

COURTESY TEATRO MASSIMO DI PALERMO

Set design for Act I of the current production of *La Fanciulla del West*

In 1891, Jeannette Thurber asked Antonín Dvořák to journey across the Atlantic to take up the post of professor of composition at the National Conservatory of Music in New York. Although Dvořák's fame was already secured in America, Thurber hoped that the Czech composer could come and forge a new national American musical identity. When Giacomo Puccini came to America for the world premiere of *La Fanciulla del West* at the Metropolitan Opera on December 10, 1910 (the first world premiere hosted by the New Yorkers), he was tacitly charged with the same task. Puccini had been criticized at home for writing operas that were too "international." Could he foster that national musical identity the Americans craved? Although neither Dvořák nor Puccini achieved the later success of Gershwin, Copland, or Adams in depicting America's sound and history, Puccini was the first to portray a seminal period of the country's past in glorious musical Technicolor. Before the premiere of Puccini's oft-forgotten masterpiece, Amer-

ican opera had merely aped its European counterparts with tales from the Ancient World or seminal European literature. *La Fanciulla del West* paved the way for other "nationalist" works such as *Porgy and Bess*, *Nixon in China*, and *Doctor Atomic*. It likewise set a sonic precedent for two genres in which America would come to dominate, the movies and musical theater.

The premiere of *La Fanciulla del West* was not the first time Puccini had been to America. It was on a trip to New York in 1907, when the Met performed a season of his operas, that the composer first saw David Belasco's play *The Girl of the Golden West*. Puccini and Belasco knew each other well, since Puccini had adapted Belasco's play *Madama Butterfly*. However the acquisition of the rights to *The Girl of the Golden West* was not as easy as the composer would have wished. Ricordi, Puccini's publishers, had approached Belasco's agent only to find that the deal's terms were far too rich for the Italians' taste. Customarily, Puccini began to become distracted and was thinking of other possible subjects, knowing that, in any event, a dramaturgical challenge lay ahead in adapting *The Girl of the Golden West* for the operatic stage. Ultimately, things came together and Puccini was clearly excited by the challenge when he wrote to Ricordi in August 1907.

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Dorothy Kirsten starred in the title role of the 1960 production

We're under way! *The Girl* promises to be a second *Bohème*, but stronger, hardier and more ample. I am imagining a large-scale scenario, an extensive clearing in the great Californian forest with gigantic trees, and we will need eight to ten supernumeraries on horseback.

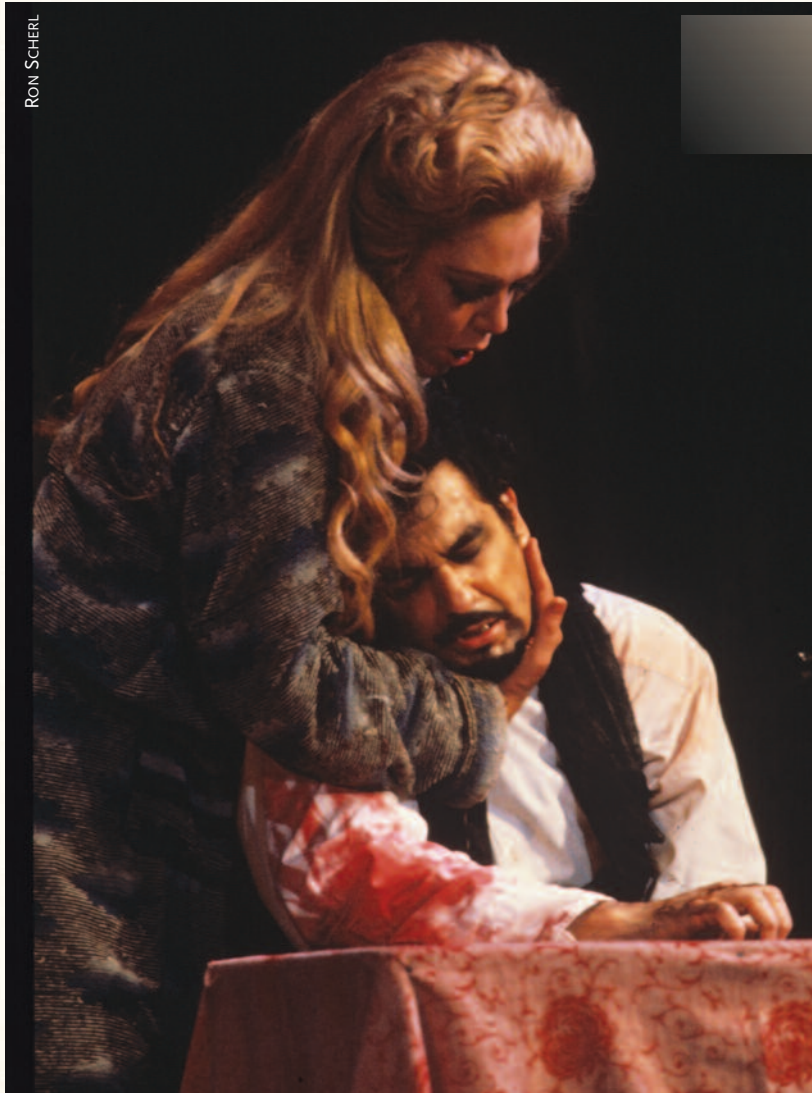
It is revealing that Puccini thought of his new project as a "second *Bohème*." Although he had exchanged the Latin quarter of Paris for the Cloudy Mountains during the Gold Rush, for Puccini it was primarily a romance (and he clearly wanted to replicate the success of *Bohème*). Back at home, however, Puccini's adoption of this new American tale would renew criticism of his work. At a time when Europe was facing great political instability, Italy as a whole was intent on maximizing opportunities to assert its national character. Francesco Batilla wrote that "a great preoccupation for all musicians, whether old or young, is that of the question of *italianità*. Our musicians are no longer sure of their Italianness." Having embraced a wider European tradition—including the orchestral virtuosity of Debussy and Richard Strauss and the harmonic excess of a post-Wagnerian tradition—Puccini's work was looked at with some scepticism. And, having toyed with French and "Japanese" subjects to date, the Nationalists had grown tired of Puccini's internationalism. Such issues were seemingly irrelevant abroad and, while Puccini had begun *La fanciulla del West* without a firm commission, by April 1910 the Metropolitan Opera had signed a contract indicating that they would premiere the work later than year. Puccini need not worry about any underlying censure at home and, in any event, was already hard at work.

