



## ***La traviata***

An Opera in Three Acts by Giuseppe Verdi  
Libretto by Francesco Maria Piave  
after the novel *La Dame aux Camelias* by Alexandre Dumas  *fils*

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### **Characters in order of singing**

Violetta Valéry  
Flora Bervoix  
The Baron  
The Marquis  
The Doctor  
The Viscount  
Alfredo Germont  
Annina (Violetta's maid)  
Joseph (a manservant)  
Giorgio Germont (Alfredo's father)  
Messenger

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### **Approximate timings of the opera**

Act One 30 mins  
***Interval 20 mins***  
Act Two 60 mins (***5 minute pause between Scene One and Scene Two***)  
***Interval 15 mins***  
Act Three 30 mins

**Please turn off digital watches, mobile phones, text message functions and pagers**

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### **Background to the opera**

#### A Strange Girl

Sometime in the 1840s Alexandre Dumas met Marie Duplessis, the most beautiful courtesan in Paris. He was 20 years old and completely overwhelmed by her. They had a brief affair but Dumas found he couldn't afford to keep her, and he resigned her (11 months later) to a richer lover. Two years later Marie was dead. She was only 23.

It is always very difficult to describe beauty, but Dumas had a go. "She was tall," he wrote, "very thin, dark-haired and with a pink and white complexion. Her head was small, her eyes long and slanting like those of a Japanese woman but lively and alert. Her lips were the colour of cherries and she had the most beautiful teeth in the world."

Everybody noticed her teeth, Marie Duplessis used to say that it was lying that kept them so white. This sounds like a typical put-down, because actually she was very honest in her dealings with people. Franz Liszt, the only man she ever loved, remembered her saying to him: "I am a strange girl and I don't know how to hang on to this life, which I've no idea how to lead, and which I can't stand anyway."

Marie knew she was dying, she had tuberculosis, and her way of coping was to enjoy herself as much as she could. She came from peasant stock and was totally uneducated, but her natural good sense, and wonderful beauty, ensured that she had a brilliant career in 19<sup>th</sup>-century Paris. Marie Duplessis was a kept woman, a very high-class prostitute, but with none of the sordid trappings of prostitution. She had her own apartment, her carriage, her box at the opera – and one lover at a time. He had to be extremely rich; Marie got through 100,000 francs a year.

### The Demi-monde

There were many women like Marie in Paris. They were shunned by respectable society and they retaliated by inventing their own society – the *demi-monde*, the half world. This was inhabited, on the female side, by any woman who had come down in the world: a courtesan, a divorcee, or a woman who had had an illegitimate baby. However the men who turned up for demi-monde dinners and parties were extremely respectable. They were rich young men out on the tiles, or older married men, slipping off to meet their mistresses. The men were untainted by the demi-monde and could always return to the respectable world. The women had to remain.

All this worked in Paris because the French in that period led very compartmentalised lives and, as long as the two worlds never overlapped, there was no trouble. However if a young man and a courtesan began to live together permanently, as man and wife, or worse if he actually *married* her, then all hell broke loose. And if the French were intolerant to an established mistress, the Italians were even worse – as Verdi discovered.

### **Verdi in Paris**

Verdi turned up in Paris in 1847, just as Marie lay dying. He went to see Alexandre Dumas's play on Marie, *La Dame aux Camelias*, and he sat back and enjoyed himself. He wrote to a friend:

I enjoy, here in Paris, complete personal freedom... I don't visit anybody, I don't receive anybody, nobody knows me and I'm not pointed at. I enjoy good health; I write a lot; my affairs go well; *everything* goes well except my head, which I always hope will change, and which never does change. Farewell

One of the reasons Verdi was so cheerful was that his mistress, Giuseppina Strepponi, was living only a block away. He visited her constantly and extended his holiday in Paris from three months to two years. However, love in Paris was one thing, love back at the

family farm in Busseto was quite another. When Verdi got back to Italy, he told his parents he intended to bring Signora Strepponi to live in the family house – and brought the ceiling down on his head. His parents were furious and Verdi wrote savagely to a friend:

I am still in my utterly charming home town! This blessed, blessed Busseto! How beautiful! How elegant! What a place! What society! I am enthralled, and I don't know how I can tear myself away!! I found my father and mother in excellent health and certainly happier than I am.

