

# Class 8: Puccini's Passion

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## A. Passion, 1890s

### 1. Class title 1 (*Il tabarro* scene)

I originally advertised this class under a different title; it is now **Puccini's Passion**, for reasons you shall see. Let's start by listening to half-minute clips from three Italian operas that made it big in the 1890s. I wanted the style of singing to be relevant as well. Though the singers are not the original performers, they were trained in the same tradition; they would all probably have been born by the time these works premiered. What quality do these three singers have in common?

### 2. Section title A (*Cav/Pag/Bohème*)

### 3. Mascagni, Leoncavallo, and Puccini posters

So what was the common quality? My title gives it away: **passion**, which I would say is the primary characteristic of the **verismo** movement with which all three composers were associated. The music is written to give the singers a moment or two of peak intensity, and the vocalists of this vintage were prepared to sacrifice everything else in order to attain it. The three operas were *Cavalleria Rusticana* (1890) by **Pietro Mascagni** (1863–1945), *I pagliacci* (1892) by **Ruggero Leoncavallo** (1857–1919), and *La bohème* (1896) by **Giacomo Puccini** (1858–1924). The first two are substantial one-act operas of just over an hour in length; they are frequently performed together as “Cav and Pag.” *La bohème* is in four acts, though all are short. All three were hugely successful. But look at the next two operas by each composer: *L'amico Fritz* and *Iris* by Mascagni, another version of *La bohème* and *Zazà* by Leoncavallo, and *Tosca* and *Madama Butterfly* by Puccini. I think it likely that many people in the room have seen the two later Puccinis, plus probably several others that followed after those. But while many of you have probably encountered *Cav* and/or *Pag*, I doubt anyone has seen live performances of any of the other four; I certainly haven't. So what did Puccini have that the others either didn't or couldn't sustain?

### 4. Illustrations to Giovanni Verga's *Cavalleria Rusticana* (1880)

Both *Cavalleria Rusticana* (Rustic Chivalry) and *I pagliacci* (The Clowns, or The Traveling Performers) are set in Sicily, the remote south of Italy where passions are supposed to be more intense, more authentic, than they are in the cities. Both feature common people, as opposed to, say, the Verdi operas, whose characters are mostly upper-class. The shift to **realism** was basically a literary movement, akin to what Zola was doing in France; in Italy, it was known as *Verismo*. *Cavalleria Rusticana*, in fact, was a setting of a story (later a play) by the leading novelist of the *verismo* movement, **Giovanni Verga** (1840–1922).

### 5. Popularity statistics

Puccini was a shoo-in for this course. While he is only the *second* most frequently performed opera composer in the world, after Verdi and before Mozart, he has a popular appeal that the other two lack; you will often find people responding to Puccini whom Verdi and Mozart leave cold. Indeed, four out of the top twelve operas (in frequency of performance) were written by him. *Cav* and *Pag* come much lower in the list, and no other opera in the *verismo* style figures at all. So here's the thing: because of his passion and his ability to grab an audience by the heartstrings and often the throat, Puccini is generally classed as a *verismo* composer; and because he is the only one to continually command the stages of the world while the others have faded, he is thought of as **the** *verismo* composer. But was he?

## 6. Menu for the rest of the class

But *was* he? My answer is: **no, only in part**. All the same, *verismo* makes a useful lens through which to examine Puccini's extraordinary popularity. So in the remainder of this hour, I am going to look first at some of the characteristics of the *verismo* movement and how Puccini adopts them. Then, more briefly, I shall outline some ways in which he was *not* a typical *verismo* composer. And finally, after the break, I am going to look at the one work of his which indisputably ticks all the *verismo* boxes, his one-act melodrama *Il tabarro*, though it dates from the last decade of his life, being premiered at the Metropolitan Opera in 1918.

# B. Puccini and Verismo

## 7. Section title B (Puccini and Verismo)

The shock there is part of the point. The hurtling music was the opening of Puccini's *Tosca*, representing an escaped prisoner running into hiding. The images are all moments of high emotion from Puccini operas. Emotional intensity, dramatic extremes, these are key elements of *verismo* opera. In the strictest definition, which includes both *Cav* and *Pag*, *verismo* takes common people as its subject. So Mascagni's opening to *Cavalleria Rusticana*, which shows a small Sicilian town waking up, basically pins its colors to the mast: a realistic crowd scene, set to orchestral music accompanying action rather than vocal accompaniment. Here is two minutes of it in the old production at the Met by **Franco Zeffirelli** (1923–2019). It will be over 13 minutes before we hear a solo voice on the stage.

