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G. Verdi's "La Traviata": History of Creation, First Productions and Stage Interpretation of the Character of Violetta

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The article dedicated to one of the most famous operas of the world repertoire – "La Traviata" by G. Verdi, was written by an opera singer who has been singing Violetta's part on the stages of Russia and the world for more than 20 years, and a musicologist – a specialist in the field of operatic drama. The authors synthesize a historical approach with a practical one, cover cultural and biographical contexts of creation of the opera, explain the reasons for choosing a relevant and highly courageous story for the Verdi's opera times, and set out observations of the figurative-dramaturgical specificity of the work. The authors study the attitude of the composer to the current state of the Italian theatre and the reasons that prompted him to turn to the story of the drama by Alexandre Dumas. In the course of discussions, G. Verdi's letters, research works in the field of cultural studies and musicology are presented as arguments. The authors also note peculiarities of the interpretation of the title role of the opera "La Traviata" played by Maria Callas and Anna Netrebko, whose interpretations were justified, masterfully crafted and brilliantly realized. The article accentuates the main vocal and dramatic complexity of interpretation of the character of Violetta and ways to overcome it.

Keywords: G. Verdi, "La Traviata", Giuseppina Strepponi, opera house, Maria Callas, Anna Netrebko.

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Research area: culture studies.

More than half a century ago one of the most famous operas was staged at the Venetian Teatro La Fenice. It is "La Traviata" by Giuseppe Verdi. It is well known that the opera failed during the premiere. Most often, in this regard, a letter from Verdi to Emanuele Muzio (his only student and assistant) is cited: "Dear Emanuele, La Traviata last night, fiasco. Is it my fault or the fault of the singers? Time will tell" [Verdi, 1973: 65]. In a

letter of the same day to Giovanni Ricordi the composer writes about "the need to give the sad news... La Traviata was a fiasco. Let us look for the causes. This is the story" [Verdi, 1973: 65]. Verdi used the same restrained phrases about a "solid fiasco" of the new musical drama in his letters to Vincenzo Lukardi and Cesare De Sanctis. However, a year later, La Traviata was staged at another Venetian Theatre, San Benedetto, and

was successfully accepted by the public, which was a beginning of the triumphal procession of the Verdi's masterpiece on stages around the world. All of this is well-known to musicians and opera-lovers, as well as the fact that the failure of the premiere is traditionally explained by its social background and that frankness of reality demonstration that the Venetian audience could not forgive.

The failure of this opera was quite painful for Verdi. He watched performances and learnt, for example, that *La Traviata* was going to be staged in Naples and, in this regard, sceptically wrote to Cesare Sanctis on November 29, 1854: "I do not want *Rigoletto* and *La Traviata* to be staged in Naples. There is no suitable troupe for either opera. Both of them will certainly fail. [Verdi, 1973: 83-84]. In 1857, Verdi's *Simon Boccanegra* fails at Teatro La Fenice, on which he inform Clara Maffei with following words: *Boccanegra* in Venice was almost the same complete fiasco as *La Traviata* [Verdi, 1973: 98. italics added – V.B., S.V.]. As you can see, the shock of the failure of the opera about the life and death of Violetta Valéry became for the composer a sad "measure" of failure that emphasizes the degree of upset experienced after the Venetian premiere in 1853.

Compared to any other work, Verdi's letters contain very little information about *La Traviata*. Let us try to reconstruct the chronology. The first hint of interest in the Dumas story or something similar (since Verdi does not specify any name of the work or its author) can be found in a letter to Salvatore Cammarano of April 9, 1851. The essence is as follows. The composer is not satisfied with the script of "Troubadour" that gave rise to a lot of complaints and comments. Having set out his vision of the drama to the librettist, maestro ends a letter with an apology for the "impudence" and the proposal to take up "another story – simple and heartfelt, about which we can say that it is almost finished" [Verdi, 1973:

57]. However, apparently Cammarano managed to make the necessary changes that eventually satisfied the composer. "A simple and heartfelt story" had to be translated into a series of musical libretto with another playwright, since shortly after the completion of the libretto "Troubadour" Cammarano died, before the Roman premiere of the opera.

The name of the new Verdi's opera was first mentioned in a letter to Cesare De Sanctis from January 1, 1853: "For Venice I write "The Lady of the Camellias" that will probably be titled as "The Fallen Woman" ("*La Traviata*"). The plot is modern. Perhaps another would not have taken up this plot because of decency, because of the age and because of thousands of other stupid prejudices... But I do it with great pleasure" [Verdi, 1973: 63]. And after 2 months Verdi tells friends about the failure of the opera preferring to remain silent about the reasons.

