



Deutsch: Bühnenbild - La Bohème. Author: [Dominik0815](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:La_Boheme.jpg)
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Background and Reference Materials

La bohème

- **What to Listen for in *La bohème*** 1-9
- **Fact Sheet for *La bohème*** 10-12
Compiled by Jill Leahy
- ***The Da Capo Opera Manual*** by Nicholas Ivor Martin 13
La bohème logistics and synopsis summary
- **Oxford Music Online** condensed article: 14-15
La bohème by Julian Rushton
- **Books and Websites related to Giacomo Puccini and *La bohème*** 16-17
Compiled by Jill Leahy
- **“Four Men at Work on *La bohème*”**, from *Opera: A History in Documents* by Piero Weiss, Oxford University Press, © 2002 19-22
- **“Giacomo Puccini”** from *The Great Composers: An Illustrated Guide to the Lives, Key Works and Influences of over 100 Renowned Composers*, by Wendy Thompson, Hermes House, © 2009 23-24

What to listen for in *La bohème*

HOW TO USE THIS GUIDE:

- The **WTLF** (What to Listen For) number indicates recommended excerpts from the opera. Consider the WTLF excerpts as "signposts" to guide listeners to significant parts of the music—excerpts that can be recognized easily during a full performance.
- The name of the excerpt is listed and characters who sing in the track are included below the name. (Note that opera arias and ensembles are named by their first words.) Track length is given in minutes and seconds.
- At the right, the CD Track numbers of the full-length recording are listed.
- Musical vocabulary words are in **BOLD** font.
- **Libretto** pages are from the full-length recording.

NOTES:

- **CD tracks and Libretto pages** refer to the EMI Classics (Blackdog) Recording of *La bohème* by the Orchestra e Coro del Teatro dell'Opera di Roma, conducted by Thomas Schippers, © 2005. Featured artists are Mirella Freni (Mimi), Nicolai Gedda (Rodolfo), Mario Sereni (Marcello), Mario Basiola, Jr. (Schaunard), Ferruccio Mazzoli (Colline), Mariella Adani (Musetta), Carlo Badioli (Benoit).
- The action of *La bohème* begins immediately after 40 bars of orchestral music. There is **no overture or prelude**.
- The music of *La bohème* is full of lyrical, soaring melodies that express the beauty and pain of young lovers.
- Listen for "**tag tunes**" or motifs throughout the opera. As the curtain rises, listen for bom-bom-bom, a motif that symbolizes the joys and hazards of Bohemian life.
- You may have heard some of the music of *La bohème* used in **movie soundtracks**: *Moonstruck* and *Room with a View*
- *La bohème* is organized in **four acts**. The Pittsburgh Opera performances will likely include two intermissions—one after Act 2 and one after Act 3.

- *La bohème* employs a large number of **artists:**

- Principal artists 13 4L, 2F, 2S, 3B, 2CB
- Chorus 36 + Children SSAATTTTBB
- Orchestra 67 (including 5 Banda)
- Supernumeraries TBD
-

- *La bohème* **orchestra** includes:

- | | | | | |
|-----------------|----------------|---------------|--------------|-----------------------|
| 1 piccolo | 4 French horns | 18 violins | 3 percussion | On-Stage Banda |
| 3 flutes | 3 trumpets | 6 violas | 1 timpani | 2 piccolos |
| 2 oboes | 3 trombones | 6 celli | | 2 trumpets |
| 1 English horn | 1 cimbasso | 4 double Bass | | 1 snare drum |
| 2 clarinets | | 1 harp | | |
| 1 bass clarinet | | | | |
| 2 bassoons | | | | |

SOURCES for descriptions and musical excerpts:

Baker, Theodore. *Schirmer Pronouncing Pocket Manual of Musical Terms, Fifth Edition*. New York: Schirmer, 1995.

Holden, Amanda. *The New Penguin Opera Guide*. New York: Penguin Books, 2001.

Macy, Laura, and Stanley Sadie. *The Grove Book of Operas, Second Edition*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2009.

Osborne, Charles. *The Dictionary of the Opera*. New York: Welcome Rain Publishers, 2001.

Peattie, Antony and the Earl of Harewood, Eds. *The New Kobbé's Opera Book*. New York: Penguin Putnam, 1997.

Selection	Timing Page
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Act I

WTLF 1 CD 1, Track 3 "Legna! . . . Sigari!" 3:41 p. 61
 Rodolfo, Marcello, Colline, Schaunard

In this festive quartet, the friends celebrate with "Hoorays" that bounce along for some time. Listen for galloping orchestra accompaniment and how the tune is passed from instrument to instrument.

WTLF 2 CD 1, Track 8 "Che gelida manina!" 4:27 p. 81
 Rodolfo

One of the most famous tenor pieces in all opera. The music is declamatory and speech-like, full of emotional intensity. The sequence is one of the most lyrical passages of music in the opera. The power of the romantic melodies and the simplicity of their love unfolding create an enchanting musical and dramatic experience. The orchestra accompanies this scene allowing the voices to be heard, understating them with a warmth and charm expressed by the solo flute, muted strings, and harp to create an exquisitely scored ending to Act I.

Rodolfo



How cold your lit - tle hand is! Let me warm it here in mine. For -
get your door - key; it's much too dark to find it.

Che gelida manina, Rodolfo's aria from La Bohème, Act 1

Che gelida manina,
se la lasci riscaldar.
Cercar che giova?
Al buio non si trova.
Ma per fortuna
é una notte di luna,
e qui la luna
l'abbiamo vicina.
Aspetti, signorina,
le dirò con due parole
chi son, e che faccio,
come vivo. Vuole?
Chi son? Sono un poeta.
Che cosa faccio? Scrivo.
E come vivo? Vivo.
In povertà mia lieta
scialo da gran signore
rime ed inni d'amore.
Per sogni e per chimere
e per castelli in aria,
l'anima ho milionaria.
Talor dal mio forziere
ruban tutti i gioelli
due ladri, gli occhi belli.
V'entrar con voi pur ora,
ed i miei sogni usati
e i bei sogni miei,
tosto si dileguar!
Ma il furto non m'accora,
poiché, poiché v'ha preso stanza
la speranza!
Or che mi conoscete,
parlate voi, deh! Parlate. Chi siete?
Vi piaccia dir!

What a frozen little hand,
let me warm it for you.
What's the use of looking?
We won't find it in the dark.
But luckily
it's a moonlit night,
and the moon
is near us here.
Wait, mademoiselle,
I will tell you in two words
who I am, what I do,
and how I live. May I?
Who am I? I am a poet.
What do I do? I write.
And how do I live? I live.
In my carefree poverty
I squander rhymes
and love songs like a lord.
When it comes to dreams and visions
and castles in the air,
I've the soul of a millionaire.
From time to time two thieves
steal all the jewels
out of my safe, two pretty eyes.
They came in with you just now,
and my customary dreams
my lovely dreams,
melted at once into thin air!
But the theft doesn't anger me,
for their place has been
taken by hope!
Now that you know all about me,
you tell me who you are.
Please do!

