



GIUSEPPE VERDI
(1813-1901)

— LA TRAVIATA —

Opera in tre atti · Oper in drei Akten
Opera in three acts · Opéra en trois actes

Libretto / livret: Francesco Maria Piave

THE METROPOLITAN OPERA
ORCHESTRA AND CHORUS

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"La traviata": The Threat of the Natural

JAMES HEPOKOSKI

In some senses Verdi's two masterpieces from the early 1850s, *Il trovatore* and *La traviata*, are twins. The latter was composed on the heels of the former; they received their first performances within two months of each other (Rome, 19 January 1853; Venice, 6 March 1853, respectively); and many sonorous and structural relationships exist between them. And yet their pervading atmospheres are strikingly different. In the Romantically grotesque *Il trovatore* one is swept up by factional clashes in a distant, late-medieval Spain, by white-hot intrigues of passion and revenge. *La traviata* on the other hand, was to confront its audiences with a slice of current life. As Verdi had originally envisioned it, it was to be something of a social commentary performed in modern dress. Anticipating certain features of operatic realism by several decades, *La traviata* evoked the contemporary world of the 19th-century, aristocratic French salon - perfumed, dance-saturated and shot through with a *frisson* of frankness concerning modern sexual and emotional relationships. *Il trovatore* and *La traviata* are twins, but by no means are they identical twins. Although *Il trovatore* was composed in relative leisure over a period of about two years, *La traviata* was dashed down at breakneck speed,

in a matter of months - perhaps even of weeks. In fact Verdi wrote no opera more rapidly than he did *La traviata*. In early May 1852, while working on *Il trovatore*, he signed a contract with Venice's La Fenice theatre to write a new opera for the following February. (La Fenice was the house for which Verdi had already written *Ermani*, *Attila* and, most recently, *Rigoletto*.) A list of singers had been drawn up and, eventually, a librettist determined (the standard Venetian librettist, Francesco Maria Piave), but the subject of the opera remained an open question well into the autumn.

By late September a subject had been proposed - although we do not know what it was, it was certainly not yet *La traviata* - and La Fenice dispatched Piave to Verdi's home at Sant'Agata in order to produce a libretto. But while working with Piave Verdi suddenly changed his mind and demanded that the new opera be made from the play *La Dame aux camélias* by Alexandre Dumas fils (recently adapted from the same author's novel of 1848). As Piave explained in a letter to La Fenice on 20 October 1852: "I had completely written a libretto for him, and I was just about to return, when Verdi caught fire with another topic. Quiet and calm, I had to write the scenar-

io in five days. I'm just finishing it now . . . I think Verdi will surely make a beautiful opera from it, because he is certainly all worked up." As several writers have suggested, the controversial subject may have engaged Verdi on more than purely theatrical grounds. At the time he was living openly with his mistress (later his wife), Giuseppina Strepponi, a retired soprano with something of a past of her own. Although it is surely inappropriate, as Julian Budden has argued, crudely to map the opera's plot onto the composer's life, it nevertheless seems reasonable to suppose that Verdi and Strepponi may have interacted with this topic in a deeply personal way. Piave seems to have stayed with the composer until early November in order to expand the new scenario into some sort of rough, provisional libretto. Its title was *Amore e morte* (Love and Death), not *La traviata*, and Verdi began to sketch out a few themes for it at this time. Early, untexted musical sketches have been reproduced for "Ah, fors'è lui" and "Sempre libera" from Act I: in them Violetta is still referred to as Margherita (her "Dumas" name). Piave would not produce a more finished version of the libretto until early December 1852. This was only about two months before the opera's contracted date of première, and about three before what would be its actual première. During those months Verdi would not only have to compose the new opera for Venice but would also have to travel to Rome to rehearse, orchestrate and supervise the first performances of *Il trovatore*.

