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DOI:

[10.1017/9781108891028.027](https://doi.org/10.1017/9781108891028.027)

Document Version

Peer reviewed version

[Link to publication record in King's Research Portal](#)

Citation for published version (APA):

Rindom, D. (2023). Editing Puccini. In A. Wilson (Ed.), *Puccini in Context* (Vol. Cambridge, pp. 217-223). (Composers in Context). Cambridge University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1017/9781108891028.027>

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Editing Puccini

Ditlev Rindom

Puccini is among the most frequently performed operatic composers in the world today: according to Operabase, he is currently ranked third (behind Mozart and Verdi) by sheer number of productions, with three of his works among the ten most frequently performed in the world.¹ This popularity is closely linked to the material dissemination of his operas from the 1880s onwards, with copies of his music circulating as vocal scores, arrangements, and eventually also full orchestral scores. Since the end of authorial copyright in 1994, they have become newly available in ever cheaper forms, the internet giving musicians access to free digital downloads. Yet in spite of this extraordinary popularity, until recently remarkably little attention was given to the complex task of editing Puccini's works. A critical edition of his operas was only announced by Ricordi in 2008, finally promising to offer performers and scholars access to editions informed by the latest musicological research.

The reasons for this delay are undoubtedly linked to the wider scholarly fortunes of nineteenth-century Italian opera. Critical editions of the repertory first emerged in the 1970s as part of a wider scholarly reassessment of this repertory, acting as a key means of establishing its scholarly seriousness while removing a wide array of errors and later nineteenth- and twentieth-century accretions. As Puccini has increasingly entered the musicological canon, a critical edition perhaps became inevitable. Puccini editors are in many ways privileged compared to scholars of earlier music since the composer worked closely with his publisher Ricordi right from near the beginning of his career. This has generated an extraordinary body of archival resources covering the development of Puccini's oeuvre, from autographs and

¹ <https://www.operabase.com/statistics/en>. Accessed 15.07.2022

sketches to printed editions and internal management correspondence.² Yet this abundance of materials also raises problems, since the surviving sources frequently disagree, raising questions over an individual source's relative significance, chronology, and even authorship. These challenges have been compounded by some gaps in the evidence, with correspondence and other sources only partly able to resolve uncertainties, and some documents (such as orchestral parts) having been destroyed in the Allied bombing of the Ricordi archive offices during World War Two.

The wider goals and methods of editing Puccini's operas to some degree continue those that have attended earlier critical editions of nineteenth-century Italian opera. In the case of Verdi's works, for instance, the editor's principal task has typically been to choose a particular source – usually the composer's autograph, since Verdi typically notated later revisions directly into these texts to be preserved by Ricordi – as a base text to correct errors that have persisted into later editions, drawing on further sources as necessary to make informed interventions. Underlying these moves has been an enduring belief in some form of authorial intention: that while opera is a richly texted artform, the composer is the ultimate arbiter for how the work should have sounded at any particular moment, and any critical edition should seek to reflect that. This intention may well have changed over time, informed by numerous different historical agents who helped to shape the musical text (be they singers, conductors, instrumentalists, librettists or directors), and it is necessarily the object of some historical speculation. Yet authorial intention has provided a guiding principle as editors seek to provide the highest standard of performance materials for the present day – particularly for works from the mid nineteenth century onwards as the composer enjoyed ever greater forms of authorial control, and the musical text became increasingly fixed in performance.

² For an indispensable survey of these sources, see Schickling, *Puccini*

A brief overview of Puccini's compositional routine can introduce some of the significant differences from the 'Verdian model', wedded though Puccini editing remains to the basic idea of authorial intention. Puccini's standard working method was to work on sketches and drafts, culminating in a continuity draft in short score, and to then slowly put together an autograph score.³ Sections of the work might be sent to the publisher before the entire opera had even been orchestrated, but the general practice was that the autograph would be sent to Ricordi for the preparation of a vocal score by Puccini's close friend Carlo Carignani (to be used for rehearsals and to be put on sale for the public) and a master copy of the full score and orchestral parts to be made. A copy of the orchestral score would then be used for the first rehearsals and performances (often working as a kind of intermediate text), during which changes would routinely be made. These revisions would eventually be noted in the next printed edition of the piano-vocal score (the second edition).

Even after the first performances, however – when an edition of the orchestral score had finally been printed – the full score and its parts were only still available for rental, since Ricordi would not put the full orchestral scores of the operas on sale until much later, and even then only in miniature form in order to safeguard the company's performance rights. Since the full score was not available for purchase, any further changes would usually be made by hand by copyists into the orchestral scores and parts, only being reprinted at a later date. It is important to recognise, however, that until the mid-twentieth century Ricordi had separate offices for music intended for rental (for professionals) and for sale (to amateurs), and it was the former that was most quickly updated with changes to the score. Compared to Verdi, Puccini's works entered general circulation much more quickly, which meant that the composer could exert considerably more control over the published scores than earlier generations of composer in Italy. Thus, while Verdi famously complained vociferously about the poor quality

³ On Puccini's working methods, see *Ibid.*

of editions of his music, Puccini was in a comparatively privileged position in terms of controlling his printed output and was actively involved in its dissemination – even if practical limitations on his time mean this may not always have been executed with care.

