

La bohème

by Giacomo Puccini

The romantic tale of the beautiful and frail seamstress Mimì, the poet Rodolfo and their circle of friends is one of the best loved operas of all time. Puccini's rapturous score captures the spirit of these 19th-century Bohemians living in Paris - friends who manage to dream and love in the face of poverty and illness, melting the hardest of hearts and leaving all others aching with nostalgia and longing.



Presented by Arizona Opera
Friday January 29, 2010
Saturday, January 30, 2010
7:30pm
Symphony Hall

A Short History of Opera

The word **opera** is the plural form of the Latin word **opus**, which translates quite literally as **work**. The use of the plural form alludes to the plurality of art forms that combine to create an operatic performance. Today we accept the word **opera** as a reference to a theatrically based musical art form in which the drama is propelled by the sung declamation of text accompanied by a full symphony orchestra.

Opera as an art form can claim its origin with the inclusion of incidental music that was performed during the tragedies and comedies popular during ancient Greek times. The tradition of including music as an integral part of theatrical activities expanded in Roman times and continued throughout the Middle Ages. Surviving examples of liturgical dramas and vernacular plays from Medieval times show the use of music as an "insignificant" part of the action as do the vast mystery and morality plays of the 15th and 16th centuries. Traditional view holds that the first completely sung musical drama (or opera) developed as a result of discussions held in Florence in the 1570s by an informal academy known as the **Camerata** which led to the musical setting of Rinuccini's drama, *Dafne*, by composer, Jacopo Peri in 1597.

The work of such early Italian masters as Giulio Caccini and Claudio Monteverdi led to the development of a through-composed musical entertainment comprised of **recitative** sections (**secco** and **accompagnato**) which revealed the plot of the drama; followed by **da capo arias** which provided the soloist an opportunity to develop the emotions of the character. The function of the **chorus** in these early works mirrored that of the character of the same name found in Greek drama. The new "form" was greeted favorably by the public and quickly became a popular entertainment.

Opera has flourished throughout the world as a vehicle for the expression of the full range of human emotions. Italians claim the art form as their own, retaining dominance in the field through the death of Giacomo Puccini in 1924. Rossini, Bellini, Donizetti, Verdi, and Leoncavallo developed the art form through clearly defined periods that produced **opera buffa**, **opera seria**, **bel canto**, and **verismo**. The Austrian Mozart also wrote operas in Italian and championed the **singspiel** (sing play), which combined the spoken word with music, a form also used by Beethoven in his only opera, *Fidelio*. Bizet (*Carmen*), Offenbach (*Les Contes d'Hoffmann*), Gounod (*Faust*), and Meyerbeer (*Les Huguenots*) led the adaptation by the French which ranged from the **opera comique** to the grand full-scale **tragedie lyrique**. German composers von Weber (*Der Freischütz*), Richard Strauss (*Ariadne auf Naxos*), and Wagner (*Der Ring des Nibelungen*) developed diverse forms such as **singspiel** to through-composed spectacles unified through the use of the **leitmotif**. The English **ballad opera**, Spanish **zarzuela** and Viennese **operetta** helped to establish opera as a form of

entertainment which continues to enjoy great popularity throughout the world.

With the beginning of the 20th century, composers in America diverged from European traditions in order to focus on their own roots while exploring and developing the vast body of the country's folk music and legends. Composers such as Aaron Copland, Douglas Moore, Carlisle Floyd, Howard Hanson, and Robert Ward have all crafted operas that have been presented throughout the world to great success. Today, composers John Adams, Philip Glass, and John Corigliano enjoy success both at home and abroad and are credited with the infusion of new life into an art form which continues to evolve even as it approaches its fifth century.

