Recondite Harmony: La bohème

Chapter 7: La Bohème: sfumature

“Sfuma un’ardente scena d’amor”

As the pages of Rodolfo’s play crackle into flames near the start of Act I of La Bohème, momentarily keeping the bohemians warm in their frigid garret, the bohemians describe an evanescent drama that could be La bohème itself. The opera’s nearly permanent place on the operatic stage, where it has remained for over a century, has rendered it so familiar to audiences that its ephemeral qualities no longer surprise. But this succinct tale of brief love extinguished too early something in common with the synecdochical drama set ablaze, whose capriciousness and brevity are mockingly described. The opera’s audience is

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1 [nuances]
2 “An ardent scene of love vanishes” from La bohème, Act I.
3 Rodolfo: my ardent play will warm us.
Marcello: You maybe want to read it? You’ll freeze me.
R: No, the paper will crackle into ashes / and inspiration will return to the heavens / it threatens great damage to the world / and Rome is in danger! [...] R: Quiet, they are giving my play... Colline...to the fire / I find it scintillating!
R: Vivo!
C: (as the fire dies down) But too short!
R: Brevity is a great merit [...] R: In that languid blue flame, an ardent scene of love vanishes [...] R, M, C: Beautifully disappearing in a happy blaze M: Oh God!.../ the flame is already dying,
C: What a useless play!
M: It already wears thin, crumples, dies (the fire goes out)
C e M: Down with the author!
R: No, in cener la carta si sfalda/ e l’estro rivoli ai suoi cieli.] Al secol gran danno minaccia.../ E Roma in periglio! [...] R: Zitto, si dà il mio dramma...
Colline...al fuoco./ Lo trovo scintillante!
R: Vivo!
C: (mentre il fuoco si sta spegnendo) Ma dura poco!
R: La brevità, gran pregio [...] R: In quell’azzurro - guizioso languente / Sfuma un’ardente scena d’amor [...] R, M, C: Bello in allegra/ vampa svanir.
M: Oh Dio!.../ già s’abbassa la fiamma.
C: Che vano, che fragile dramma!
M: Già scrichiola, /increspasì, muore. (il fuoco si spegne)
C e M: Abbasso, abbasso l’autore!}
shown only fleeting glimpses of the unsettled lives of these characters, and the music (beginning with the opening unresolved dominant seventh chord, which is the first link of a sequential cycle) is similarly flexible and unstable. As love blooms and dies, as moods change kaleidoscopically, as the frail Mimi passes on, as the bohemians live through this transient stage in their lives, the music follows suit.

The four “quadri” [tableaux] are not “acts,” but partial views of an unpredictable and unaccountable existence, based on events and personages from Henry Murger’s life. Much narrative detail is omitted (taking further the episodic structure first seen in *Manon Lescaut*) and scenes unseen from *La bohème* abound. We are not given a chance to see a panoramic view of their Paris—no traditional introductory chorus here to establish time and place. We only hear narrative-within-narrative descriptions of the grey skies and rooftops of the city, the millionaire uncle, Chez Mabille, the pawn shops. And we are made aurally aware of out-of-sight activities, such as Colline falling down the garret.

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4 Henry Murger, whose *Scènes de la Vie de Bohème* were the basis for the opera, entitled his twenty-third chapter, “La Jeunesse n’a qu’un temps” [Youth comes only once] which treats the lives of the now former bohemians as they become respectable—even Musetta gets married.