WTLF 3 CD 1, Track 9 "Sì. Mi chiamano Mimì"**4:54 p. 82**

Mimì, Rodolfo

Seamstress Mimì responds, telling Rodolfo about her work. She then tells him how she loves flowers and spring. This is a famous soprano aria. Listen for the flute that makes little bird songs when Mimì sings about springtime. After Mimì and Rodolfo sing together in octaves, the music slowly dissipates as the two lovers decide what to do next. As they exit the stage, the harp accompanies their luminous "Amore", providing tenderness and color.

Mimì



Well, my friends call me Mi - mi, but my real name's Lu - ci - a...

Mi chiamano Mimì, Mimì's aria from La Bohème, Act 1

Sì. Mi chiamano Mimì,
 ma il mio nome è Lucia.
 La storia mia è breve.
 A tela o a seta
 ricamo in casa e fuori...
 Son tranquilla e lieta
 ed è mio svago
 far gigli e rose.
 Mi piaccion quelle cose
 che han sì dolce malia,
 che parlano d'amor, di primavera,
 di sogni e di chimere,
 quelle cose che han nome poesia...
 Lei m'intende?

Yes, they call me Mimì,
 But my name is Lucy
 My history is brief
 To cloth or to silk
 I embroider at home or outside...
 I am peaceful and happy
 And it is my pastime
 To make lilies and roses
 I like these things
 That have so sweet smell,
 That speak of love, of spring,
 That speak of dreams and of chimera
 These things that have poetic names
 Do you understand me?

WTLF 4 CD 1, Track 11 "O soave fanciulla"**3:57 p. 86**

Rodolfo, Mimì

A love duet by Rodolfo and Mimì (O sweet maiden). Listen for snatches from the earlier solos as they reappear during this duet. This is Puccini at his most intense. The famous high note as they leave the stage together is the musical test of the leading characters.

Act Two

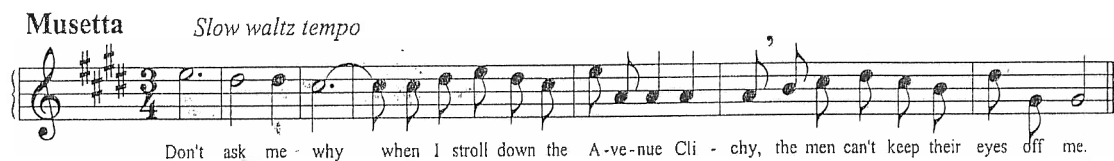
WTLF 5 CD 1, Track 16 "Quando men' vò"

5:00 p. 106

Musetta, Marcello, Alcindoro, Mimì, Rodolfo, Schaunard, Colline

Musetta's waltz is truly an opera *scena*. It takes all of the forces available to create this show-stopping tour de force. All the fuss and by-play stops dead as she takes the limelight and gives her all. The scene fragments into side plots and comments. Then Marcello takes up the famous waltz tune. The melodic line passes from group to group as Musetta's music is brilliantly orchestrated with woodwinds and horns, giving her an extravagant and fiery musical character. Her melody is simple—it's basically a descending scale.

Musetta *Slow waltz tempo*



Don't ask me - why when I stroll down the A-ve-nue Cli - chy, the men can't keep their eyes off me.

Quando men vo, Musetta's aria from La Bohème, Act 2

Quando men vo soletta per la via,
La gente sosta e mira
E la bellezza mia tutta ricerca in me
Da capo a pie'...

Ed assaporo allor la bramosia
Sottile, che da gli occhi traspira
E dai palesi vezzi intender sa

Alle occulte beltà.
Così l'effluvio del desio
m'aggira,
Felice mi fa!

E tu che sai, che memori e ti struggi
Da me tanto rifuggi?
So ben:
le angoscie tue non le vuoi dir,
Ma ti senti morir!

When I walk all alone in the street
People stop and stare at me
And look for my whole beauty
From head to feet

And then I taste the slight yearning
which transpires from their eyes
and which is able to perceive from manifest
charms

to most hidden beauties.
So the scent of desire is all around me, tutta
it makes me happy!

And you, while knowing, reminding and
longing,
you shrink from me?
I know it very well:
you don't want to express your anguish,
but you feel as if you're dying!

Translated by Giuseppe Cusmano (gcusman@tin.it)

Act Three

WTLF 6 CD 2, Track 3 "Mimì! . . . Speravo di trovarvi qui"

Marcello, Mimì

4:55 p. 120

This music suggests the real despair and passion that Mimì feels in her relationship with Rodolfo. The fun and sweetness have disappeared from the music, which has taken on a desperate quality and a new pathos. Listen for emotionally-charged swells in the orchestra that support the voices.

WTLF 7 CD 2, Track 7 "Addio . . . D'onde lieta uscì al tuo grido"

Mimì

3:19 p. 128

In this aria, Mimì contemplates returning home without Rodolfo. He appears and a duet between him and Mimì becomes a quartet including Marcello and Musetta. Listen for strings and percussion that build the intensity of the scene. This track illustrates how opera can express multiple emotions simultaneously.

WTLF 8 CD 2, Track 8 "Dunque è proprio finite"

Rodolfo, Mimì, Marcello, Musetta

5:33 p. 129

Two couples, both having a "love scene", create a quartet full of contrasts. Mimì and Rodolfo have the lyrical sustained music, while the fast-paced insults of Musetta and Marcello provide a strong counterpoint. Puccini repeatedly uses musical themes to evoke emotional responses in the audience. As Mimì sings that they will part with no hard feelings, the orchestra surges under her with the music from their love duet at the climax of Act I.

Act Four

WTLF 9 CD 2, Track 10 "O Mimì, tu più non torni"

2:58 p. 137

Marcello, Rodolfo

Months after the lovers have gone their separate ways, Marcello and Rodolfo commiserate about their loneliness. Shimmering strings remind us of happier times through the use of the musical motives.

[28] RODOLFO

Andantino mosso

p O Mi - mi our love is o - ver.
O Mi - mi tu più non tor - ni.

Oh days de - part - ed,
O gor - ni bel - li,

WTLF 10 CD 2, Track 14 "Vecchia zimarra"

3:21 p. 148

Colline, Schaunard

Colline decides to sell his most prized possession, his old coat, to help pay for a doctor. This is a famous bass aria, one that is simple to sing, but powerful in its emotional portrayal of sadness and altruism. Listen for the plucked strings beneath the lyrical line of the singer.

