

*Virginia
Opera*

*Verdi's
La Traviata*

STUDY GUIDE

2005-2006 SEASON

LA TRAVIATA

by
Giuseppe Verdi

Libretto by Francesco Maria Piave
after the play *La Dame aux Camelias* by
Alexandre Dumas *fils*

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Premiere

First performance on March 6, 1853, at the Teatro La Fenice in Venice, Italy.

Cast of Characters

Violetta Valery	Soprano
Flora Bervoix , her friend.....	Mezzo-Soprano
Annina , Violetta's maid.....	Soprano
Alfredo Germont	Tenor
Giorgio Germont , his father.....	Baritone
Gastone , Vicomte de Letorieres, friend of Alfredo.....	Tenor
Baron Douphol , Violetta's protector.....	Baritone
Marchese D'Obigny , friend of Flora.....	Bass-Baritone
Doctor Grenvil	Bass
Giuseppe , Violetta's servant.....	Tenor
Commissioner	Bass
Spanish Gypsy	Solo Dancer
Ladies and gentlemen, friends of Violetta and Flora, gypsies, servants, etc....	Chorus

Brief Summary

Setting: In and around Paris, in the mid 1800's

I. The young courtesan Violetta Valery is hosting an exclusive party at her Parisian townhouse. She is ill with consumption, but tries to ignore it. One of her guests brings along a friend, Alfredo Germont. He has been admiring her from afar and has longed to meet her. When they have a moment alone he confesses his love. She doesn't want to take him seriously but eventually tells him to return the next day. After her guests leave she considers Alfredo's words and the manner of her life and decides unequivocally that she will live her life with freedom to do as she chooses.

II. Alfredo's entreaties have prevailed and he and Violetta are living together at her country home outside Paris. While Alfredo is in Paris, his father pays Violetta a visit. He demands, and then pleads with Violetta to give up Alfredo. The scandal over their liaison is hurting his family. At first Violetta refuses but eventually agrees to give up the man she loves. She returns to Paris with Alfredo believing she has returned to her old life as a courtesan. He follows her to a party and insults her by throwing money at her.

III. Violetta is dying of consumption. She is alone and destitute. She knows that Alfredo's father has told him the truth about her sacrifice and she is waiting for him to return to her. She fears it is too late. Alfredo finally arrives and the two lovers pledge themselves and promise to be together forever. Violetta is so happy her pain disappears and she feels a surge of life. With a cry of joy she falls into Alfredo's arms, and dies.

Full Plot Synopsis and Musical Highlights

Prelude

The sound of muted strings opens the opera, playing a high violin motif that will be heard again at the beginning of Act IV. This sad, evocative theme foreshadows the illness and death of Violetta. Following the opening theme is a broad, expansive melody which is identified as the Violetta/Alfredo love theme. It appears in the overture two times. The music of the overture serves to paint a picture of Violetta, but in reverse order: first, her death; second, her love for Alfredo; and third, her carefree life as a courtesan.

Act I

The orchestra signals an excited atmosphere as the curtain rises to show the luxurious salon of the beautiful courtesan, Violetta Valery. An evening party is in progress and Violetta is greeting her guests. Among her guests are her close friend, Flora Bervoix, her physician, Dr. Grenvil, Baron Douphol, her patron, and Alfredo Germont, a handsome young man from Provence. Violetta has provided the finest food and drink for her extravagant party and Baron Duphol, who has noticed Alfredo's interest in Violetta with some annoyance, prods him into singing a spirited drinking song in honor of the occasion. Alfredo does not disappoint and responds with "Libiamo," (Let us drink), a song that celebrates wine, friendship, and beauty. It begins as a solo, becomes a duet, as Violetta returns his sentiments, and ends as a grand scene as the chorus completes the 'brindisi' (a song that invites a group to drink). Afterwards, the guests begin to move into an adjoining room while Violetta lingers a moment, feeling weak. She is seized with a sudden fit of coughing and is surrounded by concerned guests. She insists that they dance and enjoy themselves while she rests a moment. Alfredo remains with her. He cautions her to take better care of herself and then launches into a declaration of his love for her. He has loved her at a distance for months. At first Violetta is amused by his ardor, but eventually realizes the depth of his devotion. Alfredo sings, "Un di felice, eterea," (One happy, heavenly day), which builds to the ardent melody, "Di quell'amor ch'e palpito," (From such a love so tremulous). This melody represents Alfredo's love and is employed to great dramatic effect later in the opera. Violetta gives him a flower, her signature camellia, and tells him to return when the flower has faded.

