

Class 3: *La Traviata*

A. Classic for Good Reason

1. Class title 1 (Act I still from Chicago)

For most of my career, I have been an opera professional. But I used to hate being called an “**opera buff**,” for to my mind that meant people who go to operas because they are fans of the people who sing it, and connoisseurs of the tradition of performance rather than the intrinsic qualities of the piece itself. That is not for me. All I care about is compelling music and a drama that evokes my sympathies.

2. Terrence McNally: *The Lisbon Traviata*, 1989

Nevertheless, opera buffs of this kind make up a significant proportion of every audience, and *La traviata* in particular is an opera that brings them out in force. Terrence McNally wrote a play in 1989 called *The Lisbon Traviata*—a bittersweet comedy about a group of gay men arguing over a rare bootleg recording of Maria Callas singing the leading role in Lisbon in 1958. The fact is that a role like Violetta Valery, the “fallen woman” of the title, is a test for the greatest sopranos, and a battleground for fans to compare the performance of the latest *diva* against the treasured recordings of their favorites. As I say, this is not my approach; I would imagine it is not yours either. For what is more likely to put a new listener off opera than to think you have to be part of an arcane in-group to belong at all?.

3. Some reasons for operatic popularity

La traviata is THE most-often performed opera for a reason, or rather for several reasons. Here are four of them, in the order of their importance to me. The first, obviously, is the music; *La traviata* is popular because Giuseppe Verdi (1813–1901) was a great composer, and this opera contains some of his most memorable tunes. But I am not going to go into that today; I just hope that if I play enough you can hear for yourselves. Nor am I going to go into the last point, the opportunities it gives for singers to strut their stuff; it is not important to me, as I’ve already explained. But I will devote this class to exploring the other two, that *La traviata* is a moving human drama *and* an opportunity for stage spectacle.

4. DVD cover of Covent Garden production

To do that, I will play two substantial sections from an excellent but pretty traditional production from the Royal Opera House, Covent Garden, London (where my parents took me to see my first opera, which also happened to be *Traviata*). I will be concentrating only on scenes for the soprano **Violetta (Ermonela Jahö)** and her lover **Alfredo Germont (Charles Castronovo)**, Act I for the spectacle and Act III for the human drama. The conductor is **Antonello Manacorda**, and the stage director is **Richard Eyre**.

5. Charles Castronovo and Ermonela Jaho in Act I of *La traviata*

Act I opens on a party. The courtesan Violetta is the mistress of a rich baron, who spends his money lavishly. The much less affluent Alfredo has been admiring her from afar, and now catches the attention of all the company by proposing a toast to love. Catching Violetta alone for a moment, he pleads his love, and asks to see her again. These scenes are the central portion of Act I.

6. Verdi: *La traviata* (Richard Eyre, Act I, *brindisi* and duet)

7. Placido Domingo and Ermonela Jaho in Act II of *La traviata*

Alfredo wins Violetta's heart. She abandons the *demi-monde* and goes with him to a rented house in the country. 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 is consumptive), she 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. This is the substance of Act II.

8. Act III of *La traviata* at the Royal Opera House

By Act III, she 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. But hope revives when Alfredo comes in, and for a moment she seems well enough to make new plans. As you can see, the spectacle has completely gone; this act stands on its human drama alone. I will play almost all of it, and I trust you will see that it stands indeed.

9. Verdi: *La traviata* (Richard Eyre, Act III, almost complete)

10. Class title 2 (still from the above)

B. Some Other Approaches

11. Class title 3 (Decker production at the Met)

Any opera that is performed as much as *La traviata* runs a big risk of going stale. The biggest danger is a production that becomes routine, leading to spectacle that seems tawdry, burying the human drama, and as often or not leading to sloppy treatment of the music. People who just go for the sopranos may not care, but others will.

12. — the same, with four criteria from slide 3

Of our four criteria shown here, the things that most reliably bring in audiences are fine singers and impressive productions. **The Metropolitan Opera** has always sought out the finest singers, and in 2011 they put on a production by the German director **Willy Decker** that premiered at Salzburg in 2006 and had been seen in several other European theaters since. I consider it one of the great operatic productions of our time—of *any* opera—for reasons I will explain at the end of the hour. But of course it completely abandons the eye-candy spectacle, what is sometimes referred to a “frocks and furniture.” And audiences like that, so of course it had to go. Here is a clip from the current Met production by **Michael Mayer** that replaced it in 2018; I would be interested to hear what you think of it. The singers are **Juan Diego Flórez** and **Diana Damrau**.

13. Verdi: *La traviata* (Michael Mayer, Act I, *brindisi*)

14. — still from the above

What did you think? To me, the production is gaudy and meretricious. Though claiming to restore a sense of period, it effectively cancels it out, giving us a Disney fantasy on the mid-19th century, rather than the real thing. Compare the **film of the opera** made by **Franco Zeffirelli** in 1983. On the stage, Zeffirelli, who is a designer as well as director, has always been noted for his ultra-realistic period settings; he has even been known to go shopping in flea markets for period corsets to give his chorus members the right shape! So it is no surprise that this film should open with a meticulous reconstruction of Paris around 1850. But he goes further, **putting the entire story into context** by using the orchestral Prelude as a kind of narrative frame. Let’s watch the first seven minutes and tell me what you think. The Violetta and Alfredo are **Teresa Stratas** and **Plácido Domingo**.

