

## The Bohemian Paris of 1830



In 1830, Paris was a city of great energy, vitality, and ebullience. It was in every way—politically, socially, economically, and culturally—the center of France. It was also a world center of art and literature, attracting artists and writers from all over the world. This Paris was

a city of great contrasts: of enormous wealth and of abject poverty, of intellectual and artistic brilliance and of popular illiteracy, of a glittering and powerful high society and of disenfranchised masses. Paris was also the center of European revolutionary thought and activity—Louis Philippe ascended the throne on a wave of revolution and was forced from the throne by another. The student uprising depicted in Hugo's *Les Misérables* took place in 1832.

Although Paris was one of the world's great cities in 1830, it was not yet the modern metropolis of wide, tree-lined avenues, great squares, beautiful public buildings and museums that it would become in the 1850s under Napoleon III. Rather, it was a cramped city of 1,000 narrow, winding streets and blind alleys where 30,000 houses sheltered a populace of more than 800,000. Modern improvements such as sewers and bridges were being implemented, but much of the city resembled an overpopulated anthill.

Most Parisians traveled the busy, crowded streets on foot and faced, in Chopin's words, "more mud than it is possible to imagine." Customs gates marked the roads that led out of the crowded confines of the city into fields and small villages. Of course, all was not grim in the lives of the lower classes of Paris. Each quarter of Paris had restaurants and cafés where its citizens, no matter their social class or occupations, could relax, wine, dine, and socialize. The Café Momus, which is the setting for Act II of *La bohème*, was a real café, catering to young artists and writers. In fact, all of the locations of *La bohème* were real places and its characters based on real people. Adapted from [www.operaed.org](http://www.operaed.org)

### Paris in the 1890s

During the last half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, many important scientific and technological advances were changing the lives of Europeans. Modern conveniences, like electric lighting and telephones, would not have been affordable for the four friends in *La bohème*. But, if they had lived in 1889, they could have seen the completion of the Eiffel Tower and taken the train in any direction from Paris.

## Pittsburgh Opera Education thanks our generous supporters:

Alcoa Foundation  
Allegheny Regional Asset District  
American Eagle Outfitters Foundation  
Bayer  
Bobby Rahal Motorcar Company  
BRIDGES & Company, Inc.  
Frick Fund of the Buhl Foundation  
Buncher Family Foundation  
Anne L. & George H. Clapp Charitable Trust  
Dominion Foundation  
Eat'n Park Hospitality Group  
Eaton Corporation  
Eden Hall Foundation  
Equitable Resources Foundation  
Fidelity Investments  
The Grable Foundation  
The Guilds of Pittsburgh Opera  
The Henry E. Haller, Jr. Foundation  
Highmark Blue Cross Blue Shield  
Martha Mack Lewis Foundation  
National Endowment for the Arts  
Pennsylvania Council on the Arts  
Pennsylvania Department of Community & Economic Development  
Pennsylvania Department of Education  
The Pittsburgh Foundation  
The PNC Financial Services Group, Inc.  
PPG Industries, Inc.  
Reed Smith LLP  
The Techs  
Triangle Tech  
UPMC Health System  
US Steel Corporation

## For more information on Pittsburgh Opera's education programs, please contact:

**Marilyn Michalka Egan, Ph.D.**  
Director of Education  
megan@pittsburghopera.org  
412-281-0912 ext 242

**Kristin Gatch**  
Manager of Education Programs  
kgatch@pittsburghopera.org  
412-281-0912 ext 227

**Linda Giebel**  
Education Programs Associate  
lgiebel@pittsburghopera.org  
412-281-0912 ext 229

**Pittsburgh Opera**  
2425 Liberty Avenue  
Pittsburgh, PA 15222  
[www.pittsburghopera.org](http://www.pittsburghopera.org)

# La bohème

Music by Giacomo Puccini  
Libretto by Giuseppe Giacosa and Luigi Illica

PITTSBURGH OPERA  
E D U C A T I O N

Study Guide to the Opera



Final Scene of Act III: Rodolfo and Mimì remember their past happiness together.

At the same time, Marcello and Musetta burst out of the tavern, fighting over her constant flirting, and furiously part ways. In a tender ending, Mimì and Rodolfo realize how lonely they will be during the cold winter and decide to stay together until spring.

