

An Introduction to Italian Opera

(With suggested recording references)

Peter Bassett

PART 2 - THE ART OF LIVING

It may come as a surprise to discover that Italy's greatest composer of the nineteenth century was born a Frenchman, and became an elected politician. When he was not writing operas, he spent much of his time farming. He cultivated the fiction that he was really just a peasant but, in fact he was a shrewd businessman. Giuseppe Verdi was born in the village of Roncole, near Parma, in October 1813. Europe in those days had been turned upside down by the French Revolution, and after 1796, successive French armies had crossed the alps to bring Liberty, Equality and Fraternity to Italians, and also to rob, tax, and conscript them. By 1813, Napoleon had absorbed the greater part of six Italian states directly into France. Among these was the former Duchy of Parma, in which Verdi was born. So, technically, he was born a Frenchman, and he was baptised not Giuseppe but Joseph Fortunin Francoise. After the defeat of Napoleon in 1815, the Congress of Vienna assigned the French territories in Italy to Austria; which is how the Austrians came to govern much of Italy for almost five decades.

And Verdi's parliamentary career? That began in 1861, when at the insistence of Cavour - the Prime Minister of the newly independent Kingdom of Italy - he stood for election as a deputy to the first national parliament. He didn't seek a second term, but at least he could say that he had personally experienced the more prosaic business of government - drains and trains and such like - as well as the high drama of the Risorgimento which had brought about a modern, free and united Italy.

Although Verdi was born into modest (though not impoverished) circumstances, he died a wealthy man. Between 1844 and 1891 he acquired some thirty farms and estates with associated buildings. He was the landlord of numerous tenants, he invested substantially in railway stock and bank bonds, and he founded a company to sell pork products under the 'GV Brand' name. He was anything but a peasant or even an unworldly artist living in some ivory tower. He understood the world, drove hard bargains, gave large amounts to charity and was well acquainted with family tragedy; all of which gave his operas a force and conviction which still rings true more than a century later.

Verdi the master of character and mood; that's how we see him today. But, initially, his contemporaries were attracted to other qualities. Patriotism was one of them. It meant a lot to Verdi, and he consciously projected it onto his early operas, and sometimes onto his later ones too. In *Nabucco* of 1842, his third opera and first great success, the Israelites, captive in Babylon, yearn for their homeland in a long, slow and memorable chorus which begins: "Go, my thought, on golden wings...". Italian patriots identified this with their own predicament in their Austrian captivity, as Verdi knew that they would. The text was drawn from the Bible (which made it difficult to censor), but the spirit of the music was indisputably Italian.

The young Verdi's appeal to patriotism was rather blatant, but it suited the times perfectly. At the premiere of *I Lombardi* (The Lombards at the First Crusade) performed in 1843, the audience compared themselves with the Crusaders, and the Austrians with the Saracens defiling the Holy Land. *Ernani* followed in 1844, and then three more operas were produced in little more than a year: *The Two Foscari*, after Byron, *Joan of Arc* (which censors later caused to be renamed *Harriette of Lesbos* [I'm not making this up]), and *Alzira* about the Spanish conquest of Peru, which Verdi himself later described as "really awful".

Success could never be taken for granted, but it has to be said that the patriotic subtexts of many of these early works did them no harm. In *Attila*, written in 1846, a Roman general addressed the

invading Hun: “You may have the universe, but leave Italy to me”, and the audience rose to cheer. Another character, the daughter of a slaughtered Roman defender, incited the populace to vengeance.

[*Allor che i forti corrono*. Attila (Verdi). Joan Sutherland (Odabella). London Symphony Orchestra, Richard Bonyngue. Decca 1963.]

Even in *Macbeth*, performed the following year, Verdi managed to introduce a chorus for Scottish exiles who sing *O patria oppressa* (O fatherland oppressed). During early performances of this opera in Venice, the audience threw onto the stage bouquets of red and green, the Italian colours, until this was forbidden, whereupon they threw bouquets of yellow and black, the Austrian colours, and took pleasure in watching the singers refuse to pick them up.

