



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



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*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



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

“opera buffa” type—and by his astonishing compositional virtuosity, in which a piece of more than three hours maintains a singular idea, applying the “*Motivführung*” principle of composition, which Mozart learned from his collaborator, Joseph Haydn.<sup>2</sup>

In its political polemic, the optimism about the nature of man which permeates the opera, with its theme of equality and justice, is a reflection of the enthusiasm for the American Revolution among republicans in Europe.

A servant, Figaro, and his bride-to-be, Susanna, are forced into a conspiracy, to thwart the intent of their master, the lustful Count Almaviva, to assert one of the most brutal practices of the nobility, the “*droit de seigneur*,” or “right of the first night” (which an oligarch exercised by sleeping with a newly-wedded bride on his domains, before permitting the bridegroom to do so).

The conspiracy widens, as the two bring in his neglected and forlorn wife, while the Count incorporates his lackeys into his scheme.

### Dangerously Revolutionary

The “revolutionary” theme of the drama is evident at once, as Figaro responds to being told by Susanna that the Count wants to reassert his oligarchical rights with her, with a defiant cavatina, “*Se vuol ballare*”—If you want to dance, he sings, referring to the Count, I will play the tune; i.e., you will not get away with this. Imagine the response from the nobility seated in the audience, to the impudence of this mere servant, in challenging this previously enforced right!

In 1786, when this opera was first performed, there was no legal concept of justice for servants living in Hapsburg Austria. Servants, as well as most others who were not part of the nobility, lived at the mercy and “beneficence” of the oligarchy. The bestiality of this “*droit de seigneur*” shows the extent to which a large segment of the population was treated as property, no better than animals. Yet, the reaction to this challenge was tempered by the extraordi-



Susanna, Figaro, and Countess Almaviva conspire to teach the Count a lesson.

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narly beautiful music of Mozart, which adds to the drama on the stage. It becomes impossible for an audience not to recognize the human qualities of the servants, or to be moved by the haunting prayer of the Countess as she pleads, in “*Porgi, amor*,” for her lost love to return.

In the end, it is Susanna, the Countess, and Figaro who prevail, as the Count falls into their elaborate trap, and must plead for forgiveness from his wife, before everyone who lives on his estate. For the moment, it is a happy ending, as cunning has defeated brute force, and love has trumped lust.

Yet, the ending leaves one with an eerie, unresolved sense that all is not really well. Mozart demonstrates a prescience, through the development of his characters—who are not stereotypes, but real, live human beings, with fears and anxieties, and hopes for a better future—of the dangers lurking if Europe’s oligarchy rejected the notion of the inalienable rights of all the people, which was the driving force behind the American Revolution. The bloody chaos of the French Revolution, unleashed in 1789, three years after the premiere of Mozart’s opera, by Britain’s Lord Shelburne, to prevent the spread of the American Revolution to Europe, is a palpable threat, just

beneath the surface in the opera. It is foreshadowed in the revolt against the Count, whose unhappy capitulation to the plot was necessary to prevent a nastier conclusion.

It was for this reason that the play from which the opera was adapted, written by Pierre Augustine Beaumarchais—who was a leading organizer in France of support for the American Revolution—was a matter of controversy at Joseph II’s court. The play had been banned by the Emperor’s decree, but Mozart and his librettist, Lorenzo Da Ponte, convinced Joseph that the opera was unlikely to lead to riots, as the play had when it opened in Paris.<sup>3</sup>

### Historical Specificity

In numerous writings and statements on the method of Classical composition, Lyndon LaRouche has emphasized the importance of “historical specificity.” By this, he means that the intent of the author or composer is to choose an historic moment of crisis in order to provide, to the audience, an insight into their own thinking and behavior, through a self-conscious reflection on the actions of those on the stage. To accomplish this, great dramatists, on the level of Shakespeare and Schiller, picked specific historical



events or personalities, as in Shakespeare's *Richard III* or Schiller's *Don Carlos* and *The Maid of Orleans*, to take the audience beyond "the facts" of historical developments, to a deeper level of truth.

