

America forever! Puccini and *La fanciulla del West*

Ringrazio con tutto cuore l'egregio signor Viafora per le gentili parole pronunziate. Sono veramente grato al gran pubblico di New York per le accoglienze tanto entusiastiche che ha fatto alle mie opere. Accetto l'augurio del buon viaggio e finisco gridando 'America forever!'

*[My heartfelt thanks, dear Mr. Viafora, for all your kind words. I am really deeply grateful to the great public of New York for the very enthusiastic welcome they have given my operas. I accept your wishes for a safe journey, and conclude by cheering: 'America forever!']*¹

Giacomo Puccini speaking prior to his departure from New York in 1907.

To the New World

On the afternoon of 21 February 1907, Giacomo Puccini stood in the little office of the Columbia Phonograph Company of New York and, knowing no English, saluted his hosts in the operatic language of Lieutenant B F Pinkerton (without benefit of the *Star-Spangled Banner*, whose themes appear five times in *Madama Butterfly*). On the 28th, the maestro, together with his wife Elvira, boarded the French liner *La Provence* and sailed home to Europe.

He had arrived in New York a month earlier at the invitation of Heinrich Conried, manager of the Metropolitan Opera, to supervise performances of two of his most famous works: *Manon Lescaut* (1893) and *Madama Butterfly* (1904), neither of which had been heard before at the Metropolitan. *Butterfly* had been performed in Washington in 1906 by Henry Savage's British company, and Savage and Tito Ricordi had then taken the opera, in English, on a fourteen-thousand-mile tour to sixty US and Canadian cities. Two hundred performances had been given within six months. The Met's production would be the first to be sung in Italian in North America.

In 1890 Puccini's fortunes had reached their lowest ebb. Although his first two operas, *Le villi* and *Edgar*, had met with some critical success, both had failed commercially. He was heavily in debt and had to struggle to support a growing family. His younger brother Michele, a music teacher, had already emigrated to Argentina, and Giacomo wrote to him about his anxiety over the premiere of *Edgar*: 'I am terribly afraid for the opera, because everybody is dead set against me. If you can find work for me after *Edgar* I shall come - only it mustn't be in Buenos Aires, but in the interior, among the redskins.' On another occasion: 'If I could find means of making money I would come where you are. Is there any chance for me there? I would leave everything behind and go. . . . I shall come and we'll manage *somehow*. But I shall need money for the voyage. I warn you!' Michele tried to dispel his brother's unrealistic expectations, describing in vivid terms the hardships he had

¹ Puccini's voice survives on a recording made by the Columbia Phonograph Company. A number of silent movies have also survived, showing him shooting birds (one of his favourite pastimes), relaxing at home, and visiting New York.

endured. He died of yellow fever in 1893, the year of Giacomo's first triumph, *Manon Lescaut*. Manon too was to die in the new world.

In June 1905 Puccini was finally able to travel to Argentina (and to Montevideo in neighbouring Uruguay) not to work amongst the 'redskins' but to have a holiday. His only musical mission was to prepare, introduce and attend the performances of his definitive version of *Edgar* in the Teatro de la Ópera (the second Teatro Colón would not be finished until 1908). *Manon Lescaut*, *La bohème*, *Tosca* and *Madama Butterfly* had also been programmed, with the best casts of that time and under the baton of Leopoldo Mugnone, a long-time friend of Verdi and one of Puccini's favourite conductors. Giacomo and Elvira were fêted, and he pursued his favourite pastime – shooting birds. He composed one piece of music during his stay, and this has recently come to light. It is a school hymn called *Dios y Patria (God and Homeland)* with words by Matías Calandrelli, a journalist of the newspaper *La Prensa*, which commissioned the work. It is the only one of Puccini's compositions to be based on a text in Spanish; Ramerrez and his Mexican gang in *Fanciulla* all speak perfect Italian!

After *Butterfly*, the composer explored all kinds of subjects for a new work: Gabriele d'Annunzio's *Parisina* and *The Rose of Cyprus*, Oscar Wilde's *A Florentine Tragedy*, and Pierre Louys' *La Femme et le pantin*, re-titled *Conchita*, amongst them. He even considered an opera on the subject of Marie Antoinette, entitled *The Austrian Woman*. However, when he arrived in New York in January 1907, he announced to the assembled press that he was thinking of writing an opera with western America as its setting. The next day's headlines proclaimed:

'Would Write THE American Opera
M. Puccini Fired to Compose The West'
Will Consult Mr. Belasco.'

