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When referring to this work state full bibliographic details including the author of the chapter, title of the chapter, editor of the book, title of the book, publisher, place of publication, year of publication, page numbers of the chapter

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<b>Title of the chapter</b>	The musical language of <i>La bohème</i>
<b>Editor/s</b>	Arthur Groos and Roger Parker
<b>Title of the book</b>	Giacomo Puccini: <i>La bohème</i>
<b>ISBN</b>	0521319137
<b>Publisher</b>	Cambridge University Press
<b>Place of publication</b>	Cambridge, UK
<b>Year of publication</b>	1986
<b>Chapter/Page numbers</b>	80-101

## 5 *The musical language of La bohème*

BY WILLIAM DRABKIN

Few people would deny that Puccini's reputation as a composer was made, and has been upheld, in the opera house, and that interest in his music has been largely confined to this establishment and the journalistic world surrounding it. Fifty years after the appearance of the first substantial study of a Puccini opera worthy of the term 'analysis', his musical scores are all but ignored by serious music journals and university analysis seminars, places from which informed critical opinion on other musical matters has long flowed in abundance. The occasions on which his music has been subjected to serious investigation have often pointed up the shortcomings in applying analytical methods or systems which have met with success elsewhere, e.g. the analysis of operatic acts and scenes into smaller structural units associated with, among others, the Wagner scholar Alfred Lorenz,<sup>1</sup> or the search for large-scale tonal unity and motivic organisation;<sup>2</sup> but they have not come up with new approaches, or encouraged further research on the musical content of his operas.

It is not difficult to find critics of Puccini's musical style or dramaturgical methods. Serious writers who have had to face Puccini squarely in their chartings of operatic history have usually found a mixture of good and bad elements in his music: an attitude most eloquently summed up by the ambiguous remark that 'Puccini's music often sounds better than it is, owing to the perfect adjustment of means to ends'.<sup>3</sup> But the best known general assessment of Puccini as an opera composer, Joseph Kerman's in *Opera as Drama*, takes one of his major scores (*Tosca*) as an example of failed operatic composition.<sup>4</sup>

Among the monographs on the composer, which have naturally tended to be more laudatory, Puccini's success has usually been described in terms likely to be unacceptable to the critical reader: melodic genius, attention to orchestral colour, the ability to set up ideal atmospheric conditions for the unfolding of dramatic action.

Even the standard English life-and-works survey by Mosco Carner, which is written with all the knowledge, experience and sympathy required of such a piece of scholarship, is dotted with observations on compositional method and the finished scores which the discerning reader may well take to suggest flaws in Puccini's technique or realisation. Referring to the general deployment of the music and dramatic action, for instance, Carner remarks that 'the first act is invariably the best constructed'; a comment which, on reflection, seems as devastating to the integrity of Puccini's art as any I have found in the writings of his most virulent critics.<sup>5</sup> The composer's own pronouncements about his work – that he was above all a melodist, that his genius lay in the working out of 'the little things' in an opera and, perhaps most notorious of all, that he was always concerned with keeping his musical style 'up to date' – cannot have helped matters much, either.

In most discussions of opera composed in the century or so leading up to Puccini – say, from Mozart to late Wagner and Verdi – an important criterion of excellence has been the demonstrability of some sort of *unity*, a system or method operating over the entire range of a score. Following Lorenz's monumental Wagner studies and his lesser-known work on Mozart, there have been numerous attempts to chart the influence of tonal relations over large stretches of operatic music. In an age concerned not only with large-scale tonal unity but also with motivic economy, there have also been important studies of thematic integrity in opera: Donington's monograph on the *Ring* is probably the most spectacular, as well as most sensible, demonstration of interrelationship and interdependence in Wagner's system of leitmotifs.<sup>6</sup> In studies of theme and motif in Italian opera, there have been some admirable essays on recurring themes, particularly in Verdi: their dramatic placement, and the nature of their transformations. But here we have already lost some of the systematisation which had been considered a desideratum of persuasive analysis: the successful account of significant thematic recurrence must necessarily relegate large tracts of music to the function of 'passing time'. An account of the famous 'bacio' theme from *Otello*, for instance, need not concern itself with more than a few minutes of music in the score; and an explanation of this opera in terms of thematic recurrence need not invoke many other important themes from the opera.

