

MANON LESCAUT

An opera in Four Acts by Giacomo Puccini

Libretto by Ruggero Leoncavallo, Marco Praga, Domenico Oliva,
Giuseppe Giacosa, Luigi Illica, Giulio Ricordi, Giacomo Puccini.

based on *L'histoire du chevalier Des Grieux et de Manon Lescaut*
by Antoine-François Prévost.

STUDY GUIDE



EDUCATION UNDERWRITER

Welcome to Pacific Opera Victoria!

This Study Guide has been created primarily to assist teachers in preparing students for their visit to the opera.

It is our hope that teachers will be able to add this to the existing curriculum in order to expand students' understanding of opera, literature, history, and the fine arts.

Materials in the Study Guide may be copied and distributed to students. Some students may wish to go over the information at home if there not enough time to discuss in class. The opera experience can be made more meaningful and enjoyable when students have the opportunity to learn about the opera before they attend the performance.

For more information about the history of opera, including a glossary of opera terms, please see other Study Guides on the Pacific Opera Victoria web site at http://www.pov.bc.ca/involve_education.html .

Please Note: The Dress Rehearsal is the last opportunity the singers will have on stage to work with the orchestra before Opening Night. Since vocal demands are so great on opera singers, some singers choose not to sing in full voice during the Dress Rehearsal in order to preserve their vocal chords and avoid unnecessary strain.

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Audience Etiquette

The following list of *Dos* and *Do Nots* will help you (and those around you) enjoy the experience of a night at the opera:

- **Do** dress in whatever you find comfortable. However, going to the opera can be an opportunity to dress in formal attire.
- **Do** be on time. Latecomers disturb the rest of the audience and the singers. They will be seated only at suitable breaks – often not until **intermission**.
- **Do** find your seat with the help of your teacher or an usher. It is also customary to remove your hat in respect to the artists and to the person sitting behind you.
- **Do** turn off cell phones, pagers, digital watch alarms and all electronic devices.
- **Do Not** take photos. The flash can be very disturbing to the artists.
- **Do Not** chew gum, eat, drink, or talk. Let the action on stage surround you. As an audience member, you are a very important part of the process taking place. Without you there is no show.
- **Do** get settled and comfortable before the performance begins. Read your programme before the performance; rustling through the programme during the show can disrupt everyone.
- **Do** clap as the lights are dimmed and the **conductor** appears and bows to the audience. Watch as the **conductor** then turns to the **orchestra** and takes up his or her **baton** to signal the beginning of the opera.
- **Do** listen to the **prelude** or **overture** before the curtain rises. This is part of the performance and an opportunity to identify common musical themes that may reoccur during the opera.
- **Do** sit still; whisper only when it is absolutely necessary, as a whisper is heard all over the theatre, and NEVER (except in an emergency) stand during the performance.
- **Do** applaud (or shout **Bravo!**) at the end of an **aria** or **chorus** piece to signify your enjoyment. The end of a piece can be identified by a pause in the music.
- **Do** laugh when something is funny.
- **Do** read the English **surtitles** projected above the stage to understand the story.
- **Do** listen for subtleties in the music. The **tempo**, volume and complexity of the music and singing often depict the feelings of a character or give a sense of the action. Notice repeated words or phrases; they are usually significant.

Finally, have fun and enjoy the show!

presents

MANON LESCAUT

October 12, 14, 17, 19, 21, 2006, 8 pm
Royal Theatre, Victoria, BC

An opera in Four Acts by Giacomo Puccini
Libretto by Ruggero Leoncavallo, Marco Praga, Domenico Oliva,
Giuseppe Giacosa, Luigi Illica, Giulio Ricordi, Giacomo Puccini.

based on *L'histoire du chevalier Des Grieux et de Manon Lescaut*
by Antoine-François Prévost.

First Performance February 1, 1893, at the Teatro Regio, Turin
Sung in Italian with English surtitles

CAST & CREATIVE TEAM

Manon Lescaut	Christiane Riel
Lescaut, her brother	John Avey
Geronte di Ravoir	Bruce Kelly
Des Grieux, a student	Philip Webb
Edmondo, a student	Eric Olsen
The Innkeeper	Aaron Durand
A Singer	Erin Cunès
The Dancing Master	Eric Olsen
A Drunken Officer	Eric Olsen
A Sergeant	Steven De Vries
The Commandant	Neil Reimer
Conductor	Giuseppe Pietrarroia
Director	Tom Diamond
Set and Costume Designer	Leslie Frankish
Lighting Designer	Robert Thomson
Choreographer	Jacques Lemay
Resident Stage Manager	Jackie Adamthwaite
Assistant Stage Managers	Steve Barker Connie Hosie
Chorus Master and Répétiteur	Robert Holliston

With the Victoria Symphony and the Pacific Opera Chorus

Synopsis of *Manon Lescaut*

Puccini set his opera *Manon Lescaut* in France and in America, shortly before the French Revolution, in the second half of the 18th century. The final act in Puccini's version takes place in a vast desert in Louisiana. The setting of Pacific Opera Victoria's October 2006 production of *Manon Lescaut* is the early 1940s when France was occupied by Nazi Germany during World War II. Therefore, while the words and music are faithful to Puccini, some details of time and place in Pacific Opera Victoria's production are different from the original version of the opera.

Act 1. In Amiens, France, townsfolk and students pass a summer evening drinking, flirting, and playing cards outside the inn. The student Des Grieux, saying he has never been in love, gallantly asks a group of girls which of them will capture his heart.

A coach arrives with Manon, her brother Lescaut, and Geronte, a rich, elderly tax collector. Des Grieux is captivated by Manon, who tells him she is being sent to a convent. While Lescaut gambles, Geronte secretly asks the innkeeper to arrange transportation to take him and "a lady" to Paris. Edmondo overhears and warns Des Grieux that Geronte plans to abduct Manon. Des Grieux persuades Manon to flee with him instead. Abetted by Edmondo and the students, they slip away in the car intended for Geronte. Lescaut promises the furious Geronte that his sister will soon tire of the student's poverty.

