

La traviata
(the “fallen one,” or, “the one who went astray”)

Opera in 3 acts by Giuseppe Verdi

libretto by Francesco Maria Piave

based on the play *La dame aux Camélias* (1852), known in English as *Camille*,
an adaptation of the novel of the same name by Alexandre Dumas *fils* (1824-1895),
first published in 1848

First performance: Venice, Teatro La Fenice, 6 March 1853

Characters:

Violetta Valéry, a Parisian courtesan afflicted with tuberculosis (consumption), a character based on the real-life courtesan Marie Duplessis (1824-1847), with whom Alexandre Dumas *fils* was romantically involved in the years 1844 and 1845; she may also have been one of the lovers of Franz Liszt – Soprano
Alfredo Germont, a fashionable young man of provincial origins, the character based indirectly on Alexandre Dumas *fils* - Tenor
Giorgio Germont, Alfredo’s father, a character who does not bear the slightest resemblance to Alexandre Dumas *père* – Baritone
Flora Bervoix, Violetta’s friend – Mezzo-soprano
Annina, Violetta’s maid – Mezzo-soprano
Gastone, Vicomte de Letorières, Alfredo’s friend – Tenor
Baron Douphol, one of Violetta’s lovers, a rival of Alfredo - Baritone
Marquis d’Obigny, a nobleman – Bass
Dottore Grenvil, Violetta’s physician – Bass
Giuseppe, Violetta’s servant – Tenor
Flora’s servant - Bass
A messenger – Bass

Party guests, gypsies, matadors and picadors, dancers, and servants

Setting – at the insistence of the management of the Teatro La Fenice in Venice, and contrary to the wishes of the composer and librettist, the original setting of the opera was portrayed as Paris and environs about the year 1700; it was not until the 1880s that the opera began to be staged in costumes compatible with 19th-century fashions; a residual anachronism that could never be corrected after the original completion of the libretto had to do with references to monetary currency. The principal monetary currency in France ca. 1700 (during the reign of Louis XIV) was the *louis d’or* (the gold louis). In the 19th century, in contrast, continuing until the adoption in France of the euro at the end of the 20th century, the customary currency was the franc. The references to louis (*luigi* in Italian) are still retained, no matter when or where the opera is set in modern productions

Synopsis

Act I

At the start of the act, a party is in progress at the luxurious Parisian home of the courtesan Violetta Valéry. Gastone introduces her to his friend Alfredo, who has long admired her. In fact, he inquired after her every day during her recent illness, more than her patron, Baron Douphol. A toast is proposed, but since Baron Douphol refuses to lead it, Alfredo sings the drinking song for Violetta instead. As her guests leave the room to dance nearby, Violetta is overcome with faintness from her illness and needs to rest. She is now alone with Alfredo, who urges her to give up her life of dissipation in Paris lest she die from it. Alfredo declares his love for her, but she tells him to forget her, since she is incapable of love. She does agree to see him again, however. The party soon ends. When all of her guests have left, Violetta, alone, ponders what has just happened. She is surprised at how deeply she has been affected by Alfredo's sincerity. She believed that she was impervious to sentimentality and could not possibly have hoped to be loved or return love. But for the time being, she dismisses all thoughts of love as madness and resolves to return to her life of pleasure.

Act II

Scene 1 – in a country house near Paris

Violetta has given up her life in Paris to live in a country house with Alfredo. They are very happy together, but Alfredo's composure is disturbed when he learns from Violetta's servant that she has had to sell her possessions in order to maintain their household. He leaves to try to raise funds. As soon as he is gone, Violetta receives a visit from Alfredo's father, who believes her responsible for ruining his son. His attitude changes once he learns that it is she who has been financing their household. Nonetheless, he requests that Violetta break off the relationship, because it has created a scandal that is jeopardizing the engagement of Alfredo's sister. Violetta agrees to break off her relationship with Alfredo. She intends to tell him that she is returning to the patronage of Baron Douphol. Alfredo is crushed and leaves for Paris, swearing revenge.

