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**Practical solutions to performing the role of Violetta Valery in Giuseppe Verdi's *La traviata* (1853)**

**Introduction**

In this paper I explore possible solutions to the practical problems presented by the role of Violetta in Verdi's opera, *La traviata*. As a practising singer, I am aware of the particular vocal and dramatic challenges involved in performing the role. An experienced singer can advise on how the role should be sung. A director or drama coach can advise on how it should be played. Recorded versions of the role are available to be heard and seen for reference purposes. The memoirs of individual singers may give glimpses of their personal impressions of the role. Detailed information on the role in its entirety, however, has not been documented by a performer. I believe that practice-led research may assist future students, performers and directors to assess how the role of Violetta might be successfully approached.

In the works of Verdian scholars such as Julian Budden (1978), David Kimbell (1981) and Gilles de Van (1998), little reference to the singer's experience on a technical and analytical level appears to be made. They tend to glance at the fortuitous nature of the opera's realism, both structurally and historically, in adducing general principles regarding Verdi's methods. They may cite Verdi's personal life and the fact that the opera is based on a true story as a lucky or irrelevant coincidence.

In practice, provided that the soprano is not so physically ill-suited as to be unattractive, the role of Violetta will be offered to the singer possessing a voice which can manage the Act I finale. It is a 'plum' prima donna's role. Julian Budden (1978, p. 122) quotes a letter from the librettist, Francesco Maria Piave, to Marzari, President of La Fenice Opera House, which tells of Verdi's insistence that 'to sing Traviata one must be young, have a graceful figure and sing with passion'. Verdi wrote a letter to the music publisher Giulio Ricordi, in which he referred to the role of Violetta as one in which 'even a mediocrity could possess the right qualities to shine in that opera and be dreadful in everything else' (Budden 1978, pp. 343-44). These remarks would

suggest that vocal quality was not the most important consideration for Verdi when contemplating the role of Violetta. In the competitive atmosphere of today's operatic world and with the standards of comparison available to the public through digital recording and cinema, a 'mediocrity' would find her presentation of the role of Violetta unacceptable.

I begin by providing a background to the character of Violetta and note the biographical and literary sources of the role as well as subsequent stage and film manifestations of the character. I also note the novelty of a role which presented challenging contemporary issues to its audiences. By drawing on my own experience, I explore the various dramatic and musical strategies necessary to give a convincing portrayal of Violetta. By exploring the technical challenges of the Act I Finale in performing the repeat section of *Sempre libera degg'io* (Cal 1), I examine the breadth of vocal and dramatic strategies involved in presenting it as part of the opera as a whole. In my second vocal demonstration (Cal 2) I perform the comparatively simple yet poignant *Addio, del passato* of Act III, in which the character of Violetta must rely on the dramatic warmth of a lower tessitura (prevailing vocal range) to reveal her nostalgic longings. Through the two vocal excerpts, I hope to demonstrate the paradoxes of a role which makes widely different technical demands on the singer but allows her to use them in a way which naturally shows the development of Violetta's character.

### **The character of Violetta**

The literal translation of the title of Giuseppe Verdi's opera, *La traviata*, is 'the woman led astray'. The leading character, Violetta Valery, was the forerunner of the *Moulin Rouge* character, Satine. Violetta's manifestation as Satine in Baz Luhrmann's (2001) award winning film, *Moulin Rouge*, continued Verdi's exposition of the tragic physical degeneration and death of a dissolute beauty, morally redeemed and redeeming by love. The role of Violetta was originally based on the real-life courtesan Marie Duplessis, who, as Marguerite Gautier, was the subject of Alexandre Dumas' (1848) novel and play, *La Dame aux Camélias*. The character in Dumas's play survived into the 1930's as Greta Garbo's *Camille* and, in Jonathan Kent's (2007) West End musical adaptation set in World War II Paris, as *Marguerite*. The significance of the name 'Camille' and the flower itself, relates to the white camellia which the original Marguerite Gautier would wear to show her availability and to the red camellia worn on those days when she was unavailable. Each of these reinterpretations of *La traviata* figuratively adds to the sense of Violetta as a 'fallen woman'.

