**Gender Politics**

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For as long as opera scholars have concerned themselves with gender as a concept and hermeneutic frame, Puccini’s works – and their female characters in particular – have functioned as a critical lynchpin. His body of operas has been consistently pathologised, read as damaged and damaging, like no other composer’s. Their vital statistics are certainly unforgiving: nine female fatalities and five male strewn across twelve operas. Only in *La fanciulla del West* and the two late comedies *La rondine* and *Gianni Schicchi* do all protagonists survive as the curtain falls. Of the male victims, two – *Le villi*’s Roberto and *Tosca*’s Scarpia – are villains murdered by the women they have mistreated; Luigi (*Il tabarro*) is strangled by his lover’s vengeful husband; Edgar (*Edgar*) dies heroically in battle offstage and Cavaradossi (*Tosca*) is executed by firing squad. Among Puccini’s women, the suicide rate is alarming, precipitating the deaths of Tosca and Butterfly, Sister Angelica and *Turandot*’s Liù. Physical infirmity kills both *La bohème*’s tubercular heroine Mimì and Manon Lescaut, who collapses exhausted in the desert. But romantic entanglements also prove fatal: in *Le villi*, Anna dies, unseen, of a broken heart; *Edgar*’s Fidelia is stabbed by her romantic rival Tigrana; and Giorgetta is murdered by her husband after he has discovered her infidelity in *Il tabarro*.

Yet these body counts (hardly unusual in serious Italian opera of the time) only tell part of the story. Not least because the fates of Puccini’s characters have as much to do with his works’ literary sources – with patterns of gendered representation stretching far beyond opera, that is – as with the composer’s particular musical treatments. Foregrounding the question of gender politics within and around Puccini’s operas specifically therefore demands that we attend to how characters are portrayed through music as well as plot; that we take note of the gendered terms in which Puccini depicted himself, spoke about others and has been understood; and ultimately that we consider how his operas have been gendered as an assemblage of associations and experiences, both in the composer’s own time and since.

Listening to Puccini’s array of operatic deaths, for instance, reveals a significant differentiation between the musical roles of dying male and female characters. Each of the male deaths outlined above is crucial to the progress of their respective narrative; but only Roberto’s demise-by-dancing constitutes an opera’s dénouement – and even then, his death follows hot on the heels of the ghost of his wronged fiancée Anna refusing (in the most emphatic, blisteringly lyrical terms) to forgive him. What is more, Roberto’s death is accompanied by a chorus of furious Willies rather than by a tenorial swansong of his own. Indeed, we might note that not one of Puccini’s doomed male characters is given the opportunity for extended operatic self-expression in his final moments. As Cavaradossi waits for the firing squad, for example, it is Tosca’s voice – her anxieties and her impatience (amplified in the slow trudge of the orchestra with its cymbal shivers) – that we hear, overshadowing his own lyrical last word in ‘E lucevan le stelle’, as she comprehensively mediates our experience of his demise.

In short, the final moments of Puccini’s male characters are contained, brutally to-the-point. Should we celebrate them as ‘modern’, realist achievements? Should we hear such operatic male inarticulacy as a response to the nineteenth-century social revolution Richard Sennett called ‘the fall of public man’, which (among other things) saw gender roles harden and polarise?[[1]](#footnote-1) Or is the musical brevity of Puccini’s male deaths above all a symptom of their lack of emotional appeal – and their assumed lack, perhaps, of erotic charge for audiences – around the turn of the century, relative to the unfortunate fates of their female counterparts?

What, more to the point, should we make of the almost ecstatically extended, altogether less realistic death scenes of many of Puccini’s heroines? Think of Manon, whose death rings down the curtain; though not before she has captivated her audience with one last, now-iconic showpiece (‘Sola, perduta, abbandonata’) and one last duet, in which her dwindling energy is rendered audible in the shrinking ambit of her melodic line – shrinking, that is, except when the magnificent blossoming of a searing climax demands otherwise – after which her lover Des Grieux can only sob once, amidst the orchestra’s funereal cadences.

Think, too, of Butterfly, a heroine whose demise seems to leak backwards through the colouring of an entire opera, but whose closing scene emerges from a halting, fragmentary orchestral texture: a sonic backdrop from which Butterfly’s voice (decoratively fluttering, yes, but now also furious) briefly appears to stand apart, before sinking back into the Orientalist scenery as gleaming soprano filigree. Or think of Angelica, who bids her worldly farewells from a cloud of harp, high woodwind and shimmering strings, only for that delicate atmosphere to be additionally perfumed by a chorus of children’s voices, piano and cymbals as she begs for mercy from the Virgin Mary, who miraculously appears with Angelica’s dead son, carried forth on another of Puccini’s unmistakable surging orchestral climaxes.

