ACCESS OPERA
EDUCATOR GUIDE

GIUSEPPE VERDI

RIGOLETTO

The Metropolitan Opera

THE WORK

An opera in three acts, sung in Italian

Music by Giuseppe Verdi

Libretto by Francesco Maria Piave

Based on the play *Le Roi s'Amuse* by Victor Hugo

First performed March 11, 1851,at the Teatro La Fenice, Venice

PRODUCTION

Bartlett Sher
Production

Michael Yeargan
Set Designer

Catherine Zuber
Costume Designer

Donald Holder
Lighting Designer

Production a gift of C. Graham Berwind, III – Director, Spring Point Partners, LLC; Gramma Fisher Foundation, Marshalltown, Iowa; and Mr. and Mrs. Paul Montrone

Rigoletto Educator Guide
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With just a few carefully chosen dramatic elements—a splendid royal palace as the site of debauchery and crime, a noble duke as a lascivious tyrant, and a court comedian as the emotional epicenter of a heartbreaking tale—Giuseppe Verdi's brilliant, blood-soaked *Rigoletto* turned the 19th-century social order on its head. Written during an era when revolutions roiled Europe and age-old absolute monarchies teetered on the brink of extinction, both Verdi's opera and the Victor Hugo play that inspired it were met with official censorship and condemnation. Yet as Verdi well knew, the very plot points that so infuriated the authorities (such as a nobleman's shameless savagery and a humble jester's murderous revenge) also lent the story an undeniable narrative flair.

For director Bartlett Sher, *Rigoletto* is a story of power and corruption—and the disastrous consequences of allowing autocratic tendencies to go unchecked. To fully explore the work as a political parable, Sher has transposed the story from 16th-century Mantua to the brief period of democracy in Germany between the two world wars. The Weimar Republic, as this period was known, was an era of both tremendous artistic output and profound political instability, as the ongoing traumas of World War I, the economic effects of rampant inflation, and the terrifying rise of fascism seeped into every facet of daily life.

This guide takes Sher's "lessons from history" as its mandate. Using *Rigoletto* as an interdisciplinary lens, it focuses on three distinct time periods and the political and artistic movements that defined them: the middle of the 19th century (when the opera premiered), the interwar period in Europe (when Sher's production is set), and the world in which we now live. The information on the following pages is designed to provide context, deepen background knowledge, and enrich the overall experience of attending a final dress rehearsal at the Metropolitan Opera.

The Metropolitan Opera is a vibrant home for the most creative and talented singers, conductors, composers, musicians, stage directors, designers, visual artists, choreographers, and dancers from around the world. Founded in 1883, the Met first opened in a lavish opera house at Broadway and 39th Street that, while beautiful, had significant practical limitations. Almost from the beginning, it was clear that the stage facilities of the original theater could not meet the Met's technical needs. But it was not until the Met joined with other New York institutions in forming Lincoln Center for the Performing Arts that a new home became possible. The new Metropolitan Opera House, which opened at Lincoln Center in September 1966, was a technical marvel of its day, and has remained an architectural landmark ever since.

Each season, the Met stages more than 200 opera performances in New York, welcoming more than 800,000 attendees. In addition to presenting the indispensable masterpieces of history's great composers, performed by the world's finest singers and directed by visionaries from throughout the theatrical world, the Met is committed to ensuring that opera remains a living art form by commissioning and staging vital new works that tell modern stories and engage with the issues of today. The Met is also a leader in new media distribution initiatives, harnessing state-of-the-art technology to bring performances from the Met's iconic stage to millions of people worldwide.

This guide includes a variety of materials on Giuseppe Verdi's *Rigoletto*.

The Source, The Story, and Who's Who in *Rigoletto*
A Timeline: The historical context of the opera's story and composition
A Closer Look: Brief articles highlighting important aspects of Verdi's Rigoletto
Ten Essential Musical Terms: Musical terminology that will help students analyze and desribe Verdi's work
Student Critique: A performance activity highlighting specific aspects of this production and topics for a wrap-up discussion following students' attendance
Further Resources: Recommendations for additional study, both online and in print

This guide is intended to cultivate students' interest in *Rigoletto*, whether they have any prior acquaintance with opera or the performing arts. It includes activities for students with a wide range of musical backgrounds and will encourage them to think about opera—and the performing arts as a whole—as a medium of both entertainment and creative expression.

This guide offers in-depth introductions to:

- The theatrical archetype of the clown and its place in Verdi's opera
- The composer's negotiations with official censors
- The history of the Weimar Republic reflected in the production's updated setting
- Creative choices made by the artists of the Metropolitan Opera for this production
- The opera as a unified work of art, involving the efforts of composer, librettist, and Met artists

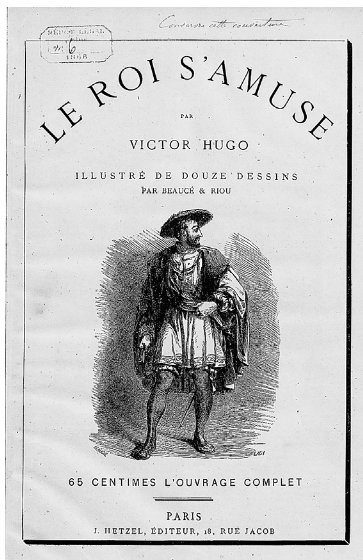
Summary

Rigoletto, a hunchbacked court jester, works in the lavish palace of the Duke of Mantua, an obscenely wealthy young man who spends most of his time chasing women. The Duke and his friends enjoy Rigoletto's jokes, but they find his deformities repulsive and treat him terribly. When one of the Duke's friends hears that Rigoletto has a girlfriend, they decide to kidnap her.

In fact, the woman who lives in Rigoletto's apartment is not his girlfriend. She's his daughter, Gilda, and she has recently fallen in love with a young student she met at church. When the Duke's friends kidnap Gilda and bring her to the palace, she is horrified to discover that the man she loves is actually the cruel Duke. Rigoletto begs the Duke's friends to tell him where his daughter is, but they just laugh at him. Suddenly, Gilda rushes out of the Duke's bedroom in tears; the Duke has forced himself on her, and she is deeply traumatized.

