

# *LA TRAVIATA*

Guide to the Opera  
2010-2011 Season



MUSIC BY **GIUSEPPE VERDI**

TEXT BY **FRANCESCO MARIA PIAVE**

PREMIERED IN **VENICE, ITALY** ON **MARCH 6, 1853**

BASED ON THE NOVEL ***LA DAME AUX CAMEILAS***

BY **ALEXANDRE DUMAS**

 **MADISON OPERA**



## I. CAST OF CHARACTERS

**Violetta Valery:** a courtesan in Paris, famous for being a carefree party girl

**Alfredo Germont:** a nobleman from the country, in love with Violetta

**Giorgio Germont:** Alfredo's father, who disapproves of Violetta

**Flora:** Violetta's friend and accomplice in Paris

**Annina:** Violetta's maid

**Gastone:** Alfredo's friend, a count

**Baron Douphol:** an older man, Violetta's escort and current fling

**Grenvil:** Violetta's doctor

## II. DIRECTOR'S NOTE FROM GARNETT BRUCE



“Anyone who has spent any time at all in the company of girls of Marguerite’s sort (Violetta in the opera) is quite aware of what pleasure they take in making misplaced remarks and teasing men they meet for the first time. It is no doubt a way of levelling the scores for the humiliations which they are forced to undergo far too often at the hands of the men they see every day.”

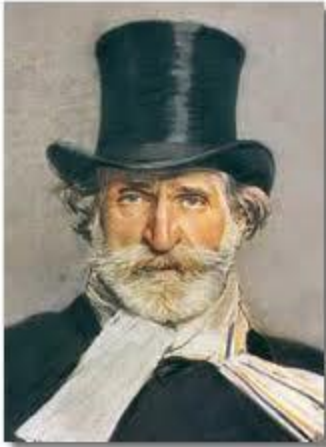
**-*La Dame aux Camélias*, Alexandre Dumas-fils, Chapter VII**

The novel by the illegitimate son of Dumas-père (author of *The Three Musketeers* and *The Count of Monte Cristo*) was published in 1848, chronicling the life of Parisian courtesan Marie Duplessis. Part of the initial shock (and success) of *La Dame aux Camélias* was Dumas-fils’ use of abbreviations for known dignitaries and socialites of the present day. The novel is presented as a flashback, allowing the author to reflect on his brief, poignant encounter with Marie, and the horrible way she was allowed to wither and die from consumption. As much as it celebrates a life, it condemns a society, all through the misty lens of an author’s point of view.

One of the magical things about Desmond Heeley’s scenery and costumes and Christine Binder’s lighting is the recreation of memories--not flat out reality, but a softer, more gentle, more emotional space. And it is here Verdi’s music can bring the story into real time, puncturing a gauzy mood with raw emotion and conflict. Part parable, part melodrama, *La Traviata* puts Violetta in the center of the frame--her witty remarks in Act I, her earnest grasp of the truth in Act II, and her justifiable anger at being abandoned in Act III. Verdi wrote this score from a very personal place, with a very real eye to changing the world by showing it to them, and now, several generations later, to us. The strongest memories seldom seem to fade away.

*Garnett Bruce, La Traviata stage director*

### III. GIUSEPPE VERDI (1813 – 1901)



Born in 1813 in the Italian village of Le Roncole near Busseto, Giuseppe Verdi spent his early years studying the organ. By the age of seven, he had become an organist at the church of San Michele Arcangelo. It was there that the young Verdi was an altar boy and, according to myth, his mother saved him from the French in 1814. In 1823, Verdi moved to Busseto where he attended music school and by the age of 13 was an assistant conductor of the Busseto orchestra. After finishing school, Verdi applied for admission to the Milan Conservatory. He was rejected for admission, although one of the examiners suggested that he "forget about the Conservatory and choose a maestro in the city" to study with. Verdi studied composition in Milan with Vincenzo Lavigna, a composer and the conductor at the famous opera theater La Scala. Verdi bounced back and forth between Milan and Busseto until he was named conductor of the Busseto Philharmonic in March 1836.

By May 1836, Verdi married childhood sweetheart, Margherita Barezzi, who also happened to be the daughter of his greatest supporter. He returned to Milan several years later, this time with a young family. Verdi's first opera, *Oberto*, was brought to the stage at La Scala in November 1839 and ran for multiple performances. The noted Ricordi firm published *Oberto* and, based upon his initial operatic effort, Verdi won a contract for three additional operas. He began work on his next opera, *Un Giorno di Regno*, but was interrupted when, one by one, his family fell ill. A little over the course of a year, Verdi lost his son, his daughter, and his beloved wife to illness. Unfortunately, *Un Giorno* was a complete failure.

