

# GIUSEPPE VERDI LA TRAVIATA

*by*  
*Rosalba Pisaturo*

The Guild of Mercury Opera  
Rochester

## Giuseppe Verdi (1813-1901)

- His early years
- The operas from 1839 to 1850
- The trio Rigoletto, Il Trovatore, La Traviata
- The 1848 novel 'Camille' by Alexander Dumas
- The 1851 play 'La Dame aux Camélias'
- Giuseppina Strepponi and the 1853 opera 'La Traviata'

Giuseppe Verdi was born on October 10, 1813 in Le Roncole near Busseto. His parents were poor farmers and his only sister died very young. His father had a close friend, Antonio Barezzi who was president of the local Philharmonic Society; and when they both realized how much interest in music the ten year old Giuseppe was showing, they decided that his musical education had to be formalized under the guide of the music director of the Cathedral of Busseto, Ferdinando Provesi.

At 16 Giuseppe he had moved into Barezzi's home, and began helping him with marches and overtures for the Philharmonic. In 1832, it was decided that Giuseppe's talent belonged in the Conservatory of Milano, the musical capital of Italy and the home of La Scala Opera House. At 19 and with some financial help, Verdi, who had affirmed his musical talent in his city, moved to Milano. But here the Conservatory did not accept him and the reasons were never given. We only know that years later the name of the Conservatory was to be changed to Verdi Conservatory, but Verdi

refused to grant permission to use his name by saying:  
“They did not want me when I was young, they cannot have me now that I am old.”

He still completed his education in Milano where he was exposed to the triumphs of the leading opera composers of the era, Rossini, Bellini and Donizetti. In 1839 he premiered his first success, **Oberto**.

In 1833 he married Antonio Barezzi's daughter Margherita. They had two children, Virginia in 1837 and Icilio in 1838, This became the most critical period of his life, when he was stricken by a series of tragedies: his daughter Virginia died in 1838, a month after Icilio's birth; Icilio died fourteen months later in 1839, and his wife Margherita died of encephalitis in 1840.

Verdi was so devastated and personally defeated that he cancelled a contract for three commissioned operas at La Scala and became a recluse.

Under the encouragement of close friends he slowly resumed his work. In 1842 he composed **Nabucco**, the opera that gave the Italians the anthem for a nation longing for freedom and independence from the Austrian oppressive rule. In the next 7 years Verdi had produced 13 operas which represented a steady growth in his musical and dramatic style.

And these operas, like **Nabucco** also have a backdrop of political intrigue which related to the *Risorgimento*, the political movement for the independence and unification of Italy. In the minds of the Italian people Verdi soon became a political figure and a voice against the Austrian occupation. He had many run-ins with the Austrians censors who kept a close eye on the reaction of the audiences to his operas.

For himself Verdi always claimed to have been an unwilling political hero who knew nothing of politics. The strange coincidence remains in the fact that during this period, to the annoyance of the Austrian police, the walls of most major cities of Italy were covered with the graffiti saying "VIVA VERDI" This cry of the underground had a double meaning: first it acknowledged the greatness of the composer, second it read the acronym for

Viva:

Vittorio  
Emanuele  
Re  
Di  
Italia

(Long Live Victor Emmanuel, King of Italy) the ruler who would later become the first king of the united kingdom of Italy and who reigned from 1861 to 1878. Verdi's operas sent such a strong message of freedom that to this day we still say that he battled in the opera houses just like Garibaldi battled in the open fields.

Those years also saw significant developments in Verdi's personal life. The leading soprano of the time, Giuseppina Strepponi, had known and worked with Verdi since the beginning of his career, she was influential in the staging of his first opera **Oberto** and she had created the leading role of Abigaille in his triumphant **Nabucco**. They always had been good friends, but in the middle of the 1840s, their friendship blossomed into love and Giuseppina moved in to live with Verdi in his home in Busseto.

This created much disappointment and consternation for his parents, for his father-in law and mentor, Antonio Barezzi; and because of all the criticism and the gossip they were both shunned by many people. Nevertheless they lived together for over 10 years and did not get married until 1859.

