

# La Bohème

GIACOMO PUCCINI (1858 – 1924)



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Cover: Heidi Stober (centre) as Musetta . Above: (l-r) Dimitri Pittas as Rodolfo and Joshua Hopkins as Marcello. Both photos from La Bohème (Houston Grand Opera, 2012). Photos: Felix Sanchez

# Welcome

Puccini's glorious masterpiece, one of opera's favourite and most poignant love stories, is freely adapted from Henri Murger's 1851 novel, *Scènes de la vie de bohème*, set in Paris's Latin Quarter. Puccini drew from a wealth of personal experience as a young student living with his brother and cousin in a drafty garret in Milan, often pawning their possessions to pay for rent, food and firewood. This production, set during France's *Belle Époque* features romance, art, and a young and talented cast.

*La Bohème* also opens the door to meaningful discussions with students along a diverse range of curriculum topics including World Studies (Industrial Revolution, class structure, poverty, "bohemian life"), English (literary sources, adaptation), Classical Languages and International Languages (Italian), Interdisciplinary Studies (music and business) and even Biology (diseases and vaccinations).

With its memorable melodies and heartfelt story of young love, *La Bohème* is undoubtedly great entertainment. But after studying the work, you'll discover that this popular opera also boasts depths of expression that speak to universal human concerns, making it a truly timeless piece of art.

\***Belle Époque** means "Beautiful Era" and refers to a period in French cultural history lasting roughly from the 1870s until the outbreak of World War I in 1914.

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# Opera 101

## WHAT IS OPERA?

The term “opera” comes from the Italian word for “work” or “piece,” and is usually applied to the European tradition of grand opera. Opera is a form of storytelling which incorporates music, drama and design.

Though its origins date back to ancient Greece, the form of opera we are familiar with today started in the late 16th century in Florence, Italy. Count Giovanni de’ Bardi was a patron and host to a group of intellectuals, poets, artists, scientists and humanists including Giulio Caccini (composer) and Vincenzo Galilei (father to the astronomer and scientist, Galileo Galilei, who was most famous for his improvements to the telescope). These individuals explored trends in the arts, focusing on music and drama in particular. They were unified in their belief that the arts had become over-embellished and that returning to the transparency of the music of the ancient Greeks, which incorporated both speech and song, and a chorus to further the plot and provide commentary on the action, would present a more pure, natural and powerful way to tell stories and express emotions.

The first opera, *Dafne*, about a nymph who fled from Apollo and was subsequently transformed by the gods into a laurel tree, was composed by Jacopo Peri in 1597. From then on, the early operas recreated Greek tragedies with mythological themes. During the 17th and 18th centuries, topics expanded to include stories about royalty, and everyday or common people. Some operas were of a serious nature (called *opera seria*) and some light-hearted (called *opera buffa*). Since then operas have been written on a wide variety of topics such as cultural clashes (*Madama Butterfly*), comedic farce (*The Barber of Seville*), politicians on foreign visits (*Nixon in China*), the celebration of Canadian heroes (*Louis Riel*), and children’s stories (*The Little Prince*), to name a few.

The COC presents works in the western European tradition but musical equivalents to European opera can be found in Japan, at the Peking Opera in China, and in Africa where it is called Epic Storytelling.

### What are the differences between operas, musicals and plays?

Traditionally operas are through-sung, meaning they are sung from beginning to end with no dialogue in between. Singers must have powerful voices in order to be heard over the orchestra (the ensemble of instrumental musicians that accompanies the dramatic action on stage during an opera). Remember: opera singers don’t use microphones!

Musicals are a combination of dialogue and sung pieces and often include choreographed numbers. The singers often use microphones and are accompanied by a pit band which includes more modern instruments like a drum kit, guitar and electronic instruments.

Plays are primarily spoken works of theatre with minimal singing or music.

There are always exceptions to the rule: though *Les Misérables* is through-sung it is still classified as a piece of musical theatre because of its style of music. By the same token, some operas, like Mozart’s *The Magic Flute*, have spoken dialogue in addition to singing.

### What does opera feel like?

Take five minutes out of the school day and instead of using regular voices to converse, ask the class to commit to singing everything. Make an agreement with the students that it’s not about judging people’s voices but about freeing our natural sounds. Make up the melodies on the spot and don’t worry about singing “correctly.” Did the musical lines help express or emphasize certain emotions?

If so, how?

# Attending the Opera: Make the most of your opera experience

## WELCOME TO THE FOUR SEASONS CENTRE FOR THE PERFORMING ARTS



So you're headed to the opera, and there are a few questions on your mind. Here are some tips on how to get the most out of your opera experience.

First, there's the question of **what to wear**. People wear all sorts of things to the opera – jeans, dress pants, cocktail dresses, suits, etc. The important thing is to be comfortable. Wear something that makes you feel good, whether it be jeans or your nicest tie. But skip that spritz of perfume or cologne before you go out; the Four Seasons Centre for the Performing Arts is scent-free. Many fellow patrons and performers are allergic to strong scents.

