

# Operaphoria™

VOLUME XVII ISSUE 6

MARCH 9, 2024

METROPOLITAN OPERA, LIVE IN HD

NOTE: EARLY START TIME 12:00 P.M.

SEE IT AT  
CELEBRATION  
CINEMA NORTH



## *La Forza del Destino*: Verdi's Russian Adventure

After *Un Ballo in Maschera*'s successful Rome premiere, plus a quiet marriage to his long-time companion, Giuseppina Strepponi, Verdi announced his retirement. With 21 operas behind him, many of them regularly performed worldwide, the 46-year old composer seemed ready to settle down at Sant'Agata, his vast farm-estate near Busseto. But in 1860, Italy's Resorgimento (Unification) was becoming a reality through the work

of Count Cavour and Victor Emmanuel II, who in 1861 would become King of Italy. And it was this development that provided a new opportunity for Verdi: politics.

With unification becoming a reality—for all of Italy except the vast Papal States—Prime Minister Cavour urged Verdi to become a member of the new Parliament, to which he reluctantly agreed, easily winning his home town Busseto seat. He and Strepponi, along with their sizable staff, moved into an entire floor of a luxury hotel in Turin, seat of the new government. And contrary to Verdi's picture of his four years in parliament, he was very active in fashioning legislation to improve agriculture, flood control, music education, and opera house funding.

But before the year was out, Verdi was hemorrhaging money both in Turin and Sant'Agata, where his building projects were very expensive. Thus, when the Russian Imperial Opera asked for

a premiere at a reportedly very high fee, he was ready to come out of retirement. Getting right to work, he first suggested an opera based on Hugo's *Ruy Blas*, but the censors immediately rejected it.

Then he turned to Spanish drama and Ángel de Saavedra's *Don Álvaro o la fuerza del sino*, which was accepted. Verdi immediately assigned the libretto to Francesco Piave, who had written seven earlier librettos for him, including *Rigoletto* and *La Traviata*.

As he worked on the music, Strepponi prepared for their three winter months in St. Petersburg. First, she had all their outer coats fur lined, then she packed massive amounts of pasta, a dozen cases of Bordeaux wine, several of champagne, and a vast assortment of cheeses and cured hams. Of what the Russians ate she was not sure, but she was certain to feed Verdi what he wanted. They arrived in November 1861 with a staff of three and were

(continued...)



Photo: Paola Kudacki/Met Opera

Lise Davidsen as Leonora

(continued from front)

housed in lavish accommodations, replete with its own staff. But the rehearsals had stopped because the prima donna was ill. It was soon obvious *La Forza* would not be ready for the Carnival season, so the Verdis agreed to return for the 1862 season.

Returning to St. Petersburg in November 1862, Verdi again had a stellar Italian cast, which he rehearsed tirelessly. Of the premiere, he wrote his publisher, Ricordi, “Results and performance very, very good. Settings and costumes extremely opulent.” And Strepponi, a former opera star herself, agreed. The critics were also full of praise for the music and performers. Verdi was so pleased with the attention he received, he and Strepponi agreed to stay an extra month to enjoy the lavish parties in his honor, including the Tsar’s bestowing upon him the Imperial and Royal Order of St. Stanislaus.

Leaving Russia, the Verdis returned to Sant’Agata to attend to the endless building projects and problems. However, shortly after they left for Spain to launch *La Forza*’s first European premiere in the country of its author, who was in attendance. But by 1869, preparing *La Forza* for its La Scala premiere, Verdi concluded the ending had “an excess of corpses on stage,” so he did a major revision, which is the version seen thereafter, the one we will see today. – GD

## Production

### *La Forza del Destino*, by Verdi

Sat, March 9, 2024. Starts 12:00 p.m.