5 Alexandre Schanne describes the real people behind Henry Murger’s *Scènes de la Vie de Bohème* in *Souvenirs de Schannard* (Paris: G. Charpentier, 1887), 1-2: “Rodolphe is Murger. Colline was composed of the philosopher Jean Wallon and Trapadoux, called the “Green giant.” We find in the painter Marcel Lazare and Tabar. Schaunder is Alexandre Schanne: that’s me. [...] Murger, publishing in the *Corsaire* [Satan] his first scenes from *la Vie di Bohème*, gave me a role calling me “Schannard.” The first “n” of the word, being inverted by the printer, became a “u,” making “Schuarnard.” [Rodolphe, c’est Murger. Colline est un composé du philosophe Jean Wallon et de Trapadoux dit le “Géant vert”. On retrouve dans le peintre Marcel Lazare et Tabar. Schaunard, c’est Alexandre Schanne c’est moi. [...] Murger, publiant dans le *Corsaire* [Satan] ses premières scènes de *la Vie di Bohème*, m’y donna un rôle en m’appelant Schuannard. Le premier n du mot, ayant été renversé par l’imprimeur, devint un u, ce qui faisait Schannard.]

stairs, Parpignol the toy seller approaching, Musetta singing from inside the tavern, and
church bells ringing on the Avenue d'Orleans.7

In addition to the lack of a clear narrative trajectory, the first audiences of La bohème
would have noticed something else missing as well: many operatic conventions. Puccini,
librettists Luigi Illica and Giuseppe Giacosa, and editor Giulio Ricordi challenged traditional
ways, in a manner not unlike that of their bohemian protagonists, with the then-progressive
aim of making the opera seem as “realistic” as possible.

There is also no moral to this story, or even a clear dramatic conflict—no sworn
enemies8 or patriotic causes. As Daniela Goldin writes:

In general, just by reading a cast list one can foresee how an opera will end.
One can imagine a plot, its complications and its motives. Not so in Bohème.
Before the end, there is no episode or element that allows one to expect the
tragic-pathetic outcome of the opera.9

Theorist, and occasional music critic, Heinrich Schenker particularly objected to the
restless shifting of emotions displayed by the characters:

Should a composer seriously consider such men [Puccini and Leoncavallo],
as seriously as they themselves do and reward half-truths with whole? No.

One can employ music only for that which is either completely true or

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7 As Greenwald notes: “we are still keenly aware that the boundaries of what we have just witnessed are not
finite.” Helen Greenwald, “Dramatic Exposition and Musical Structure in Puccini’s Operas” (PhD diss.,
CUNY, 1991), 222-3.

8 - As Daniela Goldin writes, “La Bohème is an opera without enemies, which places it absolutely out of
panorama of operatic tragedy.” [La Bohème e’ un’opera senza nemici; il che la pone assolutamente fuori del
panorama operistico tragico.] Daniela Goldin. “Drammaturgia e linguaggio della Bohème di Puccini” in La Vera
Fenice: librettisti e libretti tra Sette e Ottocento (Turin: Einaudi, 1985), 346.

9 Goldin, “Drammaturgia,” 344. “In genere, alla sola lettura del “cast” si può prevedere come va a finire
un’opera, si possono immaginare una vicenda, le sue complicazioni e i suoi moventi. Non così’ in Bohème: prima
del finale, non c’è un solo episodio o elemento che faccia prevedere l’esito tragico-patetico dell’opera.” Goldin
adds on 358, “Consider too the disappearance in La bohème of the strophe (which is fundamental, as we know,
in Verdi’s libretti).” [considerare anche la sparizione, nella Bohème, della strofa (fondamentale invece, sappiamo,
nella poetica verdiana).]
completely false. Thus, for example, the count in Mozart’s *Marriage of Figaro* or Mozart’s *Don Giovanni*, despite their less than honorable intentions, are at least men of more steady sentiments, and more steady desires than Marcels, Rodolfos, etc. [...] We fear that the two Italians have gleaned from Murger’s book only the superficial salacity of the material. Rather dishonestly.¹⁰

Further, many aspects of the stage business were shocking in their day.¹¹ In how many operas do the protagonists disappear at the end of an act—still singing—leaving behind an empty stage? Have we ever before heard the prima donna finish her first aria with the antithesis of a flashy ending—a quasi-recitative¹²—or die, sans deathbed aria, while the tenor does not even notice? The actual moment of Mimi’s death is not even marked in the score. And, just before he realizes this, Rodolfo lapses into speaking voice, shattering the most basic of operatic commandments and removing yet another layer of separation between the stage and reality.