Studies sympathetic to Puccini may have fallen into the unity trap

by praising his music not for its sheer verve, as Debussy is said to have put it, but for qualities which have conferred the halo of classicism upon early composers: motivic economy and total unity. *La bohème*, for instance, has been admired by both Maisch and Carner for its being underpinned by the key of C major, which is said to govern the tonal organisation of the first act, to return in the fourth act to assume a prominent role, to be transformed towards the end of the act (by Mimì's tragedy) into C minor, and finally to be deflected a semitone upwards to the key of C sharp minor, in which the opera ends. The fact that the opening and closing tonalities of Act II, F and B♭ major, are in a dominant-to-tonic relation is also adduced as evidence of Puccini's 'progressive tonality'. But it is difficult to hear – and just as difficult to observe in the score – a fundamental role for C major in Act I or a sense of 'progression' from F to B♭ in Act II.

At the beginning of the opera the key of C major, however frequently it occurs, is forever moving toward the flat side, by way of the circle of fifths, and usually ends up in B♭ major (from bar 1 of the opera to bar 46 of rehearsal number 1; from no. 3 bar 22 to no. 4 bar 10; from no. 5 bar 1 to no. 6 bar 3). The instability of C major is forecast already by the opening motif in the bass, G–F♯–F, which is initially interpreted as a dominant seventh chord ( $V_2^4$ ) of C (Ex. 1a), but whose emphasis on F in the first 24 bars is later picked up by the dominant of B♭, whose root is F. Indeed, when the G–F of the  $V_2$  chord is 'linearised', i.e. when Puccini assigns a chord to each of these notes, they provide the harmonic impetus for the arrival of B♭ major (Ex. 1b). At the end of the first act the key of C major does make a brief appearance, but it would be a mistake to read into it the resolution of previous tonal arguments. Rodolfo's great aria, beginning with 'Che gelida manina' and culminating in 'Talor dal mio forziere', is set chiefly in the flat keys of D♭ and A♭, Mimì's 'Mi chiamano Mimì' and the ensuing duet ('O soave fanciulla') in the sharp keys D and A; the two pages of the key of C major, which concludes the act, have neither the weight nor the required relationship to the previous keys for us to find sufficient tonal resolution in this key when the act ends.<sup>7</sup>

Similarly, the choice of B♭ at the end of Act II seems governed more by its maximal contrast with the preceding 'Waltz' scene, in E major, than by any affinity to the F major with which the act had opened. With this contrast, Puccini effectively depicts the realities of life which the characters become aware of at the end of the act:

## Example 1

[Act I: bars 1-2]

a)

Allegro vivace ♩ = 108

[Act I: No. 1, bars 41-44]

b)

that all great love scenes and expensive nights on the town must come to an end and that, sooner or later, it is time to pay the bill and go home.

There have been equally valorous efforts to show unity of theme or motivic economy in the score, but these have probably raised more questions than they have been capable of answering. It is well known, for instance, that the final bars of the opera, at which the curtain closes on Mimì's corpse (Ex. 2b), are a repetition – in the same key – of the coda to Colline's 'coat aria' (Ex. 2a); yet it would be being uncharitable to Puccini to regard the literal repetition of theme as underlying some deep symbolic significance in the coat, or in the owner's farewell to it. In an age in which our ears have been trained to listen for unifying devices, it is easy to read more into a score than will be of help in understanding it. Thus the 'coat aria' coda, if we are conscious of its origin when we hear it at the end of the opera, runs an interference pattern against the dramatic substance of the final scene. If, however, we take a more neutral view of it, regarding it as a simple linear elaboration of the final tonic, then its recurrence will sound less prominent. Some evidence for this view is offered by the end of another solo scene, 'Mi chiamano Mimì', in which a major-mode version of this linear elaboration brings the lyrical part of the scene to an end (Ex. 2c).