Once you're dressed, it's important to **arrive on time** for the show. Late patrons cannot be admitted to the theatre, and you may have to watch the first act on a television screen in the lobby rather than from your seat. If you don't have your ticket yet, arrive as early as possible – the line-up for the box office can often be quite long prior to a performance! The main doors open one hour before the performance. Line up there and have your ticket ready to present to the usher. If you have any questions about

tonight's performance, drop by the welcome desk (just inside the main doors) to ask a member of the COC staff, who are full of useful information not only about tonight's opera, but also about COC programs in general. A **pre-performance chat** takes place in the Richard Bradshaw Amphitheatre (Ring 3) about 45 minutes before the show. These chats, given by members of our **COC Volunteer Speakers Bureau**, offer valuable insight into the opera and the specific production that you'll be seeing.

Before the opera starts, take the opportunity to **explore the lobby**, known as the Isadore and Rosalie Sharp City Room. Stop by concessions and **order a beverage for intermission or purchase a snack**. Browse the Opera Shop and pick up a memento of your experience at the opera. (Note: the Opera Shop is not open at dress rehearsals.) Walk up the stairs, passing a sculpture as you go, and note the floating glass staircase – the longest free-span glass staircase in the world! On the third floor, you'll see the Richard Bradshaw Amphitheatre, home to our Free Concert Series. You'll also see a mobile by artist Alexander Calder, adding some colour and whimsy to the space.

Chimes will ring throughout the lobby **ten minutes** before the performance, reminding everyone to find their seats. Head towards the door noted on your ticket, get a program from the usher, and find your designated seat in R. Fraser Elliott Hall. It's best to use this time to open any candies you might have and turn off your cell phone – the hall is built to carry sound, so small sounds travel further than you may think! Photography is not permitted once the show starts. The design and direction of the show is under intellectual property and only the official COC photographer and/or members of the media can take pictures and even then, only under special circumstances that require prior arrangements.

As the lights go down and the audience quiets, **listen carefully**. Remember all of that traffic you heard in the lobby? And now... not a peep! The auditorium is physically separated from the outside and the ground below, making for the best acoustic experience possible.

Now it's time to sit back and **enjoy the opera!**

**SURTITLES™** will be projected on a horizontal screen above the stage. SURTITLES™ originate from the idea of “subtitles”, which are most commonly used in foreign films to make them more accessible outside of their country of origin. The COC was the first opera company to adapt this concept for the operatic stage. Slides containing the English translation of the *libretto* (text for the opera) are projected in a more visible place for the audience: above the stage. SURTITLES™ were first used by the COC at the premiere of the opera *Elektra* in 1983. Only the name could be trademarked, as the technology for the projections was already in existence. Opera companies from around the world have adopted this audience initiative under different names, and it has revolutionized opera stages everywhere.

Feel free to show your **appreciation to the performers** by laughing at humorous bits or applauding after a well-performed aria. If a performer has pulled off some particularly impressive vocal fireworks, it's absolutely acceptable to yell out your appreciation in addition to applause. You may hear your fellow audience members shouting “bravo!” for a man, “brava!” for a woman, or “bravi!” for a group of performers. Feel free to join in!

*La Bohème* lasts approximately two hours, 10 minutes including one intermission.  
The opera is sung in Italian with English SURTITLES™.

R. Fraser Elliott Hall.  
Photo: Tim Griffith



# Characters and Synopsis

## MAIN CHARACTERS (in order of vocal appearance)

Name	Description	Voice Type	Pronunciation
Marcello	painter	Baritone	mahr-CHEH-loh
Rodolfo	poet, in love with Mimì	Tenor	roh-DOHL-foh
Colline	philosopher	Bass	koh-LEE-neh
Schaunard	musician	Baritone	shoh-NAHR
Benoît	landlord	Bass	behn-WAH
Mimì	seamstress	Soprano	mee-MEE
Parpignol	toy vendor	Tenor	PAHR-peen-yohl
Alcindoro	state councillor	Bass	ahl-cheen-DOH-roh
Musetta	singer	Soprano	moo-ZEH-tah
Customs Officer		Baritone	
Customs House Sergeant		Baritone	

*The final scene from La Bohème (Houston Grand Opera, 2012). Photo: Felix Sanchez*



## SYNOPSIS

### ACT I

It is Christmas Eve in Paris. Two poverty-stricken young artists, Marcello, a painter, and Rodolfo, a poet, attempt to work in their freezing garret; in desperation they burn one of Rodolfo's dramas to keep warm. Their two roommates, Colline, a philosopher, and Schaunard, a musician, return home. Even though Schaunard has brought food, the four bohemians decide to eat their Christmas dinner in the Latin Quarter. Just then, Benoît, their landlord, arrives to demand his overdue rent. The men ply him with drink and, when he boasts of marital indiscretions, they feign moral indignation and throw him out. Marcello, Colline, and Schaunard leave for the Latin Quarter. Rodolfo, always the loner, promises to join them after finishing some work, but a knock on the door interrupts him. Mimì, a young neighbour, enters in search of a light for her candle. Clearly ill, and breathless from the stairs, she faints and drops her room key. Rodolfo is entranced by her and, when she recovers, manages to detain her by concealing the key. Either by accident or design both their candles go out, and

as they search in the darkness for the lost key, their hands touch. Both of them solitary, both poetic, they are instantly attracted, and gratefully declare their love before leaving to join Rodolfo's friends.

