La Bohème

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La Bohème

Study Guide

2012 / 2013
Dear Friends,

Welcome to our exciting 2012-2013 season! Florida Grand Opera is pleased to present the magical world of opera to the diverse audience of South Florida. We begin our season with a classic Italian production of Giacomo Puccini’s *La bohème*. We continue with a supernatural singspiel, Mozart’s *The Magic Flute* and Vincenzo Bellini’s famous opera *La sonambula*, with music from the bel canto tradition. The main stage season is completed with a timeless opera with Giuseppe Verdi’s *La traviata*. As our 72nd season finale, we have added an extra opera to our schedule in our continuing efforts to be able to reach out to a newer and broader range of people in the community; a tango opera *María de Buenos Aires* by Astor Piazzolla. As a part of Florida Grand Opera’s Education Program and Student Dress Rehearsals, these informative and comprehensive study guides can help students better understand the opera through context and plot. Each of these study guides are filled with historical backgrounds, storyline structures, a synopsis of the opera as well as a general history of Florida Grand Opera. Through this information, students can assess the plotline of each opera as well as gain an understanding of the why the librettos were written in their fashion.

Florida Grand Opera believes that education for the arts is a vital enrichment that makes students well-rounded and helps make their lives more culturally fulfilling. On behalf of the Florida Grand Opera, we hope that these study guides will help students delve further into the opera. We hope you enjoy the show!

I look forward to seeing you at the Opera!

Kevin G. Mynatt
Managing Director
Florida Grand Opera

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A message from Kevin Mynatt
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Opera combines colorful sets and costumes, dynamic staging, passionate stories, and poetic words with beautiful music. Richard Wagner referred to it as Gesamtkunstwerk, or a “total art work.” You might watch dancing, sword fighting, characters dressing in disguises, the tenor wooing the soprano, or unfurling schemes against another character. Operas can be romantic, comedic, tragic, dramatic, or all of the above. Primarily, opera is entertaining!

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OPERA ETIQUETTE:
_ Attending an opera is an exciting occasion! You should dress comfortably, but presentably. Many audience members use an opera as an opportunity to dress in formal attire.

_ Arrive early. Audience members who arrive after the start of the performance are prevented from entering until there is a change of scene.

_ It is customary to show your appreciation at various times in the performance with applause. The audience will applaud at the beginning of each act as the conductor enters the orchestra pit, at the ends of particularly well-sung arias or choruses, at the close of each scene or act, and during the final curtain call as the performers bow.

_ If you want to show your admiration even more, you can call out “Bravo!” for a male singer, “Brava!” for a female singer, or “Bravi!” for an ensemble. If you enjoyed the entire production, stand and clap during the curtain call to join in a standing ovation.

_ Audience members are expected to turn off all cell phones and refrain from using cameras with or without flash during the performance.

_ While concessions are sold in the lobby before the performance and during intermissions, no food or drink is allowed inside of the theatre.

_ Be respectful of the musicians and your fellow audience members and do not talk during the performance.

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Florida Grand Opera stands as one of the oldest performing arts organizations in Florida. It was formed in June 1994 by the merger of Greater Miami Opera, founded in 1941, and The Opera Guild Inc. of Fort Lauderdale, founded in 1945. Florida Grand Opera is one of the resident companies of The Adrienne Arsht Center for the Performing Arts of Miami-Dade County where it presents its Miami performances in the Sanford and Dolores Ziff Ballet Opera House. Fort Lauderdale performances are given at the Broward Center for the Performing Arts.

The Greater Miami Opera was founded by Dr. Arturo di Filippi, a voice teacher at the University of Miami. The first production, held at Miami Senior High School in 1942, was a single performance of Leoncavallo’s Pagliacci, performed in English, with Dr. di Filippi singing the role of Canio. In 1945, Dr. di Filippi appeared in a production of Il trovatore at Ft. Lauderdale Central High School, representing the first production of the The Opera Guild, Inc. Florida Grand Opera has a rich history of presenting internationally acclaimed artists such as Robert Merrill, Dorothy Kirsten, Richard Tucker, Renata Tebaldi, Roberta Peters, Franco Corelli, Renata
Scotto, Montserrat Caballe, Jon Vickers, Sherrill Milnes, Nicolai Gedda, Birgit Nilsson, Anna Moffo, Plácido Domingo, Beverly Sills, Joan Sutherland, Evelyn Lear, James Morris, Thomas Stewart, Diana Soviero, Justino Díaz, Simon Estes, Elizabeth Futral, Helen Donath, Deborah Voigt, and Fernando de la Mora. Luciano Pavarotti made his American debut in 1965 with the company’s production of Lucia di Lammermoor.

In April, 2007, Florida Grand Opera presented the critically acclaimed world premiere of David Carlson’s Anna Karenina with libretto by Colin Graham. Anna Karenina was commissioned as a co-production by Florida Grand Opera, Michigan Opera Theatre, and Opera Theatre of Saint Louis. In May 1997, the Company presented the world premiere of Balseros, an opera by Robert Ashley with libretto by world renowned Cuban writer María Irene Fornés. Balseros was commissioned as a co-production by Florida Grand Opera, Miami-Dade Community College and the South Florida Composers Alliance. Another world premiere was Robert Ward’s Minutes Till Midnight in 1982. American premieres include Gioachino Rossini’s Bianca e Falliero and the final revised version of Alberto Franchetti’s Cristoforo Colombo.

