

PUCCINI'S VERISMO AND INNOVATIVE STYLE THROUGH THE LENSE OF *LA BOHÈME*

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SUMMARY. Being one of the last Italian composers who have dedicated themselves exclusively to the operatic genre, Giacomo Puccini is considered to be the foremost representative of the dawn of the glorious era of Italian opera. The genius of Puccini lies in the antithesis of the extremes - "simplicity - complexity" -, from a musical, as well as a literary, dramaturgical and psychological point of view. *La Bohème* is the essence of Puccini's verismo. The Italian composer uses a wide range of ways to illustrate the colorful dimensions of the human soul. In order to illustrate the musical language and the innovative style of the composer through *La Bohème*, we have chosen to focus on several pillars that help offer a general overview: tempo, rhythm and the composer's instructions marked in the score; the role of the orchestra; expression by a simple, yet rich and splendid melodic approach; a keen sense concerning the abilities of the human voice; a very insightful and refined way of building characters, especially female ones. Alongside the main elements of composition, Puccini has a propensity to use motifs and leitmotifs in his music, and to employ aesthetic values, as well as elements of rhetoric. In this study we will review some benchmarks and important issues in order to decipher the eternal mystery of *La Bohème*, a valuable and enigmatic heritage left behind by Puccini.

Keywords: Puccini's verismo, innovative style, opera, *La Bohème*, post-romanticism

1. Post-romanticism and Verismo in Music

Post-romanticism encompasses a range of secular and religious creative endeavors emerging at the end of the 19th century, up until cca. the 1950s, and can be defined as a logical and necessary consequence of the evolution of musical Romanticism. In the majority of cases, composers accept the paradigms of the romantic era, and continue them, as to, for

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example, broadening the tonal principle, and including bitonality and polytonality. In terms of complexity, we are talking about certain elements that are molded unto old concepts, but are further developed.

A fundamental aspect approached by post-romanticism is the focus on greatness, grandeur, extreme dimensions; permanent dynamism also becomes an essential element of the era: musical structures are no longer static, enclosed, and musical sections are complex and variable. Nonetheless, their development is permanent: everything is resumed, is developed, is open and dynamic, and with regards to form, for instance, it is on the one hand extrapolated, developed, innovated, becoming syntheses of several formal principles. While the purpose of romantics was to explain the poetic content of a work, the post-romantic musical discourse is profoundly philosophical.

Musical verismo a musical trend taking place between 1870-1920 – alongside academism, neoclassicism, post-romanticism, impressionism, nonconformity, etc. –, however, the term itself is specific to the operatic genre. The movement encompasses opera works, in Italian, showcasing a realist ideological approach, in which the composer uses an augmented tonal system, but also musical modes, often mensural rhythmic notation, built on motifs rather than musical phrases, rich timbre combinations, interpreted by professional musicians.²

The term comes from the Italian *vero* of Italy and means “true”, “realism”³, thus being the artistic movement representing the Italian version of French naturalism, with origins found in the second half of the 19th century, reaching its peak between 1880-1890. French naturalism is born of the fusion of positivism and realism⁴, one of the most important representatives of this movement being the French writer, Emile Zola. He sees the novel “not as a fiction, but as an instrument for investigating man and his environment through a careful analysis of the narrated facts.”⁵ The term “experimental” is the most appropriate adjective to briefly describe the essence of the novel conceived by Zola; it will become a particular way of creating, a manner that

² Elena Maria Șorban, *Muzica nouă (New Music), Tranziția muzicii de la romantism la polistilismul secolului XX (Musical Tradition from Romanticism to the Multiple Styles of the End of the 20th Century).*, Post-romanticism, Editura Eikon, Cluj-Napoca, 2014, p. 10.

³ *Verism (Verismo)*, Jean Lupu, Daniela Caraman-Fotea, Gabriel-Constantin Oprea, Nicolae Racu, Eugen-Petre Sandu, *Dicționar Universal de Muzică (Universal Music Dictionary)*, Litera Internațional, București – Chișinău, 2008, p. 361.

⁴ Alexandru Emanoil, *Verismul (Verismo)*, chap. *Verismul (Verismo)*, Editura Semne, București, 2012, p. 11.

⁵ *Idem*, (Author/s translation). The original text in Romanian: „...nu ca pe o ficțiune ci ca pe un instrument de investigare a omului și a mediului său de existență, prin analiza atentă a faptelor narate.”, p. 11.

will study reality through scientific methods. "The artist has to become impersonal; he must act with the cold-blooded approach of a surgeon, conveying fragments of life without claiming to judge upon good or evil. In analyzing the facts, he must abandon his own morality to make room for brutal reality."⁶

The concept of realism and naturalism breaks the formal "restraint" of classicism and the fantastic imagination of romanticism, and delves into new themes. The forerunner of this new movement is found in France: Henry Murger, who published the novel *Scènes de la vie de bohème* in 1851, illustrating his own life as a starving artist. This work will be the major source of inspiration for Puccini in creating the environment and characters in his opera; for example, the two female characters are taken directly from Murger's work.⁷

Painters, such as Jean-François Millet, Gustave Courbet, or Édouard Manet, break with classic tradition and evolve into broaching realistic scenes. Exceeding the official requirements of painting mythical or heroic figures, they begin to paint ordinary people, moments of everyday life.