Verdi vowed never to compose another comedy and began to believe that everyone had a predetermined destiny, even if that meant death at a young age. Throughout this troubled period, the director at La Scala still believed in Verdi, and it was Verdi himself who later declared that with his next work, *Nabucco*, "my musical career really began." At dress rehearsals for *Nabucco* in the La Scala theater, carpenters making repairs to the house gradually stopped hammering and, seating themselves on scaffolding and ladders, listened with rapt attention to what the composer considered a lackluster chorus. At the close of the number (the famous Chorus of the Hebrew Slaves) the workers pounded the woodwork with cries of "Bravo, bravo, viva il maestro!" The opening of *Nabucco* was a triumph. Verdi was famous, commanding a higher fee than any other composer of his time.

*I Lombardi* followed *Nabucco* and won an unprecedented victory over Austrian censors. Verdi's triumph in retaining the libretto and melodic themes the censors had hoped to ban as "religious" in nature forged the composer's lifelong reputation as an ideological hero of the Italian people. This would be the first of his many battles with censors for artistic freedom.

Over the next seven years, the composer penned ten additional operas of varied success, gradually making the transition between two distinct eras of Verdi composition. Initially captive of the "bel canto" style of Donizetti which focused almost solely on vocal purity and elegance, Verdi continually experimented to produce his own operatic genre in which drama was driven by melody and characters had an identifiable musical essence.

In explaining his work *Il Trovatore*, Verdi said: "I think (if I'm not mistaken) that I have done well; but at any rate I have done it in the way that I felt it." In saying so, he defined his own creative hallmark. Although a musical genius, Verdi composed spontaneously from the heart. A brilliantly schooled musician, he placed emotional sensibility above intellect in all that he wrote. In the process, he created the remarkable marriage of dramatic characterization and vocal power, an indelible artistic signature.

The creation of an operatic tour de force based upon his ingenious artistic formulation assured Verdi's immortality, beginning in 1851 with *Rigoletto*, followed soon after by *Il Trovatore*, *La Traviata*, and ultimately in 1871, by *Aida*. Even without the masterpieces that followed - *Simon Boccanegra*, *Un Ballo in Maschera*, *La Forza del Destino*, and *Don Carlos* or his great Requiem Mass - the Maestro could have afforded to rest on his musical achievements and stand unchallenged as the premier operatic composer of any age. In fact, with the success of *Aida*, Verdi seemed to have abandoned composing altogether, producing no new works for fifteen years.



Fortunately an electrifying libretto for *Otello*, created by poet Arrigo Boito, brought the composer out of his self-imposed retirement. The opening of *Otello* in February of 1887 attracted an international audience to Milan for a dramatic event which ended only after the citizenry had showered Verdi with gifts and applause throughout twenty curtain calls and towed his carriage to the hotel. Public festivities continued until dawn.

In 1893, with the premiere of *Falstaff*, Verdi and his adoring audience repeated the entire sequence of events at La Scala - all in honor of a comedy he had vowed as a young man never to write. The maestro finally retreated to his country home in Sant' Agata with his second wife, singer Giuseppina Strepponi. They spent several peaceful years in retirement until her death in 1897. His wife's death left Verdi in a state of unbearable grief. He immediately fled Sant' Agata for the Grand Hotel in Milan and, after four unhappy years, Verdi died in 1901, the victim of a massive stroke. Verdi's death left all Italy in mourning. He still is revered throughout the music world as the greatest of operatic composers and, more particularly, in Italy as a patriotic hero and champion of human rights.

*Courtesy of Arizona Opera.*

## IV. WHAT TO LISTEN FOR

Verdi crafted his music to make the listener aware of certain elements of the plot. See if you can detect the following techniques as you watch and listen to *La Traviata*:

### > *Reoccurring musical themes*

The first notes of the prelude, played before the curtain rises, establish the theme of Violetta's suffering from her illness, tuberculosis. This same theme is heard in the final act as Violetta nears death. In this same prelude a theme is introduced that portrays Violetta's love. This love theme is repeated in Act II when Violetta bids Alfredo goodbye.



