La Traviata

Everyone knows *La Traviata*: It is one of the most-performed operas in the repertoire, and the big Opera Houses know that it guarantees ‘bums on seats’ – particularly in the current financially tight environment in which the Arts find themselves. What, then, draws audiences to this piece? Yes, it has great tunes - the ‘Brindisi’ and ‘Sempre Libera’ are instantly recognisable to both the regular and occasional opera-goer. Verdi, like Puccini after him, was a dab-hand at writing great hit tunes, and this entices audience, singer, and conductor-alike to his works. But, I am not convinced that this, in the end, is the main draw of *La Traviata*.

When Opera Lyrica asked me to conduct *La Traviata* for them I also thought that I knew the piece fairly well. However, the more I delved into the score, the more I discovered that *La Traviata* isn’t the grand operatic statement we like to think it is: *La Traviata* is a person, a woman for whom it seems that Verdi had huge admiration and respect. The piece seems to be written through the prism of this remarkable woman. Even when she isn’t physically in a scene, she dominates, and she finally gains the love and respect of every other major protagonist in the opera. The piece is a wonderful, extended character study. Violetta Valery is the life-blood of the opera, and her character is, I believe, what makes us return again and again to the piece.

So, who is Violetta Valery, and how does Verdi portray her?

Despite the title, and the tragic denouement, Verdi does not depict Violetta as a woman in need of pity. One strong, simple string chord accompanying Violetta’s ‘Donna son io, signore’ (‘I am a woman, sir), as Giorgio Germont enters her country escape in Act II calling her a floozy, speaks volumes about Verdi’s attitude towards her. This is a strong, independent woman, not afraid to speak out – Verdi and Violetta immediately put Germont in his place. Germont, not expecting such a strong woman, has a tough job on his hands to effect the outcome he desires, and despite finally breaking Violetta’s resolve, he ends the scene with a respect for her he clearly didn’t have when he entered. His ‘Piangi, o misera’ (‘Weep, o poor woman’) is one of the only times that Verdi allows Germont to express genuine concern and love for another character. His later cavatina and cabaletta (‘Di Provenza’ and ‘No, non udrai rimpoveri’), sung to Alfredo, are a masterclass in manipulation – akin to Lauretta’s ‘O mio babbino caro’ in Puccini’s *Gianni Schicchi*. But, his music here never scales the emotional heights of his previous scene with Violetta. Giorgio Germont leaves Violetta with an altered view of her, wishing her happiness (‘Siate felice’).

In the finale of Act 2, we also see that Violetta is hugely respected by her friends, despite her chequered history. She elicits overwhelming sympathy from them when Alfredo, believing her of betraying him, repays his perceived debt by slinging money in her face in the most public of ways. During this scene, when Verdi allows time to stand still in an ensemble which pre-cursors a similar moment for Desdemona in his later *Otello*, Violetta herself doesn’t wallow in self-pity. Despite her evident grief and love for Alfredo, she doesn’t break her promise to Giorgio Germont, even under the most humiliating of circumstances. She is a woman of her word, and Verdi ends Act 2 demanding that the audience respect Violetta and her courage.

Verdi first introduces us to Violetta in the Overture, foretelling her eventual decline in the opening phrase of the opera with a direct quotation of the Act III Entr’acte and the music that surrounds Violetta’s Act III sick bed. This music is quickly forgotten, however, with the electric energy of the party music of Act I Scene I. But, the seed has been planted. Violetta is only too aware of her eventual fate: She knows that things do not look good for her. After a year in a sick bed, the consumption is killing her. Although she appears as the party girl, full of vivacity, Violetta and Verdi are not stupid: Indeed, the average age of mortality for a woman in Italy at the time Verdi wrote *La Traviata* was 34 years. Life was a delicate and fragile thing, and Violetta is only too aware of what awaits her, despite her ‘E Nulla’ (It’s Nothing’). Verdi throws Violetta into the vortex of Act I, so that she doesn’t have time to think about her illness. Moments with Alfredo aside, the pace is relentess. Verdi convinces us, and almost convinces Violetta herself, that she has nothing to live for but pleasure. This results in the mania of ‘Gioire, di volutta ne vortici, di volutta perir’ (Joy…to want to plunge into the vortex, to want to perish’), and the famous ‘Sempre Libera’ (‘Always free’). This cabaletta is a staple of the opera-pops concerts, and it is easy to forget that this is a conflicted woman on the edge of love and death. This cabaletta is her final attempt to live in the present and to not accept that an uncertain future, with only one eventual outcome, is heading her way. She invokes pleasure, madness and joy as her coloratura becomes more frenzied and higher, and Verdi drags us breathless into the vortex with her.

The result of this is that we are surprised to learn at the beginning of Act II that Violetta has not embraced the mania of Act I, and has taken life by the horns, opting to live for love. We learn from Alfredo in his cavatina (‘Dei miei bollenti spiriti’) that Violetta told him ‘Voglio vivere. Io voglio a te fedel’ (‘I want to live. I want to be faithful to you.’). Alfredo, and later Giorgio Germont, take Violetta’s talk of her own life and death as metaphor. Little do they know that Violetta is actually talking about the reality of her situation. This is hardly suprising: As we saw in Act I, Violetta has become a master at supressing her emotions. However, she does feels them deeply, and occasionally they bubble to the surface.

The second melody we hear in the overture is one of the most famous melodies of the opera. It is presented ardently by violin, viola and cello, but is under-scored by a graceful dance-like accompaniment in the wind and remainder of the strings. This melody belongs to Violetta, and beautiful though it is it feels restrained. It appears only once more in the piece, half-way through the opera, in the most climatic and heart-wrenching moment. As Violetta leaves Alfredo, she sings ‘Amami Alfredo. Amami quanto io t’amo’ (‘Love me Alfredo, Love me as much as I love you.’). This melody is now anything but restrained: Marked in the score ‘with passion and strength’, from almost nowhere, Violetta’s emotions overwhelm her and the audience. Verdi leaves us in no doubt that Violetta feels love and life deeply and fully. In fact, there is no other character in the piece who has such honest and gut-wrenching music written for them.

By Act III, Violetta is dying, but her approach to death is understated and human. She jokes with the doctor, and tries to make others feel better about her impending demise. Only when she is alone do we hear her honest thoughts and feelings about her death. In ‘Addio bel passato dei sogni ridenti’ (‘Farewell beautiful past of smiling dreams’), she refers to herself as the traviata - the first time that the word appears in the piece. However, there is no self-pity in this music. In transcendent and sublime music she asks God to accept her, to welcome her. She wants no cross and no tomb to cover her bones, and she accepts that her life is over (‘tutto e fini’) with an unaccompanied final note with which Verdi reveals her strength and vulnerability.

As Violetta Valery dies, she enters a reverie, and believes that she is being restored to health. She ends her life on a high, singing ‘O Gioia’ (‘O Joy’). We haven’t heard Violetta singing about joy since Act I, but despite her death Verdi makes us feel that she believes it in her last breath in a way she didn’t in Act I.

Violetta’s story is a complex and utterly human one, and the audience are more fully aware of her entire journey than any of the other characters that inhabit her world. Verdi’s triumph is to take us into Violetta’s world and to let us know, understand, respect and like her. We feel her love, sacrifice and death in a personal way: Perhaps that is why we all return to *La Traviata* again and again.