At the core of Florida Grand Opera’s mission is a commitment to training emerging opera professionals and educating young people about opera while embracing the diverse cultural heritage of the South Florida community. Each year, established education programs, including the School Dress Rehearsal Program and the company’s education festivals expose thousands of children and students to opera’s many facets. Florida Grand Opera’s renowned artist training program, the Young Artist Studio, nurtures gifted young singers and provides them with the skills and experiences necessary to move beyond their training at universities and music conservatories into successful careers in the professional opera world.
Where did opera come from? What prompted composers to create it? Poets, musicians, architects, artists, philosophers, mathematicians, and many other thinkers had become obsessed with a recreation of the Greek culture during the Italian Renaissance. In the 1500’s, a certain group of composers from the Camerata Fiorentina, or Florentine Academy, began to focus on the reproduction of Greek Drama. The Camerata believed that several factors were extremely important in recreating these dramas: the sung text must be understood, the music should reflect the cadences of speech rather than dance, and most importantly, the music should explore and enhance the emotions being expressed. The Camerata developed Western music’s earliest operas, the most well-known being Monteverdi’s L’Orfeo. Following L’Orfeo’s success, the art form spread rapidly amongst composers, artists, and poets. The Baroque form consisted of sung recitatives by soloists which would move the plot or story line, arias in which the soloist would explore an emotion, and choruses where the rest of the characters commented on the action. Composers began to create duets, trios, and other ensemble numbers with multiple soloists, allowing for more character interaction and more dynamic plot lines. As the Classical period began, the chorus of an opera became more integral to the story, rather than merely providing commentary. Arias began to express multiple emotions and more complex ideas and main characters took on more human attributes. All of these developments are present in the works of Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart.
Until the late 1700’s, operas fit into very specific classifications: opera seria, the noble and “serious” genre, and opera buffa, the comic and low brow genre. Mozart revolutionized opera as he began to blend these genres in his later works. In The Marriage of Figaro, buffo, or comic, servant characters like Figaro were portrayed alongside seria noblemen like Count Almaviva. Furthermore, the buffo characters often displayed more admirable qualities than the nobles. Mozart’s Don Giovanni is classified as a dramma giocoso, or comic drama. It features lighthearted moments and comic scenes such as Giovanni’s servant displaying the catalogue of his master’s conquests to a jilted lover, but ends quite dramatically with the womanizer being dragged to Hell for his terrible debauchery.

Giuseppe Verdi composed operas during the Romantic period as harmonic language became more varied and effective. Due to the concurrent developments in literary style, plots explored a greater depth of emotion and action, and provided commentary on current events with more frequency. As more regions chaffed under the oppressive rule of foreign empires, composers sought to express nationalistic themes with their art. Verdi endured many struggles with government and church censors over his operas, because of their political overtones or, in Rigoletto’s case, portrayal of an abusive and degenerate nobleman.

As opera developed even further, national styles diversified and developed their own canons. Verdi, Mozart, and Rossini, among others, are considered by scholars to be members of the Italian School of operatic composition. Italian School composers created highly melodic music which displays the singers to the best of their abilities. The orchestra accompaniment is usually secondary to the vocal line, and as such, these operas are termed “Singer’s Opera.” Conversely, the German School of Opera, which crystallized itself through the works of Carl Maria von Weber, Beethoven, and Wagner, emphasizes the power of the music as a whole instead of displays by the vocalist. Weber’s opera Der Freischütz (The Marksman) is considered the first important German Romantic opera, and is particularly well known for its unearthly Wolf’s Glen scene. Weber’s opera Euryanthe followed Der Freischütz and was through-composed, blurring the distinctions between recitative and aria. This melding of recitative and aria was enhanced and expanded by Richard Wagner, who wrote in flowing and endless melodies. Wagner’s operas like Tristan und Isolde, Parsifal, and The Ring Cycle best exemplify the German focus on the effectiveness of the orchestra, vocalists, and poetry as a total production to create the drama. The French School, founded by Lully and developed by composers such as Meyerbeer, Bizet, Gounod, and Massenet, is a balancing point between the Italian and German ideologies. Instrumental support for the vocal line was more complex and rich, while the vocal line was less florid. The voice was always well displayed while still doing its part to evoke and progress the dramatic plot.
In response to this demand, composers began creating works that incorporated domestic characters in funny situations. The music was lighthearted and characters relatable, leaving audiences happy and upbeat by the end of the performance. Some of the most well known opera buffa are *The Marriage of Figaro* by Mozart and *The Barber of Seville* by Rossini. In the late 19th century, British and American composers sought to create new comedic works that mixed many genres of music, dance, and drama. These composers drew musical ideas from the opera buffa idiom, but also included dance numbers and parody elements that were typical of burlesque shows. “Musical comedies” such as Cohan’s *Little Johnny Jones* (1904) and Kern’s *Nobody Home* (1915) typified this genre. As in opera buffa, ordinary, average characters were emphasized and
brought to life. The plots were simple and easy to understand. Unlike opera, however, dancing and acting played a major role in these productions in order to bring the variety show to life.

In 1927, Oscar Hammerstein II and Jerome Kern delivered a musical dealing with prejudice, and tragic, undying love: *Showboat*. This musical was revolutionary for a number of reasons. *Showboat* was clearly distinguishable from the “musical comedy” (like opera buffa) and established itself as a “musical play” (like opera seria). All of the elements were subservient to the play; the story was cohesive and the integrated songs that contributed to the action by establishing moods, unveiling characters, or advancing the plot. *Showboat* dealt with heavy emotions and was like nothing that had come before it. It paved the way for musicals by allowing them to deal with new subject matter. A few years later, *Strike Up the Band* (1930) included social commentary on war, capitalism, and North American politics. Since the 70’s, composers have taken the modern musical in many different directions. Because the music from a “musical” is no longer popular music, composers have often brought “pop” music back to the stage. Andrew Lloyd Weber has done so numerous times in *Jesus Christ Superstar* (1971), *Cats* (1982), and *Phantom of the Opera* (1986) by incorporating rock beats and electric instruments in the orchestra.

Some composers, such as Jonathan Larson, have even created entire musicals (Rent (1994) using rock band instrumentation. There is no longer “typical” sound for a musical, as the repertory is as diverse as the composers who have created it. New musicals explore all facets of the human experience, social injustice, and worldly problems, as well as science fiction and fantasy. Though there is dancing, over the top acting, and rock and roll music in our modern musical, the themes of love, loss, and longing are not unlike its operatic ancestor.

Many call the Broadway musical “American Opera.” The musical, though primarily drawing from operatic arts, was created through a conglomeration of many different elements, much like our American culture. Opera made use of drama, music, costumes, and art to tell timeless stories that resound deep within our souls, as many musicals aim to do today. Many parallels can also be drawn between subject matter of opera buffa and the musical comedy, as well as opera seria and the musical play. Songs are used to create drama, move the story forward, and hopefully teach us something about our own lives. The orchestra is used in both art forms to support the singers and add depth to their words. And though the acting and dancing used to be quite different between and an opera and a musical, current trends on Broadway and in opera houses are showing that they are learning from each other’s successes. And though they are learning and growing from each other today, we must not forget the musical’s roots. Without opera, the modern musical would never have come to be.
The operatic Voice

Professional singer
Opera singers are classified in two different ways. First, they are identified as soprano, mezzo-soprano, tenor, etc., based upon their singing range. Secondly, they are categorized based on characteristics of their sound. Type of voice is often referred to with the German word Fach (plural Fächer), which means “subject” or “speciality.” A singer’s fach determines what roles they are most likely to perform.

