

Music, Metaphysics and Religion in Verdi & Wagner: The Aesthetic Experience of the Sacred



Francisco Aranda Espinosa



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HECHO EN MÉXICO | MADE IN MEXICO

*For M.P., with all my love and affection.
For my parents, Norma and Octavio.
For Lorenzo, my only brother.*

*With profound gratitude to Naomi Brickman, for her attentive reading
and thoughtful support throughout the gestation of this text, and for
her time and dedication.*

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Prologue

It is safe to assume that anyone who appreciates music and drama is familiar with the operas of Giuseppe Verdi and Richard Wagner. There is also little doubt that both rank among the most important composers in the history of music. The two were born in 1813: Verdi on October 10 in Le Roncole, a village near Busseto in the Italian province of Parma, and Wagner slightly earlier, on May 22, in Leipzig, then part of the Kingdom of Saxony. While Verdi died in 1901 at the age of 88 in Lombardy, which borders his native Emilia-Romagna, Wagner passed away suddenly in 1883 at the age of 69, a bit farther from Germany, having spent that summer with his wife, Cosima, the daughter of Franz Liszt, in a beautiful palazzo on Venice's Grand Canal.

Musically, Wagner was influenced by Haydn and Beethoven, as well as by composers such as Chopin, Bellini, Schumann, and Weber. He was one of the greatest revolutionaries of musical discourse in Romantic opera¹. It would not be an exaggeration to say that this genius from Leipzig, through his sweeping revolution in the field of art, shook the very foundations of inspiration—the Muses themselves. Among the structural elements that shaped this musical transformation were chromaticism, associated with the timbral richness of the expanded orchestra—which in Wagner occupied a role analogous to that of the dithyrambic chorus of Greek tragedy²—and the expansion of the harmonic cosmos. Taken together, these features gave rise to what Wagner termed the “endless melody,” characterized by a continuous displacement of the tonal center. This harmonic mobility left a decisive mark on the subsequent development of Western art music, reaching its radical articulation in the

¹ It should be noted that by the term discourse, as used here, we refer strictly to the use of technical resources within the musical structure, and not to the verbal language Wagner could draw on to write his own literary plots and libretti.

² A dithyrambic chorus in ancient Greek tragedy is a passionate, lyrical group performance that expresses collective emotions, often praising gods or celebrating heroic deeds.

serialism of the Second Viennese School, led by Arnold Schoenberg and his principal pupils.

As a counterpoint, Verdi drew upon the Italian operatic tradition, particularly as illustrated by Mercadante, Rossini, and Donizetti, yet he refined a distinct voice that matured over time into something uniquely his. Far from being a guardian of form, he profoundly reshaped operatic drama in Romanticism. His evolution was governed by a constant strain between formal convention and expressive freedom, gradually shifting from bel canto to a more integrated and psychologically driven dramatic idiom. While Wagner's revolution was one of total aesthetic and philosophical rupture, Verdi's revision was internal and architectural in nature. Instead of dismantling the Italian musical heritage, he reconfigured it from within, amplifying its suggestive potential. Though Verdi's orchestration grew increasingly nuanced, it remained less dense and symbolically charged than Wagner's; his mastery lay rather in the economy of his means and the surgical precision with which he rendered human truth in music. Verdi's legacy forged the universe of Puccini and of *verismo* composers such as Mascagni, Catalani, Cilea, Leoncavallo, and Zandonai; it further found subtle resonance in the works of later modernists like Stravinsky, Prokofiev, and even Ravel, who absorbed aspects of his clarity of line and orchestral restraint. His ability to fuse music and dramatic veracity prepared the way for new paradigms in 20th-century opera, even if his techniques persisted in being rooted in tonality. If Wagner made the Muses tremble, Verdi attended to them—more intimately, perhaps more humanly—allowing their voices to reverberate in the anguished nobility of Isabel de Valois, the moral torment of a court jester, or the desolate grandeur of his *Messa da Requiem*.

Each developed within the realm of art according to his own rhythm and manner in ways that were radically different yet equally decisive. Their positions in the history of 19th-century opera are both emblematic and in many respects irreconcilable, though they sometimes converge mysteriously in their ultimate aesthetic aims. Verdi belongs to a continuum that emphasizes the eloquent force of melody and the human voice, while Wagner seeks to redefine opera through myth, philosophy, and orchestral symbolism as vehicles for a new kind of musical drama. In confronting

the question of how to ennoble opera beyond mere entertainment, both offer answers that arise from fundamentally disparate worldviews. Verdi's approach was that of a consummate craftsman who effectively captured the public's ear within a tightly managed system of production. He was a self-made man, a prosperous landowner who operated with a shrewd entrepreneurial mind. He oversaw libretti, orchestrations, casting, theater negotiations, and even rehearsals. Unlike Wagner, whose intellectual aspirations were grandiose and speculative, Verdi worked with themes that often appeared simple or even hackneyed: love, jealousy, three-sided romances, power, vengeance... But by way of them he achieved an extraordinary synthesis of beauty, intimacy, and profundity. He reduced the grand structures of *bel canto* to their essence: direct and passionate utterance with the melodic line at the heart of expression. His operas—especially in the early and middle periods—seldom exceeded three hours in length, and he maintained a structural economy that focused attention on the voice. Homophony governed his scoring, with polyphony emerging only at the end of his career in *Falstaff*, where he resolved a lifelong pursuit of unity through the surprising medium of a comic fugue.

On the other hand, Richard Wagner fashioned himself as a philosopher-artist—a self-styled sovereign—rejecting the inherited divisions of recitative-aria, which he viewed as artificial interruptions in the spectrum of theatrical action. His operas are not lyrical schemes so much as philosophical treatises cast through music, and his creative process integrated orchestration, literature, poetry, and scenic conception into a unified whole. Wagner's subjects differed from Verdi's, focusing on mythology, legend, religion, and the metaphysical dimension in place of contemporary bourgeois life. He strove to achieve what he called *Gesamtkunstwerk*—the total work of art—in which all the arts dissolved into one organic vision. His mind was intensely individualistic, determined to construct a world in which he was the sole legislator of artistic value. Wagner shifted the orchestra from a background element into a protagonist, carrying the psychological and allegorical weight of the drama. Stylistically, his development may be traced from the early works—*Rienzi*, *Der Fliegende Holländer*, and *Lohengrin*—which still exhibit the traditional fragmentation of opera into acts and discrete

tableaux, towards his mature works —*Tristan und Isolde*, *Die Meistersinger von Nürnberg*, and *Parsifal*—, where the musical and dramatic fabric becomes continuous, flowing through scenes without recess. It is in these later operas that Wagner's polyphonic procedure becomes most evident, with sophisticated contrapuntal textures and a proliferation of leitmotifs that transform over time, creating a new temporal configuration. For Wagner, the past serves less as a set of historical events and more as a mythical, iconic reservoir—an epiphany of memory that the listener must feel, not just understand. In this sense, he builds a musical metaphysics of time in which the present is continually haunted and marked by echoes of the past.

Verdi engages time more in terms of dramatic momentum than as a metaphysical schema. In his late works —particularly in *Don Carlo*, which was composed more than a decade after *Tannhäuser* and is here examined in deliberate dialogue with it— we begin to sense a closer involvement with temporal and political complexity. Though Verdi remains distant from the intellectual movements of German Romanticism and largely uninterested in the writings of thinkers like Schopenhauer, Nietzsche, Mann, or Adorno, he nonetheless develops a mature style that shows an interest in interiority and historical weight, drawing on authors such as Shakespeare, Schiller, Hugo, Scribe, Dumas, *et al.* His political consciousness is conveyed through explicit narratives centered on the charged social unrest of European history as opposed to Wagner's mythic allegory. Verdi's last masterpieces —*Boccanegra*, *Aida*, *Otello*, *Falstaff*— demonstrate an astonishing command of orchestral coloration, harmonic subtlety, and dramatic propulsion that places him —despite his very independent path— alongside Wagner as one of the true renovators of operatic form.

The works of Verdi and Wagner can be read as layered aesthetic systems that interrogate the grounds of religion, power, and human mortality. Positioned at the intersection of musical form and philosophical content, their operas embody the polarities of individual longing and transcendence. That is to say the scenario becomes a site of critical reflection, where theological, ethical, and existential questions are dramatized through the synergy of music, text, and scenic anatomy. The music of these two titans

—Verdi, the herald of the people's lament, and Wagner, the philosopher of mythic totality— enacts the sublime as the experiential threshold of an ontological crisis. Through voice, leitmotif, silence, and sacrifice, they sculpt the sacred into theatrical form.

Verdi and Wagner share little on the surface: one was a pragmatist of the stage, a man of political sensibility and restrained religiosity; the other a utopian thinker, both megalomaniacal and mystical. Yet the two were at heart *tragedians of the sacred*. That *sacred* instance in their work assumes the nature of the *numinous*—at once grand and terrifying—and extends to human frailty before a divine order that is both unreachable and inescapable. It is in this dissonance between the mortal voice and the everlasting silence that their music dwells. In Wagner, the leitmotif becomes more than a technical device; it is a metamusical signifier. Each phrase turns into a sign of unveiling, an imprint of the invisible, a shadow of a truth that escapes enunciation. In *Tannhäuser*, the motifs move beyond recurring melodies to become epiphanies of the past, each return marking the irreversibility of time and the impossibility of redemption. The Venusberg theme—introduced in the Overture—returns relentlessly, exuding voluptuousness like an irreparable wound; the pilgrims' chorus, distant and ascending, becomes a mirage of spiritual purity always out of reach. Verdi, who scorned all kinds of philosophical abstraction, employed thematic recurrence with equal metaphysical intensity. In *Don Carlo*, the shadows of the past weigh upon every gesture: the unfulfilled love, the father who becomes a tyrant, the Church that sanctifies cruelty in the name of salvation. Music takes on the character of fate, and the orchestra carries the memory of decisions never made, paths never taken, forgiveness never granted. In this opera, the sublime is political as much as spiritual—it is the weight of power exercised over human desire. The leitmotif then becomes the locus of dramatic persistence; it is Nietzsche's eternal return but in terms of musical form: a certainty that haunts the present because it has already happened and cannot be undone. Each motif is a simulacrum of the real, a rupture in the plane of theatrical time, a beckoning to a past that has become absolute. In Wagner, the leitmotif is mystical theology; in Verdi, it is historical. Both however use it to educe the sublime.

The experience of the sacred, as theorized by René Girard, Georges Bataille, and Rudolf Otto, pivots on a paradox: the inclination to comprehend the infinite and the simultaneous recognition of its incomprehensibility. In Verdi and Wagner, this paradox becomes *sublime music*. By a stroke of fortune, their operas are full of moments when logos collapses—when words are not enough, when characters fall silent before overwhelming truths. But the music does not stop; it swells, it inquires, it implores. Expressed otherwise, it testifies to the unspeakable. In *Tristan und Isolde*, love becomes a (meta)physical annihilation; in *Rigoletto*, Monterone's *maledizione* acts as a theological pronouncement. In both cases, the sacred appears as a negation—the negation of morality, of logic, of redemption. There is no *katharsis* here in the Aristotelian sense—only rupture, the fall into the abyss. This is music of existential vertigo where the listener confronts the very confines of representation.

The sacred as the ancients knew it is close to the real: it resists being tamed by reason or contained by dogma. Centuries later, Wagner interprets this notion by elevating Christianity to an ur-myth of compassion and reformation, a hierophany staged in chromatic tones. Accordingly, music serves as a form of theology by other means, continuing the sacred discourse first known to the ancients. The drama of salvation, exile, sacrifice, and revelation is not confined to the libretto—it is embedded in the musical structure itself. Wagner's endless melody, Verdi's dramatic chiaroscuro, the return of themes, the interplay of timbre and silence—all contribute to a dramaturgy in which the stage becomes a temple, and the orchestra a prophetic voice. Still, their modes of representing theological concepts vary considerably. Wagner yearns for transcendence, but his heroes are often crushed by the very sacredness they invoke. Verdi, ever the dramatist of flesh and politics, provides a more tragic philosophy: his sacred is always tainted by corruption, his characters always tormented by guilt or betrayal. The *Eccelesia*—whether physical or metaphorical—in *Don Carlo* or *Aida* is rarely an abode of salvation; it is a labyrinth of masks and the abuse of power. Despite these differences, Verdi and Wagner ask the same fundamental question: can the human voice, fragile and finite, speak to(wards) the infinite? Their operas are built on this wager. In moments of almost unbearable beauty—Elisabetta's farewell,

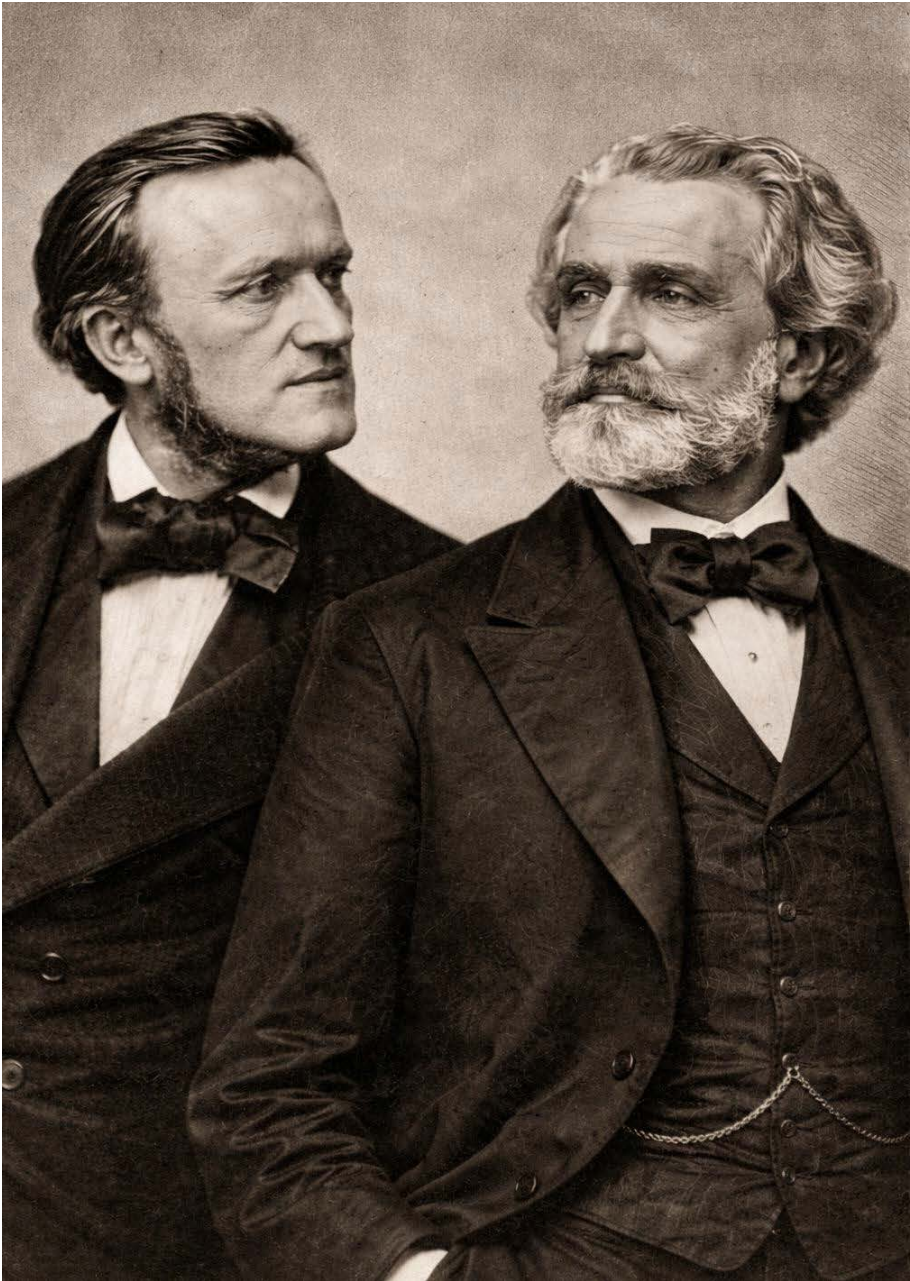
Rigoletto's quartet, Isolde's transfiguration, Rodrigo's moan—the voice is more than a character's expression; it turns into a metaphysical event, a reaching-towards that defines the sublime itself.

If this book is animated by any central thesis it is that the operas of Verdi and Wagner disclose a theology of tragedy, through which the sacred is experienced as an aesthetic revelation. Beyond religious doctrine, they partake of the more ancient sense of *theo-logos*—the word or reason of the divine. Tragedy in this view is not merely the fall of the hero but the exposure of a hieratic structure in turmoil, the unmasking of divine absence through suffering. The tragic-sublime in these works hatches from their withholding of any offer of closure. Carlo disappears into mystery; Tannhäuser seeks redemption that never fully arrives. The same is almost true of the endings of *Rigoletto* and *Tristan*. By bringing forth a sustained meditation through the abyss without moral edification, these narratives subvert traditional lessons. Absent the promise of comfort, the sacred unveils terror and beauty—a beauty that wounds, a terror that sanctifies. The revival of sacrifice, secrecy, and epiphany across these operas suggests a metaphysical architecture beneath the historical scaffolding. Characters veil their identities, take vows, betray oaths, suffer punishments, and attempt elusive conciliation. These are not simply plot tools; they are rituals. Each chapter in this book investigates these patterns across symbolic, musical, and philosophical dimensions. We will attend to the sacred as told in the libretto, as well as in the tremor of the violins, the hesitation of a cadenza, the breath before a high note. For in Verdi and Wagner the sacred not only speaks; it sings.

It is no coincidence that both Verdi and Wagner end their careers with works that seem to undo their previous supra-empirical seriousness. If in Wagner the sacred is purified into abstraction, in Verdi it persists incarnate in human conflict. The wound may not be healed; it lingers, forever... There is no metamorphosis, only moral reckoning. These opening lines thus do not serve as a prelude; rather, they invite the reader to embark on a pilgrimage through the aesthetic and sacred landscapes Verdi and Wagner summon. Along this expedition, the work traces how these composers elicit the sublime as the aesthetic manifestation of the sacred through metaphysical mechanisms, bringing into dialogue the luminous

shadows and epiphanies of *Don Carlo* and *Tannhäuser*, as well as the fateful tragedies of *Rigoletto* and *Tristan und Isolde*. Ensuing passages delve deeper into the complex, sometimes contradictory theology of sound that enlivens these operatic prisms. From crime and punishment to mysticism and apocalypse, from silence to irony, the journey unfolds as an encounter with the sacred beyond the frontiers of creed, to reveal itself as a lived episode to be endured. In the end, we may come no nearer to redemption than do *Tannhäuser*, *Rigoletto*, *Tristan*, or *Carlo*. But like them, we will have heard the sublime—and in hearing, been transformed.

The author.



Chapter 1

The Leitmotif, an Epiphany of the Past: *Don Carlo* and *Tannhäuser* as Tragic Allegories of Spiritual Power

Giuseppe Fortunino Francesco Verdi and Wilhelm Richard Wagner, though often set in opposition, shared a profound interest in the collision between individual subjectivity and overarching systems—be they political, religious, or metaphysical. *Don Carlo* and *Tannhäuser* offer two of the clearest examples of this convergence. At first glance, the operas part ways in striking fashion: one is a somber Spanish court drama, the other a romantic fantasy of medieval Thuringia. Yet both are shaped by multifarious historical and personal elements, intricately reworked across multiple versions by their creators, and they depict individuals who long for love and transcendence only to find themselves crushed between the sacred and the profane, the real and the illusory. In each piece, as in ancient Greek tragedy, the promise of redemption fails—not because it is untrue but because it is unobtainable under the constraints of historical and divine law.

Don Carlo: Life, Milieu, and Creative Gestation

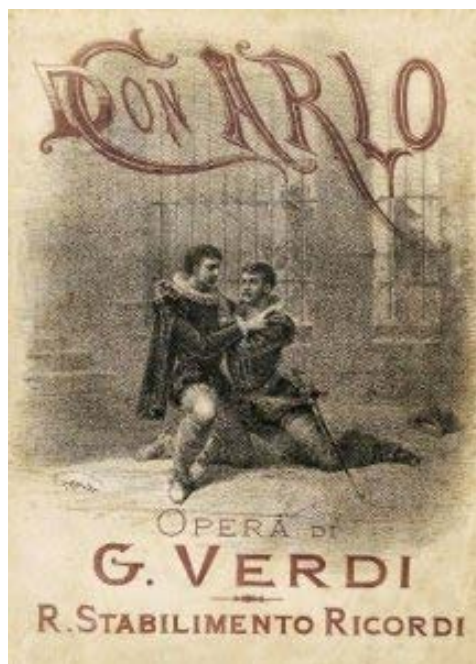
Verdi's *Don Carlo* —*Don Carlos* in its French form— springs from a confluence of personal grief, political turbulence, aesthetic ambition, and the shadow of nineteenth-century Italian nationalism. To situate the opera within a biographical and historical framework is to acknowledge a composer whose life was inseparable from the pressures of his epoch—a period distinguished by revolutionary upheaval, censorship, familial loss, and the gradual construction of a unified Italian identity. By the time Verdi undertook the path that would yield *Don Carlo*, he was already a superstar, one whose works had dominated musical discourse across Europe and whose name had become a metonym for national aspiration. His trajectory from provincial obscurity to the musical heart of Italy coincides with his aesthetic vocation: to forge a voice grounded in dramatic directness yet expansive enough to respond to the civic and metaphysical anxieties of his age. By the 1840s, Verdi was considered an emotional seismograph of Italy's ideals. *Va, pensiero* in particular had become an unofficial anthem of Italian unification. Verdi's name indeed became a political cipher: "Viva VERDI" was taken as an acrostic for *Viva Vittorio Emanuele Re d'Italia*, a hidden slogan serving the hopes of

the Risorgimento. Yet personal tragedy marked Verdi's life with a pain that ran parallel to his public ascent. In 1838, he married Margherita Barezzi, with whom he had two children. Both died in childhood, and Margherita herself followed shortly thereafter—a loss that shadowed Verdi's later reflections on mortality and interior solitude. His move to Busseto and his later marriage to Giuseppina Strepponi¹—herself a celebrated prima donna—afforded him emotional grounding while simultaneously underscoring the strains that intimacy endured under the spotlight of public expectation. La Strepponi became a critical partner in emotional, intellectual, and musical terms, providing a stabilizing presence even as Verdi navigated the demanding world of commission, premiere, and revision.

Don Carlo was conceived for the Paris Opéra and premiered on 11 March 1867 as a grand opera in five acts, with a French libretto by Joseph Méry and Camille Du Locle, based on Friedrich Schiller's 1787 play. The commission arrived during a period when Verdi was selectively accepting large projects; the allure of the Parisian stage, with its prestige and its capacity for monumental works, convinced him to adapt Schiller's political and romantic tragedy to the conventions of French grand opera—historical sweep, large-scale ensembles, elaborate staging, and ballet. Verdi's compositional process proved arduous: he reworked the libretto extensively, cutting and reshaping scenes to focus on the emotional and political dilemmas of the characters while keeping the ceremonial grandeur demanded by the Opéra. After the Paris premiere, *Don Carlo* underwent numerous revisions: the Italian translation by Achille de Lauzières and Angelo Zanardini for performances in Bologna (1867) and Naples (1872), then the famous 1884 Milanese version in four acts, and the 1886 Modena revision which combined Act I from the original with later cuts restored. These alterations showed Verdi's determination to tighten the dramatic pacing, adapt to performance circumstances, and underline its central conflict: the clash of personal passion and political duty within the rigid structures of monarchy and the Catholic Church.

¹ The cantatrice who had originated the role in *La Traviata* became the composer's second wife in 1859. Born in Cremona, Lombardy, she was forty-three years old at the time of their marriage.

Image: Historical cover of *Don Carlo* by R. S. Ricordi, 1868.



Paris in the 1860s was an epicenter of artistic energy and political contradiction. The Second Empire under Napoleon III fostered cultural spectacle even as it suppressed dissent; the Paris Opéra was both a locus of high social visibility and of artistic compromise. Verdi's contract stipulated the hallmarks of French grand opera—ballet, choruses, and an expansive dramaturgy that accentuated scenic variety and formal balance. Yet the composer's own instincts inclined towards personal interiority and integrated musical drama rather than mere mechanical emulation. This friction between institutional requirements and artistic conviction emerges with particular clarity in Verdi's private correspondence, where the public façade of success gives way to a lucid, almost surgical assessment of performance, staging, and musical vitality. In a letter to his Parisian librettist, the composer writes:

Naples, Dec. 15, 1872.

