# Recondite Harmony: the operas of Puccini

Introduction

"Il mio mistero è chiuso in me."[2]

Who is Puccini? His operas, while everywhere heard, have until recently remained in large part hidden from the analyst's eye. Not an opera season goes by without a performance of at least one of his works, and although much has been written about Puccini's biography, his love life, the dramaturgy of his libretti, his psychological makeup, his revisions, etc., very little critical attention by scholars has been paid to the actual notes he put together. More than twenty-five years ago, Roger Parker wrote that "Puccini represents a last outpost against the rigours of music theory"[3] and that statement still largely holds, despite some important analytic contributions at the dissertation level,[4] in books,[5] and in a relatively small number of scholarly articles[6]—a number of which do not agree.

Perhaps the most contentious focus of these debates is that of Puccini's cultural and musical identity: is he traditional or progressive? This author does not challenge the sometimes conflicting

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[2] [My mystery is hidden in myself.] From *Turandot*, music by Puccini, libretto by Giuseppe Adami and Renato Simoni.

[3.] Roger Parker, *Analysis: Act I in Perspective*, in "Giacomo Puccini: *Tosca*", ed. Mosco Carner (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 118.

[4] Micheal F Anders., "Musical and Dramatic Structure in the Finales of the Operas of Giacomo Puccini" (Ph.D. diss., Ohio State University, 1997); Deborah Burton, "An Analysis of Puccini's *Tosca*: a Heuristic Approach to the Unifying Elements of the Opera." (Ph.D. dissertation University of Michigan, 1995); Norbert Christen, *Giacomo Puccini: Analytische Unterschungen der Melodik, Harmonik und Instrumentation. Schriftenreihe zur Musik* 13. (Hamburg: Verlag der Musikalienhandlung Karl Dieter Wagner, 1978); Andrew C. Davis, "Structural implications of stylistic plurality in Puccini's *Turandot*" (Ph.D. diss., Indiana University, 2003); Franca Ferrari, "Il linguaggio melodico di Puccini nella drammaturgia di *Bohème*, *Tosca* e *Madama Butterfly*." (Dissertation Università degli Studi di Bologna, 1989-90); Helen Greenwald, "Dramatic Exposition and Musical Structure in Puccini's Operas." (Ph.D. diss., City University of New York, 1991).

[5] William Ashbrook and Harold Powers, *Puccini's "Turandot": the end of the great tradition.* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991); Nicholas Baragwanath, *The Italian Traditions & Puccini: Compositional Theory & Practice* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2011); Andrew Davis, *Il Trittico, Turandot and Puccini's Late Style* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2010); Michele Girardi, *Giacomo Puccini: L'arte internazionale di un musicista italiano.* Venice: Marsilio, 1995) [English translation: *Puccini: his Internatonal Art*, trans. Laura Basini, Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2000]; Antonino Titone, *Vissi d'arte: Puccini e il disfacimento del melodramma.* Materiali 36 (Milan: Feltrinelli, 1972).

[6] A select list of studies that devote space, at least in part, to analyzing the music of Puccini includes the following works: Allan Atlas, "Crossed Stars and Crossed Tonal Areas in Puccini's *Madama Butterfly*" *19th-Century Music* 14 (1990): 186-196; Nicholas Baragwanath, "Analytical Approaches to Melody in Selected Arias by Puccini," *Music Theory Online*, Volume 14/2 (June 2008); Marcello Conati, "*Il tabarro* ovvero la 'solita' insolita forma" *Studi Musicali* 3 (2004): 265-282; William Drabkin, "The musical language of *La bohème*" in Arthur Groos and Roger Parker, *Giacomo Puccini: La bohème*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 80-101; Helen Greenwald, "Puccini, *Il tabarro*, and the Dilemma of Operatic Transposition" *Journal of the American Musicological Society* 51/3 (Autumn, 1998): 521-558; James Hepokoski, "Structure, Implication and the End of *Suor Angelica*." *Studi Musicali* 3 (2004): 241-264; Réné Leibowitz, "L'arte di Giacomo Puccini." *L'Approdo musicale* II/6 (April-June 1959): 3-27; Alfredo Mandelli, "La logica del West (appunti su un finale di Puccini)," *Rassegna musicale Curci* 30/ 1 (April 1977): 19-21; Roger Parker and Allan Atlas, "A Key for Chi? Tonal Areas in Puccini," *19th-Century Music* 15 (1992): 229-234; Giorgio Sanguinetti, "Puccini's Music in the Italian Theoretical Literature of Its Day," *Tosca's Prism* (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 2004): 221-248; Roman Vlad, "Attualità di Puccini," In *Critica pucciniana* (Lucca: Comitato Nazionale per le Onoranze a Giacomo Puccini..., 1976), 152-189. For a more complete bibliographic listing, as of 1999, see Linda Fairtile, *Giacomo Puccini: A Guide to Research* (New York: Garland, 1999).

