ACCESS OPERA
EDUCATOR GUIDE

VERDI

IL TROVATORE

The Metropolitan Opera

THE WORK

An opera in four acts, sung in Italian

Music by Giuseppe Verdi

Libretto by Salvatore Cammarano and Leone Emanuele Bardare, based on *El Trovador* by Antonio García Gutiérrez

First performed January 19, 1853, at the Teatro Apollo, Rome

PRODUCTION

David McVicar
Production

Charles Edwards
Set Designer

Brigitte Reiffenstuel
Costume Designer

Jennifer Tipton
Lighting Designer

Leah Hausman
Choreographer

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Superstition and prejudice, hatred and fear, passionate and all-consuming love: These are the primal emotions that power *Il Trovatore*, one of Verdi's most thrilling works and one of the most popular operas of all time. Based on a sprawling but wildly popular play by Spanish playwright Antonio García Gutiérrez, Verdi's opera has a famously implausible plot, in which two babies are accidentally swapped in one woman's quest for revenge—with tragic results. But believability is beside the point. As in the medieval courtly love tradition that Gutiérrez's play echoes, the opera's characters are archetypes: Manrico and Leonora, the heroes, are on the good side; Count di Luna, however, is straightforwardly villainous. The only exception is Azucena, one of Verdi's most compelling characters, who is the victim of traumatic persecution yet herself inflicts horrific violence.

Il Trovatore hews closely to an older way of composing Italian opera that was on the verge of becoming obsolete when it premiered in 1853. Unlike the daring formal experiments of *Rigoletto*—the opera that preceded it—and the groundbreaking realism of *La Traviata*—which followed—*Il Trovatore* sticks to well-worn formulae inherited from the bel canto operas of Verdi's forebears, Vincenzo Bellini and Gaetano Donizetti. But Verdi delivers these devices with a dramatic intensity unmatched by any other opera in the repertory. From the opening drum rolls to the moment the curtain falls in the last act, *Il Trovatore* fires on all cylinders. But the opera doesn't come without monumental challenges. As the world-famous tenor Enrico Caruso remarked, "all it takes for a successful performance of *Il Trovatore* is the four greatest singers in the world."

This guide is intended to help students understand why scholars deem *Il Trovatore* the apotheosis of Italian bel canto opera and how plot can matter less than dramatic truth in sung theater. The guide will also enable students to appreciate elements of David McVicar's production, which updates the action from late-medieval Spain to the early 19th century, evoking the chaos of the Spanish War of Independence through the grotesque artistic style of Francisco Goya. 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 *Il Trovatore*.

The Source, The Story, and Who's Who in *Il Trovatore*
A Timeline: The historical context of the opera's story and composition
Closer Looks: Brief articles highlighting an important aspect of Verdi's *Il Trovatore*
Guided Listening: A series of musical excerpts with questions and a roadmap to possible student responses
Ten Essential Musical Terms: Musical terminology that will help students analyze and describe 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 *Il Trovatore*, 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. In particular, this guide offers in-depth introductions to:

- Romantic tropes in *Il Trovatore*
- Storytelling as a narrative device in the opera
- 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

A NOTE FOR EDUCATORS:
Il Trovatore, like many other musical and literary works of the 19th century, explicitly describes an itinerant group of people known as "Gypsies," who are frequently associated with things such as witchcraft and the occult, fortune-telling, and tarot-card reading. In the Act I aria *"Abbietta zingara"* for instance, a Gypsy woman is accused of witchcraft and blamed for causing a child's illness. These fictional Gypsies perpetuate an unfortunate stereotype of the real-life Roma, a traditionally nomadic ethnic minority living in countries across the world.

The term Gypsy today has largely negative connotations and is considered a slur by some, and the preferred term for this ethic group is either Roma or Romani people. More information about the Roma and their lives in contemporary European society can be found on the web at the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE)'s Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights. To read more about the history of the Roma, particularly in Spain, as it pertains to Bizet's *Carmen*, another opera with depictions of Romani people, visit this page: metopera.org/discover/education/educator-guides/carmen/the-world-of-the-romanies/. In this guide, we use the terms Roma or Romani when referring to the ethnic group generally, though maintain the term Gypsy in the text from the opera, as to preserve the historical and cultural context in which the work was composed.

Summary

The characters of *Il Trovatore* are always bringing up the past. They relive its trauma constantly and obsessively. Long before the main action begins, Count di Luna's father has a woman burned at the stake for putting the evil eye on his infant son—who then disappears in mysterious circumstances. When the fire dies down, onlookers are horrified to find a baby's skeleton in the ashes. Everyone assumes that woman's daughter, Azucena, is responsible for the outrage. But Azucena has made a tragic error. She accidentally threw her own baby onto the fire rather than di Luna's brother. Consumed with guilt, grief, and the desire for vengeance, she raises the child—Manrico—as her own son.

Decades later, Count di Luna and Manrico, a knight in the service of a rebel prince, find themselves on opposite sides of a political struggle—and a love triangle. Politics takes a back seat to matters of the heart as they both compete for the affections of Leonora, a lady-in-waiting to the Princess of Aragon. Leonora loves Manrico, the mysterious troubadour who sings to her in the garden, but not the villainous Count. But the traumatic events of the past are about to catch up with all three of them as Azucena's dark secrets are gradually revealed. By the time the curtain falls, Azucena has avenged her mother, but at a terrible cost.

THE SOURCE: THE PLAY *EL TROVADOR* BY ANTONIO GARCÍA GUTIÉRREZ

Verdi was a man of the theater. He was constantly on the lookout for theatrical works, new or old, that could catch his imagination—no surprise given that almost all his operas were derived from spoken drama. By the early 1850s, Verdi—by now quite famous—was constantly being sent plays to read, whether by his friends or his publisher. This is probably how he got a hold of Antonio García Gutiérrez's *El Trovador* (1836), which doesn't seem to have ever been published in Italy. Giuseppina Strepponi, Verdi's then-partner and eventual second wife, was also a consummate woman of the theater, having had a successful career as an opera singer, and spoke multiple languages. She likely translated Gutiérrez's play for Verdi and certainly seems to have felt some ownership over the project, judging by a letter she sent him shortly before the premiere which states: "Hurry up and give OUR *Trovatore*!"

