

Il Trovatore premièred 1853

GIUSEPPE VERDI (1813-1901)

Libretto by Salvatore Cammarano and Leone Emanuele Bardare

Running time: 2 hours 32 mins (including lots of applause!)

Wiener Staatsoper in 1978

Il Conte di Luna	<i>Piero Cappuccilli</i>	Baritone
Leonora, a duchess	<i>Raina Kabaivanska</i>	Soprano
Azucena, a gypsy	<i>Fiorenza Cossotto</i>	Mezzo
Manrico the troubadour	<i>Plácido Domingo</i>	Tenor
Ferrando, Luna's captain of guard	<i>José van Dam</i>	Basso Profondo
Ines, confidante of Leonora	<i>Maria Venuti</i>	Soprano
Ruiz, one of Manrico's soldiers	<i>Heinz Zednik</i>	Tenor
Old Gypsy	<i>Karl Caslavsky</i>	Bass
Messenger	<i>Ewald Aichberger</i>	Tenor
Conductor / Director	<i>Herbert von Karajan</i>	

Biscay (partly set in Aragon) during the early 15th century

Synopsis

PART 1 [THE DUEL] SCENE 1: A hall in the palace of Aliaferia.

Ferrando tells the story of Azucena the daughter of a woman who, 20 years before, was burnt for witchcraft because she cast the evil eye on the Conte di Luna's infant brother. To avenge her mother, Azucena allegedly threw this younger brother onto the embers of the pyre.

PART 1 [THE DUEL] SCENE 2: The gardens of the palace.

Before the current civil war started, an unknown knight won Leonora's love by his bravery during a tournament. Since then he sometimes returns to serenade her as a troubadour called Manrico. [During the civil war Manrico was nursed back to health by Azucena – supposedly his mother – after a wound had been inflicted by di Luna.]

Leonora's two admirers both approach through the garden: di Luna quietly, and Manrico in full-throated song. Hastening to greet Manrico, Leonora blunders into the arms of di Luna. The count is enraged to discover that his rival is a civil war rebel. Both men rush off to duel.



PART 2 [THE GYPSY] SCENE 1: A ruined hovel in a gypsy camp at the foot of a Biscay mountain. Manrico has defeated di Luna in the duel, but spared his life. Azucena sings a ballad to Manrico about a woman – who proves to be her own mother – who was burnt at the stake. She goes on to tell the ghastly story of how, seeking to avenge her mother, she threw an infant into the flames who turned out to be her own son, rather than di Luna's brother her intended victim. Azucena then tries to resolve some of the resulting confusion by maintaining that Manrico is her own son. Next a messenger tells them that Leonora, who believes that her lover is dead, is about to take the veil. Manrico hastens away.

PART 2 [THE GYPSY] SCENE 2: Porch of a place of retreat near Castellor.

di Luna has also heard about Leonora's intention and he plans to abduct her. As Leonora bids farewell to her companions, di Luna steps out of the shadows, but he's confounded by the appearance of Manrico – accompanied by his followers – who hurry Leonora away.

[REFRESHMENTS]

PART 3 [THE GYPSY'S SON] SCENE 1: An encampment.

di Luna's troops prepare to assault Manrico's stronghold. A gypsy has been arrested on suspicion of spying, and Ferrando recognises her as Azucena. In terror she calls out for Manrico, naming him as her own son. Di Luna is exultant: by burning her in front of Manrico's fortress he can torment Manrico, and also avenge his brother's death.

PART 3 [THE GYPSY'S SON] SCENE 2: A room adjacent to the chapel at Castellor.

In the beleaguered castle Manrico and Leonora are about to be married. Ruiz reports that a pyre has been erected outside the walls, and that Azucena is being led towards it in chains. Manrico leads his men in a rescue attempt.

PART 4 [THE EXECUTION] SCENE 1: A wing of the palace of Aliaferia.

Leonora approaches – armed with a phial of poison – to rescue Manrico, who has now been imprisoned with his mother. From the castle she hears monkish chants of death, as well as Manrico's own singing. She accosts di Luna, who's initially deaf to her appeal. However he agrees, when she offers to marry him in exchange for Manrico's freedom. Leonora then drinks the slow-acting poison.