Dear Du Locle,

Well, our Don Carlos is doing finely and the public is extremely pleased with it. Indeed, if not everything is good, many portions of it are superlatively good. The two ladies and the baritone are very fine. The tenor has a lovely voice and is intelligent, but unhappily his figure is too stout for a lover. The basses are just barely mediocre. The *mise en scène* deplorable as regards costuming of the crowd. Some scenes are good. Men's choruses good. Orchestra excellent. In the ensemble of the musical execution there is a verve and brio that are always lacking in Paris. Here Don Carlos takes half an hour less than in Paris (...)

Write me, and believe me ever. Your affectionate,
G. Verdi²

The letter is revealing in its practical observations and equally so in its artistic implications: Verdi evaluates singers, orchestral execution, choruses, staging, etc. with an acute awareness of how musical drama lives—or fails to live—on stage. His criticism of the *mise en scène* and of Parisian inertia (“a verve and brio that are always lacking in Paris”) implies a deeper dissatisfaction with a production that privileged spectacle and protocol over dramatic impetus. Even the remark about the reduced duration is significant: tempo, dramatic flow, and concision appear as ethical as well as agogic concerns. What comes to light is a composer negotiating grand opéra not as an ornamental edifice but as a living organism whose truth depends on dramatic cohesion, credibility, and rhythmic vitality rather than on the mere compliance of any contractual form. Where French opera traditionally foregrounded external display, Verdi sought to imbue these elements with psychic purpose. His Carlo is not merely an object of courtly intrigue; he is a deeply introspective man, riven by demands of loyalty, ideological commitment, and the agonies of forbidden love. The libretto distills Schillerian density into a series of tableaux that alternate between public ritual and intimate confession.

² See Verdi, in *Prod'homme*, 1921, p. 100.

While rehearsing, Verdi insisted on clarity of character and motivation. This preoccupation with interior coherence and histrionic intelligibility was not confined to abstraction or theory; it permeated Verdi's practical involvement with the work at every phase of its realization. His epistolary exchange with Du Locle reveals a composer obsessively attentive to casting, and even to the theological identity of minor personages, insofar as these conformed to the moral and psychological order of Carlo's world:

Naples, Nov. 16, 1872.

Dear Du Locle,

It is an age since I wrote to you, but you understand that the journey, the matters I had to attend to at Sant'Agata, and the getting settled here, have deprived me of invaluable time. I have been here with Peppina³ about ten days; the rehearsals of Don Carlos are well advanced. The tenor intended for Don Carlos was taken sick, and we have to be content that he has a fine voice, but an unhappy face. But my basses are below par; they are three baritones who are not quite sure [...] Before the end of the month we shall go on the stage—at least I hope so. And you—what are you doing? I am rejoiced with your little shop—and how is the big shop getting on?

Write me here with the simple address

*Maestro Verdi
Napoli.*

*All kinds of good wishes to you all, in which my wife joins. Goodbye.
G. Verdi.*

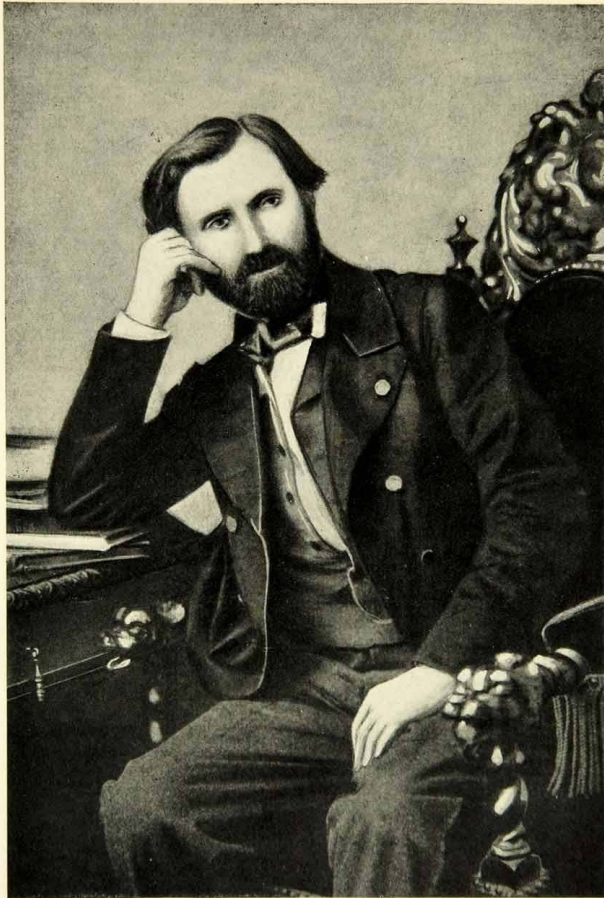
P.S. Please write post-haste to tell me whether the monks in the last scene in Don Carlos are Inquisitors or brethren of the monastery of San Giusto. Lose no time in answering this. Goodbye⁴

³ Peppina is an Italian diminutive of Giuseppina Strepponi, Verdi's wife.

⁴ See Verdi, in *Prod'homme*, 1921, p. 100.

The second letter illustrates how Verdi's methodology was dialogic: informed by his librettists and refined within an inner grammar of moral inquiry. By that time, the monastery of San Yuste in Verdi's new piece had become more than a spectacle: it was a crucible where public events and private torment intersected. Still, this period in Verdi's life was not free of external pressures. The French authorities expressed strong disapproval of the piece, and the subject of the Spanish monarchy, the Inquisition, and heretical tensions had to be navigated with care. Moreover, Verdi's own health and emotional reserves were also taxed; the years of the 1860s were punctuated by personal fatigue and rumination. The logistical demands of a Parisian premiere —rehearsals, arrangements for staging, and battles over cuts— added further complications to a composer already attuned to the demands of authenticity in opera. At the first representation, critics and audiences were divided: some praised its depth and scale, others found its dramaturgy unwieldy. Verdi himself would continue revising the opera for years, including versions in Italian, cuts for other houses, and a four-act variant that excises the original first part set in Fontainebleau. Yet across its transformations, the work remained —by Verdi's own estimation— a milestone of his artistic maturity: a fusion of the public and the private, the political and the psychological, the orchestral canvas and the intimate aria. To appreciate *Don Carlo* as a living work then is to recognize the biographical ordeal from which it emerged—the confluence of a composer who had witnessed familiar loss, national aspiration, and aesthetic evolution; a milieu that demanded both splendor and intellectual sensitivity, and a creative spirit determined to reconcile these forces in music that could speak to both heart and conscience.

Image: “Verdi in Early Life” (1872). Print Portrait Giuseppe Verdi Artist Historic Italian Fashion. Reproduced by the Courtesy of Messrs, Ricordi, 1931.



Reproduced by the courtesy of Messrs. Ricordi

VERDI IN EARLY LIFE

Power, Politics, and Passion in *Don Carlo*

Don Carlo is set in sixteenth-century Spain during the reign of Philip II, against the backdrop of the Inquisition and the war in Flanders. In Act I, the Infant Carlo, heir to the Spanish throne, meets his betrothed, Isabel

de Valois, in the forest of Fontainebleau. They fall in love instantly but political necessity forces Isabel to marry King Philip —Carlo's father—to seal peace between Spain and France. In Act II, in the cloister of San Yuste, Carlo confides in his friend Rodrigo, Marquis of Posa, about his despair. The duet is one of Verdi's most beautiful scenes: '*Dio, che nell'alma infondere*' ("God, who instills in the soul.") Posa urges Carlo to devote himself to the cause of liberty for the oppressed Flemish provinces. Carlo agrees, but when he later meets Isabel in the royal gardens, his declaration of love compromises her honor, and the King's mistress, Countess Eboli —herself secretly in love with the Infant— overhears. Spurned, Eboli vows revenge. Act III centers on political confrontation. At a public ceremony in Madrid, Flemish deputies plead for clemency; Carlo passionately supports them, defying King Philip, who orders his arrest. Posa intervenes and Philip begins to suspect conspiracies. In a private scene the King laments his loveless marriage in a touching aria, '*Ella giammai m'amò*' ("She never loved me,") and places his trust in the Grand Inquisitor, who insists that both Carlo and Rodrigo be sacrificed to preserve the State's authority. During Act IV, Posa visits Carlo in prison and takes the blame for his political actions; he is shot, dying in Carlo's arms, while he sings one of the most exquisite passages in the entire opera: '*Per me giunto è il dì supremo... Io morirò, ma lieto in core*' ("For me, the final day has come... I shall die, but with a joyful heart.") The Prince resolves to continue the mission in Flanders. In the final act, he meets Isabel at the monastery of San Yuste to bid farewell but Philip and the Inquisitor arrive to arrest him. In a sudden mystical intervention the ghostly silhouette of Charles V —Philip's father— appears from the cloister, taking Carlo into the darkness. Whether this leads to salvation or death remains ambiguous, thus sealing the opera's tragic aura.

In *Don Carlo*, Verdi stages one of the most thorough dramatizations of impotence as political tragedy. The eponymous Prince is at once a lover and a would-be popular liberator. He desires Isabel de Valois, now Queen and wife of his father, King Philip II, and he dreams of emancipating Flanders —Vlaanderen, now one of Belgium's three regions— from the yoke of imperial oppression. Yet right from the start any drive towards love or political agency is frustrated and structurally negated. Throughout

the five-act opera, what appears goes beyond the collapse of a single man to signify the exposure of a world in which action has been evacuated of potency—a world ruled by divine right, suspicion, and surveillance. In this universe, the Church is the ultimate arbiter of being and power. Love and justice, far from being redemptive forces, are swallowed by the logic of sovereignty. As argued by Carl Schmitt, that sovereignty melds legal considerations with metaphysical ones:

Sovereign is he who decides on the exception (...) The exception is more interesting than the rule. The rule proves nothing; the exception proves everything: it confirms not only the rule but also its existence, which derives only from the exception. In the exception the power of real life breaks through the crust of a mechanism that has become torpid by repetition (Schmitt, 2005, pp. 5, 15).

The Grand Inquisitor embodies this terrifying exception: blind, old, and godlike, he eclipses even the King, deciding on matters that affect both political governance and spiritual life. His word is determinant because it breaks the circuit of moral reason and substitutes jurisdiction. This is the universe Verdi conjures; an ostentatious landscape where power is theological, not rational, and where action—political or even erotic—is always already foreclosed. The Inquisitor may be interpreted as a late-Romantic incarnation of what Michel Foucault would call “pastoral power”—a form of governance that, rather than merely repressing, deeply penetrates the soul, shaping subjectivity from within (Foucault, 2007). Blindness here is no impediment; on the contrary, the Inquisitor’s lack of physical sight suggests a teleological blueprint that outstrips appearances. His demand that Carlo be sacrificed, *‘Un grande sacrificio a Dio!’* translates politics into liturgy, framing execution as an act of spiritual purification. In such a regime there is no *outside*: even rebellion becomes part of the system it seeks to overthrow, a sacrificial motion that reaffirms the power of the divine. The music Verdi composes for this encounter (the Inquisitor-Philip duet) is austere, almost stripped of lyricism. The scene takes shape in low, foreboding registers, with sparse harmonic movement and minimal orchestral dynamics. This moment rejects emotional confrontation in favor of domination. Verdi’s restraint mirrors the ideological claustrophobia of the

whole apparatus. Philip may resist verbally, but musically he is overpowered; the Inquisitor's phrases cut through the King's doubts with unwavering dominance. The duet ceases in submission: Philip concedes unconvinced only because the alternative—excommunication, divine judgment, isolation—is unthinkable. As the Inquisitor departs, he mutters "Peace!," more than a simple Catholic blessing as a grim verdict: peace then is not the fruit of justice; it is the consequence of enforced silence and obedience. The defining moment of the opera's political theology occurs in this duet, '*Dunque il trono piegar dovrà*' ("Thus the throne shall yield.") Here Verdi gives form to a core theological-political claim: that the throne—symbol of secular dominion—must bow before the Church, whose hegemony is both terrestrial and spiritual, penetrating the soul and judging even unspoken intentions. The Inquisitor, blind yet all-seeing, becomes the absolute supervisor, evoking the Pauline image of a divine justice that admits no exterior. As Giorgio Agamben observes in his reading of Paul, divine law is not just regulative but also constitutive—it considers the deed together with "an implacable reflection on the paradoxical situation that emerges out of the desire to establish [...] relations with God" (Agamben, 2005, p. 117). Therefore Carlo's very desire—whether for love or liberation—is already condemned before it can manifest. His tragedy stems from causes deeper than mere failure to act; it is the impossibility of meaningful action in a world in which all spaces of genuine freedom have been sealed off by divine and political sovereignty.

Let us return to an earlier scene: the opening in the Fontainebleau forest, with an almost bucolic vision of romantic union. Carlo and Isabel, not yet bound by dynastic politics, meet as near-equals. Even this pre-political space is infected by future impossibility. The marriage is revoked for reasons of State and Isabel becomes Queen of Spain, not wife to Carlo. From this moment on the Infant becomes what Hegel in his *Phenomenology of Spirit* terms the "beautiful soul"—a subject torn between inner conviction and external reality, paralyzed by the gap between them:

The beautiful soul, lacking all actuality, caught in the contradiction between its pure self and its necessity to empty itself into being and to turn itself around into actuality, in the immediacy of this

opposition to which it adheres—in an immediacy which is alone the mediating middle and the reconciliation of an opposition which has been intensively raised to the point of its pure abstraction, and which is itself pure being or empty nothingness (Hegel, 2018, p. 387).

As in Hegel's passage, Carlo is stuck in an inexorable unease between his core beliefs—the urges for love, justice, and freedom—and the brutal external reality of political and religious impediments. His paralysis is born of the adverse dialectic between the self as imagined and the world as it is. This impotence proves the profound existential alienation of the modern subject whose genuine expectations remain forever suspended between an abstract inner truth and a world that refuses to actualize them. In this way, Verdi showcases more than a political tragedy: a metaphysical one where the soul's yearning for unity turns into a haunting emptiness. Carlo is incapable of reconciling his passion with the logic that surrounds him, nor can he withdraw fully into negation. The Infant oscillates, always between confession and silence, impulse and withdrawal, unable to translate his interiority into Hegelian History (the Spirit). His tragedy is therefore not only personal; it becomes ontological: he is a subject whose very structure has been foreclosed by the mnemonic order he occupies.

Systemic factors underlie this expropriation, excluding mere accident. As we have followed, Verdi's depiction of Spain captures an instantiation of an intangible regime where political/religious power and ritualistic practice work together to silence difference, stifle desire, and quell objections. The *auto-da-fé* scene in Act III makes this explicit: the burning of heretics is a moment of popular justice and also a terrifying scene in which the crowd becomes complicit in sovereign abuses and violence. In *Don Carlo*, nevertheless, it is beyond the King—Schmitt's sovereign—that the decision rests with the Vatican–Inquisition bureaucracy; Philip is portrayed as both fragile and anguished, ensnared by the very system he presides over. Political sovereignty has been subsumed by theological supremacy and with it the possibility of (any kind of) autonomous action.

Isabel too is caught in this matrix of tragedy and unfeasibility. As Queen she personifies the enigma of sovereign femininity—an emblem of virtue and authority who nonetheless has no agency over her own

body or her impulses. She is the Queen of Iberia, yet she cannot love freely, speak fully, or act according to her conscience. Her subjectivity is encased within the double binds of dynastic duty and religious morality. Every motion she makes—from the suppression of her love for Carlo to her outward display of royal decorum—is marked by repression, never by choice. Her final aria, ‘*Tu che le vanità*’ (“You who knew the vanities”) is a prayer addressed to Charles V longing for a beatitude that never arrives. La Regina aspires to deliverance through a retreat into spiritual abstraction, into the hope of a peace that lies beyond the historical world she inhabits. This difficult *pezzo* is steeped in a bittersweet lyricism, musically hovering between memory and resignation. Here the composer offers an image of consciousness as sacrificial: Isabel’s virtue becomes her own prison, her voice a cry for a freedom that is in her world structurally denied. Like Carlo, she becomes a figure of holy defeat, magnanimous in grief, yet bound by the system that sanctifies her. It is worth reading the full text of her *Preghiera*:

ISABEL DE VALOIS:

You who knew the vanities of the world
And enjoy deep rest in the grave,
If there is still weeping in heaven, weep for my sorrow,
And bring my tears to the throne of the Lord.
Carlo must come here! Let him leave and forget now!
I swore to Posa to watch over his days.
Let him follow his destiny, glory will mark his path.
For me, my day has already come to an end!
O France, noble land, so dear to my green years!
Fontainebleau! Seeing you opens my mind.
I swore eternal love there before God,
And this eternity lasted only one day.
Among you, lovely gardens of this Iberian land,
If Carlo must still stop his steps in the evening,
May the clods, the streams, the springs, the woods, the flowers,
With their harmonies sing of our love.
Farewell, beautiful golden dreams, lost illusion!

The knot is broken, the light is muted!
Farewell, green years, once again!
Yielding to cruel sorrow,
My heart has but one desire:
the peace of the grave!
(...)

If there is still weeping in heaven, weep over my sorrow,
And bring my tears to the throne of the Lord.
If there is still weeping in heaven, weep for my sorrow,
And bring your tears with mine to the feet of the Lord⁵

De Valois is constrained by a world that withholds her both love and voice. Yet her renunciation is rendered with sublime charm: Verdi's music, full of suspended harmonies and floating melodic lines, seems to insinuate a (hopeful) grace beyond the strictures of law. Even so, this grace remains aesthetic rather than salvific because it consoles the audience through sound yet changes nothing in the world of the opera.

⁵ See Giuseppe Verdi: Don Carlo [Libretto]. (n.d.). Palau de les Arts Reina Sofia (Spain). Retrieved from https://www.lesarts.com/wp-content/uploads/2017/12/Libro-to_Don-Carlo-1.pdf (my translation).

Image: Mirella Freni and Plácido Domingo in *Don Carlo*, performed at the Metropolitan Opera, 1983. Photo by Johan Elbers / Met Opera. Courtesy of The Chronicle Collection.



Image: Sonya Yoncheva as Isabel and Matthew Polenzani in the title role of *Don Carlo*, performed at the Metropolitan Opera, 2025. Photo by Ken Howard / Met Opera.



Carlo's final attitude —joining the ghostly monk in the monastery— has often been seen as a mystical relief. However, such a reading ignores the opera's logic: San Yuste is a place of recession, the final negation of political will. The chorus sings a vision of peace that echoes the Inqui-

sitor's refrain and Carlo vanishes into the shadows, into the ritualized containment of the cloister. As Slavoj Žižek writes:

The true victory (the true 'negation of the negation') occurs when the enemy talks your language. In this sense, a true victory is a victory in defeat: it occurs when one's specific message is accepted as a universal framework, even by the enemy (Žižek, 2008, p. 189).

By the end of *Don Carlo* we realize that even the escape from dictatorship is concocted by the same mechanism that has produced it: the protagonist's disappearance points to a reality far removed from liberation, signaling an absorption into the very *sacred* hierarchy he once resisted. Yet in this apparent defeat something of his own will is enfolded and rearticulated by the Institution itself: the Church and the monarchy neutralize him not only by silencing him outright but by enclosing his frustrated desire within their own distinctive grammar. His rebellion is canonized as tragic inevitability. As Žižek implies, the true triumph of power is when it speaks *in the language* of its opponent—when dissent is aestheticized and domesticated as part of the totality. Thus Carlo's failure becomes the empire's sly victory: the negation of negation returned as a ritual.

The Aesthetic Dimension of *Don Carlo*

Don Carlo stands as one of Verdi's most nuanced achievements. It is a mature-period work that dramatizes introspective conflict through musical contrast, formal tension, and character delineation. Verdi does not construct an *opera of ideas* in the Wagnerian style; instead, he sculpts contradiction directly into the fabric of the score. The dramaturgy of *Don Carlo* is built upon a lattice of dualities: the sacred and the profane, love and duty, King and subject, public and private hopes. These lacunae function less as riddles to be solved than as fractures within the anatomy of meaning. Each act intensifies these concerns, layering musical motives and harmonic shifts that eschew synthesis in favor of magnifying the distance between antagonistic forces. Indeed the greatness of this work is rooted in its power to make these contradictions clearly audible. *Don Carlo* chiefly illustrates this aesthetic principle.

The final result is one of dialectical presentation *senza redenzione*, as Vincenzo Vitiello (1995) would name it⁶. Scenes such as the Philip-Inquisitor duet or the valediction of Carlo and Isabel are indicative of this strategy. The music gives equal expressive weight to both sides of the moral or political dissidence allowing no easy identification. The composer avoids the temptation to collapse density into clarity. As Julien Budden aptly notes, “Verdi’s greatness lies in his refusal to transcend conflict by philosophical means; instead, he makes the contradictions sing” (Budden, 1992, p. 304). It is precisely through this refusal to solve the conundrum that Verdi lifts the operatic form into a space of acute existential resonance. This is not to say that he renounces coherence. On the contrary, the work is meticulously devised. Nevertheless, rather than achieving Wagnerian cohesion, the motifs return as echoes of memory—reopening old wounds and recalling the irretrievable. The use of key relationships, orchestral coloring, and recurring rhythmic cells generates an internal logic of variation and return. For instance, the noble solemnity of the introductory *auto-da-fé* moment, with its grand choral masses and religious pageantry, is musically countered by the private, tender, and tonally unstable love scenes (Isabel-Carlo). Transitions shatter at each turning point, asserting the discord between public duty and personal pure emotion.

Verdi’s sagacity for musical characterization shines brightest in *Don Carlo*, potentially more so than in *Rigoletto*, *La Traviata*, or *Il Trovatore*. Each character is musically individuated through their relationship to lyricism, rhythm, tessitura, and harmonic gravity. Carlo’s vocal line often levitates between melody and furor; his part strains against the orchestral breadth surrounding him. Isabel’s part is dignified, melancholic, commonly set in high, arching phrases that project both nobility and inner distance. On the other hand, the King’s great monologue ranks as one of the most penetrating scenes in the composer’s entire output: austere in orchestration, frozen in time, it externalizes power, doubt, and desolation. This is the text of Philip’s aria:

⁶ (Christianity) without redemption.

PHILIP II:

She never loved me!

That closed heart is closed to me, she has no love for me!

I still see her contemplating my white hair

With a sad face on the day she came here from France.

No, she has no love for me!⁷

Even the Grand Inquisitor, with his subterranean bass and angular lines, is a musical presence designed not merely to intimidate, but to fill the air with a drive towards ultimate value. Each character's inner state is hinted through timbral inflection and melodic constriction. Rooted more in external realities than in psychological introspection, Verdi's realism manifests as a dramatic exploration of social experience:

GRAND INQUISITOR:

Am I before the King?⁸

This brief utterance —conveyed by a ca. ninety-year-old basso profundo, reminiscent of Sarastro in Mozart's *singspiel*⁹— resonates with compressed preeminence. It is an interrogation posed in the full consciousness of power presiding over the sovereign. Later, he avows existential dominion:

GRAND INQUISITOR:

The King may kill his son; but I—I can overthrow kings...

I create and destroy sovereigns¹⁰

The lines demonstrate how Verdi and his librettist grant the Inquisitor textual prominence: his phrases are delivered in the bass register, with

⁷ See Giuseppe Verdi: Don Carlo [Libretto]. (n.d.). Palau de les Arts Reina Sofia (Madrid, Spain). Retrieved from https://www.lesarts.com/wp-content/uploads/2017/12/Libreto_Don-Carlo-1.pdf (my translation).

⁸ Idem.

⁹ Die Zauberflöte (The Magic Flute).

¹⁰ See Verdi: Don Carlo [Libretto]. (n.d.). Palau de les Arts Reina Sofia (Madrid, Spain). Retrieved from https://www.lesarts.com/wp-content/uploads/2017/12/Libreto_Don-Carlo-1.pdf (my translation).

pointed melodic contours and orchestral moderation, marking him as a figurehead that radiates an incorporeal finality far beyond merely terrifying. By embedding these phrases within ascetic recitative and reserving tonal luminosity for Philip, Carlo, Eboli, and Isabel, Verdi reinvents the Inquisitor role while conjuring up dominion through timbre and melodic severity. The Inquisitor's voice not only narrates cosmic disharmony—it obliterates it.