Having fallen out with his previously stalwart collaborator Luigi Illica, who had backed another project when Puccini was still unsure about the Belasco, Puccini began a new working relationship with Carol Zangarini. They also failed to see eye to eye and the libretto, which Puccini felt was too loose an adaptation of the play, began to stall. Guelfo Civinini, a writer local to the composer's Tuscan home, stepped into the breach and pushed the libretto to its first full draft. The difficulties were indicative of the complicated dramaturgical task that Puccini had foreseen when he had first encountered the play in 1907. It needed cutting and refocusing and Puccini wanted to elide the two last acts into one. More important, however, was creating a



balance between the world of the miners and Minnie and Johnson's relationship. The happy ending would also prove difficult, although Puccini's solution is mesmerizingly beautiful. While in *La Bohème* the love affair had grown out of the work's milieu, here it forms a marked escape from the mundane. And unlike the previous opera, where the relationship unfolds through Rodolfo's eyes, Puccini aligns us with Minnie's emotions in *La Fanciulla*, rather than Johnson's. The Mexican bandit is cast as the "other," the ultimate sexy bad boy of Western yore. Alongside this central relationship, Puccini wanted to give richness to the world of the Polka saloon with detailed portrayals of the miners, particularly given the palpable absence of the female voice from the chorus. Yet it was important not to let the characterization of the community make it feel too episodic, thereby derailing the work's overarching dramaturgy (something that the Gershwins would face when adapting both DuBose Heyward's novel *Porgy* and Dorothy Heyward's theatrical adaptation).

The chief solution by which to whip this mixture of romance and locale into one dramatic unit was to create a free flowing and



Carol Neblett as Minnie and Plácido Domingo as Dick Johnson in the 1979 production

beguiling sound world. As the lights dim, the full orchestra rings out with a rich diminished chord, which is quickly followed by a secondary blast. Another more refined theme comes through; this ostensibly depicts the lovers' romance pitched against the harsh surroundings. Finally, there is a swaggering rhythmic "ragtime" fanfare. The sum effect, which rolls setting, emotion, and local color into one, is breathtaking. It is bettered still by the appearance of Minnie. After the quiet conversation of the miners, with parlando sections and colorful touches (such as ragtime rhythms and the "dooda, dooda day" of *Camptown Races*), the arrival of the opera's emotional linchpin could not be clearer. A stunning loud C-major chord, replete with longing dissonances, speaks plainly to the miners and the audience. It is answered later in the act by the warmth of Johnson's "Quello che tacete." Initially, Minnie and Johnson's romance appears simple, almost trite. The lilting waltz of the miners is charming, if banal, as the lovers take to the dance floor, but when Johnson assumes the theme as his first big aria, it takes on a new level of sophistication. In the intimacy of the scene in Minnie's

hut—reminiscent of the confrontational second act of *Tosca*, with its three protagonists—Puccini blurs these boundaries further; the musical language is at its most fluid when the lovers are closest, as the "number" approach of Italian tradition is subsumed into an ever-evolving form. Recurrent reminders of the weather and the isolation of the miners' encampment, such as the scurries of snow (indicated by pizzicato strings and piccolo) or the *macchina del vento* (wind machine), punctuate these episodes. And it is through the consequence of these elements that Puccini unfolds and unifies the work's structure.

