Recondite Harmony: the Operas of Puccini

Chapter 4: Le Villi: an individual voice

“A work out of the ordinary”

“In his music there is always an individual, original stamp”

“Artistic individuality [...] a laudable aversion to the conventional”

“Singular talent and such original, masculine beauty, for a public that was completely unprepared for it”

These reactions, written about Puccini’s first opera after the premiere, may seem odd to today’s listeners: of all of the composer’s theatrical works, Le Villi seems the most traditional. At first glance, it appears to be a “numbers” opera with traditional prelude and introductory chorus, and the chorus serves as narrator, a conventional device with which Puccini soon dispensed. There are solos and duets as well (with no traditional recitatives, however.) And the opera has a supernatural plot, a Romantic tale of the spirits of forsaken women who avenge themselves on their unfaithful men.

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1 “Un lavoro fuor del comune” [Ricordi, Gazzetta Musicale di Milano, XL/5, 1 febbraio 1885]; “Ma nella sua musica c’è sempre un’impronta individuale, originale” [Gazzetta Ferrarese, reported in Il Teatro Illustrato XII/13, 4 February 1892]; “individualità artistica [...] una lodevole avversione al convenzionale.” [Gazzetta del Popolo (Turin), reported by Gazzetta Musicale di Milano, XL/1 4 January 1885]; “singolari attitudini e così masche, originali bellezze, ad un pubblico che non vi era per nulla preparato.” [Filippo Filippi in La Perseveranza (Milan) 26 January 1885, reported by the Gazzetta Musicale di Milano XL/5, 1 February 1885, 45]. These reviews were for the revised two-act version, which carried the name Le Villi. (The subtitles were also changed from “legend in one act and two parts” to “Opera ballo in two acts.”) The original one-act work, entitled Le Willis, had also received similar responses after its premiere on 31 May 1884 at the Teatro dal Verme in Milan. In Il Mondo Artistico, XVIII, 24-25, 10 June 1884, Milan, 2-3, the reviewer elaborated further: “The event that has attracted all the public attention in these last days was the performance at the Dal Verme of the operetta in one act by Puccini: Le Willis. The first who heard some parts of this composition quickly noted merit in the young maestro that was out of the ordinary.” [L’avvenimento che ha assorbita tutta l’attenzione del pubblico, in questi ultimi giorni, è stata la rappresentazione al Dal Verme dell’operetta in un atto del Puccini: Le Willis. I primi cui fu dato di udire qualche cosa di questa composizione, accennarono subito ad un valore nel giovane maestro fuori dal comune. [...] Quoted in Marco Capra, “Tra wagnerismo, sinfonismo e giovane Scuola: gli inizi della carriera di Puccini nel racconto della stampa periodica.” In Giacomo Puccini: L’uomo, il musicista, il panorama europeo. Atti del Convegno internazionale di studi su Giacomo Puccini nel 70o anniversario della morte. Eds. Ravenni, Gabriella Biagi and Carolyn Gianturco. (Luca: Libreria Musicale Italiana, 1997: 31, 37-38.

2 Also noted in Helen M. Greenwald, “Dramatic Exposition and Musical Structure in Puccini’s Operas.” PhD diss., City University of New York, 1991), 103
A closer look at the score reveals something even more unusual: two different numbering systems, both original to the autograph score. There are indeed individual set-pieces (1-10) but there are also sequential rehearsal marks (1-59) that traverse both acts. The second system betrays the fact that the musical score is almost completely continuous, with a strong reliance on instrumental sections. Because of these two features, given the cultural milieu of Italy at the time, the score was considered “symphonic,” that is, Wagnerian and progressive, despite its traditional elements. The two numbering systems are emblematic of the stylistic duality that pervades this piece.

Indeed, the “symphonic” aspect of Le Villi is mentioned most in the contemporary reviews: “Puccini is distinguished essentially by his instrumental colors: there is a movement, a life, a spontaneity in the whole of his work that is truly marvelous,” and “symphonism abounds and gives Le Villi a new, pleasing expression, apart from the usual, conventional lyric opera.” Verdi himself chimed in: “I have heard much good of the musician Puccini. [...] It seems, however, that the symphonic element predominates in him!

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3 Elphinstone notes that the symphonic intermezzi were written in the original version to be heard during the scene, in the single-act opera. Michael Elphinstone, “Le Villi, Edgar, and the Symphonic Element,” in The Puccini Companion. William Weaver and Simonetta Puccini, eds. (New York: W. W. Norton, 1994), 82.

