

Dying With Honor
Representations of Suicide Among the Titular Heroines of Giacomo Puccini

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores the representations of suicide among three titular heroines in Giacomo Puccini's operas: *Tosca*, *Suor Angelica*, and *Cio-Cio-San*. As women in highly rigid patriarchal societies, these characters are relegated to lives dictated by oppressive outside forces of anti-feminine culture. I argue that the suicides of these characters are not a representation of intrinsic weakness but are an exhibition of independence and agency to control their own fates. This research combines the specific disciplines of suicidology, feminism, opera criticism and the soprano voice. While there are plentiful resources covering Puccini's biographical information and theoretical analyses of each opera, this paper fills an existing gap in its performance-centered research approach. Interviews with celebrated interpreters of these heroines present a personal perspective behind the vocal, physical, and emotional demands of performing these roles. A detailed look at the words of the libretti and letters from Puccini himself provide insight into his desire to infuse these characters with strength and intelligence. The significance behind the composer's preference for large, powerful voices known as the *lirico-spinto* soprano is also explored. The operatic suicides of *Tosca*, *Suor Angelica*, and *Cio-Cio-San* each exhibit autonomy and strength, debunking the stereotype of the "tragic soprano." A holistic and detailed survey of these heroines reveals that their suicides transform them into women who are no longer passive—the acted upon become the actor.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

When considering Puccini's most iconic heroines the titular Tosca, Suor Angelica, and Cio-Cio San immediately emerge as three of his most notable characters. Each of these operas feature an iconic soprano role infused with pathos, culminating in death by suicide. Existing scholarship laments the overwhelming frequency of female death and subjugation in opera, major components of *Tosca*, *Suor Angelica*, and *Madama Butterfly*. Regrettably these suicidal sopranos are often coalesced into the same category as fellow Puccini heroines Mimì or Manon Lescaut, who die from an illness in the loving embrace of a tenor. Instead, it is important to afford suicidal operatic heroines individual and specific analytical consideration.

These characters' methods of suicide differ but the rationale behind all three of their suicides is heartbreakingly similar. Before delving into their individual situations, it is important to understand basic concepts of suicidology. Suicidology is the scientific study of suicide that focuses on the sociological components of suicidal behavior. The evolution of suicide's reputation from individual to sociological is largely credited to two main scholars: Émile Durkheim and John Baechler. Each character is treated as an individual "case study" with application of sociological principles to their situations to better understand the context of their deaths.

In addition to investigating these characters' subjection to female-specific life-altering issues, I explore specific quotes from the libretti with a focus on these women's final words. Interviews with four sopranos who specialize in this repertoire provide a

personal look behind the women who perform these heroines onstage. There is a specific focus on Puccini's own views and his intentions for these heroines as revealed by his personal letters. While there are many resources that cover Puccini's biographical information and theoretical analyses of each opera, this research fills an existing gap in its performance-centered research approach. This paper is a complete informative guide for performers who are engaged and/or interested in these three roles.

While each of these operas is beloved by performers and audiences alike, several operatic scholars opine on the lack of intrinsic strength among these three suicidal characters. However, Puccini allows each of these aforementioned heroines the ability to write their own ending, elevating their status to that of an *actor* rather than solely a woman who is *acted upon*. Although Tosca, Suor Angelica, and Cio-Cio San are all marginalized as women in a patriarchal society, they each display inspiring inner strength within these limitations. While the course of their lives is often dictated by outside forces beyond their control, the suicides of these characters do not represent an intrinsic weakness but are an exhibition of independence and agency to determine their own fates.

CHAPTER 2

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Arguing this topic demands multi-faceted research in the areas of suicidology and manifestations of suicide on the operatic stage. It is also important to research feminist perspectives on opera, particularly those which address the tragic soprano archetype. This project requires a deep historical and sociological analysis of each of the three characters, along with studies about Giacomo Puccini, his librettists, and their working relationships.

SUICIDOLOGY AND OPERATIC SUICIDES

Suicidology is the study of suicide, suicidal behavior, and suicide prevention. Suicidology is rapidly evolving even in the 2020's, over a century after Puccini's time. While applying the more developed information from the twenty-first century provides some valuable insight and specific nomenclature, the scholarly focus remains centered on the leading sociologist of Puccini's day, Émile Durkheim (1858-1917).

Any serious study of suicidology begins with Durkheim, who is widely considered the founder of suicidology due to his revolutionary work *Le Suicide*, published in 1897. The publication includes two sections: the first detailing "Extra-Social Factors" and the second detailing "Social Causes and Social Types." In the latter section Durkheim classifies suicides into three main categories: egoistic, altruistic, and anomic.¹ These new classifications each assert that suicide is actually a social behavior, rather than an individual act. Durkheim includes many case studies and statistics from throughout

¹ Émile Durkheim, *Suicide*, trans. John A. Spaulding and George Simpson (New York: Free Press, 1997).

continental Europe to support his claims. These show contributing factors such as marital status, financial troubles, and country of residence all support certain trends pertaining to suicide.² Durkheim asserts that males are generally more afflicted by suicide, arguing that women are too weak and timid to exhibit the energy, courage, and planning required of a suicidal person.³ A highly discussed publication that swept the continent, *Le Suicide* and/or discussions about Durkheim's findings were likely known to Puccini due to the close chronological proximity of Durkheim's publication and the composition dates of the operas considered in this project. Preceding Durkheim's pioneering work, Italian physician Enrico Morselli authored *Il suicidio, saggio di statistica morale comparata* (*Suicide: An Essay on Comparative Moral Statistics*) in 1883 in Puccini's native Italian language. The Morselli consists mostly of statistics in contrast to Durkheim's more literary style, but the idea of introducing sociological concepts to the issue of suicide is likewise a major theme. Subsections of the Morselli include "Social Influences," and "Influences Arising out of the Biological and Social Issues of the Individual," among others.⁴ One journal article in particular, "Pre-Durkheim Suicidology" emphasizes the importance of Morselli's publication and how it paved the way for Durkheim's massive impact. Authors Goldney and Schioldann argue Morselli is deserving of "at least equal status as the more generally recognized Durkheim."⁵ *Il suicidio's* publication date of

² Ibid.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Enrico Morselli, *Suicide: An Essay on Comparative Moral Statistics* (New York: Arno Press, 1975).

⁵ Robert D. Goldney and Johann A. Schioldann, "Pre-Durkheim Suicidology," *Crisis: The Journal of Crisis Intervention and Suicide Prevention* 21, no. 4 (2000), 186.

1883 meant Puccini had access to these new discussions surrounding suicide in his own vernacular language for nearly two decades before the composition of *Tosca*.⁶ Although it is not absolutely certain that Puccini read Morselli's work, it is reasonable to conclude he was familiar with this rising hot topic of viewing suicide through a sociological lens. The growing public interest in suicidology in *fin-de-siècle* Europe could certainly offer an explanation as to why Puccini began to select plots featuring suicidal women.

The shift away from viewing suicide as a purely medical or psychological problem to a complex sociological issue continues to have a profound and lasting effect on 20th and 21st century suicidology scholarship. Authors Linda and Michael Hutcheon argue the same sociological perspective applies to representations of suicide in the operatic repertoire, writing "On the operatic stage, it is often the individual's relation to society that frames and conditions the decision to take one's own life. The individual and the social are not separable in operatic representations of suicide."⁷ According to 20th-century suicidologist Edwin S. Shneidman who continued to build on Durkheim's base of sociological thought, anomic suicide "comes from the perception that one's relationship to one's society—the social world—has radically changed."⁸

I especially value Kathryn K. Johnson's excellent explanation of anomic suicide:

Anomic suicide shares with egoistic the characteristic that the bonds linking the individual to the society as a whole are loosened. In anomic suicide . . . it is not

⁶Premiered in 1900 in Rome, *Tosca* is Puccini's earliest opera to include a suicide.

⁷Linda and Michael Hutcheon, *Opera: The Art of Dying* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2004), 126.

⁸ Edwin S. Shneidman, *Comprehending Suicide: Landmarks in 20th-Century Suicidology* (Washington, DC: American Psychological Association, 2001), 34.

the individual who transcends the norms of society, but the society which loses its ability to impose regulation on the individual. . . . Either the society itself, falls apart through political and social transformation or the individual's life experiences, either through excessive failure or unexpected success, no longer fit the societal context that was binding to him in the past.⁹

John Baechler's *Suicides* is another landmark publication that seeks to classify types of suicides, focusing on the motivation behind them. Baechler argued that the root of suicide is explained through personal factors, concluding that it is an attempt to solve a problem.¹⁰ He calls suicide a "*behavior* rather than an act because only rarely is it circumscribed by the precise moment when it is accomplished."¹¹ Baechler proposes four types of suicides that can be used separately or in conjunction with Durkheim's three original classifications: escapist, aggressive, oblativ, and ludic suicides. My interest lies in the escapist and oblativ categories, as the suicides of all three heroines seem to befit both descriptions.

An overwhelmingly common perspective unifies the majority of scholars, the librettists, and the composer himself: these are men writing about women and their situations and feelings, who then prescribe certain actions, emotions, and occasional biases upon them. The literature problematizing the male gaze in literature, music, and other arts is rich, but it lies outside the scope of the present literature review. Nonetheless, it is important to include research specifically with female authorship on the topic of suicidal women.

⁹ Kathryn K. Johnson, "Durkheim Revisited: Why Do Women Kill Themselves?" *Suicide and Life-Threatening Behavior* 9, no. 3 (1979): 146.

¹⁰ Jean Baechler, *Suicides*, trans. Barry Cooper (New York: Basic Books, 1979), 11.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

Silvia Cannetto's "Women and Suicidal Behavior" continues the theme of emphasizing sociological elements of suicidal behavior. Cannetto specifically writes about the influence of cultural and political factors, stating "cultural acceptability appears to be an important influence on method choice."¹² The author writes about traditional views of suicide as a masculine behavior, which most likely finds its roots in Durkheim's *Le Suicide*. "Women were assumed to be immune to suicide as long as they acted 'like women,' that is as long as they stayed subordinate to men within 'traditional' institutions."¹³ This article poses the question of *why* women resort to suicide and answers that they often feel stuck, without a resolution to their current problem or undesirable situation. Not only do males have more mobility but are also "allowed a wider range of means" to resolve disputes and seek justice.¹⁴ Bluntly stated, suicide is seen as a symptom of "unfeminine nature."¹⁵ Kathryn K. Johnson's journal article likewise affirms suicide is generally considered as a "male phenomenon."¹⁶ This raises a relevant question in my research, since the only instances of suicide in Puccini operas involve female characters.

In addition to suicidal women, the functional role of female opera characters is central to my topic. There is currently much dispute surrounding the power and status of women in operatic plots. The fallen female is undoubtedly a stereotype in opera, and

¹² Silvia Cannetto, "Women and Suicidal Behavior: A Cultural Analysis," *American Journal of Orthopsychiatry* 78, no. 2 (2008): 260.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 261.

¹⁴ Cannetto, "Women and Suicidal Behavior," 263.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶ Johnson, "Durkheim Revisited," 145.

death of the female lead is especially common among the operas most produced today. The “ABC” trio of *Aida*, *La bohème*, and *Carmen*¹⁷ all have the death of the prima donna in the final scene in common. Catherine Clément addressed this problem head on in her book *Opera, or the Undoing of Women*, published in 1988. Clément, a trailblazer in the world of feminist music criticism, is the first scholar to address the prevalence of the death of female characters in opera.¹⁸ She goes beyond literal death, also discussing metaphorical death and the repression of female characters onstage. Clément spends a significant portion of the book detailing the case of Cio-Cio-San, writes briefly about Tosca, but does not cover Suor Angelica at all.¹⁹ In the foreword to Clément’s book, Susan McClary, who later authored her own book *Feminine Endings*, argues that women are the “jewels” of opera, but “the role of a jewel, a decorative object, is not the deciding role.”²⁰ I refute this assertion in my project.

Research studies combining both suicidology and opera criticism are particularly useful resources. The publications regarding manifestations of suicide on the operatic stage are fairly limited, but a few scientific scholars have contributed articles in scholarly journals. Emab Salib’s “Suicide in Puccini’s Operas!” is perhaps the most closely related publication to my project topic. The article is specific to Puccini and his operatic compositions, authored by a Doctor of Psychiatry and published in a medical journal.

¹⁷ The “ABC shows” reference is common vernacular in the opera houses of the United States.

¹⁸ *Opera, Or, The Undoing of Women*, by Catherine Clément (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1988).

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁰ Susan McClary, foreword to *Opera, Or, The Undoing of Women*, by Catherine Clément, 5.

Salib not only explores the prevalence of suicides in Puccini's operas, but briefly explores the common threads between his suicidal characters. He notes:

All suicide victims in Puccini's operas were unmarried young women with considerable social and psychiatric morbidity, not that different from what we observe in our practice, especially when assessing suicide risk factors. It is interesting, however, to note that none of Puccini's suicide victims were men!²¹

Salib comments that Puccini portrayed acts of suicide with "remarkable realism"²² and notes "in his treatment of female suicide, Puccini combined compassion and pity for his heroines with a strong streak of sadism, hence the emotional appeal."²³ Graeme Feggetter's "Suicide in Opera" provides a more general overview of the topic. Feggetter offers three distinct views of operatic suicide: the first is suicide as rational and heroic, as seen in the operas of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries: the second a romantic concept growing from Goethe's *The Sufferings of Young Werther*, and the third, a more realistic approach.²⁴ The Puccini heroines' suicides appear to belong to the third category, falling in line with the verismo plots of Puccini and his contemporaries. Feggetter states these suicides would not be out of place as psychiatric case studies.²⁵ I believe this to be an accurate assessment and contributing factor to why a significant portion of my research is focused on suicidology itself. Feggetter writes that "operatic characters

²¹ Emab Salib, "Suicide in Puccini's Operas!," *Medicine, Science, and the Law* 42, no. 1 (2002): 27.

²² Ibid.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Graeme Feggetter, "Suicide in Opera," *British Journal of Psychiatry* 136, no. 6 (1980): 553.

²⁵ Feggetter, "Suicide in Opera," 554.

usually give their reasons for their suicidal behaviour in considerable detail,”²⁶ which I will now explore by reviewing the libretti of the three operas of my focus.

THE LIBRETTI

The words of the heroines themselves are the most transparent and valuable insights into their thoughts on death, suicide, and their current relationships. While the way Puccini sets these words to music often reinforces or perhaps reveals additional elements at play, I am choosing to focus solely on the libretto, irrespective of musical setting for the purpose of this literature review. I am seeking answers for several questions about each heroine in their respective libretto: What are their views on death? Do these women welcome it? Is the notion of suicide specifically mentioned, either by them or others? Are the heroines explicitly encouraged to take their own life by other characters? How do they view their current relationships and their relationship to society?

Nico Castel’s *The Complete Puccini Libretti* serves as my resource for each of the three operas. Castel provides a word-for-word Italian to English translation (including stage directions marked in the score) along with an International Phonetic Alphabet transcription for optimal Italian singing diction.²⁷ Each guide begins with basic information including the librettists, premiere date, source material, setting, a list of characters, and a detailed plot summary. Figure 2.1 shows the introductory page of Castel’s “Tosca” libretto.

²⁶ Ibid., 553.

