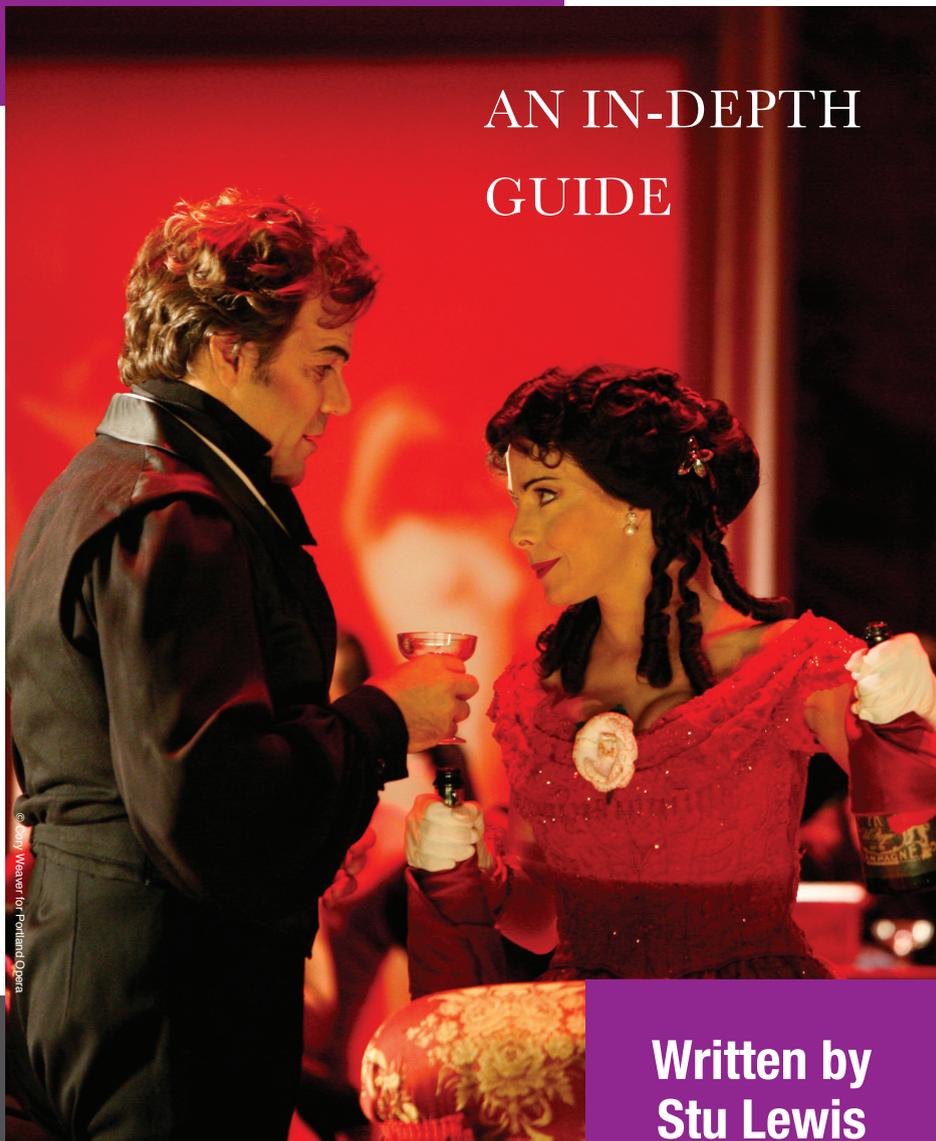


VERDI'S

LA TRAVIATA

AN IN-DEPTH
GUIDE



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Written by
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LYRIC OPERA
KANSAS CITY

TRAVIATA – THEN AND NOW

“People’s reactions to opera the first time they see it are very dramatic; they either love it or they hate it. If they love it, they will always love it. If they don’t, they may learn to appreciate it, but it will never become part of their soul.” Thus, in the film *Pretty Woman*, the billionaire Edward Lewis tells his streetwalker-turned-escort Vivian as they settle into their box seats at the San Francisco Opera. Soon we see her moved to tears. The opera they attend is *La Traviata*, and in a plot point missed by most of the film’s audience, the opera has such a strong effect on her because she sees on the stage a parallel to her own life – the story of a courtesan whose checkered sexual history prevents her from fulfilling her dream of happiness with the man she loves.

Before we continue, an explanation of the institution of the courtesan is in order. Courtesans were not simply prostitutes or even high-class call girls. While they did provide sexual favors for those men who were wealthy enough to afford their services, they were well-educated women who were valued as much for their sophistication and intellectual gifts as they were for their beauty and physical companionship. And unlike the women who have figured so prominently in recent sex scandals in the United States, they enjoyed open relationships with their male companions. In an era where upper-class women were denied higher education, they served an important function. In fact, some even charged for conversation alone.

