

La traviata



An opera in three acts

Music by Giuseppe Verdi

Libretto by Francesco Maria Piave after *La Dame aux Camélias*, the play by Alexandre Dumas *fil*

Premiere Venice, Teatro La Fenice 6<sup>th</sup> March 1853

Written by Glyndebourne Education Department  
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## Preparing for a workshop

This pack contains information about the basic storyline and characters of **La traviata** - it would be useful for your students to know something of this before the workshop. The entire pack will not take long to read.

## Breaks and refreshments

There will be a break of approximately 30 minutes during the workshop, and about one hour and 45 minutes between workshop and performance at the theatre.

Please ensure that the students bring drinks, snacks and a packed meal as food and refreshments will not be available.

## Parking

Please allow adequate time for parking before a workshop as workshops must start promptly (please make sure you check the start time of your workshop)

## Information

Students below year 10 should not attend the workshop.

If you would like further information, please contact Glyndebourne Education on 01273 812321

## What will happen in a workshop?

Many of the students who will attend our workshops have never been to see an opera before. The workshop will serve as an introduction to opera itself as well as the specific opera to be seen that evening.

The afternoon will consist of:

Warm up activities

Musical exercises

Dramatic exercises

Listening to singers from the GTO company

Discussing the opera

By the end of the workshop, the students will be ready to see and hear and enjoy the opera with genuine understanding.

Students should wear comfortable clothes suitable for physical activities (if you would like to please bring a change of clothes for the evening performance).

## The Characters

Violetta

a courtesan (high class prostitute)

**Soprano**

Aldredo Germont

her lover (as yet, from afar...)

**Tenor**

Giorgio Germont

his father

**Baritone**

Flora Bervoix

Violetta's friend (and colleague)

**Soprano**

Gaston de Letorières

mutual friend of Alfredo and Violetta

**Tenor**

Annina

Violetta's maid

**Soprano**

Baron Douphol

Violetta's escort

**Baritone**

Marquis d'Obigny

Flora's escort

**Bass**

Dr Grenvil

a doctor

**Bass**

## Overview

Based on a popular play of the time, Verdi's *La traviata* tells the tale of perhaps the original "whore with a heart of gold", a myth which would later to be revisited by writers, artists and musicians on a regular basis, most recently of course in Baz Luhrman's *Moulin Rouge* whose plot is not dissimilar...

At one of her Parisian parties, the high-class prostitute, Violetta, meets Alfredo, an ardent young tenor who convinces her to give up her life of vice and move with him to a love nest in the country. A few months later, Alfredo's father jinxes their happiness, when he emotionally blackmails Violetta into leaving his son, reminding her that a woman in her position is not welcome in a family such as his. She leaves and in a fit of jealous rage, Alfredo follows her back to Paris and there publicly humiliates her, throwing his gambling winnings at her feet in payment for their relationship. Months later, Alfredo receives a letter from his father, remorsefully confessing his part in their break-up and rushes to Violetta's apartment to find her dying from consumption. In a final moment of hope, the lovers imagine that they will run away from Paris one final time, but are cheated of this fantasy by death.

## Synopsis

### **Act I** – *The house of Violetta Valéry*

While entertaining in her Parisian home, the courtesan (a high class prostitute), Violetta Valéry is introduced by her friend Gaston de Letorières to Alfredo Germont. While her escort, Baron Douphol, looks on moodily, Alfredo joins Violetta in a drinking song. An orchestra is heard in the next room, but before the dancing can start, Violetta suffers a fainting spell. While Violetta recovers in her parlour, Alfredo takes the opportunity to confess that he has adored her ever since he first set eyes on her and proclaims that no one could ever love her as much as he now does. The courtesan makes light of his declarations, but invites him to call on her the next day. Alone, she wonders if Alfredo could actually be the man that she could love, but is haunted by fears that a woman in her profession might be condemned to a life of frivolous pleasure.

### **Act II**

**Scene One** – A country house on the outskirts of Paris, three months later Alfredo and Violetta are now happily living together. But when Alfredo learns from the maid Annina that Violetta has had to sell her possessions to pay for their living expenses, he immediately leaves for Paris to raise enough money to buy back Violetta's belongings. Violetta enters, looking for Alfredo and is surprised to find his father instead. Giorgio Germont tells her that he has a daughter who is currently engaged to a young man from a respectable family. Explaining that his sons' affair with a woman of Violetta's reputation is a threat to his daughter's planned wedding, he begs Violetta to leave Alfredo forever. At first refusing adamantly, Violetta eventually gives in and agrees to break with Alfredo. Germont expresses his gratitude for her sacrifice and goes to wait in the garden while Violetta writes to Alfredo. But when Alfredo comes back unexpectedly, Violetta can hardly control herself and reminds him of how deeply she loves him before rushing out. No sooner has she gone, but a servant delivers Alfredo the letter in which she explains that she has left him forever to return to her former life in Paris. Giorgio Germont re-enters and asks his son to return to their family home in Provence, but Alfredo, hurt and angered by Violetta's sudden rejection, sets off to find her.

