Study Guide

La bohème
by
Giacomo Puccini

Libretto by Giuseppe Giacosa and Luigi Illica, based on the novel
Scènes de la Vie de Bohème by Henri Mürger

World premiere: Turin, Teatro Regio, February 1, 1896
Toledo Opera

Presents

La bohème

At the Valentine Theatre

October 5 and 7, 2012
Student Night at the Opera October 3, 2012

Featuring

Rodolfo (tenor)..........................Rolando Sanz
Mimi (soprano)..........................Sujin Lee
Marcello (baritone)......................Lee Poulis
Musetta (soprano)........................Jennifer Rowley
Schaunard (baritone)...................Michael Krsankowski
Colline (bass-baritone)..............Sean Cooper
Benoît/Alcindoro (baritone).........Jason Budd

Conductor................................James Meena
Stage Director............................Michael Capasso

Toledo Opera Chorus
Toledo Opera Children’s Chorus

The Toledo Symphony Orchestra
Plot Synopsis

Act I
Paris, the 1830s. In their Latin Quarter garret, the near-destitute artist Marcello and poet Rodolfo try to keep warm on Christmas Eve by feeding the stove with pages from Rodolfo’s latest drama. They are soon joined by their roommates—Colline, a young philosopher, and Schaunard, a musician, who brings food, fuel, and funds he has collected from an eccentric student. While they celebrate their unexpected fortune, the landlord, Benoit, comes to collect the rent. Plying the older man with wine, they urge him to tell of his flirtations, then throw him out in mock indignation at his infidelity to his wife. As his friends depart to celebrate at the Café Momus, Rodolfo promises to join them later, remaining behind to try to write. There is another knock at the door; the visitor is a pretty neighbor, Mimì, whose candle has gone out on the drafty stairway. No sooner does she enter than the girl feels faint; after reviving her with a sip of wine, Rodolfo helps her to the door and relights her candle. Mimì realizes she lost her key when she fainted, and as the two search for it, both candles are blown out. In the darkness, Rodolfo finds the key and slips it into his pocket. In the moonlight the poet takes the girl’s shivering hand, telling her his dreams. She then recounts her life alone in a lofty garret, embroidering flowers and waiting for the spring. Rodolfo’s friends are heard outside, urging him to join them; he calls back that he is not alone and will be along shortly. Expressing their joy in finding each other, Mimì and Rodolfo embrace and slowly leave, arm in arm, for the café.

Act II
Amid the shouts of street hawkers, Rodolfo buys Mimì a bonnet near the Café Momus and then introduces her to his friends; they all sit down and order supper. The toy vendor Parpignol passes by, besieged by eager children. Marcello’s former sweetheart, Musetta, makes a noisy entrance on the arm of the elderly but wealthy Alcindoro. The ensuing tumult reaches its peak when, trying to regain Marcello’s attention, she sings a waltz about her popularity. She complains that her shoe pinches, sending Alcindoro off to fetch a new pair. The moment he is gone, she falls into Marcello’s arms and tells the waiter to charge everything to Alcindoro. Soldiers march by the café, and as the bohemians fall in behind, Alcindoro rushes back with Musetta’s shoes.

Act III
At dawn on the snowy outskirts of Paris, a customs official admits farm women to the city. Merrymakers are heard within a tavern. Soon Mimì wanders in, searching for the place where Marcello and Musetta now live. When the painter emerges, she tells him of her distress over Rodolfo’s incessant jealousy. She says she believes it is best that they part. Rodolfo, who has been asleep in the tavern, wakes and comes outside. Mimì hides nearby, though Marcello thinks she has gone. The poet first tells Marcello that he wants to separate from his sweetheart, citing her fickleness; pressed for the real reason, he breaks down, saying that her coughing can only grow worse in the poverty they share. Overcome with tears, Mimì stumbles forward to bid her lover farewell as Marcello runs back into the tavern upon hearing Musetta’s laughter. While
Mimì and Rodolfo recall past happiness, Musetta dashes out of the inn, quarreling with Marcello, who has caught her flirting. The painter and his mistress part, hurling insults at each other, but Mimì and Rodolfo decide to remain together until spring.

