

A Librettist and Collaborator

Edited by Jill Leahy



Francesco Maria Piave (1810—1876) was the son of a glass maker in Murano in the lagoon of Venice. His career as a journalist and translator took him to Rome where he became part of a literary circle with the librettist Jacopo Ferretti. Back in Venice, he became the resident poet and stage director for La Fenice opera house, a role he later assumed at La Scala in Milan.

Piave possessed a broad vocabulary and was considered a facile writer. He was recommended as a librettist to Verdi and after proving he could follow Verdi's explicit instructions on what he wanted in a libretto, they began a successful collaboration and a long-lasting friendship. During his lifetime, Piave worked for many composers and created librettos for over 30 operas, but the 10 librettos he wrote for Verdi are considered to be his best and most important ones: *Ernani* (1844), *I due Foscari* (1844), *Attila* (1846), *Macbeth* (1847), *Il Corsaro* (1848), *Stiffelio* (1850), *Rigoletto* (1851), *La traviata* (1853), *Simon Boccanegra* (1857), and *La forza del destino* (1862).

On his way to a rehearsal at La Scala in December 1867, he suffered a stroke that left him unable to speak or move. He lived in this disabled condition for nine years until his death at age 65 in 1876. During those years of being unable to work, Verdi and his wife generously took care of Piave and his family, even paying for his funeral.



The Role of a Lifetime

The role of Rigoletto has been called "the career goal of every baritone in the world" by one writer. The artist who created the role was **Felice Varesi**, a baritone who sang several Verdi roles during his long career.

Varesi's daughter Giulia wrote about his first appearance as the character Rigoletto: "How many times have I heard tell of the emotions of that Venetian premiere. My father, ashamed and timid in his ridiculous buffoon's costume, did not know how to pluck up the courage to appear before the public for he feared their derision; and at the very last moment, it was Verdi himself who, giving him a shove to get him on stage, made him stumble over the boards behind the scenes and fling himself onto the stage, staggering all over the place. The audience thought this an inspiration for a buffoon's entrance and were enraptured."

Adapted from Jonathan Keates, *Verdi: English National Opera*

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Rigoletto

Music by Giuseppe Verdi • Libretto by Francesco Maria Piave

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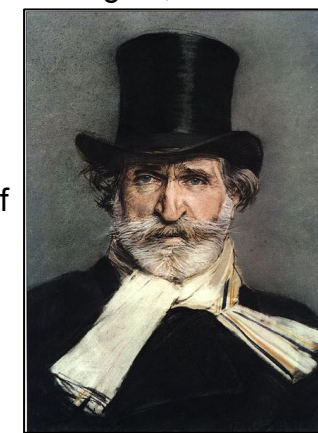
Stage set for the 1851 premiere of Verdi's opera, *Rigoletto* (Act 1, Scene 2)

Changing the Names to Protect the Guilty!

by Jill Leahy

During Verdi's early years, Italy was not a unified country. The Italian peninsula comprised many kingdoms and states; many were feuding and many others were under French or Austrian occupation. When Verdi received a commission from Venice in 1850 to compose an opera for the Teatro La Fenice, he knew his work would have to pass a review by the Austrian censors who looked for immoral as well as seditious content. Even so, he chose a Victor Hugo play from 1832, *Le roi s'amuse*, which was closed by censors in Paris after its first performance. The story depicted attempted murder of a king, rape, adultery, disrespect for religion, and criticism of royalty—all scandalous subjects.

When Verdi suggested the subject to the Venetian-based librettist, Francesco-Maria Piave, he told Verdi that the character of Triboulet the court jester was "one of the greatest creations to be found in theatre of all countries and all times." A libretto in Venice in the 1850s required approval by the theater management, mayor of the city, police, and Department of Public Order. For *Rigoletto*, Piave and Verdi produced countless rewrites before the libretto was approved.



