# Class 11: La vie de bohème

## A. Murger

1. Title Slide 1 (Death of Mimì in the Puccini opera)
2. Murger: *Scènes de la vie de bohème*, breakdown

The text we are going to look at today, is *Scenes de la vie de bohème* by **Henry Murger** (1822–61). This began life as a series of substantial short stories in a newspaper, finally published as a collection in 1851. No need to read the list on the right; the point I want to make is that only 8 chapters out of the 22 contain any of the plot material used in either of the two operas based on it, and most of that is only a small portion of those chapters.

3. Murger, Leoncavallo, and Puccini 1

The story of how the two operas got written rather more complicated than with last week's *Manon*. **Ruggiero Leoncavallo** (1857–1919) had been the first librettist of *Manon Lescaut* (1893) by **Giacomo Puccini** (1858–1924), but dropped the project. Sometime in 1893, buoyed by his new fame as the composer of *I pagliacci* the previous year, he started work on an adaptation of the Murger stories. A year later, for some reason he offered his libretto to Puccini. Puccini thanked him for the idea, but eventually gave the project to the two collaborators who had finally pulled *Manon Lescaut* together, **Luigi Illica** and **Giuseppe Giacosa**. Their opera, the familiar *La bohème*, premiered in 1896.

4. Murger, Leoncavallo, and Puccini 2

What Leoncavallo did not tell Puccini was that he was setting his own libretto himself! He was not in any particular hurry; he was convinced that he possessed the true spirit of *Bohème* and that his version would easily eclipse that of his rival. It premiered a year later (1897) in Venice, and was indeed a success. But posterity quickly showed its preference for the Puccini, and so it has remained.

5. Murger, Leoncavallo, and Puccini 3 (animated)

And here's the issue. If you look at the Leoncavallo through the lens of the Puccini, it is a failure. But in its own terms, it is a lot more faithful to the spirit of Murger's original, and is a work that contains many fine things. My task today is: (a) to demonstrate this in the first hour, but (b) also to show in the second that fidelity to the original is not necessarily the most important thing. My problem—other than the uphill battle of preaching a heretic gospel to probable Puccini-lovers—is that there is only a very poor-quality video of the Leoncavallo, and it does not have titles. So I have had to add my own, *and* translate the text first! All the same, I'm afraid the Leoncavallo will start with a double disadvantage, in that I can't show it in so compelling a way.

# B. Leoncavallo

The one place where the two operas come at all close to one another is in the final scene, in which the leading character Mimì, mortally ill with consumption, returns to her former lover Rodolfo and dies in his apartment. I will bookend the class between the two versions, showing the last 4 minutes of the Leoncavallo now, and the equivalent part of the Puccini at the end of the class.

6. Leoncavallo: *La bohème*, end of Act IV
7. — last page of the vocal score

Here is the music of this. Both Leoncavallo and Puccini knew the value of quoting tunes from earlier in the opera for emotional effect. The first one here comes from the finale to Act I, celebrating Christmas. The second is the coda to the aria that ends Act III, in which a character despairs over the loss of his lover, who has left him. But neither of these is peculiar to Mimì or her lover Rodolfo. The first is a chorus sung by everyone onstage; the second belongs to the aria sung by Marcello about the loss of Musette. In fact, Mimì and Rodolfo are not the two main characters in this opera; they are merely the ones who end it. The tenor is Marcello, and the leading female role without question is Musette. I'm going to play you two excerpts from Act I: first, the little aria in which Musette introduces Mimì; and then the little duet that Musette sings with Marcello, who is rather tipsy. Afterwards I'll ask you what you think of the style.

8. Leoncavallo: *La bohème*, Act I, "Mimì Pinson la biodinetta"
9. Leoncavallo: *La bohème*, Act I, Marcello/Musette duet
10. — still from the above

What did you think of the style? It's very light, isn't it? Especially in the duet, I found myself thinking of Viennese operetta—and indeed Leoncavallo went on to write operettas later in his career. He was an excellent tunesmith. Puccini might write the better arias, but Leoncavallo excelled at tunes, of the kind that come in four-line structures and would work independently of their dramatic context. Musette's aria about Mimì (which is cut down to almost nothing here), is a good example. But it tells us a lot more about Musette than it does about Mimì, doesn't it? [Made even more by this director's inexplicable decision not to make her a *biondinetta*—little blonde—but a brunette!]

