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Verdi in Victorian London

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9. A Moral Case: The Outburst of *La traviata* (1856)

The production of *La traviata* in London in 1856 was preceded by two remarkable events: Her Majesty's Theatre reopened under the leadership of Lumley, and the Covent Garden Opera House was destroyed in a terrible fire. In February, it was rumoured that "the two great establishments in the markets ('Hay' and 'Covent-Garden') would again be striving to outdo each other on Tuesday, Thursday and Saturday, in splendour of pageantry and ruinous superfluity of *prime donne*."¹ On 5 March a fire, whose cause was not possible to ascertain, tore through Covent Garden: "The fire was inexplicable, its progress unexampled, and its ravage incalculable."² John Henry Anderson, a magician to whom a short lease had been granted by Frederick Gye, had organised a "Carnival Benefit," a masked ball, which took place on 4 March. At some point between 4 and 5 a.m., the fire began in the carpenter's shop and nothing could be done to extinguish it. The loss was terrible, not only in financial but also in artistic terms. An announcement soon circulated, however, informing the public that Gye had managed to obtain the Royal Lyceum Theatre temporarily and was in a position to confirm the imminent opening of his operatic season there.³

Early in April, therefore, the forthcoming Royal Italian Opera season was officially announced by Gye at the Royal Lyceum. Gye had engaged a number of star singers including Marietta Piccolomini, who was

1 *The Musical World*, February 2, 1856, p. 73.

2 *The Musical World*, March 8, 1856, p. 152.

3 *The Musical World*, March 29, 1856, p. 201.

expected to make her appearance in Verdi's new opera *La traviata*. In the meantime, the reopening of Her Majesty's Theatre had also been arranged and Lumley had set sail to Paris to organise a new company. On 5 April a short, ironical mention of *La traviata* appeared in *The Musical World*, commenting on Verdi's new opera and prominent position. Since no fewer than three operas belonging to the "Emperor of The Unisons" were promised by Gye, those who cherished Verdi and took delight in his works would be well satisfied.⁴

Later in April Lumley made a public announcement in which he informed his subscribers that Marietta Piccolomini had been secured for his establishment together with Marietta Alboni. On 15 April, meanwhile, Gye opened the Royal Italian Opera season at the Lyceum with *Il trovatore*, featuring the same cast as the year before, Constance Nantier-Didiée, Pauline Viardot and Enrico Tamberlik appearing in the main roles.⁵ On 10 May the Italian opera season at Her Majesty's Theatre opened with *La Cenerentola*, featuring Marietta Alboni in the title role, together with Vincenzo Calzolari, Belletti and Zucconi. *Il barbiere di Siviglia* and *La sonnambula* followed immediately thereafter. Finally, on 24 May, while *Rigoletto* was reprised at the Lyceum Theatre, *La traviata* was produced at Her Majesty's Theatre, featuring Piccolomini in the title role, Calzolari as Alfredo and Federico Beneventano as Germont senior.⁶ According to Lumley, the enthusiasm the *prima donna* ignited was immense and spread like wildfire. "Once more frantic crowds struggled in the lobbies of the theatre, once more dresses were torn and hats crushed in the conflict, once more a mania possessed the public. Marietta Piccolomini became the rage."⁷

Unlike any other Verdi opera in Victorian London, *La traviata* ignited a debate concerning the immoral nature of its libretto that overshadowed

4 *The Musical World*, April 5, 1856, p. 216.

5 *The Musical World*, April 19, 1856, pp. 251–53.

6 Weeks before the premiere at Her Majesty's Theatre was announced the publisher Boosey & Sons was advertising different reductions and arrangements of *La traviata* in the columns of *The Musical World*. In addition to similar arrangements of *Il trovatore* and *Rigoletto*, an unabridged piano reduction of *La traviata*, realised by Rudolf Normann and bearing a portrait of Marietta Piccolomini, was now available, together with a select collection of songs and duets, a *Grand Selection* for military band and an Orchestra suite entitled *La traviata Quadrille and Valse*. Also the English translation of the most celebrated airs was soon made available to the local amateurs.

7 Lumley, *Reminiscences of the Opera*, pp. 375–76.

the discussion of the quality of its music. In the middle lay the figure of Marietta Piccolomini, whose powerful dramatic talent and questionable vocal skills appear to have played a pivotal role in determining the rapturous success of *La traviata* in 1856 London. As many contemporary commentators suggested, she monopolised the audience's attention at the expense of the composer.

In accordance with the Theatre Regulation Act of 1843, every new dramatic piece was to be submitted to the Lord Chamberlain for approval at least seven days before its intended performance. A separate Examiner of Plays appointed specifically for this purpose was responsible for the licensing of any work to be staged, upon the condition that all the necessary emendations be made. Although Alexandre Dumas' *La Dame aux camélias*, from which Francesco Maria Piave had derived the libretto, would be banned twice from the London stage, once in 1853 (under the title *Camille*) and again in 1859, John Mitchell Kemble, the Examiner of the Plays, granted *La traviata* the requested license on 19 May 1856.⁸

As it was generally assumed that audience members understood little or no Italian, and since operagoers were said to bring home just a few nice tunes to hum in their beds—as someone would argue in the course of the ensuing season—censorial interventions consisting in the cutting of entire passages were not frequent with regard to Italian operatic librettos.⁹ Furthermore, in an opera the words were considered subsidiary to the music, a circumstance that allowed for greater tolerance on the part of the censorial authority, even when the operatic version of a banned dramatic text was concerned.¹⁰

The only visible alteration imposed on the libretto of *La traviata* was in Act II, scene 14, where—as reported in *The Times*—the infuriated Alfredo “summons the whole company from the banquet, confesses to them how he has accepted the bounty of Violetta, and by way of repayment flings her portrait at her feet, amid the general indignation of all present, including his own father.”¹¹

8 Roberta Montemorra Marvin, “The Censorship of Verdi’s Operas in Victorian London,” *Music & Letters*, 82/4 (2001): 582–610.

9 *Ibid.*, p. 587.

10 See John Russell Stephens, *The Censorship of English Drama 1824–1901*, p. 83.

11 *The Times*, May 26, 1856, p. 12.



Fig. 9 Scene from *La traviata* at Her Majesty's Theatre. Violetta faints after Alfredo flings her "portrait" at her feet. *The Illustrated London News*, 31 May 1856.

The alteration did not affect the lyrics but rather the stage directions.¹²

Alfredo

Ogni suo aver tal femmina
Per amor mio sperdea
Io cieco, vile, misero,
Tutto accettar potea,
Ma è tempo ancora! tergermi
Da tanta macchia bramo
Qui testimoni vi chiamo
Che qui pagata io l'ho.

Getta con furente sprezzo una borsa
ai piedi di Violetta, che sviene tra le
braccia di Flora e del Dottore. In tal
momento entra il padre

Alfredo

All she possessed, this woman here
Hath for my love expended.
I blindly, basely, wretchedly,
This to accept, condescended.
But there is time to purge me yet
From stains that shame, confound me.
Bear witness all around me
That here I pay the debt

In a violent rage he throws a purse
at Violetta's feet—she faints in the
arms of Flora and the Doctor. At this
moment Alfred's father enters.

12 *Verdi's La Traviata: Containing the Italian Text with an English Translation by T.T. Barker; and Music of all the Principal Airs* (Boston: O. Ditson, c. 1888), p. 39.

As we learn from the dialogue between Alfredo and Annina in Act II, scenes 1 and 2, Violetta has been spending all her money to ensure Alfredo's comfortable lifestyle but, after three months, she is running short of money and has been forced to sell her jewels, horses and carriages. Alfredo feels ashamed and when he meets Violetta at the ball in Flora's apartment it is not his intention to insult her by paying her back for her sexual favours; instead, he blames himself for having accepted her generosity and wants to repay the debt. While the words uttered by Alfredo clearly describe the moral obligations that spur him to make amends for his own blindness, none of the audience members would have missed the potentially offensive meaning of his gesture, if he had flung the purse of money as written in the original libretto. Paying Violetta back could have been understood as an explicit reference to her social position and moral condition; this would have shocked the public and offended their sense of decorum.

