



## Giuseppe Verdi and the Atoning Cost of Forgiveness

Gavin D'Costa and Sara M. Pecknold

Giuseppe Verdi (1813 – 1901) is not usually regarded as a Catholic theologian, but rather as one of the greatest Italian opera composers. Like many of the intelligentsia of his day, he found the Roman Catholic Church irrelevant and inhibiting. He celebrated the Pope's fleeing from Rome with his overly nationalistic opera, *La battaglia de Legnano* after the 1848 Roman revolution. He defiantly cohabited with his mistress, Giuseppina Strepponi, for some years before their eventual marriage in 1859.<sup>1</sup> Why then suggest that Verdi's work might be profoundly theological? The answer is simple: it just is. The Catholic culture of sacrificial atonement was part of the furniture of Verdi's Italy just as much as the nationalism (the *Risorgimento*) that Verdi so strongly supported. Whatever the causality, the theme of sacrificial atonement drives some of his greatest middle period operatic works. And it is this theme in two of those operas that we wish to inspect, collaborating as theologian and musicologist.

One biographical detail is important to our theme. In 1836 Verdi married Margherita Barezzi and had two children: the first, a daughter, named after the Virgin Mary, Virginia Maria Luigia, and the second, a son, Icilio Romano, already indicating Verdi's patriotism. Verdi was devoted to his family. He suddenly had to face a tragic and almost operatic catastrophe. First, he was crushed by the death of his daughter, followed by the death of his son, and within a year, Margherita's death in 1840. When Gustav Mahler's son died, Mahler visited Freud to discuss this and other traumas. Perhaps Verdi worked out this loss in his music? He is compulsively interested in father-daughter and father-son relationships and the power of family relationships to both destroy and separate as much as to unite and create.<sup>2</sup> In the two operas we examine, the uniting and creating is both personal and political. Forgiveness and sacrifice are required as

<sup>1</sup> For the autobiographical background, see Julian Budden's authoritative, *Verdi*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2008 (3<sup>rd</sup> ed.), and John Roselli, *The Life of Verdi*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2000.

<sup>2</sup> See Gilles de Van, *Verdi's Theater. Creating Drama through Music*, trans. Gilda Roberts, Chicago University Press, Chicago, 1998 [1992], 157–67 on the 'Father Figure' in Verdi's operas.

much for personal love as for national unity. We argue that *Rigoletto* (premiered 1851) and *La Traviata* (premiered 1853) exemplify and develop this theme in most interesting ways.

We will first trace our theological theme in the plot, exploring its literary and performative aspects. We want to suggest that attending Verdi is akin to a music-drama-liturgy and is part of the sacralising of the aesthetic community. Verdi's operas have a natural liturgical texture: repetitive performativity, the dramatic, the visual, the aural, the intellectual and aesthetic, and a subliminal communication of the great mystery of redeeming love. Opera itself has always been liturgical, from the devotion of Venetian aristocrats who religiously attended throughout Carnival, to Wagnerian 'pilgrimages' to Bayreuth. The danger that arose in the nineteenth century was the *replacement* of Church with concert hall, Eucharist with musical spectacle, and Christ with Romantic heroes such as Beethoven. Verdi's *Requiem* was first performed while 'Monsignor Calvi celebrated a "dry mass" . . . without the consecration of the bread and wine'<sup>3</sup> Despite the emerging belief that the arts have greater salvific power than the sacraments, powerful theological themes—themes that resonate in concord with Church belief—are central to Verdi's operas.

The libretto is a vital component of opera, even if it is true that Verdi was 'committed to the romantic notion of music as more intimate or more psychologically revealing than language'.<sup>4</sup> Francesco Maria Piave, the librettist for both *La traviata* and *Rigoletto*, was compliant to Verdi's every demand. And Verdi was relentlessly demanding.<sup>5</sup> The choice of texts on which to work were Verdi's and he had a sharp eye for the dramatic element. The two original texts derive from Victor Hugo (*Rigoletto*) and Alexandre Dumas (*Traviata*). In a longer study, it would be helpful to show how Verdi adapted the originals to drive his dramatic concerns forward. We are aware of the many objections to the approach we employ here, but rather than argue for a methodology, we are happy to proceed and ask the reader to judge whether the analysis works.

*Rigoletto* is set in the sixteenth-century ducal court of Mantua, where the Duke and his courtiers relentlessly pursue earthly pleasures. Rigoletto, the crippled court jester, amuses the philandering courtiers

<sup>3</sup> See David Rosen, *Verdi: Requiem*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995, 11.

<sup>4</sup> Sandra Corse, *Opera and the Uses of Language*, Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, Rutherford, 1987, 68. One of the most seminal nineteenth-century writings on the superiority of instrumental music to access the ineffable and sublime is E. T. A. Hoffman's 'Beethoven's Instrumental Music,' in *Strunk's Sources Readings in Music History*, edited by Ruth A. Solie, W. W. Norton, New York, 1998, 151–9.