Gutiérrez's *El Trovador* had taken Madrid by storm in 1836 and made its author an overnight success. The play is a sprawling drama nominally set in Zaragoza in the autonomous community of Aragon, one of the kingdoms that flourished on the Iberian Peninsula during the late-medieval period, populated by a cast of characters ripped from a storybook version of the period—singing troubadours, noble ladies, Romani people, and more. The plot rests on certain premises that modern audiences find hard to accept, from the hero and villain who don't realize they are brothers to the fact that Azucena accidentally throws her own child onto a burning pyre. Nineteenth-century audiences were much more willing to take these contrivances at face value. But what must have drawn Verdi (and Strepponi) to the play was its taut network of relationships. Count di Luna and Manrico are bitter rivals in a love triangle with Leonora, who loves Manrico and hates di Luna. But they are also in another kind of triangle with Azucena, who di Luna despises as his brother's murderer and whom Manrico loves as his mother. One curious result is that the primary female characters never interact. The characters' motivations are, however, clear and sharp, and

tensions run high. The materials are, in other words, perfect for opera, where dramatic truth can be communicated effectively by the music and plot details—at least sometimes—don't matter as much.

Verdi initially wanted to entrust the libretto of *El Trovador* to the poet and dramatist Salvadore Cammarano, most famous today for writing the libretto to Donizetti's bel canto classic *Lucia di Lammermoor* (1835). Verdi had collaborated with Cammarano on several operas, including a mooted (but never completed) adaptation of Shakespeare's *King Lear*; he thus knew Cammarano as a skilled poet with relatively conservative dramatic instincts. Cammarano's first attempts stripped much of what Verdi found gripping in Gutiérrez's drama, and the composer was forced to provide the poet with a detailed scenario of his vision for the adaptation. The libretto Cammarano subsequently produced seems to have followed Verdi's scenario in most aspects and fully satisfied the composer. In fact, when Cammarano unexpectedly died in July 1852, the poet tasked with completing the libretto, Leone Emanuele Bardare, didn't have a great deal to do.

Cammarano's instinctive use of the traditional formulas and set pieces of bel canto opera left their mark on Verdi's compositional process. *Il Trovatore* is constructed in large numbers, closed dramatic units that invariably end with a pause for rapturous applause—very different from the continuously developing drama with which Verdi experiments in *Rigoletto*. The opera therefore stands as the apotheosis of an older way of writing Italian opera, a thrilling capstone to a grand tradition that Verdi would thereafter leave behind.

Synopsis

ACT I *Spain, early 19th century, during the Peninsular War.* 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 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, Azucena, has nursed him back to health in a camp in the mountains.*

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.

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.

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.

WHO'S WHO IN *IL TROVATORE*

CHARACTER	PRONUNCIATION	VOICE TYPE	THE LOWDOWN
Count di Luna A nobleman	Count dee LOO-nah	baritone	Count di Luna has only two desires: to possess Leonora and to take revenge on the woman who—so he thinks—killed his baby brother.
Leonora A lady-in-waiting	leh-oh-NOH-rah	soprano	Leonora is in love with the mysterious troubadour singing beyond the garden wall. If she can't have him, she would rather die.
Azucena An old woman	ad-zoo-CHEH-nah	mezzo-soprano	Azucena is torn between her love for her dead mother and her adopted son, ultimately choosing to sacrifice him to avenge her.
Manrico A rebel officer	man-REE-koh	tenor	Manrico loves Leonora and will do anything to stop the Count possessing her—without realizing that he is, in fact, the Count's brother.
Ferrando An officer in the count's army	feh-RAN-doh	bass	Count di Luna's henchman witnesses the tragic events that set the story in motion and seeks revenge on his lord's behalf.

The Creation of *Il Trovatore*

1813 Giuseppe Verdi is born on October 9 in a small village near Busseto, a market town in the province of Parma. His father and mother are both tradespeople, an innkeeper and an innkeeper's daughter, respectively. Verdi is just a few months younger than Antonio García Gutiérrez, born on July 5 of the same year.

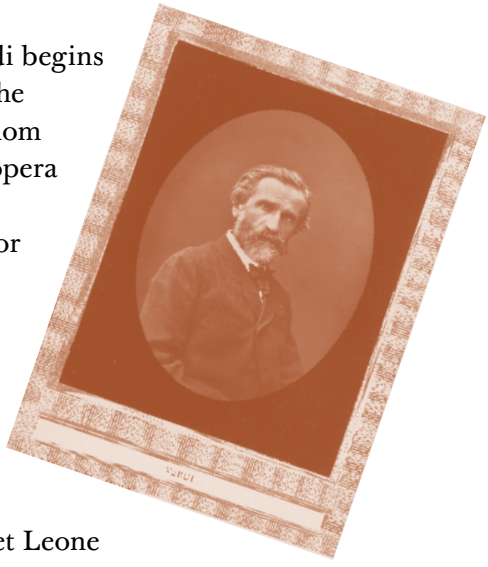
1832 The young Verdi, a promising musician despite a patchy musical education, sits the entrance examination for the Milan Conservatoire: To everyone's surprise, he is rejected. Undeterred, he decides to study privately in Milan.

1836 Gutiérrez, now an aspiring playwright struggling to make ends meet in Madrid, writes a stirring Romantic drama called *El Trovador*. It is a huge success and makes Gutiérrez's name.

1839 Verdi's first opera, *Oberto*, scores a modest success at the Teatro alla Scala in Milan, Italy's most famous opera house. But success is bittersweet: Verdi's infant son Icilio died just a few weeks before. A few months later, while working on his second opera, a comedy, Verdi's first wife Margherita Barezzi falls ill and dies. The bereft composer is forced to continue working on the comic opera, but it flops miserably.

1842 Verdi finally scores a triumphant success with his biblical opera *Nabucco*, which premieres at La Scala. Among the cast is Giuseppina Strepponi, who will eventually become the composer's second wife. Over the next decade Verdi works tirelessly, writing at least one opera per year: He will later refer to this period as his anni di galera, or "prison years."

