

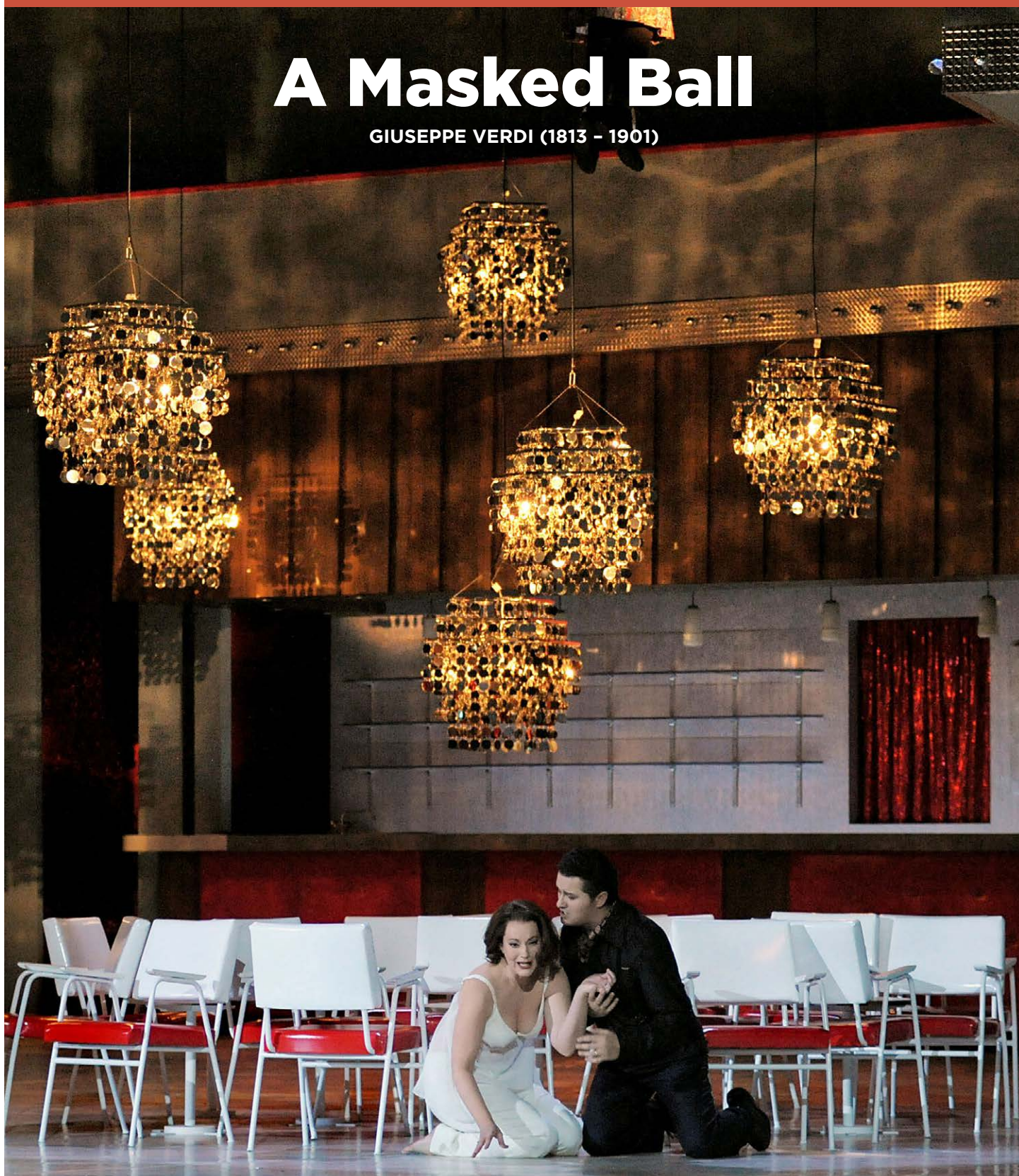


**EXPLORE
& LEARN**
CANADIAN OPERA COMPANY

Study Guides

A Masked Ball

GIUSEPPE VERDI (1813 - 1901)



2013-2014
SEASON

Production Sponsor
A Masked Ball



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Cover: Catherine Naglestad as Amelia and Piotr Beczala as Riccardo in *A Masked Ball*.

Above: A scene from *A Masked Ball*. Both images from the Berlin Staatsoper production, 2008. Photos: Ruth Walz

Welcome

A Masked Ball is a tale of forbidden passion between two lovers embroiled in political intrigue beyond their control. Not unlike the opera's plot, political schemes have played a huge role in *Ball*'s history from the beginning. Originally forced to change the opera's setting to Boston from Sweden to quell censors' fears of real-life, copy-cat assassination plots, Verdi and his opera are proof that his theme of "love in a dangerous time" is both a universal truth and historically fluid. This production is set in the American south of the 1960s, with its undertones of Kennedy-era tensions, assassinations, and power plays.

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Opera 101

WHAT IS OPERA?

The term “opera” comes from the Italian word for “work” or “piece,” and is usually applied to the European tradition of grand opera. Opera is a form of storytelling which incorporates music, drama and design.

Though its origins date back to ancient Greece, the form of opera we are familiar with today started in the late 16th century in Florence, Italy. Count Giovanni de’ Bardi was a patron and host to a group of intellectuals, poets, artists, scientists and humanists including Giulio Caccini (composer) and Vincenzo Galilei (father to the astronomer and scientist, Galileo Galilei, who was most famous for his improvements to the telescope). These individuals explored trends in the arts, focusing on music and drama in particular. They were unified in their belief that the arts had become over-embellished and that returning to the transparency of the music of the ancient Greeks, which incorporated both speech and song, and a chorus to further the plot and provide commentary on the action, would present a more pure, natural and powerful way to tell stories and express emotions.

