

Audience Preview Guide

**Wednesday, February 5, 2020 -
Student Night at the Opera**

Friday, February 7 , 2020

Sunday, February, 2020

Valentine Theatre

TOLEDO OPERA

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The Setting

The opera takes place in Paris, around 1830.

Act I

In the four bohemians' garret (on Christmas Eve)

Act II

The Latin Quarter (later that evening)

Act III

A toll gate at the Barrière d'Enfer (late February)

Act IV

Back in the garret (some months later)

Characters

La bohème

by Giacomo Puccini

Libretto by Luigi Illica and Giuseppe Giacosa

Rodolfo - a poet

Mimi - a seamstress

Marcello - a painter

Musetta - a singer

Schaunard - a musician

Colline- a philosopher

Benoit - their landlord

Alcindoro - a state councillor

Parpignol - a toy vendor

Synopsis

ACT I

Paris, in 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 philosopher, and Schaunard, a musician, who brings food, fuel, and funds he has collected from an eccentric nobleman. While they celebrate their unexpected fortune, the landlord, Benoit, comes to collect the rent. After getting the older man drunk, the friends urge him to tell of his flirtations, then throw him out in mock indignation at his infidelity to his wife. As the others depart to revel at the Café Momus, Rodolfo remains behind to finish an article, promising to join them later. There is another knock at the door—the visitor is Mimì, a pretty neighbor, whose candle has gone out in the stairwell. As she enters the room, she suddenly feels faint. Rodolfo gives her a sip of wine, then helps her to the door and relights her candle. Mimì realizes that she lost her key when she fainted, and as the two search for it, both candles go out. Rodolfo finds the key and slips it into his pocket. In the moonlight, he takes Mimì's hand and tells her about his dreams. She recounts her life alone in a lofty garret, embroidering flowers and waiting for the spring. Rodolfo's friends call from outside, telling him to join them. He responds that he is not alone and will be along shortly. Happy to have found each other, Mimì and Rodolfo leave, arm in arm, for the café.

ACT II

Amid the shouts of street hawkers near the Café Momus, Rodolfo buys Mimì a bonnet and introduces her to his friends. They all sit down and order supper. The toy vendor Parpignol passes by, besieged by 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 gain Marcello's attention, she loudly sings the praises of her own popularity. Sending Alcindoro away to buy her a new pair of shoes, Musetta finally falls into Marcello's arms. Soldiers march by the café, and as the bohemians fall in behind, the returning Alcindoro is presented with the check.

ACT III

At dawn at the Barrière d'Enfer, a toll-gate on the edge of Paris, a customs official admits farm women to the city. Guests are heard drinking and singing within a tavern. Mimì arrives, searching for the place where Marcello and Musetta now live. When the painter appears, she tells him of her distress over Rodolfo's incessant jealousy. She says she believes it is best that they part. As Rodolfo emerges from the tavern, Mimì hides nearby. Rodolfo tells Marcello that he wants to separate from Mimì, blaming her flirtatiousness. Pressed for the real reason, he breaks down, saying that her illness can only grow worse in the poverty they share. Overcome with emotion, Mimì comes forward to say goodbye to her lover. Marcello runs back into the tavern upon hearing Musetta's laughter. While Mimì and Rodolfo recall past happiness, Marcello returns with Musetta, quarreling about her flirting with a customer. They hurl insults at each other and part, but Mimì and Rodolfo decide to remain together until springtime.

ACT IV

Months later in the garret, Rodolfo and Marcello, now separated from their girlfriends, reflect on their loneliness. 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 with news that Mimì is outside, too weak to come upstairs. As Rodolfo runs to her aid, Musetta relates how Mimì begged to be taken to Rodolfo to die. She is made as comfortable as possible, while Musetta asks Marcello to sell her earrings for medicine and Colline goes off to pawn his overcoat. Left alone, Mimì and Rodolfo 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 Mimì slowly drifts into unconsciousness. Musetta prays for Mimì, but it is too late. The friends realize that she is dead, and Rodolfo collapses in despair.

What is Opera?

Opera is a theatrical drama or comedy told in music through powerful, unamplified voices no-microphones used. Opera combines several art forms—vocal and instrumental music, theater, drama, visual art and often dance—into one complete theatrical experience.

