

GIACOMO PUCCINI (1858- 1924)

September has traditionally been “Opera Month” at Il Cenacolo with the Sal Reina Opera Outing and luncheon speakers addressing various facets of opera, and especially the San Francisco Opera. This year the San Francisco Opera is presenting two operas by Giacomo Puccini: La Bohème and Tosca. After Giuseppe Verdi, he is considered the greatest of classical Italian opera composers. While his early work was rooted in traditional late-19th-century romantic Italian opera, he successfully developed his work in the realistic “verismo” style, of which he became one of the leading exponents. Another reason for Alla Corrente to look at Puccini this fall is the fact that Puccini died 90 years ago this November 29.

PUCCINI was born Giacomo Antonio Domenico Michele Secondo Maria Puccini in 1858 in Lucca (Tuscany). He was one of seven children of Michele Puccini and Albina Puccini (née Magi). Puccini was the last descendant of a family that for two centuries had provided the musical directors of the Cathedral of San Martino in Lucca. Puccini initially dedicated himself to music, therefore, not as a personal vocation but as a family profession.



Following the death of his father when Giacomo was five, the municipality of Lucca supported the family with a small pension and kept the position of cathedral organist open for Giacomo until he came of age.

He first studied music with two of his father’s former pupils, and he played the organ in small local churches. He was given a general education at the seminary of San Michele in Lucca, and then at the seminary of the cathedral. One of his uncles, Fortunato Magi, supervised his musical education. Puccini got a diploma from the Pacini School of Music in Lucca in 1880, having studied there with his uncle and later with Carlo Angeloni, who had also instructed Alfredo Catalani. A grant from the Italian Queen Margherita, and assistance from another uncle, Nicholas Cerù, provided the funds necessary for Puccini to continue his studies at the Milan Conservatory. He studied at the conservatory for three years. In 1880, at the age of 21, he composed his first mass, which marked the culmination of his family’s long association with church music in his native Lucca. At the Milan Conservatory, his principal teachers were Antonio Bazzini, a famous violinist and composer of chamber music, and Amilcare Ponchielli, the composer of the opera *La Gioconda*. On July 16, 1883, he received his diploma and presented as his graduation composition *Capriccio Sinfonico*, an instrumental work that attracted the attention of influential musical circles in Milan.

After the premiere of the *Capriccio Sinfonico*, Ponchielli and Puccini discussed the possibility that Puccini’s next work might be an opera. A performance of Giuseppe Verdi’s *Aida*, which he had seen in Pisa in 1876, had convinced him that his true vocation was opera. Ponchielli invited Puccini to stay at his villa, where Puccini was introduced to another young man named Fernando Fontana. Puccini and Fontana agreed to collaborate on an opera, for which Fontana would provide the libretto. The work, *Le Villi*, was entered into a competition sponsored by the Sozegno Music Publishing Company in 1883 (the same competition in which Pietro Mascagni’s *Cavalleria Rusticana* was to become the winner in 1889). The judges did not think *Le Villi* worthy of consideration, but a group of friends, led by the composer-librettist Arrigo Boito, subsidized its production, and its premiere finally took place with some success at Milan’s Teatro Dal Verme on May 31, 1884. *Le Villi* was remarkable for its dramatic power, its operatic melody, and, revealing the influence of Richard Wagner’s works, the important role played by the orchestra. G. Ricordi & Co., music publishers, assisted with the premier by printing the libretto without charge; fellow students from the Milan Conservatory formed a large part of the orchestra. The performance was enough of a success that Giulio Ricordi immediately acquired the

copyright, with the stipulation that the opera be expanded to two acts. Revised into a two-act version with an intermezzo between the acts, *Le Villi* was performed at Milan's La Scala on January 24, 1885. However, Ricordi did not publish the score until 1887, hindering further performance of the work. He also commissioned Puccini to write a new opera for La Scala and gave him a monthly stipend. With this backing, Puccini began a lifelong association with Giulio Ricordi, who was to become a staunch friend and counselor.

The new opera commissioned by Ricordi was *Edgar*. Work was begun in 1884 when Fontana began working out the scenario for the libretto. Puccini finished primary composition in 1887 and orchestration in 1888. *Edgar* premiered at La Scala on April 21, 1889 to a lukewarm response. The work was withdrawn for revisions after its third performance. In a Milanese newspaper, Giulio Ricordi published a defense of Puccini's skill as a composer, while criticizing Fontana's libretto. A revised version met with success at the Teatro di Giglio in Puccini's native Lucca on September 5, 1891. In 1892, further revisions reduced the length of the opera to three acts from four, in a version that was well received in Ferrara and was performed in Turin and in Spain. Puccini made further revisions in 1901 and 1905, but the work never achieved popularity. Without the personal support of Ricordi, *Edgar* might have cost Puccini his career.

