



La bohème is an opera in four acts, composed by Giacomo Puccini between 1893 and 1895 to an Italian libretto by Luigi Illica and Giuseppe Giacosa, based on *Scènes de la vie de bohème* (1851) by Henri Murger.

The story is set in Paris around 1830 and shows the Bohemian lifestyle (known in French as "*la bohème*") of a poor seamstress and her artist friends.

The world premiere of *La bohème* was in Turin on 1 February 1896 at the Teatro Regio, conducted by the 28-year-old Arturo Toscanini. Since then, *La bohème* has become part of the standard Italian opera repertory and is one of the most frequently performed operas worldwide.

Origin of the story

As credited on its title page, the libretto of *La bohème* is based on Henri Murger's 1851 novel, *Scènes de la vie de bohème*, a collection of vignettes portraying young bohemians living in Paris in the 1840s. Although often called a novel, the book has no unified plot. Like the 1849 play drawn from the book by Murger and Théodore Barrière, the opera's libretto focuses on the relationship between Rodolfo and Mimì, ending with her death. Also like the play, the libretto combines two characters from the novel, Mimì and Francine, into the single character of Mimì.

Much of the libretto is original. Major sections of acts two and three are the librettists' invention, with only a few passing references to incidents and characters in Murger's book. Most of acts one and four follow the book, piecing together episodes from various chapters. The final scenes in acts one and four—the scenes with Rodolfo and Mimì—resemble both the play and the book.

Performance history and reception

The world première performance of *La bohème* took place in Turin on 1 February 1896 at the Teatro Regio and was conducted by the young Arturo Toscanini. The role of Rodolfo was played by Evan Gorga with Cesira Ferrani as Mimi, but Gorga was unable to accommodate the high tessitura and the music had to be transposed down for him. The initial response of the audience at the first performance was subdued and critical responses were polarized. Despite this varied introductory response, the opera quickly became popular throughout Italy and productions were soon mounted by a number of opera companies to much critical acclaim.

"La bohème" is a poignant opera by Giacomo Puccini that tells the tragic love story of a young poet, Rodolfo, and a seamstress, Mimì, set against the backdrop of 19th-century Paris.

Overview

"La bohème" is set in the Latin Quarter of Paris during the 1830s and follows a group of young bohemians living in poverty. The opera explores themes of love, friendship, and the harsh realities of life faced by artists. The story is based on Henri Murger's novel "Scènes de la vie de bohème," which depicts the lives of struggling artists in Paris.

Act I

The opera opens in a garret shared by Rodolfo, a poet, and his friends Marcello, a painter, Colline, a philosopher, and Schaunard, a musician. On a cold Christmas Eve they are struggling to keep warm and decide to celebrate the holiday. Rodolfo meets Mimì, a beautiful seamstress, when she knocks on their door seeking a light for her candle. They are instantly attracted to each other, and their love blossoms amidst the backdrop of their impoverished lives.

Act II

The scene shifts to Café Momus, where the bohemians celebrate Christmas Eve. Rodolfo introduces Mimì to his friends, but the mood darkens when Musetta, Marcello's former lover, arrives with her wealthy suitor, Alcindoro. As the evening progresses, it becomes clear that Mimì is gravely ill, and Rodolfo feels guilty for not being able to provide for her health needs. Their love is tested by the realities of their situation.

Act III

In a tavern outside Paris, tensions rise as Marcello and Musetta argue, reflecting the struggles of their relationship. Mimì, now seriously ill, is brought to Rodolfo by Musetta, who hopes to help. The couple reminisces about their happier times, but the weight of Mimì's illness looms over them. The act ends with a sense of impending tragedy as Mimì's health deteriorates.

Act IV

The final act takes place back in the garret, where Rodolfo and Marcello are now alone, reflecting on their lost loves. Musetta returns with Mimì, who is close to death. Despite their efforts to care for her, Mimì succumbs to her illness, leaving Rodolfo heartbroken. The opera concludes with a poignant reminder of the fleeting nature of love and life.

Conclusion

"La bohème" remains one of the most beloved operas, celebrated for its beautiful music and emotional depth. The story of Rodolfo and Mimì captures the essence of youthful passions and the harsh realities of life making it a timeless classic in the operatic repertoire.



PROGRAMME for u3a Opera Appreciation Group Fri. 21st Nov. 2025

We will be watching two different recordings of this opera so that we can compare and contrast the very different versions.

Version One. Acts 1 and 2. Recorded at the Metropolitan Opera in New York in 1982 under the baton of James Levine. The production was by Franco Zeffirelli who also designed the sets and costumes.

Cast of main Characters:

Rodolfo	Jose Carreras	Mimi	Teresa Stratas
Marcello	Richard Stilwell	Colline	James Morris
Schaunard	Allan Monk	Musetta	Renata Scotta

For this production Zeffirelli designed sets and costumes of extraordinary realism and beauty. Perhaps even more astonishing is Zeffirelli's direction that mirrors the music so closely in the action taking place on stage.

Version Two. Acts 3 and 4. This is a "Film" version produced at the Filmstadt Wien, Rosenhugel Studios in Vienna. The producer was by the Academy Award Nominated director Robert Dornhelm.

	<p>Cast of Main Characters:</p> <table><tbody><tr><td>Rodolfo</td><td>Rolando Villazón</td></tr><tr><td>Mimi</td><td>Anna Netrebko</td></tr><tr><td>Marcello</td><td>George van Bergen</td></tr><tr><td>Colline</td><td>Vitaly Kovalyov</td></tr><tr><td>Schaunard</td><td>Adrian Erod</td></tr><tr><td>Musetta</td><td>Nicole Cabel</td></tr></tbody></table>	Rodolfo	Rolando Villazón	Mimi	Anna Netrebko	Marcello	George van Bergen	Colline	Vitaly Kovalyov	Schaunard	Adrian Erod	Musetta	Nicole Cabel
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This filmed version provides the opportunity to include scenes of Paris appropriate to the plot of the opera which are not usually possible in a traditional stage production.

[The performances that we plan to watch last just over two hours]