### ACT II

A festive crowd celebrates Christmas Eve in the Latin Quarter. At the Café Momus, Rodolfo introduces Mimì to his roommates. Their carefree mood changes when Musetta, Marcello's former lover, appears with Alcindoro, her aging sugar-daddy. Musetta, still in love with Marcello, attempts to attract his attention. He deliberately ignores her but eventually cannot resist her obvious play for him. Musetta shrewdly gets rid of the besotted Alcindoro and leaves him to foot the entire bill as she and her bohemian friends escape through the crowd.

### INTERMISSION

*A scene from La Bohème (Houston Grand Opera, 2012). Photo: Felix Sanchez*



### ACT III

Early one snowy February morning, Mimì seeks out Marcello, who is painting a mural at a tavern near the city gates where Musetta now makes an honest living entertaining the travellers. Mimì tells Marcello she and Rodolfo have separated because of his jealousy. As Marcello tries to comfort her, Rodolfo appears, also seeking Marcello's advice. Mimì conceals herself and overhears their conversation. Rodolfo tells Marcello he is leaving Mimì because of her flirtations with other men. Marcello is skeptical and forces Rodolfo to admit the truth – Mimì is mortally ill and Rodolfo is consumed by feelings of guilt and remorse, knowing that the harsh conditions of their life together have endangered her health. Mimì's cough gives her away, and Rodolfo realizes she has overheard everything. Overwhelmed by her plight, Rodolfo promises to stay with Mimì until the spring, but Marcello and Musetta argue viciously and separate.

### ACT IV

Rodolfo and Marcello, both now separated from Mimì and Musetta, are working in their garret. Schaunard and Colline arrive with supper, and the four fantasize about attending a fancy ball. Suddenly, Musetta enters with Mimì, now close to death and desperate to be with Rodolfo. Marcello and Musetta leave to summon a doctor and to buy Mimì a muff to warm her hands. Colline also departs to sell his beloved overcoat. Left alone for a few moments, Mimì and Rodolfo remember their happier times together. The others return, but before the doctor can arrive, Mimì dies.

*Synopsis courtesy of Houston Grand Opera*

*(l-r) Joshua Hopkins as Marcello and Peixin Chen as Customs House Guard in La Bohème (Houston Grand Opera, 2012). Photo: Felix Sanchez*



# Genesis of the Opera

## THE BOHEMIAN LIFE

*La Bohème* was adapted from Henri Murger's series of short stories. Initially appearing in various magazines, Murger's stories depicted the life and times of bohemian\* artists, social rebels and radicals in Paris's famed Latin Quarter. Murger vividly captured their unconventional attitude towards freedom, pleasure, and love, their complete commitment to art and their ideas, but also reminded his readers of the harsh realities of their lives. His characters endured extreme poverty, illness, addiction and heartache.

These stories were eventually collected in 1851 in a volume entitled *Scènes de la vie de bohème* (*Scenes of the Bohemian Life*) – the book is something between a novel and a short story cycle of loosely related vignettes.

Murger's stories were also converted into a popular stage play and eventually two operas. When Puccini began writing *La Bohème*, one of his contemporaries, a composer named Ruggero Leoncavallo, had already started to write an opera based on the same source material. Upon hearing of Puccini's choice in subject matter, Leoncavallo publicly accused Puccini of unfair play, and sought exclusive rights over the work. Nonplussed, Puccini proceeded with his own opera, and declared that the public should be able to decide whose work deserved greater acclaim.



Henri Murger



Giacomo Puccini

\*The word *bohemian* refers to an inhabitant of Bohemia, a central European region corresponding to an area of the modern-day Czech Republic. But the word gained a further meaning in the 19th century when it began to signify a socially unconventional person, especially an artist or writer. In the preface of his *Scènes de la vie de bohème*, Henri Murger gave a long exposition of bohemianism, presenting it as an artistic phenomenon found in every epoch of human history: "Today, as of old, every man who enters on an artistic career, without any other means of livelihood than his art itself, will be forced to walk in the paths of Bohemia."

*Verismo* was a literary movement in southern Italy beginning in the 1870s, characterized by gritty realism, a concern with poverty, the use of everyday rather than poetic language, quotes from popular songs of the day, and a tragic ending. *Verismo* literature influenced opera, and the first verismo work to be adapted for the operatic stage was *Cavalleria rusticana* (1890) by Pietro Mascagni. Though *La Bohème* shares some traits with other *verismo* works – and is often referred to as an example of the movement – not all scholars agree with the characterization. (For more, see the Introduction to the Listening Guide on page 13.)

## THE WORK AND ITS PREMIERE

Puccini's *La Bohème* premiered in 1896 in Turin, Italy. Through its subject matter of penniless artists living for their ideals, the work's realism and heartfelt drama reverberated with the larger artistic concerns of the *verismo* tradition (see previous page).

