

GIACOMO PUCCINI

And a Word About His Forthcoming Opera

By R. L. Cottenet

GIACOMO PUCCINI is by all odds the most popular operatic composer of our day. Wherever opera is given, his works are performed twice as often as those of any other living composer. Even in Germany his operas are said to be more popular with the general public than are the works of Richard Wagner. Of the seven operas which Puccini has already produced, "La Bohême" and "Madame Butterfly" are most frequently given, and it is said that when a manager is at a loss to know how to attract the public, he invariably produces one of these two operas, and—no matter what the cast may be—always with financial success. Puccini deserves the great popularity accorded to him, because his operas appeal to all classes of music lovers. The boy in the gallery leaves the theatre whistling the airs he has just heard, whereas the most advanced student of modern musical composition cannot fail to be impressed by their endless flow of melodic invention in the scores, the brilliant coloring of the orchestration, and the many beautiful and dramatic effects, often obtained by the simplest means. A striking example of Puccini's simplicity of method is offered in the finale of the second act of "Madame Butterfly."

Thematically, orchestrally and harmonically it is treated in the simplest manner. Yet the atmosphere which he achieves, of stillness and of distance, of patience and of longing, is indescribably beautiful, and cannot fail to impress all those having any musical appreciation whatsoever. This is pure genius. For the singers, Puccini's music is not only melodic but admirably scored for the voice. Vocally grateful, it has made the reputation of more young artists than all the teachers in the world have ever done.

Puccini has been wise in adapting, for his libretti, stories which have already proved by their success, either as novels or plays, the value of their dramatic qualities. His first two operas are the only exceptions to this rule. The first, "Le Ville," was adapted from an old legend, a legend that already had inspired the composer, Adam, to write the ballet "Giselle."

"EDGAR," his second opera, is an adaptation of "La Coupe et les Lèvres," a work by Alfred de Musset. The book for his third opera, "Manon Lescaut," is said to be the work of Puccini himself, in collaboration with two friends. It is, of course, an adaptation from L'Abbé Prévost's novel of that name.

Illica and Giacosa, two of the most gifted men in the literary world to-day, collaborated in adapting the books of his three most successful operas, "La Bohême," "Madame Butterfly," and "La Tosca."

Puccini is now at work on an opera, the book for which is an adaptation of Ouida's novel, "Two Little Wooden Shoes." It has also been stated that D'Annunzio is writing a libretto for Puccini, the subject of which is taken from an episode in the present European war.

Puccini's sympathetic personality, his charming and affable manner, gained for him many friends when he visited America in 1910.

He is an ardent sportsman; shooting being, indeed, his favorite recreation. During the summer he spends much of his time on the water, and in the gardens of his villa in Italy, where he has an enormous cage containing hundreds of small birds of various kinds. He delights in watching and listening to them, and declares that it is by listening to them that



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many of his best musical ideas are inspired. Puccini has a home in Milan, but his villa at Torre del Lago is where he spends most of his time. It is very probable that he will return to New York to witness the first performance of "Two Little Wooden Shoes."

It has been said on good authority that Puccini, in this forthcoming opera, has returned to the simplicity of orchestration which characterizes "La Bohême," and that he has found that the complexity of the modern orchestration and the constant use of dissonances is detrimental to genuine inspiration.

Giacomo Puccini is now fifty-seven years of age. He was born in Lucca, where, for five generations, his family have produced musicians of note. His great-great-grandfather was an organist and composer of church music and Maestro de Capella to the Republic of Lucca.

HIS great-grandfather, a composer and theorist, was equally well known, whereas his grandfather was a composer of many operas which obtained considerable success. His father was a renowned composer of ecclesiastical music, which was so much appreciated, that, after his death, Pacini wrote a requiem to his memory.