The two literary works, *Les fleurs du mal* by Charles Baudelaire and *Madame Bovary* by Gustave Flaubert (both published in 1857), constituted the sign of revolt against the bourgeois values for the Italian *scapigliatti*.⁸ The Italian term *scapigliatura* is the equivalent of the French term *bohème* (artistic bohemianism).

This artistic movement tends to study and analyze the most nuanced, fine details, both the brightest and darkest ones of the human soul and psyche, and it makes way for countless masterpieces in all artistic areas. In music, the most illustrious representative of the Italian verismo was the famous Giacomo Puccini, who, through his works of generous musicality and melodic fluidity, of bold yet not unbearable harmonies (not even for the traditionalists), of arias of great beauty and nobility, which address dramatic themes, "covering a wide geographical and cultural area, manages to bring forth the extraordinary revitalization of Italian opera music, reviving the glorious era of Verdi in the last years of the 19th and those of the 20th century."⁹ Giacomo Puccini was the composer who put emphasis on the

⁶ *Idem*, p. 11.

⁷ www.litkicks.com, *Henry Murger*, „Most of the characters in *Scenes de la Vie de la Boheme* were based on his friends and associates. Mimi and Musette were, in real life, Lucille Louvet (who died in 1848) and Marie-Christine Roux.”

⁸ *Idem*, p. 18.

⁹ Jean Lupu, Daniela Caraman-Fotea, Gabriel-Constantin Oprea, Nicolae Racu, Eugen-Petre Sandu, *Dicționar Universal de Muzică (Universal Music Dictionary)*, Litera Internațional, București-Chișinău, 2008, (Author/s translation). The original text in Romanian: „...care

deep feelings and emotions of people, thus, the topics approached in his works comprise different moments of everyday life, at the center of which is often a female protagonist who experiences an intensely dramatic event: Mimi in *La Bohème* – who suffers from tuberculosis; the main protagonist in *Tosca*, who suffers from abuse and dies by suicide; Cio-Cio-San in *Madama Butterfly* – is the victim of unfulfilled love and is abandoned by her family; Lauretta in *Gianni Schicchi*, a young girl, who is in love, even though her marriage to her lover is not allowed (the opera has a happy ending, this character is an exception to Puccini's tragic heroines); or Turandot, the princess with a tragic destiny from the work by the same title. Moreover, the subjects of his works “do not revive myths, they are not looking for historical heroes, Puccini was not interested in politics, he was not a revolutionary, and he did not become the follower of any of the trendy political movements of the era”¹⁰, although we know of many verismo operas of his contemporaries such as: Mascagni's *Cavalleria rusticana* (1890), Leoncavallo's *Pagliacci* (1892); but also impressionist ones: Debussy's *Pelléas and Mélisande* (1902), Ravel's *L'heure espagnole* (1911); and expressionist ones: Bartók's *Bluebeard's Castle* (1911) and Berg's *Wozzeck* (1917-21).

Giacomo Puccini's figure remains a point of reference in the history of music, not only because of his rich and unique work, containing works that are permanently featured in the repertoire of opera houses throughout the world, but also due to his innovative style. Historically following the operatic language of Verdi and Wagner – which have reached new heights in the mindset of audiences – one of the biggest admirers of the aforementioned composers, namely Giacomo Puccini, becomes a renowned composer in his own right, representing an absolutely new style of writing music, while becoming a fellow composer admired by Verdi himself.

What makes his style innovative? Puccini's work has a “three-dimensional” quality by concentrating and synthesizing several concepts, and carrying these out in a deeply personal manner. These three concepts are the following: “the Romanticism of Verdi, French music - between Massenet's vocal approach and impressionist timbres -, and the principles of Wagnerian drama, amid a romantic musical backdrop, spiced with a temperate romantic

acoperă o întinsă arie geografică și culturală, reușește să aducă muzicii de operă italiene o revigorare extraordinară reînviind epoca gloriei verdiene în ultimii ani ai sec. XIX și în cei ai sec. XX.”, p. 364-365.

¹⁰ Ecaterina Banciu, *Itinerarii muzicologice: Mozart, Puccini, Toduță, Terényi (Musicological Paths: Mozart, Puccini, Toduță, Terényi)*, chap. „Enigme” pucciniene (*Puccini's Enygmas*), Editura Media Musica, Cluj-Napoca, 2009, (Author/s translation). The original text in Romanian: „...nu reînvie mituri, nu caută eroii istorice, Puccini nu era interesat de politică, nu a fost un revoluționar și nu a devenit adeptul nici unuia dintre curentele la modă.”, p. 80.

impetus, constrained and conditioned by the convulsions of a transformed *Novecento*, in an age where romanticism provides only the framework and background for evoking perhaps the most peaceful and mediocre existence.”¹¹

In order to broach the topic of Puccini's verismo and depict a complex overview on his work and draw certain conclusions upon his innovative style, his oeuvre must be analyzed from several points of view, from the perspective of some basic elements, such as tempo and rhythm, the composer's instructions, orchestration and vocal aspects. Given that *La Bohème* is Puccini's fourth opera in chronological order, we consider it to be part of his first stage of creation. Nonetheless, *La Bohème* becomes the first landmark, not only in terms of its success, but also in terms of an absolutely innovative musical language, created in a highly personal style.

