

## HEARTBREAK AND TRAGEDY: THE WOMEN IN PUCCINI

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The definition “Puccinian heroine” became current in musical criticism and in musicology more than a century ago and indicates, in general, the female figure in the theater of Giacomo Puccini. The use of this expression conjures up the image of a woman suffering for love, the idea of self-destruction and death. Moreover, these poor creatures, often victims of a cruel destiny, are associated with a strong melancholy and a constant feeling of inadequacy. However, beyond a simplistic analysis of their common features, the Puccinian heroines have strong individual characteristics and each of them has a precise place in the development of the operatic production of the composer. In other words, the model of the woman who “lives and dies for love” grows in perfection and refinement as Puccini himself becomes more aware of his own artistic abilities, from innocent Anna in *Le Villi* to little Liù in *Turandot*. This latter character sums up all the traits mentioned above, in such a way as to embody the very concept of sacrifice for love:

***Turandot:***

*“Chi pose tanta forza nel tuo cuore? (What gives your heart such courage?)*

***Liù:***

*Principessa, L'amore!...*

*(Princess, it is love!...)*

*Tanto amore, segreto, inconfessato...*

*(My secret, undeclared love...)*

*grande così che questi strazi sono*

*(so great that these tortures)*

*dolcezza a me, perché ne faccio dono*

*(are sweet to me, because I offer them)*

*al mio Signore... ”<sup>1</sup>*

*(to my Lord...)*

It is well known that Mosco Carner, in his biography<sup>2</sup>, was the first critic to attempt a psycho-analytical interpretation of why Puccini was obsessed with this type of female figure. This work is now considered a classic in the history of Puccinian criticism. The hypothesis of this scholar is that the composer suffered from a mother fixation: an obsession with the domineering figure of the mother made him feel guilty at the idea of conceiving love for other women. He therefore felt it necessary to render them as inferior to the maternal figure and to punish them for having loved.

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<sup>1</sup> The quotation from Puccini's libretto is taken from *Tutti I libretti di Puccini*, Milan, Garzanti 1984, editor E.M.Ferrando.

<sup>2</sup> Puccini. *A Critical Biography*, London, Duckworth 1958.

(Puccini lost his father when he was five and he and his mother always had a close and affectionate relationship; she gave him her psychological support until the end of her days). This psycho-analytical reading of Puccini dominated by a mother fixation would explain both the type of heroine we find in his works and also the way he treats them. As Carner writes:

*Each of these heroines shows a serious flaw in her character and stands at the bottom of that height on which Puccini had enthroned the Mother. It is precisely because of their degraded position that he was able to fall in love with his heroines, display such extraordinary empathy with them and achieve so complete an identification with their personalities. For them he wrote his most inspired, poetic and poignant music”<sup>3</sup>[...]*

and he later continues :

*How do we account for the fact that Puccini’s passionate love for them must always be accompanied by a sadistic impulse? Why must he always kill that which he loves and act the role of a Bluebeard? ...Two explanations suggest themselves. One is provided by the marked ambivalence in his personality, which compels him to love and hate simultaneously...The second answer lies in the probability that for all their “unworthiness” Puccini felt unconsciously that his heroines were in some way rivals of the exalted mother-image. He may even have identified them with it to some extent, so that loving them carried with it an incestuous implication. But as his conscious mind could never allow the admission of such a forbidden desire, it had to be repressed, though the “guilt” remained but was now transferred from himself to his heroines. Having soiled the Mother they had to be punished for a crime committed by himself.”<sup>4</sup>*

However, as Fedele d’Amico pointed out in his numerous articles on Puccini<sup>5</sup>, this hypothesis, albeit fascinating and certainly valid, is too strictly connected to the personality of the composer and it does not capture the

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<sup>3</sup> ibid. p 303

<sup>4</sup> ibid. p 304

<sup>5</sup> Cf. Fedele d’Amico. *L’albero del bene e del male*, Pisa , Maria Pacini Fazzi 2000, editor Jacopo Pellegrini.

historical significance of his neuroses as being representative of an era. In brief, d'Amico succeeded in centering the question on Puccini's music and no longer on his *persona*, emphasizing once and for all the modernity of his musical language and placing him definitively in the *Novecento*.