Rigoletto is desperate to avenge his daughter, so he hires a hitman named Sparafucile to kill the Duke. Passing by the seedy inn where Sparafucile lives with his sister Maddalena, Gilda overhears their bloody plan. Although the Duke has treated her horribly, Gilda still remembers the kind words he said to her at the church and—disguising herself as a man—decides to sacrifice herself to save him. When Rigoletto retrieves the Duke's body from Sparafucile, he lifts the hood covering the body's head and finds Gilda, who has been fatally wounded. Gilda begs her father for forgiveness and then dies in his arms.

THE SOURCE: THE PLAY *LE ROI S'AMUSE* BY VICTOR HUGO



The novels, plays, and short stories of French writer Victor Hugo are inseparable from the politics of his day. Born in 1802, Hugo lived through a dizzying series of revolutions and political upheavals in France. He would also endure a 19-year exile for his political views. Hugo was a staunch liberal dedicated to a secular, democratic, egalitarian France, an ideal which is readily discernible in his novels *The Hunchback of Notre Dame* (a tale of love and redemption set amidst the cruelties of the medieval inquisition) and *Les Misérables* (in which a merciless police inspector tenaciously pursues a reformed convict while young revolutionaries find love and death on the Parisian barricades). *Le Roi s'Amuse* (*The King Amuses Himself*) is less well known than Hugo's epic novels, yet it, too, clearly reflects Hugo's political leanings, featuring a villainous king so deeply corrupted by his own power that he will stop at nothing to get what he wants. The play premiered in 1832, two years after the overthrow of the absolutist Bourbon monarchy and the establishment of a constitutional monarchy in France. Yet even the new, relatively liberal government found Hugo's depraved king to be an unforgivable insult to the throne, and the play was banned the morning after its premiere. Hugo fought hard to have the ban lifted, but to no avail; *Le Roi s'Amuse* would not be performed again for 50 years.

Fortunately, the ban on performances of Hugo's play did not extend to its dissemination in published form, and *Le Roi s'Amuse*—its popularity bolstered, no doubt, by its notoriety—enjoyed relatively wide distribution. One of the many readers impressed by this irresistibly gritty drama was Giuseppe Verdi, who in 1850 called it "the greatest story of modern times." Unfortunately, the censors in Venice, where the new opera was scheduled to be performed, were less enthusiastic about Hugo's work. Citing the "disgusting immorality" of the plot, they threatened to ban Verdi's opera unless the story were rewritten to cast the Duke in a more favorable light. Verdi responded that he would rather scrap the project entirely than adopt such an illogical adaptation: Without the Duke's tyrannical absolutism and unrepentant lasciviousness, Gilda's rape and Rigoletto's ill-fated revenge would make no sense. The Venetian censors finally backed down. *Rigoletto* went forward as planned, and the result is now one of the most iconic operas of all time.

Synopsis

ACT I: *Germany, during the era of the Weimar Republic.* In the great hall of his lavish palace, the Duke boasts about his luck with the ladies. No woman is off-limits as far as he is concerned, and lately he has taken to flirting with the Countess Ceprano, the wife of one of his best friends. Rigoletto, the court jester, mercilessly teases the Countess's jilted husband. The Duke's courtiers enjoy Rigoletto's jokes, but they do not think of him as a friend. Instead, they cruelly laugh at him behind his back and mock his physical deformities. Ceprano wants to get back at Rigoletto for his insults, so he and his fellow courtiers decide to kidnap the woman they've seen in Rigoletto's apartment, whom they assume to be Rigoletto's mistress. All of a sudden, Monterone, a wealthy nobleman, forces his way into the crowd and accuses the Duke of seducing his daughter. When

Rigoletto responds to Monterone's fury with his typical jokes, Monterone curses him, wishing Rigoletto to suffer the same pain and embarrassment he is feeling. The Duke's men arrest Monterone and drag him away.

That night, after the party, Rigoletto thinks about Monterone's curse. A solitary figure introduces himself to Rigoletto: It is Sparafucile, a hit man, who tells Rigoletto he can "make problems disappear." Rigoletto returns home, thinking about Sparafucile's offer.

Rigoletto's home. The woman who lives in Rigoletto's apartment is not his mistress; she's his daughter, Gilda. Rigoletto is terrified that something will happen to Gilda, so he has asked her to stay home and not venture out. Gilda agrees to this rule, promising that she will leave home only to go to church. What Gilda doesn't tell her father is that she has recently fallen in love with a young man she saw while praying.

The Duke appears at the apartment, and Gilda instantly recognizes him as the young man from the church. He introduces himself as a poor student named Gualtier Maldè and declares his love for Gilda. Unaware that the sensitive young man is actually the cruel Duke in disguise, Gilda is overjoyed.

Meanwhile, the Duke's courtiers have gathered outside Rigoletto's home to kidnap his "mistress." When Rigoletto arrives, they say they are abducting the Countess Ceprano and ask Rigoletto to help. The courtiers blindfold Rigoletto, who holds a ladder for them as they kidnap Gilda. When Rigoletto discovers that his daughter has been taken, he is horrified and heartbroken. He wonders if this tragedy has anything to do with Monterone's curse.

ACT II: *The Duke's palace.* Alone in his chambers, the Duke reflects on his encounter with Gilda and wonders if he might actually love her. Soon his courtiers arrive. They laugh as they tell him how they kidnapped Rigoletto's "mistress" and left her in the Duke's bedroom. The Duke realizes it

is Gilda and hurries off to see her. Rigoletto enters, looking for Gilda. When he reveals that she is actually his daughter, the courtiers are surprised. Nevertheless, they refuse to help Rigoletto find her. Soon, Gilda appears, disheveled and deeply traumatized. She tells Rigoletto how the Duke wooed her, and of her abduction by his men. Monterone is brought into the palace to be executed. In the commotion, Rigoletto quietly vows to take revenge on the Duke.

