

Giacomo Puccini Biography



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Synopsis

Italian composer Giacomo Puccini, born on December 22, 1858, started the operatic trend toward realism with his popular works, which are among the most often performed in opera history. But the fame and fortune that came with such successes as *La Bohème*, *Madama Butterfly* and *Tosca* were complicated by an often-troubled personal life. Puccini died of post-operative shock on November 29, 1924.

A Musical Inheritance

Giacomo Puccini was born on December 22, 1858, in Lucca, Italy, where since the 1730s his family had been tightly interwoven with the musical life of the city, providing five generations of organists and composers to the Cathedral of San Martino, Lucca's religious heart. It was therefore taken for granted that Giacomo would carry on this legacy, succeeding his father, Michele, in the role first held by his great-great grandfather. However, in 1864 Michele passed away when Giacomo was just 5 years old, and so the position was held for him by the church in anticipation of his eventual coming of age.

But the young Giacomo was disinterested in music and was a generally poor student, and for a time it seemed that the Puccini musical dynasty would end with Michele. Giacomo's mother, Albina, believed otherwise and found him a tutor at the local music school. His education was also subsidized by the city, and over time, Giacomo started to show progress. By the age of 14 he had become the church organist and was beginning to write his first musical compositions as well. But Puccini discovered his true calling in 1876, when he and one of his brothers walked nearly 20 miles to the nearby city of Pisa to attend a production of [Giuseppe Verdi's](#) *Aida*. The experience planted in Puccini the seeds of what would become a long and lucrative career in opera.

From Milan to 'Manon'

Motivated by his newfound passion, Puccini threw himself into his studies and in 1880 gained admission to the Milan Conservatory, where he received instruction from noted composers. He graduated from the school in 1883, submitting the instrumental composition *Capriccio sinfonico* as his exit piece. His first attempt at opera came later that year, when he composed the one-act *La villi* for a local competition. Although it was snubbed by the judges, the work won itself a small group of admirers, who ultimately funded its production.

Premiering at the Teatro dal Verme in Milan in May 1884, *La villi* was well received by the audience. But more importantly, it caught the attention of the music publisher Giulio Ricordi, who acquired the rights to the piece and commissioned Puccini to compose a new opera for La Scala, one of the most important opera houses in the country. Performed there in 1889, *Edgar* was an utter failure. But Ricordi's faith in Puccini's talents remained unshakable, and he continued to support the composer financially as he set to work on his next composition.

Blaming the failure of *Edgar* on its weak libretto (the lyrical portion of an opera), Puccini set out to find a strong story on which to base his new work. He decided on an 18th-century French novel about a tragic love affair and collaborated with the librettists Giuseppe Giacosa and Luigi Illica on its adaption. *Manon Lescaut* premiered in Turin on February 2, 1893, to great acclaim. Before the year was out, it was performed at opera houses in Germany, Russia, Brazil and Argentina as well, and the resulting royalties paid the 35-year-old Puccini quite handsomely. Despite this overwhelming success, however, his best was still to come.

The Big Three

With their accessible melodies, exotic subject matter and realistic action, Puccini's next three compositions are considered to be his most important; over time they would become the most widely performed in opera history. The result of another collaboration between Puccini, Giacosa and Illica, the four-act opera *La Bohème* was premiered in Turin on February 1, 1896, again to great public (if not critical) acclaim. In January 1900, Puccini's next opera, *Tosca*, premiered in Rome and was also enthusiastically received by the audience, despite fears that its controversial subject matter (from the novel of the opera's same name) would draw the public's ire. Later that year, Puccini attended a production of the David Belasco play *Madam Butterfly* in New York City and decided that it would be the basis of his next opera. Several years later, on February 17, 1904, *Madama Butterfly* premiered at La Scala. Though initially criticized for being too long and

too similar to Puccini's other work, *Butterfly* was later split up into three shorter acts and became more popular in subsequent performances.

His fame widespread, Puccini spent the next few years traveling the world to attend productions of his operas to ensure that they met his high standards. He would continue to work on new compositions as well, but his often-complicated personal life would see to it that one would not be immediately forthcoming for some time.

