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LA TRAVIATA in China

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Few people in China know *La traviata*, but millions of Chinese know *Cha Hua Nü* ("The Camelia Woman", a translation of the title of Dumas fils' drama *La Dame aux Camélias*), since the play was introduced in China early this century. The title remained when, later on, Verdi's opera *La traviata* was put on stage. In China, *La traviata* was one of the earliest Western operas to be performed, and is also Verdi's only opera represented with full staging. The first performance of *La traviata* in China took

place in Beijing at the end of 1956. Performed by the Central Opera Theater (or rather its predecessor, the Central Experimental Opera Theater), it was conducted by Li Guo-quan, then chief conductor of the theater. It was an all-Chinese production and was sung in Chinese. The Chinese people immediately loved this opera. The Theater went to Tianjin, Xian, Chengdou, Chongquin and Guangzhou and there were more than two hundred performances staged. Verdi's name, and his

music, soon became very popular.

During the "Cultural Revolution" (1966-76) *La traviata* was banned, as were most other Western musical compositions. The Theater had to stop every artistic activity, and all the musicians were sent to the countryside to be re-educated by soldiers, peasants, and the harsh life. The conductor Li Guo-quan died during that period. Those who survived describe the ten year period as the most terrible "nightmare."

In 1978, with the beginning of a new era in China, the Central Opera Theater was reestablished, and Zheng Xiao-ying became its new chief conductor. Trained at the Moscow Tschaikovsky Conservatory, Zheng Xiao-ying had her successful opera debut in 1962 (*Tosca*) at the Moscow Musical Theater. She became China's first woman conductor and in 1978, was one of the leading conductors in the country. Under her baton,

Verdi's *La traviata* was one of the earliest performances of the Central Opera Theater after its rebirth in Beijing, and a national tour, including major cities such as Shanghai, Nanjing and Hangzhou, was launched. Soon, *La traviata* again reached and exceeded two hundred performances. The opera won a national performance prize in 1980, during the Festival organized to celebrate the Nation's thirty-year anniversary. Verdi's music has regained its popularity among millions of Chinese. This year, the Central Opera Theater is invited to perform at the Performing Arts Festival of Hong Kong, the Savonlinna Opera Festival of Finland, and in France. *La traviata*, whose story in China has been so much intertwined with the history of the Central Opera Theater, will be heard in Chinese, for the first time in Europe.

A note on the author: Sue Zheng is a graduate student in the Music Department at New York University and daughter of the conductor mentioned in the article, Zheng Xiao-ying. [Ed.]