



1999

# A Fragment from Act II of Giacomo Puccini's La Boheme

Linda B. Fairtile

*University of Richmond*, [lfairtil@richmond.edu](mailto:lfairtil@richmond.edu)

Follow this and additional works at: <http://scholarship.richmond.edu/university-libraries-publications>



Part of the [Music Commons](#), and the [Performance Studies Commons](#)

---

## Recommended Citation

Fairtile, Linda B. "A Fragment from Act II of Giacomo Puccini's La Boheme." In *The Rosaleen Moldenhauer Memorial: Music from Primary Sources*, edited by Jon Newsom, 358-366. Washington, D.C.: Library of Congress, 1999.

This Book Chapter is brought to you for free and open access by the University Libraries at UR Scholarship Repository. It has been accepted for inclusion in University Libraries Faculty and Staff Publications by an authorized administrator of UR Scholarship Repository. For more information, please contact [scholarshiprepository@richmond.edu](mailto:scholarshiprepository@richmond.edu).

# A Fragment from Act II of Giacomo Puccini's *La Bohème*

Linda B. Fairtile

GIACOMO PUCCINI'S FOURTH OPERA, *La Bohème*, is the work which reflects his reaching full compositional maturity. After the completion of *Manon Lescaut* in 1892, Puccini considered setting either Giovanni Verga's short story, *La Lupa*, or Henry Murger's novel, *Scènes de la Vie de Bohème*. For a time, it appears that he favored the Verga work, and even visited the author in Catania to observe Sicilian culture firsthand. However, in July of 1894, Puccini expressed his doubts about the suitability of *La Lupa* to his publisher, Giulio Ricordi, and turned his attention exclusively to *Scènes de la Vie de Bohème*.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> According to Mosco Carner, *Puccini: A Critical Biography*, 3rd ed. (London: Duckworth, 1992), p. 77, it was Contessa Blandine Gravina, Cosima Wagner's daughter by her first marriage to Hans von Bülow, who, during a chance meeting with Puccini, may have convinced the composer of the inappropriateness of an operatic *La Lupa*.

However, the librettist and composer Ruggero Leoncavallo had also discovered Murger's novel. Amid charges and countercharges of literary theft, the two composers set to work. Puccini's trips to supervise productions of *Manon Lescaut*, as well as his relentless, if often expedient, interference with the efforts of his librettists for *La Bohème*, Giuseppe Giacosa and Luigi Illica, delayed the completion of the libretto until August 1894. Puccini then began a compositional draft, notating complete vocal lines and a sketch of the accompaniment material.<sup>2</sup> Drawing upon previous compositions, such as his *Capriccio sinfonico* and sketches for *La Lupa*, in addition to creating new material, Puccini's progress at this stage was rapid. Still, constant revision of the libretto caused many delays. A note in the autograph full score of the opera, now at the Ricordi Archive in Milan, reveals that the composer refined and orchestrated Act I from January 21 to June 6, 1895; he dated Acts II to IV July 19, September 18, and December 10, 1895, respectively. Although in no apparent hurry, Puccini finished his *La Bohème* fifteen months ahead of Leoncavallo.

<sup>2</sup> Arthur Groos and Roger Parker, *Giacomo Puccini: "La Bohème"* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), pp. 102–14, contains a detailed discussion of the composer's work habits.

Many critics attending the premiere of Puccini's *La Bohème* on February 1, 1896, compared it unfavorably with the

phenomenally successful *Manon Lescaut*. In the *Gazzetta Piemontese*, the critic Carlo Bersezio termed the work “a momentary error” and “a brief deviation from the path of art.”<sup>3</sup> Alfredo Colombani, of the *Corriere della Sera*, offered a more prescient opinion:

the improvement in workmanship is most noticeable. The melodic material displays the same origin, but here one finds it purified, made noble. Violence and brutality are diminished, perorations and bombastic phrases are less frequent, the search for effects is better camouflaged, and the music flows, swift and agile, now sprightly, now anguished...<sup>4</sup>

Today, Puccini's *La Bohème* is one of the most beloved works in the operatic repertory. At the Metropolitan Opera, it ranks second in number of performances behind Verdi's *Aida*. Leoncavallo's version of *La Bohème*, completed in 1897, is all but forgotten.