[30] COLLINE

Moderato e triste

p Ven - er - able gar - ment, lis - ten I'll say good - bye
Vec - chia zi - mar - ra sen - ti, io re - sto al pian

WTLF 11 CD 2, Track 15 "Sono andati?"

5:05 p.149

Mimi, Rodolfo, Schunard

The final love duet between Mimi and Rodolfo before she dies. Probably one of the most moving musical moments in all of opera. Descending lines, a slow tempo, and tenuto (stretched) notes in the strings create a heartbreaking mood.

[31] MIMI

Andante calmo

Have they left us? I was not real - ly sleep - ing
So - non - da - ti? Fin - ge - vo di dor - mi - re

but I want - ed to be a - lone with you, love
per - ché vol - li con te so - la re - sta - re

WTLF 12 CD 2, Track 16 "Dorme? . . . Riposa"

4:58 p. 152

Musetta, Rodolfo, Marcello, Mimi, Schunard, Colline

When Mimi dies, all sound stops for a few moments and she dies in silence. Rodolfo cries her name when he finally realizes that she has died—it's one of the saddest moments in all of opera.

A Song to Learn

On Christmas Eve, the children sing a song about the seller of toys, Pargignon.

Allegretto giocoso (♩ = 100)

Here is Par-pi-gnol, Par-pi-gnol, Par-pi-gnol! With his pret-ty

p *mf*

bar-row, filled with toys! Here is Par-pi-gnol, Par-pi-gnol, Par-pi-gnol, Par-pi-gnol! I want the

horn and I the horse. I want the drum and I the dog. Buy a horn and a horse. Here is Par-pi-gnol!

Composer: Giacomo Puccini (1858–1924)

Giacomo Antonio Domenico Michele Secondo Maria Puccini was born in Lucca, Italy, into a family with four generations of composers. Inspired by Verdi's *Aida*, Puccini enrolled in the Milan Conservatory at age 17. After finishing his studies, he composed his first opera, *Le Villi*, in 1884 to moderate success. From the first production of his opera *Manon Lescaut* in 1893 to his death from cancer 30 years later, Puccini dominated Italian opera with works which remain the most performed operas today.

Librettists: Luigi Illica (1857–1919) and Giuseppe Giacosa (1847–1906)

Luigi Illica was an Italian journalist, dramatist, the librettist and accomplished poet. Rebellious and passionate at an early age, he ran away to sea at age twenty and in 1876 fought in a battle with the Turks. Three years later he moved Milan and began his literary career, and around 1875 made his debut as a theatrical author. At age 58 he volunteered to fight in World War I, but after suffering a serious fall from a horse was forced to return home, dying three years later in Piacenza, Italy. Though he collaborated with several composers, his work on three of Puccini's operas—*La bohème*, *Tosca*, and *Madama Butterfly*—is considered his chief contribution to the field.

Giuseppe Giacosa was an Italian poet, playwright and librettist who began his career as a lawyer. After joining his father's law firm directly after attending college, he moved into the literary world with the success of his one-act verse comedy, *Una partita a scacchi* ("A Game of Chess"). From 1888 to 1894 he held the chair of literature and dramatic art at the Milan Conservatory, and joined with Puccini and Illica in 1893 to form a partnership for Puccini's operas.

Literary Basis

French author Henri Murger (1882-1861) used his own experiences as a poor writer in Paris to write an episodic prose novel consisting of a collection of vignettes about young Bohemians living in Paris c.1830. He later converted the 1851 novel (*Scenes de la Vie de La bohème*) into a successful play that formed the basis of the opera. Not long after Puccini began working on the opera about bohemian life, he became involved in a controversy with Ruggiero Leoncavallo, who claimed the rights to use the novel for his opera, stating Puccini already knew this. Puccini rebutted the accusation in a letter in a local newspaper, welcoming Leoncavallo to a competition, letting the public decide who had the best opera. Puccini's *La bohème* has become a standard in the operatic repertoire, while Leoncavallo's is rarely performed.

In 1830, Paris was undergoing a revolution, both politically and artistically. In July 1830, King Charles X was overthrown, marking the transition of power from the constitutional monarchy and from hereditary right to popular sovereignty.

Within Paris, there was the artistic movement, the Bohemian Revolution, begun by Henri Murger in the early 1800s. The term Bohemian was first used to describe the untraditional lifestyle of artists, writers, musicians, and actors in many European cities. Bohemians were associated with unorthodox political or social viewpoints, often expressed through non-marital relations, frugality, and “voluntary poverty”.

Premiere

- *La bohème* is a 4-act opera in the *verismo* style.
- Premiered in Turin on February 1, 1896 at the Teatro Regio, conducted by Arturo Toscanini

Setting: Paris around 1830

Act I: A garret overlooking the snow-covered roofs of Paris on Christmas Eve
Act II: A crossroads with the Café Momus to one side
Act III: The Barrière d’Enfer
Act IV: The garret, several weeks later

Cast of Characters

Rodolfo, a poet	tenor
Mimi, a seamstress	soprano
Marcello, a painter	baritone
Schaunard, a musician	baritone
Colline, a philosopher	bass
Musetta, a singer	soprano
Benoit, their landlord	bass
Alcindoro, a state councilor	bass
Parpignol, a toy vendor	tenor

Synopsis

ACT I

On Christmas Eve in Paris, the poverty-stricken painter Marcello and poet Rodolfo complain about the cold in their garret, and Rodolfo burns his old dramas to keep warm. Their two roommates, Colline, a philosopher, and Schaunard, a musician, return home, bringing food. Benoit, their landlord, arrives to demand his overdue rent, but the men manage to throw him out with feigned indignation over his marital indiscretions. Marcello, Colline, and Schaunard leave for the Latin Quarter, and Rodolfo promises to join them after finishing some writing. Mimi, a young neighbor, appears, wishing to relight her candle. Obviously ill, she drops her room key and nearly faints. Rodolfo is instantly attracted to her and manages to detain her by concealing her key after he secretly finds it. He also snuffs out his own candle and as the two search in the darkness for her key, their hands touch, and they spontaneously express their love for each other.

ACT II

A crowd celebrates Christmas Eve in the Latin Quarter, where Parpignol is selling children's toys. At the Café Momus, Rodolfo introduces Mimì to his roommates, but their carefree mood changes suddenly when Musetta, Marcello's former lover, makes a noisy entrance on the arm of the elderly yet wealthy Alcindoro. Musetta attempts to attract Marcello's attention, and though he deliberately ignores her he finally succumbs to her charms. Musetta shrewdly gets rid of Alcindoro, and she and the bohemians escape through the crowd.