## 8. Mascagni: *Cavalleria Rusticana*, opening (Met)

Puccini had his crowd scenes too. The most famous of them is Act II of *La bohème*, where the four students go out to a local café on Christmas Eve, and find apparently half of Paris in attendance, at least in the Met's Zeffirelli production, which Peter Gelb found quite impossible to replace. But unlike Mascagni six years earlier, Puccini manages a remarkable feat of intercutting the crowd scene with snatches featuring the five soloists.

## 9. Puccini: *La bohème*, Act II opening (Met)

## 10. Puccini: *La bohème*, Act III (Met)

I haven't time to play it, but at the opening of Act III, Puccini does almost the opposite, showing a few hardy souls venturing out before dawn on a freezing snowy morning. There were musical fingerprints too. Through most of the career of Verdi, operas had been composed of pretty-much-distinct arias, duets, and so forth, connected by music of lower intensity to advance the plot. In the interests of realism, *verismo* composers aimed for a continuous texture with less obvious solos.

#### 11. 78-rpm records of "Vesti la giubba" and "Vissi d'arte"

But they also realized the importance of the solo aria in providing moments of peak intensity, and to provide excerpt that could have a separate life outside the theater. Puccini even had the acumen to write his arias at a length that could fit a single side of a 78-rpm record! Here are two of them, though both sung now by modern performers. In *I pagliacci*, the leader of the troupe, **Canio**, has just discovered that his young wife **Nedda** is having an affair with a local villager. How can he put on make-up and play the clown while his heart is being torn up inside? This is **Placido Domingo** in the Zeffirelli film.

#### 12. Leoncavallo: *I pagliacci*, "Vesti la giubba"

#### 13. Record labels as above, focusing on "Vissi d'arte"

**Floria Tosca**, the heroine of the Puccini opera bearing her name, is a celebrated singer and the lover of the painter **Mario Cavaradossi**. Rome is under brutal Neapolitan occupation, and the liberal Cavaradossi has hidden an escaped political prisoner at Tosca's country villa. Ambushing her after a concert, the chief of the secret police, **Baron Scarpia**, is entertaining Tosca in one room while his henchmen are torturing Cavaradossi in the next. Eventually Tosca gives in and reveals the hiding place. Scarpia tells her that she can save her lover from execution if she will sleep with him now. This is Tosca's last-ditch prayer to a God whom she has honored and served, but who now seems to have deserted her. Listen for the marvelous way it starts with almost nothing, but within a mere two minutes has worked itself up into a huge climax. The singer is **Angela Gheorghiu** in a production in London.

#### 14. Puccini: *Tosca*, "Vissi d'arte"

#### 15. *I pagliacci*, final scene

Need I say that violence is an inevitable ingredient of *verismo* opera? Both these arias pave the way to murder. The last part of *I pagliacci* is the stage play that the troupe present to the public. It's a trivial farce about a jealous husband and fickle wife. Only this time it is real. Nedda tries to play along until she realizes that her husband is out for revenge. The last line of the opera is "La commedia è finita"—the comedy is over. Indeed it is!

#### 16. Leoncavallo: *I pagliacci*, final scene

#### 17. Scarpia and Tosca

The murder in *Tosca* works a little differently. Tosca accepts Scarpia's proposition, on condition that Cavaradossi's execution be faked, and that he provide them with a note of safe-passage to be able to get out of Rome. We pick up the scene while he is writing it. I'll play a 6-minute sequence. The actual singing it contains is minimal, probably no more than 30 seconds in all. But Puccini learned from the original *verismo* composers, and then developed it to a remarkable degree, the power of using

orchestral music without singing to build dramatic section. There are two such sequences here. In the first, while Sacripia is still writing, Tosca notices a knife on the table and surreptitiously hides it; it is a *locus classicus* of opera acting technique that I used for years in my acting classes. So he goes for her, and she kills him. But there are at least two minutes in the scene left. Tosca has two objectives, to cleanse herself of the deed and to get out of there safely. So she washes the blood off her hands, and then looks for the note of safe passage. To her horror, it is still in Scarpia's hands. But she pries it from his fingers, and prepares to leave. However, she is still a God-fearing woman and cannot leave the body like that. So she sets two candles on either side of his head and places a crucifix on his breast. Only then can she leave. This is from a film made in the actual Roman setting specified by Puccini (not a stage set); the singers are the American soprano **Catherine Malfitano** and the Italian **Ruggero Raimondi**.

