

# *La Bohème*

## A Guide for Educators



The Met  
ropolitan  
Opera

Ken Howard/Metropolitan Opera

# WHAT TO EXPECT FROM *LA BOHÈME*

ART, MUSIC, POETRY, LOVE: A GROUP OF YOUNG BOHEMIANS HAD IT ALL—UNTIL THE ICY hand of death came between them. To outsiders, Bohemian Paris seemed an exotic and extravagant realm where passing romances, raucous parties, and an idealistic devotion to art reigned supreme. That the so-called “Bohemian revolutionaries” who lived there had chosen to forego the creature comforts of bourgeois life only made them appear more romantic. For the actual denizens of the Left Bank, however, Bohemian bonhomie had a distinctly bleaker aspect: Debt, deprivation, and the diseases of urban squalor lurked behind their apparently festive life. For the young Italian composer Giacomo Puccini—himself no stranger to the financial struggles of young artists—it was this very clash of joie-de-vivre and abject poverty that made the Bohemian world ideally suited to opera. For generations of opera lovers ever since, Puccini’s glorious masterwork *La Bohème* has brought the Bohemian world to life.

From its earliest days, *La Bohème* was a smashing success. “Men die and governments change,” the American inventor Thomas Edison proclaimed in 1920, “but the songs of *La Bohème* will live forever.” Almost a century later, it seems that Edison was right. The characters and songs of *La Bohème* have inspired Oscar-winning films ranging from *Moonstruck* to *Moulin Rouge*. The heartrending story, updated to reflect the ills of the late twentieth century, also became the hit Broadway musical *Rent*. And, to this day, *La Bohème* is the most-performed opera in the history of the Met, where Franco Zeffirelli’s production embodies both the monumental grandeur and quiet intimacy of Puccini’s masterwork.

This guide delves into the history and context of *La Bohème*, one of the most popular operas of all time. The following pages include biographical details about the composer, information on the opera’s source and creation, and a guided listening exercise to bring the opera into the classroom. Although your students may not be familiar with Puccini’s music, the opera’s plot, or even operatic performance in general, they will likely recognize many of the themes and ideas presented in this masterwork. Thus, the guide will foster connections between *La Bohème* and other classroom subjects by inviting students to consider how the themes of *La Bohème* still resonate today. Finally, by offering pathways for considering the many elements of a live opera performance—including music, story, and visual design—it will help students of all ages develop the confidence to engage with opera both during and after the Final Dress Rehearsal performance.

## THE WORK:

### *LA BOHÈME*

An opera in four acts, sung in Italian  
Music by Giacomo Puccini

Libretto by Giuseppe Giacosa and  
Luigi Illica

Based on the novel *Scènes de la Vie de Bohème* by Henry Murger

First performed February 1, 1896,  
at the Teatro Regio, Turin, Italy

## PRODUCTION

Marco Armiliato, Conductor

Franco Zeffirelli, Production

Franco Zeffirelli, Set Designer

Peter J. Hall, Costume Designer

Gil Wechsler, Lighting Designer

## STARRING

Ailyn Pérez

MIMI

Olga Kulchynska

MUSETTA

Matthew Polenzani

RODOLFO

David Bizic

MARCELLO

Andrey Zhilikhovsky

SCHAUNARD

Jongmin Park

COLLINE

Arthur Woodley

BENOIT AND ALCINDORO

Production a gift of Mrs. Donald D.  
Harrington

Revival a gift of Rolex

## ABOUT THE METROPOLITAN OPERA HOUSE



Johnathan Tichler/  
Metropolitan Opera

The Metropolitan Opera is a vibrant home for the most creative and talented singers, conductors, composers, musicians, stage directors, designers, visual artists, choreographers, and dancers from around the world.

The Metropolitan Opera was founded in 1883, with its first opera house built on Broadway and 39th Street by a group of wealthy businessmen who wanted their own theater. In the company's early years, the management changed course several times, first performing everything in Italian (even *Carmen* and *Lohengrin*), then everything in German (even *Aida* and *Faust*), before finally settling into a policy of performing most works in their original language.

Almost from the beginning, it was clear that the opera house on 39th Street did not have adequate stage facilities. But it was not until the Met joined with other New York institutions in forming Lincoln Center for the Performing Arts that a new home became possible. The new Metropolitan Opera House, which opened at Lincoln Center in September of 1966, was equipped with the finest technical facilities of the day.

Each season the Met stages more than 200 opera performances in New York. More than 800,000 people attend the performances in the opera house during the season, and millions more experience the Met through new media distribution initiatives and state-of-the-art technology.

This guide includes several sections with a variety of background material on *La Bohème*.

- **The Source, The Story, and Who's Who in *La Bohème***
- **A Timeline:** The historical context of the opera's story and composition
- **A Closer Look:** A brief article highlighting an important aspect of Puccini's *La Bohème*
- **Guided Listening:** A series of musical excerpts with questions and a roadmap to possible student responses
- **Student Critique:** A performance activity, highlighting specific aspects of this production; and topics for wrap-up discussion following students' attendance
- **Further Resources:** Recommendations for additional study, both online and in print
- **Glossary:** Common musical terms found in this guide and in the concert hall

This guide is intended to cultivate students' interest in *La Bohème*, whether or not they have any prior acquaintance with opera or the performing arts. It includes activities for students with a wide range of musical backgrounds and seeks to encourage them to think about opera—and the performing arts as a whole—as a medium of both entertainment and creative expression.

In particular, this guide will offer in-depth introductions to:

- The relationship between Henry Murger's novel *Scènes de la Vie de Bohème* and Puccini's opera
- The myths versus the realities of Bohemian Paris
- The aesthetic principles behind *La Bohème*'s plot and music
- Creative choices made by the artists of the Metropolitan Opera for this production
- The opera as a unified work of art, involving the efforts of composer, librettist, and Met artists

Ken Howard/  
Metropolitan Opera



## SUMMARY

It is bitterly cold in the attic apartment where Rodolfo lives with his friends Marcello, Colline, and Schaunard. They are very poor, and usually cannot afford food, rent, or firewood, but Schaunard has earned some money. He invites his friends to dinner at a nearby café. Rodolfo stays home to finish some writing, but he is interrupted by a knock at the door. It is his neighbor, a young woman named Mimì, who needs help relighting a candle the wind blew out. Mimì and Rodolfo fall in love at first sight, and they go together to meet Rodolfo's friends at the café.

Meanwhile, the streets of Paris are full of people celebrating Christmas Eve. Rodolfo, Mimì, and his friends find a table at the Café Momus. Suddenly Marcello's ex-girlfriend Musetta appears. She has found a wealthy new boyfriend named Alcindoro, but she misses Marcello and wants to get back together with him. She sings and dances to get Marcello's attention then sends Alcindoro away. While he is gone, she makes up with Marcello and tells the waiter to charge Alcindoro for the friends' dinner.

A few weeks later, Marcello and Musetta have found work at a tavern on the edge of Paris. One cold night, Mimì arrives. She tells Marcello that she and Rodolfo have been fighting because he unfairly accuses her of flirting with other men. When Marcello asks Rodolfo about Mimì, Rodolfo claims he doesn't love her anymore. Finally, however, he tells Marcello the truth: Mimì is very ill, and Rodolfo hopes that if he breaks up with her she will find someone who can pay for her medicine. Mimì, standing behind a nearby tree, hears everything. She confronts Rodolfo and tells him it's over. But then, after talking some more, they decide to stay together.

