

The Power of lyricism in Puccini's drama

Elena HEBEISEN-MOŞUC¹

Abstract: *Puccini's musical language is deeply imbued with beauty and truth. His poetic realism gains enormously in color and setting because Puccini understands opera as theater. His lyricism serves to express inner feelings, transforming characters' intimate feelings into moments of high dramatic tension. His melodies are full of cantabile, intensely expressing extraordinarily thrilling moods, deep inner feelings, bringing to the spectators' normal characters with whom they resonate and with whom they experience musical moments that often reach catharsis. The orchestra participates intensely in the melodic discourse through strong contrasts of dynamics and color, maintains balance in harmony, emphasizes the characters' emotional states through the use of instruments capable of suggesting subtle emotions, remaining faithful to the Italian traditions of belcanto and verismo, but at the same time integrating modernist elements.*

Key-words: *opera, lyricism, drama, phrase, technique*

1. Introduction to the Puccinian universe

*"I am not the musician of the big things, I feel the small things; and those are the only ones I like to treat."²
Giacomo Puccini*

Through the beauty of the musical writing, the architecture of the works that often take on symphonic valences, the bold harmonies that arouse the listener's interest, the musical phrases full of passion, drama, specific sonorities, the orchestral complexity, but above all through the emotions that emanate from his compositions, the great Maestro Giacomo Puccini, celebrated in 2024 on the 100th anniversary of his death, has earned a place not only in the world of opera, but especially in the hearts and souls of his adoring listeners. When you say Puccini you say love, and love dominates his entire universe.

¹ National University of Music Bucharest, elena.mosuc@bluewin.ch

² "Ich bin nicht der Musiker der grossen Dinge, ich empfinde die kleinen Dinge; und nur sie liebe ich zu behandeln." (Krause 1984, 14). The author's translation in the text above.

The Italian master Giacomo Antonio Domenico Michele Secondo Maria Puccini, known as Giacomo Puccini, born on December 22 1858, in Lucca, a pearl of Tuscany, the place of generations of Puccini masters, where religious celebrations and opera were at the forefront, put the soul and character of this mythical place on the portative. His intensely emotional operas, which combine strong expressivity with highly detailed, complex, sophisticated orchestration, have been recognized and highly acclaimed, securing him a place of honor among composers of the Romantic, post-Romantic and verismo periods. What characterizes him is not only his preoccupation with the construction of imposing scores, but also in rendering in the minutest detail the depth of the characters which, with the aid of word and sound, he paints with great skill, delicacy and love. As he has often said, his particular concern is for the details, for the 'little things' that he wants to treat (Krause 1984, 14).

Few master composers have managed to reflect their personal lives in their works. The artist-bohemian, the melancholy, the eroticism of his life cannot be separated from his musical creation, predominantly opera, because "too much is hidden inside Puccini"³ (Krause 1984, 7), and it touches the soul of the rich and the poor alike. The likeable Maestro knew how to live for the musical theater for which he was surely born, giving us operas of immense value, always up to date and which will move entire generations of music lovers. "Puccini continues the great line of Italian vocal melodicism, but with a deepening of the symphonic context"⁴ (Constantinescu 2008, 188).

His operas, with which he definitively gained fame, number 12, listed here in the order of their composition: "Le Villi"(1884), "Edgar"(1889), "Manon Lescaut"(1893), "La Bohème"(1896), "Tosca"(1900), "Madama Butterfly"(1904), "La Fanciulla del West"(1910), "La Rondine"(1917), "Il Tabarro"(1918), "Suor Angelica"(1918), "Gianni Schicchi"(1918) and the unfinished opera "Turandot"(1924).

He collaborated very well with all his exceptional librettists: Ferdinando Fontana, Marco Praga, Domenico Oliva, Giuseppe Giacosa, Luigi Illica, Guelfo Civinini, Carlo Zangarini, Giuseppe Adami, Alfred Maria Willner, Heinz Reichter, Giovacchino Forzano, Renato Simoni.

There are numerous sacred works, the best known being the "Messa da Gloria" and many orchestral exceptionally complete the Puccinian universe. Lieder like "Sole e amore", "Storiella d'amore", "E l'uccellino", "Terra e mare", "Canto d'anime", "Morire", "Salve Regina", "Inno a Diana" and many others are beloved by us, singers, performed by great voices of world opera, male and female alike and you can listen to them on CDs and youtube in wonderful interpretations. (see Contributorii di Wikipedia, 2024)

³ "Zu viel verbirgt sich in Puccinis Innerem" (Krause 1984, 7). The author's translation in the text above.

