

The Non-Verismo Tendency of the Verismo Opera *La Bohème*: A Comparative Study of Murger's Novel and Puccini's Opera

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Abstract

Through a comparative study of Puccini's opera, *La Bohème*, and the literary script, Murger's novel, *Scènes de la vie de Bohème*, this paper analyzes the selecting, adding and re-shaping of the original plot when Puccini adapted the opera script in collaboration with the playwrights, the artistic transformation of the characters and their destinies and the great changes in storytelling techniques and the tone so as to explore Puccini's unique opera aesthetic philosophy under the influence of verismo and sum up the "non-verismo" tendencies of his works in the form of verismo.

Key words: Puccini; *La Bohème*; Murger; *Scènes de la vie de Bohème*; Verismo opera; Verismo literature; Comparative study

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INTRODUCTION

For a long time, the name of Italian composer, Giacomo Puccini (1712-1781) has been closely linked to verismo opera. Although not all his operas belong to the scope verismo, scholars have controversial opinions on whether

some of his works are verismo opera.¹ However, *La Bohème*, premiered in 1896, has long been recognized as one of the successful models of verismo opera.

Puccini started the creation of *La Bohème* in 1894. That was when the verismo literature was popular in Europe and the pervasively influenced the Italian opera field. Following the aesthetic principles copying the original appearance of things and opposing exaggerated imagination in all unrealistic romantic works of art in opera, *Cavalleria Rusticana* (1890) by Pietro Mascagni (1863-1945) and *Pagliacci* (1892) by Ruggero Leoncavallo (1857-1919) came out and were a great success. They started a boom of verismo opera in the world of Italian opera and attracted a large number of composers to imitate.

Although becoming famous with the opera *Manon Lescaut*, Puccini, under the background of the verismo movement, has begun to search creation inspirations with the focus on describing real-life. Wandering between the novel of Giovanni Verga, a poet in Sicily, *La Lupa* and

¹Examples include *Tosca* and *Turandot*. There are different opinions on the judgment of verismo opera and the two widely accepted criteria include operas which strictly follow the creation principles of verismo in both the content and the form and they are literary works like news reports to reflect the real appearances of things; all the operas created by "giovane scuola" composers during the Italian verismo period are considered as verismo operas. Judging from the first criterion, neither *Tosca* nor *Turandot* belongs to verismo operas. Giovane scuola refers to a group of young composers at the end of 19th century and the early of 20th century in Milan Conservatory in Italy who joined the movement of verismo opera after Verdi Conservatory, including Puccini, Mascagni, Leoncavallo, Catalani, Giordano and Cilea and the like. Mallach, A. (2007). *The Autumn of Italian Opera: From Verismo to Modernism, 1890 - 1915* (p.42). Lebanon, NH: Northeastern University Press.

Murger's *Scènes*² for a while, eventually he chose the latter. Puccini understood the importance of playwriting on the overall effect of opera's final shape. In order to make the script better fit his yearning dramatic effect, he personally plunged into the transformation of Murger's novel into a screenplay, and starting from *La Bohème*, he formed a long-term stable cooperative relations with screenplay writer Luigi Illica (1857-1919) and Giuseppe Giacosa (1847-1906) (Clemens, 2004, p.73). From a large number of correspondence exchanges of them in the creative process, the repeatedly revised manuscripts of *La Bohème* and book records of the arguments of them on the play (ibid., p.75), we can easily come to this judgment: Puccini's whole idea of theater for *La Bohème* began to be implemented from the beginning of the screenplay adaptation; therefore the various artistic treatments made when refining the script can fully represent Puccini's judgment on the aesthetic the properties of the operas.

Indeed *La Bohème* at the opera theme absolutely has notable features of verismo opera: concerned about the fate of ordinary characters, describing the daily life of ordinary people and having social criticism; in musical aspect, it also follows the general aesthetic principles of verismo opera: abandoning the traditional music structure of early Romantic Italian Grand Opera, the music and the story laying out a chain, using the through-composed creative approach and even the main aria passages being natural introduced completely for the story needs without affecting the continuity of drama development. However, with the seemingly "real" story set and music creation technique, the audience was able to always feel extremely romanticism in *La Bohème*, which is the opposite to the aesthetic principles of verismo opera which opposites romanticism and advocates objective and true description of life.³ If we conduct a comparative study of this opera and its literary script, Henry Murger's novel, *Scènes de la vie de bohème*, we can feel many "non-verismo" tendencies of this verismo opera more clearly.