²⁷ Castel’s *The Complete Puccini Libretti* covers every Puccini opera in the canon.

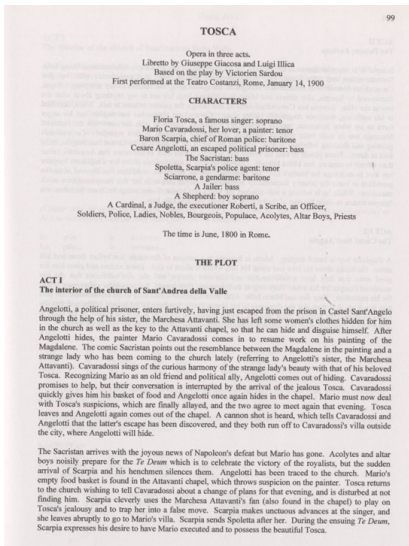


FIGURE 2.1: Information Page from Castel’s *Tosca*, 99.²⁸

The Castel libretti are considered the gold standard for Italian opera in opera houses in the United States. They have proven to be an instrumental resource in my career as a performer, and now as a scholar as well. I examine each libretto in the following order:

Tosca, *Suor Angelica*, and *Madama Butterfly*.

Tosca (1900) librettists Luigi Illica and Giuseppe Giacosa were frequent collaborators of Giacomo Puccini. Illica and Giacosa crafted the libretto for prior Puccini operas such as *La bohème*, but *Tosca* marked their first venture into writing a libretto where the prima donna took her own life rather than succumb to a fatal illness. The essence of *Tosca*’s plot is a love triangle between Tosca, her lover Mario Cavaradossi, and the vile chief of police Baron Scarpia. Scarpia is known throughout Rome as a man of immense authority and influence. He physically, sexually, and mentally abuses Tosca. The height of their conflict comes in act two, when Scarpia tortures Tosca with the

²⁸ Giacomo Puccini and Nico Castel, “Tosca,” in *The Complete Puccini Libretti*, vol. 2, ed. Marcie Stapp (Geneseo NY: Leyerle, 1994), 99.

screams of her lover, his prisoner Mario, whom he is interrogating. When Scarpia sings “Si, t’avrò” (yes, I’ll have you),²⁹ Tosca exclaims “Ah! Piuttosto giù m’avvento!” (I would rather throw myself out the window!).³⁰ This statement foreshadows how she will take her own life in the next act by leaping from the Castel Sant’Angelo. Shortly following is the famous aria “Vissi d’arte,” one of the most beloved soprano arias in the repertoire. In “Vissi d’arte” Tosca reaches an anagnorisis that even after living “correctly” and adhering to society’s ideal of a perfect female, she is but a pawn at the hands of men in control. A few moments later when Tosca plunges the knife into Scarpia, she cries “Questo è il bacio di Tosca!” (This is the kiss of Tosca!).³¹ This phrase reveals a transformation for Tosca, as she completely turns the tables by changing the feminine, sexual connotations of a kiss to a violent, “unfeminine” act. The final phrase in act two solidifies Tosca’s strength, as she exclaims “E avanti a lui tremava tutta Roma!” (and before him trembled all Rome!).³² Tosca’s courage and strength are now undeniable—she alone has defeated the most powerful man in Rome.

The evidence of Tosca’s outright strength continues in act three. The stage directions in both the Ricordi score and Castel libretto read that Spoletta throws himself on Tosca, but she “pushes him away so violently that he almost falls back into the stair well.”³³ After rushing to the parapet of the Castel Sant’Angelo, Tosca shouts her last words; the blazing battle cry “O Scarpia, avanti a dio!” (Oh Scarpia, we shall meet before

²⁹ Puccini and Castel, “Tosca,” 162.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Ibid., 169.

³² Ibid., 170.

³³ Ibid., 184.

God).³⁴ Although I am not diving into the realm of musical analysis for the purpose of this literature review, I find it necessary to note that the phrase ends on a searing high B-flat, further adding strength and power to her final speech. Rather than allow the Roman soldiers to decide her fate, Tosca takes control of her own destiny as she proclaims she is no longer bound by earthly forces, but ready to face judgment at the hands of her Maker.

Suor Angelica (1918) is the middle opera of Puccini's *Il Trittico*, with libretto by Giovanni Forzano. It is entirely clear that Angelica welcomes death from her first entrance that ends on the text "La morte è vita bella!" (Death is beautiful life!).³⁵ The majority of insight into Angelica's history comes during her intense confrontation with her aunt, La Zia Principessa. Angelica was forced to enter the convent upon giving birth to her son out of wedlock and has been cruelly separated from her son and family for seven years. Angelica's aunt comes to visit for the first time, asking her to waive rights to her family inheritance in light of her younger sister's impending marriage. Angelica agrees without hesitation but tells her Aunt "Non posso offrirti di scordar mi figlio!" (I cannot offer to forget my son).³⁶ La Principessa then matter-of-factly delivers the news of Angelica's son's illness and subsequent death, remaining emotionless throughout her speech. Beside herself with grief, Angelica signs the document with an unsteady hand and collapses on the floor before regrouping to sing her aria "Senza mamma." In this response to the news of her child's passing, Angelica expresses her strong desire for

³⁴ Ibid., 184.

³⁵ Giacomo Puccini and Nico Castel, "Suor Angelica," in *The Complete Puccini Libretti* (Geneseo, NY: Leyerle, 1994), 241.

³⁶ Ibid., 256.

death and subsequent reunion with her son. She explicitly asks “Quando potrò morire?” (When will I be able to die),³⁷ revealing that she views death as a gift.

Just a few moments after the aria, Angelica’s final words before drinking poison reveal her motive for taking her life: “Muio per lui è in cielo lo rivedrò!” (I die for him and will see him again in heaven!).³⁸ Then, horror comes over her as she realizes she has committed a mortal sin by committing suicide, resulting in eternal damnation and separation from her son. Angelica declares “Per amor di mi figlio, ho smarito la ragione!” (I have lost my reason for love of my son).³⁹ The opera ends with “Il Miracolo” (the miracle) in which Angelica is saved by God and welcomed into heaven by the embrace of her son.

The libretto of *Madama Butterfly* (1904) sees another collaboration between Giacosa and Illica, this time setting a story first seen in 1898 as a short story by John Luther Long, then dramatized into a one-act play by David Belasco. The opera is set in Japan where there is an existing cultural tradition of suicide for honor, called seppuku. The titular Madama Butterfly is Cio-Cio-San⁴⁰, a geisha who marries visiting American Navy Lieutenant B.F. Pinkerton, is subsequently abandoned, and waits on his return for several years alongside their child she bore.

Shortly after she dreams of Pinkerton’s return in the aria “Un bel dì” (One fine day), the American consul Sharpless arrives with the marriage broker Goro. They know

³⁷ Puccini and Castel, “Suor Angelica,” 259.

³⁸ Ibid., 262.

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ The names Cio-Cio-San and Madama Butterfly will henceforth be used interchangeably.

full well that Pinkerton has found and married a legitimate American bride and are trying to arrange a new marriage between Butterfly and Prince Yamadori. Goro tells Sharpless “I suoi parenti l’han tutti rinegata” (Her relatives have all rejected her).⁴¹ Three years have passed⁴² since her uncle disowned her at her nuptials to Pinkerton, and she is still without the support of her family. She shows even further loyalty to Pinkerton when rejecting Yamadori’s proposal, pledging allegiance to her country “Gli Stati Uniti” (The United States).⁴³ Since her marriage, Butterfly’s relationship to her family, culture, and religion has completely turned upside down—a defining factor in anomic suicides.

When Sharpless bluntly asks Cio-Cio-San what she would do if Pinkerton never returns, she replies “Due cose potrei far: tornar...a divertir la gente col cantar...oppur meglio, morire” (I could do two things: return to entertaining the people with my singing, or better, die).⁴⁴ Distraught at the thought of returning to life as a geisha, Butterfly sings “Questo mestier che al disonore porta! Morta! Mai piu danzar! Piuttosto la mia vita vo’ troncar! Ah! Morta!” (This profession leads to dishonor! Dead! Never again to dance! Rather my life I’ll cut short! Ah! Dead!)⁴⁵ Butterfly explicitly states multiple times that she *prefers* death to returning to her old life, removing any air of pity surrounding her suicide.

⁴¹ Giacomo Puccini and Nico Castel, “Madama Butterfly,” in *The Complete Puccini Libretti* (Geneseo, NY: Leyerle, 1994), 340.

⁴² Pinkerton has promised Butterfly he will return with the Robins. Earlier in the scene, Butterfly asks Sharpless when the robins nest in America, for they’ve nested three times already in Japan.

⁴³ Puccini and Castel, “Madama Butterfly,” 342.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 347.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 350.

When Pinkerton arrives to retrieve their son, accompanied by his legal American wife Kate, Butterfly exclaims, “Tutto è morto per me! Tutto è finito!” (All is dead for me! All is finished!).⁴⁶ The libretto shows Butterfly has already decided that she will end her life. Before bidding her child goodbye, she reads this inscription on her father’s own sword and suicide instrument: “con onor muore chi non può serbar vita con onore” (With honor dies the one who cannot keep living with honor).⁴⁷ This text provides the inspiration for the title of my project. She tells her son “muor Butterfly perchè tu possa andar di là dal mare senza che ti rimorda ai dì maturi il materno abbandono” (Butterfly dies so that you may go beyond the sea, without your mother’s abandonment tormenting you in your grown up days).⁴⁸

COMPOSER AND CHARACTER STUDIES

Now that each heroine’s explicit thoughts surrounding death and suicide has been extracted from their individual libretto, character studies and research specific to the life and works of Puccini comprise the final category of my literature review. Any Puccini research should begin with the publications of author Mosco Carner. Carner’s 1958 *Puccini: A Critical Biography* is widely considered the gold standard in Puccini scholarship. Several existing literature reviews go so far to even organize their research as “BC” (Before Carner) and “AC” (After Carner).⁴⁹ This is the most complete biography on Puccini, providing insight into his psyche and mood swings, musical and dramatic

⁴⁶ Puccini and Castel, “Madama Butterfly,” 369.

⁴⁷ Ibid., 372.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ This organization is seen in the literature review for Scovasso’s “Il Trittico: Giacomo Puccini’s Enigmatic Farewell to Opera.”

analysis of his operatic works, and details his working relationships with collaborators like librettists and publishers. Carner's work-specific *Madam Butterfly: A Guide to the Opera* and *Giacomo Puccini: Tosca* provide wonderfully detailed accounts of each opera. Both books serve as a companion to educate operagoers on the inner workings of the composition process, musical content, dramatic arc, and history of the piece. These Carner resources offer a particularly valuable look into the source material and the evolution of the heroines to stronger women in their operatic representations.

The later portion of *Giacomo Puccini: Tosca* includes musical and dramatic analysis, in terms of structure, key areas, and style. Plentiful discussion regarding the onstage drama and plot is also included.⁵⁰ Chapter five in *Tosca*, "Play and Opera: A Comparison" is a particularly insightful read that details the evolution of the operatic Floria Tosca into a more sympathetic, intelligent, and compassionate diva.⁵¹ This evolution is reinforced in Burton's "An Analysis of Puccini's *Tosca*." This resource corresponds with Carner's comparison and contrast between the Toscas of Puccini and Sardou's original source material. Burton argues that Puccini's *Tosca* is a much stronger and complex woman, due to changes from the original plot in the libretto as well as evidence from musical analysis.⁵²

The *Madam Butterfly* guide is organized in a similar manner to Carner's *Tosca*. The first half of the book details background information regarding the opera's source

⁵⁰ Mosco Carner, *Giacomo Puccini: Tosca* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), <https://www-fulcrum-org.ezproxy1.lib.asu.edu/concern/monographs/cn69m460x>.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 46-66.

⁵² Deborah Ellen Burton, "An Analysis of Puccini's 'Tosca': A Heuristic Approach to the Unifying Elements of the Opera" (PhD diss., University of Michigan, 1995).

material, in this case the David Belasco play.⁵³ The musical analysis is a bit more compact, mostly contained to one chapter entitled “The Music.”⁵⁴ Carner’s *Madam Butterfly* guide also includes a delightful foreword from soprano Victoria de Los Angeles,⁵⁵ a revered Cio-Cio San during her storied soprano career.

While Carner’s guides are instrumental, he covers only two of the three operas of my focus. Steven Scovasso’s “Il Trittico: Giacomo Puccini’s Enigmatic Farewell to Opera” fills a similar role for research on both the opera and role of Suor Angelica. Scovasso notes Puccini’s infrequent use of the mezzo-soprano voice for any roles of major importance.⁵⁶ This document provides wonderful insight into all things *Suor Angelica*, from Puccini’s composition process, to musical analysis, to critical reception.

Verdi and Puccini Heroines: Dramatic Characterization in Great Soprano Roles is another excellent source that explores character motivations and dramatic analyses. The authors’ direct comparison of Puccini heroines to the characters in the original source material is notable. They write Sardou’s *La Tosca* has “no introspective awareness or search for understanding of her own life,”⁵⁷ also writing Sardou’s play “offers a reactionary view of female power run amok.”⁵⁸ The authors also write of Puccini’s vast

⁵³ Mosco Carner, *Madam Butterfly: A Guide to the Opera* (London: Barrie and Jenkins, 1979).

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 45-67.

⁵⁵ Carner, “Madam Butterfly,” 7-8.

⁵⁶ Steven Scovasso, “Il Trittico: Giacomo Puccini’s Enigmatic Farewell to Opera” (MA thesis, Arizona State University, 2015), 41.

⁵⁷ Ryan and Geoffrey Edwards, *Verdi and Puccini Heroines: Dramatic Characterization in Great Soprano Roles* (Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press, 2011), 179.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 180.

improvement of Butterfly's character, claiming Puccini, Illica, and Giacosa infused the heroine with a sense of nobility and "heroic free will."⁵⁹

Perhaps no one is more qualified to write about the work of Puccini than the composer himself. There are two excellent collections of Puccini's letters, invaluable primary sources that provide insight into his inner thoughts and processes. Vincent Seligman's *Puccini Among Friends* shows a different, more casual side of the composer. Seligman's mother Sybil was a close friend and alleged lover. Upon his mother's death, Seligman found more than 700 letters from Puccini to Sybil.⁶⁰ Puccini calls her "the best friend I have"⁶¹ and clearly trusted her. The book is organized chronologically by date in both chapters and parts; chapters four and five in part one and chapter two in part five are my focus, as they cover the periods of the operas at the center of my research. It is important to note Puccini's earliest letters to Sybil are dated 1905: therefore the *Butterfly* and *Tosca* chapters are another source of information regarding his life at the time of composition, as well as critical reception of the works themselves. Puccini studies by authors such as Stanley Sadie and William Ashbrook were also consulted. These contain similar, but more in-depth information than that found in the opening chapters of *Puccini Among Friends*. Therefore, this resource is primarily included for its unique insight into Puccini's inner thoughts as revealed in his letter writing.

Carteggi Pucciniani, translated by Ena Makin as *Letters of Giacomo Puccini* is the foremost source of Puccini's letters. The book is organized in chapters that cover each

⁵⁹ Ibid., 97.

⁶⁰ Vincent Seligman, "Puccini Among Friends" (London: Macmillan & Co. Ltd., 1938).