Intermission

As Act 2 opens in Paris, Lescaut's promise has been fulfilled. Manon is installed in luxury as Geronte's mistress. Lescaut congratulates himself on having persuaded her to abandon Des Grieux, but Manon misses her young lover. Lescaut tells her he has taught Des Grieux to gamble and that the young man might soon win enough to support Manon.

Singers serenade Manon with a madrigal Geronte has written for her. When she complains of boredom, Lescaut leaves to find Des Grieux. Geronte and his friends admire Manon as she has a dancing lesson and then depart as Manon promises to join them shortly.

Des Grieux arrives, reproaching Manon for her faithlessness. She wins him over, and they passionately reaffirm their love. Geronte walks in on them and makes ironic apologies. Manon holds a mirror to his face, challenging him to behold the reason she cannot love him. Geronte leaves, threatening to return very soon.

As Des Grieux and Manon start to flee, she realizes it's a pity to leave behind such luxury. Des Grieux reproaches her and bitterly laments his descent into a life of gambling. Lescaut rushes in with the news that Geronte has denounced Manon to the police. As Lescaut and Des Grieux urge her to flee, Manon lingers to gather up as many jewels as she can. The police arrive and arrest her for prostitution and theft.

Act 3 takes place at a holding station in Le Havre. Manon and a group of undesirables await deportation. Lescaut and Des Grieux try to help Manon escape, but the plan fails. The names of those to be deported are called out one by one as the workers comment. As Manon is dragged weeping from his arms, the desperate Des Grieux persuades the Commandant to let him go with her.

Intermission

Act 4. No Man's Land. After the transport has been bombed, a badly injured Manon and an exhausted Des Grieux attempt to flee to safety. At Manon's urging, Des Grieux leaves to look for water. Left alone, Manon expresses her despair and her fear of death. When Des Grieux returns, having found nothing, Manon pledges her love for him and dies in his arms.

Giacomo Puccini: His Life and His Operas

Shortly before he died, Giacomo Antonio Domenico Michele Secondo Maria Puccini wrote to a friend: "Almighty God touched me with his little finger and said to me: 'Write for the theatre. Remember, only for the theatre.' And I have obeyed that supreme commandment". Having accepted divine will, Puccini composed some of the most popular operas ever written, earned a few millions, gambled most of the money away at the poker table, satisfied his appetite for loose women, boats and fast cars and, most of all, exterminated the population of wild geese around his villa at Torre del Lago.

This in a nutshell is the life of Puccini, who defined himself as "a mighty hunter of wild birds, opera librettos and beautiful women", and who said "Just think! If I hadn't happened to take up music I would never have managed to do anything in this world!"

Opera Italiana

Puccini's Youth

Giacomo Antonio Domenico Michele Secondo Maria Puccini was born in the Tuscan town of Lucca on December 22, 1858, the fifth child and first son of Michele and Albina Puccini. He was named in honour of several of his forebears, who had been distinguished musicians and composers, each of them holding the posts of organist of the Cathedral of San Martino and Maestro di Cappella of the Republic of Lucca, and each a respected composer. The Puccini musical dynasty began with young Giacomo's great great grandfather, another Giacomo Puccini (1712 to 1781), and was carried on by his son, Antonio Benedetto Maria Puccini (1747 to 1832), his son, Domenico Vincenzo Maria Puccini (1772 to 1815), and his son, Michele (1813 to 1864), young Giacomo's father.

When young Giacomo was still a child, his father Michele died, leaving behind his pregnant 34-year-old wife Albina and seven children from 16 months to 12 years of age. In a striking example of job security, two of Michele's positions (choirmaster and organist at the Church of San Martino and teacher at the Collegio Ponziano) were reserved for his son and heir, six-year-old Giacomo. It was fully expected that Giacomo would follow in his father's footsteps. Mamma Puccini struggled to raise and educate all of her children, in particular young Giacomo. Although he was destined to be a musician, Mamma wanted him to have a good basic education first; she would say sagely, *puro musico, puro asino* (*pure musician, pure jackass*). However, young Giacomo was an inattentive student. One of his teachers reported, *He comes to school only to wear out the seat of his pants*. It took him five years to scrape through the four-year elementary school curriculum.

He began his music studies with his mother's brother, Fortunato Magi, a stern and forbidding man, who, not without reason, considered the young scamp lazy, disrespectful, and untalented. Albina Puccini soon found a new teacher, Carlo Angeloni, who taught harmony and composition at the Istituto Musicale Pacini. Angeloni had been a student of Michele Puccini's, was a composer himself, and loved opera. Angeloni also introduced young Giacomo to what would be a life-long hobby for him – hunting. The two established quite a rapport, both musically and on the local waterfowl marshes.

By the age of 14 Giacomo was earning a bit of money playing organ in a number of the town's churches. He would shock the congregations by slipping folksongs and hits from the latest operas (such as Verdi's *Rigoletto*) into his improvisations. He had other ways of using his musical talent to earn income. He took on a pupil. He played piano in the local taverns, nearby resorts, and, it was rumoured, a brothel. He stole organ pipes and sold them to support his smoking habit – playing around the notes of the missing pipes in order to hide the theft.

Puccini was familiar with opera; his composer ancestors had all written operas; his teacher composed operas and introduced him to the works of Verdi. Then in 1876 he and some friends walked over a dozen miles to

Pisa to see the first local production of Verdi's *Aida*. He was so blown away by the performance that he decided to take up writing operas. Many years later he said, *When I heard Aida in Pisa, I felt that a musical window had opened for me.*

He continued his musical studies in Lucca, composing mostly church music, until in 1880, with the help of a loan from his mother's cousin Nicolao Cerù and a bursary from Queen Margherita of Italy, he was able to move to Milan, the cultural capital of Italy, to study composition at the Milan Conservatory of Music. One of his teachers was the highly regarded Italian violinist and composer Antonio Bazzini, whose only opera *Turanda*, had flopped at Milan's La Scala opera house in 1867. *Turanda* was based on a play by Carlo Gozzi, which would later inspire Puccini's last opera, *Turandot*.