Puccini's first opera was *Le Villi* and Anna, the female protagonist, is the first of the series of his frail heroines. This one-act opera, with a libretto by Ferdinando Fontana, written especially for the Sonzogno competition which took place on the 1 of April 1883, failed to make the grade. Notwithstanding this fact, the opera was put on the stage thanks to the interest and support of a group of admirers, including the very influential Arrigo Boito and Ponchielli, Puccini's Maestro at the Milan Conservatory. The first performance took place at the Teatro del Verme in Milan on May 31, 1884, and was an outstanding success acclaimed by both public and critics. A few days later, Giulio Ricordi, the music publisher, bought the world rights to the opera and commissioned Puccini to compose a new work to be performed at the Teatro alla Scala, again using a libretto by Fontana. As Ricordi had suggested, Puccini reworked *Le Villi* developing the opera into two acts and in this new version, it went on stage at the Teatro Regio in Turin on December 26, 1884, attaining the same success as the Milan première. Despite the weaknesses of Fontana's libretto, based on Alphonse Karr's story *Les Willis*<sup>6</sup> whose modest proportions did not allow Puccini to fully develop the characters, the work was full of good ideas. The protagonist Anna, ethereal, innocent creature, with her melancholic aria "*Se come voi piccina io fossi*", (referring to the small bunch of forget-me-nots she is holding in her hand), possesses some of those features common to the subsequent heroines, such as the total dedication to love leading to personal sacrifice and death.

If with *Le Villi* Puccini showed himself to be exceptionally talented, - "*Puccini, in our opinion, has something extra and this something is perhaps the most precious of gifts [...] it is having in one's head (or as the French say dans son ventre), ideas: and either you have them or you don't [...]*" as

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<sup>6</sup> The subject of *Le Villi* is not based on *Giselle ou les Willis*, the famous ballet in two acts by Théophile Gautier, Henry Vernoy de Saint-Georges and Coraly, set to music by Adolphe Adam, (in its turn adapted from a German myth by the poet Heine in his *Über Deutschland II. Elementargeister und Dämonen*), as Dominique Amy (*Giacomo Puccini. L'homme et son oeuvre*, Editions Séghers, Paris 1970, p. 31) and Julian Budden (*The Genesis and Literary Sources of Giacomo Puccini's First Opera*, "Cambridge Opera Journal", I/1, March 1989, pp.79-85) have pointed out.

Giulio Ricordi said<sup>7</sup> - with *Edgar* we can already sense the great composer about to emerge. The next step was to choose by himself the subject of his operas and thus, by finding the right theatrical material, Puccini was able to give full rein to his expressive powers and to hold his own against his librettists.

In this opera, whose subject, chosen by Fontana, was freely adapted from the dramatic poem by Alfred de Musset's *La Coupe et les Lèvres*, we have the opposition between the two female protagonists, the innocent Fidelia and diabolical, Moorish adventuress Tigrana<sup>8</sup>. The opera was a fiasco<sup>9</sup>, largely due to Fontana's libretto, whose dramaturgy was lacking in coherence: the two women end up symbolically personifying good and evil in a context which is hardly plausible in an action drama in the Scapigliatura fashion. Puccini tried several times to rework the opera, reducing the original four acts to three, but only succeeded in eliminating a lot of music of good quality without managing to save the opera.

Tigrana's character, whose wild, devilish and provocative nature is the complete opposite of Puccini's heroine (and who, in the first version of the opera, had a wonderful mezzo-soprano role, rich in dramatic and eloquent musical phrases), was drastically reduced in subsequent revisions. Fidelia however, a faithful and delicate creature following the typical model of the other feminine figures of Puccini's theater, above all in the third act with her aria "Addio, addio, mio dolce amor", reaches the heights of the true Puccinian heroine, with a melody so beautiful as to make this aria one of the lyrical highlights of the whole opera.

Puccini attained a decisive leap of quality with *Manon Lescaut*. This opera, which debuted on February 1, 1893, at the Teatro Regio in Turin, was a great triumph and received enthusiastic reviews from the critics<sup>10</sup>. It decreed world-wide fame for the composer.

The work on the libretto, adapted from Abbé Prevost's famous novel *Histoire du chevalier Des Grieux et de Manon Lescaut*, proved to be long and laborious. It is certainly very difficult to discern today with any precision, on the basis of letters and other documents, to which of the various collaborators who worked on the draft (Leoncavallo, Praga, Oliva, Illica and probably Giacosa) can be attributed this or that clever idea,

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<sup>7</sup> "Gazzetta musicale di Milano", XL/5, February 1, 1885, pp. 44-6.

<sup>8</sup> The structure of the subject and the opposition of the two women recalls *Carmen* by Bizet.

<sup>9</sup> The first performance of *Edgar* took place at the Teatro all Scala on April 21, 1889: the opera was coldly received both by the public and the critics and after only two performances it was taken off the stage so that Puccini could make some changes.