Image: Ferruccio Furlanetto as Philip II and James Morris as the Grand Inquisitor in *Don Carlo*. Metropolitan Opera, 2015. Photo by Ken Howard / Met Opera.



In addition, the “heavens’ voice” serves a dual purpose: it is both a bearer of dramatic action and a vehicle for aesthetic overcoming. Equally, the orchestra, which in early works like *Oberto* or *Lombardi* acted mainly as accompaniment, assumes in *Don Carlo* a more active role by often complicating the vocal line, counterpointing the singer’s aims with musical undercurrents of doubt, sarcasm, or futility. It is through this radicalization between voice and orchestration that Verdi creates his richest effects: a music that internalizes crisis rather than fixes it. *Don Carlo* also departs from Verdi’s previous works in its use of musical silence. There are moments in the score where action stalls, where harmonic progression halts, and where the music lingers on unsettled intervals or opaque tonal centers.

These moments —neither fully melodic nor purely dramatic— create a *sanctum of meditation* that belongs uniquely to the aesthetic realm. They allude to moments that go beyond mere pauses in action, transforming them into symbols of the utter impracticality of action itself. In this way, the score becomes an allegory of the central theme: the numbness of the subject within a world of inextricable demands. The refusal to provide a definitive resolution gives *Don Carlo* its tragic strength; Verdi's Spain is not merely cruel; it is formally absolute—a dramatic, social order in which every attempt at escape is musically inflected, arrested, and transfigured into articulation. And yet this is where *Don Carlo*'s greatness lies: in providing redemption as a grace born from self-contradiction. In this world music can never truly redeem; it attests by singing what cannot be harmonized in the action. The voice —as regret, as trace, as ethical residue— remains the final wave of defiance. In *Don Carlo*, singing is the last sanctuary of the subject and music becomes the very site where irreconcilability is made clear.

Musical Memory and Historical Weight in *Don Carlo*

*Verdi's darkest opera causes us to tremble,
but the composer's musical genius does it in a fascinating
and deeply moving way*¹¹

As previously indicated, *Don Carlo* is based on Schiller's play *Don Karlos, Infant von Spanien*, a landmark of German historical drama that illustrates the intellectual and artistic currents of the late 18th century, particularly the Enlightenment and the *Sturm und Drang* movement. Written during a time of growing political unrest in Europe, the play refers to the ideals of reason, justice, and the critique of absolutism, especially in the context of monarchy and organized religion. Schiller's historical setting —16th-century Spain— provides a dramatic ambience for examining issues such as the moral responsibility of rulers, the oppression of the Inquisition, and the sequelae of political repression. Though Schiller takes liberties with accuracy, he uses historical figures

¹¹ Bayerischen Staatsoper, 2026. See <https://www.staatsoper.de/>

like Carlo of Spain, Isabel de Valois, and the Marquis of Posa to probe timeless themes of liberty, conscience, and the polarity between personal judgment and public duty. Regarding the adaptation of the play into an opera, Andrew Porter notes:

(...) it is a deliberate and noble attempt to make the paraphernalia of French grand opera serve a new elevated purpose. Schiller's play *Don Karlos* was an ideal subject. It contained both dramatic spectacle and interesting character studies, and it proclaimed themes dear to Verdi: his love of individual and national liberty, his detestation of aristocratic or ecclesiastical tyranny (...) the music by the mature Verdi is too fine to leave unperformed (Porter, 1971, pp. 8, 12).

While the leitmotif is most often associated with Wagner and the Germanic tradition, Verdi in his own musical idiom developed a sophisticated and deep sense of motivic return. Nowhere is this more evident than in *Don Carlo*, where the musical skeleton is laced with delicate, yet emotionally charged returns of melodic, harmonic, and orchestral formulations that act as more than structural devices: they are epiphanies of the past. These themes —whether fragments of love duets, ghostly invocations, or cadences tied to betrayal or submission— operate as sonic memory traces. They summon what has been lost or repressed and ergo disrupt continuity, creating a (new) temporality in which the past implodes into the present. Unlike Wagner's systematic growth of leitmotifs as identifiers for characters, objects, or ideas, forming a vast web of associative links, Verdi's technique is less codified and more spontaneous. Yet in *Don Carlo* this is neither arbitrary nor decorative. It assumes a speculative function: to stage the persistence of History within the psyche, to draw out an ache detectable long after it has been denied, and to expose the implausibility of emancipation from what has already been inscribed. Thus Verdi's motifs act as existential vestiges—residues of an unrealizable truth.

A prime example is the motif associated with Carlo and Isabel's ill-fated love, introduced in the Fontainebleau scene and reappearing throughout the opera at moments of zeal or renunciation. The theme itself —lyrical, imbued with innocence— is steeped in grief, casting a

shadow over any celebration of their love and its inherent unattainability. It becomes in Adornian terms a “congealed memory,” a gesture that no longer speaks of hope but of negation. In this sense, the music does not participate in the dramatic illusion; it reflects upon it. As Adorno formulates of late Romantic opera, here “(...) the music becomes a commentary on the stage, since the author takes up an attitude and violates the very ideal of immanent form in the name of which the music drama was originally conceived” (Adorno, 2005, p. 92). While this is an original critique of Wagner’s techniques, it also illuminates the strategy in *Don Carlo*: to break the illusion of unity, allowing music to safeguard what the drama can no further sustain—the footprint of a love condemned by suprastructure. In these terms, the musical recurrence is less a recollection than a mourning, a manifestation of what could have been but never was. This aesthetic of the fragment as epiphany is deeply tied to a Romantic conception of time, one that sees history as characterized by ruptures and returns supplanting linear/chronological movement. Verdi, while not a true metaphysician like Wagner, theatricalizes time as catastrophe. When the love theme recurs in San Yuste—when Isabel and Carlo prepare to part forever—it is a sign of futility: the motif’s return invokes eternity as opposed to a narrative conclusion. The past, denied by history, comes back to haunt the present, now hollowed of all possibility.

Another crucial reiteration is found in the spectral motif assigned to the monk whose voice opens and closes the opera. His chant, ‘*Carlo, il sommo imperatore...*’ (“Charles, the supreme Emperor”) appears at pivotal moments, looming over the drama. This works as a theological reminder: that earthly suffering and political injustice exist as part of a divine substructure that eludes comprehension. The invocation of the emperor is an uncanny *memento mori*, as if to say that all passion, rebellion, and love will hereafter evaporate into the grave. Here the leitmotif is a kind of sonic token of entropy—the fading voice of order that once ruled the world and now survives only as remembrance. Verdi uses this procedure not only to bind the sprawling scenes, but also to achieve an intellectual geography in which the past is never past. As Søren Kierkegaard noted in *The Sickness unto Death*, the greatest misfortune lies less in the inability to forget than in being condemned to remember what

resists change. In his own words: “The misfortune is not that Christian truth is never uttered (...) but that it is uttered in such a way that at last the generality of men attach to it no significance whatever” (Kierkegaard, 1941, p. 166). In *Don Carlo*, the protagonists are precisely such beings: eternally condemned to remember love, justice, and freedom, and to know that none of these can be realized within the coordinates of their world.

The significance of this rests on how Verdi subtly undermines the very structure of melodramatic logic. In classic opera, action progresses by way of recitative-aria, through contention and relief. In *Don Carlo*, however, leitmotifs introduce a level of fatalism: the return of the past reveals that the future is already compromised. That becomes a form of determinism—a confirmation that the world will not change, that the same wounds will open again, that resistance will always be co-opted or stifled. Music does not enable freedom; it sings the insurmountability of stasis. This is particularly evident in the themes identified with the Marquis of Posa—perhaps the opera’s most noble character: “Posa’s musical physiognomy is strangely old-fashioned: his music almost all dates from the earliest layers of the score, and even then recalls the Verdi of the early 1850s (or even 1840s)” (Sadie, 1992, p. 160). His idealism, his advocacy of liberty in Flanders, his unconditional friendship with Carlo: all are marked musically by a series of righteous, almost martial themes, which return after his death in altered minor-key versions. The transformation of his motif—from defiant to elegiac—enhances the opera’s descent into resignation. The ideals of Posa survive only as reminiscence; his death, like Carlo’s political powerlessness, is integrated into the vast canvas of impotence. Verdi then is not simply writing music *for the stage*—he is manufacturing an ontology in which history becomes intelligible only *as repetition*. The present is inflected by the past, which persists as an active memory, sedimented in motifs and colors that signify loss. The epiphanic quality of these musical rebounds is anchored in immanence, foregoing the pursuit of a truth that would confront exclusion and breach. Aesthetically, the latter aligns Verdi with a broader nineteenth-century Romanticism that understands memory primarily as ruin and estrangement. Nietzsche, pondering the Dionysiac state in *The Birth of Tragedy*, describes an ecstatic experience that destroys the usual

boundaries of existence and floods personal memories into a collective fissure. He writes that this state,

(...) contains, for as long as it lasts, a lethargic element in which all personal experiences from the past are submerged. This gulf of oblivion thus separates the worlds of everyday life and Dionysiac experience from one another (Nietzsche, 1999, p. 129).

Verdi's epiphanies of the past speak precisely in this register: they do not promise renewal, they reverberate with finality. Yet there is also something redemptive in this use of thematic return—not in the storytelling but in the music itself. The reappearances allow the audience to feel what the characters fail to enact. In these terms, the leitmotif serves as an ethical tool: it remembers when the world forgets; it reactivates moments even after they have been crushed by power. Here we might recall Benjamin's notion of history as a field of lost opportunities that cry out to be redeemed—by the light of remembrance, where progress finds no foothold (Benjamin, 2003). This idea is given profound form in Carlo's poignant decry:

CARLO:

Lost, my only treasure, ah, you splendor of my life!

At least let me hear you still.

Your words open this soul to heaven!¹²

In Carlo's text we find the soul's desperate grasp for a past unrecoverable lost, yet eternally alive in memory. The treasure that is lost cannot be reclaimed through forward motion or historical progress; instead, it persists as a spectral presence—an aching void that opens the soul towards transcendence. Music becomes a receptacle for association, mutating personal and historical loss into a deep elucidation of deprivation, eagerness, and the ineffable connection between past and present. Following this idea, Verdi's opera is unable to (and does not want to) redeem History; it only allows the listener to bear witness

¹² See Giuseppe Verdi: Don Carlo [Libretto]. (n.d.). Palau de les Arts Reina Sofia (Madrid, Spain). Retrieved from https://www.lesarts.com/wp-content/uploads/2017/12/Libreto_Don-Carlo-1.pdf (my translation).

to its wreckage: the leitmotif is hence both a wound and a form of testimony. From a dramaturgical angle, this mode of melodic epiphany allows Verdi to articulate subjective interiority in a system that censors it. Carlo cannot speak freely; he is silenced by Father, State, Church, and Empire—even by “Mother.” But the return of his love theme in the score speaks for him. Isabel is also incapable of acting, for she is compelled by protocol and faith. Still, her prayer echoes with remembered tenderness. The theme becomes a surrogate for voice—a non-verbal statement that abides when language fails. In doing so Verdi presages a modernist conception of music as the last sanctuary of meaning in a disenchanted world.

Don Carlo stages political and theological tragedy intertwined with a musical reverie on the inexorable current of time. The treatment of thematic patterns—more fluid and emotionally driven than Wagner’s—results in an aesthetic of *anamnesis*, a space where trauma and love survive as fragile leitmotifs. These do not lead music/drama to any kind of synthesis; rather, they convene what Giorgio Agamben (2005, p. 64) terms, “(...) a remainder [*resto*] into it that exceeds”—that which exists outside the law’s organization that music makes tangible. In *Don Carlo* the leitmotif ceases to be an instrument of narrative cohesion and becomes a wound that sings.

Image: Performance of *Don Carlo* at the Salzburg Festival 2013, conducted as part of the opera’s ongoing reinterpretation in contemporary European culture, televised by Arte, featuring Anja Harteros and Jonas Kaufmann. Photo by Monika Rittershaus.



Towards *Tannhäuser*

Richard Wagner's *Tannhäuser* is born from the retelling of a legend of the Middle Ages, while simultaneously evidencing the composer's relentless quest to redefine the purpose of the *Musikdrama*. In Wagner's case, the act of composition was never isolated from his own tumultuous life—shaped by intellectual rebellion, political fervor, debts and exile, philosophical inquiry, and an unyielding belief in art as a thoroughgoing force. Thus to situate *Tannhäuser* within Wagner's biography is to follow the evolution of a creator who saw in myth the possibility of reconciling sacred and profane, eros and redemption, impulse and spirit. In 1845 he began to work on *Tannhäuser und der Sängerkrieg auf Wartburg*, drawing upon the *Tannhäuser* legend and the thirteenth-century *Sängerkrieg* (Minstrel Contest at the Wartburg Castle). This mythic tapestry appealed to Wagner's conviction that opera must engage both the elemental forces of longing and the redemptive potential of aesthetic devotion. The environment in which he composed this new masterpiece was one of intellectual ferment. Romanticism had foregrounded the subjective, the mythic, and the divine; German philology and folklore studies were excavating archaic narratives with renewed vigor, and nationalist impulses sought cultural artifacts that could express the soul of the Volk.

It was in this climate that *Tannhäuser* premiered at the Dresden Court Opera on 19 October 1845. From its inception, the opera fuses sacred and profane love within a richly suggestive framework, articulating redemption as a process mediated by affect and faith. Wagner revised the work repeatedly, most notably for the 1861 Paris production, which introduced a new Venusberg Bacchanale in response to French grand opera tastes—revisions that reveal his evolving musical-dramatic ideals, particularly an integration of leitmotivic thought and orchestral color. Within this scheme, the tension between earthly passion, embodied by Venus, and spiritual drive, represented by Elisabeth, forms a central dramaturgical antithesis while simultaneously serving as a metaphor for the Saxon's own conflicts. Unlike the Italian composers' emphasis on melody as ornament, Wagner sought an amalgam whereby melody, harmony, leitmotif, and mythology cohere into a living entity. As we

have said, the gestation of *Tannhäuser* was also enmeshed in Wagner's personal circumstances. Financial precarity, professional frustration, and his deepening attraction to leftist political ideas, including participation in the 1849 Dresden uprising, meant that Wagner labored in a state of both compulsion and existential unrest. The revolutionary convulsions that briefly erupted in Dresden would force Wagner into exile in Switzerland and later other locales, yet it also crystallized his belief that the artist must be a social as well as a spiritual agent.

The initial reception of the opera was mixed, owing partly to its stylistic audacity and partly to audience expectations, as Germans were accustomed to the formal structures of Singspiel and Italianate convention. Wagner's music, with its relentless cellular integration and rhetorical subtlety, confounded immediate categorization. Critics identified in *Tannhäuser* passages of brilliance but struggled with its overarching framing. Wagner himself was unbowed; his later amendments—including modifications for Paris—would demonstrate both his stubborn idealism and his willingness to readapt it without relinquishing core artistic intent. Importantly, Wagner's setting informed his rethinking of drama, religion, and myth; he immersed himself in Germanic sagas, medieval romance, Schopenhauerian metaphysics, and a growing realization that the *Musikdrama* must encompass the totality of human affairs. *Tannhäuser* therefore stands as a hinge between an early experimentation and the mature theoretical formulations that would dominate Wagner's later years.

The role of Elisabeth especially presages Wagner's lifelong fascination with the motif of the redeeming woman—a figure whose spiritual purity opens a pathway to salvation, not through repression of desire, but through its transfiguration. Moreover, the contest at Wartburg, with its poets and warriors, becomes emblematic of artistic endeavor itself—a community of voices seeking harmony amid discord. The richness of these symbolic layers would later test both audiences and singers. In performance history, *Tannhäuser* has been equally complicated: initial misunderstandings at the Paris opening night in 1861, notorious disputes over the ballet placement, and the eventual recuperation of the work in Wagnerian repertory attest to its challenging yet enduring appeal. However, beneath these external vicissitudes lies a core that remains strikingly original for its period: an

opera that refuses to choose between music and philosophy, myth and mind, yearning and redemption. To truly understand *Tannhäuser* is to witness Wagner's own journey—a restless and ambitious pursuit of an art that could embrace the contradictions of lust and spirit. The opera's birth in the atmosphere of mid-century German spirit, political upheaval, and personal turbulence makes it a testament to the composer's audacious belief in the power of the *Musikdrama*.

Image: *Tannhäuser*. Act 1, Scene 2 – Tannhäuser: “What once you granted only to the gods, your favor has now given to me, a mortal.”



The Aesthetics of Leitmotif, Memory, and Redemption

The story of *Tannhäuser* is set in medieval Germany, where the knight-minnesinger Tannhäuser has spent a long time in Venus' enchanted grotto, indulging in sensual pleasures. Hankering for redemption, he returns to the mortal world and the court of Thuringia, where his love for Elisabeth, the Landgrave's niece, is rekindled. At the Wartburg Song Contest, his hymn to Venus scandalizes the courtiers; only Elisabeth's plea spares him from death. He undertakes a pilgrimage to Rome in search of indulgence, yet the Pope withholds forgiveness. Returning in despair, he discovers that Elisabeth has died after praying for his salvation. Venus attempts to reclaim him, but the sight of Elisabeth's funeral procession and the news of a miracle—the blossoming of the Pope's staff—brings Tannhäuser final restoration, and he collapses lifelessly.

If Verdi's use of leitmotif in *Don Carlo* creates a panorama haunted by the irretrievable past, Wagner reforms this trait into the very architecture of his drama, the anticipation of his total work of art, *Der Ring des Nibelungen*. In *Tannhäuser* (revised 1861), he prompts the leitmotif from a sign of remembrance into a metaphysical system—a web of sonic signs that structure time, identity, and ascendance. The epiphanic nature of Verdi's *ritornellos*¹³, signaling lost love, historical paralysis, and personal ruin, finds an aesthetic trace in Wagner's treatment of *Erinnerung* and *Erlösung*¹⁴. What in Verdi was merely political, in Wagner becomes spiritual memory; what in Verdi is historical fatality, in Wagner is soulful striving.

Tannhäuser goes beyond a straightforward retelling, presenting a deeply textured exegesis that draws from diverse literary and folkloric traditions, fusing them into a stratified narrative that reflects Wagner's own evolving prism. The argument transpired from a blend of multiple sources, each contributing different elements that Wagner revamped to tailor his dramatic, poetic, literary, and philosophical purposes:

¹³ “Historically, incidental music and the leitmotiv are mediated by the ritornello in the form it had assumed in the older opera down to Weber” (Adorno, 2005, p. 26).

¹⁴ Remembrance and Redemption.

As with all Wagner's mature operas, the plot of *Tannhäuser* is an imaginative development of a variety of sources. Chief among them were *Der getreue Eckart und der Tannenhäuser* (The Faithful Eckart and Tannenhäuser), from Ludwig Tieck's collection of fairytales *Phantásus*, which tells the story of Tannenhäuser and his cupidinous activities in the Venusberg, his pilgrimage to Rome and his repulsion by the Pope; E.T.A. Hoffmann's story *Der Kampf der Sänger* (The Singer's Contest), from his *Serapions-Brüder*, about a song competition at the Wartburg Castle; the essay *Elementargeister* by Heinrich Heine, containing a characteristically ironic poem about Tannhäuser; as well as a play by Friedrich de la Motte Fouqué and Eichendorff's story *Das Marmorbild* (Cervone, 1989, p. 25).

By interweaving these sources, Wagner created a chef d'oeuvre that meets the demands of any single genre, enabling a multifaceted delving of themes such as pleasure, suffering, expiation, and the dissonance between pure and profane ardor. This not only deepens the opera's symbolism but also typifies Wagner's broader method of sketching upon a wide cultural reservoir to forge his unique mythic world. *Tannhäuser* is fundamentally a tragedy of divided subjectivity—of a soul torn between sensual fulfillment and spiritual salvation. This division, often allegorized as the strife between Venus and Elisabeth, is not merely erotic or moral: it stands for an acute rift that Wagner addresses through music. While the stratagem is structured around Christian elements—penitence, the Papacy, Rome, the Virgin Mary—it does not operate as a religious *drama of salvation* in the same sense as Wagner's later *Parsifal*. Rather, it performs a dialogue between pagan and Christian orders, with the hero seized between the hedonistic eternity and the moral everyday-temporality of Germany. Wagner's Protestant background informs this ambivalence: redemption here is depicted as a tragic exhibition of existential *affirmation* contrasting with submission to an institutional soteriology:

[Wagner's] stipulation that Tannhäuser's absolution depended on the papal staff sprouting leaves was by no means intended as the impossible condition it seems: the miracle of a blossoming staff occurs occasionally in popular Christian morality tales of the period as a symbol of the new life offered by salvation and divine mercy (Cervone, 1989, p. 29).

Unlike Verdi, whose political theology frequently involves sacrificial reconciliation with power, as we witnessed in *Don Carlo*, *Tannhäuser* portrays the hopelessness of a coalescence between *eros* and *agape*, myth and history. Elisabeth, the redemptive female archetype, incorporates a Christian sacrificial model akin to Schopenhauer's cognizance of commiseration: "All love (*caritas*) is compassion or sympathy (...) all true and pure affection is sympathy or compassion, and all love that is not sympathy is selfishness" (Schopenhauer, 1969, pp. 374, 376). The philosopher aims for true salvation by overcoming the will-in-itself, emphasizing compassion, asceticism, or self-denial as the path to this goal. This is Elisabeth's prayer:

ELISABETH:

Oh, blessed Virgin, hear my prayer!
Here in the dust I bend before thee,
Now from this earth, oh set me free!
If vain desires and earthly longing
Have turned my heart from thee away,
The sinful hopes within me thronging,
Before thy blessed feet I lay;
And on thy bounty I will call,
That heavenly grace on him may fall!
(O'Connell¹⁵, 1929, p. 479).

Elisabeth's renunciation of earthly love and her death in prayer for her lover's salvation represent exactly this kind of overshadowing of the individual will through pure, selfless love—what Schopenhauer saw as the highest ethical act. Yet Elisabeth's mission to secure the salvation of *Tannhäuser* is unilateral; the protagonist does not achieve redemption by pursuing Schopenhauer's compassion. Instead, he persists in his tragic disjunction, affirming life—and therefore death—even as it fails. In

¹⁵ Charles O'Connell produced one of the earliest English translations of several opera librettos in his *Victor Book of the Opera*, which we have compiled here irrespective of subsequent English versions. Henceforth any reference to his name indicates that he is responsible for the English rendering of the selected passages, regardless of the original librettists of Verdi and Wagner.

this sense, if Elisabeth is a traditional-Christian, Tannhäuser is more of a Nietzschean figure: “(...) for only as an *aesthetic phenomenon* is existence and the world eternally *justified*” (Nietzsche, 1999, p. 33).

Image: Elza van den Heever as Elisabeth in *Tannhäuser*. Photo by Evan Zimmerman / Met Opera.



Tannhäuser participates in Wagner’s broader project of transforming opera into a rhetorical space. It foretells the full collapse of affirmative tragic art into the decadence Nietzsche would later accuse the composer of in *Meistersinger* and *Parsifal*, yet it still sustains the Dionysiac impulse at its core. *Tannhäuser* thus stands as a hinge between musical tragedy and theological drama, between mythic-pagan assertion and Christian negation (of life itself). This reading situates it within a comparative frame with Verdi’s sacred-political adaptations, underscoring Wagner’s engagement with tragedy, time, and above all, redemption. While Verdi critiqued the Institution through the misfortune of modern political subjects, Wagner here interrogates the very foundations of redemptive logic itself. *Tannhäuser*, as *Don Carlo*, is a tragedy of worlds that cannot be truly reconciled.

