

# GIACOMO PUCCINI'S LA BOHÈME

by  
Rosalba Pisaturo

## HIS EARLY LIFE

Giacomo Puccini was born in Lucca in 1858. He was the oldest son in a family which counted four generations of professional musicians.

Driven by tradition and by a very ambitious mother, he succeeded in becoming the fifth generation composer in his line. When his father died in 1864, little Giacomo was

6 and his mother at 34 was pregnant and with 7 other children to raise.

In 1880 Puccini was sent to Milano to the famous Conservatorio. This was the finest training school in Italy for composers and singers; although to be accepted at the Conservatorio of Milano was not easy.

Age, previous musical education and availability of space were strongly considered.

Earlier Verdi himself had been rejected at the age of 19; and now Puccini is not only considered old at 22, but he is also a rather poor young man who has only to fulfill his mother's wishes in pursuing a musical career, as tradition in the Puccini family dictated.

Wearing old clothes, worn shoes and with very little money, Puccini had to prepare for his admission exams.

In a letter to his mother, he wrote: “ When I have money, I go to the café, but on many, many evenings I don’t go, because a glass of punch costs forty *centesimi!*”

Not only Puccini passed the exams, but the next three years in Milano shaped him as the composer whose existence as a poor student defined the characters and the situations of all his operas, especially “La Bohème”.

In some aspects the opera contains many autobiographical elements of his days as poor student in Milano between 1880 and the premiere of “Edgar” in 1889.

Those were the ‘bohemian’ years of a young student struggling to survive while looking for success. In 1885 he also met Elvira Gemignani, the woman who left her husband for Puccini and whom he loved for the rest of his life.

## Influence of Verismo

After Verdi, a new sentimental 'realistic' melodrama of VERISMO appeared in Italy. This new style was introduced in opera by Mascagni and Leoncavallo and it later dominated the world's opera stages with such popular works as Puccini's "La Boheme", "Tosca" and "Madama Butterfly".

VERISMO had begun as a literary movement introduced in Milano in 1860 by the 'Scapigliatura Milanese' and it was to modernize Italian art, music and theatre. Many young artists labeled themselves 'Scapigliati' (the Disheveled Ones of Milano) and they all had a common goal of giving a more modern and realistic approach to the Arts.

As Puccini settled in Milano he was introduced to Cleto Arrighi, the originator of 'Scapigliatura' and to Arrigo Boito, its chief propagandist and the most passionate advocate of a 'new type of music'.

Their idea was of transforming conventional opera into a 'poema sinfonico scenico' where each act would form a movement and in which scenery, costumes, libretto and singers

would function like individual instruments within an orchestra. The libretto would then be more of a 'poem' necessary to fill in the outlines of the plot in a language worthy of the subject. As much as this theory of Boito was rather cloudy and unrealistic, it did have a certain impact on Puccini whose fresh musical imagination and melodic simple phrases of all his operas touch the heart

because they come from the heart.  
Since his first opera “Le Villi” in 1884,  
Puccini in a letter to his mother talks of a  
“good little subject... in the symphonic genre  
that appeals to me a good deal, since I think  
I can succeed”. And in fact “Le Villi” was the  
first of many operas which made the  
critics declare that they had found the  
composer for whom Italy had been waiting  
for a long time.

Puccini’s art focuses on the intimate setting  
of human emotions; all his protagonists,  
regardless of their settings, are characters  
to whom the whole world will always relate  
because they are focused essentially on  
true human experiences.

With Puccini the grandeur of Wagner and the nobility of Verdi are replaced with ordinary people living ordinary lives, having to deal with the cold realities of the world, and appreciating the little things in life. The whole opera is nothing but a world poised between poverty and beauty. "I love little things", the composer once said, "and I can and want to make the

music of little things, if they are true, passionate and human, and go to the heart."

"La Bohème" is one of his many little stories which gave the operatic world the simple, straightforward message that love is gentle and sweet even when overpowered by loss and despair. This is the fundamental truth even in "Manon Lescaut", "Tosca" and "Madama Butterfly".

The universal appeal of “La Bohème” is a result of the joys, sorrows and conflicts of real people. To this day the opera remains on the list of the most performed operas because it is a timeless parable of love and suffering with which any type of audience identifies. It deals with the transitory nature of youth, the passion of falling in love at first sight and the harsh consequences

of fragile health, all of this without ever judging the characters’ morality. The recent Broadway show “Rent”, based on Puccini’s opera, demonstrates how youth learns its own bitter lesson in its own too-brief time; proving one more time this universal appeal of “La Bohème”.

Puccini was a craftsman of language and emotion. His scores are so genuine and simple that one could use the language in his scores to teach the Italian language. He uses the most simple, basic expressions to communicate the deepest feelings and emotions.

What he called “l’evidenza della situazione” was to enable the spectator to follow the drama even without understanding the actual words. He always demanded from the librettisti to leave space for spreading his colors more lyrically, for “affectionate little phrases”, for “episodes delicate, tender, luminous, and exquisite”. He paid special

attention to 'le piccole cose', the little things in the lives of little, unimportant people, and to the 'grande dolore in piccole anime'.

Puccini's lyrics are full of words ending in 'ino', a suffix in the Italian language which gives a more intimate, gentle and genuine meaning to the word. It would be interesting to count how many times Puccini uses the word 'manina' in all his operas.