Two intermissions

Conductor: **Yannick Nezet-Seguin**

Production: **Mariusz Trelinski**

Leonora: **Lise Davidsen**

Preziosilla: **Judit Kutasi**

Don Alvaro: **Brian Jagde**

Don Carlo: **Igor Golovatenko**

Melitone: **Patrick Carfizzi**

Marquis, and Padre: **Solomon Howard**

## Learning from Art

In keeping with the Met’s commitment to update classic operas, presenting them as relevant for today’s audiences, they have co-produced this *Forza* with the Polish National Opera, where it premiered, directed by the acclaimed Polish director, Mariusz Trelinski. According to the Met’s program notes, Trelinski rejects the concept



Photo: Magda Heuckel/Polish National Opera

*The world in ruins.*

of a destiny governed by divine decrees. Rather, our destiny is handed to us by flawed teaching and learning, and the resulting difficulty we have in escaping the roles that have been given us. We see this in the domineering Calatrava, who has dictated who his children must be, with Leonora being incapable of complying with that role. Nor can Don Carlo get past his assigned role of avenging the family honor.

Director Trelinski’s understanding of destiny is a rejection of the ancient Greek dramatic convention of the *Deus Ex Machina* (God from a machine). The Greeks used a crane to hoist one of the gods over the stage, who then used his divine power as a way of moving ahead some stuck dramatic action. As if to say, humans create a mess, and the gods can bail us out. So, is Trelinski saying that the gods are not responsible, but our parents and teachers are? Not really. He is saying that destiny is our inability to get past the roles given to us.

(continued on next page)

*(Learning from Art continued)*

It is *our* inability, which we must own. *We* are responsible for how we turn out.

*Operaphoria* hates to get sideways with Euripedes, but in this case we believe Trelinski is closer to the truth about how the world might get saved. Let's not wait for the gods. Our destiny is ours to shape.

Trelinski sets the opera in current times. The final act is a world in ruins, "...a bombed-out, post-apocalyptic subway tunnel." Trelinski explains, "The tribulations of the protagonists stand in for civilizational conflict on a global scale." – GP

## The Plot

Most titles of Verdi operas have names of people, places or events, except this one, which is titled as an abstract concept. The force of destiny allows for unexpected plot development. As in:

**Act 1.** At the beginning of *Forza*, a Spanish nobleman, Don Alvaro, and Leonora have planned to elope, because her father, Calatrava, has forbidden his daughter to marry someone he believes is from a lower class. Calatrava caught them eloping, and has threatened Alvaro, who does not want to fight the old man. He takes out his gun and throws it on the floor to demonstrate his peaceful intentions. But when the gun hits the floor, it goes off and kills the father of the woman he loves. Leonora's brother, Don Carlo, witnesses this, and is committed to revenge. No matter what else, he will kill Don Alvaro. But first the lovers flee the scene, and in the confusion, they are separated. Leonora sings a poignant aria about being a pilgrim and an orphan.

The **Second Act** is two years later, still in Spain. Leonora, disguised as a man, is still searching for Alvaro. At a road house she recognizes her brother, who is also disguised, and she discovers he still wants to kill her and Alvaro. She sneaks away, now committed to hiding in a monastery for the rest of her life. There, the Padre takes her to a cave, where she may live, and he promises to care for her and protect her identity.

**Act 3** takes place in Italy years later, where Alvaro is with the Spanish army. He believes Leonora is dead. Alvaro helps a wounded soldier who, as fate would have it, is Leonora's brother, Carlo. However, the two are both disguised and do not recognize each other. Unknowingly, Alvaro has saved the life of the man who is committed to killing him, and they swear eternal friendship and loyalty. The trumpets sound and they are once again off to another battle.

This time it is Alvaro who is seriously wounded, and his dying wish is that his new and trusted friend will care for his personal possessions when he dies, so he can die in peace. As Alvaro is taken off to die, Carlo looks through Alvaro's things, and finds a picture of his sister, Leonora. Now Carlo knows his new best friend is his worst enemy. Then, miraculously, Alvaro recovers, which pleases Carlo immensely because he can now have the satisfaction of killing Alvaro himself. Carlo insists on a duel, which Alvaro tries to avoid, but they duel, and once again Carlo is seriously wounded. This grieves the good Alvaro, who decides to seek peace at a monastery.

