Recondite Harmony: The Music of Puccini

Chapter 3: motivic elaboration and the MPI

The difficulty for me is beginning an opera, finding, that is, its musical atmosphere. Once the beginning is fixed and composed, there is nothing more to fear: the opera has been determined and it goes.

To this quote from Puccini, which Adami notes he repeated many times, let us add a statement from Carner: “nearly always Puccini begins with what he called ‘il motivo di prima intenzione,’ the motto theme embodying the work’s essential spirit.” In most of Puccini’s operas, these opening musical statements appear before the curtain opens and thus focus the listener’s ear on the aural landscape before any visual cues are given.

One could argue that Puccini’s “motivo di prima intenzione” [motive of first plan, hereafter MPI] is simply a form of the traditional Verdian tinta (literally, “tint”), a concept resistant to translation. In recent opera scholarship, however, “tinta” has been utilized to a large extent to

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2 Giuseppe Adami, Puccini (Milan: Fratelli Treves, 1935), 103. [La difficoltà è, per me, cominciare un’opera, trovare cioè la sua atmosfera musicale. Quando l’inizio è fissato e composto, non c’è più da aver paura: l’opera è decisa e cammina.] Greenwald discusses both this Puccini quote and the next that Carner reports in Helen Greenwald, “Dramatic Exposition and Musical Structure in Puccini’s Operas” (Ph.D. diss., CUNY, 1991), 1-30. Her analysis compares all the opening curtains in light of many parameters including whether they are tonally open or closed, and the tonal relationships between the initial gestures and the first scenes.


4 Puccini uses pre-curtain preludes in nine of his twelve operas: Le Vili, Manon Lescaut, Tosca, Madama Butterfly, La Fanciulla del West, La Rondine, Suor Angelica, Gianni Schicchi and Turandot.

indicate a general coloration (such as “modal” or “chromatic”) rather than a specific musical structure or texture. Even Abramo Basevi, the contemporary authority on Verdi’s early and middle works, describes “tinta” or “colorito” [coloring] in general terms: “a center toward which the different pieces that compose the opera converge.”

Puccini’s MPI, as proposed here, is a different sort of creature. The word “motive” carried some weight for this composer: although “motivo” is often best translated as “theme” in earlier Italian works (implying a complete melody), by Puccini’s era—thanks to the Wagnerian leitmotiv—it could also mean a short melodic cell. And when Puccini states that he needs the opening of an opera to be “fixed and composed,” it seems likely that he is referring to specific notes, not a general coloration.  

(Autumn, 1998): 533. Julian Budden, in comparing two musically related themes in La bohème also refers to the tinta: “no dramatic significance in the likeness [of the two themes]; it is merely an element in the “tinta” of La bohème, comparable to the four-note motive…in Manon Lescaut” Julian Budden, Puccini: His Life and Works. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 164.

6 Basevi writes, “In the general concept of the drama, however, music finds a foothold, a center toward which the different pieces that compose the opera converge, more or less, according to the ingenuity of the maestro; and then that which is called coloring or the general tint is obtained. But the attainment of this coloring is not the musician’s resolved goal, but rather the means for conveniently associating, with respect to the drama, the various pieces of which the opera is composed [...] the coloring of the music, responding to the subject, although happily appropriate, will also be always too vague to belong to one oratory or another [...] Without doubt the general coloring of an opera reveals more than anything else the ingenuity of the maestro, because it shows a synthesis of his nature. When the maestro is ready to imagine that which is necessary to impart to the music, through the arrangement of notes, the use of harmonies, the choice of instruments, etc., the sought-after coloring, that he created like a type, a rule, an element to which he easily relates the individual pieces, the motives, the accompaniments, etc. From this results a whole that surprises and irresistibly attracts the listener, who is enthralled, and must deem the opera of great talent.” Abramo Basevi, Studio sulle Opere de Giuseppe Verdi (Florence, Tofani, 1859), 114-115. A critical edition of this work has been edited by Ugo Piovano (Milan: Rugginenti, 2001). [La musica trova però nel concetto generale del dramma un punto d’appoggio, un centro verso cui convergono più o meno, secondo l’ingegno del maestro, i vari pezzi che compongono l’Opera; ed allora si ottiene ciò che chiamasi il colorito o la tinta generale. Ma il conseguimento di questo colorito non è il fine che il musicista si propone, bensì il mezzo per associare convenientemente, rispetto al dramma, i vari pezzi di cui l’Opera si compone [...] il colorito della musica rispondeva al soggetto, quantunque felicemente appropriato, pure sarà sempre troppo vago per appartenere ad uno anziché ad un altro Oratorio [...] E’ indubitato che il colorito generale di un’Opera rivela meglio d’ogni altra cosa l’ingegno del maestro, perché ne mostra l’indole sua sintetica. Quando il maestro sia giunto ad immaginare quel che è necessario ad impartire alla musica, mediante la disposizione delle note, l’uso delle armonie, la scelta degli strumenti ec., il tanto desiderato colorito, allora egli ha creato come un tipo, una regola, un termine a cui agevolmente riferisce i pezzi particolari, i motivi, gli accompagnamenti ec., onde risulta un tutto, che sorprende, e attrae irresistibilmente l’uditore, il quale pieno di meraviglia è costretto a riconoscere l’Opera d’un grande ingegno.]

7 Baragwanath writes, “Motivo may be translated literally as “motive” and understood to encompass a similar variety of meanings as the English word. But only very occasionally, and usually in the final quarter of the nineteenth century, did it signify what would now be commonly understood as a musical motive: that is, a short melodic or harmonic cell that underlies the construction of larger units. Motivo nearly always referred to an opening melody of at least four measures and may be most accurately translated as ‘principal theme (or subject).’” Nicholas Baragwanath, The Italian Traditions & Puccini: Compositional Theory & Practice (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2011), xviii.
ambience. Moreover, if we read Puccini’s statement closely, we find that he is implying two
different sorts of beginnings: he must find the music with which to begin the opera, but also that
this process must come first in the temporal process of composition. In short, he starts to compose
at the very beginning.  