After the death of his mother in the autumn of 1884, Puccini began a relationship with a married woman (his former piano student) named Elvira Gemignani (née Bonturi) in Lucca. Elvira's husband, Narisco Gemignani, was an "unrepentant womanizer," and Elvira's marriage had not been a happy one. She became pregnant by Puccini, and finding in their passion the courage to defy the truly enormous scandal generated by their illegal union, Elvira left Lucca when the pregnancy began to show in order to avoid gossip. They lived at first in Monza, near Milan, where their son, Antonio, was born in 1886. Elvira, Antonio and Elvira's daughter by Narisco, Fosca, began to live with Puccini shortly afterwards. Narisco was eventually murdered by the husband of a woman that he had had an affair with, dying on February 26, 1903. Only then were Puccini and Elvira able to marry, and to legitimize Antonio. They married in 1904.



Elvira Gemignani

In 1891 they had moved to Torre del Lago, a fishing village on Lake Massaciuccoli in Tuscany. This home was to become Puccini's refuge from life, and he remained there until three years before his death, when he moved to Viareggio. Ricordi's associates were willing to turn a blind eye to his life style as long as he remained successful. When *Edgar* failed, however, they suggested to Ricordi that he should drop Puccini, but Ricordi said that he would stay with him and continue his allowance until his next opera. To encourage his development, he sent him to Bayreuth in Germany to hear Wagner's *Die Meistersinger*.



Elvira & Giacomo

On beginning his next opera, *Manon Lescaut*, Puccini announced that he would write his own libretto so that "no fool of a librettist" could spoil it. It was based, like the *Manon* of the French composer Jules Massenet, on the celebrated 18th-century novel by the Abbé Prévost. Starting with this opera, Puccini carefully selected the subjects for his operas and spent considerable time on the preparation of the librettos. The psychology of the heroine in *Manon Lescaut*, as in succeeding works, dominates the dramatic nature of Puccini's operas. Puccini, in sympathy with his public, was writing to move them so as to assure his success. The score of *Manon Lescaut*, dramatically alive, prefigures the operatic refinements achieved

in his mature operas: *La Bohème*, *Tosca*, *Madama Butterfly*, and *La Fanciulla del West* (“*The Girl of the Golden West*”). These four mature works also tell a moving love story, one that centers entirely on the feminine protagonist and ends in a tragic resolution. All four speak the same refined and limpid musical language of the orchestra that creates the subtle play of thematic reminiscences. The music always emerges from the words, indissolubly bound to their meaning and to the images they evoke.



Giulio Ricordi

Ricordi persuaded Puccini to accept Ruggero Leoncavallo as his librettist, but Puccini soon asked Ricordi to remove him from the project. Four other librettists were then involved with the opera, as Puccini constantly changed his mind about the structure of the piece. It was almost by accident that the final two, Luigi Illica and Giuseppe Giacosa, came together to complete the opera. Puccini would continue to collaborate enthusiastically with these two librettists for his most famous mature operas (*La Bohème*, *Tosca*, *Madama Butterfly*, and *La Fanciulla del West*). (Although it eventually became celebrated worldwide, *Madama Butterfly* was a disaster at its premiere on February 17, 1904, the same year that Puccini finally married Elvira Gemignani. This was probably due to the fact that the audience found the work too much like Puccini’s preceding operas rather than because of a critical musical rejection).

Manon Lescaut premiered at the Teatro Regio in Turin on February 1, 1893. (It was Ricordi’s idea to move it from Milan to Turin). By coincidence, Puccini’s first enduringly popular opera appeared within a week of the premiere of Verdi’s last opera, *Falstaff*, which was first performed on February 9, 1893. In anticipation of the premiere, *La Stampa* wrote that Puccini was a young man about whom “great hopes” had a real basis (“*un giovane che e tra i pochi sul quale le larghe speranze non siano benigne illusioni*”).

Because of the prior failure of *Edgar*, a failure of *Manon Lescaut* could have jeopardized Puccini’s future as a composer. But, the premiere of *Manon Lescaut* received the greatest response of any of Puccini’s premieres. It established his reputation as the most promising rising composer of his generation, and he was hailed the true heir to Verdi as the leading exponent of the Italian operatic tradition.