Women’s voices are grouped (from high to low) into soprano and mezzo-soprano ranges. Men’s voices are grouped into tenor, baritone, and bass by range. Common additional descriptive words include coloratura, lyric, and dramatic.

**Soprano Fächer**

**Soubrette Soprano:**
This soprano has a voice with the lightest weight and enough agility to handle coloratura passages (vocal runs of many fast notes). She will not typically sing above a high C. A soubrette is also referred to in German as a “Character Soprano.” Her roles are frequently the maid or comic relief of the opera.

**Coloratura Soprano:**
A coloratura soprano is marked with great agility and a much higher range than a soubrette. Depending on the weight of her voice, the soprano may be additionally described as a lyric coloratura with medium weight and depth, or a dramatic coloratura with the fullest sound and a brassy, ringing quality.

**Lyric Soprano:**
Lyric sopranos are typified by an ability to sing legato (in a smooth and connected line) with a pure and beautiful sound. Many of a lyric soprano’s roles are the love interests of their opera, so a soprano of this voice type must encompass the innocence and vulnerability written into their music. Lyric sopranos may also grow into a classification known as spinto, which in Italian means “pushed.” This sound is larger than a standard lyric soprano and can cut across a larger orchestra.

**Dramatic Soprano:**
A dramatic soprano has a full and rich sound with power that can carry across the largest opera orchestras. Their tone is often darker than other sopranos. Dramatic sopranos are also marked with great stamina and endurance.
Mezzo-Soprano Fächer

Coloratura, Lyric, and dramatic mezzo-sopranos have similar vocal characteristics to their soprano counterparts, but spend more of their time singing in a lower tessitura or range of their voice. Mezzo-soprano voices are typically more mellow and rich in their sound than soprano voices.

Contralto:
The contralto fach features a significantly lower range and a very dark, rich tone. A contralto is one of the rarer female voice types due to its range.

Tenor Fächer

Comic Tenor:
The comic tenor sings roles that require acting rather than exquisitely beautiful singing. His arias may be written in a patter or speech-like style and do not feature the demands of a full lyric melody.

Lyric Tenor:
Similar to the other lyric voices, a lyric tenor must sing with beauty and command both flexibility of coloratura passages and musical phrasing of a legato line.

Heldentenor:
Meaning “heroic tenor” in German, a Heldentenor features a richer and more robust sound than the lyric tenor. In his middle range, a heldentenor may sound very similar to a baritone in color and weight.

Baritone Fächer

Lyric baritones and dramatic bass-baritones feature the same characteristics of lyric and dramatic voices. A lyric baritone has a sweeter, mellower sound, while a dramatic bass-baritone has more comfort and strength in his lower range as well as enough power to sing over a large orchestra.

Cavalier Baritone:
The cavalier baritone has a brassy quality to his voice and is capable of singing both lyric and dramatic passages. This voice is very similar to the Verdi Baritone, discussed more in-depth in the next section, but the Verdi Baritone usually sings a much higher tessitura than the cavalier baritone.

Bass Fächer

Basses are also classified as lyric or dramatic, as well as comic, based upon weight and beauty of the voice. This bass voice is marked by an extreme low range. The basso profundo (Italian for “Profound” or “Low Bass”) has an enormously resonant and full-bodied sound.
An opera performed in four acts by Giacomo Puccini (1858-1924) premiered in Turin, Teatro Regio, February 1, 1896 and conducted by the Arturo Toscanini. The libretto is by Luigi Illica and Giuseppe Giacosa based on Scènes de la vie de bohème by Henri Murger.
La bohème is the most often performed of all of Giacomo Puccini’s works, yet it is the least understood. When most people think of Puccini’s La bohème, they remember Puccini’s wonderful melodies combined with Italian melodrama and complete with the tuberculosis plagued heroine coughing to her inevitable end. Even for a 19th century audience, the atmosphere could become excessively sentimental. He tried to counteract this. Two often overlooked but crucial elements of Puccini’s La bohème are social commentary and comedy. The stereotyped public image of the opera as a sentimental melodrama undertones the real meaning of the performance.

La bohème has a different feel than many operas; it contains people who are poverty-stricken. In the first act the men are cold and famished and can’t afford the costs of food and fuel. But why are these people destitute? Are they just lazy, or is there another reason that Puccini wanted to dis play? Mimi is a seamstress, a working girl. In 19th century Europe, most seamstresses simply did not earn enough to keep themselves above the poverty level. Although they were not starving, they often lived in deplorable conditions. On the other hand, the men portrayed in the opera are struggling young artists and are according to the Marxism class theory, not really workers. Most of the characters chose the Bohemian artist lifestyle, which gave them a voluntary lifestyle of poverty.

The structure of La bohème uses opposite pairing and parallelisms to make the viewers think about the disparity of situation while being entertained. The work is not only episodic in form, but it rather uses: comedy v. tragedy, Rodolfo v. Marcello, Mimi v. Musetta, the tranquil love of Mimi and Rodolfo v. the stormy relationship of Musetta and Marcello. The second act remains the most comic of the four acts of the opera, presenting the happiness of working people and artists on Christmas Eve. Most of the comedy in this act is ignited by Musetta. The composer uses skipping staccato music to characterize her as an attractive flirt. Most of the fun occurs at Alcindoro’s expense, as he is presented with the group’s café bills at the end of the act. Even in the more melancholy acts of the performance, comedy is added in. The structure of La bohème uses opposite pairing and parallelisms to make the viewers think about the disparity of situation while being entertained.