1851 Fresh from the triumph of his opera *Rigoletto*, Verdi begins casting around for his next project. He writes to the eminent librettist Salvadore Cammarano, with whom Verdi has already collaborated, proposing a new opera based on Gutiérrez's *El Trovador*. Though the play hasn't been staged outside Spain, it is translated for Verdi by Strepponi.



1852 Work on the libretto and the opera is progressing slowly: Verdi offers the project to the Teatro di San Carlo in Naples, and then, after a refusal, to the Teatro Apollo in Rome. But in July, Cammarano dies unexpectedly. The libretto to *Il Trovatore*, almost finished, is completed by the poet Leone Emanuele Bardare.

1853 *Il Trovatore* premieres at the Teatro Apollo on January 19. Like Gutiérrez's play before it, the opera is a triumphant hit with the public. The back-to-back success of *Rigoletto* and *Il Trovatore* confirms Verdi's reputation as the leading Italian composer of his time, and he is courted by opera houses across Italy and Europe.

1853 Just two months later Verdi's next opera, *La Traviata*, premieres in Venice. Though initially a flop, the opera is restaged with success the following year and becomes one of the composer's most popular works.

1859 Verdi adapts another of Gutiérrez's plays, the historical drama *Simón Bocanegra*, into the opera *Simon Boccanegra*. This time, however, critics and the public are unenthusiastic. Verdi will eventually revise this work in the 1880s.

1861 At the culmination of a decades-long project of Italian nationalism known as the Risorgimento, the various independent states on the Italian peninsula are unified into a single Kingdom of Italy. In 1871, the only holdout—the Papal States, ruled by the pope from the city of Rome—is defeated and incorporated into the new country.

1887 *Otello*, Verdi's first new opera in more than 15 years, premieres at La Scala. The premiere is an international event, attended by critics and luminaries from around the world, and the opera is immediately acclaimed as a masterpiece.

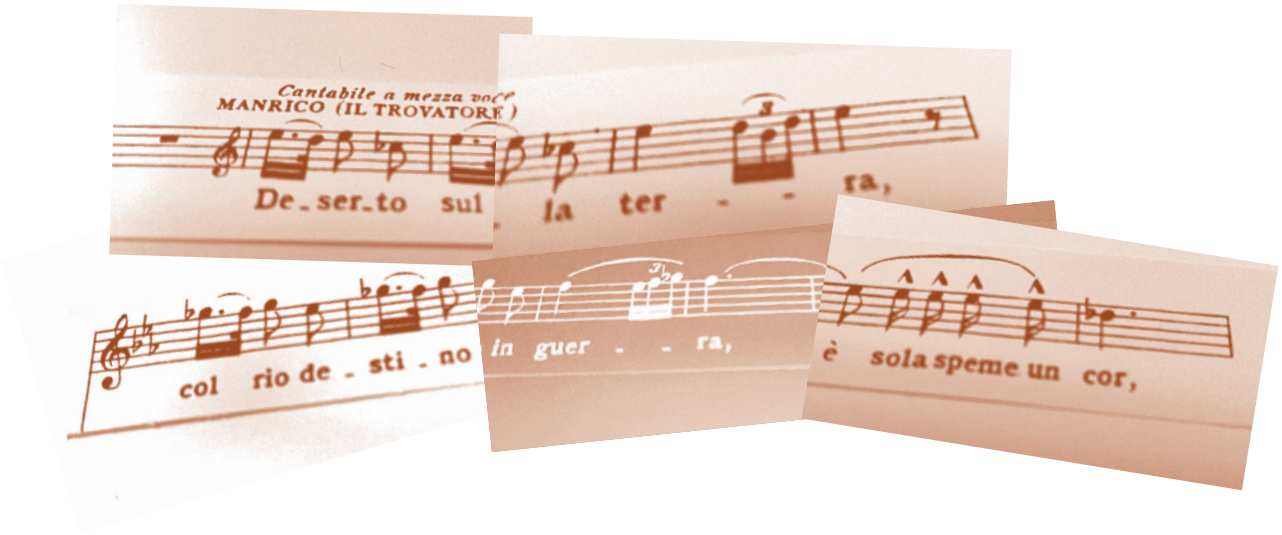
1893 The elderly Verdi, now 80 years old, astonishes the world once more with another Shakespeare opera, *Falstaff*.

1901 Verdi dies in Milan on January 27, following a stroke. He is buried alongside his wife Giuseppina, who has died four years earlier. A month later, Verdi and his wife are reburied in the newly completed retirement home for musicians that Verdi himself founded. A colossal crowd of 300,000 people line the streets, and an 800-strong choir sings the chorus "Va, pensiero" from *Nabucco*—the opera with which Verdi's triumphant career had been launched all those years ago.

Of Troubadours and Travelers

Many of Verdi's operas are named for their main characters—consider *Rigoletto* and *Macbeth*. *La Traviata*, too, is about the "fallen woman" at its heart, Violetta Valéry. And what of *Il Trovatore*? Here things get a little more complicated. There is a "trovatore" in the opera, Manrico, and he's certainly important. But Manrico is one of many characters in this opera that functions as more of an archetype: a figure that fulfills a precise storytelling function while lacking a strongly individualized character. That's partly due to Antonio García Gutiérrez's uptake of Romantic tropes in *El Trovador* that together evoke the world of late-medieval Iberia.

What even is a "trovatore," anyway? It's the Italian equivalent of the word troubadour, which we use in English but in fact comes from another Romance language called Occitan, closely related to Catalan. In the 11th and 12th centuries, in Occitania—a region straddling the border between modern-day Spain and France—a troubadour was a kind of poet-composer. Troubadour, in fact, simply means "someone who finds" poetic verses and melodies. Little is certain about the role they served in society, though many of them seem to have been members of the nobility. For one thing, their poetry typically draws on themes from the courtly love tradition, a widespread set of stories, tropes, and narrative devices popular among the nobility in the Middle Ages. In this tradition, a brave lover—usually a knight—goes on an adventure to please their lady, who is usually a paragon of virtue but is sometimes described as a cruel mistress. Troubadour poems and songs were so popular that decades (centuries, even) later their poetry was inscribed in enormous manuscripts dedicated to collecting and preserving their art. On a few rare occasions, these manuscripts feature accompanying musical notation to capture the melodies to which individual poems were sung. Some of them even contain illustrations of famous troubadours, alongside miniature biographies called vidas, though these images are not likenesses, and the biographies are likely fictional.



