



Puccini and New York

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My final lecture of this year is about Puccini, and about an opera he wrote in 1910 for the Metropolitan Opera House in New York City. This takes us into new territory, and before I go into local details of the opera and its venue, it will be useful to take a wide-angle lens: to look at how opera was changing as it approached our present, modern condition. As we move into the twentieth century, it seems clear that, in one sense at least, opera began to falter for the first time in its three-hundred-year history. Almost as soon as the new century had been celebrated, people began to mutter about an 'opera crisis' (the death of Verdi in 1901 neatly fuelled such talk), and by the 1920s, with radio and gramophone changing permanently the manner in which music made its way around the world and made its mark in domestic surroundings, the choruses of disapproval became louder and more strident. Many held that the root had set decades earlier, perhaps as early as the first half of the nineteenth century. In the eighteenth century, most opera was new - especially composed for the occasion. Revivals would occasionally occur, but it was much more prestigious to have a brand-new work, and composers turned them out with impressive regularity. Around the time of Rossini, though, there slowly began to form an 'operatic repertory': a body of works that travelled across Europe (and increasingly beyond), being revived again and again, season after season, surviving changing fashions and serving as a benchmark for new creations. By the time Verdi was in mid-career, this 'repertory' system was fully in place. Verdi had it just right when he boasted that his *Il trovatore* would be seen 'in the heart of Africa or the Indies'. Opera was becoming a global phenomenon. And, equally important, the new print technologies and the phenomenal success of the piano as a domestic instrument meant that operas became, as never before, a part of domestic life.

At first, these 'repertory' works existed comfortably alongside the steady stream of newly composed operas, with the latter still attracting greater prestige. But by the end of the nineteenth century, it was clear that new works were becoming rarer: that the 'repertory' was becoming static. Why was this? There are of course all sorts of reasons, but two were particularly important. One was simple economics. As has been made clear again and again in these lectures, opera is almost always too damned expensive: the money generated at the box office can't hope to pay for the star singers and the chorus and orchestral musicians and the stage designers and costume fitters and all the rest. Someone always has to stand behind the enterprise financially, and that someone needs a deep, deep pocket. Down to the middle of the nineteenth century this role could be taken by the myriad of kings and princes and petty dukes still hanging on in Europe: people for whom the prestige of opera was worth the expenditure (usually in a kind-of 'mixed' economy in which private money would guarantee against loss). But a large contingent of this ruling class was permanently forced out of office by the 1848 revolutions. What generally took their place in the operatic economy was, then as now, state subsidy. But, then as now, such subsidies were unpredictable, dependent on the support of the masses who vote in democratic elections. When times were good, the fact that large amounts of public money were used to sustain entertainment only a favoured few would be able to attend was tolerated. But times were often not good; subsidies would be reduced, making the purveyors of opera more and more cautious and adverse to risk. Almost inevitably, 'new' works suffered in this atmosphere: they were more expensive, and their success was less predictable. Why not have *Il trovatore* instead?

But at the same time these economic changes were threatening opera, there were also problems at what we might call the 'supply' end. For anyone who has studied opera in the closing decades of the nineteenth

century, the increasing difficulty of operatic composition is hard to ignore. This was most obvious in Italian opera, which had the longest and most robust tradition. The days were long gone when Donizetti could turn out more than sixty operas in twenty-five years, or in which even a comparative perfectionist such as Verdi managed more than one opera a year during the first decade of his career. The recurring creative problem for most late nineteenth-century composers was bound up with the changing aesthetic of opera. In the first half of the century, opera composers worked within the protective haven of what had seemed an age-old tradition: they could (and often did) kick vigorously against the restrictions which that tradition imposed, against remorselessly energetic cabalettas or elephantine ensembles; but the standard forms were nevertheless there, to stimulate creative endeavour, to help banish the agony of a blank page, to give a salutary reminder that others had travelled the route before.

