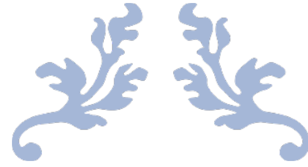
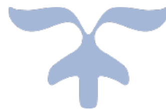


REVIEW

The Romantic World of Puccini: A New Critical Appraisal of the Operas by Iris J. Arnesen



DECEMBER 1, 2022

SAVANNAH SCOTT
MUSC 5708

Review

Arnesen, Iris J. *The Romantic World of Puccini: A New Critical Appraisal of the Operas.* Jefferson, N.C., 2009.

"…the hour of waking dreams, when hope struggles with melancholy…"

It is rare that a critical volume of a composer's operas revolves around a singular phrase plucked from a forgettable scene from an infrequently performed opera. However, in the case of *The Romantic World of Puccini: A New Critical Appraisal of the Operas*, Arnesen does just that.

In contrast with nearly all other volumes written on Puccini's operas which analyze his works in (more or less) standard terms—plot, character development, relationship between the libretto and the original source material, musical analysis, and historical context—Arnesen analyzes his operas through what she calls "The Rose Cycle"—an alternate world where (most) all of Puccini's operas are connected. The concept around which this world revolves is captured by the chorus in *Manon Lascaut* when speaking of the sunset, "…the hour of waking dreams, when hope struggles with melancholy" (16).

Before diving into the novel concept of the world of "The Rose Cycle," Arnesen follows the lead of most modern Puccini authors by opening the book with a lengthy defense of Puccini's

works. While it hardly seems necessary do so now—as Puccini's operas are among the most frequently produced in the world—historically, the composer has faced overwhelming criticism for intellectual, musical, and thematic banality. Arnesen argues that much of the distaste for Puccini's work is rooted in the inherent comparison to and bias toward that of Verdi. While this summation is not unique to Arnesen (in fact, many predecessors such as Carner Mosco wrote of Puccini being the expected but failed "heir apparent" to Verdi[i]), she nonetheless, draws a new and interesting distinction between the two composers.

Arenesen posits that the main difference between the two composers' works—and essentially why Puccini's is found to be wanting—is simply a misunderstood juxtaposition between the feminine and masculine perspectives. Where Verdi operas tend toward big, masculine themes such as "the individual and the state, or between personal desire and the demands of conscience" (1), Puccini's are much softer, nuanced, and deeply intimate with an unyielding devotion to the complexity and quiet strength of his heroines. A devotion that has been historically lost on critics.

Arnesen derides such critics for misunderstanding Puccini's heroines as weak, pathetic, and helpless creatures who ultimately meet their demise in the naïve pursuit of love. On the contrary, Puccini revered his female characters with absolute adoration inspired directly by the 12th century French Troubadours and their songs of courtly love. It was this ideal of courtly love which held the male protagonist as a slave to love who languished in misery, devoted to the all-powerful and unattainable woman—a characterization found throughout the Puccini cannon.

In order to truly understand how Puccini operas fit into the operatic repertoire, it is important to understand the *romance* genre itself—a genre of which Puccini was a true purveyor. The ideals of the Troubadours found themselves at the center of an enthusiastic revival during the Romance Era. Major elements of the *romance* genre—inspired by the Troubadours—are found in Puccini operas, everything from love as a form of madness, to love as painful but exquisite torture, to (perhaps most important to Puccini), the night as a refuge for lovers. Additionally, Puccini found himself writing at a time when the *fin de siècle* art movement was sweeping its way through Europe. Art of the *fin de siècle* was dominated by metaphors of women as animals, mythical creatures, and most relevant to Puccini, women were often represented both as flowers and the moon (5).

As is found throughout the book, Arnesen provides a distinctly feminist perspective on how Puccini was influenced by the *romance* genre and how his stance provided a sharp departure from those of his peers. Arnesen propounds that while most of Puccini's *romantic* contemporaries in the arts used similar imagery of the *fin de siècle* to represent women, their attitudes toward them were vastly different. Where Puccini celebrated the liberated and sexually powerful woman, most of his contemporaries were simultaneously disgusted yet obsessed with them.

