

# La bohème

Music by Giacomo Puccini

Libretto by Giuseppe Giacosa and Luigi Illica

PITTSBURGH OPERA  
E D U C A T I O N

Study Guide to the Opera



**Final Scene of Act III:** Rodolfo and Mimì remember their past happiness together.

At the same time, Marcello and Musetta burst out of the tavern, fighting over her constant flirting, and furiously part ways. In a tender ending, Mimì and Rodolfo realize how lonely they will be during the cold winter and decide to stay together until spring.

## **La bohème Universal Themes:**

by Jill Leahy

## **From the Latin Quarter to the East Village**

Young love. Poverty. Freedom from conventional life. Sacrificing for “ART.” Camaraderie. Pursuing pleasure. Untimely death. All these ideas are associated with the word “bohemian” and most often used with artists, writers, and anyone who pursues an artistic career. It seems like every era in history has a counter-culture movement; some of these same themes played out in what was called the “Beat” movement in the 1950s, and the “Hippie” culture in the 1970s. More recently, it was a key influence in the award-winning 1996 Broadway rock musical *Rent* by Jonathan Larson.

Henri Murger, a French writer, is credited with being the first to write about the bohemian movement in a set of short stories serialized from 1845–1849. Called *Scènes de la vie de bohème*, the vignettes portrayed the lives of young artists, writers, and those who liked to think of themselves as social rebels preferring to live in poverty rather than giving in to the strictures of conventional thought. It wasn’t until Murger and playwright Théodore Barrière turned the stories into a popular play in 1849 that the “bohemian culture” really gained notoriety. Perhaps remembering his own student days in Milan, Giacomo Puccini conceived of creating an opera on the theme. His biography tells of a time when he had to save *centesimi* (the Italian equivalent of pennies) in order to go to a café. Once he even pawned a coat (like his character Colline) in order to take a ballet dancer out to dinner.

Puccini’s opera, *La bohème*, premiered in 1896 at the Teatro Regio in Turin, Italy, famously conducted by a young Arturo Toscanini. It was not an immediate success with critics, but audiences embraced the opera almost immediately and it continues to be part of the standard opera repertoire.

# *La bohème* Synopsis

Setting: Paris, c. 1830



Adolf Hohenstein's (1854–1928) design for Mimì's costume for Act I of *La bohème*, premiere performance, Torino, 1 February 1896.

**ACT I** In their Latin Quarter garret on Christmas Eve, the painter Marcello and poet Rodolfo try to keep warm by burning pages from Rodolfo's latest drama. They are joined by their comrades—Colline, a young philosopher, and Schaunard, a musician who has landed a job and brings food, fuel, and funds (**Legna! . . . Sigari!**). While they celebrate their unexpected fortune, the landlord, Benoit, arrives to collect the rent. Plying the older man with wine, they urge him to tell of his flirtations, then throw him out in mock indignation. As the friends depart for a celebration at the nearby Café Momus, Rodolfo promises to join them soon, staying behind to finish writing an article. There's another knock; a neighbor, Mimì, says her candle has gone out on the drafty stairs. Offering her wine when she feels faint, Rodolfo relights her candle and helps her to the door. Mimì realizes she has dropped her key, and as the two search for it, both candles are blown out. In the moonlight the poet takes the girl's shivering hand (**Che gelida manina** "What a cold little hand") telling her his dreams. She then recounts her solitary life (**Si, mi chiamano Mimì** "Yes, they call me Mimì"), embroidering flowers and waiting for spring. Drawn to each other, Mimì and Rodolfo leave for the café (**O soave fanciulla** "Oh lovely girl").

**ACT II** Amid shouts of street hawkers, Rodolfo buys Mimì a bonnet near the Café Momus and introduces her to his friends. They all sit and order supper. A toy vendor, Parpignol, passes by, besieged by children. Marcello's former lover, Musetta, enters on the arm of the elderly, wealthy Alcindoro. Trying to regain the painter's attention, she sings a waltz about her popularity (**Quando me'n vo** "When I walk out"). Complaining that her shoe pinches, Musetta sends Alcindoro to fetch a new pair, then falls into Marcello's arms. The Bohemians leave Alcindoro to face the bill when he returns.