ACT III

Mimì is seeking the help of Marcello, who is painting a mural at the local tavern. She tells him that she and Rodolfo have separated, driven apart by his jealousy. Rodolfo emerges to speak with Marcello, and Mimì hides and overhears their conversation. Rodolfo tells Marcello that he wants to leave Mimì because of her flirtatious behavior. Finally, he confesses that she is mortally ill and that the harsh conditions of their life together have undoubtedly worsened her health. Hearing Mimì's coughing, Rodolfo realizes that she has overheard everything. The two lovers postpone their parting until spring, while Marcello and Musetta have a falling out.

ACT IV

Rodolfo and Marcello, now separated from Mimì and Musetta, again attempt to work in their garret and pretend not to care that their loves have found wealthy suitors. Schaunard and Colline arrive with dinner, and the four pretend they are attending a fancy ball and then enact a mock duel. Suddenly, Musetta enters with Mimì, who is dying and wishing to be with Rodolfo. Musetta and Marcello leave to fetch a doctor and to pawn some of their possessions in order to buy Mimì medicine and a muff. Colline also departs to sell his beloved coat for needed money. Left alone for a few moments, Mimì and Rodolfo have a final caress. The others return, but before the doctor can arrive, Mimì passes away.

Sources/Citations

- The Metropolitan Opera. "La boheme." 2011.
- San Francisco Opera Guild. "La boheme: 2008 Teachers' Guide and Resource Book."
<http://sfopera.com/SanFranciscoOpera/media/SiteAssets/Guild/La-BohemeStudyguide.pdf>.
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http://www.portlandopera.org/sites/files/10%20season/LA_BOHEME_STUDY_GUIDE.pdf.

La Bohème • The Bohemian

Composed by Giacomo Puccini (December 22, 1858 – November 29, 1924). Libretto by Giuseppe Giacosa and Luigi Illica. Italian. Based on novel "Scènes de la Vie de Bohème" by Henry Murger. Premiered Turin, Teatro Regio, February 1, 1896. Set in Paris about 1830. Tragedy. Through composed.

Sets: 3. **Acts:** 4 acts, 4 scenes. **Length:** I: 35. II: 18. III: 25. IV: 29. **Arias:** "Che gelida manina" (Rodolfo), "Mi chiamano Mimi" (Mimi), "Vecchia zimarra"/Coat song (Colline), Musetta's aria (Musetta). **Hazards:** None. **Scenes:** I. A garret, Christmas Eve. II. A square in the Latin quarter of Paris before the Café Momus. III. The barrier d'Enfer. IV. In the garret.

Major roles: Marcello (baritone), Rodolfo (tenor), Mimi (soprano), Musetta (soprano). **Minor roles:** Colline (bass), Schaunard (baritone), Benoit (bass), Parpignol (tenor), Alcindoro (bass). **Bit parts:** Boy (treble), Custom house sergeant (bass), Customs officer (bass).

Chorus parts: SSAATTBB. **Chorus roles:** Townspeople, soldiers, servants, students, street vendors, café customers, midinettes, waiters, working girls, gendarmes, street sweepers, customs officers, children (in 2 parts). **Dance/movement:** None. **Orchestra:** 3 fl (picc), 2 ob, Eng horn, 2 cl, bs cl, 2 ban, 4 hn, 3 trp, 3 trb, bs trb, timp, perc, xylophone, harp, strings. **Stageband:** II: 4 picc, 6 trp, 6 drums. III: chimes. **Publisher:** Schirmer, Ricordi. **Rights:** Expired.

I. Marcello and Rodolfo complain about the cold in their garret and Rodolfo uses his old manuscripts to make a fire. Colline joins them. The men are surprised when Schaunard arrives with provisions and explains that an English peer hired him to play music until the peer's parrot died. "I played for three days and then poisoned the parrot," Schaunard explains. He insists they dine out. Benoit, the landlord, comes for the rent. The young artists pretend to be offended that he has a mistress and eject him. When the men head out to the Café Momus, Rodolfo stays behind briefly to finish some writing. Mimi appears. She needs her candle lit, but is faint from the exertion of climbing the stairs. She loses her key. The wind blows out all the candles. Rodolfo has secretly pocketed the key and he persuades Mimi to stay and talk with him. Mimi and Rodolfo kiss.

II. The streets are crowded with Christmas revelers. Parpignol is selling children's toys. Mimi shows off the bonnet Rodolfo has bought her. Marcello's ex-girlfriend, Musetta, appears, her elderly suitor, Alcindoro, in tow. She causes a scene to attract the attention of the young men. Her behavior scandalizes Alcindoro, but Musetta sends him off on an errand. She escapes with Marcello and his friends amidst the soldiers' procession—sticking Alcindoro with the bill.

III. Mimi asks Marcello for help. She plans to leave Rodolfo since his jealousy is making things impossible. Marcello has a talk with Rodolfo, who admits he loves Mimi passionately, but knows that his life of poverty is hastening on her consumption. When Mimi's cough reveals that she has been eavesdropping, Rodolfo tries to comfort her. The lovers postpone their parting until spring. Marcello and Musetta have a falling out.

IV. Marcello and Rodolfo pretend not to care that their loves have found wealthy suitors. Colline and Schaunard bring bread and herring for dinner. The men pretend to be nobles at a feast and ball. This becomes a mock duel until it is interrupted by Musetta. She has brought Mimi—who is dying. They put Mimi to bed. Musetta tells Marcello to pawn her earrings and fetch a doctor. She herself goes to get Mimi a muff to warm her hands. Colline sells his beloved overcoat. The lovers have a last caress. Marcello returns with medicine; Musetta with a new muff. Mimi dies, plunging her friends into despair.

Oxford Music Online: *La bohème*

By Julian Budden

Puccini's intention to base an opera on Murger's picaresque novel appears to date from the winter of 1892–3, shortly before the première of *Manon Lescaut*. Almost at once it involved him in a controversy in print with Leoncavallo, who in the columns of his publisher's periodical *Il secolo* (20 March 1893) claimed precedence in the subject, maintaining that he had already approached the artists whom he had in mind and that Puccini knew this perfectly well. Puccini rebutted the accusation in a letter (dated the following day) to *Il corriere della sera* and at the same time welcomed the prospect of competing with his rival and allowing the public to judge the winner.

Scènes de la vie de bohème existed both as a novel, originally published in serial form, and as a play written in collaboration with Théodore Barrière. There were good reasons why neither Puccini nor Leoncavallo should have availed themselves of the latter, whose plot in places runs uncomfortably close to that of *La traviata* (Mimi is persuaded to leave Rodolfo by her lover's wealthy uncle, who uses the same arguments as Verdi's Germont). As the novel was in the public domain Ricordi's attempt to secure exclusive rights to it on Puccini's behalf were unsuccessful. Work proceeded slowly, partly because Puccini had not yet definitely renounced his idea of an opera based on Giovanni Verga's *La lupa* and partly because he spent much of the next two years travelling abroad to supervise performances of *Manon Lescaut* in various European cities. By June 1893 Illica had already completed a prose scenario of which Giacosa, who was given the task of putting it into verse, entirely approved. Here the drama was articulated in four acts and five scenes: the Bohemians' garret and the Café Momus (Act 1), the Barrière d'Enfer (Act 2), the courtyard of Musetta's house (Act 3) and Mimi's death in the garret (Act 4).

