

LOVE AND INTRIGUE

by Lionel Lackey

In setting Schiller's melodrama, Verdi began to break with convention

How the public takes to *Luisa Miller*, the latest work the Metropolitan has revived to satisfy the unprecedented postwar hunger for unknown Verdi, will require time to determine. Its greatest appeal at first may be to connoisseurs, but the general public too can find in it—if not a masterpiece—an interesting appetizer to the banquet of *Don Carlo*, *Aida* and *Otello*. The strange and bitter taste of *Luisa Miller* does not contradict the stark, almost cryptic simplicity of Verdi's musical manner; indeed, it proceeds from it. The libretto, provided by Salvatore Cammarano, gave the morose composer a subject to which he could respond in greater depth than to the conventional stories he had previously set.

It originated in *Kabale und Liebe*, a drama by Friedrich Schiller—a story of simple, honest love crushed by cynical plotting in high places. For Verdi, whose emotions were located on a more elemental plane than the romantic flights of the German dramatist, the story was simplified until what remained was the opposition of Count Walter, a provincial German nobleman, to the marriage of his son Rodolfo with Luisa Miller, the daughter of a retired soldier. Then, through the slanting and emphasis of music, Verdi eased Rodolfo into the position of the customary idealistic tenor and reshaped the conflict so that the forces of evil—Walter and his henchman, Wurm—were pitted against those of virtue, the upright Miller and his daughter.

Verdi, who himself had rankled in youth under established authority—in the form of village priests shutting him out of the church organ loft, of conservatory officials refusing him a continued musical education, of Austrian bureaucrats suppressing the freedom of his people, and of fate barring him from happiness with a wife and children (including a favorite daughter, Virginia)—now had before him the tale of a peasant and his daughter standing together against the treachery and malice of an aristocracy whose path they had inadvertently crossed.

Verdi's sympathy for the unhappy father and daughter, then, was guaranteed; perhaps also, to a lesser degree, for Count Walter, who, while standing for the forces of oppression, is also a concerned parent. Wurm, the servant who covets Luisa, and Duchess Federica, Luisa's rival, also act from direct, comprehensible and sometimes conflicting motives—the kind Verdi liked. As for Rodolfo, Verdi recognized both his love and his rhetoric, typical

of the heroes of the period (such as Ernani): "Farewell, sword, on which I swore to defend the innocent and the oppressed" (William Weaver translation).

Modern audiences as well should find a greater sense of identification with the characters of this opera—a greater interest in their problems—than with some of the composer's other works. The characters stand on a realistic social plane, lower than usual for Verdi. The problem of young lovers at loggerheads with their parents is certainly current, as is the departure of a family from a community in the wake of a scandal, though few modern middle-class families would, like Luisa and her father, plan to take up begging as their new vocation. Rodolfo provides the center of what melodrama there is, given his familiarity with that skeleton in the closet, Walter's and Wurm's joint murder of the former count. It is not unnatural, even in our time, for the young and idealistic to be melodramatic—a tendency usually shrugged aside by their elders, as in the conclusion of Act I of *Luisa*, when Count Walter deflates his son's extravagant threats of murder and self-immolation. (Blackmail finally secures Rodolfo's objective, the dropping of Walter's charges against Luisa.)

In *Luisa Miller* Verdi produced what may be the most unique effect of any of his works before *Rigoletto*, which it preceded by slightly over a year. This uniqueness stems from the blending of familiar characteristics of early Verdi with subtle touches not previously associated with this straightforward, strong, often blunt composer. The tone is one of wan, even eerie melancholy—a far cry from the blazing martial excitement of *Nabucco* or *Il Trovatore*, closer to the more intimate *Rigoletto* and *Traviata*. And *Luisa* has little recourse to the popular dance rhythms found in the gay (sometimes not so gay) moments of the latter two operas. Not until *Don Carlo* did Verdi provide surprises in such quick succession.

The first surprise is the overture, based on one theme:



This is developed in sonata form, with counterpoint and modulating harmonies, in a Beethovenesque fashion, revealing greater technical adroitness on Verdi's part than the later, potpourri-like *Forza del Destino* overture. The use of woodwinds in the opening chorus (reminiscent of pastoral passages in *William Tell* and Meyerbeer's *Prophète*) shows a care for orchestration unusual in the early Verdi. Luisa's subsequent lines . . .