15. Verdi: *La traviata* (Franco Zeffirelli film, opening)

16. — still from the above

So what did you think was going on? Did this context help draw you in? The way he has the party begin in another room, which we only gradually enter, exactly fits the way Verdi writes the music for an offstage band, which is only gradually transferred to to main orchestra.

17. Duplessis/Gautier/Valéry

Look at the relationship between the opera, the book on which it is based, and real life. *La traviata* was based on a play by **Alexandre Dumas**, who based his leading character upon his own mistress. Dumas’

novel opens with Alfredo attending a sale of Violetta's effects after she is dead. In the film, it looks as though they are preparing just such a sale—but then the Violetta comes back to life! But notice something else: Verdi based his opera on the stage hit of only a year before; it was the one and only time that he attempted a contemporary subject. So it would not have been a period spectacle, but played in modern clothes—or it would have been, but the censors felt the subject was too shocking, and only permitted its production if played in the costumes of the previous century! It seems that, even back then, period spectacle was what *isolated* audiences from reality, not what led them to it.

18. Nadine Sierra in Act I of *La traviata* (David Livermore production, Florence 2022)

So it is not inappropriate to play *La traviata* in modern dress. And that is what happens in a recent production in Florence directed by **Davide Livermore** (Italian, despite the American name). Only he doesn't bring it quite up to date, but sets it in the late 1960s, as flower-power overlaps with women's lib. The party, when it happens, is a rave in which half the people seem either to be smoking pot or having sex, and Violetta herself works as a kind of porn star. A little shocking, perhaps, but then the original milieu was shocking. Again, I'll show the opening, beginning in the middle of the Prelude because I am interested in what Livermore does with it. We can discuss after you have watched.

19. Verdi: *La traviata* (Davide Livermore, Florence 2022, opening)

20. — still from the above

Again, what did you think? I was immediately drawn in by the unexpectedness of the opening, and the ambiguity of what is going on behind the doors in this hotel corridor. As we saw with the Zeffirelli also, ambiguity can be a more powerful tool than outright statement. This is actually a very good production, with some superb performances, and the changed settings do make you see a familiar story in a new light. I just wish that Livermore had gone all the way, however, and set the opera in the 2020s; although more recent than the 19th-century, the 1960s are still half a century ago. So instead of seeing Violetta's position of sexual slavery as degrading and real, audiences are amused by what new twist this clever director will think up.

21. Willy Decker production of *La traviata* at the Met

So we are back to the **Willy Decker** production that used to be at the Met before they replaced it with that Disney monstrosity. Bear with me if I start with the same opening sequence as in the previous two productions. Decker uses modern dress, but in an abstract context; for me, the paradoxical result is to bring us closer to the characters as individuals. Yes, his symbolism with the huge electric clock and the white-haired figure representing Death is perhaps a little too obvious. But he takes the time to develop it, rather than filling the stage with incident, and this keeps us puzzled, on our toes, watching to see what happens next—which is exactly the right attitude with an opera that you know all too well. Then the Chorus comes in; tell me what you think about how Decker treats them. This is the original 2006 production from Salzburg, with the young **Anna Netrebko** as Violetta.

22. Verdi: *La traviata* (Willy Decker, Salzburg 2006, opening)

23. — still from the above

What did you notice about the chorus? Decker treats them as an almost menacing mass, not individuals. Even the women are in tuxes, indistinguishable from the men; to show Violetta alone as the single woman in a world of men goes much further to express her position than to make her a porn star. I want to cut ahead to the end of the act and the beginning of the next, territory we have not visited before. Violetta ends the act with a two-part aria, the slow section (“*Ah, fors’è lui*”) wondering whether she is really falling in love, followed by a fast section (“*Sempre libera*”) in which she realizes that it is folly to give in to sentiment, and determines to plunge deep into the social whirl, burining the candle at both ends. This is where we’ll start. But Verdi twice interrupts this by her hearing—maybe literally, maybe in her mind—Alfredo singing his melody from the love duet offstage. It is just a hint that she may give in to him after all, which is what she does. Interestingly, Decker brings Alfredo onstage physically, then moves immediately to their second-act idyll in the country. I want you to notice two things: how clear it is that they are really in a relationship, but also how much of that relationship is their delight in playing the roles of romantic lovers, *as though the whole thing is in quotes*. It is only a couple of pages of recitative, but it is the best Act II opening I have ever seen—or have ever directed. The Alfredo is **Rolando Villazón**.

24. Verdi: *La traviata* (Willy Decker, Salzburg 2006, Act I end and Act II start)

25. Class title 4 (still from the above)