Unfortunately, the relationship doesn't last. By the time spring arrives Rodolfo and Mimì have broken up. Marcello has heard that she has a rich new boyfriend, and Rodolfo pretends to be happy for her even though he misses her terribly. Rodolfo and his roommates sit down to eat. Just then, Musetta appears at the door with Mimì, who is now very, very sick. In order to buy Mimì medicine, Musetta decides to pawn her own earrings and Colline decides to pawn his coat. Marcello and Schaunard go with them. Left alone, Rodolfo and Mimì remember happier days. The friends return with a gift for Mimì: a muff to keep her hands warm. Mimì thanks them and closes her eyes. At first, Rodolfo thinks she is sleeping, but then he realizes she is dead. Sobbing, he cries out her name.

Marty Sohl/  
Metropolitan Opera



## THE SOURCE: *SCÈNES DE LA VIE DE BOHÈME* ("SCENES OF BOHEMIAN LIFE"), BY HENRY MURGER

Bohemia, a modern atlas will tell you, is a region on the western side of the Czech Republic. Yet when a volume bearing the title *Scenes of Bohemian Life* appeared in book shops in the middle of the nineteenth century, the "Bohemia" in question was another place entirely: Paris. The artists who gathered in the French capital claimed that they had renounced bourgeois society in favor of artistic and social freedom—and were therefore akin to gypsies. Since it was believed at that time that the Roma people (as gypsies call themselves) came from Bohemia, the artists called themselves "Bohemians." (In fact, the English moniker "gypsy" is based on a similar, and equally mistaken, belief that the Roma originated in Egypt.) The Parisian Bohemians met daily at local cafés and bars to share their work. Prominent among these was the Café Momus, a real-life café frequented by (among others) Charles Baudelaire, Gerard de Nerval, and a young man named Henry Murger, who in 1845 began publishing short stories about life in Bohemian Paris. Many of Murger's characters were inspired by real people: the musician Schaunard was based on his friend Alexander Schanne; Mimì was a fictionalized version of a certain Lucille (hence the opera's line "they call me Mimì, but my real name is Lucia"); and Rodolphe, the earnest young poet, was based on Murger himself. Although the initial vignettes attracted little attention, an 1849 play based on Murger's stories enjoyed a surge of popularity. And in 1851, when Murger collected and published his vignettes under the title *Scènes de la Vie de Bohème*, the Bohemian world rocketed to international fame. Half a century later, the young Giacomo Puccini recognized in Murger's starving artists his own youth in Milan. Deeply moved by Murger's stories, he and his librettists stitched together several vignettes to form the tender, multi-faceted love story we know today.



Jonathan Tichler/  
Metropolitan Opera

# SYNOPSIS

## **ACT I: *Paris, 1830s, Christmas Eve***

Rodolfo and Marcello are hard at work in their attic apartment. It is bitterly cold. Setting down his paintbrush, Marcello observes that it is difficult to survive as an artist when you never sell any work. Rodolfo agrees. They can barely afford food or rent, let alone firewood for their little stove, and Rodolfo must burn the precious pages of his play to heat the apartment. Soon their roommates Colline and Schaunard arrive. Schaunard has just earned some money, and he invites his friends to a café for dinner. Their excitement is dampened by the arrival of their landlord, Benoit, who reminds them that they owe him three months' rent. Not wishing to lose their dinner money, the friends give Benoit a glass of wine, ask him if he has any girlfriends, and then (when he answers yes) declare him a womanizing scoundrel and throw him out. Marcello, Colline, and Schaunard leave for the café. Rodolfo, who has to finish some writing, promises to join them soon.

Rodolfo sits down to write. Suddenly, he hears a knock at the door. It is a young woman, who introduces herself as his downstairs neighbor and asks him to relight her candle. Rodolfo notices she is out of breath. She assures him it is nothing to worry about. Rodolfo lights the candle, but as the young woman turns to go, she discovers she has dropped her key. Just then, a gust of wind blows out both her candle and Rodolfo's. As they search for the key in the dark, Rodolfo begins to tell her about himself. He says that he has long called himself a poet but never truly understood poetry or beauty until he saw her. She tells him her name is Mimi and that she lives a modest but happy life sewing silk flowers. They have fallen in love. Rodolfo's friends shout to him from the street, and Mimi shyly asks if she can go with him to the café. He happily agrees. As the door closes behind them, they can still be heard singing a duet of love.

## **ACT II: *The Café Momus***

The streets of Paris are filled with people celebrating Christmas Eve. Vendors hawk candy and sweets, a band plays music, and children crowd around the fabulous wagon of the toymaker Parpignol. Rodolfo buys Mimi a pink bonnet. The friends find a table at the café, and Rodolfo introduces them to Mimi. Colline and Schaunard are pleased to meet her but Marcello is skeptical, since his relationships always start out with sweetness and joy but end in bitterness and rage. Marcello is still grumbling when his ex-girlfriend Musetta appears. Although Musetta now enjoys fancy clothes and carriage rides on the dime of her rich new boyfriend, Alcindoro, she secretly misses Marcello and decides to win him back. She noisily enters the café and begins to sing. When she is sure she has Marcello's attention, Musetta declares that her foot hurts and tells Alcindoro to go buy her a new pair of shoes. While he is gone, she makes up with Marcello and tells the waiter to give Alcindoro the friends' dinner bill. The curtain falls on general revelry and good cheer.

**ACT III: *The Barriere d'Enfer (one of the toll gates at the edge of Paris), a few weeks later***

Marcello and Musetta have found work at a tavern at the edge of Paris. One cold dawn, Mimì comes looking for them. She tells Marcello that she and Rodolfo have been fighting because Rodolfo accuses her of flirting with other men. Marcello says that Rodolfo is presently in the tavern and asks if Mimì wants to see him, but Mimì says no and hurries away just as Rodolfo appears. Rodolfo tells Marcello that he no longer loves Mimì, but Marcello is skeptical. Finally, Rodolfo tells Marcello the truth: Mimì is very ill, and the damp cold of his apartment is slowly killing her. He hopes that if he pushes her away she will find a new boyfriend who can afford to take care of her. Mimì, standing behind a nearby tree, hears everything. She confronts Rodolfo and tells him it's over. But then, agreeing that winter is an awful time to be alone, they decide to give the relationship one more try.

**ACT IV: *The attic apartment, the following spring***

Marcello paints and Rodolfo writes. Both have broken up with their girlfriends. Marcello has recently seen Mimì, who he says was wearing fine clothing and riding in an elegant carriage. Rodolfo pretends to be happy for her, but he is actually heartbroken. When Colline and Schaunard arrive, the four friends sit down to dinner. Suddenly, Musetta appears at the door. She has brought Mimì, who is now so sick she can barely climb the stairs. Musetta gives Marcello her earrings to sell so he can buy medicine and a muff for Mimì. Colline decides to pawn his overcoat to help with the expenses and Schaunard goes with him. Left alone, Rodolfo and Mimì recall the happy days they spent together. The friends return. Musetta slips the muff onto Mimì's hands. Mimì thanks her, then closes her eyes. At first, Rodolfo thinks she is sleeping, but the scared silence of his roommates reveals all: Mimì is dead. Collapsing next to her lifeless body, Rodolfo cries out Mimì's name.