This was nothing however to the fury that erupted when Strepponi actually turned up. The whole town felt insulted; stones were thrown at his windows, his mistress was abused in the street, the family was in uproar. Verdi responded by retreating into his farmhouse, repelling all visitors, picking up Dumas' play – and writing *La Traviata*.

### The Story

The story of *La Traviata* is extremely simple. The opera is set in Paris in the mid-nineteenth century, **Alfredo Germont** (tenor) falls in love with a courtesan, the consumptive and beautiful **Violetta** (soprano). They meet at a party in her Paris apartment, fall in love and leave the city to live together in the country.

News of the affair trickles down to Provence, the extremely conservative province where the Germonts live. Everybody is shocked at Alfredo's behaviour, and the young man who is due to marry his sister considers breaking the engagement. Alfredo's father, **Giorgio Germont** (baritone) rushes up to town and, in an interview with Violetta, persuades her to abandon Alfredo.

Violetta returns to the life of the demi-monde and Alfredo, who hunts her down at another party, insults her in front of the guests. He is hustled abroad by his father.

Meanwhile, back in Paris, Violetta succumbs to consumption. She retreats to her room, attended only by her faithful maid, **Annina**, and a doctor. Alfredo and his father return in time to be reconciled to her, but it is too late; not even Alfredo's love can save Violetta and her death ends the opera.

### The Music

*La Traviata* is famous for being the quietest, most conversational opera Verdi ever wrote. Arias, duets, and dialogue flow into each other with a fluidity that was quite new to his music. However Verdi never gave up some old fashioned ways of writing music, particularly the *cavatina*. The *cavatina* is a song in two parts. The first is usually slow, thoughtful, and *always* interrupted. The interruption could be a messenger, or a voice offstage, or even a cannon shot, but the effect is invariably the same. The singer wakes up and swings into the fast, brilliant second part, the *cabaletta*. This is specially designed to show off his voice and, if he pulls it off, the singer exits to storms of applause.

## The Opera

*La Traviata* starts quietly with the strings shimmering in the pit. The 1st and 2nd violins play a quiet melody that describes the Violetta's melancholy private character, and then give way to a soft um cha cha; and another melody takes over to describe her public face, glamorous, charming, and slightly feverish.

### Act One –Violetta's house in Paris

#### **Violetta's Party**

All this delicacy is swept away as the curtain goes up. A stage band crashes into the opening number, and we find ourselves in the middle of a party. The demi-monde swirls in front of us on stage, the kept women, the rich young men and Violetta herself, champagne glass in hand. She is accompanied by an elderly man, the Baron, her current protector. Violetta greets her guests and starts talking to a young man who has just arrived with a shy friend in tow. The dialogue goes very fast, just like real conversation, and you have to go to many *Traviatas* before you quite hear what is being said.

#### **Enter Alfredo**

The young man is called Gaston, and he introduces his shy friend as Alfredo. He tells Violetta that Alfredo has been to her house every day during her recent illness, to ask after her. The Baron takes an instant dislike to him. Violetta offers Alfredo champagne and asks him to lead them all in a *brindisi*, a drinking song. Alfredo immediately agrees and Violetta responds to his song, only to collapse with a fit of coughing. The band strikes up offstage and the guests rush off to dance in another room. Only Alfredo remains behind.

Violetta is startled to see him there and asks if he really did turn up every day to inquire after her. He says he did. He loves her. Violetta tries to put a stop to this at once. Her life is quite difficult enough without young men thinking they are in love with her. The dialogue spills into a duet and you'll hear that, though Alfredo and Violetta are singing together, they are at cross purposes. Alfredo sings steadily of his love, but Violetta won't listen and sings a light hearted tune to the words, "This is all much too serious, friendship is all I offer..." However music can often tell the audience things that the character does not yet know and, as the duet finishes, you will notice that Violetta has joined Alfredo in his tune. She is more affected by the young man than she realises and gives him a flower from her bouquet, a camellia. Alfredo is ecstatic and leaves with the other guests.

#### **Violetta Alone**

Left alone Violetta suffers a reaction. She starts the first part of a cavatina as she muses on the young man's love and wonders for a moment if she should return it. But she shakes off the idea – there *is* no true love in Paris, all she can hope to live for is enjoyment. She fills up a champagne glass and swings into her brilliant cabaletta, "Give me freedom!" There is something feverish about the gaiety of this piece, and Violetta is devastated when she hears Alfredo interrupting it, as he sings to her from the street.

