

Lyric Opera of Kansas City
presents an in-depth guide
to Giacomo Puccini's

A decorative graphic featuring a lit candle with a flame, a key, and floral motifs. The background is a sepia-toned map of a city, likely Florence, with various streets and buildings visible. The entire graphic is framed by ornate, swirling blue and black lines. The title "LA BOHEME" is written in a large, black, serif font across the center of the graphic.

LA
BOHEME

Forever Young

An in-depth guide to Giacomo
Puccini's *La bohème* by Stu Lewis
of the Lyric Opera Guild

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INTRODUCTION

“Il conto! Così presto?” (“The bill! So soon?”) The four “Bohemian” roommates have been enjoying Christmas Eve in the Latin Quarter, thanks to an unexpected financial windfall, but they have spent so much money with the various street vendors that they have none left to pay for dinner. No problem, Musetta tells them; her elderly suitor will take care of it. Rent, bar-tabs – these are not the concerns of the young.

While *La bohème* is often seen as a romance, the opera’s real subject is youth itself: the time that so many people over thirty look back on in amazement, wondering how they could be so happy with so little money to their name. There is comedy in this opera, not because the writers need to add “comic relief” but rather because in one’s twenties the very essence of life is comic. There is also tragedy, but it is tragedy suffused with the glow of nostalgia, as described in William Saroyan’s *The Human Comedy*, “The evil color of wrong had been lost in the bright color of right, and together they had become a color more beautiful than the color of right alone.”

The fallacy of youthful thinking is the illusion that youth can go on forever. Bob Dylan once wrote of his own youth, “With haunted hearts through the heat and the cold/We never thought we could get very old/We thought we could live forever in fun...” Colline’s tearful farewell to his coat in Act IV is touching because he is bidding farewell not only to an object, but to an era of his life.

La bohème may be set in the 1830’s, but Puccini certainly was thinking of his own student days when he composed it; the brief musical motif which is associated with the “Bohemian” life was taken from a piece he wrote as a student. Today’s audiences do not need a stage director’s updating of the setting to put themselves into the action and to realize that it is a reminder of the time when their own lives were devoted to friendship, love, laughter, and the belief in endless possibilities – and of *il conto*, which invariably comes too soon.

CHARACTERS

Rodolfo (roh-DOLL-foh), tenor. A poet

Marcello (mar-CHELL-oh), baritone. A painter

Colline (kol-LEE-nay), bass. A philosopher

Schaunard (sho-NAR), baritone. A musician

Benoit (ben-WA), bass. Landlord

Mimi (mee-MEE), soprano. A seamstress

Parpignol (par-pin-YOL), tenor. A toy vendor

Musetta (moo-ZET-tah), soprano. An entertainer

Alcindoro (al-chin-DO-roh), bass. An elderly “admirer” of Musetta

Customs Officer, bass.

Sergeant, bass.

Child, treble.

Students, townsfolk, shopkeepers, street vendors, soldiers, and waiters

THE STORY

Puccini was to a great extent influenced by the German composer Richard Wagner, which can be felt in this opera in two ways: (1) the use of the orchestra to carry the melody and (2) the use of the leitmotiv (leading motive), in which given musical phrases are assigned to particular characters, places, or situations.

The action of the opera occurs over a period of several months in the 1830's in Paris, France.

ACT I: Christmas Eve: A garret

As is typical of Puccini, there is no overture. The curtain opens on the garret (attic apartment) shared by the four "Bohemians": Marcello, Rodolfo, Colline, and Schaunard. The orchestra sounds the theme which will be associated with the "Bohemian" lifestyle. Marcello and Rodolfo are alone in the apartment. Marcello expresses the frustration he is feeling with the progress of his painting of the Red Sea, as Rodolfo looks out at the chimneys of Paris and complains about the idleness of their stove, which sits quiet like a *grand seigneur* (grand lord). His fragmentary aria "Nei cieli bigi" introduces the musical theme which will characterize him throughout the opera. Marcello suggests using a chair for firewood, but Rodolfo offers the manuscript of his play instead. As the blaze provides some scant heat, Colline enters, complaining of his unsuccessful attempt to pawn some of his possessions. Two more acts of Rodolfo's play are tossed into the fireplace, and a lively melody in the orchestra depicts the fire (one might hear in this music a faint reference to the fire music of Wagner's *Die Walküre*). Comically, they discuss the fire as if they were critiquing the play itself, and as the fire subsides, Colline and Marcello shout, "Down with the author."

