

Giacomo Puccini (1858-1924)

1858-1874 – Puccini is born in Lucca, Italy, on 22 December 1858, a member of a large family of musicians that had been centered in Lucca for four generations. His father Michele (1813-1864) was a minor musician and composer. Giacomo's sister Iginia (1856-1922) became a nun. He was very close to his sister and frequently visited her at the convent of Vicopelgo, traditionally believed to be the inspiration for the setting of the opera *Suor Angelica*. As a boy, Giacomo receives a standard classical education in Lucca.

1874-1880 – Musical studies at the Istituto Musicale Pacini in Lucca under Puccini's uncle Fortunato Magi. In this period, the composer spends much time studying the operatic scores of Giuseppe Verdi. His early successes as a composer derive from sacred pieces written to be performed in Lucca.

1880-1883 – Study at the Milan Conservatory with the assistance of a scholarship and a stipend from one of his uncles. In Milan, Puccini acquaints himself with the music of the principal French operatic composers of the 19th century as well as that of Richard Wagner, besides fashionable Italian operatic styles. A graduation composition, the *Capriccio sinfonico* (1883) soon finds success as a concert piece in Italy. While in Milan, Puccini comes into contact with a group of Bohemian artists known as the *Scapigliati* (the “wild ones” or “disheveled ones”), of which Arrigo Boïto is also a member. During part of this period, Puccini shares lodgings in Milan with Pietro Mascagni, later the author of the opera *Cavalleria rusticana*

1883-1893 – Years of struggle to establish himself as an opera composer. Two operas originate from this period: *Le villi* (1883) and *Edgar* (1889). The first, written for an opera competition, was a moderate success that brought Puccini into contact with Giulio Ricordi, head of the Milan music publishing firm of Ricordi, a great support to the composer for years to come. The second was the only true operatic failure of his career. In these years he became involved with a married woman from Lucca, Elvira Bonturi, with whom he had a son, Antonio, in 1886. They marry in 1904 after her husband dies. In 1891, Puccini stays at his famous country retreat near the hamlet of Torre del Lago for the first time; at first, he rents a modest gamekeeper's house.

1893-1904 – A period of success after success in the opera theaters of Italy, beginning with *Manon Lescaut* in 1893, written to a libretto worked on by many individuals, including his great collaborators Luigi Illica and Giuseppe Giacosa. The composer Ruggero Leoncavallo also contributed. This opera was followed by *La bohème* (1896), *Tosca* (1900), and *Madama*

Butterfly (1904). Leoncavallo believed that he had a prior claim to set the text for *La bohème* and ended his friendship with Puccini over his anger at Puccini's refusal to yield in the matter. Puccini travels frequently in this period, even to Latin America, mainly to supervise productions of the operas he had written up to that time. Elvira Bonturi and their son Antonio frequently accompany him. His success as an opera composer makes it possible for him to build a new house at Torre del Lago. In 1903 Puccini is the victim of a serious automobile accident that leaves him incapacitated for months. Aside from his marriage to Elvira Bonturi, he indulges himself with love affairs.

1905-1910 – A rather dry period for operatic composition that is nonetheless enlivened with trips to the United States in 1907 and 1910 and the première of the opera *La fanciulla del West* in New York City in 1910. Travel to help supervise productions of his operas continues, this time including a trip to Egypt. There is more sexual scandal in his private life, the most distressing a false accusation of an affair with a family servant at Torre del Lago. Tragically, the servant involved commits suicide over the accusation.

1911-1918 – After a long period of inactivity as an opera composer, Puccini finally is able to finish the opera *La rondine* (1917) and the famous cycle of one-act operas known as *Il trittico* (“the triptych”): *Il tabarro*, *Suor Angelica*, and *Gianni Schicchi* (1917-18). All of the latter were first performed in New York City in 1918. The composer did not travel to the United States at this time due to war conditions.

1919-1924 – During the last few years of his life, Puccini struggles to complete his last opera, *Turandot*. Unfinished at the time of his death, it is completed in 1926 by a minor composer, Franco Alfano, recommended by Arturo Toscanini, a long-time associate. In poor health since the autumn of 1923, the composer early in 1924 begins to suffer from a severe sore throat. The seriousness of his condition is not recognized until the autumn of 1924, after the pain in his throat becomes unbearable. He is discovered to have a carcinoma on the pharynx and is advised to seek radium treatment either in Berlin or Brussels. He chooses Brussels, where he dies on November 29 in the midst of a course of treatment. The immediate cause of death is not cancer, but a sudden heart attack. Thousands attend his funeral in Milan in December.

