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# MANTUA, THE CITY OF RIGOLETTO

Itinerary discovering the places in Giuseppe Verdi's Opera

The last of these houses, once owned by the family of the Cavriani Counts (the Count of Ceprano is one of the main characters of the opera), lets us imagine an original floor plan similar to the one described in the opera as Rigoletto's house, with a rear facing the patrolled walkway, bordered by a great defensive lakeside wall recalling the old bastion, with an extensive view of the Middle Lake.

(Act one, scene seven)  
*L'estremità più deserta d'una via cieca.  
A sinistra una casa di discreta apparenza  
con una piccola corte circondata da muro.*

*«... la porta che dà al bastione  
è sempre chiusa?» (Rigoletto) [scene ten]*

*«Adducilo  
Di qua al bastione ... or ite ...» (Gilda) [scene twelve]*

Via Cappuccine, which leads to Square of San Leonardo from Via Trento, still recalls the scenario of the first meeting between Rigoletto and Sparafucile. From Via Trento, on the right there is Cavriani Palace (clearly similar to the name of the count of Ceprano) and on the left what remains of the boundary wall of the Capuchin garden, opposite to the former convent of the same name which closes the alley.

(Act one, scene seven)  
*L'estremità d'una via cieca ....  
... a destra della via è il muro altissimo  
del giardino e un fianco del palazzo di Ceprano.*

*«A voi presente un uom di spada sta ... » (Sparafucile) [scene seven]  
«Pari siamo! ... Io la lingua, egli ha il pugnale;  
L'uomo son io che ride, ei quel che spegne» (Rigoletto) [scene eight]*

The temple, where the courtship of the Duke and the first sentimental seduction of Gilda took place, is never represented on stage, nor described, but it is nevertheless important in the story. If we accept the location of Rigoletto's House at the end of Via Cappuccine, it seems obvious to think that the temple might be associated with the Church of San Leonardo.

(Act two, scene six)  
*«Tutte le feste al tempio  
mentre pregava Iddio,  
bello e fatale un giovane  
s'offerse al guardo mio ...» (Gilda)*

## 4 - SPARAFUCILE'S ROCCHETTA



Detail of the borgo floorplan of San Giorgio based on an early 19th century map (Private collection).



Mantua  
Sparafucile's Rocchetta

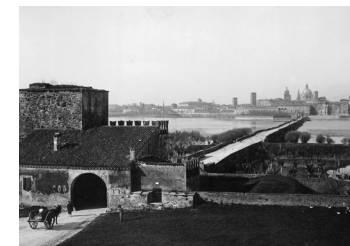
Sparafucile's inn may be ascribed to the current Rocchetta (stronghold) bearing the same name, that is remains of a fortification wall protecting the satellite village of San Giorgio since the late Middle Ages (as can be seen from the Bertazzolo chart of 1628) which, at the time when the opera was written, still served as a guard station and customs post. The Rocchetta has been partially restored, although it cannot be visited inside. The inn, the main set of act three and location where Rigoletto's curse took place, with the death of his daughter Gilda, is represented in a completely realistic manner: both Piave and Bertolucci imagined it distant and isolated from the public street as, indeed, it is currently.

(Act three, scene one)

*A sinistra, è una casa a due piani, mezzo diroccata,  
la cui fronte, volta allo spettatore, lascia vedere per una  
grande arcata l'interno d'una rustica osteria al pian terreno,  
ed una rozza scala che mette al granaio...*

*“La donna è mobile  
qual piuma al vento,  
muta d'accento  
e di pensiero” (the Duke) [scene two]*

## 5 - MIDDLE LAKE



Mantua,  
Sparafucile's Rocchetta,  
on background the bridge of San Giorgio and the city of Mantua  
(ASCMn, Photographic Collection, Dresser, Gardens Box 1, photo 5)