Despite the strength of this musical language, Torre Franca, Puccini's critical nemesis, thought it was merely a "tedious medley of Viennese operetta with a dash of Wagner and authentic North-American film." With all these supposed influences, can the opera of the Golden West truly be seen as part of any national tradition? After the premiere in 1910, *The Evening World* said that there was "nothing American about the score of *La Fanciulla del West* except a suggestion of ragtime, and the suave, mellifluous Italian phrases fall strangely upon the ears from the mouths of the rough and uncouth miners in a camp of forty-niners in California." Like Dvořák before him, Puccini had drawn on local sounds and framed them in his own style. Local signifiers (such as the ragtime

music in *La Fanciulla* or the snap rhythms of Dvořák's "American" String Quartet) are all well and good, but the very mechanisms that translate the non-art traditional music into the symphony, the string quartet, or the opera rob it of its essential originality. And for a contemporary audience that demanded a clear mirror image of itself in the proscenium arch, Puccini or Dvořák's fusion of styles was too equivocal. Even the title of the opera mixes "Fanciulla" (Italian) and "West" (English). At a time when new national cultures were forming their cultural heritage—however hokum—this amalgam was problematic. Equally problematic was the reaction of the Italians. The Italian nation celebrated the fiftieth anniversary of the Kingdom of Italy in the year after the world premiere of *La Fanciulla del West*. Many commentators and musicologists felt that Puccini had failed to export their brand of nationalism to America. But what the critics on either side of the Atlantic had fallen short of realizing was that Puccini had taken the essentially old-school building block of Italian lyricism and transmuted it into a new, richer vernacular.

That musical language would evolve even further with Puccini's



*Tito Gobbi starred as Sheriff Jack Rance
in the 1960 production*

melds Hispanic rhythms with the thoroughly expatriate argot of the Broadway Musical. These works, like the nation that formed them, are joined by their common diversity. And while Irving Berlin and Cole Porter chose more jazzy inflections for their musicals, Richard Rodgers (and Andrew Lloyd Webber after him) pinned their colors to Puccini's mast, with easy melodies and a piquant but eloquent harmonic palate. The choice of a thoroughly Puccinian idiom in *The Phantom of the Opera* is no coincidence. By referencing moments in *Tosca* or *La fanciulla del West*, Lloyd Webber indicates something of the universality of romance and Puccini's innate ability to project that through music.

La Fanciulla del West was an early trendsetter for these and other composers. Moving with a cinematic grace, Puccini showed a brilliant eye for detail but an unbending need for theatrical pace and punch. Although harsh early criticism made for the work's slow reception history, the opera can now be considered the forgotten gem of the composer's output. With the passage of time, critical need for clearly defined national styles eroded. Notwithstanding the condemnation of Torrefranca and his carping brood, the work's qualities were not lost on all who heard it. On March 27, 1918 Anton Webern wrote to his friend and teacher Arnold Schoenberg after attending a performance

of the opera in Prague, conducted by Heinrich Jalowetz. "I am surprised that it is a score that sounds original in every way. Splendid. Every bar astonishing. Very special sounds. Not a shade of kitsch! And mine is a first-hand impression. I have to say I really liked it." This unlikely early defendant proves that Puccini had succeeded in writing a beguiling and subtle work, of which both the New and Old Worlds could be justly proud. ❁

later works. Although the composer finally appeased his Italian critics with the composition of a thoroughly indigenous comedy, *Gianni Schicchi* (the final part of *Il Trittico*), his style would continue to embrace wider approaches. While many have written about Puccini's failings, being both over-emotional and unsymphonic, his music continues to speak clearly to audiences throughout the world and the "un-Italian" composer became the county's greatest musical export. Indeed, such was the power of Puccini's language that the two most successful genres of the twentieth century, the movies and musical theater, would later adopt it. We are familiar with the sounds of *La Fanciulla del West* because the ensuing generation of Hollywood composers would depend on its radical cropped-shot technique, moving quickly from one musical thought to another—as in the overture. Puccini's ability (like that of Richard Strauss) to depict specific temporal conditions would similarly be the envy of that new moving-picture art form. If Puccini had created a "tedious medley" of operetta, Wagner, and film, then the Golden Age of Hollywood was only another assortment of Puccini, operetta, and Wagner. Although the Gershwins would later invoke the music of the South and jazz, George Gershwin's own ambition was for his work to reflect *Die Meistersinger von Nürnberg* and *Carmen*. So while *Porgy and Bess* is often considered the great polemic of American opera, its own aspirations are equally equivocal. Indeed Bernstein's *West Side Story* (a work with similar aims)

— WAS — — P U C C I N I — — R O B B E D ? —

The climactic phrase in Dick Johnson's aria, "Quello che tacete," bears a strong resemblance to a similar phrase in the Phantom's song, "Music of the Night," in Andrew Lloyd Webber's 1986 musical *The Phantom of the Opera*. Following the musical's success, the Puccini estate filed suit against Webber accusing him of plagiarism and the suit was settled out of court.