The first opera, *Dafne*, about a nymph who fled from Apollo and was subsequently transformed by the gods into a laurel tree, was composed by Jacopo Peri in 1597. From then on, the early operas recreated Greek tragedies with mythological themes. During the 17th and 18th centuries, topics expanded to include stories about royalty, and everyday or common people. Some operas were of a serious nature (called *opera seria*) and some light-hearted (called *opera buffa*). Since then operas have been written on a wide variety of topics such as cultural clashes (*Madama Butterfly*), comedic farce (*The Barber of Seville*), politicians on foreign visits (*Nixon in China*), the celebration of Canadian heroes (*Louis Riel*), and children’s stories (*The Little Prince*), to name a few.

The COC presents works in the western European tradition but musical equivalents to European opera can be found in Japan, at the Peking Opera in China, and in Africa where it is called Epic Storytelling.

What are the differences between operas, musicals and plays?

Traditionally operas are through-sung, meaning they are sung from beginning to end with no dialogue in between. Singers must have powerful voices in order to be heard over the orchestra (the ensemble of instrumental musicians that accompanies the dramatic action on stage during an opera). Remember: opera singers don’t use microphones!

Musicals are a combination of dialogue and sung pieces and often include choreographed numbers. The singers often use microphones and are accompanied by a pit band which includes more modern instruments like a drum kit, guitar and electronic instruments.

Plays are primarily spoken works of theatre with minimal singing or music.

There are always exceptions to the rule: though *Les Misérables* is through-sung it is still classified as a piece of musical theatre because of its style of music. By the same token, some operas, like Mozart’s *The Magic Flute*, have spoken dialogue in addition to singing.

What does opera feel like?

Take five minutes out of the school day and instead of using regular voices to converse, ask the class to commit to singing everything. Make an agreement with the students that it’s not about judging people’s voices but about freeing our natural sounds. Make up the melodies on the spot and don’t worry about singing “correctly.” Did the musical lines help express or emphasize certain emotions?

If so, how?

Attending the Opera: Make the most of your experience

WELCOME TO THE FOUR SEASONS CENTRE FOR THE PERFORMING ARTS



So you're headed to the opera, and there are a few questions on your mind. Here are some tips on how to get the most out of your opera experience.

First, there's the question of **what to wear**. People wear all sorts of things to the opera – jeans, dress pants, cocktail dresses, suits, etc. The important thing is to be comfortable. Wear something that makes you feel good, whether it be jeans or your nicest tie. But skip that spritz of perfume or cologne before you go out; the Four Seasons Centre for the Performing Arts is scent-free. Many fellow patrons and performers are allergic to strong scents.

Once you're dressed, it's important to **arrive on time** for the show. Late patrons cannot be admitted to the theatre, and you may have to watch the first act on a television screen in the lobby rather than from your seat. If you don't have your ticket yet, arrive as early as possible – the line-up for the box office can often be quite long prior to a performance! The main doors open one hour before the performance. Line up there and have your ticket ready to present to the usher. If you have any questions about

tonight's performance, drop by the welcome desk (just inside the main doors) to ask a member of the COC staff, who are full of useful information not only about tonight's opera, but also about COC programs in general. A **pre-performance chat** takes place in the Richard Bradshaw Amphitheatre (Ring 3) about 45 minutes before the show. These chats, given by members of our **COC Volunteer Speakers Bureau**, offer valuable insight into the opera and the specific production that you'll be seeing.

Before the opera starts, take the opportunity to **explore the lobby**, known as the Isadore and Rosalie Sharp City Room. Stop by concessions and **order a beverage for intermission or purchase a snack**. Browse the Opera Shop and pick up a memento of your experience at the opera. (Note: the Opera Shop is not open at dress rehearsals.) Walk up the stairs, passing a sculpture as you go, and note the floating glass staircase – the longest free-span glass staircase in the world! On the third floor, you'll see the Richard Bradshaw Amphitheatre, home to our Free Concert Series. You'll also see a mobile by artist Alexander Calder, adding some colour and whimsy to the space.

Chimes will ring throughout the lobby **ten minutes** before the performance, reminding everyone to find their seats. Head towards the door noted on your ticket, get a program from the usher, and find your designated seat in R. Fraser Elliott Hall. It's best to use this time to open any candies you might have and turn off your cell phone – the hall is built to carry sound, so small sounds travel further than you may think! Photography is not permitted once the show starts. The design and direction of the show is under intellectual property and only the official COC photographer and/or members of the media can take pictures and even then, only under special circumstances that require prior arrangements.

As the lights go down and the audience quiets, **listen carefully**. Remember all of that traffic you heard in the lobby? And now... not a peep! The auditorium is physically separated from the outside and the ground below, making for the best acoustic experience possible.

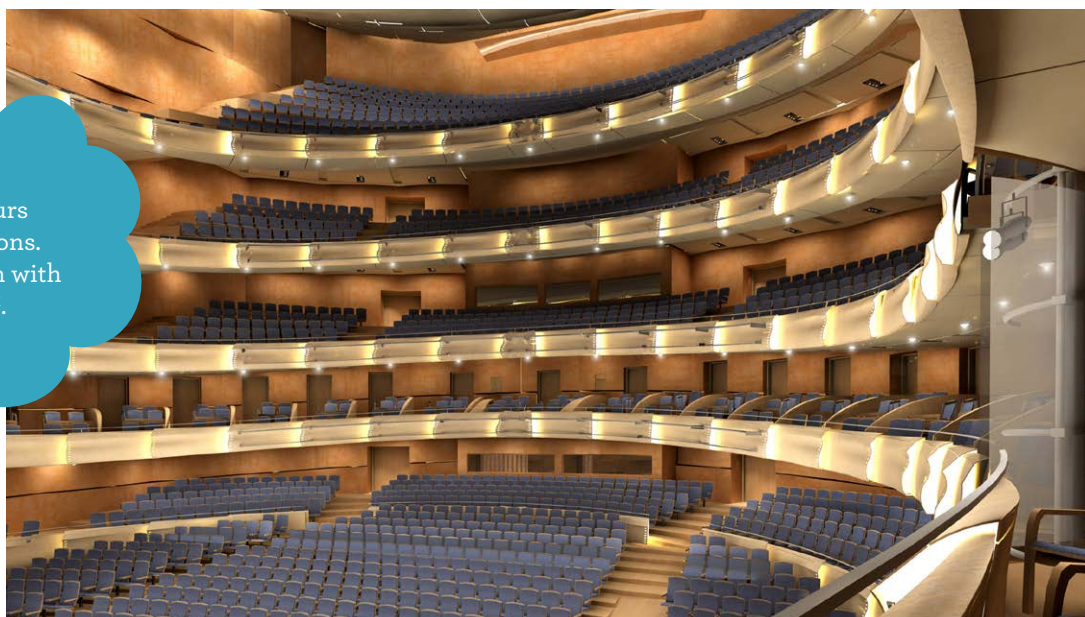
Now it's time to sit back and **enjoy the opera!**