The institution goes back at least as far as the ancient Greeks, whose men sought the companionship of “hetaeras” for both sexual and intellectual stimulation. Courtesans flourished in sixteenth-century Italy, a time when even the pope had mistresses; Pope Alexander VI was known to have fathered six children with one woman. The film *Dangerous Beauty*, though it takes liberties

with the biographical details of its heroine Veronica Franklin, accurately depicts the attitudes of the society of its time. The British Restoration period and nineteenth-century France were also eras in which the institution flourished. It became superfluous not because of a change in morality but because upper-class and middle-class women themselves became educated, depriving it of its rationale.

Verdi called the story of this opera “a subject for our time.” In the words of opera scholar M. Owen Lee, he “was determined to use the medium of which he was now a master to arouse sympathy for society’s outcasts, the sort of people we might go out of our way to *avoid* on the streets.” Like Alexandre Dumas, upon whose novel and play the opera is based, he wanted to protest the exploitation of women, and he gave the opera a contemporary setting. However, to get the work past the censors, he reluctantly allowed it to be set in an earlier era, to remove the “sting” of the message – just as in later years he would be forced to move the action of *A Masked Ball* from Europe to New England.

Pretty Woman has a happy ending of sorts (if we overlook the ironic voice-over comments about Hollywood happy endings), as if to say it is possible to escape one’s past. Verdi knew better, which is why this opera has never ceased to move us. And listen closely to the selection from *La Traviata* which accompanies the reuniting of the lovers at the end of the film. It’s not the love theme – it’s the tearful music to which Violetta bids Alfredo farewell.

CAST, CHARACTERS AND ARTISTS

General character information is listed below. To view the actual cast and artists in the Lyric Opera 2014-15 season production of *La Traviata*, visit www.kcopera.org/productions/la-traviata-14/artists.

Violetta Valéry – a courtesan (Soprano)
(vee-oh-LET-tah va-lay-REE)

Alfredo Germont – Violetta's lover (Tenor)
(ahl-FRAY-do zher-MON')

Giorgio Germont – Alfredo's father (Baritone)
(ZHOR-zhio zher-MON')

Doctor Grenvil – a physician (Bass)
(grahn-VEEL)

Flora Bervoix – Violetta's friend, probably also a courtesan (Mezzo-Soprano)
(FLOW-rah bear-VWAH)

Baron Douphol – Alfredo's rival for Violetta's affection (Baritone)
(doo-FOLL)

Gastone – in Violetta's circle of friends (Tenor)

Marchese d'Obigny – in Violetta's circle of friends (Bass)

Giuseppe – Violetta's servant (Tenor)

Annina – Violetta's maid (Soprano)
(ah-NEE-nah)

Chorus and dancers representing party-goers, gypsies, and carnival-goers

BRIEF SYNOPSIS

Act 1

Paris, 1800s – Violetta Valéry, a famous courtesan hosts a lavish party with her current lover, Baron Douphol. She is introduced to Alfredo Germont, who comes from a reputable family. Alfredo has admired Violetta from afar for a long time. The guests request that Alfredo give a toast and he complies, singing the famous “Drinking Song,” in celebration of true love.

Violetta knows that she is terminally ill and she begins to feel faint. She requests that her guests continue dancing in the next room so that she may rest. Alfredo enters and proclaims his love for Violetta. At first she refuses his advances, in her life as a courtesan she cannot accept true love. But she is finally moved by Alfredo; giving him a flower, she tells him to visit her again when it is wilted. Violetta realizes that she desires to experience authentic love.

Act II

Three months later, Violetta now lives with Alfredo in the countryside outside of Paris; she has completely abandoned her previous life. Even when she receives an invitation to a ball in Paris, she ignores it. When speaking with Violetta’s maid, Annina, Alfredo discovers that their new life is possible because Violetta has sold all of her belongings. Upset at this discovery, Alfredo decides to leave for Paris to earn back all of the money Violetta lost.

While Alfredo is gone, Alfredo’s father, Giorgio Germont, visits Violetta. Giorgio explains that his daughter is unable to get married because Violetta’s reputation is spoiling their family’s name. He demands that Violetta leave Alfredo. At first, Violetta refuses, professing her unconditional love for Alfredo.

However, once Giorgio explains that Violetta and Alfredo do not have a future together, Violetta agrees to leave Alfredo, believing that it is in the best interest of Alfredo. Violetta writes Alfredo a note, leaves for Paris, and decides to attend the ball after all.

Upon Alfredo's return from Paris, he is distraught by Violetta's departure. When he finds the invitation to the ball, Alfredo believes that Violetta has betrayed him and left him in order to return to her old life. Giorgio comforts Alfredo in his despair.