⁴ "Puccini continuă marea linie a melodismului italian vocal, adăugându-i însă o aprofundare a contextului simfonic." (Constantinescu 2008, 188). The author's translation in the text above.

In all these creations, Puccini integrated the lyricism and drama that we are accustomed to in operatic creation, in the lied he maintained a concentrated lyricism with great attention to text and vocal expressiveness, while in "Messa di Gloria", for instance, he combined the religious and operatic traditions that characterize him, making it vibrant, moving, captivating, expressive and emotionally intense.

2. On lyricism and drama. Key concepts

2.1. What lyricism means

According to the online Romanian dictionary ("Dexonline," n.d.), lyricism refers to the lyrical content of a work, inspiration, lyrical attitude, exalted way of feeling or expressing feelings.

If we refer to lyric poetry, it directly expresses personal affective states, intimate feelings. And if we talk about the voice, its lyricism is characterized by a sweet sound, free of tension, mobility (see Coteanu et al. 1984, 503).

Lyricism can be found in all the arts, wherever emotions and personal expression can touch the human heart. Its importance in opera is undeniable.

As characteristics of lyricism we emphasize:

- ♦ Subjectivity - reflects all the artist's feelings and emotions (joy, sadness, elation, melancholy, love).
- ♦ The emotional intensity with which all feelings are exposed, preferably to be as sincere, authentic, intense, strong, using the tone of an appropriate and moving voice.
- ♦ Poetic style - imagery presented in poetic language (be it in the way a vocal score is presented or even in the expression of body movements), welcome metaphors, symbols and figures of speech are important to give intense expression to emotions.

In opera, the voice, as an immaterial body, is the one that leads the thread of the scenic action through the modulations imposed by the score and by the singer who conducts it with the precise purpose of moving the listener, not of making empty sounds. "The notes are not just ornaments. Every note, every phrase has its exact meaning and is constantly changing, like in a conversation. Wouldn't it be terrible if someone expressed different feelings without ever changing the tone of their voice?"

We singers must be able to modulate every phrase like an instrumentalist, otherwise we shouldn't sing"⁵ (Maria Callas in Eva Riger & Monica Stegman 2002, 303).

Their interweaving will create a magic and will surely lead us straight to the listener's heart, and the ability with which the great Puccini evokes deep feelings, from love and passion to pain and despair, through his music is unique.

2.2. The power of Puccini's lyricism and drama

Puccini's musical language was deeply imbued with *beauty* and *truth*. His poetic realism gains enormously in color and scenery because Puccini understands opera as theater. In a letter to Giuseppe Adami (writer and music critic, librettist of "Turandot", "Il Tabarro", "La Rondine"), Puccini wrote how important contrasts were to him, and that his music should "speak more to the eyes than to the ears"⁶ (Krause 1984, 10). Puccini first had to see the scenes in front of his eyes, only then could he put the music on the portative. The characters of his operas are deep, passionate, moving, gaining much dramatically precisely through the lyricism that is not just an aesthetic element, but an element full of dramatic force. The tension created, the timbral contrasts of the soloists that Puccini knows how to combine with the orchestration in a desire to amplify the drama of the characters, the timbral variation to emphasize emotional states, the timbral colors, the use of extremes of vocal register that amplify dramatic tension, the fusion with the orchestra, all contribute to the psychological exposure of the characters and their inner tension, and the dramatic resolutions give rise to a deep emotional force. "It also crystallized the intense sentiment, characterization, and craftsmanship of the musical language of verismo that was widely apparent in Puccini's work. This he handled with a greater degree of flexibility and far more technical variety and finesse than most of his contemporaries. There was also in Puccini's scores a persistent interest in new musical developments from beyond Italy's (or even opera's) borders, which added heightened expressive color and richness to his music" (Derham 2018, 195-196).

Then, as he himself said, he also uses details in the shaping of the characters, those little things that he took pleasure in and that weighed a lot in the

⁵ "Die noten sind nicht nur einfach Ornamente. Jede Note, jede Phrase hat ihren genauer Sinn und ändert sich ständig, wie in einem Gespräch. Wäre es nicht schrecklich, wenn jemand unterschiedliche Gefühle ausdrückte, ohne je den Ton der Stimme zu ändern? Wir Sänger müssen jede Phrase modulieren können wie ein Instrumentalist, sonst sollen wir nicht singen" (Maria Callas in Eva Riger & Monica Stegman 2002, 303). The author's translation in the text above.

⁶ "Die Vorhänge müssen <sonnenklar, reich an bunten Kontrasten> sein und <mehr zu den Augen als zu den Ohren sprechen>, heisst es in einem Turandot Brief an Giuseppe Adami" (Krause 1984: 10). The author's translation in the text above.

characterization of a character. As a detail, each character has its own motif in the musical discourse, recurring melodies at the right moments being used perfectly.