The subject of David Belasco's play *The Girl of the Golden West*, first seen in New York in 1905, had been drawn to Puccini's attention by his friend Marchese Piero Antinori. Now it seemed that the time had come to create his third 'American' opera - on a quintessentially American theme. What better time to announce it than in the wake of the hugely popular *Butterfly*, and what better place than in the shadow of the Metropolitan whose management was paying him to supervise productions of his own works? In the 1907 season, *La bohème* (1896) and *Tosca* (1900) were also performed.

Conried needed Puccini as much as the composer needed Conried, since the latter was under great pressure from his board for letting Oscar Hammerstein's competing Manhattan Opera House tie up the rights to important new works. Conried would suffer the humiliation, during Puccini's visit, of having Strauss's *Salome* taken off after a single performance because it outraged wealthy patrons and board members alike. Puccini had seen Strauss's controversial work in Vienna the year before and described it as a 'terrible cacophony, there are some very beautiful feelings in the orchestra, but in the end it wears you out'. *Salome* would not be allowed back to the Met for another twenty-seven years.

Giacomo and Elvira arrived in New York on 18 January on board the SS *Kaiserin Auguste Victoria* of the Hamburg-America line, the same ship that would bring Gustav Mahler to New York the following year. Puccini's contract had provided for eight thousand dollars and two first-class roundtrip tickets, in return for which he was to be at the Metropolitan Opera's disposal for six weeks. Because of delays *en route*, the ship arrived just three hours before the opening night performance of *Manon Lescaut*. The visitors were whisked to their suite on the tenth floor of the luxurious Hotel Astor in Times Square. Then Puccini was met at the opera house, just three blocks away, by Conried, and escorted to his box. The performance was already in progress but at the end of the first act the composer was greeted with a fanfare from the orchestra and a standing ovation from the audience. He rose and bowed at intervals, and later wrote to a friend: 'Every time there was applause I had to get up and sit down. . . . I felt like one of those puppets you see in a circus.' At the end of the second act he had to go onstage, first with Enrico Caruso (*Des Grieux*) and Lina Cavalieri (*Manon*), who then left him alone, where 'he stood very much embarrassed, and the applause was deafening,' reported the *Times*. The end of the opera brought another tumultuous ovation. Puccini's arrival in the US had been a triumph.

Butterfly followed. The public loved it but the composer was less than satisfied with the singing of Geraldine Farrar and the conducting of Arturo Vigna, who had difficulty controlling his orchestra.

With *Butterfly* out of the way, Puccini spent several evenings in theaters where, in spite of his almost non-existent knowledge of English, he saw three plays by Belasco: *The Music Master*, *The Rose of the Rancho* and *The Girl of the Golden West*. With the latter, Belasco once again impressed Puccini with his 'daring staging' and cinematic effects (as he had with his play *Madame Butterfly* in London), this time achieved with moving curtains showing the panorama of California's Sierra mountains, the log cabin and the saloon. Musical accompaniment was provided by a banjo, 'bones' (xylophone) and a concertina, and included such folk tunes as *Old Dog Tray*, *Camptown Races*, *Coal Oil Tommy*, *Rosalie*, *the Prairie Flower*, *Wait for the Wagon*, *O Susanna* and *Pop Goes the Weasel!* Thirty-two men were required to produce the blizzard on top of Cloudy Mountain with newfangled snow and wind machines.

According to Belasco, Puccini came rushing backstage saying: 'I want the play! I have already the minstrel song in my head.' But the composer was not ready to make any more public announcements, saying only that he 'hoped that Belasco might soon write something that he could use.' In response to a question, he commented that he had enjoyed *The Girl of the Golden West* because of the naïveté of the heroine whom he found refreshing' and 'adorable'.

Back in Torre del Lago, Puccini wrote to Belasco: 'I have been thinking so much of your play . . . cannot help thinking that with certain modifications it might easily be adapted for the operatic stage. Would you be good enough to send me a copy of the play. . . . I could then have it translated, study it more carefully, and write to you my further impressions.'