The Basic Elements of Opera

Singing Is The Primary Method Of Expression. The most defining aspect of opera is that the majority of lines are sung instead of spoken. The characters express their thoughts and feeling in song rather than speech. Because it usually takes longer to sing something than to say it, however, the action may sometimes seem slower than in a play. Occasionally, even in an opera, characters may speak rather than sing, but the vast majority of lines will be sung.

Opera Combines Many Different Art Forms. Much of the excitement of opera comes from its use of multiple art forms. Opera combines singing, acting, orchestral music, poetry, dance, mime, theatrical scenery, costumes and lighting in a unique art form all its own. The word “opera” itself is an Italian word derived from the Latin word “opus,” which means work (as in work of art).

An Opera Tells A Story. As in a play, opera is performed on a stage with scenery, props and lighting, by actors wearing costumes, make-up and wigs to create a specific character, time, and place. While the actors sing their lines they are accompanied by a piano, small instrumental ensemble, or even a full orchestra, that may be either to the side of the stage or beneath the stage in the orchestra “pit.” Opera stories come from many different sources: mythology, the Bible, fairy tales, literary classics and history. Operas may be about mythological gods, historic heroes, royalty, or ordinary people from the past or present. The words sung in an opera are written down in a libretto (Italian for “little book”). The libretto is sometimes sung in a language other than English, depending on the nationality of the composer and librettist (the author of the libretto).

NOTE: The story of *La bohème* is based on the French novel, *Scènes de la vie de bohème (Scenes of Bohemian Life)* by Henri Murger.

The Music In An Opera Reflects The Mood And Events In The Story. The addition of music to telling a story tends to greatly increase the emotional intensity of a performance. Even if you cannot understand the words being sung, the music provides many clues. It reflects a character’s feelings; it hints at a turn in the plot; it may even describe an event (a storm, for example). If something sad or frightening is about to happen, you may hear a warning in the music before the action takes place.

An Opera Is Structured Like A Play. Most operas begin with an overture, which is an introductory piece of instrumental music that often presents musical themes heard in the opera. As in a play, an opera is divided into one or more acts and various scenes that contain a mixture of arias (one singer), duets (two singers), ensembles (more than two singers, such as trios, quartets, etc.), scenes with a chorus, and sung dialogue called recitative.

The Creative Team: Career Possibilities

Many people work together to create an opera production. Members of the creative team include the singers, the conductor, the stage director, and the designers (sets, lighting, costumes, wig and make-up). These careers often involve many years of study and hard work to master.

The Conductor. The conductor communicates information about the music and the timing of the show to the singers on the stage and to the orchestra through the gestures he or she makes, often using a baton. The conductor is usually addressed using the Italian term, as “Maestro” or “Maestra.” The conductor trains for his/her work just like the singers. He or she must have a broad knowledge of singing, the orchestra, and music in general. The orchestral score, with approximately twenty staves (individual lines) of music, must be studied and mastered long before rehearsals even begin. The conductor uses the score as a guide as he or she coaches the singers and the orchestra toward a performance.

The Stage Director. An operatic stage director faces all the challenges of a theatrical stage director, plus a

few special concerns. The opera must be staged to obtain the greatest emotional effect by moving the singers about with a natural flow that enhances the meaning of the story without interfering with the music. The composer has built the framework within which the stage director must work. Entrances, duets, fights, exits, shipwrecks, and all other stage “business” must take place within a specified number of measures or beats. Action must be compressed or extended as written by the composer. Like a conductor, a stage director must be completely familiar with the musical score. He or she must know Italian, French, German, or whatever language is being sung, as well as have a working knowledge of everything and everyone both on stage and backstage. He or she is also often the person working with the designers to make sure everything on stage is a cohesive whole.

The Designers. Every element the audience sees on stage (the sets, the costumes, the lights, the wigs and make-up) requires a person with special skills to plan and implement how that element is going to enhance the story of the opera. Set designers create sets that transport the audience to a different time and place, and that remain light enough to move around during scene changes and small enough to store in the theaters “wings” (space off to the side of the stage, out of the audience’s view). Costume designers must make each character unique through what they wear. Lighting designers take a theater that is normally completely dark and use electric light and color to create different settings (night vs. day) and moods (energized, spooky, etc.), and to draw the audience’s attention to different characters or locations on stage. Wig and Make-up designers can adjust an actor’s age, hairstyle, add distinguishing marks like scars and tattoos, and help further tailor the unique impression each character’s appearance makes on the audience.