⁶¹ Giacomo Puccini to Sybil Seligman, April 6, 1906 in *Puccini Among Friends*, 77.

of his operas in chronological order. Each chapter begins with a few pages regarding Puccini's collaborators, performance information, and special insight into what was happening in his personal life.⁶² The collection includes letters written throughout Puccini's compositional process while he determines source material, collaborates with librettists and his publisher Ricordi, and oversees rehearsals. Puccini writes of his meetings with the wife of the Japanese ambassador to Italy to receive her input regarding *Madama Butterfly*.⁶³ This meeting demonstrates Puccini's desire to accurately represent the culture in his work. He expresses joy at the nuns' reception of a preview performance of *Suor Angelica*,⁶⁴ which meant a great deal to him, since his sister Igenia lived at the convent. He asks Ricordi why the now-iconic act two line from *Tosca* had been removed: "why has the last line been cut out: 'and before him all Rome trembled?'" I put it in and it serves my purpose. It is accordingly better to keep it."⁶⁵ These letters provide an indispensable look into Puccini's motivations and goals for his heroines, as well as his deep connection to each of their stories.

Puccini's letters also contain his opinions on the various sopranos who performed these heroines. He mentions sopranos by name including Salomea Krusceniski, Marguerite Giraud Carré, and Rosina Storchio, among others. As my research for this project developed, I learned more about Puccini's affinity for what is known as the *lirico-*

⁶² Giacomo Puccini, *Letters of Giacomo Puccini: Mainly Connected with the Composition and Production of his Operas*, ed. Giuseppe Adami, trans. Ena Makin (New York: Vienna House, 1973).

⁶³ Giacomo Puccini to Giulio Ricordi, Summer 1902, in *Letters of Giacomo Puccini*, 146.

⁶⁴ Giacomo Puccini to Giuseppe Adami, in *Letters of Giacomo Puccini*, 214.

⁶⁵ Giacomo Puccini to Giulio Ricordi, November 4, 1896, in *Letters of Giacomo Puccini*, 121.

spinto soprano voice type. The *lirico-spinto* soprano exhibits a strong, large-sized voice, tending toward dramatic characterizations and colors. The significance of casting a *lirico-spinto* soprano to perform these roles is a major clue that Puccini viewed these heroines as strong women. The *lirico-spinto* voice type, or “Fach,” is covered in fine detail in pedagogue Richard Miller’s *Training Soprano Voices*. Miller specifically mentions each of these roles in his text and writes about their high tessitura and dark timbral qualities.⁶⁶ Youna Jang Hartgraves’ doctoral dissertation titled “Understanding the Lirico-Spinto Soprano Voice through the Repertoire of *Giovane Scuola* Composers” is another valuable resource, breaking down the Italian grammar behind the term *spinto* and delineating the vocal demands of the Italian operatic repertoire during Puccini’s era.

These three representations of suicide show that Puccini envisioned the title heroines of his operas as strong females. I recognize the strength that Puccini instilled in each of these women by making them both the actor and the acted upon, rather than solely the latter. The libretto of each opera overwhelmingly confirms Feggetter’s assertion that opera characters do indeed provide reasoning for their suicides.⁶⁷ The heroines’ quotes on the topics at hand clearly state their respective views on death, and their current situations in life. The idea of suicide was not implanted or forced by other characters in the opera: it was their own decision. Because these characters take death into their own hands, suicidal women turn the notion of McClary’s view of women in

⁶⁶ Richard Miller, *Training Soprano Voices* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 9-10.

⁶⁷ See footnote 25.

opera as decorative jewels⁶⁸ on its head. While *Tosca*, *Suor Angelica*, and *Cio-Cio-San* may have different motivations for taking their own lives, their shared preference for death over remaining in their current life's circumstances is undoubtedly clear. The sociological definitions and classifications of suicidal behavior further support the heroines' reasons to take their own lives: their suicides were means to achieving a larger goal. Plenty of general resources about Puccini and his operas exist in the scholarly canon, but scholarship and research regarding suicide on the operatic stage is limited, especially concentrated on the works of one specific composer. My research has led me to the conclusion that the suicides of *Tosca*, *Suor Angelica*, and *Cio-Cio-San* should not invoke pity but were marks of empowerment for these women. Ultimately, I hope this project sparks new discussion surrounding the fragile and pathetic soprano stereotype.

CHAPTER 3

SUICIDOLOGY: APPLICATION ON THE OPERATIC STAGE

At an extremely simplified level the plots of *Tosca*, *Suor Angelica*, and *Madama Butterfly* exemplify the struggle of the individual against society. Although suicide is autonomous by definition, outside forces often dictate the conditions that lead to the

⁶⁸ See footnote 20.

decision to end one's life. Suicidology is the study of suicide and suicide prevention.⁶⁹ While suicide has existed since antiquity it was not seriously investigated until the latter half of the 19th-century. It is important to note that post-French Revolution the public's view of suicide transformed from that of a mortal sin to a secularized behavior. Linda and Michael Hutcheon assert that by the mid-19th century suicide was no longer seen as a religious sin nor criminal offense, but at once "rendered psychological, social, and medical."⁷⁰ It is reasonable to assume that heightened exposure to studies, writings and literature about suicide in the late 19th-century resonated with Puccini. A bevy of both fictional and non-fictional works on the topic began to remove prior stigma surrounding discussion of suicide.

The inclusion of suicide in Puccini's operatic work reflects a growing literary trend that began in the 19th-century. Many classics such as *Madame Bovary* (1857), *Thérèse Raquin* (1868), and *Anna Karenina* (1877) conclude with the suicide of the titular heroine. Hughes Ransom argues that these novels reveal a situation where "death has proven superior to living on" and provides a new freedom and escape from the "internal deaths," or struggles of health, powerlessness, and loss that affected women.⁷¹ In the following decades, modernism was "coming to dominate the aesthetic and cultural

⁶⁹ "Suicidology" in *Merriam-Webster Dictionary Online*, Accessed July 29, 2022.

<https://www.merriam-webster.com/medical/suicidology>

⁷⁰ Linda and Michael Hutcheon, *Opera: The Art of Dying*, 129.

⁷¹ Hughes Ransom, "Death as Freedom in 19th century Women's Literature: An Escape from Idleness," *Artifacts* 14, (April 2016),

<https://artifactsjournal.missouri.edu/2016/04/death-as-freedom-in-19th-century-womens-literature-an-escape-from-idleness/>

field”⁷² as Puccini was composing his works. Representations of suicide in literature continued with Modernist authors such as Virginia Woolf and Joseph Conrad authoring works addressing self-killing. Henrik Ibsen’s play *Hedda Gabler* (1891) includes the suicides of both a supporting male character and that of the title heroine. The works of Puccini and his fellow *verismo* opera composers brought suicide from the pages of novels and staged plays to an operatic venue.

A landmark non-fiction work arrived in 1897 with the publication of Émile Durkheim’s *Le Suicide*. The book revolutionized the study of suicidology, introducing the notion that suicide is a social behavior rather than an individual act. This is the foremost publication surrounding suicidology and later influenced many 20th and 21st century studies about suicide. Durkheim classifies suicides into three main categories: egoistic, altruistic, and anomic.⁷³ *Le Suicide* was a highly-discussed work around the time of Puccini’s operatic compositions, largely due to the emphasis on the sociological factors of suicide.

Enrico Morselli authored his suicidological study *Il suicidio, saggio di statistica morale comparata* (*Suicide: An Essay on Comparative Moral Statistics*) in Puccini’s native Italian language. Published fifteen years earlier than Durkheim’s work, the Morselli consists mostly of statistics alongside the application of sociological concepts. Subsections of the Morselli include “Social Influences,” and “Influences Arising out of

⁷² Emanuele Senici, “Introduction: Puccini, His World, and Ours” in *Giacomo Puccini and His World*, 6.

⁷³ Durkheim, *Suicide*.

the Biological and Social Issues of the Individual,” among others.⁷⁴ Multiple suicidology scholars assert that Morselli is deserving of “at least equal status as the more generally recognized Durkheim⁷⁵” The 1883 publication date of *Il Suicidio* meant Puccini had access to new thoughts and discussions surrounding suicide nearly two decades before the composition of *Tosca*, his first opera to include a suicide.

Viewing suicide as a complex sociological issue has endured throughout the 20th and 21st centuries. Linda and Michael Hutcheon agree with the sociological lens writing, “On the operatic stage, it is often the individual’s relation to society that frames and conditions the decision to take one’s own life. The individual and the social are not separable in operatic representations of suicide.”⁷⁶

All three of these characters endure upheaval in their relationships directly before ending their lives. *Tosca* has become a murderess, only to witness the brutal murder of her lover Mario a few hours later. *Angelica* heartbreakingly learned her son is dead, igniting a yearning to reunite with her child through any means possible. *Butterfly* is finally forced to face the truth that her husband has officially abandoned her upon his return to Japan after three years to retrieve their son, with no intentions of renewing their marital love or relationship. Relegated to living in societies where they never truly enjoyed control of their own destiny, these characters have chosen to seize power where they can, through the method of ending their lives.

⁷⁴ Morselli, *Suicide: An Essay on Comparative Moral Statistics*.

⁷⁵ Goldney and Schioldann, “Pre-Durkheim Suicidology,” 186.

⁷⁶ Linda and Michael Hutcheon, *Opera: The Art of Dying*, 126.

Durkheim viewed the traditional family unit as a protective force against suicide, seeing the traditional roles of wife and mother as having a “prophylactic impact.”⁷⁷ Silvia Cannetto writes that “women were assumed to be immune to suicide” regardless of their cultural or political environment.⁷⁸ This gendered view of suicide is well-established in scholarship with suicide seen as a symptom of “unfeminine nature.”⁷⁹ This position is directly rebutted by Puccini’s operas as male suicides are absent from the entirety of his compositional canon. His inclusion of suicidal women may illuminate Puccini’s overarching beliefs about the capabilities of the female sex. Historically, opera has been considered an intrinsically “female” genre,⁸⁰ displacing the voice of the composer onto “female voices and female singers.”⁸¹

In terms of his family life, Puccini found himself surrounded by the female sex from a young age. He enjoyed a deep closeness with his mother Albina as exhibited in his personal letters.⁸² Their intimate relationship paired with his despondency after her death leads Sandra K. Davis to call it “mother worship,”⁸³ an undoubtedly interesting thought considering the transformative nature and motivations of motherhood for both Suor

⁷⁷ Howard I. Kushner, “Suicide, Gender, and the Fear of Modernity in Nineteenth-Century Medical and Social Thought,” *Journal of Social History* 26, no. 3 (1993), 475.

⁷⁸ Cannetto, “Women and Suicidal Behavior: A Cultural Analysis,” 260.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 263.

⁸⁰ This opinion roots from Italian critic Fausto Torrefranca, who considered symphonic music “masculine” and operatic repertoire “feminine” in nature.

⁸¹ Carolyn Abbate, “Opera, or the Envoicing of Women,” in *Musicology and Difference: Gender and Sexuality in Music Scholarship*, ed. Ruth A. Solie (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1993), 228.

⁸² Puccini, Giacomo. “Letters from Giacomo Puccini.”

⁸³ Sandra Davis, “Metamorphosis of a Butterfly: Puccini and the Making of a Powerful Tragic Heroine” (Ph.D. diss., University of Hawaii, 2005), 54.

Angelica and Cio-Cio-San. Puccini's father Michele, an organist and choirmaster in Lucca, died when his eldest son Giacomo was only five years old. This left young Giacomo as the eldest man in the house, with one younger brother and five sisters. Davis notes that Puccini's tenor characters are "generally weak," a possible reflection of the absence of a father figure or perhaps even his own amicable, non-confrontational personality.⁸⁴

Although the geographic settings, eras, and social factors affecting each character are incredibly different, there are striking similarities between Puccini's suicidal heroines. Emab Salib, a doctor of Psychiatry, notes that "all suicide victims in Puccini's operas were unmarried young women with considerable social and psychiatric morbidity, not that different from what we deserve in our practice."⁸⁵ Salib lauds Puccini's depiction of suicides with "remarkable realism."⁸⁶ These suicides would not be out of place as psychiatric case studies,⁸⁷ the realistic elements aligning with the verismo-influenced plots of Puccini and his contemporaries.

Social circumstances undoubtedly inform an individual's decision to commit suicide, yet it is ultimately an individual demonstration of free will. Jean Baechler argued that the root of suicide is explained through personal factors, concluding that it is an attempt to solve a problem.⁸⁸ Soprano Jill Gardner has enjoyed a career as one of the most prolific Puccini sopranos in the 21st century, performing each of the three characters

⁸⁴ Davis, "Metamorphosis,"

⁸⁵ Salib, "Suicide in Puccini's Operas!" 27.

⁸⁶ Ibid.

⁸⁷ Feggetter, "Suicide in Opera," 554.

⁸⁸ Baechler, *Suicides*, 11.

of focus in multiple productions across the United States. Gardner considers these women as “true heroines on a path to self-enlightenment,”⁸⁹ emphasizing their desire to take action and better their respective situations.

In addition to considering the social circumstances of a suicidal person, it is important to contemplate how and why suicide brings relief to its victim. In *Suicides*, Baechler proposes four types of suicide that can be used separately or in conjunction with Durkheim’s three original classifications. Using Baechler’s classification system, the suicides of Tosca, Angelica, and Cio-Cio San are escapist suicides: a flight from intolerable grief or punishment, occurring when a subject takes her life following loss and/or as atonement for a fault.⁹⁰ They all share similar feelings of extreme grief and hopelessness upon losing a major love of their life. Tosca witnesses the torture and death of her lover Mario Cavaradossi; Angelica learns that her young son passed away from an illness; Cio-Cio San’s reckless husband not only abandons her for years but also takes her beloved son away. At first glance, purely escapist suicides can be classified as a display of weakness. However, the suicides of Tosca, Angelica, and Cio-Cio-San are not simply classified. According to Baechler’s classification system, each of their deaths also qualifies both as an escapist suicide: following loss and/or as atonement for a fault⁹¹, as well as oblativ suicide, the phenomenon of dying for something larger than one’s self.⁹² The libretti show that the suicides of these characters ascend purely individual motives

⁸⁹ Jill Bowen Gardner, interview with the author, August 19, 2022.

⁹⁰ Baechler, *Suicides*, 84.

⁹¹ *Ibid.*

⁹² *Ibid.*, 157.

and are executed in a way that does not invoke pity, but genuine compassion and respect from operatic audiences.

CHAPTER 4

CASE STUDY #1: TOSCA

“Vissi d’arte” as we know it almost never came to be. The original source material for *Tosca* is the French play *La Tosca*, authored by Victorien Sardou. Sardou first granted the rights to Alberto Franchetti, a rival of Puccini’s who progressed as far as

hiring *Manon Lescaut* and *La bohème* librettist Luigi Illica to write the libretto. Illica and Giulio Ricordi, two close friends of Puccini, had no qualms in persuading Franchetti to abandon his own *Tosca*,⁹³ opening up the opportunity for their favorite composer. As with past Puccini operas Giuseppe Giacosa was hired to polish Illica's libretto into verses appropriate for singing. After nearly five years of work, Puccini's *Tosca* premiered on January 12, 1900 in Rome. Giacosa intentionally classified *Tosca* as a melodramma rather than in the vein of the popular verismo works at the turn of the century, and the premiere cemented Puccini's status as a national institution with the who's who of Italian culture in the audience.⁹⁴ Queen Margherita and the Prime Minister Luigi Pelloux, rival composers Mascagni and Franchetti, and European and transatlantic reporters adorned the crowd.