A reprieve from their misery is not far away, however. Introduced by his own theme, Schaunard enters with two boys carrying firewood, food, and a handful of coins. He explains to his roommates how he acquired this windfall. A wealthy man had hired Schaunard to play the piano until his parrot died, and the musician cleverly convinced the maid to speed the process by poisoning the bird. His three roommates, however, ignore him as they prepare to devour the food. Not so fast, he tells them – on Christmas Eve in Paris, one must dine out. Introducing the Latin Quarter theme (which will be heard in several variations in later acts), he describes the delights that await them there.

Before they can depart, there is a knock on the door. It is the landlord, Benoit, who has come to collect the overdue rent. Puccini achieves a comic effect here with orchestral music that in a deliberately exaggerated manner suggests high tragedy. The elderly landlord, however, is no match for the four young men, who feign friendliness and trick him into bragging about his probably non-existent love affairs. When Benoit mentions that he is married, they pretend to be offended by his infidelity and throw him out of the apartment, without having collected the rent.

With that hurdle out of the way, the roommates prepare to leave for a night on the town, but Rodolfo says he needs a few minutes to finish an article he is writing. The others depart, saying they will wait for him downstairs. Suddenly, there is a knock on the door, and introduced by her theme in the orchestra, Mimi enters, asking Rodolfo to light her candle, which has burned out. She is clearly in poor health, and she loses consciousness, but Rodolfo revives her with some water. Once revived, she departs, but she returns a moment later, having noticed that she has lost her key. Rodolfo purposely blows out his candle, and the two begin crawling on the floor in the dark to look for the key. Rodolfo quickly finds it, but wanting to prolong Mimi's visit, he pockets it. As the two continue searching, their hands touch.

What follows is some of the most glorious romantic music ever composed. In the aria "Che gelida manina," Rodolfo comments on the coldness of Mimì's hand, and as he holds it, he proceeds to tell her his life story, describing how, despite his poverty, he lives like a *grand seigneur* (echoing his earlier description of the stove), and how her beautiful eyes have given him new dreams. This aria is remarkable in that it starts in a conversational tone (the first nine notes are a monotone) and builds to a crescendo with an optional high C (which most tenors take advantage of) on the word *speranza* (hope). Note how the "Nei cieli bigi" theme is incorporated into this aria. He then asks Mimì about herself. She replies with the aria "Mi chiamano Mimì" (They call me Mimì), built on the theme with which she was introduced when she entered the apartment. The structure of the aria helps depict her personality. Whereas Rodolfo's music suggested confidence and bravado, Mimì's is full of starts and stops as she describes her life as a seamstress and maker of artificial flowers. She even pauses at one point to ask Rodolfo if he is following her. As she sings of the "first kiss of April," she seems to gain confidence, but then she becomes suddenly self-conscious, and the aria ends with the opera's one line of pure recitative (sung speech, such as that used by Mozart), as if to suggest her sense of embarrassment at being so forward.

The mood is broken momentarily by Rodolfo's friends, who shout their impatience from below. He tells them that he is not alone, and that they should go ahead to the café.

