

# Novel into *Opera*



## 11. The Bohemian Life

Thursday, December 8, 2022

## The Bohemian Life

SOMETIME IN 1893, the composer **Ruggiero Leoncavallo** (1857–1919), buoyed by his triumph with *I Pagliacci*, started writing a libretto based on *Scènes de la vie de bohème*, a set of stories by **Henry Murger** (1822–61), published in book form in 1851. Leoncavallo had been the first librettist on *Manon Lescaut* by **Giacomo Puccini** (1858–1924), and he now drew Puccini's attention to this new subject. Puccini was interested, but got his favored librettists, **Luigi Illica** and **Giuseppe Giacosa**, to put together a new version, quite different from Leoncavallo's, though ending similarly. Their opera premiered in 1896. Meanwhile, unknown to Puccini, Leoncavallo was setting his libretto himself. He waited until after Puccini's premiere to launch his opera, confident that it would blow his rival's effort out of the water. Despite early acclaim, it failed to do so.

A story of overconfidence and petty rivalry, perhaps, but it raises interesting questions about the role of the adaptor in opera. Leoncavallo was closer in spirit to the Murger original, but an esthetic that worked for a set of stories is not necessarily appropriate for the stage. Though departing from Murger in important respects, Puccini may in the end have been the more true to his legacy. *rb.*

### A. Henry Murger

The stories that comprise *Scènes de la vie de bohème* were published serially over the course of several years, and gathered together into a book in 1851. Before that, however, Murger collaborated with the playwright Théodore Barrière to make the stories into a play; this became the source for the final act in both composers' operas.

## C. Giacomo Puccini

Act 1: *the garret*. After bluffing their way out of paying rent, Rodolfo's friends leave him to work alone. **There is a knock on the door; it is their neighbor Mimì, begging a light for her candle.** The two try to prolong their encounter by introducing themselves, and at the end Rodolfo takes Mimì out to celebrate Christmas Eve.

Act 2: *the Café Momus*. **The streets are full of joyful crowds.** Musetta arrives on the arm of an elderly admirer; she taunts Marcello with jealousy; the two make up; and they land the admirer with the check.

Act 3: *winter dawn; the city walls*. Mimì comes in to consult Marcello; she is worried about Rodolfo. Marcello extracts the truth from him: that he is worried about Mimì's health and his inability to look after her. Mimì realizes she will have to leave and bids him a farewell with no hard feelings. **But he persuades her to wait until Spring. Their duet is interrupted by a slanging match between Musetta and Marcello.**

Act 4: *the garret*. Rodolfo and Marcello pretend they don't care that their lovers have left them, but they do. Their friends arrive with some food. **Suddenly Musetta enters with Mimì on the brink of death. The others go to fetch a doctor and raise money for medicines, leaving the lovers alone, to exchange memories of past times. The friends return, but it is too late; almost unnoticed, Mimì dies.**

— **Puccini: *La bohème***, excerpts as highlighted above

Studio-recorded film, 1965. Mirella Freni (Mimì), Adriana Martino (Musetta), Gianni Raimondi (Rodolfo), Rolando Panerai (Marcello); Herbert von Karajan (c), Franco Zeffirelli (d).

For materials used in each class, see the instructor's website:

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Murger wrote "Bohemia is a stage in the artistic life; it is the preface to the academy, the poorhouse, or the morgue." It is inhabited by young artists, poets, and musicians, whose aspirations, sufferings, and love-affairs fill the 22 chapters of the book. There is no narrative through-line, and no obvious heroes or heroines, although both composers focus on two couples: the painter Marcel and the singer Musette, and the poet Rodolfe and his lover Mimi, a seamstress.

## B. Ruggiero Leoncavallo

Act 1: *the Café Momus*. The friends gather to celebrate Christmas Eve. Mimi sings a song introducing Musette, and **Musetta in turn sings one about Mimi.** In a break between the courses of their meal (which is eventually paid for by a rich acolyte), **Marcello flirts with Musette.** All sing of the joy of Christmas.

Act 2: *a tenement courtyard*. Musette has been ejected from her room and her furniture is piled in the court. Nothing daunted, the Bohemians arrange it as an open-air *salon* to receive their guests, who arrive and sing **the "Bohemian Anthem."** **The rich Visconte Paolo offers Mimi a more luxurious life; but she fears it would break Rodolfo's heart.** Musette entertains the crowd in a waltz.

Act 3: *the garret shared by Marcello and Rodolfo*. **Musetta, who can no longer bear the sufferings of hunger and want, determines to leave Marcello. Mimì returns, missing Rodolfo's love. Musette tries in vain to dissuade her.** But when Marcello and Rodolfo return, they throw the women out. Marcello instantly regrets what he has done.

Act 4: *the garret*. On the brink of death, Mimì returns to Rodolfo, explaining that she has been in hospital. Musette sacrifices her jewels to procure fuel to warm the room. **But as the Christmas chimes are heard, Mimì dies.**

— **Leoncavallo: *La bohème***, excerpts as highlighte above

Vienna Klangboden, 2002. Katya Lytting (Musetta), Juanita Lascarro (Mimi), Mikhail Davidoff (Marcello), Vittorio Vitelli (Rodolfo); Marco Guidarini (c), Guy Joosten (d).