
Giacomo Puccini
A Life of Music :: 1858-1924

Presented by Margaret Marsh

9 April 2026. 07-281-2408

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A Life of Music

Giacomo Puccini (1858-1924) was an Italian composer best known for his operas *La Bohème*, *Tosca*, *Madama Butterfly*, and *Turandot*.

The Maestro's Journey: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HKbOpPwDXEw>

He drew inspiration from a wide range of literary sources, and his late Romantic music with its immortal melodies emphasised the strong characters, drama, and fast pace of his emotional operas, which remain today as popular as ever.

Films based on Puccini's life:

1953: "*Two Loves Had I...*", an Italian-French drama (with an English dub), featuring Marta Toren, Gabriele Ferzetti, Nadia Gray". [1.45.00]

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=V0iiqZdW9Sk>

1984: "*Puccini*", A TV Movie Docudrama about a domestic episode in the life of Giacomo Puccini at his home in Torre del Lago. Robert Stephens and Virginia McKenna. [1.52.00]

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sB2wmxG0RtA>

A Family of Musicians

Puccini was born into a hard-working musical family in the picturesque walled town of Lucca in the Grand Duchy of Tuscany on 22 December 1858. Baptised the next day, he was given the names of all his musical ancestors:

Giacomo Antonio Domenico Michele and Secondo Maria

At the time of his birth, the house was inhabited by his parents, Michele and Albina, his grandmother Angela Cerù, his 4 sisters Otilia, Tomaide, Maria, and Iginia, a “servant”, Assunta Menconi. A year later, another sister, Ramelde, was born, another “servant”, Carola Martinelli, was hired, and later Macrina was born and finally, after the death of his father, Michele Jr was born.

A total of 12 whanau ... No wonder they need such a big house!

A Little History

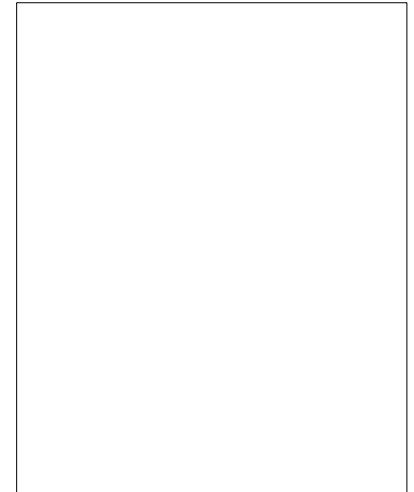
Puccini was the last descendant of a family that for two centuries had provided music directors for the Cathedral of San Martino. He initially dedicated himself to music not as a personal vocation but as a family tradition.

The Istituto Pacini

Lucca has had a music institute since 1842, established by Giovanni Pacini, with the consent and the protection of Duke Carlo Lodovico.

From 1843, Puccini's organist father, Michele, had performed various duties there and had also held various teaching posts including counterpoint and composition.

He became the Institute's Director in 1862.



Puccini is 10 - The Istituto Pacini

Giacomo begins his musical studies at the Institute in 1868 studying violin, piano and vocalisation, then classes for practical harmony and organ, and finally composition and counterpoint. Many of his teachers had been his father's students!

1876 - But a performance of Verdi's opera "*Aida*", which he saw in Pisa, convinces him that his true vocation was as a composer of operas.

He finished his training in 1880 with a diploma in composition, composing his "*Messa Di Gloria*" (Glory Mass) as a graduation exercise before going onto the Milan Conservatory.

Kyrie, Messa Di Gloria. Concordia University Chorus [6.29]

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mLJ7CbPTCgA>

Full Choral Masterpiece: Royal College of Music, London. [46.24]

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0W510wAlsAA&t=69s>

1880 - Puccini is 22 – The Milan Conservatory

In the autumn of 1880 he enrolls at the Milan Conservatory, where his principal teachers are Bazzini, the famous violinist and composer of chamber music, and Ponchielli, the composer of the opera “[La Gioconda](#)”.

1883 - Puccini is 25 - Graduation

On July 16, 1883, he received his diploma and presented as his graduation composition “*Capriccio sinfonico*”, an instrumental work that attracted the attention of the influential musos in Milan.

Capriccio sinfonico explained by the LSO Players. [1.12m]

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OHU_G86494g

Capriccio Sinfonico explained by Sir Antonio Pappano. [2 min]

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vqIN7U8TEc4>

Preludio sinfonico · Frankfurt Radio Symphony. [9.40]

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kEsP1aB8VKg>

1883 Le Villi – The Wilis - The Fairies

“A heartbroken young woman is transformed into a villi, a legendary evil supernatural creature, to take revenge on her unfaithful lover: she forces him to dance until death.”