It is not surprising to learn, then, that during his Roman trip in January 1853 Verdi wrote to Giuseppina to complain that he was getting very little work done on the new opera. Such may be gleaned from her responses to him on 3 and 17 January: "And haven't you written anything [of *La traviata*] yet?"; and "I am very sorry about what you tell me concerning the opera for Venice; I hope, however, that the situation is not quite so black as you paint it, and that on your arrival . . . you will have several finished pieces in your trunk."

Verdi returned home the last week of January 1853, surely by now working at full steam on *La traviata*. He quickly summoned Piave there to help polish the libretto. One can only imagine the feverish pace of his compositional activity at this time, since the rehearsals were to begin in late February. A letter from Piave to Carlo Marzari at the Venetian theatre on 4 February informs us that Verdi had finished drafting the first act. Apparently he completed the remaining two acts in the following sixteen days. Thus it may be that, apart from some preliminary late-1852 sketching, he drafted the whole opera in about four to five weeks. It also seems clear that while composing the work he was accepting practical advice from Giuseppina, who was doubtless the first to sing through Violetta's famous arias: an early, very taxing draft of "Addio del passato," for example - one without the relief of the celebrated oboe interpolations - may be dated to this February 1853 period. Verdi arrived in Venice on 21 February with the opera now

probably "complete" - but surely unorchestrated - and finished the remainder of the task during the two-week period of rehearsals, from 21 February to the première on 6 March 1853.

Amid such a flurry of creation there could be little time to revise or reflect at leisure. The story of the opera's initial failure is now famous. "*La traviata* was a large fiasco - and worse, they laughed," Verdi wrote to the conductor Angelo Mariani on 7 March, the day after the première. "Well, what do you want? I'm not bothered by it. Was it my fault or theirs? For my part, I do not think that the last word on *La traviata* was uttered last night. They'll see it again . . . and [then] we'll see."

The failure of the opera in 1853, however, is not directly attributable to its "modern-realistic" tone. (In fact, for the première and for most of the subsequent performances during Verdi's lifetime the polite fiction had to be sustained that the action took place "around 1700" rather than "around 1840" as indicated in the score.) Rather, there were more workaday problems involved, including a number of difficulties with the principal singers, Fanny Salvini-Donatelli (Violetta), Lodovico Graziani (Alfredo) and Felice Varesi (Germont).

The first *La traviata* may have died a hasty death in 1853, but a little over a year later Verdi was able to resurrect it after revising five of its numbers - some of them to accommodate an anticipated new Germont, Filippo Coletti. Three of the revisions are from Act II:

the expansive Violetta-Germont duet; Germont's cabaletta, "No, non udrai rimproveri"; and the Largo of the finale, "Di sprezzo degno." Two are from the last act: the cabaletta of the Violetta-Alfredo duet, "Ah! Gran Dio! Morir sì giovine" (originally in D flat major, not in its current C), along with the music that immediately precedes it; and portions of the Finale. The new *La traviata* - the version that we know today - was unveiled with tremendous success in Venice at the Teatro San Benedetto on 6 May 1854. It spread rapidly throughout Europe, though not without some initial controversy, to become one of the most popular operas ever composed.

It may be difficult for today's listeners to respond fully to the tingling undercurrent of the forbidden that may have been the chief feature of *La traviata* for its first audiences. We may get a sense of it, though, from the observations in 1859 of Abramo Basevi, the foremost contemporary commentator on Verdi's works, and one whose analytical descriptions have proven invaluable to present-day Verdians. Despite his admiration for much of the music of *La traviata*, Basevi's overall assessment was mixed. "In this opera," he protested, "the love depicted by Verdi [which Basevi identified as the modern doctrine of free love] is voluptuous, sensual, totally lacking that angelic purity found in Bellini's music . . . Everything emits lasciviousness and pleasure . . . Verdi was unable to resist the temptation of setting to music a filthy and immoral

subject with the aim of rendering it more common and acceptable . . . It is easy for everyone to see that today *La traviata* is an opera especially favored by the fair sex," who needed consequently to be warned about the "danger" associated with such spectacles, "which insinuate poison into the soul." And so on.

