

Guiseppe Verdi's *Rigoletto*, based on Victor Hugo's 'Le roi s'amuse', was originally titled *La Maledizione (The Curse)*, (*sometimes Monterone's Curse*). This dramatic television version was filmed in the Renaissance splendour of the City of Mantua in the actual places and at the hours of the day indicated in Francesco Maria Piave's libretto and broadcast live around the world, or as close as time zones allowed, on September 4th and 5th 2010. The locations chosen included the sumptuous rooms of Palazzo Te, the Palazzo Ducale – the main residence of the powerful Gonzaga family and dukes of the city of Mantua – and also the Rocca di Sparafucile, a former fort and customs post located at the entrance to the city on the opposite bank of the River Mincio. Maestro Zubin Mehta conducted the Orchestra Sinfonica Nazionale della Rai remotely from the Teatro Scientifico Bibiena. Through an advanced and sophisticated technological system, the locations in different points Mantua were seamlessly linked together. This BBC showing (over the two days and three programmes) was introduced by Katie Derham.

Rigoletto premièred 1851 at La Fenice in Venice

GIUSEPPE VERDI (1813-1901)

Running time: 150 mins

Rigoletto, <i>the Duke's jester</i>	baritone	Plácido Domingo
Gilda, <i>his daughter</i>	soprano	Julia Novikova
Duke of Mantua	tenor	Vittoria Grigolo
Sparafucile, <i>an assassin for hire</i>	bass	Ruggero Raimondi
Maddalena, <i>his sister</i>	contralto	Nino Surguladze
Giovanna, <i>Gilda's nurse/companion</i>	mezzo-soprano	Caterina Di Tonno
Count Ceprano	bass	Gergio Gatti
Countess Ceprano, <i>his wife</i>	mezzo-soprano	Kassandra Dinopoulou
Matteo Borsa, <i>a courtier</i>	tenor	Leonardo Cortellazzi
Count Monterone	baritone	Gianfranco Montresor
Marullo	baritone	Giogio Caoduro
L'orchestra Sinfonica Nazionale della Rai and i Solisti Cantori	Conductor	Zubin Mehta

Synopsis

ACT 1, FILMED AT THE PALAZZO TE, MANTUA

Scene 1: At a lavish ball the Duke of Mantua is telling Matteo Borsa about his latest flirtation, a young woman he sees each Sunday at church. She lives in a remote street and an unknown man enters her house each night. As they admire the ladies of the court, the duke expresses his admiration for all women and his disdain for monogamy. Count Ceprano watches the duke pursue his wife, but the hunchback jester Rigoletto mocks him. (*Rigoler: french to laugh.*)

Marullo tells the courtiers that Rigoletto has a mistress. When Rigoletto further humiliates Count Ceprano in front of the duke, the courtiers plot their revenge on the jester. The festivities are interrupted by Count Monterone whose daughter's honour has been taken by the duke. After Rigoletto taunts him for trying to protest his daughter's lost virtue, Monterone places a curse on the duke and his terrified jester.

Scene 2: With Monterone's curse weighing on his thoughts, Rigoletto encounters the assassin Sparafucile, who offers to rid him of any rivals. (*Sparare: italian to shoot – fucile: gun.*) The jester rejects his services. Left alone, Rigoletto compares how he and Sparafucile use their respective weapons: Rigoletto, his wit, and Sparafucile, his sword. He enters the house and is

greeted by his daughter Gilda. When she asks Rigoletto about her family and mother, he insists that she has no family and laments that her mother, the only one to have ever loved him, died. As they are speaking, the disguised duke slips in and recognizes Rigoletto.

After Rigoletto leaves, Gilda confesses her feeling of guilt to her nurse/companion Giovanna. She wonders if she should have told her father about the man who follows her to church. Suddenly she is surprised by the duke, disguised as a poor student, who declares his love. As she admits her feelings for him, they are interrupted by a noise outside and he reluctantly leaves. Soon Rigoletto returns and encounters Marullo, Borsa, and other courtiers. They tell him that they are planning to abduct Countess Ceprano, and Rigoletto offers to join them. On the pretext that they are all masked, Marullo covers Rigoletto's eyes and ears with a blind fold. The courtiers break into Rigoletto's house and kidnap Gilda while he holds the ladder. Realising what has happened, Rigoletto recalls Monterone's curse.

INTERVAL



ACT 2, FILMED IN THE PALAZZO DUCALE, MANTUA

Upon returning to Rigoletto's house, the duke found that Gilda had been abducted. Courtiers enter and relate how they kidnapped Rigoletto's "mistress" and brought her to the palace. Realizing they are referring to Gilda, he rushes off to her. Rigoletto enters and tries to maintain his composure as he searches for signs of his daughter. As he realizes that Gilda is in the next room with the duke, he tells the courtiers that they have not abducted his mistress, but his daughter.

Gilda enters crying and Rigoletto demands the courtiers leave the room. She tells her father about the duke's seduction. Rigoletto decides that they will leave Mantua.

