

Novel into *Opera*

ALEXANDRE DUMAS FILS



3. Opera Structures

Thursday, October 6, 2022

Opera Structures

THE SAME PRINCIPLES that go into shaping the solo *scena* in the operas of Verdi or the *bel canto* composers who preceded him go into structuring the two-person and small-ensemble scenes through which most of the drama takes place. These involve identifying those moments in the action that can best be expanded with slow, lyrical music—the equivalent of the *cavatina* section in an aria—and those whose excitement or intensity suggest faster music—the equivalent of a *cabaletta*. The librettist's task is then to link these moments into a scene that will make them the musical highpoints in a dramatic arc.

All the examples in today's class will be taken from *La traviata*, Giuseppe Verdi's setting of Francesco Maria Piave's 1853 adaptation of the 1853 play *La dame aux camélias* (The Lady of the Camellias) by Alexandre Dumas *fils*. This is especially interesting because Dumas himself adapted the play from his own 1848 novel of the same title, so comparison of all three versions can reveal much about the different exigencies of the three media: page, stage, and score.

Rather than list the sections below in the order in which I will introduce them in class, I thought it would be more helpful to explain each scene in chronological place in the story. The double names of the characters—Marguerite/Violetta, Armand/Alfredo, and Duval/Germont—refer to their names in the play and opera respectively. The scene numbers, however, refer to the opera only. *rb*.

Background

Marguerite Gautier (Violetta Valéry in the opera) is a courtesan in contemporary Paris, living from party to party, and kept by a rich aristocrat. Armand/Alfredo, a young man from the provinces, meets her and falls in love. Over the course of two acts in the play or twenty minutes in the opera, he persuades her to admit her own love, and move with him to a retreat in the country. She, however, is ill with consumption, and fears that her months are numbered.

Act II: Germont and Violetta

Marguerite/Violetta has been living happily with Armand/Alfredo for some months. Unknown to him, she has been selling off the gifts from previous admirers to fund their expenses. She receives a visit from Duval/Germont, her lover's father. Though censorious at first, he comes to respect her, and it is on the basis of that respect that he persuades her to give up her relationship with his son, for the sake of his young daughter who is about to get married. When he points out what otherwise lies in store for them as exiles from society, she reluctantly agrees—and also promises to arrange it so that Armand/Alfredo will never know.

Act II Finale

Marguerite/Violetta plunges back into society life and once more becomes the mistress of her rich protector. She does this in order to make Armand/Alfredo reject her, as she had promised his father. He corners her at a party, and in front of all the guests, throws money at her face, shaming her as a common whore.

Act III: Alfredo and Violetta

Marguerite/Violetta has indeed become ill, and is spending her last days in a small obscure apartment. Stricken with conscience, Duval/Germont has written to his son explaining that her apparent betrayal was a sacrifice made at his request. Armand/Alfredo rushes to her side, but is too late to save her.

Sources of Clips Shown

There are many productions of the opera, both on DVD and online. Performances of the Dumas play, however, are much rarer; I have had to go with an old American radio adaptation (under the usual American title, *Camille*) and the one filmed version that sticks close to the original text. Most of the other films with similar titles tell distinctly different versions of the story.

— **Dumas: *La dame aux camélias***

Christiana Réali (Marguerite), Roger van Hool (Duval);
French television film, 1998; Jean-Claude Brialy (d)

— **Dumas: *Camille***

Eva la Gallienne (Camille), Richard Waring (Armand);
American radio broadcast, 1953; translator unknown

— **Verdi: *La traviata***

Ermonela Jaho (Violetta), Charles Castronovo (Alfredo),
Plácido Domingo (Germont);
DVD London 2006, Antonello Manacorda (c), Richard Eyre (d)

For materials used in each class, see the instructor's website:

<http://www.brunyate.com/novel-opera/>

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