

Giacomo Puccini

“Puccini spoke a language that everybody understood – the dialect of our feelings.”

Filippo Sacchi in *Il Corriere della Sera*, 1924

George Bernard Shaw, the music Critic for *The World*, wrote after hearing Giacomo Puccini's *Manon Lescaut*, “Italian opera has been born again.” Puccini would achieve both wealth and fame with this work after its premiere in 1893, but the pressure of being the crowned successor to Giuseppe Verdi would weigh heavily on him. He would spend three years painstakingly perfecting his next masterpiece, and *La Bohème* would prove to be a lasting and well-loved operatic staple. Based on Henry Mürger's novel, *Scènes de la vie de bohème*, Puccini's opera would be crafted by skilled librettists Giuseppe Giacosa and Luigi Illica to polish the now well-known poignant drama with its memorable characters. Puccini was a perfectionist and tried the patience of his publisher and his collaborators. Giacosa confessed to Ricordi, “With the continual revising, retouching, adding, correcting, cutting, abbreviating, fattening to the right so as to slim to the left, I'm dead tired.” But it is just this attention to detail that allowed Puccini to create the legacy of this enduring masterwork, and even Giacosa later admitted, “Puccini has surpassed all my expectations, and I now understand the reason for his tyranny over verses and accents.”

With a prestigious and well-dressed international crowd packing the theater in Turin on the opening night of *La Bohème* in 1896, expectations were high for this young composer's new work. Puccini was deeply depressed by the lukewarm response, and admitted later to a biographer that when he returned to his hotel that evening: “There was in me a sadness, melancholy, a wish to cry...I passed a most miserable night.” But his beloved work that he described as loving boundlessly would within three years be produced in sold out houses in such diverse countries as Russia, South America, Egypt, and Algeria. It remains one of the most commonly performed and truly beloved operas in the world today.

Giacomo Puccini was born in Lucca, Italy in 1858 into a family heritage of professional musicians with great expectations for his success. After a slow start in his musical studies, he was inspired at the age of eighteen by a performance of Verdi's *Aida*, and he confidently declared that God had told him to write only for the theater. He would compose a dozen operas and leave a legacy of unforgettable musical heroines, including *Tosca*, *Madama Butterfly*, *Turandot*, and *The Girl of the Golden West*. His memorable melodies have been woven into our daily lives as commercials and movie soundtracks, and many of his operas remain in the top ten most currently performed. Puccini described himself as a composer with “more heart than mind”, and it is his talent for giving voice to the tragedies and triumphs of the human heart that will guarantee his music a place on the operatic stage for many generations to come. Luciano Pavarotti said simply, “I'm sure that a hundred years from now, all over the world, there will still be Rodolfos waiting for Mimis to come knocking on their doors. For as long as there will be opera, there will be *La Bohème*.”