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An Introduction to
Pathways for Understanding Study Materials

The goal of Pathways for Understanding materials is to provide multiple “pathways” for learning about a specific opera as well as the operatic art form, and to allow teachers to create lessons that work best for their particular teaching style, subject area, and class of students.

Meet the Characters / The Story/ Resources
Fostering familiarity with specific operas as well as the operatic art form, these sections describe characters and story, and provide historical context. Guiding questions are included to suggest connections to other subject areas, encourage higher-order thinking, and promote a broader understanding of the opera and its potential significance to other areas of learning.

Guided Listening
The Guided Listening section highlights key musical moments from the opera and provides areas of focus for listening to each musical excerpt. Main topics and questions are introduced, giving teachers of all musical backgrounds (or none at all) the means to discuss the music of the opera with their students. A complimentary CD of the full opera, as well as the full libretto (with English translation), are provided as part of the Guided Listening resources and are sent via mail.

Guiding Questions / Discussion Points
Guiding Questions or Discussion Points appear within several sections of these materials to spark discussion in your classroom and facilitate student exploration. Note that these questions are not intended to serve as “official” learning outcomes for the opera experience; rather, we hope that they act as a point of departure for prompting meaningful analysis and conversation amongst students. We are aware that teachers incorporate the study of opera into their classrooms in many ways and to address a variety of student outcomes, and we expect that individual teachers will adapt these materials to best serve their specific curriculum and instructional goals.

CD Provided
Puccini: La Bohème
Licia Albanese, Carlo Bergonzi
The Metropolitan Opera Orchestra and Chorus
Thomas Schippers (Conductor)
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Libretto Provided
La Bohème
Music by Giacomo Puccini
Libretto by Giuseppe Giacosa and Luigi Illica
English version by Ruth and Thomas Martin
G. Schirmer, Inc.
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Production Information

Music: Giacomo Puccini
Text (Italian): Giuseppe Giacosa and Luigi Illica
World Premiere: Turin, Teatro Regio
February 1, 1896

Meet the Characters

Mimì (soprano): A poor seamstress suffering from consumption (tuberculosis).

Musetta (soprano): A flirtatious coquette, Musetta loves Marcello but is always trying to make him jealous.

Rodolfo (tenor): A poor Parisian poet who falls in love with Mimì.

Marcello (baritone): Rodolfo’s roommate, a painter. He carries on a relationship with Musetta.

Schaunard (bass): A musician, Schaunard is the fourth roommate.

Colline (bass): A philosopher, he lives in the same apartment with Marcello and Rodolfo.

Benoit (bass): The landlord of the building where the four roommates live.

Alcindoro (bass): A rich older man, an admirer of Musetta’s.
The Story of La Bohème

Act I
Paris, the 1830s. In their Latin Quarter garret, the near-destitute painter Marcello and poet Rodolfo try to keep warm on Christmas Eve by feeding the stove with pages from Rodolfo’s latest drama. They are soon joined by their roommates—Colline, a philosopher, and Schaunard, a musician, who brings food, fuel, and funds he has collected from an eccentric student. When the landlord, Benoit, comes to collect the rent, they ply the older man with wine, then throw him out. As his friends leave for the Café Momus, Rodolfo promises to join them later, remaining behind to write. There is a knock at the door; the visitor is a pretty neighbor, Mimi, whose candle has gone out on the stairway. Rodolfo relights it. Mimi realizes she has lost her key, and in the confusion, both candles are blown out. As the two search for the key in the moonlight, their hands meet. Rodolfo tells Mimi his dreams (“Che gelida manina”). She then recounts her life alone in a lofty garret, embroidering flowers and waiting for the spring (“Mi chiamano Mimi”). Rodolfo’s friends are heard outside, urging him to join them; he calls back that he is not alone and will be along shortly. Expressing their joy in finding each other (Duet: “O soave fanciulla”), Mimi and Rodolfo embrace and leave for the café.

Act II
At the Café Momus, Rodolfo introduces Mimi to his friends. Marcello’s former sweetheart, Musetta, makes a noisy entrance on the arm of the elderly but wealthy Alcindoro. The ensuing tumult reaches its peak when, trying to regain Marcello’s attention, she sings a waltz about her popularity (“Quando me’n vo’”). Sending Alcindoro off on an errand, she falls into Marcello’s arms and tells the waiter to charge everything to Alcindoro. Soldiers march by the café, and the bohemians fall in behind.

Act III
At dawn by a tavern on the snowy outskirts of Paris, a customs official admits farm women to the city. Mimi wanders in, searching for the place where Marcello and Musetta now live. When the painter emerges, she tells him of her distress over
Rodolfo’s incessant jealousy (Duet: “O buon Marcello, aiuto!”). She says she believes it is best that they part. When Rodolfo appears from the tavern, Mimì hides nearby, though Marcello thinks she has gone. The poet tells Marcello that he wants to separate from his sweetheart, citing her fickleness; pressed for the real reason, he breaks down, saying that her coughing can only grow worse in the poverty they share; he’s desperately afraid she will die from her illness. Overcome with tears, Mimì stumbles forward to bid her lover farewell (“Donde lieta usci”). While Mimì and Rodolfo recall past happiness, Musetta quarrels with Marcello, who has caught her flirting (Quartet: “Addio dolce svegliare”). The painter and his mistress part, hurling insults at each other, but Mimì and Rodolfo decide to remain together until spring.

**Act IV**

Now separated from their girlfriends, Rodolfo and Marcello lament their loneliness in the garret (Duet: “O Mimi, tu più non torni”). Colline and Schaunard bring a meager meal. To lighten their spirits the four stage a dance, when suddenly Musetta bursts in to tell them that Mimì is outside, too weak to come upstairs. Rodolfo carries her in, while Musetta asks Marcello to sell her earrings for medicine and Colline goes off to pawn his overcoat (“Vecchia zimarra”). Left alone, Mimì and Rodolfo recall their first meeting and their happy days, but she is seized with violent coughing (Duet: “Sono andati?”). The others return and Mimì drifts into unconsciousness. When Rodolfo at last realizes that she is dead, he throws himself despairingly on her body, calling her name.
Puccini’s intention to base an opera on Murger’s picaresque novel appears to date from the winter of 1892–3, shortly before the première of *Manon Lescaut*. Almost at once it involved him in a controversy in print with Leoncavallo, who in the columns of his publisher’s periodical *Il secolo* (20 March 1893) claimed precedence in the subject, maintaining that he had already approached the artists whom he had in mind and that Puccini knew this perfectly well. Puccini rebutted the accusation in a letter (dated the following day) to *Il corriere della sera* and at the same time welcomed the prospect of competing with his rival and allowing the public to judge the winner.