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"

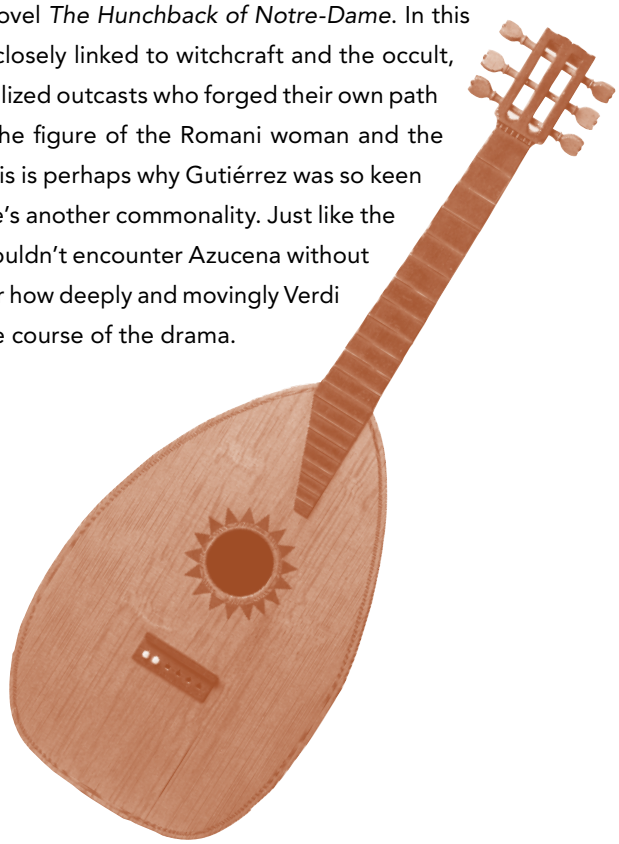
TENOR the highest standard voice type in adult males

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

BASS the lowest voice type

Regardless of their real identities, the memory and legacy of the troubadours remained extremely influential long after their medieval heyday. By the 19th century, troubadours had become a popular literary and artistic trope in depictions of the Middle Ages. They were idealized as artists, nonconformists, and individualists whose commitment to art drove them to write and sing passionate love poetry—even if this meant living outside society and its norms. Gutiérrez was certainly drawing on this tradition, as well as the tradition of courtly love, in his play; Manrico and Leonora are clearly shaped by the lovers and ladies that populate both troubadour poetry and medieval Arthurian romances. This influence partly explains their relatively light characterization in the opera: We are already supposed to know and understand their characters. By keeping the title *Il Trovatore*, Verdi knew his contemporary audiences would be able to call to mind a whole world of setting and characterization before hearing a single note.

We also know, however, that Verdi at one point considered renaming the opera after the character who, more than any other, steals Manrico's thunder as the protagonist: his mother, Azucena, tortured by her guilty conscience but hellbent on revenge. Azucena is the character Verdi was most taken by, and it shows in the extraordinary intensity of her music. All the same, her characterization is itself shaped by a long line of depictions of Romani people in Western art, literature, theater, poetry, and music—a family of artistic imagery widely popular in the Romantic era. It's no coincidence, for instance, that Azucena is a near-contemporary of Esmeralda, the Romani dancer in Victor Hugo's 1831 novel *The Hunchback of Notre-Dame*. In this artistic tradition, Romani women were closely linked to witchcraft and the occult, fortune-telling, and tarot cards: marginalized outcasts who forged their own path at the edge of society. In that sense, the figure of the Romani woman and the figure of the troubadour overlap, and this is perhaps why Gutiérrez was so keen to combine the two in his play. But there's another commonality. Just like the troubadour, contemporary audiences couldn't encounter Azucena without also "pre-characterizing" her—no matter how deeply and movingly Verdi developed her characterization over the course of the drama.

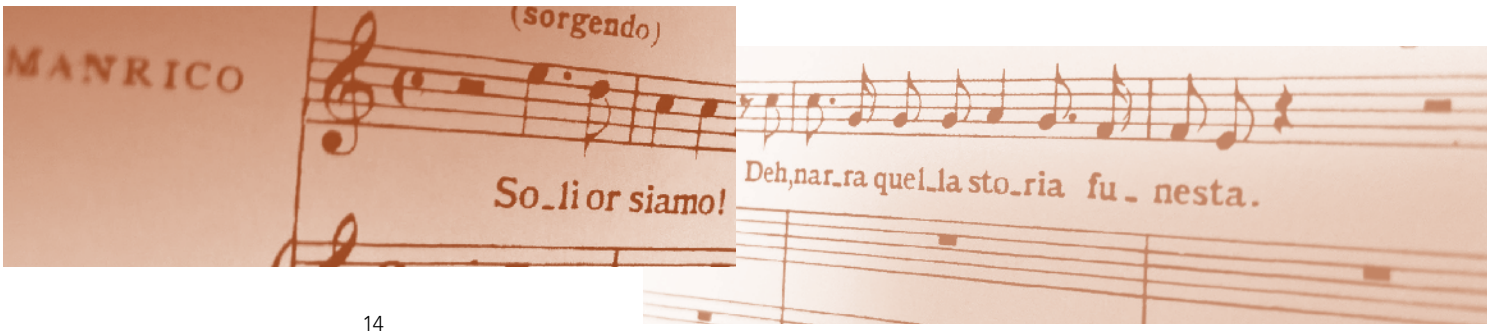


Stories Within Stories

One of the most striking features of *Il Trovatore* is its inclusion of nested narratives. In other words, the opera is stuffed with scenes in which one character tells another about things that happened in the past before the main story begins. More than once, we hear the story of Azucena's mother burning at the stake and Azucena's subsequent infanticide. It's as if no one in the opera can move on from the past. Of course, Verdi and Cammarano could have simply brought their audience up to speed with these events using a printed summary of the plot (in mid-19th-century Italian opera houses, it was the norm to distribute opera libretti to the public). But they didn't. Instead, they chose to have their characters tell us about those traumatic past events on stage, again and again. The question is, why?

