

## **CHAPTER 4**

### **VERDI'S MUSICAL STRATEGIES**

#### **Overview**

In this chapter I seek to show how each of the arias and ensembles analysed demonstrates one, or a combination, of the rhythmic, melodic, harmonic, timbral, textural or structural signifiers of the status and social space of Violetta and of the singer within the context of the developing action. These arias and ensembles contain recognizable aural cues which function as metaphors for psychological processes. Research into the relationship between cognitive science and music theory, as noted in Chapter Two, has led Zbikowski to note the work of Lakoff and Johnson on cross-domain mapping. The ability of a listener to conceptualize one domain (music) in terms of another (for example, spatial orientation) is, in their view, metaphorical. The ‘repeated patterns of bodily experience’ permit what Johnson termed ‘image schemata’ which is used by composers in text painting.<sup>460</sup> These provide the structure for understanding music through conceptual metaphors which also reflect cultural knowledge.<sup>461</sup> The allusive nature of music and its capacity for metonymy as discussed by Gibbs, is seen as valuable in explaining the invoking of ‘*function* as well as the affect’ in song.<sup>462</sup> Zbikowski has also noted Karbusicky’s investigations into the possibility of musical metaphors, rather than simply the metaphors used to describe music.<sup>463</sup>

An audience inculturated within the Western art music tradition of the mid-nineteenth to early twenty-first centuries might reasonably be expected to understand the aural

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<sup>460</sup> Zbikowski, “Metaphor and Music Theory: Reflections from Cognitive Science,” p. 4.

<sup>461</sup> Ibid., p. 5.

<sup>462</sup> Ibid., p. 7.

<sup>463</sup> Zbikowski, “Metaphor and Music,” p. 507.

cues and musical gestures provided by Verdi. These gestures also have wider social implications through their involvement of the singer in the identity of the courtesan, through the flux of performance. The ‘liminal’ and ‘transgressive’ aspects of performance as cited in the work of Suzanne G. Cusick and others will be revisited during this discussion.<sup>464</sup>

The musical strategies and gestures used by Verdi describe a trajectory of different vocal techniques and emphases required of the singer during the course of the opera. A specific *posizione* is sought at every juncture. The voice-type for each aspect of Violetta as her character develops and her physical strength deteriorates should match that *posizione*. This poses a challenge for the singer who must perform the role. It is not sufficient that she be able to master the *coloratura* heights and elaborate ornamentations of the Act I Finale. The burst of fireworks must also be seen to have its following moment of suspension and final period of decay. Act II demands that Violetta sustain a lengthy dialogue devoid of brilliant *coloratura* display. In this a deeper lyrico-dramatic soprano strength should show her fear, passion and eventually weakened capitulation. This strength must also serve to reveal her nobility of sacrificial resolve and place her on a moral pinnacle by the end of that Act. In Act III, Violetta must waive attention-grabbing vocal technique and even resort to the spoken word as her physical powers desert her.

At each point on this trajectory the singer is physically required to become something different. In the experience of the writer, she is required to support rapid-fire phrases, maintain complete glottal control and a high laryngeal position for the *coloratura* of

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<sup>464</sup> Cusick, “Performance as Research,” p. 141.

Act I.<sup>465</sup> With very little opportunity for vocal rest, she must return to the stage in Act II for the moral wrestling-match she endures with the hieratic Germont. She should reveal the full tone of lowered larynx, wide pharynx and open throat as well as some less refined moments of breathless exclamation in this extended section. The penetrating, open-throated ‘singer’s formant’ should manifest itself in the Finale of Act II if she is to be heard over the entire company.<sup>466</sup> In Act III the singer returns to the more girlish timbre of the heightened larynx as she sings a folk-like melody. Before doing this, she must be ready to project speech onstage with clarity of diction and tone, but return to dramatically rounded pitched notes immediately. Her final sung passages at times require the higher larynx of the *coloratura* without the previously needed dramatic force or vocal agility as she projects an ethereal quality.

The musical necessity for engaging in a variety of vocal techniques in keeping with the character’s *posizione* imposes different physical states on the singer. In Act I, the singer should be mentally prepared for an arduous period of physical exertion culminating in relentless pressure for fast, high-*tessitura* display. Since this is the beginning of the opera, such effort should occur when the singer is rested and able to cope with the initial effort. By the end of the *Brindisi* (*Libiamo, libiamo ne’lieti calici*) in Act I, Violetta will have performed a highly strenuous and tiring ensemble. This should give the singer of this role an intimation of the breathless exhaustion felt by the character. By the end of Act I, having been allowed only the respite of an intervening ensemble before the Finale, the singer should experience both the elation and the fatigue born of the vocal feats she has just performed.

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<sup>465</sup> Mason, “The Teaching (and Learning) of Singing,” p. 212.

<sup>466</sup> Sundberg, “Where Does the Sound Come From?”, pp. 242 – 244.

The prospect of Act II for the singer may entail the knowledge that her *coloratura* virtuosity will not be required. After the rest provided by the Act I interval, however, the singer's stamina and ability to convey dramatic intensity without the help of *bravura* technique will be heavily taxed. The weight of her words becomes more important than it would be in a fast aria or an ensemble.<sup>467</sup> She will use them in sustained melodic lines or breathless *parlante* exchanges. This Act is the fulcrum on which Violetta's fate is balanced.<sup>468</sup> The movement of that fate from one side to the other is inexorably painstaking. The singer should feel some of its frustration and injustice to the *coloratura* in her. She should also feel the challenge to her ability to produce the full-bodied and passionate sounds which indicate a new *gravitas* in her character.

