

A complete performance,
unequaled in its dramatic impact
culled from the dress rehearsal
for the 1946 Broadcast

Verdi

La Traviata

ARTURO
TOSCANINI

ALBANESE • PEERCE • MERRIL



Giuseppe Verdi

La Traviata

DISC 1

- | | |
|---|-------|
| 1) No.1: Preludio | 3:56 |
| 2) Act I, No.2: Introduzione | 4:47 |
| 3) Seguito del No.2: Brindisi | 2:59 |
| 4) Seguito del No.2: Valzer-Duetto nell' Introd. Atto I | 6:26 |
| 5) Seguito del No.2: Stretti dell' Introd. Atto I | 6:55 |
| 6) No.3: Scena ed Aria Violetta - Finale Atto I | 6:55 |
| 7) Act II.No.4: Scena ed Aria Alfredo | 3:41 |
| 8) No.5: Scena e Duetto | 16:44 |
| 9) No.6: Scena - Violetta | 3:23 |
| 10) Seguito del No.6: Scena ed Aria Germont | 6:38 |

Total time: 57:07

DISC 2

- | | |
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| 1 Act III. No.7: Finale I (Flora, il Marchese, il Dottore) | 1:02 |
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NOTE: *in 3-act Ricordi version, Act II begins here*

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| 2 Seguito del No.7: Coro di Zingarelle - Finale II | 2:53 |
| 3 Seguito del No.7: Coro di Mattadori Spagnouli | 2:36 |
| 4 Seguito del No.7: Seguito del Finale II | 7:53 |
| 5 Seguito del No.7: Largo del Finale II | 5:32 |
| 6 Act IV. No.8: Scena ed Aria - Violetta | 11:27 |

NOTE: *in 3-act Ricordi version, Act III begins here*

- | | |
|--|------|
| 7 No.9: Bacchanale | 0:44 |
| 8 No. 10: Scena e Duetto (Violetta ed Alfredo) | 8:45 |
| 9 No.11: Finale ultimo | 5:49 |

Total time: 46:45

Toscanini and *La Traviata*

Many people, when they think of Arturo Toscanini, think first of his intimate connection with the Italian opera, and particularly with the operas of Giuseppe Verdi. Toscanini made his debut, at Rio de Janeiro in 1886, conducting *Aida*; and the last occasions on which he conducted were two recording sessions, in June of 1954, at which he re-recorded some passages from *Aida* and *Un ballo in maschera* so that his earlier NBC Symphony broadcast performances of those operas could be issued by RCA Victor.

Moreover, Toscanini's relation to Verdi was not only musical but deeply personal as well. As a young man, he idolized Verdi, in early 1887, though his conducting career was already successfully launched, Toscanini got himself hired as second cellist for the premiere of *Otello*, the rehearsals for which were supervised (though not conducted) by Verdi himself. He later met Verdi, who had heard and admired his conducting, and it was through the joint influence of Verdi and his librettist Arrigo Boito, who was also a member of the governing board of Milan's La Scala opera house, that Toscanini became, in 1898, La Scala's music director. Throughout his life Toscanini not only cherished and frequently performed Verdi's works; he also kept before him the memory of Verdi the man as a sort of moral exemplar, a model of artistic and personal integrity.

But as Harvey Sachs has shown in his excellent 1978 biography of the conductor, Toscanini's relation to Verdi's three most popular operas—*Rigoletto*, *Il trovatore*, and *La traviata*—was a rather uneasy one. During the early years of his career, Toscanini seems to have had very mixed feelings about conducting these works in Italy. And this is perhaps most evident in the case of *La traviata*. Though he conducted it at Brescia in 1894, and gave several performances in Rio during the early years of this century, he did not conduct it again in Italy until 1913, and did not conduct at La Scala until 1923. During his tenure at New York's Metropolitan Opera (1908-1915) he did not conduct it once. Given Toscanini's evident love for Verdi and his music, why should this have been so?

In most Italian operatic performances of the mid and late nineteenth century, the singers pretty much ran the show. They were permitted to add cadenzas and flourishes, to repeat and transpose arias, and to vary the tempi arbitrarily in order to create opportunities for sheer vocal display—regardless of the cost to the dramatic effect intended by the composer. Verdi's three most popular operas, precisely because they were so popular, were among the most severely abused.

