

## REVIEWS



Washington National Opera

*Hei-Kyung Hong as Violetta and John Matz as Alfredo, in the Washington Opera production of "La Traviata."*

# Verdi's *La Traviata*— The Woman Who Went Astray

The Washington National Opera performance of Giuseppe Verdi's *La Traviata* on May 14, directed by Marta Domingo, was magnificent. This performance was conceived in honor of the 150th anniversary of *La Traviata*, and utilized the rarely heard, original 1853 score. From the very first, beginning with the overture, the orchestra, conducted by Giovanni Reggioli, captured the attention of the audience. In contrast to many modern performances, in which historical specificity is violated with modernized sets and costumes, in this case both were presented in the period specified by Verdi, and were beautifully designed.

The singing was superb. Korean-American soprano Hei-Kyung Hong, making her role debut as Violetta, was particularly extraordinary. John Matz, singing his first Alfredo, was somewhat stiff in his physical movements, but in his singing was tremendous. The Mexican baritone Jorge Lagunes did a wonderful job portraying Alfredo's father, Giorgio Germont.

The performance was especially challenging, because the 1853 score is much more difficult than the later one of 1854. There are five differences in Acts II and III: the duet of Violetta and Germont; the final section of Germont's aria; the Act II finale; the Act III duet of Violetta and Alfredo; and the final scene. In the duet with Germont, when she cries out that she would rather die than leave Alfredo ("Ah, si, morir preferiro!"), Violetta's part climbs one-and-a-half octaves to a high-C. Germont's music soars up to F-natural both in the duet with Violetta and in the *cabaletta* "No, non udrai rimproveri." This *cabaletta*, along with Alfredo's *cabaletta*, "O mio rimorso, o infamia," are usually eliminated in modern performances.

### Educating for Citizenship

In his operas, Giuseppe Verdi was engaged in a project similar to that launched by Friedrich Schiller in Germany earlier through the creation of a national theater—the use of beauty to

elevate and prepare a population morally and intellectually for the establishment of a sovereign nation-state and the responsibilities of republican citizenship. Even though its subject matter is not explicitly political, as was the case in many of Verdi's earlier operas, *La Traviata*, which deals with the life and death of a French courtesan in 1847 (five years before the opera was written), is clearly part of the same political project.

Violetta Valery is "la traviata," literally, "the woman who went astray." And yet, in the course of the opera, this kept woman, or prostitute, who sought only pleasure, is transformed by Alfredo Germont's love for her, a love she had never previously experienced. But Alfredo's father, Giorgio Germont, demands that she leave Alfredo, because his sister's engagement will be ruined if her brother is linked to a prostitute in a relationship that would never receive the approval of the Church.

Although he is himself transformed during the play in response to Violetta's selflessness, and in the end realizes the damage that he has done, Giorgio Germont's small-minded, false morality, based upon traditional family values and customs, is precisely the mentality which Verdi knew had to be changed, if the ongoing effort to create a republic were not to result in tragedy.

At the same time, Alfredo's response to Violetta's leaving him is one of jealous rage, which so blinds him that he is unable to think. Thus, he cannot see that Violetta still loves him, and that it was his father's intervention which caused her departure from him.

But, even Violetta is not without responsibility for the outcome, in that she is unable to resist the pressure placed upon her by Alfredo's father. She has run out of funds, she has a fatal disease. She has asked God for



Washington National Opera

*In an act of selfless love, Violetta writes a farewell letter to Alfredo.*

forgiveness for her past waywardness, but, as she says, “even if God should forgive her, mankind, to her, remains

implacable.”

When Alfredo finally returns to her, hours before she dies, he asks her to for-

give him and his father. She responds: “I should forgive you? It’s I who am guilty, but only love made me so.”

In the end, as she is about to die, this “woman who went astray,” gives Alfredo the most beautiful of gifts. She gives him a miniature portrait of herself and then in the second to last aria of the opera, *Prendi, quest’e l’immagine*, she sings:

And if a gentle maiden  
In the flower of her youth  
Should give you her heart,  
Make her your wife, I wish it.  
Then give her this portrait  
And tell her it is a gift  
From one, among the angels,  
Who prays for her and for you.

So, although *La Traviata* ends in “bitter grief,” nonetheless Violetta’s last wish is an image of hope of future happiness.

— William F. Wertz, Jr.

## So Close to Perfection: A Failed Effort At Mozart’s *Le Nozze di Figaro*

*“In my opinion each number in Mozart’s Figaro is a miracle; it is totally beyond me how anyone could create something so perfect; nothing like it was ever done again, not even by Beethoven.”*

—Johannes Brahms<sup>1</sup>

While Brahms’ evident enthusiasm for Mozart’s opera, *Le Nozze di Figaro* (*The Marriage of Figaro*), may have led him to a slight overstatement, there is no doubt that this work is among the small number of compositions which qualifies for such accolades.

Mozart’s *Figaro* was a brilliant intervention into the cultural/political life of the Emperor Joseph II’s Vienna. With this work, he transformed opera, both in its form—“Figaro” fits neither the “opera seria” style of the so-called classical operas popular at the time, nor the



© 2004 Los Angeles Opera

*Erwin Schrott as Figaro and Isabel Bayrakdarian as Susanna, in the Los Angeles Opera production of “The Marriage of Figaro.”*