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American Women as Operatic Characters: Puccini's *Fanciulla del West* Versus Chadwick's Marietta in *The Padrone*

With the premiere of Giacomo Puccini's *Girl of the Golden West*, subtitled *Fanciulla del West,* at the *Metropolitan Opera,* 10 December 1910, the exotic topic of the American Wild West entered the world of grand opera.[1] Puccini's collaboration with the playwright David Belasco had begun with *Madama Butterfly* as early as 1900. In 1907 Puccini attended a Broadway performance of Belasco's successful melodrama *The Girl of the Golden West* (1905). Delighted with the colorful story about the years of the Gold Rush in California, he became interested in the play as a libretto for his next opera.

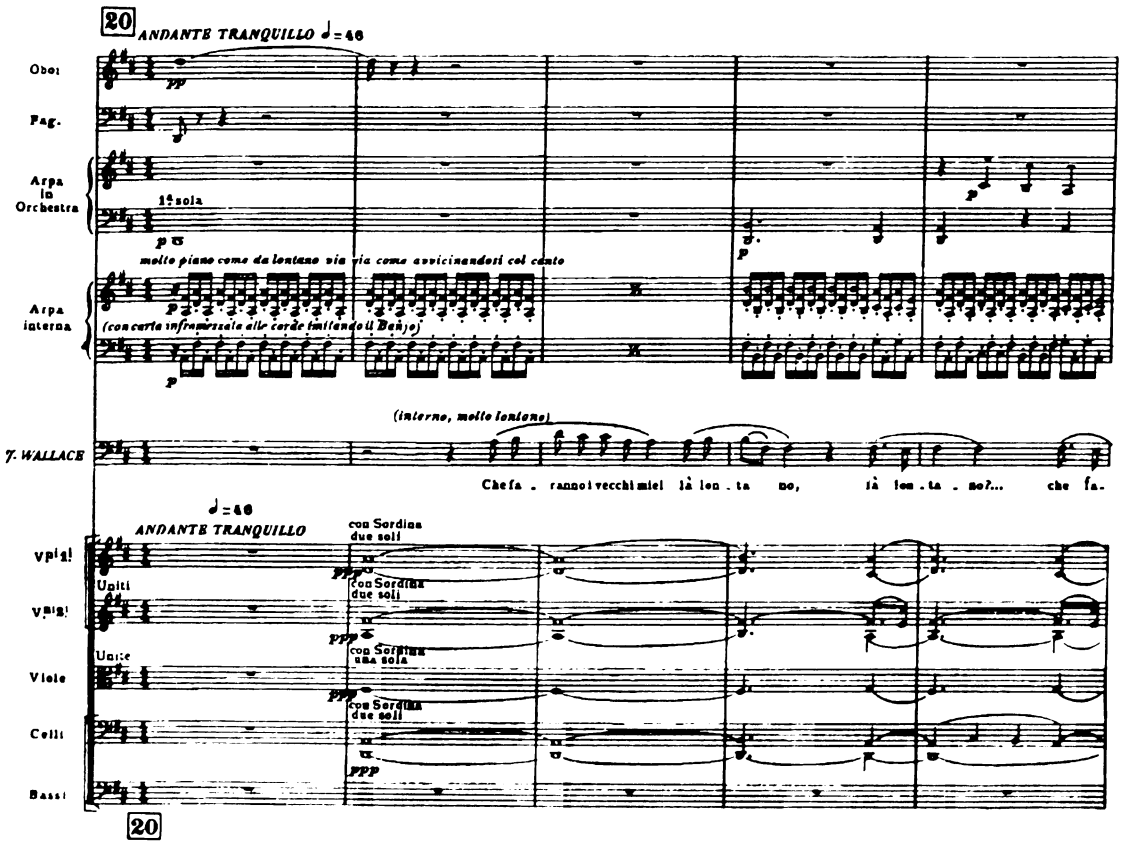
Minnie, the Girl, is the proprietress of a saloon, adored by the miners of the camp, but has never been in love. When suddenly the bandit Ramerrez, alias Dick Johnson, turns up planning to rob the saloon, both are enamored of each other. While the miners chase Dick, the sheriff (who himself wants to marry Minnie) discovers Dick's refuge in the attic of Minnie's cabin because of his blood dripping down on the floor. Minnie now offers herself as the stake of a poker game with the sheriff, which she finally wins—by exchanging cards. But Dick is recaptured and brought to the gallows. At the last possible moment Minnie arrives on horseback and appeals to the miners' sense of justice and forgiveness. By the force of her rhetoric she wins them over, and Minnie and Dick leave the camp together.

