



**ACCESS OPERA
EDUCATOR GUIDE**

GIACOMO PUCCINI

LA BOHÈME



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Opera

LA BOHÈME

THE WORK

An opera in four acts, sung in Italian

Music by Giacomo Puccini

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

First performed on February 1, 1896, at Teatro Regio in Turin, Italy

PRODUCTION

Franco Zeffirelli
Production

Franco Zeffirelli
Set Designer

Peter J. Hall
Costume Designer

Gil Wechsler
Lighting Designer

Production a gift of
Mrs. Donald D. Harrington

Revival a gift of The Joseph and
Robert Cornell Memorial Foundation
and Viking

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Art, music, poetry, love: a group of young bohemians had it all—until the icy hand of death came between them. To outsiders, bohemian Paris seemed an exotic and extravagant realm where passing romances, raucous parties, and an idealistic devotion to art reigned supreme. That the so-called “bohemian revolutionaries” who lived there had chosen to forego the creature comforts of bourgeois life only made them appear more romantic. For the denizens of the Left Bank, however, bohemian bonhomie had a distinctly bleaker aspect: Debt, deprivation, and the diseases of urban squalor lurked behind their apparently festive life. For the young Italian composer Giacomo Puccini—himself no stranger to the financial struggles of young artists—it was this very clash of joie de vivre and abject poverty that made the bohemian world ideally suited to opera. For generations of opera lovers ever since, Puccini’s glorious masterwork *La Bohème* has brought the bohemian world to life.

From its earliest days, *La Bohème* was a smashing success. “Men die and governments change,” the American inventor Thomas Edison wrote to Puccini in 1920, “but the songs of *La Bohème* will live forever.” Almost a century later, it seems that Edison was right. The characters and songs of *La Bohème* have inspired Oscar-winning films ranging from *Moonstruck* to *Moulin Rouge*. The heartrending story also became the hit Broadway musical *Rent*, updated to reflect the ills of the late 20th century. And, to this day, *La Bohème* is the most performed opera in the history of the Met, where Franco Zeffirelli’s picturesque production embodies both the monumental grandeur and quiet intimacy of Puccini’s masterwork.

This guide delves into the history and context of *La Bohème*, one of the most popular operas of all time. The following pages include biographical details about the composer, information on the opera’s source and creation, and a guided listening exercise to bring the opera into the classroom. Although your students may not be familiar with Puccini’s music, the opera’s plot, or even operatic performance in general, they will likely recognize many of the themes and ideas presented in this masterwork. The information on the following pages is designed to provide context, deepen background knowledge, and enrich the overall experience of attending a final dress rehearsal at the Metropolitan Opera.



The Metropolitan Opera is a vibrant home for the most creative and talented singers, conductors, composers, musicians, stage directors, designers, visual artists, choreographers, and dancers from around the world. Founded in 1883, the Met first opened in a lavish opera house at Broadway and 39th Street that, while beautiful, had significant practical limitations. Almost from the beginning, it was clear that the stage facilities of the original theater could not meet the Met's technical needs. But it was not until the Met joined with other New York institutions in forming Lincoln Center for the Performing Arts that a new home became possible. The new Metropolitan Opera House, which opened at Lincoln Center in September 1966, was a technical marvel of its day, and has remained an architectural landmark ever since.

Each season, the Met stages more than 200 opera performances in New York, welcoming more than 800,000 attendees. In addition to presenting the indispensable masterpieces of history's great composers, performed by the world's finest singers and directed by visionaries from throughout the theatrical world, the Met is committed to ensuring that opera remains a living art form by commissioning and staging vital new works that tell modern stories and engage with the issues of today. The Met is also a leader in new media distribution initiatives, harnessing state-of-the-art technology to bring performances from the Met's iconic stage to millions of people worldwide.

This guide includes a variety of materials on Giacomo Puccini's *La Bohème*.

The Source, The Story, and Who's Who in *La Bohème*

A Timeline: The historical context of the opera's story and composition

A Closer Look: A brief article highlighting an important aspect of Puccini's *La Bohème*

Guided Listening: A series of musical excerpts with questions and a roadmap to possible student responses

Ten Essential Musical Terms: Musical terminology that will help students analyze and describe Puccini's work

Student Critique: A performance activity highlighting specific aspects of this production and topics for a wrap-up discussion following students' attendance

Further Resources: Recommendations for additional study, both online and in print

This guide is intended to cultivate students' interest in *La Bohème* whether or not they have any prior acquaintance with opera or the performing arts. It includes activities for students with a wide range of musical backgrounds, and will encourage them to think about opera—and the performing arts as a whole—as a medium of both entertainment and creative expression. In particular, this guide offers in-depth introductions to:

- Puccini's use of vocal and instrumental music to depict his central characters and their relationships
- The recurrence of musical themes in the opera
- Creative choices made by the artists of the Metropolitan Opera for this production
- The opera as a unified work of art, involving the efforts of composer, librettist, and Met artists

Summary

It is bitterly cold in the attic apartment where Rodolfo lives with his friends Marcello, Colline, and Schaunard. They are very poor and struggle to afford food, rent, or firewood, but Schaunard has earned some money. Rodolfo stays home to finish some writing, but he is interrupted by a knock at the door. It is his neighbor, a young woman named Mimì, who needs help relighting a candle the wind blew out. Mimì and Rodolfo fall in love at first sight.