During his compositional process Puccini met several times with notoriously cocky and "indefatigable monologist" Sardou,⁹⁵ but adhered to his own desire to morph the title character into one of great strength and complexity. Sardou's *La Tosca* reflects the trends of typical 19th-century literature that depicted men as heroic and political with female characters assuming a more passive role.⁹⁶ Puccini's Floria Tosca is a stark contrast to Sardou's *La Tosca*, who has "no introspective awareness or search for understanding of her own life."⁹⁷ Sardou's play "offers a reactionary view of female

⁹³ Stanley Sadie, *Puccini and his Operas* (New York: St Martin's Press, 2000), 37.

⁹⁴ William Ashbrook, *The Operas of Puccini* (Ithaca NY: Cornell University Press, 1985), 77.

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, 72.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*

⁹⁷ Ryan and Geoffrey Edwards, *Verdi and Puccini Heroines: Dramatic Characterization in Great Soprano Roles* (Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press, 2011), 179.

power run amok.”⁹⁸ Queen Marie-Caroline of Naples and Lady Hamilton Sardou’s reign over Rome’s corrupted society while Baron Scarpia is reduced to a minor character. Sardou’s title heroine embodies ignorance and simplicity, but Puccini’s Tosca lacks “neither intelligence nor humour” and exudes dignity.⁹⁹ Puccini had a documented history of changing the existing source material to craft stronger female characters as exhibited in his earlier operas *La bohème* and *Manon Lescaut*. From the outset of Puccini’s career, he centered his operas on women, taking care to mold them into the characters he envisioned. Tosca enters the opera as an offstage voice, marking the shift from a woman referenced by men earlier in the score to the central character in the story. Soprano Nina Gravrok remarked that Tosca knows she is an excellent singer, and therefore has plentiful self-esteem and confidence when interacting with the men in her life.¹⁰⁰ Her graceful entrance music (Figure 4.1) sets the stage for a Tosca teeming with beauty and elegance.

⁹⁸ Edwards, *Verdi and Puccini Heroines*, 180.

⁹⁹ Sadie, *Puccini and his Operas*, 37.

¹⁰⁰Nina Gravrok, Interview with author, June 28, 2022.

Andantino sostenuto ♩ = 56
 (Tosca entra con una specie di violenza, guardando intorno sospettosa)
 (Tosca enters with a kind of violence, looking about her suspiciously)

411
 qui!
 here!

Andantino sostenuto ♩ = 56
dolcissimo e con tutta l'espressione

25
pp

413 (si appressa a Tosca per abbracciarla)
 (he approaches Tosca to embrace her)

(Tosca lo respinge bruscamente)
 (Tosca pushes him back brusquely)

135431

FIGURE 4.1: Giacomo Puccini: The Entrance Music of Floria Tosca.¹⁰¹

American soprano Carol Vaness enjoyed a career with Tosca as a signature role, performing the diva at houses including the Metropolitan Opera, Covent Garden, and Paris Opera, among others. Vaness remarks Tosca is “in every way, a real title role because she practically created the problem of the plot.”¹⁰² Before we can fully comprehend the dramatic fulfillment of Tosca’s suicide, we must explore her life and relationships. At its root, *Tosca* is the story of a dramatic love triangle between the greatest prima donna in Rome, her lover Mario Cavaradossi, and the brutal chief of police Baron Scarpia. A violent, power-hungry tyrant, Scarpia is known throughout Rome as a man of immense authority and influence. Furthermore, he will stop at nothing in his quest to satiate his lust for the diva. The height of Tosca and Scarpia’s conflict arrives in act

¹⁰¹ Giacomo Puccini, *Tosca*, ed. Roger Parker (Milan: Ricordi, 2008), 36.

¹⁰² Vaness, Interview with the author, June 10, 2022.

two while he propositions Tosca amongst screams of torture from her lover Mario in another room. When Scarpia sings “Si, t’avrò” (yes, I’ll have you),¹⁰³ Tosca exclaims “Ah! Piuttosto giù m’avvento!” (I would rather throw myself out the window!)¹⁰⁴ This statement foreshadows the method of her suicide, leaping from the Castel Sant’Angelo. When Scarpia assaults her to initiate sex, Tosca yelps three high notes and begins her aria “Vissi d’arte.” She questions why her noble and pious life, dedicated to her art and God above, has led to such horrible suffering. Even after living “correctly” and adhering to society’s ideal of a perfect female, she is but a pawn at the hands of men in control.

Puccini’s decision to alter Sardou’s play where women hold the political power and instead choose the male villain Scarpia as the tyrant of Rome has important implications in reinforcing Tosca’s strength. Scarpia is not only her oppressor, but the oppressor of her entire city. By murdering Scarpia, Tosca empowers herself as an individual, “shattering her identity as a passive victim at the hands of man.”¹⁰⁵ Puccini’s operatic revisions also reveal the composer’s intentions to “place Tosca in a stronger position by having her demonstrate greater emotional control.”¹⁰⁶ While Tosca attempts to bargain for Cavaradossi’s life in act two, Puccini modified the line “Quanto?...Il Prezzo” (what is the price) by transposing the line down an octave from a dramatic high A to middle voice, marked *quasi parlato*. This calm, speech-like vocal writing places

¹⁰³ Puccini and Castel, “Tosca,” 162.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid.

¹⁰⁵ Edwards, *Verdi and Puccini Heroines*, 89.

¹⁰⁶ Linda Beard Fairtile, “Giacomo Puccini’s Operatic Revisions as Manifestations of His Compositional Priorities” (PhD diss., New York University, 1996), 286.

Tosca in a stronger negotiation position than if she were having an emotionally fueled outburst.

Catherine Clément declares Scarpia's murder as the ultimate recognition of the capability of a prima donna, that "a chief of police is less powerful than a woman of the stage when she acts out the truth of her own life."¹⁰⁷ While Scarpia writhes on the floor after his stabbing, Tosca boasts "e ucciso da una donna!" (and killed by a woman!).¹⁰⁸ The final words Scarpia hears are "Guardami! Son Tosca, o Scarpia!" (Look at me! I'm Tosca, oh Scarpia!).¹⁰⁹ Tosca wants to ensure Scarpia fully comprehends that his demise has come at the hands of a woman whom he considered to be a sexual conquest, never dreaming of the diva as a threat to his power and his life.

The final phrase in act two solidifies Tosca's strength as she exclaims "E avanti a lui tremava tutta Roma!" (and before him trembled all Rome!).¹¹⁰ This outright commendation of the significance of Scarpia's defeat was a very important inclusion to Puccini. Originally Ricordi removed this line from the libretto, angering Puccini. In a letter to Ricordi, Puccini asks "why has the last line been cut out: 'and before him all Rome trembled?' I put it in and it serves my purpose. It is accordingly better to keep it."¹¹¹ Tosca's courage and strength are undeniable thanks to Puccini's decision to realize a male villain. She herself has defeated the most powerful man in Rome who is

¹⁰⁷ Clément, *Opera*, 41.

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, 213.

¹⁰⁹ Puccini and Castel, "Tosca," 213.

¹¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 214.

¹¹¹ Giacomo Puccini to Giulio Ricordi, November 4, 1896, in *Letters of Giacomo Puccini*, 121.

tyrannizing her fellow citizens. Psychologist and renowned suicidology scholar Silvia Cannetto asserts that women were assumed to be immune to suicide as long as they acted “like women,” meaning they stayed subordinate to men within traditional institutions.¹¹² Tosca’s murder of Scarpia therefore transforms her standing in society, granting her an agency she has never known or experienced before. Society has now lost its ability to “impose regulation”¹¹³ on Tosca, a hallmark of anomic suicide. Thus, Tosca’s new status as a murderess opens the door for her dramatic suicide in the following act.

During the final act, Tosca must continue to act the part of a helpless female up through Mario’s mock execution. As she sings the “Com’è lunga l’atessa” (What a long wait)¹¹⁴ arietta before and during the execution her impatience quickly turns into absolute despair as she discovers the shots fired proved fatal to her lover. After this trauma, she returns to the fierce woman from the end of the previous act. As Scarpia’s associates run to arrest Tosca for their leader’s murder, they exclaim “Tosca pagherai ben cara la sua vita!” (Tosca will pay very dearly for his life!).¹¹⁵ The stage directions included in both the Ricordi score and the Nico Castel libretto state that Spoletta throws himself on Tosca, but she “pushes him away so violently that he almost falls back into the stair well.”¹¹⁶ Not only has Tosca murdered Scarpia, but also now accomplishes physical domination over another man, the soldier Spoletta.

¹¹² Cannetto, “Women and Suicidal Behavior,” 261.

¹¹³ Johnson, “Durkheim Revisited: Why Do Women Kill Themselves?” 146.

¹¹⁴ Puccini and Castel, “Tosca,” 228.

¹¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 231.

¹¹⁶ Puccini and Castel, “Tosca,” 231.

Tosca's leap from the parapet of Rome's Castel Sant'Angelo undoubtedly reigns as one of the most extravagant deaths in opera. After rushing to the top of the Castel Sant'Angelo, Tosca shouts her final words; the blazing battle cry "O Scarpia, avanti a dio!" (Oh Scarpia, we shall meet before God),¹¹⁷ which ends on a high b flat.¹¹⁸ Soprano Vanessa says after the trauma Tosca has endured, her "spirit is already running"¹¹⁹ before her physical jump. This suicide is a very quick decision: the singular phrase serves as Tosca's final words before jumping to her death. This suicide is particularly physically challenging for performers, who must jump off a set many feet off the ground, usually onto a trampoline-like landing pad. Even though conscientious opera companies provide spotters for safety, it is nonetheless not a stage move for risk-averse sopranos. While Vanessa personally does not find the vocal demands of the role particularly challenging, the dramatic nature of the role requires an intense emotional involvement which requires nothing less than a soprano's emotional and physical all onstage.¹²⁰

Between the final jump, the deeply intimate combat with Scarpia, and the lack of downtime during the course of the opera, this is certainly one of opera's most physically demanding soprano roles.

Speaking in terms of character and musical development, Ryan and Geoffrey Edwards write that with the final leap, "suffering and despair are musically transfigured in a triumphant moment of tragic joy as Tosca launches herself into eternity."¹²¹ Puccini

¹¹⁷ Ibid.

¹¹⁸ Puccini, *Tosca*, 334-5.

¹¹⁹ Vanessa, Interview.

¹²⁰ This is discussed in-depth in Chapter 8.

¹²¹ Ryan and Geoffrey Edwards, *Verdi and Puccini Heroines*, 181.

employs triumphant music with heavy brass and fortissimo dynamics, as well as a reprise of Mario's aria "E lucevan le stelle."¹²² Rather than allow the Roman soldiers to decide the final course of her life, Tosca takes control of her own destiny as she proclaims she is no longer bound by earthly forces, but ready to face judgment at the hands of her creator.

¹²² Puccini, *Tosca*, 335.

CHAPTER 5

CASE STUDY #2: SUOR ANGELICA

Suor Angelica (1918) is the middle opera of Puccini's *Il Trittico*, with libretto by Giovanni Forzano.¹²³ Chronologically *Suor Angelica* was the final composition of the trilogy, making it Puccini's final complete work before his death.¹²⁴ In connection with the overall perspective of feminist opera criticism *Suor Angelica* is a very important work as one of the only works in the repertoire with a completely female cast. Not only are men absent from the convent setting onstage but only two male figures are even referred to in the opera: Jesus Christ and Angelica's unnamed son. While this opera is not frequently the subject of musical scholarship it would be an unfortunate remission to exclude Angelica's harrowing turned miraculous story in this study of operatic heroines.

Forzano's drama was originally intended to be a spoken play but Puccini's long desire to compose an opera revolving around nuns and convent life made *Suor Angelica* the perfect story to set to music. When Puccini first encountered the subject matter and plot, he was incredibly excited to finally discover "the mystic subject of which he had so long dreamed."¹²⁵ Puccini received plentiful exposure to church music during his childhood, including instruction relating to the performance and composition of church music. The vocational paths of the Puccini family suggest they were strong in the Catholic faith: the family had a strong history of organists and church music

¹²³ Forzano also wrote the libretto for *Gianni Schicchi*, the third opera of the trio.

¹²⁴ Puccini's final opera, *Turandot*, was unfinished at the time of the composer's death in 1924.

¹²⁵ Spike Hughes, *Famous Puccini Operas: An Analytical Guide for the Opera-Goer and Armchair Listener* (New York: Dover, 1972), 186.

composers¹²⁶ and Giacomo's eldest sister Iginia was a nun at a convent in Vicopelago, Italy, near his hometown of Lucca. Puccini traveled to Iginia's convent to offer a preview performance of *Suor Angelica*. This performance was very well-received by the nuns and Puccini saw the pure connection they felt to Angelica's character.¹²⁷ *Suor Angelica*'s first public hearing at the convent shows Puccini's desire to share his operas with women who were close to and knowledgeable about the subject matter.

In contrast with Tosca's past as the feminine ideal, Angelica has transgressed and brought shame upon her wealthy family by becoming pregnant at a young age. Her punishment is harsh—life in a convent away from her family and son. From Angelica's first vocal entrance it is exceptionally clear that she welcomes death. Her first passage ends with a powerful climax on the text "La morte è vita bella!" (Death is beautiful life!).¹²⁸ After this line, the entire orchestra plays a passionate motive marked fortissimo, with a crescendo to triple forte: the loudest music in the opera thus far (figure 2). This same motive returns later in the opera after Angelica drinks her poison potion, confirming her preference for excitement and death once again through this motivic recall. This incredibly beautiful phrase is one of the most impassioned and triumphant of the show—a dynamic orchestral exhibition of the strength that can be found in death.

¹²⁶ Helen Greenwald, "Verdi's Patriarch and Puccini's Matriarch: Through the Looking Glass and What Puccini Found There," *19th-Century Music* 17, no. 3 (Spring 1994): 222.

¹²⁷ Puccini, trans. Adami, *Letters of Giacomo Puccini*, 214.

¹²⁸ Giacomo Puccini and Nico Castel, "Suor Angelica" in *The Complete Puccini Libretti*, (Geneseo, NY: Leyerle, 1994), 241.

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SISTER ANGELICA
SUOR ANGELICA

(she remains deep in thought)
(*rimane come assorta*)

glor - y!
bel - la!

(with passion)
(*con passione*)

ff *fff* *rubando*

FIGURE 5.1: Giacomo Puccini: The “Strength in Death” Motive.¹²⁹

The audience learns about Angelica’s history from her gossiping sisters at the convent. She has lived as a nun for seven years without receiving a single word from her family. Furthermore, she was a princess before she came to the abbey. The nuns wonder and gossip about the horrible sin that caused her to become a nun in penitence. A few minutes later, a carriage transporting none other than Angelica’s aunt, “La Zia Principessa” arrives at the convent. Angelica has finally received a visitor after a seven year wait. However, Zia Principessa did not travel to catch up with Angelica and exchange a warm embrace—she has official business on behalf of their family. She tells Angelica she needs her signature on a document waiving her rights to any family inheritance, then shares that Angelica’s sister Anna Viola is to be married. Angelica is thrilled at this news and asks who her sister is marrying. La Principessa cruelly replies:

¹²⁹ Giacomo Puccini, *Suor Angelica* (Milan: Ricordi, 1919), 23.

