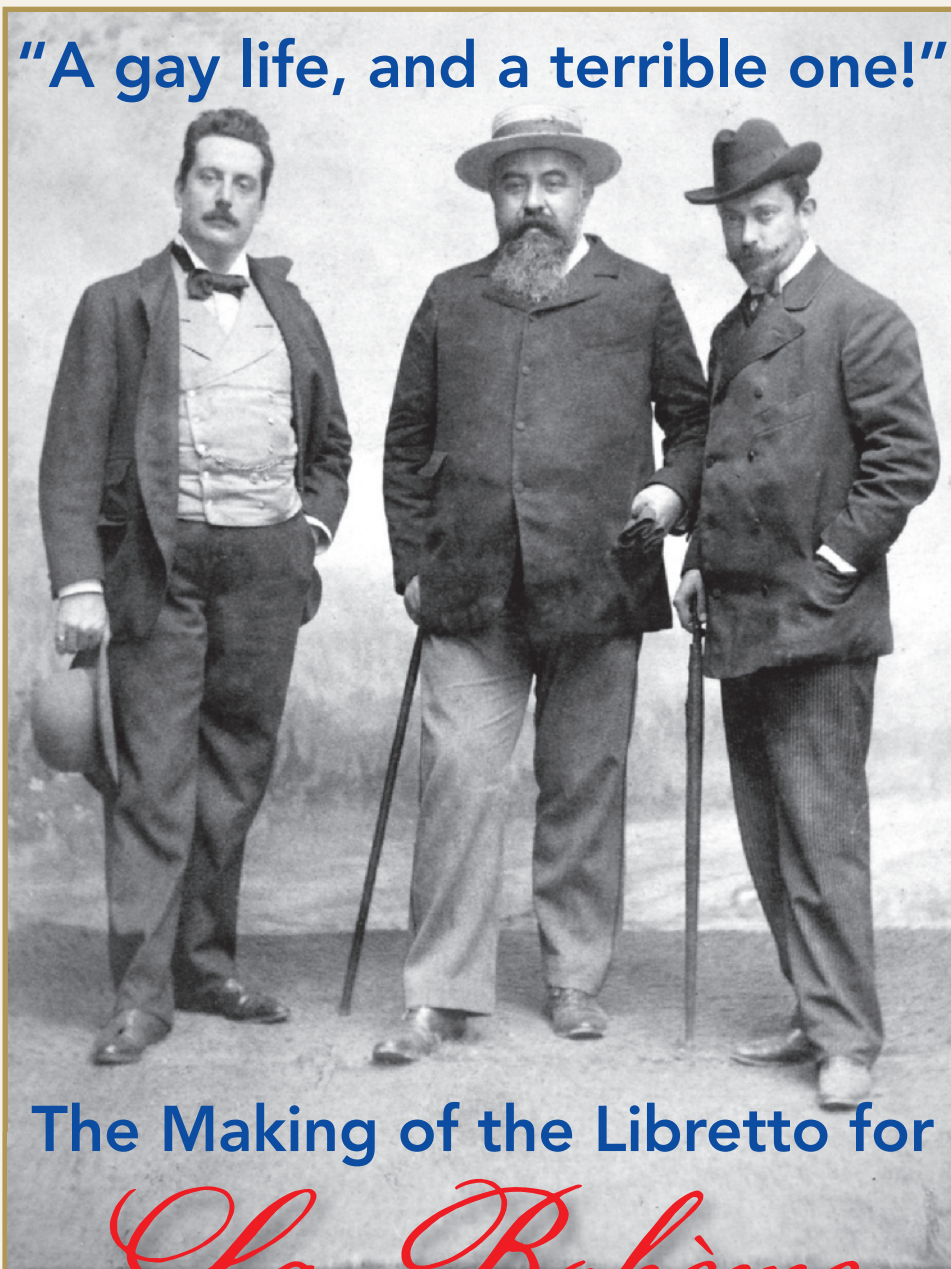


"A gay life, and a terrible one!"