By the 1880's all that was changed. The joint onslaught of French and German influences (in the latter case, as much instrumental and operatic music) virtually destroyed the fixed forms that had once existed across different composers' works. In the good old days, there was a kind of structural template onto which any given subject could be plotted: each of three or four principals would have at least one solo scene; there would be a series of duets, and at least one grand confrontation against a grand scenic and choral tableau. Mix all this judiciously and, hey presto, you had an opera. Now, however, a newly cosmopolitan cultural vogue in Italy meant that each opera had, as never before, to create its own formal world. And although this might seem an advance, particularly to our Wagner-influenced ideal of what constitutes 'serious' musical drama, freedom from fixed forms was almost inevitably achieved at the price of fluency. The rate of operatic production gradually slowed as composers endlessly picked over possible subjects, searching for a plan that would be at once dramatically effective and a new vogue word - 'original'. As composers slowed down, impresarios and theatre managers had yet another reason for turning to past works for the basic operatic fodder.

In this perilous atmosphere, only one late-nineteenth-century Italian composer managed repeatedly to create works of lasting interest, and his name was of course Giacomo Puccini. In a certain sense no one offers a more vivid illustration of the creative struggle that modernopera required. Puccini's maturity is again and again marked by periods of stagnation: of repeated compositional blocks in mid-opera and of inactivity caused by the obsessive search for the right subject - one that could fire his creative imagination while also being completely 'original'. However, and although haltingly, Puccini produced a body of works that have remained in the repertoire. His most famous contemporaries, Mascagni, Giordano and Leoncavallo, created just one opera apiece that has stayed in the world's theatres. How did Puccini manage to succeed so often?

Again, there could be many answers, but the one I'd like to stress involves Puccini's abiding concern with ambience, the sense of place that is so important to his brand of musical drama, and that invades the musical as well as the literary and visual sides of the work. A reading of Puccini's voluminous correspondence with his librettists and publishers illustrates this vividly: as he searched and searched for new operatic ideas, identification of (and probably with) a striking new ambience was one of his first and indispensable creative priorities. Just think of the three most famous Puccini operas, all written one after the other around the turn of the century: *La bohème* in Bohemian Paris of the 1830s; *Tosca* in ecclesiastical Rome in 1800; *Madama Butterfly* in modern-day Japan. There is also a sense here of progressively more intense involvement with the musical and dramatic possibilities of what, fifty years earlier, would have been thought merely the 'background'. Puccini's last operas strengthen this impression of a deepening concern. *Il trittico* depends for its full dramatic effect on the violent contrast of its three settings, a contrast that in part replaces the usual, internal varieties of tone and continuities of narrative and character. And Puccini's last opera, *Turandot*, is a work whose musical language is more consistently controlled by its setting than any other the composer wrote.

This increasing concern with what is sometimes called 'local colour' was hardly unique to Puccini: we can, for example, see seeds of it in many French operas of the period, and also in some of Verdi's later operas, most especially in *Aida*. And the reasons why opera was becoming more alert to the possibilities of its geographical and temporal setting are of course complex. Partly the change was stimulated by technological advance: by the availability of more sophisticated lighting and other visual effects, and by the increased

possibilities furnished by the expansion in orchestral and harmonic colours. On a more basic level, though, the binding effect of a clearly established ambience, the fact that a sense of space could define an opera's individuality, acted as a substitute for the simpler, more immediately comprehensible formal shapes that earlier opera had enjoyed: the foregrounding of a setting, in other words, gave the impression of coherence that had earlier been supplied by recurring formal models.

One could--some have doubtless done so--take a ponderous, Marxist-aesthetic sledgehammer to this new obsession with ambience. Whether cynically aware or not, Puccini was, the argument might go, constrained to sell again and again the same basic product to his passive, willing, bourgeois audience. The audience wanted to have placed before them ritual enactments of their cultural and political prejudices; but, precisely because of the remorseless uniformity of their demands, they felt an increasingly urgent need to be tricked into thinking that each enactment was somehow entirely new. And so: what better way of disguising the uniformity of the product than to dress each reiteration in a startling different surface situation? It's a simple case of what the economists call 'commodification'. Such arguments find support from those who like to harp on the narrowness of Puccini's musical language. It is, they will tell us, obvious that, at extreme moments of emotional climax, Puccini's main characters tend to shed whatever exotic geographical trappings they might have been clothed in; when they rise above the staff to those famous cathartic high notes, they are suddenly all sound reassuringly Western and, well, Puccinian. What's more, even the musical markers of local colour, those devices that Puccini used to delineate that crucial sense of difference craved by his audience, can sound remarkably similar when placed side by side. For example, Bohemian students, Roman villains and Japanese relatives are all characterised on occasions by a prominent use of the whole-tone scale, as if there's a standard language that means 'not-us', and it doesn't particularly matter who the particular 'non-us' is at any given time.