Another professor, who became Puccini's mentor, was Amilcare Ponchielli, best known as the composer of the opera *La Gioconda*, which had premiered in 1876.

During his three years at the Milan Conservatory, Puccini lived the life of a student, continually broke, asking Mamma for money and good olive oil, eluding creditors, outwitting landlords, going to the opera, – in short, living an impoverished artistic life not unlike that evoked in his later opera *La bohème*.

His roommates included his younger brother Michele, a cousin, and the young Pietro Mascagni, who would make his name as a composer of 15 operas, the best known being *Cavalleria rusticana*. Puccini and Mascagni were to remain friends – and rivals – for many years; their wives did little to help the friendship. In 1921 Puccini's wife Elvira would be so outraged by a rumour that Mascagni would be appointed a senator before her far more deserving husband that she threatened to renounce her Italian citizenship and emigrate.

Puccini's Early Operas

In 1883, with the encouragement of Ponchielli, who even found him a librettist, Puccini entered a competition for a one-act opera. The opera, *Le Villi*, was based on the legend of the Willis, the ghosts of girls who, having died of broken hearts, exact revenge on their faithless lovers by forcing them to dance until they die of exhaustion. Perhaps the most famous retelling of this legend was the 1841 ballet *Giselle*.

Le Villi not only did not win the competition, it wasn't even given an honourable mention, although Ponchielli himself was one of the judges. It has been suggested that Puccini's score, which he submitted right at the deadline, was so illegible the judges didn't consider it.

However, Puccini's librettist, Ferdinando Fontana, put great effort into getting the opera performed and was able to secure the support of Arrigo Boito, an influential critic, composer of the opera *Mefistofele*, and the librettist for *La Gioconda* and later for Verdi's final operas, *Otello* and *Falstaff*. Boito helped collect enough money to stage *Le Villi* at the Teatro dal Verne, Milan on May 31, 1884, to an enthusiastic reception from audience and critics alike.

Marco Sala wrote in *L'Italia*, *Puccini's opera is, in our opinion, a small, precious masterpiece from beginning to end.*

Antonio Gramolo of *Il corriere della sera* concurred: *The virtues we encounter in Le Villi reveal in Puccini an imagination singularly inclined to melody. In his music there is freshness of fantasy, there are phrases that touch the heart because they must have come from the heart, and there is craftsmanship so elegant and refined that from time to time we seem to have before us not a young student but a Bizet or a Massenet ... In short we believe that in Puccini we may have the composer for whom Italy has been waiting for a long time.*

And, from Filippo Filippi of *La Perseveranza* came this: *Puccini reaches the stars ... Poor competition panel, that threw the opera into a corner like a rag!*

Even Verdi took notice. The grand old man of Italian Opera, then in his 70s, wrote to a friend, *I have heard the composer Puccini well spoken of. ... He follows modern trends, which is natural, but remains attached to melody, which is above passing fashion.*

Puccini also came to the attention of Giulio Ricordi, head of the powerful publishing house Casa Ricordi. Ricordi published the score and within days of the premiere offered Puccini a contract to expand *Le Villi* to two acts and to write a second opera, which would premiere at Milan's great opera house, La Scala. This contract meant Puccini now had a small but regular income. More important, it was the beginning of a lifelong association. Ricordi became Puccini's publisher – and far more. He acted as Puccini's business manager, his mentor, his father-figure and friend; he weighed in with advice and encouragement and helped resolve the multiple disputes between Puccini and his librettists.

In the summer of 1884 Puccini's mother, who had been the bedrock of his life, died after a long illness.

Around that time, Puccini had fallen in love with a certain Elvira Gemignani, a married woman and the mother of two children. Elvira left her husband and moved in with Puccini, creating a major scandal in Lucca and among Puccini's family and adding to his financial pressures for, despite the small income from Ricordi, he was not well off. Elvira brought with her the elder of her two children, her daughter Fosca. In 1886 Elvira gave birth to Giacomo's son, Antonio. The couple was not married until 1904, after the death of Elvira's first husband.

Theirs was a tumultuous relationship, as stormy as any opera plot. Puccini was far from a model husband; over the years he had countless affairs with other women. He called himself *a mighty hunter of wild fowl, operatic librettos and attractive women*. Elvira was uninterested in the arts, didn't enjoy Puccini's hunting and card-playing friends, and grew less beautiful and more jealous and suspicious over the years. She eavesdropped on Giacomo, went through his clothes, checked his mail. She was even known to resort to hunger strikes and to physical attacks on Giacomo and at least one of the women with whom he was involved.

Puccini's second opera, *Edgar*, was poorly received at its 1889 premiere at La Scala. Subsequent revisions did not make it the success that Puccini, Ricordi (and Ricordi's shareholders) had hoped. Ricordi continued to support Puccini and blamed much of the failure of *Edgar* on the libretto by Fontana.

A week after the premiere, Ricordi wrote to Puccini: *Remember, Puccini, that you are in one of the critical and difficult moments of your artistic life. I say this not because of the idiocies given forth by our famous music critics, but because now we must open a breach, scale it with courage and perseverance, and there plant a victorious flag. I ... sense the worth of this Edgar. I read in it clearly all your gifts, all the hopes for the future....*

Your good Fontana has shown himself to be an eloquent orator but a caviling one. More of a philosopher-lawyer than a poet: the subtleties of his reasoning are admirable but they do not convince, they do not persuade... Yet, after all, it is the imagination and the personality of the musician which are everything. It is the musician who colours the work, who presents it to the public. Without him it is a zero.