Puccini is a composer associated with the *verismo* movement, an idea based on the realistic themes he focused on, intense drama, realistic approach to emotions and situations. However, although the themes are very realistic, the range of subjects is much wider, encompassing many romantic love stories, which is why his verism becomes much more refined and impressionistic. Puccini's universe means much poetry, elegance, melancholy or sadness and much sensitivity. And yes, his work lives very much through the visual side in which his verism is polished through colors and decor. For these reasons, there are even musicologists such as the German Ernst Krause who, in his biographical book "Puccini", does not consider the great composer a true verist for the reasons given above (Krause 1984, 12-13). Puccini's *verismo* is not that of Mascagni ("I Pagliacci") or Giordano ("Andrea Chénier"), but everything is more refined and sublimated, and the themes (love, suffering, death) have a maximum emotional impact on the audience. His very theatrical operas emphasize the everyday life of quite simple people, in general, his music emphasizes the intense moods between them, and even if the phrases are often simple, they are charged with much passion through the vocal and orchestral discourse. This reaches the listener's soul and stays in his or her ear, even humming them. If, for example, we only listen to Puccini's music, we do not see really the scene and yet, imaginary, it appears before us.

2.3. Belcanto vs. Puccini. Belcanto vocal technique vs. Puccini technique

The legendary Maria Callas used to say in various interviews that "Anyone who can sing *belcanto* can sing anything". Even though *belcanto* means *beautiful singing* and, as the Italians say "si canta come si parla", with a beautiful, warm and expressive voice, this style requires a very solid vocal technique that allows the soloist endless possibilities to technically and interpretively resolve the role. A belcanto singer must pay attention not only to *vocal acrobatics*, often extreme vocal virtuosity and showiness, but also to sonorous chromatics, seductive vocal inflections, highly differentiated dynamics and many other ways to make sense of cadences, phrases, ornamentations, trills, coloratura or variations in *cabalette*. The great vocal teacher G.B. Lamperti pointed out in his book about the technic of belcanto: "*The human voice is the most precious of musical instruments, and more delicate than any other! Only a singer who can sing well is able to endow it with sustained force and expressiveness*" (G.B. Lamperti 2012, 36).

Belcanto, as a performance style, was revived in the second half of the 20th century through the worldwide development of the opera scene, of singing schools,

through the brilliant careers of exceptional artists of the “golden generation” who revolutionized it (Maria Callas, Montserrat Caballé, Joan Sutherland). “The fatal aura of the *belcanto* heroine projects her into immortality, as the mystery of her existence constantly provokes new and new interpretations”⁷ (Moșuc 2023, 306).

If in a *belcanto* opera, in general, the sound air column on which the soloist sings is often reduced, being minimal especially in the piano passages, in the intimate moments (and there are many of them), it increases as the phrases become fuller, more vibrant, more beautiful, flexibility being a *sine qua non*. (see Magrini 1905)

In *belcanto* there is a great emphasis on the brilliance of the voice, the emotions are generally more idealized, the music is more cerebral. However, emotions should not be missing. The structure of operas is based on generally fixed forms, they have a specific architecture and, in this context, the voice, which is the queen of the *belcanto* style, must shine (see Celletti 1989).

Speaking of Puccini’s music, of course his style is very different from the belcantist style, much more modern than that of his predecessors. The first thing the soloists are confronted with when they enter the Puccinian universe is the volume of sound, which is much more consistent than in *belcanto* (similar sometimes to the Wagnerian style, which also requires a lot of sustain). The orchestra becomes a true dialog partner, no longer the often simplistic orchestra of the *belcanto*. Puccini’s orchestrations are very complex, often dense, rich in colorful harmonies, the orchestra becoming a character in itself capable of reflecting many moods, greatly intensifying the emotional atmosphere. The orchestral sound becomes very generous and, clearly, the same is expected from the soloists. Of course, there are also many moments of maximum intimacy that pose no sonic problems. For the singers Puccini is quite demanding, and a fair amount of practice is required. Everything must be kept under control so that the musical discourse is not only coherent, but also seductive, virile and balanced.

An essential concept in Puccini’s music as in *belcanto*, is *legato*. *Legato singing* is the interpretation technique that creates a continuity between sounds, giving the phrase a special expressiveness. The long phrases create an emotional tension that perfectly matches the story’s moments of maximum intensity. Puccini’s style has its roots in the *belcanto* tradition, but he develops and transforms it to suit the times and sensibilities of the audiences of his time. On *legato*, Professor Giubileo expresses: “In conducting the phrase, a musician always has in mind in concept of *legato* sound, whether it follows a melodic part or exceeds an accompanying part. By *legato*, we do not mean here a series of notes gathered in a ligature, but rather

⁷ “Aură fatală a eroinei de *belcanto* o proiectează în nemurire, căci misterul existenței ei provoacă neîncetat noi și noi interpretări” (Moșuc 2023, 306). The author’s translation in the text above

the art of producing timbrally homogeneous and dynamically consequent sounds"⁸ (Marco Giubileo 2008, 102).

