

OpPop

La Bohème



Background to the Opera

GIACOMO PUCCINI (1858–1924) was only one of two composers who adapted *Scènes de la vie de bohème* by **Henri Murger** (1822–61) at around the same time (1896). At first, his opera received less acclaim than that of his rival, **Ruggiero Leoncavallo**, but posterity has totally reversed that situation. Murger's book is really a collection of separate newspaper stories, which hang together thematically rather than as a continuous narrative. The success of Puccini and his librettists, **Luigi Illica** and **Giuseppe Giacosa**, came from their ability to thread together scenes that are secondary in the book, but build a powerful emotional arc in the opera.

La Bohème is essentially an intimate story involving a handful of people, all young and all struggling to make a place for themselves. Ever since **Franco Zeffirelli** directed the opera at La Scala in 1963 (a production remounted at the Met in 1982), his style of romantic ultra-realism has shaped the expectations of generations of opera-goers. We shall contrast scenes from that production with those from a much more recent one from Berlin by the Australian director **Barrie Kosky**, who throws out Zeffirelli-type spectacle in favor of a closer focus on the characters and their feelings. At stake is the question of what is more important in opera, production or people?

La Bohème is one of the most-often produced operas in the world—and by the same token, the most-often mounted with flown-in guest singers given little or no rehearsal. So any production that is thought through from scratch, as Barrie Kosky's was, is something of a rarity. Franco Zeffirelli presumably gave his production the same attention when it was new, forty year ago; what happens in any given revival, however, is largely up to the talents of the individual performers. *rb.*

5. *La Bohème*

May 11, 2023

The Story of the Opera

ACT ONE. A garret (Christmas Eve). [*We meet the four friends: Rodolfo the poet, Marcello the painter, Colline the philosopher, and Schaunard the musician, who has recently earned enough money for them all to go out on the town.*] Rodolfo stays behind a short time to finish some work. There is a knock at the door. This is Mimì, a girl who lives in another room in the building. Her candle has blown out and she asks Rodolfo to light it. She is briefly overcome with faintness, and Rodolfo offers her a glass of wine. Both find ways to prolong this first meeting, and soon they are telling each other their life stories. When his friends call to Rodolfo from the street, Mimì asks if she can go with him.

ACT TWO: Quartier Latin (the same evening). A great crowd, including children, has gathered with street sellers announcing their wares. The friends arrive; Rodolfo buys Mimì a pink bonnet, while Colline buys a coat and Schaunard a horn. Parisians gossip with friends and bargain with the vendors; the children of the streets clamor to see the wares of Parpignol, the toy seller. The friends enter the Cafe Momus. As they dine at the cafe, Musetta, Marcello's ex-lover, arrives with her elderly admirer Alcindoro. To the embarrassment of her patron, she sings a risqué song, hoping to reclaim Marcello's attention. The ploy works. Musetta sends Alcindoro to the shoemaker to fix a shoe that she claims is too tight. By the time he returns, the young people have left, landing him with the bill.

ACT THREE: At the city walls (late February). [*Mimì appears, coughing violently. She tries to find Marcello, who is currently living in a little tavern where he paints signs for the innkeeper. She tells him of her hard life with Rodolfo, who abandoned her the night before. When Rodolfo comes out, she hides, but overhears him telling Marcello that she is too ill for him to be able to help her, and his hope that his pretended unkindness will inspire her to seek a wealthier suitor.*] Mimì tells Rodolfo that she is leaving him, and asks that they separate amicably. But their love for one another is too strong for the pair to part. As a compromise, they agree to remain together until the spring,

when the world is coming to life again and no one feels truly alone. Meanwhile, Marcello has found Musetta, and the couple quarrel fiercely over her flirtatious behavior and his jealousy.

ACT FOUR: The garret (some months later). [*Marcello and Rodolfo are trying to work, though they are primarily talking about their girlfriends, who have left them and found wealthy lovers. They are joined by Schaunard and Colline bringing a very frugal dinner and all parody eating a plentiful banquet. Musetta suddenly appears with Mimì, severely weakened by her illness; they assist her to a bed. The other leave to raise money for some medicine, and to leave the lovers alone together.*] Mimì tells Rodolfo that her love for him is her whole life. He presents her with the pink bonnet he bought her, which he has kept as a souvenir of their love. They remember past happiness and their first meeting. The others return, with a gift of a muff to warm Mimì's hands and some medicine. Mimì gently thanks Rodolfo for the muff, which she believes is a present from him, reassures him that she is better and falls asleep. None of them notice the exact moment of her death. Rodolfo rushes to the bed, calling Mimì's name in anguish, weeping helplessly as the curtain falls.

— adapted from Wikipedia; italicized sections will be omitted

Productions Sampled

METROPOLITAN OPERA, NY, 2018. Sonya Yoncheva (Mimì), Susanna Phillips (Musetta), Michael Fabiano (Rodolfo), Lucas Meachem (Marcello); c. Marco Armiliato; d. Franco Zeffirelli

KOMISCHE OPER, BERLIN, 2019. Nadja Mchantaf (Mimì), Vera-Lotte Böcker (Musetta), Jonathan Tetelman (Rodolfo), Günter Papendell (Marcello); c. Jordan de Souza; d. Barrie Kosky

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