



[La Traviata \(Sung in Italian\)](#) by [WNO](#)

Reviewed by [Denis Joe](#) February 2012

Perhaps the two most popular opera composers, these days, are Puccini and Verdi. Whilst the former's output dwarfs the latter, only a handful of Verdi's operas remain popular, and none more so than ***La Traviata***. It is the staple production of many opera companies and an opera that is guaranteed to get 'bums on seats'. That would suggest that the chances of presenting the work in a novel fashion are pretty slim. But David Mc Vicar's *La Traviata*

(first performed two years ago) certainly gives food for thought and in doing so creates the realisation that the composer, even at the height of his popularity, did not rest on his laurels.

The Prelude to this opera is, for me, the most perfect beginning to any opera. We know from the start that it will not end well for the characters, as the orchestra plays the quiet bars, that we will hear again in the third act: the leitmotif of Violetta on her death bed. It is the most heart-rendering music I can think of and describes a scene that could be nothing other than tragic. Slowly the prelude picks up tempo as we go backwards into the fading heartbeats that will dominate the second act. Then there is a pause, as the curtain rises to reveal a large group of people, enjoying what life has to offer.

And it is then that we can understand why Verdi chose to open this opera with the dying motif. The courtesan, Violetta, is throwing a party to celebrate her recovery from a serious illness, known today as pulmonary tuberculosis, but was then known by the more descriptive (and Romantic) term: 'consumption' (see Clark Lawlor's excerpt from his book in the WNO programme). One of the main features of the disease is that the victim experiences something like a recovery, only more profound, usually when they are near death.

One of the standing jokes of opera is how you have to suspend disbelief when you see a strapping soprano playing the role of a consumptive. Most of the time, as with the tenor role, the voice requires a larger bodied singer in order to do justice to the roles. But Joyce El-Khoury has the authority and beauty of presence and voice in the role. This is obvious from the very start when, having sent the guests away to another room, Violetta catches sight of her pale reflection in the mirror. She also sees that Alfredo, the shy young man who had been introduced to her earlier on, is still in the room.





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