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**Puccini's Women**

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## **Puccini's Women**

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### **Abstract**

It is no secret that Puccini loved women. Not only was he married, but he had numerous affairs, including one with the cousin of his housekeeper that caused a good deal of trouble. However, as conventional as it was for the last nineteenth and early twentieth century, this does not define Puccini's view of women. The other side of Puccini's attitude towards women can be seen in his operas and their heroines. Progressively, Puccini drew stronger and stronger female characters in his operas who invariably outshine their male counterparts. Starting with the self-centered and flighty Manon and working through to the demanding Turandot and Liù who will sacrifice herself to teach Turandot the true meaning of love, Puccini's women show themselves to be increasingly stronger figures and more and more worthy of admiration for their character. This paper examines the progression of the dramatic character of Puccini's heroines as a prelude to a study of the degree to which this is reflected in the music that accompanies their drama.

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## Introduction

Puccini's operas either have reached or will reach their centennial years at this within a decade. There is now an increasing amount of material about Puccini and his operas, most of which fall into several discrete categories. There are the biographies that tend to concentrate on the difficult process that Puccini went through to get librettos that would do what he wanted done and the rather constant revisions that he made even years after the operas were given all over the world. A few concentrate on his personal life and others give significant musical analysis of his development as a composer either passing over the more embarrassing moments of his life or treating them with discretion. In addition there are many books that rehearse the plots of the operas along with musical examples. Most books handle several of these areas but, surprisingly even here there is almost a total disconnect between the various categories. What I propose today is something that I have not seen in any study. That is the relationship between Puccini's experience with women and the portraits

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Puccini was literally surrounded with women his whole life. Born into a family with many sisters and only a much younger brother, his father died when he was five years old. The key figures in his family life were all women, starting with his very strong-willed mother, Albina Magi Puccini.

Puccini was an indecisive person in times of stress and hated making final decisions. He was, if only subconsciously aware of the dominance of the women in his life and constantly sought to counter this with masculine activities such as card playing, hunting and going to bars with other men. It goes almost without saying, that he was both very sexually active and could become emotionally dependent on these women. In his student years and early twenties he does not seem to have made any strong relationships and indeed he

advised his brother to have sex frequently, but not to fall in love because it would hinder his work and career. Love was not his goal when it came to women. Nevertheless, one of his liaisons did turn serious, that with Elvira Bonturi Gimignani, the mother of two who was married to a friend of his. Elvira, pregnant with Puccini's child, separated from her husband and stayed, for the most part, with Puccini for the rest of her life. After Elvira's husband died in 1904, Puccini and Elvira were finally married. This did not stop Puccini from having numerous short affairs which did not seem to bother Elvira excessively. It was the most serious affairs that upset her and gradually turned her into a wild woman constantly berating Puccini and spying on him. This activity was not limited to going through his pockets and correspondence but at time she dressed in his clothes and when out looking for him.

His first serious affair after settling in with Elvira occurred in 1900 with a young lawyer from Turin, "Corrina," who Puccini saw while working of the premier of *La Bohème*.<sup>1</sup> She, thinking that Puccini would leave Elvira and marry her, moved herself into a house near the Puccini estate at Torre del Lago. Guiseppi Ricordi, Puccini's publisher, agent and mentor (as well as the one who paid Puccini his stipend), had to cajole and threaten him and Corrina to end the affair. He was joined by Puccini's sister among others in urging him to give up the affair. Elvira also "hit the roof". Puccini gave in.

The next major affair was with the upper class Jewish wife of a London banker, Sybil Seligman, an amateur musician of some talent. There was a brief sexual liaison which she broke off afraid of what the scandal would do to her, but she and Puccini remained friends for life and he turned to her for advise and comfort. She was a major factor in his working on *La Fanciulla del West*. Indeed she became a friend of the entire family.

In 1908 while working of *La Fanciulla del West*, Elvira accused Puccini of having an affair with the house keeper, Doria Manfredi. Both denied it but Elvira literally went crazy, first she fired the girl and then spent the next two years accusing her in public and hounding her where ever she went. Doria, a sensitive girl, finally committed suicide leaving a note that proclaimed her innocence. The Manfredi family had an autopsy performed that proved that Doria was a virgin. Elvira refused to admit this and sued Elvira for defamation of character. Puccini left Elvira and the two lived apart for over two years. At one point Puccini considered a formal legal separation but it never materialized. All the while Elvira sent him the most vicious letters stating that his was all his fault, etc. When Elvira refused to back down she was sentenced to five months in prison. Puccini, in the end, paid a very large sum of money to have to Manfredis drop the suit thus keeping Elvira out of jail. Finally a reconciliation was made but there was no warmth in the marriage for many years.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>The exact identification of Corrina was somewhat of a mystery, but she has now been identified as Teresa Corinna Ubertis, a lawyer from Turin. See Helmut Krausser, *Der Jagd nach Corinna*, 2008.