Censorship of Verdi's operas took some curious turns. *Attila* aroused real fanaticism amongst Italian audiences and, after performances, a brass band and torchlight procession accompanied him to his lodgings amidst cheering crowds. He got away with murder, so to speak, with *Attila*, but he was not so lucky with another work premiered in Venice five years later, originally called *La maledizione* but renamed *Rigoletto*. The subject, based on a story by Victor Hugo, contained just the sort of ingredients guaranteed to upset a censor: a frivolous and dissolute ruler, a loose girl who sleeps with him, and a hideous hunchback. The censors expressed their mortification that Verdi and his librettist had chosen a subject of “repulsive immorality and obscene triviality”. Changes were suggested, which would make the work acceptable. Verdi rejected them. He insisted that the Duke be a libertine because without this the story lost its point. Even the sack in which Gilda's body is delivered to her father in place of the Duke, had been rejected. Verdi was flabbergasted: “I don't understand why the sack has been omitted! What does the sack matter to the police? Are they afraid of the effect on the stage?” The censors objected to the character Rigoletto (who at that point was called Triboletto) being ugly and a hunchback. Verdi's retort to this was “I find it very beautiful to portray this character externally misshapen and ridiculous, but inwardly impassioned and full of love. I chose the subject precisely for these qualities and these original features. If they are removed, I cannot write the music.” In the end, both sides made compromises and *Rigoletto*, which is undoubtedly one of Verdi's masterpieces, received its first triumphant performance at *La Fenice*.

[*Pari siamo!* Rigoletto (Verdi). Tito Gobbi (Rigoletto). Philharmonia Orchestra, Walter Susskind. EMI 1950.]

Although *Rigoletto* quickly spread around the world, there were many people who found a work which embraced kidnapping, rape, murder and all but suicide repulsive. Some opera companies omitted the final duet between father and dying daughter, probably because sopranos objected to being stuffed into a sack. Of course, if there is no duet then any stand-in can take the place of the soprano for the final scene. On one occasion in Barcelona, the Rigoletto, in an act of dramatic fervour, ripped open the sack to discover a man with a large black moustache. He closed it instantly but it was too late and the audience tittered.

And while we're on the subject of moustaches and Rigoletto, I should mention the case of the tenor Walter Midgley who played the role of the Duke of Mantua at Covent Garden in 1952. During the aria *Questa o Quella*, he took a deep breath at the end of the second verse and sucked in the left half of his false moustache. Turning his back on the audience, he succeeded in coughing it up, and then, following his exit he painted on the missing portion in order to complete the opera. However, the gauze backing of the left half remained in Midgley's throat, necessitating an urgent visit to his doctor the following morning. Ever afterwards he used greasepaint rather than artificial hair on his upper lip.

At a production in Melbourne in 1932, the baritone playing the title role had great difficulty staying in character when confronted with an over-enthusiastic audience. *The Bulletin* critic described it thus: “Hunchback Rigoletto totters on, designing to speak to his daughter, but is instantly recognised, despite his disguise, as the popular singer Apollo Granforte, of the Milan Grand Opera

House. No good his pretending he isn't. The audience knows better and calls his bluff. He gives up the attempt to deceive it, comes to the footlights and bows 17 times."

By the late 1850s, time was running out for the Austrians in Italy. When Verdi was in Rome for the premiere of *Un Ballo in Maschera* (a story of the assassination of the King of Sweden which had to be reset in Colonial Boston for censorship reasons) his very name - V E R D I - was being used as an acronym for *Vittorio Emanuele Re D'Italia*. Victor Emanuel of the House of Savoy was destined to become the king of an independent Italy. 'Viva Verdi!' people shouted with deliberate ambiguity in the streets and opera houses, especially if Austrians were present.

Patriotism at the expense of self interest was a favourite theme of Verdi throughout his career, but with his maturing and with the achievement of a free and united Italy, its expression became more subtle and politically less one-eyed. As the nineteenth century drew to a close, Verdi increasingly disapproved of the directions in which Italian governments were moving. In particular, he disapproved of Italy's colonial ambitions in Ethiopia. "We are wrong" he said "and will pay for it." It is hardly a coincidence that in *Aida*, we find the oppressed and captive Ethiopians drawn with particular sympathy.

The role of Aida, the enslaved Ethiopian Princess, is an unusually demanding one. Her music is exquisitely refined and full of the most taxing delicate effects juxtaposed with passages requiring a ringing and splendid tone in the middle voice. There are constant changes of gear vocally and singers approach the role with trepidation. However, there is no more beautiful example of Verdi's mature expression of patriotism than in the Third Act when, on the banks of the Nile by moonlight, Aida tries to reconcile the irreconcilable: love for her native land and love for Radames, the man who had enslaved her people.

[*O patria mia*. Aida (Verdi). Montserrat Caballé (Aida). New Philharmonia Orchestra, Riccardo Mutti. EMI 1974.]

When Verdi was in his late twenties, he suffered an appalling calamity: his two young children and then his wife all died within a short space of time, and he was left in complete desolation. Never were Macduff's words on the slaughter of his wife and children so apt:

"...All my pretty ones?
Did you say all?...
What! all my pretty chickens and their dam
At one fell swoop?
...Did heaven look on,
And would not take their part?"

