

Il trovatore

Music by Giuseppe Verdi

Libretto by Leone Emanuele Bardare and Salvatore Cammarano
Based on a play by Antonio García Gutiérrez

Study Guide to the Opera

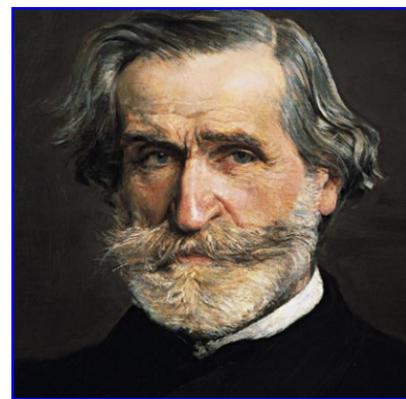


The Anvil Chorus scene from Verdi's *Il Trovatore*, Photo by Ken Howard, Metropolitan Opera

An Opera with a Staggering Number of Productions

Giuseppe Verdi was an Italian romantic composer and Italy's shining star. His 14 operas are regularly performed on the world's stages. Verdi's music and librettos penetrate the soul because the composer wrote music to express feelings and human emotion.

The decade before *Il trovatore's* 1853 premiere, however, had been an emotional time for Verdi. After suffering the loss of two infant children and his wife within a short period of time, Verdi fell into despair, vowing to give up musical composition forever. A friend convinced him to write *Nabucco*, and its opening performance in March, 1842, made Verdi famous. The composer followed that success with *Macbeth* and *Rigoletto*, among other operas, but Verdi wanted to explore new boundaries.



Giuseppe Verdi
(1813–1901)

In 1849, Giuseppe Verdi was living with Giuseppina Strepponi in Busseto. Her translation of Gutiérrez's drama, "El trovador," played a huge role in the creation of the opera *Il trovatore*. Verdi chose Cammarano, an established "operatic poet" to develop a libretto, despite not having a commission from a theater. Cammarano strictly followed convention, which often frustrated the composer. Verdi appreciated the quality of the verse but continuously pushed Cammarano to go beyond standard musical formats. Verdi began composing the opera in 1852, but tragedy struck soon when Cammarano passed away in July. With a heavy heart, Verdi turned to Leone Emanuele Bardare, a young prodigy from Naples, to finish the libretto. Verdi also altered the opera, making Leonora a more prominent character. These changes enhanced the quality, resulting in widespread critical acclaim. After delays related to the location of the premiere, Verdi finally reached an agreement with a theater in Rome, which scheduled *Il trovatore* during the spring 1853 Carnival season.

Within three years of the opera's premiere, *Il trovatore* gained immense popularity. A staggering 229 productions were held worldwide. Naples alone hosted eleven different stagings at six different theaters. Though the creative route had its ups and downs, Verdi's "troubadour" opera has "legs" and continues to run.

Il trovatore Synopsis

Set in Aragon and Biscay (now Vizcaya), Spain, during the Peninsular War in the 15th century

Act I

The commander of the Royalist Aragon troops, Count di Luna, is obsessed with Leonora, a young noblewoman in the queen's service, who does not return his love. Outside the royal residence, his soldiers keep watch at night. They have heard an unknown troubadour serenading Leonora, and the jealous count is determined to capture and punish him. To keep his troops awake, the captain, Ferrando, recounts the terrible story of a Romani woman who was burned at the stake years ago for bewitching the count's infant brother. The woman's daughter then took revenge by kidnapping the boy and throwing him into the flames where her mother had died. The charred skeleton of a baby was discovered there, and di Luna's father died of grief soon after. The daughter disappeared without a trace, but di Luna has sworn to find her.

In the palace gardens, Leonora confides in her companion Ines that she is in love with a mysterious man she met before the outbreak of the war, and that he is the troubadour who serenades her each night. After they have left, Count di Luna appears, looking for Leonora. When she hears the troubadour's song in the darkness, Leonora rushes out to greet her beloved but mistakenly embraces di Luna. The troubadour reveals his true identity; he is Manrico, leader of the partisan rebel forces. Furious, the count challenges him to fight to the death.