4 Mascagni adopted the technique of including a symphonic intermezzo, which soon became known as “intermezzo mascagnano.” Puccini complained, in a letter to Carlo Clausetti of 9 August 1895: “Le Villi initiated the type that today is called ‘mascagnano’ and no one gives me credit for it.” Eugenio Gara, ed., Carteggi pucciniani (Milan: Ricordi, 1958), 117.

5 Baragwanath writes, “Puccini’s first opera, Le Villi 1883–85), bears witness to the influence of these decades of reform in its “Romantic” subject matter, its extended orchestral interludes, its loosening of traditional verse structures, and, not least, in its quotation (in m. 15) of the head motive of the Last Supper theme from Parsifal” Baragwanath, The Italian Traditions, 37. For an exploration of the contemporary meanings of “symphonic” see Abbate, “Opera as Symphony,” op. cit.

6 Filippo Filippi in La Perseveranza, 26 January 1885, as reported by the Gazzetta Musicale di Milano XL/5, 1 February 1885, 45. Quoted in Capra., 41. [abbonda il sinfonismo e che dà alle Villi un aspetto nuovo, per me aggradevole, all’influò del solito melodramma lirico convenzionale.]
Recondite Harmony: Le Villi

No harm in that. Only that one must do this cautiously. Opera is opera; symphony is symphony, and I don’t believe that in an opera it is nice to put in a symphonic passage just so the orchestra can play away.” In sum, Le Villi is Janus-faced, a mixture of old and new, of Italian tradition and the wagnerismo of the then-future.

In fact, Puccini’s first opera was written for a competition (the first Concorso Sonzogno, which he lost) the rules of which required precisely this double trait. The contest announcement reads: “The music must be inspired by the fine traditions of Italian opera, but without renouncing the fruits of the science of contemporary sounds, whether domestic or foreign.” These last few words indicated that the judges (there were five, two of whom were Puccini’s professors at the Milan Conservatory) were open to the modern, Wagnerian trends, but in an Italian way—a compromise forged in the overheated Verdi-Wagner culture wars of the times. In essence then, Puccini was simply completing the task at hand.

This raises the question, then, as to how Puccini could have been perceived as “original” when many young composers were following the same leads—enough, indeed, to hold a competitive public contest. But even amidst the popularity of current musical trends, Puccini stood out. He had made a strong impression of individualism on the Milanese musical community, almost from the first day he arrived. His entrance test at the conservatory already shows a predilection for extended chords (ninths, elevenths and

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7 Gara, Carteggi, 12. [Ho sentito a dir molto bene del musicista Puccini. [...] Pare però che predomini in lui l’elemento sinfonico! niente di male. Soltanto bisogna andar cauti in questo. L’opera è l’opera: la sinfonia è la sinfonia, e non credo che in un’opera sia bello fare uno squarcio sinfonico, pel sol piacere di far ballare l’orchestra.]

8 Mario Morini, Nandi Ostali, Piero Ostali jr. Casa musicale Sonzogno: cronologie, saggi, testimonianze (Milan: Sonzogno, 1995) vol. 1, 259. [La musica dovra’ essere ispirata alle buone tradizioni dell’opera italiana, ma senza rinunciare ai portati della scienza dei suoni contemporanea, così nostrale che straniera.] The announcement for the second incarnation of the competition, which Mascagni won to great acclaim with Cavalleria Rusticana in 1890, omitted the final four words. Ibid., 263.

9 The judges were Amilcare Ponchielli, composer and teacher, Pietro Platania, organist for the Milan Duomo Franco Faccio, conductor and author, Cesare Dominiceti, composer and collaborator with Boito, and Amintore Galli, musicologist, professor of aesthetics, and composer.
Recondite Harmony: Le Villi

After the admittance test, Puccini wrote to his mother telling her the exam had posed no difficulty at all for him, and that he had completed a given D major phrase thus: \[\text{Ex. 4.0}\]

Ex. 4.0 - From a letter to his mother, Puccini’s entrance exam solution

The B that is the last quarter of the second measure, beginning Puccini’s completion, clearly implies an A dominant ninth chord. A less imaginative student might have filled out the period in more obvious ways, such as: [Ex. 4.1a and b]

Ex. 4.1a and b

Puccini’s penchant for extended chords made its way into Le Villi as well, in some striking ways. \[\text{Ex. 4.2a-c}\]

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10 Asioli, whose texts were used at the Milan Conservatory, included eleventh and thirteenth chords in his regola dell’ottava, considering them “third and fourth additions.” Still, for an entering student to use these extended chords with facility, would have been impressive. Bonifacio Asioli, *Il maestro di composizione ossia seguito del trattato di armoni*. (Milan: Giovanni Ricordi, [1832c]). See also Nicholas Baragwanath, *The Italian Traditions to Puccini: Compositional Theory and Practice in Nineteenth-Century Opera*. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2011).