Unlike *belcanto*, which emphasizes virtuosity and the abstract beauty of music, Puccini's compositions focus on emotional realism. His music is more dramatic and integrated into the story, reflecting the psychological states and inner conflicts of the characters. And the *legato* used helps to create a musical continuity that intensifies the emotion and expressive beauty of its melodies.

"In artistic singing the unification of registers becomes an imperative necessity, because only the sounds born from each other can be part of the same family, providing the technical support of the *legato* art. In this harmonious sonorous ambience, brightness, thickness, volume and vibrato will be adequately dosed, which are the component elements of the extra-vocal timbre that is manifested differently with each performer, in the timbre of the different vocals"⁹ (Câmpeanu 1975, 15).

3. The woman as the main figure in the universe of Puccini. Some case studies

The Puccinian universe has the woman at the center of attention and knew like no other to represent all facets of the female soul. He loves them in his works in the most profound and total way, expressing his love in extraordinarily beautiful melodies. Each character is deep and moving, and his lyricism proves to be a central force that enhances the dramatic impact of his operas. In his operas we do not see a preference for a particular feminine typology, but his operas, through his moving music, bring to our attention the woman with all her love, passion, fears, pains, hopes, illusions, betrayals, desires or sacrifices.

3.1. The character Musetta

⁸ "Nel condurre la frase, un musicista ha sempre presente in concetto di suono legato, sia che segua una parte melodica, sia che esegua una parte accompagnatoria. Con legato, non inrendiamo qui una serie di note raccolte in una legatura, bensì l'arte di produrre suoni timbricamente omogenei e dinamicamente conseguenti l'uno con altro." (Marco Giubileo 2008, 102). The author's translation in the text above.

⁹ "În cântul artistic unificarea registrelor devine o necesitate imperioasă, pentru că nu numai sunetele născute unele din altele pot face parte din aceeași familie, asigurând suportul tehnic al artei legato-ului. În această armonioasă ambianță sonoră se vor doza în mod adecvat, strălucirea, grosimea, volumul și vibrato-ul, elemente componente ale timbrului extra-vocalic ce se manifestă diferențiat, cu fiecare interpret, în timbrul diferitelor vocale" (Câmpeanu 1975, 15). The author's translation in the text above.

Who has not fallen in love with the music of the opera “La Bohème” and its poor and dreamy, but optimistic and full of life, loving, happy or sad, artists? Puccini was very inspired when he decided to compose this opera based on Henri Murger’s novella “Scènes de la vie de bohème” and even though he had never seen Paris at the time, he managed to capture the French reality of the 1830s extraordinarily well. This Romantic masterpiece, one of the most fascinating creations of universal opera, is structured in four acts. We meet artists trapped in the poverty of the time, but who brighten their lives through sincere friendship and true love.

Musetta is one of the two main female characters and we meet her in the second act when she appears very energetically on stage accompanied by the rich man she has conquered after her break-up with the painter Marcello whom she still loves and with whom she will be reunited. Surely every soloist who performs the role inevitably falls in love with this brilliant and seductive character.

Musetta’s lyricism is particularly evident in her famous aria “Quando m’en vo”, that “Musetta’s waltz” as it is still known, winning everyone over not only with her youth, beauty and seductive power, but especially with a charming melody that highlights a flirtatious, determined and self-aware woman with a vibrant personality. She appears on the stage transformed into Café Momus like a spot of light, accompanied by the rich man full of gifts, very smiling, elegant and determined. The sensual phrase at the beginning of the aria caught everyone’s attention and she simply mesmerized them all. Although, at first sight, it might seem that we are dealing with a superfluous woman, Musetta demonstrates in her passionately sung waltz her deep love and true feelings for Marcello whom she has not yet forgotten. She sings with vivacity, but also with a touch of vulnerability that makes her succumb to Marcello’s so-called resistance, who in turn shows in the end that he loves her even more fiercely (Figures 1, 2, 3).