Some Musical and Dramatic Characteristics of the Operas of Giacomo Puccini

- ❖ Avoidance of coloratura, a style of florid vocal ornamentation that was favored in the bel-canto period of Italian opera in the early and mid-nineteenth century; this style was strongly condemned by Richard Wagner, who advocated a vocal presentation more similar to human speech without excessive repetition of words
- ❖ Avoidance of musical cadences (i.e., musical endings); there is a tendency to blur the endings of the principal vocal sections in order to create a smoothly unfolding musical progression; this idea is related to Richard Wagner's concept of *unendliche Melodie* ("unending melody"), which mandated a continuous flow of musical ideas that only comes to a definite end at the end of an act; Italian operas of the bel-canto period are often referred to as "numbers" operas (i.e., constructed out of a series of musical sections that have strongly articulated beginnings and endings and can be detached easily from the operas as concert pieces); Wagner objected to the "numbers" conception and the pauses it invited for applause within acts; Puccini was not as extreme, favoring a more varied approach
- ❖ Use of recurring musical motives; this idea is related to Richard Wagner's concept of the *Leitmotiv* ("leading motive"), a short snippet of music that is intended to have a symbolic meaning whenever heard by the audience; in Puccini's work, the motives do not necessarily have the same weighty dramatic connotations that they do in Wagner's operas, but their dramatic function as "motives of anticipation" and "motives of reminiscence" is shared
- ❖ Loosening of the expectation that a serious opera must be set in the distant past; this idea is related to a trend in late nineteenth-century Italian opera known as *verismo* ("realism"), of which the most famous example is Leoncavallo's *I pagliacci* (1892); Puccini's operas *La bohème*, *Madama Butterfly*, *La fanciulla del West*, *La rondine*, and *Il tabarro* are all set in times that are contemporary for Puccini's lifetime or fall within living memory, a much higher proportion than for Puccini's principal predecessors
- ❖ Fluid mix of comic and serious action; this is also an aspect of "realism," a reflection of the unpredictable flow of conflicting emotions that is a part of daily life
- ❖ Principal characters are not necessarily purely good or purely evil (or almost so), as was ordinary in the operas of his principal predecessors, another aspect of "realism"
- ❖ Eclectic borrowing of musical elements from earlier Italian, French, and German operas, Asian music, contemporary popular music, pre-nineteenth-century music, and dissonant early twentieth-century styles; the most memorable music, however, is generally cast in a warm, sentimental style firmly rooted in traditions of musical Romanticism

Gianni Schicchi

Opera in 1 act by Giacomo Puccini

Libretto by Giovacchino Forzano

First performed 14 December 1918 at the Metropolitan Opera in New York City

Gianni Schicchi was composed as part of a “trilogy” (“trittico”) of three one-act operas all first performed during one evening; the other two are *Il tabarro* (“the cloak”) and *Suor Angelica* (“Sister Angelica”). *Gianni Schicchi* is performed separately far more than the others and is one of the best-loved comic operas ever written. Its most famous vocal piece is the aria “O mio babbino caro” (“Oh, my dear papa”), sung by the character Lauretta.

The idea for the story of *Gianni Schicchi* can be traced to the early fourteenth-century *Divina Commedia* of Dante Alighieri (ca. 1265-1321), one of the greatest works of Italian literature. Dante was a native of Florence and mainly lived there until he was sent into exile in 1301 (he was unfortunate in backing the losing side in a political struggle at that time). For the rest of his life, Dante was never able to return to Florence. The portion of the *Commedia* that is devoted to a description of hell (*L'inferno*) mentions one Gianni Schicchi who languishes there for impersonating Buoso Donati in order to alter a will in his favor. The basis of the story used for the opera, however, is a nineteenth-century “commentary” on Dante’s verses that was published in 1866. This version includes the character of Simone besides Donati and Schicchi. A love story was added by Puccini and the librettist Giovacchino Forzano. The Donati were prominent citizens of Florence in Dante’s time, and he was actually married to a member of the family, Gemma Donati.