## Example 2

[Act IV: No. 19, bars 23-27]

a)

*a Tempo*

*mf*

[Act IV: No. 31, bars 9-12]

b)

*Grave*

*ff dim. pp pppp*

[Act I: No. 38, bars 21-22]

c)

*a Tempo rall. ....*

*pp*

The identification of characters with specific themes, which certainly helps to explain much thematic recurrence and development in the opera (and also makes Puccini's technique resemble Wagner's more than Verdi's), has also led to a number of problematic interpretations in the score. And because the relationship between a character and a musical motif is often easier to identify (or defend) than the connection between widely separated harmonies, these problems have actually been raised in discussions of the music. The 'coat aria' coda has been dismissed as a fortuitous resemblance; so has the similarity between the main melodic idea of the 'landlord scene' (Ex. 3a) and the great love-theme heard later in the act (Ex. 3b): 'A strange foreshadowing of Rodolfo's big phrase occurs at No. 20 in Act I. During the scene with Benoît, Marcello and the others twit the landlord about his amorous prowess. Perhaps Puccini was unconscious of the undeniable resemblance.'<sup>8</sup>

## Example 3

[Act I No. 20, bars 1-2]  
a) *Lo stesso movimento*

fl, ob, eng hn

[Act I No. 32, bars 9-10]  
b)

RODOLFO  
Tal - or dal mio for - zie - re —

## Example 4 [after Maisch, p. 57]

[Act I No. 41, bars 1-2 (transposed to C)]  
a)

fl, hn

[Act IV No 2, bars 21-22]  
b)

RODOLFO  
( O Mi - mi tu più non tor - ni, o gior - ni —

## Example 5

[Act II No 21, bars 17-20]  
MUSETTA

Ed as - sa - po - ro al - lor la bra - mo -  
- sia sot - til che da gl'oc - chu tra - spi - ra

Thematic similarity has often been claimed in support of a dramatic relationship. But sometimes it fails to convince, or it overlooks a much greater similarity whose dramatic significance is questionable. Maisch, for instance, argues for a connection between the great love-theme and that of the opening duet in Act IV, which, he claims, is 'easily recognisable' in Ex. 4a and 4b.<sup>9</sup> But he ignores a more obvious source for the later phrase, the middle strain of Musetta's waltz (Ex. 5).

If some of the more easily perceived thematic relationships in the score are difficult to explain in dramatic terms, then perhaps we are reading into the music – or hearing in it – more than we were intended to, and more than is evidently good for us. We have become familiar not only with Puccini's music but also with the compositional techniques of other, more respected musical dramatists, as well as with a number of methods of modern musical analysis. All of this will make the conditions for 'naively listening' to *La bohème* very difficult to imagine, let alone reconstruct. But if the qualities of greatness we sense in Puccini's art are different from those of his predecessors, then we should not be surprised to find that successful methods of investigating his music may be different from those which have won approval elsewhere.

It is sometimes thought that Puccini represents a half-way house between Verdi and Wagner, a composer rooted in the Italian tradition of vocal melody but strongly influenced by Germanic practice in a number of respects: the use of the orchestra as a binding force over long stretches of music, the consistent association of characters with motifs or themes, and the development of a more chromatic palette when required by the needs of the drama. Therefore it might seem appropriate to re-work some of the traditional methods of opera criticism when dealing with one of his scores. But the resulting 'mixture' in Puccini, whatever its origins, must be understood in its own terms. And the failure so far of attempts to describe Puccini's musical language along even the most progressive lines of opera scholarship must lie in the inapplicability of the analytical precepts developed from that scholarship, not in the music itself. The monuments of Verdi and Wagner research have cast deep shadows over Puccini's scores.