1. THE CONSTRUCTION OF OPERA STORY LINE REFLECTS CLUES OF NON-VERISMO TENDENCIES

² Murger's *Scènes de la vie de bohème* will be referred to as *Scènes* in this article.

³ Since the mid-19th century, the European literary circle was tired of is romantic literature full of fanciful imagination, and thus realism represented by Honore de Balzac (1799-1850) and naturalism represented by Edmond de Goncourt (1822-1896) and Jules de Goncourt (1830-1870) were born. They spread to Italian music field, and promoted the verismo opera movement. Opposition against romantic music genres and Wagner idealism music have been two important concepts in the verismo opera movement. Qian, Y., & Lin, H. (2003). *An introduction to opera* (p.315). Shanghai: Shanghai Music Publishing House.

Although *Scènes* is often referred to as a fiction, but the story narration is very loose. Murger named his work as "scenes" and that is because the whole novel is more like a juxtaposition of life scenes. The story is composed of the daily life and the romance of literati and artists in Latin Quarter in Paris. It is difficult to use coherent story line to link them together and in the text it is even difficult to find a complete dramatic conflict throughout the play. The main characters appearing in the novel altogether are more than ten. It is difficult to say who is the real protagonist and it is more like portraits of ordinary people who live bohemian life dissolutely and uninhibitedly.

Puccini's libretto is more interested in the theme of love in the novel. In the seemingly messy pile of puzzling plot, he picked out the love story between Rodolfo and Mimi to architecture the opera story line and expand this clue which does not accounting for much in the original story and have it the main thread throughout the opera. The second storyline of the opera starts around the flirts and fights between Marcello and Musetta. The life of musician Schaunard and philosopher Colline which takes more ink in the original text is not heavily written in the opera. Chores in daily life as well as the flirtation of the heroes and heroines in the novel were significantly cut or omitted altogether in the opera since they have nothing to do with "sincere" love.

Such and such, the somewhat dissolute and absurd life state of the hero under Murger's pen is carefully disguised by Puccini and eventually what is presented on the opera stage is a highly idealized, purified and romantic love story. Such filters have showed the composer's creative tendencies: putting more emphasis on romantic storytelling rather than truly describing the event as news reports which is preached by realism then..

2. CHANGES IN THE NARRATIVE TONE DILUTE THE COLOR OF NON-VERISMO OF THE OPERA

Murger's novel *Scènes* is a classic realistic literary works. Following the writing principle of realistic literature to "truthfully report the incident", the wording in the novel has always held an indifferent tone with a sense of alienation. On the setting of his scenes for the story, the author remains a distant stance. Even when he occasionally adds personal comments in scripted statements, they are also in slightly mocking tone.

Murger never bothers to pour any compassion and loving feelings especially on those bohemian women roles he describes. This is particularly prominent at the scene of Mimi's death. Unlike romantic death farewell of the hero and heroine in traditional literary works, Murger consciously let Mimi's death shrouded in an

absurd funny color. Mimi went to the hospital for medical treatment by carriage when she was terminally ill. Even if it has been almost impossible to erect, she stopped two or three times on the road at the drapers' shops to enjoy the window furnishings; Mimi's hospital sent several wrong notifications of her death so that when the news of her death was notified, it was like a joke. In this slightly black humor plot setup, Mimi's miserable death is greatly diluted. Rich descriptions of the departing of the hero and heroine in romantic tradition are simply presented, which gives the reader a sense of the unexpected bizarre. And when readers had no chance to mourn silently for Mimi's death, the story at the beginning of the twenty-third chapters immediately writes after the death of a year of Mimi, Rodolfo and Marcello held a grand party together to celebrate they two entered high society. It is true that one year is not short, but the author consciously put such a description followed by the death of Mimi, apparently trying to completely cut off the reader's compassion for Mimi.