Along with the evolution of the character it is important to consider how revolutionary the idea of Violetta's transition through love to moral ascendancy, even nobility, could be and in an operatic context, what impact this might have on a singer's conception of the role. That a prostitute might be an operatic heroine was a radical notion for its time. Where opera had previously dealt with the exploits of characters from classical mythology or those with noble lineage belonging to the distant past, *La traviata* confronted audiences with a member of the contemporary *demi-monde*. After being introduced at a party in her own salon by her friend Gastone to his acquaintance, Alfredo Germont, the operatic incarnation of Marguerite, Violetta Valery, begins a transformation from frenetic pleasure-seeker to noble, self-sacrificing lover. For an operatic singer taking on the role, the finale of Act I requires a spectacularly demanding musical communication of the character's sudden emotional changes.

When Violetta begins the finale, in her recitative, *E strano*, she questions how she could reject love for 'the barren follies' of her life. Then, in the simple preliminary aria, the cavatina *Ah, fors'è lui*, she warms to the possibility that Alfredo could be the one she has dreamed of since girlhood. The singer's task is to convey Violetta's physical fragility and emotional turmoil, whilst strongly projecting tone (normally required to carry over a pit orchestra), accuracy and clarity of diction. In what follows I shall examine the challenges encountered in finding a balance between robust vocal projection and the need to dramatically convey Violetta's story of declining health.

### **Dramatic and vocal techniques**

In spoken theatre, vocal inflection, facial expression, gesture and timing indicate whether the words express or belie the motives and emotions of a character. In addition to these performative capabilities, opera has a more powerful arsenal. To the foregoing must be added the expressive potential of pitch (through melody and harmony); dynamics (changes in loudness); form (melodic or harmonic structure) and repetition of forms; timbre (tonal quality) of instruments and voices; vocal interplay and vocal-instrumental texture. The greater scope for expression, however, can be a two-edged sword. For a performer approaching the role of Violetta Valery (who, like the original Marguerite, is ill with tuberculosis), to give the most effective portrayal in conjunction with dramatic stagecraft, the challenge is to manage the demands of vocal technique for musical purposes. The singer must use the technically demanding music which Verdi has provided, yet not allow it to become a barrier to a convincing portrayal of Violetta's character for the audience.

In the Schirmer Piano-vocal edition (1961, p. viii) of the *La Traviata* opera score, Robert Lawrence comments: 'The fact remains that *Sempre libera* is not *coloratura*, but *fioritura* - the grafting of florid passages onto a body of music that is essentially lyric or dramatic'. The Italian word 'coloratura' is usually applied to the decoration of a vocal melody with runs, roulades and cadenzas. The term also applies to a certain type of high soprano voice with enough flexibility to produce the quickly articulated pitch differentiation necessary to perform this highly decorative music. The Italian word *fioritura* is applied to the embellishment of an aria or instrumental piece. Lawrence's contention is that since the role of Violetta is lyric/dramatic, and the aria *Sempre libera* is *coloratura*, in its entirety the role requires characteristics additional to the lightness and flexibility of the coloratura soprano voice. Its performance must be grounded with warmth and strength in the lower vocal range yet able to move effortlessly at very high pitches.

### **Performance Practice**

There has been much philosophical debate over several hundred years regarding the expressive potential of music. For the purposes of this discussion, however, the experience of audience response to music of the Western (European) tradition will allow us to accept that Minor tonality is often perceived as denoting a sad or negative mood. Major tonality is often perceived as denoting a more sanguine or positive mood. If one were to imagine a piano keyboard, the notes of higher frequency (pitch) are laid out towards one's right and the lower notes to one's left. In the middle, to the left of a pair of black keys, is the note Middle C. The C Major scale would use all the white notes ascending from that Middle C to the next C an octave (eight white notes) above it. The essential difference between a Major and Minor scale is that the Minor will use, as it ascends, not the whole tones C, D and E, but C, D and the semitone to E flat (the black note to the left of E). The Minor scale and the chords made from its notes will effect a change in the listener's responsive mood from that produced by the Major. On the one hand, differences in the relative pitch of notes may thus be very small but capable of creating expressive nuances. On the other hand, they may be very wide, as in leaps from low to high pitch. Both types of pitch interval can induce appreciable tensions in the listener.

