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# Notes on the Performance of Rigoletto

## **Keywords**

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# Notes on the Performance of Rigoletto\*

by Martin Chusid

Three points are made in this paper, each of them bearing on the performance of *Rigoletto*. The first concerns the libretto near the beginning of Act III. The scene shows a "rustic tavern" installed in a "half-ruined two-storey house." As you recall, Rigoletto and Gilda are watching from the outside. Verdi's stage direction reads: "Entra il Duca nell'osteria."<sup>1</sup> An audience that has forgotten the alternative methods spelled out by Sparafucile in Act I for trapping his intended victims<sup>2</sup> may well ask what the Duke is doing there at this time. Is it sheer and unbelievable coincidence that he happens to drop in at this remote, shady tavern on a dark and stormy night? But no, Rigoletto is certainly expecting to see him. Why? On this point, Verdi's autograph is illuminating. In the text set by the composer, the Duke's first words are not "Una stanza e del vino," which is what we find in the printed scores and librettos, but "Tua sorella e del vino." The Duke has come to see Maddalena. It is made clear and specific at the start of the scene. But why, for more than a hundred and twenty-five years, have audiences been left to merely infer this—from that earlier conversation, later from the Duke's "Un dì . . ." and Rigoletto's still later statement that for more than a month he has been planning the encounter?

\*Based on a paper read at the Cini Foundation, Venice, September 1979; see "Other Conferences," this Newsletter.

<sup>1</sup>See Folio 209 recto of the Autograph which is preserved in the vaults of the Casa Ricordi, Milan.

<sup>2</sup>Act I, scene 7.

Sparafucile: Usually I kill in the city,  
Or else under my own roof.

In response to Rigoletto's "And how, in your house?"

Sparafucile: It's easy . . .  
My sister helps me  
She dances through the  
streets. . . She's pretty. . .  
She attracts the one I want  
. . . and then . . .

Some other pertinent facts: Verdi's "Tua sorella" is crossed through and another hand has written above "Una stanza".<sup>3</sup> It is significant that Verdi's sketches for the opera also read "Tua sorella".<sup>4</sup>

How important these two words were to Verdi may be deduced from the letter he wrote to the President of La Fenice—or, rather, the most important of the three presidents who made up *La Presidenza* of the theater—Carlo D. Marzari.<sup>5</sup> The Venetian censors had refused permission for the libretto entitled *La Maledizione* which Pave had written first, and on which Verdi had been working for some months. Pave had then rewritten the libretto to overcome the objections. The revised text, entitled *Il Duca di Vendome*, and carrying the censor's seal of approval, was sent to Verdi, who wrote back:

14 December 1850

. . . I have had very little time to examine the new libretto, but I have seen quite enough to realize that, rendered in this fashion, it lacks character and importance, and, in fine, that the scenic points have become very cold. If it was necessary to change the names, the setting should also have been changed, to a prince, a duke of some other country, for example a Pier Luigi Farnese or some other, or the action moved back to the time before Louis XI when France was not a united kingdom, making him a Duke of Burgundy or of Normandy, etc. In any event, an absolute ruler.

<sup>3</sup>Folio 209 verso.

<sup>4</sup>See the facsimile edition *L'Abozzo del 'Rigoletto' di Giuseppe Verdi*, ed. by Carlo Gatti (Milan: Ricordi for the Ministero della Cultura Popolare [1941] 2 fascicles, 32 and 24 pp.

<sup>5</sup>Marzari's official title was "Presidente Anziano ed agli Spettacoli."

In Act I Scene 5, the wrath of the courtiers against Triboletto makes no sense. The old man's curse, so terrible and sublime in the original, here becomes ridiculous, because the reason that drives him to curse no longer has the same importance, and because it is no longer a subject who so boldly addresses the king. Without this curse, what range, what significance does the drama have? The Duke becomes a character of naught: the Duke simply has to be a libertine; without that, there is no justification for Triboletto's fears lest his daughter leave her hiding-place; without that, the drama is impossible.

And here we come to the most directly relevant portion of the letter:

... How on earth does the Duke go alone to a remote tavern, without an invitation, without an amorous appointment? ...

Verdi closes this letter with a flat refusal to set *Il Duca di Vendome*.

