelsis Deo! Alleluia, Alleluia! At last yesterday at three in the afternoon our *Rigoletto* reached the directors safe and sound, with no broken bones and no amputations".³⁰ With these words, Piave wrote to Verdi on 26 January 1851, declaring victory over the censors. Verdi was elated. At long last, the deformed yet loving jester which had drew him to Hugo's play in the first place would finally make it to the stage.

The French Alliance

So, ironically, the literary source for one of Verdi's best-loved operas, *Rigoletto*, is one of Hugo's less famous dramas, *Le roi s'amuse*. Hugo sets the plot outside the French royal court and the main character is an anonymous aristocrat rather than the glorious François I. Still, the play was censored and banned. Hugo made an impassioned appeal against the ban, which was followed by an endless argument with the authorities who justified the censorship on account of the immorality the play allegedly engaged with.

The context in which this dispute took place was deliberately politicised. The July Revolution occurred in 1830, just under two years before the first production of Hugo's play. It was still very fresh in people's minds and it had, after all, broken out over matters concerning state censorship. Odilon Barrot, a fledgling orator who would become famous during the 1848 uprising, delivered a speech at the appeal hearing. His words were fired up with passionate rhetoric, defending the play to the utmost of his abilities. Although the appeal was not overturned in Hugo's favour³¹ he was given permission to publish the text. Hugo took advantage of the situation, and together with the text he also published an elaborate Preface that dealt with political injustice his career and work were subjected to as well as with aesthetic matters. In this Preface, very cleverly Hugo juxtaposes the randomness of court life in the sixteenth century and brutal censorship in the 1830s. This enabled him to recount an identical story in the reception of the drama as the drama itself. It is a brilliant piece of intertextuality.

In much the same way, the censorship of *Rigoletto* is relevant for a few reasons. Firstly, it gives us an insight into Verdi's working strategies. In correspondence available to us, he gives detailed descriptions of his progress in writing the opera, making it extremely clear that the manner and method of conceiving it was already in his mind prior to him writing it down. Secondly, in his disputes with the Venetian counsel it is manifest what was dramatically relevant and important to him. Therefore, it is implicit what he considered less vital and, therefore, could be renounced to expediency. Thirdly, and not least intriguingly, this correspondence makes available important material to a diversity of critics to unearth in these working strategies and in the principled dispute the facts that eventually led to the opera's undiluted success.

Monumental creativity coupled with artistic obduracy are the hallmarks of irrefutable genius. The trials and tribulations that the opera underwent enabled Verdi to refine *Rigoletto* to its pure essence. Verdi makes it clear that the quality of that refined essence was the curse. Here, he is on a par with Hugo. "From this flows the entire play. The real dramatic theme is Saint-Vallier's curse".³² Hugo's Preface to his play was summarised by Verdi in a letter and dispatched to Piave. In it, Verdi states that the old man's anathema is replete with more than a poetic justice. Hugo is claiming that his play is neither abusive nor vituperative; rather, it is completely moral. When the jester is reprimanded, it is not only by the theatre's logic but also by the retributive hand of Providence. Yet, whether the curse is understood as a post-revolutionary signifier for divine intervention is hardly the point. What matters here is that it is as equally important to Hugo's play as it is to Verdi's opera, and Hugo's apologia is more an effort on his part to relocate the foundation of his tragedy from remorseless irony to the more acceptable domain of uncompromising justice. In much the same way, Verdi's reading and understanding of the story is not only of his typically flawless dramatic instinct that reminds one of Shakespeare, but, rather, a pre-emptive justification that has its foundation in Hugo's.

In critical writings about *Rigoletto*, in instances where the motif is endowed with a similar productive status, it can be regarded as moral as the composer himself stressed the curse was. It is a moral that does not only concern the tale but is also relevant to the composer's creative process as well. *Rigoletto* seems unable to discard Monterone's curse off his mind. It could be read as symbolical of Verdi's accurate