(The two operas being performed by the San Francisco Opera during Fall, 2014 are *La Bohème* and *Tosca*. Interestingly, they are the next two operas Puccini composed after *Manon Lescaut*. Both were written with the collaboration of the two librettists Luigi Illica and Giuseppe Giacosa).



LA BOHÈME

Puccini’s next work after *Manon Lescaut* was *La Bohème*, a four-act opera based on the 1851 book by Henri Murger, *La Vie de Bohème*. *La Bohème* premiered in Turin in 1896, conducted by Arturo Toscanini. Within a few years, it had been performed throughout many of the leading opera houses of Europe, as well as in the United States. It was a popular success, and remains one of the most frequently performed operas ever written.

The libretto of the opera, freely adapted from Murger’s episodic novel, combines comic elements of the impoverished life of the young protagonists with the tragic aspects, such as the death of the young seamstress Mimí. Puccini’s own life as a young man in Milan served as a source of inspiration for

elements of the libretto. During his years as a conservatory student and in the years before *Manon Lescaut*, he had experienced poverty similar to that of the bohemians in *La Bohème*, including chronic shortage of necessities like food, clothing, and money to pay rent. Although Puccini was granted a small monthly stipend by the Congregation of Charity in Rome (*Congregazione di Carità*), he frequently had to pawn his possessions to cover basic expenses. Early biographers such as Wakeling Dry and Eugenio Checchi, who were Puccini's contemporaries, drew express parallels between these incidents and particular events in the opera. For example, Checchi cited a diary kept by Puccini while he was still a student that recorded an occasion in which, as in Act IV of the opera, a single herring served as a dinner for four people. Puccini himself commented: "I lived that *Bohème*, when there wasn't yet any thought stirring in my brain of seeking the theme of an opera. (*Quella Bohème io l'ho vissuta, quando ancora non mi mulinava nel cervello l'idea di cercarvi l'argomento per un'opera in musica.*)"

TOSCA

Puccini's next work after *La Bohème* was *Tosca* (1900), arguably Puccini's first foray into "verismo", the realistic depiction of many facets of real life including violence. Puccini had been considering an opera on this theme since he saw the play *Tosca* by Victorien Sardou in 1889, when he wrote to Ricordi, begging him to get Sardou's permission for the work to be made into an opera: "I see in this *Tosca* the opera I need, with no overblown proportions, no elaborate spectacle, nor will it call for the usual excessive amount of music."

The music of *Tosca* employs musical signatures for particular characters and emotions, which have been compared to Wagnerian leitmotifs, and some contemporaries saw Puccini as thus adopting a new musical style influenced by Wagner. Others viewed the work differently. Disagreeing with the allegation that *Tosca* displayed Wagnerian influences, a critic reporting on the February 20, 1900 Torino premiere wrote: "I don't think you could find a more Puccinian score than this."



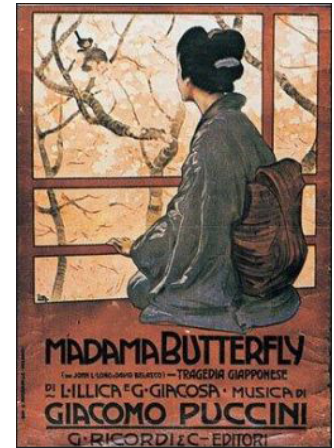
On February 25, 1903, Puccini was seriously injured in a car accident during a nighttime journey on the road from Lucca to Torre del Lago. The car was driven by his chauffeur and was carrying Puccini, his wife Elvira, and their son Antonio. It went off the road, fell several yards, and flipped over. Elvira and Antonio were flung from the car and escaped with minor injuries. Puccini's chauffeur, also thrown from the car,



suffered a serious fracture of his femur. Puccini was pinned under the car, with a severe fracture of his right leg and with a portion of the car pressing down on his chest. A doctor living near the scene of the accident, together with another person who came to investigate, rescued Puccini from the wreckage. The injury did not heal well, and Puccini remained under treatment for months. During the medical examinations that he underwent, it was also found that he was suffering from a form of diabetes. The accident and its consequences slowed Puccini's completion of his next work, *Madama Butterfly*.

In 1908, having spent the summer in Cairo, the Puccinis returned to Torre del Lago, and Puccini devoted himself to *Fanciulla*. But living with Elvira proved difficult. Tempestuous rather than compliant, she was justifiably jealous and was not an ideal companion. The marriage between Puccini and Elvira was also troubled by infidelity, as Puccini had had frequent affairs himself, including with well-known singers.