A few weeks later, Mimì arrives at a tavern on the edge of Paris. She tells Marcello that she and Rodolfo have been fighting. When Marcello asks Rodolfo about Mimì, Rodolfo claims he doesn't love her anymore. Finally, however, he tells Marcello the truth: Mimì is very ill, and Rodolfo hopes that if he breaks up with her she will find someone who can pay for her medicine. Mimì, standing behind a nearby tree, hears everything. She confronts Rodolfo and tells him it's over. But then, after talking some more, they decide to stay together.

By the time spring arrives Rodolfo and Mimì have broken up. One day, while Rodolfo and his roommates sit down to eat, Musetta appears at the door with Mimì, who is now very, very sick. In order to buy Mimì medicine, Musetta pawns her own earrings and Colline pawns his coat. Left alone, Rodolfo and Mimì remember happier days. The friends return with a gift for Mimì: a muff to keep her hands warm. Mimì thanks them and closes her eyes. At first, Rodolfo thinks she is sleeping, but then he realizes she has died.

THE SOURCE: *SCÈNES DE LA VIE DE BOHÈME (SCENES OF BOHEMIAN LIFE)*, BY HENRI MURGER

Today, Bohemia is a region on the western side of the Czech Republic. Yet when a volume bearing the title *Scenes of Bohemian Life* appeared in book shops in the middle of the 19th century, the "Bohemia" in question was another place entirely: Paris. The artists who gathered in the French capital claimed that they had renounced bourgeois society in favor of artistic and social freedom—and were therefore akin to "gypsies." Since it was believed at that time that the Romani people came from Bohemia, the artists called themselves "bohemians." (In fact, the English moniker "gypsy," a derogatory term no longer in use, is based on a similar—and equally mistaken—belief that the Romani originated in Egypt.) The Parisian bohemians met daily at local cafés and bars to share their work. Prominent among these was the Café Momus, a real-life café frequented by the likes of Charles Baudelaire, Gérard de Nerval, and a young man named Henri Murger, who in 1845 began publishing short stories about life in bohemian Paris.

Many of Murger's characters were inspired by real people: the musician Schaunard was based on his friend Alexander Schanne; Mimì was a fictionalized version of a certain Lucille (hence the opera's line "they call me Mimì, but my real name is Lucia"); and Rodolphe, the earnest young poet, was based on Murger himself. Although the initial vignettes attracted little attention, an 1849 play based on Murger's stories enjoyed a surge of popularity. And in 1851, when Murger collected and published his vignettes under the title *Scènes de la Vie de Bohème*, the bohemian world rocketed to international fame. Half a century later, the young Giacomo Puccini recognized in Murger's starving artists his own youth in Milan. Deeply moved by Murger's stories, he and his librettists stitched together several vignettes to form the tender, multi-faceted love story we know today.

Synopsis

ACT I: *Christmas Eve, in a tiny room at the top of a house in Paris's Latin Quarter.* The poet Rodolfo and the painter Marcello feed the stove with pages from Rodolfo's latest drama, just to stay warm. Their two other roommates arrive: Colline, a philosopher, and the musician Schaunard, who brings food, fuel, and a bit of money—just in time for the landlord, Benoit, to come ask for the rent. But instead of paying, the four get the old man drunk enough to tell tales of his flirtations, then they throw him out, accusing him of cheating on his wife.

All but Rodolfo head off to the Café Momus. He wants some time to write. But before he gets started, a pretty neighbor, Mimì, knocks at the door. The draft in the stairway has blown out her candle. Mimì feels faint and stumbles. Rodolfo rouses her with a glass of wine, then helps her to the door and relights her candle. She realizes she doesn't have her key and must have dropped it when she fainted. As Rodolfo and Mimì look for it, both their candles are extinguished. Rodolfo finds the key—and slips it into his pocket. Then he takes Mimì's cold hands and tells her of his dreams. She responds by talking about her life and how she sits in her own room, waiting for the spring. Rodolfo's friends are heard calling from the street, asking him to join them. Happy to have found each other, Mimì and Rodolfo set out for the Café Momus, arm in arm.