**VOICE TYPE**

Since the early 19th century, singing voices have usually been classified in six basic types, three male and three female, according to their range:

**SOPRANO**

the highest voice type, normally possessed only by women and boys

**MEZZO-SOPRANO**

the voice type lying below the soprano and above the contralto; the term comes from the Italian word "mezzo," meaning "middle"

**CONTRALTO**

the lowest female voice type, also called "alto"

**TENOR**

the highest standard voice type in adult males

**BARITONE**

the voice type lying below the tenor and above the bass

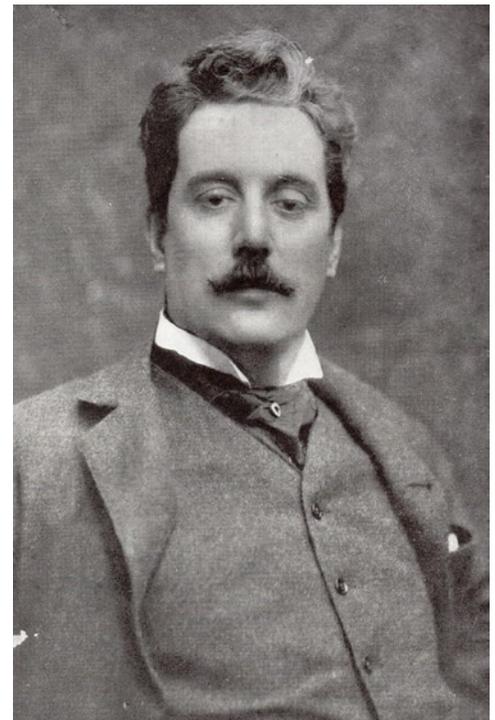
**BASS**

the lowest voice type

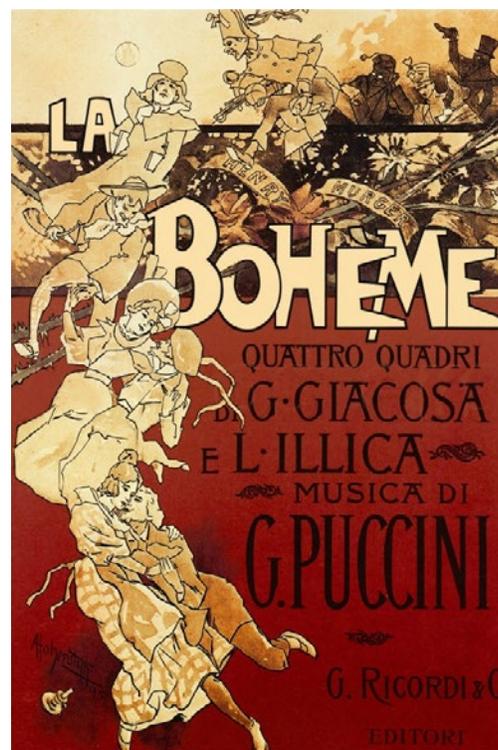
# WHO'S WHO IN *LA BOHÈME*

Character		Pronunciation Guide	Voice Type	The Lowdown
Rodolfo	A writer	roh-DOHL-foh	tenor	A poor poet living in an attic in Paris with three friends. His life will be forever changed when he meets the young seamstress who lives downstairs.
Mimi	A seamstress	mee-MEE	soprano	Rodolfo's downstairs neighbor and the love of his life. Unfortunately, she suffers from tuberculosis, a fatal disease.
Marcello	A painter	mahr-CHEL-loh	baritone	Rodolfo's friends. They all live together in the tiny attic apartment, where they try to make a meager living painting, writing, and composing.
Schaunard	A musician	show-NARD	baritone	
Colline	A philosopher	kohl-LEEN-neh	bass	
Musetta	A young woman	moo-ZET-tah	soprano	Marcello's feisty girlfriend, she quarrels and breaks up with him regularly but is always there when her help is needed.
Benoit	A landlord	ben-WAH	bass	The four friends' stingy and boorish old landlord.

- **1845** Henry Murger, a young Bohemian writer living in Paris, publishes a series of short stories about life on the Left Bank. The stories receive little attention until an 1849 adaptation for the stage begins playing nightly to sold-out crowds.
- **1851** Buoyed by the success of the play, Murger expands and publishes his writings under the title *Scènes de la Vie de Bohème* (“Scenes of Bohemian Life”). A blockbuster both in France and abroad, the book almost single-handedly establishes the quasi-mythical image of the Bohemian artist.
- **1858** Giacomo Puccini is born on December 22 in Lucca, a town on the western edge of Tuscany. As the oldest son in a family of seven children, Puccini is expected to go into the business at which his family has excelled for four generations: music. In fact, his first formal music studies are with his uncle.
- **1880** Given his family background, Puccini’s career in Lucca is all but assured. Yet the young composer has higher aspirations. Hoping to pursue a career as an opera composer, he moves to Milan, Italy’s operatic capital. His early years in Milan perfectly exemplify the “Bohemian” lifestyle: intense poverty, tireless work, and friendships with the city’s most important intellectuals.
- **1883** The publisher Sonzogno announces a competition for young composers and Puccini submits his first opera, *Le Villi*. To his chagrin, he receives no prize at all, not even an honorable mention.
- **1884** Despite the disappointment of the Sonzogno competition, Puccini manages to find sponsors for a performance of *Le Villi* at the Teatro dal Verme, Milan’s second most important opera house (after the Teatro alla Scala). In the audience is Giulio Ricordi, head of the Ricordi publishing house, who is so taken with Puccini’s work he immediately signs an exclusive contract with the young composer.
- **1889** Puccini’s second opera, *Edgar*, premieres at La Scala. It is the only true flop of Puccini’s career.
- **1893** The disappointment of *Edgar* is all but forgotten when Puccini’s third opera, *Manon Lescaut*, premieres in Milan to rapturous acclaim. The success of *Manon* makes the formerly penniless Puccini a rich man and he moves to a posh villa near the town of Torre del Lago. It is around this time that he discovers Murger’s *Scenes de la Vie de Bohème* and joins forces with the librettists Giuseppe Giacosa and Luigi Illica to bring Murger’s stories to the operatic stage.



- **1894** Work on the new opera goes quickly. In July, Illica writes to Giulio Ricordi, “It is Sunday, a quarter past twelve, and my eyes are moist ... Mimi has just died, and the poor Bohemians are weeping, gathered in silence around her corpse.”
  
- **1895** In December, Puccini finishes composing *La Bohème*’s music. Like Illica, he is profoundly affected by Mimi’s tragic story. Years later, he will recall completing the scene of Mimi’s death: “I had to get up and, standing in the middle of my study, alone in the silence of the night, I began to weep like a child. It was as though I had seen my own child die.”
  
- **1896** On February 1, *La Bohème* premieres at the Teatro Regio in Turin, conducted by Arturo Toscanini. It is a major occasion, with members of the royal family in attendance. The critics’ reviews are chilly, but the audience adores the new work.
  
- **1900** *La Bohème* is heard for the first time at the Metropolitan Opera. By now, the opera is so popular that postcards depicting scenes from the opera are being sold and mailed around the world.
  
- **1924** Puccini is diagnosed with cancer and travels to Brussels for treatment. He dies on November 29, the unfinished score of his final opera, *Turandot*, lying beside him on his bedside table. His body is taken to Milan and temporarily interred in the Toscanini family crypt before being transferred to his estate at Torre del Lago.