2. The Genesis of *La Bohème*

Following the success of *Manon Lescaut*, Puccini becomes the permanent composer of the publisher Ricordi, an event that also solves his financial difficulties: he buys back his family home - which will become the inspiring surrounding for later composing *La Bohème* – and could afford to participate in the preparation of the *Manon Lescaut* performances in several different cities.

The respect of the composer towards the well-known Italian librettist Luigi Illica, will slowly turn into a close friendship. Alongside many of Puccini's works, the Italian poet also wrote the libretto of several opera composers, such as: Pietro Mascagni, Alfredo Catalani, Umberto Giordano, or Baron Alberto Frachetti. While Puccini worked with him for a great number of years, the impulsive natures of both Italian artists hindered their collaboration at the beginning, however, Ricordi came up with a brilliant solution to resolve the issue, by introducing a third person in the mix, namely the Italian playwright and librettist Giuseppe Giacosa, who was more of a quiet type and wildly talented, and who became the mediator between the first two “friends-enemies” not merely on a personal level, but

¹¹ Sandu Vasile-Cristian, *Stilemele verismului în evoluția operei moderne (The Styles of Verismo in the Evolution of the Modern Opera – PhD Thesis)*, Teză de doctorat, conducător științific: prof. univ. dr. Eduard Terényi, chap. 5 *Verismul puccinian (Puccini's Verismo)*, Academia de Muzică „Gheorghe Dima”, Cluj-Napoca, 2009, (Author/s translation). The original text in Romanian: „...romantismul de sorginte verdiană, muzica franceză, între vocalitatea massenetiană și timbralitate impresionistă și principiile dramei wagneriene, pe fondul unei drame muzicale romantice dar cu un elan romantic temperat, constrâns și condiționat de convulsiile unui Novecento în plină transformare, o epocă în care romantismul asigură doar cadrul și decorul pentru evocarea poate a celei mai pașnice și mediocre existente.”, p. 169.

also in their creative work: he polishes Illica's lines and creates more "masterful" lyrics, as per the composer's wishes. Following the 10 year collaboration of the three artists, three world famous masterpieces will be born: *La Bohème* (1896), *Tosca* (1900) and *Madama Butterfly* (1904).

The letters of Ricordi and Illica from a period of time were lost, so we are not able to ascertain the first steps of the collaboration. However, when the exchange of letters continues, the subject of the next work is already established, and the creation of the libretto has already started.¹²

"The grotesque and seductive life of the Parisian poets, painters, philosophers and musicians, the picturesque fauna of the Latin Quarter, inspires the composer. The life lived by the composer at Torre del Lago reconstitutes the authentic French bohemian lifestyle of the French author from the 1830s."¹³ Puccini was indulging in the company of Tuscan painters and poets, making up a true "Bohemian Club", and in this lifestyle and in the description of poor artists, we find a sort of self-description or autobiographical fresco, taking a retrospective look at his student life in Milan.

The collection of stories entitled *Scènes de la vie de bohème* by Henry Murger was first published in the *Le Corsair-Satan* magazine - a publication edited by Gérard de Nerval -, during in the last years of the reign of the d'Orléans dynasty.¹⁴ The title's explanation is simple: "Bohème" was considered to be the region of the Gypsies, therefore, Murger's four characters were representatives of the Gypsy culture in Paris:¹⁵ young artists, whose imagination surpasses their talent and who would rather choose poverty than to accept the limitations of bourgeois existence. These four people are direct models for Puccini's characters: Rodolfo, a poet, writer and journalist; Marcello, the painter, who submits the same painting to the Louvre, each time with another title; Schaunard, the musician who recounts many adventures; and Colline, the philosopher, whose character is the most expressive.

Murger's female characters are also portrayed without an expression of sensitivity: Phémie, Schaunard's girlfriend, is portrayed as a woman of questionable morals, Marcello's Musette is a singer with a beautiful voice,

¹² *Idem*, p. 156.

¹³ Elena Andrieș-Moldovan, *Prototipuri feminine în creația pucciniană (Female Archetypes in Puccini's Oeuvre)*, chap. *Introducere (Introduction), Eternul feminin în creația pucciniană (Female Eternity in Puccini's Works)*, Mediamusica, Cluj-Napoca, 2007, (Author/s translation). The original text in Romanian: „Viața grotescă și înduioșătoare a poeților, pictorilor, filozofilor și muzicanților parizieni, fauna pitorescă a cartierului latin, îl inspiră pe compozitor. Viața pe care compozitorul o trăiește la Torre del Lago, reconstituie boema autentică de la 1830 a scriitorului francez.” p. 1.

¹⁴ *Idem*, p. 1.

¹⁵ *Idem*, p. 1.

but who sometimes sings off pitch, and is the muse of many men, however, even Rodolfo's Mimi is described as a young, beautiful and fragile girl, but if she gets bored or is indisposed, she gets rough and lacks affect. The female character Francine is not part of the play, she is just the subject of a story told by another character: she is a modest seamstress with a good heart, but who has tuberculosis. Francine's love story with a poor sculptor named Jacques is one of the very few dramatic moments of the work.

