Synopsis

France and Spain, c. 1560

Act I
The forest near the palace at Fontainebleau, France

Act II
SCENE 1 The monastery of St. Just, Spain
SCENE 2 A garden outside the monastery

Act III
SCENE 1 The queen's gardens, Madrid
SCENE 2 Plaza in front of the Basilica of Our Lady of Atocha, Madrid

Act IV
SCENE 1 The king's study, Madrid
SCENE 2 The prison

Act V
The monastery of St. Just

Act I
Against the wishes of the Spanish King Philip II, his son and heir Carlo has traveled incognito to Fontainebleau, where negotiations are under way for a peace treaty between Spain and France. He has seen his intended bride Elisabeth, daughter of the French king, and fallen in love with her on sight ("Io la vidi"). When he meets Elisabeth and her page, who have been hunting and become lost in the forest, Carlo offers his protection without revealing his identity. Elisabeth questions him about her future husband, apprehensive over her marriage to a stranger. Carlo gives her a miniature portrait of himself, and she realizes that he is the prince. It is clear to them both that their feelings of love are mutual (Duet: "Che mai fate voi?"). Their happiness ends with news that the treaty arrangements have been altered and Elisabeth is to marry King Philip, Carlo's father. Elisabeth reluctantly accepts. While everyone around them celebrates the end of the war, Elisabeth and Carlo are devastated.

Act II
Carlo seeks peace at the monastery of St. Just in Spain, where he prays at the tomb of his grandfather, Emperor Charles V. He is confronted by a monk who

seems to be the emperor's ghost. His friend Rodrigo, the Marquis of Posa, arrives to remind Carlo of his commitment to the cause of the Flemish people who are oppressed by Spanish rule. Both pledge themselves to the cause of liberty and swear eternal friendship (Duet: "Dio, che nell'alma infondere amor").

In a garden outside the monastery, Princess Eboli entertains the other ladies of the court with a song ("Nel giardin del bello"). Elisabeth—now queen—enters, followed by Posa, who hands her a secret letter from Carlo asking for a meeting. When he is admitted, Carlo asks the queen to obtain Philip's permission for him to go to Flanders, then suddenly declares his continuing love. Elisabeth rejects him and Carlo rushes off. The king enters and, finding the queen unattended, banishes the Countess of Aremberg, who should have been present.

Left alone with the king, Posa bravely asks Philip to end his oppression of the Flemish people. Philip refuses but is impressed by Posa's courage. He warns him to beware of the Inquisition and tells Posa about his suspicions of his wife and Carlo, asking Posa to watch them. Posa accepts the assignment, knowing that being in the king's confidence will help him in the futu e.

Act III

Carlo has received a letter asking him to a secret meeting at midnight in the queen's gardens in Madrid. He thinks the meeting is with Elisabeth, but in fact the woman is Princess Eboli, who is in love with him. When Carlo discovers her identity, he rejects her. Eboli, realizing where the prince's true feelings lie, swears to expose him. Posa arrives in time to overhear Eboli and threatens to kill her but is stopped by Carlo. Eboli leaves. Posa persuades Carlo he is now in danger and Carlo hands over some secret papers to him that might be used as evidence of treason.

At a public burning of heretics in front of the Basilica of Our Lady of Atocha, Carlo leads a group of Flemish deputies to Philip. The king rejects their pleas for freedom. When he also dismisses Carlo's own request to rule Flanders, the prince draws his sword on his father. He is disarmed by Posa and arrested. In thanks, Philip makes Posa a duke. As a group of heretics is led to the stake, a celestial voice welcomes their souls into heaven.

Act IV

In his study at night, the king reflects on his life with a wife who doesn't love him ("Ella giammai m'amò!"). He consults with the old and blind Grand Inquisitor, who consents to the death sentence for Carlo: as God sacrificed his son to save mankind so Philip must stifle his love for his son for the sake of the faith. The

Inquisitor also demands that Posa be handed over to him. As he leaves, Philip wonders if the throne must always yield to the altar. Elisabeth enters, having discovered that her jewel case has been stolen. Eboli, who knows that Elisabeth keeps a portrait of Carlo in it, had taken the box and given it to the king. Philip now shows the box to Elisabeth, takes out the portrait, and accuses her of adultery. Elisabeth collapses and the king calls for help. Eboli and Posa rush in, he to express amazement that a king who rules half the world cannot govern his own emotions, she to feel remorse at what her jealousy has brought about. Alone with Elisabeth, Eboli confesses that she not only falsely accused her but that she has been the king's mistress. Elisabeth orders her from the court. Eboli laments her fatal beauty and swears to spend her final day in Spain trying to save Carlo ("O don fatale").