analytic work by William Ashbrook, Allan Atlas, Nicholas Baragwanath, Andrew Davis, William

Drabkin, Michele Girardi, Helen Greenwald, James Hepokoski, Harold Powers, Giorgio Sanguinetti

and others, nor suggest that her book will supersede it. Rather, the analytic investigations completed

previously have made possible this book's focus. In short, the thesis of this volume is that the

diametrically opposed forces of the traditional and the progressive live together in Puccini's music,

embedded deeply within his harmonic constructs and in many musical parameters. The author

hopes that the observations set forth in these pages will help frame Puccini studies in a way that

helps to reconcile previously contentious issues.

Often the question of Puccini's identity is framed in nationalistic terms: is he the scion of the

Italian tradition or a progressive composer steeped in the foreign influences of his day. This is

indeed the subject of Alexandra Wilson's book *The Puccini Problem*, and the issue is succinctly

referenced by the original title of Michele Girardi's volume *L'arte internazionale di un musicista italiano*

(literally, "The international art of an Italian musician").[7] It was a controversial subject in Puccini's

own time and he left clues supporting both sides of the issue. How are we to make sense, for

instance, of the following two quotes?

"I am not a Wagnerian; my musical education was in the Italian school."[8]

"Although I may be a Germanophile, I have never wanted to show it publicly."[9]

Was Puccini a secret Wagnerian, then? Exploring his place within the highly charged nationalistic

atmosphere of his social and cultural milieu—the subject of chapter 1—also has ramifications for

multiple parts of this analytical study.

By extension, this debate must also inform the choice of analytical tools. Should only

traditional Italian compositional methods be considered? Are German-influenced analytic tools—

either of the early 20th century or of own time—off-limits?  While some might say "yes," this author

would argue that inviting factors of social context into the discussion cuts both ways:  in Puccini's

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[7] See note 5.
[8] *Neue Zeitschrift fur Musik* 79 (1912): 241; as cited in John Deathridge, *Wagner: Beyond Good and Evil.* Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008), 234, and Baragwanath, *The Italian Traditions*, 40.
[9] [Benché io sia un germanofilo non ho voluto mai mostrarmi pubblicamente.] Claudio Sartori, *Giacomo Puccini* (Milan: Edizioni Accademia, 1978),  306.

time and place, there was a wide acceptance of German music and compositional techniques. As

Sanguinetti writes, "Toward the end of the 19th century, the influence of German theoretical

thought begins to be strongly felt. [...] This resulted in the Italian view that Germany had ousted

France as the cradle of music theory."[10]

This negates neither the *italianità* of Puccini's earlier training nor his output. But since traits

from both sources find resonance in his music, it would be too restrictive, and ultimately

unsatisfying, to draw xenophobic boundaries, opting for one to the exclusion of the other.

Therefore the analyses here will draw upon ideas of Italian theorists, such as Domenico Alaleona,

Alfredo Casella, Giacomo Setaccioli, (and, to some extent, Abramo Basevi), as well as the more

organicist, Germanic methods of Heinrich Schenker, Arnold Schoenberg and others. (More recent

analytic insights will also be considered.) As William Rothstein writes, "It seems foolish to eschew

organicist methods of analysis for music conceived according to organicist premises, but it is equally

foolish to apply *only* [emphasis added] organicist methods to music differently conceived."[11] The

author hangs her analytical hat on Rothstein's "only."

