

Popularity... and then?

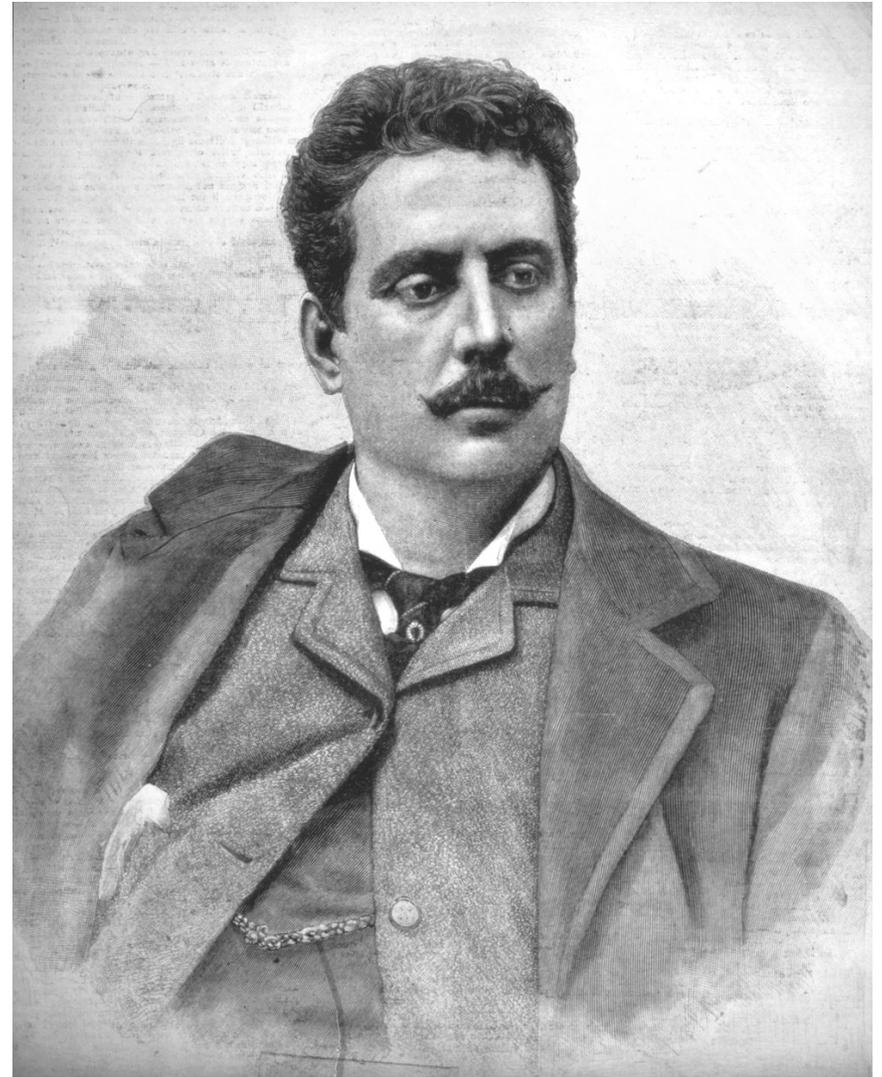
[We omit the comic scene when the wife of one of the older men arrives, and the impassioned aria where the younger deckhand **Luigi** rants against social injustice...]

...but pick it up where Giorgetta sings nostalgically of Belleville, the working-class district where she grew up—joined unexpectedly by Luigi, who was also born there.

[The minor characters all leave.] Luigi stays for a word with Michele, but really to be alone with Giorgetta, who clearly returns his passion. They agree to meet later that night; Giorgetta will light a match as a sign that the coast is clear. Luigi goes and Michele comes out, asking his wife to snuggle next to him under his cloak, in a last-ditch attempt to revive their fading marriage. But she is unresponsive; both their lives have changed too much after the death of their baby years before in that stuffy cabin. She excuses herself and goes inside.

