

VOX IMAGO

VERDI
LA TRAVIATA

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TEATRO ALLA SCALA

LA TRAVIATA

LA TRAVIATA BY VERDI: LISTENING GUIDE

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Did Giuseppe Verdi in any sense intend that the portrait of Violetta Valéry, the heroine of his 1853-1854 opera *La traviata*, reflect his feelings for Giuseppina Strepponi, the ex-singer with whom he began a serious relationship several years after the death in 1840 of his first wife, Margherita Barezzi? He returned from Paris with Giuseppina in the summer of 1849 to take up residence first in a home in Busseto, the Palazzo Cavalli, then in a villa near Busseto, Sant'Agata. He did not marry her until a decade later, on August 29, 1859. The Italians, particularly the important Verdian, Alessandro Luzio, editor of the great, four-volume compendium, *Carteggi verdiani*, believe it was, but the justly praised English Verdian, Julian Budden, insisted that Verdi would never have portrayed Giuseppina Strepponi as a prostitute, even as one who gave up her former life for love. As is so often the case, I think the truth falls between these two poles: I do not believe that the works of an artist can be independent from his life, but neither do I hold that the artistic image needs to be identical to his life. In short, the strength of Verdi's portrayal of Violetta cannot be thought to be independent of his life, but he cannot have thought to represent in Violetta an artistic transposition of Giuseppina Strepponi.

The version of the opera present in this CD and DVD, conducted by Lorin Maazel for the Teatro alla Scala in 2007, and based on a staging of the opera undertaken more than ten years earlier by the great cinema director, Liliana Cavani, follows pretty much the form of the revision of the opera presented by Verdi at the Teatro San Benedetto of Venice on May 6, 1854. The composer made several significant modifications at that point in the score he had presented earlier, with unhappy results, at the Teatro La Fenice in Venice on March 6, 1853. I say "pretty much," because Mr. Maazel presents the opera with several important modifications to Verdi's revised score, modifications typical of much of today's performing practice, not all of which can be simply accepted for reasons that will become apparent in the following notes.

In the first measures of his prelude (N. 1), Verdi already presents us with a musical vision of the dying Violetta, using music that will ultimately open the last act of his opera, where however it is transposed up from the B minor of the prelude to the C minor he would use in the final act. In the prelude, however, this opening passage leads immediately to an anticipation of one of the most intense moments in the entire opera, when Violetta bids a sad farewell to her beloved Alfredo ("Amami, Alfredo, quanto io t'amo" [Love me, Alfredo, as much as I love you]). But Verdi is not finished with the latter theme. He now plays it against a counterpoint that recalls inevitably the young, flirtatious Violetta (see particularly her "amar non so, né soffro un così eroico amor" [I don't know how to love, nor will I permit such a heroic love] in her initial duet with Alfredo within the introduction). In short, although the prelude begins by providing us with music associated with Violetta's death scene, the piece as a whole offers us a composite portrait of Verdi's heroine.

Act I

This is the only act in all the music of Verdi for which thus far we have a sketch laying out the structure of the whole. Verdi made this sketch early in the history of his work on *La traviata*. Not only is the heroine called "Margherita" (after the original courtesan in the novel and play by Alexandre Dumas *fiils*, Marguerite Gautier), but Verdi has no name for the tenor, who is called simply "il Tenore" [The Tenor]. And the composer sketches several significant melodies without texts, but in place of what will become "Di quell'amor" [Of that love], sung first by Alfredo in his duet with Violetta within the introduction, Verdi knows nothing better for this famous melody than to indicate the first words the duke sings in his duet with Gilda in *Rigoletto*, "È il sol dell'anima; la vita è amore" [It is the sun of the soul, life is love]: he wanted a melody similar to that melody, but doesn't know yet what it will be.

The first scene of the opera begins with a party at the home of Violetta (Introduction, N. 2). Men enter, accompanied by the full orchestra, which plays festive music. They have been gambling at the home of Violetta's friend, Flora, and are late, but they are greeted with kindness by Violetta herself, who welcomes them to her home. She is a courtesan, the so-called "lady of the camellias," who wears a red camellia on days she is not available and a white one when she is. Despite her status, she is admired by all. But at this point the strings alone are heard playing a different tune, as one of the guests, the

