

La Bohème

Opera in Italian in four acts

Music by Giacomo Puccini

Libretto:
Luigi Illica and Giuseppe Giacosa,
adapted from the novel
by Henri Murger,
Scènes de la vie de Bohème
(Scenes from Bohemian Life)

Premiere: Teatro Reggio, Turin, Italy

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Principal Characters in La Bohème

Marcello, a painter	Baritone
Rodolfo, a poet	Tenor
Colline, a philosopher	Bass
Schaunard, a musician	Baritone
Mimi, a seamstress	Soprano
Musetta, a singer	Soprano
Benoit, the landlord	Bass
Alcindoro, a state councillor	Bass
Parpignol, a vendor	Tenor

Students, townspeople, shopkeepers,
street-vendors, soldiers, waiters and children.

TIME: about 1830

PLACE: Paris

Brief Story Synopsis

It is Christmas Eve. Rodolfo, a poet, gazes out the window of his garret studio at the snow-covered rooftops of Paris while his friend Marcello works on a painting. Both artists have no money and are starving. To provide heat, Rodolfo feeds one of his manuscripts to the stove. Two friends arrive: Colline, a philosopher, and Schaunard, a musician, the latter bringing food and wine. Benoit, the landlord, arrives to collect the overdue rent, but he is quickly dispatched after they fill him with wine and express mock outrage when he reveals his amorous exploits.

Marcello, Colline, and Schaunard go off to the Café Momus to celebrate Christmas Eve, but Rodolfo remains behind to finish a manuscript. His neighbor, Mimi, knocks on the door, seeking help to light her extinguished candle. She is seized by a coughing fit and faints, and Rodolfo revives her. Suddenly, Rodolfo and Mimi fall in love.

In the Latin Quarter, Rodolfo buys Mimi a bonnet, Colline buys a secondhand overcoat, and Schaunard bargains over the cost of a pipe and horn. All sit at a table at the Café Momus and order lavish dinners.

Musetta, Marcello's former sweetheart, arrives, accompanied by the elderly Alcindoro. While Alcindoro goes off to buy Musetta a pair of new shoes, Musetta succeeds in luring Marcello to return to her; they agree to become sweethearts again. Unable to pay for their dinners, the bohemians sneak away amidst the passing military retreat. Alcindoro returns to find no Musetta, but only the bohemians' exorbitant dinner bill.

Mimi and Rodolfo have argued incessantly, causing Rodolfo to move to an inn where Marcello and Musetta reside. Mimi seeks and finds Marcello, and reveals that Rodolfo's petty jealousies have tormented their love affair; she begs him to help them separate. When Rodolfo appears, Mimi hides, only to be given away by a fit of coughing. The lovers reunite and decide to remain together until spring, while Musetta and Marcello quarrel vociferously.

Back in their garret, Rodolfo and Marcello are bachelors again, nostalgically reminiscing about the wonderful times they shared with their sweethearts. Colline and Schaunard arrive, and all the bohemians rollick and engage in horseplay, temporarily forgetting about their misfortunes.

Musetta announces that Mimi has arrived, and that she is deathly ill. Musetta sends Marcello to sell her earrings for money to buy medicine, get a doctor, and buy a muff to warm Mimi's freezing hands; Colline goes off to sell his treasured coat.

The two lovers, left by themselves, reminisce about their first meeting. While Mimi sleeps, she dies. The grief-stricken Rodolfo is shattered, unable to cope with the death of Mimi, and the death of love.

Story Narrative with Music Examples

Act I: Christmas Eve—A garret overlooking the snow-covered roofs of Paris

La bohème begins without overture or prelude; its brief opening music conveys the lighthearted, carefree spirit of the bohemian artists.



These young artists are poverty-stricken and nearly destitute. It is freezing in the garret because they have no money for firewood. Marcello, a painter, is huddled near an easel with his painting "Crossing of the Red Sea," a work he never seems to be able to finish; Rodolfo, a poet, tries to work on a manuscript.

Both artists are hungry, cold, and uninspired. Rodolfo stares out the garret window, and observes that smoke rises from every chimney but their own.

“Nei cieli bigi guardo fumar dai mille comignoli Parigi”



The scene is transformed into humor and mayhem when the two freezing artists try to find ways to generate heat from their stove. They ponder their options: burn a chair for firewood, throw in Marcello's painting, or sacrifice an act from Rodolfo's drama.

While Rodolfo's doomed play goes into the flames, Colline, a philosopher, arrives; he notes how quickly the fire has expired by using Rodolfo's manuscript as fuel, cynically proclaiming that "brevity is a great asset" (literally, "brevity is the soul of wit").

Schaunard, a musician-friend, triumphantly arrives with provisions: beef, pastry, wine, tobacco, and firewood.

Schaunard's theme:



The ecstatic bohemians celebrate boisterously. Schaunard explains his sudden wealth: he received money from an eccentric Englishman, who paid him an outrageous sum to play to a neighbor's noisy parrot until it dropped dead; he actually succeeded in killing the parrot not through his music, but by feeding it poisoned parsley.

The landlord, Benoit, arrives to collect his long-overdue rent. To divert him, the bohemians ply him with wine, which, together with flattery, inspires him to boast about his amorous and indiscreet exploits with young women. The bohemians pretend mock outrage as they dismiss him, their rent payment temporarily deferred.

Marcello, Colline, and Schaunard leave for the Café Momus to celebrate Christmas Eve. Rodolfo decides to stay behind awhile in order to complete an article for a magazine.

Alone, Rodolfo is lethargic and unmotivated. As he throws down his pen, he is suddenly interrupted by a timid knock on the door. It is his beautiful neighbor Mimi; the fragile woman is exhausted and out of breath from climbing the stairs. Mimi's candle has extinguished because of the hallway drafts, and she seeks light to find her way to her room.

