

## The Spinto Soprano Voice and Comparative Analysis. *Aria Vissi d'arte* from the opera *Tosca* by Giacomo Puccini

Mădălina BOURCEANU<sup>1</sup>

**Abstract:** *In the works of Giacomo Puccini, the spinto soprano voice can be compared to a musical instrument that can reach its fullness when it becomes an instrument capable of any expressive availability. The drawn portrait of the puccinian heroine is based on the sound explosions that are closely related to the intensity of the orchestral commentary, emitting brilliant sonorous sounds of a unique expressiveness. In terms of vocal and artistic qualities, the singer's skills consist of singing nuanced depending on the word, color variations (light or dark), the use of contrasting intensities combined with vocal polychromy, psychological knowledge of the character and self for a complete, successful mastery. These considerations cannot be dominated by the effort made in supporting the verist repertoire. The depth of his musical thinking reflects the significance of revelation through musical expressiveness, melody, rhythm, tempo and drama.*

**Key-words:** *Puccinian language, spinto soprano voice, vocal artistic concepts, corresponding to verism, comparatively interpretive analysis.*

### 1. Introduction - The Puccinian musical language

The aesthetics of Giacomo Puccini's (1858 – 1924) creation is based on several principles: the specific aspects of the era, the predilection for the real, concrete fact; the choice of opera characters among ordinary people, the special importance given to the libretto, the unity of the dramatic text and music must serve the principle of theatricality, the pronounced sensitivity in the musical construction of its characters with preference for females and not always bearing titles of nobility; cultivating a supple melodic line, undeveloped motifs, thematic mosaic and small forms (short arias) as well as orchestral colour; the sincere, spontaneous, direct and accessible character of the musical language, able to express eternal human aspirations (Berger 2009, 8-9). The trajectory of its evolution, which connects the Italian bel-canto with

---

<sup>1</sup> PhD Candidate, Transilvania University of Braşov, [madalina.bourceanu@unitbv.ro](mailto:madalina.bourceanu@unitbv.ro)

some peculiarities of extra-European language, starts from Verism, passing through Impressionism to stop at the threshold of the Expressionist aesthetics of the modern school. As Willanis says, Giacomo Puccini's works were perfect because they all have one purpose, namely: to summarize the fascinating caress of the song, where the thought disappears deeply into the flowering of emotion.

Giacomo Puccini stands out with his own, distinct style. The opera was the genre approached by the composer for most of his creation. He studied many contemporary composers, such as Igor Stravinsky (1882 – 1971) and Claude Debussy (1862 – 1918). As such, his works have evolved throughout his life, from the traditional influences of the nineteenth century seen in *Manon Lescaut*, to the realism and the style of verism in *Madama Butterfly*. Giacomo Puccini had an affinity for drama and a real passion for storytelling, being able to create structures and build works that are balanced in terms of stage movement. While taking over the traditional influence, his scores changed the role of the orchestra, resulting in theatrical songs that were recognized worldwide.

The great merit of Giacomo Puccini was indeed not to be influenced by nationalism, the assimilation and synthesis of different languages and musical cultures at a fast pace. He had an eclectic inclination that he himself recognized in a playful tone from the benches of the Conservatory. Some works actually feature an unusual combination of the gallant Luigi Boccherini (1743 – 1805) style (destined to reappear, years later, in the eighteenth-century setting, in *Manon Lescaut*) and timbre-harmony combinations that refer to the Wagnerian style. In order to address Giacomo Puccini's artistic personality, it is necessary to investigate the relationships he established with the various musical and theatrical cultural trends of his time. (<https://www.operatoursitaly.com/composers/giacomo-puccini>)

Above all, starting from *Tosca*, Giacomo Puccini uses a typical Wagnerian technique, whose canonical model can be identified in the famous hymn from the second act of *Tristan and Isolde* by Richard Wagner (1813 – 1883). It is what could be defined as a kind of thematic crescendo, or rather a form of proliferation of a motivic nucleus (a possible subject to generate secondary ideas), whose evolution develops and takes place in a sound climate, located just before ending the episode (a technique that Giacomo Puccini uses in a particularly systematic and effective way in the opera *Il Tabarro*).

## 2. The Spinto Soprano voice

The sharp lyric voice, characteristic for Giacomo Puccini's works, is marked by vocal beauty, expressive elegance, sound nuances ranging from pianissimo to fortissimo,

and in all the expressive contexts required by the dramatic evolutions of the vocal line, by beautiful, rich timbre in a multitude of nuances, from the darkest to the brightest. The sonority is characterized by a natural incisiveness that creates a strong impact in the theatre or concert hall; an unusual sound and timbre consistency, overflowing in abundance, and emanating delight and joy in conveying the artistic message to the audience. The dramas of the characters are generated by historical and social realities. The vocal category of the spinto lyric tenor and spinto lyric soprano is preferred by the composer to emphasize the strongly dramatic atmosphere generated by his characters and at the same time to balance them with the sonority of the orchestra.