Puccini commenced his musical education at Lucca, and then went to the conservatory of

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music at Milan where he studied under the famous Ponchielli. While in Milan, Puccini wrote several orchestral works, the most familiar of which is a Sinfonia-Capriccio. His first opera, "Le Villi," was produced by the generosity of his friends at Milan, on May 31, 1884. It so happened that one of the ladies of the Ricordi family, a family famous as music publishers, was present at this performance, and, being much impressed by the music, at once telegraphed her praise of the work to the late Giulio Ricordi, who was at that time the head of the Ricordi firm. An answer came back instructing his firm to buy the opera. Giulio Ricordi was quick to recognize the genius of Puccini, and did all in his power to bring him into public notice.

We know with what brilliant results.

"EDGAR," his second opera, originally written in four acts but now reduced to three, was brought out at La Scala, Milan, in February, 1892, but had only a mediocre success.

Puccini's first real triumph came with the production of his third opera, "Manon Lescaut," which occurred on February 1, 1893, at the Teatro Regio in Turin. During the last two seasons at the Metropolitan Opera House it proved to be one of the most popular of their productions, and it remains in the repertoire of all the leading theatres of Europe and South America to-day.

At its first production in Italy the cast was the strongest that could be obtained. Mlle. Ferrani created the part of Manon, and Giuseppe Cremonini that of Des Grieux. Cremonini, during that season, was singing in Buenos Ayres, but Puccini insisted that only Cremonini could do justice to the part and after much trouble they succeeded in canceling his contract and bringing him back to Italy. His success was enormous and he continued singing the part for many seasons in Europe and South America. There are many people here who will remember this delightful artist when he appeared at the Metropolitan Opera House, where he sang for several seasons during the Grau management, and where he created the part here of Cavaradossi in "La Tosca." He was young, handsome and gifted with a voice of the purest lyrical quality. It is said that his voice very closely resembled the voices of Gayarre and Mario; he had all the elements of success. His death occurred in Cremona, Italy, his birth place, when he was but thirty-two years of age, after an illness of less than a week. The illness was the result of a cold contracted at an operatic performance for the benefit of the poor in his native city. His death caused a real loss to art, and a deep-felt regret to the public of three continents.

THE fourth of Puccini's operas to be heard was "La Bohème." This opera has done more to make its composer famous than any of the others. It was first brought out at Turin on February 1, 1896, at the Teatro Regio, and it is said still to be given oftener than any other opera in the world.

"La Tosca," Puccini's fifth opera, was

produced in Rome at the Costanzi Opera House on the 14th of January, 1900. The superb performances of this opera, given in New York, under the direction of Arturo Toscanini, with Mme. Destinn as Tosca, and Caruso as Cavaradossi, are never to be forgotten. Particularly the last act, where Puccini has written some of his best and most characteristic music. This act was so gloriously sung by these two artists that it is safe to say that their performance can never again be equalled.

Four years elapsed before another opera of Puccini's was produced, and then, at La Scala, in Milan, on February 17, 1904, "Madame Butterfly" was given for the first time. We all know the enormous success which this opera has everywhere obtained, and how, after "La Bohème," it is the most popular work of Puccini. Yet at its first performance it was hissed from its commencement to its very end. The reason for this attitude of the Milanese public is generally accredited to a cabal of Puccini's enemies, but whatever the real cause, the result was that the following morning the firm of Ricordi sent back to the management of La Scala the check which they had received from them for the rights of production, and, taking back the music of the opera, refused to let them give another performance of it. Three months later, at Brescia, on the 28th of May, the second performance of the opera was given, with the same cast, and with one or two unimportant alterations in the score. This second performance was an enormous success and the same critics who had abused it at the first performance in Milan, were now loud in their praise of it.

David Belasco's production of "The Girl of the Golden West" inspired Puccini to write his seventh and latest opera. The first performance of it occurred at the Metropolitan Opera House, December 10, 1910, under the direction of Arturo Toscanini. Belasco himself superintended the staging, and the cast included Mme. Destinn, Caruso and Pasquale Amato. Puccini came here from Italy expressly to superintend the last rehearsals and to witness the first performance.

But in spite of a series of performances, perfect in every detail, the opera had only a fair success here, and scored even less of a success in Europe.