

LA BOHÈME

COMPOSER BIOGRAPHY

GIACOMO PUCCINI, *Composer*



Giacomo Antonio Domenico Michele Secondo Maria Puccini (December 22, 1858 – November 29, 1924) was an Italian composer who has been called the most important Italian composer in the generation after Giuseppe Verdi. His operas, including *La bohème*, *Tosca*, *Madama Butterfly*, and *Turandot*, are among the most frequently performed in the standard repertoire. Some of his arias, such as "O mio babbino caro" from *Gianni Schicchi*, "Che gelida manina" from *La bohème*, and "Nessun dorma" from *Turandot*, have become part of popular culture.

EARLY LIFE

Giacomo Puccini was born in Lucca, in the region of Tuscany in Italy, into a family with five generations of musical history behind them (his family included famous composer Domenico Puccini). It was therefore assumed Puccini would inherit the talent and interest and continue in his family's chosen craft.

Puccini's father died when Puccini was only five years old, and upon his death, Puccini fell heir to the position of choir master and organist at San Martino Church, and also professor of music at Collegio Ponziano. His mother had high hopes for him and entrusted Puccini to her brother, Fortunato Magi, for musical instruction. Magi considered Puccini to be a poor and undisciplined student. It was not until Puccini and his brother,

Michele, walked 18.5 miles (30 kilometers) to see a performance of Verdi's *Aida* in Pisa that he became entranced by opera. This incident is what inspired Puccini to be an opera composer.

In 1880, with financial assistance from his uncle, Dr Nicolao Cerù, and a sizeable grant from Queen Margherita of Italy, Puccini enrolled in the Milan Conservatory and studied composition with Amilcare Ponchielli (Italian opera composer) and Antonio Bazzini (Italian violinist, composer and teacher). When not studying, Puccini enjoyed frequenting the theatre as much as possible.

While studying at the Conservatory, in 1882, Puccini obtained a libretto from Ferdinando Fontana (Italian journalist, dramatist, and poet, best known today for his libretti for Puccini's *Le Villi* and *Edgar*) and used it to enter an opera competition. The competition was for a one-act opera, which Puccini saw advertised by the publishing firm of Edoardo Sonzogno in its house journal *Il teatro illustrato*. Although he did not win, *Le Villi* was later staged in 1884 at the Teatro Dal Verme in Milan, where it caught the attention of Giulio Ricordi. Ricordi was head of G. Ricordi & Co. music publishers, and after seeing *Le Villi*, immediately commissioned a second opera from Puccini. This was to become *Edgar* (1889). *Edgar* was unsuccessful but sealed Puccini's lifelong association with the house of Ricordi.

In July 1883, Puccini ended his studies with an instrumental piece called *the Capriccio sinfonico*, which was performed by the student orchestra under Franco Faccio (a known conductor of Verdi). This performance revealed for the first time Puccini's talent for melodic invention and colorful orchestration. In the same year, at the

age of twenty-one, Puccini composed the *Messa*. This marked the culmination of his family's long association with church music in his native Lucca. Although Puccini himself correctly titled the work *Messa*, referring to a setting of the full Catholic Mass, today the work is popularly known as his *Messa di Gloria*. This work anticipated Puccini's career as an operatic composer by offering glimpses of the dramatic power that he would soon unleash on the stage; the powerful "arias" for tenor and bass soloists are certainly more operatic than is usual in church music.

In 1886, Elvira Gemignani (the widow of a Lucca merchant) and Puccini began a relationship and started living together.

TORRE DEL LAGO

Although at the beginning of the 1900s, the composer was often abroad to supervise the staging of his works, from 1891 onwards, Puccini spent most of his time at Torre del Lago. Torre is a small community about fifteen miles from Lucca, situated between the Tyrrhenian Sea and Lake Massaciuccoli, just south of Viareggio. While renting a house there, he spent time hunting and still regularly visited Lucca. In 1896 Gemignani gave birth to a son, and by 1900 Puccini had acquired land and built a villa on the lake, now known as the "Villa Museo Puccini." He lived there until 1921, but was forced to move to Viareggio, a few kilometers north, when pollution produced by peat (decayed vegetation) developed on the lake. The "Villa Museo Puccini" is presently owned by his granddaughter, Simonetta Puccini, and is open to the public.

THE MIDDLE YEARS

Puccini's third opera, *Manon Lescaut* – which was produced in 1893 and was staged for the first time at the Teatro Regio in Turin – was his most successful work to date. It was staged just eight days before Verdi's *Falstaff* and was based on Abbé Prévost's 18th century novel. Puccini was suddenly established as a wealthy composer, even abroad, and as artistic successor to Maestro Verdi. Additionally, *Manon Lescaut* launched Puccini's remarkable relationships with the librettists Luigi Illica and Giuseppe Giacosa, who collaborated with him on his next three operas – *La bohème*, *Tosca*, and *Madama Butterfly* – which became his three most famous and most performed operas.