It is almost dawn and the guests bid Violetta farewell, "Si rideda in ciel l'aurora," (Dawn is waking in the sky). Left alone, Violetta expresses her joy and wonder over meeting a man who has offered her real love. Before that thought can take hold she reproaches herself, declaring that dreams of true love are futile and worthless. She vows to forget Alfredo and remain free to continue a carefree life of pleasure. Musically, Violetta's lengthy solo scene is comprised of an accompanied recitative, "E strano," (It is strange), followed by a slow aria, "Ah, fors'è lui," (Perhaps it is he), followed by another accompanied recitative, "Follie!" (Folly!) and a brilliant faster aria, "Sempre libera!" (Always free!). Before Violetta can completely finish, we hear a reprise of Alfredo's declaration of love, "Di quell amor," from outside her window. Violetta seems to reject this

reminder as she continues to sing the ornamented runs and high notes that punctuate her passionate declaration.

Act II

Some months have passed since Violetta met Alfredo. She has succumbed to his entreaties and her own desire for true love and abandoned her old life. It has been three months since she and Alfredo moved to her country house outside Paris. Alfredo is deliriously happy and expresses his feelings, “*Dei miei bollenti spiriti,*” (The youthful ardors of my fiery spirits). He is shocked to learn from Violetta’s maid, Annina, that Violetta has been selling her jewels and other possessions to pay the expenses of living in the country house. He expresses remorse and rushes off to Paris to raise money.

A letter arrives from Flora asking Violetta to attend a party at her house that very evening. Violetta is amused with the thought of returning to her former life, but will not seriously consider it. A gentleman caller is shown in. The caller is Giorgio Germont, Alfredo’s father. He begs her to renounce Alfredo forever. At first he is stern and insulting but eventually softens when he realizes that Violetta’s character is not what he assumed. He explains that his son’s love affair has damaged Alfredo’s career and that the family of his daughter’s fiancée has threatened to break off the engagement should the affair continue. Musically the scene between the elder Germont and Violetta is a lengthy, grand duet. There are four parts to the duet following some initial recitative. The first part is the most involved, comprising three subsections in which Germont describes his family’s plight, “*Pura siccome un angelo,*” (God gave a daughter pure as an angel), and Violetta responds with her true feelings for Alfredo and the seriousness of her illness, “*Non sapete quale affetto vivo,*” (You don’t know the deep devotion). Germont’s unyielding reply and Violetta’s capitulation completes the lengthy first movement, “*Ah, dite alla giovine,*” (Oh, say to that gentle maiden). The second part is Violetta’s heartbroken resolution to leave Alfredo that very day, and the last two parts involve Violetta’s wish to tell Alfredo in her own way, and a request that Germont tell his son of her sacrifice after her death, “*Morro! Morro!*” (I shall die!).

Germont expresses his gratitude and embraces her before leaving the room. Violetta prays for strength as she replies to Flora’s note, saying she will come to the party. Then, she begins writing a farewell note to Alfredo. She is distraught and emotional as she completes the letter and is unprepared for Alfredo’s sudden return. He is upset by a stern letter from his father which announces an impending visit. Violetta suggests it would be best if he saw his father alone. Alfredo is confused by her behavior and her tears. As she leaves, her emotions well up and she cries out to him to love her always, as much as she loves him. This outburst, “*Amami, Alfredo!*” (Love me, Alfredo!) is sung to the love theme heard in the prelude to the opera. Alfredo receives Violetta’s farewell note just as his father enters the room. He reacts with disbelief and then anger. His father attempts to console him in the aria, “*Di Provenza il mar,*” (The sea and land of Provence). Ignoring his father’s pleas to return home with him to Provence, Alfredo rushes away, determined to follow Violetta back to Paris.

