

Synopsis

Act I

California during the Gold Rush. Inside the Polka Saloon, Nick, the bartender, welcomes the miners as they return from the hills. Jake Wallace, a traveling minstrel, sings a sentimental song that causes Jim Larkens to break down in tears. The men collect money for his passage back home. Trin and Sonora both bribe Nick to help them win the heart of Minnie, the owner of the bar, with whom all the men are in love. The Wells Fargo agent Ashby arrives with news of the imminent capture of the Mexican bandit Ramerrez and his band. An argument breaks out between Rance and Sonora, each claiming Minnie will be his wife. Just as a brawl begins to erupt, Minnie herself appears and restores order. She sits the men down for a Bible lesson, teaching them that there isn't a sinner on Earth who can't be redeemed. Later, alone with her, Rance confesses his love to Minnie. But she is not interested and, recalling her happy childhood, paints a different picture of her ideal love. A stranger bursts into the bar, introducing himself as Dick Johnson from Sacramento. Minnie recognizes him as a man that she once met on the road. The jealous Rance orders Johnson to leave town, but when Minnie declares that she knows him, the others welcome Johnson. As he and Minnie dance, the miners drag in a man named Castro, one of Ramerrez's band. Castro pretends that he will lead them to their hideout. He then whispers to Johnson—who is in fact Ramerrez—that he let himself be captured to lure the miners away from the saloon, in order for Johnson to rob it. The men depart with Castro, and Minnie and Johnson are left alone. She tells him about her simple life and that she is still waiting for her first kiss. When she shows him the hiding place where the miners keep their gold, he replies that as long as he is nearby, nobody will harm her or touch the gold. She shyly invites him to visit her in her cabin later that evening.

Act II

In Minnie's cabin, the Native American woman Wowkle sings a lullaby to her baby and bickers with the child's father, Billy Jackrabbit. Minnie returns and excitedly prepares for her meeting with Johnson. He arrives, and when they are alone, she gives in to his declarations of love, and they kiss. Johnson, full of doubt as to how to tell her about his true identity, is about to leave, but she asks him to stay for the night as it has begun to snow. When several shots sound, Johnson hides. Rance appears with some of the men and tells Minnie that they are concerned for her safety—they have discovered that Johnson is Ramerrez. Minnie claims to know nothing, and the men leave. She then angrily confronts Johnson, who confesses his past but declares that, when he met her, he decided to give up his former life. Deeply hurt, Minnie sends him away. Another shot rings out.

Johnson, wounded, staggers back into the cabin, and Minnie hides him in the attic. Rance returns, certain that he has found his man, and demands to search the room. Minnie refuses, and the sheriff almost gives up, when a drop of blood falls on his hand from above. He discovers Johnson's hiding place and prepares to take him away, but Minnie stops him—she challenges Rance to a game of poker. If he defeats her, she will give herself to him; if he loses, Johnson will be hers. When Minnie cheats and wins, Rance hurriedly exits into the cold night.

Act III

Minnie has nursed Johnson back to health. In the camp, Nick and Rance grumble about the misfortune that Johnson's arrival has caused them. Suddenly, a commotion erupts, and moments later, the men drag in Johnson. As the miners prepare to hang him, Johnson asks for one last mercy—that they lead Minnie to believe that he is free and far away. Rance is enraged, but the men hesitate when they hear Minnie's cries in the distance. She appears, wielding a rifle. When her pleas to spare Johnson prove fruitless, she reminds the men how much they owe her and of her Bible lesson—there isn't a sinner on Earth who can't be redeemed. The miners finally give in and release Johnson. He and Minnie leave the camp to start a new life together far away from their beloved California.

Giacomo Puccini

La Fanciulla del West

Premiere: Metropolitan Opera House, New York, 1910

Puccini's "American" opera, based on David Belasco's play *The Girl of the Golden West*, had its glamorous and highly publicized world premiere at the Metropolitan Opera, with the composer in attendance. The drama is set during the California Gold Rush, and the "girl" of the title is one of Puccini's most appealing heroines—a strong, independent woman determined to win the man that she loves. In the course of her struggles, she must fight her social and natural environment, the local sheriff (who has his own designs on her), and even her lover's criminal past. The opera explores themes of sacrifice and redemption that long have been popular in opera, but it is set within the common milieu of everyday people that inspired so much of Puccini's best work. After its initial success, *Fanciulla* disappeared from the repertory for several decades. Some critics found the story and setting not conducive to grand opera. (Stravinsky, for one, repeatedly referred to it as a "horse opera.") It is notoriously difficult to cast, with a highly demanding title role and a number of important smaller parts. Although these challenges remain, *Fanciulla* has rebounded in popularity in recent years and is now counted among Puccini's best works.