The work is not only episodic in form, but it also makes comparisons of these forms: comedy v. tragedy, Rodolfo v. Marcello, Mimi v. Musetta, the tranquil love of Mimi and Rodolfo v. the stormy relationship of Musetta and Marcello. These contrasts give the work a solid dramatic form rather than an episodic one. Puccini’s attempts here at dramatic realism never become naturalism. Mimi’s death is not horrible but quiet and dignified. There are no murders. Marcello’s jealous love for Musetta could easily have become ugly and violent as it does in the original story, but in the opera, it remains essentially comic. As contrasting pairs for its form a result of this original operatic and theatrical style, Puccini achieves something new in La bohème.
Cast & Characters

Ailyn Pérez
soprano
A young seamstress in Paris who makes silk flowers.

Arturo Chacón-Cruz
tenor
A destitute poet who shares a small apartment with three other roommates.

Mark Walters
baritone
A poor and unsuccessful painter. He lives with Rodolfo in the Latin Quarter of Paris.

Brittany Ann Reneé
soprano
A singer and Marcello’s girlfriend.

Schaurard
baritone
A musician sharing the attic with Rodolfo and Marcello.

Benoit
bass
The landlord of the four roommates.

Parpignol
tenor
A toy vendor.

Colline
bass
An philosopher and the last roommate.

Alcindoro
bass
A rich bourgeoise and state councilor.
In their small Latin Quarter garret, the poor artist Marcello and poet Rodolfo try to keep warm on Christmas Eve by feeding the stove with pages from Rodolfo’s latest drama. They are soon joined by their roommates—Colline, a philosopher and Schaunard, a musician, who brings food, fuel and funds he has collected from an eccentric student. While they celebrate their unexpected fortune, the landlord, Benoit, comes to collect the rent. Plying the older man with wine, they urge him to tell of his flirtations, and then throw him out in mock indignation at his infidelity to his wife. As his friends depart to celebrate at the Café Momus, Rodolfo promises to join them later, remaining behind to try to write. There is another knock at the door. The visitor is a pretty neighbor, Mimì, whose candle has gone out on the drafty stairway.

No sooner does she enter than the girl feels faint; after reviving her with a sip of wine, Rodolfo helps her to the door and relights her candle. Mimì realizes she lost her key when she fainted, and as the two search for it, both candles are blown out. In the darkness, Rodolfo finds the key and slips it into his pocket. In the moonlight the poet takes the girl’s shivering hand, telling her his dreams (“Che gelida manina”). She then recounts her life alone in a lofty garret, embroidering flowers and waiting for the spring (“Mi chiamano Mimì”). Rodolfo’s friends are heard outside, urging him to join them. He calls back that he is not alone and will be along shortly. Expressing their joy in finding each other (Duet: “O soave fanciulla”), Mimì and Rodolfo embrace and slowly leave, arm in arm, for the café.
Act 2

Amid the shouts of street hawkers, Rodolfo buys Mimì a bonnet near the Café Momus and then introduces her to his friends. They all sit down and order supper. The toy vendor Parpignol passes by besieged by eager children. Marcello’s former sweetheart, Musetta, makes a noisy entrance on the arm of the elderly but wealthy Alcindoro. The ensuing tumult reaches its peak when, trying to regain Marcello’s attention, she sings a waltz about her popularity (“Quando me’n vo”). She complains that her shoe pinches, sending Alcindoro off to fetch a new pair. The moment he is gone, she falls into Marcello’s arms and tells the waiter to charge everything to Alcindoro. Soldiers march by the café, and as the bohemians fall in behind, Alcindoro rushes back with Musetta’s shoes.
At dawn on the snowy outskirts of Paris, a customs official admits farmwomen to the city. Merrymakers are heard within a tavern. Soon Mimi wanders in, searching for the place where Marcello and Musetta now live. When the painter emerges, she tells him of her distress over Rodolfo’s incessant jealousy (Duet: “O buon Marcello, aiuto!”). She says she believes it is best that they part. Rodolfo, who has been asleep in the tavern, wakes and comes outside. Mimi hides nearby, though Marcello thinks she has gone. The poet first tells Marcello that he wants to separate from his sweetheart, citing her fickleness.
He is further pressed for the real reason, and he breaks down, saying that her coughing can only grow worse in the poverty they share. Overcome with tears, Mimì stumbles forward to bid her lover farewell (“Donde lieta uscì”) as Marcello runs back into the tavern upon hearing Musetta’s laughter. While Mimì and Rodolfo recall past happiness, Musetta dashes out of the inn, quarreling with Marcello, who has caught her flirting (Quartet: “Addio dolce svegliare”). The painter and his mistress part, hurling insults at each other, but Mimì and Rodolfo decide to remain together until spring.

Act 4 Now separated from their girlfriends, Rodolfo and Marcello lament their loneliness in the garret (Duet: “O Mimì, tu più non torni”). Colline and Schaunard bring a meager meal. To lighten their spirits the four stages a dance, and this turns into a mock duel. At the height of the hilarity Musetta bursts in to tell them that Mimì is outside, too weak to come upstairs. As Rodolfo runs to her aid, Musetta relates how Mimì begged to be taken to her lover to die. The poor girl is made as comfortable as possible, while Musetta asks Marcello to sell her earrings for medicine and Colline goes off to pawn his overcoat, which for so long has kept him warm (“Vecchia zimarra”). Left alone, Mimì and Rodolfo wistfully recall their meeting and their first happy days, but she is seized with violent coughing. When the others return, Musetta gives Mimi a muff to warm her hands and prays for her life. As she peacefully drifts into unconsciousness, Rodolfo closes the curtain to soften the light. Schaunard discovers that Mimì is dead, and when Rodolfo at last realizes it, he throws himself despairingly on her body, repeatedly calling her name.
The Composer

Giacome Puccini

(1858-1924)
Giacomo Puccini was born in 1858 in Lucca, where his father (a pupil of Donizetti) was the fourth generation of Puccinis to have served the republic and the church as composers. Giacomo was five when his father died and studied with local teachers with a view of taking on family responsibilities. However, when he was 17, he saw Verdi’s Aida and was inspired to be an opera composer instead. He went to the Milan Conservatory. In 1884, he finished his studies and wrote his first opera, on a tale of supernatural enchantment. It had some success when given in Milan in 1884, and on the strength of it the publisher Giulio Ricordi initiated an association with him that was to continue throughout Puccini’s life.

