Class 3: Opera Structures

A. Marie, Marguerite, and Violetta

1. Title Slide 1 (*La traviata*)

Almost everything we shall discuss today will be taken from *La traviata,* the 1853 opera by **Giuseppe Verdi** (1813–1901). We heard an aria from it last week, but today I want to go beyond that, to consider structures involving two or more people.

2. Dumas, Piave, and Verdi

It is particularly interesting in that the original author, **Alexandre Dumas *fils*** (1824–95) himself did a large part of the work, by turning his novel of 1848 into a stage play which opened in 1852. The translation from novel to stage scenario is normally the first thing that a librettist would have to tackle, but in this case, Verdi's librettist **Francesco Maria Piave** (1810–76) did not have to because Dumas had already done it for him. We will look into this more in a moment, but we shall find that, in terms of layout, Piave really had to do very little to adapt Dumas' play. Most of his concern was to make room for Verdi's music, and that's what we'll look at just now.

3. Marie, Marguerite, and Violetta

Dumas based his novel on his own mistress, a courtesan called **Marie Duplessis**. She was called **Marguerite Gautier** in the novel, and the novel itself was called *La dame aux camélias*, or "The Lady of the Camellias"—the camellias, white and red, being a signal as to whether she was available for sex. On the American stage and in film, her name became **Camille**. Piave and Verdi renamed her **Violetta**.

4. Richard Waring and Eva le Gallienne

I have been having difficulty working out the best way to demonstrate the transition from text to music. The Dumas play is available in French online, and I did a rough translation of a couple of the scenes for the handouts. But most of the films diverge from it quite considerably. However, I discovered an old audio recording of the play from 1953, featuring **Eva le Gallienne** and **Richard Waring**, both acting in a distinctly old-fashioned style. It is heavily cut, but the bits that remain are very close indeed to Dumas' script. Let's listen to part of the final scene. **Marguerite** is dying of consumption. In the previous act, **Armand Duval**, her lover, has staged a public denunciation of her, not knowing that her apparent betrayal is at the request of Armand's father, who is concerned for the reputation of his daughter. Now **M. Duval** has written to Armand explaining Marguerite's sacrifice, and Armand rushes to her apartment to be with her. <u>As you listen, ask yourself how the drama is being conveyed, and where you would put the music, if you were a composer</u>.

5. *Camille* (radio): scene from Act V
6. — the above, drama!
7. — the above: tenderness, passion, despair?

So how was the drama conveyed? Principally in Eva le Gallienne's delivery, her hesitations, her rushes. The whole scene up to the point where I stopped was hyper, over the top, as if she were trying to convince him—but more especially herself—that this would be the happy ending. But where's the room for music in that? *Allegro agitato* is all very well, but you can't do the whole scene that way. Part of it, certainly, but we need time for tenderness at the very least.

8. Typical structure of a *belcanto*/Verdi *scena*

Mozart worked out a way to do this, and the *bel canto* composers **Rossini**, **Bellini**, and **Donizetti** turned it into a kind of formula; for most of his career, **Verdi** follows suit. The formula is to treat a scene, whether it be a duet or an aria, in two major parts. One of these, called the ***cavatina***, would be slow; the other, the ***cabaletta***, would be fast; each could be used to convey the appropriate emotion. These two sections might be linked by a less lyrical **transition**, introduced by some kind of action, and possibly rounded off with a **coda**. We saw this last week in Violetta's big Act I aria. In the introduction, she wonders if she dare fall in love; in the *cavatina*, she imagines it happening; in the transition, she realizes it is foolishness; and in the *cabaletta*, she determines to plunge back into the social whirl.

9. The above with notes on this scene

A composer might be able to get a fast *cabaletta* out of the Dumas text, but there is no room for anything slow. So Piave has to manufacture one. What he decided to do was to isolate two moments: one their dream of a future together (*cavatina*), the other their despair on acknowledging that death is inevitable (*cabaletta*). There is just a hint of a cue for the latter in the text, when Marguerite says "A moment ago, I rebelled against death"; what Piave has to do is *show* it. For the slow section, he takes a line from the Dumas that was cut in the radio broadcast: Armand tells Marguerite that they will leave Paris and go somewhere far away. Piave turns it into a time-out moment for both of them. Listen for them as we watch the scene in the same production as before, from Covent Garden, with Ermonela Jaho as Violetta and **Charles Castronovo** as Alfredo. Note that each of these sections takes the same form: a solo for one character, the other replying with either a new solo or an echo of the first one, and then the two singing together. I'll add annotations showing the start of each section. When we come to the sections marked "cavatina" or "cabaletta," ask yourselves what we gain emotionally by the music taking over the clock at these times.