Scene 2: a party at Flora's residence in Paris

Violetta's friend Flora is surprised to learn that she and Alfredo have separated, and that Violetta will arrive at Flora's party with Baron Douphol. When Violetta arrives, she is disturbed to see Alfredo at the same gathering, and the baron is offended by his disparaging remarks about her. The two men play cards; Alfredo is winning when the game is interrupted by supper. Violetta takes Alfredo aside and warns him that the baron might challenge him to a duel. Alfredo says he will leave only if she comes with him. She decides to keep her promise to his father, and refuses, which causes Alfredo to become very angry. He throws his winnings from cards at her feet and tells everyone that he has now paid back the money she spent on him. Standing among the appalled party guests, Alfredo feels remorse immediately. After the spectacle he has made, the baron does challenge him to a duel.

Act III

Violetta is now dying of consumption at her Paris residence, tended by her loyal servant Annina. Her physician tells Annina that she only has a few hours to live. It is Carnival time (when many Europeans indulge themselves in various kinds of entertainments just before the beginning of the penitential season of Lent), and Violetta sends Annina out to distribute alms to the poor. Alone, Violetta rereads a letter from Alfredo's father. He and the baron have fought their duel. The baron was wounded, but both he and Alfredo are still alive. Alfredo, however, is now living abroad. By this time, Alfredo learned the true reason why Violetta broke off her relationship with him. Both father and son are coming to visit her. Violetta is afraid that they will arrive too late, but Alfredo does enter to see her for the last time. For a time, the two pretend that she will recover, and together they plan to spend their lives together once again. Violetta is soon overcome with weakness and must confront the reality of her situation. Alfredo's father enters with the physician and begs her to forgive him for the grief he has caused her. She is not able to respond. Alfredo begs her not to leave him, but just as her strength seems to be coming back, she falls back and dies.

Giuseppe Verdi:

“È strano/Ah, fors’è lui/Sempre libera”

from

La traviata (1853)

At the end of Act I, the courtesan Violetta Valéry has just met a young man that she has fallen for. She is uncomfortable with the feelings of love he has aroused in her, since she has never been in love before, and never expected to be for the rest of her life. Her last thought is to dismiss her vulnerability as nonsense and resolve to live only for pleasure. This is one of the most famous examples of a so-called cavatina-caballetta pairing in the bel-canto repertory of nineteenth-century opera.

(Recitative:)

È strano!... è strano!...
In core scolpiti ho quegli accenti!
Saria per me sventura un serio amore?
Che risolvi, o turbata anima mia?
Null’uomo ancora t’accendeva.
Oh, gioia ch’io non conobbi,
Esser amata amando!
E sdegnarla poss’io
Per l’aride follie del vivere mio?

It’s strange!... It’s strange!...
Those words are carved into my heart!
Would a serious love affair bring me misfortune?
What do you think, oh troubled soul?
Until now, no man has inflamed you.
Oh, joy that you have never known,
To love and be loved!
Am I able to set this aside
For my life of sterile folly?

(Cavatina:)

Ah, fors’è lui che l’anima
Solinga ne’ tumulti
Godea sovente pingere
De’ suoi colon occulti.

Ah, perhaps he is the man
That my soul in torment
Delighted in depicting
In concealed colors.

Lui, che modesto e vigile
All’egre soglie ascese,
E nuova febbre accese
Destandomi all’amor!

This man, modest and vigilant,
Who watched my sickbed,
And started another fever
By awakening love in me!

(Recitative:)

Follie! Delirio vano è questo!
Povera donna, sola, abbandonata
In questo popoloso deserto
Che appellano Parigi.
Che spero or più?
Che far degg’io?
Gioire!
Di voluttà ne’vortici perir!
Gioir!

Madness! This is delirious vanity!
I am a poor woman, alone, abandoned
In this populated desert
Called Paris.
What more can I hope for now?
What should I do?
Enjoy myself!
I will perish down the vortex of pleasure!
Enjoy myself!

(Cabaletta:)

Sempre libera degg'io
Foleggiare di gioia in gioia;
Vò che scorra il viver mio
Pei sentieri del piacer.

I must always be free
To frolic from delight to delight;
I want my life to glide
Over the paths of pleasure.