What if we were to take Puccini at his word, and explore his works by considering the
opening motives of his operas (or “preludes” as he often labeled them) both as the first sounds
heard, but also as representative of the initial schemata upon which he built his musical structures?
In attempting this, we make no claim of authenticity, but rely only upon our own observations and
“analytical fantasies” in acting as *ciceroni*.  

Tracing the MPI could not, of course, explain every nuance of a completed and complex
operatic score, if only because Puccini’s word “prima” implies that there might be second, third or
more plans, developed perhaps in response to the exigencies of the drama, to accommodate bits of
added local color (such as borrowed pre-existing tunes), or even practical considerations, such as
transpositions for singers. Certainly the pull of dramatic factors would lead to accommodations for
various harmonic and leitmotivic effects and interpolations, which in some cases might seem as
inexorably tractional as a patch of quicksand.  

Despite these musical detours, however, an original
itinerary might still be uncoverable.

Inevitably, this entails a conception of the score that has become more complex over time,
entailing an analytical process more like an archaeological dig. In such a multi-dimensional score, a

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8 For *Tosca*, we know that Puccini composed the “prelude” (that is, the opening motive) first, as he dated it and the rest
of the opera’s large formal units upon completion. See Ex. 10.0.
9 A reference to Heinrich Schenker, who called his works “New Musical Theories and Fantasies”: the three volumes
were *Harmonielehre* (1906), *Kontrapunkt* (1910/1922) and *Der freie Satz* (1935, posthumous). The Schenkerian concept of
motivic parallelism (also called “hidden repetition”) will be utilized in this chapter. It refers to a surface-level series of
pitch-classes restated on at least one deeper structural level. As to the appropriateness of employing this concept to
Puccini’s music, we refer the reader to this volume’s introduction.
10 *[guides]*
11 As Schoenberg has written, “Deviation into remote [harmonic] regions often occurs in descriptive music.” Arnold
two-dimensional list of key areas, without aural “depth perception,” only adds to the confusion: there could be background keys, for example, upon which a short section is grafted like a parenthetical statement, either synchronically or diachronically (the direct and indirect conflations discussed in chapter 2).

These musical layerings can usually be tied to the narrative thread. For example, in Tosca (just before II/3), the score shows a D major chord over a dissonant E pedal. When a window is opened in Scarpia’s room and we hear an off-stage gavotte in pure D major: the E pedal disappears. Then, when the gavotte is over, the E pedal returns, bringing us back into the internal world of Scarpia’s room. Later, at II/19, after another off-stage event sans E pedal (the cantata), the police chief violently shuts the window and we hear the E pedal resume immediately. In sum, the external, off-stage music is also “outside” the musical background, inserted like a parenthetical statement.

In the analyses below (some of which go into in more detail than others), the effects of the MPI are writ both large and small. In many operas the MPI will be seen to function microcosmically as the source of “thematic cells” from which much of the opera’s melodic content derives. But it can also exhibit influence macrocosmically as the large-scale design, the musical “itinerary” of the musical odyssey of each opera, or—Tristan-like—it can adduce a tonal

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12 Scarpia’s aria “Ha più forte sapore” is also inserted parenthetically into this scene.


14 In essence, these would be “dissonant prolongations”. See Chapter 1, note 67.
“problem,” usually a lack of resolution or the appearance of an anomalous note, that resolves only at the end of the opera.

As Webster wrote twenty years ago, “The hunter of motivic correspondences and derivations is a familiar figure on the analytical scene, who, after a period of ostracisation, is making something of a comeback.” Yet to embark in the current intellectual climate on an expedition of this type—for motivic coherence and parallelism—is still to risk derision for betraying “an atavistic urge toward the calmer waters of earlier generations’ critical battles.” To summon up Heinrich Schenker’s motivic parallelisms, Arnold Schoenberg’s “Grundgestalt” or Rudolph Reti’s “prime thought” is often thought to blindly adhere to the organicist and structuralist thinking of the early twentieth century.

But organicist analytic inquiries, deriving from foreign (Germanic) traditions, had currency in Puccini’s own milieu. In an article published shortly after the composer’s death, Alaleona discusses Puccini’s “gestural motives” [motivo-gesti] in such terms: “There are entire pages that arise, like iridescent reflections in a mirror, from the multiplication of infinite facets of the same mother-cell; and with what naturalness the secondary and relative motives grow from the fundamental gestural motive.”

A similar outlook was expressed by one of Puccini’s closest friends and colleagues, Carlo Clausetti, in his analysis of Wagner’s Tristan und Isolde, which Puccini admired: “in Tristano few notes are required to sustain an expressive part, thanks to the alternative predominance of rhythm

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19 Carlo Clausetti, Tristan e Isotta di Raccardo Wagner: Notizie e documenti raccolti da Carlo Clausetti (Naples: G. Ricordi, 1907). As noted above in Chapter 1, note 37, Puccini said the publication was “Very beautiful.”
and harmony. The new designs that derive from the decomposition of the primordial themes impose themselves on the sentiment of the listener even before they are recognized through analysis.”

Despite the strong influence of Wagner, Puccini’s use of motivic material is not nearly as deeply embedded as the German’s. The Italian composer’s protean transformations occur more in the creation of different themes that remain relatively stable—more like Verdian reminiscence motives—rather than in the varying of each leitmotive in appearances throughout the work, even though there is some of that transformation as well. In this sense, Puccini’s motivic technique is almost as much a product of his double inheritance as his harmonic language.

Despite the differences, the same basic process—developing and manipulating “primordial themes”—does seem to occur in Puccini. These microcosmic thematic cells are often immediately perceptible on the surface of the composition, even though the same motivic bits are given new “contextual clothes”: altered rhythm, direction, harmony or dynamics.