In one sense, this creative choice is nothing new; the play-within-a-play is a classic aspect of spoken drama. This device can be intensely dramatic (think of *Hamlet*) or broadly comedic (*A Midsummer Night's Dream*). Novels often reproduce letters from one character to another, and in some novels (like *Dracula*) the story is told entirely through fictionalized letters, telegrams, newspaper reports, and so on. In all these cases, the point is partly to create layers within the story, nested mini narratives within the main narrative that often reflect ironically on events in the overarching plot. Opera also makes extensive use of this framing, perhaps most obviously in the form of onstage songs—an example of diegetic music. Here, even in the context of a genre where everyone is singing all the time, a character will break out into "song"—often an excuse for the composer to employ an obviously different musical style, or a characteristic dance. Famous examples from the opera repertory are too common to count, but one well-known example is the "Habanera" in Bizet's *Carmen*.

But the onstage song isn't the only kind of story-within-a-story cultivated within opera. Letters live a busy life on the operatic stage, especially in the 19th century. Verdi's *La Traviata* has Violetta dramatically sing-speak the words of a letter from her lover's father, while Tchaikovsky's *Eugene Onegin* sees Tatiana write Onegin a love letter on stage in real time. Onstage songs can also be employed to comment on the action in the main drama. In Wagner's *Der Fliegende Holländer*, Senta sings a ballad that relates the terrible legend of the Flying Dutchman, closely echoing her own role in the opera. In Rossini's *La Cenerentola*, meanwhile, Cenerentola sings an old folk song that just so happens to pick up on the Cinderella story. But even straightforward narrations, like those found in *Il Trovatore*, are more common than you might think.



What makes *Il Trovatore* unique is that it includes multiple versions of the same narrative. In Act I, Ferrando recounts a series of tragic events from his perspective. The musical characterization is striking: At the moment Ferrando describes the *"abbietta zingara"* ("despicable Gypsy") standing near the baby's crib, the music suddenly reflects the style used by Azucena and her community. By describing Roma in the process of telling her story, Ferrando musically conjures her into being. Azucena herself gives us multiple versions of the same tale. Her entrance aria in Act II (*"Stride la vampa"*), with its two identical verses, is an onstage song; we have the sense that this is a well-rehearsed tale, its dramatic images of her mother's execution perhaps embellished or magnified for dramatic effect. But the narrative that follows (*"Condotta ell'era in ceppi"*), told to Manrico alone, is one of the most original passages in Verdi's output. The desperate high note that erupts from Azucena when she tells Manrico she burned her own son—almost a scream of pain—caps a passage of storytelling magic, somehow more powerful in being narrated for the audience than it would have been had the events in question been staged. "Show, don't tell" is a common piece of screenwriting advice in the film industry. But sometimes, as in this opera, "tell, don't show" is just as apt.

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/aotrovatoremusic.

"Tacea la notte placida"

Leonora's entrance aria follows the classic pattern laid down by bel canto opera. *"Tacea la notte placida"* represents the slow, lyrical section that typically comes first. Here, Leonora is describing how she has fallen in love with the troubadour singing her name in the gardens. It is notable for the way Verdi builds intensity through the various sections of the long, beautiful melody.

WHAT TO LISTEN FOR:

- How the music shifts from major to minor at the halfway mark in each verse
- How the contour of the melody gradually rises to a high peak at the end of each verse
- The smooth, legato singing required to deliver the long, continuous melody

00:00 The aria begins with a brief orchestral introduction, setting up a gentle pulsing accompaniment in the strings. Leonora begins to sing with two long, arching, symmetrical phrases. These are followed by a brief transition, two shorter phrases that creep upwards step by step and lead to a pregnant pause, where Leonora raises the note she is holding by two inching half steps.

00:49 The key changes from minor to major, and the accompaniment switches to a lilting, off-beat vamp (often described as a "big guitar" effect). Picking up from the note she left hanging, Leonora sings two paired phrases that sail upwards.

01:12 Then, in one extended phrase built from little sighing figures (descending pairs of notes), she climbs ecstatically to a gleaming high note. A brief additional phrase wraps up the first verse and leads seamlessly into the orchestral introduction for the second verse.

01:50 Leonora continues her story in the second verse, which—aside from a few embellishments to the melody—follows the pattern of the first verse almost exactly, until the high note at the end.

03:17 This time, the additional phrase doesn't round things off, but leads instead to a prolonged, slowed-down repetition of the climbing phrase, hitting the same high note even more rapturously than before. To this grand climax, Leonora adds a brief cadenza—a vocal flourish that briefly delays the final conclusion of the melody, climbing to an even higher note at the very top of her range and then drifting gracefully downwards.

04:12 Leonora's last note leads seamlessly into a transition to the second part of her aria.

"Vedi! Le fosche notturne"

The Anvil Chorus that opens Act II is one of the most famous pieces from *Il Trovatore*. It introduces the Romani community from which Azucena hails, and as such is stamped with musical characteristics that represent her difference from the other characters. These musical traits also show up in Azucena's solo music and, crucially, the music of other characters when they are describing Azucena (or her mother). Most striking of all is Verdi's use of onstage anvils as both a prop and percussion instrument in the memorable refrain to the chorus. Historically, Roma in Europe often worked as tinkers or blacksmiths, so the anvils are both a musical device and an element of characterization and scene setting.

WHAT TO LISTEN FOR:

- The spiky, ornamented musical lines in the verse that represent Azucena and her community
- The sharp contrast between the verses and the refrains, in terms of tempo, texture and instrumentation
- The strong emphasis on unison writing, both in the chorus and the orchestra

00:00 The chorus begins with an orchestral introduction. In the loud first phrase, in a minor key, strings and high woodwinds play the same melody in unison, emphasized by constant strikes on the timpani. In the second phrase, quieter and in a major key, the pulsing accompaniment features the triangle. The many ornamental flourishes, unpredictable off-beat rhythmic accents, and the heavy use of percussion are all standard conventions in Western classical music of the period for representing "exotic" populations (in this case, Roma).