Characters:

Gianni Schicchi, a middle-aged Florentine citizen (baritone)

Lauretta, his daughter, in love with Rinuccio (soprano)

Zita, also called La Vecchia (“the old woman”), a cousin of Buoso Donati, the deceased (contralto)

Rinuccio, Zita’s nephew, in love with Lauretta (tenor)

Gherardo, Buoso’s nephew (tenor)

Nella, Gherardo’s wife (soprano)

Gherardino, their son (child soprano)

Betto di Signa, Buoso’s poor brother-in-law (bass)

Simone, Buoso’s elderly cousin (bass)

Marco, Simone’s son (baritone)

La Ciesca, Marco’s wife (mezzo-soprano)

Maestro Spinelloccio, a physician (bass)

Armantio di Nicolao, a notary (baritone)

Pinellino, a cobbler (bass)

Guccio, a dyer (bass)

Setting: Florence, in the year 1299

Synopsis

The setting is the bedroom of Buoso Donati, a wealthy Florentine, who has just died in bed. At first his relatives mourn ostentatiously, then become irritated when they learn that there is a rumor that Buoso intended to leave all his money to a monastery. They immediately search everywhere they can think of for the will. Rinuccio is the one who finds it, but he refuses to allow his aunt Zita to see it unless she agrees that she will respect its terms. If the will provides the family with the wealth they seek, she must agree to allow him to marry Gianni Schicchi's daughter Lauretta. This is an issue, because Schicchi is viewed as beneath the social station of the Donati. Zita, who does not care who Rinuccio marries as long as she receives a handsome bequest, agrees to Rinuccio's conditions. She reads the will as Rinuccio sends for Schicchi. It turns out that the rumor is true: Buoso has left his wealth to a monastery. All of his relatives are disappointed and angry. They intend not to allow Rinuccio to marry Lauretta and say that they will not go along with Rinuccio's idea to have Lauretta's famously clever father Gianni Schicchi somehow plot to get them out of their predicament.

Schicchi and Lauretta enter but are not treated courteously. Schicchi, who sees how disheartened the relatives are, cynically believes that Buoso must be better. His is told that Buoso is actually dead, and he tries to make everyone feel better by reminding them of their likely inheritance. Zita lets him know that they have been disinherited and will not consider permitting Rinuccio and Lauretta to marry. Rinuccio begs Schicchi for help, but after being treated so shabbily he is reluctant to assist such undeserving people. His daughter persuades him to try anyway by singing her aria "O mio babbino caro." After reading the will, Schicchi at first announces that nothing can be done. Suddenly he has second thoughts and sends his daughter away so that she will have no knowledge of what he is planning. Schicchi first orders the body to be moved to another room and tells the women to make up the bed. He makes sure that nobody else but the family members in the room have knowledge of Buoso's death, but before he can explain what he intends to do, Buoso's physician arrives. He is prevented from entering the bedroom by Buoso's relatives, while Schicchi imitates Buoso's voice, telling the doctor that he is feeling better and is in no need of treatment. The physician leaves bragging about his medical skills. Then Schicchi explains that he intends to impersonate Buoso in bed and dictate a new will in the presence of a notary.

Rinuccio leaves to fetch the notary. The relatives try to agree on how Buoso's estate should be divided, but they cannot settle on who should receive the best assets of all: Buoso's mule (believed to be the best in Tuscany), some mills in the town of Signa, and the house he died in. They agree to let Schicchi decide who will inherit those items, but each one promises him a bribe if they are selected. Schicchi agrees to accept each bribe. Before the notary arrives, Schicchi reminds all of the penalty for impersonation of a dead person and forgery of a will, including accessories to the crime: the loss of a hand and permanent exile from Florence.

The notary arrives with witnesses. Schicchi dictates a will that provides for a very modest funeral, a token sum of money to the monastery, and the division of less-valuable property that the relatives had agreed on. Schicchi grants the mule, mills, and house to himself, however, to the stupefaction of the relatives. After the notary leaves, he orders everyone out of the house he has just inherited. They try to steal whatever they can on the way out. Schicchi is now in a position to give Lauretta a dowry, so she will be able to marry Rinuccio. The lovers embrace as Schicchi watches them. He turns to the audience and asks if this was not the best use for Buoso's money. The relatives have condemned him to hell for his treachery, but he hopes that the audience will find him "not guilty," with all due respect to Dante (who depicted him burning in hell). Schicchi starts the applause himself and bows.