Intermission

**ACT III** At dawn on the snowy outskirts of Paris, a Customs Officer admits farm women to the city. Musetta and revelers are heard inside a tavern. Soon Mimì walks by, searching for the place where the reunited Marcello and Musetta now live. When the painter emerges, she pours out her distress over Rodolfo's incessant jealousy (**Mimì! . . . Speravo di trovarvi qui**). It is best they part, she says. Rodolfo, who has been asleep in the tavern, is heard, and Mimì hides; Marcello thinks she has left. The poet tells Marcello he wants to separate from his fickle sweetheart. Pressed further, he breaks down, saying Mimì is dying; her ill health can only worsen in the poverty they share. Overcome, Mimì stumbles forward to bid her lover farewell (**Addio . . . D'onde lieta uscì al tuo grido**) as Marcello runs back into the tavern to investigate Musetta's raucous laughter. While Mimì and Rodolfo recall their happiness, Musetta quarrels with Marcello (**Dunque è proprio finite**). The painter and his mistress part in fury, but Mimì and Rodolfo decide to stay together until spring.

Intermission

**ACT IV** Some months later, Rodolfo and Marcello lament their loneliness in the garret (**O Mimì, tu più non torni**). Colline and Schaunard bring a meager meal. The four stage a dance, which turns into a mock fight. The merrymaking is ended when Musetta bursts in, saying Mimì is downstairs, too weak to climb up. As Rodolfo runs to her, Musetta tells how Mimì has begged to be taken to her lover to die. While Mimì is made comfortable, Marcello goes with Musetta to sell her earrings for medicine, and Colline leaves to pawn his cherished overcoat (**Vecchia zimarra** "Old coat"). Alone, Mimì and Rodolfo recall their first days together (**Sono andati?** "Have they gone?"), but she is seized with coughing. When the others return, Musetta gives Mimì a muff to warm her hands and prays for her life. Mimì dies quietly (**Dorme? . . . Riposa**), and when Schaunard discovers she is dead, Rodolfo runs to her side, calling her name.

Courtesy of Opera News



# Characters

**Rodolfo** [roh-DOHL-foh] *tenor*

A struggling poet and playwright who lives with three friends; he falls in love with Mimì at first sight.

**Mimì** [mee-MEE] *soprano*

A frail seamstress who falls in love with Rodolfo instantly when they meet by accident. She is dying of consumption (tuberculosis).

**Marcello** [mar-CHEHL-loh] *baritone*

One of the four friends who live in a very shabby room in Paris; a painter. He still has feelings for Musetta, his former girlfriend.

**Musetta** [moo-ZEHT-tah] *soprano*

A flirtatious singer and Marcello's old girlfriend. She is still in love with him.

**Colline** [koh-LEE-neh] *bass*

One of the four friends, a philosopher.

**Schaunard** [shoh-NAHR] *baritone*

One of the four friends, a musician.

**Benoit** [ben-WAH] *bass*

The four friends' landlord.

**Alcindoro** [ahl-cheen-DOH-roh] *bass*

A wealthy older gentleman. One of Musetta's many admirers.

**Parpignol** [par-peen-YOHL] *tenor*

A toy vendor.

Boy *treble*

Customs house sergeant *bass*

Customs officer *bass*

Townspople

Waiters

Soldiers

Working girls

Servants

Gendarmes

Students

Street sweepers

Street vendors

Customs officers

Café customers

Children

## Meet the Composer and the Librettists

by Jill Leahy

After Verdi, **Giacomo Puccini** (1856–1924) is considered the most important composer of Italian opera. He is credited with advancing the *verismo* style to opera because his subjects and characters portray everyday life. Puccini's operas are known for their memorable melodies that are even recognizable to people who don't listen to opera. Remember the music that soared in the background in the movie *Moonstruck*?