Fig. 1

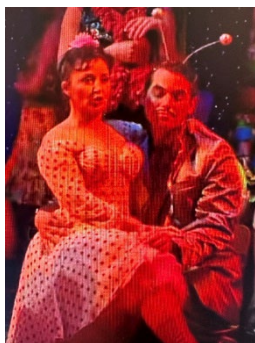


Fig. 2



Fig. 3

“La Bohème”, Zurich Opera. Elena Moşuc (Musetta) ©2005 Christoph Hebeisen

The dynamic flexibility emphasizes her captivating personality, and the refinement is at its peak when the waltz's final high note "B" is diminished from forte to pianissimo. The lyricism of Musette's waltz music perfectly matches her graceful, elegant, easygoing personality. She arouses both the admiration of men who desire her and the envy of many women. The orchestra subtly accompanies her in the more intimate moments of the song and becomes intense towards the end when the emotional intensity also increases.

However, we really know Musetta in the fourth act when she returns to the poor artists' attic with a sick Mimi, helping her to climb up to Rodolfo, asking for his help. He shows great compassion for his dying friend by selling his expensive earrings, mobilizing everyone into action to sell what they have, to buy a sleeve for Mimi shivering by cold. A very touching scene when Musette prays in front of the candle, asking for divine help from the Madonna whom she invokes to save Mimi (see "La Bohème PDF Kostenlose, gratis, frei noten," n.d., 273): "Madonna benedetta, fatte la grazia a questa poveretta che non debba morire" ("Blessed Virgin, descend grace upon this poor girl who must not die"). It is here that we realize that Musetta is a girl with deep human feelings. She is a true friend with a big soul and able to touch the hearts.

3.2. The character of Mimi

Mimi is the main female character in this opera. She and Rodolfo are the center of attention, and the whole story is built around them, which Puccini presented with very captivating music. Mimi is a young seamstress living in 19th-century Paris, a simple, poor girl, a fragile character with complex emotions, whose moods and emotions Puccini captures in the smallest detail through a lyricism of music of remarkable beauty and intensity.

Her at first timid entrance, marked by brief, small moments, musically perfectly captured in the conversation between the two, is followed by her first aria "Si, mi chiamano Mimi" in which she introduces herself to her neighbor Rodolfo from whom she wants a light for his extinguished candle.

The aria has a simple, flowing melody, with expression befitting the delicacy of the character, but full of exemplary Puccinian lyricism that reflects Mimi's fragility and sincerity, her innocence, melancholy, but also her longing for love. It is a *coup-de foudre* between her and Rodolfo from whom she will never be parted, her lyricism reaching its climax in the famous duet "O soave fanciulla" (Figure 4).



Fig. 4. *“La Bohème”, Puccini Festival Torre del Lago*
©2018 Lorenzo Montanelli Photographer

The voices of the two soloists blend harmoniously, expressing joy and the passion of their love, but Mimi is somewhat restrained, aware of her poor health. So, she decides to enjoy life to the full as much as possible. Musically, the long phrases of both, her aria and the duet require maximum support, perfect breath control and a great ability to convey subtle nuances. Tragedy and suffering characterize the next two acts of the opera. Mimi’s health deteriorates more and more, and lyricism becomes the medium through which the suffering and despair of the two is conveyed. The music becomes sadder and sadder, increasingly fragmented as the singer’s voice has to convey the inner struggle of the character who is increasingly aware of the inevitability of what is to come. The last act is quite complex for the soprano, requiring her to move from sustained, dramatic, intense phrases with rich, powerful voice, with various timbral colors and dynamics that heighten the expressiveness and dramatic tension, then slipping slightly into intimate, mournful moments of soft, ethereal timbre, moving gently into imperceptible whispers. Poignant is when she sings (see *“La Bohème PDF Kostenlose, gratis, frei noten,”* n.d., 260) *“Sono andati, fingevo di dormire, perchè volli con te sola restare, ho tante cose che ti voglio dire...”* (“they went away, I pretended to sleep, because I wanted to stay with you, I have so many things I wanted to tell you”). The climax on the word *“dire”* (“to say”) creates an emotional tension bringing a touch of grief, regret, deathbed emotion and intensifies the feeling of sadness at that moment. Although it is a very small thing (as the master liked to do), the climax brings an extra layer of sensitivity in a moment of reflection, delaying the resolution of the sentence, a suspension that reflects the heroine’s difficulty in expressing her feelings in the face of the death she still does not want to accept. Mimi is a very poetic character, she is full of candour, connected to what is simple and natural that subtly defines her and with which she has a personal and intimate relationship, such as the sun and the rose she talks about

in the aria. Everything here is on a very positive and optimistic note, yet she lives all her emotions with a certain restraint.

Mimi dies gently next to the person she loves, and her death, musically rendered by a massive orchestra in a minor key, supporting Rodolfo's desperate cry of "Mimi, Mimi" is an extremely moving moment that tears cannot resist (Figure 5).



