

Giacomo Puccini (1858-1924) *Messa di Gloria*, 1880

Puccini wrote orchestral pieces, sacred music, chamber music, solo music for piano and organ, and songs for voice and piano, most notably his 1880 *Messa di Gloria* (being performed at our Spring concert), his *Preludio Sinfonico* of 1882, and his 1890 string quartet movement *Crisantemi*. However, he is primarily known for his operas including *Manon Lescaut*, *La bohème*, *Tosca*, *Madama Butterfly*, *La fanciulla del West*, and *Turandot*. He is regarded as the greatest and most successful proponent of modern Italian opera after Verdi (1813-1901) the generation before Puccini.

Giacomo Puccini, born in Lucca in 1856, came from a locally famous musical family. Since the 18th century, Puccinis had been employed as church musicians, so much so that the name “Puccini” was practically synonymous with “church composer” in his home town. As a child, he was a member of boys’ choirs and organist at local churches.



Lucca Cathedral

He grew up with five sisters and a brother, receiving his first music lessons from his father before his untimely death in 1864. In 1868 Puccini enrolled in the violin class at the G. Pacini Institute of Music, a school renowned even outside Lucca, where he continued his studies including composition. Among his first compositions is the *Messa quattro voci*, his graduation piece written in 1880.



Puccini's Birthplace



Instituto Musicale "G. Pacini"



Milan, Conservatory

Puccini moved to Milan, the cultural capital of Italy. From 1880 to 1883 he attended the Conservatory where his teachers among others were Antonio Bazzini (who also taught Verdi) and Amilcare Ponchielli (see Note). He shared his dorm with Pietro Mascagni, composer of the 1890 opera *Cavalleria rusticana*. Immediately after the final exam he composed his first opera, *Le Villi*, and wrote only operas from then on. It is thought that his three years as a student at the Conservatory are portrayed in the lives of the poor young artists in *La bohème*.

Giacomo Puccini's *Messa* is composed for orchestra and four-part choir with tenor and baritone soloists. It is not a true *Messa di Gloria*, which consists of only the Kyrie and Gloria and omits the Credo, Sanctus, Benedictus, and Agnus Dei. The Credo had already been written and performed in 1878 and was initially conceived by Puccini as a self-contained work.

Even at the beginning of his career with the *Messa*, his biographer, Julian Budden states that "the composer is totally in full command of his material". Puccini never published the full manuscript of the *Messa* even though it was well received. Puccini had turned to opera. Puccini did re-use some of its themes in other works, such as the Agnus Dei in his opera *Manon Lescaut* and the Kyrie in *Edgar*.

In 1951 Father Dante del Fiorentino, an American priest, was conducting research in Lucca into Puccini for his biography *Immoral Bohemian*. He contacted the family of Vandini, Puccini's musical secretary. In the course of his research, the *Messa* manuscript was rediscovered. In 1952 it was performed first in Chicago and then in Naples, when it was renamed *Messa di Gloria*. Again, it was well received.

NOTE: Antono Ponchielli (1834-1886) was a student of Antonio Bronzini (1818-1897). Ponchielli also became a teacher as well as an opera composer. His most famous opera is *La Gioconda* written in 1876 and revised in 1880. Its ballet music *Dance of the Hours* was used in Walt Disney's 1940 *Fantasia* and its melody was turned into the popular song *Hello Muddah, Hello Fadduh! (A Lette from Camp Granda)* recorded in 1963 by Allan Sherman. In 2020, the song was selected by the Library of Congress for preservation in the United States National Recording Registry for being "culturally, historically, or aesthetically significant".^[2]

Pat Kilburn

Sources: Puccini: *His Life and Works* by Julian Budden, *The New Grove Dictionary of Music & Musicians*, sheet music, CD booklet, and various websites, and Wikipedia articles.