VOICE TYPES

Since the early 19th century, singing voices have usually been classified into six basic types, three male and three female, according to their range:

SOPRANO the highest voice type, normally possessed only by women and boys

MEZZO-SOPRANO the voice type lying below the soprano and above the contralto; the term comes from the Italian word "mezzo," meaning "middle"

CONTRALTO the lowest female voice type, also called "alto"

TENOR the highest standard voice type in adult males

BARITONE the voice type lying below the tenor and above the bass

BASS the lowest voice type



ACT II: *Café Momus and the surrounding streets.* In the crowded streets around the café, vendors are selling their wares. Schaunard is inspecting musical instruments and Colline old books, while Marcello flirts with passing girls. Rodolfo stops to buy Mimì a bonnet. Colline and Schaunard complain about the crowds. Children run by, chasing a man selling toys. Seated at last, the friends tease each other, toast, and chat about love. Marcello's former girlfriend, Musetta, makes a grand entrance with her new suitor, a rich old man named Alcindoro. Musetta flirts with Marcello. When the embarrassed Alcindoro tries to stop her, she sends him to buy her a new pair of shoes, then promptly reunites with Marcello. The bill arrives, and Musetta leaves it for Alcindoro to pay. A military guard marches by and the crowd, including Rodolfo, Mimì, and their friends, falls in behind.

ACT III: *A tavern at the gates of Paris.* On a snowy morning a few weeks later, Mimì comes to a tavern at the gates of the city, looking for Marcello, who lives there with Musetta. Marcello comes out to meet her, but she won't go in, because Rodolfo is inside too. Mimì says Rodolfo's jealousy has become unbearable: they need to break up. She is coughing badly. Marcello sees Rodolfo coming over, and Mimì pretends to leave but hides instead. Rodolfo tells Marcello he needs to break up with Mimì. He says he's bored with her, but before long admits that he's worried his freezing apartment is making her sicker than ever. He blames himself for Mimì's illness. Mimì, who has overheard it all, comes forward and says goodbye to Rodolfo. Meanwhile Marcello gets into a fight with Musetta over her flirtatious behavior, and they part. But Mimì and Rodolfo, still plainly and painfully in love, decide to stay together at least until spring.

ACT IV: *The Latin Quarter apartment.* Months have passed, and Rodolfo and Mimì are separated. He and Marcello are back in their old apartment, trying to work, talking about their ex-girlfriends as if they didn't care. Colline and Schaunard come in with a meager dinner, and the four pretend to feast like nobles, dance, and stage a mock duel. Their game is cut short when Musetta rushes in, followed by Mimì, who is by now seriously ill. The men prepare a bed. Marcello and Musetta go off to buy a muff to keep Mimì's hands warm. Colline decides to pawn his old overcoat for money to help her and leaves with Schaunard. Alone at last with Mimì, Rodolfo produces the bonnet he bought her by the Café Momus. The others return, bringing the muff and a bit of drink. They have summoned a doctor as well. Mimì seems to fall asleep, but Schaunard notices the sad truth: she has died. The opera ends with Rodolfo's cry of grief.



WHO'S WHO IN LA BOHÈME

CHARACTER	PRONUNCIATION	VOICE TYPE	THE LOWDOWN
Rodolfo A poor young writer	roh-DOLE-foh	tenor	Rodolfo falls head over heels for Mimi, but jealousy trips him up.
Mimi A poor young seamstress	mee-MEE	soprano	Mimi is a quiet young woman suffering from tuberculosis.
Marcello A poor young painter	mar-CHELL-o	baritone	Rodolfo's friend and roommate, Marcello loves Musetta, but her flirting drives him away.
Musetta A party girl	moo-ZETT-ah	soprano	Musetta may just want to have fun, but deep down she's generous and kind.
Alcindoro A rich old man	ahl-cheen-DOH-roh	bass	Alcindoro is the typical old fool who'll buy anything if his girlfriend agrees to stick around.
Colline A would-be philosopher	col-LEAN-nay	bass	Rodolfo's friend and roommate
Schaunard A musician	show-NARR	baritone	Rodolfo's friend and roommate
Benoit A landlord	ben-WAH	bass	An elderly man who likes to drink and boast about his flirtations