Leitmotifs here function as audible metaphors for this schism. They do not simply accompany the drama; they are the drama itself, evolving

in parallel with —and often in contradiction to— the words and acting. Music remembers what the characters (and the audience) tend to forget (Abbate, 1993). The leitmotif turns into a medium of subconscious reinforcement, of reminiscence, of trauma, of craving for the unattainable. This is perhaps clearest in the breach between the (equally compelling) Venusberg music and the pilgrims' chorus—two worlds that define the opera's extremes. The sensual chromaticism of Venus' realm, saturated with harmonic instability, stands in bold divergence to the diatonic solemnity of the pilgrims' theme, which aspires to an exalted spiritual state. These two worlds coexist in friction throughout the whole opera. Their thematic reappearance, especially in the Overture and the Rome Narration, creates a musical dialectic in which redemption is fancied for but never attained. As in *Don Carlo*, this reintroduction of material implies circularity: the soul trapped in its own antinomy. The Rome Narration in Act III is a pivotal moment in this regard. Tannhäuser recounts his expedition to Rome, only to be rejected: "Thou art for evermore accursed! And as this barren staff I hold... Ne'er will it put forth a flow'r or leaf... Thus shalt thou never more behold... Salvation or thy sin's relief!" (O'Connell, 1929, p. 480). This is Tannhäuser's account of the Vatican episode:

TANNHÄUSER:

How shall I find pardon?

How atone for my guilt?

My salvation I have seen vanish,

Heaven's favour flies from me.

Yet I will travel repentant,

Beat my breast, fall prostrate in the dust

Contrition be my chosen lot.

(...)

With such devotion in my heart as no penitent
Has ever felt before, I sought the path to Rome.

An angel had, oh wrenched the sinful pride

From out my arrogant being;

For her I wished to expiate my fault in humility,

Implore the salvation that was denied me,

In order to sweeten for her the tears
She had once shed over me, a sinner!
The manner in which the heaviest-laden pilgrim beside me
Took his way appeared to me too easy.
When his foot trod the soft sward of the meadows,
I sought thorn and stone for my bare feet;
When at the spring he would allow his lips to taste refreshment,
I would imbibe the scorching glow of the sun;
When he devoutly offered up his prayers to heaven,
I would shed my blood to the glory of the Almighty;
When the weary pilgrim would refresh himself at the hospice,
I would bed down my limbs in snow and ice.
With eyes fast shut, their beauty not to see,
I dragged myself, blind, through Italy's fair pastures,
I did it, because, filled with remorse, I wished to atone,
In order to sweeten my angel's tears!
I came thus to Rome, to the holy see,
Lay prostrate, praying, at the threshold to the sanctuary.
Day dawned; bells rang out, heavenly anthems came floating down,
Then rose exultantly in a fervent shout of joy,
For they promised pardon and salvation to the multitude.
Then I saw him through whom God proclaims himself
All men prostrated themselves before him in the dust.
And he bestowed grace on thousands, pardoned,
Thousands he commanded joyfully to rise.
Then I, too, drew near—my head bowed down to earth
With sorely grieving mien, myself I accused
Of the sinful delights my senses had experienced,
Of the longings no penance had yet cooled;
And for deliverance from the searing bonds,
Shot through with savage pain, I implored him.
And he whom I so begged began:
'If you have enjoyed such sinful delights
And inflamed your passions at the fires of hell,
If you have sojourned in the Venusberg,

Then, now from henceforth, you are eternally damned!
As this staff in my hand
No longer bedecks itself in fresh green,
So from the burning brands of hell
Deliverance can never blossom for you!’
Then I sank, speechless, to the ground;
I fainted clean away¹⁶

And later, when the troubadour despairs of the chance of redemption, he renounces his penitential journey and inflects a disheartened yen to revisit the sensual, unrepentant life with Venus. He faces divine grace as intrinsically inaccessible; his wish to return to the Venusberg arises from disillusionment as much as from lust—an escape into oblivion rather than ecstasy. The Venusberg, once an icon of temptation, now becomes a refuge from spiritual failure, revealing the profound entanglement of eroticism and despair in his delirium:

TANNHÄUSER:
To you, dame Venus, do I return,
Into thy magic’s sweet night;
To your court do I descend,
Where your alluring charm will smile
Upon me now for always!¹⁷

¹⁶ See Wagner, R. (n.d.). Tannhäuser libretto (English & German). Murashev.com. Retrieved August 5, 2025, from https://www.murashev.com/opera/Tannh%C3%A4user_libretto_English_German

¹⁷ Idem.

Image: Pierre-Auguste Cot *The Storm* (1880)*



* Cot's painting, with its swirling winds and figures caught between exhilaration and peril, evokes the same turbulent, seductive intensity as Tannhäuser's return to Venusberg. Just as the lovers in the storm are swept into a moment of passionate abandon, Tannhäuser is drawn back into Venus' enchanted grotto, surrendering to the irresistible pull of sensuality and danger. Both works capture the psychological and emotional tension of desire and the perilous allure of the otherworldly.

The turbulence of Tannhäuser's reentry to Venusberg arouses visual parallels, such as P-A. Cot's painting *The Storm* (1880), in which the tempest simulates inner turmoil and erogenous chaos. Nowhere is the evolution of Wagner's manner more apparent than in this scene—an episode that marks a decisive step towards the through-composed structures of his later dramas. In both vocal line and agogic treatment, this grand monologue anticipates the psychological and musical innovations of the *Ring*:

Here the narrative is all-important and regular phrase structure therefore gives way to a continuous dramatic recitative or arioso comparable to that of the later music dramas. The nature of the musical line actually changes as the verse describes in turn Tannhäuser's contrite state of mind on beginning his journey, his memory of Elisabeth, the heavily oppressed pilgrims, the mood of adoration in Rome, the grief-stricken penitence and finally the Pope's rebuff (...) The orchestra also assumes a dominant role in

the Rome Narration (...) in bearing the burden of the dramatic argument, looks forward to the epoch-making innovations of the *Ring* and beyond (Cervone, 1989, p. 33).

That moment is musically devastating. Motifs associated with spiritual whirl are undermined by dissonance and despair. But most telling is the resurgence —faint, wounded— of the Venus motif, as if to say there is no fleeing from the past; desire, once awakened, is eternal. This moment encapsulates what Jankélévitch described as a kind of diabolical irreversibility of time in music—the idea that certain experiences, once lived or once sung, can never be unmade. For Vladimir Jankélévitch (1974), irreversibility is not a property of time. Time itself is irreversible; the (impossible) repetition implies the impossibility of *confirmation*. In this regard, Wagner approaches a theological impasse unlike the one Verdi stages in *Don Carlo*. In the two operas, the divine law —whether voiced by the Grand Inquisitor or the Pope— proves impermeable to human keenness. Both Carlo and Tannhäuser are compelled towards something more than earthly love; they gesture towards a joining of the erotic and the divine, of action and salvation. Yet in both cases the very geometry that defines the sacred render such a synthesis unthinkable. The music, however, keeps the agony alive. If religion in these operas denies redemption, music mourns it—or better, music keeps open the wound that redemption would close and even heal. Wagner's difference from Verdi lies in his integration of this logic into the musical syntax itself. Hence, the leitmotif is not just a reminder of what came before; it is a presentification of the eternal. In *Tannhäuser*, time collapses under the weight of iteration. We hear Venus' lustful motif long after Tannhäuser has abandoned her. We also hear the pilgrims' chorus before any spiritual metamorphosis occurs. These themes resemble the structure of impulse and memory as such; they are, in Schopenhauerian terms, expressions of the will, which knows no rest and no satisfaction (Schopenhauer, 1969). Music in Wagner is the purest articulation of this eternal venture and the leitmotif is its container.

A Dialogue Rekindled

Verdi frames revival as a break in continuity—a break in time that reveals the inescapability of History. His motifs return to *haunt*. Wagner, however, embraces this haunting and builds his dramatic world around it. The particularity resides equally in technique and a worldview: Verdi is a composer of historical tragedy; Wagner, a virtuoso in philosophical incongruity. Yet both intersect in their acknowledgment that desire exceeds the structures—political, theological, aesthetical—that attempt to contain it. In *Tannhäuser*, as in *Don Carlo*, the failure of redemption is less a dramatic flaw than a philosophical insight. Both operas play the unlikelihood of spiritual rescue within the systems that claim to offer it. The Pope's refusal to grant forgiveness to Tannhäuser corresponds to the Inquisitor's demand for sacrifice. Both characters outline institutions that, while promising eternity, deny *the human*. And yet both operas end with ambiguous allusions to the numinous: In *Don Carlo*, the spectre of Charles V may or may not offer refuge; in *Tannhäuser*, the Pope's staff miraculously blossoms after the protagonist's demise. These moments, suspended between miracle and irony, aestheticize the tragedy. They offer what Nietzsche might call a sublime consolation of art—a beauty that reveals the abyss without closing it (Nietzsche, 1999).

Crucially, Wagner's logos makes this aestheticization more cosmological. In *Tannhäuser*, the orchestra often knows more than the characters; its mnemonics operate independently, binding scenes through a web of motifs that stand up to individual consciousness. The Overture, with its juxtaposition of the pilgrims' theme and the orgiastic music of the Venusberg, prefigures the entire tragedy: the battle between flesh and spirit, between wrestling and redemption. This use of leitmotif as musical prophecy gives *Tannhäuser* its archetypal dimension; it becomes an allegory of (all) humans—told in musical terms. And yet Wagner's reliance on the metaphysics of music also leads to moments of aesthetic overdetermination. Whereas Verdi's works retain a rawness of political trauma, Wagner's leitmotifs can at times exclude ambiguity: the system *speaks* too much. But in *Tannhäuser* this is not yet totalized; the opera still belongs to the composer's period where tribulation remains ineffable

and redemption uncertain. In this, it continues to be a vulnerable work, full of contradictions, unanswered, and therefore profoundly *modern*.

It is there, in the fragility of the striving of the irreconcilable, that *Tannhäuser* and *Don Carlo* touch one another: both protagonists are obsessed with the return of an insurmountable past, whether that past is a lost love, a failed political hope, or a search for further meaning. The two creators use leitmotif as a means of giving sound to memory, sorrow, and the limits of freedom. Thus the leitmotif becomes in both hands an *epiphany of the impossible*. To review *Tannhäuser* from *Don Carlo* is not to compare two works on the level of national style or theatrical tradition, but to map a shared anxiety: the despair of redemption in a world ruled by absolutes. The music remembers what the law represses. And in the act of listening we too become bearers of that memory. Tannhäuser is torn between the voluptuous ecstasy of Venus and the redemptive love offered by a Thuringian lover. He is more a poet than a prince and thus symbolically, the artist par excellence, the one who must negotiate between the world of appearances and that of truth. But Tannhäuser's odyssey, like Carlo's, is doomed. Even when he repents and embarks on expiation, the Pope himself declines to offer absolution. Redemption turns into an impasse: its only fruition occurring posthumously when Elisabeth dies of grief and is declared the true savior of his soul. Her death serves as both a narrative and spiritual pivot, for it is only through her self-effacing love and sacrificial compassion that transcendence is granted—realized beyond institutional grace and relying on personal devotion. Tannhäuser, unable to unite the warring currents of his desires, is finally redeemed only through the death of another, underscoring the tragic irony that salvation lies beyond human scope. In this light, the opera recites the deferral of redemption and its dependence on distress and loss, revealing a spiritual logic in which grace arrives only after all earthly avenues have failed. Both *Tannhäuser* and *Don Carlo* therefore dramatize what Kierkegaard names “the sickness unto death”—the despair of being confined between incompatible extremes. Carlo pines for love and freedom but cannot act without invoking treason or sin. Tannhäuser wants redemption but fails to renounce the salacious desires he has succumbed to. In Kierkegaard's own words:

The self is a relation which relates itself to its own self, or it is that in the relation (which accounts for it) that the relation relates itself to its own self; the self is not the relation but [consists in the fact] that the relation relates itself to its own self (Kierkegaard, 1941, p. 17).

—a formulation that shows the internal division of the two protagonists. Neither opera offers integration; both end in dissolution. And Kierkegaard continues:

Man is a synthesis of the infinite and the finite, of the temporal and the eternal, of freedom and necessity, in short it is a synthesis. A synthesis is a relation between two factors. So regarded, man is not yet a self (Kierkegaard, 1941, p. 17).

This existential elaboration summarizes the profound inner turmoil that defines both Carlo and Tannhäuser: each incarnates this dialectical synthesis. The philosopher describes a self divided by opposing forces entangled in a wrestle that defies harmonious resolution: Carlo's wishes are perpetually obstructed by the weight of duty, law, and religious orthodoxy, while Tannhäuser is fractured by his inability to renounce earthly, sensual tastes. Their selves remain in a state of agonizing severance; they fail to span the divide between their infinite expectations and finite realities; they dwell amid the skirmish between boundless hopes and human constraints. Rather than achieving integration or wholeness, they are condemned to live—and ultimately perish—in this dialectical rupture. Kierkegaard's backbone not only elucidates their complexity but also illuminates the tragic structure that underpins both operas: a space where the reconciliation of freedom remains forever out of reach.

Musically, this fragmentation is exemplified through sharply contrasting but structurally analogous means in both Verdi and Wagner's operas. In *Don Carlo*, the use of stark, declamatory vocal lines fused with tightly woven motivic development creates a sense of heightened vigor that conveys the claustrophobic universe Carlo inhabits. The choral writing is often massive and imposing, acting as both a societal force and a psychological gravity that presses on the characters. Even in Carlo's

most lyrical moments, such as his duets with Isabel —particularly ‘*Ma lassù ci vedremo*’ (“But we’ll see each other up there!”)— the music is permeated by somber harmonies. These moments are articulations of a realm where love must overcome earthly boundaries and enter the domain of spiritual elongation. Conversely, Wagner’s musical idiosyncrasy in *Tannhäuser* employs a richly chromatic harmonic palette, moving beyond traditional diatonic confines to evoke a pervasive sense of psychic unrest. The music of Venus is characterized by lush orchestral textures and swirling chromatic motifs that imply surfeit and eerie seduction. The use of dissonance, continuous modulation, and fluid, unusual progressions conveys a world without firm tonal grounding, mirroring Tannhäuser’s instability. By comparison, the choruses at the Wartburg project austere, diatonic clarity with strong melodic lines and stately rhythmic patterns that invoke sacredness and communal order. These choral episodes are deliberately cast in a conservative harmonic structure with modal inflections and hymn-like simplicity that varies considerably from the decadent chromaticism of the Venusberg sections. That distance between the chromaticism of the Venusberg and the Wartburg chorus is visually reinforced in productions such as Schneider-Siemssen’s New York one, where the guests’ solemn arrival echoes the austere harmonic clarity.

Image: *Tannhäuser*: Arrival of the Guests at the Wartburg. Scene from Gunther Schneider-Siemssen’s Metropolitan Opera production. Artwork by Marty Sohl / Met Opera.



The 1861 version of *Tannhäuser* —prepared to meet the expectations of the Paris Opéra— did more than add ballet and restructure scenes; it brought a deeper stylistic disquiet into the work. Wagner, now steeped in the chromatic, harmonically adventurous idiom of *Tristan und Isolde*, found himself reworking a score originally conceived in the early 1840s. The result is a musical text in which older and newer idioms collide, often without full integration:

The pandemonium almost entirely eclipsed a stylistic problem concerning the grafting of new sections in Wagner's mature, post-*Tristan* style onto a work of the mid-1840s. A stylistic incongruity is most apparent in the latter stages of the new Bacchanal and in the newly written scene for Venus and Tannhäuser (...) The rising chromatic four-note phrase ubiquitous in *Tristan* is introduced at the height of the revelry, immediately followed, incidentally, by a string flourish shortly to become familiar in *Siegfried* (Cervone, 1989, p. 26).

This stylistic disparity underlines *Tannhäuser*'s transitional status within Wagner's opus. Straddling youthful Romanticism and the harmonic advancements of his later dramas, the opera resists full consensus. However, it is precisely this incongruity that contributes to its evocative power—an attribute that has secured its resonance. Even in this final version, the fundamental fluctuation between erotic and spiritual elements persists. The harmonic syntax remains deliberately unsettled and its structure embraces recursiveness rather than linear progression. This architecture, combined with the expanded harmonic vocabulary and orchestral innovations, situates *Tannhäuser* as a work bound up with the modernist problem of representing a kind of a rhetorical inconclusiveness *through* sound.

What distinguishes Giuseppe Verdi and Richard Wagner in these operas is not the thematic core; it is the philosophical stance. Verdi locates tragedy in the historical: *Don Carlo* is a critique of absolutism, a picture of State power that subjugates human emotion and freedom. It is no accident that the Grand Inquisitor is blind—he sees only through doctrine, never through compassion. Such a portrayal of authority invites broader reflection. Adorno, for instance, drew a distinction between an Enlightenment-oriented Verdi and an ultra-Romantic Wagner, remarking

that both creators exposed the violence of authority in different registers (Adorno, 2005). Under this lens, Verdi offers a counterforce through lyrical protest while Wagner does so through metaphysical *overabundance*. In *Tannhäuser*, redemption is metaphysical and inaccessible. The Pope's declaration that Tannhäuser is damned forever unless his staff should bloom with leaves is a cruel irony—his repentance is nullified by institutional rigidity. Only Elisabeth's self-sacrifice ultimately prompts the miracle. In this regard, the opera plays out the tragic logic of Romanticism: salvation cannot be earned but only given, and even then, only after death. As Adorno indicates, Wagner encodes the metaphysical in art by legitimizing its transfiguration into a parabolic resolution. Tannhäuser's final redemption is not so much theological as musical (Adorno, 2005). *Don Carlo* ends in mystery, probably more so than any other Verdian opera. In both cases, the work closes with vagueness rather than affirmation. Verdi resists any redemptive totality: as stated before, *Don Carlo* is a tragedy without catharsis, an opera in which action is continually stalled and no one truly triumphs. Verdi's vision is existential: the world is unjust, and music can articulate but not solve that injustice.

The Elisabeths in both operas play vital roles. In *Tannhäuser*, she is the pure intercessor, the *Mater Dolorosa* whose suffering redeems the fallen man. Verdi's Isabel is more enmeshed—both victim and agent, concealed by duty, yet emotionally lucid. Her aria is an elegy for the loss of self within history. She too seeks peace, but it is a peace beyond this physical world. Both women function as symbols of spiritual mediation, yet only through their erasure—implying that the feminine is conscripted into tragic necessity as a frame for the Spirit's self-alienation (Hegel, 2018). This perspective on tragedy holds that it stems from a clash between spiritual forces that belong to the same ethical order and should ideally be in harmony. The commitment to such an abstract ideal—good in itself but flawed when placed in relation to other aspects of life—leads to a collision with external forces and the broader social order; consequently, the tragic hero is overthrown in the course of his own conflict.

Finally, *Don Carlo* and *Tannhäuser* present the tragic collision in the midst of two forms of *good*: freedom and faith, love and duty, *eros* and *agape*. These values are unable to harmonize within the given world.

Opera as a synthetic art form makes this polarization clear and visible. But in these works the Hegelian synthesis —Christian salvation— fails. The result is more fragmentation, delay, and sacrifice. This failure, however, is never artistic. Rather, it becomes the very subject of the art itself. By refusing to resolve their (musical/philosophical) contradictions, Verdi and Wagner created works that remain perpetually contemporary. In *Don Carlo*, the voice of political protest still cries out against institutional tyranny. In *Tannhäuser*, the anguish of unredeemed desire resounds in every open cadenza. These are operas of *tragic* illumination. The question that persists is not whether redemption is possible, but whether it is even desirable within these worlds. In the two compositions, salvation requires the annihilation of the self—Carlo must vanish, Tannhäuser must perish. Thus music offers a unique space in which such sacrifice can be experienced without being imposed. As Nietzsche meditates:

(...) the optimism lurking in the genesis of opera and at the heart of the culture it represents has succeeded in divesting music with frightening speed of its Dionysiac purpose in the world and in imposing on it the character of a pleasurable play with form (Nietzsche, 1999, p. 93).

Yet in masterpieces like *Don Carlo* and *Tannhäuser*, music eludes this reduction, preserving its tragic or Dionysiac power to confront the limits of human existence.

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Chapter 2

Without Redemption—Crime and Punishment in *Rigoletto* and *Tristan und Isolde*

In analyzing *Don Carlo* and *Tannhäuser*, we found operas in which tragedy unfolds as a collision of opposites: law versus desire, dominion versus freedom, spirit versus flesh. Both Verdi and Wagner position their protagonists in worlds where redemption is sought but unattainable; distress and condemnation subsist without culminating in salvation. This tension takes on an even more profound character in *Rigoletto* and *Tristan und Isolde*, works in which the possibility of redemption is not merely suspended but explicitly denied. They confront us with a dramatic landscape where crime and punishment—prefiguring Fyodor Dostoevsky’s timeless masterpiece—appear inexorable, and where the weight of guilt and the search for absolution is framed as a trajectory from which there is no turning back. While *Don Carlo* brings to life the struggle between idealism and sovereignty, guilt and moral awareness, and *Tannhäuser* navigates the unfeasible homeostasis between carnality and spirituality, *Rigoletto* and *Tristan* dive deeper into the tragic dimension of human action without recourse to the supernatural or restoration of order. In *Don Carlo*, the political and moral ideal collapses under tyranny, with Verdi’s glorious music underscoring the inescapability of condemnation. In *Tannhäuser*, the hero’s search for atonement fails, and the music saturates the encounter between desire and sanctity. This tragic logic intensifies in *Rigoletto* and *Tristan und Isolde*, where passion and murder lead to apocalypse, without any horizon of salvation.

The Genesis of *Rigoletto*

*Rigoletto has survived the incomprehension of critics
as it survived the censors’ scissors (...)*
*Its variety, its profundity, its brave originality have kept it alive;
we need only listen, admire, and be moved*
—William Weaver

In 1851, Verdi premiered *Rigoletto* at La Fenice in Venice, launching what would become the first of his so-called *trilogia popolare*, later followed by *Il Trovatore* and *La Traviata*. While these three works are now canonical in the operatic repertoire, the creation of *Rigoletto* was far

from straightforward. It was born at the confluence of creative ambition, political turbulence, and a battle with censorship, marking a crucial moment in Verdi's evolution from a successful composer of patriotic operas into a dramatist of human dialectics. By 1850 the composer had already gained national recognition through masterpieces such as *Nabucco* (1842), *Ernani* (1844), also born out of a combination Verdi-Hugo-Piave-Fenice, and *Macbeth* (1847), based on Shakespeare, works that resonated strongly with the ideals of the Italian Risorgimento. However, "(...) *Rigoletto* is inherently different. It is Verdi's first opera conceived as an entity, in which individual parts are in the service of a coherent musical-dramatic vision" (Gossett, 1996, p. 7).

By that time Verdi was increasingly disillusioned with grandiose historical or biblical subjects and sought to explore more intimate dramas. In letters from this period, he expressed his willingness to move beyond traditional structures and themes, complaining that too many librettos were formulaic and lacked true depth. This artistic restlessness coincided with a maturing political situation: the failed revolutions of 1848 had shaken Europe, including the Italian states, and left behind a climate of reaction and retrenchment. The oppressive Austrian regime, particularly in the territories of the Kingdom of Lombardy–Giulia–Venetia, kept a tight grip on cultural production, a constraint Verdi had to proceed with considerable strategic caution.

What, after all, was so objectionable about the story? Many operas in the past had contained seductions and murders, even regicides. The immorality of *Rigoletto* was different. In other operas virtue and evil were always easily identified; virtue was attractive; evil, repulsive. Here the vicious libertine is anything but repellent: the misshapen jester is the embodiment of selfless paternal love; and even the sweet Gilda is not all of a piece: vice has tainted her. She forgives her seducer (implicitly condoning his sin) and commits suicide [or sacrifice] to save him. All the characters are contradictory, unexpected, against the grain (Weaver, 1985, p. 7).

The subject chosen for *Rigoletto* was revolutionary. Verdi began adapting Victor Hugo's play *Le roi s'amuse* (1832), which he described as

“the greatest subject and perhaps the greatest drama of modern times” (Verdi, in Gossett, 1996, p. 7). The play —banned in France after a single performance— offers a scandalous critique of royal immorality, featuring a lascivious king, a bitter court jester, and the tragic seduction of his daughter. In collaboration with the Venetian librettist Francesco Maria Piave, Verdi saw in this story the opportunity to create a bold new opera—one that placed ordinary characters and their personal dramas at the forefront, moving away from tales of kings and warriors. The new piece centers on a buffoon, *Rigoletto* —initially called *Triboletto*, derived from Hugo’s character *Triboulet*—, who is a physically deformed and morally ambiguous figure caught in a deeply human and profoundly tragic predicament. Italian censors, however, were quick to intervene: the Austrian authorities in Venice rejected the libretto outright in its original form. They were particularly alarmed by the depiction of an infamous monarch —François I of France— as a licentious womanizer and moral degenerate. Cedric Wallis presents the following explanation of the historical character:

Francis was clearly not a very estimable character, but he had the good taste to enjoy the genius of men greater than himself, and sometimes even gave them his help and patronage. He was the great-nephew of the poet Charles d’Orléans, the brother of Marguerite de Navarre, the father-in-law of Catherine de Medici and the lover of Diane de Poitiers —he consorted and fought and argued with such colorful figures in history as Cesare Borgia, Savonarola, Machiavelli, Martin Luther and John Calvin— he was the patron of Benvenuto Cellini, of Leonardo da Vinci and of Titian, and amongst the poets who adorned his capital, if not his Court, were Rabelais, Ronsard, Villon and Clément Marot, who appears in Verdi’s opera, Italianized into Marullo (Wallis, 1986, p. 6).

