

La traviata

Music by Giuseppe Verdi
Libretto by Francesco Maria Piave

Study Guide to the Opera

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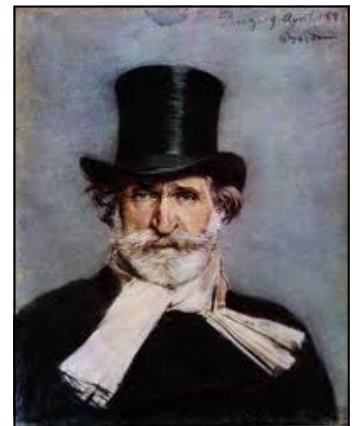


Misguided Society Belle Succumbs After Too Many Parties

by Jill Leahy

Some speculate that the opera *La traviata* could be called the original *Pretty Woman*, recalling the story of the 1990 film. One of the movie's famous scenes depicts Edward (Richard Gere) and Vivian (Julia Roberts) at the opera, watching a performance of *La traviata*, and Vivian is brought to tears. As the viewers, we're meant to see the similarity between the movie and the opera—a courtesan falling in love with a wealthy suitor. But in Verdi's day, fiery romances at the opera often didn't turn out so well.

It's useful to remember that in 18th- and 19th-century Europe, operas were a popular form of entertainment, similar to our movies today. Verdi based his opera on the play, *The Lady of the Camellias*, a thinly-veiled autobiographical account by Alexandre Dumas *fils*, about his love affair with a Parisian courtesan in the mid 1800s. Verdi fought the Italian censors to set the opera in his present day and was also willing to take on Italian conservatives who disapproved of his living with a woman he had not married. However, opera companies insisted on setting the story in the early 1700s and, famously, the 1853 premiere was not successful, partly due to bad singing, and partly due to audience reaction to the change in setting. In 1854, after tweaking the music and hiring new singers, *La traviata* was a huge success—a love story that explores class, reputation, devotion, and sexual politics. Today, Verdi remains the number one composer tracked by *Operabase.com*, and *La traviata* is statistically listed as the number one opera tracked worldwide.



Giuseppe Verdi
(1813–1901)

Giovanni Boldini's 1886 portrait of Verdi hangs in the National Gallery of Modern Art, Rome

La traviata Synopsis

It may be a good thing to copy reality; but to invent reality is much, much better. Verdi, 1876

ACT I In her Paris salon, the courtesan Violetta Valéry greets party guests, including Flora Bervoix, the Marquis D'Obigny, Baron Douphol, and Gastone, who introduces a new admirer, Alfredo Germont. This young man, having adored Violetta from afar, joins her in a drinking song (**Libiamo ne'lieti calici**). An orchestra is heard in the next room, but as guests move there to dance, Violetta suffers a consumptive fainting spell, sends the guests on ahead, and goes to her parlor to recover. Alfredo comes in, and since they are alone, confesses his love (**Un dì, felice, eterea**). At first, Violetta protests that love means nothing to her. Something about the young man's sincerity touches her, however, and she promises to meet him the next day. After the guests have gone, Violetta wonders if Alfredo could actually be the man she could love. But she decides she wants freedom (**Sempre libera**), though Alfredo's voice, heard outside, argues in favor of romance.

Intermission

ACT II Some months later, Alfredo and Violetta are living in a country house near Paris, where he praises their contentment (**Lunge da lei . . . De' miei bollenti spiriti**). But when the maid, Annina, reveals that Violetta has pawned her jewels to keep the house, Alfredo leaves for the city to settle matters at his own cost. Violetta comes looking for him and finds an invitation from Flora to a party that night. Violetta has no intention of going back to her old life, but trouble intrudes with the appearance of Alfredo's father. Though impressed by Violetta's ladylike manners, he demands that she renounce his son; the scandal of Alfredo's affair with her has threatened his daughter's engagement (**Pura siccome un angelo**). Violetta says she cannot (**Ah! Dite alla giovine**), but Germont eventually convinces her (**Morrò! . . . la mia memoria**). Alone, the desolate woman sends a message of acceptance to Flora and begins a farewell note to Alfredo. He enters suddenly, surprising her, and she can barely control herself as she reminds him of how deeply she loves him before rushing out. Now a servant hands Alfredo her farewell note as Germont returns to console his son with reminders of family life in Provence (**Di Provenza il mar, il suol**). But Alfredo, seeing Flora's invitation, suspects Violetta has thrown him over for another lover. Furious, he determines to confront her at the party.