11 Gara, *Carteggi*, 1. [November 1880] “My exam was a joke because they had me accompany a very easy one-line bass written without numbers, and then they had me develop a melody in D major [...] It went almost too well.” [l’esame mio fu una sciocchezza perchè mi fecero accompagnare un basso scritto di una riga, senza numeri e facilissimo e poi mi fecero svolgere una melodia in re maggiore [...] è andata anche troppo bene.] The original writing above the music reads “soggetto dato / di qui in giù è mio / ecc.”

12 Ibid. [soggetto dato / di qui in giù c’ mia]
Although such extended chords were taught at the Milan Conservatory, thanks to the theories of its first director Bonifacio Asioli, it would be another three years before Verdi would open his Otello with a C eleventh chord, re-asserting with this progressive gesture his

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14 The rehearsal numbers in *Le Villi* are continuous, through individual numbers and acts. Therefore score locations might have been indicated by those alone; however, we have decided to retain the first Roman numeral indicating the act, as an aid to the reader.

15 See chapter 2, note 21.
place, at the advanced age of seventy-four, as the leader of the Italian operatic school. And another C eleventh, which opens Mascagni’s *Cavalleria Rusticana* and paves the way for the opera’s other extended chords, would not be heard until 1890, six years after its composer played contrabass at the premiere of *Le Villi*.\(^\text{16}\)

It was not only his individuality that won Puccini support. His skills at traditional musical techniques were also well developed:\(^\text{17}\) he arrived in Milan the scion of four generations of *maestri di capella* (a position destined for young Giacomo), whose father had been the director of the Istituto Musicale in Lucca, from 1852 until his early death (Michele Puccini *père*, was a composer who had also compiled two practical theoretical treatises).\(^\text{18}\) Puccini placed highest in the entrance exam to the Milan Conservatory (a test that Verdi had failed)\(^\text{19}\) and went on to win honors there, writing scholarly fugues along the way. This image of Puccini as a highly trained composer and contrapuntist is still not generally known today.

\(^\text{16}\) There are many similarities between *Le Villi* and *Cavalleria Rusticana*, beyond the fact that they were both written for the Sonzogno competition. In a letter from Alfredo Catalani to the critic Giuseppe Depanis of 26 January 1893, the former quotes composer Alberto Franchetti as saying, “At Hamburg when *Cavalleria* was produced there, they found that it derived from *Le Villi*.” Mosco Carner, *Puccini: a Critical Biography*, 2nd ed. (1974; reprint, New York: Holmes and Meier, 1988), 31.

\(^\text{17}\) The requirements of the Istituto Musicale of Lucca were stringent, and very conservative. Nicholas Baragwanath, *The Italian Traditions*, 47: “By the time he enrolled at the Milan Conservatory [...] he was, by Lucchese standards, already a fully-trained musician,” and 55: “During Giacomo Puccini’s time at the Istituto Musicale, eight years of study was the norm. Four years of rudiments were followed by a further three years of advanced studies, the whole course being rounded off with a final year of ‘composition.’”

\(^\text{18}\) Students of counterpoint and composition, at the Lucca Conservatory (known then as the Istituto Musicale Pacini) learned figured bass, simple, imitative and double counterpoint, canon, fugue, periodology (the joining of melodic phrases into periods); poetic meters, the nature of the human voice, the nature of instruments in general, church and theater styles, the art of knowing and using different musical effects, and music history. See Giulio Battelli, “Giacomo Puccini all’Istituto Musicale ‘G. Pacini’” In *Giacomo Puccini: L’uomo, il musicista, il panorama europeo*, 5-6. See also Deborah Burton, “Michele Puccini’s Counterpoint Treatise” *Quaderni pucciniani* (1996): 173-181, and Baragwanath, *The Italian Traditions*.

