

PART I

Formative Influences

CHAPTER I

Forefathers and Teachers

Alexandra Wilson

Lucca, the small Tuscan city where Puccini was born, is as unspoiled now as it was during his childhood, its honey-coloured Renaissance architecture encircled by well-preserved defensive walls. The central hub of the city is the Piazza San Martino, where tourists now sip cocktails and coffees at pavement cafés as the locals conduct their evening *passeggiata*. And dominating the square is the Cattedrale di San Martino, a fine Romanesque and Gothic cathedral whose foundation dates back to the eleventh century, though it was substantially rebuilt in the fourteenth. It is home to many celebrated artworks by painters of the Italian Renaissance including Ghirlandaio and Tintoretto. Many years later it was here, in this cultural treasure-box, that for over a century the Puccini men plied their trade.

Puccini's father, Michele (1813–64), was *maestro di cappella* (organist and musical director) at Lucca's cathedral until his premature death at the age of fifty. Before Michele, in a continuous ancestral line, the *maestri di cappella* had been his own father Domenico (1772–1815), before him Antonio (1747–1832), and before him the original Giacomo (1712–81), also known as Jacopo. All had been steeped in ecclesiastical music, their compositions ranging from small-scale works for daily services to full-scale Mass settings (some of it harking back stylistically to plainchant, even as late as the early nineteenth century).¹ Directing the choir and playing the organ were other key components of the job. Each followed closely in his father's footsteps. After the first Giacomo pursued musical studies at the Accademia Filarmonica in Bologna, his son Antonio followed suit, studying with the same teacher who had taught his father. Domenico, too, trained in Bologna, though he subsequently made the more adventurous step of travelling to distant Naples to study with Giovanni Paisiello.² Domenico's son, Michele, would also study in both cities.

¹ Baragwanath, *The Solfeggio Tradition*, p. 43.

² S. Puccini, 'The Puccini Family', pp. 6–7.

These relatives must have been rather abstract historical figures as far as Giacomo Puccini was concerned. His great-great-grandfather Giacomo and great-grandfather Antonio were, naturally enough, long dead, but he also never knew his grandfather. Domenico died in 1815 (reputedly after eating a sorbet poisoned by political rivals), predeceasing his own father Antonio and more than forty years before young Giacomo's birth.³ Furthermore, Giacomo would barely even have known or remembered his own father, Michele, who died in 1864 when the boy was only five years old. Giacomo and his younger brother Domenico Michele (known as Michele), who bore the names of their celebrated musical ancestors, grew up in a female-dominated household with their mother, Albina, and six surviving sisters (a seventh, Temi, had died in infancy in 1854, before Giacomo was born). These female relatives are discussed by Helen M. Greenwald in Chapter 3 of this book, and we shall meet Puccini's brother again in Ellen Lockhart's chapter on the composer's transatlantic travels (Chapter 8).

Despite his lack of direct contact with his forefathers, Puccini must nevertheless have felt their legacy powerfully. A funerary oration about his father, given by the veteran opera composer Giovanni Pacini, made it clear that it was assumed Michele's young son would step into his father's shoes as soon as he was of an appropriate age.⁴ This was an expectation that persisted at both the community and the domestic level. Puccini's mother, Albina, was certainly determined that her elder son should continue the glorious, and thus far unbroken, family line.⁵ How often in his life Puccini would have the hopes of others thrust upon him: first, to continue the Lucchese church music tradition; second (an even greater burden), to continue the glorious line of Italian operatic composition, being expected, as he was from an early stage in his career, to step into the shoes of Verdi.

In due course, Puccini's patrons and supporters would exploit the idea of the Puccini 'dynasty' in order to mythologise the composer. (Indeed, it is a legend that has persisted into recent times, Michele Girardi opening his study of the composer's works with the declaration that 'The impressive musical lineage of the Puccini family is surpassed only by that of the Bachs.'⁶) Ferdinando Fontana, Puccini's first librettist, pronounced in 1884 that the composer was '172 years old . . . since he is in fact simply the latest flowering of a branch of musicians planted in Lucca in 1712'.⁷ Further back, the family hailed from Celle, a small village in the mountains around the Serchio valley.⁸ The

³ Ibid., p. 7. ⁴ Budden, *Puccini*, p. 1. ⁵ S. Puccini, 'The Puccini Family', p. 11.