Puccini's "Big Four":

The operas *La bohème*, *Tosca*, *Madama Butterfly*, and *Turandot*

La bohème:

Libretto by
Giuseppe Giacosa and Luigi Illica in 4 acts

first performed 1 February 1896 at the Teatro Regio in Turin,
conducted by Arturo Toscanini

Setting: the Latin Quarter of Paris in the 1840s; there are specific references in the libretto to Louis Philippe, King of the French between 1830 and 1848, and François Guizot, Louis Philippe's trusted adviser who served as his foreign minister and prime minister between 1840 and 1848

Literary model: a collection of stories known as *Scènes de la vie de Bohème* by Henri Murger (1822-1861), first published in serial form between 1845 and 1849, then produced as a play in 1849, then published as an anthology in 1851; the stories are said to be fairly accurate portrayals of habitués of the Latin Quarter known to Murger, who claimed that the Bohemians of Paris led "a gay life, but a terrible one"

Principal lovers: Rodolfo, a poet, and Mimì, a seamstress

Their love story: Rodolfo meets Mimì by chance on Christmas Eve; while his roommates have left their bleak garret to celebrate a financial windfall, Rodolfo answers the door to find Mimì, who asks for a light for her candle, which has gone out; they immediately fall in love; their brief period of romantic bliss is broken up by Rodolfo's insane jealousy, but they reconcile; at the end of the opera, Mimì, by this time very ill, dies in the same garret where she first met Rodolfo as they renew their vows of love and recall their first meeting

Other incidents: Rodolfo's close friends are the painter Marcello, the philosopher Colline, and the musician Schaunard; each experiences lost loves; the relationship explored in greatest detail is that of Marcello and Musetta, a girl who drifts from one lover to another in seek of amusement and financial support; all selflessly try to assist Mimì as she dies, even Musetta, who offers to sell her earrings in order to buy her medicine; the second act is a magnificent operatic spectacle set in front of the Café Momus in Paris as the Bohemians celebrate Christmas Eve

Notes on genesis: Puccini began work on *La bohème* in 1893 at the time of the première of *Manon Lescaut*; in a café in Milan in March of the same year, he announced to Ruggero Leoncavallo that he was working on the opera; Leoncavallo had also been working on an opera on the same subject without Puccini's knowledge and claimed that he had prior rights to it; the friendship between the two composers ended immediately; a *La bohème* by Leoncavallo was completed in 1897 without the success of the Puccini setting

Tosca

Libretto by
Giuseppe Giacosa and Luigi Illica in 3 acts

first performed 14 January 1900 at the Teatro Costanzi in Rome

Setting: Rome, 17-18 June 1800, the narrowest and most specific chronological time frame for any opera in the standard repertory (taken from the literary model, which is set shortly after the Battle of Marengo, 14 June 1800); each act is set in a notable Roman landmark: Act I in the Church of Sant'Andrea della Valle, Act II in the Palazzo Farnese, and Act III in the Castel Sant'Angelo

Literary model: the play *La Tosca* (1887) by Victorien Sardou (1831-1908), one of the most prominent French playwrights of the nineteenth century

Lovers: Mario Cavaradossi, a painter, and Floria Tosca, an opera singer

Their love story: Tosca and Cavaradossi are already in love at the start of the opera; their relationship is disrupted by Cavaradossi's attempts to assist his friend Cesare Angelotti, an escaped political prisoner; both Cavaradossi and Angelotti were sympathetic to the French-dominated Roman Republic of 1798-1799 that had recently been overthrown by the forces of the King of Naples; in Act I, Cavaradossi attempts to hide Angelotti in the Church of Sant'Andrea della Valle; while hidden, there is a touching love scene with Tosca, who has come to the church partly to worship and partly to visit her lover; once Tosca has left, Angelotti comes out of his hiding place to be sent to Cavaradossi's villa outside the city of Rome; soon the police chief of Rome, Baron Scarpia, enters the church in search of Angelotti; he has Tosca followed in order to find both Cavaradossi and Angelotti—also, he desires Tosca for himself; in Act II, Cavaradossi is tortured in order to get him to reveal Angelotti's whereabouts; to stop the torture, Tosca reveals the hiding place; Scarpia nonetheless intends to have Cavaradossi executed; he offers Tosca the option of sleeping with him in return for saving Cavaradossi's life; she agrees at first, but instead of following through, she stabs Scarpia to death; in Act III, Tosca believes that a mock execution was arranged for Cavaradossi before she killed Scarpia, but it turns out she was betrayed; a firing squad kills Cavaradossi; before she can be arrested for the murder of Scarpia, Tosca kills herself by jumping from the ramparts of the Castel Sant'Angelo