<sup>2</sup>While Puccini did not have an affair with Doria, he did have a brief affair with her cousin, Giulia.

Puccini also had three other significant relationships but they caused no particular trouble for him: the Hungarian Jena Vêzsey, the German noblewoman, Josephine von Stägel and the German Jewish opera singer Rose Ader.

All of these women, with the possible exception of Doria were strong women and clearly were the stronger of the parties in their relationship with Puccini. Thus all the women in his life were strong characters and I believe had at least an indirect or subconscious influence on Puccini's dramatic sense and the development of his female characters. That Corrina lay behind some of the early heroines seems likely. Elvira may well have been the model for Turandot, and certainly Doria was the model for Liù in the same opera. Direct connections for the others are not as easy to discern but they certainly contributed to his overall concepts of women. His sisters were also influential, particularly Iginia (Sister Guilia Enricchetta) who helped him with the general background of *Suor Angelica*.

With this in mind let us survey the Puccini operatic heroines beginning with Manon, from his first unqualified success, *Manon Lescaut* of 1893. Manon is a flighty young girl of about 15 years of age whose parents noticing this have decided to put her in a convent. At a coach stop on the road to Amiens she meets Des Grieux; they fall instantly in love and leave together. But Manon is torn between her love of luxury and love of Des Grieux. In several cases her love of jewelry leads her to abandon Des Grieux until he can win her back, but in the end . She delays fleeing a gambling hall to grab up money and is arrested and sent to Louisiana. Des Grieux goes with her but she dies in the desert (?) of Louisiana proclaiming while Des Grieux is looking for water for her, that she is alone and abandoned. Beautiful music, yes, but she is the picture of a self-indulgent thoughtless female who really cares for no one but herself.

In 1896, *La Bohème* presents us with two interesting females: Mimi and Mussetta. Mimi the heroine with tuberculosis is a seamstress with a number of liaisons in her past, but now poor, she flirts with the poet Rodolfo, and by the end of Act One they are in love. They have little to do in Act Two as our attention turns to Mussetta the one-time lover of the painter Marcello and now mistress of the rich Alcindoro. Seeing Marcello celebrating with his friends Rodolfo (with Mini) and others she deliberately tries to make Marcello jealous and succeeds, then she gets rid of her lover and leaves with Marcello. While both of these very different women are similar to Manon, they eventually show that there is more to their character as they interact with the other characters. In Act III, Mimi overhears a conversation between Rodolfo and Marcello and learns that she is terminally ill and that this is destroying Rodolfo and his efforts to write. She decides to leave Rodolfo for his benefit because of her love for him. She is willing to leave the man she loves to help him. Mussetta in Act IV finds the dying Mimi and brings her to the apartment that Rodolfo and Marcello share. She acts with compassion and sacrifice to allow the lovers to be together as Mimi dies. Both Mimi and Mussetta are stronger and less selfish in their actions and in defining the meaning of love than Manon,



In 1900, Puccini brought Sardou's play *La Tosca* to the operatic stage as *Tosca*. The model for Tosca is clear; the famous actress, Sarah Bernhardt, had made this play her vehicle and had defined the character and a great deal of Tosca's stage actions by her portrayal. It is Bernhardt's Tosca that Puccini recreated on the operatic stage. But what the character traits that led him to *Tosca*? This is a very strong character who although insanely jealous, is willing to sacrifice her honor to save her lover. At the high point in Act Two, when driven to desperation by the villain, Baron Scarpia to sleep with him or have her lover die, she gives her moving credo of how she lives her life for her art and her love. At the crucial point in the drama she spies a knife on the table and in a burst of energy stabs Scarpia killing him. However, Scarpia has not planned to free her lover but the mock execution will be a real one. When realizes that her plan has gone awry in Act III, she commits suicide by jumping off the top of the Castelo de Sant' Angelo.

Certainly this is the strongest character that Puccini has put on the operatic stage to this point. But it is worth noting that her actions come from passion and they are her immediate reactions to the crisis of the moment, not well-considered actions created out of convictions.

