

Giacomo Puccini

Shortly before he died, Giacomo Antonio Domenico Michele Secondo Maria Puccini wrote to a friend: "Almighty God touched me with his little finger and said to me: 'Write for the theatre. Remember, only for the theatre.' And I have obeyed that supreme commandment". Having accepted divine will, Puccini composed some of the most popular operas ever written, earned a few millions, gambled most of the money away at the poker table, satisfied his appetite for loose women, boats and fast cars and, most of all, exterminated the population of wild geese around his villa at Torre del Lago.

This in a nutshell is the life of Puccini, who defined himself as "a mighty hunter of wild birds, opera librettos and beautiful women", and who said "Just think! If I hadn't happened to take up music I would never have managed to do anything in this world!"

Opera Italiana

Puccini's Youth

Giacomo Antonio Domenico Michele Secondo Maria Puccini was born in the Tuscan town of Lucca on December 22, 1858, the fifth child and first son of Michele and Albina Puccini. He was named in honour of several of his ancestors, who had been distinguished musicians and composers, each of them holding the posts of organist of the Cathedral of San Martino and Maestro di Cappella of the Republic of Lucca, and each a respected composer. The Puccini musical dynasty began with young Giacomo's great great grandfather, another Giacomo Puccini (1712 to 1781), and was carried on by his son, Antonio Benedetto Maria Puccini (1747 to 1832), his son, Domenico Vincenzo Maria Puccini (1772 to 1815), and his son, Michele (1813 to 1864), young Giacomo's father.



Giacomo Puccini

When young Giacomo was still a child, his father Michele died, leaving behind his pregnant 34-year-old wife Albina and seven children from 16 months to 12 years of age. In a striking example of job security, two of Michele's positions (choirmaster and organist at the Church of San Martino and teacher at the Collegio Ponziano) were reserved for his son and heir, six-year-old Giacomo. It was fully expected that Giacomo would follow in his father's footsteps. Mamma Puccini struggled to raise and educate all of her children, in particular young Giacomo. Although he was destined to be a musician, Mamma wanted him to have a good basic education first; she would say sagely, *puro musico, puro asino* (*pure musician, pure jackass*). However, young Giacomo was an inattentive student. One of his teachers reported, *He comes to school only to wear out the seat of his pants*. It took him five years to scrape through the four-year elementary school curriculum.

He began his music studies with his mother's brother, Fortunato Magi, a stern and forbidding man, who, not without reason, considered the young scamp lazy, disrespectful, and untalented. Albina Puccini soon found a new teacher, Carlo Angeloni, who taught harmony and composition at the Istituto Musicale Pacini. Angeloni had been a student of Michele Puccini's,

was a composer himself, and loved opera. Angeloni also introduced young Giacomo to what would be a life-long hobby for him –hunting. The two established quite a rapport, both musically and on the local waterfowl marshes.

By the age of 14 Giacomo was earning a bit of money playing organ in a number of the town's churches. He would shock the congregations by slipping folksongs and hits from the latest operas (such as Verdi's *Rigoletto*) into his improvisations. He had other ways of using his musical talent to earn income. He took on a pupil. He played piano in the local taverns, nearby resorts, and, it was rumoured, a brothel. He stole organ pipes and sold them to support his smoking habit – playing around the notes of the missing pipes in order to hide the theft.

Puccini was familiar with opera; his composer ancestors had all written operas; his teacher composed operas and introduced him to the works of Verdi. Then in 1876 he and some friends walked over a dozen miles to Pisa to see the first local production of Verdi's *Aïda*. He was so blown away by the performance that he decided to take up writing operas. Many years later he said, *When I heard Aïda in Pisa, I felt that a musical window had opened for me.*

He continued his musical studies in Lucca, composing mostly church music, until in 1880, with the help of a loan from his mother's cousin Nicolao Cerù and a bursary from Queen Margherita of Italy, he was able to move to Milan, the cultural capital of Italy, to study composition at the Milan Conservatory of Music. One of his teachers was the highly regarded Italian violinist and composer Antonio Bazzini, whose only opera *Turanda*, had flopped at Milan's La Scala opera house in 1867. *Turanda* was based on a play by Carlo Gozzi, which would later inspire Puccini's last opera, *Turandot*. Another professor, who became Puccini's mentor, was Amilcare Ponchielli, best known as the composer of the opera *La Gioconda*.

