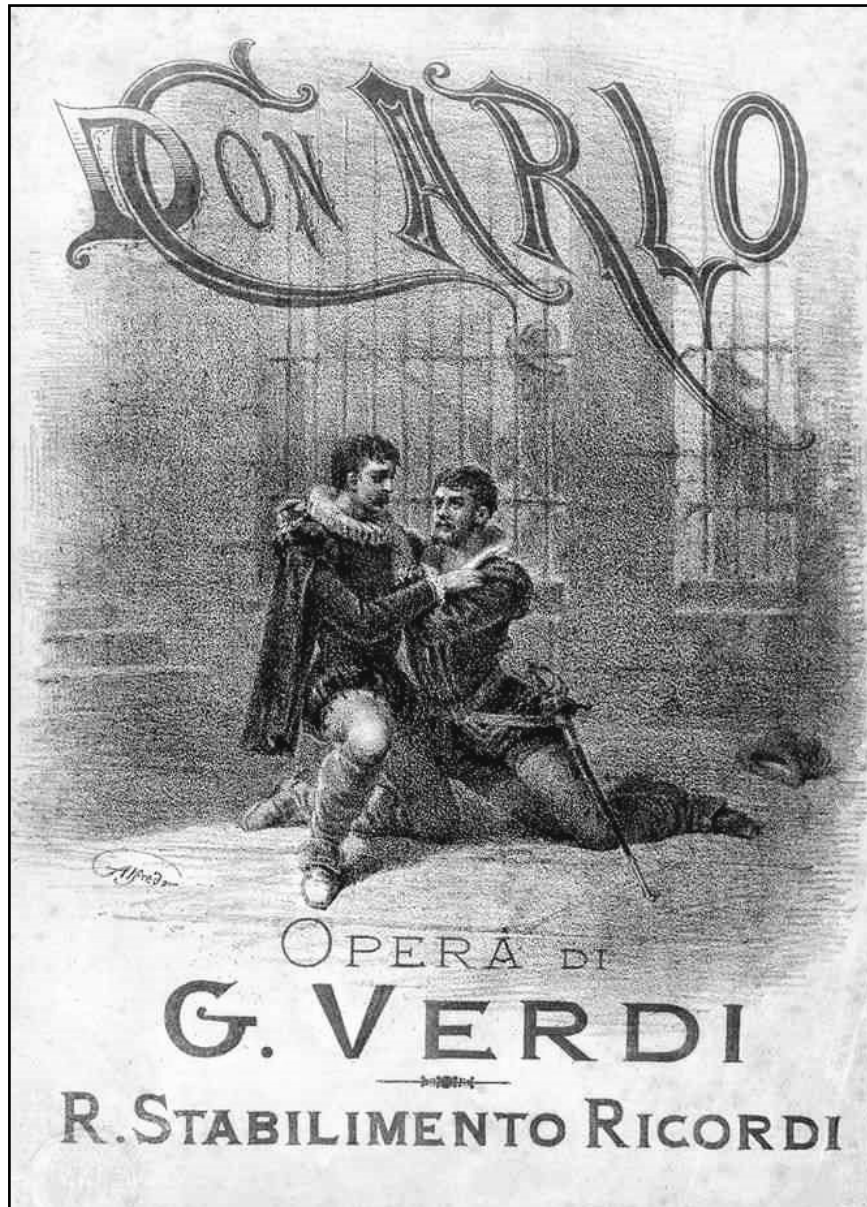


Opera & Real Life



7. Verdi's Opera Kings

April 12, 2022

Verdi's Opera Kings

THREE OF VERDI'S OPERAS FEATURE—or were originally intended to feature—real kings: **François I** of France in *Rigoletto* (1851), **Gustavus III** of Sweden in *Un ballo in maschera* (1858), and **Philip II** of Spain in *Don Carlos* (1866). The first two of these were subject to censors reporting to the Austrian government, and both were subject to a series of compromises that demoted the leading characters, changed the locale, and even modified the title. By the time he was writing *Don Carlos*, however, Verdi was a mature composer, and the political situation had settled. He was also working from a French adaptation of the play by **Friedrich Schiller** (1759–1805), who took matters of politics and morality very seriously. As a result, *Don Carlos* is one of the few Verdi operas where his treatment of history is on equal footing with his interest in drama and romance.