SURTITLES™ will be projected on a horizontal screen above the stage. SURTITLES™ originate from the idea of “subtitles”, which are most commonly used in foreign films to make them more accessible outside of their country of origin. The COC was the first opera company to adapt this concept for the operatic stage. Slides containing the English translation of the *libretto* (text for the opera) are projected in a more visible place for the audience: above the stage. SURTITLES™ were first used by the COC at the premiere of the opera *Elektra* in 1983. Only the name could be trademarked, as the technology for the projections was already in existence. Opera companies from around the world have adopted this audience initiative under different names, and it has revolutionized opera stages everywhere.

Feel free to show your **appreciation to the performers** by laughing at humorous bits or applauding after a well-performed aria. If a performer has pulled off some particularly impressive vocal fireworks, it's absolutely acceptable to yell out your appreciation in addition to applause. You may hear your fellow audience members shouting “bravo!” for a man, “brava!” for a woman, or “bravi!” for a group of performers. Feel free to join in!

A Masked Ball lasts approximately three hours including two intermissions. The opera is sung in Italian with English SURTITLES™.

R. Fraser Elliott Hall.
Photo: Tim Griffith



Characters and Synopsis

MAIN CHARACTERS (in order of vocal appearance)

Name	Description	Voice Type	Pronunciation
Samuel	A conspirator	Bass	
Tom	A conspirator	Bass	
Oscar	Riccardo's page	Soprano	
Riccardo	Earl of Warwick, Governor of Boston	Tenor	ree-CAR-doh
Renato	Riccardo's secretary, Amelia's husband	Baritone	reh-NAH-toh
A judge		Tenor	
Silvano	A sailor	Bass	seel-VAH-noh
Ulrica	A fortune-teller	Mezzo-soprano	ool-REE-kah
Amelia's servant		Tenor	
Amelia	Renato's wife	Soprano	ah-MAY-lee-yah



(l – r) Anna Prohaska as Oscar, Dalibor Jenis as Renato, Oliver Zwarg as Samuel and Andreas Bauer as Tom in the Berlin Staatsoper production of *A Masked Ball*, 2008. Photo: Ruth Walz

SYNOPSIS

ACT I, scene i

The governor's house

Riccardo reviews his guest list for the coming masked ball. Seeing the name of Amelia, he is moved and privately expresses his guilty love for his secretary's wife. Renato, his secretary, enters to warn Riccardo about plots against Riccardo's life, which the governor laughs off. The judge appears, requesting that Riccardo exile Ulrica, a fortune-teller suspected of supernatural practices. Oscar, the page, defends Ulrica and Riccardo decides to visit her in disguise to see for himself, inviting the court to follow him.

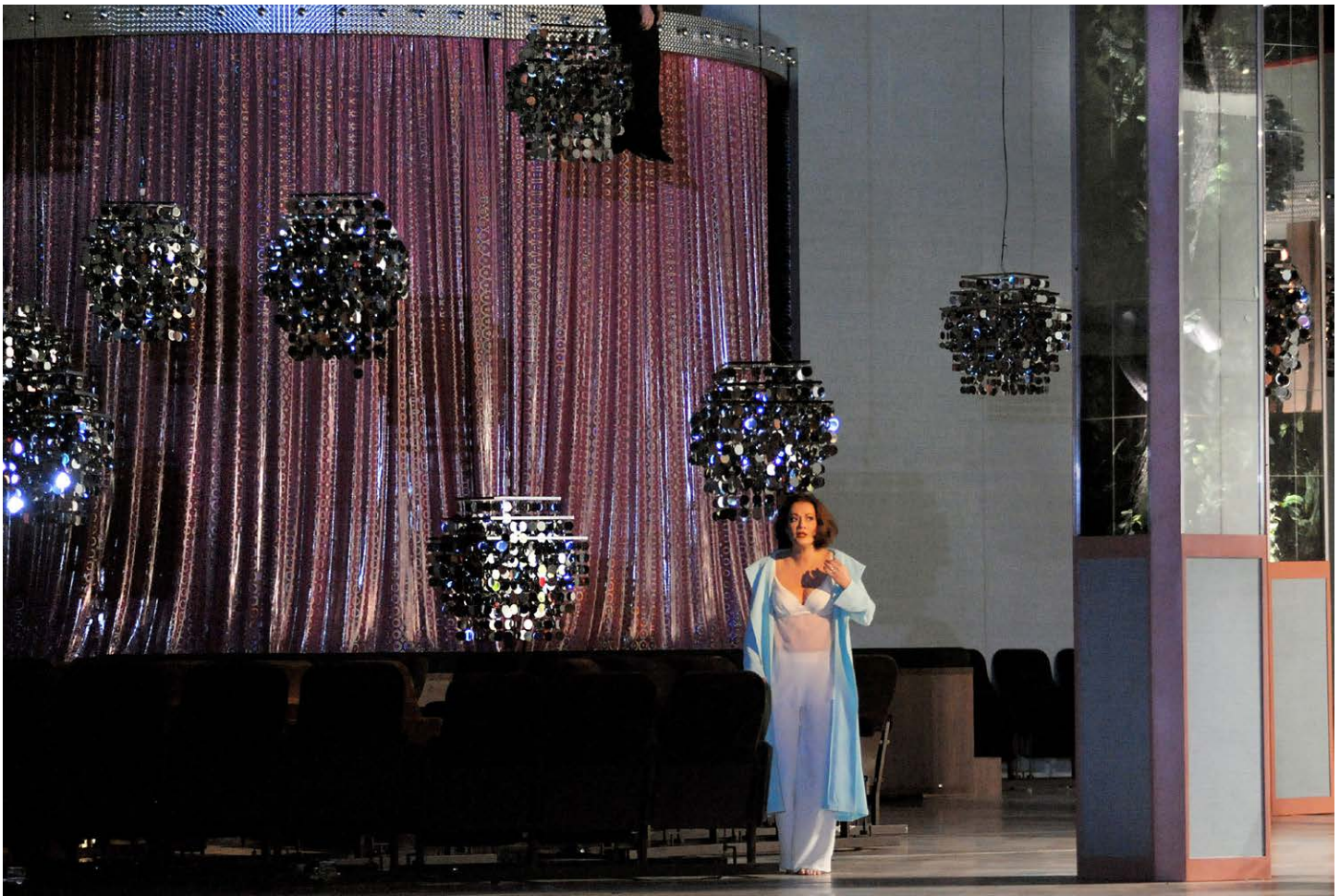
"She is my star, such as the heavens do not possess."
Riccardo