The preceding remarks are not intended as a defence of Puccini's art against his critics, but as an illustration of the difficulties encountered in attempting a positive evaluation. If, as it has been suggested, 'few composers have a more easily identifiable style than Puccini's',<sup>10</sup> it must also be true that few defy accurate description more than Puccini's. We are constantly reminded, for instance, of two cardinal features of his musical language: its rich vein of melody, and its attention to orchestral detail. But these are among the most elusive matters of style, much more difficult to comprehend scientifically than, say, the use of harmony, counterpoint, or rhythm. Music theory is capable of telling us much about har-

monic and contrapuntal correctness, and it is beginning to recognise the power of rhythm in clarifying areas of pitch construction. But it has never developed an adequate theory of timbre or instrumentation, i.e. a theory capable of explaining why a musical score could be called 'well orchestrated'. And to demonstrate the way in which a self-contained theme is melodically coherent – as, for example, a detailed Schenkerian analysis may show – is a far cry from showing what makes a theme unforgettable. No self-respecting analyst should regard melodic beauty or perfection of orchestral detail as musically insignificant; but when they seem to loom large in a composer's style, the analyst's task is made all the more difficult: to penetrate the surface of the score, and to discover the true basis of its musical integrity.

It might therefore be appropriate to begin with a consideration of one of the most famous, and typically Puccinian, moments in *La bohème*, Mimì's 'Sono andati?' from Act IV, of which it has been said that 'Puccini would not have been Puccini had he not immortalised Mimì's last moments with one of the most inspired melodies that ever sprang into his head'.<sup>11</sup> Much of the power of the melody is the result of its context: by preceding it with a statement of the opening of the Act I love-theme, Puccini uses one of the simplest musical means of shattering Rodolfo's hope, namely, a continuation in *C minor* of a phrase that the listener will have expected to proceed in the major. Thus the very first note and chord of the theme is highly charged, musically and dramatically, despite its being a simple expression of the key of *C minor*.

The musical integrity of the next eight bars is based on what at first sight may appear to be the most notorious type of contrapuntal progression, an upper line and bass moving together in parallel octaves for an entire octave descent (Ex. 6). But to describe this bass line as 'doubling the melody' is to miss the point: that the same line is functioning both as a melody and as a bass. There is no other bass line to reckon with.

Here is a clear example of an effective passage in a Puccini score – and the melody could not have been 'harmonised' better by another bass line – which contradicts all that we have been taught by conventional theory about the independence of parts. The key to understanding this theme lies in the compass of the descent, which is precisely one octave, so that – to express it in Schenkerian terms – the melody is outlined by the octave descent 8–7–6–5–4–3–2–1

## Example 6

[Act IV: No. 21, bars 5-12]

Andante calmo

Arpa

MIMI (Rodolfo nods)  
So - no an - da - ti? Fin - ge - vo di dor - mi - re - - per - chè

Viol.

Vle.

Vc.

Andante calmo

while the bass arpeggiation I-V-I is filled in by passing notes: C (B $\flat$  A $\flat$ ) G (F E $\flat$  D) C. The fact that the G in the middle of the arpeggiation supports a I $_4^6$  chord, rather than a true dominant, is of utmost importance here, for it prevents melody and bass from being genuinely parallel. And the clarity of the bass descent, with the arrival of a G marking a point of relative rhythmic repose (as the end of a four-bar phrase), makes a root-position V $^7$  in the seventh bar unnecessary.

The inner parts provide a powerful force countering the parallel movement in the outer parts, remaining at or around the same pitch level for as long as possible. It is especially interesting to note that the cellos do not enter until the second bar, and that the judicious use of the harp helps to make the initial C in the viola seem to remain at the same pitch level as well as moving down by a step to B $\flat$ .

Arpa

MIMÌ

vol - li con - te so - la re - sta - re... Ho tan - te co - se che ti vo - glio

Viol.

Vle.

Vc.

Arpa

MIMÌ

di - re... o u - na so - la, ma gran - de co - me il ma - re, —

Viol.