Posa visits Carlo in prison to tell him that he has used the secret papers to take upon himself the blame for the Flemish rebellion. He is now a marked man, so Carlo must take up the cause of liberty for Flanders. Posa is shot by agents of the Inquisition. As he dies he tells Carlo that Elisabeth will meet him at the monastery of St. Just and declares he is happy to have sacrificed his life for a man who will become Spain's savior ("Per me giunto è il dì supremo").

Act V

Elisabeth has come to the monastery, wanting only her own death ("Tu, che le vanità"). When Carlo appears, she encourages him to continue Posa's quest for freedom in Flanders and they hope for happiness in the next world. As they say goodbye, Philip and the Grand Inquisitor arrive. As the agents of the Inquisition move in on Carlo, the Emperor Charles V materializes out of the darkness to insist that suffering is unavoidable and ceases only in heaven.

Giuseppe Verdi

Don Carlo

Premiere: Paris Opéra, 1867 (*in French as* Don Carlos)

Verdi's longest and most ambitious opera—a dark and intense epic of Spain at the height of the Inquisition—takes a profound look at the intersection of the personal and the political spheres. The personal issues at stake are large in themselves, including a pair of love triangles. Politically, there is a revolution (expressed both in terms of a province rebelling against its king and a son rebelling against his father) and the still-relevant question of the boundaries of church and state. The opera depicts these conflicts with a magnificent and haunting score that probes the full range of the lush Romantic vocabulary. With its spiritual, emotional, and philosophical ambitions, *Don Carlo* is more demanding than some of Verdi's more familiar works, but its qualities are uniquely rewarding. The composer reworked the score several times over a period of almost 20 years. The Met presents *Don Carlo* in its original five acts, sung in Italian

The Creators

During a career spanning 60 years, Giuseppe Verdi (1813–1901) composed 28 operas, at least half of which are at the core of today's opera repertory. His role in Italy's cultural and political development has made him an icon in his native country. He has been specifically praised for his gift for finding the humanity beneath the public personae of his characters, an ability that arguably reached no greater heights than in *Don Carlo*. The writings of German poet, philosopher, and historian Friedrich Schiller (1759–1805) express the intense yearning for personal and political freedom that became the hallmark of the 19th-century Romantic movement. The librettist François Joseph Méry (1798–1866) was a notable Parisian playwright whose work on this libretto was completed by Camille du Locle (1832–1903) after Méry's unexpected death.

The Setting

The opera is set in grim, authoritarian Spain at the time of the Inquisition, circa 1560. While both Schiller and Verdi took some poetic license with actual events and relationships, most of the protagonists (including the title hero, his father, King Philip II, Philip's father, the Emperor Charles V, and Philip's third wife, Elisabeth di Valois) are based on historical models. Charles V ruled one of the

largest empires ever built, including half of Europe and virtually all the New World. He abdicated in 1558 and retired to a monastery, pronouncing himself dead to the world (giving rise to legends that his ghost hovered around his grave). At one point, a character in the opera relates gossip from the court of France, with the seemingly innocuous line that the king was planning to take part in a joust; the curious historical fact is that Henry II was accidentally killed in a joust at about this time. The simultaneous adherence to and disregard for history is one of the most interesting features of this opera.

The Music

With its epic scale, *Don Carlo* lacks the dramatic concision of Verdi's later works, while maintaining a unique structure that builds over its five acts, with the monumental auto-da-fé at the center. The opera features a number of complex one-on-one confrontations in which the orchestra provides the foundation while the singers are free to go off on melodic tangents. The chorus, when it appears, is imposing—most notably in the auto-da-fé—and reminds us that the world is dependent on the choices and actions of the lead characters. The grandeur of the score telescopes in Acts IV and V to the individuals, with magnificent and melodically rich solo scenes for the lead bass, the mezzo, the baritone, and the soprano. The celebrated Study Scene (Act IV, Scene 1), which begins with King Philip's nine-minute monologue in which he muses on his loveless marriage and the burden of ruling an empire, is among the most remarkable creations in Verdi's enormous output. The title role, one of the pinnacles of the Italian repertoire, has a single brief aria in the first scene but, curiously, doesn't get one of the great solos in the later acts.

