



OPERA
COLORADO



LA BOHÈME

LA BOHÈME

Dear Teachers,

Opera Colorado is pleased to provide engaging educational programs and performances for students across Colorado. What follows is a guide that we hope you and your students find useful, as we explore Giacomo Puccini's *La bohème*. In the spirit of exploration, we have included various lessons that connect *La bohème* with different subjects of learning.

The lessons reference the Colorado Department of Education's Academic Standards. This does not mean, however, that these lessons should be limited to these subjects. While we would be incredibly pleased if you used these lessons in the exact format provided, we encourage you to expand, alter, and adapt these lessons so that they best fit your students' abilities and development. After all, the teacher knows their students' needs best. We would appreciate your feedback on our teacher evaluation form emailed to you after the performance by our Manager of Education & Community Engagement. We hope that you enjoy all that Opera Colorado has to offer!

THANK YOU!



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PHOTO | Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec, "At the Moulin Rouge" (1895)

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MEET THE ARTISTS



Zach Borichevsky
tenor
Rodolfo
“ro-DOL-foh”



Matthew Burns
bass-baritone
Colline
“koh-LEE-neh”



Raquel González
soprano
Mimì
“mee-MEE”



Alex Granito
baritone
Schaunard
“shoh-NAR”



Timothy Mix
baritone
Marcello
“mar-CHELL-oh”



Oliver Poveda Zavala
bass-baritone
Benoit
“ben-WAH”



Kathryn Lewek
soprano
Musetta
“moo-ZETT-ah”



James Eder
bass-baritone
Alcindoro
“al-cheen-DOR-o”

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CAST OF CHARACTERS

Music by Giacomo Puccini

Libretto by Luigi Illica & Giuseppe Giacosa, adapted from the 1851 novel *Scènes de la vie de bohème* by Henri Murger

Premiered in Turin on February 1, 1896 at the Teatro Regio

- **Rodolfo** – A poet and hopeless romantic, Mimì’s neighbor and love interest.
- **Mimì** – A quiet and kind hearted seamstress, Rodolfo’s neighbor and love interest.
- **Marcello** – A painter and roommate of Rodolfo, still hung up on his ex-girlfriend.
- **Musetta** – A singer and flirtatious it-girl, Marcello’s ex-girlfriend
- **Colline** – A philosopher and roommate of Rodolfo, has fabulous taste in outerwear.
- **Schaunard** – A musician and roommate of Rodolfo, provides wine and food to the group.
- **Benoit** – An eccentric and mischievous man, landlord of the four Bohemians.
- **Alcindoro** – A wealthy and gullible older gentleman, Musetta’s current fling.

DID YOU KNOW?

The characters of Puccini’s *La bohème* are called bohemians.

Bohemianism was and still is considered a social and cultural movement or **counterculture** driven by a desire to live unconventionally and defy societal norms with some avenue of artistic expression involved.

The term emerged in France in the early nineteenth century out of perceived similarities and stereotypes between the urban Bohemians and the Romani people of France (believed to have come to France in the fifteenth century from Bohemia) but soon turned into a catch-all term for any artistically motivated person who has broken away from social conventions through their lifestyle and art. Similar counterculture waves include the beatniks of the 1950s, the hippies of the 1960s and 70s, and the grunge movement of the 1990s.

Vocabulary Highlight: counterculture - (noun) a way of life and set of attitudes opposed to or at variance with the prevailing social norm.



PHOTO | Evan Zimmerman, The Metropolitan Opera

LA BOHÈME

SYNOPSIS

Four acts. Sung in Italian.

SETTING: c. 1930 in Paris, France

ACT I - *The attic of an apartment in Paris' Latin Quarter, rented by four struggling artists.*

It's Christmas Eve and Marcello and Rodolfo are trying to work in their freezing-cold loft. Out of desperation, they decide to burn one of Rodolfo's manuscripts to keep warm. Colline and Schaunard join their roommates in the loft. Schaunard brings food and wine, supplied by his latest job, but the group decides to save it for the days ahead and instead go to the Latin Quarter for Christmas dinner. They are interrupted when Benoit, their landlord, comes to collect the rent. The group is quick to come up with a scheme as they get Benoit drunk, get him to tell of his marital infidelity, and throw him out with mock indignation. The group leaves, except for Rodolfo, who plans to finish his work and join them later. Another knock at the door reveals Mimì, their neighbor, asking Rodolfo to relight her candle. Clearly ill, Mimì faints as she enters the room. Rodolfo helps her up and relights her candle. Their hands touch and they are instantly infatuated with each other. The pair leaves to join the rest of the group at the café.

ACT II - *The Christmas Eve markets in the Latin Quarter in Paris.*

The group arrives at the café and orders dinner. As they eat, Marcello's former sweetheart, Musetta, enters on the arm of a wealthy admirer, Alcindoro. Bored of her suitor and still in love with Marcello, Musetta vies for her ex's attention, eventually reuniting with Marcello. The group escapes through the crowd, leaving Alcindoro to pay their bill.

