

LA TRAVIATA

GIUSEPPE VERDI

Music: The Characters

Students Will

- Read the "Synopsis"
- Read the information sheets "The Composer" and "The Characters" included with the lesson
- Listen to audio selections from *La Traviata* online
- Discuss and answer questions on the appropriate portions of the activity worksheets

Copies for Each Student

- "Synopsis"
- "The Composer"
- "The Characters"
- Activity Worksheets 1-3

Copies for the Teacher

- "Synopsis"
- "The Composer"
- "The Characters"
- Activity Worksheets 1-3

Getting Ready

Decide which sections of the worksheets you wish your class to complete. Prepare internet access to the online listening selections. Gather pens, pencils, and additional writing paper as needed.

Introduction

Have your students read the "Synopsis" as a class. Give each student a copy of the information sheets "The Composer" and "The Characters," or display them on the screen. Read through the information, discussing each character and listening to the online selections as you go.

Guided Practice

Read the directions on the activity worksheets. Have students complete the portions of the activity worksheets you have chosen, with opportunity for questions.

Independent Practice

If students are working with a partner or in small groups, give them time to discuss their answers before writing them down. Have students share their answers individually, or by groups, and tell why they gave their answers.

La Traviata

Evaluation

Have students discuss and evaluate the answers of others. After individual or small group responses have been shared and/or turned in, the class can then formulate comprehensive answers for the class with the teacher asking leading questions to guide the discussion.

For Further Study

The teacher may want to have students further research *La Traviata*. Students may also want to do additional research on Giuseppe Verdi or Francesco Maria Piave, their lives and other works, or other related topics online or in their school library. Their findings can be shared with the class at the beginning of a later lesson.

TEKS

Grade 6

(4) Historical and cultural relevance. The student relates music to history, culture, and the world. (B. C.)

Grade 7

(4) Historical and cultural relevance. The student relates music to history, culture, and the world. (B. C.)

Grade 8

(4) Historical and cultural relevance. The student relates music to history, culture, and the world. (B. C.)

Music, Level I

(5) Historical and cultural relevance. The student relates music to history, culture, and the world. (A. C. D. E.)

Music, Level II

(5) Historical and cultural relevance. The student relates music to history, culture, and the world. (A. B. C. E)

Music, Level III

(5) Historical and cultural relevance. The student relates music to history, culture, and the world. (A. B. C. E.)

Music, Level IV

(5) Historical cultural relevance. The student relates music to history, culture, and the world. (A. B. C. E)

Correlates: Language Arts, Drama, Music

Gardner's Intelligences: Verbal-Linguistic, Musical, Interpersonal

Bloom's Taxonomy: Knowledge, Comprehension, Application, Analysis, Evaluation, Synthesis

Sources:

La Traviata Libretto

Warrack, John and West, Ewan, The Oxford Dictionary of Opera, Oxford University Press, 1992.

Online Resources:

www.oxfordmusiconline.com

www.aria-database.com

Synopsis

ACT ONE

In her Paris salon, the courtesan Violetta Valéry greets party guests, including Gastone, who introduces a new admirer, Alfredo Germont. This young man, having adored Violetta from afar, addresses her with a drinking song; she joins him in the salute to pleasure. An orchestra is heard in the next room, but as guests move there to dance, Violetta suffers an attack of faintness. Concerned, Alfredo returns and, since they are alone, confesses his love. At first Violetta protests that love means nothing to her. Something in the young man's sincerity touches her, however, and she promises to meet him the next day. After the guests have gone home, Violetta wonders if Alfredo could actually be the man to fulfill her need for love. But she decides she prefers freedom, though Alfredo's voice, heard outside, argues in favor of romance.

ACT TWO

Scene I

Alfredo and Violetta are living in a villa near Paris, where he praises their contentment. When the maid, Annina, reveals that Violetta has pawned her jewels to keep the villa, Alfredo leaves for the city to raise money. Violetta receives an invitation from Flora to a party that night. She has no intention of going back to her old life, but trouble intrudes with the appearance of Alfredo's father, Giorgio Germont. He demands she renounce his son: the scandal of Alfredo's affair with her has threatened his daughter's engagement. Violetta says she cannot, but Germont eventually convinces her. Alone, the desolate woman sends a message of acceptance to Flora and begins a farewell note to Alfredo. He enters suddenly, surprising her, and she can barely control herself as she repeats how deeply she loves him before rushing out. A servant hands Alfredo her farewell note as Giorgio returns to console his son with reminders of family life in Provence. But Alfredo, seeing Flora's invitation, determines to confront her at the party that evening.