\(^\text{19}\) Puccini wrote home to his mother, 10 November 1880: “This morning I was at the Conservatory and I saw that I was the best of everyone, modesty apart.” [stamattina sono stato al Conservatorio e ho veduto che sono stato il migliore di tutti, modestia a parte.] Arnaldo Marchetti, *Puccini com’era* (Milan: Curci, 1973), 15. Verdi was never admitted to the Milan Conservatory, an institution that now bears his name.
The support he gained proved quite useful. Although Puccini lost this competition, sponsored by the publishing house Sonzogno, his opera was bought by the rival publishing house run by Giulio Ricordi, to whom the young composer was introduced by none other than his own professor of composition, Amilcare Ponchielli—one of the judges of the competition. There are some today who see in this a conspiracy to bring together Puccini and the Ricordi firm, a collaboration that eventually produced all of Puccini’s works, save La Rondine. Whatever the truth of the situation, Puccini would gain sympathetic acclaim for having been overlooked by the judges and Ricordi would hire a rising star.

Le Villi also shows Puccini’s predilection for dissonant pedal points. Indeed, Le Villi opens with a pedal point of G that lasts six measures and acts ultimately as a dominant to C major. Before it resolves, however, that low G is paired with pitches D and A, creating a dominant ninth in the bass. And there is additional dissonance as well: triads of F major,  

20 The composer Arturo Buzzi-Peccia explained a possible reason for the competition: “At that time the public used to remain at performances which lasted four, even five hours […] Grand opera was in great favor, but, unfortunately, the grand operas of young composers were not successful except in very rare cases, and also then they had a demi-success it lasted the life of a new moon, sometimes with a little crescent, almost full success, then vaning down into the darkness of oblivion. Sonzogno, the publisher, said: ‘If they are not able to make a good opera in four acts, they may be able to make a short one in one act, or two parts of one act.’” Arturo Buzzi-Peccia, “The Young Puccini as I knew him,” The Musical Courier, 93/22 (November 25, 1926: New York: Blumenberg & Floersheim): 8, 33. Sonzogno was also responsible for bringing Carmen to Italy, in Naples in 1880.

21 Ponchielli (1834 - 1886) studied at the conservatory in Milan, the city where he gave his first opera, I promessi sposi, in 1856. He is best known for his opera La Gioconda, which had a triumphal premiere at La Scala in 1876. He became professor of composition at the Milan Conservatory in 1883. La Nuova Enciclopedia della Musica (Milan: Garzanti, 1983, rep. 1991): s.v. “Ponchielli.”

22 See Girardi, Puccini: His International Art, 22-23.

23 In a review of Le Villi (in the Gazzetta Musicale di Milano, XL/5, 1 February 1885, 44) publisher Giulio Ricordi praised the young composer, while tossing in some gratuitous anti-Wagner sentiments: “Puccini, in our opinion, has something else, and this something else is perhaps the most precious of gifts […] to have in one’s own head (or in one’s gut, as the French say) IDEAS: and these one has or one does not […] neither are they acquired studying notes, counterpoint, harmonies, disharmonies, or sweating for hours over those hieroglyphics full of science and poison that are Wagnerian scores.” [Puccini, a parer nostro, ha qualche cosa di più, e questo qualche cosa è forse la più preziosa delle doti, […] di avere nella propria testa (ou dans son ventre, come dicono i francesi) delle IDEE: e queste si hanno o non si hanno, […] né si acquistano studiando e ristudiando punti, contrappunti, armonie, disarmonie, e sudando lungamente su quei geroglifici pieni di scienza e di veleno che sono le partiture Wagneriane.]

24 The history of this compositional device extends from Renaissance chansons to Beethoven concerti to late nineteenth-century academic fugues and Wagnerian operas. But pedal points, depending upon how dissonantly they are treated, can also be seen as foreshadowing the later dissolution of tonality. As such, pedal points are another instance of bridging the old and the new, the traditional and the innovative.
C major, and D dominant seventh, ornamented with suspensions, float above, creating a temporary ambiguity of tonal center. [Ex. 4.3]

Ex. 4.3: *Le villi*, opening, Act I

A variation on this sonority, with D minor seventh chords above the G pedal, occurs at II/32/16 during the symphonic interlude “La Tregenda”. [Ex. 4.4]

Ex. 4.4

The pedal point on E at II/33/4 is surmounted by the clashing triads of D major, C major, B minor and A minor, written as parallel 6/4 chords, which ultimately return to E minor. [Ex. 4.5]
Ex. 4.5

The pedal point on C at II/40/21 underlies mostly parallel 6/4 chords, creating a soprano line that slides chromatically from the fifth scale degree to the tonic. [Ex. 4.6]

Ex. 4.6

The variety of dissonant pedal points is innovative, yet the pedals all ultimately serve tonal functions, such as prolonging a single harmony, as in the above example.\(^{25}\)

