

## The Emancipation of Feminine Roles in Puccini's Creation

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**Abstract:** *The heroines represented in the operas of Giacomo Puccini often show diverse typologies of women, built during the 19<sup>th</sup> and the 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. The researches regarding the Puccini's operas generally focus on a single category of feminine characters, the so-called 'heroines of Puccini'. Starting from this finding, we wish to provide a different approach – a more original one, to include a comparative analysis of the heroine of Puccini typologies. The method proposed in this article is based on the analysis of the Puccini feminine characters in three distinct categories (the sentimental heroine, the fatal heroine, and the modern heroine) in a dynamic way. Some feminine characters are noted as evolving even within the same opera, reaching emancipation or a transformation until the end of the opera; consequently, they can be placed into two or three categories that define them.*

Key-words: *feminine typologies, emancipation, Puccini's heroines*

### 1. Introduction

The domination of 'the heroine of Puccini' in musicological literature distorts at times our understanding regarding Puccini's operas, but also the perception of Puccini, as a composer. When discussing the heroines that can be analysed to this end, we limited the feminine characters to those that have at least a full aria to sing in the operas.

As a more thorough case study, we selected three Puccini feminine heroines for each category: Mimì from *La bohème* as the sentimental heroine; Turandot from the opera bearing the same name, as the femme fatale; from *La fanciulla del West*, Minnie is the role embodying the traits of the modern heroine.

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By showing the comparative stereotypical representation of Puccini feminine characters, both from a musical and an interpretative way, we will have a more complex perspective over this heroine.

## 2. The issues regarding the heroines of Puccini

Most of the writers often discuss the issue of heroines of Puccini and underline some similarities between them. This group of heroines was collectively named 'the Puccini girl' or 'the Puccini character', but is mostly called 'the heroine of Puccini' (Wilson 2007, 215) [5]. With so many different feminine characters in the operas of Puccini, it could be quite difficult for us to sum up the qualities that they share.

By lacking agreement regarding the traits found in 'the heroine of Puccini', its belonging is complicated and varied.

For Weaver, the term 'heroines of Puccini' includes Butterfly, *Fidelia* (*Edgar*), Manon, Mimì, Minnie (*La fanciulla del West*), and Suor Angelica (Weaver 1994, 119). Corse's heroines includes Mimi, Butterfly, Liù, Turandot, Tosca, (Corse 1983, 93) while Carner considers only Manon, Mimì, and Musetta (Carner 1992, 303).

To more clearly show the differences or similarities in the opinions of musicologists, we created a table of Puccini's heroines (Table 1) below.

Eight characters are identified as 'heroines of Puccini', while the others are not. However, we note that, of the eight characters considered heroines of Puccini, only Mimì is considered a 'heroine of Puccini' by all three writers. Suor Angelica and Turandot are individually considered heroines of Puccini only by one of the musicologists, at a time.

| Musicologist   | Heroine names                                  |
|----------------|--|
| William Weaver | Angelica, Butterfly, Fidelia, Liù, Manon, Mimì |
| Sandra Corse   | Butterfly, Liù, Mimì, Tosca, Turandot          |
| Mosco Carner   | Manon, Mimì, Musetta                           |

Table 1. *Heroines of Puccini*

## 3. The typologies of feminine roles in the twelve masterpieces of Puccini

In the following model, we observe that each feminine character from Puccini's operas can be placed into one of the three categories. For this study, we will define the heroine as the feminine role that interprets at least one full aria in any of

Puccini's operas. To exemplify and support these selections as far as placing the characters into one of the three categories chosen, we will select a heroine for each category and we will analyse it from a musical and interpretative perspective.

The way in which the heroines of Puccini emancipate can be traced both on a personal level and compared with other feminine characters.