Ricordi stood up against the demands of his shareholders that Puccini's retainer be dropped, and he encouraged Puccini to write another opera.

Despite the modest allowance from Ricordi, which was an advance against future royalties, Puccini was barely scraping by, especially now that he was supporting Elvira, her daughter, and their son Antonio. He was also frequently ill and still in debt to Nicolao Cerù, who was asking for repayment of the loan he had given Puccini for his studies in Milan.

In 1890 Puccini wrote in desperation to his younger brother, Michele, who had moved to Argentina: *If you can find work for me, I will come there. ... And send me some money. ... I have few hopes here.* In a later letter to Michele he said, *With disaster right around the corner, it's a miracle if I can get to the end of the month. ... And in*

September I have to move. ...They have thrown me out of here for playing the piano at night. ... If you are doing well where you are, I will come there too.

In the end he did not go. Michele died of yellow fever in Rio de Janeiro in 1891.

Meanwhile, with Ricordi's encouragement and expert stick-handling of a succession of librettists, work proceeded on Puccini's next opera, *Manon Lescaut*. As the premiere approached, Puccini, now 34, knew this opera was probably his last chance to be successful and to escape the poverty in which he was living. If *Manon Lescaut* failed, he would have to go back to making a living as what he called a *third-rate organist*.

Manon Lescaut

Puccini's opera *Manon Lescaut* was based on the seventh and final volume of the novel *Mémoires et aventures d'un homme de qualité qui s'est retiré du monde* by Antoine-François Prévost, popularly known as Abbé Prévost. This volume, published in Paris in 1731 as *L'Histoire du Chevalier Des Grieux et de Manon Lescaut*, had already inspired operas by Daniel Auber, whose *Manon Lescaut* premiered in 1856, and by Jules Massenet, whose *Manon* appeared in 1884.

As he was composing the opera, the shadow of Massenet's popular version loomed over Puccini, and in fact Puccini's publisher Giulio Ricordi advised him to find a different subject. But Puccini had his heart set on an opera about Manon. He insisted that while Massenet *feels the subject as a Frenchman, with the powder and the minuets, I shall feel it as an Italian, with desperate passion*. He declared, *Why should there not be two operas about her? An inconstant girl can have more than one lover*.

During the three years it took him to write the opera, Puccini went through librettist after librettist. The task of writing the libretto while avoiding too much duplication of scenes in Massenet's work involved some seven people, including the composer himself and his publisher Giulio Ricordi.

The librettists included Ruggero Leoncavallo, who would soon make his name as the composer and librettist of *Pagliacci* and who would feud with Puccini over the right to compose *La bohème*. Puccini was not satisfied with Leoncavallo's efforts on *Manon Lescaut*, and decided to ask the well known playwright Marco Praga to take on the libretto for *Manon Lescaut*.

Praga later recalled that Puccini had approached him while he was playing cards at the Savini Restaurant.

Suddenly, without any warning, he said, 'You must write me a libretto.' I confess that although the unexpected proposal took my breath away, the friendship and admiration which I felt for Puccini made my resistance rather weak. I had never written a libretto; I had never even thought of writing one. 'That doesn't matter,' said Puccini, ... 'You have a sure theatrical instinct; you know how to construct. If you refuse to write the poem' – for although I am the son of a poet, I had made it plain at the outset that I would not write the verses – 'you may choose your own collaborator.'

Praga proposed that his friend Domenico Oliva write the verses for the libretto while he himself would set out the structure of the scenes. Praga suggested four acts:

Act 1: The meeting of Des Grieux and Manon

Act 2: Des Grieux and Manon in their modest apartment

Act 3: Manon living in luxury with Geronte

Act 4: Manon's death in the Louisiana desert.

Praga and Oliva wrote the libretto, but Puccini demanded so many changes, including the elimination of the entire second act, that Praga withdrew. He recalled that Puccini *wanted a third act of a completely different colour, such as he had vaguely in his head. I dug my heels in. He was just as obstinate... Finally, tired of sessions and*

arguments, I announced that I would retire in good order and leave Oliva as umpire of the situation, free to write and re-write according to the whims and desires of the composer.

Oliva hung on a little longer, removing the second act and adding the scene at Le Havre with the embarkation of the prostitutes. Eventually, however, he too wearied of Puccini's frequent demands for changes.

Now Giulio Ricordi recommended the poet and playwright Giuseppe Giacosa, and Giacosa called in a more experienced librettist, Luigi Illica, for additional help. Together they reworked the libretto, and, with contributions from Leoncavallo and Ricordi – not to mention Puccini himself – the work was finally completed.

With so many hands in the final libretto of *Manon Lescaut*, the decision was made to put no one's name on the final score except that of the composer.

Giacosa, Illica, and Puccini went on to form what has been called the most successful composer/librettist team of Puccini's career. Ricordi called them *the Trinity*. Illica and Giacosa worked on three of Puccini's subsequent operas, *La bohème*, *Tosca*, and *Madama Butterfly*. This is not to say that Illica and Giacosa didn't find Puccini as maddening to work with as Praga and Oliva had. They were frequently at loggerheads with Puccini, and Ricordi often had to act as peacemaker.

On one occasion, Illica wrote to Ricordi to complain of the trouble he had reading Puccini's mind:

You and I, racking our brains to find or to invent canvases for Puccini, are truly barking up the wrong tree. Puccini has confided in a friend that he could quite happily get along without my librettos ... and that anyway no one understands him because he is seeking something... something... which...! You will appreciate that this "something", described in this manner, is rather difficult to interpret. Thus, I am supposed to grope about in total darkness, and find this "something" which Puccini is looking for, only to hear him say simply, "I don't like it".