In Act III there will be little opportunity for the singer either to demonstrate *bravura* or overriding dynamic power. Instead she is constrained to take on the attributes of a lyric soprano, generally lighter in tone than the dramatic soprano and without the highest reaches of the *coloratura*. At times she must perform with *un fil di voce*, with *mezza voce* or be given simple music which might as easily be sung by a *soubrette*. She is even required to convey a highly important passage in speech. The singer must be reconciled to restraint and to a manifest diminution of her prowess which yet contains sudden demands for great control in a high *tessitura*. She may experience this as the succumbing of her own voice to the fate which befalls Violetta's physical strength.

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<sup>467</sup> de Van, *Verdi's Theater*, p. 77.

<sup>468</sup> Private communication with Joan Carden, 23 May 2009.

There is a discernible continuity in Verdi's use of strategic devices as metaphors to establish important moments in the *posizione* of Violetta and the other characters with whom she must interact. As well as the metrical cues which contrast Violetta's waltzing world with the foursquare constraints of masculine concerns, other gestures are notable. Disjunct rhythm is used to imply conflicting intent, while its opposite denotes accord. The highly significant interval of a sixth occurs in both its major and minor forms to expose character and emotional mood at salient points, as will be shown in the following sections.<sup>469</sup> Widely divergent melodic lines denote disagreement or misunderstanding, but can coalesce into passages where the singers come to concordant terms in thirds or tenths. Gently legato passages ostensibly conveying contentment run ironically counter to rhythmically agitated lines in which words of fear and anger are expressed or may even belie their own lyrics. Chromatic inflections and runs emphasize momentary or persisting emotional conflict and opposing ideas. Ascending chromatic runs heighten mood or tension, while descending runs imply a subsidence of will or energy. As will be revealed in the following analysis, Verdi uses these strategies to build contrasts between individual will and overwhelming fate to reveal the turmoil of emotions beneath the ideas expressed in words and to provide co-ordinates for each stage in Violetta's developing *posizione*.

In keeping with the integration of theoretical and contextual analysis, I have chosen

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<sup>469</sup> For a discussion on the semiotic significance of this and other musical devices in Verdi's *oeuvre* see also: Beghelli, Marco, "Performative Musical Acts: The Verdian Achievement", in, *Musical Signification: Essays in the Semiotic Theory and Analysis of Music*, Tarasti, Eero ed., (Berlin and New York: Mouton de Gruyter, 1995), pp. 393 – 412.

certain arias and ensembles in which Violetta takes part as data samples in support of my argument. Some ten separate sections of the opera will require detailed critical analysis in order to pinpoint the vocal, psychological and social *posizione* of Violetta and of the singer at each stage of the unfolding action.

## Act I

The initially powerful *posizione* of Violetta (and of the performer) is established early in Act I with her easy assumption of what Kramer might see as ‘masculine’ endings and the ability to mix with and override the predominantly male ensemble in the *Introduzione* (Ex. 1). Violetta’s musical entry is comfortably within the brisk quadruple metre of the masculine world with which she deals.

Example 1. Act I. Violetta’s entry in *Introduzione* (pp. 12 – 13)

Violetta (va loro incontro)  
Flo - - ra, a - mi - - ci, la

v. not - - te che re - - sta d'al - - tre gio - - ie qui fa - - te bril-

The key is A major and, in a succession of leaps and *acciaccature* which do not use the full extent of her range, she maintains the mood of light-hearted banter (Ex. 2).

Example 2. Act I. Excerpt from *Introduzione* with Violetta, principals and chorus (p. 14)

The musical score is written in G major and 4/4 time. It features a vocal line for Violetta (V.) and a chorus (Coro) consisting of Soprano (Sopr.), Tenor (Ten.), and Basses (Bassi). The lyrics are: "so-glio con tal farmaco i ma-li so-pir. Sì, la vi-ta s'addop-pia al gio-ir, sì, la". The score includes a variety of musical notations such as notes, rests, and dynamic markings.

Violetta is not required to sing against the male chorus, but alternates with them or joins the whole ensemble in short, affirmative phrases. She is accompanied by thinly scored strings and winds, either off-beat or doubling her own vocal line. As part of the entire company she may be happily subsumed within an orchestral and vocal *tutti* without losing the focus of attention (Ex. 3).

Example 3. Act I. Excerpt from Introduzione. Violetta and ensemble (p. 27)

V. Be - via - - mo, be - viam.  
F. Be - via - - mo, be - viam.  
A. Be - via - - mo, be - viam.  
G. Be - via - - mo, be - viam. O Ba - ro - ne, nè un verso, nè un vi - va tro - ve.  
B. Be - via - - mo, be - viam.  
D. Be - via - - mo, be - viam.  
M. Be - via - - mo, be - viam.  
Coro - via - - mo, be - via - - mo, be - viam.  
- via - - mo, be - via - - mo, be - viam.  
- via - - mo, be - via - - mo, be - viam.

She is at home and in her element. There is no disturbance to the elegance of her social space. The performer should be comfortably able to cope with the moments of *parlante* and homophonic ensemble which end no higher than an *f* sharp<sup>1</sup>.

A more telling exposition of Violetta's situation occurs with her involvement in the *Brindisi* (*Libiamo, libiamo ne' lieti calici*) which both introduces her characteristically whirling waltz rhythms and implicates her in the slightly disreputable atmosphere of the toast which has become a drinking song (Ex. 4).

Example 4. Act I. Opening bars of the *Brindisi*. Woodwind section (p. 31).

It is difficult to imagine the protected sister of Alfredo ever being involved in such a situation. The steps of the waltz lock partners into an embrace in which they must move swiftly in circles around each other and around the room without a set destination. It suggests a public intimacy only acceptable within the space of the dance-floor. This temporal signifier of the centripetal vortex into which Violetta is being drawn will return repeatedly throughout the opera to emphasize her *posizione*. The tempo of the *Brindisi* is *Allegretto* in the light, one beat per bar in 3/8 with Alfredo's direction being *con grazia leggerissimo* which emphasizes his affectionate but diffident foray into Violetta's world (Ex. 5).