*a transitory score*

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¹¹ As Dona de Sanctis writes in, “Literary Realism,” 117-18: “the libretto’s apparent disorganization also resembles the randomness of ‘real life’ a theme of literary naturalism that contributed to *Bohème*’s modernity.” Quoted in Greenwald, *Dramatic Exposition*, 240.

The opera opens without clearly establishing a tonic, and tonal closure is frequently lacking elsewhere in the work as well. Perhaps the most striking example in the opera of this open-endedness is the bitonal clash in keys a tritone apart, at II/27, when the concertato built on Musetta’s E major waltz remains incomplete while overlapping with the tattoo’s march that begins in Bb major.\(^{13}\) [Ex. 7.0]
Ex. 7.0 - bitonal clash at II/27

The overall effect is that of musical flexibility and fragmentation. Puccini wrote, “It cost me some effort to keep to the reality, and then to liricize somewhat all these little bits. And I succeeded.”\(^{14}\) Part of his solution was to create leitmotivic thematic cells, and slightly more extended passages, that thwart traditional expectations of full-blown set-pieces. As

Salvetti writes, “The coherence of the musical discourse [...] does not rely upon long scenes constructed harmoniously on a single idea, but from many small phrase fragments.”

The restless surface of the music and its close linking to the vicissitudes of the action were the attributes most noticed by contemporary critics, usually with little approbation. Eduard Hanslick, Wagner’s nemesis, was particularly vehement, criticizing the emphasis on “ordinary things” and the score’s fragmentation: “Everything is broken up into the smallest bits and pieces; the power to comprehend and unite, without which there is no genuine effect in music, is totally lacking. [...] The basic feeling of the whole, continually broken up, is thus dissipated in noisy, nervous details.”

As noted in Chapter 1, Hanslick saved his sharpest invective for Puccini’s overt use in this opera of parallel fifths.

The critic known as Jarro wrote an article in which he “interviewed” Puccini about La bohème by means of a supernatural encounter. If one were disposed to view this as a writerly conceit and place some measure of credence in the authenticity of this account, then “Puccini” defended his parallel fifths thus:

With the fifths at the beginning of the second act, with consecutive 5-3 chords on three trumpets, I believe to have suggested the clamor, the hubbub of a public celebration. The contrapuntal error renders the racket, the undignified

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15 [La coerenza del discorso musicale si affida così’ non a grandi scene, costruite unitariamente su un’unica idea, ma a tanti piccoli incisi.] Guido Salvetti, “Il Novecento I,” in Storia della Musica, 9 (Turin: EDT, 1979), 165.
16 [allergewöhnlichsten Dinge] and [Alles zersplittert sich in kleinste Stücke und Stückchen; die überschauende und zusammenfassende Kraft, ohne welche es in der Musik keine echte Wirkung gibt, fehlt gänzlich. [...] Die Grundempfindung des Ganzen, unaufhörlich zerrissen, zerflattert dergestalt in lauter nervösen Details.] Eduard Hanslick: “Die moderne Oper, VIII (Berlin, 1899), 81-83. Quoted in English translation in Groos and Parker.
17 “It is impossible to interpret this clever cultivation of ugliness as a ‘witty’ protest against the harmony of our great masters; it is nothing more than a crude musical insult. The unmotivated use of ugliness just because it is ugly, as well as the insolent predominance of the most banal dialogue, are a result of the naked realism that has now also invaded opera.” [Für einen “witzigen” Protest gegen die Harmonielehre unserer grossen Meister können wir diese raffinierte Züchtung des Hässlichen doch unmöglich halten; sie ist nichts weiter als eine rohe musikalische Beleidigung. Die unmotivierte Umwendung des Hässlichen, blass weil es hässlich ist, sowie die anmassende Vorherrschaft des banalsten Dialoges sind eine Konsequenz des nunmehr auch in die Oper eingedrungenen nackten Realismus.] Ibid., 84.
vivacity of the celebration! The progression of fifths in the third act is slower, given to the flutes and harps, with a tremolo on the bridge of the cellos. They are descending fifths without thirds, empty fifths that give the idea of falling snow, of the bleakness of the cold. I believe to have used them with efficacy.¹⁸