Giacosa completed the versification by the end of June and submitted it to Puccini and Ricordi, who felt sufficiently confident to announce in the columns of the *Gazzetta musicale di Milano* that the libretto was ready for setting to music. He was premature. Giacosa was required to revise the courtyard and Barrière scenes, a labour which he found so uncongenial that in October he offered – not for the last time – to withdraw from the project; however, he was persuaded by Ricordi to remain.

Having finally decided to abandon *La lupa* in the summer of 1894 Puccini began the composition of *La bohème*. From then on the librettists' work consisted mostly of elimination, extending even to details on whose inclusion Puccini had originally insisted, such as a drinking song and a diatribe against women, both allocated to Schaunard. The score was finished on 10 December 1895.

Since La Scala was now under the management of the publisher Edoardo Sonzogno, who made a point of excluding all Ricordi scores from the repertory, the première was fixed for the Teatro Regio, Turin (where *Manon Lescaut* had received its première in 1893).

The principals were Cesira Ferrani (Mimi), Camilla Pasini (Musetta), Evan Gorga (Rodolfo), Michele Mazzini (Colline) and Antonio Pini-Corsi (Schaunard); the conductor was Toscanini. The public response was mixed: favourable to Acts 1 and 4, less so to the others. Most of the critics saw in the opera a falling-off from *Manon Lescaut* in the direction of triviality. But nothing could stop its rapid circulation. A performance at the Teatro Argentina, Rome, under Edoardo Mascheroni (23 February) introduced Rosina Storchio as Musetta, a role in which she later excelled. A revival at the Politeama Garibaldi, Palermo (24 April) under Leopoldo Mugnone included for the first time the Act 2 episode where Mimi shows off her bonnet. On this occasion Rodolfo and Mimi were played by Edoardo Garbin and Adelina Stehle (the original young lovers of Verdi's *Falstaff*), who did much to make *La bohème* popular in southern Italy in the years that followed. Outside Italy most premières of *La bohème* were given in smaller theatres and in the vernacular of the country. In Paris it was first given in 1898 by the Opéra-Comique, as *La vie de bohème*, and achieved its 1000th performance there in 1951. Today *La bohème* remains, with *Tosca* and *Madama Butterfly*, one of the central pillars of the Italian repertory.

In their preface to the printed libretto Giacosa and Illica claimed to have made their heroine a composite of Murger's Mimi and Francine. In fact she is based almost entirely on Francine, a marginal character in the novel who appears with her lover, the sculptor Jacques, in one chapter only ('Francine's muff') in total isolation from the other Bohemians. Unlike his pert, wilful Mimi, Murger conceived Francine in purely romantic terms – all innocence and fragility. By taking Francine as a model for their Mimi the librettists allowed Puccini not only to distinguish her musically from Musetta, as Leoncavallo was never able to do, but also to achieve that perfect balance of realism and romanticism, of comedy and pathos which makes *La bohème*, on its own level, one of the most satisfying works in the operatic repertory.

There is a retreat here both from the 'symphonism' that marked Act 1 of *Manon Lescaut* as well as from the unrestrained emotionalism of its last two acts. Mimi, an archetypal Puccinian heroine, tugs at the heart-strings mostly by a subdued pathos; only once in Act 3 does she burst out in an agony of soul ('O buon Marcello, aiuto!'). *La bohème* establishes a first-act design, already outlined in *Manon Lescaut*, which served Puccini for all the operas of his middle period, namely a lively opening with much variety of incident that eventually broadens out into a calm love-duet. Throughout, the harmonic idiom is bolder yet more subtle than in Puccini's previous operas (the triads of the *Café Momus* theme would not disgrace the Stravinsky of 15 years later). His ability to conjure up a particular ambience is nowhere shown to better advantage than at the start of Act 3, with its suggestion of falling snowflakes conveyed by a succession of open 5ths on flutes and harp over a cello pedal. Debussy, who disliked the works of the 'giovane scuola', is reported to have said to Falla that he knew of no one who had described the Paris of that time better than Puccini.

Accessed 06/25/2013: <http://www.oxfordmusiconline.com/subscriber/article/grove/music/O900607>

Giacomo Puccini and *La bohème*

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Puccini, Simonetta. The Puccini Companion. Boston: W. W. Norton & Company, 2000.
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Southwell-Sander, Peter. Puccini. London, England: Omnibus P, Exclusive distributors, Music Sales Corp., 1996. ML 410 .P9 S192 1996
Presents the composer against the background of his time using personal letters, recollections, paintings, and more to present a complete picture of the composer's life

Wilson, Conrad. *Giacomo Puccini*, Phaidon, 1997.
ML410.P89M26 ISBN: 071483291X
Analyzes Puccini's major works in connection to his personality/relationships.

Young, John Bell. *Puccini: a listener's guide*, Amadeus Press, 2008.
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Explores the inspiration for *La bohème* as well as its dramatic and musical elements on pages 37-60

Interesting Puccini/ *La bohème* Websites

<http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/482661/Giacomo-Puccini>

Gives a condensed chronological biography.

<http://www.classical.net/music/comp.lst/puccini.php>

Abbreviated biography along with recommended recordings, and scores.

<http://www.metoperafamily.org/metopera/search/index.aspx?SelectedTab=3&q=La+boheme>

Listen to Metropolitan Opera productions of *La bohème*

<http://www.gutenberg.org/files/18445/18445-h/18445-h.htm>

Henri Murger book on line

<http://www.columbia.edu/itc/music/NYCO/laboheme/murger.html>

New York City Opera project

<http://www.allmusic.com/artist/giacomo-puccini-mn0000928153>

Brief biography, lists of compositions with dates and run times

<http://www.classicalarchives.com/composer/3195.html#tvf=tracks&tv=essentials>

Brief biography, lists notable musical movements in each opera

<http://www.classicsforkids.com/composers/bio.asp?id=40>

Classics For Kids – concise biography of Giacomo Puccini and other major composers

<http://www.manitobaopera.mb.ca/learn/documents/Bohemestudyguidewithtitlepage.pdf>

A study guide that offers a brief synopsis, information on the composer and librettists, points out what to listen for, and offers a list of suggested listening materials.

http://www.portlandopera.org/sites/files/10%20season/LA_BOHEME_STUDY_GUIDE.pdf

A comprehensive study guide that gives a full synopsis, a biography of Puccini, and explores major subjects such as bohemia, the industrial revolution, and Tuberculosis. Offers suggestions for lesson plans.

