Week 4: Italian Mastermind: Giacomo Puccini

1. Which of Puccini’s tragic operas highlights the interest and fascination of the day with the Far East, has a screen adaptation, and inspired a musical?  
   **A: Madama Butterfly**

   This three-act opera premiered in February 17, 1904 at La Scala. Libretto by Luigi Illica and Giuseppe Giacosa, and based on a short story called “Madame Butterfly” by John Luther Long. Its original premiere was two acts and was poorly received, despite having such notable singers as soprano Rosina Storchio, tenor Giovanni Zenatello and baritone Giuseppe De Luca in lead roles. This was due in part to a late completion by Puccini, which gave inadequate time for rehearsals. Puccini revised the opera, splitting the second act in two, with the Humming Chorus as a bridge to what became Act III, and making other changes. Success ensued, starting with the first performance on May 28, 1904 in Brescia. In 1907, Puccini made his final revisions to the opera in a fifth version, which has become known as the "Standard Version" and is the one that is most often performed around the world. However, the original 1904 version is occasionally performed, such as for the opening of La Scala's season on December 7, 2016, with Riccardo Chailly conducting.

   Royal Opera House: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cmaQfmg0Rk0](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cmaQfmg0Rk0)

2. One of this opera’s most popular aria has been covered by Aretha Franklin and Michael Bolton. Can you name the opera and aria?  
   **A: “Nessun Dorma” from Turandot**

   Aretha Franklin: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uHb75oTHOV4](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uHb75oTHOV4)

   Pavarotti and Michael Bolton: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9uZJM2ictXw](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9uZJM2ictXw)

   This opera in three acts was posthumously completed by Franco Alfano in 1926, and its libretto is by Giuseppe Adami and Renato Simoni. It is based on Count Carlo Gozzi’s play of the same name. It premiered on April 25, 1926 at La Scala and was conducted by Arturo Toscanini.
3. What opera was commissioned and first performed by the Metropolitan Opera?
   
   **A: La Fanciulla del West**

   Lucianno Pavarotti: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Dk0-qm1gNM0](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Dk0-qm1gNM0)

   Metropolitan Opera: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gW85AKJxMzk](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gW85AKJxMzk)

   Deemed by Puccini as one of his greatest works, *La fanciulla* has not risen to the same popularity as his other operas. It was premiered by the Met on December 10, 1910 and was again conducted by Toscanini and starring Enrico Caruso and Emmy Destinn, for whom the roles Dick Johnson and Minnie were created. It is based on David Belasco’s play “The Girl of the Golden West.”

4. What Puccini opera was the subject of a public dispute with composer Ruggero Leoncavallo who was also writing an opera on the same subject matter at the time?
   
   **A: La bohème**

   Royal Opera House: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7mXrbjNncbQ](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7mXrbjNncbQ)

   Salzburg Festival: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GC4RO2VM1BI](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GC4RO2VM1BI)

   The world premiere of this four act opera took place in Turin on February 1, 1896 and was again conducted by Toscanini. The librettists are Luigi Illica and Giuseppe Giacosa (same ones as *Madama Butterfly*) and it’s based on the novel “Scènes de la vie de bohème” by Henry Murger.

   Simultaneously, Ruggero Leoncavallo premiered his *La bohème* in Venice on May 6, 1897. While it later was titled *Mimi Pinson*, it did not survive against Puccini’s version.

   Maria Callas sings an aria from Leoncavallo’s *La bohème*: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=reZh_f4HoTM](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=reZh_f4HoTM)

   Leoncavallo: *La bohème / Act 4* - Mimi Pinson la biondinetta · Renée Fleming [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9jHljOJm6Ok](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9jHljOJm6Ok)

   Montserrat Caballé - Musette Svaria [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lZDZNG9yPnc](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lZDZNG9yPnc)
5. This melodramatic opera is famously called the “Shabby Little Shocker.” Which opera is it?
   A: Tosca

Maria Callas: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Nk5KrIxePzI](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Nk5KrIxePzI)

Royal Opera House: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0euYKIMfV4I](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0euYKIMfV4I)

Premiering in Rome on January 14, 1900, Puccini partner with the same librettists as Madama Butterfly and La bohème for this three act opera. It is based on the play, “La Tosca” by Victorien Sardou. Musicologist Joseph Kerman was the one to call it a “shabby little shocker” in his first book Opera as Drama in 1956. This book talks about the understanding of opera’s story as the key and provides a basis for the librettist’s text and the composer’s music.

6. What cathedral did Puccini study so he could learn the tone of its great bell?
   A: St. Peter’s Basilica

To get an exactness of Tosca’s “Te deum,” he did spend some time listening outside of St. Peter’s Basilica. Going so far to measure out the bells and even ordering bells from four different foundries. Although, this turned out to be more troublesome and expensive since they still disappointed Puccini and also because they go almost unnoticed at the beginning of Act 3.

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kcMMqLOColl](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kcMMqLOColl)

Demonstration of special giant bass chimes made for productions of Tosca [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tskLTYfxBFA](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tskLTYfxBFA)