Since these abuses persisted well into the twentieth century, we can get a vivid idea of them from surviving early recordings. Take for example the recording of Alfredo's aria "*De' miei bollenti spiriti*," from Act II of *La traviata*, made in 1906 by the great tenor Fernando di Lucia. In translation, the text of the aria runs as follows:

The youthful ardor of my boiling spirits
She has quenched with the calm smile of love.
Since the day she said:
"I want to live faithful to you,"
Forgetful of the universe,
I live as though in heaven.

Verdi's tempo marking is *Andante*, a medium pace, and the serene simplicity of the vocal line (Violetta's remembered "calm smile of love") contrasts sharply with the restlessly agitated string accompaniment (Alfredo's "boiling spirits"). For this contrast to make its intended effect, the tempo must be kept going pretty steadily. Yet whenever he comes to a beautiful phrase, di Lucia slows the tempo almost to a standstill in order to stretch out the phrase and show off his beautiful voice and superb breath control. The gentle yet persistent forward motion on which the aria depends for its effect never even has a chance to get started. There is thus no coherent relation established between words and music.

Now as soon as Verdi had gained enough power and prestige to enforce his will on his singers—in about 1847, the time of *Macbeth*—he began to insist at rehearsals, and even to have it written into his contracts, that no liberties were to be taken with his scores. And his letters, from then until the end of his life, are filled with complaints about how not only singers but also conductors attempted to usurp the composer's role of creator in the production of opera in Italy. As one can see from records like di Lucia's, Verdi was far from successful in his efforts to reform, but there can be no doubting his seriousness.

As soon as Toscanini, in his turn, began to gain prestige as a conductor, he enthusiastically took up Verdi's cause of reform. For Toscanini had been conducting not only Verdi's final masterpieces, *Otello* and *Falstaff*, in which there is much less opportunity for the sorts of abuses inflicted upon his earlier operas, but also the music dramas of Wagner, which were composed specifically to combat the whole view of musical theater symbolized by such abuses. And Toscanini would soon bring to La Scala such "advanced" modern works as Debussy's *Pelléas et Mélisande* and Strauss's *Salome*. This experience, together with Verdi's example, strengthened Toscanini's growing conviction that the intimate dramatic relation

between words and music should be honored in all operatic performances—even (or perhaps especially) in performances of Verdi's popular “pot-boilers” (as they are considered by some musical intellectuals).

But this is not at all a popular position to adopt toward such familiar and much-loved works as *Rigoletto*, *Il trovatore*, and *La traviata*, which the Italian public wanted to hear as it had always heard them. It is this fact that accounts for Toscanini's reluctance to conduct these works in Italy. When he announced his intention to conduct *Il trovatore* at La Scala in 1902, the year after Verdi's death, Giulio Ricordi, who was Verdi's publisher but who did not share Verdi's (and now Toscanini's) reformist views, moved to block the production. A shouting match between the two men ensued, Toscanini won, and the performance was not only a triumph but a revelation as well. One Milanese critic, who had earlier not particularly cared for Toscanini's work, noted the “absolute and surprising newness” of the opening scene, and went on the praise the “audacity” that enabled Toscanini to succeed “at bringing into relief every smallest detail, at animating every scene, at bringing life into every particular.”

The peculiar nature of *La traviata* made it a prime target for Toscanini's reforms. For in addition to being a drama of passion, it is also a very intimate and personal drama, containing a great deal of realistic conversation in which the conventional line between recitative and aria is intentionally blurred. From the letters Verdi wrote when he was composing *La traviata*, it is clear that he saw it as effecting a significant break from conventional Italian grand opera. Two months before the premiere, which took place at Venice on March 6, 1853, he wrote to one friend: “It's a contemporary subject. Another composer would perhaps not have done it because of the costumes, the period or a thousand other foolish scruples, but I did it with pleasure.”

To us, in the late twentieth century, it seems odd to hear *La traviata* spoken of in this way, for we think of it as a Romantic period-piece. But to its composer, to its first audiences, and no doubt to the young Toscanini it was a very contemporary drama indeed, with an extremely touchy subject: a courtesan's vacillation between continuing her life of luxurious sensual pleasure and abandoning it in favor of true love. It's early performances were greeted, especially in England, by loud protests against its immorality, and Verdi's biographer Francis Toye tells us: “Lovers, especially lovers whose love was illicit, attended it very much in the same spirit as they afterwards attended performances of *Tristan and Isolde*. In short, *La traviata* became the symbol of revolt against current sexual conventions.”