*La Bohème* utilized melodramatic speech set to music – Puccini was among the first and greatest practitioners of the *parlando* style (speaking style), which was regarded as a more naturalistic imitation of everyday speech than highly formalized singing.

At the time of its premiere, Italian audiences were unsure of how to react to the novelty of the story. Perhaps one reason for this sense of disorientation was that Puccini's opera was staged at Turin's Teatro Regio, a theatre that earlier in the season had featured the Italian premiere of Wagner's *Götterdämmerung*, a work characterized by its comparative enormity and stratospherically different content (a war among gods). In contrast, *La Bohème*'s subject and style called out to a segment of the urban population and depicted a lower class far different from the privileged group that ordinarily attended the opera house. Mixed reactions notwithstanding, the opera quickly became a popular piece.



Engravings by Adolphe Richard for an 1879 edition of Murger's *Scènes de la vie de bohème*

## INDUSTRIAL REVOLUTION

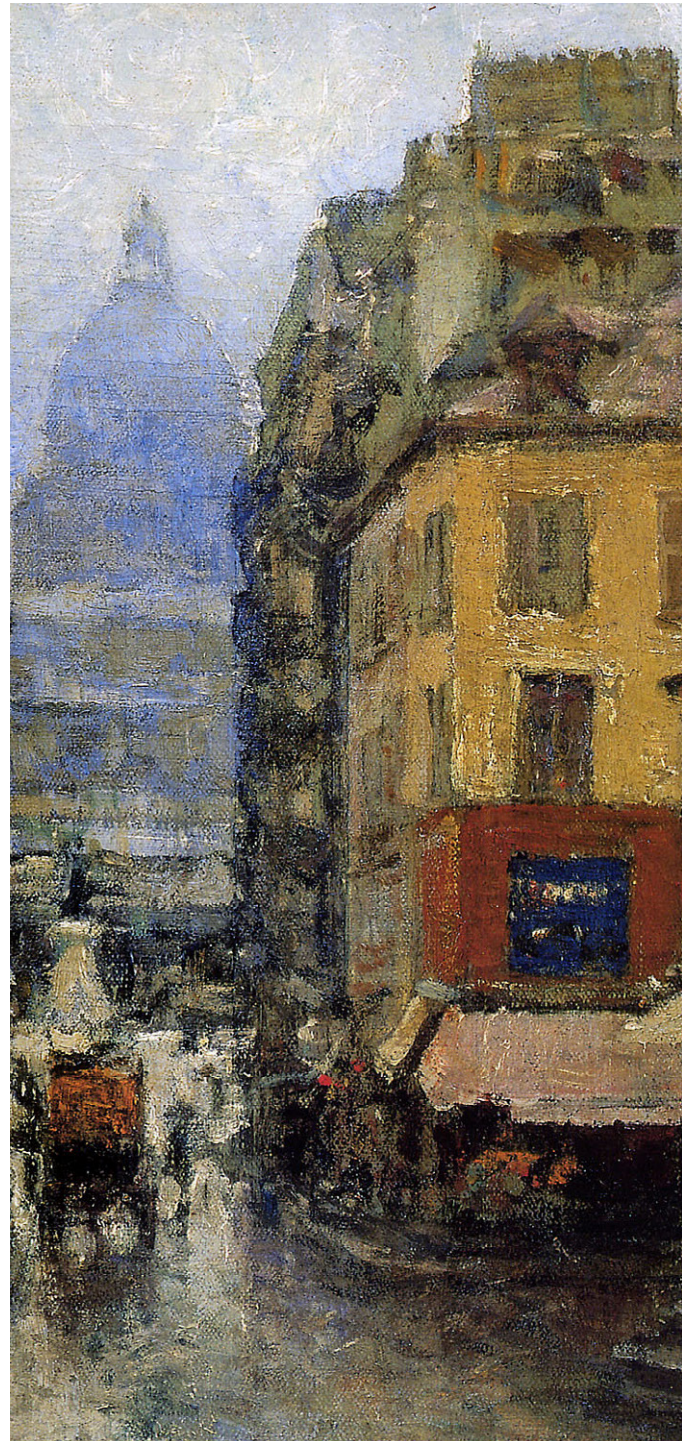
The Industrial Revolution radically altered the day-to-day lives of Europeans. The growth of industry brought with it a rapidly expanding workforce and created a divide between the wealthy and the poor, which was exacerbated by unsanitary living conditions. Such factors led to the artistic reaction against self-indulgence and wealthy living. The premiere of *La Bohème* coincided with a period of social unrest in mid-1890s Italy, with labour movements gaining in influence. *La Bohème*'s democratic appeal and its acknowledgment of poverty and poor living conditions signalled changing times in both life and in art.

## CONTINUED ACCLAIM

Puccini's music and the treatment of the story by the librettists\* – Giulio Ricordi and Luigi Illica – combined to create one of the most popular operas of all time, with enduring themes of young love set to incredibly powerful, beautiful music. Puccini's ability to create compelling characters and express larger-than-life emotions through unforgettable melodies, is what makes *La Bohème* a perpetual favourite of audiences and a lasting artistic treasure trove.

