Introduction

Today there seem to be few composers as central to the popular operatic repertory as Puccini. A perennial favourite of audiences the world over, his most enduring works are staples of opera companies from San Francisco to Sydney. Puccini is, to put it bluntly, a safe bet: at a time when adventurous productions of new works pose considerable financial risks for state-subsidised theatres, even a very run-of-the-mill production of *La bohème*, for instance, can be relied upon to bring in the mainstream operatic audience and, in the process, balance the books. Puccini also represents to a perhaps unrivalled extent the very essence of Italian opera, at least as it is popularly imagined: tuneful, passionate and emotionally direct. At first glance, then, there would seem to be no composer less problematic than Puccini.

A closer inspection of the reception of this intriguing figure's music, however, reveals a far more complex situation. While Puccini's audiences surely still view him as the Italian opera composer *par excellence*, his reputation among today's critics and academics is – to say the least – mixed. A long-held cultural distrust of overt, comprehensible artistic sensuality seems to relegate Puccini to the second-class carriage of music history. Puccini, one might speculate, is too popular, too unchallenging, too conservative to win the respect that mainstream modernism has long enjoyed. Joseph Kerman's notorious jibe – that *Tosca* is a 'shabby little shocker' – can stand as emblematic of the hostility that Puccini's operas can provoke.[1]

None of this would have surprised the composer, however, for he always polarised opinion. In the words of early-twentieth-century conductor and critic Vittorio Gui, Puccini was 'the most beloved and most despised' of composers,[2] while the modernist critic Guido M. Gatti noted in 1927 that 'there has perhaps been no example, in the history of Italian music of the last fifty years, of an œuvre that has

provoked as much praise and as much hostility as that of Giacomo Puccini; that has had idolisers and detractors in such equal measure, all of them impassioned and resolute'.[3] Indeed, Puccini's status was anything but assured in his own time. He was, of course, a famous and popular figure, enjoying a degree of international superstardom possibly hitherto unfamiliar to any composer in the history of Western music. Initially, however, this was precisely the problem with Puccini: for critics at the turn of the twentieth century, the question of the composer's Italianness – versus his 'international-ness' – was a matter of fraught debate. The arguments raged with a vehemence that today seems almost unbelievable: his music was simultaneously held up as a symbol of cultural strength and derided as a manifestation of decadence. The sharp divide between critics who viewed his works as 'a constant sigh of pure, uncorrupted, unadulterated Italianness',[4] and those who castigated them as 'the collaboration of two impotents'[5] mirrored wider ideological rifts in a society increasingly beset with dissatisfaction and disunity. Responses to score and libretto were at times almost drowned out, as Puccini became caught up in a crossfire of polemics concerning the contested question of what it really meant to be Italian. The first aspect of the Puccini problem thus becomes clear: how could he be secured as a fundamentally Italian composer, and what was at stake in this process?

This problem lay at the heart of a broader crisis of national identity that gripped Italy at the turn of the twentieth century. The nation, although politically unified, remained culturally divided, and the debates surrounding Puccini's operas illustrate the existence of many different, competing visions of national identity. Furthermore, there was a widely shared belief in turn-of-the-century Italy that the nation was in a period of social and moral decline, and the arts could not remain aloof from such concerns. Music critics of all political persuasions shared similar anxieties about the state of contemporary Italian society; where they diverged was in the contradictory solutions that they proposed. Puccini's music and persona were presented as both the antidote to and the embodiment of the degeneration widely felt to be afflicting contemporary Italy.

That a composer should fall victim to such politicisation was unsurprising, for opera had long been a vehicle in Italy for the dissemination of nationalist messages to a wide audience. Verdi was, of course, the most prominent among the politically active Italian opera composers, although his reputation as the 'bard of Italian nationalism' has come under some scrutiny in recent years, as we shall see shortly. Puccini, on the other hand, has repeatedly been presented by recent commentators as apolitical, both personally and musically.[6] He certainly had few aspirations to emulate Verdi's political activity, though he undoubtedly craved his musical prestige, and there are few references to current affairs in his published correspondence, at least until the First World War. Yet as the leading exponent of the Italian art form most closely linked to the national self-image, Puccini and politics became inextricably intertwined. Critics of Puccini's own time pointed again and again to the connections that they perceived between his operas and developments in contemporary society: the works thus became political – and involved in the nation-building process – irrespective of their composer's own degree of personal commitment.

