



## ***THE GIRL OF THE GOLDEN WEST***

### **THEMES**

Puccini's opera, *The Girl of the Golden West*, based on a 1905 play by San Franciscan David Belasco, premiered at the Metropolitan Opera in 1910. The opera, set in the rough and ready American West, offers the Italian composer's version of an untamed New World, filled with the restlessness, longing and bravado of men looking to strike it rich. Seeing that this is a Puccini opera, it seems natural that an entire camp of forty-niners, lawmen and outlaws alike, is tamed by the spirit of a strong, but tender-hearted young woman. In this respect, *The Girl of the Golden West* is very much in keeping with Puccini's most popular works — *La Bohème*, *Tosca*, *Madame Butterfly*, and *Turandot*. While an "exotic" setting allows the composer to paint each opera with distinct atmospheric color, Puccini's operas appeal to the heart. Puccini's heroines — Mimi, *Tosca*, *Cio-Cio*, *Turandot* and *Minnie* — all struggle with the universal question of what it means to love and be loved. Puccini's music speaks to the truths of being human, whatever the opera's locale.

#### **Unrequited Love, Mutual Love**

Act I opens in *The Polka*, the general store and saloon that is the gathering spot for the Cloudy Mountain mining camp. The men come here to drink and gamble, sing and fight, and distract themselves when they get lonely or homesick. Sheriff Rance enters the saloon, just in time to break up a fight, and it is clear that he is the authority figure in town. He is certain that he will get what he desires. He will capture Ramerrez, a ruthless bandit on the loose, and he boasts that Minnie, the owner of *The Polka*, will be his. With his claim on Minnie, the room erupts in chaos, but Minnie enters and quickly restores the peace. While she is a sweet and loving soul, she is also a force to be reckoned with. Minnie reminds Rance that he already has a wife, and tells him that she seeks mutual love. A stranger enters, and Minnie and "Johnson from Sacramento" are instantly attracted to each other. Rance becomes jealous, and departs determined to capture Ramerrez. When the news of a bandit sighting frightens Minnie, she confesses to Johnson that the miners have entrusted her with their gold. Unbeknownst to Minnie, Johnson is the bandit Ramerrez, whose gang has plans to rob her of the gold. With tender feelings and a change of heart, Johnson decides that he must stop the robbery. He promises Minnie that he will return.

#### **Jealousy, Trust, Betrayal**

In Act II, a blizzard rages, and the plot gets stormy, right along with the change in the weather. Johnson returns to confess his love for Minnie, and she offers her love in return. A surprise announcement interrupts the moment, and Johnson hides to avoid being captured. Minnie comes to discover that Johnson is the bandit Ramerrez. Minnie is cast further in doubt when Sheriff Rance enters with a photo, evidence that Ramerrez has another woman. After everyone leaves, Johnson tries to explain to Minnie that he has decided to change his ways, because of his love for her. Hurt and betrayed, Minnie orders him to leave. Moments later, gunshots sound, and Minnie opens the door to find that Johnson has been shot. She brings him inside and hides him. Rance soon appears, hot on the trail, and discovers that Johnson is hiding in the loft overhead. Minnie proposes to Rance that they play a game of poker with the stakes being Johnson's life. When Minnie discovers that she holds a losing hand, she cheats to save her love.

## Forgiveness

Act III opens with the hunt for the escaped Johnson, who is hiding in the hills. Johnson is captured, and Rance finally has his moment of revenge. The men of the camp are eager for blood. As the hanging noose is readied, Johnson confesses to the robberies, but denies ever having killed anyone. As he awaits his fate, Johnson asks the men of the camp to spare Minnie of heartbreak. Minnie is to believe that he is free and far away.

*Ch'ella mi creda libero e lontano,  
Sopra una nuova via di redenzione!  
Aspetterò ch'io torni  
E passeranno i giorni,  
Ed io non tornerò...  
Minnie, della mia vita mio solo fiore,  
Minnie, che m'hai voluto tanto bene!  
Ah! tu della mia vita mio solo fior!*

*Let her think I'm free and far away,  
on my way to a new life of redemption!  
She'll wait for me to return..  
and the days will pass,  
and I won't return...  
Minnie, only flower of my life,  
Minnie, you who have loved me so much!  
Ah, you, the only flower of my life!*

His fervent expression of his love for Minnie moves the miners, until Rance breaks the mood by calling for Johnson's death by hanging.

## Redemption and the Redemptive Power of Love

The noose is tightened and the crowd is primed and ready for violence, when Minnie arrives with her revolver drawn. She declares her love for Johnson and pleads with the men to spare his life. She reminds the miners that she has given them all the best years of her youth. Sonora is the first to soften, "Ah Minnie, he's robbed us of more than gold! He's stolen your heart!" She tells them that they must forgive, even as they insist that they cannot. One by one, she speaks to the miners of their years of friendship, and the supreme truth of her love for all of them. Her plea is heard, and Johnson is released.

## Changing Destiny, Fate

When this opera ends, *The Girl of the Golden West* departs from the expected. There is no dramatic tragedy, no death, no extreme sacrifice of the heroine to entertain the audience for an evening. Minnie and Ramirez simply sing their goodbyes to the men of the camp and head west into the sunset together.

*Goodbye, my sweet country.  
Goodbye, my California!  
Lovely Sierra peaks, snows, goodbye!*

The miners sing their farewell, knowing that Minnie will never again return, and the curtain falls to a mixed moment — a happy ending tinged with love and loss. Life at the Cloudy Mountain mining camp will certainly be a little sadder, a little darker, without the company of a kind-hearted woman.