⁶ Girardi, *Puccini*, p. 1. ⁷ Fontana, 'Giacomo Puccini', p. 381.

⁸ S. Puccini, 'The Puccini Family', p. 3.

Puccini's deep roots in the heart of Tuscany were also something that could be exploited for propagandistic, nationalistic purposes. Fontana and other patrons and journalists who played a role in introducing the composer to the world were writing at a moment when Italy was finding its feet as a newly unified nation and using the Tuscan language and Tuscan artistic and intellectual heritage to forge a standard 'Italian' identity.

For centuries, then, the Puccinis had been rooted in one small area, as was of course typical for the vast majority of people at the time. Domenico and Michele's sojourns in Naples must have seemed highly adventurous, while Giacomo's twentieth-century travels to North and South America would have been unfathomable to his forebears. For all his globe-trotting, however, Puccini would remain wedded to Tuscany, always regarding it as the home to which he would return. Throughout his childhood, most of his formative experiences took place within a very small geographical orbit: the Puccini home in the Via del Poggio was only a few paces away from the cathedral, around which much of the young Puccini's life revolved. As a successful young composer, he purchased a property at Torre del Lago – a hamlet some thirty miles away, near the coast – that would become vital to him as a country retreat. In 1894 he established a bohemian club in a hut near his writing retreat on the banks of Lake Massaciuccoli, at the foot of the Apuan Alps, in order to lark about and drink with artistic friends, including a number of painters affiliated with the Macchiaioli school. The Tuscan milieu in which Puccini grew up and that remained so important to him is discussed further by Axel Körner in Chapter 4.

The youngest musical Puccini would, of course, take his talents in a very different direction from his ancestors, who had been occupied first and foremost with ecclesiastical music – though his grandfather Domenico wrote four operas in both *seria* and *buffa* genres.⁹ Nobody would have foreseen Giacomo pursuing such a different course. He was, naturally, given the same apprenticeship as his forefathers, singing as a chorister and studying the keyboard in preparation for becoming a church organist. After his father's death, keyboard tuition was provided by his maternal uncle, Fortunato Magi: there was, then, musical talent on both sides of Puccini's family. Magi initially stepped in to keep Michele's position at the cathedral warm until the young Giacomo was old enough to assume the role, though it soon became obvious that this was an unlikely prospect.¹⁰ More formal tuition, both academic and musical, was provided at the cathedral seminary. At this point, Puccini's gifts were not immediately

⁹ Ibid., p. 7. ¹⁰ Girardi, *Puccini*, p. 3.

apparent. He was reportedly a restless pupil who struggled to settle to academic work and was frequently expelled and readmitted, while Magi was unimpressed by his progress at the keyboard and even recommended to Albina that her son give up studying music.¹¹ It is fortunate for the world of opera that these words went unheeded.

Subsequently, Puccini transferred his studies to the Istituto Pacini (founded by the eponymous composer in 1842), where he honed his keyboard skills sufficiently to become an occasional church organist and café pianist.¹² At the Istituto, Puccini received lessons in composition from the teacher of harmony and counterpoint, Carlo Angeloni, a congenial teacher if a rather unadventurous composer.¹³ Angeloni had himself studied with Michele Puccini, as had the Institute's violin teacher, Augusto Michelangeli, with whom Giacomo also had lessons.¹⁴ Thus, in a neat twist, Puccini received a form of paternal tuition by proxy. He flourished under the guidance of his new teacher and, steadily, his compositions began to attract notice in local competitions.

Puccini would break the established family tradition of studying in Bologna and Naples, instead taking up a place at the Conservatorio in Milan. For a young composer keen not to be hemmed in by a life that revolved around the church, it was vital to head north. Although symphonic music was extremely late to reach the Italian peninsula compared with other European countries (Italy heard its first Beethoven symphony only in 1873), an interest in it was, by now, growing steadily in cosmopolitan Milan and Turin. By the final decades of the nineteenth century, Italian conservatoires, at least in the north, were allotting an increasing portion of the curriculum to training young composers in techniques of writing for orchestra. Italy's longstanding policy of cultural 'splendid isolation' was starting to collapse, to the consternation of some older figures in the musical establishment.