<sup>5</sup> See Julian Budden, *The Operas of Verdi*, Volume 1, Oxford University Press, New York, 1973, 477–81 on Verdi's near total control over the words, music, and presentation of the opera.

with debased talk. The nobleman Monterone arrives and curses the Duke and Rigoletto: the former for the rape of his daughter, and the latter for ridiculing his family's dishonour. Later, outside Rigoletto's garden, the assassin Sparafucile offers Rigoletto his services; the jester initially declines. Meanwhile, Rigoletto's daughter Gilda has fallen in love with a young man she has seen at Mass (the only place she's allowed to go); this young man is eventually revealed as the Duke in disguise. The wicked courtiers abduct Gilda to the court, where the Duke either rapes or seduces her (the libretto is not entirely clear). Rigoletto, finding Gilda dishonoured, vows vengeance. Enlisting Sparafucile, Rigoletto plots the Duke's murder. However, Gilda (disguised as a boy) intercepts the assassin's dagger in order to save the Duke, whom she still loves. Sparafucile delivers her body in a sack to Rigoletto; just as Rigoletto is ready to dump the body into the river, he hears the Duke's voice and realizes that the villain is not dead. Freeing Gilda's beautiful face from the sack, Rigoletto cries in horror as Gilda begs for the Duke's forgiveness. After she breathes her last, Rigoletto laments Monterone's curse.

*Rigoletto* explores the way in which pride, deceit and revenge are obstacles to the paths of forgiveness and reconciling unity. The 'disunity' is dramatically exemplified in Rigoletto's two compartmentalised lives: one of private devotion to, and protectiveness of, his daughter – the familial; the other, of public cruelty, mockery, and trickery at the Duke's court – the socio-political. Rigoletto's political life at the court is Machiavellian, for the court is a location of disunity and intrigue as the opening act of the opera reveals. His menacing meeting with Sparafucile, just before seeing Gilda, helps to dramatically contrast his tender exchanges with his daughter, but intrigue simmers in his refusal to tell Gilda her own family name in his obsessive attempt to 'protect' her from the fallen outside world. Rigoletto even generates the treachery of the social world by enabling the Duke's exploits. What makes Rigoletto an interesting figure is his awareness of this psychological and social split, spitefully blaming the court's intrigues: 'If my heart is cold, you're the ones who changed me. But in my own home I feel as a father.'<sup>6</sup> In both instances, at home and at the court, he believes he is a puppet to 'fate' – a theme recurrent through his arias.

Gilda, meanwhile, has been trapped in the inner world of her father's house, only going out to Mass under the watchful eye of her

<sup>6</sup> We use the English translation of James Fenton (A) from the recording of The English National Opera Orchestra and Chorus for Jonathan Miller's staging (recorded 1983, 70 quote); and sometimes the translation of Ruth and Thomas Martin (B) for the Metropolitan Opera (G. Schirmer, New York, 1957); and sometimes the translation of Lionel Salter (C) for Deutsche Grammophon, from the Riccardo Chailly 1988 recording with the Bologna Opera Orchestra. We are grateful to Dr Eliana Corbari for advice on the Italian. Pecknold has provided some translations (indicated: TP).

easily bribed maid, Giovanna. The opera's energy spins around a twofold vortex: Rigoletto's desire for revenge against Gilda's abduction and ravaging by the Duke; and Gilda's love for her father, and her suitor (the disguised Duke). Gilda's attempt to save the Duke from death – commissioned by her vengeful father—creates a counter force to Rigoletto's actions. The turning point that unleashes these powerful forces and creates the drama of the opera is Rigoletto's inability to forgive the Duke for Gilda's defilement, but rather to stand as judge and executor – and even to attribute divine wrath to these all too human functions. The theological overtones of the libretto could not have been lost to Verdi – or the audience.

Verdi's music develops in sonic gesture the notions of sin and atoning forgiveness as they are spun out in the libretto. The orchestral introduction begins with the 'maledizione' ('curse') theme that recurs throughout the opera: a single, ominous, repeated C. The dark introduction is refuted when the curtain rises on the court, as an on-stage band plays a cheerful dance. The crookedness of court is revealed through the ironic relationship between music and words. The music employs fast, flippant dance rhythms and the folksy-patriotic Italian idiom of the municipal band. At the same time, the courtiers speak of hideous deeds, including rape and beheading. The listener's stomach turns at the lack of remorse. The level of nausea is increased by the assault of um-pah-pah rhythms in the brass and little trills in the high winds that sound just a little out of tune. The slight discord reveals a deep perversion; the Duke and his men are morally off-pitch.

Conversely, Gilda personifies musical sincerity and purity. Rigoletto and Gilda's first meeting in Act I is musically fluid, changing in speed, mood and melody. However, one thing remains constant: the sincere way the music expresses the text (in contrast to the lurid mismatch of music and words at court). The father-daughter duet emphasizes the words 'angel' (Gilda's mother), 'death', 'heaven', and 'God'.<sup>7</sup> The beauty of Gilda's weeping vocal lines depict her compassion, and the celestial height of her notes—often two octaves above middle C—reveals her closeness to heaven. That Rigoletto is able to match his own music to comply either with the duplicity of court, or the sincerity of Gilda, reveals the dichotomized state of his soul.

Act II, scene i, forms the centre of the plot, dramatically and theologically. Before Gilda is taken into a palace bedroom by her abductors, the Duke, on his own, has a moment of vulnerability, brought on by the radiance of love: 'No other woman has ever had such power/ to make me feel that I could love her for ever. She was so

<sup>7</sup> TP.

innocent, so modest in manner,/ I could almost have believed myself a new man (of virtue).<sup>8</sup> Gilda's innocence has the same power over her father: to bring forth virtue, gentleness, and care. But the power of the court and the force of the Duke's sexual desire win out; his 'love' turns to lust, shaming the virtuous Gilda. The libretto is ambiguous. Most often the opera is performed as if the Duke has raped Gilda, or sometimes, Gilda does not look quite so roughed up and a seduction is implied. But 'shame' and 'dishonour' are Gilda's and Rigoletto's; for these are the courtiers' words placed in the libretto for what has taken place. Rigoletto dismisses the courtiers who have stopped him getting to the Duke's chambers. One of the most moving exchanges in the opera now takes place between a tender, consoling Rigoletto and a distraught, shamed Gilda.