Viscount Gastone de Letorières, introduces Violetta to a young man, Alfredo Germont, who, he says, has loved her now for some time. Flora turns to Violetta's partner of the moment, the Baron Douphol, and asks him to say some words of welcome to the guests on this happy occasion, when wine appears. The baron, already jealous, refuses (he has known Violetta for only a year), so she turns her attention instead to Alfredo (who has been formally introduced to her only a few moments before), and he agrees to lead a *brindisi*, "Libiamo ne' lieti calici che la bellezza infiora" [Let us drink from the happy goblets that give rise to loveliness] and the chorus joins in the festivities. Violetta sings a second stanza herself ("Tra voi saprò dividere il tempo mio giocondo" [Among you, I will know how to pass my joyous days]) and they share a final stanza: she sings part of the melody ("La vita è nel tripudio..." [Life is uncertain]), but it is completed by Alfredo ("Quando non s'ami ancora" [When one does not yet love]).

A band is heard in another room and all the guests hurry there for what Violetta promises will be "dancing." But she herself feels weak and cannot leave at once, although she promises to join them when she can (this is the first sign we will see of the consumption that will ultimately kill her). Accompanied still by the off-stage *banda* alone, a dialogue follows between Alfredo and Violetta. He has waited for her and watched over her incipient illness. They sing of his love for her and she mocks him, but he is altogether serious and in a duet together, accompanied now again by the orchestra, he specifies that he has loved her for a year ("Un dì, felice eterea" [One day, eternally happy]), describing then the pains and delights of love ("Di quell'amor che è palpito dell'universo intero" [Of that love which is the heartbeat of the entire universe]), speaking of love as the "croce e delizia al cor" [cross and delight of the heart]. But Violetta will hear none of it, and in flirtatious tones she offers him only friendship, not love ("Ah se ciò è ver fuggitemi..." [Ah if it that is true, fly from me]). They continue their dialogue together and sing a lovely cadenza to conclude what is a *cantabile* of a duet, with no concluding cabaletta. This will be the first time in *La traviata*, but by no means the only one, where Verdi avoids the cabaletta convention, a concluding (often quicker) section of an aria or duet. Instead we hear the off-stage *banda* again, although it will soon be joined by pizzicato strings, and the dialogue between Alfredo and Violetta continues. She gives him a flower and tells him to bring it back when it has withered. "Domani" [Tomorrow] he asks? And she responds, "Ebben; domani" [Well then, tomorrow].

Now the guests return from their dancing and the entire orchestra is heard again, playing the same melody with which the introduction began. But now they sing of their departure, as dawn has arrived, to new music, leading ultimately to a reprise of the opening melody for the entire orchestra, a conclusion of the introduction.

As they depart they leave Violetta alone on stage (Aria Violetta, N. 3). She has been strangely moved by Alfredo's pronouncement of his love for her, and she sings a recitative in which she thinks about what he has said "È strano! È strano!!" [It is strange! It is strange!!], but she continues with the *primo tempo* of her aria, "Ah, forse è lui" [Ah, perhaps it is him]. Verdi here sought to insist upon Violetta's French background by writing a *romance* in two stanzas (he would do the same in her third-act solo aria), but we are used to hearing only a single one of these stanzas, the first, with the second invariably cut. I have long felt this was an error, but no Violetta seems prepared to contradict this tradition and only the first stanza is sung in this recording. (Imagine a Dietrich Fischer-Dieskau cutting similar repetitions in a Schubert song cycle: there would be a terrible outcry of protest.) After a brief introduction by the winds, the strings alone play chords to accompany her melody (in F minor), but soon she quotes (now in F major) the melody Alfredo introduced in their duet together ("A quell'amor che è palpito dell'universo intero" [To that love, which is the heartbeat of the entire universe]). Might he be the one I could truly love? She asks in her first stanza; then she continues in the second stanza: Will he bring love to me, a sincere young girl?

"Folly." It is folly, she sings to begin the *tempo di mezzo* of her aria. No, this "povera donna" [poor woman] (Verdi will parody this moment by referring to it explicitly in his last, comic opera, *Falstaff*) must live alone in this "populous desert they call Paris": she can hope for nothing but pleasure. And now she attacks her cabaletta "Sempre libera" [Always free], in which she seems to reject all that Alfredo has offered her. But now, in what is the most effective preparation for the repetition of a cabaletta theme in all of opera, she hears Alfredo's voice from off-stage singing "Amor è palpito dell'universo intero" [Love is the heartbeat of the entire universe]. Again she rejects the idea that she could ever love, and using the same musical ideas that preceded the first statement of her cabaletta theme, she again seeks to put him out of her mind, repeating the entire cabaletta theme, "Sempre libera." But Alfredo's voice recurs in the concluding cadences of the aria, singing "Amor è palpito dell'universo," as Violetta's vocal fireworks, with her repeated high Cs, express her intention to reject the idea.