We noticed that feminine characters are evolving even within the same opera, by getting emancipated or transforming themselves until the end of the opera. Consequently, we considered necessary to place them into two categories out of three, thus granting complexity and accuracy to the character analysis. This analysis model allows each character to be placed into several groups at the same time, unlike previous researches. Puccini's characters are often multidimensional and the topic can change their description. Thus, a character may be found in various points depending on the response of the character to a situation surrounded by drama. For example, Turandot starts as a fatal heroine, killing all her suitors. The opera ends, however, with her not contemplating the killing of Prince Calaf, as she transforms into a woman definitely touched by love. In this current situation, Turandot can no longer be considered a fatal heroine, but a sentimental one.

The versatility of a role can be unveiled and assessed by observing it through many different lenses.

To sort all the feminine roles found in the twelve Puccini operas, here is a table (Table 2) proposed by us and including our classification, based on the parameters that list the feminine characters in the three categories previously mentioned: the sentimental heroine, the fatal heroine, and the modern heroine.

| Opera title in chronological order | Year of the premiere | Main heroine        | Sentimental heroine typology | Fatal heroine typology | Modern heroine typology |
|------------------------------------|----------------------|---------------------|------------------------------|------------------------|-------------------------|
|                                    |                      | Secondary character |                              |                        |                         |
| 1. <i>Le Villi</i>                 | 1884                 | Anna                | •                            | •                      |                         |
|                                    |                      | ---                 |                              |                        |                         |
| 2. <i>Edgar</i>                    | 1889                 | Fidelia             | •                            |                        |                         |
|                                    |                      | Tigrana             |                              | •                      |                         |
| 3. <i>ManonLescaut</i>             | 1893                 | ManonLescaut        | •                            |                        |                         |
|                                    |                      | ---                 |                              |                        |                         |
| 4. <i>La bohème</i>                | 1896                 | Mimi                | •                            | •                      |                         |
|                                    |                      | Musetta             | •                            | •                      |                         |
| 5. <i>Tosca</i>                    | 1900                 | Tosca               | •                            | •                      | •                       |
|                                    |                      | ---                 |                              |                        |                         |
| 6. <i>Madama Butterfly</i>         | 1904                 | Madama Butterfly    | •                            |                        |                         |
|                                    |                      | ---                 |                              |                        |                         |
| 7. <i>La fanciulla del West</i>    | 1910                 | Minnie              | •                            |                        | •                       |
|                                    |                      | ---                 |                              |                        |                         |

| Opera title in chronological order | Year of the premiere | Main heroine        | Sentimental heroine typology | Fatal heroine typology | Modern heroine typology |
|------------------------------------|----------------------|---------------------|------------------------------|------------------------|-------------------------|
|                                    |                      | Secondary character |                              |                        |                         |
| 8. <i>La rondine</i>               | 1917                 | Magda               | •                            | •                      |                         |
|                                    |                      | ---                 |                              |                        |                         |
| 9. <i>Il tabarro</i>               | 1918                 | Giorgetta           | •                            |                        |                         |
|                                    |                      | ----                |                              |                        |                         |
| 10. <i>Suor Angelica</i>           | 1918                 | Suor Angelica       | •                            |                        |                         |
|                                    |                      | The aunt            |                              | •                      |                         |
| 11. <i>Gianni Schicchi</i>         | 1918                 | Lauretta            | •                            |                        |                         |
|                                    |                      |                     |                              |                        |                         |
| 12. <i>Turandot</i>                | 1926                 | Turandot            | •                            | •                      |                         |
|                                    |                      | Liù                 | •                            |                        |                         |

Table 2. *Classification of Heroines of Puccini*

#### 4. The sentimental heroine of Puccini

To highlight the specific traits of the sentimental heroine of Puccini, here are some of the traits of Mimì from *La bohème*.

Puccini's character, Mimì, is an idealised one and shows the manner of the composer to shape his character and get it in line with the ideal of the sentimental heroine.

