

The Pescadero Opera Society presents

La Bohème



Music by Giacomo Puccini
Libretto by Giuseppe Giacosa and Luigi Illica

After Henry Murger's novel,
Scènes de La Vie de Bohème

Opera in Four Acts

Setting: The Latin Quarter in Paris
Time: Christmas Eve, 1857

Characters

Rodolfo, a poet (tenor)..... David Hobson
Mimi, a seamstress (soprano) Cheryl Barker
Marcello, a painter (baritone) Roger Lemke
Musetta, a singer (soprano)..... Christine Douglas
Schaunard, a musician (baritone)..... David Lemke
Colline, a philosopher (bass)..... Gary Rowley
Students, working girls, townsfolk, shopkeepers, street-vendors, soldiers, waiters
and children

Conducted by Julian Smith
Directed by Baz Luhrmann
Performed by the Australian Opera and Ballet Orchestra

Première performance at the Teatro Regio in Turin, Italy on February 1, 1896

Synopsis

Act I

A garret in the Latin Quarter of Paris on Christmas Eve, 1957

The near-destitute artist, Marcello and poet Rodolfo try to keep warm on Christmas Eve by feeding the stove with pages from Rodolfo's latest drama. They are soon joined by their roommates, Colline, a young philosopher, and Schaunard, a musician who has landed a job bringing them all food, fuel and money.



While they celebrate their unexpected fortune, the landlord, Benoit, arrives to collect the rent. Plying the older man with wine, the Bohemians urge him to tell of his flirtations, then throw him out in mock indignation at his infidelity to his wife. Schaunard proposes that they celebrate the holiday at the Café Momus. Rodolfo remains behind to try to finish an article, promising to join them later.

There is a knock on the door. It is a neighbor, Mimì, whose candle has gone out on the drafty stairway. No sooner does she enter than she feels faint. After reviving her with a sip of wine, Rodolfo helps her to the door and relights her candle. Suddenly Mimì realizes that she has dropped her key. As the two search for it, both candles are blown out. In the moonlight the poet takes the girl's shivering hand, and tells her about his dreams, "Che gelida manina" (Your tiny hand is frozen). Mimì then recounts her life alone in a garret, embroidering flowers and waiting for the spring, "Mi chiamano Mimì" (My name is Mimì). Rodolfo's friends are heard outside, urging him to come down. He calls back that he will be along shortly — and he won't be alone. Voicing their new-found rapture, Mimì and Rodolfo embrace and slowly leave, arm in arm, for the café.

Act II

The Café Momus

Amid the shouts of street hawkers, Rodolfo buys Mimì a bonnet and then introduces her to his friends. They all sit down and order supper. A toy vendor, Parpignol, passes by, besieged by eager children. Marcello's former lover, Musetta, makes a noisy entrance on the arm of an elderly but wealthy gentleman, Alcindoro. Trying to attract Marcello's attention, she sings a waltz about her popularity. Musetta then complains that her shoe pinches, and sends Alcindoro to fetch a new pair. As soon as he is gone she falls into Marcello's arms. When the Bohemians' bill is presented, Musetta tells the waiter to charge everything to Alcindoro. Soldiers march by the café, and the Bohemians fall in behind. Alcindoro returns with Musetta's shoes — only to face the double bill.

Act III

At dawn on the snowy outskirts of Paris

Outside the city gates of Paris a Customs Officer admits farm women into the city. Late merrymakers are heard inside a tavern. Mimì wanders in, searching for the place where the reunited Marcello and Musetta now live.

When the painter emerges, she tells him about Rodolfo's incessant jealousy. She feels that it is best that they part. Rodolfo, who has been asleep in the tavern, is heard. Although Marcello thinks she is gone, Mimì hides nearby to listen.

Rodolfo tells Marcello that he wants to separate from Mimì. He then breaks down crying, saying that her persistent coughing can only grow worse in the poverty they share.

Overcome with tears, Mimì stumbles forth to bid Rodolfo farewell. Marcello runs back into the tavern on hearing Musetta's raucous laughter. Mimì and Rodolfo recall their past happiness, and Musetta dashes out of the inn, quarreling with Marcello, who has caught her flirting. Marcello and Musetta part, hurling insults at each other, but Mimì and Rodolfo decide to remain together until spring.



Act IV

The garret, some months later

Rodolfo has separated from Mimì, and Marcella from Musetta. Rodolfo and Marcello are once more at their work, lamenting their loneliness. Colline and Schaunard bring a meager meal to lighten their spirits. The four stage a dance, which turns into a mock duel.

