

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. Soon, their roommates—Colline, a philosopher, and Schaunard, a musician—return. Schaunard brings food, fuel, and funds that 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—it is Mimi, 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. Mimi 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 Mimi'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, Mimi and Rodolfo leave, arm in arm, for the café.

Act II

Amid the shouts of street hawkers near the Café Momus, Rodolfo buys Mimi a bonnet and introduces her to his friends. They all sit down and order supper. 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. A parade of soldiers passes by the café as the friends join the crowd of revelers.

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. Mimi 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 that she believes it is best that they part. As Rodolfo emerges from the tavern, Mimi hides nearby. Rodolfo tells Marcello that he wants to separate from Mimi, blaming her flirtatiousness. Pressed for the real reason, he breaks down, saying that her illness can only

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grow worse in the poverty that they share. Overcome with emotion, Mimì comes forward to say goodbye to her lover. Upon hearing Musetta's laughter, Marcello runs back into the tavern. 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 lovers, 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.

Giacomo Puccini

La Bohème

Premiere: Teatro Regio, Turin, 1896

La Bohème—the passionate, timeless, indelible story of love among young artists in Paris—can stake its claim as the world’s most popular opera. It has a marvelous ability to make a powerful first impression (even to those new to opera) and to reveal previously unnoticed treasures after dozens of hearings. At first glance, *La Bohème* is the definitive depiction of the joys and sorrows of love and loss; on closer inspection, it explores the deep emotional significance hidden in the trivial things—a bonnet, an old overcoat, a chance meeting with a neighbor—that make up our everyday lives. Following the breakthrough success of *Manon Lescaut* three years earlier, *La Bohème* established Puccini as the leading Italian opera composer of his generation.

The Creators

Giacomo Puccini (1858–1924) was immensely popular in his own lifetime, and his mature works remain staples in the repertory of most of the world’s opera companies. His operas are celebrated for their mastery of detail, sensitivity to everyday subjects, copious melody, and economy of expression. Puccini’s librettists for *La Bohème*, Giuseppe Giacosa (1847–1906) and Luigi Illica (1857–1919), also collaborated with him on his next two operas, *Tosca* and *Madama Butterfly*. Giacosa, a dramatist, was responsible for the stories, and Illica, a poet, worked primarily on the words themselves. The French author Henri Murger (1822–1861) drew on his own early experiences as a poor writer in Paris to pen an episodic prose novel and later a successful play, *Scènes de la Vie de Bohème*, which became the basis for the opera.

The Setting

The libretto sets the action in Paris, circa 1830. This is not a random setting but rather reflects the issues and concerns of a particular time and place. After the upheavals of revolution and war, French artists had lost their traditional support base of aristocracy and Church, and they were desperate for new sources of income. The rising bourgeoisie took up the burden of patronizing artists and earned their contempt in return. The story, then, centers on self-conscious youths at odds with mainstream society, feeling themselves morally superior to the rules of the bourgeoisie (specifically regarding sexual mores) and expressing their independence with affectations of speech and dress. The bohemian

In Focus

ambience of this opera is clearly recognizable in any modern urban center. *La Bohème* captures this ethos in its earliest days.

The Music

Lyrical and touchingly beautiful, the score of *La Bohème* exerts a powerfully immediate emotional pull. Many of its most memorable melodies are built incrementally, with small intervals between the notes that carry the listener with them on their lyrical path. This is a distinct contrast to the grand leaps and dives on which earlier operas often depended for emotional effect. *La Bohème*'s melodic structure perfectly captures the "small people" (as Puccini called them) of the drama and the details of everyday life. The two great love arias in Act I—the tenor's "Che gelida manina" and the soprano's "Sì, mi chiamano Mimì"—seduce the listener, beginning conversationally, with great rushes of emotion seamlessly woven into more trivial expressions. In other places, small alterations to a melody can morph the meaning of a thought or an emotion. A change of tempo or orchestration transforms Musetta's famous, exuberant Act II waltz into the nostalgic, bittersweet tenor-baritone duet in Act IV, as the bohemians remember happier times. Similarly, the "Streets of Paris" theme first appears as a foreshadowing in Act I, when one of the bohemians suggests going out on the town; hits full flower in Act II, when they (and we) are actually there; and becomes a bitter, chilling memory at the beginning of Act III, when it is slowed down and re-orchestrated.

Met History

La Bohème had its Met premiere while the company was on tour in Los Angeles in 1900. Nellie Melba sang Mimì and improbably added the mad scene from Donizetti's *Lucia di Lammermoor* as an encore after the final curtain (a practice she maintained for several other performances). This production lasted until 1952, when one designed by Rolf Gerard and directed by Joseph L. Mankiewicz, who insisted his name be removed after a disagreement with some of the singers, replaced it. In 1977, *La Bohème* served as the first opera telecast as part of the *Live from the Met* series, starring Luciano Pavarotti and Renata Scotto in a new production directed by Fabrizio Melano. The spectacular current production by Franco Zeffirelli premiered in 1981 with James Levine leading an impressive cast that included Teresa Stratas, Scotto (as Musetta), José Carreras, Richard Stilwell, and James Morris. *La Bohème* was presented at the Met in 59 consecutive seasons after its first appearance and has appeared in all but nine seasons since 1900, making it the most performed opera in company history. Having been presented more than 480 times since its premiere, Zeffirelli's staging is the most performed production in Met history.