Vle.

Vc.

Example 6, continued

If the above example demonstrates that a melody like ‘Sono andati?’ cannot be understood simply as a great melody *per se* but in relation to its supporting bass-line and harmonies, then it should perhaps now be easier to demonstrate that Puccini’s melodic genius is really a gift for writing great *themes*, i.e. melodies considered together with their accompaniments. There is not a single important unaccompanied melody in the score of *La bohème*, and his melodies are harmonised in different ways only when they serve some specific dramatic purpose, i.e. on the rare occasions when they are treated more like Wagnerian leitmotifs. Conversely, it would be equally wrong to consider Puccini’s use of harmony independently of the melodies which they support. The composer has often been accused of harmonic short-breathedness, a tendency to bring phrases quickly to a harmonic close instead of striving towards Wagnerian ‘endless melody’. But although it is true that his chords are usually not rich in chromaticism, and that his phrases tend to finish on tonic chords more often than one finds in Wagner, the composer’s inclination away from normal triadic accompaniment prevents his music from sounding like a series of short segments, each punctuated by a gesture of finality, in keeping with what is sometimes referred to as his ‘mosaic’ technique of composition.

In the first famous theme from the opera, that associated with Rodolfo the poet, the harmonic stasis in the first six bars (a descent of 5–4–3–2–1 over a tonic pedal) is mitigated by the crucial placement of a single chromatic note, the E<sub>b</sub> in the fourth bar, which converts an ordinary supertonic chord into a secondary dominant (Ex. 7). This change not only causes the unconventional progression V/V–I, which robs the last tonic chord of its sense of finality, but also sets up the resolution of the V/V as the ultimate goal of the theme in bar 15, the chord of F major. The modification of II to V/V in the first phrase of the theme is paralleled by the same procedure in F major in bars 7–10, and this change of course requires a further expansion of the phrase to accommodate the normal supertonic as part of the cadence in F major (Ex. 8). The simplicity of Puccini’s melodies – their diatonicism, their conjunct motion, the frequent long stationary patterns within them – cannot in itself determine their memorability: harmony plays a substantial role in organising them for the listener.

A more sophisticated illustration of Puccini’s advanced diatonicism

## Example 7

[Act I No. 1, bars 46-51]

Lo stesso movimento

RODOLFO

Nei cie - li bi - gi guar - do fu - mar da

Lo stesso movimento

mil - le co - mi - gno - li Pa - ri - gi, e

is provided by the great love-theme, first heard at Rodolfo's 'Talor dal mio forziere'. As with most of the themes in *La bohème*, its impact can be felt in the first few bars. Again it is the participation of the bass line which makes the beginning so effective. What might have seemed a pedestrian melody, were it harmonised with ordinary tonic and dominant chords in the first two bars, is given an extra thrust by the supporting 'arpeggiations' (in the Schenkerian sense) in the bass line, A $\flat$ -C and B $\flat$ -E $\flat$ , so that the crucial descent of the melody proceeds in team with the bass (Ex. 9).

In the next bar the same procedure is accelerated, from the minim to the crotchet level, so that from each of the primary chords a third-related chord branches off: note that in both bars 1-2 and bar 3, the 'main' chords flank the secondary branchings. It would be easy enough to label the third chord of bar 3 as a secondary dominant,

Example 8  
[Act I: No. 1, bars 52-60]

RODOLFO

pen - so a quel pol - tro - ne d'un vec - chio ca - mi -

net - to ingan - na - to - - re che vi - ve in

*poco rit.* a Tempo

o - zio co - me un gran \_\_\_\_\_ si - gnor!

