

Verdi's Fathers and Daughters

by Gianna Wichelow

An early tragedy in Verdi's first marriage had a lasting impact on his life, and – many believe – on his art.

At the age of 23, in 1836, he married Margherita Barezzi, one of his music students. This was a love match and they had two children in quick succession: a daughter in 1837 and then a son in 1838. Later in 1838 their little girl suddenly died. A year later the little boy died. And a year after that, at the age of 27, Verdi found himself a widower, when his wife passed away suddenly. A few years later he began a relationship with the soprano Giuseppina Strepponi, whom he married in 1859. That marriage produced no children. Is it possible that the father-daughter relationships he portrayed so movingly in his operas was an outlet for what he had lost in his own life?

The following three examples illustrate the most potent of Verdi's father-daughter relationships.

In *Luisa Miller*, the title character is devoted to her father, and is also in love with a man she cannot have. Complications ensue (of course!) and she sacrifices her own romantic fulfilment to save her father's life. By a twist of fate she dies from poison handed her by her beloved, before dying in her father's arms.

In *Rigoletto* the title character of the hunchback has retrieved his daughter Gilda from the convent school she attended. He has not seen her in years, and there is an awkward tenderness between them as they get to know each other again. But it is not long before she is seduced by the Duke, and – sacrificing herself for her new love – is mistakenly stabbed to death by her father. In their final,

heartbreaking duet, she tells him she will be reunited with her mother in heaven.

There are other examples of tragic and moving father/daughter relationships in Verdi's operas, but none perhaps were so personally and dramatically personified as in *Simon Boccanegra*.

In the prologue of the opera Simon discovers that the woman he loves has died. The child she bore him out of wedlock has disappeared. As he is acclaimed Doge of Genoa and achieves the pinnacle of his public life, he realizes he has lost the two people he loves most in the world.

The rest of the opera takes place 25 years later, and – early on – we have the magnificent reunion scene as Simon meets and recognizes his beloved daughter Amelia, now grown up. We can't help but be reminded of Verdi's own tragedy and how he might have imagined – miraculously – meeting his own daughter as a grown woman, and the outpouring of almost unbearable joy he would have felt. The music speaks for itself in this most beautiful duet.

Their time together is short-lived, however, as Simon dies in the end of the opera. He knows his daughter has found a love of her own in Gabriele, and decrees that his new son-in-law will succeed as Doge after him. But it is a bittersweet twist that just as he has found her, so he loses her again, along with his life.

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