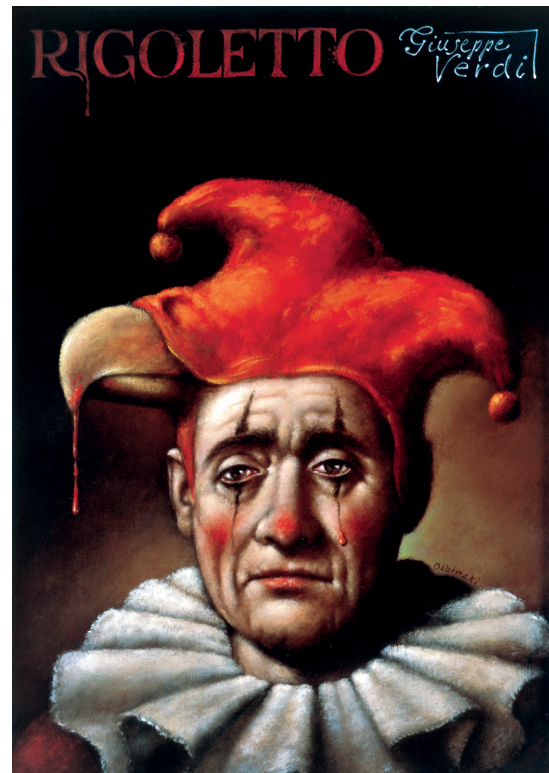
Mantua,  
view of the city.  
(©Lucio Rossi/Latitudeslife.com)

The inn of Sparafucile is situated on the left bank of Middle Lake, one of the three lakes formed by the River Mincio, the dark and mysterious setting of the last dramatic events of the opera. From the lake shore we can also see the majestic and mysterious profile of the princely city that frames the whole drama of Rigoletto.

(Act three, scene one)

*Deserta sponda destra del Mincio.  
Il resto del teatro rappresenta la deserta parte del Mincio,  
che nel fondo scorre dietro un parapetto in mezza ruina;  
di là dal fiume è Mantova. È notte.*

*«Qual notte di mistero!  
Una tempesta in cielo!  
In terra un omicidio!» (Rigoletto) [scene seven]*



## MANTOVA CITTÀ D'ARTE E DI CULTURA



INTRODUCTION

We trace our steps through the places of the opera “Rigoletto” by Giuseppe Verdi, set in Mantua in the 16th century, through an itinerary weaving together imagination and reality. These places were part of the setting of the opera, but they were so close to reality that the people in the audience attending the melodrama saw reflections of different moments in their own lives, recognizing familiar environments and landscapes, the result of a conscious and realistic decision of the author of the opera. Palaces and squares, streets and alleys, city views were as true and realistic as to be identified in a hypothetical

ORIGIN OF THE OPERA

In 1850 Giuseppe Verdi set up a new Opera, on a libretto by Francesco Maria Piave, taken from the play by Victor Hugo *Le Roi s'amuse*, which struck him for the intensity of the main characters and the dramatic force of the story. It is a harsh tragedy where figures with reprehensible customs, seducers, courtiers, assassins and prostitutes, are set and there is even an attempt to assassinate a king. It was to be performed at the Gran Teatro La Fenice in Venice under the title *The curse*. On 21 November 1850, however, the opera encountered the prohibition of Austrian censorship, deploring “the poet Piave and the famous master Verdi” for having failed “to choose another set to demonstrate their talents except disgusting immorality and obscene triviality”. While another version of the libretto was quickly prepared, largely purged of the unpleasant passages, which however encountered the steady opposition of Verdi, discrete negotiation began by the management of the Fenice and by Piave with the Central Directorate of Police, which was to allow the opera Rigoletto to be staged - on 11 March 1851 – where, in return for maintaining the dramatic conflicts created by Hugo, and wanted by Verdi, there is a change of places and historical times: from Paris to Mantua, from the Seine to the Mincio, from a King to a Duke, from Triboulet, evil jester, to Rigoletto. In the end the operation was genial and highly successful, thanks to the work of the Central Director of Police Luigi Martello “who was in fact one of the compilers of the new opera's libretto”, as the musicologist Claudio Gallico wrote. Martello reached the top of the Lombardy-Veneto administration after having served it for many years precisely in Mantua, as “a very sad commissioner”, available to exchange “license with liberty”, as described by Don Enrico Tazzoli in his chronicle of 1848 in Mantua. The undeniable

location within the city. The scene sketches of Giuseppe Bertoja, trustworthy set designer of Verdi, the seventeenth-century map of the engineer and cartographer Gabriele Bertazzolo, the Teresian cadastre, the chronicles of this period, are the traces to find a connection between the environments and landscapes described in the Opera and real places, as we can see them now. This itinerary, although it is a fictional work and based on a theatrical work, intends to offer the traveller new ways for interpreting the historical and cultural heritage, as well as new opportunities for visiting the city.

wisdom of the accomplishment of the transposition is in large measure due to the deep knowledge that the Director had of the city and its surroundings, and enabled him to suggest to Piave scenarios, names, settings and situations which made the new location more plausible: for the realism of the solutions adopted, for the matching of the stage performances to the places, for the “veracity of the artistic fictions, more real, than reality itself in invention and artifice” (still Gallico) to lead the people of Mantua to recognize Rigoletto as their fellow-citizen, and also find him a home.

