'Rigoletto'

Tables turn on court jester, as the Duke seduces his daughter

Verdi's operas have wide popularity, due in part because the music is so well known. The grand march from "Aida," the gypsy chorus from "Il Trovatore," and so on, are tunes quickly spotted as Verdi hits. In "Rigoletto," there are more familiar arias and ensembles than any of the master's other works.

This was the 19th opera composed by Giuseppe Verdi at the transition between his early and middle periods of his long career as the world's best-known opera composer. It was followed promptly by "Traviata" and "Trovatore," creating a triumvirate of the most-performed works at the core of the opera repertory. "Rigoletto" opening on March 28 is San Diego Opera's third production of the 2009 season.

Getting the commissioned opera on the stage for a premiere in Venice in 1851 was not an easy task. Verdi already had a reputation as an Italian patriot and insurgent against the ruling monarchy of the time. His earlier opera subjects had roused the government censors and forced changes that would not slander the aristocracy. (''Un ballo in maschera'' had to be moved from Sweden to Boston because the drama centered on an assassination of the king. It didn't matter in America where Tom and Sammuel plot to kill the governor).

The problem with "Rigoletto," based on an 1833 play by Victor Hugo, was casting the Duke as a libertine who seduced the women of his court and any skirt that caught his fancy. The libretto submitted to the Venetian censors was rejected as "disgusting immorality and obscene triviality." (That's enough to guarantee the success of any opera!)

However, Verdi was determined to complete his work and sent the libretto back for revision. Still featuring the immorality of the lecherous Duke, he changed the title of the opera from "Il Duca di Vendome" to the name of the court jester and made him the key protagonist for the drama. Verdi managed to avoid stripping the Duke of his lecherous control over his conquests in order to keep his distinct mark of dramatic confrontation.

After clearing the censors, Verdi threw himself into the project writing the score in six weeks. He appeared in Venice just a month before the opening night for piano rehearsals and to complete the orchestration. Such genius is what made Verdi so famous and successful during his lifetime.

Following the wildly popular Venetian premiere, "Rigoletto" moved into the standard repertory with 250 performances in the first 10 years. In America, the first performance was in New York in 1857. Later the opera gained fame for the American debut of famous tenor Enrico Caruso at the Metropolitan Opera in 1903 and has never lost its popularity.

In a nutshell, the story of "Rigoletto" is about treachery and personal sacrifice. The hunchback jester for the Duke of Mantua tries to protect his daughter Gilda from his lecherous boss. She is abducted by courtiers as a payback to Rigoletto/jester and falls for the Duke's sweet talk. Gilda learns of her lover's infidelity but still protects him from her father's revenge. Gilda is the disguised victim of a paid assassin. Suicide is her redemption.

Two arias from "Rigoletto" help to keep the opera at the top of the hit list. The Duke's aria in Act III, "La donna è mobile," (Woman is fickle) and "Caro nome" (Dearest name) in Act I are familiar tunes. The dramatic quartet in Act III is another melody easy to whistle while leaving the theatre.

San Diego Opera presents an international cast for the three principals. Lado Ataneli, a baritone from Georgia, as the title character; Albanian tenor Giuseppe Cipollini as the Duke; L'uchia Varghiova from Slovakia sings Gilda, Rigoletto's daughter and target of the Duke's debauchery to form the trio.

Eduardo Müller conducts and Loel Manessor directs the SDO ensemble in five performances at the Civic Theatre. "Rigoletto" is sung in Italian with English text above the stage.

Performances at the Civic Theatre are: 7 p.m. March 28, March 31 and April 8; 8 p.m. April 3; and 2 p.m. April 5. For ticket information, call 619-533-7000 or visit sdopera.com.