Tuberculosis Websites

http://nobelprize.org/educational_games/medicine/tuberculosis/readmore.html

Nobel Prize page about the doctor who identified the disease

<http://www.hsl.virginia.edu/alav/>

UVA website about tuberculosis and the history of the American Lung Association

<http://www.mayoclinic.com/health/tuberculosis/DS00372>

Mayo Clinic pages about tuberculosis

FOUR MEN AT WORK ON *LA BOHÈME*

[Milan, February 1894]

Dear Signor Giulio,

Puccini has gone off and I meanwhile, from my bed where I'm nailed down by a stubborn influenza, am writing you . . . about—what else? *La bohème*.

And so Puccini doesn't like at all the solution we found Sunday evening. He wants to begin [the last act] the way it is fixed in his head, with Mimì in bed, Rodolfo at his table writing, and the stub of a candle lighting the scene.

That is, no separation between Rodolfo and Mimì!
Well then, in that case there's really no *Bohème* left at all, and what's more, no Mimì by Murger!

What we have is a meeting in a garret between a journalist-poet and a little seamstress. They love each other, quarrel, then the little seamstress dies. . .

The case is pitiful, but it isn't *La bohème*! The love element is moving (and romantic), but Murger's Mimì is more complex! One should also have some pity for the librettists!

Now I say that it's already wrong that the separation between Rodolfo and Mimì should not occur in full view of the public; imagine if there is not to be any separation at all! Because the essence of Murger's book is precisely that great freedom in love (supreme characteristic of *La bohème*) practiced by all the characters. Think how much greater and more moving Mimì can be when—though she could go on living with a lover who furnishes her with silk and velvet—feeling that her phthisis is killing her she goes to die in the desolate, cold mansard, just so she can die in the arms of Rodolfo. It seems inconceivable to me that Puccini should not understand the greatness [of this situation]!
Yet this is Murger's Mimì!

And note (to me it seems almost inspired) how novel it would be to begin the last act exactly the way the first began. Only now it isn't winter but autumn. From the wide window one doesn't see all the roofs of Paris covered with snow, but Rodolfo gathers a leaf brought in by the wind and his thoughts return to Mimì.

One could begin with Rodolfo alone—and meanwhile apprise the public of the separation—that very necessary separation!! (Up to now we haven't had a solo for the tenor!)

Just as there are four principals—Rodolfo, Marcello, Schaunard, Colline—in Puccini's *La bohème*, so there were four principals in its creation: the professional librettist Luigi Illica (1857–1919), the playwright and man of letters Giuseppe Giacosa (1847–1906), the publisher Giulio Ricordi (1840–1912), so prominent in the genesis of Verdi's *Otello* (see p. 230f above), and of course the composer himself, Giacomo Puccini (1858–1924). Ricordi served as a sort of court of appeals during the sometimes heated squabbles concerning the ultimate shape this opera, based on Henry Murger's *Scènes de la vie de bohème* (1851), was to assume. Illica undertook the drafting of the scenario, with important interventions by Puccini. Giacosa took care of the versification and the smaller details, putting on the final touches, though in one of the letters below he is heard complaining that none of his touches ever seemed to be final. Between the first mention of the opera in 1893 (in connection with a dispute that arose between Puccini and Leoncavallo, who was also at work on the same subject) and its first performance under Toscanini in Turin on 1 February 1896, the correspondence between the two librettists, the publisher, and the composer flowed thick and fast. In it, the opera is seen taking shape amid bursts of inspiration, drastic changes of direction, fits of anger, and heartfelt reconciliations, as befitted the creators of a work in which the main characters behaved in much the same way. The only detached participant here was Ricordi; but then, he could afford to be above the fray: though a composer himself, he was a shrewd businessman, hence a realist, and besides he was older than the rest. In our selection from the fifty or so pages this exchange occupies in the published source, we begin with a bitter complaint addressed by Illica to Ricordi:



In the whole drama our bohemians do nothing but eat well and drink even better: here we might show them to the public engaged in sharing a herring four ways and finding in it a hundred different flavors.

In the end, if we want to, there's the possibility of completing the libretto and healing the great wound it suffered when the "courtyard" scene was cut.

But at this point, it seems to me you should take our side rather than Puccini's.

Believe me, the newspapers will be exceedingly severe. They will say there was no need of two of us to write a libretto—or rather—extract an incomplete libretto from a book.

This way, instead, while leaving Giacosa the greatest latitude and freedom, everything will be repaired; what is more, this last act will be powerfully moving and poetic.

And so—as we agreed on Sunday—we too shall be able to breathe a little. For if we were to remove the "courtyard" and replace it with "nothing," it would be too little.

Forgive all this chitchat, but Puccini can be frightening... Unfortunately (it must be confessed!) you usually side with him!

But the truth must out, and the culprits are always Giacosa and yours truly.

A "courtyard" scene had indeed been cut, and much of what Illica suggested here—the separation of the two lovers, the opening of Act IV resembling the opening of Act I, even the shared herring—found its way into the final version. Some five months later, it was Puccini's turn to complain to Ricordi. The subjects here are the "Latin Quarter" and "Barrière d'Enfer" acts, the latter of which proved to be, despite Puccini's misgivings, a rich source of musical inspiration to him. It is interesting to note that it was the composer who shaped the Musetta episode in the "Latin Quarter" act.

Milan, 21 July 1894

My dear signor Giulio,

I shall be in your study Tuesday morning at 10. Illica's irritation surprises me and I find it odd. When he came here we agreed perfectly . . . and he explored that I wasn't composing *La bohème* and said he would always be ready to support me in every way. Now that I have come back to him, he amuses himself by giving himself airs, and then if he says I put it aside, whose fault was it? Had the work been as it should have been, that is, logical, compact, interesting, and well balanced, that would have been enough. But it was nothing of the sort so far. Must I blindly accept the gospel according to Illica? I'll take no enemies, thank you, I'm too experienced for that. Now I begin to see *La bohème*, but only with the "Latin Quarter" the way I described it during my last conference with Illica, with Musetta's scene, which I thought up: and the death I will have the

way I conceived it, and then I'm sure I shall produce an original and vital work. As for the "Barrière," I remain of the same opinion, namely, that I don't much like it. I see in it an act where there's little music: only the comedy flows, but it's not much. I should have wished for some further melodramatic elements; we shouldn't forget that we have plenty of comedy in the other acts. In this one I wanted a scenario that would let me range freely in a somewhat more lyrical vein... Enough, let Signor Illica calm down and we'll do the job; but I occasionally want to speak my piece too, and not be ordered about.