Violetta in this scene is given an opportunity to show the two sides of her character, the nascent love she feels for Alfredo and her desire for freedom and pleasure. Nor can we eliminate one of these two aspects of her life. The principal reason why the part is so difficult to sing is that a performer must be capable of presenting both the florid, flirtatious girl we witness in "Sempre libera" and the more thoughtful, mature woman of "Ah forse è lui." If Act I of *La traviata* has emphasized and concluded with the "Sempre libera" aspect of her personality, the remainder of the opera will explore the other element, and Verdi quite

rightly insists upon making all these various demands on the singer. It is those apparently contradictory demands that make the part so difficult to perform.

Act II, Scene I

We are in the country house near Paris where Violetta has now lived for three months with her Alfredo. She has allowed the other part of her personality to vanquish her love of pleasure and her desire to be free. As the act opens we see a joyous Alfredo, presented to us in what is the most standard aria form in the opera (Scena and Aria Alfredo, N. 4). Accompanied by pizzicato strings, joined at cadences by wind instruments, Alfredo sings in the *primo tempo* of his love for Violetta, “*Dei miei bollenti spiriti*” [Of my inflamed spirits]. But it is only during the *tempo di mezzo* that he learns, from Violetta’s servant, Annina, who has returned from Paris, that their luxury in this country retreat has been purchased by Violetta with the sale of all she has previously owned. Alfredo is aghast at this and will now be off to Paris himself, in an effort to correct this situation. Verdi wrote here a standard cabaletta (“*Oh mio rimorso!... Oh infamia!...*” [Oh my remorse!... Oh infamy!...]). Although the presence of the cabaletta is well prepared and the nature of the theme is perfectly appropriate for this moment in the drama, I cannot say as much for the repetition of the theme, which follows a transition in the orchestra alone. It was surely these mechanical repetitions that led Verdi to reject altogether the cabaletta convention, and I cannot blame a conductor such as Mr. Maazel, who follows tradition by cutting the transition and the reprise of the melody. To say that their presence adds little to the opera is, I fear, true.

There follows the most extraordinary confrontation in a duet (Scena [and] Duet [Violetta and Germont], N. 5) in all nineteenth-century Italian opera: the meeting of Alfredo’s father (Giorgio Germont, a baritone) with Violetta. This is a lengthy duet, which certainly features some elements of the standard duet structure, but is much longer and much more complex. During the course of the piece Germont must convincingly lead Violetta to abandon her life with Alfredo, and we must be able to follow her decision in the music.

In a recitative before the arrival of Germont, we learn that Flora has invited Violetta and Alfredo to a dance at her house that evening. Violetta has no intention of going. We learn, too, that she is expecting a businessman (who she hopes will sell her goods so that she can continue living with Alfredo). Instead, it is Giorgio Germont who arrives. Truculently, he begins by insulting Violetta and accusing her of leading his son astray. She reacts in a dignified fashion, “*Donna son io, signore*” [I am a woman, sir]. Now, Germont understands that he cannot simply attack her, and so—as their formal duet begins—he speaks of his two children. Two? Asks Violetta? “*Pura siccome un angelo Iddio mi diè una figlia*” [Pure as an angel is the daughter God gave me] Germont responds, again accompanied by strings alone which are joined by wind instruments at the cadences. He relates that his daughter cannot marry while her brother lives in sin with Violetta. So, she must leave him briefly she says, and, although it will be hard she is prepared to do so. No, he responds, she must leave him forever. No, she responds, she cannot do it (“*Non sapete quale affetto*” [You cannot know what affection]). As she continues she refers to her illness and speaks of the limited life span she will have. Verdi rewrote some of this in 1854, particularly her statement, “*Il supplizio è sì spietato*” [The sacrifice is so heartless]. The original version was very nice to be sure, but the revised version is even better and one would be hard pressed to give it up. This was not a simple change, despite Verdi’s later pronouncements in a letter to his Neapolitan friend, Cesare De Sanctis on May 26, 1854, that his *Traviata* of 1854 was essentially the same as the original opera of 1853. This is a significant shift in the music, and must be understood as such, despite Verdi’s self-serving words.