During his three years at the Milan Conservatory, Puccini lived the life of a student, continually broke, asking Mamma for money and good olive oil, eluding creditors, outwitting landlords, going to the opera, – in short, living an impoverished artistic life not unlike that evoked in his later opera *La Bohème*.

His roommates included his younger brother Michele and the young Pietro Mascagni, who would make his name as a composer of 15 operas, the best known being *Cavalleria rusticana*. Puccini and Mascagni were to remain friends and rivals for many years; their wives did little to help the friendship. In 1921 Puccini's wife Elvira would be so outraged by a rumour that Mascagni would be appointed a senator before her far more deserving husband that she threatened to renounce her Italian citizenship and emigrate.

The Early Operas

In 1883, with the encouragement of Ponchielli, who even found him a librettist, Puccini entered a competition for a one-act opera. The opera, *Le Villi*, was based on the legend of the Willis, the ghosts of girls who, having died of broken hearts, exact revenge on their faithless lovers by forcing them to dance until they die of exhaustion. Perhaps the most famous retelling of this legend was the 1841 ballet *Giselle*.

Le Villi not only did not win the competition, it wasn't even given an honourable mention, although Ponchielli himself was one of the judges. It has been suggested that Puccini's score, which he submitted right at the deadline, was so illegible the judges didn't consider it.

However, Puccini's librettist, Ferdinando Fontana, put great effort into getting the opera performed and was able to secure the support of Arrigo Boito, an influential critic, composer of the opera *Mefistofele*, and the librettist for *La Gioconda* and later for Verdi's final operas, *Otello* and *Falstaff*. Boito helped collect enough money to stage *Le Villi* at the Teatro dal Verne, Milan on May 31, 1884, to an enthusiastic reception from audience and critics alike.

Marco Sala wrote in *L'Italia*, *Puccini's opera is, in our opinion, a small, precious masterpiece from beginning to end*. Antonio Gramolo of *Il corriere della sera* concurred:

The virtues we encounter in Le Villi reveal in Puccini an imagination singularly inclined to melody. In his music there is freshness of fantasy, there are phrases that touch the heart because they must have come from the heart, and there is craftsmanship so elegant and refined that from time to time we seem to have before us not a young student but a Bizet or a Massenet ... In short we believe that in Puccini we may have the composer for whom Italy has been waiting for a long time.

And, from Filippo Filippi of *La Perseveranza* came this: *Puccini reaches the stars ... Poor competition panel, that threw the opera into a corner like a rag!*

Even Verdi took notice. The grand old man of Italian Opera, then in his 70s, wrote to a friend,

I have heard the composer Puccini well spoken of. ... He follows modern trends, which is natural, but remains attached to melody, which is above passing fashion.

Puccini also came to the attention of Giulio Ricordi, head of the powerful publishing house Casa Ricordi. Ricordi published the score and within days of the premiere offered Puccini a contract to expand *Le Villi* to two acts and to write a second opera, which would premiere at Milan's great opera house, La Scala. This contract meant Puccini now had a small but regular income. More important, it was the beginning of a lifelong association. Ricordi became Puccini's publisher – and far more. He acted as Puccini's business manager, his mentor, his father-figure and friend; he weighed in with advice and encouragement and helped resolve the multiple disputes between Puccini and his librettists.



Giulio Ricordi

In the summer of 1884 Puccini's mother, who had been the bedrock of his life, died after a long illness.

Around that time, Puccini had fallen in love with a certain Elvira Gemignani, a married woman and the mother of two children. Elvira left her husband and moved in with Puccini, creating a major scandal in Lucca and among Puccini's family and adding to his financial pressures for, despite the small income from Ricordi, he was not well off. Elvira brought with her the elder of her two children, her daughter Fosca. In 1886 Elvira gave birth to Giacomo's son, Antonio. The couple was not married until 1904, after the death of Elvira's first husband.

