Puccini:
His Life and Works

Julian Budden

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Contents

Preface vii
Acknowledgments viii
Key to Sigla ix

1 *Early Life at Lucca* 1
2 *The Student at Milan* 17
3 Le Villi 37
4 Edgar 58
5 Manon Lescaut 87
6 La bohème 131
7 Tosca 181
8 Madama Butterfly 223
9 La fanciulla del West 274
10 La rondine 332
11 Il trittico 370
12 Turandot 417
13 *Puccini as Man and Artist* 474

Appendices

A *Calendar* 480
B *List of Works* 494
C *Personalia* 497
D *Select Bibliography* 510

Index 519

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Preface

It has taken more than a hundred years for Puccini to be admitted to the ranks of the Master Musicians Series. At the time of the series's foundation the English musical establishment held opera at a discount (had not Sir Hubert Parry declared that lovers of the genre possessed the lowest taste of all those who considered themselves musical?). Therefore inclusion was limited to opera composers who had distinguished themselves in other fields, Wagner alone, as the self-proclaimed heir of Beethoven, being excepted; hence the belated recognition of Verdi, Bellini, and, most notably, Rossini.

A milestone in the revaluation of Puccini was Mosco Carner's classic study *Puccini: A Critical Biography* (1958, 3rd edition 1993.) High on the list of its successors stand William Ashbrook's *The Operas of Puccini* (1968, reprinted 1985); Dieter Schickling's meticulously researched *Giacomo Puccini: Biographie* (1989), which, as well as bringing fresh information to light, corrects numerous errors and assumptions to be found in earlier biographies of the composer, due partly to the unreliable memories of those who knew him, partly to his frequent failure to date his letters; and Michele Girardi's detailed and penetrating *Giacomo Puccini: l'arte internazionale di un musicista italiano* (1995, Eng. 2000). To these must be added the publications of the Istituto di Studi Pucciniani, directed by the composer's granddaughter Dr Simonetta Puccini, and of the recently founded Centro Studi Giacomo Puccini, Lucca, to say nothing of various articles by distinguished scholars in the standard periodicals, many of which have furnished material for the present overview.

In discussing the operas I have opted for a narrative technique as the simplest way of illustrating Puccini's way of adapting his musical ideas to the needs of the drama in hand. I have also dwelt briefly on a number of the subjects which occupied him for some time before being laid aside, since they can often be shown to have had a bearing on the works that

he completed. In this way I hope to fill out the picture of a composer whose music has spoken directly to the public since the day it was written, and does so still.

Acknowledgments

For help in preparing this book my thanks go to Gabriele Dotto, who granted me unlimited access to the archives of that Casa Ricordi; to Mrs Teresa Melen for permitting me to consult the autographs of Puccini's letters to her grandmother, Sybil Seligman, still available only in the English translation made by her own father, Vincent Seligman; to various Puccini scholars, such as Debra Burton-Wrobel, Helen Greenwald, and Roger Parker, and to my colleagues at the Centro Studi Giacomo Puccini, Lucca, especially Gabriella Biagi Ravenni for her tireless assistance and encouragement; Dieter Schickling, for directing me to unexplored regions of the composer's life and works; and Michele Girardi, whose insights into the music of Puccini and its relation to that of his contemporaries provided me with a wealth of ideas, and do still.

Julian Budden

Florence and London, 2002

Key to Sigla

ARP	G. Adami: *Il romanzo della vita di Giacomo Puccini* (Milan, 1944)
BPP	*Biblioteca Passerini Landi, Piacenza*
CP	E. Gara (ed.): *Carteggi pucciniani*
FPL	*Fondazione Puccini, Lucca*
FGP	A. Fraccaroli: *La vita di Giacomo Puccini* (Milan, 1925)
GGP	M. Girardi: *Giacomo Puccini: l'arte internazionale di un musicista italiano* (Venice, 1995)
GPE	G. Puccini: *Epistolario,* ed. G. Adami (Milan, 1928)
MP	G. R. Marek: *Puccini* (New York, 1951; London, 1952)
MPI	G. Marotti and F. Pagni: *Giacomo Puccini intimo* (Florence, 1926, repr. 1942)
PAF	V. Seligman: *Puccini among Friends* (London, 1938)
PCB	M. Carner: *Puccini: A Critical Biography* (London, 3rd ed. 1992)
PCE	A. Marchetti: *Puccini com'era* (Milan, 1973)
PGP	C. Paladini: *Giacomo Puccini* (Florence, 1961)
PLI	G. Pintorno (ed.): *Puccini: 276 lettere inedite* (Montecatini, 1974)
PRS	S. Puccini (ed.): *Giacomo Puccini: lettere a Riccardo Schnabl* (Milan, 1981)
QP	S. Puccini (ed.): *Quaderni pucciniani* (Milan, 1982–)
SGP	D. Schickling: *Giacomo Puccini: Biographie* (Stuttgart, 1989)

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CHAPTER 1

Early Life at Lucca

'And you, my beloved brothers, whose hearts respond to the call of Christian charity, would do well to spare a thought for a mother, now in her eighties, for a bereaved and lonely widow, for *six daughters* of tender years, for a *young lad*, sole survivor and inheritor of the art of harmony which his forebears so abundantly reaped, and which he will one day be able to revive.'[1] With these words Giovanni Pacini, together with Mercadante one of the two foremost living composers of his generation, wound up his funeral oration on Michele Puccini, organist of Lucca Cathedral and director of the city's musical institute, on 18 February 1864. His injunction was duly heeded. Not only was Albina Puccini accorded a modest pension, sufficient to provide for a young family that would soon be increased by another son; the functions performed by the deceased were transferred to her brother, Fortunato Magi, until such time as 'Signor Giacomo' should be able to discharge them himself. Born on 22 December 1858, Signor Giacomo was just over five years old.

Musical dynasties, common enough in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, were exceptional in the nineteenth. That the system should have survived at Lucca is mainly due to the city's unusual position and circumstances. Situated on the banks of the Serchio, where the river debouches from the Apuan Alps into a broad, fertile plain

[1] G. Pacini: *Discorso in Morte di Michele Puccini* (Lucca, 1865), 9–10.

before threading its way through wooded hills to the sea at Viareggio, it first emerged as a Roman fort, the remains of which can be seen to this day. During the Middle Ages 'The Most Serene Republic of Lucca' disputed the hegemony of Tuscany with Pisa and Florence; and though it eventually lost ground to its rivals, it continued to thrive as an industrial city, internationally famous for its silks and textiles. The massive ramparts, constructed in the late sixteenth century and never breached in anger, helped to keep the local institutions free from outside contagion.

For centuries Lucca had boasted a strong tradition of sacred music. Of the many fine romanesque churches that throng its labyrinthine network of narrow streets, several possessed their own seminary of voices and instruments: the Metropolitan San Martino, graced from 1467 to 1486 by the presence as musical instructor ('magisculus') of the Carmelite monk John Hothby; San Michele al Foro, massive in white marble; San Frediano with its spectacular west-front mosaic. During the eighteenth century Lucca gave to the world two composers of note: Francesco Geminiani and Luigi Boccherini, both born into the profession. But from 1739 the overwhelming presence was that of the Puccini family. That year Giacomo (1712–81), the first of the line, came from the mountain village of Celle to be appointed organist of San Martino and director of the municipal Cappella Palatina. As a youth he had studied at Bologna with the famous Padre Martini, with whom he kept up a life-long correspondence. His son Antonio (1747–1832), grandson Domenico (1772–1815), and great-grandson Michele (1813–64) likewise matriculated at Bologna, the last two continuing their studies at Naples. Among them Domenico achieved more than local fame. His opera *Quinto Fabio* was performed to general acclaim in Livorno in 1810 with Maria Marcolini, Rossini's first Tancredi, in the title role, and as late as 1850 his portrait appeared in an album published by Breitkopf & Härtel alongside those of Bach, Handel, and Beethoven. But the hopes expressed by the *Corriere mediterraneo* that he would assume the mantle of Cimarosa were dashed by his sudden death at 42—from poison, some said, due to his liberal politics. His son Michele devoted himself mainly to church music. If his compositions lack the creative spark, he was sufficiently eminent as a teacher to rate a mention

in Arthur Pougin's supplement to Fétis's *Biographie universelle des musiciens* (1865).

In 1849 the republic of Lucca, a duchy since the Napoleonic wars successively under French and Austrian suzerainty, became absorbed into the state of Tuscany. In the meantime its musical institutions had suffered a certain decline. Gone since 1799 were the triennial Feste delle Tasche, held during the local elections, with their orgy of pageant-like oratorios. In 1842 the various music schools were amalgamated into the present Institute, housed in an ancient monastery in the Via Elisa under the directorship of Giovanni Pacini. Composer of some 90 operas, friend and one-time colleague of Rossini, detested by Bellini and held in low esteem by Verdi, Pacini had settled at nearby Pescia, whence he exercised a powerful influence on musical education in the region. In the years that followed he handed over more and more of his teaching to Michele Puccini, who in 1862 became the institute's official director. Like all such establishments it was funded by the municipality, as was the Cappella Comunale, successor to the Cappella Palatina, which played for the more important yearly functions and whose members gave six concerts a year as the Società Orchestrale Boccherini directed by the city's leading violin teacher, Augusto Michelangeli. In 1867 Pacini died, leaving his name to the institute that he had brought into being.

Inevitably the city's cultural life was overshadowed by that of Florence, temporary capital of the new united Italy during the late 1860s. Yet, considering the size of the population, it remained remarkably rich. The principal events of the year, including the schools' prize-giving, were grouped round the Festa della Santa Croce, held on 14 September, on the eve of which a wooden crucifix of medieval origin is still carried in a solemn procession headed by the bishop from the cathedral to the church of San Frediano, to be returned the following day. Services covering a period of some ten days required the composition of two sets of vespers, a mass and a 'grand motet' (*motettone*) for soloists, double choir, and double orchestra. Not only were 'sopranisti' hired from the Sistine Chapel; the annual opera season at the Teatro del Giglio was planned to coincide with the festivities, so that the guest artists could take part in it. During the 1830s and 40s under the tolerant régime of

Duke Carlo Ludovico, the disorder of whose private life was matched only by his munificence towards the arts, Lucca's municipal theatre had enjoyed a period of genuine glory. Its seasons were managed by 'the Napoleon of impresarios', Alessandro Lanari, and visiting stars included Maria Malibran. But the Tuscan annexation had put an end to all that: no more novelties, merely an unremitting diet of stale repertory fare. Two operas a year were the rule. However, a further two were usually mounted during Carnival time at the Teatro Pantera, run by an association of the local nobility; while the Teatro Goldoni, founded for the performance of spoken drama, would often start its post-Easter season with a couple of comic operas or operettas. In no case did expenses run to the engagement of front-rank singers. The orchestra was, of course, recruited locally, with results that left much to be desired. A performance in 1877 of *Guglielmo Tell* moved a critic to remark that the opera was unrecognizable as Rossini's. Puccini's claim, as reported by most of his biographers, to have seen his first opera at Pisa in 1876 is refuted by a recently discovered letter in which he recalls having admired Mercadante's *La Vestale* 'while a student in Lucca'[2] (it was given at the Pantera in 1874); but the Pisan *Aida* may well have been the first opera that he saw decently mounted and performed.