An organicist approach would normally entail a search for overall musical coherence. In

opera studies, this has been often linked to an exploration of tonality, to how or whether the music

is "in a key." Too frequently the issues at stake in this debate have been framed in yes-or-no terms:

is there a single overarching tonality for a given work? Do keys have associations to characters or

concepts?[12] Do transpositions to accommodate singers or certain instruments negate or undermine

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[10][Verso la fine del XIX secolo inizia a farsi sentire potentemente l'influenza del pensiero teorico tedesco. [...] Questo fece si che, nell'opinione italiana, la Germania spodestasse la Francia come culla della teoria musicale.] Giorgio Sanguinetti, "Un secolo di teoria della msuica in Italia. Bibliografia critica (1850-1950." *Fonti Musicali Italiane* 2/1997: 163-4.

[11] William Rothstein, "Common-tone Tonality in Italian Romantic Opera: An Introduction" *Music Theory Online*, Volume 14/1, March 2008, http://www.mtosmt.org/issues/mto.08.14.1/mto.08.14.1.rothstein.html, §1.

[12] Patrick McCreless, with Robert Bailey, isolated four types of tonality that interact: *classical tonality*, which involves normal tonic-dominant relations, *associative tonality*, in which keys are linked with aspects of drama, *expressive tonality*, in which ascending or descending keys express intensification or relaxation, and *directional tonality*, an interplay between two different tonal centers. Patrick McCreless, *Wagner's "Siegfried": Its Drama, History, and Music* (Ann Arbor: UMI Research Press, 1982), 88-95, summarized in Warren Darcy, *Wagner's "Das Rheingold"* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993), 52. The case has sometimes been made convincingly in the literature that Puccini employs what is known as "associative tonality," in which keys symbolize aspects of the drama. (See, for example, Atlas, "Crossed Stars.") But there are also many instances in which the same key in different contexts admits little apparent fixed association. In *La bohème*, for example, Bb major is the key of Rodolfo's "Nei cieli bigi," the first act "lost key" scene (I/27), the parade at the end of Act II, and Mimi's discussion with Marcello in Act III/9. In *Tosca*, Ab major is both the key of Tosca's entrance music

tonal organization? These questions heighten awareness of the challenges of understanding opera as musical art, but in searching for coherence *only* in tonality—or railing against it—some scholars may have bypassed more subtle cohering elements. Let us then problematize this discussion a bit and take a fresh look at Puccini's scores.

In addition to being shrouded in mystery to most music theorists (many of whom recoil from looking at any scores of Italian operas), the works themselves are full of tonal, metric and formal ambiguities that do not fit neatly into standard analytic rubrics. As Lewis Lockwood has stated, "behind the vast emotional and dramatic world of Puccini's operas there is a wonderful and intricate musical mind, part of which we can come to know through close analysis of his harmonic language."[13] Yet his scores are not simple to analyze: there are thickets of unresolved dissonances, unexpected changes of key, sudden leitmotivic appearances, shifting rhythms and meters and motions to keys remote from the initial or final tonic.

Most problematic to interpret are shifts between diatonic and alternative pitch collections (such as whole-tone or pentatonic scales), and passages that seem to exhibit compounded qualities of both. Ashbrook, Powers and Davis[14] have written extensively on the former, focusing on the juxtaposition of different styles. One example of the latter is the famous opening motive of *Tosca*—called "preludio" by the composer and the "Scarpia motive" by almost everyone else. It is constructed of layers of different pitch collections: we hear three diatonic major chords, laid out on a whole-tone framework (Bb-Ab-E) and topped by a chromatic line (D-Eb-E).

[Ex. I.0]

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and Scarpia's "Ha più forte sapore," while F# major is the tonality in which Cavaradossi shouts "Vittoria" and Gb major, its enharmonic equivalent, is the key of Scarpia's "Sei troppo bella Tosca." Although imaginative writers could make connections here, it seems a stretch to do so.
[13] Private communication with the author.
[14] See note 5.