The 'Affaire Doria' and *La fanciulla*

Work on *Fanciulla* was brought to a halt in the autumn of 1908 by a shocking domestic crisis. The immediate cause was Elvira's suspicion that her husband was having an affair with their maid Doria Manfredi. Puccini had a history of amorous adventures - his affair with Elvira herself had begun while she was still married to a school friend - and more were to come. Her suspicion on this occasion had been aroused by Fosca, her daughter from her first marriage. Giacomo denied the accusations but there were many violent scenes and temporary separations. Puccini confided to a friend: 'My life goes on in the midst of sadness and the greatest unhappiness...As a result *The Girl* has completely dried up - and God knows when I shall have the courage to take up my work again.' He added that his life had been virtually destroyed by his wife's jealousy and that he was so unhappy he had 'often lovingly fingered my revolver!'

In January 1909, after being repeatedly vilified in public by Elvira, the maid Doria committed suicide by swallowing a corrosive poison used as a disinfectant. An autopsy confirmed *virgo intacta*. At the instigation of the Manfredi family, Elvira was charged and found guilty on three counts: defamation of character, libel, and menace to life and limb. She was sentenced to five months and five days in jail, and fined. Eventually, Puccini paid the family a large sum of money to save his wife from imprisonment.

Recent research by the Italian film director Paolo Benvenuti suggests that Puccini had in fact been having an affair with Doria's cousin, Giulia Manfredi who, like Minnie in *La fanciulla del West*, worked in a hostelry frequented by hunters and local farmers. This was the Chalet Emilio, which sits on the edge of Lake Massaciuccoli, opposite Villa Puccini. Giacomo and Giulia, it is said, had an illegitimate son, also called Antonio (though his name might as well have been Sorrow) who was given to a nurse in Pisa together with a monthly endowment which stopped on Puccini's death in 1924. Antonio Manfredi died in poverty in 1988, leaving a suitcase full of letters, photos and other documents confirming the relationship.

The tragic Doria, it seems, had been 'set up' by Fosca (Elvira's daughter and wife of the impresario Leonardi) whom Doria had caught *in flagrante* with Guelfo Civinini, one of the librettists of *Fanciulla*. Publicly humiliated at every turn and torn between loyalty to her cousin and devotion to the maestro, Doria found her situation unbearable and took her own life. No doubt she was in Puccini's mind when he came to write the poignant music for the faithful slave girl Liu who commits suicide rather than betray her master. It was at this very point in the unfinished *Turandot* that Puccini laid down his pen.

The whole melancholy but engrossing story has been told by Paolo Benvenuti in his film *La ragazza di Lago* (The Girl of the Lake), and by Adrian Mourby in the journal *Opera Now* and the British newspaper *The Independent* of 6 July 2008.

1910 – Triumph in New York

In time, the composer's focus returned to *Fanciulla*, and the orchestration was finished at midnight on 27 July 1910. He regarded the score as his finest work to date, and it has often been remarked that it introduced new sounds and structures

into his compositional style. Some commentators at the time detected the influences of Wagner, Debussy and Strauss. Others thought that 'the music, generally speaking, strikes one as constrained, too elaborate and too modern in harmonic structure to suggest the primitive elemental types whose thought and action it is intended to illustrate'. Another critic wrote: 'What the public has always wanted, wants now, and always will want in any opera, above all things, is melody.... There is surprisingly little of this in *The Girl of the Golden West*.' Yet another observed: '...it may be doubted whether any who knew the composer only through *La bohème* would recognize him in this, so far has he travelled in thirteen years.'

It is possible to detect Wagnerian influences at work in *Fanciulla*, albeit in a carefully controlled way. Puccini was introduced to the music of Richard Wagner at the Milan Conservatory, and he attended the Bayreuth Festivals of 1888 and 1889. He once observed: 'Nothing of Richard Wagner has died: his opera is the yeast of all contemporary music, and there is yet something to germinate, later, in happier artistic times.' In *Fanciulla* he made his own use of leitmotifs, notably in relation to Minnie and the miners, and he used a form of 'endless melody' instead of set 'numbers' – something that admirers of his earlier operas did not necessarily welcome.

Of special significance from a musical point of view, is a four-note motive that appears in the orchestra when Minnie decides to hide the wounded Johnson. This is repeated a number of times. It is a reference to the famous chromatic motive that opens *Tristan und Isolde*, through which Wagner expresses the inter-relationship of suffering and desire. Now harmonized in E-flat minor, Puccini uses it to describe the pain of Minnie and Johnson that is part and parcel of their love.²

There are other parallels too: in the theme of the destructive consequences of a lust for gold, the redemptive role of a woman (Puccini deliberately strengthened this aspect of Minnie's character over Belasco's model); the awakening of the shared past of Minnie and Johnson a *la* Siegmund and Sieglinde; Rance's Hunding-like involvement; the symbolism of a door suddenly blowing open as an expression of the coming of love; Minnie's Act 2 response to the wounding of Johnson, reminiscent of Sieglinde's Act 2 delirium; Puccini's direction for 'eight to ten' horses in Act 3 paralleling Act 3 of *Die Walküre*, and Minnie's Valkyrie-like cry as she rides to Johnson's rescue. The radiant ending offers more than a nod to *Parsifal*, one of Puccini's favourite operas, an association reinforced by Minnie's words: 'Brothers, there isn't a sinner in the world to whom the path of redemption is not open!'