But the new generation of Italian composers found these foreign stimuli more intriguing than threatening. Puccini was keen to hone his skills in instrumental writing, something that would bear fruit later: the scoring of his operas is sophisticated by comparison even with that of Verdi. Furthermore, Puccini was by this time demonstrating a level of progress and ambition that suggested he would be a suitable candidate for the prestigious environment of the Conservatorio and benefit from the wider cultural opportunities on offer in sophisticated Milan. Puccini's mother, Albina, unfortunately failed to secure the funding her son would need from the city council in Lucca. (One wonders if there was already a suspicion

¹¹ S. Puccini, 'The Puccini Family', pp. 10–11. ¹² Budden, *Puccini*, pp. 5–6. ¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 6.

¹⁴ Centro studi Giacomo Puccini, 'Istituto musicale'.

that the boy was not going, after all, to provide the useful service to the community that had been expected of him.) She was, however, able to secure a modest award for her son from a highly prestigious source: Queen Margherita herself, a benefactor to musicians whose families found themselves in financial distress.¹⁵

The bulk of Puccini's funding, however, came from his great-uncle, the notary Dr Nicolao Cerù, on the understanding that the young man would pay the funds back from his first earnings.¹⁶ Cerù was just one of several more distant male relatives upon whom Albina could call to step into the breach and provide resources and contacts for the young fatherless boy. Another, Carlo Biagini, a family cousin by marriage, agreed to offer an official address for Puccini on his arrival in Milan, though in practice Giacomo was keen to seek his independence and moved to a number of different lodgings in the city.¹⁷ This was not a family that regarded music as a frivolous career for a young man: Puccini was supported and encouraged, and the family's investment in him ultimately paid the highest dividends.

Arriving in Milan as a student, Puccini found himself in one of the most elegant, cosmopolitan, forward-looking cities in the Italian peninsula. The young composer was able to immerse himself in a rich musical life (as discussed in greater detail by Ditlev Rindom in Chapter 5), attending operas at La Scala and the Teatro Dal Verme as well as a variety of orchestral concerts, the sum of which provided him with cultural experiences he could never have hoped to find in sleepy Lucca. One senses his excitement as he reports to his sister in a letter of 9 December 1880 that he has seen, for the first time, *Carmen* ('bellissima opera').¹⁸ Giacomo's brother Michele would later also study at the Conservatorio but failed to graduate with a diploma.¹⁹ He was destined to be far less successful than his famous brother and would end up dying young and on hard times.

Among Puccini's formative influences at the Milan Conservatorio was Antonio Bazzini, a virtuoso violinist turned composer. Though first and foremost an instrumental composer himself, interested in chamber and symphonic music, Bazzini was an ardent Wagner enthusiast, passing on this interest to his students and counter-balancing the virulent anti-Wagner feeling that Puccini would, in due course, encounter from other important musical patrons, most notably the publisher Giulio Ricordi.²⁰ And Bazzini had written an opera, *La Turanda*, which was performed at La

¹⁵ Budden, *Puccini*, p. 16. ¹⁶ Girardi, *Puccini*, p. 5. ¹⁷ Budden, *Puccini*, pp. 16, 24.

¹⁸ Marchetti (ed.), *Puccini com'era*, p. 19. ¹⁹ S. Puccini, 'The Puccini Family', p. 29.

²⁰ Budden, *Puccini*, pp. 21–2.

Scala in 1867, whose subject would ultimately receive a far more successful setting by his famous pupil almost six decades later. Thus, although Bazzini is now a name that has largely been consigned to the footnotes of music history, he was able to foster in the student Puccini an interest in some of the key developments that were beginning to be embraced in musical circles in late-nineteenth-century Italy.