Even so she finishes the cavatina in fine style though, as the curtain comes down, we can hear Alfredo's music outside, winning the day.

## **Act Two**

**Scene One** – A country house near Paris: three months later

### **Love and Money**

Sure enough, as the curtain goes up on Act Two we find ourselves in Violetta's house in the country. Three months have passed and Alfredo enters to tell us (in another cavatina) how happy life is. He is interrupted by Violetta's maid, Annina, who is rushing up to town. Alfredo asks her errand, and is horrified to discover that she has been sent to sell up all Violetta's possessions – the life they have been leading in the country has been eating away her money.

This is an important moment as it shows that Violetta really does love Alfredo and is determined not to let him keep her. Alfredo is obviously so young and immature that he hasn't thought to ask where the money is coming from. Now however he knows, and he sings a cabaletta full of remorse for his thoughtlessness. He decides to dash up to town as well and sell all *his* property. This useful decision gets rid of him for a while and clears the stage for the greatest scene in the opera, Violetta's confrontation with his father, Giorgio Germont.<sup>1</sup>

### **A Visitor**

Violetta enters, laughing over a party invitation from her friend Flora. She has no intention of accepting it and tosses the invite on to the table. (Watch this invitation, it is going to be a very important prop at the end of the scene.) A servant enters to say a gentleman wishes to be admitted. "Oh, yes," says Violetta, thinking of her property, "that's my lawyer, let him in..." And in comes Giorgio Germont.

The interview starts badly. The old man stalks in, glares at the obvious luxury all round him, and demands to know who is footing the bill. "Sir," says Violetta, "you are addressing a lady, and this is *my* house..." Germont is abashed, and calms down a little. He tells her that his son is about to give her his fortune – "I would refuse it," says Violetta.

### **A Request**

The two of them stare at each other for a moment, and then the real conversation begins. Germont tells Violetta he has come to plead for *both* his children. He describes his daughter, a young, beautiful, girl and about to be married. However Alfredo's scandalous affair has shocked everybody and Mademoiselle Germont's fiancée is under great pressure to cancel the wedding. Violetta is immensely touched by the picture of the innocent girl she can never be, and says, yes, she understands; she will leave Alfredo until his sister is safely married. But Germont wants more. With rising horror, Violetta realises he is asking her to leave Alfredo for ever.

She breaks into a panic stricken aria. Doesn't Germont know that they are in love and that she is dying? They have so little time left; she can't give him up. Germont listens and begins to demolish her arguments. To start with, is she really dying? Surely she exaggerates. But, more importantly, how long will Alfredo's love last?

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<sup>1</sup> Giorgio Germont is often called *Germont pere* (Germont senior) when people talk about the opera.

Nineteenth-century people believed that passionate love could only last if it was channelled into marriage. In marriage a young couple received God's help to be faithful to each other whereas, outside marriage, love could only last a couple of years. Very gently Germont points out what seems to him to be an obvious truth to Violetta, and adds that, as her love is already doomed, would she give mind giving it up now, rather than wait for Alfredo to get tired of her? They may yet be in time to save his daughter's wedding.<sup>2</sup>

### **Violetta gives in**

Violetta listens to Germont in despair. In her heart of hearts she agrees with him and, though she knows that God may forgive her affair, she realises Man will not. She agrees to leave Alfredo, and derives a crumb of comfort from the thought that she has helped an innocent girl, "Go and tell your daughter, " she tells Germont, "that a woman she never knew has given up her happiness for her." Germont is deeply moved and Violetta begs him to embrace her as his daughter. She tells him to wait in the garden while she writes Alfredo a letter. She refuses to tell him her future plans (they are of course to return to her former life) and the pair part with mutual respect and affection.

### **Letters and Invites**

Violetta writes first to the Baron, to say she is coming back. She gives this letter to Annina (who is horrified when she sees the address). Then she writes a farewell letter to Alfredo, but is interrupted by the sudden appearance of the young man himself. She clutches him hysterically and begs him to say he will always love her, then rushes out of the room, taking the letter with her.