Act II

During the duel, Manrico overpowered the count, but some instinct stopped him from killing his rival. The war has raged on, with the Royalist forces victorious in the most recent battle. Manrico was badly wounded, but his mother, the Romani woman Azucena, has nursed him back to health in a camp in the mountains.

A band of Roma people gathers at its mountain hideout. Azucena is the woman for whom di Luna has been searching. Her life is scarred by the memory of her mother's death and the terrible revenge she exacted. Manrico, who has never heard the full story, is determined to finally know the truth. Azucena tells him how she stole the older count's infant son but, in her manic rage, accidentally murdered her own child instead. When Manrico demands to know who he truly is, Azucena is evasive. All that matters is the mother's love she has shown him all his life and that he does not fail to take revenge on the house of di Luna. A messenger arrives with news that Leonora, believing that Manrico has fallen in battle and hoping to escape di Luna's grasp, is entering a convent. Azucena pleads with Manrico to stay, but he resolves to go to her immediately.

Instrumentation

Woodwinds: piccolo, flute, oboe, clarinet, bassoon

Brass: horn, trumpet, trombone, tuba (cimbasso)

Percussion: timpani, triangle, tambourine, castanets, cymbals, **anvils**, bass drum

Strings: violin, viola, cello, string bass, harp



Characters

ARIAS TO LISTEN FOR

Conte di Luna *baritone*
[KOHN-tay dee LOO-nah]
A young noble of Aragon

[Il Balen](#)

Manrico *tenor*
[mahn-REE-koh]
Troubadour and chieftain under the Prince of Biscay

[Ah sì, ben mio
Di quella pira](#)

Leonora *soprano*
[lay-oh-NOH-rah]
Lady-in-waiting to the Princess of Aragon

[Miserere / D'amor sull'ali rosee
Tacea la note / Di tale amor](#)

Azucena *mezzo-soprano*
[ah-dzoo-CHAY-nah]
A Biscayan Romani woman

[Stride la vampa](#)

Ferrando *bass*
[fehr-RAHN-doh]
The Count's captain of the guard

Ruiz [roo-EECE] *tenor*
A soldier in Manrico's service

Inez [EE-nez] *soprano*
Leonora's companion

Coro
Soldiers, nuns, Roma, jailer

Di Luna arrives at the convent with his troops to take Leonora by force, but his attempt to seize her is foiled when Manrico and his men attack. In the ensuing chaos, the lovers escape.

INTERMISSION

Act III

Di Luna has laid siege to the fortress where Manrico has taken refuge with Leonora. Soon, soldiers bring in Azucena, whom Ferrando and his men have captured wandering nearby. When she hears di Luna's name, her reaction arouses suspicion, and Ferrando recognizes her as the murderer of the count's brother. Azucena cries out to Manrico to rescue her, and di Luna realizes that he now has his enemy in his hands. He orders a pyre built for Azucena before the walls of the fortress.

Inside the castle, Manrico and Leonora are preparing to be married. She is frightened, but he assures her of his love even in the face of death. When news of Azucena's capture arrives, Manrico summons his forces and prepares to attack.

Act IV

Manrico's army has been defeated, and he and Azucena are being held captive in di Luna's castle. Leonora has escaped and now comes to the prison to pray for Manrico's salvation. When di Luna orders the execution of Manrico and Azucena at sunrise, Leonora offers herself to the count in return for her lover's life. However, she secretly takes a slow-acting poison, sealing her fate.

In their cell, Manrico tries to comfort Azucena, who is terrified of the stake and the fire that await her. Leonora appears to tell Manrico that he is saved and urges him to escape. Understanding that she has promised herself to di Luna, he denounces her and refuses to flee. But the poison is already taking effect, and Leonora dies in his arms, just as di Luna arrives. He sends Manrico to his execution. Azucena cries out that her mother is avenged—di Luna has killed his own brother.

Adapted from *The Metropolitan Opera*

Geography, History, and Troubadours



Countryside of the Tena Valley with the Pyrenees Mountains in the background, in Aragon, Spain.

Aragon is an autonomous region in northeastern

Spain, encompassing the provinces of Huesca, Zaragoza, and Teruel. The community is bounded by France (north), Catalonia (east), Valencia (southeast), Castile–La Mancha (southwest), and Castile–León, La Rioja, and Navarra (west). The Pyrenees Mountains, which dominate the relief north and south of the Ebro River basin, rise to 9,840 feet. The *castellor* mentioned in the opera could represent one of many area castles.