As with a literary writer's use of specific methods of rhythm through the use of grammar, syllabic structure and punctuation to elicit readers' responses, a composer uses musical syntax with similar objectives. For instance, time signatures such as 2/4, 4/4 or 3/8 at the beginning of a

passage of music indicate where the most emphatically stressed sounds should be heard. These sounds may occur at the first of every four counts, of every three counts, of every two counts and so on. Where there are four counts before the next stressed sound, for example, it will be said that there are 'four beats to a bar' and the upper figure in the time signature will be '4'. Different time signatures can be used to indicate rhythms appropriate to dancing, marching or other activity and help to express the action taking place. Where words are set to music, the composer will generally attempt to place an important syllable at the beginning of a bar in order that the word and sense are expressed more naturally.

The cavatina of the Act I Finale carries on after the opening recitative (a sung passage in speech rhythms) in the time signature of 3/8. It is reminiscent of Violetta's earlier duet with Alfredo, and is an *Andantino* in the first Minor tonality in the opera, its quaver rhythms presciently more like a dead march than a waltz. The cavatina moves from the key of F Minor, which gives the impression of a doubting mood, to the key of F Major, which is more expressive of hope and exuberance. I believe that it is more effective if the singer interprets the *fermata* (the pause) and the *crescendo* (increase in volume) indicated in the score to make the transition from Minor to Major by using *portamento* (an unbroken carrying of the tone, including intervening pitches) from the *pianissimo* (very soft) passage into the *forte* (loud) *A quell'amor* melody. By this means, the melody which is marked *con espansione* (to be performed expansively) expresses more vividly Violetta's sudden access of abandonment to romantic love. This expansive melody requires a full, quasi-dramatic soprano tone as she exactly repeats Alfredo's earlier thoughts on love and then moves to the floridly ornamented cadence.

Although *portamento* may be appropriate in portraying a rush of feeling for Alfredo it is, in my opinion, quite the opposite when used as a slide — that is, with poorly differentiated gradations in pitch, more like a 'whoop' than a true glissando. Used in that way it could disrupt the melodic line and the grammatical sense within a phrase. I argue that it is therefore not appropriate in the octave leap from *lui* to *che* (from F above Middle C) in its 6th bar. Even though on a tight short 'i' vowel in the words *tumulti* and *occulti*, rising from the next C up to A flat, the tone needs to be kept controlled yet unconstricted, with continuous breath support and very relaxed jaw. The voice will then clearly enunciate those two words which emphasise the contrast between the crowd in which Violetta lives and the self-effacing vigil of her lover. Where the vocal line moves from G above Middle C to A flat and B flat, I must take care that the *passagio* (the break in tone where

the tendency is to slip between 'chest' and 'head' registers and where the resonance is felt in those parts of the body) is undetectable and that the *pianissimo* passages on lower notes are still strong enough for clarity of tone.

The technical problems I have identified above suggest that this section is more within the comfortable range of the lyric, or even dramatic, soprano. The lyric soprano voice is of a lighter, less forceful quality than that of the dramatic soprano which should be forceful and have strong declamatory ability. As a singer whose greatest strength lies in the lyric and coloratura passages, I must work to place my voice with a lowered larynx to achieve warmer tone on lower pitches. Breath control is essential for the *forte* crescendoing passage on *e nuova febbre* followed by the crescendo from *pianissimo* and its expanding pause before the *forte A quell'amor*. For a performer of my build, age, and childbirth history, it can be difficult to maintain the breath control which takes undue pressure away from the throat and thus keeps vibrato under control on sustained notes. Success in this regard may depend, not only on vocal warm-ups, but on time of day and general health. The emotion which *A quell'amor* is intended to convey demands a strong dynamic of dramatic soprano fullness, with accents at the beginning of bars. I personally find the original cadenza difficult to execute with sufficient speed and accuracy. This cavatina, which is more comfortable for the lyric or dramatic soprano, precedes vocal sections of an entirely different nature.