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. For the libretto, Puccini's publisher recommended the services of Carlo Zangarini (1874–1943), whose mother hailed from Colorado and who was fluent in English. Puccini found much of Zangarini's work "truly beautiful" but was frustrated by how slowly he worked, so the author and journalist Guelfo Civinini (1873–1954) was brought in to collaborate. The American impresario David Belasco (1853–1931) wrote and produced the source play, *The Girl of the Golden West*, on Broadway in 1905. Born in San Francisco during the Gold Rush, Belasco moved to New York in 1882 and became a playwright, producer, and director. He is remembered for bringing a naturalistic sense to the American stage and for his embrace of the latest technology in his productions. Belasco was also the author and producer of *Madame Butterfly*, which Puccini set just before *Fanciulla*.

The Setting

The opera unfolds in the mountains of California during the Gold Rush of 1849–50. The anachronistic presence of a Pony Express rider and a Wells Fargo agent would indicate a date after 1860, but historical accuracy is not the goal in this tale. Puccini

was enchanted by Belasco's fictional setting, with its combination of mythic and grittily realistic elements.

The Music

With his international stature already assured, Puccini explored new musical horizons in *La Fanciulla del West*: There are few arias (the tenor's Act III "Ch'ella mi creda libero e lontano" being a standout exception), and most of the music relies on changes of tone and color instead of set pieces. The orchestral sweep, appropriate to the dramatic landscape of the California mountains, is apparent in the first bars of the brief, explosive prelude, while in the second act, falling drops of blood are pictured musically. As in *Tosca* and *Madama Butterfly*, local musical elements are depicted for color, albeit sparingly. They include a cakewalk theme right at the beginning that recurs throughout the score, as well as a haunting melody sung by the camp minstrel that was long attributed to 19th-century American songwriter Stephen Foster but actually derives from a tune of the Native American Zuni tribe. The three lead roles, especially the gun-slinging title soprano, are among Puccini's most impressive and vocally challenging creations. The multiple layers of Minnie's character are revealed in the demands of her music, which ranges from the lyrical (her recollections of childhood in Act I) to the expressive spoken words that Puccini often used at key emotional moments (the tense poker scene in Act II) to the highly dramatic (her explosive outburst directly following the poker scene).

Met History

Fanciulla had its world premiere at the Met on December 10, 1910, with Puccini supervising a spectacular production designed and directed by David Belasco and conducted by Arturo Toscanini. Emmy Destinn, Enrico Caruso, and Pasquale Amato were the leads on this glittering occasion. One reason for the opera's initial success was the casting of some of the crucial ensemble roles: Adamo Didur, who would sing the title role in the Met premiere of *Boris Godunov* two seasons later, was Ashby, the Wells Fargo agent, while Antonio Pini-Corsi, a veteran of world premieres in Italy (he was the first Ford in Verdi's *Falstaff*) sang the miner Happy. The company mounted a new production in 1929, featuring Maria Jeritza, Giovanni Martinelli, and Lawrence Tibbett. The opera subsequently fell out of the Met repertory until opening night of the 1961–62 season, when Fausto Cleva conducted a new staging that featured Leontyne Price and Richard Tucker in the lead roles. Dorothy Kirsten (1961–70) and Franco Corelli (1965–66) also appeared in the opera in that decade, and Renata Tebaldi famously sang five performances in 1970. *Fanciulla* was the first complete opera given in the new Met at Lincoln Center: A Metropolitan Opera Guild student performance on April 11, 1966, tested the almost-completed building's acoustics only months before the official opening in September of that year. Barbara Daniels, Plácido Domingo, and Sherrill Milnes starred in the premiere of the current production, by Giancarlo del Monaco, in 1991, conducted by Leonard Slatkin in his company debut.

Program Note

Puccini took about 40 years to write 12 operas. His letters reveal an ongoing struggle to find stimulating ideas that evoked, as he once said to his English friend and confidante Sybil Seligman, “the spirit behind the words.” That spirit often manifested itself in a particular place and time—Paris, the Port of Le Havre, the California Sierras, Nagasaki at the turn of the 20th century, Rome in 1800, Florence in 1299. Puccini wanted to make the theatrical experience lifelike, to take his operas and his audiences “on location,” and he suffered deeply until he found the right time and place.