Much more so than with Verdi, then, where – at least up until the final works – the autograph has peculiar authority, the Puccini editor's task is to review all the existing sources and to create an edition that they feel best reflects the composer's intentions at a particular historical moment. To put this even more strongly: while for the Verdi edition the composer's own autograph has typically been treated as the gold standard, in the case of Puccini such a move is far more problematic since the autograph was soon superseded by later revisions and versions of the opera from the moment of the first rehearsals (or even before). As James Hepokoski has shown, this was a development already in place by Verdi's later operas, and in many ways reflected the changes happening in the music publication business as it became increasingly industrialised, with members of the orchestra asked to insert the bowing marks for the first printed edition of *Falstaff*.⁴ In the case of Puccini, for example, it is thus the second editions of both *Manon Lescaut* and *Tosca* (in the vocal score) that almost certainly reflect the works as given at their world premières, since the first editions were already obsolete by the time the rehearsals had ended and there are already differences between the autographs and the first editions.⁵ As with Verdi, Puccini's autographs also contain numerous ambiguities and minor errors that have been carried over into later editions and that require editorial attention.

Puccini, moreover, was an inveterate reviser of nearly all of his operas, creating numerous problems over which particular instance of an opera should be considered a base text and forcing the editor to decide how much of an opera's history to incorporate into any edition.⁶ As series editor of the Puccini critical edition, Gabriele Dotto, has suggested, 'Puccini's operas

⁴ Hepokoski, 'Overriding the Autograph Score'

⁵ Schickling, *Puccini*, pp. 232-4

⁶ Fairtile, 'Giacomo Puccini's revisions as manifestations of his compositional priorities', 6

offer a conundrum not unlike Verdi's *Don Carlo(s)*, so far as identification of a "single, final" version is concerned', and the composer frequently mulled over revisions which he did not implement.⁷ In subsequent years the composer would regularly return to his works, making adjustments small and large that gradually made their way into performance materials and scores. And yet these changes were inconsistently noted (often by copyists or conductors), such that the vocal scores and the full orchestral scores do not necessarily match.

Further challenges are created by gaps in the historical record. In many cases, crucial performance sources may be missing, be it portions of sketches (which Puccini in some cases gave away as gifts once they was no longer considered useful) or the scores used by conductors at the première that indicated vital changes that took place at the rehearsals and thus indicate a key 'in between' text in the transition from the autograph to first or second edition. In some cases, later changes that were annotated into printed editions are also not necessarily easy to understand, since dating these and even establishing their hand is not straightforward; even if they were approved by Puccini, changes may have initially come from a third party. The case of *Manon Lescaut* (the first volume in the Puccini critical edition to be published) is a fascinating one. Puccini returned to the score several times, in the first years of the twentieth century cutting Manon's Act Four aria and seeking Toscanini's advice on matters of orchestration and articulation, with both composer and conductor evidently writing changes into a copy of the second edition of the orchestral score, and some Ricordi employees also being involved.⁸ These revisions then became for the basis for the first score to be put on general sale for the public in 1915, an edition that was further revised in the 1920s (again with Toscanini's involvement). It is only with the recent critical edition that the nature of these

⁷ Dotto, 'Preface'

⁸ Scherr, 'Puccini's *Manon Lescaut*'

interventions has been finally understood, allowing us to understand the evolution of the three main versions of the opera.⁹

A further editorial challenge comes from the complexity of Puccini's orchestral writing, which has presented many risks for earlier copyists and editors to insert mistakes or fail to correct errors on the composer's part. The expanded orchestration and highly sophisticated instrumental writing of Puccini's scores creates a wealth of opportunities for uncertainty, with the doubling of lines between strings and woodwind or the repetition of thematic material raising recurrent questions over articulation, phrasing, and dynamics. While an idea of authorial intention remains a guiding principle of the Puccini edition – however much informed by an awareness of the plurality of authorial voices within any musical text – the complex textual history of Puccini's works inevitably makes the selection of a final version (there is no such thing as a 'definitive' version) of many of Puccini's operas a challenging task. And when fewer discrete versions of a particular work exist, that may also pose different challenges, raising serious questions about gaps in historical knowledge as the editor grapples with the problems of missing sources and ambiguous authorial intentions.