After the cavatina, in *recitative stromentato* (orchestrally accompanied sung recitation) Violetta suddenly repudiates her romantic daydreams as 'Folly! ... Folly!'. In the *Allegro brillante* (brilliantly fast) *cabaletta* (the second, more urgent section of the composite aria) which uses a 6/8 time signature, Violetta then defiantly pursues her denial of romantic love in *Sempre libera* (in F Minor's relative key, A flat Major) singing: 'Always free I must / Dart lightheadedly from joy to joy'. After performing this once she is momentarily grounded by Alfredo in the *Andantino* (slightly faster than walking pace but slower than the preceding section) serenade in a 3/8 time signature. Here he sings the words of their earlier duet. But Violetta begins the word '*Follie!*' on a dissonant B flat, clashing with Alfredo's C on the word '*delizia*' ('delight') to cut him off and reject his serenade. Then an *Allegro* group of cadenzas in a 4/4 time signature reaches 'top' C (two octaves above Middle C) followed by D flat with *Allargando* (getting slower and fuller in tone) re-establishing her reckless determination to 'Enjoy! ... Enjoy!'.

In my experience, what I have just described is a particularly strenuous cabaletta. Tension is created by its many hectically fast, high and virtuosic passages. Executed by Violetta, a character who is revealed to be dying of tuberculosis, it portrays well the cynical social expectations of brilliance at any cost. The challenge for the singer is to execute relentless trills, runs and leaps to high Cs and D flats. Sustained notes in the final bars, for the word '*pensier*' ('thought') in which Violetta stresses that she must direct her mind only to pleasure, require extraordinary physical stamina. I now vocally demonstrate this.

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\* Vocal Demonstration Number 1. Schirmer Piano-Vocal Opera Score *La traviata* (1961) (Repeat of the *cabaletta* only).

Text taken from the libretto by Francesco Maria Piave, and English translation (by William Weaver in *Verdi: La traviata: The Metropolitan Opera Classics Library*, Boston, Little, Brown & Co., 1983):

*Sempre libera degg'io*

Always free I must

*Folleggiare di gioia in gioia*

Dart lightheadedly from joy to joy

*Vo' che scorra il viver mio*

I want my life to glide

*Pe' sentieri del piacer*

Along the paths of pleasure.

*Nasca il giorno, o il giorno muoia,*

Whether the day is born or dying,

*Sempre lieta ne' ritrovi,*

Always gay at parties,

*A diletta sempre nuovi*

My thought must fly

*Dee volar il mio pensier.*

Always to new delights.

[Audio: MP3 Cal 1 Excerpt from performance: 16.08.2008 \[.mp3 - 2.27MB\]](#)

Caroline Ellsmore soprano, Greg Ellsmore piano

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In the preceding vocal demonstration I presented the musical strategies used by Verdi to express an intensely emotional repudiation of romantic love. I earlier mentioned that in opera, such strategies are used in conjunction with the stagecraft available to a speaking actor. The single character of Violetta must portray an emotional volte face in the scena (the fully accompanied recitative with the arioso or songlike melodies of the cavatina and cabaletta) of which I have demonstrated only a small section. She sustains the entire finale of Act I, using coloratura, lyric and dramatic soprano techniques, as well as movement and gesture. To cater for discerning modern audiences, any facial movement must be realistic, while the breath required for the unrelenting expression of elaborate passages requiring extremely high notes is similar to that for a swimmer underwater. Added to this may be the suggestion of dance movement in the cabaletta, often hampered by the tight bodices and wide, crinolined long skirts of late nineteenth-century costume. A soprano undertaking this can be physically exhausted before having to perform what comes next.