*Scènes de la vie de bohème* existed both as a novel, originally published in serial form, and as a play written in collaboration with Théodore Parrière. There were good reasons why neither Puccini nor Leoncavallo should have availed themselves of the latter, whose plot in places runs uncomfortably close to that of *La traviata* (Mimì is persuaded to leave Rodolfo by her lover’s wealthy uncle, who uses the same arguments as Verdi’s Germont). As the novel was in the public domain Ricordi’s attempt to secure exclusive rights to it on Puccini’s behalf were unsuccessful. Work proceeded slowly, partly because Puccini had not yet definitely renounced his idea of an opera based on Giovanni Verga’s *La lupa* and partly because he spent much of the next two years travelling abroad to supervise performances of *Manon Lescaut* in various European cities. By June 1893 Illica had already completed a prose scenario of which Giacosa, who was given the task of putting it into verse, entirely approved. Here the drama was articulated in four acts and five scenes: the Bohemians’ garret and the Café Momus (Act 1), the Barrière d’Enfer (Act 2), the courtyard of Musetta’s house (Act 3) and Mimì’s death in the garret (Act 4). Giacosa completed the versification by the end of June and submitted it to Puccini and Ricordi, who felt sufficiently confident to announce in the columns of the *Gazzetta musicale di Milano* that the libretto was ready for setting to music. He was premature. Giacosa was required to revise the courtyard and the Barrière scenes, a labour [sic] which he found so uncongenial that in
October he offered – not for the last time – to withdraw from the project; however, he was persuaded by Ricordi to remain.

At a conference with his publisher and the librettists during the winter of 1893–4, Puccini insisted on jettisoning the courtyard scene and with it Mimi’s desertion of Rodolfo for a rich ‘Viscontino’ only to return to the poet in the final act. The librettists strongly objected, but Illica finally proposed a solution whereby the last act, instead of opening with Mimi already on her deathbed as originally planned, would begin with a scene for the four Bohemians similar to that of Act 1, while Mimi’s absence would be the subject of an aria by Rodolfo. The aria became a duet, but otherwise Illica’s scheme was adopted in all essentials. Other revisions outlined by Illica and filled out by Giacosa during 1894 included the ‘two self-descriptions of Rodolfo and Mimi’ in Act 1 and their duet ‘O soave fanciulla’. At the time the Café Momus scene was still envisaged as a ‘concertato finale’ to Act 1; nor is it clear precisely when it was made into a separate act. At one point Illica wished to eliminate it altogether, but Puccini stoutly defended the Latin quarter ‘the way I described it … with Musetta’s scene which I invented’. His own doubts, curiously, concerned the Barrière d’Enfer, a scene that owes nothing to Murger and which the composer felt gave insufficient scope for musical development. His suggestion that they replace it with another episode from the novel was curtly refused by Illica.

Having finally decided to abandon La lupa in the summer of 1894 Puccini began the composition of La bohème. From then on the librettists’ work consisted mostly of elimination, extending even to details whose inclusion Puccini had originally insisted, such as a drinking song and a diatribe against women, both allocated to Schaunard. The score was finished on 10 December 1895.

Since La Scala was now under the management of published Edoardo Sonzogno, who made a point of excluding all Ricordi scores from the repertory, the première was fixed for the Teatro Regio, Turin (where Manon Lescaut had received its première in 1893). The principals were Cesira Ferrani (Mimi), Camilla Pasini (Musetta), Evan Gorga (Rodolfo), Michele Mazzini (Colline) and Antonio Pini-Corsi (Schaunard); the conductor
was Toscanini. The public response was mixed: favourable [sic] to Acts 1 and 4, less so to the others. Most of the critics saw in the opera a falling-off from *Manon Lescaut* in the direction of triviality. But nothing could stop its rapid circulation. A performance at the Teatro Argentina, Rome, under Edoardo Mascheroni (23 February) introduced Rosina Storchio as Musetta, a role in which she later excelled. A revival at the Politeama Garibaldi, Palermo (24 April) under Leopoldo Mugnone included for the first time the Act 2 episode where Mimi shows off her bonnet. On this occasion Rodolfo and Mimi were played by Edoardo Garbin and Adeline Stehle (the original young lovers of Verdi’s *Falstaff*), who did much to make *La bohème* popular in southern Italy in the years that followed. Outside Italy most premières of *La bohème* were given in smaller theatres and in the vernacular of the country. In Paris it was first given in 1898 by the Opéra-Comique, as *La vie de bohème*, and achieved its 1000th performance there in 1951. After a performance at Covent Garden by the visiting Carl Rosa company in 1897 *La bohème* first established itself in the repertory of the Royal Italian Opera on 1 July 1899 with a cast that included Nellie Melba (Mimi), Zélie de Lussan (Musetta), Alessandro Bonci (Rodolfo), Mario Ancona (Marcello) and Marcel Journet (Colline). From them on its fortunes in Britain and America were largely associated with Melba, who was partnered among others, by Fernando de Lucia, John McCormack, Giovanni Martinelli and, most memorably of all, Enrico Caruso. Today *La bohème* remains, with *Tosca* and *Madama Butterfly*, one of the central pillars of the Italian repertory.

JULIAN BUDDEN
Guided Listening: “Che gelida manina!”
CD 1, Track 7 | Libretto pg. 9

It is Christmas Eve, ca. 1830. Rodolfo, a poor poet, is finishing an article when Mimi arrives at the door.