intuition in issues relating to dramatic and orchestral colour. Verdi himself attests that he would feel inexplicably inspired, a thought-process fully-structured and unchangeable in its inception. This would set the key and tone, as it were, for the whole work under construction. In other words, it is the spark of genius that illuminates and enlightens his mind. In the sense that he finds himself hostage to anguish that has its own preordained moral and musical character, something quite similar occurs to the jester when he leaves the Duke's palace and heads home in the first Act. However, if Verdi means this when he claims that the whole dramatic moment is encapsulated in that crucial moment, then he appears to be implying that his inspiration and the idea of inspiration are interchangeable. Aesthetic statements and protective rhetoric are invariably interwoven throughout Verdi's correspondence, and debates about this particular opera make continuous reference to these letters. This almost propels the reader towards feeling a sense of inevitability, namely, that musical form, dramatic structure, and moral perspective are all seemingly preordained by Verdi's own creative genius. Naturally, the reader is free to disagree. Perhaps it does not quite work like that and "Quel vecchio maledivami!" is not actually the point of reference that makes the opera successful, as Verdi claims it was. Some critics persuasively argue that the motif of this curse blends seamlessly with other motifs in the opera after the first Act, and this happens not because the curse has been realised. Neither is it because it is developing into an even more severe retribution, but because in the latter stages of composing it simply becomes a dissolving rather than a resolving influence. Whichever way one opts to understand it, morally or musically, the curse is more effective as a metaphor for the composer's compositional methods when it comes to setting drama to music than it does as the keynote to our engaging with *Rigoletto*.

The Music

Hugo's play is both compelling and profound. Set to music by Verdi has placed it among his best-loved operas. It was given its first performance in March of 1851, which roughly coincided with the composer's middle years, both of his life and of his operatic output. Perhaps *Nabucco* remains among the most popular in Verdi's repertory; however, *Rigoletto* never dropped out of the entire operatic canon and its popularity has never waned.³³ It was immediately appealing even in Verdi's own time, and since then critics and opera lovers alike have referred to a wonderful trilogy, namely, *Rigoletto*, *Il trovatore* (1853), and *La traviata*, the last two both premiered in 1853. It appears that, consciously or otherwise, Verdi was attracted to librettos that spoke of a 'fallen' woman – a notion that is prevalent in his trilogy. It is not easy to forget Violetta Valéry in *La Traviata*, or dismiss with impunity the way men regarded and treated women in *Il trovatore*. This theme also has its precursors: one recalls Lida in *La Battaglia di Legnano* and Lina in *Stiffelio*; there is also Luisa in *Luisa Miller*. All these women are victims of man's sovereignty; when they are not, death visits them brutally even if ultimately it is a relief from the tyranny of life. At the end of *Rigoletto*, another very young woman, Gilda, becomes victim of sexual naïveté; she is killed by Sparafucile in an ironic twist that becomes all but unbearable. The conventions of tragedy ask for the senseless death of an innocent person, generally a woman. Here, one thinks of Desdemona, Cordelia, Juliet, and more. Gilda is another victim. Her inherent innocence is culturally out of tune with the callousness, manipulation, and evil rife at the court of Mantua.³⁴ Numerous surveys have been carried out on modern music history. It has been ascertained that *Rigoletto* heralds Verdi's initiation into maturity. It marks a novel refined blend of his typical musical vigour with a more calculated structural innovation, totally inspired by theatrical setting. In fact, it is celebrated in the *Bollettino dell'Istituto di studi verdiani*, with critics bestowing lavish praise on it. It was also the first work that found its way into the new critical edition of Verdi operas.³⁵ However, what elements or qualities make it such a success? "Ch'hai di nuovo, buffon?"

Despite its immediate success, *Rigoletto* has been the most vulnerable of operas by Verdi to subtractive appraisals. For instance, a critical analysis by Wolfgang Osthoff shows that structurally the plot is formed of a sequence of mirror images, each projecting a clash of well-articulated contrasts and comparisons.³⁶ The duet between Rigoletto and Sparafucile in the first Act all but convinces Rigoletto that, essentially, little separates the simple court jester from the diabolical killer.³⁷ Perhaps being cued in by Rigoletto's own "pari siamo" ("we are equal"), the critic continues to argue that characters in *Rigoletto* seem to appear in stark black or white, identities that embody evil or good. We sympathise with Osthoff to some extent. For instance, the name of the villain of the piece means 'to shoot a gun' – Sparafucile. When he, in fact, asks Rigoletto to supply him with the name of his victim, the jester makes reference to both the Duke and himself as 'Transgression' and 'Retribution' respectively.³⁸ The element of contrast that mark this libretto is no better articulated in the depiction of father and daughter, the former labelled "difforme" and obsessed, the latter beautiful and innocent. The irony of this contrast does not escape Rigoletto, especially after Gilda's intimate meeting with the Duke. Rigoletto exclaims: "Ch'ella potesse ascendere /

Quanto caduto er'io ... / Ah presso del patibolo / Bisogna ben l'altare!"³⁹ In a plot characterised by moral depravity, the innocent victim is destroyed not by accident but by design, namely, through her essential identity. Neither reconciliation nor compromise are possible: the tragedy is unavoidable.