<sup>10</sup> The première of *Manon Lescaut* took place eight days before Giuseppe Verdi's *Falstaff* at the Scala.

especially since Puccini himself, together with Giulio Ricordi, took an active part.<sup>11</sup>

Puccini did not fear comparison with Massenet's *Manon*<sup>12</sup> but indeed he distanced himself from it not only by modifying the structure of his libretto as compared with the model of the French composer, but also by stating that if Massenet: "[...] *will feel it in the French fashion, with powder and minuets* [...] *I will feel it in the Italian manner, with desperate passion*". In fact passion is the true unifying theme of Puccini's *Manon Lescaut*, where the protagonist, torn between amorous passion and the passion for gold, expresses herself with a musical language shaken by violent accents which can only be called revolutionary for the Italian opera tradition of those times. Although this opera is the expression of a moment of transition between the decline of the moral values of the *Risorgimento* and the consolidation of the new ideals of the *petite bourgeoisie*, this heroine has in common with those who followed the fact of being a victim of cruel fate and considering love as a separate entity and not as a symbol of positive moral values as it was for Verdi's heroines. But, whereas in the subsequent operas of Puccini love, pure and disinterested, is imbued with nostalgia, in this opera it is desperate passion. *Manon's* death on a desert plain in Louisiana is the fulfillment of a preordained destiny damned from the beginning.<sup>13</sup>

*La Bohème* signaled the start of the marvelous artistic partnership between Puccini and his librettists Illica and Giacosa (together with Giulio Ricordi who often intervened to give precious suggestions) which heralded the birth of the three masterpieces which were also Puccini's greatest successes: *La Bohème* itself, *Tosca* and *Madama Butterfly*. The opera reached the stage on February 1, 1896, at the Teatro, Regio, Turin, under the conductor Arturo Toscanini and with Cesira Ferrani in the role of Mimì, exactly three years after *Manon Lescaut's* first performance, but it was not greeted with the same enthusiasm as the former work, primarily because of the negative reaction of the Turin critics. Carlo Bersezio presumptuously sentenced in the "Gazzetta Piemontese" that "*the Bohème... would leave*

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<sup>11</sup> Owing to this frequent alternation, the opera was published with an anonymous libretto.

<sup>12</sup> Massenet's *Manon* went on stage at the Opéra-Comique, Paris, on January 19, 1884, and arrived in Italy at the Teatro Carcano in Milan, seven months after the première of Puccini's *Manon Lescaut*, the October 19, 1893.

<sup>13</sup> Cf. Fedele d'Amico *Le ragioni di "Manon Lescaut"*, in id., *I casi della musica*, Milan, Il Saggiatore, 1962, pp.281-283.

*little trace in the history of opera*". Shortly afterwards, this very same work become one of the most popular operas in the world.

The subject matter was based upon the French writer Henry Murger's novel<sup>14</sup> *Scènes de la vie de Bohème*. Luigi Illica and the others freely adapted the libretto. Moreover, the character of Mimì was not drawn from that of the novel, who was anything but tender<sup>15</sup>. Instead, they drew upon the character of Francine, who only appears in a short chapter of the novel entitled *Le manchon de Francine* and whose angelic traits were better suited to Puccini's dramatic needs.

From her first entrance on the scene, in her introducing aria<sup>16</sup>, Puccini's Mimì is shown as a sweet, pure and childish young girl who lives "all by herself" embroidering artificial flowers but her romantically passionate nature manifests itself in the lyrical outburst in the central part of the aria "*Ma quando vien lo sgelo*". As the opera develops, the character and the emotions of this heroine captivate us so wholly that, at her death, in the fourth act, we are moved as any human being would be by the death of a loved one. Mimì represents youthfulness (of life and love) which can never return: her death symbolizes the end of that phase of life, thoughtless and irresponsible, which because of this nature, is destined to die. Only the memory remains, imbued with regret and nostalgia.

Puccini had begun to think about *Tosca* as a suitable subject immediately after *Edgar*'s first performance. This drama by Victorien Sardou had originally been written especially for the famous actress Sarah Bernhardt and was performed by her in Paris at the Théâtre de la Porte Saint-Martin, November 1887. Ferdinando Fontana, the librettist of Puccini's first two operas, suggested writing an opera on this drama and Puccini was immediately very enthusiastic. In his letter to Giulio Ricordi on 7<sup>th</sup> May 1889, the composer asked his publisher to obtain the rights for the libretto:

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<sup>14</sup> Henry Murger's *Scènes de Bohème* were published in episodes in the Parisian magazine "*Le Corsaire Satan*" from March 1845 up to April 1849. Its great success convinced the dramatist Barrière, together with Murger himself, to write a five-act play based on these episodes of life in the garrets of the Latin Quarter. This work, *La vie de Bohème*, was performed with great success on November 22, 1849, at the Théâtre des Variétés before Louis Napoléon. Murger, who up until then had lived from hand to mouth just like the characters in his stories, suddenly found himself rich and famous, thanks to the contract with the publisher Lévy who wanted to publish the work in volume form in 1851 under the title *Scènes des la vie de Bohème*.

<sup>15</sup> This is the portrait of Mimì which Murger shows us in his romance: "*her proud features, sweetly illuminated by two clear blue eyes, in certain moments of anger or irritation took on a look of almost wild brutality; in which an expert would perhaps have recognized traits of strong selfishness and great insensitivity*".

