

# Comedy in Song

**Puccini:** *Gianni Schicchi*, excerpts (Royal Opera House 2011; Elena Zilio, *Zita*; Gwynne Howell, *Simone*; Francesco Demuro, *Rinuccio*; Ekaterina Surina, *Lauretta*; Lucio Gallo, *Schicchi*; Richard Jones, *director*; Antonio Pappano, *conductor*)

## C. A Touch of Romance

A brief sample of the music for the romantic strain in the opera, illustrated with further clips from the production above, plus:

**Puccini:** *Gianni Schicchi*, “O mio babbino caro” (Met 2018; Kristina Mkhitryan, *Lauretta*; Jack O’Brien, *director*)

## D. Schicchi at Glyndebourne

The complete production from the 2004 season of the Glyndebourne Festival Opera, presented uninterrupted.

**Puccini:** *Gianni Schicchi*, complete (Glyndebourne 2004; Felicity Palmer, *Zita*; Luigi Roni, *Simone*; Massimo Giordano, *Rinuccio*; Marie McLaughlin, *Lauretta*; Alessandro Corbelli, *Schicchi*; Annabel Arden, *director*; Vladimir Jurowski, *conductor*)

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## 5. A Family Show

October 15, 2025

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IN A CAREER DEVOTED MAINLY TO TRAGEDY, PUCCINI CONSULTED THE COMIC MUSE ONLY ONCE, TOWARDS THE END OF HIS LIFE. Commissioned for a 1918 premiere at the Metropolitan Opera in New York, he took his one-act melodrama *Il tabarro* (The Cloak) and added two more pieces to it, making a triptych (*Trittico*) all connected by the theme of death; the additions were the all-female opera *Suor Angelica* and the comedy *Gianni Schicchi*. Though death might seem an improbable subject for a comedy, the idea of a contentious family at a wake squabbling over the will offered plenty of farcical potential.

The subject actually derives from Dante, who shows Schicchi—an historical figure—condemned to the *Inferno* for the crime of impersonating a dying man, Buoso Donati, in order to forge a will. To make this work as a comedy, Puccini needed to make the Donati family totally awful (and hence comic), make Schicchi sympathetic (he is one of the great baritone roles), and give him an altruistic reason for the deception. This comes because his daughter Lauretta is in love with young Rinuccio Donati, and he wants to give them a good start. This adds a romantic layer to the opera, encapsulated in Lauretta's famous aria "O mio babbino caro." Though romance is a comparatively small proportion of the whole, it gives the score its unique color. *rb*.

## A. Death as Comedy

The genesis of *Gianni Schicchi*, and the big question: do we play it in the original period of 1299, or update it in some way? Both the major productions we shall be seeing take the latter approach.

**Puccini:** *Gianni Schicchi*, will-reading scene (Italian TV, 1956)

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

## B. The Comic Plot

The opera takes place 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, in effect: "Whatever—just hand over the will." They read it, and discover the rumors to be true; the friars get it all.

It appears that Rinuccio has already sent for Schicchi. When he arrives, accompanied by Lauretta, he is disgusted by the family's greed, snobbery, and hypocrisy. He refuses to help, but is persuaded by Lauretta in that famous aria. 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 impromptu 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 some mills at Signa.

All agree to leave these decisions to Schicchi, but as they help him dress for bed, they each try to bribe him to give the properties to them. Just before the **Notary** enters, Schicchi warns them about the penalties for forging a will: amputation of the hand, and exile for life. This threat 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. While Schicchi 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.