Giacomo Puccini, Giuseppe Giacosa, and Luigi Illica in 1896

Ricordi Historical Archive  
Photo by Luigi Montabone

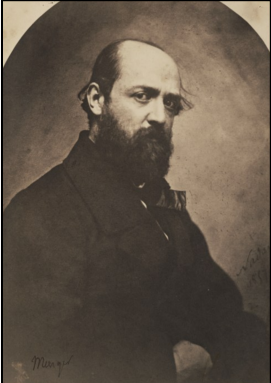
There's a funny story surrounding the creation of *La bohème*. In 1893, while lunching in a café in Milan with friend and fellow composer **Ruggero Leoncavallo** (most noted for his opera *Pagliacci*) Puccini let it slip that he was working on an opera based on Murger's stories. Furious, Leoncavallo reminded Puccini that he had offered him a libretto for an opera called *La bohème* just a year before and that Puccini had rejected it. Tempers flared and Leoncavallo walked out, promptly sending a notice to the newspaper announcing his intended new opera. Puccini also submitted a notice to the paper saying that he had been working on an opera based on Murger's stories. As comments flew back and forth about who was first, Puccini finally wrote: "Let him compose and I will compose and the public will judge. Precedence in art does not imply that one must interpret the same subject with the same artistic ideas." Puccini's *La bohème* was the first to be presented in 1896. Premiered in 1897, Leoncavallo's opera was initially well received, but it faded quickly. Puccini's version has become a standard in the operatic repertoire; Leoncavallo's opera is rarely performed.

After achieving great success with his opera *Manon Lescaut*, Puccini collaborated enthusiastically with the writers **Giuseppe Giacosa and Luigi Illica**. Puccini was a genius at knowing what worked on stage, a fact that often drove his librettists to complain loudly to music publisher Giulio Ricordi. In the case of *La bohème*, with Illica supplying the detailed dramatic prose structure, and Giacosa the "versifier" ensuring the literary quality of the text, it still took nearly three years for the librettists to satisfy Puccini and for him to compose the opera. In spite of these relationship complications, this talented trio went on to collaborate on *Tosca* and *Madama Butterfly*.

## Scènes de la vie de bohème

### Adaptations of *Scenes of Bohemian life*:

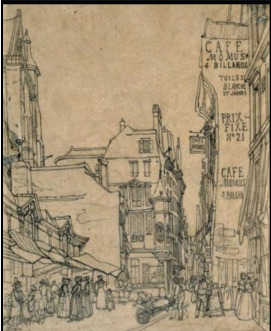
- 1896 *La bohème*, opera by Giacomo Puccini
- 1897 *La bohème*, opera by Ruggero Leoncavallo
- 1904 *Bohemios*, zarzuela by Amadeo Vives
- 1996 *Rent*, musical by Jonathan Larson
- 2001 *Moulin Rouge!*, film by Baz Luhrmann



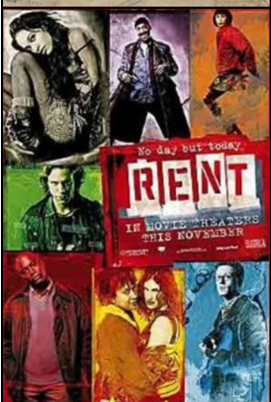
**Louis-Henri Murger (1822–1861)** was a French novelist and poet who was among the first to depict bohemian life. He is best known as the author of the 1845–1849 *Scènes de la vie de bohème*, vignettes based on his own experiences as a desperately poor author living in a Parisian garret in the Latin Quarter. The stories romanticized bohemian life and many were semi-autobiographical. In an effort to make himself appear “elegant and noticeable” he sometimes signed his name Henry Mürger.



The setting for *La bohème* is the **Latin Quarter in Paris**, located on the left bank of the Seine. The name is derived from the Latin language, widely spoken around the Sorbonne University during the Middle Ages. Landmarks include the Panthéon, student-filled cafes, bookshops, and winding cobblestone streets.



**Café Momus**, where *La bohème* characters party in Act II, became a paint store by the 1860s, and today it's a boutique hotel. The Café was located at No. 15 of the gloomy Rue des Prêtres Saint-Germain-l'Auxerrois.



Jonathan Larson was an American playwright and composer who is known for creating the **Broadway musical *RENT***, which was a modern reimagining of Puccini's tragic opera *La bohème*, set in New York's East Village. Larson started writing the songs in 1988 while supporting himself by waiting tables in a diner—life imitating art. *RENT* opened off-Broadway in 1996, 100 years after *La bohème*. The show soon moved to Broadway, where it had a 12-year run of 5,123 performances.

Henri Murger  
Latin quarter, Paris  
Café Momus  
RENT poster  
Moulin Rouge film

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