However, not everyone acknowledged Puccini’s originality. In fact, amid the accolades of individuality that greeted \textit{Le Villi}, another sentiment also appeared in the press: “I must note that here and there in the music of \textit{Le Villi}, not very often however, there are some hints, some half-phrases, some orchestral effects, some harmonic combinations, that

\(^{25}\) Other instances of pedal points occur at I/21/23, I/25/14, II/32/24, II/34/6, II/36/20, II/45/8, II/47/0, II/53/0, II/55/6, II/56/0, II/56/13, II/57/4, II/58/0, but these are mostly repetitions of earlier music.
recall other works." Indeed, composer and fellow Lucchese Alfredo Catalani claimed privately that *Le Villi* was derivative of his own two operas *Elda* (1876, premiered 1880) and *Dejanice* (1883). One aspect of all three of these works is the use of open fifths—the very sonority to be considered emblematic of Puccini’s scores, especially after *La bohème*. In *Le Villi*, open fifths are used as the motive of the Villi, the female spirits themselves. (These, however, are not parallel fifths, a development that will come later.) In Catalani’s *Elda*, the open fifths appear only in brief, transitional passages, as in Ex. 4.7:

Ex. 4.7

But in *Dejanice*, the opera opens with blatant open fifths (which return later in the opera).

These open fifths are in B minor, the same key as Puccini’s open fifths in *Le Villi*.

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26 *Gazzetta del Popolo* (Turin), reported by *Gazzetta Musicale di Milano*, XL/1 4 January 1885, 5-6. [mi corre obbligo di notare, che qua e la’ nella musica delle Villi, non molto spesso però, c’è qualche accenno, qualche mezza frase, qualche effetto orchestrale, qualche combinazione armonica, che ricorda altri lavori.]

27 Alfredo Catalani (1854-1893) was born in Lucca to a family of musicians; he entered the Istituto Musicale Pacini and studied with Puccini’s uncle and first teacher, Fortunato Magi (as did Alberto Franchetti). Like Puccini a few years later, Catalani attended the Milan conservatory studying composition with Bazzini, from where he graduated with a one-act opera *La falce* (1875) to a libretto by Arrigo Boito. *Elda* was commissioned by Giovannina Lucca, head of the Lucca publishing company, which owned the rights to all the Wagner operas in Italy.

28 Harvey Sachs, “Manon, Mimi, Artù,” in *The Puccini Companion*. William Weaver and Simonetta Puccini, eds. (New York: W. W. Norton, 1994), 125. Catalani quotes Alberto Franchetti saying, “Puccini ’s *Le Villi* derives from the old *Elda* from which he took, amongst other things, the theme of the Funeral March, and from *Dejanice*.” Catalani goes on to say “It pleases me that it should have been he who said it, because I myself, though thinking the same, did not have the courage to say it […] For twelve long years have I been working and fighting: should I now sit still and watch the ground being taken away from under my feet?”
While Puccini may have echoed Catalani’s opening musical statement (and we know that he saw and admired this opera),\(^{29}\) the spirit of Wagner’s open fifths, as in the prelude to Der fliegende Hollander or the “Ride of the Valkyries” (also in B minor), haunts both later works. [Ex. 4.8a-c]

Ex. 4.8

a)

\[Le \text{ Villi, I/13/47}\]

\[\text{PPP}\]

b)

\[\text{Catalani, Dejanice, prelude with open fifths}\]

c)

\(^{29}\) Carlo Paladini, \textit{Giacomo Puccini: con epistolario inedito} (Florence, 1961), 33. “Last night I went to Catalani’s new opera. It doesn’t throw the public into raptures, but artistically speaking I think it’s a fine work, and if they do it again I shall go back and see it.” [Ieri sera fui all’opera nuova del Catalani; generalmente la gente non va in visibilio. Ma io dico che, artisticamente parlando, è una bella cosa e se la rifanno ci torno.]
Catalani’s assertion that Puccini borrowed from his operas might have rested not only on the use of open fifths, but also on the inclusion of a waltz, the occasional dissonant pedal point, some parallel octaves and triads (Catalani even has a passage with parallel augmented triads), and the use of unisons as common-tone transitions. A libretto about supernatural female spirits, like *Elda*, was a fashionable choice and most probably not a direct forerunner.