Alfredo decides to go to the ball and confront Violetta. When he arrives, he sees Violetta with Baron Douphol. Alfredo challenges Baron Douphol to gamble against him and Alfredo wins a large sum of money. Alfredo announces that he will take Violetta home with him, but Violetta says that she now loves Baron Douphol. In a fit of rage, Alfredo throws his winnings at Violetta, yelling to the crowd that he no longer owes her anything. Entering at this time, Giorgio, knowing the true meaning of this scene, scolds Alfredo for his behavior.

Act III

Violetta's illness has advanced; her doctor says that she does not have much time left. Violetta receives a letter from Giorgio, stating that he was filled with guilt and told Alfredo the reason for Violetta's departure. Alfredo bursts into Violetta's apartment, filling Violetta with a final burst of joy before she dies in Alfredo's arms.

DETAILED PLOT OUTLINE

ACT I: *Paris, a salon in Violetta's house, August, about 1850.*

Before the curtain is raised, a brief prelude introduces the story. First we hear a solemn melody, followed by a more sprightly one (which will recur in a more serious context later). Just as we are enjoying this melody, Verdi introduces a jarring chord – a half-step above the tonic – that foreshadows the tragic ending which lies ahead.

The curtain rises on a party which is already in progress. Violetta greets some guests who have just arrived. Gastone enters with Alfredo, introducing him to Violetta as one of her admirers. As the partygoers sit down for dinner, Gastone informs Violetta that during her recent illness, Alfredo came to her house daily to inquire about her welfare. She chides Baron Douphol for not being as attentive as this relative stranger.

Throughout this party scene, the orchestra continues to play lively party music, while the dialogue consists of conversational lines sung to fragments of the melody. Verdi had used a similar technique in *Rigoletto*, which also opens with a raucous party.

Violetta pours a glass of wine for Alfredo, comparing herself to the goddess Hebe (in the sort of classic reference that librettist Francesco Maria Piave loved to use). Gastone asks the Baron to propose a toast, but still stinging from Violetta's insult, he refuses, and the honor falls to Alfredo. Following an orchestral introduction, he begins the lively *Brindisi* (drinking song), a rather formal number in which his melody is echoed by the chorus, followed by Violetta's repetition of the same melody, with another repetition from the chorus.

Music is heard in the next room, and the guests go off to dance. Violetta, however, has a dizzy spell and needs to sit down. Noticing her difficulty, Alfredo stays behind with her. He tells her that her fast-lane lifestyle is killing her, and that he alone loves her enough to protect her from herself. She is amazed to learn that he has loved her from afar for a year.

Like the dialogue in the opening scene, their lines are sung in melodic fragments accompanied by the dance music from the next room. In the love duet that follows, the dance music falls silent, not because the party has stopped but because Verdi draws us into their private world where they are focused on each other and are no longer aware of it. When this brief reverie ends and the partygoers re-enter, the party music will once again come to the forefront. (Leonard Bernstein was likely influenced by this scene. He used a similar device in the dance at the gym in *West Side Story*).

The duet which follows demonstrates Verdi's skill at musical characterization. Introducing a romantic melody which will recur later in the opera, Alfredo tells Violetta that he fell in love with her the first time he saw her. In a subtle touch that suggests his initial shyness, Verdi inserts two rests in his opening line: "Un dì – felice, eterea" ("One day – happy, ethereal"). Violetta's response to Alfredo, that she cannot love in the same way that he does, is sung to a rapid melody, containing a number of triplets (three notes where the beat calls for two), suggesting offhand laughter. Thus not only their words but the very tempo of their music conveys the difference in attitude between the two. At the end of the exchange, their voices join in duet to Alfredo's melody, a subtle indication that she may be falling in love, but her continued use of triplets even as she sings this melody may indicate a degree of uncertainty in her voice.

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Following a brief interruption by Gastone, Violetta tells Alfredo to leave, but she gives him a flower, instructing him to return when it has withered. Alfredo leaves happily, knowing that a plucked flower will wither in a day. The rest of the guests return and say their farewells. As if to emphasize the frivolity of their society, they explain that they need to go home to rest up for the next party.

Violetta is left alone on stage to consider the events of the past hour, and to sing one of the most spectacular arias in all of opera. While it follows a time-worn pattern – recitative, slow section, transition, and fast section (referred to as a cabaletta) – its content is anything but formulaic.

