

LA TRAVIATA

Giuseppe Verdi (1813 –1901)



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Cover: Marina Rebeka as Violetta in *La Traviata* (Lyric Opera of Chicago, 2013). Photo: Todd Rosenberg

Above: A scene from *La Traviata* (Lyric Opera of Chicago, 2013). Photo: Todd Rosenberg

Welcome!

La Traviata is one of Verdi's supreme achievements and remains one of the world's most-performed operas. Despite a flop of a premiere and a rocky beginning, the opera has withstood the test of time with its universal story, sympathetic characters, and unforgettable and moving melodies.

On the surface, *La Traviata* is a tragic love story, but dig deeper and you'll discover the opera's profound commentary and critique of 19th-century society. You'll find a wealth of topics to further explore and discuss with your students in class or on the ride to and from the Four Seasons Centre for the Performing Arts. These topics

include the roles of women in social and cultural contexts (Social Sciences and Humanities), social class structure and its role in interactions between people (Social Sciences and Humanities), the impacts of the Revolution of 1848 in art, culture, and society (History), and self-sacrifice for love and the "greater good" as a theme for many stories and narratives (English).

Prepare to surrender your hearts to this masterpiece and enjoy your evening at the opera!

La Traviata is sung in Italian with English SURTITLES™.



STUDENT DRESS REHEARSALS 2015/2016

La Traviata Verdi
Monday, October 5, 2015 at 7:30 p.m.

Pyramus and Thisbe Monk Feldman/Monteverdi
Sunday, October 18, 2015 at 7:30 p.m.

Siegfried Wagner
Wednesday, January 20, 2016 at 5:30 p.m.*

The Marriage of Figaro Mozart
Monday, February 1, 2016 at 7:30 p.m.

Carmen Bizet
Saturday, April 9, 2016 at 7:30 p.m.

Maometto II Rossini
Monday, April 25, 2016 at 7:30 p.m.

*Please note the earlier start time to accommodate the length of the opera, approximately five hours including two intermissions.

PLAN
YOUR
NEXT VISIT
IN 2015/2016!

Opera 101

WHAT IS OPERA?

The term “opera” comes from the Italian word for “work” or “piece,” and is usually applied to the European tradition of grand opera. Opera is a form of storytelling which incorporates music, drama and design.

Though its origins date back to ancient Greece, the form of opera we are familiar with today started in the late 16th century in Florence, Italy. Count Giovanni de’ Bardi was a patron and host to a group of intellectuals, poets, artists, scientists and humanists including Giulio Caccini (composer) and Vincenzo Galilei (father to the astronomer and scientist, Galileo Galilei, who was most famous for his improvements to the telescope). These individuals explored trends in the arts, focusing on music and drama in particular. They were unified in their belief that the arts had become over-embellished and that returning to the transparency of the music of the ancient Greeks, which incorporated both speech and song, and a chorus to further the plot and provide commentary on the action, would present a more pure, natural and powerful way to tell stories and express emotions.

The first opera, *Dafne*, about a nymph who fled from Apollo and was subsequently transformed by the gods into a laurel tree, was composed by Jacopo Peri in 1597. From then on, the early operas recreated Greek tragedies with mythological themes. During the 17th and 18th centuries, topics expanded to include stories about royalty, and everyday or common people. Some operas were of a serious nature (called *opera seria*) and some light-hearted (called *opera buffa*). Since then operas have been written on a wide variety of topics such as cultural clashes (*Madama Butterfly*), comedic farce (*The Barber of Seville*), politicians on foreign visits (*Nixon in China*), the celebration of Canadian heroes (*Louis Riel*), and children’s stories (*The Little Prince*), to name a few.

The COC presents works in the western European tradition but musical equivalents to European opera can be found in Japan, at the Peking Opera in China, and in Africa where it is called Epic Storytelling.

What are the differences between operas, musicals and plays?

Traditionally operas are through-sung, meaning they are sung from beginning to end with no dialogue in between. Singers must have powerful voices in order to be heard over the orchestra (the ensemble of instrumental musicians that accompanies the dramatic action on stage during an opera). Remember: opera singers don’t use microphones!

Musicals are a combination of dialogue and sung pieces and often include choreographed numbers. The singers often use microphones and are accompanied by a pit band which includes more modern instruments like a drum kit, guitar and electronic instruments.

Plays are primarily spoken works of theatre with minimal singing or music.

There are always exceptions to the rule: though *Les Misérables* is through-sung it is still classified as a piece of musical theatre because of its style of music. By the same token, some operas, like Mozart’s *The Magic Flute*, have spoken dialogue in addition to singing.

What does opera feel like?

Take five minutes out of the school day and instead of using regular voices to converse, ask the class to commit to singing everything. Make an agreement with the students that it’s not about judging people’s voices but about freeing our natural sounds. Make up the melodies on the spot and don’t worry about singing “correctly.” Did the musical lines help express or emphasize certain emotions? If so, how?

Attending the Opera: Make the most of your experience

WELCOME TO THE FOUR SEASONS CENTRE FOR THE PERFORMING ARTS



So you're headed to the opera, and there are a few questions on your mind. Here are some tips on how to get the most out of your opera experience.