Don Carlo *at the Met*

Until its Met premiere in 1920, *Don Carlo* was little known in this country. That first production, headed by Rosa Ponselle and Giovanni Martinelli, chalked up 14 performances for an impressed if somewhat puzzled public before disappearing in 1923. The opera had its defining moment in 1950, when Rudolf Bing chose it as the inaugural production of his administration. Those performances featured an impressive array of singers, including Jussi Björling, Delia Rigal, Cesare Siepi, Robert Merrill, Fedora Barbieri, and Jerome Hines, and the conducting of Fritz Stiedry. Bing turned to theater director Margaret Webster and designer Rolf Gerard to make the production unlike anything previously seen at the Met. James Levine conducted a new staging by John Dexter in 1979, with Renata Scotto, Marilyn Horne, Giuseppe Giacomini, Sherrill Milnes, Nicolai Ghiaurov, and James Morris. In 2010, director Nicholas Hytner made his Met debut with a new production, starring Roberto Alagna in the title role.

Program Note

The longest and most ambitious of Verdi's works, *Don Carlo* seems to encompass multiple operas. Parading across its vast canvas is an array of richly characterized individuals who elicit the full range of the composer's art; their particular relationships play out against an epic backdrop of conflicting social, political, and religious forces. Scenes of searing intimacy and familial turmoil are juxtaposed with grand spectacles that formidably display the power of church and state.

Subject as they are to intense passions, each of the opera's five principal characters sacrifices the elusive prospect of individual happiness to follow a sense of moral duty beyond themselves. "In no other opera did Verdi work harder or more successfully," remarked musicologist Joseph Kerman, "to fuse the fates of individuals with the destiny of nations." Even more, Verdi's musical portrayals amplify the drama so incisively that he transforms the fateful weight of history bearing down on his characters into readily identifiable human terms

Romantic literature had, of course, whetted the public's appetite for fictional dramas into which well-known historical figu es were projected and provided the source for much of its expression in opera. The dominant template for this genre had been established by the conventions of French grand opera. Despite his serious reservations about these, in the mid-1860s Verdi accepted a new commission from the Paris Opera and embarked on an operatic treatment of *Don Carlos* by Friedrich Schiller (1759–1805).

This diffuse, gigantic play in blank verse represented a remarkably ambitious project for the young Schiller, who finished it in 1787, on the eve of the French Revolution. Set in the mid-16th century, *Don Carlos* plays loosely with its historical characters. Schiller devised a tragic conflict between the absolute rule of Philip II of Spain and the liberal desire for self-determination represented by Rodrigo, Marquis of Posa. Don Carlos, heir to the throne, was in fact a violently unstable man eventually imprisoned by his father, but Schiller reconstructs him into a figu e tormented by Hamlet-like doubts; his passion for Posa's cause offers a way of sublimating the hopeless love he feels for his stepmother, Elisabeth of Valois (historically, Philip's third wife).

Although Verdi had already used Schiller's plays for three earlier operas, he became especially invested in *Don Carlos*, as the opera was titled in the five-act French format in which it was composed and introduced. Verdi involved himself closely in shaping the libretto, which was prepared by François Joseph Méry and Camille du Locle. They streamlined Schiller's play but added scenes from other sources, including the opening act in the forest of Fontainebleau, which sets up a "back story" and a basis for musical reminiscence to underscore the tragic love between Carlo and Elisabeth, as well as the chilling auto-da-fé for the opera's epicenter. But Verdi insisted on retaining two dialogues his librettists left out of their scenario as too unconventional: Philip's one-on-one encounters

with Posa and with the Grand Inquisitor (which pits two bass voices against each other).