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SYNOPSIS (CONTINUED)

ACT III - *On the outskirts of Paris in the bitter cold.*

A couple of months later, Mimì seeks out Marcello for some advice. She is worried about Rodolfo's incessant jealousy and wonders if they should part ways. As Marcello comforts Mimì, Rodolfo appears and Mimì hides to listen to their conversation. Rodolfo tells Marcello of his plan to leave Mimì because of her flirtations with other people. Pressed for the truth, Rodolfo reveals he feels guilty that their living conditions are making Mimì's illness worse. Mimì is overcome with emotion, and her weeping and coughing reveals her hiding place. The couple decides to wait until springtime to separate, when the world feels less lonely. Meanwhile, Marcello and Musetta have a fierce argument and split up.

ACT IV - *Back in the garret, some months later.*

Spring has come and Rodolfo and Mimì have separated. Rodolfo, Marcello, Colline, and Schaunard are together in the loft, attempting to forget about Mimì and Musetta. Suddenly, Musetta appears and tells the group that Mimì is outside but is too weak to come upstairs. Rodolfo runs to her aid, and Musetta tells the rest of the men that Mimì requested to be taken to Rodolfo to die.

They all make Mimì comfortable and everyone except Rodolfo leaves to sell their belongings for medicine.

Now alone, Rodolfo and Mimì reminisce about their relationship, but Mimì is overcome with violent coughing. The others return and Mimì drifts off to sleep. Moments later, they realize Mimì is dead, and Rodolfo weeps by her side.

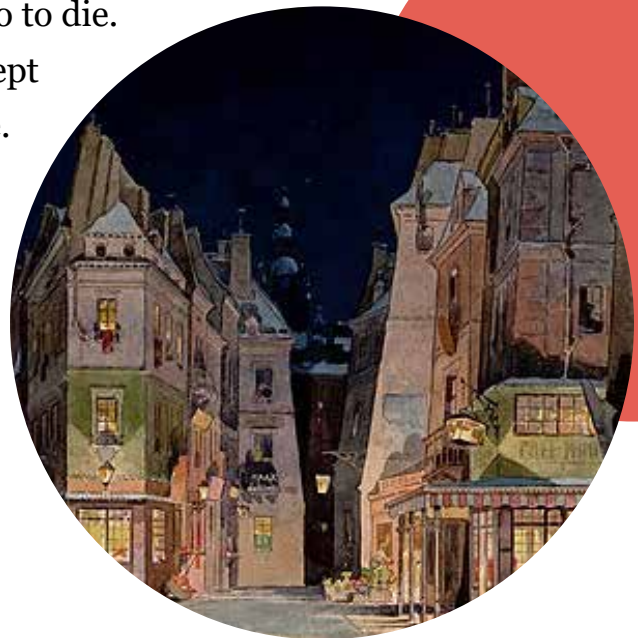


PHOTO | Set design by Adolfo Hohenstein for act 2 in the premiere.

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MEET THE COMPOSER: GIACOMO PUCCINI



Who wrote the music?

**GIACOMO
PUCCINI**

“Art is a kind of illness”

Giacomo Puccini was born on December 22, 1858, in Lucca, Italy. Like many great composers, Puccini was born into a musical family, and it was expected that he would take on the legacy of being the organist and composer at the Cathedral of San Martino just as his father had done. However, Puccini showed very little interest in music as a boy and wasn't a particularly brilliant student in school either. However, his mother, Albina, refused to give up on him and enrolled him in studies with a tutor at the local music school. Over time, he began to show signs of progress, and by the age of fourteen, he had gone on to fulfill his family's legacy as the organist of San Martino.

Puccini's career trajectory forever changed when he and one of his brothers attended a performance of Verdi's *Aida*. They walked nearly twenty miles to the nearby city of Pisa to see it. It was this experience that planted the seeds of what would eventually become a lucrative career

in opera. Motivated by his new passion, Puccini threw all of his efforts into his music in his early twenties. His first attempt at opera came shortly after his graduation from the Milan Conservatory when he composed the one-act opera *La villi* for a local competition. Though the judges weren't impressed, Puccini found a loyal following that ultimately funded the premiere of this work at the Teatro dal Verme in Milan in 1884.

It was this premiere that caught the ear of well-known publisher Giulio Ricordi. Ricordi then commissioned Puccini to compose an opera to be performed at La Scala, one of the most famous and historic opera houses in the world. This work, titled *Edgar*, was a total flop, but this did not shake Ricordi's faith in Puccini. The failure was blamed on the poor *libretto* and so Puccini was determined to find himself some better writers with whom to collaborate. With his successful premiere of *Manon Lescaut* in 1893, he finally felt that he'd found the perfect writers: Giuseppe Giacosa and Luigi Illica.