[*O figli, o figli miei!...Ah, la paterna mano*. Macbeth (Verdi). Placido Domingo (Macduff). La Scala Orchestra, Claudio Abbado. Polydor 1976.]

Verdi's immediate reaction to this disaster was to want to give up composition, especially when his second opera failed. It had been a comedy, written in the depths of despair. But time healed the emotional wounds and he went on to write *Nabucco*.

When he was thirty-eight, he read a sketch for an opera based on the Spanish play *El Trovador*. He commented at once that he would only set the story if he could retain "its boldness and novelty". At the time, there was more than a little boldness and novelty in his own private life, for he was in a relationship with the soprano, Giuseppina Strepponi, who already had two illegitimate children and had been the mistress of the impresario at *La Scala*. Not surprisingly, the relationship drew criticism, especially since Verdi and Strepponi lived together for twelve years before eventually marrying.

When they first met, Strepponi was an established *prima donna* of the dramatic repertory of Bellini and Donizetti, but she encouraged and supported the young Verdi and she created the role of

Abigaille in *Nabucco*. At thirty-one she retired from the stage and became a singing teacher in Paris, where Verdi renewed his acquaintance. In 1849 they set up house together on a farm at Sant' Agata that remained Verdi's base for the rest of his life. It is not entirely clear why they avoided formal matrimony for so long. One train of thought has it that Verdi had promised his first wife that he would never marry again. My own feeling is that, after the tragic end of his first family, when heaven had 'looked on', he had little heart for another relationship of a similar kind. It was only by virtue of Strepponi's constancy and strength that he eventually felt able to remarry. There were testing times when a rival soprano, Teresa Stolz, came to live at Sant' Agata. Strepponi was convinced that Stolz had also become Verdi's mistress. We shall never know for certain. Strepponi herself has been described as a splendid woman, warm-hearted, intelligent, and devoted to a man who, with all his honesty and integrity, could be moody and irascible. She was still at his side on the first night of *Falstaff*, his last, miraculous work, completed when he was eighty.

Forty years earlier, buoyed up by the enormous success of *Rigoletto*, Verdi was in the mood for a red-blooded and dramatically vigorous subject. The Spanish play filled the bill. At first his librettist, Cammarano, had some hesitations, and Verdi was on the brink of giving it away. But work began and proceeded as far as the third Act. Eight days after finishing Manrico's call to arms: *Di quella pira*, Cammarano suddenly died. Verdi, who had felt a real affection towards him, read of his death in a theatrical journal and was devastated. Life seemed to be imitating art. In a typically generous fashion, Verdi paid Cammarano's widow six hundred ducats instead of the agreed five hundred, even though part of the third Act and all of the fourth remained unfinished.

Il trovatore received its premiere in Rome in 1853, just a few weeks before *La traviata* in Venice. Although the two operas exist in quite different worlds of sound and emotion, Verdi had been working on them simultaneously. Audiences found *Trovatore* a tremendously exciting work, but they weren't quite sure what to make of *Traviata* with its contemporary setting and (for its time) provocative story.

Trovatore's plot is convoluted and improbable, but the action is propelled along by a torrent of glorious melody and intense, dramatic situations. There is such vigour and speed in the action that the critic Hanslick once remarked that the characters arrive on stage as if shot from a pistol. The premiere was an overwhelming success. On the night of the third performance, Verdi was carried back to his hotel in a torchlight procession; and beneath the balcony of his suite, a band played selections from his operas until the early hours of the morning. One can only hope that the other hotel guests were music lovers.

Trovatore is the quintessential opera. With its baby mix-ups and extremes of passion and revenge, it provides most people's mental image of what opera is all about; as Gilbert and Sullivan in *The Gondoliers*, and the Marx Brothers in *A Night at the Opera* saw to their advantage! It is an emotional roller-coaster powered by lots of high-octane melody. With any other composer at the wheel, the whole thing might have gone careering over a cliff. But by the 1850s, Verdi knew exactly how to keep his operas on the rails and his audiences on the edge of their seats.

[*Stride la vampa*. *Il trovatore* (Verdi). Marilyn Horne (Azucena). National Philharmonic Orchestra, Richard Bonyngé. Decca 1976.]

Azucena in *Trovatore*, Eboli in *Don Carlos* and, especially, Amneris in *Aida* - all strongly drawn mezzo-soprano roles - held a special place in Verdi's affections. He wrote superbly for deeper voices, and for an example one need look no further than the great bass aria which expresses so powerfully, the anguish and loneliness of King Philip of Spain in *Don Carlos*. If anything can be described as 'typical' Verdi, then, for me, this is it.