The Creation of *La Bohème*

- 1845** Henri Murger, a young bohemian writer living in Paris, publishes a series of short stories about life in Paris's Left Bank. The stories receive little attention until an 1849 adaptation for the stage begins playing nightly to sold-out crowds.
- 1851** Buoyed by the success of the play, Murger expands and publishes his writings under the title *Scènes de la Vie de Bohème (Scenes of Bohemian Life)*. A blockbuster both in France and abroad, the book almost singlehandedly establishes the quasi-mythical image of the bohemian artist.
- 1858** Giacomo Puccini is born on December 22 in Lucca, a town on the western edge of Tuscany. As the oldest son in a family of seven children, Puccini is expected to go into the business at which his family has excelled for four generations: music. In fact, his first formal music studies are with his uncle.
- 1880** Given his family background, Puccini's career in Lucca is all but assured. Yet the young composer has higher aspirations. Hoping to pursue a career as an opera composer, he moves to Milan, Italy's operatic capital. His early years in Milan perfectly exemplify the "bohemian" lifestyle: intense poverty, tireless work, and friendships with the city's most important intellectuals.
- 1883** The publisher Sonzogno announces a competition for young composers and Puccini submits his first opera, *Le Villi*. To his chagrin, he receives no prize at all, not even an honorable mention.
- 1884** Despite the disappointment of the Sonzogno competition, Puccini manages to find sponsors for a performance of *Le Villi* at the Teatro Dal Verme, Milan's second most important opera house (after the Teatro alla Scala). In the audience is Giulio Ricordi, head of the Ricordi publishing house, who is so taken with Puccini's work he immediately signs an exclusive contract with the young composer.
- 1889** Puccini's second opera, *Edgar*, premieres at La Scala. It is the only true flop of Puccini's career.
- 1893** The disappointment of *Edgar* is all but forgotten when Puccini's third opera, *Manon Lescaut*, premieres in Milan to rapturous acclaim. The success of *Manon* makes the formerly penniless Puccini a rich man and he moves to a posh villa near the town of Torre del Lago. It is around this time that he discovers Murger's *Scenes de la Vie de Bohème* and joins forces with the librettists Giuseppe Giacosa and Luigi Illica to bring Murger's stories to the operatic stage.
- 1894** Work on the new opera goes quickly. In July, Illica writes to Ricordi, "It is Sunday, a quarter past twelve, and my eyes are moist ... Mimì has just died, and the poor bohemians are weeping, gathered in silence around her corpse."

- 1895 In December, Puccini finishes the score for *La Bohème*. Like Illica, he is profoundly affected by Mimì's tragic story. Years later, he will recall completing the scene of Mimì's death: "I had to get up and, standing in the middle of my study, alone in the silence of the night, I began to weep like a child. It was as though I had seen my own child die."
- 1896 On February 1, *La Bohème* premieres at the Teatro Regio in Turin, conducted by Arturo Toscanini. It is a major occasion, with members of the royal family in attendance. The critics' reviews are chilly, but the audience adores the new work.
- 1900 *La Bohème* is heard for the first time at the Metropolitan Opera. By now, the opera is so popular that postcards depicting scenes from the opera are being sold and mailed around the world.
- 1924 Puccini is diagnosed with cancer and travels to Brussels for treatment. He dies on November 29, the unfinished score of his final opera, *Turandot*, lying beside him on his bedside table. His body is taken to Milan and temporarily interred in the Toscanini family crypt before being transferred to his estate at Torre del Lago.

Telling It Like It Is: Puccini's Naturalistic Opera

"Mimi is like a flower withered by poverty," Rodolfo sadly tells Marcello in Act III of *La Bohème*. "Love is not enough to save her." Puccini's opera begins with a romanticized view of young people relinquishing bourgeois comforts for the sake of their art, in what Rodolfo describes as his "happy poverty as a writer." But by the time the curtain falls on the final act, the characters' poverty—marked by their hunger, their squalid living conditions, and Mimi's fatal disease—has taken on a distinctly tragic hue. Poverty is crucial to the opera's plot. Moreover, *La Bohème*'s depiction of poverty reflects an aesthetic philosophy popular at the turn of the 20th century: verismo, or "naturalism" (from the Italian word *vero*, "true"). Italian opera composers borrowed the concept from French literature, which in the 19th century aimed to tell realistic stories of hardship and destitution.

For opera composers, this new ideal was a major departure from the status quo. Since its inception, opera had been neatly split into "serious opera," which focused on mythological figures and ancient nobility, and "comic opera," which depicted clever members of the lower classes outwitting their idiotic rich counterparts. Composers of the new "naturalistic" opera, on the other hand, sought to objectively portray the lives of the urban poor. When it came to telling the story of poverty and deprivation on the operatic stage, Murger's stories of "la vie de bohème" were a terrific source. The fact that Murger himself had been a bohemian in Paris made the stories seem authentic, as did the fact that the lead characters were based in large part on people Murger knew personally. Rodolfo's dire financial circumstances allowed Puccini and his collaborators to depict the effects of poverty, while the tender love story guaranteed that audiences would come away moved and satisfied. Yet one of the most realistic elements of Puccini's plot is something that would, only a few years before, have seemed unremarkable: Mimi's disease.

For most of the 19th century, it was believed that consumption was an illness caused by a "weak constitution." In literary-dramatic circles, it was associated with prostitutes and other women of weak moral character. Indeed, this was still the view when Murger published his novel in 1851. In 1882, however, the German doctor Robert Koch identified tubercle bacillus, the bacterium that causes tuberculosis. Almost overnight, consumption went from being a generic ailment to a highly specific disease linked to the filthy, crowded living conditions of the urban poor. The discovery led to early efforts in public health and hygiene, as well as the 1905 Nobel Prize in Medicine for Koch. It also meant that in 1896, when Puccini's *La Bohème* premiered, consumption was no longer a designator of weak morals but rather a gut-wrenching illustration of poverty's impact on innocent lives. Puccini even took pains to depict Mimi's disease musically: her melodies are frequently interrupted by coughing spells and shortness of breath, a tendency which increases as the opera reaches its—and her—tragic end.