Notwithstanding this emendation, the effect upon both the public and the critics was enormous and the opera ignited a long-lasting debate. The fear that having a prostitute for a protagonist would encourage immorality, or even enhance the plague of prostitution, played an important role in stirring up the discussion.

Walter E. Houghton argues that, even though a fallen woman was made an outcast by the Victorian code of purity, the difficult living conditions typical of industrial English cities and the extremely low wages at the humblest social level resulted in an enormous number of illegitimate children and fallen women. By 1850 there were at least 50,000 prostitutes in England and Scotland, and 8,000 in London alone, a plague which contemporary commentators called "The Great Social Evil."¹³ The Strand, Haymarket and Covent Garden were among the neighbourhoods in London where the phenomenon was most noticeable and pervasive. A police report issued on 20 May 1857 counted 480 prostitutes working in 45 brothels situated in the Covent Garden, Drury Lane and Saint Giles district alone. However, given the difficulty of investigating the underworld outside the already ascertained number of brothels, this figure was said to represent "a conscientious

13 Walter E. Houghton, *The Victorian Frame of Mind, 1830–1870* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1957), p. 366.

approximation to the number of street-walkers.”¹⁴ As Michael Pearson notes, if the estimate made by the medical journal *The Lancet* in 1857 was correct, it meant that there were roughly 6,000 brothels and 80,000 prostitutes in London alone.¹⁵

In 1857, the dramatic situation in the theatre district prompted William Acton to coin the expression “Traviata-ism” to suggest a relationship between the objectionable libretto of *La traviata* and the sad spectacle that was forced upon operagoers outside the theatre: “Traviata-ism for ladies may be well enough across the footlights, but a plunge into a hot bath of it on leaving her Majesty’s Theatre is a greater penalty than I would impose upon the most ardent admirer of that very popular ‘opera without music.’”¹⁶

Another striking testimony to the manner in which the Strand and Haymarket presented themselves at night is offered by Hippolyte Taine’s *Notes on England*.

Every hundred steps one jostles twenty harlots; some of them ask for a glass of gin; others say, “Sir, it is to pay my lodging.” This is not debauchery which flaunts itself, but destitution—and such destitution! The deplorable procession in the shade of the monumental streets is sickening; it seems to me a march of the dead. That is a plague-spot—the real plague-spot of English society.¹⁷

Prostitution in London was referred to as a plague, and between 1840 and 1850 a long series of publications, books, articles and reports investigated its possible causes and drew attention to its negative consequences on British society.¹⁸ One proposed approach to the problem consisted in banning all the licentious literature that might have endangered the education of young men and women. In 1869

14 William Acton, *Prostitution, Considered in its Moral, Social & Sanitary Aspects In London and Other Large Cities* (London: John Churchill, 1857), pp. 16–17.

15 Michael Pearson, *The Age of Consent. Victorian Prostitution and its Enemies* (Newton Abbot: David & Charles, 1972), p. 25.

16 William Acton, *Prostitution, Considered in its Moral, Social & Sanitary Aspects*, p. 118.

17 Hippolyte Taine, *Notes on England* (New York: Holt, 1885), p. 36. Taine’s *Notes* were edited in the decade 1861–1871 (cfr. p. xxvii).

18 See Michael Ryan, *Prostitution in London, with a Comparative View of that of Paris and New York* (London: Bailliere, 1839); Gustave Richelot, *The Greatest of Our Social Evils: Prostitution*, trans. Robert Knox (London: Bailliere, 1857); James Miller, *Prostitution Considered in Relation to its Cause and Cure* (Edinburgh: Sutherland; London: Simpkin, 1859).

Francis Newman, Professor Emeritus at University College London, expressed himself in the following terms:

For myself, I am firmly convinced that many things in the school-classics perniciously inflame passion in boys and young men: so do many approved English poems, plays, sculptures and paintings. All such things are a great cruelty to a boy who struggles to keep his imagination undefiled.¹⁹

Contemporary commentators occasionally referred to the negative influence exerted by French literature upon English society and objected to those modern works of fiction which were “tainted with impurity; borrowing largely, in this, from the French school.”²⁰ Some of them argued that the descriptions of sexuality in which such playwrights as Victor Hugo and Alexandre Dumas indulged were detrimental to the English sense of decorum and contrary to Victorian social values. This issue had already been raised in 1834, when the English poet Robert Southey complained about the immoralities present in the plays of Hugo and the elder Dumas, “which were characterised by a preponderance of adulteresses, prostitutes, seducers, bastards, and foundlings.”²¹ In 1853 George Henry Lewes made explicit reference to *La Dame aux camélias* and expressed a sense of relief when the Lord Chamberlain refused to license “this unhealthy idealisation of one of the worst evils of our social life.” “Paris,” he continued, “may delight in such pictures, but London, thank God! has still enough instinctive repulsion against pruriency not to tolerate them.” The mistake, Lewes argued, consisted in treating this intolerable “idealisation of corruption” too lightly, a choice that tended to “confuse the moral sense, by exciting the sympathy of an audience.”²²

As we will see, the arguments against Dumas’ original drama would be reiterated in the course of the 1856 opera season, when *La traviata* was performed at Her Majesty’s Theatre. Interestingly, no trace of this discussion and no reference to the morally questionable subject of

19 Francis W. Newman, *The Cure of the Great Social Evil with Special Reference to Recent Laws Delusively Called Contagious Diseases’ Acts* (London: Trübner, 1869), p. 26.

20 William Logan, *The Great Social Evil* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1871, 1st edn. 1843), p. 232.

21 John Russell Stephens, *The Censorship of English Drama 1824–1901*, pp. 81–83.

22 William Archer and Robert W. Lowe (ed.), *Dramatic Essays: John Forster, George Henry Lewes. Reprinted from the “Examiner” and the “Leader”* (London: Walter Scott, 1896), pp. 240–42.

La traviata can be found in the London periodicals in the month that preceded its first performance. The problem emerged on 28 May, four days after the premiere, when the critic of *The Times*, who had already reviewed *La traviata* two days before, raised the issue of the opera's morality and the extent to which the librettist had been faithful to the original French drama. The commentator went so far as to suggest a way in which the morbidity of the plot might have been attenuated.

Some means might have been found of preserving the situations of M. Dumas without retaining the social position of the *dramatis personae*. A virtuous young lady who loved devotedly, was insulted at a large party, and ultimately died of consumption, would have served just as well for a heroine as a Parisian *lorette*. At the Theatre du Vaudeville, the lives of people whose existence lies *hors de société*, are found to furnish exceedingly pleasant plots, but London audiences have happily not yet grown used to such society.²³

The idea of having a *lorette* on stage was perceived as outrageous and offensive, and the negative influence exerted by French literature was deplorable. This opinion reflected the position of those contemporaries who maintained that such a subject was unfit to be brought before "our sisters and wives" and echoed the fear already expressed by George Lewes.

In response to what his colleague at *The Times* had suggested regarding the moral issue, the critic of *The Leader* took a more balanced, unbiased position on 31 May. He did not agree with the *Times* on the benefits of converting the main character into a lady of fashion; that change, he argued, would have failed to result in any moral improvement.

The critic of *The Times*, who, we observe, has recently taken to the moral as well as the musical sciences, and who has nearly as fine an eye for virtue as ear for Verdi, regrets that the *Traviata* was not converted into a young lady of fashion, broken-hearted by a gay deceiver, in the conventional way of good society. For our own wicked part, we cannot see how that vulgar kind of infidelity in love would be more moral or more affecting than a "lost one" purified by sacrifice and redeemed by death [...] We do not wish to be understood as approving the subject of the *Dame aux Camélias*—in the novel there are incidents that disgust—but we protest against this prudery about the story of a *Traviata* in the thick of our dramatic atmosphere of seductions and adulteries.²⁴

²³ *The Times*, May 28, 1856, p. 5.