This manuscript transmits ten measures from the so-called “Sextet” in the opera's second act, corresponding to pages 207 (measure 2) through 210 (measure 1) of the current published orchestral score. The passage forms part of the middle section of a tripartite structure that begins and ends with the renowned “Musetta's Waltz” (“Quando m'en vo”). At this point in the plot, the inhabitants of Paris's Latin Quarter, gathering to celebrate Christmas Eve at the Cafe Momus, witness the spectacle of Musetta's successful attempt to win back her lover. The section as a whole presented a problem for Puccini's librettists, who had to reconcile its function as the old-fashioned, static set piece of the act with the composer's demands for picturesque “episodes” to aid characterization. Such problems were indicative of this collaboration, with the seasoned dramatist (Illica) and the sensitive poet (Giacosa) on the one hand, and Puccini, the demanding composer, on the other.

The manuscript is an earlier version of pages 77–78 of the autograph full score of *La Bohème*, Act II. It is on the same type of paper that Puccini used for pages 1–14 and 67–106 of the second act, containing twenty-two staves with preprinted

<sup>3</sup> “l'errore di un momento”; “un breve traviamiento dal cammino dell'arte” cited by Eugenio Gara, ed., *Carteggi Pucciniani* (Milan: G. Ricordi & C., 1958), p. 141.

<sup>4</sup> il miglioramento nella fattura è sensibilissimo. Il materiale melodico risente della medesima origine, ma si ritrova qui purificato, nobilizzato. Sono diminuite la violenza e la brutalità, sono meno frequenti le perorazioni e le frasi ampollose, più mascherate le ricerche di effetto, e la musica corre lesta e agile, ora briosa, ora straziante...Cited by Eugenio Gara, op. cit., p. 141.

instrumental designations and six unlabeled vocal staves. There is, however, no evidence that the composer tore this manuscript page from the autograph. Puccini sent his scores to Ricordi in sections, often only a few gatherings at a time, and some time later, Ricordi employees bound the gatherings into volumes. It seems likely that Puccini replaced this manuscript page with the current pages 77–78 of the autograph score before sending the materials to Ricordi.

A secondary document suggests a continuation of the story. Included with the manuscript is a small fragment of the same type of music paper, which transmits three inscriptions. The first, “Villa del Castellaccio-Pescia,” in an unknown hand, refers to the estate where Puccini had been a guest from June through November of 1895, orchestrating Acts II to IV of *La Bohème*. The second inscription, in a different hand, identifies the manuscript’s contents as “Sestetto / della Bohème / quartier latino,” and begins an incomplete statement of location and date, “Villa del Castellaccio a.” This second inscription also includes the cryptic phrase “Scapaccione sul Collo,” literally, a smack on the neck such as one might give a disobedient child.<sup>5</sup> Finally, Puccini himself completed the date statement with “di 4. 7. 95 / Ore di notte / mezza id” and drew a vertical line to separate the “Sestetto” and “Scapaccione” inscriptions. The date July 4, 1895, places the note within the time that Puccini worked on the orchestration of the opera’s second act. The identification of music and geographical location suggests that Puccini presented the rejected page to someone at the villa, possibly his host, Count Bartolini. However, if the composer did consider the manuscript and accompanying note to be mementos, it is curious that neither bears his signature.

The manuscript reveals aspects of Puccini’s compositional practice. During the orchestration phase, he apparently copied complete vocal lines from the draft, polished them, and only then wove the orchestral fabric from the sketched accompaniment. Evidence of this procedure surfaces in measure seven of the manuscript, where rhythmic figures in the vocal parts show heavy revision, while similar material appears, accurate and unedited, in the orchestral accompaniment.