*poco rit.* a Tempo *f*

and thus to 'explain' it as a simple modification of the chord immediately following it. But as a four-part sonority, it has a particular expressiveness of its own, and a tonal ambiguity that enables it to function as a supertonic of a different key, C minor. In the continuation of his theme, Puccini realises this other possibility for the chord, and he exploits its potential further by suspending a note in

## Example 9

[Act I No 32, bars 9-17]

RODOLFO

Ta - lor dal mio for - zie - re ru - ban tut - ti i gio -

in Ab I (1<sup>6</sup>) (V<sup>3</sup>) V

- rel - li due la - dri, gli oc - chi bel - li V'en -

I (VI) (-) V<sup>9</sup>/V V̄

trar con voi pur o - ra, ed i miei so - gni u - sa - ti

(1<sup>6</sup>) (V<sup>3</sup>) (I + added 6th) (V<sup>6</sup>)

*poco allargando*

e i bei so - gni mie - i to - sto si di - le - guar!

in Ab III  
in C minor I (-) I<sup>6</sup> II<sup>6</sup><sub>3</sub> I<sup>6</sup><sub>4</sub> V I

the vocal part above it (bar 7, second beat); the marking 'poco allargando' highlights this chord still more, calling the listener's attention to a sonority heard only moments before in a different harmonic context.

There can be no doubt about Puccini's repetition of themes and motifs as a way of organising the score of *La bohème*, and this has sometimes led to unfavourable comparisons with Wagner's use of leitmotifs. But whereas Wagner built the grandest architectural designs from an elaborate *system* of motifs, all of which are derived

– in the literal sense of the word – from the most basic elements of musical language such as common chords and rhythmic figures, and which is applied consistently and completely in his mature works, Puccini's elements of musical identification are much more elaborate utterances, and do not lend themselves to the normal Wagnerian methods of transformation such as change of mode, decomposition, juxtaposition, or contrapuntal combination with other motifs. We have already seen the dangers of imputing transformation of one theme into another in the course of the opera. There are, of course, examples of motifs used in different ways to move the drama along. The theme of the Bohemians from the very beginning of the opera, which is itself based on the repetition of a few motivic cells, lends itself ideally to variation in other contexts: in Act IV, which has rightly been seen as a recapitulation of earlier music from the opera, the Bohemians' theme is appropriately shortened by the omission of some of this repetition.

The theme at the beginning of Act II, which depicts the Latin Quarter festivities, is anticipated in Act I when the four young men decide to dine out on Christmas Eve. This would seem too obvious an example of thematic repetition to be worthy of analytical commentary; but it is instructive in that it clearly points up the difference between Wagner's and Puccini's use of themes. The leitmotifs of the former composer are too short for early, isolated statements of them to be felt as leading up to their main use. In the *Ring*, for instance, the introduction of the 'sword' motif at the end of *Das Rheingold* and the singing of the motif of 'redemption' in the last act of *Die Walküre* (by Sieglinde, although it is later associated with Brünnhilde) are problematic: they cannot really be assimilated into the musico-dramatic design upon first hearing of the cycle. But the extensiveness of the 'Latin Quarter' theme enables Puccini to present it in Act I, at a low dynamic level and with legato articulation, in circumstances under which it will be understood as a premonition of a later statement of the theme – though we have not yet heard the beginning of Act II. The effect is akin to an off-stage statement of a theme followed by its 'on-stage' presentation (i.e. by the pit orchestra), and runs completely contrary to our normal explanation of two playings of a theme: that the second is a repetition or variation of the first.

The fact that Puccini's themes are longer than Wagner's leitmotifs does not prevent them from undergoing any melodic or harmonic

## Example 10

[Act IV. No. 2, bars 13-15]

Andantino

The musical score for Example 10 consists of two systems of music. The first system, labeled 'm C. II<sup>7</sup>', contains bars 13 and 14. The second system, labeled 'III', contains bars 15 and 16. The music is written for piano and is marked 'espressivo'. The key signature has one sharp (F#) and the time signature is 3/4. The tempo is 'Andantino'. The score shows a melodic line in the right hand and a bass line in the left hand. The right hand features a series of chords, including a minor second interval between the tonic and dominant. The left hand has a more active, rhythmic accompaniment.

transformation whatever: rather, transformation is not exploited systematically but is used only sparingly. The two themes from *La bohème* which are given new 'meaning' by such transformation – and not until Act IV – are the love-theme and Mimì's motif. As an introduction to the duet between Rodolfo and Marcello, the love-theme is given a wistfulness by its being harmonised with two minor chords in place of the major tonic and dominant chords. This establishes a mood of regret in which the two Bohemians can lament the absence of their loved ones (Ex. 10). These two chords not only mitigate the effect of the repetition of a familiar theme, but also prepare us for a statement about love that is considerably lower in temperature than any heard earlier in the opera.