It was quite otherwise with spoken drama. Here, it seems, Lucca enjoyed a certain pre-eminence in the peninsula with a constant succession of touring companies under an actor-manager of distinction. The fare ranged from Goldoni and Alfieri to the latest offerings of Dumas (*père et fils*), Octave Feuillet, and Sardou, not to mention Dal Testa and Giacosa. In 1876 we hear of a 'seconda donna' who in Ludovico Muratore's *Virginia* was 'more and more applauded, and deservedly, because she combines charm and elegance with beauty of expression and a fine stage presence'.[3] Her name was Eleonora Duse. All this must surely have contributed to Puccini's theatrical flair, his extraordinary ability to conceive his music in terms of realistic action and gesture and even to envisage the operatic possibilities of a play when performed in a language of which he understood not a word.

[2] Letter to Avv. G. De Napoli, 9 April 1910, in the possession of the Associazione Civica S. Mercadante, Altamura.

[3] *La Provincia di Lucca*, 13 March 1876.

At the time of Michele's death in 1864 the family were housed in the Via del Poggio, near the church of San Michele. Albina, eighteen years younger than her husband, was a capable manager, able to keep up their middle-class status with two servants, and moreover a woman of rare determination. Not that the infant Giacomo showed much aptitude for the role that she hoped would one day be thrust upon him. By all accounts, including his own, he was an idle young scamp, the despair of his uncle, Fortunato Magi, who was training him as a chorister and giving him elementary lessons on the keyboard. Whenever he sang out of tune Magi would kick him sharply on the shin, with the result that for the rest of his life Puccini was unable to hear a lapse of pitch without imaginary twinges of pain. Fortunately for him, Magi resigned his position at the Istituto Pacini in 1872 after a fierce dispute with the local authorities and moved to Sarzana to take up a similar post. A gifted composer with a fine orchestral imagination, an efficient conductor, and a first class teacher, much respected by his pupils, Magi had an uncommon talent for making enemies; hence, it would seem, successive moves from Sarzana to Ferrara, La Spezia, and finally Venice, as director of the Liceo Musicale Benedetto Marcello (where his pupils included Alberto Franchetti, soon to be numbered among the leading lights of his generation). But Magi's character seems not to have softened. A laudatory review of his direction of Massenet's *Le roi de Lehore* in 1879 contains dark references to 'the envious, the impotent and the malevolent', which tell their own story. He died in 1882 aged 43, not, however, before relenting towards his nephew sufficiently to provide him with a testimonial for the Milan Conservatory.

As a schoolboy Giacomo was first admitted to the church seminary of San Michele, from which he passed at the age of eight to that of the cathedral, as befitted one destined for an organist's career. Unfortunately for him, the seminary's musical traditions had been recently curtailed by the archbishop in favour of an austere, almost medieval scholasticism. No wonder that the boy proved a recalcitrant learner: 'He comes into class', ran one of his reports, 'merely to wear out the seat of his trousers. He pays not the slightest attention to anything, and continually pretends to play on his desk as though it were a piano. He never reads.'[4] He

[4] From D. Del Fiorentino: *Immortal Bohemian*, 9–10.

took five years instead of the usual four to scrape through the curriculum, impeded by a deep antipathy to mathematics—a trait later to be held against him by his musical detractors. His general schooling finished in 1874, he became a full-time student at the Istituto Pacini, whose junior classes he had frequented for the past two years. By now the desk-drumming fingers had acquired sufficient skill for him to deputize as organist at various parishes in the neighbourhood, notably the summer resort of Mutigliano, where he would scandalize the faithful by weaving operatic hits into his voluntaries. He played the piano for popular entertainments at the Café Caselli in Lucca's main street, the Via Filungo, and also, it is rumoured, like the young Brahms, in less reputable establishments. It was in 1874 that he took on a pupil, Carlo Della Nina, a tailor's son from the nearby village of Porcari. The tuition, which lasted four years, was unlikely to have been systematic; for teaching was no more Puccini's métier than it was Verdi's. But it allowed him to provide the lad with voluntaries that he could pass off as his own. Less to his credit is the story, confirmed by Puccini himself, of his banding together with some friends to filch pipes from the decrepit organ of the Benedictine Sisters in order to buy Tuscan cigars. Clearly, the smoking habit that persisted throughout his life had been contracted early.

Since his departure from Lucca, Magi's functions at the Istituto Pacini had been divided between two of his colleagues. Carlo Marsili succeeded him as director, while Carlo Angeloni took over his harmony and counterpoint classes, so becoming Puccini's first teacher of composition. Five years older than Magi and, like him, a pupil of Michele Puccini, Angeloni was a far less colourful figure, whether as man or musician. Two of his operas had been given with some success at the Teatro Pantera; but there is no hint of the theatrical in his sacred works, which are at least respectable. The counterpoint is strict and unadventurous, the melodic writing bland with chromatic touches, much in the style of Teodulo Mabellini, organist of Florence Cathedral and presiding genius of the region, who frequently came to Lucca to direct his own masses. The honours heaped upon Angeloni after his death in 1901 prompted a few caustic comments from the Puccini family about the city that had failed to erect an adequate monument to Boccherini. But there is no reason to doubt Giacomo's sincerity when he wrote to Tos-

canini urging him to perform a *Stabat mater* by his old teacher at the Paris International Exhibition of 1898 ('Believe me, Angeloni is a truly and thoroughly distinguished composer of church music.')[5] Certainly he proved a congenial professor, under whom Giacomo made steady progress. Already in his first year Puccini's name appeared among the various prize-winners of the institute—below, however, that of his friend and fellow-pupil Carlo Carignani, for whom an outstanding career as a pianist was confidently predicted (in fact he would be remembered merely as the arranger of Puccini's vocal scores). A document of 1875 attests that 'over the past year Signor Puccini Giacomo has distinguished himself in the organ school and is thus genuinely worthy of the Primo Premio Lucca del Palazzo Comunale on this day of September'.[6]

So far nothing of the future composer. Yet it is to this year that his earliest known composition has been ascribed: a song for mezzo-soprano and piano to an anonymous love poem entitled 'A te'. Clearly a student work, Puccini thought sufficiently well of it to present the autograph to the institute in 1901. Three distinct melodic ideas couched in the faintly cloying idiom of Angeloni bear witness to a certain fluency of invention: a plain 16-bar period by way of piano introduction; a long vocal paragraph in ternary design; and a lighter concluding section (*più mosso*), which features a progress from subdominant start to tonic close. In a short coda the accompaniment changes from chordal pulsations to tremolando, bringing an increase of tension. The operatic composer *in posse*? It is a little early to say. It was the following year that saw the event, already alluded to, which turned Puccini's thoughts in that direction. For the Quaresima season of 1876 the Teatro Nuovo, Pisa, decided to mount an 'opera mostro' in the grand style. The choice lay between Meyerbeer's *Gli Ugonotti* and Verdi's *Aida* and finally fell on the latter. The management of the newly opened railway from Lucca announced a special train to carry ticket-holders to the theatre and another at two o'clock in the morning to take them home. The first of these was cancelled after the opening night; but Puccini was not to be baulked of his attendance. Together with Carignani and another friend, the painter and sculptor Zizzania, he made the nineteen-mile

[5] CP 181, p. 158.
[6] G. Musco: *Musica e teatro di Giacomo Puccini*, i, 42.

journey by way of Monte Pisano on foot. The evening's experience proved decisive for his career. From then on, he later told his friends, his sights were firmly set on the theatre. Many years would pass, however, before the seed sown by *Aida* would have a chance to ripen. Meanwhile we may note a few months later the completion of Puccini's first composition to which a definite date can be assigned: a *Preludio a orchestra* inscribed by him 'August 8 1876', and possibly intended for the annual September concert of works by students of the institute, though there is no record of its having been performed there or anywhere else. The autograph, recently presented by a private owner to the Comune di Lucca (missing, however, a single page) shows a fairly short piece based on the polarity of two ideas in E minor and major, respectively: the first a murmur of tremolando strings with woodwind embroidery, shifting in its tonality, the second a periodic theme, wide-spanned and assertive. The concluding measures offer two features of marginal interest: a couple of bars of 4/4 within the prevailing triple pulse, foreshadowing that flexibility of rhythm that will characterize the mature composer, and a striking, Tchaikovskian cadence with a bass in contrary motion to the preceding melodic figuration.[7]

For the autumn of 1877 the city of Lucca planned a prestigious Esposizione Provinciale with exhibits in every branch of the arts and sciences. Its musical contribution was to be a piece for voices and orchestra with tenor or bass soloist and an opening prelude or overture. For this a competition was announced in January, the winner to receive 200 lire, the runner-up half that amount. All entries were to be written 'clearly and intelligibly' and submitted anonymously. Puccini offered a setting of a patriotic poem, 'I figli d'Italia bella', only to have it returned to sender with the recommendation to study more and to improve his handwriting. In the event no prize seems to have been awarded; nor has Puccini's ode ever come to light.

Had the adjudicators been aware of the composer's identity they might have examined the manuscript more carefully. For in the meantime Puccini had suddenly begun to attract attention with a motet, *Plaudite populi* for baritone solo, mixed chorus, and orchestra, first given

[7] The piece was given its first performance on 6 October 1999, at the church of San Frediano by the Orchestra of La Scala, Milan, conducted by Riccardo Muti.

at a student concert on 29 April and repeated at the church of San Paolino, the city's patron saint, on 11 July, the eve of the appropriate feast day. 'Hearing this music', observed the critic of *La provincia di Lucca*, 'we are reminded of an old proverb, "Cats' children catch mice". In fact Giacomo Puccini represents the fifth musical generation of his family; he has before him excellent examples to imitate and could become a composer of considerable skill, since he shows a suitable aptitude for his art'. There follow the usual exhortations to study classical models and so prove himself worthy of his forefathers. The praise was not misplaced. Set to a commonplace Latin text in the saint's honour, the motet shows little sign of individuality, but it is fluently and confidently written in ternary form, the baritone having the entire central section to himself. Only a tiny phrase featuring the dip of a seventh, several times repeated, hints at the Puccini to come.

