

LIVE FROM LINCOLN CENTER
March 28, 2001 8:00 PM on PBS
New York City Opera
Puccini's *La Bohème*

Our next **Live From Lincoln Center** telecast, on Wednesday evening, March 28, will be devoted to the acclaimed **New York City Opera** production of Puccini's *La Bohème* brought to you direct from the stage of the New York State Theater at New York City's Lincoln Center for the Performing Arts.

We take for granted the primacy of Giacomo Puccini as a composer of operas. Yet in common with many composers Puccini was not an instant success. Two operas he composed in the 1880s, "Le villi" (1884) and "Edgar" (1889), indicated little by way of mastery of the idiom, but they paved the way for his first genuine success, "Manon Lescaut" of 1893. Indeed, a young London music critic named George Bernard Shaw wrote perspicaciously in 1894: "Puccini looks to me more like the heir of Verdi than any of his rivals."

In casting about for his next opera, Puccini and his librettists, Giuseppe Giacosa and Luigi Illica, decided upon a setting of the 1854 novel, "Scènes de la vie de Bohème", by the Frenchman, Henry Murger. Their "La bohème" was three years in the making. After its first performance, conducted by 28-year old Arturo Toscanini in February, 1896, its success can be described as moderate, at best. One local Turin critic even described it as "empty and downright infantile." The press reaction four years later when "La bohème" was performed for the first time by the Metropolitan Opera in New York was not much better: the critic of the New York Tribune described it as "foul in subject and fulminant and futile in its music." He went on to say the work was "silly and inconsequential." But Puccini's publisher, Giulio Ricordi, quickly recognized the value of the opera. Three months after the premiere he wrote to Puccini: "If this time you have not succeeded in hitting the nail squarely on the head, I will change my profession and sell salami."

It need hardly be added that far from selling salami, Ricordi went on to become one of the most successful music publishers in the world. To this day the house of Ricordi continues the traditions of its founders; and "La bohème" long ago established itself as one of the cornerstones of the world's operatic repertory.

The Frenchmen of Murger's original, Rodolphe and Marcel, become, in the Italian of Puccini and his librettists, Rodolfo and Marcello. The second female lead, Musetta (which means bagpipe) is Marcel's on-again off-again lover. She's a gold-digger and man-hunter who refers to her love life as a song--that the rich men she courts for periods of time are the verses, each different, each with its own meaning, but that Marcel is the refrain, constant and always the logical return at the end of each episode. Needless to say, she drives Marcel bananas. In

being deathly ill with tuberculosis, the principal female, Mimi, reminds one of Violetta, the heroine of Verdi's "La Traviata." But the two are vastly different. Violetta has lived a life in the demimonde as a courtesan; Mimi, on the other hand, appears to be naïve and virtuous (though not without some feminine guile!). Further, the incidents in "La Traviata" revolve around the crucial importance of a good name, family and marriage. No such concerns are evident in "La bohème," whose principal characters are true "bohemians" as we understand the word and as defined by Webster: a person (as a writer or an artist) living an unconventional life usually in a colony with others.

The story of "La bohème" is really a simple one, reflecting the "vie de bohème", the bohemian life. Marcello, Rodolfo, Colline and Schaunard--respectively a painter, a poet, a philosopher and a musician--live together in an artists' garret. Mimi, a seamstress who lives upstairs, and Rodolfo fall in love; Marcello and Musetta are former lovers who have had a falling out but who are reunited thanks to some fancy "footwork" on Musetta's part. The crunching poverty to which they are all condemned eventually leads to the death of Mimi, with Rodolfo repeating her name in anguish at the end.

It would be hard to name another opera more abundant in gorgeous melodies than "La Bohème." In Act I, when Rodolfo and Mimi first meet, Rodolfo's melting "Che gelida manina" (Your little hand is frozen) is followed immediately by Mimi's "Si, mi chiamano Mimi (Yes, I am called Mimi), and the act ends with their great love duet "O soave fanciulla (Oh lovely girl). Act II, set in the Cafe Momus, brings Musetta's coquettish waltz "Quando me'n vo soletta" (As I walk alone). In Act III Mimi bids Rodolfo goodbye in the aria "D'onde lieta usci" (Back to the place I left). In Act IV comes Colline's aria "Vecchia zimarra" in which he bids farewell to his coat, followed by Mimi's "Sono andati" (Have they gone) her expression of pleasure at being alone one last time with Rodolfo.

Puccini's "La Bohème" is arguably the most beloved of all operas. It is with excited anticipation that we look forward to bringing it to you Live From Lincoln Center on Wednesday evening, March 28, as performed by the artists of the New York City Opera. I leave you with the usual reminder to check your local station's listing for the exact day and time of the broadcast in your area. See you then!