It is difficult not to hear such extravagant closing gestures as revelling in the expressive potential of female mortality: in its capacity to catalyse emotional outpourings onstage and pathos in an auditorium, to leave an audience both appalled and enchanted by short-lived beauty. Even the death of Mimì in *La bohème* – so devastatingly unremarked, when it finally occurs – was described by Puccini in a letter to Giulio Ricordi as ‘the whole point of Act IV’.[[2]](#footnote-2) In this context, it is hardly surprising that the spectacular array of female fatalities in Puccini’s operas has been presented as damning evidence in the general case against the art form’s gender politics and its sustained ‘undoing of women’, as French philosopher Catherine Clément labelled the tendency in 1988.[[3]](#footnote-3) Such was the centrality of Puccini’s oeuvre within the first wave in the early 1990s of a distinctly ‘feminist musicology’ that by the end of that decade Linda Fairtile’s *Giacomo Puccini: A Guide To Research* already boasted a ‘Gender Studies’ section within its annotated bibliography.[[4]](#footnote-4) In these circumstances it is surely no coincidence that Puccini’s Butterfly is the headline act in Clément’s book chapter ‘Dead Women’; nor that Puccini’s operas have reliably provided fuel for subsequent English-language polemics aimed at general readers on the subject of opera’s misogyny.[[5]](#footnote-5)

It would be a mistake, however, to date the search for connections between Puccini’s operas and broader issues of gender politics solely back to the new musicological enthusiasms of the 1990s. The monumental biography by Austrian-born British musicologist Mosco Carner (who turned 20 a few days before the composer died) is steeped in Freudian psychoanalysis and shares that discipline’s acutely gendered fixations. Carner introduces Puccini’s early life in quasi-Oedipal terms, starting with the death of his father, Michele, before backtracking to the birth of Giacomo himself five years earlier.[[6]](#footnote-6) Other father-figures subsequently appear: Puccini’s erstwhile composition teacher Amilcare Ponchielli is his ‘fatherly friend’; his publisher Giulio Ricordi a ‘paternal friend’.[[7]](#footnote-7) Still more significant, though, is Puccini’s relationship with his mother. In particular, her death in July 1884, which Carner suggests ‘affected him very deeply – more than so natural an event would normally affect a son’.[[8]](#footnote-8) Not only was her death the direct impetus behind Puccini’s elopement with Elvira Gemignani; it was also a catastrophe for a composer experiencing what the biographer diagnoses as ‘unresolved bondage to the mother-image’. Carner posits that this explains both Puccini’s basic state of ‘neurotic fixation’ and his ‘innumerable infidelities committed with obscure and socially inferior women’.[[9]](#footnote-9) But Carner is ultimately concerned with the impact of Puccini’s mother problem on his operatic characters: ‘in the tenors he is the romantic lover, in the baritones he is the killer of his heroines’.[[10]](#footnote-10) The most meaningful characters, though, are his exquisitely suffering women: ‘It is precisely because of their degraded position [in comparison to his mother] that he was able to fall in love with his heroines, display such extraordinary empathy with them and *achieve so complete an identification with their personalities*’.[[11]](#footnote-11)

This is not the place for an in-depth exploration of Carner’s psychoanalytic reading of Puccini’s life and works. Yet this biographical notion of the composer’s intimate ‘identification’ with his operatic heroines is crucial for understanding Puccini’s gender politics – which is to say the gender politics of the discourse that has accumulated around him and his operas. What emerges most clearly from Carner’s assessment, after all, is an image of Puccini as somehow woman-like; in addition to describing his subject as ‘a splintered, neurotic personality, feminine in many ways’, Carner draws an explicit comparison between the ‘elemental masculinity’ and ‘battle cry’ of Verdi’s music and the sensual ‘mating call’ of Puccini’s.[[12]](#footnote-12) Where Verdi’s music was vigorous and earthy, that is, Puccini’s was simply oversexed.

Such a view was not novel when the first edition of Carner’s biography was published in 1958. The composer had already been attacked during his lifetime for the supposed ‘effeminacy’ of his works, most famously in Fausto Torrefranca’s lengthy polemic *Giacomo Puccini e l’opera internazionale* (1912), which branded the composer a ‘perfect womanly musician’.[[13]](#footnote-13) As Alexandra Wilson puts it, Torrefranca saw Puccini as ‘emblematic of the most effete and decadent tendencies of the fin de siècle’; and as various scholars have made clear, such accusations speak volumes about broader anxieties in Italian culture (and around Europe, for that matter) at the dawn of the twentieth century – in particular about the nature of masculinity and shifting attitudes to gender roles in response to emerging notions of the so-called ‘nuova donna’.[[14]](#footnote-14) In 1898, for instance, the Italian sociologist Scipio Sighele described how ‘The new woman, tired of what she calls her slavery, has understood that in order to impose her own will she must become a political force – to win, that is, the right to elect representatives of the people and to be elected herself.’[[15]](#footnote-15) It is all too easy to see with hindsight how such changing attitudes and emergent worries about the disempowerment of the male populace could culminate in the rise of Mussolini’s brand of Italian fascism in the 1920s, with its much-vaunted ideal of heroic hyper-masculinity – albeit an ideal with latent homoerotic potential.[[16]](#footnote-16)