Mimi's coughing indicates that she is ill. But their first meeting has aroused love. Both become nervous and fidgety; a candle blows out, a candle is re-lit, and then the candle blows out again. Mimi faints, and Rodolfo revives her with sprinkles of water and sips of wine.

Just as Mimi is about to leave, she accidentally drops her key, and both grope for it in the dark. Rodolfo finds the key, and without Mimi's knowing it, he places it into his pocket. Their hands meet in the dark, and Rodolfo notices how cold her hands are.

“Che gelida manina, se la lasci riscaldar”

Andantino affettuoso
RODOLFO



Che ge - li - da ma - ni - na, se la las-ci ris-cal - dar,
How cold your little hand is! Let me warm it for you.

Mimi's presence has inspired the struggling poet. He tells Mimi about himself: he is poor, but with his rhymes, dreams and visions, he has the soul of a millionaire. Then Rodolfo admits that Mimi has captivated him; his words are underscored with the sweeping and ecstatic signature music of the opera: “Talor dal mio forziere.” (“Your eyes have stolen my dreams, and the hope of your love will replace that theft.”)

Rodolfo: “Talor dal mio forziere”

Con molto espressione
RODOLFO



Ta-lor dal mio for - zi - e - re, ruban tutti i gioielli due ladri gli occhi belli.
But two thieves robbed my treasures: a pair of pretty eyes.

Mimi replies modestly to Rodolfo's sudden ardor: “Mi chiamano Mimi” (“My name is Mimi”). She explains to Rodolfo that she embroiders artificial flowers, and yearns for the real blossoms of spring, the flowers that speak of love.

“Mi chiamano Mimi”

Andante lento
MIMI



Sì, Mi chia-ma - no Mi - mi, ma il mio no - me è Lu-ci - a.
Yes. They call me Mimi, but my real name is Lucia.

From the street below, Rodolfo's friends call him to hurry up and join them to celebrate Christmas Eve at the Café Momus. Rodolfo opens the window and tells them that he will be along shortly, but that they should be sure to hold two places at the café.

As moonlight envelops them, Rodolfo, enchanted with Mimi's beauty and charm, turns to her, and together they proclaim their newfound love. Rodolfo begins their rapturous duet, "O soave fanciulla" ("Oh lovely maiden"). The music rises ecstatically as both affirm, "Ah! tu sol commandi, amor" ("Only you rule my heart").

Arm in arm, Mimi and Rodolfo walk out into the night to join their friends at the Café Momus.

Act II: The Latin Quarter and the Café Momus

Outside the Café Momus, crowds, street hawkers, and waiters create a kaleidoscope of Christmas Eve joy and merriment. Schaunard tries to negotiate the purchase of a toy horn, Colline tries on a coat, and then Rodolfo appears with Mimi, who wears a charming pink bonnet that he has just bought for her as a present. They proceed to an outside table at the Café Momus where Rodolfo introduces Mimi to his friends.

“Questa è Mimi, gaia fioraia”

Allegro moderato
RODOLFO



Questa è Mimi, gaia fiorata. Il suo venir comple - ta la bella compagnia,
This is Mimi, happy flower girl. Her presence completes our beautiful gathering.

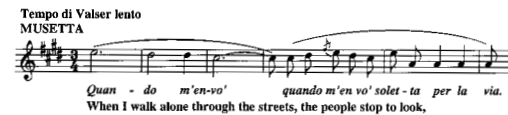
All the bohemians proceed to order themselves a lavish dinner, oblivious of the reality that they have no money to pay for it.

Marcello suddenly turns gloomy as he hears in the distance the voice of his former sweetheart, Musetta. Musetta, elegantly dressed, makes a dashing and noisy entrance on the arm of the state councillor, the old and wealthy Alcindoro, whom she orders around unmercifully.

Musetta is the last entry into the bohemian family. She is a singer who is volatile, tempestuous, conceited, egotistical, flirtatious, and hungry for adulation. Amid the mayhem at the café, Musetta tries to get Marcello's attention, but he pretends to ignore her. Frustrated, Musetta becomes tempestuous, and when that fails, she approaches Marcello and addresses him directly, using every bit of her irresistible charm.

Musetta sings her famous waltz, a song in which she brags about her own popularity and how men are attracted to her: "Quando m'en vo" ("When I walk through the streets, people stop and look at my beauty"). Musetta implores Marcello to return to her, but he continues to ignore her.

Musetta's Waltz: "Quando m'en vo"



Musetta, now totally baffled and frustrated, pretends that her shoes are pinching her, and she sends the dutiful Alcindoro to buy her another pair. After Alcindoro is gone, Marcello suddenly becomes seized again by Musetta's spell; he capitulates, Musetta falls into Marcello's arms, and the lovers are reunited.

A waiter brings the bohemians their staggering check, and Musetta has the waiter add it to Alcindoro's. As soldiers fill the square and drum their retreat, the four bohemian artists, with Mimi and Musetta, follow the parade and disappear into the crowd.

Alcindoro returns with Musetta's new shoes, only to find an immense bill. Jilted and abandoned, he drops helplessly into a chair.

Act III: The Barrière d'Enfer, the snowy outskirts of Paris

It is a cold winter's dawn at the customs tollgate at the entrance to the city. Gatekeepers admit milkmaids and street cleaners, and from a nearby tavern the voice of Musetta is heard singing amid sounds of laughter and gaiety.

Marcello and Musetta now live in the tavern. Marcello's "Red Sea" painting has become its

signboard, and he has found sign painting more profitable than art. Musetta gives singing lessons.

Mimi appears, shivering and seized by a nasty coughing fit. She asks a policeman where she can find the painter Marcello. Marcello emerges from the tavern, and Mimi proceeds to pour out her desperation to him: Rodolfo has been exploding into irrational fits of incessant jealousy that have led to constant bickering. Mimi pleads with Marcello to help them separate.

