

Operapedia: *La Traviata*

Henry Stewart finds all the high notes in Verdi's iconic tragedy.



Opera News Archives

Time and Place

Verdi's Trovatore, one of his most enduring operas, had its premiere less than two months before *Traviata*; *Rigoletto*, also among Verdi's best-remembered, came less than two years earlier. In twenty-four months, Verdi unveiled three of the greatest operas ever written! He intended to make *Traviata* stand out by setting it in modern times, like the novel, but the theater preferred to play it safe with the censors by pushing the setting back a hundred and fifty years. These days, productions are often set at the time of the opera's composition, though the differences between the eras of Louis XIV and Napoleon III are surely lost on many modern audiences.

“[I]f the opera is given,” Verdi warned, in despair over the quality of casting at Venice’s Fenice, “it will be a complete fiasco.” The world premiere, on March 6, 1853, proved him correct: though the overture and drinking song drew curtain calls for the composer, Act II fared far worse, thanks to the singers, whom Verdi had admonished before and during the dress rehearsals. The composer allowed a second production more than a year later— at a different theater in Venice, with a new cast and a reworked Act II—that set it on its path to glory.



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Spoiler Alerts

*Verdi's frequent collaborator, Francesco Maria Piave, adapted the libretto from Alexandre Dumas fils's 1848 novel **La Dame aux Camélias**, based on the life of courtesan Marie Duplessis, a mistress to Dumas, Liszt and others. The book was adapted into movies—starring actresses from Greta Garbo to **Isabelle Huppert**—but first it was a play, which Verdi saw in Paris in 1852. He was so impressed he started composing music immediately, without even an outline for a libretto. An Italian translation of the play was playing just a short walk from La Fenice when **Traviata** had its premiere.*



Perennial Showstopper

*Act I finale, “Ah! fors’è lui.... Sempre libera,” a grand-scale scena in which the courtesan Violetta ponders whether she could ever sacrifice freedom for love, is one of the finest monologues in opera. The music is extraordinarily demanding, moving up and down the staff through melancholia, agitation and rapture. It has been a calling card for every serious dramatic coloratura soprano, from Maria Callas to Anna Netrebko. It’s such an icon of diva-dom that it even appears in the dragulous *Adventures of Priscilla, Queen of the Desert*, lip-synched by a spectacularly costumed Hugo Weaving.*

Reactions

“La Traviata was an immense fiasco,” Verdi wrote from his hotel the night of the premiere, “and worse, people laughed. Still, what do you expect? I am not upset over it. I’m wrong or they are wrong.... I believe that the last word on La Traviata was not said last night.” He may have been overstating its failure: it ran for nine performances and after the third was received more warmly, eventually earning more than almost anything at La Fenice that season—including Verdi’s own Ernani.

The Performance We Wish We’d Seen

Luisa Tetrazzini made one of the greatest debuts when she showed up at Covent Garden in 1907 as a nobody, sang Violetta and left a superstar. A contemporaneous recording of “Sempre libera” reveals a soprano whose voice moved through taxing coloratura like water—easy, fluid and unstoppable. She made her New York City debut in January 1908, again as Violetta, at Oscar Hammerstein’s Met rival, the Manhattan Opera Company. Legend has it that she took the final E-flat in “Sempre libera,” gathered up the train of her ball gown and started offstage—still holding the note!





Hit Tune

One of those tunes everyone knows, even opera-haters, is *Traviata*'s drinking song, "Libiamo ne' lieti calici," a rousing ode to alcohol whose swaying melody and oom-pah-pah rhythm can dry any throat. Nowhere is its effect better illustrated than in Billy Wilder's *Lost Weekend*, when an alcoholic Ray Milland watches the piece performed, mouth watering for the ample champagne onstage, yearning so fiercely for the bottle of rye in his overcoat in the checkroom that he hallucinates the swaying choristers as a whole line of overcoats, his bulging flask shining so brightly it almost burns a hole through the pocket.



In Pop Culture

Richard Gere forces *La Traviata* on Julia Roberts in Garry Marshall's 1990 *Pretty Woman*, making a highfalutin claim to *Camélias*'s lineage with its story of a Hollywood hooker with a heart of gold who falls for a wealthy business jerk. Roberts is delighted by her first opera, then moved to tears—which makes her, what, emotionally acceptable to Gere? The whole thing feels grossly elitist and condescending, but Roberts's fancy red dress might be a redeeming gag, evoking *Dumas fils* and the reason his heroine was called “the lady of the camellias”—because she kept flowers in her box at the theater, red ones to signal when she was menstruating and thus unavailable for sex.

Something Completely Different

Natalie Dessay and her 2011 Aix-en-Provence costars and director, Jean-François Sivadier, allowed documentarians to film their rehearsals for the 2012 film *Becoming Traviata*, an impressionistic look at what it takes to make opera happen, from the blocking to the proper facial expressions to communicate meaning. A more traditional movie would be Franco Zeffirelli's 1983 big-screen version, starring Teresa Stratas and Plácido Domingo, which was nominated for two technical Oscars because it's so darn pretty. ■