ACT I, scene ii

Ulrica's dwelling

In hiding, Riccardo sees Amelia ask the fortune teller to rid her of the love that torments her. Ulrica tells her of a healing plant that grows in the graveyard nearby. Riccardo vows to follow Amelia on her quest. As his courtiers appear, he asks for his own fortune and is told he will soon die by the hand of a friend. Ulrica says the murderer will be the next person to shake his hand, a prophecy that seems absurd to Riccardo. Renato enters and greets him with a handshake, but Riccardo's faith in his friend is secure. The people recognize Riccardo and all hail their beloved governor.

"He laughed at my predictions, but he has one foot in the grave." Ulrica



Catherine Naglestad as Amelia in the Berlin Staatsoper production of *A Masked Ball*, 2008. Photo: Ruth Walz

ACT II*The graveyard*

A terrified Amelia searches for the plant that will make her fall out of love, and prays for assistance in her ordeal. Riccardo appears and declares his love for her. At first reluctant, Amelia finally admits her love as well. At the sound of footsteps, she lowers her veil and conceals her identity. Renato appears, warning of approaching assassins. Riccardo agrees to leave only after Renato promises to take the unknown woman to the gates of the city, without speaking to her or looking at her. When the conspirators, Samuel and Tom, appear and find Riccardo gone, they decide to amuse themselves by revealing the face of the mysterious woman. When it becomes clear that Renato will fight rather than permit this, Amelia raises her veil. Renato is astounded and the conspirators break out in laughter. Enraged by his friend's betrayal, Renato arranges to meet with the conspirators the next day.

"Thus he rewards me for saving his life! He has defiled my wife!" Renato

ACT III, scene i*Renato's study*

Renato informs Amelia that she must die. Although she admits her love for Riccardo, she insists that she has not betrayed her husband and begs to see her young son for a final time. Renato meets with Samuel and Tom and vows to help them kill the governor. They elect to draw lots to decide who will strike the final blow. Renato forces Amelia to draw and she is horrified when she selects her husband's name. Oscar enters, bringing invitations to a masked ball in the governor's palace. Renato decides to take Amelia with him and carry out the assassination at the ball.

"It is a masked ball of the greatest splendour!" Oscar

ACT III, scene ii*The governor's study*

Riccardo decides to sign an order sending Renato and Amelia back to England and muses on the loss of his love. He is brought an anonymous message warning that he risks assassination at the ball, but decides to see Amelia one last time.

ACT III, scene iii*The ballroom in the governor's mansion*

Renato, Samuel, Tom and their followers search for Riccardo. Renato persuades Oscar to reveal the governor's disguise. Amelia enters, finds Riccardo and begs him to escape, revealing that she sent the anonymous note. He reiterates his love, but tells her that she must leave with her husband. As they bid a last, tender farewell, Renato throws himself between them and kills the governor. Before he dies, Riccardo bids his people to release Renato and assures him that his wife's honour is intact. Everyone grieves as Riccardo dies.

"I love her, but I wanted to protect your name and her heart!" Riccardo

Genesis of the Opera

THE COMPOSER

Giuseppe Verdi (1813 – 1901) lived through a century in which Italian opera was enjoying a golden age, with composers such as Donizetti, Bellini and Rossini hard at work. But it was Verdi who redefined the art form, evolving from writing operas with sung-spoken text (*recitative*) punctuated by moments of show-stopping pieces, to focusing on more through-composed works, emphasizing seamless musical transitions between scenes to propel the drama forward. It was the story, emotions and relationships between characters which motivated Verdi's compositions more than the possibilities of mere spectacle (although he could do that brilliantly, too).

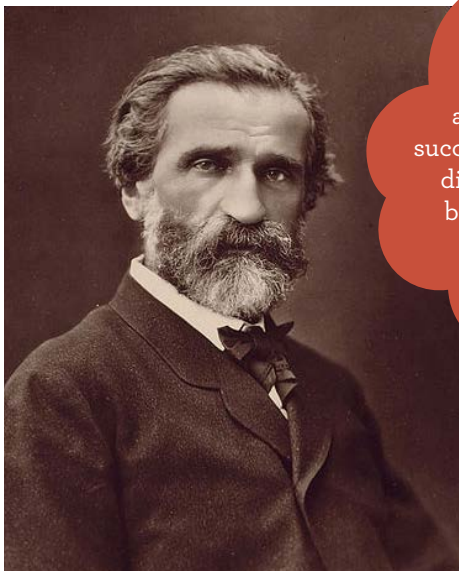
A Masked Ball was Verdi's first opera after the massive success of his three middle-career masterpieces, known as *la trilogia popolare* (the popular trilogy) comprised of *Rigoletto* (1851), *La Traviata* and *Il Trovatore* (both in 1853). With *Masked Ball*, he expressed a deeper maturity and insight, as revealed in the hopeless and passionate love between Amelia and the governor. He also utilized comic touches to add tension and relief to the unrelenting drama of the story, such as the use of the page, Oscar, and the laughing duet of the two conspirators, Samuel and Tom. This comedy-in-drama was a true Shakespearean masterstroke.