**Act 4.** Another five years have passed. Carlo has recovered and has tracked down Alvaro, who had found peace in his new identity as Father Raphael. Carlo once again demands a duel to death. Alvaro again rejects the demand, but when Carlo uses a racial insult, Alvaro is ready to fight once again. This time Carlo is mortally wounded, (and the audience is generally feeling okay about it). The clashing of swords has roused a hermit in a nearby cave, and Alvaro asks the hermit to assist the dying man. The hermit, of course, is Leonora. She goes to help her dying brother, who with his last ounce of strength stabs his innocent sister, and they both die. In this version, the Padre demands that Alvaro live, focusing on forgiveness. The curtain falls on the two survivors.

Carlo's evil spirit does not, in fact, define the

*(continued on next page)*

(The Plot continued from page 3)

opera. Verdi studied Shakespeare, and learned how to lighten things up. He introduced two fun characters: Preziosilla, a fortune-teller and entertainer who recruits young men for the military, and Fra Melitone, a cranky priest who delivers a comic sermon about the irresponsibility of poor people (a sermon taken directly from a play by Schiller.) The character of the muleteer, Trabuco, also lightens the drama. – GP

## A Curse?

Among some opera observers, *Forza* has garnered a reputation for being cursed, which conflicts with the feeling of being blessed that some of us experience when anticipating seeing the opera with Lise Davidsen singing Leonora. The legend about *Forza* being cursed may have begun in 1960 when Leonard Warren, the famed Verdi baritone, died during a performance in which he was singing the role of Carlo. Warren had just completed his Act 3 aria, “*Morir, tremenda cosa,*” (“To die, a momentous thing”) and died of a heart attack, dropping tragically to the stage floor.

A few performers have seen the opera as being cursed. Luciano Pavarotti reportedly rejected the role of Don Alvaro because of the Warren incident. Towards the end of his career Franco Corelli sang the role, but did specific rituals during the performance to hold the curse at bay. Some advertisements for productions of *La Forza* suggest that the legend may have promotional value. For example, in 2017 the Israeli Opera was “braving the curse” to perform *La Forza*.

The final scene of the original version left three of the four major characters dead on stage. The only survivor at curtain was the good Padre Guardiano, perhaps suggesting the church’s immunity to curses, though we wouldn’t necessarily rely on this plot point as evidence. So, be sure to see the *Live in HD* performance of Lise Davidsen singing Leonora to make up your mind. We believe you will feel blessed. – GP

## 2023/2024 Metropolitan Opera

Live in HD  
Schedule

SEE THEM AT  
CELEBRATION  
CINEMA NORTH



### *Romeo et Juliette*, by Gounod

March 23, 2024 12:55 pm

The Bartlett Sher production of this favorite romantic opera. Yannick Nezet-Seguín conducts a sparkling cast, featuring Nadine Sierra, who won the Met National Council Auditions with Juliette’s aria – “*Je veux vivre.*” Benjamin Bernheim as Romeo. Will Liverman sings Mercutio, and Samantha Hankey is Stephano.

### *La Rondine*, by Puccini

April 20, 2024 12:55 pm

Sometimes described as Puccini’s operetta – which is what he had been commissioned to write. A lyric comedy with a sad ending, set in Paris and the Riviera, full of music to set us dancing. Angel Blue is Magda, a French courtesan who, like Violetta, falls for an idealistic lover who convinces her to abandon her life of excess. Jonathan Tetelman is Ruggero. Maestro Speranza Scapucci conducts.

### *Madama Butterfly*, by Puccini

May 11, 2024 12:55 pm

The Anthony Minghella production, with mesmerizing puppetry and sets. Asmik Grigorian in the role of Butterfly, and Jonathan Tetelman is Pinkerton, the insensitive American who destroys her. Elizabeth De Shong is in the supportive role of Suzuki. Maestro Xian Zhang makes her Met debut conducting this beautiful opera, which is also an important socio-political document.