

Program Notes: U-M Life Sciences Orchestra

April 24, 2016

Puccini - La Bohème - Act I

It would be difficult to find someone who doesn't love at least one of Puccini's operas. A composer of sweeping melodies and possessing a soft spot for the intense love story, Puccini created works that continue to resonate with audiences worldwide.

Simultaneously, he is one of the most criticized composers: such melodic and crowd-pleasing music is sometimes lacking in depth, according to some critics. Musicologist Donald Jay Grout wrote, "Puccini's music... often sounds better than it is." During Puccini's lifetime and after *La Bohème's* premiere, the music critic Bersezio advised Puccini to consider *La Bohème* "a momentary error, a brief digression, and to return to the path of true art." Musicologist Fausto Torrefranca, when asked to choose a figure in Italy's musical art as the subject of a study, said, "We have chosen Puccini rather than any other because he seems to us to be the only one who embodies most perfectly all the decadence of modern Italian music and represents all its cynical commercialism, all its pitiful impotence and its triumphant international vogue."

While it may be easy to criticize something popular as "lesser", the thematic and dramatic transformations in Puccini's operas were also largely due to the change in the actual dramatic material itself. Helen Greenwald eloquently states that "Puccini's operas, on the other hand, are thought to be feminine, more rooted in fin-de-siecle stasis, decadence, neuroses, and eroticism and centered (for the most part) on the nearly ritualistic suffering and death of the female lead," and that the location of the operas themselves, as compared to Verdi's, for example, "moved from the castle and the cathedral to the home." The combination of relevant subject matter and touching melodies captivated audiences. Puccini's music is impeccably paced and organized with lean and effective motivic content. Melodic material is transformed and used as accompaniment, and even though at the surface the music sounds pleasant, there are moments of sheer dissonance and intense tension.

Puccini often spent many months planning out his operas. He was obsessed with creating the right atmosphere and setting the right sonic and visual color for the drama. Instead of dividing the opera into acts, he used the word *quadro*, or "image".

Bohème exhibits this passion for visual perspective reflected in musical sound. The beginning is a bustle, yet in moments when describing the Latin Quarter of Paris, the sound becomes ethereal, almost impressionistic. French influence as well as German (from Wagner) had seeped into Puccini's ear. The following acts all have different sonic landscapes, each representing a certain part of town or time of year.

The young, 28-year-old Toscanini conducted *La Bohème's* premiere in Turin in 1896. Subsequently, the opera has ranked continuously amongst the three most performed operas alongside *La Traviata* and *Carmen*.

The plot for Act I begins on Christmas Eve in a small, Parisian Latin Quarter loft, where Marcello and Rodolfo, painter and poet, are freezing. To keep warm, Rodolfo offers his latest play as tinder. They are soon joined by their roommates: Colline, a philosopher, and Schaunard, a musician. Schaunard has brought food, fuel, and money, which he has sneakily conned from a foreign student. While they celebrate, their landlord Benoit arrives to collect the rent. In order to distract him, they pretend to show generous hospitality and ask him about his most recent flirtations. They coax out personal information, and pretending to be shocked at his infidelity, kick him out. They agree to leave for Café Momus to celebrate; however, Rodolfo decides to remain behind briefly to finish a commission from a local paper.

Once alone, there is a knock at the door: it is his neighbor, Mimì, whose candle has gone out in the stairwell. As soon as she comes in, she almost faints; after a sip of wine, she feels a bit better, and once her candle is lit, she moves to leave. Mimì realizes that she has misplaced her key, and while they both search for it, the draft from the open doorway extinguishes both of their candles. In the darkness, Rodolfo finds her key and hides it in his pocket. While they continue searching, he grabs her cold hand and speaks to her about his life and dreams. She then tells him about her job as a flower embroiderer and how she eagerly awaits the first moments of Spring. Rodolfo's friends have been waiting for him downstairs and are urging him to hurry; he lets them know that he is not alone and that he will join them shortly. Mimì and Rodolfo are left alone once more; she proposes that she come with him to meet his friends. They profess their love for each other and leave, arm in arm, for the café.