But “hunting motivic correspondences” is a treacherous undertaking. Too many analyses, including those of Réti, find thematic connections in unlikely places and, ultimately, fail to convince. Some criteria for limiting the connections suggested must be in place, since, as Lerdahl writes, Puccini’s motives are substantially different than Wagner’s leitmotives, and should be labeled “dominant motives” [motivi dominanti], utilizing (in Gianni Schicchi) techniques of instrumental music: the augmentation and diminution of themes, rhythmic displacement, fragmentation, and altered harmonizations. Giacomo Setaccioli, Il Contenuto Musicale del Gianni Schicchi di Giacomo Puccini: con la esposizione e la illustrazione dei motivi tematici (Rome: De Santis, 1920), 29.
and Jackendoff note, “Given any two sets of pitches and durations, it is possible logically to ‘transform’ one into the other, and to do so in any number of ways.” Therefore, the following discussion is limited to exact repetitions of intervallic patterns (including inversions and retrogrades) that can be altered only by projection onto a different pitch-class collection (for example, a whole-tone version of a diatonic melody, or a minor third transformed into a major third).

Further, in the first part of the discussion, there will be no search for concealed repetitions: all of the examples discussed in this section exist completely and uninterruptedly on the musical surface. (The nature of thematic transformation, however, precludes the elimination of possible connections on the basis of a different harmonic or rhythmic context: it is, in fact, the point of these transformations to create new and clever contexts for the same patterns.)

Puccini’s quote also tells us something else: once the MPI has been set, “the opera has been determined and it goes.” That is, a plan for the entire opera has now somehow been engaged. For the purposes of the following discussion, let us imagine that this could be taken literally. If so, examining the musico-dramatic arrival points in his operas could lead to a clearer picture of the whole: one derived from the composing-out of the MPI on a large scale. That analytic step extends the Schenkerian notion of motivic parallelism to a point where Schenker himself would not have gone, a superstructure spanning more than one movement or act. But since Schenker termed his concepts “fantasies,” we see no harm in extending his ideas to include whole multi-movement works as well: the reader will have to be the final judge.

*Manon Lescault*

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Puccini’s first operatic success, this 1893 third work was called “symphonic” by George Bernard Shaw, a label that, at that time, suggested an interrelated “motivic web.” Ex. 3.0 shows the first section of the opera’s prelude. In A major, the opening gesture consists of an arpeggiation of that harmony: E - A - E - C#. Both this arpeggio figure and the opening interval of the perfect fourth can be seen as sources for development of prominent surface material. In these first eleven bars, however, there is also a peculiar emphasis on the pitch class F# in bars 6, 7, 8 and 10: as we shall see, the anomalous note F# is used prominently in this work, and will be the concluding tonic of the opera.

Ex. 3.0 - Manon Lescaut, opening of the prelude, I/0/0

In the next examples, we locate motivic elements of the opening gesture on the easily perceptible, surface musical level. Exx. 3.1a-c show prominent instances of the rising-falling perfect fourth (the first intervals heard in the opera) and Exx. 3.1d-f contain retrograde versions of

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25 The curtain is raised after 28 bars of the prelude, which then recapitulates the opening strain. Puccini also used a version of this theme in his “Minuet n. 2” from Tre Minuetti (1884).
the arpeggiation figure. While it could be argued that these patterns are not unusual and certainly common to many musical works, even other Puccini operas, the numerous and prominent occurrences of these particular figures within this single work do not seem randomly chosen.

Ex. 3.1 - Manon Lescaut, perfect fourths, and arpeggio figures in retrograde

a) I/58/10-16

![Diagram of perfect fourths and arpeggios in retrograde]

b) III/11/0-2

![Diagram of perfect fourths in retrograde]

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26 See Girardi, Puccini, 91, for a similar discussion.
c) IV/9/21-10/3

\[\text{<perfect fourths>}\]

\[
\text{ff} \quad \text{Sola, perduta, abbandonata.}
\]

\[\text{<perfect fourths>}\]

d) I/16/0-3

\[\text{<arpeggiation figure>}\]

\[
\text{Tra voi, belle brune e bionde, de si seconde}
\]

e) II/9/3-5

\[\text{<arpeggio figure>}\]

\[
\text{Per me tu lotti}
\]

f) II/20/12-21

\[\text{<arpeggiation figure>}\]

\[
\text{L'ora, o tirsi, è vagga e bella}
\]
Now let us take our bird’s eye view of Manon’s landscape (and let’s hope we see it more accurately than Puccini’s librettists did!). There is no Louisiana desert here, but we can make out an itinerary whose arrival points—the final tonics of the first three acts—are E major, A minor and E major, a giant expansion of the opening gesture, E - A - E. Further, if we combine this pattern with the whole-tone complex on C# at IV/25/6, which substitutes for the dominant of the final F# minor tonic, the result is the full arpeggio pattern, E - A - E - C#. Ex. 3.2 shows a diagram of the opera in which this itinerary is laid out.

Ex. 3.2 - Manon Lescaut, global expansion of E - A - E - C#

If one were to condense the tonal motion of this opera even further, to just the beginning and end points of the entire operatic trajectory, the result would be a transition from the opening A major tonality to the closing F# minor one, in essence a 5-6 motion, E - F#, over A. [Exx. 3.2 and 3.3]

Ex. 3.3 - Manon Lescaut, overall harmonic motion

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27 Budden notes that the first version of the first act ended in Bb, not E: “so much for Puccini’s concern for long-range tonal architecture!” Budden, Puccini, 117. However, the whole structure of the opera was altered after he completed that early Act I: Act I was expanded, the first half of Act II was eliminated, and the second half became Act III. It is likely then that Puccini altered any long-range tonal planning he might have had in place.

