

PUCCINI IN CONTEXT

Exploring the many dimensions of Giacomo Puccini's historical legacy and significance, this book provides new perspectives on the life and work of a much-loved opera composer and demonstrates how political concerns shape the way we approach and perform his works in the present day. Accessibly written chapters by a range of international experts explore Puccini's interests, attitudes, and relationships, and examine how his works reflected the cultural, political, and social zeitgeist of their time. The essays first map Puccini's personal and professional networks, the regions and cities that meant so much to him, and his travels for both work and leisure. They go on to probe the composer's attitudes towards contemporary developments in music, literature, film, and drama and investigate his collaboration with librettists, publishers, singers, and conductors. The book closes with chapters on Puccini's compositional legacy, performance history, relationship with popular culture, and place in the international operatic canon.

ALEXANDRA WILSON is Professor of Music and Cultural History at Oxford Brookes University. Her books include *The Puccini Problem* (2007), *Opera in the Jazz Age* (2019), and *Puccini's La bohème* (2021).

COMPOSERS IN CONTEXT

Understanding and appreciation of musical works is greatly enhanced by knowledge of the context within which their composers lived and worked. Each of these volumes focuses on an individual composer, offering lively, accessible and concise essays by leading scholars on the many contexts – professional, political, intellectual, social and cultural – that have a bearing on his or her work. Biographical and musical influences, performance and publishing history and the creative afterlife of each composer's work are also addressed, providing readers with a multi-faceted view of how the composers' output and careers were shaped by the world around them.

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PUCCINI IN CONTEXT

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Preface

Giacomo Puccini (1858–1924) lived in fascinating times. His career spanned a period of rapid stylistic change in music history, and although he may not have embraced musical modernism to the same extent as some contemporaries, he was a more adventurous composer than most of the history books are willing to admit. The musical innovations of the period were something he could not possibly ignore, and his works were inevitably measured against them. Puccini also bore the expectations of a nation upon his shoulders as he faced demands to continue a long and very distinctive national musical tradition, whilst also being expected to move with the times.

Some of the chapters in this book examine Puccini's compositions against this backdrop of artistic flux. Others explore his relationship with the cultural, political, and social zeitgeist of his time, both in Italy and further afield. We learn that Puccini flirted both with the most advanced intellectual currents of his time and with popular culture, embracing the high and the low in ways that were sometimes regarded as strange in his own time. The book also aims to provide new perspectives on Puccini the man, examining his hobbies, interests, relationships, and attitudes. The modern communication systems that were established during his lifetime meant that he was well-travelled, and his network of friends, lovers, and professional associates spread across several continents. Puccini's relationships with fellow composers, singers, and conductors were fascinating and far from uncomplicated.

The drastic social and political change that took place during Puccini's lifetime makes him a particularly interesting case study for a book about a composer 'in context'. His career coincided with seismic events in global politics, including World War I and the rise of fascism. The Unification of Italy had taken place when Puccini was a child, but the drive to 'make an Italian nation' was still ongoing decades later, and Puccini himself was expected to contribute to the cultural nation-building process. The new

nation was not a happily united entity during the period spanned by Puccini's career: the middle classes may have been riding the crest of a wave, but the workers were rebelling. Even though Puccini regarded himself as an apolitical composer, seeking none of the activism his predecessor Verdi had embraced, he could not avoid becoming embroiled in the political debates of his time, particularly those surrounding national identity. Yet Puccini was in many respects a supremely international figure – something that was regarded as problematic during his lifetime but that needs considering afresh in our globalised world.

This book concerns itself both with Puccini's contemporary milieu and with what we might call his 'afterlife': his posthumous reception, changing reputation, and influence on other artistic figures. His works have been simultaneously wildly popular and critically maligned, their impact on other musicians extensive. And while aspects of his works that seemed problematic in his lifetime (their internationalism; their straddling of high and low culture) now seem anodyne, other aspects that were uncontroversial at the turn of the twentieth century – notably the representation of race and gender – can no longer be taken at face value.

This book – which can be read cover-to-cover or dipped into – is divided into eight parts, each consisting of thematically grouped chapters. Though these progress in loosely chronological fashion, some range widely across the period from Puccini's lifetime to the present. 'Formative Influences' examines Puccini's relationship with significant figures who mattered to him personally (family, friends, lovers), as well as with his teachers and the other young composers of his generation. 'Puccini's Places' delves into the political history of Tuscany, a region to which the composer remained attached throughout his life, and takes us to Milan – where Puccini studied, where his publishers were based, and where some of his works would be premiered. Subsequent chapters examine Puccini's travels, for work and pleasure: to central Europe, northern and western Europe, and further afield.

Chapters in 'Influences and Interests' discuss Puccini's response to contemporary stylistic trends in music, literature, and drama. The authors also consider his complicated relationship with early film and his personal enthusiasm for technology of all types. We turn in the next part of the book to the creative process that first brought Puccini's works to the stage. These chapters consider the composer's collaboration with librettists and publishers, the ways in which the operas were first staged, and the singers and conductors who interpreted his works.

The next sequence of chapters is devoted to the ways in which the composer's image and reputation were shaped, including via the new medium of photojournalism. We learn how critics chastised Puccini and biographers memorialised him. Subsequent chapters examine how we might consider Puccini's works through a political lens, ranging widely across religion, party politics, and questions of gender and race. Some of the authors consider how the debates of the composer's own time shaped aspects of his works; others are more concerned with how political concerns influence our reading of his operas today and how they ought to be performed.

The final two parts of the book are focused upon what we might call the 'afterlife' of Puccini's works. We learn about Puccini performance in the modern age, including the process of editing his works and later twentieth-century interpretations of his music on audio and video recordings as well as on stage. The book concludes with a consideration of Puccini's legacy and posthumous reputation. The authors consider his influence upon composers, both 'serious' and 'popular', and the way in which his music has been incorporated into a wide range of works of popular culture, including films and pop songs. The final chapter considers Puccini's long-term reputation and his place in the international performing canon a century after his death.

The authors who have contributed to this collection of essays all have expertise in Puccini and his works but come from different disciplines, backgrounds, and parts of the world. Some are musicologists; others historians or literary scholars. Some have been writing about Puccini for decades; others are at the beginning of their research careers. Among their number are people who have worked in opera houses and been involved in the process of bringing opera to the stage or illuminating it for audiences. Something all the contributors have in common, however, is that they were writing their chapters in the years 2020–22, against the backdrop of circumstances that were challenging for everyone. I am extremely grateful to the authors for their hard work on this project at such a difficult time. My thanks must also go to Kate Brett, Commissioning Editor at Cambridge University Press, and to Abi Sears, Production Assistant, for their guidance and efficiency in bringing this book to publication, as well as all CUP staff involved in the book's production. I hope that it will provide interesting insights into Puccini's life, works, and cultural environment, both for the Puccini aficionado and for the reader who is new to his operas.