After one of the tiffs during work on *La bohème*, Ricordi wrote Puccini to say,

*[Illica is] very annoyed with you. He has almost decided to have nothing further to do with *la bohème*. He complains of having wasted much time and effort only to find himself used, cast aside, taken up again and shoved away like a dog ... I succeeded in making Illica go back to work ... But he insists that I tell you that he is going on with his work solely out of regard for me!!*

Manon Lescaut had its first performance on February 1, 1893, at the Teatro Regio, in Turin. It might have premiered at the world famous opera house La Scala in Milan (where three of Puccini's operas, *Edgar*, *Madama Butterfly*, and *Turandot* had their first performances). However, La Scala was already booked for the opening of the final masterpiece by Giuseppe Verdi. Verdi's last and possibly finest opera, *Falstaff*, opened a week after *Manon Lescaut* made its premiere to great acclaim, marking young Giacomo Puccini as the new icon of Italian Opera, the successor to Verdi himself.

On its opening night, *Manon Lescaut* took 30 curtain calls, and calls of *Bravo! Bravissimo!* rang through the theatre. The reviews were enthusiastic.

In the *Gazzetta Piemontese* Giuseppe Depanis wrote approvingly of the *robust opera of a young Italian maestro, one who has done honour to his name and to his country. Art has no boundaries, to be sure. None the less, national pride is legitimate: Last night was a good night for art and for Italy.*

Giovanni Pozza of the Milan *Corriere della sera* had this to say:

Between Edgar and this Manon, Puccini has vaulted an abyss... Manon is the work of the genius conscious of his own power, master of his art, a creator and perfecter of it... Puccini's genius is truly Italian. His song is the song of our paganism, of our artistic sensualism. It caresses us and becomes part of us.

Verdi's publisher Ricordi shrewdly linked the performance rights to *Manon Lescaut* with those for Verdi's *Falstaff*, so that if a company wished to perform one of the operas, it had to produce the other as well.

Manon Lescaut quickly traveled throughout Italy and beyond. By the end of 1893 it had been seen in Buenos Aires, Rio de Janeiro, St. Petersburg, Madrid, and Hamburg. The following year saw productions in Lisbon, Budapest, Prague, Montevideo, Philadelphia, and Mexico.

The opera's premiere at Covent Garden in London in May 1894 prompted this from the playwright George Bernard Shaw, then music critic of *The World*:

Puccini, at least, shews no signs of atrophy of the melodic faculty: he breaks out into catching melodies quite in the vein of Verdi: for example, 'Tra voi, belle', in the first act of Manon, has all the charm of the tunes beloved by the old operatic guard.

On that and other accounts, Puccini looks to me more like the heir of Verdi than any of his rivals ... and though the miserable end of poor Manon has compelled him to fall back on a rather conventional operatic death scene in which the prima donna at Covent Garden failed to make anyone believe, his third act, with the roll-call of the female convicts and the embarkation, is admirably contrived and carried out.

In 1907 *Manon Lescaut* was performed at the Metropolitan Opera in New York with Lina Cavalieri as Manon, Antonio Scotti as Lescaut, and Enrico Caruso as Des Grieux. The title role was also performed by Lucrezia Bori in the 1910 Paris premiere and by Lotte Lehmann, who sang it in Vienna in 1923.

Over the decades, the opera proved as changeable as its fickle heroine, as Puccini continued to revise the score. A year after the premiere, the opera was performed at La Scala with a new finale to Act 1.

Puccini also removed Manon's Act 4 aria, "Sola, perduta, abbandonata" ("alone, lost, abandoned"), one of the most intense moments in the act. He was finally persuaded by conductor Arturo Toscanini to reinstate it for the 30th anniversary performance, given at La Scala in 1923.

Even now the libretto is seen as problematic, particularly with regard to the gap between Act 1, when Manon runs off with Des Grieux and Act 2, which opens to show her living in luxury as the mistress of another man. In the original libretto, as conceived by Praga and Oliva, the second act followed the first much more smoothly by showing the young lovers in their Paris apartment. But Puccini had demanded the removal of this scene, probably because it was too similar to the second act of Massenet's opera *Manon*.

The gap between Act 3 and 4 is also rather jarring. At the end of Act 3 the lovers have been reunited and have sailed off to the New World. At the beginning of Act 4 they are lost in the Louisiana desert, with no explanation provided as to how they got there. In Prévost's original book, Des Grieux had wounded the governor's nephew in a duel over Manon; thinking he had killed his rival, he fled into the desert with Manon.

Admittedly, Puccini cannot be held fully responsible for inventing the infamous Louisiana desert; Prévost had conjured it in his original novel, and Auber's opera kept it, while Massenet had Manon die before she could be transported to the New World.

Quibbles about geography and plotlines aside, Puccini's opera is a compelling depiction of young love, desperation, and tragedy, with, at its centre, the bewitching figure of Manon, innocent, foolish, fickle, and irresistible. The opera made Puccini's reputation, and he went on to fulfill its promise with a series of masterpieces that are among the most enduring in the repertoire.

The Successful Composer

The stupendous success of *Manon Lescaut* meant Puccini could begin to live well. He could travel. He could buy the house he had rented in Torre del Lago since 1891. He was also able to buy back the house in which he was born, a sentimental gesture only, as he did not live there.

Meanwhile there was the question of Puccini's next opera.

Shortly before the premiere of *Manon Lescaut*, Puccini began considering an opera based on the story *Scènes de la vie de Bohème* by Henry Murger. Then, in March, 1893, Puccini and Ruggero Leoncavallo, who had helped with the libretto of *Manon Lescaut*, met in a café. Puccini stunned Leoncavallo by announcing that he was writing *La bohème*. Leoncavallo said he was also composing *La bohème*, using the very libretto he had offered Puccini on a previous occasion – which Puccini had turned down at the time! They quarreled, and Leoncavallo immediately went to the press and published a statement in the newspaper *Il secolo*:

Maestro Leoncavallo wishes to make known that he signed a contract for the new opera, and has since then been working on the music ... Maestro Puccini, to whom Maestro Leoncavallo declared a few days ago that he was writing Bohème, has confessed that only on returning from Turin a few days ago did he have the idea of setting La Bohème and that he spoke of it to Illica and Giacosa, who he says have not yet finished the libretto. Thus Maestro Leoncavallo's priority over this opera is indisputably established.