First, there's the question of **what to wear**. People wear all sorts of things to the opera—jeans, dress pants, cocktail dresses, suits, etc. The important thing is to be comfortable. Wear something that makes you feel good, whether it be jeans or your nicest tie. But skip that spritz of perfume or cologne before you go out; the Four Seasons Centre for the Performing Arts is scent-free. Many fellow patrons and performers are allergic to strong scents.

Once you're dressed, it's important to **arrive on time** for the show. Late patrons cannot be admitted to the theatre, and you may have to watch the first act on a television screen in the lobby rather than from your seat. If you don't have your ticket yet, arrive as early as possible—the line-up for the box office can often be quite long prior to a performance! The main doors open one hour before the performance. Line up there and have your ticket ready to present to the usher. If you have any questions about

tonight's performance, drop by the Welcome Desk (just inside the main doors) to ask a member of the COC staff, who are full of useful information not only about tonight's opera, but also about COC programs in general. A **pre-performance chat** takes place in the Richard Bradshaw Amphitheatre (Ring 3) about 45 minutes before the show. These chats offer valuable insight into the opera and the specific production that you'll be seeing.

Before the opera starts, take the opportunity to **explore the lobby**, known as the Isadore and Rosalie Sharp City Room. Stop by concessions and **pre-order a beverage for intermission or purchase a snack**. Walk up the stairs, passing a sculpture as you go, and note the floating glass staircase—the longest free-span glass staircase in the world! On the third floor, you'll see the Richard Bradshaw Amphitheatre, home to our Free Concert Series. You'll also see a mobile by artist Alexander Calder, adding some colour and whimsy to the space.

Chimes will ring throughout the lobby **10 minutes** before the performance, reminding everyone to find their seats. Head towards the door noted on your ticket, get a program

from the usher, and find your designated seat in R. Fraser Elliott Hall. It's best to use this time to open any candies you might have and turn off your cell phone—the hall is built to carry sound, so small sounds travel further than you may think! Photography is not permitted once the show starts. The design and direction of the show is under intellectual property and only the official COC photographer and/or members of the media can take pictures and even then, only under special circumstances that require prior arrangements.

As the lights go down and the audience quiets, **listen carefully**. Remember all of that traffic you heard in the lobby? And now... not a peep! The auditorium is physically separated from the outside and the ground below, making for the best acoustic experience possible.

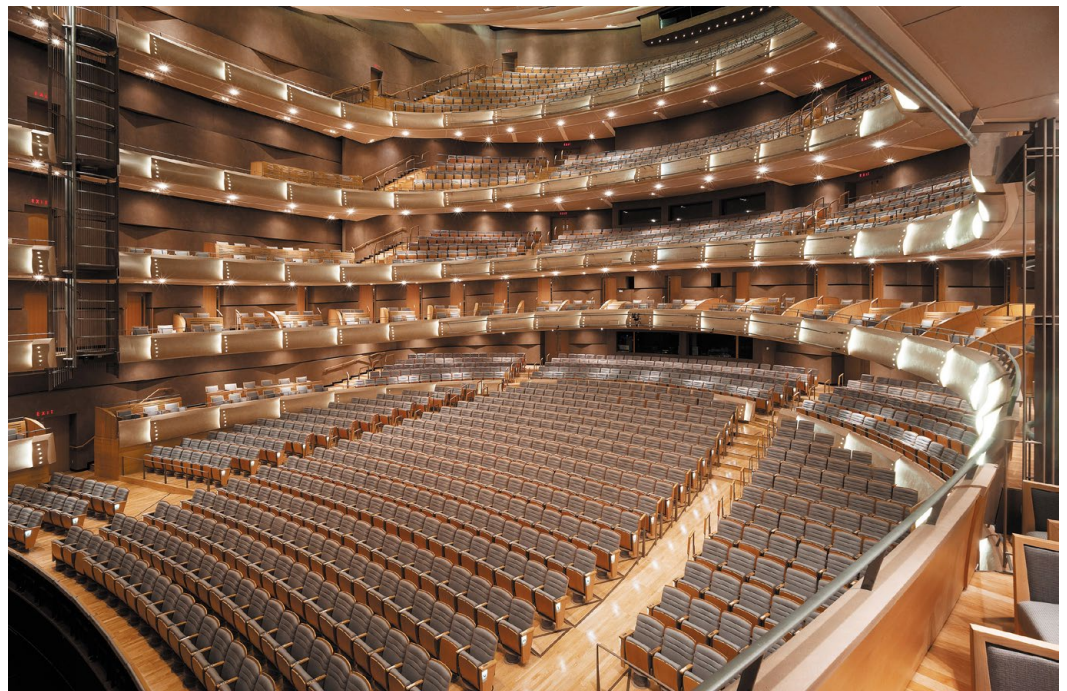
Now it's time to sit back and **enjoy the opera!** **SURTITLES™** will be projected on a horizontal screen above the stage. **SURTITLES™** originate from the idea of "subtitles", which are most commonly used in foreign films

to make them more accessible outside of their country of origin. The COC was the first opera company to adapt this concept for the operatic stage. Slides containing the English translation of the *libretto* (text for the opera) are projected in a more visible place for the audience: above the stage. **SURTITLES™** were first used by the COC at the premiere of the opera *Elektra* in 1983. Only the name could be trademarked, as the technology for the projections was already in existence. Opera companies from around the world have adopted this audience initiative under different names, and it has revolutionized opera stages everywhere.