MR. LACKEY here turns his attention from Flotow's *Martha*, of which he wrote in these pages two weeks ago, to Verdi's *Luisa Miller*. A Floridian (born in Miami), he teaches English at Baptist College of Charleston, South Carolina.



... which would normally be the cabaletta to her opening solo, develop instead into a duet with Rodolfo and then a grand ensemble—one that does not end grandly, however, but with a quiet, churchlike coda.

The most famous aria of *Luisa Miller*, Rodolfo's in Act II...



... has a restrained clarinet accompaniment that helps to make it one of Verdi's most sensitive tenor arias before Don Carlo's "Io lo vidi."

The emotional keynote of *Luisa Miller* comes in a choral phrase sung by Luisa's friends in Act II, Scene 1:



The words, about a just and powerful being who watches over the oppressed, suggest the theme that dominates the greatest passages of the work—the consolation of innocence in the sight of God and loved ones. This emotion comes to the forefront in the last act, the finest of the opera, in the powerful scene between Luisa and her father. After a gloomy prelude and subdued opening chorus of friends, through which a pallid reminiscence of Luisa's Act I refrain "P'amo d'amor" keeps flitting in the woodwinds, there is a recitative made ominous by the scarcity of minor harmonies; the otherworldly figures that accompany Luisa's hints at suicide have a deceptively bland elegance that frightens us (and Miller) as her meaning becomes clear. In the middle of their duet a sprightly figure, heard softly in the orchestra, begins to make its presence felt:



Luisa tells her father that for his sake she has changed her mind. He stammers out incredulous cries of "figlia!" The theme, in a driving, nearly hysterical crescendo, carries their voices along with it to the most overwhelming emotional moment of the opera. After this, the folklike tune of the cabaletta...



... offers a moment of tender calm, making no attempt to equal it in dramatic force.

The last scene, if it is something of an anticlimax emotionally, maintains the sense of tension and horror, from Luisa's organ-accompanied lament through her duet with Rodolfo to the final chords. Physical sensations as well as emotions are mirrored graphically in the music, down to the gulps with which Rodolfo swallows the poison and Luisa's shivers as she feels death coming on (depicted by twisting, chilly violin figurations). She then launches into a broad phrase typical of Verdi's later dying heroines...



... upon the completion of which Rodolfo stabs Wurm and dies after addressing his father, "La pena tua mira!"

This line, freely translated "See what you get for meddling," makes for a dramatic conclusion. One wonders, however, if an expression of grief from one or both fathers would not have been a more fitting ending than the recrimination of this young do-gooder who has just murdered three people, including himself. For it is father love, Verdi's most sacred feeling, that has given impetus to the finest moments in this compelling work.

WHO WAS WHO IN LUISA MILLER

	WORLD PREMIERE Teatro San Carlo, Naples December 8, 1849	AMERICAN PREMIERE Walnut Street Theater, Phila. October 27, 1852 (in English)	NEW YORK PREMIERE Castle Garden July 20, 1854	METROPOLITAN PREMIERE December 21, 1929
LUISA MILLER	Marietta Gazzaniga	Caroline Richings	Valeria Gomez	Rosa Ponselle
RODOLFO	Settimio Malvezzi	Thomas Bishop	Neri Beraldi	Giacomo Lauri-Volpi
MILLER	Achille De Bassini	Peter Richings	Francesco Graziani	Giuseppe De Luca
COUNT WALTER	Antonio Selva	Ph. Röhr	Filippo Coletti	Tancredi Pasero
WURM	Marco Arati	Thomas McKeon	Herr. Muller	Pavel Ludikar
FEDERICA	Mme. Salandri	Emeline Reed	Mme. Martini-d'Ormy	Marion Telva
LAURA	Anna Salvetti	—	—	Aida Doninelli
PEASANT	Sig. Rossi	John Edwin McDonough	—	Giordano Paltrinieri
CONDUCTOR	Giuseppe Verdi	Dr. W. P. Cunnington	Max Maretzek	Tullio Serafin

Octet for Mixed Voices



Luisa Miller's spokesmen—Williams, Milnes, Flagello, Caballé, Pearl, Tucker, Tozzi, Schippers—in Grand Tier Restaurant

Photo: Duane Michals

During the first week of the Metropolitan Opera's *Luisa Miller* rehearsals, the cast took time out from a hectic schedule to talk about an opera new to all of them, though Montserrat Caballé admitted learning the role of Luisa two years ago, just for the Metropolitan production. "It's a very hard opera," she sighed. "All those antiquated Italian words," agreed Ezio Flagello, who sings Wurm, the villain. "But very beautiful," said conductor Thomas Schippers. "For a long time I've wanted to conduct it; I've done so much early Verdi. In fact, we planned to give it eight years ago in Spoleto, but we ran into casting problems. Youngsters just can't tackle this music."