Theirs was a tumultuous relationship, as stormy as any opera plot. Puccini was not a model husband; over the years he had countless affairs with other women. He called himself *a mighty*

hunter of wild fowl, operatic librettos and attractive women. Elvira was uninterested in the arts, didn't enjoy Puccini's hunting and card-playing friends, and grew less beautiful and more jealous and suspicious over the years. She eavesdropped on Giacomo, went through his clothes, checked his mail. She even resorted to hunger strikes and to physical attacks on Giacomo and at least one of the women with whom he was involved.

Puccini's second opera, *Edgar*, was poorly received at its 1889 premiere at La Scala. Subsequent revisions did not make it the success that Puccini, Ricordi (and Ricordi's shareholders) had hoped. Ricordi continued to support Puccini and blamed much of the failure of *Edgar* on the libretto by Fontana. Ricordi stood up against the demands of his shareholders that Puccini's retainer be dropped, and he encouraged Puccini to write another opera.

Despite the modest allowance from Ricordi, which was an advance against future royalties, Puccini was barely scraping by, especially now that he was supporting Elvira, her daughter, and their son Antonio. He was also frequently ill and still in debt to Nicolao Cerù, who was asking for repayment of the loan he had given Puccini for his studies in Milan.

In 1890 Puccini wrote in desperation to his younger brother, Michele, who had moved to Argentina: *If you can find work for me, I will come there. ... And send me some money. ... I have few hopes here.*

In a later letter to Michele he said, *With disaster right around the corner, it's a miracle if I can get to the end of the month. ... And in September I have to move. ... They have thrown me out of here for playing the piano at night. ... If you are doing well where you are, I will come there too.*

In the end he did not go. Michele died of yellow fever in Rio de Janeiro in 1891.

Meanwhile, with Ricordi's encouragement and expert stick-handling of a succession of librettists, work proceeded on Puccini's next opera, *Manon Lescaut*. As the premiere approached, Puccini, now 34, knew this opera was probably his last chance to be successful and to escape the poverty in which he was living. If *Manon Lescaut* failed, he would have to go back to making a living as what he called a *third-rate organist*.

Manon Lescaut: Puccini's First Hit

During the three years it took him to write *Manon Lescaut*, Puccini went through librettist after librettist. The task of writing the libretto involved some seven people, including the composer himself and his publisher Giulio Ricordi. The librettists included Ruggero Leoncavallo, who would soon make his name as the composer and librettist of *Pagliacci* and who would feud with Puccini over the right to compose *La Bohème*. Puccini was not satisfied with Leoncavallo's efforts on *Manon Lescaut*, and decided to ask the well known playwright Marco Praga to take on the libretto for *Manon Lescaut*.

Praga brought in a friend Domenico Oliva, but Puccini demanded so many changes that Praga withdrew. Oliva hung on a little longer, but eventually, he too wearied of Puccini's frequent demands for changes.

Now Giulio Ricordi recommended the poet and playwright Giuseppe Giacosa, and Giacosa called in a more experienced librettist, Luigi Illica, for additional help. Together they reworked

the libretto, and, with contributions from Leoncavallo and Ricordi – not to mention Puccini himself – the work was finally completed.

With so many hands in the final libretto of *Manon Lescaut*, the decision was made to put no one's name on the final score except that of the composer.

Giacosa, Illica, and Puccini went on to form what has been called the most successful composer/librettist team of Puccini's career. Ricordi called them *the Trinity*. Illica and Giacosa worked on three of Puccini's subsequent operas, *La Bohème*, *Tosca*, and *Madama Butterfly*. This is not to say that Illica and Giacosa didn't find Puccini as maddening to work with as Praga and Oliva had. They were frequently at loggerheads with Puccini, and Ricordi often had to act as peacemaker.

Manon Lescaut had its first performance on February 1, 1893, at the Teatro Regio, in Turin. It was an enormous hit, and the reviews were enthusiastic.

In the *Gazzetta Piemontese* Giuseppe Dejanis wrote approvingly of

the robust opera of a young Italian maestro, one who has done honour to his name and to his country. Art has no boundaries, to be sure. None the less, national pride is legitimate: Last night was a good night for art and for Italy.

Manon Lescaut quickly traveled throughout Italy and beyond. By the end of 1893 it had been seen in Buenos Aires, Rio de Janeiro, St. Petersburg, Madrid, and Hamburg. The following year saw productions in Lisbon, Budapest, Prague, Montevideo, Philadelphia, and Mexico.

