

Preview

Opera Circle's *Rigoletto*: conversations with conductor Andrea Raffanini and baritone Marco Stella

by Mike Telin



“I love this opera!” exclaims Italian conductor Andrea Raffanini. “*Rigoletto* is one of the best, not just for Verdi but for all of the nineteenth century opera repertoire.” On Saturday, June 15 beginning at 7:30 in the Ohio Theatre at PlayhouseSquare, [Opera Circle](#) presents one performance of Verdi’s masterpiece under the direction of Maestro Andrea Raffanini.

Based on Victor Hugo’s play *Le roi s’amuse*, the opera was premiered on March 11, 1851 in Venice and was an instant success. Its tragic story centers around the Duke of Mantua, his court jester, Rigoletto, and his daughter Gilda ([read a synopsis here](#)).

“Rigoletto is a complex character, but it’s a role that is a baritone’s dream,” says Marco Stella, who will make his Opera Circle debut in the title role. Performed in the original Italian with English subtitles, the cast includes tenor Isaac Hurtado as the Duke, soprano Dorota Sobieska as Gilda and bass Nathan Baer as the assassin, Sparafucile.

We spoke to conductor [Andrea Raffanini](#) and dramatic baritone [Marco Stella](#) by telephone to hear their perspectives on Verdi’s masterpiece.

Andrea Raffanini

Mike Telin: Maestro Raffanini, thanks for taking the time to talk. This is not your first time conducting in Cleveland.

Andrea Raffanini: That’s right, I conducted CityMusic in 2004 and Bellini’s *Montagues and Capulets* in 2009 with Opera Circle.

MT: What are the challenges of conducting Rigoletto?

AR: Conducting *Rigoletto* is a challenge because [the work] represents a new approach to opera for Verdi. And the character of Rigoletto is not that of a normal singer or a normal role. [With *Rigoletto*] Verdi wanted to create a new way of singing, and for half of the opera the character doesn’t sing. He does sing but it’s like more like speaking, because Verdi wanted a new [approach] to acting in the opera. In *Rigoletto* we sing because something has happened. I think this is opposite [of most] opera.

MT: In view of Verdi's new approach to opera with Rigoletto, what do you like about his approach?

AR: It's difficult to choose because I think it is a perfect opera. For example, Verdi started [this approach] four years earlier with *Macbeth* but it was too much too early. In *Rigoletto* he wanted to do something really new, but Verdi also wanted to give to the Italian audience something that was normal, so the role of the Duke is very classical. He's a tenor. He sings when he is in love, when he is angry, when he's happy, when he's drunk, he's always singing. The role of Gilda falls somewhere in between the Duke and *Rigoletto*, she is a soprano, sometimes sings bell canto, and sometimes more dramatic. All of these characters go around the central role of *Rigoletto*.

MT: Tell me your thoughts about the role of Rigoletto.

AR: I like the deepness of *Rigoletto*. He begins as a clown but during the opera he becomes more and more human. He doesn't sing in the beginning but as he becomes human he needs to sing. When he cries he needs to sing. And by the end of the opera he sings more, because he is becoming human. In the beginning it is a shock for the audience because he speaks. It is in the music but it is like speaking. He is an actor.

Rigoletto is a role that can have all of the different colors of humanity. He's terrible in the beginning, a very bad person. And he is a father crying in the middle, but he is a man who cannot cry at certain points and a man who can cry at other points. With his daughter he is a good person, but he is a terrible person with the friends of the Duke. He wants to kill someone but he wants to [protect] his daughter.

It's also important to remember that Verdi chose the subject of *Rigoletto* after Victor Hugo, but the most important writer for Verdi was Shakespeare. Throughout his life he wrote after Shakespeare, *Macbeth*, *Othello* and *Falstaff*. He wanted to realize *King Lear*, but he couldn't because he understood that *King Lear* was too difficult for the opera world. It was not possible to turn it into an opera.

MT: Your enthusiasm for the opera really comes through, but you also have an enthusiasm for researching and writing.

AR: Yes, When I was a student I also studied literature and history so for me it is very important to understand the context, the period and the culture the social atmosphere and the history when something happens. It is important also because you imagine what the meaning of a choice is at that moment [in time]. It is important to understand the origin of every choice of the composer. And to understand why the composer chose [to do it that way]. And I just like history so it's always a pleasure, not just the job. [laughing]

MT: How does your research play into this production?

AR: You know, it's not always possible to put everything into one production, you have to consider how much time you have and money. Of course if you have a billion dollars you can choose the costumes and add certain details and add everything you want. But

what I care about with this production is the color, and the dramatic tension of the opera is really important. We don't have a lot of money or a month of rehearsal time. But, I think we can do that, because it is normal to prepare an opera in one week, so it is the job of the conductor to choose what is important for a good performance.

Marco Stella



Dramatic baritone Marco Stella is a fascinating conversationalist. Born in Stockholm, the son of a Swedish mother and a father of Italian heritage, he first realized he wanted to make singing his career after performing the lead in the musical *Chess* at the age of twenty.

Mike Telin: Is this your first role for Opera Circle?

Marco Stella: Yes it is and it is also my first i. But it is not my first performance in the States; I sang at the Austin Lyric Opera in 2004.