Feel free to show your **appreciation to the performers** by laughing at humorous bits or applauding after a well-performed aria. If a performer has pulled off some particularly impressive vocal fireworks, it's absolutely acceptable to yell out your appreciation in addition to applause. You may hear your fellow audience members shouting "bravo!" for a man, "brava!" for a woman, or "bravi!" for a group of performers. Feel free to join in!

La Traviata
lasts approximately
two hours and 55
minutes, including two
intermissions.
The opera is sung in
Italian with English
SURTITLES™.

R. Fraser Elliott Hall.
Photo: Tim Griffith



Characters and Synopsis

MAIN CHARACTERS (in order of vocal appearance)

Name	Description	Voice Type	Pronunciation
Violetta Valéry	courtesan	soprano	vee-oh-LEHT-ta va-lay-REE
Flora Bervoix	Violetta's friend	mezzo-soprano	FLO-rah ber-VWAH
Alfredo Germont	Violetta's lover	tenor	al-FREH-doh jerh-MON
Giorgio Germont	Alfredo's father	baritone	DJOR-joh jerh-MON
Baron Douphol	rival of Alfredo's & wealthy count	baritone	baron doo-FOLL



Preliminary costume sketch for *La Traviata* by designer Cait O'Connor.

SYNOPSIS

ACT I

While entertaining members of the *demi-monde* of French society in her Parisian home, the beautiful but frail courtesan Violetta Valéry is introduced to Alfredo Germont, a young man from Provence. Alfredo tells her that he has adored her since he first set eyes on her, and proclaims that no one could ever love her as much as he now does. Violetta gently rebuffs him but invites him to call on her the next day. Later, when alone, she ponders the possibility of finding true love, then laughs off the idea, declaring that her life will remain a whirl of pleasure.

INTERMISSION

ACT II

Scene i

Violetta has renounced her life as a Parisian courtesan and is now living happily in the country with Alfredo. Alfredo is surprised to learn that Violetta has been secretly selling off her possessions in Paris to pay for their living expenses, and, disturbed by this, he departs for Paris to raise enough money to buy back Violetta's belongings. After he has left, Alfredo's father, Giorgio Germont, pays a visit to Violetta. He tells her that he has a daughter who is currently engaged to a young man from a respectable family. He explains that Alfredo's affair with a woman of Violetta's reputation is a threat to his daughter's marriage and begs Violetta to leave Alfredo forever. At his insistence Violetta agrees to break with Alfredo and writes a letter to him. Alfredo returns unexpectedly and Violetta quickly takes her leave, promising to return later.

A messenger then delivers the letter to Alfredo, in which she tells him that she has left him forever to return to her former life in Paris. Germont returns, asking Alfredo to return to their family home but Alfredo, hurt and angered by Violetta's rejection, sets off to find her in Paris.

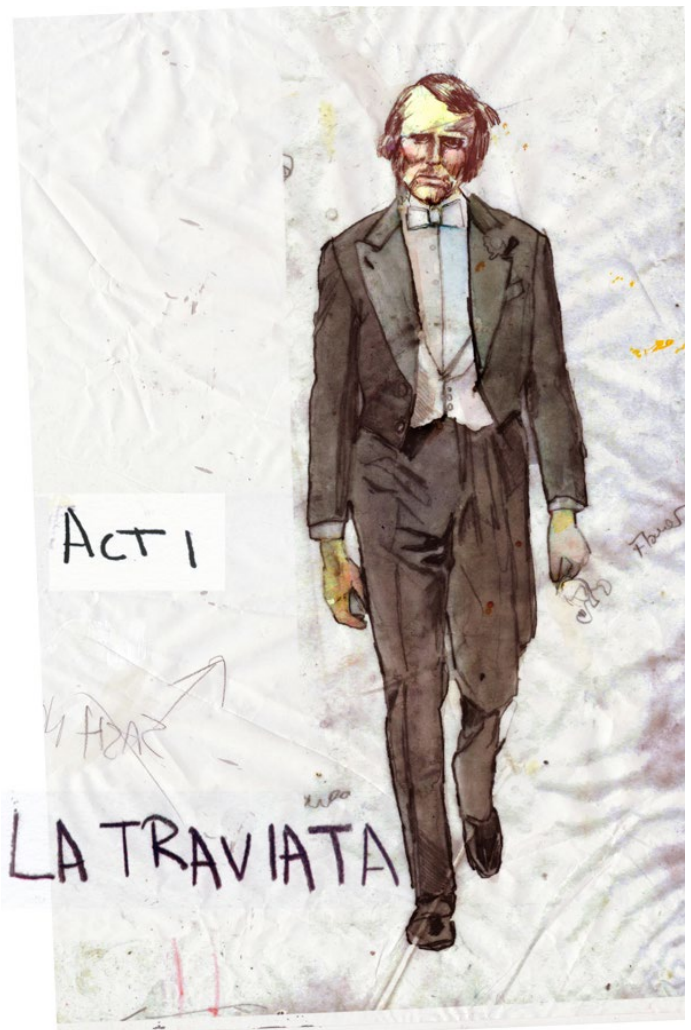
Scene ii

A party is in progress at the home of Violetta's friend, Flora. Alfredo enters and proceeds to gamble. Violetta has returned to Baron Douphol, her rich protector. Fearing their confrontation could lead to a duel, Violetta begs Alfredo to leave. He is overcome with rage and, in front of all the guests, he insults Violetta who faints. Germont, in search of his son, arrives to witness the whole scene.

