

La traviata Giuseppe Verdi

One of Verdi's most notable achievements in *La traviata* is the way he challenges operatic conventions in his music, rather as the 'immorality' of the drama affronts the respectability of the theatre-going public. Relatively simple rhythms and themes that develop mainly by small intervals seem to exist in a more intimate and less grandiose world than that of *Rigoletto* or *Il trovatore*, written at much the same time. Verdi frequently abandons the standard use of set numbers, where characters sing in distinct formal patterns of separate recitative and aria. Instead the orchestra is used to provide continuity, creating a sense of flowing unbroken melody; the strikingly eloquent parts for individual singers arise from and subside into this broader musical background.

The activities outlined here do no more than suggest the immense subtlety of the music, but they will help students to hear more of what is going on and give them opportunities to respond in their own way, by playing, composing and singing themselves.

Quotations from the libretto are from ENO's English version by Edmund Tracey

Please note that these activities require access to a vocal score and, where possible, a recording of the opera. They are written for teachers teaching Key Stage 3 and 4 music.

© Copyright ENO Baylis

These pages are for educational use only and may not be published in any form without permission from ENO Baylis

ENO Baylis

The ENO Works, 40 Pitfield Street, London N1 6EU

Telephone +44 (0)20 7739 5808 Fax +44 (0)20 7729 8928

email: baylis@eno.org

www.eno.org/baylis

I Talking to One Another (Key Stage 4/GCSE)

Objective: To explore the expressive use of string writing in *La traviata*

Focus: Instrumentation and the expression of feeling

Sections: Prelude to Act 1; Prelude to Act 3

The Prelude to Act 1 is like a first picture of Violetta – a tone picture presented in two parts. The 1st subject over the opening 15 bars is a portrait of her frailty as a heroine: seemingly crystalline divided strings, dynamic markings that keep returning to the very quietest of tones, accents on weak beats of the bar (e.g. bar 3) that sustain the sound even as the stumbling intermittent nature of the motif itself seems to predict a tragic outcome. The lyrical 2nd subject appears first on violins; the second time it's heard on cellos decorated with a counter-melody of staccato patterns in the upper strings that suggest a kind of desperate frivolity. This 2nd subject itself is later heard in a passionate outburst of love in Act 2 ("Love me Alfredo, love me as much as I love you") but all we hear at first in this Prelude is its suppressed but deep-burning fervour. As the prelude develops, the dynamics are full of *piano* and *pianissimo* and tiny crescendos and diminuendos – a *forte* marking appears only twice, when the cellos and clarinets burst out for half a bar before falling back into *pianissimo*.

The Prelude to Act 3 repeats the opening bars of Act 1 with the same sequence of chords on the violins, but then develops differently. Here the love theme is silent as Violetta lies on her deathbed. Instead, the music wanders into C minor and D flat before coming back to the home key. It ends with off-beat sounds that are like quiet sobs.

Activity:

Choose contrasting instruments to improvise a 'question and answer' dialogue. Question and answer should last no longer than about ten seconds each, long enough to be interesting and short enough to be easily remembered. The teacher could have the 'question' role while pupils have different instruments for the 'answer' and take turns within a circle; or a confident pupil could act as the questioner; or pupils can do this activity in pairs. Discuss the feelings that seem implied by the different dialogues, and choose pairs of characteristics to stimulate the improvisation – bouncy and shy, constricted and angry, ardent and bored, etc.

Now choose instruments where the pairs are of similar type – piano and keyboard, alto and bass xylophone, descant and treble recorder etc. Make up some instrumental 'conversations' that express two sides of the same personality, so that there is less obvious contrast and more continuity than in the first activity. This could be a way of making an outline portrait of someone in the class or of a well-known figure, showing something of their outward and inner selves.

Choose a figure from fiction or the cinema or TV who seems to be both 'bad' and 'pitiful' at the same time – Gollum from *Lord of the Rings*, say, or any number of TV characters. Make up music for the character that lasts for eight bars and expresses one aspect of their personality, as it would be seen by an outside observer who isn't entirely sympathetic. Meanwhile, a partner makes up another eight bars of music on a related instrument (see above) that expresses an aspect of their personality more sympathetically, seen from within. Bring the two pieces of music together and try to find parts of the music that are similar and parts that are different. Can you adapt the two pieces

to make one longer piece that synthesises both parts of the character? Try to make the two instruments fit in with each other rather than simply stating two bald alternatives – experiment with overlapping the music to make contrasting textures, or weaving both parts in and out of one another. Present these pieces in a shared session.

