

GIACOMO PUCCINI

b Lucca, December 22, 1858; *d* Brussels, November 29, 1924

Giacomo Puccini was born into a family of court composers and organists in the historic city of Lucca, Italy. With a strong feeling of tradition in the Puccini family, it was expected that Giacomo would assume his deceased father's position as *Maestro di Cappella* when he came of age. By 14 he already was playing organ in a number of the town's churches.

Albina Magi, the composer's mother, also came from a family of musicians. Her brother, Fortunato, became her son's first music teacher. His uncle was a strict instructor and was known to kick Puccini when he made mistakes. For his part, Puccini was unruly, easily bored and preferred to hunt for bird's nests rather than study. Seeing little progress, Albina decided a new teacher was in order and sent the boy to Carlo Angeloni, a former pupil of her husband. Giacomo's attitude and study habits quickly changed.

Money was scarce for the family, and to supplement his church earnings Puccini would play piano at the local bars and at houses of "ill repute." He withheld a small percentage of his earnings for cigarettes and began the bad habit of smoking (which ultimately caused his death). As a young man, Puccini was determined to be rich and independent. His teacher introduced him to opera through the study of Verdi's piano scores. Then in 1879, Puccini attended his first opera performance, *Aida*, and was deeply moved – his destiny was to be a composer for the theater.

He knew it was necessary to study in the Italian operatic capital, Milan. After completing studies at the Pacini Institute of Music in Lucca, Puccini enrolled at the Milan Conservatory in 1880 under the auspices of a royal scholarship. His living expenses were provided by a loan from an uncle but money was always tight. Puccini lived the bohemian life of



*A scene from Minnesota Opera's
2010 production of La bohème*

a poor student and became acquainted with many important musical and literary figures. For a short while, he shared a room with the composer Pietro Mascagni, who became famous for his one-act opera *Cavalleria rusticana*. To save money, the two of them would cook meals in their room and, as this was strictly forbidden, one would play the piano loudly to drown out the noise of pots and pans. One can see how the composer drew from his own life experiences in the writing of his opera, *La bohème*.

In 1883 at the age of 25, Puccini graduated with a diploma in composition from the Milan Conservatory. His thesis composition, *Capriccio sinfonico*, was played by the student orchestra and received high praise from influential critics. This was the start of a celebrated career.



*A scene from Minnesota Opera's
2005 production of Tosca*



A scene from Minnesota Opera's 2004 production of *Madame Butterfly*

librettist Ferdinando Fontana began to canvass the opera to the broader circle of the Italian intelligentsia. One of these individuals was the highly influential librettist and composer, Arrigo Boito, who was instrumental in getting *Le villi* staged.

The reception to the new work was mixed, but the revised two-act version was staged in a number of cities outside of Italy (a remarkable feat for such a young composer). Puccini's next opera, *Edgar*, however, was a resounding critical failure, yet the astute publisher, Giulio Ricordi, found fault in the libretto only and promise in the music. He pitted himself against the shareholders of his publishing house who demanded that Puccini be released from retainer. Ricordi's confidence was rewarded with *Manon Lescaut*, Puccini's first true success.

In 1884, Puccini became acquainted with Elvira Gemignani who was encouraged by her husband, a pharmacist and former classmate of Puccini's, to take voice lessons with the composer. Shortly after his mother's death, he was joined by Elvira and her daughter, Fosca, in Milan. She left her son, Renato, with her husband. Two years later she gave birth to their only child, Antonio, which caused a great scandal in Puccini's birthplace of Lucca – his family, very conventional and religious, was outraged. He seldom visited that city again in his lifetime.

With the popularity of *Manon Lescaut*, Puccini was now generally considered by the Italian art circle to be Verdi's successor (even by the great composer

Puccini was not a prolific composer. Unlike most of his contemporaries, he produced his operas at long intervals, partly because of his fastidiousness in choosing subjects, several of which he took up only to abandon after several months, and partly because of his constant demands for modifications of the texts. Much of his time, too, was spent in hunting in the marshes around his home and in trips abroad to supervise revivals of his works.

The composer's first work for the stage, *Le villi*, was originally submitted to a contest sponsored by the wealthy music publisher, Edoardo Sonzogno. The one-act opera received not even honorable mention, but Puccini was certain of its merit. He and



A scene from The Minnesota Opera's 2000 production of *Turandot*

himself). As the royalties began rolling in, Puccini began to show a predilection for machines and gadgets, in particular fast automobiles and motor boats. His solitary nature drew him to a purchase a villa near the sea, surrounded by the mountains at Torre del Lago. Through the years, this villa became a home base where he could enjoy his passion for hunting and fishing, along with the nature and silence of the surroundings.