VOICE TYPES

Since the early 19th century, singing voices have usually been classified into six basic types, three male and three female, according to their range:

SOPRANO
the highest voice type, normally possessed only by women and boys

MEZZO-SOPRANO
the voice type lying below the soprano and above the contralto; the term comes from the Italian word "mezzo," meaning "middle"

CONTRALTO
the lowest female voice type, also called "alto"

TENOR
the highest standard voice type in adult males

BARITONE
the voice type lying below the tenor and above the bass

BASS
the lowest voice type

ACT III: *The outskirts of town*. Despite everything that has happened, Gilda still loves the Duke. Rigoletto, by contrast, knows that the Duke is a scoundrel. Wanting Gilda to see what the Duke is really like, Rigoletto brings her to the seedy inn where Sparafucile lives with his sister, Maddalena. They watch through a window as the Duke shamelessly flirts with Maddalena. Gilda is heartbroken. Rigoletto begs his daughter to disguise herself in men's clothing and leave town, saying it is no longer safe for her to remain. After she leaves, Rigoletto hires Sparafucile to murder the Duke. He grimly looks forward to dumping the Duke's dead body in the river.

As storm clouds gather in the night sky, Gilda, worried for the Duke's safety, returns to the inn.

From outside, she overhears Maddalena urging her brother to spare the Duke and kill Rigoletto instead. Sparafucile refuses to kill Rigoletto, but he says that if he can find another body to give Rigoletto in the Duke's place, he will save the Duke's life. Gilda decides that she will sacrifice herself to provide the body Sparafucile needs. Disguised as a man, she knocks on the door and says she is a traveler looking for shelter from the storm. Sparafucile stabs Gilda and ties up her body in a bag for Rigoletto to collect. When Rigoletto arrives, he naturally assumes that the limp body in the bag is the Duke's. He gloats over his revenge … until he hears the Duke singing inside the inn. Horror-stricken, Rigoletto opens the bag to find his own daughter, fatally wounded. Gilda asks her father to forgive her and the Duke, then dies in his arms. Mad with grief, Rigoletto declares that Monterone's curse has come true.

WHO’S WHO IN *RIGOLETTO*

CHARACTER	PRONUNCIATION	VOICE TYPE	THE LOWDOWN
Rigoletto A court jester	ree-goh-LET-toh	baritone	Born a hunchback, Rigoletto has always been teased. Now a bitter and cynical adult, he has learned to defend himself against people’s cruelty by making jokes about everyone else. His one source of joy and happiness is his daughter, Gilda.
Gilda Rigoletto’s daughter	JEEL-dah	soprano	Rigoletto is terrified that someone will mistreat his daughter, so he keeps Gilda locked away at home. She leaves the house only to go to church—which is where she meets and falls fatefully in love with Gualtier Maldè (who is really the Duke in disguise).
Duke of Mantua		tenor	Cruel and lecherous, the Duke uses women, throws them away, and never looks back. Rigoletto typically laughs at the Duke’s dalliances, but when the Duke seduces Gilda, Rigoletto plans a brutal revenge.
Sparafucile and Maddalena A hit man and his sister	spah-rah-foo-CHEE-leh / mahd-dah-LEH-nah	bass and mezzo-soprano	After hearing how the Duke has mistreated his daughter, Rigoletto hires Sparafucile to kill the Duke. Unfortunately, this plan will tragically backfire.
Monterone A wealthy nobleman	mohn-teh-ROH-neh	Bass	Monterone is the father of a young woman seduced by the Duke. When Rigoletto makes fun of the grieving father’s shame and embarrassment, Monterone curses the jester.

The Creation of *Rigoletto*

1802 Victor Hugo is born in the French city of Besançon, 13 years after the beginning of the French Revolution and two years before Napoleon Bonaparte crowns himself Emperor of France.

1813 Giuseppe Verdi is born on October 9 or 10 (the exact date is uncertain) in Le Roncole, a tiny Italian village near Parma. Verdi's parents are innkeepers with no musical training, yet they soon recognize their son's prodigious talents. He will receive his first music lessons at the age of three.

1814 Following a series of bruising military defeats, Napoleon abdicates his throne, and the Bourbon dynasty once again takes power. Napoleon will make a brazen comeback the following year, but after his decisive loss at the Battle of Waterloo a few months later, the French government seems to be securely in Bourbon hands.

1822 Verdi, only nine years old, is hired to play organ at San Michele, a beautiful church across the street from his parents' inn. But Le Roncole's limited musical life falls far short of Verdi's needs, and he soon moves to the nearby city of Busseto to continue his musical studies.

1830 Once again, revolution breaks out in France. The Bourbon king is replaced by a constitutional monarchy.

1832 Verdi moves to Milan, the operatic capital of Italy. He hopes to study at the Milan Conservatory, but his application is rejected for bureaucratic reasons. (Ironically, the conservatory will officially be renamed "The Giuseppe Verdi Conservatory" after the composer's death.)

On November 22, Victor Hugo's play *Le Roi s'Amuse* premieres in Paris. Its success is short-lived: Deemed overly antagonistic to the crown, the play is banned the morning after its premiere.

1839 Verdi's first opera premieres at the Teatro alla Scala, Milan's most famous opera house. The opera is successful enough that Bartolomeo Merelli, the impresario in charge of La Scala, signs Verdi to a contract for three more operas.

1840 In stark contrast to the successes of 1839, 1840 is one of the worst years of Verdi's life. His wife dies on June 18, and his second opera is a total flop.

1842 On March 9, La Scala hosts the premiere of Verdi's third opera, *Nabucco*. It is an extraordinary hit. Singing the powerhouse role of the antiheroine Abigaille is Giuseppina Strepponi, a riveting young soprano who will become the love of Verdi's life. *Nabucco*'s success launches a period of extraordinary productivity for Verdi: Between 1844 and 1849, he will compose no fewer than 11 operas.

1847 Verdi moves to Paris and begins living with Strepponi.

1848 Revolutions break out across Europe, sweeping through Germany, Denmark, Belgium, Ireland, and the sprawling Austro-Hungarian Empire. In France, the constitutional monarchy is overthrown, and a new republic is established. In northern Italy, uprisings in Milan and Venice drive out the ruling Austrian army. When the Austrians retake the cities a few months later, however, they institute a brutal crackdown on free speech and politically motivated art.

1849 Verdi returns to Busseto, bringing Strepponi with him. In September, he expresses interest in writing an opera based on *Le Roi s'Amuse*.