Fig. 5. "La Bohème", Zurich Opera. Elena Moşuc (Mimi), Jonas Kauffmann (Rodolfo) ©2005 Suzanne Schwiertz, Opernhaus Zürich

Mimi is a very sensitive soul who finds beauty in the smallest details of life, as Puccini liked to portray, a symbol of humanity, vulnerability and love, and the lyricism of her music expresses all these things perfectly. In order to have a believable Mimi on stage, the role is best cast for a soprano (lyric, light lyric, spinto) who possesses a refined vocal technique with a deep understanding of inner feelings and who can construct an authentic character.

3.3. The character of Liù

"Liù, bontà. Liù, dolcezza" ("Turandot PDF Kostenlose, gratis, frei noten," n.d., 348) sings Timur in Act III after Liù's death. She is the key character in the oriental fantasy opera, developing a temperamental and character tension that surpasses that of Princess Turandot. The story Puccini drew on comes not from China, but from Persia (Krause 1984, 292), from a collection of tales "A Thousand and One Nights" translated by the Frenchman François Pétils de la Croix in 1710 as "Les Mille et un jours" ("A Thousand and One Days"). The cold princess Turandot was not supposed to have anything in common with Manon, Musetta, Butterfly, Giorgetta, nor with sickness or marriage, but there had to be a character who embodies the ultimate love, and that is the slave, Liù. She is the symbol of sacrifice, love and gentleness in total opposition to the princess, the embodiment of hardness and icy coldness.

“Turandot” is an opera in which the chorus becomes a character of extraordinary strength, with an impressive collective lyricism.

The emotional intensity with which Liù expresses her desperate plea to Calaf not to face death through the three-question test is fully felt in the first aria “Signore, ascolta!”. The simple melodic line of pure lyricism renders her silent and sincere love and is in total opposition to Princess Turandot’s monumental and grandiose phrases who does not wish to belong to any man. The role demands a science of phrasing and breathy dosage to build as beautifully as possible the undulating phrases, the octave leaps in the treble in the piano descrescendo to the pianissimo lost at the end of the aria. The dynamic control, the timbral nuances used cleverly, the interweaving of expansive, passionate moments with almost whispered ones throughout the role, especially in the passage before the final aria “Tanto amore segreto” are points of strength in the interpretation of the role and which demonstrate the class of a soprano who can hold the audience captive in her world throughout her melodic discourse. Liù’s lyricism is subtle at many times and symbolizes humanity in a cruel and inhuman world. Her last aria before death “Tu, che di gel sei cinta” (“You, who are surrounded by frost”) in which Liù shows her dignity, her courage to face a powerful character, Princess Turandot, is a very tense and moving moment in which a simple character becomes one of the most powerful symbols of human love and sacrifice. (Fig. 6 and Fig. 7)



Fig. 6 a 7 “Turandot”, Ancient Theater of Taormina. Elena Moşuc (Liù), Chrystelle di Marco (Turandot) ©2024 Pier Paolo Papalia Photography

3.4. The character of Magda

“La Rondine” (“The Swallow”) is an opera that is not very well known, but in recent years it has been increasingly taken up in the repertoire of theaters, winning many fans. It reflects the harsh reality of society as opposed to the romantic dream. The opera’s central character is Magda, a beautiful, sophisticated woman, a romantic dreamer, supported by a wealthy man, who yearns for true love. Her best known

aria is her aria "Ch`il bel sogno di Doretta" ("Who knows Doretta's beautiful dream?") sung very often by sopranos in concerts.

Typically Puccinian, the melody, which requires a warm and flexible voice, is simple, but it flows so beautifully, undulating, with long and expressive phrases, expressing a great melancholy, believing almost unrealizable the love in her dream. Remarkable are those high notes on the note "A" which have to be sung in pianissimo precisely to convey this dreamy atmosphere in his soul and in which the audience must be drawn into. Her lyricism becomes more and more complex from the moment she meets Ruggero, with whom he instantly falls in love. In the second act in the large ensemble "Ore dolci e divine" ("Sweet and Divine Hours"), Magda manages to abandon herself and forget the reality in which she lives, determined to live her own dream with Ruggero. The melodies are very beautiful, joyful, passionate, complex, exalted, and vocally, of course, with demanding support, volume, intensity, and wholehearted participation in the music. In the act that follows, after reading the letter from Ruggero's mother who wishes her son to have a beautiful family with children, Magda realizes that this is utopian in her case, feeling unworthy of such a husband after the tumultuous life she has had up to this point. She realizes the conflict within herself, realizes that she cannot survive the social differences and decides to return to her former life with utmost sorrow in her heart, giving up the love of her life. The soprano is asked to render vocally and very expressively on stage this awareness of the conflict between her dream and reality.

