

# Class 5: A Family Show

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## A. Death as Comedy

### 1. Class title 1 (a production of *Gianni Schicchi* in Croatia)

The picture comes from a production of *Gianni Schicchi* in Croatia. I have no idea what it sounded like; I chose it simply for all those facial expressions. It represents the members of an extended family reading the will of the family patriarch who has just died, and finding that it does not say at all what they hoped it would. Let's look at the scene in five other productions (including one of my own), using the music that **Giacomo Puccini** (1858–1924) used for the moment in his opera.

### 2. Section title A (will-reading montage)

The last picture, the one in the middle, comes from one of my own productions. The point that all of them make, however, is that this is a comedy, and one that depends upon a family portrait gallery of oddball caricatures. Which is why I call it **A Family Show**.

### 3. Puccini: *Trittico* images

*Gianni Schicchi* is a one-act opera, coming relatively late in the composer's career, after he had made his name with *La bohème* (1896), *Tosca* (1900), *Madama Butterfly* (1904) and others. It was part of a trilogy or triptych, *Il trittico*, commissioned by the Metropolitan Opera in New York, for premiere in 1918.

Puccini had already written the one-act opera *Il tabarro* (The Cloak), and took this opportunity to add two one-act operas to it. The common theme is death. In *Il tabarro*, the master of a barge on the Seine kills the lover of his much younger wife. In *Suor Angelica*, a noblewoman exiled to a convent after the birth of her son out of wedlock, kills herself to be with him in heaven after she hears that he has died. And in *Gianni Schicchi*, the members of the Florentine **Donati** family get **Gianni Schicchi** to forge a new will after they discover that their rich ancestor Buoso has left them with practically nothing.

### 4. Dante and the *Inferno*

Schicchi was a real-life character mentioned by **Dante Alighieri** (1265–1321) as being consigned to the *Inferno* for impersonating an already-dead man to dictate a more favorable will. It seems that the core of the story is likely true. But to make it into a comedy, Puccini and his librettist **Giovacchino Forzano** (1884–1970) had to achieve three things: (a) make Schicchi himself interesting; (b) give him some non-selfish reason for the deception; and (c) make his victims, the Donati family, sufficiently repulsive that the audience will take his side. Not every singer manages to make Schicchi interesting (a), but those that do, such as **Alessandro Corbelli** in the production I'll show after the break, do so with ease. The non-selfish reason (b) is that Schicchi's daughter **Lauretta** is in love with **Rinuccio Donati**, and he wants to

give them a good start. And the success of (c), portraying the Donatis as sufficiently greedy and hypocritical, depends a great deal upon casting, make-up, stage direction, and the acting abilities of the performers. Fortunately, that is a much easier challenge to live up to than playing a perfect Schicchi.

## 5. The Relatives of Buoso Donati

Here are all the Donati family members. An actor needs to pick up every slight cue in the score, and I have made an 8-page booklet of character sketches which I'll post on the website, but there is really no need for you to memorize them. Note, however, that every production I have shown so far updates the action to the Twentieth Century. I looked at 18 of them, and only two set the show in the year 1299 as Puccini specifies. Here is the will-reading scene from one of them, shown on Italian television in 1956. There are no titles, but you won't need them. I'll start from their muttered prayers that they will get the valuable items they most want, then proceed through the will-reading itself. Tell me what you think.

6. Puccini: *Gianni Schicchi* (RAI 1956), will-reading

7. The same scene from the Met premiere, 1918

8. Will-reading stills (repeat of final slide of section title)

Did you get much from that? It is black-and-white, for sure, but it is very difficult to look at all these people in costumes so different from our own and see them as real people—or, if unreal, at least as men and women whose personalities we recognize. The same problem would have occurred in the Met premiere: the characters simply get lost in all that period scenery. At least every one of the five stills I showed before have characters that we can relate to our own times, even if they are set several decades back. When I was directing, I used to call this the **Masterpiece Theatre** approach, and for *Gianni Schicchi*, I would never have it any other way. Let's watch the scene one more time, in a low-budget production in English, made I think with apprentice artists as part of the **Met Education** program in 1993. It may have no stars, but it does show how well a modern setting can bring out the characters.

9. Puccini: *Gianni Schicchi* (Met Guild 1993), will-reading

# B. The Comic Plot

## 10. Section title B (The Comic Plot)

That was just a group of screenshots from the production at the **Royal Opera House, Covent Garden** by **Richard Jones**. I don't expect you to get much more from it than wild characters, updating to mid-century, and a madcap succession of events. This was my runner-up choice for the production to show in full—I think you'll like the Glyndebourne one after the break better—but it is not bad. It will certainly serve to provide illustrations for this brief summary of the *opera buffa* parts of the story. I'll play you three substantial clips; it was hard to know where to start and stop, but you'll get a full production in the second hour.