PART 4 [THE EXECUTION] SCENE 2: A horrid dungeon.

Manrico comforts the fearful Azucena. Leonora then arrives to free Manrico. Refusing to leave without her, he begins to suspect the bargain that she may have made. When Leonora sinks dying at his feet, he's overcome with remorse. Di Luna enters and consigns Manrico to immediate execution, forcing Azucena to watch from her prison window. As Manrico dies, she reveals to di Luna that he has killed his own brother: her mother is avenged!

Confused by this Plot?

Many others have been. Here's an arbitrary selection of Google quotes:

Houston Chronicle – "Demystifying the convoluted plot of *Il Trovatore*"

Metropolitan Opera – It's true that the story has been called absurd and impossibly confusing. It is the one work most often sent up whenever people are trying to make fun of opera.

SimpleOpera – "Il Trovatore – A complete guide to Verdi's most absurd opera"

The backstory narrated by Ferrando in the opening scene is crucial. You might almost feel that you need to memorise every word that he sings? Azucena's agonising mistake is pivotal. She subsequently brings up di Luna's younger brother as 'Manrico' pretending that he's her own dead son. Kobbé drily observes that 'with an almost supernatural instinct for opera' this error preserves 'the baby that was destined to grow up as a tenor with a voice high enough to sing' the romantic lead in this work.



Operatic Context

Sandwiched between *Rigoletto* and *La traviata*, *Il Trovatore* comes from a creative early/middle period of Verdi's long career. He was still composing prodigiously fast to secure his financial position. He'd now progressed to a more 'personal' style (more influenced by Donizetti than late Rossini). Coinciding with a greater concern for 'ordinary' people in interesting predicaments, his characters now express themselves with greater delicacy and individuality. The gypsy Azucena particularly fired his imagination. The success of the première even surpassed *Rigoletto*, and Verdi himself enjoyed the street-theatre parodies that persisted for decades (*A Night at the Opera* by the Marx Brothers could be regarded as part of this long-running tradition). Bruno Barilli described this opera as the definitive melodrama. It makes fewer demands of the singers' acting skills than *Rigoletto*. Caruso pithily remarked that all one needed for a good performance were the four best singers in the world.

The arias typically start from quiet, sometimes unremarkable openings, gradually unfolding in mounting waves of melody to culminate in grand engulfing phrases employing the full extension of the voice. The opera's extraordinary range of expression is best seen in the diverse elements that Verdi unifies within the so-called 'Miserere' scene (in Part 4 Scene 1). Herbert von Karajan's *Trovatore* first made its mark in legendary performances at the Salzburg Festival which he also directed. This 1962 production formed the basis for later revivals in Salzburg and Vienna.

Selected Musical Biographies

MANRICO: JOSÉ PLÁCIDO DOMINGO (born 1941). He grew up working in his parents' Zarzuela company in Mexico, and has since regularly promoted these Spanish operettas. He's recorded more than one hundred complete operas, and performed over 150 roles in more than five different languages. From 1990, he performed as one of *The Three Tenors* with Luciano Pavarotti and José Carreras (and recorded the best-selling classical album of all time). In the early 2010s, he completed a transition from tenor repertoire to baritone parts (such as Simon Boccanegra). Increasingly he also conducts operas and concerts.

FERRANDO: JOSÉ VAN DAM (born 1940) is a Belgian singer who has enjoyed an exceptional international career, since making his opera début at the Paris Opéra in 1961. King Albert II of Belgium made van Dam a Baron in 1998 to recognise his musical achievements. The following year he sang when Belgium's Crown Prince Philippe married Mathilde d'Udekem d'Acoz.

CONDUCTOR: HERBERT VON KARAJAN (1908–1989) was an Austrian. During the Nazi era he first appeared at the Salzburg Festival with the Vienna Philharmonic and the Berlin Philharmonic. During the Second World War he conducted at the Berlin State Opera. He was principal conductor of the Berlin Philharmonic for 34 years. Generally regarded as one of the greatest conductors of the 20th century, he was a controversial but dominant figure in European classical music from the mid-1950s until his death. A reason for this was the large number of recordings he made and their prominence during his lifetime. By one estimate, he was the top-selling classical music recording artist of all time, having sold an estimated 200 million records.