To make this a bit more challenging – try to use sections of scales within the music, so that composing an interesting melody involves small shifts of rhythm rather than big leaps in pitch (Verdi does much the same). And try to use small variants in dynamics, so that listeners really have to concentrate to hear the contrasts, to grasp the ‘talking’ that is going on in the music.

Listen to Verdi’s two Preludes and hear how he solved similar problems!

II Plain and Decorated (Key Stage 4/GCSE)

Objective: To explore Verdi's inventive use of simple musical elements

Focus: Melody and contrasting styles

Sections: Alfredo's expression of love in Act 1 No. 5 ("Ah, it is love and love is our destiny"); Violetta's recognition of her new-found love later in the same act No. 6 (using the same words in the ENO translation); Alfredo's offstage singing at the very end of Act 1 ("Ah love is our destiny..."); Violetta's reading of the letter in Act 3 No. 16 ("You have kept your promise..."); Violetta's final cry ("The pain has gone...")

These sections use the great *legato* lyrical phrase first heard from Alfredo as he declares his love during Violetta's party. It has something in common, rhythmically and melodically, with the 2nd subject of the Prelude. Its sudden shift from major to minor-key tinge has often been interpreted as expressing the complexity – "*croce e delizia*" ("cross and delight") – that afflicts love in this opera. When Violetta repeats it later in the act it comes decorated with pizzicato strings and clarinet triplets, as if Violetta is still pre-occupied with her glittering external world rather than the inner areas of experience that Alfredo is exploring. At the end of the act, while Alfredo sings it offstage in an *andantino* passage, Violetta's more florid style overwhelms it as she determines to carry on with life's pleasures. When she reads the letter on her death-bed, the solo strings (*tremolo* and *pianissimo*) play it to recall the lovers' first meeting. At the very end, it comes in an extremely attenuated form to accompany Violetta's false recovery. Verdi adapts the phrase beautifully for a variety of purposes.

Activity:

Discuss the tunes of love-songs that pupils know – pop, musicals, folk etc. In groups of four, choose several examples of these; sing them and find how to play them on classroom instruments. Discuss the shapes of the tunes – upward aspiring leaps, stepped downward movements (as here), and other variations. Discuss how these tunes fit in with the words – the 'hook' in a pop song is usually a straightforward example – and how different patterns can be effective in different ways. Present the findings to the whole class.

In groups of about four, make up a new sentence to express a feeling associated with love – it could be for a family member if pupils don't want to make private feelings public – and experiment with different tunes to fit it to. After trying these possibilities, choose an agreed tune and present it to the class, with some group members playing and some singing.

Devise a mini-scenario in which versions of this musical phrase might recur with differing meanings – anger, surprise, jealousy, comfort, suspicion, happiness, etc. Choose three or four of these and, in groups, find ways in which the tune can be adapted to evoke the different sensations. Some techniques might include: changing the rhythm, changing the dynamic within the tune, adding notes within the basic shape, decorating the tune with a second melody, changing the instrumentation in places within the tune [cf. Activity I], etc.

Develop the music composed in this way so that the words 'disappear' into the music, and a purely instrumental version is left. Present the results to the class – perhaps some versions could be done with explanations about what techniques were chosen, and others as a guessing game ("Which feeling is this one?"), while ensuring that comments are positive.

Listen to the passages from Verdi and compare his musical choices with those produced in class.

III Me and You – You and Me (Key Stage3/4 or GCSE)

Objective: To explore Verdi's use of contrasting singing voices in a dramatic context

Focus: Voices

Sections: Parts of Act 2 – the confrontation between Germont (baritone) and Violetta (soprano). A short extract from this Act would be appropriate. The recitative and duet Nr. 8 (“You’re Violetta Valery?...”) contains a whole range of emotions. There is Violetta’s dignified and assertive response to Germont’s opening accusation (“Sir, you address a woman, and this is my house..”); her powerful outburst (“My past is over...I love Alfredo and God has heard my prayer”); his plea to her (“I have a daughter...”); her reply and their discussion full of rapid switches in tonality; her beautiful *andantino cantabile* lyrical outburst (“Comfort your daughter...”) with Germont’s accompanying consoling tune itself accompanied on the cellos; and their reconciliation as the ongoing harmonic clashes are resolved and the two singers’ themes are also reconciled.

This is music of impassioned argument, full of short sharp contrarities, moving between pride, hope, fear, anger, sympathy, despair, resignation with an apparently unanswerable logic.

Activity:

Pupils should discuss arguments between two generations and the emotions involved. There is no shortage of possible conflicts with which they will be familiar – arguments with parents over clothes, mobile phones, bedtime, boy/girlfriends, or with teachers over behaviour, homework, attitudes. They should bring out examples of ‘right on both sides’ and what it feels like to make up after a quarrel.