Structuralist and post-structuralist poetics complement this point of view about the plot and its musical setting. Both peel the form of the opera down to its essential outline. A good number comprehensive analyses have been made of *Rigoletto*, especially with regard to Verdi's use of key relationships and use of tone. Perhaps among the more detailed scrutinies is that engaged with by Marin Chusid. He rightly argues that the main key of the opera hovers around Db, with significant excursions to C Major, giving an aura of tragic anticipation most particularly in the first Act. This is followed by more deviations, most notably to the key of D Major, most particularly at the point where the tragedy inexorably takes hold, announced by the ferocious storm halfway through the third Act.⁴⁰ The basic tenet of Chusid's argument is that the tonal progression and organisation of *Rigoletto* turns methodically and consistently on chromatic relationships to the original key, both from below as well as from above. In his critical discussion, David Lawson is in agreement with Chusid with regard to the centrality of Db. However, he argues that D is the only other key that complements the original.⁴¹ In yet another study, Marcello Conati amalgamates the ideas of the previous two critics, and introduces yet another one, namely, the tonal relationship of Gb which acts as a counter to the dramatic power of C. Rigoletto favours the key of C, most notably in his dramatic solo "Corteggiani, vil razza dannata". Harmonically, this key is unacquainted with that of Gb, which tellingly corresponds with the Duke of Mantua in his "Parmi veder le lagrime" at the start of the second Act. This could be read in the light of the court jester being both socially and emotionally far removed from the Duke.

Andante sostenuto (♩ = 66)

The musical score is presented in two systems. The first system shows the vocal line and piano accompaniment. The piano part includes a 'Brass' section with dynamics 'p' and 'ppp'. The second system continues the vocal and piano parts, with dynamics 'p' and 'pp'.

Example 1

As the monologue of Rigoletto below shows, this quality is inextricably tied to a crucial moment in the first Act. This is when a courtier, Monterone, disrupts the revelry going on in the palace and makes a public scene admonishing the Duke of Mantua for ravishing his daughter. Rigoletto derides Monterone, prompting the latter to heap a curse on the jester with the words: "E tu, serpente, tu che d'un padre ridi al dolore / Sii maledetto!"

RIGOLETTO

Ah! la ma-le-di-zio - - - - - nel

pp

Example 2

Musically and emotionally there is concordance: whenever Rigoletto remembers Monterone's curse he sings softly as if the memory of that moment is too painful to articulate. The music too undergoes a moment of recollection. Thus, the musical accompaniment depicts both the curse and the court jester's introspective mood. However, brooding and predestination apart, the listener also knows that despite the fact that the curse is hurled at Rigoletto for mocking Monterone, the gang of courtiers which also include Marullo and Conte Ceprano have already come together and planned to play an unsavoury trick on Rigoletto. This happens well before Monterone creates a moment of dramatic intensity with his curse. It transpires that what starts off as a joke in very bad taste becomes ultimately a prank that goes horribly wrong. Yet, for the many enthusiasts who are themselves bent on adhering to superstition, what is known as the 'curse motif' articulates more than just a mere repetition of a line or two: it embraces the dramatic quality of the entire work. Verdi had stressed since the very beginning that without the curse the subject matter and the plot cannot hold. In fact, in one of his letters to Pavia, he writes that "Tutto il soggetto è in quella maledizione".⁴⁴ One remembers that halfway through working out a compromise with the censors, the libretto had been re-titled 'La maledizione'. Reiterating the motif identified in example I above can lead to understanding it as a leitmotif or a meta-statement on the opera itself. As the curse that Monterone heaps on Rigoletto comes to fruition and is realised, the majestic opening becomes an ending, and the theme itself becomes increasingly part and parcel of the encroaching musical language. With each reiteration, this leitmotif gains an emotional intensity and a visionary power. It opens up a new seam, and adds a fresh dimension and a deeper perspective to both the music and the text.

RIGOLETTO (*cruciamo*)

Ah! ah! ah! la ma-le-di-zio - - - - - nel

pp

ff (Tutti)

Example 3

RIGOLETTO

Ah! la ma-le - di - zio - - - - - ne!

pp

Example 4

From a harmonic point of view, this leitmotif also becomes more unobtrusive. The quaint German sixth in the first example above cedes to the diminished chord in the second example, one with which the listener would be better acquainted. This metaphor cannot by itself justify the productive status that Verdi gives the anathema. As any paraphrase of the plot reveals, it is actually possible to tell the story without even making a fleeting mention of Monterone or his curse at all. The essential points are all given in the first few scenes. On most evenings, the evil Sparafucile lingers around Rigoletto's house. There he spies the Duke of Mantua who for many months had also been visiting the location regularly. In his slyness, Sparafucile also senses that the Duke is sexually interested in Gilda. Despite his over-rehearsed obsession with the safety of his daughter Gilda, Rigoletto is not aware of these two loitering around his home. His self-absorption blinds him to this fact.⁴⁵ Given that he has made many enemies at court and that he is protecting a priceless human being at home, the odds are against him the moment the opera starts. Therefore, Monterone's spooky and over-dramatic disruption of the feast and the pronouncement of the curse on Rigoletto helps in over-determining the following tragedy.