Image: Francis I of France. Portrait by Jean Clouet, c. 1527–30



Wallis' statement shows an oligarch whose appetite for power and pleasure coexisted with an authentic reverence for genius. The dichotomy is important when considering the way certain personalities from his orbit—whether historically or through imaginative transformation—migrate into the fictional world of *Rigoletto*. In this operatic metamorphosis, courtiers, who were historically distinct individuals, become types: condensed paradigms of intrigue, flattery, or mockery. Clément Marot, the refined yet often satirical poet at the court of Francis, is granted an afterlife as Marullo. In Verdi's opera—originally titled *La maledizione*—Marullo is no longer the poet-diplomat who maneuvered through the treacherous waters of sponsorship; instead, he becomes a sharp-tongued courtier quick to spread scandal and relish the Duke's amorous exploits. This change shows Verdi and Piave's need to strip away historical specificity in favor of dramaturgical purpose: Marullo is a mouthpiece for the court's cynical

complicity, a node in the network of gossip that drives the plot towards its fatal conclusion. Whereas the historical Marot could indulge in wit while still commanding literary respect, the operatic Marullo exists in a morally flattened microcosm where that wit is inseparable from cruelty and every jest becomes part of the machinery of corruption. In this sense, Verdi's engagement with the work of Hugo was not simply a mutation of names; it became a commentary on how, in a world of absolute power, even the role of the poet risks becoming an accessory to moral decay. This strain becomes explicit in the official rebuttal to the libretto, where the State intervenes directly to police both morality and discernment:

His Excellency the Military Governor Cavalier de Gorzkowski... regrets that the poet Piave and the celebrated Maestro Verdi have not been able to choose some other theme on which to exhibit their talents than one of such repellent immorality and obscene triviality as the subject of the libretto entitled *La Maledizione*... His Excellency has therefore determined to forbid absolutely the performance¹

Verdi responded vehemently and persistently to Gorzkowski over the rejection of Piave's first manuscript: "If you suppress this, I shall withdraw the opera." Writing to the president of La Fenice, he added: "I, trusting your poet's word, set myself to work studying the subject, meditating profoundly on it; and the idea, the musical tint, is already determined in my mind. I can even say that the principal and most fatiguing work is already done."²

The pliant Piave, however, did a little string-pulling behind the scenes and suddenly, as if by magic, the way was made clear. If the names of the characters were changed, and the action was moved from France to Italy, the dramatic situations and therefore Verdi's inviolable music, could remain unaltered (Wallis, 1986, p. 7).

¹ Edict from the Cavalier de Gorzkowski to the Count Mocenigo in Venice (Kimbell, 1980, p. 22).

² Verdi's letter to Count Mocenigo, President of La Fenice Opera (Gossett, 1996, p. 8).

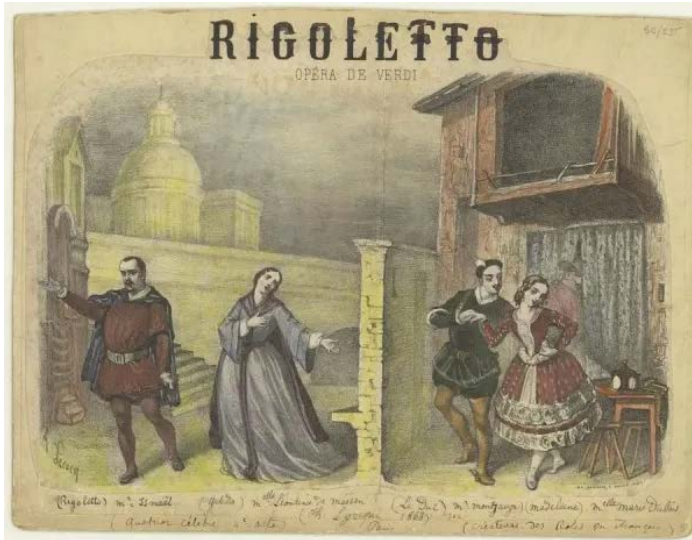
Subsequently, Verdi's displeasure —and his habitual frankness— prompted him to send further correspondence to the Austrian government in Venice:

A singing hunchback? Why not?... Can it be effective? I don't know. But if I don't know, then neither, I repeat, does the person who propped the change. That is just what seemed so wonderful to me: to portray this ridiculous, terribly deformed creature, who is inwardly filled with passion and love. It was precisely because of all these original qualities and characteristics that I chose the subject, and if they are cut out I shall no longer be able to compose the music. If I am told I can leave my music as it is, for this drama too, I reply that I don't understand such reasoning. And I frankly declare that my music, whether beautiful or ugly, is never written at random, and that I always try to give it character... My artistic conscience will not permit me to put this libretto to music³ (Verdi, in Gossett, 1996, p. 9).

After a series of discussions and a clear disposition to find middle ground, Francis I of France was transformed into Il Duca di Mantova, a fictional regent. That conversion involved turning the King into a minor ruler, while other names and settings were also altered: Triboulet took on a new form as Rigoletto —from the French *rigoler* (“to laugh or joke”) and *rigolo* (“a joker”)— while Blanche gained a soprano role as Gilda. Verdi nevertheless insisted that Piave preserve the psychological and dramatic essence of Hugo's play intact. The result was *Rigoletto*, a dark, tightly woven tragedy that dared to picture a protagonist who is both a villain and a victim, both cruel and pitiful.

³ Verdi's letter to Piave.

Image: Verdi, *Rigoletto* (1863). Framed print depicting a scene from the opera. Image courtesy of Heritage images.



If the Duke is Crime, *Rigoletto* is Punishment...?

In 16th-century Mantua, the cynical, sharp-tongued court jester Rigoletto entertains the libertine Duke, mocking the courtiers whose wives and daughters the Duke seduces, but his depravity earns him Count Montecrone's curse, which he dismisses—until fate turns it upon him. Unknown to the court, Rigoletto has a sheltered daughter, Gilda, whom he guards obsessively in a secluded home. The Duke, disguised as a poor student calling himself Gualtier Maldé, woos Gilda, causing her to fall deeply in love. That night, the courtiers, thinking Gilda is Rigoletto's mistress, seize her and deliver her to the Duke, who succeeds in seducing her. Swearing vengeance, Rigoletto hires the assassin Sparafucile to murder the Duke, but Gilda, overhearing Sparafucile and his sister Maddalena planning to spare his lover and kill the next man to arrive, sacrifices herself to save him, entering the house and being fatally stabbed. Rigoletto comes to claim the Duke's body only to find his dying daughter in the sack, sealing the terrible curse.

Rigoletto represented a major stylistic leap for Verdi. He rejected the episodic structure of his earlier operas and instead created a highly unified musical drama, although not comparable to *Don Carlo* or *Otello* in terms of leitmotivic development. From the chilling *maledizione* —the curse of Monterone⁴ that “(...) works its spell in a horrendous manner on the buffoon” (Gossett, 1996, p. 9)—, placed at the beginning of Act I, to the devastating finale, the opera advances with relentless tragic rationale. The music operates as more than simple decoration, unveiling the characters’ inner temperaments. Rather than interrupting the flow, the arias, trios, and duets enhance the dramatic momentum. Rigoletto’s own vocal line reflects his conflicted nature—biting and mocking at court, tender and broken with his daughter, anguished and explosive in his *parlando* monologues. The Duke’s iconic ‘*La donna è mobile*’ (“Woman is fickle,”) a seemingly light-hearted ode to feminine volubility, is itself a stroke of irony, presented just before the profligate’s actions bring about the sacrifice of Gilda. Verdi’s decision to withhold this melody from the singers until the opening night signals his recognition of its power and catchiness: he feared that if it were leaked it would be sung in the streets and threaten *Rigoletto*’s impact:

Verdi had foreseen *La donna è mobile* would be a dangerously infectious tune. The tenor [Raffaele Mirate] was only given the music at the last moment, with strict instructions not to sing or whistle it outside the theatre staff. This precaution was justified, for people came out of the theatre singing both words and music and in a few days Venetians were teasing their girls by humming the catchy accusation of fickleness into their ears. Piave tried the joke on his own mistress, but she got her own back by improvising a retort that began ‘*Piave è un asino*’, sung to the same tune (...) Piave is a silly ass (Wallis, 1986, p. 8).

Verdi’s masterwork reverberates with the tragic consciousness of modernity; it shows a disenchanted world in which heavenly guarantees have collapsed and the divine has been reduced to a private agony. Gilda, the

⁴ Count Monterone is an adapted version of the historical figure Monsieur de Saint-Vaille.

only character capable of sacrificial love, functions as a kind of tragic saint. Her love for the Duca —blind, pure and fatal— evinces a Christ-like readiness to die for another's sin; still, her death brings no redemption. As Terry Eagleton notes, in the modern tragic vision, there is no providential design into which grief is finally woven (Eagleton, 2003). Gilda's death is therefore a final silence that leaves her father alone with the corpse of his ideal, a cruel twist that goes beyond divine rebalancing and deepens the metaphysical despair. The opera thereby captures a defining ingredient of modern tragedy as it progresses in *Rigoletto*: the absence of any overarching providential order that might restore cosmic balance. Unlike religious dramas, where death may serve as a form of purification or spiritual ascent, Gilda's demise resists such consolations; it is not a passage into a higher realm or a moment pregnant with hope, but a brute cessation—a void that confronts her father and the audience with the reality of loss unmitigated by meaning or salvation.

Gilda's disappearance is not a sacrifice that saves others or reconciles conflicting forces; it is the tragic consequence of individual flaws and the merciless workings of fate as shaped by human actions. The ideal that *Rigoletto* tries to protect —his daughter as an avatar of purity and hope— is irrevocably shattered, leaving him isolated and engulfed by grief. Such a fracture, reflecting ideal and reality, love and callousness, stands for a modern sensibility skeptical of any divine justice, thereby eclipsing the existential loneliness of human existence. The erosion of celestial design here strips the tragedy of any comforting narrative; pain is not interlaced into a grand tapestry but remains raw and unresolved. The result is a bleak outlook that challenges audiences to confront tragedy not as an account of moral order but as a mirage of human frailty and the often arbitrary nature of fate. Through this lens, *Rigoletto* becomes a profoundly modern work, suffused with contemporary existential dreads about meaning, loss, and the silence that follows catastrophe.

Rigoletto premiered to enormous acclaim on March 11, 1851. Critics and audiences were captivated by its courageous subject and emotional resonance. The opera confirmed Verdi as the dominant voice in Italian opera, and heralded the beginning of a new aesthetic period in his career—one more concerned with the inner lives of characters, uncertainty

and multifaceted mental states. The philosophical potency of *Rigoletto*, evident even in the present day, derives from its enduring capacity to confront human peril. This is affectingly exemplified by its powerful representation of marginalized and physically marked characters, prominently achieved in *Il Trovatore* as the gypsy Azucena, and in *La Traviata* as Violetta Valéry, a courtesan. Moreover, the opera emphasizes the tragic outcomes of desire and moral compromise, thus contributing to its lasting significance. In creating *Rigoletto* Verdi overcame censorship by shifting it into something even more potent—an opera that is at once deeply personal and political:

Verdi, for once, was satisfied with his work. No doubt *Rigoletto* would have been better still left in its original historical setting—it would interest the audience, for example, to know that Monterone’s curse was pronounced on behalf of the legendary Diane de Poitiers—but such small matters are unimportant when set against the undoubted power and effectiveness of the whole work which, as Francis Troye says in his life of Verdi, has in it something of the inevitability of Greek... (Wallis, 1986, p. 8).

In a more stringent way than the one presented in *Don Carlo*, *Rigoletto* exhibits a moral universe in which divine justice is either helpless or neglected. The hunchbacked jester, amid a web of vengeance and violence, watches his own attempt to punish the Duke backfire tragically with the slaying of his own daughter. The opera immerses us in a space where crime triggers an unavoidable sequence of repercussions with no possibility of restitution; in this cosmos, it does not aspire to redemption but runs its course according to an unyielding and relentless logic. Surely the most striking dialogue occurs in the final exchange between Rigoletto and Sparafucile, when the *gobbo* pays the assassin to kill the Duke. It reads as follows:

RIGOLETTO:
At midnight I shall return

SPARAFUCILE:
I can throw him in the river without help.

RIGOLETTO:
No, no, I want to do it myself.

SPARAFUCILE:
All right; his name?

RIGOLETTO:
Do you want to know mine as well?
He is Crime, I am Punishment⁵

As Dostoevsky penned in his chef d'oeuvre, written nearly fifteen years after *Rigoletto*, there is no crime without punishment; yet the deepest punishment falls upon the criminal himself. The guilty party experiences more than an external sentence, for he must endure an inner moral and spiritual reckoning. In the end, Rigoletto discovers that he is both *crime and punishment*, for crime here is not a single act but an entire mode of living—a career built on malice, parody, and complicity in deceit: “Pain and suffering are always inevitable for a large intelligence and a deep heart. The really great men must, I think, have great sadness on earth.” (Dostoevsky, 1993, p. 474). And later:

‘Ah, why did you say that?’ ‘It was not because of your dishonour and your sin I said that of you, but because of your great suffering. But you are a great sinner, that’s true,’ he added almost solemnly, ‘and your worst sin is that you have destroyed and betrayed yourself’ (...) (Dostoevsky, 1993, p. 575).

⁵ See Murashev.com. (n.d.). *Rigoletto libretto* (Italian-English). Retrieved on August 8, 2025 from Murashev.com website: https://www.murashev.com/opera/Rigoletto_libretto_Italian_English

Dostoevsky's words insist on the idea that the true punishment is internal—a torment of conscience and soul that can be far more calamitous than any external penalty. Such a vision aligns beautifully with Rigoletto's nemesis, where the curse he brings upon himself is more harrowing than any legal or social sanction. Here the punishment is not administered by a Court or a King, nor even the State; it is entwined into the fabric of the diegesis as a mechanism of cause and effect. His jeering of Monterone becomes the curse that haunts him, for it sets in motion a cascade of ethical determinations that will return upon him with hurtful precision. Thus the abduction and subsequent death of Gilda are not simply external accidents—they are a mirror held up to Rigoletto's own actions, compelling him to face the world he has helped to sustain. In the Dostoevskian schema, torment lies in recognition and actualization: the moment when the criminal sees himself in the anguish he undergoes. Rigoletto, clutching the sack that holds his own daughter's body, cries, 'Ah... *la maledizione*'—having to reach a high A, a note more typical of a tenor's range than that of a baritone— but the real curse is his realization that he is both victim and architect of disaster. This is why the conclusion is so merciless: there is no cathartic salvation, no exoneration; the punishment is the unending weight of knowing, a sentence that will outlast the final note.

Aesthetics Through The Characters

Verdi's music in *Rigoletto* assigns each major figure not only a vocal range but also an ethos, creating an audible aesthetics of character that goes far beyond mere classification. This is a carefully crafted blend of timbre, melodic style, harmonic logos, rhythmic profile, and orchestral color that together form a unique identity for each role, making their psychological and moral traits instantly recognizable and felt by the listener. For instance, the Duke's tenor voice is not just a high male register; it suggests youth, charm, and ease through flowing lyrical phrases and bright orchestration. His melodies tend to be light, effortless, and rhythmically buoyant, betraying his libertine nature and careless self-indulgence. The music amplifies his superficial charisma, masking a moral emptiness beneath the glittering surface. For his character,

Piave made some additions, including the solo scene *Parmi veder le lagrime*, which has often been criticized as inconsistent with the crudeness of the Duke's subsequent behavior. But Verdi and Piave need not explain; the Duke is inconsistent. He is as *moble* as the women he mocks (...) His momentary tenderness is in character, though unreal, like a French Queen's milking cows (Weaver, 1985, p. 7).

All the same, immediately following his rendition of the recitative '*Ella mi fu rapita*' the Duke is informed that Gilda has not been lost: she has been captured by the courtiers —Borsa, Marullo, Ceprano— for his own benefit and is now in his custody. Here the music rapidly reverts to its early style —constantly crowned with a high D at its conclusion, in keeping with the virtuosic traditions favored by Pavarotti and, more recently, by Juan Diego Flórez— which presents a relatively pure and unfiltered view of the role, a moment where joy is conveyed through the most extravagant yet sincerely felt recognizable expressions:

DUKE:

I seem to see the tears
 Coursing from her eyes
 As bewildered and afraid
 At the surprise attack,
 Remembering our love,
 She called her Walter's name.
 But he could not defend you,
 Sweet, beloved maid;
 He who would pledge his very soul
 To bring you happiness;
 He who, in loving you, envied
 Not even the angels⁶

⁶ See Murashev.com. (n.d.). Rigoletto libretto (Italian-English). Retrieved on August 11, 2025 from Murashev.com website: https://www.murashev.com/opera/Rigoletto_libretto_Italian_English

The Duke dwells in a realm of lyrical seduction, carefree melodies, and bright tonal centers, while Rigoletto's world is chromatic, unstable, and painted by darker orchestral hues. Yet these worlds are not sealed off; they collide and contaminate each other just as their fates are bound together. The harmonic plan becomes in effect a map of their relationship and moral outlook: two tonal poles linked by inevitable confluence, with the orchestral mass acting as the connective tissue that ensures the tragedy feels musically as well as narratively fated. The Duke stands as a figure of pseudo-Dionysiac sensuality —though infamous— akin to what Nietzsche would describe as the *tragic musician*, an egocentric who enacts his will through aesthetic charm rather than ethical considerations. In the philosopher's own words:

(...) the Dionysiac artist presents the essence of everything that appears in a way that is immediately intelligible, for he has command over the chaos of the will before it has assumed individual shape, and from it he can bring a new world into being at each creative moment, but also the old world with which we are already familiar as phenomenon. In this latter sense he is a tragic musician (Nietzsche, 1999, p. 122).

His beauty —and, of course, his power— are his justification:

(...) the egoistic Duke is committed to his role as an ardent young lover. He is totally absorbed by his own love song [mostly in the famous quartet *Bella figlia dell'amore*], another formal piece, as simple structurally as the remainder of his music, which consequently shapes the entire composition (Gossett, 1996, p. 11).

The Duke's musical principle impregnates much of the opera's surface, pointing to the structural centrality of his aesthetic within the drama as a whole. Melodic simplicity and repetitive phrasing form an expressive axis around which the emotional and tonal layers of the work revolve and against which they are contrasted. These joyful, flowing lines —mainly in *Bella figlia*, one of the finest ensembles in operatic history— create a luminous acoustic space that heightens the bleakness of the protagonist's

world, defined by chromatic inflection and jagged motifs. Hence, Il Duca is both an archetype of decadent Dionysiac exuberance and of destructive self-indulgence. His *aesthetic* dominion is not simply about rule or power but about the supremacy of beauty and pleasure no matter the cost to others. This juxtaposition—between the magnetic allure of the Duke's writing and the aftermath it unleashes—makes him one of Verdi's most fascinating and sinister creations: a man whose domination conceals moral vacancy and whose charm becomes the catalyst of ruin. Here he is, first singing yet another song about the love of women, then serenading a harlot, revealing both his unforced charm and his moral shallowness, as he treats seduction as a casual amusement rather than an expression of heartfelt emotion:

DUKE:

Woman is fickle, false altogether,
 Moves like a feather borne on the breezes;
 Woman with guileful smile will e'er deceive you,
 Often can grieve you, yet e'er she pleases,
 Her heart's unfeeling, false altogether,
 Moves like a feather borne on the breeze!
 Wretched the dupe is, who when she looks kindly,
 Trusts to her blindly. Thus life is wasted!
 Yet he must surely be dull beyond measure,
 Who of life's pleasure never has tasted.

(...)

Fairest daughter of the graces,
 I, thy humble slave, implore thee
 With one tender word to restore me,
 End the pangs of unrequited love!
 (O'Connell, 1929, pp. 384-385).

This captures as vividly as words allow the image of a languid, amorous young aristocrat and his contemptuous attitude towards women upon whom he projects—and implicitly condemns—his own most glaring vice. In doing so, the portrait presents a man who cloaks selfish fancy in charm and wit, turning moral weakness into a kind of self-justifying

persona. His melody and manner alike deliver a complacent assurance that his conquests are foreordained and that love for him is little more than a game played at the expense of sincerity.

Image: Jussi Björling as the Duke in *Rigoletto* at the Metropolitan Opera, December 4, 1945. Photo taken in New York.



As established earlier, the aesthetics of *Rigoletto* merge the grotesque and the sublime, creating a dramatic logic that echoes Romantic conceptions of *the tragic*: Gilda's lyric soprano lines rise like sacred chants amid a profane exterior. Her purity is fragile, always threatened by the brute force of male desire. The orchestration, which frequently isolates solo instruments to underscore moments of psychological unveiling, strengthens this musical edginess. Abbate and Parker (2015) remark how the score behaves almost as an all-consuming pull shaping the course of the drama. The music oversteps the role of mere accompaniment, actively guiding the narrative and bringing

to light the submerged emotional currents. Through carefully constructed motifs and orchestral cues, Verdi weaves a sense of *destiny*, casting into relief the tragic dimensions of the story and deepening the audience's engagement with the characters' fates. Within this sound world, Gilda is defined by her voice, which articulates innocence and vulnerability through delicate ornamentation and melodic purity. Her vocal lines soar with youthful idealism, innocence, and openness, often supported by transparent orchestration. Verdi crafts her presence as an oasis amid the cynicism and brutality surrounding her, using moments of extended legato, light dynamics, and tender harmonic shifts to draw the listener into her inner world. Gilda's trajectory leads her from sheltered purity to tragic self-sacrifice, thereby underscoring her clash between personal devotion and a cruel extrinsic reality. This evolution is effectively achieved through a meticulous interplay between text and music in which subtle phrasing and dynamic gradations carry her dawning awareness of betrayal, moral awakening, and conviction. By the final act, her vocal part, though retaining its luminosity, gains an unmistakable gravity, denoting the collapse of innocence into a self-chosen fate—a shift that elevates her beyond mere victimhood into a fully realized tragic agent.

Gilda is a departure from earlier operatic heroines —Abigaille from *Nabucco*, Giselda from *Lombardi*, Elvira from *Ernani*—, she “(...) is the very antithesis of what we commonly think of as the typical romantic *prima donna*” (Kimbell, 1980, p. 26). Her style resists the model of the tempestuous or self-assertive operatic character, and this moderation possesses a disarming truthfulness that also escalates the opera's irony. Though she begins as an innocent young girl (when she sings the ravishing *Caro nome*, with the flights of coloratura as manifestations of the same innocence) she evolves into a bearer of moral resolve, sacrificing herself to save the man who has deceived her. Her final act is defined by rising above her circumstances rather than remaining passive—her death, while *tragic* in a Greek sense, is also rendered with a spiritual elevation that corrodes any simple reading of her as a common victim. To this J. B. Steane adds:

The depth of this warm-hearted girl's sincerity is suggested as she reciprocates Rigoletto's devotion: 'Ah, se può lieto rendervi, gioia è la vita mia' ('Life is joyful to me if I can make you happy'). The

fullness of heart, life and voice enlarges in the second duet, after Gilda has been abducted and seduced (...) ‘Tutte le feste’ feels its way towards complete confession when, the mind in grip of its frightful memory, the voice rises in feverish triplets to a fortissimo high A which in its dramatic quality and emotional intensity means more than all the higher notes sung in the previous act (...) By this time the girl is a woman. The voice which makes its last confession (‘V’ho ingannato’) is mature and full, its regret expressed with a movingly tender generosity (Steane, 1986, p. 9).