In the opening section – “E strano” (“It’s strange”) – she expresses her amazement that Alfredo’s words could touch her so deeply. While this section, with its conversational rhythm, could be called recitative, it is hardly the unmelodic recitative of the type that earlier composers used to provide transitions between musical numbers, but rather a dramatic form of musical speech that Verdi employed to intensify the emotional content of his characters’ expression. This leads to a slow section – “A fors’è lui” (“Maybe he is the one”) – in which she considers the possibility of true love, slipping into a reprise of the music he used in his declaration of love. Suddenly, however, she exclaims “Follie! Follie!” (“What folly!”), saying that such love is not for her, and in the brilliant cabaletta – “Sempre libera” (“Always free”) – she declares that her life must be devoted solely to the pursuit of pleasure. But even as she does so, she hears Alfredo’s repeated declaration of love (from below her balcony, or perhaps in her imagination, depending on the stage director) as a counter-melody to her own. For the moment her desire for the party life wins out, and the aria comes to a spectacular finish.

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Over the years, many sopranos have heightened the effect by inserting a high E-flat on the next to last note, to the point where some fans have come to believe that this note was part of Verdi's score. In recent years, however, the pendulum seems to have swung back toward singing the conclusion as Verdi wrote it. Either way, this is one of opera's great showstoppers.

Act II: *Scene 1: A country house near Paris: The following January*

Much has happened since the Act I curtain. Omitting the second act of the play upon which the opera is based, Verdi and Piave open the second act with Alfredo and Violetta beginning their fourth month of unwedded bliss. Alfredo enters, and in the aria "Dei miei bollenti spiriti" he describes their idyllic existence. As he concludes the first section, Annina enters in traveling attire. When Alfredo questions her, he learns that Violetta has gone into debt financing their country lifestyle, and she has ordered Annina to go into town to sell a number of her possessions. Alfredo tells her that he will go to Paris to obtain the money from his own assets. He then sings the cabaletta of his aria, expressing his shame at having allowed Violetta to get into such dire straits. In contrast to Violetta's first-act aria, Alfredo's aria follows a more familiar pattern in which there is an interruption, often from a third party, preceding the cabaletta.

Alfredo leaves, and Violetta and Annina enter. Giuseppe, another servant, enters with a party invitation from Flora, which Violetta immediately rejects. He leaves, returning a moment later to escort a gentleman into the room. Much to Violetta's surprise, the guest is Giorgio Germont, Alfredo's father.

What follows is a remarkable duet that had virtually no precedent in operatic history, a dramatic dialogue consisting not of a symmetrical pattern but of a series of free flowing melodies, each appropriate to the speaker and the situation. Only at the very end do Violetta and Germont join their voices to the same melody.

Germont opens the dialogue by angrily accusing her of ruining his son, but her dignified reply – that she is a lady in her own house and does not have to listen to that sort of talk – disarms him. She further surprises him by showing him documentation that her money, not Alfredo's, has been supporting the couple. Nevertheless, Germont is not swayed from his mission. He tells her he also has a daughter, whose fiancé is planning to break off the engagement because of the scandal caused by Alfredo's living arrangement. Germont tells Violetta that he is asking her for a great sacrifice: that she leave Alfredo forever so the family honor can be restored. Not believing Violetta's assertion that her illness is most likely terminal, he speaks of her future, when, lacking the security of marriage, she will find herself deserted. Reluctantly, she agrees to Germont's terms, asking only that after her death Alfredo must learn the truth about the reason she has left him. Tearfully, she asks Germont to embrace her like a daughter.

Germont leaves, and Violetta summons Annina, telling her to send her RSVP to Flora's party. Ominous chords – again reminiscent of *Rigoletto* – establish a solemn mood. As a plaintive melody is heard on the clarinet, Violetta begins to write a letter to Alfredo. As she is finishing, she is surprised by Alfredo's entrance. As she stammers her concerns to Alfredo, her music becomes increasingly agitated, culminating in the outburst "Amami, Alfredo"

("Love me, Alfredo"), to a slower version of the melody that was introduced in the opera's prelude. She leaves, and shortly afterward, a messenger delivers her letter to Alfredo, and he learns that she has left him. Germont enters, and Alfredo falls into his arms in despair. In the aria "Di Provenza il mar, il suol" Germont reminds Alfredo of his country roots and begs him to return to his family, but Alfredo storms out, vowing to get his revenge on Violetta for deserting him. This confrontation between father and son, incidentally, has no parallel in the play.

Germont is often seen as the villain of the opera, but it would be fairer to see him as a well-meaning representative of middle-class, provincial values (literally: he comes from Provence) that are contrasted with the looser morals of Parisian high society. After all, as one critic has wryly asked, how many of us, even in our more liberated times, would want Violetta as a daughter-in-law? Germont's dilemma is the inner conflict between his sense of morality and his personal feelings. In *The Verdi Baritone: Studies in the Development of a Character*, Geoffrey and Ryan Edwards have described in detail the ways in which Piave and Verdi humanized a character who was essentially unsympathetic in the play, concluding, "the characterization of Germont goes beyond melodramatic stereotype and cliché to explore the struggle, torment, and ultimate loss of a man compelled to play a social role fundamentally antithetical to his human nature."

