

OPERA EXPLAINED

An Introduction to...

PUCCINI

La Bohème

written by
Thomson Smillie

narrated by
David Timson

The NAXOS logo features the word "NAXOS" in a bold, serif font, centered between two horizontal lines of decorative, repeating patterns.

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An Introduction to...

PUCCINI *La Bohème*

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A complete recording of Puccini’s *La Bohème* is available as a 2CD set from Naxos.

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Giacomo Puccini (1858–1924): *La Bohème*

The word ‘opera’ is Latin and means ‘the works’; it represents a synthesis of all the other arts: drama, vocal and orchestral music, dance, light and design. Consequently, it delivers an emotional impact which none of the others can match. The only one of the arts whose origins can be precisely dated, it was ‘invented’ in Italy in 1597 as part of the Renaissance – the rebirth of interest in classical values. As an art form it is truly international, crossing all linguistic and cultural barriers, and it is probably the only one whose audience continues to expand, not in spite of, but because of developments in entertainment technology.

From its early origins in Italy opera spread across Europe, establishing individual and distinctive schools in a number of countries. France had an early and long-standing love affair with it – hence the term *grand opéra*, referring to the massive five-act creations that graced the Paris Opéra in the nineteenth century. Germany had an excellent school from as early as Mozart’s time, and opera perhaps reached its highest achievement with the mighty music dramas of Richard Wagner. Russia, Great Britain, and the Americas have also made their contributions.

But in the popular imagination opera remains an Italian concept – and no

wonder. From its earliest years Italians dominated the art: Cavalli and Monteverdi were among the first to establish its forms; there was a golden age, called the *bel canto*, at the beginning of the nineteenth century when Bellini, Donizetti, and Rossini ruled supreme; Giuseppe Verdi was probably the most revered artist in history; and, for many, Puccini represents, in every sense, the last word in this beloved genre.

Although the twentieth century has not been as lavishly endowed with opera composers, it can still boast a few, including Richard Strauss, Igor Stravinsky, and Benjamin Britten – and, maybe most significantly in the long run, those errant step-children of opera, the Broadway musical and the Lloyd Webber spectacular.

La Bohème

While the academics may fume and the pundits deplore, the fact now seems established that Puccini was the most popular opera composer of all time. Not necessarily the greatest, simply the best-loved. And of his 12 operas, the most popular is *La Bohème*, a short story, almost an anecdote, of young people falling in and out of love against a background of poverty in the Paris of the 1840s.

Puccini was born in Lucca on the western side of Italy in 1858, was trained in the family tradition as a musician and, like most opera composers, fumbled his first opera, *Le villi*. But with his second, *Manon Lescaut* in 1893, he scored a smash hit and followed it with a string of operas which remain the backbone of the popular operatic repertory – and the box-office salvation of every opera company. *Butterfly*, *Tosca* and *La Bohème* head the list.

The whole art form of opera had begun in Italy during the Renaissance, as a conscious attempt at a re-nascence, rebirth, of the practices of Greek drama,

which is believed to have been sung, not spoken. Italian opera reached its peak with Verdi – the greatest of all Italian opera composers. Puccini was his artistic heir, and while his operas may lack the philosophical profundities of the older composer, they have special characteristics of their own.

Puccini was a master of theatrical craftsmanship (as was Verdi), and knew what would work as cannily as any later Broadway impresario. He made his librettists' lives hell (as did Verdi) until they supplied him with exactly the verses he needed and the dramatic situations to create his sensations and spin his melodies. And the result is a series of operas which deliver an emotional wallop few other composers can match.

Because deep down, all the opera lover wants is a good story and some great melodies. *La Bohème* delivers both.

The story is extracted from Murger's *Scenes from Bohemian Life*, a popular novel telling of the adventures of young and starving artists, in love and in Paris. Rodolfo meets Mimì; they have a variously tender, occasionally stormy, love affair. They split and they come together again. In the end both are doomed and defeated by the opera's omnipresent villain – poverty.

Puccini, who adored women, in life as in art, created the lovely heroine Mimì and invested her with some of his most glorious melodies. Master craftsman that he was, he provided moments of spectacle, a great deal of humour and what used

to be called horseplay, some philosophy and much tenderness.

The result is an opera that has enchanted the public for 100 years and even has occasionally, as in the superbly constructed third act – one of the perfect acts in opera – delighted the academics and earned the admiration of the grumpiest pundit.

Notes by Thomson Smillie

Thomson Smillie began his career in the early days of Scottish Opera and has been artistic director of the Wexford International Festival, general manager of the Opera Company of Boston, and general director of Kentucky Opera. He now makes a career as a writer, speech-writer, and public speaker. He has a strong belief that people mature into a love of opera and travels the world encouraging a love of the art form. His other passions are travel, languages, and friendships. He has written several other titles in the Naxos ‘Opera Explained’ series.



David Timson studied acting and singing at the Guildhall School of Music and Drama. He has performed in modern and classic plays through the UK and abroad, including *Wild Honey* for Alan Ayckbourn, *Hamlet*, *The Man of Mode*, and *The Seagull*. Among his many television appearances have been roles in *Nelson's Column* and *Swallows and Amazons*. For Naxos AudioBooks he has recorded, to date, three volumes of *The Adventures of Sherlock Holmes*, and directed *Twelfth Night* as well as playing Feste. On Naxos, he takes the part of the Narrator in Stravinsky's *The Soldier's Tale*.



OPERA EXPLAINED

This series introduces, in words and music, the plot and background of major operas. Using the principal themes and arias, taken from the Naxos recording of the complete work, Thomson Smillie is informative yet entertaining, enabling the listener to get more from this remarkable art form.

An Introduction to...
PUCCINI
La Bohème

written by **Thomson Smillie**
narrated by **David Timson**

La Bohème is one of three operas – the others are *Carmen* and *Aida* – believed to be the most popular ever written. In the case of *La Bohème* the reason is that it virtually defines the term ‘romantic’. The poignant story of Mimi and Rodolfo is told in music of such tender beauty, allied, as always, to Puccini’s intuition of what works in the theatre, resulting in an opera that readily appeals to our emotions and senses.

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