The Singers. Singers are often hired to sing a role a year or more in advance and, in the world of professional opera, must have their roles memorized before the first rehearsal. If the role is new to them they need to not only learn all their notes but also all the words to their role, often in a foreign language. In addition, singers must learn the parts of the singers and orchestra around them so they’ll know how those elements relate to their own role. Voice teachers help singers with their vocal technique and vocal coaches help them with language, musical style, and character development. Coaches also play the orchestra score on the piano so singers can learn their parts in the context of the whole. Singers are always in the process of learning new roles so that they can work in many places, including other countries. This advanced preparation is crucial because there is rarely much time to rehearse once the cast, conductor, and director are assembled.

Rehearsals/Behind the Scenes

The cast of an opera isn’t assembled until approximately three weeks before the opening night. The singers, who are often chosen by audition, come from around the country and sometimes the world and may not have met each other before the first rehearsal. The conductor leads them through the music with piano accompaniment, showing them his or her interpretation of tempo and phrasing. The stage director shows them where and when and how to move around the stage and how to interpret the drama. This collaboration of conductor and stage director with the singers brings the opera’s plot and music to life.

The opera is staged in a rehearsal room first, using tape on the floor to let the singers know where sets and stairs will be. It moves to the theater’s stage just a few nights before opening. It is then that the orchestra is brought into the process, along with the technical aspects of theater such as lights, costumes, sets, and make-up. Technically and logistically, the opera usually comes together in just five days.

Once in the theater, a stage manager runs rehearsals. Although invisible to the audience, the stage manager is responsible for coordinating the efforts of the stage crew who work backstage (including props people, lighting people, stage hands, costumers, electricians, carpenters, and more), the singers (helping them time entrances, costume changes, and breaks), and conductor (letting him or her know when everything is ready to begin). Video and audio monitors make it possible to see the conductor and hear the orchestra throughout the backstage areas of the theater, and the stage manager can communicate with the singers in their dressing rooms using a PA system. Everyone must be in the right place, at the right time, in the right costume, holding the right prop through many changes and throughout a long drama that cannot stop once it’s begun.

Given that most operas are around three-hours long, in a foreign language, performed entirely from memory, and involve the coordination of many people and art forms, it is a truly incredible feat that they can be performed with only a few weeks of rehearsal and a few days of work in the theater. It takes a team of extremely skilled, very hard working people for opera to be successful.

Giacomo Puccini 1858-1924

Giacomo Antonio Domenico Michele Secondo Maria Puccini was born in Lucca in Tuscany, Italy on December 22, 1858 into a family of five generations of church organists, choirmasters, and composers. His father died when Giacomo was five years old, and he was sent to study with his uncle Fortunato Magi, who considered him to be a poor student.



Giacomo Puccini
1856 - 1924

As a teenager, Puccini served as an organist to the area churches and played the piano as entertainment at social events. In March 1876, the twenty-year old walked 18.5 miles to attend a performance of Verdi's latest opera success, *Aida*. This event changed his life and he decided that he would make opera his life's work.

The greatest influence in Puccini's life was his mother, who petitioned and received a grant to send her son to the Milan Conservatory, where he worked diligently at his music and received his diploma in 1883. While studying at the Conservatory, Puccini obtained a libretto from Ferdinando Fontana, and entered a competition for a one-act opera in 1882. Although he did not win, *Le Villi* was later staged in 1884 at the Teatro Dal Verme and it caught the attention of Giulio Ricordi, head of G. Ricordi & Co. music publishers, who commissioned a second opera, *Edgar*, in 1889.