The spinto lyric voice is generated by the characters of the verist composers, balancing the sonority of the orchestra, and emphasizing the dramatic atmosphere. The voice represents the resonance of sound waves through related sciences. The scientific coordinates of the study of bel-canto consist of the deep knowledge of the history of the art of singing.

The spinto soprano vocal category refers to stronger voices than the lyric ones, lyric voices with a boost. Most of Puccini's voices fall into this category, although many works have also been portrayed by lyrical voices. For example, the role of Minnie is a distinct dramatic role. The greatest spinto soprano of recent times, Brigit Nilsson, recorded the role, but avoided it on stage. Most of the time the role is considered unattainable. However, Dorothy Kirsten (1910 – 1992), a lyric soprano, was very successful in this role. Although it is illogical, such situations are possible and more and more common in modern times. (<https://www.britannica.com/biography/Dorothy-Kirsten>) Not all sopranos with a spinto lyric voice have approached the roles according to their vocal qualities for various reasons. Contemporary opera directors, when compiling a cast, do not always pursue vocal qualities only, but also stage credibility.

It is wonderful when a tenor has a remarkable voice, looks good and can be an intellectual musician. The voice itself, if not accompanied by the intellect, does not always have the expected effect. The great opera composers know how and when to use this type of voice, spinto lyric soprano. The temperament of some of the main tenors in history is as legendary as that of sopranos or even castrates, usually representing the delight of the public. In *All About Eve*, Thelma Ritter (1902 – 1969) calls tenors the only people in shows more temperamental than their mistresses in the wardrobe. Giacomo Puccini wrote magnificent music for tenors, even though in his heart he was with the sopranos.

Giacomo Puccini's roles generally require a boost of the lyric voice, because the Verist opera has a large orchestral apparatus and its sonority can easily exceed a medium voice, thus reducing the expressive effects. Also, there are roles that can

be played by more lyrical voices. Giacomo Puccini's heroines such as Laretta, Sister Angelica, Liu, Masetta, Magda de Civry emanate lyricism both in voice and character, as compared to Princess Turandot, Tosca, Manon Lescaut or Madama Butterfly.

In terms of voice, from a technical point of view, the performers of Giacomo Puccini's works should be noted for: the characteristic melodic lines that require wide breath, long phrases with many important culminations, and last but not least, well-mastered dosage. The drama of the characters is closely related to the text and the orchestration that punctuates and colours the states of the characters. The most important feature of Giacomo Puccini's roles is the psycho-physical strain of the performers, the drama of the action being the basis of the Wagnerian-style mental, physical and vocal consumption (for example, the opera Turandot).

From a vocal point of view, it is necessary for the Giacomo Puccini performer to have a good dosage of the breathing, due to the long sentences, and homogeneity of registers because it is often necessary to use the effect of "voce di petto", accents and sudden transitions from one register to another, dynamic effects required by the Verist writing (transitions from *forte* to *piano*, and back). Thus, a dynamic and colourful palette of great refinement is created, which is challenging for the voice of the performers and that of the main singer, respectively, but which brings the audience and the singers in a state of total sharing, the most human of feelings.

### **3. Vocal artistic concepts corresponding to verism**

The singer embodies in his interpretation, actions and expressions, the ideal being to combine them. The physical presence and vitality of the singer transforms the poetic-musical text into a real being. If the acquisition is successful, if the illusion is complete, everything becomes credible, natural, the artist expressing the musical intentions of the composer but also the personal vocal ones. Because the singer uses words, the vocal intentions of the verbs are often important. At the same time, the role of accompaniment is vital when it comes to harmonic and dynamic aspects of music, as well as registers or timbres, tempo, dynamics, and direction in space.

The characteristic voice of verism expresses sincerity, vulnerability, or the performance of emotional disconnection. Each type of voice has developed through an explicit connection to amplification technologies and in response to changes in audience expectations and sensibilities. These voices can claim an authenticity that transcends their performance and that can sing in certain moments, places, and cultural conditions. Therefore, the voice is receptive, lively, and dynamic. Given the continuous advances in technology, audio-visual design

and the possibilities offered by the use of contemporary performance styles to interpret historical narratives, it can be concluded that musical theater will continue to develop and continue to discover new, special voices (Miller 1926, 139).

