Synopsis

Act I

In and around Paris during the 19th century. Violetta Valéry knows that she will die soon, exhausted by her restless life as a courtesan. At a party, Gastone introduces Violetta to Alfredo Germont, a young man who has been fascinated with her for a long time. Rumor has it that he has been inquiring after her health every day. His seemingly naïve and emotional attitude amuses the guests, and they ask Alfredo to propose a toast. He celebrates true love, and Violetta responds in praise of unceasing pleasure. As the party moves into the ballroom, Violetta feels faint and stays behind. Only Alfredo remains and declares his love. There is no place for such feelings in her life, Violetta replies, but she gives him a camellia, asking him to return when the flower has faded. He realizes that this means that he will see her again the following day. Alone, Violetta is torn by conflicting emotions—she doesn't want to give up her way of life, but, at the same time, she feels that Alfredo has awakened her desire to be truly loved.

Act II

Violetta has chosen a life with Alfredo, and they enjoy their love in the country, far from society. When Alfredo finds out that this is only possible because Violetta has been selling her property, he immediately leaves for Paris to procure money. Violetta has received an invitation to a masked ball at Flora's home, but she no longer cares for such distractions. In Alfredo's absence, his father, Giorgio Germont, pays her a visit. He demands that she separate from his son, as their relationship threatens his young daughter's impending marriage. But over the course of their conversation, Germont comes to realize that Violetta is not after his son's money—she is a woman who loves unselfishly. He appeals to Violetta's generosity of spirit and explains that, from a bourgeois point of view, her liaison with Alfredo has no future. Violetta's resistance dwindles, and she finally agrees to leave Alfredo forever. Only after her death shall he learn the truth about why she returned to her old life. She accepts the invitation to the ball and writes a goodbye letter to her lover. Alfredo returns, and Violetta tearfully hurries away. Soon after, a messenger delivers Violetta's letter, and while Alfredo is reading it, his father appears. He exhorts his son to return to their native land, but all the memories of home and a happy family can't prevent the furious and jealous Alfredo from seeking revenge for Violetta's apparent betrayal.

At the masked ball, news has spread of Violetta and Alfredo's separation. Eventually, Alfredo arrives, followed soon after by Violetta and her new lover, Baron Douphol. Alfredo and the baron battle at the gaming table, and Alfredo wins a fortune: lucky at cards, unlucky in love. When everybody has withdrawn,

Alfredo confronts Violetta, who claims to be truly in love with the baron. In his rage, Alfredo calls the guests as witnesses and declares that he now repays Violetta for her time with him, throwing his winnings at her. She collapses in shock. Giorgio Germont, who has witnessed the scene, rebukes his now-penitent son for his behavior. Violetta says that, one day, Alfredo will understand her actions.

Act III

Back in her home in Paris, Violetta is dying. Her last remaining friend, Dr. Grenvil, knows that she has only a few more hours to live. Alfredo's father has written to Violetta, informing her that his son was not injured in his duel with Douphol. Full of remorse, Germont has told his son about Violetta's sacrifice. Alfredo wants to rejoin her as soon as possible. Violetta is afraid that he might be too late. The sound of celebrations is heard outside while she is in mortal agony. Alfredo finally arrives, and though their reunion fills Violetta with renewed joy, she realizes that even his return is not enough to save her. Giorgio Germont arrives, and as death approaches, Violetta bids Alfredo to keep her memory alive. Suddenly, all sorrow and suffering seem to miraculously leave her—a final illusion before death claims her.

Giuseppe Verdi

La Traviata

Premiere: Teatro La Fenice, Venice, 1853

Verdi's *La Traviata* survived a notoriously unsuccessful opening night to become one of the best-loved operas in the repertoire. Following the larger-scale dramas of *Rigoletto* and *Il Trovatore*, its intimate scope and subject matter inspired the composer to create some of his most profound and heartfelt music. The title role of the "fallen woman" has captured the imaginations of audiences and performers alike with its inexhaustible vocal and dramatic possibilities—and challenges. Violetta is considered a pinnacle of the soprano repertoire.

The Creators

In a remarkable career spanning six decades in the theater, Giuseppe Verdi (1813–1901) composed 28 operas, at least half of which are at the core of today's repertoire. His role in Italy's cultural and political development has made him an icon in his native country. Francesco Maria Piave (1810–1876), Verdi's librettist for *La Traviata*, collaborated with him on ten works, including *Ernani*, *Rigoletto*, *La Forza del Destino*, and the original versions of *Macbeth* and *Simon Boccanegra*. Alexandre Dumas fils (1824–1895) was the son of the author of *The Three Musketeers*. His play *La Dame aux Camélias* (*The Lady of the Camellias*), which Verdi adapted into *La Traviata*, is based on Dumas's own, semi-autobiographical novel of the same name.

The Setting

With *La Traviata*, Verdi and Piave fashioned an opera from a play set in contemporary times—an anomaly in the composer's long career. Dumas's *La Dame aux Camélias* was a meditation on (and reinterpretation of) the author's youthful affair with the celebrated courtesan Marie Duplessis, known as a sophisticated and well-read woman whose charms and tact far surpassed her station.

