

La bohème
(The Bohemian girl)

Opera in 4 acts by Giacomo Puccini (1858-1924) based on a collection of stories by
Henri Murger (1822-1861) known as the *Scènes de la vie de Bohème*
(Scenes of Bohemian Life), a portrayal of habitués of the Latin Quarter of Paris known to
Murger that was first published in serial form between 1845 and 1849,
then produced as a play in 1849, then published as an anthology in 1851

Libretto by
Giuseppe Giacosa and Luigi Illica

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

Characters (the first seven are major characters drawn from the Murger
collection):

Mimi, a seamstress - soprano
Rodolfo, a poet – tenor
Marcello, a painter - baritone
Colline, a philosopher - bass
Schaunard, a musician – baritone
Musetta, a singer and courtesan - soprano
Benoit, a landlord - bass
Parpignol, a vendor of toys - tenor
Alcindoro, an admirer of Musetta – bass
A sergeant of the customs office - bass
A customs guard - bass

Merchants, dressmaker's apprentices, shop girls, students, soldiers, café customers, waiters,
street urchins and their mothers, peasants, manual laborers

Setting – Paris in the Latin Quarter during the reign of Louis Philippe (King of the French, 1830-1848); many sources indicate a date of ca. 1830 for the action, however this date is irreconcilable with the literary model and a chronological clue in the libretto; Murger's collection states that the four Bohemians Rudolph, Marcel, Colline, and Schaunard met each other and started living together in April 1840; the only other dated event is from 1844; Act IV of the libretto, which is set in the spring of an unspecified year, refers to the French statesman François Guizot as if he were prime minister of France; in fact, Guizot was prime minister of France only between September 1847 and February 1848, never in the spring; the original Murger collection never mentions Guizot, and it is possible that the librettists were confusing his period as foreign minister (1840-1848) with the short period when he served simultaneously as prime minister; it is probably best to say that the time frame is sometime in the mid-1840s, when Murger has Mimi die in a public hospital

Synopsis

Act I

A garret apartment in Paris in the Latin Quarter on Christmas Eve

The poet Rodolfo is gazing out the window while the artist Marcello is working on his painting *The Crossing of the Red Sea*. While they talk about the nature of love (and Musetta's coldness toward Marcello), they acknowledge that they are both freezing and have no fuel for the stove. They consider burning furniture or *The Crossing of the Red Sea* but settle on burning the manuscript for a play that Rodolfo has written. Colline enters as it burns; they all make jokes as if this is the play's first performance (a "fiery," "sparkling," "colorful" theater piece, they say). The flame soon goes out, but suddenly two errand boys burst in with food, wine, cigars, and firewood. They were sent by Schaunard, the fourth Bohemian, who explains that he received a large sum of money from an English nobleman who hired him for several days. They begin to set the table for a banquet, but Schaunard reminds them that it is Christmas Eve, when all the Bohemians in the Latin Quarter traditionally dine outside and gather to make merry.

The landlord Benoit suddenly enters to demand the overdue rent that is due him. There is money on the table to pay it now, but the Bohemians distract Benoit by giving him wine and flattering him about his prowess as a flirt. When he tells them that he is married, the Bohemians pretend to be scandalized by his philandering and throw him out with the rent payment. Then they celebrate their good fortune in still having money to divide among themselves and imagine how it could be spent. Marcello, Colline, and Schaunard want to go outside to participate in the Christmas Eve celebrations, but Rodolfo says he wants to stay behind to finish a journal article. The others say they will wait for him to join them later. Left alone, Rodolfo tries to write, but finds no inspiration. Then, he hears a knock on the door. It is a neighbor woman whose candle has extinguished; she hopes that she can get it lit again. Rodolfo invites her in immediately; she is reluctant at first, but she does accept the invitation. She appears pale and ill and drops the candlestick and a key she is holding. Rodolfo gives her a drink and lights the candlestick, which prompts her to want to leave. But the candlestick goes out once again in the hallway, and so does Rodolfo's. Furthermore, she realizes that she has forgotten her key. Rodolfo finds the key in the dark, but conceals it at first, so that she does not find it herself, and he can use that as an excuse to get near her before she can try to leave. He does get near her and takes her hand, which is very cold, so he tries to warm it. He lets go and then they tell each other about themselves. Rodolfo explains his work as a poet, and she explains that her real name is Lucia, but that everyone calls her Mimì (she says she doesn't know why). She is nothing but a humble seamstress and embroiderer of flowers, poor but happy. Rodolfo's friends call to him from the courtyard to hurry up. They realize it is useless to do so when they are told he is not alone, and they go on their way. Rodolfo and Mimì realize they are in love. Rodolfo wants to stay inside with her, but she persuades him to let her come along to enjoy the Christmas Eve celebrations.