THE REAL KING

King Gustav III of Sweden (1746 – 1792), Verdi's inspiration for the character of Riccardo, was a great fan of theatre, opera, and all the arts. He founded the Royal Swedish National Theatre in 1788 and was even one of Sweden's most successful playwrights at the time. King Gustav also founded an opera company and schools for singing and dancing.

TRUE TO LIFE: A group of aristocrats – Count Ribbing, Count Horn and Captain Anckarström – conspired to kill King Gustav III, just as in Verdi's opera. Captain Anckarström is believed to have been the one to pull the trigger at a masked ball, shooting the king in the back.

But, unlike the opera, the king took two weeks to die and did not forgive Anckarström, who was publicly flogged for three days, had his right hand chopped off and was then beheaded. The assassination, moreover, was probably not motivated by Anckarström's jealousy over a romantic relationship between his wife and the king – there is much historical evidence suggesting the king was gay.



Giuseppe Verdi. Photo by Ferdinand Mulnier, circa 1870

Verdi was the antithesis of the struggling artist with little financial talent. He successfully negotiated his own contracts directly and invested his money well, building a very comfortable life, and was able to help others less fortunate than himself.



King Gustav III of Sweden.
Painting by Lorens Pasch the Younger, circa 1785

HOW THE OPERA CAME TO BE

Verdi was preparing a work he had been yearning to write his whole life: *King Lear*, based on Shakespeare's masterpiece. He had arranged to create it for Naples. However, when he found out he could not have his soprano of choice for the role of Cordelia, he put the opera aside and instead began working on *A Masked Ball*.

Previously, the great French playwright and librettist* Eugène Scribe (1791 – 1861) had written a play, *Gustave III*, based on the assassination. The composer Daniel François Auber (1782 – 1871) turned that play into a successful opera, *Gustave III, ou Le Bal Masqué* (*Gustav III, or The Masked Ball*), which premiered in Paris in 1833.

It's notable that Verdi was willing to write an opera based very closely on the same libretto: it was the only time in his career that he took material that had already been used in a successful contemporary opera. He worked with his own librettist, Antonio Somma, to make the necessary alterations and arrived in Naples to work on orchestration and start rehearsals. However on the very day that Verdi arrived, January 15, 1858, there was an assassination attempt on Napoleon III, as he made his way to the theatre in Paris (ironically to see an opera). In addition to this unlucky coincidence, approximately one year earlier, an assassin had targeted the King of Naples (also unsuccessfully). The censors got nervous and came down firmly on Verdi, demanding major changes to his storyline which, after all, centred on the assassination of a king. They didn't want the opera to inspire some copy-cat tragedy.

After all the trouble that Verdi had experienced with the censors, other opera companies took some startling liberties with the setting of *A Masked Ball*. Two years after its premiere, *Masked Ball* appeared in Paris with Florence as its setting and, later that same year, at Covent Garden, London, the setting was shifted to – wait for it – Naples!

*Librettist: the individual who writes the *libretto*, which is the words or text of the opera. *Libretto* is the diminutive of the Italian word “libro” meaning “book.”

Verdi was offered an almost unrecognizable version of his libretto with all the censors' changes made. He wasn't interested and, instead, offered his opera to Rome. A few changes were required there by the censors, which Verdi was willing to accept. The setting for the opera was changed from Sweden to 17th-century Boston. King Gustav of Sweden became Riccardo, Earl of Warwick, Governor of Boston.



Shannon Mercer as Oscar in a scene from the COC's production of *A Masked Ball* in 2003. Photo: Michael Cooper

THE OPERA FINALLY HAS ITS PREMIERE!

A Masked Ball premiered in Rome on February 17, 1859. It was a triumph with the public, a little less so with the press. It was soon being performed all over Europe and in North America.

When *Masked Ball* was revived in London in the 1880s, George Bernard Shaw – the famous Irish playwright – enjoyed the opera, but felt it was antiquated and overly conventional and worried that audiences might feel the same way. Apparently this was not the case, as it remains as popular as ever. It's Verdi's most romantic opera, with, at its heart, the story of a passionate and impossible love between two mature people.

In 1935 the opera finally appeared in its original Swedish setting. Since then, *Masked Ball* has often been produced in its originally intended form, in addition to its Boston setting and many others that imaginative directors have come up with.

The day that Verdi arrived in Naples to begin rehearsals for *A Masked Ball*, Napoleon III survived an assassination attempt while on his way to a performance of an opera in Paris. To commemorate his narrow escape, Napoleon III held a competition to design a new opera house. Charles Garnier's design won and you can still see the breathtaking Palais Garnier in Paris today, including the private entrance designed for the emperor in order to minimize any further risk of assassination.



A view of the front of the Palais Garnier, circa 1880 to 1890

SOMETIMES A NAME IS JUST A NAME

Regardless of the setting, the story is very much the same, with only some names changing. Here's a chart to show those differences side by side.

BOSTON SETTING	SWEDISH SETTING
Samuel	Count Horn
Tom	Count Ribbing (sometimes called Count Warting)
Riccardo	Gustav III
Renato	Captain Anckarström
Ulrica	Madame Arvidson
Silvano	Christian

The masquerading doesn't just take place at the ball. Earlier in the story, Riccardo dresses up as a sailor to visit Ulrica. Renato wears Riccardo's cloak to help him escape ambush. Amelia hides herself first from Riccardo and then from her husband. Finally, at the masked ball, all disguises are removed.