A lively party is underway at Flora's town house in Paris. A group of gypsies and matadors are dancing and singing for the assembled guests. Alfredo arrives with his dangerous mood reflected in repeated motifs in the orchestra. He begins playing cards. Violetta arrives on the arm of her former lover, Baron Duphol. Violetta pleads with the Baron not to argue with Alfredo, but the two men are hostile and begin to spar verbally. When supper is announced Violetta tries to speak privately with Alfredo, begging him not to provoke a duel. Alfredo will not leave the party unless Violetta returns to him. She cannot tell him the truth about her departure, instead she lies to him that she cannot return because she loves the Baron. Enraged, Alfredo calls the guests back into the room and denounces Violetta, throwing the money he has won at the gambling table in her face. Everyone is appalled by his behavior. His father, who has just arrived at the town house, reproaches him. In a large concerted finale, the main characters react to this shocking turn of events. Germont is disapproving but maintains a self-contained lyricism, Alfredo is remorseful with a fragmented vocal line, and Violetta dominates with an emotional but simple melodic line that begs for understanding. The guests assure Violetta of their love and loyalty while the Baron vows to avenge her. Violetta expresses her true love for Alfredo as the curtain falls on the second act.

Act III

Violetta's condition has worsened since she left Alfredo, and now she lies dying in the bedroom of her Paris apartment. Doctor Grenvil tries to cheer her, telling her she will soon be well. As he leaves, he confides in Annina that her mistress has only a few hours left to live. Left alone, Violetta rereads aloud a letter she had previously received from Alfredo's father. In this letter Germont told her about the duel that Alfredo had fought with Baron Duphol, wounding him. But most importantly, Germont revealed that he had told Alfredo the truth about her great sacrifice. Alfredo himself was hurrying to her side to beg her forgiveness.

Violetta fears he will not arrive in time. She knows she is dying. She cries out, "E tardi!" (It is too late!) Remembering past joys and praying for forgiveness, she sings the poignant "Addio del passato," (Farewell to the past). As the noise of Carnival revelers is heard outside of Violetta's window, Annina rushes in with the news that she has just seen Alfredo in the street. Moments later Alfredo enters the room and takes Violetta into his arms in a passionate embrace. The lovers resolve to remain together forever and talk about their future together, "Parigi, o cara, noi lasceremo," (We shall leave Paris, O dearest).

Exhausted by emotion, Violetta attempts to rise but falls back in a fit of coughing. Alfredo sends for the doctor. Violetta appeals to heaven not to let her die now that happiness seems so near, "Ah, gran Dio, morir si giovine," (Ah, dear God, to die so young). Dr. Grenvil arrives just as the elder Germont appears. Violetta gives Alfredo a locket that contains her likeness. She requests that he present it to the innocent girl he will one day marry, telling her that it represents an angel who prays for them in heaven, "Prendi, quest'e l'immagine," (Take this image). For a brief moment the illusion of returning health fills Violetta's spirit. She cries out in joy, but falls back lifeless into the arms of Alfredo as all present utter words of despair and grief.

Historical and Literary Background

During the 1840s, the young writer, Alexandre Dumas *fils* , (son of the author of *The Three Musketeers* and *The Count of Monte Cristo*, Alexandre Dumas *pere*) became romantically involved with a young woman who was considered one of the great courtesans of her day. Her given name was Alphonsine Plessis, but it became Marie Duplessis as part of her transformation from country girl to courtesan. Their liaison lasted eleven months, after which Marie became the mistress of Franz Liszt. Their time together made a lasting impression on the young writer. When Marie died of consumption in 1847, she was also very young, just 23 years old. (Note: She is buried in Montmartre Cemetery in Paris where her grave monument is still clearly visible. The auctioning of her belongings was a well-attended affair observed by Charles Dickens.) The following year Dumas published a novel, *La Dame aux Camelias*, using Marie as the basis for his heroine, Marguerite Gauthier. Dumas followed up his novel with a play of the same title in 1852. It is clear in the preface to the play that Dumas had high regard for Marie:

“She was tall, very slender, black-haired, and with a pink-and-white complexion. She had a small head, long enamel-like eyes, like those of a Japanese, but lively and delicate. Her lips were red as cherries, and she had the most beautiful teeth in the world. One might call her a Dresden-china miniature....She was one of the last – and one of the few – courtesans who had a heart. Doubtless that is why she died so young. She lacked neither intelligence nor integrity....She had a native distinction, she dressed with taste, and she walked gracefully – almost with nobility.”

