

A MUCH LOVED OPERA: LA BOHÈME

Presented by **George Kurti Plohn**

The title of this opera is not meant to be translated, we simply call it by its French name ***La bohème***. Granted, in English it would be *The bohemian*. But what is its meaning? In our context, certainly it is not about somebody in the region of Bohemia, in the Czech Republic - I hasten to say - but rather people who practice an unconventional lifestyle, often in the company of like-minded people, with few permanent ties, and practicing free love. It involves musical, artistic, literary or spiritual pursuits.



Puccini, the composer of ***La bohème***, in his own private life was also a sort of bohemian himself. In his twenties, he went to Milan from his hometown, Lucca, and he studied hard there, while he was penniless and hungry most of the time. And he was also a great womanizer, which reached its highest point in the autumn of 1884, when at 36, he began a relationship with a 24 year old married woman named Elvira Gemignani. Elvira's husband, Narciso Gemignani, was himself an unrepentant philanderer, and Elvira's marriage was not a happy one. Elvira became pregnant by Puccini, and a son, Antonio, resulted from this affair. Elvira, Antonio and Elvira's daughter by Narciso, Fosca, began to live with Puccini shortly afterwards, when Narciso was killed by the husband of a woman that Narciso had an affair with. Only then, in early 1904, were Puccini and Elvira able to marry, and to legitimize Antonio. But the marriage between Puccini and Elvira was also troubled by infidelity, as Puccini had frequent parallel affairs himself, including with well-known singers such as the famous Austrian soprano Maria Jeritza, the Czech operatic legend Emmy Destinn, the Italian soprano Cesira Ferrani who was to sing Mimi's role in *La bohème* at its premiere, and the outstanding Romanian-born soprano Hariclea Darclée. All these ladies were the greatest opera singers in Europe at the beginning of the 20th century.

If this was not enough, in 1909, Puccini's wife Elvira publicly accused Doria Manfredi, a maid working in the Puccini household, of having an affair with the composer. After being publicly accused of adultery, Doria Manfredi committed suicide. An autopsy

determined, however, that Doria had died a virgin, refuting the allegations made against her. Elvira Puccini was prosecuted for slander, and was sentenced to five months in prison, although a payment to the Manfredi family by Puccini spared Elvira from having to serve the sentence. Some music critics and interpreters of Puccini's work have speculated that the psychological effects of this incident on Puccini interfered with his ability to complete compositions later in his career, and also influenced the development of his characters such as Liù in his opera *Turandot*, a slave girl who dies tragically by committing suicide. So much for our hot-blooded composer!

Having had such a tumultuous life and being a chain smoker of cigars and cigarettes, it shortened his life. He began to complain of chronic sore throats. A diagnosis of throat cancer led his doctors to recommend a new and experimental radiation therapy treatment. Puccini and his wife never knew how serious the cancer was, as the news was revealed only to his son.

Puccini died on November 29, 1924, at age of 66, from complications after the treatment; uncontrolled bleeding led to a heart attack the day after surgery. News of his death reached Rome during a performance of his opera *La bohème*. The opera was immediately stopped, and the orchestra played Chopin's *Funeral March* for the stunned audience. He was buried in Milan, in Toscanini's family tomb, but that was always intended as a temporary measure. In 1926 his son arranged for the transfer of his father's remains to a specially created chapel inside Puccini's much beloved villa at Torre del Lago.



Giacomo Puccini, who lived between 1858 –1924, has been called "the greatest composer of Italian opera after Verdi". Puccini's early work was rooted in traditional late-19th-century romantic Italian opera, but later he successfully developed his work in the realistic *verismo* style, of which he became one of the leading exponents.

Puccini's *La bohème* is considered one of the three or four most popular operas in the entire modern opera repertory. It was Puccini's 4th opera and the second of his four most mature works: *Turandot*, *La Bohème*, *Tosca* and *Madame Butterfly*, and I am proud to tell you that all these great operas will be presented in our opera series here at Esplanade.

La bohème had its première in Turin, in northern Italy, on February 1, 1896, when Puccini was 38 years old.

It happens that around 1830, in Paris, there were a lot of prospective artists who were dirt poor, but young and happy and Giacomo Puccini described their ordinary life and love in this opera. The opera's plot centers around a community of artists in Paris, particularly the romantic relationship between the poet Rodolfo and the grisette (a young working-class woman) Mimi, quite like the parallel relationship of Rodolfo's roommate Marcello and the beautiful Musetta.

SYNOPSIS

Act 1

Around 1830, in Paris, four Bohemians, near-destitute artists, the poet Rodolfo, the painter Marcello, the musician Schaunard, and the philosopher Colline live together in an old attic. They are poor, but happy. On the night of Christmas Eve, they try to keep warm by feeding the stove with pages from Rodolfo's latest drama.