<sup>16</sup> The introductory phrase of Mimì's aria "*Mi chiamano Mimì*" is anticipated by the clarinets in the orchestra when the girl knocks on the door, it is to say even before she comes on stage.

“ [...] *I'm thinking of Tosca! I beg you to take the necessary steps to obtain Sardou's permission before abandoning the idea, which would greatly sadden me, for in this Tosca I see the opera I need, one whose proportions are not excessive, either as performance or as something giving rise to the usual superabundance of music*”<sup>17</sup>.

Ricordi tried straight away to contact Sardou through his French agent, but because of a series of problems raised by the playwright, it was some time before the contract was concluded. Approximately a year later, Puccini had occasion to see *La Tosca* on stage in Milan, with Sarah Bernhardt and although he understood little of the French, he became newly enthusiastic. So in 1889, he and Ricordi, after having excluded Fontana, who was deeply offended, they entrusted Illica to write a libretto from Sardou's play. Illica worked at the libretto during 1891 and he was still busy when Puccini began to compose *Manon Lescaut*. However, at a certain point, it is not known exactly when, Puccini abandoned the project and Ricordi offered Illica's libretto, which had been prepared for Puccini, to another composer of his company, Alberto Franchetti, who accepted it. In October 1894, Illica and Franchetti visited Paris to show Sardou the final draft of the libretto and to obtain his approval. Verdi, who was in Paris for the French première of *Otello*, was also present at the meeting and expressed great admiration for the work.

It is not known exactly what reawakened Puccini's interest in *Tosca*<sup>18</sup>. It is however likely that Verdi's enthusiastic verdict induced Ricordi to reflect and to once again offer the libretto to the most talented composer of Casa Ricordi. Moreover, letters and documents demonstrate that in March Franchetti gave up the idea of working on the opera because he did not feel up to the task. So a new contract was drawn up and Puccini began to work on *Tosca*. As for the successful *La Bohème*, Giuseppe Giacosa collaborated in putting the prose into verse with Illica and the libretto was completely reworked for Puccini's dramatic needs.

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<sup>17</sup> Cf. Gara. *Carteggi pucciniani*, editor E. Gara, Milan, Ricordi, 1958, 31, pp.31-2.

<sup>18</sup> *Tosca* is the title chosen by Puccini and his librettists instead of *La Tosca*, the original title of Sardou's drama.

*Tosca* was performed at the Teatro Costanzi in Rome on January 14, 1900, under the conductor Leopoldo Mugnone and with Hariclea Darclée in the principal role. The public's reaction, apart from some encores, was not particularly warm: true success only arrived with the repeat performances, especially those in the following year in Italy and abroad. But for decades the critical reviews were very hard on this particular Puccini's opera.

At first, *Tosca* may seem a completely different type of heroine from the previous ones: she is a famous singer who performs in papal Rome, a *diva*, sensual, enterprising, free and haughty. But *Tosca* is also a pious woman, devoted to the Madonna even though she lives an immoral relationship of free love with Mario Cavaradossi, of whom she is jealous and therefore fragile and vulnerable. She too will suffer the same cruel destiny for having loved too much. In this opera where everything that happens is an omen of death and love excludes any form of consolation and appears only in a negative image, *Tosca's* (and *Mario's*) blind exaltation of the senses and consequent recklessness cause her final desperate gesture. When she comes face to face with the death of her lover and when the police come running, having discovered that she killed Scarpia, she decides, on a sudden impulse, to throw herself from the terrace of Castel S. Angelo.

Already at the beginning of November, even before the debut of *Tosca* in Rome in January 1900, Puccini had begun a wide-scale search for his next opera. Among the many ideas, the possibility of working together with Gabriele D'Annunzio was also considered, but it was only during his stay in London in the summer of 1900 for the first English performance of *Tosca*, that the composer found the drama he was looking for. Here, at the Duke of York's Theatre, Puccini saw the American David Belasco's play *Madame Butterfly*. Although he understood not a word of the text because it was in English<sup>19</sup>, the composer was totally overcome by the tragedy of the heroine. When he returned to Italy he immediately tried to persuade Ricordi to purchase the rights to the libretto. Ricordi, despite being unconvinced regarding the subject, asked George Maxwell, his agent in New York, to negotiate with the American playwright. However, the issue was somewhat complicated by the fact that Belasco had himself based his play on a short story by the lawyer John Luther Long, published for the first time in the

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<sup>19</sup> As had happened for *Tosca* played by Sarah Bernhardt in French, also in this case having been able to understand the sense of the action even without understanding the dialogue, was irrefutable proof for Puccini of the theatrical effect of the drama.