More than anything else, though, it was the Wagnerian influence that affected both composers. In this period, both Catalani and Puccini frequently and ostentatiously used the Wagnerian half-diminished seventh chord (the *Tristan* chord). Some prominent instances in *Le Villi* are: [Ex. 4.9a and b]

Ex. 4.9

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30 Alfredo Catalani, *Elda: dramma fantastico in 4 atti* di Carlo D’Ormeville (Milan: Lucca, 1880). These characteristics can be found on the following pages of the score: waltz (74); pedal points (52, 56, 75, 104); parallel octaves and triads (7, 52, 101, 135, 136); unisons as transition (54).

31 *Elda* was a story of the Lorelei, and indeed *Loreley* became the name of the work when revised in 1890.

32 After writing how Puccini was not like Wagner, critic Filippo Filippi continues, “Wagner is a huge mine, and I don’t deny that Puccini has taken some colors, some expressions from him, as do all—even those who claim to despise him.” Filippo Filippi, *La Perseveranza*, 2-3 June 1884. Quoted in Michael Elphinstone, “*Le Villi*,” 80.

33 Catalani was known for being a Wagnerian, and it shows in his scores. In *Elda*, for instance, “Valhalla” is mentioned in the text, and there are many prominent uses of the half-diminished seventh (*Tristan*) chord. In one chorus, sailors sing “Ohè,” like the sailors in *Tristan*, after a stream of E half-diminished sevenths. In *Dejanice*, the end of the prelude to Act I contains a phrase so close to the “Love of the Wolsungs” motive from the *Ring*, that it is almost plagiarism. Giving a nod to Verdi’s *Aida*, however, he starts one aria from *Dejanice* with “O patria mia.”
The half-diminished chord is also seen in an expanded form at II/57/23 [Ex. 4.10]

Ex. 4.10

In addition, there are echoes of the Act III prelude of *Tristan* in Guglielmo’s scene (at II/42/15), a strong reliance on the orchestra to carry the melody (see Ex. 4.2a, I/4/26)
and a rudimentary use of leitmotives. At II/47/0, for instance, in Roberto’s solo scena, just before giving voice to his remembrance of happier times (“Torna ai felici di”), we hear a minor version of the second waltz tune, which was played at I/11/0 when the elderly Guglielmo dances with a young girl, to the laughter of the crowd. [Exx. 4.11a and b]

Ex. 4.11

a)

And later in the same scene, at II/49/0, when Roberto wonders whether Anna still lives, we hear the theme from “L’abbandono,” now accompanied by a half-diminished seventh, indicating the answer, given by an omniscient orchestral narrator, which is “no.”

The musical community in Milan at this time was entranced not only with Wagner’s operas, but with Weber’s Der Freischütz and other works with fantastic stories in northern
European settings. Thus were produced such works as Le Villi, Elda, and Floria Mirabilis by Spyros Smaras. Salvetti notes: “In the [Italian opera world of the] 1880s, ‘Wagnerism’ was limited to the choice of Nordic and fabulous subjects, which were accompanied by subtleties of timbre and ample symphonic settings.” One of the winners of the first Concorso Sonzogno was Guglielmo Zuelli whose opera, La Fata del Nord, had a similar subject and ambience.

The source for Le Villi was a French story by Alphonse Karr, “Les Willis,” published in 1852, which inspired the scapigliato writer Ferdinando Fontana to make a libretto from it. Originally titled Le tradite [the deceived women], Fontana originally promised the libretto to composer Francesco Quaranta who renounced the rights in August 1883. Puccini met

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34 Critic Filippi explicitly made connections among Le Villi, Weber and Wagner: “[Le Villi] is very close to those fantastic subjects that Weber prefers, exactly because he too was the powerful colorist of whom Wagner admitted being a follower and imitator.” Filippo Filippi, La Perseveranza, 26 January 1885, reported by the Gazzetta Musicale di Milano XL/5, 1 February 1885, 45. Quoted in Capra, 41. [si avvicina molto a quei soggetti fantastic tedeschi che il Weber prediligeva, appunto perché anche lui è stato quel potente colorista, del quale si è confessato seguace, imitatore, lo stesso Riccardo Wagner.]

35 Maehder names several other works of this period with Nordic subjects: Catalani’s La Wally (1892), Smareglia’s Cornill Schut (1893) and Mascagni’s L’amico Fritz (1891), I Rantzau (1892) and Guglielmo Ratcliff (1895). Maehder, Jürgen. “Manon Lescaut e la genesi delle strutture drammatico-musicali nel primo Puccini.” Teatro alla Scala: Manon Lescaut, concert program. (Milan: Edizioni del Teatro alla Scala - Rizzoli, 1992): 40.