Germont recognizes that this is a grave sacrifice she must make for his family, but, as he says, “*Bella voi siete, e giovine...*” [You are beautiful, and young...]. Man is changeable, Germont states, and when she grows old, Alfredo will tire of her, “*Un dì, quando le veneri*” [One day, when you no longer can be what you were], nor can they ever be in peace because God has not blessed their union. And so, Violetta responds, “*Così alla misera ch’è un dì caduta*” [Thus to the miserable one who one day fell], with her melodic line played simultaneously by the first violins, a flute, and an oboe. Having now decided that there is no further hope for her relationship with Alfredo, she sings a new section devoted to Alfredo’s sister (“*Dite alla giovine sì bella e pura*” [Tell the young girl, so beautiful and pure]), followed by Germont’s “*Piangi, o misera*” [Weep, o miserable one]. This and the passage leading up to it were transposed down by half a tone (from E major to E flat major for 1854, probably to help with the lower tessitura of the part required by the 1854 baritone, Filippo Coletti). This section concludes with the final cabaletta of the duet (“*Morrò!... La mia memoria*” [I will die!... but let my memory]), as Violetta gives herself over to Germont and decides what she must do to separate from Alfredo. Germont has been victorious, but he now understands the strength of the woman he is facing.

Violetta writes a letter to Flora saying that she will be present at her party that evening with the baron. When Alfredo returns from Paris, he is faced with a Violetta who he finds writing to him, a letter announcing that she will leave him (Scena Violetta and Aria Germont, N. 6). This is a remarkable scene, where the depths of Violetta’s emotions are expressed in a single phrase (“*Amami, Alfredo, amami quanto*

t'amo" [Love me, Alfredo, as much as I love you]), a phrase that seems to define the entire drama thus far. One can well understand Maria Callas's position, which I directly heard her express some years ago, that the act could easily end immediately after Violetta's phrase. That position, of course, considers *La traviata* to be an opera exclusively about Violetta, rather than about three characters and their complex interactions, Violetta, Alfredo, and his father, Giorgio Germont. Alfredo at first does not understand that Violetta is leaving him until he receives the letter that she has prepared in the previous scene and his father appears to console him. Germont asks his son to return to him in Provence, his homeland ("Di Provenza il mar, il suol" [Of Provence, its sea, its soil]). But however beautiful his *primo tempo*, which is shaped also as a French *romance* in two strophes, which we always hear complete, Alfredo pays him no heed and decides to follow Violetta to Flora's (whose letter he finds). Verdi drafted several versions of a cabaletta for Germont's aria, "No, non udrai rimproveri" [No, you will hear no reproaches], and modified his original music significantly in 1854, bringing its repeated high notes down lower for Coletti. One could argue that the original version is more urgent than the revision, and this revised cabaletta is frequently cut in modern productions, as it is in this one. Instead, after Germont's *primo tempo*, Alfredo runs off to Flora's giving his father no opportunity to say anything else, and seriously truncating his aria.

Act II, Scene II

The scene now shifts to the party at Flora's for the finale of the second act (N. 7). After an entertainment opening sung and danced by the women, dressed as gypsies ("Noi siamo zingarelle venute da lontano" [We are gypsies who have come from far away]), and the men, dressed as Spanish matadors ("Di Madride noi siam mattadori" [From Madrid, we are matadors]), Alfredo appears, without Violetta, prepared to play cards. Violetta enters on the baron's arm, and it is the baron who first realizes Alfredo is there. He asks Violetta to ignore him, but she sings a passionate phrase three times, first to the text "Ah perché venni! incauta!..." [Ah why have I come, incautious one!] begging God for pity, but there is no pity for her. The baron plays cards with Alfredo who constantly wins, over an orchestral phrase repeated again and again, as Alfredo, unlucky in love, is fortunate at cards. A servant announces that dinner is served, and the baron agrees to suspend their game until after dinner, when Alfredo will accept whatever challenge the baron wishes to present him. All exit, except Alfredo, and Violetta now runs in to find him. He forces her to admit that she loves the baron, not him, and he summons the company back. See this woman, he says. Who, Violetta? She gave up everything for me, but I call you all to witness that I have now paid her back, and he throws his winnings at the poor woman, who is destroyed, but cannot reveal what she has done and why. The chorus reacts strongly ("Oh infamia orribile tu commettesti!..." [Oh it is horrible, infamous, what you are committing]). The honorable Giorgio Germont arrives in time to watch his son's shameful act (it is one of the most horrifying scenes in all opera), and he leads a final slow ensemble on which the act concludes: Where is my son? I do not see him, no one should ever defame a woman's honor, not even in anger. He knows the truth, although he does not reveal it, and the others respond in turn. Alfredo is appalled at what he has done, but he cannot take back his furious gesture. The original conclusion of the act was too similar to an earlier ensemble Verdi had written, and so he rewrote it in 1854. You will hear his revision in the performance from La Scala, with each character singing his or her own reaction to Alfredo's words. The baron, for example, sings: "A questa donna l'atroce insulto" [The atrocious insult to this woman] and he challenges Alfredo to a duel as the curtain descends on the act.

