

Verdi's *La Traviata*

By Jessica Moss

Giuseppe Verdi's *La traviata* has the highest success of any opera in history. The Teatro La Fenice in Venice commissioned Verdi in 1852, and although he did not have a subject at the time of signing, Verdi eventually settled on the life and story of Marie Deplessis. She was a famous and recently deceased Parisian courtesan. By May of 1853 the music and drama of Verdi's *La traviata* was premiered. Modern audiences would say this show contains everything necessary for a love story: Girl meets guy, they fall in love, the "break-up", when all hope is lost, forgiveness and reconciliation occur, and in great operatic tradition, the death of the prima donna. What separates *La traviata* from other operas to the extent that it has celebrated nearly 170 years of success? Perhaps the success of *La traviata* comes down to Verdi's numerous high-stakes choices. The risks Verdi took with *La traviata* include selection of subject and his nonconformity to the expectations of the audiences of his time.

Until the end of what Verdi calls his "Galley Years" (1843-1839), the subject of most operas was that of by-gone heroes, royal courts, and ancient mythology. These stories were filled with moral lessons or re-enforced the beliefs of the aristocracies. In *La traviata*, Verdi chooses to use Marie Duplessis, a notable and successful courtesan as his subject, who had only passed away a few years before his commission. This marks one of his first big risks, high-stakes decisions. By choosing a subject from modern history, and not an ancient fable, he was defying operatic tradition. Because of this choice, he unintentionally began building the bridge from the Bel Canto era of opera to the coming Verismo era. *La traviata* was a precursor and inspiration for composers like Ruggiero Leoncavallo (*I Pagliacci*) and Giacomo Puccini (*La Boheme*).

Verismo opera is about showing realism in art, and in opera that is the humanity of real people, especially that of the commoner. The real-life circumstances that brought Marie Duplessis, Verdi's Violetta Valerey, to the courtesan profession can only help

build the audience's sympathies for the character he built. In 1824, Marie was born into poverty. Her birth name was Alphonsine Rose Plessis. Because of the abusive nature of her father, Marie's mother abandoned the family. Unwanted by her father, Marie was sent to live with her mother's cousin. This did not last very long, and she was brought back to her father. By 1838 at the age of 14, her father sold her into servitude to a seventy-two year old wealthy man from the country. Marie was clearly unhappy with this arrangement as she ran away several times to find work in laundries or shops. It was at the age of 16 that she realized prominent men were willing to pay her for her company in both private and social settings. Imagine how appealing that might be to someone who had spent her entire life struggling through abject poverty, compounded by being an unwanted child by those who were supposed to love and care for her.

Now the cultivation of a courtesan is a little more complex than what some might imagine. Many would simply call this profession "prostitution." However, as a kept woman, there were three different types or levels. There was the *grise*, the *lorette*, and the courtesan. Many women fell into the first two categories. A *grise* was a woman who worked in laundries, or some other menial job, but sold her body to help supplement her income in order to pay bills and eat. A *lorette* was a woman who did not need to work because the men she courted would pay for various aspects of her life; including housing, food, clothing. However, something about these women or the company they kept did not allow them to ascend to the level of a courtesan. A courtesan was a woman who maintained a particular balance of qualities that we inherently consider feminine. They could discuss poetry, music and fashion, but could also converse intelligently on subjects that were at the time exclusive to men: politics, war tactics, trade. These are some of the reasons why Marie Duplessis was so successful. Despite her background, she empowered herself to be educated, knowledgeable, and independent.

During her life, Marie exhibited certain character traits that entranced the socialites of Paris: her ability to be discreet, her intelligence, and her wit. As a person, it was said that Marie loved to laugh and laughed often, but her smile had some of the similar intrigue that we see in the mood of the Mona Lisa - somewhat like a trance of a rather sad boredom just beneath the surface. Of course, her character, wit and intelligence were important, but she was also very beautiful. Gustave Claudin describes her in *Mes Souvenirs*: "Her distinction, grace, and charm were sure to make her a star in the world of gallantry...Marie Duplessis was thin and pale, and had magnificent hair which came down to the ground. She was wayward, capricious, and wild, adoring today what she had hated yesterday, and vice versa. She possessed the art of elegance to the

highest degree...” The joie de vivre that she added to the places she filled seemed all the more poignant by the knowledge that it wouldn’t last forever. She knew that she was suffering from consumption, or tuberculosis, which was the cause of her death at the young age of 23. This is where the inspirational subject of *La traviata* meets the music and stage; as the opening scene is of Violetta (Marie) hosting a party in one of her illustrious salons at the peak of her professional success. This background information about Marie Duplessis to modern audiences takes historical digging, but to the audiences in 1853 this was common knowledge. Verdi took her life story and transmitted it across the stage lights to a society that wanted to shun and ignore this type of profession, lifestyle and person.

Shock, horror and disgust are some of the common words used in early reviews of *La traviata*. The critics who saw and experienced this opera were loyalists to the traditions of opera. They did not want to see carnal pleasures like gambling, and drinking being promoted and praised on the stage, especially in an elegant salon provided by a courtesan. Surely Verdi knew this when he wrote *La traviata*, so he wrote the story and his music with incredible genius. In producing this opera, Verdi demanded that the opera be staged in modern dress, in order to further blur the lines between audiences and the onstage characters. Musically speaking, *La traviata* follows many aspects of Italian tradition, particularly in regard to the hierarchy of voice parts, but it breaks free of other rules. Verdi reduced the number of acts and lessened the traditional sense of “numbers operas” by creating only small breaks between arias, and thus allowed the focus to be on the psychology of the characters. Beyond taking the risk of setting a contemporary story of a famous courtesan on stage, he sets it to contemporary music: the waltzes and polkas that had taken Europe by storm were the sounds that accompanied these heinous salon parties celebrating licentious behaviour. All of this was almost in direct violation to what had become commonplace in opera houses. However, all of these risks reap an immense reward. By Violetta's final aria, “addio del passato”, the audience cannot help but sympathize and see her humanity. Instead of using vocal acrobatics, Verdi writes with “distilled, dignified, and heart-rending simplicity.” It is in her final and weakest moment physically that we see the magnitude of her moral strength and her abiding belief in the redeeming power of love.

In his great risk-taking, Verdi created a tragedy that was romantic, social, and realistic. *La traviata* forged a new path in operatic history, and its story continues to evolve. Because of the unabashed honesty of the human experience in *La traviata*, Verdi created one of the most well-known works in the lyrical canon.