Verdi's own words and correspondence helps secure for *Rigoletto* a special place in the composer's repertoire. Added to this there is also numerous critical discussions and commentaries that helped consolidate the opera's place as a triumphant force in the history of the genre. Within its historical and cultural context, much of the novelty emerges from a title role that exposes a hitherto unheard-of type of hero, namely, a deformed, complicated, obsessed, and almost totally unsympathetic protagonist at the start of the opera until grief overwhelms him and he shows his tremendous humanity midway through Act II. When this cathartic moment descends on him, the tidal wave of pleading and tears has a reforming effect on the deformity not of his physique but of his inner vindictiveness. However, until that point, like Richard III, Rigoletto feels "curtailed of this fair proportion, / Cheated of feature by dissembling nature, / Deformed, unfinished".⁴⁶ This makes him the ideal buffoon; yet, there is sinister innuendo lurking beneath the outward deformity, one that triggers an inner disfigurement as well. In an honest monologue, reminiscent of those delivered by evil characters in a Shakespearean tragedy, Rigoletto admits that he is envious, unkind, and resentful. This occurs early in Act I. Yet, again like Richard III, his paradoxically beautiful ugliness enables him to come across as a more effective protagonist. In fact, Victor Hugo, in yet another important Preface, asserts that ugliness was beauty.⁴⁷ Contradictions and antithetical representation were even more glaring in Italian opera of the 1850s, when one remembers that Hugo's radical and radicalising statements were made in the 1830s. Alessandro Roccatagliata sums it up as follows, namely, "such vile things had never before been seen at the opera".⁴⁸

What problematizes Rigoletto's status as a tragic hero are his dubious actions. Also, casting him as the lead character, one notes that his voice does not quite frame the prevailing categories of opera in Italy of the nineteenth century. As a father he is rightly cast as a baritone, like Germont in *La Traviata*. In this, he is similar to the other father in the opera, namely, Monterone, whose fate he will eventually share. However, as a tragic hero, Rigoletto would traditionally have been fashioned into a tenor. To compound matters, the tenor in the opera, namely, the amoral and depraved Duke, is given the most

heroic arias to sing without possessing either the moral or the emotional prerogative to do so. The Duke's character focuses on his own artificiality while interpreting a few of the more fine and emotionally-loaded arias. For instance, the "Parmi veder le lagrime" has caused more than a proverbial headache for those critics trying to come to terms with the Duke's character. Thus, both Rigoletto and the Duke share a few of the qualities generally associated with the conventional male protagonist.

In very different ways, they both adore the leading lady, Gilda. However, the love they bestow on her is the result of their unpardonable narcissism. Another similarity is the fact that, indirectly, they both participate in her death. The conventional ranking of opera is brought into focus in the way Rigoletto and his master, the Duke, interact. One takes note of the affiliation between aristocrat and plebeian, the type of music each is given to sing, their tragic and comic statuses, together with the type of voice the composer opts for. Added to this one finds the attendant implications of dramatic purpose and performer status.

At this point, a minor digression seems appropriate. In the *bel canto* period in Italy, which coincided or, rather, was a result of the Romantic sentiment pervading the imagination of artists, the term *basso* as a vocal designation referred to both the bass voice and the baritone. Arguably, the baritone's voice is the most mellow of the male spectrum, with its more accessible range largely situated comfortably in the middle section of the whole gamut. The more dramatic top notes would generally be reserved for brilliant conclusions of arias or ensembles. Sounding like a more mature voice than that of the tenor, for instance, characters possessing a baritone voice would more often than not be older men. They would possess presence and authority as a result of family status, political privilege, or even religious prerogative. They would be a force to contend with and would usually be opposed to the love interest of the leading lady and leading man (soprano and tenor respectively). Up till the time Verdi came on the scene, baritones were most of the time relegated to a supporting role. They would help in articulating the plot and in the development of the main characters without, however, obtaining any authentic psychological depth themselves. It would have been very rare to come across a sub-textual development of any sort, little to no proof of a complex self resting beneath a veneer that the character would maintain in public. Rather, baritones would be given conventional scenes, with the main focus devoted to harrasing primary characters into submission or expressing belated remorse when catharsis is no longer possible.⁴⁹