The Guided Listening Activities are designed to introduce students to a selection of memorable moments from the opera. They include information on what is happening dramatically, a description of the musical style, and a roadmap of musical features to listen for. Guided Listening Activities can be used by students and teachers of varying levels of musical experience.

IN PREPARATION

Teachers can access recording for these Guided Listening Activities at metopera.org/aobohehemusic.

“Che gelida manina”

As Rodolfo and Mimì search for her lost key, his hand brushes hers. Grasping her hand tenderly, he observes that it is cold as ice. In this aria, Rodolfo introduces himself to Mimì. Puccini also uses this aria to introduce musical and poetic motifs that will return throughout the opera. For instance, Mimì’s cold hands will be an important indicator of her advancing illness, and coldness (of her hands, of the apartment, etc.) will consistently be contrasted with the warmth of love.

WHAT TO LISTEN FOR:

- How the music reflects the ideas in the poetry, and how music and poetry work together to create the dramatic trajectory of the scene
- Puccini’s use of high notes to illustrate important ideas
- Melodies that will be used over and over again in the opera

- (00:18) Rodolfo takes Mimì’s hand and begins to sing. The first few words are all on the same note, but on the word “*lasci*” (“let me [warm your hand]”) the melody suddenly jumps up, as though Rodolfo’s emotions are so strong he cannot control his voice. He reaches the highest notes of the phrase on “*Cercar, che giova?*” (“Will it really help to look?”), then the melody makes its way back downward.
- (00:40) The harp echoes the final notes of Rodolfo’s melody. This musical interlude gives the phrase a feeling of closure. It also gives Rodolfo time to hold Mimì’s hand, stare lovingly into her eyes, or otherwise express his devotion without recourse to words—an excellent reminder that performing an operatic character is as much about acting as singing!
- (01:11) Rodolfo returns to the melody he sang at the very beginning. On the line “[I’ll tell you] who I am” (01:23), the melody leaps upward. This high note is accompanied by a bright, shining chord in the orchestra.
- (01:48) As Rodolfo begins describing who he is, the music changes again. The simple melody Rodolfo sings reflects the simple life he describes himself as leading. Yet the orchestra is full of lush chords, suggesting that a great sea of feeling and emotion lies behind his humble words.
- (02:50) The most luxurious melody of the entire aria. Rodolfo only understands the true meaning of beauty, love, and wealth when he meets Mimì. This melody will appear throughout the opera whenever Puccini wants to refer to Rodolfo and Mimì’s love.
- (03:49) As Rodolfo’s melody soars to ever more extreme heights, the orchestra plays the melody he just sang. Listen to the large assortment of instruments, all playing together to make this moment both beautiful and emphatic.
- (04:12) For most of the aria, the drama seems to be building: the music gets louder and denser, and Rodolfo’s melodies get fancier and fancier. Now it all recedes back into a single, simple line. After the high-flying poetry of the aria, he is ready to fall silent and listen as Mimì introduces herself.

"O soave fanciulla"

After introducing themselves, Rodolfo and Mimì sing a duet for the first time. One of Puccini's most important compositional techniques involves using the same melody repeatedly throughout an opera to connect disparate moments in the plot. In this duet, you will recognize a melody from "*Che gelida manina*." Why might Puccini have chosen to link these two moments?

WHAT TO LISTEN FOR:

- The return of music from "*Che gelida manina*"
 - How the two voices are combined: sometimes Mimì and Rodolfo sing the same music at the same time (in unison), sometimes they sing different music at the same time (counterpoint), and sometimes they take turns singing
- (00:00) The flute plays the soaring melody from (02:50) in "*Che gelida manina*" as Rodolfo addresses Mimì. From offstage, the voice of Marcello is heard declaring, "Rodolfo has found his poetry!"
- (00:19) Listen to how the music builds: Rodolfo's singing gets higher and higher and the orchestra increases in volume and density. The effect is a musical wave, surging upward to the moment when Mimì and Rodolfo's voices will finally join.
- (00:38) Mimì and Rodolfo begin singing together—to the same melody that the flute played at (00:00), and that Rodolfo sang in "*Che gelida manina*." When multiple people sing the same melody at the same time, they are singing in unison.
- (00:46) The melody continues, but now Rodolfo and Mimì take turns singing fragments of the tune.
- (00:59) Rodolfo sings a short three-note repeating fragment while Mimì sings a slowly rising melody. Note the contrast with the unison texture at (00:38); when two different melodies occur at the same time, it is called counterpoint.