The chance to follow up his first triumph came exactly a year later. The occasion was a performance again at the church of San Paolino of a composite mass written by pupils of the Istituto Musicale Pacini. Neither the 'Sinfonia' by Pietro Giusti nor the Kyrie and Gloria of Carlo Guerini aroused much critical interest. But then came Puccini's motet ('which we heard last year and whose manifold beauties we duly noted')[8] and a Credo ('newly composed, showing real invention and a fine orchestral sense; there are some original ideas, and the "Incarnatus et crucifixus" does not sound like the work of a beginner, but rather of an experienced composer'). The Sanctus and Agnus Dei by the once so promising Carignani were judged merely 'melodious' and 'effective'. Reviewing the performance in *Il Moccolino*, Dr Nicolao Cerù, Albina's cousin by marriage, recalled the adage about cats and mice, which had doubtless become a catchphrase in the family. The only other composition that has been tentatively assigned to 1878 is a setting for tenor and bass (whether soloists or chorus is not specified) with organ or harmonium of the Passiontide hymn *Vexilla regis prodeunt*. Commissioned by a music-loving chemist from Bagni di Lucca (another scene of the young Puccini's moonlighting activities), it is a straightforward, naïf piece with moments of Italianate sweetness but little else. His payment, the chemist's son tells us, was 10 lire (about 50p) and one of the

[8] Unsourced quotations in this chapter are from *La provincia di Lucca*.

special cakes for which Bagni di Lucca was famous. It is certainly not worth more.

Over the next two years we hear little of the budding maestro, now entering his twenties. There are references to his accompanying visiting singers at their benefit concerts 'with his usual skill'. In 1879 he is credited with a 'Valzer' written for the town band but as yet untraced. A concert given during Holy Week 1880 included pieces by, among others, 'I carissimi maestri Puccini Giacomo e Puccini Michele' (*père*), but what they were is not recorded. Once again it was the Feast of San Paolino that brought the revelation: a *Messa a quattro voci* entirely composed by Puccini as his passing-out piece for the Pacini Institute. Not all the music was unfamiliar. The Credo was the one written two years earlier; and the performance included the motet, inserted after the Gloria. This time the praise was unstinted. Originality, melodic charm, grandeur of conception and structure, strict adherence to the 'philosophy' of the text—all these attributes were found in the latest offering. The reviewer of the *Provincia di Lucca* had only two reservations: the Sanctus was too short (a frequent complaint in those days), and the 'Cum sancto spiritu'—'un fugone coi baffi' (a grand fugue with moustaches, or, as we might say, 'with knobs on') was over-ingenious for liturgical use.

For three quarters of a century the existence of this mass was known only to scholars, until in 1951, the priest Dante Del Fiorentino (who in his youth as curate at Torre del Lago had known Puccini and had since emigrated to America) made an edition of the music, which was published under the erroneous title of *Messa di gloria,* since when it has enjoyed numerous performances and more than one commercial recording. Laid out for tenor and baritone soloists, mixed chorus, and full orchestra, its stylistic patchwork reflects the dilemma that affected Italy's church music during the late nineteenth century. At a time when sacred and secular styles were moving ever further apart, her composers had long been content to incorporate theatrical elements alongside the time-honoured contrapuntal procedures deemed proper to a liturgical work. By the 1860s, under the influence of foreign models, they felt the need to aspire to a loftier, more consistently devotional manner without renouncing their national heritage of spontaneous melody or, in some cases, of operatic immediacy. The problem lay in the lack of a common

Ex. 1.1

Larghetto

denominator. There were no choral festivals in Italy comparable to those of the Lower Rhine in Germany and the Three Choirs in England, which fostered a long line of cantatas and oratorios from Spohr and Mendelssohn to Gounod, Saint-Saëns, and Dvořák, nourished at the roots by Bach and Handel yet capable of absorbing modern techniques akin to those of the symphony and the tone-poem. Certainly Italy had her masses and oratorios composed anew for the yearly feast days; but unlike those of the north they were not commercially profitable and rarely spread outside the city for which they were written, with the result that each composer went very much his own way. The situation is aptly illustrated by that strange coat of many colours, the *Messa per Rossini* of 1869, to which at Verdi's suggestion 13 of the country's leading composers, himself included, contributed a movement by way of homage to the Grand Old Man of Italian music, recently deceased. No two pieces are written alike. Solutions vary from the naïf to the sophisticated, from scholastic rigour to almost improvisatory freedom, from chamber-like intimacy to grand, ceremonial gesture. Not until the first notes of Verdi's 'Libera me' does the air become charged with electricity. Amid such a gallimaufry, Puccini's mass cuts a not ignoble figure. The invention is fresh, if not always distinguished, the part-writing skilful: above all the composer is totally in command of his material. The opening Kyrie is a ternary structure based on two ideas, major and minor, the first of which has a seductive sweetness that Puccini will put to more than liturgical use in his second opera, *Edgar* (Ex. 1.1). Each is furnished with its own imitation point, both deftly woven into a peaceful, delicately scored coda. The main theme of the Gloria has all the naiveté of a nursery-rhyme, enlivened, however, by an extension of the final phrase into one of those successions of parallel unresolved chords,

subtly varied with each repetition, that will become a personal hallmark.

There is breadth and nobility in the 'Laudamus te'; while a still clearer glimpse of the future is offered by the 'Gratias agimus', a lyrical tenor solo introduced by an orchestral motif that exerts a strong subdominant pull with each recurrence. The independence of the orchestral part, scored throughout with rare imagination, allows an element of dialogue in the central episode; and the concluding phrase of the main period is emphasized by a doubling of the outer parts—a device soon to be regarded as a Puccinian mannerism, though he was not the first to employ it. Most remarkable of all is the manner in which the melody itself comes to rest in the dominant key with a perfect sense of finality—a scheme to be epitomized in Prince Calaf's 'Nessun dorma', far in the future. Less distinguished is the 'Qui tollis', a somewhat jovial melody announced by the basses and later taken up by full chorus over a tramping accompaniment. A homophonic 'Quoniam' coloured by touches of modal harmony and punctated by fanfares prepares for the 'Cum sancto spiritu', a *tour de force* of polyphony in which all the standard devices of canon, imitation, augmentation, diminution, pedal point, and stretto are used with a freedom that raises it far above the level of a school exercise. As a crowning stroke of ingenuity, the opening strain of the Gloria is re-introduced as a countermelody to the fugue subject, slightly altered so as to accommodate it. The same theme, thundered out in full choral and orchestral panoply, will take charge of the conclusion, so rounding off a massive structure which, if not an expression of deep religious feeling, is at least a remarkable flexing of musical muscles.

A similar strength of architecture marks the Credo, composed two years earlier. Here the prevailing mood is sombre, though charged at the outset with a sense of energy—note the wide sweep of the unison melody and the propulsive thrust of the orchestral syncopations in the fourth bar (Ex. 1.2). This is the main thematic nucleus of the movement, within which both the 'Incarnatus' and the 'Crucifixus' form consecutive episodes, the first a tenor solo above murmuring chorus, the second a dark, sepulchral melody for basses that rises and falls with a weary insistence beneath plangent harmonies. Unusually, the minor mode is preserved throughout the 'Et resurrexit', conceived as a long

Ex. 1.2

Andante

Chorus: Cre - do, cre - do in u - num de - um,

build-up with imitative entries leading to a full-blooded reprise of Ex. 1.2 ('Et in spiritum sanctum')—not, one feels, a particularly comforting faith. There is a tranquil oasis in the 'Et unam sanctam catholicam', after which the syncopations of Ex. 1.2 raise their menacing heads, this time to dissolve into a graceful, pastoral melody with a typically Puccinian downward gradient over a bass of purling semiquavers. It is as though the composer envisaged the life of the world to come in terms of the rural retreat to which in later years he loved to retire. But this too will be whipped up to an emphatic conclusion.

The Sanctus is indeed perfunctory; and a few bars of 'Hosanna' are sufficient to wind up the Benedictus, a suave baritone cantilena, which will furnish a phrase for the minuet in Act II of *Manon Lescaut*. Destined for the same opera, where it is rechristened 'madrigale', is the entire Agnus Dei, here laid out for tenor and baritone soloists with choral refrain (Ex. 1.3). So familiar is the melody in its later context that it may seem to jar in a sacred work (for an Agnus Dei of similarly intimate character, however, see an undated *Mass in G* by Angeloni held at the Istituto Boccherini). At all events it was highly praised at the time, and to the unprejudiced ear the caressing triplets at the words 'Dona nobis pacem', echoed by the orchestra in the final bars, may seem a suitably haunting *envoi*.

With this mass Puccini had by the standards of Lucca proved himself

Ex. 1.3

Solo Tenor: A-gnus de - i qui tol - lis pec-ca-ta mun - di,

fully worthy of his ancestors. Its technical mastery is indeed striking, particularly in the care given to the orchestra, whether in the accompaniments or in the interstices between vocal paragraphs. Here was a composer who had already learned, in Verdi's words, to move notes around to his own purposes. Yet for one who aspired to an international career his training still lacked what might be called the symphonic dimension; and this was not to be had within the walls of his native city.

To an earlier generation it would not have seemed important. The decline of instrumental music in Italy during the early nineteenth century was a by-word throughout Europe, and accepted without demur by Italians themselves. If the basic skills continued to be taught at the conservatories, it was purely as an academic discipline.

By the mid-century, however, the more far-seeing spirits had begun to realize that without an infusion of instrumental techniques learned from the north, Italian opera was heading for sterility. With this in mind, Abramo Basevi, a doctor from Livorno, founded the Società del Quartetto Florence, which gave regular performances of the German classics during the 1850s accompanied by analytical programme notes. In 1863 Milan followed suit with its own Società del Quartetto, Giulio Ricordi acting as its secretary. The society published its own journal, in which Boito preached the gospel of Mozart, Beethoven, and Mendelssohn—strictly with a view to the enrichment of Italian opera. From the Villa d'Este outside Rome, where he spent several months of each year, Liszt promoted a similar activity with the aid of Baron von Keudell and his own pupil, Sgambati. Slowly the symphony concert began to take shape under the pioneering batons of Carlo Pedrotti in Turin and

Giusppe Martucci in Naples. At first single movements were the rule, interspersed with overtures and an assortment of 'lollipops' (Boccherini's popular minuet played by full strings and Mozart's 'Rondo alla Turca' scored for full orchestra with 'Turkish' percussion were steady favourites). By 1873 Turin had progressed as far as a complete Beethoven symphony. Faccio's concerts in Milan, on the other hand, continued for years to be burdened with a superabundance of overtures. As for the concerts given by the Società Orchestrale Boccherini of Lucca, these would hardly do credit to a Sunday afternoon bandstand. Throughout the 1870s the fare never varied: an overture by Auber or Rossini to begin with; a couple of vocal solos from well-known operas, usually with piano accompaniment; a handful of short pieces by local composers with titles such as 'Elegy', 'Religious Melody' or 'Triumphal March': at least one 'divertimento' on themes from *La sonnambula, Linda di Chamounix*, or some such repertory work with the director, Augusto Michelangeli, as concertante soloist; and the evening would end with a set of Strauss waltzes. Mendelssohn's Violin Concerto, rashly introduced in 1874, was greeted by an empty hall. The first complete symphony to be heard in Lucca was Haydn's 'Farewell' in 1882—as if a work of such length could be tolerated only if it involved an element of spectacle. When four of the society's members presented a movement from one of Haydn's string quartets, they were taken to task for sitting in a group and playing as though to each other instead of coming to the front of stage and performing towards the audience!