The transitoriness that permeates almost every aspect of the plot is typified by the opera’s sequential opening. Here, the opening theme remains unresolved on a 4/2 inversion of the dominant seventh of C major for twenty-four measures. (This is the most unstable arrangement of the chord since the dissonant seventh is in the bass.) Once having arrived at C major, however, the pattern is repeated on the V4/2 of F [I/1/0], moving to Bb major [I/1/40]. Then, after the aria “Nei cieli bigi,” this descending fifths sequence (circle of fifths) proceeds to the dominant 4/2s of Eb, Ab, Db [at I/2/13, I/3/0, and I/3/9 respectively],

[Ex. 7.1] As Helen Greenwald writes:

This non-tonic opening reflects both the action that has been going on before the opera and the in medias res situation as the curtain rises on Marcello painting “The Passage of the Red Sea” and Rodolfo gazing out of the window [...] Puccini clearly understood [this] by setting it against a cycle of fifths—a progressive musical device that can be joined midstream and ended effectively and easily at any desired point.¹⁹

Ex. 7.1 - descending fifths sequence, La bohème, opening


¹⁹ Greenwald, “Dramatic Exposition,” 252. Puccini, even as a student, was attracted to this type of sequence, as attested to by a doodle in his class notebook of 1882, in which he writes out the falling fifths pattern, as rising fourths, moving from C through Fbb before making enharmonic alterations. Three of Puccini’s notebooks are conserved at the Instituto Musicale “Boccherini” in Lucca and can be viewed online at http://www.internetculturale.it.
Sequences are transitory by nature, and thus are very useful for connecting diverse keys or registers by simply repeating ascending or descending patterns that can disrupt tonal stability. And the score of *La bohème* reads like a primer in this technique: in the first act alone, there is a multitude of sequential patterns. For instance, Puccini composes a 7-6 descending sequence at I/4/24 that leads into a rising chromatic passage of parallel sixths supporting augmented triads. [Ex. 7.2a] At I/13/0, we find a sequence of rising minor thirds, in which the four-bar model begins in Eb major, then moves up to Gb major, A major and C major, an expanded diminished seventh chord or minor-third cycle. [Ex. 7.2b] A few bars later, at I/21/29, we hear a descending sequence of parallel tenths [Ex. 7.2c] followed soon by another parallel tenths sequence during “Che gelida manina” at I/32/13 [Ex. 7.2d]. The start of “O soave fanciulla,” at I/41/0, shows an ascending thirds sequence that seems to embody the rising passions of the two lovers [Ex. 7.2e]
Ex. 7.2

a) 

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\begin{musicbox}
\begin{music}
\staves{4}
\line 1 \text{ \textit{"Vuoi leggere forte? Mi geli."}}
\line 2 \text{ \textit{No, tieni la carta...}}
\line 3 \text{ \textit{augmented triads}}
\end{music}
\end{musicbox}
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b) 

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\begin{musicbox}
\begin{music}
\staves{4}
\line 1 \text{ \textit{Guardare!, e un pappagallo}}
\line 2 \text{ \textit{poi sogghignare}}
\line 3 \text{ \textit{Pescate fogover}}
\end{music}
\end{musicbox}
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c) 

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\begin{musicbox}
\begin{music}
\staves{4}
\line 1 \text{ \textit{E finita sera a vostro amico. Ah!}}
\end{music}
\end{musicbox}
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d) 