“*Century Illustrated Monthly Magazine*” in 1898<sup>20</sup>. An agreement with Belasco was finally reached in April 1901 and the libretto, made up of two acts, the first being the prologue for the events in the second act, was finished in June 1902, by which time Puccini had already begun to compose the music for the first act.

In February 1903, the work on *Madama Butterfly* was abruptly interrupted when a car accident occurred in which Puccini broke his right tibia. The accident happened on the night of 25<sup>th</sup> of February on the way back to Torre del Lago from a dinner at Lucca with Elvira Bonturi and their son Tonio when, as a result of the driver’s error, the car left the road and overturned. The composer was in a wheelchair for many months and the opera reached the stage only a year after this accident. After the death of Elvira’s first husband, Puccini was finally able to marry her on January 1, 1904, thus rendering their eighteen-year-old son legitimate. A few days later, he left for Milan to see the rehearsals for the performance of *Madama Butterfly* which took place at the Teatro alla Scala on February 17, 1904. The conductor Cleofonte Campanini had prepared the opera with great care, and the cast was of an exceptionally high level, with the twenty-seven-year-old Rosina Storchio, (at that time at the top of her career), in the principal role. Nevertheless the première was a terrible fiasco. Even if it has been never proved, it seems certain that the lack of success of the opera was due to the presence in the theater of a hostile faction organized by Puccini’s rivals. The opera was immediately withdrawn from the stage and Puccini, embittered but certain of the worth of his opera, reworked it with some important changes. In this new version *Madama Butterfly* triumphantly took to the stage at the Teatro Grande, Brescia, on May 28, 1904, and from there began her conquest of the world.<sup>21</sup>

Cio-Cio-San is one of the most complex and ambiguous female figures in Puccini’s theater and her psychological drama constitutes the very center of the opera’s action. She finds herself the victim of a cultural clash between

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<sup>20</sup> It would seem that Luther Long’s short story was based upon the novel *Madame Chrysantème* by Pierre Loti, which had been published in 1887. This novel draws on Loti’s personal experience, who having been stationed in Japan, had lived at first hand the experience of marrying a *geisha* to amuse himself.

<sup>21</sup> There are four different versions of the opera, from that published for the very first performance at the Scala on February 17, 1904, to those of the first performance at Brescia on May 28, 1904, in London at Covent Garden on July 10, 1905, and in Paris at the Opéra Comique on December 28, 1906. For the genesis of the four versions cf. Arthur Groos, *Lieutenant F.B. Pinkerton: problems in the genesis and the performance of Madama Butterfly* in *The Puccini companion*, New York, London, W.W. Norton and Company, 1994, edited by William Weaver and Simonetta Puccini, pp. 169-20 and also Michele Girardi *Giacomo Puccini. L’arte internazionale di un musicista italiano*, Venice, Marsilio Editori, 1995, pp. 223-257.

strict Japanese tradition and her attempt to “americanize” herself, which forces her to become schizophrenic, as William Weaver describes so well.<sup>22</sup> Butterfly incorporates both the traits of a child and a woman; she is proud yet submissive, deluded yet determined, fragile yet courageous. Her despairing realization, that occurs in the very moment in which the outside world breaks into her little house with the arrival of Pinkerton’s new American wife, constrains her to make a choice. She does not hesitate to make the extreme sacrifice, giving up her own life, following the moral canon of Japanese tradition and being elevated by this sacrifice to the status of a true tragic heroine.

After the success of the second version of *Madama Butterfly* at Brescia, Puccini went through a very difficult period during which he searched in every direction for suitable subject matter. At the beginning of 1907, Puccini sailed to America where the New York Metropolitan Opera was dedicating a season to some of his operas. This gave him the opportunity to see some plays, including David Belasco’s *The Girl of the Golden West*. Once back in Europe, and after having carefully read the play which Belasco had sent him, Puccini decided on it as the subject for his new opera. With the death of Giuseppe Giacosa on September 1, 1906, Luigi Illica no longer had anyone with whom to collaborate, and Puccini, even though he held him in great esteem, had always preferred that he did not work alone. Therefore, on the recommendation of Tito Ricordi<sup>23</sup>, Puccini chose a new librettist to take Illica’s place, a certain Carlo Zangarini, whose excellent knowledge of English made him particularly suitable. Unfortunately, their rapport lasted only a year. Already in April 1908 Tito Ricordi put Puccini in touch with Guelfo Civinini who was entrusted with reworking Zangarini’s first two acts and drafting the third act. However, Puccini’s work on the *Fanciulla*, already made difficult by problems with the librettists, was further complicated by a series of events in the composer’s home life which dealt him a severe blow and caused him to interrupt his work for several months. Despite their recent marriage, the relationship between Puccini and Elvira had been critical for some time, without doubt partly due to her difficult and

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<sup>22</sup> “[...] Examined closely, she is a double character; her cultural schizophrenia extends even to her speech. When she is around Westerners, she lapses into a kind of baby talk, becoming a “stage Japanese”, as if that is what she thinks they expect of her (and she is probably right); but when she is with other Japanese – with Goro, or Prince Yamadori, or in particular with Suzuki – her language and her whole bearing change. She ceases to simper, to play the Japanese doll, and becomes a forceful, stubborn, brave woman”[...] (in *The Puccini companion*, cit., p 117.)