Act II: Scene 2: Flora's house, that evening

Party music immediately brings us back to the world of Act I, only this time Flora is the hostess. She announces that she has invited Violetta and Alfredo; she is surprised to learn that they have separated and that Violetta's escort will be the Baron.

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A group of women dressed as gypsies – apparently paid entertainers – enter and perform a song and dance, as well as telling a few fortunes. They are followed by some men disguised as matadors, led by Gaston, who relate an amusing story and join the gypsies in a dance. This scene effectively creates a festive mood that provides a keen sense of contrast with what is to follow. (Lyric Opera audiences may well be reminded of the horseplay which precedes Mimi's entrance in the final act of *La bohème*).

Alfredo enters and heads for the card table. Soon afterwards Violetta enters with the Baron. Seeing Alfredo, she regrets having come to the party. Alfredo hits a big winning streak at the table, but he is openly in a bad mood. This entire exchange is accompanied by a steady melody in the orchestra whose rhythm suggests the continuation of the party but whose notes and orchestration seem more ominous.

The guests go off to dinner, but Violetta returns, followed by Alfredo. She warns him that the Baron is dangerous, but he is too angry to listen, and when he presses her for the reason she left him, she lies and tells him she loves the Baron. Alfredo summons the other guests to the room, and he insults Violetta by throwing his gambling winnings in her face as payment for their time together in the country.

Violetta faints. The guests are appalled by Alfredo's boorish manners and tell him to leave. Germont, who has followed Alfredo to the party, arrives just in time to witness the incident he had come to prevent. He denounces his son, saying that no man of honor offends a woman. Alfredo is immediately overcome with remorse. The Baron challenges him to a duel.

One thing that opera (and other forms of musical drama) can do but other forms of drama cannot is to allow us to experience the thoughts and feelings of several characters simultaneously. As Violetta comes to from her faint, the three principal characters join with the chorus in an elaborate ensemble. Alfredo continues to express his remorse, Germont laments that he cannot reveal the truth, and Violetta, possibly speaking to herself (since she cannot openly proclaim her love), says that some day Alfredo will understand and forgive her. Her voice soars above the others like the voice of an angel, and the music reaches an almost religious intensity as the curtain falls.

Act III: *Violetta's bedroom, the following month*

A somber prelude, based on the first-act prelude, establishes the mood. Violetta is asleep in bed, and Annina has fallen asleep in her chair while watching over her. Violetta awakens and then wakes Annina by asking for a glass of water. Dr. Grenvil enters and offers Violetta words of encouragement, but she realizes that the end is near, a fact that he confirms privately with Annina. When the doctor leaves, Violetta orders Annina to give half of the small sum of money they have left to charity. All of this dialogue is sung in a sort of recitative over the orchestral continuation of the music of the prelude.

Left alone on stage, Violetta re-reads a letter that she has received from Giorgio Germont. Following a long-standing operatic convention, she speaks the words of the letter (rather than singing), while a violin solo accompanies her reading with the melody to which Alfredo first declared his love for her. In the letter Giorgio informs her that Alfredo wounded the Baron in the duel, but not fatally, and that Alfredo now knows the truth about her "sacrifice" and the two will soon come to visit her. "Too late," she exclaims.

Looking at her wasted face in the mirror, she begins the aria “Addio, del passato” saying goodbye to her dreams of the past. It is in this aria that the term “traviata” appears, in her self-description as a “lost one.” Verdi accompanies her lament with the most plaintive of instruments, the oboe, which even completes her phrases when she pauses.

A chorus of carnival goers is heard from the street beneath her window. This type of ironic contrast between the action on stage and the world outside appears to be Verdi’s innovation, though this device was subsequently used in a number of other operas, such as Massenet’s *Werther*, in which the sound of children singing a Christmas carol accompanies the death of the title character, and *Carmen*, where the crowd in the arena cheers the bullfighters as Don José stabs his former lover.

Annina enters, announcing Alfredo’s arrival. The lovers sing a duet in which Alfredo asks for forgiveness and, as Violetta momentarily forgets her illness, the two plan a life together far from Paris. Violetta suddenly realizes the hopelessness of her situation, exclaiming “great God – to die so young,” beginning another duet. These two duets are more symmetrical – one might say conventional – than the ones we heard earlier in the opera, in that Alfredo and Violetta echo each other’s music.

Giorgio now enters, followed by Annina and the doctor. Realizing that Violetta had not exaggerated the seriousness of her condition, he regrets the pain he caused her in her final days. Violetta calls Alfredo to her bedside and gives him a miniature portrait, asking him to show it to his future wife and to tell her it is a picture of the angel who is watching over them. At this moment

the orchestra sounds a phrase which recurs throughout the scene, consisting of two short notes and one longer one (da-da-DUM, da-da-DUM), perhaps suggesting a funeral march. Always in the background, this motif acts on our subconscious in the way that a good movie score does. In an ensemble, the other characters express their laments.