But the conservatories were already changing with the times. In 1870 a parliamentary bill had been passed reforming the curriculum so as to give greater prominence to the teaching of instrumental music. In Milan the trend had already begun under the directorship of Lauro Rossi, who not only published an up-to-date manual on harmony and orchestration but also initiated the revival of Italy's Renaissance heritage. His progressive policies were maintained and developed by his successors, Alberto Mazzucato and Stefano Ronchetti Monteviti. In 1873 the teaching staff had a valuable acquisition in Antonio Bazzini, an internationally renowned violinist much admired by Schumann, who at the age of 46 had renounced the career of virtuoso to devote himself to composition and the promotion of chamber music (he was one of the first Italians to form his own permanent string quartet). Cultural

capital of the new Italy, visited by all the star performers of Europe, Milan was the obvious destination for a young man of Puccini's talents, as it had been for Verdi nearly half a century before.

Accordingly, Albina applied to the Lucca city council on behalf of her son for an appropriate grant; but, though repeated over the next two years and supported in 1882 by an application from Giacomo himself, her request was refused. Early biographers have hinted that Puccini had already disqualified himself by his love of irreverent pranking. A more likely explanation is that by this time the council did not dispose of the necessary funds. Not only had the 1870s been a time of international recession, but, ever since the formation of the Italian state, an increasing financial burden had fallen upon local authorities, resulting in the temporary closure of many theatres throughout the peninsula. With his *Messa a quattro voci* of 1872, first performed not at the church of San Paolino but at the cathedral itself, Catalani had caused an even greater stir than Puccini, and at a considerably younger age. But there is no evidence that the city council subsidized his move first to Paris, then to Milan, though the local papers proudly reported his subsequent triumphs. Should Puccini rise to similar heights, the authorities were doubtless ready to bask in his reflected glory; but they saw no reason to help him up the ladder, especially since he had renounced all thought of becoming their cathedral organist and director of the Istituto Pacini.

Fortunately Albina had a further shot in her locker. In his funeral speech for her late husband Pacini had spoken of 'two noblewomen who have already expresserd the wish to extend a beneficent hand towards the education of two young daughters of him who now reposes in a better world'. It was therefore to them that the widow turned for help. The Duchessa Carafa suggested that she apply directly to Queen Margherita for one of the royal bursaries available to musicians born of needy families. Her request was supported by the Marchesa Pallavicini, herself a lady-in-waiting to the queen; and the money was duly forthcoming. True, it did not amount to much—a mere 1200 lire. But Dr Cerù came to the family's aid with an additional subsidy, so that the completion of Giacomo's musical education was now assured.

CHAPTER 2

The Student at Milan

'TO-DAY MILAN IS WITHOUT DOUBT THE FIRST MUSICAL CITY in Italy.' Not a proclamation but rather a simple statement of fact thrown out in the course of a review by a correspondent of the *Gazzetta musicale di Milano*. It was not an exaggeration. No other centre could offer such a wide range of musical fare combined with so high a standard of performance. Puccini's arrival there could hardly have been better timed. The city was fast pulling out of the economic recession of the 1870s that had resulted in many a bankruptcy throughout Europe and more than a few suicides in Vienna. A massive International Exhibition was being planned for 1881 and with it a grand concert hall (never, alas, completed). New ideas in politics, literature and the arts were in the air. No wonder the young provincial from Lucca felt exhilarated. 'How beautiful Milan is, and what youthfulness!'—so he concluded one of his earliest letters home.[1] Pride of place, as always, belonged to the Teatro alla Scala, which presented much the same appearance as it does today. The houses that had obstructed the view of its façade had been cleared away, making room for the present piazza complete with memorial to Leonardo da Vinci and linked to the more spacious Piazza del Duomo by the Galleria Vittorio Emanuele, then regarded as a marvel of modern engineering. Each year the theatre commanded an array of star singers, stage artists of the highest distinc-

[1] PCE 1, p. 15.

tion and an orchestra 110 strong under the direction of Italy's ablest conductor, Franco Faccio. Of its annual seasons only one was regular: the Carnevale-Quaresima, which ran from Boxing Day to Holy Week and offered five or six operas distributed among a double cast of principals. Here grandeur was the order of the day. Of the 60 performances given during the winter months of 1879–80 *Aida* accounts for 23, *La Gioconda* (heard for the first time in Milan in its definitive form) for 14; the rest of the tally was made up by *Lucia di Lammermoor, Rigoletto*, and Gounod's *Faust* (an honorary Italian opera since 1863). Shorter evenings were filled out with the spectacular ballet *Excelsior*, the first of several similar confections with choreography by Leopoldo Manzotti and music by Romualdo Marenco, two names that have long since passed into near-oblivion. Over the next three years the same pattern was maintained. The lodestars of 1880–1 were Ponchielli's exotic *Il figliuolo prodigo* with its Assyrian bacchanal and the newly revised *Simon Boccanegra*. Lesser offerings included an Italian version of *Der Freischütz* with the spoken dialogue 'musicked' by Faccio and the part of Ännchen adapted for contralto. The season of 1881–2 opened with *Guglielmo Tell* followed by *Gli Ugonotti;* but the principal efforts were directed towards the prestigious novelty, Massenet's *Erodiade*, commissioned by the Casa Ricordi, though first given the previous year at Brussels to the French text to which it had been composed. In the event it may not have measured up to the expectations aroused three years earlier by the same composer's *Le roi de Lehore*; but its influence on Puccini's generation is all too apparent. The soaring strain doubled by cellos and violins in octaves with its melting half-close that introduces Salome's air 'Il est doux, il est bon' could have been taken from any opera by Mascagni, Giordano, or even Puccini himself (Ex. 2.1).

The principal items of the following year were Halévy's *L'ebrea* and *Dejanice* (a more licentious *Gioconda* with an Aegean setting) by Puccini's fellow-Luccan Alfredo Catalani, whom he had several times visited during his first year at Milan and found 'most kind'[2] (sad to say, their cordial relationship would not last). 'In general, it doesn't send people into raptures', Puccini observed, 'but artistically speaking it's a fine piece,

[2] PGP, 31.

Ex. 2.1

Andante

mf

Massenet: *Hérodiadè*

and if they do it again I shall go back there.'[3] *Dejanice* would likewise leave its mark on the younger composer.

Milan's second lyric theatre was the Dal Verme, a huge edifice situated between the Arena and the Castello in the modern quarter facetiously known as the Milanese 'Ring'. Originally an all-purpose wooden theatre, the nobleman whose name it bears had had it rebuilt in 1872 in the latest style with only two tiers of boxes (as against La Scala's six), a large amphitheatre gallery, and a raked auditorium which allowed every stallholder a clear view of the stage. Its seasons were longer than those of La Scala, with which they frequently overlapped, and the turnover of works was more rapid, though standards of performance were inevitably lower. Mostly the Dal Verme dealt in repertory pieces; but it had more than one novelty to its credit. Ponchielli's revised *I promessi sposi*, given in the theatre's inaugural year, rescued its author from sixteen years of provincial drudgery. In 1877 the première of *Preciosa* launched Antonio Smareglia on his operatic career. It was the Dal Verme, too, that introduced the Milanese public to Bizet's *Carmen*—'a very fine opera indeed', noted Puccini,[4] who had attended the third performance. Elsewhere opera seasons of varying length sprouted like mushrooms, and at no time more prolifically than in 1881, the year of the Exhibition. Milan's leading prose theatre, the Manzoni, offered Thomas' *Mignon, Crispino e la comare* by the brothers Ricci, *Rigoletto*, and Emilio Usiglio's comedy *La notte in prigione*. At the Castelli there

[3] Ibid., 33

[4] PCE 2, p. 19.

was Gomes's *Il Guarany*, a grand-opera hit of 1870, *Guglielmo Tell, Semiramide* and *La favorita*. The Dal Verme's cartello included *Carmen, Gli Ugonotti, La forza del destino, Faust*, and Auteri's *Stella*, while a brief summer season at La Scala presented *Don Giovanni* and, as its *pièce de résistance* (at Verdi's suggestion), Boito's *Mefistofele*, not heard in Milan since its disastrous première of 1868. An operetta company paraded an assortment of Offenbach, Lecocq, Suppé, and Johann Strauss at the Teatro Fossati; and the Santa Radegonda would find room for Paisiello's *Il barbiere di Siviglia* amongst a host of lighter entertainments. 'Not bad, eh?', was Puccini's summing up.[5]

Meanwhile instrumental music was making steady, if belated strides in the Lombard capital. Its oldest concert-giving organization was the Società del Quartetto, whose mainstay was Bazzini's string quartet with local artists added as required; but it also offered hospitality to distinguished visitors such as Sarasate, Joachim, and Anton Rubinstein, not to mention the adolescent prodigy Ferruccio Busoni. Nor were its activities confined to chamber music. From 1872 Faccio put the orchestra of La Scala at its disposal, until their success at the Paris Exhibition of 1878 led to the formation of the Società dell'Orchestra del Teatro alla Scala, which gave an average of six concerts a year after the closure of the Carnevale-Quaresima season. For these, however, sights were lowered. Each concert was divided into two parts, both beginning and ending with a well-known overture. In between there was nothing more substantial than a suite (e.g., Bizet's *L'Arlésienne*), a Liszt Hungarian Rhapsody or, at most, Beethoven's Septet with the string parts increased to full orchestral strength. One searches in vain for a complete symphony. Virtuosity was what drew an audience. Paganini's *Moto perpetuo* played by massed violins would be sure of a 'bis!'; Beethoven's 'Eroica' would merely empty the hall.

For those in search of genuine symphonic fare there were only the Concerti Popolari given during the winter months by pupils of the Conservatory, following an initiative launched by Alberto Mazzucato in 1877. As with the Victorian 'Monday Pops', the title was euphemistic, for the programmes made no concessions to popular taste. Brahms's First Symphony, Mendelssohn's 'Scotch' or Beethoven's Fifth

[5] PCE 6, p. 29.

would feature alongside a Mozart concerto or a Dvořák tone-poem, and on one occasion Tchaikovsky's fantasy-overture *Romeo and Juliet*, then regarded as the height of daring modernism. True, the concerts were often diluted by chamber items; but at least when Schubert's Octet was given at a Concerto Popolare it was performed by eight players only—much to the disapproval of a critic, who would have preferred a doubling up of the string parts and the whole work directed from the podium.