Verdi's librettist for *La traviata*, Francesco Piave, made his text from the novel *La Dame*

aux camélias (The Lady of the Camellias), by Alexander Dumas *fils*. The novel, which was published in 1848, was in turn derived from (and even alludes to) Abbé Prévost's earlier novel *Manon Lescaut*, which was to inspire famous operas by Massenet and Puccini. But it was also based on a love affair that Dumas had had with a celebrated courtesan named Marie (née Alphonsine) Duplessis. She became the Madeleine Gauthier of Dumas' novel and the Violetta of Verdi's opera. Though *La Dame aux camélias* (and the play that Dumas made from it) were set in Paris of the 1840's, the story's bold subject-matter caused the censors to force Verdi and Piave to alter the date of the action to "c. 1700"—as it appears in programs of the first performances and even in the vocal scores published prior to 1914. Nowadays, of course, *La traviata* is always set to its proper era.

In view of Toscanini's earlier skittishness with regard to *La traviata*, it is most interesting that he chose it as the first of the four Verdi operas that he broadcast during his years with the NBC Symphony (1937-1954). He may well have intended his performance as a statement, even a manifesto, for when it came to musical performance, and especially to the performance of opera, Toscanini never lost his reformer's zeal. The broadcasts took place on December 1 and 8, 1946, and RCA Victor issued its recording of them—which will soon be available on RCA compact discs—in 1950. The performance is, as we should expect, very straightforward and hence untraditional, and for this reason many critics have dealt quite harshly with it. As much as any of Toscanini's NBC Symphony recordings, *La traviata* has contributed to the myth that in his later years he was a tense and rigid conductor who took everything too fast and, in his performances of opera, drove his singers relentlessly, sacrificing the human content of the drama to his predominantly orchestral conception of the music.

Now anyone but the most fanatical Toscanini idolater must admit that there are indeed performances from his NBC years of which these accusations hold true. But his performance of *La traviata*, as broadcast and as issued by RCA Victor, is not among them. The autograph score of the opera contains no metronome markings, which is unusual for the punctilious Verdi and which probably testifies to the speed with which the work was orchestrated. And even the Ricordi orchestral score does not contain as many markings as do most of Verdi's scores there are, for example, none at all in Act II, Scene 2. But if one bothers to check Toscanini's tempi against those that are in the Ricordi score, one finds that all of his tempi in Act I either correspond exactly to Verdi's or are a little slower except one (for Violetta's "*Sempre liberia*"), which is only slightly faster. In Act II, Scene 1, there are indeed a couple of tempi that are considerably faster than Verdi's—the very opening one, for exam-



ple—but again most are either accurate or a little slower. In Act III, all of Toscanini's tempi are slower than Verdi's except one that corresponds exactly and two that are considerably faster: the finale and Alfredo's "Ah non piu" (just following the "Parigi, o cara" duet with Violetta). But in the latter case the score's metronome marking seems inappropriately slow and may indeed be a long-perpetuatea misprint. (Because of the lack of scholarly literature on *La traviata*, I have been unable to discover the provenance of the metronome markings in the published score.) Incidentally, it is also most instructive to check Toscanini's tempi with

a metronome because one discovers how much, even though unobtrusive, they vary within a given number—and thus how mistaken are the familiar accusations of rigidity.

Yet once all this has been said, it cannot be denied that the broadcast performance of *La traviata* is a flawed one. Of the three principal singers, Jan Peerce as Alfredo is passionate and wholly convincing throughout, if occasionally a little pushy and unsubtle; but Licia Albanese, the Violetta, is nervous and cautious, rather hectic and unfocussed, throughout much of the earlier part of the action, and Robert Merrill, as Germont, often sings nasally and monochromatically. The minor roles are not filled with distinction.

Fortunately, however, about 13 hours of rehearsals for the broadcasts survive on acetate discs, and it is from these that the performance presented here derives. Almost all of it is taken from the two dress rehearsals of November 30 and December 7, but there are also some bits from an earlier rehearsal. (A very interesting selection from one of the still earlier, purely orchestral rehearsals, with Toscanini himself singing all the roles, is available on Relief 812.) I must say that I have never been as bothered by the flaws of the broadcast performance as many people, even ones who ordinarily love Toscanini's work, have been. But any listener who has been bothered by them will, I am certain, find this performance tellingly superior in all ways. Any listener who, like me, already loves the broadcast version will find that what was excellent there is here raised to sheer incandescence. And any listener who does not already know Toscanini's *La traviata* will gain from this performance not only the clearest imaginable idea of what the opera is really about but also an understanding of the ideals to which Toscanini devoted himself so selflessly for so many years. For what we have here is nothing less than one of Toscanini's finest achievements.

