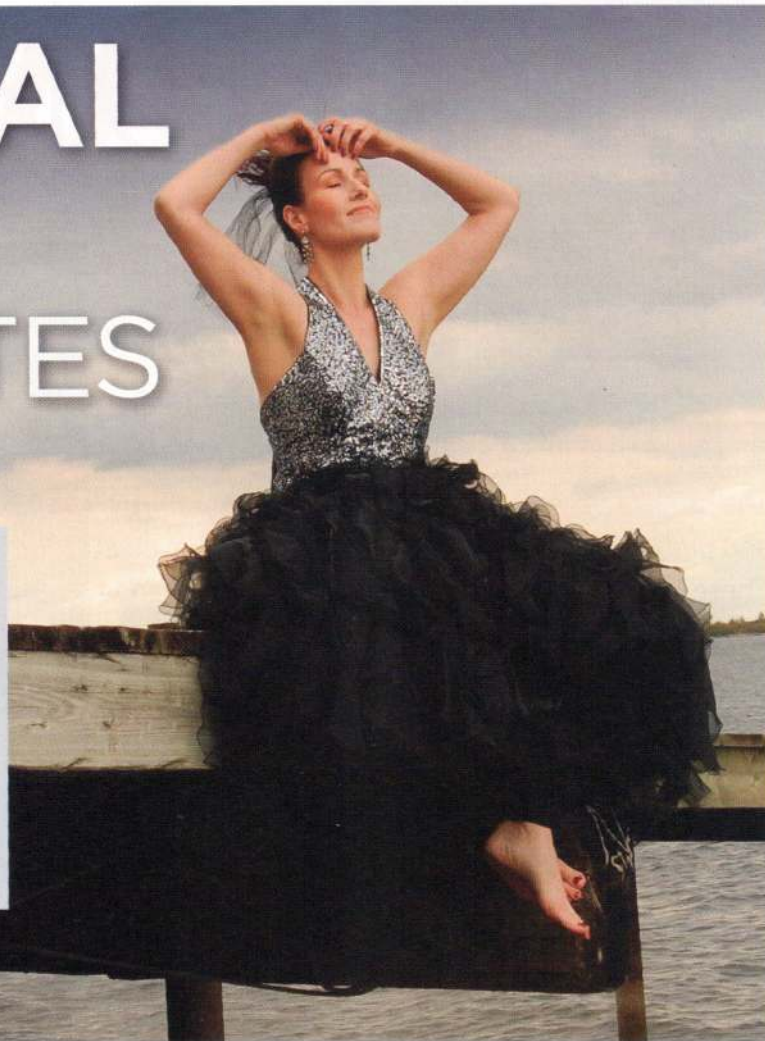


# SCANDAL HITS THE HIGH NOTES

Verdi's illicit love affair led to *La Traviata* in 1853, and Edmonton Opera's sizzling season finale today

BY GILBERT A. BOUCHARD



Alberta-born soprano Laura Whalen will portray the tragic Violetta



Edmonton Opera is pulling out all the dramatic and musical stops to crown its season with a no-holds-barred production of *La Traviata*.

This classic tragedy, written in 1853 by Giuseppe Verdi, is the most frequently performed and most extensively recorded of all the canonic composer's operas. This is, in itself, an amazing feat — given this famous 19th century composer's career and impressive output.

Verdi, a giant of Italian opera and one of the most popular composers of his and any era, penned a bevy of works that still dominate opera seasons around the globe: *Rigoletto*, *Il Trovatore*, *Aida* and his trinity of operas based on Shakespeare: *Macbeth*, *Otello* and *Falstaff*.

"This is a tight and compact opera that tells such a powerful story and takes its romantic subject matter seriously," says director Michael Cavanagh.

Based on Alexandre Dumas' scandalous (and autobiographical) play *La dame aux camellias* — a theatrical work about an ill-fated love affair between the consumptive courtesan Violetta and the young nobleman Alfredo — Cavanagh says the story "grabbed" Verdi because the composer himself was in the middle of a "really scandalous relationship with a famous diva" that hiked eyebrows across Italy. Verdi, then at the


height of his fame and creative power, faced pressure to end his illicit affair just as *La Traviata's* Violetta and Alfredo were pressured to break up by the uptight Germont.

Verdi's intense personal connection to the opera helps to explain why he dubbed *La Traviata* his favourite and applied tremendous musical energy to the work.

"This is an opera that has powerful surges of emotion," adds Cavanagh. "Verdi was furious with society for not allowing his love to flourish, and projected that anger onto his own characters. No one is left off the hook in this opera."

For those who wonder about such things, *La Traviata* translates into *The Fallen Woman*.

Cavanagh has nothing but praise for his stellar cast, an ensemble lead by Alberta-born soprano Laura Whalen, who will sing the tragic Violetta opposite Québécois opera star Marc Hervieux as Alfredo. Edmonton Opera favourite Theodore Baerg portrays Germont.

"I'm underlining the memory aspect of the story, given that it was written as a memoir of this great forbidden love," says Cavanagh. "I'm also stressing the lush, florid world of the play as well as the great seasonal references in the opera by projecting floral paintings by Monet as background elements." 

Edmonton Opera's presentation of Giuseppe Verdi's *La Traviata* plays April 25, 28 and 30 at the Jubilee Auditorium. For more information, please see Music listings on Page 30.