A couple of minutes later a servant arrives to say that Violetta has dashed up to town. He is followed by a passer by who has been given a letter to deliver to Alfredo. One look at it and Alfredo knows his life is ruined. He cries out in horror – and turns to find his father in the room. Germont tries to comfort him but Alfredo does not even listen. He roams the room restlessly, sees the invitation, and immediately assumes that Violetta has gone to Flora's party. He drops the invitation and runs out of the room. The curtain falls as Germont bends to pick up the card, to find out where on earth his son has gone.

### **Scene Two – Flora's House in Paris: the same night**

#### **At Flora's**

This scene lands us straight in another demi-monde party. It is quite different from Violetta's party, as the hostess, Flora, is a more exuberant character. She has provided billiards and gambling tables, and her guests arrive dressed up as bull fighters and gypsies. The news of Violetta and Alfredo's separation is already being gossiped about and when Alfredo arrives, by himself, the men try to cheer him up by taking him off to the gaming tables. Violetta enters, in deep black, and escorted by the Baron. She and Flora sit apart while the Baron joins the gambling party; he plays Alfredo and is soundly beaten.

People start to move to the supper room, but Violetta hangs back. She has asked Alfredo to see her for a moment. Alfredo enters, stiff with fury. He doesn't know the real

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<sup>2</sup> The solution that would occur to a modern, that Violetta and Alfredo should get married, was out of the question. No respectable man *could* marry a courtesan. Alfredo would be ostracised by society - and his sister's wedding would still be cancelled.

reason for her desertion, and assumes that she wants to return to her old courtesan life. He begs her to come back and, when she refuses, works himself up into a towering rage and calls in the rest of the guests.

### **Payment**

In they come, greatly puzzled, as Alfredo points furiously at Violetta. "Do you see that woman there?" he cries, "I lived with her for three months and forgot to pay her! I'll do it now!" And he throws his winnings at her head. Violetta faints, the guests are thunderstruck, and Germont marches forward. He has just arrived in time to hear his son brand Violetta as a bought woman, and is horrified at the boy's behaviour. He turns on him, "You raise your voice in public, you insult a woman!" he says, "Is this how my son behaves?" The Baron walks forward and challenges the young man to a duel, and Alfredo collapses into hysteria and remorse.

The scene ends with an immense finale in which all the characters express their feelings; Alfredo simply breaks down, Germont remains inflexible and furious while Violetta, hardly able to stand, sings a beautiful, pain filled line, that soars over everybody else.

### **Act Three – Violetta's bedroom: a few months later**

The last act is set in Violetta's bedroom. She is the last stage of TB and has been deserted by all her former friends and lovers. Only the faithful Annina still attends her, assisted by a charitable doctor. The doctor makes an early morning visit and talks soothingly as he feels the sick woman's pulse. You will hear it fluttering in the strings, and it comes as no surprise to hear that Violetta is dying.

### **Germont's Letter**

Alone, she pulls out a letter from Germont and reads it, practically by heart. He tells her that Alfredo and the Baron fought a duel (with no serious hurt) and that the young man rushed off abroad. He has however told her of Violetta's sacrifice, and they are both hurrying to Paris to see her. Violetta puts the letter down, "Too late!" she cries. Outside a carnival procession passes and, overcome by the sounds of cheerful life going on all around her, Violetta launches into a huge aria, a gigantic outburst of grief. As she subsides Alfredo runs into the room.

### **The Death Sentence**

The two fall into each other's arms, and Alfredo immediately proposes to take her away. For a moment Violetta believes it might be possible, she calls for the doctor and tries to get dressed. But she is too weak and, as she realises that not even Alfredo's love can revive her, she faces up to the fact of her own death.

Germont enters to stand by her bedside. He is shattered by what he sees; the man who was so confident that he knew all about love, sees True Love in front of him, dying on the bed. He tells Alfredo that he bitterly reproaches himself. Meanwhile Violetta has found a miniature of herself and she calls Alfredo over. She gives him the picture and tells him to give it to the girl he will marry. Once again Violetta projects herself on to the image of an innocent woman as she imagines Alfredo's future wife. "You are to tell her," she says, "that I will be praying for you both in Heaven."

### The End

And now comes the most heart breaking part of the opera. Violetta suddenly sits up on the bed. "Alfredo!" she cries, "I feel better – the pain has gone – I feel life returning!" Only the doctor knows that this is the last stage of consumption and, as she turns to her lover, Violetta collapses and dies in his arms.