Edgar failed: it was a bad story and Fontana's libretto was poor. This may have had an effect on Puccini's thinking because when he began his next opera, *Manon Lescaut*, he announced that he would write his own libretto so that "no fool of a librettist" could spoil it. Ricordi persuaded him to accept

Leoncavallo as his librettist, but Puccini soon asked Ricordi to remove him from the project. Four other librettists were then involved with the opera, due mainly to Puccini constantly changing his mind about the structure of the piece. It was almost by accident that the final two, Illica and Giacosa, came together to complete the opera. They remained with Puccini for his next three operas and probably his greatest successes: *La bohème*, *Tosca* and *Madama Butterfly*.

The world première performance of *La bohème* took place in Turin on February 1, 1896 at the Teatro Regio, conducted by the young Arturo Toscanini. The initial response of the audience at the first performance was subdued and critical responses were polarized. Despite this, the opera quickly became popular throughout Italy.

The first performance of *La bohème* outside Italy was at the Teatro Colon in Buenos Aires, Argentina. The opera was given in Alexandria, Lisbon, and Moscow in early 1897 while the United Kingdom premiere took place at the Theatre Royal in Manchester in English. The opera reached New York City on May 16, 1898.

Puccini collaborated with several librettists on his works, including Luigi Illica and Giuseppe Giacosa. His most famed operas include: *Manon Lescaut* (1893), *La bohème* (1896), *Tosca* (1900), *Madama Butterfly* (1904), *La fanciulla del West* (1810), *Il Trittico*—a collection of three one-act operas: *Il tabarro*, *Suor Angelica*, and *Gianni Schicchi* (1918), and *Turandot* (1926)—unfinished at the time of Puccini's death and later completed by Franco Alfano, one of Puccini's protégées.

Puccini was somewhat reclusive. He preferred his home in the country to hectic city life and enjoyed hunting and long walks through the countryside. He was a lifelong smoker, particularly of cigars, and in 1924 was diagnosed with throat cancer. He underwent surgery which left him no longer able to speak and died of a heart attack four days later on November 29, 1924 in Brussels.

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The "Real World" of *La bohème*

The "bohemian" class emerged in France in the 19th-century in contrast to its well-established and well-to-do bourgeoisie (also commonly called the "middle class"). While the French bourgeoisie had a strict and nationalistic morality, the younger generation rejected their parents' patriotic and economic priorities. The bohemians believed in the Romantic ideal of artistic genius, but also had to rely on the marketplace to sell their creations and earn a living, instead of the older model of wealthy aristocratic patronage which could support their artistic ideals.

Bohemians were rebellious, flamboyant, loud, and seemingly shameless, often blurring the line between private and public life. Parisian bohemians in particular were inspired in their fashion by Gothic novels, fashionable romances, and romantic dramas.

Puccini's opera and Murger's book captured a very particular and fleeting period in Parisian history. Puccini set his *Bohème* in the 1830s, and at that time, the city was experiencing an influx of people from the countryside and other towns in search of jobs. Home to a population 40% larger than at the turn of the century, Paris was strained beyond its abilities. Only 20% of its buildings were connected to a water supply, and many tenants shared bathrooms, which were emptied every night by 2,300 night-soil carts. Cramped quarters and tight architecture were conducive to frequent interactions, spurring both creative and emotional connections.

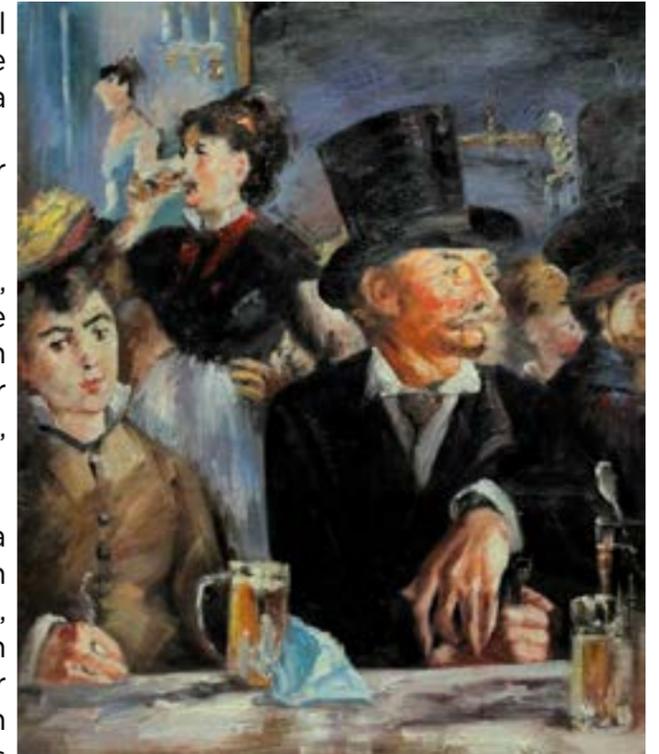
To escape the poverty and claustrophobic living conditions, many working-class women, like Mimì and Musetta, turned to prostitution, either walking the streets or working at one of the city's nearly 200 registered brothels. A poor, bohemian artist like Rodolfo was in no position to be a suitable breadwinner.