Rigoletto introduces a startling image that will interpret much to come. After hearing of his daughter's shaming by the Duke and her exposure to the violent society of which he is a part, he discloses a redemptive purpose in his secrecy about his daughter, or so it would seem: 'O Lord, I sought of Thee,/ Infamy for myself alone,/ That she might rise as far as I had fallen./ Ah, Thy altar is most needed Near the gallows!/ But the altar is overthrown/ And all is lost!' (C)<sup>9</sup> Rigoletto curiously seems to picture his accumulation of infamy as a way of protecting his daughter's honour, as if he were a kind of karmic magnet that would attract dark forces away from her by drawing them upon himself. But that is no longer possible. She has fallen. One might, to allude to Paul's speech on the Areopagus in Athens, suggest Rigoletto's altar is to a hidden god, while Gilda in her innocence truly knows that God, who is signified in her coming actions. Rigoletto's infamy has blinded him. In his warped universe, revenge is called for to bring about balance and justice. In the next act Rigoletto will tell Sparafucile that he must murder a man, and in answer to the question, what is that man's name, Rigoletto replies: 'He is Crime, I am Punishment'.<sup>10</sup> Rigoletto even imagines his revenge has divine sanction: 'Give me a chance, I'll make things even./ Then I'll have the chance to punish. Then the fatal storm will sound./ Then the lightning will flash from Heaven.' (A) These are darkly ironic words, for the storm will not herald a vengeful God but rather, innocent self-sacrifice, revealing the redeeming power of forgiveness. Gilda's costly Christ-likeness slowly and inexorably emerges. Gilda now pronounces the real judgement of the opera: 'Oh father, what

<sup>8</sup> A, 78. This last line could also be translated: 'I almost believed in the power of virtue' – 'Quasi spinto a virtù talor mi credo!'

<sup>9</sup> Solo per me l'infamia / a te chiedeva, o Dio... / ch'ella potesse ascendere / quanto caduto er'io... / Ah presso del patibolo / bisogna ben l'altare!... / ma tutto, ma tutto ora scompare... / l'altare... si rovesciò! / tutto scompare

<sup>10</sup> Egli è Delitto, Punizion son io'.

savage joy I see/ Flashing in your eyes! Forgive him . . . even as for us/ A voice from Heaven will call for pardon.’ (C)<sup>11</sup> Gilda continues, in an aside to God: ‘He betrayed me, but I love him: O God,/ I plead for pardon for his sin!’ Divine pardon must have a human analogue.

As these devastating events unfold, Verdi musically magnifies Rigoletto’s self-delusion and Gilda’s role as heavenly agent. When Rigoletto bursts forth ‘An avenger will rise!’,<sup>12</sup> the music adopts a popular idiom akin to the politically rousing choruses from Verdi’s other operas. However, Rigoletto is not leading a chorus, nor calling a troop of valiant men to arms; he is just one man, foolishly aggrandizing his desire for personal revenge. The depth of his folly is confirmed when Gilda names his sin (‘savage joy’). In the duet’s concluding climax, the voices complement each other in soaring harmonies; however, the disparity between the characters’ words reveals again Verdi’s sense of irony.<sup>13</sup> Despite the transcendent beauty and persuasiveness of Gilda’s vocal line, Rigoletto cannot join in her tropes of love and forgiveness; he seems hypnotized with his own desire that the Duke shall ‘fall by the hand of the scornful buffoon.’<sup>14</sup>

The rest of the opera (Act III) moves into the tragic redemptive endgame. Verdi signifies that thin line between what Hughes calls the ‘secularisation of sacrifice’ and its theologising.<sup>15</sup> Mercy and forgiveness become feminine voices, primarily in Gilda, and secondarily in Maddalena, Sparafucile’s sister. Both women plead with their respective men not to carry out revenge and murder. Catherine Clément, the French feminist, has criticised Verdi’s (and the main western operatic tradition’s) systematic ‘undoing of women’.<sup>16</sup> Clément has some fine insights, but she fails to recognise Verdi’s subversive ‘feminism’, for here women represent the divine, and thus become the sacrificial victims for a patriarchal society ordered by lust, power, and intrigue. They, not the men, really operate outside the rules of a male constructed society. It is women who open the audience’s eyes to the tragic absurdity of Rigoletto’s claiming divine wrath and Sparafucile’s claiming the honour of the assassin keeping his word (‘Have you known me betray a client? This man has paid me, I keep my word.’ (C)

<sup>11</sup> O mio padre, qua gioia feroce/ balenarvi negli occhi vegg’io! Perdonate . . . a noi pure una voce/ di perdono dal cielo verrà.

<sup>12</sup> B, 12.

<sup>13</sup> On the structure of nineteenth-century operatic aria and duet form, see Scott L. Balthazar, ‘The forms of set pieces’ in *The Cambridge Companion to Verdi*, ed. Scott L. Balthazar, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2004, 49–68.

<sup>14</sup> B, 12.