\*Librettist: the individual who writes the libretto. Libretto is the diminutive of the Italian word libro meaning "book," and it refers to the words or text of the opera.

*La Bohème*'s poignant narrative has been a continued source of inspiration for artists in the 20th and 21st centuries. In 1994, Jonathan Larson paid homage to the composer and *La Bohème*, when he wrote his Tony Award-winning musical *Rent*, using similar characters, storylines and even melodies from Puccini's score! The hit musical was made into a movie in 2005 using some of the original cast members. Film director Baz Luhrmann (*Australia*, *Moulin Rouge* and *Romeo and Juliet*) produced a modernized version of the opera for the Broadway stage, setting it in Paris in 1957 instead of the 1840s.



Paris. Latin Quarter. Painting by Nikolay Dosekin from the early 1900s

# Listening Guide

## INTRODUCTION

Few composers have a more easily identifiable style than Puccini's, which hinges on its rich vein of melody and attention to orchestral detail. At the same time, his style is extremely difficult to categorize.

His music is often viewed as a kind of ancestor to the modern movie score, but this comparison relegates it a little too much to the role of background sonic wallpaper and doesn't take into account Puccini's painstaking work process. In truth, it is difficult to find another opera composer who attended with so much care to the detail of integrating word, note and gesture. Puccini's operas are some of the most compact, tightly constructed works in the standard repertoire. For this reason, *La Bohème* is one of the few operas whose performance lasts about as long as a spoken reading of the *libretto*. This extreme concision is a consequence of the direction Italian opera had taken in the late 19th century.

With Puccini, standard operatic forms were simplified and reduced, giving way to music which emerges more naturally as free melodic declamation supported by an expressive, theme-oriented orchestration. More than his illustrious Italian predecessors (Rossini, Donizetti, Verdi), Puccini was open to the concept of symphonic development as practiced by the German masters and his

operas are notable for adopting a "through-composed" style, with a greater sense of continuity and flow (like that of a symphony).

Puccini also looked to French models (especially the operas of Massenet and Bizet) to forge a new, conversational style of vocal writing which shifts constantly between *recitativo* (words sung in a way that imitates speech), *arioso* (singing that is more tied to the rhythm of speech than an aria) and full-scale *aria* (a song for one singer which allows a character to express emotions and reflect on the drama). Although usually lumped under the *verismo* label (the late 19th-century literary movement characterized by gritty realism and tragic endings which influenced Italian opera), Puccini actually kept his distance from the movement, and his style of vocal writing is quite far removed from the emphatic declamation associated with *verismo* opera (represented by the over-the-top emotions of a piece like Pietro Mascagni's *Cavalleria rusticana*).

The tracks listed below are excerpted from *La Bohème*, Decca 466 070-2. Orchestra and Chorus of the Teatro alla Scala di Milano, Riccardo Chailly, conductor. Angela Gheorghiu, Roberto Alagna, Simon Keenlyside, Elisabetta Scano. At [coc.ca/COCRadio](http://coc.ca/COCRadio) you can experience this listening guide online.

(l-r) Dimitri Pittas as Rodolfo and Katie Van Kooten as Mimì in *La Bohème* (Houston Grand Opera, 2012). Photo: Felix Sanchez



**MUSICAL EXCERPT**

Act II: “Quando me’n vo” (“When I walk out...”)

**CONNECTION TO THE STORY**

Musetta, an old flame of Marcello’s, enters the Café Momus with her elderly, rich companion, Alcindoro. She attracts Marcello’s interest with an exaggerated, attention-seeking performance.

**MUSICAL SIGNIFICANCE**

Act II of *La Bohème* is divided in an almost cinematic fashion, between “long shots” which show the festive crowds enjoying themselves at the Café Momus and “close-ups” which focus the “camera lens” on the group of young bohemian friends. This aria is presented as one of those close-ups, whose main function is to musically establish Musetta’s flirtatious, jealous personality. With three soft tings, the orchestra draws our attention away from the turmoil of the crowd, focusing our attention on Musetta. She then proceeds to sing what has become the opera’s most memorable tune: a waltz, which in terms of its musical structure is deceptively simple. Puccini often wrote what are termed conjunct melodies: musical phrases that move stepwise or in small skips. This is a trait which his tunes share with folk music and children’s songs, making them immediately accessible to the ear as well as memorable. “Musetta’s Waltz” (as this tune is popularly known), is really just a very well manipulated descending E-major scale! One big part of Puccini’s style is his use of tempo fluctuations to extract the utmost expressivity from these simple tunes. Listen at 0:07 for the suggestive *rallentando* (gradual slowing down) in the very first phrase on the words “solletta per la via” (“alone along the street”) followed by a return to the original tempo. This push and pull of the overriding tempo is one stylistic element which separates Puccini from, say, Mozart, who maintains a much more steady rhythmic pulse.

**FURTHER REFLECTION**

“Quando me’n vo” is definitely Musetta’s “signature tune”. Can you name other performers or characters who are especially associated with one particular song?

“Musetta’s Waltz” may be a pretty tune, but what do you think are her real intentions in singing it? How would you envision staging this scene?



