

GIACOMO PUCCINI
The Bohemian Composer

by
Rosalba Pisaturo

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 left pregnant and with seven children to raise.

In 1880 Puccini was sent to Milano to pursue his studies at the Conservatorio. This was the finest training school in Italy for composers and singers; 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.

Giacomo Puccini embodies the 19th century ideal of the poor suffering artist.

On one hand, Puccini the man had his share of financial struggles to achieve this standing. On the other, Puccini the artist was able to cleverly manipulate human suffering with an outpouring of melodies unified by the use of musical notes which represent specific characters, emotions and situations.

In Milano around 1860 an aesthetic movement called “Scapigliatura Milanese” was to modernize Italian art, music, and theatre. Many novelists, artists, journalists, librettists, poets and composers labeled themselves Scapigliati (The Disheveled Ones from Milano) and they all had the 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 the movement’s title 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.

All of Puccini's operas are good little stories which deal with the simple, straightforward message that love is gentle and sweet, but it leads to loss and despair. This is the fundamental truth in "Manon Lescaut", "La Boheme", "Tosca", "Madama Butterfly" for theirs are all doomed loves.

The only happy love story he attempted, "Turandot", was never completed, although even in this last opera

of his he created the character of Liu', of whom we will talk about later.

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 Italian that give a more intimate, gentle, genuine meaning to the word. An interesting study would be to count how many times Puccini uses the word ‘manina’ in all his opera.

- TOSCA
Opera in three acts
Libretto by Giuseppe Giacosa and Luigi Illica
Rome, Teatro Costanzi, 1900
Based on the play “Tosca” by Victorien Sardou.
- SYNOPSIS: Floria Tosca, a prima donna, pursued by Scarpia, chief of the Roman police, unwittingly helps to destroy her lover, the painter Cavaradossi, a liberal patriot, having attempted to save his life by apparently yielding to the wishes of Scarpia who in turn kills him.

Many critics found faults in “Tosca” for its crude realism and for the cynical and melodramatic aspects of the score. But for Puccini this was that ‘new kind of opera’ which broke away from anything traditionally academic. With “Tosca” Puccini became part of that ‘young Italian school’ called Verismo and along with Mascagni, Leoncavallo, Giordano and Cilea, he displayed the virtues of a great lyric melodist.

In the whole opera the aria 'Vissi d'arte' is the only extended lyric passage of Tosca, who protests at her cruel treatment, and who passionately underlines love and music, the two great forces to which she has devoted her life. Hers is a life of a woman who has deep faith and who has never harmed a living soul, but has dedicated herself in helping unfortunate people.

The final act of "TOSCA" begins with an Orchestral portrayal of dawn over the Eternal City, we hear bells of various pitches, including the deep tolling of the 'campanone' of St. Peter's. A shepherd-boy off stage sings 'Io de' sospiri', a folksong in Roman dialect.
(Mascagni had introduced Sicilian dialect in his "Cavalleria Rusticana" as an element of 'Verismo').

It is a peaceful scene, but it serves only as contrast to the tragedy that lies ahead.

In fact it is like a prelude to the passionate aria of Cavaradossi, for which the opera is mostly known, 'E lucevan le stelle'. Now he recalls his nights of love with Tosca; a love that leads to loss and death.

"Svani' per sempre il sogno mio d'amore,
L'ora e' fuggita, e muoio disperato".

The words for this aria were written by Puccini himself, their simplicity creates the effectiveness of the situation, and just like in 'Vissi d'arte' they are perfectly matched to the characters and their situation.

- TURANDOT

Opera (unfinished) in three acts

Libretto by Renato Simoni and Giuseppe Adami

Milano, La Scala, 1926

Based on the drama "Turandot" by Carlo Gozzi

- SYNOPSIS:

Prince Calaf wins the hand of Princess Turandot by answering her three riddles; failure to solve them would have meant his death. In turn Calaf challenges her to find out his name before the

next day. Turandot tortures his father's slave Liu' who kills herself rather than be forced to reveal Calaf's secret.

"Turandot" is the quiz opera par excellence. Asking of riddles and being tested by questioning is nothing new in the Arts. Carlo Gozzi in the 1770s had become very popular in Venice by entertaining a large audience with his 'fiabe teatrali' which

dealt with characters of 'Commedia dell'Arte'. When Puccini read Gozzi's 'Turandotte', he found it to be the most normal and human of all his fables. Being the mysterious power of love the dominating force in the play, Puccini's plan in the opera was to convert the legendary icy Princess into a human sensitive being.