... my artistic conscience does not allow me to set this libretto to music.<sup>6</sup>

This letter and its relationship with the heavily censored version of the libretto provides, I think, an important clue to the reason audiences have been deprived of an important bit of plot clarification. In all probability, Verdi's text was altered to appease police censors. *Basta con la Censura* and back to Verdi's "Tua sorella".<sup>7</sup>

<sup>6</sup>Original in the archives of the Teatro la Fenice. It has been published in *Verdi e la Fenice*, (Venice: Ente Autonomo del Teatro la Fenice, 1951) 42-3, and in Franco Abbiati's *Giuseppe Verdi* (Milan: Ricordi, 1959) II, 86-7, without the letter's date. Piave's MS of *Il Duca di Vendome*, containing many corrections, together with a clean copy are also at la Fenice. Films of the letter and the librettos are in the Archive of the American Institute for Verdi Studies.

<sup>7</sup>I am delighted to report that two Verdi scholars, who were unhappy with the illogicality

My second point concerns "Caro nome". If we once more consult the sketches and Piave's libretto, we find that originally Gilda finished her aria, and then the courtiers came onstage to kidnap her. How effective was Verdi's idea to create an overlap: to show the audience, and make them listen to, the courtiers gathering outside of Rigoletto's house. What a fine touch to contrast Gilda's innocence, her virginal love, and the scoundrels' scheming; to forge a dramatic link between the elegaic but somewhat static aria and the action-packed finale. But Verdi had another thought to help keep the motion moving, still another effect which audiences have been deprived of until now. At the cadence before the coda of "Caro nome", (mm. 63-69) Gilda sings twice "Gualtier Maldè"—the words, the name, with which the scene had begun. All printed scores and MS copies provide a conventional melodic progression from dominant to tonic twice: "Gualtier Mal—" on B, rising to "—dè" on E. And, in fact, Verdi had originally written it that way. But he had an afterthought and entered it into the autograph.<sup>8</sup> He altered the cadence both times, and the melodic line stays on the dominant. As a result, there is no melodic resolution at this point. Although many members of the audience may fail to understand why, they will surely sense

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of the drama posed by the words "Una stanza" took matters into their own hands and substituted Verdi's actual text for the censored version. It is all the more remarkable in that they did so independently of each other and without having seen the autograph.

Thirteen years ago, Andrew Porter translated *Rigoletto* for performance in English by the Sadler's Wells (now English National) Opera. He wrote an article about that translation which was published in the *Sadler's Wells Magazine* no. 10 (Spring/Summer 1968) and is reprinted in this Newsletter. See his last paragraph. The answer to his question is: Yes, it certainly was justified. More recently, in Spring 1979, David Lawton conducted *Rigoletto* for Opera on the Sound, a Long Island company, and advised the tenor to sing "Tua sorella" because he knew that version of the text from the facsimile edition of the sketch.

<sup>8</sup>See folios 118 verso and 119 recto.

more strongly than in the past the link between these two scenes.<sup>9</sup>

My final point has to do with the *Introduzione* to Act I. Let us first compare the stage directions for the opening scene to be found in the libretto—which I take to be Piave's conception—with Verdi's autograph. The libretto reads: "Sala magnifica nel palazzo ducale con porte nel fondo che mettono ad altre sale, pure splendidamente illuminate, folla di cavalieri e dame in gran costume nel fondo delle sale. Paggi che vanno e vengono. La festa è nel suo pieno, Musica interna da lontana e scrosci di risa di tratto in tratto. Il Duca e Borsa che vengono da una porta del fondo."

By comparison, the autograph reads: "Festa da ballo. Musica interna . . . Folla di cavalieri e donne che passaggiano nelle sale del fondo. Paggi che vanno e vengono. Nella sala in fondo si veda ballare. Da una delle sale vengono parlando fra loro il Duca e Borsa."<sup>10</sup> There is quite a difference between the scenic conceptions of poet and musician. How much more musical is Verdi. His words remind us that this is not just a *Festa*, it is a "Festa da Ballo. Musica interna . . . Si veda ballare." In this context it makes good dramatic sense for a wind band offstage to open the drama proper; and to play so much in the course of the *Introduzione*. It is also logical for the Duke to sing a *Ballata*—his "Questa o quella"—and for another musical group—this time made up of a string orchestra *sul palco*—to provide a Minuet and Perigordino. As we all know, after the Perigordino this small stage orchestra is finished for the evening. Or are they? If your answer to that question is yes, you are in for a surprise similar, perhaps, to the one I received while first studying the autograph. There are 82 additional bars of