1850 Verdi hopes to stage the new opera, which he has named *Rigoletto*, in Venice. Unfortunately, the city is once again under the control of the absolutist Austrian monarchy and the conservative censors find Hugo's story "obscene" and "immoral." Verdi must fight tooth and nail to bring the opera to the stage.

1851 *Rigoletto* finally premieres at Venice's Teatro La Fenice on March 11. It is a phenomenal success.

Back in Paris, the president of the French Republic seizes power in a bloody coup d'état. As an outspoken critic of the regime, Hugo must flee the country. He remains in exile, first in Belgium and then in the Channel Islands, until 1870.

1858 For centuries, the region now known as Italy has been a political patchwork of tiny city states, principalities, and duchies. Yet citizens and political thinkers across the peninsula have begun to imagine a unified Italy free from foreign domination. Victor Emmanuel II, King of Sardinia, is tapped as a potential leader of the prospective country, and Verdi's name is employed as a handy acronym for the hopeful phrase "Vittorio Emmanuele, Re d'Italia" (Victor Emmanuel, King of Italy).

1861 Italy is finally unified. At the behest of the new prime minister, Camillo Cavour, Verdi enters the Italian parliament. He will serve until 1865.

1901 Verdi dies on January 27. The funeral is small, in accordance with the composer's wishes, but a public memorial procession through the streets of Milan is attended by thousands. Verdi is mourned as a national hero: just one man, yet a towering figure who embodied the political aspirations and artistic pride of an entire country.

Clowning Around

Jester, clown, comedian: Rigoletto's title can vary. Yet no matter how his job is described, Verdi's hero always embodies the literary archetype of the "fool," a catch-all term for characters who provide comic relief for other people in the story—and who are typically anything but foolish. The fool has been a staple of literature and drama for centuries, and understanding this complex literary figure will deepen our appreciation of both Verdi's opera and the deeply tragic "fool" at the story's heart.

In a royal court, the jester held an oddly privileged position. As someone who rubbed shoulders with the court's most powerful people, the jester was a court insider with access to all the juiciest gossip. At the same time, the jester was clearly an outsider. With their colorful costumes, jesters were easy to differentiate from everyone else at court. More subtly, the way jesters spoke—with poems, puns, and even songs—made it clear that they thought and conversed on a different level than the people around them.

The content of the jester's speech was also unusual. Since anything a jester said could be dismissed as merely the nonsensical ramblings of a fool, jesters could speak truth to power with remarkable liberty. As long as their remarks were couched in the clothing of comedy, jesters could (at least in theory) say anything they wanted without fearing punishment. In fact, we still see this idea today at events such as the White House Correspondents' Association dinner, when comedians are invited to insult the president and powerful cabinet members to their faces.

Rigoletto, the court comedian, banters with the Duke.

It might seem that jesters enjoyed a plum position: Hired to make people laugh, they might have lived a life of gaiety and contentment free from the usual stressors of life in an absolutist regime. Yet the jester's job had a decidedly darker aspect. Perpetually viewed as different, jesters were frequently subject to ridicule and spite. This was especially true if they had a deformity or disability. For instance, Rigoletto, a hunchback, is a lightning rod for not only casual contempt from the Duke's friends (such as jeers and insults) but also the unimaginably cruel "joke" of Gilda's kidnapping.

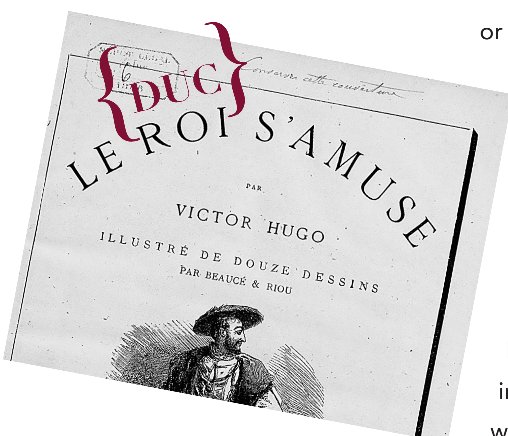
Rigoletto, then, is a comedian, but his life is anything but comic. Both Verdi and Hugo realized that this ironic juxtaposition of happiness and sorrow would make their story of love, hatred, and revenge all the more powerful. Verdi was right when he observed that Hugo's play was one of the greatest dramas of the modern age. For when the clown on stage removes a smiling mask to reveal his own bitter tears, the whole audience will likely weep along with him.

Dodging the Censor's Pen

Rigoletto is one of Verdi's most famous operas, but the opera we know and love today could easily have looked and sounded very different. At every step of the creative process, Verdi was forced to battle with the censors in Venice (where the opera premiered) to preserve the essential qualities of Hugo's cynical play. Initially, the Venetian authorities forbade Verdi from writing an opera based on *Le Roi s'Amuse*; later, the subject was only approved with significant modifications to the setting and the characters. Yet while Verdi's troubles with *Rigoletto* were perhaps unusually pronounced, the truth is that for Italian composers in the early to mid-1800s, censorship was a fact of life. Operas were censored for the same reason that all kinds of theater were: Authorities worried that certain subjects would spread dangerous ideas among the public, undermining the social order of the day.

One particularly touchy topic was the unflattering representation of royalty. This was especially true in the years after the French Revolution, when the monarchs of Europe suddenly understood the precarity of their positions and began to view their subjects with fear. Italy was no exception, and in the decades before Italian unification in 1861, the various states that existed on the peninsula—among them the Kingdom of the Two Sicilies with its capital in Naples; the Papal States, ruled by the pope from Rome; and the Hapsburg Empire, which controlled much of Northern Italy, including Milan and Venice—tried their utmost to suppress the kind of revolutionary sentiments that might lead to an uprising. Immorality, broadly conceived, was also a standard reason for required revisions, with crime, blasphemy, and sexual transgression among the most common targets of the censor's pen. Between an unethical and philandering ruler on the one hand and premeditated homicide on the other, *Le Roi s'Amuse* and *Rigoletto* managed to offend censors on both these counts, and one can see why the story was never going to be an easy sell.