Discussion Points

• What is the mood of this excerpt? What is the tone? What descriptive words would you use to describe it?

• How would you describe the rhythm, dynamics, and tempo? Do they change throughout the excerpt? Explain.

• How would you describe the melody in this aria? Is it sweeping, disjointed, or something else?
  o Based on the text and melodic of this aria, how do you think Rodolfo is feeling?
  o Do you think their meeting is love at first sight for the characters? Why or why not?

• We don’t hear from Mimi during this aria. How might she be feeling as she listens to Rodolfo’s invitation? How might you feel in a similar situation? Explain.

• How would you describe the orchestration of this piece? Is it heavy, light, or something else?
  o What instruments do you hear most often? Does the orchestra complement the singer, or detract from the singing? Explain.

• There is a dramatic musical change in tone and mood when Rodolfo sings, “Chi son? Sono un poeta…” (Who am I? I am a poet…) Why might Puccini have written it this way? Do you find it effective? Why or why not?
Guided Listening: “Sì. Mi chiamano Mimì”
CD 1, Track 8 | Libretto pg. 9

Mimì responds to Rodolfo’s “Che gelida manina!” in this aria.

Discussion Points

• What is the mood of this excerpt? What is the tone? What descriptive words would you use to describe it?

• How would you describe the rhythm, dynamics, and tempo? Do they change throughout the excerpt? Explain.

• What type of person is Mimì? Does she seem happy, sad, content, or something else? Use examples from the music and/or text to support your answer.

• Like Rodolfo’s aria, Mimì sings with great lyrical and dynamic shifts. What might this tell you about Mimì and Rodolfo as characters? Are they passionate or apathetic? Use text to support your thoughts.

• With the line, “guardo sui tetti e in cielo” (I overlook roofs and sky), there is a musical shift. What changes happen in the orchestration? Do you think this also demonstrates an emotional shift? If so, what is the nature of the shift, and why does it occur?

• Is Mimì speaking literally or figuratively when she describes scenes in her aria? How can you tell?
  o What might be foreshadowed when Mimì sings, “Ma i fior ch’io faccio, ahimè!... non hanno odore!” (But the flowers I make, alas...have no smell!)? Make a prediction on what is to come for Mimì based on this line.

• If you were the stage designer and/or director of this opera, how would you stage this scene? What would the characters wear? What props might be used?
Guided Listening: “O soave fanciulla”  
CD 1, Track 10 | Libretto pg. 10

Rodolfo’s friends are calling for him to join them at the café. Rodolfo, unable to contain his feelings, declares his love for Mimi.

Discussion Points

• What is the mood of this excerpt? What is the tone? What descriptive words would you use to describe it?

• How would you describe the rhythm, dynamics, and tempo? Do they change throughout the excerpt? Explain.

• How would you describe the instrumentation like during this duet? What instrument(s) are most prominent?
  o Why do you think Puccini chose these instruments over others? How might these instrumental sounds represent the characters? Use musical examples to support your answer.

• How long have Rodolfo and Mimi known one another? Do you think their love is true? Why or why not?
  o What might the music and text tell you about how both of these characters view life, love, and loss?

• During this duet Mimi and Rodolfo often sing over one another. 
  o Why do you think Puccini decided to write the piece this way?
  o Do you find it confusing or musically satisfying to hear this musical technique? Why do you feel that way?

• What other stories, films, plays, or musical pieces feature two characters fall in love at first sight? Do you find these stories believable? Why or why not?
In the Café, Marcello, an artist friend of Rodolfo, sees a past love, Musetta, out with a new lover.

Discussion Points

• What is the mood of this excerpt? What is the tone? What descriptive words would you use to describe it?

• How would you describe the rhythm, dynamics, and tempo? Do they change throughout the excerpt? Explain.

• Compare Musetta’s aria with Mimi’s. What is similar and different about the two excerpts? Explain.

• Why might Puccini have decided to add musical “interruptions” – brief musical lines from other characters – throughout Musetta’s aria? Do you find this additional texture supportive of the piece overall or do you think it detracts from the song? Explain.

• How is Marcello and Musetta’s love for one another similar to or different from the love between Rodolfo and Mimi? How do you know? What about the music and text supports your answer?

• How old is Musetta? How old is Mimi? How can you tell? How might the difference in their music influence your image of these characters?
Guided Listening: “Donde lieta uscì”  
CD 2, Track 6 | Libretto pp. 24-25

After several months of being together, Rodolfo and Mimì are at breaking point in their relationship.

Discussion Points

• What is the mood of this excerpt? What is the tone? What descriptive words would you use to describe it?

• How would you describe the rhythm, dynamics, and tempo? Do they change throughout the excerpt? Explain.

• Mimì’s theme music begins this scene. Where do we first hear this melody?

• What do you hear when Mimì sings “addio, senza rancor” (goodbye; and no hard feelings)? Is there a shift in the music? How do you know?
  - How does the music prior to this line differ from the musical tone that comes after Mimì says goodbye?
  - Why do you think Puccini wrote this shift? Does the text support this change? Why or why not?

• Puccini uses specific instruments in this piece to transition to a new musical and emotional tone. What instruments do you hear?
  - Do they create an image or feeling in your mind? Do they portray sadness? Happiness? Lightness? Heaviness?
  - Do these sounds correlate with text and emotional context in this moment? Why or why not?

• How do you think Rodolfo will react to Mimì’s decision to end their relationship? Do you think he will let her go? Why or why not? Use the text and music, as well as what you know about Rodolfo’s character, to support your predictions.
Guided Listening: “O Mimì, tu più non torni”
CD 2, Track 9 | Libretto pp. 27-28

Rodolfo and Marcello sit together, trying to work. Both men are preoccupied with sadness over losing their loves.

**Discussion Points**

- What is the mood of this excerpt? What is the tone? What descriptive words would you use to describe it?

- How would you describe the rhythm, dynamics, and tempo? Do they change throughout the excerpt? Explain.

- How are Marcello’s and Rodolfo’s feelings about their past lovers different and/or the same? Do you think that Rodolfo and Marcello each loved their significant others in the same way or in different ways? How can you tell? What about the music and the text informs your answer?

