RENT and La bohème: Similarities

by Jill Leahy

Jonathan Larson was an American playwright and composer who was born in New York in 1960. He is known for creating the Broadway musical RENT, which was a modern reimagining of Puccini's tragic opera La bohème, set in New York's East Village. Larson starting writing the songs in 1984 while supporting himself by waiting tables in a diner—life imitating art. After many iterations and workshop productions, RENT finally had its last rehearsal on January 24, 1996 before opening off-Broadway. Sadly, shortly after giving his final interview about the show, Larson died suddenly at the age of 36 of a previously undiagnosed aneurysm. Ironically, RENT opened in February 1996, 100 years after La bohème. The show was an immediate sell-out success and moved to Broadway in April 1996, where it had a 12-year run of 5,123 performances, the ninth longest-running Broadway show at the time.

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Study Guide to the Opera

La bohème Universal Themes:

From the Latin Quarter to the East Village

Young love. Poverty. Freedom from conventional life. Sacrificing for “ART.” Comraderie. Pursuing pleasure. Untimely death. All these ideas are associated with the word “bohemian” and most often used with artists, writers, and anyone who pursues an artistic career. It seems like every era in history has a counter-culture movement; some of these same themes played out in what was called the “Beat” movement in the 1950s, and the “Hippie” culture in the 1970s. Most recently, it was a key influence in the award-winning 1996 Broadway rock musical RENT by Jonathan Larson.

Henri Mürger, a French writer, is credited with being the first to write about the bohemian movement in a set of short stories serialized in 1846. Called Scènes de la vie de bohème, the stories portrayed the lives of young artists, writers, and those who liked to think of themselves as social rebels preferring to live in poverty rather than giving in to the strictures of conventional thought. It wasn’t until Mürger turned the stories into a popular play in 1849 and then a novel in 1851 that the “bohemian culture” really gained notoriety. Perhaps remembering his own student days in Milan, Giacomo Puccini conceived of creating an opera on the theme. His biography tells of a time when he had to save centesimi (the Italian equivalent of pennies) in order to go to a café. Once he even pawned a coat (like his character Colline) in order to take a ballet dancer out to dinner.

Puccini's opera, La bohème, premiered in 1896 at the Teatro Regio in Turin, Italy, famously conducted by a young Arturo Toscanini. It was not an immediate success with critics, with Carlo Bersezio from La Stampa saying, even as it leaves little impression on the minds of the audience, will leave no great trace upon the history of our lyric theater.” Audiences, however, embraced the opera almost immediately and it continues to be part of the standard opera repertoire around the world. It is the most-performed opera in the history of the Metropolitan Opera, and in the 2013 season alone it had 471 performances worldwide.

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La bohème Synopsis

Setting: Paris, c. 1830.

ACT I
In their Latin Quarter garret on Christmas Eve, the painter Marcello and poet Rodolfo try to keep warm by burning pages from Rodolfo’s latest drama. They are joined by their comrades—Colline, a young philosopher, and Schaunard, a musician who has landed a job and brings food, fuel, and funds (Legna! . . . Sigari!). While they celebrate their unexpected fortune, the landlord, Benoit, arrives to collect the rent. Plying the older man with wine, they urge him into all of his flirtations, then throw him out in mock indignation. As the friends depart for a celebration at the nearby Café Momus, Rodolfo promises to join them soon, staying behind to finish writing an article. There’s another knock; a neighbor, Mimi, says her candle has gone out on the drafty stairs. Offering her wine when she feels faint, Rodolfo relights her candle and helps her to the door. Mimi realizes she has dropped her key, and as the two search for it, both candles are blown out. In the moonlight the poet takes the girl’s shivering hand (Che gelida manina “What a cold little hand”) telling her his dreams. She then recounts her solitary life (Si, mi chiamano Mimi “Yes, they call me Mimi”), embroidering flowers and waiting for spring. Drawn to each other, Mimi and Rodolfo leave for the café (O soave fanciulla “Oh lovely girl”).

ACT II
Amid shouts of street hawkers, Rodolfo buys Mimi a bonnet near the Café Momus and introduces her to his friends. They all sit and order supper. A toy vendor, Papignol, passes by, besieged by children. Marcello’s former lover, Musetta, enters on the arm of the elderly, wealthy Alcindoro. Featuring Alcindoro to fetch a new pair, then falls into Marcello’s arms. The Bohemians leave Alcindoro to face the bill when he returns.

