

Recondite Harmony: the Operas of Puccini

Chapter 10: *La Fanciulla del West: into the sunrise*

*Waltz in, waltz in, ye little kids, and gather round my knee,
And drop them books and first pot-books, and hear a yarn from me. [...]
O little kids, my pretty kids, down on your knees and pray!
You've got your eddication in a peaceful sort of way;
And bear in mind thar may be sharps ez slings their spellin' square,
But likewise slings their bowie-knives without a thought or care.*

Bret Harte, "The Luck of Roaring Camp" (1892)¹

This scene of rough-hewn Wild West types getting their "eddication" conjures up images of David Belasco's 1905 *Girl of the Golden West*.² The homey narrator of Harte's poem, who does not in fact "sling his spellin' square," manages standard orthography for the words "waltz" and "rhythm," as well as "pray," "parallel,"³ which point to Puccini's *Fanciulla* as well. This opera's score has a rhythmic vitality that is most evident in the many dance patterns in the work (waltz, polka, bolero), and it contains the composer's trademark progressive parallel harmonic constructions as well.

In this chapter, rhythmic and metric aspects of the score will be highlighted, along with a discussion of Puccini's source material in light of the issue of authenticity. In the yarn

¹ Bret Harte also wrote a short story about an independent woman thriving in the Wild West who ran an establishment called the Polka Saloon, and who could have been a model for Belasco's *Girl*: Bret Harte, "Miggles" *Overland monthly and Out West magazine*, 2/6, June 1869: 570-576.

² Belasco's novelization of his play is accessible at: www.fanciulla100.org, along with many source materials for this opera, scholarly articles, video clips and interviews with performers.

³ "The first word out was "parallel," and seven let it be, /Till Joe waltzed in his "double l" betwixt the 'a' and 'e' /For since he drilled them Mexicans in San Jacinto's fight /There warn't no prouder man got up than Pistol Joe that night — /Till 'rhythm' came! He tried to smile, then said 'they had him there.' /And Lanky Jim, with one long stride, got up and took his chair."

Puccini tells us, though, the main characters get more than an education: nothing less than quasi-Wagnerian redemption in a multicultural Far West is the order of the day.

“[the heart is] the metronome within us.”

Puccini, as quoted by Ricci⁴

Rhythmic structures in opera have traditionally been tied both to dance, as in the requisite ballets of French grand opera, and to textual verse forms. Puccini uses some sort of dance in every opera, with formal ballets in *Le Villi* and *La rondine*. In this sense, the composer is tipping his hat to tradition. But, as Greenwald points out, Puccini’s dances are “woven into the very fabric of the drama,”⁵ thus disguising their traditional roots.

As for verse forms, Puccini always requested them from his librettists, but then, as Ashbrook and Powers observe, “once he got what he wanted he chopped and altered lines out of all metric recognition, to suit preconceived musical passages.”⁶ And one need only observe the neat *settenari* lines opening *Tosca* scattered all over a chaotic musical scenetta to see that the forms and rhythmic patterns in Puccini’s music were not controlled by poetic patterns. This was partly the influence of Wagnerian revolution: musical prose and *Versmelodie* trumped traditional poetic meters.

Puccini’s training, as Baragwanath has explored, involved a study of rhythm that was tied to expression and Affekt, in the long Italian tradition. One of Puccini’s teachers in Milan, Amintore Galli, “continued to maintain the distinction between a repetitive pulse,

⁴ Luigi Ricci, *Puccini Interprete di se stesso* (Milan: Ricordi, 1954, Rep. 1980), 12. [il Maelzel che sta dentro di noi]. Dieter Schickling has cast some doubt about the authenticity of Ricci’s remarks in a private communication with this author.

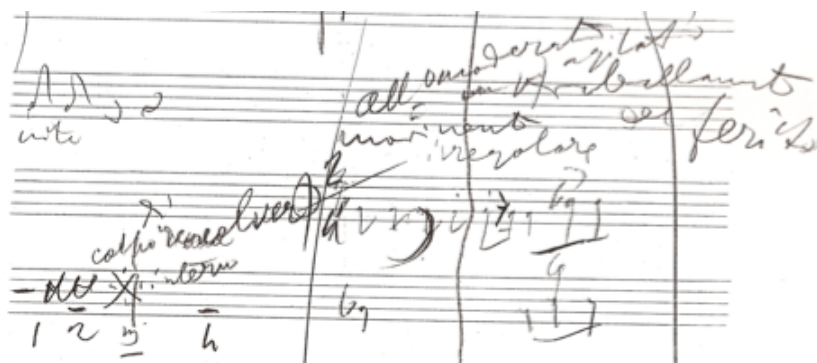
⁵ Helen Greenwald, *Dramatic Exposition and Musical Structure in Puccini’s Operas* (Ph.D. diss., CUNY, 1991), 76.

⁶ William Ashbrook and Harold Powers, *Puccini’s ‘Turandot’: the End of the Great Tradition* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991), 8.

whether comprised of feet or accents, and *ritmo*, which he defined as ‘an aesthetic ordering of a succession of musical values (figures).’⁷ In fact, in notes from this class, Puccini has written down “Music imitates man’s internal phenomena, and it is therefore an essentially subjective product [...] rhythms complete this phonetic [illegible] (images expressed by means of sounds) reproducing the same movements.”⁸

In *Fanciulla*, Puccini seems to adhere to this tradition. He aspires to rhythmic mimesis when he writes that the rhythm at I/58 should be played “imitating a horse’s gallop.”⁹ And, in a sketch housed at the Beinecke Library at Yale University, Puccini works out the rhythm for depicting the moment in Act II when Johnson re-enters Minnie’s cabin after being shot, lurching and stumbling: the composer writes, “irregular movement / staggering from the wound.” [Ex. 10.0]

Ex. 10.0: Puccini’s sketch of *Fanciulla*, II/56, Beinecke Library, Yale University: “Revolver shot off-stage” [colpo revolver interno] / “All[egr]o moderato agitato” / “irregular movement” [movimento irregolare] / “staggering from the wound” [traballamento del ferito]



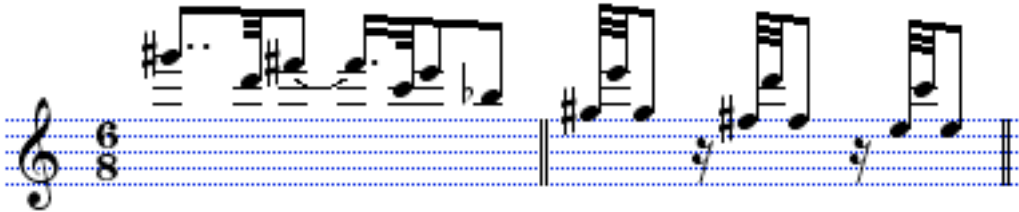
⁷ Nicholas Baragwanath, *The Italian Traditions & Puccini: Compositional Theory & Practice* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2011), 70.