THE PLOT OF THE OPERA

The opera consists of three acts. The main characters are the Duke of Mantua, the court jester Rigoletto, Gilda (the daughter of the jester), Sparafucile and his sister Maddalena.

The opera is set in Mantua and its surroundings, in the 16th century. The hunchback and deformed Rigoletto is the insolent and cynical court jester of the Duke of Mantua, arrogant libertine and great seducer. Rigoletto has an only daughter, Gilda, a beautiful and pure girl, whom he loved deeply and forced into a secluded and secret life. Gilda confirms his devotion to her father, however concealing her interest for an unknown young man she meets every Sunday at church and she feels in her heart to love. The young man, who represents himself to be a poor student, is none other than the Duke

in disguise who, impressed by the beauty of Gilda, and ignoring who she is, decides to conquer her, with the complicity of the nurse. In the meanwhile, the courtiers of the Duke, in order to punish the insolence of Rigoletto, decide to kidnap the young woman whom he hides at home, believing her to be his mistress. At night the misdeed is accomplished, with the involvement of Rigoletto himself who, bandaged, believes to participate with his friends the courtiers in the abduction of a lady loved by the Duke, the Countess of Ceprano; Gilda is carried off to the palace, where, Rigoletto, once alone, discovers the terrible joke. Returning at night to Gilda's house and without finding her, The Duke is worried and distressed; the Courtiers announce him to have abducted Rigoletto's mistress: the Duke informed that Gilda is in his palace, goes and reaches her exultant. Rigoletto hastens to the palace, he begs the onlookers for pity and he asks for his daughter to be returned to him. Gilda finally joins him and tells him how she met the Duke and how she has been now deceived and outraged by him. Rigoletto, recalling a similar story which happened to the old Count of Monterone, mocked by him, decides to avenge the grave offense: the Duke will pay his wickedness with death. So he hires an assassin, Sparafucile, who runs an infamous inn where his sister Maddalena receives her customers: she has also attracted the Duke who, incognito, courts her. Rigoletto and Gilda also come here, while she is disguised as a man, ready to leave for Verona; but first Rigoletto wants his daughter, still in love with the Duke, to see his infidelity with her own eyes. The young man, disguised as an official, is already in the inn and declares his love to Maddalena. Gilda leaves and Rigoletto pays the assassin to kill his sister's suitor and hand over the corpse to him wrapped in a sack. But Maddalena, moved by a feeling of mercy for the handsome young man, persuades his brother to spare him: Sparafucile will kill the first traveller who, by midnight, asks for hospitality at the inn, and then he will hand over the body, wrapped in a sack to Rigoletto. But the traveller will be Gilda who, driven by the love for the Duke returns to the inn and decides to sacrifice herself for him after hearing what Sparafucile and Maddalena have agreed. The situation degenerates: Gilda is stabbed and when Rigoletto, triumphant, opens the sack, he discovers the agonizing body of his daughter who dies asking her desperate father forgiveness for herself and her seducer.

Notes translated from *Il Dizionario dell'Opera*, edited by Piero Gelli, Milan, Baldini&Castoldi, c1996, p. 1066-1069

RIGOLETTO'S PLACE

There were many places in the city of Mantua which inspired the setting of Rigoletto to Francesco Maria Piave and his collaborators and that later the Mantuans could recognize as most authentic in the performances of the opera of Verdi.

For each location you can see:  
- in italics the scenic provisions of the libretto, which are considered to be corresponding;  
- in quotation marks the quotes of the most famous passages which are sung and relate to the same places mentioned.

- 1 PALAZZO DUCALE
- 2 RIGOLETTO'S HOUSE
- 3 ST. LEONARDO DISTRICT
- 4 SPARAFUCILE ROCCHETTA'S
- 5 MIDDLE LAKE

1 - PALAZZO DUCALE



Gabriele Bertazzolo, *Urbis Mantuae Descriptio*, Mantova, Ludovico Delfichi, 1628 (Teresian Municipal Library Roll 1 Printing)



Palazzo Ducale Sala dei Fiumi



Palazzo Ducale, residence of the Duke of Mantua, is the setting of the first and second act of the opera, and the place where the first events leading to the final tragedy of Rigoletto start, among dances, music, courtships and jokes.