**Act IV**

Now separated from their girlfriends, Rodolfo and Marcello lament their loneliness in the garret. Colline and Schaunard bring a meager meal; to lighten their spirits the four stage a dance, which turns into a mock duel. At the height of the hilarity Musetta bursts in to tell them that Mimì is outside, too weak to come upstairs. As Rodolfo runs to her aid, Musetta relates how Mimì begged to be taken to her lover to die. The poor girl is made as comfortable as possible, while Musetta asks Marcello to sell her earrings for medicine and Colline goes off to pawn his overcoat, which for so long has kept him warm. Left alone, Mimi and Rodolfo wistfully recall their meeting and their first happy days, but she is seized with violent coughing. When the others return, Musetta gives Mimì a muff to warm her hands and prays for her life. As she peacefully drifts into unconsciousness, Rodolfo closes the curtain to soften the light. Schaunard discovers that Mimì is dead, and when Rodolfo at last realizes it, he throws himself despairingly on her body, repeatedly calling her name.

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**Puccini and La bohème**

Some mystery exists over the origin of the idea of the composition of *La bohème*. Following the success of Puccini's *Manon Lescaut*, the composer toyed with the possibility of an opera based on Giovanni Verga's *La lupa*, a tale from the collection that inspired Mascagni's *Cavalleria rusticana*. But he veered off course from that destination and, sometime in 1893-1894 turned his attention to Henri Mürger's *Scènes de la vie de Bohème*. The next thing we hear about the topic is the scandal involving the composer Ruggiero Leoncavallo, composer of Pagliacci, who was writing his own version of Mürger's novel. In documentation that still exists, Leoncavallo swears that sometime in 1892 he showed a scenario of the novel to Puccini and Puccini's publisher Ricordi but that at the time both Puccini and Ricordi rejected it. A few months later, in 1893, the two composers run into each other at a café and Puccini mentions his work on an opera of *La bohème*. Leoncavallo was furious, feeling that the project had been stolen from him. In operatic Milan during this period composers usually hid their projects with the utmost secrecy, protecting them like an inventor would a patent for a brilliant new invention. For Puccini to mention his project to his fellow composer therefore was highly unusual in the first place, and he paid dearly for that slip.

Leoncavallo immediately announced in the newspaper that he had embarked on a *Bohème* project. The next day, Puccini was forced to announce in a rival newspaper that HE had begun a project, and was quite well along with it. The battle of the newspapers went on for awhile, with Puccini essentially dismissing the situation by saying, “What does it matter to Leoncavallo? Let him compose and I shall compose and the public will judge.” In the end, Leoncavallo seemingly won the 'contest'. His *Bohème*, which premiered 15 months after Puccini’s, was very successful at its first performances. Puccini’s premiere, at the Teatro Regio in Turin, was not the
unqualified success that he had enjoyed earlier. The public contrasted it to the very successful *Manon Lescaut*, also based on a French novel. The consensus was that this *Bohème* was more of the same, nothing new from the young composer, not evident of real growth. And although the first *Bohème* audience seemed to take the work to heart, the critics were not kind.

History has proved them wrong of course, and Puccini’s masterpiece holds the opera stage like no other work from the same period. Leoncavallo’s *Bohème* is hardly ever staged anymore, despite the fact that it was the first really successful vehicle for the brilliant young tenor Enrico Caruso. The score certainly has its moments, but it emphasizes the more tragic elements of the story at the expense of the wonderful humanity and humor of the original Mürger novel, something that Puccini captured beautifully in his brilliant score. The thing that seems to have bothered the critics the most about Puccini's work was its episodic realism. There is something quite life-like about the mixture of pathos and humor in this score, and it was this realism that, in fact, made *La traviata* and *Carmen* failures at their premieres as well. For some reason the critics found this new sense of realism too tough to take.

To be fair to them, we must remember that on that same stage in Turin six weeks prior to the debut of *La bohème*, that same audience experienced the local premiere of Wagner’s *Götterdämmerung*. Being in the company of Teutonic gods and goddesses for six hours had surely rendered them incapable of accepting anything approaching the human or the mundane onstage; it was certainly a stretch.

An interesting tidbit: who was on the podium for the Wagner as well as for the *Bohème* that fateful year of 1895? None other than the 28-year-old Arturo Toscanini. Puccini was delighted with the maestro, and actually found him to be “a very sweet and nice man”, something contrary to the conductor whom we know to have been able to fill his musicians with dread at the raising of one eyebrow. But the premiere of *La bohème* was the beginning of a long (though tempestuous) relationship between the composer and the young conductor.