As Marcello attempts to comfort Mimi, Rodolfo emerges from the tavern. Mimi fears meeting him and hides in the background. She overhears Rodolfo tell Marcello that he wants to separate from his fickle sweetheart; he calls her a heartless coquette.

When Marcello questions his veracity, he admits that he truly loves Mimi, but he is terrified that she is dying from her illness, and he feels helpless because he has no money to care for her.

“Una terribil tosse”

Lento triste
 RODOLFO

U - na ter-ri-bil tos-se l'e-sil pet-to le scu-o - te
 A horrible coughing racks her fragile chest.

The musical score for Rodolfo's 'Una terribil tosse' is written in 4/4 time with a key signature of two flats (B-flat and E-flat). The tempo is 'Lento triste'. The melody begins with a series of eighth notes, followed by a triplet of eighth notes, and then a half note. The lyrics are written below the staff, with the English translation provided below the Italian lyrics.

Mimi, overcome with tears, rushes from hiding and embraces Rodolfo. She insists that they must part for their own good and without regrets. She would be grateful if he would send her her little prayer book and bracelet, but as a reminder of their love, he should keep the little pink bonnet he bought her on Christmas Eve.

“Addio, senza rancor”

Andantino mosso
 MIMI

Ad - di - o, sen - za ran - cor,
 Goodbye, no hard feelings,

The musical score for Mimi's 'Addio, senza rancor' is written in 4/4 time with a key signature of two flats (B-flat and E-flat). The tempo is 'Andantino mosso'. The melody begins with a half note, followed by a quarter note, and then a half note. The lyrics are written below the staff, with the English translation provided below the Italian lyrics.

However, the love of Mimi and Rodolfo is so intense that they cannot separate, and their intended farewell is transformed into a temporary reconciliation. In a renewed wave of tenderness, they decide to postpone their parting and vow to remain together until springtime.

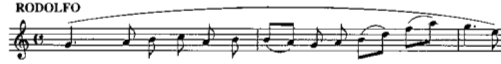
In a quartet, the music of Mimi and Rodolfo conveys the warmth and tenderness of their love, vividly contrasted with a temperamental and feisty quarrel between Marcello and Musetta: Marcello suspects that Musetta has been flirting again, and they furiously hurl insults at each other.

Act IV: The bohemians' garret, several weeks later

Rodolfo and Marcello have parted from their respective sweethearts, Mimi and Musetta, and they lament their loneliness. They pretend to work, but are uninspired. They tease each other about their ex-lovers, but then become pensive. Their duet, "O Mimi, tu più non torni" ("Oh Mimi, you're not coming back to me"), is a nostalgic reminiscence of their past happiness with their absent amours.

Rodolfo and Marcello: "O Mimi, tu più non torni"

Andantino mosso
RODOLFO



O Mi - mi, tu più non tor - ni, o gior - ni bel - li,
Oh Mimi, you will never return! Oh lovely days!

Schaunard and Colline arrive with provisions, and the bohemians' spirits become elevated: they dance, horse around, stage a hilarious mock duel, and feign an imaginary banquet.

Just as their festive mood peaks, Musetta, with great agitation, interrupts them and announces that Mimi is outside; she is deathly sick and they must prepare a bed for her. Mimi told Musetta that she felt that she was deathly ill and wanted to be near her true love, Rodolfo.

Rodolfo and Mimi are reunited, and past quarrels are forgotten. Mimi is suffering from her illness and complains of the cold. There is no food or wine, and Musetta gives Marcello her earrings and asks him to pawn them so they can pay for medicine and a doctor. Likewise, Colline decides to pawn his treasured overcoat and bids it a touching farewell.

"Vecchia zimarra" ("Old faithful coat")

Allegretto moderato e triste
COLLINE



Vecchia zimarra, senti, io resto al pian, tu ascendere il sacro monte or devi. Le mie grazie ricevi.
Listen, my venerable coat, I'm staying behind, but you go on to greater heights. I thank you.

Mimi and Rodolfo are left alone and poignantly reminisce about their first meeting.

“Sono andati?”



Afterwards, Mimi drifts off to sleep. Marcello returns with medicine, and Musetta prays for Mimi while Rodolfo lowers the blinds to soften the light while she sleeps.

Schaunard looks toward Mimi and realizes she has died. Rodolfo glances at his friends and senses the tragic truth. Marcello embraces his friend and urges him to have courage.

Rodolfo falls on Mimi's lifeless body as a thunderous, anguished orchestral fortissimo accompanies his despairing and wrenching cries of grief and loss: "Mimi, Mimi, Mimi!"

Puccini and La Bohème

Giacomo Puccini (1858-1924) was the heir to Italy's cherished opera icon, Giuseppe Verdi. He became the last superstar of the great Italian opera tradition in which the art form was dominated by lyricism, melody and the vocal arts.

Puccini came from a family of musicians who for generations had been church organists and composers in his native Lucca, Italy, a part of the region of Tuscany. His operatic epiphany occurred when he heard a performance of Verdi's *Aida*; it was the decisive moment when the eighteen-year-old budding composer became inspired toward a future in opera. With aid from Queen Margherita of Italy that was supplemented by additional funds from a great-uncle, he progressed to the Milan Conservatory, where he eventually studied under Amilcare Ponchielli, a renowned musician and teacher, and the composer of *La Gioconda* (1876).

In Milan, Ponchielli became Puccini's mentor; he astutely recognized the young composer's extraordinarily rich orchestral and symphonic skills and his remarkable harmonic and melodic inventiveness, resources that would become the hallmarks and prime characteristics of Puccini's mature compositional style.