Act II

Outside the Café Momus on Christmas Eve

The Bohemians crowd to celebrate in the square outside the Café Momus. There are street vendors and customers of the café seated at tables. Rodolfo buys Mimì a pink bonnet at a milliner's shop on the way to the café, then introduces her to his friends. Parpignol exhibits his

toys to delighted children while they order a sumptuous meal. The pleasant scene is disrupted when Musetta, once Marcello's lover, strolls by with her patron, the wealthy and elderly Alcindoro. She goes out of her way to be certain that Marcello notices her and her new companion (actually quite an embarrassment to him). She screams that her shoe is too tight, and as Alcindoro obediently runs off to the cobbler, she falls into a passionate embrace with Marcello. A waiter approaches with the bill for the dinner, but the Bohemians have already spent all of Schaunard's money. A military detachment performs a tattoo in front of the café; the Bohemians depart with Musetta and Mimì; the bill is left for Alcindoro to pay.

Act III

Dawn at the Barrière d'Enfer, a Paris toll gate, the following February

Marcello and Musetta are now living together at a tavern. Mimì has come to ask Marcello for advice about her crumbling relationship with Rodolfo. She says that he is jealous and often says that he wants to break off their relationship. Marcello advises her to leave him. Rodolfo had come to the tavern earlier to see Marcello as well, but without telling Mimì. He has been sleeping there. As he awakens, Mimì hides. Rodolfo tells Marcello that Mimì is indeed a flirt, besides which she is dangerously ill and not likely to live much longer. Mimì has a coughing fit and is discovered. Rodolfo runs to assist her immediately. Musetta's laughing in the distance prompts Marcello to leave the room (he believes that Musetta is flirting herself), so Rodolfo and Mimì are left alone. Mimì tells Rodolfo that she is going to leave him. She wants her belongings but will permit him to keep the pink bonnet he bought her as a memento. They agree to separate only when the winter is over and are able to enjoy a tender moment together. In the meantime, Marcello and Musetta return; they also vow to separate, in their case shouting insults at each other.

Act IV

The same garret apartment as in Act I, now in the spring

Marcello and Rodolfo pretend to work, but they are actually trying to learn from each other what is going on with their former lovers Musetta and Mimì; they are both clearly still in love. It is learned that Mimì has taken up with a wealthy man. Schaunard and Colline enter with a meager supper. After it is eaten, they argue and fight a mock duel. Musetta suddenly appears. She says that Mimì is outside, too weak to mount the stairs. Rodolfo rushes out to help her while the others prepare a bed. Musetta explains that she heard that Mimì had left her patron and was dying. Once she found her, she asked to be taken to Rodolfo. The Bohemians have no food to offer Mimì. Musetta gives Marcello her earrings to sell to pay for medicine and a doctor. They leave to buy a muff for Mimì to help keep her warm. Colline also leaves to pawn his overcoat and asks Schaunard to leave as well, obviously so that Mimì and Rodolfo can be alone together for the last time. They remember the time when they first met and declare eternal love. The others return one by one. Mimì slips into unconsciousness after she is given the muff that Musetta brought back for her. Musetta prays at her bedside. The Bohemians pretend for a time that Mimì is merely sleeping, even though she is actually dead. Rodolfo weeps and throws himself on Mimì's lifeless body as the others either weep themselves or try to turn away from the tragedy.

Operas of Giuseppe Verdi
(1813-1901)

Dates are of first performance:

Oberto (1839)
Un giorno di regno (1840)
Nabucco (1842)
I Lombardi (1843)
Ernani (1844)
I due Foscari (1844)
Giovanna d'Arco (1845)
Alzira (1845)
Attila (1846)
Macbeth (1847)
I masnadieri (1847)
Il corsaro (1848)
La battaglia di Legnano (1849)
Luisa Miller (1849)
Stiffelio (1850)
Rigoletto (1851)
Il trovatore (1853)
La traviata (1853)
I vespri siciliani (1856)
Simon Boccanegra (1857)
Un ballo in maschera (1859)
La forza del destino (1862)
Don Carlos (1867)
Aïda (1871)
Otello (1887)
Falstaff (1893)

Completed Operas of Richard Wagner
(1813-1883)

Dates are of composition:

Die Feen (1833-34)
Das Liebesverbot (1835-36)
Rienzi (1838-40)
Der fliegende Holländer (1840-41)
Tannhäuser (1843-45)
Lohengrin (1846-48)

Der Ring des Nibelungen:
Das Rheingold (1853-54)
Die Walküre (1854-56)
Siegfried (1856-71)
Götterdämmerung (1869-74)

Tristan und Isolde (1856-59)
Die Meistersinger von Nürnberg (1862-67)
Parsifal (1877-82)

Some Noteworthy Operas by French Composers (or Immigrants to France)
Written During the Romantic Period in Music

Daniel-François-Esprit Auber (1782-1871): *La muette de Portici* (1828)
Fra diavolo (1830)
Manon Lescaut (1856)

Giacomo Meyerbeer (1791-1864): *Robert le diable* (1831)
Les Huguenots (1836)
Le prophète (1841)
L'africaine (1865)

