

La Traviata

Verdi's tragic opera beckons newcomer and operaphile alike



Aline Kutan is Violetta and Eric Fennell in Green Mountain Opera Festival's production of "La Traviata," June 20 and 22 at the Barre Opera House.

Photo by Emily Piper

By **Jim Lowe** Times Argus Staff - Published: June 13, 2008

When the Green Mountain Opera Festival presents Verdi's "La Traviata," June 20 and 22 at the Barre Opera House, it's likely that more than half the audience will never have seen it before.

"It's easy to draw inspiration from the first-timers," explained Francis Graffeo, who will conduct. "I get a thrill, when we approach a moment in the opera, when I imagine someone seeing it for the first time, I'm looking forward to them experiencing what I did the first time."

On the other hand, "La Traviata" is one of the most popular operas of all time, and there will be those in the audience who know every word and every note.

"It has its own shape in the minds of a lot of people – that inspires me," Graffeo said. "When you're working at the level of detail that we are here, the showman in all of us knows that the cognoscenti out there are going to appreciate your touch."

Now in its third year, the Green Mountain Opera Festival is presenting concerts, master classes and open rehearsals in the Mad River Valley, its home, and two performances of "La Traviata," fully staged with professional orchestra, sung in the original Italian with English super-titles, at the Barre Opera House. The festival's previous productions, Rossini's "The Barber of Seville" in 2006 and Puccini's "Madame Butterfly" in 2007, were virtually sold out.

Founded and directed by Montreal bass-baritone Taras Kulish, the festival is under the auspices of the Green Mountain Cultural Center, a Waitsfield nonprofit arts-presenting organization. The festival brings to Vermont some of the best of today's young up-and-coming opera talent. A fine example is Montreal soprano Aline Kutan, who will star as Violetta, the doomed courtesan. Born in Istanbul of Armenian parentage, she grew up in Canada. Kutan sang in a choir as a teen, and it wasn't long before she wanted to sing opera.

"I think what attracted me to opera was that it was theater but it was sung," Kutan said. "And so when it's sung, there's a second level of emotion that happens. I was mesmerized by it."

Kutan remembers first seeing "La Traviata" when she was about 15.

"It was just too heart-breaking," she said. "Even at 15 or 16 you can understand the kind of sacrifices that this woman made."

This will be Kutan's first Violetta. Alfredo will be sung by American tenor Eric Fennell, who has performed at New York City Opera, Glimmerglass and our own Opera North in Lebanon, N.H. Kutan has sung at the Paris National Opera and La Scala, and recently starred in "Lakmé" at the Opéra de Montréal. They will be joined by veteran baritone Theodore Baerg who has been a soloist with the likes of the New York Philharmonic, the San Francisco Opera and Glyndebourne Festival, among many. The stage direction will be by Ron Luchsinger, longtime director at Opera North.

"This is one of the great classics," Luchsinger. "One would have thought of it as timeless as the film, 'Camille', or the play and book on which it was based. But the opera is more timeless because of the music – which cuts through all the specificity which dates it."

"La Traviata," by Giuseppe Verdi, was first performed in Venice in 1853. The libretto by Francesco Maria Piave was based on the classic novel by Alexandre Dumas fils, "La Dame aux Camélias." Although it was a failure at its premiere, it became a success in its first year and remains one of the best-loved and frequently performed, recorded and filmed operas of all time.

In the mid-19th century, Violetta Valéry is a successful courtesan (what in our time would be called a kept woman) at the top of Paris' decadent social world (our jet set).

"Violetta depends upon the kindness of strangers," Luchsinger said, referring to Blanche's famous line in Tennessee Williams' "A Streetcar Named Desire."

Violetta is approached by the young Alfredo, a naïve young man from a good family who professes love for her. In fact, he says, he has been in love with her for a year. Violetta, who has never known real love, succumbs to the handsome young man. She leaves the city to be with Alfredo in the country.

This blissful love is not to last. While Alfredo is out, his father, Giorgio Germont, visits Violetta, imploring her to leave his son. Her dubious reputation is making it difficult for Germont's daughter to marry. Forlornly, Violetta acquiesces and returns to her former protector, Baron Douphol.

Later, when Alfredo encounters Violetta at a party, he publicly attempts to buy Violetta's services with cash that he has just won in a card game. Violetta collapses in tears, and Alfredo flees after being admonished by his father for his bad behavior. Germont realizes his mistaken sentiments, and gives his approval to the relationship. But, it is nearly too late. Violetta dies in Alfredo's arms.

"We would prefer, I would guess, that the story end like 'Pretty Woman,'" Luchsinger said. "Of course, that's not going to happen. It helps if we understand the 19th century social structure in which the openings for women were severely restricted – no property, no bank account, no vote. And if you were born outside the conventional family, you had no recourse."

Once, at a pre-concert lecture, Luchsinger came up with a contemporary analogy.

"Maybe we could understand it better if Violetta and Alfredo were the same sex," he said. Within that context, we can understand it in our modern times a little more clearly the social pressure requiring the denial of this kind of relationship."

Of course, in opera, this emotional stress has to be delivered musically – and beautifully.

"The music just transports us to another level of feeling," Kutan said. "When I entered this role, that was my consideration too, to drive this character from beginning to end with different colors of voice, different ideas how to present what she says, how she says it."

In the first act, for example, at the party, Violetta is happy-go-lucky.

"But, when she meets this man, she has to sing this aria, 'Sempre libera,' suddenly she's questioning," Kutan said. "What are these things I'm feeling?"

"It's universal for someone who is in love for the first time, those palpitations in your heart," she said. "You're drawn into it and you can't avoid it. It's an attraction for that love."

The second act is largely between Violetta and Germont.

"It's very heart-breaking for her," Kutan said. "She knows she's going to die and there's this man who obviously hasn't forgiven the fact that she is who she is. The circumstances of that society don't allow him to accept her. He is sympathetic, nevertheless he's come there with a mission to have her renounce Alfredo."

And then, there is the final act.

"In the last act, vocally the challenge is to die," Kutan said. "The voice has to die little by little. It's one of the most wonderful solos."

With an opera as well-known and popular as this, the challenge is to make it fresh. For Graffeo, rather than finding an approach that is novel, it is a matter of making the music work as well as it can. And the festival setup, with its intimacy and three weeks of rehearsal, helps.

"The kind of camaraderie here that Taras encourages and fosters, allows me as a conductor to work with the singers on a level that really gets inside their singing," Graffeo said. "I'm insisting on – gently – a real devotion to bel canto vocalism."

Graffeo was referring to the early 19th century when the focus in opera was more on bel canto, or beautiful singing, than drama. Graffeo wants both.

"I'm asking all three of the singers particularly to adhere to a vocal line that really begins with their – and I use these terms to encourage them and to 'negotiate' with them – that begins with their best vocal sounds, vibrant colorful sound from the minute they make a tone, from the second they start making a sound."

Luchsinger feels that Verdi himself does much of the job of keeping it fresh, though the stage director is setting the production in the 20th century just after World War II.

"But that's not what keeps it fresh," Luchsinger said. "What you do is play it as true dramatically as you possibly can. You chase your singer-actors to be convincing, real and not artificial. And that keeps any opera alive."

"What we do is pretty straightforward," Luchsinger said. "Sometimes the less that you do with it the more modern it seems."