²⁴ "Madame Piccolomini—La Traviata," *The Leader*, May 31, 1856, p. 524.

The Athenaeum addressed the subject of *La traviata* in quite negative terms: “the slow pulmonary death of the Lady of Pleasure, when accompanied by an orchestra, is more repulsive to us than when it is gasped, sighed, and fainted to its dying fall.”²⁵ In contrast, *The Illustrated London News* addressed the issue of morality in quite mild terms: although the drama had been censored by the Lord Chamberlain, the opera was more pathetic than outrageous.

In the Italian opera the groundwork of the story and the principal incidents remain the same; but the details are softened down, and the piece, as it stands, is scarcely more objectionable than others (the *Favorita*, for instance) which pass current on the Opera stage. It is, moreover, irresistibly pathetic, and he must be a stern moralist indeed who can witness unmoved the sorrows of the erring but most interesting heroine.²⁶

The critics of *The Literary Gazette* and *Musical Gazette* also joined the choir. They expressed their appreciative and approving opinions with regard to the singer and addressed only in passing the quality of the music.²⁷ Very little attention was paid to the moral implications involved in the subject of the libretto. In this regard the critic of *The Literary Gazette* held that “the heat and violence of the original” had been “duly abated to suit the more temperate medium of the lyrical stage.”²⁸

The moral question was also touched upon by the critic of *The Saturday Review*. He argued that the choice of *La traviata* was an instance of bad taste and reiterated the claim made by Lewes. It was against the interest of morality to appeal to the public’s sympathetic feelings by putting on stage a character deserving of pity rather than admiration or love. He supported the idea that theatrical representations should benefit public morality and that it was pernicious to make vice appear more fascinating than virtue.

However we may attempt to disguise the fact—to wrap it up in soft sounding words and high flown phrases—vice is vice, in what light so ever it may appear, and we are sinning against right when we make it seem more fascinating than virtue. If such plots find favour in England, we should at once renounce all hope of seeing public morality in any

25 *The Athenaeum*, May 31, 1856, p. 688.

26 *The Illustrated London News*, May 31, 1856, pp. 587–88.

27 “Music and the Drama,” *The Literary Gazette: A Weekly Journal of Literature, Science, and the Fine Arts*, May 31, 1856, p. 332.

28 *Ibid.*

way benefited by the teachings of the stage. At any rate, of *La Traviata* we should be sorry to think that it had made a successful appeal to "the merciful construction of good women."²⁹

The critic of *The Morning Post* was of a completely different opinion. He strongly objected to all those prudish commentators who claimed that the subject of *La traviata* was so immoral that it should have been avoided, if not banned. This critic, whose review of *La traviata* was also reproduced in the columns of *The Musical Gazette* on 5 July, held that "The stage, whether it be dramatic or lyric, cannot avoid the exhibition of vice in contrast to virtue any more than a painter can dispense with the shadows which give effect to the lights in his picture."³⁰ It was a mere absurdity to stage a dramatic fable in which the vices of mankind were not to be touched upon or dealt with. The mistake into which people fell, he argued, was that "they did not sufficiently discriminate between the exposure and the palliation of vice." It was not immoral to deal with vice, but only to treat it lightly or to throw round it an attractive aura. In Violetta's case, it was clear that virtue prevailed over vice; the lost one was understood as the redeemed one, the woman who, having wandered from the path of virtue, showed a stronger sense of honour and virtue than those who abandoned her. Moreover, it was a mistake to confound Dumas' *La Dame aux camélias* with Verdi's *La traviata*, since all that could be perceived as inappropriate and objectionable in the drama had been amended in the opera. *La traviata* was not worse than many other earlier operas.

As these reviews suggest, the issue of the dubious morality of Verdi's most recent opera and the way in which it could be understood as pernicious to the Victorian sense of decorum was raised by many contemporary journals, whose critics joined in a spirited discussion. Notwithstanding the objections to its questionable subject, *La traviata* scored a tremendous success among the public. As was repeatedly emphasised in the press, operagoers thronged the theatre night after night, eager to attend the opera derived from the most controversial drama of an entire epoch. To some extent, the sense of prudery that accompanied the appearance of *La traviata* in London was instrumental

29 *Ibid.*

30 "La Traviata," *The Musical Gazette*, July 5, 1856, pp. 285–86 (from the *Morning Post*).

in determining its popular success. This controversy led also to the publication of an anonymous pamphlet, *Remarks on the Morality of Dramatic Compositions with Particular Reference to "La Traviata,"* etc. Its author took a stance in defence of the opera and suggested that its popularity was a good sign, since it showed a "tendency to regard mere artificial law-made sins as no sins at all."

It shows that genuine pity for suffering humanity, ruined and victimized by a hollow and atrocious system of society, animates the bosom of the highest and the fairest in the land. It shows the prevalent disregard for a rotten conventionalism. It shows a growing contempt for the cant of orthodoxy, and the frauds of a gross and withering superstition. It shows that the genuine principles of true morality are recognized, and that there is something in human nature which we could rely on still, and even amidst decomposing institutions, and society in a state of dissolution and collapse is not perhaps the most fallen and debased.³¹

The position expressed by the anonymous author of these *Remarks* invites a reflection on the nature of the discussion that animated the London periodicals soon after the first performance of *La traviata*. Although not every critic shared the same moralising attitude, most of them seemed to agree on the necessity for theatrical performances to treat moral issues with great care. If theatrical representations were to benefit public morality, they had to draw a clear line between what was right and what was wrong; to blur that line by making vice appear more appealing than virtue might have engendered a pernicious confusion in the audience. *La traviata* represented a case in point. The figure of Violetta was surrounded by a positive aura, and the conflicting impressions a spectator might derive from the opposition of her personal dignity to her social condition might also result in that pernicious sympathy to which Lewes had initially referred. Moreover, in *La traviata* the relationship between vice and virtue could have been overturned; Violetta's devotion to Alfredo, her abnegation and her final sacrifice made her a better person than those who looked down upon her with contempt. According to the author of the *Remarks*, while music critics' moralising about *La traviata* showed that they had embraced

31 *Remarks on the Morality of Dramatic Compositions: With Particular Reference to "La Traviata,"* Etc. (London: John Chapman, 1856), also quoted in Montemorra, pp. 601–02.

the “cant of orthodoxy,” the public seemed able to make a distinction between “those genuine principles of true morality” that may be found even in a fallen woman, and the moral stigma that the “atrocious system of society” attached to her. The issue of having a prostitute on stage revealed far more about Victorian class structure and social prejudice than about female immorality.

An even more animated debate concerning the libretto of *La traviata* and its immorality exploded in the Victorian press a few months later. It was triggered by an article published on 2 August in *The Spectator*, in which the critic drew attention to two recent theatrical events which shared the same negative quality: the opera *La traviata* and a play by Tom Taylor, *Retribution: A Domestic Drama in 4 Acts*. Adapted from Charles de Bernard’s novel *La loi du tailon*, *Retribution* was given at the Royal Olympic Theatre on 12 May 1856.³²

The critic agreed with his colleagues that it was Marietta Piccolomini who should be credited with the success of *La traviata*. The young and innocent-looking interpreter had disguised the immoral character of the Parisian courtesan and won the admiration of the public; she had infused Violetta with grace and pathos such as were not to be found in any Parisian *lorette*. The shameful libretto, taken from an infamous modern French novel, had been worthily set to music by Verdi, and the result was simply outrageous. However, the critic regretted that the ladies of the aristocracy seemed to have been neither outraged nor distressed by the vice underlying the opera, since they continued to throng the theatre and crowd their boxes. “But,” the critic argues, “these ladies are not exempt from the weakness of slavery to fashion.” Then, in order to prevent fashion from prevailing over virtue he envisaged a committee of patronesses whose mission would be to forbid immoral operas from being performed. About *Retribution* the critic was no less lenient, arguing that it was not true that “murder and adultery are the most interesting subjects of dramatic art, for it is not true that the persons guilty of these crimes present the most interesting contrasts of character or the most powerful conflicts of passion.”³³ Concluding his review, he claimed that although it was tolerable to “borrow from the

32 See Massimo Zicari, “Un caso di moralità: La Traviata nella Londra Vittoriana (1856),” *Musica/Realtà* 103 (2014): 141–57.