When Gilda launches into *Caro nome* her soaring floriture are not merely vocal displays; they are musical epitomes of her romantic idealism. The ornate melodic flights with their delicate and suspended phrases translate her naïve infatuation into sound: each ornament is like a sigh or a daydream, unburdened by the distrust and danger that surround her. In Verdi’s writing, virtuosity turns into *meaning*—here melisma stands as an authentic device, independent of diva showmanship (Aranda Espinosa, 2024). It is the spontaneous overflow of a secluded young woman’s first awakening to love, untouched by reality. Nevertheless, as the drama progresses, this same voice, once a medium of pure and rapturous belief, is remolded by disloyalty and disillusionment. After witnessing the Duke’s faithlessness and enduring the violence of her rape, Gilda’s tone darkens; her phrases shorten, her lines lose the free, floating expansiveness of *Caro nome*. What was once effervescent becomes weighted, and even her most *cantabile* utterances bear the shadow of experience and knowledge. In Act III, when she sees the Duke romancing Maddalena with the same spell he used on her, the design of her earlier musical world collapses into a more earthbound reality. This change is narrative as well as musical: the voice that once embodied untouched idealism now bears the imprint of pain, her timbre shaded with resignation. In this transmutation, Verdi demonstrates how love’s song can be both the breaking of the dream and its funeral lament, binding innocence and betrayal in the same tragic arc. Following Gossett’s reading of Gilda’s finale:

By the end of the second act she is a victim of the Duke’s treachery, and her music is suffused with mature sadness, sadness becoming

despair and resolve in the final act. In her soaring line, *Perdona tu, o padre*, she is far removed from the simple girl of the first act, while her final words, *Lassù in cielo*, define a moment of transfiguration [as will occur with Wagner's *Liebestod*], of holiness (Gossett, 1996, p. 12).

The musical identity of Gilda is largely forged through duets, and even her aria—a dreamlike, single-movement parade that strays from the original aria form—emerges directly as a response to Gualtier Maldè's (the Duke in incognito) false avowal of love. For much of the opera she is heard embellishing Rigoletto's lines with gentle descants or answering the Duke's phrases in languid, blissful coloratura. It is not until the final scene that she undergoes an emotional arousing and is determined to offer her life to save her unworthy Duca that she acquires full musical individuality. Until then her voice reaches its utmost effectiveness only in the shared intimacy of those she cherishes. Though a *candida* for some readings of the role, William Weaver however points out that "Gilda should not be made too angelic. After all, from the beginning she is a disobedient daughter (...) she finally disobeys God himself with her self-slaughter" (Weaver, 1985, p. 7). Gilda brings forth her sheltered world and the ephemeral nature of her dreams which stand against the harsh realities enclosing her. By weaving these distinct identities into the mechanisms of the opera, Verdi constructs a world where character and music are inseparable. This allows the audience to perceive Gilda's temper through purely musical means and feel the emotional narrative on a visceral level. It also builds dramatic tension, as these sonic worlds collide and intertwine, matching the relationships on stage. Great interpreters of Gilda have included divas such as Luisa Tetrazzini, Amelita Galli-Curci, Lily Pons, Maria Callas, Joan Sutherland, Renata Scottò, Ileana Cotrubas, and Edita Gruberova, each bringing her own balance of technical finesse and nuance to the part.

Image: Joan Sutherland as Gilda in *Rigoletto*. Photo by Louis Melancon / The Metropolitan Opera, 1970.



While Gilda's vocal writing is sculpted by intimacy, tenderness, and a musical identity that blossoms primarily in the presence of her father and her lover, the score extends her world through an orchestral web that constantly comments *on the drama*. The instrumental writing is never passive; it acts as a narrative voice, framing the characters' emotions, casting shadows, and amplifying epiphanic moments. This dynamic between voice and orchestra is especially evident in the broader theater, where the orchestration not only defines atmosphere but also sharpens the nervousness that drives the story forward:

The orchestra establishes the mood in its opening prelude so that the frivolous stage band heard as the curtain rises on Act I rings doubly false. When Monterone enters, enraged at the Duke's se-

duction of his daughter, the opening music is recalled (...) The score of *Rigoletto* is so rich we can evoke only some of its magical moments, such as the duet for Rigoletto and Sparafucile (...) The dialogue is simple, even naturalistic, as the melodic interest and oppressive dramatic climate lie squarely in the orchestra, with a melody played by a single muted cello and single muted contrabass in octaves pitted against chords in clarinets, bassoons and low strings. The trio in the last act, with its eerie representation of the rising storm should also be mentioned (Gossett, 1996, pp. 9-12).

The commentary draws attention to one of Verdi's milestones in *Rigoletto*: his use of the orchestra as a fundamental voice, configuring the opera's architecture. As David Kimbell (1980, p. 25) continues, "(...) not even the opulence that Wagner, Strauss, and Puccini brought into the opera house can deafen us to the dramatic flair of Verdi's orchestral and harmonic innovations." The opening prelude immediately establishes a mood of ominous jitters beneath the surface of merriment.

The brass, led by solo trumpet and trombone, intone a restrained motif later to be associated with the curse placed on Rigoletto; this builds an intensity and eventually explodes into a passionate sobbing figure for full orchestra; the figure peters out the brass motif returns, and simple cadences effect a solemn close (Sadie, 1992, p. 537).

Therefore, when the frivolous band sounds at the curtain rise, the first dissonance rings with a bitter irony—an illusory veneer over a fraudulent and dangerous world. This variance between surface and undercurrent is an iterative feature in the score, and the orchestra's role in articulating it is crucial. The recall of the opening music at Monterone's entrance shows how Verdi uses thematic cells to unify the drama and reinforce the sense of a looming, inescapable curse. These (leit)motifs become markers, weaving a sonic thread of doom that connects characters and events across the opera. In the duet between Rigoletto and Sparafucile, the dialogue's simplicity is offset by the orchestra's evocative textures. The muted cello–contrabass melody, somber and intimate, creates an atmosphere thick with menace and fatalism, while winds and strings

provide a harmonic tension that illuminates the shadowy pact unfurling between the characters. Similarly, the trio in the final act, with its disquieting storm representation, wields the orchestra to externalize the inner turmoil and menacing cataclysm. The swirling storm becomes a sonic metaphor for the chaos and moral upheaval that culminates the tragedy:

The ‘musical tint’ extends beyond simple melodic quotations. Verdi uses the orchestra, especially the low winds, to give these passages a unique sound. And it has been forcefully argued that *Rigoletto* features a harmonic plan, binding the opera together tonally, as logical as that of any symphonic work. Certain keys and tonal progressions serve as points of reference, organization, and symbolic meaning (Gossett, 1996, p. 10).

Gossett’s annotations go to the heart of a compositional sophistication in *Rigoletto*. What the musicologist identifies here is the way the dramaturgy is embedded in an integrated sonic system—one that bolsters the psychological, allegorical, and narrative dimensions of the opera. The use of low winds—bassoons, bass clarinets, trombones—creates a timbral shadow that colors much of the score, lending certain portions a pungent, almost acrid weight. This is not incidental orchestration; it is a sound world that belongs specifically to *Rigoletto*, distinguishing its texture from earlier Verdi works. The musical tint is hence more than a thematic recollection; the composer builds a network of tonal centers and harmonic progressions that lend the opera the coherence of a symphonic cycle. Certain keys operate both symbolically and structurally—anchoring moments of moral gravity, emotional rupture, or revelation. By way of example, the fluctuation between dark, flat-side tonalities and brighter, sharp-side tonal regions can parallel *Rigoletto*’s own wavering between bitterness and tenderness, suspicion and love. Likewise, the Duke’s music gravitates towards radiant tonalities that materialize as allegories for his charm and seeming freedom—keys that feel open and expansive, yet are harmonically unstable, corresponding to the moral instability beneath his charisma.

The harmonic plan operates almost like an invisible, subconscious narrator. The reappearance of certain progressions or tonal poles aligns with the notion of aural signposts, subtly shaping our perception of character

and course. The low winds, when paired with specific harmonic shifts, can foreshadow doom—as their color shadows Rigoletto’s lines when the curse is mentioned—or deepen the irony of moments that seem light on the surface, such as the Duke’s carefree arias—*Questa o quella, La donna è mobile*—, the former sung to an indifferent courtesan and the latter to a prostitute. From this perspective, *Rigoletto* becomes a unified tonal organism. This has profound implications for how we read two of the central figures: the Duke and Rigoletto himself. Their musical worlds—harmonically, rhythmically, and timbrally—are in constant counterpoint.

Unlike the Duke’s polished surface, Rigoletto stands as a model of a profound Hugoesque dichotomy, a character whose essence Verdi captures with extraordinary detail: “Rarely is Rigoletto able confidently to sustain the lyric impetus of his song; it tends to be undetermined by his *alter ego*” (Kimbell, 1980, p. 25). Physically deformed and socially marginalized as a hunchbacked jester, Rigoletto occupies a liminal space: he is both an insider and an outsider, part of the world he mocks yet perpetually alienated from it. His character is marked by sharp dualities—he is a cynic and a victim, a sharp-tongued tormentor and a tender, devoted father. This is made vividly tangible through the vocal material Verdi provides for him: a baritone role—both high and low—renowned for its extraordinary demands, requiring a singer to navigate a wide spectrum of technical challenges. Rigoletto’s vocal lines frequently employ dissonance, mimicking bitterness and a profound inner turmoil. The orchestration surrounding him introduces low winds and somber harmonic progressions that create a *musical contour*, signaling his marginalization. His music can suddenly shift from harsh sarcasm to gentleness, reflecting the polarities within his character: the buffoon and the broken father, the mocker and the desperate protector. “When Rigoletto says ‘*Pari siamo*’ he could be expressing the motto of the whole work: the beautiful and the ugly can be equally good, equally evil” (Weaver, 1985, p. 7). “‘But here I become another person,’ he exclaims at the end of his monologue (...) as he makes to enter his house” (Kimbell, 1980, p. 25). The baritone tessitura of Rigoletto provides the perfect vehicle for his multifaceted nature. In moments of caustic edge, his vocal lines are often jagged and rhythmically incisive, punctuated by sudden accents that underscore his

sarcastic edge and deep resentment towards the courtiers who degrade and use him. These passages bear more than mere anger; they reveal a savagery born of self-protection and a deep-seated need to shield himself from pain, a mask designed to protect Rigoletto's tenuous selfhood. Yet beneath this exterior lies a profound vulnerability, most poignantly showed in his lyrical outbursts, particularly in scenes involving his daughter — '*Veglia o donna, questo fiore*' ("O woman, watch over this flower")— where the music softens, the vocal line opens into moments of warmth, exposing a father's fierce love and his longing for innocence in a world rife with degradation:

RIGOLETTO:

(to Giovanna, his housemaid)

O woman, watch over this flower
Entrusted, pure, to your keeping;
Be vigilant, that nothing may ever
Sully its purity.
From the fury of the winds
That have broken other flowers,
Protect her, and unstained
Restore her to her father⁷

These antipodes are central to Rigoletto's dramatic power. His role demands a singer who can glide seamlessly from cutting scorn to heart-wrenching pathos, often within a single scene or even a single musical phrase. Leading portrayals of the role include Tito Gobbi, Dietrich Fischer-Dieskau, Leonard Warren, Robert Merrill, Sherrill Milnes, Cornell MacNeil, Piero Cappuccilli, Rolando Panerai, Renato Bruson, and Leo Nucci. More recently, notable baritones have included Thomas Hampson, Željko Lučić, and Dmitri Hvorostovsky, though the latter's reading of the hunchback was never recorded.

⁷ See Murashev.com. (n.d.). Rigoletto libretto (Italian-English). Retrieved on August 8, 2025 from Murashev.com website: https://www.murashev.com/opera/Rigoletto_libretto_Italian_English

Image: Leo Nucci as Rigoletto in Zeffirelli's production, featured on *Globalist* (December 2021). Photo by Teatro Regio di Parma.



The music itself traces Rigoletto's oscillations: chromatic fragments deliver his inner disjunction while soaring lyrical lines reveal the humanity that persists despite his deformity and harsh surroundings. Furthermore, Rigoletto's orchestral palette stresses his alienation; the orchestra paints a dark halo around the character, highlighting his status as an outcast trapped between worlds. Yet this musical darkness is never one-dimensional for it also harbors moments of warmth that complicate our sympathy for him and deepen the tragedy of his fate. Rigoletto resists reduction to a caricature of monstrosity or villainy; he is a sensitive individual whose antinomies make him one of Verdi's most outstanding inventions: "Despite the deformity that sets him outside normal humanity, Rigoletto remains the most profoundly human of Verdi's creations, as well as the most complicated and richest Verdian role" (Weaver, 1985, p. 7). His own battle —between the corrosive bitterness born of social exclusion and the pure, protective love for Gilda— epitomizes the central antithesis between appearance and reality, pessimism and innocence, ferocity and tenderness. Through the vocal and musical idiom Verdi crafts for him, Rigoletto confronts his physical ugliness to become a paragon of the tragic fragmentation of the human condition itself:

We observe Rigoletto first as court jester, evilly arrogant towards Monterone in the first scene, his words marked by a chromatic, jerky, sinuous accompaniment in the orchestra, a mockery of majesty seen through the warped perceptions of the hunchback. We learn his innermost thoughts in the recitative, *Pari siamo*, seeing the ambiguities of his life as servant of the Duke, his hatred of the courtiers, his love for his daughter. These facets of his personality emerge more fully in a series of confrontations with other characters, Sparafucile, Gilda, the courtiers in the abduction scene. We watch the broken father beg them for his daughter in Act II, lashing out in anger that has no more effect than his pathetic plea, *Miei signori, perdona, pietate...* In this aria, one of the most remarkable solo compositions in all opera, Rigoletto emerges in all his guises: jester, servant, misanthrope, father, man (Gossett, 1996, p. 11).

That fragmentation —between public skepticism and private affection— turns him *tragic* in the classical sense. The jester is aware of his complicity in the dishonest world he labors, yet he also rails against its injustices. His cry “Courtiers, you damned scum!” is both a plea for his daughter and a desperate, existential scream against a system where justice is a satire and deformity turns out to be a metaphor for moral inversion. The following are three examples of his division. First, to Monterone:

RIGOLETTO:

You did conspire against us, my lord,
And we, with royal clemency, forgave you.
What mad impulse is this, that night and day
You make complaint about your daughter’s honour?⁸

Later, when he is alone, after talking to a murderer:

We are two of a kind:
My weapon is my tongue,

⁸ See Murashev.com. (n.d.). Rigoletto libretto (Italian-English). Retrieved on August 8, 2025 from Murashev.com website: https://www.murashev.com/opera/Rigoletto_libretto_Italian_English

His is a dagger;
 I am a man of laughter,
 He strikes the fatal blow!
 The old man cursed me...
 O mankind! O nature!
 It was you who made me evil and corrupt!
 I rage at my monstrous form, my cap and bells!
 To be permitted nothing but to laugh!
 I'm denied that common human right, to weep
 (...)

Oh, damnation!
 My hate upon you, sneering courtiers!
 How I enjoy snapping at your heels!⁹

Finally, to his beloved Gilda:

Only with you
 Does my heavy heart find joy
 You are my life!
 Without you, what would I have on earth?
 Ah, my daughter!¹⁰

In Hugo, Triboulet is already an unsettling exemplar: a buffoon whose wit makes him indispensable to the King, yet whose bitterness is fueled by a profound contempt for the world that exploits him. Verdi-Piave's redesign of Triboulet into Rigoletto exacerbates the bipolarity between the abnormal and the human, not only through the libretto's structure and the storytelling, but also through the music itself, particularly through evocation. The description of Rigoletto's first appearance—his chromatic, sinuous accompaniment when taunting Monterone—shows this double

9 See Murashev.com. (n.d.). Rigoletto libretto (Italian-English). Retrieved on August 10, 2025 from Murashev.com website: https://www.murashev.com/opera/Rigoletto_libretto_Italian_English

10 See Murashev.com. (n.d.). Rigoletto libretto (Italian-English). Retrieved on August 10, 2025 from Murashev.com website: https://www.murashev.com/opera/Rigoletto_libretto_Italian_English

perception: we see him as the court sees him, agile, astute, but the music also conveys an inward distortion, a worldview refracted through pain, acerbity, and a perpetual defense mechanism. This is not simply evil arrogance; it is a form of self-preservation in a toxic environment where cruelty becomes currency. The humor is a mask but also a weapon; it aligns him with the amorality of the Duke even as it deepens his alienation from the courtiers. The turning point, “We are two of a kind,” is among Verdi’s most revelatory recitatives, akin to a soliloquy in Shakespeare. Here Rigoletto breaks the public mask and addresses himself (and us) directly, acknowledging the anomaly of his quintessence: “I am like Sparafucile, he with the dagger, I with the tongue.” This comparison is less a confession than a recognition: the jester and the murderer are, in different registers, servants of the same corruption. Verdi’s setting—a flexible declamation that resists lyrical expansion—projects a jagged self-examination and lays bare the inner life of a man trapped between the degrading role imposed by his master and the sacred sphere of his love for Gilda. The kidnapping scene in Act II and the aria ‘*Cortigiani, vil razza dannata*’ push this duality to its breaking point. In the original play, Triboulet’s rage at the seduction is almost politically subversive, revealing the despot’s court as a moral cesspool. Verdi condenses this into a breathtaking arc: from volcanic fury to abject entreaty, Rigoletto is stripped of his weapons—wit, derision, verbal agility, and venom—and reduced to raw paternal desperation. Gossett is right to call *Cortigiani* “one of the most remarkable solo compositions in all opera,” because it compresses into a single number the totality of Rigoletto’s being: the biting naysayer, the eternally humiliated servant, the enraged man, the broken father. The orchestration follows this emotional fall apart, moving from martial outbursts to a hollow, almost chamber-like texture as his anger drains into supplication.

What arises in this composite is more than simply the tragedy of a father’s loss: it is the tragedy of a man whose deformity—physical and social—has become the lens through which he experiences the world. Triboulet rages against God for giving him a daughter—his one vulnerability—in a world where he must live by contempt. The Verdian Rigoletto keeps this cosmic aporia but deepens it through music, allowing us to

hear the discrepancies as they coexist: contempt and care, coarseness and vulnerability, pride and humiliation. He is in essence a man whose humanity has been forced into contortions by his environment, just as his own body has. His tragedy is not only that he loses Gilda but that he never manages to reconcile the disparate selves within him: the jester whose ridicule is armor, the servant complicit in wrongdoing, the father seeking to build a moral refuge for his child, and the man whose love is poisoned by a world that will not let him be whole.

RIGOLETTO:

(to himself)

Great God in heaven!

She was struck by the bolt

That I, in righteous vengeance, loosed!

(to Gilda)

Beloved angel! Look at me, listen to me!

Speak, speak to me, dearest child

(...)

Do not die, my treasure, have pity!

Oh, my dove, you must not leave me!

(...)

Oh my daughter!

No, you must not leave me, do not die.

If you go away, I shall be alone!

Do not die, or I shall die beside you!

(...)

Oh my daughter, my Gilda!

No, you must not leave me, do not die!

Gilda! My Gilda! She is dead!

Ah! La Maledizione!¹¹

¹¹ See Murashev.com. (n.d.). Rigoletto libretto (Italian-English). Retrieved on August 8, 2025 from Murashev.com website: https://www.murashev.com/opera/Rigoletto_libretto_Italian_English

Rigoletto presents a moral world governed by the implacable rhythm of cause and effect. The curse —‘*Quel vecchio maledivami*’— is also a leit-motif that resists superstition and takes on philosophical substance. It is less the voice of God than the distant souvenir of Greek tragedy itself, a reminder that the world is ruled by aftereffects without mercy. Although Verdi did not pursue the same artistic ideals as Wagner, as we have stated, his tragic vision is no less profound for it moves beyond the confines of moralism into the realm of the existential—a *Weltanschauung* in which human actions themselves set the engine of fate into motion, and where the seeds of ruin are sown in the very soil of desire, pride, and error. In Verdi, tragedy does not descend upon the characters as a punishment handed down from on high, nor is it merely the product of external malevolence. Rather, it is the inevitable consequence of choices made, passions indulged, and truths ignored. In this light, even love —especially in its purest and most selfless form— provides no deliverance. Gilda’s unconditional devotion to the Duke, Violetta’s sacrifice, or Amelia’s fidelity in *Un Ballo in Maschera*, etcetera, cannot forestall the final calamity. On the contrary, such love often accelerates the path to destruction because it collides with the hypocrisy and the political machinations that dominate that operatic world. The result is always a tragedy: one in which the noblest impulses are as powerless as the basest instincts to alter the outcome. This existential quality distinguishes Verdi’s vision from Wagner’s, where redemption —whether through love or sacrifice— remains a *possibility*. In Verdi there is no Love-Death episode to evaporate suffering into eternity; there is only the weight of the moment, the irrevocability of the act, and the silent, almost cruel indifference of the world. His characters live and perish in a horizon shaped less by metaphysical necessity and more by the reality that, in being human, they carry within themselves the forces of their own undoing.

Conversely, in *Tristan* Wagner will craft an architecture in which earthly tribulations find repose in a transcendence that is both erotic and metaphysical. While Verdi’s *amorosi* are bound to the temporal —imprisoned within the contingencies of politics, betrayal, and mortality— Wagner’s Isolde and Tristan cohabit a space where love moves beyond the material world into the domain of myth and philosophy. Their passion, though born in the mortal sphere, finds consummation only in death,

which for Wagner becomes not annihilation but union beyond the limits of time and space. Therefore, the fatal trajectories in Verdi and Wagner are propelled by slightly different philosophical engines, a distinction that now becomes more evident: Verdi's is situated within the ineluctable condition of human fallibility, Wagner's in a push towards the disperse of those limits. In Verdi, the tragic end affirms the permanence of loss; in Wagner, as in the closing measures of the *Liebstock*, it promises a transfiguration of that loss into something everlasting. This difference becomes all the more striking when one turns from the bare, unredeemed finality of Gilda's passing in *Rigoletto* to the oceanic expansion of Isolde's final utterance, where death is no longer the negation of passion but its fulfillment.

A Night Without Dawn

Richard Wagner's *Tristan und Isolde* elevates the treatment of impossible love and destructive passion to an ethereal plane. Conceived during the late 1850s in the wake of Wagner's personal and artistic crises, the work was coined as both a private confession and an audacious experiment at the confines of the *Musikdrama*. Exiled from Germany after the failed Dresden uprising of 1849, and burdened with unfinished projects, Wagner found in the medieval story of Tristan an image for his own sense of isolation: emotional, political, and of course metaphysical. The genesis of *Tristan* was inseparable from Wagner's passionate and illicit love for Mathilde Wesendonck—his patron's wife—whose poetry he set in the *Wesendonck Lieder*, works he famously described as “studies for *Tristan*,” and whose correspondence uncloaks an aesthetic dialogue that profoundly influenced his introspections on love. First, from Wagner's Venice Diary¹²:

December 8— (...) Since yesterday I have been occupied with the *Tristan* again. I'm in the second act still, but—what music it's becoming! I could work my whole life long at this music alone. Oh, it grows deep and fair, and the sublimest marvels fit so aptly to the sense; I have never made a thing like this! But I also am

¹² See Wagner, 1905, p. 79.

melting away in this music; I'll hear of no more, when it's finished.
In it will I live for aye, and with me.

And in a letter to Mathilde:

[December 1857]

The great outburst duet between Tristan and Isolde has turned out beautiful beyond all measure.— In the first flush of joy thereat¹³

Wagner's decision to turn to *Tristan und Isolde* was not simply a choice of subject but the eruption of an inner demand. By the time he had completed *Lohengrin* and was working over *Der Ring des Nibelungen*, he found himself creatively and financially drained. In Zürich, under the patronage of the wealthy silk merchant Otto Wesendonck, Wagner lived in a kind of suspended state—physically distant from the great opera houses of Germany, yet still intellectually in a fevered frame of mind. His relationship with Mathilde was a catalyst: their ultimately unconsummated affair gave Wagner a laboratory in which to probe themes of forbidden love, desire, and self-destruction. The *Tristan* project also became a kind of escape from the monumental scale of the *Ring*. Rather than the sprawling mythic cycles of gods and heroes, *Tristan und Isolde* offered Wagner the concentrated crucible of two characters bound by an impossible passion. In his correspondence, Wagner described *Tristan* as a work he doubted could ever be performed, so radical was its musical style and emotional magnitude (O'Connell, 1929). At this time his reading of Schopenhauer was refashioning his ideology: the philosopher's ideas on the will, suffering, and the liberation through renunciation infused the dramaturgy and harmonic style of *Tristan*. Hence, the opera was born from a confluence of exile, intellectual ferment, forbidden love, and a restless drive to push music beyond the boundaries of conventional opera. These circumstances pervaded the work with a biographical immediacy that outran simple anecdote: Wagner went beyond adapting an antique legend, creating an unprecedented meditation on the impossibility of love's realization in life.