Three descending chords tell us all we need to know about the couple's feelings. They sing a beautiful duet "O soave fanciulla" (O lovely girl), but after reaching a crescendo, the music ebbs to a quiet encounter between the two. Mimì hints that she would like to join Rodolfo and his friends. When he suggests that they remain in the apartment, she hints that after enjoying a meal together they might experience intimacy. As romantic as the music is, Rodolfo's

controlling nature – which will become significant later in the opera – becomes evident in two ways. He extracts a declaration of love from her, and the music of this part of the duet echoes Rodolfo's aria, not hers, as if he is bringing her into his domain. Nevertheless, the act ends with the two leaving arm in arm, singing softly of love.

ACT II: Later that evening, the Latin Quarter

As the curtain opens on the bustling Latin Quarter, the horns sound the Latin Quarter theme that Schaunard introduced in the first act. Some critics have commented on the apparent inconsistency of the fact that the people who a moment ago were complaining of the cold choose to spend the evening in an outdoor café. One biographer has commented that Puccini may have modeled the scene on his own home town of Lucca, Italy, where the weather on Christmas Eve was generally warm enough that one could enjoy outdoor activities.

The first half of this act is all atmosphere. Street vendors sell their wares, a chorus of children follow the toy vendor Parpignol, followed by their angry mothers, and a young child whines about the toys he wants. The four roommates go on a shopping spree with Schaunard's generous sharing of his windfall. Schaunard buys a horn; Colline, who has visited a barber, now buys a coat (which will figure in the action later on) and a book; Rodolfo buys a bonnet for Mimì; and Marcello looks for a young woman to spend money on. Ominously, Rodolfo complains about the attention Mimì is supposedly paying to other men.

Rodolfo introduces Mimì to his friends in a brief fragment of an aria, explaining that he is the poet and she is the poetry, and the five settle in at a table at the Café Momus (which was an actual establishment at the time the opera takes place).

The relative tranquility of the scene is broken by the entrance of Marcello's on-again, off-again love interest Musetta, with her old but wealthy "admirer" Alcindoro in tow. (As if to imply that to the Bohemians all members of the older generation are essentially the same, many directors have the same singer portray Alcindoro and Benoit). She proceeds to embarrass her escort by calling him by the pet name "Lulu." Marcello, in a jealous rage, describes her (beginning with a variation of the lilting theme which will be associated with her) as a "bird of prey." He pretends not to notice her, so Musetta forces the issue by making a scene, complaining about a supposedly dirty plate and smashing it on the ground. Alcindoro tries in vain to silence her, as Colline and Schaunard sit back to enjoy the comedy. Rodolfo stuns Mimì by telling her that he would never forgive such behavior from her (remember, this is their first date). Mimì, in turn, sympathizes with Musetta, recognizing that despite her apparent gaiety she is really unhappy and still loves Marcello.

Musetta then sings one of Puccini's most famous arias, "Quando me'n vo" (When I wander). Since there would be no occasion for her to give a speech at this point, some directors stage this as an actual song being sung for the patrons; we learn later that Musetta is, among other things, a professional singer. While sopranos often include this aria in recitals, only the first verse and the bridge are actually a solo; during the next verse, the others provide a running commentary, in effect turning the aria into an ensemble.

Having attracted Marcello's attention, Musetta now looks for a way to ditch Alcindoro. She feigns a sudden foot pain, complaining that her shoe is too tight, and she raises her skirt (much to Alcindoro's embarrassment) to take off the offending shoe; Alcindoro leaves to find a new pair of shoes for her. Marcello is helplessly smitten. "Youth is not ended," he proclaims, reprising a verse of the aria, accompanied by Musetta's fake screams of pain, and as the melody dies out, the two fall into each other's arms.

Now comes the reality check alluded to earlier, the bill that none of them have saved enough money to pay. Musetta rescues them by telling the waiter that Alcindoro will pay it when he returns. As if the scene did not already contain enough chaos, a military band comes marching down the street, followed by a group of children who enjoy marching along with the soldiers. The Bohemians lift the shoeless Musetta onto their shoulders, and they manage to get lost in the crowd. Alcindoro returns, and when he is confronted with the bill he collapses into his chair in time with the concluding chords of one of the most joyous and most chaotic acts in all of opera.