Puccini’s own attitudes to gender have played little more than a cameo role in most writing about the gender politics in and around his operas. Insofar as his opinions can be deduced almost a century after his death from his letters and the reams of anecdotes repeated more or less fondly by commentators, he comes across – at least in his view of women – as a man of his time. A time, that is, when, as Susan Rutherford has made painfully clear, the inequality of men and women was inscribed in Italian law – which allowed for wives to be imprisoned for between three months and two years for adultery, while no such equivalent charge existed for husbands until 1899 (and even then was only considered if a mistress had been brought into the family home or kept conspicuously elsewhere).[[17]](#footnote-17) It was a time, moreover, when literacy rates among Italian women increased from merely 19% in 1861, to 54% forty years later.[[18]](#footnote-18) And it was a time when women’s minds and bodies were newly pathologised in relation to their sexuality, whether by physician and criminologist Cesare Lombroso, who claimed in 1891 that women simply didn’t like sex; or – au contraire – by figures such as the author Alfredo Oriani, who dismissed any female allegations of rape, arguing instead: ‘The female knows that masculine love is aggression, violence, sometimes even bloodshed, but aggression tempts her, violence stimulates her, bloodshed in its origins of scratches and bites often becomes to her a sensual pleasure. […] No woman will spurn a man who tries to rape her in an impetus of love; she might hate him, but her pride will find in that provoked violence the most beautiful of compliments’.[[19]](#footnote-19)

In such a context, Puccini’s steady stream of flirtations and affairs might seem not only inevitable but also relatively harmless. Perhaps that is why his consistent philandering has so often been framed as a source of amusement – a sign of the Great Man’s lovable human side. Thus, according to one quip widely quoted in popular writing about Puccini (if impossible to trace to a reliable source), the composer described himself as a ‘mighty hunter of wild fowl, operatic librettos and attractive women’. Yet this image of a lyrical Lothario is by no means confined to programme notes and marketing copy: even his generally sober biographer Mary Jane Phillips-Matz reports that, while on a trip to Monte Carlo in spring 1921, the composer – then in his early 60s – ‘bragged that four beautiful young women had driven him to the customs station at the Italian border. Not bad for a “little old man like me,” he joked’.[[20]](#footnote-20)

There are limits, nevertheless, to the indulgences granted. Arman Schwartz, for instance, has written sensitively about writer Giuseppe Adami’s claims that their work on *Turandot* was entangled in the composer’s plans (never executed) for another opera set in Venice (‘not, absolutely not, the nauseating Venice of face powders, beauty spots, and lorgnettes’, Adami stressed – his insistence exuding its own distinctly gendered anxieties – but rather ‘A Venice full of pathetic, moving, poetic hues’).[[21]](#footnote-21) Adami’s recollection of Puccini unveiling a pictorial source for his latest idea provides a fleeting but altogether less familiar insight into the composer’s attitudes to women:

At a certain point [Puccini] opened a drawer and pulled out a French magazine that throbbed with naked women. He leafed through it slowly, stopping at a page that contained an audaciously suggestive image. And he handed it to me: Venice. A remote canal, bathed in light. A large window with protective grates. Behind it, clinging to the bars for all to see, a wild-haired nude girl, who arched her supple body in a provocative offering to a young boatman resting below, twisting with spasms, his arms stretched out toward the elusive vision.[[22]](#footnote-22)

As Schwartz observes drily, ‘It is not difficult […] to imagine why [Adami’s] story has not found its way into the secondary literature’. On the contrary, as he points out, for all that the possibility of a Venetian subtext in *Turandot* might appeal to the twenty-first-century operatic hermeneut, this particular vignette foregrounds precisely ‘the aspects of Puccini that have made us most uncomfortable: his exploitative treatment of women, his susceptibility to kitsch’.[[23]](#footnote-23)

There is little doubt that Puccini’s treatment of women both on and off the operatic stage has provoked discomfort – and more – among commentators in recent decades. Indeed, from the late-twentieth century onwards, scholars (and to an extent opera directors) have approached Puccini’s operas as texts ripe for feminist readings and re-readings, their female characters alternately mourned as victims and celebrated as fearless, radically envoiced women. Yet such concerns for the welfare of Puccini’s real and fictional women were far from mainstream earlier in the twentieth century. On the contrary, it was precisely the composer’s seeming commitment to kitsch (his attraction to ‘grande dolore in piccole anime’ – great sorrow in little souls – as he famously described *Tosca*) that more consistently provoked criticism during Puccini’s lifetime and in the decades that followed.[[24]](#footnote-24) Hence Joseph Kerman’s widely repeated dismissal of *Tosca* as a ‘shabby little shocker’, for instance; and we might read as similarly anti-kitsch Gustav Mahler’s complaint to his wife following an early performance of the same opera that Act 2 consisted of ‘A man tortured; horrible cries. Another stabbed by a sharp bread knife’.[[25]](#footnote-25)