Scene II

At her soirée, Flora learns from the Marquis that Violetta and Alfredo have parted, then clears the floor for a band of Gypsies and dancers, who sing of a bullfighter and his coy sweetheart. Soon Alfredo strides in, making bitter comments about love and gambling recklessly at cards. Violetta has arrived with Baron Douphol, who challenges Alfredo to a game and loses a small fortune to him. Everyone goes in to supper, but Violetta has asked Alfredo to stay behind. Fearful of the Baron's anger, she wants Alfredo to leave, but he misunderstands her apprehension and demands that she admit she loves Douphol. Crushed, she pretends she does. Alfredo calls in the others, denounces Violetta and hurls his winnings at her feet. As the guests rebuke him and Douphol challenges him to a duel, the elder Germont enters in search of his son and also denounces his behavior.

ACT THREE

In Violetta's bedroom, Dr. Grenvil tells Annina that Violetta has not long to live; tuberculosis has claimed her. Alone, Violetta rereads a letter from Germont saying the Baron was only wounded in his duel with Alfredo, who has now been told the truth and is on his way to beg her pardon. But Violetta senses it is too late. Paris is celebrating Mardi Gras, and after revelers pass outside, Annina rushes in to announce Alfredo. The lovers ecstatically plan to leave Paris forever. Giorgio Germont enters with the doctor before Violetta is seized with a last resurgence of strength. Feeling life return, she gets out of bed, staggers and then falls dead at her lover's feet.

The Composer

Giuseppe Verdi was born in Le Roncole, Italy on October 10, 1813. At the time the village was part of the first French Empire. His parents, Carlo Giuseppe Verdi and Luigia Uttini, kept a small inn and grocery store. When Giuseppe was an infant, Russian Cossack troops raided the village killing men, women and children. His mother hid from troops with Giuseppe in a church belfry for twenty-four hours.

The Verdi family moved to the town of Busseto when Giuseppe was still a child. Here he took his first lessons in composition. When Don Pietro Seletti, a Latin teacher and amateur violinist, learned that Giuseppe was interested in music he said, “What do you want to study music for? You have a gift for Latin, and it will be much better for you to become a priest. What do you expect from your music? Do you fancy that someday you may become organist of Busseto? . . . Stuff and nonsense. . . That can never be.”

For a while, it seemed that Seletti was right. When Giuseppe Verdi was nineteen, he applied to the Milan Conservatory, but was not admitted because they believed he was “lacking in musical talent.” Verdi continued his studies taking private lessons and attending operatic performances and concerts. He also attended gatherings called “salons” hosted by Clara Maffei. These *Salotto Maffei* attracted artists, composers, scholars, and writers to discuss art, literature, and the current news.

Verdi returned to Busseto and became the town music master. A local merchant and music lover, Antonio Barezzi, hosted Verdi’s first public performance in his home. Barezzi so loved Verdi’s music that he employed Verdi to teach his daughter, Margherita, music. Margherita and Verdi fell in love and were married on May 4, 1836. They had two children: a daughter, born March 26, 1837 and a son, born on July 11, 1838.

Oberto, Verdi’s first opera, opened in Milan at La Scala on November 17, 1839. His daughter had passed away the year before on August 12, 1838, and his son died only a month before on October 22, 1839. Shortly after his son’s death, his wife became ill and died on June 18, 1840. It is no surprise that the comic opera Verdi had been hired to compose after *Oberto* was not a success. Verdi vowed to give up opera. However, only a few months had passed before Verdi was given the libretto for a proposed opera about Nebuchadnezzar, King of Babylon. This libretto caught his interest, and Verdi composed the music. Verdi was twenty-nine years old when that opera, *Nabucco*, opened at La Scala in 1842 with great success.