⁸ [La musica imita i fenomeni interni dell’uomo, ed è perciò un prodotto essenzialmente soggettivo, [...] i ritmi completano questa idologia? fonetica (immagini espressa per via di suoni) riproducendo gli stessi movimenti.]

⁹ [Imitando il galoppo d’un cavallo]

We also find unusual meters (such as the marking 5/2 at II/27/2), and odd phrase lengths (such as three-bar units at III/7/6). Syncopation and dotted notes are in evidence almost throughout the work and hemiolas are often part of a theme, such as at the opening of Act II, the rhythm of which Puccini called “grotesque.”¹⁵ [Ex. 10.1]

Ex. 10.1: *Fanciulla*, II/0/3: hemiolas



It is also not inconceivable that Puccini was encouraged to such heights of metric complexity, not only by the many dance themes he had heard in connection with the Belasco plays, but also by the transcriptions of Native American songs he owned. In the Fletcher book, the meter of “Ghost Dance Song,” for example, was transcribed with five-bar phrases, and the lullaby “Kawas, thy baby is crying” shows alternating 6/8 and 9/8 meters;¹⁶ the Curtis collection also contains many examples of such indirect metric dissonance, such as the transcription of “Kisaka: Woman’s Song of Rejoicing” that alternates 2/8 and 3/8.¹⁷

“Atmosphere, it does not exist in life—only in literature”

se non fosse stato il solito pudore che lo teneva lontano da ogni apparente stramberia avrebbe voluto scrivere così.] Ricci, *Puccini*, 162. Puccini did make some innovations in his writing technique for this opera, however. As Girardi observes, he uses a graphic sign for the first time at I/88/14 indicating sliding off a note: this will appear in a later opera, as the dying Suor Angelica sees her child. Michele Girardi, *Puccini: His International Art* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2000), a translated and slightly revised edition of *Giacomo Puccini: L'arte internazionale di un musicista italiano* (Venice: Marsilio, 1995), 304.

¹⁵ Puccini: “The second act, in Minnie’s cabin, opens with a duet of Indian servants, a short page of staccato music with a rhythm which has a strain of the grotesque.” *New York Times*: “Puccini here; his opera views,” 18 November 1910.

¹⁶ Alice C. Fletcher, *Indian Story and Song from North America* (Boston: Small, Maynard, 1900). 100 and 109.

¹⁷ Natalie Curtis, *The Indian’s Book* (New York and London: Harper, 1907), 135.

- Puccini¹⁸

The first account of Puccini's interest in the American Wild West comes from a letter he wrote to his brother after seeing Buffalo Bill's traveling show in Milan, twenty years before the premiere of *La Fanciulla del West*:

Buffalo Bill was here, which I liked. Buffalo Bill is a group of North Americans with a quantity of Indian redskins and buffalos that perform splendid shooting tricks, and truly represent scenes from the frontier.¹⁹

In the letter cited above, Puccini writes of Buffalo Bill "truly" representing scenes from the West,²⁰ a statement that summons up issues of authenticity in the composer's own work. As we shall see below, Puccini had access to—among his many musical sources—Native American songs transcribed and published in early collections by Natalie Curtis and Alice Fletcher and, most probably, by the Wa-Wan Press.²¹ However, these borrowed

¹⁸ Interview with *The Evening Mail*, 19 November 1910, three weeks before the premiere of *Fanciulla*.

¹⁹ [C'è stato qui Buffalo Bill che mi piaque. Buffalo Bill è una compagnia di americani del Nord, con una quantità di indiani pellirosse e di bufali, che fanno dei giuochi di tiro splendidi e riproducono al vero delle scene successe alla frontiera.] Letter to brother Michele Puccini, 24 April 1890, in Eugenio Gara, ed. *Carteggi Pucciniani*. (Milan: Ricordi, 1958), 38. Before choosing Belasco's *The Girl of the Golden West* for a subject, he wrote "I like the West as a setting, but in all the plays I have seen I've found only a few scenes here and there. Never a simple plot, all a jumble, and, at times, in bad taste and old-fashioned [...] Before leaving, I should have a conversation with Belasco, but I don't have much hope." Puccini to Tito Ricordi, New York, 18 February 1907 Gara, 340-341. [L'ambiente del West mi piace, ma in tutte le 'pièces' che ho visto ho trovato solo qualche scena qua e là. Mai una linea semplice, tutta farragine e, a volte, cattivo gusto e vecchio gioco [...] Prima di partire debbo avere un abboccamento con Belasco, ma ci spero poco.]

²⁰ By making a linguistic distinction between "North Americans" and "redskins" this simple quote foreshadows issues raised by the later operatic work that hinge on whether the embarrassingly primitive portrayals of Native Americans in the opera derive from Belasco's drama *The Girl of the Golden West*, on which the opera was based, or whether Puccini himself subscribed to negative cultural stereotypes. For more on Puccini's attitudes toward Native Americans see Linda Fairtile, "Real Americans Mean Much More? Race, Ethnicity, and Authenticity in *The Girl of the Golden West* and *La fanciulla del West*," *Studi pucciniani* 4 (2010): 89-101. The Native Americans in *Fanciulla* speak without articles and in infinitives only, oddly similar to a type of dialogue invented by Puccini's first librettist, Federico Fontana: as Fontana wrote to Ponchielli (19 September 1878) he had learned to write "versi nuovo-modello" without articles and with verbs only in the infinitive. Sergio Martinotti, "Torna ai felici di': il librettista Fontana," *Quaderni Pucciniani* (1992): 57.