The success of the subject broached by Murger will ensue after the premiere of the play *La vie de bohème*, adapted with the Parisian playwright Théodore Barrière. The performance took place in 1849, at the *Théâtre des Variétés*.¹⁶ Obviously, the heroine is idealized: Mimi's character is refined by combining it with Francine's pure character, a model that will be adopted also by Illica, Giacosa and Puccini. The idea of self-description of the two main characters comes from Illica and is approved by the two coauthors; he borrows the idea of the first meeting between Francine and Jacques, which will result in the two famous arias of the first act: the tenor's *Che gelida manina* (Rodolfo) and the soprano's *Si, mi chiamano Mimi* (Mimi).

The world premiere of *La Bohème* took place on February 1, 1896, at the Teatro Regio in Torino¹⁷, exactly three years after the premiere of *Manon Lescaut*.¹⁸ The soprano Cesari Ferrari, who was the Manon's role creator for Manon Lescaut's world premiere, had accepted the composer's invitation the second time around and became Puccini's first Mimi.¹⁹ In addition to Cesari Ferrari, the cast of the premiere included also other famous singers of the time, such as Camilla Pasini (Musette), Evan Gorga (Rodolfo), Tieste Wilmant (Marcello), Michele Mazzora (Colline), Antonio Pini-Corsi (Schaunard), Alessandro Polonini (Benoit and Alcindoro) and Felice Foglia (Parpignol).²⁰ Ricordi ensures that the success of the work is equal or greater to that of the enormous success of Manon Lescaut, therefore, he introduced a new artist: the young conductor Arturo Toscanini.²¹

As always, the reaction was two-fold: while the audience was enchanted by this new type of music, the critics had a different opinion. However, the opinion of the latter group was not entirely without foundation.

¹⁶ Julian Budden, *Puccini*, chap. 6, *Bohémélet (La Bohème)*, Európa Könyvkiadó, Budapest, 2011, p. 157.

¹⁷ Tibor Fajth, Dr. Tamás Nádor, *Puccini, Szemtől szembe (Puccini – Face to Face)*, chap. *Puccini művei (Puccini's Works)*, Gondolat Könyvkiadó, Budapest, 1977, p. 290.

¹⁸ William Ashbrook, *Puccini Operái (Puccini's Operas)* chap. 3, *A három nagy mű. A Bohémélet, a Tosca és a Pillangókisasszony („Three Immense Works. La Bohème, Tosca and Madama Butterfly”)*, Zeneműkiadó, Budapest, 1974, p. 69.

¹⁹ *Idem*, p. 69.

²⁰ *Idem*, p. 69-70.

²¹ *Ibidem*.

The disappointment of the critics can be also understood: firstly, the Teatro Regio's season opened on December 22, 1895, with *Götterdämmerung*, a three-act opera by Richard Wagner, shortly before the premiere of *La Bohème*. It is not surprising that after such a complex opera, Puccini's music seemed to be "poorer" to the critics, especially as they previously found numerous "Wagnerian musical motifs" reinterpreted by Puccini in *Manon Lescaut*. In contrast to *Manon Lescaut*, the music of *La Bohème* does not allude to Wagner at all.²² Secondly, while the cast was made up of well-known performers, some of them were not prepared properly for taking on such roles.²³ Thirdly, another reason that helps us understand why it was an initial "failure" is that the score of the opera was not entirely finished, honed and polished; the final version of the work – the one we all know and the one what is performed today – was later reworked by the composer himself.²⁴

3. Innovative Language and Style

3.1. The Opera's Tempo, Rhythm, and the Composer's Instructions

In terms of tempo and rhythm, as with every musical work, they are the basic elements of that piece of music's character. In the case of Puccini's operas, the tempo is a constant dramatic element of musical discourse. An "incorrect" tempo, meaning a too swift or too slow tempo required from the conductor or the performers, can change the music's character – to either descriptive or emotional -, the atmosphere or dramatic message conceived by the composer. Within Puccini's operas, the tempo changes quite frequently, therefore, in order to convincingly interpret the work, both the orchestra and the singers must be able to be naturally flexible, while remaining professional. The indications set forth by the composer refer not only to tempo, but are more complex, since they are very specific musically and as pertaining to the storyline, and rhetoric. In this sense, Puccini's genius is noticed in the way he adapts the concept of tempo into a generally valid style of verismo: "equating musical time with biological time of actual spoken utterance."²⁵ In order to illustrate this flexible and natural method, I chose three musical examples not only from *La Bohème*, but also from *Madama Butterfly* and *Tosca*.

²² *Idem*, p. 70-71.

²³ *Idem*, The tenor had great difficulties with the vocal requirements for the role, and Marcello was replaced almost in the last moment, since the previous singer was inadequate. p. 71.

²⁴ *Idem*, p. 71.

²⁵ *Idem*, p. 71.

