



GLYNDEBOURNE
EDUCATION

Opera Experience



La bohème

Giacomo Puccini

*An opera in four acts
Libretto by Luigi Illica and
Giuseppe Giacosa based on
Henry Mürger's 'Scènes de
la vie de Bohème'*

First performed in Turin,
February 1896

Written by Glyndebourne Education
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La bohème



Preparing for a workshop

This pack contains information about the basic storyline and characters of *La bohème* - it would be useful for your students to know something of this before the workshop. The entire pack will not take long to read.

Breaks and refreshments

There will be a break of approximately 30 minutes during the workshop, and about one hour and 45 minutes between workshop and performance at the theatre.

Please ensure that the students bring drinks, snacks and a packed meal as food and refreshments will not be available.

Parking

Please allow adequate time for parking before a workshop as workshops must start promptly (please make sure you check the start time of your workshop)

Information

Students below year 10 should not attend the workshop.

If you would like further information, please contact Glyndebourne Education on 01273 815023 or email tessa.chisholm@glyndebourne.com

What will happen in a workshop



Many of the students who will attend our workshops have never been to see an opera before. The workshop will serve as an introduction to opera itself as well as the specific opera to be seen that evening.

The afternoon will consist of:

Warm up activities

Musical exercises

Dramatic exercises

Listening to singers from GOT Company

Discussing the opera

By the end of the workshop, the students will be ready to see and hear and enjoy the opera with genuine understanding.

Students should wear comfortable clothes suitable for physical activities (if you would like to please bring a change of clothes for the evening performance).

La bohème

Characters

Mimi

A beautiful, frail (and consumptive) seamstress. Lives downstairs from the boys. Not very good with matches.

Soprano

Rodolfo

A young, naive, romantic writer. Desperate to meet "the one", who (conveniently) turns out to be Mimi, the girl from downstairs.

Tenor

Marcello

A fiery and quick-tempered painter, more open with his emotions than Rodolfo and more fun loving and practical.

Baritone

Musetta

A fiery and passionate shop-girl. Cut from the same cloth as Marcello and strongly contrasted with Mimi's demure and quiet nature. Her stormy relationship with Marcello is constantly contrasted with the everlasting love of Rodolfo and Mimi.

Soprano

Colline

A philosopher. Owner of an outrageously furry coat.

Bass

Schaunard

A musician currently in the employ of an Englishman's parrot.

Baritone

Benoit

The boys' nerdy, sleazy landlord.

Bass

Alcindoro

Musetta's wealthy "patron" - foolishly thinks he can possess her with enough money.

Bass

Parpignol

Less-than-legal toy salesman.

Tenor

Chorus

Made up of students, working girls, shop keepers, street vendors, citizens, children, waiters, soldiers, customs officers etc.

La bohème

Overview

A bunch of artistically-inclined lads live together in a dump of an apartment in Paris, much preferring getting drunk to doing anything which might earn them some money. It's Christmas Eve and when one of the gang earns a windfall they decide to go out to Café Momus to celebrate, leaving the writer Rodolfo in the garret. This proves to be very timely, for no sooner have the boys left, than Mimi, the beautiful and sickly girl from downstairs comes to ask for a light for her candle. Fumbling in the dark, their hands meet and the youngsters fall in love.



At the Café, we meet the feisty Musetta, who used to go out with Marcello, the artist of the group. Their love is still alive and and she leaves her current rich patron for Marcello.

Months later, we find that Rodolfo has grown increasingly jealous and, more seriously, is worried about Mimi's health, which he fears is deteriorating. However, he is unable to break up and they agree to stay together until the spring.

Spring comes around and the boys are all on their own again until their laddish antics are interrupted by the arrival of Musetta and Mimi who is dying. Sadly, none of their efforts to save her come to much, and Mimi dies of consumption (tuberculosis), leaving Rodolfo in agony.

Act One

Christmas Eve in a garret in the Latin Quarter of Paris.

In desperate straits, the poet Rodolfo and his flatmate Marcello decide to burn Rodolfo's latest play in an extreme effort to keep warm. As they do this, they talk and joke about the problems of love. Colline, a philosopher, joins them - he's equally broke, having failed to pawn some of his books. Christmas is looking very bleak until Schaunard the musician enters, miraculously loaded with firewood and provisions bought with the money he earned playing the piano to an eccentric Englishman's parrot...

The boys are on their way out of the garret to celebrate when their landlord, Benoit, enters demanding overdue rent. Plying him with drink and asking about his love life, they pretend to be outraged at his lecherous confessions and throw him out (without handing over any cash).

Job done, Marcello, Colline and Schaunard head off to the Café Momus, leaving Rodolfo behind who promises to catch them up when he has finished an article he is writing. Just as he settles down to work, he hears a timid knock at the door. He opens it to find Mimi, the girl who lives downstairs, in search of a light for her candle. She is weak and dizzy and seized with a fit of coughing. Rodolfo revives her with a glass of wine.