At the height of the hilarity, Musetta bursts in to tell them that Mimì is outside, too weak to come any further. As Rodolfo runs to her aid, Musetta relates how Mimì begged to be taken to Rodolfo to die. Rodolfo assists Mimì to the bed. Musetta gives her earrings to Marcello to buy medicine and to send for a doctor. She herself will buy a muff for Mimì's cold hands. Colline goes off to pawn his overcoat, which for so long has kept him warm.

Alone with Mimì, Rodolfo recalls their first happy days together. Mimì is seized with violent coughing. When the others return, Musetta gives Mimì the muff, pretending that Rodolfo paid for it. When Rodolfo lowers the blinds to soften the light, Mimì sinks quietly into death. Schaunard discovers that she is dead, and Rodolfo throws himself despairingly on her lifeless body, repeatedly calling her name.



Giacomo Puccini

Born: Lucca, December 22, 1858 — Died: Brussels, November 29, 1924



Giacomo Puccini was the fifth generation of a family of professional musicians and composers, living and working in and around Lucca, Tuscany, Italy. When he was just five years old his father died.

Puccini eventually took over his father's position as choirmaster and organist at San Martino Church. It was expected that Giacomo would follow in the path of his ancestors, who were church composers and organists, thus continuing the long family tradition. All that changed for him one night in 1876, when he and a friend walked thirteen miles to the city of Pisa to see a production of Verdi's *Aida*. From that moment on Giacomo knew that his true passion would be opera.

In 1880, Puccini completed his studies at the Pacini Institute in Lucca. Having just finished composing a mass, *Messa di Gloria*, a great-uncle was encouraged to help support his musical education. A scholarship was also granted from Queen Margherita at Milan's Conservatorio. Milan, with its famous Teatro alla Scala, was the place to be for all young up-and-coming composers.

For three years (1880-1883) Puccini continued his studies at the Conservatorio. For a graduating exercise he composed an orchestral piece, *Capriccio sinfonico*, which was performed by the student orchestra. It achieved great success at its performance and foretold the gifts that were to be — of operas blending intense emotion and theatricality with tender lyricism, colorful orchestration and a rich vocal line.

Meanwhile, the music-publishing firm of Edoardo Sonzogno announced the first of several competitions for a one-act opera. (Mascagni's *Cavalleria Rusticana* was discovered in this way in 1889.) Puccini, then still a student of the Conservatorio, decided to take part in it. A young librettist and journalist, Ferninando Fontana, suggested that he compose an opera around the story, *Le Villi* (The Witches). Though Puccini didn't win, the opera was produced successfully in 1884 in Milan. As a result, the great Milanese music publisher, Giulio Ricordi, acquired the rights to *Le Villi*, and commissioned Puccini to write a new opera, again with the young Fontana as his librettist. This was the beginning a life-long association of Puccini and Ricordi, in whom he found a fatherly friend and wise guide.

Puccini was a perfectionist, writing just eight full-length operas, compared to Verdi's 28. He set high standards for himself and everyone else involved in his operas. His early works show German influence. Later works show the influence of Debussy, and even a touch of the atonality of Schoenberg. But he never strayed too far from his melodic Italian roots or lost his attachment to his native Tuscany.

He worked tirelessly with the sopranos who played his heroines. Maria Jeritza, Puccini's favorite Tosca, recalled, "Sometimes he would make me so angry I wanted to cry. He would say, 'If ever I wake you at three in the morning and ask you to sing a high C, you will sing a high C.'"

When he was financially able, he bought a villa at Torre del Lago, living there much of his life. He was eventually driven away by the smell of a peat factory that was built during World War I. Puccini took no interest in politics and thought the war a mistake from the start. His lack of enthusiasm for the war was one reason for his falling out with his fiercely patriotic friend, conductor Arturo Toscanini.

Puccini was fond of hunting and smoking, and was fascinated with the mechanical marvels of his day. He owned a wireless and a phonograph and corresponded with Thomas Edison. He also owned several automobiles and motor yachts, and barely survived one of the first car crashes in Italy. Puccini once described himself as a "mighty hunter of wild fowl, operatic librettos and attractive women."

Puccini was a notorious lady's man, but he was innocent of the scandal that most shook his marriage. Convinced he was having an affair with a maidservant, his wife, Elvira, drove the young girl from the house

and publicly denounced her. The girl was so shaken that she committed suicide, whereupon it was determined that she was in fact a virgin.