Puccini's early experiences served to elevate his acute sense of drama, which eventually became engraved in his operatic works. He was fortunate to have been exposed to a wide range of dramatic plays that were presented in his hometown by distinguished touring companies. He saw works by Vittorio Alfieri and Carlo Goldoni, as well as the French works of Alexandre Dumas (father and son) and those of the extremely popular Victorien Sardou.

In 1884, at the age of 26, Puccini competed in the publisher Sonzogno's one-act-opera contest with his opera *Le Villi* (*The Witches*), a phantasmagoric romantic tale about young women who die of lovesickness because they were abandoned. Musically and dramatically, *Le Villi* remains quite a distance from the poignant sentimentalism which later became Puccini's trademark. Although Puccini lost the contest, La Scala agreed to produce *Le Villi* for its following season. But more significantly where Puccini's future career was concerned, Giulio Ricordi, the influential publisher, recognized the young composer's talents and lured him from Sonzogno, his rival and competitor.

Puccini became Ricordi's favorite composer. His prized status with Ricordi resulted in much peer envy, resentment, and jealousy among the young composer's rivals. Nonetheless, Ricordi used his ingenious golden touch to unite composer with librettist, and he proceeded to assemble the best poets and dramatists for his budding star, Puccini.

Ricordi commissioned Puccini to write a second opera, *Edgar* (1889), a melodrama involving a rivalry between two brothers for a seductive Moorish girl that erupts into powerful passions of betrayal and revenge. Its premiere at La Scala was a disappointment: the critics praised Puccini's orchestral and harmonic development since *Le villi*, but considered the opera mediocre. Even its later condensation from four to three acts could not redeem it or improve its fortunes, and it is rarely performed in modern times.

Ricordi's faith in his young protégé was triumphantly vindicated by the immediate success of Puccini's next opera, *Manon Lescaut* (1893). The genesis of the libretto was itself an operatic melodrama, saturated with feuds and disagreements among its considerable group of writers and scenarists that included Ruggero Leoncavallo, Luigi Illica, Giuseppe Giacosa, Domenico Oliva, Marco Praga, and even Giulio Ricordi himself. The critics and public were unanimous in their praise of *Manon Lescaut*, and in London the eminent critic George Bernard Shaw noted that in this opera "Puccini looks to me more like the heir of Verdi than any of his rivals."

For Puccini's librettos over the next decade, Ricordi secured the talents of the illustrious team of the scenarist Luigi Illica and the poet, playwright and versifier Giuseppe Giacosa. The first fruit of their collaboration was *La Bohème* (1896), drawn from Henri Murger's vivid novel about life among the artists of the Latin Quarter in Paris during the 1830s, *Scènes de la vie de Bohème* (*Scenes of Bohemian Life*).

The critics were strangely cool at *La Bohème*'s premiere; several of them found it a restrained work when compared to the fierce and inventive passions of *Manon Lescaut*. In spite of the opera's negative reviews, the public eventually became enamored with it. But in Vienna, the powerful Mahler was hostile to Puccini and virtually banned *La Bohème* in favor of Leoncavallo's treatment of the same subject.

Ruggero Leoncavallo also wrote an opera titled *La Bohème* that was based on the same Murger story. Leoncavallo had earlier achieved worldwide acclaim for his opera *I Pagliacci* (1892), and one year later was part of the legion of librettists who wrote the libretto for Puccini's *Manon Lescaut*.

Many friends attempted to persuade both Puccini and Leoncavallo not to simultaneously write operas based on Murger's story, a caution based primarily on the fact that certain elements of the plot, if adapted from the original play, were uncomfortably too close to that of Verdi's renowned *La Traviata*: both heroines die of tuberculosis, and in Murger, Mimi is persuaded to leave Rodolfo by his wealthy uncle who employs some of the same arguments posed by Giorgio Germont in *La Traviata*.

Nevertheless, both composers were intransigent and attacked the composition of the work. Initially, two composers composing an opera on the same subject developed into a spirited competition. But in true operatic tradition, passions erupted, and what began as a friendly rivalry eventually transformed into bitter enmity between Puccini and Leoncavallo, particularly after Leoncavallo claimed that he had precedence in the subject. Earlier, Ricordi had been unsuccessful in securing exclusive rights for Puccini because Murger's novel was in the public domain. Leoncavallo's *La Bohème* premiered in 1897, one year after Puccini's *La Bohème*. The critics and audiences lauded Leoncavallo's opera. Although it is perhaps unjust, Leoncavallo's opera is rarely performed in modern times, eclipsed by the more popular Puccini work.

After *La Bohème*, Puccini transformed Victorien Sardou's play *La Tosca* into a sensational, powerful, and thrilling music-action drama. Although the play was extremely popular in its time, Puccini certainly provided immortality for its playwright through his opera's success.

For his next opera, he adapted David Belasco's one-act play *Madame Butterfly* (1904). At its premiere, the opera experienced what Puccini described as "a veritable lynching"; the audience's hostility and denunciation of the composer and his work were apparently deliberately engineered by rivals who were jealous of Puccini's success and favored status with Ricordi. Nevertheless, Puccini's *Madama Butterfly* quickly joined its two predecessors as cornerstones of the international operatic repertory.

Puccini followed with *La Fanciulla del West* (*The Girl of the Golden West*) (1910), *La Rondine* (1917), the three one-act operas of *Il Trittico*—*Suor Angelica*, *Gianni Schicchi*, and *Il Tabarro* (*The Cloak*) (1918), and his final work, *Turandot*, completed posthumously in 1926 by Franco Alfano.

In general, Puccini's musical and dramatic style reflects the naturalistic movement of the "giovane scuola," a group of artists in late nineteenth-century Italy who developed the genre of verismo, or Realism in opera. The fruit of their style represented a fidelity to nature and real-life situations, and was intended to be an accurate representation of life situations without idealization.