“Chi per amore condone la colpa di cui macchiaste il nostro bianco stemma!” (To one whose love forgave the sin with which you stained our spotless family crest!).¹³⁰

Angelica agrees to sign the document without a fight, however she tells her aunt “Non posso offrire di scordar mi figlio!” (I cannot offer to forget my son).¹³¹ La Principessa then matter-of-factly delivers the news of Angelica’s son’s illness and subsequent death, remaining emotionless throughout her speech. Helen Greenwald considers this scene between Angelica and the Principessa a female mirroring of the confrontation between Philip and the Grand Inquisitor in Verdi’s *Don Carlo*.¹³² Both conflicts are set in a church and the use of the lowest range possible voice types of bass and contralto are significant. Puccini infrequently uses the mezzo-soprano voice, for any roles of major importance¹³³ and the villainess Principessa’s arietta “Nel Silenzio” is one of only a handful of mezzo soprano arias by Puccini. This scene emphasizes the heartbreak Angelica endures as she has now lost her son a second time—in a more final way. This scene provides valuable insight into her character and the motive behind her suicide.

Beside herself with grief, Angelica signs the document with an unsteady hand and collapses on the floor before regrouping to sing “Senza mamma”—the aria and most identified musical excerpt in *Suor Angelica*. “Senza mamma” (Without mama) is Angelica’s heartbreakingly beautiful response to this shocking news in which she expresses her strong desire for death and subsequent reunion with her son. Her desire to

¹³⁰ Puccini and Castel, “Suor Angelica,” 254.

¹³¹ Puccini and Castel, “Suor Angelica,” 256.

¹³² Helen Greenwald, “Verdi’s Patriarch and Puccini’s Matriarch,” 222.

¹³³ Steven Scovasso, “Il Trittico,” 41.

die is specifically seen in the text “Oh dolce fine d’ogni mio dolore, quando in cielo con te potrò salire? Quando potrò morire?” (Oh sweet end of my every sorrow, when will I be able to ascend to heaven with you? When will I be able to die?”).¹³⁴ This text reveals that Angelica views death as a gift, one which she happens to be able to gift herself thanks to her knowledge and skills as an herbalist.

Up until this point, the music in the opera is “a metaphor for the monotony and hopelessness that plagues Angelica’s life”¹³⁵ but the poison both literally and musically frees her, unlocking a new musical language. Rapturous music from the orchestra begins to sound just as Angelica announces her final words before consuming the poison: “Muio per lui é in cielo lo rivedrò!” (I die for him and will see him again in heaven!)¹³⁶ After Angelica drinks her fatal potion and prepares for her heavenly reunion, despair quickly assumes her when she realizes she has committed a mortal sin and is now damned for eternity. The “Ah son dannata!” is a shriek on high A, accompanied by a dense orchestration marked fortissimo with tremolos and forceful dotted eighth sixteenth note rhythms. This realization is similar to the scream-like drama of Tosca’s final vocal line. The vocal writing in this section marks a major contrast from Angelica’s long legato lines in middle voice throughout the earlier pages.

After begging “Madonna, salvami! Per amor di mi figlio!” (Madonna, save me for love of my son!)¹³⁷ in a low tessitura, the final measures of the opera are termed “Il

¹³⁴ Puccini and Castel, “Suor Angelica,” 259.

¹³⁵ Andrew Davis, *Il Trittico, Turandot, and Puccini’s Late Style* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2018), 111.

¹³⁶ *Ibid.*, 262.

¹³⁷ Puccini and Castel, “Suor Angelica,” 262.

Miracolo” (The Miracle). As an angelic offstage chorus sings the Salve Maria, Angelica declares “Per amor di mi figlio, ho smarito la ragione!” (I have lost my reason for love of my son), an appeal to God for forgiveness from this mortal sin. As the poison consumes her, the chorus swells with “O Gloriosa Virginum,” musically providing a “final, magnificent release of energy for Angelica” as she makes her final impassioned plea for forgiveness, reaching a dramatic forte high C on her final “Salvami!” (Save me!). After the many prayers and praises from both Angelica and her fellow nuns,¹³⁸ the opera concludes with the miraculous reunion between mother and son. Her story has come full circle: death *is* now beautiful life.

Angelica commits suicide as a sacrifice of her own life, so that she may be reunited with her son in death.¹³⁹ Suor Angelica has brought great dishonor to her family, and then again dishonored her son by following her family’s wishes to enter the convent and abandon her child. However, her suicide restores the honor she knew in her youth as she reunites with her son and savior God in heaven. Puccini’s music and Forzano’s libretto strengthen Angelica’s character by revealing the horrors and heartbreak she has suffered in her short life. Linda and Michael Hutcheon write that our sympathy for her grief, loss, and distress as a mother superimposes our responses to Angelica’s death.¹⁴⁰ Sopranos who perform the role often note a deeper connection to the story and character when they themselves are mothers. Nina Gravrok recalled she became much more

¹³⁸ The implications of religion and suicide are further discussed in chapter 10 of this document.

¹³⁹ Refer to footnote #9 regarding oblation suicide.

¹⁴⁰ Linda and Michael Hutcheon, *Opera: The Art of Dying*, 131.

emotional when performing Angelica after the birth of her daughter, in contrast to her experience in a different production years prior.¹⁴¹ Angelica is a refreshing operatic heroine who isn't compelled by romantic love or sexual attraction, but by genuine motherly love.

¹⁴¹ Gravrok, Personal Interview.

CHAPTER 6

CASE STUDY #3: CIO-CIO-SAN

In *Madama Butterfly* Puccini “brought his development of the tragic heroine to its dramatic culmination.”¹⁴² Puccini wished to compose *Butterfly* for several years, telling Ricordi in a letter dated November 20, 1900 “the more I think of *Butterfly* the more irresistibly am I attracted.”¹⁴³ The story of Madame Butterfly was first seen in 1898 as a short story by John Luther Long, then dramatized into a one-act play by David Belasco. While there is no evidence Puccini read Long’s short story, the composer attended Belasco’s *Madame Butterfly: A Tragedy of Japan* in London during the summer of 1900 during his trip to assist in preparations with the first Covent Garden *Tosca*. Puccini’s only opera to be designated as a tragedy, the term “*Tragedia Giapponese*” is a perhaps a homage to the title of the original source material. The original story concludes with Butterfly’s *unsuccessful* suicide attempt, a stark difference from Puccini’s opera.

Puccini and librettists Illica and Giacosa “infused the character of Butterfly with a nobility and sense of heroic free will that is utterly lacking in any of the earlier sources.”¹⁴⁴ Puccini consulted outside sources to receive cultural guidance and approval of the work. Madame Ohamy, the wife of the Japanese Ambassador to Italy, consulted with the composer several times on his work and introduced him to native Japanese music. In a letter to Ricordi, Puccini revealed that “she liked it, especially as just such a

¹⁴² Ryan and Geoffrey Edwards, *Verdi and Puccini Heroines*, 95.

¹⁴³ Giacomo Puccini to Giulio Ricordi, November 4, 1896, in *Letters of Giacomo Puccini*, 141.

¹⁴⁴ Ryan and Geoffrey Edwards, *Verdi and Puccini Heroines*, 97.

story as Butterfly's is known having happened in real life."¹⁴⁵ Puccini's efforts to take counsel from and receive Madame Ohama's approval cannot be underestimated as proof of Puccini's love for this story and his quest to create an operatic masterpiece. He also attended a performance by renowned geisha Sadayakko in Milan, where he likely heard traditional Japanese music that inspired the passages of musical orientalism in his score.

The protagonist of *Madama Butterfly*, Cio-Cio-San, is a Japanese teen from Nagasaki, forced to work as a geisha after her father's *seppuku*. In Japanese culture *seppuku*, disembowelment by sword, is considered an honorable suicide. This self-execution was reserved for samurai to preserve their honor by escaping from the torture and shame that result from capture by their enemies. Historically *seppuku* was also invoked as capital punishment for samurai who brought shame upon themselves.¹⁴⁶ The opera begins with the arrival of feckless American Naval Captain B.F. Pinkerton. Pinkerton is eager to take a Japanese bride to amuse himself during his deployment, after which he will return to the United States and legitimately marry an American bride. After a short and happy time together Pinkerton leaves for America and Butterfly remains waiting patiently for his return for three years. While Butterfly's maid Suzuki doubts that Pinkerton will ever return, Butterfly remains steadfast in her conviction of their love and pictures his long-awaited return while singing the famous aria "Un bel dì vedremo" (One beautiful day).

¹⁴⁵ Giacomo Puccini to Giulio Ricordi, Summer 1902, in *Letters of Giacomo Puccini*, 146.

¹⁴⁶ Andrew Rankin, *Seppuku: A History of Samurai Suicide* (Tokyo: Kodansha International, 2012).

Several examples in the libretto reveal Butterfly is a very strong woman who makes her own decisions throughout the opera. When Prince Yamadori proposes marriage in act two she remains faithful to Pinkerton against the counsel of others, repeatedly referring to herself as “Mrs. B.F. Pinkerton.” to everyone present. Later in the same act, the letter scene with the American Consul Sharpless is a constant back and forth,¹⁴⁷ in contrast with the earlier literary versions where she never interrupts Sharpless during this scene. After Sharpless asks Butterfly what she would do if Pinkerton never returns, she responds with the aria “Che tua madre” replying “Due cose potrei far: tornar...a divertir la gente col cantar...oppur meglio, morire” (I could do two things: return to entertaining the people with my singing, or better, die).¹⁴⁸ This aria stating her preference for death removes any possible air of pity surrounding her suicide. These striking words mark her final solo music up until her goodbye to her son in “Tu? Tu? Piccolo Iddio!”

In act three Butterfly does not enjoy the happy reunion she dreamed about upon Pinkerton’s return to Japan. He has come only to retrieve their son Sorrow, who will live in America with Pinkerton and his new American wife, Kate. Facing abandonment, Butterfly makes true of her words in the second act by choosing the blade of the sword over returning to her work as a geisha, forced to and face the reality of the inconsolable pain of life without her son.

¹⁴⁷ Giacomo Puccini and Nico Castel, “Madama Butterfly” in *The Complete Puccini Libretti* (Geneseo, NY: Leyerle, 1994), 427-431.

¹⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 431.

Butterfly's goodbye aria to Sorrow, "Tu? Piccolo Iddio!" is one of the most impactful moments of the operatic repertoire. The aria begins with scream-like exclamations, conveying Butterfly's passion and love as she bids her son farewell. She tells him "muor Butterfly perchè tu possa andar di là dal mare senza che ti rimorde ai di maturi il materno abbandono" ("Butterfly dies so that you may go beyond the sea, without your mother's abandonment tormenting you in your grown up days").¹⁴⁹ Cio-Cio-San's goodbye to Sorrow (figure 6.1) is a moment of "genuine pathos created by a composer with a great and rare understanding of the lyrical and dramatic power of music."¹⁵⁰ Just as in the suicide of Suor Angelica, this is above all a sacrifice in the name of motherly love. While the overall tessitura of Butterfly resides in middle voice, this aria sits mostly above the upper passaggio,¹⁵¹ adding additional vocal edge, strength, and volume. Soprano Carol Vaness remarks that this section is similar to the vocal writing for Tosca, rather than Butterfly's generally more demure music.¹⁵²

¹⁴⁹ Ibid., 463.

¹⁵⁰ Hughes, *Famous Puccini Operas*, 11.

¹⁵¹ The upper passaggio is considered the second "break" in the female voice that typically lies around pitches Eb5-F5 for soprano.

¹⁵² Carol Vaness, Personal Interview.

But.
 ben! — A - mo - re, ad - di - o! ad - di - o! pic - co - lo a - mor!
 glance! — Good - bye for - ev - er! Good bye, my dar - ling, my love!

ff *p rit. col canto* *pp*
r.h.

FIGURE 6.1: Giacomo Puccini: Butterfly's Farewell to Sorrow.¹⁵³

Cio-Cio-San's suicide by samurai knife is undoubtedly one of the most heart-wrenching and memorable of all operatic staged suicides. In terms of suicidology, Linda and Michael Hutcheon write "In the background of what Durkheim would see as a suicide caused by individual isolation and lack of social integration is the notion of a culture in which suicide is condoned."¹⁵⁴ Considering her prior experience with her father's Seppuku, Butterfly is likely culturally open to suicide as a potential option. Cultural and political factors are a key determinant in suicide and "cultural acceptability appears to be an important influence on method choice."¹⁵⁵ Butterfly chooses the traditional seppuku method in order to reunite herself with the culture she forsook on her wedding day, restoring her honor in the process. Immediately before "Tu? Piccolo Iddio!" Butterfly recites the inscription on her father's knife and suicide weapon

¹⁵³ Giacomo Puccini, *Madama Butterfly*, ed. Victor Trucco (New York: G. Schirmer, 1963), 321.

¹⁵⁴ Linda and Michael Hutcheon, *Opera: The Art of Dying*, 134.

¹⁵⁵ Silvia Cannetto, "Women and Suicidal Behavior," 260.

(figure 6.2): “Con onor muore chi non può serbar vita con onore” (With honor dies, who cannot keep living with honor).¹⁵⁶

Butterfly

(reads in a low voice the words that are engraved on the knife)

Con o - nor muo - re chi non può ser-bar
Let him die with hon - or who can no long-er

dim.

(She points the knife sideways toward her throat.)

vi - ta con o - no - re.
stay a - live with hon - or.

ppp

44041

FIGURE 6.2: Giacomo Puccini: “Dying with Honor.”¹⁵⁷

In order to prevent further shame, Butterfly dies the death of a samurai—usually thought of as a strong, masculine figure. In contrast, alpha male military officer B.F. Pinkerton is so cowardly he is unable to even confront the woman he so deeply betrayed face-to-face. The dichotomy of Butterfly and Pinkerton’s characters is quite progressive: the young Japanese woman with extreme fidelity, conviction, and strength, contrasted

¹⁵⁶ Puccini and Castel, “Madama Butterfly,” 462.

¹⁵⁷ Puccini, *Madama Butterfly*, 317.

with the should-be strong American military man who can't come to face his past transgressions.

Seppuku would have never been allowed for a woman, so this method of suicide is quite the endorsement of female strength. Linda and Michael Hutcheon write that Cio-Cio-San's suicide can be read by a final taking back of power, as she ends her alienation from her own society by her death.¹⁵⁸ Rather than relegate Butterfly to living out her days as a geisha away from those she loves, her suicide with the samurai knife allows her the ability to exhibit autonomy as well as keep with Japanese cultural tradition.

¹⁵⁸ Linda and Michael Hutcheon, *Opera: The Art of Dying*, 135.