<sup>5</sup> Manlio Cortelazzo and Paolo Zolli, eds., *Dizionario etimologico della lingua italiana*, vol. 5 (Bologna: Zanichelli, 1988), p. 1143, transmit an 1836 definition of the word “scapaccione”: “blow delivered with the open hand to the back of the head” (“colpo dato con la mano aperta sulla parte posteriore del capo”). Giacomo Devoto and Gian Carlo Oli, eds., *Il dizionario della lingua italiana* (Florence: Felice Le Monnier, 1990), p. 1706, add a disciplinary aspect: “slap delivered between the head and neck, usually as a means of paternal punishment” (“schiaffo dato tra capo e collo, di solito come provvedimento di punizione paterna”).

On the first page of the manuscript, Puccini labeled the blank vocal staves in descending order of range, with the names “Musetta” (soprano), “Mimi” (soprano), “Rodolfo” (tenor), and “Colline” (bass). Ending with Colline, the bass of the ensemble, suggests that the composer had originally specified only four voices on this page. He then changed “Colline” to “Alcindoro,” a higher bass role, before adding the baritone “Sch[aunard],” and replacing Colline at the bottom of the now six-part vocal texture. Page 2 of the manuscript presents a different situation, while providing a clue to Puccini’s notational practice. After designating staves for Musetta, Mimi, and Rodolfo, the composer again inserted Alcindoro, this time just beneath Musetta. The parts for Mimi and Rodolfo were then shifted down a line, followed by those for Schaubard and Colline. However, it appears that Puccini also obliterated one measure of Mimi’s vocal line to free her staff for Alcindoro. This suggests that the composer wrote out at least partial vocal lines before he had laid out the entire texture. The treatment of Alcindoro on both of the manuscript pages implies that his presence may have been a late decision, not covered in vocal drafts of the passage.

In addition, Puccini appears to have altered both the text and music of several vocal lines in the manuscript. Although by this time the composer had a completed libretto in hand, measures 5 through 8 of Musetta’s line reveal drastic textual revisions, from the visible fragments “sarà mio, è vinto / ah...è vinto” to “So ben le angoscie tue / e non le vuoi dir! / ah...ma ti senti morir.” It may have been these changes in text, disrupting both syllabification and rhyme scheme, which demanded a complete rewriting of the vocal line on collettes pasted over measures 5 and 8. Rodolfo’s “E’ fiacco amore” in measure 5 has become “E’ fiacco amor quel che le,” and it is possible that Puccini changed the two eighth notes to four sixteenths to accommodate the addition of syllables.<sup>6</sup> By contrast, in measures 7 and 8, Colline’s text changed from “Chi fa quel che avverrà” (which rhymed with Schaubard’s “Marcello cederà”) to “Mi piaccion assai più,” a variant of his text in measure 5, with no resultant change to the vocal line.

<sup>6</sup> Clearly, the omission of the syllable “of-” at the end of the measure 5 was an oversight, since the following measure (the first of page two) begins with the word’s concluding syllables, “-fese.”

Two vocal revisions notated on the manuscript pages seem to reinforce musical and dramatic distinctions between the





opera's female roles. The removal of Mimi's octave leap in the first measure, a minor third below Musetta's, strengthens each character's individuality, while the suppression of vocal material for Musetta two measures later (traces of which are visible through a collette) leaves Mimi as the lone female voice in that phrase.<sup>7</sup>

<sup>7</sup> Since Henry Murger's novel, *Scènes de la vie de Bohème*, trans. Elizabeth Ward Hagus, introd. D. B. Wyndham Lewis (New York: Dodd Mead and Co., 1930), portrays Musetta and Mimi as virtually interchangeable, with Musetta perhaps receiving the more sympathetic characterization, Puccini's attempts to distinguish them are all the more significant.

Still other alterations affect text setting. Puccini changed the rhythm of Colline's "cieco" in measure 3 from a jarring eighth-quarter to a smoother quarter-quarter pattern. Rather than improve the text setting, the change to Schaunard's and Colline's vocal lines in measure 5 accents insignificant syllables: "stupenda è *la* commedia" and "ma piaccion mi *assai* più." Deleted notes in the following measure suggest that Puccini may have planned to relieve this awkwardness by assigning still higher pitches to the more appropriately stressed syllables "-me-" and "più." However, since his original choice of high E was not consonant with Musetta's vocal line, the composer substituted lower pitches for Schaunard and Colline, relying on downbeat emphasis alone to highlight the proper syllables.