The opera made Puccini's reputation, and he went on to fulfill its promise with a series of masterpieces that are among the most enduring in the repertoire.

The Successful Composer

The stupendous success of *Manon Lescaut* meant Puccini could begin to live well. He could travel. He could buy the house he had rented in Torre del Lago since 1891. He was also able to buy back the house in which he was born, a sentimental gesture only, as he did not live there.

Meanwhile there was the question of Puccini's next opera. Shortly before the premiere of *Manon Lescaut*, Puccini began considering an opera based on the story *Scènes de la vie de Bohème* by Henry Murger. The fact that this idea was ever transformed into the great opera *La Bohème* is a minor miracle, given the personalities of its creators, gadfly Puccini, and frustrated librettists Illica and Giacosa, not to mention a very public spat between Puccini and his old friend and rival Leoncavallo over the rights to the opera.

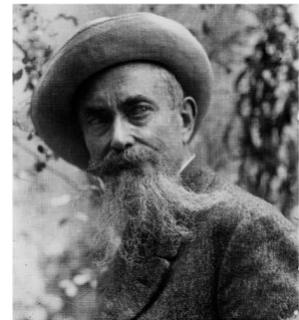
In March, 1893, Puccini and Ruggero Leoncavallo, who had helped with the libretto of *Manon Lescaut*, met in a café. Puccini stunned Leoncavallo by announcing that he was writing *La Bohème*. But Leoncavallo was also composing a *La Bohème*, using the very libretto he had offered Puccini on a previous occasion – which Puccini had turned down at the time! They quarrelled. Each went to the press to proclaim his moral superiority, and the race was on.

The two *La Bohèmes* eventually premiered in successive years (Puccini's first, in 1896). Although Leoncavallo's version was quite well received, it was eventually overshadowed by the enormous success of Puccini's work.

Despite the rivalry with Leoncavallo, Puccini took quite a while to get down to serious work on *La Bohème*. He started in early 1893, but then turned his attention to the excitement of buying a bicycle, which he named Mary, and to the challenges of learning to ride. Hunting season was also a distraction. Puccini's publisher, Giulio Ricordi wrote: *Puccini, Let not your passion for birds seduce you away from music. Therefore, an eye on the gunsight, but your thoughts on Bohème!*

In August 1893 Puccini invited librettist Luigi Illica to join him at his home, assuring him that he really was working on *La Bohème*; however, his charming invitation focused more on the delights of country life:

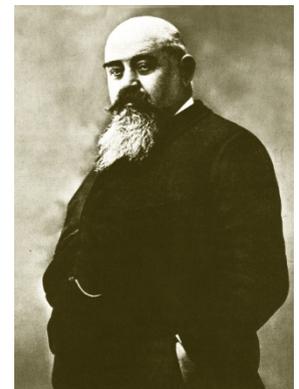
I am struggling with our characters. I am working, and having a good time. I'm killing vast numbers of birds while I wait to leave for Brescia, where [the soprano, Emma] Zilli will amaze everyone with her verve ... and kill off Manon before her time! ... In my house there are soft beds, chickens, geese, ducks, lambs, fleas, tables, chairs, guns, paintings, statues, shoes, velocipedes, pianos, sewing machines, clocks, a map of Paris, good oil, fish, three different qualities of wine (we don't drink water), cigars, hammocks, wife [not strictly accurate: Puccini and Elvira would not marry for 20 more years], children, dogs, cats, rum, coffee, different kinds of pasta, a can of rotten sardines, peaches, figs, two outhouses, a eucalyptus, a well in the house, a broom, all for you (except the wife). Come.



Luigi Illica

Puccini was also busy travelling to oversee various productions of *Manon Lescaut* and working on an opera called *La Lupa*, which he eventually abandoned. His mercurial flitting from project to project maddened both Ricordi (for whom time was money) and his hapless librettists.

The librettists, Luigi Illica and Giuseppe Giacosa, were the dream team brought in by Ricordi to rescue Puccini's first great hit *Manon Lescaut*, after Puccini had torn through three other librettists. Although Giacosa, Illica, and Puccini were the most successful composer/librettist team of Puccini's career, their relationship was stormy, for Puccini was maddening to work with and impossible to satisfy.