The dramatic style of the verismo attracts the audience due to the moments of contrast and the variety of voices that give a dramatic effect. It is extremely important that the integrity of the text is maintained and that the words are not distorted by pronunciation. The different use of dynamics from one sentence to another must be consistent with the text. Some contraindications to vocal style in verism are: (Ricci 1954, 38-73)

- deformation of the sound by forcing, unstamping or pushing the sounds, especially in the acute register (this being far from the manner of singing adopted in verism, which consists primarily in naturalness both visually-scenically and expressively);
- sliding between sounds often confused with specific behavior;
- attack on the sounds below, an effect used in certain musical moments, which belongs to the contemporary pop style;
- the amount of movement in the realist creation depends on the temperament, the emotions of the character or the passion. The gesture must always be expressive, in accordance with the rhythm and in accordance with the music.

#### **4. Aria *Vissi d'arte* from the opera *Tosca* by Giacomo Puccini - comparative analyses**

The aria *Vissi d'arte* from the opera *Tosca* by Giacomo Puccini, written for the soprano Hariclea Darclée, is a musical masterpiece performed by many sopranos over time. Regarding the different periods in which the same area can be interpreted, it can be seen that the evolution of voices is different. From a vocal, technical point of view, it is difficult to compare the same interpretation of two artists separated by decades in time. Even if this work requires a pushed lyric voice, there are also lyric sopranos who approach this role, as seen by observing this in the following interpretations analysed further on, and not only. Also, during the composer's contemporaneity, there were no voices as wide and having a similar technique to the present times, these requirements being more and more recent. For example, a comparison can be made between Rosa Ponselle (1897 – 1891) and Daniela Dessi (1957 – 2013). More than in his previous works, in *Tosca*, Giacomo Puccini distinctly outlined a prominent female character, Tosca, endowed with superior moral virtues, with exceptional qualities that stirred the admiration of the

opera spectator. Giacomo Puccini had a special appreciation for the Romanian singers. He chose the tenor Grigore Gabrielescu (1859 – 1915) for the world premiere of the opera *Edgar* (for the title role), and later, Hariclea Darclée (1860 – 1939) for the world premiere of the opera *Tosca* (for the title role). The latter suggested the introduction of a soprano aria in the second act, thus giving birth to the famous *Vissi d'arte*.

If we could make a collage of the qualities of the following performers, in my vision, I would opt for the pianissimo perfectly played by Monserrat Caballe, the vocal homogeneity of Leontine Price and soprano Maria Slătinaru Nistor, the vocal structure of Maria Callas and the metallic effects it renders to certain passages, Angela Gheorghiu's softness and vocal tenderness, intertwined with the interpretation and the experience of the soprano Renee Fleming. Of course, these are but a few interpretations analysed here, there are many more of similar value. It is noteworthy that a work can be performed in different ways by the same singer. The determining factors are: the musical requirements of the conductor, the help of the ensemble (especially of the orchestra), the understanding/chemistry between the stage partners but also the momentary disposition of the artist. One can notice the difference of approach of the following passage, which represents the culmination of the famous area *Vissi d'arte* from the opera *Tosca* by Giacomo Puccini, through different interpretations:

4

Fig. 1. The culmination of the famous area *Vissi d'arte, vissi d'amore* from the opera *Tosca* by Giacomo Puccini

**Rosa Ponselle (1897 -1981)**

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GheszdYdArs> (1919)

Even if the film is not the of the highest quality, because there was no high-performance equipment at that time as it is at present, it is remarkable and also hard to believe that the soprano of 22 years old interprets one of the most beautiful and difficult areas with so much naturalness, without effort. The performance is distinguishable by expressiveness, sensitivity and musicality.

**Birgit Nilsson (1918 - 2005)**

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AGPWIDl\\_k6I](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AGPWIDl_k6I) (1961)

The climax is rendered by voice leap, and separate position from the previous passage; it is similar to the interpretation of soprano Raina Kabainvanska (1934)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9H45MMW7VxA>

**Maria Callas (1923 - 1977)**

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NLR3lSrglww> - (Covent Garden – 1964)

The climax is rendered by opening the mouth slightly wide, which leads to a wider vibrato; it should be noted that this does not happen in other two interpretations of the same area, the passage being solved by emitting a more domed sound;

**Leontine Price (1927-)**

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jy-l96O7Hu4>

From a technical point of view, the passage is solved perfectly by means of an opening to the acute through the amplitude of the whole phrase and perfect vocal homogeneity.