33 “Theatrical Moralities,” *The Spectator*, August 2, 1856, p. 16.

Italians their mellifluous voices, and from the French their neatness of plot and smartness of dialogue," it was harmful to the moral purity of British society to welcome that "prurient sentiment and melodramatic situation which must be the bane of art." The critic's attitude was consistent with those commentators who considered the influence of foreign literature, especially French, pernicious to the British sense of decorum. He advocated the idea that theatrical representations, whether lyric or dramatic, should reflect the national character and its moral values, whereas the fashion then prevalent in London was to stage more exotic and certainly more immoral works imported from abroad. In this sense the critic was expressing his own nationalistic orientations rather than a concern for the moral function of theatrical performances.

On 4 August, this article was reproduced in the columns of *The Times*, a circumstance that prompted the immediate response of other periodicals and occasioned a discussion in which Lumley eventually intervened in defence of the much discussed opera he had put on stage. In response to *The Times's* harshly critical article, on 7 August a reader wrote a letter to the editor in which he argued that although it was certainly wrong to make a courtesan the interesting heroine of a drama, incest, murder, rape and many other similar forms of "unbridled debauchery" were common subjects in the opera. *La traviata* was not dissimilar to *Rigoletto*, *Lucrezia Borgia* or even *Don Giovanni*. There was no reason to be so concerned for the British female public, especially because "from the opera they bring away with them but the airs, as from the drama they bring the story."³⁴ The editor replied by addressing the issue in terms of a "grave question of public morality": while the music was not worth analysing, the libretto was based on a subject that should have never been exhibited on stage in the presence of decent womanhood: "Surely, in order to entertain an English lady it is not necessary to take her for a saunter in the Haymarket at midnight, and to conduct her about 4 a.m. to the consumptive ward of a hospital that she may see a prostitute finish her career."³⁵

34 "Mademoiselle Piccolomini—The Traviata, to the editor of the Times," *The Times*, August 7, 1856, p. 9.

35 *The Times*, August 7, 1856, p. 8. The reference to Haymarket, where Her Majesty's Theatre was situated, is not accidental: the neighbourhood was notoriously crowded with prostitutes.

Not only was the libretto offensive because of the public representation of prostitution, but also because it called attention to “the brothels and abominations of modern Paris of the Boulevards as they exist in the year 1856.” The feeling of deep indignation that characterised the critic’s reaction stemmed from the fact that the kind of immorality staged by *La traviata* reflected a problematic aspect of contemporary life instead of some safely remote historical or fictional world. The objection could be extended to many other theatrical pieces whose subjects, be they old or new, were transgressive. It was also argued that, to some extent, such an immoral opera owed its success precisely to the morbid expectations its subject roused among the general public.

In a way, having decided to reproduce the article that appeared in *The Spectator*, the editor of *The Times* seemed to have taken upon himself the responsibility of launching the discussion and supporting the position of those commentators who believed the dramatic performances involved licentious elements harmful to the education of the youth. This finds confirmation in another article appearing on 9 August, in which the critic of *The Times* insisted on the detrimental influence of what he called the “modern school of Satanic writers in Paris.” These writers indulged in the representation of those hideous vices which lay in front of anybody who walked the streets of Paris. It was morally wrong to import those French dramas and put them on stage in London; it was wrong to draw the public’s attention to harlotry and incest, adultery and seduction; it was wrong to assume that modern English life could offer nothing better than those Parisian vices in which French playwrights took so much interest. In conclusion, the critic apologised to his readers for not having spoken up before but, he held, it had been not his intention to interfere with the profits of managers and actors.

The moralising position of *The Times* prompted the immediate response of the critic of *The Leader*, who commented on the attacks against the management of Her Majesty’s Theatre “for producing pieces which turn upon certain vices supposed to be prevalent at the present day,”³⁶ and ridiculed his colleague for having taken such a prudish position. On 9 August he argued that such aberrations as those present in *La traviata* were “especially the subjects of the dramatic art.” In this sense, Verdi’s recent achievement was not dissimilar to many other dramatic

36 “La Traviata and The Times,” *The Leader*, August 9, 1856, p. 757.

as well as operatic works, which did not seem to have provoked such an animated debate. Even though one might question the taste of an artist who selects subjects that are neither powerful nor beautiful, still the stage should be recognised “as the mirror in which society, looking, will see its own defects as well as its beauties.” Despite the fact that the editor of *The Times* wanted a mirror in which the distortions and deformities of modern life would be erased, the point in staging *La traviata* was that it presented the old, typical struggle between good and bad, and ended with the expected triumph of good, but in a new shape.

The march of all these tragedies presents to us invariably the contest between the bad and the good—the peril to which the good is exposed by the bad agency—and, whatever may be the tragic mination [*sic*], the real triumph of the good. Because in none of these cases does the spirit of the devil gain the victory [...] The class which Violetta la Traviata represents, does exist. It is called into existence by the selfishness and depravity of town-made man; its existence continues unmitigated through the selfish resolve of society to ignore it. But that class consists of some thousands of women—women born to the best qualities of their sex; and these qualities are sometimes so inextinguishable that they remain throughout. If we look gravely into that tragedy, we shall find the same struggle between good and bad, with the same triumph of good. *La Traviata* shows us one instance. After a life of heartless depravity into which she has been led, a natural passion, a genuine affection takes her from it; but she is cast back by the suspicions and repulsions of society.³⁷

Although Violetta is condemned by society, her love for Alfredo redeems her for a life of vice. It is Giorgio Germont, Alfredo’s father, who asks Violetta to abandon his son. Their debauched relationship will cast a moral shadow on the entire family and especially on Alfredo’s sister, whom no decent man will ever marry. It is not until the end of the opera that Violetta’s sacrifice is acknowledged, but it is in spite of all social prejudices and moral biases surrounding her. Moreover, the class of women that Violetta embodied in the opera existed in the real world and could be neither ignored nor eliminated. They were victims of the same society to which the audience belonged and in which operagoers saw themselves reflected.

This line of argument was also followed by Lumley, who, in the middle of all this turmoil, felt the urge to make his position clear. In

37 *Ibid.*

a letter that appeared in the columns of *The Times* on 11 August the manager stated that it had not been his intention to use a plot of dubious morality for the sole purpose of displaying the vocal and dramatic qualities of the principal artist. Nor would it have been difficult to make those changes in the libretto that might have prevented the critics from reacting so harshly. In arguing against his detractors, Lumley used the very same weapon: the moral nature of the subject.

As it stands, the melancholy catastrophe illustrates the Nemesis that attends on vice, and that cannot be entirely averted even by the most touching and devoted repentance. Strike out from the character the evil which had blighted it, and the last scene would have offended against the dramatic canon—that suffering should only be exhibited for the purpose of teaching a moral lesson.³⁸

According to Lumley teaching a moral lesson was still the purpose of the stage: this goal was achieved by mirroring real life and bringing to the stage subjects that reflected the many possible ways in which the continuous conflict between good and evil was manifested. The moral value of *La traviata* lay in showing the audience that noble feelings could dwell even in the broken heart of a “repentant Magdalena.”

In the meantime, the critic of *The Saturday Review* expanded on this issue and called attention to the danger inherent in combining a repulsive plot and a charming actress.