A scene from the COC's production of A Masked Ball in 2003. Photo: Michael Cooper

Listening Guide

INTRODUCTION

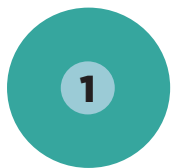
Of Verdi's middle-period operas, *A Masked Ball* (1859) is one of the few not to undergo extensive musical revisions following its initial run of performances. In contrast, *Simon Boccanegra* (1857/1881), *La forza del destino* (*The Force of Destiny*, 1862/1869) and *Don Carlos* (1867/1884) were significantly reworked after they premiered, and today are most often presented in their later versions, which means that different stages of Verdi's artistic development co-exist side by side in those works, sometimes juxtaposed all too obviously.

A Masked Ball, on the other hand, was composed relatively quickly. And for all of its variety of musical styles, it is an opera that moves forward in a user-friendly, easy-to-follow single span (compare that with the confusing, sudden chronological leaps one finds in *Simon Boccanegra*).

A Masked Ball is unique within Verdi's operas for the degree to which it relies on humour and lightness – both in situation and in its musical forms. We hear these elements mainly in the songs Verdi wrote for Riccardo and Oscar – and we can literally call them songs rather than the traditional Italian operatic term *arias*. When the King dresses up as a fisherman to visit the fortune-teller Ulrica, he sings a *canzone* (song) with a decidedly popular, waltz-like rhythm. Likewise, Oscar's two "arias" are labeled *ballata* (ballad) and *canzone* and share the two-verse structure we associate with the song form rather than the more developed, complex structure Verdi would use in a full-blown aria.

The almost wholesale adaptation of *Masked Ball's* Italian libretto from the existing French libretto for Daniel Auber's 1833 opera *Gustave III, ou Le Bal Masqué* at least partially explains Verdi's use of these lighter musical forms. In the 19th-century French opera tradition, it was common to find more popular two-verse *couplets* (i.e. song in which all verses are sung to the same music) very similar to the *canzone* favoured for Oscar. Given that the operas' two librettos run almost parallel – number by number and line by line – and that the later piece is most often a direct translation into Italian from the French, it's not surprising Verdi opted to try out musical forms more associated with French opera. Verdi peppers humour and lightness throughout the score: Oscar's quicksilver contributions; Riccardo's carefree, tripping, dance-inspired rhythms; the conspirators Sam and Tom literally "ha-ha-ing" their way into the distance at the end of Act II – these elements are brilliantly melded with traditional narrative and thematic materials (love story and heavy melodrama) to make *Ball* the most surprising of Verdi's mature operas.

The tracks listed below are excerpted from *Un ballo in maschera*, Deutsche Grammophon 453 149-2. Orchestra and Chorus of Teatro alla Scala, Milan, Claudio Abbado, conductor. Plácido Domingo, Katia Ricciarelli, Renato Bruson, Edita Gruberova. You can also experience the Listening Guide online at coc.ca/COCRADIO.



MUSICAL EXCERPT

Act I, introduzione, ensemble: "Signori: oggi d'Ulrica all magion v'invito" ("Gentlemen, today I invite you to the dwelling of Ulrica")

CONNECTION TO THE STORY

Riccardo has been asked to sign a banishment order for the fortune-teller, Ulrica. Oscar defends the supposed prophethess, and Riccardo, as a lark, suggests that the whole court visit her in disguise.

MUSICAL SIGNIFICANCE

This ensemble is part of a larger integrated musical section Verdi designated as the opera's *introduzione* (introduction), comprised of a chorus, three arias (Riccardo's *sortita* or entrance aria; Renato's *cantabile* or song-like aria and, Oscar's *ballata* or ballad). The main melody at 00:48 starting at "Ogni cura" ("every

care”) has a very “Offenbachian” quality as characterized by its skipping rhythms which require the singer to be nimble in his text delivery, and to keep the mood light and fun. French composer Jacques Offenbach was the premier composer of *opere* (light, frothy, comic musical theatre pieces) during the 19th century, and his confections were performed all over Europe. It’s not surprising to detect Offenbach’s influence on *Masked Ball* given that its *libretto* was directly based on Auber’s French precedent (see **INTRODUCTION** above). Listen to the main theme’s reprise at 2:18, when the tempo accelerates, and the dance rhythms seem to owe much to the famous *can-can* from Offenbach’s *Orpheus in the Underworld*!

FURTHER REFLECTION

Can you think of ways rhythm is used in any of your favourite songs to suggest a specific mood or emotion?

Can you name two or more operas or musicals that originated from the same source material, be it a book, a libretto or a film?



2

MUSICAL EXCERPT

Act II, duet: “Non sai tu che se l’anima mia il rimorso dilacera e rode...” (“Do you not see that if remorse corrodes and cuts my soul...”)

CONNECTION TO STORY

Riccardo joins Amelia for a clandestine meeting on the outskirts of the city. After declaring his love, he forces her to admit that she too loves him.

MUSICAL SIGNIFICANCE

This grand love duet, one of the most technically challenging and musically complex in all of Verdi’s operas, features a different type of vocal writing and characterization from what we find in Musical Excerpt 1. The bright, almost comical mood created there by the quick rhythms and catchy tunes is replaced here by long-lined, sweeping melodies which serve to express Riccardo and Amelia’s tormented passion for each other. The role of Riccardo is often compared to the Duke of Mantua, a tenor part from Verdi’s great opera *Rigoletto* (you’ve surely heard the Duke’s famous aria, “Le donna è mobile,” sung [here](#) by Spaniard Plácido Domingo). Riccardo and the Duke both share light-hearted elements musically speaking, yet the vocal line Riccardo sings in this duet sets him apart from the Duke’s libertinism and marks him as a noble character. He genuinely cares for Amelia and knows that, because she is married, it is wrong for him to be in love with her. The sheer variety of his music makes Riccardo one of Verdi’s most complex tenor roles.

