

Puccini - The maestro and a succès de scandale

Puccini's Wild West opera, *La fanciulla del West*, has a rare outing in Edinburgh. It is almost certainly based on his secret love affair that was mired in tragedy. Jessica Duchen went to his house in Tuscany to find out more

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The costume of Minnie, the Girl of the Golden West, hangs in the shadows halfway up the back stairs of Giacomo Puccini's house in Torre del Lago, Italy. Simonetta Puccini, the composer's granddaughter, makes sure I spot it. It was worn, she says, by the soprano Gigliola Frazzoni at La Scala, Milan, in 1955. Red neckerchief, black trousers, white shirt. Not for Minnie the grand gowns of *Tosca* or the exotic silks of *Madama Butterfly*. Hers is a tale of the Gold Rush, populated by miners and poker games.

Exactly 100 years after Puccini penned the opera of which she's the heroine, *La fanciulla del West*, Minnie seems almost incongruous in this villa of dreams. Unusually among the composer's female characters, she is no histrionic glamour queen, nor does she wilt from consumption, or kill herself rather than face dishonour. Instead, she's the independent-minded manager of a tavern where she plays cards, serves as counsellor and schoolmarm to the local miners, and ultimately walks away into the sunset with her beloved Dick Johnson. This is not how we usually think of Puccini's stories.

Even now, in its centenary year, this opera is peculiarly underrated. But Susan Bullock, arguably Britain's finest dramatic soprano today, is passionate about restoring Minnie to her rightful prominence. She will be singing the role for the first time at a concert performance in the Edinburgh Festival.

Minnie, says Bullock, is Puccini's most complex heroine. "She has many more sides to her than most of the others," she points out. "She can calculate coolly how to hide a card in her stocking to cheat at poker, yet she has a deep religious faith, and when she's alone with Dick Johnson she reveals a lot of insecurities. On one hand she's happy alone in the mountains, but also she can whip out the gun and say, 'this is what keeps me company'. She's a wonderful, multifaceted person to discover, and for me it's wonderful to play not a myth or a goddess, but a real woman."

Why, then, is the opera not performed more often? Some concerns may be practical, Bullock suggests. "Minnie is often called the Wagner of Puccini: the role is as demanding as the German dramatic repertoire. Also, *Fanciulla* is expensive to cast because you need so many soloists. But it's a great story and it ought to be a real crowd-puller."

Yet maybe another cause lies behind its odd-girl-out status: one that makes the work just a bit too close to the bone. In 1903 Puccini - who adored fast cars as well as hunting, shooting, fishing and women - was badly injured in a road accident. A 16-year-old maid, Doria Manfredi, was engaged at Torre del Lago: she nursed him back to health. But her devotion produced terrible consequences.

Elvira Puccini, well aware of her husband's countless infidelities, became desperate with jealousy, to the point that she is supposed to have laced his coffee with bromide and planted camphor in his trouser pockets to lessen his sexual appetite.

The marriage had been positively operatic from the start. Elvira had left her first husband and eloped with the composer in 1885; they lived together thereafter and were only free to marry in 1904. Now she openly accused the maid of seducing the "Maestro". Denounced and helpless, Doria swallowed poison. After her death, a post-mortem revealed that she was a virgin.

Doria's family took Elvira to court; Puccini paid them 12,000 lire in order to avert his wife's prison sentence. The money was easy. The psychological blow was not. He considered separating from Elvira; their son, Antonio, threatened emigration.

It was only three years ago that the director Paolo Benvenuti, working on his feature film *Puccini e la fanciulla*, stumbled upon the truth. Puccini's lover was not Doria, but her cousin, Giulia Manfredi; Doria had served as go-between. Benvenuti traced Giulia's granddaughter, Nadia Manfredi, whose father - named Antonio, like Puccini's father and son - was believed to be Puccini's illegitimate child, but who had died with his heritage unproven in 1988 after working most of his life as a hospital porter. A suitcase in Nadia's attic contained some 40 letters that completed the puzzle.

This was just the latest of many Puccini scandals. A frantic inheritance battle had raged for the succession in Torre del Lago, complicated by the composer's legion of love affairs and, it seems, those of his son, too; Simonetta only won recognition as Puccini's granddaughter in 1995.

What did this mean for *La fanciulla del West*? First, perhaps ironically, the opera's librettist, Guelfo Civinini, was caught up in the initiation of Doria's persecution. The maid had inadvertently walked in on Puccini's married stepdaughter, Fosca, in flagrante with Civinini; Fosca apparently instigated the framing of Doria in revenge. But also, Giulia, like Minnie, was an independent-spirited woman who worked in a bar.

Puccini's affair with Giulia, Benvenuti discovered, was more than a flash in the pan: it had continued until the end of the Maestro's life. The composer's heroines, famously enough, were often fuelled by his relationships with various mistresses, whom he termed his "little gardens". If Minnie seems more real than the others, it might be because she is a tribute to the woman to whom Puccini was closest.

What of the happy ending - a rarity in Puccini's operas? He and his librettists had the original play by David Belasco to follow; still, might the conclusion have been a gentle incidence of wishful thinking? It's neither so simple, nor so happy. Puccini's biographer Julian Budden points out that what lingers is the pathos of the friends the lovers leave behind. "What strikes us above all is the pity of it," he writes.

The tragedy of Doria left a lasting impact on Puccini. In *Turandot*, his last opera, Liu, the servant girl, kills herself rather than betray the man she loves. Liu was Puccini's own addition to the drama and he wrote some of her crucial words himself. Many

have detected a parallel with Doria. Puccini by then was battling not only cancer, but also his own mind - a loss of self-belief that seems astonishing in an artist of his stature. On his death, *Turandot* lay unfinished. Its mystery has haunted opera-lovers ever since.

Puccini is still at Torre del Lago: his remains and his family's - Elvira, Antonio, and Antonio's wife - are interred in a chapel converted from what was once the drawing room. Elsewhere in the house stand models of Puccini's yachts (*Cio Cio San I* and *II*, named after *Madama Butterfly*), signed photographs of great singers, a statue of tenor Enrico Caruso, Puccini's piano - still fitted with candlesticks - and a cabinet filled with shotguns.

"Puccini seems always to have been surrounded by scandal," Bullock remarks. "But maybe this is what inspired this lavish and emotional music. Maybe that is what he needed."

La fanciulla del West was first performed at the Metropolitan Opera, New York, in 1910, starring Emmy Destinn as Minnie and Enrico Caruso as Dick; Arturo Toscanini, the Met's music director, was on the podium. Puccini regarded the opera as his best work to date. If he ever dreamed of escaping to a world of simple happiness with Giulia, his own Minnie, he did not let on. We still have the music, and the music is enough.

'*La fanciulla del West*', Usher Hall, Edinburgh, 23 August (0131 473 2000)