Ex. I.0: autograph of "preludio" of *Tosca*[15]



Then there are passages that appear to have no functional bass line and are composed with a parallel *non*-voice-leading, as Hepokoski puts it.[16] Both Baragwanath[17] and Drabkin have noted, for instance, how both the soprano and bass lines of several Puccini arias, such as Mimì's "Sono andati" and Butterfly's "Un bel dì" follow an underlying scalar motion. These sorts of analytic knots are tackled in chapter 2, in which both puzzles can be seen to derive from more normative underlying schemata that the composer has kept hidden from view; these are made more complex by techniques framed here as *direct* (synchronic) and *indirect* (diachronic) *conflation.*

Another technique, one that relies on the invariance and the functional redefinition of pitch-classes, can help explicate the following passage from *Suor Angelica.* [Ex. I.1] Here, the harmony moves from C# minor to a tonicized E major to C major to a common-tone F# half-diminished seventh chord to an E minor chord, all in a few moments. This array is clearly tonal, yet it cannot be analyzed in a standard functional harmonic way—nor should it be. The score also has a disjointed, unintelligible look. The puzzle is why it does not sound that way.

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[15] The source for this autograph is not known.

[16] James Hepokoski, "Structure, Implication and the End of Suor Angelica." *Studi Musicali* 3 (2004): 241.

[17] Baragwanath, *The Italian Traditions*, 270-1.

Ex I.1 - *Suor Angelica*, rehearsal numbers 52-53.[18]



In this passage, an element of cohesion may be found sequestered beneath the tumultuous surface: each of the harmonic sonorities (C# minor, E major, C major, F# half-diminished seventh chord, E minor) contains the pitch-class E.[19] Like a secluse thread, winding furtively through this harmonic labyrinth, this note allows for an aural connection that smoothes the way, and which may eventually lead us to a certain amount of daylight. (Where that thread arrives is discussed in chapter 3.)

An isolated pitch class (as pivot note, common tone or pedal tone) can instantly travel far afield in the tonal universe.[20]  For example, if C is the tonic of a C major passage, it can, if presented in isolation, be reinterpreted immediately as the leading tone B# to C# minor, or the sixth scale

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[18] The text reads, "Everything has been offered to the Virgin, yes, everything; but there is an offering I cannot make: to the gentle Mother of Mothers, I cannot offer to forget…my son!", [Tutto offerto alla Vergine, sì, tutto; ma v'è un'offerta che non posso fare:  alla Madre soave delle Madri, non posso offrire di scordar…mio figlio!]

[19] The sonorities in bar 2 (a 7-6 suspension into a half-diminished 6/5 on B, and the half-diminished seventh on D#) do not contain E, but they do prepare and tonicize the E major in bar 3.

[20] This is related, but not equal to, the concept of *sonorità* proposed by Petrobelli, which is tied to vocal tessitura and has associative links to characters.  He defines it thus:  "a specific pitch prolonged by various means of articulation, and considered independently of any harmonic function." Pierluigi Petrobelli, "Towards an Explanation of the Dramatic Structure of *Il trovatore*" Trans. William Drabkin, *Music Analysis*, Vol. 1, No. 2 (Jul., 1982), 132. Puccini's pitch invariance has been found to often reside in the orchestral parts not only in the vocal lines, and thus in pitch classes, not individual pitches.

degree of E minor.  One aspect of the study of Puccini's harmonic writing, akin in some ways to

the idea of *sonorità* originally discussed by Pierluigi Petrobelli,[21] is a study in this sort of pitch-class

sleight-of-hand.

In this, Puccini was not alone:  "common-tone tonality" is usually analyzed with

transformational tools, which have revealed these types of progressions in a vast repertoire,

including many examples from nineteenth-century Italian opera.[22] But Puccini adapted this

compositional resource to his own sensibilities, often including invariant dissonant pitch-classes in

the mix.