<sup>15</sup> See Derek Hughes, *Culture and Sacrifice. Ritual Death in Literature and Opera*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2007, 144–154.

<sup>16</sup> Catherine Clément, *Opera or the Undoing of Women*, trans. Betsy Wing, Virago Press, London, 1989 [1988], pp. 119, 60–65, 18–9.



The storm scene in the middle of Act III is intensely dramatic. Some directors employ strobe lighting and deep thunder claps, underlining judgement day, and even echoing the moment of Christ on the cross where a terrible storm erupts. The singing is fast and furious, shot through with lightning flashes of insight and intuition, and God is revealed now, not as Rigoletto had expected, but in Gilda's recognition that only through sacrifice can she now save the Duke, who is to be murdered. An innocent's death undoes the social and personal violence unleashed by Rigoletto, the Duke, and Sparafucile. Sparafucile gives in to his sister's pleas for mercy. He will murder whoever knocks at the door, knowing nobody is likely to venture out on a stormy night. Gilda, in her action recalling the altar image that Rigoletto had earlier conjured up, refuses to return betrayal with anything other than love: 'Although he betrayed my love, I'll lay down my life for him.'(C)<sup>17</sup> She steps into the place that will redeem the fallen Duke from death. The Duke sings 'women are fickle',<sup>18</sup> just when the loyalty of Gilda, unknown to him, saves him. Is Gilda's death futile? If we judge it from whether the Duke and Rigoletto repent and forgive, the answer is yes. But, if Gilda is a type of Christ, then the answer is no. Christ's death was undertaken on our behalf, even if we do not realise this or when we do, refuse to 'convert'. Gilda's death is both an act of love and an affirmation that love is stronger than life. Verdi has surely penetrated to the heart of the cross.

In Gilda's last words – as she knocks on the tavern door of her death, like Christ on the cross, she begs forgiveness: for herself (for she is not Christ), for what she is to do; and for her assassins, for what they are about to do: 'I beg Heaven's forgiveness for these villains. And you, father, forgive your unhappy daughter.' (C) Her father's inability to forgive in Act II has now generated a fateful violence that can only be undone through sacrifice, and one that no one will notice, not even the villains. Even Rigoletto sees Gilda's death as the transpiring of the curse made upon him by Monterone in Act I. As Sparafucile's hellish door opens, her (apparently) final words repeat the plea for forgiveness, echoing Christ's words on the cross: 'God! Forgive them!'<sup>19</sup> Brilliantly, for the drama, these are not her final words, for the murdered Gilda is able to speak to Rigoletto, who is triumphantly disposing of what he thinks is the Duke's body.

The duet closing the opera is designed to break our hearts, as love's sacrifice should. The dying gasps of Gilda refuse to blame anyone other than love, and again she begs forgiveness from

<sup>17</sup> Ah, s'egli al mio amore/ divenne rubello,/ io vo' per la sua/ gettar la mia vita . . .

<sup>18</sup> La donna è mobile / qual piuma al vento

<sup>19</sup> Both (A) and (C) render 'Dio! Loro perdonate!' with 'Heaven'.

Rigoletto for the Duke: 'No more, forgive him. Dear father, farewell!'. Gilda promises to pray for her father in heaven. This is an interesting move, for of course suicide is an unforgivable sin, but Verdi refuses to envisage Gilda's choice in that manner. Her death is redemptive – and requires a human response from the actors in the drama and from us, the viewers. Rigoletto, still blinded by passion and grief, recalls Monterone's curse. Our interpretation so far would suggest the curse, like the curse uttered after Adam's expulsion from the garden, is somatically carried by Gilda, bringing about the redemptive possibility of forgiveness for both men – the Duke and Rigoletto. Whether they take it up goes beyond the closing curtains of the opera – and lingers with the hearer in the music and memory as they leave the theatrical church that Verdi has created.

There is one more aspect of Verdi's compositional craftsmanship that illuminates further the theme of atonement in *Rigoletto*: his use of key signatures. Historically, different musical keys and key signatures (the addition of sharps and flats to the musical scale) have been associated with different ideas and affects. Although these associations changed greatly over the centuries, Rita Steblin has recognized that by the nineteenth century, key associations were dominated by the 'sharp-flat principle,' that is, 'the psychological association of ever-increasing strength and brightness [with the addition of sharps] ... or, conversely, weakness and sombreness [with the addition of flats]'.<sup>20</sup> Although most Verdi scholars have rejected that he composed according to large-scale tonal organization, Roger Parker has noted that in *Il trovatore*, flat keys are assigned to the world of court, whilst sharp keys are assigned to the 'world of the gypsies'.<sup>21</sup> Similar key associations are at work in *Rigoletto*, and we would argue that the sharp-flat principle here points directly to themes of purity, sin, sacrifice and atonement.

As applied to *Rigoletto*, the principle is very simple: Verdi usually assigns Gilda sharp keys, and he usually assigns the Duke and Rigoletto flat keys.<sup>22</sup> Furthermore, the composer *only* assigns Gilda

<sup>20</sup> See Rita Steblin, *A History of Key Characteristics in the Eighteenth and Early Nineteenth Centuries*, 2nd ed., Rochester: University of Rochester Press, 2002, 96–128 and 146–186.

<sup>21</sup> Roger Parker, 'Giuseppe Verdi,' in *Grove Music Online*, *Oxford Music Online*, <http://www.oxfordmusiconline.com.proxycu.wrlc.org/subscriber/article/grove/music/29191pg4> (accessed November 22, 2011).