This politicisation responded to a wide variety of musical concerns that can be provisionally unified in the notion of anxiety. First, the time of the premières of some of Puccini's most lasting works was also the time when the full force of Wagner's operatic reforms was felt in Italy. The insecurity of the critics in the face of the German is telling: as the debates discussed in chapter 2 show, the reception of *La bohème*, for instance, was significantly coloured by concerns as to whether a Teutonic notion of compositional organicism was compatible with the fabric of Puccini's scores, and whether Puccini's style had developed since *Manon Lescaut*. The superficial concern of the critics was obvious: was Puccini as adept or modern a composer as Wagner? However, underpinning this question was a more intensely troubling anxiety: to what extent was a crucial ingredient of Italian opera, its more modular yoking together of memorable arias for star singers, compatible with the modernity of the (supposedly) artistically unified *Musikdrama*? The second aspect of the Puccini problem thus

emerged: to what extent was Puccini's Italianness reconcilable with an equally vital notion of modernity?

Faced with this challenge, Puccini's critics initially responded with a whole host of interesting arguments designed to address the first aspect of the problem – how to underwrite the composer's Italianness. Questions of gender, for instance, became intimately connected to the nationalising discourses that surrounded Puccini, as his supporters attempted to portray him as the ideal Italian male. This endeavour and the motivations underpinning it are crucial themes running throughout this book, for the notion of manliness was intrinsic to the pan-European *fin-de-siècle* imperialist mentality. For a new nation struggling to define itself, questions of gender and the cultivation of suitably 'masculine' behaviour were particularly necessary and urgent. However, as will become apparent, the most extreme anti-Puccini rhetoric also hinged upon images of gender, inverting the manly metaphors employed by Puccini's admirers. Considerations of gender led in turn to discussions of class, as contemporary intellectuals opposed Puccini's music as the embodiment of the vulgar, 'feminised' bourgeois culture represented by Prime Minister Giolitti's *Italietta*. Carducci, for example, argued that the rise of the bourgeoisie after 1860 'completed the emasculation of Italy'.[7] Puccini's status as 'the mouthpiece of middle-class sentiment', as one of his obituarists would later put it,[8] was far from unproblematic.

These controversies reached their high-water mark in a fascinating, savage study that will serve as the centrepiece of this book – Fausto Torrefranca's *Giacomo Puccini e l'opera internazionale*, written in 1910 and published in 1912. In order to belittle the composer and his music, Torrefranca charged him with 'effeminacy', which had a number of related connotations: sickness, weakness, intellectual incapacity and lack of originality. If we delve into wider contemporary discourse we can see that these tropes were also attached to other 'outsider' groups, most notably homosexuals, foreigners and Jews. As Puccini was the leading exponent of an art so intimately linked to the national identity, such labels were profoundly troubling. Puccini was here being quite deliberately marginalised: one of the critic's concerns was

precisely the extent to which Puccini's operas were international but not Italian. And while Torrefranca's book may nowadays seem a crazed one-off attack, it is more accurately viewed as a culmination and synthesis of arguments that had already been expressed about Puccini's works during the 1890s and 1900s. As one might deduce from the title of the book, such concerns about internationalism and its political and aesthetic implications had reached a decisive point.

Surprisingly, however, Puccini's critical fortunes after Torrefranca's attack are much more difficult to assess. The 1910s brought *La fanciulla del West*, *La rondine* and *Il trittico*, all of which were premièred abroad, and all of which – with the exception of *Gianni Schicchi* (the third panel of the *Triptych*) – were largely disappointments. Ironically, Puccini's musical style had probably never been more self-consciously – if problematically – modern and adventurous, particularly in *Fanciulla*, but the continuing concern about the composer's internationalism increasingly had to be reconciled with his considerable fame abroad. The view that Puccini's music represented a debasement and cheapening of 'pure' Italian values had long been fermenting in the critical dialogue surrounding the composer, and it would come to form an important part of his reception from 1910 onwards. But increasingly this first aspect of the Puccini problem was displaced by its second dimension: what price this Italianness if it came at the cost of Puccini's modernity? Or, looked at in another way, what if Puccini's international success and eventual historical greatness were to come at the expense of a contemporary sense of *italianità*?

In other words, the Puccini problem became a problem of progress and reaction, of modernity and tradition. As with the issue of the composer's Italianness, this reflected broader aspects of the cultural moment: fears of a profound crisis of modernity – prompted by the threats posed at the turn of the twentieth century by urbanisation, industrialisation and technology – were widespread, and they came to be filtered through criticism of Puccini's music. At a crucial moment of self-definition in Italian history, coinciding with a pan-European period of radical upheaval across the arts, Puccini became caught between those who strenuously sought to defend the old order and

those who sought radical cultural regeneration. Indeed, the two perhaps structurally incompatible dialogues – how to be Italian and how to be modern – were inextricably linked, and would be negotiated and renegotiated throughout Puccini's career. They come to their head in the responses to *Turandot*; by this stage, Puccini's status inside and outside Italy was fairly secure, but this time his music provoked critical responses from those conservative commentators worried by the comparative adventurousness of the score and a seeming retreat from 'Italian' emotion.