As Arnesen describes it, women of the *fin de siècle* were basically divided into two categories, the Madonna and the whore. The Madonna (symbolized by flowers and the moon) was chaste, passive, innocent, natural, unburdened by human intelligence and therefore, unthreatening. The whore, on the other hand (symbolized by snakes, mythological creatures, and

water sprites), was an unnatural, cunning, and a therefore menacing creature who possessed an unquenchable thirst to drag man down through depravity to death. This representation speaks to the "…the loathing and disgust that decent, Victorian-era men naturally felt toward beautiful women who dragged them into bed and forced them to have incredible sex" (15). This Madonna/whore dichotomy is exemplified in many operas of the time like Saint-Saëns' *Samson et Dalila* and Bizet's *Carmen,* but seemed to be utterly foreign to Puccini. As Arnesen describes it,

> "Puccini had no conception of, at least dramatically, of either a "madonna" or a "whore." His heroines are young, beautiful, passionate, and sexual beings. To him, sex was life affirming, and the very idea of despising or punishing his unmarried female characters for engaging in it would have been ludicrous to him. The concept of chasteness as a positive characteristic of women seems to have been alien to his mind" (14).

While his *romantic* peers remained obsessed yet horrified by the strong, sexually liberated woman, Puccini was enthralled by her. Rather than being terrified of being caught in the clutches of such a creature, Puccini's male characters are positively euphoric to be at their mercy. A true *romantic,* Puccini fused both the courtly love of the Troubadours and the imagery of the *fin de siècle* to present his heroines in a sublimely positive and distinctly Puccinian light.

After a rousing defense of both Puccini and his misunderstood themes, Arnesen takes the reader on a deep dive into her world of the "Rose Cycle"—an alternate universe, not unlike Wagner's *Ring Cycle*, where (nearly) all of Puccini's operas and heroines are connected. Like any world, the world of the "Rose Cycle" is governed by a set of unspoken laws: day equals death and night equals life, existence is but a waking dream, and finally, that wealth and power debar one from love.

The first law, which undoubtedly found its roots in the songs of the Troubadours, where illicit love blossomed under the cover of night, takes the concept to a new level in the world of the "Rose Cycle." In this world, the coming of day doesn't just mean that love will die, but that the heroine herself will die. Beginning with the first opera of the cycle *Manon Lascaut*, Puccini repeatedly connects his heroine and her power with the light of the moon. Under the moonlight, the Puccini heroine and her love affairs flourish, but at the break of day, just as the moon vanishes, so does the life-light of the Puccini heroine. In *Tosca,* both the title character and her lover Cavaradossi die at dawn as do Butterfly in *Madama Butterfly* and Liu in *Turandot*. In *La bohéme,* Mimì dies at daybreak when a ray of sunshine falls across her face. Similarly, the title character in *Suor Angelica* dies when the moon passes behind a cloud. More tangentially, in *Turandot,* Prince Calaf cannot be executed until the moon has risen (when the title character regains her killing power).

Building on this theme, the second—and perhaps most important—law maintains that life in this world is but a waking dream as described in the quote from *Manon Lascaut*, "…the hour of waking dreams, when hope struggles with melancholy." Arnesen explains this rather abstract

concept as the intense sadness paired with almost desperate joy that pervade all Puccini operas. This is often realized in his operas as passionate lovers who struggle to keep hope that their might love might last forever in the face of looming death. Arnesen cites letters written by the composer which suggest that Puccini himself struggled immensely with fear of his own mortality. She goes on to conjecture that it was his personal fight to maintain hope while fighting against the passage time which inspired this world of the waking dream. As Arnesen puts it,

> "The waking dream is a period of hope, during which Puccini's lovers attempt to Persuade themselves that through love, they can make the night last forever" (17).

The final law in this world features an antagonistic relationship between love and money. In the late 19th century, *romance* culture dictated that young artistic types were impervious to the lure of power and money. They found themselves instead devoted to nature and love. Again, Puccini takes this ideal to the next level in the world of the "Rose Cycle." As Arnesen delineates it, "His characters have their choice: gold and/or power, or love. They cannot have both" (18).