However, less than a year later, in a letter to Cesare De Sanctis comes up an interesting observation: "Ah, so you like my *Traviata*? That poor sinner who was so unfortunate in Venice. One day I am going to make the world do her honour. But not at Naples where your priests would be terrified of seeing on stage the sort of things they do themselves at night on the quiet, while it would be better to do them in the bright sunlight in a public place like Diogenes" [Verdi, 1973: 78]. For the first time the composer himself talks about another cause of possible failure of the opera accused after the premiere to be "immoral": the extraordinary relevance of the story that turned out to be so outspoken for the opera stage that the audience who read the novels of Balzac, Stendhal, Guy de Maupassant and knew about the history of creation of the Dumas play was not ready to accept the same story from the scene of opera that had its own laws.

As if Verdi "explodes" the conventions on the inside. It is unlikely that he set himself the



Giuseppina Strepponi

task to shock the audience. It is known that the composer strove for a different purpose when choosing a “simple and heartfelt story”: he wanted truthfulness and naturalness on the opera stage, the real, authentic experiences just like those in the novel by Alexandre Dumas that affected him so much and that Verdi understood for deeply personal reasons.

Let us remember that in 1851 Verdi spent summer in Busseto, where, since 1849, he has been coming to with his girlfriend, a singer Giuseppina Strepponi. The composer knew that living under the same roof with a woman without formalizing their relationship was perceived by the provincials around them as an outrage against morals and almost a scandal, an insult to fellow citizens who buzzed about the past of Giuseppina who had three illegitimate children. Let us not forget that Antonio Barezzi, Verdi's former father-in-law, the father of his first wife Marguerite, was highly respected in the city. Perhaps by judging a relationship between Verdi and Strepponi, the townspeople wanted to show support for a man who was respected by Verdi himself calling him

“my kind angel” and who remained in a very good relationship with him.

Anyways, another summer in Busseto cost Verdi a lot of unpleasant moments and hours and again showed that even his fame and unequivocal leadership on a music stage did not provide protection from human gossip and public bigotry. No wonder the premier of “The Lady of the Camellias” that Verdi watched with his girlfriend in the Parisian theatre “Vaudeville” in February 1852 was something special to the composer. “The match of personal and artistic impressions was a powerful fermentative beginning, which allowed him... to give up, even if only in this case, the conventional, theatrical aspects of the art that had nothing to do with real life” [Gasparov, 2009: 106].

Finally, another aspect that seems to lie on the surface, but was never mentioned in literature relating to the history of “La Traviata”. It is important to remember that after the Italian “years of drudgery”, when Verdi left home Busseto only to see premieres of his operas, the author of “Nabucco” and “Macbeth” periodically travelled

to Paris. Since the 30's of the 19th century the city gained a status of the capital of the art world and became a sort of a "seething cauldron" where all the processes were powerful and bright. Despite the fact that Verdi was living a secluded life, he still could not remain uninvolved in the world around him. Influence of Giuseppina who was open-minded and had a keen interest in what was going on around her, very gently and lovingly drew attention of her beloved man to literary, theatrical and musical trends, which certainly played a role in the changes reflected in the "revolutionary" for the Italian opera plots that were "Rigoletto" and "La Traviata". It is no coincidence that both of these works were written based on the plots of French playwrights – Verdi's contemporaries.

Talking about the reasons for the choice of the story, O. Tverdokhlebova takes a short excursus to the history of French literature and notes that "since the 20's of the 19th century French writers preferred novels on the theme of love. In the 50's-60's, the modern and household themes and stories were dominant in the "fancy" Romance literature. Among them there was a so-called theme of "rehabilitation of a courtesan" [Tverdokhlebova, 2003: 71], one of the embodiments of which became a novel and then a play by Alexandre Dumas that also had an autobiographical background. The same is seen in the opera by Verdi who, as rightly observed by Alexander Matusevich, "elevates, romanticizes and breathes life with his music into a quite questionable story" [Muzikal'naia zhizn', 2014: 6-7]. Thus, both works contributed to "actualization of significant... socio-cultural phenomena existing in society, translation of information about their availability through the artistic images in order to attract public attention to them" [Voprosy kul'turologii, 2013: 78].