Starting from these principles, Puccini and his libretto writers built Mimì with the positive traits of an ideal woman or of a sentimental heroine. Puccini took over Mimì from Murger's novel. The music critics noted, however, the transformation that Puccini fully performed, namely that of Murger's MimitoMimì– the Puccinian opera character.

Ever since Mimì was introduced into the opera, all her traits suggested that she was the ideal woman from the perspective of all behavioural books; she is the embodiment of the 19<sup>th</sup>-century sentimental heroine.

Mimì is different from other opera heroines, like Musetta, who enters the stage like a swirl. Mimì enters shyly. The first words heard by Rodolfo are those dealing with excuses and despair; she gently says 'Scusi' [Forgive me] through the closed door. Her theme, which could also be perceived as leitmotif (Figure 1), is interpreted by a clarinet, but it is too fearful, starting *pianissimo* and reaching a more perceptible volume before dimming.

Fig. 1. *The leitmotif of Mimì*

We notice several traits of the sentimental heroine in the ‘*Si, mi chiamano Mimì*’ aria. To more concisely sum up these traits, we created a table that can prove useful to this end (Table 3).

| Section | Personality            | Text                                |
|---------|------------------------|-------------------------------------|
| A       | bashful                | ‘ <i>Si, mi chiamano Mimì</i> ’     |
| B       | plain, childish        | ‘ <i>Mi piacciono quelle cose</i> ’ |
| C       | full of life, carefree | ‘ <i>Sola mi fa il pranzo</i> ’     |
| D       | lyrical                | ‘ <i>Ma quando</i> ’                |
| B’      | plain                  | ‘ <i>Germogliata in un vaso</i> ’   |

Table 3. *‘Si, mi chiamano Mimì’ aria*

## 5. The fatal heroine of Puccini

As far as the traits of the femme fatale typology are concerned, we will closely observe the dynamic of *Turandot* from the opera bearing the same name.

The ‘femme fatale’ concept crosses a turbulent period of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, when Europe was amidst cultural challenges and changes.

The femme fatale can be thus perceived as a woman showing various traits that were conventionalised – these women are distant and cold, exotic, sadistic, sexual and erotic, violent, with own will, and – finally – untameable.

The musical exoticism in *Turandot* is rendered through local Chinese songs. The song related to *Turandot* has been identified as ‘*Mu-li-hua*’ [‘*Jasmine flower*’] Chinese folk song (Figure 2). Girardi writes that this song symbolises ‘the human side of *Turandot*’ (Girardi 2000, 452).



Fig. 2. 'Mu-li-hua'

The musical theme is perceived in the tonality of *E flat*, albeit interpreted with different orchestrations. In the first act, the children's choir is the first to sing this melody, accompanied by two saxophones.

The cruelty of Turandot is musically expressed in the first scene. The opera starts loudly, with a five-sound evil-boding motif, connected to Turandot, in the opinion of researchers (Figure3).



Fig. 3. Five-sound motif

Through 'In questareggia' aria Turandot appears as a heroine full of exoticism and mystery, nonetheless authoritarian as a princess. The minor tonality that crosses this aria creates an atmosphere full of mystery. The tempo – *molto lento* – creates the feeling of time standing still and carrying the listener far away, while the colourful accompaniment – mainly by flute and clarinet – creates a very enigmatic environment.

Turandot not only dictates the direction of tonalities sung but is – at the same time – in melodic control. Calaf tries to express his perspective in another tonality, but he actually only manages to accompany the musical lead of Turandot. Eventually, he surrenders to Turandot's grandeur, singing the melody exactly in the tonality dictated by her (Figure 4).

Gli e - nig-mi so-no tre, la mor-teè u - na! No! No! Gli e - nig-mi so-no tre, la mort teè u - na!

No! No! Gli e - nig-mi so-no tre, una è la vi - ta! Gli e - nig-mi so-no tre, u - naè la vi - ta!