Giuseppe Verdi (1813—1901)

The final version was greatly altered from the Victor Hugo play: the King in the play became a Duke in the opera (although some say the Duke was recognizable as Vincenzo I Gonzaga, the Duke of Mantua), the entire setting was changed from France to the little known Duchy in Italy, the characters' names were all changed (Triboulet became Rigoletto—from the French *rigoler*, to make fun of), and the title of the opera changed from *La Maledizione* to, ultimately, *Rigoletto*. Even with all the changes, audiences loved this opera. Maybe it's because people enjoy seeing how far the "mighty" can fall. By 1852, *Rigoletto* had premiered in all of Italy's major cities and today it is listed on *OperaBase* as the #10 most-performed opera in the world.

Rigoletto Synopsis

ACT I. Mantua, in the 1500s. At his palace, the Duke lightheartedly boasts to his courtiers of amorous conquests, escorting Countess Ceprano, his latest prize, to a private chamber as his hunchback jester, Rigoletto, makes fun of her husband. (“**Questo o quella**”) Marullo announces that Rigoletto is suspected of keeping a mistress, and Ceprano plots with the courtiers to punish the hated buffoon. Attention is diverted when Monterone, an elderly nobleman, enters to denounce the Duke for seducing his daughter. Ridiculed by Rigoletto and placed under arrest, Monterone pronounces a curse on both the Duke and his jester.

On his way home that night, Rigoletto broods on Monterone's curse. Rejecting the services offered by Sparafucile, a professional assassin, he notes that the word can be as deadly as the dagger. Greeted by his daughter, Gilda, whom he keeps hidden from the world, he reminisces about his late wife, then warns the governess, Giovanna, to admit no one. But as Rigoletto leaves, the Duke slips into the garden, tossing a purse to Giovanna to keep her quiet. The nobleman declares his love to Gilda, who has noticed him in church. He tells her he is a poor student named Gualtier Maldè, but at the sound of footsteps he rushes away. Tenderly repeating his name, Gilda retires. (“**Caro nome che il mio cor**”) Meanwhile, the courtiers stop Rigoletto outside his house and ask him to help abduct Ceprano's wife, who lives across the way. The jester is duped into wearing a blindfold and holding a ladder against his own garden wall. The courtiers break into his home and carry off Gilda. Rigoletto, hearing her cry for help, tears off his blindfold and rushes into the house, discovering only her scarf. He remembers Monterone's curse.

Intermission

ACT II. In his palace, the Duke is distraught over the disappearance of Gilda. When his courtiers return, saying it is they who have taken her and that she is now in his bedchamber, he joyfully rushes off to the conquest. Soon Rigoletto enters, warily looking for Gilda; the courtiers bar his way, though they are astonished to learn the girl is not his mistress but his daughter. The jester reviles them, then embraces the disheveled Gilda as she runs in to tell of her courtship and abduction. As Monterone is led to the dungeon, Rigoletto vows to avenge them both.

Intermission

ACT III. At night, outside Sparafucile's run-down inn on the outskirts of town, Rigoletto and Gilda watch as the Duke flirts with the assassin's sister and accomplice, Maddalena. (“**La donna è mobile**”, QUARTET: “**Bella figlia dell'amore**”) Rigoletto sends his daughter off to disguise herself as a boy for her escape to Verona, and then pays Sparafucile to murder the Duke. As a storm rages, Gilda returns to hear Maddalena persuade her brother to kill not the Duke but the next visitor to the inn instead. Resolving to sacrifice herself for the Duke, despite his betrayal, Gilda enters the inn and is stabbed. Rigoletto comes back to claim the body and gloats over the sack Sparafucile gives him, only to hear his supposed victim singing in the distance. Frantically cutting open the sack, he finds Gilda, who dies asking forgiveness. Monterone's curse is fulfilled.

—Courtesy of *Opera News*, adapted



Characters of the Opera

Tragic triangle of love and hate

Rigoletto *baritone*
[ree-goh-LEH-toh]
A hunchback jester in the Duke's court. A widower, he adores his daughter, Gilda, but hates the Duke and his courtiers.