As we can see, all the circumstances of Verdi's life – both subjective, personal and objective, historical-cultural – as if gradually

prepared the ground for the birth of the opera masterpiece. "Solid fiasco" was so painful for Verdi that, as was previously mentioned, he was able to respond on it just with short messages to friends. Although the premier failed, in the next year several theatres announced the scandalous opera on posters of their stagione. The best of them was the version of the Neapolitan San Benedetto that is recognized everywhere and opened the way for "The Fallen Woman" to the world stages.

However, it would be wrong to think that since then the musical drama of Verdi and Piave has gained continued success and applause. The letters of the composer in 1854 prove this. From them we learn that "La Traviata" was staged by the Naples Teatro San Carlo in October. Again, the opera received cold greeting largely due to the extremely weak performance. And if only a year earlier Verdi was limited by the phrase "is it my fault or the singers'?", now he had no doubt that "the time told" in favor of the author! At this time the composer in every detail (in comparison with the failure of the premiere in 1853) describes his attitude to what has happened: "So, "La Traviata" was a fiasco! I knew it... How did the management have the decency to stage a new opera with such a mediocre troupe! And you are asking me to write for Naples?.. With this management? When the public keeps being neglectful whenever it is offered something new?.. Why is it not possible to similarly show a queen and a peasant woman, a virtuous woman and a courtesan on the stage of your San Carlo? Why not show a doctor on the stage feeling pulse of a patient, or show a costume party... etc.? It is indecent, you say. Why? If it is possible to die of poison or a sword, why is it not possible to die of tuberculosis or the plague?" [Verdi, 1973: 90].

Again, the emotions of Verdi's statement aim to persuade the recipient of the necessity and relevance of the appearance in the theatre of



Maria Callas as Violetta. Directed by L. Visconti

realistic events and stories. At the same time, the maestro suggests that the performers of the main parts should be talented in terms of vocal and acting skills. Among his contemporaries, Verdi singled out Maria Piccolomini and Adelina Patti.

In the 20th century Maria Callas can be attributed to those contemporaries. The direction by Luchino Visconti (1955), where she played the title role, “caused a scandal, since she accurately touched the society in a sore spot that had not changed since Verdi” [Herbst, 2002]. At the same time, “Callas just breathed life into Verdi’s Violetta... And it is hardly possible to assess her singing in the play by the usual, “standard” measures. The opera “La Traviata” itself is that if the performer does not have the tragic temperament, the play turns into a notorious “concert in costumes” [Herbst, 2002].

Here are the memories of Maria Callas: “Luchino Visconti is an important new stage in my artistic life. I will never forget the third act of “La Traviata” staged by him. I went on the stage like a Christmas tree, dressed up as the heroine of Marcel Proust. Without sweetness,

without vulgar sentimentality. When Alfred was throwing money at my face, I did not bend down, did not run away: I stayed on the stage with arms outstretched as if I said to the public: “Here is a shameless woman before you” [Callas].

Verdi’s words, quotes from the memoirs of the great singer and the personal experience of stage embodiment of Verdi’s characters suggest that the role of Violetta is extremely complex both in a dramatic and a vocal aspect.

The opera is written in three acts, the second of which has 2 scenes: in a country house of Violetta and at the ball at Flora’s. In fact, the singer who sings the title role has to play four mini-pieces to reveal the richness of the image. It requires new timbre colours from a performer. It is no accident A. Herbst writes that M. Callas’ contemporaries pointed out that she sang this role with four different voices [Herbst, 2002]. The image of the main character goes through evolution from a free woman-courtesan who is desired by all the men around her, through a home happy atmosphere to the forced abandonment of happiness, public humiliation and tragic death.

Of course, the singer performing this part should think through a lot herself, comprehend a lot and to go on stage with her own vision of the role. After all, no matter what the directors taught, each soprano offers their own interpretation of the role in compliance with their organics and their vocal talent. Of course, you can follow the example of the great singers, notice interesting details and try to impersonate them on stage, but you cannot copy someone else's style naturally and inspiredly – so much that it could touch the audience.

Every scene with Violetta requires mastery of vocal control, the ability to implement “a conflict achieved in a vocal part by the opposition of the lyrical and virtuosic elements” [Leontovskaia, 1982: 16]. This creates certain difficulties and is the reason that it takes a long time for many singers to take up the role, because coloratura sopranos are afraid not to fill the whole part, and dramatic sopranos, on the contrary, are afraid of technical tasks.

