

# The Puccini Story



An interview with **Dr Joseph Talia, OAM**  
Artistic Director,  
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4 August 2008

## **Q. Tell us a little about this new production.**

**A.** “We are devising an original program which tells the story of his life through narrative and music – and the emphasis is not necessarily going to be on the music because the music speaks for itself. So we’d like to use the narrative to enhance the public’s knowledge of the man; as a man; as a character; the sorts of things that made him tick; and why he became such a fantastic composer. How that personality actually fed into his music...”

## **Q. What do you think is Puccini’s contribution to Opera?**

**A.** “Its two fold; first - more and more he inherited the mantle from Verdi – in the early Puccini especially you can see that in terms of the dramaturgy, the sort of pictures he is trying to paint ... he has definitely been influenced by Verdi. He hiked across the hills of Tuscany to Pisa when he was only 17, to see a production of *Aida* and I think he was particularly impressed with the visuals as well as the music – the fact that in *Aida* there was more continuity, more composed through than just a number of arias which followed each other, with the odd duet.

He was also impressed with the atmosphere and the visuals that Verdi was able to conjure up. I believe his idea of when to enter a scene and when to leave it, especially the end visuals of an Act, were influenced by Verdi. But then he took it to the next level; he became particularly obsessed with dramatic authenticity and with further analysis of the inner life of his characters. He seemed to have not just an emotional attachment but a real empathy with his characters. I think he was thus able to further, not just the opera plot, but the way he approached character – Mimi for instance was arguably his first great character. (*Manon* was fantastic but a little more uni-dimensional) Mimi was a far more complex personality and one he had affinity with. It seems he saw this young woman as being a really lovely innocent in whom fate seemed to conjure up the possibility of misfortune. So there’s not only enormous empathy but tremendous compassion. You get the feeling that if he could reverse her fortunes he would.

I think this was very important in Puccini’s life. I don’t know if it was a Tuscan trait: it may have been influenced by regional folklore but it definitely was a big thing for him – this affinity...this love of women, but particularly for women who seemed to be handicapped by fate.”

## **Q. Is he more of a story teller?**

**A.**” I think he is a story teller. He becomes very trim in his story-telling; you find there is no fat in most of his major productions. That in many respects came as a result of his second opera, *Edgar*, which was essentially a failure. Not because of the music...in fact the music was a step forward from *Le Villi* which had been very successful...but because Fontana, his librettist, actually gave him a bad libretto to work with.

So, in *Edgar* there was some fantastic music – some of which was renewed in *Tosca* with minor changes – but it never stood up to the scrutiny of the contemporary audience in terms of the drama.

But the big lesson he learned from *Edgar* was that you could have fantastic music but unless you are telling a terrific story and you do so in a very intelligent, direct but sympathetic way you're not going to keep your audience. So from then on he actually becomes very particular about his librettist and the poets that he works with. The to and fro between the composer and the librettist has become legendary – he was apparently very difficult to work with – but eventually he got what he wanted!

So, dramatic authenticity was very important to him. Having said that we mustn't neglect the fact that he really also conjured up a tremendous atmosphere in his operas, which he got across not only through very powerful melodic invention but also a tremendously colourful and exotic orchestration which elicited particular colours specific to the situations and also the overall atmosphere of the opera. You only have to think of something like *Butterfly* ..the orchestration is unique to that...it couldn't be swapped into anything else. More and more, as he becomes a mature artist, there is this tremendous ability to 'hit the nail on the head' with the kind of atmosphere he is trying to create.

I don't think that one can overlook the fact that the music he gives to his different characters actually builds the character...and is cohesive. I think that's the thing about Puccini's success...this cohesion about his characters. Occasionally they act 'out of character' but when they do so it is in a way that makes sense to modern audiences."

**Q. About this production, what gave you the idea? What are you trying to achieve with it?**

A. "I feel that audiences know Puccini's music. Almost everybody has heard bits of *Butterfly*...bits of *Bohème*, even if you haven't seen the whole thing. I think Puccini, the man, is much more elusive and I felt that for his 150<sup>th</sup> anniversary it would be an opportunity to let our audience know much more about Puccini, the man; how his passions, his philosophy and his personality fed into his music.

We want to use the narrative to talk about Puccini and his characteristics that people may not know too much about but which influenced him as a composer in Italy at that time.

The sense of place is very important with Puccini. He was very attached to Torre del Lago, the lake he lived by from 1884. This was the year his mother died and also when he took up with Elvira Gemignani. This subsequently caused quite a scandal because Elvira was married to one of his mates and already had one child and apparently there was another one on the way – it is suggested that it was in fact Puccini's child. Initially she was going to him for music lessons and things went from there. The scandal led them to leave Lucca and settle in Torre del Lago and he really fell in love with the lake...the wildlife on the lake...and in fact became a prodigious hunter. It has been said he wasn't a terrific shot but it seems the act of hunting was very close to his heart.

He was also a very modern man in many respects. He seems to have readily adapted to the new technology of his day almost as soon as it came in; motor cars, motor bikes, motorboats on the lake, telephones and all the contemporary technology. We'd call him an early adopter – something people probably wouldn't think to associate with him.