music for the small string orchestra following the Perigordino. In fact they play until the entrance of Monterone. This is the passage following Rigoletto's remarks to the Duke about Ceprano's head, "A cosa ella vale?," mm. 360-441 of Act. I.<sup>11</sup> It should be noted that this music resembles closely, but is not identical to, the music for the string section of the pit orchestra. If the strings *sul palco* play those 82 bars, it will be simultaneously with the wind *banda* and the pit orchestra, and we can understand properly the remark Verdi made in a letter to the composer Prince Joseph Poniatowski dated 24 August 1852. This is more than a year after the Venetian premiere. Verdi was responding to Poniatowski's report of a successful performance of *Rigoletto* in Leghorn:

I'm glad that *Rigoletto* pleased you. I don't know the Leghorn company, but I can imagine what the staging, the orchestra, and the three orchestras of the *Introduzione* were like.<sup>12</sup>

Yet not a single score that I've seen—either printed or MS copy—has three orchestras playing together. How can we explain this remarkable difference between Verdi's conception and performance tradition? There is an answer to this question, although perhaps not a completely satisfactory one. Immediately before bar 360 of the autograph there is a note which is *not* in Verdi's hand. It reads: "Questi v[ioli]ni furono levati ("These violins were removed")."<sup>13</sup> On whose authority "levati"? If Verdi's, why that letter of

<sup>11</sup>Folios 31 verso to 37 recto.

<sup>12</sup>The original of this letter in the Biblioteca Estense, Modena. Photocopy in the Istituto di Studi Verdiani, Parma, and film in the Archive of the American Institute for Verdi Studies.

<sup>13</sup>Folio 31 verso. The notation was made with a crayon of burnt Sienna coloring. This type of crayon was used frequently by employees of Ricordi on Verdi's autographs to mark the individual numbers into which the earliest printed piano-vocal scores were to be subdivided. For a discussion of these subdivisions see M. Chusid, *A Catalog of Verdi's Operas* (Hackensack, N.J.: Jos. Boonin, 1974) pp. 1-2.

<sup>9</sup>When I informed Mr. Lawton of Verdi's afterthought, he had the soprano sing "Caro nome" in the last two performances of his series with the repeated B's. [Editor's note: at Mr. Chusid's suggestion, they were also sung in the New York City Opera revival in October 1979.]

<sup>10</sup>Folios 5 recto, 6 recto, 7 recto and 9 recto.

1852? Another curious fact: the MS copy of *Rigoletto* which was deposited and still resides in the archives of La Fenice, in other respects an extremely faithful copy of the autograph, also lacks this music. On the other hand, we can hazard a pretty good guess as to why Verdi chose to write music for three orchestras playing simultaneously. As Abramo Basevi, Pierluigi Petrobelli, and others have pointed out, in his *Introduzione* Verdi was thinking of the finale to Act I of Mozart's *Don Giovanni*.<sup>14</sup>

What are the implications for

staging *Rigoletto* to be derived from these remarks? First, directors must study carefully Verdi's own remarks on staging to be found scattered throughout the autograph. Naturally they and the singers must use the text of the libretto that Verdi set,<sup>15</sup> not the one printed for the censors. And, finally, *speriamo* that performers and directors will consult the new edition of the opera<sup>16</sup> being prepared by the University of Chicago Press and Casa Ricordi before making the many decisions necessary for the production of a Verdi opera.

<sup>14</sup>See for example Basevi's *Studio sulle opere di Giuseppe Verdi*, (Florence: Tofani, 1859), p. 190. Revised and enlarged from articles originally published in *l'Armonia*, Florence. Also Petrobelli's "Verdi e il *Don Giovanni*", *Atti del I° Congresso Internazionale di Studi Verdiani*. Venice, July 31-August 2, 1966. (Parma: Istituto di Studi Verdiani, 1969) pp. 232-246.

<sup>15</sup>There are numerous changes made by Verdi to the text of the regular printed libretto, which follows that printed for the first performance (Venice: Gaspari, n.d.). For example, in the final act, during the Terzetto, the libretto calls for Sparafucile to sing "*Ancor c'è mezz'ora*". But Verdi actually set the more euphonious jingle "*Ancora mezz'ora*".

<sup>16</sup>[Editor's note: edited by Martin Chusid.]

