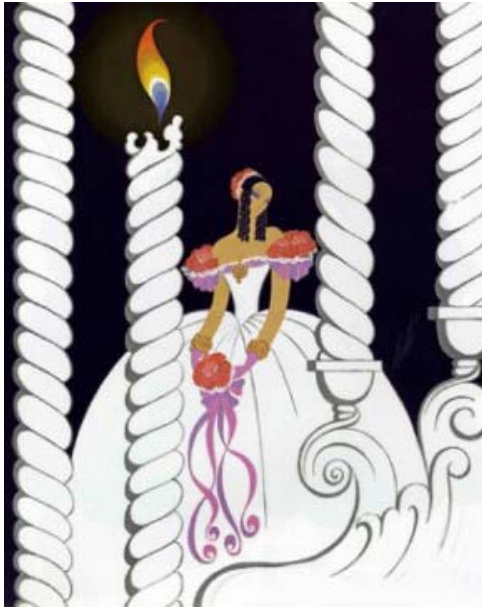


The Pescadero Opera Society presents

La Traviata



Music by Giuseppe Verdi
Libretto by Francesco Maria Piave

After Alexandre Dumas' play,
La Dame aux Camellias

Opera in three acts

Setting: In and around Paris,
about 1700

Characters

Violetta Valéry, a courtesan (soprano) Renée Fleming
Alfredo Germont (tenor) Rolando Villazon
Giorgio Germont, his father (baritone) Renato Bruson
Baron Douphel, Violetta's protector (baritone) Philip Kraus
Flora Bervoix, her friend (mezzo-soprano) Suzanna Guzmán
Annina, Violetta's maid (soprano) Anna Alkhimova
Gaston, friend of Alfredo (tenor) Daniel Montenegro
Dr. Grenvil (bass) James Creswell
Marquis D'Obigny, friend of Flora (bass) Lee Poulis
Giuseppe, Violetta's servant (tenor) Sal Malaki
Ladies and gentlemen, friends of Violetta and Flora, matadors, picadors, gypsies,
servants of Violetta and Flora, masks, etc.

Conducted by James Conlon
with the Los Angeles Opera Orchestra and Chorus

Première performance Venice, Teatro La Fenice, March 6, 1853

Synopsis

Act I

A salon in Violetta's house



It is August. There is a gala underway and the mood is festive. Violetta Valéry, a famed Parisian courtesan¹, greets her party guests, among whom is Alfredo Germont, a young man who has loved Violetta from afar for some time. Eventually all sit down to dinner and Violetta calls for a toast. Alfredo takes up the cup to sing the famous drinking song, “Libiamo ne’ lieti calici.” An orchestra is heard in the next room but, as guests move there to dance, Violetta has a fainting spell (the symptoms suggest that she is suffering from consumption). She sends her guests on ahead and goes to her parlor to recover.

Alfredo remains behind and, with the dance music heard in the background, warns Violetta that her way of life will kill her if she persists. He offers to protect her and admits his love for her. Violetta tells him that he will soon forget her, and that love means nothing to her. She playfully gives Alfredo a flower, telling him to return when it has faded. But, something about the young man's sincerity touches her, and she promises to meet him the next day.

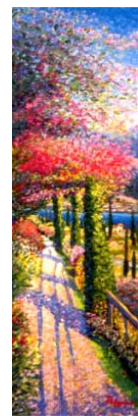
After the guests have gone, Violetta muses fondly of her new conquest and shrugs off her sentimental thoughts, resolving that a life of pleasure and freedom is her only choice (“Sempre libera”). Alfredo's voice is heard outside below the balcony who argues in favor of romance.

Act II

Scene 1: A country house near Paris

It is the following January, and several months have passed. Violetta and Alfredo have been living together in a country house near Paris. The maid, Annina, hurries in to inform Alfredo that Violetta has pawned her jewels to finance their country life. Alfredo immediately decides to raise the money himself and rushes off to Paris.