The Music

Verdi's musical-dramatic ability to portray the individual in a marginalized relationship to society keeps this work a mainstay on the world's stages—according to popular lore, for the last one hundred years, there has been at least one performance of *La Traviata* somewhere in the world every single night. The vocal and emotional scope of the title character is enormous: Compare the defiant fireworks in the Act I show-stopper aria "Sempre libera degg'io" to

the haunting regret of Act III's "Addio, del passato." The dramatic demands continue in Violetta's interactions with others, most notably in the extended Act II confrontation with her lover's father, Germont. Often cited as the emotional core of *La Traviata*, it is one of the most resoundingly truthful scenes in opera. Germont embodies the double-faced morality of the bourgeoisie, and Violetta's interactions with him parallel her precarious dealings with society in general. She begins with defiance, becomes desperate, and finishes defeated. It is a vast journey within a single scene.

Met History

La Traviata was first performed at the Met within a month of the company's opening in 1883 but then was retired during a subsequent all-German period. After returning to the schedule in 1892, it has since been performed more than a thousand times. The company introduced notable productions in 1921, designed by architectural legend Joseph Urban; 1935, choreographed by George Balanchine; 1957, directed by Tyrone Guthrie; and 1966, directed by Alfred Lunt. Franco Zeffirelli created two stagings for the company, one in 1989 and another in1998. On New Year's Eve 2010, a bold new production by Willy Decker had its premiere. The roster of artists who have appeared in the opera's three principal roles at the Met reads like a who's who of generations of great singers. Licia Albanese holds the record for the most performances of Violetta at the Met (87), followed by American beauty Anna Moffo (80) and Spanish femme fatale Lucrezia Bori (58). Renée Fleming, Angela Gheorghiu, Natalie Dessay, Marina Rebeka, Sonya Yoncheva, and Anita Hartig have been among the notable recent interpreters of this timeless role. On December 4, 2018, Yannick Nézet-Séguin—in his first performance as the Met's Jeanette Lerman-Neubauer Music Director—led the premiere of a new staging by Michael Mayer, which starred Diana Damrau in the title role, Juan Diego Flórez as Alfredo, and Quinn Kelsey as Germont.

Program Note

Verdi was still working on *Il Trovatore* when he began *La Traviata* in 1852, and they are as different as chalk from cheese. The three great operas (*Rigoletto*, *Il Trovatore*, and *La Traviata*) that mark his mid-century maturation all feature complex and colorful orchestration and a more advanced tonal language, but each is molded to its individual dramatic requirements. In *La Traviata*, the result is an appealing intimacy of tone, an exploration in music of the vulnerable human heart.

But in 1851, when the composer was first approached about an opera for the 1853 carnival season at Venice's Teatro La Fenice, he dragged his feet and set conditions. He wanted a "donna di prima forza," or bravura soprano (not at all suitable for the future Violetta), before he would put pen to paper, and he was picky about the story: "I don't want any of these ordinary subjects which crop up by the hundreds," he wrote. Eventually, after several rejected suggestions, Verdi found his inspiration: Alexandre Dumas fils's play (adapted from that author's earlier novel of the same name) *La Dame aux Camélias*. On New Year's Day 1853, Verdi wrote to his friend Cesare De Sanctis, saying, "For Venice I'm doing *La Dame aux Camélias* which will probably be called *La Traviata* [*The Fallen Woman*]. A subject for our own age. Another composer wouldn't have done it because of the costumes, the period and a thousand other silly scruples. But I'm writing it with the greatest of pleasure."

A subject for the age, indeed: In the wake of the French Revolution and the Napoleonic Wars, a newly heterogeneous, parvenu Parisian society indulged in hedonism of every kind. The bourgeoisie claimed its right to privileges formerly reserved for the elite, and men and women alike were on the make. By the mid-century, prostitution was linked to the concept of modernity as part of burgeoning social mobility and opportunism in cities, far from the moral strictures in country villages. As Dumas fils observed in his 1842 *Streetwalkers, Lorettes* [middle-class kept women]*, and Courtesans*, it was more profitable for a lower-class girl than factory work or shoplifting. If there was misery aplenty for lowly streetwalkers, the courtesans often lived lives of luxury. The real-life inspiration for Violetta was Marie Duplessis, and she was the mistress of, among others, Count Ferdinand Montguyon, Antoine Agenor de Guiche, the elderly Baltic-German Count Gustav Ernst von Stackelberg, and Count Edouard de Perregaux, who eventually married her. She died in February 1847, at age 23, of tuberculosis.

Dumas had an affair in 1844–45 with Duplessis that ended badly. In a mixture of myth and the transformation of real life, he wrote his novel *La Dame aux Camélias* in 1848, then turned it into a drama in 1852. In the play, Dumas toned down the promiscuity of Marguerite (as Duplessis's stand-in was named), deleted the red camellia that was her code for menstruation and hence unavailability for love-making (the white camellia had the opposite meaning), and made her kinder, more loving, than her earlier incarnation. If Verdi and his librettist

Francesco Maria Piave are faithful to the play in many respects, they carry the idealization of their heroine Violetta Valéry much farther than Dumas did, and the results of their shared labors are greater by far than either the novel or the play.