***ACT III: A tollgate on the outskirts of town, outside a tavern:
two months later***

Puccini was associated with the *verismo* school of composition, which focused on continuous melody rather than “set pieces.” Nowhere was that ideal more perfectly realized than in this act, in which a chorus, duet, trio, aria, duet, and quartet flow seamlessly into each other.

Even though we have been away for an intermission, Puccini still felt the need to change the mood from the gaiety of the previous act, which he does with two thundering chords. A staccato melody on the harps and flutes, possibly a variation of the Latin Quarter theme, depicts the snowy tableau. A contingent of street-sweepers signal to the guards that they want to pass through the gate. Voices are heard from the tavern, including that of Musetta, who reinforces the languid mood of the scene with a slow reprise of the first line of “Quando me’n vo.” Other tradesmen call to the guards for admission and proceed down the street.

Mimi’s theme is heard in the orchestra, and she enters, asking for Marcello’s whereabouts, and the latter is summoned from the tavern. (We later learn that he has been painting murals there and Musetta has been giving voice lessons to the customers.) In an impassioned duet, she begs

Marcello for his help, describing how Rodolfo's jealousy has torn them apart. Marcello tells her that Rodolfo arrived at the tavern early that morning. Seeing him emerging from the tavern, Marcello tells Mimì to hide, which she does.

As the orchestra plays his theme, Rodolfo enters. He tells Marcello of Mimì's flirtatious behavior, but soon the real reason for the couple's separation comes out: Rodolfo has been unable to cope with Mimì's illness, which he believes to be terminal. Mimì, who did not realize the seriousness of her condition, overhears him, and as the two men lament Mimì's fate, she joins her voice to theirs, confronting her own mortality. Her sobs and coughing attract the attention of Rodolfo, who tries to console her by telling her he may have exaggerated his description of her condition. Musetta's theme accompanies her offstage laughter, and Marcello, wondering whom she is laughing with, rushes into the tavern to confront her.

Mimì then turns to Rodolfo and sings the tender aria "Addio, senza rancor" (Goodbye, without rancor). The orchestration behind her singing is remarkable, in that as she sings a melody new to the opera, the accompaniment is based on her theme and other components of the music which accompanied her first-act aria, so that their farewell contains memories of their first meeting. Only as the aria reaches its conclusion does the orchestra take up the new melody.

In a tender duet, Rodolfo and Mimì reflect on everything they are leaving behind, and as they do, they decide to stay together at least until spring. In the meantime, Marcello and Musetta emerge from the tavern embroiled in one of their endless lovers' quarrels, the voices of their bickering mingling with the tender expressions of love of the other couple, effectively creating a quartet. At the end, Rodolfo and Mimì are left alone on stage, and they exit singing quietly together, much as they did in Act I (listen for the first four notes of the Bohemian theme in the

background, played softly on the oboe). But this act does not foreshadow a happy ending, which Puccini tells us by concluding the act with the mood-changing chords with which the act began.

ACT IV: The garret: a few months later

The final act of the opera contains many parallels to the first. The setting is the same; in both acts Rodolfo and Marcello are alone on stage at the beginning and are then joined by the other two roommates and later by Mimì.

The act opens with the now-familiar Bohemians theme. Rodolfo and Marcello are in mid conversation. Each has seen the other's love interest in the company of another man, and though they pretend not to care, both are affected by the news. The two join their voices in a duet, expressing their longing for their lost romances. It is interesting to note that whereas throughout much of the opera the music depicting the relationship between Rodolfo and Mimì has been more romantic and serious than that assigned to the other pair, in this duet there is no difference between the feelings of the two men.