The *Si, mi chiamano Mimi* aria from the first act of *La Bohème*, can be structured in three sections (with an external extension) from the standpoint of musical form. The third section is made up of 23 bars, in which the composer uses no less than 22 indications concerning musical expression and tempo. The basic tempo is *Andante sostenuto molto*, followed by several of the composer's indications: *con molto anima, tutta forza, con grande espansione, poco allargando, espressione intensa, ralletando, dolce, I. Tempo - Andante, con un po' d'agitazione, sostenendo, molto marcato, accentuato, allargando, tenuto, col canto, calmo come prima, I. Tempo - ma calmo, poco ritenuto, col canto, tempo, senza rigor di tempo, con naturalezza, rallentando*. Moreover, the palette of dynamic indications is just as rich, alternating frequently, and ranging from *ppp decrescendo* to *fortissimo (tutta forza)*. This richness of color, first of all, proves the suggestive creative genius of the composer, while on the other hand, requires the height of technical training and concentration for the singers, members of the orchestra and conductor alike.

The area ends with the above-mentioned external extension, which is actually a *recitativo secco* segment, of two bars, supported by a D major pedal point. At the level of the story, this recitative suggests Mimi's "defiance" towards her own boldness and passionate outburst with which she opened herself up to a stranger. She says, "I have nothing else to say about myself. I am your neighbor, disturbing you at this unsuitable hour." The composer's indication regarding the tempo is *senza rigore di tempo, con naturalezza*, meaning its interpretation should be natural, uttered in a way that is as similar as possible to regular speech. This short fragment is a perfect example that illustrates the link between the composer's indications of tempo and rhythm, but also that of the proper way of pronouncing the words, which denotes a high-level of intelligence, rhetoric and know-how.

E. g. 1

Mimi

senza rigore di tempo
con naturalezza

rall.

Al-tro-di me non le sa-prei nar-ra-re: so-no la sua vi-ci-na che la vien fuo-ri d'o-ra aimpor-tu - na-re.

rall.

Excerpt from *La Bohème*, Act I.
The *Si, mi chiamano Mimi* aria, recitativo – Mimi

In contrast with *La Bohème*, the composer also uses the recitative in a style uniquely designed specifically for almost every opera, as shown in the final scene of *Tosca*: the female protagonist waits for everyone to leave, then signals Mario to get up, but he does not act according to the plan of the “directed execution”. Mario is shot to death, and Tosca - scared and desperate -, following a few cries, jumps off the roof of the castle into the abyss. These desperate shouts are marked by Puccini in a brilliant way, with numerous indications given, so that a proper interpretation can have a real effect on the audience, fully conveying the mindset of the character.

E. g. 2

(mentre si avvicina a Cavaradossi)
(quasi parlato)

TOSCA *p* Pre-sto, su! Ma-riol Ma-riol Su, presto! Andiam! *cresc.* (toccandolo turbata) (scuoprendolo) Su, su! Ma-riol

(grido) (con disperazione)

Ma-riol Ah! Mor-to! mor-to! mor-to! O

(frase spiro e singhiozzi) (gettandosi sul corpo di Cavaradossi)

Ma-riol... Mor-to? tu? co-si? Fi-nire co-si? fi-ni-re-co-

N. B. Per l'acustica, far gridare più soldati di quanti poi ne usciranno in scena.

(abbracciando la salma di Cavaradossi)

-sil Tu, mor-to, mor-to!

Excerpt from *Tosca*, Act III, final scene – Tosca

The *Un bel di vedremo* aria, sung by the opera's lead female character, is a crucial moment of the work, both from the point of view of the plotline and the character's psychology: the naive belief that her loved one will return, that he has not left her for a moment; she dreams, waiting for smoke to appear in the sky, signaling that a white ship will enter the harbor bringing home the one who was away.²⁶ The fabric of the aria and its register are high, combined with a medium one, loaded with a lot of text, whose interpretation resembles a *parlando rubato*, which does not merely illustrates simple speech, but references also the Japanese language, with its own accents and linguistic elements.

²⁶ Gabriela Constantinescu, Daniela Caraman-Fotea, Grigore Constantinescu, Iosif Sava – *Ghid de operă (Opera Guide)*, chap. *Madame Butterfly*, Editura Muzicală a Uniunii Compozitorilor, București, 1971.

E. g. 3

BUTT. 

BUTT. 

BUTT. 

BUTT. 

BUTT. 

Excerpt from *Madama Butterfly*,
Act II, The *Un bel di vedremo* aria – Cio-Cio-San

3.2. Orchestration, Vocal Elements and Melody

Puccini is “one of the few opera composers who[se work], if played with just with a piano and not with an orchestra loses most of what it originally wanted to convey and express. In Puccini’s work, the orchestra has a phenomenal capacity of conveying.”²⁷

²⁷ Tiberiu Soare, *Pentru ce mergem la operă? (Why do we go to the opera?)*, chap. 2. *Frumusețea ascunsă a lucrurilor de zi cu zi în opera <Boema> de Giacomo Puccini (The Hidden Beauty of Everyday Things in Puccini’s La Bohème)*, Fundația Calea Victoriei, București, 2007, (Author/s translation). The original text in Romanian: “...unul dintre puținii autori de operă care, dacă nu este interpretat cu orchestră, ci doar cu pian, pierde cea mai mare parte din ceea ce își dorea inițial să transmită și să exprime. La Puccini, orchestra are o capacitate de transmitere fenomenală.” p. 31.