The superiority of this performance to the broadcast performance issued by RCA Victor comes through, first of all, in the heightened vividness of the individual characters and their interaction with one another. There seems to be more time for things to happen, and one can more easily follow the ebb and flow of Toscanini's tempi in relation to the evolving dramatic content. Yet a close comparison between the two performances reveals that in most cases their tempi are either exactly or almost exactly the same. In some cases, in fact, the tempi in this performance are actually a little faster than those on the broadcasts. But this performance has greater freedom and flexibility, the orchestral playing is more lovingly shaped, and the words of the text are given greater weight by the singers.

The outstanding difference in tempi between the two performances comes, significantly, at the very beginning, with the Prelude to the opera. The broadcast performance is very

straightforward and controlled, inward and almost austere, while the rehearsal performance presented here is expansive and extroverted, with powerful inflections and dramatic pauses. Though the margin between the two performances is only 18 seconds, that is enough to make an enormous difference. For in this Prelude Verdi is giving us a portrait of his conflicted heroine—much of the same music will recur at the beginning of Act III, as Violetta lies dying of consumption—and a great deal hinges on the impression here created. While the broadcast version is moving in its restraint, this version better prepares us for the power and the scope of the drama we are about to witness.

The curtain rises on Violetta's salon, where a party is in progress. As she moves among her guests, making them feel at home and inviting them to an evening of pleasure, Albanese, in the broadcast performance, sounds tentative and unsure of herself. But in this performance she is firmly in command right from the beginning. The famous drinking song (or "*brindisi*") is a shade slower in this performance than on the broadcast, Peerce is even more elegant and relaxed, and Albanese, as she takes up the song in reply to him, is more passionate. The whole piece is larger and more impressive, more joyous and more rhythmically alive. In the waltz that follows, the tempo is exactly the same as the broadcast, but Albanese is far more intensely involved during Violetta's conversation with Alfredo, and the magnetic attraction between them is far more strongly felt. Listen, for example, to the sharp emphasis she gives the word "*Nulla*" ("Nothing") as she denies that there is anything wrong with her (though she has just turned pale and almost fainted); or to the word "*potrei*" as she responds to Alfredo's concerned injunction that she take better care of herself by asking "How *could* I?"

But perhaps the greatest differences between the two performances of Act I emerge in the Finale. The guests have gone, and Violetta is alone. In her contemplative cavatina "*Ah fors' è lui*" she speculates that perhaps Alfredo can offer her the love that will free her from the hectic pursuit of pleasure on which she has embarked. But she then dismisses this thought as mere foolishness ("*Follie! Follie!*"), and in the brilliant, demanding cabaletta that follows, "*Sempre libera*," she resolves always to remain free of romantic entanglements and to continue her life as before. Except for some of the *roulades* in "*Sempre libera*," which are haphazard in pitch and rather routinely tossed off, Albanese's singing of this whole *scena* on the broadcast is excellent. But her characterization of Violetta at this complex moment seems neutral and subdued when compared with the performance presented here. Her clearer articulation of the words gives "*Ah fors' è lui*" a riveting self-absorption it does not have in the broadcast performance, and the greater security of her technique in "*Sempre libera*"

makes Violetta's willed joyous abandon more convincing and compelling.

Act II, Scene 1, is set in a country house outside of Paris that Alfredo and Violetta are now sharing (five months have passed). The action of the scene, which is densely packed and often confusing, turns on a visit that Alfredo's father, Giorgio Germont, pays to Violetta. He has come to persuade her to give up Alfredo, whom he is convinced she will ruin—both morally and financially. Though he is unexpectedly impressed with Violetta and quickly grows sympathetic to her plight, he persists and succeeds: she agrees to tell Alfredo she does not love him. The scene ends with Violetta's abrupt departure for a ball at the Paris house of her friend Flora, and with a reunion of father and son that is short by Alfredo's rushing off in pursuit of Violetta to avenge himself on her for having left him.