Poulenc – Concerto for Organ, Strings & Timpani

During the 1920s and early 1930s, Francis Poulenc was famous for creating whimsical, jovial works. The untimely death of his colleague and friend Pierre-Octave Ferroud in 1936 reignited Poulenc's faith in the Catholic religion. Even though the *Concerto for Organ, Strings and Timpani* was commissioned in 1934, Poulenc took four years to complete the work. He himself described his approach as "...not the happy-go-lucky Poulenc who wrote the Concerto for two pianos, but a Poulenc *en route* to the cloister—a fifteenth century Poulenc, if you like."

Associations with Baroque repertoire abound, yet Poulenc himself might have preferred an association with the Renaissance. However, Poulenc's study of the works of Bach and Buxtehude is evident. The colorful, idiomatic registration choices for this concerto are partly due to the help of Maurice Duruflé, who premiered the piece and acted as Poulenc's advisor in all matters dealing with registration. Even though most of the work is either intense or songfully meditative, there are hints of Poulenc's humor, particularly toward the end of the work.

The *Concerto for Organ, Strings and Timpani* is separated into seven sections without any breaks in between. It opens with the organ's powerful G Minor chord and flourish reminiscent of Bach, followed by an agitated allegro. The organ follows with a slow, lyrical section leading to an ethereal melody alternating between first and second violins. A presto with bustling triplets brings the interplay between the organ and strings into full force, leading to a powerful climax. A lamenting, song-like section follows with alternating countermelodies between the organ middle register and the cellos.

Poulenc's humor appears eventually with a scherzando, ascending melody, accompanied by a rhythmic ostinato in the strings. The initial G Minor organ chord returns, followed by ethereal organ music accompanied by pizzicato strings and a viola solo. The organ has the last say with fortissimo chords and a final powerful, dry note with the string orchestra and timpani.

Gershwin - An American in Paris

George Gershwin composed the beginning melodic fragments of *An American in Paris* in 1926 on his first visit to Paris. Gershwin had a fascination with the French city and admired many of the major French composers who were his contemporaries. In fact, Gershwin had wanted to study with Maurice Ravel, and later on would convince Ravel to tour the United States. After composing several pieces for piano and orchestra, Gershwin decided to compose something that would stand independently as an orchestral composition.

This work uses a wide variety of percussion, including Parisian taxi horns, in order to evoke the sounds of the hustle and bustle of 1920s Parisian street life. The piece contains two large contrasting sections: the beginning of the piece describes Paris from the perspective of an American tourist, while the second section reflects on the American's own music amidst a bout of nostalgia. Then, introductory material returns, but is now paired with the previously heard American Blues. In Gershwin's own words:

"The opening gay section is followed by a rich blues with a strong rhythmic undercurrent. Our American... perhaps after strolling into a café and having a couple of drinks, has succumbed to a spasm of homesickness. The harmony here is both more intense and simpler than in the preceding pages. This blues rises to a climax, followed by a coda in which the spirit of the music returns to the vivacity and bubbling exuberance of the opening part with its impression of Paris. Apparently the homesick American, having left the café and reached the open air, has disowned his spell of the blues and once again is an alert spectator of Parisian life. At the conclusion, the street noises and French atmosphere are triumphant."

There are moments of clear French influence, with impressionistic floating chords in the winds. Gershwin admitted that he had composed of the piece "in the manner of Debussy and the Six, though the themes are all original." The French city music, combined with the American blues creates a wonderful and unique sound world.

A new musicological critical edition of the full orchestral score of *An American in Paris* will eventually be released by the Gershwin family working in conjunction with the Library of Congress and the University of Michigan. Thanks to Professor Mark Clague, we are fortunate to have the corrected taxi horns with the appropriate pitches for our performance today. (Read more from Prof. Clague: <http://umhealth.me/gershhorn>)

Program notes by Roberto Kalb