We cannot but regret that the opera chosen for her *début* was one in which some of the most immoral phases of Parisian life are laid bare before us; but the audience seemed to forget the repulsive nature of the plot in the enthusiasm they felt for the young actress. She looked so pure and innocent that, notwithstanding the truth and fidelity of the impersonation, it was not easy to remember the type of character which she was endeavouring to represent. Herein, however, lies the chief mischief likely to arise from putting such a story on the stage. By the fascination which Mademoiselle Piccolomini throws around the character, and the poetry she infuses into it, the moral sense is deadened, and our perceptions of right and wrong are in danger of becoming misty and confused.³⁹

Again, presenting so colourful an instance of the immoral Parisian life, dressed in the clothes of fascination, may have confused the public. The

38 “La Traviata. To the Editor of The Times,” *The Times*, August 11, 1856, p. 7.

39 *The Saturday Review*, August 9, 1856, pp. 339–40.

charm and allure with which the *prima donna* infused the character may have resulted in a misunderstanding of the plot. One week later the same commentator took a more overtly critical position against the critic of *The Times*, whose behaviour had proven to be neither consistent nor entirely honest. Why had he taken so long to react to the alleged depravity of Dumas's dramatic plot? Did opportunism lie behind such a tardy reaction? Having published a lengthy article on 26 May in which "laudatory criticism" outweighed negative comments and where no mention of the morbidity of the plot was to be found, it was remarkable, the critic of *The Saturday Review* argued, that it took the critic of *The Times* almost three months to express his most profound moral concern. In what now seemed to be rather an attack against *The Times* than a reflection on Verdi's opera, the journalist of the *Saturday Review* now denied that the plot of *La traviata* was immoral, though only one week before he had pronounced it a regrettable circumstance that it displayed the most immoral phases of Parisian life.

Granting, however, that the literary and dramatic antecedents of the opera inevitably invest it with associations calculated to repel a correct moral taste, we utterly deny that the plot of the piece is in any respect immoral. The moral of *La Traviata*, such as it is, we take to be this—that even in the lowest depths of vice the heart of woman is still capable of being touched by a true and disinterested affection, but that the outraged laws of society forbid her tasting of the unsullied happiness which she has irretrievably forfeited.⁴⁰

To some extent, the power to arouse the audience's repulsion and elicit their strongest reactions was inherent to the operatic genre. But immorality was out of question once Violetta, as also other critics held, was seen as a woman capable of true love but spoiled by our society's false beliefs and moral biases. In this regard, the critic's position was consistent with that of the anonymous author of the *Remarks*, who had argued that it was less a question of female immorality than of social prejudice.

On 16 August, the critic of *The Leader* returned to the issue in terms strongly suggestive of the role *The Times* had played in attracting increasingly larger crowds.

⁴⁰ *The Saturday Review*, August 16, 1856, pp. 352–53.

The more the *Times* said "Don't go," the more people went; the more it pronounced the performance of the *Traviata* to be unfitted for the presence of ladies, the more ladies were present; for it is a fact that at the additional performances of the opera, the number of women has positively increased in the audience.⁴¹

The animosity that had characterised the reviews published in the preceding months aroused the public's morbid curiosity. This had induced the audience to respond and contribute, even unintentionally, to the success of the opera; perhaps if *La traviata* had not been a moral case, it would not have drawn so much attention to both its authors and interpreters in London. The issue regarding the dubious moral quality of *La traviata* seemed of less concern to the Victorian female public, who continued to attend its performances and to crowd the opera theatre, than of the male critics, who feared for the negative influence its subject could exert on their wives, sisters, daughters and mothers. The general public seemed to be divided along two distinct orientations: those who looked at prostitution as a social evil and those who sympathised with the sad conditions in which poor young ladies were forced by the unfortunate circumstances of life.⁴² As already pointed out, the moralising attitude expressed by the male critics seems to reflect less the issue of female morality than that of the social power structure of Victorian London. Behind this structure lay the belief that women should confine themselves to the domestic dimension, cultivate the ideal of premarital chastity and avoid any exposure to immoral behaviour. This, of course, had little or nothing to do with the real problem of prostitution and its social and economic causes. This dualistic approach is reflected in the repeated references critics made to the repentant Magdalene, a figure evoked to suggest that prostitutes had to repent their own sin despite the fact that, as some Victorian writers had already begun to suggest, they were more often than not "much more sinned against than sinning."⁴³

41 "La Traviata in the Pulpit," *The Leader*, August 16, 1856, p. 781.

42 Susan Rutherford, "La Traviata or the 'Willing Grisette,' Male Critics and Female Performance in the 1850s," in *Verdi 2001: Atti del convegno internazionale*, ed. Fabrizio Della Seta, Roberta Marvin, and Marco Marica (Florence: Leo S. Olschki, 2003), 2: 585–600.

43 See Deborah Logan, "An 'Outstretched Hand to the Fallen': The Magdalen's Friend and the Victorian Reclamation Movements: Part I. 'Much More Sinned Against than Sinning,'" *Victorian Periodicals Review* 30/4 (1997): 368–87.

On 23 August, the critic of *The Spectator* returned to this topic and expressed himself in terms consistent with what had been published on 2 August. All the figures involved in the production of theatrical events shared a certain degree of responsibility in the choice of subject matter; among them the press and the general public were to be counted, together with the theatrical manager, the actors, the dramatist and the composer, who were now dragged in front of the tribunal of the press and exposed to public shame. However, the critic insisted that *La traviata* was founded on a licentious novel whose recklessness was neither alleviated nor mitigated by the grace and fascination of Piccolomini's "birdlike voice." On the contrary, it was wrong and even dangerous to push its hideousness into the background and make its allurements more attractive and seductive by means of a fine singer. While the presentation of the morbid anatomy of those vices in which French dramatists like Dumas indulged was in itself deplorable, to have them embodied on stage by a talented singer was detrimental. "But the complete realisation of a scene presented by skilful actors on a modern stage exerts far greater power over the sympathies of an audience, rendered excitable by all the accompaniments of theatrical illusion, and by the contagion of a crowd all sharing the same emotion, than the most powerful writer can exert over his solitary reader."⁴⁴ On this account, the critic would not impose on literature the same restrictions he would consider appropriate for stage representations; the alluring, charming qualities of a good actress made of Violetta the object of admiration, and a young lady of weak principles would even envy the grace and gaiety of Violetta, rather than learn the moral lesson imparted by her story.

But if the moral question monopolised the attention of the critics and triggered the curiosity of the public, what was the people's response to the music of *La traviata*? And what role did the main interpreter play in its rapturous success? As Lumley would put it in his *Reminiscences*, "the important problem of permanent success was not completely solved, so far as the season of 1856 was concerned, until the appearance of a young Italian lady of high lineage on the boards of Her Majesty's Theatre."⁴⁵ The business of opera was strongly dependent on those international stars whose vocal talent and dramatic power could draw the audience

44 *The Spectator*, August 23, 1856, p. 13.

45 Lumley, *Reminiscences of the Opera*, p. 375.

and fill the theatre; whether the critics liked them or not was another question.