Notes on genesis: Puccini became interested in the Sardou play as a possible operatic subject in 1889; the playwright caused difficulties, because his permission was needed to produce his play as an opera, and he wanted it set by a composer of established reputation; Verdi was interested, but backed out on grounds of old age; the minor composer Alberto Franchetti was contracted to compose a setting in 1894, but was dissuaded from doing so by the music publisher Giulio Ricordi and Puccini in collaboration; Ricordi and Verdi believed Puccini would produce the best setting after they heard *Manon Lescaut*; Franchetti renounced his contract in 1895; Puccini began working with Sardou in 1896; his setting was completed in 1899 after much bickering among the librettists, Puccini, and Ricordi

Madama Butterfly

Libretto by

Giuseppe Giacosa and Luigi Illica in 3 acts (originally 2 acts)

first performed 17 February 1904 at the Teatro alla Scala in Milan

Setting – Nagasaki, Japan, in the late nineteenth century

Literary model: the play *Madame Butterfly* (1900) by David Belasco (1853-1931), the most prominent theatrical producer on Broadway during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, also a playwright and director; Belasco's play was based on a short story by John Luther Long (1861-1927) that appeared in the *Century Magazine* in 1898; Long's story was inspired by the true story of a Japanese geisha who married an American naval officer, but was abandoned after he married a new bride in the United States; Long learned of the incident from his sister, the wife of an American missionary stationed in Nagasaki

Lovers – Benjamin Franklin Pinkerton, a lieutenant in the United State navy, and Madame Butterfly (Cho-Cho-San), fifteen years' old at the start of the opera

Their love story – Pinkerton and Madame Butterfly are married with the assistance of a marriage broker; after getting to know each other, they soon fall deeply in love; the relationship is disrupted, however, by absence; it is necessary for Pinkerton to leave Japan as part of his naval duties; he promises to return, but stays away for years while Butterfly pines; she is left alone in Japan, ostracized by her family because she has married a non-Japanese, to be cared for by her faithful maid Suzuki, her only reliable source of emotional support; she occasionally receives news of her husband (as well as gifts of money) from Sharpless, the American consul in Nagasaki, who is sympathetic to her; Butterfly refuses to give up hope that her husband will return to her one day; she is offered the opportunity to be kept by a wealthy Japanese noble, but refuses to disregard her wedding vows or stop loving her husband; at last Pinkerton does return to Japan, but not to take up married life with Butterfly; he arrives accompanied by his new American wife; both are determined to take Pinkerton's son away from her to raise as their own; Butterfly still refuses to be disloyal or disobedient and agrees to relinquish the child without displaying any anger or disrespect towards her rival; humiliated, abandoned, and robbed of her beloved son, she decides to commit suicide; Pinkerton is wracked with guilt at the news of her death

Notes on genesis: Puccini had the idea of composing *Madama Butterfly* after he saw a performance of the Belasco play in London in 1900 while supervising the first production of *Tosca* there; although unable to understand the English dialogue, he was able to follow the story line and found himself profoundly moved; negotiations with Belasco were completed in 1901; the original two-act version of the opera was a failure at its première at La Scala, but after it was re-worked into three acts for a production in Brescia the same year, it became a tremendous world-wide success

Turandot

Libretto by
Giuseppe Adami and Renato Simoni in 3 acts

first performed 25 April 1926 at the Teatro alla Scala in Milan,
conducted by Arturo Toscanini

Setting – Beijing, China, in legendary times

Literary model – the play *Turandot, Prinzessin von China* (1801) by Friedrich von Schiller (1759-1805), which was based on the play *Turandot* (1762) by Carlo Gozzi (1720-1806); similarities with the Greek myth of Oedipus and the Sphinx are also obvious