When Bazzini was promoted to become the Conservatorio's director in 1881, following the death of the previous incumbent, Puccini was transferred to the composition class of Amilcare Ponchielli. Though less worldly and curious about foreign musical influences than Bazzini, and indeed suspicious of the traces of such influences he detected in the young Puccini's work, Ponchielli was a useful teacher because of his immersion in the contemporary operatic establishment.²¹ At the time when he began teaching, he had recently enjoyed great success with his opera *La Gioconda*. This work was indebted to earlier Italian operatic traditions and more conservative than Puccini's mature works. Yet Puccini must have learned a lot from his teacher's crowd-pleasing opera in terms of how to establish a dramatic atmosphere through music, handle an operatic crowd, create a prayer scene, use offstage musical voices, and achieve an effective musical *coup de théâtre*. And, as Julian Budden notes, Ponchielli's influence upon Puccini's style can be seen in 'the ability to evoke an ambience with a few instrumental brush-strokes; the occasional integration of a recurring motif within the melody of a closed number; and, in particular, the winding-up of an important scene by means of an orchestral peroration based on its most memorable theme'.²² Ponchielli was also a useful figure in helping Puccini to establish a network of contacts among the north-Italian musical community. It was he who introduced Puccini to the aforementioned writer and poet, Ferdinando Fontana.²³

At the Conservatorio, where a rounded musical education was provided, Puccini also had the opportunity to study the history and philosophy of music with Amintore Galli, a prominent music critic of the day (both for newspapers such as *Il secolo* and for specialist music periodicals such as the *Rivista musicale Italiana*) and advisor to the publishing house Sonzogno.²⁴ As a specialist in both French opera and the works and aesthetics of Wagner, Galli would certainly have encouraged Puccini to broaden his musical horizons and to explore these repertoires, from detailed study of scores and by watching live performances. The young composer would integrate traces of both styles into his embryonic musical language, setting him on the

²¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 26–7. ²² Budden, *Puccini*, p. 27. ²³ S. Puccini, 'The Puccini Family', p. 15.

²⁴ Girardi, *Puccini*, p. 6.

pathway to developing a distinctive musical style that was more ‘international’ than that of his predecessors or even his *verismo* contemporaries.

A further early patron was Franco Faccio, director of the Società Orchestrale at La Scala from 1880, who pioneered the performance of orchestral music in the city; he admired Puccini’s *Capriccio sinfonico*, conducting its first performance with the Conservatorio orchestra in 1883 and reviving it in Turin twice the following year.²⁵ This brought Puccini to the attention of Filippo Filippi, one of the most important Italian music critics of the day and a former editor of the Ricordi music journal, the *Gazzetta musicale di Milano*. Filippi was an admirer of German symphonic music and also of German ways of listening to music. In the 1870s he had advocated for serious musical appreciation, writing:

We should educate the public, make them patient and diligent, aware of the fact that music is an art, and that a taste for it and particularly an understanding of it develops only with patience . . . I don’t hold the view that music is art for the masses, for the people. No, my good sirs: music is written for educated people, for those people who, when listening to a music drama, know and appreciate its entire historical and aesthetic discourse.²⁶

Such radical ideas went against the grain in the Italian context, where audiences were often encouraged to exhibit a purely emotional response to music.

Filippi discerned something of quality in Puccini’s embryonic style, devoting space in the newspaper *La perseveranza* to his student composition *Capriccio sinfonico*. He wrote, ‘Puccini has decidedly a musical temperament, especially as a symphonist, having unity of style and personality of character.’²⁷ Thus pursuing his musical studies in Milan, at the heart of the Italian musical establishment, provided Puccini with numerous advantages that would launch his career. Of course, it was not only eminent professors and their contacts within the professional musical world who had an impact upon Puccini’s youthful music development. Vital, too, were the friends with whom he shared lodgings, meals, camaraderie, and conversations about the latest international musical trends. Some of these would remain friends; others would become bitter rivals. It is to this circle of contemporaries who were thrust into competition with each other that we now turn.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 9. ²⁶ Filippi, *Musica e musicisti*, p. 222.

²⁷ Cited in Dry, *Giacomo Puccini* (Bodley Head, 1906), p. 17.