Puccini entered his opera-ballet “*Le Villi*” in a competition for one-act operas. The judges did not think it was worthy of consideration, but a group of friends subsidised its production, and the premiere took place with immense success at Milan’s Verme Theatre on 31 May 1884.

Le Villi was remarkable for its dramatic power, its operatic melody, and, revealing the influence of Richard Wagner’s works - the important role played by the orchestra.

The music publisher Giulio Ricordi immediately acquired the copyright, with the stipulation that the opera be expanded to two acts. He also commissioned Puccini to write a new opera for La Scala and gave him a monthly stipend: thus began Puccini’s lifelong association with Ricordi, who was to become a staunch friend and counselor.

Roberto's Aria, Torna ai felici di. Jonas Kaufmann. La Scala. [6.54]

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YMD-6XCzh7I>

Full Opera [1.06.00]: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ay7BYf5HDQg>

Le Villi. Roberto's Aria, Torna ai felici di.

Here is the house of God, what a horrible night!
Strange voices pursue me
The Wills... Hurrah! These are tales!
No, the Wills' fatal vengeance does not pursue
me!
You alone pursue me, remorse!
Infernal viper!
You alone pursue me, remorse!
Viper with infernal venom!

Return my sorrowful thoughts to the happy days,
The flowers of May were laughing, love was
blooming for me.
Now everything is covered with mystery...
And in my heart I have nothing but sadness and
terror,
Perhaps she lives! Let us knock!
What a shudder seized me!
In vain I tried
to raise my hand on that threshold!
To hear it, it seems to me truly a mournful song!
O supreme God! Of my journey,
O supreme God, this is the goal of my destiny...
Let forgiveness, let forgiveness
Make her happy just for a moment, and then I
will die!
I cannot pray! Ah, cursed be the day
That I went far from here!
Cursed be your beauty, O vile courtesan...
Cursed forever! Cursed!

1884 – His mother, Aliba, dies

After the death of his mother, Puccini fled from Lucca with a married woman, Elvira Gemignani, who he had met as her piano teacher. She was to become his lover, and it soon became clear that she was expecting his child. They were happy in the early days before her jealousy and possessiveness dominated their lifelong relationship.

First moving to Monza, near Milan, where their son, Antonio, was born. Then in 1891 they moved to Torre del Lago, a fishing village in Tuscany where he bought the **Villa Puccini**, his cherished home and artistic refuge, where he lived for over 30 years.

<http://www.giacomopuccini.it/en/villa-puccini/>

At Villa Puccini 1910. [4.25]: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PPcn-HdjfP8&t=6s>

They were finally able to marry in 1904, after the death of Elvira's husband.

1889 - “Edgar”, Puccini's second opera is about a man who is torn between his love for the innocent Fidelia, and his passion for the sultry Tigrana. It premiered at La Scala ... but it was a failure. However, the publisher Ricordi continued to have faith in his protégé and sent him to Bayreuth, Germany to see Wagner's “*Die Meistersinger*”.

Edgar - Tigrana [5.08]: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=s25tsqsT1Wg>

Full Opera [2.36.00]: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yRj7TMZ6eow>

1893 - Manon Lescaut premieres at the Teatro Regio, Turin

“Destined for the convent, the young Manon falls head over heels in love with a handsome stranger and decides to flee with him. Yet aspiring to a life of wealth and luxury, she ends up throwing herself into the arms of a rich nobleman. Can she forget her true love?”

Puccini was a little-known and destitute composer with only two operas to his credit, neither of them particularly successful, when he chose the Prévost novel *“Manon Lescaut”* as his next subject.

Although the work had already enjoyed considerable fame as Massenet’s 1884 masterpiece, *“Manon”*, Puccini was convinced that he had finally found a story and characters suited to his own particular strengths, famously declaring that *“while Massenet feels the subject as a Frenchman, with the powder and the minuets, I shall feel it as an Italian, with desperate passion.”* He was correct.

Placido Domingo and Kiri Te Kanawa in rehearsal [2.28]:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0jlhfrciSzg>

Manon Lescaut – Luciano Pavarotti - Donna non vidi mai [3.02]:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=z01sTVLM71A>

Full Opera – Teatro Regio, Parma. Eng Subs. [2.50.00]

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=idnOS9vSqQo>

1896 - La Bohème premieres at the Teatro Regio in Turin.