The production of *The Girl* under Arturo Toscanini was a success, partly due to the famous participants, among them Emmy Destinn as Minnie and Enrico Caruso, in full Western regalia and singing the part of Dick Johnson. The setting was splendid, with live horses on stage for the final act. Belasco himself had helped to mount the opera, trying to catch as much of the naturalistic atmosphere of his melodrama as possible. Though the reviews honored the composer's skill, his treatment of the "Americanness" of the

subject was judged critically. On the one hand the story was regarded as Italianized: "The West it depicts is, of course, the West as an Italian, who has never seen the West, imagines it."[2] On the other hand Puccini's musical procedure evoked harsh criticism: "American character and spirit in music, various in manifestation, and still vague to Americans themselves, must remain to an Italian a greater mystery, even, than American slang to an English author."[3]

Arthur Farwell, quoted above, was by no means a minor critic. He firmly declared that, in spite of the use of Indian melodies, Puccini's music could not be perceived as American. Belasco's own intention had been to create a story "faithful to life. . Why, I know the period [of] Forty-nine as I know my alphabet and there are many things in my *Girl of the Golden West* truer than many of the incidents in Bret Harte!"[4] The playwright even included the musical portrayal of a local wandering minstrel as a naturalistic element. Puccini, on the other hand, by giving the banjo singer Italian words to sing ("Che faranno i vecchi miei" in act 1), transformed the formerly realistic figure into an artificial construct (Example 1).

Though, as Farwell noticed, the melody quotes the Festive Sun Dance of the Zuni, the amalgam of the Indian tune with a Puccinian harmonic texture finally turns the quotation into musical fiction. On behalf of the ragtime, which is introduced with the appearance of Dick Johnson (act 1, rehearsal number 72), Farwell writes, "This would lend an American tang