By way of background, *La bohème* (1896) is considered to be one of his best works, as well as one of the most romantic operas ever composed. It is arguably today's most popular opera. *Tosca* (1900) was debatably Puccini's first foray into verismo – the realistic depiction of many facets of real life including violence. The opera is generally considered to be of major importance in the history of opera. Based on David Belasco's one act play, *Madama Butterfly* (1904) was initially greeted with great hostility (mostly organized by rivals of Puccini) but, after some reworking, it became another of his most successful operas.

The first ten years of the century proved to be very tormenting for Puccini's private life, and a series of failed projects with regard to music was the result. Puccini had a passion for driving fast cars, and in 1903 he was seriously injured in one of Italy's first automobile accidents. Happily, in 1904 Puccini and Gemignani were married, but sadly in 1906 one of Puccini's librettists, Giuseppe Giacosa, passed away. This left Puccini only with Luigi Illica, who did not satisfy the composer when he (the librettist) worked alone. After these events Puccini's compositions became less frequent, and there was a long period before his next opera was produced. This was *La Fanciulla del West*, based on a stage play by David Belasco called *The Girl of the Golden West*. Puccini's opera had its world première at the Metropolitan Opera, which had Belasco himself as the stage director and Arturo Toscanini (one of the most acclaimed musicians of the late 19th and 20th Centuries) as orchestra conductor.

In 1909 Puccini's wife embroiled the house in scandal, accusing Puccini of having an intimate relationship with their maid, Doria Manfredi. Gemignani publicly denounced the maid and consequently, due to extreme stress, the maid committed suicide. A court case pursued and established the girl's innocence (although due to supposed illegitimate children, it is said that the affair did occur). Elvira was successfully sued by the Manfredis (a noble family who held the lordship of Faenza – Italian city and commune – in the late Middle Ages and early Renaissance), and Giacomo had to pay damages. The Puccinis separated, but finally reconciled. However, the

relationship was never the same again. The publicity affected Puccini deeply and he was in a state of emotional turmoil. To make matters worse for Puccini, in 1912, Giulio Ricordi (Puccini's editor and publisher) passed away.

Serious differences between Puccini and Giulio Ricordi's son, Tito (who became director of the company after his father's death) caused Puccini finally to accept a lucrative offer by the directors of the Vienna Karltheater in 1913. In 1917, he began writing *La Rondine*, but it was not staged until March 27th, 1917 in Monte Carlo. It is not considered to be one of Puccini's best works but it was warmly received. Then, in 1918, *Il trittico* premiered in New York. This work was composed of three one-act operas: a horrific episode (*Il tabarro*), in the style of the Parisian Grand Guignol – a theatre in the Pigalle area of Paris, which specialized in naturalistic horror shows, a sentimental tragedy (*Suor Angelica*), and a comedy (*Gianni Schicchi*). Of the three, *Gianni Schicchi* has remained the most popular, containing the well-known aria “O mio babbino caro.”

PUCCINI POLITICS

Unlike Richard Wagner and Giuseppe Verdi, Puccini did not appear to be active in the politics of his day (although Mussolini – leader of the Italian National Fascist Party – claimed that Puccini applied for admission to the Party). While it has been proven that Puccini was indeed among the early supporters of the Fascist party, at the time of the election campaign of 1919 (in which the Fascist candidates were defeated), there do not appear to be any records or proof of any application given to the party by Puccini. Additionally, it should be noted that had Puccini applied, his close friend Toscanini (an extreme anti-Fascist), would probably have severed all friendly connections with him and ceased conducting his operas. This notwithstanding, Fascist propaganda appropriated Puccini's figure. One of the most widely played marches during Fascist street parades and public ceremonies was the "Inno a Roma" (Hymn to Rome), which Puccini composed in 1919 (with lyrics by Fausto Salvectori). It was based on these verses from Horace's *Carmen saeculare*:

Alme Sol, curru nitido diem qui / Promis et celas alius que et idem / Nasceris, possis nihil urbe Roma / Visere maius.

(O Sun, that unchanged, yet ever new, / Lead'st out the day and bring'st it home, / May nothing be present to thy view / Greater than Rome!)

THE FINAL YEARS

A habitual Toscano cigar chain-smoker, Puccini began to complain of a chronic sore throat towards the end of 1923. A diagnosis of throat cancer led his doctors to recommend a new and experimental radiation therapy treatment, which was being offered in Brussels. Puccini and his wife never knew how serious the cancer was, as the news was only revealed to his son. Puccini died on November 29, 1924, from complications from the treatment. Uncontrolled bleeding led to a heart attack the day after his surgery.