“A four-act opera following young, impoverished artists in 1840’s Paris. It focuses on the tragic romance between the poet Rodolfo and the seamstress Mimi, who falls ill with tuberculosis. The story centers on themes of love, loss, and the hardships of bohemian life.”

It is one of the most famous operas ever written, following the unforgettable story of two young lovers in Paris. With a great love story comes a beautiful score, including arias like “*Musetta’s Waltz*” and “*Yes, they call me Mimi*”. It would go on to become a consensus canon work.

Puccini is widely held, alongside other contemporaries, as a leading proponent of the **verismo** tradition; a less fantastical, more grounded counterpoint to the fanciful subject matter often associated with the **bel canto** style. But while the slice-of-life drama sung through *La bohème* may shy away from gymnastic vocal flourishes, it’s by no means any less arresting.

Juliana Grigoryan – Yes, they call me Mimi [6.06]

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1CaeTYnb_9w

Full Opera: Orchestra and Chorus, La Scala. Dir: Zeffirelli. [1.43.00]

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5U2N2c96Kuk>

Full Opera: Live stream from the Teatro Comunale Modena. [3.17.00]

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=F3IEr3SQPx0>

1900 - Tosca premieres at the Teatro Costanzi in Rome.

“Tosca is a fast-paced, political thriller set in Rome in 1800, focusing on the passionate love between Floria Tosca and Mario Cavaradossi, broken by the corrupt Chief of Police, Baron Scarpia, who tricks Tosca into revealing a fugitive’s hiding place, forces her into a horrific bargain, and ultimately drives her to murder and suicide.”

Based on Sardou's 1887 dramatic play, “*La Tosca*”, it is a melodramatic piece set in Rome, with the Kingdom of Naples' control of Rome threatened by Napoleon's invasion of Italy. It contains depictions of torture, murder, and suicide, as well as some of Puccini's best-known lyrical arias.

Musically, Tosca is structured as a ‘*through-composed*’ work, with arias, recitative, choruses and other elements musically woven into a seamless whole. Puccini used Wagnerian leitmotifs to identify characters, objects and ideas. While critics have often dismissed the opera as a facile melodrama with plot confusions — musicologist Joseph Kerman famously called it a “*shabby little shocker*” — the power of its score and the inventiveness of its orchestration have been widely acknowledged. The dramatic force of Tosca and its characters continues to fascinate both performers and audiences, and the work remains one of the most frequently performed operas.

Vissi d’art, Maria Callas, 1958. Eng Subs. [3.23]

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VRPDuIYxlAc>

Full Opera: Tosca, Finnish National Opera. Eng Subs. [2.03.00]

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ciPRoKKkD0k&t=484s>

1904 - Madama Butterfly premieres at La Scala, Milan.

“The tragic tale of a young Japanese geisha who falls in love with an American naval officer in Nagasaki. She embraces his life, but he abandons her. Some years later he returns with a new American wife to take their child, leading to devastating consequences.” [More information.](#)

Based on the 1898 story “*Madame Butterfly*” by John Luther Long, from stories told to him by his sister, the wife of a missionary stationed in Nagasaki. It was also based on the 1887 semi-autobiographical French novel “*Madame Chrysanthème*” by Pierre Loti.

Puccini wrote five versions of the opera. The original two-act version which was presented at the 1904 world premiere was withdrawn after a disastrous premiere. Puccini then substantially rewrote it, splitting the long second act in two, with the “*Humming Chorus*” as a bridge between Acts 2 and 3.

Love Duet (Vogliatemi bene), Opera Australia. [7.44]

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=F00ujpjt9o>

Full Opera: Madama Butterfly - Freni, Domingo. Eng subs. [2.25.00]

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qSw2cS_kpbE&t=2853s

Full movie by Frédéric Mitterrand. [2.14.00]

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3stgof-xyN0&t=3942s>

Wish me well
A tiny bit of well-being
The kind that befits a child
One that suits me well

Wish me well
We are accustomed to
The small things in life
Humble and quiet
A tenderness
Fleeting yet profound
Like the heavens,
like the ocean waves

Let me kiss your dear hands
My Butterfly,
how well they named you
Delicate butterfly

They say that overseas
If a butterfly falls into
a man's hand
Every butterfly
Is pinned and
Stuck on a table

There is some truth to that
And do you know why?
So that it can never escape
I have caught you
I hold you close
You are mine.