18. Puccini: *Tosca*, Act II ending

## C. Puccini in Color

19. Section title C (*Butterfly*, *Rondine*, *Turandot*)

I could name many ways in which Puccini was *not* a *verismo* composer, but I'll stick to one. He had very little interest in going into Sicilian villages and describing the lives of the poor. In fact, he wrote only one opera with a contemporary working-class cast, and that is *Il tabarro* (The Cloak), part of the *Trittico*, or triptych of one-act operas he wrote for the Met in 1919; I will devote the second hour to it. All his other operas have got historical or literary settings, and many of them have a distinctly exotic flavor. From right to left, these are the heroines of his *Madama Butterfly* (1904, Japan), *La rondine* (1917, Viennese operetta), and *Turandot* (1924, ancient China). Puccini was both a **colorist** and a **poet**.

20. Puccini: *Madama Buterfly*, flower duet

I have time for only one example, shown here in a traditional production. **Butterfly** is a teenage girl of good but impoverished family in Nagasaki who allows herself to be brokered as the "bride" of visiting US Navy Lieutenant **Benjmin Franklin Pinkerton**. She truly loves him, but he treats this as a purely temporary arrangement that will present no obstacle to him making a proper marriage stateside. He leaves; she bears his child, a little boy, and together they await his promised return. Now the ship is sighted entering the port. In fact, he has only come to claim the child and place her in the care of his new and presumably childless wife). But she doesn't know this. She gets her maid **Suzuki** to help her decorate the house with flowers, then all three sit down to wait until dawn accompanied, in a truly original stroke, by an offstage chorus that is entirely hummed. I only have an updated production from Hamburg. Its modern setting makes the important point that Puccini's poetry, Puccini's color, is not a matter of *shoji* screens and cherry blossom but is rooted where it really matters, in the music.

21. Puccini: *Madama Buterfly*, flower duet and humming chorus

22. Class title 2 ("Verismo: not only grime")

## D. Spotlight on Murder

### 23. Section title D

The only Puccini opera that obeys the *verismo* tenet of working-class realism came towards the end of his career, when the *verismo* movement had basically run its course. He had been toying with the idea of setting the melodrama *Il tabarro* (The Cloak) from about 1910, but it was only when the New York Metropolitan Opera commissioned a new work for 1919 that he realized it could make the first part of a triptych of short operas. The other two, *Suor Angelica* and *Gianni Schicchi* are both period pieces and not *verismo* at all.

### 24. Set for the Royal Opera House production

I showed those black-and-white pictures because most productions revel in the opera's *noir* environment of a barge tied up at an industrial quay by the Seine. The 2011 production that I shall show, by **Richard Jones** at the Royal Opera House in London, is spruced up a bit, but the moment you hear Puccini's music with the never-ending churning of the water, and watch the repetitive work of the stevedores, there is no doubt that this is an environment with little time for enjoyment. So when **Giorgetta (Eva-Maria Westbroek)**, the younger wife of the barge captain **Michele (Lucio Gallo)**, begs for some time off and a drink for the men, you feel it is well deserved—especially when a beggar comes along with a source of music.

### 25. Puccini: *Il tabarro*, opening

### 26. — still from the above

The first half of the opera is devoted to setting up the environment and the cast of semi-comic supporting characters. But the one who gets our focus is Giorgetta, who is clearly not happy in her life—there is a back-story we will learn much later. The first we realize that she might be open to a younger lover comes towards the end of the first half, when she sings of her love for Bellville, the crowded part of the city where she grew up. And in a trick that Puccini had used once before in *Tosca*, what starts as an aria for her becomes a duet with one of the deck-hands, the tenor **Luigi (Alexandrs Antonenko)**, who was also born there. They end up singing the same glorious tune, but I admire the way that director Richard Jones keeps them on opposite sections of the deck.

### 27. Puccini: *Il tabarro*, Belleville duet

### 28. Eva-Maria Westbroek as Giorgetta

The minor characters go home. We are now exactly half-way through the opera. All that is left is: **(1)** a scene for Giorgetta and her lover Luigi (though not yet consummated, I think), **(2)** another for her and Michele, **(3)** an aria for him, and **(4)** the horrifying denouement. Note also the way Puccini punctuates the tension with **two young lovers** walking on the quay. I used not to like Puccini very much, until a professor at graduate school asked me to direct this. I found myself thrilling to the passion between Giorgetta and Luigi, of course; but what really surprised me was how deeply I felt for both her and Michele in their duet together, where we first learn that they have had a child who died in infancy.

You see him reaching out; no matter the electricity between her and Luigi, you ache for her to respond to her husband. But she just can't, and that is the real tragedy.

### 29. Score page

Another thing that impressed me was to discover how integrated the score was. The use of **triplets**, for example, that underpin the whole thing from beginning to end. Here are a couple of examples, then we'll watch the final 25 minutes unbroken.

### 30. Musical discussion

### 31. Puccini: *Il tabarro*, last 25 minutes

### 32. Class title 3 ("Popular for good reason")