A. Francois I

Rigoletto (1851) is based on the banned play *Le roi s'amuse* (The King Amuses Himself) by **Victor Hugo** (1802–85), about the supposed amorous affairs of **King François I** (reigned 1515–47); the opera's most famous aria, "La donna è mobile" (woman is fickle), is a loose translation of a poem attributed apocryphally to the King himself. It is sung in the opera by the entirely fictional **Duke of Mantua**, who is lured to an inn outside the city walls by the attractions of the innkeeper's sister. Meanwhile, the Duke's jester **Rigoletto** brings his daughter **Gilda** to watch the true nature of the man who wooed and seduced her in the preceding acts.

Verdi: *Rigoletto*, Duke's entrance in Act III

Met 2013; c. Michele Mariotti, d. Michael Mayer; Piotr Beczala (Duke)

B. Gustavus III

Un ballo in maschera (A Masked Ball, 1858) is also based on a French text, a libretto written by **Eugène Scribe** (1791–1861) for a *grand opéra* by **Daniel Auber** (1782–1871). And it is also about a real person, **King Gustavus III** of Sweden (reigned 1771–92), whose autocratic but democratically-intended reforms angered the old school aristocrats, who formed a cabal to assassinate him at a masked ball. Scribe and Verdi added some non-historical elements: the *friendship* between the King and his chief counsellor, and the unconsummated *love* of the King for the counsellor's wife.

Censorship requirements forced a change of title and locale. The place is now Boston. The King has become Riccardo, the colonial Governor; his counsellor is now Renato, and the chief conspirators are called Sam and Tom. Most modern productions, however, return to the original setting with Renato, Sam, and Tom becoming the historical Counts Anckarström, Ribbing, and Horn. The soprano's name remains Amelia.

After the opening chorus, we shall cut to the end of Act II. **Amelia**, racked with guilt, has come at night to a deserted place with the intent to kill herself. But the **King** has followed and declared his love. She is about to submit when her husband, **Anckarström**, arrives, loyally warning the King that the conspirators are coming to ambush him; he offers to change cloaks so as to face the assassins himself. Before he flees, the King makes his friend promise that he will escort the masked lady (Amelia is now veiled) to the city, and neither follow her inside the city gates nor ask her name. But Amelia unveils herself to save her husband, making him a laughing-stock.

Determined to get revenge for this betrayal of friendship, Anckarström joins the conspirators in a plot to assassinate the King at a masked ball that evening. We will watch the scene of their oath, then follow with a short passage from the ball scene itself.

Verdi: *Un ballo in maschera*, excerpts from Acts II and III:

Parma 2011; c. Gianluigi Gelmetti, d. Pierluigi Samaritani;
Kristin Lewis (Amelia), Serena Gamberoni (Oscar), Francesco Meli (King), Vladimir Stoyanov (Anckarström), Antonio Barbagello (Ribbing), Enrico Rinaldo (Horn)

C. Philip II

The reign of **Philip II** from 1556 to 1598 was a period of power and prosperity for Spain, marred (as we would now see it) by the excesses of the Inquisition and cruelties verging on genocide perpetrated by the occupying forces in the Spanish Netherlands (Flanders); both play a significant role in both Schiller's play and Verdi's opera. It is basically a political drama, with the historical narrative spiced up (as in *Ballo*) with largely fictional elements involving *love* and *friendship*. The *love* is that between the heir to the throne **Don Carlos** and **Princess Elizabeth of Valois**, whom he is sent to woo in the first act. But then **King Philip** needs a dynastic marriage to cement a treaty, so Carlos finds Elizabeth becoming his stepmother rather than his bride.

The *friendship* is between Carlos and **Rodrigo, Marquis of Posa**. Posa has just returned from the Netherlands, and enlists his friend's help to win them their freedom. This is the thread we shall follow in our excerpts from the story: the duet between the two young men, the scene where Posa presents his case to the King, the violence that breaks out when Carlos does the same in the middle of a grand *auto-da-fé* (burning of heretics by the Inquisition), the great scene for two basses between the King and the **Grand Inquisitor**, and the death of Posa, who sacrifices himself for the sake of Carlos, his friend.

[Verdi composed *Don Carlos* to a French libretto, but it was almost immediately translated into Italian, which is the language we most often hear today (though the Met is about to mount one in French). Verdi also made two different shorter versions in Italian, so you need to check which one you are actually seeing or buying!]

Verdi: *Don Carlo*, various excerpts

Met 2010; c. Yannick Nézet-Seguin, d. Nicholas Hytner;
Roberto Alagna (Carlos), Simon Keenlyside (Posa), Ferruccio Furlanetto (King), Eric Halfvarson (Grand Inquisitor)