<sup>22</sup> The major exception for the Duke is his third act 'La donna è mobile' ('Women are Fickle') in B Major with five sharps. But this too seems a deliberate choice. B Major has so many sharps that even into the nineteenth century it was considered harsh, violent and overexcited by most theorists. Here, Verdi's sense of irony is superb: he sets an innocuous-sounding melody, crooned in velvety tones by the most malicious of villains, in a key that attempts to sound bright and festive, but simply goes too far. Had the Duke sung in E Major (four sharps), such as Gilda does in 'Caro nome', we might believe his sentiments; but Verdi's choice of the overly-bright key 'blinds' the listener with its



flat keys when she sings with one of these men. The dark, onerous nature of the life at court has already been illustrated here, as has Gilda's role as a shining, spotless, sacrificial lamb. The sharp-flat principle intensifies these polarized musical characterizations. On the one hand, the Duke and Rigoletto, whose deeds stir into motion the shadowy machinations of court, often sing in keys with flats, which by the nineteenth century have dark, sombre associations. Conversely, Gilda, who continually shimmers in the midst of mirky Mantua, sings in keys with sharps, which by the nineteenth century were often associated with purity, exuberance, innocence. Moreover, in her solo singing, Gilda *begins* in sharp keys, but she is 'pulled into' flat-key duets by both the Duke and her father. Does Gilda's change in key signature within the duets signify male domination, or are these modulations redemptive? That is, do the Duke and Rigoletto corrupt Gilda's pure, sharpened key signatures, or does Gilda take on the corruption and humiliation of their sinfulness, joining their weakness, in order that they might be redeemed? Verdi leaves open the possibility that Gilda's flattened duets may signify musical incarnation, thus bolstering her Christological role.

A brief summary of some of the mutations between sharp and flat keys in the final act of the opera may be helpful. In Act III, the Duke arrives at the tavern and sings 'La donna è mobile' in the self-deluded key of B major, biting full of five sharps. Like the dance music which opens Act I, this chillingly cheery aria reveals the Duke's complete denial of his own culpability. Subsequently, the quartet between Gilda, Rigoletto, the Duke and Maddalena shifts to five flats, the preferred key of both the Duke and Rigoletto earlier in the opera; Verdi seems to subtly remind us of the men's previous sins. As the storm approaches and the drama accelerates towards Gilda's self-sacrifice, Verdi capitalizes on an interplay between the key of D major (one sharp), often considered a 'key of triumph'<sup>23</sup>, and the parallel key of D minor, a key of deep suffering, supplication and often associated with the *Kyrie*.<sup>24</sup> When Gilda cries 'God, forgive them!', Verdi underpins her sacrifice with a D minor chord heavily laden with notions of passion and liturgical supplication; her atoning sacrifice is nearly complete. Later, when she lies dying in her father's arms, Gilda repeats words from Act I—'up there in heaven'—in two different keys: D major and D-flat major. It is remarkable that Gilda 're-attains' the sharp key of D major before her death; it confirms her continued purity and perhaps even her triumph. The immediate repetition of the same text ('up there in Heaven') a semi-tone

aggression; the Duke has transgressed the boundary of sensible key association—musically, he has sinned.

<sup>23</sup> See Steblin, 240–1.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 244.

lower—in D flat major (five flats)—strengthens further Gilda’s Christological function, as she ‘takes on’ the key associated with the Duke’s seduction of Gilda and with Rigoletto’s vows of vengeance. Gilda’s celestial musical nature is united with the earthly flatted key—musical hypostatic union?—just as she departs this world, and promises to pray for her father’s soul.

In the next opera chosen for our discussion, the theme of atonement and forgiveness deepens and develops. *La traviata*, the fallen woman, was not Verdi’s chosen title for the opera. He wanted *Amore e morte* (love and death), but the censors preferred bourgeois moralising.<sup>25</sup> The original novel upon which it was based, by Alexandre Dumas *fiils*, emphasised the Christian overtones of Margu rite’s sacrifice (Violetta in the opera).<sup>26</sup> This theological motif has been suppressed, or sometimes overturned, in contemporary critical reception of *Traviata*, despite the opera’s explicit theological motifs.<sup>27</sup> We want to argue that *Traviata* creatively develops the theme of atoning sacrifice earlier explored in *Rigoletto*, but with a remarkable twist.

*La traviata* begins at a Parisian soir e, where Violetta and Alfredo are first introduced. As the guests adjourn to another room, Violetta swoons. Alfredo lingers with her and declares that he loves her. She insists that he will forget her, and that she will continue to live only for pleasure. Nevertheless, Violetta does go to live with Alfredo in the country; they are both transformed, reborn through their love. Alfredo discovers that Violetta has been selling her possessions to subsidize their life together. He leaves immediately for Paris, to access his own money and to ‘recover her possessions’.<sup>28</sup> In his absence, Alfredo’s father Germont visits Violetta and insists that she leaves Alfredo; Violetta’s reputation has endangered his daughter’s engagement. Heartbroken, Violetta departs, leaving Alfredo with a letter of farewell. When Alfredo, Violetta and Germont meet at a party in Paris, Alfredo makes a dishonourable scene. The chorus consoles the devastated Violetta as Alfredo bemoans his remorse. In Act III, Violetta languishes from consumption in her Parisian apartment. Alfredo arrives, declaring his love once more. The lovers resolve to marry, but Violetta has not the strength to go to church. Germont enters and repents of his former cruelty. The stricken woman gives

<sup>25</sup> Censorship was a serious issue for Verdi. See David B. Kimbell, *Verdi in the Age of Italian Romanticism*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1981, 23–33.

