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A *Traviata* from another time

by George Loomis

If you attended the Théâtre des Champs-Élysées's new production of *La traviata* not knowing what to expect and listened carefully to the divided solo violins at the start of the prelude, you would likely have noticed that this familiar music sounded different than usual. Part of the difference stemmed from an absence of vibrato, but the tones themselves were softer and mellower.

Welcome to the era of Verdi on period instruments. The modern orchestra found its current form at the beginning of the twentieth century, by which time orchestral instruments had essentially evolved into their present state. This is why the period instrument movement, which got its start in the Baroque, has been able to look for repertoire in the nineteenth century. Early-nineteenth-century opera has been slow to benefit, but 2018 was a banner year: I saw operas by Rossini (in Salzburg, Austria, and Purchase, New York), Giovanni Simone Mayr (Purchase), Donizetti (Bergamo, Italy), and Saverio Mercadante (Innsbruck, Austria) performed on period instruments.

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Now comes another, with Jérémie Rhorer leading his Cercle de l'Harmonie in a rare Verdi production using period instruments (seen on December 3). As significant as this achievement is, one shouldn't get the impression that this *Traviata* will shock the listener. The opera's premiere was in 1853, fairly far along in instrumental evolution. The tempos and expressive approach of Rhorer's nuanced interpretation could hardly offend traditionalists, nor were vocal lines subjected to novel ornamentation. Still, there were striking differences in instrumental color. And the orchestra's comparatively transparent sound made for a vocal–instrumental balance that seemed to reduce temptation by the singers to push the voice.

Vannina Santoni as Violetta with the cast of La traviata. *Photo: Vincent Pontet.*

Not that there was anything small-scale about the first-rate cast. Vannina Santoni was a captivating Violetta, thoroughly involved and full of energy. Her "Sempre libera" had ample brilliance; other big moments, such as "Amami, Alfredo," registered strongly; and she has the looks and dramatic flair for the role. Her bright voice could do with a bit more resonance, but she was mesmerizing in quiet, lyrical passages. In "Dite alla giovane," in which she gives in to Germont's demand to give Alfredo up, the simple "oom-pah-pah" string accompaniment sounded less intrusive on period instruments, thereby detracting less from the singer's legato phrases.

Saimir Pirgu has sung Alfredo more than one hundred times, but he is still a young man and his portrayal retains its dashing youthfulness and lyrical freshness, making it a fine match for Santoni's vivacious Violetta. As is common now, Violetta was onstage during the start of Alfredo's solo scene in Act II, giving the audience a glimpse of the couple's brief, sensual time together in the country. Her presence seemed to inspire the ardor that enlivened Pirgu's polished delivery of the *cantabile* of his aria, and he gave a vigorous, ringing account of its *cabaletta*.

As Alfredo's father, Germont, the stylish French baritone Laurent Naouri was the perfect image of upper-middle-class rectitude—dressed in a three-piece suit, hat in hand and coat draped over an arm (thanks to Chloé Obolensky, the costume designer)—as he beseeched Violetta to give up Alfredo for the sake of family honor. His solid singing had a directness that projected authority.

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Hospital beds have appeared in *Traviata* productions before, but Deborah Warner's production, with sets by Justin Nardella, Chloé Obolensky, and Jean Kalman, addresses Violetta's fatal tuberculosis in an arresting and novel way. During the prelude, her maid, Annina, enters a tuberculosis ward and removes a sheet apparently covering a corpse. Out jumps Violetta in a brilliant red dress, and the opera's opening party scene begins. The beds remain, however, offering a parallel universe to the opera's action. One of the occupants is a double of Violetta, an apparent representation of how she envisions herself when nearing death.

opera.

Vannina Santoni as Violetta. Photo: Vincent Pontet.

The two Violettas interact amicably during the course of the opera. In Act I, the double throws the real Violetta a flower to give to Alfredo. Violetta has obviously given a lot of thought to her disease and resolved not to let it impinge on her high spirits or lifestyle. Here, her aria "Sempre libera" is not only about freedom from societal and marital constraints, but also about the constraints of a fatal disease (as long as that is physically possible). The beds were removed for the final act, which gave the set the eerie serenity of a Salvador Dali painting.

As arresting as the staging is, it is the musical dimension one will remember most. Rhorer chose a lower pitch than usual, A=432 Hz, one that Verdi is thought to have favored. As with the period instruments, the object is to make the singers feel more comfortable. And the performance was virtually uncut; only the repeat of the baritone's *cabaletta* was omitted. The important thing in this *Traviata* was that Rhorer's departures from custom were combined with splendid voices, a cogent staging, and a high level of musical execution that presented a familiar opera in an exciting and revelatory new way.

France Musique will broadcast La traviata *on Sunday, December 16, at 8 p.m. cet*.

George Loomis writes about classical music for MusicalAmerica.com, *Opera* magazine, and the *Financial Times*.