The private apartments and the magnificent rooms, where banquets, receptions and parties gladdened the Duke's life, are likely to be identified with the Appartamento di Vincenzo I and the Sala dei Fiumi. The complex of Palazzo Ducale is among the most extensive palaces in Europe, with its precious rooms, numerous buildings connected by corridors and galleries, private apartments, courtyards, squares and gardens. It hosts masterpieces of the 15th and 16th centuries, as the chivalric cycle by Pisanello, the Camera degli Sposi by Andrea Mantegna, the Appartamento di Troia by Giulio Romano and the tapestries by Raffaello. Since 1590, Claudio Monteverdi, author of L'Orfeo, the first masterpiece of melodrama, also worked here. Within the perimeter of the Palazzo Ducale in fact stood the court theatre of the Gonzaga, transformed first into a cocoon market and then into a vegetable market, and which now houses the National Archaeological Museum. In the complex of Palazzo Ducale there is also the Palatine Basilica of St. Barbara, the church where the liturgical functions of the court were celebrated, accompanied by sacred music played on the organ by Graziadio Antegnati, dating back to 1565 and still working.

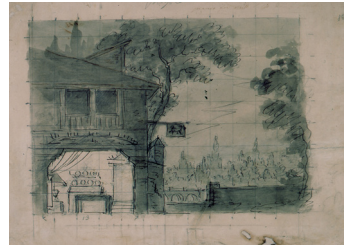
(Act one, scene one)  
*Sala magnifica nel Palazzo Ducale con porte nel fondo che mettono ad altre Sale, Pure splendidamente illuminate...*

«Questa o quella per me pari sono a quant'altre dintorno mi vedo...» (the Duke)

(Act two, scene one)  
*Salotto nel Palazzo Ducale. Vi sono due porte laterali, una maggiore nel fondo che si schiude...*

«Cortigiani, vil razza dannata, per qual prezzo vendeste il mio bene?» (Rigoletto) [scene four]

2 - RIGOLETTO'S HOUSE, PIAZZA SORDELLO



Giuseppe Bertoja, The most deserted dead-end street. Sketch for the first performance of Rigoletto (1.7). Pencil, pen and watercolor. Pordenone, Civic Museum "Ricchieri".



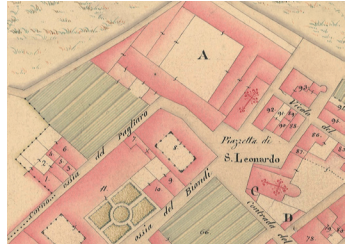
Mantua. Rigoletto's House, Studio Calzolari 1950-65 (Mantua, Photo library of the Baratta Library/ Media Library, Tourist Promotion Fund, APT 290)

Although its position is not the one that can be deduced from the description provided by the libretto (... Gilda resided “in a quiet back-alley (in un remota calle)” at “the most deserted end of a cul-de-sac (all'estremità più deserta di una cieca via)” ...), the court jester's house was identified with the current Rigoletto's House in Piazza Sordello. In fact, the dwelling is the only remaining example of a typical two-storey building with a fenced garden, characteristic of Renaissance Mantua, which curiously corresponds to the indications of Hugo and later Piave, as represented in the sketch of the scene by Bertoja. Moreover, the proximity of the house to the ducal residence seemed suitable for a person working at court, and in particular for a court jester. The current house has a small porch, evoked by opera lovers as the “balcony of Gilda”, which marks out a pleasant garden, in which stands the statue of Rigoletto, by the sculptor Aldo Falchi, placed here in 1978. The building is currently the seat of the tourist Infopoint “Rigoletto's House”.

(Act one, scene seven)  
*L'estremità più deserta d'una via cieca. A sinistra una casa di discreta apparenza con una piccola corte circondata da muro. Nella corte un grosso ed alto albero ed un sedile di marmo; nel muro, una porta che mette alla strada; sopra il muro, un terrazzo praticabile, sostenuto da arcate. La porta del primo piano dà sul detto terrazzo.*

«Caro nome che il mio cor festi primo palpar, ...» (Gilda) [scene thirteen]

3 - ST. LEONARDO DISTRICT



Mantua, church of San Leonardo, Teresian Cadastre, 1778, State Archives of Mantua. Detail



Vicolo Cappuccine District of San Leonardo

From the description by Piave, Rigoletto's house could be placed in the urban area bounded by the patrolled wall overlooking Middle Lake. The most authentic traces of the past documented by Bertazzolo can be found in the district of San Leonardo and precisely among the houses next to the former convent of the Capuchin nuns, an 18th century building situated in Square of San Leonardo, used as a military hospital during the Austrian domination.