<sup>23</sup> Tito Ricordi, Giulio’s son, had begun to look after the family affairs in 1897. Puccini did not have an easy relationship with him, but the situation became even more difficult after Giulio’s death in 1912.

stubborn character and her blind jealousy. In February 1903, after Puccini's car accident, Elvira hired a sixteen-year-old girl Doria Manfredi from Torre del Lago, to nurse him. Thanks to her care and devotion, she was then kept on as a maid. Six years after being hired, suddenly and inexplicably, Elvira began to suspect her of being her husband's lover and persecuted her ferociously. Forced to give up her work, the poor girl was tormented by the rumors put about by Puccini's wife throughout Torre del Lago. Finally she could stand no more and poisoned herself the January 23, 1909, dying in agony five days later. It was a scandal: Doria's relatives asked for a medical examination with the presence of witnesses, which showed the girl to be a virgin, so they accused Elvira of slander. For the first time Puccini, who had fled to Rome to avoid the scandal, began seriously to consider the prospect of separation. On July 6, 1909, the court of Lucca sentenced Elvira to five years' imprisonment plus a fine. However, in the following months, Puccini persuaded the Manfredi family to drop charges in exchange for a conspicuous sum of money. The couple was reconciled but the experience was especially damaging to Puccini's inner equilibrium. He began to work again on the *Fanciulla* and he finished the score by July of the following year.

The opera premiered triumphantly at the Metropolitan Opera of New York on December 10, 1910, under the baton of Arturo Toscanini with Emmy Destinn in the role of Minnie. The reviews were favorable but not as enthusiastic as the public.

Minnie is the first Puccinian heroine whose frantic search for happiness is not suffocated by death. The opera, whose modernity represents a turning point in Puccini's theater, with its experimentation with new expressive musical approaches, is built around the prospect of a happy ending. The protagonist, after having defied fate and the men of the miners' camp, manages to rescue her lover and escape with him towards freedom and love. But even Minnie is a contradictory figure, strong and sure of herself, passionate and authoritarian, (one only has to think of her entrance in the final scene, on a galloping horse, a pistol clenched between her teeth, and having dismounted, ready to shield her lover's body with her own while keeping the men at a distance with her gun), yet sweet and pure. "I am nothing but a pure little girl, obscure and good for nothing", the girl says of herself, but meanwhile she aspires to a superior condition, that of the man she has just met and by whom she is irrevocably attracted. She is an honest woman, defending the miners' gold from possible theft, but ready to cheat in the card game to save the life of her lover, the repentant bandit Johnson. And

yet, in the finale, where the music should emphasize the happy end, a trace of melancholy is to be found.

Following the European launch of the *Fanciulla del West*, Puccini's anxious quest for a new subject, became less frenetic, and he carefully examined several possible projects. Among these was *El Genio Alegre*, a play by the Quintero brothers, which, although he quickly abandoned the idea, served to put him in touch with the journalist and playwright Giuseppe Adami, who was his most faithful collaborator in his final years, as well as the editor of his first collection of letters and his biographer. Meanwhile, Puccini had for some time been playing with the idea of writing a work consisting of three one-act operas. This idea began to take form in June 1913, when Puccini came across the play *Houppelande* by Didier Gold.<sup>24</sup> The versification of the libretto, *Il Tabarro*, was entrusted to the Tuscan poet Ferdinando Martini and Puccini began to write the music for it. In October of the same year, while the composer was in Vienna for the Austrian première of the *Fanciulla*, he received an interesting proposal from the two impresarios of the Carltheater, Eibenschütz and Berté, who asked him to compose an operetta<sup>25</sup> and promising him a large amount of money. Puccini showed interest in the idea and shortly after was reached an agreement which gave him copyright for the score in Italy and several other countries<sup>26</sup>. Puccini refused the first subject which they sent him but agreed to discuss the second one with the designated librettists, Willner and Reichert, both specialists in this genre. The German libretto would then be translated into Italian by Giuseppe Adami, who would also eliminate all spoken dialogues, transforming it into an opera. Even though Puccini had been considering writing an operetta since 1905, when he was given the opportunity he turned it down. The city of Vienna was chosen for the first performance, which would have been sung in German, but when Puccini began to work on *La Rondine*, the first war world had broken out. When he finished the work in the late spring of 1916, he had to find a neutral place to stage it. Tito Ricordi, who took over the Casa Ricordi following the death of his father Giulio in 1912, refused to publish *La Rondine* so Puccini gave it to Sonzogno who accepted. The first performance, conducted by Gino Marinuzzi, took place at the Opéra of Montecarlo on March 27, 1917, with

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<sup>24</sup> Puccini saw the *Houppelande* in the late spring of 1912 at the Théâtre Marigny, Paris, while there to supervise the French première of *Fanciulla del West*, which took place on May 16, of the same year.