Far more surprising is it to come across such items as the Prelude to *Die Meistersinger* or the *Siegfried Idyll*. For if there is one name conspicuous by its absence from the Milanese scene it is that of Richard Wagner. Not that it was unknown in Italy. The theories propounded in *Oper und Drama* had been a matter for discussion since the 1850s, if only at second or third hand, since the book had yet to be translated into Italian. Indeed, 'music of the future' had become a catchphrase that had even reached Lucca. Of Wagner the composer nothing was known until the first Italian performance of *Lohengrin* at Bologna in 1871. Its effect was to divide Italy's musical world into two camps. Many who had dreaded an avant-garde monstrosity were surprised to find the music so accessible—understandably, since it had been written before its author had formulated his more radical theories. Others maintained an entrenched opposition from the start. For them Wagner remained the German enemy, the operatic equivalent of General Radetzky who had so ruthlessly put down the uprising of 1848. National honour demanded that he be resisted at all costs. No-one was more zealous in the anti-Wagnerian cause than Giulio Ricordi, already the driving force behind the firm of which his frequently ailing father, Tito, was the titular head. A man of uncompromising views, a witty controversialist, a skilled diplomat and even a modest composer of songs and operettas under the pseudonym of J. Burgmein, 'Sör Giuli' (as he was known to his Milanese intimates) was destined to play an important role in Italy's musical life and in Puccini's in particular. His god was Verdi, and his chief ambition to bring about a collaboration between the Grand Old Man and his own friend, the former iconoclast Arrigo Boito. Not only were his years of patient angling successful; in the meantime he had won a far greater share of Verdi's confidence than his father or grandfather had ever enjoyed. Few photographs of Milan's

musical events are without the trim little figure with the wing collar and spade-shaped beard who seems to be surveying the scene with an air of faintly amused proprietorship.

Ricordi's opposition to Wagner was, no doubt, fuelled by the fact that the rights to his operas had been acquired by the rival firm of Francesco Lucca. Clearly, however, it rested on artistic conviction, since after the widow Lucca sold him her entire establishment in 1888 his attitude never changed. In the year of Verdi's death he infuriated Wagnerians throughout the peninsula by withholding the Meister's operas out of respect for the deceased.

During the 1870s a torrent of articles denouncing Wagner and all his works poured from Ricordi's house magazine, the *Gazzetta musicale di Milano,* at Giulio's instigation. But by 1880 the Wagnerian tide was proving difficult to stem. For Puccini's entire generation from Catalani to Mascagni his operas possessed a deep and abiding fascination, far greater than that of mere forbidden fruit. 'Wagner's kind of music', Catalani wrote, 'may certainly not be the one that should prevail in the manner that he himself would wish, but it is undoubtedly that which speaks most directly to us; therefore we should rejoice every time we hear that the music of the great German has triumphed.'[6] For Mascagni Wagner was simply 'the *Papa* of all *composers*, present and future'.[7] His name would haunt Puccini's early career like a hidden motif.

He had a notable sympathiser in Antonio Bazzini. A musician of European horizons and a close friend of Hans von Bülow, Bazzini had been the first to introduce Wagner's music into the concerts of the Società del Quartetto. As a composer his forte was instrumental music (his only opera, *Turanda*, had failed disastrously at La Scala in 1867), and his output includes several string quartets of decent workmanship, none of which, alas, has weathered the years as hardily as his violin lollipop *La ronde des lutins*. Resident for many years in Paris, Bazzini's idols were Gounod and Saint-Saëns, whose influence is evident in his contribution to the *Messa per Rossini*. Happily, it was to Bazzini's tuition that Puccini was assigned during his first two years at the conservatory. Although

[6] Letter to S. Stampa quoted without date, M. Zurletti: *Catalani* (Turin, 1982), 45.

[7] Letter to V. Gianfranceschi, 8 April 1887, in P. Mascagni: *Epistolario*, ed. R. Iovino, M. Morini, and A. Paloscia, i (Lucca,1996), no. 85, p. 72.

strictly speaking he was over the required age limit, his admission had been easy. 'Tell my dear teacher Angeloni', he wrote to Albina, 'that the examination was a pushover ('sciocchezza'), because they made me fill out a bass line unfigured and very easy; then they made me develop a melody in D major which didn't strike me as very happy' (and he quoted the first four bars, which as the wife and sister of professional musicians she would have been able to read); 'all right, it went almost too well.'[8] In fact he was awarded first place among the applicants and passed directly into the senior class.

From now on a series of letters home lifts the curtain for the first time on Puccini's character and personality. Especially racy and high-spirited are those to his youngest sister Ramelde, with whom he had developed a special bond that included his brother Michele, all three set faintly apart from their more strait-laced elders. Here we notice his eye for detail, whether describing the latest fashions in women's hats or, much later, the workings of a new bicycle model to her husband. The letters to Albina, whom, like all her brood, he addressed with the polite 'Lei', are more serious in tone, never failing to assure the anxious mother that he was getting enough to eat and not spending too much money ('I went to hear *L'étoile du nord* with Donadia and Auber's *Fra Diavolo* with the famous tenor Naudin. *L'étoile* cost me a few pence ('bigei') in the gallery and *Fra Diavolo* nothing at all, because Francesconi, who used to be the manager at Lucca, gave me a free ticket.')[9] Sometimes a note of defensiveness creeps in—even of contrition (' . . . if I've often made you angry, it isn't because I don't love you but because I've been a beast and a scoundrel, I admit it myself').[10] Within a month of his arrival he gives an account of his daily routine:

> In the morning I get up at 8.30. When I have a lesson I go to it. If I have no lesson I practise the piano a little. A little does me, but I do need to practise. I shall now buy an excellent method by Angeleri, one of those in which everyone can teach themselves perfectly well. To continue: at half past ten I have breakfast, then I go out. At one o'clock I come home and do some work for Bazzini for a couple of hours; then from three to five

[8] CP 1, p. 1.
[9] PGP, 30–1.
[10] Ibid., 33.

> it's back to the piano to read through a bit of classical music. Actually I'd like to take out a subscription for scores, but this costs quite a few pence. At present I'm going through Boito's *Mefistofele*, which Favara, a friend of mine from Palermo, has lent me. At five o'clock I go and take a frugal meal (but a lot of that frugality!) and have some minestrone alla milanese, which, to tell the truth, is very good. I have three platefuls, then something else to fill up with; a small hunk of cheese . . . and half a litre of wine. Then I smoke a cigar and go off to the Galleria to take a walk up and down, as usual. I stay there until nine o'clock and return home dead tired. Back home I do a bit of counterpoint, but I don't play, because at night one isn't allowed to. After that I climb into bed and read seven or eight pages of a novel. Such is my life.[11]

Throughout his student years his official residence was with his cousin by marriage, Carlo Biagini, whom the law required to act 'in loco parentis', since Giacomo was not yet 25. But in the meantime he moved successively to other addresses, always with an eye to saving costs. For though he was by no means as hard up as his future Bohemians, money was tight, and his letters home drop frequent hints that a little more would not be unwelcome. Albina did what she could; she sent him clothes and, at his special request, a jar of good Luccan olive oil in which to cook his beans. But she had a household to run and the dowries for three of her daughters, Tomaide, Nitteti, and Ramelde, to provide for. By April 1881 she felt the need for a more reliable account of her son's progress and prospects than he himself was likely to give her. She therefore wrote a hopeful letter to Bazzini, who replied at length:

> Your son Giacomo is doing well and making progress in his principal study of composition. He has been somewhat neglectful of his subsidiary studies (piano, aesthetics, dramatic theory etc.) despite repeated urgings from me, and for this there are penalties to be paid. I know that these are not serious matters; but he really must convince himself (and I have told him so) that the Academic Council *does not make deals* and that *all the courses must be followed*.
>
> I cannot therefore at present let you have the letter for which you ask

[11] CP 2, pp. 2–3.

> me, but I hope I shall be able to do so later on and still in time for the purpose you have in mind.
>
> I think that if he applies himself seriously he may be able next year to leave the conservatory with honour. As for finding him immediately afterwards the means of making enough money in his profession, I can make no promises, dear Madam, because I would merely be telling you a lie. . . . It is not in my power to grant a lucrative position to a pupil, however gifted and deserving he may be. The competition in Milan is enormous. Certainly he may be sure of a recommendation from me, wherever possible. In the meantime he must make useful contacts; and I think this will not be difficult, since he has a pleasant way with him and a likeable personality.
>
> But above all he must work diligently and keep to the rules of discipline.[12]

How many ambitious mothers have received just such a letter from their son's tutor! Doubtless its substance was communicated to Giacomo. That he took much notice of it may be doubted; for he was not one to apply himself to topics in which he had no interest. He made no secret of being bored to death by aesthetics. His notebooks on the subject, which he presented to the Istituto Boccherini at Lucca, are full of marginal scribblings: 'Ouch!! Oh God!! Help for God's sake!! I can't stand it!!! It's too much!!! I'm dying!!!' and so on. Puccini was never an intellectual.

During his first year in Milan the harvest of composition is meagre. All that can be assigned with near-certainty to that period is a string quartet in D, written (so he told his mother) for Bazzini, of which only the opening Allegro can be said to have survived in its original form. While containing no hint of the mature composer, it at least bears witness to a fluent technique and a decent command of the medium. Launched by a 'Mannheim rocket' on the viola, it proceeds through sequences and imitation-points to a smooth contrasted theme in the orthodox manner, followed by development and reprise. There are moments, too, which raise it above the level of a mere exercise: a combination of first subject with elements of the second subject-group to form a new theme at the start of the development; the long preparation

[12] Letter to Albina Puccini, 17 April 1881, in C. Sartori: 'Quisquilie pucciniane e intuizioni bazziniane', *NRMI*, viii (1974), 370.

for the reprise involving a steady increase of chromatic dissonance; and a surprise turn to F major for the recapitulated second subject—the only point at which the music breaks out of the circle of related keys. There is even a note of Haydnesque impudence at the final cadence. Mendelssohn, however, would seem to be the chief model; and if, on the debit side, the texture is somewhat unvaried, this is understandable in a composer accustomed to think mainly in terms of top-line melody. A four-handed piano arrangement of the final movement, a 'Scherzo', made by Giacomo's brother Michele exists in the Puccini museum at Celle. Like so many of Puccini's early compositions, it would be put to operatic use, as will be seen. Possibly to the same period belongs a string quartet movement in A minor also entitled 'Scherzo'—a quirky little piece that suggests an acquaintance with the ballet music from Verdi's revised *Macbeth*. This too would find a place on the stage.