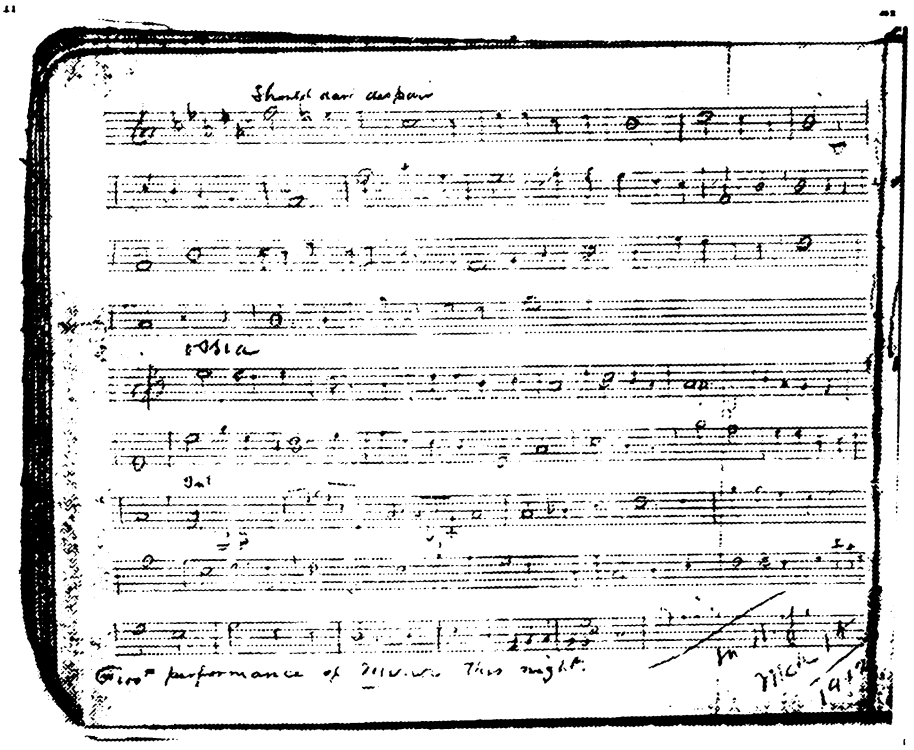


Puccini, La fanciulla del West, *act 1: "Che faranno i vecci miei," [opening]*

to the music were it not for the striking fact that ragtime in a tragic-dramatic sense is something which never entered the heads of the American people, and this therefore passes as a sort of Wagnerian *leit-motif*, without ever so much as suggesting to the audience that it is their own familiar ragtime, and it therefore has in this sense nothing to contribute to any atmosphere in which an American would feel at home."[5] But which music—particularly on stage—could make Americans feel at home? This remained an unanswered question, but it summarized an already endless discussion on American opera. The plot itself and the role construction, with the Girl as a Western heroine, the first female protagonist to have survived to the end of a Puccini opera, were barely spoken of. Only the *New York Times* mentioned that Minnie scarcely was "any product of a ladies' seminary."[6]

George Whitefield Chadwick (1854-1931) knew Puccini's opera well; as early as January 1911 it was rehearsed by students of the opera school of the *New England Conservatory of Music* in Boston, whose director he had been since 1897. Though Chadwick criticized "several defective places" in the opera, he resumed, "I believe this piece would go in English if the right people were at hand!" (*Memoirs*, January 17, 1911).[7] The cause of American opera had hitherto been intensely discussed. One attempt to incite composers had been the competition for American Opera of the Metropolitan Opera House in 1910. The composer had to be a native-born American, the libretto in English, the opera a grand opera. The $10,000 prize was awarded to Horatio Parker, professor of music at Yale University, for his *Mona*. Chadwick, who was one of the jury members, recorded his disappointment: "Spent all the afternoon on the Metropolitan operas. Some astonishing 'arbeit' but nothing really fine as yet" (*Memoirs*, January 18, 1911). On November 16, 1911, he wrote: "Spent a good part of the night in planning the scenario of a one-act opera, which I have had in my head for a long time and here is the result." The plot was finally worked out as a libretto by David Kilburn Stevens. The opera, now named *The Padrone*, was a two-act work with an interlude. At first Chadwick wanted it to be sung in English *and* Italian, to emphasize the story of Italian immigrants in the United States. He gave up this plan, according to his memoirs, sometime after October 18, 1912. He enjoyed working on the project ("Never had anything so easy to work dramatically," *Memoirs*, February 28, 1912). The piano-vocal score was finished in December 1912 and submitted to the Metropolitan Opera.

A *padrone* was a kind of labor agent. In the opera the padrone Catani owns a tavern, where Marta works with her daughters Marietta and Francesca, all from Trapani, a place known to Americans as one of the centers of the Sicilian mafia. Marietta is obliged to dance with her tambourine in the streets. With her savings she has paid the passage to America for her fiancé Marco, whom she will marry as soon as he arrives in the United States the following day. Catani is enamored of Marietta and, learning of Marco's imminent arrival, connives with Francesca, Marco's ex-lover,



George W. Chadwick, sketchbook page for The Padrone *(Reproduction with kind permission of the New England Conservatory, Boston).*

to tell the immigration officers that Marco has spent time in jail: a reason to deny him passage into the country. Catani and Francesca's plot succeeds, and Marco is refused admittance. Marietta, finally discovering Catani's intrigue, stabs him to death.

The coverpage of the holograph score shows the crossed flags of Italy and the United States. Two elements of local color represent the encounter musically. A tarantella highlights Marietta's profession when she appears in act 1, and the familiar American tune "Home Again," which is included in the chorus of the crowd awaiting the ship, marks America at the beginning of act 2 (rehearsal number 4). Furthermore pentatonic elements give the arias of Marietta, Francesca and Marco the flavor of foreignness in the otherwise diatonic context.