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\begin{musicbox}
\begin{music}
\staves{4}
\line 1 \text{ \textit{\"Entro ora, vedo pure con}}
\end{music}
\end{musicbox}
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parallel tenths sequence
In the second tableau, Musetta's capricious “second” theme is built on descending tenths (or thirds), decorated with 4-3 suspensions [Ex. 7.3a] at II/17/11, while in the third tableau, beginning at III/10/0, Puccini writes a larger-scale sequence of rising minor thirds that outlines an expanded diminished seventh pattern while subsuming an ascending 5-6 pattern. Bb minor becomes Gb major 6/3 chord through the 5-6 shift, which then serves as the subdominant of Db major, enharmonically reinterpreted as C# minor; the pattern repeats, advancing the sequence to E major. Next, E minor takes over and, with a different melodic pattern, ascends to G minor and then Bb minor.20 [Ex. 7.3b] Later in the tableau, at III/21/0, when Rodolfo sings “Mimi e’ tanto malata!” we hear yet another sequence built on descending fifths. [Ex. 7.3c]

Ex. 7.3

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20 The original version of this passage, at III/10/4, shows a shorter sequence but the vocal line moving up to high C. This is shown in Groos and Parker. *Giacomo Puccini “La bohème,”* 113.
In the fourth tableau, there are numerous thematic reminiscences, and accordingly we hear reprisals of sequential material, such as the descending fifths pattern at IV/6/19-33: B minor-E major-A major. Yet there is also new sequential material, such as the extension of Mimi’s theme at her return (IV/12/50), which combines rising thirds with voice exchanges [Ex. 7.4a], and the chromatically descending parallel tenths at IV/18/2, which move from A minor to Eb dominant seventh, the distance of a tritone. [Ex. 7.4b]
Puccini’s skill at employing sequences derived in large part from his training in the thoroughbass traditions, where they were known as “arrangements” [disposizioni] or “bass motions” [movimenti del basso]. As Baragwanath writes:

These involved the application of short sequential melodic figures or designs to the individual parts of model realizations (sung and/or played) of the “bass motion by step,” or scale, and to the other bass motions consisting
of regular patterns of conjunct and disjunct intervals.\(^{21}\)

And Puccini did not have to look far to find models: his own father’s counterpoint treatise, employed for years at the Lucca conservatory, contains a list of the “regular movements and sequences of the bass” [movimento o andamenti regolari del Basso].\(^{22}\) Two of these, for example, describe descending fifth patterns: ascending by fifth and descending by fourth [sale di 5a e scende di 4a], and ascending by fourth and descending by fifth [sale di 4a e scende di 5a]. The elder Puccini employs the latter within G major, but the former modulates from C to E.

Puccini used the old patterns, which he had at his fingertips, for non-traditional purposes, however. Defying rigid tonal structures, the prolific use in \textit{La bohème} of the open-ended patterns allows free-floating passage from one key to another, an essential part of Puccini’s vision for this new kind of opera. And when Puccini employs the sequences in an expanded way, outlining equal divisions of the octave, as in Examples 7.2b and 7.3b, he even invokes the type of “atonality” put forth by his contemporary Domenico Alaleona.\(^{23}\)

\textit{scenes unseen}

The few passing moments of which we catch sight in \textit{La bohème}, were once more numerous. In adapting Murger’s \textit{Scènes}, the opera’s creators worked long and hard to arrive at the final product and, in the process, they discarded much material (enough for ten operas, as Illica wrote). The largest section to be cut was an entire act, “The Cortile Scene” (originally Tableau III) which, along with a politically risky scene from Act IV, has now been

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22 See Deborah Burton, “Michele Puccini’s Counterpoint Treatise,” \textit{Quaderni Pucciniani} (1996): 177, and Baragwanath, \textit{The Italian Traditions}, 161. Baragwanath describes the treatise as “essentially a handwritten compilation of pedagogical materials drawn for the most part from early Neapolitan sources and Sala (1794), Fenaroli (1814), and Mattei (ca. 1824–25, ca. 1827, and 1850 [1829?]).” Ibid., 165.

23 See Chapter 1.
published and translated into English. Many other documents, however, including those housed at Giacosa’s family home, reveal fascinating glimpses of the La bohème that might have been.