00:36 The chorus begins to sing in two symmetrical phrases that rise smoothly upwards. The second time, it is answered in the orchestra by a laughing ornamental figure, which gradually converges on a single note emphasized by both chorus and orchestra.

01:03 At the refrain ("Who brightens the Gypsy man's day? / The Gypsy girl!"), two sets of onstage anvils are struck in alternation, one set on the strong beats and the other on the weak beats. Everything is sung and played loudly: Women join the men in the chorus, and the accompaniment sets up a powerful vamp that mirrors the anvil strikes. Towards the end, the orchestra drops out, leaving the chorus alone to set up the final cry of *"La zingarella!"* ("the Gypsy girl!").

01:33 The second verse begins. It is almost the same as before, but the men in the chorus sing a new melody over what was previously the orchestral introduction. The symmetrical, rising choral phrase is now sung by both men and women and it is abbreviated, leading more swiftly into the refrain.

02:22 The second refrain is identical to the first.

"Di quella pira"

In a classic bel canto aria, the second part—known as a cabaletta—is faster, more energetic, and often vocally taxing. *"Di quella pira,"* in which Manrico declares his intention to rescue Azucena from being burned at the stake, is one of the most famous examples of the form. Verdi didn't write the two very high Cs that most tenors interpolate into the aria, but this tradition is almost as old as the opera itself. One key feature of the cabaletta form is that its main verse is meant to be repeated exactly. Often, as in this performance, the repeat is omitted, partly because the two high Cs are so difficult.

WHAT TO LISTEN FOR:

- The thrumming accompaniment in the main verse, recalling a Spanish guitar
- The way Verdi builds intensity through the sections of the aria to bring the house down at the end
- The singer's control of the voice, and the integration of the difficult high notes into the musical flow

00:00 There is a single measure setting up the thrumming, strumming accompaniment pattern. Manrico enters with a powerful, purposeful melody that emphasizes each beat of the measure, with a vocal flourish underscoring the words *"pira"* (pyre) and *"foco"* (fire). The two halves of the phrase mirror one another symmetrically. The melody is repeated almost exactly as before, but with a high note ornament folded into the end of the phrase.

00:24 There is a brief change to the minor mode, though Manrico uses the same rhythmic pattern. This sets up a reprise of the main melody as Manrico declares that he will save Azucena or die trying: Here the singer interpolates a dramatic high C into the phrase.

00:49 Two rapid, repeating phrases stacked one after the other drive the melody to its conclusion, embellished with a brief cadenza.

01:03 The chorus joins in for a substantial coda, faster than the main verse, as Manrico summons his men (*"All'armi!"*) to join him in the rescue attempt. Trumpet fanfares and drums in the orchestra evoke the military spirit of the words and drive the singer onwards to a final, thrilling high C.

"Miserere d'un alma"

The *"Miserere"* is another very famous excerpt from the opera, often performed as a standalone piece. Verdi inventively inserts this ensemble piece for Leonora, Manrico, and the chorus in between the two main sections of Leonora's Act IV solo aria (*"D'amor sull'ali rosee"*). The skill of the ensemble lies in the way Verdi introduces the three musical elements of the aria individually—the offstage chorus singing a prayer for the condemned, Leonora's fearful reaction, and Manrico's passionate offstage singing—before combining them all in a grand apotheosis.

WHAT TO LISTEN FOR:

- The different textures Verdi uses to characterize the three layers of the ensemble
- How Verdi uses a change from major to minor to generate dramatic tension

00:00 From offstage, a male chorus can be heard singing a somber prayer for those about to die, in a minor key. The unaccompanied choir and the word *"Miserere"* recall the world of sacred music, but this is not a genuine Catholic prayer—rather, it's a theatrical sound-alike. A funeral bell tolls throughout.

00:44 Leonora begins to sing of her terror. The accompaniment, with its sharp rat-tat-tat rhythmic pattern played by trumpets, evokes a funeral march. Towards the end of her melody, a series of half-step sighing figures mimic sobbing, or gasping in fright.

01:19 From offstage, Manrico can be heard singing to a simple accompaniment, a lilting off-beat vamp played by the harp alone. Though Manrico is saying "Leonora, farewell," the music switches from minor to major, creating a poignant contrast between Manrico's lyrical, songlike melody and Leonora's terror.

01:48 A single answering phrase from Leonora drives the music back to the gloomy minor key of the beginning. The second verse of the *"Miserere"* begins as before, with the offstage male chorus. When Leonora begins her second verse, this time the chorus continues to sing as an additional layer of the accompaniment. Manrico's ensuing solo, however, remains unaccompanied.

03:38 Leonora's answering phrase remains in the major key of Manrico's solo. In the ensuing coda, all three musical layers are combined. The chorus and Manrico continue to sing from off stage, while Leonora sings a new set of phrases that descend repeatedly from high in her range. In the very final phrase, Leonora reverses direction, ending climactically on a gleaming high note.

Encouraging Student Response in Attending the Final Dress Rehearsal

COMMON CORE STANDARDS AND *IL TROVATORE*

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 and immerses them 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: *Il Trovatore*." The 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 singer and 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?

Il Trovatore is an opera that refers constantly to traumatic, violent acts committed before the main story even begins. It also ends tragically with two deaths in quick succession, as Leonora poisons herself and Manrico is executed. At the same time, the opera is not aiming for psychological realism, nor do its characters—with the possible exception of Azucena—reflect on the emotional impact violence has had on them. Instead, the opera constantly sets up confrontations among characters who represent strong archetypes: the hero, the villain, the heroine, the henchman, etc.

- Reflect on this kind of storytelling. How does it compare to the kinds of narrative you have encountered in present-day entertainment media, such as movies or television shows?
- Do you think stories should aim to be realistic? What are the pros and cons of realism as a storytelling mode?

Though the opera is named for Manrico, the central character at the heart of the plot is undoubtedly Azucena. Azucena is a unique character in Verdi's operas: She has committed murder in her bid for vengeance, but she is also loving mother to Manrico. Throughout the opera her inner conflict seems to tear her apart.

- Is Azucena a sympathetic character overall? Why or why not? Would you describe her as an anti-heroine?