– to which an apparently wounded Puccini replied in a rival paper, *Il corriere della sera*:

From Maestro Leoncavallo's declaration in yesterday's Il Secolo the public must understand my complete innocence; for, to be sure, if Maestro Leoncavallo, for whom I have long felt great friendship, had confided to me earlier what he suddenly made known to me the other evening, then I would certainly not have thought of Murger's Bohème. Now – for reasons easy to understand – I am no longer inclined to be as courteous to him as I might like, either as friend or musician. After all, what does this matter to him? Let him compose, and I will compose. The public will judge. Precedence in art does not imply that identical subjects must be interpreted by identical artistic ideas. I only want to make it known that for about two months, namely since the first performance of Manon Lescaut in Turin, I have worked earnestly on my idea, and made no secret of this to anyone.

The two *La bohèmes* eventually premiered in successive years (Puccini's first, in 1896). There were enough similarities to suggest that Puccini may indeed have used some of Leoncavallo's ideas for his version. But in the end it was Puccini's version that prevailed; his *La bohème* is one of the most popular operas ever written.

Despite the contretemps with Leoncavallo, Puccini took quite some time to get down to serious work on *La bohème*. Some work was done in early 1893 at Torre del Lago, in between the excitement of Puccini's purchase of a bicycle, which he named Mary, the accessories that Mary needed – the bell, the light, the pump – and the challenges of learning to ride. Hunting season was also a distraction. Ricordi wrote Puccini, *Let not your passion for birds seduce you away from music. Therefore, an eye on the gunsight, but your thoughts on Bohème!*

Puccini invited Illica to join him at Torre del Lago, assuring him that he really was working on *La bohème*; however, his charming invitation focused more on the delights of country life:

I am struggling with our characters. I am working, and having a good time. I'm killing vast numbers of birds while I wait to leave for Brescia, where [the soprano, Emma] Zilli will amaze everyone with her verve ... and kill off Manon before her time! ... In my house there are soft beds, chickens, geese, ducks, lambs, fleas, tables, chairs, guns, paintings, statues, shoes, velocipedes, pianos, sewing machines, clocks, a map of Paris, good oil, fish, three different qualities of wine (we don't drink water), cigars, hammocks, wife [Puccini and Elvira would not marry for 20 more years], children, dogs, cats, rum, coffee, different kinds of pasta, a can of rotten sardines, peaches, figs, two outhouses, a eucalyptus, a well in the house, a broom, all for you (except the wife). Come.

In fact, Puccini continued to work on an opera called *La Lupa (The She-Wolf)*, frustrating the efforts of Illica and Giacosa to get him to pay attention to *La bohème*. Finally, on July 13, 1894, Puccini wrote, ... *Instead of being enthusiastic about The She-Wolf, I confess that I am assailed by innumerable doubts ... I am only sorry about the time that I have lost, but I shall make up for it by throwing myself with all my heart into Bohème.*

Even after that, he was more concerned with finding a nice quiet place to work on the opera. *La Bohème* was composed partly in Milan and partly at Torre del Lago, but in the summer of 1895 he rented a villa called Il Castellaccio, a nice house with a pool!

La bohème is today considered one of Puccini's best works, as well as one of the most popular and romantic operas ever composed. However, it was not very well received when it premiered at Turin in 1896. Nor were the operas that followed immediately successful, although most are now among the most popular in the operatic repertoire.

Puccini's next opera, *Tosca*, was a subject he had been toying with since 1889, just after the premiere of *Edgar*. Based on a play which Victorien Sardou had written in 1887 for the famous actress Sarah Bernhardt, *Tosca* is full of sex, violence, torture, suicide, politics, and religion. It is perhaps not surprising that audiences liked it, while critics deplored the sexuality, violence, and brutality.

While Puccini was in London for the Covent Garden premiere of *Tosca*, he saw a play called *Madame Butterfly* by American writer David Belasco. Although he understood very little of the English dialogue, he was moved by the plight of the geisha and the exotic atmosphere of the play and rushed backstage to beg for permission to use the play for his next opera. Belasco later wrote, *I agreed at once and told him he could do anything he liked with the play, and make any sort of contract, because it was impossible to discuss arrangements with an impulsive Italian who has tears in his eyes and both his arms round your neck.*

Madama Butterfly premiered at La Scala in February, 1904. Despite very high hopes and Puccini's belief that it was his best and most advanced opera, the first performance was a fiasco marked by hisses, catcalls, and rude comments from the audience. The reaction may have been engineered by jealous rivals of Puccini. In any event, Puccini withdrew the opera after that single performance, revised it, and unveiled the new version three months later in Brescia. It was a triumph. Ever since, the touching and gloriously melodic tragedy of the geisha who loved an American naval officer has been one of the most beloved of operas.

While he was working on *Madama Butterfly*, Puccini was also dealing with health problems and upheavals in his personal life.

He enjoyed fast cars and boats and the good life. In February 1903 he was in an auto accident – his second in less than a year. This time he nearly died. He had seriously injured his leg and endured a long, painful recovery, during the course of which he was also diagnosed with diabetes. At the time Puccini had been involved in a passionate affair with a woman known only as Corinna. However, Elvira's husband died the day after Puccini's car accident. Elvira put pressure on Puccini to dump Corinna and marry her; the Puccini family and Ricordi were also urging him to marry Elvira. After Corinna threatened legal action, Puccini settled out of court. As part of the settlement he had to marry Elvira, and in January, 1904, Puccini finally married the mother of his 17-year-old son.

