



LA BOHÈME

GIACOMO PUCCINI

Opera Guides



David Rendall as Rodolfo and Valerie Masterson as Mimi in the First Act of Jean-Claude Auvray's 1977 production for ENO (photo: Andrew March)

PREFACE

This series, published under the auspices of English National Opera, aims to prepare audiences to enjoy and evaluate opera performances. Each book contains the complete text, set out in the original language together with a current performing translation. The accompanying essays have been commissioned as general introductions to aspects of interest in each work. As many illustrations and musical examples as possible have been included because the sound and spectacle of opera are clearly central to any sympathetic appreciation of it. We hope that, as companions to the opera should be, they are well-informed, witty and attractive.

Nicholas John
Series Editor

La bohème

Giacomo Puccini

Opera Guides

Series Editor

Nicholas John



OVERTURE

Overture Publishing
an imprint of

ALMA BOOKS
3 Castle Yard
Richmond
Surrey TW10 6TF
United Kingdom

This Opera Guide first published by John Calder (Publishers) Ltd in 1982

This new edition of *La bohème* Opera Guide first published by Overture Publishing, an imprint of Alma Books Ltd, in 2017

Articles © the authors

© Alma Books Ltd, 2017

English translation of the *La bohème* libretto © G. Ricordi & Co., 1982

ISBN: 978-0-7145-4451-9

All the pictures in this volume are reprinted with permission or presumed to be in the public domain. Every effort has been made to ascertain and acknowledge their copyright status, but should there have been any unwitting oversight on our part, we would be happy to rectify the error in subsequent printings.

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in or introduced into a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form or by any means (electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise), without the prior written permission of the publisher. This book is sold subject to the condition that it shall not be resold, lent, hired out or otherwise circulated without the express prior consent of the publisher.

Printed in the United Kingdom

CONTENTS

Page

vi	List of Illustrations
7	Some Aspects of 'La Bohème' <i>William Ashbrook</i>
13	Romance and Irony <i>Nicholas John</i>
27	The Music of 'La Bohème' <i>Edward Greenfield</i>
33	Henry Murger and 'La Vie de Bohème' <i>Joanna Richardson</i>
41	Thematic Guide
47	'La Bohème' <i>Italian libretto by Giuseppe Giacosa and Luigi illica after Henry Murger's 'Scènes de la Vie de Bohème' English version after William Grist and Percy Pinkerton</i>
51	Act One
70	Act Two
86	Act Three
96	Act Four
109	Discography
112	Bibliography

LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS

Cover: Lucien Fugère (Schaunard), Max Bouvet (Marcel), Adolphe Maréchal (Rodolphe) and J. Isardon (Colline) at the Opéra Comique première (in French) in 1898.
Cover design by Kevin Scally.

Frontispiece: David Rendall and Valerie Masterston (photo: Andrew March)

Page

- 8 Evan Gorga and Ines Maria Ferraris
- 9 Maria Zamboni and Aureliano Pertile (Teatro alla Scala)
- 10 Florence Easton as Musetta and Frieda Hempel as Mimi (Mander and Mitchenson Theatre Collection)
- 13 Alessandro Bonci as Rodolfo (Royal Opera House Archives)
- 13 Rosetta Pampanini as Mimi
- 14 John Copley's Covent Garden production (photo: Reg Wilson)
- 16 The 1942 Sadler's Wells production (photo: Michael Boys)
- 18 Christian du Plessis, Eric Shilling, John Tomlinson, David Rendall and David Marsh, ENO, 1977 (photo: Andrew March)
- 20 Giacomo Aragall and Ileana Cotrubas (photo: Clive Barda)
- 21 Christian du Plessis, Lorna Haywood and Denis Dowling in the 1977 ENO production (photo: John Garner)
- 22 Marie Collier as Musetta at Covent Garden in 1961 (Royal Opera House Archives)
- 22 Connelli's design for Musetta (Royal Opera House Archives)
- 24 Voytek's design for the 1962 Sadler's Wells production
- 25 Robert Ferguson and Josephine Barstow (photo: John Garner)
- 26 The death of Mimi at La Scala in the 1963 production (Teatro alla Scala)
- 28 Mirella Freni as Mimi (Teatro alla Scala)
- 28 Nellie Melba as Mimi (Royal Opera House Archives)
- 30 Heddle Nash with Dora Labette (Royal Opera House Archives)
- 33 Charles Kullman, the American tenor, as Rodolfo at the Met.
- 33 Mafalda Favero as Mimi (Teatro alla Scala)
- 35 Antonio Scotti as Marcello (Royal Opera House Archives)
- 35 Edmond Clément as Rodolfo (photo: Nadar)
- 36 Ettore Bastianini at the Met. (Royal Opera House Archives)
- 36 Tito Gobbi as Marcello (Ida Cook Collection)
- 38 Geraldine Farrar as Mimi at the Met.
- 38 Frances Alda as Mimi at the Met. in 1917
- 39 Catherine Mastio as Mimi
- 39 Emma Trentini as Musetta, Manhattan Opera House, 1906
- 50/85 Scenes from the first performance in Turin in 1896
- 69 The 1977 ENO production designed by Hubert Monloup
- 84 A page from Puccini's manuscript score of Act Two (© Ricordi)
- 95 The 1902 Covent Garden production (Mander and Mitchenson Theatre Collection)
- 108 The death of Mimi at Covent Garden in the 1982 televised performance (photo: Reg Wilson)