Intermission

At her soirée that evening (**Avrem, lieta di maschere la notte**), Flora learns from the Marquis that Violetta and Alfredo have parted, then clears the floor for hired entertainers—a band of fortune-telling Gypsies and some matadors who sing of Piquillo and his coy sweetheart. Soon Alfredo strides in, making bitter comments about love and gambling recklessly at cards. Violetta has arrived with Baron Douphol, who challenges Alfredo to a game and loses a small fortune to him. Everyone goes in to supper, but Violetta has asked Alfredo to see her. Fearful of the Baron's anger, she wants Alfredo to leave, but he misunderstands her apprehension and demands that she admit she loves Douphol. Crushed, she pretends she does. Now Alfredo calls in the others, denounces his former love and hurls his winnings at her feet (**Alfredo, di questo core**). Germont enters in time to see this and denounces his son's behavior. The guests rebuke Alfredo and Douphol challenges him to a duel.

Pause

ACT III In Violetta's bedroom six months later, Dr. Grenvil tells Annina that her mistress has not long to live; tuberculosis has claimed her. Alone, Violetta rereads a letter from Germont saying the Baron was only wounded in his duel with Alfredo, who knows all and is on his way to beg her pardon. But Violetta senses it is too late (**Addio, del passato**). Paris is celebrating Mardi Gras and, after revelers pass outside, Annina rushes in to announce Alfredo. The ecstatic lovers plan to leave Paris forever (**Parigi, o cara, noi lasceremo**). Germont enters with the doctor before Violetta is seized with a last resurgence of strength (**Ma se tornando . . . Ah! Gran Dio! Morir sì giovane**). Feeling life return (**Prendi, quest'è l'immagine de' miei passati giorni**), she staggers and falls dead at her lover's feet.

—Adapted from *Opera News*



Characters



Violetta Valéry

[vee-oh-LAY-tah vah-leh-REE] *soprano*
The reigning courtesan of Paris who falls in love with Alfredo Germont. Her character is based on a woman of the 19th century named Marie Duplessis, immortalized in *La dame aux camélias*.

Alfredo Germont

[ahl-FRAY-doh zhair-MOHN] *tenor*
A young nobleman who falls in love with Violetta and fights to be with her; his family discourages the relationship.

Giorgio Germont

[JOR-joh zhair-MOHN] *baritone*
Alfredo's father, who demands that Violetta renounce his son because the scandal of Alfredo's affair with her has threatened his daughter's engagement.

Baron Douphol

[bah-ROHN doo-FOHL] *baritone*
Violetta's protector, who challenges Alfredo to a duel over her.

Flora Bervoix

[FLOHR-ah bair-VWAH] *mezzo-soprano*
Violetta's friend and fellow hostess, whose party provides spirited entertainment by gypsies.

Annina

[ah-NEE-nah] *soprano*
Violetta's maid, faithful to her until her death.

Gastone

[ga-STOH-neh] *tenor*
Alfredo's friend.

Marchese D'Obigny

[mar-KAY-zeh doh-bee-NYEE] *bass*
Flora's friend.

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Doctor Grenvil

Party Guests

Dancers—

matadors, picadors, gypsies

Servants

A gardener

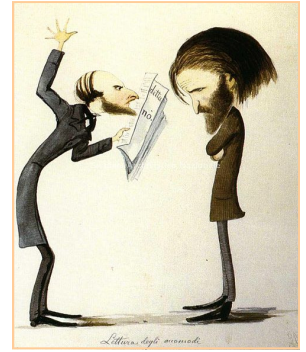
Messenger

Meet the Composer and Librettist

by Jill Leahy

Giuseppe Fortunino Francesco Verdi (1813 – 1901)

The composer, born in a village in the province of Parma in northern Italy, was 20 when he moved to Milan to continue his studies. In 1839 his first opera, *Oberto, Conte di San Bonifacio*, was produced and was modestly successful. Verdi's wife and two children died while he was writing his next opera, a comedy called *Un Giorno di Regno*; when the opera failed, Verdi vowed to stop writing for the stage.