²¹ For more information about the Wa-wan Press, based in Newton Center, Massachusetts, which was named for the Omaha ceremony for peace, friendship and song, see Vera Brodsky Lawrence, ed., *The Wa-Wan Press, 1901-1911*, 4 vols. (New York: Arno Press, 1970) and Allan Atlas, "Belasco and Puccini: 'Old Dog Tray' and the Zuni Indians," *Musical Quarterly*, 75/3 (Autumn, 1991): 362-398. Farwell received help from Fletcher, who worked at the nearby Peabody Museum of Harvard University, and used melodies that appeared in her book, Fletcher, *Indian Story*.

musical themes, for the most part, have been removed from their cultural connections and transformed with a musical style redolent of early twentieth-century modernism. The questions then arise: does Puccini's musical packaging damage the contents? Does the thick musical filter through which we perceive these original fragments further damage whatever genuineness they might have retained after alteration by transcription? Or, like a cathedral built around a tiny sacred relic, does their nearly concealed verity claim to confer the mantle of authenticity—and by extension, the modifier “American”—on the opera?²²

The questions of Americanness and authenticity in *Fanciulla* have been particularly critical for North American audiences, and it has been so from the first performance at New York's Metropolitan Opera on 10 December 1910. Perhaps anticipating those expectations, Puccini said, “The music cannot be called American, for music has no nationality—it is either music or nothing.”²³ Yet, listening to Gold Rush miners and Mexican bandits sing in Italian has been a stumbling block to the willing suspension of disbelief for many. This has occurred despite the fact that the art-form of opera as a whole, from the outset, has presented plotlines in tongues alien to the subject matter (Did Orpheus speak late sixteenth-century Italian?).

The choice of an opera's language is usually made to foster transparency for homegrown audiences and, usually, the composer. And as a critic from the *New York Telegraph* noted on the day after *Fanciulla*'s premiere: “The Spaniards of ‘Carmen’ sing in

²² A mismatch between style and content has been present in opera from its beginnings: Jacopo Peri in his preface to *Euridice* writes: “I, ... set notes to the fable of *Dafne*, ... simply as a trial of what the song of our own day could do...abandoning all other manners of singing heard until then.” Translation from Piero Weiss *Opera: a history in documents* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002, 15. [‘io...mettessi sotto le note la favola di Dafne...per fare una semplice prova di quello, che potesse il canto dell'età nostra...tralasciando qualunque altra maniera di canto udità fin qui’, mi diedi tutto a ricercare l'imitazione, che si debbe a questi Poemi.]

²³ Interview with the *New York American*, 1 November 1910, Rome. *The Musical Leader* of 15 December 1910 also reported the following: “Puccini did not write an American opera and no one scouted the idea that he did more than he, when he saw the first billboards in front of the Metropolitan announcing *The Girl of the Golden West* as an American opera. ‘American opera!’ he cried aghast. ‘This is no American opera; it is pure Italian opera,’ and the billboards were changed.” Quoted in Annie J. Randall and Rosalind Gray Davis, *Puccini and the Girl: History and Reception of ‘The Girl of the Golden West’*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005, 133.

French, the Egyptians in ‘Aida’ sing the language of Victor Emanuel, the gods of [the] ‘Ring’—and this is the strangest of all—lisp the mellifluous accents of Goethe and the delicatessen.”²⁴

But many details of *Fanciulla*’s plot—beyond the question of transmission language—are troublesome to American audiences in that they bump up against notions of the West inherited from over a hundred years of cinematic mythmaking. Puccini and his librettists had their own versions of those myths, with Wagnerian overtones, in which the male characters weep for their distant mothers, girlfriends or pets (showing emotions alien to most Western film stereotypes), study the bible, need to be rescued by their women, and ride off into the *sunrise* (that is, they are headed back East), reformed from sin. In most of these films, however, as Jane Tompkins writes, “the Western plot turns not on struggles to conquer sin, but on external conflicts in which men prove their courage to themselves and to the world by facing their own annihilation.”²⁵ And they ride into the setting sun, following the westward frontier.

In fact, however, the historical West of the Gold Rush era—as recorded in first-hand accounts by J.S. Holliday and William Downie—bears more of a relation to the opera’s libretto than to Hollywoodiana. As Downie writes, “I had two married men with me here, whose drinking propensities severely tried my patience. Several times I determined to discharge them, but they always found some excuse. They would generally begin to cry, and between their tears and draughts of whisky, tell me that they had just had letters from home.”²⁶ Holliday too writes of weeping in his diary “I parted from my family completely

²⁴ Algernon St. John-Brenon, *New York Telegraph*, 11 Dec. 1910, quoted in Randall and Davis, *Puccini and the Girl*, 133.

²⁵ Jane Tompkins, *West of Everything: the inner life of Westerns*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992, 31.

²⁶ William Downie, *Hunting for gold: reminiscences [sic] of personal experience and research in the early days of the Pacific coast from Alaska to Panama*. San Francisco: California Publishing Co., 1893, 130.

unable to restrain my emotions and left them all bathed in tears.”²⁷ He writes as well of missing his mother as well as his wife, and the need for religion.²⁸

As in the opera, hard-bitten gamblers did in fact take up collections for the desperate: “Gambling was then carried on on a large scale all over the city [...] The banker would have a little tin cup by his side, in which he would deposit all silver coins under half a dollar. This small change was termed ‘chicken feed,’ and when anybody came in looking hungry or thirsty, and seemingly in want of means to satisfy his cravings, the banker would dive into the tin cup and take from it a dollar or more. [...] There was a certain spirit of magnanimity and generosity, which inspired all who had plenty of money at that time.”²⁹

And there were indeed traveling minstrels. Downie relates that one snowy Christmas Eve in Yuma, one knocked on the miners’ cabin door: “A stranger staggered in, nearly overcome with fatigue, cold and hungry. He carried a violin in a case and was at once made welcome by the miners. [...] He turned out to be Mr. Frank Littleton, the well-known musician, and soon recovering under the influence of an exceeding hospitality, he participated in the entertainment and played the accompaniment.”³⁰ That evening a miner named Fred Stone performed a song he had written in the persona of a dying village maiden. Its sweet sadness recalls the themes of missing mother and friends of Jake Wallace’s song in *Fanciulla*:

Mother, dear, the bells are ringing.

There’s holly on the window pane;

I hear the distant voices singing,

Christmas-tide has come again. [...]

²⁷ J.S. Holliday, *The world rushed in: the California gold rush experience* New York: Simon and Schuster, c1981, 62.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 333-6, 344.

²⁹ Downie, *Hunting for gold*, 13-14.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 194.

Do you think dear friends will miss me,
 When wild mirth will freely flow?
 No more village youth will kiss me,
 Underneath the mistletoe?³¹

Downie also gives a sly account of the punishment for theft, the crime for which the opera's hero Johnson/Ramerez is almost lynched: "It was a process without the expenditure of county money, it chiefly concerned the robbers individually, and the sequence was in nearly all instances certain death. There were no extenuating circumstances to be advanced, when the crime was theft [...] The penal code of the early days in the mining camps was undoubtedly severe, but it was wonderfully effective."³² In the opera, though, Minnie's pleading does save her lover from this end.

