

## **Dramaturgical construction of the character Mimi from opera *Boema* de Giacomo Puccini**

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*Abstract:* The paper below aims to present two aspects related to the opera "Boema" by Giacomo Puccini, which are less known to the lovers of this genre: the source of inspiration and the dramaturgy. What inspired the composer was, on the one hand, the literary creation of Murger's "Scènes de vie de Bohème" and on the other hand the objective reality of his contemporary Parisian bohemian. The second section of the paper aims at presenting the novel aspects of the dramaturgic conception of this work, a dramaturgical conception that is unique in universal genre creation.

**Keywords:** Murger, Puccini, Parisian bohemia, libretto, music, characters, dramaturgy

### **1. The context of opera *Boema* creation**

Opera *Boema* was inspired to Giacomo Puccini (as well as to Ruggero Leoncavallo) by the theatrical adaptation *La Vie de la bohème* (made in 1849 by the young playwright Théodore Barrière and played with great success at Théâtre des Variétés) of the foileton *Scènes de la Bohème* published by Henry Murger (1822-1861) between 1845 and 1848 in the Parisian newspaper *Le Corsaire* and later transformed into the novel called *Scènes de la Bohème*, published in 1851.

The translation of the work into Italian was done twenty years later and published in 1872 by Sonzogno.

Of the three variants of Murger's writing, the drama is the one in which the dramatic interest is focused on Mimi and her illness, through the scene of her death and the desperate cry of the main male character "O, ma jeunesse, c'est toi qu'on enterre!"<sup>2</sup>, so that Barrière realises a final full of patheticism. If, despite Murger's insistence, he did not accept any changes to the final text, Puccini did not take it into his work. The extraordinary success of *La Vie de la bohème* has led Murger to gather most of the stories published in the booklet and to create additional chapters and linking elements to achieve the required continuity for the creation of the novel *Scènes de la Bohème*.

The term "bohème" originates in France in 1659, when in one of his writings, the memorialist Tallemant des Réaux uses it to describe "a character living on the edge of society, cultivating a new form of freedom of thought and adopting an eccentric clothes style"<sup>3</sup>.

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<sup>2</sup> "O, my youth, you are in fact the one who is buried!"

<sup>3</sup> Cf. <http://fr.wikipedia.org>

Murger defines 'bohemia'<sup>4</sup> as the social state of the very poor artists in Paris, that is, "of those individuals who enter the arts world without a means of existence other than art itself." Of the three types of Parisian bohemia - "ignored bohemia", "amateurism" and "the true bohemia" - the author is interested in the third category in which he inserts the heroes of his novel, that is bohemian artists who "have the chance to succeed, who are already known in the literary or artistic world, and poverty is only a transitory moment in their lives."

"Murger's heroes, young people aged between 20 and 30 who have no material support, belong to Paris of the 1840s. Their lives - joy, sadness, pranks, love, love affairs - are narrated in a comic and picturesque tone, in which the folk slang elements admirably mix with the most daring rhetoric. In 1844, Balzac, in his novel *Un prince de la bohème*<sup>5</sup>, also defines the 19th century Parisian bohemia in terms of nobility: "Ce mot de Bohème vous dit tout. La Bohème n'a rien et vit de tout ce qu'elle a. L'espérance est sa religion, la foi en soi-même est son code, la charité passe pour être son budget. Tous ces jeunes gens sont plus grands que leur malheur, au-dessous de la fortune mais au-dessus du destin"<sup>6</sup>. Murger's work is partly autobiographical, he is himself one of the heroes, alongside other characters who represent individuals extremely real to all those who attended the famous Parisian Quartier Latin at the time.

## 2. Aspects of drama conception

In 1893, playwright Luigi Illica and writer Giuseppe Giacosa agreed on a libretto for the opera *Boema* which was Puccini's next project with a content and structure very close to Murger's drama. The composer agrees with this collaboration, but things do not go at all in the way he desires; the music is ready in a year, while the writing of the libretto requires two, being constantly hindered by Puccini's differences with Illica, due to the inconsistencies between the quality of the presented text variants and the dramaturgical requirements of the composer. In terms of Puccini's way of thinking and feeling, besides the fact that the work as a whole was devoid of an actual intrigue, the beginning section of Murger's creation was too mosaic, with scenes quite inconsistent to be able to form a logical introduction to his musical-dramatic deployment without a convincing construction of the libretto. Ricordi's conciliatory intervention helped, after two years of controversial discussions between the composer and Giacosa and Illica, of tense relationships due to the tyrannical exigency and permanent corrections imposed by Puccini to his librettists on the realization of a libretto in the dramaturgical spirit and musically created by Puccini.

Except for the tragic scenes of the 3rd and 4th acts, the authors kept the picturesque tone of the Murger version and proved their craftsmanship in an extremely versatile versification where the noble style and the familiar lexicon are perfectly intertwined. The virtues of this style of libretto so well molded on the composite episodes that give the richness and originality of the work as a whole blend perfectly with the musical substance whose

<sup>4</sup> Environment where the bohemia live, cf. NODEX 2002; untidy style of life, without material support, without the safety of the next day

<sup>5</sup> Issued in 1840 in *Revue parisienne* with the title *Les Fantaisies de Claudine* and next published in 1844 and then in 1846 in *Scènes de la vie parisienne* in *La Comédie humaine*

<sup>6</sup> "The word 'bohemia' says everything. Bohemia has nothing and lives out of everything it has. Hope is its religion, self-confidence is its code, and charity is its budget. All these young people are bigger than their misfortune, beneath luck, but above the destiny"

passage from one register to another, from comic or capricious to pathetic, are made with so much lightness and elegance, that the overall balanced feeling of the construction is assured.