The play had been through a long process with the censors due to its “indelicate” subject matter. The original novel had been denounced as containing “foul and hideous horrors.” However, the outrage of the guardians of public virtue over the play’s subject matter did nothing to effect its popularity. Dumas had taken the larger-than-life figure of Marie Duplessis, used various aspects of her life, including his own association with her, and reinvented her as a tragic heroine. Additionally, he was challenging prevalent stereotypes about the character of women who do not live up to society’s expectations. Dumas’ heroine is caught in the tug and pull between social attitudes and self-determination and ultimately sacrifices her own happiness for the good of the man she loves.

Verdi saw the play in Paris in 1852 and was deeply impressed. The play was praised for its freshness, simplicity and genuineness, the same traits Verdi has been demanding from his librettists. He wanted plots that were relevant to his time and were daring as well as inspiring. *La Dame aux Camelias* offered a bold subject with beautiful and tragic overtones, plus a manageable cast, ready-made scenarios, and the opportunity to showcase the vocal and theatrical resources of a prima donna. He had a copy of the play sent to Italy so that his librettist, Francesco Maria Piave, could begin the work of transforming the play into an opera libretto.

Verdi composed LA TRAVIATA in record time while on a tight schedule, partly due to his continuing work on the opera *Il Trovatore*, which had its premiere in Rome only two

months before that of LA TRAVIATA. Perhaps it came so quickly because the subject resonated with Verdi and his own situation. As a young man Verdi had endured the deaths of his young wife and two very young children in the successive years of 1838, 1839, and 1840. He was devastated to the point of nearly renouncing composition altogether. His words chronicle his state of mind, "A third coffin goes out of my house. I was alone! Alone!" He met Giuseppina Strepponi, a brilliant soprano shortly after his wife's death. She was a source of encouragement and support. Their paths diverged until they reacquainted in Paris in 1847. Her career had come to a sudden end and she was struggling with her personal affairs. Shortly thereafter they began living together in a country house outside Paris before moving back to Verdi's home in Italy. Their relationship received considerable criticism, particularly from Verdi's benefactor, Antonio Barezzi, the father of Verdi's first wife. Verdi and Giuseppina were able to overcome the scandal and lived together for nearly fifty years, eventually marrying in 1859.

LA TRAVIATA was written during a time that Verdi described as his "galley slave" years (1842-1853). During this period Verdi arduously wrote sixteen operas, an average of one every nine months. *Rigoletto*, *Il Trovatore*, and LA TRAVIATA were written at the end of this part of Verdi's life and became cornerstones of the Italian operatic repertory. The premiere of LA TRAVIATA, however, at the Teatro La Fenice in Venice was a disaster. Verdi had specified a heroine who must be "young, have a graceful figure, and sing with passion," but he was contractually obligated to accept Fanny Salvini-Donatelli, a soprano of considerable girth. The baritone was nearing the end of his career and didn't like what had been written for him, and the tenor was hoarse. When the hefty prima donna "died" of consumption on stage, the audience screamed with laughter. Verdi wrote, "*La Traviata* last night - a fiasco. Was it my fault or the singers? Time will tell." Less than a year later with a few alterations the opera triumphed. LA TRAVIATA still delights audiences as not only one of Verdi's best-loved operas, but also as a great music drama. Verdi had succeeded in writing an opera about the bourgeois world of his own day, with a sense of great authenticity and intimacy. Violetta is a heroine we understand and for whom we feel great compassion.