[*Dormiro sol nel manto mio regal*. *Don Carlos* (Verdi). Ruggero Raimondi (Philip II). Orchestra of the Royal Opera House, Covent Garden, Carlo Maria Giulini. EMI 1971.]

In 1883, the Italian publisher Sonzogno offered a prize for a one-act opera. One of the entrants that year was Giacomo Puccini, whose hurriedly finished entry, *Le Villi*, based on the same story

as the ballet *Giselle*, didn't even receive a mention from the judges. It had been completed in such a rush that there was no time to prepare a fair copy, and the judges were confronted with Puccini's notoriously illegible scrawl. They probably gave up. The prize was shared by two composers, Zuelli and Borelli, who haven't been heard of since. In 1889, Pietro Mascagni's third opera, *Cavalleria rusticana* (Rustic Chivalry), won the prize. Umberto Giordano was also a contestant this time with his first opera, *Marina*. He was to achieve lasting fame in later years with *Andrea Chénier*. Another young composer with his eye on Sonzogno's prize was Ruggiero Leoncavallo, whose opera *Pagliacci* (Clowns), although short enough, was ineligible for the competition because it had two acts, not one. *Pagliacci* eventually received its premiere under a barely known twenty-five year old conductor called Arturo Toscanini.

When Mascagni was a student at the Conservatoire in Milan he met Puccini, his senior by five years, and struck up a friendship with him. They even shared a room for a while. It is said that the first Act of *La bohème* echoes Puccini's and Mascagni's own style of living and their resourcefulness in dealing with creditors. Puccini, still smarting from his own experience of the opera competition, advised Mascagni not to enter but rather to offer *Cavalleria rusticana* to the publisher Ricordi. This was done, but Ricordi rejected the manuscript with the words "I don't care for it", an error of judgment which lost him millions, and for which he never quite forgave himself. The work was then entered for the competition, and won. Unfortunately however, Mascagni and his librettist had not obtained permission from the original author of the story, Giovanni Verga, before using it for their opera, and the resulting litigation went on for years.

Cavalleria rusticana took the operatic world by storm and, within two years, it had been performed just about everywhere. In London, Queen Victoria received Mascagni in her box to assure him that she had been "moved to tears". He became famous overnight and was hailed as the successor of Verdi, a judgment which proved somewhat premature. His melodrama of infidelity and revenge amongst Sicilian peasants is a masterpiece of its type. Its intermezzo alone must be one of the most played pieces of music of the twentieth century.

One soprano who literally threw herself into the role of Santuzza in *Cavalleria* was Maria Jeritza. Her physical energy was inexhaustible and when, on stage, the tenor singing Turiddu gave her a push, she would go rolling down a huge flight of steps. When one particular Turiddu, Alfred Piccaver, revenged himself for some slight by refusing to administer the push, she simply rolled down anyway.

Cavalleria ushered in the age of *verismo*, a term which referred not only to musical style but also to subject matter drawn from daily life, rather than the heroic or Romantic themes favoured by Verdi. Admittedly, *La Traviata*, which dealt with the trials of a courtesan in French society, had some of the attributes of *verismo*. But it was Bizet's *Carmen*, the story of a female worker in a cigarette factory, that was the real spiritual ancestor of *Cavalleria* and the *verismo* operas which followed it.

As for Mascagni, no other work of his, with the possible exception of *L'Amico Fritz*, lived up to the promise of *Cavalleria*, and he ended his days as a somewhat tragic figure. It is a story that could have provided the scenario for one of his own operas. He embraced fascism enthusiastically and even wrote a bombastic opera, *Nerone*, as a tribute to Mussolini. *La Scala* spurned the work for a long time, and it eventually owed its production to the personal intervention of the *Duce*. Because Mascagni had become the musical mouthpiece of the fascist government, most of his fellow musicians turned their backs on him. With Mussolini's overthrow, he was stripped of his property and honours and spent his last years in comparative poverty and complete disgrace in a small hotel room in Rome. Mascagni was the victim of premature success and poor judgment, but we are indebted to him for *Cavalleria rusticana*, a work of almost universal appeal; which is a rare achievement indeed.

Leoncavallo's *Pagliacci* seems to be forever linked to *Cavalleria* in a double bill, a point encapsulated in a silly rhyme which runs:

"Cav and Pag, Cav and Pag,
They go together like zig and zag;

They've never been billed as Pag and Cav -
I wonder why they never have?