At the outset of the season a new rage from Italy had been announced in the columns of *The Musical World*. Marietta Piccolomini was the new star of the operatic firmament; in her country she had caused a frenzy at least equal to that which had accompanied the appearance of Jenny Lind in London a few years before.⁴⁶ The descendant of a noble family, Marietta Piccolomini had struggled against her own family to become a singer and devote her life to opera. Having overcome the opposition of her father, she was granted permission in 1852 to appear in public in *Lucrezia Borgia* at the Teatro della Pergola in Florence. The furore she created was soon recorded by the national and international press, and Violetta would become the character she most excelled as. When in 1856 Meyerbeer visited Italy in order to get a sense of the day-to-day practice of contemporary Italian stage music, he made a stop in Siena for the purpose of seeing her Violetta. As the composer noted in his diaries, Piccolomini was “a very significant talent,” even though she excelled less in her vocal technique than in her dramatic skills. “Not a big voice, no great singing style, little by way of top notes, but spirit, grace, elegance, fire, important acting ability, peculiarly genial perception of detail; in short she pleases me very much.”⁴⁷

Similar opinions about the discrepancy between Piccolomini’s small voice and great dramatic talent were expressed by other contemporaries. In 1856 Verdi himself mentioned Piccolomini more than once when discussing the intended composition of *King Lear*; she would be an excellent Cordelia since “her voice is small, but her talent great.”⁴⁸ Then, it is not surprising that at the beginning of the 1856 opera season both Lumley and Gye were trying to secure Marietta Piccolomini for their operatic establishments. As expected, a true frenzy accompanied her appearance as Violetta in London, even though it did not equal the craze witnessed in Rome, Florence and Turin.

46 *The Musical World*, March 29, 1856, p. 200.

47 Robert Ignatius Letellier, ed., *The Diaries of Giacomo Meyerbeer*, iii: 1850–1856 (Madison and London: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 2001), p. 367.

48 Gaetano Cesari, Alessandro Luzio and Michele Scherillo (eds.), *I copialettere di Giuseppe Verdi* (Milan: Commissione, 1913), pp. 194–197, available at <https://archive.org/details/icopialettere00verd>



Fig. 10 In reporting on Marietta Piccolomini's success, *The London Journal* portrayed her as a real beauty, a charming singer, an impressive actress, and the daughter of a noble family. *The London Journal*, 23 August 1856.

There, it was reported, on many occasions her ardent admirers would have dragged her carriage home, had she not protested against this insane desire. Although the *prima donna* was immediately and almost unanimously credited with the success of the opera, not everybody agreed that she possessed all the vocal as well as dramatic qualities that would justify the unconditional applause that operagoers were bestowing upon her.

Her voice was a high and pure soprano, with all the attraction of youthfulness and freshness; not wide in range, sweet rather than powerful, and not gifted with any perfection of fluency or flexibility. Her vocalization was far from being distinguished by its correctness or excellence of school. Her acting was simple, graceful, natural, and apparently spontaneous and untutored. To musicians she appeared a clever amateur but never a great artist.⁴⁹

49 Lumley, *Reminiscences of the Opera*, pp. 375–76.

According to the critic of *The Times*, the trepidation that accompanied the premiere of *La traviata* in London on 24 May was due to the *début* of Piccolomini rather than to the quality of either the libretto or its music. The new *prima donna's* rendition of the principal role was declared "the most perfect ever witnessed" and the extensive tribute paid to Piccolomini was instrumental in demonstrating the limits of the music, which "except so far as it affords a vehicle for the utterance of the dialogue, is of no value whatever." It was a "triumph with which the composer has as little to do as possible."⁵⁰ The young *prima donna* excelled in those qualities that were related primarily to her histrionic force. She "monopolized to herself all the attention of the public, who contemplating that mute figure forgot the insipid air by which her movements were accompanied."⁵¹ The climax was achieved in the last scene.

The tottering step with which Mademoiselle Piccolomini endeavoured to reach her chair when the malady was at its height was fine to the highest degree. Every spectator followed her movements with a sort of nervousness, and audibly rejoiced when she was fairly seated, so obvious was the danger that she might fall exhausted in the midst of her efforts.⁵²

The *prima donna* left the audience in a state of enthusiastic admiration, which resulted in moments of breathless suspense followed by final stormy applauses and universal calls for her reappearance before the curtain. A couple of days later, *The Times* recorded the resounding success of Piccolomini's second appearance, while still insisting on the poor quality of the music.

It is Mademoiselle Piccolomini's truthful expression of the sentiments she has to embody, the force of her 'points,' the accurate detail of her by-play, that gain for her the suffrages of her hearers. They applaud lines rather than passages, and regard the music more as a form of elocution than as a specimen of an independent art. An opera in which the composer's work may be set down as nought looks like a sort of solecism, but, nevertheless, that such a thing is to be found, and in a thriving condition, may be ascertained by any one who will witness *La Traviata*.⁵³

50 *The Times*, May 26, 1856, p. 12.

51 *Ibid.*

52 *Ibid.*

53 *Ibid.*

When on 31 May the critic of *The Musical World* reviewed the premiere of *La traviata*, he drew attention to the triumph of Marietta Piccolomini alone. Her success was certain and the opinion unanimous that “an artist at once original and fascinating had debuted and triumphed.”⁵⁴ While as a vocal artist Piccolomini revealed her lack of experience and a voice not yet fully trained, in terms of expression and dramatic power she was possessed of great talent and undeniable histrionic art. As far as plot went, the critic referred to what had appeared in the columns of *The Times* regarding the first performance; he deferred the analysis of Verdi’s music to a later occasion. On 7 June, he continued to report on the increasing success of Piccolomini and the unprecedented enthusiasm she created but, again, he failed to express an opinion on the musical quality of *La traviata*, or lack thereof.



Fig. 11 Marietta Piccolomini. *The Illustrated London News*, 31 May 1856.

54 *The Musical World*, May 31, 1856, p. 346.

On 31 May, *The Illustrated London News* recorded the success of the new opera which, it was argued, belonged entirely to the new *prima donna*. Her qualities as an actress were said to have overshadowed her attributes as a singer, and ample space was dedicated to her noble lineage and struggle to become a singer. Here, Verdi's music was pronounced the weak link; it included some nice melodies, but of a poor quality, while none of the concerted pieces so distinctive of his previous achievements were to be found in *La traviata*.⁵⁵ On the same day, *The Saturday Review* pronounced the personal success of Marietta Piccolomini undeniable: "At the end of every act she was loudly called for; her performance was repeatedly interrupted by enthusiastic demonstrations of delight; and when the curtain fell, the audience would not be satisfied until she had three times appeared before them to receive their thanks and plaudits."⁵⁶ But, the critic held, Piccolomini's unquestionable success was less dependent on her vocal than on her dramatic skills: "it is as a dramatic *artiste* that she is greatest; and it is principally to her acting that her success is due. Charming as her voice is, the singer was eclipsed by the actress."⁵⁷ Having expanded generously on the plot, the critic insisted that the music was not worth discussing: "The fact is, that the latter [the music] is a mere accessory, and that the piece is to be regarded less as an opera than as a powerful drama set to music, of little significance or beauty in itself."⁵⁸

On 2 August, Chorley took the opportunity to recapitulate the achievements of the past season and call attention to the undeserved popularity of Marietta Piccolomini.⁵⁹ The critic claimed that "the song of triumph was never louder in misrepresentation of its misdeeds, even in the days that are gone,"⁶⁰ by which he intended to illustrate the evident

55 *The Illustrated London News*, May 31, 1856, pp. 587–88.

56 *The Saturday Review*, May 31, 1856, p. 104.

57 *Ibid.*

58 *Ibid.*

59 In the meantime *Il trovatore* had been produced for the first time at Her Majesty's Theatre, on which occasion Augusta Albertini was also introduced to the London public. At the end of May, while *La traviata* was taking London by storm and Piccolomini was preparing for *La figlia del reggimento*, Johanna Wagner joined the team led by Lumley and made her debut in Bellini's *I Montecchi e I Capuleti* as Romeo. On 26 June, Marietta Piccolomini scored another success as Maria in *La figlia del reggimento*.