The first extensive solo scene of the heroine “E strano...” embodies different facets of the image: tenderness, dreaminess, unspent feeling of true love that Violetta once dreamed of, and a fierce denial (was not it from the fear to be deceived?) of a possibility of this happiness for herself, a kind of “declaration” of a demimondaine who is long-living with easy virtue. Such a sharp gradation requires from a singer, on the one hand, cantilena, a good breath support that helps to sing the aria “Ah, forse lui che l'anima solinga ne'tumulti”. On the other hand, virtuosic vocal control in the range of three octaves, the ability to control and prepare the upper sounds avoiding “pitiful-shrill” notes. It is no coincidence that this scene was included in the concert repertoire of many opera divas, because it is extremely bright and, in modern language, presentable, which allows the singer to demonstrate the strongest sides of her skills. At the same time, it is a mistake to believe

that “Sempre libera” is the only important and crucial aria in the opera. The most intense scenes, in terms of emotional and dramatic development of the character, can be heard in the next acts.

The most difficult for the performer of Violetta's part is the second act. At the beginning the heroine is in a state of perfect happiness, complete confidence that finally she found true mutual love in her life; she is calm, homely, because she lives in harmony with herself. However, Giorgio Germont changes everything. A lot is written about the internal heat and the importance of the duet scene of Violetta and Alfredo's father in discovering the image of the main heroine and understanding of the greatness of her sacrifice. It was also noted by the composer himself in a letter dated February 17, 1855, the quotation of which is shown below. An extensive scene requires from the performers not just dramatic skills to “live through” the events, but do it so naturally that the public would believe in the authenticity of what is happening. At the same time, the emotions also must be expressed musically, intoned very precisely, which is possible only with a certain detachment from occurring. One of the best performers of Violetta's part Anna Netrebko finds extremely suitable colours for this duo. “Violetta's breakdown occurs quietly, without visible emotions. It is read in a tired voice and appearance. The vocal sound suddenly becomes flat and lifeless – as if the soul left the body” [Potapova, 1998].

The next scene with Alfred is even more difficult. Violetta is not just in a difficult, but indeed a terrible condition: the forced parting with Alfred is akin to death for her. At this, she has to, against her will owing to a strange girl and her word given to Giorgio Germont, come up with a lie to make her lover believe in her treacherous betrayal. The real climax of this scene becomes Violetta's appeal to the lover: “Amami, Alfredo, amami quant'io t'amo”. Perhaps this phrase



Anna Netrebko as Violetta. Directed by W. Decker

captures the strongest emotion in the opera. It is no accident that Verdi builds it based on the theme of “perfect love”. O. Tverdokhlebova writes about it surprisingly accurately: “Love theme from the entry appears only once in the opera and is brought to its climax: supported tutti of the orchestra, tremolo in the *ff* dynamics, in a rhythmic increase, it sounds passionate and strong as a majestic hymn to love, but, represents, at the same time, a farewell to the dream” [Tverdokhlebova, 2003: 75].

In an effort to express all the intensity and drama of the situation, the singer, however, should try to control herself because, been overwhelmed with emotions, she can lose voice. An additional “provocation” in this case is the author’s dynamics and powerful “waves” of the orchestral crescendo – diminuendo that seem to reflect emotions overwhelming the character. Let us express an opinion that the mentioned *ff*, to a certain extent, implies a special attention to this phrase. After all, if to perform it ingenuously, the orchestra will just “overlay” the singer and the whole tragic experience will “sink” under the weight of the instrumental sound. At the same time, this place of the score requires special sensitivity and delicacy of the conductor whose

gesture could provoke a performer of the part for an inadmissible overdrive.

The final aria “Addio del passato” is very difficult vocally and technically. It requires a soft extending, “endless” breathing, some “incorporeity” of the timbre and extraordinary smoothness of each sound. Let us refer again to the review of N. Potapova admiring the performance by A. Netrebko: “Anna plays the death of the heroine philosophically easily... the beginning of the aria is almost passionless, with calmness of the dying woman. And only the last high note is a desperate cry of heart” [Potapova, 1998]. In this case, it is difficult to refrain from quoting the following expression: “Death comes not as a cessation of existence in reality, but rather as the only possible end of love...” [Gavrilova, 2014: 27].

In the “farewell” aria, it is important to fulfil all the accents and nuances specified by Verdi. Let us note that the composer constantly stresses the upbeat. Thus, doomness of the heroine and her destiny’s outcome can be strongly felt. It would seem that the same notes are written for all the singers in clavier, but everyone performs this scene differently. It depends on the internal state of the singer, her ability to feel it and on

the advertency of the conductor, for whom it is important to support the performer and at the same time to follow the soloist without upsetting the tempo.