Corresponding pages of the autograph score of *La Bohème* reveal that Puccini rewrote vocal lines after he rejected this manuscript. Rodolfo's music underwent the greatest change: in measure 3, the response "Mimi" replaced his "T'amo" in unison with Mimi. In addition, Musetta's "non le vuoi dir" (measure 6) now has a characteristically coquettish setting, complete with grace notes. Other alterations are minor: Mimi's "T'amo" (measure 3) ends on an eighth note rather than a quarter to make room for Rodolfo's new entrance, her text in measure 6 is distributed more smoothly over the existing rhythmic structure, and Musetta's first note in measure 5 has become an eighth note rather than a sixteenth.

Certain changes in the orchestral portions of the manuscript reflect alterations in the vocal lines. Collets pasted over the parts of the flutes and oboes in measure 5 reflect changes in Musetta's part, as do the rewritten viola and cello lines in measure 6 and the new clarinet figure inserted on the trombone line in measure 8. Other modifications reinforce the original orchestration. In the first two measures, Puccini



rewrote the downbeat eighth notes in the viola and cello parts so that they now double the harp line. In measure five, a doubling of the clarinet line covers up the original horn material, while in the following bar Puccini appears to have rewritten horns two through four to conform with the rhythm of the first horn. Octave doubling in the first violins (measures 7 and 8) has disappeared, so that the entire section plays in unison. Puccini's revoicing of the parallel triads in measure 2 reflects a more daring alternative: originally, flutes and oboes each played both the third and the fifth of the triad, while the clarinets covered the root and third. In Puccini's revision, the oboes play in parallel fifths instead.

In measure 4, the second oboe and second clarinet now join the violins and violas in shadowing the vocal line, while the harp and violas have been modified to provide support a sixth below. The manuscript contains a single instance of orchestrational reduction: the elimination of the horn and bassoon chord that had doubled the harp and lower strings on the final beat of measure 4. Other changes include octave transposition (flute, measures 1 and 6).

The orchestral portions of the autograph score differ from this manuscript chiefly in terms of heavier orchestration and in reflecting changes made in the vocal lines. In the autograph score, the bass clarinet ("clarone") plays throughout the passage, save measures 7 and 8.<sup>8</sup> The horns in measure 1 are given a complete triad, rather than a single note, although its duration is now a full beat shorter than the original. The composer added piccolo to measures 5 and 6, while altering the flutes to conform with Musetta's new vocal line. Timpani strokes now appear in measures 4, 6, and 8, and numerous errors in English horn transposition (measures 1, 3, 4, and 8) have been corrected.

<sup>8</sup> In the manuscript, the bass clarinet is apparently pitched in B-flat, while in the autograph it is in A.

The manuscript is less detailed than the autograph score in terms of dynamics and articulation markings. However, it was customary for Puccini to add the bulk of these markings at an even later stage, on the page proofs of the published score. Compared to the first published orchestral score of *La Bohème* (plate number 99010, dated 1898), this manuscript is inconsistent in its notation of dynamic indications,

articulations, and phrase markings. Most tempo-related markings that appear in the published score are not present in the manuscript: “poco rall.” in measures 4 and 7 (although a “poco allargando” does appear over the vocal lines in this bar), “a tempo” in measures 5 and 8, and “a tempo cres. ed incalz. un poco” in measure 9 are all missing.

It is likely that Puccini rejected this manuscript page because of its appearance. Corresponding pages in the autograph, often equally disorderly, reveal that the composer had several changes of heart after the preparation of this manuscript. He may have decided that the heavily edited page could not support further modification, and turned instead to a fresh sheet of paper. However, the presence of collets on the manuscript suggests that Puccini probably had, at one point, considered it a fair copy.