The Making of the Libretto for

La Bohème

Creating an opera libretto for a demanding composer is difficult, hard work. Very few librettists ever are successful, let alone remembered by the public for their output. However, several prominent pairings of librettists and composers creating immortal masterpieces began in the eighteenth century with Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart and Lorenzo da Ponte (*Le Nozze di Figaro*, *Don Giovanni*, and *Così fan tutte*). Giuseppe Verdi stood out in the nineteenth century first with Francesco Maria Piave (*Ernani*, *Rigoletto*, *La Traviata*) followed by Arrigo Boito (*Otello* and *Falstaff*).

Dr. Evan Baker is an educator, writer, and lecturer on operatic history and production. He contributes regularly to several publications, including San Francisco Opera Magazine.

The twentieth century includes Richard Strauss and Hugo von Hofmannsthal (*Elektra*, *Der Rosenkavalier*, *Ariadne auf Naxos*, *Die Frau ohne Schatten*, and *Arabella*) and Giacomo Puccini with his team of Giuseppe Giacosa and Luigi Illica, creating three cornerstones of today's operatic repertory: *La Bohème*, *Tosca*, and *Madama Butterfly*. Several composers preferred to create their own libretti, most notably Richard Wagner for all his operas and Alban Berg for *Wozzeck* and *Lulu*.

Although the process of creating a libretto is straightforward, it is a difficult one—particularly with temperamental librettists and strong-willed composers. After the selection of the source material, be it based on any combination of an original idea, a novel, or a stage play, a text must be produced, usually first in the form of a prose scenario.

Versification follows, with the words set to poetic and distinct rhythmic meters in hopes of producing a coherent and singable text with a clear dramatic structure that the composer can set to music. The possibility that a libretto might stand on its own as literature is rare. Many poets and playwrights intensely disliked being librettists, considering it to be demeaning and unrewarding hackwork.

During the composition of his *Manon Lescaut* in 1892, Puccini became acquainted with Giuseppe Giacosa and Luigi Illica. Earlier, Giacosa had proposed a Russian-themed libretto to Puccini but it was politely declined. About the same time, Puccini was having great problems with the chaotic state of the libretto for *Manon Lescaut*. Giulio Ricordi, Puccini's publisher, brought in Illica in as "script doctor" to salvage much of the text. At Ricordi's behest, Giacosa also assisted with revising the libretto. Both greatly helped to make *Manon Lescaut* a success at the Teatro Regio in Turin on February 1, 1893, and the seeds were planted for their collaboration on *La Bohème*.

Giulio Ricordi (1840–1912) must be considered the unsung hero in the creation of *La Bohème*. The most successful member of the family dynasty of the House of Ricordi, the Milanese music publishing firm, Giulio printed, among others, the works of Bellini, Donizetti, and Rossini. Marshalling his exquisite skills of diplomacy, charm, and tact, Ricordi gently guided the suspicious and often cantankerous Verdi out of his retirement after the great success of *Aida* in 1872, shrewdly inducing the composer to accept Arrigo Boito as his librettist in creating the magnificent operas *Otello* and *Falstaff*. Called "Sör Giulio" by Giacosa, the publisher frequently inserted himself into the creative process of the libretto for *Bohème*.

Already an experienced librettist, Luigi Illica (1857–1919) was a writer and successful playwright. A fast worker, he also was easily offended and possessed a hot temper, which in one instance led to a duel where he lost half an ear. In working with Puccini, Illica took source material and transformed it into a prose scenario that would be passed onto Giacosa for versification, although he versified some of his own text. One of Illica's great skills was transforming lines of fixed syllables into irregular lengths, a complete contrast to the prevailing practice of standardized poetic meter. Giacosa humorously referred to such text as "Illicisaballi."

Giuseppe Giacosa (1847–1909) was one of Italy's leading playwrights during the last decades of the nineteenth century. Endowed with an elegant beard and rotund figure, he was known for his equanimity, earning the sobriquet "the Buddha." He versified Illica's prose but was a perfectionist and worked slowly to produce quality text. Aware of his high standing as a playwright, Giacosa disliked writing librettos, calling the process "pedantic." It was hard work and frequently he became exasperated with Puccini's endless demands for changes, leading to voluble letters of resignation that were never accepted. At one point, Giacosa complained to Ricordi, "I must confess that with these continual refinements, retouchings, additions, corrections, cuts, restoring the cuts, blowing it up on the right, thinning it out on the left, I am deathly tired."

