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 Miserables 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.

Paris in the 1890s

During the last half of the 19th 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.

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.
**La bohème Synopsis**

**Characters of the Opera**

**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?**

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 terms), first published the stories found in his novel in the magazine *Le Corsoire* 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*, and a jazz album by pianist Dave Burrell, the *Broadway musical Rent* by Jonathan Larson, and the 2001 film *Moulin Rouge!*

**French Pronunciations related to La bohème**

La bohème lah boe-EM

Henry Murger aw-REE-zhay

Café Momus kah-FAY moh-moes

**Italian Pronunciations related to La bohème**

Giacomo Puccini JAW-koh-moh poo-CHEE-nee

Luigi Illica LHAY-jee EEL-lee-kah

Giuseppe Giacosa joo-SEP-peh jah-KOH-zah