One of the most surprising discoveries to be found in these papers has to do with perhaps the most famous line of the opera, “They call me Mimi, but my name is Lucia.” In the version of the aria at Casa Giacosa, Mimi’s given name is, instead, Maria, a phonetically closer choice, and one probably relating to another of Murger’s characters. Yet, because the name of the character in the original novel on which Mimi was primarily based had been “Lucille,” perhaps the librettists decided upon the nearly equivalent “Lucia.” [Exx. 7.5a-b]

Exx. 7.5 - facsimiles of Giacosa’s sketches for “Mi chiamano Mimi”

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25 The presence of archival material at the Casa Giacosa was first noted thirty years ago by Dr. Bice Serafini; her subsequent article and thesis, along with a brief article written by her advisor at the University of Pisa, Dr. Federico Ghisi, were, until the recent publications of this author and Pier Giuseppe Gillio, the only published accounts of the drafts. The sketches eluded further examination for several reasons: the Giacosa family archive is closed for most of the year, Serafini’s thesis has vanished from the University of Pisa library, and Ghisi’s article is little known.
26 [Mi chiamano Mimi, ma il mio nome è Lucia.]
27 Elements of Mimi were also based on Murger’s character Francine.
The Latin Quarter tableau underwent numerous changes as well, the largest of which was its separation from the first tableau and subsequent transformation into Act II. Only a few documents from this tableau have survived at the Casa Giacosa, but all are quite informative. The most fascinating of these is a single page containing not less than six versions of the beginning of Musetta's waltz, written meticulously by Giacosa, and all variations on the same idea.28 [Ex. 7.6]

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28 [recto, on letterhead of the Società degli Autori]
When I go along on the street alone and secure
People stop and stare
And
(all from head to foot)
When I go along alone on the street
People stop and (look) stare
At my beauty - search in me (from head to foot)
All from head to foot […]

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Ex. 7.6 - facsimile of versions of Musetta’s waltz

[recto]

When I go among the people all alone
When I go along the street
When I go along the muddy street

Quando me'n vo per via sola / La gente sosta e guarda / E (Tutta da capo a piè)
Quando me'n vo sola per la via / La gente sosta e (guarda) mira / E la bellezza mia - ricerca in me (da capo a piè) / Tutta da capo a piè [...]

[verso]

When one stops and looks at me
Each one stops and looks at me
When I go along on the street
Each one stops and looks at me
When I go along the muddy street

Quando me'n vo per via sola e sicura / La gente sosta e guarda / E (Tutta da capo a piè)
Quando me'n vo sola per la via / La gente sosta e (guarda) mira / E la bellezza mia - ricerca in me (da capo a piè) / Tutta da capo a piè [...]

When I go among the people all alone
Each one stops and looks at me
When I go along on the street
Each one stops and looks at me
When I go along the muddy street

Quando me'n vo per via sola e sicura / La gente sosta e guarda / E (Tutta da capo a piè)
Quando me'n vo sola per la via / La gente sosta e (guarda) mira / E la bellezza mia - ricerca in me (da capo a piè) / Tutta da capo a piè [...]

When I go among the people all alone
Each one stops and looks at me
When I go along on the street
Each one stops and looks at me
When I go along the muddy street

Quando me'n vo per via sola e sicura / La gente sosta e guarda / E (Tutta da capo a piè)
This waltz is a well-known example of Puccini’s “prima la musica”—that is, his practice of composing the music before receiving the text. It was originally a piano piece, *Piccolo valzer*, published a few years earlier. Adami writes that Puccini had sent Giacosa some dummy verses to show the meter and line length of the pre-existing melody “Cockadoodle-doo, cockadoodle-doo, beefsteak” [Cocoricò, cocoricò, bistecca] and that the librettist “turned pale, trembled and groaned” before coming up with Musetta’s verses the next day, claiming that had been easily done. These sketches attest to the laborious process that actually took place.