10. Verdi: *La traviata*, Act III, farewell duet
11. — still from the above

What did those moments do for you? Did you feel that the tension was lost with the switch back to normal time? The reason that the slow/fast *cavatina*/*cabaletta* convention had such a long life cannot merely be because it was a convention; it must also have answered a dramatic need.

12. Roger van Hool and Christiana Réali in *La dame aux camélias* (1998)

There is a considerably more complex two-person scene in both the play and the opera, and that is when Armand's father, **M. Duval**, calls on **Marguerite** in the country retreat she has set up with Armand and asks her to give him up. It is complex because M. Duval turns out to be a multi-layered character, and his interview with Marguerite runs the gamut from disdain to something close to affection. Watch the scene in **Jean-Claude Brialy's** film of 1998, which sticks remarkably close to the Dumas play, though it omits several long section in which Duval spells out the consequences of a sustained liaison. Afterwards, let's talk about his character and the various tactics he uses with Marguerite, and see if you can find moments that might be expanded with music in either the *cavatina* or *cabaletta* modes. As you see, the actors are **Christiana Réali** and **Roger van Hool**. I added the titles myself, from my own translation of the Dumas play.

13. Dumas: *La dame aux camélias* (1998 film), M. Duval and Marguerite
14. — still from the above

How did that strike you? Does M. Duval come over as believable? To what degree is he sympathetic? What moments could be expanded with music? One thing that strikes me, watching this again, is how low-key it is, compared to the opera, but understatement is as appropriate to the film medium as emotional intensity is to the operatic one.

15. Proportions in the scene with the Father

I made a chart of how this scene is treated in both the novel and the play by Dumas, in Piave's opera libretto—all by counting the number of words—and in Verdi's opera, counting by playing time. I divided the scene into four sections: the opening, in which the Father is both dismissive and aggressive; his first plea, leading to her agreement to give the son up for a while; his second plea, requiring a permanent sacrifice; and the details and farewells that form a coda following her agreement. Don't worry about the novel column for now; I'll talk about that later. One thing you'll notice is that Piave cut down considerably on the aggressive first section of the play, and Verdi set it quite perfunctorily, in rapid recitative; I guess both wanted to move quickly to the point where the characters were addressing each other on the basis of respect and perhaps even some feeling.

16. Two excerpts from the scene in the play

Now if I were the librettist looking through the Dumas play to find musical moments to offer my composer, my eye would be caught immediately by passages like these. The first is where M. Duval first appeals to Marguerite's sympathy by describing his daughter. It is so obviously lyrical that it demands music to match. The second is cued by those words in italics, "*to herself*," which immediately suggests the interiority that music handles so well. I'll play the scene after the break, but here as a teaser is a sample of what Verdi does with each of these moments.

17. Verdi: *La traviata*, samples (Marina Rebeka and Dmitry Hvortovsky)
18. Intermission title (as at the opening)

B. Larger Structures

19. Chart of the Germont/Violetta scene, main duets only
20. Chart of the Germont/Violetta scene, full scene

A few more words before I play the scene. The core of it, as we already have seen, is the long section where Germont tells Violetta what lies ahead for her, and she reluctantly accepts. Musically, this can most easily be seen as a giant duet structure in three movements, fastish–slow–fast, each consisting of a solo for one of the two, a complementary solo for the other, and then some singing together. The final fast movement, the *cabaletta*, is postponed to the closing section, after she has agreed and they have discussed what to do. Before all this there are two other sections: the aggressive introduction, which Verdi gets through quickly in recitative, and Germont's first plea. Although there is some singing together, it is easiest to think of this as two short arias: the *cavatina* for him that we have already sampled, creating sympathy for his daughter, and an impassioned *cabaletta* for her, saying how hard it will be to give up Alfredo, even temporarily. I have marked the sections. **Plácido Domingo** is Germont.