28 The orchestral interlude between Acts II and III is omitted in this schema, since its final tonic (B major) can be considered a large-scale dominant to E major, the Act III tonic, which is implied but actually avoided in that act’s conclusion. The harmony at that point moves directly from F#7 to E, another motivic juxtaposition of the E-F# pair.

29 The diagrams included here are not traditional Schenkerian graphs, although they display some Schenkerian graphing apparatus. While fully formed Schenkerian graphs with complete Ursätze may be traceable in these operas, that is not the primary purpose of these illustrations.
This shows a juxtaposition of E and F# that can be related to the many contiguous appearances of those two pitch classes. As the opera progresses, unusual moves from E to F#, or F# to E, take center stage. Examples 3.4a-c show prominent appearances of F#-E at the end of Act III and at the opening and closing of Act IV. The F# minor seventh chord heard near the close of Act III contains all the pitch classes of both A major and F# minor—F#, A, C# and E—and the final motion from F#7 to E bypasses a dominant (which would have been B major), an elision that emphasizes the motivic F#-E connection even further. In Act IV, at both the opening and the conclusion, the plaintive descending second, F#-E, with parallel harmonies and voice-leading, recalls the heroine’s name “Manon”: when she first appeared in Act I, Manon’s full four-syllable name was associated with, and later sung to, a descending stepwise fourth. But by the last act we are on a first name, two-note basis with her. The conclusion of the opera (Ex. 3.4c) contains a whole-tone complex on C# at IV/25/6, eliding a true dominant. This sonority (G-A-C#-E#) includes the pitch class of the dominant, C#, and that of the leading-tone, E#, but also the motivically important A.

30 This occurs at I/22/14 at Manon’s entrance, and at I/34/0, during the ari “Donna non vidi mai.”
Ex. 3.4 - *Manon Lescaut*, appearances of F#-E

a) conclusion of Act III

b) opening of Act IV

c) conclusion, Act IV
La bohème

The beginning of Puccini’s next opera was borrowed from the Capriccio Sinfonico, his 1883 graduation exercise at the Milan Conservatory. The opening gesture consists of two strands: in the bass a chromatic descent of three notes, G-F♯-F, and above it a diatonic ascent of three notes, G-A-B, with horn-call-like accompaniment. [Ex. 3.5]. The combination of the two creates an unresolved G dominant 4/2 chord—a unresolved tonal “problem”—that finally resolves to its tonic, C major, twenty-five bars later at I/0/25 (but without the third scale degree E in the bass, which the dominant inversion leads us to expect.) When that C major appears, in fact, the lack of a true resolution is made more conspicuous by the upper melodic line jumping from F—the dissonant note that should resolve down to E—directly to C.

Ex. 3.5 - La bohème, opening

This motto is heard in keys related by descending fifth: first G7, moving to C7, then F7, which points to a resolution in the Bb major tenor aria “Nei cieli bigi.” At I/3, the sequential pattern continues and we hear Eb7, then Ab7. After coming this far around the circle of fifths, the music of the Bb tenor aria is reprised at I/4/8 and, after a sequence of parallel augmented triads, returns once more at I/5, now in C major, the implied original key. Finally, after much dizzying chromatic wandering, an arrival point is reached at I/8/4 in the key of Gb, with striking parallel triads (which hint at the many prominent parallel triads and open parallel fifths to come in this
work). D major arrives at I/10, along with the two other Bohemians, and the Gb becomes reinterpreted as F#. Soon after, at I/11/0-2, the bass line, as if in passing, has F-F#-G, a retrograde of the opening motive [Ex. 3.6]

Ex. 3.6 - *La bohème*, I/11/0-2

![Image of Ex. 3.6]

The next strong arrival point comes at I/16/0, with an F major theme, associated with the Café Momus, that contains more parallel triads. An unexpected knock at the door brings in the landlord Benoit and a fortissimo E in the bass, supporting a dissonant ninth chord.

To take a synoptic view of the expository material heard thus far, then, we have the opening bass G, then Gb/F#, followed by F and then E, an expansion of the opening motive plus its resolution, an example of motivic parallelism. [Ex. 3.7]

Ex. 3.7 - *La bohème*, I/0-16

![Image of Ex. 3.7]

A full analysis of this opera requires more space than can be provided here, but such a discussion would ultimately suggest that the long-sought E, as final resolution, comes as the third degree—not of C major (as in Act I)—but as the lowered third degree of C# minor, the concluding tragic tonality.
The surface motives of *Bohème* are related to the opening as well, but since that motto is a combination of chromatic and diatonic elements, almost any melody could conceivably be traced to it. Nevertheless, there are several passages where the resemblance seems too close to pass over. As can be seen in Ex. 3.8a, the music at II/6/6 accompanying the children’s laughter outside the Café Momus, just happens to be written with the pitches G-F#-F-E-F#-G in the soprano.
The complete four-note motive can also be found as an accompanying figure at I/27/4-6, on the original pitch classes—no small feat in the key of Bb major—just after the bass line shows an ascending diatonic stepwise third. [Ex. 3.8b]

Ex. 3.8b - *La bohème*, I/27/4-6

In essence, the opening motive can be seen broken down into two versions of three stepwise notes—one line chromatic the other diatonic—the sources of many themes from this opera. Examples 3.8c-f offer a few examples of these three-step gestures, incorporated into I/17/5, I/25/11 (Mimi’s entrance and theme), I/41/0 (“O soave fanciulla”) and II/21/0 (“Quando m’en vo”).