CHAPTER 7

THE METAMORPHOSIS OF MADAMA BUTTERFLY

The premiere of *Madama Butterfly* at La Scala¹⁵⁹ on February 17, 1904, was an unequivocal disaster. The audience absolutely hated the original ninety-plus minutes second act, the absence and diminished importance of the tenor Pinkerton, and alleged borrowing of musical lines from Puccini's *La bohème*.¹⁶⁰ In fact, there was not a single curtain call at *Madama Butterfly*'s premiere performance.¹⁶¹ William Ashbrook goes so far as to term February 17th, 1904 as a "black mark on the proud history of La Scala."¹⁶² Puccini immediately pulled the opera from La Scala himself and set to work on revisions, confident that *Butterfly* would become a worldwide favorite.¹⁶³ Years before in a letter to Ricordi, Puccini wrote "I believe that the clearest proof that an opera has been successful is its immediate repetition,"¹⁶⁴ highlighting the importance of his canceling the production after the premiere evening. Puccini's revisions included shortening the act one wedding ceremony, cutting a scene featuring Butterfly's drunken uncle, dividing the second act into two separate scenes, and providing the tenor a mini-aria before leaving the stage for the final time.¹⁶⁵ The vocal writing and capabilities of the titular soprano

¹⁵⁹ La Scala, in Milan Italy, is considered by many opera historians, musicians, and audiences to be the greatest and most important opera house in the world, especially for the presentation of Italian opera. Additionally, La Scala's audience is widely considered to be the world's toughest and most discerning.

¹⁶⁰ Ashbrook, *The Operas of Puccini*, 108.

¹⁶¹ Ibid.

¹⁶² Ibid.

¹⁶³ *Madama Butterfly* is currently the 6th most performed opera in the world, according to Operabase's 2015-16 statistics.

¹⁶⁴ Giacomo Puccini to Giulio Ricordi, July 3, 1896, in *Letters of Giacomo Puccini*, 126.

¹⁶⁵ Hughes, *Famous Puccini Operas*, 112.

also underwent a significant change between the Milan and Brescia premieres, and so the new vocal demands called for a different, more dramatic voice type.

The La Scala Butterfly, Rosina Storchio, was a light lyric soprano and the mistress of the famed conductor of *Butterfly*'s original premiere, Arturo Toscanini.¹⁶⁶ She possibly bears some degree of responsibility for the catastrophic premiere as the known mistress was therefore a favorite target of Milan's notoriously difficult audiences. Puccini wrote to Storchio on the day of the doomed premiere, describing her art as "true, delicate, and moving."¹⁶⁷ Puccini clearly admired Storchio, later writing to her that he wishes to hear her "sweet little voice"¹⁶⁸ again.

A change was made for the planned revised premiere in Brescia with soprano Salomea Krusceniski featured in the title role. Krusceniski was a dramatic soprano known for her interpretations of *Aida* and *Gioconda* and Puccini's revisions suited her more sizable instrument. Butterfly's final aria "Tu? Piccolo Iddio!" underwent a melodic change at the text "O a me" to higher vocal line, reaching an apex of high A5 in contrast to the original high note of F#5 (figures 7.1 and 7.2).

¹⁶⁶ Ashbrook, *The Operas of Puccini*, 109.

¹⁶⁷ Giacomo Puccini to Rosina Storchio, February 17, 1904 in *Letters of Giacomo Puccini*, 162.

¹⁶⁸ Giacomo Puccini to Rosina Storchio, May 4, 1904 in *Letters of Giacomo Puccini*, 164.

FIGURE 7.1: Giacomo Puccini: “O a me” (Revised and Current Version).¹⁶⁹

FIGURE 7.2: Giacomo Puccini: “O a me” (Original Version).¹⁷⁰

This revision exhibits a common Puccini technique to double the orchestral and vocal lines for dramatic effect, a practice which had “the potential to render a singer inaudible.”¹⁷¹ However, this is not an issue for larger voices that are capable of more

¹⁶⁹ Puccini, *Madama Butterfly*, 317.

¹⁷⁰ Fairtile, “Operatic Revisions,” 646.

¹⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 302.

volume and power. On the contrary, dramatic-type voices can struggle with softer dynamics, particularly in the higher register. Puccini's revisions for the voice also included the removal of a pianissimo on high B-flat at the culmination of the act two duet "Tutti i fior?"¹⁷² between Suzuki and Cio-Cio-San.

The first performance of the revised (and present form of) *Madama Butterfly* in Brescia in May 1904 was a grand success. Puccini wrote that the soprano "Krusceniski sings very well and is not deficient in grace and feeling for the part."¹⁷³ When *Madama Butterfly* received its London premiere the following year in 1905, Puccini strongly endorsed the dramatic soprano Emmy Destinn in the title role, suggesting his preference to continue casting a larger voice for the geisha. The casting change from a light soprano in the failed original premiere to two dramatic sopranos after compositional revisions indicate that Puccini modified his original view of Butterfly from that of a child-like doll and came to stress the more tragic aspects of the role.¹⁷⁴

The Paris premiere of *Madama Butterfly* in 1906 was directed by Albert Carré, *regisseur* of the Opéra-Comique. Carré attended the London premiere in 1905 with his wife Marguerite. He yearned to bring the opera to Paris under his own direction with Marguerite starring in the title role. During the early 20th-century Paris "was swept up by a vogue for all things Japanese,"¹⁷⁵ inspiring Carré's scrupulous cultural study for his

¹⁷² This duet is commonly known as "The Flower Duet"

¹⁷³ Giacomo Puccini to Giulio Ricordi, May 1904, in *Letters from Giacomo Puccini*, 165.

¹⁷⁴ Ashbrook, *The Operas of Puccini*, 114.

¹⁷⁵ Michele Girardi, "Introduction to Albert Carré's Staging Manual for *Madama Butterfly*" in *Giacomo Puccini and His World* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2016), 294.

mise-en-scène which Puccini later considered the definitive staging of the opera.¹⁷⁶ However, the rehearsal process is described as a “trying experience”¹⁷⁷ due to the casting of Marguerite. The soprano’s other repertoire included roles like Massenet’s Manon and Debussy’s *Mélisande*, a markedly lighter voice than the dramatic soprani of the Brescia and London premieres. Puccini had no say in the casting choice for the title role and became “increasingly agitated” about Marguerite’s shortcomings in the role.¹⁷⁸ She attempted to be culturally correct, studying how geishas handle fans with famous Japanese actress Sada Yakko,¹⁷⁹ but her vocalism left Puccini wanting more. He repeatedly wrote to his friends lamenting of Marguerite’s vocal weakness. Puccini told his friend Sybil Seligman that Madame Carré “wants too many cuts—the reason being that she feels that the strain would otherwise be too much for her strength.”¹⁸⁰ On November 20th 1906 roughly one month before the premiere date Puccini told Sybil, “I’m in a terrible state of panic about Mme. Carré: I’m afraid she hasn’t the force necessary to go through with the opera.”¹⁸¹ Puccini’s own words repeatedly confirm his preference for a voice of strength and power in the role of Cio-Cio-San.

It is important to clarify the meaning of “dramatic” soprano in Puccini’s time and present day. While 21st century dramatic sopranos are known for their interpretations of

¹⁷⁶ This position is confirmed by Puccini in various letters, including to Tito Ricordi in 1907.

¹⁷⁷ Fairtile, “Operatic Revisions,” 59.

¹⁷⁸ Emanuele Senici, “Puccini on His Interpreters” in *Giacomo Puccini and His World*, 243.

¹⁷⁹ Girardi, “Introduction to Albert Carré’s Staging Manual, 294.

¹⁸⁰ Vincent Seligman, *Puccini Among Friends* (The Macmillan Company: New York, 1938), 93.

¹⁸¹ Seligman, *Puccini Among Friends*, 97.

German heroines such as Isolde and Brünnhilde, they are unlikely to perform the role of Butterfly alongside Wagnerian repertoire. However, many dramatic sopranos performed the role in their earlier years before their voices grew to full power and maturity.

One example is dramatic soprano Nina Stemme, widely known as the foremost Wagner soprano of our current time. Stemme performed Cio-Cio-San at the Gothenburg Opera in her home country of Sweden in 1995, two years after her international career was jumpstarted in the finals of Cardiff Singer of the World in 1993.¹⁸² Stemme's vocal quality was always that of a "lyric-plus" voice, meaning her voice was greater in size than the average lyric soprano. While her vocal timbre and size was well-suited for Puccini's music during her early thirties, she grew into the heavier demands of the German repertoire during her forties and fifties.

While there are multiple categorical descriptions for "lyric-plus" voices that are used today, Italians "perceived lirico-spinto soprano as dramatic soprano"¹⁸³ in the 20th-century. The significance of the lirico-spinto voice in performing these Puccini heroines, as well as basic information about the *Fach* system is addressed in detail in the next portion of this document.

¹⁸² Stemme performed Puccini's "Donde Lieta" as her competition aria

¹⁸³ Youna Jang Hartgraves, "Understanding the Lirico-Spinto Voice Through the Repertoire of *Giovane Scuola* Composers" DMA diss., University of North Texas, 2017, 10.

CHAPTER 8

THE LIRICO-SPINTO VOICE

On the operatic stage, “women exist as sonority and sheer physical volume.”¹⁸⁴

The soprano voice is particularly resonant and commanding thanks to the extended vocal range, physical properties, and particular overtones of the voice type. There are many different sub-types of the soprano voice, called vocal *Fachs*. The word *Fach* means “compartment” in German and is universally recognized in the opera world as the term for ‘voice-category.’¹⁸⁵ Puccini’s vocal writing for each of the three heroines demands a similar voice—a soprano *Fach* known as the *lirico-spinto*. This term typically describes a voice with an Italianate quality and innate ability to produce thrilling, large sounds, especially at the top of the range.

The *Fach* system divides operatic roles into distinct categories, grouping similar roles to act as a guide for both singers and opera houses in appropriate vocal repertoire. While this system is less than a century old, voice type classifications are well-documented during Puccini’s composition dates. In 1892, Eduardo Sonzogno published an article that delineated the various types of soprano, including light (*leggero*), lyric, and dramatic voices.¹⁸⁶

¹⁸⁴ Abbate, “Opera, or the Envoicing of Women,” 254.

¹⁸⁵ J.B. Steane, “Fach,” *Grove Music Online*. 2002; Accessed 14 Jul. 2022. <https://www-oxfordmusiconline-com.ezproxy1.lib.asu.edu/grovemusic/view/10.1093/gmo/9781561592630.001.0001/omo-9781561592630-e-5000003863>.

¹⁸⁶ Eduardo Sonzogno, “Le nostre illustrazioni,” *Il Teatro Illustrato e la Musica Popolare* 11, no. 125 (May 1892): 66.

Composers, particularly of the late Romantic and Verismo styles, wrote particularly complex soprano roles that blend multiple styles, giving rise to hybrid voice types. Famed pedagogue Richard Miller's guide *Training Soprano Voices* lists nine different *Fächer* for the soprano voice: soubrette, soubrette/coloratura, dramatic coloratura, lyric, lirico-spinto, spinto, young dramatic (Jugendlichdramatisch), dramatic (Hochdramatisch), and between-*Fach* (Zwischenfachsängerin).¹⁸⁷

The *Zwischen* and *Dramatic* categories are more closely aligned with the German repertoire, while the *lirico-spinto* voice is connected to a more Italianate style of music and singing, as reflected in the terms' languages of origin. While it is important to note that true dramatic voice types have the ability and occasionally do perform these roles (Tosca in particular), the *lirico-spinto* voice is indelibly tied to the Italian works of Puccini. Operas that called for this soprano voice type are thought to have begun with the works of Verdi, a compositional predecessor of Puccini who is likewise regarded for his heroines. The literal translation of *spinto* is the past participle of the Italian verb *spingere*, meaning "pushed." In singing, this describes the voice capable of additional weight and thrust at the top of the register in moments of climax. Authors in Grove Music Online pointedly writes that the translation of "pushed" is in no way meant to be pejorative but instead describes a heightened ability of vocal power.¹⁸⁸ While "pushed" is the main

¹⁸⁷ Richard Miller, *Training Soprano Voices* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 7.

¹⁸⁸ J.B. Steane, "Spinto (opera)," *Grove Music Online*. 2002; Accessed 14 Jul. 2022. <https://www-oxfordmusiconline-com.ezproxy1.lib.asu.edu/grovemusic/view/10.1093/gmo/9781561592630.001.0001/omo-9781561592630-e-5000007506>.

translation, there are also many other verbs listed under *spingere* in the dictionary, such as “to thrust.”¹⁸⁹ Grammatically speaking, the proper term is *lirico-spinto* rather than the shortened version. The past participle of *spingere* may not stand alone as the verb needs a subject to describe *where* it is pushing or extending from—therefore the literal translation of *lirico-spinto* is close to that of a “lyric plus” voice.

While Miller differentiates the two voice types, many scholars refer to *lirico-spinto* and *spinto* voices as one and the same given they possess both lyric and dramatic qualities. Miller specifically denotes Tosca, Angelica, and Cio-Cio-San in the *spinto* category of his classifications, also specifying that the geisha is often sung by a lighter voice “for visual reasons.”¹⁹⁰ Soprano Nina Gravrok, who has performed all three heroines in European opera houses finds that although her *lirico-spinto* voice is at home in all of these operas, each role is a very different singing experience. She remarked specifically on the low vocal tessitura of Cio-Cio-San, which makes it the easiest role of the three in her opinion.¹⁹¹

Miller writes that the *lirico-spinto* Fach is prescribed when the role includes a number of high, sustained passages that compete with a full orchestral sound¹⁹² and the *spinto* as the soprano who can sing roles that demand dramatic vocalism while sustaining high tessitura.¹⁹³ Both definitions are true of the writing for Tosca, Suor Angelica, and

¹⁸⁹ Catherine Love, ed., *Webster’s New World Italian Dictionary*, (William Collins Sons, London, 1985), 419.

¹⁹⁰ Miller, *Soprano Voices*, 10.

¹⁹¹ Gravrok, Personal Interview.

¹⁹² Miller, *Soprano Voices*, 9.

¹⁹³ *Ibid.*, 10.

Cio-Cio-San and these two terminologies are interchangeable, referring to the same voice type. *Lirico-spinto* voices typically exhibit a darker timbral quality and are larger in size than traditional lyric voices. The vocal ability to cut through large orchestras and sing with additional power than their lyric counterparts begs an important question: why does the *lirico-spinto* voice type most commonly correspond with Puccini sopranos?

The turn-of-the-century saw a major shift in the compositional style of Italian opera, shifting from *bel canto* melismas to more sustained legato lines demanding heightened vocal stamina.¹⁹⁴ In terms of orchestration, Wagner's influence on Italian composers resulted in drastic changes in orchestral size. Puccini's vocal writing shows "an obsession with the power of the human voice"¹⁹⁵ as larger voices are required to sail over sizable orchestras. This is particularly true at moments of the *forte* or *fortissimo* dynamic, as a singular voice must compete with sixty plus players in the pit. This is exemplified by the orchestra doubling the vocal line in Butterfly's "Tu, tu, piccolo iddio" as she exclaims "guarda ben! Amore, addio!" (Look closely! Goodbye, love!) in her goodbye to her son before her suicide. This aria was revised from the original Milan premiere to include additional soaring phrases that doubled the orchestra,¹⁹⁶ a success made possible by the casting shift to a more powerful and "dramatic" soprano, discussed at length above.

¹⁹⁴ Hartgraves, "Lirico-Spinto Voice," 15

¹⁹⁵ Anthony D'eccelesiis, "The Aria Techniques of Giacomo Puccini: A Study in Music-Dramatic Style" Ph.D diss., New York University, 1961, 183.

