

Dove l'uomo è fascino e la donna è l'alare: the Quiet Defiance of Puccini's La Bohème

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In stark contrast to the remainder of the standard operatic repertoire, instead of babies thrown into fires, sons in love with their mother-in-law, mystical rings of fire, head-cutting, suicide, self-sacrifice, or spontaneous expiration through excess of emotion, Puccini's *La Bohème* presents us with an opera where a sick girl gets sicker and dies. "No one is evil; it is the opera of innocence... - as if there were no responsibility, as if nothing happened other than this great cold, freezing them all, which one of them, a woman, cannot withstand" (Clément 83). More simply put, *Bohème*'s plot is "boy meets girl, girl dies" (Berger 109).

While this lack of momentous action might make *Bohème* seem an unlikely candidate for an operatic innovation, I argue that the opera's quiet insurrection against its genre and tradition becomes apparent when its heroine, Mimi, is closely examined. In constructing Mimi, Puccini has deviated from the expectations of genre, gender, and disease narrative typically found in nineteenth century Italian operas, creating an operatic heroine that escapes the typical dramatic formulations of her predecessors: "She does not do anything. She waters her flowers at the window, she embroiders silk and satin for other people, that is all" (Clément 84). By highlighting these subtle but radical uniqueness in the way Mimi as a heroine is treated by other characters in the opera and by us as an audience, I offer a new reading of *Bohème* that recognizes the work as an innovative text, "the first Italian opera in which the artificialities of the medium is so little felt" (Budden 180). Taking Budden's observation to heart, I hope to reveal *Bohème* as an opera

that operates outside of the conventional dramatic formula and enables instead a new frontier for narrating both an operatic woman and an operatic death.

Scholars of Italian opera seem to disagree on exactly what constitutes a *verismo* opera, and, subsequently, which works to include under the label. Even a text supposedly definitive as *The Oxford Dictionary of Music* asks “and where does one draw the line—is *La Traviata* not *verismo*? ... *Jenufa*? What about *Peter Grimes*?” (936). Unlike the operas that typify the *verismo* genre, namely *Cavalleria Rusticana*, *I Pagliacci*, and Puccini’s own *Il Tabarro*, *Bohème* seems to lack the intense murder scenes considered to be requisite of *verismo*. It instead falls into a category of a tame, murderless non-comic Italian opera where it shares few peers, if any. Abbate and Parker statement in *A History of Opera* that “narrative wildness... exaggerated coincidence, obscure motivations, and multiple deaths” (12) seems to typify the majority of the operatic repertoire we have come to love today (of these stereotypes, middle Verdi operas like *Trovatore* spring to mind). *Bohème*, on the other hand, seems to rely on the simplest of coincidence: Mimi just happens to knock on Rodolfo’s door that fateful night (compare this to Azucena mistakenly killing her own baby); our Bohemian characters have dramatic motivations that are down to earth: their dramatic concern surrounds food, warmth, and merry youth (and does not involve decades of intricately plotting a vengeful murder); and the opera’s death is singular (who does not die by the end of *Trovatore*?) Mosco Carner, too, notes this peculiarly tame plot: “the sequence of acts is loose, there is no strong dramatic motive to propel the action, nor do the characters develop, but remain passive figures to whom things just happen” (364). Indeed, if a viewer considers the distinct hallmark of a *verismo* opera like *Cavalleria Rusticana* to be its everyday-wretched realism (jealous knife fight among Sicilian peasants), the same would

consider *Bohème* (friends go to dinner and joke around until one of them dies) to be simply mundane.

To understand *Bohème* in this sense, however, is to fault it for what is intentionally lacking, and to judge its nonconformity to operatic conventions as Puccini's incapability is rather unfair and reductive, since he has certainly demonstrated his mastery of the *verismo* in subsequent works like *Tosca* and *Il Tabarro*. *Bohème* resists genre classification not because it is plain and simple, a transparent work, but because the way it operates runs counter to much of the dramatic framework conventionally used to create Italian opera. It does not fit in because it revolts. Through exploring the ways *Bohème* consciously resists the violent plot conventions of *verismo* operas, the gendered dramatic framework of Italian operas, the feminine subject position theory, and the star power system of today's opera houses, we will understand *Bohème's* mundanity, its lack of gypsy baby killings, not as Puccini's failure to create drama, but rather as his resistance to the excesses of operatic convention. *Bohème's* lack of secret affairs, jealous rage, and knife stabbings enables space in the dramatic framework for the construction of gender and disease narrative that deviates from operatic norms. When *Bohème* is viewed in this light, we will see its strangeness not as a deficiency, but rather a quiet revolution, a testament to Puccini's creation of an opera where "a real dramatic conflict is missing, the tragic element is entirely created by Mimi's illness" (Marggraf 67).