Censorship occurred at various stages in the opera-writing process. Subjects were vetted in advance by the managers of a given theater and by the police; the libretto itself, once written, also needed official approval. Censors could demand alterations to specific words or lines, modifications to characters, the excision of specific arias or choruses, or even the rewriting of entire acts. But sometimes censorship was imposed at a later stage, after the dress rehearsal, or even after the first performance. In these cases, composers had to be able to rewrite or adapt their music in a hurry. Prior to Verdi, composers frequently reused numbers from their back catalog to fill the gaps in a censored opera; numbers that had previously fallen prey to censorship could also be reused in later works, with new words and new dramatic scenario. Given the unending demand for new works in Italian opera houses and the speed with which Italian composers were expected to write their music, this habit of reuse made good artistic, economic, and practical sense.



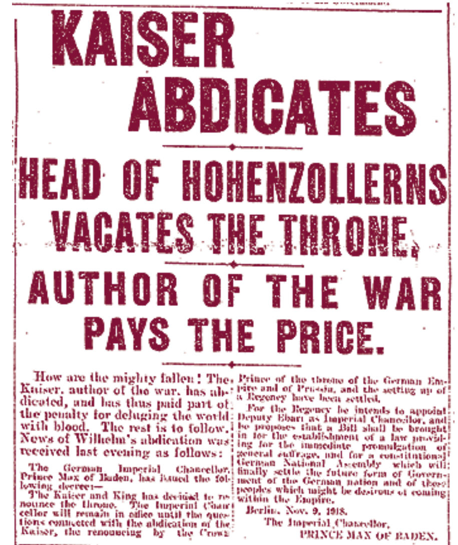
On the other hand, censorship in Italian opera was never consistent. A libretto rejected by the censor in Venice might be accepted by the authorities in Rome, while an opera staged in Milan might be banned in Naples. For this reason, it seems likely that Verdi knew exactly what kind of trouble the censors might cause him when he decided to adapt Hugo's play—and also that he had a decent chance of writing the *Rigoletto* he wanted anyway.

The Weimar Republic

1918 On November 9, following several weeks of nationwide protests, Kaiser Wilhelm II of Germany abdicates the throne.

The First World War ends on November 11 at 11AM. The war has been catastrophic. Across Europe, 15 million people are dead. Germany alone is left with two million orphans, one million widows, and one million people with war-related disabilities.

While some Germans are relieved that the war is over, many others are ashamed by the loss. Almost immediately, conspiracy theories begin to spread blaming Jews, communists, and other minorities for Germany's defeat.



KAISER ABDICATES

HEAD OF HOHENZOLLERNS VACATES THE THRONE.

AUTHOR OF THE WAR PAYS THE PRICE.

How are the mighty fallen! The Kaiser, author of the war, has abdicated, and has thus paid part of the penalty for deluging the world with blood. The rest is to follow. News of Wilhelm's abdication was received last evening as follows:

The German Imperial Chancellor, Prince Max of Baden, has issued the following decree:—

The Kaiser and King has decided to renounce the throne. The Imperial Chancellor will remain in office until the questions connected with the abdication of the Kaiser, the renouncing by the Crown Prince of the throne of the German Empire and of Prussia, and the setting up of a Regency have been settled.

For the Regency he intends to appoint Deputy Ebart as Imperial Chancellor, and he proposes that a Bill shall be brought in for the establishment of a law providing for the immediate promulgation of general suffrage, and for a constitutional German National Assembly which will finally settle the future form of Government of the German nation and of those peoples which might be desirous of coming within the Empire.

Berlin, Nov. 9, 1918.

The Imperial Chancellor,

PRINCE MAX OF BADEN.

1919 With Wilhem's abdication, Germany is in need of a new government. Berlin, the capital, is still roiled by protests, so politicians head to the bucolic town of Weimar to draft a new constitution. The constitution, which guarantees freedom of speech, equality for men and women, and universal suffrage, is finalized on August 11. The Weimar Republic, so named for the town where the constitution was crafted, begins.

Many Germans are excited about their new democracy, but two groups are furious about the new governmental structure. One group is the traditional conservatives, including business and church leaders, who are appalled by the Republic's labor-friendly laws and liberal social mores. The other group is a right-wing collection of nationalists and fascists; this group will soon coalesce into the Nazi Party.

In the meantime, delegates from the Allied forces meet with German delegates in the French town of Versailles to hammer out a peace treaty. By the time the treaty is finalized, Germany has lost one seventh of its prewar territory and been demilitarized. Most onerous of all, Germany is forced to assume sole financial responsibility for the war. Germany will not finish paying this debt until 1987.

1923 Desperate to prop up the national economy after the end of the war, the German government has been printing huge amounts of paper money, walloping the country with rampant hyperinflation. By November, when the government prints its first trillion-mark bank note, the exchange rate is more than four trillion marks per dollar.

On November 15, the government institutes a new currency (the Rentenmark, equal to one billion old imperial marks) to try to stabilize the economy. The measure works, and over the next few years, Germans will enjoy relative prosperity. Unfortunately, the new currency is also accompanied by strict austerity measures, including a rollback of social security and labor laws, that will prove disastrous when the economy once again takes a turn for the worse.

1929 On October 29, a sudden stock market crash in the United States sparks the Great Depression. Germany's still-fragile economy is deeply affected by the downturn, and soon one third of the German workforce is unemployed. Unfortunately, these dire economic circumstances provide ample fodder for the right-wing parties, including the Nazis, that have long been dissatisfied with the Weimar Republic.

1932 Over the course of the year, Germany holds no fewer than three major elections. Yet these attempts to establish a government capable of dealing with the ongoing economic disaster bear little fruit: No single party gets a majority, and establishing a government depends on building a coalition between parties. The traditional conservatives see their chance to overturn the Republic. Confident that they can control the upstart fascists, they decide to join forces with the Nazis and agree to make Adolf Hitler chancellor. It is a Faustian bargain that will have horrific consequences for the future.

1933 Hitler assumes control of the German government on January 30. The Weimar Republic—and the era of political and social progress it represented—is over, to be replaced by the terror, destruction, and genocide of the Third Reich.

The Guided Listening Activities are designed to introduce students to a selection of memorable moments from the opera. They include information on what is happening dramatically, a description of the musical style, and a roadmap of musical features to listen for. Guided Listening Activities can be used by students and teachers of varying levels of musical experience.

