Puccini, Giacomo (1858-1924) – *I Crisantemi*

Puccini was born into a Tuscan family of church musicians and it was expected that young Giacomo would succeed his father, Michele Puccini, as ‘maestro di cappella’ at the San Martino cathedral in the small town of Lucca—a position that had been held by a Puccini for four generations. Sadly Michele died when Giacomo was only six years old and the chain of succession was broken. These circumstances did, however, free the young man to pursue other musical avenues and after seeing a performance of Verdi's *Aida* at the age of 15 he became inspired to write opera. In 1883, while attending the Milan Conservatory, Puccini composed a one-act opera for a competition; he did not win, but *Le Villi* was successful enough to put the young Puccini on a very different career path that led to him becoming one of the most successful and famous opera composers of all time. *La Bohème, Tosca, Madama Butterfly* and *Turandot* are among the most frequently performed in the standard repertoire.

Puccini himself acknowledged that his true talent lay "only in the theatre," and so his non-operatic works are relatively few. However, the string quartet was a medium for which he had a certain affinity – as a conservatory student he composed a set of three short minuets and an unrelated scherzo for string quartet. In 1890 he composed *I Cristantemi (The Chrysanthemums)* in response to the sudden death of a friend. The man in question was Amadeo di Savoia, Duke of Aosta, a young and ambitious Italian prince who was selected to assume the throne of the King of Spain after the Glorious Revolution of 1868. The task of unifying a violent nation and restoring constitutional order under constant threat of assassination and civil war proved too great, and Amadeo abdicated in 1873 whereupon a Republic was declared. Amadeo returned to Turin, humiliated, and lived quietly until his death at the age of 44. It is not known how the friendship between Puccini and the Duke came about but it was of sufficient significance to inspire this elegiac piece, named after the flower of mourning and heroism in Italian tradition.

Composed in just one night, as alleged by Puccini in a letter written to his brother, *I Crisantemi* is a single-movement elegy in ternary form based on two plaintive melodies in C sharp minor. The first is restless, building its power from chromatic figures moving in contrary motion. In the middle, a mournful theme for the first violin sounds over pulsations in the viola; the first violin and cello then repeat the melody, in double octaves, with the pedal in the second violin. A brief return of the opening music closes the lament. Puccini thought enough of this music to reuse some of it in his opera *Manon Lescaut*, composed three years later in 1893. The main theme that opens the quartet serves as the orchestral backdrop for much of the action of Act IV, when Manon and her lover des Grieux are wandering to their deaths in the desert wasteland of Louisiana, and the soloistic second theme underscores the Act III prison duet between the ill-fated lovers.

*Elizabeth Dalton, 2018*