To acknowledge such devices is to view the musical score as multidimensional and layered,

which is akin to Schenker's notion of structural levels. While some Schenkerian concepts are in play

here (such as the idea of motivic parallelism discussed in chapter 3), this is not a book of

Schenkerian analysis.  Schenker himself, while he had heard and reviewed *La bohème*,[23] would never

have admitted Puccini to his pantheon of geniuses as the second honorary German (Chopin was the

only one); and while *Ursätze* can be identified in a few limited situations, the mysteries of Puccini's

technique are not revealed so straightforwardly. Schenker might also disapprove of how his concepts

are extended here. Even so, taking a step back and noting patterns larger (or deeper, if you will) than

the immediate musical surface, while duly observing what is there, is a valuable means of

understanding Puccini's organizational procedures.

The examination of Puccini's operas offered here cannot lift all veils: opera is a multivalent

art-form and to put under the spotlight a single aspect of a many-faceted work is to leave less

interrogated many rich contextualities.  As Parker writes, "When we write about the medium, we, of

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[21] Pierluigi Petrobelli, "Towards an Explanation of the Dramatic Structure of *Il trovatore*," *Music Analysis*, William Drabkin, trans. Vol. 1, No. 2 (July, 1982): 132ff.

[22] The term was coined by David Kopp in *Chromatic Transformations in Nineteenth-Century Music* (Cambridge:  Cambridge University Press, 2002, and has also been used by William Rothstein, "Common-tone Tonality."

[23] Schenker's opera reviews were published in *Die Zeit*, the *Neue Revue*, and *Die Zukunft*, in the 1890s. See Hellmut Federhofer, "Heinrich Schenker als Essayst und Kritiker" (Zurich: Hildesheim, New York:  Olms, 1990), and Nicholas Rast, "A Checklist of Essays and Reviews by Heinrich Schenker," *Music Analysis* VII/2 (1988):  121-132.  Italian translations of Schenker's opera reviews appears in Giorgio Sanguinetti, "L'opera italiana nella critica musicale di Heinrich Schenker" *Nuova Rivista Musicale Italiana* 29/3:  431-67. Schenker felt that the music of *La bohème*, for example, was superficial, that it compared poorly to Mozart, and that Puccini would have been better off choosing a subject set in an Italian milieu.

course, have to choose our personal route, and we will perforce leave huge areas of any work we address gaping in our wake."[24] Opera is a genre in which the music is inextricably tied to visual, textual and dramatic elements, and should be considered from many, oft-contradictory, vantage points. We cannot argue that the scores of Puccini's operas function on the same principles as those of his instrumental works (see the comparison in Chapter 6 of the opening of *Manon* and the minuet from which it is derived): reflecting dramatic twists and turns, the operatic music is more restless and fragmented in almost every parameter. (It was, in fact, the fragmentary nature of Puccini's opera scores that received much contemporary comment.) Nevertheless, analytical investigations such as these hopefully work to establish musical "knowns" upon which further hypotheses can be more securely grounded.

*Recondite Harmony* offers a close analytic reading of all of Puccini's operas, with an eye to identifying consistent compositional techniques, as well as highlighting salient moments in each opus that merit special analytic attention. Throughout, the interpenetration of traditional and progressive musical factors has been traced to specific compositional techniques.

The impetus to undertake this enterprise was not to enshrine Puccini as a Great Composer,[25] but to attempt to solve the mystery of what makes his music tick. Does *Recondite Harmony* then promise to break a Puccini "code," to reveal a *Geheimnis* to his oeuvre? Not in the least. But since the composer did not show his compositional hand in treatises, essays or even letters, a discussion such as this can only help us to peek behind the curtain and spy on this wizard's clandestine doings.

The volume is divided into two parts. In the first, approaches that inform the entire corpus of Puccini's operas are examined. Chapter 1 sets the stage, evaluating the influences on Puccini of Wagnerism and Modernism, examined in relation to his cultural context, and in reference to the criteria of Puccini's contemporary, theorist Domenico Alaleona. The next two chapters focus on specific elements of his musical palette (the pitch-related and the motivic), in order to reveal not

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[24] Roger Parker and Allan W. Atlas, "A Key for Chi? Tonal Areas in Puccini" *19th-Century Music*, Vol. 15, No. 3 (Spring, 1992): 232.
[25] See Baragwanath, *The Italian Traditions*, 35.

only what his musical vocabulary entails, but also to search for consistent compositional procedures that may exist among the works.