This Classical method forces members of the audience to confront their own fears, to reflect on their own axioms, as they watch the struggles, failures, and successes of those on stage, so they may locate their own sense of identity in history, and find the courage to act against the wrongs they face in their own times. This succeeds in art, not in the literal and didactic way pushed by modernists such as Bertolt Brecht, who reject the Classical form, but through use of metaphor and irony, so that viewers may discover, in their own imagination, what the dramatist or composer has discovered about the potential to transform them, by making them self-conscious.

For this reason, it is both wrong and immoral for modern producers to take a Classical work and change it, to make it more "relevant" to the modern audience, by such tricks as moving the setting. This is commonly done with Beethoven's great opera *Fidelio*, which was written about the jailing of the Marquis de Lafayette. It is often re-set, in either Nazi Germany or a Central American dictatorship, thus robbing it of its real, rich historical context, that of the battle to bring the American Revolution to Europe. Similarly, the recent staging in Berlin of Mozart's *Abduction from the Seraglio*—which was composed with the intent of dampening the enthusiasm of some Viennese oligarchs for war with the Turks—was set in a Twentieth-century bordello and drug den.

### 'Figaro' in Los Angeles

In June 2004, the Los Angeles Opera presented *Le Nozze di Figaro*. The first act was a complete joy, as the story literally leapt off the stage. The singing was excellent, the playing of the orchestra was crisp. A particular standout was Erwin Schrott, a baritone from Uruguay, who played

Figaro. In addition to a rich voice, Schrott's athletic cavorting and expressive acting made him a highly sympathetic character, in sharp contrast to David Pittsinger's effective performance as the Count, whose plaintive request that Susanna meet him for a tryst, in Act III's "Crudel," combined a seductive sweetness with more than a hint of menace.

Yet, despite an overall superlative cast, there was one huge problem. No, the setting was not Hollywood, but a recognizable Segovia in 1780—true to both Beaumarchais and Mozart, with one glaring exception. As the curtain opens on Act II, with the Countess singing "Porgi, amor," we first see her on the bed, on the *telephone!* This seemingly minor contrivance—which was completely incongruous, serving no function whatsoever—was repeated in the beginning of Act III, when the Count is seen at the opening of the curtain, also on the phone! In both cases, nothing was said by the characters, who hung up the phone, and then began singing.

However, that one directorial indulgence (or, perhaps, act of temporary insanity), destroyed the historic specificity of the whole performance. Instead of leaving the theater exhilarated and uplifted, those who really

know Mozart walked away with a dull ache, saddened that, once again, a great moment had been ruined by an impulsive act of ego, as a conceit of Brechtian *Regietheatre* destroyed what was otherwise a nearly perfect performance.

—Harley Schlanger

1. Quoted in Wolfgang Hildesheimer, *Mozart* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1982).
2. For a discussion of Mozart's development of Haydn's "*Motivführung*" principle, see Lyndon H. LaRouche, Jr., "Mozart's 1782-1786 Revolution in Music," *Fidelio*, Winter 1992 (Vol. I, No. 4). See also David Shavin's accompanying "Mozart and the American Revolutionary Upsurge," for a detailed presentation of Mozart's involvement in the republican movement of his time.
3. One Mozart scholar, Volkmar Braunbehrens, goes so far as to argue that Joseph II approved of a performance of the opera as a "political calculation." He writes that Joseph, who was a reformer and had taken steps to limit the near-absolute power of the Austrian oligarchy and the Church, "was creating a political issue [by approving of performing the opera]. . . . From his viewpoint, the servant who defends his rights was only of minor interest; it was far more important to hold a mirror up to the nobility." [From Volkmar Braunbehrens, *Mozart in Vienna* (New York: Grove Weidenfeld, 1986).]



Count Almaviva, Figaro, Countess Almaviva, and Susan—and in the middle of everything, a bizarre, anachronistic telephone!

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