## Puccini Abandoned His Musical Genealogy to Compose Beloved Operas

Giacomo Puccini was born in Lucca, Italy, and as the descendant of a long line of musicians, was expected to inherit the music position at the cathedral when he came of age. He studied music locally as a boy, and then attended the Milan Conservatory, but becoming just another church organist was not grand enough for the rebellious Puccini. After seeing *Aida*, Puccini recalled, "When I heard *Aida* in Pisa, I felt that a musical window had opened for me." In Milan, Puccini lived a bohemian life, complete with garret apartment, which he shared with fellow student Pietro Mascagni (composer of *Cavalleria Rusticana*). And like the character Colline in *La bohème*, Puccini once pawned his coat for cash.

Puccini's first opera, *Le Villi*, was well received by the public, but more importantly, caught the attention of Giulio Ricordi, head of the powerful publishing house. By 1893, with the production of *Manon Lescaut*, Puccini's career came into full flower. From then until his death, Puccini composed some of the world's most frequently performed operas, including *Tosca*, *Madama Butterfly*, *Turandot*, and of course, *La bohème*. Henry Murger's novel, *Scènes de la vie de la bohème*, so touched Puccini that he continued to make corrections to the opera for two decades, creating one of the world's most enduring and beloved stories of romance, friendship, and the struggle for survival.



Giacomo Antonio  
Domenico Michele  
Secondo Maria  
**Puccini**  
(1858—1924)

The great composer's names are those of his musical relatives back four generations, making him a symbolic family tree.

# La bohème Synopsis

Giuseppe Giacosa and Luigi Illica based the libretto on the novel *Scènes de la vie de bohème* by Henry Murger, set in the Latin Quarter, Paris, France in the 1830s. The action begins immediately, without an overture or prelude.

**ACT I:** It is Christmas Eve in Paris. Two poverty-stricken young bohemians, Marcello, a painter, and Rodolfo, a poet, attempt unsuccessfully 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 home some food, the bohemians decide to take their holiday dinner in the Latin Quarter. Just then, Benoit, their landlord, arrives to demand his overdue rent. The men ply him with drink, and when he boasts of marital indiscretions, they throw him out with feigned indignation. Marcello, Colline, and Schaunard leave for the Latin Quarter. Rodolfo promises to join them after finishing some work, but a knock at the door interrupts him. Mimì, a young neighbor, enters, wishing to relight her candle. Obviously ill, she nearly faints, and drops her room key. Rodolfo is instantly attracted to her and manages to detain her by concealing her key after he secretly finds it. He also snuffs out his own candle, and as the two search in the darkness for her key, their hands touch. Spontaneously, they pour out their love for one another.

**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 abruptly when Musetta, Marcello's former lover, makes a noisy entrance on the arm of the elderly but wealthy Alcindoro. Musetta attempts to attract the attention of Marcello, who deliberately ignores her, but then finally succumbs to her charms. Musetta shrewdly gets rid of Alcindoro, and instructs the waiter to give him all of their bills. She and the bohemians escape through the crowd.

## Intermission

**ACT III:** Early one snowy February morning at the Barrière d'Enfer, a tollgate in Paris, Mimì arrives seeking Marcello, who is painting a mural at the local tavern. She tells him that she and Rodolfo have separated, driven apart by his jealousy. Earlier that morning, Rodolfo had arrived at the inn himself, and when he now emerges to speak with Marcello, Mimì conceals herself and overhears their conversation. Rodolfo tells Marcello that he wants to leave Mimì because of her flirtatious behavior. Finally, he confesses that she is mortally ill and admits his guilty feelings; he knows that the harsh conditions of their life together have undoubtedly worsened her health. Hearing Mimì's coughing, Rodolfo suddenly realizes that she has overheard everything. The two lovers pledge to stay together until spring, while Marcello and Musetta argue viciously and separate.

## Intermission

**ACT IV:** Rodolfo and Marcello, now separated from Mimì and Musetta, again attempt to work in their garret. Schaunard and Colline arrive with supper, and the four fantasize about attending a fancy ball and then enact a mock duel. Suddenly, Musetta enters with Mimì, who is near death and wants to be with Rodolfo. Musetta and Marcello leave to sell some of their possessions in order to buy Mimì medicine and a muff, and to summon a doctor. Colline also departs to sell his coat for needed money. Left alone for a few moments, Mimì and Rodolfo reminisce about their first meeting and their love. The others return, but before the doctor can arrive, Mimì dies.



