



La bohème by Welsh National Opera

Reviewed by Denis Joe June 2012

For its Summer 2012 season, Welsh National Opera presents two of the greatest and most famous operas on the theme of love. But the two could not be more different: Puccini's classic, *La bohème*, gives us a real-life approach to love, with all its irrationality and heartache. Wagner's masterpiece, *Tristan and Isolde*, meanwhile, positions love in the realms of a virtue that is even higher than valour or duty.

Are you put off the idea of opera by all those hysterical protagonists, highbrow plots and sky-high prices? Well, watch this myth busting video by Tim Rhys Evans on the WNO website. But if I could recommend one single opera, above all others, to the uninitiated it would be

La bohème

- . An opera replete with the most beautiful melodies that combine with a simple tale to melt the blackest of hearts.

Four artists live together in a garret. We first meet Marcello and Rodolfo, who are trying to keep themselves warm one winter's night. We are then introduced to Colline, who is angry because the pawn shops are not open on Christmas Eve. Then the composer Schaunard arrives with food and drink, which they are enjoying when the landlord arrives demanding his rent. They invite him in and act friendly towards him, Schaunard even produces money for him, but once they have played around with it, they steal it back and the landlord is sent packing.

It is an ingenious way of introducing us to the characters, but crucially, it also sets the ambience in which the drama plays out. Puccini was the composer of *verismo* opera at its very finest, and none can be said to have portrayed a 'reality' as well as *La bohème*. The characters are timeless: one could almost argue that the opera is an early portrayal of what we might call 'men behaving badly'.

One evening they all decide to go out, but Rodolfo, a poet, needs to finish a piece for his journal, and so his friends go off, leaving him to find inspiration. Alone and struggling he hears a knock on his door. It is the seamstress, Mimi, from another part of the building. Her candle has gone out (has she blown it out on purpose we wonder). Rodolfo invites her in, lights her candle and just as she is about to leave, she announces that she has dropped her key. They both fumble around the floor looking for it. Their hands touching (accidently on purpose) brings in the first of the great operatic arias: *Che gelida manina* ('Your tiny hand is frozen'), in which Rodolfo takes the opportunity to tell Mimi of his life (

hi son? Sono un poeta

./

Che cosa faccio? Scrivo

C

) and we are given the first hint of Mimi's frail health. Mimi introduces herself:

Sì. Mi chiamano Mimì

('Yes, they call me Mimi'). Her humility seems less forced than that of Rodolfo (

Ma i fior ch'io faccio

/

Ahimè! non hanno odore

).



The first act closes after Rodolfo's friends call up to him to hurry up. When he tells them that he is not alone, they shout up that he must have found his muse. As he turns to speak to Mimi she is silhouetted against the moonlit window leading into one of the most beautiful duets, *O soave fanciulla* (

'Oh beautiful vision') which ends in an affirmation of love (

Fremon già nell'anima

/

le dolcezze estreme,

/

nel bacio freme amor).

In Act Two Rodolfo introduces Mimi to his friends who are celebrating Christmas in The Latin Quarter. It is here that we meet Musetta, formerly the lover of Marcello, now described by him as a viper, who consumes human hearts. She is with her suitor, and this gives us a wonderful portrayal of jealousy: Marcello is jealous because she is with someone else, and Musetta is similarly unsettled because he is ignoring her (although we know he is pretending).

Musetta is a wonderful character, and she takes out her mounting frustration with Marcello on her wealthy suitor, telling him that her shoes pinch and demanding that he buy her another pair. Her feisty individualism is expressed to great effect in her aria *Quando me'n vo'* ('When I walk, I walk alone') which she sings to Marcello, only enraging him further (

E tu che sai, che memori e ti struggi

, /

da me tanto rifuggi?

). By the end of the act they are reconciled, and the friends manage tell the waiter that Musetta's patron will be footing their bill.

Act Three opens with a street scene at dawn where road sweepers are arriving for work and women congregate to sell their goods at the market. In a nearby tavern, we can hear Musetta having a good time. Mimi arrives on the scene coughing and in a desperate state. She asks one of the street guards where she can find the painter Marcello and they point her towards the tavern.