Despite Illica's and Giacosa's irritation and complaints with the composer's insistence for changes, more often than not Puccini's instincts proved him correct. Often, Puccini did not know exactly

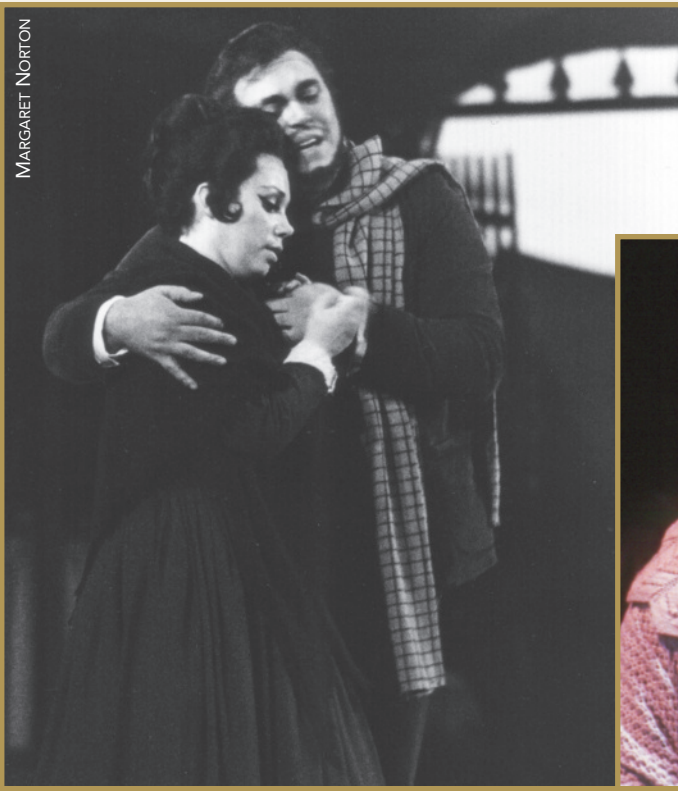
what he wanted, but he always had in mind the image of the stage action which, combined with his music, would create the great theatrical effect. Often the three artists were summoned to Ricordi's office, where they quarreled, hammered out compromises, suggested new ideas, cut passages of text, or excised entire acts. Frequently, Ricordi applied his diplomatic skills to soothe overheated personalities, resolved artistic differences, and occasionally made his own contributions to the libretto.

The source of *La Bohème* derives from Henry Mürger's *Scènes de la vie de Bohème*, first serialized over three years beginning in 1845 in the Parisian journal *Le Corsaire de Satan*. Théodore Barrière collaborated with Mürger in adapting the short stories into a five-act play, *La Vie de Bohème*, which premiered to great success at the Théâtre des Variétés on November 22, 1849 with Louis Napoleon in the audience. Two years later, *Scènes de la vie de Bohème* appeared in book form in which Mürger added a preface and rearranged many of the short stories. Mürger's semi-autobiographical character sketches captured much of the 1840s Parisian milieu of Montmartre and the Latin Quarter. The author imagined himself as Rodolphe, an impoverished, starving writer. Many of the other characters are composites of known figures of the period that would provide a wealth of material for the opera.

As *Manon Lescaut* approached completion in 1892, it seems that Illica introduced Puccini to Mürger's novel. Puccini was enthusiastic and asked Illica and Giacosa to create the libretto. At the same time Ruggiero Leoncavallo, the composer of *Pagliacci*, announced his intention to write an opera also based on Mürger's novel. A contretemps ensued, and in the end Leoncavallo's *La Bohème* premiered at Venice's Teatro la Fenice in 1897, eighteen months after Puccini's opera. Despite a string of moderate successes, which included a production at the Vienna Court Opera under Gustav Mahler's personal direction, Leoncavallo's opera was eclipsed by Puccini's version and disappeared from the repertory.