The problem for a singer is that the finale to Act I occurs almost at the beginning of the opera. In programming a recital, a singer would normally choose the opposite order in which to present her repertoire. The less strenuous pieces usually ease a singer into those which are more difficult. In *La traviata*, the finale occurs before the further demands of Violetta's non-virtuosic but chromatically charged duet, *Non sapete quale affetto*. Violetta sings this in Act II with Alfredo's father, Giorgio Germont, as she is asked by him to renounce Alfredo and tells him that he does not know what he is asking of her. The chromaticism, which uses semitonal intervals to increase tension, emphasises the conflict building between Violetta and Germont and the agony of Violetta's sacrifice. The darkness and simplicity of Act III is yet to be more thoroughly investigated regarding the physical relief from fast-paced, high and florid passages for the Violetta who can turn her attention to the more dramatic elements of the role. She must, however, be sufficiently rested and without vocal strain to produce the *gravitas* and depth of tone to maintain the character.

The nostalgic folk-like aria, *Addio del passato* of Act III, returns to Violetta's essentially dramatic soprano qualities after her brutal self-sacrifice and rapid decline in health. In an alteration of



character symbolised by the subduing of vocal brilliance, it occurs when Violetta's reconciliation with Alfredo and his father is about to come too late for the return of strength and health. Simpler and less virtuosic, this aria is a vivid realisation representative of both her physical decline and her ascent in moral dignity. Unadorned with the complexities of her former life, it is an expression both of her material disintegration and increasing ethical control. The symbolic flower, the camellia which Violetta gives to Alfredo in Act I in mere dalliance and which echoes the symbolism of sexual availability in Dumas's play, is materially spoiled, but the metaphorical perfume of Violetta's original innocence is restored. I now present this in my next vocal demonstration.

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\*Vocal Demonstration Number 2. Schirmer Piano-Vocal Opera Score, La traviata. (First verse only)

Text taken as for Demonstration Number 1.

*Oh come son mutate! ...*

Oh, how I've changed! ...

*Ma il Dottore a sperar pure m'esorta! ...*

Still the Doctor urges me to hope! ...

*Ah con tal morbo ogni speranza e morta!*

Ah, with this disease, all hope is dead!

*Addio, del passato bei sogni ridenti,*

Farewell, lovely, happy dreams of the past,

*Le rose del volto già sono pallenti;*

The roses in my face are fading already;

*L'amore d'Alfredo perfino mi manca,*

And I am without Alfredo's love also,

*Conforto, sostegno dell'anima stanca ...*

The comfort and support of my weary soul ...

*Ah! Della traviata sorridi al desio,*

Ah! Smile at the wish of the lost one,

*A lei, deh perdona, tu accoglila, o Dio!*

Forgive her, and receive her, O God!

*Ah! tutto ... or tutto fini.*

Ah! All ... now all is finished.

*Le gioie, i dolori tra poco avran fine;*

The joys, the griefs will soon have an end;

*La tomba ai mortali di tutto e confine!*

The tomb is the end of everything for mortals!

*Non lagrima o fiore avra la mia fossa!*

No tear or flower will my grave have!

*Non croce col nome che copra quest'ossa!*

Nor a cross with a name to cover these bones!

*Ah! Della traviata sorridi al desio,*

Ah! Smile at the wish of the lost one,

*A lei, deh perdona, tu accoglila, o Dio!*

Forgive her, and receive her, O God!

*Ah! tutto ... or tutto fini.*

Ah! All ... now all is finished.

[Audio: MP3 Cal 2 Excerpt from performance: 16.08.2008 \[.mp3 - 6.4MB\]](#)

Caroline Ellsmore soprano, Greg Ellsmore piano

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## **Paradox and performance**

Within my personal investigation and experience, as several different voice-types are required to plot the development of Violetta's character there is both difficulty (dare one say, something of the super-human?) and a paradoxical ease in effectively managing the vocal techniques for this role. Verdi has written the part in such a way that Violetta's arias and duets are entirely appropriate to her physical decline. At the outset she maintains a strong and showy control of her situation, indicated by the use of high, fast and flexible coloratura technique. In her later dealings with Germont as her physical situation becomes more oppressive, she uses technique suited to a lyric soprano. Finally, she must summon the vocal weight of the dramatic soprano for the full impact of her tragedy.