Different from Murger's indifference on Mimi's death, in the opera, Puccini added a touching romantic farewell scene for Mimi and Rodolfo, and by the rendering and promoting of the music, he had the tragic death of Mimi is more humbling. According to records, in 1896 in the performance of *La Boheme* in Palermo, the audience could not get out of the sad atmosphere for a long time. The actors who were unloaded with the makeup and the rest half of the orchestra performed Mimi's death scene once again (Wu, 1999, p.10). In addition to the rendering of the tragic death of Mimi, each character in Puccini's works is shining glory of human nature. Even frivolous, romantic, vanity and material Musetta also generously pawned off the beloved earrings to send Mimi weak hospice in the final scene of the opera, and this episode does not exist in Murger's novel.

From the absurd, indifferent novel to the tragically dignified opera, Puccini's opera narrative style is a complete overturn to the literary script. Therefore, even it derived from the verismo works and it was in the form of verismo architecture, full-bodied romantic writing tone is completely different from the creation starting point of the composer.

3. FROM MALE-CENTERED TO FEMALE-CENTERED, SUBSTITUTION OF PERSONAL FEELINGS CONTRADICTS TO THE CREATIVE PRINCIPLE OF VERISMO

Murger's *Scenes* used plenty of space to describe the Bohemian bachelors' confusion, poverty and their life which are marginalized and still have ideas for art. Role of women in Murger's work is negligible and each appears in the book is just a brief romance with the male

roles. Almost all of them are exactly the same, flair, kitschy, shallow and materialistic. Their best talent is to manipulate men's emotions and money. Murger's such descriptions of women make their roles difficult to win the reader's love and compassion. Their significance in the novel is the embellishment or even entertainment, and even their death is not worth wasting too much ink. Murger's writing style which deliberately weakens the role of women makes the male roles more plentiful, lively, and "real".

However, Puccini's *La Boheme* is just like most of his works which are centered with the role of women and the male actors are just the romantic partners of the heroine and even foil products to indicate women's noble sentiments. Female characters in Puccini's opera world are almost perfect and they have all qualities of the ideal woman in the western universal ethics. Even the courtesan roles such as Musetta are very sincere and lovely, and Mimi is even shining the holy light as an angel.

The emphasis of female characters comes from Puccini's personal experience. In his growing experience and music learning process, his mother was the source of all his love and support. The early death of his mother brings him the pain that all his life could not get out of. Most scholars believe that those ideal women in Puccini's opera more or less represent his mother's image in his mind and are a tribute to his mother. Puccini has been looking for a woman as beautiful as his mother and such futile search led to his love life imperfect. The repeated quarrels and piques of Musetta and Marcello probably mapped some discordant fragments of the composer's personal love life.

This kind of female characters-centered writing preference of Puccini itself does not have the "non-verismo" mark, but to bring the personal experience and emotions into the role has been something that realism will abandon. Once out of the writing position of objective description of the events and characters, verismo aesthetic tendencies are essentially collapsing.

4. THE CONTRADICTION OF THE IMAGE OF MIMI IN PUCCINI'S PEN IS THE PRODUCT OF INCOMPLETE VERISMO

In Murger's novel, Mimi does not appear until the story goes to half. Her romance with Rudolph in the novel does not account for too much space. Different from the diligent embroidery girl in the opera, the novel does not tell Mimi's occupation. All the background information about her is just limited to former mistress of a friend of Rudolph. In the novel, Mimi is a flirtatious woman and all day long she just walks in between all kinds of men, longing flashy life of the upper class, but eventually becoming abandoned mistress of the nobility. The only shared feature of her in Puccini's opera is her pale

morbid beauty of the look and the final outcome of the tragic death.