Il Trovatore is striking for the number of times it tells and retells the story of Azucena's mother and the Count's brother. We hear the story first from Ferrando's perspective in his Act I aria (*"Di due figli vivea padre beato"*). In Act II, Azucena's song *"Stride la vampa"* portrays her mother's execution and is immediately followed by her longer narrative of the circumstances that lead to the tragic baby swapping (*"Condotta ell'era in ceppi"*). The story is then referred to again in di Luna's interrogation of Azucena in Act III, and a final time in Azucena's tortured reminiscences in Act IV.

- What is the effect of these repeated narrative interludes? Why do you think Verdi chose not to represent the events of the past directly on stage in a prologue or similar?
- Which of the various versions of the story do you think is closest to the truth? And why?

It is impossible to disentangle Azucena's character from the fact that she is, at some level, a representative of a minority group. There were in Verdi's day (and there remain today) Romani communities, in Italy and across Europe, who have faced significant discrimination and persecution: Many hundreds of thousands of Roma were murdered during the Holocaust, to give one particularly stark example. Of course, Azucena's character is building on a long literary and artistic tradition of depicting Roma, or Gypsies, as outcasts, witches, fortune-tellers, and the like; neither Gutiérrez in his play, nor Verdi in his opera, was aiming to accurately depict real Romani people, and in fact this idea would never have crossed their mind. Nonetheless, this all raises some difficult questions:

- Do you think the opera implies that Azucena accidentally murdered her own son—and was willing to murder the Count's baby brother—because she is a Romani woman?
- It's possible to argue that the opera depicts the murder as a tragic outcome of persecution. If Azucena's mother hadn't been accused of putting the evil eye on di Luna's brother—a common stereotype associated with Roma in art and literature—would Azucena have been driven to violence?
- Do you think David McVicar's production of the opera comes down on one side or the other?
- Do you think it's ethical to stage operas like *Il Trovatore* (or Bizet's *Carmen*) that contain literary and artistic tropes which are considered offensive by many Roma today?

There are no right or wrong answers to these questions. Like all works of theater, operas like *Il Trovatore* continue to provoke debate long after they were written, and students should feel empowered to engage with Verdi's passionate masterpiece at all levels.

IN PRINT

Abbate, Carolyn and Roger Parker. *A History of Opera*. New York and London: W. W. Norton, 2015.

Two of the world's most famous opera scholars come together in this accessible single-volume history of opera from its invention to the present day, written for a nonspecialist audience.

Budden, Julian. *Verdi. The Master Musicians Series*. London: J. M. Dent & Sons, 1985.

A scholarly biography of Verdi that considers the man, the myth, and the music in an accessible and engaging way.

Parker, Roger. *The New Grove Guide to Verdi and His Operas*. Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2007.

Chapters on each individual Verdi opera adapted from the *New Grove Dictionary of Opera*, supplemented with suggested further listening and reading.

ONLINE

DM's Opera Site, "*Il Trovatore* by Giuseppe Verdi."

https://www.murashev.com/opera/Il_trovatore_libretto_Italian_English

Full libretto to *Il Trovatore* featuring the original Italian with parallel English translation.

Metropolitan Opera, "*Il Trovatore*: 'Stride la vampa'":

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4eGlFme5SvU

Anita Rachvelishvili sings Azucena's famous Act II aria "Stride la vampa" at the Met in the 2017–18 season.

Royal Opera and Ballet, "Insights: *Il Trovatore*."

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=I3ze9rh8SsQ

In-depth interviews with the creative team behind the Royal Opera House's recent production of *Il Trovatore* (2023), led by opera expert Flora Willson.

Aria

A song for solo voice accompanied by orchestra, traditionally used to express a character's emotions or to reflect on a situation that has arisen in the plot. Nineteenth-century Italian arias often feature a two-part form that showcases an intensification of emotion from a lyrical first section (the cantabile) to a faster second section (the cabaletta). As Verdi's career progressed, however, the cabaletta fell out of fashion. *Il Trovatore* is one of the last Italian operas to contain several examples of the two-part aria, most notably in Leonora's two solo arias.

Baritone

Literally "deep sounding," a baritone is a male singer with a vocal range between that of the low bass voice and the high tenor voice. Uncommon until the 19th century, baritone roles have grown in popularity in opera since the works of Verdi, who was extremely fond of this voice type and frequently employed it to depict morally ambiguous characters (or outright villains), authority figures (especially fathers), and sometimes both at once. In *Il Trovatore*'s morally clear-cut universe, however, Count di Luna is straightforwardly villainous.

Bel Canto

A predominantly Italian vocal style of the late 18th and 19th centuries, bel canto singing emphasizes lyricism and ornamentation in order to showcase the beauty of the singer's voice. Its focus on melodic beauty directly contrasts with a contemporary Germanic focus on formal balance. Bel canto singing is most closely associated with the music of Gioachino Rossini, Vincenzo Bellini, and Gaetano Donizetti. Verdi grew up in this tradition but was already beginning to transcend it in his earliest operas. *Il Trovatore*, a more traditional work than the radical *Rigoletto* that preceded it, can be counted as the last truly successful work in this older tradition.

Cadenza

A passage near the end of an aria where the soloist sings a virtuosic flourish without accompaniment, briefly delaying the final notes of the song. In the 18th and early 19th centuries, Italian opera singers were expected to improvise these passages on the spot, but by the mid-1800s they were usually written out in full in the score. Cadenzas are featured in many of the solo arias in *Il Trovatore*, especially in the slow section, where they add emphasis to the concluding notes.

Coloratura

Vocal writing for a solo singer that features crisp repeated notes, intricate melodic figures, rapid scales, and trills. Requiring vocal agility and a wide range, coloratura singing tests any singer's technical skill and interpretive ability. In the first half of the 19th century, Italian opera made extensive use of coloratura, but as the years passed, it increasingly became more of an artistic effect. In *Il Trovatore*, the role of Leonora is the only one to retain significant coloratura elements.