Principal lovers – Calaf, a Tartar prince, and Turandot, daughter of the Chinese emperor
Their love story – Princess Turandot is bound by sacred oath to marry whichever royal suitor is able to answer three riddles successfully; the penalty for failure is execution; at the start of the drama, a fresh victim, a prince of Persia, is about to be beheaded; Calaf, son of the exiled and defeated Tartar king Timur, reveals himself to his father as now living in Beijing; once he sees Turandot, he falls in love; since he is of royal blood, he is eligible to attempt the riddles; everyone tries to dissuade him, but he refuses to be deterred; in fact, he is able to answer all of them; Turandot is reluctant to marry Calaf (or any man), because she is haunted by the experience of one her ancestresses who was raped and murdered by the Tartars; after Calaf's success, she begs her father not to force her to marry him, but he says that she must; she turns to Calaf and tells him that he may have her by force, if he wishes, but he only wants to marry her if his love is returned; he is willing to release her from her vow if she can learn his name before dawn (it had never been revealed to her); all of Beijing is kept awake throughout the night to find somebody who knows the name, but it is not possible to learn it; the prince has an idea to win Turandot's love, which is simply to kiss her in order to humanize her; the idea works; after she has been kissed, she admits that she does love Calaf, who then reveals his name to her before dawn; at the end, she tells her father that his name is Love (and it is believed they will marry happily)

Other incidents – Timur's touchingly loyal slave girl Liù is the only person in Beijing other than Timur himself who knows Calaf's name; she commits suicide rather than be tortured to reveal it; comic relief is provided in special vignettes written for the court officials Ping, Pang, and Pong

Notes on genesis – Puccini wanted to set the subject after reading the Schiller play in 1920 on the recommendation of a friend; he worked closely with the librettist Simoni to develop the scenario and told him that he became more attached to this project than any he had earlier worked on; at the time of his death, Puccini was able to finish only the first two acts of the opera and a portion of the third act; sketches for the remainder of the third act were turned over to Franco Alfano to complete on the recommendation of Toscanini, who conducted the première (and stopped the music to draw attention to the spot where Puccini ceased composing)

The Operas of Giacomo Puccini (1858-1924)

Le villi – libretto by Ferdinando Fontana in 2 acts

first performed in its revised version on 26 December 1884 at the Teatro Regio in Turin (an earlier version as *Le willis* first performed at the Teatro del Verme in Milan on 31 May 1884)

Edgar – libretto by Ferdinando Fontana in 3 acts

first performed on 21 April 1889 at the Teatro alla Scala in Milan

Manon Lescaut – libretto by Ruggiero Leoncavallo, Domenico Oliva, Giulio Ricordi,

Luigi Illica, Giuseppe Giacosa, and Marco Praga in 4 acts

first performed on 1 February 1893 at the Teatro Regio in Turin

La bohème – libretto by Giuseppe Giacosa and Luigi Illica in 4 acts

first performed on 1 February 1896 at the Teatro Regio in Turin, conducted by Arturo Toscanini

Tosca – libretto by Giuseppe Giacosa and Luigi Illica in 3 acts

first performed on 14 January 1900 at the Teatro Costanzi in Rome

Madama Butterfly – libretto by Giuseppe Giacosa and Luigi Illica in 2, later 3 acts

first performed on 17 February 1904 at the Teatro alla Scala in Milan

La fanciulla del West – libretto by Guelfo Civinini and Carlo Zangarini in 3 acts

first performed on 10 December 1910 at the Metropolitan Opera House in New York City, conducted by Arturo Toscanini

La rondine – libretto by Giuseppe Adami in 3 acts

first performed on 27 March 1917 at the Théâtre du Casino in Monte Carlo

Il trittico (“the triptych”):

(all first performed on 14 December 1918 at the Metropolitan Opera House in New York City)

Il tabarro – libretto by Giuseppe Adami in 1 act

Suor Angelica – libretto by Giovacchino Forzano in 1 act

Gianni Schicchi – libretto by Giovacchino Forzano in 1 act

Turandot – libretto by Giuseppe Adami and Renato Simoni in 3 acts

first performed on 25 April 1926 at the Teatro alla Scala in Milan, conducted by Arturo Toscanini