<sup>26</sup> See *La Dame aux camellias*, The Folio Society, London, 1975, trans. Barbara Bray.

<sup>27</sup> Overturned for instance, in Cl ment, *Opera or the Undoing of Women*, 60–5, speaking of the ‘prostitute’s crucifixion’ by the ‘bourgeois family’ (pp. 64, 60); see also Conrad, *Song of Love and Death*, p. 155. Others tend to secularise the ‘sacrifice’ theme, as increasingly too place because of the context of reception: see Hughes, *Culture and Sacrifice*, 144–154.

<sup>28</sup> Ruth and Thomas Martin, transl., *La traviata*, G. Schirmer’s Collection of Opera Librettos, New York, G. Schirmer, 1961, 7.

Alfredo a medallion by which to remember her; she blesses his future marriage to another, more 'pure' woman when she herself has died, and promises to pray for them both in heaven. Exclaiming that she is rejuvenated and full of joy, Violetta collapses, dead, in Alfredo's arms.

Act I introduces the idea of atonement when Alfredo speaks of the 'love' that he feels for Violetta, which is 'the very breath of the universe itself – mysterious and noble, both cross and ecstasy of the heart.'<sup>29</sup> Violetta picks up these same cruciform words in her aria on Alfredo's departure; and Alfredo sings them yet again, off stage – spatially emphasising both the embodied and the transcendental nature of love. The drama of the opera resides in the three central characters, Violetta, Alfredo, and Germont, learning the meaning of these words. The women, as so often in Verdi, open up the path to the divine.<sup>30</sup> If Gilda in *Rigoletto* was innocence, Violetta, in contrast, is a high class prostitute. If Gilda sought a mother, Violetta, in contrast, has no family at all, and reaches out to Germont as a father, and sacrifices herself for Alfredo's sister, whom we never see on stage. Verdi takes on a double challenge: a family-less prostitute will exemplify redeeming grace; she will also unveil the pretensions and stultifying values of the bourgeois family. To bring off such a task will require the most complex musical characterisation of Violetta, otherwise Verdi's audiences would be unconvinced at her heroic self-sacrifice. In fact, Violetta's changing musical character, from the light, rapid singing of Act I, to the dramatic weight of her Act III death scene, makes Violetta one of the more challenging female operatic roles. Many sopranos have lamented that nearly three different voices are required from one woman to sing the role of Violetta. Perhaps Verdi's most powerful musical tool in *traviata* is the use of two particular recurrent themes, or melodies: Alfredo's 'misterioso altero' ('mysterious power') theme, and the love theme which both Alfredo and Violetta share. As the story progresses and the characters themselves are transformed, the recurrence of these themes takes on increasingly more significance.

The most memorable musical moments of *La traviata* are centered around this idea of sacrificial love. As Alfredo declares his love in Act I, there is a sudden, achingly beautiful oscillation between minor (which can be thought of as sorrowful) and major (which can be thought of as joyful) harmonies on the words 'mysterious power'. This poignant passage evokes the mystery of love as it can only be

<sup>29</sup> vissi d'ignoto amor,/ di quell'amor ch'è palpito/dell' universe intero,/ misterioso, altero,' croce e delizia al cor. The Italian text and English translation come from the 1955 Giulini recording in Milan, with Callas as Violetta.

<sup>30</sup> During the middle period, *Simon Boccanegra*, shows the male/father carrying through this role.

seen, say, in the Passion of Christ. Fittingly, this minor-major alternation resolves at the melodic climax on the word ‘cross’. Violetta’s response, ‘Dimenticarmi allor’ (‘you will soon forget me’),<sup>31</sup> resembles the Eucharistic command, ‘meam commemoratiónem’ (‘do this in remembrance of me’). Violetta’s plea of anti-commemoration is refuted, reversed by Alfredo’s repeated confirmation of the delightful cross he is willing to endure for her sake. The soaring conclusion to the duet inextricably links the notions of sacrifice, delight, and remembrance. What is perverse to many a ‘modern’, is in fact central to the cultic sacrificial in the Christian drama.

Alone, Violetta repeats the ‘mysterious power’ theme; however, she quickly convinces herself that to love is folly. Her following aria, ‘Let me live for pleasure only’, virtuosically praises the frivolous life. In the middle of this aria, Verdi breaks with operatic convention in order to emphasize the centrality of the ‘mysterious power’ theme. We have already mentioned how Alfredo sings ‘mysterious and noble, both cross and ecstasy of the heart’ again from off-stage. Although not entirely unique in nineteenth-century opera, these off-stage interjections, in the middle of the *prima donna*’s moment of solo glory, would have been—and are still today—surprising and powerful; Verdi himself seems to refute Violetta’s adherence to the life of frivolity, and to proclaim the permanence of a truer, sadder, transformative love.

In Act II, in the fertile countryside, Alfredo and Violetta enjoy the ‘ecstasy’ of their love. As Violetta puts it earlier, she is ‘loving being loved’,<sup>32</sup> and Alfredo indicates the baptismal power of love’s new life: ‘I feel like a man reborn’;<sup>33</sup> comparing this idyll to ‘heaven’.<sup>34</sup> In the heat and heart of such ecstasy, the path of the cross must now be walked if the truth of love is to continue. It is called for because society is not ready to accept the simple ecstasy of love, but requires instead bourgeois respectability. Verdi, who had lived with his mistress for years before finally marrying her must have personally known the power of this social hypocrisy.