Some Aspects of 'La Bohème'

William Ashbrook

When *La Bohème* was first introduced at New York's Metropolitan Opera House in December 1900 Henry Krehbiel started off his review of that event in these terms: '*La Bohème* is foul in subject, and fulminant but futile in its music'. Today when the esteem and affection with which *Bohème* is regarded are if anything firmer than ever, Krehbiel's alliterative dismissal seems ludicrously stuffy and wide of its mark. Yet among critics of that time Krehbiel's peevishness reflected a not uncommon attitude. In October 1897 when the Carl Rosa Company gave the opera its London première at Covent Garden, one reviewer dismissed the score as 'not stimulating enough to be heard often'. Even its first Italian audiences shared this resistance to what seems today to be the opera's inescapable appeal. This once widespread attitude provides a convenient way to approach *La Bohème* afresh, as a work very much of its period, symptomatic of its time.

The critics and general public attending the première of *La Bohème* at Turin's Teatro Regio on February 1, 1896, found themselves rather lost, not quite knowing how to relate to this novelty. One reason for this sense of disorientation lies in the context created by the operas that preceded it on the Regio's bill. That season had opened on December 22, 1895 with the Italian première of *Götterdämmerung*, conducted by Toscanini, and it would be repeated twenty times during the next months; interlarded in this run of *Götterdämmerung* were five performances of Verdi's *Falstaff*, opening on December 28; Verdi's final opera was not yet three years old, but this was its second 'edition' at Turin. Both *Götterdämmerung* and *Falstaff* were works that put the Turin public on its mettle because of their relative difficulty and novelty; the setting and action of both works were alien to the everyday world of proto-industrial Turin. Imagine the jolt, then, of *La Bohème* with its tenement studio and dowdy urban ambience after such fare, and consider too that as a comi-tragedy it presented an unfamiliar mixture of genres. Puccini's combination of humorous and tragic elements must have puzzled an Italian public familiar with the old *semiseria* convention, which inserted *buffo* characters into serious plots that ended happily and which traditionally kept the comic and serious characters distinct. *La Bohème* involved a shrinking of the aesthetic distance from something as remote as the primeval banks of the Rhine to a smaller scale world populated by characters one might encounter on the streets of any large city, and it is precisely the adjustment of emotional perspective demanded by Puccini's opera that caused its first audiences to feel they had lost their bearings. But the initial coolness of the reception seems to have worn off quickly since some of the twenty-three performances that season were probably added to meet public demand.

The sense of immediacy or of universality produced by the drama of *La Bohème*, did not then fit handily into anyone's preconceptions of what operas were supposed to be about. Although its action was nominally set in the Paris of Louis-Philippe, it seemed closer in time and place because the poorer sections of large cities and the behaviour of artists and their girls are not redolent of any particular period. To think for a moment of the different effect produced by *La Bohème* in comparison to that by the Louis-Quinze flavour of



Evan Gorga, the first Rodolfo in Turin, 1896



Ines Maria Ferraris, the Musetta in the performance given at La Scala in 1925 to honour Puccini's memory.

Manon Lescaut (its immediate predecessor in Puccini's output) is to grasp the point. In 1896 audiences were unaccustomed to encountering in the operahouse something close to the world of the streets outside. Nor should the immediacy of *La Bohème* be confused with the naturalistic effusiveness of works like *Cavalleria* (1890) and *Pagliacci* (1892), for they involve crimes of passion carried out in a comparatively primitive setting. Undeniably there are elements in *La Bohème* conditioned by the *verismo* vogue – Mimi's pathetic catalogue of personal effects in her 'Farewell' is a case in point – but they have been adapted unobtrusively into a framework that seems almost sophisticated when set against that employed by Mascagni and Leoncavallo. Certainly *Pagliacci* also mixes comic and tragic ingredients in its plot, but there the stylized artificiality of the *commedia dell'arte* performed by Canio's troupe supplies a needed change of pace to the intensities of the main action, while the humour of *La Bohème* involves the 'gay yet terrible' lives of the characters themselves – to quote a tag from Murger prefixed to Puccini's score.