Upon hearing of Puccini's death, all of Italy, as well as fans from all over the world went into mourning. When news reached New York during a performance of *La bohème*, the opera was immediately halted so that the orchestra could play Frédéric Chopin's *Funeral March*. The audience was stunned.

Puccini was originally buried in Milan, but in 1926 his son Antonio had Puccini's remains transferred to Torre del Lago. Puccini is now buried there with his wife and son who died later. Torre instantly became a place of spontaneous pilgrimage and people traveled from near and far to see the house where the most popular composer of the 20th century had lived and worked.

AFTER DEATH

Turandot, Puccini's final opera, was left unfinished after his death. The last two scenes were completed by Franco Alfano (Italian composer and pianist) based on the composer's sketches. There is some dispute as to whether

Alfano followed the sketches or not, since they were said to be indecipherable. However, it is believed he did follow the sketches because he was given (still existing) transcriptions from Guido Zucconi who was accustomed to interpreting Puccini's handiwork.

In April 1926 when Arturo Toscanini conducted the premiere performance of *Turnadot*, in front of a sold-out crowd (with every prominent Italian, except for Benito Mussolini in attendance), he chose not to perform Alfano's portion of the score. When the performance reached the point where Puccini had completed the score, Toscanini stopped the orchestra. The conductor turned to the audience and said: "Here the opera finishes, because at this point the Maestro died." (Some record that he said, more poetically, "Here the Maestro laid down his pen.")

Toscanini edited Alfano's suggested completion (*Alfano I*) to produce a version now known as *Alfano II*, and this is the version usually used in performance. However, some musicians (for example, Ashbrook & Powers, 1991) consider *Alfano I* to be a more dramatically complete version. In 2002, an official new ending was composed by Luciano Berio (composer known for experimental work and for pioneering electronic music) from original sketches, but this finale has to date been performed only infrequently.

NOTES ON STYLE

The subject of Puccini's style is one that has been long avoided by musicologists. This avoidance can perhaps be attributed to the perception that his work, with its emphasis on melody and evident popular appeal, lacked "seriousness." A similar prejudice beset Rachmaninoff (composer representative of Russian late Romanticism) during his lifetime. Despite the place Puccini clearly occupies in the popular tradition of Verdi, his style of orchestration also shows the strong influence of Wagner, matching specific orchestral configurations and timbres to different dramatic moments. His operas contain an unparalleled manipulation of orchestral colors, with the orchestra often creating the scene's atmosphere.

The structures of Puccini's works are also noteworthy. While it is to an extent possible to divide his operas into arias or numbers (like Verdi's), his scores generally present a very strong sense of continuous flow and connectivity, perhaps another sign of Wagner's influence. Like Wagner, Puccini used leitmotifs to connote characters (or combinations of characters). This is apparent in *Tosca*, in which three chords signal the beginning of the opera, and are then used throughout to announce Scarpia. Several motifs are also linked to Mimi and the bohemians in *La bohème* and to Cio-Cio-San's eventual suicide in *Butterfly*. Unlike Wagner, however, Puccini's motifs are static. Where Wagner's motifs develop into more complicated figures as the characters develop, Puccini's remain more or less identical throughout the opera (in this respect anticipating the themes of modern musical theatre). Another distinctive quality in Puccini's work is the use of the voice in the style of speech; characters sing short phrases one after another as if talking to each other.

Puccini is celebrated for his melodic gift, and many of his melodies are both memorable and enduringly popular. These melodies are often made of sequences from the scale. Very distinctive examples are "Quando me'n vo" (Musetta's Waltz) from *La bohème* and "E lucevan le stelle" from Act III of *Tosca*. Today, it is rare not to find at least one Puccini aria included in an operatic singer's CD album or recital. Interestingly – and unusual for operas written by Italian composers up until Puccini's time – many of Puccini's operas are set outside Italy. He sets his operas in exotic places such as Japan (*Madama Butterfly*), gold-mining country in California (*La fanciulla del West*), Paris and the Riviera (*La rondine*), and China (*Turandot*).

Pulitzer Prize-winning music critic Lloyd Schwartz summarized Puccini: "Is it possible for a work of art to seem both completely sincere in its intentions and at the same time counterfeit and manipulative? Puccini built a major career on these contradictions. But people care about him, even admire him, because he did it both so shamelessly and so skillfully. How can you complain about a composer whose music is so relentlessly memorable, even – maybe especially – at its most saccharine?"

During his life Puccini took an active role in his operas, involving himself in many matters relating to their production and the selection of singers, conductors, and venues. He traveled the world to make sure everything was carried out correctly (these travels certainly helped to publicize his works). Additionally, the great maestro's participation in rehearsals and presence at performances added greatly to the public's interest. In the end, Puccini's repertoire was complete with only twelve operas (in contrast to Verdi's twenty-eight). He was interested in quality, as opposed to quantity.

Sources: wikipedia.com, geocities.com, arena.it