Discussion Questions

1. The Prelude to the opera is unusual in that it summarizes the important points of the heroine's life, but in reverse order. Why do you think Verdi structured the Prelude in this way and how does the reverse order of the musical themes fall into place with the opening scene of the first act?
2. Violetta Valery is described as a courtesan. Is she a prostitute or is there a difference?
3. The opera and the play it is based upon are considered a critical commentary on middle class (or bourgeois) morality. What is "middle class morality" and how does the plot line of the story challenge society's view of "fallen" women?
4. The translation of the opera's title is "The Woman Who Strayed" or "The Wayward Woman." What does this tell us about mid-19th Century (and later!) societal attitudes about the heroine's character?
5. The author of the novel and play, *Les Dame aux Camelias*, Alexandre Dumas, was trying to break a stereotype in the minds of the populace. What stereotype was he challenging?
6. What opera did Richard Gere take Julia Roberts to see in the movie, *Pretty Woman*? (Answer: *La Traviata*) How was this opera relevant to the movie and why?
7. How did Alexandre Dumas succeed in making the real-life Marie Duplessis into a tragic heroine?
8. Which character in Verdi's opera represents the view of society? (Alfredo's father, Giorgio Germont) How does he change his view of Violetta, and what does she do to make him see her in a different light?
9. The novel and subsequent play by Dumas has been used as the basis for other artistic creations. Can you name some? (the opera, *La Traviata*; the movie, *Camille* – starring Greta Garbo; the ballet, *Marguerite and Armand* – Royal Ballet; the film, *Moulin Rouge* – starring Nicole Kidman;
10. How does Verdi use the music to show changes, both physically and emotionally, in the character of Violetta as she progresses through the three acts of the opera?

of the country's folk music and legends. Composers such as Aaron Copland, Douglas Moore, Carlisle Floyd, Howard Hanson, and Robert Ward have all crafted operas that have been presented throughout the world to great success. Today, composers John Adams, Philip Glass, and John Corigliano enjoy success both at home and abroad and are credited with the infusion of new life into an art form which continues to evolve even as it approaches its fifth century.



The Operatic Voice

A true (and brief) definition of the “operatic” voice is a difficult proposition. Many believe the voice is “born,” while just as many hold to the belief that the voice is “trained.” The truth lies somewhere between the two. Voices that can sustain the demands required by the operatic repertoire do have many things in common. First and foremost is a strong physical technique that allows the singer to sustain long phrases through the control of both the inhalation and exhalation of breath. Secondly, the voice (regardless of its size) must maintain a resonance in both the head (mouth, sinuses) and chest cavities. The Italian word “*squillo*” (squeal) is used to describe the brilliant tone required to penetrate the full symphony orchestra that accompanies the singers. Finally, all voices are defined by both the actual voice “type” and the selection of repertoire for which the voice is ideally suited.

Within the five major voice types (*Soprano, Mezzo-Soprano, Tenor, Baritone, Bass*) there is a further delineation into categories (*Coloratura, Lyric, Spinto, Dramatic*) which help to define each particular instrument. The *Coloratura* is the highest within each voice type whose extended upper range is complimented by extreme flexibility. The *Lyric* is the most common of the “types.” This instrument is recognized more for the exceptional beauty of its tone rather than its power or range. The *Spinto* is a voice which combines the beauty of a lyric with the weight and power of a *Dramatic*, which is the most “powerful” of the voices. The *Dramatic* instrument is characterized by the combination of both incredible volume and “steely” intensity.

While the definition presented in the preceding paragraph may seem clearly outlined, many voices combine qualities from each category, thus carving an unique niche in operatic history. Just as each person is different from the next, so is each voice. Throughout her career Maria Callas defied categorization as she performed and recorded roles associated with each category in the soprano voice type. Joan Sutherland as well can be heard in recordings of soprano roles as diverse as the coloratura Gilda in *Rigoletto* to the dramatic Turandot in *Turandot*. Below is a very brief outline of voice types and categories with roles usually associated with the individual voice type.