“Quando me’n vo” (Musetta’s Waltz)

The four friends and Mimì have just sat down to dinner at the Café Momus, when who should enter but Musetta, Marcello’s feisty ex-girlfriend. She is at the café on a date with Alcindoro, her rich new boyfriend, but she misses Marcello and hopes to win him back. To get his attention, she begins to sing and dance, declaring that her beauty is utterly irresistible to anyone who sees her.

WHAT TO LISTEN FOR:

- The way the music depicts Musetta’s flirtatious character
 - The contrast between Musetta’s singing and the conversation taking place between the other characters
- (00:13) Musetta sings a very slow, languid melody while the winds play little frills below. One can almost imagine her walking down the street, taking one step per note, swishing her skirt as she swings her hips from side to side. On the words “*soletta*” (“all alone”), she sings a very short, fast note before landing on a longer note. This is called an “ornament” or “grace note.” The musical effect, a little bounce, is like the wink of Musetta’s eye or the coquettish toss of her head.
- (00:37) Musetta begins singing the same melody again, so we think we know how it will continue. But at (00:49), the melody suddenly changes, leaping into the stratosphere when Musetta mentions her own rapturous beauty. The sudden variation is both surprising and exciting.
- (00:55) Marcello and Alcindoro both comment angrily on Musetta’s behavior. There is no accompaniment from the orchestra, so their words sound like a surly interruption of Musetta’s song.
- (01:00) Aware that her plan is already having its desired effect, Musetta continues her flirtatious song, now with a new melody.
- (02:01) Musetta returns to her opening melody while Alcindoro and Mimì comment in the background.
- (02:26) Slowly, more and more voices are added the background chorus, increasing the dramatic and musical tension as Musetta declares, “Marcello still loves me! I’ve won!”

“Vecchia zimarra” (Coat Song)

Mimì lies dying. Colline decides to pawn his overcoat to help buy medicine for her. As he contemplates parting with his “old friend,” he sings it a song of farewell and thanks. In contrast to much of Puccini’s music, which often features long, soaring melodies, this aria has predominantly short, heavy melodies. Ask your students if this music conjures different emotions than the preceding selections, and invite them to consider why.

WHAT TO LISTEN FOR:

- The steady, constantly repeating bass line (the lowest pitches in the orchestra)
- The repetition of a single melody with different words (strophic composition)
- The use of minimal accompaniment to create a somber atmosphere

- (00:00) As the aria begins, listen especially to the bass line, where there is the constant alternation of a low note and slightly higher note. The effect is like heavy footsteps which trudge inexorably forward.
- (00:24) As Colline recalls the happy days he and the coat spent together, his melody changes slightly, moving higher and sounding happier. Nevertheless, the bass line trudges steadily on.
- (00:37) “In your large pockets,” Colline says, “you have sheltered precious works of philosophers and poets.” The coat has not only kept him warm, it has also protected his books and thus his livelihood. On this line, Colline sings his way down a short chromatic scale (equivalent to playing all the white and black keys on a piano). Since chromatic scales use notes that would not typically be included in the aria, the scale sounds strange, sad, and surprising.
- (00:55) The melody from the beginning of the aria returns with a new text. Strophic writing (i.e., multiple verses of text sung to the same melody) is typically used in dirges and other songs of lamentation. Yet Colline does not complete the full melody, as we might expect. Instead, he falls silent in the middle of the phrase—perhaps he is too sad to go on, or perhaps he knows that Mimì is fading and he has no time to lose.
- (01:19) “Farewell,” Colline says one last time as the full orchestra takes over. The lush orchestration, which seems to indicate the surge of emotion Colline must be feeling, is a stark contrast to the preceding orchestral accompaniment—which, trudging along, seemed as thin and threadbare as Colline’s old coat.

Aria

A song for solo voice accompanied by orchestra. In opera, arias mostly appear during a pause in dramatic action when a character is reflecting musically on his or her emotions. Most arias are lyrical, with a tune that can be hummed, and many arias include musical repetition. For example, the earliest arias in opera consist of music sung with different stanzas of text (strophic arias). Another type of aria, da capo arias, became common by the 18th century and feature the return of the opening music and text after a contrasting middle section. In the 19th century, Italian arias often featured a two-part form that showcases an intensification of emotion from the first section (the cantabile) to the second section (the cabaletta).

Bass

The lowest sounding line in music. Bass also refers to the lowest singing range for the male voice. Opera composers often choose a bass voice to sing one of two opposite types of roles: comic characters or dramatic and serious characters. For example, Mozart and Rossini wrote comic parts for basses, using musical repetition and low notes for comic effect. Wagner and Mozart wrote serious parts for basses, focusing on the gravity that a low register can contribute to the overall musical texture.

Ensemble

A musical piece for two or more soloists, accompanied by orchestra. Types of ensembles include duets (for two soloists), trios (for three soloists), and quartets (for four soloists). Sometimes singers will respond directly to one another during an ensemble. At other times, singers will each sing to themselves as if the other singers were not on stage. In ensembles, multiple characters may simultaneously express very different emotions from one another.