By this point in the broadcast performance, Albanese has found herself, but Merrill, who of course has not been heard in Act I, has problems with nervousness. In this rehearsal performance he sings far more richly and expressively. Moreover, though most of the tempi are exactly the same as on the broadcast, three of the scene's big set pieces are noticeably slower, and are also more effectively shaped. These are Germont's "*Pura siccome un angelo*," in which he tells Violetta of Alfredo's sister, whose chances of a good marriage will be ruined if Violetta and Alfredo continue to cohabit; his "*Un di quando le veneri*," in which he points out that Violetta's beauty will soon fade and Alfredo will tire of her; and her anguished response, "*Dite alla giovine*," in which she agrees to give up Alfredo.

The differences between the two performances in Act II, Scene 2 and in Act III are fewer and of less significance, but they all work in favor of the performance presented here because they combine to project a more vivid and touching sense of Violetta's tragedy. The festive music that opens Act II, Scene 2, is more joyous and sparkling in this performance than on the broadcast, and the sharply contrasted music of the gambling scene that follows it is more tense and grim (despite some problems of coordination in its opening bars). The gambling music is three times interrupted by *cantabile* asides in which Violetta expresses her anguish at what is taking place, and it is traditional for conductors to italicize these three virtually identical passages by slowing down the tempo dramatically. But this was not Toscanini's way. In both performances, but even more effectively in the one presented here, he manages to slow the tempo just enough to let Violetta soar expansively over the orchestra without breaking the overall continuity of the scene. And again, during the ensemble that concludes the scene, Violetta is suddenly heard alone in an impassioned outburst as she tells Alfredo he cannot understand the love that is in her heart. This passage too is more expan-

sive and griefladen in the present performance than on the broadcast. Finally, in Act III, there are Violetta's reading of the letter from Germont and her touching farewell to Alfredo, both of which are more expressively handled by Albanese here than on the broadcast.

Because the dress rehearsals did not constitute a real performance, given before a paying audience, Toscanini himself participates uninhibitedly. We frequently hear him hushing his—singers and orchestra or enthusiastically cheering them on, throwing out a monitory “*Crescendo!*” or “*Legato!*” or simply singing along. And in Act II, Scene 1, we are surprised to hear him, in his hoarsely croaking baritone, taking the role of Violetta's servant Guiseppe—in place of a singer who was evidently indisposed. Since these were dress rehearsals, there are none of the famous Toscanini outbursts of temper—though at one point he does come close. At the beginning of Alfredo's “*De' miei bollenti spiriti!*” something in the accompaniment displeases him, and he curses “*O, per dio santo!*” (“Oh, for God's sake!”) and then adds “*Teste di—*” (“Heads of—”). He was apparently about to level some such North Italian epithet as “Cabbage-heads” or “Cauliflower-heads” at his string-players but then decided it was more important to get on with the rehearsal. And near the end of Act II, Scene 2, as Violetta emerges from the ensemble to tell Alfredo that he cannot understand all the love that is in her heart, Toscanini begins to speak. His old voice is ardent and caressing, and it sounds almost as though he were joining her in an impromptu love-duet. But he is actually telling her not to force, to take it easy, to sing each of Verdi's dotted-eighth and sixteenth-note figures as though it were composed of a quarter-note and an eighth-note written in 6:8 time (rather than the common or 4:4 time in which the passage is in fact written). The blend of total emotional involvement and professional detachment is characteristic, revealing, and, I think, very moving.

In some of the commercially issued recordings of Toscanini operas, we can also occasionally hear him getting carried away to the point where he joins in the singing. Of one such moment Jan Peerce once said:

There are some people who say, “It spoils the record.” And I tell them: “Isn't that funny, for me it makes the record.” Imagine hearing Toscanini—not planning it, just naturally singing faintly in the background—and knowing this guy's blood is on the record; and some sbmo says, “That spoils it.” They don't know what inspires people.

I agree—and I think that you will too.

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GIUSEPPE VERDI

La Traviata

DRESS REHEARSAL, RECORDED NOVEMBER 1946 IN NEW YORK CITY

Violetta Valery	Licia Albanese, sop.
Afredo Germont	Jan Peerce, ten.
Giorgio Germont, is father	Robert merrill, barit.
Flora Bervoix	Maxine Stellman, mezzo
Annina, Violetta's maid	Johanne Morland, sop.
Gastone, Viscount de Letoriers	John Garris, barit.
Barone Duopol	George Cehanovsky, barit.
Marquis d'Obigny	Paul Dennis, bass.
Doctor Grenvil	Arthur Newman, bass.

CHORUS MASTER: PETER WILHOUSKY

ARTURO TOSCANINI

CONDUCTOR

Total Time: 1:43:52

Technical restoration (2003) Graham Newton

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