Chorus

A section of an opera in which a large group of singers performs together. Most choruses include at least four different vocal lines, in registers from low to high, with multiple singers per part. The singers typically play certain background roles on stage, such as soldiers, peasants, or Roma, as in *Il Trovatore*—the Anvil Chorus at the start of Act II is one of the most famous extracts from the opera. In 19th-century operas, onstage choruses often represented local populations, in which guise they have frequently been interpreted as metaphors for nationalist sentiments. However, *Il Trovatore* also makes extensive use of offstage choruses as an element of scene setting and as a way of adding color to the score.

Libretto

Meaning "little book" in Italian, the libretto is the text of an opera, including all the words that are spoken or sung by performers. Throughout most of operatic history libretti were written in poetic verse. Until the early 18th century, composers frequently set music to a pre-existing libretto. During the 18th and 19th centuries, collaboration between the author of the libretto, known as the librettist, and the composer became more frequent. As Verdi's fame increased, he became very demanding with his librettists, often hounding them until they provided exactly what he wanted.

Mezzo-Soprano

A female voice with a range between that of a contralto and soprano. A mezzo-soprano's voice is slightly deeper than that of a soprano, so mezzo-sopranos are often cast in supporting roles. Verdi, however, reserved some of his most dramatic and complex roles for this voice type, from Azucena in *Il Trovatore* to Amneris in *Aida*. As with his baritone roles, Verdi's mezzo-sopranos often depict morally ambiguous characters who aren't straightforwardly a hero or a villain. In *Il Trovatore*, Azucena attracts sympathy as Manrico's loving mother and her persecution as a Romani woman, but also horror for her murder of an innocent child.

Recitative

A type of vocal writing that imitates the accents and inflections of natural speech. Composers often employ recitative for passages of text that involve quick dialogue and the advancement of plot, since the style allows singers to communicate large amounts of information efficiently. In the 18th century, recitative was either accompanied by a single instrument (such as a keyboard or harpsichord), a small ensemble, or, more rarely, the whole orchestra. As the 19th century progressed, however, orchestral accompaniment became the default; all the recitative passages in *Il Trovatore* are accompanied by the orchestra.

Romantic

A period of music history lasting from approximately 1820 to 1900. Beginning in literature and later adopted by musicians, the Romantic movement reflected a newfound focus on individuality, nature, and emotional extremes. In music, composers began to experiment with new forms and more expressive harmonies, often placing extreme technical demands on the performers. However, in Italy in the first half of the 19th century, it was literary Romanticism that had the greatest influence on the reigning bel canto opera tradition, via the Romantic novels and plays that composers like Verdi adapted into operas.

Il Trovatore

Performance date:

Reviewed by:

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

As you watch *Il Trovatore*, 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 the opera and this performance at the Met!

THE SHOW, SCENE BY SCENE	ACTION	MUSIC	SET DESIGN / STAGING
Ferrando relates the story of Azucena's mother and Count di Luna's brother. MY OPINION OF THIS SCENE:	☆☆☆☆☆	☆☆☆☆☆	☆☆☆☆☆
Leonora tells Ines she loves the mysterious troubadour. MY OPINION OF THIS SCENE:	☆☆☆☆☆	☆☆☆☆☆	☆☆☆☆☆
Di Luna waits for the troubadour in the garden. MY OPINION OF THIS SCENE:	☆☆☆☆☆	☆☆☆☆☆	☆☆☆☆☆
Leonora mistakes di Luna for the troubadour (Manrico). The Count and Manrico prepare to duel. MY OPINION OF THIS SCENE:	☆☆☆☆☆	☆☆☆☆☆	☆☆☆☆☆

THE SHOW, SCENE BY SCENE	ACTION	MUSIC	SET DESIGN / STAGING
The Roma sing as they work in their encampment. Azucena sings of her mother's execution. MY OPINION OF THIS SCENE:	☆☆☆☆☆	☆☆☆☆☆	☆☆☆☆☆
Azucena tells Manrico the terrible story of how she accidentally murdered her own son. MY OPINION OF THIS SCENE:	☆☆☆☆☆	☆☆☆☆☆	☆☆☆☆☆
Manrico learns that Leonora is to enter a convent and prepares to rescue her. MY OPINION OF THIS SCENE:	☆☆☆☆☆	☆☆☆☆☆	☆☆☆☆☆
Di Luna sings of his love for Leonora. MY OPINION OF THIS SCENE:	☆☆☆☆☆	☆☆☆☆☆	☆☆☆☆☆
The Count, Manrico, and Leonora confront one another again outside the convent. Manrico escapes with Leonora. MY OPINION OF THIS SCENE:	☆☆☆☆☆	☆☆☆☆☆	☆☆☆☆☆
Ferrando entertains the soldiers. MY OPINION OF THIS SCENE:	☆☆☆☆☆	☆☆☆☆☆	☆☆☆☆☆
Di Luna and Ferrando interrogate Azucena. MY OPINION OF THIS SCENE:	☆☆☆☆☆	☆☆☆☆☆	☆☆☆☆☆
Manrico and Leonora prepare to wed, until they hear of Azucena's capture. Manrico gathers his men to rescue her. MY OPINION OF THIS SCENE:	☆☆☆☆☆	☆☆☆☆☆	☆☆☆☆☆

THE SHOW, SCENE BY SCENE	ACTION	MUSIC	SET DESIGN / STAGING
Leonora prepares to save Manrico from prison. MY OPINION OF THIS SCENE:	☆☆☆☆☆	☆☆☆☆☆	☆☆☆☆☆
Leonora bargains with the Count for Manrico's safety. She secretly takes poison. MY OPINION OF THIS SCENE:	☆☆☆☆☆	☆☆☆☆☆	☆☆☆☆☆
Manrico comforts Azucena. They think of better times. MY OPINION OF THIS SCENE:	☆☆☆☆☆	☆☆☆☆☆	☆☆☆☆☆
Leonora tries to rescue Manrico, who accuses her of betraying him. He realizes too late Leonora is dying. MY OPINION OF THIS SCENE:	☆☆☆☆☆	☆☆☆☆☆	☆☆☆☆☆
Leonora dies. Di Luna has Manrico executed. Azucena reveals the terrible truth. MY OPINION OF THIS SCENE:	☆☆☆☆☆	☆☆☆☆☆	☆☆☆☆☆