Beginning in the mid-19th century, Parisian coffeehouses became gathering places for bohemians such as artists, writers, thinkers, and more. Spending their time in coffeehouses—often to escape their unheated apartments—many painters and writers of the era depicted the complex and seductive café life in their artworks and novels (see the above painting).

By the 1860s, much of the quaint, artistic Parisian landscape had been bulldozed by Paris officials in order to rebuild and accommodate the growing population. Although the life of the Parisian bohème continued, things had changed.

Adapted from "The Historical Context of La Bohème" by Magda Romanska, BLO Dramaturg

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At the Café- Édouard Manet

What to Listen For

General Guiding Questions:

- What instruments are playing?
- How fast is the music? Are there sudden changes in speed?
- Is the rhythm steady or unsteady?
- Key/Mode: Is it major or minor? (Does it sound bright, happy, sad, urgent, dangerous?)
- Dynamics/Volume: Is the music loud or soft? Are there sudden changes in volume (either in the voice or orchestra)?
- What is the shape of the melodic line? Does the voice move smoothly or does it make frequent or erratic jumps?
- Do the vocal lines move noticeably downward or upward?
- Do the melodies end as you would expect or do they surprise you?
- How does the music make you feel? What effect do the above factors have on you as a listener?
- Does the type of voice singing (baritone, soprano, tenor, mezzo, etc.) have an effect on you as a listener?

Second Listening and Follow-up Questions:

- What is the orchestra doing in contrast to the voice? How do they interact?
- What kinds of images, settings, or emotions come to mind when listening to the music? Does it remind you of anything you have experienced in your own life?
- Do particularly emphatic notes (low, high, held, etc.) correspond to dramatic moments in the text?
- What type of character fits this music? Romantic? Comic? Serious? Etc.

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La bohème - Act II
Photo courtesy of Tri Cities Opera

Listening Selections

Selection #1: "O soave fanciulla," Mimì and Rodolfo, Act I

This duet comes at the end of Act I, after Mimì and Rodolfo have introduced themselves to one another and searched for Mimì's key. Rodolfo sees Mimì in the moonlight, and the two realize that they are in love.



<https://youtu.be/LYB5QS8LS-4>

Selection #2: "Quando m'en vo," Musetta, Act II

The four friends and Mimì are having a joyous celebration at the Café Momus, when suddenly Marcello's ex, Musetta, comes in on the arm of a wealthy older man. To make Marcello jealous (and because she loves attention), Musetta sings this flirtatious song.



www.youtube.com/watch?v=m1_BKpgUG4I

Selection #3: "Vecchia zimarra," Colline, Act IV

Musetta has just brought the desperately ill Mimì back to the garret apartment, and all of the friends are rallying to try to save her. They have no money for food or medicine, so Colline decides to sell his beloved coat. Before he does, he sings this aria as a good-bye.



<https://youtu.be/OGr7UsHSpqI>

A NOTE FROM DAVID ANGUS, BOSTON LYRIC OPERA
MUSIC DIRECTOR AND CONDUCTOR OF *LA BOHÈME*, ON ITS MUSIC:

For me, the word that sums up Puccini's music is passion. The surges of emotion that ebb and flow through his romantic music appeal directly to the listeners' hearts, whether or not they know anything about music. He knows exactly how to allow a singer to soar over the orchestra in wonderful lyrical lines, and he plays with our emotions with his gorgeous twists of harmony.