Nasca il giorno, o il giorno muoia,
Sempre lieta ne' ritrovi
A dilette sempre nuovi,
Dee volare il mio pensier.

Whether at dawn or at dusk,
Always joyful in finding
New sensations to delight me,
My spirit must fly.

(The cavatina is interrupted by a stanza of text—and accompanying music—from a duet heard earlier in the act that depicts the first meaningful conversation between Violetta and Alfredo; Violetta sings it in the cavatina, but during Violetta's caballetta, Alfredo sings it in the background; in the cavatina, this stanza of text reminds Violetta of the sweetness of her encounter with Alfredo and the words he spoke to her; in the caballetta, the sound of Alfredo's voice challenges her resolve to forget him—but she cannot possibly forget him, no matter how frenetically she tries to do so:)

A quell'amor ch'è palpito
Dell'universo intero,
Misterioso, altero,
Croce e delizia al cor.

The love that is pulsing
From the whole universe,
Mysterious, lofty,
Is at once a torment and delight to my heart.

Giuseppe Verdi:

“Libiamo ne’ lieti calici”

(The “Brindisi,” or “Drinking Song”)

from

La traviata (1853)

In Act I, the courtesan Violetta Valéry is hosting a boisterous party. Alfredo, who will soon be her new lover, proposes a toast to the assembled guests after her patron, Baron Douphol, refuses to do so in a churlish way. The term Brindisi to mean a drinking song has no connection to the Italian town of Brindisi on the Adriatic coast. Rather, it is an Italianized corruption of a German phrase once used to introduce toasts, “bring dir’s” (“I offer it to you”).

Stanza 1 (sung by Alfredo):

Libiamo ne’ lieti calici,
Che la bellezza infiora,
E la fuggevol ora s’inebrii
A voluttà.
Libiam ne’ dolci fremiti
Che suscita l’amore,
Poichè quell’occhio al core
Onnipotente va.
Libiamo, amor fra i calici
Più caldi baci avrà.

Let’s drink to the merry glasses
That adorn beauty,
And make this fleeting moment inebriated
With voluptuousness.
Let’s drink to the sweet throbbings
That arouse love,
Because this eye aims straight
For the almighty heart.
Let’s drink, since lovemaking among the glasses
Will make the kisses hotter.

Refrain (sung by the chorus):

Libiam, amor fra’ calici
Più caldi baci avrà.

Let’s drink, since lovemaking among the glasses
Will make the kisses hotter.

Stanza 2 (sung by Violetta):

Tra voi saprò dividere
Il tempo mio giocondo;
Tutto è follia nel mondo
Ciò che non è piacer.
Godiam, fugate e rapido,
È il gaudio dell’amore;
È un fior che nasce e muore,
Ne più si può goder.
Godiamo, c’invita un fervido
Accento lusinghier.

With you I know I can share
Enjoyable times;
Everything is madness in the world
That is not pleasure.
Let’s celebrate, since fleeting and quick
Is the delight of love;
It is a flower that blooms and dies,
And can no longer be enjoyed.
Let’s celebrate, we are invited to by a fervent,
Enticing compulsion.

Refrain (sung by the chorus):

Godiamo la tazza e il cantico
La notte abbellà e il riso;
In questo paradiso
Ne scopra il nuovo dì.

Let's celebrate the cups and the singing
That beautify the evening and the laughter;
In this paradise
Let the new day discover us.

Stanza 3 (truncated, sung by Alfredo and Violetta):

Violetta (to Alfredo):

La vita è nel tripudio...

Life is about enjoying oneself...

Alfredo (to Violetta):

Quando non s'ami ancora...

Only if one has not yet been in love...

Violetta (to Alfredo):

Not dite a chi l'ignora...

Don't say that to somebody who doesn't know
anything about love...

Alfredo (to Violetta):

È il mio destin così.

That is my destiny.

Refrain and Coda (sung by the chorus):

Godiamo la tazza e il cantico
La notte abbellà e il riso;
In questo paradiso
Ne scopra il nuovo dì.

Let's celebrate the cups and the singing
That beautify the evening and the laughter;
In this paradise
Let the new day discover us.