IN PREPARATION

Teachers can access recordings for these Guided Listening Activities at metopera.org/aorigolettomusic.

"Gualtier Maldè … Caro nome che il mio cor"

Gilda has seen a handsome young man during her frequent visits to church. She can't stop thinking about him, but she has no idea who he is or where he is from. Imagine her surprise, then, when this same young man appears at her window one night and introduces himself as "Gualtier Maldè," an impoverished student. Maldè tells Gilda that he loves her. When he leaves, she reflects on the happiness she has found, never suspecting that the gentle young Maldè is actually the Duke in disguise.

WHAT TO LISTEN FOR:

- How Verdi's score depicts Gilda sighs, breathlessness, and rapid heartbeats
- Three different types of virtuosic ornamentation: trills, melismas, and high notes

(00:00) Gilda stands alone after Maldè's departure, thinking about what has just happened. Listen to the solo flute (the high, breathy instrument). Throughout this aria, different solo instruments accompany and punctuate Gilda's singing.

(00:10) Gilda softly says the name of the man she just met. This introductory section of the aria is very simple and introspective.

(00:50) Two flutes introduce the aria's main melody.

(01:19) Gilda repeats the melody the flutes just played as she recites the aria's first line: "That sweet name makes my heart beat faster." Listen to how she pauses briefly between each syllable, as though she is out of breath. Singers rely on very careful control of their breath to produce the music you hear on stage. Try singing this line: Does it make you get out of breath? Do you feel like you're sighing?

(02:05) Listen to how Gilda oscillates rapidly between two notes. This is a type of ornamentation called a trill, and it is a hallmark of virtuosic arias.

(02:49) The orchestra drops out, and Gilda sings a soaring melody all on her own. Listen carefully and you'll notice that Gilda's numerous notes all accompany a single syllable of text. This is a compositional technique called a melisma and is another major element of operatic virtuosity.

(03:44) Gilda sings an enormous melisma that cascades from a very high to a very low note. Since sopranos have the highest voices of any opera singer, super high notes are a crucial element of their virtuosic toolbox. Listen to how Gilda mixes melismas and high notes in this section.

(05:08) This solo is the climax of the entire aria, with tons of trills, melismas and high notes.

(06:10) The orchestra plays a syncopated variation of Gilda's opening melody, but Gilda does not sing along with them. Instead, she simply repeats the name Gualtier Maldè over and over.

(06:38) Gilda sings the opening melody one last time as she brings the aria to a close. In the background, you hear the Duke's henchmen commenting on her appearance as they prepare to kidnap her.

“La donna è mobile”

The Duke has come to Sparafucile’s club to dance and flirt. Intoxicated, he lounges on a couch and sings an upbeat song about the fickleness of women—a deeply ironic sentiment, given the Duke’s own behavior. This song will be crucial later in the opera, when Rigoletto hears the supposedly dead Duke singing and realizes that Sparafucile has killed someone else instead. It is also one of the most famous tunes ever written.

WHAT TO LISTEN FOR:

- The structure of the aria, which alternates between verses (featuring the same music but different texts) and refrains (in which both music and text are repeated)
- The triple-meter time signature

(00:00) Listen to tune played by the orchestra and observe how easy it is to count a steady “one–two–three” with the music. When we can easily group musical pulses into sets of three, we say that the piece is in triple meter. This meter is often associated with dances (like the waltz) because it is lively and easy to follow.

(00:12) The Duke begins singing the aria’s main melody. Pay attention to the lyrics, so you can see if/when they return: “A woman is a fickle thing, flitting around like a feather in the breeze.”

(00:23) The melody repeats, but now the words are different. The Duke says that no matter how a woman looks, she is always lying.

(00:34) The melody changes, climbing upward before finally falling back down to bring the phrase to a close. Yet the lyrics are the same as at (00:12).

(00:51) The Duke ends this portion of the aria with a flourish, repeating the last few notes of the verse, then tossing off a dazzling high note.

(01:12) The music from the beginning of the aria repeats, but now the lyrics are different: “If you trust her, you’ll be miserable. Tell her your secrets and she’ll break your heart.” Since the music repeats but the lyrics have changed, this is the verse portion of the song.

(01:34) The music from (00:34) returns—and so do the lyrics. Thus, this is the refrain portion of the song, which always features identical music and text.

(02:00) Instead of simply repeating the flourish from (00:51), the Duke sings a giant melisma, then leaps up to a soaring high note—two virtuosic techniques guaranteed to win applause from the audience!

“Ah, più non ragiono”

A terrible storm is brewing as Gilda comes to Sparafucile and Maddalena’s inn. Although her father has begged her to leave town as quickly as possible, she has a terrible premonition that something will happen to the Duke. As Gilda stands outside the inn, she overhears Sparafucile and Maddalena talking about the planned murder. Gilda makes a fateful decision as lightning and thunder split the sky.

WHAT TO LISTEN FOR:

- How Verdi’s score depicts a violent thunderstorm
- The interaction between Sparafucile and Maddalena’s conversation (inside the inn) and Gilda’s monologue (as she stands outside)

(00:00) At the end of Act II, Rigoletto swears to strike the Duke “like a lightning bolt.” As the storm blows in at the beginning of Act III, however, Rigoletto’s metaphor seems to be taking on a very literal form. In the opening seconds of this excerpt, listen to how Verdi uses the orchestra to create flashing lightning, grumbling thunder, and rushing wind.

(00:06) To approximate the sound of wind, Verdi uses an unusual technique: a chorus standing offstage hums a seven-note melody that rises and falls like a fearsome gust.

(00:28) Maddalena begs her brother not to kill the Duke. As she does, the orchestra begins playing an ominous, repeating rhythm.

(00:44) Listen again to the lightning, thunder, and wind created by the orchestra and offstage chorus. The lightning seems to occur just as Sparafucile explains his evil plan. Why do you think Verdi did this?

(01:27) The wind and thunder in the orchestra are every bit as sinister as Maddalena’s plan.

(01:53) For the first time in this scene, the onstage characters have the same melody as the orchestra. Ask your students what is happening in the storm at this moment. Why do they think so?