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### Dead Heroines

Consumption was the nineteenth-century name for TB, tuberculosis. It is a disease that kills at least three operatic heroines, Mimi in *La bohème*, Antonia in *The Tales of Hoffmann* and Violetta in *Traviata*. Modern audiences sometimes get a little impatient when the heroine goes pale in Act Three. "Oh no," they groan, "not another heroine with a cough..." But a young woman with TB was a common sight two centuries back. There was a TB epidemic in the nineteenth century and almost half the deaths of people under 25 were attributed to it. It was a disease of the young, and talented. The poet John Keats, the novelist Emily Bronte and the composer Carl Maria von Weber were just three of the artists who died of it.

Symptoms of the illness were nervousness, coughing, blood spitting – and above all – paleness. It was called the white plague. Consumptive women were actually considered rather attractive. Marie Duplessis' sparkling eyes, pale complexion and feverish cheeks were part of her charm, and many of her lovers were excited by the idea that they might be her last – that she would die before she met another man. Dumas made an impression on Marie by actually caring about her illness, and visiting her when she was ill.

Doctors noticed that consumptives were naturally feverish and they told their patients to steer clear of excitement, parties and alcohol. It is quite obvious, the moment the curtain goes up, that Violetta is killing herself. There she is in the middle of a party, with a champagne glass in her hand.

One of the cruellest features of the illness is also dramatised in the opera, the *spes phthisica*, the false hope of recovery. Just before they died the sufferer often thought they were getting better. That is why Violetta gets to her feet at the end of the show and cries out that the pain has gone. Most of the singers playing the Doctor at this moment shake their head sadly at the back of the stage, and of course Violetta falls to the ground a moment later.

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### A Courtesan's wages

Money is extremely important in *La traviata*. Violetta and Alfredo do not live on air, and the issue of who pays for what fuels Alfredo's incredible insolence in Act Three. Courtesans were notoriously keen on money and many of them invested their earnings to provide for their old age – but not Marguerite du Plessis. She never considered her old age, and spent every penny she got. She bought dresses, jewels, carriages, hired a box at the Opera and generally got through 100,000 francs a year. This was a huge sum, much more than any ordinary young man could afford. Marguerite was always very frank about the cost of keeping her, and Dumas reproduced her first conversation with

him in his novel. This novel was a fictional version of his relationship with Marie in which he re-named the heroine as Marguerite:

"My poor fellow," said Marguerite, "you have to be very wealthy to love me! You obviously don't realise that I spend about eight thousand francs a month, and that spending this much has become a complete necessity for me. Can't you see that I'd ruin you in no time at all?"

It is always difficult to convert sums of money into modern equivalents, but the following prices from nineteenth-century Paris might help to put Marguerite's 100,000 francs into context.

### **French Currency**

The basic unit of currency in Paris was the franc, which was made up of 100 centimes or sous.

#### Other People's Wages

The average worker earned about 3 to 4 francs a day (women earned about half this rate), a teacher earned about 300 fr. a year, a priest about 1,000, a clerk 1,300. Cabinet ministers earned 20,000 fr.

#### The Cost of Living

In Paris a workman's lunch cost about 40 sous, and a very expensive meal at the Café de Paris 500 fr. Corsets cost about 16-18 fr, but a fashionable hat could cost as much as 1,800 fr. The cheapest seat at a decent theatre was about 5 fr, Marguerite's box at the Theatre Italien, on a six month lease, would have cost 5, 475 fr. Her camellias would have cost 3 fr. each.

### **The Camellia Mystery**

Marie Duplessis always wore a camellia at her breast and acquired the nickname *La Dame aux Camélias* – the Lady of the Camellias. She liked the flower because it didn't have a heavy scent (which in her tubercular condition made her breathless) and because she found it a useful way to signal her availability. Dumas tells us: "For 25 days in every month the camellias were white, and for five they were red. No-one ever knew the reason for this variation in colour which I mention but cannot explain..." Actually Dumas knew exactly what the change of colour signified, he just didn't dare say so in print.

**Sarah Lenton for ENO Baylis**  
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ENO Baylis  
London Coliseum, St Martin's Lane, London WC2N 4ES  
Telephone +44 (0)20 7632 8484 Fax +44 (0)20 7845 9443  
email [baylis@eno.org](mailto:baylis@eno.org) [www.eno.org/baylis](http://www.eno.org/baylis)