



Major Delights

*'La traviata' from San Diego Opera,
recommended by MARIA NOCKIN*

In 1824, two people were born whose lives were destined to intertwine and bring them both fame. Rose Alphonsine Plessis was born into an abusive household, but she grew up to become Marie Duplessis, the most famous courtesan of her time. Alexandre Dumas, the younger, who was bullied at school because of his mixed racial background, grew up to be an esteemed playwright. Marie met him when they were twenty years old. He described her as tall and slim, with lustrous black hair and incredibly white teeth. She once quipped that it was lying that made them so white.

Dumas and Duplessis were friends for over a year and she inspired him to write his 1848 novel, *La Dame aux camélias*. She died at the age of twenty-three, but he had great success with the book which he soon turned into a play. It was première in Paris in 1852 and, eventually, it enchanted Verdi. The composer had a soft spot in his heart for people who were not totally accepted by society. After his first wife and his children had died, he plunged himself into work. A few years later, he began to seek the company of Giuseppina Strepponi, the soprano who sang the première of his first major success, *Nabucco*. When she became his constant companion, people began to gossip about them. They married, eventually, but not until long after the first performance of *La traviata*.



Dancers in a scene from Verdi's 'La traviata' at San Diego Opera. Photo © 2010 Ken Howard

Verdi was not happy with the setting of the *Traviata* première at La Fenice in Venice. He wanted the time of the plot to be the present, but he was overruled. He did not like the cast either, but the show went on with those poorly chosen singers. Since the soprano was quite plump and did not look the slightest bit consumptive, the audience did not believe that she was ill. That night was a fiasco. The second performance, however, was given in a different theatre with a more appropriate cast. It went well, and *La traviata* has been a hit ever since.



From left to right: Elizabeth Futral as Violetta, Marius Brenciu as Alfredo, Kristopher

Irmiter as Dr Grenvil, Rebecca Skaar as Annina and Alan Opie as Giorgio in Verdi's 'La traviata' at San Diego Opera. Photo © 2010 Ken Howard

On 17 April 2010, San Diego Opera presented Verdi's *La traviata* in a spectacular production that Andrew Sinclair originally created for San Francisco Opera. John Conklin designed the mid-nineteenth century scenery that evoked the atmosphere of the demi-monde, while David Walker's costumes fit well and showed the fashion of the times.



Elizabeth Futral as Violetta in Verdi's 'La traviata' at San Diego Opera. Photo © 2010 Ken Howard

Italian conductor Renato Palumbo was to have made his San Diego début leading this performance, but shortly before the overture was to begin, general director Ian Campbell came on stage to tell the audience that Palumbo was ill and would be replaced by resident conductor Karen Keltner.



Elizabeth Futral as Violetta and Marius Brenciu as Alfredo in Verdi's 'La traviata' at San Diego Opera. Photo © 2010 Ken Howard

Elizabeth Futral's interpretation of Violetta explores all the facets of the role and this appearance in San Diego was no exception. She tugged at your heartstrings from her first meeting with Alfredo. Her first act coloratura was precise and the rest of her singing was passionate and coloured with beautiful dramatic tones. She is a lovely artist who can be seen again in Ricky Ian Gordon's *Orpheus and Euridice* at Long Beach Opera in June.



Suzanna Guzmán as Flora and Scott Sikon as the Marquis d'Obigny in Verdi's 'La traviata' at San Diego Opera. Photo © 2010 Ken Howard

Marius Brenciu was a warm voiced Alfredo whose energetic acting matched Futral's passion. It might have been better if he had omitted the

cabaletta 'O mio rimorso, o infamia', however, because it was the only passage that was not smooth. The most pleasant surprise of the evening was the Germont of British baritone Alan Opie. His interpretation was riveting because you could see his opinion of Violetta changing by the minute. He has a resonant Verdi voice, an easy delivery and floods of bronzed tone that soar over the orchestra. His characterization was one of the major delights of this fine performance.



Elizabeth Futral as Violetta and Marius Brenciu as Alfredo in Verdi's 'La traviata' at San Diego Opera. Photo © 2010 Ken Howard

Suzanna Guzmán was a sexy Flora with a sultry chest voice that dripped with honey. As the Vicomte Letorrieres, the Marquis D'Obigny and the Baron Douphol, Joseph Hu, Scott Sikon and Nicolai Janitzky were a trio of courtly gentlemen who sang with polished tones. Rebecca Skaar was a committed Annina and Kristopher Irmiter was a secure Dr Grenvil. Nick Munson, Michael Stephen Blinco and Joe Pechota added greatly to the performance with their fine characterizations of the Messenger and the Servants of Flora and Alfredo.



Elizabeth Futral as Violetta and Alan Opie as Giorgio in Verdi's 'La traviata' at San Diego Opera. Photo © 2010 Ken Howard

Opera companies are beginning to pay more attention to dance and Kristina Cobarrubia's choreography was a case in point. Her dancers were a charming Act III party diversion. Chorus master Timothy Todd Simmons always has a good group that sings in tune while acting in small groups. On this occasion, the chorus delivered an excellent performance.



Elizabeth Futral as Violetta and Marius Brenciu as Alfredo in Verdi's 'La traviata' at San Diego Opera. Photo © 2010 Ken Howard

As mentioned earlier, conductor Karen Keltner substituted for Renato Palumbo at the last minute. Listening to the performance, however, no one would ever have known that she was not the maestro who prepared the cast. She drew shimmering sonorities and luminous playing from the orchestra. She is definitely a major asset to the company and we look forward to hearing her *Faust* next season. *La traviata* was the last production of 2010 for San Diego Opera. Next year they will present Giacomo Puccini's *Turandot*, Richard Strauss's *Der Rosenkavalier*, Charles Gounod's *Faust* and Georges Bizet's *Carmen*.

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LA TRAVIATA
SAN DIEGO OPERA
ITALY
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ELIZABETH FUTRAL
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JOSEPH HU

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