ACT III
At dawn on the snowy outskirts of Paris, a Customs Officer admits farm women to the city. Musetta and revelers are heard inside a tavern. Soon Mimi walks by, searching for the place where the reunited Marcello and Musetta now live. When the painter emerges, she pours out her distress over Rodolfo’s incessant jealousy (Mimi! . . . Speravo di trovarti qui) “I was sure he’d come.” It is best they part, she says. Rodolfo, who has been asleep in the tavern, is heard, and Mimi hides; Marcello thinks she has left. The poet tells Marcello he wants to separate from his fickle sweetheart. Pressed further, he breaks down, saying Mimi is dying; her ill health can only worsen in the poverty they share. Overcome, Mimi stumbles forward to bid her lover farewell (Addio . . . D’onde lieta uscì al tuo grido) as Marcello runs back into the tavern to investigate Musetta’s raucous laughter. While Mimi and Rodolfo recall their happiness, Musetta quarrels with Marcello (Dunque è proprio finite) “That’s the end for us.” The painter and his mistress part in fury, but Mimi and Rodolfo decide to stay together until spring.

ACT IV
Some months later, Rodolfo and Marcello lament their loneliness in the garret (O Mimi, tu più non torni) Colline and Schaunard bring a meager meal. The four stage a dance, which turns into a mock fight. The merrymaking is ended when Musetta bursts in, saying Mimi is downstairs, too weak to climb up. As Rodolfo runs to her, Musetta gives Mimì a muff to warm her hands and prays for her life. Mimi dies quietly (Dorme? . . . Riposa), and when Schaunard discovers she is dead, Rodolfo runs to her side, calling her name.

Characters of the Opera

Rodolfo [roh-DOHL-foh] tenor
A struggling poet and playwright who lives with three friends; he falls in love with Mimi at first sight.

Mimi [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-foh] 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.

Papignol [par-peen-YOL] tenor
A toy vendor.

Boy
Customs house sergeant
Treble
Bass
Bass

Townspeople
Waiters
Working girls
Working girls
Gendarmes
Solders
Gendarmes
Servants
Students
Street vendors
Street sweepers
Customers officers
Café customers
Children

Meet the Composer and the Librettists

by Jill Leahy

After Verdi, Giacomo Puccini (1858-1924) is considered the most important composer of Italian opera. He is credited with bringing the verismo style to opera because his subjects and characters portray everyday life. Puccini’s operas are known for their memorable melodies that are even recognizable to people who don’t listen to opera. Remember the music that soared in the background in the movie Moonstruck?

There’s a funny story surrounding the creation of La bohème. In 1893, while lunching in a café in Milan with friend and fellow composer Ruggero Leoncavallo (most noted for his opera Pagliacci) Puccini let it slip that he was working on an opera based on Mürger’s stories. Furious, Leoncavallo reminded Puccini that he had offered him a libretto for an opera called La bohème just a year before and that Puccini had rejected it. Tempers flared and Leoncavallo walked out, promptly sending a notice to the newspaper announcing his intended new opera. Puccini also submitted a notice to the paper saying that he had been working on an opera based on Mürger’s stories. As comments flew back and forth about who was first, Puccini finally wrote: “Let him compose and I will compose and the public will judge. Precedence in art does not imply that one must interpret the same subject with the same artistic ideas.” Puccini’s La bohème was the first to be presented in 1896. Premiered in 1897, Leoncavallo’s opera was initially well received, but it faded quickly. Puccini’s version has become a standard in the operatic repertoire; Leoncavallo’s opera is rarely performed.

After achieving great success with his opera Manon Lescaut, Puccini collaborated enthusiastically with the writers Giuseppe Giacosa and Luigi Illica. Puccini was a genius at knowing what worked on stage, a fact that often drove his librettists to complain loudly to music publisher Giulio Ricordi. In the case of La bohème, with Illica supplying the detailed dramatic prose structure, and Giacosa the “versifier” ensuring the literary quality of the text, it still took nearly three years for the librettists to satisfy Puccini and for him to compose the opera. In spite of these relationship complications, this talented trio went on to collaborate on Tosca and Madame Butterfly.

Courtesy of Opera News

Puccini, Illica, Giacosa