Example 5. Act I. Brindisi. Libiamo, libiamo, ne' lieti calici. Alfredo's entry (p. 32)

The delicate orchestration for Alfredo's solo and Violetta's response uses woodwind and strings with brass and tympani entering only for the chorus interjections (Ex. 6).

Example 6. Act I. *Brindisi*. Excerpt from Violetta's vocal line with orchestration (p. 37)

V. il tem - po mio gio - con - do; tut - - to è fol - li - a, fol - li - a nel

Viol.

V-le

Vc.

Cb.

This isolates the *posizione* of Alfredo *vis à vis* Violetta and defines them both against the robust group of revellers who have no share in the space of their future relationship. It allows Violetta to warn Alfredo of her role as one who gives herself without knowing how to give love; ‘Nol dite a chi l’ignora’ (Don’t speak of it to one who doesn’t know it<sup>470</sup>) (Ex. 7).

Example 7. Act I. *Brindisi*. Violetta and Alfredo (p. 42)

V. - pu - - dio... Nol di - tea

Alfredo (a Violetta)

Quan - do non s'a - mi an - co - - ra...

V. chi l'i - gno - ra. Ah! go -

A. È il mio de - stin co - - si Go -

<sup>470</sup> Weaver, “La Traviata English Translation of Libretto,” p. 133.

Although the *tessitura* is not unduly high for Violetta, in the experience of the writer, the pace of *acciaccature* and semiquaver figures is demanding. Once the singer of Violetta enters the *Brindisi* she is caught in a vocal line in which she is lucky to find two one-beat gaps for breathing-space (Ex. 8).

Example 8. Act I. *Brindisi*. Excerpt from Violetta's relentless vocal line (p. 38).

v.   
 - re, nè più si può go - - der Go - diam, c'in -

Apart from the first choral version, it gives little respite between sentences for the final section. In this she will sing over the entire ensemble's and orchestra's urgently stabbing quavers to end on a sustained *fortissimo* three-bar trill and four bars of *b flat*<sup>1</sup> (Ex. 9).

Example 9. Act I. *Brindisi*. Final bars. Violetta and ensemble (p. 47)

V.   
 F. sco-pra, ne sco-pra il nuo-vo di.   
 A.   
 G. sco-pra, ne sco-pra il nuo-vo di.   
 B. sco-pra, ne sco-pra il nuo-vo di.   
 D. sco-pra, ne sco-pra il nuo-vo di.   
 M. sco-pra, ne sco-pra il nuo-vo di.   
 Coro sco-pra, ne sco-pra il nuo-vo di.   
 sco-pra, ne sco-pra il nuo-vo di.



melodic shape seem to sigh as they rest at levels of a third before rising then falling again. This significant melody will recur in the Finale of Act I and in Act III (Ex. 11).

Example 11. Act I *Scena III*. Alfredo's *arioso Un di felice* which becomes the *Di quell'amor* paean to love (pp. 55 – 56)

A. vis - si d'i - gno - to a - mor. Di quell'a - mor, quell'a - mor ch'è pal - pi - to del - l'u - hi -

A. - ver - so, del - l'u - ni - verso in - te - ro, mi - steri - o - so, mi - steri - o - so, al - te - ro, croce, croce de -

A. - li - zia, croce e de - li - zia, delizia al cor.

Violetta responds at first by playing the coquette with evasive triplets and darting hemidemisemiquavers (Ex. 12).

Example 12. Act I. Excerpt from *Valzer-Duetto*. Violetta (p. 57)

V. Io sono franca, in - ge - nu - a; al - tra cer - car do - ve - - te; non ar - - - du o tro - ve -

Rhythmically and melodically they remain separated until Violetta is gradually brought into line with Alfredo's feelings. Despite Violetta's clarinet-doubled vocal flights and final coloratura run, she and Alfredo having moved into the same triplet rhythms, then an ecstatically ascending demisemiquaver run, come to rest on a comfortably concordant third. Violetta has been given a glimpse of a different space in which her life may move (Ex. 13).

Example 13. Act I. Excerpt from *Valzer-Duetto*. Violetta and Alfredo (p. 60)

V. -lor

A. cor!

The singer, meanwhile, has moved to a new vocal space in which a higher laryngeal position and precise glottal control will allow her to execute the *brillante* b flats<sup>1</sup> and the rapid runs (Ex. 14) (P. 60). This is a preparation for the *bravura* technique required later in Act I.

Example 14. Act I. Excerpt from *Valzer-Duetto*. Violetta and Alfredo (p. 60)

V. ah! ah! di-menti-car-mial-

A. ah! ah! croce e delizia al

The band in E major, temporarily excluded while she and Alfredo have allowed themselves to be vulnerable, returns with Gastone's interruption (Ex. 15).

Example 15. Act I. Excerpt from Gastone's interruption of *Valzer-Duetto* (p. 60)

Banda int.

V. (ad Alfredo)

G. -gia - va... (rientra)

A. Ah! ah! sta ben!.. re-state!

Although Violetta tells Gastone that they have only been talking nonsense, she gives Alfredo permission to see her again when the flower she gives him has withered.

Their leave-taking is lingering and full of promise, with the word ‘Addio’ repeated as an implied  $V^7 - I$  perfect cadence (Ex. 16).