In 1909, Elvira unexpectedly became jealous of Doria Manfredi, a young servant from the village who had been employed for several years by the Puccinis. She drove Doria from the house, accusing her of having an affair with Puccini and threatening to kill her. Subsequently, the servant girl poisoned herself, and her parents had the body examined by a physician, who declared her a virgin. The Manfredis brought charges against Elvira Puccini for persecution and calumny, creating one of the most famous scandals of the time. Elvira was found guilty, but through the negotiations of the lawyers did not serve her five-month sentence, and Puccini paid damages to the Manfredis, who withdrew their accusations. Eventually the Puccinis adjusted themselves to coexistence, but the composer from then on demanded absolute freedom of action.



Doria Manfredi

(According to documents found in 2007 in the possession of a descendant of the Manfredi family, Nadia Manfredi, Puccini was actually having an affair with Giulia Manfredi, Doria's cousin. Press reports at the time these documents were discovered alleged that Nadia Manfredi was Puccini's granddaughter, by a son, Antonio Manfredi, born to Giulia.) Some music critics and interpreters of Puccini's work have speculated that the psychological effects of this incident on Puccini interfered with his ability to complete compositions later in his career, and also influenced the development of his characters such as Liu (from *Turandot*), a slave girl who dies tragically by suicide.

Puccini's last opera, based on the fable of *Turandot* as told in the play *Turandot* by the 18th-century Italian dramatist Carlo Gozzi, is his only Italian opera in the Impressionistic style. Puccini did not complete *Turandot*, unable to write a final grand duet on the triumphant love between Turandot and Calaf. Suffering from cancer of the throat, he was ordered to Brussels for surgery (see below), and a few days afterward he died with the incomplete score of *Turandot* in his hands.

Turandot was performed posthumously at La Scala on April 25, 1926. Arturo Toscanini, who conducted the performance, concluded the opera by lowering his baton at the point Puccini had reached at his death, and thus ending the performance. Two final scenes were completed by Franco Alfano from Puccini's sketches, but to true Puccini aficionados (like his close friend Toscanini) these were inferior to the work of the master and they would not accept the additions as part of the opera.

PUCCINI AND POLITICS

Unlike Verdi, Puccini was not active in the politics of his day. His indifference to politics caused him personal and professional problems during World War I. Puccini's long-standing and close friendship with Toscanini was interrupted for nearly a decade because of an argument in the summer of 1914 (in the opening months of the war) during which Puccini remarked that Italy could benefit from German organization. Puccini was

also criticized during the war for his work on *La Rondine* under a 1913 commission contract with an Austrian theater after Italy and Austria-Hungary became opponents in the war in 1914 (although the contract was ultimately cancelled). Puccini did not participate in the public war effort, but privately rendered assistance to individuals and families affected by the war.

In 1919, Puccini was commissioned to write music to an ode by Fausto Salvatori honoring Italy's victories in World War I. The work, *Inno a Roma (Hymn to Rome)*, was scheduled to premiere on April 21, 1919, during a celebration of the anniversary of the founding of Rome. The premiere was delayed until June 1, 1919, when it was played at the opening of a gymnastics competition. Although not written for the Fascists, the *Inno a Roma* was widely played during Fascist street parades and public ceremonies.

Puccini had some contact with Benito Mussolini and the Italian Fascist party in the year preceding his death. Unsolicited, in 1923 the Fascist party in Viareggio made Puccini an honorary member and sent him a membership card. However, evidence that Puccini was actually a member of the Fascist party is equivocal. The Italian Senate had traditionally included a small number of members appointed as Honorary Senators in recognition of their cultural contributions to the nation. Puccini hoped to attain this honor, which had been granted to Verdi, and he undertook to use his connections to bring about the appointment. While Honorary Senators could vote, there is no indication that Puccini sought the appointment for this purpose. Puccini also wished to establish a national theater in Viareggio, a project which would require government support. Puccini met with Mussolini twice, in November and December 1923, seeking support for the theater project. While the theater project never came to fruition, Puccini was named Honorary Senator (*senatore a vita*) a few months before his death.