The brittle virtuosity of Act I (where the highest note is D flat — or an optional E flat — in the third octave above Middle C) follows the standard pattern of *bel canto* in which the beauty of vocal tone is allied to flexibility of speed and extremes of pitch. This form of non-realism was favoured in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Yet given that it depicts the showy, fast-paced and exhausting life Violetta's real-life predecessor must have lived at that time, it is perfectly in character. This is followed by Violetta's moral crisis and near panic in *Non sapete* within her Act II duet with Giorgio Germont. Its poignant chromaticism and relative lack of technical virtuosity later in Act II leads to the sustained plangency of *Amami, Alfredo* where only the B flat in the second octave above Middle C is reached. In Act III, Violetta sings *Addio del passato*, where A in the second octave above Middle C is reached and, *No, No*, with B in the second octave above Middle C as highest point. Violetta's role moves to *Ah Gran Dio morir* with A in the second octave above Middle C as highest note. The fluctuating process of physical descent is illustrated through the lower pitches which Violetta is able to reach. The libretto and score require that despite her physical weakness, Violetta should show that she has gained fiscal ascendancy and reversed what would normally be her situation by 'keeping' Alfredo in Act II, rather than being 'kept' by a man herself. Having attained moral ascendancy, thereafter she must finally show the thoroughly mature dramatic depth required.

The fact that serious 'contemporary' musical theatre in mid-nineteenth century Italy could use folksong, coloratura, waltz, bacchanal and *brindisi* (drinking song) so naturalistically and remain perfectly in character makes *La traviata* unusual, if not unique. Most of the Italian operatic conventions - even what Joseph Kerman (1956, p. 146) regarded as the 'worst,' such as that of the *cavatina* and *cabaletta* - worked. The plot and characters lent themselves to the conventions of Italian *opera seria* which Verdi was using at the time. That is, no burlesque was involved. He neither needed to abandon the traditional forms nor to exercise too much of the conscious pushing of boundaries (which he would do later for *Otello* and *Falstaff*) by blurring the 'edges' between recitative and aria. Such developments would later be termed music-drama. The singer who performs Violetta should take all of these forms, styles and conventions in her stride.

## Conclusion

*La traviata* demands that Violetta remains onstage throughout, performing virtually without a rest. Even though no return to coloratura virtuosity is required of the singer after Act I, in my

experience the finale to that Act is physically exhausting. It must always be approached with a view to the long Scene 1 colloquy between Germont and Violetta in Act II, followed by Scene 2 in which Violetta's soaring vocal part must carry over the full cast ensemble. After this, Violetta must sustain clear dramatic projection for a spoken passage, the recitative, the aria and the duet with Alfredo yet to come in Act III. In this paper I have aimed to demonstrate that the only way to approach these diverse requirements is to maintain focus beyond the strenuously showy Finale of Act I, to the fullness of lyric tone which denotes the romantic centre of Violetta's character. With this in mind, a singer should attack the virtuosity of the Act I Finale with a higher laryngeal lightness of tone. Analysis of my own experiences suggests that by using a vocal approach which avoids too powerful a projection, one may manage the flexibility and height without damaging the voice for what will be demanded later. This said, I know from my own discussions with Australian sopranos Joan Carden and Cheryl Barker, that every moment of the intervals between the acts must be used by the performer to recuperate, focus and gather energy for what follows. As Violetta's character develops, each of her voices must be allowed to sing.

### Notes:

1. Marie Duplessis was originally idealised as the character, Marguerite Gautier by Dumas fils. Although it was he who had parted from Duplessis because he did not have the means to keep her in wealth, Dumas reversed this in his novel and play so that Marguerite gave up her lover, Armand, for the sake of his family. Dumas's scenario was used in *La traviata*.
2. This occurs in the salon of her friend Flora, at the card party during which Violetta is insulted by Alfredo.

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