During the age of Debussy in France, Mahler in Austria and Elgar in England (an incredible time in music history) was the age of Puccini in Italy, whose operas dominated the stage from the first production of his Manon Lescaut in 1893 to his death 30 years later.

Life in the big city never agreed with Puccini, but it greatly influenced his work. His bohemian existence as a poor student later found expression in La bohème. Puccini was loosely associated with the verismo movement, which strove to create more natural and believable opera theater, and did not hesitate to write period pieces or to exploit exotic locales. In Tosca he wrote an intense melodrama set in Rome during Napoleonic times.

For Madama Butterfly he chose an American story set in Japan. Having enjoyed a well round of praise up to that point in his career, Puccini was completely unprepared for the total failure of Madama Butterfly when it was first presented in 1904. But he had faith in the work and revised it until it was accepted. The complications with Butterfly undermined his confidence and temporarily prevented him from moving on to new projects. But later, during a visit to New York he agreed to write La Fanciulla del West, based on David Belasco’s popular play The Girl of the Golden West. At this point, Puccini had developed a distinctive heroine – “little women” who suffer and die for their true, limitless love. Though reluctant to embrace “modernisms,” Puccini had a remarkable sense of theater- a sense that is manifested in his command of color, motif and harmony.
World War I caused the next major break in Puccini’s creative life. Hostilities complicated his negotiations to write an operetta for Vienna, which was now in enemy territory. The operetta became instead a commedia lirica, *La Rondine*, eventually produced at Monte Carlo and welcomed coolly at the Met as “the afternoon of a genius.” Puccini never regained his youthful eminence and romantic spontaneity, but he continued to work seriously, broadening his horizons.

A chain-smoker, Puccini developed throat cancer and was taken to Brussels in 1924 for treatment by a specialist. Though the surgery was successful, Puccini’s heart failed, and he died shortly afterward. At the time of his death, he had nearly finished working on the most ambitious of his operas, *Turandot*, based on Schiller’s romantic adaptation of a fantasy by Carlo Gozzi, the 18th century Venetian satirist. In *Turandot* for the first time Puccini wrote extensively for the chorus, and provided an enlarged, enriched orchestral tapestry that showed an awareness of Stravinsky’s *Petrouchka* and other contemporary scores.
Librettists

Illica & Giacosa

(1857-1919) (1847-1906)
Luigi Illica had a rough beginning. At an early age, he ran away to sea and in 1876 he found himself fighting the Turks. However, three years later, he moved to the relatively peaceful enclave of Milan Italy and there began his literary career. In 1882 he produced a collection of prose sketches, including *Farfalle* and *effetti di luce*. The following year, he wrote his first play, *I Narbonnier-Latour*. His greatest success in this field of playwriting was a comedy in Milanese dialect, *L’eredità di Félic* (1891).

He began writing librettos in 1889. While his work on three of Puccini’s operas is recognized as his chief contribution to the field, he also wrote librettos for several other composers, including those for Umberto Giordano’s *Andrea Chenier* (1896—the same year as La bohème) and two operas of Pietro Mascagni.

Giuseppe Giacosa began his professional life as a lawyer. He graduated in law from Turin University and immediately joined his father’s firm in Milan. When his one-act verse comedy, *Una partita a scacchi*, became a popular success, he permanently moved into the literary world. From 1888-1894 Giacosa held the chair of literature and dramatic art at the Milan Conservatory.

The Puccini-Illica-Giacosa partnership was organized by the publisher Giulio Ricordi in 1893. As the head of the most powerful publishing firm in Italy during the 19th century, Ricordi had the ability to make or break any young composer who came along, the same way that a CEO of a major record label can do today.

Having taken Puccini under his wing, Ricordi was intent on hiring the best writers to work with the young composer on his La bohème -- he found them in Illica and Giacosa. The three had a very clear division of responsibilities when working together. It was Illica’s job to plan the scenario (the opera’s plan, and division into acts and scenes) and to draft the dialogue. Giacosa transformed the prose into polished verse and Puccini set this verse to music. This collaboration was such a success that the three worked together (dividing the responsibilities in the same way) on two other operas: *Tosca* (1900) and *Madama Butterfly* (1904). The collaboration ended with the death of Giacosa in 1906. Puccini continued to discuss the idea of translating the story of Marie Antoinette into an operatic setting with Illica, but this project never came to fruition. For his final operas, Puccini turned to other librettists.
The Dispute with Ruggero Leoncavallo


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After the premiere of Manon Lescaut, Giacomo Puccini and Luigi Illica left Turin for Milan. Around February of 1893, Puccini asked Illica to write a scenario based on Henri Murger and the Bohemians. The original story had been published in installments in a French periodical, under the title *Scenes de Bohème*. Seeing how popular it was, Murger collaborated with Theodore Barriere to write a play called *La Vie de Bohème*. Then he used his characters again in a novel, *Scènes de la vie de Bohème*. Illica may have read an Italian translation of it, but he may also have known the play. By mid-March, he had a well-tailored scenario ready. No announcement was made at the time because composers, librettists, and publishers traditionally tried to prevent their rivals from learning their plans. Soon, Puccini’s project erupted in a full-blown opera-business scandal over the rights to *La bohème*.

Soon, Puccini’s project erupted in a full-blown opera-business scandal over the rights to *La bohème*.

It began with an angry and well-publicized exchange between him and Ruggero Leoncavallo. Once Puccini’s close friend and collaborator, Leoncavallo had become famous with *Pagliacci*, which had had its premier in 1892 at the Teatro Dal Verme in Milan. Widely traveled and sophisticated, Leoncavallo, had become a serious rival of Puccini. In March, during a chance encounter in the Galleria, Puccini and Leoncavallo went into a café to discuss their work.

When Puccini said he was writing *La bohème*, a stunned Leoncavallo responded by saying that he too was composing *La bohème*, and that he was using his own libretto, the very one he had offered to Puccini some time before. Leoncavallo claimed that in that occasion, Puccini had shown no interest in the subject. An angry exchange followed, with each claiming the legal right to the story. Thinking about that conversation, Leoncavallo decided to turn to the press. News of his new *bohème*, “taken from the novel of the same name by Murger,” was published in the issue of March 20-21, 1893 of “Il Secolo”, the newspaper owned by Casa Sonzogno. The notice, really a shot across Ricordi’s bow, stated that he had been working on his opera for several months. On March 21, 1893, a similar announcement about Puccini’s Bohème appeared in “Corriere della Sera.”