A poster of *La Bohème*, illustrated by Adolfo Hohenstein

## TELLING IT LIKE IT IS: PUCCINI'S "NATURALISTIC" OPERA

"Mimi is like a flower withered by poverty," Rodolfo sadly tells Marcello in Act III of *La Bohème*. "Love is not enough to save her." Puccini's opera begins with a romanticized view of young people relinquishing bourgeois comforts for the sake of their art, in what Rodolfo describes as his "happy poverty as a writer." But by the time the curtain falls on the final act, the characters' poverty—marked by their hunger, their squalid living conditions, and Mimi's fatal disease—has taken on a distinctly tragic hue. Poverty is crucial to the opera's plot. Moreover, *La Bohème*'s depiction of poverty reflects an aesthetic philosophy popular at the turn of the twentieth century: *verismo*, or "naturalism" (from the Italian word *vero*, "true"). Italian opera composers borrowed the concept from French literature, which in the nineteenth century aimed to tell "realistic" stories of hardship and destitution.

For opera composers, this new ideal was a major departure from the status quo. Since its inception, opera had been neatly split into "serious opera," which focused on mythological figures and ancient nobility, and "comic opera," which depicted clever members of the lower classes outwitting their idiotic rich counterparts. Composers of the new "naturalistic" opera, on the other hand, sought to show the urban poor as they "really" lived. When it came to telling the story of poverty and deprivation on the operatic stage, Murger's stories of "la vie de bohème" were a terrific source. The fact that Murger himself had been a Bohemian in Paris made the stories seem authentic, as did the fact that the lead characters were based in large part on people Murger knew personally. Rodolfo's dire financial circumstances allowed Puccini and his collaborators to depict the effects of poverty, while the tender love story guaranteed that audiences would come away moved and satisfied. Yet one of the most "realistic" elements of Puccini's plot is something that would, only a few years before, have seemed unremarkable: Mimi's disease.

For most of the nineteenth century, it was believed that consumption was an illness caused by a "weak constitution." In literary-dramatic circles, it was associated with prostitutes and other women of weak moral character. Indeed, this was still the view when Murger published his novel in 1851. In 1882, however, the German doctor Robert Koch identified *tubercle bacillus*, the bacterium that causes tuberculosis. Almost overnight, consumption went from being a generic ailment to a highly specific disease linked to the filthy, crowded living conditions of the urban poor. The discovery led to early efforts in public health and hygiene, as well as the 1905 Nobel Prize in Medicine for Koch. It also meant that in 1896, when Puccini's *La Bohème* premiered, consumption was no longer a designator of weak morals but rather a gut-wrenching illustration of poverty's impact on innocent lives. Puccini even took pains to depict Mimi's disease musically: her melodies are frequently interrupted by coughing spells and shortness of breath, a tendency which increases as the opera reaches its—and her—tragic end.



***The Weary*, a depiction of the Parisian urban poor from 1897 by the French artist Jules Adler. (Musée Calvet, Avignon, France)**

The Guided Listening Activities are designed to introduce students to a selection of memorable moments from the opera. They include information on what is happening dramatically, a description of the musical style, and a roadmap of musical features to listen for. Guided Listening Activities can be used by students and teachers of varying levels of musical experience.

## IN PREPARATION

For this activity, teachers will need access to a recording of *La Bohème* and the libretto.

## "CHE GELIDA MANINA"

As Rodolfo and Mimì search for her lost key, his hand brushes hers. Grasping her hand tenderly, he observes that it is cold as ice. In this aria, Rodolfo introduces himself to Mimì. Puccini also uses this aria to introduce musical and poetic motifs that will return throughout the opera. For instance, Mimì's cold hands will be an important indicator of her advancing illness, and coldness (of her hands, of the apartment, etc.) will consistently be contrasted with the warmth of love.

What to listen for:

- How the music reflects the ideas in the poetry, and how music and poetry work together to create the dramatic trajectory of the scene
- Puccini's use of very high notes to illustrate important ideas
- Melodies that will be used over and over again in the opera

- (00:16) Rodolfo takes Mimì's hand and begins to sing. The first few words are all on the same note, but on the word "lasciar" ("let me [warm your hand]") the melody suddenly jumps up, as though Rodolfo's emotions are so strong he cannot control his voice. He reaches the highest notes of the phrase on "Cercar, che giova?" ("will it really help to look?"), then the melody makes its way back downward.
- (00:40) The harp echoes the final notes of Rodolfo's melody. This musical interlude gives the phrase a feeling of closure. It also gives Rodolfo time to hold Mimì's hand, stare lovingly into her eyes, or otherwise express his devotion without recourse to words—an excellent reminder that performing an operatic character is as much about acting as singing!
- (01:12) Rodolfo returns to the melody he sang at the very beginning. On the line "[I'll tell you] who I am" (01:23), the melody leaps to the highest note of the piece. This high note is accompanied by a bright, shining chord in the orchestra.
- (01:53) As Rodolfo begins describing who he is, the music changes again. The simple melody Rodolfo sings reflects the simple life he describes himself as leading. Yet the orchestra is full of lush chords, suggesting that a great sea of feeling and emotion lies behind his humble words.
- (02:50) The most luxurious melody of the entire aria. Rodolfo only understands the true meaning of beauty, love, and wealth when he meets Mimì. This melody will appear throughout the opera whenever Puccini wants to refer to Rodolfo and Mimì's love.
- (03:48) As Rodolfo's melody soars to ever more extreme heights, the orchestra plays the melody he just sang. Listen to the large assortment of instruments, all playing together to make this moment both beautiful and emphatic.
- (04:13) For most of the aria, the drama seems to be building: the music gets louder and denser, and Rodolfo's melodies get fancier and fancier. Now it all recedes back into a single, simple line. After the high-flying poetry of the aria, he is ready to fall silent and listen as Mimì introduces herself.

## "O SOAVE FANCIULLA, O DOLCE VISO"

After introducing themselves, Rodolfo and Mimi sing a duet for the first time. One of Puccini's most important compositional techniques involves using the same melody repeatedly throughout an opera to connect disparate moments in the plot. In this duet, you will recognize a melody from "Che gelida manina." Why might Puccini have chosen to link these two moments?

What to listen for:

- The return of music from "Che gelida manina"
- How the two voices are combined: sometimes Mimi and Rodolfo sing the same music at the same time ("in unison"), sometimes they sing different music at the same time ("counterpoint"), and sometimes they take turns singing

- (00:00) The flute plays the soaring melody from (02:50) in "Che gelida manina" as Rodolfo addresses Mimi. From offstage, the voice of Marcello is heard declaring, "Rodolfo has found his poetry!"
- (00:19) Listen to how the music builds: Rodolfo's singing gets higher and higher and the orchestra increases in volume and density. The effect is a musical wave, surging upwards to the moment when Mimi and Rodolfo's voices will finally join.
- (00:38) Mimi and Rodolfo begin singing together—to the same melody that the flute played at (00:00), and that Rodolfo sang in "Che gelida manina." When multiple people sing the same melody at the same time, we say they are singing "in unison."
- (00:46) The melody continues, but now Rodolfo and Mimi take turns singing fragments of the tune.
- (00:59) Rodolfo sings a short three-note repeating fragment while Mimi sings a slowly rising melody. Note the contrast with the "unison" texture at (00:38); when two different melodies occur at the same time, we call it "counterpoint."

## "QUANDO ME'N VO, SOLETTA PER LA VIA'"

The four friends and Mimi have just sat down to dinner at the Café Momus, when who should enter but Musetta, Marcello's feisty ex-girlfriend. She is at the café on a date with Alcindoro, her rich new boyfriend, but she misses Marcello and hopes to win him back. To get his attention, she begins to sing and dance, declaring that her beauty is utterly irresistible to anyone who sees her.