ACT 3, FILMED AT THE ROCCA DI SPARAFUCILE ON THE OPPOSITE BANK OF THE RIVER MINCIO

Rigoletto and Gilda spy on the disguised Duke who is awaiting the arrival of Maddalena, Sparafucile's sister. While pouring some wine the duke sings '*La donna è mobile*' (*Woman is fickle*) and then begins to seduce Maddalena, as Rigoletto and Gilda look on [in the famous '*Bella figlia dell'amore*' quartet]. Rigoletto orders Gilda to put on a man's clothes to prepare to leave for Verona and tells her that he plans to follow later. After she leaves, he completes his bargain with the assassin, who is ready to murder his guest for 20 scudi. Rigoletto pays Sparafucile half of the fee to murder the duke and says he will return at midnight to pay the balance and retrieve the body. As a storm approaches, Gilda returns dressed as a man and

listens from outside as Maddalena, fascinated by the duke, tries to convince her brother not to kill him, “kill the hunchback instead” she counsels but he answers “Do you take me for a thief or a robber – have I ever double crossed a client!” Sparafucile finally yields, but only if someone comes to the tavern, as a replacement. Gilda decides to give her life to save the duke.

As midnight strikes, Rigoletto knocks on Sparafucile’s door. The assassin accepts the rest of the jester’s money and gives him the corpse which has been placed in a sack. Rigoletto is rejoicing over his vengeance when he hears the duke’s voice in the distance. Opening the sack, he discovers his daughter. Asking for his blessing, Gilda dies in Rigoletto’s arms.

Operatic Context

The challenge posed by censors was very fresh in Verdi’s mind after a last minute intervention fatally undermined his *Stiffelio* opera, so he and his librettist Piave had anticipated problems from the start. Even in liberal Paris, Victor Hugo’s *Le roi s’amuse* play had been banned after one performance. This play stimulated the composer as no subject since *Macbeth*. He famously described Hugo’s Triboulet – precursor of Verdi’s *Rigoletto* title role – as a creation worthy of Shakespeare. When the censors read Piave’s original *La maledizione* libretto they were appalled, and absolutely forbade the performance of ‘such repellent immorality and obscene triviality’ in Venice.

The first rewrite *Il Duca di Vendome* – which moved the focus away from François I’s royal French court – was accepted by the censors but completely rejected by the composer, as crucial and powerful elements of the plot had been eliminated. A second attempt – *Rigoletto* – satisfied all parties, by shifting the action to the court of a fictitious Italian duke, and eliminating some of the more flagrantly libertine passages.



Verdi shrewdly concealed *La donna è mobile* his most memorable ‘earworm’ in this opera until the last minute, correctly fearing that it would be publicised by street musicians if it had been heard prematurely. The première was a brilliant popular success, and within ten years *Rigoletto* was staged in around 250 opera houses around the world. Although *Rigoletto* can be identified the earliest of of Verdi’s operas that survived essentially unimpaired from its first performance, this summary conceals various early perturbations. Some censors were less accommodating than Venice, and for at least a decade alternate versions – with at least three different titles – were all that could be seen in many theatres.

One key to *Rigoletto* is the split personality of the central character: ‘grossly deformed and absurd, but inwardly passionate and full of love’ as Verdi himself put it. This results in veerings of tone, from darkness to light, and from comedy to tragedy, which give *Rigoletto* an almost Shakespearean expressive range, as well as a breadth of sympathy typical of all Verdi’s operas from this time forward.

One part of *Rigoletto's* unique colouring is achieved by excluding female voices from the chorus. The Act 3 quartet is one of Verdi's greatest and most characteristic achievements, resolving a situation of excruciating emotional complexity into a torrent of passionate but exquisitely shaped song. [This ensemble also features in the *Quartet* film that's based on Ronald Harwood's stage play.]



Claudio Monteverdi (1567-1643) in Mantua

Monteverdi originally developed his career at the Gonzaga Court in Mantua (and subsequently after 1613 in Venice). The first surviving opera *Euridice* by Jacopo Peri was created in Florence in 1600. The spread of this new genre to other courts began with the performance of Monteverdi's *Orfeo* in Mantua in 1607. His title role provides an extraordinary example of early 17th century vocal virtuosity, and the Mantuan orchestra seems to have been larger and more varied than in Florence. Both *Euridice* and *Orfeo* included castratos in their casts. Women on stage were generally subject to a papal ban in the Papal States, so castratos regularly sang female roles (as well as heroic male roles). Monteverdi's second Mantua opera was *L'Arianna* (1608). Ariadne's lament – the only music that survives – was said to have moved the audience to tears, and it was an influential model for subsequent composers.

Selected Musical Biographies

RIGOLETTO: 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.

SPARAFUCILE: RUGGERO RAIMONDI (born 1941) is an Italian bass-baritone opera singer who's also appeared in films. His career promptly included major opera houses in Italy and abroad, including the Glyndebourne Festival (*Don Giovanni*), a role that he reprised when Joseph Losey filmed this opera in 1979. He first directed a production of *Don Giovanni* in 1986, and decided to continue as a part time director. Raimondi is especially well-known for his Rossini and Mozart roles, although he's also sung works by Verdi, Puccini and many other composers.

CONDUCTOR: ZUBIN MEHTA (born 1936) is an Indian conductor. Mehta was music director of the Los Angeles Philharmonic from 1962 to 1978, the youngest music director for any major North American orchestra. From 1978 to 1991, Mehta was music director of the New York Philharmonic. In 1981 he was appointed as Music Director for life of the Israel Philharmonic Orchestra. He was chief conductor of the Maggio Musicale Fiorentino in Florence from 1985 to 2017.