Violetta appears, looking for Alfredo. She finds an invitation from Flora to a party that night, but has no intention of going back to her old life. Alfredo's father, Giorgio Germont, enters the house. He pleads with Violetta to leave Alfredo for the sake of the Germont family honor, and specifically for the sake of Alfredo's sister whose wedding would be threatened by his scandalous relationship to a courtesan. Violetta protests that Alfredo is all she has in the world, and tries to convince Germont about the purity and intensity of their love. She also reveals the seriousness of her illness, that she is indeed dying. But Germont is ad-



¹**Courtesan:** In the mid-16th century a courtesan referred to a mistress, especially one associated with wealthy, powerful, or upper-class men who provided luxuries and status in exchange for her companionship.

amant, and assures Violetta that she will find others to love. Violetta reluctantly gives in to Germont's demand. She insists that she break the news to Alfredo in her own way and begs Germont to remain to comfort his son. She asks Germont to promise to tell Alfredo the truth after her death.

Alone, Violetta sends a message to Flora accepting her invitation to the party. She begins a farewell note to Alfredo. He enters suddenly, surprising her. Violetta can barely control herself — she reminds him of how deeply she loves him, and rushes out of the room. A servant hands Alfredo Violetta's farewell note, which says that she must leave him forever.

Germont returns to console his son, reminding him of family life in Provence. But Alfredo, seeing Flora's invitation, suspects that Violetta has left him to return to her old friends. Furious, he is determined to confront her at the party.

Scene 2: A salon in Flora's townhouse

Flora learns from the Marquis that Violetta and Alfredo have parted. She then clears the floor for hired entertainers — a band of fortune-telling Gypsies and some matadors. Soon Alfredo enters, making bitter comments about love; he gambles recklessly at cards. Violetta appears on the arm of Baron Douphol, who challenges Alfredo to a game and loses a small fortune to him.

Everyone goes in to dinner, but Violetta has asked Alfredo to see her privately. Fearful of the Baron's anger, she wants Alfredo to leave, but he misunderstands her apprehension and demands that she admit she loves Douphol. Crushed, she pretends she does. Alfredo calls in the others, angrily denounces Violetta and hurls his winnings at her feet in "payment" for their time together. Germont enters in time to see this and criticizes his son's behavior. The guests reproach Alfredo, and Douphol challenges him to a duel.

Act III Violetta's bedroom

Six months have passed. Dr. Grenvil tells Annina that her mistress has just a few hours to live — tuberculosis has claimed her life. Alone, Violetta rereads a letter from Germont which says that Alfredo, who had fled abroad after fighting a duel with the Baron, now knows the truth about her sacrifice and is hurrying back to her. Violetta, knowing that her time left on earth is almost over, bids farewell to the past and to life.

Paris is celebrating Mardi Gras and, after revelers pass outside, Annina rushes in to announce Alfredo, who throws himself into Violetta's arms. The lovers ecstatically plan to leave Paris forever. Violetta decides that she and Alfredo should go to church to celebrate his return, but the strain of even getting to her feet is too much, and she repeatedly falls back.

Germont enters with the doctor. Violetta gives Alfredo a locket with her portrait, telling him that, should he marry, he can give it to his bride. Violetta, suddenly feeling a last resurgence of strength, gets to her feet and staggers joyfully. She then falls dead at Alfredo's feet.



Giuseppe Verdi

Born: October 10, 1813 in Le Roncole, Duchy of Parma

Died: January 27, 1901 in Milan, Italy



Giuseppe Verdi was born into a family of small landowners and taverners. When he was seven he helped the local church organist; at 12 he studied with the organist at the main church in nearby Busseto, becoming his assistant in 1829. He already had several compositions to his credit. In 1832 he was sent to Milan, but was refused a place at the conservatory. He studied with Vincenzo Lavigna, composer and former La Scala musician. He might have taken a post as organist at Monza in 1835, but instead returned to Busseto where he was passed over as maestro di cappella, but became town music master in 1836. He married Margherita Barezzi, his patron's daughter — their two children died in infancy.

Verdi had begun an opera, and tried to arrange a performance in Parma or Milan. He was unsuccessful, but had some songs published and decided to settle in Milan in 1839, where his *Oberto* was accepted at La Scala; further operas were then commissioned. The opera was well received, but his next, *Un Giorno di Regno*, failed miserably. His wife died during its composition. Verdi nearly gave up, but was excited by the libretto of *Nabucco* and, in 1842, he saw its successful production. His reputation was carried across Italy, Europe and the New World over the next five years. It was followed by another opera, also with marked political overtones, *I Lombardi alla Prima Cociata*, was again well received. Verdi's gift for stirring melody and tragic and heroic situations struck a chord in an Italy struggling for freedom and unity, causes with which he was sympathetic. But, much opera of this period had political themes, and the involvement of Verdi's operas in politics was easily exaggerated.