What to listen for:

- The way the music depicts Musetta's flirtatious character
- The contrast between Musetta's singing and the conversation taking place between the other characters

- (00:12) Musetta sings a very slow, languid melody, while the winds play little frills below. One can almost imagine her walking down the street, taking one step per note, swishing her skirt as she swings her hips from side to side. On the words "soletta" ("all alone"), she sings a very short, fast note before landing on a longer note. This is called an "ornament" or "grace note." The musical effect, a little bounce, is like the wink of Musetta's eye or the coquettish toss of her head.
- (00:37) Musetta begins singing the same melody again, so we think we know how it will continue. But at (00:46), the melody suddenly changes, leaping into the stratosphere when Musetta mentions her own rapturous beauty. The sudden variation is both surprising and exciting.
- (00:56) Marcello and Alcindoro both comment angrily on Musetta's behavior. There is no accompaniment from the orchestra, so their words sound like a surly interruption of Musetta's song.
- (01:00) Aware that her plan is already having its desired effect, Musetta continues her flirtatious song, now with a new melody.
- (02:01) Musetta returns to her opening melody, while Alcindoro and Mimi comment in the background.
- (02:26) Slowly, more and more voices are added the background chorus, increasing the dramatic and musical tension as Musetta declares, "Marcello still loves me! I've won!"

## "VECCHIA ZIMARRA, SENTI"

Mimi lies dying. Colline decides to pawn his overcoat to help buy medicine for her. As he contemplates parting with his "old friend" (i.e., the coat), he sings it a song of farewell and thanks. In contrast to much of Puccini's music, which often features long, soaring melodies, this aria has predominantly short, heavy melodies. Ask your students if this music conjures different emotions than the preceding selections, and invite them to consider why.

What to listen for:

- The steady, constantly repeating bass line (the lowest pitches in the orchestra)
- The repetition of a single melody with different words (called "strophic" composition)
- The use of minimal accompaniment to create a somber atmosphere

- (00:00) As the aria begins, listen especially to the bass line, where there is the constant alternation of a low note and slightly higher note. The effect is like heavy footsteps which trudge inexorably forward.
- (00:24) As Colline recalls the happy days he and the coat spent together, his melody changes slightly, moving higher and sounding happier. Nevertheless, the bass line trudges steadily on.
- (00:37) "In your large pockets," Colline says, "you have sheltered precious works of philosophers and poets." The coat has not only kept him warm, it has also protected his writing and thus his livelihood. On this line, Colline sings his way down a short "chromatic scale" (equivalent to playing all the white and black keys on a piano). Since chromatic scales use notes that would not typically be included in the aria, the scale sounds strange, sad, and surprising.
- (00:53) The melody from the beginning of the aria returns with a new text. "Strophic" writing (i.e., multiple verses of text sung to the same melody) is typically used in dirges and other songs of lamentation. Yet Colline does not complete the full melody, as we might expect. Instead, he falls silent in the middle of the phrase—perhaps he is too sad to go on, or perhaps he knows that Mimi is fading and he has no time to lose.
- (01:19) "Farewell," Colline says one last time as the full orchestra takes over. The lush orchestration, which seems to indicate the surge of emotion Colline must be feeling, is a stark contrast to the preceding orchestral accompaniment—which, trudging along, seemed as thin and threadbare as Colline's old coat.

## IN PREPARATION

For this activity, students will need the "Opera Review" reproducible handout found in the back of this guide.

### COMMON CORE STANDARDS AND *LA BOHÈME*

**CCSS.ELA-Literacy.SL.9-12.1**  
Initiate and participate effectively in a range of collaborative discussions (one-on-one, in groups, and teacher-led) with diverse partners on grades 9-12 topics, texts, and issues, building on others' ideas and expressing their own clearly and persuasively.

**CCSS.ELA-Literacy.SL.9-12.1d**  
Respond thoughtfully to diverse perspectives; synthesize comments, claims, and evidence made on all sides of an issue; resolve contradictions when possible; and determine what additional information or research is required to deepen the investigation or complete the task.

## ENCOURAGING STUDENT RESPONSE IN ATTENDING THE FINAL DRESS REHEARSAL

Watching and listening to a performance is a unique experience that takes students beyond the printed page to an immersion in images, sound, interpretation, technology, drama, skill, and craft. Performance activities help students analyze different aspects of the experience and engage critically with the performance. They will consider the creative choices that have been made for the particular production they are watching and examine different aspects of the performance.

The enclosed performance activity is called "Opera Review: *La Bohème*." The reproducible handout for this activity, available at the back of this guide, will invite students to think of themselves as opera critics, taking notes on what they see and hear during the performance and critiquing each singer and scene on a five-star scale. Students should bring this activity sheet to the final dress rehearsal and fill it out during intermission and/or after the final curtain. When you return to class, students can use their "Opera Review" sheets as they review and discuss their experience.

## FOLLOW-UP DISCUSSION

Start the class with an open discussion of the Met performance. What did students like? What didn't they? Did anything surprise them? What would they like to see or hear again? What would they have done differently? The discussion offers an opportunity to apply the notes on students' "Opera Review" sheet, as well as their thoughts about the visual design of the Met production—in short, to see themselves as *La Bohème* experts.

*La Bohème* is one of the most influential works of art produced in the modern era. Among the works based on or inspired by Murger and Puccini's stories include *Moulin Rouge*, *Moonstruck*, *Rent*, and even an episode of *The Simpsons*. The themes presented in *La Bohème* clearly resonate throughout our artistic culture, inspiring continued interest from writers, movie producers, and more. Now that your students have seen the opera, ask them to identify some of the main themes and consider how the many elements of the performance—music, acting, costumes, stage sets, wigs, makeup, etc.—worked together to express these themes. In your discussion, you may draw from the following questions.

- Can you think of any other movies/novels/works of art/etc. that have themes similar to those presented in *La Bohème*?
- Why did Rodolfo feel that he had to push Mimì away (in Act III)? Do you agree with his decision? Although it is never specified in the opera, why do you think they might have broken up in the period between Acts III and IV?
- Puccini wanted to write an opera that showed poverty in all its gritty detail. Do you think he was successful? Why or why not? How did the costumes, stage sets, and/or acting express the characters' living conditions?
- In 1996, the hit Broadway musical *Rent* brought the story of *La Bohème* to the streets of New York. If you were to set a production of *La Bohème* in the modern world, how would you do it? Would you use the same music or write new music? If new music, what kind of music would you use? Why? What else would you need to change to make the story seem "modern"?
- Rodolfo and his friends are what today we would call freelance artists: They only get paid when someone buys their art. In the nineteenth century, this was a relatively new idea. (Until the end of the eighteenth century, artists had been paid as staff members at European aristocratic courts; with the fall of the aristocracy, however, artists had to strike out on their own.) Do you think artists should have to work freelance? Why or why not? What are some other options? How might Rodolfo's story be different if he didn't have to struggle financially?

Finally, remember that opera is a multi-media art form: any and all aspects of the performance your students have just seen—including the act of seeing it live—are important factors contributing to the overall experience. Ask them for any final thoughts and impressions. What did students find most memorable?

## FURTHER RESOURCES

### IN PRINT

*The Metropolitan Opera Presents: Giacomo Puccini's La Bohème.* Milwaukee: Amadeus Press, 2014.