Ex. 3.8 - *La bohème*, I/17/5, I/25/11, I/41/0 and II/21/0
La fanciulla del West

La fanciulla del West, Puccini’s self-proclaimed “modern” opera, which premiered in 1910, has a theme of redemption, as stated by the composer himself. Is it possible that this theme could be

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32 Puccini, quoted in an interview with Giacinto Cottini, *Gazzetta di Torino*, 11 November 1911: “In Belasco’s drama […] a very small share was devoted to the redemptive element of the protagonist: it was I who wanted from the librettists a greater development of it so that this desire for purification, this difficult yearning towards a peace gained through love and action, would be more evident, more sincere.” Quoted in Michele Girardi, “Il finale de La Fanciulla del West e alcuni problemi di codice,” *Opera & Libretto II* (Florence: Olschki, 1993), 435, and in *Puccini: his International Art*, 285. [Nel dramma di Belasco […] era stata data assai piccola parte all’elemento redentore della protagonista: io fui che volli dai librettisti uno sviluppo maggiore di esso, onde apparse più evidente, più sincero questo desiderio di purificazione, questo anelito affannoso verso una pace conquistata con l’amore e l’operosità.]
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somehow linked to the interval of a rising major third, C to E, that opens the work?³³ Looking at the opera in its entirety, we can see a giant, ascending C to E motive composed out in a manner similar to that which we have noted in Manon Lescaut: the first act begins and ends in C, the second moves from D major to Eb minor, and the last act, while beginning in a tonally ambiguous manner, ends in E major. The struggle towards redemption, if it is reflected in this rising structure, is apparently a difficult, upwards climb. [Ex. 3.10]

Ex. 3.10 - La Fanciulla del West, macrocosmic expansion of C-E

Intervals of a major third are presented both vertically (stacked) and horizontally (rising) in the opening measure of the prelude as part of a whole-tone complex that, when it returns at the end of the opera, resolves to E major, at III/44/9. [Exx. 3.11 and 3.12] So, although the major third is an important component of the MPI, it is the entire whole-tone complex C-E-G♯-B♭ that would appear to be the MPI—the “problem” that must be solved.

³³ Girardi sees the theme of “love pushed towards redemption” as represented by the prelude as a whole. Girardi, Puccini, 286.
Ex. 3.11 - *La Fanciulla del West*, prelude, with thematic cells
Ex. 3.11 - continued
The construction of the prelude merits a closer look. As noted, the first sonority is comprised of the augmented triad C - E - G# over a Bb bass. Two of the three thematic cells discussed herein are intervallic subsets of this combination: the major second (Bb - C, or G# (Ab) - Bb) and the open (usually major) third (C - E, E - G#, or G# (Ab) - C). The third thematic cell is derived from a combination of these two: an ascending leap of a major third followed by two descending whole steps, hereafter the “do-mi-re-do pattern”: we hear this pattern in the first four melodic pitch classes, C - E - D - C. These are all indicated in Ex. 3.11.
On the musical surface of the opera, even the “local color” Puccini borrows, in fact, reveals implementations of this primary thematic material: he includes, for example, the refrain from Stephen Foster’s “Camptown Races” (“doo-dah”), which, in the original, is set to a descending major second. (The first part of the pentatonic tune, unquoted in the opera, is also a combination of thirds and seconds.) With some irony, Puccini quotes the refrain in inversion, as an ascending major second. Below, in Examples. 3.13a-c, are several selections of La fanciulla foreground material based on the major second. Exx. 3.13d-e and 3.13f-g show material derived from the other two thematic cells.

Ex. 3.13a-c - La Fanciulla del West, major seconds at I/2/0-3, I/6/2-3 and I/17/5

34 Several non-American scholars have erroneously identified this song as “Dooda Dooda Day” including Girardi, Puccini, 295, even though it is an American translation.
35 Girardi also has a similar discussion. Ibid, 292ff.
c.

Ex. 3.13d-e: *La Fanciulla del West*, open thirds at the Act I finale and II/0/5

d.

e.
Ex. 3.13f-g - *La Fanciulla del West*, do-mi-re-do patterns at I/21/9 and I/99/6-7

