

Why Luisa Miller?

by Robert A. Tuggle

A Verdi specialist suggests that the characters, despite "preposterous action," ring true

Until recently, if the public knew *Luisa Miller* at all it was as the minor Verdi opera with one lovely tenor aria, "Quando le sere al placido." Anyone who probed deeper discovered its reputation with Verdi scholars as a transitional work, just before *Rigoletto*, *La Traviata* and *Il Trovatore*, that revealed a new sensitivity and restraint in the composer.

All this is true as far as it goes. The tenor aria is one of Verdi's happiest melodic inventions, an elegiac throwback to the melodic poise of Donizetti in "Una furtiva lagrima," and the delicacy of the writing throughout anticipates the personal feeling of much of *La Traviata*. But too much praise for a single aria is out of balance, and stress on *Luisa's* position in the development of the composer makes it difficult to view the work for itself. In a career as productive as Verdi's, there is a tendency to consider the landmarks as of real importance and the points in between as only a means of getting there.

When Verdi first mentioned his new opera for Naples, he left the choice of subject to the librettist Salvatore Cammarano, specifying only that it should be "a short, absorbing drama with plenty of action, plenty of passion, so that I will be able to set it easily to music." Cammarano suggested Schiller's *Kabale und Liebe* (Love and Intrigue), a play with which Verdi was familiar, and sent the composer a synopsis and schedule of musical numbers. During their collaboration the librettist eventually commented, "If I weren't afraid of being branded a Utopian, I would be tempted to say that for an opera to obtain the maximum of perfection one mind should be responsible for both text and music." The libretto incorporates a number of Verdi's additions, and *Luisa Miller's* final shape is his. The music that the words called forth was controlled partly by the common materials of Italian opera in the mid-nineteenth century—orchestra, chorus and solo voices, set pieces with connecting recitative. One of the advantages of this form was the great variety of musical textures available. *Luisa Miller* reveals a composer with such command of his resources that dramatic emphasis becomes a matter of technical control. In *Luisa Miller* we can attribute nothing to accident.

The overture, with its tight development of a single theme, establishes the kind of basic orchestral sound in which the characters exist throughout the opera. Act I begins with a little birthday chorus for Luisa, a light number for piping voices and instruments which almost demands

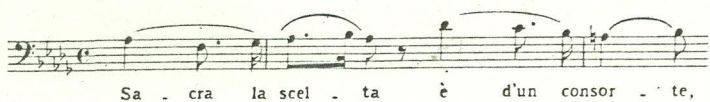


ACT I, SC. 1 (above): Luisa (Maliponte) celebrates birthday; ACT I, SC. 2 (below): Rodolfo (Richard Tucker), who loves the peasant Luisa, meets his noble fiancée, Federica (Dunn)

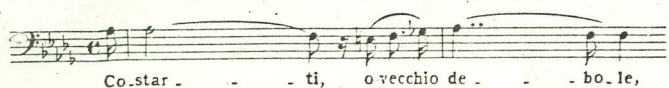


MR. TUGGLE, the Metropolitan Opera Guild's Director of Education, wrote his senior thesis at Princeton on Verdi and operatic drama, discussing such then rarely performed early Verdi as *Nabucco*, *Ernani*, *Macbeth* and *Luisa Miller*.

to be sung on tiptoe. The villagers are integrated into the play, and one of their number, Laura, occasionally separates from them for a more personal statement. Two of them, Miller and his daughter, are singled out for close attention. Luisa responds graciously to her friends in her entrance aria, "Lo vidi, e'l primo palpito," a pleasant piece whose innocent and light coloratura makes it apt for a young girl on her birthday. The aria is interrupted by the sudden entrance of Rodolfo. The expected cabaletta for Luisa, "T'amo d'amor ch'esprimere," is turned economically by Verdi into an ensemble containing a love duet for Rodolfo and Luisa, with brief interpolations by Miller, who voices misgivings. Having united the couple musically, Verdi has the ensemble end softly, again avoiding an applause-demanding finish and building expectation of the scene to come, between Miller and Wurm. Wurm's demands for Luisa's hand impel the aria Miller sings, a piece of great dignity, with strong rhythmic accompaniment:



Wurm shatters Miller's security and reveals Rodolfo's identity. His short passage, based on the same minor third, is a musical mockery of Miller's aria:



Miller's cabaletta is significant in its avoidance of the intensity that repetition of a rhythmic figure in the orchestra normally gives the form. A powerful first line is followed by a rather limp second one, and the piece conveys a clear musical impression of a man who is not so much enraged into a definite course of action as he is overwhelmed by what is happening.

Scene 2 provides information necessary to advance the plot, and its musical treatment is subdued in comparison with the scenes before and after. Count Walter's aria, "Il mio sangue," with its short, restless opening, establishes him as a figure of importance; the succeeding interview with Rodolfo implies little communication between father and son. The chorus that greets Federica reveals a different group of people. The formal tune they sing is a cool thing of isolated notes, contrasting strongly with the sustained melodic lines of Luisa's friends. Federica and Rodolfo have a brief moment when they sing together in reminiscence of childhood, "Dall'aule raggianti." This is quickly followed, however, by an angry if perfunctory duet, whose musical interest is on a level with their emotional involvement.