The climax of the duet is its slow middle section in which Riccardo beseeches his beloved: “M’ami Amelia” (“Love me Amelia” – listen at 2:44) and then she, knowing she risks losing both her life and family if she reciprocates, replies, “Me difendi dal mio cor!” (“Defend me from my heart” – 3:11). After this slow section, the *cabaletta* (generally the quicker, more rhythmic musical response to a slower movement, beginning here at 4:19) is broken into three verses, one for Amelia, then Riccardo and then both together (at 6:44).

FURTHER REFLECTION

Why do you think Riccardo needs to hear the words “I love you” from Amelia so badly?

Most operas contain some type of love duet – why do you think this musical form is such an integral operatic element?



3

MUSICAL EXCERPT

Act II, aria: “Eri tu che macchiavi quell’anima” (“It was you who besmirched that soul”)

CONNECTION TO STORY

Believing that his wife Amelia has been unfaithful to him with Riccardo, Renato decides to kill his former friend. His emotional reaction is multi-faceted, however, as he also laments the breakdown of his marriage and the loss of an important friend.

MUSICAL SIGNIFICANCE

This is the most complex and elaborate aria Verdi ever wrote for the baritone voice and remains the most famous musical number from the opera. Verdi was almost single-handedly responsible for creating a new type of baritone – now unsurprisingly labeled the “Verdi baritone” – who could manage the high-lying *tessitura* (where the music lies in a singer’s range) of an aria like this one, and emit the kind of rich, warm timbre required to fill out its long-breathed phrases. To this day, the Verdi baritone is one of the rarest voice types; it’s extremely difficult to find singers who can meet the demands of this type of vocal writing.

“Eri tu” has a two-part structure: in the opening section, Renato addresses a portrait of Riccardo, not only angry because of the affair he suspects Riccardo had with his wife Amelia, but because he laments the loss of a trusted friend whom he admires. The second, less overtly dramatic section, called the *cantabile* (song-like piece), begins with the passage “O dolcezze perdute, o memorie” (“O lost sweets; O memories” – listen at 1:06). Here, the spinning melody which movingly conveys Renato’s grief and disillusionment is supported by an appropriately light, *arpeggiated* (broken chord) harp accompaniment.

FURTHER REFLECTION

An aria like this one allows a character to externalize emotion while no one else is onstage in much the same way as does a monologue in a play. Name some famous monologues from plays you know (from any time period) and decide what primary emotions the character is expressing.

Is Renato a villain in your opinion? Is he at all justified in wanting to seek revenge against Riccardo?



4

MUSICAL EXCERPT

Act III, aria: “Saper vorreste di che si veste” (“You would like to know what he’s wearing”)

CONNECTION TO THE STORY

At the ball, the conspirators are worried that Riccardo could have discovered their plot and stayed away. Unwittingly, Oscar acts as their accomplice: he thinks Renato wishes to play a joke on his friend, and after some hesitation, he reveals Riccardo’s disguise.

MUSICAL SIGNIFICANCE

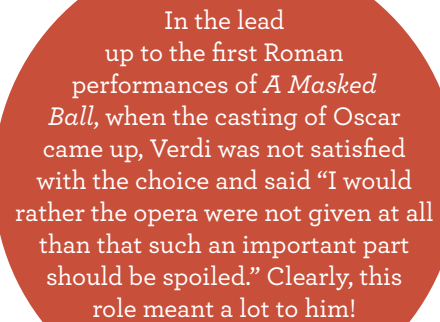
The role of Oscar comes out of the well-established tradition of pants roles (male characters sung by sopranos and mezzo-sopranos) stretching back to Cherubino in Mozart’s *Le nozze di Figaro* (1786) and going forward to Richard Strauss’s Octavian in *Der Rosenkavalier* (1911). The high *tessitura* of Oscar’s vocal line signifies his youthfulness, joy, and uninhibited emotion. Oscar’s high spirits in this little aria add sparkle and form a contrast to the grim conspiracy that underlies the glamour of the masked ball. Listen as the cheeky page taunts the men who are plotting Riccardo’s assassination with his “tra la las” at 00:25.

Oscar's music is based on French musical models (see also Musical Excerpt #1). "Saper vorreste" is a straight-forward French *couplet* (two-verses song), a relatively simple musical form appropriate for a servant character. Contrast this with Verdi's music for the more socially exalted Riccardo and Amelia who express their emotions in a formal style, with full-blown *arias*, *cabalettas* and grand duets. NOTE: In the COC's production, the role of Oscar is depicted as female.

FURTHER REFLECTION

Why do you think composers like Verdi used a high-voiced female singer to play the role of a young man like Oscar?

Name some other operatic roles or characters in films or books you've read in which a woman either plays or impersonates a man.



In the lead up to the first Roman performances of *A Masked Ball*, when the casting of Oscar came up, Verdi was not satisfied with the choice and said "I would rather the opera were not given at all than that such an important part should be spoiled." Clearly, this role meant a lot to him!

What to Look for

The Canadian Opera Company will present *A Masked Ball* in a production from Berlin Staatsoper. This production premiered there in 2008.

You'll recall that Verdi had already changed the setting of his opera from Sweden to America, in order to appease censors who were worried about depicting European monarchs getting assassinated on stage. In the production you'll see at the COC, directors Jossi Wieler and Sergio Morabito have chosen to follow the American setting, placing the action in the United States. But they transport the events to an imagined America, with strong nods to the American South of the turbulent 1960s, a period which saw the rise of the Civil Rights movement and the assassination of President Kennedy.

The early 1960s in America was a forward-looking time, full of anticipation for what a brilliant future in a prosperous civilization might look like. Designers, architects and engineers were keen on utilizing modern technology and materials. There was a fascination with space travel, sleek lines, graphic shapes and bright colours.