Personal Scandals

The period between 1903 and 1910 proved to be one of the most difficult in Puccini's life. After recovering from a near-fatal auto accident, on January 3, 1904, Puccini married a woman named Elvira Gemignani, with whom he had been having an illicit affair since 1884. (Gemignani had been married when she and Puccini started their liaisons.) The couple had been living in the small, quiet fishing village of Torre del Lago since 1891, but over the years, Elvira had grown increasingly unhappy, due to the numerous other women that Puccini became involved with.

Matters reached a dramatic apex worthy of one of Puccini's operas when Elvira's jealousy led her to accuse a servant girl named Doria Manfredi of having an affair with her husband, publicly threatening her and harassing her in the village. In 1909, the distraught Doria killed herself by ingesting poison. After a medical examination proved that she had been a virgin, her family brought charges of slander and persecution against Elvira.

Mortified by what Elvira had done, Puccini separated from her and sent her away to live in Milan. She was eventually tried, found guilty and sentenced to five months in prison. Ultimately though, Puccini intervened in the matter, taking Elvira back and paying a substantial sum to Doria's family to convince them to drop the charges.

Fading Success, Failing Health

While dealing with the ongoing crises in his personal life, Puccini continued composing. On December 10, 1910, six years after his last opera, *The Girl of the Golden West* premiered at the Metropolitan Opera House in New York City. Though the initial production—which featured world-renowned tenor Enrico Caruso in the cast—was a success, the opera failed to achieve any lasting popularity, and over the course of the next decade, a string of relative disappointments followed.

In 1912, Puccini's faithful supporter and business partner Giulio Ricordi passed away, and shortly thereafter, Puccini began work on a three-part opera (realistic, tragic and comedic) that Ricordi had always been against titled *Il Trittico*. Puccini then refocused his efforts when representatives from an Austrian opera house offered him a large sum to compose 10 pieces for an operetta. However, work on the project was soon complicated by their respective countries' alliances during World War I, and for a time the compositions foundered. When *La Rondine* was finally performed in Monaco in 1918, it was moderately successful, but like its predecessor, it failed to make a lasting impact. The following year, *Il Trittico* debuted in New York City, but it too was quickly forgotten.

Seeking to achieve his former glory in the face of fading popularity, Puccini set out to write his masterwork in 1920, throwing all of his hopes and energies into the project, which he titled *Turandot*. But his ambitions would never be fully realized.

Coda

In 1923, Puccini complained of a recurring sore throat and sought medical advice. Though an initial consultation turned up nothing serious, during a subsequent examination he was diagnosed with throat cancer. As the cancer had by that point progressed beyond where it could be operated upon, Puccini traveled to Brussels in 1924 for an experimental radiation treatment. Too weak to endure the procedure, he died in the hospital seven days later, on November 29, 1924. At the time of his death, Puccini had become the most commercially successful opera composer of all time, worth the equivalent of an estimated \$200 million.

After an initial burial in Milan, in 1926 his body was moved to his Torre del Lago estate, where a small chapel was constructed to hold his remains. An opera celebration called “Festival Puccini” is held in the town every year in honor of its most famous resident.

When Puccini Came, Saw and Conquered New York City



From left, David Belasco, Arturo Toscanini and Giacomo Puccini, during one of the composer's two formative visits to New York City. Credit...DeAgostini/Getty Images

By [Michael Cooper](#)

- Nov. 16, 2018

He visited Little Italy and Chinatown, posed for pictures on the Brooklyn Bridge, marveled at the tall buildings and took in shows. He played cards in the back room of an Italian restaurant on 34th Street with the tenor Enrico Caruso. He was the toast of Gilded Age New York, thronged by reporters and cheered on by Vanderbilts and Astors.

Giacomo Puccini was a quintessentially Italian composer — “La Bohème” and “Tosca” remain opera house staples, more than a century after they were written — but his career was also shaped by the time he spent in New York.