As she's about to leave, she discovers she has lost her door key. A draught blows her candle out again, and as luck would have it, Rodolfo's is also extinguished. Groping in the darkness, Rodolfo finds the key and slips it into his pocket. He innocently bumps into Mimi and finds her hand, which is freezing cold. As he caresses it he tells her about his hopes and dreams. She in turn talks about her simple life as an embroiderer.

Rodolfo's friends shout up at him from the street; he opens the window and yells his reply - he will join them shortly. But in the moonlight, Rodolfo is overcome with Mimi's beauty. Suddenly and rapturously (this is an opera after all), the two of them fall in love. Leaving the garret arm in arm they head for the café.

Act Two

Café Momus, later the same evening.

Paris is bustling. Rodolfo buys Mimi a bonnet and introduces her to his friends. Their general high spirits are somewhat dampened however, by the spectacular arrival of Marcello's former lover, Musetta, in the company of her new protector, a rich pompous old gentleman called Alcindoro.

However, Musetta is a good time girl. Tired of Alcindoro's tedious attentions, she proceeds to provocatively attract Marcello's attention. Screaming that her foot is pinched she sends Alcindoro off to buy her a new pair of shoes. Unfettered, she approaches Marcello who melts.

The Bohemians' bill arrives and Musetta tells the waiter to add it to Alcindoro's. So as a military band marches past the friends race off together, leaving poor Alcindoro with the bill, a pair of unwanted shoes and without Musetta.

Act Three

The Barriere D'Enfer, a tollgate on the outskirts of Paris, two months later.

It is dawn -street sweepers and peasants file through the tollgate, while others are still drinking in the tavern. Mimi is looking for Marcello, who is currently living at the Tavern with Musetta. She implores Marcello's help and advice - how can she stop Rodolfo's irrational anger and jealousy? Marcello can only advise her, reluctantly, to separate from him.

Rodolfo, who has spent the night at the tavern, comes out and Mimi hides. He tells Marcello that he wants to leave Mimi, saying that she's fickle and unfaithful. However, Marcello presses him and he admits that his real concern is that she has consumption and that the poverty in which they live is killing her.

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Synopsis

Another of Mimi's consumptive coughing fits betrays her presence. She has heard it all and realises for the first time just how ill she is. Marcello leaves the lovers alone and sadly Mimi bids Rodolfo farewell. But their love is of the eternal variety and they agree to stay together until spring. Whilst this touching reunion takes place outside, inside the tavern, Musetta and Marcello resume their rather hostile noisier arguing and Musetta sweeps out in a rage.

Act Four

The garret, the following spring.

Marcello is back at his easel, Rodolfo at his desk and things would seem to have returned to how they were at the start of the story - only they are both still occupied with Musetta and Mimi, who have been spotted with wealthy admirers.

Schaunard and Colline enter with some bread and a herring. A riotous mock banquet, dance and duel ensue. Then Musetta bursts in: she has brought Mimi with her and it is very clear that she is dying. To raise some cash for medicine and a doctor, Musetta gives Marcello her earrings and tells him to sell them; she goes in search of a muff to keep Mimi warm. In an emotional outpouring Colline decides to pawn his overcoat.

Left alone in the garret, Mimi and Rodolfo recall happier days and reassure each other of their love. But though the others return with medicine it is too late, and Mimi's life ebbs quietly away leaving Rodolfo devastated and heart broken.



La bohème

Giacomo Puccini

(b. Lucca, Italy, December 22, 1858; d. Brussels, November 11, 1924)

Puccini's music often comes under attack from critics who find it manipulative and shallow, giving the audience what it wants. Perhaps this is why for the last century his operas have been so consistently popular...

Auspicious beginnings...

Puccini was born into a long line of musicians and was greatly encouraged to pursue music from an early age. In 1880 he entered the Milan Conservatory, where he was strongly encouraged to move from the world of church music to the stage. After years of frustration and failed performances, Puccini produced his first successful opera, *Manon Lescaut*. By the time his next work, *La bohème* was given its premiere in 1896, he was Italy's most talked-about-musician.

Bohemian Like You...

However, this box-office hit was not Puccini's original choice of subject matter. He had in fact begun work on another novel. But in March 1893, just a month after the first performance of *Manon Lescaut*, Puccini chanced to meet fellow Italian composer Ruggero Leoncavallo in a café in Milan. He was well aware that Leoncavallo was already working on a new opera based on Henry Mürger's *Scènes de la vie Bohème* (Scenes of a Bohemian Life), and perhaps this knowledge wickedly led Puccini to express his own interest an opera based on the book. Leoncavallo was understandably put out (he had in fact previously offered the libretto, the words for the opera, to Puccini who had rejected it). Thus began a public rivalry - the press soon caught onto the rift and the quarrel continued in the public gaze. Both men did indeed eventually write an opera called *La bohème* - but it is Puccini's, which remains to this day the successor of the contest.

Just what makes it so good?