Stanley J. Sharpless

No aria typifies *Pagliacci* or the *verismo* school in general than *Vesti la giubba*. In this, Canio bitterly laments the irony of playing the comic fool on stage opposite his wife, Nedda, while in real-life his heart is breaking because of her infidelity. The story of *Pagliacci* was drawn from an incident involving the composer's father, who was a magistrate. He had actually presided at the trial of an actor in a touring theatre company who had murdered his wife after a performance. *Verismo* indeed!

[*Vesti la giubba*. Pagliacci (Leoncavallo). Placido Domingo (Canio). La Scala Orchestra, Georges Prêtre. Philips 1994.]

Leoncavallo also wrote his own version of *La bohème*, in which Enrico Caruso won his first success. Although it is a fine work, it was eclipsed by Puccini's opera on the same subject, which reached the stage first and was soon sending audiences into ecstasies. It is sad but true that there seems to be room in the world for only one *La bohème*.

Umberto Giordano is remembered chiefly for *Andrea Chénier*, a work loosely inspired by the life of an historical figure, Marie-Andre Chénier, a French poet who became both champion and victim of the Revolution. It is a boldly drawn and thrilling work. The librettist was Luigi Illica, who also wrote the librettos of many of Puccini's operas. Giordano was a modest and kindly man but, on one occasion, he had a quarrel with Illica which resulted in his threatening him with a pistol which was actually a toy. Terrified by what he thought was a real weapon, Illica promised to do anything Giordano asked. When the composer confessed to his ruse, the two men burst out laughing and remained friends for the rest of their lives. Such melodrama seems appropriate for the authors of a work which ends with the imprisoned hero and heroine rejoicing that the guillotine will soon unite them for ever.

[*E' la morte*. Andrea Chénier (Giordano). Montserrat Caballé (Maddalena), Luciano Pavarotti (Chénier). National Philharmonic Orchestra, Riccardo Chailly. Decca 1884.]

Would it be an exaggeration to say that Puccini is, today, the most popular composer of operas? I don't think so. His output was not great. Altogether he wrote only twelve operas, three of which were one-acters intended to be performed as a single night's entertainment. Verdi, by comparison, wrote twenty-six and Donizetti more than seventy! Yet, *La bohème*, *Madame Butterfly* and *Turandot* are household names even amongst people who would not normally regard themselves as opera-goers. Puccini took *verismo* and humanised it. He set out to move rather than shock his audience, and there is no clearer example of this than in *La bohème*, in which Mimi and her companions recall past happiness in the midst of adversity.

This opera won for Puccini a place in the pantheon of operatic composers, notwithstanding an early critic who pontificated: "Even as it leaves little impression on the minds of the audience, *La bohème* will leave no great trace upon the history of our lyric theatre." Another critic from the *New York Tribune* damned the work as "foul in subject and fulminant but futile in its music." Take comfort from both of these judgments next time you feel inclined to disagree with informed opinion.

Puccini's life was not exactly bohemian but it was certainly colourful and should not pass unremarked. He came from a musical family in Lucca, long associated with the organ and church music. But at the age of eighteen, after walking nineteen kilometres to see a performance of *Aida* (the first opera he had seen), he resolved to write opera and only opera.

Even his student work quickly revealed his characteristic talent for melody and colourful orchestration. It also revealed his wandering eye. In his twenties he developed a relationship with Elvira Gemignani, whose husband, a former school friend, had suggested that she might take piano and singing lessons from Giacomo. Not a good idea! She was already the mother of two children but in 1886 she bore Puccini a son, Antonio. It was not until the death of Elvira's husband

in 1904 that the relationship was formalised. Fast cars, fast motor boats and the shooting of wildfowl were amongst the composer's other passions.

But, let's leave Elvira and return to Mimi, a decidedly more fragile heroine. In 1898, Melba went to Lucca for six weeks to study the part with Puccini himself. He annotated her score and dedicated it in his own handwriting 'To the Mimi of my dreams'. In the following year, Melba made her debut in the role with great success. One of her rivals, the soprano Mary Garden, remarked: "I never saw such a fat Mimi in all my life. Melba didn't impersonate the role at all - she never did that - but, my God, how she sang it."

Melba's partnership with Caruso as Mimi to his Rodolfo has entered operatic folk-lore: her silvery, flute-like soprano blending perfectly with his golden ringing tenor. Even his practical jokes at her expense are legendary. Everyone knows about the hot sausage pressed into her tiny frozen hand during a performance in Monte Carlo, but there were other, less well-known pranks. Melba herself recorded her surprise once at hearing a strange squeaking noise accompanying Rodolfo's ministrations to the dying Mimi. At first she thought that Caruso was ill, for his features seemed drawn and solemn, and every time he bent down in that most poignant of scenes, there was the same extraordinary noise of squeaking. Then she almost stopped singing when she noticed that he had a tiny rubber toy which, at the most pathetic phrases, he was squeezing in her ear. Presumably, any audience members who overheard the noise thought it was part of Mimi's consumptive cough.