Verdi, however, changes all this. With him, the baritone gains emotional supremacy and dramatic potency of the kind not available to the public since Mozart's *Don Giovanni*. Much like Shakespeare albeit in a different medium, Verdi was a tireless trailblazer who was endlessly looking for new musical/dramatic potential. Arguably, among his great contributions to the development of opera in Italy, is his development and complete transformation of the baritone. His artistic vision enabled him to perceive the wonderful potential inherent in the baritone voice, eventually creating a vast array of refined and nuanced characters that have substantially and uniquely enhanced the most challenging and intriguing repertoire. Verdi created roles for him that clearly identified him as a separate vocal power from the bass. He also raised the vocal range, absorbing the top four notes as an integral part of the *tessitura*. What became known as 'the Verdi baritone' needs perforce be in possession of a powerful yet beautifully-toned voice, strong enough to enable it to rise above the more full-bodied and rounded orchestration. Simultaneously, he would also need to have dynamic flexibility, together with a dark vocal timbre that would enable him to provoke intense and varied emotional colour. Thus, in developing this new baritone role, Verdi has now created more space for him to consider and discover deeper and more complex psychological anguish, ambivalent situations, and conflicting motives that define and identify this new inner self. Through this new treatment of the baritone voice, he now demonstrates that human beings can experience layers of contrasting emotions, from pride to shame, triumph to torment, hope and disenchantment. In many ways, then, the Verdi baritone develops into a trope for the voice of humanity.

In this manner, the second scene in the first Act of *Rigoletto* where Rigoletto engages in a duet with the Duke, puts these diverse vocal affiliations into focus. A number of scholars have been profuse in their praise of this scene's taut and compact musical organisation which consists of securing perfect balance between the demands of the music, those of the libretto, and the characters' interpretation of both. Comparisons have been made between this episode and one found at the end of Act I of *Don Giovanni*. The setting is likewise a grand hall where a banquet is laid on. In this scene from Mozart's opera, the dance music is intricately entwined into the fabric of the score, with Mozart inimitably and playfully negotiating balance between no fewer than three groups of instrumentalists on stage with the rest of the orchestra in the pit. The comparable scene in *Rigoletto* is no less complex, with musical continuity depending on two bands and the mandatory orchestra.

The comparison extends beyond musical organisation, however, because Don Giovanni himself is another social nonconformist. Both he and the Duke of Mantua can orchestrate a plot, as it were, being masters of the art of language, seductive charmers, and incurable philanderers. Don Giovanni uses a servant for comic relief as well as to introduce his sexual adventures, while the Duke operates on his own despite having a jester who can do things for him. Both rakes are threatened by the fathers of the girls they seduce yet, importantly, both maintain a degree of charm. The difference is in the resolution. The two pairs of lovers in Mozart's opera can enjoy peace and everlasting happiness after the denouement that brings Don Giovanni to justice. This ending conforms to a conventional social paradigm that is normally acquainted with the ending of a comedy. Very differently, the Duke in *Rigoletto* literally gets away with murder, escaping scot-free while all the other characters are left to punishment. Despite this outrage it is almost impossible not to applaud the Duke at the end even if audience have grown to dislike him passionately. Despite his best efforts, the Duke is not the typical villain one meets in a classical or Elizabethan tragedy. He is neither a Goneril nor a Iago. Hugo's King is his immediate prototype, one who even enjoys episodes of pure comedy, something that the professional funny-men, Triboulet and Rigoletto, never do! The happy ending in *Don Giovanni* spares the audience from disturbing amorality, something that Verdi's opera does not. Ambiguity in *Rigoletto* is sustained and maintained until the final notes are heard.

Throughout the opera, one gets a sense of things not quite adding up, not quite fitting, people's behaviour not quite conforming to expectation. To further confuse the moral spectrum, in the third Act the audience comes across an honest prostitute and an honourable murderer. A restlessness and anxiety of purpose is created here, to the extent that the audience no longer knows what it should think of both the situation it is facing and of the characters creating this moral ambiguity. This, more than anything else, is perhaps what urges critics forward in their search for the innovative in *Rigoletto*. Yet, the very genre puts up resistance to these efforts. From a structural point of view, *Rigoletto* is not overtly radical in the sense that traditions are never really ignored. What we get is convention being held up to critical scrutiny. The original name of Rigoletto, namely, Triboulet, has its etymology in the Italian verb 'tribolare', which means 'to endure suffering', while in the opera, the name Rigoletto has a French source, namely, 'rigoler', which means 'to joke'. A discerning audience will not help noting the paradox inherent in the jester's personal situation. They will also be aware that he is in transit, as it were, on a journey between two entirely different traditions. A man made up of 'tribolarei and 'rigoler' is the archetypical 'pagliaccio', the man who jokes on the outside but suffers on the inside.

