

Senior Citizens Music Appreciation Program

Date: June 15, 2026

Time: 10:30-noon

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Why is Puccini So Popular?

I. Announcements

A. Blawenburg Band 250th Anniversary of the American Revolution Concert Series

July 4:	Washington Crossing State Park (NJ)	7:30 pm
July 8:	23 South Warren Street, Trenton NJ	6:00 pm
July 30:	Morven Museum and Garden, Princeton NJ	6:00 pm

Details on these performances are available at <https://blawenburgband.org>

II. Who Was Giacomo Puccini?

A. Born in Lucca, Italy in 1858, he was the sixth of nine children in the family of Michele Puccini and Albina Magi. His family had a long history of musical activity, notably as masters of chapel music for more than 100 years at the Cathedral of San Martino in Bologna. Giacomo became a member of the chapel boys' choir and later a substitute organist at San Martino. With the uncle Fortunato's guidance, Giacomo studied music and graduated from the Pacini School of Music in Lucca in 1880. Then, obtaining support from another uncle and Queen Margherita of Italy, he spent three years at the Milan Conservatory, where he composed his first orchestral work, the *Capriccio Sinfonico*. In addition to studying music, Giacomo developed a broad familiarity with dramatic literature, which served him well as he moved into composing operas. He died of cancer in 1924 at the age of 65.

B. Operatic Output

1. *Le Villi* (1884)
2. *Edgar* (189)
3. *Manon Lescaut* (1893)
4. *La Boheme* (1896)
5. *Tosca* (1900)
6. *Madama Butterfly* (1904)
7. *La Fanciulla del West* (1910)
8. *La Rondine* (1917)
9. *Il Trittico* (Three one act operas) (1918)
10. *Turandot* (unfinished, completed by Franco Alfano) (1924)

III. Elements of Puccini's Operatic Style

- A. “Man of the Theatre”: Puccini had an unerring understanding of how to construct operas that moved the action along. Each of his mature works, beginning with *Manon Lescaut*, have easily comprehensible plots and well-constructed librettos that help the audience follow the action without difficulty.
- B. Supreme melodist: Puccini's operas have set arias for lead singers that are memorable and whose vocal melodies are frequently doubled in the orchestra to emphasize the melodic line.
- C. Adaptability: As the heir to Verdi as the most important Italian operatic composer of the period 1880-1925, Puccini never “stood still” in developing his compositions. He was influenced not only by the long tradition of Italian vocal music, but by Wagner, French music (Debussy, Ravel), Viennese operetta, and musical ideas from the locales where he set his operas. He employs Japanese musical forms in *Madama Butterfly* and Chinese folk songs in *Turandot*, while also seeking to evoke the American west in *La Fanciulla del West*.
- D. Great orchestrator: Puccini used the orchestra in creative ways, introducing bold harmonies and “sound painting” scenes with techniques used by German and French composers. As an example, the opening chords of *Tosca* serve as a unifying motif throughout the work in ways that had not been used by other Italian operatic composers.
- E. Summary: The distinguished British scholar Julian Budden summed up the competing views of Puccini's legacy in this quote from his 2002 biography of the composer.

“No composer communicates more directly with an audience than Puccini. Indeed, for many years he has remained a victim of his own popularity; hence the resistance to his music in academic circles. Be it remembered, however, that Verdi's melodies were once dismissed as barrel-organ fodder. The truth is that music that appeals immediately to a public becomes subject to bad imitation, which can cast a murky shadow over the original. So long as counterfeit Puccinian melody dominated the world of sentimental operetta, many found it difficult to come to terms with the genuine article. Now that the current coin of light music has changed, the composer admired by Schoenberg, Ravel, and Stravinsky can be seen to emerge in his full stature.”

IV. Today's Music

- A. Puccini, *The Operas*. EMI Classics 2 15460 2.
- B. Puccini, *Tosca*. EMI Classics 7243 5 56304 2 1.
- C. Puccini, *La Boheme*. DVD. Deutsche Grammophon 00440 073 4539.
- D. Puccini, *Madama Butterfly*. DVD. Deutsche Grammophon B0004282-09.
- E. Puccini, *La Fanciulla del West*. DVD. Kultur D 4603.
- F. Puccini, *Il Trittico*. EMI Classics 0777 7 64165 2 5.
- G. Puccini, *La Rondine*. RCA Victor Gold Seal GD60459(2).

- H. Puccini, *Turandot*. Warner Classics 5054197406591.
- I. *Maria Callas at Covent Garden*. 2CD/DVD. Warner Classics 50999 9 03770 2 0.

V. You Tube Films

- A. *Le Villi*, Opera de Las Palmas de Gran Canaria (2025) <https://youtu.be/D8yw-e-iyS0?si=U-qKvEZ4m4l3EdzK>
- B. *Edgar*, Teatro Regio di Torino (2008) <https://youtu.be/ZUbb1xLCekk?si=q1XwYbwtAAUA2vzl>
- C. *Manon Lescaut*, Metropolitan Opera (1980) <https://youtu.be/nEjFfo4QY8?si=3ZdmRU1QYrbxuZlw>
- D. *La Boheme*, La Scala <https://youtu.be/5U2N2c96Kuk?si=pyAcr5RpQs3-EO0n>
- E. *Tosca*, Filmed Opera on Location in Rome (1976) <https://youtu.be/cSWJDkLyeV0?si=yd1-oPCC2HWu7NU8>
- F. *Madama Butterfly*, Film of Opera https://youtu.be/qSw2cS_kpbE?si=jH4f3mUKsTnmFOOo
- G. *La Fanciulla del West*, La Scala <https://youtu.be/RApJ3DHwrWo?si=bo4UUUzIUvORqS3M>
- H. *La Rondine*, Washington National Opera <https://youtu.be/6WYnRuLBe2g?si=fLrzAuPGP7fO8sip>
- I. *Il Trittico*, San Francisco Opera <https://youtu.be/64DE0WgseJY?si=T2kjWa07nPfX1kD->
- J. *Turandot*, Gran Teatre del Liceu (Barcelona) (2009) https://youtu.be/AxyOR1__8jY?si=CJxDORAb51CPtxQR

VI. Sources

- A. Giacomo Puccini, Wikipedia https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Giacomo_Puccini
- B. The Life of Giacomo Puccini, English National Opera <https://www.eno.org/people/giacomo-puccini/>
- C. Spike Hughes, *Famous Puccini Operas*. New York: Dover, 1972.
- D. Carolyn Abbate and Roger Parker, *A History of Opera*. Updated edition. New York: Norton, 2012.