The case of the opera that followed the 'big three' in the Puccini canon is, in this context, particularly interesting. It's the opera he wrote for the Metropolitan; it's called *La fanciulla del West*; it uses as its source a contemporary play by the American author David Belasco, called *The Golden Girl of the West*; and it's my topic for what remains of this lecture. At first blush, what could be more fitting: an opera written especially for the USA is based on an American play, with an American subject. What's more, for New York and the Metropolitan, the coming twentieth-century city and the coming twentieth-century opera house, this was clearly a crucial moment in attempting to demonstrate international credentials, to compete with the major European centres. In terms of singers and conductors New York's wealth had done this already (the presence of Toscanini and Caruso, both of whom would star in *Fanciulla*, assured that); but the *Fanciulla* commission was something different - it would be the first time that an American company could boast an operatic premiere of 'world' significance, and thus take a big step up the global cultural ladder. No wonder that the newspapers were full of it, or that the contract was signed with a special gold pen.

Puccini was, needless to say, paid unprecedentedly high fees for making the journey across the Atlantic. A letter he wrote on board his liner the *George Washington*, boarded in London, shows what luxury he was afforded in the 'Imperial Suite':

'A princely bath, a room with two gilt bedsteads with various sorts of opaline-tinted lamps; a drawing room with luxurious divans and mikado mirrors; dining room with furniture in the best English taste, ingenious cupboards which are even lighted inside, everything comfortable, large, and spacious as in the most modern of hotels. Price 320 (pounds) for passage alone. Large windows with sumptuous silk curtains. In short, a stupendous suite! Praise be to the Metropolitan!'

And before we wonder what an astronomical sum 320 pounds might be in modern money, it's good to know that tickets for the first night went on the black market for upwards of \$100, which makes the price of Puccini's passage seem like something of a bargain.

And, in one sense at least, Puccini did what was expected of him. The opera he crafted for the Metropolitan,

written in the midst of considerable personal crisis, imitated his earlier works in gaining an intense sense of freshness and challenge from its startling ambience. But rather than Bohemian Parisians or Japanese geishas, this time he placed Americans (native and otherwise) in the spotlight. We will examine how this went down with the locals a little later; let's first explore the opera in some detail.

The drama is set in the Californian gold rush of 1848-9, with saloons and sheriffs, Indians and Mexicans and outlaws, and with (at the centre) The Girl herself, Minnie, who has a heart of gold, who falls in love with the leader of the outlaw band (one Dick Johnson by name) and who eventually saves him from the noose. Let's immediately get a feel for this new ambience by listening to the orchestral music that begins Act I. It's by no means a full-blown overture, but its slightly self-conscious panorama of leitmotifs is an excellent indication of the musical atmosphere and the musical techniques to come. The performance here is by the Orchestra of the Accademia Santa Cecilia in Rome, conducted by Franco Capuana, and we'll continue the extract as the curtain rises on the Polka Saloon at the start of Act I.

EXAMPLE 1: Puccini, *La fanciulla del West*, start of Act I (Decca 421 595-2)

There is a great deal of musical activity in those first couple of minutes, and they're worth pausing over. At the very start there's a repeated, wide-spread orchestral chord, undoubtedly meant to create the sensation of space, that crucial ingredient of the Western myth. This central idea then moves seamlessly into a more urgent, lyrical melody (later connected with the fraught love between the Girl and the Outlaw); and at the end of the overture, we get a brash statement of a 'cakewalk', another 'exotic' musical touch. Then, when the curtain rises, distant voices are heard yelling 'Hello!' and an offstage balladeer sings a scrap of melody that will become very important to the opera as a whole. Let's hear the passage again, to help identify all those strands.