In response to Germont’s request that she leave his son because of the shame she brings upon the family, Violetta brings in Alfredo’s regeneration theme: ‘The past does not exist – I love Alfredo now; God wiped out my past with my repentance’.<sup>35</sup> The sinner can be innocent because all that is required is repentance. However, what is enough for God is not enough for fallen society. Germont, in his blindness to Violetta’s simple and true love, demands a

<sup>31</sup> (C), p. 4.

<sup>32</sup> *esser amata amando!*

<sup>33</sup> *E dal soffio d’amor rigenerato*

<sup>34</sup> *ciel*

<sup>35</sup> *Più non esiste – or amo Alfredo, e Dio/ lo cancellò col pentimento mio*

'sacrifice' from her to keep his life intact. 'Sacrificio' is repeated thirteen times in the exchange between Violetta and Germont and for each character it signifies a different vision. For Germont it will free his family of the stain of shame. For Violetta, it is incurred because she loves Alfredo, for his sake, and does not wish to block his sister's happy future, for her sister's sake. Violetta is forbidden by Germont to reveal the cause of her actions. Violetta exposes the corruption that will demand her sacrifice in stark terms: 'Even if God grants [me] mercy charitably, Man will always be implacable.'<sup>36</sup> This is the turning point of the opera. What is even more demanding of her sacrifice is that no one, especially her beloved for whom she carries it out, will know of it. Like Christ, she must die abandoned, out of love, for those who abandon her. This links both Violetta and Gilda.

Throughout Act II, Verdi continues to illustrate musically Violetta and Alfredo's transformation through love. When Alfredo proclaims his rebirth, the music is gradually transformed through a series of ear-grabbing modulations which lead into his aria 'De' miei bollenti spiriti' ('My passionate spirit'). The lover's bliss is painted time and again on the soaring melodic pinnacle: the mantra 'Io vivo quasi in ciel' ('I live as though in heaven').<sup>37</sup> At the same time, there is a subtle undermining of this ecstasy in the cellos and double basses: the low strings descend ominously, introducing primal, flatted tones, foreign to the rest of the aria. With this one musical twist, Verdi simultaneously invokes supernatural expanse and grounded earthiness, transcendence and foreboding.

The action drives forward to the personal and social disruption brought about by the loss of love. Alfredo is angered by Violetta's return to Paris, and reads it as betrayal, refusing to return his father's love as he rushes to Paris to take 'revenge' on Violetta.<sup>38</sup> Alfredo then humiliates Violetta publicly (Act II, scene 2), paying her money for her services, wishing to cleanse himself from her stain.<sup>39</sup> When Alfredo is disowned by his father for such a vile action (Germont is wonderfully ambivalent throughout and Verdi never slips into caricature), Alfredo becomes 'sick with remorse' and feels Violetta can 'never forgive [him] now'.<sup>40</sup> Violetta, the form of heavenly love, immediately forgives, knowing that one day, what she has done might touch Alfredo's heart. This Christ-likeness is essential for the musical and dramatic power of the opera.

<sup>36</sup> Se pur benefico le indulga Iddio/ l'uomo implacabil – per lei sarà

<sup>37</sup> Martin, 6.

<sup>38</sup> vendicar

<sup>39</sup> Tergermi/ da tanta macchia bramo.

<sup>40</sup> Da lei perdono – più non avrò

Act III opens with Violetta dying from consumption, the AIDS of Verdi's time. Consumption was thought to be sexually related.<sup>41</sup> The clues for interpreting this act are often lost on a modern secular audience. One clue is found in the festivities happening immediately outside Violetta's window. Lent is the supreme time of the cross. The Fatted Ox festivities in Paris took place just before Lent began, a reference that Verdi's audiences would recognise. Revelry and excess marked 'Fat Tuesday', as it was sometimes called, for Ash Wednesday followed with forty austere days leading to the cross – and three days later, the resurrection. Ecstasy is the supreme mark of love, which without the cross, can become profligate, sensualist, and self-seeking. Violetta enters now into her *via dolorosa* (the term occurs eight times, five in Violetta's singing). Violetta takes upon herself the sins of the world, when the world regards her as the sinner. The fourteenth occurrence of '*sacrifizio*' occurs with Violetta reading a letter from Germont, who says he has revealed her sacrifice to Alfredo and they are both returning to Paris to ask her pardon.<sup>42</sup> The opera shifts gears from Rigoletto, where in the finale, both the Duke and Rigoletto fail to repent when the curtain falls on Gilda's death. Here, both men repent, and return to the sacrifice (Violetta) to acknowledge their failings – and to honour her love. The scene is set for both cross and resurrection, both cross and ecstasy of the heart. This mixed emotion is precisely what the music generates: a kind of tragic joy as the curtain falls.