The cast assembled for the revival is both stellar and seasoned. Richard Tucker sings Rodolfo. Giorgio Tozzi performs his father, Count Walter. Sherrill Milnes will be responsible for Miller, and Louise Pearl is Duchess Federica, Rodolfo's fiancée. Nancy Williams sings Laura, friend of Luisa.

Opinions about the work, however, proved tentative at first. Tucker said cautiously, "Well, it grows on you, but the first time I heard it—in fact the first few times, before I began rehearsals this week—I thought to myself, this sort of Verdi, young Verdi, is like going backwards when you've sung all his rich roles. You've had the mince pie and now you're being served jello—dietetic jello." The tenor, who has recently lost quite a bit of weight, rolled his eyes in well-remembered agony. "However, the more I hear it, the more I like it. My aria, 'Quando le sere al placido,' contains some beautiful legato singing, the sort I like to do best."

"I certainly like it," said mezzo Louise Pearl. "Opera companies often revive inferior music, and Verdi, even when he's not at his greatest, is so much better than most other composers."

"I prefer it to *Ernani*," said Tozzi. "It's loaded with very beautiful music, and if some of it is in the stereo-

typed Verdi pattern, you do hear his brilliant invention in the big ensembles. There is also an opportunity for some fine bass singing, especially in the second act."

Milnes noted Verdi's usual high musical creativity in the score and added, "I find a lot of Donizetti influence in the first act. Not so much in the other two, though."

"And Bellini," added Miss Pearl. "Donizetti," said Schippers, "was a very strong influence on Verdi. If you're familiar with the *Duca d'Alba* or *Maria Stuarda*, some of Verdi's early works sound like absolute steals."

"Verdi is more gutsy than Donizetti," amended Milnes; "his music reflects more anger. He has a forbidding type of line, while most of Donizetti's music is happy." Miss Caballé discounted the Donizetti theory. "No, no," she said firmly, "*Luisa Miller* is an entirely different style—much heavier."

"It's not as much *bel canto* as Donizetti," agreed the conductor. "In fact, it's less *bel canto* than other Verdi works—but there's a great deal of coloratura singing."

"A great deal," Miss Caballé agreed. "The music's exciting—a real bravura opera, and they're performing it that way, too," said Miss Williams. "I wish so many of the ensembles had not been cut, though I know it was necessary. I don't think any of the ensembles are superfluous. Verdi meant them to be repeated; he knew, the way Wagner did, you have to go through the valleys and plains to appreciate the mountains." Everyone agreed that in addition to the influences of other composers, *Luisa Miller*, in common with other early Verdi, was full of portents of music to come. "I hear 'um-papa-pah-pah-um-pah' and I think to myself, 'Di quella pira,'" smiled Tucker. "And *Traviata* and *Otello*," Milnes said. "Verdi was breaking with old operatic traditions."

"That's right," put in Schippers. "*Luisa*, with its domestic format, was a blow at the pompousness of opera in that period."

"He was making the form more lifelike, too," continued Milnes, "veering away from the set piece—the aria and cabaletta, during which all action stops. He had his aria and cabaletta, true, but people enter while it's being sung, so the action overlaps."

Another point on which nearly everyone agreed was the third act, which they said contains some of the most beautiful music in the opera. "The trio!" they exclaimed, practically in unison. But Flagello disagreed: "The first and second acts are fine; the third falls apart." Tenors have made similar statements about Act II of *Butterfly*—for the same reason, as Flagello admitted. "In Act III, I don't appear until the last moment of the show, and then I'm spitted on the tenor's sword!"