60 *The Athenaeum*, August 2, 1856, p. 968.

mismatch between the rage that had accompanied Piccolomini's appearance in London and her true vocal merits. Such expressions as "abuse of fine language" and "mystification of the public" were pronounced by the critic in order to undermine that undeserved chorus of praise. Chorley insisted that Marietta Piccolomini possessed a talent as a dramatic actress but not as a singer. This opinion was also shared by John Edmund Cox, who in 1872 expressed himself in unequivocal terms: "As for singing she had not a idea of what the meaning of that accomplishment really was."⁶¹

Although not every critic agreed that Marietta Piccolomini was a valuable singer, most of them claimed that she alone was to be credited with the enormous success of the opera. This is confirmed by the countless detailed descriptions of the impressive manner in which she had conveyed the dramatic power of her character to the open-mouthed audience. That she had a small voice seems beyond doubt, but that she could not sing appears to be controversial. The critical opinions that appeared in the London press were to a large extent consistent with those that were to appear in Paris when *La traviata* was given on 6 December 1856. *Le Constitutionnel* pronounced Piccolomini a talent full of grace, originality and surprise, a talent *sui generis*, an artist gifted like nobody else. She could *tell* what other songstresses would *sing*; but she would tell it with such an accent, verve and sentiment that one felt captivated by her charm without realising what the cause might be.⁶² *La Patrie* wrote that her success represented the perfect example of a rare dramatic intelligence, though other periodicals expressed doubts about her vocal technique, which appeared to be still undeveloped. Other comments that appeared in the French press later that year confirmed that she was a mesmerising artist whose dramatic talent amply compensated for her untrained vocal technique and feeble voice.

Notwithstanding the hostility shown by the most conservative periodicals, in London *La traviata* continued to be an incontestable success, appealing greatly to the general public. At the end of October, performances resumed at Her Majesty's Theatre; again the opera house

61 John Edmund Cox, *Musical Recollections of the Last Half-Century* (London: Tinsley, 1872), p. 301.

62 *Le Constitutionnel*, December 8, 1856. See Hervé Gartioux, *La Réception de Verdi in France*, p. 217.

was besieged by the multitudes, again every box was full, again every single stall was occupied, again Piccolomini was recalled, applauded and covered with bouquets. All those who had prophesied a short and ephemeral success were now proved mistaken. *The Times* recorded once more the triumph of both Piccolomini and the opera:

Not only was the theatre crammed full as soon as the doors were opened—not only was the standing room in the pit completely choked up by a compact mass of excited humanity, but after this process was accomplished there still remained a crowd outside, anxiously desiring admittance, and refusing to believe that the desire could not be granted. The triumph of the vocalist in every way corresponded to the eagerness of the anticipators. Mademoiselle Piccolomini was watched throughout her exquisite performance with devotional attention, and at the fall of the curtain came those thunders of applause that cannot be imagined by those who have never learned by actual experience what can be done by the lungs of a crowded audience, in a large theatre, raised to the highest pitch of excitement. Then followed ‘calls,’ each accompanied by a shower of bouquets, and so ended the loud ceremonial.⁶³

The critic continued to express strong disapproval for the music, which he considered merely commonplace, and to emphasise the significant gap between the response of the most severe critics and the enthusiasm of the public. While the former referred to the limited resources of the composer and to the consequently low quality of the music, the latter responded to the blandishments of the main vocalist.

No one pretends to care sixpence about Verdi’s music to *La Traviata*; not a single air forming part of it has taken a place among popular tunes, whereas barrel organs have drawn their inspirations from *Don Pasquale* and *La Figlia*. Without Mademoiselle Piccolomini *La Traviata* would probably be unendurable, but *with* Mademoiselle Piccolomini it is one of the ‘lions’ of 1856, which, universally censured, is universally patronized.⁶⁴

Other contemporary writings seem to confirm the pattern presented thus far: signs of enthusiastic admiration with regard to the main interpreter were frequent, while only moderate and occasional signs of appreciation were expressed for the composer and his music, let alone the libretto.

63 “Her Majesty’s Theatre,” *The Times*, October 27, 1856, p. 10.

64 *Ibid.*, p. 11.

In his *Journal of a London Playgoer*, Henry Morley, Emeritus Professor of English Literature at University College London, commented on the way the success belonged to the principal singer only.

For of *La Traviata*, the opera with which she [Piccolomini] has connected her success, I must say candidly that it is the worst opera by Verdi that has found its way to England, while his very best is, on its own score, barely tolerable to the ears of any well-trained London audience. Generally, too, in each of Verdi's operas there is some one thing that, if not good, may pass for good among the many; there is the "Donna è mobile" in *Rigoletto*, the "Baleno del suo sorriso" in the *Trovatore*, or the "Ernani involami" in *Ernani*. In the *Traviata* there is absolutely nothing. Grant a decent prettiness to the brindisi, "Libiamo," and the utmost has been said for an opera very far inferior in value to the worst of Mr. Balfe's. Where the voice of the singer is forced into discords of the composer's making, and the ear is tortured throughout by sounds which the wise man will struggle not to hear, it is obviously impossible to judge fairly of the vocal powers of the *prima donna*.

In spite of bad music, and in spite of a detestable libretto which suggests positions for her scarcely calculated to awaken honest sympathy, in spite of the necessity of labouring with actors who, as actors, can make—and no wonder—nothing at all genuine out of their parts, Mdlle. Piccolomini creates and obtains the strongest interest for a *Traviata* of her own [...] Mdlle. Piccolomini is the beginning, the middle and the end of the opera, and it is her *Traviata* that the public goes to see. Her *Traviata* conquers the libretto to itself; and to a wonderful degree succeeds also in conquering the music and in impressing its own stamp on very much of it.⁶⁵

But what was Verdi's position in London in 1856? How was he conceptualised as an artistic figure? Did the audience really have to endure his music? According to Lumley, "Verdi's music now shared the same fate as its fortunate exponent. It [*La traviata*] pleased—it was run after—it became one of the most popular compositions of the time."⁶⁶ In the manager's account, even if the anti-Verdists and the musical purists denounced Verdi's music with the epithets of their stereotyped vocabulary, *La traviata* soon achieved a marked and lasting popularity. Although it was judged "trashy, flimsy and meretricious" by the anti-

65 Henry Morley, *The Journal of a London Playgoer from 1851 to 1866* (London: Routledge, 1891), pp. 114–16.

66 Benjamin Lumley, *Reminiscences*, p. 378.

Verdists, among whom a strain of bigotry was pervasive, the dramatic power of the composer impressed the masses. As Frederick Crowest put it, “the popular nature of the music, its freedom from technical and theatrical perplexity, which the public at large is glad to be without, its ever changing colour, variety and expression—all this contributes to the vitality of *La Traviata*.”⁶⁷ But, as we have seen from the opinions expressed with regard to the main interpreter, little or no attention was paid to the quality of Verdi’s music. A first analysis of Verdi’s new opera had been carried out by the critic of *The Athenaeum* as early as May, when both Lumley and Gye had promised to produce it.

It seems written in the composer’s later manner,—grouping with his *Rigoletto* and *Trovatore* without being equal to the latter opera,—to demand from its heroine a less extensive *soprano* voice than Signor Verdi usually demands,—to contain in the *finale* to its second act, a good specimen of those pompous slow movements in which the newer Italian *maestro* has wrought out a pattern indicated by Donizetti;—also throughout an unusual proportion of music in triple or waltz *tempo*. If such choice of rhythm have been made in order to represent the festivity of the Parisian scenes through which the consumptive lady of pleasure and her weak, heartbroken lover move, it is as odd an example of disregard to local colouring as was ever produced by artist. In Vienna the *valse* would prevail, in Warsaw the *polonaise* or the *mazurka*, but in Paris, the *gavotte*, the *bourrée*, the *contredanse*, the *galoppe*.⁶⁸

Chorley had taken the opportunity to look over the piano reduction of *La traviata*, so as to draw some possibly premature conclusions. In his opinion, Verdi had mistakenly adopted the triple metre in order to evoke the Parisian scene, instead of considering those genres more typical of French dance music. As a matter of fact, during his visit to Paris in 1847 Verdi had acquired a good knowledge of the Parisian theatrical world, and in a letter to Countess Clara Maffei dated 6 September 1847 he mentioned two plays which were creating a furore in the French capital: Felix Pyat’s *Le chiffonnier de Paris*, and Dumas’ and Auguste Maquet’s *Le Chevalier de Maison-Rouge*.⁶⁹ It also seems clear that not only was Verdi well informed about those dramatic novelties

⁶⁷ Crowest, *Verdi*, p. 137.