In the ideal *verismo* portrayal, no subject was too mundane, no subject was too harsh, and no subject was too ugly; primal passions became the underlying subject of the action as it portrayed the latent animal, the uncivilized savage, and the barbarian part of man's soul—a confirmation of Darwin's theory that man evolved from primal beast. Therefore, the plots dealt with intensive passions involving sex, seduction, revenge, betrayal, jealousy, murder and death. In this genre and its successors, modernity and film noire, man is portrayed as irrational, brutal, crude, cruel, and demonic. In these portrayals, death often becomes the consummation of desire, and good does not necessarily triumph over evil. In the Realism genre, Enlightenment's reason and Romanticism's freedom and sentimentality were overturned; man was portrayed as a creature of pure instinct.

Throughout his career, Puccini identified himself with *verismo*, what he called the "stile mascagnano," the Mascagni style first successfully portrayed in *Cavalleria Rusticana* (1890). Swift, dramatic action and brutal, sadistic primal passions certainly underlie *Tosca* and *Il Tabarro*. In other operas, such as *Manon Lescaut*, *La Bohème* and *Madama Butterfly*, *verismo* elements are expressed in the problems and conflicts of characters in everyday situations and in identifiable contemporary venues. Puccini's last opera, *Turandot*, is a fairy tale that takes place in ancient China, but the carnage from the executioner's axe and the agonizing death of Liù are pure verismo.

Puccini's musical style possesses a strongly personal lyrical signature that is readily identifiable: lush melodies, occasional unresolved dissonances, and

daring harmonic and instrumental colors. His writing for both voice and orchestra is rich and elegant, and his music possesses a soft suppleness, elegance and gentleness, as well as a profound poignancy. His supreme talent is his magic for inventing sumptuous melodies, which he expresses through his outstanding instrumental coloration and harmonic texture. As such, Puccini's musical signature is so individual that it is recognized immediately. To many, Puccini's music is endlessly haunting. It has been said that one leaves a Puccini opera performance, but the music never leaves the listener.

In all of Puccini's works, leitmotifs—melodies identifying persons and ideas—play a prominent role by providing cohesion, emotion, and reminiscence; however, they are never developed to the systematic symphonic complexity of Wagner, but are always exploited for their ultimate dramatic and symphonic effect. One of Puccini's most brilliant dramatic techniques is to preview the music associated with his heroines—their leitmotifs—before they appear. This is evidenced in the entrances of Tosca, Butterfly, Manon Lescaut, and Mimi.

Puccini's dramatic instincts never failed him. He was truly a master stage-craftsman with a consummate knowledge of the demands of the stage; perfect examples of his acute dramatic craftsmanship are the roll call of the prostitutes in *Manon Lescaut* and *Tosca*'s "Te Deum." In the terms of music drama, he certainly integrated his music, words, and gestures into a single conceptual and organic unity.

Puccini was meticulous in evoking ambience with his music; examples are the bells of awakening Rome in Act III of *Tosca* and the ship's sirens in *Il Tabarro*. In *La Bohème*, there are many instances in which musical ambience or musical impressions realistically capture minute details of everyday life: the crackling of the fire when Rodolfo's manuscript is burning; the sound of Colline tumbling down the stairs, and the falling snowflakes at the start of Act III. Debussy, although antagonistic to the Italian school of opera, confessed that he knew of no one who had captured Paris through music during the era of Louis-Philippe "as well as Puccini in *La Bohème*."

With the exception of his last opera, *Turandot*, Puccini was not a composer of ambitious works or grand opera stage spectacles in the manner of Meyerbeer or Verdi. He commented that "the only music I can make is of small things," acknowledging that his talent and temperament were not suited to

works of large design, spectacle, or even portrayals of romantic heroism.

Indeed, *La Bohème* does not deal with the romantic or melodramatic world of kings, nobles, gods, or heroes; rather, it is a realistic portrayal of simple, ordinary people and the countless little humdrum details of their everyday lives. Certainly, *La Bohème* epitomizes Puccini's world of "small things." Its grandeur is that it does not portray supercharged passions evolving from world-shattering events, but rather intimate moments of tender, poignant human conflicts and tensions.

Specifically in *La Bohème*, Puccini creates a perfect balance between realism and sentimentality, as well as between comedy and pathos. Ultimately, in the writing of dramas filled with tenderness and beauty Puccini had few equals, and he had few rivals in inventing a personal lyricism that portrayed intimate humanity with sentimentalism and beauty.

Puccini's *La Bohème* is based on Henri Murger's *Scènes de la vie de Bohème* (*Scenes from Bohemian Life*), a series of vivid autobiographical sketches and episodes drawn from Murger's own experiences as a struggling writer in Paris in the 1830s. Murger's story first appeared serialized for a magazine and later, with huge success, as a novel and then a play.

The characters in Puccini's *La Bohème* were drawn directly from Murger's *Scènes*. Rodolfo, the poet and writer, was Murger himself—a poor, struggling, headstrong and impetuous literary man. Characteristically, a poet thinks in metaphors and similes, so in Act I of the opera Rodolfo addresses the stove that does not provide warmth as "an old stove that is idle and lives like a gentleman of leisure." And when Mimi is reunited with Rodolfo in Act IV, Rodolfo says that she is as "beautiful as the dawn" (although Mimi corrects him: "beautiful as a sunset").

Marcello was a figure drawn from several painters Murger knew, particularly a painter named Tabar, who was endlessly working on a painting called "Crossing the Red Sea." In Murger, the "Red Sea" painting was so often rejected by the Louvre that friends joked that if it was placed on wheels, it could make the journey from the attic to the committee room of the Louvre and back by itself.

Schaunard was based on the real-life Alexandre Schanne, who actually called himself Schaunard. He was the bohemian version of a Renaissance man: he was a painter, a writer who published his memoirs, and a musician and composer of rather unorthodox symphonies.