INTERMISSION

ACT III

Violetta lies dying of consumption. She comforts herself by re-reading a letter from Germont, in which he explains that he has told his son the true reason for Violetta's sudden break with him. Violetta's maid Annina informs her that Alfredo has arrived and he rushes in, begging her to leave Paris with him forever. Violetta eagerly agrees but collapses. The doctor is summoned and he arrives with Alfredo's deeply remorseful father. After saying her final farewell to Alfredo, Violetta dies in his arms.



Preliminary costume sketch for *La Traviata* by designer Cait O'Connor.

Genesis of the Opera

GIUSEPPE VERDI (1813–1901): DEFINING ITALIAN OPERA

From the 1830s until his death, Verdi was the reigning opera composer in Italy. Over the course of his career the art form underwent significant changes, including shifts in preferred subject matter, staging conventions and techniques of composition. Verdi was front and centre in driving many of the innovations that modernized Italian opera.

For Verdi's predecessors and contemporaries the traditional way of structuring opera was to combine musically impressive set-pieces (arias, ensembles, duets) that had clear beginnings and endings with sections of recitative and dialogue that moved the plot along until the next occasion for an extravagant musical number.

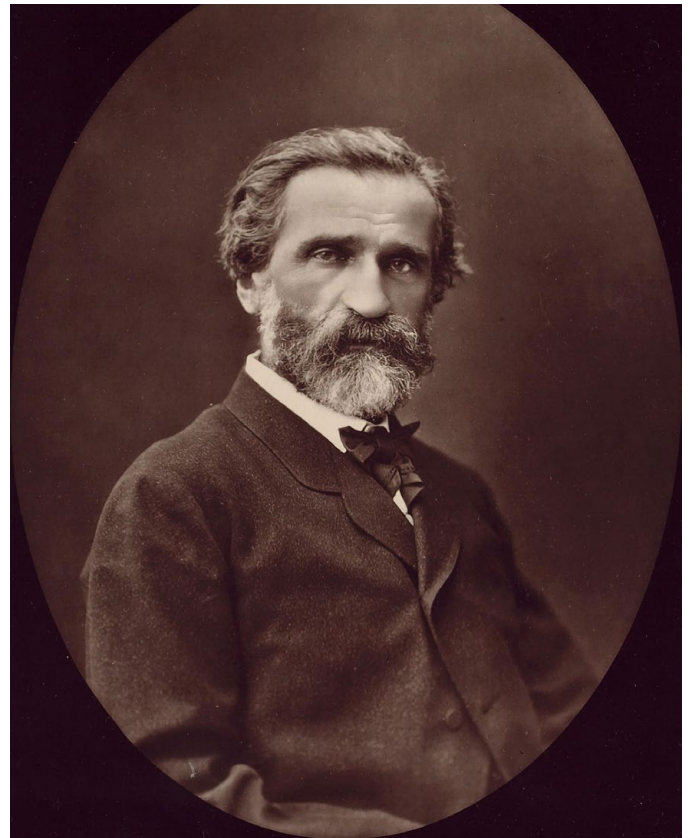
Verdi thought this created an unrealistic “start-and-stop” quality that detracted from the force of the drama. He sought new modes of expression that would allow for a faithful retelling of his dramatic sources, while keeping the action moving forward with greater musical continuity.

PRIVATE DRAMA

La Traviata is based on the French play *La dame aux Camélias* (1852) by Alexandre Dumas, fils, which the author had adapted for the stage from his own best-selling novel of the same name (1848). Dumas's play attracted Verdi's attention because it offered a new and invigorating Realism. In this story, morality did not necessarily triumph, the scale was intimate and personal, focusing on people's private lives, and the characters and situations were recognizably contemporary, speaking to all manner of issues that were relevant to, and vigorously debated by, the public in mid-1800s Europe. As Verdi wrote to a friend it was “a subject of the times. Others would not have done it because of the conventions, the epoch, and for a thousand other stupid scruples.”

WRITING IN HASTE

Verdi had a commission with the Teatro La Fenice in Venice for the Carnival season in March 1853, but he was slow to decide on a subject with his librettist Francesco Maria Piave. This is partly due to the composition of another opera, *Il Trovatore*, which he was writing for an opera house in Rome. By the time Piave and Verdi finally agreed on Dumas's play as the subject, they had only four months before the scheduled premiere. It took Verdi another eight weeks to finish up with *Il Trovatore*, so when he got to *Traviata* it had to be written in an unbelievably short period of time, perhaps in less than two months.