The original and complex orchestration used by the composer plays a highly significant role in the relationship between dramatic context and characters. Due to the fact that Puccini's orchestra is a highly complex one – not only in terms of the number of musicians who form it, but also as it relates to the descriptive, dramatic and emotional aspects of the score – a constant problem may arise in properly calibrating and adapting it to the voices on stage. In certain interpretation, Puccini's orchestra is said to be the objective “mirror” of the storyline, thus developing the drama of the characters also in a subtle and subconscious way.²⁸ “The overlapping sound planes, the novel ways of attacking a note and of articulation, the timbre and the generous color palette explored at the level of the inner voices, in the direct relationship with the vocal text, represent an exposition fit for a master regarding the concept of vocal dramaturgy.”²⁹

On the topic of the particular type of orchestration used by the verist composer, there are certain innovative elements of composition that make the fabric of musical discourse to be an absolutely individual one, specific for Puccini's own style.

As in *Edgar*, and many other operas, the audience first hears the female character, and only then sees her, basing their first impression upon the orchestra. In *La Bohème*, for instance, Mimi's motif is interpreted by the clarinet - alongside the string instruments - as an introduction, a musical motif that remains a main trait of her melodic portrait. Here, the uncluttered melody appears in an augmented form, but suddenly becomes troubled and indecisive, by the use of a Wagnerian dominant in the area of the subdominant, suggesting weakness and disease.³⁰ Therefore, the essence of the character's whole being is concentrated in these two melodic elements, just after she appears on stage. Hence, just in a few bars, the composer emphasizes her two essential attributes: her naive charm and her illness.

²⁸ Sandu Vasile-Cristian, *Stilemele verismului în evoluția operei moderne (The Styles of Verismo in the Evolution of the Modern Opera – PhD Thesis)*, Teză de doctorat, conducător științific: prof. univ. dr. Eduard Terényi, chap. 5 *Verismul puccinian (Puccini's Verismo)*, Academia de Muzică „Gheorghe Dima”, Cluj-Napoca, 2009, p. 170.

²⁹ *Idem.* (Author/s translation). The original text in Romanian: „Planurile sonore suprapuse, modurile inedite de atac și articulație, timbralitatea și paleta coloristică generos explorată la nivelul vocilor interioare, în relația directă cu textul vocal, reprezintă o magistrală expunere a conceptului de dramaturgie vocală.” p. 170.

³⁰ Julian Budden, *Puccini*, chap. 6, *Bohémélet (La Bohème)*, Európa Könyvkiadó, Budapest, 2011, p. 188

the character's attitude, but also regarding the musical elements used. With the exception of Colline's aria *Vecchia zimarra* and Mimi's aria *Sono andati*, the entire scene is exclusively composed of motifs, leitmotifs and musical phrases previously used, the difference being that this time, the musical fabric, the orchestration is woven much finer. The musical discourse is a kind of a "re-exposition" of past events in the form of "recapitulated" motifs; the nostalgic character is interrupted in some cases by the lines of helpless friends, offering words of advice and encouragement. The conversation between characters is reduced to very short questions and answers, unfinished thoughts, as people tend to react in such situations. The maneuver to simplify and reduce the dialogue – one introduced by the two librettists and the composer – becomes the basic element used to escalate the tension, while the atmosphere becomes increasingly tragic. The replacement of the usual means of creating a dramatic atmosphere leading to a climax with such few words uttered becomes a leading element of verismo. Here are two examples of words uttered with the highest emotional level:

1. "Coraggio..." ("Courage...") uttered by Marcello when Rodolfo finds out that his lover is no longer breathing, as he is supported by his friends in perhaps the most difficult moment of his life. "The traditional *recitativo secco* of the Italian melodrama in Puccini's work makes way for a *parlando* – as though speaking or reciting –, in sharp contrast to Wagner's lyrical declamation."³¹

E.g. 5

MAR. LARGO SOSTENUTO con angoscia

(31) Coraggio...

LARGO SOSTENUTO

ff

fff tutta forza

Excerpt from *La Bohème*, Act IV, final scene – Marcello

³¹ Elena Andrieș-Moldovan, *Puccini. Adevărul unei vocații*, (*Puccini. A Vocation's Truth*), 2nd Part, chap. 1. *Elemente de atmosferă în opera pucciniană*, (*Atmospheric Elements in Puccini's Opera*), 1.1 *Aspecte ale melodicii pucciniene* (*Aspects of Puccini's melodies*), 1.1.1 *Parlando-ul puccinian* (*Puccini's Parlando*), Media Musica, Cluj-Napoca, 2007, (Author/s translation). The original text in Romanian: „Tradiționalul *recitativo secco* al melodramei italiene în creația lui Puccini face loc *parlando*-ului, termen al cărui echivalent românesc este de *vorbire muzicală*, spre deosebire de *declamația lirică* a lui Wagner.” p. 89.