Puccini's career was thus marked by popular success and critical doubt; in the years since his death, these motifs have remained central to his musical and musicological reputation. Indeed, while the first aspect of the Puccini problem – the composer's national identity – has receded somewhat, the second – his modernity – has continued to cripple his reception history. The composer's popularity has only added to the problem: crowd-pleasing Italian operas were not valued particularly highly by the modernism that is typically supposed to have ruled the musicological academy for much of the later twentieth century. As the boundaries between popularity and artistic achievement have blurred, however, scholarly attitudes towards Italian opera have changed. By the 1980s Verdi's music had begun to gain critical respectability, but this process did not achieve as much for Puccini. For some time his works remained objects of contempt, and even when he was not openly derided, he was often conspicuous by his absence, failing to merit more than a cursory mention in many supposedly 'comprehensive' studies of twentieth-century music.[9]

The radical transformation of the musicological discipline in recent years, however, has altered this situation: Puccini's suitability for scholarly treatment is no longer in doubt, as has been demonstrated by the publication of several new critical biographies (including the first 'Master Musicians' study devoted to the composer[10]), a Puccini research guide,[11] a critical catalogue of his works,[12] Puccini-focused journals such as *Studi pucciniani* (the first issue of which included a bibliography comprising some 1,500 items on the composer[13]), and articles approaching his life

and works from a variety of different perspectives. The more pluralistic approach taken by many current musicologists means that they are untroubled by previously vexing issues such as Puccini's almost unsurpassed ability to straddle the divide between art and entertainment. However, although Puccini's popularity may no longer be an overt problem for musicologists, to say that one can now respectably study Puccini is not to say that he is now valued particularly highly.

Unlike several of the recent studies of Puccini's life and works, this book has not been conceived as a revisionist history seeking primarily to legitimise Puccini's place in the canon. It concerns itself not so much with the aesthetic worth of Puccini's music *per se* (however that might be defined) as with the ideologies that shaped the many divergent responses to it in Puccini's own time. However, it does so from the basic premise that rather than being dismissed as an insignificant throwback to the nineteenth century, Puccini deserves recognition as a profoundly modern figure: he raises provocative questions about how, precisely, we should define the modern in music. Puccini was indisputably one of the key cultural players of his age, both in Italy and abroad, and the influence of his music and the repercussions of the debates that it prompted were widely felt both in Europe and across the Atlantic. Although this book deals primarily with the Italian reception of Puccini's works, aesthetic debates elsewhere are also considered in some detail, because foreign influences had a profound impact upon Italian thought and culture of this era, and because Puccini was an unashamedly international figure, ever eagerly responsive to the most modern of foreign trends.

This book is both the first in-depth investigation of the critical reception of Puccini's operas and the first serious attempt to contextualise Puccini within his political, aesthetic and intellectual milieu. The sources I have examined in writing this book include monographs, musicological journals, popular music reviews, daily newspapers, and magazines devoted not only to music, but to arts and culture in general. Appendix 1 gives further information about these publications: places and dates of publication, periodicity, circulation and important contributors. In certain cases background information

is also provided on the newspaper or periodical's particular political or musical stance. Appendix 2 provides biographical details about the principal critics and writers – as well as singers, artists, theorists, politicians and members of Puccini's circle – mentioned in the book, where these are traceable and, in the case of those writing under assumed names, identifiable. Unfortunately – yet inevitably – some critics remain elusive.

The findings presented in this book open our eyes to the different but equally valid possibilities offered by 'high-', 'middle-' and 'low-brow' publications as historical documents. Debates about Puccini's contribution to the health of the nation permeated all levels of review, and I seek to highlight the important but all too often overlooked role played by popular journalism in communicating ideas of nationhood to a wide audience. Even the most impressionistic of reviews – and there were many, for the development of what we might term 'musicology' came late to Italy – have their uses. Critics were often reiterating long-standing clichés, but the subtle transformation of such rhetorical tropes in each new era can be extremely illuminating to the historian.