Example 16. Act I. *Valzer-Duetto*. Violetta and Alfredo bid farewell (p. 64)

[ $V^7$  I]

After the tumult of the intervening chorus, the ambivalence of Violetta to her situation is worked out in the extensive *Scena ed Aria Violetta Finale* to Act I (Pp. 80 – 107). Each section bears vivid relevance to Violetta’s (and the performer’s) *posizione* in the sense of her relationship with her environment from moment to moment. It begins with the recitative *È strano*, whose very hesitant movement and structure follows rather than dictates the thought patterns involved. It is not preceded by a rolled chord, for example, but emerges as her thoughts occur. The instrumental music interjects as an indicator of the internal emotions evoked by Violetta’s disturbingly new ideas. The singer is no longer part of the breathlessly excited throng depicted in the previous *Stretta*. Off-beat entries, chromatic changes and pauses signify ambivalence. Alone on stage, she begins to lose the self-assurance she had in her accustomed social space. Relinquishing control of her cynicism, she allows herself the abandoned run from *b* flat<sup>1</sup> on ‘gioia’ which anticipates the vocal struggle which the singer will experience between lyricism and seductive virtuosity which soon follows (Ex. 17). This momentary display of vocal embellishment will become emblematic of the conflict between the idealized space of innocent provincial childhood and the unforgiving reality of her immediate social space and time.

Example 17. Act I. *Finale*. Excerpt from Violetta's recitative. *È strano*. (p. 81)

v.   
 mi-a?... Nul-l'uo.mo an-co-ra t'accen-de-va.... O, gio - ia ch'ionon co-nob-bi, es-scr a-ma-ta a-

There follows the *cantabile*, *Ah fors'e lui*, which tiptoes in on A-flat major with a hesitant triple metre using pianissimo quavers on first and third beats in the strings and *dolicissimo* semiquavers followed by rests in the vocal line which seems to portray a gasping for air. The singer is required to use delicacy in observing semiquaver rests, triplets and simple ornamentation. She must also show great control of an open-throated *portamento* without sliding, as she leaps from *f* to the octave above on 'lui che' and the sixth in the word 'tumulti' and similar phrases. (Ex. 18).

Example 18. Act I *Finale*. Excerpt from Violetta's *cantabile*, *Ah, fors'e lui* (p. 82)

v.   
 so-ling-a ne' tu - mul - ti, so-ling-a ne' tu - mul . ti go - dea so - ven - te pin - ge -

She is supported by sustained notes from the lower woodwinds and a faintly funereal string rhythm of staccato quavers on the first and third beats. There is irony in this use of the sinister rhythmic pattern which underpins Violetta's hopes of love while at the same time beating the tattoo of her procession towards death (Ex. 19).

Example 19. Act I. *Finale*. Excerpt of *cantabile* showing woodwinds and first violin part (p. 83).

Clar. in Do I. Solo

Fag.

V. - re de'suoi co-lo-ri oc - cui - ti, de'suoi co-lo-ri oc - cul - ti!... Lui, che mo.desto e vi - gi - le

Viol.

Mastery of the situation without unnecessary display is required vocally and dramatically. It is then that the full import of Alfredo's words returns to Violetta. The character and the singer fall under the spell of the tenor's music. In its original key of F Major and still with the delicate woodwind and string accompaniment, Violetta begins to sing Alfredo's alluring serenade as 'A quell'amor' (Ex. 20).

Example 20. Act I. *Finale*. Violetta echoes Alfredo's theme (p. 84).

V. *f* *con espansione*

A quel - l'a - mor. quel - l'a - mor ch'è pal - pi - to del - l'u - ni -

Having been momentarily in Alfredo's musical and social space, Violetta returns to A-flat major and repeats her own melody. This time she recalls girlish dreams of future love which may have been no more than a glorious mirage, the 'divino error' (Ex. 21).

Example 21. Act I. *Finale*. Excerpt from *cantabile* before returning to Alfredo's theme (p. 87)

v. *ppp* *con espansione*  
 di quel di-vi-no er-ror. Sen - tia che a-mo - re, che a-mo - re è pal - pi-to

Nevertheless she repeats the serenade as something already expected. The words ‘croce e delizia’ constantly reinforce their evocation of the conflicting emotional spaces of sacrifice and delight (Ex. 22).

Example 22. Act I *Finale*. Excerpt from *cantabile* (p. 88)

v. *p* *legg.*  
 - o - - so, mi - ste-ri - o-so, al-te - - ro, cro- ce, cro-ce e de - li - zia, cro-ce e de-

Before ending this lyrical phase, however, Violetta heralds a changing *posizione* by breaking into a short cadenza which rises through an uncomfortably augmented fourth and minor thirds to *b flat*<sup>1</sup> (Ex. 23). This is another preparation for the singer to experience the exertion and project an intimation of the excitement which is about to emerge.

Example 23. Act I. *Finale*. *Cadenza to cavatina* (p. 89).

v. *p*  
 - li - zia, delizia al cor! croce e do - li-zia, de-lizia al cor! ah! \_\_\_\_\_ de-lizia al

After Piave's stage direction, 'resta concentrata,' comes 'scuotendosi'.<sup>471</sup> This indicates that Violetta and the singer who portrays her must be shaken out of the reverie which required a generally lower laryngeal position and brought firmly into the space of the courtesan's virtuosic display.

The tempo moves from *Andantino con espansione* and the indefinite pause which ends it, to the galvanic *Allegro* of Violetta's recitative, *Follie!, follie!* (Ex. 24).

Example 24. Act I. *Finale*. Opening of recitative *Follie! Follie!* between *cantabile* and *cabaletta*, *Sempre libera* (p. 89)

V. (resta concentrata) (scuotendosi)  
 cor! Fol-li-e! fol-li-e!... de-li-rio va.no è questo!...

Singer and strings begin with leaps and angular intervals until the tremolos of the violins, underpinned by chromatically rising fragments in the lower strings, build tension under the repeated notes of the vocal line (Ex. 25).