2. The name of his loved one, “Mimi”, is repeatedly spoken by the leading male character as he approaches the bed of the dying young woman. This dramatic moment is a perfect example to illustrate the contrast between the “symphonic” style and the expressive force of rests. We are referring to a continuous musical discourse, “exactly what Wagner did in his works, but without imitating Wagner’s work one bit.”³² As opposed to a continuous, uninterrupted musical score, the existing rests have an expressive value. They are crucial, since they convey important emotions. Returning to the dramatic moment mentioned above, the complex fabric of the orchestra speaks for the character. This coda concentrates an entire tragedy in 11 bars. The whole orchestra plays with *tutta forza*, while the initial dynamic marking steadily decreases from *fff* to *ppp*, as this way of expressing the deepest of human feelings is typical for Puccini’s works. The fragment represents the most dramatic moment of the opera, and the culmination itself of the entire work. Instead of a long, poetic, wide-ranging musical discourse, Puccini tailors reality, as he lets an entire orchestra speak for the desperate character, instead concentrating the entirety of all human pain into two syllables: “Mi-mi”:

E. g. 6

The image shows a musical score excerpt from Puccini's *La Bohème*, Act IV, final scene, featuring Rodolfo. The score is written for voice and piano. The vocal line is in the upper staff, starting with the name 'Mimi.....' and marked '(piangendo)'. The piano accompaniment is in the lower staves, with a dynamic marking 'dim.' and a fermata over the final notes. The key signature is three sharps (F#, C#, G#) and the time signature is common time (C).

Excerpt from *La Bohème*, Act IV, final scene – Rodolfo

In Puccini’s music melody undoubtedly dominates, and is first and foremost placed in the vocal score. The melody of the opera is created in an Italian fashion, but with a modern structure, “close to a singing declamation, conceived in the spirit of the *continuous melody*, with spontaneous, natural

³² Tiberiu Soare, *Pentru ce mergem la operă? (Why do we go to the opera?)* chap. 2., *Frumusețea ascunsă a lucrurilor de zi cu zi în opera <Boema> de Giacomo Puccini (The Hidden Beauty of Everyday Things in Puccini’s La Bohème)*, Fundația Calea Victoriei, București, 2007, (Author/s translation). The original text in Romanian: „exact ceea ce a făcut Wagner în operele sale, dar fără a fi cătuși de puțin o imitație a operelor wagneriene din partea lui Puccini.” p. 37.

lines, using a wide range of ways, from singing to speech, from laughter to crying, from crying to... silence, brief sentimental confessions replacing long winded arias.”³³ Puccini’s vocal score is, in fact, a sublimation of melody on the dramatic background of the declamation itself. The continuous musical discourse is characteristic for his style, “approaching some of the principles of Wagner’s creation, such as the use of leading motifs, framed in a continuous declamation which sometimes reaches the level of sung and intonated speech, very similar to natural speech, attaining a kind of synthesis between *Spechstimme* and *Sprechgesang*, to great effect for the musical dramaturgy of his works.”³⁴ This type of “musical speech” couples two necessary extremes: the cantilena - the fluency and the lengthy unfolding of the romantic phrase – and the impetuosity, vocal effects and timbre inflections of the spoken voice.³⁵ It is hard to think of a melodic subject that is not sung. Puccini’s melodies generally contain narrow range melodies, as in, the themes are gradually ascending or descending, using close intervals. We find countless examples for this specific approach in the work’s score.

There are very few melodic lines in *La Bohème* that are made up of large intervals; we will find most of them in Musette’s score. Generally, Puccini’s large intervals are used to highlight the scene’s dramatic intensity; such is the case of *Tosca*, when in Act III the lead female character retells the story of killing Scarpia. As far as *La Bohème* is concerned, these musical motifs that include large intervals express Musette’s desire to be at the center of attention, as in, for example, in “Vien, Lulu”:

E. g. 7



Excerpt from *La Bohème*, Act II – Musette

³³ Vasile Iliuț, Anamaria Călin, *O carte a stilurilor muzicale (The Book of Musical Styles)*, vol. III, chap. *Giacomo Puccini*, Editura Muzicală, București, 2011, (Author/s translation). The original text in Romanian: „apropiată de declamația cântată, gândită în spiritul *melodiei continue*, cu replici date spontane, firesc și natural, utilizându-se o foarte variată gamă de modalități, de la cânt la vorbire, de la răs la plâns, de la strigăt la... tăcere, locul ariilor ample fiind luat de scurte mărturisiri sentimentale.” p. 244.

³⁴ *Idem.* (Author/s translation). The original text in Romanian: „apropiindu-se de unele principii de creație wagneriene, ca, de pildă, folosirea unor motive conducătoare, încadrate într-o declamație continuă ce uneori atinge nivelul vorbirii cântate și intonate, foarte apropiată de firescul exprimării, realizând un fel de sinteză între *spechstimme* și *sprechgesang*, de mare efect în dramaturgia muzicală a operelor sale.” p. 243.

³⁵ Julian Budden, *Puccini*, chap. 6 *Bohémélet (La Bohème)*, Európa Könyvkiadó, Budapest, 2011, p. 188.

The melodies have a diatonic character, while Puccini uses ascending lines in this opera, which often anticipate a broken chord:



E. g. 8

Excerpt from *La Bohème*, Act II – Mimi



E. g. 9

Excerpt from *La Bohème*, Act III, The *Donde lieta* aria – Mimi



E. g. 10

Excerpt from *La Bohème*, Act III – Mimi

The abovementioned examples only contain ascending passages (broken chords), however, here is a well-known musical phrase – of a diatonic melody –, that is the beginning of *Musette's waltz*, beginning with a descending line in E major:



E. g. 11

Excerpt from *La Bohème*, Act II, *Musette's Waltz*

3.3 Motifs, Symbols and Hidden Metaphors

Regarding the question of the balance of the opera's score, the most obvious answer is found in the analysis of the relationship between the first act and the last one. The action takes place in the same location – in the attic. Rodolfo and Marcello are both on stage when the curtain rises in both acts.