He visited twice: The Metropolitan Opera brought him over in 1907 to oversee its first productions of “Manon Lescaut” and “Madama Butterfly,” then again in 1910 when it staged the world premiere of his American-themed opera, “La Fanciulla del West.” In 1918, the Met gave the premiere of “Il Trittico” — which [the company is reviving Nov. 23 to Dec. 15](#), with a cast including Plácido Domingo, to mark the work's centennial — but World War I kept Puccini from the opening.

Image



Puccini on the Brooklyn Bridge in 1910. Credit...Archivio Storico Ricordi

Puccini's New York visits were filled with incident and intrigue, success and frustration. They are reminders that golden ages may not always sparkle as brightly to those who live through them. (After the Met's “Butterfly” in 1907, Puccini grouched to a friend about the great Caruso. “He won't learn anything, he's lazy and he's too pleased with himself,” he wrote, conceding that “all the same his voice is magnificent.”)

A dash from the steamship to the stage

He almost missed his first Met opening. Puccini — a superstar in an era when opera was popular entertainment — was paid a hefty fee to come to New York in the winter of 1907. He was supposed to begin his stay by overseeing the final rehearsals of “Manon Lescaut.”

But his steamship was late.

The Met brought him over in style, aboard the Kaiserin Auguste Victoria. He delighted in the ship’s luxuries, including the 70 electric light bulbs illuminating his cabin. But it was a rough crossing, and his ship did not arrive in Hoboken until opening night.

Hoffmann, Jr. and Mrs. Fanny, Miss Klein, Mrs. Sadoff-Tauscher, E. W. Dupont, and Miss Janet Thompson.

MELODRAMA SET TO MUSIC.

A Fine Performance of Puccini's Work Arouse Great Enthusiasm.

Giacomo Puccini's latest opera, "La Fanciulla del West," was performed for the first time on any stage at the Metropolitan Opera House last evening, with all the circumstances denoting great success. It was a special performance, outside the subscription series, and the prices had been doubled but the house was filled to its utmost capacity and the audience was repeatedly brought to a high pitch of enthusiasm, etc., as is usual, could hardly give sufficient evidence to those who were responsible for the production and those who participated in it.

Music Manuscript by Puccini, with His Autograph.

To the New York Times

Giacomo Puccini

New York 10-12-10

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Behan's Part in It.

Not many opera houses would so much of their immediate success to the dramatic significance of their libretto as "La Fanciulla del West." It is hardly too much to say that its success is due more to Mr. Behan than to the music which has engaged in his own and intensity the effect of his melodrama by the power of music. "The Girl of the Golden West" had better be remembered for years ago by its theatrical effectiveness, the skill with which its lines and situations were worked, the perfect construction of the characters, and the glimmer of the crowd and atmosphere in which the story was told. The opera has not lost its power in Mr. Puccini's opera, and it was a happy fact that upon deep impressions, which were upon his own, and which were upon the memory of the spectators, the opera was given in the Metropolitan Opera House. The opera was given in the Metropolitan Opera House, and the success of the opera was due to the dramatic significance of the libretto, which was the work of Mr. Behan.

"La Bohème" would recognize him in this, so far has he traveled in thirty years.

In Comparison with "Tosca."

There is something in this music, however, of "Tosca," and it shows many points of contact with "Madama Butterfly" in the outline of certain of its more sustained melodic passages. The fact of that link Johnson sings in the third act after his capture, for instance, is of a very swift and fine of that opera, it was never delivered to music who heard "La Fanciulla del West" last evening. That the new work shows completely less frequency of melodic invention, or even call it invention, than Puccini's earlier work. There is certainly far less of the clearly defined melodic lines, which, in "La Bohème" and "Tosca," the love of which is in its early scenes. There is, in fact, little of it, and what there is has not more distinction than the same to which the music has themselves in waiting in the first act and which, when dramatic into the end of the opera, is a very of very melodramatic character for the Italian style it has in mind.