EXAMPLE 2: Puccini, *La fanciulla del West*, start of Act I (Decca 421 595-2)

It will, I hope, be plain from this brief, action-packed opening that, even in comparison with Puccini's earlier operas, the musical depiction of the setting is remarkably many-sided. It may even be that Puccini chose this story precisely because the image of the American far west, while undoubtedly exotic, held no very precise musical equivalence. Even a cursory list of the various 'characteristic' idioms embraces an impressive technical range, and you just heard three of them: those wide-spaced augmented chords and whole-tone passages which open the opera, and which are associated with the dramatic, mountainous landscape; the jagged, 'cakewalk' syncopations that often accompany references to the bandit world; and the simple, folk-like tunes represented most obviously by the balladeer's tune, which will be associated with the miners' nostalgia for their distance homes. And pretty soon there are other ideas: a more 'primitive' musical side of the miners appears when they improvise the banal, gauchely harmonised waltz that Minnie and her outlaw lover dance in Act I; and, most 'primitive' (and, for us, most embarrassing) of all, the narcotically repetitive music given to the native Americans at the start of Act II, characters who express themselves in desperately ungrammatical Italian, and frequently lapse into saying nothing more sophisticated than 'Ug'.

What's immediately striking is the way these diverse idioms constantly invade each other in *La fanciulla*. That orchestral prelude to Act I is a case in point: the initial, transparently scored augmented chords seem to struggle to maintain their integrity against the incursion of the more conventionally lyrical material. But an even more obvious example of transformation and development is when the balladeer's song comes centre stage, which happens early in Act I. As it happens, this tune's transformations started long before it reached the stage. Puccini, always hunting for 'authentic' material but not worrying where precisely it came from, got the melodic line from a collection of native American tunes (its origin is, purportedly, a Zuni Indian water dance); but then, typically for him, he used it as the key expression of the miners' nostalgia for their distant families. You heard it in the background at the start of the act, but pretty soon it figures more prominently, as the signature tune of the balladeer Jake Wallace [Vallass], played as a blackface minstrel. The Zuni dance is, with some adroit harmonic manipulation, turned by Puccini into a simple folksong called 'Che faranno i

vecchi miei, là lontano' (What will my old folks do, there far way?), with the strings imitating a 'primitive' guitar or banjo. But very soon (and significantly at the words 'Quanto piangerà': how she [the mother of the departed one] will weep) the miners are drawn into the theme, and it swells into a great choral lament, with the miners banging their tankards on the table to accentuate their involvement. It's a wonderful example of the way in which Puccini could start with a disarmingly simple idea, and gradually enrich it both harmonically and orchestrally, eventually developing it into a complex choral ensemble, transforming the miners into a powerful collective voice of nostalgia, and fashioning the theme into one of the opera's most important carriers of dramatic meaning.

EXAMPLE 3: Puccini, *La fanciulla del West*, 'Che faranno i vecchi miei', Act I

The continuation of this little scene adds a further layer to this simple tune. Having heard that beautiful close, one of the miners breaks down, saying that he can no longer bear the brutal life they are all sharing. A great orchestral crescendo emerges, and then there is a full orchestral reprise of the ballad, during which the miners hastily pass the hat round, collecting enough money to send their lamenting companion home. And then, as the sobbing man departs, the miners gently hum the concluding phrases of the ballad; again stressing the collective voice, and perhaps adding a promiscuous hint of the so-called 'negro' spiritual to the stylistic mix.

EXAMPLE 4: Puccini, *La fanciulla del West*, 'Jim, perchè piangi?', Act I

This brief passage near the start of Act I is rather typical of *La fanciulla*: a simple melody gradually takes on dramatic meaning as it passes through various musical treatments, accumulating significance as it is transformed by its context.

