

Giacomo Puccini

Jah'-coh-moh Poo-chee'-nee

A composer of the Romantic Era



born
December 22, 1858
Lucca, Italy

died
November 29, 1924
Brussels, Belgium

“
**Almighty God
touched me with
his little finger and
said, ‘Write for the
theater—only for
the theater.’ And
I have obeyed his
supreme command.**
”
—*Giacomo Puccini*

Giacomo Puccini’s father was a composer who died when Giacomo was five. Giacomo then began taking music lessons from his uncle but showed little interest or talent. His mother, however, was determined to develop Giacomo’s musical skills, so she sent him to a local institute of music. Here Giacomo became a fine student. By the time he was 14 he was a talented pianist and organist, good enough to serve as a church organist.

When he was 18, Giacomo saw a performance of the **opera** *Aida* by Giuseppe Verdi. He was so impressed by the performance that he decided to become an opera composer. However, Giacomo knew he would have to continue his musical studies in order to develop his skills. In 1880 (age 22), he applied for and received a scholarship to study composition at the Milan **Conservatory** of music. By the time he completed his studies at the conservatory three years later, he was writing music that was praised by his teachers as well as concert audiences in Milan.

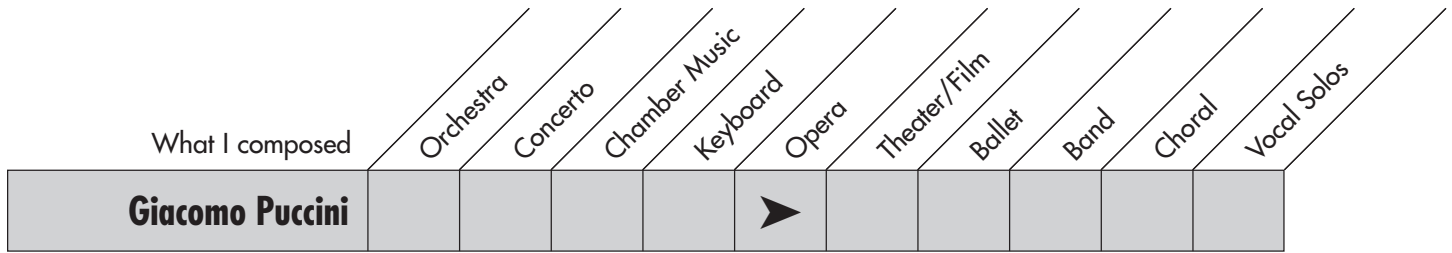
Puccini’s first opera was not a success, but it came to the attention of a music publisher, who **commissioned** Puccini to write another. This opera, entitled *Edgar*, was a failure (Puccini called it “a mistake”), but the publisher continued to support and encourage him. Finally, in 1893 (age 35), Puccini completed his first successful opera, *Manon Lescaut*. His next opera, *La Bohème*, produced in 1896, has since become one of the most popular and beloved operas ever written.

La Bohème was followed by another opera, *Tosca*, which was a huge success. By 1900 (age 42), Puccini had become a famous and wealthy man. He built a huge villa in the town of Torre del Lago in the Italian province of Tuscany. His 1904 opera, *Madama Butterfly*, was unsuccessful when it was first produced, but Puccini revised the opera and produced it again, this time to great success. Today both *Tosca* and *Madama Butterfly* are among the most widely performed operas in the world. Puccini traveled to the United States in 1907 (age 49) for the first American performance of *Madama Butterfly*.

By this time, Puccini was recognized as the greatest living opera composer. When he wasn’t composing, he spent his days at his Tuscan villa. He was always on the lookout for a good **libretto** (the dialog of an opera) to set to music. Many of his operas had female heroines whose flawed character resulted in an early death.

In his later life, Puccini enjoyed riding in fast cars and motorboats. His operas made him wealthy; when he died in 1924, his estate was worth four million dollars. Puccini’s music was rather conservative for its time, and he did not embrace the musical changes of the early twentieth century. His operas, however, are widely performed and remain popular.

Giacomo Puccini



Puccini Factoids:

- As a young man, Puccini spent a great deal of his own money to present his operas. At one point he had so much debt that he considered moving to South America.
- He was never confident as a composer and constantly had doubts about his operas. The only exception was *Madama Butterfly*, which he revised after its unsuccessful premiere. Puccini was certain that this was the finest opera he had ever written and would be a success.
- Puccini enjoyed duck hunting at his Tuscan villa.
- Puccini's 1907 visit to the United States inspired him to write an opera set in America. The result, *The Girl of the Golden West*, premiered at the Metropolitan Opera House in New York City in 1910, with Puccini in attendance.

Famous Works:

Manon Lescaut – an opera
La Bohème – an opera
Tosca – an opera
Madama Butterfly – an opera
Turandot – an opera

1858: Birth of Giacomo Puccini. Macy's Department Store is founded by R.H. Macy in New York City.

1869: Russian chemist Dmitri Mendeleev develops the periodic table of chemical elements.

1879: Thomas Edison successfully tests the first incandescent light bulb.

1888: John Boyd Dunlop, a Scottish inventor, patents the first inflatable tire. Prior to that, tires were made of solid rubber.

1896: The first modern Olympic Games are held in Athens, Greece.