Germont, figuratively wearing ashes and sackcloth, comes to see his part in the crucifixion of the dying Violetta: 'Oh, rash old man! Only now do I see the harm I have done.'<sup>43</sup> And Alfredo resists, but recognises, the tragedy: 'God did not bring me back to you to face such a tragedy.'<sup>44</sup> The sacrificial victim must pay the Christological price for bringing about repentance through the enactment of real love. The final words of Violetta are intriguing. Hutcheon and Hutcheon make much of the replication of the detailed medical moments of a consumptive death, especially the final burst of ecstatic energy;<sup>45</sup> and Clément renders it as a misogynist resolution.<sup>46</sup> Violetta's closing words are: 'The spasms of pain have ceased. A strange vigour has brought me to life! Ah! I shall live – Oh,

<sup>41</sup> See Linda Hutcheon & Michael Hutcheon, *Opera: Desire, Disease, Death*, University of Nebraska Press, Lincoln & London, 1999, pp. 40–8. The AIDS analogy is interestingly developed by Daniel Snowman, *The Gilded Stage. A Social History of Opera*, Atlantic Books, London, 2009, p. 241.

<sup>42</sup> Il vostro/ sacrificio io stesso gli ho svelato; egli/ a voi tornerà pel suo perdono

<sup>43</sup> Oh, malcauto vegliardo!/ Il mal chi'io feci ora sol vedo!

<sup>44</sup> A strazio sì terribil/ qui non mi trasse Iddio

<sup>45</sup> Hutcheon & Hutcheon, p. 29–30, 46–7.

<sup>46</sup> Clément, pp. 64–5, although Clément, 60, is sensitive to the resurrection theme I wish to highlight. She says: 'Violetta spits out her life in a song of resurrection.'



joy!<sup>47</sup> Contrary to these critics, could this instead be the moment of real Christian life, when death and pain are overcome, and the ecstatic joy of the cross is fully grasped? Love and life are to be found even in separation and death. The Lenten period is a glimpse of how forgiveness and repentance bring eschatological life amidst death. The fallen woman must bring salvation to the world overturning the usual order of things. If *Rigoletto* ended without resurrection, *Traviata* by complexifying innocence further, keeps the cross and resurrection in perfect and painful tension.

Musically, the ‘tragic joy’ of *La traviata* is nowhere more powerfully communicated than in the final Act. Ever the true dramatist, Verdi revives Alfredo’s Act I ‘mysterious power’ theme at just the right moment. As Violetta reads Germont’s letter explaining that he and Alfredo seek her forgiveness and will soon arrive, a solo violin plays the ‘mysterious power’ theme in the background. Hence, another break with convention: Violetta reads the letter *in a speaking voice*; this simply was not done in nineteenth-century tragic opera. The shocking use of the spoken voice allows the solo violin to take the spotlight, as it croons the familiar, minor-major, caressing lines of the ‘mysterious power’ theme. Through this one musical gesture, Verdi allows the entire story to pass before us; and in contrast to Act I, the listener now understands just what the ‘cross’ of love signifies.

The solo violin highlights this ‘tragic joy’ a second time in the third act, even more powerfully. After the other characters assure Violetta that ‘God calls you to His side’,<sup>48</sup> the violin repeats Violetta’s broad, soaring, Act II love theme that she sings just before leaving Alfredo (‘Beloved Alfredo, how much I love you’).<sup>49</sup> Undergirded by full orchestra and rumbling timpani, a solo violin cries out the stratospheric, descending lines. The melody of Violetta’s first sacrifice now seems to signify the call of heaven; thus the ‘fallen woman’s’ love is connected to the Divine.

Just before Violetta’s death, Verdi again defies convention by having Violetta speak: ‘How strange / all at once / The dreadful pain is gone / I am reviving / suddenly I feel ...’<sup>50</sup> And in the middle of a spoken line, Violetta breaks into song on the words ‘I return to life’.<sup>51</sup> Verdi emphasizes Violetta’s heavenly ascent (‘Oh joy!’)

<sup>47</sup> Cessarono gli spasimi del dolore./ In me rinasce – m’agita insolito vigor!! Ah! Ma ritorno a viver! / Oh gioia!

<sup>48</sup> Martin, 24.

<sup>49</sup> TP.

<sup>50</sup> Martin, 24.

<sup>51</sup> TP.

with a soaring melody nearly two octaves above middle C, while the full orchestra blasts triumphant harmonies. In death, Violetta seems to attain the promised joy. The grief of her loved ones are painted in tormented, minor harmonies—also requiring full orchestra. The opera ends with a rapid descent in the upper strings, followed by clipped sobs in the winds and a decisively tragic chord. The loss of Violetta is keenly felt; will the strength of her sacrifice restore joyful ‘harmony’ to the lives of those who loved her? Verdi does not answer this question, musically at least. But it could be argued that the sheer memorability of *traviata*’s famous love themes provides hope for future joy.

We hope to have shown that even if the power of the Christian drama was migrating in a secularised form into the opera house, its Christological centre still organises the enchantment that kept audiences riveted and remains as the reflected light that generates the meaning and compelling beauty of the opera. Even in the citadel of the secularised aesthetic arena the glory of the divine light still shines.<sup>52</sup>

*Gavin D’Costa*  
*Department of Theology &*  
*Religious Studies*  
*University of Bristol*  
*3 Woodland Road*  
*Bristol*  
*BS8 1TB*  
*gavin.dcosta@bristol.ac.uk*

*Sara M. Pecknold*  
*Benjamin T. Rome School of Music*  
*The Catholic University of America*  
*Washington, DC*  
*20064*  
*15pecknold@cardinalmail.cua.edu*

<sup>52</sup> We thank Dr Eliana Corbari, Professor Gerard Loughlin, Angeline Smith Van Era, and Dr Andrew H. Weaver. No faults in this piece are attributable to them.