- Rodolfo is a tenor, while Marcello is a baritone. How might these character’s differing voice parts create differing images of them?
  - Do you see Rodolfo and Marcello as similar or different characters? Explain.
  - What might these characters look like? How much do you think the vocal range of these characters influences your overall idea of them?

- What other musical genres incorporate stories of lost or unrequited love? How might that music be different from the opera music you are hearing today? Discuss the similarities and/or differences in how these various types of music broach the topic of lost or unrequited love.
Guided Listening: “Vecchia zimarra, senti”  
CD 2, Track 13 (0:00-1:37) | Libretto pg. 31

The group of friends search for resources to help save Mimi.

Discussion Points

• What is the mood of this excerpt? What is the tone? What descriptive words would you use to describe it?

• How would you describe the rhythm, dynamics, and tempo? Do they change throughout the excerpt? Explain.

• How would you describe the orchestration in this aria? Do you hear a lot of instruments?
  o Why do you think Puccini chose to use limited instruments? How does this choice highlight not only Colline’s song, but the setting and feelings amongst the friends at this trying time?

• Why is Colline singing about his coat while Mimi lies near, close to death? Is he truly ignoring her and thinking only about himself, or might he have a larger plan for his coat? Use the text and music to support your answer.

• How would you stage this scene?
  o Would you have Colline move away from the action to perform this aria? Who might be hearing his words, or is this song only something to be shared with the audience? Create a stage plan based on the text and music.

• What do you think will happen in the final scenes? Using the information you gained from studying the other musical numbers, make a prediction about the conclusion of Puccini’s La Bohème.
Giacomo Puccini was born in 1858 in the town of Lucca, located in the northern region of Tuscany, Italy. The Puccini family had a rich tradition of making music, and occupied honored positions in their community for four generations, including composer of sacred and secular music, church organist, and choir master. Michele Puccini, Giacomo’s older brother, was committed to following in the family’s music tradition, but young Giacomo didn’t appear to have the talent or interest in becoming a professional musician. Though tutored in music by his uncle, Giacomo’s chief pleasures seemed to be hunting birds and smoking cigarettes. Only one teacher, Carlo Angeloni, seemed to understand him and, with patience, was able to develop his hidden talent. Before long, Giacomo began to earn modest fees by giving piano and organ lessons, and was able to help build his family’s small income.

Though he would become one of history’s most famous opera composers, Giacomo Puccini did not attend an opera until he was 17 years old, when he traveled twenty miles on foot to see a performance of Verdi’s *Aida* in Pisa. The performance deeply moved Puccini, and inspired him to continue his musical education and begin writing his own operatic works.

In 1880, at age 22, Puccini entered the Milan Conservatory, the main music school in Italy’s most important musical city, where he began studying with Amilcare Ponchielli, a composer whose most famous work is the opera *La Gioconda*. Puccini worked hard and Ponchielli and the other teachers were impressed with the young composer’s talent and dedication. Though his student days were filled with homesickness and poverty, he seemed to thrive in this environment. His poor, struggling artist’s life would later influence his creation of *La Bohème*.

When he graduated from the Conservatory in 1883, Puccini entered a competition to write a one-act opera. He was confident in the quality of his entry, *Le Villi*, but it did not win the competition. However, Giulio Ricordi, a publisher of music and an
influential man in Milan’s musical scene, took interest in Puccini’s work and arranged to have *Le Villi* performed. It was a success with both the public and the critics. Ricordi and Puccini became life-long friends, and their colorful collaboration is well-documented in abundant correspondence.

Puccini’s second opera, *Edgar*, took five years to compose, but was not well received. Desperate to have his next work make a lasting impression, Puccini chose the story of *Manon Lescaut*, which the French composer Jules Massenet had already adapted for his own opera with considerable success. It was a gamble for the barely-known Puccini to put himself in competition with a recognized master, yet Puccini’s *Manon Lescaut* was a tremendous success and made him famous not just in Italy, but around the world.

Puccini composed three operas over the next decade, all adapted from literary or theatrical sources: *La Bohème* (1896) about struggling artists in Paris, based on Henri Murger’s novel *Scènes de la vie de bohème*; *Tosca* (1900) about the turbulent affairs of an accomplished stage actress and her politically radical lover, based on Victorien Sardou’s play; and *Madama Butterfly* (1904), a tragic love story between a Japanese geisha and an American naval officer, adapted from David Belasco’s play. Although *La Bohème* and *Madama Butterfly* were not warmly embraced by the critics initially, all three operas soon became standards in the repertoire of opera houses worldwide.

Due to challenges in his personal life, Puccini did not compose any music for six years following *Madama Butterfly*. In 1907, he went to the United States where he supervised productions of *Manon Lescaut* and *Madama Butterfly* at the Metropolitan Opera. While in New York, he saw Belasco’s play *The Girl of the Golden West*, which would serve as the inspiration for his next opera. *La Fanciulla del West*, as it is called in Italian, premiered at the Metropolitan Opera in 1910 with Enrico Caruso among the principal singers. Puccini later composed *La Rondine* (1917) and “The Triptych”, or *Il Trittico* (1918), a set of three one-act operas: *Il Tabarro* (The Cloak), *Suor Angelica* (Sister Angelica), and *Gianni Schicchi*. 
Puccini’s life ended in 1924 while he was composing his final work, *Turandot*. Three weeks before his death, suffering from throat cancer, he whispered to his friend and conductor Arturo Toscanini, “If anything happens to me, do not abandon my dear beautiful princess, my *Turandot*.” On November 29, Puccini died of heart failure while undergoing treatment for the cancer. *Turandot* was completed by Puccini’s friend Franco Alfano. When the opera was first performed, Maestro Toscanini paused for a moment, noting with silence the place in the score where “Puccini put his pen down for the last time.”

Composing opera can be a lengthy process, particularly for composers as detail-oriented as Giacomo Puccini, who composed only twelve operas in his lifetime. Restless and unhappy unless involved in a project, Puccini was rarely satisfied with his creations (though he never tired of attending performances of his favorites). His manuscripts were full of cross-outs, blotches, and an assortment of scribbles, and much of his time was spent travelling the world to conduct rehearsals and oversee performances of his works. He had a great knowledge of the demands of the stage and a keen instinct for theatrical effect.