Obviously, the development of characters in the opera takes place at an increasing trajectory. It was noted by Verdi himself, who wrote to Cesare De Sanctis in February, 1855: "You find that the second act is weaker than the other! You are wrong. The second act is better than the first. The third one is the best of all – and so it should be. I want one thing: to stage myself with two suitable performers a duo of the second act that seems long to you; then maybe you would find it very impressive and equal in dignity to any other my duos in regards to a thought and would find it superior to many duets in form and feeling.

I would like to be able to let you listen to the performance of a singer who can sing *andante* *Di Provenza* so that you could understand that this is the best *cantabile* I have written for a baritone! I would like to stage the end of the opera by myself and especially the final scene of the card game – and then maybe you would have changed your opinion about it!" [Verdi, 1973: 90 – 91].

Let us note that in this passage from a letter from Verdi of February 17, 1855 he repeats the idea several times in different versions: "I would like to stage by myself". It gives the right to assume that the composer was not satisfied with not only the insufficient skills of performers, but also the weakness of the dramatic play, the lack of the director's work. Of course, it should be taken into account that the position of the director in the modern sense of the word began to appear in theatres only at the beginning of the 20th century: first in the drama, and then in the musical theatre. Therefore, in this aspect, Verdi looked far ahead knowing that for the presentation of characters in the lyrical-psychological opera it is necessary to

provide a strong vocal and dramatic component, as well as the director's work.

Maestro's ideas got their implementation in the 20th century, when not only the performers of the main parts, but also the director play an important role in creation of the opera. Often, the name of the latter interests the public almost more than performers. But as the experience of recent years shows, the most significant results are obtained when the vocal and dramatic skills of singers are combined with a clear and reasonable logic of the director's will striving for the most accurate embodiment of the composer's message. With no doubt we can say this about the W. Decker's production held in Salzburg in 2005. Offering his own version of Verdi's masterpiece in the Regietheater¹ tradition, the German director keeps relevant topics raised by Dumas and Verdi, and thus conveys an authentic drama of the main character destiny created in front of the audience by the consummate singers: Anna Netrebko (Russia), Rolando Villazon (Mexico) and Thomas Hampson (United States). Each performer not only is amazing and flawless musically, but also "lives through" the role on the stage, thereby achieving the highest degree of influence. Not by chance, even inexperienced viewers talked about the real aesthetic and musical shock that they experienced while watching the performance directed by W. Decker.

It has been 160 years since the first staging of "La Traviata", but until now this opera retains a tremendous power of the impact. Verdi not just immortalized the story by Alexandre Dumas. He created the drama of a tender, loving soul reaching extraordinary heights in its sacrifice, and thereby giving rise to love and compassion in everyone who has touched a brilliant masterpiece of the Italian maestro.

¹ Regietheater – a modern phenomenon of the opera that develops from the second half of the 20th century. For details, see. [Novgorodova, 2014: 93].

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Опера Дж. Верди «Травиата»: к вопросу об истории создания, первых постановок и сценической трактовке образа Виолетты

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Статья, посвященная одной из самых известных опер мирового репертуара «Травиате» Дж. Верди, написана оперной певицей, более 20 лет исполняющей партию Виолетты на сценах России и мира, и музыковедом – специалистом в области оперной драматургии. Авторы синтезируют исторический подход с практическим, освещают культурологический и биографический контексты создания оперы, объясняют причины выбора актуального и чрезвычайно смелого сюжета для оперной сцены времен Верди, а также излагают наблюдения над образно-драматургической спецификой произведения. Рассматривается отношение композитора к современному состоянию итальянского театра и причины, побудившие его обратиться к сюжету драмы А. Дюма. В ходе рассуждений в качестве аргументов привлекаются письма Дж. Верди, исследования в области культурологии и музыковедения. Отмечаются особенности интерпретации заглавной партии оперы «Травиата» Марией Каллас и Анной Нетребко, чья трактовка представляется оправданной, мастерски продуманной и блестяще реализованной. Акцентируются основные сложности вокального и драматического воплощения образа Виолетты и пути их преодоления.

Ключевые слова: Дж. Верди, «Травиата», Джузеппина Стреппони, оперный театр, Мария Каллас, Анна Нетребко.

Научная специальность: 24.00.00 – культурология.