On the other hand he wasn't a particularly good scholar, particularly in his early years. His Uncle, who succeeded his father at the Conservatorium, actually thought that Puccini lacked talent in the early years when he was trying to teach him music. Of course, it wasn't that he lacked talent – he was just plain lazy; a bit of a dreamer and his mind was elsewhere. Fortunately for him, his mother was a very strong woman and she refused to give up on him. She arranged for him to change tutors and by the time he ended his course there he had produced a very substantial Mass. His talent was already showing – for example the *Capriccio* he wrote for his final year at the Milan Conservatorium was later adopted as the first part of *La Bohème*.

I think it's also interesting for people to know that, like most of us, he was a complex personality and in some respects contradictory. He was a prodigious womaniser and a very bohemian man in real life. He led a bohemian life in his younger days as a student in Milan but also later in life, when he was very successful, he and some of his artist friends established a bohemian club – no more than an opportunity to get together every night and drink, play cards and only occasionally do some composing. This is one of the reasons why *La Bohème* is so successful and popular because it has an element of authenticity.

So when you ask how is he different to other composers, then, apart from the dramaturgy, there is another area that we can't dismiss and that is where he became the conduit to the communal heart. I don't think there has ever been a composer who so directly communicated with the human emotions as Puccini did."

**Q. What about his travel overseas and how that may have influenced him**

**A.** "He travelled to America several times and loved New York and its frenetic lifestyle. He also was fascinated by its technology and met with people like Alexander Graham Bell. He seems to have recognised the potential for music recordings even back then.

He went to London where he developed a relationship with Sybil Seligman. He obviously researched deeply into French literature and that too is obvious in his opera use. In addition I think Wagner had a tremendous influence on him. He was particularly struck with some of the harmonies in *Tristan and Isolde* and in his first huge success, *Manon*, he writes an intermezzo or prelude which in many respects fulfils the same function as the prelude to *Tristan and Isolde*. i.e. it quotes from his opera but in a very orchestral or symphonic way.

Later on I believe he was enormously influenced by the French composers – specifically Bizet had a tremendous influence on him. Apparently when he first saw *Carmen* he was struck by the real-life personalities and emotions that the characters were able to bring to the stage.

With Massenet it might have been in the reverse order. When his publisher asked him why he would want to do another *Manon*, when Massenet's was so popular he apparently replied that Massenet was French and did it with all the associated 'powder and puff' but he would do it as an Italian with all the 'passion and drama',

Later again in life he was very influenced by Stravinsky and he was up to date with what people like Schoenberg were doing. So, if you listen to things like *Turandot*, you can actually feel these influences. The difference was that with Puccini he was open to the whole palette of musical colours but at the end of the day he was true to himself.

So, whilst adopting and learning from other influences he stamped his own mark on the music.

Thus it's a real struggle to deal with all this in developing this production but really he is such a towering figure in opera that for his 150<sup>th</sup> anniversary one really owes it to him! To keep alive the memory not only of the music but of the man.

How do we do it?

We're going to try to synthesise different aspects of his personality through the narration and explore how those aspects feed into the music. We're going to represent his music right from the beginning – Anna's aria from *Le Villi* where you will hear that Puccini stamp right from the word go. We then follow through to the end with *Turandot* – and not just *Nessun Dorma*! There is a lot of music which is not often done, such as from *Edgar* or *Schichi*. We are also including a duet from *The Girl of the Golden West*, which is not often done, but which is representative of a new *modus operandum* in Puccini emphasising the synthesis between the drama and the music; I believe with *The Girl of the Golden West* he went to the next level; in many respects it represents for Puccini what *Falstaff* did for Verdi. It's interesting that neither of those

operas is amongst the most popular for the composers. In reality, however, they are a watershed – musically very different to what they had previously composed.”

**Q. What are the challenges of concert versions? What about venue issues.**

**A.** “Clearly, singers you choose have to have good carrying voices to deal with the orchestra almost in any space [e.g. behind the orchestra at BMW Edge.] It can be difficult with some of the younger singers – we have a range of proficiency and experience but I think it works very well.

I think what we did at the Edge worked well in the end and I hope this will work with Puccini as well – we’ve got multimedia visuals; photos and images which will also add to the concert experience as well.

Yes, it presents difficulties but I think one of the things in the Arts is we need to be challenged and to rise to those different challenges. One thing that concerns me in Australia is... the Arts, once they become established and people get a little bit of government money they become terribly bureaucratized – and I’m not sure that this is a very good thing for the Arts, or for artists.

We also have a problem with “political correctness”; the Arts, by their very nature, should not be politically correct...they should be challenging and provocative. Not only to the artists but also to the audience. If you become too careful and too interested in the notion of marketing [or ‘give the audience what they want’] I think it’s a disaster for the Arts. I think artists should stay a little aloof. That’s not to say that we don’t share our humanity but we shouldn’t shape that humanity to ‘fit in’ for the sake of grants or audiences. If you have an artistic scene that panders to the lowest common denominator you’ve already built in the long term destruction of the art form.

So the Puccini Story is difficult; it would be easier to put on one production...than to devise a life story with all its inherent dangers and actually cast for 11 or 12 operas. Nevertheless we will take the challenge. I believe our company is quite avant garde and provocative – the flip side of that is whilst we continue to do works that are less known or popular we’re amongst those who are most ‘strapped for cash’. Yet creativity often goes with that.”