The first performance of Puccini's *La bohème* was hardly encouraging. To begin with, Toscanini, who had just triumphantly conducted the first Italian performance of *Götterdämmerung*, refused to allow encores since he believed, rightly, that to do so destroyed the artistic integrity of the piece. This was a very modern idea and it didn't go down well at all. The leading tenor and baritone were less than ideal. The press were generally cool and, in some cases hostile. One critic asked what had pushed Puccini down the deplorable road of *Bohème*. Another called the work empty and puerile. However, within weeks, the opera was playing to full houses and went on to rapturous receptions elsewhere. Puccini bought a new yacht, and called it *Mimi*.

If the premiere of *La bohème* was depressing, the first nights of *Tosca* and *Madama Butterfly* were absolute shambles. Firstly, *Tosca*. The premiere took place in January 1900 in Rome where, of course, the opera is set. Some of the singers received anonymous letters before the performance, threatening violence. Anarchists were active and there was talk of a possible bomb threat. This was taken seriously because a bomb had actually been thrown backstage in 1894 during a performance of Verdi's *Otello* in Pisa. Queen Margherita was to be present for *Tosca*, which increased the likelihood of anarchists exploiting the occasion. There had been much unrest throughout the country resulting from a major military defeat against Ethiopia in 1896, a worsening economy and the imposition of martial law. King Umberto was unpopular because of his extravagant lifestyle and he had been the target of several attempted assassinations. An anarchist eventually succeeded seven months later. This then was the somewhat tense atmosphere in which *Tosca* was to be revealed to the world.

Fifteen minutes before the curtain went up the conductor was informed by the police that a bomb might well be thrown during the performance. He was told that, if that happened, he should immediately play the National Anthem. Not surprisingly, everyone was in a right state when the performance began. Almost at once, whispering and disturbances could be heard in the auditorium. The interruptions grew louder until eventually there were shouts of 'Stop! Down with the curtain!' Down it came and the conductor rushed backstage. Then it was discovered that the disturbances had been caused by a group of latecomers trying to get in and the protests of those already seated. When things got under way again, the opera ran its course.

The critics, as could be predicted, were not complimentary. The word 'melodramatic' appeared frequently. One newspaper devoted its entire front page to discussing the opera (*Advertiser*, please note) finally concluding that the composer should not 'have attempted something the futility

of which ought not have escaped him'. Even as recently as 1956, an American critic called it a 'shoddy little shocker'.

Of course, *Tosca* went on to be one of the most popular of all operas, with the roles of Tosca and Scarpia becoming vehicles for magnificent characterisations by singers of the calibre of Maria Callas and Tito Gobbi. One commentator who observed Callas's classic portrayal in Act Two described it thus: "This Tosca is not just an outraged prima donna, but a tough and direct woman trapped in a situation that makes her panic. There is no strutting or false dignity, rather a last-ditch effort to keep control. She gulps down the wine for quick dutch courage, and then stands mesmerised by the sight of the knife, putting the glass down slowly as the thought of murder passes inexorably into her mind. Only at the last second does the animal release itself, the tension held in her hand clasped over the top of the glass. At the end of the scene she weeps with nervous exhaustion as she lurches blindly around the chamber, grabbing at her stole, repelled at touching a dead body, unable to believe what she has just done, desperate not to forget anything vital or leave incriminating evidence." It was a stunning piece of directing by Zeffirelli and revealed the dramatic heights to which an operatic role could be taken by Callas who, like Floria Tosca herself, lived for her art.

[*Vissi d'arte*. *Tosca* (Puccini). Maria Callas (Tosca). Orchestra of the Royal Opera House, Covent Garden, Carlo Felice Cillario. Live recording 24 January, 1964.]

In his autobiography, Tito Gobbi referred to the 1964 performances of *Tosca* at Covent Garden, from which that recording was taken. Callas had made a comeback after two or three years of semi-retirement. Everyone was afraid she might cancel at the last moment, and the strictest orders were given that no one should be admitted to any rehearsal. Gobbi relates that Callas stayed away from one rehearsal of Act II because of a slight cold, and so John Copely, the Director, stood in for her so that the stage movements could be worked through. It so happened that, on that particular day, a distinguished titled lady called at the box office to collect her tickets. Realising that a rehearsal was in progress, she implored Sergeant Martin, who guarded the door, to allow her just one glimpse of the diva: if he would just open the door a single crack...The poor man, with all the solemn authority for which he was famed, explained that he simply could not do so, not even for such a distinguished lady. Well, would he just for one moment open the little window connected with the house so that she might at least hear a note or two from the famous voice?