Puccini often composed at the piano from the libretti, writing musical sketches in the margins. One libretto version of the first tableau, housed at the Museo Illica in Castell’Arquato, shows one of these, with the annotation “Motivo o di Colline o Schaunard” [theme of either Colline or Schaunard], which was not ultimately used.

Ex. 7.7 - facsimile of sketch “Motivo o di Colline o Schaunard”

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29 The *Piccolo Valzer* was published in the magazine *Armi ed Arte* (Genoa: Montrofano, 1894) on the occasion of the christening of the battleship Umberto I. The tempo marking reads, “con ondulazione” [with undulation] as befitting its nautical subject. Other writers and musicians who contributed to this issue were Alberto Franchetti, Luigi Mancinelli and Edoardo Trucco. A modern edition exists in Giacomo Puccini, *L’Opera completa per Pianoforte*. Ed. Marco Sollini. (Rome: Boccaccini and Spada, 2000).


31 Illica was also annoyed at being asked to “paraphrase music” as had happened with *Manon Lescaut*. Illica wrote to Ricordi in January 1893: “Permit me to tell you that I do not feel strong enough to return to paraphrasing music.” [Permetta che Le dica che io non mi sento la forza di ritornare a parafrasare della musica] Gara, *Carteggi*, 78-79.
In the last act, Puccini wanted the action to focus on the amorous scenes and the “Tod von Mimí” as he put it. Therefore, he wanted to abridge the initial elements of the last act. One of the parts that he excised, after much discussion and work, was the “toast to water,” whose text has long been a mystery. This toast caused many problems amongst the collaborators. As Puccini wrote to Ricordi in October 1895, “That toast will be my death!” Among the papers at the Casa Giacosa, is a printed proof of the toast. [Ex. 7.8] It reads:

**RODOLFO**: ‘Youth - that fearless reigns/ to seek inebriation - wine disdains / if the eye - shining vividly / its sparkle - lights up by itself / there is no need for - the birth of Noah. / I drink pure water - the inebriation is in me.’

**COLLINE** (à Metastasio): ‘If water is unavailable / the vine doesn’t make wine. / But water has nothing to do with / the vat’s liquids [humours]. / Therefore water is absolute / and wine is contingent. / And con-se-quent-ly / only in water is truth.’

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32 This was probably inspired by Murger’s character Jacques, who is a member of the “Water-drinkers’ Club” [Société Buveurs d’Eau], an abstemious group dedicated to pure intellectual pursuit. Murger, Sénes, 291. The bohèmes abstain for less lofty reasons.

33 [Quel brindisi sarà la mia morte.] Gara, Carteggi, 122.
SCHAUNARD: ‘The vapor of wine clouds the brain / The vapor of water clouds the sun. / since the empyrean lies above man / so has water a flight more lofty than wine.’

MARCELLO: Praise the sea, keep to the earth / Praise God, believe in destiny. / Praise the fields and live in a hothouse. / Praise water and drink wine.’

RODOLFO: ‘Now let’s clear the halls / for a dance.’

MARCELLO: ‘With vocal music.”’
Ex. 7.8 - “proof” of brindisi text

La giovinetta — che habbia regna
cercar l’eurìrrezza — nel vin disdegna
se la pupilla — viva le splendo
la sua favilla — per sè s’accende
duopo non era — nascer Noa.
Beve acqua pura — l’eurìrrezza è in me.

 COLLINE
(intonatissimo)
Se d’acqua è sprovvoduta
la vite non fa vino.
Ma dell’amor del tao
l’acqua non ha mostier.
Ergo l’acqua è assoluta
e il vino è contingente.
E con-se-guen-te-mente
solo nell’acqua è il ver.

 SCHAUNARD
Il vapore del vino annobia il còlbro
il vapore dell’acqua annobia il sol.
Siccome all’uomo sovrasta l’empìreo
tal più eccelso che il vino ha l’acqua al vol.