Suddenly, the mood changes. Violetta says, “E strano” (“It’s strange”), echoing the words she spoke in her first-act aria. She explains that the pain has stopped and she is returning to life. “O gioia!” (“O joy”), she exclaims, before collapsing to the floor. The doctor pronounces her dead as the curtain falls.

The late Dr. Morton Creditor, long-time board member of the Lyric Opera Guild, in his physician’s-eye study of operatic ailments, pointed out that Verdi and Piave have given us a realistic portrayal of Violetta’s death from consumption – a disease known today as tuberculosis. People dying of this disease remained conscious and lucid until the end, and before death they frequently experienced a phenomenon known as *spes phthisica*, a sense of euphoria and false hope. What they were not aware of – since germ theory was unknown in their day – was that the disease was highly contagious. In later times, it is doubtful that Alfredo would have risked close contact with her. Prior to 1950, there was no effective medical treatment, though some patients exposed to the disease remained non-symptomatic, and some experienced spontaneous recovery. Many considered it to be a life-style disease, and in telling her that her fast-lane lifestyle was killing her Alfredo was expressing the medical views of his day.

ONLINE RESOURCES

Our favorite La Traviata video clips from fellow opera companies:

www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLs0evScqLO_vk4CRQx2OWyYH4ADnH4O3L

Photos and renderings previewing the production:

www.flickr.com/photos/kcopera/sets/72157642169899194/

La Traviata musical highlights:

www.youtube.com/watch?v=xmmaJxwzd8

GIUSEPPE VERDI AND THE CREATION OF *LA TRAVIATA*

Giuseppe Verdi was born in 1813 in the village of Roncole, now part of Italy but then under French control. As has been the case with most great composers, his musical talents were recognized at a young age, and he soon moved to nearby Busseto to pursue his music studies under the watchful eye of an arts patron named Antonio Barezzi. During the course of his studies, he fell in love with and married Barezzi's daughter, Margherita. In the tumultuous years that followed (1838-1840), his life turned tragic as disease claimed the lives of both their children and then Margherita herself. All this happened about the time that the first of his twenty-six operas, *Oberto*, appeared with moderate success.

Many Verdi scholars have commented on the significance of the father-daughter relationship in Verdi's operas (*Rigoletto*, *Aida*, *Simon Boccanegra*, to name a few), suggesting a link between this phenomenon and Verdi's memories of his own deceased children. In *La Traviata*, Violetta serves as a surrogate daughter for Germont, and there is tenderness in their music reminiscent of the exchanges between Rigoletto and Gilda. By the end of this scene, in fact, Germont seems more sympathetic toward Violetta than he is toward his own son.

Verdi's attempt to write a comedy, *Un giorno di regno*, despite his heartbreak, was less successful, and he had all but decided to abandon composing when a friend virtually thrust a libretto at him and forced him to take it home to read. The story, set in the Biblical time of the Babylonian Exile, contained one number which haunted Verdi's imagination – a chorus of Israelite exiles longing for their homeland. Thus was born *Nabucco*, which

was to become a major success, and the rest is history. The aforementioned chorus was called “Va pensiero,” and the audience understood that Verdi was thinking not about ancient times but rather about the still unformed Italian nation, suffering under the rule of various foreign powers. In the 1840s, Verdi composed several operas, most of which he realized were not his best work, as economic necessity forced him to write more quickly than he would have liked. He sometimes referred to these as his “galley years.”

In 1847, Verdi reconnected with Giuseppina Strepponi, who had sung the lead female role in *Nabucco* but had recently retired from the stage due to voice problems. She was to become the second love of his life, and the couple began living together shortly afterward, though they scandalized their neighbors by avoiding the marriage altar for over a decade. In particular, he was criticized by his former patron and father-in-law, Barezzi, prompting the reply, “in my house lives a free, independent woman.”

There can be little doubt that in Giuseppina – whose very name was the feminine form of Verdi’s own – the composer had found a true soul-mate. She was a woman of great intellect, who had genuine input into the creation of Verdi’s operas, as well as – if we are to believe her portraits – great physical beauty. Verdi biographer Mary-Jane Phillips-Matz has stated that she was the true model for Violetta. Consider a letter she wrote to Verdi later in life, in light of Violetta’s sentiments in the opera: “Verdi, I am not worthy of you; and the love which you have for me is a gift, a balm to the heart....Continue to love me, love me even after death, when I present myself before Divine Justice, rich with your love and your prayers.” The two eventually married in 1859, and they remained together until her death in 1897.