During the 1890s, Puccini began working with Luigi Illica, who worked out the scheme and drafted the dialogue, and the poet and playwright Giuseppe Giacosa, who put the lines into verse. Although they had participated on *Manon Lescaut* (in a string of several librettists) their first true collaboration was *La bohème* in 1896, followed four years later by *Tosca* and then *Madame Butterfly* four years after that. Giacosa died in 1906, putting an end to the successful team that produced three of Puccini's most enduring works.

In 1904, Giacomo and Elvira were finally married legally, following her first husband's death. Their relationship, however, was a constant storm. She was insanelly jealous, and a letter, written prior to their union, stated her decision



A scene from Minnesota Opera's 2004 production of Madame Butterfly

to leave him. Many of her accusations about him were not unfounded. The composer had quite a weakness for women and carried on many extramarital affairs throughout his life.

While Puccini was recuperating from an automobile accident, a young girl named Doria Manfredi was hired as a nurse and maid. She remained in the household as the Puccinis' maid. Elvira saw the makings of an affair and immediately discharged her. But that was not enough. She continued her slanderous accusations through the small village, and the townspeople, aware of her husband's past philandering, quite naturally believed her. The innocent girl, totally humiliated, took poison and died after five days of

unbearable suffering. Giacomo took refuge in Rome and Elvira fled to Milan. Doria's family sued Elvira following an autopsy that proved Doria's virginity.

Puccini and his wife lived apart for four months while Elvira persisted in defending her legal position. The case was tried and she was sentenced to five months' imprisonment – but Puccini made a large financial settlement with the Manfredi family and the lawsuit was dropped. In September of 1909, Giacomo, Elvira and Antonio were reunited at Torre. A month later he wrote, "In my home I have peace – Elvira is good – and the three of us live happily together."

Puccini's later operas were quite varied in their styles and subjects. *La fanciulla del West*, set in the American West, is notable for its advanced impressionistic orchestration and composition. *La rondine* was designed to be a musical comedy in the Viennese style but seemed more related to *La traviata* than to *Die Fledermaus*. *Il tritico* was an evening of one-act operas that are quite a mixed bag: *Il tabarro* was Puccini's bow toward the verismo style; *Suor Angelica* is a gripping emotional drama set in a nunnery; *Gianni Schicchi* is a comic masterpiece that features Puccini at his most exuberant. There is a thought that Puccini was mocking his own success with this piece.

At the age of 60, the composer set out to write an opera that was atypical of his past style. He studied the developments in contemporary music and based the new work on Count Carlo Gozzi's fable about the cruel Chinese princess Turandot. The completion of the work was cut short due to his ill-health.

Puccini had been dealing with a persistent cough for months. He began complaining of stinging sore throats and his diagnosis revealed cancer of the throat. He traveled to Brussels to receive radium therapy, accompanied by his son and stepdaughter – Elvira had bronchitis and remained in Milan. Radioactive needles were inserted into the tumor. Initially, the doctor was optimistic, but four days later, the composer suffered a heart attack. Puccini died on November 29, 1924 and his remains are now entombed in the chapel of his villa at Torre.

Although *Turandot* was left unfinished, the conductor Arturo Toscanini entrusted its completion to another Ricordi composer, Franco Alfano. In 1926, the opera premiered under the baton of Toscanini. Out of respect for the composer, the maestro stopped where Puccini had written his last notes. He turned to the audience and emotionally said, “At this point the master laid down his pen.”

Puccini has been much maligned for his flirtation with popular music, but he had an uncanny feel for a good story and talent for enthralling yet economical music. His experiments with tonality and form, while constant, were always subtle, and, unlike his contemporary Stravinsky, he did not seem to need to be controversial. His melodies are mostly simple stepwise vocal lines, yet with them he managed to create arias of astonishing beauty. The use of orchestra is economical and to the point – few operas of his have overtures and Puccini often captures the right dramatic moments with just a splash of colorful chords. Though his personal life was plagued with self-doubt and laborious perfectionism, Puccini profoundly influenced the world of opera with a deep understanding of music, drama and humanity.



A scene from Minnesota Opera's 1995 production of Turandot