* * * * *

The question of musical, rather than dramatic, authenticity in *Fanciulla* is a much thornier issue. In regard to "American" source material, Puccini wrote a letter to Sybil Seligman on 22 July 1907, in which he mentions three sources for Native American melodies: "Thank you for the Indian songs you sent me; I've also written to America to get them—and I await those you promised me."³³ We can determine now that Puccini took some fragments of Native American source material from two early ethnographic collections that are still housed today at the Museo Puccini at Torre del Lago: Alice Fletcher's *Indian Story and Song from North America*, and Natalie Curtis's *The Indian's Book*. It appears likely that the third source included transcriptions and arrangements of Native American melodies published in the Wa-Wan Press by Arthur Farwell, which are not extant in the museum

³¹ Ibid., 192-3.

³² Ibid., 103-4.

³³ Vincent Seligman, *Puccini Among Friends* (New York: Macmillan, 1938), 138-40.

collection.³⁴ Farwell attended the *Fanciulla* premiere as a critic for *Musical America*, and noted with disapproval that two Native American quotations were used inappropriately.³⁵

The opening of Act II of *Fanciulla*, after a modified D major passage interspersed with whole-tone flourishes, shows the squaw Wowkle cradling a baby and singing on repeated Ds and Cs. This bears a striking resemblance to the “Song of the Laugh” from Fletcher’s collection.³⁶ [Ex. 10.2a and b]

Example 10.2

a) “Song of the Laugh”

SONG OF THE LAUGH.
Ponka. He-dhu'-shka.

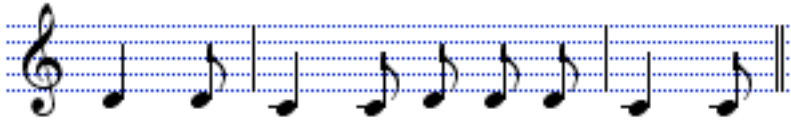
Ha, ha, ha ha ha! Ha ha! hi hi! ha ha! hi!

The image shows a single line of musical notation on a treble clef staff. The melody consists of a sequence of notes: a half note G4, a quarter note A4, a quarter note B4, a quarter note C5, a quarter note B4, a quarter note A4, a quarter note G4, a quarter note F4, a quarter note E4, a quarter note D4, and a quarter note C4. The notes are connected by a slur. Below the staff, the lyrics are written in a stylized font: "Ha, ha, ha ha ha! Ha ha! hi hi! ha ha! hi!".

³⁴ See Atlas, “Zuni,” 362-398 for a discussion of Puccini’s use of a Zuni melody published by Wa-Wan.

³⁵ Arthur Farwell, “The Music in Puccini’s Opera.” *Musical America* 13/6 (Dec. 17, 1910): 5. Farwell’s own arrangements of Native American pieces belie his commitment to authenticity. They are often heavy with chromatic harmonies and modernist touches, and he has admitted to altering his style to fit the American public’s idea of a “savage’s music.” He wrote, “It was at this time that I made my first really savage composition on Indian themes [...] I had earlier inclined to the more pastoral songs and peace chorals, and folks reasoned naively that these could not represent the Indian, since the latter was a savage. Evidently I must reform and do something really Indian. The theme of the *Navajo War Dance* was something to make your blood curdle and your hair to stand on end.” Farwell, “Second Trip West,” in *Wanderjahre of a Revolutionist and Other Essays on American Music*, ed. Thomas Stoner, Eastman Studies in Music IV (Rochester: University of Rochester Press, 1995), 123. Quoted in Michael V. Pisani. *Imagining Native America in Music* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005), 234. Pisani adds, “What was ‘blood curdling’ about the work, however, was not any particular ‘savageness,’ but rather Farwell’s experimentation with modernist techniques in harmony and rhythm in combination with the Navajo song. He peppered his accompaniment with nonfunctional dissonances and varied the length of successive phrases to avoid a sense of predictability [...] The cadences are all on stark open fifths, but the harmonies that accompany the melodic phrases are quite pungent.” In addition, Farwell’s harmonization of “The Lone Prairee,” a cowboy folk-song recorded by Henry F. Gilbert, contains French augmented sixths, half-diminished sevenths, augmented chords, and unresolved sevenths and ninths. Arthur Farwell, *Folk-songs of the West and South: Negro, Cowboy and Spanish-Californian* (Boca Raton: Masters Music Publications, n.d.).

³⁶ Fletcher, *Indian Story*, 13.

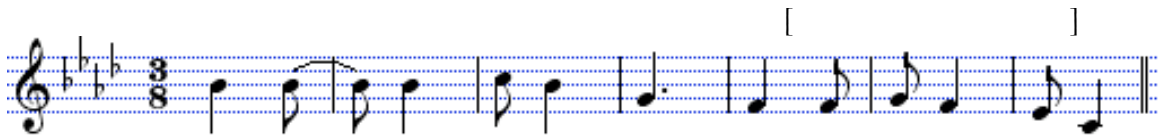
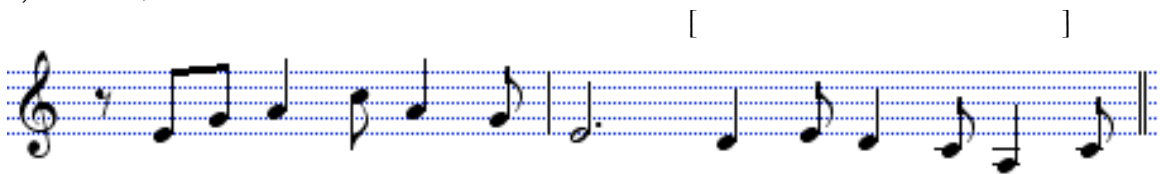
b) *Fanciulla*, II/1/2:

Wowkle's sung text also includes the words "Hao Wari," which are explained in the Curtis book thus: "Hao means sleep, and Wari signifies the rocking motion of the child to and fro."³⁷ It is thus conceivable that Puccini did consult these texts to find music for the opera's Native Americans.

However, there are snatches of Native American melodies from these collections that can be seen to appear in the opera when those characters are not referenced in any way. For example, the last five pentatonic notes of "Wokan Olowan," from the Curtis book, could have been used, transposed down a minor third, during the Act II love scene between Minnie and Johnson. [Ex. 10.3 a and b]

Ex. 10.3

a) Wokan Olowan, Curtis, 77

b) *Fanciulla*, II/22/1

³⁷ Curtis, *The Indian's Book*, 128. Carner cites a melody in Curtis (an "Indian medicine song") as a possible source for lullaby. Mosco Carner, *Puccini: a Critical Biography*. (New York: Holmes and Meier, 2nd. ed., 1974, rep. 1988), 406. The song he cites can be found on Curtis, *The Indian's Book*, 450.