Now began the period Verdi later called his "years in the galleys." He had a long and demanding series of operas to compose, and usually to direct, in the main Italian centers and abroad. They included *Ernani*, *Macbeth*, *Luisa Miller* and eight others in 1844-50, in Paris and London as well as Rome, Milan, Naples, Venice, Florence and Trieste, with a pause in 1846 when his health gave way. These works included strong, somber stories, a vigorous, almost crude orchestral style that gradually grew fuller and richer, forceful vocal writing, including broad lines in 9/8 and 12/8 meter and, above all, a seriousness in his determination to convey the full force of the drama. His models included late Rossini, Mercadante and Donizetti. He took great care over his choice of topics and about the detailed planning of his librettos. He established his basic vocal types early, in *Ernani* — the vigorous and determined baritone, the ardent and courageous but sometimes despairing tenor, the severe bass; among the women there seemed to be more variation.

The "galley years" had their climax in three great, popular operas of 1851-3. First among them was *Rigoletto*, which was produced in Venice after trouble with the censors (a recurring theme for Verdi). It was a huge success, as its richly varied and unprecedented dramatic music amply justifies. No less successful in Rome was the more direct *Il Trovatore*, at the beginning of 1853. Six weeks later was *La Traviata*, the most personal and intimate of Verdi's operas, was a failure in Venice. With some revisions it was favorably received the following year at a different Venetian theatre. With the dark drama of the one, the heroics of the second and the grace and pathos of the third, Verdi had shown how extraordinarily wide his expressive range was.

Later in 1853, he went with Giuseppina Streponi, the soprano — with whom he had been living for several years, and whom he was to marry in 1859 — to Paris, to prepare *Les Vêpres Siciliennes* for the Opéra, where it was given in 1855 with modest success. Verdi remained there for a time to defend his rights in face of the piracies of the Théâtre des Italiens and to deal with translations of some of his operas. The next new one was the somber *Simon Boccanegra*, a drama about love and politics in medieval Genoa, given in

Venice. Plans for *Un Ballo in Maschera*, about the assassination of a Swedish king, in Naples were called off because of the censors, and it was given instead in Rome in 1859.

Verdi was involved in political activity at this time, as representative of Busseto (where he lived) in the provincial parliament. Later, pressed by Cavour, he was elected to the national parliament, and ultimately became a senator. In 1862, *La Forza del Destino* had its premiere at St. Petersburg. A revised *Macbeth* was given in Paris in 1865, but his most important work for the French capital was *Don Carlos*, a grand opera after Schiller, in which personal dramas of love, comradeship and liberty were set against the persecutions of the Inquisition and the Spanish monarchy. It was given in 1867 and several times revised for later Italian revivals.

Verdi returned to Italy, to live in Genoa. In 1870 he began work on *Aida*, which was given at Cairo Opera House at the end of 1871 to mark the opening of the Suez Canal; Verdi was not present. *Aida* was again produced in the tradition of grand opera, and more taut in structure than *Don Carlos*. Verdi was ready to give up opera; his works of 1873 were a string quartet and the vivid, appealing “Requiem” in honor of the poet, Manzoni, was given in 1874-5, in Milan (San Marco and La Scala, aptly), Paris, London and Vienna. In 1879 the composer-poet Boito and the publisher Ricordi prevailed upon Verdi to write another opera, *Otello*. Verdi, working slowly and much occupied with revisions of earlier operas, completed it only in 1886. This, his most powerful tragic work, a study in evil and jealousy, had its premiere in Milan in 1887. It is notable for the increasing richness of allusive detail in the orchestral writing and the approach to a more continuous musical texture, though Verdi, with his faith in the expressive force of the human voice, did not abandon the “set piece” (aria, duet, etc.) even if he integrated it more fully into its context — above all, in his next opera. This was another Shakespeare work, *Falstaff*, on which he embarked two years later, which was given in 1893. This was his first comedy since the beginning of his career, with a score whose wit and lightness betray the hand of a serene master — this was Verdi’s last opera. Still to come was a set of “Quattro pezzi sacri,” although Verdi was a non-believer.

Verdi spent his last years in Milan — rich, authoritarian but charitable, much visited, revered and honored. He died at the beginning of 1901 — over 28,000 people lined the streets for his funeral.