Between 1850 and 1853, Verdi created his three most enduring works, **Rigoletto**, **Il Trovatore** and **La Traviata**. In these three operas he introduced more enigmatic characters, who are both hostile

and loving, heroes and outcasts. *Rigoletto*, *Azucena* and *Violetta* are musical portraits that develop individually as their drama unfolds. These three operas are considered Verdi's best for the level of maturity the composer had reached in creating scenes which heightened the dramatic effect with exceptional orchestration and most beautiful melodies. To this day they remain Verdi's three most performed operas.

In the winter of 1851, while he was working on the debut of **Il Trovatore**, Verdi and Strepponi went to Paris to see “*La Dame aux Camélias*,” a new play by Alexander Dumas fils, based on his 1848 novel, “*Camille*.” Verdi was familiar with this widely read novel which was the rage of Paris. Dumas’ story is a romantic attack on the hypocritical morality of high society when it deals with the *demimonde* (the world of illicit sex) and

he argues with the character of Camille that a good heart is more important than wealth. We must remember that in mid-19<sup>th</sup>-century France and England, sexual hypocrisy was widespread. Prostitution and gambling were very popular; men had mistresses whom they supported financially, they concealed them and were not supposed to fall in love with them. Such courtesans were in the relationship only for cash and gifts, and were available to their lovers only so long as it suited them. They were not

respectable women, they were not allowed to mix in 'polite society' and respectable families would not want to be associated with families where there were members entangled with such a creature. With Camille in the novel and Marguerite in the play, Dumas set himself to break this stereotype, arguing that even a courtesan can be truly loving, generous and self sacrificing. At the performance of the play in Paris, Verdi, who himself at that time was "living in sin" with Strepponi; being both ostracized because of

their life style, was taken with the character of the courtesan, and commissioned immediately a libretto from Maria Piave for **La Traviata** (The Fallen Woman) or (The Wayward Woman). Verdi worked on **Il Trovatore** and **La Traviata** at the same time and seven weeks after he introduced the world to **Il Trovatore** on January 19, 1853, **La Traviata** premiered on March 6, 1853 at the Teatro La Fenice in Venice. They say that he actually worked on it only for four weeks and

this illustrates the fecundity of his genius and the facility with which he composed. But his remarkable achievement is not in having written such a wonderful opera in such a short period of time, but in having produced a work in a style completely different than **Il Trovatore**, where the music deals with passions of love, hatred and vengeance. The music of **La Traviata** corresponds with settings of drawing-rooms; it is vivacious, graceful, gentle and overshadowed by sorrow.

Verdi, who had for many years reflected and portrayed the political injustices of his homeland in his operas, is now taking on the whole social order of his time. Retaining the original Parisian setting, he changed the heroine's name to Violetta and made her an angelic creature whose self-contempt and fear of risking love is almost incomprehensible unless one knows that she was a courtesan, loved only for her body and her high spirits, and destined to die young and alone.

The scandalous subject, Violetta, a beautiful young courtesan, abandons her lavish Parisian lifestyle for the true love of Alfredo, a young man from a respectable family from Provence. They are very happy in their country home until his father intervenes demanding that Violetta break off the relationship, because the fiancé of Alfredo's sister will not marry her while her brother's illicit union continues. Violetta agrees and sacrifices the relationship telling Alfredo she no longer loves him.

She goes back to her empty life in Paris, but, alone and dying of tuberculosis, she waits for Alfredo's return. His father tells him of her noble gesture, but when Alfredo arrives, it is too late, and she dies in his arms.

The character of Violetta introduced on the stage a scandalous subject matter, but Verdi made of it a masterpiece of romantic opera by simplifying the emotions on the basis of the heroine's vulnerability, and purifying her with her integrity and her act of heroism.