Near the end of his life, Puccini was still striving for greatness with his last opera, *Turandot*. Marek wrote, “He became a frightening taskmaster, not only with his librettists but, above all, with himself. He was bent on doing something new, determined to write music of much larger scope, of legendary stature and philosophic implication.” Some critics felt that he nearly succeeded. Only death from throat cancer in 1924 prevented him from finishing and polishing the opera. (*Turandot* was eventually completed by his close friend, Franco Alfano, using Puccini’s notes.) At the première performance of *Turandot* at La Scala in 1926, the conductor, Arturo Toscanini, ended the performance in the middle of Act III (after Liù’s death), turned to the audience and said, “At this point the Maestro laid down his pen.”

La Bohème



During the winter of 1892, shortly before the première of *Manon Lescaut*, Puccini decided to write a new opera based on Henry Murger’s picaresque novel, *Scènes de la Vie de Bohème*, which was originally published in serial form, as well as a play written in collaboration with Théodore Parrière.

One day, in a Milan café, Puccini happened to meet his friend, Ruggiero Leoncavallo. In conversation it was revealed that each of them was at work on an opera based on Murger’s novel. A bitter quarrel developed, and the two composers became lifelong enemies. Leoncavallo claimed precedence in the subject, maintaining that he had already approached the artists whom he had in mind, and that Puccini knew this perfectly well. Puccini rebutted the accusation and, at the same time, welcomed the prospect of competing with his rival and allowing the public to judge the winner. Puccini’s publisher, Giulio Ricordi attempted to secure exclusive rights to the work on Puccini’s behalf but, because the novel was in the public domain, he was unsuccessful.

Puccini began the composition of *La Bohème* in the summer of 1894, and collaborated with librettists, Giuseppe Giacosa and Luigi Illica, who had done some work on the libretto for *Manon Lescaut*. Work proceeded slowly, partly because Puccini spent much of the next two years traveling abroad to supervise performances of *Manon Lescaut*.

Puccini was extremely demanding of Giacosa and Illica. There were many arguments and angry letters. At one time or another both librettists wished to resign from the project and had to be placated by Puccini’s publisher, Giulio Ricordi. Puccini was equally demanding of himself, spending almost the entire year of 1895 orchestrating *La Bohème*. The score was completed on December 10, 1895, resulting in a work so polished and tightly constructed that it was impossible to cut one line from it.

Giacosa and Illica claimed to have based Mimì almost entirely on Murger’s Francine, a marginal character in the novel who is all innocence and fragility. By taking Francine as a model for their Mimì the librettists allowed Puccini not only to distinguish her musically from Musetta, but also to achieve that perfect balance of realism and romanticism, of comedy and pathos.

Because La Scala was under the management of the publisher, Edoardo Sonzogno, who made a point of excluding all Ricordi scores from the repertory, the première was instead performed on February 1, 1896, in the Teatro Regio in Turin, the same place where *Manon Lescaut* had received its première in 1893. The public’s response to the performance was less than enthusiastic, despite the expert conducting of the newly appointed musical director, twenty-eight-year-old Arturo Toscanini. Bersezio found the music too simplistic. He wrote, “This is music which can amuse us, but hardly move us, and even the intensely

dramatic finale of the opera does not seem to be adequately colored and dressed with musical forms.” He advised Puccini to consider *La Bohème* “a momentary error, a brief digression, and to return to the path of true art.” Carlo Bersezio wrote in *La Stampa*, “Just as *La Bohème* does not leave much impression in the mind of the listeners, it will not leave much impression on the history of our lyric theater.”

On April 13, 1896 the opera was performed in Palermo. In contrast to the premiere performance’s disappointment, it was reported in newspapers throughout Italy and elsewhere that the audience was delirious, refusing to leave the theater until the final scene had been repeated. The Italian public quickly grew so fond of *La Bohème* that Leoncavallo’s opera on the same subject, which premiered a year after Puccini’s, never really had a chance.

George Bernard Shaw, after seeing *Manon Lescaut*, recognized Puccini as the heir to Verdi. But, even after the worldwide success of *La Bohème*, there were Italian critics who could not forgive him for his apparent lack of lofty artistic ambitions, for being too progressive, for ignoring the laws of harmony, and for his “unpleasant” use of parallel fifths.

Outside Italy most premières of *La Bohème* were given in small theatres and in the vernacular of the country. In Paris it was first given in 1898 by the Opéra-Comique, as *La Vie de Bohème*, and achieved its 1,000th performance there in 1951. It was performed in Manchester, England in 1897, and later that year in English at Covent Garden, and in 1899 in Italian. A company from Italy gave the American premiere of *La Bohème* in Los Angeles in 1897, and the following year in New York at Wallack’s Theater. The Metropolitan premiere took place on December 26, 1900. Henry Krehbiel, critic for *New York Tribune*, referred to it as “summer operatic flotsam and jetsam.”