⁶⁸ *The Athenaeum*, May 3, 1856, p. 561.

⁶⁹ Emilio Sala, “Verdi and the Parisian Boulevard Theatre, 1847–9,” *Cambridge Opera Journal* 7/3 (1995): 185–205.

depicting poverty and the sordid aspects of Parisian contemporary life, but he also knew about Marie Duplessis' preference for the new waltz dance. Marie Duplessis, the Parisian courtesan after whom Dumas had created Marguerite Gautier, the main character of *La Dame aux camélias*, was keen on waltz, the most fashionable dance in Paris in the late 1840s.⁷⁰ Chorley's knowledge of the most recent aspects of Paris social life was probably not up to date, a circumstance that led him to question the suitability of Verdi's choices in that regard. About Verdi's music, Chorley was unequivocal, for he held that "there is, indeed, little in its score to satisfy the mind or to detain the ear." Such a negative verdict would find confirmation in a later article, in which he stated that "the music of *La traviata* is trashy; the young Italian lady cannot do justice to the music, such as it is. Hence it follows that the opera and the Lady can only have established themselves in proportion as Londoners rejoice in a prurient story prettily acted."⁷¹

Although the Piccolomini rage was much reported in *The Musical World* (on 2 August it published a sonnet that John G. Freeze had dedicated to Marietta Piccolomini) not a word was printed in that journal regarding Verdi's music. As we have seen, *The Illustrated London News* pronounced Verdi's music the weakest part of the performance for, notwithstanding some nice melodies, it included none of those concerted pieces that were to be found in his previous achievements.⁷² Other journals had addressed this question only in passing, and judged Verdi's music a mere accessory to the dialogues. *The Times* is a case in point: "We have been thus minute with the plot, because the book is of far more consequence than the music, which, except so far as it affords a vehicle for the utterance of the dialogue, is of no value whatever, and, moreover, because it is essentially as a dramatic vocalist that the brilliant success of Mademoiselle Piccolomini was achieved."⁷³ When, two days later, the same critic insisted that the public "applaud lines rather than passages, and regard the music more as a form of elocution than as a specimen of an independent art," he was confirming his opinion of the subordinate role played by the music and its limited artistic value.

70 Emilio Sala, *Il Valzer delle Camelie* (Turin: EdT, 2008), pp. 53–86.

71 *The Athenaeum*, August 16, 1856, p. 1023.

72 *The Illustrated London News*, May 31, 1856, pp. 587–88.

73 *The Times*, May 26, 1856, p. 12.

La traviata represents an unprecedented case in the reception of Verdi's operas in Victorian London. In 1856, the discussion of the questionable libretto and its moral implications monopolised the attention of the press to such an extent as to relegate the composer to a subordinate role of little influence. Although it was generally argued that dramatic and lyric representations offered themselves as a mirror for the audience's reflection, no sooner was their subject too dangerously close to a problematic aspect of Victorian society, than they were understood as a threat to social respectability and public decorum. What dramatic censors saw on stage did not please them because it challenged those beliefs and convictions that lay at the core of Victorian society as a power system. While some critics objected to the subject of *La traviata* as such, for it was unacceptable to make a French *lorette* the protagonist of an opera, many insisted that it was Piccolomini's "pure and innocent" performance that made its moral character dangerously misty and confusing. It was the seductive power of her acting, the allure of her gestures, the mesmerising quality of her figure that scared the critics. As already suggested, many commentators expressed their strong fear that the positive aura with which she infused the character of Violetta might have a misleading effect on the public, and especially on female operagoers. She made the thin line between right and wrong disappear.

But Marietta Piccolomini also seems to have played a key role in marginalising the figure of the composer. In fact, she was the actress who made people forget about the music or, as some critics suggested, made them wonder whether there was music at all behind the lines she uttered. This balance would be overturned in the following years for, no sooner had Marietta Piccolomini withdrawn from public artistic life, than *La traviata* came to be listened to and appreciated on the basis of its musical and dramatic content.

In Dublin the forthcoming performance of *La traviata*, which was announced for 14 October, provoked reactions similar to those recorded in London. On 11 October John MacHugh, a Catholic chaplain of Dublin, wrote a letter to the Earl of Carlisle, Lord Lieutenant of Ireland, asking for such a dangerous opera to be prohibited in order "to save the public morals of Dublin from such a gross outrage to their Christian and moral feelings."⁷⁴

⁷⁴ *The Musical World*, October 18, 1856, p. 666.

On 13 April 1857, a “Grand Verdi Festival” was produced at the Exeter Hall and attracted an immense crowd. The festival was reviewed as “a musical entertainment of a novel and varied character [...] for the admirers of Verdi, the popular representative of Young Italy, the concert provided was a real treat, since it comprised a selection of favourite *morceaux* from his three most successful operas—*Il trovatore*, *La traviata*, and *Rigoletto*.”⁷⁵ The critic of *The Times* recorded two issues of some importance: first, the Exeter Hall Committee entertained “strong objections to the text of the notorious *Traviata*” and “interdicted the publication of an English translation of the programme in the form of a book of words;” second, an “enormous audience” assembled at the call of Verdi, three-fourths of which “consisted of persons who would on no account have been tempted to visit a theatre, and yet thought it quite legitimate to listen to the words and music of *La traviata* in Exeter-hall.” The episode is revealing and the way in which it was recorded by *The Times* is even more telling. The idea of producing a “Grand Festival” reflected the extent to which Verdi was appreciated by the general public and demonstrated that his success had unquestionable implications in terms of money-making. To this success, the discussion on the moral quality of *La traviata* had contributed greatly.

By 1857, and despite all negative criticisms, Verdi had established himself as one of the most significant living representatives of Italian opera in London. In the course of the two parallel operatic seasons there, his recent works made their appearance several times, being produced and revived successfully by both operatic establishments. *La traviata* was given at Her Majesty’s Theatre on 23 April 1857, featuring Marietta Piccolomini in the title role and Antonio Giuglini in the part of Alfredo, and once more on 18 July, upon conclusion of the entire season. The same opera appeared in the rival season at Covent Garden on 16 May, this time with Angiolina Bosio as Violetta. Her interpretation of the character was distinctly different from that of Piccolomini. Looking more ladylike and refined, in Chorley’s eyes, Bosio’s Violetta was less offensive, more supportable than Piccolomini’s, an opinion shared by some other contemporary commentators.⁷⁶ Mario was Alfredo and Francesco Graziani was Germont; the performance, it was said,

⁷⁵ “Exeter-hall,” *The Times*, April 14, 1857, p. 10.

⁷⁶ Susan Rutherford, “La Traviata or the ‘Willing Grisette,’” pp. 585–600.

created an unprecedented excitement and *La traviata* filled the theatre for several nights.

On 23 April *Il trovatore* was given at the Royal Italian Opera, featuring Mario as Manrico, with Grisi as Leonora, Nantier-Didiée as Azucena, Graziani as Conte di Luna, Tagliafico as Ferrando. The interpreters were pronounced superb and the opera attracted a crowded audience. The same opera was produced at Her Majesty's Theatre one month later, on 23 May, with Alboni as Azucena, Spezia as Leonora, Giuglini as Manrico, Federico Beneventano as Conte di Luna, Vialetti as Ferrando; again, the opera was a success. On 7 May, Angiolina Bosio was Gilda in *Rigoletto*, and was received with enthusiasm by the crowded audience at the Royal Italian Opera, while on 2 June, *Nino* was produced at Her Majesty's Theatre, featuring the baritone Corsi, who made an impression despite his worn voice.