Masked Ball's set (by designer Barbara Ehnes) depicts a glamorous night club, with a stage, bar and dance floor. The mirrored opulence is literally reflected in a series of chandeliers made of small round discs that can be lowered and raised.

The colours of the set, which are aided by strong lighting design (by Olaf Freese), are pale blue, silver and red, with touches of orange. The look is very much of its time and this also shows in the costuming by designer Anja Rabes. Costumes range from more conservative cuts and looks of the late 50s for older characters, to the more modern fashions gaining ascendancy in the early 60s: colour-blocked and sparkly mini-dresses for women, tightly tailored slim-fitting suits for men. Amelia has hints of Jackie Kennedy glamour in the lines of her outfits. And in one scene, Riccardo wears well-tailored khakis and a sweater, a look reminiscent of President Kennedy whose image captured a historical moment of American glamour, youth and promise.

Like any well-rendered period piece, it's important to remember that not every character in a story is going to dress completely in fashion. As in our own time, some people may be five or 10 years behind what is considered in style!



(l-r) Dalibor Jenis as Renato, Piotr Beczala as Riccardo and Catherine Naglestad as Amelia in the Berlin Staatsoper production of *A Masked Ball*, 2008. Photo: Ruth Walz

COC Spotlight: Karen Olinyk

Not everyone at the COC is an opera singer... take a peek behind the scenes and learn about the many diverse careers available in the arts! In this edition we interview Karen Olinyk, Assistant, Artistic Administration and Music and a Member of the COC Chorus.



Karen Olinyk

(Assistant, Artistic Administration and Music / Member of the COC Chorus)

Position: Assistant, Artistic Administration and Music / Member of the COC Chorus

Name: Karen Olinyk

Hometown: Born in Burnaby, BC

Education: Bachelor of Music and Master of Music from University of British Columbia (UBC); Diploma in Operatic Performance from University of Toronto (UofT)

First became interested in opera: during my undergraduate degree (Bachelor of Music) at UBC. I originally started as a choral singer in children's choirs, my high school choir, and then went into voice performance at UBC. It was there that I was recruited for my first operatic role: Assunta in *The Saint of Bleeker Street* by Menotti. I loved the whole idea of being a character, in costume, on stage – I was hooked!

What made you decide to pursue this sort of career path? For singing, I think it was just the pure enjoyment of performing, either in a choir, as a soloist, or onstage in an opera, that made me want to pursue that career. I couldn't think of a greater joy than doing what I loved to do and sharing it with other people. For administrative work, it just seems to be

a wonderful way to combine a "day job" with my love of opera. Because I help set up chorus auditions and Ensemble Studio auditions at the COC, I interact with many singers and am able to help them along their career path.

If someone was interested in working in an opera company's music department, what would you recommend they have in terms of skills or experience? Difficult question...we have several people in the music department who have many, many years of performing experience (which includes singers, pianists, conductors, etc.) as well as people that have production backgrounds (stage managers, set painters, etc.) so obviously having operatic experience of some kind is a huge asset. Everyone in the music department also has to have a certain level of proficiency in computer programs such as Word, Excel, Filemaker and be capable of doing a certain amount of research both in the traditional sense and on the Internet.

If someone was interested in becoming a member of an opera chorus, what would you recommend they have in terms of skills or experience? I believe that everyone in the chorus has a degree or diploma in either voice performance or opera performance. (Many have degrees in other areas, as well!) Certainly, any kind of stage or dance experience is an asset. For our auditions, we ask that each singer prepare two arias, one in Italian and one in any other language, so being able to sing in languages other than English is an important skill to have. Solo singing experience as well as choral experience can be an asset.

What do you love most about your career? I love so many things about singing but I think the thing I love most is just being on stage at the Four Seasons Centre for the Performing Arts. It's a huge thrill every time – being on stage never gets old. Administratively, I most enjoy helping people navigate the audition process and being able to share information about the COC, our performances, and all of our great programs.

What do you enjoy the least about your career? I think the long hours, especially when I am working in the office during the day and then have a rehearsal at night until 11 p.m.!

What surprises you most about your career? How much I enjoy the challenge of learning a new opera and how much paperwork is involved in opera.

What are you looking forward to most in *A Masked Ball*? I'm really excited about Adrienne Pieczonka singing Amelia – I think she's amazing, I love watching her work and can't wait to hear her in this role.

What do you enjoy outside of opera? I enjoy going out for dinner with friends, gardening, traveling to BC to see my family, and going out to concerts and other opera performances. It's really nice to be in the audience sometimes.

Active Learning

One of the best parts of taking your students to the opera is the discussion and further exploration the opera can inspire. Take a deeper look into the themes and story of *A Masked Ball* with these discussion questions and ideas for further exploration.

DISCUSSION

- ♦ Amelia goes to the graveyard on Ulrica's advice, in order to find a plant that will get rid of her illicit love for Riccardo. What would such a plant look like? Would you take it?
- ♦ Should Riccardo have told Renato about the prediction after they shook hands? Why or why not?
- ♦ Examine different methods of fortune-telling. Do you believe in it? Hold a debate on whether or not fortune-tellers like Ulrica are genuine.

FURTHER EXPLORATION

- ♦ What happens to Renato and Amelia after the ball? Will Renato let her live? Write a story exploring the lives of Renato and Amelia after the masked ball.
- ♦ This opera was censored because the plot centered around the assassination of a monarch (see more on page 10). Verdi refused the changes required by the censors and had the opera performed elsewhere, with only the geographical setting amended, as well as corresponding changes to titles (for example, Riccardo, was transformed from a king to a governor). Find other examples of writers and artists fighting against censorship, either historically or in our own time. What are your own thoughts concerning the censorship of art, music, and literature? Are there times when you feel it's appropriate, or is it always wrong? Discuss as a class.

Did viewing the opera spark some scintillating debates or discussions? Would your students like to share examples of their work with the COC? E-mail us at education@coc.ca. We'd love to hear from you!

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Opera Now podcast, episode 170.



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