



## Verdi's *La traviata*

### The Original *Traviata*: The True Story of Marie Duplessis

She was born Rose Alphonsine Plessis in 1824 in a small village in Normandy, France to a desperately poor family. She became a prostitute at the age of 12, a liaison arranged by her father. At the age of 15, she moved to Paris and took a menial job in a dress factory.

Evidently, she was an extremely attractive and intelligent young woman, with a petite figure and enchanting smile. By the time she was 16, she had become aware that prominent men were willing to give her money in exchange for sexual favors and her company in both private and social settings. She became a courtesan and established a salon within the Parisian *demi-monde*, an underground society in 19<sup>th</sup> century France, inhabited by women who had come down in the world: a courtesan, a divorcee, one who had had an illegitimate baby. These women maintained a society of elaborate dinners, parties and “salons,” expecting to be paid by the men they entertained.

However the men who turned up for *demi-monde* dinners and parties were completely respectable. They were rich young men on the town or older married men, slipping off to meet their mistresses. The men were untainted by the *demi-monde* and could move freely between it and the “respectable” world.

Rose adopted the name, “Marie” and added the aristocratic sounding “Du,” becoming Marie Duplessis. She knew she had “consumption” (tuberculosis) and wouldn’t live long. But she remained eminently successful as a courtesan. She learned to read and write and kept herself up on world events so as to be able to converse on those topics when at a social function. She established a fashionable salon and had a number of wealthy and aristocratic lovers as well as a number of artistic men. Among the latter were the composer Franz Liszt and the author Alexandre Dumas the Younger.

She was very self-deprecating. Liszt reports that she said to him, “I am a strange girl and I don't know how to hang on to this life, which I've no idea how to lead, and which I can't stand anyway.” (Keep this in mind when you listen to Violetta’s “*Sempre libera*.”)

Dumas describes her: "She was tall, very thin, her eyes long and slanting like those of a Japanese woman but lively and alert. Her lips were the colour of cherries and she had the most beautiful teeth in the world." She used to say that she kept her teeth white by lying. (Not true, since she was very honest in her dealings with people. She had only one lover at a time and stayed on good terms after they broke off.)

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Her salon was evidently very fashionable and successful, and her lovers paid her quite well. Her expenses were on the order of 100,000 francs per year. By comparison, at that time a teacher earned about 300 francs a year, a priest about 1,000, a bureaucrat 1,300. Cabinet Ministers earned 20,000 francs per year.

She died of tuberculosis in 1847 at the age of 23. Two of her former lovers, a Swedish count and a French count, the latter whom she had briefly married, were by her side. Within a few weeks of her death, her belongings were auctioned off to pay her debts. Her funeral in Montmartre cemetery was said to have been lavish, and attended by hundreds of people.

### **Verdi's *La traviata*:**

Alexandre Dumas wrote a novel based on their relationship, *La Dame aux camélias*, first published in 1848. The real-life Marie always wore a camellia on her gown and was often called "La Dame aux Camélias." (She liked the flower because it didn't have a heavy scent which in her tubercular condition made her breathless.). The book is regarded as semi-autobiographical: Dumas became "Armand Duval" and Duplessis "Marguerite Gautier."

The novel was very successful and Dumas adapted it as a play, which premiered in Paris in 1852. The play was a worldwide success; in the English-speaking world, *La Dame aux Camélias* became known as *Camille*. Sixteen different versions have been performed at Broadway theatres alone.

Verdi and Giuseppina Strepponi (his lover, later his wife) were in Paris in 1852. They saw the play, possibly the premiere. Verdi was fluent in French and a great fan of the theater. He was very taken with the play, obtained the rights and quickly handed it off to Mario Piave, one of his most active librettists. He had already written the librettos for *I due Foscari* (1844), *Ernani* (1844), *Macbeth* (1847) *Il corsaro* (1848), *Stiffelio* (1850) and *Rigoletto* (1851). For *Traviata*, Verdi and Piave again changed the names of the principals to Violetta Valéry and Alfredo Germont.

Verdi and Giuseppina had moved into his farm at Sant'Agata near his home town of Bussetto. They weren't married at that time and Giuseppina suffered abuse and indignities from the closed society of Bussetto; she was frequently snubbed and sometimes overtly insulted. This angered Verdi and made the story of the opposition of M. Germont to his son's relationship with Violetta all the more poignant. Most Verdi scholars agree that Giuseppina's ill-treatment at Bussetto was a motivation for Verdi in his development of the plot.

*Traviata* is one of Verdi's "Big Three:" his most famous and successful operas, including *Rigoletto* (1851) and *Il trovatore* (1853). These represent Verdi's "middle period" when he had reached the height of his fame, both in Italy and the world.

- Art Axelrod for the Opera Guild of Rochester, March 2017