(02:02) Sparafucile and Maddalena, who are standing inside the club and talking to each other, both sing the same jagged tune. By contrast Gilda, who stands outside listening through a window, sings a different tune. Why might Verdi have chosen to group the voices this way?

(02:07) Now all three characters sing the same melody. What effect does this have on the drama of the scene?

(02:22) The storm music pauses just long enough for us to hear the tolling of a bell in the distance. The time has come to kill the Duke. Soon, however, the winds return, now more insistent than ever.

(02:46) Gilda announces that she wants to die for the Duke. As though illustrating her fateful decision, a bolt of lightning strikes. Between thunderclaps, we can hear her knocking on the door.

(03:07) The music from (01:53) returns.

(04:07) The storm bursts around Gilda as she stumbles into the inn. Sparafucile grabs a knife, stabs her, and drags her body outside into the rain.

Aria

A song for solo voice accompanied by orchestra. In opera, arias mostly appear during a pause in dramatic action when a character is reflecting musically on his or her emotions. Most arias are lyrical, with a tune that can be hummed, and many arias include musical repetition.

Chorus

A section of an opera in which a large group of singers performs together, typically with orchestral accompaniment. Most choruses include at least four different vocal lines, in registers from low to high, with multiple singers per part. The singers are typically from a particular group of people who play a certain role on stage—soldiers, peasants, prisoners, and so on. Choruses may offer a moral, comment on the plot, or participate in the dramatic action.

Ensemble

A musical piece for two or more soloists, accompanied by orchestra. Types of ensembles include duets (for two soloists), trios (for three soloists), and quartets (for four soloists). Sometimes singers will respond directly to one another during an ensemble. At other times, singers will each sing to themselves as if the other singers were not on stage. In ensembles, multiple characters may simultaneously express very different emotions from one another.

Intermission

A break between the acts of an opera. At the beginning of an intermission, the curtain falls (that is, closes), and the lights in the auditorium become brighter. Intermissions provide audiences with a chance to walk around, talk with one another, and reflect on what they have seen and what could happen next. The break in the performance may also correspond with a change of time or scene in the story of the opera—the next act may take place hours or months later or be set in a different location. Usually, lights will dim and a bell may sound to indicate that the intermission is drawing to a close and the opera is about to resume.

Libretto

The text of an opera, including all the words that are said or sung by performers. Until the early eighteenth century, a composer would frequently set music to a pre-existing libretto, and any given libretto could thus be set to music multiple times by different composers. During the 18th and 19th centuries, collaboration between the author of the libretto, known as the librettist, and the composer became more frequent. Some opera composers, most notably Richard Wagner, are known for writing their own text.

Melody

A succession of pitches that form an understandable unit. The melody of a piece consists of the tune that a listener can hum or sing. During arias, the singer will usually sing the main melody, though other instruments may play parts of the melody. Sometimes, such as during ensembles, multiple melodies can occur simultaneously.

Score

The complete musical notation for a piece, the score includes notated lines for all of the different instrumental and vocal parts that together constitute a musical composition. In an opera orchestra, the conductor follows the score during rehearsals and performances, while each performer follows his or her individual part.

Solo

A piece, musical passage, or line for a lone singer or other performer, with or without instrumental accompaniment. The most common type of solo in opera is the aria, which is composed for a single voice with orchestral accompaniment.

Theme and Motive

Themes are the melodic ideas that are musical building blocks for a piece. A theme is often recognizable as a distinct tune and may reappear in its original form or in altered form throughout the piece. A motif (or motive) is a brief musical idea that recurs throughout a musical work. Motives can be based on a melodic, rhythmic, or harmonic component, and their repetition makes them recognizable to the listener. In opera, musical motives are often symbolically associated with specific characters or dramatic ideas.

Verismo

A movement in Italian theater and opera in the late 19th century that embraced realism and explored areas of society previously ignored on the stage: the poor, the lower-class, and the criminal. Its characters are driven by passion to defy reason, morality, and the law. In order to reflect these emotional extremes, composers of verismo opera developed a musical style that communicates raw and unfiltered passions. Musically, verismo operas react against the forced ornamentation of the bel canto style and instead emphasize a more natural setting of the text to music. Before its exploration on the operatic stage, the verismo aesthetic first developed within literature.

Encouraging Student Response in Attending the Final Dress Rehearsal

COMMON CORE STANDARDS AND *RIGOLETTO*

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.SL.9- 12.1
Initiate and participate effectively in a range of collaborative discussions (one-on-one, in groups, and teacher-led) with diverse partners on grades 9–12 topics, texts, and issues, building on others' ideas and expressing their own clearly and persuasively.

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.SL.9- 12.1d
Respond thoughtfully to diverse perspectives; synthesize comments, claims, and evidence made on all sides of an issue; resolve contradictions when possible; and determine what additional information or research is required to deepen the investigation or complete the task.

Watching and listening to a performance is a unique experience that takes students beyond the printed page to an immersion in images, sound, interpretation, technology, drama, skill, and craft. This performance activity will help students analyze different aspects of the experience, engage critically with the performance, and express their views in a respectful and supported environment.

The enclosed performance activity is called "Opera Review: *Rigoletto*." The reproducible handout for this activity, available at the back of this guide, will invite students to think of themselves as opera critics, taking notes on what they see and hear during the performance and critiquing each scene on a five-star scale. Students should bring this activity sheet to the final dress rehearsal and fill it out during intermission and/or after the final curtain. When they return to class, students can use their "Opera Review" sheets as they review and discuss their experience.

DISCUSSION

Students will enjoy starting the class with an open discussion of the final dress rehearsal. What did they like? What didn't they? Did anything surprise them? What would they like to see or hear again? What would they have done differently?

Next, ask your students to focus on *Rigoletto*'s characters. Who was their favorite character? Who was their least favorite character? Which character was the most memorable, and why? Invite them to consider how the many elements of the final dress rehearsal—music, poetry, acting, singing, costumes, stage sets, wigs, makeup, etc.—worked together to bring each character to life. Then begin a more general discussion of *Rigoletto*'s plot; the following questions may facilitate your discussion:

- Why do you think Rigoletto is a court jester? Did he take the job because he loved it, or because he felt he had no other options?
- When Rigoletto meets Sparafucile (in Act I), he observes, "Sparafucile and I are basically the same: I wound with words, he wounds with a knife." What do you think this means? Has Rigoletto himself ever been hurt by words?
- Why do you think the Duke pretended to be a poor student when he first introduces himself to Gilda?
- Do you think Gilda loves the Duke? Do you think the Duke loves Gilda? Why or why not?
- Throughout the opera, Rigoletto is terrified by "the old man's curse." Where does this idea come from? Do you think he is really cursed? What other explanation might there be for this tragic story?

