Study guide to Giuseppe Verdi's romantic tragedy

*La Traviata*

[The wayward woman]

at the Detroit Opera House, Nov. 16-24, 2013

**QUICK INFO**

- Opera in three acts
- Set in the glittering salons of Paris and a house in the French countryside, mid-19th century
- Premiered March 6, 1853, at the Teatro La Fenice in Venice, Italy
- Text by Francesco Maria Piave (1810-1876, b. Murano, an island in the Venetian lagoon)—his 8th libretto for Verdi
- Music by Giuseppe Verdi (1813-1901, b. Le Roncole, Parma)—his 19th opera
- Based on the play by French author Alexandre Dumas the younger, *La Dame aux camélias* [The lady of camellias] (1852), in turn based on his novel of the same title, which was based partly on the author's affair with Marie Duplessis, a celebrated courtesan who died a year before the novel was published
- Sung in Italian with English translations projected above the stage
- Running time about 3 hrs

**BEARDS THAT CONTAIN BRILLIANCE:**

The hirsute creators of *La Traviata*, Giuseppe Verdi (left) and Francesco Maria Piave.
THE STORY
(Adapted from Opera Production: A Handbook, by Quaintance Eaton, University of Minnesota Press, 1961.)

At one of her brilliant supper parties, the beautiful but sickly courtesan, Violetta Valery, meets the well-born Alfredo Germont, and for love of him eventually abandons her feverish life of pleasure. Alfredo’s father intrudes on their idyllic existence in the country and, although realizing her sincerity, persists in his demand that Violetta renounce Alfredo, for the public scandal of the relationship may prevent Alfredo’s sister from marrying a respectable suitor. Violetta determines to make the sacrifice and departs, leaving only a note for Alfredo.

That night, she appears at a ball in Flora’s house on the arm of an old admirer, Baron Douphol, to the fury of Alfredo, who also attends the party. The two men play at cards; Alfredo wins consistently. Unable to persuade Violetta to return to him, Alfredo insults her by throwing his winnings at her feet.

Violetta becomes desperately ill, and all her friends desert her, leaving her virtually penniless. Alfredo at last returns to Violetta’s apartments in her final hours. His father has told him of Violetta’s noble renunciation, and urged him to seek her forgiveness. Overjoyed at the sight of him, Violetta attempts to rise. But it is too late, and Violetta dies in Alfredo’s arms.

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1 A fashionable woman who, in exchange for her company and physical affections, was “kept” by the men with whom she had relationships. These men, without marrying the courtesan, would pay her living expenses and support her extravagant lifestyle. Violetta is dying from consumption—what is now known as tuberculosis—which is supposed to have been brought on by this fast-moving, decadent, risky existence.
THE CAST OF CHARACTERS (AND SINGERS)

Violetta Valéry (La Traviata), a courtesan suffering from consumption
- American soprano Nicole Cabell (Nov. 16, 20, 23)
- American soprano Corinne Winters (Nov. 22, 24)

Alfredo Germont, the young man who loves her
- Italian tenor Leonardo Caimi (Nov. 16, 20, 23)
- American tenor Zach Borichevsky (Nov. 22, 24)

Giorgio Germont, his father
- American baritone Stephen Powell

The production at the Detroit Opera House will feature the Michigan Opera Theatre Orchestra and Chorus, led by Italian conductor Leonardo Vordoni, with staging by Italian director Mario Corradi.

A SILENT KILLER

Like Marie Duplessis (1824–1847), the real-life courtesan upon whom she is based, the heroine of the opera, Violetta, is afflicted with a terminal case of tuberculosis (TB). In the 19th century, this disease was known as “consumption,” because it would appear as though the patient were being consumed from within—having long coughing fits that produced blood, developing fevers, and losing weight. It was also believed that the disease was exacerbated by a fast, riotous lifestyle, such as these Parisian socialites lived. Violetta, however, claims the opposite, believing that her partying ways will help her to forget her sickness. As she proclaims to the group gathered in her salon, “Al piace m’affido, ed io soglio / Con tal farmaco i mali sopir” (“I entrust myself to pleasure, and I am in the habit / of soothing my ills with this medicine”).

Putting aside its romantic treatment by Dumas and Verdi, TB has historically been one of man’s most common causes of death. It is brought on by bacteria (Mycobacterium tuberculosis) that typically affect the lungs and spread through the air from one person to another. Understanding and treatment of the disease has much improved since Verdi’s day, and the number of people who are diagnosed and die from tuberculosis has greatly decreased in Europe and the Americas. However, it remains a serious problem in developing countries where adequate treatments are scarce. Today, TB is second only to HIV/AIDS as the commonest lethal disease that emanates from a single infector. The World Health Organization (WHO) reports that in 2011, 1.4 million people died from TB and 8.7 million people were diagnosed with it, mostly in Asia and sub-Saharan Africa. Organizations like the WHO continue to do hugely important work, researching the
disease and providing support in seriously affected countries, so that stories like that of Violette, and so many real people like her, may be ones of hope instead of tragedy.

FOREVER FREE

One of the most famous showpieces for soprano (the highest female voice) is “Sempre libera” [Forever free], which Violette sings in Act I after Alfredo has confessed his deep love for her and exited her salon with the rest of the guests. Used to play-acting her emotions and romantic attachments, she is unaccustomed to the frank love that Alfredo offers her and that he may inspire within herself. In this moment of crisis for Violette, she insists that she will not accept Alfredo, but will instead throw herself even more deeply into her pleasure-seeking and party-going. As Alfredo continues his love song from outside her window, Violette expresses this determination with wild bursts of coloratura (meaning “coloring” in Italian), a sort of high-flying, fast-moving, pitch-jumping style of singing used in opera to express extreme states of emotion, whether joy or madness. In this case, it is perhaps a little bit of both.

Listen to a recording of the aria (there are many on YouTube, including excellent renditions by American-born stars Beverly Sills and Anna Moffo) and read the lyrics below. Try to puzzle out, from the combined effect of the text and the music, what the creators are saying about Violette's emotional state. Is she truly committed to this life of pleasure, or is it merely pretense? Does she long for one thing, even as she sings of something else? Does Alfredo's music actually echo into her room, or is she perhaps only dreaming it? And if she is dreaming it, what is the content of that dream?

Violette:
Sempre libera degg’io
colleghiare di gioia in gioia,
vo’ che scorra il viver mio
pei sentieri del piacer.
Nasce il giorno, o il giorno muoia,
sempre lieta ne’ ritrovi,
a diletto sempre nuovi
de volare il mio pensier.

Alfredo:
Amor è palpito dell’universo intero,
misterioso,
croce e delizia al cor.

Violette:
Oh! Oh! Amore!
Follie! Gioir!

Violette:
I must be forever free
frolicking from joy to joy,
I wish for my life to flow
along the pathways of pleasure.
As a day is born, or as a day dies,
I’ll keep turning happily
to ever-changing delights
that make my spirit soar.

Alfredo:
Love is the heartbeat of the entire universe
mysterious, changing,
tortment and delight of the heart.

Violette:
Oh! Oh! Love!
Madness! Bliss!