Early in 1893, Illica quickly drafted the scenario and sent it to Giacosa. The original scenario called for five scenes in four acts. Act I, scene 1: the garret and the Bohemians; scene 2: the Latin Quarter in Café Momus; Act II: at the Barrière d'Enfer; Act III: the courtyard of Musetta's domicile; Act IV: the garret and Mimi's death. Newly discovered documents have revealed far more details that do not appear in the finished product. Only the high points can be offered here, but the details are available in the excellent publication by Arthur Groos and Roger Parker *La Bohème*, part of the Cambridge Opera Handbooks series (Cambridge, 1986).

Many of the events in the garret of the first and last acts are based on chapters of Mürger's novel. Marcel's painting of the parting of the Red Sea appears in chapter 7, and chapter 9 relates Rodolfo burning his manuscript to keep the garret warm. Chapter 19 shows the Bohemians duping their landlord, but the name Benoît comes only from the play. Mimi is actually a composite of two characters from the novel. Rodolfo's first encounter with Mimi is taken from chapter 18 with the artist Jacques and the seamstress Francine. Schaunard, not Colline, goes to pawn the overcoat. In the novel, Mimi dies alone in a hospital; a stark contrast to the opera's ending with her death in the garret.



Left and below: Childhood friends Luciano Pavarotti and Mirella Freni both made their San Francisco Opera debuts as Rodolfo and Mimì in 1967 (left). The pair reprised their roles for the 1988 production (below).



Save for one allusion, Act II has no similarity with the novel. The only reference is to chapter 11, set in “A Café in Bohemia” that takes place inside the Café Momus, not outside, as in the opera. While composing the Act II music, Puccini came up with a musical theme that had no text. Giuseppe Adami, an early biographer of Puccini, gleefully relates the composer explaining to Giacosa how he envisioned setting the text to music:

... in his musical work, [Puccini] feels an impetus and excitement that Giacosa does not feel. He has his ‘busy hours in which the hand is slow to follow the mind.’ Having found situations and scenes, if the verses are lacking, he sets the situations to music, as he always did.... The words will come later and can adapt to already fixed rhythms.

From time to time, he makes a trip to Milan. He needs the verses for Musetta. He has already composed the famous Waltz. He sings it again and again to Giacosa, pacing up and down his studio in Foro Bonaparte like a Napoleon who must overcome every obstacle in that of the obstinate musical ear of his great collaborator. To make things clear, he writes the meter he wants:

‘Look, you must do me some verses that correspond to these words: *Cocoricò, Cocoricò, bistecca* [cock-a-doodle-do, cock-a-doodle-do, beefsteak]. The poet turns pale, shudders, groans. But the next day the lines [of Musetta’s text] are adapted precisely to the music:

‘Quando me’n vo – quando me’n vo – soletta...’

Giacosa pockets the verses. He smiles, satisfied: ‘Well then. Now we’re there... as you see, it really was so simple.’

The original Act III, “Courtyard of a house at 8 rue de Bruyère” was to have been a grand social gathering hosted by Musetta and was derived from an episode in Mürger’s novel. Richly

detailed with many people, the act opened with the Bohemians, including Mimì, appearing at the entrance to the courtyard. At the same instance, Musetta throws out bailiffs who attempted to repossess her furniture for non-payment of the rent. In short, porters arrive to carry out the furniture, and Musetta decides to throw a party and invites the residents of the building with the courtyard. Amidst the milling people, Mimì is charmed by a Viscount, creating a jealous row with Rodolfo and, at the end of the act, they separate.

It appears the entire act was cut in part because Puccini disliked it. Further, the act itself held up the progress of the dramatic action and did not fit with the overall structure of the opera. Not all of the material from the deleted act was lost. Some of the ideas were recycled elsewhere, the most prominent being Musetta’s introduction of Mimì to a group of students: “She is called Mimì / but her name is Lucia.” These lines were revised to become a part of Mimì’s magnificent aria in Act I as “Mi chiamano Mimì / ma il mio nome è Lucia.”