Example 25. Act I. *Finale*. Lower string accompaniment to recitative (p. 90)

V. Ie  
 Vc.  
 Cb.  
 p

Violetta reveals the tragedy of the *posizione* in which she is trapped. She sings of the insanity of believing that her situation could be different. Herein lies the justification

<sup>471</sup> Ibid., p. 89.

for Verdi's engaging with a character whose social space would normally be outside acceptable boundaries.

Within the restriction of monotone, having referred to herself as a 'poor woman,' Violetta sings of being alone and abandoned in the vast space of a paradoxically crowded desert called Paris. Her social space is at once full of people and empty of compassion. She is convinced at this point that she has no alternative but to live the life in which she is caught. The singer abandons the recitative's restraint and final minor third sung on 'degg'io' (must I), changing it to a resolute major third on 'Gioire' (Enjoy) (Ex. 26).

Example 26. Act I. *Finale*. Excerpt from recitative (p. 90)

v. Po-ve-ra don-na, so-la, ab-ban-do - na-ta in que-sto po-po-lo - so de -

v. - ser-to che appella-no Pa - ri-gi, chespero or più? che far deg-g'i - o? Gio - i - re,.. di vo-lut-tà... ne'

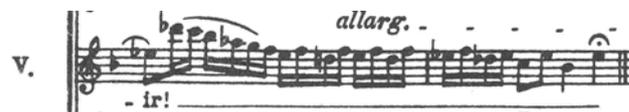
She then launches into a word-painting cadenza with *secco* accompaniment, on the word 'vortici' in which the vortex of pleasure drawing her towards death is depicted by notes that rise to  $c^2$  and fold in upon themselves, plummeting in descending triads and rising tones until they end after a chromatic semitone, on  $d$ . The singer has covered nearly a two-octave range requiring high laryngeal position for the upper notes and rapid execution of *passagi* (Ex. 27).

Example. 27. Act I. *Finale*. Opening *cadenza* to recitative (p. 91)



This is both an evocation of a space and time which will become increasingly constricted for Violetta and a sudden curtailing of vocal flight for the singer. No sooner has this happened, however, than Violetta (*con forza*) resolves to perish from pleasure, in an expansive coloratura display which ascends to high  $d^2$  flat. The word ‘Gioir!’ is repeated to accommodate this. The singer must leap a demanding seventh to  $d^2$  flat which, in the writer’s experience requires well-prepared breath support, high *larynx* and unerring pitch. This is high-risk vocalising which gives the singer an opportunity to identify with the physical tension of Violetta’s febrile state (Ex. 28).

Example 28. Act I. *Finale*. Conclusion of *cadenza* to recitative (p. 92)



After a pause, the key moves from F to A Flat major and the metre whirls into an *Allegro brillante* in compound duple time. The triplets which are now forced at the double into each bar transform the earlier *Andantino con espansione* of the *cantabile Ah, fors’è lui* into frenetic denials of that luxurious reverie. The *cabaletta* will be the last opportunity for Violetta as courtesan and singer to demonstrate her mastery of the social and vocal space she inhabits with virtuosic performance. It shows the fiery brilliance of the apparently cynical seductress and her powers of display.

The *cabaletta* is introduced by strings, horns and winds with short upward sweeps, tumbling scalic passages and trilled *appoggiature* followed by ascending arpeggios in the upper parts (Ex. 29).

Example 29. Act I. *Finale*. Opening section. Woodwinds (p. 92)

**Allegro brillante**

The image shows a musical score for woodwinds, titled "Allegro brillante". It consists of six staves of music. The top staff is for the Flute, followed by Clarinet, Bassoon, Oboe, and two parts of the Bassoon/Clarinet. The music is in 3/4 time and features a key signature of one flat. The tempo is marked "Allegro brillante". The score includes various musical notations such as trills (tr), appoggiatures (accents), and dynamic markings (mf). The woodwinds play a complex, rhythmic pattern with many trills and slurs.

Violetta takes up the breathless pace, repeating the melody of the introduction and adding wide extensions in range from  $c$  to  $c^2$  to fit the ideas she must express. While protesting that she must be ‘always free’, she is revealing the paradox of the social space of demanding ostentation in which she is imprisoned. Although she sings of life moving smoothly along paths of pleasure, she acknowledges that she must be gay in her search for novelties and amusement at every social gathering whether the day (and by implication, her own life) is beginning or ending. The singer must dip to  $c$  on the word ‘muoia’ (dying) and either produce an instantly strong dramatic note or possibly choose to let the tone itself die (Ex. 30).

Example 30. Act I *Finale*. Excerpt from *cabaletta* (p. 93)

On 'ritrovi', the word Violetta uses for 'parties', she leaps in an arpeggio from  $e^1$  to a trilled  $g^1$ , thence to the  $c^2$  (Ex. 31).

Example 31. Act I. *Finale*. Excerpt from *cabaletta* and opening of repeated melody (p. 94)

This flight, though carried by further arpeggios in the woodwinds, leads her back to the original refrain *con effetto questo ripiglio*, as if it were a reprise. She refers to the flight of her thoughts as focussing on pleasure with ever more elaborate configurations on the word 'volar'. This idea is reiterated and reinforced until the voice leaps in sixths and a seventh to  $d$  flat<sup>2</sup> with descending runs, like a bird flying against a high window (Ex. 32).

