

## Giacomo Puccini

Giacomo Puccini was the most important composer of Italian opera after Verdi. He wrote in the verismo style, a counterpart to the movement of Realism in literature and a trend that favored subjects and characters from everyday life for opera. On his often commonplace settings Puccini lavished memorable melodies and lush orchestration. It was around the turn of the twentieth century that he reached his artistic zenith, composing in succession his three most popular and effective operas, *La Bohème*, *Tosca*, and *Madama Butterfly*.



Young Giacomo took organ lessons early on from his uncle, Fortunato Magi, and later from Carlo Angeloni. At ten, he sang in local church choirs and by age 14 was freelancing as an organist at religious services. His first compositions were for organ, often incorporating operatic and folk elements. In 1880, Puccini entered the Milan Conservatory, where he studied for three years under Ponchielli and Bazzini. While there, he wrote his first opera, *Le villi*, which he once more entered in a competition. Though he lost, Arrigo Boito and, more importantly, publisher Giulio Ricordi helped arrange a premiere in Milan on May 31, 1884. The work was enthusiastically received, and Puccini was on his way.

Around this time the composer met Elvira Gemignani, wife of a merchant in Lucca. They carried on an illicit affair, and she gave birth to his son in 1886. When her husband died in 1904, the two were married. Puccini's next opera, *Edgar*, was poorly received at its 1889 premiere. Subsequent revisions failed to rescue it from its encumbering libretto. His next effort, however, *Manon Lescaut*, was a sensational success at its 1893 Turin premiere. Puccini's next three operas confirmed his preeminence in Italian opera. *La Bohème* (1896), *Tosca* (1900), and *Madama Butterfly* (1904) were not immediately as successful as *Manon Lescaut*, but in time achieved greater acclaim. By the middle of the twentieth century, they had become — and remain today — his most often performed and recorded works.

Puccini suffered a creative dry spell for a time and was unable to finish another opera until the moderately successful *La fanciulla del West* (1910), which premiered in New York with Toscanini conducting and Caruso singing the role of Johnson. His sluggishness of inspiration owed much to charges by his wife he was having an affair with a servant girl, charges that drove the hapless, and as it turned out, innocent young girl to suicide in 1909. In 1913, Puccini accepted a lucrative commission from Vienna interests, which resulted in *La rondine*. Received warmly at its 1917 Monte Carlo premiere, it faded under the judgment it was the least of his operatic efforts. Puccini followed this disappointment with his trilogy of one-act operas, *Il trittico* — comprised of *Il tabarro*, *Suor Angelica*, and *Gianni Schicchi* — all premiered at the Metropolitan Opera in New York in 1918. Only the latter work, a comedy, was well received.

While Puccini was working on his last opera, *Turandot*, he was diagnosed with throat cancer (1923). During radiation treatment in Brussels, he suffered a heart attack and died on November 29, 1924.