Mimi describes to Marcello her relationship with Rodolfo, that he is jealous. Rodolfo is staying in the tavern, and Marcello tells Mimi to go home and that he will speak to the jealous poet. But the audience sees Mimi hide and listen to the friends' conversation. Rodolfo begins by saying that Mimi is always flirting (*Mimi è una civetta*) and that he wants to end the relationship, but Marcello berates him and questions the truth of what Rodolfo is saying (

Non mi sembri sincer

). He tells Marcello that his fear is really for Mimi's health and that he knows she is dying of consumption (

Una terribile tosse

/

l'esil petto le scuote

/

e già le smunte gote

/

di sangue ha rosse..)

. Mimi overhears all this and sobs, betraying herself. Rodolfo goes to her and we experience another beautiful duet of the lovers as they sing farewell to each other until the flowers bloom in spring. This most tender of scenes ends on a quartet, where Rodolfo and Mimi declare their devotion to each other while Marcello and Musetta argue in the background.



Act Four opens with Marcello and Rodolfo playing in their garret, imagining a better life (*In un coupe?*)

but the play acting quickly turns to thinking of their loved ones (

O Mimi tu più non torni

). They are joined by Colline and Schaunard who have brought food for them all. Whilst they are fooling around Musetta comes in to say that Mimi is downstairs but is too ill to come to them.

They rush to bring Mimi into the room, and lay her down on a bed. Musetta offers to pawn her own jewellery in order to pay for a doctor. Everyone is upset at the state of Mimi. There is a tender moment between Mimi and Rodolfo as she feels the heightened sense of ecstasy that precludes death from consumption (

Sono andati? Fingevo

).

Welsh National Opera's production of *La bohème* is a triumph. It would be easy to dismiss it as a 'bums-on-seats' production, and that may well be the case. Yet

La bohème

is accorded the same dedicated treatment as any other WNO production. The cast was outstanding. Anita Hartig sang the role of Mimi with impressive beauty and skill. Her slight build, giving us the impression of frailty, belied an overpowering stage presence as well as a beautiful and pure soprano voice. It is hardly surprising that this Romanian singer is in great demand, with future engagements lined up with Deutsche Oper, The Vienna State Opera and the Metropolitan Opera in New York, even though her opera debut, with Opera Națională Română din Cluj-Napoca, as Mimi, was only five years ago.

Alex Vicen is also in demand, particularly for his Puccini roles. A handsome (relatively) slight figure, his Rodolfo was a tour de force and he possesses a beautiful tenor voice that almost sounded *bel canto* at times. My favourite character of any Puccini opera is probably Musetta, and Kate Valentine was outstanding in her portrayal, especially in the second act which places great demand on both singing and acting ability.

This was an excellent cast but mention should also go to Carlo Rizzi and the orchestra for such a wonderful performance. One of the hallmarks of Welsh National Opera is the set design and although it was traditional, it looked magnificent. The lighting was stunning especially the Lapis lazuli of the night outside the garret window. Happily, WNO will rerun this production in its Autumn 2012 season and I would urge anyone to go along, should they have the opportunity. This is Puccini's most popular opera, and with good reason, because it is his most sentimental.

Some of my friends who are opera lovers, dismiss Puccini, and other composers of *verismo* opera, as flippant and beneath them. They view the sentimentality of the genre, with its lush melodies and melodrama, as somehow unworthy of such a high art form as opera. But I feel this attitude has a lot to do with the fact that these operas are accessible and therefore popular.

Verismo

operas are populated with real life characters without any pretensions that the sensuousness that they feel is anything more than ordinary human emotion. Many of these operas shocked the

contemporary audiences of their day, for their portrayal of ‘vulgarity’. It is this ‘vulgarity’ that is key to the reactions of those snobs who would dismiss

La bohème

as over sentimental. The realism at the heart of Puccini’s operas (with the exception of *Turandot*

) is no different from that portrayed in Emile Zola’s novels. Watching an early Ken Loach film nowadays, it is hard to ignore how corny it seems. What was shocking at one time is acceptable now, but that shouldn’t undermine the work as a great experience.

Autumn schedule is at <http://www.wno.org.uk/boheme/venues-and-performances>