Meanwhile, my cordial greetings, and see you on Tuesday.

Scarcely two weeks later, Puccini seemed utterly at peace with his librettist:

Torre del Lago, 3 August 1894

Dear Illica,

How glad I am of the news you give me! I saw you were fired with enthusiasm and never doubted it would be a masterpiece!

I'm working. I hope to get some material in a fortnight. Can you send me the "[Latin] Quarter" by then? Musetta I shall treat in a *pastoral* way as you suggest. Excellent the Alcidoro, etc. Good too Schaunard's toast, and I'm also very pleased with the Musetta business; that way I have a *complete* character, also musically.

I have full confidence in you and believe this libretto will turn out a masterpiece of humor and emotion. The definition of love you added to the opening scene is wonderful and novel: "L'amore è un caminetto che sciupa troppo" ["Love is a chimney that uses too much fuel"], etc. Keep it up.

In the next letter, to Ricordi, Puccini shows exactly what he conceived Giacosa's role to be in the collaboration:

Torre del Lago, 7 September 1894

My dear signor Giulio,

You will have seen Illica. Now I'm waiting for the cuts and the revision by Giacosa (absolutely necessary, also for the sake of the work's unity, and then, when duly pondered, the libretto acquires etc. etc). Now the original work is there! Very much so! The last act is splendid. The "[Latin] Quarter" too, but very difficult; I had that acrobat removed, and it will be necessary to prune other things. It would be good if you too were to look it over, to purge it of some bizarre things that are really not needed. For ex.: The horse is the king of the animals, rivers are wines made of water, and many more that Illica dotes on as if they were his children (if he had any). What needs to be shortened a great deal is act 2, the "Barrière" [which became act 3]: all that stuff at the beginning is useless, and we have agreed to tighten it, as well as all the rest, and the final quartet: but this is the weak act. That is my opinion, I could be wrong! so much the better for me. But what I think has succeeded very well indeed is the last: the death and all that happens before it are *truly moving*.

At this time Ricordi was in Paris with Verdi and Boito, getting ready the premiere of *Otello* in French at the Opéra. His response to Puccini's letter is therefore also interesting for its information on the older composer, his rehearsal methods, and his personal interest in Puccini.

Paris, 29 September 1894

My dear, good Puccini,

You can't believe how pleased I was to receive here a letter from you; we are working like slaves!... I haven't the time to breathe!... Suffice it to say that yesterday I had not the time to have lunch and didn't eat till half past 6 in the evening... Verdi, who will be 81 years old in a few days, has grown younger since last spring! Yesterday he had the gumption to order, be present at, and direct the following rehearsals: 12 o'clock: detailed study, choruses—from 1 to 2: conductor of the orchestra—from 2 to 2:30: rehearsal of the ballet—from 2:30 to 5:30: piano rehearsal with soloists, acts 3 and 4! I must say! . . .

By the way, on Tuesday 9 October Verdi will be 81 years old: if you wish to telegraph him a word of good wishes, I'm sure he will greatly appreciate it, since, despite his many occupations, he has twice already spoken to me about you, what are you doing, etc. etc.

And now that I've given you my news, let us speak about us. I see you first want Giacosa's revision!... Alas!... It will greatly draw out the proceedings, and I don't know when you will hold in your hands enough material to work on without having to resort to mosaic work. But I immediately wrote to Milan, urging great haste. If you like you can also write directly to Tito [Ricordi, Giulio's son], since if Giacosa should be in Milan, so much the better, we would save time. The more I think about it, the more I like *Bohème*!

To be sure, in my modest opinion, the 2nd [now 3rd] "Latin Quarter" act is an arduous enterprise, because it's hard to give the whole scene a sprightly form, keep things flowing, not leave any holes through which cold air might blow, creating voids. But Puccini has sturdy shoulders, strong lungs!! After all, is he, or is he not, the Doge [his nickname among the collaborators on the opera]? No verses in French: let Giacosa translate them in such a way that, if necessary, also the French meter can be adapted to the music. Let me hear from you again. And the Rodolfo-Mimi duet? finished?... Are you satisfied?... And the hunt?... Paris?... very beautiful! But I can't wait to leave.

P.S. And the Great Kaiser-Leon-Cavallo is he doing it, or isn't he? I mean *La bohème* of course.

"The hunt" was a reference to Puccini's well-known passion for that sport. Leoncavallo's *Bohème*, published by Ricordi's rival Sonzogno, had its première one year after Puccini's; and though it survived for a while side by side with the latter, it eventually disappeared from the stage. It is time now to hear from the fourth collaborator, Giacosa:

Milan, 25 June 1895

Dear Giulio,

I have completed, and I think very satisfactorily, the "Barrière" act. You tell me you want the 4th and final act by Saturday. How can I, with my house upside down because of the move? I must leave the apartment vacant by the 30th of this month: you can imagine there's not a piece of furniture left in place today.

Turin, 10 January 1896

Dear Illica,

This Marcello simply will not do. He understands nothing and won't succeed even with as many rehearsals as they have at Bayreuth. La Ferrari excellent, excellent the Musetta, excellent Pini-Corsi and Polonini. The tenor has arrived but he is always sick. I'll hear him again tomorrow and I'll report to you. As for Colline, still no word. They tell me the part will be taken by a bass from *Götterdämmerung*, but I think he has a hard, unsuitable voice.

To sum up, we're behind and incomplete. I'll wait, then blow my top.

Illica now joined Puccini in Turin and from there reported to Ricordi, who responded:

Milan, 23 January 1896

My dear Illica,

I thank you for your letters, which portray the situation with your usual humor. It seems to me there is a lack of understanding as to the patience you need to produce an opera like *La bohème*. As I telegraphed to you, Verdi and Boito, with the undersigned as assistant, held 23 detailed staging rehearsals with the soloists, asking them (*patiently* and *courteously*) to do segments of scenes over and over again, always *without singing*! For throats are not made of tempered steel, and once the vocal cords are tired, we're done for!

I shall come on Sunday, as I promised, so that on Monday we can have two good rehearsals: impossible for me to come sooner, given my business engagements. And so we'll dine together on Sunday, with the Doge.

The first performance (on 1 February) was a popular success. The reviews were mixed, and it is interesting to note how little Ricordi was affected by this. His response to Illica's report on the press was mailed from Rome, where the next staging of *La bohème* was already in progress.

Dear Illica,

I found Toscanini very obliging indeed. I've received your kind letter: the article is fine, but we need to talk. For the moment your presence is not needed, we're only at the beginning. I'm waiting for [the tenor] Gorga in order to make some decisions. Yesterday (in the morning) I thought it a good idea to go see Signor Giulio and tell him everything! The baritone is vile!... The others (except Colline, whom I haven't yet heard) are all right. Write to me soon.