For his work, Puccini uses characters found in his literary work which function as a source of inspiration<sup>7</sup>: Henri Murger himself becomes poet Rodolfo, Alexandre Schanne becomes the musician Schaunard, François Tabar is painter Marcel, Joseph Desbrosses becomes the sculptor Jacques, Charles Barbara is here the journalist Carolus Barbemuche, Jean Wallon becomes philosopher Gustave Colline. Neither the places frequented by heroes are different: the Café Momus near the Louvre and the Prado Bar Restaurant in Ile de la Cité, Rue de la Tour d'Auvergne next to Montmartre, is the street on which Rodolfo lives - like Henry Murger himself, Colline lives in Ile Saint-Louis and Marcel at his workshop in Quai aux Fleurs, Musetta, when he becomes a courtesan, moves from Rue de la Harpe to Rue de Bruyère.

What Puccini perfectly manages, through his music, in the amalgam of extraordinary characters and situations is, on the one hand, creating a unique atmosphere in the genre, that admirably defines one of the fundamental features of late nineteenth-century France- the essence of the Parisian bohemia - and on the other hand, he creates an atypical main character - Mimi - whose humble path to the tragic outcome is woven coherently, convincingly, sensitively and discreetly, without glimpses of spectacular.

On issues of Puccini musical drama in general, Gabriella Biagi Ravenni and Michele Girardi remark: "Puccini managed to master the orchestra as no other Italian did before him, creating new forms by manipulating the structures inherited from the great Italian tradition, adding them bold, harmonious progressions that had little or nothing in common with what was happening in Italy, although they were aware of the work of French, Austrian and German colleagues."<sup>8</sup> And with reference to the *Boema* masterpiece, in his work on Puccini, Julian Budden describes Puccini as a talented and original composer, revealing the vibrant innovation hidden in the popularity of works such as "Che gelida manina."

He describes in musical terms the area (with the imprint of the Puccinian style embedded in harmony) and points out that his structure was somehow rarities at that time, having three distinct musical paragraphs that still form a coherent and complete whole. This ingenuity in musical experimentation was the essence of Puccini's style, as it was pointed out in the various ways of using the reason to express ideas beyond the narrative or the text."<sup>9</sup> The composer proves in *Boema*, as in *Manon Lescaut*, a perfect mastery in creating an exceptional orchestration that abounds in harmonic innovations and a theatrical language that is characterized by profound originality.

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<sup>7</sup> Cf. <http://fr.wikipedia.org>

<sup>8</sup> In Grove Music Online: "Puccini succeeded in mastering the orchestra as no other Italian had done before him, creating new forms by manipulating structures inherited from the great Italian tradition, loading them with bold harmonic progressions which had little or nothing to do with what was happening then in Italy, though they were in step with the work of French, Austrian and German colleagues."

<sup>9</sup> "Julian Budden describes Puccini as a gifted and original composer, noting the vibrant innovation hidden in the popularity of works such as "Che gelida manina". He describes the aria in musical terms (the signature embedded in the harmony for example), and points out that its structure was rather unheard of at the time, having three distinct musical paragraphs that nonetheless form a complete and coherent whole. This gumption in musical experimentation was the essence of Puccini's style, as evidenced in his diverse settings and use of the motif to express ideas beyond those in the story and text." – in *Puccini: His Life and Works*, Oxford University Press, 2005, apud <http://books.google.ro/books/about/Puccini.html>

In *Boema*, Puccini does not follow a subject according to the classic pattern - presentation, tension, denouement - but builds action in the style of Murgerian scenes from which the actual intrigue is missing, being replaced by a succession of images, ordinary gestures of everyday life, which he entrusts with an extremely well organised dramatic potential to achieve a fluent and convincing whole from a dramaturgical point of view; without excess, no intrigue, no climax, no spectacular love. Only Mimi's disease is the one which gives form to the tension and a realistic tone to the story. But her death does not have the tragic meaning of the ends similar to the usual heroines of the opera; It is only the natural, foreseeable consequence of a frustrated fate, among so many others in the Parisian bohemian.

If Puccini had so much controversy with his librettists about the characters (for example), regarding the smallest details of each one and of their way of interaction, it was only his fierce desire to give life to the perfect dramaturgic expression of the music he had created.

In *Boema*, nothing is like in any other work of the composer or any other creator of the genre. Here, the more or less daily predictable is the one that determines, very close, the relationships, the approaches, the motives, even the feelings of the characters, and through this the dramaturgy of this work is fundamentally innovative.

The opera was structured by the composer in four acts, and the action took place in Paris in 1830; It is the first time that Paris is represented in the opera in a modern way: with Quartier Latin, Montmartre, Café Momus, etc.

The premiere of *Boema* by Giacomo Puccini took place 3 years after the extraordinary success of *Manon Lescaut*, February 1<sup>st</sup>, 1896, at Teatro Regio in Turin, under the baton of Arturo Toscanini.

The show had a good reception of the audience, while the critics' impressions were divided: some recognized the masterpiece in the new Puccinian opera, while others described it as an deplorable unsuccess. Time has proven, however, that *Boema* is one of the few creations of the genre with such great success to audiences around the world.

### 3. Final Note

Given that *Boema's* subject is well-known (according to officially recognized statistics, Puccini creations programming around the world is ranked fourth) we do not consider it necessary to present it in this paper.

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