In the “Il Secolo” of March 22-23, 1893, another announcement described the contract Leoncavallo had to compose the new opera. And it went further. “Maestro Puccini, to whom Leoncavallo spoke two days ago, telling him that he was composing *La bohème*, confessed that he got the idea of writing *La bohème* just a few days after he returned from Turin, and that he had spoken about it to Illica and Giacosa, who, according to him, had not yet finished the libretto.
For that reason, it is confirmed beyond dispute that Maestro Leoncavallo has the priority in this opera.” Puccini shot back in the *Corriere della Sera*, saying that Leoncavallo’s statement established his own good faith beyond all doubt, for it was certain that if Maestro Leoncavallo, “to whom I have been bound for many years by intense feelings of friendship, had told me earlier what he told me unexpectedly the other evening, the I would not have thought of composing *La bohème*. Now, for reasons that are easily understood, I do not have the time to be as courteous as I might wish to be toward him as friend and musician. Anyway, what does this matter to Maestro Leoncavallo? Let him compose, I will compose. The audience will decide...I only want to let it be known that I have been working seriously on my idea for about two months, that is, since the premiere of *Manon Lescaut* in Turin, and I have made no secret of that to anyone.”

Quite a different story was told by Ferruccio Pagni and Guido Marotti. With Puccini, in intimate, they said Leoncavallo had indeed offered Puccini his libretto of *La Vita di Bohème*, about a year before the controversy arose, but Puccini had turned it down without even looking at it.

At the time their account ran, Puccini said he had other projects in mind, and in any case he was not familiar with Murger’s work, which Leoncavallo had used as a source. Nearly a year later, after reading the novel, he had decided to commission a scenario from Illica. From surviving correspondence, it was clear that Illica had been working on Puccini’s project for some time, and that he had produced something good enough to be shown to the demanding Giacosa. This casts suspicion on Puccini’s story, for it would have been almost impossible for Illica to have read the Murger story, digested it and finished an acceptable sketch of such a complex work in just six weeks.

On March 22, 1893, just when news of the dispute reached the newspapers, Giacosa congratulated Illica on having created a theatrically valid scenario, although he felt the novel could never become an opera. By then Puccini, convinced of the opera’s potential, asked Ricordi to ask about acquiring the rights to Murger’s work, a sure sign that he had not taken this step before. Had he secured the rights, he could have prevented Leoncavallo from writing his *bohème*. But when Ricordi learned that Murger’s novel was in the public domain, both men were free to use it and two versions of the same opera were launched.
The Rise of Bohemia

Map of Bohemia from the explorer Burgess 1896
To 19th century civilians, “Bohemia” was a real country with real inhabitants, but not marked on any map. They traced its frontiers with a mixture of reality and fantasy. Those who were bohemians chose a life of poverty, and were sometimes vagabonds, as well. We inherit their problem of just where to locate Bohemia, and how to count its residents. To be able to say how many Rodolfoes and Mimis were shivering and starving in their garrets in that period was hard to determine. In this way, as in others, Bohemia resists respectability. It cannot be mapped and graphed and counted because it was never wholly an objective condition. Bohemia had outward signs of membership: clothing, occupation, gait, rhythm of life. But it had to be entered through the mind, through some consciousness of belonging. Whether a certain form of dress or rhythm of life was bohemian or not depended – and still does – on how it was meant or taken. Bohemian gestures were often symbolic actions.

Our map must place Bohemia at the intersection of literary life and cultural symbolism. To enter it might have real and unforeseen consequences sometimes-even tragic ones- but to go in was always to make a gesture and a statement -about self identity, about society.

Since “Bohemia” was half-life and half-symbol, to invent the name was not far from discovering the thing. The term “bohemianism” started to emerge in the 1830 and 1840’s in France to describe the artists and creators who began to concentrate in the lower-rent, lower class gypsy neighborhoods. By 1850, the word was shedding its literal translation with gypsies and its first extended ties with a shady underworld of beggars and conmen to take on the definition best enshrined for most of us in Puccini’s opera.

Almost from the start “Bohemia” has expanded outward from its French homeland to colonize other countries. It found its classic American expression in Greenwich Village during the years before and after World War I, later reappearing as the “Best Generation” and “Hippiedom.” These “Bohemiass,” like their original archetypes, have nurtured themselves on the merger of art and life, mixing rebellion with ambition, simultaneously sponsoring real artistic vocations and appropriating the artist’s image to dramatize ambivalence toward the beckoning destinies of ordinary social life.

“Bohemia” has also changed its relationship to society in our century. Its form of membership – hair, dress, irregular work patterns, drugs, unconventional sexual behavior – have broken free of the marginal spaces that once confined them.
They are increasingly becoming accepted as features of our ordinary life. Perhaps the need for Bohemia is receding now, even as the free spaces within which it originally developed grow rare and less accessible. We may have to imagine a future without bohemians. If so, we will miss their vitality and inventiveness. And we will need some new mirrors in which to explore the conditions – and the limitations – of our liberation.
The life of Giacomo Puccini (1858 - 1924) spans a period frequently known as the age of verismo, or realism. Opera, however, is an art form that had its roots first in myth or religious mystery, and traditionally boasts superhuman heroes, grand affluence and emotional excess. Verismo is an operatic style that arose in the 1890s in Italy which emphasized literary naturalism, contemporary settings, lower-class subjects and violent passions and actions.

The term realism primarily refers to the artistic and literary movements in which artists and writers focused on common everyday subject matter and treated it in a “realistic” or “true to life” manner. The term realism primarily refers to the artistic and literary movements in which artists and writers focused on common everyday subject matter and treated it in a “realistic” or “true to life” manner.

La bohème, a realistic opera, depicts bohemians who practice arts that are either fanciful or fraudulent—they are rich only in feelings. La bohème is about those who cannot afford to live operatically. How did this realism become imposed on opera? Realism was not only a movement in the arts— it was also a philosophical attitude and a response to the unprecedented scientific and social changes of the 19th century, specifically the Industrial Revolution and scientific discoveries and their influences on society.