The fact that Gilda maintains her innocence implies that her world is miles away from the one her father and the Duke inhabit. Although she sings one, she probably would not be aware of the lurking sexual innuendo beneath the dazzling coloratura of a 'cabaletta'. Her tragic reading and gross misjudgement of her seducer confirm this. Perhaps most clearly standing on his own, entirely isolated, like a character who finds himself in the wrong opera, is the tenor. He is nowhere more out of tune with the impending tragedy as he is in the third Act, singing 'La donna è mobile' while Gilda's life literally hangs in the balance.

'La donna è mobile', coming as it does at a moment of impending doom, is the most incongruous moment in the opera. It is made even more remote by it being scored in the key of B Major, making it un-relatable to anything else in the opera. It is flirtatious and audacious in tone, where other arias in the opera are subtle and refine; it is cheery and gay where others are sober and reflective. The words also carry a heavy ironic weight because the women in *Rigoletto* are the most constant feature. Yet, its incompatibility with the rest of the opera is not entirely shocking for, rather than coming across as direct self-expression, it is part of a bigger pantomime, a stage song, with a distinctive tune and a distinct rhetoric. Thus, this aria is deliberately meant to sound incongruous and out of place. The seemingly frivolous aria suddenly carries a more serious thematic and musical relevance when, in the famous quartet 'Bella figlia dell'amore', the intelligent listener hears in the first phrases of this piece a parodic reworking of the 'La donna è mobile' tune, shifting from tonic to dominant and back to tonic again as the tenor's aria had done.⁵⁰ There are number of musical attributes that stress the apparent sense of dislocation this aria creates with its surrounding scenes. There is an empty bar at the beginning of the aria together with the vapid oom-pah-pah accompaniment before the voice enters. Perhaps more structurally and thematically relevant, fragments of the tune emanate from the Duke's semi-consciousness and he sings them as he drifts into sleep later on in the same Act. At this point, the artificiality and superficiality of the tune suddenly takes on ominous overtones that become replete with tragic foreboding. In fact, it is on hearing a strand of this tune that Rigoletto realises in full horror that the body in the sack could not be that of the Duke he had commissioned Sparafucile to assassinate. This is the supreme psychological moment in the drama, and it is brought about by the banal tones of "La donna è mobile".

There is a similar scene in Hugo's *Le roi s'amuse*, where the King delivers a speech that, as the stage directions show, should also be declaimed as a sung interlude. Although I could find nothing that could lead me to what tune these words would have been originally sung, it is surmised that the melody would have been a catchy one. It was also common practice to insert short ditties such as this one in early nineteenth-century plays which would have made use of words known to the public.

In fact, the couplet "Souvent femme varie / Bien fol est qui s'y fie" ("Woman is often changeable / he who trusts her is quite insane") was allegedly made up by François I himself, whose theatrical representation actually sings in Hugo's play. The audience would have known these words and, as in popular theatre, they would have been expected to join in.⁵¹ So, while the Duke in Verdi's opera is inspired about the fairer sex by the words of another notorious philanderer, in the actual Hugo drama the King sings a ditty that he himself allegedly created. Metaphors of alienation are rounded off by these words in the play. Again allegedly, Victor Hugo saw these words grafted on a window sash when he was on a visit to the opulent castle of Chambord, François I's own hunting-lodge. He most probably took the King's couplet home, either in his mind or, more probably, by cutting out this piece of wood from the window.⁵² Hugo's violence, as it were, of the physical legacy equitably resonates with his attack on its literary equivalent. Yet, intricately connected with this story is the notion of disengagement from historical precedent and source, of de-contextualisation. Again, we get the same sense of things not quite adding up. The idea of the stolen piece of wood from Chambord finishing in the hands of the Duke of Mantua not only adds an intertextual dimension to this most simple of tunes, but also appears to act as trope for the nervous synchronism in the opera's framework of different social, political, and aesthetic milieu.