*The complete opera libretto, in both English and Italian, with additional essays on the history and reception of Puccini's masterwork. Available at the Metropolitan Opera Shop at [metoperashop.org](http://metoperashop.org).*

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

*Budden's biography includes lengthy chapters on each of Puccini's major operas. It is the most scholarly work on this list, but the writing is accessible and engaging, and Budden's book is well worth the effort for those who wish to delve more deeply into the composer's life and music.*

Murger, Henry. *The Bohemians of the Latin Quarter.* Translated by Ellen Marriage and John Selwyn, introduction by Maurice Samuels. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004.

*Murger's complete novel, translated into English, with an excellent introduction discussing the nineteenth-century idea of "Bohemian life."*

Siegel, Jerrold. *Bohemian Paris: Culture, Politics, and the Boundaries of Bourgeois Life, 1830–1930.* Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1986.

*A detailed history of the Bohemian movement. Later chapters discuss artists such as Picasso and Matisse and may provide opportunities for teachers to link the story and performance of La Bohème to other artists and artistic movements with which students may be familiar.*

Weaver, William. *Puccini: The Man and his Music.* New York: E. P. Dutton, in association with the Metropolitan Opera Guild, 1977.

*An entertaining and insightful overview of Puccini's life and work, richly illustrated with numerous photographs and other relevant images.*

### ONLINE

The Metropolitan Opera. "Franco Zeffirelli: Directing La Bohème." <http://www.metopera.org/discover/video/?videoName=franco-zeffirelli-directing-la-boheme&videoid=3128452197001>

*An eighteen-minute film from 1980 in which legendary director Franco Zeffirelli discusses the process of staging La Bohème.*

The Metropolitan Opera. "La Bohème in Rehearsal."

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JqEOdBVtGUE>

*A special behind-the-scenes look as Anita Hartig and Vittorio Grigolo work out "Si, mi chiamano Mimi" in the rehearsal room of the Metropolitan Opera.*

The Metropolitan Opera. "La Bohème: Setting the Stage." <http://www.metopera.org/discover/video/?videoName=la-boheme-setting-the-stage&videoid=2540386032001>

*Soprano Renée Fleming (whom your students may recognize from her performance of the Star Spangled Banner at the 2014 Super Bowl) interviews Met Technical Director Joe Clark about the scenery in La Bohème. A fascinating glimpse into how the sets are constructed, as well as insider tips such as how to create a fake snowstorm.*

New York City Opera Project, Columbia University. *New York City Opera Project: La Bohème.* <http://www.columbia.edu/itc/music/NYCO/laboheme/>

*A collection of images relating to both Murger's stories and Puccini's opera.*

## act/scene

Acts and scenes are ways of categorizing sections of operas. An act is a large-scale division of an opera, and each opera will typically include from two to five acts. Acts can be subdivided into scenes, which are often differentiated by a change in setting or characters.

## adagio

Literally “at ease,” adagio is a tempo marking that indicates a slow speed. An adagio tempo marking indicates that the performer should play in a slow and leisurely style.

## allegro

Italian for “cheerful” or “joyful,” Allegro is the most common tempo marking in Western music, indicating a moderately fast to quick speed.

## aria

A song for solo voice accompanied by orchestra. In opera, arias mostly appear during a pause in dramatic action when a character is reflecting musically on his or her emotions. Most arias are lyrical, with a tune that can be hummed, and many arias include musical repetition. For example, the earliest arias in opera consist of music sung with different stanzas of text (strophic arias). Another type of aria, da capo arias, became common by the eighteenth century and feature the return of the opening music and text after a contrasting middle section. Nineteenth-century Italian arias often feature a two-part form that showcases an intensification of emotion from the first section (the cantabile) to the second section (the cabaletta).

## articulation

The smoothness or hardness with which a note is begun and ended. Articulation is a way of indicating the degree to which each note connects to the next, and can be seen while watching the bow of a stringed instrument player. A note can be attacked sharply and made short, or it can flow smoothly into the next note.

## baritone

Literally “deep sounding,” a baritone is what a typical male voice sounds like—the term refers to a male singer with a low but not extremely low vocal range. A baritone will sing notes that are higher than those sung by a bass and lower than those sung by a tenor. Uncommon until the nineteenth century, baritone roles have grown in popularity in opera since the works of Verdi, who often reserved the voice type for villains.

## baroque

A period of music history lasting from approximately 1600 to 1750. The beginning of the Baroque period coincides with the invention of opera as a genre, and its end coincides with the death of the composer Johann Sebastian Bach. The Baroque period saw the rise of modern tonality, an expansion of performing forces, and increased ornamentation. The term “baroque” means bizarre or exaggerated, and was used by critics in the Eighteenth century critics who preferred a simpler and less-ornamented style.

## bass

The lowest sounding line in music. Bass also refers to the lowest singing range for the male voice. Opera composers often choose a bass voice to sing one of two opposite types of roles: comic characters or dramatic and serious characters. For example, Mozart and Rossini wrote comic parts for bass voice, using musical repetition and low register for comic effect. Wagner and Mozart wrote serious parts for bass voice, focusing on the gravity that a low register can contribute to the overall musical texture.

## bel canto

Referring to the Italian vocal style of the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, bel canto singing emphasizes lyricism and ornamentation in order to showcase the beauty of the singer's voice. Its focus on lyrical embellishment directly contrasts with a contemporary Germanic focus on a weighty, dramatic style. Bel canto singing is most closely associated with the music of Gioachino Rossini, Vincenzo Bellini, and Gaetano Donizetti.

## cadenza

An ornamented musical elaboration played in a free style by a soloist to display his or her virtuosity. Cadenzas are typically improvised—that is, created by a performer on the spot—though they can also be written out in advance. They most frequently occur near the end of a piece, at a point of harmonic tension when the piece is about to conclude.

## chorus

A section of an opera in which a large group of singers performs together, typically with orchestral accompaniment. Most choruses include at least four different vocal lines, in registers from low to high, with multiple singers per part. The singers are typically from a particular group of people who play a certain role on stage—soldiers, peasants, prisoners, and so on. Choruses may offer a moral or commentary on the plot, or participate in the dramatic action.

## Classical

A period of music history lasting from approximately 1750 to 1830, bordered by the earlier Baroque period and the later Romantic period. Contrasting with the ornamentation common to the preceding Baroque period, Classical music is characterized by simple and elegant melodies, regular harmonic accompaniment, and contrasts between melodic themes. The composers most closely associated with the Classical period include Joseph Haydn, Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart, and Ludwig van Beethoven.

## coloratura

A rapid and elaborate ornamentation by a solo singer, particularly common in operas of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Requiring vocal agility and a wide and high range, coloratura showcases the virtuosity of a singer by featuring repeating melodic figures, rapid scales, trills, and other embellishments.

## conductor

The person who directs the orchestra, setting the tempo, giving interpretive directions to the musicians, and generally holding all the musical elements of a performance together. In orchestra performance, the conductor typically stands on a podium in front of the players and uses a baton to communicate the meter and tempo, and his or her non-baton hand to indicate dynamics, phrasing, and articulation to the musicians. The gestures of a conductor can be likened to a non-verbal language that the musicians understand.

## contralto

A deep female voice, with a vocal range that extends lower than that of a mezzo-soprano. Contraltos are known for having a very wide range and for the power and depth of sound with which they can sing. As is the case for roles for basses, many of the earliest roles in opera for contraltos are comic roles, though nineteenth-century composers also wrote dramatic roles for female singers with a lower range.