### **Scene Two** – *The house of Flora Bervoix*

Violetta's friend, Flora Bervoix is hosting a soirée with fortune-telling Gypsies and singing matadors. Soon, Alfredo appears, snarling about the inconsistency of women and gambling recklessly at cards. Violetta has arrived with her protector, Baron Douphol, who challenges Alfredo to a game and loses a small fortune to him. Fearful of the Baron's anger, Violetta wants Alfredo to leave, but Alfredo misinterprets her apprehension and demands that she admit that she loves Douphol. Crushed, she pretends she does. Overcome by rage, Alfredo publicly denounces his former love and hurls his winnings at her feet. She faints and Alfredo's father, who has just arrived in search of his son, furiously reproaches Alfredo for his dishonourable conduct.

**Act III** – *Bedroom in Violetta's apartment, months later*

Dr Grenvil tells Annina that her mistress is dying of tuberculosis and does not have long to live. Alone, Violetta tries to console herself by rereading a letter from Alfredo's father saying that Alfredo knows that she was forced to leave and is on his way to beg her forgiveness. Fearing that it is too late, Violetta is disconsolate. Paris is celebrating Mardi Gras, and in the midst of the noise of revellers, Annina rushes in to announce Alfredo. Violetta is overcome with joy and eagerly agrees to leave Paris with him forever. But in her attempt to rise, Violetta collapses in a fit of coughing. The doctor is summoned and he arrives with Alfredo's remorseful father. But it is too late. After saying her final farewell to Alfredo, Violetta's life fails her and she falls dead at her lover's feet.

## Giuseppe Verdi

(b. Busseto, Italy, October 9, 1813; d. Milan, January 27, 1901)

Verdi is possibly the most important composer of Italian opera there ever was. In him, Italian music gained a distinct identity and Italy gained an important figurehead through his political activism both on and off the stage. Though he didn't really experiment radically with new theories, he refined the work of Rossini, Bellini and Donizetti. He was also uncompromisingly nationalistic and many of his early operas have choruses that were thinly disguised inflammatory appeals to the patriotism of his countrymen struggling for national unity and against foreign domination.

He wrote a total of 26 operas from 1839 – 1893, with libretti adapted from romantic authors, Spanish dramatists and Shakespeare. His main requirements in a libretto were strong emotional situations, exciting contrasts and fast-paced action – whether the plot was plausible did not concern him. Consequently most of his plots are violent melodramas full of improbable characters and ridiculous coincidences but with plenty of opportunity for exciting, lusty, ferocious melodies and rhythms.

Giuseppe Verdi was born in 1813 in a small village in Parma, Italy, son of an innkeeper and a spinner. He was given a formal education in the humanities, music and rhetoric and at the age of 9, took over as the local church organist, becoming a precocious composer in his teens of small symphonies, cantatas and church music.

In 1831 he moved to the local town, Busseto, and became engaged to Margherita Barezzi, the daughter of his landlord. In 1832 he won a scholarship to study in Milan, but was turned down by the Conservatoire because of his age (four years too old) and his unorthodox piano technique. Instead, he studied privately with Vincenzo Lavigna, a conductor at famous theatre, La Scala.

Then in 1836 he settled down in Busseto where he was appointed master of music and began his operatic career with his first opera *Oberto, Re di San Bonifacio*. He married Margherita who bore two children.

In October 1839, ambition got the better of him and he resigned as Master of Music in Busseto. By November, *Oberto* had been premiered at La Scala and his self-assured and single-minded approach had won him three more commissions. In 1840, Margherita and his two children died and in a fit of depression Verdi temporarily renounced composition. His next opera, *Nabucco*, did not appear for 18 months. But when it did, it was a resounding success; its biblical tale with a political message struck a chord with the long-suffering Italians and secured his fame.

In the eleven years between *Nabucco* and *La traviata*, Verdi wrote no less than sixteen operas. During this period Verdi met Giuseppina Strepponi, a soprano who was to become his mistress and later (in 1859) his wife. She was a woman of great generosity and patience and her wit and tact proved to be a good match

for his blunt and rather humourless personality and she furthermore gave him the courage to write his most politically sensitive operas. They lived in Paris from 1847 – 1849 and in 1849 returned to Busseto where they bought the farm of Sant'Agata, on land owned by Verdi's ancestors. However, they were soon forced to leave because of local opposition to Strepponi on account of her chequered past. From the age of 19, she had been the breadwinner for her family and her career soon took off. By 1841 she'd given birth to four children, all by different fathers (she would soon lose two fathered by Verdi) and as was usual then, all children were abandoned to orphanages.