It is very easy to associate the *verismo* genre with violent killings. Both *Cavalleria Rusticana* (1890) and *I Pagliacci* (1892), two early *verismo* operas that today have come to define the genre, feature bloody endings that capitalize on the shock effect of romantic betrayals that end in enraged stabbings. To locate *Bohème's* sense of *verismo* against these operas, then, is to find little commonality. All three operas present the plight of the poor and utilize

contemporaneous musical techniques (note the famous *quasi-parlato* ending of all three), but Mimi's tame death does not go hand in hand with Alfio's knife fight with Turiddu or Canio's murder spree. We should instead trace *Bohème's* roots in the verismo movement not to its Italian origins, but to the veristic source of the movement itself in French Naturalism. It is important to note that both *Cavalleria* and *Pagliacci* locate their source texts firmly within an Italian origin: *Cavalleria* is based on a novella by Giovanni Verga, while *Pagliacci* is a semiautobiographical work by Leoncavallo himself. *La Bohème*, on the other hand, takes its source material from Henri Murger's *Scènes de la vie de Bohème*, and its stage adaptation by Theodore Barriere, with Murger's assistance. Considering the difference in these source texts, *Bohème* aligns itself more with its French roots rather than the Italian one, indeed tracing its veristic element not to the jealous stabbings of the Italian countryside, but rather its origin in French Naturalism.

Think about the paintings of the Naturalist painters Courbet, Millet, or Daumier, for example, where one can definitely locate this original root of everyday timidity that can be found in *Bohème*. Looking at the women sitting in trains in Daumier's painting, the viewer may easily imagine many of them as seamstresses who could very easily say "la storia mia è breve, a tela o a seta ricamo in casa e fuori." Perhaps it is no coincidence that *Bohème's* famous Café Momus, setting of Act II, is the very spot in Paris where Gustav Courbet and Henri Murger themselves frequented together (Byam 116). Courbet's portrait of a "Sleeping Spinner" or Millet's "The Seamstress" are exact representations of Mimi's colleagues in profession. One only needs to add the frailty of disease to her frame to imagine her as Mimi.

Furthermore, Puccini's rejection of Italian veristic violence as the basis for his new opera is evident in his decision to reject Giovanni Verga's *La Lupa* as a potential source text. Until 1892, Puccini worked on *La Lupa* alongside *La Bohème*, two concurrent projects drawing

separately from both the Italian *verismo* and French Naturalism. Only after visiting Sicily and conversing with Verga is he convinced that *Bohème* was the more suitable text, and scrapped the working libretto for *La Lupa* (Groos 34). Although both genres fall neatly under the broad definition of Realism, they are inherently differentiated by the tame everydayness that is a facet of French Naturalism and the stark violence of its Italian counterpart. In this sense, *Bohème* is a *verismo* opera that draws its character straight from the source of *verismo* itself, French Naturalism, far removed the Italian essence of violence as developed by Verga and musicalized by Mascagni and Leoncavallo.

But *Bohème's* refusal to be Italian does not stop here. Resulting from its nonconformity to the expectations of a *verismo* plot, it also fails to adhere to the expectations of gender roles in the operatic tradition. Catherine Clément in *Opera, or the Undoing of Women* points at a dramatic trait that unites the nineteenth century Italian repertoire: “from the moment women leave their familiar and ornamental function, they are to end up punished” (7). For Clément, opera structures its drama through representation of male authority asserting force over feminine deviation. In *Feminine Endings*, Susan McClary confirms this theory of masculine domination over feminine excess in musicological terms: “musical devices in opera work to uphold the rectitude and fortitude of men and masculinity, and to suppress the misbehavior of its women... the soprano is a figure of excess, contained by masculine rationality and often subject to narrative death” (81). An audience will immediately notice that *Bohème*, an opera where characters “remain passive figures to whom things just happen” does not operate off of these theories of operatic narrative construction (Carner 364).