However, as Rosen has said, "it is disquieting when an analysis, no matter how cogent, minimizes the most salient features of a work."[26] Therefore, heeding this warning, the second half of the book is devoted to brief essays discussing single works that individuate more fully musical aspects special to each score and the relationship of those technical processes to the operas' dramatic narratives.

Chapter 4, *Le Villi: an individual voice*, places Puccini's first opera in the context of the competing traditional and progressive forces of late 19th-century Italy. Although it is in many ways a standard numbers opera, contemporary critics considered Puccini "original" and noted his early use of extended chords, dissonant pedal points, and the *"Tristan"* chord. Chapter 5: *Edgar: scattered jewels* treats Puccini's next opera in light of its failed dramatic and musical experimentation; some of these musical moments, including instances of proto-bitonality[27] and parallelisms, served the composer in later works. Traditional forms, proposed but often declined, as well as the relation of this musical characteristic to the depiction of Manon, is the focus of the sixth chapter, *Manon Lescaut: towards a new country*. Concepts of "la solita forma" and aspects of Hepokoski's and Darcy's Sonata Theory are invoked here. The chapter *La bohème: sfumature*[28] highlights the abundance of traditional sequences in this opera—one of which opens the work—and discusses how these unstable patterns are unleashed to foster a new episodic format reflecting the mercurial dramatic narrative. Previously unpublished libretto sketches are reproduced here as well. Chapter 8: *Tosca: inevitabilites* scrutinizes large-scale non-traditional musical design within a diatonic framework, in relation to Sardou's play and its Neoclassic reliance on the structure of Greek tragedies.

Transformations, both dramatic and musical, are so embedded in the organization of *Madama Butterfly* that they take on a thematic quality of their own. Chapter 9 describes a journey

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[26] Charles Rosen, *The Classical Style: Haydn, Mozart, Beethoven* (New York: Norton, 1972), 3.
[27] We use the term "proto-bitonality" to indicate the superimposition of elements from different diatonic collections, without a larger-scale establishment of those keys.
[28] [nuances]

from the strict counterpoint of the opera's opening to the harmonically unresolved conclusion

that seems to herald atonality. Motivic and common-tone (Neo-Riemannian) transformations are

also discussed. The focus of Chapter 10, *La fanciulla del West: into the sunrise*, is the elaborate rhythmic

and metrical development in this opera, which developed from both traditional and progressive

sources; featured is a previously unpublished autograph rhythmic sketch. The concepts of

authenticity and Puccini's stated theme of redemption are also touched upon. Puccini's sixth stage

work, a response to a commission to write a Viennese operetta, is in dialogue with that genre.

Chapter 11: *La Rondine*: *masquerades and simulacra* treats the influences on Puccini of Johann Strauss,

Richard Strauss and Franz Lehàr, the use of diatonic constructions with Modernist irony, and the

concept of "musica al quadrato."[29] Considering the three operas of Puccini's triptych as a single

tripartite entity—Puccini's original and quite experimental concept—, Chapter 12: *Il Trittico*: *amori,*

*dolori e buonumori*[30] explores dramatic and musical connections among the individual works, followed

by a discussion of narrative musical techniques in these operas that invokes the work of Davis and

Conati, among others. Last, Chapter 13: *Turandot: dawn at dusk* details the dialogue between Italian

traditions and progressive Modernism which, far from finding resolution at the end of Puccini's life,

became more intense. Issues raised by Ashbrook, Powers, Davis and others are explored here. Plot

summaries of all the operas are included in the Appendix.

Our hope is that, by peeking behind Puccini's mask, by disclosing aspects that have

heretofore been obscure, the listener familiar with Puccini's music will be enticed to hear it again

with new ears. And from that may spring discussions of his music that, although they might

challenge, support or enhance the ones presented here, would ultimately enrich the discourse.

*Notes on the text*

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[29] [music squared]
[30] [loves, sorrows, and good humor]

All translations are by the author unless otherwise noted. Locations in the score are marked by

Act/Rehearsal Number/Measures after, so that the first measure of an opera would be labeled

I/0/0.


*Acknowledgements*