Colline, the philosopher, was patterned after a friend known as the “Green Giant” because his oversized green overcoat had four big pockets, each jokingly named after one of the four main libraries of Paris.

Oddly enough, “bohème” is a word that has a variety of definitions and connotations when it is translated into English. Bohemia is geographically a part of the central European nation of Czechoslovakia, but bohemian is also the name western Europeans once gave to gypsies to describe their carefree and vagabond life style. For the Murger/Puccini story, the name applies to the colonies of aspiring and starving young Parisian artists who gathered in the nineteenth century in Montmartre at the time of the building of the Church of Sacre Coeur.

So the Bohemia that Murger wrote about is not a place on the map in central Europe, but a place on the edge of bourgeois society. In Murger’s Bohemia, the prospective writer, painter, composer, or thinker learns about life through love, suffering, and death, all of which become necessary and important learning experiences in an artist’s development that provide the opportunity to grow, evolve, and gain wisdom.

But bohemian life can be a time of false illusions, aptly described by the painter Marcello in Act II of Puccini’s opera: “Oh, sweet age of utopias! You hope and believe, and all seems beautiful.” In the end, the artist must move on and leave the bohemian life before he is destroyed, a destruction caused not necessarily by freezing or starvation, but by arresting him in a world of false dreams and hopes, of capriciousness, promiscuity and rebellion.

Most importantly, the prospective artist must leave bohemian life and learn discipline: if he does not, he will despair and never really learn that first and foremost, it is discipline itself, the antithesis of bohemian life, that he must develop in order to write his poem or paint his picture. In that sense, bohemian life for these artists is synonymous with the struggles portrayed in many of the ancient myths, in which archetypes experience trials and tribulations, but their turbulent experiences serve to raise their consciousness to awareness.

For Puccini's *La Bohème*, Ricordi united one of the finest librettist teams: Luigi Illica and Giuseppe Giacosa. Both had participated in writing the libretto for the earlier *Manon Lescaut* and would later write the librettos for Puccini's *Madama Butterfly* and *Tosca*. For *La Bohème*, the playwright Illica completed the prose scenario, and Giacosa converted the scenario into verse.

Initially, the opera was conceived in four acts with five scenes, but composer and librettists struggled intensively to slash what they began to consider to be inherent superfluities. Therefore, a scene in which Mimi deserts Rodolfo for a rich viscount was discarded. However, in Act III of the opera, Rodolfo explains to Marcello his reasons for leaving Mimi, and his pretext is that Mimi was flirting with a "viscontino." Another scene that was discarded took place in the courtyard of Musetta's house after she had been evicted. This scene was excised because Puccini felt that it bore too much similarity to the mayhem of the Café Momus scene.

In 1896, the premiere of *La Bohème* took place in Turin, Italy under the baton of a very young conductor named Arturo Toscanini. It was impossible to have the premiere at La Scala, as it was then under the management of Ricordi's arch-rival, the publisher Edoardo Sonzogno, a vengeful competitor who unabashedly excluded all Ricordi scores from his La Scala repertory.

Most of the critics denounced Puccini's *La Bohème*, considering it a trivial work and far removed from the intense passions the composer had indicated in his earlier success, *Manon Lescaut*. The eminent music critic Carlo Bersezio wrote about the premiere in the newspaper *La Stampa*: "It hurts me very much to have to say it; but frankly this *Bohème* is not an artistic success. There is much in the score that is empty and downright infantile. The composer should realize that originality can be obtained perfectly well with the old established means, without recourse to consecutive fifths and a disregard of good harmonic rules." The critic further deemed that *La Bohème* had not made a profound impression on the minds of the audience, and that it would leave no great trace on the history of the lyric theatre. He boldly accused Puccini of making a momentary mistake, and suggested that he consider the opera an accidental error in his artistic career.

In the same vein, *La Bohème* inspired the composer Shostakovich to comment sarcastically: "Puccini writes marvelous operas, but dreadful music."

And a New York critic called it “summer operatic flotsam and jetsam.” Nevertheless, when *La Bohème* was staged in Palermo shortly after its 1896 premiere the audience response was delirious, and the people refused to leave the theater until the final scene had been repeated.

Critics can at times be self-proclaimed soothsayers who seem to be assisted by an infallible crystal ball, and most of the time they are right (although Mark Twain, as astute critic himself, damned the critics in favor of the public). Nevertheless, the critics’ prophecies about *La Bohème*’s ability to capture the collective minds and hearts of the opera public turned out to be dead wrong.

Many critics belabored the composer’s breach and disregard of so-called rules of musical composition, such as those parallel fifths that Puccini used so effectively to evoke the gay Christmas celebration in the Latin Quarter of Paris in Act II. But contrariwise, there was the cynicism of George Bernard Shaw: “The fact is, there are no rules, and there never were rules, and there will never be any rules of musical composition except the rules of thumb; and thumbs vary in length, like ears.”

The poignant and sympathetic humanness of the *La Bohème* story have become the inspiration for many other theatrical vehicles. In 1935, Gertrude Lawrence starred in a movie adaptation of *La Bohème* called “Mimi”; Deana Durbin sang “Musetta’s Waltz” in the 1940 film “It’s a Date”; and Cher, in the recent film “Moonstruck,” indeed became “lovestruck” after her first encounter with *La Bohème*.

La Bohème’s captivating appeal never ceases, and its artistic greatness is that it can readily adapt to contemporary situations. Recently, Jonathan Larson wrote the Pulitzer Prize and Tony Award-winning rock opera *Rent*, a modernized *La Bohème* story depicting anxious young people struggling in their existential world; in this version of the story, the heroine’s tragic death occurs because of her drug addiction rather than from consumption.