Whilst in Paris, his dead wife's father, Antonio Barezzi, had written him a letter criticising him for the relationship. He replied to Barezzi

*I have nothing to hide. In my house there lives a free independent lady, a lover (as I am) of the solitary life, who has means that cover her every need. Neither she nor I owes any explanation for our actions to anyone at all.*

When looking at the story of *La traviata* it's hard not to draw any parallels between Verdi and Strepponi's situation and that of Alfredo and Violetta – except that Verdi chose to ignore the narrow morals of his society while Violetta felt compelled to honour them.

Whether or not Verdi had a personal investment in the story, he was clearly struck when he discovered *la Dame aux Camélias*, Alexandre Dumas Junior's 1848 novel based on the author's relationship with one of the most celebrated courtesans of the day, Marie Duplessis. In February 1852, Dumas adapted the novel for the stage and it is possible that Verdi saw the play during a visit to Paris. When commissioned to write a new opera by the Venetian theatre *La Fenice*, this was the story he settled on.

The run up to the first night was fraught. In January 1853, Verdi found himself in disagreement with the theatre over casting. He strongly objected to Fanny Salvini-Donatelli playing Violetta. He insisted that to sing *traviata*, one must be “young, have a graceful figure, and sing with passion” – according to one report, she weighed 130kg (that's over 20 stones!!). Salvini did sing the role, along with a cast of other singers unapproved by Verdi.

The first run was one of Verdi's rare failures. After first night in March 1853, Verdi wrote, “*La traviata* was a fiasco. My fault or the singers? Time alone will tell”. The revival in May 1854 was at another Venetian theatre, San Benedetto, which offered singers better suited to the roles. Since 1854, the opera has not left the repertory.

Over the next eighteen years, he wrote only six more operas, constantly revising his operas for revival across Europe and frequently travelling to supervise productions. During this time, his music became associated with the revolutionary struggles to unite Italy. Music such as the Chorus of Hebrew Slaves from *Nabucco*, achieved iconic status as statements of nationhood.

In response to this, Verdi projected the romantic image of a rough-hewn, self-taught son of the soil. He became increasingly interested in politics and had a five-year spell as a member of the Senate.

In the last 30 years of his life, Verdi wrote only two more operas: *Otello* and *Falstaff*. In 1874, his monumental *Requiem* was premiered. He devoted much time to further revisions and oversaw his estates as well as building a hospital and founding a home for retired musicians in Milan. Strepponi died in 1897 shortly followed by her husband, who died in Milan in January 1901. There was a huge funeral in his honour attended by a quarter of a million people, who burst into an impromptu rendition of the Chorus of Hebrew Slaves.

## Opera Glossary

**aria** A song for solo voice reflecting how the character feels (usually miserable) about what has just or is about to happen.

**auditorium** Space within the theatre occupied by the audience.

**baritone** Middle-range man's voice, lurking somewhere between bass and tenor.

**bass** Lowest male voice. Often plays characters with dubious moral fibre.

**chorus** A body of singers who (mostly) sing and act as a group to make the crowd scenes a bit more plausible. Also the term used for any musical number sung by this group.

**conductor** Hand-waving-head-honcho, positioned to obscure the view of the lady sitting in the centre of the front row. Makes sure everyone is performing the same piece.

**contralto** (or alto) Low-pitched woman's voice. Not to be confused with... counter tenor High-pitched man's voice. Nearest we have nowadays to a castrato (from the verb to castrate...ouch...)

**ensemble** From the French word for "together". When two or more soloists try to have their say at the same time (can get rather messy...). Ensemble for two is a duet, three is a trio, four a quartet and so on.

**finale** The final number of an act - sung by an ensemble (see above).

**intermezzo** A piece of music played between the acts of an opera (usually just long enough for the prima donna to put on her sixth frock of the show).

**interval** A (welcome) break between the acts of an opera. The lights go on and the audience is free to move around, catch up on what's been happening, join the chorus at the bar...

**libretto** The text of an opera. Written by a librettist.

**mezzo-soprano** Female singer who can't quite reach those top notes. Not much glass-shattering action here.

**orchestra** Group of musicians found in the pit.

**overture** Music at the start of the show. Sets the scene, warms up the orchestra and reminds the audience that the performance is about to begin.

**prima donna** The leading woman singer in an operatic cast. Not to be confused with Guy Ritchie's wife...

**props** Mobile pieces of the set which help to make it all a bit more believable.

**proscenium arch** Wall in front of the curtain, dividing the stage from the auditorium.

**recitative** The bits which aren't the songs. Closer to the rhythm of speech and often accompanied by just a harpsichord or piano. Used to further the action of the story (we'd never get home if the plot was told through the arias...).

**repetiteur** from the French for to repeat. This tortured soul sits in on rehearsals and pretends to be an orchestra at the piano.

**score** The full score contains all the sung and orchestral parts in the opera. The vocal score has the voice parts and a piano reduction of the orchestra (for rehearsals - see repetiteur).

**soprano** High female voice. Watch out for those delicate window panes...

**synopsis** Outline of the plot. Especially useful during the interval when it is once more light enough to find out what on earth is happening.

**tenor** A high male voice. The good guy, pure of heart and all that.