Notwithstanding the dated quality of Basevi's moralizing, what he was perceiving went beyond subject matter into the structure of the opera itself, and also into what Verdi would have called its *tinta*, or defining world of musical-sonorous colors. The dichotomy that Basevi was striving to address was that between the old-world, formulaic dignity, or even purity, of traditional Italian opera and the new urban effervescence (largely imported from France, in his view) that was threatening to undermine it. Basevi correctly noted that *La traviata* gave the surface impression of displaying "more simplicity" than Verdi's earlier works, that it often seemed to proceed as a string of relatively unpretentious but intensely charming melodies, lacking "that full development that the [true] Italian genius requires." Here, suggested Basevi, Verdi was often concerned with approaching "the French genre of *opéra comique*," whose styles are also at home in the contemporary salon: "With *La traviata* Verdi transports chamber music to the operatic stage - and with good success." In short, when compared with most of Verdi's earlier works *La traviata* could be heard as delivering a series of ephemeral jolts of pleasure or sentimental sensuality.

Some of this becomes more comprehensible when we realize that in the years immediately preceding *La traviata* Verdi had been trying to develop a new, compact directness in his operas. On the one hand, he was making his own treatment of the Italian formal traditions as lean, unelaborated and dramatically striking as possible; on the other, he was experimenting with different ways of grafting certain French operatic structures - most notably, lighter or more "artless" strophic songs - onto this concise Italian base. These compositional problems are most directly taken up in *Rigoletto* (1851), *Il trovatore* and *La traviata*, each of which poses the problem of integrating French styles and structures in more emphatic ways. Verdi's further tilting toward French, modern subject matter in *La traviata* must have been, at least in part, a response to this pressing problem of French-Italian generic fusion, and it is hardly surprising that his next opera, the far more expansive *Les Vêpres siciliennes* (1855), would be written in French for the Paris Opéra.

We can be more specific. The formalized, old-world Italian operatic conventions of the 1830s and 1840s consisted of such things as a fondness for highly stylized, "lyric-form" melodies (usually in the schemes of *ad ba* or *ad bc*, followed by a formal coda, often with cadenza); for formulaic solo pieces comprising a slow cantabile followed by a brief, "connective" *tempo di mezzo* and a fast, repeated cabaletta; for multipartite duets and ensembles. All of these things were normally pressed into

the service of grand dramas whose protagonists were aristocrats. These structural conventions may be understood as a self-consciously "elevated" mode of discourse (Basevi's "full development") that differs radically from that of the lighter solo song in two or three stanzas. Simpler strophic songs, especially those with concluding, punch-line refrains, were more characteristic either of middle- or lower-class characters or of aristocrats displaying a casual or "natural" feeling with which middle-class audiences increasingly identified. The traditional home of such songs was in France, for example in the once-popular *opéras comiques* of Boieldieu or Auber, or in certain portions of Meyerbeerian grand operas. (They may also be found, of course, in some influential French or French-influenced works of Bellini and Donizetti and, for that matter, in much German opera from Weber to Wagner.) Certainly by the early 1850s Verdi was grasping fully the enormous dramatic power that could be wrung from the inherent socio-political distinctions between the stiffly formal non-strophic genres (Italian) and the more relaxed or "characteristic" strophic genres (French).

Toward the end of the first act of *La traviata*, for example, Violetta's celebrated solo piece, "Ah, fors'è lui"/"Sempre libera" is often taken to be a model of the Italian double-aria. But in fact the cantabile ("Ah, fors'è lui"), which one would normally expect to be non-stanzaic, unfolds in two stanzas, each of which begins in the minor mode and concludes with a major-