It is interesting to note here the uniqueness of this occurrence, that with the sole exception of *Bohème*, the totality of Puccini's operatic output does reflect the gendered theories

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of Clément and McClary. Tosca dares to defy police authority and disobeys her man, her excess is suppressed by police authority, and finding no way out, she commits suicide; Butterfly dares to love an American man, she too is pressured into suicide; Magda is a courtesan who dares to seek true love, with male punishment looming over her, she too succumbs to suicide; Giorgetta dares to have an affair with a young dock worker and finds that she is punished by her jealous husband, with a fate pretty much worse than suicide; Liu the slave girl dares to love her master, a noble prince, and dies as well from suicide. The opposite case, where the feminine works herself out of this system, is also true: Turandot dares to defy the princes who try to claim her, and is initially ruined by it. Only when she relents and gives in to the male kiss does she triumph, accepted back into her community as a princess. Calaf's kiss forced upon Turandot cleanses her of feminine excess and stuns her into submission to the masculine; she is put in her place and becomes acceptable, controllable. This is a woman who survives Italian opera because she is put in her place.

In *Bohème* however, we could hardly fault Mimi for enjoying flowers, springtime, and looking at the sun. Nor can we blame her for leaving a man from whom she is consensually dismissed, and, by loving a poor poet, she does not offend an unacceptable crossing of social classes either. This places *Bohème* in a unique position within the popular Italian repertoire as the opera where the woman's excess is not suppressed by the man - its drama is not constructed around the injustices done to Mimi by the men who surround her. Verdi's *Traviata* presents a compelling comparison where the heroine too is dying from tuberculosis, but in this case, as Clément argues, disease acts merely as a backdrop, a result of Germont's masculine framing of Violetta's sexual excess. Mimi and Rodolfo's love is forbidden, in contrast, not by a figure of masculine authority, but by something simpler, something more natural, disease.

Because of this curiously unblamable heroine phenomenon, lacking in both feminine excess and a masculine framing, nothing gloriously dramatic seems to happen to Mimi. Since there is no male authority looming upon her, trying to control her excess, there is seemingly little conflict to drive Mimi as a dramatic character. These moments of feminine resistance are indeed the kernel of the most intense dramatic constructions in the majority of popular Italian operas throughout the nineteenth century: “Non tremare” and “In mia man” in *Norma*, “Giudici ad Anna” in *Anna Bolena*, “Orsu, Tosca parlate” in *Tosca*, Lucia’s mad scene, the riddle scene in *Turandot*, “Voi lo sapete” in *Cavalleria*, and the intense final scene of *Pagliacci* are but the first examples that come to mind where intense emotions are created in the feminine through a disapproving masculine. Mitchell Morris in *Reading as an Opera Queen* theorizes that the audience, particularly from the standpoint of opera queens, consumes these intense kernels of drama through the alignment of subject position to the heroine in plight (188). For Morris, opera viewing involves placing oneself into the shoes of the heroine suffering on stage in order to experience the betrayal of Bolena or Norma or the frantic outbursts of Tosca or Lucia from the subject position of the soprano. On a more cynical note, Susan McClary calls this occurrence “the illusion of authentic communion” (Clément XV). Ivan Martinson confirms this in “How to Be an Opera Queen”: “at the opera we hear our most extreme feelings take over and work themselves out to just the melodramatic catharsis we can but fantasize in real life, and liberate us, somewhat, from the miasma of reality... Next *Don Giovanni* you go to, identify yourself with Donna Elvira and picture a recent flame as the callous Don” (18). So what does an opera queen do with *La Bohème*, then, if nothing as exciting as the situations mentioned above really happens to Mimi? One finds it hard to locate that feminine excess in Mimi, but finds it instead in Rodolfo.