### LA BOHÈME

- Opera in four acts, based on "Scènes de la vie de bohème" by Henri Mürger
- Libretto by Luigi Illica and Giuseppe Giacosa
- Torino, Teatro Reggio, February 1, 1896
- SYNOPSIS

Tragedy and comedy in the lives and loves of impoverished artists in Paris. Rodolfo falls in love with Mimì but abandons her for her own good on realizing that she is a consumptive. She returns to die in his arms.

## Background

The word 'Bohemian' as a term was first used in the 19<sup>th</sup> century to describe the non traditional lifestyle of impoverished artists, in major European cities. These artists in the 1800's began to concentrate in the lower-rent, lower class gypsy neighborhoods.

The term also reflected a belief that Bohemia was the land where gypsies came from, although the opera refers to the lifestyle of the artists and not to the region of Bohemia in the Czech Republic.

Puccini was also familiar with the opera of Michael Balfe "The Bohemian Girl" of 1845, which was translated in Italy as "La Zingara".

Mürger's novel is the story of a group of friends who lived in the Bohemian artistic subculture of France. The four young men were the gypsies of Parisian culture: artists of more imagination than talent.

When Puccini first read Mürger's novel, he could easily understand and identify himself with the plot. These poor young artists, dreamers, who lived and loved for the moment, were nothing but the reality of Puccini's own poor student days in Milano.

So Bohemian is only a stage in a man's life, it is not a profession.

As Mürger himself wrote:

“Anyone who wants to spend his life in the arts, with no other means of support but art alone, must pass along the path of ‘le bohème’.”

- In the opera the four artists are:  
     Rodolfo, the writer  
     Marcello, the painter  
     Colline, the philosopher  
     Schaunard, the musician  
 and then there is:  
     Mimi, the ill seamstress  
     Musetta, the singer

## Discography

### **Puccini's *La Bohème***

DVD: TDK DVUS-OPBOH

Recorded at Teatro degli Arcimboldi, Milan, 2003

<b>Mimi</b>	Cristina Gallardo-Domâs
<b>Musetta</b>	Hei-Kyung Hong
<b>Rodolfo</b>	Marcelo Álvarez
<b>Marcello</b>	Roberto Servile
<b>Schaunard</b>	Natale de Carolis
<b>Colline</b>	Giovanni Battista Parodi
<b>Parpignol</b>	Alberto Fraschina
<b>Benoit</b>	Matteo Peirone
<b>Alcindoro</b>	Angelo Romero
<b>Un sergente dei doganieri</b>	Ernesto Panariello
<b>Un doganiere</b>	Tino Nava
<b>Un venditore ambulante</b>	Antonio Novello

Orchestra and Chorus of Teatro della Scala, Milan, Bruno Bartoletti, Cond.  
 Direction and Stage Design, Franco Zeffirelli

From its beginning the opera is dominated by melodic richness with arias which emerge fluidly and with great dramatic impact from the fast moving 'conversational' dialogue. This dialogue will continue until the end with recurring melodies to remind us of all the love and despair which dominates the whole opera.

- ACT I

As his friends go out, Rodolfo is left alone to finish a newspaper article, but he is not in the mood to write. While he is singing "Non sono in vena" someone knocks; it is Mimì whose candle has blown out and who shortly after drops her key. Their hands touch in the darkness and together they sing three of the most popular operatic arias ever written.

- ACT II

Mimì and Rodolfo join the other friends at the Café Momus. Here Musetta, Marcello's former lover, arrives with her rich admirer and tries to attract Marcello's attention with her frivolous waltz-song "Quando me'n vo soletta". She succeeds and the two of them reconcile.

- ACT III

Mimì is very ill, she looks for Marcello to tell him of her hard life with Rodolfo who has left her. In their duet she conveys her desperate cry for help, while he tries to comfort her.

Rodolfo, who is staying at Marcello's, confesses that the real reason for leaving Mimì is not his jealousy, but her illness and the fact that he cannot provide her with the comfort she needs.

Rodolfo and Mimi now sing of their lost love. In the aria “Donde lieta uscì” they reconcile and agree to remain together until the Spring.

Leoncavallo composed an opera “La Bohème” at the same time as Puccini and based on the same story, but it focuses more on the tempestuous relationship between Musetta and Marcello and it is almost never played.

- ACT IV

Back in the setting of the Bohemians’ attic Marcello and Rodolfo share their nostalgic memories of their loved ones and their past happiness (“O Mimi, tu più non torni”. Musetta arrives bringing with her Mimì who is very ill and exhausted.

Everyone wants to help the dying girl, and Colline will make his ultimate sacrifice when he decides to pawn his overcoat to get money for a doctor.

In the famous aria “Vecchia zimarra” he addresses the garment that has done him and others much service over the years. Because of its genuine emotion, the aria remains one of the best in opera history.

Left alone, Mimì and Rodolfo recall their past happiness. As the others return, Mimì dies and Rodolfo cries out her name.

“La Bohème” was not a success when Arturo Toscanini conducted its premiere in Torino on February 1<sup>st</sup>, 1896. The public was left indifferent and the critics were hostile.

Its second performance in Rome on February 23<sup>rd</sup> was attended by the Queen Margherita and still there was some criticism.

During its third performance in Naples on March 14<sup>th</sup> things improved a little.

Its fourth production in Palermo on April 24<sup>th</sup> was an uncontested triumph with 45 curtain calls, the opera caught on with the audience and became the universal success that it has been ever since.

Puccini's art focuses on the intimate setting of human emotions and all his protagonists, regardless of their settings, are characters who are focused, essentially on the human experience, and to whom the world will always relate.