Real emotion, and with it the appropriate music, return when Scene 3 reverts to Miller's house. A hunting chorus is heard outside, its light echo effects (Verdi's only concession to the mountain locale) setting off the tense voices within. Rodolfo's avowal of love at the words "Son io tuo sposo" is the first point of emphasis in the scene, and all



ACT I, SC. 3 (above): Luisa hears her father (Sherrill Milnes) denounce Count Walter (Ruggero Raimondi), Rodolfo's father; ACT II, SC. 1 (below): to save her father from prison, Luisa agrees to write letter stating she loves only Wurm (Plishka)





ACT II, SC. 2 (above): Walter tells Wurm that if their past crime is uncovered, they both will die;
 ACT II, SC. 3 (below): upon reading Luisa's words, Rodolfo is overcome by the betrayal of his love



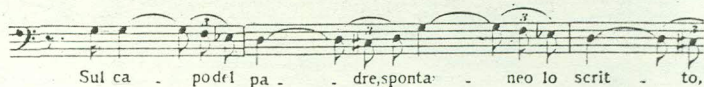
motion stops for it to make its full effect. The orchestra carries the action forward with two melodic figures that weave a background for voices, leading into the first big ensemble of the opera. In this concerted piece, the four principals—Miller, Rodolfo, Walter and Luisa—enter singly with individual melodies. The men sing consecutively until the entrance of Luisa, where everyone starts to sing together. From this point on, the soprano line is the important one, and its painfully lovely flight above the other voices is joined at the end by the tenor. The act ends quickly, with Rodolfo's threat to reveal Walter's secret.

The quantity and profile of music allotted the principal characters in Act I quickly establishes each of them for the audience. In Act II, Verdi continues his method of building character within the framework of the usual operatic forms; the music becomes more specific in the three scenes, with hero and heroine carrying the weight of the structure. Luisa in Scene 1, trapped in an impossible situation, has an aria and cabaletta far removed from her sprightly music at the beginning of the opera. At the mercy of Wurm, her music has a confining downward thrust, and her voice soars only infrequently:



The expected major tonality of the cabaletta does not immediately materialize, since there is no release in her situation.

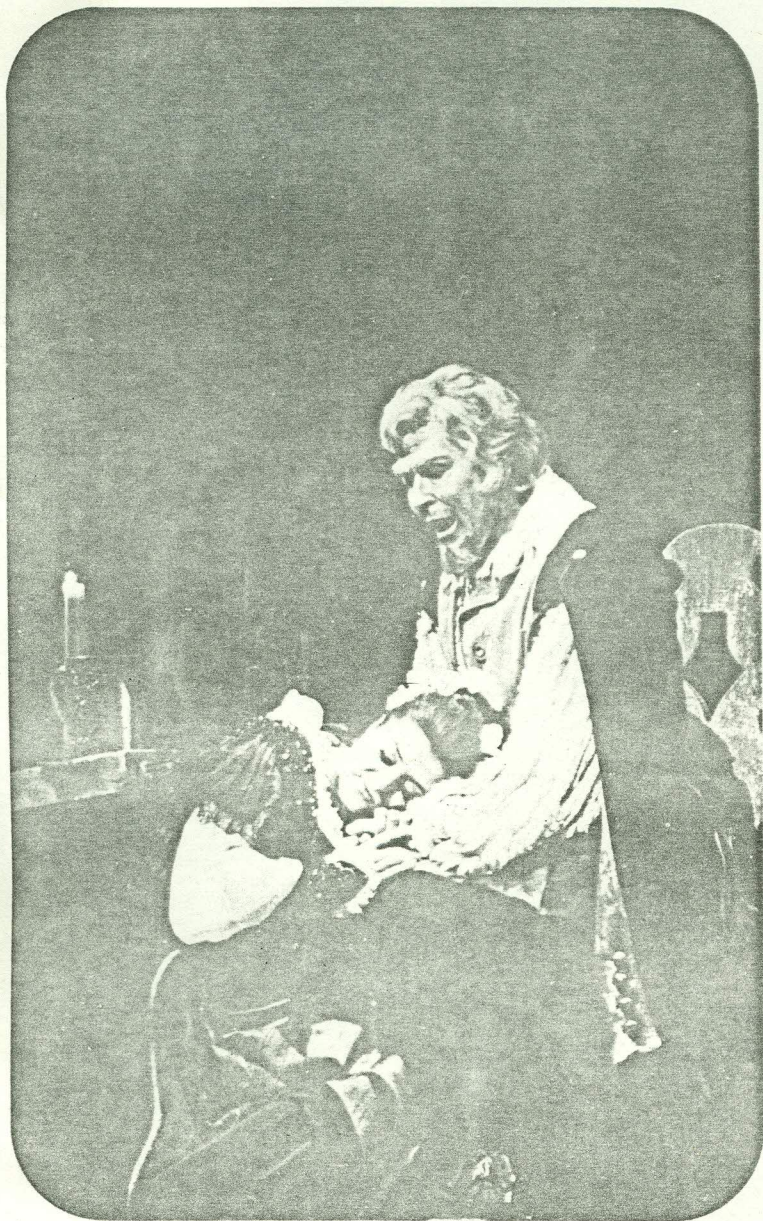
The villain of the opera, the retainer Wurm, has no musical life of his own. His response to "Tu puniscimi" (cited above) follows the same procedure as his response to Miller in Act I—a phrase based on another character's, revolving and going nowhere:



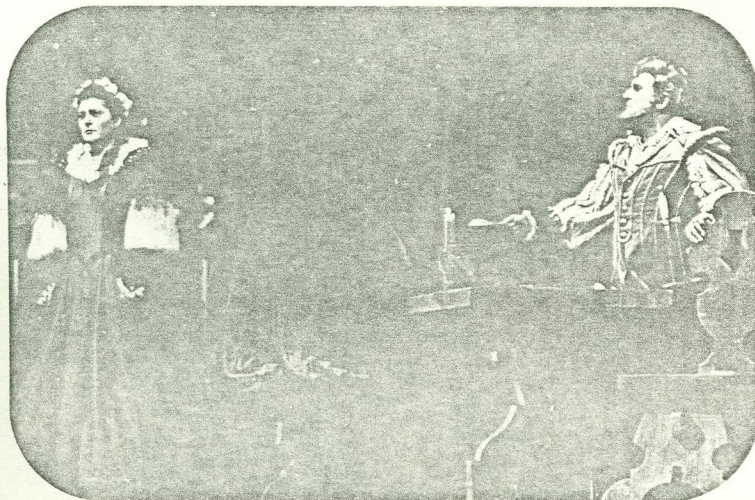
It turns and undermines but has no individuality. Only in the next scene does Wurm have something stronger to sing. In the duet with the Count, "L'alto retaggio," master and servant are united first with identical phrases—as they recount the crime that binds them to each other—and then with complementary ones, beginning "O meco incolume," as they stand together.

Federica's music that follows again has no warmth, her cold questions being made more impersonal by the series of dropping octaves that support them. When Luisa enters, under duress, there is a scene in which no one onstage believes. Maintaining her love for Wurm without conviction, she obtains no musical response from the others. Then there is a sudden change in the atmosphere: the orchestra drops out, and the scene concludes with an unaccompanied quartet. The singers go through their artificial motions in the artificial scene contrived by the Count and Wurm, and the effect is one of complete musical chill.

Rodolfo learns of his apparent betrayal in Scene 3, and



ACT III: Miller (above) tries to console his daughter, who has sacrificed her happiness to gain his freedom; Rodolfo (below) confronts Luisa with her letter, then gives the unwitting girl a drink, which is poisoned



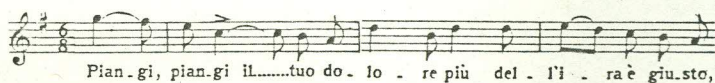
Photos: Beth Bergman

here occurs his melancholy lament, "Quando le sere." The cabaletta, "L'ara, o l'avello apprestami," is the one rather conventional moment in the opera, adding nothing to the character of Rodolfo but providing a weight that balances the earlier scene for Luisa and an energy that finishes the act strongly, and impelling Rodolfo toward the climactic events that lie ahead.

Act III of *Luisa Miller* is one of the great melodic sequences in all opera. Most of the plot's convolutions have already taken place, and it remains only for the main characters to work their way to the tragic close. Back in Miller's house, the restless theme of the overture is the orchestral substance over which Laura and the villagers attempt to comfort Luisa. She is intent upon suicide, and when Miller returns, the first part of their duet is a florid little mad scene, in which she describes the joys of the tomb. Miller argues brokenly at first; then his music gathers strength, and the issue is not in doubt from the moment the harmony changes from minor to major, at the words "L'amor che un padre ha seminato." When they decide to leave and wander together, it is his wish and his melody that she repeats and then sings reassuringly above his song:



The duet between Luisa and Rodolfo, on the other hand, is a series of answering phrases that proceed naturally from each other, with Luisa's prayer turning into recitative and then the formal start of the duet, "Piangi, piangi," slipping in almost without notice:



Their responses coalesce into the "Maledetto" sequence, which unites them once more as Rodolfo learns the truth. They are joined by Miller in the final trio, in which Luisa's soprano renounces the downward motion that has characterized it through much of the opera and takes unencumbered flight above the male voices. Wurm is stabbed by Rodolfo and dies without a sound, leaving only the two fathers alive as the opera ends.

Reviewing a performance of *Luisa Miller* at Sadler's Wells in 1953, Andrew Porter observed that "the real characters are Luisa, her father and her beloved; and the preposterous action does not affect the validity of their emotions." This might well serve as a definition of the effect of all opera. We may have presence of mind enough to think that the action onstage could not possibly happen, but the music will not permit us to deny the life of the people it creates. We believe either completely or not at all. If we do not believe in *Luisa Miller*, it is not because of Verdi.