For the premiere at La Fenice in 1853, Verdi argued for contemporary costumes and stage sets ("No wigs!," he insisted) but did not get his way. The opera was set back in time (ca. 1700), and the role of Violetta was sung by one Fanny Salvini-Donatelli, whose participation Verdi furiously opposed. Thirty-eight years old and stout, she did not make a convincing picture of a young consumptive; Verdi had requested a singer "with an elegant figure who is young and sings passionately." The fact that Germont was sung by Felice Varesi, not in prime voice at the end of his career, did not help either; he was replaced by Filippo Coletti in the revised version that followed in 1854. For the new staging, Verdi chose Maria Spezia, 13 years younger than Salvini-Donatelli and much slimmer.

In Verdi's music, Violetta is at the center of it all from the beginning: Take, for example, the divided high strings that bespeak her frailty in the opening orchestral prelude and the violins' lyrical melody that follows, evocative of her grace and sweetness. But she is also part of a glittering social scene. The music we hear in the beginning is borrowed in part from Verdi's 1841 opera *Oberto, Conte di San Bonifacio*, and it showcases Violetta's charming coquetry. When the partygoers call for a brindisi (drinking song), Alfredo obliges with one of the opera's most famous numbers, "Libiamo ne' lieti calici," to which Violetta responds in kind. Waltzes by the banda (the stage band playing music that the characters hear) are punctuated by Violetta's spell of faintness and Alfredo's concern. His declaration of love comes in the Act I duet "Un dì felice, eterea," remarkable for its directness of expression and its chamber-music quality. A similar intimacy marks his pizzicato-accompanied lyrical song "De' miei bollenti spiriti" at the start of Act II, although a fiery and conventional cabaletta, "Oh mio rimorso!," follows. When the partygoers depart the first act, Violetta sings the renowned cavatina-cabaletta paired arias that tell of her divided soul: the tender, loving creature who wants to believe the ardent young man ("Ah fors'è lui") and the pleasure-loving cocotte who would be "Sempre libera degg'io" ("Always free"), set to some of the most giddily febrile coloratura ever created.

The duet between Germont and Violetta in Act II is the heart of the opera. Here, Verdi moves from recitative (more speech-like) through arioso (a melodic style midway between recitative and aria) to the duet proper, beginning with Germont's "Pura siccome un angelo" and proceeding through seven sections in which Violetta traverses almost every tragic emotion possible. By the end of this complex scene, Germont has come to understand Violetta's true love for his son. He will display that understanding at the end of the act in the big ensemble finale, its climax the moment of outrage when Alfredo vents his unwarranted contempt for Violetta by throwing his winnings at her.

The swooning and gradual, agonized revival of an unjustly accused heroine prompts what the scholar Julian Budden named "the groundswell effect," or the final emphatic passage in the slow concerted ensemble section of the finale. The father's sorrowful nobility, Alfredo's shame and confusion, and Violetta's pathos are each distinct in this ensemble, which ends with the kind of lyrical transfiguration that we expect from Verdi at such moments.

The divisi violins and the theme from the opera's opening bars return for the sick-room scene in Act III. Violetta reads Germont's letter, in which he promises to come see her, aloud, accompanied by tremolo solo strings and a melody for the violins. (Hollywood recognized the strength of this dramatic device and has borrowed it for many a movie.) In the dying Violetta's exquisite farewell to bygone days ("Addio, del passato"), the insistent pathos of the off-beat accents is evocative of sobbing. The instant when minor mode cedes to major mode is magical—but it cannot last. The Mardi Gras carnival chorus ("Largo al quadrupede") might be musically banal in the manner of all "carny music," but the contrast with Violetta's private agony is an undeniable coup de théâtre. The duet for Violetta and Alfredo that follows ("Parigi, o cara") returns us to the archetypal *Traviata* music in its sweet simplicity: *This* is the novelty of this opera. When Violetta tells Alfredo that if his return cannot restore her to health, nothing can prevent her from dying, the restraint of this quiet phrase, accompanied only by strings, is remarkable, more affecting than any breast-beating fury could possibly be. The lovers' despairing shared cabaletta ("Ah! Gran Dio! morir sì giovane") leads to Germont's entrance; he is now ready to claim Violetta as his daughter. The death-scene, with its massed ensemble, is notable for an economy of scale that only magnifies its heartbreaking effect.

After a French revival of this opera in 1864 by impresario Léon Carvalho, Verdi was asked which of his operas thus far he liked best. He replied, "Speaking as a professional, *Rigoletto*, speaking as an amateur, *La Traviata*." Thereafter, this composer, who both adhered to Italy's operatic traditions and reinvented them throughout his long life, would avail himself of French grand opera traits, but *La Traviata* is sui generis in the way it speaks to the heart. No wonder that the "amateur" Verdi loved it, and so do we.

—Susan Youens

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