	<i>Coloratura</i>	<i>Lyric</i>	<i>Spinto</i>	<i>Dramatic</i>
<i>Soprano</i>	Norina (Don Pasquale) Gilda (Rigoletto) Lucia (Lucia di Lammermoor)	Liu (Turandot) Mimi (La Bohème) Pamina (Magic Flute)	Tosca (Tosca) Amelia (A Masked Ball) Leonora (Il Trovatore)	Turandot (Turandot) Norma (Norma) Elektra (Elektra)
<i>Mezzo-Soprano</i>	Rosina (Barber of Seville) Angelina (La Cenerentola) Dorabella (Così fan tutte)	Carmen (Carmen) Charlotte (Werther) Giulietta (Hoffmann)	Santuzza (Cavalleria) Adalgisa (Norma) The Composer (Ariadne auf Naxos)	Azucena (Il Trovatore) Ulrica (A Masked Ball) Herodias (Salome)
<i>Tenor</i>	Count Almaviva (Barber of Seville) Don Ottavio (Don Giovanni) Ferrando (Così fan tutte)	Alfredo (La Traviata) Rodolfo (La Bohème) Tamino (Magic Flute)	Calaf (Turandot) Pollione (Norma) Cavaradossi (Tosca)	Dick Johnson (Fanciulla) Don Jose (Carmen) Otello (Otello)
<i>Baritone</i>	Figaro (Barber of Seville) Count Almavira (Le nozze di Figaro) Dr. Malatesta (Don Pasquale)	Marcello (La Bohème) Don Giovanni (Don Giovanni) Sharpless (Madama Butterfly)	Verdi Baritone Germont (La Traviata) Di Luna (Il Trovatore) Rigoletto (Rigoletto)	Scarpia (Tosca) Jochanaan (Salome) Jack Rance (Fanciulla)
<i>Bass</i>	Bartolo (Barber of Seville) Don Magnifico (Cenerentola) Dr. Dulcamara (Elixir of Love)	Leporello (Don Giovanni) Colline (La Bohème) Figaro (Marriage of Figaro)	Buffo Bass Don Pasquale (Don Pasquale) Don Alfonso (Così fan tutte)	Basso Cantate Oroveso (Norma) Timur (Turandot) Sarastro (Magic Flute)

Opera Production

Opera is created by the combination of myriad art forms. First and foremost are the actors who portray characters by revealing their thoughts and emotions through the singing voice. The next very important component is a full symphony orchestra that accompanies the singing actors and actresses, helping them to portray the full range of emotions possible in the operatic format. The orchestra performs in an area in front of the singers called the orchestra pit while the singers perform on the open area called the stage. Wigs, costumes, sets and specialized lighting further enhance these performances, all of which are designed, created, and executed by a team of highly trained artisans.

The creation of an opera begins with a dramatic scenario crafted by a playwright or dramaturg who alone or with a librettist fashions the script or libretto that contains the words the artists will sing. Working in tandem, the composer and librettist team up to create a cohesive musical drama in which the music and words work together to express the emotions revealed in the story. Following the completion of their work, the composer and librettist entrust their new work to a conductor who with a team of assistants (repetiteurs) assumes responsibility for the musical preparation of the work. The conductor collaborates with a stage director (responsible for the visual component) in order to bring a performance of the new piece to life on the stage. The stage director and conductor form the creative spearhead for the new composition while assembling a design team which will take charge of the actual physical production.

Set designers, lighting designers, costume designers, wig and makeup designers and even choreographers must all be brought “on board” to participate in the creation of the new production. The set designer combines the skills of both an artist and an architect using “blueprint” plans to design the actual physical set which will reside on the stage, recreating the physical setting required by the storyline. These blueprints are turned over to a team of carpenters who are specially trained in the art of stage carpentry. Following the actual building of the set, painters following instructions from the set designers’ original plans paint the set. As the set is assembled on the stage, the lighting designer works with a team of electricians to throw light onto both the stage and the set in an atmospheric as well as practical way. Using specialized lighting instruments, colored gels and a state of the art computer, the designer along with the stage director create a “lighting plot” by writing “lighting cues” which are stored in the computer and used during the actual performance of the opera.

During this production period, the costume designer in consultation with the stage director has designed appropriate clothing for the singing actors and actresses to wear. These designs are fashioned into patterns and crafted by a team of highly skilled artisans called cutters, stitchers, and sewers. Each costume is specially made for each singer using his/her individual measurements. The wig and makeup designer, working with the costume designer, designs and creates wigs which will complement both the costume and the singer as well as represent historically accurate “period” fashions.

As the actual performance date approaches, rehearsals are held on the newly crafted set, combined with costumes, lights, and orchestra in order to ensure a cohesive performance that will be both dramatically and musically satisfying to the assembled audience.