For Turandot to be transformed into a warm and loving being as are the other heroines of Puccini, it had to be accomplished in a final duet,- "It must be a great duet" he wrote " These two almost superhuman beings descend through love to the level of mankind, and this love must at the end take possession of the whole stage in a great orchestral peroration".

To the critics “Turandot” represents “the consummation of Puccini’s whole creative career” for the composer wanted this to be the capstone of all his work. But while he worked on “Turandot”, Puccini was a sick man and the fact that he left the opera unfinished after the death of Liu’ and that he died shortly after that, is perhaps the most enigmatic part of his life.

Puccini wrote most of the lyrics for this opera as he had done for other operas and created the role of Liu’, which did not exist in Gozzi’s play. Liu’, the young slave, plays a small part in “Turandot”, but her ‘piccola parte’ makes her one of the most accomplished and most lyrical character. In her moving aria ‘Signore ascolta’ she pleads with Calaf and tells him of her broken heart and her love for him.

In the Third Act, empowered by the strength of Love, she resists under torture in confessing his name and then kills herself as the ultimate gesture of self-sacrifice. The aria 'Quel nome!...L'amore?' is the emotional climax of the opera; here Liu embodies all the female virtues which are lacking in Turandot, while Puccini perfectly highlights the qualities of the last of the frail women he had always dealt with in his music.

After Liu's death, her body is carried away and in the aria 'Liu'...bonta' she is called 'bonta', dolcezza and poesia'. These are simple, gentle words of the heart for which no explanation is needed. Perhaps Puccini was dreaming of something lovelier than his previous operas, but "Turandot" still retains the same power of melody and the same richness in harmonic structure.

- **MADAMA BUTTERFLY**
Opera in two acts
Libretto by Luigi Illica and Giuseppe Giacosa
Milano, La Scala, 1904
Based on the play by David Belasco
- **SYNOPSIS:**
Pinkerton, an American Navy lieutenant, marries and deserts a Japanese geisha girl who has renounced her religion for his sake. He returns with his newly married American wife to reclaim his child by the geisha, who in despair commits suicide.

Although Cio-Cio-San shares some qualities with other Puccini heroines, she is really in a class by herself. She is only 15 years old and most of the work's weight rests on her shoulders. She goes from child like innocence to an adult understanding and calm acceptance of her destiny. Cio-Cio San personifies the conflict of two cultures and the contrast between ancient

traditions and modernization. “Butterfly” is the saddest of Puccini’s operas and the most sentimental. The heroine is not simply the victim of a misplaced love, she is a strong woman who can face death with the same courage as she faces her family’s rejection and the long wearing months of loneliness.

The passionate love duet in Act One, when she and Pinkerton celebrate their marriage seems to be the happiest time of the whole opera, but in reality it is shadowed by melancholy, as Cio-Cio-San fears that her happiness is so great that she may die of it.

- **GIANNI SCHICCHI**
Opera buffa in one act.
The last of the TRITTICO
Libretto by Giovacchino Forzano
New York, Metropolitan, 1918
- **SYNOPSIS:**
Gianni Schicchi, called in by Rinuccio Donati to falsify the will of a rich relative, who has left everything to the Church, impersonates the dead man before witnesses and dictates a new will leaving the most valuable part of the estate to himself – but as a dowry for his daughter. Rinuccio's betrothed.

Gianni Schicchi is constructed as a series of quickfire scenes, in which situation rather than character is the mainspring of the action. The only real character is Gianni Schicchi himself who gives us, with his funny monologues, some fine examples of the 'opera buffa' tradition. The scene where he dictates the will of Buoso Donati is hilarious.

However, his contribution is mainly theatrical. The highlight of the opera is Lauretta's famous aria "O! mio babbino caro" when she pleases with her father for his approval.

- LA BOHEME

Opera in four acts

Libretto by Illica and Giacosa

Torino, Teatro Regio, 1896

- SYNOPSIS

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

Based on Henri Mürger's "Scènes de la vie bohème", the title explains itself: Bohemia was traditionally the land of gypsies (Balfe's opera "The Bohemian girl" of 1845 had been translated in Italy as "La zingara") and the four young men in Mürger short stories are the gypsies of Parisian culture: artists of more imagination than talent.

These dreamers who lived and loved for the moment Puccini could identify with from his own poor student days in Milano.
In the opera they are Marcello, the painter; Rodolfo, the writer; Schaunard, the musician; Colline, the philosopher.
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 continues until the end with recurring melodies which remind us of all the love and despair which dominates the whole opera.

'Che gelida manina' remains one of the most popular operatic arias ever written.

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.