One further example from Act I may help to underline this process, the way in which melodies can transform as they move through the drama. This example involves the melody that introduces the heroine Minnie as she first appears in the saloon and is greeted by the miners. It's emblematic of the opera's bold stylistic mix, and the way that all the melodies seem constantly to merge into each other. Significantly in view of the larger relationship between vocal and instrumental forces in this opera, the melody is primarily associated with the orchestra. What is more, the series of sequential repetitions it undergoes boldly expands its harmonic vocabulary and, in the process, recalls both the chords of the opera's opening introduction and also the gentler tones of the ballad 'Che faranno i vecchi miei'. In this recording, Minnie is sung by Renata Tebaldi.

EXAMPLE 5: Puccini, *La fanciulla del West*, 'Hello, Minnie!', Act I

Let's now hear now this theme plays out at the end of Act I, Minnie is alone in the saloon with Dick Johnson, as yet not knowing that he is an outlaw. As reminiscences of the opening of the act yet again appear, this time gently nostalgic ones, Minnie wonders aloud what she might have achieved if she had had education; eventually she bursts into tears, saying that she is 'oscura e buona a nulla' (unknown and good for nothing). But Johnson rallies her, saying that she has the face of an angel (un viso d'angelo). Minnie repeats the words, and then utters a sad 'ah!' as the curtain falls. All this is touching enough, but the musical halo that Puccini wraps around these last moments is wonderfully evocative. It is based in the melody that introduced Minnie, but again its atmosphere is completely changed by the delicate orchestration. We even hear the miners, humming gently in the background, and the curtain falls as the solo instruments of the orchestra gradually fall away.

EXAMPLE 6: Puccini, *La fanciulla del West*, end of Act I

I could continue with further illustrations from this remarkable score, demonstrating in particular how these two key melodies, that associated with the miners and Minnie's theme, are further transformed in the final scene of the opera, which is one of the most musically daring in all Puccini. But time presses, and I hope I've already said enough to suggest something of the work's peculiar properties. It's clear that, with his New York venue in mind, Puccini devoted significant energy to the opera. True, its 'exoticism' may at first seem similar to the type he employed in earlier operas (Stravinsky was cruel about this: noting harmonic similarities with *Madama Butterfly*, he called *Fanciulla* 'an eastern western'). But the similarity is only on the surface. While in *Butterfly* the exotic is kept clearly differentiated from the 'normal', in *Fanciulla*, as we've heard, Puccini made a bold step toward a new kind of opera, one whose articulation was based less on simple juxtaposition of the 'exotic' versus the 'normal', more on the continuous development of both aspects: one adapted, that is, to the demands of the more modern, naturalistic dramas he now saw about him. It was, at least in part, an experiment from which he retreated in subsequent operas, into the poised sentimentality of *La rondine*, the vignettes of *Il trittico*, the fabulous world of *Turandot*. However, the example he left us in *Fanciulla* is an impressive and moving monument to his constant search for genuine creative progress. This tale of the fugitive, many-sided west may never become as popular as the operas that precede Puccini canon, but its example cannot fail to engage our respect for its composer.

So, to repeat the question I posed earlier, what did New York make of *La fanciulla*? The story of the premiere at the Metropolitan and its critical reception has been told recently in great detail, and with a better awareness of the cultural confusions [see the book *Puccini and the Girl*, by Annie Randall and Rosalind Gray Davis], and it is a tale of many ironies, particularly if one is attuned to the 'colonial' aspects of the whole affair. As mentioned earlier, the New Yorkers had commissioned Puccini for a particular reason and were eagerly looking forward to a prestige accessory from the European 'centre': a world premiere that would mean something in Europe. What is more, the frank exoticism of *Madama Butterfly* had been a great hit in previous years. But now, instead of Japanese geishas encountering US sailors in distant lands, the exoticism was much closer to home, in fact was home. It is clear that, for Puccini, the 'American' subject matter was itself highly exotic; and, as we have seen, he went about clothing his new ambience in a generous mix of musical styles, with American Indians, cowboys, ragtime, orchestral wide-open spaces and all the rest mingling together on his musical palette. But his American audience, understandably, saw things differently: in particular they did not appreciate finding themselves portrayed as something close to ethnographic exhibits. Surely there'd been a mistake; at the least, Puccini should have done better research, taken them more seriously and less cavalierly: above all he should have taken the trouble to find out what they thought out how they should be caricatured. His borrowing of an Indian song for the balladeer Jake Wallace was a case in point. As one impresario was reported to have told the composer: 'When you introduce a blackface minstrel act into *The Girl*, you have the gentleman of colour twang his banjo to a weird Indian melody instead of a thrum of ragtime. That is not right, and it is not American. You ought to have him pick the banjo to the tune of 'Suwanee Ribber' or 'Dixie', you know, to be strictly true to life.' Puccini tried to defend himself but was probably confused by this rebellion of the natives. The techniques he habitually used, taking 'foreign' material and, through his considerable musical skills, making them his own, had always served him in the past. As he had declared earlier in a newspaper interview: 'I think I have succeeded in getting plenty of atmosphere in *Girl of the Golden West* without employing the coon song to obtain it.'