No matter what the critics say, Puccini's popularity is thoroughly justified, as is demonstrated in this his first great work. His feeling for dramatic pacing is superb and his high standards for the libretto led proved to be too much at times for Giuseppe Giacosa, one of the two poets working on the text. At one point in the relationship, Giacosa tried, unsuccessfully to resign after yet another demand from the composer that a passage or even whole act be re-written.

In addition to having extremely clear ideas about the action of the opera, Puccini had a great feeling for musical pacing. *La Bohème* is built around fast-moving conversation-like music in which the plot develops fluidly and which frames the huge emotional outbursts of song in which characters express their emotions.

La bohème

Giacomo Puccini

Puccini's ability to find the perfect melody for the moment is closely related to his sense of theatre and these moments of release are greatly anticipated and well-received by audiences.

Puccini is also an expert portrayer of characters through music. All of the characters are given distinctive music, which distinguishes each in relation to the others. So it is that Rodolfo's ardent music contrasts with Marcello's fiery outbursts, Mimi's gentle, sweet melodies jar against Musetta's coquettish and vampish lines. Even the blustering landlord, Benoit has a distinct musical personality, setting him apart.

After a slow start...

After an objection by Puccini, Ricordi, his publisher moved the premiere to Turin's Teatro Regio where it opened on February 1, 1896. The first performance was not well received at first by an audience expecting a repeat of *Manon Lescaut's* fire, but within six months, it was the composer's most popular work, a claim it retains to this day.

Life beyond Bohemia - good living and fast cars

In 1900, his next opera, *Tosca* was received with both public and critical acclaim and even the disastrous first performance of *Madame Butterfly* in 1904 couldn't dent his popularity. By now he was wealthy enough to indulge his tastes for sports cars and expensive property and to spend as much time as he liked shooting and fishing (often to the detriment of work schedules). But all wasn't rosy - he found himself in an unhappy marriage and was regularly unfaithful. In one notorious case, one of his servants was driven to suicide by Elvira Puccini's assertions that she was sleeping with her husband. An autopsy revealed that, for once, Puccini had not had his way. Far from contrite about the incident, the composer dismissed her death as the actions of a "silly girl" - a comment indicative of a cruel streak in his character that dismayed even those who loved him.

And in the end...

In the end, good living caught up with him, and Puccini died from throat cancer in Belgium in 1924. He left behind a body of work which is immediately recognisable for its accessible style and fusion of the bel canto tradition (which favoured beautiful sound) and the verismo movement (which sought to bring a degree of realism into opera). But however much he aimed to be true to life, Puccini regarded beauty as the ultimate criterion of value, a truth which can be heard throughout his output.

aria A song for solo voice reflecting how the character feels (usually miserable) about what has just or is about to happen.

auditorium Space within the theatre occupied by the audience.

baritone Middle-range man's voice, lurking somewhere between bass and tenor.

bass Lowest male voice. Often plays characters with dubious moral fibre.

chorus A body of singers who (mostly) sing and act as a group to make the crowd scenes a bit more plausible. Also the term used for any musical number sung by this group.

conductor Hand-waving-head-honcho, positioned to obscure the view of the lady sitting in the centre of the front row. Makes sure everyone is performing the same piece.

contralto (or alto) Low-pitched woman's voice. Not to be confused with... counter tenor High-pitched man's voice. Nearest we have nowadays to a castrato (from the verb to castrate...ouch...)

ensemble From the French word for "together". When two or more soloists try to have their say at the same time (can get rather messy...). Ensemble for two is a duet, three is a trio, four a quartet and so on.

finale The final number of an act - sung by an ensemble (see above).

intermezzo A piece of music played between the acts of an opera (usually just long enough for the prima donna to put on her sixth frock of the show).

interval A (welcome) break between the acts of an opera. The lights go on and the audience is free to move around, catch up on what's been happening, join the chorus at the bar...

libretto The text of an opera. Written by a librettist.

mezzo-soprano Female singer who can't quite reach those top notes. Not much glass-shattering action here.

orchestra Group of musicians found in the pit.

overture Music at the start of the show. Sets the scene, warms up the orchestra and reminds the audience that the performance is about to begin.

prima donna The leading woman singer in an operatic cast. Not to be confused with Guy Ritchie's wife...

props Mobile pieces of the set which help to make it all a bit more believable.

proscenium arch Wall in front of the curtain, dividing the stage from the auditorium.

recitative The bits which aren't the songs. Closer to the rhythm of speech and often accompanied by just a harpsichord or piano. Used to further the action of the story (we'd never get home if the plot was told through the arias...).

repetiteur from the French for to repeat. This tortured soul sits in on rehearsals and pretends to be an orchestra at the piano.

score The full score contains all the sung and orchestral parts in the opera. The vocal score has the voice parts and a piano reduction of the orchestra (for rehearsals - see repetiteur).

soprano High female voice. Watch out for those delicate window panes...

synopsis Outline of the plot. Especially useful during the interval when it is once more light enough to find out what on earth is happening.

tenor A high male voice. The good guy, pure of heart and all that.