8: MURDER AFLOAT

A. IN THE BACKGROUND

1. Class title 1 (Scene from *Il tabarro*)
2. — the above, as section title
3. *Cavalleria rusticana, I pagliacci, La bohème*

I could hardly do a class on **Opera and Real Life** without mentioning the one style of opera that actually has "real life" in its name, could I? This is verismo, or "realism," an Italian movement that sprang up in the early 1890s, with the two one-act operas *Cavalleria rusticana* (Rustic Chivalry) by **Pietro Mascagni** (1863–1945) and *I Pagliacci* (The Touring Players) by **Ruggiero Leoncavallo** (1858–1919). Both operas are set in the South of Italy, where passions are supposed to run higher, among ordinary village people. Both are characterized by intense emotion, and end in violent death. **Giacomo Puccini** (1858–1924), my featured composer today, is often associated with the *verismo* movement, and indeed his *La bohème* (1896) features impoverished students in a Paris garret, though it has no violence.

4. *La bohème* at the Met

Yet Puccini was different: he loved color. Look at these two scenes from *La bohème* that are *not* set in a garret. The stage for Act II is filled with ordinary people, alright, yet the whole point of the scene is to make the audience's jaws drop with amazement at the sheer spectacle. Act III features the young students in pairs, threes, or fours, yet its setting, in a snow-covered square on the outskirts of Paris, is intended to create poetry, not realist grunge.

5. *Il tabarro*, LP cover

It was not until 1918, in the triptych of operas he wrote for the Met in New York, always referred to as the *Trittico,* that Puccini wrote a true *verismo* opera—working-class people, intense passion, and violent murder—long after *verismo* itself had become a dead letter. This was his one-act piece, *Il tabarro* (The Cloak), the last half-hour of which will be my featured opera today. I showed the end of this in a class two years ago. As it lasted two hours, I had time to go quite deeply into the background. I can't do that now, but I can use the various animated titles I made to sum up my main points. First, that Puccini was no stranger to passion and violence in his work.

6. *Verismo* class, section title B ("Puccini and Verismo")

The music there was the opening of *Tosca.* Second, that despite this, Puccini also loved glamor, exotic settings, beautiful women, and lots of color.

7. *Verismo* class, section title C ("Puccini in Color")

From right to left, the three operas are *Madama Butterfly* (1904), *La Rondine* (1917), and *Turandot* (1926), thus bracketing *Il tabarro* (1918, but probably started rather earlier). But my fourth title video made clear how different *Tabarro* actually was,

8. *Verismo* class, section title D ("Spotlight on Murder")

For the setting of *Il tabarro* is a working barge, plying up and down the Seine from Paris to the coast. The captain, **Michele**, has a rather younger wife, **Giorgetta**. They had a child who apparently died in infancy. Even since then, Giorgetta has felt trapped in their tiny cabin, and in the company of the various laborers her husband hires to help with loading and unloading. 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**) begs Michele (**Lucio Gallo**) for a break and a drink for the men, you feel it is well deserved—especially when a beggar comes along with a source of music.

9. Puccini: *Il tabarro* (London 2011), opening **[7:49]**
10. — 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. 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.

11. Puccini: *Il tabarro*, Belleville duet **[4:17]**

B. IN THE FOREGROUND

12. Section title B (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 Lugi, 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.

13. 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.

14. Musical discussion **[1:25]**
15. Puccini: *Il tabarro*, last 25 minutes **[25:48]**
16. Class title 3 ("Where did it go wrong?")