Seen from this point of view, thus, 'La donna è mobile' becomes one of the pivots around which the opera turns, supplying the emotional tenor of the work and allowing us a perfunctory glance, as it were, at its literary and aesthetic pedigree. All this occurs through one short almost frivolous song. With its straightforward harmonic progression and strophic structure, it is, nonetheless, characteristic of what makes this opera an uneasy masterpiece, constantly assailed by a persistent ambivalent sense of anomaly. In this matter it is itself atypical, especially for those scholars of Verdi's œuvre who try to come up with convincing arguments attesting to popularity in nineteenth-century opera houses being the result of musical/structural coherence, especially in the works of Verdi's famous middle period. Thus, the piece that was most popular in *Rigoletto* was the one that least fitted in the structure. Verdi's own words in this regard are most unhelpful, especially since they are couched in an essentialist idiom that obscures the work's difficulty and complexity. Yet, it is in all likelihood a more positive thing if one can interpret him against the predicates of convention, and to retain a degree of suspicion of through-composed texts, whether in the public arena with regard to musical composition, or in the inherent quality of the work itself, or in the critical debate that, of its nature, seeks to either extol or denounce it. Maybe it is also a good thing that audiences who throng to Verdi opera performances select as their favourite work one that keeps fluctuating and shifting position under their gaze, one that is vulnerable to reduction but equally one that tires it out. Ultimately, the audience chooses the one that is "mobile" for their unwavering point of reference.

Thus, to adopt a neat reductive attitude, if the compositional process of *Rigoletto* has a story to tell it is, in all probability, about not belonging rather than one which tells us that the opera fails because it does not belong. By 'not belonging' I am understanding not conforming to a traditional operatic aesthetic, or not belonging to Verdi's initial period of opera production. "What's new", then, is ultimately something ancient – a resistance to conformity, a rebellious streak that makes human nature so unpredictable, "mobile", eternally fascinating and, ultimately, tragic even in its most superficial moments.

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- 1 Francesco Maria Piave, *Rigoletto* (Milano: Mondadori, 1971), p. 25.
 - 2 A. Gramsci, *Quaderni del carcere*, ed., V Gerratana, 4 vols., (Turin: Einaudi, 1975), vol. III, 14/72, p. 1739; trans., in D. Forgacs & G Nowell-Smith (eds.), *Antonio Gramsci: Selections from the Cultural Writings*, trans., W. Boelhower (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1985), pp. 204-5.
 - 3 A. Gramsci, *Quaderni*, vol. III, 14/19, pp. 1676-7; Forgacs & Nowell-Smith (eds.), *Selections*, pp. 379-80.
 - 4 *Ibid.*, p. 258.
 - 5 A. Manzoni, 'Sul Romanticismo. Lettera al Marchese Cesare D'Azeglio', in *Opere*, vol. III: *Opere varie*, ed. G. Bezzola (Milan: Rizzoli, 1961), p. 455.
 - 6 G. Mazzini, *Filosofia della Musica* (1836), cited passage trans., in 'From the *Philosophy of Music*'

- in R.A. Solie (ed.), *Source Readings in Music History: The Nineteenth Century* (NY & London: Norton, 1998), p. 46.
- 7 See S. Castelvocchi, 'Walter Scott, Rossini, e la couleur ossianique: il contest cultural della *Donna del lago*', *Bollettino del Centro rossiniano di studi* 23 (1993), 57-71; and G. Tomlinson, 'Opera and Drama: Hugo, Donizetti, and Verdi', in *Music and Drama* (NY: Broude Brothers, 1988), pp. 171-92.
- 8 For a thorough discussion of Verdi's compositional engagement with Romantic writers, see D.R. Kimbell, *Verdi in the Age of Italian Romanticism*, pp. 460-515.
- 9 A highly interesting argument is presented by M.A. Smart, in 'Proud, Indomitable, Irascible: Allegories of Nation in *Attila* and *Les vêpres siciliennes*', in M. Chusid (ed.), *Verdi's Middle Period*, pp. 227-56.
- 10 The date also coincides with the revolutionary period in Italy.
- 11 Letter to Piave, April 21, 1848; trans. in M.J. Phillips-Matz, *Verdi: A Biography*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), p. 237.
- 12 Letter of October 18, 1848; G. Cesari & A. Luzio (eds.), *I copialettere di Giuseppe Verdi*, p. 469; trans. in Phillip-Matz, *Verdi*, p. 237.
- 13 In this case the colonial oppressor was France (ruling thirteenth-century Sicily), which presented something of a diplomatic problem for Verdi since *Vêpres* was destined for the *Paris Opéra*, a constituency he particularly wished to please. On the inflections of patriotism in *Vêpres*, see A. Gerhard, *The Urbanisation of Opera: Music Theatre in Paris in the Nineteenth Century*, trans. M. Whittall (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), pp. 342-87.
- 14 G. Martin, *Aspects of Verdi*, pp. 93-116; P. Robinson, *Opera and Ideas: From Mozart to Strauss* (NY: Harper & Row, 1985), pp. 155-209.
- 15 W. Weaver, *Verdi: A Documentary Study* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1977), p. 182.
- 16 *Ibid.*, p. 179.
- 17 C. Osborne, *Rigoletto: A Guide to the Opera* (London: Barrie and Foss, 1979), pp. 12-14.
- 18 F. Werfel & P. Stefan, *Verdi: The Man in His Letters* (New York: Vienna House, 1973), pp. 148-9.
- 19 M.J. Phillips-Matz, p. 162.
- 20 W. Weaver, p. 178.
- 21 More discussion on this subject can be pursued in J. Budden, *The Operas of Verdi 1: From 'Oberto' to 'Rigoletto'* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992), p. 140.
- 22 W. Weaver, p. 158.
- 23 V.K. Janik & E.S. Nelson, *Fools and Jesters in Literature, Art, and History: A Bio-Bibliographical Sourcebook* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1998), p. 382.
- 24 W. Weaver, p. 179.
- 25 *Ibid.*, p. 180.
- 26 *Ibid.*, p. 182.
- 27 *Ibid.*, p. 181.
- 28 *Ibid.*
- 29 *Ibid.*
- 30 Phillips-Matz, p. 277.
- 31 In fact, the play was not produced in Paris again before 1882.
- 32 Phillips-Matz, p. 831.
- 33 Verdi composed no fewer than thirty-two operas. Among revisions carried out, *Rigoletto* is the seventeenth.
- 34 This brings *Rigoletto* close to Shakespearean tragedy. One cannot fail to remember Horatio's lines at the end of Act I in *Hamlet* "Something's rotting in the state of Denmark", after which the reader follows with horror the irrevocable undoing of the innocent Ophelia, another victim of intrigue and manipulation.
- 35 M. Chusid (ed.), *The Works of Giuseppe Verdi*, series I, vol. 17 (Chicago: University of Chicago Press; Milan: Ricordi, 1983).
- 36 More detail on this idea can be found in W. Osthoff, 'The Musical Characterisation of Gilda', *Verdi: Bollettino dell'Istituto di studi Verdiani* 3/8 (1973), 1160-95.
- 37 The aria in the scene immediately following this duet starts with the words, 'Pari siamo', literally meaning 'we are equal'.
- 38 See Osthoff, 1168-70. In one of the earliest drafts, the idea was to call Sparafucile Strangolabene, literally meaning "strangle her well".
- 39 "So that she may be raised / As high as I had fallen ... / beside the gallows / One must raise an