A different sort of criticism of *La Bohème* came from English-speaking audiences. They had difficulty accepting Puccini’s engaging crew of Bohemians running afoul of Victorian morals. A British critic wrote that Murger’s work was “hardly suitable for the book of an opera.” After the Met premiere in the *Tribune*’s critic wrote, “*La Bohème* is foul in subject, and fulminant but futile in its music. Its heroine is a twin sister of the woman of the camellias . . . but Mimì is fouler than Camille, alias Violetta, and Puccini has not been able to administer the palliative which lies in Verdi’s music.” Even movie critic, Louella Parsons, managed to take a swipe at *La Bohème*, commenting that it was “woefully bereft of sunshine and smiles.” Through the efforts of soprano Nellie Melba, who sang Mimì in the first Italian performance in London and in the Metropolitan premiere, *La Bohème* was later established in English-speaking countries. Melba, Enrico Caruso and Arturo Toscanini were among its champions.

La Bohème straddles the divide between comedy and tragedy, and its music has a distinctively bittersweet quality. The score shows Puccini in the full flower of genius. There are still highbrows, however, who can’t surrender to Puccini’s frank emotionalism, but audiences have been so moved by his dramatic genius and musical effectiveness that they have kept *La Bohème* among the handful of indispensable operas in the standard repertoire.

The English critic, Frank Granville Barker, cast aside inhibition and wrote, “The man or woman who is insensitive to the spell of this performance really isn’t fit to live in civilized society, for it is one of the wonders of the world.”

Today *La Bohème* remains, along with *Tosca* and *Madama Butterfly*, as one of the central pillars of the Italian repertory and appears as #2 on Opera America’s list of the 20 most-performed operas in North America.

La Bohème: The Video (1993)

Starring David Hobson and Cheryl Barker; conducted by Julian Smith



This production of *La Bohème* performed at the Sydney Opera House is outstanding! The setting has been updated to Paris, 1957. The characters are portrayed by young, passionate performers with voices to match their passion — innovative staging and the perfect blend of acting and singing. The principals are all young enough to be playing a band of Bohemians with positive conviction (not overweight or over-aged). Puccini would be proud to see his masterpiece come to life with such perfection.

One of the reasons that the cast works so well together is because they were all friends offstage as well as on. Hobson and Barker had sung Rodolfo and Mimi in a VSO country tour of *La Bohème* in 1987, so they were old hands in the roles when the new updated version was premiered by The Australian Opera in Sydney in July 1990. This would explain the chemistry between the two.

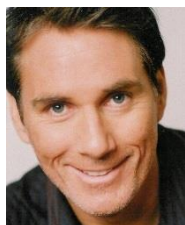
The Audience — The only disappointing part of this production was the audience — silent, except for an occasional cough, they sat on their hands. Perhaps, for the purpose of filming, they were instructed not to clap or shout until the end of a scene. I guess we'll never know.

Baz Luhrmann (director)



Baz Luhrmann is a well-known Australian film director, screenwriter and producer best known for *The Red Curtain Trilogy*, which includes his films *Strictly Ballroom*, *Romeo + Juliet* with Leonardo DiCaprio and *Moulin Rouge* with Nicole Kidman. In 2008, he released his film *Australia*, starring Hugh Jackman and Nicole Kidman. His most recent film, *The Great Gatsby*, with Leonardo DiCaprio and Tobey Maguire, was released in May 2013. He also took the large “L’Amour” sign in Act I and used it in *Moulin Rouge*.

David Hobson (Rodolfo)



David Hobson is an Australian tenor and composer. He is the Rodolfo who you'll be dreaming of. He is tall and handsome as well as a brilliant actor. He gives life to every note he sings. When he belts out a high C, it's not a matter of showing off his tenor, but a real emotional outpouring. He put himself so deeply into the character that at the curtain calls he was still in tears. Hobson's voice, though a bit thin for the role of Rodolfo, is actually that of a high lyric tenor, a rare *haute-contre* or baroque tenor, which is prominent in French Baroque and bel canto operas of the 18th and early 19th centuries, such as those composed by Mozart and Rossini.

Cheryl Barker (Mimi)



Cheryl Barker is an Australian soprano who has had an active international career since the late 1980s. She conveys a tender and lovely Mimi. Her acting skills make up any weakness in her voice, and in the end she has become the real Mimi. Barker masterfully balances the combination of ill health and beauty with her highlight being Mimi's death scene. She and David Hobson make a very good match, between them the chemistry is convincing, which makes their parting all the more heartbreaking.