Verdi and Naples censor,
Caricature by Delfico

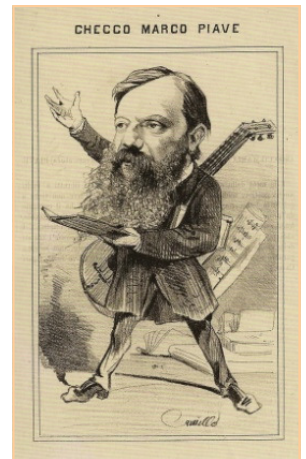
La Scala's impresario, Bartolomeo Merelli, convinced him to write another opera for the Milan opera house, and in 1842 at the age of 28, he wrote *Nabucco*, a bold new opera about the fall of Jerusalem in 587 B.C.E. The opera's moving chorus, "Va, pensiero", became a rallying cry for Italy's struggle for independence. From this point on, Verdi held a prominent reputation in Italy's operatic theater scene and, later, in the country's political scene. He was skilled in creating melodies for theatrical effect, and his forward thinking propelled him away from the standard Italian opera format. During the next three decades, Verdi continued to garner success and fame, with *Rigoletto* (1851), *Il Trovatore* (1853), *La traviata* (1853), *Don Carlos* (1867), and *Aida* (1871). In 1874, Verdi completed his *Messa da Requiem* and retired soon after.

Francesco Maria Piave (1810 – 1876)

An Italian opera librettist, journalist, and translator, Piave worked with the most significant composers of his day, though he is best known for his long-standing association with Verdi, with whom he collaborated on ten operas.

Born in Murano, Piave studied to be a priest, but left the church and became a proofreader. In Rome and Venice, he mingled with other librettists and worked with Verdi on *Ernani* in 1844.

Piave also worked as a poet and as a stage director for *La Fenice* in Venice and at *La Scala* in Milan. Though a mediocre stage director, he was more tactful than Verdi and was able to help him in negotiations with censors and opera companies. Despite their personality differences, Piave and Verdi were life-long friends. When Piave suffered a stroke that left him paralyzed and unable to speak, Verdi helped to support his family and paid for his funeral nine years later.



The Lady of the Camellias

The girl who became *La dame aux camélias* came from Lower Normandy, the daughter of a tinker and a maid. At the age of fourteen, her father left her with a bachelor in his seventies; upon escape, she found work in a factory, at a laundry, and then took up prostitution. Marie wrote that she sold herself in order to get the luxury that she craved and because no one had responded to her love. She transformed herself from a lowly *grisette*, to a more businesslike *lorette*, and then to the top of the professional ladder as a *courtesan*—an elegant, cultivated entertainer of wealthy gentlemen and nobility.



Alphonsine Plessis, called Marie Duplessis, later Mme la Comtesse de Perregaux (1824 – 1847)

She was a woman of exceptional beauty, grace, and charm, and had magnificent hair that came down to the ground. She was elegant to the highest degree, and carried bouquets of white camellias as long as the florists could provide them. On several days of each month, she wore a red camellia to indicate that she was not *open for business*. When she died of consumption at the age of 23, Franz Liszt, one of her admirers, wrote that “some unknown, mysterious chord from an antique elegy echoes in my heart when I recall her.”

Alexandre Dumas *fils* (the son of the author of *The Three Musketeers* and *The Count of Monte Cristo*) became the lover of Marie Duplessis. She welcomed, for a time, an *affaire du coeur* with this good-looking young man, but ended the relationship six months before her death.



Alexandre Dumas, fils (1824 – 1895)

The sale of her effects provided Dumas with the opening scene for *La dame aux camélias*, the novel and play that led to her immortalization in print and, later, in Verdi's opera. Some critics have claimed that the novel was a flawed work, but it is eternally seductive. It has become like Marie Duplessis herself—a type like Manon. Perhaps the greatest irony of Marie's story became evident upon her death. In her apartment on the Boulevard de la Madeleine, friends found a copy of *Manon Lescaut*, with notes in the margins in Marie's own hand.

—Adapted from *Opera News*

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