MT: Your first Rigoletto? Congratulations, and I don't need to tell you that it is a rather complex role.

MS: [Laughing] Well I think that is why I have waited to perform the role but I have to say it's a role that is a baritone's dream.

MT: Why did you wait so long to take on the role?

MS: I Started singing relatively late. I was twenty-two when I decided to go into opera and the first production I ever saw was *Rigoletto*. I was absolutely blown away with Verdi's music and the complexity of the role. And I said to myself, maybe a little naively, but I did say that I don't think I will be able to play the role until I have a daughter or a child. I now have an eleven year-old daughter and now I can really get into it. I think you need to go in with that weight in your body and mind.

Also, the Italians speak about color all the time, the colors of your voice. There are voices that will just trump it out in the role of Rigoletto or there will be very lyrical voices that don't have the right color. But the Italians and the school I come from, we are always searching to have a color in how you speak to your daughter and how you address the maid — how you talk about the Duke and how you speak to the Duke, how you speak to Sparafucile and how you reflect about how you spoke to Sparafucile. So there are so many shades and colors. It is a very complex role.

MT: I had a great conversation with Andrea Raffanini about the evolution of Rigoletto during the opera; how do you see his development as a character?

MS: First, I think there has to be a pre-Rigoletto, before he came to the court. They talk about the fact that his daughter has been there for three months, but he has not always been at the court and she has been in a convent prior to this point. Rigoletto was not wor-

ried about her when she was in the convent because no one could reach her. But now she has been in town for three months and he is worried. He takes her to church, but that is the meeting point, that was a dating place during those times, the place where met your spouse – that's where conversations took place. And that must terrify him. But at the same time he cannot deny his daughter to go to church on Sunday because that is what everybody does.

So at the beginning of the opera Rigoletto is already not in a happy place, he is worried. He goes to work but he hates going because that means he has to leave his beloved daughter. I also think he has a guilt trip because he could not take care of her which is why he put her in the convent. He also speaks about his love for the wife who died — we don't know when she died but she left him with the daughter.

I also think that if he had not been taken up in the Duke's court as a jester he probably would have been dead on the street and because of all of this he has evolved into a not very nice person. Deep down I don't think Rigoletto is a nice person. He has a tremendous love for his daughter, but I'm sure he's scorned by life.

There is an intriguing point in the opera when Sparafucile [enters] and Rigoletto asks him if he is a thief? Sparafucile says no, I'm a killer. And right away Rigoletto asks him how much to kill a nobleman? He's not afraid, he just sees an opportunity and I think that says a lot about Rigoletto. This is just my interpretation but it is how I read the music.

MT: I would say that Rigoletto is streetwise and not to be taken as a fool in spite of the fact that he is a jester.

MS: Absolutely!

MT: On a completely different subject, you come from a very interesting background, Swedish and Italian.

MS: A lot of Italians immigrated to Sweden. The first came between 1910 and 1915, they were plasterers and made ornaments on the top of the ceilings of houses like leaves, or small angels. This was very typical in European houses and the Italians were the best at it. Then in the 1950's Sweden was [booming] after the war because Sweden had no war or recession and the country had all of these great industries that needed labor.

MT: How did your family get to Sweden?

MS: My Father had an Italian orchestra — you can go to YouTube and look at *Bruno Stella Orchestra*. He started it during the war as a trio and that evolved into an orchestra. They came to Sweden in 1956 and made a big breakthrough. Of course the Italians were always nicely dressed and brought wine and good manners. He met my mom in 1958, they were married and I was born in 1966. So I do have some musical background from my father.

MT: And Scandinavia has been quite good for your career?

MS: Absolutely it has. I studied at opera school there and my first jobs as a freelancer were in Sweden. After that I was a soloist for three years in Lübeck, Germany. During those years I was still singing as a bass-buffo- bass-baritone. Then I met my singing teacher who I still have, Dale Fundling, an American living in Europe. He told me that I was not a bass-buffo-bass-baritone but rather a dramatic baritone. So we started to make the change. That has been successful for me, and I'm now on a three year contract with the Gothenburg Opera as a soloist. And [the Opera Circle] opportunity came up because Dorota also started studying with Dale a year ago and she heard of me through him.

MT: You said you came to singing quite late; can you pinpoint the moment when you made that decision?

MS: I have the date and the hour. [laughing] I was twenty years old and I had just finished my last year of high school in Sweden. I had been an exchange student in the States but I wanted to finish my degree in Sweden. I was studying economics and languages. The school had an artistic branch although I was not part of it but I played the guitar and sang. They liked my singing, and they asked me if I would play the main role in a newly-written Swedish musical called *Chess*. It has played in both New York and London and it was written by the guys from ABBA who also wrote *Mamma Mia!* We had to ask for permission to do the world premiere staging of it before the [official] premiere in London which was set for March, 1986 and ours was in January. And Benny Andersson, the pianist with ABBA who co-wrote it and who was a good friend, said great, do it. The musical is about the chess match between Bobby Fischer and Garry Kasparov. So on the stage singing I decided that was what I wanted to do. After I completed my year of military service, I looked for a singing teacher, and they told me that being Italian and with my voice, I should sing opera. And that's how it all started.

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