Unlike his idol, Giuseppe Verdi, Puccini did not focus on heroic figures in his operas; he was best at basic human emotions. Puccini’s operas are loved for their dramatic intensity, memorable melodies, rich orchestral writing, and are performed year after year in opera houses all over the world.
La Bohème Resources: Puccini, Verismo, and La Bohème

The life of Giacomo Puccini (1858–1924) spans a period frequently known as the age of “verismo,” or “realism”. The term “realism” primarily refers to the artistic and literary movements in which artists and writers focused on common everyday subject matter and treated it in a “realistic” or “true-to-life” manner. Opera, however, is an art form that had its roots first in myth or religious mystery, and traditionally boasts superhuman heroes, grand affluence and emotional excess. “Verismo” (Italian for “realism”) is an operatic style that arose in the 1890s in Italy and which emphasized literary naturalism, contemporary settings, lower-class subjects and violent passions and actions. La Bohème, a realistic opera, depicts bohemians who practice arts that are either fanciful or fraudulent; they are rich only in feelings. La Bohème is about those who cannot afford to live operatically.

How did this realism become imposed on opera? Realism was not only a movement in the arts; it was also a philosophical attitude and a response to the unprecedented scientific and social changes of the 19th century, specifically the industrial revolution and scientific discoveries and their influences on society.

The industrial revolution resulted in the tremendous growth of cities and so was responsible for bringing artists in contact with all kinds of people, including the lower classes. This destroyed the former assumptions that the lower classes were too uninteresting as subjects for art. The industrial revolution also produced many technological improvements that improved the standard of living for all classes in society: for example, typewriters (1868), telephones (1876), electric lamps (1879), and motion pictures (1879).

Developments in science, philosophy and the social sciences resulted in a revival of determinism, the idea that individuals have no control over their fate. Scientific discoveries doubted religious ideals, and discredited idealism in general. Materialism became the compelling attitude, replacing idealism. Charles Darwin and Spencer proposed that life evolved from strictly materialistic causes: the
accidental variation of species and the natural selection of the fittest. In philosophy, human developments were ascribed material causes by Karl Marx and Hegel. In the social sciences, the behavior of individuals and societies was explained to be the result of concrete, materialistic influences, those of heredity and environment.

The arts were influenced by the industrial revolution and other developments and reflected the attitudes of materialism and determinism. Literature avoided the heroic or dramatic presentation of characters and plots; instead they told stories which presented the plain, unornamented material of ordinary people's lives. Consequently, the main characters in novels became much less heroic and much more like everyday people, as in Maurice Flaubert's *Madame Bovary* (1856), Leo Tolstoy's *War and Peace* (1869), Giovanni Verga's *Country Life* (1880) and Emile Zola's *Nana* (1880).

Music was perhaps the last of the arts to be affected by realism because music is, after all, unrealistic by nature. Song instead of speech and continuous music has the effect of heightening, not downplaying, the importance of the drama and the people represented, something quite opposite to realism's basic idea. Therefore, realism perhaps was not as effective in music as in the other arts because composers still needed formal and stylistic methods that were the opposite of the principles of literary realism.

Puccini was shrewd; he wanted to become rich and famous. So he chose operatic subjects that reflected the realistic, deterministic attitude of his day. Also, he preferred presenting "human" situations for their dramatic effect, as opposed to the mystical and metaphysical ones. He portrays his heroines especially as figures who lack the power to control or change their fates. In *La Bohème*, for instance, Mimì's love for Rodolfo is doomed by her ill health and his poverty.

But realism was a short-lived movement. The idea that events can be portrayed realistically or objectively, limited artistic style, both for Puccini and art in general. By the turn of the century, discoveries in theoretical physics by Albert Einstein, Max Planck and others, contradicted this tenet; the new developments argued that time
and place were not objective facts, but a matter of relative perspective. Artists in all fields then began to reflect this scientific overthrow of realism with a wide variety of new, non-objective, non-representational approaches. Post-realism includes such diverse figures as writers James Joyce and Thomas Mann; painters Pablo Picasso, Joan Miro and Piet Mondrian; and the opera composer Benjamin Britten.

Puccini, too, in his final opera, *Turandot*, turned away from verismo and the deterministic attitude towards life that it implied. *Turandot* is a richly symbolic setting of an ancient Chinese legend.

Realism, however, did not die with the challenges of science in the early 1900s. In fact, realism continues to be a major force in commercial art today; its influence can be felt in advertising, in films and on television programs, and in virtually all popular fiction.
La Bohême Resources: Online Resources

Note: click on the blue link below the description to visit the corresponding page.

- **La Bohème – Youth Chorus**
  Behind-the-Scenes, Seattle Opera (2013)
  [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=A1MDKvO3wp0](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=A1MDKvO3wp0)

- **The Music of La bohème (The Royal Opera)**
  Behind-the-Scenes/Artist Interviews, The Royal Opera (2013)
  [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kj8Z8Becq04](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kj8Z8Becq04)

- **Si, mi chiamano Mimi – La bohème – Nicole Car – Opera Australia**
  Opera Excerpts, Opera Australia (2013)
  [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1XZRbkxo0BY](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1XZRbkxo0BY)

- **Jonathan Miller’s sublime production of La bohème returns to ENO**
  Production Preview, English National Opera (2013)
  [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=z7KRH5iiN4M](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=z7KRH5iiN4M)

- **La Bohème at Lyric Opera of Chicago**
  Informational Video/Production Preview, Lyric Opera of Chicago (2012)
  [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=D3p8xBG4MZo](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=D3p8xBG4MZo)

- **Lyric Opera & The Second City Introduce Dr. Opera – Session 2: Mimi and Rodolfo**
  Comedic Sketch, Lyric Opera of Chicago (2012)
  [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NXo4vf8JXUA](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NXo4vf8JXUA)