## 2

### MUSICAL EXCERPT

Act III: “Mimì! – Speravo di trovarvi qui” (“Mimì! – I was hoping to find you here”)

### CONNECTION TO THE STORY

Mimì has come to ask Marcello for advice on her crumbling relationship with Rodolfo. She complains to him of Rodolfo’s acute jealousy and Marcello advises her to leave him.

### MUSICAL SIGNIFICANCE

In the overall structure of *La Bohème*, Act III can be considered its “slow movement,” full of sombre colours and gentle lyricism that contrasts with the more boisterous ending of Act II and beginning of Act IV. It is framed by an arresting, two-note figure which is heard at its very start and end, further signifying Puccini’s desire to set this act apart as a kind of lyrical interlude. The slightly slower, more reflective music of this act suits its nostalgic, bittersweet atmosphere, which charts the end of a love affair. This duet for Marcello and Mimì is a good example of Puccini’s knack for merging conversational passages into full-blown melodies that then quickly disappear (listen for the transition between the conversation at 0:26 and the burst of melody at 0:38). He repeats small melodic fragments such as this one, ingeniously spinning them in different ways to turn barely a minute’s worth of musical material into a duet lasting three and a half minutes. Listen at 2:37 as the initial melodic fragment from 0:38, first sung by Mimì, is taken over by Marcello, and is then morphed into a duet which provides the emotional climax of the scene.

### FURTHER REFLECTION

Why do you think Mimì has decided to confide in Marcello first before speaking with Rodolfo directly about their relationship troubles?

Puccini sets this scene during winter on the bleak outskirts of Paris – how do you think this contributes to this part of the overall story?



## 3

### MUSICAL EXCERPT

Act III: “Donde lieta uscì al tuo grido d’amore” (“From where she came at your call of love”)

### CONNECTION TO THE STORY

Mimì tells Rodolfo that she is going to leave him. She asks him to parcel up her belongings but offers him her pink bonnet as a memento.

### MUSICAL SIGNIFICANCE

By the end of the 19th century, composers had become more insistent on the vocal effects they expected, emphatically marking them in the score itself. Whereas in an earlier period (for example, 16th-century Baroque opera), singers were given more freedom to express the music as they wished, by Puccini’s time, composers provided a more specific road map with regards to tempo, emphasis and expression.

Mimì’s Act III aria demonstrates several examples of this kind of instruction: listen at 1:17 to the words “quell cerchietto d’oro” (“that little gold ring”) where the singer is asked to broaden the first part of the phrase leading to the climactic high note, but then specifically told to go back to the original tempo for the last four notes. The same thing happens eight bars later – listen for the same push and pull in tempo as prescribed by Puccini beginning at 1:52.

### FURTHER REFLECTION

What is the emotional effect on the listener of allowing a singer to push and pull the underlying tempo of a piece of music?

Having listened to this aria, what would you say is Mimì's overall attitude towards leaving Rodolfo?

Puccini's pure and innocent Mimì is quite different from the character in Henri Murger's original stories, where she is often bad tempered, selfish and stays out all night with her "protectors." Why do you think her character was altered for the opera?

## 4

### MUSICAL EXCERPT

Act IV: "Che avvien? – Nulla. Sto bene" ("What's happening – Nothing. I'm all right")

### CONNECTION TO THE STORY

As Mimì lies dying, Musetta gives her a muff in which to warm her hands. Mimì tries to reassure her friends that she is all right; Musetta prays for her, but it is all too late.

### MUSICAL SIGNIFICANCE

When examining a composer's work, pauses in the musical flow may not always merit as much attention as the music itself. However, in Mimì's death scene, Puccini's canny use of silence is crucial to conveying the human tragedy at hand. The pause that occurs between 2:26 and 2:31, just before a mournful chord is played by the woodwinds and horns, marks the death of Mimì. Conductors often stretch this silence to maximize its dramatic value.

The only aria for bass (the lowest male voice) in all of Puccini's operas is "Vecchia zimarra" ("Old coat") sung by Colline in *La Bohème's* final act. Puccini always considered this aria an autobiographical one, springing from his youth. According to the composer, when he was a poor student in Milan, he had to pawn his own coat despite the freezing temperatures that day, so he could afford to take a young ballerina out for dinner.

During the seconds leading up to this moment (starting at 1:56), we hear the orchestra quoting a passage from Rodolfo's Act I aria, a much happier time in their relationship. In this manner, Puccini constructs much of Act IV almost entirely from variations on material we have heard earlier in the opera. The particular placement of this quote is calculated to remind us of a time lost forever, which can now survive only in memory.

### FURTHER REFLECTION

What is Puccini's intention in having Mimì die at the end of the opera? Can you name other operas in which the heroine dies? Why do you think so many composers felt it necessary for their lead female character to die?

# What to Look for

## BOHEMIAN PARIS

This is a new COC production of Puccini's *La Bohème* by Tony Award-winning director John Caird with designs by Olivier Award-winning designer, David Farley.