With this request Sergeant Martin complied and at that moment John Copley, lying in Gobbi's arms with beard and glasses, let out an excruciating shriek. 'Ah, the unmistakable voice!' whispered the delighted lady.

When he was in London in 1900, Puccini attended a performance of a play called *Madame Butterfly* although, since he had practically no English, he would have understood little of what was being said. The play's author was the American David Belasco who had, in turn, adapted it from a story by one John Luther Long of Philadelphia. Long, for his part, drew inspiration from a novel *Madame Chrysanthemum* by the French writer Pierre Loti. Names were changed as the story evolved from one form to another. So, for example, in the French novel, the marriage broker whom we know as Goro, bore the distinctly odd name of Kan-Goo-Rou. And in Long's story, Pinkerton's American wife Kate was called Adelaide. Perhaps the State Opera should restore these names for the performances later this year?

Belasco had begun his professional life in a travelling circus and had then become an itinerant actor and a producer. Another of his plays, *The Girl of the Golden West*, provided Puccini with a subject for his next opera. Belasco's art made no claims to profundity but it was theatrically effective and direct, and influenced American theatre in the direction of greater, almost cinematic, naturalism. This suited Puccini's operatic style to a tee. Belasco's *Madame Butterfly* had plenty of exotic touches: illuminated backdrops of rice-fields, cherry blossom in a garden, fishing boats and snow-capped Mount Fuji. During *Butterfly's* night vigil, compressed into just fourteen minutes,

night fell, stars appeared, the lanterns to celebrate her husband's return went out one by one, dawn broke and birds sang. Puccini absorbed it all into one of his most evocative scores.

And so, what we have ended up with is Japan as seen through French and American eyes, as seen through Italian eyes. The result, astonishingly, is deeply moving, but the audience which gathered at *La Scala* on 17 February 1904 thought otherwise. When the music began, an ominous silence was gradually broken by laughter, hisses and shouts of derision. In Act Two, the soprano's kimono billowed up and there were calls of "Butterfly is pregnant". At the end of her night vigil, imitation birdsong was used to greet the dawn, but that was taken as an invitation to the audience to join in with their own bird and animal cries.

There were problems with the structure of the opera as presented, as Puccini was the first to admit. He made cuts and reworked some sections. But the audience's reaction on that opening night was quite unwarranted. No work for the lyric theatre has endured a more disgraceful initiation than did *Madama Butterfly* in 1904. How could any one fail to be touched by music such as the love duet in Act I, which leaves us in no doubt that the willing transformation of Cio-Cio-San into Mrs Benjamin Franklin Pinkerton has already begun.

[Love duet Act I. *Madama Butterfly* (Puccini). Mirella Freni (Cio-Cio-San), José Carreras (Pinkerton). Philharmonia Orchestra, Giuseppe Sinopoli. Deutsche Gramophon 1988.]

Puccini called the opening night of *Madama Butterfly* a Dantean Inferno, prepared in advance. Strange to say, it was indeed *The Inferno*, the first part of Dante's *Divine Comedy*, that provided the inspiration for Puccini's only comedy, *Gianni Schicchi*, the third part of his *Trittico* (or Triptych) which included *Il tabarro* and *Suor Angelica*. In Dante's masterpiece there is a reference to one Gianni Schicchi, condemned to endless torment for forging a Will. The kernel of the idea around which the librettist Forzano constructed his text goes like this: In thirteenth century Florence, wealthy Buoso Donati has died and his avaricious relations have discovered that he has left all his property to a monastery. They call in Gianni Schicchi, a clever peasant, to advise them. Schicchi impersonates the dead man and dictates a new Will to the notary, having already sealed the lips of the relatives by reminding them that their conspiracy is a crime. In the guise of Buoso he then bequeaths the best of the property to his 'dear, devoted, most affectionate friend, Gianni Schicchi'.

On this slender but neat plot, Puccini and Forzano fashioned a small masterpiece of ironic humour, evocative of the Florence of Dante, Boccaccio and Giotto. Its music owes not a little to the quicksilver prototype of Verdi's *Falstaff*, but, once again, Puccini demonstrates his particular skill in evoking the atmosphere of different times and places.