- **Puccini: La boheme – Musetta’s Waltz (Heidi Stober)**
  Opera Excerpt, Houston Grand Opera (2012)
  [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FNo9hvWEVT0](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FNo9hvWEVT0)

- **Che gelida manina sung by Ji-Min Park from La boheme by Opera Australia**
  Opera Excerpt, Opera Australia (2011)
  [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0550yeqrDuU](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0550yeqrDuU)

- **“O soave fanciulla” from La Bohème with Ailyn Pérez and Stephen Costello**
  Behind-the-scenes, Cincinnati Opera (2010)
  [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iaAdEKky3sM](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iaAdEKky3sM)

- **Opera Carolina Overtures Roundtable: The Cast of La Boheme**
  Artist Interviews, Opera Carolina (2010)
  [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=m5xsGQvgT5Q](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=m5xsGQvgT5Q)

- **Opera Carolina Overtures with Maestro Meena: La Boheme**
  Informational Video, Opera Carolina (2009)
  [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=a8e9-8ypSFk](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=a8e9-8ypSFk)

- **La Bohème: “Il conto!... Così presto?” (Act II Finale)**
  Opera Excerpt, Metropolitan Opera (2008)
  [http://bcove.me/fiq2rut3](http://bcove.me/fiq2rut3)
Additional Resources: The Emergence of Opera

The origins of opera stretch back to ancient Greece, where playwrights used music and dance to augment moments of action in their stories. At this time, it was popular to write plays in Attic, a sing-song language, where half the words were sung and half were spoken. Dance was also a pivotal part of Greek drama; a chorus danced throughout scenes in an effort to highlight the play’s themes.

The philosopher Aristotle, in ‘The Poetics,’ outlined the first guidelines for drama, known as the Six Elements of Drama. Aristotle suggested that a play’s action should take place in one day, portray only one chain of events, and be set in one general location. Over the centuries, playwrights and composers took Aristotle’s advice more seriously. The tradition of including music and dance as an integral part of theatre continued through Roman times and into the Middle Ages. Liturgical drama, as well as vernacular plays, often combined incidental music with acting.

Opera can also be traced to the Gregorian chants of the early Christian Church. Music was an integral part of worship, and incorporated ancient melodies from Hebrew, Greek, Roman, and Byzantine cultures. The Church’s organization of music throughout the early Middle Ages gave it structure, codifying scales, modes, and notation to indicate pitch and rhythm. The chants were originally sung in single-line melodies (monophony), but over time more voices were added to compliment the main melody, resulting in the beginning of polyphony (many independent voices or parts sung simultaneously).

However, the Church objected polyphony, worried that the intricate weaving of melodies and words obscured the liturgical text. Since conveying the meaning of the text was the primary reason for singing in church, polyphony was viewed as too secular by Church leaders, and was banished from the Liturgy by Pope John XXII in 1322. Harmonic music followed, which developed as songs with one-line melodies, accompanied by instruments. Then, in 1364, during the pontificate of Pope Urban V, a composer and priest named Guillaume de Machaut composed a polyphonic setting of
the mass entitled *La Messe de Notre Dame*. This was the first time that the Church officially sanctioned polyphony in sacred music.

Another early contributor to the emergence of opera was Alfonso the Wise, ruler of Castile, Spain, in the 13th century. Also known as the Emperor of Culture, he was a great troubadour and made noted contributions to music’s development. First, he dedicated his musical poems, the “Cantigas de Santa Maria,” to Saint Mary, which helped end the church’s objection to the musical style. His “Cantigas” are one of the largest collections of monophonic songs from the Middle Ages. Secondly, he played a crucial role in the introduction of instruments from the Moorish kingdoms in southern Spain. These instruments, from the timpani to lute, came from Persia and the Arabic culture of the Middle East. Throughout the European Renaissance (14th–16th centuries), minstrels and troubadours continued to compose harmonic folk songs which informed and entertained. Some songs were mere gossip; others were songs of love and heroes. These contained a one-line melody accompanied by guitars, lutes, or pipes.

Martin Luther (1483–1546) continued to reform church music by composing music in his native tongue (German) for use in services. He also simplified the style so that average people in the congregation could sing it. Luther turned to the one-line melodies and folk tunes of the troubadours and minstrels and adapted them to religious texts. His reforms had great impact upon the music of Europe: the common people began to read and sing music.

From the church at this time also emerged the motet, a vocal composition in polyphonic style, with Biblical or similar text which was intended for use in religious services. Several voices sang sacred text accompanied by instruments, and this format laid the groundwork for the madrigal—one of the last steps in preparing the way for opera. Sung in the native language of the people in their homes, taverns, and village squares, madrigals were written for a small number of voices, between two and eight, and used secular (rather than biblical or liturgical) texts.
When refugee scholars from the fall of Constantinople (1453) flooded Italy and Europe, their knowledge of the classics of Rome and Greece added to the development of European musical traditions. Into this world of renewed interest in learning and culture came a group of men from Florence who formed a club, the Camerata, for the advancement of music and Greek theater. Their goal was to recreate Greek drama as they imagined it must have been presented. The Camerata struggled to solve problems that confronted composers, and were interested in investigating the theory and philosophy of music. The Camerata also experimented with the solo song, a forerunner of the opera aria.

Not surprisingly, Greek and Roman mythology and tragedies provided the subject matter of the first librettists. The presence of immortals and heroes made singing seem natural to the characters. Composers used instrumental accompaniment to help establish harmony, which freed them to experiment with instrumental music for preludes or overtures. Development of the recitative and the instrumental bridge enabled writers to connect the song, dance, and scene of the drama into the spectacle which was to become opera. This connector-recitative later evolved into a form of religious drama known as oratorio, a large concert piece which includes an orchestra, a choir, and soloists.

Members of the Camerata—Jacopo Peri, Ottavio Rinnuccini, and Jacopo Corsi—are credited with writing the first opera, *Dafne*, based on the Greek myth. Their early efforts were crucial in establishing the musical styles of the new genre in the early 17th century. A sizeable orchestra was used and singers were in costume. *Dafne* became famous across Europe.