Domestic bliss did not ensue. Elvira's jealousy over the years had all too often been well founded. In 1908 she accused Puccini of having an affair with Doria Manfredi, a servant girl who had started working for them after Puccini's car crash and had lasted longer than most servants in the tempestuous Puccini household. Elvira fired Doria but continued to accuse and threaten her and talk insultingly to Doria's mother and relatives. Eventually the girl, swearing she was innocent, committed suicide. After an autopsy proved her innocent, her family sued Elvira, and Elvira was sentenced to five months' imprisonment. After an appeal, Puccini and the family settled out of court. Although the Puccini marriage nearly broke up over this tragedy, the couple eventually reconciled – although Puccini persisted in his philandering and Elvira in her jealous scenes.

Given Puccini's health problems and the turmoil of the Doria Manfredi tragedy, it was not surprising that six years elapsed between *Madama Butterfly* and the premiere of Puccini's next opera which was also based on a play by David Belasco. Puccini first saw Belasco's *The Girl of the Golden West* in 1907 in New York, where he was attending a Puccini festival at the Metropolitan Opera. The story of miners in the California gold rush intrigued Puccini. Puccini's long-time librettist, Giuseppe Giacosa, had died the previous year, and Puccini turned to a new librettist, Italian-American Carlo Zangarini. As was usual with Puccini's librettos, work did not proceed smoothly. When Zangarini had not completed the libretto as quickly as Puccini wanted, he brought in a co-librettist, a young poet and journalist named Guelfo Civinini. *La Fanciulla del West*, starring Enrico Caruso, finally premiered at the Metropolitan Opera in New York in December 1910, with Arturo Toscanini as conductor.

In 1912 Giulio Ricordi, who had been instrumental to Puccini's career and profoundly important as a friend and professional manager, died. Casa Ricordi was now in the hands of Tito Ricordi, who did not get along well with Puccini. Puccini's next opera was published by Ricordi's rival Sonzogno. *La Rondine*, the story of a love affair between a courtesan and a younger man, is more like a Viennese operetta than Puccini's other works. Although its music is charming, it is considered one of his less successful works.

La Rondine was followed by a trilogy of one-act operas, *Il trittico*. The three operas are *Il tabarro*, a tragic tale of adultery and murder, *Suor Angelica*, the story of a nun who has had an illegitimate child, and *Gianni Schicchi*, a comedy of fraud and young love, which has proved the most popular of the three.

Puccini then started work on his last opera, *Turandot*, based on a 1762 play by Carlo Gozzi. It is the gripping story of a cruel Chinese princess whose suitors must answer three riddles or be put to death, of a prince who falls in love with her, and a slave girl who loves the prince and dies to save him.

On November 29, 1924, before he could finish the opera, Puccini died in Brussels of throat cancer – a result of a lifetime of heavy smoking. After a large funeral in Brussels, Puccini's body was taken to Milan for a national funeral. Mussolini, who had become Prime Minister of Italy in 1922, announced his death in the Italian Parliament. Arturo Toscanini conducted the Requiem from Act 3 of *Edgar*. Puccini was buried first at the Toscanini family tomb in Milan; two years later his remains were moved to his beloved home at Torre del Lago.

Turandot, considered by many his greatest opera, was completed by Franco Alfano and premiered in April, 1926, at La Scala. At the point where Puccini's score ended, Toscanini, the conductor, stopped the performance, saying, *The Opera finishes here for at this point the Maestro died*. It was not until the second performance of *Turandot* that the version completed by Alfano was played.

Puccini's twelve operas include some of the greatest masterpieces in the repertoire. Their rich melodies, complex and compelling characters, and passionate emotions made them very popular – and Puccini very rich. He had a gift for creating works that were deeply theatrical, wondrously musical, and full of passion. His librettos contain painstakingly detailed stage directions, which go beyond descriptions of the setting and delve into the psychology of the characters. While his obsession for creating the perfect libretto and the perfect dramatic experience caused havoc for his librettists, the characters, particularly his heroines, continue to enthrall audiences. His great gift for melodic invention has also ensured his works a lasting place in the repertoire.

Puccini's Operas

Opera	Date and Place of First Performance
Le villi:	1884, Teatro dal Verme, Milan
Edgar:	1889, Teatro alla Scala, Milan
Manon Lescaut:	1893, Teatro Regio, Turin
La bohème:	1896, Teatro Regio, Turin
Tosca:	1900, Teatro Costanzi, Rome
Madama Butterfly:	1904, Teatro alla Scala, Milan
La fanciulla del West (The Girl of the Golden West):	1910, Metropolitan Opera, New York
La rondine (The Swallow):	1917, Opéra, Monte Carlo
Il trittico (The Triptych) Three short operas	
Il tabarro (The Cloak);	
Suor Angelica (Sister Angelica)	
Gianni Schicchi)	1918, Metropolitan Opera, New York
Turandot (unfinished at Puccini's death in 1924):	1926, La Scala, Milan (completed by Franco Alfano)

Resources

<http://www.gutenberg.org/dirs/etext96/lesco10.txt>

English text of L'histoire du chevalier Des Grieux et de Manon Lescaut by Abbé Prevost

<http://www.landofpuccini.com/index.asp>

Puccini's Tuscan homeland, his life and works

http://www.musicweb-international.com/classrev/2001/Jan01/Manon_Lescaut.htm#introduction

Comparative reviews of recordings of Manon Lescaut

<http://www.operaitaliana.com/autori/biografia.asp?ID=6>

Information on Puccini and his contemporaries

Julian Budden. *Puccini: His Life and Works*. Oxford University Press, 2002.

Mary Jane Phillips-Matz. *Puccini: A Biography*. Northeastern University Press, Boston, 2002.

Workshop #1 – Exploring Plot and Character

Objectives:

- Students will be able to express their knowledge of character by writing a character sketch.
- Student will be able to express their knowledge of the storyline of *Manon Lescaut* through verbal and written expression.