"He dies without a sound," said Milnes. "I think that's a letdown. Verdi should have given him some self-justification. Even Iago gasps, 'I only did what was right!' There are other weaknesses in the structure, too. In Act I, Luisa and her father are about to be jailed, and Rodolfo prevents it. But at the opening of the second act, Miller is in prison. Why? For something he did between acts, which the audience doesn't see." In spite of these plot discrepancies, Schippers believes that *Luisa* is legitimate theater. "Look how well the poison scene of the third act is calculated."

"It's real tragedy," nodded Tozzi. "The Count, for instance, driving his son to suicide. It's just as true today that many parents drive their children to extremes, seeing the next generation only in terms of their own needs." The bass refused, however, to draw a hippie parallel. "Rodolfo's not an escapist; he meets the situation head-on. He's a realist—more so than his father. He also has a great deal of his father's stubborn nature. Possibly, when audiences see the opera they'll say these melodramatic shenanigans are absurd, but if you read the daily paper you'll find many similar situations. Human behavior hasn't changed that much. People do act in strange ways if they're emotionally driven."

Though Miss Pearl thinks the plot of *Luisa* a bit rudimentary, she finds her role of the Duchess believable—"something like Amneris, but kinder. She has more dimension than most 'other woman' types. She's sympathetic, and though she does want the tenor, it's because she truly loves him. She loses him through no fault of her own."

"My role," laughed Nancy Williams, "is sweet and guileless, the typical Verdi companion, brought in to reinforce the soprano's line." Miss Caballé, in spite of her love for the music, feels rather the same way about Luisa—"so sweet, so nice, so good, like Mimi in *La Bohème*. She never changes, never grows; she is always the same." Tucker, however, praised Rodolfo's rebellious spirit. "He's trying to break away from his father's traditional thinking. It's a good, meaty character."

"I see Miller as possibly fifty but still vigorous, even though he's supposed to be the oldest man in the cast," said Milnes. "I like the part; it's sympathetic. And in it

I see something of Verdi's preoccupation with father-daughter love, which appears in so many of his operas. It was scarcely a decade after he lost his own wife and children that he wrote *Luisa Miller*."

"I like the role of Wurm well enough," said Flagello. "He's the most intelligent member of the cast—a real schemer, definitely a pattern for Iago. I also think of Paolo in *Simon Boccanegra*, though I happen to like that part better. It's more developed."

As for evil Count Walter? "He's not evil," argued Tozzi; "he's ambitious for his son's sake. A Macbeth type, who allows himself to be pushed into murder. He wants to found a dynasty and have his own ambitions continue through his son. He's typical of the oppressing father, who thinks he knows what is best for his child. There are definite facets to his personality; he's a three-dimensional character. There are some excellent scenes to play. I'm thinking of the duet in the second act between Walter and Wurm, when Wurm turns, so to speak. Walter tells him that someone knows their guilty secret—the murder of the old Count so that Walter might inherit—and Wurm, far from being a self-confident Machiavellian villain, turns cringing and servile. It's an exciting revelation of character, and it gives Walter a chance to display his own strength, his hard-headedness. 'If I die, you'll go with me,' he threatens Wurm, while the music moves at a frenzied pace."

What place will *Luisa Miller* take in the repertory? "It depends on how it's presented," says Schippers. "It's a first-class opera, and it calls for a first-class performance. You can get away with a second-rate *Aida*, but *Luisa* must always be done with great élan."

"I think it's going to be a great success," said Milnes. "It's being directed so well by Nat Merrill; he has so many exciting touches, such as the use of the chorus. *Luisa* calls for a huge chorus, and since you can't put all of them onstage and justify it dramatically, he's come up with the ingenious idea of a play-within-a-play. When the audience enters, the curtain will be up, and onstage there will be boxes ranged around the acting area; in the boxes will be the chorus, dressed as an 1850 audience. They'll watch the opera, and from time to time they'll join in the singing."

"I always like to do first performances," said Tucker. "I enjoy singing in revivals. I'm really an operatic pioneer! But I can't predict whether this opera will be a hit or not. I like it, but as I said, it does lack the polish and the assurance of later Verdi."

"If it doesn't have quite the finish of later Verdi," Tozzi said, "it still can't be dismissed lightly. Opera goes in cycles. *Martha* was a favorite in Caruso's time; now it's dated. *Luisa Miller* was neglected as Verdi's later works came along, but it might be more popular today. You can't say. It's up to the public."

A chorus of assent rose behind him: "The public decides," agreed the singers, with a sense of finality born of experience.

FLORENCE STEVENSON