They all intend to go to a bar, but Rodolfo has not finished writing his poem yet. Rodolfo promises to join them soon, and the others leave.

Mimi, a neighbor, knocks on Rodolfo's door, and she asks him to light her candle for her, which he does, but then the flickering light goes out.

When Rodolfo's candle goes out too, Mimi inadvertently drops her house key and the two search for it in the dark; Rodolfo finds it but conceals it in his pocket. While he continues to search for it pretending he hasn't found it, he touches Mimi's hand and sings his famous aria, "*Che gelida manina* (What a cold little hand)." Following his aria, Mimi sings her charming aria, "*Si, mi chiamano Mimi* (Yes, they call me Mimi)." They fall in love from that very moment. You will be fascinated by Puccini's magical music.

She recounts her life alone in a lofty garret, embroidering flowers and waiting for the spring. Rodolfo's friends are heard outside, calling 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 2

At the Cafe Momus, Rodolfo introduces Mimi to his three friends. All enjoy the Christmas Eve. They all sit down and order supper.

The toy vendor Parpignol passes by, besieged by children. Marcello's former sweetheart, Musetta, makes a noisy entrance on the arm of the elderly but wealthy Alcindoro. The ensuing tumult reaches its peak when, trying to gain Marcello's attention, she loudly sings the praises of her own popularity. Sending Alcindoro off on a pretext, she finally falls into Marcello's arms. Soldiers march by the café, and as the bohemians fall in behind, the returning Alcindoro is presented with the check.

Act 3

The next year, in February, Mimi visits Musetta and Marcello. Mimi consults Musetta about Rodolfo who is recently cold to her. Then, Rodolfo visits Marcello. Mimi hides at once. Rodolfo says to Marcello, "I love Mimi, but she has tuberculosis. I am poor, and I can't buy any medicine for her, and can't take care of her. I should say goodbye to her." Then, suddenly Rodolfo notices Mimi. They love each other, but they decide, nevertheless, to choose to live separately.

Act 4

Months later in the garret, Rodolfo and Marcello, now separated from their girlfriends, reflect on their loneliness. Colline and Schaunard bring a meager meal. To lighten their spirits the four stage a dance, which turns into a mock duel. At the height of the hilarity Musetta bursts in with news that Mimì is outside, too weak to come upstairs. As Rodolfo runs to her aid, Musetta relates how Mimì begged to be taken to Rodolfo to die. She is made as comfortable as possible, while Musetta asks Marcello to sell her earrings for medicine and Colline goes off to pawn his overcoat. Left alone, Mimì and Rodolfo recall their meeting and their first happy days, but she is seized with violent coughing. When the others return, Musetta gives Mimì a muff to warm her hands and prays for her life. Mimì slowly drifts into unconsciousness. Then Schaunard realizes that she is dead, Rodolfo notices the look on his friends' faces. *Why do you look at me? Why do you have such faces?* he is asking and then when he gets the reality, he shouts in his ultimate despair, in forte fortissimo, Mimi's name twice: *Mimi! Mimi!*

This last scene will certainly move you.

And on this tragic note, the opera comes to its end.

Our DVD is a recording from the San Francisco Opera under the baton of Tiziano Severini, with an outstanding cast consisting of the great soprano Mirella Freni as Mimì, the legendary Luciano Pavarotti as Rodolfo, soprano Sandra Pacetti as Musette, the New York born Canadian baritone Gino Quilico as Marcello, while the great Bulgarian bass Nicolai Ghiaurov sings Colline, and the famous Italian bass Italo Tajo sings Schaunard. Only big names, legendary names!

Let me mention here a sweet detail.

Mirella Freni grew up alongside **Luciano Pavarotti** in Modena, Italy. They were even rumored to have had the same wet nurse at the daycare in the tobacco factory where their mothers worked. Like brother and sister, Luciano and Mirella played together and later trained together and remained the best of friends. Freni was the one who convinced Pavarotti to pursue a vocal calling beyond singing in the local amateur chorus with his father.

And another interesting fact is that Mirella Freni was married to the great Bulgarian bass Nicolai Ghiaurov, whom she called affectionately— *"my big basso."*

Let's reminisce a little about our soloists.

Luciano Pavarotti, the "King of the High Cs", will be never forgotten. He passed away on September 6, 2007 after a yearlong battle with pancreatic cancer. He was 71 years old. The opera world lost one of its greatest.

Mirella Freni, born in 1935, she is around, now 82, and still active in her trade, teaching singing. On the other hand, she lost her husband, the great bass Nicolai Ghiaurov, who passed away in 2004. Italo Tajo, the other bass, died in 1993 at the age of 78.

La Bohème with Anna Netrebko and Rolando Villazon

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mrxaOXOals>