¹³ See Wagner, 1905, p. 16.

Image: Mathilde Wesendonck (1828-1902), German poet and muse to Wagner.



Tristan und Isolde is a story that stretches back to an ancient legend, one of the most enduring and passionate tales from the world of chivalry and courtly love. At its heart, it is about a love so powerful and overwhelming that it defies all rules—social, moral, and even life itself. The story begins with Tristan, a brave knight and loyal servant to King Marke of Cornwall. In a bold move, Tristan slays Isolde's intended, Morold, and sends his severed head as a sign of defiance. However, he sustains an incurable wound during the battle. In a state of desperation, he consented to be transported by boat to Ireland to facilitate the return of Isolde, the princess and Tristan's adversary, to King Marke's court for marriage, thereby uniting their respective realms. Isolde greeted him and provided medical care for the wounded man who identified himself as "Tantris." Even so, she ascertained

the true identity of the stranger by examining a notch on his sword which exactly matched a fragment she had discovered in Morold's head. Despite her thirst for retribution, she approached his bedside with the sword; yet, when their eyes met, the weapon fell from her hand. After a period of silence, Isolde nursed Tristan back to health. With the image of the fairest queen in his heart, Tristan departed, swearing eternal devotion. In Cornwall he remained cognizant of the blood guilt that would forever stand between them. He decided on a selfless act that would simultaneously stymie his enemies at Court: he offered to wed Isolde to King Marke. Isolde accepted the arrangement and followed him to the ship without speaking. Still, fate had other plans. On the return journey, Tristan and Isolde accidentally drank a magic potion—the elixir of love which also appears in Donizetti's famous opera—that was mistaken for a deadly poison. Instead, the elixir binds both in a deep, irresistible fondness. From that moment the two are caught in a passionate and dangerous web of silence and forbidden love. This silence, as Patrice Chéreau notes, is not mere reticence but the very condition of their affect, a silence built on privation and the weight of an emptiness unlike any other:

(...) on absence and silence, the weight of absence (...) The weight of silence (...) And what sort of emptiness is it? Not just any kind of emptiness. One could say for example that he does not miss her—in the amorous sense—until he has drunk the poison and death. What he then misses—he gradually comes to understand—is a partner in death, the death that they have drunk but which did not want them. She proposes death to him, he senses it, guesses it and accepts it, he asks for nothing more, then they drink and, thinking that they are living their final moments, they give themselves up to the forbidden thing that they have been expecting for such a long time: physical desire (Chéreau, 2008, p. 15).

Chéreau's theoretical backbone reframes the potion scene as a misdirected pact with death—an embrace of mortality that is thwarted, leaving the lovers suspended in an intermediate state between life and the realization they sought. This “death that did not want them” becomes the true wound of tragedy: an unhealed scarcity in which love is inseparable from

the desire for an end, and desire becomes a deferral without a pledge, “(...) a desire that does not last and which, after its brutal explosion, is transformed into something quite different: a reflection, a life experience (...)” (Chéreau, 2008, p. 16). Their love must remain veiled, for Isolde is betrothed to King Marke, Tristan’s lord and friend. Moments stolen together are filled with joy and desperation, yet there is always the knowledge that discovery would mean ruin for both. This is a tragedy in every respect because despite their love’s fervor it cannot exist freely in the world they live: Tristan is torn between loyalty to his King and his love for Isolde, while Isolde is also torn between duty and proclivity. The tale ends with Tristan’s death from a fatal wound and Isolde’s subsequent passing—not in pain but in a preternatural union, as if their love finally finds satisfaction beyond earthly life. The narrative is rich in epitomes of love’s power and affliction: the enchanted potion, secret meetings, and the ultimate sacrifice.

Tristan und Isolde is a timeless story that subverts reason and social expectation, manifesting the deepest yearnings and contradictions of the human heart. In composing it, Wagner abandoned the established codes of operatic storytelling, deliberately blurring the distance between recitative-aria-ensemble into a continuous musical being, thereby enacting his own understanding of the *Unendliche Melodie*. The structure of the score was painstakingly designed to defer closure—harmonic resolutions are delayed, melodic phrases seem to gravitate endlessly towards an unattainable cadence, and the famed Tristan chord, “(...) presaged (though never given in that precise form) in the Liszt song [*Die Lorelei*], as well as by earlier composers as various as Mozart, Spohr and Gottschalk” (Sadie, 1992, p. 625), becomes a musical emblem of a suspended agony. The orchestration, with its shimmering strings, muted winds, and rich harmonic palette, operates as the action’s core not merely as ornamentation of any substance: the orchestra, more than the singers, stands as the medium through which the inner states of the characters are presented.

The libretto, though rooted in Gottfried von Strassburg’s 13th-century romance (*fl. ca.* 1200-20), was rewritten by the composer in a terse, almost incantatory manner, condensing action into concentrated moments of heightened consciousness rather than episodic events. From

its inception, *Tristan* was envisioned not as an entertainment but as a *Gesamtkunstwerk* in which music, poetry, and philosophy were inseparable. It is a play of *interiors*—of night rather than day, of the soul's movements rather than the world's. The diegesis, sparse and symbol-laden, serves less as a vehicle for drama than as a frame for the unfolding of an emotional state. Already here Wagner hints at an image of love stripped of the consolations that romance might offer: there is no path to divine sanction, no cathartic release in the Aristotelian sense—no through pity and fear effecting the proper *katharsis* of these emotions (Aristotle, 1994)—but rather what Nietzsche would later describe as the knowledge of the terrible and questionable character of existence, the intuition into the incompatibility of guilt and punishment in reality, indeed the recognition of the contradictions of the world, the gaze directed into the horrifying truth (see Nietzsche, 1999, p. 40). The work is steeped in the awareness that love, in its purest form, cannot be lived in the light of day without destruction. This is a non-redemptive vision—an image of desire so absolute that it consumes every chance of survival, leaving only the destructive embrace of death as its climax.

Image: Poster of *Tristan and Isolde* by Edmund Blair Leighton. Canvas Wall Art



Drawing on the Celtic legend and Schopenhauer's doctrine, especially that of *The World as Will and Representation*, Wagner's musical tragedy—not to be confused with the drama of *salvation*—offers no earthly or spiritual exit for its protagonists: their love finds completion only in death, which Wagner himself described as “a monument to this loveliest of all dreams” (Sadie, 1992, p. 630). The music—with its revolutionary chromaticism and dissonances—builds an atmosphere where sensuality and death merge into a continuous interlude that resists any kind of

traditional narrative logic. Wagner thus advances the idea that music articulates the ineffable, the absolute ache that only final silence can contain, what Schopenhauer considered a copy of the will:

(...) music is as *immediate* an objectification and copy of the whole *will* as the world itself is, (...) the multiplied phenomenon of which constitutes the world of individual things. Therefore music is by no means like the other arts (...) but a *copy of the will itself* (...) (Schopenhauer, 1969, p. 257).

A Philosophy of Desire and Impossibility: Linking Schopenhauer with *Nietzsche*

As we have perceived, the background of *Tristan* is thoroughgoing. Schopenhauer's influence is explicit: love as the manifestation of desire that can only be unfettered through the negation of the will—death. But for Schopenhauer death is not the only possibility for denying the will, for music itself has this right, and does so in a manner no other art can achieve. In *The World as Will and Representation*, he asserts that while the visual arts present the Platonic Ideas—the timeless essences of things—music bypasses these entirely and gives voice not to the phenomenon,

(...) but only the inner nature, the in-itself, of every phenomenon, the will itself. Therefore music does not express this or that particular and definite pleasure, this or that affliction, pain, sorrow, horror, gaiety, merriment, peace of mind themselves, to a certain extent in the abstract, their essential nature, without any accessories, and so also without the motives for them (Schopenhauer, 1969, p. 261).

This is why music can move us so profoundly without the mediation of concepts: it does not imitate the world but directly presupposes its inner essence. When one contemplates a painting or a sculpture, Schopenhauer argues that the will is momentarily muted because our attention is absorbed in the pure perception of form, color, and proportion. But music does more: it provides an (exceeding) yet temporary liberation,

or better, a *narcotizing* of the will, by allowing us to know it without personal involvement. In this state we hear the will's patterns, tensions and resolutions as pure form, divorced from the appetites of our own striving. The pleasure is ambivalent: we are immersed in the very essence of the will, yet freed from its compulsive demands. For Wagner, this notion was seditious. It justified his belief that music was the highest of the arts, able to *elaborate* what logos could not—the ineffable dimension of experience that escapes conceptual thought. But Wagner did not take Schopenhauer's idea as a call for serene detachment; instead, he used it to increase the listener's identification with the passions performed. In *Tristan*, music conveys the gist of the will beyond passive contemplation, drawing the audience into the longing itself, and thereby blurring the boundary between the aesthetic and the emotional. In this way, Wagner migrates Schopenhauer's passive, contemplative disengagement into an active exercise where the temporary suspension of the will becomes indistinguishable from its ecstatic affirmation.

Wagner's encounter with Schopenhauer's book in 1854 was a seismic event in his intellectual life, reshaping his understanding of art and metaphysics. It provided a philosophical vocabulary for intuitions he had already been nurturing: the idea that music could articulate the inner truth of existence beyond the reach of any kind of logic, and that the most fundamental experiences are rooted in suffering and desire. Schopenhauer, a Platonic-Kantian yet openly atheist—or more accurately anti-Christian, and in his later years inclined towards Buddhism—based his metaphysics on the distinction between the world as representation, the phenomenal realm structured by space, time, and causality, and the world as will, the noumenal reality of blind impulse. Everything in nature, from the falling stone to the flowering plant to the human heart, is an instance of this insatiable will to live, whose acquiescence is endless straining without final satisfaction:

Everything presses and strives towards *existence*, if possible *organised existence*, i.e., *life*, and after that to the highest possible grade of it. In animal nature it then becomes apparent that *will to live* is the keynote of its being, its one unchangeable and unconditioned quality (...) I am right in declaring that *the will to live* is that which cannot be further explained, but lies at the foundation

of all explanations, and that this, far from being an empty word, like the absolute, the infinite, the idea, and similar expressions, is the most real thing we know, nay, the kernel of reality itself (...) The possible wearing out of the machine cannot in any way be equivalent to the constant inflow through nourishment. Eternal becoming, endless flux, belong to the revelation of the essential nature of the will (Schopenhauer, 1969, pp. 108-164).

Desire—even for another’s spouse—in Schopenhauer’s scheme is the direct utterance of the will in the sphere of consciousness. As soon as one desire is satisfied, another emanates, perpetuating a cycle of need and temporary relief that defines the human condition—certainly Freudian, Lacanian, and Jungian psychoanalysis operate within these coordinates. This is why for the philosopher of Danzig happiness is *negative*—a momentary cessation of pain falling short of a lasting state. Love therefore far from being a purely ennobling force is the will’s most cunning stratagem: the biological imperative to (re)produce disguised as the most exalted of human emotions. Schopenhauer’s notorious chapter *On the Metaphysics of Sexual Love* in his magnum opus insists that romantic love prioritizes biological imperatives (namely the perpetuation of the species) over the lovers’ happiness (Schopenhauer, 1969). Beneath the poetry of attraction lies the cold actualization of the self-assertion of the will. Still, for Schopenhauer there is a possible escape from this cycle: the denial of the will. This can take the form of ascetic renunciation, in which the individual turns away from the world, embraces compassion for all living beings, and aims at the stillness of the will’s extinction—what he analogizes to the Buddhist Nirvana. This restless cycle reveals a deeper oddity in Schopenhauer’s system: the will is at once the ground of all reality and the principle that binds human existence to need and privation. Here is a more recent translation of this intuition:

The will determines itself, and at the same time both its action and its world; for besides it there is nothing, and these are the will itself. Only thus is the will truly autonomous, and from every other point of view it is heteronomous. Our philosophical endeavors can only extend to exhibiting and explaining the action of men in its inner

nature and content, the various and even opposite maxims, whose living expression it is (Schopenhauer, 2020, p. 351).

The philosopher underscores the puzzling status of the will: it is autonomous only in the absolute sense, since it is the ground of all reality, determining both its own action and the world that is nothing but its objectification; yet, from every empirical standpoint, it is governed as individual beings are bound to motives and to it. In dissent from Kant, for whom autonomy was the rational self-legislation of the moral law, Schopenhauer sees that autonomy only in the metaphysical self-sufficiency of the will while human agents remain unfree in their phenomenal existence. Philosophy therefore cannot transcend the will but can only numb it, exposing its inner workings, and revealing it *in action*, in contradictory maxims, and in the ceaseless struggle of life; and this very recognition, though limited, opens the path towards understanding the futility of *negating* the will. In art, however, there is a temporary unbound—a doping—of the (heaviness of the) will: aesthetic contemplation allows the individual to *apprehend* the Platonic Idea, the timeless forms of things, without the agitation of demand. But this is only a respite, not a permanent escape. The only definitive escape is the total renunciation of the will culminating in death.

It is this scope that Wagner seizes upon in *Tristan und Isolde*. The opera is also steeped in the logic of desire as Schopenhauer understands it: Tristan and Isolde's love is limned not as a harmonious arrival but as an unquenchable thirst that deepens precisely because it cannot be satisfied in life. From their first duet to the final *Liebestod*, they move towards obliterating the self within the other rather than *reconciling* with the external world. The Tristan chord (F–B–D#–G#) functions almost as a signature: harmonically ambiguous, prorogued in its cadential arrival, it also includes the restless *agitation* of the will. The score's chromaticism with its persistent avoidance of cadential closure is not only a stylistic choice but a depiction of Schopenhauer's notions: desire without consummation, uneasiness without emancipation.

Nonetheless, Wagner departs from Schopenhauer in crucial ways. The philosopher's ideal is a sweeping quietism: to deny the will is to extinguish the passions, to detach oneself from the urges of love, ambi-

tion, and pleasure. Tristan and Isolde do not renounce their love in this sense; rather, they ennoble it to the point where it destroys the possibility of ordinary life. They do not retreat into a Buddhist-like serenity; they affirm their passion with a kind of tragic lucidity, knowing it will consume them. In this sense, Wagner recasts Schopenhauer's negation of the will into what might be judged as a tragic mode of existence: not in the Nietzschean sense of a joyous yes to life, but in the recognition that to live fully is to accept, and even embrace, the pain that accompanies the highest forms of love. To clarify these ideas, it is useful to ponder some excerpts from the libretto. First, consider the lovers' affirmation of their love after taking the elixir from Brangäne, Isolde's lady-in-waiting:

TRISTAN/ISOLDE:
 How our hearts
 Are borne aloft!
 How all our senses
 Pulsate with bliss!
 Longing devotion's
 Burgeoning blossoms,
 Yearning love's
 Blessed glow!
 My breast bursting
 With exultant delight!
 Isolde! Tristan!
 Broken free of the world,
 Won for me!
 You my only awareness,
 Utmost rapture of love!¹⁴

Then, when they are alone in the night:

¹⁴ See Murashev, D. (n.d.). *Tristan und Isolde libretto (English-German)*. Retrieved August 12, 2025, from https://www.murashev.com/opera/Tristan_und_Isolde_libretto_English_German

ISOLDE:

Is it I? Is it you?
You, clasped in my arms?

TRISTAN:

Is it I? Is it you? No illusion?

TOGETHER:

Not a dream?
O heart's rapture, O sweet, most sublime,
Boldest, loveliest, most blessed joy!

(...)

Descend,
O Night of love,
Grant oblivion
That I may live;
Take me up
Into your bosom,
Release me from
The world!¹⁵

Lastly, Isolde's transfiguration, occurring after Tristan's demise, is perhaps Wagner at his most poetic:

ISOLDE:

How softly and gently
He smiles,
How sweetly his eyes open
Can you see, my friends,
Do you not see it?
How he glows ever brighter,
Raising himself high

¹⁵ See Murashev, D. (n.d.). *Tristan und Isolde libretto (English-German)*. Retrieved August 12, 2025, from https://www.murashev.com/opera/Tristan_und_Isolde_libretto_English_German

Amidst the stars?
Do you not see it?
(...)
How in tender bliss sweet breath
Gently wafts from his lips
My friends! Look!
Do you not feel and see it?
Do I alone hear this melody
So wondrously and gently
Sounding from within him,
In bliss lamenting, all-expressing,
Gently reconciling,
Piercing me, soaring aloft,
Its sweet echoes
Resounding about me?
Are they gentle aerial waves
Ringing out clearly,
Surging around me?
Are they billows
Of blissful fragrance?
As they seethe
And roar about me,
Shall I breathe, shall I give ear?
Shall I drink of them,
Plunge beneath them?
Breathe my life away
In sweet scents?
In the heaving swell,
In the resounding echoes,
In the universal stream
Of the world-breath
To drown, to founder
Unconscious, utmost rapture!¹⁶

¹⁶ See Murashev, D. (n.d.). *Tristan und Isolde libretto* (English-German). Retrieved

On one level, the lovers' death is indeed a ransom from the will, but it is also the culmination of their passion, a caress that annihilates them, and rather than relinquish it, they refuse to dilute it. Taken this way, they become more Nietzschean. While Schopenhauer regards suffering inherent in life and pursues its negation-destruction, Nietzsche *espouses* life with its own sorrows and mortality. Death is not the serene extinction of the will (not even through the ravishing music of the *Liebtestod*); it is in fact the apotheosis of an unbroken force. As Isolde sings in the end, she does not imagine herself passing into a void; she conceives herself being engrossed, drowned, unconscious—highest bliss. In Wagner's hands, the negation of the will is inseparable from the ecstatic effect of its deepest desire. This is where Wagner's divergence from Schopenhauer becomes most evident with Nietzsche caught between the two. Though Schopenhauer was Nietzsche's indirect teacher, the former believed that aesthetic encounter provides a passing relief by blocking desire, a position the apostle would not really embrace. Music in this regard is a direct *expression*—more accurately, an *articulation* because it does not express anything in particular—of the will; still it can be contemplated in a detached manner.

Wagner's music does not permit such detachment: the score of *Tristan* is designed to ensnare the listener in the very web of distress it depicts. Its surging agogic and intertwining leitmotifs pull us into an affective state where the distances between subject and object, listener and sound, fade. The music does not invite us to contemplate the Platonic Idea of love; it makes us feel the intoxication *of love* itself: Wagner knows how to make us *sick*—yet he does so with extraordinary artistry. If Schopenhauer's aesthetics are premised on the suppression of the will, Wagner's are founded on the sharpening of its awareness to the point where negation and a sort of benign sickness coincide. One might say that Wagner gives a musical dramatization of the moment at which Schopenhauer's quietistic ideal collapses under the weight of its own logic. If the only true freedom is the abolition of desire but desire is the essence of life, then to extinguish desire is to extinguish life itself. That is why Nietzsche—among the

most radical of thinkers— first distanced himself from Schopenhauer and then from his idol, Richard Wagner. Nonetheless, *Tristan* —which appeared during the period when the young Friedrich was still an avid admirer of Wagner— confronts this truth head-on, refusing to soften it with the solaces of redemption. There is no divine judgment that blesses the lovers in death, no sense that their passion has been shrived into a higher form. The Love-Death then is not a mystical transfiguration into some eternal harmony; it is the final outpouring of an earthly passion that could not be lived except in defiance of the day-world. The image is non-redemptive precisely because it offers no purpose beyond the undoing that love itself demands.

In this light, *Tristan und Isolde* —like *Rigoletto*, though in a denser philosophical form— occupies a unique position in the history of tragic Western art. Traditional tragedy, from Aeschylus to Racine and Kafka, presupposes some form of abreaction—a purgation of pity and fear that leaves the audience reconciled to the indispensable ordeal. Even when the ending is bleak, as in Sophocles' *Oedipus Rex* or the *Oresteia*, the tragic *disposition* implies a larger order in which the hero's downfall has meaning. The tragedy of *Tristan* denies this teleology; it gives us the catharsis of *no-catharsis*, the satisfaction of an unhealed wound. We emerge from *Tristan* not comforted but unsettled, haunted by the sense that sexuality's only true enjoyment is its own disappearance. Naturally, this is not to say that Wagner abandons beauty for metaphysics. On the contrary, the beauty of *Tristan* is overwhelming—but it is a beauty that contains within itself the knowledge of its own inconceivability. Schopenhauer would have conceded in this the double-edged nature of art: it can momentarily free us from the will, yet in doing so it makes us all the more aware of the will's tyranny, for "(...) the attention is now no longer directed to the motives of willing, but comprehends things free from their relation to the will. Thus it considers things without interest, without subjectivity, purely objectively" (Schopenhauer, 1969, p. 196). Wagner's twist is to turn this awareness into an aesthetic principle: the never-ending avoidance of closure of his music is not a flaw to be overcome but the very condition of its power. The audience is placed in the position of the lovers themselves, suspended, waiting, hoping, yet knowing that the only rest will be the final silence.

Tristan und Isolde can be read as both a homage to and a critique of Schopenhauer. It accepts his diagnosis of the human condition but refuses his prescription of neutrality. Wagner's lovers do not renounce the world in order to escape suffering; they plunge into that suffering as the only way to affirm the profundity of their passion. They thereby enact a kind of *aesthetic liberation*: a freedom that is as destructive as it is exalting. This is why the opera remains so unnerving: it offers no moral, no redemption, only the inebriating clarity of a passion that refuses to be jeopardized. Finally, Wagner's engagement with Schopenhauer is not that of a disciple merely illustrating a master's philosophy but of an artist transposing a philosophical system into a work of art that surpasses it. Where Schopenhauer's quietism seeks the stillness of Nirvana, Wagner gives us the burning intensity of the *Liebestod*. Where the first holds that deliverance lies in the negation of desire, Wagner shows us that desire can only be negated by being carried to its extreme. The depth of *Tristan und Isolde* lies precisely in this nexus—between negation and assertion, between the Lacanian *forclusion of the will* and the ecstatic embrace of its power. From this angle, the opera is indeed a philosophical act: a meditation in sound on the inescapable entanglement of love, law, and death, and on the strange, perilous beauty that arises when we refuse to turn away from them.

In a way that is similar yet distinct, Nietzsche's concept of love as depicted in *Tristan* stands in antagonism with the ideal of late Renaissance opera as embodied by Wagner's early compositions. This work, as opposed to the latter *Parsifal*, which disappointed Nietzsche after he had venerated the composer, is entirely *musical*; beyond doubt, it is also metaphysical, but its very conception of tragedy is what makes it fundamentally *authentic*. For Nietzsche, this Wagnerian *metaphysics* was on the right (Schopenhauerian) *side*. This is not only because both protagonists die without being saved but also because the music is an end-in-itself: it is not at the service of logos, not even incidentally. First and foremost, in *Tristan* music is music. For Nietzsche, early Wagner was the most veritable reference point regarding Greek tragedy. According to the philosopher, he was the composer of the most accurate models of what we might understand as musical tragedies. *Tristan und Isolde*, like

all his works prior to *Parsifal*, pointed towards that Nietzschean-tragic horizon. The turning point comes at the end, as we have seen throughout these pages: the characters are carried in a continuous transfiguration that does not overshadow their words. The *Liebestod* is ultra-Romantic, surely. But it is not Christian: that is what matters for Nietzsche. Therefore, the philosopher's final verdict is positive: with *Tristan*, Wagner was already heading *in the right direction*.

Image: Waltraud Meier as Isolde sings the *Liebestod* during a 2007 production at La Scala, Milan. Photo by Marco Brescia / Teatro alla Scala.