Puccini's next opera was *Madama Butterfly* which took a great deal of effort in setting the libretto, and the first time that Puccini used an exotic setting for which he sought to create a specific national sound. In this case that of Imperial Japan. The opera was a dismal failure at its premiere in January of 1904. Puccini pulled the opera after the first performance and reworked the last act, dividing it into acts two and three. He continued to make small changes for years until the version we have today, but the basic plot and character traits never changed. Cho-Cho San (Butterfly) is a girl from a disgraced family whose father was ordered by the Emperor to commit suicide (*seppuku*). Butterfly has the knife as her only family token. Strong-willed she refuses the hand of a wealthy Japanese suitor, converts to Christianity for Pinkerton and her child by him, and finally when confronted with Pinkerton's American wife who wants her child, follows family tradition and commits *seppuku*. This is no act of impulse as Tosca's leap is, but a well thought out and carefully planned action. Puccini gives us a full setting of her preparations including her farewell to her child. As such she is a much stronger person than Tosca.

In 1910, Puccini's *La Fanciulla del West* based on Belasco's "The Girl of the Golden West" opened in New York to rave reviews. Its completion had been delayed for about a year by the "Doria" matter. The heroine is Mini, the owner of the Polka Saloon in a California mining town during the gold rush. She acts as den mother, teacher, protector of the gold and money of the miners, and general confidant. She also has attracted the sexual attention of some of the miners and the sheriff, Rance, but ends up falling in love with the stranger Dick Johnson who is actually the bandit Ramirez. He has come to discover where the money is so his gang can rob the miners. But in love with Mini is abandons his plan. In Act II, in Mini's cabin they continue to explore their feelings when Rance and a posse come in looking for Ramirez who they have tracked to the

cabin. When they leave Johnson confesses the truth and Mini kicks him out. But in his attempt to escape he is wounded, and retreating to the cabin Mini unsuccessfully hides him and then when discovered challenges Rance to a card game. If she wins Rance leave and Johnson is safe; if she loses she will be with Rance. She wins—but only by cheating. In Act III, several months later Johnson/Ramerez is caught again and is going to be hung by Rance and the miners. Mini, hearing of this rides in and pleads with the miners to give Johnson to her. As they give in she leaves California for a better life singing “Addio a California.”

Mini becomes a dynamic heroine from her entrance in Act I shooting a gun into the air to stop a bar fight through her actions to save the man she loves in Act III. She moves the entire opera through her strength and commitment. This is the most complete character set at a level not seen before from Puccini.

That Puccini’s next opera, *La Rondine*, is something of an anomaly. It was commissioned for Vienna to be an operetta in the Viennese style. Puccini quickly realized artistically that this was not possible for him, but traces of Viennese operetta remain both in the story and the music. Most Viennese operettas are bittersweet and *La Rondine* fits this description. Also it contains its share of music in the “popular” style, particularly in its dance sequences.

*La Rondine* has instructive and interesting parallels to Verdi’s *La Traviata*. Both Violetta (*La Traviata*) and Magda (*La Rondine*) are “kept women” who long for love and leave their patrons for the men they love (Germont and Ruggero respectively). In both family considerations for the well-being of the man’s family determine the parting of the couple. But that is where the similarities end. In *La Traviata*, Violetta is pushed by Germont’s father to end the relationship for the sake of his daughter’s chance at a good bourgeois marriage. In *La Rondine*, it is the heroine Magda, herself who decides to end the relationship she sought for the well-being of her lover’s future. She is aware that if she marries eventually her past will come to light and destroy Ruggero and his bourgeois family. *La Rondine* is not a tragedy, so Magda returns to her former patron. While not up to the level of commitment of Minnie or Cho-Cho-San, or as violent as Tosca, Magda is a still strong woman who will sacrifice her own happiness for the sake of her lover. She returns to a loveless relationship with the physical comforts she now realizes only make her situation less pleasant.

Puccini had long thought about a set of one act opera which finally resulted in *Il Trittico*, composed of *Il Tabarro*, *Suor Angelica*, and *Gianni Schicchi*. All three deal with death but in very different ways and under very different circumstances. *Il Tabarro* is meant as shocking melodrama. Giorgetta is married to Michele, an older man the owner of the river barge. Miserable after the death of her infant child, she seeks comfort in an affair with one of the stevedores, and finally in an effort to free herself and have a happy life, plans to leave her husband for her lover. Michele has his suspicions and by accident gives the signal for the rendezvous. When the lover comes on the barge he is killed and Giorgetta is forced to face the results in a most grisly way.

*Suor Angelica* is unique in opera for its all female cast. It also has two strong female leads: Suor Angelica and her elderly guardian aunt The Princess. Suor Angelica has been forced by her aunt into a convent for having born a child out of wedlock. Now seven years later, she comes to get her niece to sign away her estate to her younger sister. She is about to be married to one who, in the Princess' words, will overlook the stain on the family's honor if her dowery is increased by this money. The Princess is cold, domineering and unforgiving. Suor Angleica only pleads for news of her son. After some hesitation the Princess reveals that the boy died at age five, two years earlier. I cannot think of any other female character in opera who is so powerful and so cold – not even Turandot.

