

4-2014

The Sounds of Paris in Verdi's La Traviata (book review)

Juliana Starr

University of New Orleans, jstarr1@uno.edu

Follow this and additional works at: http://scholarworks.uno.edu/fl_facpubs

Recommended Citation

Starr, Juliana. "The Sounds of Paris in Verdi's La Traviata." (book review) *H-France Review* 14 (April 2014): 1-4. <http://www.h-france.net/vol14reviews/vol14no65starr.pdf>

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by the Department of Foreign Languages at ScholarWorks@UNO. It has been accepted for inclusion in Foreign Languages Faculty Publications by an authorized administrator of ScholarWorks@UNO. For more information, please contact scholarworks@uno.edu.

H-France Review Vol. 14 (April 2014), No. 65

Emilio Sala, *The Sounds of Paris in Verdi's La traviata*. Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2013. xv + 206 pp. Figures, notes, bibliography, and index. \$95.00 U.S. (hb). ISBN 978-1-107-00901-1; \$60.80 U.S. (eb). Kindle digital file.

Review by Juliana Starr, University of New Orleans.

How did Paris and its musical “soundscape” (p. 11) influence Verdi’s *La traviata*? In this volume, Emilio Sala breaks fresh ground in the fields of ethnomusicology, music history, and sound studies by re-examining the famous opera in the cultural context of the French capital in the mid-nineteenth century. Verdi arrived in Paris in 1847 and stayed for almost two years. There, he began his relationship with the soprano Giuseppina Strepponi, and regularly attended performances at the boulevard theaters, whose plays made frequent use of incidental music to intensify emotion and render certain dramatic moments memorable to the audience. It was in one of these theaters, the Théâtre du Vaudeville, that Verdi, upon return to Paris in 1852, probably witnessed one of the first performances of Dumas fils’s hugely successful play, *La Dame aux camélias*. Making deft use of primary source material, including unpublished musical works, journal articles and rare documents and images, Sala’s close examination of the incidental music for *La Dame aux camélias*, and its musical context, offers a new and invaluable interpretation of *La traviata*’s modernity.

Dividing his volume into three chapters with an introduction and conclusion, the author seeks firstly to dispel the cliché of Verdi the peasant, the *naïf*, the “folkloristic-plebian Shakespeare” (p. 1). Such notions, though still enjoying currency today, are nationalistic fabrications that paint a distorted reality. Sala offers instead an understanding of the composer as a bold nineteenth-century entrepreneur, a bourgeois professional, “a modern man in search of a modern musical stagecraft aimed at a modern audience” (p. 3). As such, Verdi was as much a citizen of Paris as he was a citizen of Parma, and as much a brother of Balzac as he was a brother of his Italian contemporaries.

Using an archaeological approach, Sala’s goal is the reconstruction of a horizon of meaning that transcends the boundaries of *La traviata* itself, of its genesis and reception. This broadened textuality should not be confused, however, with a mere work of contextualization or of source-tracing. His aim is to approach the opera via the system of representation (musical and non-musical) to which it belongs, while understanding that the relation between empirical reality and representation is reciprocal and “irksomely multifaceted” (p. 6). The myth of the lady of the camélias, for example, does not start with Marguerite Gautier and Violetta Valery, but with Alphonsine Plessis/Marie Duplessis, whose life is already mythical. Hence, even biographical information, not in itself but in its representation, is relevant in forming Sala’s thematic (and sonic) field of inquiry.

Chapter one thus begins from a place frequented by Alphonsine Plessis/Marie Duplessis—the boulevard theater. One of its most constant and typical traits was its extensive use of music during performances. Here, the author attempts to describe the sonic landscape of boulevard theaters at the time of Verdi’s first stay in Paris, from summer 1847 to summer 1849, in order to define certain musical and dramaturgical processes and effects that may have left a trace on the composer’s burgeoning creativity. Rather than constructing a complete list of performances that Verdi could have attended, he examines a

few works that have obvious and significant resonances with Verdian dramaturgy. Firstly, *Le Chiffonnier de Paris* (1847) was one of the key works of the socially engaged *mélodrames*. Its original orchestral material by Pilati survives, consisting of fifty musical numbers plus a long overture. The parallels with *La traviata* (1853) are apparent in both its plot and music. We see the contrast created between the despair of the seamstress Marie, who is overcome by fatigue and hunger, and the rejoicing crowd that we hear offstage. Indoors, on Shrove Tuesday, a despairing woman sits lonely and abandoned, while outdoors the masked crowds of Paris, crazed by the carnival, rejoice.