Fig. 4. *Fragment of the Calaf – Turandot duet*

At the beginning, the opera portrays Turandot as a fatal heroine; however, she turns into another type of woman. There are clues about sentimental traits highlighted during the opera; Liù is the perfect example, as she gave her life to protect her beloved prince. Through her death, Peking locals learned more about the power of sacrifice. The love and kiss of Calaf make Turandot eventually turn from a fatal heroine into a sentimental heroine.

## 6. The modern heroine of Puccini

We are using the 'modern heroine' term to describe the third category among the types of characters found in Puccini's operas.

To exemplify the traits of the modern heroine of Puccini, we will analyse Minnie from *La fanciulla del West*.

The actions of Minnie stand as evidence of the third character type, namely the modern heroine: she is strong and independent, an equal to men.

In 'Oh, se sapeste come il vivere è allegro' aria, we note how the aria gives off a strong and self-sustaining individual. The tempo is quite fast and full of energy—*allegretto mosso e giocoso*. The vocal part in this aria is very dynamic as if Minnie wandered the countryside. The descending parts (Figure 5) sound as if Minnie was galloping on the edge of the mountain. The notes along the section, particularly the rising ones with crescendo marks, grant energy to the music.

(con gaiezza)

Minnie

Oh se sa-pe-ste co-me il vi-vere è alle-gro: ho un pic-co-lo pol -  
 le - dro che mi por - ta a ga - lop - po lag - giù per la mon - ta - gna, per  
 pra - ti di giun - chi - glie, di ga - ro - fa - ni ar - den - ti, per ri - vie - re pro - fon - de

Fig. 5. Start of 'Oh, se sapeste come il vivere è allegro' aria

The orchestra contributes to this atmosphere full of spirit, too. The arpeggios that are constant and played solo by the violin and harp (Figure 6) give effervescence to the arias as if a brook bubbled nearby.

senza Sordina

Solo Violin

First Harp

Figure 6. Violin and harp solo

'Laggiù nel Soledad' ['There, in solitude'] love aria is more suited to Mimì from *La bohème* than to the modern heroine, through the fearful orchestration, the instrumentation, the airy lines, and the tender moments. The orchestra's part is very light: the bass is almost imperceptible. The strings section perform a very smooth accompaniment.

The vocal line becomes much more lyrical and ample.



Minnie is the most accurate example of a modern heroine from all the operas of Puccini. Nonetheless, Minnie, like all the other heroines of Puccini, is complex and cannot be pinned to a single category. We are dealing with a character full of dynamism, passing from one man to another depending on the circumstances and the person beside her. Minnie also has a sentimental side, like her aria 'Laggiù nel Soledad' shows it. As a modern heroine, Minnie is independent and an entrepreneur, in the classical meaning of the term.

## 7. Conclusions

The sentimental heroine, the fatal heroine, and the modern heroine are feminine character typologies under continuous transformation and emancipation, being built in a specific manner for the operas of Puccini. During the research, we noticed the fact that each feminine character typology analysed is musically portrayed via different methods, by using all the specific musical elements, including melody, dynamics, tempo, and instrumentations. We can thus note a clear differentiation between the three heroine categories in the composition plan. The instrumentation of Mimì sentimental heroine's arias often highlights instruments like the flutes, the hautboys, and the first violins and is orchestrated in a superficial manner. The fatal heroine, represented by Turandot is characterised mainly by dissonances, strong dynamics, and surprising orchestration. The modern heroine is highlighted through dynamism and vocal independence.

Another aspect resulting from the analysis of the feminine characters from this perspective is reviewing the general opinion on the composition values of Puccini himself. From this perspective, we proved that he was not a composer who could deal only with a certain type of heroine through his operas. These show various feminine typologies. This acknowledgement of social changes influenced Puccini's manner of composing his operas and shaping his heroines, as well as their portraits, tacitly leading to the emancipation of his feminine characters and his emancipation as a composer.

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