Tradition has it that the seal of unqualified acceptance was set upon Puccini's opera when it was introduced to Palermo in April 1896, after the composer had made a number of slight but crucial adjustments to his score. Though the opera soon made its way, its early performers were called upon to find a tone and a mode of acting unlike anything demanded by their previous stage experience. Further, *La Bohème* called out to a segment of the urban public beyond the restricted circle that customarily patronized the opera house, for people could identify with Rodolfo, Mimi and Marcello, and their desire for warmth, love and high spirits, more closely than with an Ernani or an Azucena. And this new public was no more used to encountering its counterparts upon the lyric stage than were subscribers of long-standing. Nearly twenty years after the première of *La Bohème* Ildebrando Pizzetti would lambaste Puccini's art as 'bourgeois', and however sincere this rival

composer's rancour at the gravitational pull exerted upon the repertory by works like *La Bohème*, he put his finger directly upon its most novel aspect. The mid-1890s were a time of real social unrest in the industrial cities of Northern Italy like Turin, where the Labour movement held some of its first work stoppages in Italy during those years, and to some extent *Bohème*, with its more democratic appeal, its (admittedly romanticized) depiction of poverty ('*Ah, la miseria!*'), was a sign of these changing times.

Bohemianism, as described in the opera's sources, Henri Murger's prose sketches and his later dramatization of them (in collaboration with Théodore Barrière), was a subject that exerted a personal attraction upon Puccini. As a student at the Milan Conservatory graduating in 1883, Puccini had first-hand knowledge of both the gaiety and grimness of *la vie de Bohème*. It is largely a waste of time, however, to dig for exact parallels of the plot of *La Bohème* in Puccini's own experience, since his co-librettists, Giuseppe Giacosa and Luigi Illica, demonstrably based their text upon an amalgam of characters and episodes in their sources; more fruitful would be a brief glance at Bohemianism as a phenomenon of Northern Italian life. It did not really take root in Milan until the 1860s, delayed because the *Risorgimento* and subsequent Unification had demanded a different style of demeanour, but once these patriotic questions were settled and the old fervours had become tinged with some disillusion, there arose a group of writers, painters and composers in Milan who called themselves the *Scapigliatura* (the Disorderly Ones). As a movement it was relatively short-lived: their *pronunciamenti* about new directions for art received a humiliating setback with the initial fiasco of Boito's *Mefistofele* in 1868, since Boito had for a time been in the forefront of the *Scapigliati*. But if the accomplishments of that group seem wayward and shallow in retrospect, the influence exerted by the movement upon the youth of that time and later was more lasting, and it gave an air of modishness to what might otherwise have seemed mere exuberance. To one who, like



Maria Zamboni as Mimì (Teatro alla Scala)



Aureliano Pertile as Rodolfo, a role he sang at La Scala and Covent Garden in the late 1920s (Teatro alla Scala)



An early production of Act Two in Berlin featuring Florence Easton as Musetta and Frieda Hempel as Mimi. (Raymond Mander and Joe Mitchenson Theatre Collection)

Puccini, had immersed himself in this influence, Murger's vignettes had the force of prototypes.

The writing of the libretto of *La Bohème* was entrusted by Giulio Ricordi, with Puccini's acquiescence, to Giacosa and Illica. Ricordi had brought them together as a team to put the final touches and adjustments on the troublesome libretto of *Manon Lescaut*, adjusting a work that had seen a number of people (Leoncavallo, Mario Praga, Domenico Oliva, and both Puccini and Ricordi) turn their hands to it. Giuseppe Giacosa (1847–1906) had up to this time been primarily a dramatist and poet; while Luigi Illica (1857–1919) was primarily a librettist, writing among other things the texts for *Andrea Chenier* and *Iris*. To follow up on their trying experience with the hugely successful book to *La Bohème* they would supply Puccini with the librettos for *Tosca* and *Madama Butterfly*. Illica was responsible for scenarios and outlines, while Giacosa wrote the verses, but as the work went on and on their separate functions, particularly on Illica's part, overlapped. The development of the text was troublesome; there were false starts, episodes and even a whole act discarded, and the proportionate participation of the various characters (particularly Schaunard) remained up in the air until late in 1895. Puccini's high-handed treatment of his librettists, his terse insistence upon revisions of passages already revised and re-revised, brought the fastidious Giacosa more than once to the point of wanting to throw over the whole project, and only the diplomacy of Ricordi kept the disaffected librettist to his task. One upshot of these troubles with the book was the loss to Puccini of the support of Boito, who had been instrumental in getting his first opera, *Le Villi*, produced in 1884, because Boito was a staunch friend of 'Pin' Giacosa and his whole family. By 1895 Boito had come to view Puccini as an intransigent boor who had insufficient respect for distinguished men of letters. Yet in the long view Puccini's sense of the theatre and of those novel effects that particularly suited his approach to operatic form has proved justified, if not his want of tact, for he and his collaborators were engaged upon creating something close to a new genre of opera.