Michele suspects that she has another lover. Working out that it must be Luigi, his thoughts become violent. To calm himself, he lights his pipe. Suddenly he detects motion on the boat; it is Luigi, who has mistaken Michele's match for Giorgetta's signal. Michele creeps up on the younger man, strangles him, then hides the body under his cloak as Giorgetta comes back on deck. When she snuggles up to him once more, Michele pulls back the cloak to reveal Luigi's body.

Puccini: *Il tabarro*, scenes as above (London 2011; Richard Jones, director; Antonio Pappano, conductor; Eva-Maria Westbroek, Giorgetta; Alexandrs Antonenko, Luigi; Lucio Gallo, Michele)



8. Puccini's Passion

April 14, 2026

8. Puccini's Passion

PUCCINI IS OFTEN CATEGORIZED AS THE LEADING COMPOSER OF THE ITALIAN VERISMO MOVEMENT. In that *verismo* is defined as the realistic depiction of working-class folk and the drama of contemporary life, the only Puccini opera that really fits is his late one-act melodrama *Il tabarro* (The Cloak), which premiered at the Met in 1919; we shall devote the last hour of class to watching extended sections.

Actually, the two composers who launched *verismo*—**Pietro Mascagni** (1863–1945) with *Cavalleria rusticana* (Rustic Chivalry) in 1890, and **Ruggero Leoncavallo** (1857–1919) with *I pagliacci* (The Traveling Players) in 1892—did not stay with the same aesthetic for long either. Both branched out in other directions, though neither matched that first great triumph. Puccini, on the other hand, went from strength to strength, attaining a peak of popularity he holds to this day.

Nevertheless, the main thing Puccini had in common with *verismo* composers is a nose for passion, and the ability to write music that sweeps the hearer up in it. So although he remained his own man, a comparison to his *verismo* contemporaries is still a useful way to study his success. *rb.*

A. Passion, 1890s

Realism as a literary movement, and some samples of the original style of *verismo* opera vocalism from 78-rpm records.

Mascagni: *Cavalleria rusticana* (1890). Lina Bruna Rasa, Santuzza

Leoncavallo: *I Pagliacci* (1892). Aureliano Pertile, Canio

Puccini: *La bohème* (1896). Aristodemo Giorgini, Rodolfo

B. Puccini and Verismo

Some qualities that Puccini had in common with *verismo* composers: his depiction of crowds, the raw power of his arias (all mainly short), his use of the orchestra to set a mood or accompany action, and the threat and/or sudden outbreak of violence.

Mascagni: *Cavalleria rusticana*, opening (Met 1987, Franco Zeffirelli)

Puccini: *La bohème*, Act II opening (Met 1981, Franco Zeffirelli)

Leoncavallo: *I Pagliacci*, “Vesti la giubba” (Plácido Domingo, Canio)

Puccini: *Tosca* (1900), “Vissi d’arte” (Angela Gheorghiu, Tosca)

Leoncavallo: *I Pagliacci*, end (Plácido Domingo, Teresa Stratas)

Puccini: *Tosca*, Act II end (Catherine Malfitano, Ruggero Raimondi)

C. Puccini in Color

A few of the ways in which Puccini was *not* a typical *verismo* composer: his avoidance of contemporary subjects, his poetic side, and love of exotic color.

Puccini: *Madama Butterfly* (1904), Act II flower duet & humming chorus (Hamburg 2012, Vincent Broussard, *director*; Alexia Voulgaridou, *Butterfly*; Christina Damian, *Suzuki*)

D. Spotlight on Murder

Puccini's one-act melodrama *Il tabarro* (The Cloak), which premiered at the Met in 1919, is his one work that ticks *all* the defining boxes of *verismo*. We shall watch substantial scenes in this hour.

The setting is a barge carrying goods up the Seine to Paris, where it is now docked. We see the men doing their backbreaking repetitive work, while **Giorgetta**, the younger wife of the owner **Michele**, does her best to make a home of the boat. She persuades her husband to give the men a break and joins them in a spot of impromptu dancing.