mode refrain: as Basevi put it, it is "treated as a [French] *romance*." Thus Verdi calls upon the humbler strophic song to invade the elevated, formal cantabile section. There is an important dramatic point behind this choice: once left alone, and now suffused with "natural" feeling, Violetta cannot fully keep up the pretense of grand, pseudo-aristocratic structures. Her mask drops as she delivers something simpler: a frank, two-stanza song, one in which she even adopts Alfredo's earlier "Di quell'amor" as a spotlighted, major-mode refrain, as if to underscore that it was his declaration of love that now summons up her more honest self. Violetta is represented here as a *prima donna* for whom genuinely elevated or old-world genres seem to be inappropriate. It is only through the subsequent repudiation of this natural self (in the *tempo di mezzo*, "Follie!") that she permits herself to re-don the social mask of the standard cabaletta, "Sempre libera," and thus to continue the "false" pose of one who moves easily as the hostess of aristocrats at play. We should notice, though, that the formulaic cabaletta is infiltrated by the refrain of the cantabile, and even by Alfredo's voice itself: that is, the stylized structure is pierced by the "threat" of the natural.

Similarly, it is significant that in her famous deathbed aria in Act III, "Addio del passato," all social pretense drops once again for the delivery of yet another heartfelt, two-strophe, minor-major *romance* with refrain - one which, this time, in its recollapse back to the

minor mode, permits of no further re-donning of the false mask. In many ways "Addio del passato" may be heard as a third-act transformation (or transfiguration) of "Ah, fors'è lui"; one cannot adequately consider the one without reference to the other. These complementary solo pieces are the two anchors of the opera, and between them they illustrate Verdi's original title for it, *Amore e morte*: Love in Act I and Death in Act III.

Other "French" strophic structures in *La traviata* serve more straightforward purposes: the shared drinking-song (*brindisi*), "Libiamo ne' lieti calici" toward the beginning of Act I, for example, in which the musical stanzas (and the text itself) suggest an informal spontaneity and an embrace of sheer pleasure; or Germont's "Di Provenza il mar, il suol" in Act II - like Violetta's "Ah, fors'è lui" the cantabile of an otherwise "normal" double-aria - in which his very position of supplication and unashamed appeal to natural or simple sentiments call forth the two strophes; or the pair of inset, varied couplets (stanzas) for the guests dressed up as gypsies and matadors near the beginning of the Act II finale, genre pieces sung as if in quotation marks. When these numerous strophic pieces are considered along with the notable stretches of explicitly "frivolous" background music in the first two acts, it is clear why Basevi heard the opera as a legitimation of self-indulgent pleasure, one carried out as a succession of simpler melodies that often recall the styles of the salon and chamber music.

It is worth stressing, though, that in *La traviata* all of this is still inset into an Italian frame of reference. For all of the opera's French flavor, in its strong, frequent returns to traditionally Italian structures and, perhaps even more important, in its emphatic retention of the "earlier" Verdian melodic and orchestral style - concise, lapidary and directly to the point - it still asks to be perceived as essentially Italian. Indeed, large portions of it are explicitly Italian. Alfredo's beautifully wrought double-aria at the opening of Act II, for instance, "De' miei bollenti spiriti"/"Oh mio rimorso!", conveys standard ("formal" or "grand") tenor-behavior within mid-century Italian operas, and his adoption of the familiar cantabile-cabaletta format is perfectly appropriate. Similarly both the Largo movement of the Act II finale ("Di sprezzo degno") and the poignant duet near the end of the final act ("Parigi, o cara"/"Ah! Gran Dio! Morir si giovine") rely throughout on Verdi's masterly realizing of familiar Italian formulas.

Perhaps the boldest reworking of purely Italian conventions occurs in the much-discussed Violetta-Germont duet in Act II. Here Verdi expanded the normally brief "first-movement" section (beginning with "Pura siccome un an-gelo"), accordion-like, to contain numerous successive melodic starts, each of which might be mistaken for the onset of the formal "second movement" (which actually begins much later, with Violetta's "Dite alla giovine"). As far as its structure was concerned, the duet baffled Basevi (and several later com-

mentators), who could only assert, "The form is absolutely new, due to the variety of its melodic lines." Once again, this played into his larger characterization of *La traviata* as a succession of irresistible melodic stunners.