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**Libretto & Source of La bohème**

Puccini's opera was based on Henri Mürger’s novel, *Scènes de la vie de bohème*. The book was originally published as a series of stories or episodes from the lives of quasi-fictional bohemian students, poets, actors and artists living in the Latin Quarter in Paris around 1840. These stories were essentially reminiscences of Mürger’s own student life at the time, with the major characters being based on his extended circle of friends and acquaintances. The main character of the novel (Rodolphe) is Mürger himself, more an editor of popular magazines than the poet of the opera. Mosco Carner, in his exhaustive biography of Puccini, quotes a description of the hero from Mürger’s original: “…a young man whose face could hardly be seen for a huge, bushy, many-colored beard. To set off this prognathic hirsutism, a premature baldness had stripped his temples as bare as a knee…” Can you imagine the operatic Rodolfo appearing on stage looking anything like this?! The other characters are either directly drawn from Mürger’s student days (like Benoit and Schaunard) or are composite characters based on two or three individuals with whom the author was involved (Mimi, Musette and Marcel).
Once published in novel form, Mürger’s work struck the imagination of contemporary Parisians who found much to love in these vivid characters. It also became something of a parlor game trying to discover which real personage was the basis for one of the fictional characters. The author’s success was compounded by a dramatic version of the book, a five-act play entitled *La Vie de Bohème*, that he wrote in collaboration with Théodore Barrière and was first performed in 1849. The libretto for the opera is based on both versions, a wise choice by Puccini’s librettists Giuseppe Giacosa and Luigi Illica. Besides having the challenge of telescoping this sprawl of countless episodes into a compact and singable text, they had to decide how many of these wonderful characters the operatic version would successfully support. In doing so they had to jettison a number of colorful individuals but, thankfully, not to the detriment of the basic story that they decided to tell: the doomed love of a sensitive poet for a terminally ill seamstress.

For all its literary influence on the general picture that we have of the bohemian life in the Paris of the 1840s, Mürger’s work is not the most scintillating read, and for opera lovers it is more a curiosity to be explored rather than a work to be enjoyed on its own merits. (It is rather like Sardou’s *La Tosca*, upon which Puccini’s opera *Tosca* is based: the opera is so much greater than its source). For whatever reason Giacosa and Illica were able to extrude a significant amount of true poetry out of the story and characters of *La vie*, a treasury of language that inspired Puccini to a level of musical genius that he had only touched upon in his earlier works.

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### The Music of *La bohème*

Certain characteristics of Puccini’s style help us to better understand what makes *La bohème* the masterpiece that it is. For instance, Puccini allowed himself to be more open to the concept of symphonic development as we know it from the German masters of the symphony than other Italian composers of opera, Verdi included. This means that we encounter a greater sense of the operas being ‘through-composed’, a greater sense of continuity and ‘flow’ in the music rather like one would hear in a movement of a symphony. Hence, although certain Puccini arias and ensembles can be lifted out of context and performed free-standing, there is very little sense of ‘numbers’ or isolated pieces in his operas, as we have in the works of Verdi up to *Otello* and *Falstaff*. But Puccini used something called ‘thematic reminiscence’, a favorite compositional technique of Italian operatic composers wherein a melody or a melodic fragment recurs at appropriate moments in the drama in order to create an effect of irony (the ‘maledizione’ theme in *Rigoletto*), nostalgia (‘Amor, amor è palpito’ in *La traviata*) or heightened emotion (the ‘kiss’ or *bacio* theme in *Otello*), borders on the Wagnerian leitmotif because of its widespread use in all of his operas and because these melodic ideas will often recur in varied form, disguised or ‘developed’. The ‘suicide’ motive in *Butterfly* is a wonderful example; think, too, of the Scarpia chords in *Tosca*, which permeate the entire texture of the opera. There are such melodies in *La bohème*, particularly the themes attached to the Bohemians and to Mimi.

To call Puccini a brilliant orchestrator is perhaps an understatement: his manipulation of orchestral colors and techniques is unparalleled, certainly in the Italian repertoire. Only Verdi’s *Falstaff* looks forward to the brightness that Puccini seems to strive for (and gets!) in every one of his scores. This *tinta* or overall orchestral color is unmistakable. We notice it
immediately in the short orchestral introduction to *La bohème* Related to the *tinta* is Puccini’s deft ability to write ‘atmospheric’ music, music which is able to perfectly characterize the setting of a scene and comes as close as music can to the decorator’s art. Consider the change of mood from Mimi’s aria in Act I to the duet, "O soave fanciulla" where the orchestra immediately envelopes the loving couple in a wash of romanticism; or the very 'snowy', chilly atmosphere at the opening of Act III describing dawn in Paris at the Barrière d'Enfer.