Between 1896-1904, Puccini composed *La bohème*, *Tosca*, and *Madama Butterfly*. Between 1910 and 1920, he wrote *La fanciulla del West*, *Il trittico*, *La rondine*, and *Turandot*. *Turandot* was Puccini's last attempt to achieve his former fame and glory. Though he passed away in 1923 before he could realize his ambitions, it remains one of the most popular pieces in operatic repertoire today. He left behind twenty-three pages of manuscripts for *Turandot* which one of his contemporaries, Franco Alfano, eventually finished for him. At the time of his death, Puccini had become the most commercially successful opera composer, worth the equivalent of almost \$200 million.

MEET THE LIBRETTISTS: LUIGI ILLICA & GIUSEPPE GIACOSA

Luigi Illica began his literary career in 1879 in Milan, Italy. He was immediately productive and released a collection of prose sketches titled *Farfalle, effetti di luce* in 1882. He followed this with the completion of his first play, *I Narbonnier-Latour*, just one year later. His most successful play wouldn't come until almost ten years later, with the completion of *L'eredità di Felis* (1891). Illica found himself more and more frequently occupied with librettos in 1889. While he is best known for the three librettos he completed for Puccini, he also wrote for several other composers as well, including Giordano and Mascagni. By the end of his career (marked by his enlisting in the military at age 58), Illica had worked on more than thirty librettos.

Giuseppe Giacosa began his career in law. He graduated with a law degree from Turin University and set out to work in his father's firm. His career officially shifted to literature when his one-act comedy, *Una partita a scacchi*, became a success. At the same time, he also held the chair of literature and dramatic art at Milan University from 1888-1894.

With Ricordi having taken the young Puccini under his wing, he was determined to find the best writers for the composer, and he found them in both Illica and Giacosa. The three had a very clear division of responsibilities: Illica would set up an organizational plan for the opera (ie., the division of acts and scenes) and draft the dialogue, Giacosa would transform prose to verse, and Puccini would set the verse to music.

This collaboration ended with the death of Giacosa in 1906. For a time, Puccini continued to discuss plans of turning the story of Marie Antoinette into an opera with Illica, but the project never came to fruition. For his last few works, Puccini turned to other librettists.



PHOTO | Photo of Puccini, Giacosa, Illica. 1900

What is Verismo?

Verismo, or realism, is a late nineteenth century style of opera which depicts ordinary characters and emotions of its time. Subject matter began to stray away from mythical characters and creatures and instead was centered around life in lower classes, local customs, and regional dialect and idioms.

The heroes of verismo operas were rural folk, poor city dwellers, and representatives of bohemianism. Although many scholars have argued that not all of Puccini's operas belong to the scope of verismo, *La bohème* has long been recognized as one of the most successful examples of this style. It is “perfectly realistic” in depicting the lives of several impoverished artists living and working in Paris.

The main element of Puccini's musicodramatic writing has to do with his treatment of the subject matter. Puccini understood that great drama is not necessarily all action, movement, and conflict—it should also include moments of repose, contemplation, and lyricism. This kind of writing highlights the aim of verismo: to explain that life is more than a constant stream of events and to advocate for time for emotional reflection.

DID YOU KNOW?

La bohème served as the inspiration for Jonathan Larsen's 1996 Broadway musical *Rent*. Both shows document the life of a group of artists struggling with poverty and disease (tuberculosis in *La Bohème* and HIV/AIDS in *Rent*); still, the characters are all able to find happiness through love, friendship, and the act of creation. The ease with which the story can be told in either 1830 or the late 1990s highlights the timelessness of its themes. We also have Jonathan Larsen to thank for the concept of discounted “rush” tickets. In order to live the truths of his musical, Larsen wished for the type of people he was writing it about and for could also be able to see it by lifting financial barriers.



PHOTO | Broadway cast of *Rent*, Joan Marcus, 2006

LA BOHÈME

NAME: _____ DATE: _____

Bohemian Word Search

D S E A M S T R E S S Z D A L
R O D O L F O H C T Z F D L D
E Z B H S Y G G B G V R V C V
H A T S I T R A H T G C E I Q
P N S I N G E R J S G S F N P
O F E N I L L O C C F Z Y D Q
S F M W N O I T P M U S N O C
O H E N H N A I M E H O B R G
L R T E O P L R P A R I S O M
I M C A N D L E L I G H T A U
H L I M I M D R A N U A H C S
P T V N A I C I S U M P B W E
C R O U V Y Z H H T B L J M T
A W B O L L E C R A M C M I T
B L O N G I P R A P E R D B A

MIMI
MUSETTA
RODOLFO
MARCELLO
COLLINE
SCHAUNARD
PARPIGNOL
ALCINDORO
PARIS
BOHEMIAN
ARTIST
MUSICIAN
SEAMSTRESS
SINGER
PHILOSOPHER
POET
CANDLELIGHT
CONSUMPTION