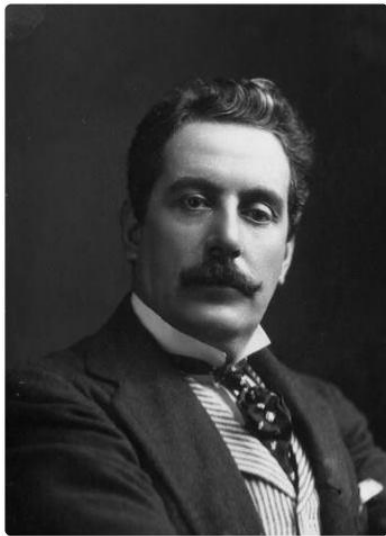




SAN FRANCISCO
OPERA

Manon Lescaut

Composer Biography: Giacomo Puccini



Born 22nd December 1858 in Lucca, Italy, music was in Puccini's blood, but he was not a wunderkind. Except for a handful of compositions, he was an opera composer, full stop, he never even conducted a single piece that he wrote. Puccini's father, among other duties, was director of the local conservatoire and church organist. When he died in 1864, Puccini's uncle succeeded him in those posts, although the six-year-old Giacomo was to take over as organist as soon as he was "able to discharge such duties," according to the official decree. Puccini never did take over, despite playing the organ and composing a few small pieces as a young man.

He saw his first opera, Verdi's *Aida*, at fifteen and "felt that a musical window had opened." He started composing larger works with an eye toward attending the Milan conservatoire, where he matriculated in 1880. His first taste of success came in 1884 with the one-act opera and ballet *Le willis* (later renamed *Le villi* and changed to two acts). One month later his mother died and Puccini almost immediately eloped with Elvira Gemignani, a married woman with whom he would have a stormy relationship for the rest of his life. (They eventually married in 1904.)

Puccini never worked quickly, always searching for the right subject matter, the one that would "make people weep, therein lies everything." *Edgar*, his first full-length opera, premiered at La Scala in 1889, five years after *Le villi*. It failed, receiving just three performances, and has never entered the repertory (the last Met staging was in 1909 while its Vienna premiere was 2005). Puccini began a string of major successes four years later with *Manon Lescaut*, followed in 1896 by *La Boheme* and in 1900 with *Tosca*. This regularity was interrupted in February 1903 by a car accident that left Puccini house bound for eight months. *Madama Butterfly* premiered just shy of the one-year anniversary of his car crash but was withdrawn immediately because of its poor reception.

In 1909, before he could complete another opera, scandal engulfed Puccini when his wife, Elvira, was found guilty of "defamation of character, libel and menace to life and limb,

relating to the suicide death of Doria Manfredi", the Puccinis' 16-year-old servant girl. Puccini was no saint (he had several affairs and according to one biographer, his "conquests were easy and numerous"), but he denied a relationship with Doria, whose virginity when she killed herself was verified posthumously. Upon appeal, the case was withdrawn after Puccini paid the girl's family 12,000 lire.

His life never seemed to be particularly fulfilling after that point. He had some success with *La Fanciulla* and *Il trittico*, both of which premiered at the Met, and wrote some things that he didn't love, including *La rondine* and the choral work *Inno a Roma* ("a real piece of crap"). His last four years were haunted by a Proustian fear of death, lest he not complete his beloved *Turandot*. The fear proved well-founded. Puccini died of throat cancer in 1924 with *Turandot* unfinished.

Adapted from www.theopera101.com