Later on, the recurrence of the same theme, at the end of a climactic musical phrase in which Rodolfo and Mimì express their ecstasy in being reunited, is harmonised in another way. From the new harmonic setting, the listener is able to recognise that the characters' happiness is not going to last very long: the harmony, instead of opening out from the tonic to the dominant, now closes up towards the tonic (Ex. 11).

This transformation of the love-theme, timed to mark the beginning of the denouement of the drama, has been preceded by the only instance of a truly Wagnerian development, the reharmonisation of Mimì's motif as the heroine is brought into the garret for the last time (Ex. 12). The references to a Tristanesque sound world with its diminished and half-diminished seventh-chords (and a prominent English horn) are unmistakable, and the special 'symphonically developmental' qualities of the passage have been noted elsewhere. But what makes the passage compelling is that it is the *only* moment in the opera which is developed in this way. Mimì's motif, which is musically as frail as the character it portrays, could be subjected to intervallic distortion or harmonic reinterpretation at

## Example 11

[Act IV No 15, bars 9-12]

MIMÌ  
An - cor sen - to la vi - ta qui

RODOLFO  
Be - ne - det - ta boc - ca

*poco rall* *f* *dim*

No, tu non mi la - sci più!

Tuan - cor mi par - li!

*ppp*

any number of points in the opera. But whereas the failure of a composer to realise the full potential of his musical material might in some circumstances be taken as a criticism of his compositional technique, the very absence of development of Mimì's motif until the final scene of the opera is an essential ingredient of the success of the passage in question.

I should like to end this discussion with one illustration of musical continuity in *La bohème*. As has been stated before, the apparent

## Example 12

[Act IV: No. 13, bars 38-45]

*(to Colline; they both drag the bed forward)*

SCHAUNARD

Noi ac-co-stia-mo quel let - tu-cio.

*Meno molto*

MIMI

*(Musetta brings a glass of water and makes Mimì sip it)  
(passionately)*

Ro - dol - fo!

RODOLFO

*(Rodolfo and Marcello support Mimì and lead her towards the bed)*

Là. Da be-re.

shortness of breath in Puccini's harmony – itself a condition of his use of material that strives towards the status of self-contained theme – has led some critics to fault his music, and motivated others to seek another explanation, according to which the ideals of an opera based on the juxtaposition of themes can be seen to be compatible with those of a through-composed score:

Puccini creates continuity not by interweaving his themes but largely by juxtaposition. And this brings us to his characteristic mosaics in which diminutive melodic 'squares', not longer than a bar and often even less, are repeated, varied or treated sequentially, after which the same process is continued with the next 'square'. This technique may have been making a virtue of necessity, for Puccini's melodic invention tends to be short-winded.<sup>12</sup>

The analogy to 'mosaic' technique seems more a way of avoiding a

discussion of the binding forces in Puccini's scores than an explanation of their cohesiveness; yet it is certainly in keeping with conventional critical appreciation of Puccini, and probably also with what is generally understood by the composer's self-professed concern for 'the little things'. But a large problem in the understanding of continuity in Puccini is that the normal procedures we have learnt to recognise in music – the interruption of a cadence, elision, 'progressive' harmony (in the real sense of the term) – are not the distinguishing features of the compositional technique of a score like *La bohème*.