38 Ferdinando Fontana (1850-1919) was a poet, journalist and librettist. He wrote the libretti for Puccini’s Le Villi, Edgar and had plans with him to work on Tosca. He also wrote the libretto for Ponchielli’s L’odio, based on drama by Sardou. In his youth, his mother’s death caused him to quit school and help to provide for his two younger sisters. He did menial work, then worked at Corriere di Milano as a proof-reader; he wrote poems and plays in Milanese dialect, and was a member of the literary scapigliatura. For more information see Biancamaria Longoni, “Vita e opere di Ferdinando Fontana” Quaderni Pucciniani (1992): 237-246.

39 Francesco Quaranta (1848-1897) was born in Naples but established himself in Milan. “Quaranta” means forty and Fontana and Puccini slyly referred to a “N. 40” in their correspondence.

Fontana at the pensione run by Antonio Ghislanzoni (poet, journalist and sometime librettist for Verdi) where various members of the Famiglia Artistica Milanese were gathered.\textsuperscript{41}

It seems that Fontana was interested in collaborating with Puccini precisely because of his “symphonism”: “With the success of his Capriccio sinfonico still fresh in my memory, I thought the young composer would need a fantastic subject, and I explained to him the plot of \textit{Le villi}.”\textsuperscript{42} And Puccini reacted in a similar vein: “I truly like it a great deal because there is much room for symphonic-descriptive work, which really pleases me because I think I could be successful with it.”\textsuperscript{43}

Fontana came by his attraction to German sources through direct exposure: he had lived in Berlin from 1878-89, where he was a correspondent for the \textit{Gazzetta Piemontese}. It was there, he said, that he first sketched \textit{Le Villi}.\textsuperscript{44} And he must have been attracted to the story’s musical references and promising spots for leitmotivic connections, such as the recurring mentions of a breeze and a waltz in the following passage:

\begin{quote}

The girls and boys waltzed joyously; the young people played, one on violin, the other on horn. The forest became still more silent; a light breeze, which had been rustling the foliage, stopped shaking the trees.... this breeze also carried a breath of some charming and singular measures of a song that was not unfamiliar to him... quite distinctly, they were some measures of the waltz he had composed earlier... it was the voice of women, pure, smooth, fleeting;
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{41} The “Famiglia Artistica Milanese” was a society founded in 1873 by the artist Vespasiano Bignami, which originally had its seat in the Piazza della Scala. “Lettere a Giacomo Puccini: 1884-1919” \textit{Quaderni Pucciniani} (1992): 46n.

\textsuperscript{42} Marchetti \textit{Puccini com’era}, 37n. [Vivo nella memoria il ricordo del successo del suo Capriccio sinfonico, mi parve che per il giovane maestro ci volesse un argomento fantastico e gli spiegai il canovaccio delle Villi].

\textsuperscript{43} Gara, \textit{Carteggi}, 6. [mi piace molto davvero, essendoci parecchio da lavorare nel genere sinfonico descrittivo, che a me garba assai perché mi pare di doverci riuscire.] Puccini’s youthful exuberance is seen in the autograph score with markings such as “ppppppimo.”

\textsuperscript{44} Sergio Martinotti, “‘Torna ai felici dì’: il librettista Fontana,” \textit{Quaderni Pucciniani} (1992): 63.
he stopped and held his breath to listen. It was again the waltz that was sung." \(^{45}\)

If *Le Villi* is not a success today it may be because of its lack of inherent dramatic structure. \(^{46}\) Fontana did not do much to transform Karr’s tale into a visually striking, theatrical work. His theories of the theater, also betraying a quasi-Wagnerian affect, proposed doing away with conventional opera and replacing it with “scenic, symphonic poems” \(^{47}\) instead of a libretto, the audience would simply be given a poem that would provide an outline of the story. \(^{48}\) Fontana’s verses, added to the symphonic intermezzi in the opera’s revision, are along these lines. \(^{49}\)

Fontana had radical political ideas as well: he spoke at political meetings, ran unsuccessfully for office and, accused by the authorities of being an instigator in 1898, he

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45 Alphonse Karr, “Les Willis” In *Contes et Nouvelles* (Paris: Hachette, 1858), 227, 233. [Des filles et des garçons valsaient joyeusement; des jeunes gens jouaient, un du violon, l’autre du cor. La forêt devenait encore plus silencieuse; un vent léger, qui faisait de temps en temps frissonner le feuillage, avait cessé d’agiter les arbres [...] ce vent apportait aussi par bouffées quelques mesures vagues et singulières d’un chant qui ne lui était pas inconnu [...] c’étaient quelques mesures bien distinctes de la valse qu’il avait autrefois composée [...] c’étaient des voix de femmes, des voix pures, suaves, fugitives; il s’arrêta et retint son haleine pour écouter. C’était toujours la valse qu’on chantait.]

