

OPERA EXPLAINED

An Introduction to...

VERDI

La Traviata

written by
Thomson Smillie

narrated by
David Timson

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Giuseppe Verdi (1813–1901): *La Traviata*

The word ‘opera’ is Latin and means ‘the works’; it represents a synthesis of all the other arts: drama, vocal and orchestral music, dance, light and design. Consequently, it delivers an emotional impact which none of the others can match. The only one of the arts whose origins can be precisely dated, it was ‘invented’ in Italy in 1597 as part of the Renaissance – the rebirth of interest in classical values. As an art form it is truly international, crossing all linguistic and cultural barriers, and it is probably the only one whose audience continues to expand, not in spite of, but because of developments in entertainment technology.

From its early origins in Italy opera spread across Europe, establishing individual and distinctive schools in a number of countries. France had an early and long-standing love affair with it – hence the term *grand opéra*, referring to the massive five-act creations that graced the Paris Opéra in the nineteenth century. Germany had an excellent school from as early as Mozart’s time, and opera perhaps reached its highest achievement with the mighty music dramas of Richard Wagner. Russia, Great Britain, and the Americas have also made their contributions.

But in the popular imagination opera remains an Italian concept – and no wonder. From its earliest years Italians dominated the art: Cavalli and Monteverdi were among the first to establish its forms; there was a golden age, called the *bel canto*, at the beginning of the nineteenth century when Bellini, Donizetti, and Rossini ruled supreme; Giuseppe Verdi was probably the most revered artist in history; and, for

many, Puccini represents, in every sense, the last word in this beloved genre.

Although the twentieth century has not been as lavishly endowed with opera composers, it can still boast a few, including Richard Strauss, Igor Stravinsky, and Benjamin Britten – and, maybe most significantly in the long run, those errant step-children of opera, the Broadway musical and the Lloyd Webber spectacular.

La Traviata

Nowadays, as opera is perceived as a respectable pastime, it is hard to appreciate the shock once engendered by such radicals as Mozart, Puccini, and, especially, Verdi. In 1853, when hypocritical Victorian society ignored the existence of armies of what we now call ‘sex industry employees’, it was almost inconceivable that an established composer would write an opera whose title means, roughly, ‘The Woman who Went Astray’. Further, he presents his ‘heroine’ in a way that wins deep sympathy. (Mozart engendered a similar sense of shock with *The Marriage of Figaro*, an openly anti-aristocratic work, and Puccini annoyed the comfortable bourgeoisie by depicting the poverty of ‘La Bohème’ as the true villain of the piece.)

Verdi, though, was never one to shy away from controversy. His *Rigoletto* in 1851 ran him into serious censorship problems (political on that occasion), and his career would be marked by constant battles against the political censors and the Mrs Grundys of his day.

La Traviata, despite, or maybe because of, its unpromising subject, has continued to captivate audiences. The reasons for its enduring popularity fill library shelves and are, in summary: a superb ‘human interest’ story, a captivating cast of characters, and music which, and here’s the trick, is both enchanting and deeply insightful.

Like many great stories, that of *La Traviata* is based on life. Though names have been changed to protect both the innocent and the guilty, the characters inhabited

Paris in the mid-nineteenth century. The ‘heavy father’, called Giorgio Germont in the opera, is in life none other than Alexander Dumas Senior, the author of *The Count of Monte Cristo*, *The Man in the Iron Mask*, and much else.

The son, Alfredo in the opera, is in life Alexander Dumas Junior, the author of *The Lady of the Camellias*. The doomed heroine of the title was Marguerite Gauthier, a high-class call girl – or courtesan, to use the fashionable euphemism – who did indeed have an affair with Junior and succumbed to tuberculosis, the AIDS of its day. Junior in the great tradition of kiss-and-tell, wrote the phenomenally successful novel, which later became a play, *The Lady of the Camellias*. In due course it would become a famous movie, *Camille*, one of Greta Garbo’s greatest hits, and a ballet, Frederick Ashton’s *Marguerite et Armand*, a vehicle for Margot Fonteyn and Rudolph Nureyev.

Although the plot may seem creaky, with its hinge that Violetta (as she is called in the opera – the name changes are totally confusing) must sacrifice her love for Alfredo for the sake of his family’s honour, it is undeniably effective in the theatre. And Verdi was a great theatrical craftsman. In fact he was much more, because while his music could be ravishingly beautiful and exciting (*La Traviata* is one of the most prodigally melodic scores in the entire repertoire), it could also contain great psychological depth. Listen to the very opening bars of the Act I Prelude: the sense of nostalgia, of *déjà vu*, is overwhelming. Listen to how the simple melody of love, first introduced in the charming love duet, becomes an all-consuming expression of passion in Violetta’s renunciation, and later a dry husk of itself as Violetta lies dying.

There’s no doubt about it, *La Traviata* deserves its place in the hearts and minds of opera lovers the world over as a work that is thrilling theatre, great music, and a profound expression of the human condition.

Thomson Smillie

Thomson Smillie began his career in the early days of Scottish Opera and has been artistic director of the Wexford International Festival, general manager of the Opera Company of Boston, and general director of Kentucky Opera. He now makes a career as a writer, speech-writer, and public speaker. He has a strong belief that people mature into a love of opera and travels the world encouraging a love of the art form. His other passions are travel, languages, and friendships. He has written several other titles in the Naxos ‘Opera Explained’ series.



David Timson studied acting and singing at the Guildhall School of Music and Drama. He has performed in modern and classic plays through the UK and abroad, including *Wild Honey* for Alan Ayckbourn, *Hamlet*, *The Man of Mode*, and *The Seagull*. Among his many television appearances have been roles in *Nelson's Column* and *Swallows and Amazons*. For Naxos AudioBooks he has recorded, to date, three volumes of *The Adventures of Sherlock Holmes*, and directed *Twelfth Night* as well as playing Feste. On Naxos, he takes the part of the Narrator in Stravinsky's *The Soldier's Tale*.



OPERA EXPLAINED

This series introduces, in words and music, the plot and background of major operas. Using the principal themes and arias, taken from the Naxos recording of the complete work, Thomson Smillie is informative yet entertaining, enabling the listener to get more from this remarkable art form.

An Introduction to...
VERDI
La Traviata

written by **Thomson Smillie**
narrated by **David Timson**

La Traviata owes its enduring popularity to a superb story of young love and fatal sacrifice, set to music by Italy's master melodist at the peak of his powers. Interest and poignancy are added by the fact that this is a true story – the baritone 'heavy' is Alexander Dumas who wrote *The Count of Monte Cristo*. But it is the central figure, the heroine Violetta, the archetypal 'whore with the heart of gold', who dominates the piece. It is her opera and we love her for it.

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Total time

65:23