

La Bohème

Historical Background

by Stephen Willier

Giacomo Puccini, the creator of some of the world's most beloved operas, was descended from a long line of composers and church organists. He emerged as the leading opera composer among his contemporaries, a group known as *La Giovane Scuola* (The Young School), which included such well-known names as Ruggero Leoncavallo, Pietro Mascagni, and Francesco Cilea. Some of the elements of Puccini's style that caused him to far outstrip his contemporaries are his great sense of theater, his melodies with their memorable shapes and clear rhythmic outlines, the creation of melodies for great operatic voices, the intense emotional impact of his libretti and music, and the power of his orchestra to suggest and sustain a variety of moods.

Although later in his career Puccini was to experience difficulty finding suitable libretti, this was not the case with *La Bohème*. He discovered that Leoncavallo was writing both text and music for an opera based on Henry Mürger's novel, *Scènes de la vie de bohème*. Puccini immediately took up the same subject, saying of Leoncavallo, "Let him compose, I will compose, the public will judge." And the public has judged, for while Leoncavallo's version was popular for a time, as with most of his works except for *I pagliacci*, it has not withstood the test of time. Mürger was a minor figure on the mid-nineteenth century Parisian literary scene. Today his novel is known almost exclusively through Puccini's opera, one of the most popular in the entire repertoire. Mürger's work was autobiographical, showing the vicissitudes of young artists and their lovers living a precarious existence. Mürger himself lived a "vie de bohème" (and so had Puccini during his student years in Milan) and died at age thirty, partly from dissipation. Several of his friends and characters in the novel specifically died of consumption, the wasting disease of the nineteenth century that has been portrayed in a number of works of art, paramount among them Verdi's *La traviata* and Puccini's *La bohème*. We view Mürger's novel as "romantic," but in fact it was considered one of the first novels of realism, the movement that was such an influence on opera in the latter part of the nineteenth century.

For this work, Puccini's librettists were Luigi Illica and Giuseppe Giacosa, both of whom has contributed significantly in the difficult birth of his previous opera, *Manon Lescaut*. They wanted to capture the novel's spirit, reproduce its atmosphere, remain faithful to the characters, keep both comic and tragic incidents, and retain the general outline of the narrative. Mürger had presented the story in four distinct tableaux rather than as a continuous narrative and Puccini and his librettists did the same. Puccini's opera is, like Mürger's work, "scenes" from bohemian life, but the distinct scenes have a powerful cumulative effect and even though comedy is included, albeit on a rather broad level, the ultimate outcome is tragic. *La Bohème* is a tightly unified work both musically and dramatically. One of the main themes running through it is coldness and its connection with poverty, illness, loneliness, and death. Another unifying device comes through musical reminiscence. Mimi's theme and other musical motives return often, especially in act 4, which is mainly constructed of previous musical ideas, producing a sense of nostalgia and loss. The orchestra plays an important narrative role. In a number of instances, the delicate chamber-orchestra scoring heightens various aspects of scene painting, the flicker of flames in the stove, the rising of the moon, the rushing warmth of spring arriving.

The premiere took place in Turin on 1 February 1896, exactly three years after the premiere of *Manon Lescaut*, at the same venue, the Teatro Regio. The conductor was the twenty-nine-year-old Arturo Toscanini. Surprisingly, the work was initially somewhat of a failure, especially among the critics. Puccini subsequently made some changes in the score, especially in act 2, when he opened it up and "let in some air." The work soon took off around the world, in Argentina, Paris, and London, with many great opera stars such as Nellie Melba, John McCormack, and Giovanni Martinelli lending their splendid voices to various productions. It is one of the most beloved of operas and never fails to make a deep impression.

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