This story was bursting with references to real life. Around 1910 the seemingly endless influx of immigrants into the U.S. reached its peak. The huge number of mostly poor, often illiterate Italians mainly from the South and from Sicily provoked prejudices, irritations, and irrational fears of criminal organizations. As described in Jacob Riis's *How the Other Half Lives* (1890), the Italians were seen as humble creatures of the lowest rank, helpless but easily prone to drawing a knife. The padroni, already Americanized Italians, held a superior position. As they seemed to assist in the integration of their compatriots, who by the time of their arrival often hardly spoke English, they were tolerated and even supported by the American officials. They employed the newcomers on commission, loaned cash or transferred money through their own banking system back to Italy.

By adding special charges, they themselves profited handsomely, while driving their exploited victims into an increasing dependency. Under this system only very few Italians became sufficiently acquainted with the customs of their new surroundings, a reason for the emergence of little Italys, which outsiders regarded suspiciously. Women in particular had strong deficiencies in education and professional training.[8]

The first entry in Chadwick's *Memoirs* of 1913 reads thus:

> This year has started off by deserving its reputation as a thirteener. First of all, I received 'The Padrone' back from the Metropolitan Opera House, N.Y. with a polite letter stating that 'It was not found suitable for production at their establishment.' Beyond the conventional editorial phrase, no explanation was given. I found out however, through H. E. Krehbiel, that Gatti-Casazza disliked the book because it was a drama of life among the humble Italians, and probably too true to life, and that it had been played through by Morgenstern, one of the accompanists who reported unfavorably on it. So there is the consideration that American composers get from the leading American opera house!

Chadwick's opera project went no further at that time. As far as he was concerned, it was a failure. Still in 1911 Chadwick's *Suite Symphonique* had been awarded the prize as "Best Orchestral Work by an American Composer" in the annual contest of the National Federation of Musical Clubs. He was a highly renowned American composer. What was wrong with *The Padrone*?

Whereas the American operas hitherto performed at the Met, like Frederick Converse's *Pipe of Desire* (1910) and Horatio Parker's *Mona* (1912), had treated fairy tales and historic saga, Chadwick had chosen a contemporary, realistic subject. But—was it representable on stage? The immigrant question evoked controversial emotions. Exposed by the philanthropism of the emerging progressive movement, problems of poverty, child labor, settlement, or education were acknowledged and discussed at length. However, prejudices, suspicion and anxieties fostered general resentments towards the foreigners and foreign cultures considered inferior to the Anglo-Saxon mainstream culture. Social criticism appeared in journals and periodicals, and the muckraking penetrated even novels like Upton Sinclair's *The Jungle* (1906). Thus while a story like that of *The Padrone* might have been reported in a journal or even a novel, it was not appropriate for a representation at the Metropolitan Opera, with its "millionaire board of directors."[9] Grand opera was expected to create illusions and to fill the "desires for higher degrees of entertainment" of a mainly upper class audience.[10] It should present great singers and dancers, elaborate costumes and scenery, and should convey an aura of the marvelous, even the spectacular. *The Padrone* with its realistic lower class story neither contributed to the picturesque nor to the illusionary image

of a spotlessly prospering America. Revealing a shady side of everyday life, *The Padrone* was not politically correct—at least not in the realm of opera.

Beyond the choice of America as operatic subject, Puccini's *Fanciulla* and *The Padrone* are connected by the similarity of role construction: both female protagonists are depicted as strikingly strong. Minnie, recalling the pioneer woman stereotype, is transferred into the context of a glorified dream about Going West. She owns a saloon, works on her own in rough, male-dominated surroundings, uses poker and rhetoric as her weapons, but also knows well how to handle a revolver (act 1, rehearsal no. 65). By contrast, Minnie is a girl, pure, without vice and never before having been in love.[11] Beyond this she is driven by moral energy: she teaches the miners to read the Bible, she stores their money, and she inspires Dick Johnson with the impulse to repent and start a new life. Furthermore her intervention prevents his execution, thus affirming the values of civilization over an archaic and brutal code of the West. Similar female qualities are described in the article "Woman and her Possibilities" published in the *New England Conservatory Magazine* in 1899: "We lift man from the moral degradation of strong drink, tobacco, profanity and obscenity. The future will be ruled . . . by intellectual strength and noble moral energy."[12] Despite the implausibility of her role, Minnie embodies exactly this moral energy. Unlike her, the tambourine girl Marietta is a realistic figure. At the end of the nineteenth century Italian immigrant children still worked for the padroni as street acrobats or musicians.[13] Marietta exemplifies without exaggeration the hopelessness of female immigrants. Trying to escape the dependency on the "white slaver," who owns her dress but not her heart, her only refuge is marriage. In spite of the public prejudice against unmarried immigrant girls, assumed to be "'loose' and sexually immoral,"[14] she develops sufficient moral power to resist Catani. Like Minnie she deliberately decides whom to marry, defending at least a bit of freedom for herself. With Marietta's affective attack on Catani, Chadwick follows the operatic tradition of *Tosca, Cavalleria Rusticana,* or *I Pagliacci*, but also recalls one of the common contemporary prejudices about Italians in America. Lacking in education and civil instruction, which could have taught her more subtle means, Marietta's attempt to defend her right to self fulfillment is condemned to fail. Thus she remains a victim of her class, her ethnicity and gender restrictions.