However, the structure and logic of the work is much more complex. The most common element in the whole work is the cold, being associated with several contexts, such as poverty, solitude, disease and death. Heat, spring, joy and love are just antitheses that appear in the form of dreams or figments of imagination. For example, in Mimi's self-characterization, she talks about the season she longs after – spring, about the cold making way for the first rays of sunshine.

Another literary motif - which is somewhat hidden – making it not always as obvious to the public – is the moon: towards the end of Act I, Mimi appears in the moonlight, which may suggest the one hand the delicate nature of a woman in love, while on the other hand symbolizing melancholy and ending. Generally speaking, directors place the first scene with moonlight in contrast with Act IV: here, Rodolfo strives to cast a shadow over Mimi, since she is in the sunlight.

We can find these hidden motifs, symbols and metaphors in the extremely rich libretto written by Illica and Giaccosa. For example, the text of the *Addio* aria of Act III includes some crucial symbols, such as the gold ring, the prayer book and Mimi's hat, three elements that boil down the whole essence of the complex drama: faithfulness, faith and eternal love, all mirrored in reality, when the girl realizes she will die.

The third section (C) of the aforementioned aria is carried out in an *Andante molto sostenuto* tempo and has a spectacular vocal fabric, this section being the culmination of the entire aria in terms of the character's state of mind, but also at the level of portrayal. The melody begins with *pp*, then, as it progresses, it bursts into *ff*, as it comes to the image of the spring kiss. The climax is reached gradually with a descending line. The orchestral score is dense: alongside the chords used in the form of a rhythmic pedal, the orchestra doubles also the soprano's melodic line. "Through the ample sinusoidal profile of the melodic line, section C of the aria offers the soprano the opportunity to fully engage her vocal timbre and range."³⁶ It is a defining moment for Mimi, her being a fiery human being,

³⁶ Elena Andrieș Moldovan, *Prototipuri feminine în creația pucciniană (Female Archetypes in Puccini's Oeuvre)*, chap. *Mimi – personajul principal feminin al operei „La bohème” (Mimi – Female Protagonist of the Opera La Bohème), Aria lui Mimi din actul I. (nr. 35) – analiza*

eager to live, full of love, and especially hope, these traits being conveyed through the metaphor of spring and nature's rebirth.

A similar fragment where the helplessness of man is dominant is the continuation of the previous aria, namely the duet between Mimi and Rodolfo in Act III, in which the style device of parallels prevail among the two pairs: Mimi – Rodolfo and Musette – Marcello. The intense lyrical and dramatic musical discourse is suddenly interrupted by Musette's cry, followed by a quarrel with Marcello, a dialogue about trivial problems, which becomes grotesque in this context. The two pairs are in high contrast: on one hand, Musette and Marcello represent the pole of simple love with deep feelings but with a light tone, and on the other hand the contrasting pole, the relationship between Mimi and Rodolfo, which embodies eternal love, filled with pain and agonizing human emotions.

This contrast is carried out brilliantly not only in terms of the dramaturgy, but also at a musical level, Puccini thus creating increasing degrees of tension: in contrast with the everyday matters of Musette and Marcello – who become grotesque in this context – Mimi and Rodolfo's confrontation with reality becomes increasingly dramatic. The contrast between the two pairs is confirmed by the librettists and the composer, by their use of the words and expressions spoken by Musette and Marcello, uttered to each other in *parlando*, such as: *pittore da bottega* ("Wall painter"), *vipera* ("shrew"), and *rospo* ("frog").

In conclusion, taking into account all these points of view we can state that verist opera music is similar to that of impressionism, but also expressionism, not necessarily from the perspective of sound, but especially in terms of the "roughness and the brutality of resolving dramatic conflicts."³⁷ Thus, Italian verismo, alongside Giacomo Puccini, represents – as part of the European stylistic ensemble of the first decades of the 20th century – an "original solution to overcoming the impasse of traditional European Romanticism"³⁸, while at the same time opening a new perspective towards new paths.

Translated from Romanian by Juliánna Köpeczi

interpretativă, (Mimi's aria from the 1st Act – interpretative analyse), Mediamusica, Cluj-Napoca, 2007, (Author/s translation). The original text in Romanian: „Prin profilul sinusoidal amplu a liniei melodice secțiunea C a ariei oferă sopranei posibilitatea de a-și valorifica în totalitate consistența timbrală a vocii.” p. 23.

³⁷ Vasile Iliuț, Anamaria Călin, *O carte a stilurilor muzicale (The Book of Musical Styles)*, vol. III, chap. *Giacomo Puccini*, Editura Muzicală, București, 2011, (Author/s translation). The original text in Romanian: „duritatea și brutalitatea rezolvării conflictelor dramatice.”, p. 247.

³⁸ *Idem*, p. 247.

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