As Adami’s recollection of the composer poring over that French magazine might suggest, however, Puccinian kitsch almost always emerges in close connection with an expression of gender perceived to be disproportionate. And to the same extent that scholars have recently become more sensitised to and critical of Puccini’s gender politics, embarrassment about his propensity for kitsch has fallen away. Wayne Koestenbaum’s groundbreaking 1993 study *The Queen’s Throat* is, in a sense, a book-length celebration of operatic kitsch; and, not coincidentally, it offers a still-rare example of an approach to *Tosca* that avoids the pendulum motion that Heather Hadlock identifies in operatic gender studies as ‘a sort of critical carousel, its ponies oscillating endlessly between undoing and envoicing, victimization and empowerment, objects and subjects, oppressive master-plots and resistant voices.’[[26]](#footnote-26) In contrast to such binarised options, Koestenbaum lauds Tosca’s Act 1 entrance as what he calls a ‘queer moment’:

The schmaltzy orchestra, accompanying her entrance, does not insist that I take sides, that I identify exclusively with male or with female, with composer or with singer. Released, my emotions swim toward the inspiring object and unite with it, and so I can’t specify where the music places me.[[27]](#footnote-27)

Here, Koestenbaum detects the kitsch in Puccini’s orchestral writing and hears in it the possibility of being transported, as a listener, across the binary that has for so long underpinned discourse around the gender politics of Puccini’s operas.

Almost thirty years after Koestenbaum’s study, conceptions of gender are inevitably continuing to shift. As I write this, the transgender baritone Lucia Lucas has just made her debut at the Metropolitan Opera in New York, singing Angelotti in *Tosca*. Yet the question of how trans- and non-binary gender identities might stimulate new interpretations and challenge longstanding assumptions about operatic gender politics remains largely unaddressed. Koestenbaum’s now-classic text might nevertheless leave us optimistic about the potential of opera scholarship and productions to keep pace with ever-changing conceptions of gender. Issues of gender politics reach far beyond the matter of which characters live or which die, who is empowered and who is victimised. In Puccini’s operas we always, inevitably, encounter his characters – their lives, deaths, joys and sorrows – mediated by our own gender identities; and no matter our starting point, we may find ourselves, like Koestenbaum, transported as we listen through gender’s many shades of grey.

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1. Sennett, *The Fall of Public Man* [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Letter to G. Ricordi of October 1895; Adami, *Letters of Giacomo Puccini*, p. 106 [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Clément, *Opera, or the Undoing of Women* [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Fairtile, *Giacomo Puccini*, pp. 264-7 [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. See, for instance, Higgins, ‘Is Opera the Most Misogynistic Artform?’ [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Carner, *Puccini*, p. 16 [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Carner, *Puccini*, p. 37, p. 44 [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Carner, *Puccini*, p. 47 [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Carner, *Puccini*, p. 300, p. 302 [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Carner, *Puccini*, p. 306 [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. My emphasis; Carner, *Puccini*, p. 303 [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Carner, *Puccini*, p. 272 [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Quoted in Wilson, *The Puccini Problem*, p. 132 [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Wilson, *The Puccini Problem*, p. 126. See also Schwartz, *Puccini’s Soundscapes*, pp. 71-2 [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Quoted in Rutherford, *Verdi, Opera, Women*, p. 202 [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. See Champagne, *Aesthetic Modernism and Masculinity* [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. Rutherford, *Verdi, Opera, Women*, p. 147 [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. Rutherford, *Verdi, Opera, Women*, p. 204 [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. Rutherford, *Verdi, Opera, Women*, p. 156 [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. Phillips-Matz, *Puccini*, p. 271 [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. Schwartz, *Puccini’s Soundscapes*, p. 137 [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. Quoted in Schwartz, *Puccini’s Soundscapes*, p. 137 [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. Schwartz, *Puccini’s Soundscapes,* p. 138 [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. Quoted in Carner, *Giacomo Puccini,* Tosca, p. 13 [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. Kerman, *Opera as Drama*, p.205; Mahler quoted in Schwartz, ‘Rough Music’, p. 235 [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. Hadlock, ‘Opera and Gender Studies’, p. 264 [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
27. Koestenbaum, *The Queen’s Throat*, pp. 200-1 [↑](#footnote-ref-27)