f.

```
<do-mi-re-do, retrograde>
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<do-mi-re-do>
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The construction of the entire thirty-five-bar prelude itself is derived from the division of the octave into equal parts, and the cyclic constructions that derive from that type of procedure. The whole-tone collection built on C (WT0) can be divided into two augmented triads: C-E-G# and Bb-D-F#. The first of these, C-E-G#, is heard synchronically or “vertically” at the outset over the bass note Bb; the other, Bb-D-F#, is presented “horizontally,” distributed diachronically over the length of the prelude. Puccini has placed each “leg” of the Bb-D-F# triad in the bass, at distances of approximately twelve measures, which divides the introduction roughly into thirds. The first of these thirds begins with the initial Bb as a bass note; at I/1/0 the opening sonority recurs but now with F# in the bass. Lastly, at I/1/11, we have a pure D minor triad, with pitch

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36 This again is a dissonant prolongation. Puccini has also used the complementary whole-tone hexachord (C#-D#-F-G-A-B) as a type of dominant substitution, at I/03 and I/1/3.
class D in the bass. From this point, both the soprano and bass lines move through arpeggiations of the minor seventh D - F - A - C, to return to pitch class C at 1/17. [Ex. 3.14]

Ex. 3.14 - *La Fanciulla del West*, prelude, expanded motivic structures

In the larger design of this prelude, we can find each of the three thematic cells, also shown in Ex. 3.11. The vertical major ninth C - D at I/1/13 and (on a deeper level) the move from D minor through the minor seventh chord to C, derive from the major second neighbor motion, the first of the thematic cells. We can also trace the expansion of our third motivic cell, “do-mi-re-do” (C - E - D - C), here. C is reasserted over F# at I/1/0, and, seven bars later, the motion C - E is repeated twice in the soprano, accentuating pitch class E. This is followed by D in the soprano (emphasized with fermatas at I/1/11 and I/1/13) and then, finally, C at I/1/17. Immediately after the prelude, as the curtain opens, we hear E major; thus, a larger-scale motion from C to E can be traced here, an enlargement of the second motivic cell, the major third.

These motivic resources are exploited throughout the first act of the opera, which is, in many aspects, a composing-out of the prelude’s construction. Like the prelude, the act is divided roughly into three sections, reflecting musical (and dramatic) divisions. Those musico-dramatic units span 1) from the end of the prelude to the entrance of Minnie, the Girl herself (I/42,
Recondite Harmony: motivic elaboration and the MPI

punctuated by a pistol shot),\(^{37}\) 2) from there to the entrance of Johnson-Ramerrez, the bandit with a heart (I/72), and 3) from there to the end of the act, when the two fall in love. At each of these articulation points, pitch class C is reasserted and thus C can be seen to be prolonged throughout: when Minnie enters, we hear “her theme,” which will return to close the act and which begins and ends in C;\(^ {38}\) at Johnson’s entrance, we hear the “cakewalk” theme in C,\(^ {39}\) and the act ends on a surprising and evocative C major ninth.

The stunning conclusion of the first act of *La fanciulla*, on a pianissimo major ninth chord was quite daring for an Italian opera composer of his time (even though several years earlier, in 1904, Puccini had ended both acts of the original version of *Madama Butterfly* with unresolved harmonies).\(^ {40}\) The theatrical effect produced here can only be described as “ethereal,” reflecting Minnie’s recall of Johnson’s words, “the face of an angel” and possibly even the theme of redemption. Motivically, it recalls the D - C major second interval we saw in the prelude, and the first thematic cell.\(^ {41}\) The presence of an unresolved D over the act’s tonic C also looks ahead to the opening D major key of the next act and to the completion of the opera’s rising major third key plan.

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\(^{37}\) As with the cannon blast that marks the middle of the first act of *Tosca*, Puccini has not made his articulation points difficult to spot.

\(^{38}\) See the discussion of this passage in Chapter 1 above.

\(^{39}\) After Johnson’s entrance, the harmony moves directly to E major by way of the augmented triad C-E-G# (sung by Johnson as E-C-G#). Both the augmented triad and the move from C to E are motivically related to the MPI. As to the nature of the syncopated theme that is linked to his entrance, see Chapter 12 below.

\(^{40}\) Verdi’s 1893 *Otello* begins with a dominant eleventh chord on C, but there are no unresolved dissonances at the ends of the opera’s acts.

\(^{41}\) Pitch class B, the seventh of this ninth chord, is also prominently sounded here: on the deepest structural level this B is the fifth degree of the E major scale (the ultimate tonic) and is related to the B of the E major at I/2. Thus, pitch class C, though it be the tonic of Act I, must ultimately be regarded as the lowered sixth scale degree of the opera’s E major tonic, and upper neighbor to B. By presenting C and B simultaneously in such a prominent spot, Puccini emphasizes this relationship.
**Suor Angelica**

A delicate miniature set in a seventeenth-century Italian convent, *Suor Angelica*, the middle member of Puccini’s *Il Trittico*, exhibits organizing musical techniques similar to those discussed above, but brought to a new level of sophistication. Here as well, the surface motivic material springs from the opening motive: off-stage bells that commence with the pitches F - D - E - C.\(^{42}\)

[Ex. 3.15]

Ex. 3.15 - *Suor Angelica*, prelude

There are two basic motivic contours to which this pre-curtain prelude (the MPI) of *Suor Angelica* gives rise. The most obvious intervallic shape, suggested by the first four pitch classes F-D-E-C, is a pair of falling thirds; the second is the double neighbor figure (F-D-E) formed by the first three notes only. (The double neighbor contour can be even more directly linked to the first four notes of the second measure of the prelude, F-E-D-E.)\(^{43}\) With these two primary shapes in mind, one can track their incarnations in the surface melodic contours of this opera. In addition, Puccini has enhanced the cohesive effect of this procedure by setting many of these thematically related bits to a shared dotted rhythm.\(^{44}\)

Exs. 3.16a and b show two of the most striking motivic derivatives of the falling third pattern, which appear at the central dramatic climax of the opera, the confrontation between

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\(^{42}\) The bells’ pattern of two descending open thirds is similar to the ostinato bell pattern heard in *Tosca* at I/68/3: Bb-G-Ab-F.

\(^{43}\) Although the second pitch class of this pattern, E, is initially presented as a passing tone, Puccini uses the entire surface shape as a source for the primary motivic material. When this material is developed, the passing E can be transformed into a primary note in a double-neighbor figure. It is precisely this possibility for multiple musical meanings that lends the interrelationship of motives its creative flexibility.