Giuseppe Giacosa

Much of the credit for *La Bohème's* existence must go to Ricordi, that master of shuttle diplomacy, who soothed Puccini's string of browbeaten librettists and refused to accept their regular resignations.

After one of the tiffs during work on *La Bohème*, Ricordi wrote Puccini to say,

[Illica is] very annoyed with you. He has almost decided to have nothing further to do with la Bohème. He complains of having wasted much time and effort only to find himself used, cast aside, taken up again and shoved away like a dog ... I succeeded in making Illica go back to work ... But he insists that I tell you that he is going on with his work solely out of regard for me!!

At one point, Illica wrote *To work for Puccini means to go through a living hell. Not even Job could withstand his whims and his sudden volte-faces. I cannot keep up with his constant acrobatics.*

In fall of 1893 Giacosa wrote Ricordi to say he was withdrawing from the project, leaving Illica to deal with Puccini alone; Ricordi refused to accept his resignation.

Giacoso too found Puccini a bear to work for, writing to Ricordi in June 1895:

*I'm tired to death of this constant reworking, touching up, adding, correcting, cutting, pasting together again, pumping it up on the right, and paring it down on the left ... I have already redone this blessed libretto three times, from start to finish, **three times**, and certain sections I have done four or five times ... Will it really be finished? Or do I have to start again at the beginning?*

After three years of work, they did finally finish *La Bohème* (nearly). Puccini made a few more changes after the 1896 premiere!

La Bohème is today considered one of Puccini's best works, as well as one of the most popular and romantic operas ever composed. However, it was not very well received when it premiered at Turin in 1896. Nor were the operas that followed immediately successful, although most are now among the most popular in the operatic repertoire.

Despite their stormy working relationship with Puccini, Illica and Giacosa stuck it out with the composer, creating the libretti for his next two operas, *Tosca* and *Madama Butterfly*. Puccini remained as fickle and demanding as ever; the librettists threatened to quit from time to time; and the exasperated Ricordi continued to play peacemaker.

Tosca was a subject Puccini had been toying with since 1889, just after the premiere of *Edgar*. Based on a play which Victorien Sardou had written in 1887 for the famous actress Sarah Bernhardt, *Tosca* is full of sex, violence, torture, suicide, politics, and religion. It is perhaps not surprising that audiences liked it, while critics deplored the sexuality, violence, and brutality.

While Puccini was in London for the Covent Garden premiere of *Tosca*, he saw a play called *Madame Butterfly* by American writer David Belasco. Although he understood very little of the English dialogue, he was moved by the plight of the geisha and the exotic atmosphere of the play and, according to Belasco, rushed backstage to beg for permission to use the play for his next opera. Belasco later wrote, *I agreed at once and told him he could do anything he liked with the play, and make any sort of contract, because it was impossible to discuss arrangements with an impulsive Italian who has tears in his eyes and both his arms round your neck.*

Madama Butterfly premiered at La Scala in February, 1904. Despite very high hopes and Puccini's belief that it was his best and most advanced opera, the first performance was a fiasco marked by hisses, catcalls, and rude comments from the audience. The reaction may have been engineered by jealous rivals of Puccini. In any event, Puccini withdrew the opera after that single performance, revised it, and unveiled the new version three months later in Brescia. It was a triumph. Ever since, the touching and gloriously melodic tragedy of the geisha who loved an American naval officer has been one of the most beloved of operas.

While he was working on *Madama Butterfly*, Puccini was also dealing with health problems and upheavals in his personal life.

He enjoyed fast cars and boats and the good life. In February 1903 he was in an auto accident — his second in less than a year. This time he nearly died. He had seriously injured his leg and endured a long, painful recovery, during the course of which he was also diagnosed with diabetes. At the time Puccini had been involved in a passionate affair with a woman known only as Corinna. However, Elvira's husband died the day after Puccini's car accident. Elvira



Puccini in 1902 with his first car, a De Dion-Bouton.

put pressure on Puccini to dump Corinna and marry her; the Puccini family and Ricordi were also urging him to marry Elvira. After Corinna threatened legal action, Puccini settled out of court. As part of the settlement he had to marry Elvira, and in January, 1904, Puccini finally married the mother of his 17-year-old son.