The Camerata set the scene, and onto the budding operatic stage came Claudio Monteverdi. He is considered the last great composer of madrigals and the first great composer of Italian opera. He was revolutionary in developing the orchestra’s tone-color and instrumentation. He developed two techniques to heighten dramatic tension: *pizzicato*—plucking strings instead of bowing them; and *tremolo*—rapid repetition of a single note. Modern orchestration owes him as much gratitude as does
opera. In his operas, such as Orfeo (1607), the music was more than a vehicle for the words; it expressed and interpreted the poetry of the libretto. His orchestral combinations for Orfeo were considered to be the beginning of the golden age of Baroque instrumental music.

Monteverdi’s experimentation with instruments and his willingness to break the rules of the past enabled him to breathe life into opera. He was far ahead of his time, freeing instruments to communicate emotion, and his orchestration was valued not only for the sounds instruments created but also for the emotional effects they could convey. In his work, music blended with the poetry of the libretto to create an emotional spectacle. His audiences were moved to an understanding of the possibilities of music’s role in drama.
The current opera house, located at Lincoln Center, is the second home of the Metropolitan Opera. The original Metropolitan Opera House was located at Broadway and 39th Street.

The Met’s new home at Lincoln Center cost $49 million to build and construction took four years.

The Met is the second-deepest building in Manhattan. It consists of ten floors. There are six floors above and three floors below the stage level, and all levels are cushioned with anti-vibration pads for sound-proofing.

The opera season generally runs from September to April, during which time the opera company puts on seven performances per week (two on Saturdays) from a repertoire of 21-25 different operas.

The auditorium can seat 3,800 people on its five tiers: Orchestra, Parterre, Dress Circle, Balcony, and Family Circle. Additionally, there is standing room space for 253 people on various levels.

There are no 90° angles anywhere in the auditorium, and the boxes have irregular, shell-patterned decorations. This design distributes sound evenly throughout the auditorium and prevents it from being “swallowed.”

A single African rosewood tree was used to panel the walls. This tree, imported from London, was almost 100 feet long and about 6 feet in diameter.
The ceiling of the opera house rises 72 feet above the orchestra floor and is covered with over **one million** 2½-inch square sheets of nearly transparent 23-carat gold leaf. Not only does the gold add to the glamour of the interior, but it also cuts down on the need for maintenance and repainting.

Upon entering the opera house, one may notice that the ceiling in the outer lobbies has a **greenish color**. These ceilings are covered with a Dutch alloy which contains copper and turns green when it tarnishes.

There are **two house curtains** in the auditorium – the “Guillotine” curtain, and the Wagner curtain. The Guillotine curtain is made of gold velour, and rises and descends vertically. The Wagner curtain is a design that was conceived by composer Richard Wagner. This type of curtain was first used in 1886 in Bayreuth, Germany and is a motorized tableau drape with an adjustable speed. The existing curtain at the Met is woven of 1,150 yards of gold-pattered Scalamandre silk and was installed in 1990. It is the biggest Wagner curtain in the world.

The **“Sputnik” chandeliers** were a gift from the Austrian government. The central chandelier is 17 feet in diameter and is surrounded by 8 starbursts of varying sizes. The 12 satellite clusters can be raised to avoid blocking the stage. Altogether, the chandeliers contain over 3,000 light bulbs.

Not all the chairs at the Met are the same size; they vary in width from 19 to 23 inches. This **staggered seating** arrangement provides the best possible sight lines.

The conductor’s podium is **motorized** so that it can be adjusted to any height.
Additional Resources: Reflections after the Opera

After every opera performance, the director, conductor, and performers reflect and evaluate the different aspects of their production, so that they can improve it for the next night. In a similar way, these Guiding Questions encourage active reflection, both individually and collectively, on your student’s opera experience.

Think about the portrayal of the characters in the production at the Met.

- How were the characters similar or different from what you expected? Try to identify specific qualities or actions that had an impact on your ideas and thinking.
- Did the performers’ voices match the character they were playing? Why or why not?
- Did any characters gain prominence in live performance? If so, how was this achieved? (Consider the impact of specific staging.)
- What did the performers do to depict the nature of the relationships between characters? In other words, how did you know from the characters’ actions (not just their words) how they felt about the other characters in the story?
- Stereotypically, most opera performers are considered singers first, and actors second. Was this the case? How did each performer’s portrayal affect your understanding of (or connection with) their character?

Consider the production elements of the performance.

- How did the director choose to portray the story visually? Did the production have a consistent tone? How did the tone and style of each performer’s actions (movement, characterization, staging) compare with the tone and style of the visual elements (set design, costume design, lighting design)?
- How did the set designer’s work affect the production? Did the style of the setting help you understand the characters in a new way?
- How did different costume elements impact the portrayal of each character?
- How did the lighting designer’s work affect the production?
- Did you agree with the artistic choices made by the directors and designers? If you think changes should be made, explain specifically what you’d change and why.
Additional Resources:
A Guide to Voice Parts and Families of the Orchestra

Voice Parts

SOPRANO
Sopranos have the highest voices, and usually play the heroines of an opera. This means they often sing many arias, and fall in love and/or die more often than other female voice types.

MEZZO-SOPRANO, or MEZZO
This is the middle female voice, and has a darker, warmer sound than the soprano. Mezzos often play mothers and villainesses, although sometimes they are cast as seductive heroines. Mezzos also play young men on occasion, aptly called “pants roles” or “trouser roles.”

CONTRALTO, or ALTO
Contralto, or alto, is the lowest female voice. Contralto is a rare voice type. Altos usually portray older females, witches and old gypsies.

COUNTERTENOR
Also often known as alto, this is the highest male voice, and another vocal rarity. Countertenors sing in a similar range as a contralto. Countertenor roles are most common in baroque opera, but some contemporary composers also write parts for countertenors.

TENOR
If there are no countertenors on stage, then the highest male voice in opera is the tenor. Tenors are usually the heroes who “get the girl” or die horribly in the attempt.

BARITONE
The middle male voice. In comic opera, the baritone is often a schemer, but in tragic opera, he is more likely to play the villain.