To the music of Schaunard's theme, the musician enters with Colline. As in Act I, they have food with them, but the dinner will be much more sparse – some bread and a single herring. With mock gentility, the four sit down to eat. Soon, they are engaged in the sort of horseplay only young people would think of – dancing together (Marcello, taking the woman's part, even sings a line in a falsetto voice) and a mock duel with fireplace implements.

Suddenly, the mood changes. Musetta barges in and tells the men that Mimì is with her but is still outside the room, exhausted from climbing the stairs. Whereas in Act I, the mood change (with Benoit's entrance) was ironic, here it is serious. As Mimì is helped to enter, we hear her theme with some flatted notes. Musetta explains that Mimì had left

her rich lover and now wishes to return to the man she really loves before she dies. Mimì complains that her hands are freezing (echoing Rodolfo's first-act aria). As Musetta's theme is heard in the orchestra, Mimì tells Marcello that Musetta is really a good person. Musetta takes off her earrings and offers them to Marcello to pay for Mimì's medications and a doctor, and the two leave, Musetta saying that she will buy Mimì a muff. (Puccini scholar John Louis Digaetani has suggested that the desperate search for medicine reflects Puccini's time rather than the time the opera takes place, when Mimì's disease – presumably tuberculosis – was incurable. He argues that there is a degree of social protest in the opera, criticizing the lack of health care for the poor.)

The scene falls quiet. Colline gazes at his favorite possession – his overcoat – and decides to pawn it to help the dying young woman. He sings the famous “coat aria” (“Vecchia zimarra”), recounting his relationship with the object. Though on the surface a song to an inanimate object should be a source of comedy, many people find this one of Puccini's most moving arias, perhaps because they realize, as was mentioned earlier, that the coat symbolizes the joys of the Bohemian life style. As if to reinforce this, at the conclusion of the aria the orchestra plays a sad five-note minor-key variation of the Latin Quarter theme. As he leaves, he encourages Schaunard to do the same so the lovers can have some private time alone.

Mimì now turns to Rodolfo, and in the aria “Sono andati?” (Are they gone?) she tells him she was faking sleep so they would be left alone. (Fans of the Broadway musical's may have a sense of déjà vu here, since Andrew Lloyd Weber lifted a nine-note phrase from this aria to use in the song “Point of No Return” from *Phantom of the Opera*). The two then reminisce about their first meeting, and for the first time Rodolfo sings a phrase of Mimì's music. Mimì lets Rodolfo know that she saw him hide her key. Schaunard and Musetta enter separately, each to subdued, slow versions of their

themes. Marcello enters with the medicine. As she becomes weaker, Mimì's voice becomes almost a monotone. Musetta gives Mimì a muff for her hands and begins to warm the medicine over a candle as she prays for Mimì's recovery. Colline enters with the money he received for his coat, but in the meantime Schaunard has noticed that Mimì is no longer breathing. To provide the most effective change of mood possible, Puccini stops the music altogether and inserts a few lines of spoken dialogue – the only such lines in the opera. Noticing that his friends are silent, Rodolfo suspects the worst, and Marcello's single word – *coraggio* – tells him all he needs to know. He rushes to Mimì's bedside shouting her name, as the orchestra thunders her "Sono andati" melody, followed, amazingly, by the five notes that followed the coat aria. In the words of opera critic M. Owen Lee, "he ends his opera with an orchestral reminiscence of something that quietly symbolizes the opera's real theme: the artist's life, the sacrifices an artist makes, and the humanity he learns as he lives *La bohème*."

GIACOMO PUCCINI

Giacomo Puccini was born in 1858 in the Tuscan village of Lucca, Italy. While he came from a long line of musicians, he was the first in his family to become involved in secular rather than church music. He first encountered opera when he walked seven hours to sneak into a performance of *Aida*. Recognized early in life for his musical talent, he studied composition formally for several years while living a Bohemian existence reminiscent of the characters in *La bohème*. During these years he developed close friendships with two other composers who were also to have a lasting impact on the direction opera was to take after Verdi – Leoncavallo and Mascagni – and he shared a room with the latter for a number of years.

