

Giacomo Puccini

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Puccini was born in Lucca, Italy on the 23rd of December 1858 and he was considered the last of the great Italian composers. Giacomo, along with his brother Michele who died young, were the fifth generation of a family of professional musicians and composers living and working in and around Tuscany, Italy. All the previous generations of Puccini's were basically church composers and organists at Lucca's Cathedral - San Martino.

When Giacomo was just six years old, his father died. It was expected that Giacomo would follow in the path of his ancestors and therefore continue the long family tradition of organists at San Martino. However, one night in 1876, that all changed when Puccini and a friend walked thirteen miles to see a production of Verdi's *Aida*. From that moment on Giacomo knew that his true passion would be opera and opera only.

It was slow going for Giacomo at first. But with the support of some great friends and teachers, he was well on his way to becoming one of the greatest Italian opera composers. Two of his greatest and most well-known operas are *Madame Butterfly* and *La Bohème*.

While in London in 1900 Puccini's attention was drawn to a play by David Belasco entitled *Madame Butterfly*, then showing at the Duke of York's Theatre. Puccini, always on the watch for new operatic material, went to see it. Although his grasp of English was at best tentative, he was very taken with the strong female protagonist, and afterwards rushed to the 'Green Room' to meet the author and secure the rights to the material. He might have known that the play's origin, a novella (medium length story) by John Luther Long, was in fact based on the earlier novel, *Madame Chrysanthème*, which had already inspired André Messager's opera of the same name.

The following year, an Italian translation of the story was sent to Luigi Illica and Giuseppe Giacosa, Puccini's librettists. Puccini worked on *Madame Butterfly* for two years (a short time considering that he had to stop composing for eight months out of these 24). On February 25th, 1903, he was badly injured in a car accident, suffering a compound fracture of his right leg.

Recovery was slow. It was discovered that Puccini suffered from diabetes and his shin-bone had to be re-broken in order to set properly. A slight limp would remain. He returned to writing *Butterfly* as soon as he was able to and completed the score on December 27th, 1903.

In the course of composition, Puccini became fascinated with Japanese culture and discussed not only "authentic" Japanese motifs (motif = a recurring musical theme or melody) and folk-songs with the wife of the Japanese ambassador, but also details of *Butterfly's* behavior with a Japanese actress on tour in Milan. The opera was slated for La Scala. Rehearsals went well: musicians and stage-hands are said to have been moved to tears after the execution of some passages.

The premiere on February 17th, 1904, however, was a fiasco! Greeted by the yells of the public, a reaction that was quite possibly 'staged' by rival publisher Sonzogno and the composers he had under contract, Puccini withdrew his opera. The morning after the terrible opening night, Puccini wrote: "... It was a real lynching! Those cannibals didn't listen to one note. But my *Butterfly* remains what it is: the most deeply-felt and imaginative opera I have conceived!"

Still, almost immediately Puccini started revising it. Many details were eliminated from the first act and the drama was tightened. This revised version was presented at the Teatro Grande in Brescia on May 28th, 1904. This time it was a stupendous success: seven pieces had to be encoed and Puccini was called ten times in front of the curtain!

Giacomo Puccini and the finishing of La Bohème ...

It was at midnight on December 10th 1895 that Giacomo Puccini laid down his pen after finishing *La Bohème*, he was so moved by the death of Mimì that he wept. "Standing in the middle of the study," he later wrote "alone in the silence of the night, I began to weep like a child. It was as though I had seen my own child die."

Puccini went on to achieve great success in his career as a composer and towards the end of 1923 he began to complain of throat pain. In the autumn of 1924, Puccini was diagnosed with throat cancer and underwent extensive treatment. Although the treatment seemed to be successful, the strain of the ordeal was too much for his heart and Puccini died on November 29th, 1924. His body was brought to Milan and temporarily buried in Toscanini's family tomb. Italy experienced a great loss the day Puccini died and the nation went into a four day period of mourning with Mussolini delivering the oration for the funeral services.