Giuseppe Verdi, circa 1890. Photo: Ferdinand Mulnier

TOO CLOSE FOR COMFORT

Verdi fought, but lost, to have *La Traviata* set in the present day—he wanted the sets and costumes to be continuous with the clothes and rooms of his 19th-century audience, as the opera depicted a part of their quickly changing, heady cultural world: cosmopolitan society, the rise of modernity, the pleasures and social problems of booming metropolises, the tensions inherent in middle-class morality, the powerful economic systems of money and credit.

But wherever *Traviata* was staged during Verdi's life, censors and theatre managers demanded that the time period be pushed into remote history—around 1700 was the preferred chronological remove—to dilute the shock and social critique inherent in the work. Its relevance to contemporary society was not lost on audiences, however, as evidenced by denunciations of *La Traviata* in many cities and countries. After its English premiere (1856), for example, *The Times* protested against the opera's “foul and hideous horrors,” and sale of the English translation of the libretto was forbidden in the U.K.

A MEDIOCRE BEGINNING

La Traviata's premiere on March 6, 1853 at the La Fenice opera house in Venice received decidedly mixed reviews. The consensus seems to be that the performance was a disappointment due to a lacklustre cast. (Violetta was and is one of the most formidable roles in the soprano repertory). The next year, staged in another theatre and with some alterations to the score by Verdi, *La Traviata* triumphed magnificently, and has only grown in popularity since. One unverifiable legend claims that in the last hundred years, there has been a performance of *La Traviata* every single night somewhere in the world.



Auditorium, Teatro La Fenice, Venezia, Italia (2007) ©Andreas Praefcke

A COMPLICATED HEROINE

La Traviata translates to “the woman led astray,” and Violetta is without a doubt one of opera’s most interesting examples of the “fallen woman.” Arguably no other heroine in the operatic repertory is as significant as Violetta, and Verdi accords her the most beautiful music of any of the principal characters in *Traviata*.

Her individual predicament, moreover, is so moving because it comes as a result of a larger hypocrisy: she is asked to sacrifice her chance at happiness and fulfilment in the interest of upholding conventional morality, yet the ostensibly polite society around her is actually corrupt and materialistic. As Violetta changes throughout the course of the opera, Verdi gives her unforgettable music that charts an authentic psychological trajectory of change and growth, making her not only one of the best-loved heroines in opera, but one of the most real and complete as well.

VIOLETTA'S REAL-LIFE INSPIRATION

Dumas, the author of the novel and play that served as the basis of *La Traviata*, really did fall in love with a famous Parisian courtesan named Marie Duplessis (1824–1847) who was the model for the doomed heroine of *La dame aux Camélias* and Verdi's opera. Duplessis was born in Normandy and by the time she was 12 her alcoholic father had forced her into prostitution. Three years later she came to Paris and worked briefly at a dance hall, and then gradually made her way into wealthier and more refined circles as a courtesan. In addition to her physical beauty, she was graceful and charming; having learnt to read and write, she amassed a library, read broadly, and was a smart and fascinating conversationalist. She charged extraordinary rates for appearing with clients in public and cultivated expensive tastes. Camellias, her preferred flowers, cost three francs each, roughly the daily salary of a labourer. She had many famous lovers from the nobility, the *nouveau riche* and the artistic classes, and conducted a passionate affair with composer Franz Liszt. Like Violetta she suffered from, and ultimately succumbed to, tuberculosis.



Marie Duplessis at the theatre. Watercolour by Camille Roqueplan

SOMETHING OLD, SOMETHING NEW

With *La Traviata* Verdi went further than he had up to that point in disregarding the conventions of Italian opera and in developing a continuous musical drama. For example, the dialogue between Violetta and Alfredo in Act I or Violetta and Germont in Act II demonstrate a remarkably naturalistic and dramatically coherent conversation. Of course Verdi does deploy some traditional operatic forms throughout; one of his talents as a composer was precisely this ability to combine the old and the new in productive and dramatically exciting ways.

19TH-CENTURY SPECIFICS

Unlike *Rigoletto*, for example, in which the music does not carry any explicit messages about the historical or geographical setting of the action, *La Traviata* does. Verdi quite deliberately gives us music that is infused with the local colour of Paris in the mid 1800s. He does this by using and making frequent reference to, the waltz, a dance that was symbolic of the very rhythm, pace and structure of 19th-century society, especially the fringes of respectability, where courtesans and other persons of doubtful morality would have been located.

LIVING FAST AND DANGEROUS

Perceptions of disease are often tied up with ideas about morality (for a recent example, consider the narratives of contamination, pollution and culpability that emerged around the AIDS epidemic). Tuberculosis in the 19th century was thought to be closely connected to city-living and the moral recklessness entailed, so Violetta's ailment very specifically reflects her occupation and position in society. That being said, the illness also had a romantic aura. In the words of William Berger suffering from it was the period's "version of 'heroin chic.'"

VERDI'S FAVOURITE

When Verdi was asked later in his career which of his operas was his favourite he replied "Speaking as an amateur, *La Traviata*; as a professional, *Rigoletto*."



Poster promoting the premiere of La Traviata (1853).