\(^{44}\) Girardi covers similar ground in Girardi, *Puccini*, 399ff.
Angelica and her Princess aunt. The first of these reflects the ominous shift in mood by presenting the motivic shape in minor mode and in retrograde. The second is Angelica’s solo aria “Senza mamma” whose opening gesture is an elaborated version of the same pattern. The same figure can also be heard in the theme first played at 10/5 [Ex. 3.16c].

Exx. 3.16a-c - Suor Angelica, rising/falling thirds

a. 42/0

![Ex 3.16a - Suor Angelica, rising/falling thirds](image1)

b. 60/1-3

![Ex 3.16b - Suor Angelica, rising/falling thirds](image2)

c. 10/5

![Ex 3.16c - Suor Angelica, rising/falling thirds](image3)

The second of the opera’s thematic cells, the double neighbor, is shown in its surface guises in Exx. 3.17a-c:
Exx. 3.17a-c - *Suor Angelica*, double neighbor patterns

a. 25/7

b. 26/6-8

c. 39/1-2

(In 3.17a, the dotted rhythm is replaced by a close approximation with rests.)

Like each of the other operas we have examined so far, *Suor Angelica* can be seen to have a large-scale design derived from its expanded MPI, the first four pitch classes, F - D - E - C. (The pitch classes of the second measure, F - E - D - E - C, will also have an important role to play in

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45 For further prominent examples of dotted rhythms, see 8/1, 15/1, 17/0 (the so-called “death” motive) and 50/3.
this regard.) Both initial fragments fill in the interval of a perfect fourth F to C, and, on the largest scale, the opera moves from F major at the start down a fourth to C major at the close. Thus the plagal nature of the overall structure—the essential thrust of the harmonic plan of this religious work—could be seen to symbolize a grand “Amen.”

One might stop here, using just the final point of arrival of this one-act opera as a guide. But it is possible to explore further: Puccini’s motivic work here functions with a greater subtlety than we have seen thus far.

In the introduction to this book, a brief section of Suor Angelica was presented in Ex. I.1 that seemed to make no functional harmonic sense: it traversed the keys C# minor, E major, C major, an F# half-diminished chord and the key of E minor seemingly without any harmonic logic. But, as noted there, each vertical harmony contains the pitch class E. Like an “internal” pedal point, then, E is invariant throughout this scene, even though the harmonies can seem randomly dispersed, or led astray by a correspondence with the dramatic import of fleeting textual references. [Ex. 3.18]

Ex. 3.18 - Suor Angelica, prolongation of E at 52/0 - 53/0

In many of his operas - but nowhere as succintly as in Suor Angelica - Puccini uses extended pitch classes, such as this E, to make their way through the maze of foreground harmonies; they appear as either tonicized notes, consonant common tones connecting harmonies, or dissonant
pedal points. These long notes can contribute to the “map” of the work, in an expansion of the MPI.

As noted previously in the second act of Tosca, sometimes these long pitch classes are interrupted by expressive and parenthetical “graftings” or indirect conflations, such as solo arias. These, notoriously, could be transposed at whim by singers, but after the interruption, the background key resumes immediately. So, in order to trace the expansion of the MPI over larger spans of this opera, we must recognize this more sophisticated technique, and not look merely at harmonic arrival points, although, as tonicized pitch classes, cadences will play a part as well. Space limitations prohibit a detailed exegesis of this process in Suor Angelica, which can be found elsewhere. Let it suffice here to sketch an outline of the expanded MPI. [Ex. 3.19]

Ex. 3.19 - Suor Angelica, expansion of F-D-E-C

The extended pitch classes observed in this opera bear something of a family resemblance to what Pierluigi Petrobelli has termed “sonority” [sonorità]: a vocal pitch (not pitch class) that is harmonized by a series of consonant chords or key areas. As Rothstein writes, “Petrobelli argued that Azucena’s music in Il trovatore centers around a single melodic pitch, B4, which is alternately harmonized by the keys of E minor and G major. At about the same time, [Martin] Chusid demonstrated the centrality of the pitch C4 to the music sung by two baritone characters in

46 See Burton, An Analysis, Chapter VI.
Rigoletto, Monterone and Rigoletto himself. In Puccini’s case, the long pitch classes are carried mostly by the orchestra, and often present in dissonant structures, such as pedal points.

The E in *Suor Angelica’s* design is supported by A minor, E major, C# minor, E minor, and the series of seemingly non-functional chords that contain E, as described above, as well as an E (bass) pedal point from 43/10 to 44, and from 46/9-11. The other three pitch classes that constitute the MPI are crowned by full cadences: F at 3/2, D at 10/4 and C at 66/0. [Exx 3.20a-c]

Ex. 3.20a - *Suor Angelica*, F major cadence at 3/0 -2

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48 E initially receives consonant support from A minor (39/0), A major (41/0), the unusual key of C# minor (42/0), symbolic perhaps of the dark heart of this opera. After the arresting juxtaposition of C# minor and C minor that opens this section (Ex. 3.20), E appears as a pedal point at 43/10 - 44/0, after which it remains active through assorted harmonies. At 46/0, E minor once again takes over and the E pedal point returns at 46/9-11. Pitch class E continues, after an interpolation at 47 of Gb major, through A major and C# minor to appear, from 52/2, as a consonant member of several chords as seen above, and of A minor at 53/2. When the Princess tells Angelica that her son has died, at 56/0, a whole-tone section with ostinato C-Bb-E commences, with E as the (emphasized) lowest pitch. The dramatic confrontation is now over, but E remains: through a C# minor seventh at 57/0, E major four bars later and finally, in a repetition of the music opening this scene, an E pedal point, first under Bb major and then, at 58/5, unadornedly alone.

49 Greenwald hears a major arrival point a little earlier: “because there are few points of arrival in *Suor Angelica*, the event of closure at the end of ‘Senza mamma’ is a dramatic landmark.” Helen Greenwald, “Verdi’s Patriarch and Puccini’s Matriarch: ‘Through the Looking-Glass and What Puccini Found There,’” *19th-Century Music* LVII/3 (Spring 1994), 231.
The final member of the expanded opening motive, C, is fully established with a cadence in C major at 66/0, which seems curiously like a final resolution, except that the bass note falls away, leaving the less stable fifth scale degree in the bass, a 6/4 inversion. For although Puccini writes a perfect authentic cadence to the tonic, set to an “Amen” and followed by a “pausa lunga,” creating

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50 Hepokoski discusses the rotational aspect of much of this opera, from rehearsal numbers 61 to 66: “The cyclic repetition of this music, with some variants and interpolations, begins immediately and continues to the end of the opera, which thus closes with an enhanced restatement of the music that has led us into rehearsal no. 66. Such an obvious double-cycling at the close can trigger the suspicion that a more generalized impulse toward circularity and rotation might also have been at work, albeit less self-evidently, in earlier portions of the opera” [243]. He relates this to the “obsessively circular madness and suicide of Angelica” [264]. James Hepokoski, “Structure, Implication and the End of Suor Angelica.” Studi Musicali 3 (2004): 241-264.