Harmony

The simultaneous sounding of pitches to produce chords, and the relationship between different chords as they succeed one another. Throughout much of Western music, systems of rules govern these progressions to help create our sense of musical tension, expectation, and conclusion. Tonal harmony is based on progressions of chords in relationship to a tonic (or home) key. In the 19th century, as composers sought novel sounds to reflect the originality of their invention, they began to employ chords and progressions of greater dissonance and greater distance from the home key. As such dissonances moved beyond mere sound effects into the musical structure itself, the traditional theory of tonal harmony became insufficient as a way to understand and describe musical structure.

Libretto

The text of an opera, including all the words that are said or sung by performers. Until the early 18th century, a composer would frequently set music to a preexisting libretto, and any given libretto could thus be set to music multiple times by different composers. During the 18th and 19th centuries, collaboration between the author of the libretto, known as the librettist, and the composer became more frequent. Some opera composers, most notably Wagner, are known for writing their own text.

Melody

A succession of pitches that form an understandable unit. The melody of a piece consists of the tune that a listener can hum or sing. During arias, the singer will usually sing the main melody, though other instruments may play parts of the melody. Sometimes, such as during ensembles, multiple melodies can occur simultaneously.

Recitative

A type of vocal writing between speech and song that imitates the accents and inflections of natural speech. Composers often employ recitative for passages of text that involve quick dialogue and the advancement of plot, since the style allows singers to move rapidly through a large amount of text. Recitative may be accompanied either by a keyboard instrument or by the whole orchestra.

Score

The complete musical notation for a piece, the score includes notated lines for all of the different instrumental and vocal parts that unite to constitute a musical composition. In an opera orchestra, the conductor follows the score during rehearsals and performances, while each performer follows his or her individual part.

Theme/motive

Themes are the melodic ideas that are musical building blocks for a piece. A theme is often recognizable as a distinct tune and may reappear in its original form or in altered form throughout the piece. A motif (or motive) is a brief musical idea that recurs throughout a musical work. Motives can be based on a melodic, rhythmic, or harmonic component, and their repetition makes them recognizable to the listener. In opera, musical motives are often symbolically associated with specific characters or dramatic ideas.

Verismo

A movement in Italian theater and opera in the late 19th century that embraced realism and explored areas of society previously ignored on the stage: the poor, the lower class, and the criminal. Its characters are driven by passion to defy reason, morality, and the law. In order to reflect these emotional extremes, composers of verismo opera developed a musical style that communicates raw and unfiltered passions. Musically, verismo operas react against the forced ornamentation of the bel canto style and instead emphasize a more natural setting of the text to music. Before its exploration on the operatic stage, the verismo aesthetic first developed within the realm of literature.

Encouraging Student Response in attending the Final Dress Rehearsal

COMMON CORE STANDARDS AND LA BOHÈME

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.SL.9-12.1

Initiate and participate effectively in a range of collaborative discussions (one-on-one, in groups, and teacher-led) with diverse partners on grades 9–12 topics, texts, and issues, building on others' ideas and expressing their own clearly and persuasively.

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.SL.9-12.1d

Respond thoughtfully to diverse perspectives; synthesize comments, claims, and evidence made on all sides of an issue; resolve contradictions when possible; and determine what additional information or research is required to deepen the investigation or complete the task.

Watching and listening to a performance is a unique experience that takes students beyond the printed page to an immersion in images, sound, interpretation, technology, drama, skill, and craft. This performance activity will help students analyze different aspects of the experience, engage critically with the performance, and express their views in a respectful and supported environment.

The enclosed performance activity is called “Opera Review: *La Bohème*.” The reproducible handout for this activity, available at the back of this guide, will invite students to think of themselves as opera critics, taking notes on what they see and hear during the performance and critiquing each scene on a five-star scale. Students should bring this activity sheet to the final dress rehearsal and fill it out during intermission and/or after the final curtain. When they return to class, students can use their “Opera Review” sheets as they review and discuss their experience.

DISCUSSION

Students will enjoy starting the class with an open discussion of the final dress rehearsal. What did they like? What didn't they? Did anything surprise them? What would they like to see or hear again? What would they have done differently?

La Bohème is one of the most influential works of art produced in the modern era. Among the works based on or inspired by Murger and Puccini's stories include *Moulin Rouge*, *Moonstruck*, *Rent*, and even an episode of *The Simpsons*. The themes presented in *La Bohème* clearly resonate throughout our artistic culture, inspiring continued interest from writers, movie producers, and more. Now that your students have seen the opera, ask them to identify some of the main themes and consider how the many elements of the performance—music, acting, costumes, stage sets, wigs, makeup, etc.—worked together to express these themes. In your discussion, you may draw from the following questions.