Activity #1: The Story

- Have students read a version of *Manon Lescaut*. You can use the synopsis found in the Study Guide. You can choose to read it aloud to the students or have them read it silently. Stop to discuss.

Activity #2: Sharing with a group

- After viewing the Dress Rehearsal, have the students discuss what they saw. To help focus conversations, students can create a list of qualities that they feel are key to understanding the story and its characters.

Activity #3: Character sketch

- Students will create (on their own or in a group) a character sketch for one of the main characters (for example, Manon, Des Grieux).
- Have students fill out the “Character Profile” sheet in detail, asking these questions:

What can be assumed about this person?
What is the character’s relationship with the other characters?
Why does the character make the choices he or she does?

- Remind students to include evidence from the opera to support their claim.
- Remind students of the music sung by their character. Do the emotions conveyed through the music fit the character sketches?

Activity #4: Creating a journal from point of view of a character

- Students will pick a point of conflict for the character they have chosen in the last activity and write a journal of those events from the character’s point of view.
- Explain that they are to take on the persona of that character and should refer to the character in the first person. Students are to express only information that their character would know; they may use the character profile for assistance.

Character Profile

Character's Name : _____

Physical Characteristics (style and physical attributes): _____

Psychological Characteristics (mental aspects of character, how does he/she think?)

Emotional Characteristics (is he/she generally cheerful, sad, snobbish, "off-balance" etc.?)

Family: _____

Career/Income (if applicable): _____

Interests and Hobbies: _____

Other interesting facts

Workshop #2 – Writing a Review of *Manon Lescaut*

Objectives:

- Students will be able to write clear and well-supported expository essays.
- Students will use observation and critical thinking skills based on real-life, real-time experiences.
- Students can submit their writing for publication (school newspaper) or you can send the reviews to Pacific Opera. We would love to hear what the students thought!

Activity #1: Sharing thoughts with the group

Individually students will write, in point form, the answers to the following questions:

What did you like about the opera? What did you dislike?

What did you think about the sets, props and costumes?

Would you have done something differently? Why?

What were you expecting? Did it live up to your expectations?

What did you think of the singers' portrayal of their characters?

Break the students into groups to discuss their feelings and reactions to the production. Encourage the students to go beyond the questions posed.

Activity #2: Outlining your review

Go over the essential aspects of a review including:

a clearly stated purpose

a coherent comparison/contrast organizational pattern

a summary paragraph

capturing the interest of the reader

precise nouns

revision for consistency of ideas

You might give your students a few examples of reviews for fine arts events from the newspaper. Have the students fill out the “Review Outline” worksheet. Once this has been completed, students may write their rough draft.

Activity #3: Peer Conferencing

Students will exchange reviews to critique and edit. Encourage the students to focus on effective coordination of ideas in sentences and the correct use of grammar and punctuation.

Activity #4: Creating the final draft

Have students make the appropriate adjustments to their reviews. You could also have the students type the pieces and organize them into a newspaper.

Review Outline

Purpose (why are you writing this and who is your audience?)

Plot Synopsis (including who sang what role, etc.)

Paragraph #1 (compare and contrast, things you liked or didn't like)

Paragraph #2 (compare and contrast, things you liked or didn't like)

Paragraph #3 (compare and contrast, things you liked or didn't like)

Summary/Closing Paragraph

Workshop #3 – The Effect of the Setting of *Manon Lescaut*

When you see Pacific Opera Victoria's production of *Manon Lescaut* you will find that the setting of the opera has been changed.

Abbé Prévost's original novel was set in Paris and Louisiana around 1720. Puccini's opera was also set in France and in America, but some 60 years later, shortly before the French Revolution, in the second half of the 18th century. However, the director of this production, Tom Diamond, has moved the opera to the early 1940s when France was occupied by Nazi Germany during World War II.

Questions for Class Discussion or Writing:

1. Discuss other instances in which a story has been retold in a different setting. Examples could include other theatrical or operatic productions in which the setting has changed but the words and music remain the same (For example, Pacific Opera Victoria's production of *Rigoletto* in April 2006 was moved from the 16th to the 19th century). Other examples could include instances in which a writer or composer has taken a story and completely reworked it (e.g., Leonard Bernstein's retelling of Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* in the musical *West Side Story*).

2. Choose some other time or place and write a new synopsis of *Manon Lescaut* (e.g., Victoria in 1970, Mars in 2525). Consider how the time and place you have chosen will affect the physical setting, the events in the story, and the characters' costumes, actions, and feelings.

3. After watching the production of *Manon Lescaut*, discuss how setting the opera in more modern times, during a war, changes it. Consider costumes and the physical stage set, changes in events and situations, and the characters' feelings and motivations.

Do you like this change of setting? Do you think it is effective? Why or why not?

Teacher's Comments

Your comments and suggestions are greatly appreciated. Please take a few minutes to fill out this questionnaire and return it to the address below. Thank you for your comments and suggestions.

Name: _____ School: _____

Address: _____

Phone Number: _____ Fax: _____ Grade(s) you teach: _____

Email: _____ Subjects: _____

Have you attended other arts events with your students in the past year? Yes No

If yes, what were they? _____

Were you able to use the Teacher's Study Guide in your classroom activities before attending the opera?
Yes No

If not, please elaborate: _____

If so, which sections of the Study Guide did you find most useful?

How appropriate was the information provided in the Study Guide? _____

What would you add/delete?

Did you spend classroom time discussing the performance after your students attended the opera?
 Yes No

Do you have any comments about the performance itself?

Would you like to receive information on our future Student Dress Rehearsals? Yes No

How would you like to receive information? Fax Email Letters Other _____

Further comments and suggestions _____

Please return this form to:

Pacific Opera, 1815 Blanshard Street, Suite 500, Victoria, BC V8T 5A4 Fax: 250.382.4944