I have already given one instance of Puccini's unconventional continuity, the prefacing of 'Sono andati?' by the first four bars of the love-theme. A more extended example of Puccini's skill may be seen in the duet which concludes Act I ('O soave fanciulla'), which is also based on the love-theme and forms a dramatic conclusion to a scene reaching back over two arias and some long stretches of conversation. Here the love-theme is used to introduce itself, so to speak: a four-bar phrase sets up the key of A major, but this is soon reinterpreted as a prelude to another four-bar phrase which aims at a different tonality, E major. When both Mimì and Rodolfo sing together in octaves for the first time ('Ah! tu sol comandi, amor!' / 'Fremon già nell'anima'), the preceding music gives the impression that harmonies underlying this theme have been altered, i.e. that the tonality of E major still governs bar 9 and that the A major chord is a subdominant (Ex. 13). But Puccini proceeds with his theme in its original form, so that after four more bars the listener must be forced to understand everything from bar 9 onwards – retrospectively – as in the key of A major, i.e. that the chord in bar 9 was indeed a tonic. A single bar of uncertainty is enough to carry what might otherwise have been dubbed an excessive repetition of a familiar tune. It is a passage like this which reminds us of the judgment that, in Puccini, 'the musical utterance is kept at high tension, almost without repose, as though it were to be feared that if the audiences were not continually excited they would go to sleep'.<sup>13</sup> I hope that this illustration might be accepted as evidence that, for Puccini, the art of musical continuity lies in something more sophisticated than giving his listener a periodic poke in the ribs.

The activity we call 'musical analysis' is nowadays defined in broad terms, and encompasses a far wider range of investigative methods

Example 13

[Act I: No. 41, bars 1-12]

Largo sostenuto  $\text{♩} = 58$

RODOLFO

*p* *3 dolciss.* *3*

O so - a - ve fan - ciul - la, o dol - ce

Largo sostenuto  $\text{♩} = 58$

*pp*

*3*

vi - so di mi - te cir - con - fu - so al - ba lu - nar,

in - te, rav - vi - so il so - gno ch'io vor -

*f*

re - i sem - pre so - gnar!

*ff* *cres. molto*

MIMI *con anima*  
Ah! tu sol co - mandi, a - mor! \_\_\_\_\_

*con anima*  
Fre - mon già nel - l'a - ni - ma le dol - cez - ze e -

*fff* *largamente sostenuto* *P* *espressivo*

tu sol - co - man - di, a -

- stre - me.

*dim.*

The image shows a musical score for voice and piano. The voice part is on a single staff with lyrics '- mo - rel'. The piano accompaniment consists of two staves (treble and bass clef) with complex rhythmic patterns and arpeggiated figures. The key signature has two sharps (F# and C#).

than ever before. Yet most attempts at it are still directed toward finding unity in musical works of art, or at least strong evidence of the application of a system. In even as modern, wide-ranging and perceptive a study as Kerman's *Opera as Drama*, the search is for universal truths more than for an understanding of individual masterpieces: in the end, one remembers the names of the composers Monteverdi, Gluck, Mozart, Verdi and Wagner better than the titles of operas by other composers: *Fidelio*, *Carmen*, *Boris Godunov*.

If Puccini failed, in his collected work, to establish a valid aesthetic of opera composition, or to live up to those of his great predecessors, then the enormous success which many of his stage works have enjoyed must be the result of an extraordinary ability to focus on the problems relating to the single art-work, without the benefits of a governing system or of elements of what one may wish to call a steadily maturing 'personal style'. On close inspection, we might even find that, for instance, 'Un bel di' works along very different lines from those of its precursor in *La bohème*, 'Sono andati?'; indeed, the results of this essay may not be of much help in explaining the musical rightness of a *Butterfly*, or a *Tosca*. But if we concern ourselves less with discovering unity in Puccini's scores, or consistency in the application of a system, or even features common to many of his operas, and instead follow Tovey in the search for *integrity* in the individual art-work, we shall probably be in a better position to discover the elements of mastery which inform a score like *La bohème*.