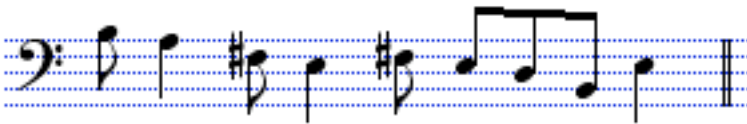
From Farwell's "Song of the Leader,"³⁸ Puccini could have derived a musical moment between Minnie and Sherriff Jack Rance. [Ex. 10.4a and b]

Ex. 10.4a

a) Arthur Farwell, "Song of the Leader"



b) *Fanciulla*, I/64/7



Borrowings seem more probable in the case of Carlos Troyer's arrangements of Zuni melodies, published by Wa-Wan. Here we find the source for camp minstrel Jake Wallace's "Che faranno i vecchi miei," identified by Atlas,³⁹ but also a melody similar to one of the main themes of the opera, which first appears in the prelude at I/0/7, very similar to a medicine song described by Geronimo, according to Curtis.⁴⁰ [Ex. 10.5a-c] Troyer also includes a melody almost identical to one that appears at the farewell to homesick Larkens at I/26/13.⁴¹ [Ex. 10.5d-e]

³⁸ Brodsky, *The Wa-Wan Press*, volume 1, 48.

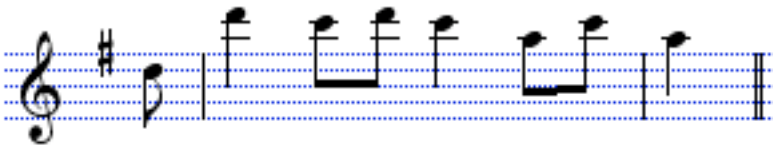
³⁹ Atlas, "Zuni." On page 15 in Belasco's typescript of his play, a copy of which was given to Arturo Toscanini, and which is now in the collection of the Toscanini family, Belasco writes, "Jake sings in the uneven minstrel phrasing"; it is possible that Puccini's unusual phrase lengths in this song reflect that original direction.

⁴⁰ Curtis, *The Indian's Book*, 329.

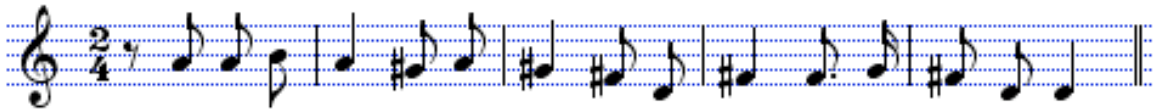
⁴¹ Ricci, reportedly echoing Puccini, calls this the love theme, in its appearance at II/76/0. Luigi Ricci, *Puccini Interprete di se stesso* (Milan: Ricordi, 1954, Rep. 1980), 163.

Ex. 10.5:

a) Troyer: “Zunian Lullaby”



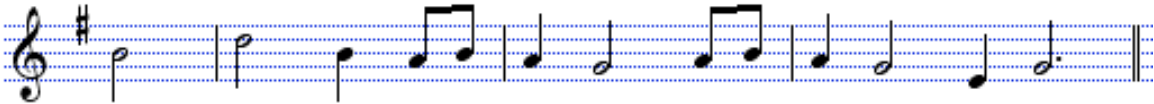
b) Medicine song from Geronimo



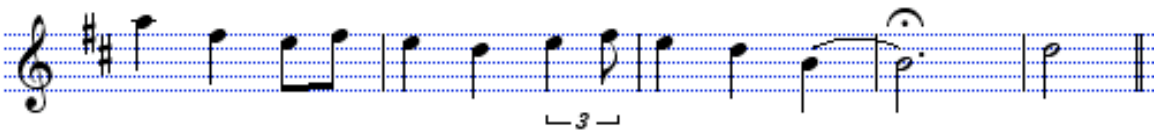
c) *Fanciulla*: prelude, I/0/7



d) Troyer “The Coming of Montezuma”⁴²



e) *Fanciulla*, I/26/13



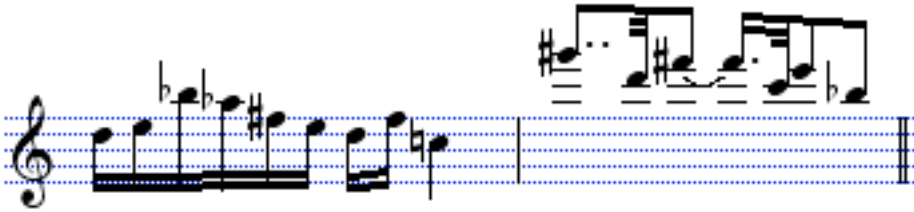
If Puccini used Native American tunes for Anglo scenes, he also did the reverse. Rather than utilizing open fifths and parallel constructions to signify “savages,” as had become standard at that time,⁴³ he associates these Native Americans with the following

⁴² Brodsky, *The Wa-Wan Press*, vol. 2, 156, 173.

⁴³ Pisani, *Imagining*, 228-229: “Following the recognition of the rhetorical power of pentatonicism in the 1890s, three new techniques that developed during this concentrated period contributed to the ongoing syntax in music that reflected native America—all of them in some way derived from folk cultures, though not necessarily American Indian cultures per se. These techniques encompassed (1) melodic parallelisms (also associated with primitivism, alterity, and orientalism); (2) modality (associated with ancientness as well as the sacred); and, less commonly, (3) dissonance (associated with the “rawness” of the primitive experience).... The parallel index entered the American popular song repertory sometime between 1903 and 1909, the same time that indexical Indian features began showing up in this venue.” Randall and Davis see references to cultural stereotypes in this scene: “Puccini uses ‘Indian’ musical conventions that by 1910 had become standard

whole-tone passage—arguably the most sophisticated sort of European music in the opera—while using his trademark parallels and open fifths elsewhere.⁴⁴ [Ex. 10.6]

Ex. 10.6: *Fanciulla* II/0/2-3, scene with Wowkle, whole-tone passages⁴⁵



b) *La bohème*, III/0/0

Also instructive is a comparison between the more typical contemporary depiction of Native Americans, such as C. Harvey Worthington Loomis’s 1904 “Chattering Squaw,” which uses parallel fourths, and a similar passage from *Fanciulla* that accompanies a scene, not between Wowkle and Billy, but one with Minnie and the miners.⁴⁶ [Ex. 10.8 a and b]

Ex. 10.8

a) C. Harvey Worthington Loomis: “Chattering Squaw” from *Lyrics of the Red Man*

b) *Fanciulla*, I/43/4

What might seem to be inappropriate use of cultural musical markers in *Fanciulla*, however, may in fact be a signal of the opera’s overall message of universal harmony and redemption. As Fairtile writes:

A preoccupation with authenticity may blind us to a constructive aspect of

⁴⁶ Farwell wrote that Puccini used “The Chattering Squaw” in *Fanciulla*. Farwell, “The Music in Puccini’s Opera.”: 5. Also see Fairtile, “Real Americans,” 99.

