

Program Note

In 1912, Giacomo Puccini was having his usual trouble finding a subject for his next opera and, incredibly, even considered Washington Irving's 1819 *Rip van Winkle*. In a letter to librettist Luigi Illica, he wrote, "I told you that I still want to *make people weep*: Therein lies everything. But do you think that this is easy? It's terribly difficult ... In the first place, where is one to look for a subject? And will our imagination find that sacrosanct, that enduring thing?" His previous operas entailed multifarious difficulties—it took seven librettists to fashion the text of *Manon Lescaut*, for example—but *La Rondine* just might take the cake (or Linzer torte, or mille-feuilles, given the Viennese origins and French milieu of the opera). To cite just a few, the third act was not finalized until the 1920 Vienna performance, three years after the Monte Carlo premiere; the character Prunier changed from tenor to baritone and back to tenor in the course of much chopping and changing; and the outbreak of World War I complicated the endeavor all along the way.

When Puccini was in Vienna in 1913 to supervise the Court Opera (now State Opera) production of *La Fanciulla del West*, he was approached by Siegfried Eibenschütz and Heinrich Berté, the directors of the Carl Theater (a showcase for crowd-pleasing operetta). They wanted Puccini to compose eight or ten musical numbers for insertion into spoken dialogue and offered him an enormous fee, plus 50% royalties. But Puccini damned the first libretto they gave him in no uncertain terms. When their second try, *La Rondine*, originally proffered to Franz Léhar, came his way, he was not over the moon, but neither was he entirely unenthused. (Puccini adored Léhar and hung an inscribed portrait of him in the dining room of Villa Puccini.) When he began work on his "light, sentimental opera with touches of comedy ... a sort of reaction against the repulsive music of today, which ... is very much like the war," he insisted that the dialogue be replaced with lyrical verse to be set to music, and librettist Giuseppe Adami obliged, albeit with maximum difficulty. Never, Adami wrote later, had work been more exhausting, arduous, infuriating, difficult, and desolating—he wrote 16 acts en route to the final three. And the final act was the "problem child" from the start: namely, how to bring about the parting of the lovers Ruggero and Magda. Should there be an anonymous letter? A revelation by Prunier and Lisette? An injunction from the banker Rambaldo, Magda's keeper? The ultimate solution was a letter from Ruggero's mother welcoming "Paulette" as the pure and virtuous future mother of her son's children. Magda, unable to bear deceiving the man she loves any longer, renounces him and departs.

The opera even embroiled Puccini in a politico-patriotic scandal. For personal and professional reasons, Puccini remained largely neutral during the First World War—though his comments that his native Italy could benefit from some of the "German order" so enraged his fellow countryman Arturo Toscanini that the one-time collaborators fell out bitterly for years. And when he refused to publicly condemn the German attacks on France, writer Alphonse Daudet's son Léon led a campaign against the composer, declaring that *La Rondine's* premiere in neutral Monte Carlo

constituted treason. Puccini felt impelled to refute the venom. In a lengthy letter to leading French newspapers, he attested that “My life and my art are the most valid testimony before the whole world of my patriotism” and that after Italy joined the fray on the side of the Allies, he gave the rights to his opera over to an Italian publisher.

When it finally did reach the stage, *La Rondine* drew further fire for its resemblances both to Verdi’s *La Traviata* and Puccini’s own *La Bohème*. Like *Traviata*’s courtesan Violetta Valéry, supported by the wealthy Baron Douphol but in love with the provincial Alfredo Germont, Magda is also a “kept woman,” the trophy of a rich banker named Rambaldo, and like Violetta, she gives up her luxurious life for true love. Her Alfredo is named Ruggero, also from a rural family but far more naïve than his predecessor in Verdi. Prunier’s palm-reading scene in Act I of *La Rondine* recalls the fortune-telling guests disguised as Gypsies at Flora’s party in *La Traviata*. And Magda’s maid, Lisette, who borrows her mistress’s finery to go to the dance hall, is herself borrowed from Johann Strauss II’s Adele in *Die Fledermaus*—how appropriate for Puccini to filch a motif from operetta for his fusion of opera and operetta. Finally, Prunier, Puccini’s society poet, seems to be an older, cynical version of Rodolfo in *La Bohème*, in love with Lisette but only if he can remake her, and devoid of Rodolfo’s youthful élan and idealism.