I'm afraid there's plenty more where this came from as soon as one looks closely at *La fanciulla* and its reception: plenty more about 'coons' and 'chinks' and 'greasers'; about, in short, how an opera and a society that in some ways seem strikingly modern can embarrass us with their attitudes. But then that's *La fanciulla del West* for you: its musical splendours constantly undermined by its closeness to home. One last circumstance seems in this context telling. In Puccini's contract with the Metropolitan, which details the extraordinary fees and other bonuses bestowed on him, there's a tiny, handwritten addition, something presumably supplied at the composer's insistence. It had been agreed that, as well as that luxury suite on the transatlantic liner, he would get room and board while supervising the rehearsals in New York, and the exact requirements are laid out in the contract: '1 living room, 1 bedroom, 1 bathroom, and meals'. But Puccini evidently wanted something more: the handwritten note adds to the end of the list 'as well as automobiles'. Once again, a jarring image of modernity enters the scene. Puccini, who was passionate about speed boats and motor cars, who was periodically addicted to the rush and bustle of modern life, knew exactly what he wanted from the US, which was already the centre of this new, urban world. And he got it, making sure that the latest automobiles would be at his disposal as he travelled around the metropolis. In their turn, those

audiences at the Metropolitan, anxious for the kind of prestige that opera could bring, knew what they wanted from Puccini. But in *La fanciulla del West* they got something different: something that, disconcertingly, placed them too near for comfort to the receiving end of Puccini's musical fantasy.

La fanciulla del West and its troubled first reception at the Metropolitan is in many ways a good place to end these six lectures about operas and the cities and cultures that have nurtured them. It is fitting in part because, in all sorts of ways, the three-hundred-year-old story that began with Monteverdi and Venice in the 1630s came to something like an end with Puccini's last works. He and his arch-rival Richard Strauss were the last composers whose operas immediately conquered the international stages and became instant 'repertory' works. As I mentioned at the start, the twentieth century has been a difficult time for 'new' opera. Opera is still with us, of course, and in some senses is a huge growth industry: in certain places, the USA in particular, more opera is now performed than ever before. But the repertory is mostly static, and when it expands it does so backwards rather than forwards; new works are still presented, but they tend to come from a forgotten past rather than from living composers. Whether or not this is a matter for great lamentation is a point we could debate: but to explore the issue, and to discuss why some people devote desperate energies to promoting contemporary opera, would require another lecture entirely.

But there's another point: the curious reception of *La fanciulla* is also a fitting end because its terms of reference are so disconcertingly modern. The myth of the cowboy riding in those wide-open spaces is still, after all, with us today. True, its vogue may finally be coming to an end: the idea of forging ever westward, bring 'civilisation' to new frontiers, now tends to make us uncomfortable; we cannot forget as easily as we once did the damage that this expansion inevitably did the environment, and to the human populations already existed within it. 'Exoticism' is now much harder to enjoy, simply because everyone is now close to home, everyone has become part of our shrinking and ever more fragile world. In this sense, *La fanciulla del West* can still ask hard questions. What's more, its story may remind us that opera, although it can generate something very close to pure aesthetic pleasure, also engages hard questions, in particular questions about who we are and about our changing place in a changing world. So long as it continues in that task, it will surely remain with us, whether or not the idea of 'contemporary' opera remains an impossible dream in the twenty-first century.

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