1908: Thomas Selfridge is the first person to die in an airplane crash. The plane is piloted by Orville Wright, who is injured, but recovers.

1914: The Panama Canal opens.

1918: The first Pulitzer Prizes, for Fiction, Drama, and Poetry, are awarded.

1924: Death of Giacomo Puccini. The IBM Company is founded in New York.

What in the world is happening?

Giacomo Puccini (1858–1924)

“Quando m’en vo” from *La Bohème*

Giacomo Puccini’s fourth **opera**, *La Bohème*, was written in four acts with an Italian **libretto** by Luigi Illica and Giuseppe Giacosa. It was based on a collection of stories by Henri Murger published in 1851. These vignettes, which romanticized the bohemian lifestyle, were set in the Latin Quarter of Paris in the 1830 and 1840s.

The Puccini opera premiered on February 1, 1896, in the Teatro Regio (Royal Theatre) in Turin, Italy. It was conducted by the phenomenal Italian musician Arturo Toscanini (relatively unknown at this point), who became the principal conductor at La Scala opera house (Milan, Italy) and later of the NBC **Symphony** Orchestra, which was created for him in 1937. *La Bohème* was a moderate success, and productions quickly spread throughout Italy in 1897–1899. It also made its way to Argentina, Germany, France, England, the United States, and Czechoslovakia before the end of the century. It even inspired a more recent musical called *Rent*.

La Bohème focuses on the main characters of poet Rodolfo and his new-found love, the seamstress Mimì. In the second act, a group of friends dines at a local café. The coquettish singer Musetta (a soprano), arrives with her older, wealthy admirer, the pompous government administrator Alcindoro. “Quando m’en vo” also known as “Musetta’s Waltz” is an aria set in $\frac{3}{4}$ time. Musetta is surrounded by her bohemian friends as she is trying to attract the attention of her ex, Marcello, in order to make him jealous of her relationship with Alcindoro (of whom she has now grown tired). Musetta complains of a tight shoe during the aria, so Alcindoro rushes off to the shoemaker to get it fixed. Now that he’s gone, Marcello and Musetta jump into each others’ arms. Mimì recognizes their true love for each other. The scene ends with the group of friends having to pay their bill, but no one has enough money so the group departs, leaving the bill for Alcindoro to pay when he returns.

Translation:

When walking alone in the street, people stop and stare at me.

And everyone examines my beauty, from head to toe.

And then I taste the hidden longing in their eyes.

And from my charms they perceive my hidden beauties.

So the scent of desire is all around me, and it makes me happy!

And you who know, who remembers and yearns, you shrink from me?

I understand, Marcello, you don’t want to express your anguish, but you feel like your heart is breaking.

- The tempo marking for this aria is quarter note = 104, Lento. Does the tempo stay steady, or does it alter during the performance? Would it be easy to waltz during this aria?
- Listen for the occasional grace notes and how they are performed.

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Art is a kind
of illness.

”

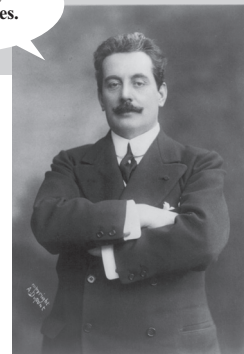
—Giacomo Puccini

TIMING

- :01** Musetta sings the main theme.
- :37** Marcello and Alcindoro comment, then Musetta continues her flirtatious ways.
- 1:06** The string accompaniment gets richer and fuller, echoing her melody.
- 1:31** As Musetta sings the main theme again, Alcindoro is feeling anger, as Musetta’s singing is upsetting him. Mimì sings to Rodolfo—she believes Musetta and Marcello really do love each other.
- 2:10** Other friends join in with comments about the situation in a quick tempo.
- 2:24** Musetta expressively calls out for Marcello. The others join in, six voices singing at once on different lyrics. Musetta complains about the pain her shoes are giving her, and sends Alcindoro to the nearby shop.

Review!

Don't forget your
opera glasses.



Giacomo Puccini

Name _____

Place the letter of the correct answer in the space provided.

For True/False questions, print True or False in the space provided.

1. Puccini was born in _____ and died in _____ .
A. Belgium
B. Italy
2. When he was 18 years old, Puccini was impressed by an opera written by _____ .
A. Prokofiev
B. Mozart
C. Verdi
D. Rossini
3. True or False: Puccini received a scholarship to study composition at the Milan Conservatory. _____
4. True or False: After the failure of the opera *Edgar*, Puccini's first publisher dropped him. _____
5. True or False: Puccini's opera *La Bohème* was based on stories written by Henri Murger. _____
6. Which of these operas was not written by Puccini? _____
A. *The Barber of Seville*
B. *Manon Lescaut*
C. *Tosca*
D. *Turandot*
7. True or False: In the early 1900s, Puccini was recognized as the greatest living opera composer. _____
8. True or False: Puccini himself revised his most popular opera, *Madama Butterfly*.

9. In the Listening Example, the main theme is sung by _____ .
A. Mimi
B. Musetta
C. Rodolfo
D. Marcello
10. The opera *La Bohème* is set in _____ .
A. London
B. Milan
C. Lyon
D. Paris

Bonus:

What relatively unknown conductor led *La Bohème*'s premiere? _____