We know that Chadwick was fond of operas like *Cavalleria Rusticana* or *Pagliacci.* He loved Italy, which he had visited in 1905-06, and he had many Italian friends, including several singers. He must have been conscious of the immigrant problem because Boston had one of the largest Italian communities in the United States. That he reflected on contemporary changes of female behavior is revealed by a remark on the aria "Kommt ein schlanker Bursch gegangen" from Weber's *Freischütz:* "Such guileless femininity ought not to be exposed to the public ear in these days of the Tango, slit skirts and suffragettes" (*Memoirs*, June 3, 1913). One of the main issues facing the New England Conservatory from its opening had been

the professional training of women. In the first year after its foundation in 1867, two thirds (588 out of 719) of the students enrolled at the school were women.[15] A major argument for the development of American institutions declared that proper education in America would make the customary trip to Europe, for a woman "the high road to perdition," superfluous.[16] "Since it is the women who are the main conservators of music in the United States," the woman question was picked up in wide-circulation periodicals like the *Musical Courier*.[17] Even women's political rights were discussed in the conservatory magazine. Among the student activities was a pseudo-election for the U.S. president in 1900, with the participation of both men and women.[18]

The public debate about changing role models focused on women's education, particularly higher education as the central issue. It is extremely improbable that Chadwick as a conservatory director was unaware of the arguments. Some of the ideas had already entered the realm of the arts. On the operatic stage Gustave Charpentier's *Louise* (1900) recently had seized on the questions of gender construction, social surrounding and urbanity. *Louise*, played for the first time in the United States in 1908, was soon labeled as "socialism in music."[19] The portrayal of a Parisian working girl, who chooses to live in free love and thereby free herself from social conventions embodied by the famous Mary Garden, who herself represented a new type of self-made woman, brought the successful piece into the discussion about changing role models.[20] Subsequently one New York critic wished for a composer who "was to set himself to put into music the life of the Tenderloin and its seductive temptation for the poor working girl."[21]

Louise, Marietta, and Minnie are connected by the wish for self-determination, which guides their action. Mental and physical self-fulfillment and self-determination were the main ideals of the contemporary New Woman movement: the publicly discussed topics included bicycle riding, dress codes, and smoking as well as political rights and education. How controversial the reactions were demonstrates the paradoxical fact that the librettist of Parker's 'Mona,' Brian Hooker, explicitly insisted that his protagonist had nothing to do with this modern type of womanhood: "I wrote *Mona* to express the idea that I had long desired to express—that woman derives her strength from her womanliness and not from usurping the functions that belong to man."[22]

A later opera contest confirms how decisive extra-musical aspects could be. In 1913 *Musical America* announced another competition, organized by the National Federation of Musical Clubs, representing women sponsoring music. The rules prescribed that the "libretto . . must be worthy [of] the sponsorship of The National Federation of Musical Clubs. Stories of Questionable Morality," like *Thaïs* or *Cavalleria Rusticana*, would not be admitted to the contest.[23] Marietta would have lost again.