## crescendo

A gradual raising of volume in music achieved by increasing the dynamic level. When music crescendos, the performers begin at a softer dynamic level and become incrementally louder. One of the most famous types of crescendos in opera, the Rossini crescendo, includes an increase in volume together with repeating melodic and rhythmic phrases, higher instrumental registers, and the gradual addition of instruments in order to create a particularly dramatic effect.

## diminuendo

A gradual lowering of volume in music achieved by decreasing the dynamic level. During a diminuendo, the performers begin at a louder dynamic level and become incrementally softer.

## dynamics

A musical trait pertaining to loudness and softness. During the eighteenth century, composers began indicating their desired intensity of volume in music by writing words such as piano (soft) and forte (loud) into the musical score. Dynamics encompass a spectrum from pianissimo (very soft) to piano (soft) to mezzo piano (moderately soft), all the way up to fortissimo (very loud). Music can shift to another dynamic level either suddenly or gradually, through a crescendo or diminuendo.

## ensemble

A musical piece for two or more soloists, accompanied by orchestra. Types of ensembles include duets (for two soloists), trios (for three soloists), and quartets (for four soloists). Sometimes singers will respond directly to one another during an ensemble. At other times, singers will each sing to themselves as if the other singers were not on stage. In ensembles, multiple characters may simultaneously express very different emotions from one another.

## finale

The last portion of an act, a finale consists of several musical sections that accompany an escalating dramatic tension. Finales frequently consist of multiple ensembles with different numbers of characters. When it occurs at the end of an early act in the opera, a finale may create a messy situation—and the resolution of this situation will only happen in subsequent acts. One type of finale common in comic operas, a chain finale, features characters entering or exiting from the stage to create unexpected combinations of characters, in turn increasing the opera's dramatic tension.

## forte

Meaning "loud" or "strong" in Italian, forte is a dynamic level in music that indicates a loud volume. Adding the suffix "-issimo" to a word serves as an intensifier—since forte means "loud," fortissimo means "very loud."

## harmony

The simultaneous sounding of pitches to produce chords, and the relationship between different chords as they succeed one another. Throughout much of Western music, systems of rules govern these progressions to help create our sense of musical tension, expectation, and conclusion. Tonal harmony is based on progressions of chords in relationship to a tonic (or home) key. In the 19th century, as composers sought novel sounds to reflect the originality of their invention, they began to employ chords and progressions of greater dissonance and greater distance from the home key. As such dissonances moved beyond mere sound effects into the musical structure itself, the traditional theory of tonal harmony began to become insufficient as a way to understand and describe musical structure.

## intermission

A break between acts of an opera. At the beginning of an intermission, the curtain will fall (that is, close) on stage, and the lights in the auditorium, called the house lights, will become brighter. Intermissions provide audiences with a chance to walk around, talk with one another, and reflect on what they have seen and what could happen next. The break in the performance may also correspond with a change of time or scene in the story of the opera—the next act may take place hours or months later, or be set in a different location. Usually lights will dim and a bell may sound to indicate that the intermission is drawing to a close and the opera is about to resume.

## legato

A type of articulation in which a melody is played with smooth connection between the notes. A legato passage does not include any pauses between notes or any accents at the beginnings of notes, as the notes blend into one another without a break. In contrast, a passage that is played staccato features notes played in a separated manner.

## Leitmotif

From the German for “leading motive,” a leitmotif is a recurring musical idea, or motive, that represents a particular person, object, idea, emotion, or place. This musical idea is usually a few seconds in length and can occur in the music’s melody, harmony, rhythm, or a combination of the three. Leitmotifs are most closely associated with the operas of Richard Wagner, where they are used repeatedly throughout the opera to provide unity; they also less frequently appear in operas of other composers, including Giuseppe Verdi and Richard Strauss.

## libretto

The text of an opera, including all the words that are said or sung by performers. Until the early eighteenth century, a composer would frequently set music to a pre-existing libretto, and any given libretto could thus be set to music multiple times by different composers. During the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, collaboration between the author of the libretto, known as the librettist, and the composer became more frequent. Some opera composers, most notably Richard Wagner, are known for writing their own text.

## maestro

A title of respect used to address a conductor. The term is often applied to conductors with several decades of experience. However, performers often use this honorific when addressing the conductor.

## melody

A succession of pitches that form an understandable unit. The melody of a piece consists of the tune that a listener can hum or sing. During arias, the singer will usually sing the main melody, though other instruments may play parts of the melody. Sometimes, such as during ensembles, multiple melodies can occur simultaneously.

## mezzo-soprano

A female voice with a range between that of a contralto and soprano. A mezzo-soprano's voice is slightly deeper than that of a soprano, so mezzo-sopranos are often cast in supporting roles as older women, including nurses, confidantes, or maids.

## opera buffa

A term applied to Italian comic operas from the mid-eighteenth through mid-nineteenth centuries. The plot of an opera buffa often features scenes and characters from everyday life and addresses a light or sentimental subject, concluding with a happy ending.

## opera seria

An eighteenth- or nineteenth-century Italian opera employing a noble and serious style. The plot of an opera seria often upholds morality by presenting conflicting emotions such as love versus duty, or by modeling enlightened rulers.

## operetta

Featuring spoken dialogue, songs, and dances, an operetta is a short theatrical piece. Shorter in duration than operas, operettas typically feature a light subject matter, incorporate melodies composed in a popular style, and feature spoken dialogue. Most popular from the mid-nineteenth century to the early twentieth century, the genre is the precursor of the American musical.

## ornamentation

An embellishment to the melody, rhythm, or harmony of music, intended to make a melody more expressive or ornate. Ornamentation can be either indicated through symbols written into the music or improvised by the performer.

## overture

An instrumental piece that occurs before the first act as an introduction to an opera. After the conductor enters the orchestra pit and takes a bow, the music for the overture begins. Most overtures are a few minutes in duration, and set the mood for the opera—even featuring musical themes that will occur later in the opera.

## piano

Abbreviated *p* in a musical score, piano indicates a soft dynamic level. Musicians may achieve a piano sound by using less bow, less air, or less force. In opera, soft music will often correspond with emotions of sadness or moments in the plot when a character is reflecting on a course of action or emotional state. Pianissimo is “very soft,” and can be so quiet that an audience may need to listen carefully in order to discern its melody and harmony.

## pitch

The quality of a musical sound corresponding to its perceived highness or lowness. Scientifically, pitch can be measured as the number of vibrations (or repetitions) of a sound wave per second, which is called its frequency. A sound with a low frequency, like a bass drum, will sound low and have a low pitch, while a sound with a high frequency, like a siren, will sound high.

## prima donna

Meaning “first lady” in Italian, the prima donna is the leading female role in an opera. The term may apply to the role or to the singer herself, who usually sings in the soprano register and is the star of the show. Since the nineteenth century, the term has also been applied to a singer of any gender with a self-centered and demanding personality.

## recitative

A type of vocal writing between speech and song that imitates the accents and inflections of natural speech. Composers often employ recitative for passages of text that involve quick dialogue and the advancement of plot, since the style allows singers to move rapidly through a large amount of text. Recitative may be accompanied either by keyboard or by the whole orchestra.

## rhythm

Rhythm refers to the way music unfolds over time; it is a series of durations in a range from long to short. Along with pitch, it is a basic and indispensable parameter of music. Rhythm is perceived in relation to an underlying beat and within the context of a meter. Western musical notation indicates to the performer the exact duration of each note or rest.