The first of these stretched the composer to the limits—he confessed, "[The effort] has made me spit out my lungs"—but Verdi rightly sensed the importance of these scenes not only in terms of the opera's thematic ideas but as a way to endow his musical portrayal of Philip with a full-sidedness he had never before attempted. Together with his great Act IV soliloquy, which segues into the meeting with the Grand Inquisitor, these Philip duet scenes reveal a depth of characterization far beyond the scope expected of the tragic love triangles of grand opera—the triangles here including not only Elisabeth but the filial affection Posa inspires in Philip as a replacement for his estranged son.

By now Verdi had accrued long experience in giving musical substance to dark, "unsympathetic" characters (he had recently refined his portrayal of Lady Macbeth in his revisions for a Paris revival of *Macbeth*). Yet in Philip we find a staggering advance. On a visit to the Escorial, the royal palace in Madrid, in 1863, the composer had observed that the building seemed to reflect "the savage monarch who built it." His operatic Philip, however, is no mere tyrannical foil to the freethinking republicanism of Posa or to the ill-fated love shared by Elisabeth and Carlo; we are instead made privy to Philip's despair from within. Where Schiller superimposed Enlightenment archetypes of the struggle for freedom onto figu es from two centuries before, Verdi enriched the musical palette—vocal and orchestral—and formal design of his opera to depict the ever-present polarities of idealism (in all its forms) and *Realpolitik*, autonomy and security, love and power. These acquire a mythic resonance that is all the more potent for being associated with historical (though heavily fictionalized) characters.

Indeed the considerable effort Verdi devoted to revisions over a period spanning almost two decades points to the significance the oper held for him, despite the occasionally ambivalent attitude he expressed over the compromises its staging required from the start. There is in fact a quite literal sense in which *Don Carlo* is more than one opera. Verdi expert Julian Budden has classified five separate incarnations. These range in length from the massive ur-score Verdi composed in 1866 but had to preemptively trim before *Don Carlos* was given its Paris Opera premiere (on March 11, 1867) to the streamlined, four-act version that was translated into Italian as *Don Carlo* and produced at La Scala on January 10, 1884.

The latter was shorn of the introductory Fontainebleau act and an elaborate ballet to make it more "sinewy," as Verdi termed it; at the same time, he prepared extensive revisions of the Philip–Posa scene and the final love duet between Carlo and Elisabeth, among other items. The composition of *Aida* and the Requiem in the years since the Paris *Don Carlos* had further refined

his powers, while, as Budden notes, these late-period revisions for *Don Carlo* marked "an important stage in the ascent" to "the final summits of *Otello* and *Falstaff*." A revival in Modena in 1886 restored the cut Fontainebleau opening to the revised 1884 score—with the apparent consent of the composer—making for the five-act *Don Carlo* in Italian that is the basis for this production.

The effect of the multiple competing points of view that Verdi sustains through an architecture of public spectacle and private, confessional intimacies ranks among the most extraordinary achievements in all opera. The old-fashioned music characterizing Posa introduces a kind of self-portrait of the composer's youthful idealism, while the three miraculous love duets of Carlo and Elisabeth trace the inevitable progress of the opera's core dramatic truth, which is uttered twice in the sepulchral space of the cloister at St. Just: suffering is the condition that permeates earthly life. The love that can exist only as a golden-age fantasy for Carlo and Elisabeth as well as for Princess Eboli proves to be as illusory as the political utopia sought by Posa. When Posa describes the terrors inflicted by Philip's policies, the negation of that utopia conjures one of the most abyssal dissonances Verdi ever wrote. Even the charming coquetry of Eboli's Veil Song turns out to be an ironically allegorical façade for the teeming passions that bring on catastrophe.

Verdi's music doesn't merely provide an atmosphere for the opera's pervasive sense of doomed striving. Through his ingenious use of motivic echoes (so unlike Wagnerian leitmotif) and orchestral echoes, he makes *Don Carlo*'s uniquely melancholy coloration an organic feature of the score. This, along with its convoluted history of revisions, may account for some of the neglect the opera suffered during an era that preferred the more neatly packaged tragedy that is *Aida*. But *Don Carlo* has re-emerged in the past half-century as the opera representing Verdi at his most Shakespearean—even more than the three operas expressly based on Shakespeare. Its contradictions and disjunctions are exactly what captivate us today and give a lasting allure to Verdi's endlessly rich creation. —*Thomas May*