The following year Puccini's studies took a new turn. In November 1881 the conservatory's director Stefano Ronchetti-Monteviti had died, and his place was taken by Bazzini, whose teaching activity accordingly ceased. His pupil, therefore, passed under the tutelage of Amilcare Ponchielli. On the face of it this might seem a retrograde step. Although younger than Bazzini by nearly a generation, Ponchielli was by comparison a provincial, who had never ventured outside his country's borders. Born in a village near Cremona in 1834, he passed with honours through the Milan Conservatory and at the age of 22 scored a modest success at Cremona's Teatro della Concordia with an operatic version of Manzoni's famous novel *I promessi sposi*. Thereafter ill-luck aggravated by a shy, retiring disposition, condemned him, in Verdi's phrase, to 'sixteen years hard labour' as a local bandmaster. He competed in 1868 for the professorship of counterpoint and fugue at his old conservatory. The panel judged him the winner; but due to pressure from the 'progressives' of the Società del Quartetto the post went to the runner-up, Franco Faccio. However, the monumental fiasco that year of Boito's *Mefistofele*, the failure of Faccio's *Amleto* at its revival in 1870, causing its composer henceforth to devote himself exclusively to conducting, and finally Milanese alarm at the threat of a Wagnerian invasion posed by the triumph of *Lohengrin* at Bologna in 1871 all combined to turn the tide in Ponchielli's favour. *I promessi sposi*, revised to fresh verses by the 'scapigliato' (for which read 'progressive') poet Emilio Praga, was

mounted at the Teatro Dal Verme before a delighted audience. Verdi, admittedly, was among the doubters, remarking that though Ponchielli was clearly a good musician the old and new passages in his score did not marry and that both were behind their respective times. Giulio Ricordi, on the other hand, who had bought the rights, was convinced that, given careful grooming, here was a winner. His hopes were amply fulfilled four years later by the instant success of *La Gioconda*, written to a libretto by Boito. By the time it returned to La Scala in 1880 in its definitive form, *La Gioconda* had established itself as a modern classic and its composer as a person of consequence, over whose ability even Verdi no longer had reservations. Not surprisingly, therefore, in 1881 the institution which had shut its doors in his face thirteen years before now welcomed him as a senior professor of composition along with Bazzini. Despite a wholly traditionalist approach—indeed, perhaps because of it—Ponchielli was clearly an admirable teacher and much beloved by his pupils, to whom he was always ready to lend a helping hand, however little he liked their music. With Puccini's style he was frankly out of sympathy, 'since he follows in the footsteps of Wagner, Massenet etc.', so he claimed to have confided to Verdi.[13] Yet it was to Ponchielli's good offices that Puccini owed the start of his operatic career. Not only that. Certain of the teacher's traits would find an abiding echo in the works of the pupil: the ability to evoke an ambience with a few instrumental brush-strokes; the occasional integration of a recurring motif within the melody of a closed number; and, in particular, the winding-up of an important scene by means of an orchestral peroration based on its most memorable theme—a device first used to general critical acclaim by Ponchielli in the definitive finale to Act III of *La gioconda* and by Puccini in one opera after another. Both composers, it may be added, shared a sense of fun that expressed itself in doggerel verse.

It was to his new teacher, too, that Puccini owed, if indirectly, the company of a fellow-student of similar promise. The son of a baker from Livorno, Pietro Mascagni had determined on a musical career in the teeth of parental opposition. His latest work was a cantata, *In filanda*, couched in that gentle, idyllic style to which he would return time and again in the intervals of bombast. Submitted to the Concorso

[13] Letter to his wife, undated, in F. Abbiati, *Giuseppe Verdi* (Milan, 1959), iv, 26.

dell'Esposizione di Milano in 1881, it had won high praise from the jurors; and Ponchielli advised the young man to apply for admission to the Milan Conservatory. Like Puccini before him, he passed the entrance examination without difficulty and was enrolled as a student in May 1882. The experience was not a happy one. Accustomed to being a big fish in a small pool, Mascagni found the discipline of a student's life in Milan intolerable. To relieve the tedium he indulged in extramural pursuits—deputizing as a double bass player at the Teatro Dal Verme, teaching the piano to amateurs, writing songs under the anagram 'Pigmeo Scartani', since conservatory students were strictly forbidden to publish their works while *in statu pupillari*. The result was missed lessons and poor examination results. After two years Mascagni decided that he could no longer bear it and left without a word to the authorities to join an operetta troupe as conductor. Characteristically, he regretted his decision and tried for re-admission to the conservatory if only to be allowed to take the final exam. But this time not even Ponchielli's benevolence could help him.

Throughout his stay in Milan he shared rooms with Puccini. Despite their different temperaments—Mascagni quick-tempered and irrepressible, Puccini shy and easy-going—a cordial friendship developed between them, which outlasted their student days. When Mascagni, down on his luck, applied for the post of municipal music-master at the obscure Adriatic township of Cerignola, a 'certificate' from Puccini 'moved me almost to tears'.[14] True, an unguarded remark about his colleague's work thrown out at one of those press interviews to which Mascagni was much given would sometimes arouse Puccini's suspicions. Otherwise they remained on as good terms as their respective wives would allow. Throughout his life Mascagni made enemies without number; but Puccini was never one of them.

Evidently their musical tastes were alike. Both were devout Wagnerians and would pool their meagre resources to buy a score of *Parsifal*. Mascagni shared his companion's approval of Catalani's *Dejanice*. As for Gounod's *Redemption*: 'I sat through it religiously and religiously lost all patience with it. . . . All those long recitatives, mostly on one note, all

[14] Letter to V. Gianfranceschi, 22 March, 1887, *Epistolario*, no. 87, p. 70.

those little phrases that never develop into a melody!' Thus Mascagni.[15] And Puccini, more succinctly: 'Yesterday evening I went to *Redemption* (an oratorio by Gounod) which bored me a good deal.'[16] Years later both composers would summon up remembrance of mutual assistance in dodging creditors, of 'no go areas' marked in red on a map where unpaid tradesmen might be lying in wait, of a single shared receptacle which served both as a cooking-bowl and a wash-basin—all strictly *à la Bohème* and doubtless exaggerated. At all events the yoke of academe lay easier on Puccini than on his fellow-student, even if, as he later declared, he sometimes saved himself trouble by presenting to Ponchielli the fugues that he had written for Bazzini.

His chief composition of 1882 is the *Preludio sinfonico* in A major, which was performed at a students' concert on 15 July. At the time it aroused little enthusiasm. 'The Prelude seems to me rather long', wrote Filippo Filippi, doyen of Milanese music critics, in *La perseveranza*, 'consisting as it does entirely of an adagio, which begins with woodwind chords that bring to mind Wagner's "Cigno gentil"; then comes a violin melody with some effective crescendos, but it is not easy to make sense of the way the phrases develop, and the young composer is inclined, as the saying is, to beat about the bush.' Here Filippi puts his finger on the main weakness of the *Preludio* and also on its source of inspiration. Puccini's Wagnerian predilections are confirmed that year by a jotting in one of his exercise books, which shows him succumbing to the temptation of writing his own obituary: 'This great musician was born in Lucca in the year . . . and can rightly be called a worthy successor to the famous Boccherini. He was handsome and extremely clever and in the field of Italian art possessed a power which echoed that of Wagner from beyond the Alps.' At the time Italy's favourite Wagner opera was *Lohengrin*. The limpid, radiant A major to which the *Preludio* continually returns, the rhetorical climax returning three quarters of the way through, the hushed evanescent close—all evoke the prelude to Wagner's medieval drama. Nor is Filippi's puzzlement over the phrase-structure hard to account for. Altogether there are four variants of the

[15] Letter to A. Soffredini, 4 April 1883, *Epistolario*, no. 55, p. 44.
[16] PGP, 33.

main theme, but no sense of purpose in their succession. Rather it seems as though the composer had difficulty in choosing between them. Not until the fourth statement does the melody begin to generate new ideas, notably a languorous waltz-like tune, by which time the listener might be forgiven for having allowed his attention to wander.

On the other hand, as an essay in rich harmonies and shifting orchestral colours the piece possesses genuine interest (not for nothing had Puccini's reading that year included Berlioz's celebrated treatise on instrumentation). There is even a premonition of the mature master where at the subject's third reprise an unexpected pull towards the subdominant is driven home by a splash of trumpet tone.

Certainly the *Preludio* was not a wasted exercise: for snatches of it would be recycled into Puccini's second opera, *Edgar*, though not in the work's final form. Sketches exist for a song, 'Ah, se potesse', whose autograph, now missing, is said to be inscribed 'Lucca, 15.7.1882' (but was Puccini absent from the performance of his *Preludio sinfonico*?). One document, however, stands out like a beacon: a letter written in December of that year to Dr Cerù (by now sole provider of the funds necessary for his maintenance at the conservatory, since Queen Margherita's grant had already expired), in which we find the passage: 'Tell Michele' [his brother] 'to seek out Cappelletti Medarse and ask him whether he has yet found anything for that little libretto he's promised me. I would need it soon, for I could then get ready to do something.'[17] Clearly Puccini was in no doubt about his vocation.

His three-year course at the conservatory would finish in midsummer 1883. In January the anxious mother wrote to Ponchielli a letter similar to the one she had sent to Bazzini, to receive a similar, if slightly more encouraging reply. Puccini was one of his best pupils; Ponchielli was happy with him and would be still happier if he showed a little more assiduity, 'because when he wants to he does well'. He would have no difficulty in getting his diploma at the end of the scholastic year, though, to be frank, another year at the conservatory would not do him any harm. Once his studies had been completed (and only then) Ponchielli would do his best to help him find employment. In the

[17] PCE 8, p. 31.

meantime he should pursue his studies beyond the mere curriculum and 'write . . . write . . . and pour out ('buttar giù') music'.[18] This last injunction was surely wasted, since all his life Puccini was as parsimonious with notes as Berlioz. Nor was it mere indolence, but rather a reluctance to commit to paper any idea of whose value he was not convinced. The few compositions that survive from his final year at the conservatory would all serve as material for future operas. An *Adagietto* for orchestra, of which only the first part exists, would furnish the theme of the heroine's aria 'Addio, mio dolce amor' in Act III of *Edgar*. Four songs quarried from Antonio Ghislanzoni's *Melodie per canto* would likewise be drawn upon. *Melanconia* was composed in two versions, one for baritone and piano, the other for voice and string orchestra. The manuscripts of both have disappeared, though not before being seen by Karl Gustav Fellerer, who quotes the incipit and the inscribed date, 19 June 1881.[19] The first of these surely gives the lie to the second, since the opening gesture is altogether too bold for a first-year student. Here we note for the first time Puccini's fondness for the 'soft dissonance' that results from the piling-up of thirds while avoiding any note that produces a semitonal clash.[20] The whole phrase will be transferred to the love duet in *Le Villi* with a characteristic improvement in the distribution of bass notes and the addition of a cluster of semiquavers at the end—this too a Puccinian 'tic', which will form a central idea in the opera itself (see Ex. 3.4, below).

Salve regina for voice and organ (or harmonium), whose text bears no more relation to the office hymn than does Walter Scott's 'Ave Maria', has also been falsely assigned to an earlier period, namely the years at Lucca. But since Ghislanzoni's poem did not appear before 1881 this is impossible. Moreover, the fluent keyboard writing, the Massenet-like grace and harmonic shading and a certain effortless freedom of design within the strophic ground-plan again point to a more advanced stage in his career. A caressing cadential phrase cannot fail to bring to mind the Intermezzo from *Cavalleria rusticana*: clearly the lyricism of

[18] Letter to Albina Puccini, 8 Jan 1883, in L. Marchetti: *Puccini nelle immagini*, pls. 24, 25.

[19] K.G. Fellerer, *Giacomo Puccini*, 20.