46 Wakeing Dry reported in 1906 that “[Puccini] maintains that the choice of librettos has more to do with [dramatic instinct] than anything else, and from the first he has worked a good deal in this way by more than the usual amount of consultation and exchange of ideas that goes on between a composer and the writer of the book. Wakeing Dry, *Giacomo Puccini* (London: John Lane, 1906), 28. Although Puccini may have worked closely with Fontana on the libretti for *Le Villi* and *Edgar*, he expressed his wishes much more in collaborating on later works, starting with *Manon Lescaut*.

47 *Le Villi* contains verses to be read during the two instrumental pieces; these were written by Fontana for the revised version.

48 Ferdinando Fontana, *In Teatro* (Rome: Sommaruga, 1884), 110. “Opera aims to be transformed into a scenic, symphonic poem, it aims that is to be a spectacle that is theatrical, yes, but in which the theatricality should not impose upon art, but rather the latter on the former; the musical spectacle, then, aims to become symphonic par excellence, that is, to be shaped as the best form of musical art.” [Il melodramma tende a trasformarsi in poema sinfonico scenico, tende a diventare cioè uno spettacolo, teatrale si, ma nel quale la teatralità non dovrà avere il sopravvento sull’arte, bensì questa su quella; lo spettacolo musicale, insomma, tende a diventare sinfonico per eccellenza, cioè a sagomare sulla forma migliore dell’arte musicale.] As Budden writes, “[Fontana felt that] the public’s growing taste for symphonic music would transform conventional opera into a ‘poema sinfonico scenico’, of which each act would form a movement and in which scenery, costumes, libretto and singers would function like individual instruments within an orchestra.” Julian Budden, *Puccini: His Life and Works.* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 40-41.

49 Budden describes Fontana’s poetry as typical of the scapigliatura, in that it breaks down the barriers between art forms. Budden, “The Genesis,” 84. Oddly, Puccini was again attracted to a related type of less linear dramatic structure very late in his life. See Chapter 13 on *Turandot*. 
fled to Switzerland where he remained until his death.\textsuperscript{50} Some lines in \textit{Le Villi} express anti-
clerical--indeed blasphemous--statements, such as, “Doubt God but not my love”\textsuperscript{51} from the
Act I duet, and the final “Hosanna,” sung by spirits.\textsuperscript{52} Perhaps Puccini was also temporarily
influenced by Fontana’s political and anticlerical radicalism: on the autograph score of \textit{Le
Villi} in the Flagler Collection of the Pierpont Morgan Library, are scribbled the words,
“Death to the priests.”\textsuperscript{53}

Whatever his political tendencies, the question remains as to whether Puccini was a
\textit{musical} revolutionary. Roman Vlad sees in \textit{Le Villi} foreshadowings of impressionism,
atonality, modal constructions, and even octatonicism.\textsuperscript{54} He gives an example of this last in
the passage just before the final “Gran Scena e Duetto Finale” at II/52/13: while it is true
that octatonic collections can be found here, one could also read the passage as three tonal
motions from tonic to dominant (Gb to Db/C#; B to F# and E to B) forming an
overarching, traditional sequence of descending fifths, C#-F#-B. [Ex. 4.12]

Ex. 4.12

\textsuperscript{50} Longoni, “Vita e opere,” 238-9.
\textsuperscript{51} [Dubita di Dio ma no dell'amore mio non dubitar!]
\textsuperscript{52} Budden also notes this. Budden, “The Genesis;,” 83-84.
\textsuperscript{53} [Morte ai preti] Other politically related scribblings in this document include “W Garibaldi” and “W
V.E.R.D.I.” It is unclear, however, if these are in Puccini’s hand. Giacomo Puccini, sketches for \textit{Le villi};
autograph manuscript, Mary Flagler Cary Music Collection, the Morgan Library, New York. Music Mss
(Bound), P9774.V751. Provenance of the autograph is the library of Carlo Ginori-Lisci, and states on the cover,
“Lucca Nbre a Xbre [18]83.”
Which interpretation one accepts as the more convincing depends in large part on whether one views Puccini as an innovator or a traditionalist.

As we have seen in previously, the balance and interpenetration that Puccini achieves of traditional and progressive elements are qualities that are common to all his operatic works. This first opera epitomizes that dichotomy—one that will last until his final, incomplete creation.