Carl Engel, writing about Chadwick in 1924, referred to *Louise* again when he noted,

> . . . operatic conditions in America did not encourage Mr. Chadwick to develop the dramatic side of his musical gifts. Allowing for one or two failures to start with, he might have ended up by writing an opera as successful and steeped in local color as Charpentier's 'Louise.' It is, then, belated rather than improper advice to suggest that American composers—other things being equal—look around for Louise's American cousin. She is here, somewhere. And when discovered, she may turn out a better stage figure than were Azara, Azora, Zenobia, Natoma, Mona, Cleopatra, Shanewis—and all the rest of those exotic princesses and dusky maidens on whom American composers in the past have pinned their operatic hopes. [24]

The Padrone was never staged in the composer's lifetime.[25] Chadwick finished the full score in 1913 and obviously closed the file for himself. We are left to imagine what the development of American opera would have looked like had *The Padrone* been presented at the Metropolitan Opera.

Notes

1. For both the American premiere and the Covent Garden premiere on 29 May 1911 the opera, though sung in Italian, was presented with the English title. Also the piano-vocal score, edited by Ricordi in London as soon as 1910, used the English title. The text itself was bilingual, with an English translation of the text underneath the Italian version. For further details concerning the history of the versions, see Annie J. Randall and Rosalind Gray Davis. *Puccini and The Girl: History and Reception of La fanciulla del West* (forthcoming 2003).

2. *New York Times*, 10 December 1910.

3. *Musical America* 13 (17 December 1910): 5.

4. Quoted in Lise-Lone Marker, *David Belasco. Naturalism in the American Theater* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1975), 146.

5. *Musical America* 13 (17 December 1910): 5.

6. *New York Times*, 10 December 1910 [Clippings Metropolitan Opera Archive].

7. George W. Chadwick's *Memoirs* rely on his own daybooks, notes and letters. Chadwick himself compiled the memoirs as a gift for his two sons. They are still in the possession of the family.

8. I. W. Howerth, "Are the Italians a Dangerous Class?" and Jane Addams, "Hull House and its Neighbors," in Lydio F. Tomasi, *The Italian in America: The Progressive View, 1891-1914*, (New York: Center for Migration Studies 1972), 135-158, 80-81. The Howerth article originally appeared in *Charities*, a weekly journal devoted to social work, in 1894. The Addams also appeared in *Charities*, 1904.

9. *Musical America* 11 (30 April 1910): 1.

10. Ibid.

11. Lesley Ferries, "The Golden Girl," in *The New Woman and Her Sisters. Feminism and Theatre 1850-1914*, ed. Viv Gardner and Susan Rutherford (London: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1992), 37-55.

12. Nellie R. Van Ness, "Woman and her Possibilities," in *New England Conservatory Magazine* 5 (1899): 120.

13. Maldwyn A. Jones, *American Immigration* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), 164. Street organs were still very common in Boston; *Musical America* (17 December 1898): 6 shows "organ grinders" and tambourine dancers in a caricature on a new Boston law on the tuning of street organs.

14. Kathie Friedman-Kasaba, *Memories of Migration: Gender, Ethnicity and Work in the Lives of Jewish and Italian Women in New York, 1870-1924* (New York: State University of New York Press, 1996), 138f.

15. Nancy B. Reich, "Women and the Music Conservatory," in *Aflame with Music: 100 Years of Music at the University of Melbourne*, ed. Brenton Broadstock (Parkville, Victoria: Center for Studies in Australian Music, University of Melbourne, 1996), 433.

16. Quoted in Bruce McPherson and James Klein, *Measure by Measure: A History of New England Conservatory from 1867* (Boston: The Trustees of NEC, 1995), 35.

17. *Musical Courier* 42 (20 March 1901): 21.

18. *New England Conservatory Magazine* 7 (1900): 42-44.

19. *Musical Courier* 41 (19 December, 1900): 4. *Louise* was premiered 3 January 1908 at the Manhattan Opera. Already in 1909 it was being staged in Boston.

20. Susan Rutherford, "The Voices of Freedom: Images of the Prima Donna," in *The New Woman*, 108-109.

21. Theatre Collection, Harvard University: clippings, folder *Louise New York*.

22. *Musical America* 14 (3 June 1911): 35.

23. *Musical America* 18 (17 May 1913): 1.

24. *Musical Quarterly* 10 (1924): 447f.

25. In 1997 the opera was staged for the first time as an Opera School production at New England Conservatory. It was performed in a concert version by the Waterbury Symphony Orchestra in 1995.