Though he occasionally wrote other forms of music, Puccini is known almost exclusively today for his operas, numbering twelve in all. He began his career with *Le villi* in 1884, which he initially entered in a contest sponsored by the publishing house of Sonzogno. Losing that contest may have been the luckiest break of his life, for it brought him in touch with the rival publisher Giulio Ricordi, who was to play a critical role in shepherding Puccini's career. While *Le villi* is rarely performed today, it was popular enough to mark Puccini as a composer to be watched.

Edgar (1889) was somewhat a step backward, as some beautiful music was overshadowed by an awkward libretto. The composer, however, turned this into a valuable learning experience, and throughout his life he demonstrated an obsessive concern with finding the best subjects for his future operatic projects. One biographer has commented that he rarely read a book or attended a play unless he was examining it as a potential subject for a future opera. The downside of this concern was a vast number of aborted projects, perhaps explaining Puccini's relatively small operatic output; of his dozen operas, four consist of a single act each.

Puccini's first lasting triumph came in 1893 with *Manon Lescaut*. The audience especially loved the tenor arias which established the style that was to mark much of his later music, in which a free-flowing melody followed the text rather than fitting the text into pre-determined musical patterns.

While Puccini was looking for a subject for his next opera, his old friend Leoncavallo sent him a draft of a libretto for an opera based on Henri Murger's episodic novel *Scènes de la vie de Bohème*, suggesting a collaboration, but he returned the manuscript, possibly unread. Needless to say, Leoncavallo was furious when during a later meeting with Puccini, the latter told him of his interest in creating his own version of the work. Bitter words flew back and forth, but since the work had fallen into the public domain, both were free to pursue the project. "Let him write his version and I will write mine," Puccini declared; "the audience will decide." And indeed, they have. Leoncavallo's version, while it contains much beautiful music, is rarely performed today, while Puccini's is one of the most popular operas in the repertoire.

La bohème seems so flawless that it sometimes hard to believe the degree of acrimony which existed among the various members of the creative team. Two librettists worked on the project, dividing the labor much as today's Broadway shows often assign one writer to create the "book" while another composes the actual lyrics to the songs. Luigi Illica, who fulfilled the former function, frequently clashed with the composer and in at least one instance showed better dramatic instincts than did Puccini. In a letter to Giulio Ricordi, the publisher, Illica discussed the conflict over the final act: "[Puccini] wants to start [the act] with Mimì in bed and Rodolfo writing, seated at the little table.... That means Rodolfo and Mimì have never been separated! Well, with this we really no longer have *La bohème*; and beyond that, this is no longer Murger's Mimi! They fall in love, they argue, and then the little dressmaker dies. It is a pitiful story, but it is

not *La bohème!*” It would be far more effective, he argued, if Mimì were to find a wealthy lover but, when she realized she was dying, she would return to “a desolate and cold attic apartment, just so she can die in Rodolfo’s arms.” Fortunately, Ricordi had the patience to referee among the various warring factions, and the opera opened February 1, 1896 in Turin, to mixed reviews. The public, however, understood the opera better than the critics did, and it soon became an international success, particularly in the city of its locale, Paris, where the great French composer Claude Debussy exclaimed, “I know of no one who has described the Paris of that time as well as Puccini in *La bohème.*”

For his next project Puccini chose the popular drama *Tosca* (1900), conspiring with Ricordi to trick the less talented Franchetti into giving up the rights he had acquired to the play.

During a visit to England, Puccini, who was always in search of a new work to adapt, attended a performance of American playwright David Belasco’s *Madama Butterfly*, and while few biographers accept at face value Belasco’s account of Puccini embracing him after the show and begging for the rights to the story, it is true that the composer immediately began thinking of how he could adapt this drama – despite the fact that he did not know enough English to understand the dialogue. *Madama Butterfly* opened in 1904 to mostly unfavorable reviews, but after some considerable rewriting it eventually became one of the composer’s most popular works.