One also notices after being swept away by Puccini’s melodies that the voice is often treated in a kind of *parlando* style, approximating speech (“spoken music”, according to the Harvard Dictionary of Music). A listener must take special notice of this throughout *La bohème*, where Puccini uses *parlando* to achieve a more ‘naturalistic’ quality to the conversations between the characters.

It has been pointed out by numerous scholars that Puccini has a penchant for the conjunct melody, a melody that moves stepwise or in small skips, something that his melodies have in common with folk music and children’s songs, making them immediately accessible to the ear as well as memorable. Likewise he is attracted, like his contemporary Tchaikovsky, to building melodic sequences on the scale. One of the most popular of his melodies from *La bohème*, Musetta’s waltz song “Quando me’n vo’”, is simply a very well manipulated descending E-major scale.

It has been pointed out that this is, perhaps, Puccini’s tightest score and dramatically his most cogent opera by virtue of the control he exerted over his musical material. Compared to his earlier masterpiece, *Manon Lescaut*, this opera is a modicum of unity in every possible way. Look at the way the four acts are structured. Unity is produced by virtue of the fact that both the first act and the fourth act open in the same location (Rodolfo’s garret), with the same two characters in mid-conversation (Rodolfo and Marcello) and with virtually the same music (the so-called ‘Bohemians’ theme; more about this later). Notice also that Acts I and IV are musically similar. Most of the themes introduced in Act I recur in Act IV, supporting the dramatic device of the two young lovers reminiscing over their first meeting as Mimì lies dying. Act II is the shortest of the four acts, introducing new musical material and two new characters (Musetta and Alcindoro). With the act’s quicker tempos it has the overall effect of a scherzo. Act III contains the heart of the opera, the tempos are somewhat slower and there is a more nostalgic, bittersweet atmosphere. Many commentators have noted that *La bohème* is built like a four movement symphony. This may not have been due to any conscious effort on Puccini’s part, but in fact the above stated ‘symphonic’ and cyclical structure gives the opera dramatic and musical unity (something that Leoncavallo’s effort sorely missed).

One approaches any attempt at analysis of *La bohème* with a certain amount of trepidation, as this is probably one of the most popular, talked about, over-analyzed operas in the standard repertoire. There isn’t much more to say about Puccini’s masterpiece that hasn’t already been said thousands of times, but great works can endure such analysis: every time we come back to this work we hear something new, something unique that we’ve not noticed before.

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Discussion Questions

1) In 1893, Puccini and Leoncavallo, another prominent composer, fought (at least in the newspapers) over whose idea it was to develop an opera based on Henri Mûrger’s *Scènes de la vie de bohème*. Both composers went ahead, finished their operas and had them performed. Puccini suggested leaving it up to the audience to decide which opera people preferred.

   - Based on your experience at Toledo Opera’s *La bohème*, how do people attending an opera indicate their approval/disapproval? Opera audiences in Italy go well beyond the bravos and the boos. How do they react?

   - What kinds of artistic “battles” do we have today? Who gets to decide winners and how? For example, how do we decide who is the best singer or what is the best movie? Consider the popular voice vs. the opinions of critics or other kinds of experts.

2) The premiere of Puccini’s *La Bohème* was not a success with the audience or the critics. Can you think of other examples of works (opera, music, art) that were not appreciated at the time they were created, but were later considered masterpieces? One example from the visual arts would be Monet and the Impressionists. Why were the works criticized at first?

3) One of the best ways to describe the art form of opera is: a drama or a story combined with music. Since the 16\(^{th}\) century, when the first opera was composed, stories or plots have come from a variety of sources including Greek and Roman dramas, myths, historical events and, novels or plays. Find some examples of contemporary or modern operas composed in the 20\(^{th}\) and 21\(^{st}\) centuries. What is the basis of their stories?

Create Your Own Review

Write a review of *La bohème*. Use the following chart to organize your thoughts. Consider your audience: blog review; schools news; recommendation to a friend.

Reviewers of classic operas such as *La bohème* do not usually evaluate the music or the plot, since “classic” means that the opera has long been considered a masterpiece. Reviews focus on the particular production of the opera, including the quality of the vocal and acting performances, the overall direction or vision of the production (shown in the scenery, costumes and acting), and the way the orchestra and the vocal artists performed together. Feel free in your review to evaluate plot, music and the various elements of the Toledo Opera production.
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