

Opera Pack

La bohème Puccini

Puccini

Puccini was born in 1858 in the Italian town of Lucca. He was given six christian names (Giacomo Antonio Domenico Michele Secondo Maria) and a sound musical education. Four generations of his family had been organists at the cathedral and Puccini learnt the family business early. He was a cathedral choirboy and (once his voice broke) a deputy organist for the various churches round his home. Even so he was rather a late developer for a composer. There were plenty of theatres in Lucca, but the most exciting shows they put on were plays and it wasn't until Puccini was 18 that he saw a really good performance of opera. It was Verdi's *Aida* and the moment he saw it, Puccini knew what he wanted to do. He managed to get into the Milan Conservatory of Music, although he was already far too old for the entrance exam, and he plunged into work. His first opera, *Le villi*, was not a huge success, but the Italian music publisher, Giulio Ricordi, signed him up on the spot. He gave Puccini a marvellous contract - a monthly allowance and as much time as he liked in which to write operas. The fact that his very next show was a flop didn't worry Ricordi at all, he simply encouraged his young composer to try again and from then on Puccini produced a string of masterpieces.

La bohème was Puccini's fourth opera. He obviously enjoyed the book, *Scenes from Bohemian Life*, on which it was based; the opera zips along; it is fast, light and full of jokes, just like the young artists whose lives it describes. There is an immense amount of dialogue in the score as the young men fool about, but Puccini made sure they burst into arias at regular intervals. You will notice he always 'flags' an aria by slowing up the music for a moment. This alerts the audience to the fact that something big is coming up, and gives the soloist a moment to get ready. This sort of care for the singer is typical of an Italian composer, but Puccini stands out for showing just as much interest in the orchestra - often in the smallest touches. Rodolfo burns his play, and you can hear the flicker of flames as he strikes the match, Schaunard buys a second-hand horn, "I'm a bit worried about the D" he says, and an orchestral horn tells him he is right to worry by playing a very dodgy D. Even at the climax of the opera Puccini keeps a light touch. His heroine's death is one of the quietest deaths in all opera. The hero doesn't even notice it has happened, and Puccini marked it *pppppp* in the score.

One thing in which he was surely unique was his great interest in dawn. All his operas have a dawn scene, and there is a particularly chilly one in *La bohème*. His friends put this down to the long hours he spent at day break duck shooting in the marshes near his home.

La bohème

Puccini's opera, *La bohème*, is about a group of young artists - Bohemians. Bohemia is of course a real country but, since the 19th Century, it has come to mean a way of life. Any struggling artist, who can't pay the rent and who doesn't care what he looks like, is said to be living in Bohemia. And, back in the 1840's, people could be very precise about where Bohemia was to be found - it was situated, amongst the artists, in the Latin quarter of Paris. And that is where the opera is set.

The Bohemians

Puccini based his opera on a book by a real Bohemian, Henry Murger. Murger sets out to describe Bohemia and his first chapter introduces us to his friends, "...**Colline**, the great philosopher, **Marcello** the great painter, **Schaunard** the great musician and **Rodolfo** the great poet, all used to live in the cafe Momus. They took over a room in the cafe and people fled whenever they began to talk. Their jokes turned the milk sour and the waiter who served them gradually went mad." When they *weren't* at the cafe however, the Bohemians shared a garret. Their landlord was a vain old man, **Benoit**, and the young men spent most of their time trying to earn enough to live on - and falling in love. Marcello is in love with a tavern singer, **Musetta**, and Rodolfo falls for a young embroiderer, **Mimi**. Murger sums up the living conditions, "We spent half our days not eating - and the other half dying of cold..." This is a very good description of the opening of **Act I**.

It is Christmas Eve and, in a garret, Marcello is trying to paint his masterpiece, the *Crossing of the Red Sea*. His companion, Rodolfo, is not getting on with his magazine article but staring out over the rooftops. Both are cold and hungry and Marcello grumbles as he paints, while Rodolfo sings cheerfully as he watches the smoke. "Rodolfo" says Marcello, "Let me tell you something really profound - I'm frozen..." They both glare at their empty stove and, rejecting Marcello's suggestion that they burn the Red Sea ("the smell of paint would be awful") Rodolfo decides to sacrifice one of his plays. As they burn the manuscript they are joined by Colline (the philosopher), who gravely applauds the fire and compliments Rodolfo on his drama.

The fire dies down and Schaunard (the musician) enters to a jaunty tune which always accompanies him. He is the only Bohemian ever to have any cash and today he's earned some money from a mad Englishman. He's spent it all on food, firewood, cigars and wine but he won't let the others touch the goodies; on Christmas Eve, he says, they should have supper with the rest of the Latin Quarter at the Cafe Momus.