Yes, for life. Come, come

Cast aside your anguish
Your terrible fear
The night is serene
See, everything is asleep

Oh sweet night. Come, come
So many stars
I have never seen them
so beautiful

Oh, come, come.
The night is serene
See, everything is asleep

Sweet night, so many stars
Come, come
I have never seen them
so beautiful
Come, come
Every spark shimmers
Come, you are mine
With the glow of an eye

1910 - La Fanciulla del West premieres at the Metropolitan Opera, New York

The operatic equivalent of a spaghetti western, set against a manhunt in the lawless Sierra Nevada of the 1890's, with a pistol-packing, poker-playing heroine, Minnie Falconer, one of the first independent women to stake her claim in the wilds of California, fall in love with a stranger. But is the stranger who he claims to be?

Based on the 1905 play “*The Girl of the Golden West*” by David Belasco and commissioned by the Met, the opera has fewer of the show-stopping highlights that characterise Puccini's other works, but it is admired for its impressive orchestration and for a score that is more melodically integrated than is typical of his previous work. Displaying influences from Claude Debussy and Richard Strauss, without being in any way imitative. But it received a less than positive reaction from American critics who felt the composer failed to effectively integrate an American aesthetic into the opera's score.

Puccini created the leading roles of Dick Johnson and Minnie for Enrico Caruso and Emmy Destinn, the company's two leading singers. The Met's music director and conductor, Toscanini, called the opera a “*great symphonic poem*”. This was the first world première of an opera at the Met, and it was extremely well-received by audiences of this initial production. [\[Wiki\]](#)

La Fanciulla del West: Trailer. [39 s]

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yfW28VD0_YI

Jonas Kaufmann - “Ch'ella mi creda libero e lontano” [2.05]

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gW85AKJxMzk>

Full Opera: The Girl of the West. Placido Domingo, Mara Zampieri. [2.24.00]

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RApJ3DHwrWo>

Puccini Speaks

Archival video of Puccini's visit to New York to supervise the world premiere of his opera "*La Fanciulla del West*" at the Metropolitan Opera.

The audio is from the only known recording of Puccini's voice, recorded on 21 February 1907, shortly before Puccini's departure from New York, where he had been supervising productions of several of his operas at the MET.

The composers voice was preserved on a single-sided 78 rpm recording entitled "*The Voice of Puccini*" made by the Columbia Phonograph Company. Here is an English translation of the words spoken on that recording:

Giacomo Puccini speaks:

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!

Elvira Puccini speaks:

I would like to say that the tributes accorded to my husband have made me very happy. I send a warm and sincere appreciation to everyone, especially the lovely American women, who were so very kind to us.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SPXPZWilkAk>

1917 - La Rondine (The Swallow) premieres in Monte Carlo.

La Rondine, which means 'the swallow', is Puccini's take on the La Traviata tale. Magda is a courtesan in 1920's high society Paris and mistress of wealthy Rambaldo, but she dreams of true love. At a party, the poet Prunier reads her palm and predicts that, like the swallow, she will travel south looking for happiness.

Initially conceived as an operetta before receiving the full 3 act operatic treatment, this bittersweet love story is the least-known work of the mature Puccini, largely due to the circumstances of its premiere: Italy and Austria became enemies during World War I, precluding a Vienna premiere, and the opera quietly opened in neutral Monte Carlo, never finding a permanent place in the repertoire.

Each act evokes a different aspect of French life, as well as a different take on the nature of love. Act I is set in Magda's elegant salon; Act II is set in the raucous Bal Bullier, a famous Latin Quarter dance hall; and Act III is set outside Nice on the French Riviera.

Magda's Aria from Act I - "Chi il bel sogno di Doretta" [5.00]

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CzusrVSoWD0>

Full Opera: La Rondine. [1.50.00]

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6WYnRuLBe2g>

1918 - *Il Trittico* (The Triptych), premieres at the Metropolitan Opera, New York.

Il Trittico is a collection of three one-act operas, *Il tabarro*, *Suor Angelica*, and *Gianni Schicchi*. Three hours of pure emotion!