While the story and most of the characters of *Il trovatore* are fictitious, the opera is set towards the end of a real **civil war** in Aragon. Following the death of King Martin of Aragon in 1410, six candidates staked a claim for the throne. A political meeting, the Compromise of Caspe, did not create a clear decision about succession to the throne. Subsequent battles raged in the war between the nobility and the rebels. The fortunes of the two sides mirror those of the conflict in *Il trovatore*, though none of the actual princes appear in the opera. Verdi and his librettists freely used historical facts and created characters that could tell the story of love and revenge.

One of the fictitious characters is the **troubadour** Manrico. During the Middle Ages, troubadours were the shining knights of poetry and chivalry, flourishing in the south of France and the north of Italy. The major theme of their poems and songs was courtly love; they created the mystique of refined damsels and the gallant knight. In *Il trovatore*, Manrico rises from an obscure and humble beginning in a Biscayan Roma camp to become a good enough soldier to defeat the Count di Luna in a personal duel, only to lose on the military battlefield. Other fictions in the opera's story include the characters of Leonora and Azucena, as well as the story's conceit that the Count di Luna had two sons.

William Berger, in *Verdi with a Vengeance*, defends the “wild, uninhibited, and relentlessly intense” opera and its libretto. He says *Il trovatore* is the Rodney Dangerfield of opera—immensely popular, but with no respect. Yes, the story is farfetched and insane, but with talented singers who can balance the *bel canto* requirements with the need for power, and with strong conducting that can elicit the subtleties in the orchestral score, *Il trovatore* stands for all operas. With its geographical and historical backdrop, the opera can tell the story as well as a troubadour.

The Anvil Chorus: Forging a Memorable Chorus Scene

Note: The term Gypsy is considered pejorative by some Roma people, so we use the more respectful terms Romani or Roma.

Act 2, Scene 1 of Giuseppe Verdi's opera *Il trovatore* depicts Spanish Roma people striking their anvils at dawn, singing the praises of hard work, good wine, and Romani women. The "Anvil Chorus" has become one of the best-known passages in the operatic repertoire. The piece is also commonly known by its opening words, "Vedi! Le fosche".

Roma men and women:

See how the clouds melt away
from the face of the sky when the sun
shines, its brightness beaming;
just as a widow, discarding her black robes,
shows all her beauty in brilliance gleaming.
So, to work now! Lift up your hammers!
Who turns the Roma's day from gloom to
brightest sunshine? His lovely Roma maid!



Men: Fill up the goblets! New strength and courage
flow from lusty wine to soul and body.

All: See how the rays of the sun play and sparkle
and give to our wine gay new splendor.
So, to work now!

The anvil is a forging tool used by metal workers, or smiths. Modern anvils are made of cast steel that has been treated by flame or electric induction, but the tool was first made of stone, then bronze, and later wrought iron. Historical references to anvils can be found in ancient Greek and Egyptian writings, including the works of Homer. An anvil from more than 100,000 years ago was found in the Calico Early Man Site in the Mojave Desert!

Verdi was not the only composer to use the anvil in the orchestra as a percussion instrument, but his chorus from *Il trovatore* is the best known!

- 1869 Richard Wagner's *Das Rheingold* includes 18 anvils tuned to F in three octaves.
- 1876 Wagner's *Siegfried* includes Siegfried's "Forging Song".
- 1879 Gilbert and Sullivan musically spoof the "Anvil Chorus" in their operetta, *The Pirates of Penzance*.
- 1911 Gustav Holst composes *Second Suite in F for Military Band*, which includes "Song of the Blacksmith".
- 1946 Aaron Copland premieres his *Symphony No. 3*, fusing ballet styles with the form of the symphony.
- 1966 Benjamin Britten premieres *The Burning Fiery Furnace*, about three Israelites who were thrown into a furnace for refusing to worship Nebuchadnezzar's image of gold.

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*To copy the truth can be a
good thing, but to invent the
truth is better, much better.*

*I have striven for perfection, it
has always eluded me, but I
surely had an obligation to
make one more try.*

Giuseppe Verdi

For more information on Pittsburgh Opera's education programs, please contact:

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