[20] See N. Christen: *Giacomo Puccini: analytische Untersuchungen*, 87ff.

the 'giovane scuola' is not far off. The entire 'romanza' would be elaborated into the communal 'preghiera' from *Le Villi* (see Ex. 3.2a, below).

Ad una morta exists complete only in a copyist's manuscript signed by Puccini and dated 'Milan 27 July 1883'. The autograph is confined to two substantial sketches for baritone and piano and a page of orchestration, from which the design emerges of a standard minor-major romanza, fragments of whose opening theme would be recycled into Roberto's romanza in the definitive version of *Le Villi*. The 'maggiore' unfolds a broad, soothing melody for which Puccini had already found a wordless context (see Ex. 3.2d, below). Even so, its first phrase would reappear, harmonically enhanced, in the last act of *Manon Lescaut*. A discarded chord sequence in one of the sketches carries the annotation 'alla Wagner'. The model, however, remains obscure.

The pick of the bunch is *Storiella d'amore*, dated 8 June 1883, the first work of Puccini to find a publisher. Laid out in two ample strophes of ternary design, it tells of the seduction of Dante's Paolo and Francesca by their reading of a book, though without any hint of the tragedy to come. Hence a fleet, conversational discourse in the manner of Mimì's future 'Sola mi fo il pranzo da me stessa'. In each strophe the reprise is expanded by five bars of plunging declamation in the relative minor ('Eco alla voce mia'), the only point at which the voice takes undisputed command of an otherwise self-sufficient piano part. The passage is sufficiently striking for Puccini to quote it in Act III of *Edgar.* A further feature of interest lies in the distribution of the melody within the accompaniment, varying between top, middle, and bottom line. Here, surely, is a clue to Puccini's later habit, often regarded as a mannerism, of doubling the outer parts of a chordal sequence in defiance of academic rules. But left-hand melodies without a bass are a commonplace of nineteenth-century piano music; and Puccini was not the first opera composer to reinforce them at a higher pitch (see Elisabeth's 'Prince, si le roi veut se rendre à ma prière' from *Don Carlos*). Admittedly, for the older composer this was exceptional. For Puccini it was a normal weapon in his expressive armoury. But there is nothing slipshod about it. When a separate fundamental is required it is always there.

Evident in these Ghislanzoni settings is an unusual concern for expressive and dynamic nuance, almost as if the composer intended each

to be acted as well as sung—a foretaste of that integration of word, note, and gesture which is as fundamental to Puccini's conception of opera as it is to Wagner's.

As midsummer approached there was much trepidation amongst the Puccini clan. Dr Cerù was all for sending a special recommendation from the Istituto Pacini on his young cousin's behalf, much to the latter's irritation ('You people at Lucca have got recommendations on the brain; damn whoever invented them! . . . You just don't know what kind of people Ponchielli and Bazzini are. They would send you packing with a vengeance!').[21] But there was no need for concern. Puccini graduated with honours, receiving 163 points out of 200 and so qualifying for a copper medal. Two compositions mark the occasion. The first, *Mentia l'avviso*, is a 'scena ed aria' for tenor and piano to a text by Felice Romani that had doubtless been set for decades before by students in their final year. Taken from his *melodramma serio, Il solitario delle Asturie*, written for Carlo Coccia in 1838 and re-set by several other composers including Mercadante, it is sung by a renegade Spanish count who has come at night to a lonely valley for an assignation with the ghost of his supposedly dead daughter and (as he wrongly thinks) evil genius. On the 'scena' Puccini imposes a tighter, more organic unity than would ever have occurred to Mercadante. The 24-bar introduction for piano opens with a pregnant gesture that furnishes the rhythmic scaffolding of everything that follows. The vocal setting falls into two sections, each rounded off by a modified reprise of the introduction. The first ('Mentia l'avviso') begins as conventional recitative, part conversational, part declamatory, shading into a moment of arioso. The second ('Tu cui nomar non oso') is more energetic, tremolandos giving way to galloping triplets in the accompaniment, while the voice mounts to a sustained B flat, but the opening motif returns like an obsession. The final note of the cadence is withheld as the singer imagines that he hears a groan; but it was merely the wind and waves, whereupon a hushed transition to the major prepares for the aria ('É la notte che mi reca'), in which the listener will recognize an early version of Des Grieux's 'Donna non vidi mai' from *Manon Lescaut* (see Ex. 5.4).

Of a very different order is the *Capriccio sinfonico*, his passing-out

[21] CP 4, pp. 4–5.

piece for the conservatory. Performed at the annual students' concert on 14 July it at once alerted the critics to a new voice in Italian music. Filippi of *La perseveranza* shed all his reservations of the previous year. 'In Puccini', he wrote, 'we have a decisive and rare musical temperament and one which is especially symphonic. There is unity of style, personality, character. In his *Capriccio sinfonico* there is a good deal that more experienced composers . . . have not succeeded in doing. . . . There are no uncertainties or gropings in the young author. . . . The ideas are clear, strong, effective and sustained with much truth.'

This insistence on the piece's symphonic qualities has always raised a smile among Puccini's biographers—a sign, they say, of how little the term meant to Italian musicians of the time. Certainly there is no trace here of classical symphonic form. But Carner's description of the *Capriccio* as a mere sequence of themes 'loosely strung together like beads on a string'[22] and interspersed with ineffectual attempts at development does it less than justice. Each of its ideas has a well-defined function in a coherent musical discourse laid out in a ternary plan with a scherzo-like central episode. Two contrasted gestures, one massively scored and heavy with appoggiaturas, the other lighter and more luminous, both extended sequentially, epitomize an emotional conflict that will not be resolved until the end of the composition. A profound melancholy pervades the main subject of the Andante (Ex. 2.2a), relieved by a major-key consequent (Ex. 2.2b) which, after a few valedictory references to the movement's opening gesture, subsides into a prolonged half-close. Both themes have sufficient character for Puccini to recall them in the funeral music of *Edgar*, Act III.

The idea that launches the ensuing Allegro is all too familiar from the start of *La bohème* (see Ex. 6.1a). but how astonishlingly bold it must have seemed in 1883: 24 bars over an inverted dominant seventh posed by an abrupt rhythmic 'fidget' (did Puccini know Liszt's E flat piano concerto?) resolving into 14 bars of tonic, the pattern repeated in the subdominant key! As in the opera, its function is essentially preparatory. The point of arrival is a dance-like theme (Ex. 2.2c) whose initial hemiola will be turned to good purpose later. This in turn generates a lively succession of related ideas, underpinned by recurrences of the rhythmic

[22] PCB, 332.

Ex. 2.2a

Andante moderato

p *con espressione*

Ex. 2.2b

pp

Ex. 2.2c

Allegro vivace *sostenuto* a tempo

Ex. 2.2d

pp

gesture that opened the section. A protracted cadential design effectively balances the long opening stretch. So back to the Andante. But this is no ordinary reprise: it begins directly with Ex. 2.2a interspersed with rhythmic recollections of the Allegro, then works up through sequences of increasing dissonance to a brutal climax like a question mark. There is a dramatic pause, after which Ex. 2.2b steals in with an enhanced warmth which counterpoints of Ex. 2.2a are powerless to stifle; and the movement culminates in a broad, calm melody (Ex. 2.2d), which is nothing less than a transformation of Ex. 2.2c, facilitated by the hemiola already noted. So what had been a playful interlude takes on a serene

nobility. This is surely prophetic; for one of Puccini's great strengths as a music dramatist is his ability to distil different emotional properties from the same motif according to pace, dynamic, scoring, and, above all, context. Evidently he felt that in its final form this melody deserved a text and the aid of a human voice; so he turned it into the major-key conclusion of his romanza *Ad una morta*.

Certainly the piece is not free of bombast, as might be expected from a young composer concerned to demonstrate his mastery of a modern orchestra (note the Tchaikovsky-like flourishes on flute and piccolo in the reprise of the Andante). What remains striking is the sense of proportion and the logical working-out of the ideas. None of this was lost on Filippi, who stressed the music's structural coherence and ingenuity. It was on the strength of its reception that *La musica popolare* printed *Storiella d'amore* in its issue of 4 October. The following year Faccio included the *Capriccio sinfonico* in a concert given at the International Exhibition at Turin, placing it between Beethoven's Symphony no. 1 and the March from *Tannhäuser*. The orchestral score was never published during Puccini's lifetime; but the firm of Lucca brought out an arrangement of it for piano duet. Indeed, the proprietress, the redoubtable Giovannina, suggested commissioning from Puccini a symphony in four movements. But nothing came of this; for in the meantime the composer had embarked on a project that would lead him in quite another direction.

CHAPTER 3

Le Villi

'In no other country in the world', wrote the Roman critic Francesco D'Arcais in 1879, 'does the publisher possess the power and authority that he does in Italy.'[1] This was true. Indeed, an understanding of that power and the internecine warfare between rival firms that resulted from it is as necessary to explain the operatic scene of Puccini's day as is a knowledge of the Spanish civil war of 1519 to explain the events of *Il trovatore*.

The state of affairs had come about gradually, beginning with the steady growth during the first half of the century of Giovanni Ricordi's empire. By the time of his death in 1853 he had acquired a monopoly of Italy's leading composers from Rossini to Verdi, to whom he had been able to extend a measure of copyright. But already in 1841 he faced a rival in Francesco Lucca, a former copyist in his establishment, who had in the meantime spent several months in Leipzig studying up-to-date German techniques. It was he who introduced to Italy the octavo vocal score, so much more suited to the domestic upright piano than the oblong format that Ricordi continued to turn out. Lucca was also the first to use the treble or 'violin' clef for all the upper voices. But his most far-reaching innovation was to pioneer a system whereby composers offered their works directly to a publisher, who would himself place them at a suitable theatre, so relieving the author of tedious

[1] F. D'Arcais: 'L'industria musicale in Italia', *Nuova antologia* (May-June 1879), 134.

dealings with the management. By 1870 this had become the general rule. The advent of the professional conductor meant that composers were no longer expected to direct their own rehearsals; but if this source of income was denied to them, they were amply compensated by a generous percentage of all subsequent hire-fees.

Under the lackadaisical direction of Tito Ricordi the older firm lost a certain amount of ground, though it still held the stronger hand in native talent. Lucca meanwhile had been quick to sign up foreign composers whose works had begun to flood the peninsula during the 1860s—Meyerbeer, Gounod, Thomas—and finally, by a stroke of far-seeing genius, Wagner. However, during the following decade the balance was soon redressed. The death of its proprietor in 1872 left the Casa Lucca in the hands of his widow Giovannina, an energetic businesswoman with a heart as large as her frame, who lavished a maternal care on the firm's protégés from the dissipated Petrella to the frail, consumptive Catalani. But she found more than a match in Tito's son Giulio. The gloves were now off. Every new opera would be launched with a barrage of publicity from its publisher's house magazine, to receive a douche of cold water from that of the rival firm. If Giovannina Lucca could ensure the temporary success of Gobatti's *I Goti* at Bologna in 1873, we may be sure that Giulio Ricordi had a hand in the quashing of *Lohengrin* at La Scala that same year.