Rigoletto is a tragedy of human error. Unlike, say, *Romeo and Juliet*, in which the tragic ending is due to an unfortunate coincidence (the letter telling Romeo about Juliet's

potion doesn't reach him in time), *Rigoletto*'s finale is the result of individual characters' actions, assumptions, flaws, and mistakes. Invite your students to consider what each character might have done differently to create a happier ending. For instance, the Duke could treat women with respect, his friends could decide not to kidnap Gilda, or Rigoletto could refrain from hiring a murderer to dispatch with the Duke.

It is also important to note that *Rigoletto* includes some very disturbing events, such as Gilda's rape and her eventual murder. If your students need to talk through these elements of the plot, make your classroom a safe space for them to do so. Does *Rigoletto*'s story remind them of anything happening in current events, such as the #MeToo movement? Can *Rigoletto* teach us anything about these events? Can current events teach us anything about *Rigoletto*?

Finally, remember that opera is a multimedia art form: all aspects of the performance your students have just seen—including the act of seeing it live—are important factors contributing to the overall experience. Ask them for any final thoughts and impressions. What did they find most memorable?

IN PRINT

Berger, William. *Verdi with a Vengeance: An Energetic Guide to the Life and Complete Works of the King of Opera*. New York: Vintage Books, 2000.
An excellent and accessible introduction to Verdi, with a good overview of the composer's life and insightful commentary on each of Verdi's operas.

Hugo, Victor. *The Essential Victor Hugo*. New translations with an introduction and notes by E. H. and A. M. Blackmore. New York: Oxford University Press, 2004.
A well-curated selection of Hugo's writings, this volume is also notable for its excellent introduction and a chronology that contextualizes Hugo's life and work.

ONLINE

The Metropolitan Opera. "Bartlett Sher on *Rigoletto*." December 28, 2021.
youtube.com/watch?v=9gDO4-EeIFs.
Hear from the director of the Met's production, which transports the action from 16th-century Mantua to Weimar Germany in the 1920s.

Aria Code Podcast. "Verdi's *Rigoletto*: First Love, Wrong Love." January 16, 2019.
wnycstudios.org/podcasts/aria-code/episodes/aria-code-verdi-rigoletto-nadine-sierra.
In this episode, host Rhiannon Giddens and her guests explore the aria "Caro nome," consider the dizzying thrill of first love, Verdi's brilliant powers of orchestration, and why Gilda's infatuation rings so true even today.

The Metropolitan Opera. *Rigoletto* Illustrated Synopsis.
metopera.org/rigoletto-illustrated.
Available in English and Spanish, this short, graphic novel-style synopsis provides an overview of the opera's plot.

Rigoletto

Performance date:

Reviewed by:

Have you ever wanted to be a music and theater critic? Now's your chance!

As you watch *Rigoletto*, use the space below to keep track of your thoughts and opinions. What did you like about the performance? What didn't you like? If you were in charge, what might you have done differently? Think carefully about the action, music, and stage design. Then, after the opera, share your opinions with your friends, classmates, and anyone else who wants to learn more about Verdi's masterpiece and this performance at the Met!

THE SHOW, SCENE BY SCENE	ACTION	MUSIC	SET DESIGN / STAGING
The Duke sings about women. MY OPINION OF THIS SCENE:	☆☆☆☆☆	☆☆☆☆☆	☆☆☆☆☆
Rigoletto teases Count Ceprano. MY OPINION OF THIS SCENE:	☆☆☆☆☆	☆☆☆☆☆	☆☆☆☆☆
Monterone curses Rigoletto. MY OPINION OF THIS SCENE:	☆☆☆☆☆	☆☆☆☆☆	☆☆☆☆☆
Rigoletto meets Sparafucile. MY OPINION OF THIS SCENE:	☆☆☆☆☆	☆☆☆☆☆	☆☆☆☆☆
Rigoletto speaks to Gilda. MY OPINION OF THIS SCENE:	☆☆☆☆☆	☆☆☆☆☆	☆☆☆☆☆
Gilda thinks about Maldè. MY OPINION OF THIS SCENE:	☆☆☆☆☆	☆☆☆☆☆	☆☆☆☆☆

THE SHOW, SCENE BY SCENE	ACTION	MUSIC	SET DESIGN / STAGING
The Duke thinks about Gilda. MY OPINION OF THIS SCENE:	☆☆☆☆☆	☆☆☆☆☆	☆☆☆☆☆
Rigoletto arrives at the Duke’s apartment. MY OPINION OF THIS SCENE:	☆☆☆☆☆	☆☆☆☆☆	☆☆☆☆☆
Gilda tells her father what happened. MY OPINION OF THIS SCENE:	☆☆☆☆☆	☆☆☆☆☆	☆☆☆☆☆
Rigoletto vows to get revenge. MY OPINION OF THIS SCENE:	☆☆☆☆☆	☆☆☆☆☆	☆☆☆☆☆
Rigoletto and Gilda go to Sparafucile’s inn. MY OPINION OF THIS SCENE:	☆☆☆☆☆	☆☆☆☆☆	☆☆☆☆☆
Rigoletto makes a deal with Sparafucile. MY OPINION OF THIS SCENE:	☆☆☆☆☆	☆☆☆☆☆	☆☆☆☆☆
A storm MY OPINION OF THIS SCENE:	☆☆☆☆☆	☆☆☆☆☆	☆☆☆☆☆
Rigoletto collects the body. MY OPINION OF THIS SCENE:	☆☆☆☆☆	☆☆☆☆☆	☆☆☆☆☆
Gilda’s death MY OPINION OF THIS SCENE:	☆☆☆☆☆	☆☆☆☆☆	☆☆☆☆☆