The scene of “Barrière d’Enfer” at the outskirts of Paris now becomes Act III and appears to be invented entirely by Illica. At first, Puccini disliked the act (causing Illica to feel insulted and leading to another series of explosions and arguments), for it was laden with far too many details and thus risking a break in the dramatic flow. Here Ricordi offered many valuable suggestions for cuts and refinements in the libretto, including that Musetta should sing her waltz reminiscence from inside the tavern. Eventually Illica was soothed by Puccini and Ricordi, and the collaboration proceeded further.

In the last act, the collaboration again nearly went awry due to Schaunard’s expanded character. Originally, the libretto included a humorous episode of Schaunard inveighing against sexual politics, diplomats, and economic reform stopped only by one of the Bohemians’ kick to his groin. Schaunard was also to have a mock credo against women and a drinking song in praise of water. Giacosa was never enamored of the act as it stood and refused to give into Puccini’s stubborn demands for changes. Illica stepped in, and



COURTESY SAN FRANCISCO MUSEUM OF PERFORMANCE AND DESIGN

San Francisco Opera's first Mimi was Queena Mario in 1923. The soprano signed this photo "To my dear friends Mr. and Mrs. Merola, with love and affectionate wishes for every good thing."



DE MONTE

Mary Costa sang the role of Musetta four times with San Francisco Opera. She is pictured here between acts while on tour with the Company in 1962.

expended the time and energy to create the required verses. But it was too much. Everyone was exhausted, and in the end, all realized the scene held up the dramatic progress to Mimi's final entrance. All of Schaudard's solos were deleted and the libretto further revised to include the clowning and mock swordfight between Schaudard and Colline.

The work on the libretto cost the poets, the composer, and Ricordi much paper, effort, and frayed nerves. Nonetheless, Giacosa and Illica skillfully captured much of the rich natural language and ambience expressed in Mürger's sketches and the play that reflected the social lives of the inhabitants of Paris in the 1840s together with details of the scenic action. The librettists added to the libretto a short extract from Mürger's foreword as well as their own, along with several character descriptions from the novel. Here follow several samples from the 1897 English translation of the libretto by W. Grist and P. Pinkerton:

Act I: ...Mimi was a charming girl specially apt to appeal to Rudolph, the poet and dreamer. Aged twenty-two, she was slight and graceful. Her face reminded one of some sketch of highborn beauty; its features had marvelous refinement... This frail beauty allured Rudolph. But what wholly served to enchant him were Mimi's tiny hands, that, despite her household duties, she contrived to keep whiter even than the Goddess of Ease.

Act II: ...Gustave Colline, the great philosopher; Marcel, the great painter; Rudolph, the great poet, and Schaudard, the great musician as they were wont to style themselves... Made-

moiselle Musetta was a pretty girl of twenty... Very coquettish, rather ambitious, but without any pretensions to spelling.

Act III: Either as a congenital defect or as a natural instinct, Musetta possessed a positive genius for elegance... Even in her cradle this strange creature must surely have asked for a mirror... Intelligent, shrewd, and above all, hostile to anything that she considered tyranny, she had but one rule—caprice... In truth the only man that she really loved was Marcel; perhaps because he alone could make her suffer. Yet extravagance was for her one of the conditions of well-being.

Act IV: And Mimi, too, no word of her had Rudolph ever heard except when he talked about her to himself when he was alone... One day, as Marcel furtively kissed a bunch of ribbons that Musetta had left behind, he saw Rudolph hiding away a bonnet, that same pink bonnet which Mimi had forgotten.

La Bohème successfully premiered with Arturo Toscanini conducting at Turin's Teatro Regio on February 1, 1896, with twenty-four performances in two months. Puccini, however, was not completely satisfied and continued to refine the libretto. Not until April 13, 1896 at its first performances at Palermo's Teatro Carolino did *La Bohème* achieve its breakthrough to international fame and fortune. Affirmed by Giacosa and Illica in their preface to the libretto together with Puccini's superb music, Mürger's observation of the Bohemians holds true today: *vie charmante et vie terrible*—"A gay life, and a terrible one."