Puccini's golden West...Puccini's conflation of various streams of American musical culture supports the opera's overall theme of reconciliation.⁴⁷

In an interview just before the premiere, Puccini explicitly expressed his desire for a kind of universality in this score, while indicating that his choice of musical motives for the characters had been anything but accidental: "The Golden Girl is human... Love, treachery, death, happiness—these are universal motifs, peculiar to no particular country, period or people, and differing only in the degree of joy or suffering they bring."⁴⁸

If Puccini's goal was to create a type of "melting pot" universality, how do we consider the syncopated rhythm (the so-called "cakewalk" rhythm:



) that has been linked by several writers with ragtime, and thus with that genre's African-American roots? Such a reference seems completely out of place in this opera, since no African-Americans appear, and especially since the motive is usually associated with Johnson/Ramerrez.⁴⁹ Fairtile goes further: "the hot rhythm of Johnson's musical signature unmasks him by evoking such coon song stereotypes as thief, killer, dandy, sexual predator and educated fool."⁵⁰ This appears unlikely, however, as Puccini, despite his interest in this once-popular African-American genre, told

⁴⁷ Fairtile, "Real Americans," 102.

⁴⁸ Interview *The Evening Mail*, Saturday 19 November 1910.

⁴⁹ See, for example, Girardi, *Puccini*, 288-289: "At the end of the prelude a brief fragment appears in cakewalk rhythm: the popular Afro-American dance gives a touch of local color to the statement of the tonic"; Atlas, "Lontano-Tornare-Redenzione," 360: "Johnson...characterized by an aggressively syncopated, ragtime-like motive that suggests something of his reckless abandon."; Fairtile, "Real Americans," 95: "Johnson's cakewalk figure, however, might also be understood as a signifier of his outlaw status, aligning him with derogatory markers of blackness perpetuated by the coon song craze." See also, Fairtile, "Real Americans," 94, or Julian Budden. *Puccini: His Life and Works*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 306, who feels the orchestration gives the passage a Latin American flavor.

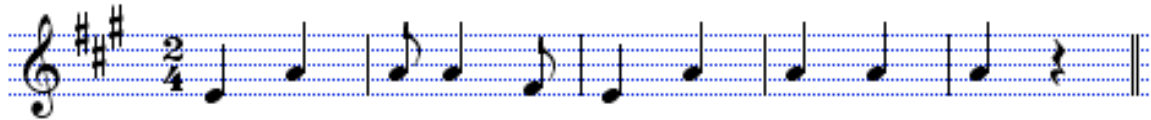
⁵⁰ Fairtile, "Real Americans," 95.

the *Evening Mail*, “There isn’t a coon song in the opera!”⁵¹ Although the rhythm appears at Johnson/Ramerez’s entrance, Randall and Davis point out that Ashby’s appearance is also accompanied by a syncopated motive, and that this rhythmic pattern seems to mark an “aspect of western American identity,” rather than symbolize a single character.⁵²

In reality, we can determine that Puccini found this rhythm associated with *all* the cultural contexts present in the opera: in Native American melodies, and in music associated with Latinos and with Western whites. Three examples of the rhythm appear in Puccini’s copy of the Curtis book of Native American melodies. [Ex. 10.9a-c]

Ex. 10.9: Native American “cakewalk” rhythms

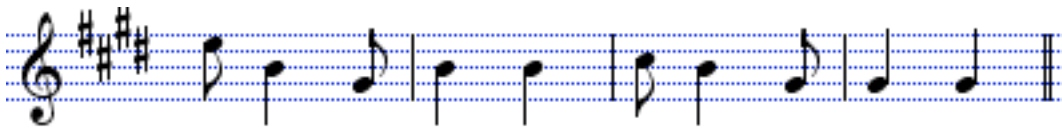
a) “Song of the Buffalo-Hide Ceremony,” Curtis, 203:



b) “Lullaby,” Curtis, 238



c) “Medicine Song,” Curtis, 327



⁵¹ Interview in *The Evening Mail*, Saturday 19 November 1910.

⁵² Randall and Davis, *Puccini and the Girl*, 20. Randall, however, ties Johnson to the “cakewalk” rhythm later in the text, on 131.

Puccini also heard this rhythm in the incidental music⁵³ to two of the Belasco plays he attended in 1907, *The Girl of the Golden West* and *The Rose of the Rancho*, both set in the West of the same period. [Ex. 10.10a-c]

Ex. 10.10: “cakewalk” rhythms in incidental music to Belasco’s *Girl of the Golden West*

a)

[]

Flute

The flute part is written in 2/4 time. It consists of a series of eighth and sixteenth notes, creating a light, rhythmic pattern. The notes are primarily in the middle range of the flute. There are two bracketed sections above the staff, one at the beginning and one towards the end.

b)

[]

Moderato

The Moderato part is in 2/4 time. The bass line consists of a steady eighth-note pattern. The treble line features a more complex melody with some triplets and rests. There are two bracketed sections above the staff, one at the beginning and one towards the end.

c) “Entr’acte”

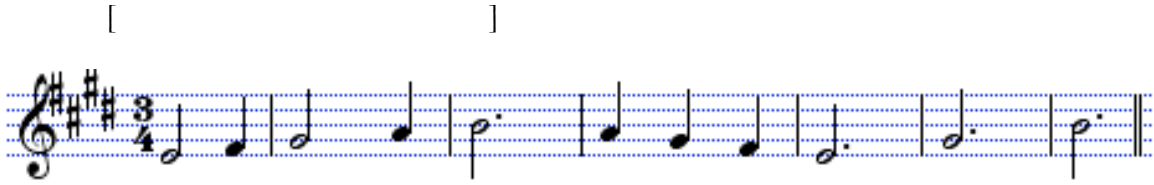
|

Allegro

The Allegro part is in 2/4 time. The bass line consists of a steady eighth-note pattern. The treble line features a more complex melody with some triplets and rests. There is a bracketed section above the staff at the beginning.