<sup>25</sup> By "operetta" we mean a musical comedy which alternates spoken prose with separate musical numbers.

<sup>26</sup> Besides Italy, also France, Belgium, England and North America.

Gilda Dalla Rizza in the role of Magda, while the Italian première went on stage at the Teatro Comunale, Bologna, on June 5, 1917, with Linda Cannetti.

Later, Puccini wrote a second version of the opera staged in Vienna, produced in German on October 9, 1920, and immediately after, a third one, which never reached the stage following the wishes of the composer.

That of Magda, the female lead of *La Rondine*, is a figure whose characteristics are very different from those of Puccini's other heroines: a woman of the world in the Paris of the Second Empire, mistress of a banker, she is light-hearted, somewhat superficial, elegant, fatuous, ironic, with a dash of cynicism. Yet she also aspires to a different type of existence and has a tendency toward melancholy. She would like to relive the purity and the passion of the true love that she had experienced in a brief affair in her youth. This in fact happens: but when she has to choose between a life in the province as the wife of her young lover or her independence, she decides to return to being a kept woman. Reality was very different from what she had imagined in her fantasies. *L'ennui*, (that typically modern malady), with the life she has ahead of her seems to her even worse than that from which she had fled and she decides to "sacrifice" herself by admitting her stormy past which she uses as an excuse to escape.

Puccini worked on *Tabarro* at the same time as *La Rondine*. First, Ferdinando Martini worked on the libretto, after which Giuseppe Adami put his hand to it, finishing the work in November 1916.

The idea of a work comprising three one-act operas surfaced again at the beginning of 1917 when Giovacchino Forzano, who had a great experience in theater, suggested two new subjects to Puccini, which he found fascinating, *Suor Angelica*, by Forzano himself, and *Gianni Schicchi*, based on some verses from Canto xxx of Dante's *Inferno*. Puccini began *Suor Angelica* in February-March 1917 while Forzano was busy writing the libretto for *Gianni Schicchi*, which he finished in June of the same year. Puccini alternated the composing of the first opera, which he finished in September, with that of the second, completed on April 20, 1918. Only at that point did the idea occur of calling the work *Trittico*, although the title did not appear on the score.

The *Trittico* was staged at the Metropolitan in New York on December 14, 1918, conducted by Roberto Moranzoni and with Claudia Muzio as Giorgetta in *Tabarro*, Geraldine Farrar as Angelica in *Suor Angelica* and Florence Easton as Lauretta in *Gianni Schicchi*. The American critics particularly praised *Gianni Schicchi*, found *Tabarro* interesting, but

considered *Suor Angelica* a failure. The Italian (and European) première took place at the Costanzi Theater in Rome on January 11, 1919, with Gino Marinuzzi as the conductor. This time the critics although still preferring *Gianni Schicchi*, were more favorable toward *Suor Angelica*, but harder on *Tabarro*.

Puccini achieved the unity of the *Trittico*, largely due to the expressive differences of the three one-act operas. The violence of *Tabarro* contrasts with the cloistered atmosphere of the moving drama of *Suor Angelica* and the comedy of *Gianni Schicchi*. Giorgetta, a female figure in the opera *Tabarro* where for once the male has the leading role, is a woman who lives her love with a sense of guilt. She is an adulteress, but the reasons for her adultery lie in the miserable and squalid life she shares with her husband Michele, living on the margins of society on a barge moored on the Seine. In addition, he is so much older than she is. In the sadness that accompanies the monotony of the passing days, regulated by the slow flowing of the river which surrounds the characters with its evil fogs, Giorgetta's love for Luigi becomes the symbol of her aspirations to a new existence where life pulsates and love is passion.

The time factor is extremely important also in *Suor Angelica*. Here in the cloister where Angelica's aristocratic parents forced her to close herself up because she is the mother of an illegitimate child, time seems to stand still, so slow is its passing. It will be the encounter with her aunt, the Princess, the *clou* of the opera, which makes her realize the reality of the time that has passed. When the death of her baby, in which she had placed all her future hopes, is revealed to her, Angelica collapses. The grief makes her lose her reason and pushes her to suicide; but the remorse for her gesture will be alleviated by the vision of the Madonna and her dead child, who open the doors of Paradise for her. The poor girl is another victim of cruel fate, in this case represented by the bigoted social conventions of her class, who considers her guilty, even though she is not.