# Verdi La Traviata

Opera in three acts

Libretto by Francesco Maria Piave

after Alexander Dumas  *fils's play La Dame aux Camélias*

*Violetta Valéry*

*Renée Fleming*

*Alfredo Germont*

*Rolando Villazón*

*Giorgio Germont, his father*

*Renato Bruson*

*Annina*

*Anna Alkhimova*

*Los Angeles Opera Orchestra and Chorus*

*James Conlon, Conductor*

*Directed for video by Brian Large, 2007*

- Act I

At a lavish party in her home Violetta meets Alfredo who is invited to offer a toast in praise of wine and pleasure, but he also sings in praise of love and the irresistible beauty of Violetta, who in turn surprises herself in feeling something strange and in finding herself affected by his declaration. She dismisses such thoughts as madness and decides to continue with her life of pleasure. (Chp. 4,9,10)

- The "Libiamo" aria is one of the most famous 'drinking songs' in the operatic repertoire. Its swirling melody describes perfectly the festive Parisian social lifestyle. \*
- The next three arias are a 12 and a half minutes tour de force for a solo soprano on stage. The music requires different vocal expressions that vary from internal prayer-like singing (E' strano) to a coloratura showpiece (Follie!) to the famous and difficult Caballetta (Sempre libera)

- Act II

Violetta has rejected her previous life and for three months has been living happily with Alfredo in the country. An unexpected visit by Alfredo's father makes her give up Alfredo when he accuses her of ruining his son and the reputation of his family by jeopardizing a proposed marriage to his sister. He asks Violetta to break the relationship for ever. Violetta is horrified; she has given up everything for his love, she has no one to turn to and she is also threatened with consumption.

Germont pleads with her and she tearfully agrees to give up Alfredo. She will tell him that she no longer loves him, but asks that he would be told of her sacrifice after she dies.

The long confrontation scene between Violetta and Germont is in many ways the emotional core of the whole opera and the music will shift at several points as the two negotiate their claims.

- Germont begins in a lyrical tone to make Violetta feel pity for his innocent daughter  
(Pura si' come un angelo) Chp. 14
- Violetta becomes agitated as she realizes the high price of Germont's request  
(Non sapete quale affetto) Chp. 15
- The music becomes sinister and manipulative as Germont focuses on the fickle nature of men and Violetta's aging (Un di', quando le veneri) Chp. 16
- Violetta takes on a sad tone as she agrees to make the sacrifice while suppressing her true emotions.  
(Dite alla giovine) Chp.17
- The tension and the emotion build in the orchestra as the two suggest what she must tell Alfredo. (Imponete) Chp. 18

After Alfredo learns that Violetta has chosen to return to her old life style, he falls into his father's arms seeking comfort. Germont's aria "Di Provenza il mar, il suol" (Chp. 22) is one of the most outstanding baritone arias in the repertoire. The father reminds his son of the rural setting of his childhood home. By singing to the music of an earlier generation, he conveys the feelings of an older man who wants his son to return home.

But the tension builds when he realizes that Alfredo is not going back home with him; for he storms out of the house to find Violetta and seek revenge for his lost love. (Chp. 23)

- **ACT III**

Violetta lies dying of consumption in a dark bedroom, tended by Annina. The doctor has given her few hours to live. She is at peace with herself and, as she reads a letter from Germont, she sings the famous aria “Addio del Passato” (Chp.34) a masterpiece of melancholy, punctuated by her shortness of breath, by lines that soar as she recalls Alfredo’s love and by ascending harmonic progression as she prays for redemption.

Alfredo is announced by Annina. He rushes in, begs her to forgive him and the two plan a new life together. The famous duet “Parigi,o cara” (Chp.36) describes the dream of their idyllic future together. The music is now perfectly symmetrical and marvelously intertwined between the two lovers. They are in every sense finally together; but it is too late.

Realizing how serious her condition is, Violetta is resigned to her fate, but still outcries her destiny as being unfair. (Ah! Gran Dio!) Chp.37

Germont has also arrived and this cheers her briefly. He and Alfredo are in despair, while Violetta, over the musical undertones of a funeral march, gives Alfredo her medallion for remembrance. (Prendi, questa e' l'immagine) (Chp.39) Soon after, she falls dead.

Verdi's message was clear: Violetta, the courtesan, proves to be more loving and generous than Germont. Her story softens the heart and makes the audience more humane and tolerant.