Operas create fables out of society’s real-life workings, and no one could fail to notice the effects of money and class in *La Rondine*. At the heart of this opera, money and dreams of true love are at odds. “Money, nothing but money!,” Magda exclaims in Act I; people in the crowd at Bullier’s in Act II ask over and over, “Who’s paying?,” “Are you rich?,” “Is that pearl real?” The students who proposition the disguised Magda lament their lack of ready cash; the opportunistic Prunier cannot help wondering whether Rambaldo’s flashy emerald is genuine; and the lovers are broke in Act III, with creditors chasing them and Ruggero asking his parents for money. One remembers the heartbroken Rodolfo crying, “Non basta amor!,” “Love is not enough!,” in *La Bohème*. The clash between old-fashioned, rural notions of women’s purity before marriage with the urban system whereby wealthy bourgeois men buy the favors of pretty, poverty-stricken young women also recalls many a previous opera.

Puccini lavished exacting labors on this work, and its music has many intriguing, enchanting aspects. The diegetic “big tune” in Act I is “Chi il bel sogno di Doretta,” a “story song” of a type common in Silver Age operettas ever since Léhar’s *The Merry Widow* and its “Vilja-Lied” in 1905. Both arias are fairy tales—in Puccini’s instance, the story of humble Doretta who turns down the offer of riches from a smitten king because she loves a poor student. The aria’s introduction is played on an onstage piano before the orchestra takes over the accompaniment for this aria-as-“valse lente,” a sensuous, French variety of the waltz, with its gorgeous melody for the violins, with falling thirds, Scotch-snap rhythms, and devastating (and deceptive) simplicity. (Waltzes, incidentally, multiply throughout this opera, along with a tango theme for

Prunier, a slow foxtrot for Magda's and Ruggero's duet "Perchè mai cercate di saper" in Act II, and a "Tempo di Polka" when the young women are recommending well-known Parisian night spots for Ruggero to visit.) Prunier cannot finish Doretta's story; he does not know the ending, he declares, and hands the conclusion over to Magda, who puts words to the violin tune. Shortly after, when Prunier reads Magda's palm, he gives us another of the hyper-lyrical moments we all love in Puccini: "Perhaps, like the swallow, you will migrate across the seas, toward a sun-filled land of dreams." At the title word "rondine," "swallow," we hear the G in the bass rubbing softly against the F-sharps in the voice and orchestra in a demonstration of love's capacity to pierce.

No commentator can resist pointing out a surprising quotation Puccini includes in Prunier's music, from Richard Strauss's *Salome*. When Prunier comically conflates the elderly aunt in Magda's wistful remembrance of a youthful episode with her mustachioed, would-be lover, he then holds forth on the women who would be more his type: Galatea, Berenice, Francesca, Salome. Puccini was present at an early staging in Graz of the scandalous Strauss adaptation of Oscar Wilde's play, with Mahler, Schoenberg, and—maybe—the teenaged Hitler also in attendance. The Salome theme he quotes is that associated with her lust for John the Baptist; it is a bite-sized quotation, and doubtless those not in the know missed it. But for those who "got it," the commentary on the radical modernism of that opera is a delicious detail. In fact, Puccini rises to the modernist challenge by bringing back the advanced harmonic style of *La Fanciulla del West* in *Rondine*, with sudden shifts of key, pungent discords, bitonality (two keys at once) in Lisette's music, intense chromaticism that obscures the tonality, and harmonic progressions in the crowd scenes that are wonderfully evocative of a jumbled mass of humanity. Puccini is a master of big ensemble scenes in which choruses and soloists mix, separate into smaller groups, fade away to two voices or even one (for example, the solo voice of Dawn that warns "Do not trust love!" near the end of Act II). The first two acts in particular are dominated by such writing.

The third act opens rhapsodically in a lovers' paradise on the Côte d'Azur, but Ruggero's announcement of "a secret" for his beloved spells the beginning of the end. As Magda, alone on stage, wonders what to do, we hear a reminiscence of Cio-Cio-San's puppet-like music in *Madama Butterfly* as she too agonizes about whether to return to her former life as a geisha or take her own life. We notice that Magda does not tell her beloved the whole truth, knowing that a complete revelation would destroy him, and we note as well that Puccini ends this sad tale, not with death and a fortissimo blaze of musical passion, but quietly, delicately. If this is not his customary way to "make people weep," it works nevertheless.

—Susan Youens

Susan Youens is the J. W. Van Gorkom Professor of Music at the University of Notre Dame and has written eight books on the music of Franz Schubert and Hugo Wolf.