

# OpPop



## 3. *La Traviata*

April 27, 2023

# *La Traviata*

## *Background to the Opera*

**GIUSEPPE VERDI (1813–1901)** hit his stride with a trio of operas in mid-career: *Rigoletto* (1851), *Il trovatore* (The Troubadour, 1853), and *La traviata* (The Fallen Woman, also 1853). Unlike any of his other subjects, this last does not have an historical setting, but was absolutely up to the moment. Verdi's librettist, **Francesco Maria Piave**, based his text upon the latest hit of the Paris season, *La dame aux camélias* (1852), the play that **Alexandre Dumas fils** based upon his 1848 novel of the same title.

The "Lady of the Camellias" was based on a real woman, Dumas' own lover, **Marie Duplessis**, a courtesan who ran a celebrated *salon* but died of consumption (probably TB) at only 23. This would have been a well-known item of Parisian gossip. The management at Venice's La Fenice opera, however, were taking no chances. Avoiding any hint of contemporary scandal, they insisted that the action be pushed back to the 17th century. It is not the décor, however, that makes the opera real, but the psychological insight into the characters, and this shows Verdi at his very best.

So *La traviata* was a contemporary opera forced into a period setting. But opera companies know that period spectacle tends to sell better than psychological realism, so the trade-off between grandeur of style and acuity of insight continues to this day. After watching substantial scenes from the first and last acts of the opera in a sensitive traditional production, we shall see how other directors have handled this dilemma.

## *The Story of the Opera*

**ACT I.** The courtesan **Violetta Valéry** is the mistress of a rich baron, and the opera opens on one of her parties. A friend introduces **Alfredo Germont**, a young man who it appears has been pursuing her from afar. At first she is not interested, but when Alfredo catches the

attention of the group by proposing a toast to love, and then steals a moment with her alone to plead his personal passion, she begins to relent. [*The guests leave. Left alone, Violetta wonders whether this might be the beginning of a true love, and whether she dare give in to it.*] But she casts such sentiment aside, and determines to live her short life to the fullest (for she knows her illness will be fatal), by plunging deep into to social whirl. Except that Alfredo's declaration of love keeps echoing in her ears...

...and this is the voice she obeys. **ACT II** opens with Violetta living with Alfredo in a house in the country whose rent she has been paying (unknown to him) by selling her jewelry. [*But she receives a visit from Alfredo's father, **Giorgio Germont**, who persuades her to give him up for the sake of his daughter, who is about to make a good marriage. Knowing she has not long to live, she eventually agrees, but realizes that the only way she can stop Alfredo from following her is to turn him against her. So she plunges back into the old life in such a way that he denounces her as a whore.*]

**ACT III.** Violetta is alone and dying, attended only by her maid. But she receives a letter from Germont saying that he has explained everything to his son, who is coming to see her to beg her forgiveness. She has an aria, "*Addio del passato*" (farewell to the past), in which she realizes it is already too late. Her hope revives when Alfredo comes in, and for a moment she seems well enough to make new plans. But this is illusory; she does not have the strength to go out. In the presence of the older Germont and her doctor, she begs Alfredo to marry a good woman for her sake, revives briefly, then drops dead.

## *Productions Sampled*

**ROYAL OPERA, LONDON**, 2019. Ermonela Jaho (Violetta), Charles Castronovo (Alfredo); c. Antonello Manacorda; d. Richard Eyre

**METROPOLITAN OPERA**, 2019. Diana Damrau (Violetta), Juan Diego Flórez (Alfredo); c. Yannick Nézet-Séguin; d. Michael Mayer

**FILM**, 1983. Teresa Stratas (Violetta), Plácido Domingo (Alfredo); c. James Levine; d. Franco Zeffirelli

**FLORENCE**, 2022. Nadine Sierra (Violetta), Franco Meli (Alfredo); c. Zubin Mehta; d. Davide Livermore

**SALZBURG**, 2005. Anna Netrebko (Violetta), Rolando Villazón (Alfredo); c. Carlo Rizzi; d. Willy Decker

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