Example 32. Act I. *Finale*. Conclusion of the *cadenza* (p. 96)

As for all such *coloratura* passages, there must be excellent control of *gorgie* or pitches articulated in the throat.<sup>472</sup> The singer uses the older technique of eighteenth century *bel canto* in a more realistic mid-nineteenth century context.<sup>473</sup> She is usually under pressure to project this in a venue far removed from the small houses and court theatres of the eighteenth century. She feels the tension of *bravura* on high notes and remains aware of the physical demands yet to come.<sup>474</sup>

This *cabaletta* is the moment in which the singer must show her own domination of the stage space. No one else will intrude on her musical display except at a distance, giving her a short time for vocal recovery before her strenuous testing at the end of the Finale. She must provide an apparently effortless demonstration of *coloratura* technique in all its connotations of elaborately ornamented line and extremely high *tessitura*. I have found this physically demanding, even when only one half of the *cabaletta* is performed. Keeping up the pace in which there are no more than a few quaver rests and maintaining the ideal *lutta di vocale* or balance of inspiratory and expiratory breath support, is an experience which can put the singer literally in the place of an individual such as Violetta who must snatch air and energy where she can. *Sempre libera* is only slowed in its tracks, giving some respite to the soprano, when Alfredo begins to repeat his paeon to love as a serenade beneath Violetta's balcony. She attempts to quash it, nearly overriding his vocal space with the word 'Follie' entering on a dissonant *b* flat (uncharacteristically for Violetta, in quadruple metre) against Alfredo's *c* (Ex. 33).

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<sup>472</sup> Mason, "The Teaching (and Learning) of Singing," p. 206.

<sup>473</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 213.

<sup>474</sup> Private communication with Joan Carden, 23 May 2009.

Example 33. Act I. *Finale*. Violetta's interruption of Alfredo's serenade (p. 97)

While Alfredo sings outside Violetta's space to lure her away from it, she resists him and tests its limits with her reiterations of the word 'gioir' and her return to the *cabaletta* with more strenuous runs, relentless pace and flying *tessitura* (Ex. 34).

Example 34. Act I. *Finale*. Further variations of *passagi* on 'dee volar' (p. 105)

The pressure of time plays its part here not only for the character of Violetta, but for the singer. Although relatively early, this is the last opportunity in the opera afforded to the performer to impress or seduce the audience with brilliant, non-semantic vocal display. Serious dramatic qualities and different vocal attributes increasingly dictated by the over-riding importance of the text will be demanded later as what Poizat calls 'a locus of jouissance – the aria' gives way to 'a locus of the mastering word – recitative', subtly transformed into *arioso* and *parlante*.<sup>475</sup> Time is literally running out for the courtesan-singer.

Singers have approached the apparent dichotomy between the vocal demands made in Act I and those made thereafter, in different ways. This is particularly evident in their

<sup>475</sup> Michel Poizat, trans. Arthur Denner, *The Angel's Cry: Beyond the Pleasure Principle in Opera*, (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University, 1992), p. 53.

attitude to the final vocal cadence of the Act I Finale *cabaletta*. Joan Sutherland showed determination, even in a later recording with Luciano Pavarotti, to fulfill every possible aspect of *coloratura* display required in the Act I Finale *cabaletta*. She did this to the extent of singing an unwritten but traditionally expected cadence which reaches an *e flat*<sup>2</sup>.<sup>476</sup> Joan Carden regretted that for her performance in the ‘live’ ABC video recording of the opera, she was unable to perform her own accustomed high *e flat*<sup>2</sup> due to a serious medical emergency at the time.<sup>477</sup> Teresa Stratas evidently felt it necessary to use the conventional high *e flat*<sup>2</sup> in her filmed performance (Ex. 35).<sup>478</sup>

Example 35. Act I. *Finale*. Cadence often varied with *f*<sup>1</sup>, *g*<sup>1</sup> to *e flat*<sup>2</sup> and *a*<sup>1</sup> in final two bars of vocal part (pp. 106 – 107)

Anna Netrebko, a singer whose darker dramatic vocal quality lends itself well to Acts II and III and whose performance of the *cabaletta* appears effortless, presents the final vocal cadence from *e flat*<sup>1</sup> to *a flat* as written,<sup>479</sup> as did Maria Callas before her.<sup>480</sup>

Cheryl Barker finds that maintenance of the ‘elasticity’ required of what she describes

<sup>476</sup> Giuseppe Verdi, *La traviata*, Joan Sutherland, Luciano Pavarotti, Matteo Manuguerra with National Philharmonic Orchestra Conducted by Richard Bonyngue (London: The Decca Record Company, 1979), Digital audio disc. Disc 1, Track 7.

<sup>477</sup> Giuseppe Verdi, *La traviata*, Joan Carden, Richard Greager, Neville Wilkie, dir. John Copley, (ABC DVD, Australia: 1987), referred to in private communication with Joan Carden, 23 May 2009.

<sup>478</sup> Giuseppe Verdi, *La traviata*, Teresa Stratas, Plácido Domingo, Cornell Macneil, dir. Franco Zeffirelli, DVD (Universal Pictures in association with Radiotelevisione Italia and Cinécitta, Rome: 1982).

<sup>479</sup> Giuseppe Verdi, *La traviata*, Anna Netrebko, Rolando Villazón, Thomas Hampson, dir. Willy Decker, DVD (Deutsche Grammophon, Salzburger Feltspiel, Salzburg: 2005).

<sup>480</sup> Giuseppe Verdi, *La traviata*, Maria Callas, Alfredo Kraus, Mario Sereni, Coro e Orquestra Sinfónica do Teatro Nacional de São Carlos, Lisboa conducted by Franco Ghione, 1958 (Lisbon: EMI Records Ltd., Digital audio disc, 1997. Disc 1, Track 11).

as a ‘dramatic coloratura’ is not common and that performance of the Act I Finale must be, as for the role of Costanza in Mozart’s *Die Entführung aus dem Serail* always of concern to the singer.<sup>481</sup> The writer attended an Opera Queensland performance of *La traviata* on 16 May 2009 in which Elvira Fatykhova sang Violetta and included the *e flat*<sup>2</sup>.

