

## **Puccini's *Girl of the Golden West* (*La Fanciulla del West*)**

### **Giacomo Puccini, David Belasco and The Met**

Two of Puccini's operas, *Madama Butterfly*, 1904 and *La Fanciulla del West* (*The Girl of the Golden West*), 1910, were based on plays by the American playwright, director and theatrical producer, David Belasco. *Fanciulla* is not well-known and not often produced these days, but *Madama Butterfly* remains one of Puccini's most important and beloved works.

In 1900, while in London, Puccini saw a production of Belasco's play *Madame Butterfly*. He was much taken by it and promptly applied to Belasco for the rights to use it in an opera, which he subsequently received. He completed the first version of his own *Madama Butterfly* in 1902. It premiered at La Scala in 1904 but received a poor reception. Puccini revised it several times; the final definitive version premiered in Paris in 1906. The production was well-received, Puccini was satisfied and this is the version that we know. This was the first of two of Puccini's operas based on plays by Belasco.

Early in 1907, Puccini had his first visit to New York. He had been invited to attend the Metropolitan Opera's premieres of *Manon Lescaut* and *Madama Butterfly*. While there, he attended several performances of plays by Belasco. One of them was *Girl of the Golden West*, then playing on Broadway.

Puccini was very intrigued by the play but initially had mixed feelings; he said that he liked the ambience of the American West, but was not enthusiastic about the play as a whole. "... never a simple thread, all muddle and at times bad taste and old hat", he complained to his publisher. But his interest was piqued. Friends urged him to take it up. He finally did, and asked his publisher to obtain the rights. He completed the score of his opera, titled *La Fanciulla del West* in 1910.

The Metropolitan Opera Company was founded in 1880 to create an alternative to New York's old established Academy of Music opera house. The subscribers to the Academy's limited number of private boxes represented the highest stratum in New York society, and by 1880, these "old money" families were reluctant to admit New York's newly wealthy industrialists into their long-established social circle. Frustrated with being excluded, the Metropolitan Opera's founding

To receive news about opera and related musical activities in Rochester, subscribe to our free eMail newsletters by sending a request to [operaguil dofrochester@gmail.com](mailto:operaguil dofrochester@gmail.com).

Information about the Opera Guild and its programs is at <http://www.operaguil dofrochester.org>, or tear off and submit the following to our representative at the simulcast, or post to:  
Opera Guild of Rochester | P.O. Box 92245 | Rochester | NY | 14692-0245.

Name .....

Address .....

.....

Email address .....

subscribers set about building a new opera house that would outshine the old Academy in every way. The first Metropolitan Opera House, built at 39th and Broadway, opened on October 22, 1883, and was an immediate success, both socially and artistically. The Academy of Music's opera folded just three years after the Met opened.

By 1910, the new and upcoming Met was eager to get itself into the world opera scene. Now, Puccini, the world's foremost Italian opera composers (Verdi had died in 1901) had created an opera set in America, based on a play by an American playwright. What a coup it would be to have its world premiere at the New York Metropolitan Opera, America's leading opera house! Met management arranged to have Puccini himself at the premiere. They paid all his expenses, including deluxe ocean passage from London to New York aboard the *SS George Washington*. The accommodations were lavish, including, according to a letter that Puccini wrote home,

"A princely bath, a room with two gilt bedsteads with various sorts of opaline-tinted lamps; a drawing room with luxurious divans and mikado mirrors; dining room with furniture in the best English taste, ingenious cupboards which are even lighted inside, everything comfortable, large and spacious as in the most modern of hotels. Price 320 [pounds] for passage alone. Large windows with sumptuous silk curtains. In short, a stupendous suite! Praise be to the Metropolitan!

(According to my calculations, British £320 in 1910 would be equivalent to over US\$40,000 today. It seems the Met really did want Puccini to be there!)

These two operas of Puccini, *Madama Butterfly* and *La Fanciulla del West*, were based on plays of David Belasco. Belasco is not well-known today, but he was one of the most celebrated playwrights, directors and producers of the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. He was born in San Francisco, California, in 1853 into a family of Sephardic Jews who had moved from London's Spanish and Portuguese Jewish community during the California Gold Rush. He became interested in the theater early in life, beginning at age 20 working as an actor, director and secretary in Virginia City, Nevada. He reported finding "more reckless women and desperadoes to the square foot...than anywhere else in the world". He said that while there, seeing "people die under such peculiar circumstances" made him "all the more particular in regard to the psychology of dying on the stage. I think I was one of the first to bring naturalness to bear in death scenes, and my varied Virginia City experiences did much to help me toward this . . .".

In 1882, at the age of 29, he came to New York, where his career flourished. During his long creative career, stretching between 1884 and 1930, Belasco either wrote, directed, or produced more than 100 Broadway plays, making him the most powerful personality on the New York city theater scene. He also helped establish careers for dozens of notable stage performers, many of whom went on to work in films. He died in New York in 1931 at the age of 77.

Among theater-goers, he is best known today for having founded the Belasco Theater, located on West 44th Street in New York, regarded by many as one of the finest in the Broadway Theater District. But we opera lovers know him best as the source of two of Puccini's finest works.

*Art Axelrod for the Opera Guild of Rochester*  
*September 2018*