Her lyricism grows, becomes more and more complex and is marked by a great sadness, the melodies that were until now fluid and full of optimism, become more and more fragmented, resigned, full of reflection. If at the beginning the composer wanted a warm voice to express joy, exaltation, passion, towards the end the voice must take on a darker and sadder color, full of emotional subtext. Timbral and dynamic nuances are desired throughout the work, emphasizing the sensitivity of the character with great psychological depth who accepts his fate.

3.5. The character of Cio-Cio-San

In 1887 Pierre Loti's novel "Madame Chrysanthème" appeared, the literary material of the Butterfly story which the American David Belasco (theater producer, impresario, director, writer – see Wikipedia contributors 2024) adapted under the name "Madame Butterfly" as a short story for the stage. Puccini saw the play in London, was totally captivated by the subject and with tears in his eyes, embracing Belasco, told him he would write the music for his new opera. Belasco relates, "Puccini was among the guests of honor and he came to me backstage.... I immediately told him that yes, he could do what he wanted - because how is it

possible with an impulsive Italian who, with tears in his eyes and both hands hanging around his neck, can discuss any business matters! I hardly think *he has seen* the play, he only *hears* the music he is about to write. Later on, I got to know him more closely and found in him a most pleasant and sincere fellow, a great artist without pretensions”¹⁰ (Krause 1984, 207).

To get to know and understand Japanese music (Puccini was neither Japan-expert nor Japan-fan), he paid a visit to Rome, where Ohyama, the wife of the Japanese ambassador, familiarized him with Japanese folklore by introducing him to some songs from her native place and told him very interesting things. He also spoke in Milan with a Japanese actress, Sado Jacco, whom he asked to speak to him in Japanese. Then he procured many records and musical notes of Japanese folklore, of which in the end he used about seven musical motifs, because there were far fewer than he had supposed. He used three-tone groups, parallel-fifths and pentatonic in the musical writing of Madama Butterfly (Krause 1984, 208).

The Master of Tears, as he is still called, has achieved true magic in his musical depiction of the fate of the unfortunate Cio-Cio-San. He transmuted us into a world full of exoticism and contrasting Italian social realism. The lyricism of the title role, which is quite long and very demanding vocally and psychically, is one of the most deeply moving and complex of the opera, representing purity, innocence, sincere love, sacrifice and immense tragedy. The young Japanese girl falls in love with the handsome American officer Pinkerton and decides to take her destiny into her own hands. The music of the first act flows in long, beautiful phrases, culminating in the lovers’ duet, one of the most beautiful duets in the opera world, in which Cio-Cio-San simply lays her soul on a platter. The role is demanding from the very first appearance on stage, but optimism, joy, love triumph, culminating in the duet ending the first act (Figures 8, 9, 10).

¹⁰ “Puccini war unter den Ehrengästen und kam zu mir hinter die Bühne...Ich sagte sofort zu, er könnte damit machen, was er wollte-denn wie ist es möglich, mit einem impulsiven Italiener, der dir mit Tränen in den Augen und beiden Armen am Halse hängt, auch nur irgendwelche geschäftlichen Dinge zu diskutieren! Ich glaube kaum, dass er das Stück wirklich *gesehen* hat, er *hört* nur die Musik, die er dazu schreiben wird. Später lernte ich ihn näher kennen and fand in ihm den angenehmsten und treuherzigsten Mitmenschen, einen grossen Künstler ohne jede übliche Angeberei” (Krause 1984, 207). The author’s translation in the text above.



Fig. 8



Fig. 9



Fig. 10

*“Nae Leonard” Opera and Opereta Theater, Galați.
Elena Moșuc (Cio-Cio-San) ©2024 Diana Păunescu*

The opera moods are very different, they alternate quite often, the music is also constantly changing, the modulations are many, the rhythmic forms different, she uses many chromaticisms, everything demands maximum concentration. Puccini is very fond of syncopations, which are very expressive, and he makes very frequent changes of measure, alternating them (2/4, 6/4, 3/4, 6/8 etc.), the result is a music that is lively, dynamic, interesting, exciting, beautiful.