Program Note

A beloved portrayal of the joys and hardships of ordinary people, Giacomo Puccini's opera about the bohemians of the Latin Quarter was neither the beginning nor the end of the literary and theatrical journey of Mimì, Rodolfo, Marcello, Musetta, Schaunard, and Colline. The characters first appeared in a series of short stories that Henri Murger published in the Parisian journal *Le Corsair* between 1845 and 1849. Murger then collaborated with Théodore Barrière on a play, *La Vie de Bohème*, which premiered in November 1849 at the Théâtre des Variétés in Paris, and soon after gathered his stories into a novelized version published in 1851 as *Scènes de la Vie de Bohème*. Not surprisingly, by the 1890s, an era in which the arts found new inspiration in the lives of the working class (Mascagni's *Cavalleria Rusticana* stands out as an operatic example), Murger's characters seemed perfectly suited for the operatic stage. Not one but two composers stepped up to the task—Puccini and Ruggero Leoncavallo (of *Pagliacci* fame), who feuded openly about who had the idea first. Resolution came in the form of two operas, with the same title, premiered a year apart: Puccini's, with a libretto by Giuseppe Giacosa and Luigi Illica, in Turin in 1896; Leoncavallo's in Venice, 15 months later. To this day, Murger's bohemians continue to inspire directors, filmmakers, and composers. Constantin Stanislavski staged Puccini's opera in a famous production at the Bolshoi Theatre in 1927. Baz Luhrmann brought it to Broadway in 1992 and then conflated the story with that of *La Traviata* in his 2001 film, *Moulin Rouge!*, itself now adapted for Broadway. Puccini's opera has received multiple cinematic treatments, including in 1965 (by Franco Zeffirelli and Herbert von Karajan), 1988, and 2008 (starring Anna Netrebko and Rolando Villazón). And its story was retold as a rock musical set in 1990s New York in Jonathan Larson's *Rent*.

In contrast to the remarkable amiability of the characters in *La Bohème*, the working relationship of the work's creators was vexed. Early in his career, Puccini revealed himself to be a remorseless perfectionist, at his most extreme in *Manon Lescaut*, which took a total of seven librettists (including publisher Giulio Ricordi and the composer himself) to lift it off the ground. The labor of bringing *La Bohème* to the stage, however, was marked less by issues of having too many collaborators than by a passionate struggle among Puccini, his two librettists, and Ricordi. Illica had finished the original scenario for the opera by 1894, but the months preceding that watershed moment had been a painful succession of arguments about the Latin Quarter scene and a now-discarded act set in a courtyard. On October 6, 1893, Giacosa, feeling strangled by Puccini's demands and ready to throw in the towel, wrote to Ricordi claiming "artistic impotence."

How remarkable, then, that, despite such creative discord behind the scenes, *La Bohème* unfolds so seamlessly and effortlessly from its opening notes. There is no prelude, and the music erupts from the depths of the orchestra on a single spring-loaded motive that defines the instability of the bohemians' lives.

Program Note

The curtain rises swiftly on a scene in medias res, the first in a series of episodes that tumble forth in quick succession, as characters improvise ways to overcome hardship: Marcello works on his painting; Rodolfo burns the pages of his play to heat the garret; Schaunard brings home the dinner; and the landlord, Benoit, is tricked out of his rent.

What is the secret to such utter freshness and spontaneity? One answer is that Puccini keeps the story moving, finding musical expression appropriate to the characters and their station in life. For this composer, “real” people simply could not sing in the formal Italian verse and musical structures that had governed so many Italian operas that came before his. Instead, he advances a more energetic and naturalistic repartee in which lyrical moments arise seamlessly out of the drama. That is exactly what happens in the second half of Act I, as the brief, intimate contact of hands groping in the dark for a lost key moves Rodolfo and Mimì to reveal something of themselves to one another in two of the opera’s greatest arias, “Che gelida manina” and “Sì, mi chiamano Mimì.”

The tone shifts again, though, as it is Christmas Eve, and the new lovers must join friends in the Latin Quarter, on a street teeming with a “vast and motley crowd of citizens, soldiers, serving girls, children, students, seamstresses, gendarmes, etc.,” as the libretto says. In the hands of a lesser composer, Rodolfo, Mimì, and their companions might have been lost in such tumult. But here, Puccini exercises his particular genius for manipulating large numbers of people and devising transparent musical textures that shine a spotlight on the characters he wants us to see and hear. At the center of it all is Musetta, who delivers a siren song (the waltz “Quando m’è venuto”) that Marcello cannot resist. As he falls into her arms, the bill arrives, and the bohemians disappear into the crowd.

One of the most familiar—and original—scenes of *La Bohème* is Mimì’s death, which differs significantly from the traditional “curtain deaths” of earlier operas. A good example for comparison is *La Traviata*, whose consumptive heroine, Violetta, is frequently thought of as a model for Mimì. Violetta, surrounded by loved ones, dies with a cry of renewed joy, a tonic chord, and a final curtain in fortissimo dynamics. When Mimì passes away, none of the characters on stage even notices that she is gone until it’s too late. She has no final spasm, nor does she collapse into a pair of loving arms. She sings no high notes; her friends have busied themselves by heating medicine, adjusting curtains, and plumping pillows; there is no vigil, no stage directions that communicate the exact moment of her death or how the singer is to enact it. The libretto does not even mark it with the perfunctory phrase that defines dozens of melodramatic deaths in opera: “She dies.” The only material indicator is in Puccini’s autograph score, where, in the margins next to the measures of the death music, he ironically

drew a skull and crossbones. A highly choreographed “good death” was not to be for the likes of his poor seamstress. Mimi only nods her head, “as one who is overcome by sleep,” and thereafter the libretto notes only “silence.” In the score, a slowing of the tempo leads to a “lunga pausa” just before the key changes from D-flat major to B minor and the tempo to *andante lento sostenuto*. Puccini adds a subtle detail in the single cymbal struck in quadruple *pianissimo* with a mallet; the diffuse sound seems to originate from and fade into the ether. Mimi is gone, and the final curtain belongs to Rodolfo.

—*Helen M. Greenwald*

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