It is evident from the above observations that some singers aim to occupy the space of the vocal seductress to its fullest extent, while others prefer to concentrate on the dramatic poignancy of the role as it unfolds. Paradoxically, any discomfort a singer may feel during the florid passages of the Act I Finale, which could manifest itself as unevenness of technique, only lends itself to the authentic portrayal of Violetta as the tuberculosis sufferer. Although the singers mentioned have sought to excel in all dramatic and vocal aspects of the role, this may be the reason behind Verdi’s seemingly offhand remark that ‘even a mediocrity could possess the right qualities to shine in that opera’.<sup>482</sup> The more vocally brilliant the singer’s performance in Act I, however, the further she tests the boundaries of normal human behaviour and flaunts the seductively transgressive qualities of the singer-courtesan. It is noteworthy that some performers and audiences have come to expect that this brilliance can only be fulfilled by extending the performance range beyond what Verdi actually wrote.

## **Act II**

In Act II, the complex *Scena e Duetto* between herself and Giorgio Germont keeps Violetta away from the whirling triplet figures of her own society. It puts the singer

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<sup>481</sup> Private communication with Cheryl Barker, 16 June 2009.

<sup>482</sup> Budden, *The Operas of Verdi: Il Trovatore to La Forza Del Destino*, p. 164, citing G. Monaldi, *Verdi 1839-98*, p. 152.

firmly within the constraints of an uncharacteristic time signature with little or no opportunity to demonstrate vocal flexibility, height or power. Where Violetta commanded the stage space in the Finale to Act I, Act II has opened in territory ceded to Alfredo. In the country house near Paris it is he who has conversed with Violetta's maid and he who has declaimed on living 'quasi in ciel' (as if in heaven) albeit with the concession of a simple triple metre in *De miei bollenti* which nods to Violetta's influence and the debt to her which he must eventually acknowledge (Ex. 36).

Example 36. Act II. Excerpt from Alfredo's aria, *De miei bollenti* (p. 111)

The *Scena e Duetto* occurs after Violetta's conversation with the maid Annina. She has been told of Alfredo's sudden departure and has uttered the words 'È strano', not heard since her first Finale recitative. Only minimal string punctuation of the seemingly inconsequential *parlante* disturbs an almost claustrophobic quietude. The stage space which is at this point neither wholly Violetta's nor Alfredo's, is almost silently expectant as the servants come and go with their messages (Ex. 37).

Example 37. Act II. Recitative with first violin part (p. 134)

There is little perceptible difference when the man expected by Violetta on business matters turns out to be Alfredo's father, Giorgio Germont. He is suddenly present in Violetta's space and determined to make it his own. What follows may possibly be one of the most protracted and agonizing negations of the love duet in operatic history. Textually, a systematic exercise in the frustration of desire, it is an extended series of *arioso* melodic lines and *parlante* conversations in which the two worlds of Violetta and Alfredo which had coalesced, are methodically divided at Germont's insistence. For the singer of Violetta, this is also a sustained frustration of the virtuosic impulses for display which were allowed free rein in Act I (Ex. 38).

Example 38. Act II. Excerpt from Violetta's recitative exchange with Germont (p. 136)

v. ca - sa; ch'io vi la - scias - sen - ti - te, più per voi che per me. (per uscire)

Ger. (Quai mo - di!)

Within the context of the nineteenth- and twentieth-century opera house which may hold audiences of several hundreds, the singer faces a different challenge after the exertions of Act I. She must be prepared to use what Manuel Garcia called *la voix sombre* of the lowered larynx, open pharynx and powerfully carrying tone.<sup>483</sup>

Violetta breaks the subdued tension of her recitative in response to Germont's accusations to repudiate her former life. She does this in a more expansive cadenza on

<sup>483</sup> Mason, "The Teaching (and Learning) of Singing," pp. 212 – 213.

the words ‘e Dio lo cancello col pentimento’ (and God erased it with my repentance)  
(Ex. 39).

Example 39. Act II. Violetta’s ornamented recitative (p. 137)

V. (con entusiasmo) *Allegro* *a tempo* *allarg.*  
- si - ste... Or a - mo Al - fre - do, e Dio lo can - cel - lò col pen - ti - men - to

Once Germont has stated his case (in Violetta’s accustomed key of A-flat major, but his own quadruple time) for Violetta’s renunciation of Alfredo for his own daughter’s sake, the parlante is joined by Violetta animando a poco a poco (Ex. 40).

Example 40. Act II. Excerpt from *parlante*. Violetta with first violin part (p. 142)

Violetta *animando a poco a poco*  
Ah! com - pren.do: dovrò per alcun tempo da Alfredo allon - ta -  
no.  
Viol. *pp animando a poco a poco*

Strings and woodwinds abandon their previously tremulous and spare accompaniment. There is an increasingly agitated and voluble crescendo with off-beat semiquaver figures and chromatic runs in the strings and insistent on-beat quavers in the woodwinds as Violetta realizes that the break demanded must be permanent. She cries out with the whole orchestra *tutta forza* in a cadence to A-flat major and then preparatory to C minor, ‘giammai! no, mai!’ (No, never!) that she will never agree (Ex. 41).

Example 41. Act II. Violetta refuses to agree with Germont's demands (pp. 143 – 144)

There is a sustained pause before Violetta returns with her characteristically urgent compound duple time, *Vivacissimo* in C minor. In *Non sapete*, Violetta frantically rejects Germont's demands, returning defiantly to the triple metre now stripped of its vocal virtuosity. Her utterances incorporate the desperate semitones from *e flat*<sup>1</sup> to *d*<sup>1</sup> which Beghelli calls formulaic 'performative musical acts' embodied in the 'theoretical emblem of lament',<sup>484</sup> and are interspersed with answering *pianissimo* staccato semitones from the strings (Ex. 42).