Secondly, Dumas's *Le Chevalier de Maison-Rouge* (1847), was a historical work with incidental music, composed by Alphonse Varney, containing seventy musical numbers, plus prelude and "Choeur des Girondins"—the latter achieving a rich life outside the theater, being published independently in 1847, reprinted in 1852, and becoming an anthem of the barricades of 1848. Again, Sala points out some fascinating parallels, this time with Verdi's opera *La battaglia di Legnano* (1849). In addition, *Le Chevalier* made generous use of what one opera critic has called the "spotlight effect" (p. 31), a typical technique of melodramatic rhetoric in which the instrumental solo suspends the on-stage flow of time, allowing us to go "inside" the characters and live the scene from their point of view. For example, when Maurice learns that the Chevalier is in fact in love with the queen, a violin solo emphasizes his agitation. For Sala: "Moments of lyrical expression such as this, however musically elementary, bear witness to the ease with which *mélodrame* could turn into musical drama." (pp. 31-32).

Thirdly, *Monte-Cristo* (1848), with incidental music again by Varney, was Dumas's ambitious adaptation of his famous novel for the stage containing ninety-three musical numbers. Here, we see an instance of a typically melodramatic (but also operatic) *topos* in the reading of a letter with musical background—in this case the famous letter that will denounce Dantès as a Bonapartist. The hero's feelings of disillusion are expressed by the figures of the double basses and cellos that strikingly anticipate those used by Verdi to accompany the hero's despair in Act 3 of *Otello*. Fourthly, *Robert Macaire*, with sixty-four musical numbers plus overture, saw the famous actor Frédéric Lemaître turn the notorious criminal fugitive into a mythical character by dancing a demonic waltz. Here, Sala traces the string of "infernal" (p. 48) or "demonic" (p. 49) waltzes from popular theater through operas, including Verdi's *Giovanna d'Arco* (1845) and *La traviata*. Finally, *Le Pasteur ou L'Évangile et le foyer* (1849), written by Émile Souvestre and Eugène Bourgeois and consisting of fifty-five musical pieces plus overture, served as the basis of Verdi's first opera composed on his return from Paris, *Stiffelio* (1850).

The sheer number of musical pieces in these plays is astonishing, something previously unknown to this reviewer. Of course, the swift succession of tableaux often tended to limit musical interludes to the function of intermezzos, since an orchestral passage was always expected during a change in scenery. Yet without the accompaniment, the on-stage dynamic would be almost incomprehensible. Indeed, for Sala, the pursuit of effect so typical of theater of the boulevard is unthinkable without the involvement of the orchestra. He effectively shows how music, with its ability to remain in the mind, fixes the focal points of on-stage development and functions as the nervous system of the performance. What is really important, he emphasizes, is the cultural and psycho-social relevance of this music, in which we find not only the soundtrack or songbook of an entire era, but also the sounds of the characters' inner life.

Chapter two examines the system of representation at work in the myth of the lady of the camellias—probably the most popular feminine myth of the bourgeois era—while paying special attention to the role of waltz and polka. In no other opera did Verdi exploit the rhythms and melodies of dance, and if we are to understand *La traviata's* extraordinary modernity, we must understand that these were recent dances. The richness of cultural connotations borne by the waltz throughout the nineteenth century can only be matched by its enormous capacity for metamorphosis. Sala effectively demonstrates its association with everything from romantic love and memory, to the fleeting of time, to sexual desire. He traces the connection with waltzing that characterized the *courtisanes amoureuses*, from Marie Duplessis (herself a famous dancer), to Marguerite Gautier (in both the novel and the play), to Violetta Valery.

The waltz *à deux temps* was danced in Parisian *bals publiques* of the mid-1840s, such as the Bal Mabille and the Jardin d'Hiver, and this same waltz defines that of Act I of *La traviata*.