Listening Guide

INTRODUCTION

The power of *La Traviata* lies in Verdi's ability to compose a score that supports and drives the dramatic action while sustaining musical continuity. To understand the importance of his work and innovations, let's quickly explore the expectations of opera audiences in Verdi's day. The *bel canto* ("beautiful singing") style of composers like Donizetti, Bellini, and Rossini dominated the opera scene and audiences expected to come to an opera to hear great singers show off their "goods:" a smooth, *legato* line throughout the singer's entire range (i.e. no shifting gears between low, middle, and high ranges), effortless vocal embellishments, and liberal and drastic changes in *tempi* (speeds of music), to name a few key features. Despite offering hours of dazzling vocal fireworks and acrobatics, *bel canto* operas were rather static dramatically and unnecessarily verbose. Like his contemporaries, Verdi also focused his attention on writing for the solo voice and a lyrical, beautiful, vocal line, but he put further emphasis and importance on connecting his music to the drama to create a more compelling and fulfilling storytelling experience.

If it's your first time listening to the piece or if you're self-proclaimed fan of the opera, here are three tips on what makes Verdi's music so accessible and powerful, and how to get the most out of your *La Traviata* listening experience. As it often happens in opera, the music can tell us more than the words to which they are set.

1

LOOK OUT FOR THEMES

Verdi's use of musical themes (a particular melody associated with an emotion, person, place, or object) enabled great clarity to his musical storytelling. Verdi uses and repeats several themes throughout *La Traviata* which drives the action on stage. The themes stir up conflict by revealing the character's true intentions and emotions.

For example, the single moral idea of the story—of love and its survival and ability to withstand all of man's attempts to corrupt it—is embodied in one elegant, lush, and tender musical phrase which makes several appearances in the score. The love theme is first heard in Act I in Alfredo's hymn to love "Di quell'amor" ("Of that love"), and Violetta picks up the theme at the climax of her *cavatina* at the end of the Act, "Ah fors'è lui" ("Ah! Maybe is he"), when she dreams that she may have found the man who will redeem her and save her. Between the two statements of "Sempre libera" ("Forever free"), in which she declares her commitment to a carefree life of pleasure, Verdi inserts the theme again, sung by Alfredo, to remind her of his love, adding a layer of conflict to her decision. The theme resurfaces twice in Act III, but this time only in the orchestra, treating the love theme like a distant memory and reminder of what might have been for Violetta.

ACTIVE LISTENING

Listen for the numerous themes in the opera (hints: Violetta's illness, a waltz-dance theme, etc.) and make note of what feeling or object or which character they might represent, when and how they occur in the opera, and how they contribute to heightening the drama on stage. Who knows what other musical secrets you might uncover?

2

THE ACCOMPANIED RECITATIVE

Recitatives, the sung-spoken parts in an opera, help move the story along. They offer an opportunity for quick dialogue between characters, or asides or commentaries for the individual characters. Traditionally, the sung-spoken melody was accompanied by a simple *basso continuo* (a chord pattern in the bass).

Verdi's predecessors, like Mozart, along with some of his contemporaries were fans of the *recitativo secco*, which translates to the "dry recitative." "Dry" refers to the lack of orchestral accompaniment underneath the singer's vocal line. Mozart preferred the dry recitative as he felt it mimicked the natural rhythm of speech. While dry recitatives moved the action forward, they also added a start-and-stop quality to the opera as in between recitatives came the wonderful choruses, arias (solos) and ensemble pieces which were fully orchestrated. Watch or listen to the following example of a soprano learning the dry recitative that precedes the aria "Batti, batti" in Mozart's opera *Don Giovanni*. Note the sparse orchestration in the piano.

[Click here to hear an example of dry recitative.](#)

The stop-and-start quality of the dry recitative didn't work for Verdi. He wanted to achieve non-stop action in his operas, so he adopted the use of the accompanied recitative (*recitativo accompagnato*). Verdi scored the recitative for the orchestra so the music and story could flow seamlessly from one musical section to the next.

ACTIVE LISTENING

Listen to tenor Jonas Kaufmann perform the role of Alfredo. In this short six-minute passage, you'll hear the accompanied recitative ("Lunge da lei" at 0:00-1:49), a short aria ("De'miei bollenti spiriti" at 1:50-3:47), a short recitative with Annina ("Annina dove veni?" at 3:48-4:40), and another short aria ("O mio rimoso!" at 4:41-6:24). First, listen without reading the subtitles (if you understand French) or the translation below. Listen for the quick transitions and range of emotions between the sections. Can you identify the emotions and notice when they change? Before you listen to the excerpt again, read the following translations below (courtesy of [Opera-Arias.com](#)). Were you able to guess what the character was expressing?

[Click here to watch Jonas Kaufmann performing the role of Alfredo.](#)

ACT II

A country house near Paris.

ALFREDO

Lunge da lei per me non v'ha diletto!
 Volaron già tre lune
 Dacché la mia Violetta
 Agi per me lasciò, dovizie, onori,
 E le pompose feste
 Ove, agli omaggi avvezza,
 Vedeo schiavo ciascun di sua bellezza
 Ed or contenta in questi ameni luoghi
 Tutto scorda per me. Qui presso a lei
 Io rinascere mi sento,
 E dal soffio d'amor rigenerato
 Scordo ne' gaudii suoi tutto il passato.