Clearly, then, for an aspirant to operatic fame it was more important to interest a publisher than an impresario. Following the example of his fellow-townsman Catalani, Puccini first looked to the widow Lucca; hence the frequent references to her in his letters home. Not that he was unduly sanguine: 'As regards the theatre there's nothing to hope for from La Lucca because Ricordi has everything in his clutches and she's in competition with him.'[2] Nonetheless, after the success of the *Capriccio sinfonico*, of which Giovannina had bought the rights, he decided to approach her personally 'so as to fix something up and at least be given some hope for the future'.[3] But evidently the lady herself was in no hurry, since every time Puccini called on her she was 'not at home'. Nor were Ponchielli's attempts to interest the Casa Ricordi on

[2] PCE 2, p. 16.
[3] PCE 18, pp. 36–7.

his pupil's behalf any more successful. Doubtless Sor Giulio hesitated to favour a young composer whose sympathies were confessedly Wagnerian.

In the event it was neither Ricordi nor Lucca who would provide Puccini with his operatic launching-pad. The firm of Sonzogno had been in existence since the beginning of the century; but it was the founder's grandson Edoardo who in 1874 first entered the musical field. No musician himself, but merely a shrewd man of business, he employed Amintore Galli, future teacher of composition at the Milan Conservatory, as his artistic adviser. By this time Ricordi and Lucca had between them cornered the market both in native opera and prestigious imports from abroad. Sonzogno therefore turned his attention to the one area which had remained unexploited, namely French *opéra comique* from Auber and Boieldieu onwards. Here fortune dealt him a trump card in *Carmen*. Introduced at a minor theatre in Naples in 1880, it lost no time in circulating throughout the peninsula, rousing audiences to enthusiasm, and with good reason. For ten years grand opera (or 'opera ballo', as it was called) had hung like a millstone round the neck of Italian composers, whose works, according to the critic Girolamo Biaggi, too often drove out of the theatre in the second act all who had not fallen fast asleep in the first. To these Bizet's masterpiece offered the perfect antidote: theatrical immediacy achieved with a light touch and a nod towards that vogue for realism, initiated by the literature of Giovanni Verga and Luigi Capuana, which would find its musical expression ten years later in *Cavalleria rusticana*.

About this time Sonzogno, already proprietor of the periodical *Il secolo*, decided to challenge Ricordi's weekly *Gazzetta musicale di Milano* with two monthly publications of his own: *Il teatro illustrato*, advertised as 'the richest theatrical journal in existence', and the already mentioned *La musica popolare*, which not only reported on local events but contained articles on music theory and, like the *Gazzetta*, printed a composition, new or old. It was in the first of these that in April 1883 readers were informed of 'a competition open to young musicians of Italian nationality for an opera in one act on an *idyllic, serious*, or *comic* subject with a prize of 2000 lire following a performance in a Milan theatre at the journal's expense'. The panel of judges would consist of three professors from the conservatory—Ponchielli, Dominiceti, and

Galli—together with Pietro Platania, organist of Milan Cathedral, and the conductor Faccio, who would select for performance the two best operas submitted. The public would be allowed to choose the winner. Entries were to be submitted before the end of the year and the panel's decision made known by the following March. With three more months of studentship ahead of him Puccini decided to compete.

In its concluding paragraph the announcement had laid particular stress on the choice of a good libretto, 'both as regards subject matter and versification . . . since it is desirable in a theatrical work that there should be no discrepancy between the qualities of music and text'. It was the ever-helpful Ponchielli who found his student a worthy librettist in the young poet and jounalist Ferdinando Fontana, already active in the operatic field. Nearly nine years Puccini's senior, Fontana was a late offshoot of that iconoclastic movement in literature and the arts known as the 'scapigliatura' which flourished in Milan during the 1860s with the novelist Giuseppe Rovani as its high priest and Arrigo Boito its chief propagandist. Like all such movements it soon developed internal divisions. While Boito held to a high aesthetic plane, many of Rovani's followers, socially committed, moved towards the new 'realism' of the 1870s, among them Felice Cameroni, who first introduced the works of Zola to Italy. By 1880 most of the leading figures of the original 'scapigliatura'—Rovani, the poet Emilio Praga, the painter Tranquillo Cremona—were dead. Boito had become a respected figure of the establishment, already at work on an *Otello* for Italy's Grand Old Man. Fontana remained with Cameroni and Cleto Arrighi (originator of the movement's title) to keep the radical torch alight. But if in politics he was a partisan of the extreme left, whose involvement in the disturbances of 1898 would earn him a lifetime's exile in Switzerland, in matters operatic Fontana was very much the heir of Boito. His ideals are expounded in a polemical tract, *In teatro*, published in 1884. Its thesis is that in its present form the theatre is dead; that historical drama, whether musical or spoken, falsifies the events it relates, and that those works which are supposed to have fired the Risorgimento can be compared to men who hide in cellars when the fighting begins, to emerge crying 'Freedom!' when it is all over. The public's growing taste for symphonic music would eventually transform conventional opera into a 'poema sinfonico scenico', of which each act would form a movement

and in which scenery, costumes, libretto, and singers would function like individual instruments within an orchestra. Thus the libretto should no more be given to the spectator to read than a part for oboe or clarinet; instead he should be provided with a 'poem', which should fill in the outlines of the plot in language worthy of the subject. It was as cloudy and unrealistic a theory as any propounded by the young Boito; but it would have a certain bearing on the author's first collaboration with Puccini.

A meeting between them was arranged at Ponchielli's country house at Lecco on the shores of Lake Como; and happily the young men took to each other at once. In view of Puccini's straitened circumstances Fontana agreed to lower his fee provided that the composer would make good the balance in the event of his winning the contest. Moreover, he had a subject ready to hand, taken, as usual with the 'scapigliati', from a near-contemporary French source: *Les Willis*, a short story by Alphonse Karr, journalist and friend of Alfred de Musset. Its basis is the Central European legend recounted by Heine in his *Deutschland II: Elementärgeister* (1834) about the ghosts of jilted maidens who dance nightly in the forests; and woe betide the faithless lover who encounters them, for he must join in the dance until he falls dead. The classic version is Théophile Gautier's scenario for Adolphe Adam's ballet *Giselle* (1846): village maiden, courted by the already affianced son of the local prince, goes mad and dies of grief on discovering his identity. The betrayer, visiting her grave by night, is surprised by the ghostly troupe, whose queen orders that he be danced to death by his victim. But Giselle's love sustains him to the end, while his fiancée understands and forgives.

Karr's treatment is both more realistic and more gruesome. His setting is a village community in the Black Forest ruled by the head forester, Wilhelm Wulf. The story begins with the betrothal at a dance of his daughter Anna with the young villager Heinrich, with whom she has long been in love. Soon afterwards Heinrich is summoned to Mainz to the bedside of a sick uncle. Before leaving he hangs a wreath of flowers outside Anna's window as a pledge of his constancy. However, the sight of his favourite brother's son restores the old man to health. Heinrich agrees to prolong his stay, the more willingly since he has begun to take to his new surroundings. What is more, his uncle has a

beautiful daughter who will one day inherit his wealth; and Heinrich soon yields to his family's pressure to marry her. Anna's brother Konrad arrives on the day of their wedding and bitterly insults the bridegroom. A duel is fought, from which Konrad returns home mortally wounded. Anna pines and dies. Only Wilhelm is left to invoke God's vengeance on 'the murderer of my two children'.

A year has passed. Heinrich's uncle has at last died leaving him the richest man in Mainz. To please his wife, now expecting their first child, Heinrich has bought a castle not far from his native village. One night he returns from hunting later than usual. As darkness falls he hears distant voices singing melodies that recall the village dances of his past. Drawn by their sound, he finds himself in a clearing surrounded by dancing maidens of unearthly beauty, one of whom bears the face and form of Anna. She holds out her arms to him and they begin to dance. . . .

Next morning his body is found in the glade.

In digesting the story for a one-act opera Fontana concentrated the action on two moments: Heinrich's departure for Mainz and his return to the forest, to be danced to death. Konrad is eliminated and Heinrich re-christened, more singably, Roberto. A more radical alteration turned the rich uncle into an aunt whose death has occurred before the rise of the curtain, so that Roberto has merely to go to Mainz to collect his inheritance. While there he falls under the spell of a local 'siren', on whom he spends all his newly acquired wealth, returning home penniless and remorseful. But his repentance is unavailing. He tries to pray, but cannot. Anna-turned-Willi is as bent on vengeance as Catalani's Elda (later Loreley).

'With the success of his *Capriccio sinfonico* still fresh in my memory', Fontana recalled, 'I thought the young composer would need a fantastic subject, and I sketched out to him the scheme of *Le Villi*.'[4] He was not far wrong. 'It is a good little subject', Puccini wrote to his mother. ' . . . It will mean working quite a lot in the symphonic descriptive genre, and that appeals to me a good deal since I think I can succeed in it.'[5] The libretto was ready by mid-September, and Puccini returned

[4] Ibid., 37n.
[5] CP 6, p. 6.

to Lucca to begin the composition. Time was short, and he was a slow worker. No documents exist to chart the opera's progress. Somehow it was finished within the prescribed deadline and consigned to the panel at the last possible moment. A fair copy was out of the question.

There followed three months of anxious waiting. At the beginning of April the judges announced their findings. Out of 28 entries five were deemed worthy of mention. The two selected for performance were Luigi Mapelli's *Anna e Gualberto* and Guglielmo Zuelli's *La fata del Nord*. Both would be given on 4 May at the Teatro Manzoni; and since both received equal applause the prize was divided between them. Of *Le Villi* not a word.

At first sight this seems puzzling. Although the entries were submitted anonymously, two of the jury—Ponchielli and Faccio—must have been familiar with Puccini's handwriting. He had already attracted attention as a composer of promise; nor had he made any secret of his intention to compete. On the other hand, a clause in the original notice specified that the score should be clearly 'intelligible'. The autograph of *Le Villi* starts neatly enough but soon degenerates into an untidy scrawl with blotches and corrections. Several of the pages are in the hand of a later copyist, evidently replacing the originals. Five judges, all fully employed in other fields, had three months in which to examine individually twenty-eight scores and then deliberate together on their findings. Is it surprising that they should have refused to waste time on a barely legible manuscript? Puccini had been despondent from the start. 'The result of the competition will be known at the end of the month', he wrote to Albina, 'but I've little hope.'[6] Doubtless Ponchielli had hinted as much.

Fontana, however, was not prepared to give up the battle as lost. One of his acquaintances was the influential, if eccentric journalist Marco Sala (among his less savoury diversions was the teaching of improper songs to prim young Englishwomen, who would perform them without understanding a word of what they were singing). It was at Sala's home that Fontana arranged a meeting at which Puccini would play his score to a select gathering that included Boito, Catalani, and Giovannina Lucca. All declared themselves in Puccini's favour and

[6] PCE 29, p. 44.