Finally in *Gianni Schicchi*, Puccini portrays the atmosphere of medieval Florence with great precision. Lauretta, the heroine, if such she can be called, is a young, sweet girl whose desire to crown her dreams of love makes her beg her cunning father's help in her famous aria "O mio babbino caro".

The choice of *Turandot* as a subject seems to have come about quite by chance. Puccini asked for Giuseppe Adami's help in searching for suitable material in collaboration with Renato Simoni, the librettist of Giordano's successful opera *Madame Sans-Gêne*. In March 1920, during a lunch in Milan with the two librettists Adami and Simoni, the latter proposed that the

work by the Italian writer Carlo Gozzi could satisfy Puccini's desire for a fairy-tale subject with more human interest. So the idea of basing an opera on his play *Turandotte* came about. However, the birth of the opera was not an easy one, as the libretto was changed several times before Puccini approved of it. It was clear to Puccini that this would be his greatest masterpiece and the final four years of his life were totally dedicated to work on this opera. Towards the end of the year 1923, while working on the orchestration of the second act, Puccini began to suffer from a sore throat accompanied by persistent coughing. As he had always smoked heavily, he had often been prone to throat problems. Consequently, at first he ignored the ailment and continued to work incessantly on *Turandot*. However, as the pain increased, he consulted a number of doctors and specialists from all over Italy; the final diagnosis was that he was suffering from throat cancer in such an advanced stage that no certain cure was possible. Puccini's family withheld from him the gravity of his condition. Meanwhile his son Tonio refused to give up hope and found a specialist who suggested that the new x-ray treatment might stop the progress of the illness. Of the two clinics that used this method, in Berlin and Brussels, they chose the latter. Puccini set off for Brussels on November 4, 1924, accompanied by his son Tonio and a friend. He took his sketches of the closing love duet between Calaf and Turandot with him, intending to complete it during his convalescence. Sadly, Puccini never had the opportunity to finish this final scene. Four days after the operation his heart unexpectedly gave way and he collapsed, dying in the hospital on November 29 at four in the morning.

However, the sketches and material he left were extensive and rich enough to enable Toscanini, who would conduct at the première of *Turandot*, to engage a young composer, Franco Alfano, to complete the score. This Alfano did, delivering his work in the final days of January 1926. It was quite a momentous task, considering that Alfano had had to decipher 23 sheets of music paper, which were sometimes almost illegible and required filling in the missing links, composing new music for the transition to the final scene, and complete the finale itself. However, it did not meet with Toscanini's complete approval, who believed that there was too much of the young composer in the work. Toscanini forced Alfano to cut 109 bars from his first version, a request which Alfano reluctantly complied, although he was deeply hurt by it. The première of *Turandot* was staged at La Scala on April 25, 1926, almost exactly a year after the date for which the first performance had originally been envisaged (April 1925). Toscanini was the conductor, with Rosa Raisa and Maria Zamboni in the leading roles of Princess Turandot and Liù respectively. After the scene of Liù's death, in

tribute to the composer, laying down his baton Toscanini turned to the audience to announce “Here, at this point, Giacomo Puccini broke off his work. Death on this occasion was stronger than art.” The first performance ended at this point. The following performances were staged with Alfano’s ending.

The première was also noteworthy in that it was beset with political problems involving Toscanini and Mussolini. The duce, having being invited by the management of La Scala to Turandot’s first performance, agreed to come on condition that the Fascist anthem “Giovinezza” be played before the start of the opera. When Toscanini learned of this, despite the management’s pressure on him, he made it clear that he had no intention of conducting if the hymn were played, thus forcing Mussolini to refuse to attend the première.

In Turandot, the character of the icy princess is contrasted with that of the little slave Liù, a figure which Puccini decided to introduce into Gozzi’s plot with the aim of “melting” the princess. Liù, as mentioned at the beginning, embodies all the characteristic features of the Puccinian heroines we have been analyzing in these pages: she is humble, selfless, honest, submissive but courageous. Yet her dedication to her loved one, compared to that of her sisters Mimì or Cio-Cio-San, is cloaked with heroism. She immolates herself on the altar of her boundless love for Prince Calaf. Liù, by sacrificing her own life, allows him to win the heart of another woman, Turandot. The princess, as in the happy endings of favorite fairy tales, should have been transformed from a cold, distant and proud woman to a new heroine conquered by the force of redeeming love. But this fails to happen: Puccini was unable to bring about this transformation not only because the work was interrupted by his unfortunate death, but perhaps due more to the fact that he himself was not totally convinced of what he was trying to do because it was too far from his poetical world. The last few pages of his score, those regarding the cathartic “melting” of the princess, were written and rewritten many times without ever reaching a satisfactory conclusion and Turandot remains, in her ambivalence filled with twentieth-century perspective, the most modern creature in Puccini’s theatre.