This production is set in Paris during the 1890s, about 50 years later than the time period depicted in Murger's stories. Caird and Farley decided on this direction because the 1890s were a more vibrant and significant moment for the artistic and cultural life of Paris than Murger's 1840s. Indeed, the period's flourishing artistic scene falls squarely into *La Belle Époque*, and provides a suitable conduit for *La Bohème*'s themes of art as an all-encompassing *raison d'être*.

The 1890s was also the era of Puccini and represents the real-life milieu in which he produced this opera.

## THE BE ALL AND END ALL IS ART

In their preliminary discussions about *La Bohème*, the creative team was guided by the idea that the four men at the heart of the story – Rodolfo, Marcello, Schaunard and Colline – treat their art and creative work as the most important aspect of their lives. All else, including financial success, material comfort, and even the spiritual nourishment afforded by love, are secondary to their artistic commitments.

Moreover, it was logical to Caird and Farley that these young men possessed the talent and work ethic to produce great art, masterpieces of timeless quality, and not just middling works of artistically minded dilettantes. To Caird and Farley, the opera is about witnessing, in as realistic a way as possible, the early life of artists who are on their way to greatness.

*A scene from La Bohème (Houston Grand Opera, 2012). Photo: Felix Sanchez*



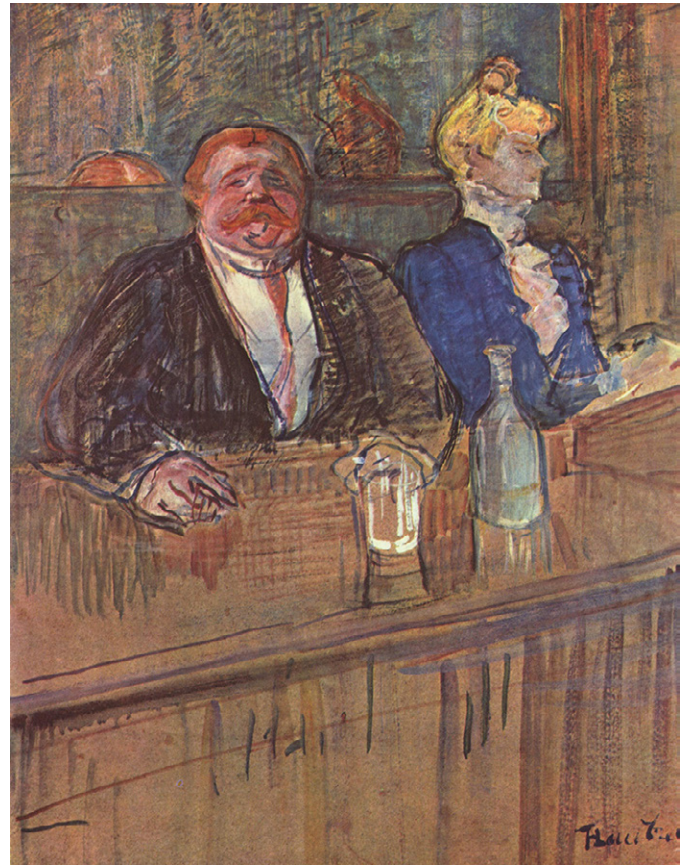
## SET DESIGN

Caird and Farley wanted to depict the constant creative activity of the bohemians, and thought that Marcello, the painter, might be a key to doing that. Their idea was that virtually the entire set of *La Bohème* could be made out of Marcello's paintings; they would function on the one hand as scenery, but also as dramatically and realistically coherent real-life objects in the context of a garret where one of the roommates is a highly productive painter.

The paintings are reconfigured into different arrangements throughout the opera to create other locations, such as the Café Momus or the outskirts of Paris.

The style of Marcello's works is partly inspired by Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec, a painter and illustrator who lived among and frequently depicted the Parisian underclasses of the late 19th century. He is today recognized as a major Post-Impressionist artist.

*Below: The four bohemian artists in a scene from La Bohème (Houston Grand Opera, 2012). Photo: Felix Sanchez*



*Above: At the Cafe: The Customer and the Anemic Cashier, 1898.  
Below: Booth of La Goulue at the Foire du Trone (Dance at the Moulin Rouge), 1895. Both paintings by Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec*



# COC Spotlight: Vanessa Smith

Education and Outreach at the COC offers programs and classes for all ages, which reach approximately 40,000 people a year! Some of the programs take place right in the classroom, or bring classrooms into the opera house for an in-depth look at the art form. School Programs Manager Vanessa Smith works collaboratively with artists, teachers and members of the company to create programs

that teach students of all ages about opera. Sometimes she leads tours; sometimes she leads classes and sometimes she puts the puzzle pieces in place so that others can carry out the mandate of the COC's education and outreach team: to offer an array of accessible, meaningful and enriching education and outreach programming to a diverse audience. Let's find out a little more about her...



**Vanessa Smith**  
(School Programs Manager)

**Position:** School Programs Manager

**Name:** Vanessa Smith

**Role in the Company:** Working in the education department brings something different every day – one day I could be filing paperwork, another mingling with teachers at a dress rehearsal event, and the next I could be playing the ukulele for some younger children at camp! I collaborate with teachers, artists, and members of the education team to make all of these great things happen.