- Can you think of any other movies/novels/works of art/etc. that have themes similar to those presented in *La Bohème*?
- Why did Rodolfo feel that he had to push Mimì away (in Act III)? Do you agree with his decision? Although it is never specified in the opera, why do you think they might have broken up in the period between Acts III and IV?
- Puccini wanted to write an opera that showed poverty in all its gritty detail. Do you think he was successful? Why or why not? How did the costumes, scenery, and/or acting express the characters' living conditions?
- In 1996, the hit Broadway musical *Rent* brought the story of *La Bohème* to the streets of New York. If you were to set a production of *La Bohème* in the modern world, how would you do it? Would you use the same music or write new music? If new music, what kind of music would you use? Why? What else would you need to change to make the story seem “modern”?

- Rodolfo and his friends are what today we would call freelance artists: They only get paid when someone buys their art. In the 19th century, this was a relatively new idea. (Until the end of the 18th century, artists had been paid as staff members at European aristocratic courts; with the fall of the aristocracy, however, artists had to strike out on their own.) Do you think artists should have to work freelance? Why or why not? What are some other options? How might Rodolfo's story be different if he didn't have to struggle financially?

Finally, remember that opera is a multi-media art form: Any and all aspects of the performance your students have just seen—including the act of seeing it live—are important factors contributing to the overall experience. Ask them for any final thoughts and impressions. What did students find most memorable?

La Bohème

Performance date:

Reviewed by:

Have you ever wanted to be a music and theater critic? Now's your chance!

As you watch *La Bohème*, use the space below to keep track of your thoughts and opinions. What did you like about the performance? What didn't you like? If you were in charge, what might you have done differently? Think carefully about the action, music, and stage design. Then, after the opera, share your opinions with your friends, classmates, and anyone else who wants to learn more about Mozart's masterpiece and this performance at the Met!

THE PERFORMANCE, SCENE BY SCENE	ACTION	MUSIC	SET DESIGN / STAGING
Rodolfo and Marcello try to keep warm. MY OPINION OF THIS SCENE:	☆☆☆☆☆	☆☆☆☆☆	☆☆☆☆☆
Colline and Schaunard return. Colline brings food, fuel for the fire, and money. MY OPINION OF THIS SCENE:	☆☆☆☆☆	☆☆☆☆☆	☆☆☆☆☆
Benoit comes to collect the rent. MY OPINION OF THIS SCENE:	☆☆☆☆☆	☆☆☆☆☆	☆☆☆☆☆
Rodolfo takes Mimi's hand and tells her about himself. MY OPINION OF THIS SCENE:	☆☆☆☆☆	☆☆☆☆☆	☆☆☆☆☆
Mimi recounts her own story. MY OPINION OF THIS SCENE:	☆☆☆☆☆	☆☆☆☆☆	☆☆☆☆☆
Street vendors hawk their wares outside the Café Momus. MY OPINION OF THIS SCENE:	☆☆☆☆☆	☆☆☆☆☆	☆☆☆☆☆

THE PERFORMANCE, SCENE BY SCENE	ACTION	MUSIC	SET DESIGN / STAGING
Rodolfo buys Mimi a bonnet, and the friends take a seat at the Café Momus. MY OPINION OF THIS SCENE:	☆☆☆☆☆	☆☆☆☆☆	☆☆☆☆☆
Musetta makes a scene and wins Marcello back. MY OPINION OF THIS SCENE:	☆☆☆☆☆	☆☆☆☆☆	☆☆☆☆☆
A parade passes in front of the café, and the friends join the crowd of revelers. MY OPINION OF THIS SCENE:	☆☆☆☆☆	☆☆☆☆☆	☆☆☆☆☆
Mimi asks Marcello for help. MY OPINION OF THIS SCENE:	☆☆☆☆☆	☆☆☆☆☆	☆☆☆☆☆
Rodolfo lies to Marcello, then tells him the truth. MY OPINION OF THIS SCENE:	☆☆☆☆☆	☆☆☆☆☆	☆☆☆☆☆
Mimi dumps Rodolfo, but then they get back together. MY OPINION OF THIS SCENE:	☆☆☆☆☆	☆☆☆☆☆	☆☆☆☆☆
Rodolfo, Marcello, Colline, and Schaunard lighten their spirits with dancing and horseplay. MY OPINION OF THIS SCENE:	☆☆☆☆☆	☆☆☆☆☆	☆☆☆☆☆
Musetta arrives with Mimi. MY OPINION OF THIS SCENE:	☆☆☆☆☆	☆☆☆☆☆	☆☆☆☆☆
Rodolfo and Mimi recall happier days. MY OPINION OF THIS SCENE:	☆☆☆☆☆	☆☆☆☆☆	☆☆☆☆☆
Mimi dies. MY OPINION OF THIS SCENE:	☆☆☆☆☆	☆☆☆☆☆	☆☆☆☆☆