Over the next ten years, Verdi composed fourteen operas with great success. During this time he met the soprano, Giuseppina Strepponi, and fell in love. Many people thought it scandalous when they lived together without being married. The couple would later wed on August 29, 1859. Verdi continued to compose operas that the public loved. He was not only a musical genius; he had other qualities that secured his operas’ successes. Verdi was fascinated and acutely aware of the character of human beings and their emotions. He knew how to translate those emotions into music and chose to work with great librettists. He did not try to revolutionize music or create a new style of opera, but used music to communicate the real-life struggles of men and women. His operas portrayed those human conditions connected with hate, love, and death.

Verdi bought an estate two miles from Busseto in 1848 where his parents lived initially. After Verdi’s mother died in 1851, Verdi and Giuseppina made the estate their home at the Villa Verdi at Sant’Agata in Villanova sull’Arda. They lived there for fifty years until his death. During those years, Verdi composed many operas. In 1853, *La Traviata* opened in Milan. Verdi had written it in less than two months as he was also working on *Il Trovatore* at the same time. *La Traviata*, based on Alexandre Dumas’s play, *The Lady of the Camellias*, is one of the most popular of all of Verdi’s operas.

The Composer cont.

Verdi was asked to write a section of a requiem in memory of the composer, Rossini. Because of business complications, this requiem was never performed during Verdi's lifetime. Later, Verdi re-worked his portion of the Rossini Requiem for his own *Requiem Mass*, composed in honor of the famous novelist and poet Alessandro Manzoni who died in 1873. This *Requiem Mass* was first performed on May 22, 1874 at the cathedral in Milan.

From 1871 to 1893, Verdi composed his final three operas. *Aida*, Verdi's most popular opera, premiered in Cairo in 1871. Sixteen years later, he composed *Otello* and it sold out weeks before the first performance. During the performance, there were repeated calls from the audience for Verdi to take the stage. After the opera, huge crowds in the streets waited for him to appear. As a sign of their respect for him, members of the crowd unhitched the horses from his carriage and pulled it through the streets to his destination. Verdi wrote his last opera and only mature comedy, *Falstaff*, when he was seventy-nine years old.

Verdi and the German composer, Richard Wagner, were born in the same year. They were each respected composers with regards to their own work, but they never met. Although it seems that they did not care for each other's work, Verdi's words upon hearing of Wagner's death were, "Sad, sad, sad!... a name that will leave a most powerful impression on the history of art."

Giuseppina Streponi died in 1897. She was buried at Casa di Riposo per Musicisti, a rest home for retired musicians that she and Verdi had planned and established. During the following years, Verdi worked on revising earlier works and composing new works. His *Quattro Pezzi Sacri*, four sacred works, was first performed on April 7, 1898 at the Grand Opera in Paris.

While staying in Milan, Giuseppe Verdi suffered a stroke on January 1, 1901. His health continued to deteriorate and he died on January 27. Famous conductor, Arturo Toscanini, conducted the many orchestras and choirs composed of musicians from all across Italy at Verdi's funeral in Milan. It remains the largest public assembly of any event in the history of Italy. Verdi was initially buried in Milan's Cimitero Monumentale, but a month later his body was moved to the Casa di Riposo per Musicisti where his wife was buried.

Verdi once said, "Of all composers, past and present, I am the least learned." He hastened to add, however, "I mean that in all seriousness, and by learning I do not mean knowledge of music." His knowledge and commitment to communicating human nature and emotion through music is proved by his twenty-eight operas, many of which are a staple of the standard repertoire today.

The Characters

Violetta Valéry (soprano): A Parisian courtesan. Violetta says she values her freedom above all else, but she has a deeper need for love. She meets Alfredo Germont, who wins her heart, and they struggle to make a life together.

Alfredo Germont (tenor): A young bourgeois from a provincial family. He falls in love with Violetta despite his father's disapproval. Alfredo's gambling problem and short temper contributed to their difficulties.

Giorgio Germont (baritone): Alfredo's father. He strongly disapproves of the relationship between Alfredo and Violetta, and convinces Violetta to leave his son. He experiences a change of heart at the end of the opera and brings a doctor to aid Violetta in her illness.