Example 42. Act II. Opening bars of Violetta's *Non sapete quale affetto* (p. 144)

These build to *fortissimo* reinforcements of her descending lines which follow octave leaps, soon intensified by the descending chromatic thirds from the woodwinds which signal desperation and defeat as Violetta sings of her life: 'che già presso il fin ne

<sup>484</sup> Marco Beghelli, "Performative Musical Acts: The Verdian Achievement", in *Musical Signification: Essays in the Semiotic Theory and Analysis of Music*, (Berlin and New York: Mouton de Gruyter, 1995), p. 395.

vedo? Ch'io mi separi da Alfredo?' (That I can already see its end near? ... For me to leave Alfredo!) ((Ex. 43).

Example 43. Act II. Textural intensification of *Non sapete* (p. 145)

Violetta reveals to Germont what she had only soliloquized in her Act I Finale recitative, *Follie! Follie!* She pleads that she is without friends or family except for Alfredo who has pledged to be everything to her. He alone must be her social space as she succumbs to the disease which is killing her. The key changes to a C major vulnerable to chromatic change and Verdi's direction for *Ancora piu vivo*. In the same compound duple metre, without the off-beat vocal-instrumental interplay of her previous plea, Violetta presses on with more aggressive rhythms in an iambic pounding of quavers with crotchets on strong beats, insisting that she would rather forfeit her life than accede to Germont's demands (Ex. 44).

Example 44. Act II. Violetta pleads her case with more force (p. 146)

Her vocal line contains ascending octave leaps and chromatic descents which function with the intensity of heartfelt cries. These are further supported by a *fortissimo* orchestral *tutti* (Ex. 45). Although her line rises only to an extended *b flat*<sup>1</sup>, she will experience the physical strain of holding this with dramatic force against the entire orchestra.

Example 45. Act II. Violetta with orchestral *tutti* (p. 147)

The image shows a page of a musical score for Act II, featuring Violetta and an orchestral *tutti*. The score is arranged in a standard orchestral format with the following parts and staves from top to bottom:

- Fl. (Flute)
- Ott. (Oboe)
- Ob. (Oboe)
- Clar. in Do (Clarinet in C)
- Fag. (Bassoon)
- in Mib (Horn in E-flat)
- Corni in Lab (Horn in B-flat)
- Trbe in Mib (Trumpet in E-flat)
- Tr-bni (Trombone)
- Cimb. (Cymbal)
- Timp. (Timpani)
- V. (Voice)
- Viol. (Violin)
- V.le (Viola)
- Vo. (Cello/Double Bass)
- Cb. (Cello/Double Bass)

The score is written in a key signature of one flat (B-flat major or D minor) and a 4/4 time signature. The music is marked *tutti* (ff) and includes various dynamics and articulations. The vocal line for Violetta includes the lyrics: "fe - ri - rò, ah! mo -".

Once Germont has patronizingly attempted to calm Violetta with a sparely orchestrated recitative, he begins the insidious attack on her social space. In an F minor *Andante piuttosto mosso parlante*, during which Violetta first begs him not to ask the impossible, Germont quietly but ruthlessly undermines her confidence. He tells the courtesan whose brilliance shone in Act I and who could induce a young man to risk losing his own social space that she can expect only betrayal.

Germont's *semplicità* vocal line enters with a sinisterly rising minor sixth, its minor tonality noted by Chafe as countering optimism.<sup>485</sup> It functions as one of the 'performative musical acts ... structure according to onomatopoeic and iconic principles'.<sup>486</sup> Its insidious nature arises from the ideas introduced by Germont's words which purport to give wise guidance about avoiding a pathetic future, but ruthlessly undermine Violetta's hopes. It can allow the singer to portray Germont in several ways (Ex. 46).

Example 46. Act II. Germont envisages Violetta's future (pp. 151 – 152)

He may be cast as a realist, a brute doling out mock sympathy or a pious provincial who wishes to spare Violetta future disappointment. This is a dramatic problem of characterisation not always solved for the performer who takes on the unsympathetic

<sup>485</sup> Eric Thomas Chafe, *Analyzing Bach Cantatas* (New York: Oxford University Press), p. 214.

<sup>486</sup> Beghelli, "Performative Musical Acts: The Verdian Achievement", in *Musical Signification: Essays in the Semiotic Theory and Analysis of Music*, p. 393.

and potentially static role of Germont. Verdi's music for this section, however, can be heard as threatening in its minor tonality, semitones, leaping minor sixths and sevenths, its semiquavers followed by rests and its suddenly twisting demisemiquavers, all underscored by *pizzicato* strings. The angular intervals, *pianissimo* dynamics and unexpected chromatic rush of notes contrast words such as 'veneri' (carnality), 'fugale' (flown) and 'sorgere' (to arise), with 'balsamo' (solace) and 'affetti' (affection) to create unease and fear in Violetta at the possibility of being abandoned. When Germont reminds Violetta that she may never enter the safe social space of marriage, she can do nothing but agree in monotone: 'È vero! è vero!' (It's true! It's true!).

Germont no longer needs to distance himself by addressing her as 'Madamigella' but uses the more familiar 'Violetta'. He invokes God's will as he closes in with the assurance of one who knows the battle is nearly won. Though his own daughter may be 'pure as an angel,' as he has extolled her in his earlier *arioso*, Violetta can actually be 'l'angiol consolatore' (the consoling angel) for his family. For Germont, Violetta is good enough to aspire to this angelic realm provided that she does not contaminate the earthly space of his family's social status. In a rhythmic echo of Alfredo's rapturous serenade, 'Di quell'amor,' now distorted *con estremo dolore*, with a fitfully descending chromatic line of resignation, Violetta revisits her former *posizione* and finds the world's doors closed to her. The singer's plangent melody is buoyed by woodwinds and first violins, above the ironically harmonizing but hollow reassurances of Germont (Ex. 47).