In 1900 in London, inspiration struck like a thunderbolt with the one-act play *Madame Butterfly* by David Belasco, the brilliant, eccentric, American, clerical-collar-wearing playwright, producer, director, and designer. Above all, Puccini was enthralled by the beautiful silent scene known as “Butterfly’s Vigil,” in which changing lights depicted the passage of time from sunset to the next morning as Butterfly awaited her beloved Pinkerton’s return. For Puccini, there was probably no better theatrical experience than this one, where action spoke louder than words. Belasco was surely Puccini’s kindred spirit.

The next inspiration was much harder to come by, and Puccini grappled with personal issues as well as artistic ones. As he wrote to the writer and critic Valentino Soldani in June of 1904, only a few months after the *Butterfly* premiere, “I’m going through a period of nervousness that stops me even from sleeping, and all this through not finding what I want.” He had considered both comic and sentimental subjects and dismissed the idea of something medieval. He read works by Gabriele D’Annunzio, Maxim Gorky, and Oscar Wilde, rejected them all, and finally turned once again to David Belasco.

In 1907 Puccini came to New York to supervise the Metropolitan Opera premiere of *Madama Butterfly*, and as always, he went to the theater. He saw not one but two Belasco plays, both set in California: *The Girl of the Golden West*, starring Blanche Bates, the same actress who had captivated him as the London *Butterfly*’s Cio-Cio-San, and *The Rose of the Rancho*, with the lovely Frances Starr. Puccini, however, did not experience the epiphany he had had when watching *Madame Butterfly* for the first time, and he even had a few concerns about both of Belasco’s Wild West ventures. As he wrote to his publisher, Tito Ricordi, on February 18, “The ‘West’ attracts me as a background, but in all the plays that I have seen I have found only some scenes here and there are good. There is never a clear, simple line of development; just a hodgepodge and sometimes in very bad taste and very vieux jeu [old game].”

Eventually, what Puccini himself called the “California disease” took hold. The combination of the (to him) exotic location and a heroine whom he found both “naïve and refreshing” was exactly what he needed to break his dry spell. With a little prodding from Sybil Seligman, who was convinced that he would rediscover his focus through another Belasco play, Puccini asked for *The Girl*.

For the task of translating this distinctly American phenomenon into an Italian opera he turned to Carlo Zangarini, a journalist and poet with an American mother (from Colorado) and a strong command of English. Zangarini struggled, Puccini became impatient, and eventually Ricordi brought in Guelfo Civinini, a Tuscan poet.

The libretto was the least of Puccini's problems, however, when composition was brought to a halt by a scandal that threatened to derail his entire career. In early fall of 1908, his wife Elvira accused him of having an affair with Doria Manfredi, their young maid. Puccini abandoned work on *Fanciulla* and fled his home at Torre del Lago; he wrote despairingly to Seligman, "*The Girl* has completely dried up—and God knows when I shall have the courage to take up my work again!" The episode ended badly, with Manfredi committing suicide, and it was a long time before Puccini could resume work on his new opera. Finally, in June of 1910, he signed a contract with the Met. His "American" opera would see the light of day in America. Belasco had agreed to assist with the staging, and Arturo Toscanini would conduct.

Met General Manager Giulio Gatti-Casazza engaged a brilliant international cast, with singers from Eastern Europe (Emmy Destinn) and Italy (Enrico Caruso and Pasquale Amato) as well as France and Germany. The challenge was great, as Belasco later wrote in his memoir, *The Theatre Through Its Stage Door*: "It was necessary to harmonize this incongruous collection of nationalities and make them appear as Western gold-miners—to create through them an atmosphere of the wild Californian days of 1849." Despite language differences, the team of Belasco, Puccini, and Toscanini worked together without an interpreter. Spirits were high, and one very fortunate *New York Times* correspondent who attended the rehearsals jubilantly reported that, even with the high ticket prices, it had cost him nothing to see "Belasco show Caruso how to kiss a young lady saloonkeeper." All were thrilled with the score, but Toscanini was concerned about "dead spots" in the acoustics of the Metropolitan Opera House. According to Gabriele Dotto, former editorial director at Ricordi, he advised Puccini to adjust the orchestration to accommodate those shortcomings. Puccini, who had known and trusted the conductor at least since the 1896 premiere of *La Bohème*, worked with him to make changes that have remained in the score to this day.

It is impossible to talk about *Fanciulla* without bringing nature into the discussion. Belasco had captured Puccini's imagination with his opening tableau, a panorama of the high Sierras featuring Minnie's cabin and the exterior of the Polka Saloon, all lit up at night. The *Fanciulla* libretto, clearly following Belasco's model, begins with a description of a wide valley with mountains in the distance and lovely pine trees surrounding the Polka Saloon, where Sheriff Jack Rance smokes his cigar and ponders the end of another day. Puccini's musical picture, however, is so vivid that it could be "seen" even in a concert performance. He

defines the vast and perilous terrain in the enormous “whoosh” of his opening chords and then dissolves them into the warm, lyric, and sheltering intimacy of the Polka. Such contrasts—of great and small, exterior and interior, gruff and tender, worldly and innocent, dissonant and consonant, sunset and sunrise—lie at the heart of *Fanciulla*.