De' miei bollenti spiriti
 Il giovanile ardore
 Ella temprò col placido
 Sorriso dell'amore!
 Dal dì che disse: vivere

ALFREDO

There's no pleasure in life when she's away!
 It's three months now since Violetta
 Gave up for me her easy, luxurious life
 Of love? affairs and expensive parties ...
 There she was used to the homage of all
 Who were enslaved by her beauty,
 But she seems happy here in this
 Charming place,
 Where she forgets everything for me.
 With her beside me, I feel myself reborn,
 Revived by the breath of love,
 Forgetting the past in present delights.

My passionate spirit
 And the fire of youth
 She tempers with the
 Gentle smile of love.
 Since the day when she told me

Io voglio a te fedel,
Dell'universo immemore
Io vivo quasi in ciel.

Detto ed Annina in arnese da viaggio

ALFREDO
Annina, donde vieni?

ANNINA
Da Parigi.

ALFREDO
Chi tel commise?

ANNINA
Fu la mia signora.

ALFREDO
Perché?

ANNINA
Per alienar cavalli, cocchi,
E quanto ancor possiede.

ALFREDO
Che mai sento!

ANNINA
Lo spendio è grande a viver qui solinghi

ALFREDO
E tacevi?

ANNINA
Mi fu il silenzio imposto.

ALFREDO
Imposto! or v'abbisogna?

ANNINA
Mille luigi.

ALFREDO
Or vanneandrò a Parigi.
Questo colloquio ignori la signora.
Il tutto valgo a riparare ancora.

Annina parte

"I want to live, faithful to you alone!"
I have forgotten the world
And lived like one in heaven ...

Annina enters in great agitation, dressed for travelling.

ALFREDO
Annina, where have you been?

ANNINA
To Paris.

ALFREDO
Who sent you?

ANNINA
My mistress.

ALFREDO
Why?

ANNINA
To sell the horses and carriages
And all her other things.

ALFREDO
What do you mean?

ANNINA
It's very costly living here on our own.

ALFREDO
But why didn't you tell me?

ANNINA
She said I mustn't.

ALFREDO
Mustn't? How much do we need?

ANNINA
A thousand louis.

ALFREDO
All right, you may go... I'm going to Paris, myself.
Don't tell your mistress that you talked to me;
There's still time to put things straight.

Annina leaves.

ALFREDO

O mio rimorso! O infamia
e vissi in tale errore?
Ma il turpe sogno a frangere
il ver mi balenò.
Per poco in seno acquétati,
o grido dell'onore;
M'avrai sicuro vindice;
quest'onta laverò.

ALFREDO

Oh, my remorse! Oh, disgrace!
And I lived so mistaken!
But the truth, like a flash,
Has broken my base sleep!
For a little while be calm in my breast,
Oh, cry of honour;
In me you shall have a sure avenger;
I shall wash away this infamy.

3

TENSION

For Verdi, tension and conflict should inform every scene. Conflict inspires passion, drives action, and heightens emotions. Verdi expressed conflict by juxtaposing two contrasting elements of music, and there is no better example of this than in Giorgio Germont's duet with Violetta in Act II. Verdi captures the argument through short movements of contrasting music, giving us his version of musical "sparring" which ultimately ends in Germont and Violetta in a unified sound once she concedes to his demands.

[Click here to watch Giorgio Germont's duet with Violetta](#)

Verdi sets up the tension in the scene brilliantly by marking Germont's entrance [at 42:17] with a short yet ominous passage in the low strings; it's clear that he didn't come to deliver good news. They don't start on a good foot either, as Germont introduces himself as the father of Alfredo, who he assumes Violetta is using to pay for her lavish lifestyle. Yikes. Violetta defends herself by showing Germont a letter stating that she is selling off all of her possessions in order to cover their living expenses, proving her genuine love for Alfredo. Acknowledging her noble act, Germont insists that he needs her to sacrifice something to prove her affection towards Alfredo. Germont asks Violetta to leave Alfredo so that no scandal can attach itself to his family and his daughter's pending marriage. Horrified, Violetta proclaims for love for Alfredo and tells Germont that she is dying of a dreadful illness making his sacrifice even more heartless and cruel. Germont tries to convince and persuade Violetta that her relationship with Alfredo is doomed as it isn't sanctioned by the church; they could never truly be a couple and Alfredo's love will never last. Ouch. After more pleading from Germont, Violetta concedes and agrees to leave Alfredo and tells Germont that he can repay her by telling Alfredo the truth after she dies. Relieved, Germont calls her act noble and heroic, and accepts her terms.

ACTIVE LISTENING

Knowing the context of the duet, ask the students to imagine the dispute and transform the provided description into the form of a script (which we call a *libretto* in opera). You can do this as a class or have the students do it individually. Next to each of the character's lines make a directorial note in brackets describing how the sentence should be delivered. For example:

Germont: Good day, Ms. Valéry. You don't know me, but I am Alfredo's father, Giorgio Germont, I don't like how you are using him to get to his fortune to pay for your lavish lifestyle. (cold, stern)

Violetta: Good day, Sir. It's an honour to meet you. (shocked, nervous)

Now play the excerpt. Make adjustments to the instructions on how to deliver the text based on Verdi's music. Keep track of your adjustments. Contrast and compare your version of the script to what you've heard. Did you have to make any changes after you listened to the music? What changes did you make and why? How might the music change if the outcome of the meeting resulted in Violetta refusing to accept Germont's demands? What other tensions are present in their exchange? Consider their opposed social classes, genders, and morals and virtues.