Turin, 6 January 1896

Rome, 12 February 1896

My dear Illica,

... I'm not the least upset about what you tell me concerning the reviews of *La bohème*: it only reinforces my conviction that it is a novel, bold work of art, and therefore subject to discussion and even lack of understanding, I mean by the intellectuals, who can never be truly dispassionate, whereas the public enjoys it and is moved!

I must confess to you that I'm exhausted by this continuous redoing, re-touching, adding, correcting, cutting, sticking back together, expanding here in order to shrink there. Were it not for my great friendship towards you and my affection for Puccini, I should by now have freed myself, for better or for worse. That blessed libretto—why, I have rewritten it for you *three times*, and some pieces four or five times. How can I keep going at such a pace? You have, out of kindness, assigned me an increase of 200 lire, but I beg you to reflect that, after I handed in the completed last act, I was obliged to go back to work at a highly detailed, arid task, spending three or four, and often even five hours a day at it. In the time devoted to this patchwork I could easily have written four articles for the "Nuova antologia," for which I get paid 300 lire per printed sheet. It's not a fortune! But still you ought to realize how absolute and urgent is my need to attend to other tasks as well, in order to make a living!

I swear to you that I'll never again be caught writing librettos. Meanwhile, as I say, the "Barrière" act is completed. I'll bring it to you this evening. See to it that Puccini is there too. As for the last act, I'll try to satisfy you, but I don't have a home. I would work at the Society [of Authors], but there I get disturbed every minute. Then, too, I need to be at home packing and supervising the workers. But I won't be leaving Milan till the end of July. Sunday I'll put my things in storage, pack off my family, and go settle down in some quiet hotel all by myself. And there, not having the family around, which after all are always a cause of distraction, there in a few days I will be done. But will it be done? Or will we need to start all over again?

Till this evening.

The time eventually came for putting the new opera in rehearsal. About a month before the première we find Puccini in Turin, and his letters to Illica are mostly very short, reflecting the hectic pace of those final weeks.



Giacomo Puccini

*I shall feel it [the story of Manon] as an Italian,
with desperate passion.*

Puccini

Puccini was the last great exponent of Italian Romantic opera. His operas have always held a special place in the affections of audiences, and rival Verdi's in popularity. He was born into a dynasty of musicians who since the 18th century had been organists at the church of San Martino in Lucca. It had been intended that Puccini should follow the family tradition, but seeing a performance of Verdi's *Aida* at Pisa made him decide to become an opera composer.

Milan

In 1880 a scholarship enabled Puccini to enrol at the Milan Conservatory. He graduated in the summer of 1883, having entered a one-act opera, *Le villi* (*The Witches*), in a competition sponsored by a music publisher. It came nowhere, but the next year Puccini played it through at a party attended by Verdi's publisher Ricordi. *Le villi* was staged in 1884, and



ABOVE: A portrait of Giacomo Puccini (1858–1924) painted in Paris in 1899, three years after he wrote his highly popular opera *La Bohème*.

Ricordi immediately commissioned another opera, *Edgar*, from the young composer, and signed him up.

Edgar was performed at La Scala in Milan in 1889, but was not well received (the composer himself described it as a “mistake”). But his next opera, *Manon Lescaut* (based, like Massenet's opera *Manon*, on the novel by Abbé Prévost), was a huge success at its Turin première in 1893. Puccini had found a winning formula: that of the young, doomed heroine whose flawed character leads to an affecting early death. He repeated it with *La Bohème* (*The Bohemian Girl*), first performed at Turin in 1896 under Toscanini; but it took some time for this romantic drama of love and death in a Montmartre garret – now one of the world's most popular operas – to catch the public's imagination.

Puccini's next opera, *Tosca*, performed in Rome in 1900, was an excursion into the brutal world of *verismo*. Its



ABOVE: Puccini at home in the music-room of his villa at Torre del Lago, near Lucca.



ABOVE: A stage set for Act I of Puccini's *Tosca*, set in the Roman church of S. Andrea delle Valle.

“body count” – an attempted rape, a murder, a faked execution by firing squad which turns out to be real, and a final, dramatic suicide – has rarely been surpassed. Critics have always been snooty about *Tosca* (one described it memorably as “a shabby little shocker”), but Puccini’s marvellous melodic gift and innate sense of drama save it from mere sensationalism.

Based on a real-life incident, as related in David Belasco’s play, *Madama Butterfly* (La Scala, 1904) returned to the “weepie” genre. The tragic tale of a Japanese geisha, betrayed and abandoned by the American naval lieutenant she believes to be her husband, took the operatic world by storm after Puccini revised it into three acts. Another Belasco play, *The Girl of the Golden West*, provided the subject-matter for Puccini’s next opera, *La fanciulla del West*, premièred at the New York Metropolitan Opera in December 1910 with Enrico Caruso and Emmy Destinn in the leading roles.

Puccini made a political mistake with his next opera, accepting a commission from the directors of a Viennese theatre instead of an Italian one,

Life and works

NATIONALITY: Italian

BORN: Lucca, 1858;

DIED: Brussels, 1924

SPECIALIST GENRES:
Italian opera.

MAJOR WORKS:
Manon Lescaut (1893);
La Bohème (1896);
Tosca (1900);
Madama Butterfly (1904);
Turandot (1926).



ABOVE: A poster for the original 1904 production of *Madama Butterfly*. Butterfly is shown bidding farewell to her child before killing herself.

drawing accusations of treachery. The little-known *La rondine* (*The Swallow*) was first performed during World War I, though in Monte Carlo rather than Vienna. Puccini worked simultaneously on a “Grand Guignol” triptych of one-act operas: the horrific *Il tabarro* (*The Cloak*), the sentimental tragedy *Suor Angelica* and his one comedy, *Gianni Schicchi*, the most successful of the three. The triptych was premièred in New York in December 1918.

“Nessun dorma”

Puccini had lived since 1891 at his villa at Torre del Lago outside Lucca, with his wife Elvira (his married mistress until 1904). In 1909 their servant girl committed suicide when unjustly accused by the jealous Elvira of having an affair with Puccini. This tragedy may have inspired the character of Liù, the gentle, lovable slave girl in Puccini’s last opera *Turandot*, based on an oriental fairy-tale. The work includes the aria “Nessun dorma”, popularized by the “Three Tenors” at a concert staged in conjunction with the 1990

football World Cup in Italy. *Turandot* was destined to have a happy ending, when the cruel princess Turandot is outwitted by Prince Calaf and finally succumbs to love. But Puccini died of a heart attack during treatment for throat cancer in November 1924, leaving the final love duet unfinished.



ABOVE: A page from the manuscript score of *La Bohème* (1896). Puccini has indicated Mimi’s death with a skull and crossbones in the margin.