Gilda [JEEL-dah] *soprano*
Rigoletto's daughter, whom the Duke fancies. Rigoletto keeps her hidden at home, looked after by her nurse, Giovanna. Gilda is only seen outside when she goes to church.

Duke of Mantua *tenor*
A handsome, charming, unfaithful womanizer. Introduces himself to Gilda as “Gualtier Maldè”.

Characters who introduce conflict

Sparafucile *bass*
[spah-rah-foo-CHEE-leh]
A professional assassin.

Maddalena *contralto*
[mah-dah-LAY-nah]
Sparafucile's sister, who helps him with one of his assassinations.

Count Monterone *baritone*
[mohn-teh-ROH-neh]
Casts a curse on the Duke for seducing his daughter and on Rigoletto for mocking him.

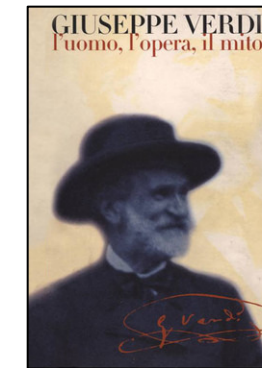
Marullo [mah-ROOL-loh] *bass*
Borsa [BOHR-sah] *tenor*
Courtiers

Count Ceprano [cheh-PRAH-noh] *bass*
A guest at the Duke's party who vows revenge when the Duke flirts with his wife.

Countess Ceprano *soprano*

Giovanna [joh-VAH-nah] *mezzo-soprano*
Gilda's nurse

Court Usher
Page
Chorus of townspeople



A Revered Composer

Giuseppe Fortunino Francesco Verdi was one of the most influential composers of the 19th century and became the most revered Italian composer in his time. Born in Le Roncole, a village in the province of Parma (Emilia-Romagna region) of Italy, the village is now called *Roncole Verdi* in honor of its most famous resident. Verdi

was baptized in the Catholic Church as **Joseph Fortuninus Franciscus**. However, since Italy at the time was still occupied by Napoleon, Verdi's baptismal name was recorded as **Joseph Fortunin François**. It's interesting to note that Verdi's surname translates into English as Green, creating humorous instances when folks refer to him as “Joe Green.”

Verdi displayed a talent for music early and honed his skills through scholarships, private lessons in Milan, and on-the-job training as *maestro di musica* in Busseto. He was supported by Antonio Barezzi, who invited Verdi to be his daughter Margherita's music teacher. The two fell deeply in love and were married in 1836. She gave birth to two children within the next two years, but both died in infancy while Verdi was working on his first opera, *Oberto*, in 1839. With the moderate success of *Oberto*, Verdi was offered a contract to write three more operas. While writing his second one, Margherita died in 1840 at the age of 26. Verdi adored his wife and children, and was devastated by their untimely deaths. When his second work flopped, it sent him into despair and he vowed to quit composing. He was persuaded to write another opera; the result was *Nabucco*, which premiered at La Scala in 1842 and established Verdi's reputation.

He found love again in the mid-1840s with the soprano Giuseppina Strepponi, composed a total of 28 operas, established Casa di Riposo (a home for retired musicians), and lived a long and successful life until his death at age 87 in January 1901. Though Verdi requested a simple funeral, legions of people showed their respect at a state funeral held in Milan, where the crowd was estimated at 200,000–300,000.

Viva V.E.R.D.I.

In the 1850s, a nationalistic movement began with the mission to join the separate regions together into one Italy and get rid of all occupying forces. Many believe that the messages about this revolution—or *Risorgimento*, which literally means “rising up” in Italian—was often delivered to the people through the work of artists such as Verdi.

The only Italian ruler at the time was Vittorio Emanuele II, then king of Sardinia. Around 1860 he gave a stirring speech that became a rallying cry for Italian patriots who wanted a unified Italy and who wanted to declare him King of Italy. Supporters realized that Verdi's name was an acronym for the sentiment that was spreading, “**Viva Vittorio Emanuele Re D'Italia**,” thus giving birth to a new slogan—“Viva VERDI.”