## Romantic

A period of music history lasting from approximately 1830 to 1900. Beginning in literature and later adopted by composers, romanticism reflected a newfound focus on individuality, nature, and emotional extremes. Music from the Romantic period often explores music’s redemptive power, focusing on the sublimity of nature, love, and the mysterious. Composers began to experiment with shortening and lengthening the standard forms and durations of musical works, and also added more expressive harmonies to convey the originality of their musical vision.

## SCORE

The complete musical notation for a piece, the score includes notated lines for all of the different instrumental and vocal parts that unite to constitute a musical composition. In an opera orchestra, the conductor follows the score during rehearsals and performances, while each performer follows his or her individual part.

## Singspiel

Literally “sung play,” a Singspiel is an opera with spoken dialogue. Singspiels are typically in German and are from the Classical or early Romantic eras. The plot of a Singspiel is usually comic in nature, and its music may include songs, choruses, and instrumental numbers that are separated by spoken dialogue.

## solo

A piece, musical passage, or line for a lone singer or other performer, with or without instrumental accompaniment. The most common type of solo in opera is the aria, which is composed for a single voice with orchestral accompaniment.

## soprano

The highest singing range for the female voice. Roles composed for soprano singers are typically among the leading roles in the opera and require soprano singers to show off their virtuosic flexibility and range.

## tempo

Literally “time” in Italian, tempo refers to the speed of a piece of music. Tempo is indicated in a score by a variety of conventional (often Italian) words—such as *allegro*, *adagio*, *vivace*, *moderato*, *grave*, and many more—that not only provide direction on the composer’s desired rate of speed, but also carry associations of gesture and character. For instance, *vivace* indicates not only a brisk speed but also a lively spirit. Additional tempo markings may indicate when a composer asks for a section of music to be sped up (such as “*accelerando*”) or slowed down (such as “*rallentando*”).

## tenor

The highest natural male vocal range. By the nineteenth century, the tenor had become the most common vocal range for male leading roles in operas. Tenor roles often feature high-pitched notes for male voice in order to showcase the singer’s range and power. A related voice type is the countertenor, with a range above that of a tenor and similar to that of a contralto.

## theme/motive

Themes are the melodic ideas that are musical building blocks for a piece. A theme is often recognizable as a distinct tune and may reappear in its original form or in altered form throughout the piece. A motif (or motive) is a brief musical idea that recurs throughout a musical work. Motives can be based on a melodic, rhythmic, or harmonic component, and their repetition makes them recognizable to the listener. In opera, musical motives are often symbolically associated with specific characters or dramatic ideas.

## timbre

Pronounced TAM-bruh, a French word that means “sound color.” It refers to the complex combination of characteristics that give each instrument or voice its unique sound. Just as we can recognize each other by the differences in our speaking voices, operatic singing voices are distinguishable by their unique timbres. Listeners can also identify orchestral instruments by their timbre without being able to see them. The creative combination of different instrumental timbres is one of the artistic aspects of orchestration.

## trill

A rapid alternation between two pitches that are adjacent to one another. Trills are a type of ornamentation, serving to embellish the melodic line, and appear regularly within *coloratura* passages. Trills also may appear near the end of a piece in order to prolong the musical tension before the music concludes.

## verismo

A movement in Italian theater and opera in the late 19th century that embraced realism and explored areas of society previously ignored on the stage: the poor, the lower-class, and the criminal. Its characters are driven by passion to defy reason, morality, and the law. In order to reflect these emotional extremes, composers of verismo opera developed a musical style that communicates raw and unfiltered passions. Musically, verismo operas react against the forced ornamentation of the *bel canto* style and instead emphasize a more natural setting of the text to music. Before its exploration on the operatic stage, the verismo aesthetic first developed within the realm of literature.

# OPERA REVIEW: *LA BOHÈME*, OCTOBER 22, 2019

Reviewed by \_\_\_\_\_

**Have you ever wanted to be a music and theater critic? Now's your chance!**

As you watch *La Bohème*, use the space below to keep track of your thoughts and opinions. What did you like about the performance? What didn't you like? If you were in charge, what might you have done differently? Think carefully about the action, music, and stage design, and rate each of the star singers. Then, after the opera, share your opinions with your friends, classmates, and anyone else who wants to learn more about Puccini's opera and this performance at the Met!

THE STARS:	STAR POWER	MY COMMENTS	
Ailyn Pérez as Mimì	*****		
Matthew Polenzani as Rodolfo	*****		
David Bizic as Marcello	*****		
Andrey Zhilikhovsky as Schaunard	*****		
Jongmin Park as Colline	*****		
Olga Kulchynska as Musetta	*****		
Arthur Woodley as Benoit and Alcindoro	*****		
Conductor Marco Armiliato	*****		
THE SHOW, SCENE BY SCENE	ACTION	MUSIC	SET DESIGN/STAGING
Rodolfo and Marcello are cold			
My opinion of this scene:	1-2-3-4-5	1-2-3-4-5	1-2-3-4-5
They are joined by Colline and Schaunard			
My opinion of this scene:	1-2-3-4-5	1-2-3-4-5	1-2-3-4-5
Benoit comes to collect the rent			
My opinion of this scene:	1-2-3-4-5	1-2-3-4-5	1-2-3-4-5

THE SHOW, SCENE BY SCENE	ACTION	MUSIC	SET DESIGN/STAGING
Rodolfo takes Mimi's hand and tells her about himself			
My opinion of this scene:	1-2-3-4-5	1-2-3-4-5	1-2-3-4-5
Mimi recounts her own story			
My opinion of this scene:	1-2-3-4-5	1-2-3-4-5	1-2-3-4-5
Rodolfo and Mimi's big love duet			
My opinion of this scene:	1-2-3-4-5	1-2-3-4-5	1-2-3-4-5
Crowds and celebrations in the street			
My opinion of this scene	1-2-3-4-5	1-2-3-4-5	1-2-3-4-5
Mimi buys a bonnet, and the friends take a seat at the Café Momus			
My opinion of this scene:	1-2-3-4-5	1-2-3-4-5	1-2-3-4-5
Musetta makes a scene and wins Marcello back			
My opinion of this scene:	1-2-3-4-5	1-2-3-4-5	1-2-3-4-5
A parade			
My opinion of this scene:	1-2-3-4-5	1-2-3-4-5	1-2-3-4-5
Mimi asks Marcello for help			
My opinion of this scene:	1-2-3-4-5	1-2-3-4-5	1-2-3-4-5
Rodolfo lies to Marcello, then tells him the truth			
My opinion of this scene:	1-2-3-4-5	1-2-3-4-5	1-2-3-4-5
Mimi dumps Rodolfo, but then they get back together			
My opinion of this scene:	1-2-3-4-5	1-2-3-4-5	1-2-3-4-5
Painting, writing, dinner, and horseplay in the attic			
My opinion of this scene:	1-2-3-4-5	1-2-3-4-5	1-2-3-4-5
Musetta arrives with Mimi			
My opinion of this scene:	1-2-3-4-5	1-2-3-4-5	1-2-3-4-5
Rodolfo and Mimi recall happier days			
My opinion of this scene:	1-2-3-4-5	1-2-3-4-5	1-2-3-4-5
Mimi's death			
My opinion of this scene:	1-2-3-4-5	1-2-3-4-5	1-2-3-4-5