

# Giacomo Puccini and Giulio Ricordi: An Opera Partnership

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Without Giulio Ricordi, we might not be able to enjoy *La Bohème*, a contender for first place in the roster of the most performed operas in the canon. He supported Puccini in the face of early failure, and remained his mainstay throughout his career. In the 19th century, publishing houses had enormous influence in the musical culture of the nation, frequently encouraging composers, bringing composers and librettists together and negotiating with opera houses concerning the performance of works to which they owned the rights.

Giacomo Puccini himself was born in 1858 in Lucca, Italy, where his family had been musicians for five generations. As a church organist at the age of 14, he was continuing in this tradition; but a youthful adventure to a performance of *Aida* in the nearby town of Pisa is said to have turned his attention to opera, and once he left the conservatory in Milan, he composed exclusively for the theater.



His teacher in Milan was Amilcare Ponchielli, composer of *La Gioconda*, who took an interest in Puccini in spite of his lack of academic drive, and eventually introduced him to Giulio Ricordi, grandson of the founder of the House of Ricordi, largest music publisher in Italy. Ricordi was Verdi's publisher and friend, and had played an important role in bringing Verdi out of retirement to compose *Otello*. He was a businessman of acuity and forcefulness, and he was described as follows by an observer of Italian musical life:



Giacomo Puccini

A writer of graceful, measured prose, a sharp and biting satirist, a fluent, elegant composer, anyone who had dealings with him realized at once that they had to do with a person of superior intellect. ... In his study there was a continual procession of composers, librettists, singers, conductors, agents and impresarios. First impressions were decisive...artists and composers who were perfectly aware of this would solicit his judgement with a kind of holy terror...A valued friend – and a formidable opponent.

G.Depanis, *I Concerti Popolari ed il Teatro Regio di Torino*  
(Turin, 1914), I, p. 175



Giulio Ricordi

Not only did Ricordi befriend Puccini, he arranged for the composer to receive a monthly stipend from the publishing house to enable him to compose his second opera, *Edgar*, which flopped in 1889. Even after *that*, Ricordi insisted that the support continue, offering to reimburse the firm out of his own pocket if Puccini did not succeed.

The road to success was still somewhat rocky: Puccini had struggled with Ferdinando Fontana, the librettist of *Edgar*, and was determined to be

involved in the writing of the next libretto, that for *Manon Lescaut* (1893). After he had similarly struggled with the first two writers, Marco Praga and Domenico Oliva, Ricordi called in Ruggero Leoncavallo (later, composer of *I Pagliacci*, but then known mainly as a librettist). Puccini was still not satisfied and eventually Luigi Illica and Giuseppe Giacosa were recruited to finish; they were to become his regular and long-suffering collaborators on his later most successful operas. Ricordi and Puccini himself each had a hand in the eventual product, resulting in possibly the longest list of librettists for a single work in opera.





Puccini's difficulties in choosing subject matter for his operas and finalizing their music and structure also became legendary. Ricordi remarked about the initial stages of *La Bohème* (1896), "It seems to me with your *Bohème* that I am at a ball game, in which the libretto is substituted for the ball." And Giacosa, who was a very well-regarded man of letters, wrote in 1893, about *Manon Lescaut*, "I have wasted more paper on these scenes and racked my brains more than for any of my own plays." (Both quoted in "The Paternal Publisher" by Nigel Jamieson, *Opera News*, June 2008, p. 38)

Even the successful *Manon*, was subject to many revisions, so that there is no definitive version even today. But the result was worth it after all. Ricordi chose Turin for the premiere, as Milan was totally preoccupied with the premiere of Verdi's *Falstaff* a few days later. *Manon* was a triumph, the greatest success of the season. When George Bernard Shaw saw it in London in 1894, he wrote, "Puccini looks to me more like the heir of Verdi than any of his rivals."

The success of *Manon Lescaut* enabled Puccini to pay back the money he had been living on from the House of Ricordi and freed him from financial concerns. It established him as an international composer, and must have hugely gratified Ricordi, who was a definite partisan of the Italian musical tradition and an anti-Wagnerian even after his firm acquired the rights to the German composer's works in Italy. *La Bohème* followed and there was now no doubt that Puccini was the master of the opera scene, with success after success to follow.

Although he and Giulio Ricordi had their artistic disagreements, and a clash occasioned by one of the womanizing Puccini's affairs, they remained great friends and colleagues until the publisher's death in 1912. Puccini described his friend as "the only person who inspires me with trust, and to whom I can confide all that is going through my mind."



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