¹⁹⁶ Revisit figures 7.1 and 7.2.

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rit. a due

Fl. I

Fl. III

Ob.

C. Ing.

Cl. Bb

Cl. F

Fag.

Corni

T. b \flat

T. b \natural

Timp.

Arpa

BUTT.

trac - cia, guar - da ben! A - more ad - di - o!

dei - so. Sieh mich an! Le'wah'kein Her - ze.

Viol.

V. le

Vc.

Cb.

unite

div.

unite

div.

unite

FIGURE 8.1: Giacomo Puccini: Full Score of “Tu, tu, piccolo iddio,” Rehearsal

55+6/7/8.¹⁹⁷

¹⁹⁷ Giacomo Puccini, *Madama Butterfly* (Milan: Ricordi, 1907), 476.

SOPRANOS IN THE PREMIERES

While *Madama Butterfly* underwent a major revision process that led to a more powerful soprano in the title role, both *Tosca* and *Suor Angelica* originally premiered with sopranos who belonged to the *lirico-spinto Fach*. Although Puccini did not conduct his operas, he actively participated in rehearsals, especially for premieres.¹⁹⁸ Therefore, the casting of the titular soprano at the premieres were particularly important. Since the original *La Scala* failed premiere of *Butterfly* is not the opera's current form today, consider Salomea Krusceniski in the Brescia performance as Puccini's desired soprano. Puccini wrote of Krusceniski's singing talents and there is documentation of her demonstrated ability to sing demanding roles such as the title role in *La Gioconda*. Soprano Emmy Destinn, the Covent Garden Cio-Cio-San, was cast in the premiere of Puccini's own *La Fanciulla del West* at the Metropolitan Opera, five years after the London premiere of *Madama Butterfly*. Puccini clearly enjoyed Destinn's dramatic instrument, proven by his recommendation to create the role of Minnie in *Fanciulla*. It is noteworthy that of the first four Cio-Cio-San's, two were romantic partners of either the conductor or director. While Puccini's non-involvement in casting Marguerite Carré is confirmed in his letters, it is also likely that Toscanini insisted upon the casting of his mistress Storchio at *La Scala*. When Puccini had full reign of casting decisions, he consistently chose a strong and sizable voice for the role of Cio-Cio-San.

Tosca featured thirty-nine-year old soprano Hariclea Darclée in the title role. Darclée had an established reputation well before her *Tosca*, particularly known for her

¹⁹⁸ Fairtile, "Operatic Revisions," 52.

work as Verdi's Aïda. She "pioneered several lirico-spinto soprano roles of the *giovane scuola*" of which Puccini was a member.¹⁹⁹ Before *Tosca*'s premiere in 1900, Darclée premiered the title role in Catalani's *La Wally* as well as the title role of Mascagni's *Iris*. Her debut as *Tosca* was a great success: she encored "Vissi d'arte" and the opera received a total of twenty-one curtain calls.²⁰⁰

The original Suor Angelica was Geraldine Farrar, an American soprano who debuted as Cio-Cio-San in the Metropolitan Opera premiere of *Madama Butterfly* in 1907, ten years before *Suor Angelica*. Puccini described this performance as going well with the press but displeasing to the composer himself. He reported Farrar was "not too satisfactory. She sings out of tune, forces her voice, and it does not carry well in the large space of the theatre."²⁰¹ However, her vocal talents must have connected with the composer in some manner given that she was repeatedly engaged in Puccini operas over the course of her career. Puccini authored a letter to Ricordi in 1910 with news of Farrar's turn as *Tosca* in Paris, an original engagement for a one-night gala performance that turned into eight repeats.²⁰² Puccini does not comment one way or another on her voice or suitability for the role of *Tosca* or Suor Angelica. Farrar enjoyed quite a prolific career in both opera and silent film and was a repertory member of the Metropolitan

¹⁹⁹ Hartgraves, "Lirico-Spinto Voice", 11.

²⁰⁰ Adami, *Letters from Giacomo Puccini*, 125.

²⁰¹ Giacomo Puccini to Giulio Ricordi, February 18, 1907, in *Letters from Giacomo Puccini*, 176.

²⁰² Giacomo Puccini to Giulio Ricordi, June 13, 1910, in *Letters from Giacomo Puccini*, 87.

Opera until her retirement in 1922 after 672 performances.²⁰³ Farrar also created the title roles of works by the verismo composers Giordano and Mascagni, whose vocal writing typically demanded a *lirico-spinto* voice.

FACH: MORE THAN A VOICE

In *The Opera Singer's Career Guide: Understanding the European Fach System*, author Pearl Yeadon McGinnis writes that a “Fach” aims to use one or two words (such as lyric, *lirico-spinto*, or dramatic) to describe many different vocal and physical factors: “Fach= voice + range + size + timbre + physical build + age and experience + desire + frequency of performance.”²⁰⁴ Of the sopranos whom I interviewed for this project, nearly all identify their own *Fach* as a subset of the *lirico-spinto* voice. For instance, Carol Vaness specifically describes her voice as a “*lirico-spinto* with *agilità*.”²⁰⁵ Many sopranos also spoke of the importance of temperament when playing these heroines who take such significant action onstage. They mused on the need for a large, often fiery personality, an offstage persona that matches the character. The saying “art reflects life” can certainly apply as it relates to the casting of operatic roles. When onstage suicide is a

²⁰³ “Farrar, Geraldine” Metropolitan Opera Archives. Accessed July 28, 2022. <http://archives.metoperafamily.org/archives/scripts/cgiip.exe/WService=BibSpeed/gisrch2k.r?Term=Farrar,%20Geraldine%20%5BSoprano%5D&limit=5000&vsrctype=no&xBranch=ALL&xmtype=&Start=&End=&theterm=Fa%72%72a%72,%20G%65%72aldin%65%20%5BSop%72ano%5D&srt=&x=0&xHome=http://archives.metoperafamily.org/archives/bibpro.htm&xHomePath=http://archives.metoperafamily.org/archives/>

²⁰⁴ Pearl Yeadon McGinnis, *The Opera Singer's Career Guide: Understanding the European Fach System*, ed. Marith McGinnis Willis (Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press, 2010).

²⁰⁵ Vaness, Personal Interview.

requirement to portray a character, it is extremely important to respect the possible impact on the performer.

CHAPTER 9

BEHIND THE VOICE: CONSIDERATIONS FOR THE PERFORMER

Opera is a *performed* genre: the art form cannot exist without the execution of live performance.²⁰⁶ Similar to performers of stage and film, operatic artists take initiative to inhabit a character. The physicality of onstage suicide must likewise be addressed by any opera company mounting a production of these works. Performer safety should always be the paramount concern for any staged work as injuries incurred in rehearsals or performances can cause life-long effects for performers. Tosca's final leap is a particularly risky move that stands out for the interviewed sopranos. Soviero recalls jumping onto a pile of multiple mattresses, the crew always asking if she was ok. Vaness remembers a production in Paris where the crew began a strike in the middle of production, a decision that Vaness had no knowledge of until seeing there were no spotters for her suicide leap. Instead, a dresser was standing there waving arms and yelling "don't jump!" The "Avanti a dio!" loses gravitas and the drama of the entire show is changed if Tosca forgoes the jump and submits to her arrest, so Vaness continued the staging without the requisite safety spotters. Decades of physically intense performances cause wear and tear on the body, especially affecting the joints, knees, and backs. The physical demands of performance and the situations and actions required of singers should be emphasized with the same importance as vocal considerations.

The process of rehearsing, breathing, and tapping into the inner psyche of a character requires not only talent, but mental fortitude. Sadly, playing tragic and violent

²⁰⁶ Abbate, "Opera, or the Envoicing of Women," 234.

characters has occasionally resulted in personal strife for actors who employ a “method acting” approach. The technique is defined by the Cambridge dictionary as a style in which the performer “tries to understand and feel the emotions of the character he or she represents.”²⁰⁷ This phenomenon is most famously exhibited in film actor Heath Ledger’s work as “The Joker” in the 2008 film *The Dark Knight*, marred by his untimely death by accidental overdose before the film reached theaters.

Theater theorist Herbert Blau writes “Performance may transform the one performing. That it has the capacity to transform seems to be universal.”²⁰⁸ Considering opera’s status as both a musical and stage medium, this transformative capacity is heightened due to the combination of visual stimuli with music’s innate power to elicit an emotional response.²⁰⁹ A 2014 study by Baltes, Miu, et al. assessed the emotional experiences of an opera audience during a live performance of *Madama Butterfly*. The study interestingly found that being a woman was associated with more unease during the performance, which was explained as a possible “facilitation of emotional reactivity to the same-sex central character of this opera.”²¹⁰ Additional scholars such as Carolyn

²⁰⁷ “Method Acting” in *Cambridge Dictionary Online*.

<https://dictionary.cambridge.org/us/dictionary/english/method-acting>

²⁰⁸ Herbert Blau, Universals of performance; or amortizing play, in *By Means of Performance: Intercultural Studies of Theatre and Ritual*, ed. R. Schechner & W. Appel (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990)

²⁰⁹ Jennifer Huang and Carol Lynne Krumhansl, “What does Seeing the Performer Add? it Depends on Musical Style, Amount of Stage Behavior, and Audience Expertise,” in *Musicae Scientiae* 15 (2011), 343-364.

doi:<http://dx.doi.org.ezproxy1.lib.asu.edu/10.1177/1029864911414172>.

<http://login.ezproxy1.lib.asu.edu/login?url=https://www-proquest-com.ezproxy1.lib.asu.edu/scholarly-journals/what-does-seeing-performer-add-depends-on-musical/docview/1437971051/se-2?accountid=4485>

²¹⁰ Felicia Baltes and Andrei C. Miu, “Emotions during Live Music Performance:

Abbate have ruminated upon the manner which female spectators interpret and understand portrayals of women onstage.²¹¹ When there is documented occurrence of the emotional impact on female audience members who are witnessing the onstage suicide, it is particularly important to recognize the impact on the performers who personify the behavior.

Erin Heisel states “the most intimate experience of intimacy in music is between a singer and the character he or she portrays.”²¹² Soprano Jill Gardner, a celebrated interpreter of *Tosca*, performed the role several times alongside her late husband Jake Gardner as Scarpia. In a personal interview she recounted a story of an argument erupting at dinner after a rehearsal when her husband joked that she was “no longer Jill dealing with Jake, but Tosca dealing with Scarpia.”²¹³ Gardner contends her success in the role is in no small part due to her intrinsic connection with the diva, claiming “Tosca is very much a part of me as I am her.”²¹⁴

The sopranos interviewed for this project noted that the sensitivities of staging a suicide scene are almost never addressed by stage directors or opera administrations. While the physical safety of performers is addressed the potential mental and emotional toll is rarely discussed or delineated. Instead, there is much more focus on “intimacy,” typically relating to romantically-tied characters who closely embrace, often kissing or

Links with Individual Differences in Empathy, Visual Imagery, and Mood,” *Psychomusicology: Music, Mind, and Brain* 24 (2014), 58-65.

²¹¹ Abbate, “Opera, or the Envoicing of Women,” 253.

²¹² Erin Heisel, “Empathy as a Tool for Embodiment Processes in Vocal Performance” *Empirical Musicology Review* 10, no. 2 (2015), 104.

²¹³ Jill Gardner, Personal Interview with the Author, August 19, 2022.

²¹⁴ Gardner, Personal Interview.

touching intimate areas. In the years since the “Me Too” movement and subsequent reckoning of rampant sexual harassment in the opera industry, intimacy coordinators are a positive addition to rehearsal rooms in the name of maintaining performer safety and professionalism. I strongly contend that rehearsal time and discussion should likewise be dedicated to the sensitivities of staging suicides, in the same vein of protecting performers both emotionally and physically. The extremely intimate relationship between singer and role warrants distinctive treatment and discussion. Just as there are special considerations when discussing race and gender as it relates to characters, care when staging and discussing suicides would be a welcome inclusion in the rehearsal process.

Vocally speaking, the full experience of these emotions can absolutely interfere with singing technique, yet a highly emotional portrayal also has the potential to connect with the audience on a more powerful level. It is often a pointed choice to ramp up emotion both vocally and physically to give a heartfelt performance, even if vocal technique is somewhat compromised. Singers should “strike a balance between empathy and necessary personal distance from the character,”²¹⁵ advice which is more easily given than applied. The acceptable emotional distance performers need is impossible to quantify as it varies from one performer to the next. Performers are called to embody a character but stop at the brink where they sense they may lose control of the moment. This is a Herculean task considering it comes in addition to memorizing hundreds of pages of music and text, following precise stage direction, and exhibiting vocal stamina to sing over a large orchestra.

²¹⁵ Heisel, “Empathy as a Tool,” 106.

Some voice instructors avoid assigning repertoire to younger singers, citing necessary “life experience” before stepping into certain roles, irrespective of vocal development. As an example, *Suor Angelica* is performed at universities and training programs throughout the world; however many teachers, coaches, and even performers often comment that the full scope of the role cannot be achieved by a soprano who is not a mother. Jill Gardner premiered her first Puccini heroine Cio-Cio-San at the age of thirty and continues to sing the Puccinian repertoire over twenty years later. She notes that sopranos who perform these roles need the “natural age, maturity, and vocal colors” that the repertoire commands.²¹⁶ Soprano Diana Soviero fondly recounts her career that spanned over 1,000 performances on over 100 stages around the globe. Before her professional debut in 1964, Soviero remembered her first study of *Madama Butterfly* in a voice lesson at Juilliard, crying by the time she reached the duet with Suzuki. Her teacher told her to close her score, saying she wasn’t emotionally ready to tackle the role. Soviero agrees “if you get too carried away emotionally you can’t sing.”²¹⁷ She shared that her goal is to bring emotion to the audience without it overtaking herself, a feat Soviero certainly achieved considering her lauded performance career spanning multiple decades.

Due to both the heightened physicality and intimacy demanded by these roles, the sopranos interviewed for this project all remark on the importance of working with artistic colleagues who they could trust in productions. For instance, the interpreters of Tosca named the baritone playing the role of Scarpia as a major factor in their safety,

²¹⁶ Gardner, Personal Interview.

²¹⁷ Diana Soviero, Personal Interview with the Author, August 22, 2022.

comfortability, and overall enjoyment of a particular production. Bringing the existing trust and intimacy of a marriage relationship to the stage is exemplified by the aforementioned husband and wife pairing of Jill and Jake Gardner. Additionally, there are documented successes of husband/wife performer and director pairs. Diana Soviero's husband, Bernard Uzan, is a long-time stage director who directed the soprano's first production of *Tosca* in Montreal. The intimate relationship and knowledge of a spouse carried over into the rehearsal room. "My husband always knew if I was faking something, or not in the moment."²¹⁸ Soviero recognized the reassuring safety and comfort in portraying vulnerability when working with her husband, also recalling that it added an extra pressure to not make a mistake and a sense of proving herself to both her husband and everyone else in the room.

Family members who work outside of the operatic and performance fields can experience emotional challenges watching their loved ones play these suicidal heroines onstage. Gardner recalls her father attending performances and asking "Why do you have to die all the time?"²¹⁹ It is vitally important to remember that in reality, each performer onstage plays a variety of roles in their own lives: wife, daughter, mother, sister, friend. Before studying or performing the role of a suicidal woman on the operatic stage it is important that singers of any age are educated on the complexities of this repertoire. It is equally important that teachers who assign this repertoire to young singers are aware of the requisite high-level emotional load when playing a suicidal character.