There are various instances of that originality which is known as "Puccini's" now supposed to be typical. American, that are used frequently but they are of a more subtle and more original character. And, indeed, even frequently to have only a rhythm and there are a few other things that have some part of the character of the opera and that might be compared with music. The same of the melodramatic nature has been recognized by the audience in the first act, whereas in "La Bohème" and "Tosca," the music is of a more subtle and more original character. There are various instances of that originality which is known as "Puccini's" now supposed to be typical. American, that are used frequently but they are of a more subtle and more original character. And, indeed, even frequently to have only a rhythm and there are a few other things that have some part of the character of the opera and that might be compared with music.

All this does not fail to keep the audience in its own mind, and as such, it is a very original character. And, indeed, even frequently to have only a rhythm and there are a few other things that have some part of the character of the opera and that might be compared with music. The same of the melodramatic nature has been recognized by the audience in the first act, whereas in "La Bohème" and "Tosca," the music is of a more subtle and more original character. There are various instances of that originality which is known as "Puccini's" now supposed to be typical. American, that are used frequently but they are of a more subtle and more original character. And, indeed, even frequently to have only a rhythm and there are a few other things that have some part of the character of the opera and that might be compared with music.



Signor Giacomo Puccini.

Reporters were waiting for him when he docked, and he told them he was already thinking about his next project: He had "some thought of writing an opera with Western America as a

backdrop,” he said, and hoped to get in touch with David Belasco. Puccini had made Belasco’s “Madame Butterfly” into an opera and would adapt his “Girl of the Golden West” as “La Fanciulla del West.”

Puccini made it into New York with just enough time to for a quick dinner at the Hotel Astor before he was whisked by carriage to the Met — where the orchestra played a fanfare as he arrived in his box. The crowd went wild. When he was brought on stage for curtain calls, [The New York Times reported](#), “he stood very much embarrassed, and the applause was deafening.”

“New York is extraordinary!” he wrote to a colleague.

PUCCINI'S MANON LESCAUT
AT THE METROPOLITAN

**A New Production That Won
Great Favor with the Audience.**

THE COMPOSER PRESENT

**Music of Grace and Charm—Messrs.
Caruso and Scotti and Mme.
Cavalieri in Chief Roles.**

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In another letter, he extolled the city's tall buildings — which had 25 or 30 floors, he noted — and the beauty of the evening lights, but complained about how expensive everything was. He also lamented that his workload was keeping him from seeing much of New York, and allowed that he preferred London and Paris. But he took special note of the beauty of American women.

“It's enough to make the Leaning Tower of Pisa stand up straight!” he wrote in one letter, adding that his wife, Elvira, was as jealous as Othello but insisting that he had behaved.

There were intrigues. One biographer, Mary Jane Phillips-Matz, wrote that Elvira made Puccini retrieve a ring from a woman he had been courting at the Met, and that she once discovered a note from another woman tucked into the band of his top hat.



The old Metropolitan Opera House in New York City, where Puccini helped to stage the company's early productions of "Manon Lescaut" and "Madama Butterfly." Credit... Bettman Archive/Getty Images

Puccini did not speak English, which sometimes left him feeling isolated, and he loathed the cold. Caruso was his constant companion — window-shopping for fancy clothes and expensive automobiles, a passion of Puccini's. They often dined at Del Pezzo's, an Italian restaurant on 34th Street, and played the card game *scopa* in the back. Caruso tended to win until, legend has it, the other players had a mirror placed behind his chair.

It was during that first trip to New York that Puccini attended one of the most notorious performances in opera history: [the American premiere of Richard Strauss's "Salome."](#)

He liked it. Before the premiere, in [a wide-ranging interview with The Times](#) in his suite at the Hotel Astor — which was interrupted at one point by a bellboy carrying a card mistakenly addressed to "Mr. Rossini" — Puccini proclaimed that "Salome" was the greatest modern opera.

Based on Oscar Wilde's play of lust, violence and religion, the opera shocked conservative Met patrons with its dance of the seven veils and its heroine's climactic kiss of John the Baptist's severed head. Under pressure from its board, the Met [canceled the rest of its run](#) and did not perform "Salome" again until 1934. The episode left a mark on Puccini.