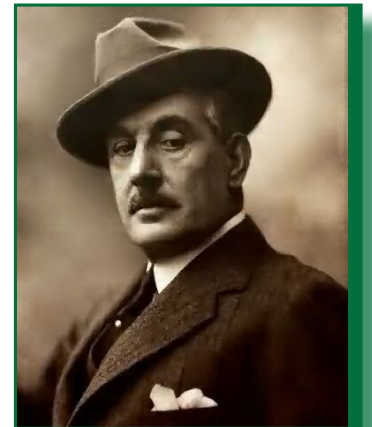
At the time Puccini met with Mussolini, Mussolini had been Prime Minister for approximately a year, but his party had not yet taken full control of the Italian Parliament through the violence and irregularities of the Italian general election of 1924. Puccini was no longer alive when Mussolini announced the end of representative government, and the beginning of a fascist dictatorship, in his speech before the Chamber of Deputies on January 3, 1925.

DEATH

A chain smoker of Toscano cigars and cigarettes, Puccini began to complain of chronic sore throats 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 in Brussels on November 29, 1924, from complications after the treatment: uncontrolled bleeding led to a heart attack the day after surgery. News of his death reached Rome during a performance of *La Bohème*. The opera was immediately stopped, and the orchestra played Chopin's *Funeral March* for the stunned audience.

Solemn funeral services were held for Puccini at La Scala in Milan, and his body was taken to Torre del Lago, which became the Puccini Pantheon. Originally,



he was buried in Milan, in Toscanini's family tomb, but that was always intended as a temporary resting place. In 1926 his son arranged for the transfer of his father's remains to a specially created chapel inside the Puccini villa at Torre del Lago. Shortly afterward, Elvira and Antonio were also buried there. The Puccini house became a museum and an archive.

LEGACY

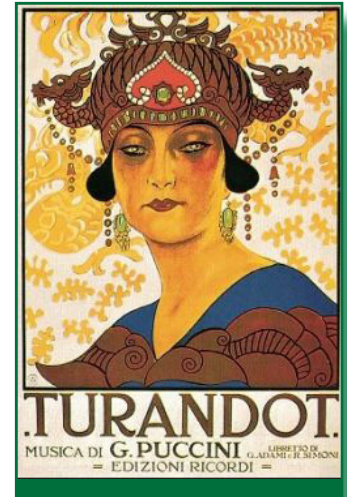
Today, Puccini is by far the most-performed composer among his Italian contemporaries, and the same was true during his lifetime. Eleven of Puccini's operas numbered among the 200 most-performed operas between August 2008 and December 2011 (worldwide, by composers of any nationality, as surveyed by Operabase). Only three composers, and three works, by Italian contemporaries of Puccini appear on this list: *Cavalleria Rusticana* by Mascagni, *Pagliacci* by Ruggero Leoncavallo, and *Andrea Chenier* by Umberto Giordano.

The majority of Puccini's operas illustrate a theme defined in *Il Tabarro*: "*Chi ha vissuto per amore, per amore si morì*" ("He who has lived for love, has died for love"). This theme is played out in the fate of his heroines—women who are devoted body and soul to their lovers, are tormented by feelings of guilt, and are punished by the infliction of pain until in the end they are destroyed. In his treatment of this theme, Puccini combines compassion and pity for his heroines with a strong streak of sadism: hence the strong emotional appeal but also the restricted scope of the Puccinian type of opera.

The main feature of Puccini's musicodramatic style is his ability to identify himself with his subject; each opera has its distinctive ambience. With an unflinching instinct for balanced dramatic structure, Puccini knew that an opera is not all action, movement, and conflict; it must also contain moments of repose, contemplation, and lyricism. For such moments he invented an original type of melody, passionate and radiant, yet marked by an underlying morbidity; examples are the "farewell" and "death" arias that also reflect the persistent melancholy from which he suffered in his personal life.

Puccini's approach to dramatic composition is expressed in his own words: "The basis of an opera is its subject and its treatment." The fashioning of a story into a moving drama for the stage claimed his attention in the first place, and he devoted to this part of his work as much labor as to the musical composition itself. The action of his operas is uncomplicated and self-evident, so that the spectator, even if he does not understand the words, readily comprehends what is taking place on the stage.

Puccini's conception of diatonic melody is rooted in the tradition of 19th-century Italian opera, but his harmonic and orchestral style indicate that he was also aware of contemporary developments, notably the work of the Impressionists and of Stravinsky. Though he allowed the orchestra a more active role, he upheld the traditional vocal style of Italian opera, in which the singers carry the burden of the music. In many ways a typical *fin de siècle* artist, Puccini nevertheless can be ranked as the greatest exponent of operatic realism.



Adapted by James J. Boitano, PhD, from dLife.com, from Claudio Sartori in Encyclopedia Britannica (online edition), and from Wikipedia.