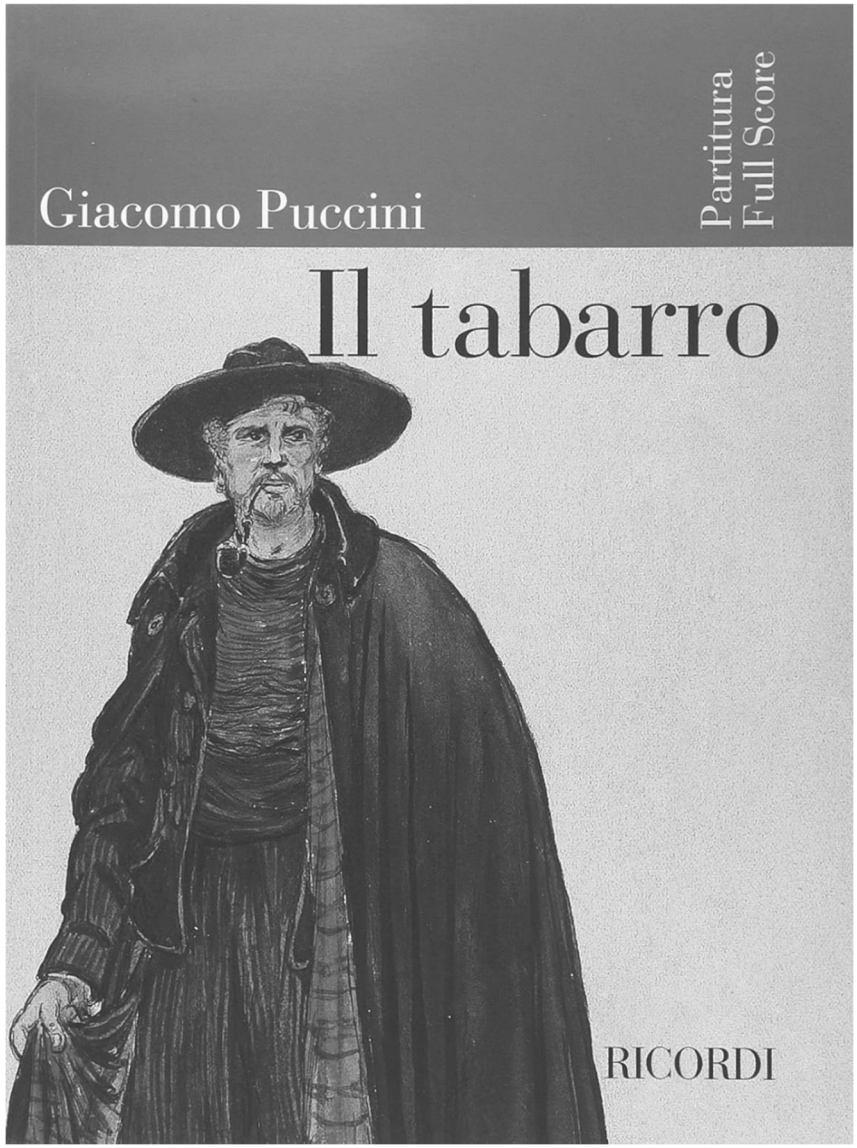
OPERA AND REAL LIFE



8. MURDER AFLOAT

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For more detail and different images, see the class website:

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MURDER AFLOAT

The idea that opera could depict real life suddenly came to the fore in the early 1890s, with the premieres of Mascagni's *Cavalleria Rusticana* (1890) and Leoncavallo's *I Pagliacci* (1892), both featuring common people in the South of Italy and their supposed propensity for violence. The movement, which had literary parallels as well, was known as ***verismo***—reality. Giacomo Puccini's *La bohème* (1896) is often lumped in with the same school, as it deals with impoverished artists in a Paris garret. There were musical similarities, undoubtedly, but *Bohème* has no violence (though plenty of pathos). His next opera, *Tosca* (1900), is most certainly violent, though its protagonists are far from peasants. In the works that followed, Puccini showed a interest in exotic color and romance that took him far from *verismo* territory, despite his musical affinities.

It was not until 1918, long after the movement had run its course, that Puccini produced an opera that fulfilled all the old *verismo* tenets. This was *Il tabarro* (The Cloak), a melodrama set on a barge on the Seine, whose characters all come from the working class, and whose passions lead inexorably to shocking violence. In making this the focus of today's class, we shall find that it is much more than melodrama, but a believable human story propelled by people whose feelings seem utterly real.

A. IN THE BACKGROUND

This opening section further develops the history summarized above, and introduces the opening scenes of *Il tabarro,* setting the stage for the three-person drama that will be the main subject of the class. 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.

[*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 a younger deckhand, **Luigi**, who was also born there. [*Shortly after this, the minor characters all leave, and we hear an anonymous young couple in the distance setting off on a date*.]

B. IN THE FOREGROUND

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. His declaration that he would cut her throat rather than see her in the arms of another man both terrifies and thrills her. 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*)