Although this study is broadly chronologically ordered, it is not a linear life-and-works study, and makes no pretence at comprehensiveness. My aim has not been to produce an exhaustive catalogue of everything written about Puccini in his own time, for such a study would be unrealistic in scope and limited in value. Rather than chronicling Puccini's critical fortunes, individual chapters concentrate on core themes that emerge from the reception documents in order to illuminate specific areas of Italian *fin-de-siècle* debate. Each opera thus becomes a lens through which to consider a particular facet of the contemporary Italian nation-building process, and Puccini's role in that process. However, thematic continuity between chapters with different perspectives results from the emergence of recurring rhetorical themes during the course of Puccini's career. These included debates surrounding the succession to Verdi, the question of whether true art could flourish in the absence of political struggle, Italian responses to the rise of modernism, and the perceived 'death'

of opera. Organicism, progress and sincerity (or, more commonly, their antonyms) were further topics that emerged powerfully and repeatedly from the Puccini reviews; all were related to wider philosophical concerns about progress and decline. Critics' quests for coherence and unity in contemporary Italian music had resonance for their aspirations for the nation.

In chapter 1, I explore tensions in Italian society around the turn of the twentieth century that prompted the politicisation of Puccini's works, and examine the inflated terms in which Puccini was lionised as a 'national composer'. Subsequent chapters then reveal how the Puccini myth established at the beginning of his career began to crumble. Chapters 2 to 4 examine the reception of *La bohème*, *Tosca* and *Madama Butterfly*, operas which, despite being adopted swiftly into the performing canon, prompted mixed responses at their first performances. All three works provoked the expression of profound insecurities about the future of Italian music and the nature of opera criticism itself. Chapter 2 focuses upon the idea of progress, with regard both to music (specifically *La bohème*) and to music criticism, while in chapter 3 the theme of insincerity and its worrying nationalist implications are explored in the context of *Tosca*. Chapter 4 provides new perspectives on the ill-fated première of *Madama Butterfly* by highlighting a current of press criticism focusing upon the supposedly superficial aspects of Puccini's opera – a dialogue in which the work was criticised for being too international and too feminine.

The notion of Puccini as a 'feminised' composer introduced in the context of *Madama Butterfly* emerges more vehemently still in the following chapter. Providing a sharp counterbalance to the hagiography presented in chapter 1, chapter 5 takes as its focus Torrefranca's *Giacomo Puccini e l'opera internazionale*, contextualising the book alongside contemporary fears about the feminisation of Italian culture, and considering the implications for Puccini's status as national composer of the rise of an increasingly aggressive, proto-Fascistic Italian nationalism in the lead-up to the First World War. Chapter 6 focuses upon the reception of Puccini's works of the 1910s: Puccini's commitment to continuing the Italian operatic tradition was

questioned repeatedly in these years. *La fanciulla del West* (1910) was seen as a botched experiment in being modern that pleased nobody, failed to fulfil the criteria for a genuinely 'Italian' opera and was widely regarded as representing a 'crisis' in Puccini's career. *La rondine* (1917) was seen as a lightweight quasi-operetta, condemned as a hybrid work and even an 'enemy opera' in a time of conflict. Finally, just as Puccini's status as national composer seemed to be in profound danger, *Gianni Schicchi* (1918) was hailed as the ray of light Italy needed as it emerged from the First World War. This chapter also discusses a second literary assault on Puccini, this time by his fellow composer Ildebrando Pizzetti, and a political demonstration against him and his music by Marinetti's Futurists.

Puccini died unexpectedly in 1924, three weeks before his sixty-sixth birthday. The tributes paid to him by his obituarists were grandiose – his status as national hero seemingly beyond dispute – and the première of *Turandot* took on the aura of a highly charged memorial service, marking the passing not merely of a composer but of an entire tradition. Yet although the opera was hailed as a triumph by Ricordi, critical responses were in fact mixed, often verging on the hostile, with few critics apparently genuinely believing *Turandot* to be the monument to Puccini for which the nation had so desperately longed. In chapter 7, I focus in detail upon the press's adverse response to the opera's eponymous heroine, widely regarded as a sterile machine woman symbolising what reviewers interpreted as Puccini's attempt to turn his back on 'Italian' sentiment. This chapter also grapples with the complex, ambivalent reception of Puccini's music in Fascist Italy, considers how the challenges posed by modernism were confronted within an Italian context and posits *Turandot* as a work that engages in a reflexive dialogue about the merits of the old and the new. At this point we seem at a very distant remove from the Italy of the *fin de siècle*, politically, socially and aesthetically. However, this book reveals surprising points of continuity in the ways in which Italians invented and reinvented their collective identity between the Risorgimento and the Fascist era. Puccini's music was fundamental to this process.