Today, Puccini’s *La Bohème* remains one of the opera world’s most popular sentimental favorites, a central pillar of the Italian opera canon that is among the indispensable handful. One can delightfully argue as to which is THE smash hit of opera—*La Bohème*, *Carmen*, *La Traviata*, *Aida*, or... Recently, the English critic Frank Granville Barker, reviewing the reissue of the Bjorling-de Los Angeles-Beecham recording, lauded the opera performance as he

explained how a magical cast can breathe life into Puccini's masterpiece. But in discussing *La Bohème* as a great work of the opera stage, he deemed it "one of the wonders of the world."

One of the fascinations of *La Bohème* is its intimate portrait of its characters. In painting, when the plane of the composition is moved forward, the viewer experiences the sensation that he has become integrated with the scene; he senses a greater presence and an emotional closeness to the subject.

Similarly, Puccini's characters in *La Bohème* absorb the viewer/listener into their intimate time and space, and the listener/viewer becomes an integral part of this heartwarming story. Puccini, the narrator and dramatist of this story, absorbs the listener through the compelling emotionalism of his lush music. As such, *La Bohème* becomes poignantly overpowering entertainment, its hypnotic and seductive appeal deriving from its subtle blend of comedy and *joie de vivre* that are fused with pathos, sentiment, tears, and tragedy.

The bohemian characters overwhelm their audience, and one cannot help but immediately become enamored by Puccini's charismatic bohemian personalities: Rodolfo the poet, Marcello the painter, Schaunard the musician, Colline the philosopher, Mimi the seamstress, and Musetta the singer. Puccini himself commented that he had become integrated with "his creatures," absorbed in their everyday problems, their dilemmas, their little joys, their loves, and their sorrows.

So it is virtually impossible not to identify with these youngsters; suddenly, each of them becomes part of our family. In certain ways they transport us to a time lost in memory, a time of youth, challenges, and dreams, and a whole list of one's own forgotten ambitions, idealisms, aspirations, and hopes. Their abandon, horseplay, and uninhibited mayhem are expressions of innocence, insecurity, and all of those fears and anxieties of youth. The bohemians become a reflection of our family, our children, our grandchildren, or us. Therefore, we empathize with them, and we are happy to see them enjoy life and be in love. But when things go wrong, we feel their pain and anguish. And when we finally witness the cruel fate of Mimi's death, we grieve for Mimi and with the bohemians as if we ourselves have lost a loved one from our family.

In certain respects, these characters in *La Bohème* become part of our collective unconscious, because somehow we understand their youthful anxieties; the opera's underlying story is a reminder of our own rite of passage.

On the surface, *La Bohème*'s simple story brings to life several episodes in the lives of four struggling artists—their joys, their sorrows, and their amours. But the bohemians' youthful experiences represent a profound inner meaning and a larger truth. *La bohème*'s message is like those in the ancient myths in which a noble transformation evolves from suffering, or from a sacrifice for the greater good of humanity; it is because of those struggles that consciousness and awareness are raised.

Plato said that you cannot teach philosophy to youth, because they are too caught up in their emotions. For youth, only experiences, pain, difficulty, and even tragedy can provide that transcendence necessary to develop maturity and understanding. In that sense, the suffering and struggles of these bohemians serve to represent a coming of age.

So the inner meaning of the *La Bohème* story is that it represents a critical moment in the lives of its characters—a transformation. This chapter in their lives is their rehearsal for life; in effect, it is a potent emotional blueprint for the future. Their struggles will transform them and they will lose their innocence; they will cross a bridge from adolescence to adulthood, and they will cross a bridge to artistic maturity.

As they experience shock in the cruel tragedy of Mimi's death, they grieve and suffer. But those sorrows serve a necessary and useful purpose by developing their inner wisdom and elevating their sensitivities and compassion. As a result, they will mature, become good artists, and learn to create.

In this early episode of their lives depicted in our story, they have learned good fellowship, young love, and humanity, all essential ingredients in the understanding of life. But their creative and artistic souls will transform toward a new and more profound maturity. Their transition will enable them to find their compass of life, build their confidence, and bring their intuitive creativity to the surface. The achieving of maturity and growth of the artistic soul are the essence of the *La Bohème* story.

The youthful experiences Puccini portrayed in *La Bohème* were autobiographical. When he was in his twenties and a student at the Conservatory in Milan, he was, like the bohemians in his opera story, a starving young artist.

Pietro Mascagni—later the composer of *Cavalleria Rusticana*—was his roommate. They lived in a garret where they were forbidden to cook. In order to use their stove, they sang and played the piano as loudly as they could in order to disguise sounds from their pots and dishes.

They were so poor that they had to pool their pennies to buy a *Parsifal* score in order to study Wagner. Always in deep debt, they supposedly marked a map of Milan with red crosses to show the danger areas where they thought they might run into their creditors. And Puccini, like Colline in Act IV of the opera, once pawned his coat so he could have enough money to take a young ballerina out on the town.

In later life, and after Puccini's phenomenal successes, the bohemian life of his youth became a beautiful and nostalgic memory. In order to capture the spirit of his past bohemian life style, Puccini and his cronies formed a club called "La Bohème." Its constitution read:

The members swear to drink well and eat better... Grumblers, pedants, weak stomachs, fools and puritans shall not be admitted. The Treasurer is empowered to abscond with dues. The President must hinder the Treasurer in the collection of monthly dues. It is prohibited to play cards honestly, silence is strictly prohibited, and cleverness is allowed only in exceptional cases. The lighting of the clubroom shall be by means of an oil lamp. Should there be a shortage of oil, it will be replaced by the brilliant wit of the members.

Puccini's muse was tragic. His heroines always die, sometimes brutally and cruelly: Manon Lescaut is broken in strength and spirit and then dies, Butterfly, Tosca, Liù and Suor Angelica die through suicide, and Mimi dies of consumption.