With Puccini’s reputation firmly established, *La fanciulla del West* (The Girl of the Golden West) (1910), also based on a Belasco play, was another triumph, though due to its more complex style of composition, it has unfortunately never achieved the lasting popular appeal of the three operas which preceded it. Based on his friendship with Franz Lehár, Puccini then considered composing a Viennese-style operetta, but writing songs joined by spoken

dialogue was not Puccini's style, and while *La rondine* (1917) has some features of operetta, it is nevertheless an opera. A year later this was followed by *Il trittico*, a compilation of three one-act operas: *Suor Angelica*, *Gianni Schicchi* (his one purely comic opera), and *Il tabarro*. *Turandot*, an ambitious mythological work expressing the redemptive power of love, was to be his crowning achievement, but his neglect of his health, in particular his chain smoking, caught up with him, and he died in 1924, leaving the third act incomplete. Franco Alfano dutifully used Puccini's sketches to complete the score. It was first performed in 1926, though as a memorial to Puccini, the conductor Toscanini chose to omit Alfano's conclusion at the world premiere.

THE WRITERS

Henri Murger (1822-1861), writer of the book on which the opera is based, lived his entire life in Paris. After working for a period of time in a law office, he decided to make writing a full-time career, editing a fashion magazine and contributing to trade journals. Today he is remembered almost exclusively for *Scènes de la vie de bohème*, the episodic “novel” upon which the opera is based. The book first appeared in serial form in the late 1840’s, and it became famous when he turned it into a play in 1849. The success of the play enabled Murger to escape the “Bohemian” poverty in which he had been living, and he was able to continue to write for a living until his death from a sudden illness at the age of 39.

Luigi Illica (1857-1919), a sailor in his early years, became one of the major literary figures of his day. He wrote thirty-five librettos, for a variety of composers, and was known for a straightforward style that was perfectly suited for the *verisimo* (realistic) style which dominated the Italian opera of his day. In addition to *La bohème*, he also worked with Puccini on *Manon Lescaut*, *Tosca*, and *Madama Butterfly*. He was also responsible for the libretto for Giordano’s *Andrea Chénier*, which, unlike most operas of the time, was an original play and not an adaptation.

Giuseppe Giacosa (1847-1906) was educated as a lawyer and worked in that capacity until the success of one of his plays convinced him that he could write full time. He collaborated with Puccini and Illica on *Madama Butterfly* and *Tosca*, as well as *La bohème*. He was one of the leading playwrights of his day. Nicknamed “the Buddha” because of his calm personality, he successfully kept the other members of the creative team working together despite the numerous disagreements they encountered along the way. After Giacosa’s death, Puccini turned elsewhere for his librettos, feeling that Illica was not capable of writing sufficiently high caliber works on his own.

MURGER AND *LA VIE DE BOHÈME*

The term “Bohemian” in Murger’s writings and in this opera refers not to a geographical location but rather to a particular life-style, based on the rejection of material wealth in favor of creativity and personal freedom. While Murger did not originate the term, he was largely responsible for popularizing it. For him, it was unique to Paris.

Far from glamorizing the idea of dropping out of society, Murger saw Bohemianism as a necessary phase in an artistic career: “Today, as in the past, any man who enters the path of Art, with his art as his sole means of support, is bound to pass by way of Bohemia.” Nevertheless, it was a temporary stay. As Marcel (to use his French name) exhorts his fellows, “The hour is come for us to go forward and look no more behind us; we have lived our life of youthfulness and heedlessness and absurdities. All that was very fine, and would make a good romance; but this farce of amorous folly, this waste of days, thrown away with a prodigality which seems to think it has eternity to live in, all this must have an end.”

Murger based the characters on people whom he knew in real life, with Rodolphe apparently representing the author himself. The most tragic of these was the real-life Musetta, who went on an ocean voyage to start a new life and died in a shipwreck.