Preliminary costume sketch for *La Traviata* by designer Cait O'Connor.

What to Look for



Arin Arbus, director of *La Traviata*

La Traviata is a new Canadian Opera Company co-production with Lyric Opera of Chicago and Houston Grand Opera.

CREATIVE BACKGROUND

The director Arin Arbus—called “the most gifted new director to emerge” by the *New York Times* in 2009—is well-known in the United States for her work with Shakespeare and spoken drama, but she has translated those skills into the world of opera to critical acclaim.

In her interpretation, the cultural key to *La Traviata* is the social role of the Parisian courtesan, which has no equivalent in contemporary society. The historical specificity of Violetta’s profession prompted Arbus to set her production in the 19th century, roughly around the time Verdi wrote the work and the period it describes.

SETS, COSTUMES AND VISUAL INSPIRATION

The production is mainly traditional (some costumes mark a creative departure), and the sets are largely minimalist.

Costumes by Cait O’Connor are both decadent and playful, befitting the excesses of 19th-century Parisian nightlife that constitutes the opera’s cultural ethos. Meanwhile, the prevailing colour palette moves from bright to dark, as the central love affair shades into a nightmare of increasing violence and heartbreak.

Arin Arbus on visual inspirations for this production: “a frail girl putting on a big dress, brightly colored damask wallpaper, a man in a woman’s wig, bull heads, skeletons, Spanish lace, iridescent bird wings, colored paper lanterns, dancing shadows, Ingmar Bergman’s figures on the horizon from *The Seventh Seal*, sunlight breaking through the trees, pastel colored cakes, carnival parades, 19th-century Parisian interiors, daguerreotypes, white plaster walls, confetti...”

In an interview for Lyric Opera of Chicago’s program, Arin shares her thoughts on what draws her to *La Traviata*. “The music. The story, which depicts a beautiful love destroyed by a petty and cruel world. I love the intimacy and the intensity of the piece, the tragedy of it, the poetry within the music, the ways the melodies are woven through, the passion expressed by the characters. And I love Violetta’s fierce thirst for life in the face of death, her self-loathing, her loneliness, the wild parties.”

For a sneak peek, click here to watch a trailer of the production!

Active Learning

La Traviata is a “human centred drama” which means the major themes of the piece are concerned with social interactions and the structure of society. Although the opera was written in the 19th century, the themes are still relevant and can serve as a spring board into discussions and projects in today’s classrooms.

Use the questions and discussion points below as inspiration for a deeper exploration of the opera.

- ♦ Money and class structure: Explore the roles socio-economic and/or birth status in the interactions of people. Compare and contrast past and present-day societal codes and behaviours.
- ♦ Morality: What was the 19th-century moral code? How did the moral code play into decisions made in society that influenced the course of society of the time? What are the moral issues that are prevalent within *La Traviata*? How are they dealt with by the characters? What are some of the problematic questions that the students can identify in regards to the story and the actions taking by the characters?
- ♦ The story of self-sacrifice for love and “the greater good” is a major theme for many stories and narratives. Reflect on Violetta’s decision to leave Alfredo at the request of his father to save his family’s reputation. What were the implications? What are your views on her decision?
- ♦ Immorality is one of the main elements to the plot; even the title of the opera, which translates to *The Fallen Woman*, has a negative connotation toward women implying that the demise of events rests on the female character. Although many of the male characters behave in at least an equally immoral fashion it is the woman that is vilified and only redeemed when her behavior changes. (In fact Alfredo tells her that her immoral behavior should stop otherwise she may become ill, one cause hypothesis that she died of illness because of her wayward ways.) Discuss gender roles, social stratification and social acceptance of certain behaviors for certain sexes.
- ♦ The story and music of *La Traviata* came under fire by the censors in the Italian states of the time, 1853. This is due to the fact that Europe was just coming out of a time of major political unrest known as the “spring of nations” or “The year of revolutions” which took place in 1848. Why would this opera have gained the ire of the Italian censors? What was going on in Italy at the time of Verdi and Piave? What were the censors’ demands/the results of those demands? What role did the arts play in European culture in terms of revolution and social awakening?
- ♦ Coping with illness: Violetta reveals early on that she is sick and shares her strategy for coping with her illness: “Al piacere m’affido, ed io soglio col tal farmaco i mali sopir.” (“I give myself to pleasure, since pleasure is the best medicine for my ills.”) What are other ways to cope with illness? How do you cope when you are sick?

Did viewing
the opera spark
some exciting debates
or discussions? Would your
students like to share examples
of their work with the COC?
E-mail us at
education@coc.ca.
We’d love to hear from
you!

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A costume sketch for *La Traviata* by costume designer Cait O'Connor.



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Above: Workshop at Howard Park Jr. P.S. Photo: COC