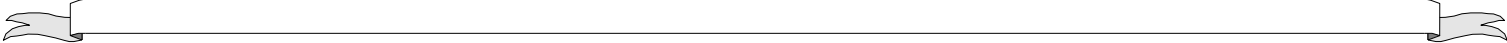
### > *Contrasting melodic lines played simultaneously*

Verdi illustrates the two very opposing life styles of *La Traviata*: The desperate, suffering and sad love story of Violetta, and the merry life of a Parisian courtesan. At the beginning of the opera super imposed over Violetta's love theme is a bright and witty melodic line that makes us think of parties and festivities- of people enjoying the good life. In the final act, as we hear the sad theme associated with Violetta's illness, counter-balanced is the music and singing heard in the streets outside of Violetta's apartment.

### > *Familiar music*

So much of Verdi's music is used in popular commercials and as background music because you can easily sing or hum his thematic lines. Have you ever heard the music of the drinking song, "Libiamo?" Can you hum the melody?





This theme, and other Verdi has written, are so engaging that they have become recognizable by many people who are not all that familiar with the entire opera. The party scene in Act II with the gypsies and matadors is memorable for the bright and exuberant singing and the dancing in colorful costumes by the entire opera chorus. One of the most popular arias of *La Traviata* is known as “Sempre Libera (Forever Free).” This aria is a musical form known as a “cabaletta.” It is sprightly, fast, short in length and catches our attention. It makes us immediately aware of Violetta’s interest in returning to her former merry life.

> ***Theatrical devices***

When Violetta reads the farewell letter she has written to Alfredo, she “speaks” the words. There is a musical background, but it serves to echo her feelings, rather than to accompany her voice. The technique employed here is called “melodrama,” that is, a dramatic reading with a melodic background.

> ***A superstar soprano***

In Act I when Violetta first discovers her love for Alfredo, Verdi writes a bold *coloratura* solo (*coloratura* sopranos have very strong voices, sing in the highest vocal range and specialize in florid runs and trills). At one point, the orchestra drops out and Violetta sings a “cadenza” (a section of an aria that shows off the singer’s virtuosity) by herself. Verdi wrote difficult parts for soprano singers. In *La Traviata* the *coloratura* singer is expected to push the limits of her vocal range, sing powerfully and, in addition, be an excellent actor to portray the difficult role of Violetta. The singing role is so difficult in the first act that Verdi gives the singer a little rest at the beginning of the second act while Giorgio Germont sings. In the rest of the opera, the soprano is required to sing dramatically. *Coloratura* sopranos are not usually required to be dramatic sopranos in the same opera, so the role of Violetta requires a virtual superstar to sing the part.

*Courtesy of Washington Opera*

## V. HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Verdi's life covered a period of great musical and political upheaval. When he was born, the classical period of Mozart and Haydn had already begun to pass, and the highly ornate *bel canto* operas of Bellini and Donizetti were enormously popular. Soon, the dramatically nuanced and musically full bodied Romantic style began to take over, varying greatly between France, Italy, and Germany, where Wagner's "music dramas" were considered revolutionary. Politically, the 19<sup>th</sup> century saw the unification of Italy in 1861 after a period of revolution that Verdi's opera *Nabucco* is said to have partly inspired. The following dates mark significant events in Verdi's life, in Italy, and around the world, from 1813 to 1901.

**1813:** Giuseppe Verdi is born in Busseto, Italy, then part of the First French Empire, under the rule of Napoleon

**1814:** Napoleon is defeated and is exiled to St. Elba

**1815:** Napoleon escapes, but is defeated again at the Battle of Waterloo; Congress of Vienna restores Austrian rule to the Kingdom of Italy

**1823:** The Monroe Doctrine declares that European powers must not colonize or interfere with independent nations in the Americas

**1827:** Beethoven dies

**1831:** Premiere of *Norma*, Bellini's most influential opera

**1836:** Verdi marries first wife, his childhood sweetheart

**1838:** Photography invented; Charles Dickens writes *Oliver Twist*

**1839:** Verdi's first opera, *Oberto*, premieres at La Scala in Milan

**1842:** Premiere of Verdi's *Nabucco*, in which the plight of the oppressed Jews was instantly compared to the plight of the Northern Italians under the Austrian Empire

**1843:** Wagner's *The Flying Dutchman* premieres in Dresden

**1848:** Revolution of 1848 in France results in the establishment of the Second French Republic, spreads revolutionary movements throughout Europe, including Italy; death of *bel canto* opera composer Gaetano Donizetti