The Operatic Voice



A true (and brief) definition of the "operatic" voice is a difficult proposition. Many believe the voice is "born," while just as many hold to the belief that the voice is "trained." The truth lies somewhere between the two. Voices that can sustain the demands required by the operatic repertoire do have many things in common. First and foremost is a strong physical technique that allows the singer to sustain long phrases through the control of both the inhalation and exhalation of breath. Secondly, the voice (regardless of its size) must maintain a resonance in both the head (mouth, sinuses) and chest cavities. The Italian word "*squillo*" (squeal) is used to describe the brilliant tone required to penetrate the full symphony orchestra that accompanies the singers. Finally, all voices are defined by both the actual voice "type" and the selection of repertoire for which the voice is ideally suited.

Within the five major voice types (*Soprano, Mezzo-Soprano, Tenor, Baritone, Bass*) there is a further delineation into categories (*Coloratura, Lyric, Spinto, Dramatic*), which help to define each particular instrument. The *Coloratura* is the highest within each voice type whose extended upper range is complimented by extreme flexibility. The *Lyric* is the most common of the "types." This instrument is recognized more for the exceptional beauty of its tone rather than its power or range. The *Spinto* is a voice, which combines the beauty of a lyric with the weight and power of a *Dramatic*, which is the most "powerful" of the voices. The *Dramatic* instrument is characterized by the combination of both incredible volume and "steely" intensity.

While the definition presented in the preceding paragraph may seem clearly outlined, many voices combine qualities from each category, thus carving an unique niche in operatic history. Just

as each person is different from the next, so is each voice. Throughout her career Maria Callas defied categorization as she performed and recorded roles associated with each category in the soprano voice type. Joan Sutherland as well can be heard in recordings of soprano roles as diverse as the coloratura Gilda in *Rigoletto* to the dramatic Turandot in *Turandot*. Below is a very brief outline of voice types and categories with roles usually associated with the individual voice type.

Opera Production

Opera is created by the combination of myriad art forms. First and foremost are the actors who portray characters by revealing their thoughts and emotions through the singing voice. The next very important component is a full symphony orchestra that accompanies the singing actors and actresses, helping them to portray the full range of emotions possible in the operatic format. The orchestra performs in an area in front of the singers called the orchestra pit while the singers perform on the open area called the stage. Wigs, costumes, sets and specialized lighting further enhance these performances, all of which are designed, created, and executed by a team of highly trained artisans.

The creation of an opera begins with a dramatic scenario crafted by a playwright or dramaturg who alone or with a librettist fashions the script or libretto that contains the words the artists will sing. Working in tandem, the composer and librettist team up to create a cohesive musical drama in which the music and words work together to express the emotions revealed in the story. Following the completion of their work, the composer and librettist entrust their new work to a conductor who with a team of assistants (repetiteurs) assumes responsibility for the musical preparation of the work. The conductor collaborates with a stage director (responsible for the visual component) in order to bring a performance of the new piece to life on the stage. The stage director and conductor form the creative spearhead for the new composition while assembling a design team, which will take charge of the actual physical production.

Set designers, lighting designers, costume designers, wig and makeup designers and even choreographers must all be brought "on board" to participate in the creation of the new production. The set designer combines the skills of both an artist and an architect using "blueprint" plans to design the actual physical set which will reside on the stage, recreating the physical setting required by the storyline. These blueprints are turned over to a team of carpenters who are specially trained in the art of stage carpentry. Following the actual building of the set, painters following instructions from the set designers' original plans paint the set. As the set is assembled on the stage, the lighting designer works with a team of electricians to throw

light onto both the stage and the set in an atmospheric as well as practical way. Using specialized lighting instruments, colored gels and a state of the art computer, the designer along with the stage director create a "lighting plot" by writing "lighting cues" which are stored in the computer and used during the actual performance of the opera.

During this production period, the costume designer in consultation with the stage director has designed appropriate clothing for the singing actors and actresses to wear. These designs are fashioned into patterns and crafted by a team of highly skilled artisans called cutters, stitchers, and sewers. Each costume is specially made for each singer using his/her individual measurements. The wig and makeup designer, working with the costume designer, designs and creates wigs which will complement both the costume and the singer as well as represent historically accurate "period" fashions.