21. Verdi: *La traviata*, Act II, Germont/Violetta scene
22. — still from the above

How did that come across for you? I am always worried that if I analyze too much, it may spoil the listening experience for you. But do too little, and I miss an educational opportunity.

23. Chart of the acts in the play and the opera

I want now to look briefly at two large-scale aspects of the adaptation. Here are the separate scenes of Dumas' play and Verdi's opera. The play, as typical of the time, is in five acts; the opera, also typical, is in three, but the second act has two substantial scenes, so it is essentially a four-scene structure. Verdi's last three scenes parallel the Dumas play pretty closely, but he and Piave condense Dumas' two acts into one. This cuts out a whole host of minor characters, mainly intended to show Marguerite among her milieu; no great loss. It cuts out the process by which Armand falls for Marguerite, gets jealous of her other lovers, is put straight about the facts of a courtesan's life, and finally enters into a true relationship; in the opera, he understands immediately and falls in love regardless; the jealousy can wait until a later act. And it cuts out Marguerite's inner debate as to whether to accept Armand; but Verdi handles that beautifully in the nine-minute aria we heard last week. The golden rules of writing an opera libretto: remove as much exposition and mere fact as possible, and focus on things that can best be expressed through music.

24. Chart of three scenes in the novel, play, and opera.

Dumas' translation of his novel into a stage play is much more extensive; he almost sat down to write a completely new work. The novel, also typical for its time, is told obliquely, as a series of confessions Armand makes to the author, beginning in Chapter 6, almost a quarter-way into the book. And all the events known only to Marguerite are told in the series of deathbed letters she writes to him in the last four chapters of the book. So if we trace the origin of the two scenes we have studied so far, we find

that the M. Duval's interview with Marguerite is reported way out of sequence, in one of her letters. And more surprisingly still, all the events surrounding her death is told in letters too; Armand is not even there! But Dumas knew the golden rules of writing a play: stay in the here and now; and *show*, not tell.

25. — the above, emphasizing the Act II finale

There is one more scene on this chart, and I want to end with it. After her interview with M. Duval, Marguerite throws herself back into her old social world, and gives herself once more to her former sugar-daddy, the **Comte de N**. Her intent is to make Armand hate her, and thus to drop his pursuit. In the novel, he calls at her Paris apartment, only to be turned away at the door because the Count is with her. He goes back to his room and writes her an angry letter, enclosing some money as the fee for her company. Like the playwright he is, Dumas moves this scene from offstage to onstage in the play. Now the confrontation takes place at at party, first as a private exchange between them; but then in the last four lines, Armand calls everyone into the room so that they can witness him throwing the money at her feet. Naturally, Piave keeps this scene; it is too good theater to pass up. But he follows it with a general chorus of horror from the assembled guests. And then Verdi trumps it with one of the big ensembles which were his specialty. **Germont** comes in and reproves his son for his ungentlemanly behavior. His solo line is joined by **Violetta's** pain and **Alfredo's** own guilt, and by parts for all the smaller roles and chorus, into a big act-finale that I shall play just now.

26. Verdi: *La traviata*, Act II finale
27. — still from the above

C. Homework

28. Kate Chopin: *The Story of an Hour*

Assuming that even a few people have attempted last week's homework assignment, let me set another one. On the website for this class (and the next), you will find a PDF of a very short story by **Kate Chopin** (1850–1904) called *The Story of an Hour*. It will only take about five minutes to read. I am inviting you to sketch out a scenario of how you might put it into operatic form, using some (but not nessarily all) of the building-blocks we have discussed so far: aria, duet, larger ensemble. No text is required, just a one-sentence summary of what would happen in each section. This is a project that I tackled myself about 20 years ago, but it was a very special commission with very special conditions, and I know that my solution is far from the only one. I will try to get a recording of it, but the real interest should come from our discussion of ways and means.

In case there are no takers for the aria exercise, I may have time to play you one more excerpt. So I shall take that deathbed scene from the end of the duet we heard through to the final curtain. Verdi loved to end his operas with a moment of pathos for his dying soprano, and this is no exception. Note that he brings in **Alfredo's father** and the **Doctor** to fill out the parts in a closing quartet.

29. Verdi: *La traviata*, Act III finale