

THE OPERA DON CARLO BY GIUSEPPE VERDI

Presented by George KurtiPlohn

Callas – Don Carlo – Aria of Eboli

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aBcLPqpSJ6g>

Remember the classic song "Bewitched, Bothered and Bewildered?" Its title might also serve as a sobriquet for the opera *Don Carlo*, one of the most enigmatic, yet profoundly beautiful operas Giuseppe Verdi ever composed.



The real life Elisabeth de Valois, Queen Consort of Spain, 1565 (age 19) She died at age 23 following complications from childbirth



The real life Felipe II de España, a portrait by Titian, 1550

The story takes place in the mid-1500s, at the time of the Spanish Inquisition, and it's loosely based on historical characters and events. The title character is the son of Spain's King Phillip II, in the opera called Filippo II, and he is clearly both bewitched and bothered — his real life counterpart was sometimes described as simply insane. As for bewildered, that's how audiences sometimes feel at the end of the opera. The drama has a complicated plot, weaving together any number of personal, political and theological conflicts, and wrapping them all up in a climactic ending which can easily leave opera-goers wondering what the heck just happened.

Still, in typical fashion, Verdi took all of the story's complexities and confusions, and left us with a great opera. It's a work that takes just about every moral dilemma imaginable, and gives them all recognizable, human faces. It could be that Verdi's opera is bewildering because, deep down, audiences hesitate to acknowledge its

messages, disturbed by the drama's vivid glimpse of how the world really is, and who we really are.

Elisabetta, the heroine of this opera, had originally been betrothed to king Philip's son, Carlos (in the opera Carlo), Prince of Asturias, but political complications unexpectedly necessitated instead a marriage to king Philip. Her relationship with her troubled stepson is heartbreaking.

Let me mention that Philip II's empire included territories on every continent then known to Europeans, including his namesake the Philippines in the Pacific. During his reign, Spain reached the height of its influence and power, the so-called its *Golden Age*. The expression, "the empire on which the sun never sets," was coined during Philip's time to reflect the extent of his dominion. A devout Catholic, Philip is also known for organizing a huge naval expedition against Protestant England in 1588, the Spanish Armada, which was unsuccessful, mostly due to storms and serious logistical problems.

ACT I

France, about 1560. Against the wishes of the Spanish King Filippo II, his son and heir, Don Carlo, has traveled incognito to Fontainebleau, where negotiations are under way for a peace treaty between Spain and France. He saw there his betrothed bride Elisabetta di Valois, daughter of the French king Henri II, and had fallen in love with her on sight. When he meets Elisabetta and her page, who have been hunting and had become lost in the forest, Carlo offers his protection without revealing his identity. Elisabetta questions him about her future husband, apprehensive over her marriage to a stranger. Carlo gives her a miniature portrait of himself, and she realizes that he is the prince. It is clear to them both that their feelings of love are mutual. Their happiness ends with news that the treaty arrangements have been altered to reflect the peaceful intention of the king of France offering the hand of his daughter Elisabetta to King Filippo, Carlo's father. Elisabetta in order not to threaten the peace accord, reluctantly accepts the situation. While all around them celebrate the end of the war, Elisabetta and Carlo are devastated.

ACT II

Carlo seeks peace at a monastery in Spain, where he prays at the tomb of his grandfather, Emperor Charles V, the Holy Roman emperor of Spain, Netherlands, Flanders and the Hapsburg lands.

He is confronted by a monk who seems to be the ghost of the emperor himself. His good friend Rodrigo, the Marquis of Posa, arrives to remind Carlo of his commitment to the cause of the Flemish people who are oppressed by the Spanish rule. Both pledge themselves to the cause of liberty and swear eternal friendship with a beautiful aria that several times will reappear as a leitmotif throughout the opera.

Meanwhile, in a garden outside the monastery, the Spanish Princess Eboli entertains the other ladies of the court with a song. Elisabetta—by now the queen consort—enters, followed by Rodrigo, who hands her a secret letter from Carlo asking for a meeting. When he is admitted, Carlo asks the queen to obtain king Filippo's permission for him to go to Flanders, but then suddenly also declares his continuing love to her. Elisabetta rejects him and Carlo rushes off. The king enters and, finding the queen unattended, banishes the Countess of AreMBERG, who should have been present.