**1853:** Premiere of Verdi's *La Traviata* at La Fenice in Venice

**1858:** Birth of composer Giacomo Puccini

**1859:** War in Italy gradually removes Austrian rulers from northern states; Charles Darwin publishes *On the Origin of Species*

**1861:** First Italian parliament is called, at peak of unification process, and Rome is declared the capitol of Italy; American Civil War– begins

**1866:** Austria cedes rule of Venice to Italy

**1870:** Rome is seized from the Pope by the Italian army, effectively ending the battle for Italian unification

**1871:** Triumphant premiere of Verdi's *Aida*; end of the Franco-Prussian war

**1876:** First complete performances of Wagner's Ring Cycle at Bayreuth

**1887:** Premiere of Verdi's *Otello*, finally shows the influence of Wagner's style on the consummate Italian Verdi

**1896:** Premiere of Puccini's *La boheme* represents changing of the guard in Italian opera; new style is more realistic, with through-composed music

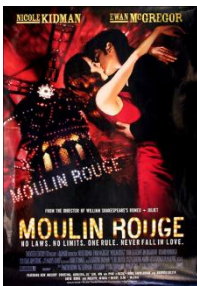
**1901:** Verdi dies in Milan

## VI. POPera CONNECTIONS

### **Movies influenced by LA TRAVIATA**



>**Pretty Woman** (1990) – Director Garry Marshall has a soft spot for opera. In fact, he’s directed operas for the stage before, and in *Pretty Woman*, he makes perfect use of *La Traviata*. The story of the movie parallel’s that of *La Traviata*, with Julia Roberts as the Violetta character. In one famous scene, her “Alfredo” Richard Gere takes her to a performance of *La Traviata* at the San Francisco Opera, and it moves her to tears. [Click to watch the scene online.](#)



>**Moulin Rouge** (2001) – In this epic Baz Luhrmann film starring Nicole Kidman and Ewan McGregor, *La Traviata* receives the full Hollywood treatment. Christian (McGregor) is a wannabe poet who defies his father to join the nightlife of Paris in 1899, where he falls for the glamorous dancer and party girl Satine (Kidman). Problem is, Satine is supposed to be an escort for an older, wealthier man, and she’s secretly dealing with a fatal illness. Sound familiar? It’s Verdi all over again!

### **Commercials that use Verdi’s music from LA TRAVIATA**

*La Traviata* contains some of the most popular music ever written to this day. Here are just a few advertisements that make use of it:

>**Huggies** (uses “Libiamo” from Act 1, Scene 1): [Click to watch online.](#)

> **Skittles** (also uses “Libiamo”, and a singing rabbit): [Click to watch online.](#)

> **Heineken** (uses “Sempre Libera” from Act 1, Scene 1): [Click to watch online.](#)

> **Nissan** (also uses “Sempre Libera”): [Click to watch online.](#)

> **EA Games** (uses the “Gypsy Chorus” from Act 2, Scene 2): [Click to watch online.](#)

\*A 2011 commercial by Bertolli also makes use of “Libiamo”!

## VII. ONLINE RESOURCES

A Brief History of Opera:

<http://www.operaamerica.org/content/education/learningCenter/intro.aspx>

Score for *La Traviata*:

> <http://www.dlib.indiana.edu/variations/scores/bhr7293/index.html>

English translation of *La Traviata*:

> <http://www.dennisalbert.com/Opera/latraviata.htm>

Biography and Discography of Giuseppe Verdi:

> [http://www.musicweb-international.com/classrev/2006/July06/Verdi\\_conspectus1.htm](http://www.musicweb-international.com/classrev/2006/July06/Verdi_conspectus1.htm)

*La Traviata* samples:

> Act I - "Libiamo" - <http://youtu.be/NcKdnkGBSgA>

> Act I - "Sempre Libera" - <http://youtu.be/l-AcsT9LRll>

> Act II.i - "Lunga da Lei" - <http://youtu.be/EWMTDFQad4k>

> Act II.i - "Di Provenza il mar" - <http://youtu.be/0saYfRBGBXY>

> Act II.ii - "Gypsy and Matador Chorus" - <http://youtu.be/Tc-PjPf-uIE>

> Act III - "Ah, Violetta (Finale)" - <http://youtu.be/mq4204iQZqI>