- altar!"
- 40 For a detailed analysis, see M. Chusid, 'Rigoletto and Monterone: A Study in Musical Dramaturgy', *Verdi: Bollettino*, 3/9 (1982), 1221-37, and Chusid, 'The Tonality of *Rigoletto*', edited by C. Abbate and R. Parker in *Analysing Opera*, pp. 241-61.
- 41 D. Lawton, 'Tonal Structure and Dramatic Action in *Rigoletto*', *Verdi: Bollettino* 3/9 (1982), 1429-63.
- 42 M. Chusid, 'The Tonality of *Rigoletto*', gives a comprehensive account of Verdi's ideas at all levels of the creative process.
- 43 J. Budden, *The Operas of Verdi* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), vol. I, p. 486.
- 44 The letter in question is reproduced in F. Abbiati, *Giuseppe Verdi*, vol. II, pp. 63-4.
- 45 Rigoletto's narcissistic blindness aids us to comprehend how Gilda's kidnapping happens successfully under his very nose. He also needs a flash of lightning to recognise that the dead body in the sack is Gilda's. In Carmine Gallone's 1946 film version of *Rigoletto*, a very famous protagonist, Tito Gobbi, projects this impressively in his aria "Pari siamo", approaching the camera and scowling short-sightedly into it.
- 46 William Shakespeare, *Richard III* (London: The Arden Shakespeare, 1994), p. 126.
- 47 See the 1827 Preface to *Cromwell*, which was adopted by intellectuals as a sort of Romantic manifesto) in Hugo, *Oeuvres completes* (Paris: Galliard, 1992), vol. XII (*Critique*), pp. 2-38.
- 48 *Drammaturgia romantica verdiana*, p. 61. In fact, one realises that Quasimodo, the hunchback of Notre-Dame, is a precise contemporary of Triboulet.
- 49 There are exceptions. Manfredo in *Il Giuramento* by Mercadante, for instance, is given an elaborate episode which serves to unearth deep psychological complexity: "Alla pace degli eletti". However, such scenes are rare.
- 50 The quartet also showcases Verdi as the master not of contrapuntal networks but a profound reader of the human psyche, with each character given music to sing that perfectly reflects their characters.
- 51 Victor Hugo, *Le roi s'amuse*, Act IV, scene ii.
- 52 For more detail on his idea, see L. Guichard, 'Hugo and *Le roi s'amuse*', *Verdi: Bollettino* 2/6 (1967), 344.