As the actual performance date approaches, rehearsals are held on the newly crafted set, combined with costumes, lights, and orchestra in order to ensure a cohesive performance that will be both dramatically and musically satisfying to the assembled audience.

Etiquette

What should I wear to the opera?

The opera is the one special place where you can really dress up and go glamorous. Cocktail dress is usually the norm for evening performances, while Sunday matinees generally see more casual sport jackets and dresses. Your opera experience is what you make of it - you'll fit in with Arizona Opera's patrons in everything from Birkenstocks to Blahniks!

How will I understand what people are singing?

English translations of the lyrics (surtitles) are projected on a screen above the stage as they are sung. Also a full synopsis of the opera is provided online and in the evening's program.

How long does the opera last?

Running times vary per opera, but many clock in between 2-3 hours in length, like most Broadway musicals.

Is there intermission?

Yes. Arizona Opera has two intermissions for most three-act operas, and a single intermission for two-act operas.

When should I clap?

At the end of big arias and, of course, at the final curtain call. Feel free to shout out "Bravo!" (for a male performer), "Brava!" (for a woman) or "Bravi!" (for an ensemble) - singers love an appreciative audience!

Any thing else I should know?

Please remain quiet from the time the orchestra starts (the overture is part of the opera, too!) so that everyone around you can enjoy the music. Don't open candy or gum wrappers, talk, use your cell phone or pager during the performance. Be sure to turn off your pager, watch alarm and phone when you enter the theater. There is plenty of opportunity to chat with people during intermission. Please do not sing along, tap in time, get up and move around or try to read your program while the performance is in progress - it's really distracting to the people around you!



La Boheme

Music by Giacomo Puccini

Libretto by Giuseppe Giacosa and Luigi Illica after

Henry Murger's novel *Scènes de la vie de bohème*

Premiered February 1, 1896 at Teatro Regio in Turin

Synopsis

Act 1

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 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 ("Che gelida manina"). She then recounts her life alone in a lofty garret, embroidering flowers and waiting for the spring ("Mi chiamano Mimì"). 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 (Duet: "O soave fanciulla"), Mimì and Rodolfo embrace and slowly leave, arm in arm, for the café.

Act 2

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 ("Quando me'n vo'"). 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 3

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 (Duet: "O buon Marcello, aiuto!"). 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 ("Donde lieta uscì") 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 (Quartet: "Addio dolce svegliare"). The painter and his mistress part, hurling insults at each other, but Mimì and Rodolfo decide to remain together until spring.

Act 4

Now separated from their girlfriends, Rodolfo and Marcello lament their loneliness in the garret (Duet: "O Mimì, tu più non torni"). 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 ("Vecchia zimarra"). Left alone, Mimì 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.

– *Courtesy of Opera News*

Giacomo Puccini

Puccini emerged into the twentieth century music world as the "King of Verismo," not through the conducting background of Mascagni or through the skilled compositional ability of Giordano, but as a master of theater.



Puccini wrote solely for the operatic stage and he understood the dramatic intensity and melodic poignancy of real life subject matter. Critics have sometimes dismissed his work as overly impassioned, melodramatic, and sentimental. The composer himself proclaimed, "The only music I can make is that of small things," although he admired the grander stylistic abilities of Verdi and Wagner.

Despite that admiration, Puccini chose to concentrate on life's familiar bittersweet passions and intense emotional storms. Puccini was born in Lucca, Italy and descended from a long line of musicians, conductors, and composers. It was assumed he would inherit the talent and interest to continue in his family's chosen craft. At the tender age of six years, upon his father's premature death, he fell heir to the position of choir master and organist at San Martino Church and professor of music at Collegio Pontiano. However, plans to preserve these posts for the young Puccini may as well have been canceled the day he hiked thirteen miles to the city of Pisa to witness a production of Giuseppe Verdi's latest work, Aida. He determined his own future at that

moment, falling completely under the spell of opera, never to recover.