The Industrial Revolution resulted in the tremendous growth of cities and was responsible for bringing artists in contact with all kinds of people, including the lower class. This destroyed the former assumptions that the lower class was uninteresting as subjects for art.
The Industrial Revolution also produced many technological improvements that improved the standard of living for all classes in society: for example, typewriters (1868), telephones (1876), electric lamps (1879), and motion pictures (1879). Furthermore, developments in science, philosophy and the social sciences resulted in a revival of determinism, the idea that individuals have no control over their fate. Scientific discoveries doubted religious ideals, and discredited idealism in general. Materialism became the compelling attitude, replacing idealism. Charles Darwin and Spencer proposed that life evolved from strictly materialistic causes: the accidental variation of species and the natural selection of the fittest. In philosophy, human developments were ascribed material caused by Karl Marx and Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel. In the social sciences, the behavior of individuals and societies was explained to be the result of concrete, materialistic influences, heredity and environment.

The arts were influenced by the Industrial Revolution and other developments and reflected the attitudes of materialism and determinism. Literature avoided the heroic or dramatic presentation of characters and plots. Instead, they told stories which presented the plain, unornamented material of ordinary people’s lives. Consequently, the main characters in novels became much less heroic and much more like everyday people, as in Maurice Flaubert’s Madame Bovary (1856), Leo Tolstoy’s War and Peace (1869), Giovanni Verga’s Country Life (1880) and Emile Zola’s Nana (1880).

Music was perhaps the last of the arts to be effected by realism because music is, after all, unrealistic by nature. Song, instead of speech, has the effect of heightening, not downplaying, the importance of the drama and the people represented, something quite opposite to realism’s basic idea. Therefore, realism was perhaps not as effective in music as in the other arts because composers still needed formal and stylistic methods that were the opposite of the principles of literary realism.

Verismo was a short-lived movement. By the turn of the century, discoveries in theoretical physics by Albert Einstein, Max Planck and others, contradicted this tenet. The new developments argued that time and place were not objective facts, but a matter of relative perspective. Artists in all fields then began to reflect this scientific overthrow of realism with a wide variety of new, non-objective, non-representational approaches. Post-realism includes such diverse figures as writers James Joyce and Thomas Mann, painters Pablo Picasso, Joan Miro and Piet Mondrian and the opera composer Benjamin Britten.
Puccini, too, in his final opera, *Turandot*, turned away from verismo and the deterministic attitude towards life that it implied. *Turandot* is a decadent symbolic setting of an ancient Chinese legend. Realism, however, did not die with the challenges of science in the early 1900s. In fact, realism continues to be a major force in commercial art today. Its influence can be felt in advertising, in films and on television programs and in virtually all popular fiction.
Puccini &
his Heroines

Giacomo Puccini
“I am nothing but a poor little girl, obscure and good for nothing,” sings Minnie, the heroine of *La Fanciulla del West*. This is an apt description of not only herself but, essentially, of Puccini’s favorite type of heroine – all women tarnished in one way or another and all social outcasts. The majority of these girls have doubtful virtue. These include – Manon, Mimi, Musetta, Butterfly and Magda. (The peasants of Torre del Lago showed the right instinct when they jokingly referred to Puccini as “il maestro cuccumeggiante” – “the composer of harlot music.”)

As though wishing to compensate them for their moral and social unworthiness, he gives them with the most endearing traits. They are gentle, tender, affectionate and childlike and they love to the point of self-sacrifice. They are those “luminous pleasing figures,” that ‘something beautiful, attractive and gracious’ of which he wrote to his librettists.

There remains a predilection for inflicting suffering and torture on his heroines. How do we account for the fact that Puccini’s passionate love for them must always be accompanied by a sadistic impulse? Why must he always kill that which he loves and act as the role of a Bluebeard? Two explanations suggest themselves. One is provided by the marked ambivalence in his personality, which compels him to love and hate simultaneously, or, as Sigmund Freud once pointed out, the thought ‘I should like to enjoy your love’ may also mean ‘I should like to murder you.’

The second answer lies in the probability that for all their “unworthiness”, Puccini felt unconsciously that his heroines were in some way rivals of the exalted mother-image. Even in his most ecstatic love scenes, almost invariably placed in the first act, there is somewhere on a distant horizon an ominous cloud, some suggestion in the music of the impending catastrophe. But it is despairing passion and pain which release the full springs of his imagination. Nowhere is Puccini more himself, nowhere does he reveal more strikingly his whole being as an artist and man, than in the lament. In these arias he not only expresses the feelings of his dramatic characters caught in extremity, but also his own pathetic despair at being condemned for ever to remain a prisoner in the cage of his neurosis; to be compelled to murder his loves.

It may have been a vague awareness of the nature of these unconscious urges that was the real cause of those long spells of abysmal and often suicidal melancholy which occasionally seized Puccini from the early years of his creative career, and which found its facial expression in that “povera faccia” so often observed by his intimates and strangers alike. This “poor face” is also in his music and it is graphically mirrored in those ineffably sad melodies of his – those dragging, sagging, broken-backed themes in the minor key – which form one of the most individual aspects of his musical style.
Consumption

The Romanticization

of Disease

Mimi in Puccini’s La bohème
“I always look well when I’m near death.” – Greta Garbo as Marguerite Gautier in the 1936 film Camille.

Operatic heroines tend to die: they are stabbed or they stab themselves, they take poison, throw themselves from ramparts or cliffs, or ride their horses into flames. Less violent, but still dramatic, is death by consumption – a fate shared by Violetta in La traviata (1853), Antonia in Jacques Offenbach’s The Tales of Hoffmann (1881) and Mimì in Puccini’s La bohème (1896). In fact, La traviata and La bohème are two of the three most frequently performed operas in North America, making consumption a strikingly popular reason for a soprano’s final aria.

The romanticization of consumption is one of the fascinating by-ways of 19th century art and literature. Consumption is the old-fashioned name for the acute, active form of tuberculosis, a contagious bacterial disease that has plagued humans for millennia; the Greeks called it phthisis.