Puccini wanted to renew the lyrical style imagining three distinct short operas, set over three different eras and places, each one illustrating its own thematic, but always to be played together because in the mind of the composer, “*Il Trittico* constituted a whole inseparable work, bound by a musical unity”. [Royal Opera House - Il Trittico – Trailer](#). [1.45]

- **Il tabarro:** Set in Paris on a barge on the Seine, Michele suspects his wife, Giorgetta, is having an affair with a worker, Luigi. After a tense evening, Michele finds them out and kills Luigi, hiding the body under his cloak, only to reveal it to Giorgetta at the end. **Key moment:** [Michele's intense aria “Nulla!... Silenzio!”](#) [3.05]
- **Suor Angelica:** A noblewoman, forced into a convent after bearing an illegitimate child, waits seven years for news of her son. Her cruel aunt arrives to demand she sign her inheritance away and informs her that the boy died two years prior. Devastated, Angelica drinks poison but, realizing suicide is a mortal sin, prays for mercy and dies amid a miraculous vision of the Virgin Mary reuniting her with her child. Puccini's personal favourite. **Key moment:** [The moving aria “Senza mamma”](#). [4.43]
- **Gianni Schicchi:** Set in Florence, the greedy Donati family is distressed that their wealthy patriarch, Buoso, has left his fortune to a monastery. They call on the clever rogue Gianni Schicchi to help. Schicchi impersonates the dead man to dictate a new will, cleverly taking the fortune for himself instead, to the fury of the family. **Key moment:** [Lauretta's aria “O mio babbino caro”](#) (O my beloved father) [1.56]

Full Opera: *Il Trittico* (The Triptych). [2.50.00]

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=63EU886inhI>

29 Nov 1924 - Puccini Dies

Puccini died of a heart attack in Brussels, aged 65, leaving his final opera, *Turandot*, unfinished. A chain smoker, he began to complain of a chronic sore throat at the end of 1923. A diagnosis of throat cancer led to recommendations of a new and experimental radiation therapy treatment which was being offered in Brussels. Puccini and his wife never understood how serious the cancer was, as the news was revealed only to his son. He died from complications after the treatment - uncontrolled bleeding led to a heart attack the day after surgery.

Although not a fervent Catholic, Puccini received the last rights from Cardinal Micara, who was also a cello player, fellow musician and a personal friend. News of his death reached Rome during a performance of *La bohème*. The opera was immediately stopped, and the orchestra played Chopin's '*Funeral March*' for the stunned audience.

His funeral took place in Brussels. He was temporarily buried in Toscanini's family tomb in Milan. In 1926, on the second anniversary of his death, his son arranged to transfer his father's remains to a specially created chapel inside the Villa Puccini at Torre del Lago. He rests alongside his wife Elvira, his son Antonio, and other family members.

An excerpt of Chopin's Funeral March, played on the organ of St Mary's, Watford, UK. [3.05]

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4VfPHpYyko>

29 Nov 1924 - Puccini dies – what happened next ...

Elvira inherited his huge estate which, upon her death, passed on to their son Antonio. When he died without an heir in 1946, his wife Rita inherited everything. She squandered much of it on the French Riviera with her freeloading brother, the self-styled Count Livio dell'Anna.

And this is an important point for, as it turned out, there may in fact have been a heir to the Puccini fortune. Evidence has recently emerged that Elvira Puccini's obsessive jealousy of Doria Manfredi was only slightly misplaced ... Puccini was indeed having an affair, not with Doria, but with her cousin **Giulia Manfredi**, and it was widely known that they had a love child, Antonio.

In 2007, documents were found in the possession of Nadia Manfredi which indicated that Puccini was actually having an affair with **Giulia Manfredi**. Upon the discovery of these documents, the press began to allege that Puccini had fathered her son Antonio, which would make Nadia a granddaughter of Puccini.

1926 - Turandot premieres at La Scala, Milan.

Set in China it follows Prince Calaf, who falls in love with the cold-hearted Princess Turandot. In order to win her hand in marriage, a suitor must solve three riddles, with a wrong answer resulting in his execution. Calaf passes the test, but Turandot refuses to marry him. He offers her a way out: if she is able to guess his name before dawn the next day, he will accept death.

Turandot is an opera in 3 acts with many endings. During the four years that Puccini worked on it with his librettists, he could not come up with a satisfactory end. When he died in 1924, the work was unfinished. The opera was completed by Franco Alfano and premiered on 25 April 1926, almost a year and a half after Puccini's death. The opera centers on themes of love, cruelty, and redemption, featuring key vocal performances by the characters Calaf and Liù, a slave girl who loves him and begs him not to risk his life answering the riddles.

Turandot: “In questa reggia” - “In this palace”. Oksana Dyka. MET [1.48]

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sSo9xVDckYw&t=91s>

Liù : “Signore, ascolta!” - “Lord, listen!”. Kiri Te Kanawa. [2.46]

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vMmrvFx2Dng>

Full Opera: Gran Teatre del Liceu - English Subtitles. [2.08.00]

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AxyOR1__8jY