According to Dr. Mosco Carner's biography *Puccini* (1958), the suffering and agonizing deaths of Puccini's heroines reflect inner demons within the composer's subconscious. Carner hypothesized that Puccini punished his heroines because they indulged in sinful love, and their guilt could be redeemed only through their death. The composer's condemnation of these heroines was the result of an unresolved early bond to his exalted mother image—in psychological terms, a raging mother complex, or an Oedipus complex. Puccini responded intuitively and compulsively to his unconscious psychological demons.

Carner theorizes that Puccini's psyche divided the powerful passion of love into two categories: holy or sanctified love opposed by mundane or erotic love. In that context, Puccini's subconscious conception of mother-love was elevated to lofty saintliness, but in contrast, he subconsciously condemned erotic and romantic love as sinful transgressions that must be punished by death.

As such, Puccini transferred his mother fixation to his heroines. Therefore, Manon, Mimi, Tosca, and Butterfly are guilty of indulging in sinful love; in Puccini's subconscious, they are unworthy rivals of his exalted mother image. These heroines are on the fringes of society, and are inferior women of doubtful virtue: Manon Lescaut's material obsessions are those of a depraved woman, Tosca's love affair with Cavaradossi is immoral, and Mimi's brief cohabitation with Rodolfo is sinful. In consequence, Puccini was subconsciously compelled to punish these women, and their punishment was exacted through sacrifice, persecution, and eventually destruction through death. The tragic fate of *La Bohème's* Mimi fits perfectly into Dr. Carner's psychological hypothesis of Puccini's conception of love as tragic guilt. Mimi's pursuit of erotic and sinful love with Rodolfo represents an immorality and sin for which she must be punished by death, an agonizing and painful death that resolves the composer's inner psychological conflicts. Puccini's ingenious music underscores the agony and pathos of her death and tugs ferociously at the listener's heartstrings.

Dr. Carner also hypothesizes that Puccini's music reflects the composer's dark side — his frustration, despair, disillusionment, and despondency. His melancholy represented unconscious conflicts and

personal neuroses that he dutifully portrayed in his art. Freud said, "Where psychology leaves off, aesthetics and art begin." And Wagner said, "Art brings the unconscious to consciousness."

Manon Lescaut, *La Bohème*, *Tosca* and *Madama Butterfly* were composed during the *fin de siècle*, a period from about 1880 to about 1910. Nietzsche called the era a time of the "transvaluation of all values"; it was a time in which man questioned his inner contradictions about the meaning of life and art. In the eighteenth-century Enlightenment, reason represented the path to universal truth and human salvation. But the Enlightenment bred the French Revolution and the bloodbath and carnage of the Reign of Terror, and Romanticism emerged as a backlash. So by the end of the nineteenth century, old beliefs about moral and social values had disintegrated and undermined the foundation of the old order of things, and the new age became spiritually unsettled and self-questioning.

In artistic expression, Romanticism's sentimentalism and its idealizations surrendered to the savage passions of Realism, or *verismo*; in many respects, the genre expressed the despair and disillusion of the *fin de siècle*. Artists probed deeply into the hidden recesses of the mind and psyche to convey secrets about neurotic and erotic sensibilities. Art portrayed the ugly side of human nature, physical and mental disease, and even abnormality. This realism flowed into the twentieth century as new types of opera heroes and heroines emerged, sometimes neurotic and sometimes deranged. Richard Strauss's *Salome* introduced a teenage sexual pervert indulging in necrophilism; *Elektra* deals with a monomania for revenge as well as matricide; and Alban Berg's *Wozzeck* deals with sadism. The music of the period portrays pessimism and malaise, and even an angst, restlessness and helplessness in its search for the unconscious demon within the self.

Likewise, Puccini's art mirrors despair, destruction and lethargy, dutifully reflecting the era's conflicts as well as his own personal neuroses. In *Turandot*, love conflicts with hate, and in *Manon Lescaut*, a seductive and perfidious woman is in conflict between reason and emotion, virtue and vice, and the spirit and the flesh.

In *Tosca*, there is a blend of politics, sex, sadism, suicide, murder, and religion, and the entire tragedy springs from Tosca's abnormal, obsessive, and uncontrollable jealousy, all pitted against Scarpia's

sadistic erotic obsessions. The intensity of Cavaradossi's lament and final agony becomes even more acute in his final aria, "E lucevan le stelle," an expression of the demon of melancholy that haunted Puccini throughout his entire life: "Muio disperato" ("I die in desperation"). And in *La Bohème*, after Rodolfo learns that Mimi has died, his final outcry, "Mimi, Mimi, Mimi!" thunderously underscored by the orchestra again expresses the composer's agonizing despair.

In Puccini's *La Bohème*, after Mimi's death the curtain falls. At the close of Murger's *Scènes de la vie de Bohème* the author relates the destinies of the bohemians after Mimi's death. The bohemians leave "la vie de Bohème" as they are supposed to, and for better or worse, like all young idealists, counterculture rebels, and "flower children" of the 1960s, they join the mainstream and establishment.

Murger tells us that Schaunard the musician eventually is successful at writing popular songs, and—perish the thought—makes tons of money.

Colline, the philosopher, marries a rich society lady, and spends the rest of his life, as Murger says, "eating cake."

Marcello gets his paintings displayed in an exhibition and, ironically, actually sells one to an Englishman whose mistress is the very Musetta he had once loved.

Rodolfo gets good reviews for his first book, and is en route to a successful writing career.

The last lines of Murger have Marcello commenting cynically on their artistic successes. Marcello tells Rodolfo: "We're done for, my friend, dead and buried. There is nothing left for the two of us but to settle down to steady work." These artists are sadder, but wiser. Their loves, Mimi and Musetta, will always remain with them as beautiful memories of their youth and their bohemian past.

In Puccini's *La Bohème*, the transformation and transition from youthful innocence to maturity has succeeded.