Illustration by Montader for *Scènes de la vie de bohème*:

"Musetta waters flowers in the middle of the night. She had told Marcel that she would stay with him as long as the flowers lived, and each evening without his noticing she got out of bed to care for them."

Adapted from New York City Opera

# Characters of the Opera

**Rodolfo** [roh-DOHL-foh] *tenor*

A struggling poet and playwright who lives with three friends; he falls in love with Mimì at first sight.

**Mimì** [mee-MEE] *soprano*

A frail seamstress who falls in love with Rodolfo instantly when they meet by accident. She is dying of consumption (tuberculosis).

**Marcello** [mar-CHEHL-loh] *baritone*

One of the four friends who live in a very shabby room in Paris; a painter. He still has feelings for Musetta, his former girlfriend.

**Musetta** [moo-ZEHT-tah] *soprano*

A flirtatious singer and Marcello's old girlfriend. She is still in love with him.

**Colline** [koh-LEE-neh] *bass*

One of the four friends, a philosopher.

**Schaunard** [shoh-NAHR] *baritone*

One of the four friends, a musician.

**Benoit** [ben-WAH] *bass*

The four friends' landlord.

**Alcindoro** [ahl-cheen-DOH-roh] *bass*

A wealthy older gentleman. One of Musetta's many admirers.

**Parpignol** [par-peen-YOHL] *tenor*

A toy vendor.

Boy *treble*  
 Customs house sergeant *bass*  
 Customs officer *bass*

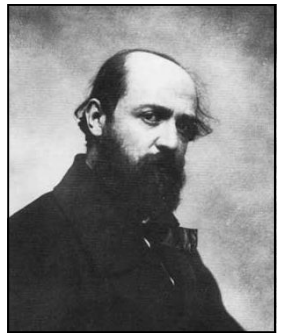
Townsppeople  
 Soldiers  
 Servants  
 Students  
 Street vendors  
 Café customers  
 Waiters  
 Working girls  
 Gendarmes  
 Street sweepers  
 Customs officers  
 Children

## La bohème Librettists

Luigi Illica (1857-1919)  
 Giuseppe Giacosa (1847-1906)

Puccini was as concerned about the quality of the librettos of his operas as he was about their musical scores. Illica and Giacosa, both established and accomplished playwrights in their own right, were Puccini's most celebrated librettists. They collaborated with him on three of his greatest successes: *La bohème* (1896), *Tosca* (1900), and *Madama Butterfly* (1904).

## Who was Henry Murger?



Henry Murger  
 1822—1861

Puccini based *La bohème* on the novel, *Scènes de la vie de la bohème*, by the French writer Henry Murger (who changed his name to Henri Mürger). Mürger, himself a member of the young artistic community of Paris, which was often called *bohémien* (bohemian in French means gypsy), first published the stories found in his novel in the magazine *Le Corsaire* between 1845 and 1848. In those stories, Mürger focused on the lives of struggling young artists and writers, living and loving in conditions of abject poverty. Mürger's unvarnished depiction of the everyday lives of lower-class Parisians appealed to Puccini's desire to bring *realism* or *verismo* to the operatic stage. Additional works have been inspired by *Scènes de la vie de la bohème*: an opera by Ruggero Leoncavallo, an MGM silent film, a British film called *Mimi*, a jazz album by pianist Dave Burrell, the Broadway musical *Rent* by Jonathan Larson, and the 2001 film *Moulin Rouge!*

*Bohemia, bordered on the North by hope, work and gaiety, on the South by necessity and courage; on the West and East by slander and the hospital.*

Henry Murger

## French Pronunciations related to La bohème

*La bohème* lah boe-EM  
 Henry Murger aw-REE meur-ZHAY  
 Café Momus kah-FAY moh-moos

## Italian Pronunciations related to La bohème

Giacomo Puccini JAW-koh-moh poo-CHEE-nee  
 Luigi Illica LWEE-jee EEL-lee-kah  
 Giuseppe Giacosa joo-SEP-peh jah-KOH-zah