Class 7 : Verdi's Opera Kings

A. Francois I

1. Title 1 (Verdi's Opera Kings)

I have changed the title for this class, which is about Verdi's operas that 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). Let's start with *Rigoletto*. Here is the King, now demoted to the Duke of Mantua, coming to an inn outside the town looking, as he says, for a woman and some wine. You'll know the tune.

2. Verdi: *Rigoletto*, "La donna è mobile" (Met, 2013)
3. Verdi and the censor

Rigoletto is based on the the 1832 play *Le roi s'amuse* (The King Amuses Himself) by **Victor Hugo** (1802–85), which is about one of the supposed amorous adventures of King François I (reigned 1515–47). The song you have just heard is a free translation of a verse attributed to François himself (although I can't now find where I read this; it's probably apochryphal anyhow). Hugo's play was banned after its first performance, and had to wait another 50 years to be staged again. Verdi had his own problem with the censors; you heard one example in that opening line. It was thought too *risqué* for him to ask outright for a woman, so "your sister and some wine" got changed to "a room and some wine."

4. Title changes in *Rigoletto*

More seriously, the Austrian authorities would not allow him to put a king onstage, even a long-dead one, so François had to be changed to an entirely fictional Duke of Mantua. Here is a partial list of the various titles used for the work. Verdi originally proposed *La Maledizione*, or "The Curse," but that was thought sacrilegeous. The censor proposed "The Duke of Vendôme," but Verdi rejected that. The same censor, who was actually quite helpful, suggested to switch to Mantua, and giving the title to the jester rather than the King/Duke himself. And so the opera was premiered in Venice in 1851. But the censors in Rome and Naples demanded further changes. They softened some aspects of the plot and, so as not to be associated with the licentious original version, changed the title to *Viscardello* or *Lionello*, or even, *Clara di Pert* (Clara of Perth), as Scotland seemed a lot farther away than even a fictional Mantua!

B. Gustavus III

5. Poster for *Un ballo in maschera*

I showed you this because the next time Verdi proposed an opera dealing with a real king—*The Masked Ball* in 1858—he ran into even more trouble. But before I describe it, take a look at the opening scene in the 2011 production from Parma that I have chosen to play. In this rather splendid setting, you will hear a group of courtiers admiring their ruler, a smaller group of conspirators plotting his downfall, and then the arrival of the Ruler himself. As you watch, ask yourselves where you think we are supposed to be?

6. Verdi: *Un ballo in maschera*, opening chorus (Parma, 2011)
7. — still from the above

What did you make of the setting? It's a pretty splendid royal palace, isn't it? Presumably in some Catholic country, given that line of cardinals. But what are all those Union Jacks doing at the end? We are meant to suppose that this is colonial Boston—yes, the one in Massachussetts—and the Ruler is **Riccardo, Duke of Warwick**. None of which is remotely likely, of course; it is the same thing as moving *Rigoletto* to the Scottish Highlands. For Verdi's opera, originally called *Gustavo Terzo*, was an adaptation of a French libretto by **Eugène Scribe** (1791–1861) for a *grand opéra* by **Daniel Auber** (1782–1871). More importantly, it was about a real person, **King Gustavus III of Sweden** (reigned 1771–92).

8. King Gustavus III

Gustavus was the kind of monarch sometimes referred to as an **Enlightened Despot**—that is to say, a monarch who uses absolute power to achieve socially responsible ends. Gustavus had fought to break the domination of the nobility over Swedish politics. But to do this, he first engineered a *coup d'état*, seizing all power for himself, then enacted a constitution which granted new rights to the common people. Naturally, many nobles resented this, and formed a cabal that shot him during a masked ball in Stockholm—hence the title. And here, rather gruesomely, is the suit he was actually wearing.

9. Masquerade dress worn by Gustavus III on March 16, 1792

As I said in the first class, however, Verdi's operas are never only, or even mainly, about politics; he always needed a human dimension as well. In *Ballo*, this dimension is twofold: the King's **friendship** with his chief counselor, **Count Anckarström**, and his intense but unconsummated **love** for Anckarström's wife, **Amelia**. She loves him too, but is racked with guilt, and comes at night to a deserted place with the intent to kill herself. But the King has followed her, and declares 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. Anckarström agrees, and we can take it on from there.

10. Verdi: *Un ballo in maschera*, Act II finale (Parma, 2011)
11. — still from the above

Act III begins with two great arias that I haven't time to play: one in which Amelia begs forgiveness from her husband, and another in which he swears vengeance against the King, the former friend who betrayed him. Then the conspirators, **Count Ribbing** and **Count Horn**, arrive and Anckarström pledges himself to join their plot. That is where we will pick it up and, if time, go on to the scene where the page **Oscar** comes in with an invitation to that evening's masked ball.