Benoit, their landlord, makes an unwelcome appearance, but the Bohemians cheat him of his rent and throw him out. Marcello, Colline and Schaunard leave for the cafe - giving Rodolfo five minutes to finish his article. He has almost started when he hears a knock at the door, a voice asks him if he could light a candle, and he looks out to find a girl on the stairs. She is exhausted with the climb and, as Rodolfo gets her a chair, she drops her key. Rodolfo surreptitiously blows his candle out and helps her search for it in the dark. (He actually finds it quite quickly and slips it in his pocket) Their hands meet, "Good heavens, how cold your hand is!" cries Rodolfo, "Let me warm it..." And, holding her fast, he tells her all about himself and his poetry. Eventually he says, "Would you like to tell me who *you* are?" "Yes", says the girl, "I am called Mimi, I make artificial flowers - and I am your troublesome neighbour..."

Outside Rodolfo's friends shout up to him, but Rodolfo can only gaze at Mimi. He has fallen in love, and he begs her to come with him to the Cafe Momus. We join them there in **Act 2**. The Latin Quarter is full of people, market stalls - and Bohemians> They have all been spending Schaunard's money. Schaunard himself has bought a horn, Colline a coat (he's shifting his library into the pockets) and Rodolfo has bought Mimi a bonnet. Marcello, who has had a row with his mistress, is offering to sell his heart to anybody who wants it. Mimi is introduced to the others and they take their places in the Cafe Momus. Marcello grumbles about love when suddenly his mistress, Musetta, arrives with her elderly admirer, Alcindoro. She has on an extremely eye-catching frock and, spotting Marcello, launches into a Waltz song. This is a very showy piece and obviously intended to catch Marcello's attention. He finds he can't resist her and they make up. But of course they have to get rid of Alcindoro. Musetta send him off to get a shoe repaired and, while he does so, she looks over the bill that has just arrived at the Bohemian's table. She calmly adds it to Alcindoro's bill, and all six of them exit hastily as the poor fellow returns (with a new shoe).

Act 3 is the coldest act of all. It is set at the Barriere d'Enfer, one of the gates into Paris. A couple of months have passed and Marcello and Musetta are lodging at the pub by the gate (Marcello's masterpiece is swinging outside as a pub sign). He is decorating the outside of the pub and Musetta is teaching singing inside. It is dawn and milkmaids and street sweepers gather at the gate, demanding to be let in. Mimi enters and asks for Marcello. She is coughing badly but, on hearing that Rodolfo is inside, refuses to go in. She pours out her troubles to Marcello. Rodolfo is jealous, he quarrels with her, watches her sleep, and wears her out. Marcello says that people like them should not live together and adds, rather complacently, that he and Musetta have an ideal relationship of laughter and love.

Rodolfo comes out of the tavern and Mimi swiftly hides. He tells Marcello that Mimi is unfaithful. Marcello says bluntly that he doesn't believe him and Rodolfo breaks down. Mimi is ill, he says, she is dying, she hacks out her life in their freezing garret and he feels so guilty that he turns on her. Mimi is aghast and sings in an aside that her life is over. Rodolfo hears her coughing and realises she has heard the whole conversation; he moves over to comfort her - just as Marcello hears Musetta laughing in the tavern. Furious with jealousy Marcello drags her out and they have a blazing row while Rodolfo and Mimi take a sorrowful farewell of each other. As you listen to their music you can't believe they are really going to part, and its no surprise to hear them decide not to separate until the Spring; one can cope with a broken heart in the warm weather. Marcello and Musetta hurl Bastard! and Bitch! at each other as Mimi and Rodolfo promise to wait till Spring. However the Act ends with an abrupt chord, the dream of Spring will be short.

Act IV takes us back to the Bohemian's garret. Marcello and Rodolfo are pretending to work, but they are in fact brooding over their mistresses. Scaunard's tune sounds in the pit and he arrives with provisions, a loaf and a dried herring. Colline joins them and all four fool around and pretend the meal is a banquet. The point of this messing about is that the audience is as startled as the men when Musetta suddenly bursts in, Mimi is at the bottom of the stairs, to ill to climb them; she has come back to die.



INSIDEOUT

Rodolfo rushes out to carry her up while the others make up a bed. They gather round her, appalled at her condition. Everybody makes a gesture to ease her last moments. Musetta takes off her ear rings and gives them to Marcello to pawn, she tells him to get a tonic and a doctor. Mimi's hands are still cold and Musetta whispers to Rodolfo that she'll get her a muff. "How good you are Musetta," says Marcello and they leave together to get the medicine. Colline eases the tension by singing a mock solemn song to his coat (which he is intending to pawn) and he and Schaunard leave the lovers to themselves. Rodolfo and Mimi sing a last duet, but the music, though it recalls Mimi's first aria, is fragile and the scoring is empty, about all you hear in the pit is the bass.

As the others come back, they offer their futile gifts, the muff and the tonic. Musetta starts to pray and, as she does so, Mimi fades away. Rodolfo does not even notice she has died until he looks at the faces round him. He cries "Mimi!" and the curtain falls.

It is an extraordinary way in which to kill your heroine, and one which Puccini never repeated. He said that when he completed this scene, "I had to get up and, alone in the silence of the night, I began to weep. It was though I had seen my own child die."

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