**Montserrat Caballe (1933 - 2018)**

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=M7wbRzPp6dQ>

The passage is distinguished by a legato that is specific to the performer throughout the area and beyond. This is highlighted by a unique pianissimo and

perhaps the best positioned, with a special sound, unlike other performers. At the same time, it solves the postures with mastery but it must be mentioned that the postures do not have their place in any musical style (for example, in her interpretations of *Le nozze di Figaro*, the role of Countess Almaviva, by Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart, where specific postures of other styles can be observed).

**Maria Slătinaru Nistor (1938-)**

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4LVVjYH6EU>

The voice and the vocal homogeneity, the special timbre with a rich harmonic consistency, being characterized by natural incisiveness, have a strong impact. Also, very well-placed breathings and phrasing make the passage very easy to solve, despite the fact that a full voice is much harder to control and conduct.

**Renee Fleming (1959-)**

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5\\_5h0fy8r2w](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5_5h0fy8r2w)

In the same passage, the singer adds a connecting sound through which she makes the mixture with the interval in question. Renee Fleming is remarkable for a sensitive interpretation and a special emotional experience.

**Angela Gheorghiu (1965-)**

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gnqa94oeGfw&list=RDgnqa94oeGfw&start\\_radio=1](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gnqa94oeGfw&list=RDgnqa94oeGfw&start_radio=1)

In the rendition of the famous film made by the great director Franco Zeffirelli, the soprano solves the same passage by starting acutely from the previous passage, makes the connection between the two intervals and implicitly the registers easier, first of all due to the structure of her lyrical voice, but also to the technical conditions in the studio.

**Anna Netrebko (1971-)**

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vGE4MBYSB9U>

The soprano makes the connection between the two intervals, and, implicitly, the registers, the next passage being rendered with the same force of the climax. In



general, the artist does not give much attention to well-thought breathing, and this is noticeable in several of her interpretations.

From a musical point of view, the whole area is sublime, the artist performing under the musical direction of conductor Valery Gergiev, together with the Vienna Philharmonic Orchestra.

## 5. Conclusions

The brilliance of the Puccinian repertoire, seen from a stylistic point of view, offer a new vision on creation, through the analysis of the afferent technical procedures and through the perspective on the dynamics of the vocal art. To summarize, through aesthetic understanding, the performer will be able to broaden his field of perception regarding the creation of Giacomo Puccini. (Wilson 2007, 70)

The lyrical-sharp voice characteristic of the works from the Verismo period, is marked by the vocal beauty, expressive elegance, sonic nuances from pianissimo to fortissimo and in all the expressive context required by the dramatic development of the vocal line, the beautiful timbre. and rich palette consistency. to the darkest sounds and to the brightest, most splendid and most expressive. The natural incisiveness is characterized by a certain sonority that fixes a strong impact in the opera house, theater or concert, by a timbre and an implicit extraordinary sound consistency, overflowing abundantly.

*Vissi d'arte, vissi d'amore* from the opera *Tosca* by Giacomo Puccini written for soprano Hariclea Darclée (1860 – 1939) is a musical masterpiece performed by many sopranos over time. Regarding the different historical aspects and in which the area can be interpreted, we can see that music is evolving, as well as vocal techniques. It is difficult to compare from a vocal point of view, the technical interpretation of two artists with a difference of ten years between them. Even if this operation requires a lyrical voice, there are also lyrical sopranos who approach this role. The technical means of rendering in the composer's time do not give us a real picture of the singers of that time, the requirements being more and more present, for example, a comparison can be made between Rosa Ponselle (1897–1981) and Daniela Dessi (1957–2016) digital. In *Tosca's* work, more than in other previous works, Giacomo Puccini (1858–1924) outlines the female character in a distinct and prominent way, Tosca, to whom she gave superior moral virtues and special qualities that trigger the admiration of the opera spectator.

Dramatic portrayal means concentration, mental and physical energy, and the athleticism of directing these skills. This is done only when artistic objectivity

can control the content of a part of dramatic literature, which leads to the transformation of reality into art. Raw emotion is not art, and art is not raw emotion.

### References

Berger, William. 2009. *Puccini without Excuses: A Refreshing Reassessment of the World's Most Popular Composer*. New York: Knopf Doubleday Publishing Group.

Miller, Richard. 1926. *On the Art of Singing*. Oxford: University Press.

Ricci, Luigi. 1954. *Puccini interprete di se stesso*. Milano: Ricordi.

Wilson, Alexandra. 2007. *The Puccini Problem: Opera, Nationalism, and Modernity*. Cambridge University Press.

<https://www.britannica.com/biography/Dorothy-Kirsten>: accessed on 14.09.2022

<https://www.operatoursitaly.com/composers/giacomo-puccini>: accessed on 26.10.2022