**Hometown:** Haliburton, Ontario

**Education:** Honours B.A. in Drama in Education and Community and a certificate in Arts Management, University of Windsor

**First became interested in opera:** Growing up in a small town, I didn't know much about opera. There's actually an opera program in my hometown now, but there certainly wasn't anything like that while I was growing up. I was very interested in theatre, however, and was very active in my high school theatre program. From there I decided to combine my love of both theatre and working with kids by taking a specialized university program, Drama in Education and Community. I'd done a lot

of choir and musical theatre on the side, which started pointing me towards more classical and operatic works. I listened to recordings and loved the power behind the singers' voices. I didn't actually see an opera until I started working here, in another department, a couple of years ago. Seeing the theatrical elements and the vocal elements come together to bring the piece alive hooked me immediately. It's such a rich art form. I couldn't stop telling other people about it.

**What kinds of things do you do in your job?** I work with teachers to design workshops specifically for their classes and what will fit into their schedule, then go through our roster of artist-educators to find who would be a good fit for the class and type of workshop. Then I'll work with that artist to design the best program for the students. Occasionally I'll go along with the artist to the workshop to help out and meet the teachers and students in person or watch their final performance. Sometimes I'll lead a workshop myself.

**When did you decide to pursue education, and why?** I've always loved working with young people. My first job was running a small summer program at a local family-run lodge, and most of my work after that involved working with young people in some capacity, from being a Resident Advisor to teaching English in Japan. Being able to combine my passion for the arts with my passion for education is a major win.

**If someone was interested in working in education and outreach in an arts setting, what would you recommend they have in terms of skills or experience?** I feel it's important to have experience both in working with children and in the arts. Having worked with children to create theatrical pieces before has really informed how I plan workshops here. Also, if you're going to be working with teachers in a school setting, a solid knowledge of the Ontario curriculum is a big help.

**What do you love most about this career?** I love the variety involved, as well as the people. People in the arts are both friendly and interesting; you never have a dull conversation!

**What do you enjoy the least about this career?** There's a little more paperwork than I'd like, but that comes with any job. My favourite times are when I get to be on my feet and actually working with students.

**What surprises you most about this career?** How young some opera fans are! I love seeing five-year-olds light up when they hear the Queen of the Night's aria from *The Magic Flute*!

**What excites you about this production?** The only production I've seen of *La Bohème* was staged in a bar and done in English. I'm eager to see a return to its original roots, and to compare and contrast the two. Coming from a theatrical background, I'm also admittedly a fan of *Rent*, and am excited to see the original source material and compare that and how the story was brought into our modern era.

**What's in your refrigerator right now?** I have a special dinner planned for someone tonight, so my fridge is full of mushrooms and ingredients for cream sauce to make a mushroom linguine. There's also a lot of orange juice – I never got used to coffee, but I can't go without my orange juice in the morning!

**Write a haiku, or tell us a pun related to *La Bohème*.**  
Burning words for warmth,  
How will I be famous now?  
Oh well, drink more wine.

**Who can't wait to see  
our *Bohème*? Me! Me!**

With \$12 standing room tickets, even  
Marcello can afford to see this opera!  
Find out how at [coc.ca/Rush](http://coc.ca/Rush) or call  
416-363-8231.

# Active Learning

One of the best parts of taking your students to the opera is the discussion and further exploration that live theatre can inspire. Take a deeper look into the themes and story of *La Bohème* with these discussion questions and ideas for further exploration.

- ♦ As noted on page 12, the successful Broadway musical *Rent* is based on the story of *La Bohème*. Watch the movie to compare and contrast the two storylines. Which one resonates more with you?
- ♦ In this opera, as in a few others, “consumption” (i.e. tuberculosis) is portrayed as a rather romantic way to die. To connect the opera with your science/biology curriculum, examine the history of tuberculosis and its effects on the body, especially in the 1800s when the disease was harder to treat. Is the opera’s depiction of Mimì’s ailments believable now that you know more about the disease? Why might an artist choose to portray a disease realistically/unrealistically?
- ♦ Even though incidents of tuberculosis have been drastically reduced, there are still hundreds of tuberculosis cases reported each year in Toronto alone. In fact the city has a Tuberculosis Prevention and Control program. [Check out their website](#) for more info on the disease, its treatment and fascinating stats.
- ♦ The bohemian lifestyle attracted writers, poets, musicians, dancers and painters. Choose one of these creative professions and write a journal chronicling your character’s arrival in Paris and first few months living as a bohemian.
- ♦ Rodolfo and Marcello live their life on almost no money. Assuming they sell very few paintings or manuscripts, how do they afford to eat at their favourite café? Research prices on art, food, and wine from the mid-1800s and craft a budget for one month of Rodolfo and Marcello’s frugal life.
- ♦ Marcello and Musetta met before this opera started. How did they meet? Why did they part? Craft a short story describing their relationship prior to the beginning of *La Bohème*.

Did viewing the opera spark some scintillating debates or discussions? Would your students like to share examples of their work with the COC? E-mail us at [education@coc.ca](mailto:education@coc.ca). We’d love to hear from you!

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Above: Summer Opera Camp. Photo: COC