Puccini loved to translate space into music. To him, the orchestra pit and the wings were simple walls that had no dominion over sound or illusion, as he demonstrated many times: In Act II of *Tosca*, Scarpia closes a window to shut out the sound of Tosca singing a cantata one floor below. In the Latin Quarter scene of *La Bohème*, the marching guard, heard from afar, becomes louder as it enters the stage and fades gradually as it exits. In *Fanciulla*, there are voices in the distance—the shouts of a posse, the singing of a minstrel—but also the sound of the wind, the snow falling on the roof of Minnie’s cabin, and even several gun shots. At the end of Act I, Minnie is left alone in the Polka Saloon to reflect on the mysterious Mr. Johnson and her first kiss, while an offstage chorus wordlessly mimics the wind in the mountains beyond. In Act II, parallel augmented intervals “howl” outside Minnie’s cabin. There is danger, and Johnson/Ramerrez, listening, catlike, for the posse that has tracked him into the woods, believes that he hears “sounds like people calling.” But Minnie, with the calm self-possession of a fireside storyteller, assures him it is only the wind.

Puccini uses dissonance and consonance to define extremities of emotion and tension between the miners, the sheriff, and the outlaw, but also between Minnie and the men who want her and love her. Minnie abhors Rance’s sexual overtures, but she longs for Johnson with equal intensity just as much as she wants to protect him. Raw sexuality is dissonant in Puccini’s Wild West, unrequited in the Wagnerian sense, while consonance in the form of singable melody is reserved for moments of the utmost tenderness. Melody summons the gentility from the hearts of characters who have learned to be tough but long for their homes, as seen in the nostalgic lyricism of Jake Wallace’s song, “Che faranno i vecchi miei” (“What are my old folks doing ... ?”). Melody is also dance music suitable for courting. The miners sing a lovely waltz on “la la la,” marking the downbeats by stomping their feet on the floor or rapping their knuckles on the table as Johnson sweeps Minnie off her feet. The theme later weaves itself into the most intimate moments between the lovers, especially in Act II, which also contains the most intense scene in the opera.

Minnie, in a virtuosic display of frontier smarts, challenges Rance to a poker game, while pizzicatos in the lower strings suspend time as cards are dealt. The vocal lines are declamatory and little is actually said, much less sung in a traditional way. This is an action scene: If Minnie loses, she will marry Rance; if she wins, Johnson is hers. There is no recourse but to cheat, and Puccini frames her victory cries, “Ah! È mio!” (“He’s mine!”) with a fortissimo explosion from

the orchestra. She laughs uncontrollably but collapses weeping as the curtain quickly falls.

Act III begins at dawn in a lonely scene marked by bass ostinatos and flourishes in the horns and clarinets. Johnson is caught, and the miners will string him up. But Minnie comes to the rescue and redeems her man by drawing a pistol on the rowdy would-be lynchers and shaming them into releasing their prisoner. The miners sadly recall the words and music of the minstrel's song, "La mia mamma, che farà s'io non torno? Quanto piangerà!" ("What will my mother do if I don't return? She'll weep so much!"), and a chorus of farewells fades to *piu*ssimo as the happy couple disappears into the sunrise.

The premiere audience applauded the work furiously, and Puccini, Toscanini, and Belasco were given many tributes, including a floral one in the shape of a horseshoe. The critics, though, had mixed reactions. The absence of consensus underscored the newness of the work and stirred the critical imagination. Some declared that Puccini was unable to capture any sense at all of the American West. Others lamented the absence of traditional arias, especially from a composer who had produced so many memorable melodies. They seemed bewildered by the opera's mix of Straussian dissonance, Debussian whole-tone scales, and fleeting lyricism. Even those who admired the work commented that the composer of *La Fanciulla del West* seemed not to be the composer of *La Bohème*. But at least one Italian critic found the work to be "profoundly Puccinian."

La Fanciulla del West is one of Puccini's most vivid, passionate, yet intimate, elegant, and tender scores. While it is true that the libretto teems with stereotypes and some might find it tempting to call it a Spaghetti Western, in the end, *Fanciulla's* complete and utter sincerity prevails. Puccini himself was pleased, as he told Sybil Seligman, "The Girl has come out, in my opinion, the best opera I have written."

—Helen M. Greenwald

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