In the light of the problems of completing the libretto, it is perhaps surprising that there are not more traces, such as the allusions to Mimi's Viscontino, to incidents that were discarded along the way. The text has much to commend it: much of the wording is felicitous for its wry wit or touching sentiment, the

imagery is consistent and frequently apt and moving. The lines endow the sharply realized characters with sufficient poetic resonance often to raise them above their rather tawdry milieu. And if there are apparent inconsistencies in construction – for instance, Act Three ends with Mimi and Rodolfo deciding not to separate just yet, while Act Four begins with them in fact apart – Puccini understood how to minimize such problems with his gift for making the emotion of a moment credible and somehow stage-filling.

La Bohème occupies a special place in the Puccini canon. The fourth of his operas, it reveals a flexibility in the handling of musical ideas together with a praiseworthy economy that was contrary to his approach in the three earlier scores. His first attempt, *Le Villi*, shows Puccini rather awkwardly attempting to fuse traditional operatic and balletic elements into a coherent work; in addition for this score he supplied *entr'actes*, giving them what seems today the rather misleading and unoperatic designation of *Parte Sinfonica*, divided into a *Primo* and *Secondo Tempo*. Lengthy musical units are very much present in his second opera, the much-revised *Edgar*. That work was burdened with a far-fetched and cumbersome symbolic libretto, a misjudgement on Puccini's part that made him determined to avoid that pitfall at all costs in the future. In *Manon Lescaut*, Puccini had not yet attained to the aptness of proportion that is so remarkable in *La Bohème*, but it stands as an advance on its predecessors in etching more clearly individualized characters and in generating a more intense level of passionate utterance. Besides these improvements, however, the symphonic aspects of *Manon Lescaut*, particularly in Act One, were a consideration seized upon by the early critics such as George Bernard Shaw at the time of its London première in 1894. Notable as this tendency seemed at the time, the feature which with hindsight seems more important is the affirmation and clear focus upon what was to become Puccini's trademark – the tragedy of fragile sentiment. There had been moments of pathos, of course, in both *Le Villi* and *Edgar*, but these had been points of secondary rather than of primary importance.

The tragedy of fragile sentiment finds a more appropriate expression in *La Bohème* than in his earlier attempts largely because he had come to discover the value of understatement. He had learned how to let intimate, apparently casual, moments carry a full freight of significance. If the full-throated emotionalism exploited in *Manon Lescaut* seems at times over-italicized, over-emphatic, that failing can scarcely be ascribed to *La Bohème*. Puccini may have seemed to have turned over a new leaf with this opera, but there were, nevertheless, reassuring signs that he was a composer as adaptive and receptive to new modes of expression as could be desired, and also one with a readily identifiable individuality. The underlying consistency of his approach can be demonstrated by the easy absorption of self-borrowings of earlier music into the score of *La Bohème*. The opening music stems from his *Capriccio sinfonico* of 1883, the melody of Musetta's waltz comes from a *pièce d'occasion* composed to celebrate the launching of a battleship, while the Act Three quartet is adumbrated from a solo song, *Sole e amore*, which had appeared in a magazine back in 1888. Only a composer with a well-developed personal idiom could insert such disparate materials into new contexts where they seem inevitably to belong.

To account for the greater flexibility and economy of treatment that sets off *La Bohème* from Puccini's earlier operas, a benificent influence is not far to seek. Verdi's *Falstaff* had its première on February 9, 1893, just eight days after the first night of *Manon Lescaut*; it was the most newsworthy new opera of the day and it was making its initial rounds of the leading theatres just at the time Puccini was feeling his way into the composition of *La Bohème*. One