It was during the 1850's that Verdi's genius truly manifested itself. *Rigoletto*, which had its premiere in 1851, was a major advance in the art of dramatic story-telling through music. This was followed by the somewhat old-fashioned *Il Trovatore*, which was nevertheless a great success in its day.

Early in 1852, Verdi and Strepioni attended a performance of *La dame aux camélias* (*The Lady of the Camélias*) in Paris, which Alexandre Dumas fils had adapted from his popular novel. Even before he obtained a copy of the play later that year, he began composing the music for what was to become *La Traviata*. The opera had its premiere March 6, 1853 in Venice. Unfortunately, the cast was less than ideal, including a soprano who was too heavy to convincingly portray a woman dying of tuberculosis, a tenor not in best voice, and a baritone who resented being in an opera in which the tenor was the leading man. Verdi, in one of his letters, described the premiere as a "disaster," and asked, "Was it my fault or the singers? Only time will tell." This description was an exaggeration. Verdi was called from the wings for several curtain calls during the performance, and most of the critics recognized the greatness of the opera despite the weakness of the cast. A year later, the opera was performed in the same city and was an unqualified success.

Along with two of its immediate predecessors, *Stiffelio* and *Rigoletto*, *La Traviata* represented a major shift in Verdi's writing, a more personal, intimate story than those of the great historical epics which had previously been his trademark. Opera historian Jonathan Abarbanel suggests that this was the result of changes in stagecraft that were taking place in Verdi's time, most notably the replacement of candle-light with gas lamps, which allowed the theater to be darkened during performances. Along with this was the lowering of

the orchestra pit. Before these innovations, he argues, opera-going was largely a social affair. With the darkening of the auditorium and the elimination of stage boxes (boxes located on the sides of the stage), audiences began to socialize less and pay more attention to the action on stage, allowing composers and librettists to pursue story lines requiring more concentration on the part of the audience.

In the years which followed, Verdi continued to advance the art of opera, gradually abandoning the “hit song” approach in favor of continuous dramatic music. Among his later triumphs were *Simon Boccanegra* (1857), *A Masked Ball* (1859), *The Force of Destiny* (1862), *Don Carlos* (1867), and *Aida* (1871), after which he attempted to retire from composing, only to be drawn out of retirement fifteen years later when he had the opportunity to collaborate with the great librettist Arrigo Boito on two adaptations of Shakespeare’s plays, *Otello* and *Falstaff*.

Verdi, however, was not only a composer. He was also an Italian patriot, deeply concerned with the future of a nation which, throughout much of his life, was actually a conglomeration of several separate states linked only by geographical proximity and linguistic ties. He was active in the “Risorgimento,” a movement calling for the establishment of an Italian nation. Because of the role his music had played in supporting this movement, when independence was achieved Verdi was selected to serve in the Italian parliament, which he did briefly, though he played a largely ceremonial role. Several of his operas reflect the goals of the Risorgimento: the “Va pensiero” chorus from *Nabucco* (previously discussed), the “Patria oppressa” from *Macbeth*, cries of “Viva Italia” in *La battaglia di Legnano*, and the scene in *Simon Boccanegra* in which the

title character admonishes his senate that their loyalty must be to Italy, not Venice.

In his final years, Verdi devoted much of his time to the establishment of a retirement home for opera singers, an institution that stands to this day. He died in January, 1901, and while he had asked for a simple funeral, when his body (along with Strepioni's) was transferred to Rome the following month, a national day of mourning was declared and mourners lined the streets. Spontaneously, they joined together to sing the song which had first united them in love of Italy: "Va pensiero."

THE WORDSMITHS: PIAVE AND DUMAS

Francesco Maria Piave was born in Murano, Italy in 1810. He began his libretto-writing career with a number of composers who now are mere footnotes in opera history. In the 1840's, Count Mocenigo introduced him to Verdi, beginning an eighteen-year collaboration which included ten operas, among them several of the composer's greatest works, in addition to *La Traviata*. Among them were *Rigoletto*, *Macbeth*, *La forza del destino*, and *Simon Boccanegra*. He also had a career as a stage director at the famed La Scala opera house in Milan. Sadly, he was disabled by a stroke in 1867 and was unable to work after that. He died in Milan March 5, 1876. During his final years, Verdi provided him with financial support.

Piave and Verdi were drawn to each other not only by their love of opera but also by their Italian patriotism. The collaboration, however, was hardly a relationship of two equals. Verdi was clearly in control, frequently criticizing Piave's work and demanding numerous revisions. Fortunately, Piave was willing to accept his subordinate role in order to remain in the composer's good graces.

Alexandre Dumas *fils* (junior) was the younger half of the most famous father-son writing duo in history. Dumas *père* is best remembered for his swashbuckling novels *The Count of Monte Christo* and *The Three Musketeers*. The younger Dumas was the out-of-wedlock son of a dressmaker. At the age of seven the elder Dumas recognized him as his son and, in an era where women had few rights, forcibly took him from his mother and supervised his education at various boarding schools.

