

Class 5: *La Bohème*

A. Many Bohèmes

1. Class title 1 (Ferrara)
2. Section title A: six *Bohème* directors

For the most part, I am only going to show two productions of *La bohème* (1896), the most popular masterpiece of **Giacomo Puccini** (1858–1924). But I wanted to first show you something of the range of what is out there. So I'll play the first minute or so of productions by each of these directors. The curtain rises, as you know, on a Parisian attic shared by two young artists: the poet Rodolfo and the painter Marcello. In this venerable production by the late **Franco Zeffirelli** at La Scala, not only has the room been recreated in every detail, but there is a whole constructed roofscape outside the window.

3. *Bohème openings 1: Zeffirelli, La Scala 1965*

Jonathan Miller, another veteran director who has recently passed on, aimed for a similar realism in his 2009 production in Paris, although he has slightly updated it. Marcello, it appears, also paints posters.

4. *Bohème openings 2: Miller, Paris 2009*

Australian genius **Barrie Kosky**, who runs the Komische Oper in Berlin, sets the opera at around the time of its composition; Marcello is now a photographer. He has the simplest set of all—but also the most believable cast, as I shall show you later.

5. *Bohème openings 3: Kosky, Berlin 2019*

Faced with the enormous stage of the Festival Theatre at Salzburg in 2012, young Italian director **Damiano Michieletto** makes his artists into modern hippies, who have turned some vast empty building into a squat.

6. *Bohème openings 4: Michieletto, Salzburg 2012*

Claus Guth, directing at the bigger opera house in Paris, sets the opera in an environment which is probably the last thing you would ever have imagined!

7. *Bohème openings 5: Guth, Paris 2017*

A word more about this. Guth is aware that *Bohème* can easily stale with so much repetition. So he has the idea of telling the whole thing from a new perspective, as a memory. Rodolfo has become an astronaut, and is now trapped in a broken-down space station that is running out of oxygen. The opera unfolds as his increasingly delirious dreams. Which leads me on to my last example: Norwegian director

Stefan Herheim, who also puts the entire opera into the past. Mimi's death is not the last thing you see on the stage, but the first.

8. *Bohème* openings 6: Herheim, Oslo 2013

In Herheim's version, Rodolfo recasts the story of his love and loss as operatic tragedy because it is easier for him to deal with than the real thing. I find it the most emotionally compelling of all these versions, but I won't try to persuade you of that today.

9. Zeffirelli, Act II

10. Zeffirelli and Kosky compared

I freely admit that, for many people, there is a "standard" way of doing *La Bohème*, exemplified by the venerable production by **Franco Zeffirelli** that has been at the Met for at least four decades. It is ultra-realistic; Zeffirelli has an entire Parisian square onstage for Act Two, and instead of just showing the students' attic room in Acts One and Four, he gives you an entire roofline, with further roofs in the distance. For people who flock to such a production, the period detail, the crowds, and the costumes are a significant part of the draw. I am going to contrast scenes from the Met production with some from **Barrie Kosky** in Berlin, which is the simplest production that I know. Other than the scene that brings the lovers together, there will be no duplication; I'll tell the story in sequence.

B. *The Story Begins*

11. Section title B (Vittorio Grigolo and Nicole Car at the Met)

This photo, from a recent production at the Met, shows the Australian soprano **Nicole Car** as Mimi; she is also the Mimì in the spaceship production in Paris. In her mid-thirties, she is rather young for a star at the Met, but in this particular role I think youth matters. **Nadja Mchantaf**, the Mimì in Barrie Kosky's production, was in her twenties at the time. Unfortunately, I don't have a video of Car's performance; the video I do have stars **Sonya Yoncheva**, who would have been in her early forties. Still, that is what you pay for at the Met: certified international stars who have reached the peak of their profession, shown in some of the most lavish productions out there. And I have to admit it is a winning combination, which is why I have changed my original plan to give more or less equal time to the two productions. So I'm offering a kind of club sandwich: Zeffirelli at the beginning, middle, and end, but in between two scenes from the Kosky production, which is simply a story about two young people in love, and very, very real. As an opera director myself—and even as a designer—I have always believed that the most important factor in opera, other than the music, is not the production but the *people*.

Anyway, let's look at the moment, from the Zeffirelli production, when the lovers first meet. Rodolfo (**Michael Fabiano**) has let his friends go on to the Café Momus, because he has some work to finish. But he lacks inspiration. Then there is a knock on the door. It is his neighbor Mimì (**Sonya Yoncheva**) seeking a light for her candle. Both play little games to prolong their meeting, and he tells her about himself.

12. Puccini: *La bohème*, Act I, entrance of Mimì (Met)

13. — still from the above

Now let's watch the same scene from Berlin, but continue to the end of the act. After Rodolfo (Chilean American **Jonathan Tetelman**) has sung his aria, Mimì (**Nadja Mchantaf**) replies with her own story. It is a very simple one—she lives alone and does embroidery for money—but she refers to many of the same images that he used in his own aria, so it becomes clear to both of them that they are kindred spirits. His friends call to wonder what's keeping him, and she shyly suggests that they go to the café together. You will see that Barrie Kosky uses the camera poetically as well as literally, which may come as a surprise after so much realism, but what I want you to focus on is the relationship between the two.

14. Puccini: *La bohème*, Act I, entrance of Mimì (Berlin)

15. Class title 2 (still from the above)

C. The Tale Continues

16. Class title 3 (Susanna Phillips as Musetta)

If there is one scene from the Zeffirelli production that I simply *must* include, it is Act II; it is only 20 minutes, so I can show it complete. Really, it is a wonder of the world: the feat of getting so much scenery and so many people on one stage! Most of the action involves a new character, the other soprano, **Musetta** (Susanna Phillips), the on-and-off-again girlfriend of the painter Marcello. Right now they are off again, and Musetta sings her *Waltz Song* to needle him. But before long, she is playing him off against her elderly sugar daddy to get him back.

17. Puccini: *La bohème*, Act II complete (Met)

18. — still from the above, with scene from Act III (Met)

Zeffirelli applies his eye for detail and scenic magic to create a chilly picture for Act III: a winter dawn at the edge of the city. But I want to cut to the end of the act, and back to the Kosky. All is not going well for Rodolfo and Mimì; he realizes that she is ill, and knows that she would be better off with someone able to take care of her. She eventually recognizes this too, and breaks it off with him at the beginning of the clip I am going to show. It is a wonderful **aria**, apparently just about packing up her things so that someone can collect them, but filled with musical memories and the love she is trying desperately not to show. The aria is immediately followed by a **quartet**, in which they agree to stay together until the spring, while Musetta and Marcello have one of their slanging matches at the other side of the stage. It is at moments like this when I most appreciate the psychological realism of Barrie Kosky's direction, and the performance of **Nadja Mchantaf**, which is as far from opera *cliché* as you could possibly imagine.

19. Puccini: *La bohème*, Act III ending (Berlin)

20. — still from the above and final moment of the opera (Berlin)

I had originally meant to show the final scene in the Kosky production also, and his treatment of his young singers is as sensitive as always. But I realize that the way he ends it, with the dead Mimì sitting bolt upright in a chair with her idealized photograph on the screen behind her, may be too metaphorical for some tastes. So instead I will give you the last ten minutes of the Met production. Mimì has indeed left Rodolfo, and gone to be the mistress of some Count. But she has come back to him to die. They have time for one last duet, filled with memories of all the Act One music, and then she goes to sleep. He doesn't even realize that she has died until he sees the expression on his friends' faces.

21. Puccini: *La bohème*, Act IV ending (Met)

22. Class title 4: A Story of Youth, for the Ages