11. Murger: *Scènes de la vie de bohème*, breakdown (repeat)

So was Leoncavallo out of his mind to make an opera about one couple only to end it with the tragedy of another? Remember the chapter index I showed you at the beginning? I picked out some episodes that provided fragments of the plot for one composer or the other. But I think Leoncavallo was less interested in this than in treating Murger's novel as a whole, going for its color and texture rather than focusing solely on individuals.

12. — the same, transformed

In this view, the characters are fungible; it doesn't much matter which woman dies. A loss to one lover is a loss to all of them, and the random death of one woman only goes to show that death waits equally

capriciously for any of them. I don't think this works in the theater; we tend to focus on individuals rather than the undifferentiated mass. But I don't think it an insane goal either.

13. Summary of Act Two

I'll illustrate a little of this in a scene from Act Two. Musette has been evicted; all her furniture is piled in the courtyard. Nonetheless, as she is expecting guests, her friends arrange the furniture so the courtyard becomes her "salon." [Such madcap improvisation is absolutely true to the spirit of the Murger.] The guests arrive, and all sing the Hymn of Bohemian Life; this is where my clip will begin. Almost at once, we plunge into an ensemble in which Mimì receives an offer from Viscount Paolo. She agonizes that it would break Rodolfo's heart, but she will go with the Viscount anyway. Theirs are the only lines I will translate, but there are others—and had we time, we would see the build into a larger ensemble still. I would also have you note what lovely music Leoncavallo gives the Viscount to sing. Puccini would have saved it for one of his major characters; he would also have pulled Mimì's agonizing into focus, not buried it in an ensemble. But at this stage in his opera, Leoncavallo is not ready to use the spotlight so selectively.

14. Leoncavallo: *La bohème*, Act II, hymn and ensemble
15. Summary of Act III

The last scene I want to play is a much longer one. It comes from Act Three, in which the tone changes entirely, becoming more genuinely tragic, although it is still focused on the Musette/Marcello relationship rather than the Mimì/Rodolfo one. Musette has been living with Marcello in poverty for some time. She still loves him, but feels the need to leave and make her own way. This is not because she has had a more lucrative offer, but for altruistic reasons. In this she is unlike Mimì. And unlike Manon Lescaut either, although she is also leaving a man whom she truly loves. And I cannot help feeling that Leoncavallo had Massenet's farewell scene in mind when writing his own; the two composers wrote to one another. She is about to leave when Mimì arrives. The ensuing duet between them is very fine, and Mimì's passionate lyricism does much to prepare her to be the tragic heroine of Act IV, though not quite enough.

16. Leoncavallo: *La bohème*, Act III, Musette's farewell and scene with Mimì
17. Leoncavallo CD cover

# C. Puccini

### 18. Section title (original staging of *La bohème*)

Fungibility of characters notwithstanding, why did **Leoncavallo** end an opera about Marcello and Musette with a tragic death ending the relationship of quite a different couple? Partly because Mimì's is the only death that Murger gives us—albeit alone in a hospital bed ten days after the reunion with Rodolfe—and partly because when **Murger** collaborated with **Théodore Barrière** to turn the series into a play in 1849, this was what they chose for their final scene.

### 19. NYCO poster by Rafal Oblinsky

So **Puccini**, **Illica**, and **Giocosa** were pretty much locked in. But they came to the logical conclusion that an opera that ends with a woman's tragic death must surely have that woman as the leading character from the very beginning. But this involved two rather radical steps. First, to fill in aspects of the story and back-story that Murger does not give. Second, to prune away everything that might detract from the central couple. This required making Marcello a secondary character (the baritone rather than the tenor), but also making Musetta, in terms of stage time, a tertiary one; her scenes are zingers, but she has barely twenty minutes on stage in all. It also required cutting out a lot of the connective tissue; I can think of no other opera where so much happens between the acts that is implied, but not spelled out.

### 20. Comparison of Murger, Barrière, Leoncavallo, and Puccini

Here is a comparison of major stages in the Rodolfo/Mimì story in the various versions. Working from the bottom up, here are the differences:

DEATH. Mimì dies alone in hospital in the original book, but Murger and Barrière show her death onstage in the play, and both composers follow suit. The only significant difference is that Leoncavallo has her spend time in hospital first, while Puccini makes no mention of it.