A few months later, when he decided to abandon an opera he had been considering, “Conchita,” based on a psychosexual drama by Pierre Louÿs, Puccini wrote to his disappointed publishers, insisting he had not been influenced by the debacle. “It was not *fear* (confound the word!) of the *prudery* of the Anglo-Saxon audiences of Europe and America,” he said. “It was not the example of ‘Salome’ in New York.”

By the time this trip ended he was ready to go home. He wrote Sybil Seligman, an English friend and confidante, “I’ve had all I want of America — at the opera all is well, and ‘Madama Butterfly’ was excellent, but lacked the poetry which I put into it.”



A golden night at the opera

The Met Opera’s archives contain a copy of the contract that brought Puccini back to New York in 1910 for the premiere of “La Fanciulla del West.” To promises of pay, expenses, and room and board, one more is added in handwriting: “cars.”

Staging the premiere of “Fanciulla” was a coup for the Met. For Puccini, it offered a chance to shine after a painful period of his life.

His wife had accused their young maid, Doria Manfredi, of having an affair with Puccini at their home in Torre del Lago, Italy — leading the young woman to poison herself in 1909. Amid scandal, Puccini was trying to finish “Fanciulla,” or “The Girl.”

“It’s raining, and I’m unhappy, with ‘The Girl’ in front of me — silent,” he wrote Mrs. Seligman in 1909. “It’s 11 o’clock at night — what great, what immense sadness!”

He arrived in New York in a different mood entirely, after a comfortable, on-time passage in the imperial suite of the George Washington. (“Praise be to the Metropolitan!” he wrote his publisher.) And he immediately jumped into a whirlwind of rehearsals and publicity.

He gave a [news conference](#) at the Met, where he declared that he would like to write a comic opera — “No more heart throbs,” he said — and gave his views of the future of the art. “I believe that modern music drama is going to be simpler and simpler,” he said.

The pre-opera publicity was not always highbrow. “Every Woman a Song and Nothing More, to Puccini,” was the headline on an Evening Mail story. “And what — I hesitated in framing the time-honored question, but it popped out before I could shut my mouth in time — do you think of American women?” the reporter wrote. “I do not think of them!” was Puccini’s reply.

But the publicity worked. The Met doubled its prices for the “Fanciulla” premiere on Dec. 10 — \$2 for tickets in the rear of the Family Circle and \$10 for orchestra seats. Scalpers reportedly tried to sell them for as much as \$150.

It was an epic night: a new Puccini opera starring Caruso, conducted by Toscanini, directed by Belasco. The opera, and the after-party, drew the upper-upper crust of New York society, like John Jacob Astor; J.P. Morgan; Nicholas Murray Butler, the president of Columbia University; and people with the last names Belmont, Vanderbilt, Juilliard, Guggenheim.

It was front-page news the next day in The Times. “My heart is beating like the double basses in the card scene,” a pleased Puccini was quoted as saying.

A world premiere without the composer

The Met staged another Puccini world premiere in 1918: his triple bill “Il Trittico,” made up of “Il Tabarro,” “Suor Angelica” and the popular comedy “Gianni Schicchi” — perhaps the comic piece he had imagined eight years earlier? (Fans of [the Marx Brothers’ “A Night at the Opera”](#) may be interested to learn that the contract securing the rights to the premiere actually refers to “the party of the first part.”)



Geraldine Farrar in the final scene of "Suor Angelica," part of Puccini's "Il Trittico." Credit...White Studios/Metropolitan Opera Archive

But Puccini did not come.

As the opera was being planned, World War I still raged. And the Armistice was signed only a little over a month before opening night.

Giulio Gatti-Casazza, the Met's general manager at the time, wrote in his memoir that there was still talk of mines in the oceans. But Puccini wrote him before the opening.

“Could I have foreseen the sudden collapse of our enemies,” Puccini wrote, “I certainly should have been helping celebrate the glorious victory in New York.”