For Nietzsche and all followers of tragic philosophy, opera would stage a dissent from both Christian redemption and dramatic convention, in which words reign supreme. In short, they must wage war against the essence of the *modern* project. This becomes clear when we compare the lovers' scene in *Tristan* with the kiss scene between Kundry and Parsifal. During the latter, Kundry's exclamation fuses beautifully with the orchestra's vast and luminous sonority. Yet when Isolde and Tristan declare their love, the opposite occurs: an appeal to absolute silence. Kundry's whimper is answered by Isolde's tragic silence. In this sense, *Tristan* becomes a triumph of restraint, inwardness, and *pianissimo* shadings. The result is a more truthful —and less theatrical— assertion

of tragedy in opera. The music is self-contained, needing no rhetorical supplement. Because not everything can be spoken, silence becomes the highest form of expression. Wittgenstein addressed this: if we were to reduce the musical to language or any kind of logos, what we would be doing would be trying to define or establish the very margins of the universe of logos, leaving the real musical experience behind: the target of the *Tractatus* was to draw those limits to thought (Wittgenstein, 1955). This explains how music, especially in *Tristan*, eclipses the frontiers of linguistics—those deep emotions that logos can only gesture towards but never fully capture. That is to say silence and sound together create a space where the unsayable can resonate most powerfully.

However, we are aware that Wagner was not a man of silence, and his actions and words show this. He was not even close to Debussy, Satie, or the veiled suggestiveness of French Impressionism. He was in truth a man of rhetorics, of cries, of unrestrained urging—and all of that is woven into the very frame of his operas. His theatre is saturated with utterance whether whispered in intimacy or hurled into the void in a *fortissimo* apogee. The force of his characters lies not only in the music that surrounds them but in the fact that they speak—obsessively, sometimes desperately—because what they have to say cannot be adjourned to the abstract grammar of instruments alone. Even at the height of orchestral sublimity there is the human voice cutting through, shaping meaning in words. It is telling that Wagner almost never treated Christian redemption as an aim—though in *Parsifal* he does. Nowhere in *Tristan* is there an appeal to divine mercy; no heavenly promise interrupts their fatal course. Their only future is in death, and that death is not sanctified by any transcendent order—it is a sealed, self-contained event, a monument to the dream of love that provides no salvation beyond itself. Thus *Tristan* belongs to the realm of tragedy: the ending is irreversible, without the compensations of Heaven or grace. The world remains as it was before, indifferent to the lovers' fate, and the silence that follows is not the peace of redemption but the void left by suppression. Nietzsche's approval of *Tristan* was based on these attributes which were reminiscent of the tragic individual the philosopher recalled since *The Birth of Tragedy*, a book initially dedicated to the composer.

Parsifal —Wagner's final work— turns towards the Christian paradigm, offering an image of redemption that stands in sharp relief to the non-redemptive universe of *Tristan*. Here the dramatic arc culminates in healing, renewal, and the restoration of order: the wounded king Amfortas is healed, the Grail is unveiled, and the realm is spiritually restored. Kundry, the errant penitent, attains the forgiveness withheld from Tannhäuser; Parsifal, a mere ignorant, assumes the role of Redeemer. In fact, the innocent fool is Divinity (re)incarnate. Even Brünnhilde and Wotan in *Götterdämmerung*, though enveloped in cosmic catastrophe, find a stance of conciliation; still never a full redemption—what the Valkyrie undergoes is beyond destruction; it is a deliberate formulation that closes the cycle and purifies the world for a new beginning. These are endings that fold tribulation into a larger narrative of salvation, where the final silence is not emptiness but enlightenment. Yet Wagner's redemptions are never whispered—they are shouted. This is because the dramatic stakes are always maximal. Whether it is Brünnhilde defying the twilight of the gods or Kundry's anguished cry before her final rest, the words carry the weight of human action, not passive submission. In *Parsifal*, the redemption is enacted, not bestowed; it is achieved through trial, confrontation, baptism, and recognition. The scenario is not abandoned to the earth's (useless) silence but filled to the last with the sound of human beings assuring meaning in the face of suffering.

Of course the distance between *Tristan und Isolde* and *Parsifal* is vast. The first strips away every possibility of mediation between passion and death; its music circles spinning without end around a yearning satisfied solely by the last cessation of striving. There is no larger order into which their love can be harmonized—it achieves truth only in the act of its own downfall. *Parsifal* subordinates Tristan's pining to a higher order, converting sorrow into a path towards mystical restoration. Where *Tristan* ends with a remaining strain that ends only with death, *Parsifal* concludes with a promise that squares up to death, absorbing it into the assurance of eternal renewal. Therefore, Wagner's late turn to Christian redemption, whether Catholic or Lutheran, moves past a mere alteration in subject matter to draft a transformation of his relationship to muteness: a path to Nietzsche's understanding of decadence:

What is the first and last thing that a philosopher demands of himself? To overcome his age in himself, to become ‘timeless.’ With what then does the philosopher have the greatest fight? With all that in him which makes him the child of his time. Very well then! I am just as much a child of my age as Wagner—i.e., I am a decadent. The only difference is that I recognised the fact, that I struggled against it. The philosopher in me struggled against it (Nietzsche, 1998, Preface).

In *Tristan*, silence is the negation that swallows all speech, all song; in *Parsifal*, silence is the stillness after renewal, the repose of a completed act. In Adorno’s words: “Wagner was acquainted with it—what he has done is not to break down the silence of myth, but to introduce music into it” (Adorno, 2005, p. 113). Between these dialectics —tragic finality and dramatic redemption— lies the full arc of Wagner’s theatre, a theatre where music and words alike are charged with the highest risks, and where the human voice in its confession remains the unbroken thread that binds passion to significance. *Tristan* is the Wagnerian piece that most perfectly balances —in a harmony that is not dialectical but affirmative— the Apollonian veil over the blurred Dionysiac abyss. Nietzsche, in his early writings, would have seen in it the culmination of Dionysiac wisdom that art alone can reveal without *erasing* the spectator:

Dionysiac wisdom in particular is an unnatural abomination: whoever plunges nature into the abyss of destruction by what he knows must in turn experience the dissolution of nature in his own person (...) above all, it is thanks to music that the tragic spectator is overcome by that certain foreknowledge of a supreme delight reached by a path leading through destruction and negation, so that the spectator believes he is hearing the innermost abyss of things speaking audibly to him (Nietzsche, 1999, pp. 48, 100).

Still, in Wagner’s hands, this reality pales in comparison to the stirring immersion into primal unity. It is an act of inhabiting the absolute, not merely skirting it. In the opera, the impossible is neither avoided nor mastered—it is endorsed to the point of exhaustion. As Nietzsche continues:

This is the first effect of Dionysiac tragedy: state and society, indeed all divisions between one human being and another, give way to an overwhelming feeling of unity which leads men back to the heart of nature. The metaphysical solace which, I wish to suggest, we derive from every true tragedy, the solace that in the ground of things, and despite all changing appearances, life is indestructibly mighty and pleasurable, this solace appears with palpable clarity in the chorus of satyrs, a chorus of natural beings whose life goes on ineradicably behind and beyond all civilization, as it were, and who remain eternally the same despite all the changes of generations and in the history of nations (Nietzsche, 1999, p. 39).

Nietzsche captures the unity and life-affirming power at the core of Dionysiac art—an attestation that *Tristan* does not merely allude to but powerfully concentrates by propelling the spectator in that primal, eternal reality. The death of Tristan is the inevitable collapse of a being who has burned himself entirely in the pursuit of a love beyond contingency, King Mark's fiancée. This is not *amor fati*; it is *amor mortis*—love of death—for only death can carry out what the reality—the Apollonian sphere—eternally frustrates (Nietzsche, 1974). The lovers' moments are less a fall than a yielding, a voluntary surrender *to the night*—a realm beyond the ordered rituals and hurdles of civilization:

ISOLDE:

You in darkness, I in light!

TRISTAN:

The light! The light!

Oh, this light,

How long before it was extinguished!

The sun set, day ran its course

But it would not stifle its spite:

Lighting its dread signal it places it

At the loved one's door

So that I might not go to her.

ISOLDE:
But the loved one's hand
Extinguished the light;
What the maid would not risk
I did not fear:
Under the power and protection
Of the Love-Spirit
I bade defiance to Day!¹⁷

As Žižek insightfully interposes,

(...) civilization is not only the universe of the Day, of the rituals and honors that bind us, but the Night itself, the infinite passion in which the two lovers want to dissolve their ordinary daily existence—animals know no such passion (Žižek, 2012, p. 441).

This *night* entices the space where the lovers struggle to escape the constraints of everyday life and identity, melting into a passion that eludes both time and social order. Yet this surrender is enigmatic: it is not a simple death or release but the confrontation with what Žižek names the “undead condition,” the death drive itself—an endless cycle of guilt and desire that traps the subject in eternal reprise:

Night is truth, everything that is buried in the depths of the heart, where the original depression is hidden; day comes in a number of different forms (something that is already enough to disqualify it): it is the realm of splendor and honours, it is the place where Isolde is, but it is also the thing that separates Tristan from Isolde; it is the thing that reveals Isolde to him, that allows him to see her, but it is also all the vanities of the world [as Isabel de Valois' prayer to Charles V] that separate him from her. Day is contradiction, deceit and torture—something from which he has to escape but which keeps on returning (Chéreau, 2008, p. 15).

¹⁷ See Murashev, D. (n.d.). *Tristan und Isolde libretto (English-German)*. Retrieved August 12, 2025, from https://www.murashev.com/opera/Tristan_und_Isolde_libretto_English_German

Tristan's circadian desperation therefore is not born from a fear of death but from the terror of living endlessly without Isolde, condemned to an unbearable perpetuity of wanting. This perspective deepens the understanding of his surrender as both a metaphysical and a tragic entrapment, revealing a complex web of dialectics. This is the parallax of Wagner's eroticism: the desired object is never attained within the realm of memory, but the very impossibility becomes the very fuel of passion. To reach it is to vanish; *Tristan* reaches it, yet the death drive in Wagner's heroes is not a desire for death-as-peace but precisely the inverse of dying—a name for the undead eternal life itself, for the horrible fate of being arrested in the endless repetitive cycle of wandering around in guilt and pain. The final passing away of the Wagnerian hero (the death of the Dutchman, Wotan, Tristan, Amfortas) is hence the moment of their emancipation from the clutches of the death drive. Tristan in Act III is not wretched because of his fear of dying: what makes him desperate is that without Isolde he cannot die and is condemned to eternal grief—he anxiously awaits her arrival so as to be able to die. The prospect he dreads is not that of dying without Isolde—the standard complaint of a lover—but rather that of endless life without her.

Image: Klaus Florian Vogt (Tristan) and Camilla Nylund (Isolde), conducted by Christian Thielemann at the Semperoper in Dresden, 2024. Photo by Semperoper Dresden.



The *Liebestod* is then not a mourning but a *transfiguration*—a sacred moment in which the Love-Death is met as actualization rather than an-

nihilation. In Girardian terms, the violence of desire has been brought to its sacrificial zenith yet the sacrificial victim (Tristan) is already absorbed into the sacred by the act of declaring his own destruction. The *Liebestod* is therefore a ritual of consecration, a crossing in which *eros* and *thanatos* combine their forces, flowing into a singular, radiant assent. The music here does not resolve in the classic tonal sense; rather, it goes on until the final breath, thus typifying the theological conundrum of redemption *through* death. As René Girard would proclaim, the victim is the scapegoat who bears the violence of the community and whose expulsion or death reinstates peace. The sacred is precisely this process of making violence invisible by concentrating it on the victim, who becomes the object of both hate and reverence:

Because the violence is unanimously ordained, it effectively restores peace and order (...) Having plunged the community into strife, the surrogate victim restores peace and order by his departure. Whereas all the previous acts of violence compounded the violence, the violence directed against the surrogate victim banished all trace of violence (Girard, 1989, pp. 83-85).

If Nietzsche eventually turned against Wagner, accusing him of Christian morbidity, it was because *Parsifal* stages redemption as a final yielding, a kenotic emptying of the self rather than the overflowing affirmation of life. This very affirmation (of Life-Love-Death) is what makes *Tristan* inexhaustible: it hovers between the Pagan rousing of Dionysus and the (tacit) promise of resurrection. For Schopenhauer it would be the ensuing aesthetic expression of the will's denial; for Benjamin (2003) perhaps a dialectical image of history in which the past—Tristan's earthly love—is redeemed in the instant of death; for Bataille, the sovereign moment when expenditure is total, leaving nothing to be recovered:

(...) sovereignty in the living world identifies him with this movement; it destines him, in a privileged way, to that glorious operation, to useless consumption. If he denies this, as he is constantly led to do by the consciousness of a necessity; of an indigence inherent in separate beings (which are constantly short of resources, which are nothing but eternally needy individuals) (Bataille, 1988, p. 23).

Bataille's quote captures the eccentricity of sovereignty —as seen in *Don Carlo*— as both a rupture from the economy of need and a submission to an ecstatic excess beyond all calculation. In the case of *Tristan*, this sovereign expenditure is not a mere loss but a sacred sacrifice: a final giving that turns death into a luminous act of completion where nothing remains yet everything is fulfilled.

The Dialectics of Tragedy: Cosmic Sacrifice and Social Punishment

If *Parsifal* will later perform a Christian kind of redemption through renunciation and compassion, *Tristan und Isolde* provides a pre-Christian, almost Orphic rite in which love's consummation becomes inseparable from the sacred night that absorbs and refashions all life. Here death is the cessation of the will but also the opening of a metaphysical threshold, a subtle passage in which the self dissipates into a continuum beyond time, law, and social order. In this opera tragedy is (meta)cosmic: it transcends the immediate consequences of action, placing the lovers in a mythic field where affects are fused into a single, unalterable act. Their fate unrolls in the court of eternity where human justice is irrelevant, and the only law is the demand of passion's realization. The Wagnerian work of art achieves this by deferring the return to the tonic for hours, forcing the listener to inhabit a space of perpetual waiting until the final transfiguration when sound itself seems to recede into silence. This is a vision of tragedy that no longer depends on the civic/political order of the *polis*, nor on the Christian teleology of salvation; it is an archaic sacrament in which the human will, exhausted, accepts its conversion into an eternal *night*.

And yet when we turn to *Rigoletto* we find an utterly different conception of tragedy, one rooted in the implacable mechanics of earthly (in)justice and human outcomes. In Verdi's world, crime has a body, punishment has a face, and the web of cause and effect is spun by social structures rather than divine archetypes. In this context, the tragic is not an ascent towards splendence but a descent into cruelty where mercy is not granted by gods or fate, and redemption is an impossible luxury. Though the two works are linked in a non-redemptive formulation, *Rigoletto* strips away the meta-

physical veil that *Tristan* drapes over death, confronting us instead with the sheer fact that grief is often meted out without higher purpose, and that the moral universe of humans may be as merciless as it is arbitrary. Where *Tristan's* lovers die as participants in a sacred rite, Gilda dies as a simple woman among others, crushed by her own father's conspiracy, subject to forces of dominion, villainy, and revenge that exist entirely within the ambit of humanity. Verdi's score, while capable of profound tenderness and lyrical beauty, never lets us forget the social context of the action. Even its moments of melodic sublimity are bound to the rhythm of subterfuge of events occurring in real time. In this fashion, the most evident disjunction between the two operas is not merely thematic but ontological: Wagner's tragedy belongs to the sacred, where the individual diffuses into a cosmic unity, while the tragedy of *Rigoletto* concerns the profane, where the individual is broken by the unyielding workings of fate.

This also reveals two essentially different relationships in opera: in Wagner, music outmatches the temporal and offers an aesthetic freeing from the constraints of the plot; in Verdi, music is bound to the pulse of human events, escalating the immediacy of each action, each word, each irreversible choice. And yet in their own ways both works confront the ultimate question of what it means to be human in the face of spoliation. In *Tristan* that destruction is incorporated as a gateway; in *Rigoletto* it is endured as a terrible sentence. Wagner invites us into a world where death might be beautiful, even necessary, while Verdi leaves us in one where death is tragic because it is neither just nor divine. In this juxtaposition, the sacred and the social, the cosmic and the concrete, show themselves as two sides of a non-redemptive operatic tragedy: one that seeks to lift us out of the mere human condition through the rapturous dissolution-of-the-self, and another that confronts us with the brutal permanence of that human condition itself.

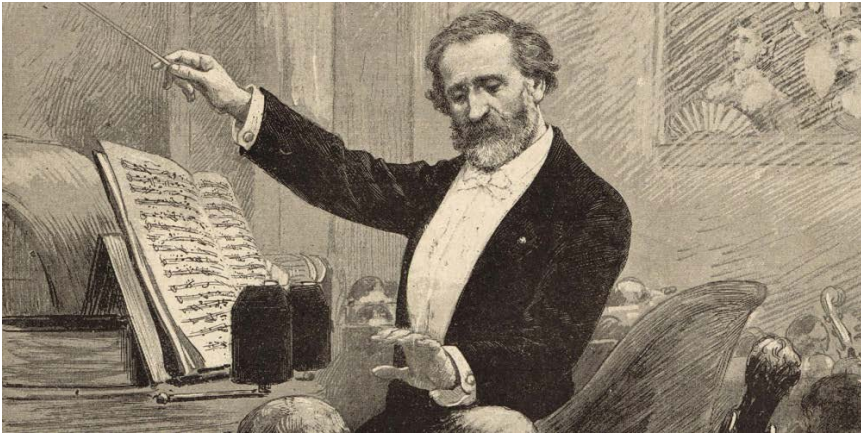
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Conclusion—Hearing the Sacred: Tragedy, Voice, and the Sound of the Sublime

Image: 1880 wood engraving by Adrien Marie showing Verdi working.



The music has faded but it continues to echo. What began as a pairing of two composers —Verdi and Wagner, two names at once historical and mythical— has led us into deeper terrain where opera becomes a form that serves as a philosophical event. Theirs is not merely a legacy of arias, ensembles, and overtures, of orchestration and action, but a shared venture into the mystery of the sacred, into the metaphysical pulse of tragedy, and into the vertigo of the sublime. As we bring this meditation to a close, the space remains filled with resonance, superseding the presence of contrast, and reverberation takes the place of resolution. Verdi and Wagner wrote in the same century and breathed the same historical air, yet they shaped different artistic visions—distinct in texture and worldview, still mysteriously convergent in aspiration. Viva VERDI!, the King of opera in Italy¹⁸; Wagner, by contrast, ruled over all Europe. As

¹⁸ The famous acronym V.E.R.D.I. became a covert patriotic slogan during the Risorgimento when openly supporting Italian unification was risky under censorship. Because Verdi was already a beloved composer whose operas like *Nabucco* were associated with the yearning for freedom, the phrase “Viva VERDI!” could be publicly displayed or shouted in theaters with a double meaning: outwardly celebrating the composer, but

we have closely followed, their operas occupy a portal between art and metaphysics where musical structures reveal more than aesthetic beauty: they reveal a *theology of suffering*, a theater of memory, and a poetics of the absolute. Both sought to transgress the limits of representation—not to explain the sacred, but to invoke it.

Each part of this book has engaged with a facet of this invocation. We have traced the conversion of the leitmotif into a vessel of time—how in *Don Carlo* and *Tannhäuser* sound becomes memory, and memory becomes destiny. In those, music carries the weight of past choices and lost redemptions, bearing witness to the invisible forces that shape human conscience and spiritual power. These operas recall the solemnity of the irreversible. With *Rigoletto* and *Tristan und Isolde*, the scenario is a site of philosophical balance, where love and guilt fuse into a phenomenon that neither death nor forgiveness can soften. It is the encounter that topples them, exceeding any notion of sin with something overwhelming: a truth too great to withstand. The sublime presents itself as a decisive decree beyond any kind of aesthetic embellishment.

What then have we heard?

In the music of Verdi and Wagner, the sacred is not a static dogma; it is rather a dynamic tremor. It appears in the return of a theme, in the breath of a voice nearing silence, in the orchestral abyss that opens beneath a single word. Their operas disclose themselves theologically through action that surpasses doctrinal limits, attaining the infinite precisely by embodying its fracture—by staging the human as that which targets the divine and trembles before it. This is the sacred as theorized by Bataille, Girard, and beyond: a force that provokes instead of *comforting*. The feeling of the infinite through the finite, of beauty that terrifies, of terror that elevates. For Verdi, this experience is filtered through history, through the flesh of politics and the weight of ethical failure. For Wagner, it is mythic, symbolic, visionary. But in both, the sacred becomes audible—and in becoming

secretly affirming support for Victor Emmanuel II as the future king of a unified Italy. This fusion of art and politics made Verdi a symbolic figure of the nationalist cause, even beyond his personal intentions.

audible, it sings. Their art shows that tragedy is not merely the fall of a hero; it is the rupture of presence, the nonappearance of God where God is most needed. In *Don Carlo*, in *Tristan*, the characters are punished for asking questions too large for the world to answer. The scene becomes a tribunal where silence reigns and music testifies. And when the orchestra rises to fill that silence, it does not explain—it beseeches. Across these pages, the operas of Verdi and Wagner have emerged, considered beyond mere Romantic fabrications, as signals of abidance. They do not merely entertain; they examine the foundations of *meaning*. Their voices —Isolde's *Liebtestod*, Elisabetta's leave-taking, Posa's ultramelodic agony— cut through time as existential utterances. Each is a moment of listening *into the abyss*. And the listener, too, is changed. This is the wager their music makes: that in pain, a truth may be heard; that in sound, the sacred may pass. Theology, philosophy, and poetics all converge here, not as arguments but as sensations. The sacred in these operas is a whole event: it happens. And when it *happens*, it leaves us undone.

It may be tempting to draw final distinctions, to summarize what Verdi is and what Wagner is not. But their true dialogue lies aligned in their full power and parallel intensity. Both compose with the full force of belief—in the reality of the sacred as artistic ordeal. Both confront what it means to create when God has vanished, or withdrawn, or become unbearable. Their music does not preach—it suffers, ascends, implores. And so, this book ends where music begins: in the silence that follows a cadenza. It ends through the act of listening, receptive to the unknown. For Giuseppe Verdi and Richard Wagner, music is the last theology that still moves the soul. And in their operas we hear not only stories but the sacred itself, singing through the fractures of the world. Otto entitled this the *mysterium tremendum*, the innermost core of religion, without which no faith could be alive:

Let us consider the deepest and most fundamental element in all strong and sincerely felt religious emotion. Faith unto Salvation, Trust, Love all these are there. But over and above these is an element which may also on occasion, quite apart from them, profoundly affect us and occupy the mind with a wellnigh bewildering strength. Let us follow it up with every effort of sympathy and imaginative intuition wherever it is to be found, in the lives of those around us, in sudden, strong

ebullitions of personal piety and the frames of mind such ebullitions evince, in the fixed and ordered solemnities of rites and liturgies, and again in the atmosphere that clings to old religious monuments and buildings, to temples and to churches. If we do so we shall find we are dealing with something for which there is only one appropriate expression, *mysterium tremendum* (Otto, 1936, p. 12).

Verdi and Wagner do not subscribe to Otto's *mysterium*; they sound it in wounds that sing through the fractures of the world. In the end, perhaps no redemption is offered. Not to Carlo, nor to Tannhäuser. Not to the jester, nor to Tristan. In their kismet we glimpse what Girard saw: that the tragic hero is guilty not because of his deeds, but because he is destined to be a victim, a scapegoat (Girard, 1989). But through their music we hear the wound, and the voice that refuses to be dampened by it. That voice —broken, glorious, human— remains the greatest evidence of the sacred. As Bataille reminds us, here death, eroticism and religion open out: "(...) an activity which is needed in order to evoke the sacred and to initiate communication and the ecstatic loss of self" (Bataille, 1988, p. 27, Appendix). And in hearing it, we too have become pilgrims of the sublime experience.

Image: Wagner at work, in an image dating to around 1875, at his residence, Villa Wahnfried, in Bayreuth.



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It is safe to assume that anyone who appreciates music and drama is familiar with the operas of Giuseppe Verdi and Richard Wagner. There is also little doubt that both rank among the most important composers in the history of music. The two were born in 1813: Verdi on October 10 in Le Roncole, a village near Busseto in the Italian province of Parma, and Wagner slightly earlier, on May 22, in Leipzig, then part of the Kingdom of Saxony. While Verdi died in 1901 at the age of 88 in Lombardy, which borders his native Emilia-Romagna, Wagner passed away suddenly in 1883 at the age of 69, a bit farther from Germany, having spent that summer with his wife, Cosima, the daughter of Franz Liszt, in a beautiful palazzo on Venice's Grand Canal.

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