The expectation and hope of the second act aria “Un bel di vedremo” (“One fine day we shall see”) is beautifully painted musically with great delicacy and sensitivity. Although it has somehow become common belief that, because of the massive orchestral accompaniment and the often low tessitura, the soprano’s casting should be spinto or dramatic, it must be borne in mind, however, that we are talking about a 15-year-old girl who towards the end reaches 18, and the aria and the many passages must be rendered in a pure, soft, young voice. If the voice has an appropriate projection and good volume, the requirements of the role will certainly be successfully fulfilled by a lyric soprano or even a light lyric soprano (like the light, but very expressive chinese soprano Ying Huang in the movie of Frédéric Mitterand from 1995 in France, directed musically by James Conlon – see AQuietNight 2016), depending on the technique and vocal projection. The drama increases along the way and the voice has to be very well dosed and intelligently conducted. The lyricism takes on deep intensity and is marked by pain and disillusionment because love is in fact one-sided. The orchestra, as a character in its own right, sustains this dreadfully

sad moment with harmonies in minor key, with short pianissimo chords, then gradually everything builds to a crescendo with wind instruments joined by strings, somehow imitating Butterfly's heartbeat. The pain actually becomes unbearable. After Sharpless reads the letter, she realizes that she has been forgotten ("Madama Butterfly PDF Kostenlose, gratis, frei noten," n.d., 234): "Ah, m'a scordata" ("Ah, he has forgotten me"). The moment is strikingly similar musically to the one in Act III of G. Verdi's "La Traviata" when Violetta bursts into a cry of rebellion to God, that equally long and intense "Gran Dio" ("Great God") on the note "G 2".

In fact, Butterfly never knew that the action undertaken by Pinkerton was a sham, it was a fad with the "so called" temporary marriage. She, in her naivety, took it all very seriously, and Pinkerton didn't listen to Sharpless's constant warnings, who often repeated to him "Bada, ella ci crede" ("Be careful, she believes").

She will stubbornly believe to the end that Pinkerton loves her. The lyricism reaches its climax in the scene in Act III when Butterfly realizes that he will return only to take the child. The moment she understands that the woman in front of her is his wife, she says to herself (see "Madama Butterfly PDF Kostenlose, gratis, frei noten," n.d., 341) "Tutto è morto per me! Tutto è finito!" ("Everything is dead to me! Everything is finished!"). It is the moment when she has decided to take her own life like her father, and now in the orchestra the timpani come in full force imitating the very loud heartbeat. It is a tragic moment in which, on the "F" note of the first octave, she says to herself, very resolutely (see "Madama Butterfly PDF Kostenlose, gratis, frei noten," n.d., 352): "Con onor muore chi non puo serbar vita con onore" ("With honor dies who cannot live his life with honor"). Dignity and honor are two fundamental characteristics in Japanese culture. The pentatonic melody of the first act, which suggested the joy of marriage in the Japanese musical motif, now returns with the same sounds, but much more dramatically and sadly, suggesting approaching death. Many Japanese melodies introduced in this opera, incredibly, are used in their original form and key, as conductor Xian Zhang claims in an interview with American television during the intermission of the 2024 performance of "Madama Butterfly" at the Metropolitan Opera New York in New York (see Sausalito 2024, min.1:03:00). There are also a lot of very transparent musical moments throughout the opera, chamber-like, with few instruments, which is a bit unusual for an opera of this caliber, but very important for the intimate moments.

In the final aria "Tu? Tu? Piccolo Iddio!" ("You? You? Little God!") the lyricism is devastatingly powerful as the soloist has to portray the infinite love for her dear child, the utmost pain of separation from him and the unbearable pain of betrayal and loss. The melody is extremely moving and very intense, with the voice simultaneously conveying resignation and despair. The act of suicide is something extremely brave and it is only in a moment of utmost despair that one manages to

take one's own life. The emotional impact on the audience is very profound and, considering that the moment is at the end of the opera, the soprano has to mobilize all her strength, all the energy left after so many hours of physical and mental consumption on stage, to resolve it exceptionally. The lyricism of the role has an extraordinary force in Cio-Cio-San's drama, it is an expression of innocence, tragic hope, deep sorrow and supreme sacrifice.

Throughout the opera, the role demands many timbral and dynamic nuances, which can only be achieved with very solid vocal technique. Emotional fragility and inner strength are required to endure throughout the opera.

4. Conclusions

These reflections on Puccini's lyricism, highlight how the great Tuscan composer created and developed deep and emotional melodies of the heroines and heroes in his operas. Puccini's operas are very well-crafted, yet even after their premiere, the master still reworked them, demonstrating his concern for perfection.

Puccini's musical universe is a combination of intense, emotional lyricism with complex, sophisticated orchestrations, capturing the intimate and intense aspects of human life. He likes to bring real characters before us, emphasizing the theme of love and sacrifice, recurring themes in his work. The orchestra is the character in the background, omnipresent through its support, evoking interesting moods and atmosphere. He challenges the soloists who perform his works, asking them to reach the listener's soul at all costs through their own magnetic force and following all the indications in the score as faithfully as possible, so that everything is passionate, deep, authentic and credible.

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