#### 11. It's sad, but where's the will?

The opera opens in **Buoso Donati's** bedroom. He has just died, and his relatives are mourning. But then the rumor spreads that he may have left all his money to the Friars. So there is a frantic search for the will, which is found by **Rinuccio**. Before handing it over, he asks his aunt **Zita** for her permission to marry **Lauretta**, the daughter of Gianni Schicchi. She replies "Whatever—just hand over the will." They read it, and discover the rumors to be true.

#### 12. Puccini: *Gianni Schicchi* (Royal Opera), finding and reading the will

#### 13. Schicchi agrees to help

Most of that is *opera buffa* music pure and simple: lots of stage action, exaggerated emotions, and characters who are types rather than individuals. Anyway, it appears that Rinuccio has already sent for **Gianni Schicchi**. When he arrives, accompanied by his daughter Lauretta, he is disgusted by the family's greed, snobbery (for he is a former peasant), and hypocrisy. He refuses to help, but is persuaded by Lauretta in her aria "O mio babbino caro," which I'll play later. Just then, Buoso's **Doctor** arrives. Schicchi tells the family to keep him away from the bed, while he hides behind it and calls out to the doctor to come back later. This dress-rehearsal is so successful that he easily persuades the family to dress him in the night-clothes and cap, so that he can impersonate the late Buoso Donati and dictate a new will. They each put in their requests for who should get what—but this leaves three properties unassigned: Buoso's prize mule, his house in Florence, and the mills at Signa.

#### 14. Puccini: *Gianni Schicchi* (Royal Opera), Schicchi lays out his plan

#### 15. Side deals, lullaby, and warning

All agree to leave the decision about the mule, house, and mills to Schicchi. But as they help him get dressed for bed, they each whisper what they will pay him to give the properties to them. This turns into a beautiful trio for the three women, as they are dressing Schicchi like a baby; it is a little vulgar in this production, but still beautiful. Then just before the **Notary** enters, Schicchi warns them about the penalties for forging a will: amputation of the hand, and exile for life.

#### 16. Puccini: *Gianni Schicchi* (Royal Opera), side deals, lullaby, and warning

#### 17. How it all ends

This threat of amputation and exile gives Schicchi a hold over the relatives, so that when he dictates the will and keeps the mule, house, and Signa mills for himself, he has only to make a gesture of an amputated stump to the family to stop their complaints. Of course, they're furious and ransack the place, stealing what they can get. While he is chasing them, Lauretta and Rinuccio come in from the terrace, having sealed their engagement with a kiss. In a frank return to old comedy tradition, Schicchi addresses the audience directly, asking us to applaud if we think the deception was worth it.

## C. A Touch of Romance

### 18. Section title C (Lauretta montage)

*Gianni Schicchi* clearly derives from traditional *opera buffa*, but it is not just an *opera buffa* show. There is a strong Romantic element too. You heard it already when Rinuccio talks about getting married on the first of May. You hear it again in his defiance of Gianni Schicchi, whom he likens to the rivers flowing from the country to fertilize the land. Listen to the start of his aria, “*Firenze è come un albero fiorito.*” What do you hear, and what does it become?

### 19. Puccini: *Gianni Schicchi* (Royal Opera), opening of Rinuccio’s aria

What did that music say to you? To me, the march at the start is like the Renaissance coming to Florence. But it turns into the tune you already know, the aria that Lauretta will sing to her father to persuade him to help Rinuccio’s family, “*O mio babbino caro.*” Here it is, in the only clip I could get from **Jack O’Brien’s** centennial production at the Met, also updated and with quite a lavish set. The Lauretta is **Kristina Mkhitarian**, with **Plácido Domingo** as Schicchi and **Atalla Ayan** as Rinuccio.

### 20. Puccini: *Gianni Schicchi* (Met, 2018), Lauretta’s aria

One problem with Puccini’s double-headed approach of making the lovers sympathetic while the Donatis are comical though horrid is that he has got to get the young people offstage for most of the plotting. Rinuccio has quite a bit at the beginning, as you have heard, but essentially this is Lauretta’s only solo singing until the short duet at the end. If you only have one aria, you’d better make it count! But she does come back at the end, for the final very brief duet. Here it is, once more in the Covent Garden production. I just wish we had a terrace with a view of Florence, but the singing at least is lovely.

### 21. Puccini: *Gianni Schicchi* (Royal Opera), ending

### 22. How it all ends

## D. Schicchi at Glyndebourne

### 23. Glyndebourne DVD cover

We’ll end with a full 2004 production of the opera from Glyndebourne, the opera house in the English countryside where I worked for four years before coming over here. The director is **Annabel Arden** and **Vladimir Jurowski** conducts. I don’t think I need say more, but we’ll have 5 minutes at the end to chat.

### 24. Puccini: *Gianni Schicchi* (Glyndebourne), complete

### 25. Glyndebourne DVD cover (repeat)