Left alone with the king, Rodrigo, the Marquis of Posa, challenges king Filippo to end his oppression of the Flemish people. The king refuses but is impressed by Rodrigo's courage. He warns him to beware of the Inquisition and tells him about his suspicions of his wife and Carlo, asking Rodrigo to watch them. He accepts, knowing that being in the king's confidence will help him in the future.

ACT III

Carlo has received a letter asking him to a secret meeting at midnight in the queen's gardens. He thinks the meeting is with Elisabetta, but it is Princess Eboli who appears because she is in love with him. When Carlo discovers her identity and rejects her advances, Eboli realizes where the prince's true feelings lie and swears to expose him. Rodrigo arrives in time to overhear Eboli and threatens to kill her but is stopped by Carlo. Eboli leaves, and Rodrigo persuades Carlo that he is now in danger and Carlo hands over some secret papers to him for safekeeping.

Meanwhile a public burning of heretics takes place in front of Madrid's cathedral, and Carlo leads a group of Flemish deputies to Philip. The king rejects their pleas for freedom. When he also dismisses Carlo's own request to rule Flanders, the prince draws his sword on his father. He is disarmed by Rodrigo and is arrested. In thanks, king Filippo makes Rodrigo a duke. As the group of heretics is led to the stake, a celestial voice welcomes their souls into heaven.

ACT IV

In his study at night, the king reflects on his life with a wife who doesn't love him. He consults with the old and blind Grand Inquisitor, who consents to the death sentence for Carlo saying that as God sacrificed his son to save mankind so king Filippo must stifle his love for his son for the sake of the faith. The Inquisitor also demands that Ricardo be handed over to him. As he leaves, king Filippo wonders if the throne must always yield to the altar. Elisabetta enters, having discovered that her jewel case has been stolen. Eboli, who knows that Elisabetta keeps a portrait of Carlo in it, had taken the box and given it to the king. Filippo now shows the box to Elisabetta, takes out the portrait, and accuses her of adultery. Elisabetta collapses and the king calls for help. Eboli and Ricardo rush in, he to express amazement that a king who rules half the world cannot govern his own emotions, Eboli feeling now remorse at what her

jealousy has brought about. Alone with Elisabetta, Eboli confesses that she not only falsely accused her but that she has been the king's mistress. Elisabetta orders her from the court. Eboli laments her fatal beauty and swears to spend her final day in Spain trying to save Carlo.

Ricardo visits Carlo in prison to tell him that he has used the secret papers to take upon himself the blame for the Flemish rebellion. He is now a marked man, so Carlo must take up the cause of liberty for Flanders. Suddenly Ricardo is shot by agents of the Inquisition. As he dies he tells Carlo that Elisabetta will meet him at the monastery of St. Just and declares he is happy to have sacrificed his life for a man who will become Spain's savior.

ACT V

Elisabetta has come to the monastery, wanting only her own death. When Carlo appears, she encourages him to continue Ricardo's quest for freedom in Flanders and they hope for happiness in the next world. As they say goodbye, King Filippo and the Grand Inquisitor arrive. As the agents of the Inquisition move in on Carlo, his late grandfather, the Emperor Charles V materializes out of the darkness to insist that suffering is unavoidable and ceases only in heaven.

Verdi (1813-1901) composed this opera in 1867 and revised it in 1883.

The libretto is based on Friedrich Schiller's play *Don Karlos, Infant von Spanien* (*Don Carlos, Prince Royal of Spain.*) of 1787.

Our DVD is a 2013 recording from the world renowned Salzburg Festival, Austria, with the Vienna Philharmonic Orchestra under the baton of Antonio Pappano.

The title role of Don Carlo is sung by the famous German tenor Jonas Kaufmann, the German soprano Anja Harteros is in the role of Elisabetta, the American baritone Thomas Hampson in the role of Rodrigo, Marchese di Posa, while in the role of King Filippo II is the Finnish bass Matti Salminen.