Wayne Koestenbaum suggests that the subject position of *Bohème* in the final scene can be acquired from the frantic onlooker in Rodolfo, “Rodolfo watches Mimi, and the others watch Rodolfo, so that he too... becomes a public wound” (235). Unlike every other heroine detailed in the pocketbook, Mimi is characterized by the sheer lack of excess. She, in control of her final moments, instead acts as a framing for the excessive and delirious Rodolfo. An access point is therefore available through the tenor hero instead of the solidly in excess Mimi. If for Clément, operatic women “expose themselves to the gaze of those who come to take pleasure in their agonies” (11) then Rodolfo here is the woman, not Mimi, for Mimi does not allow us access into her agony. In her dying moments she claims authority over her disease, even taking control of Rodolfo’s theme, becoming the masculine frame itself, repeating “che gelida manina” in her own voice. This breaks Morris’s rule that “the subject position of the heroine – never the hero – is the locus of investment” (190). By feminizing Rodolfo, Mimi turns her gendered expectation upside down. Puccini creates here an operatic heroine in the position of personal agency, putting the weight of dramatic subject position instead on Rodolfo. While Mimi in the end does not escape death, she escapes what the Italian operatic convention expects of her as a woman.

Another consequence of Mimi’s lack of dramatic excess reveals itself in *Bohème*’s refusal to operate in the operatic star power system of today’s opera houses. Freya Jarman continues McClary’s work by pointing out that while the tenor does indeed triumph over the soprano in terms of situational plot power, in terms of musical, artistic power, it is always the soprano who wins out (Jarman 60). Although the masculine character exists to frame feminine excess, it is in the drama of the feminine in plight that exemplifies operatic art. Nobody is going to swoon over Scarpia’s intensity in his negotiation with Tosca, and it is Santuzza’s torment that we focus on, not Alfio’s. The opera queen does not inhabit the mind of Germont when he

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realizes he has wronged Violetta; the opera queen's subject position is Violetta, the forgiving saint that pardons the masculine authority that has misjudged her. Jarman notes that in the eighteenth century, operatic star power has rested initially with castrati, star of the baroque repertoire, handed over to travesti singers at the end of the castrato era, and finally resting since the early nineteenth century at its current power position in the soprano voice (60). Indeed, the current star power system does not operate in favor of the masculine. Morris confirms this from the opera queen perspective: "male artists are admired... but primary allegiances and identifications are always with the ladies. There is no male opera singer who has commanded the legions of gay male fans that framed the careers of Zinka Milanov, Renata Tebaldi, Joan Sutherland, and Maria Callas" (187). Because Mimi does not provide her audience with an intense kernel of feminine drama, unable to grant us access into her subject position, *Bohème* too displays its defiance in its inability to operate within the operatic star system, refusing to offer the role of Mimi as a prima donna vehicle. Despite being consistently among the top-performed operas each year in the current century (www.operabase.com), *Bohème* is not central to the careers, in some cases only tangential, of Milanov, Tebaldi, Sutherland, Callas, or many of the star sopranos of today. This incompatibility of *Bohème*, its inability to participate in the gendered operatic formula, as well as its star power system, contradicts its enormous popularity within the standard repertoire. It operates in these points outside of the *verismo* as well as the Italian operatic construction, reflecting again Budden's claim that *Bohème* is the "the first Italian opera in which the artificialities of the medium is so little felt" (Budden 180).

This inability to serve as a star vehicle is reflected in the Metropolitan Opera's casting decision: *Bohème's* fourteen performances through the 2014-15 season are split between 6 different pairs of leads, displaying a good mix between new up and coming singers, house

staples, and a rare appearance by a star (Angela Gheorghiu for two performances). No such casting occurs regularly in any other opera of the 2014-15 season, where in the span of a few months the casting turnover would be so rapid. *Bohème* in this sense operates as an opera that can sell itself, rather than opera for the sake of selling singers.

What Puccini achieves here is the creation of a deviant space to develop the character that, he says, “instead of Mimi could very well take the name ‘Ideale’” (Edwards 62). By rejecting the standard dramatic conventions of Italian opera, Puccini allows for the portrayal of an Ideal who doesn’t let herself be pushed to gendered excesses, who can be appreciated for her own self, her truth, and her motivation, as opposed to the gymnastic capabilities of her highly-trained instrument. Mimi becomes the first operatic woman who is able to offer more than merely her femininity. In this sense, Puccini brings out the “verità” of a woman in “verismo” more than the genre was able to previously achieve. His innovation here is a restructuring of the way drama is presented in Italian opera, where instead of an overtly melodramatic plot driven by the suffering of a feminine in plight, he presents in *Bohème* a passive narrative of love and disease.

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