Domestic bliss did not ensue. Elvira's jealousy over the years had all too often been well founded. In 1908 she accused Puccini of having an affair with Doria Manfredi, a servant girl

who had started working for them after Puccini's car crash and had lasted longer than most servants in the tempestuous Puccini household. Elvira fired Doria but continued to accuse and threaten her and talk insultingly to Doria's mother and relatives. Eventually the girl, swearing she was innocent, committed suicide. After an autopsy proved her innocent, her family sued Elvira, and Elvira was sentenced to five months' imprisonment. After an appeal, Puccini and the family settled out of court. Although the Puccini marriage nearly broke up over this tragedy, the couple eventually reconciled – although Puccini persisted in his philandering and Elvira in her jealous scenes.

Given Puccini's health problems and the turmoil of the Doria Manfredi tragedy, it was not surprising that six years elapsed between *Madama Butterfly* and the premiere of Puccini's next opera which was also based on a play by David Belasco. Puccini first saw Belasco's *The Girl of the Golden West* in 1907 in New York, where he was attending a Puccini festival at the Metropolitan Opera. The story of miners in the California gold rush intrigued Puccini. Puccini's long-time librettist, Giuseppe Giacosa, had died the previous year, and Puccini turned to a new librettist, Italian-American Carlo Zangarini. As was usual with Puccini's librettos, work did not proceed smoothly. When Zangarini had not completed the libretto as quickly as Puccini wanted, he brought in a co-librettist, a young poet and journalist named Guelfo Civinini. *La Fanciulla del West*, starring Enrico Caruso, finally premiered at the Metropolitan Opera in New York in December 1910, with Arturo Toscanini as conductor.

In 1912 Giulio Ricordi, who had been instrumental to Puccini's career and profoundly important as a friend and professional manager, died. Casa Ricordi was now in the hands of Tito Ricordi, who did not get along well with Puccini. Puccini's next opera was published by Ricordi's rival Sonzogno. *La Rondine*, the story of a love affair between a courtesan and a younger man, is more like a Viennese operetta than Puccini's other works. Although its music is charming, it is considered one of his less successful works.

La Rondine was followed by a trilogy of one-act operas, *Il trittico*. The three operas are *Il tabarro*, a tragic tale of adultery and murder, *Suor Angelica*, the story of a nun who has had an illegitimate child, and *Gianni Schicchi*, a comedy of fraud and young love, which has proved the most popular of the three.

Puccini then started work on his last opera, *Turandot*, based on a 1762 play by Carlo Gozzi. It is the gripping story of a cruel Chinese princess whose suitors must answer three riddles or be put to death, of a prince who falls in love with her, and a slave girl who loves the prince and dies to save him.

On November 29, 1924, before he could finish the opera, Puccini died in Brussels of throat cancer — a result of a lifetime of heavy smoking. After a large funeral in Brussels, his body was taken to Milan for a national funeral. Mussolini, who had become Prime Minister of Italy in 1922, announced his death in the Italian Parliament. Arturo Toscanini conducted the Requiem from Act 3 of *Edgar*. Puccini was buried at the Toscanini family tomb in Milan; two years later his remains were moved to his beloved home at Torre del Lago.

Turandot, considered by many his greatest opera, was completed by Franco Alfano and premiered in April, 1926, at La Scala. At the point where Puccini's score ended, Toscanini, the conductor, stopped the performance, saying, *The Opera finishes here for at this point the Maestro died*. It was not until the second performance of *Turandot* that the version completed by Alfano was played.

Puccini's twelve operas include some of the greatest masterpieces in the repertoire. Their rich melodies, complex and compelling characters, and passionate emotions made them very popular – and Puccini very rich. He had a gift for creating works that were deeply theatrical, wondrously musical, and full of passion. His librettos contain painstakingly detailed stage directions, which go beyond descriptions of the setting and delve into the psychology of the characters. While his obsession for creating the perfect libretto and the perfect dramatic experience caused havoc for his librettists, the characters, particularly his heroines, continue to enthrall audiences. His great gift for melodic invention has also ensured his works a lasting place in the repertoire.

Maureen Woodall