A stipend from a wealthy great-uncle and a scholarship from Queen Margherita herself supported Puccini in his education at the music conservatory in Milan. The great composers Antonio Bazzini and Amilcare Ponchielli taught the young musician; Ponchielli eventually encouraging Puccini's participation in a one-act opera competition sponsored by the publishing house of Sonzogno. Friends of Ponchielli even provided the libretto. Unfortunately, Puccini's first opera, *La Villi*, didn't take the prize. However, the powerful critic/librettist, Arrigo Boito, raised funds for its performance before appreciative audiences at La Scala and Ricordi published the score. The modest success bolstered Puccini's confidence, but provided little compensation. A second opera, *Edgar*, failed as the result of a poor libretto.

Puccini's persistence was rewarded with the production of *Manon Lescaut*. Premiered in February 1893 in Turin, the opera proved a resounding triumph. Puccini was suddenly established as a wealthy composer and artistic successor to Maestro Giuseppe Verdi. The two operas that followed, *La Bohème* and *Tosca*, achieved success gradually with *Bohème* peaking after three productions and *Tosca*, after five years of presentations throughout Europe.

As Puccini acquired substantial wealth, he took on the persona which accompanied him throughout the rest of his life as the "grand seigneur." He built a reputation as a dedicated game hunter, collector of cars and motor boats, and a great romantic figure. "I am almost always in love!", he declared, and defined himself as "a mighty hunter of wild fowl, operatic librettos and attractive women." His appreciation and compassion for women abounds in the substance of his operatic heroines, their valiant struggles and, most often, melancholy demise. He created these elegant, three-dimensional characters with the material of sweet and haunting melody. The innocent Mimi, embattled *Tosca*, abandoned *Butterfly*, embittered *Turandot* - each one a fascinating study in feminine psychology, each the perfect counterpart to an equally interesting tenor role. Puccini's own stormy relationship with Elvira Gemignani evoked a certain horror in fans and attracted something of a lurid interest from the general public. A married woman, she eloped with the composer and they were not married until some time after her husband's death. Seemingly an uninteresting and strangely unchallenging partner, she is said to have limited Puccini intellectually and emotionally, inexplicably cutting him off from most personal relationships with friends and other artists.

Eventually, she embroiled the household in scandal, hounding a young maid unmercifully with accusations of a liaison with her husband. The girl committed suicide and Elvira was jailed for

five months. The Puccinis separated, then reconciled, but their relationship was forever damaged. Puccini fought hard to keep his difficult private life private, against impossible odds. "What a subject for an opera!," one social columnist exclaimed. During this tragic episode, despite his obvious emotional turmoil, the composer completed the opera *La Fanciulla del West*, which met with immediate acclaim.

In general, Puccini seems to have lived in artistic isolation. Even a productive relationship with Arturo Toscanini blew hot and cold. In one comic exchange, Puccini forgot he and Toscanini were currently estranged and sent a Christmas panettone. Realizing the error, Puccini wired Toscanini with an explanation:

PANETTONE SENT BY MISTAKE, PUCCINI.

Toscanini immediately replied:

PANETTONE EATEN BY MISTAKE, TOSCANINI.

It was Toscanini who conducted the famous opening night of *Madama Butterfly*, which ran in its original form for that one performance only. After serious reworking, including changing the basic framework from two acts to three and replacing some objectionable arias with more melodic ones, *Butterfly* triumphed in a new opening under the baton of Arturo Toscanini.

In the single decade before his death, Puccini completed *La Rondine*, and the trilogy of *Il Tabarro*, *Suor Angelica* and *Gianni Schicchi*. He was in the process of finishing *Turandot*, the opera he considered his crowning achievement, when a persistent throat ailment was diagnosed as cancer. He died a few days after surgery and completion of the work was left to colleague, Franco Alfano. Shortly before his death, Puccini wrote that the music audience had lost its taste for melody and tolerated music devoid of logic and sensibility. He predicted "the end of opera" and, in fact, *Turandot*, was the last opera to rank as an internationally accepted standard repertory piece. No one since Puccini has enjoyed such a following.