CHAPTER 2

*Contemporaries and Competitors**Richard Erkens*

When Puccini completed his studies at the Milan Conservatorio in July 1883, he faced a crucial decision. He might easily return to his hometown Lucca, accepting, as his ancestors had done for more than a hundred years, the position of *maestro di cappella* (cathedral organist), reserved for him since his father's early death. Yet he decided otherwise and stayed in the prosperous capital of Lombardy, seeking to establish himself as an opera composer. That implied, apart from an uncertain professional future, facing three main challenges: to catch the attention of either of the leading music publishers, Ricordi or Sonzogno; to break the dominance of the seventy-year-old Giuseppe Verdi; and to compete with other promising composers of his generation. All three were closely related, largely because of the unprecedented power that Ricordi, and latterly Sonzogno, had gained in the Italian opera market (about which we shall read more in Christy Thomas Adams's chapter on publishers, Chapter 15). Not only did impresarios, contracted to produce each opera house's season, become increasingly dependent on them, but the publishers also organised the music's global distribution and tightly controlled its marketing.¹

Since the première of *Aida* in 1871, and Verdi's temporary withdrawal from composing new operas, the question of who might inherit his mantle had become more and more urgent, for the Italian musical establishment in general and for the financial fortunes of the Ricordi firm in particular. But it was Ricordi's market competitor Casa Sonzogno, a relative neophyte in music publishing, that offered young composers a new opportunity in 1883 by announcing a composition prize for a one-act opera by a debut composer. By entering the competition, Puccini started his career as an opera composer in rivalry – and was initially wholly unsuccessful.

From today's perspective it seems incomprehensible that *Le Villi*, if not a prize-winner, failed even to receive an honourable mention by the jury.

¹ Baia Curioni, *Mercanti dell'opera*; Toelle, 'Opera as Business?'

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(The prize was won jointly by two now forgotten works, Guglielmo Zuelli's *La fata del nord* and Luigi Mapelli's *Anna e Gualberto*.) Already, Puccini's writing exhibited a distinctive, almost experimental character, which united the aesthetic impulses of the 1870s: a reduction of dramatic and arioso scenes; the expansion of instrumental passages related to the dramatic action (*intermezzi sinfonici*); and the integration of ballet into the plot (*opera ballo*). Thanks to the private initiative of its librettist, Ferdinando Fontana, and some influential Milanese opera sponsors, the opera was nevertheless produced at the Teatro Dal Verme in May 1884. Many contemporaries, including Puccini's fellow student Pietro Mascagni, who played the double bass on this occasion, noticed that Puccini crafted innovative orchestral writing without denying the importance of melody, so central to the Italian operatic tradition.²

At this point Ricordi demonstrated his greater guile and foresight compared to Sonzogno. As well as outbidding him for the rights to the winners of Sonzogno's own competition, on the basis of *Le Villi*'s stunningly successful première Giulio Ricordi immediately contracted the 26-year-old Puccini, commissioning him to revise and expand it and to compose a new full-length opera. Puccini's first challenge of getting the attention of a publisher was mastered, ironically as a result of the rivalry of the two mighty publishing houses.

It would take almost ten years before Puccini would be accepted as a successful composer in his own right who could legitimately be regarded as successor to Verdi. Only a few days separated the Turin première of *Manon Lescaut* (1 February 1893) and the first performance of Verdi's *Falstaff* at the Teatro alla Scala in Milan (9 February). While the former turned out to be Puccini's international breakthrough, Verdi's swansong was a long-awaited theatrical event, accompanied by inexhaustible media attention. In the shadow of these celebrations for a figure accorded a unique role in the process of Italian nation-building, members of the younger generation began to work on their own public image.

A literal representation of this process can be seen in photographs of Puccini, Mascagni, and Alberto Franchetti together in Milan for the Verdi première. The photo series, distributed as postcards, as autograph cards, and in the press, shows the three composers posing for the camera, gathered around a piano, looking kindly at each other, or studying a music score (Figure 2.1). These images, often used to illustrate the so-called *giovane scuola italiana*, do not show the representatives of a homogeneous group of

² Baragwanath, *The Italian Traditions*.