

La Bohème

An opera in four acts. Sung in Italian with English Supertitels.

Music by Giacomo Puccini.

Italian libretto by Luigi Illica and Giuseppe Giacosa

Based on *Scenes de la vie de bohème* by Henri Murger

Premiere: Turin, Feb. 1, 1896

In 1893, Giacomo Puccini engages composer Ruggero Leoncavallo in a public quarrel over the right to create an opera based on Henry Murger's episodic novel *Scènes de la vie de Bohème*. Leoncavallo had already started work on his *La Bohème*, claiming Puccini had earlier said he was not interested. When Puccini changed his mind, he said merely, "So. There will be two *Bohèmes*." Angered, Leoncavallo went on to complete his opera, which premiered at La Fenice in Venice almost a year and a half after the first performance of Puccini's *La Bohème*. It was moderately successful, but never became popular. It did hold the distinction however, of being the vehicle in which Enrico Caruso scored his first major triumph.

Puccini's first major theatrical success came early in 1893 with his third opera, *Manon Lescaut*. With this opera, Puccini clearly found his authentic voice as a musical dramatist. In the same year, he began work on *La Bohème*. He employed librettists Luigi Illica and Giuseppe Giacosa to perform the intricate task of reducing Murger's sprawling novel into a manageable libretto. Illica and Giacosa later admitted the work had been the most difficult of their careers. Illica's first distillation of the novel ran no fewer than twenty acts. The book was filled with an abundance of comic and dramatic episodes, and to reduce it to four acts took more than three years of intense labor. During that time, their difficulties were compounded by the composer's constant criticisms, as well as numerous changes of direction and modifications. Bickering became so fierce at times, the librettists threatened to resign from the project.

Delays were due in large part to Puccini's obligation to undertake several extensive promotional tours in connection with the success of *Manon Lescaut*. In keeping with his characteristic loss of confidence in his subject, he also spent a good deal of his time toying with an opera title *La Lupa*, which he later abandoned.

To put off the trail by fire that most new operas endured at La Scala in Milan, *La Bohème* was premiered at Teatro Regio in Turin on Feb. 1, 1896. The theater's new conductor, 28-year-old Arturo Toscanini, led the performance. The opera was received by the audience with only polite applause, while the critics' assessments ranged from outright condemnation to mild approval. The lukewarm reception was thought to be due to the premiere's timing. The critics and Italians in general were becoming enamored with the French and German repertory, particularly Wagner's operatic music. The Turin audiences, fresh from the first Italian performances of *Götterdämmerung* conducted by Toscanini, were in the mood for a new opera composed in a grander style, a weightier work, as opposed to that with traditional Italian lyricism.

Soon after the first performance, Puccini made various adjustments to the score, notably adding the "bonnet" episode in Act II. As the Turin season progressed, enthusiasm grew,

with 24-sold-out houses. Within the following year, *La Bohème* was performed in every opera house in Italy. Soon there was scarcely a house in the world that was not performing it. Unauthorized performances were given throughout the Europe, including a heavily cut English version done at the Comedy Theater in Manchester, England.

La Bohème has become one of the three or four most often performed works in the repertoire and is the most popular Italian lyric stage work after Verdi's *Aida*.

The reasons for *La Bohème's* enduring popularity are varied. But in the view of many commentators, the success of the opera is due to Puccini's most perfectly achieved score in which the musical style is most suited to the subject matter. *Bohème* is a highly individual work, distinctive from the styles of his other opera. It has a light poetic quality, creating an aura, mood, and imagery all its own. Even though Puccini repeats himself more than do most composers, he was never again to compose anything like *Bohème*.

The United States premiere was performed by the Dal Conte Royal Italian Grand Opera during a visit to the Los Angeles Theater in California. The Metropolitan Opera first presented *Bohème* on Dec. 26, 1900, with Nellie Melba and Albert Salèza. Luigi Mancinelli conducted.