When the novel proceeds to Chapter XVIII, Murger suddenly goes on to claim that the novel has nothing to do with a novel and it is going to tell a "real" story. This story is about the romantic love of the author's friend, the sculptor Jacques, and Francine. The way how they met is exactly the same as the plot in Puccini's opera where Mimi looks for Rodolfo asking for a light of candles; and finally Francine is also like Mimi in the opera, with the muff given by her lover, eternally resting. In addition to these similar circumstances, Francine has all the virtues that Mimi has in the opera: Kindness, honesty, sincerity, which is almost the opposite of the characteristics of Mimi in the novel. Murger suddenly inserts such a seemingly irrelevant "true story" in the text and in the narrative of Francine uses a mercy, sincere tone which is opposite with the other female roles. Although the ins and outs of the whole story is just a short chapter and it is not mentioned again in the later part of the novel, yet the tragedy of the story is in stark contrast to the whole book, bringing readers the endless regret and shock.

Perhaps Francine's story also infects Puccini who has longed for ideal women; or perhaps he is inspired by the adapted screenplay of *Scenes*.⁴ The Mimi he describes is ultimately an integrated character based on two diametrically opposite female roles, Mimi and Francine in Murger's novel. The role of Rodolfo is accordingly implanted with the personal experience of Jacques. The characterization of Mimi in Puccini's description is very wavering: on the one hand, he almost filters out all the obvious vulgar nature of Mimi in the literature and portrays the love story between Rudolph and her very sincere and moving. On the other hand, it may be because of the spirit of "verismo" creative intention. In the opera Puccini indicates to the audience that Mimi perhaps is not entirely pure. For example, from the play it can be seen in several scenes that Mimi is yearning for extravagant material life;⁵ at the beginning of the fourth act, Marcello told Rudolph he saw Mimi and "she sat on the carriage, dressed like a queen (Era in carrozza, vestita come una regina.)", which confirms Mimi's impure conduct.

All the contradictions about Mimi's image will inevitably lead to confusion in the audience. To allow the contradiction not to affect the fluency and confidence of the opera's plot, Puccini finally uses music to cleverly

hide all the contradictions. Every time when Mimi is on stage, the music is very soft and sweet and even very timid and fragile; the melody she sings is holy and sincere enough to allow the audience to ignore the details that do not comply with her beautiful image in the opera. In this way in which Puccini deliberately retains the original character but uses music to carefully hide the true characteristics of the role makes his so-called verismo proposition become indecisive and ambiguous.⁶

It is worth mentioning that, in the description of Mimi's recalling of the past before her death as well as several previous plots involving Mimi's romantic memories, it is obvious that Puccini uses the compo technique of leitmotif, and this is one of Wagner's typical composition techniques. It is known that one of the reasons why the Italian verismo opera was produced is that people were getting tired of Wagner and his highly idealistic music drama (Gesamtkunstwerk); therefore, when verismo opera was coming, it has been held up the banner of anti-Wagnerian and anti-romanticism. Since youth, Puccini's composition techniques have been greatly influenced by Wagner music (Clemens, 2004, p.10) so that his music cannot completely break up with many typical composition techniques in late Romanticism. Therefore we can say that, not only in the dramatic structure, but also in the music techniques, Puccini is not a complete verismo composer.

To sum up, the opera, *La Bohème*, which has been considered a model of verismo, is actually a work which is full of rich romanticism. Although formally it is dressed in coat of verismo, compared with the Murger's realistic literary archetype, *La Bohème* lacks the blunt statement of imperfect humanity and the sarcasm and disdain of the fate of the characters. It is in accordance with Puccini's understanding of better personality; he casts sentimental concern and sympathy on the characters. This incomplete verismo aesthetic philosophy is not just a compromised flaw, but it allows Puccini's *La Bohème* to shine moving humanist glory, making his work unique in many successful Italian verismo opera works and making it a hot opera work in the world even though Murger's novel and other derived works are not popular.

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⁴ In 1849, Murger and French theater writer Théodore Barrière (1823-1877) adapted *Scènes de la vie de bohème* into a theatrical play, *La Vie de bohème*. In the adaption of the script, the author used the writing style of juxtaposed role.

⁵ For example, in Act II Mimi watched the Jewelry shop windows and said to himself, "What a lovely coral necklace (Bel vezzo ... di corallo!); in Act IV, when Mimi was dying she hoped to have a leather muff.

⁶ Some ideas in this paragraphs come from Sam, A. (1993). Good girls/bad girls: Gender stereotypes in *La bohème*. *Opera News*.

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