BASS
The lowest male voice. Low voices usually suggest age and wisdom in serious opera, and basses usually play kings, fathers, and grandfathers. In comic opera, basses often portray old characters that are foolish or laughable.

Families of the Orchestra

STRINGS
violins, violas, cellos, double bass

WOODWIND
piccolos, flutes, oboes, clarinets, bassoons

BRASS
trumpets, trombones, French horns, baritones, tubas

PERCUSSION
bass drums, kettle drums, timpani, xylophones, piano, bells, gongs, cymbals, chimes
### Additional Resources: Glossary

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Term</th>
<th>Definition</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>adagio</td>
<td>Indication that the music is to be performed at a slow, relaxed pace. A movement for a piece of music with this marking.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>allegro</td>
<td>Indicates a fairly fast tempo.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>aria</td>
<td>A song for solo voice in an opera, with a clear, formal structure.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>arioso</td>
<td>An operatic passage for solo voice, melodic but with no clearly defined form.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>baritone</td>
<td>A man’s voice, with a range between that of bass and tenor.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ballad opera</td>
<td>A type of opera in which dialogue is interspersed with songs set to popular tunes.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>bel canto</td>
<td>Refers to the style cultivated in the 18th and 19th centuries in Italian opera. This demanded precise intonation, clarity of tone and enunciation, and a virtuoso mastery of the most florid passages.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>cabaletta</td>
<td>The final short, fast section of a type of aria in 19th-century Italian opera.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>cadenza</td>
<td>A passage in which the solo instrument or voice performs without the orchestra, usually of an improvisatory nature.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>chorus</td>
<td>A body of singers who sing and act as a group, either in unison or in harmony; any musical number written for such a group.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>coloratura</td>
<td>An elaborate and highly ornamented part for soprano voice, usually written for the upper notes of the voice. The term is also applied to those singers who specialize in the demanding technique required for such parts.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>conductor</td>
<td>The director of a musical performance for any sizable body of performers.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>contralto</td>
<td>Low-pitched woman’s voice, lower than soprano or mezzo-soprano.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>crescendo</td>
<td>Meaning “growing,” used as a musical direction to indicate that the music is to get gradually louder.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>diatonic scale</td>
<td>Notes proper to a key that does not involve accidentals (sharps or flats)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ensemble</td>
<td>From the French word for “together,” this term is used when discussing the degree of effective teamwork among a body of performers; in opera, a set piece for a group of soloists.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>finale</strong></td>
<td>The final number of an act, when sung by an ensemble.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>fortissimo</strong> (ff)</td>
<td>Very loud.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>forte</strong> (f)</td>
<td>Italian for “strong” or “loud.” An indication to perform at a loud volume.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>harmony</strong></td>
<td>A simultaneous sounding of notes that usually serves to support a melody.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>intermezzo</strong></td>
<td>A piece of music played between the acts of an opera.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>intermission</strong></td>
<td>A break between the acts of an opera. The lights go on and the audience is free to move around.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>legato</strong></td>
<td>A direction for smooth performance without detached notes.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>leitmotif</strong></td>
<td>Melodic element first used by Richard Wagner in his operas to musically represent characters, events, ideas, or emotions.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>libretto</strong></td>
<td>The text of an opera.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>maestro</strong></td>
<td>Literally “master”; used as a courtesy title for the conductor, whether a man or woman.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>melody</strong></td>
<td>A succession of musical tones (i.e., notes not sounded at the same time), often prominent and singable.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>mezzo-soprano</strong></td>
<td>Female voice in the middle range, between that of soprano and contralto.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>octave</strong></td>
<td>The interval between the first and eighth notes of the diatonic scale.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>opera buffa</strong></td>
<td>An Italian form that uses comedic elements. The French term “opera bouffe” describes a similar type, although it may have an explicitly satirical intent.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>opera seria</strong></td>
<td>Italian for “serious opera.” Used to signify Italian opera of a heroic or dramatic quality during the 18th and early 19th centuries.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>operetta</strong></td>
<td>A light opera, whether full-length or not, often using spoken dialogue. The plots are romantic and improbable, even farcical, and the music tuneful and undemanding.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>overture</strong></td>
<td>A piece of music preceding an opera.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>pentatonic scale</strong></td>
<td>Typical of Japanese, Chinese, and other Far Eastern and folk music, the pentatonic scale divides the octave into five tones and may be played on the piano by striking only the black keys.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
pianissimo (pp) Very softly.
piano (p) Meaning “flat,” or “low.” Softly, or quietly.
pitch The location of a musical sound in the tonal scale; the quality that makes “A” different from “D.”
prima donna The leading woman singer in an operatic cast or company.
prelude A piece of music that precedes another.
recitative A style of sung declamation used in opera. It may be either accompanied or unaccompanied except for punctuating chords from the harpsichord.
reprise A direct repetition of an earlier section in a piece of music, or the repeat of a song.
score The written or printed book containing all the parts of a piece of music.
serenade A song by a lover, sung outside the window of his mistress.
singspiel A German opera with spoken dialogue.
solo A part for unaccompanied instrument or for an instrument or voice with the dominant role in a work.
soprano The high female voice; the high, often highest, member of a family of instruments.
tempo The pace of a piece of music; how fast or how slow it is played.
tenor A high male voice.
theme The main idea of a piece of music; analogous to the topic of a written paper, subject to exploration and changes.
timbre Quality of a tone, also an alternative term for “tone-color.”
tone-color The characteristic quality of tone of an instrument or voice.
trill Musical ornament consisting of the rapid alternation between the note and the note above it.
trio A sustained musical passage for three voices.
verismo A type of “realism” in Italian opera during the late 19th and early 20th centuries, in which the plot was on a contemporary, often violent, theme.
vocalise  A musical composition consisting of the singing of melody with vowel sounds or nonsense syllables rather than text, as for special effect in classical compositions, in polyphonic jazz singing by special groups, or in virtuoso vocal exercises.

volume  A description of how loud or soft a sound is.
References: Works Consulted

The History of Puccini’s *La Bohème*


Additional Resources: The Emergence of Opera


