STIFFELIO

Giuseppe Verdi

Act I: At Stankar's castle near the River Salzbach, Jorg, an elderly pastor in the congregation, leads a group in prayer for Stiffelio, who has just returned from a trip. Among those gathered is young Count Raffaele di Leuthold, who secretly has seduced Lina during her husband's absence. Stiffelio relates a strange incident told to him by a ferry pilot. Eight days ago, by the first light of dawn, the boatman saw a man jump from a window into the river below, leaving behind a distressed woman. The pilot recovered the fleeing man's wallet and gave it to Stiffelio, who now produces it. Not wishing to expose any guilty secrets, the minister throws the wallet and its identifying papers into the fire without looking at them. Lina and Raffaele express relief, for it was they whom the boatman had seen. Stankar suspects his daughter has been seduced by Raffaele and privately vows revenge. Left alone with his wife, Stiffelio notices her agitation. As he takes Lina's hand, he remarks that his dead mother's ring is missing from her finger. When she will not tell him where the ring is, Stiffelio berates her, taking her silence as proof of an infidelity. Alone, Lina prays for forgiveness. She begins to write a letter of explanation to Stiffelio but is stopped by her father, who accuses her of cowardice, saying her husband's ministry is too valuable to be destroyed by scandal. After father and daughter leave, Raffaele enters with a letter for Lina, asking for another meeting. Unaware that he is being watched by Jorg, Raffaele locks the note in a bound volume of Klopstock's Messiah, to which both he and Lina have keys.

A party for Stiffelio begins in the reception hall of Stankar's castle. When Jorg tells the minister that the volume of Klopstock hides the details of another assignation between Lina and her lover, Stiffelio announces that his next sermon will be on Judas Iscariot, who betrayed Jesus. Stiffelio asks his wife to unlock the book. When she hesitates, the minister breaks open the lock, and Raffaele's letter falls to the floor. Seizing the note and tearing it to shreds, Stankar tells Stiffelio he will never know its secrets. When the angry Stiffelio moves toward his father-in-law, Lina begs that her husband's rage fall upon her instead. Stankar challenges Raffaele to a duel.

Act II: That night Lina walks among the tombstones in the cemetery. She stops at the newest of the graves and asks the spirit of her dead mother to offer her prayers of penitence to God. When Raffaele comes, Lina tells him she does not love him and demands the return of her ring, as well as the letter she wrote, pleading with him to leave her father's house. Stankar arrives and orders Lina to go. When he offers Raffaele a sword, the younger man refuses to fight. Stankar goads him into taking up the sword, but the duel is interrupted by Stiffelio. When the minister stays Raffaele's hand, Stankar tells his son-in-law that he holds the hand of the man who betrayed him. Frightened by the noise of fighting, Lina returns. Stiffelio at first refuses to believe Stankar but becomes convinced of Raffaele's guilt when he sees Lina's silent tears. Stiffelio seizes Stankar's sword and challenges his rival to defend himself. When Jorg comes to remind the minister that his followers await him in church, Stiffelio struggles for self-control, reminded that Christ died pardoning all mankind.

Act III: Despondent, Stankar considers taking his own life. When Jorg tells him Raffaele is returning to meet with Stiffelio, the Count resolves that this time the duel to avenge his family's honor will end in death. He leaves, and Stiffelio and Raffaele enter. When the husband asks his rival what he would do if Lina were free to marry, Raffaele is unable to answer. He is told to wait while Stiffelio talks with Lina. Handing his wife a decree of divorce for her signature, Stiffelio says he is leaving her. Lina protests her husband's cruelty, declaring she will always love him. Stiffelio is unmoved. Lina signs the document, then asks if she may address him not as her husband but as a man of God, confessing that she was seduced by Raffaele. As Stiffelio declares the young

count must die, Stankar enters with a bloody sword, already having killed his daughter's seducer. Lina implores God to pity her.

In church, Stiffelio's followers sing a hymn about God's mercy. The heavily veiled Lina sits among the congregation. When she lifts her veil, Stiffelio is startled but begins his sermon, taking as his lesson the eighth chapter of St. John's Gospel - the story of Christ and the adulteress. As Stiffelio reads the words of Christ's pardon for the sinner, Lina mounts the stairs to her husband's pulpit on her knees. As she reaches his feet, he places his hand on the Bible and declares his wife pardoned.