Jacques Fromental Halévy (1799-1862): *La juive* (1835)

Hector Berlioz (1803-1868): *Benvenuto Cellini* (1838)
Les Troyens (1863)

Charles Gounod (1818-1893): *Faust* (1859)
Roméo et Juliette (1867)

Ambroise Thomas (1811-1896): *Mignon* (1866)
Hamlet (1868)

Georges Bizet (1838-1875): *Les pêcheurs des perles* (1863)
Carmen (1875)

Camille Saint-Saëns (1835-1921): *Samson et Delila* (1877)

Jacques Offenbach (1819-1880): *Les contes d'Hoffman* (1881)

Léo Delibes (1836-1891): *Lakmé* (1883)

Jules Massenet (1842-1912): *Manon* (1884)
Le Cid (1885)
Werther (1892)
Thaïs (1894)

Gustave Charpentier (1860-1956): *Louise* (1900)

Some Noteworthy Operas by 19th-Century Italian Composers

Gioachino Rossini (1792-1868):

La scala di seta (1812)
Tancredi (1813)
L'italiana in Algeri (1813)
Il barbiere di Siviglia (1816)
Otello (1816)
La Cenerentola (1817)
La gazza ladra (1817)
La donna del lago (1819)
Semiramide (1823)
Le siège de Corinthe (1826)
Guillaume Tell (1829)

Gaetano Donizetti (1797-1848):

Anna Bolena (1830)
L'elisir d'amore (1832)
Lucrezia Borgia (1833)
Lucia di Lammermoor (1835)
Maria Stuarda (1835)
Roberto Devereux (1837)
La favorite (1840)
La fille du régiment (1840)
Maria Padilla (1841)
Linda di Chamounix (1842)
Don Pasquale (1843)

Vincenzo Bellini (1801-1835):

I Capuleti e i Montecchi (1830)
Norma (1831)
La sonnambula (1831)
Beatrice di Tenda (1833)
I puritani (1835)

Giuseppe Verdi (1813-1893):

Oberto (1839)
Un giorno di regno (1840)
Nabucco (1842)
I Lombardi (1843)

Ernani (1844)
I due Foscari (1844)
Giovanna d'Arco (1845)
Alzira (1845)
Attila (1846)
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I vespri siciliani (1856)
Simon Boccanegra (1857)
Un ballo in maschera (1859)
La forza del destino (1862)
Don Carlos (1867)
Aïda (1871)
Otello (1887)
Falstaff (1893)

Other notable Italian operas of the late 19th century:

Arrigo Boïto (1842-1918): *Mefistofele* (1868)

Amilcare Ponchielli (1834-1886): *La Gioconda* (1876)

Pietro Mascagni (1863-1945): *Cavalleria rusticana* (1890)

Ruggiero Leoncavallo (1858-1919): *Pagliacci* (1892)

Umberto Giordano (1867-1948): *Andrea Chénier* (1896)

Giacomo Puccini (1858-1924): *Manon Lescaut* (1893)

La bohème (1896)

Tosca (1900)

Madama Butterfly (1904)

La fanciulla del West (1910)

La rondine (1917)

Il trittico (1918): *Il tabarro*, *Suor Angelica*, *Gianni Schicchi*

Turandot (1926)

Notable Operas by 19th-Century German Composers
(and 20th-century German composers who wrote in Romantic style)

Ludwig van Beethoven (1770-1827):

Fidelio (1805)

Ludwig Spohr (1784-1859):

Jessonda (1823)

Carl Maria von Weber (1786-1826):

Der Freischütz (1821)

Oberon (1826)

Heinrich Marschner (1795-1861):

Der Vampyr (1828)

Hans Heiling (1833)

Albert Lortzing (1801-1851):

Zar und Zimmermann (1837)

Otto Nicolai (1810-1849):

Die lustigen Weiber von Windsor (1849)

Friedrich von Flotow (1812-1883):

Martha (1847)

Peter Cornelius (1824-1874):

Der Barbier von Bagdad (1858)

Richard Wagner (1813-1883) – dates are of composition:

Rienzi (1838-40)

Der fliegende Holländer (1840-41)

Tannhäuser (1843-45)

Lohengrin (1846-48)

Der Ring des Nibelungen:

Das Rheingold (1853-54)

Die Walküre (1854-56)

Siegfried (1856-71)

Götterdämmerung (1869-74)

Tristan und Isolde (1856-59)

Die Meistersinger von Nürnberg (1862-67)

Parsifal (1877-82)

Engelbert Humperdinck (1854-1921)

Hänsel und Gretel (1893)

Richard Strauss (1864-1949):

Salome (1905)

Elektra (1909)

Der Rosenkavalier (1910)

Ariadne auf Naxos (1912)

Die Frau ohne Schatten (1918)

Intermezzo (1923)

Capriccio (1941)

Hans Pfitzner (1869-1949):

Palestrina (1917)