As a consequence of these factors, each of Puccini's works must be assessed on its own terms. The editor's task remains to choose one or more sources as a base text for an edition. Yet the choice will depend on the work's own history and only rarely will one source act as a stable base text. A further crucial consideration is the need for critical editions to be both informative and *useful*. In an ideal world, a critical edition used by a scholar might present every single permutation of a work, from large-scale structural changes to bar-by-bar adjustments. Yet even if such a text were possible in the digital era, it would also be impossibly unwieldy for performance purposes, militating against the editorial clarity these volumes are designed to

⁹ Puccini, *Manon Lescaut*

offer. Pragmatic decisions must be made about what any critical edition can achieve and which version(s) of an opera it should make available to scholars and performers. As a consequence, an element of compromise is inevitable to avoid any critical edition resulting in endless tomes.

Given the length of Puccini's career and the scale of his output, several scholars have divided his works into distinct groups to outline the specific challenges the works pose.¹⁰ Rather than being strictly chronological, these reflect whether works exist as multiple discrete 'revisions' or as separate 'versions', the unfinished *Turandot* existing in only one form. Unsurprisingly, the early and mid-career works typically experienced the most substantial revisions, as Puccini returned to them over a period of time, re-visiting his earlier ideas in the light of later experience and fashioning 'ideal' versions.

Puccini's two earliest works both exist in multiple versions, with *Edgar* a notoriously challenging editorial task. The composer revised it numerous times (reducing it from four acts to three) and two acts of the autograph score were long considered lost; they were finally rediscovered in 2008, albeit in a partial state. *Le villi*, meanwhile, was long known only in its later two-act form, despite not only the autograph but also many of the performance materials for the première having survived. Given the scale of the differences between Puccini's revisions, these works are therefore both being published in multiple volumes: *Le willis* (1) and *Le villi* (2); and *Edgar: Four Acts* (1) and *Edgar: Three Acts* (2). Of Puccini's later operas, *Madama Butterfly* again underwent a major structural change (from two acts to three), which will eventually require the opera to be published in multiple volumes. Given the varying scale of Puccini's revisions, however – from small adjustments to vocal and orchestral lines, to more substantial cuts and additions, to even larger scale structural changes – it is not always obvious how one should distinguish between a 'revision' and a new 'version', nor how many of these differences should be included in any critical edition, nor indeed which version of any

¹⁰ Hopkinson, *A Bibliography of the Works of Giacomo Puccini 1858-1924*

individual opera to favour – the most well-known or the composer’s own preference. *La rondine*, for example – the only opera that Puccini published with Sonzogno rather than Ricordi, and which the present author is currently editing – exists in three published editions, the most significant changes primarily occurring in the third act of each edition and yet with obvious revisions across the entire opera in all three editions. From his correspondence it is clear that Puccini emphatically rejected the version of the opera recorded in the first edition, and until the end of his life he sought in vain to have the third edition performed (Korngold apparently expressed interest but the plan never came to fruition). The orchestral score for this final edition, however, appears to be lost. Since it was never performed nor tested by Puccini in rehearsal it would in any case be a highly unconventional base text for a critical edition. Yet in favouring the first edition instead – which was published several months after the world première and became the standard performing version – the editor is nonetheless put in the peculiar position of prioritising a version which the composer himself clearly rejected, raising significant questions about which further materials to incorporate.

Alongside these major reworkings, there are also the works that Puccini subjected to smaller scale revisions over a period of many years. While *La bohème* and *Tosca* only underwent modest later changes, *Manon Lescaut*, as suggested, underwent a remarkable series of revisions, yet it is clear that the final iteration Puccini produced for a 1922-23 run of performances at La Scala was also intended by him to be the definitive one, reversing the cut to Act Four made in 1910 and taking on board further advice from Toscanini. The critical edition thus uses this final edition as a base text, while allowing performers to recreate the earlier revisions in broad structural terms – the kind of pragmatism outlined above, since while performers cannot recreate different editions in every detail, they can nonetheless experiment with some of the most significant changes. Puccini’s later works (*La fanciulla del West*, *Il trittico*) unsurprisingly tended to have experienced smaller revisions, yet the complexity of the

orchestration also raises its own editorial challenges. In the case of *Fanciulla*, it is clear that Toscanini intervened during rehearsals to suggest a large numbers of changes to make the work more successful in the Met's acoustic, ones Puccini duly accepted.¹¹ The recent première of the critical edition of *Fanciulla* at La Scala thus presented the work as imagined prior to these additions, allowing audiences to experience an alternative sound world for Puccini's work.

As this brief overview would suggest, the challenges of editing Puccini are substantial and each opera requires its own approach. The question also remains which further sources one might draw upon better to understand Puccini's decision making. In addition to musical scores and editions, letters have long been a standard reference point for tracing how a score changed and to clarify points of confusion. Yet the proximity of Puccini's career to that of the recording industry also raises questions (as Roger Parker has observed) over whether early recordings might be considered for indications of performance style, extending the discussion beyond textual evidence to music as performance.¹² Ultimately, we need to remember that in 'editing Puccini' we are editing written texts, and any effort at evoking the composer's original intentions will also require us to consider how these operas sounded in their own time: reminding ourselves that even Puccini's very final works now belong sonically to a markedly different era. 'Historically informed Puccinian practice' might even be a task for a future project.

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