La Traviata



By April 1852 Verdi had agreed to write a new opera for the Carnival 1853 season at the Teatro La Fenice in Venice, with Francesco Maria Piave as librettist. But, even as late as October, no subject had been decided upon. The unusually tight schedule was due in part to Verdi’s continuing work on *Il Trovatore*, whose première in Rome eventually took place less than two months before that of *La Traviata*. By the beginning of November, however, Verdi and Piave had elected to base their opera on Alexandre Dumas’ play, *La Dame aux Camélias*, which had first been performed in Paris earlier that year.

Alexandre Dumas, who was personally the object of much harassment due to his socially unacceptable birth. He was purported to have had an affair with a courtesan who died in her early 20s of tuberculosis. The original title of the opera was *Amore e Morte* (“Love and Death”), which was later changed at the insistence of the Venetian censors. As Verdi wrote to his friend, Cesare de Sanctis, on January 1, 1853, 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.” The composer even proposed that, contrary to custom, the

opera should be performed in modern costume but, again the Venetian authorities would not agree, and the period was put back to the beginning of the 18th century.

La Traviata, it seems, was written in something like record time. Even though the above-quoted letter to De Sanctis was dated just over two months before the première, it was primarily concerned with composi-

tional problems surrounding the still unfinished *Il Trovatore* — it was clear that *La Traviata* was largely unwritten at the time.

The première of *La Traviata* was the most celebrated fiasco of Verdi's later career, a circumstance probably attributable more to the singers than to Verdi's musical style — Salvini-Donatelli was physically unsuited to Violetta, and Felice Varesi was too far past his prime to tackle such an exposed role. Verdi was reluctant to allow further performances until he could find a more suitable cast, but eventually allowed a second staging on May 6, 1854 at the Teatro S Benedetto in Venice, making various alterations to the score, the most important of which were to the central Act II duet between Violetta and Germont. This time success was unequivocal, and the opera soon became one of the composer's most popular works. It has retained this position into modern times, in spite of the fact that the heroine's role is one of the most feared in the soprano repertory.

Since *La Traviata* was written in great haste its genesis was thoroughly entangled with the creation of Verdi's previous opera, *Il Trovatore* — there are a series of startling musical resemblances between the two operas. These similarities are on what one might call the musical surface; in dramatic structure and general atmosphere the two works are remarkably different, in some senses even antithetical. *La Traviata* is, above all, a chamber opera — in spite of the “public” scenes of the first and second acts, it succeeds best in an intimate setting, where there can be maximum concentration on those key moments in which the heroine's attitude to her surroundings are forced to change. Perhaps, for this reason, the cabalettas, those “public” moments, which are so inevitable and essential to the mood of *Il Trovatore*, tend to sit uneasily in *La Traviata*, which is more remembered more for its moments of lyrical introspection.

It is easy to see why *La Traviata* is among the most loved of Verdi's operas. In many senses it is the composer's most “realistic” drama. The cultural ambience of the subject matter and the musical expression are very closely related — no suspension of disbelief is required to feel that the waltz tunes that saturate the score are naturally born out of the Parisian setting. And, perhaps most important, this sense of “authenticity” extends to the heroine, a character whose psychological progress through the opera is mirrored by her changing vocal character — from the exuberant ornamentation of Act I, to the passionate declamation of Act II, to the final, almost ethereal qualities she shows in Act III. Violetta is indeed Verdi's most complete musical personality to date.

La Traviata: The Video (2006)

Starring Renée Fleming, Rolando Villazon, Renato Bruson; James Conlon, conductor



This superb Los Angeles Opera's production of *La Traviata* stars Renée Fleming, who makes her heart-breaking portrayal of Violetta a vulnerable figure who is torn between self-indulgence and love, sacrificing personal happiness to become a victim of the social mores of mid-19th-century bourgeois France. Fleming's acting captures the complexity of the character and her vocalism is flawless.

Rolando Villazón returns to the role that made him an international powerhouse after his critically-acclaimed, sold-out performances at the 2005 Salzburg Festival. As Alfredo, he brings fiery passion to the role of the impetuous lover, convincing in his anger at what he thinks is her betrayal, and in his regrets in their last-act deathbed reconciliation. His voice ringing in climaxes, scaled down to sweet lyricism in the love scenes, husky, almost baritone-like in the more overtly dramatic scenes. The distinguished Renato Bruson was perfectly cast as Alfredo's father, Germont. This lavish production boasts lush sets and costumes that reflect the period, capturing all of the excitement and drama on stage.