⁵³ Incidental music to Belasco’s *The Girl of the Golden West* by William Furst, New York Public Library at Lincoln Center, *ZB3254, reels 1 and 2.

b) Waltz theme from *Fanciulla*, I/86/0:



The numerous dance rhythms in *Fanciulla* might also have been inspired by the plays' incidental music: after attending these two Belasco dramas, Puccini would have heard a cachuca,⁵⁷ two waltzes, a polka, two boleros, a manzanillo, and another habanera.⁵⁸

However, it is not only the recognizable dance rhythms that give *Fanciulla* its metric vitality. Girardi even writes that “the ever-changing rhythm becomes a prominent protagonist, reflecting the onstage situation and the crudeness of the gestures.”⁵⁹ That Puccini gave much thought to rhythmic patterns is attested to by the sketch below, housed at the Museo Puccini at Torre del Lago. At this point in the drama, III/12/4, voices of the miners chime in mostly without specified pitch, yet Puccini has precisely notated the length of each exclamation on plain paper without staff lines. [Ex. 10.14]

⁵⁷ This type of dance also appears in Gilbert and Sullivan's 1889 operetta *The Gondoliers*.

⁵⁸ Belasco was not inventing the emphasis on dancing as a pastime in the period: miner William Perkins kept a journal in which he describes seeing a samacueca (“a kind of minuet”) and the Jaleo. William Perkins, Dale Lowell Morgan, James R. Scobie. *Three years in California William Perkins' journal of life at Sonora, 1849-1852* (Berkeley: U. of California Press, 1964), 163.

⁵⁹ Girardi, *Puccini*, 314.

Carner also mentions having seen some of Puccini's sketches for this opera that showed experimentation with syncopated and dotted figures.⁶⁰

* * *

⁶⁰ Carner, *Puccini*, 408.

“The song tells how, as I sing, I go through the air to a holy place where Yusum will give me power to do wonderful things. I am surrounded by little clouds, and as I go through the air I change, becoming spirit only.”

- Geronimo’s description of an old medicine song⁶¹

After being pressed by his publisher Giulio Ricordi for many years to compose a “grand” opera with substantive moral import, and after a long period without producing a new work,⁶² Puccini turned to *Fanciulla*, “a drama of love, and of moral redemption against a dark and vast background of primitive characters and untrammelled nature,” as the opera’s preliminary note explains. It seems to be Puccini himself who desired this transformation of a straightforward Western romance: as the composer noted in a letter to his librettist Carlo Zangarini in April 1908, “Do not forget to keep an eye on the redemptionist thought, which must hover above the whole work.”⁶³ It was Puccini’s idea to substitute the reading lesson of *Old Joe Miller’s Jokes* with a Bible passage,⁶⁴ and the composer confirmed the powerful influence he had had in this area during an interview given the year after the premiere: “The idea of the heroine as redeemer was given quite a small part: it was I who wanted from the librettists a greater development of this, so that this desire for purification, this breathless panting for a peace won with love and action, would become clearer, more sincere.”⁶⁵

⁶¹ As reported by Curtis *The Indian’s Book*, 329.

⁶² Girardi notes that Puccini looked at more than thirty operas between 1903 and 1910. Girardi, *Puccini*, 262.

⁶³ Randall and Davis, *Puccini and the Girl*, 191. [...non tralasciano di tener d’occhio il pensiero redenzionista che deve aleggiare su tutto il lavoro.] On 153 Randall and Davis write, “While Puccini certainly met his goal of departing from the music of the past, he seemed impelled to wrap his new music, new dramatic conception, and new heroine in the old and very safe audience-pleasing language of Wagnerian redemption.” A fuller discussion of the development of the concept of redemption in this opera, and its context within the American Wagnerism craze can be found in Randall and Davis, *Puccini and the Girl*, 148-169.

⁶⁴ In this sense, *Fanciulla* again conflicts with the standard choices of film Westerns: Tompkins writes that “exchanging the cross for the gun is a theme played out countless times.” Tompkins, 35. However, the Western hero will usually reject religion as presented by “temperance ladies,” a group to which Minnie, as the owner of a saloon, does not belong.

⁶⁵ Interview in *Gazzetta di Torino*, 11 November 1911, 52/311: 3. Quoted in Girardi, *Puccini*, 285. [Era stata data assai piccola parte all’elemento redentore della protagonista: io fui che volli dai librettisti uno sviluppo maggiore

What Puccini intended by redemption in this opera seems to be more of a “reformation” of destructive ways, rather than a Wagnerian release from painful earthly bonds,⁶⁶ although there are many clear Wagnerian references in this work, as we shall see below. Minnie does not really risk her life when she interferes with the near-execution of Johnson, and the lovers do not perish together at the end. And, although they go East into the dawn like the Flying Dutchman and Senta, they are drawing back from the frontier and returning to worldly “civilization.”

Belasco, who directed the opera’s premiere at the Metropolitan in 1910, working closely with the composer, wrote a novelization of his play the following year that adheres more to the Puccinian concept of redemption than his original did. At the close of the earlier drama, Johnson merely tells Minnie, “A new day... Trust me... Trust me... A new life.” Whereas in the final chapter of the later novelization, Belasco shows us a more thoughtful aspect of the now-good badman:

Johnson pondered over the strange fate that had brought him under the influence—an influence which held him now and which he earnestly prayed would continue to hold him—and into close relationship with a character so different from his own. A contemplation of his past life was wholly unnecessary, for the realisation had come to him that it was her personality alone that had awakened his dormant sense of what was right and what was wrong, and changed the course of his life.”

di esso, onde apparisse più evidente, più sincero questo desiderio di purificazione, questo anelito affannoso verso una pace conquistata con l'amore e l'operosità.]

⁶⁶ On the Wagnerian concept of redemption see, for example, Bryan Magee, *The Tristan Chord: Wagner and Philosophy* (New York: Henry Holt, 2000), 178: “Redemption, when it comes at the end of [a Wagnerian] opera, means release from the need to exist at all; and it is made possible for him by the self-sacrificial love of a woman who is prepared, if one may so put it, to share his non-existence with him, which is to say, die for him and with him.”

Despite the differing conceptions of redemption, there are many moments that indicate an attempt at a quasi-Wagnerian opera. Carner writes “like a *dea ex machina* Minnie arrives on horseback—a Valkyrie of the Wild West,”⁶⁷ and like Brunnhilde, Minnie disobeys ethical rules, by lying and cheating at cards to keep her man (yet she remains unpunished). As in *Die Walküre*, a traditional production of *Fanciulla* would have large trees, horses, and a door that flies open at an embrace (this time, however, opening to winter snow, not springtime).⁶⁸ The venal pursuit of gold⁶⁹ and the focus on religion also bring to mind Wagnerian tropes.