In groups of about four or five, choose two to be singers – if possible with strongly contrasting voices – and the others to be instrumentalists, or back-up vocalists if singers feel a bit shy. Start with spoken voices. Develop an argument that uses eight sentences which move from initial conflict to final agreement – this will necessarily be somewhat formal, but discarding the inessential phrases and leaving only the skeletal nature of the argument is a good activity in itself.

Experiment with speaking the sentences in different tones of voice and listen carefully to how the meaning is changed by the pitch and cadence of ordinary speech – something like “Do you realise what I’m feeling?” has very different meanings if the emphasis goes on ‘I’ or ‘feeling’, and if the voice goes up or down or uses crescendo or diminuendo.

Following the patterns observed in the spoken version of the lines, use these as a starting point for turning the argument into eight lines of sung music. Try to make the music mirror the shifting figures within the discussion so that there is contrast as well as a sense of driving towards a conclusion. The music need not be complicated but it should be honest – it should try to sound like what it signifies. Once again, it’s a good idea to experiment with such devices as overlapping the voices, making them repeat lines if desired or stop and start if that’s appropriate. Use the instruments to imitate, follow behind or anticipate or make comments on the sung music.

To make the challenge a bit harder, use two different keys initially for the two voices and try to reconcile them by the end. You could choose two keys with many notes in common - C and G, for example, so that you can easily choose a place for the two voices

to intertwine and then come together. Or you could have one voice using a pentatonic scale and one using the entire octave. Or, harder, you could begin with two harmonically distant keys (such as G and B) and use the small number of shared notes as a point of reconciliation.

Listen to parts of Verdi's Act 2 and hear how his characters argue in song. Can you identify a number of distinct moods within the scene? How does the music change with the moods?

IV One and Many (Key Stage 3)

Objective: To explore Verdi's use of solo and chorus

Focus: Musical texture

Sections: Act 1 No.2 (Opening – “What a time to arrive...” and Drinking Song – “Be happy, and raise your glass with me...”); Act 2 Nr. 12 (Gypsy Chorus — “We're gypsy fortune tellers...”); Act 2 No.13 (Matador Chorus — “We are heroes, in Spain they adore us”); Act 3 No.17 (Carnival Chorus – “Hail to the Carnival..”) and the music immediately before and after these.

The curtain goes up on party music (*allegro brilliantissimo*), and it's not clear at first who the main characters are going to be as many voices flit in and out of the sung texture. The Drinking Song, with its simple 3/8 accompaniment, starts as a forceful but elegant solo for Alfredo, gets taken up by the chorus and then is shared by Alfredo and Violetta. The two choruses in the second half of Act 2 come immediately after the intense drama between Alfredo and his father; they return us to the cheerful but heartless world of polite society. The carnival singers in Act 3 are heard outside the window of Violetta's death-room, marking the fact that life goes on even while tragedy is occurring. Verdi sometimes uses *parlante* (= in a spoken manner) as well as sung phrases. The overall effect is to establish a solid and plausible social background against which the private drama takes place.

Activity:

Take a song that everyone in the class knows, and play around with different ways of performing it: some lines spoken in rhythm, some assigned to volunteer solo or duet singers or speakers, some to everyone. Emphasise the maintenance of pulse – perhaps sustained by player(s) on a percussion instrument(s) – so that the song continues without stopping during changes of texture. Divide the class into three or four sections, and have a mixture of solo and 'chorus' and 'orchestra' in each section as above. Perform the song again with the sections in different parts of the room, so that the classroom space becomes dramatically significant. Are there ways of arranging the space and musical texture in this way to bring out particular meanings? (Even *Happy Birthday* can acquire richer or ambiguous significance by being performed in this way.) Try this with a song with 'I' in the title – what's the difference if one, two or more singers perform the title line?

Try 'hocketing' this or another well-known song with each individual pupil singing only a single note, while the song continues flowing. This is probably best done in a circle. Some pupils can be listeners, and describe the effect to the others. Repeat this with some pupils doubling part of the vocal line on a keyboard, recorder, xylophone, etc. Experiment with changes in the texture – some bits sung or played by all, some by soloists, some 'hocketing' etc. What is the effect of these changes?

Compose a group song about some event in the life of the school or class; eight or even four lines will be enough. Make some lines about what everybody felt, and one or two about the specific feelings of a volunteer singer. Perform it in the way(s) outlined above and discuss which is the best way to perform it; does an instrumental interlude, where someone plays part of the tune between two sung lines, make a difference?

Listen to some of Verdi's choruses and compare his effects with those created in the class. Do the Drinkers sound like a party you would want to join? Do the Carnival singers sound callous or cheerful?