Murger’s book – which he did not refer to as a novel – describes a series of incidents in the lives of four men and their various romantic liaisons. Several small incidents make their way into the opera – Colline’s pockets full of books, the burned manuscript, buying food they can’t afford, cheating the landlord, the Red Sea painting. The opera’s depiction of the meeting of Rodolphe and Mimi, however, involves two totally different characters in the book, Francine and Jacques. In the book, Schaunard had a girlfriend, but she was dropped apparently for the sake of dramatic economy.

A year after Mimi's death, in a denouement Puccini wisely chose not to set, the lives of the other five principals have changed radically. Marcel, Rodolphe, and Schaunard have all become prosperous in their fields, and the cynical Colline has inherited some money and married into society. "We are closed up, old man," Marcel explains; "we are dead and buried. Youth has but one time....Ah, what do you care to say? That I am corrupted? I no longer care for anything but what is good and comfortable."

GOOD GIRL, BAD GIRL

When Musetta is praying for the dying Mimì at the opera's conclusion, she proclaims, "I am unworthy of forgiveness, while Mimì is an angel of heaven." To the superficial audience member, this distinction appears to express the difference between the opera's two female principals, but a closer examination reveals a far more subtle relationship between the extroverted Musetta and the introverted Mimì.

People who read the book after seeing the opera will no doubt be surprised to find that for Murger, Musette (to use her French name) is the more likeable of the two women. Mimì is more flirtatious, providing ample justification for Rodolphe's jealousy. In fact, she is the mistress of one of Rodolphe's friends when he first meets her. As was mentioned earlier, the Mimì of the opera is really a combination of two women from the novel. The model for Mimì, incidentally, appears to have been a woman named Lucille – hence the confusion about her name: "Yes they call me Mimì, but my name is Lucia."

In introducing Musette, Murger seems to imply that exploiting her physical appearance is a necessary survival skill for such women: "Mademoiselle Musette was a pretty girl of twenty, who, shortly after her arrival in Paris, began to live as pretty girls are apt to live when their equipment consists of a slender waist, a good deal of coquetry, a little ambition and no grammar to speak of." Given the lack of other opportunity for women in her society, the wonder is not that she seeks out rich old men but that she is willing to get off the gravy train so often to come back to Marcello. "My foolish existence is like a song," she explains; "each of my love affairs is couplet – but Marcel is its refrain."

Far from being the sweet innocent young woman her music may seem to suggest, the Mimì of the opera is just as coquettish as Musetta. Although she hears Rodolfo shout to

his friends, “We will join you soon,” she acts as if she has to drop a subtle hint to get an invitation to dinner, and she implies that she would consider sex on a first date – but she wants to be fed first. In the final act, we learn that like Musetta, she has deserted her Bohemian existence for a life of luxury. The original draft of the libretto contained an entire act that never found its way into the opera (and apparently was never set to music), in which Mimì openly flirted with a wealthy man in Rodolfo’s presence. In this sense, she is no different from Musetta; however, we actually see Musetta with Alcindoro but only hear allusions to Mimì’s relationship with the Viscount. This is not to imply that Mimì is a bad person. Rather, like Musetta, she does what she has to in order to survive.

The missing act also helps to explain one puzzling aspect of the opera. Prior to the final act, we are not aware of any interaction between the two women, so it comes as a surprise to learn that Musetta had been looking all over the city for Mimì. In the missing act Musetta is seen giving advice to Mimì on how to snare a wealthy man. What we do see in the opera is Mimì’s ability to see past the surface of Musetta’s outward behavior – something none of the men can do – and to feel her pain.

There is one other subtle link between the two women. One line of Mimì’s aria (beginning *Sola, mi fo*) echoes Musetta’s theme, suggesting that the two women are not really that different. You have to listen closely to hear it – but that is part of the magic of this opera, which continuously rewards repeated listening with a deeper understanding of Puccini’s subtlety.

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