a strong sense of completion, the tonal “door” is left open: still to come are Angelica’s suicide and
the miracle. This passage also contains double neighbor (DN) figures.

An almost identical C major resolution is heard at the end of the work, but with two
important changes: there will be no true dominant, and the tonic note will remain in the bass at the
end. The harmony in the final measures moves directly from a cadential 6/4 at 84/0/5, presented
again with double neighbor figures, to the same complex sonority before the C tonic that occurs in
Ex. 3.20c, a bVII7 over a tonic pedal. While this harmony contains D and F, which could suggest a
dominant (G7) feeling, one cannot but agree that the actual dominant has been omitted the second
time around.\(^{51}\) The dominant pitch G is present beneath the cadential 6/4, from 84/0-5, but the
expected resolution to G major never comes. [Ex. 3.21]

Ex. 3.21 - *Suor Angelica*, 84/4 - conclusion

It is possible to conjecture that the overall construction of *Suor Angelica* is scaffolded upon
two arpeggios of the triad F - A - C that support large-scale expansions of the opening motive. The
first of these arpeggios is distorted by an initial move to C# minor, temporarily creating an
expansion of the augmented triad F-A-C#, but which resolves to C at 66/0.

\(^{51}\) Since the first cadence at 66 contained a true dominant with leading tone, it unlikely that this final, abridged cadence
should be considered “modal” for its lack of a leading tone (Bb not B), as some authors have written.
Rehearsal number 66/2 is the moment in the score parallel to 36/1 where, as we have seen, there began a large-scale arpeggiation of the augmented triad F - A - C# that heralded the arrival of the Zia Principessa: now the Virgin Mary is approaching, and the remaining music outlines, on a background level, F - A - C instead. After the initial F major (supporting pitch class F) the score stays parallel to the former version, including a move to A minor supporting E at 69/0, until 75/0 where, although A remains as a bass pedal, the tonality is D major. This change is significant: in the first version, a prolonged D had preceded the prolongation of pitch class E. Here, it is interpolated within it. The motive that we shall see expanded now is: F - E - D - E - C, the pitch classes of the second measure of the prelude. [Ex. 3.22]

Ex. 3.22 - *Suor Angelica*, diagram of opera with arpeggios

The appearance of the C# minor section occurs at the moment of greatest dramatic conflict, the confrontation between Suor Angelica and her Princess Aunt, as Helen Greenwald has discussed. At this moment, the psychological dissonance of the dramatic situation has a parallel in the dissonance of the C#, which has taken the place of C and thus warped the major triad into an

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52 The harmonic support for D, seen at rehearsal number 6, represents a verticalization of an expanded augmented triad: at 4/0, D minor appears, followed by a 16-bar D major section at 5/0, which ends with an “Amen” over a D chord (F# in the bass); at 6/0, a Bb major section commences, but is interrupted at 6/8 by a leitmotive, most probably representing the Virgin Mary, which alternates between Eb minor and Gb major. Both of these tonalities support pitch classes Gb (F#) as well as Bb; pitch class D is soon re-asserted at 8/0, with an A major “andante” section that resolves to D major at 10/4, as seen in Ex. 3.20b above.

53 Greenwald, “Verdi’s Patriarch and Puccini’s Matriarch”: 232-233. See also Chapter 11 of this volume.
augmented one. Puccini has shown this C#-C struggle quite clearly on the foreground level as well, as seen in Ex. I.1 and in Ex. 3.23 below.\footnote{The scene between Angelica and her aunt comes exactly at the temporal mid-point of the opera, and also marks the end of the dramatic exposition and the first of two “arrivals” at the convent, one shadowy and cruel, the other luminous and loving. Therefore, it is tempting to link this dramatic bifurcation point with a musical one, an option Greenwald chooses. Ibid., 232. But, although Puccini’s musical scheme is indeed bipartite, this moment does not mark the end of the first half of the deep musical structure: that does not occur until the resolution of the C# to C, at 66/0, and the first expanded MPI is complete.}

Ex. 3.23 - *Suor Angelica*, C minor and C# minor, 45/0-4

Is the MPI then the secret code to Puccini’s compositional technique that will solve all his mysteries? Hardly. Each of Puccini’s operas is a unique creation, often written after years of silent, creative rumination, and each demonstrating growth in the complexity of his creative abilities. The individuality of the operas’ identities makes it improbable that all would be constructed in exactly this way. Puccini’s first opera, *Le Villi*, for example, has not yielded any clear use of the MPI, and it is impossible to determine for his last, unfinished *Turandot*, whether any large-scale motivic expansion would have been played out in the final score. In the case of *Madama Butterfly*, both acts begin with fugal counterpoint, which both begin with rising thirds, but which yield no parallelism in the overall structure. *Edgar* also seems to display little evidence of the MPI, although in the revised version that Puccini completed in 1905, the last act ends in B minor, possibly reflecting a connection with the anomalous B minor that appears as the third chord of the opening D major passage. On a
slightly larger scale, before the first return of the opening material at 1/2/0, the dominant of B minor is reached, but no resolution is present. It is unlikely but conceivable that this sort of tonal “problem” could have been set up to be musically “solved” by Puccini’s retroactive decision to end the opera in B minor.

The beginning of *Il Tabarro* suggests something along these lines as well since the first sonority is a dissonant ninth over G: the anomalous A must somehow resolve, if all it to end tonally. In fact, at the C minor close of the opera the melodic pair A-G is repeated three times, displacing a normative melodic close on the tonic note C. It seems as though Puccini goes out of his way to use A here, and not Ab, the lowered sixth degree characteristic of C minor, played only one bar before. [Exx. 3.24a and b]
Ex. 3.24a - *Il Tabarro*, opening, with G and A juxtaposed

Ex. 3.24b - *Il Tabarro*, conclusion

Like the Baedeker guides of the past, this exploratory examination of the MPI in Puccini’s operas gives us both potential itineraries and useful details to note along the way. While no traveler in a strange land should be without such a *vademecum*, reading it can in no way take the place of an actual visit, replete with all the sensory intoxication live experiences bring. And so no claim is being made that the immanent interrelationships proposed here, both small to large, speak for the entirety of the compositions. Whatever insight this discussion of the MPI may bring, it should only entice us to explore farther and deeper into this musical terrain.