 MARCELLO
Loda il mar, tieni alla terra
loda l’idìo, credi al destia.
Loda i campi e vivi in serra.
Loda l’acqua e bevi il vin.

 RODOLFO
Or agomeriam le salo
per un ballo.

 MARCELLO
Con musica vocale.

The text of this toast is remarkable, not only for the sentiments themselves, but for the individual ways in which the characters express them (Rodolfo is more poetic and Colline more philosophical, etc.)—and each of the bohèmes speak in a different meter. The mixing of meters became an issue for Puccini, as he wrote in yet another letter to Ricordi of the same period:

Reading carefully, one understands what the poet wanted, and that is a quartet sung simultaneously, with the fault though of ‘different meters’ in the ‘different toasts’. Marcello, as you see, intervenes to cut off the discussion of precedence. Rodolfo confirms the idea and Schaunard gives the signal, tapping out three so they can begin together - don’t you think? Therefore,
the idea of having one sing after the other is out, because is would be
nonsensical. And therefore how do I handle the different meters and
corcepts?"\textsuperscript{34}

That the four begin together is made clear by the text preceding the toast, which can
also be found among the papers at the Casa Giacosa. It reads:

"Rod.: Give me the mug.

I will make a toast

Marc.: Me, too

Coll.: Also me.

Rod.: It’s my turn.

Schaun.: If inspiration is bursting in all of us,

let’s toast together

Marc.: Let it be so - A toast-quartet

Schaun.: The theme is water - look here,

one - two - three - \textsuperscript{35}

Puccini also complained to Illica: “For the toast, I repeat to you that it is almost impossible
to set it (I say almost, because if one wants one can set the tailor’s bill.)”\textsuperscript{36} Puccini’s reticence

\textsuperscript{34} [Leggendo attentamente, si comprende cosa abbia voluto il poeta, e cioè un quartetto cantato
simultaneamente, col torto però dei ‘metri differenti’ ai ‘differenti brindisi.’ Marcelllo, come vede, interviene per
troncare le questioni di precedenza. Rodolfo ribadisce l’idea, e Schaunard dà il segnale battendo i tre colpi per
poter così attaccare uniti - non le pare? Dunque decide l’idea di far cantare uno dopo l’altro, poiché sarebbe un
nonsenso. E allora come fare per i differenti metri e concetti?]

\textsuperscript{35} Rod. Dammi il gotto.

Io farò brindisi.

Marc. Io pure

Coll. Anch’io.

Rod. Il turno è mio

Schaun Se in tutti l’estro freme

Brindiamo insieme

Marc. Così va detto - Un brindisi quartetto

Schaun. Il tema è l’acqua - a me

Uno- due - tre -
in this regard is peculiar given his sophisticated metric technique (after all, at the end of Act II, he combines the triple meter of Musetta’s waltz and the duple meter of the approaching parade).

Perhaps his sense of dramatic pacing was guiding him to focus on the denouement. As he wrote, “making beautiful academic music in the final act is ruinous,” a sentiment he would repeat when composing his next work, Tosca: he nixed a farewell aria by the diva as an “overcoat aria”—the signal for the audience to leave. In the end, the composer decided to omit the bohèmes’ toast and suggested the scene as it stands today, with the bohèmes shouting down Schaunard’s attempt at a toast, just a fragmentary remnant.

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Murger wrote, “youth only comes once” [la jeunesse n’a qu’un temps] but the ever-fresh La bohème may prove that wrong. The musical, visual and dramatic images of these young bohèmes entice us all the more because of their fragmentary nature; they beckon us to return to that world whenever we wish, a world where the inhabitants are always young. As Musset describes Mimi:

Mimi Pinson can remain a maiden,
If God wants it, which is his right.
She will always have her needle,
Tra-la-la!
At the tip of her finger. 

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36 Per il ‘brindisi’ ripetoti che così è quasi impossibile musicarlo (dico quasi, perché volendo si può musicare anche il conto del sarto).
37 Gara, Carteggi, 126.