When Schicchi's daughter, Lauretta, sings *O mio babbino caro*, she threatens to throw herself from the *Ponte Vecchio* into the Arno unless her father stays to help the relatives and secure her marriage to the young man Rinuccio. No-one believes that she really means to throw herself into the river, but the incident reminds us that many operatic heroes and heroines do meet untimely ends in rather memorable ways. Butterfly, of course, commits *hara-kiri*, Manrico in *Trovatore* is beheaded (after singing so beautifully too!), Aida and Radames are entombed alive, Tosca leaps to her death from a parapet, Iris, in Mascagni's opera of that name, throws herself into a sewer, others go to the guillotine, die from sniffing poisoned violets, and even from leaping from a Naples window into the crater of Mount Vesuvius thirteen kilometres away.

I mention these cheerful facts only to remind you of the beginning of Puccini's last opera, *Turandot*. A crowd has gathered at sunset outside the Imperial Palace in Peking. The moon rises and a Prince of Persia is promptly beheaded because he has failed to answer correctly three riddles set by Princess Turandot as the price for her hand in marriage. He is the latest of many who have failed in their suit. An unknown Prince then rashly risks his head, but succeeds in answering the riddles and claims his reward. Turandot pleads that marriage is a fate worse than death, and the Prince, in a moment of lunacy, offers her his head if she can guess his name before morning. *Nessun dorma*, 'none shall sleep' while Turandot's guards scour the city and torture the faithful slave girl Liù in a frantic effort to extract from someone, anyone, the Prince's name.

A famous Turandot of recent times has been Birgit Nilsson, best known perhaps as one of the great Wagnerian sopranos of the century. It was during a performance with Nilsson at the Metropolitan Opera that the tenor, Franco Corelli took to his dressing room to sulk after being outsung at the end of the great aria *In questa reggia*, in which Turandot explains her hatred of all who would try to possess her. Rudolf Bing, the manager of the *Met* with whom Nilsson had a long-standing and good-humoured battle, suggested that, in the clinch that closed the final love duet, Corelli might give her a small sharp bite on the neck. The tenor cheered up at once at this thought and did what Bing suggested. Shortly afterwards there was a phone call from Nilsson saying: 'I cannot go on. I have rabies.'

In questa reggia is a stupendous piece of theatre but, actually, the two show-stoppers are *nessun dorma* and Liù's aria, in which the gentle slave girl declares that neither she nor the blind old king could live without Calaf. She resolves to forfeit her own life rather than disclose his name.

[*Signore, ascolta!* Turandot (Puccini). Montserrat Caballé (Liù). London Philharmonic Orchestra, Zubin Mehta. Decca 1972.]

Puccini died in November 1924, a few weeks short of his sixty-sixth birthday, leaving the final scene of Turandot unfinished. The last fourteen minutes or so were completed by Franco Alfano from notes and sketches.

Verdi and Puccini were heirs to a long tradition of lyrical theatre. What has happened to that tradition? On the one hand, it has spawned some rather undernourished progeny in the musical theatre and in films and television; phantoms of the opera in more ways than one! But the opposite extreme, over-intellectualisation, risks artistic paralysis and alienated audiences. Some composers, like Luciano Berio in his opera called *Opera*, are pessimistic about the art form. Berio uses metaphors of a declining bourgeois society and even the sinking of the *Titanic*. He quotes frequently from Monteverdi's *Orfeo*, implying that opera is moving unavoidably towards the fate suffered by Euridice:- extinction.

But I prefer to look to the example of Giuseppe Verdi in the fullness of a long and fruitful life. He was in his eightieth year when he completed *Falstaff*. It is hardly the work of a man whose creative springs had run dry and who had lost interest in touching the hearts of his audience. Never was a composer more prodigal with melody than Verdi in *Falstaff*. "He scatters tunes about" said one writer, "as though he were trying to give them away." The tempo is brisk, and the writing is full of wit and subtlety. Richard Strauss told him "I can find no words to describe the impression made on me by the extraordinary beauty of *Falstaff*."

Verdi and his librettist, Boito, drew inspiration from two of Shakespeare's plays: *The Merry Wives of Windsor* and *Henry IV*, both written in precisely those years at the end of the sixteenth century when opera itself was taking its first halting steps in Florence. The closing fugue which begins with the words: 'All the world's a jest', is both a wry comment on human folly and a renewed celebration of life through music. And isn't that what opera is all about?

[*Tutto nel mondo è burla*. Falstaff (Verdi). Bruson, Ricciarelli, Nucci, Hendricks, Egerton, Valentini, Terrani, Boozer Los Angeles Philharmonic Orchestra, Giulini. Deutsche Gramaphon]