Sala further demonstrates how the subversive side of the waltz transferred to another dance for couples, one that came into vogue in Paris at the exact time when Alphonsine Plessis became Marie Duplessis--the polka. Another characteristic element of Paris's sonic landscape in those years was the vogue for Spanish dances, and this speaks to the matador chorus, made of Gastone and his friends dressed up as *toreros*. Both the polka and the Spanish style come straight from Paris of the 1840s, and they arrived together with the surge in popularity of a new social phenomenon--the *lorettes*, a term deriving from the stylish neighborhood surrounding the church of Notre-Dame de Lorette, and describing a courtesan with a rather lavish lifestyle. Thus polkas and *lorettes* entered the Parisian scene together, between 1841 and 1844, the years of Marie Duplessis and two other famous polka-dancing *lorettes*, Céleste Mogador and Élise Sergent. Through the use of diverse sources like advertising brochures, lithographs, and musical excerpts, Sala takes us on an exhilarating journey of associations, linking the *lorette* (and the lower-class *grisette*) to the flower (not only the camellia), to the song or popular refrain, to the waltz or polka. His journey goes from *Manon Lescaut* of both Abbé Prévost (1731) and Puccini (1893), to Musset, Murger, Flaubert, Balzac, Maupassant, Zola, Proust, and beyond. While others have compared these fictional courtesans, what is especially unique in this book is their comparison, not so much via visual means, but rather via dance and music.

Chapter three focuses on the stage music written by Édouard Montaubry for Dumas fils's play *La Dame aux camélias*, (the *pièce mêlée de chant*), that opened on February 2, 1852 while Verdi was in Paris. Using the three musical sources available to him--a manuscript oboe part used in 1852 at the Théâtre du Vaudeville, the printed edition of the *ronde* sung by the character of Gaston in the original play, and the printed edition of a piece for piano and violin based on the stage music by Montaubry--Sala analyzes the moments in the play when music makes some type of intervention and compares them to the homologous scenes in Verdi, pointing out the composer's prodigious receptivity to and ability for dramaturgical re-elaboration. A case in point is the waltz scene from Act I of both play and opera. On the one hand, the composer faithfully reproduces the typical morphology and syntax of the Parisian waltzes of the time, but on the other he treats these commonplace materials with extreme originality. An even more daring example is Verdi's total transformation of the boisterous tableau at the end of Act I into a close-up of Violetta alone on stage. We begin to see that what Verdi borrows from this *mélodrame* is less related to the musical numbers per se, than to their effects--the potency of expression and the way in which they remain in the mind because they are tied to the specific dynamic between music and stage. Above all, Verdi sought to translate the melodramatic combination of spoken drama with musical accompaniment into operatic terms.

The importance of Parisian popular theater for a historically informed understanding of Verdian dramaturgy has been largely overlooked. To take this world and its undisputed ruler, the *mélodrame*, as a starting point means to make room for a type of metropolitan popular culture quite divorced from old-time folkloric peasantry, a popular culture that interested Verdi as much as it did Balzac. By offering a clear understanding of the critical importance of incidental music for Parisian *mélodrame*, and in turn for operatic music and dramaturgy, Sala makes a huge contribution. We see clearly that the aesthetic of melodrama constituted the framework of Verdi's dramatic world. In addition, the French overtones of *La traviata* have been mostly explored, up to now, with respect to the presence of strophic forms in the opera. While the presence of these forms is certainly important, others have analyzed them. Sala has shown here how the question of French influence brings far richer implications than have been previously acknowledged. Indeed, cultural updating, by way of Paris, was one of the main fuels of Verdi's ebullient imagination. Sala's promotion of an auditory approach to history and his preoccupation with the retrieval of the sonic dimension of the thematic field helps not only to divert the danger of excessive formalism, but also to enrich and inform his evaluation of new interpretative possibilities. Thanks to him, the lady of the camellias is now a "sounding myth" (p. 64).

Juliana Starr
University of New Orleans
jstarr1@uno.edu

Copyright © 2014 by the Society for French Historical Studies, all rights reserved. The Society for French Historical Studies permits the electronic distribution of individual reviews for nonprofit educational purposes, provided that full and accurate credit is given to the author, the date of publication, and the location of the review on the H-France website. The Society for French Historical Studies reserves the right to withdraw the license for edistribution/republication of individual reviews at any time and for any specific case. Neither bulk redistribution/ republication in electronic form of more than five percent of the contents of H-France Review nor re-publication of any amount in print form will be permitted without permission. For any other proposed uses, contact the Editor-in-Chief of H-France. The views posted on H-France Review are not necessarily the views of the Society for French Historical Studies.

ISSN 1553-9172