Throughout the book, Arenesen draws connections between Wagner's *Ring Cycle* and Puccini's "Rose Cycle" citing Puccini's immense admiration of Wagner. She goes on to posit that Puccini drew inspiration for this final law from Wagner's character Alberich who in choosing gold and power over love, condemns himself and a host of ensuing characters in the cycle.

This connection between what Arnesen calls “Alberich’s Choice” and the “Rose Cycle” leads to the next important defining feature of this parallel world—its archetypes. According to Arnesen, the characters in this world fall into 4 main archetypal groups—the Alberichs, the Vacillators, the Artists, and most importantly, the Lady of the Rose.

For simplicity, the first character type is named after Alberich of Wagner’s *Ring Cycle* who steals the gold of the Rhine after his renunciation of love which sets off a series of unfortunate events for all involved. In the “Rose Cycle” the Alberichs are generally mature, wealthy men such as Alcindoro in *La bohéme* and Scarpia in *Tosca* who suffer miserably for their allegiance to gold. Despite being fully aware of the soul-destroying repercussions of wealth and power, the Alberichs suffer far worse fates than the doomed lovers of the waking dream—they lose themselves entirely to lives devoid of love. The two exceptions to this are generalization are the last two operas of the cycle where the Alberichs are the princess aunt in *Suor Angelica* and the title character in *Turandot*—the only Alberich who finds salvation through love.

Proximally related to the Alberichs, the Vacillators find themselves initially seduced by money, but ultimately renounce its temptation in favor of love. These characters such as Musetta in *La bohéme,* Dick Johnson in *La Fanciulla del West,* and the title character in *Manon Lascaut* are met with a far less tragic treatment than the Alberichs. Where the Alberichs lose themselves and any desire for love, the Vacillators are ultimately redeemed by it.

Although the Vacillators come dangerously close to joining the ranks of the Alberichs, they always reside within the community of the Artists. Puccini loved the Artists who forsake money and power for their art and love. They live humbly, love wholly, and despise gold and anyone who has sworn allegiance to it. In the world of the “Rose Cycle” it is the *joie de vivre* of this archetype which brings the characteristic ecstatic joy to the waking dream. The Artists include the bohemians and Mimì in *La bohéme*, Cavaradossi and his lover Tosca in *Tosca,* and the title character in *Madama Butterfly*. In keeping with the third law of this parallel world, Arnesen finds it important to note that none of these artists are ever paid for their work, which ultimately makes them that much more pure of heart and spirit.

None of the Artists’ virtue, however, compares to the archetype for whom the cycle is named, the Lady of the Rose. As Arnesen describes the soprano heroines who comprise this archetype,

> “…[they] have wholeheartedly chosen love, never wavering, never tempted by gold. Puccini used flowers, especially roses, to symbolize this character’s moral purity, and her faith in undying love” (20).

In some way or another, each of his heroines are strongly associated with flower imagery, more specifically—with roses. In a departure from the *fin de siècle* movement whose similar association was inherently patriarchal, Puccini’s was distinctly feminist. The flower-women of the *fin de siècle* found beauty in their innocent fragility, which required protection by men.

Alternatively, the Lady of the Rose's beauty was by virtue of her quiet strength. A strength that far surpassed that of her male counterpart.

After a comprehensive elucidation of the "Rose Cycle," Arensen follows they lead of her predecessors and dedicates the rest of the book to the summary and analysis of the operas which fall into the cycle (all but *Edgar* and *Gianni Schicchi*) in chronological order. What sets Arnesen's appraisal apart from all other critical volumes on Puccini is her use of the "Rose Cycle" as an analytical tool to dissect the operas from a fresh, unique, and distantly feminist perspective. Arnesen goes beyond the traditional analysis by taking a deep dive into the evolution of the Lady of the Rose herself, as if all the soprano heroines in the cycle are but one character. From this perspective we see both the Lady of the Rose and Puccini mature, expand, and transform together. While this approach may not serve as the optimal strategy for introducing a Puccini novice to his works, it is an incredibly rich resource for the well-versed to deepen their connection with and understanding of his works—works which indelibly revolve around the quote, "…the hour of waking dreams, when hope struggles with melancholy" (16).

[i] Mosco Carner, *Puccini: A Critical Biography* (New York: Holmes &Meier Publishers, 1992).