Whether considered from either the French or the Italian side, it was this unceasing profusion of brief, emotionally charged melodies -

coupled with their direct, insistent appeals to the audience to hear its own "frank" or "honest" images reflected in them - that would ultimately guarantee the success of *La traviata*. But for Basevi and many of his "old-world" contemporaries such enticements, though undeniable, could also be diagnosed as unsettling symptoms of modern times.

Synopsis

QUITA CHAVEZ

The action takes place in Paris and surroundings, around 1840. The first act takes place in August, the second in January and the third in February.

ACT I

The opera opens with a poignant prelude which establishes the feeling of impending tragedy. The curtain rises on a room in the Paris house of Violetta Valery, a courtesan, where a party is in progress. Violetta greets some of the guests, including Flora and her escort the Marquis d'Obigny, and before long they are joined by Gastone, who introduces to Violetta a young man, Alfredo Germont. Gastone informs her that Alfredo has admired her for a long time from afar, and recently when she was ill, called every day to ask about her health. Somewhat touched by his devotion she asks Alfredo if it is true, and when he re-

plies in the affirmative she remarks to her protector, Baron Douphol, that he had not done the like - a comment which annoys the Baron greatly. Alfredo becomes silent and Gastone suggests that his friend should entertain the company with a drinking song, which the latter is reluctant to do. But when Violetta adds her request as well, Alfredo breaks into the famous Brindisi ("Libiamo ne' lieti calici"), in which he sings of the pleasures of wine. Violetta responds in the same vein and the whole company joins in praise of pleasure.

When the general gaiety has reached its height, music is heard coming from the adjoining room, and Violetta suggests that they should all go in and dance. As they move towards the door she is suddenly overcome by faintness, and although she attempts to con-

tinue on her way she has another attack and is forced to sit down. Informing the company that she will join them in a moment, she bids them go in. Looking in a mirror, Violetta comments to herself on her paleness, and at that moment she suddenly becomes aware of Alfredo, who has lingered behind. He warns her that she will kill herself if she continues her present mode of life, and before long he declares his love. Violetta responds with cynical banter, but nevertheless she is moved and asks him how long he has loved her. He answers "a year", and in a duet of tenderness and charm ("Un di felice, eterea") he describes the love he has felt since the first time he saw her pass by. She replies that she can offer him nothing but friendship since she is incapable of love, and counsels him to forget her. Taking a flower from her corsage, however, she tells him to come back when it is faded, which he interprets as the morrow. Overcome with joy, he takes the flower and departs. Exhilarated by the dancing, the guests come back from the ballroom and take their leave of Violetta ("Si ridesta in ciel l'aurora").

Violetta is left alone, and to her surprise finds that she has been much affected by Alfredo's declaration ("È strano! è strano!"). In an aria ("Ah, fors'è lui") she reveals her longing for that which Alfredo represents - the state of loving and of being loved. She soon dismisses her thoughts as complete folly, however, and in a brilliant cabaletta ("Sempre libera deggio") she decides to throw herself once more

into the continuous round of pleasure her life has always been. The sound of Alfredo's voice in the distance checks her for a moment, but casting doubt aside she soon returns to her former lighthearted mood.

ACT II

The curtain rises on a room in a country house near Paris, where Violetta and Alfredo have been living together for three months. Alfredo comes in, and in an aria ("De' miei bollenti spiriti") he expresses the joy he has experienced since living with Violetta. Violetta's maid Annina enters. She tells him that she has returned from Paris, where, he is astounded to learn, she had been sent by her mistress to arrange the sale of her possessions to maintain their household. The maid discloses that 1000 *louis* are needed; on hearing this Alfredo tells her he will go to Paris to remedy matters. Left alone, he is overcome with remorse and reproaches himself for not realizing how things stood financially, vigorously declaring his intention to wipe out his shame ("Oh mio rimorso! Oh infamia!").

After he has gone, Violetta enters and Giuseppe, a servant, hands her a note which is from Flora. Telling him that she is expecting a man on business, Violetta directs her attention to the letter, which is an invitation to a party that evening: an event which arouses little interest in her. Giuseppe announces the arrival of a gentleman and thinking that it is the lawyer she is expecting, Violetta signs to the