12. Verdi: *Un ballo in maschera*, Act III/1 oath scene finale (Parma, 2011)
13. — still from the above

We don't have time for the whole of the Masked Ball scene either. But I do want to play the brief duet between the King and Amelia in which he says farewell to her for the last time. I especially like the ide of the director, Pierluigi Samaritani, to bring the player of the touching violin *obbligato* onstage amid those fascinating two-sided dancers.

14. Verdi: *Un ballo in maschera*, Act III/2 duet and assassination (Parma, 2011)
15. *Un ballo in maschera* in Brescia

After forgiving Anckarström, the King sings a deathbed aria and the opera ends amid general mourning. But I'll leave it instead with this production from the small Italian city of Brescia. If I'm not mistaken, they have doubled up on the original transposition to America, but staging this in what looks awfully like Ford's Theater in Washington!

C. Philip II

16. Philip II and Don Carlos

When Verdi attempted an opera about a real-life king again, with *Don Carlos* in 1866, he had much less trouble, and the political aspects of the opera have become really meaningful. Several reasons for this: the unification of Italy is all but complete and there are no foreign powers to placate; Verdi himself has matured (this is his fourth-from-last opera); and the libretto is a French language adaptation of a play by **Friedrich Schiller** (1759–1805), whose political plays are really about moral and political thought, not dressed up romances. The presiding monarch is **Philip II of Spain**, who reigned from 1556 to 1598, and the title character is his son, **Don Carlos, Prince of Asturias**, who died at 23 and never wore the crown.

17. Elizabeth de Valois, with the above

I mentioned that Verdi required a personal drama as well as the politicial one, and that in *Ballo* there were two such elements, which I called **love** and **friendship**. It is the same here, but Schiller was infinitely more subtle. Carlos is sent to Fontainebleau to propose marriage to the lady shown here, **Elizabeth de Valois**. And indeed they fall in love. But then news comes that Philip needs a dynastic marriage to cement a treaty, and so has chosen Elizabeth for himself. So Carlos returns to Spain in a situation where the woman he loves, and who also loves him, is now his step-mother, not his bride.

18. Bruegel: *The Massacre of the Innocents* (c.1567, HM the Queen)

The friendship is between Carlos and **Rodrigo, the Marquess of Posa**. He has just returned from service in the Netherlands, which at that time were a Spanish possession, held in check by the brutal actions of the occupying army. Something of this can be seen in **Pieter Bruegel's** 1567 painting of *The Massacre of the Innocents*, in which Herod's soldiers are replaced by those under the command of Spain. Anyway, Posa is determined to free Flanders from Spanish oppression, and enlists his friend's help in achieving it. You will hear both these elements of love and friendship in this scene from Act II, which contains one of the two most famous tenor/baritone duets from all opera (the other is *The Pearl Fishers*). The singers are **Roberto Alagna** and **Simon Keenlyside**, in the magnificent 2010 Met production by **Nicholas Hytner**.

19. Verdi: *Don Carlo*, Act II, Posa/Carlo duet (Met 2010)
20. Main title 2 (score cover)

[break]

Since this is a very expansive opera, I will play the remaining scenes broken only by brief synopsis slides like this one, so as to get in as much Verdi as possible and as little Brunyate. I shall entirely ignore the love element between Carlos and Elizabeth (they do meet, though their relationship remains chaste), and the subplot involving Princess Eboli, whom we shall not see at all. Instead, I'll concentrate on Posa's intercession with the King on behalf of Flanders, how Carlos gets caught up in the middle of it, and the way the Church in the person of the Grand Inquisitor alters the balance of everything. I shall play the big *auto-da-fé* scene of the Inquisition complete, and also the interview between the King and the Grand Inquisitor—a magnificent duet for two basses—but my other two scenes have to be excerpts only.

21. Caption to following scene
22. Verdi: *Don Carlo*, Act III/1, Posa and the King [8½ minutes]
23. Caption to following scene
24. Verdi: *Don Carlo*, Act III/2, Auto-da-fé scene (complete) [21 minutes]
25. Caption to following scene
26. Verdi: *Don Carlo*, Act IV/1, Grand Inquisitor scene (complete) [10 minutes]
27. Caption to following scene
28. Verdi: *Don Carlo*, Act IV/2, Posa's aria "Per me giunto" (only if time) [3 minutes]
29. Verdi: *Don Carlo*, Act IV/2, the death of Posa [5 minutes]
30. Main title 3 (still from the Met production, posterized)