Puccini’s use of musical quotations from Wagner’s operas has been discussed above in Chapter 1, including his version of the *Tristan* prelude’s opening motive at the finale of *Fanciulla*’s Act II, harmonized now with tritone-related chords, Eb and A minors.⁷⁰ (See Ex. 1.3e and f) Girardi writes, “The *Tristan* melody provides—to the knowing spectator—a psychological parallel between the ineluctability of the love between Tristan and Isolde, and that of Minnie, who prepares herself for a terrific trial to save the life of the man she loves, and who, like Tristan, is now wounded...Both are unarmed, both struck down by rivals.”⁷¹

⁶⁷ Carner, *Puccini*, 404.

⁶⁸ This last stage action was created for the opera, although in the Belasco drama, when Johnson says “I love you” it is equally earthshaking: “The wind blows the snow against the windows. The vestibule doors slam. The curtains of the bed flap in the wind. A small basket on the wardrobe blows down. A flower-pot topples over. The blankets in the loft flap. The lamps flicker. Suddenly the wind dies down. The clock on the mantel strikes two. The wind begins to rise again.” Belasco, *The Girl*, Act II.

⁶⁹ For some Italians, America’s fixation on lucre was not confined to the Gold Rush era. Puccini’s librettist Ferdinando Fontana visited New York in the late nineteenth century, and wrote: “Business! Business!... ‘Dollars! Dollars’ — These are the imaginary words that seem to echo in the ears of that hurried crowd, with an insistence, with a vigorous crescendo of sound that has no equal in any other part of the globe.” [‘Affari! Affari!...Dollari! Dollari!’ — Ecco le parole che vi echeggiano idealmente nelle orecchie in quelle folla frettolosa, e con una insistenza, con un crescendo gagliardo di diapason che non ha pari in nessun altro punto del globo.] Ferdinando Fontana and Dario Papa. *New York* (Milan: Galli, 1884), 54.

⁷⁰ These same tritone-related pitches, Eb and A, open Act III, although Eb is ultimately renamed enharmonically as D#. Puccini harmonized these two pitch classes with F major (the Neapolitan) and B major (the dominant) of the ultimate tonic, E.

⁷¹ Girardi, *Puccini*, 292. Girardi was first to notice this quotation, and, on page 290, notes that it has a “funeral-march rhythm.”

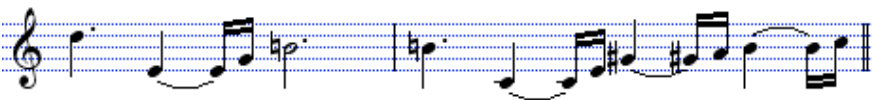
One can also note a similarity between Minnie's theme and a varied version of the *Tristan* motive, both of which are used sequentially. [Ex. 10.15 a and b]

Ex. 10.15

a) Wagner, *Tristan und Isolde*, Act I, prelude m. 24:



b) *Fanciulla*, I/42/0:



Also like *Tristan*, the resolution to the whole-tone “problem” posed by the opera’s prelude arrives only at the end of the third act (see Examples 3.11 and 3.12 above.)

Puccini admitted to concretizing the dramatic theme of redemption into a musical one, which several writers have tried to identify. Girardi and others have asserted it is the prelude as a whole.⁷² But the composer gave an interview to Arnaldo Fraccaroli, published in Milan’s *Corriere della Sera* on 10 October 1910, abridged and translated by the Metropolitan Opera, that belies this idea. Unfortunately the Met’s translation, which was widely disseminated, gives an inaccurate image of what the musical redemption theme might be. A more complete translation of the relevant passage is:

⁷² Atlas feels that there is a “redemption tinta” that includes tonal-diatonic stability, symmetry of phrase, and pentatonicism. Atlas, “Lontano-Tornare-Redenzione,” 360-361. Girardi looks at the entire prelude as “redemptive force”: “The musical mimesis is obtained by having the two chordal phrases in the two dispositions of the whole-tone scale [...] they express an indefinable torment of the soul) followed by a brief diatonic progression that stands out by contrast, the resolution of the indeterminateness of the augmented intervals strengthening its symbolic force.” Girardi, *Puccini*, 286-287. Randall and Davis agree and write “The unsettling sense that everything can change in an instant is conveyed not only by this discontinuity but also by the prelude’s prominent whole-tone oriented motif.” Randall and Davis, *Puccini and the Girl*, 12. But they also write, “the motif appears when the word *redenzione* is sung in act 1 and 3; however, it also appears in other contexts, serving a second function as a signifier of the presence of chance in the lives of the opera’s characters.” *Ibid.*, 14.

The opera opens with a few violent measures; really robust, rather than violent. There are fleeting allusions to some of the more significant themes of the opera; a blaze of energy and a hint of the redemption theme.⁷³

Then, if what Fraccaroli reports the composer says is to be believed, a fragment of the redemption theme appears fleetingly in the prelude, but it is not the prelude *in toto*.

Puccini left us a few additional clues as to what this theme might be. In an interview with the *New York American*, on 1 November 1910, Puccini said, “Here and there popular American airs intermingle, and every now and then the motive of the bandit Ramirez’s [sic] redemption song is heard.” Giving a more specific indication, he added, “The last act lasts only thirty-five minutes. Here all the motives of the opera are woven into a melodic ensemble. Minnie’s strong plea first, and Ramirez’s [sic] redemption song after, dominate the whole scene from beginning to end.”

The only musical passages that appear in both the prelude and the last scene are the sweeping whole-tone gesture that opens the opera, and the neighbor-note theme similar to Zuni lullaby and Geronimo’s medicine song (see Ex. 10.5). If the whole-tone theme stands for a *redemption-cum-reformation*, its resolution to E major at the opera’s conclusion could symbolize a “reforming” of the problematic pitch-class collection to a more civilized diatonicism. On the other hand, if the redemption theme is derived from the lullaby/medicine song, perhaps Geronimo’s description—cited above, and which Puccini could have read—is not inapt: “as I go through the air I change.”

⁷³ [L’opera si apre con poche battute violente: anzi, piu’ che violente, robuste. Vi sono fugacemente accennati alcuni dei motivi piu’ significanti dell’opera; un divampare di energia e uno spunto del motivo della redenzione.] The Metropolitan Opera’s translation reads “the opera opens with a few emphatic phrases; rather than violent, robust. Among them one hears some of the most [significant] motives of the opera; for instance, the motive of redemption.”