In his published account, Natural History, Pliny the Elder (AD 23–79) recounted numerous treatments for tuberculosis: “The cure for phthisis is effected by taking a wolf’s liver boiled in thin wine; the bacon of a sow that has been fed upon herbs; or the flesh of a she-ass, eaten with the broth ... They say too that the smoke of dried cow-dung ... is remarkably good for phthisis ... goatsuet, many persons say... melted fresh with honied wine... is good for cough and phthisis, care being taken to stir the mixture with a sprig of rue... Some writers, too, have stated that ashes of burnt swine’s dung are very useful, mixed with raisin wine.”

Tuberculosis (TB) was nicknamed consumption because it seemed to consume people from within. These symptoms included a bloody cough, fever, pallor, and weight loss. It was also known as the White Plague, and is believed responsible for 20% of the deaths in the 17th century in London and 30% of those in the 19th century in Paris.

The contagious nature of the disease was not recognized until 30 years after Giuseppe Verdi wrote La traviata. In 1882, Robert Koch, a German physician, discovered the bacterium that caused tuberculosis. Once it was realized that TB was caused by a germ and that getting close to infected people could be fatal, the romantic allure of the disease faded away. This was not before Puccini’s La bohème made explicit the connection between poverty and ill health, however. Tuberculosis is associated with crowded, unhealthy living conditions, including prisons and sometimes with the homeless-conditions which allow easy transmission of the bacteria from person to person.

However, in the early and mid 19th century, people thought the disease was hereditary or a divine punishment, or a sign of artistic genius, and there was a burst of romantic lore around consumption. The disease developed a certain cachet thanks to the prominence of some of its victims,
its lingering nature and the ideals of beauty, which matched the ethereal, wasted appearance typical of someone with the disease.

In his memoirs, Alexandre Dumas, father of the author of *La Dame aux camélias*, wrote cynically, “In 1823 and 1824 it was all the fashion to suffer from chest complaint; everybody was consumptive, poets especially; it was good form to spit blood after each emotion that was at all inclined to be sensational, and to die before reaching the age of thirty.”

Among the many victims of consumption were the novelist Robert Louis Stevenson, Thomas Mann, the Brontë sisters, Elizabeth Barrett Browning and Frederic Chopin. Perhaps the most iconic victim of consumption was John Keats, the great romantic poet who died from TB at the young age of 25. It was Keats who wrote, “Beauty is truth, truth beauty,” - that is all Ye know on earth, and all ye need to know.” His early death was an incalculable loss to literature and art.

Another Romantic poet, the supremely self-indulgent Lord Byron, is reported to have said, “How pale I look! -- I should like, I think, to die of consumption...Because then the women would all say, ‘See that poor Byron – how interesting he looks in dying!”

In his book *Verdi with a Vengeance*, William Berger explains that consumption was the most fashionable terminal illness one could get in those days, giving the victim a frail beauty and an aura of irresistible doom. It was the 19th century’s version of “heroin chic.” Consumption was in many ways the AIDS of the 19th century – a wasting disease that ravaged promising young lives, including a generation of artists.

In the 20th century, improved living conditions with improved sanitation practices, along with the development of antibiotics reduced mortality rates and made TB less of a threat. However, the TB bacillus has continued to mutate and evolve, developing drug-resistant strains. The disease is still very much with us.

In the 2008 fact sheet on tuberculosis, the World Health Organization reports that more than 2 billion people, equal to one-third of the world’s population, are infected with TB. There were over 9 million new active cases in 2006, and 1.7 million people died of the disease that year. About one in ten of those infected with the TB bacillus eventually develop the active disease, which, if left untreated, kills more than half of its victims. One out of four TB deaths are now HIV related, and tuberculosis is the world’s greatest infectious killer of women of reproductive age and the leading cause of death among people with HIV and AIDS. One way of trying to make sense of such tragedy is to make it into art. Making art of the ways we die, immortalizing the dead, is a way of giving meaning to what may seem to be senseless loss.
The Black Death that carried off millions in Europe during the 14th century is now known to us mostly through art and literature – such as Giovanni Boccaccio’s great story cycle *The Decameron* and the nursery chant *Ring around the Rosy*. TB took its place in that tradition, with the romanticization of consumption and the celebration in music and literature of the beautiful young lives it destroyed. And exactly 100 years after Puccini’s heroine Mimi died of consumption, an adaptation of *La bohème* called *RENT* brought the romantic tragedy of death by consumption into a 20th century context in which the character is dying of AIDS.
The La bohème was composed in 1896
What else happened in that year?

History_Politics
- Utah becomes a state of the United States
- Italy defeated by Abyssinians at Adowa; Italy sues for peace and withdraws its protectorate from Abyssinia
- France annexes Madagascar
- Russia and China sign Manchuria Convention
- William McKinley elected 25th President of the United States

Literature_Theater
- Paul Verlaine, French poet, dies (1844)
- Harriet Beecher Stowe, American novelist, dies (1896)
- William Morris, English poet and artist, dies (1834)
- R. M. Rilke: “Larenopfer,” poems
- Anton Chekhov: “The Sea Gull,” Russian drama

Religion_Philosophy_Learning
- Heinrich von Treitschke, German historian, dies (1834)
- Five annual Nobel prizes are established for those who during the preceding year shall have conferred the greatest benefits on mankind in the fields of physics, physiology and medicine, chemistry, literature, and peace
**Visual Arts**
- Frederick Leighton: “Clytie,” painting
- National Portrait Gallery, London, moved from Bethnal Green to Westminster
- “Die Jugend” and “Simplicissimus,” two important German art magazines, appear in Munich

**Music**
- Anton Bruckner dies (1824)
- Clara Wieck-Schumann, German pianist and composer, d. (b. 1819)
- Richard Strauss: “Also Sprach Zarathustra,” symphonic poem, Frankfurt
- Hugo Wolf: “Der Corregidor,” opera, Mannheim
- Umberto Giordano: “Andrea Chenier,” opera, Milan

**Science and Technology Growth**
- William Ramsay discovers helium
- Ernest Rutherford: magnetic detection of electrical waves of Niagara Falls hydroelectric plant opens
- Alfred Nobel dies (1833)
- French physicist A. H. Becquerel discovers radioactivity
- First English all-steel building, West Hartlepool

**Daily Life**
- First modern Olympics held in Athens
- First Alpine ski school founded at Lilienfeld, Austria
- Royal Victorian Order founded
- Beginning of Klondike gold rush, Bonanza Creek, Canada
References


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