In 1844 Dumas moved to Paris, where he met and fell in love with a young courtesan named Marie Duplessis (born Alphonsine Plessis), who had also included Franz Liszt among her prominent lovers. She became the model for Marguerite, in his novel “La dame aux Camélias” and the subsequent dramatic version of the same story. (Piave and Verdi changed her name to Violetta). Apparently he had hoped that like his fictional counterpart he could reform her and save her from a life of promiscuity. However, most of his biographers believe that Marie, unlike Violetta, had no desire to settle down into a monogamous existence and lacked Violetta’s nobility of character. She died of consumption at age twenty-three.

Though today Dumas is best remembered as the author of the book behind *La Traviata*, he was a prolific playwright who was regarded in his day as a master of dramatic construction. Unlike his father, he focused his attention on contemporary domestic issues. As a reaction to the difficulties he faced growing up as an out-of-wedlock child, many of his plays include didactic attacks on sexual immorality.

Dumas *filis* was recognized with France’s highest literary honors, being admitted to the Académie française and receiving the Legion d’honneur. He died in 1895.

OPERATIC TRAVIATAS

As we have mentioned earlier, the term “traviata” means “lost woman,” and in context it connotes the loss of sexual innocence. It represents the thinking of a time when sexual activity outside of marriage was considered immoral and unmarried couples living together were the subject of scandal.

Though most operas were written in a time when monogamy was considered the norm, opera as we know it could hardly exist without its “fallen” women. Strangely enough, the casual attitude toward adultery one finds in Renaissance comedy never found its way into comic opera, which for the most part has been the domain of the chaste heroine. Mozart’s *Così fan tutte* is on the surface a depiction of female infidelity, but the women still insist that their suitors marry them before they will be willing to betray their fiancés. Not until 1911, with Strauss’s *Der Rosenkavalier*, do we find a casual acceptance of female marital infidelity.

Tragic opera, on the other hand, thrived on sexual relationships outside of marriage. Adultery was a staple of the verismo movement around the turn of the 20th Century, usually resulting in the death of the lover, the wife, or both (*I Pagliacci*, *Cavaleria Rusticana*, *Il tabarro*, as well as the American opera most influenced by the *verismo* style, Kurt Weill’s *Street Scene*). Though Carmen (in an opera which looked forward to the *verismo* movement) never marries Don José, in killing her he acts like a jealous husband. In the mid-nineteenth century Verdi composed *Stiffelio*, an opera about a husband who forgives his wife’s infidelity, a concept so out of keeping with conventional morality that it was rarely performed. The bearing of out-of-wedlock children also leads to tragedy, as in *Faust*, *Vanessa*, *Suor Angelica*, and *Simon Boccanegra*.

Opera frequently depicts the helplessness of women in a male-dominated society, and for many operatic heroines living with a man is the only way to survive. Manon, for example (in both operas which bear her name) lives with two different men in order to avoid spending the rest of her life in a convent. In *La bohème*, not only the flamboyant Musetta but the seemingly innocent Mimì can survive economically by living with men who can support them. Bess (*Porgy and Bess*) also lives in a society where women must depend on men for their support and marriage does not fit into the equation.

Prostitution of the street-walker variety does not play a part in opera until the twentieth century, and when it does – as in Stravinsky's *The Rake's Progress* or Kurt Weill's *The Rise and Fall of the City of Mahagonny* – it is a symbol of decadence, not liberation.

Courtesans figure prominently in three operas other than *La Traviata*. Jules Massenet's *Thaïs* tells the story of a courtesan during the early days of Christianity who converted to that religion and left her profession behind her to live in a convent. A far less sympathetic courtesan can be found in the character of Giulietta in Offenbach's *The Tales of Hoffman*, a predatory woman who bewitches the hero and steals his reflection, his very soul.

The opera which most resembles *La Traviata* – and in some ways seems to be modeled on it – is Puccini's *La Rondine* (1917). Like Verdi's opera, it is the story of a small-town boy (Ruggero) who comes to Paris, falls in love with a courtesan (Magda), lives with her away from Paris, and eventually sees the relationship break up because of the difference in their backgrounds. The first act, which takes place during an informal get-together at Magda's home,

more closely resembles the first act of Dumas' play than does *La Traviata*, with its gala ball. Unlike Alfredo and Violetta, however, this opera's lovers need no external pressure from family to end their relationship; upon learning that Ruggero intends to marry her and take her home to meet his mother, Magda realizes that she has no place in his provincial world, and she voluntarily returns to her former life. Ruggero's apparent naivete in not recognizing her checkered past is often regarded as a weakness in the plot and may be a reason that this tuneful opera is not performed more often.

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