Flora Bervoix (mezzo-soprano): Violetta's friend. Flora throws a party after Alfredo and Violetta part ways, and Alfredo confronts Violetta there.

Annina (soprano): Violetta's maid.

Gastone de Letorières (tenor): Alfredo's friend. He introduces Alfredo to Violetta at the beginning of the opera.

Baron Douphol (baritone): Violetta's lover, Alfredo's rival. Violetta enters a relationship with Douphol after she leaves Alfredo. The Baron can afford her the lifestyle she is accustomed to. Alfredo cannot handle the betrayal and challenges Douphol to a duel.

Links to Musical Excerpts

“Brindisi: Libiamo ne’ lieti calici” – Glyndebourne Opera House

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UZvgmpiQCcI>

Alfredo contributes to Violetta's party with a drinking song.

“Ah, fors’ e lui... Sempre libera” – Diana Damrau

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WXR_HmjB1bo

In the first part of this aria, Violetta muses over the offer of Alfredo's love and wondering if he is her true love after her numerous flings. In the second part, she decides not to worry about her problems and, instead, live only for pleasure and freedom.

“Di Provenza il mar” – Thomas Hampson

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=v69gHTw71uM>

Alfredo's father has convinced Violetta that it is better for everyone if she leaves Alfredo. She begs him to love her and then sneaks out of the house. Later, a servant brings Alfredo her farewell letter and he rushes off to find her. Giorgio stops Alfredo and sings this aria to remind him of their home in Provence and to ask him to return with him.

“Parigi, O Cara” – Rolando Villazon and Anna Netrebko

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RLenzearEmg>

The final scene, Violetta and Alfredo plan their escape to Paris before she loses her battle with tuberculosis.

Name _____

Date _____

Activity Worksheet 1

La Traviata is a drama full of intense emotions. When you are familiar with the story and the characters, match the following descriptive words to the characters and explain why you made your choices. Use examples from the reading selections to help support your choices. Each descriptive word may be used for more than one character and each character may have more than one descriptor.

- | | | | |
|--------|---------|------------|---------|
| Loving | Selfish | Carefree | Loyal |
| Sad | Helpful | Joyful | Jealous |
| Proud | Hopeful | Despairing | Caring |

Violetta: _____

Alfredo: _____

Germont: _____

Douphol: _____

Choose one of the characters above and describe what they could have done to help bring about a less tragic outcome to the story.

Name _____

Date _____

Activity Worksheet 2

Drama is created by conflict between characters or by conflicting emotions within a character. In *La Traviata*, conflict is present between all of the main characters.

1. Germont does not approve of the relationship between Violetta and Alfredo.
2. Violetta is conflicted by her love for Alfredo and what she thinks is best for him.
3. Alfredo is jealous of Violetta's relationship with Baron Douphol.
4. Violetta's body fails her as she struggles with her illness.
5. Germont is full of guilt and his attempt to make things right is too late.

Choose one of these conflicts and write about how it contributed to the resolution of the story.

What advice you would give one, or a pair of, characters to help resolve their conflict.

Which of the characters do you think you are most like? Why?

Which character reminds you the most of someone in your life? Why?

Name _____

Date _____

Activity Worksheet 3

The drama in the story of *La Traviata* is created by the differing backgrounds, cultures, and views of its characters. Consider the following conflicts between or within characters. Write your answers on a separate piece of paper to share with a group or the class.

1. Germont does not approve of the relationship between Violetta and Alfredo. Write about a relationship you've seen a family or friend have that you did not believe was good for them. Why did you feel that way? What did you do?
2. Violetta is conflicted between her love for Alfredo and what she thinks is best for him. Have you ever had to do something that was painful in the moment because you felt it was best in the long run? Write about your experience.
3. Alfredo is jealous of Violetta's relationship with Baron Douphol. Write about an experience you've had with jealousy. How did it affect you? How did it affect the other person or people involved?
4. Violetta's body fails her as she struggles with her illness. Write about a time you've struggled with something outside your control. How did you get through it?
5. Germont is full of guilt and his attempt to make things right is too late. Write about a time you made a mistake with a friend or family member. How did you make things right? If you have regrets about the situation, how could they help you in the future?