²¹⁸ Soviero, Personal Interview.

²¹⁹ Gardner, Personal Interview.

CHAPTER 10

THE ROLE OF RELIGION

The demographic of Puccini's audiences consisted overwhelmingly of Catholic Italians. Traditional Catholics were likely uncomfortable with and disapproved of staged suicide, so the composer strengthened his audience's emotional connection with the leading ladies by portraying each of them as a devout woman of faith. In the stories that take place in Italy Puccini included familiar liturgical texts, specifically those from the Catholic Mass. Puccini and his librettists insert a clear distancing from religion for each of these characters before taking their own lives, only to include a gesture or text displaying the return of faith before the final curtain. Tosca spends all of her prayer time "asking God why he has forsaken her."²²⁰ When recounting Scarpia's murder to Cavaradossi, she tells him "Invan, pazza d'orror, alla Madonna mi volsi ai Santi" (In vain, mad with horror, I turned to Madonna and the Saints).²²¹ Tosca no longer has faith that God will save her from trouble, proceeding to tell Cavaradossi "Amor che seppe a te vita serbare ci sarà guida in terra" (My love, which was able to save your life, will be our guide on earth).²²² Tosca now views herself and romantic love as savior and guide, rather than the omniscient love of God. A few moments later after witnessing Cavaradossi's brutal death she recites her famous last words "Scarpia, avanti a Dio!" (Scarpia we will meet before God!)²²³ indicating she commits suicide ready for judgment at the throne of

²²⁰ Carol Vaness, Interview with Author, June 10, 2022.

²²¹ Giacomo Puccini and Nico Castel, "Tosca," in *The Complete Puccini Libretti* (Geneseo, NY: Leyerle, 1994), 175.

²²² Puccini and Castel, "Tosca," 180.

²²³ *Ibid.*, 184.

God, avoiding societal earthly justice and punishment. Through her suicide, Tosca “ascends into the pantheon of tragic heroines, celebrating her individual identity, embracing the righteousness of Heaven, and her own place in the divine order of creation.”²²⁴

As a nun, Angelica’s text is full of sacred thoughts, praising God, the Virgin Mary, and the Christ Child. Diana Soviero noted that the role and behavior of Angelica came naturally thanks to her own Catholic faith and upbringing.²²⁵ The opera’s convent setting features sacred-affiliated musical sounds like church bells and near constant mention of Catholic doctrine in the libretto. The convent is “Angelica’s prison but also her sanctuary; her faith is ultimately her salvation.”²²⁶ Even after Angelica’s vicious Aunt brings the news of her son’s tragic death, Angelica remains steadfast in her faith. She tells the nuns “La grazia è dicesa dal cielo” (Grace has descended from heaven) and “Lodiamo la Vergine Santa” (Let us loud the Holy Virgin.)²²⁷ When Angelica decides to drink poison, she plans to “e in Cielo, lo rivedró” (reunite with her son in heaven).²²⁸ Upon her stark realization she has committed a mortal sin through suicide, Angelica cries “Per amor di mi figlio, ho smarito la ragione!” (I have lost my reason for love of my son). With the inclusion of this line, Forzano’s libretto appeals to a medicalized understanding of suicide as Angelica claims mental illness as her reason for consuming the poison.²²⁹

²²⁴ Clément, *Opera*, 93.

²²⁵ Soviero, Personal Interview.

²²⁶ Greenwald, “Puccini’s Matriarch,” 224.

²²⁷ Puccini and Castel, “Suor Angelica,” 260.

²²⁸ Puccini and Castel, “Suor Angelica,” 320.

²²⁹ Linda and Michael Hutcheon, *Opera: The Art of Dying*, 131.

She then abruptly switches from her stupor to ask for God's help as exhibited by her final words: the repeated phrase "Salvami!" (Save me!)²³⁰ The audience is thus intended to view Angelica as a victim rather than a sinner due to her loss of reason and subsequent return to pleading to God in her final moments.

Considering Cio-Cio-San's pregnancy within the confines of marriage and steadfast fidelity in the face of abandonment she is the one heroine who is truly "without sin."²³¹ Vincent Seligman describes Butterfly's "virginal innocence" along with her "tenacious faith," also calling her the most lovable of all Puccini heroines.²³² Cio-Cio-San's conversion to Christianity upon her marriage to Pinkerton is announced in her act one arietta "Io seguo il mio destino" (I follow my destiny). She sings "al Dio del signor Pinkerton m'inchino...pregherò lo stesso Dio" (I bow to the God of Mr. Pinkerton...I will pray to the same God) which leads to disownment by her family.

Arthur Groos suggests that due to the stark difference in Eastern and Western traditions, religion becomes "the point of departure for Butterfly's construction of a new life."²³³ After the wedding ceremony she corrects her friends' congratulations to "Madama Butterfly" to "Madama B.F. Pinkerton" instead. She remains committed to her new faith just as she maintains her identity as "Madama Pinkerton"²³⁴ long after her abandonment. At the beginning of Act Two, Butterfly tells Suzuki "Pigri ed obesi sono

²³⁰ Puccini and Castel, "Suor Angelica," 324.

²³¹ Seligman, *Puccini Among Friends*, 52.

²³² Ibid.

²³³ Groos, "Madama Butterfly" in *Giacomo Puccini and His World*, 62.

²³⁴ Butterfly again corrects her name to "Madama Pinkerton," this time to Sharpless upon his visit in act two.

gli Dei Giapponesi. L'Americano Iddio, son persuasa, ben più presto risponde a chi l'implori" (Japanese Gods are lazy and obese, the American God answers prayers much faster.)²³⁵

Upon Pinkerton's return with American wife Kate in act three, Cio-Cio-San realizes the life she knew is no longer. After suffering the loss of relationship with her child, husband, and the shame of abandonment, she returns to her original religion immediately before her suicide with her bow to the Buddha upon retrieving the seppuku sword. Europeans held a very simplified impression that the Buddhist faith accepted suicide to the point where it was even elevated to a religious practice, as reflected by Durkheim in *Le Suicide*.²³⁶ Durkheim specifically attributed the concept of "altruistic" suicide, as exhibited in seppuku, to Eastern religions.²³⁷

In truth the Buddhist faith views suicide as a negative act, yet it is also acknowledged as a solution to ultimately reach nirvana. Buddhism does not see death as the end of life, but "merely a transition."²³⁸ Lamotte notes that Buddhism leaves "each person free to end his own days,"²³⁹ and suicide is not regarded in the same manner as murder, theft or other behaviors that bring harm to others.²⁴⁰ Suicide "instigated by

²³⁵ Puccini and Nico Castel, "Madama Butterfly," 330.

²³⁶ Arvind Sharma, "Emile Durkheim on Suicide in Buddhism," *Buddhist Studies Review* 4, no. 2 (1987), 119.

²³⁷ Brendan D. Kelly, "Self-immolation, Suicide and Self-harm in Buddhist and Western Traditions," *Transcultural Psychiatry* 48, no. 3 (2011), 307.

²³⁸ Brendan D. Kelly, "Self-immolation, Suicide and Self-harm in Buddhist and Western Traditions," *Transcultural Psychiatry* 48, no. 3 (2011), 299.

²³⁹ Etienne Lamotte, "Religious suicide in early Buddhism," *Buddhist Studies Review* 4, no. 2 (1987), 105.

²⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

desire” is unacceptable, but is seen as “justified in the persons of the Noble Ones who have already cut off desire...having completed their work, sever their last link with the world and voluntarily pass into nirvana.”²⁴¹ Left without Pinkerton and her son, Butterfly’s suicide severs her link to her now loveless, desolate world.

The final moments of Butterfly’s life restore her Japanese heritage in terms of both religion and method of suicide. The “Con onor muore” (with honor dies) moment with the sword places her death in a “purely Japanese ambience.”²⁴² *Madama Butterfly*’s exoticism likely allowed audiences to feel comfortable with Butterfly’s restoration to her native faith, even though it is not the audience’s own. Her return to Buddhism provides distance from her character for Western audiences while still maintaining her status as a woman of faith. Puccini’s audiences were likely less judgmental toward these suicidal characters because of the composer’s special emphasis on the role of faith in their lives. This appeal to religion brings a new level of sympathy for these characters, allowing them to maintain likeability and achieve heroine status.

²⁴¹ Ibid., 106.

²⁴² Groos, “Madama Butterfly” in *Giacomo Puccini and His World*, 80.

CHAPTER 11

PUCCINI'S LETTERS: INSIGHTS INTO A COMPOSER'S PSYCHE

This project relies heavily on Puccini's own thoughts and musings during the time of these compositions as communicated to friends, family, and associates in hundreds of letters throughout the course of his life. He praises and criticizes various performers in their roles, conveys the triumphs and failures of different premieres, and shares his personal fears, hardships, and pleasures. The successfulness (or lack thereof) of Puccini's compositions often mirrored the various peaks and valleys in his life outside of work. After the triumph of *La bohème* Puccini began work on *Tosca* for nearly five years. Puccini wrote a letter to his dear friend Ricordi during *Tosca*'s compositional process, sharing his general happiness and good health.²⁴³ Puccini's happy life stage resulted in another achievement in *Tosca*, which solidified his status as the pre-eminent composer of Italian opera and Verdi's successor.²⁴⁴

Wanting to build off of the successes of *Tosca* and *La bohème*, Puccini wrote of his desire to compose and break the boredom and monotony of his days.²⁴⁵ A few months later he lamented about the many operas which conclude the same way saying they end "either in bed like Mimì or in armchair like Violetta."²⁴⁶ The cultural suicide of Cio-Cio-San provided a novel, desired twist on the existing formula which always included the

²⁴³ Giacomo Puccini to Giulio Ricordi, November 4, 1896, in *Letters from Giacomo Puccini*, 127.

²⁴⁴ Alexandra Wilson, "Torrefranca's *Giacomo Puccini and International Opera*" in *Giacomo Puccini and His World*, 324.

²⁴⁵ Giacomo Puccini to Giulio Ricordi, August 6, 1900, in *Letters*, 143.

²⁴⁶ Giacomo Puccini to Giulio Ricordi, November 20, 1900, in *Letters*, 149.

death of the lead soprano. His attraction to the story of *Butterfly* and excitement for the opera is well-documented and detailed earlier in the project, but his personal life took an unfortunate turn during the years of composition. The composer describes himself coming through “an unpleasantly stormy period”²⁴⁷ in 1902 and he suffered a broken leg in a car accident with his family on February 25, 1903. The creation of *Madama Butterfly* was accomplished in a “period of anxiety and physical pain” due to the accident and other family misfortunes.²⁴⁸ The premiere of *Butterfly* was yet another dark time for Puccini, and it is possible the original version was not his best due to the tumult in his life during the compositional process.

Toward the end of his life and career during his work on *Il Trittico*, he told Sybil Seligman “I’ve no desire at all to work—my health hasn’t been very good...I’m certainly growing old, which is a most disagreeable thing—don’t you think?”²⁴⁹ He also wrote about his concern of the war and ration struggles resulting in food shortages. During this horrific time, he wanted to write something that made people laugh hence the inclusion of *Gianni Schicchi* along with the heavy pathos of *Suor Angelica*. Most critics found *Suor Angelica* as the most inferior of the three one-act operas but Puccini “never ceased to proclaim that *Angelica* was the best.”²⁵⁰ He exhibited his deep sentimental admiration for the piece in his original showing at his sister’s convent in Vicopelago and his subsequent

²⁴⁷ Giacomo Puccini to Giulio Ricordi, September 18, 1902, in *Letters*, 156.

²⁴⁸ Giuseppe Adami, ed. *Letters from Giacomo Puccini*, 147.

²⁴⁹ Giacomo Puccini to Sybil Seligman, January 24th, 1918, in *Puccini Among Friends*, 276.

²⁵⁰ Seligman, *Puccini Among Friends*, 285.

impassioned retelling of the performance.²⁵¹ Perhaps Puccini's own words, more than any other scholarly resource or criticism, should be the bellwether for how these titular characters should be portrayed.

²⁵¹ Ibid.

CHAPTER 12

CONCLUSION

A closer look into the suicides of Tosca, Suor Angelica, and Cio-Cio-San reveals their deaths are an affirmation of the valor and fortitude of the human spirit. Carolyn Abbate referred to operatic portrayals like these as “the envoicing of women”²⁵² in her response to Susan McClary. In the foreword to Catherine Clément’s bluntly titled *Opera, Or, The Undoing of Women*, Susan McClary states that women are the “jewels” of opera, but “the role of a jewel, a decorative object, is not the deciding role.”²⁵³ Similarly, Arman Schwartz writes that Puccini heroines “engender feelings of helplessness more obviously than those of power.”²⁵⁴ While these views may hold more validity in cases of alternative operatic leading ladies, they are an insult to the suicidal heroines of Giacomo Puccini.

In future scholarship, analysis applied through a more contemporary feminist lens that espouses character strength should gain traction. Opinions along the previous line of thinking should be easily reformed considering objective facts. A complete consideration of the libretti shows that the words of the heroines intentionally reveal their views on death and dying, replacing the notion that they commit suicide out of weakness and fear. Puccini’s compositional choices, methods and his own thoughts as communicated in his letters show that he wanted these characters to be respected for their strengths rather than grieved for their weaknesses. Puccini’s own letters express his preference of large,

²⁵² Carolyn Abbate, “Opera or the Envoicing of Women.”

²⁵³ Susan McClary, foreword to *Opera, Or, The Undoing of Women*, by Catherine Clément (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1988), 5.

²⁵⁴ Arman Schwartz, “Realism and Skepticism in Puccini’s Early Operas” in *Giacomo Puccini and His World*, 45.

powerful soprano voices for these heroines. The sheer power and vocal capabilities of the *lirico-spinto* soprano reinforce the characters as those who exude fortitude and agency: aural forces of nature whose voices that command that those onstage and in the audience take notice and listen.

The performance of suicidal characters requires significant physical, vocal, and emotional demands that warrant respect for both the sopranos that perform them and the characters themselves. My research informs my pedagogical knowledge as these are important considerations when assigning repertoire to students. I hope this project likewise assists fellow voice teachers to advise students interested in these roles.

The casting of these roles should account for performer health and safety in both a vocal and holistic manner. The emotional toll of embodying the role of a suicidal woman should be recognized and supported by artistic administration at every level. These operatic suicides constitute a “*contemplatio mortis*” of the most personal kind, forcing audiences to review their individual positions on voluntary death.²⁵⁵ Therefore it is important that they are performed and presented in all of their complexity, as Puccini intended.

As women in highly rigid patriarchal societies, Tosca, Suor Angelica, and Cio-Cio-San are relegated to lives dictated by oppressive outside forces of anti-feminine culture. However, a holistic and detailed survey of the entire picture reveals that these heroine’s suicides transform them into women who are no longer passive—the acted

²⁵⁵ Linda and Michael Hutcheon, *Opera: The Art of Dying*, 145.

upon become the actor. Their operatic suicides exhibit autonomy and strength: a powerful opportunity to write their own ending. “To die with honor,” indeed.

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