Act III

We find Violetta with her servant, Annina, in the bedroom of her Parisian apartment (Scena Violetta, N. 8). She reflects on her state. The doctor comes to visit her and lies to her about her future, telling her she will be stronger, but he tells Annina the truth: she has only a few hours yet to live. She reads a letter from Giorgio Germont, telling her that the duel took place, the baron was wounded but will recover, while Alfredo, to whom he has finally revealed the truth, is abroad. Giorgio announces that Alfredo will return to her, while he himself will come to visit her, but, she proclaims "È tardi" [It is late]. She knows that she has little time left to live, and she sings an aria consisting of a beautiful *romance* in two stanzas, "Addio, del passato" [Goodbye to the past], of which the second is often cut, as it is in this performance. I find this cut particularly unfortunate, because the two stanzas show two very different aspects of Violetta, the first offering her farewell to her past life, the second reflecting on the grave to which her remains will soon be confined.

Through her window the sounds of festive Paris are heard (Bacchanal, N. 9), as *Mardi Gras* is celebrated, with the off-stage chorus accompanied by wind and percussion instruments alone. But this is only the prelude for what Annina now reveals, the return to her of Alfredo. He enters and tries to offer her hope (Duet [Violetta and Alfredo], N. 10). In a very brief opening section, properly called a *tempo d'attacco*, Alfredo begs her forgiveness, "Colpevol sono... so tutto o cara..." [I am guilty... I know everything, my love...]. In the *cantabile* of their duet, he offers her hope that they will leave Paris together ("Parigi, o cara, noi lasceremo" [We will leave Paris, my beloved]). She responds in turn with the same text, but

when she tries to exit to a “tempio” [church] in the *tempo di mezzo*, she finds that she does not have the strength to get dressed. Horrified, Alfredo sends anew for the doctor. At this point, Violetta attacks the cabaletta, sung by each in turn, “Gran Dio!... Morir sì giovine” [Great God!... to die so young] and “Oh mio sospiro e palpito” [Oh my sighs and palpitations]. A partial reprise of the theme sung by both of them fulfills the spirit of a reprise of the cabaletta theme if not its letter. Verdi transposed this cabaletta down by a half tone in 1854, going from the original D-flat major to the new key of C major. He made several changes in the music that are clearly improvements, but what is not an improvement is the music that leads to the finale of the opera. Originally his concluding D flat could become a C sharp to begin the finale, but in the revision, he had to move the tonality from C major to E major as the dominant of the key in which the finale begins, A major, featuring the melodic C sharp. Such awkward modulations occur only when the composer makes a last minute shift of tonality, and once the absurdity of the change is pointed out, one can practically not avoid laughing at it.

The last finale (N. 11) begins with the entrance of the long-awaited Giorgio Germont. Notice that on several occasions in 1853 he sang higher notes (at “a stringervi qual figlia” [to embrace you as a daughter] and at “Che mai dite?” [What are you saying?]), but Violetta knows she is dying. She gives Alfredo a portrait of herself to offer to a woman he might one day marry. And as the orchestra intones the repeated chord in a rhythm that Verdi frequently employed to signal a death scene, as Frits Noske memorably pointed out, she takes her leave of them. The orchestra again plays the phrase from Alfredo’s Act I melody, “Di quell’amor.” As she feels new strength, her pain stops and she sings “oh gioia!” [oh joy!], then falls lifeless on the bed. Verdi has the others present, Alfredo, Germont, Doctor Grenvil, and Annina react by singing various phrases, commenting that Violetta is dead, but these are traditionally cut, as they are in this performance, leaving the final singing to Violetta alone. Medical friends tell me that this feeling of renewed life is typical of those dying of consumption, which means that Verdi was aware of the progress of the disease. Be that as it may, Verdi’s ending is very powerful and Violetta’s death, announced already in the prelude of the opera, concludes the work effectively.