SEPARATION. All the relationships are on-and-off-again in the novel and play; I can't say I have followed the details. We have already seen Mimì being seduced by Visconte Paolo on the fringes of Leoncavallo's Act II, and her failed attempt to return to Rodolfo in Act III. Puccini will put all this *between* the acts; we will see more in a moment.

MEETING. In the book and play, Rodolfo is evicted from his room which the landlord then rents to Mimì. He returns to find her already installed, but she takes pity on him and invites him to stay. There is no mention of any of this in the Leocavallo, but Puccini's librettists invent an entirely different scenario. Rodolfo is alone in his room working, when there is a knock on the door. It is his neighbor Mimì, begging a light for her candle.

Let's watch it now. I am showing it in a 1965 film by **Franco Zeffirelli**, with **Gianni Raimondi** and **Mirella Freni**, because it is straightforward, it has titles, and won't make too big a contrast with the Leocavallo.

### 21. Puccini: *La bohème*, Act I, the entrance of Mimì
### 22. — still from the above

All this is entirely made up by the librettists. Rodolfo continues with his well-known aria, and Mimì replies with her equally well-known one. The *situation* is made up, but most of the information they divulge about themselves—for example that Mimì is a seamstress who loves embroidering flowers—comes from here and there in the novel.

As we have seen, Leoncavallo spends the better part of two acts establishing the general mood of madcap gaiety associated with Murger's Bohemians. The Puccini team is much tighter. They handle this by including a certain amount of undergraduate hijinks in the first and fourth acts before matters get too serious; these are my least favorite pages in the opera. They also insert a brilliant but short Act II in which the friends go out on the town to the **Café Momus**. Here the gaiety is not created by the Bohemians, but by the people of the *quartier* in holiday mood. But the young people fit right in. I am interested, though, in how realistic and comparatively subdued Zeffirelli is on film, compared with the over-the-top theatricality of his stage production at the Met; I'll put a link on the website.

23. Puccini: *La bohème*, Act II, opening
24. Act II at the Met

In the novel, **Mimì** accepts the **Visconte's** proposition because she needs the money; we have seen this happening in the Leoncavallo, albeit only as part of a larger ensemble. Puccini's librettists orginally planned **an additional act** in which this would be spelled out, but Puccini declined to set it. As a result, we start Act III, in a bleak wintry atmosphere, not knowing what has happened since the end of the previous act, and we will end it in a similar limbo. It gradually becomes clear that all is not well between **Mimì** and **Rodolfo**. She is sick, and he does not have the money to care for her—but they are clearly still very much in love. She tells him she will have to leave, but he persuades her to stay until the Spring. This is the material for their part in the wonderfully lyrical **quartet** that concludes the act. Quartet, because their duet it set against a hammer-and-tongs fight between **Marcello** and **Musetta**; her part may be small, but Puccini compensates by making it fiery!

25. Puccini: *La bohème*, Act III, ending
26. — still from the above

There is a further ellipsis before Act IV begins. **Mimì** has presumably gone to the **Visconte**; **Musetta** has also walked out on **Marcello**; both men pretend they don't care, but they do. Their two friends **Schaunard** and **Colline** come in with a small windfall of food, and they celebrate the banquet with more of the frat-boy antics I could well do without. Then **Musetta** enters with a very sick **Mimì**; this is where we shall start if we have time. If not, I'll cut past the rather sentimental aria that **Colline** sings about selling his old coat to get money for medicine, and pick it up after all have left the room except for Rodolfo and Mimì. While Leoncavallo had kept the death scene relatively free of sentiment, Puccini pours on the lyricism with their duet. This is a new melody, interspersed with touching reminiscences of their old music, much as Leoncavallo had done, but much more effectively, since this is music unforgettably associated with *them*.

Puccini has one more marvelous dramatic stroke. Nobody on stage sees exactly when Mimì dies, and when the others notice, they try to keep it from Rodolfo. It is a brilliant piece of stagecraft in the hands of a master dramatist!

27. Puccini: *La bohème,* Act IV, entrance of Mimì
28. Puccini: *La bohème,* Act IV, duet and ending
29. Ending title