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In Puccini's Time

- 1858** Giacomo Antonio Domenico Michele Secondo Maria Puccini born
- 1859** Verdi's opera *Un Ballo in Maschera* premieres in Napoli
- 1861** Prince Albert, consort of Queen Victoria dies at 42
- 1864** General Sherman begins his March to the South in U.S. Civil War
- 1865** President Abraham Lincoln is assassinated at age 56
- 1868** *Little Women* by Louisa May Alcott published in America
- 1869** Richard Wagner's *Das Rheingold* premieres in Munich
- 1871** Verdi's *Aida* premieres in Cairo
- 1872** The University of Toledo is founded
- 1874** Harry Houdini born in Budapest
- 1875** Georges Bizet's opera, *Carmen*, premieres in Paris
- 1878** Gilbert & Sullivan's *H.M.S. Pinafore* premieres in London
- 1880** Thomas Edison patents the incandescent lamp
- 1881** Barnum & Bailey's *Greatest Show on Earth* opens at Madison Square Garden
- 1883** *Treasure Island* by Robert Louis Stevenson is first published as a book
- 1884** Puccini's *Le Villi* staged at the Teatro Dal Verme
- 1885** The Statue of Liberty arrives in New York City aboard the French ship *Isero*
- 1887** Work begins on the Eiffel Tower in Paris
- 1889** Victor Fleming, American film director of *The Wizard of Oz*, *Gone With the Wind*, born
- 1890** Vincent van Gogh dies of self-inflicted gun shot
- 1893** Puccini's *Manon Lescaut* premieres at Teatro Regio
- 1896** Puccini's *La bohème* premieres in Turin
- 1898** Golda Meir (future Prime Minister of Israel) born
- 1899** Al Capone, American gangster born in Brooklyn
- 1900** Puccini's *Tosca* premieres in Turin
- 1901** Queen Victoria and Giuseppe Verdi die
- 1902** 1st Rose Bowl football game - Michigan defeats Stanford
- 1904** Puccini's *Madama Butterfly* premieres at La Scala
- 1905** Richard Strauss' opera *Salome* premieres in Dresden
- 1906** Theodore Roosevelt is 1st U.S. President to visit another country (Puerto Rico)
- 1908** Arturo Toscanini begins conducting the Metropolitan Opera Orchestra
- 1910** Puccini's *La Fanciulla del West* premieres at the Metropolitan Opera
- 1911** Ronald Reagan, 40th U.S. President, California Governor, and actor, born
- 1912** RMS Titanic sinks off of Newfoundland killing 1,503 passengers
- 1914** Austro-Hungarian Archduke Franz Ferdinand is assassinated touching off World War I
- 1917** Puccini's *La Rondine* premieres at the Grand Théâtre de Monte Carlo
- 1918** Puccini's *It Trittico* premieres at the Metropolitan Opera
- 1920** Babe Ruth sets baseball homerun record at 54
- 1922** American actress and singer Judy Garland born
- 1923** Pharaoh Tutankhamun's tomb is discovered in Egypt
- 1924** Puccini dies. *Turandot* premieres after death

Acts I & IV
The Artists' Garret



Act II
Cafe Momus



Act III
A toll gate at the Barrière d'Enfer



Pre-Opera Activities

1. Consider the roles of the many different people who prepare for and perform in an opera. Which role appeals to you as a possible career? Once you have seen *La bohème*, you may reconsider your choice.

2. One of the best ways to describe the art form of opera is: a drama or a story combined with music. Since the 16th 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 American operas composed in the 20th and 21st centuries. What are their stories or plots based on?

Post-Opera Activities

Personal Response

1. What surprised you the most about Puccini's opera, *La bohème*?

2. What struck you as the most important theme in the opera?

Post-Opera Activities

Critical Response

Create Your Own Review of *La bohème*

Write a review of *La bohème*. Use the following chart to organize your thoughts. You can be critical, describing what you liked and what you thought needed improvement. In your review mention the plot, the music, the singing and acting, and visual elements such as the scenery and costumes.

Notes for review of <i>La bohème</i>	
Music	
Plot	
Vocal Artists (quality of voice and acting)	
Scenery and Costumes	
Overall Rating from 1 (low) to 5 (high)	