What are the Similarities between the Jonathan Larson's musical *Rent* and *La Boheme*?

Rent and *La Boheme* are both set in cities considered as havens for artists, New York and Paris. The reality behind the romantic tourist images of both cities are clearly proved false by the two stories. In early scenes in *Rent* and *La Boheme*, characters are forced to burn manuscript pages in order to stay warm, not being

able to afford firewood, or in the modern version, the heating bills.

Both *Rent* and *La Boheme* describe the devastation of a disease considered a feature of lower-class or artistic existence. In *La Boheme* one of the main characters, Mimi, is afflicted with tuberculosis, a deadly and highly infective disease still common throughout the world today. In *Rent* the plague is AIDS, and has spread to many of the characters, half of whom are infected with the illness.

Many character names in *Rent* and *La Boheme* are similar or identical, and modern characters often share similar, though updated, jobs. Musetta, in the original opera, is a flamboyant singer. Her modern counterpart, Maureen, is a performance artist who uses song as part of her repertoire. Mimi has the same name in both *Rent* and *La Boheme*, but is a seamstress afflicted with tuberculosis in the original, while in the modern version she is a stripper infected with AIDS.

Character in La bohème Character in Rent (musical)

- Mimi, a seamstress with tuberculosis : Mimi Márquez, an exotic dancer with HIV
- Rodolfo, a poet : Roger Davis, a musician who is HIV positive
- Marcello, a painter : Mark Cohen, a filmmaker
- Musetta, a singer : Maureen Johnson, a lesbian performance artist
- Schaunard, a musician : Angel Dumott Schunard, a gay drag queen percussionist with AIDS
- Colline, a philosopher : Tom Collins, a gay philosophy professor and anarchist with AIDS
- Alcindoro, a state councilor : Joanne Jefferson, a lawyer, who is a lesbian (Also partially based on Marcello)
- Benoit, a landlord : Benjamin 'Benny' Coffin III, the local landlord and a former roommate of Roger, Mark, Collins, and Maureen

Musically, *Rent* and *La Boheme* share many similarities in style and theme. The well-known "Musetta's Waltz" from *La Boheme* is repeated several times throughout *Rent*, finally forming the basis of the song *Your Eyes*. "Goodbye Love", a long, painful piece that reflects a confrontation and parting between characters in both Puccini's and Larson's work.[11] The song "Quando M'en Vo' Soletta" from *La bohème* is also referenced in the first verse of "Take Me or Leave Me," when Maureen describes the way people stare when she walks in the street. "Musetta's Waltz" is also directly referred to in the scene where the characters are

celebrating their bohemian life. Mark says, "Roger will attempt to write a bittersweet, evocative song..." Roger plays a quick piece, and Mark states, "...that doesn't remind us of 'Musetta's Waltz'." Both shows frequently rely on recitative singing, a form of rapid dialogue exchange in song, to show people arguing or heated discussions.

One of the closest similarities between the two shows occurs early on, when Mimi meets and is attracted to one of the main characters, called Rodolfo in the opera and Roger in *Rent*. The meeting occurs under near identical circumstances, as Mimi knocks at the door, hoping to receive a match for her burned-out candle. Some of the dialogue between the two characters is actually the same, as they fumble to find matches and discover they like one another. However, the *Rent* version follows its considerably darker tone, with Roger remembering seeing Mimi stripping and realizing she needs the candle for drug use.

Rent and *La Boheme* both focus on the plight of artists in cities that are reputed to celebrate them. Both shows focus on the poverty and dangers of a life lived away from conventional standards, but *Rent* shows an even bleaker existence in 20th century New York. Many theater critics consider the experience of *Rent* heightened by familiarity with the original opera, although both pieces have come to be considered individual masterpieces of their genres.