Some modern analysts have sought to locate Puccini (and *Fanciulla* in particular) within the political discourses of early twentieth century nationalism and proto-fascism, and the aesthetic of early film. Some have suggested that he employed musical equivalents of the filmic cut, interpolation and dissolve.

The debate continues, but in July 1910 the composer was preoccupied with the practicalities of performances in December at the Metropolitan, just four and a half months away. Tickets went on sale within weeks: the cheapest at \$3, the most

² See Michele Girardi and Laura Basini, *Puccini: His International Art*, University of Chicago Press, 2000, p. 291.

expensive at \$10 although scalpers were reselling them for as much as \$150. Giulio Gatti-Casazza from La Scala had replaced Conried as General Manager in 1908.

Puccini was invited to spend four weeks in New York to supervise the production. His son Tonio replaced Elvira on the journey (Puccini had forbidden her to come³), and together they arrived on the *SS George Washington* on 17 November. They had travelled in the ship's Imperial Suite (Puccini was much impressed by the marble bath and interior lighting in the wardrobes), were housed lavishly at the Knickerbocker Hotel in Times Square, and accorded every conceivable favour and attention.

During the rehearsals, Belasco achieved wonders with the stage action, bringing an experienced theatre director's touch to the hitherto neglected art of operatic acting. Toscanini lifted the orchestra to a high pitch of performance, and no expense was spared with scenery and effects. Eight horses appeared on stage amidst the towering redwoods in the final act. The great auditorium was festooned with flags, and the foyers and corridors were decorated with palms and flowering trees. Newspaper headlines proclaimed that 'One of the great musical events in the history of the country will occur this evening'. Extra police were on duty to control the crowds.

The evening was a triumph, with Caruso (Johnson), Destinn (Minnie) and Amato (Rance) giving outstanding performances, and Toscanini excelling himself. There were 55 curtain calls throughout the evening, during one of which Puccini was crowned with a silver wreath made by Tiffany, interwoven with ribbons in the national colors of Italy and the United States. There was a post-performance reception in the foyer and a banquet at the Vanderbilts. The Metropolitan paid Puccini the princely sum of 120,000 lire for the first-night royalties. In addition to the world premiere, the company performed *Madama Butterfly*, *La bohème* and *Tosca*, and a Puccini Sunday Gala concert. The composer also attended an out-of-town performance of *Fanciulla* in Philadelphia.

Exhilarated by the whole New York experience, Puccini treated himself to an expensive speed boat he had seen in a Fifth Avenue window, thereby adding to his already sizeable collection of boats, automobiles and other mechanical indulgences⁴.

The Metropolitan Opera staged one more world premiere of a Puccini work. It was *Il trittico* in December 1918, but the maestro did not attend on that occasion. The Armistice had just been declared ending World War I, and the danger of mines in the Atlantic was still very real. In any case, a further visit was hardly necessary; the fame and fortune of Giacomo Puccini in America had been secured.

Peter Bassett

³ We know this from a letter dated 30 November 1910 in which Elvira writes: 'The fact that you did not allow me to go with you, and the way in which you expressed that prohibition, hurt me deeply. I shall not get over it. Remember this. You deprived me of a great satisfaction, that of participating in your triumph....'

⁴ Puccini owned fourteen automobiles – as many as eight concurrently. They were: 1901 De Dion-Bouton, 1901 Clement (in which he had a serious accident in 1903), 1904 De Dion-Bouton, 1904 Fiat, 1905 Isotta Fraschini, 1905 La Buire, 1906 Sizaire et Naudin, 1906 La Buire, 1906 Isotta Fraschini, 1908 De Dion-Bouton, 1910 Italia, 1915 Fiat, 1919 Fiat, 1922 Lancia, 1923 Lancia. He also owned five boats, including a yacht. He couldn't resist technological gadgets and was given a phonograph by Thomas Edison, with whom he maintained a regular correspondence.

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