After the Princess leaves, Suor Angelica determines to commit suicide so that she can be with her son. An expert in herbs she prepares the fatal drought and takes it. Only at this point does she realize that she has committed a mortal sin and prays for forgiveness. The opera ends with the miracle that raises Suor Angelica from the ground to be with her son and the Virgin Mary. Many critics have disparaged this ending, but no one can doubt the strength of character she shows and the strength she shows in adversity. In many ways these two women are the strongest Puccini drew.

After the intense drama of *Suor Angelica*, *Gianni Schicchi* comes as comic relief. There is basically one character, Schicchi himself, and a lot of people who interact with him. The significant female is his daughter, Lauretta who has the single lyric aria “O mio bambino caro” to sing. But a closer look at the words wrapped in its child-like melody, shows that she is threatening to commit suicide unless Schicchi finds a way to allow her and the man she loves to marry over the objections of his family present in the room. She is neither as innocent nor childlike as she appears but a woman who knows how to get her way and is not afraid to use it.

Puccini's final opera, *Turandot* is something of a problem given that it is unfinished and that Puccini constantly made revisions while he was composing and for a long time after an opera was complete. Thus we have no way of knowing what Puccini would have finally written if he had lived to complete the opera. But Puccini had a great deal of trouble with the final duet and in the end it does not seem that he was capable of completing it even if his health had not failed. Nevertheless, the libretto and Puccini's correspondence give clear indications as to what Puccini was attempting to achieve. Each individual will have to determine for him/herself how well Alfano's completion achieves this or not.

In *Turandot*, like *Suor Angelica* we have two diametrically opposed female characters: Turandot is the princess royal who has sworn hatred of men to atone for the rape and murder of a distant ancestress, and Liù is the slave girl who has followed the exiled blind king of Tatar because once his son, Calaf, the hero, smiled at her. Turandot has avoided marriage by being allowed to ask each suitor three riddles and to have the executioner behead the suitor if he fails the test. Calaf finds his father and Liù in the crowd in front of the palace as the Prince of Persia is being sent to his death. Seeing Turandot, his is taken

with her and decides to answer the questions. In Act II, Turandot is vicious as she proceeds with the questions after reciting the grisly tale of her ancestress. But Calaf answers the questions to Turandot's anger, dismay and horror. She begs her father the Emperor not to make her follow through with the marriage. The Emperor reminds Turandot that the oath is sacred, but before he can officially rule, Calaf proposes a test to Turandot. Discover his name before the morning and he will forfeit his life. In Act III, Turandot has kept the whole city awake trying to discover the answer. Finally Liù is brought in and threatened with torture for the name. As she resists, Turandot asks why she will not give it, and Liù's response is a lesson in love, after which she grabs a knife from one of the soldiers and kills herself.

As everyone leaves the stage except Turandot and Calaf there is the great duet which, as noted, Puccini could not write to his satisfaction. In sketches that Alfano put together under Toscanini's direction, it is beautiful but does not come of the description that Puccini wanted. According to Puccini there is to be a grand awakening produced by Calaf's kiss that opens up the world of love to Turandot.

Thus in the end it is Liù who with the strength of character and love shows Turandot the way. Turandot is the only character in all of Puccini's work who actually develops and changes before our eyes through the power of self-sacrifice and love. Puccini's concept is there for us to see. Turandot through her trial has become a stronger and more sympathetic character. There is a continuous line from the selfish Manon to Liù of increasingly stronger characters.

Puccini's biographers and analysis steadfastly refuse to see a line between the events of his personal life and the characters that he created. As Julian Budden noted, "How far an artist's work can be related to his character and personality is difficult to determine. The greatest creations of the human spirit arise from conditions, which are seldom, if ever, reflected in the creator's everyday behavior."<sup>1</sup> This is reflected throughout his book where events of his life are put next to one another without any connections. I hope the preceding analysis shows that this is not so and that the experiences Puccini had with various women throughout his life predisposed him to the choice of particular librettos and the details of those librettos that he demanded from others. Throughout his adult life it seems that Puccini both in his personal relations with women and in the women he created for the operatic stage was in search of his ideal of what he thought would be "the true woman."

Puccini was a man of the theater who wrote only a little music that had a non-operatic function. He was deeply involved at every point with the libretto and the staging of his operas. Indeed he spent most of his professional working time supervising productions of his work around the world. I have not dealt here with the music of Puccini, but if I have established this connection between his encounters with women and the women he created on stage, the

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<sup>1</sup>Julian Budden, 2002, *Puccini, His Life and His Works*, p. 476.

next step would be to see how much of this is reflected in the actual music that he wrote.

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