

PROBLEM OPERAS SOLVED



"At last I have seen my true *Fanciulla!*" Puccini on Gilda della Rizza, 1921

11. PUCCINI GOES WEST

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ON 10 DECEMBER 1910, the Metropolitan Opera in New York presented its first-ever world premiere. The composer, **Giacomo Puccini** (1858–1924), was the reigning King of Italian Opera. The story was by **David Belasco** (1853–1931), the most successful playwright on Broadway at the time, one of whose many dozen plays had already been adapted by the composer as the wildly successful *Madama Butterfly*. And this one, *The Girl of the Golden West* in Belasco's title or *La fanciulla del West* in Puccini's, even had an American setting: a mining-camp saloon in the California Gold Rush of 1849.

Puccini was the last great exponent of the *verismo* movement (realist detail edited for emotional effect). Were American audiences then as prepared to see *verismo* techniques applied to their own country as to, say, Sicily or Japan? And what problems might this approach have for audiences today? *rb.*

ACT ONE

Inside the *Polka*, a mining-camp saloon in the California gold rush of 1849; the first 15 minutes of the opera are a medley of small events. Various miners enter in boisterous mood; some ask the bartender **Nick** how they stand in the affections of the owner, Minnie, and celebrate accordingly; the sad song of a balladeer makes one miner homesick and the others have a whip-round for his passage home; another miner cheats at cards and is ostracized by the sheriff, **Jack Rance**. A Wells Fargo agent tells of the sighting of a notorious bandit, **Ramirez**. An outbreak of fighting is quelled by the arrival of **Minnie**; when things settle down she resumes her Bible-reading lessons for the miners.

- **Act 1: opening sequence**

— plus trailer from Christof Loy production in Sweden

[In the second half of the act, Minnie refuses a proposal from Jack Rance, who is married already. A mysterious stranger arrives, calling himself **Dick Johnson**; Minnie has met him before and they remember each other, but it is soon clear to the audience that he is **Ramirrez** himself, come to rob the saloon. But striking a bond with Minnie, he deliberately passes up on the opportunity.]

ACT TWO

[As her native American servant **Wowkle** helps her get ready for an expected visit by Dick Johnson, Minnie confesses that she has never been kissed.] And indeed when Johnson does attempt to kiss her, she gently resists. Instead, she tells him about her life and they recall their earlier meeting. He is just about to leave when it begins to snow. It is fate; she falls into his arms and invites him to stay the night.

- **Act 2: central scenes**

[Sheriff Rance is heard arriving with a posse. Minnie tells Johnson to hide while she lets them in. When she learns of their discovery that "Dick Johnson" is actually Ramirrez, she keeps quiet...] but turns angrily on the man once they have gone and drives him out of the house. Then hearing a shot, she goes out to find Johnson wounded and hides him in her attic when Sheriff Rance returns. Not finding any sign of his quarry, Rance tries to take advantage of Minnie, until his attention is distracted by blood dripping from the ceiling. Desperate, Minnie challenges him to a game of poker, the stakes being Ramirrez' freedom if she wins, and herself if she loses. She does win (by cheating) and Rance leaves her alone with the wounded man.

- **Act 2: ending**

ACT THREE

[Some months later. Ramirrez has recovered and is now back to his old trade of robbery. Jack Rance and some of the men are on a midnight stakeout, but he is caught by another group, who deliver him to the Sheriff for justice.] The crowd becomes a lynch mob, accusing their captive of various murders, which he vigorously denies though admitting to the robberies. He says that he is prepared to die, but has one last request: that Minnie should never know of his capture and death, but instead believe that he is living somewhere far away in freedom. They take him to the gallows and put the rope around his neck when Minnie herself arrives, gun in hand....

- **Act 3: almost complete**

Puccini: *La fanciulla del West*. Metropolitan Opera 2010 (DVD).

Deborah Voigt (Millie), Marcello Giordani (Dick Johnson / Ramirrez),
Lucio Gallo (Jack Rance); Nicola Luisotti (c), Giancarlo del Monaco (d)

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

<http://www.brunyate.com/problem-operas/>

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