

PROGRAM NOTES

With Valentine's Day around the corner, love and romance are on most of our minds. This weekend's concerts span nearly a century of glorious excerpts ranging from the early romanticism of Rossini's *William Tell* to the post-romanticism of late Puccini, whose *La Rondine* edged nearly two decades into the twentieth century. Ms. Tamarkin has chosen examples from Italian, French, Russian and Viennese opera in a multi-national salute to the Valentine season. "The theme of this concert is unabashedly romantic and sentimental," she says. "Our program includes some of the most beautiful operatic music ever written for both voice and orchestra. We hope that the listener will be transported by its power and grandeur."

Overture to *William Tell* (1829) Gioachino Rossini (1792-1868)

Rossini's overture to *William Tell* might well be the most popular classical work in the entire literature – well, at least its concluding portion. Thanks to the old radio and television show, "The Lone Ranger," whose theme music adapted the overture's final segment, American children have for generations identified Rossini's music with the excitement of wild west heroism. The *William Tell* Overture actually has a fascinating history that considerably predates both radio and television.

Rossini based his opera on a drama by the German playwright Friedrich Schiller. The play's main themes are the inherent balance and grandeur of nature, and man's intrusion upon that natural order via his political and economic concerns. Rossini's *William Tell* made superb use of both ideas. The opera is unique for a number of reasons. He was, of course, Italian, and established his reputation in Italy's opera houses. In 1823, he moved to Paris, eventually settling there permanently. *Tell* was his fourth production for the prestigious Paris Opéra, but it is Rossini's sole opera to fully embrace the French five-act grand opera, complete with ballet. Most important, it proved to be his swan song. After *Tell's* successful 1829 premiere, Rossini

retired from the operatic stage, enjoying the fruits of his considerable reputation for another 39 years.

William Tell is indisputably Rossini's finest achievement in the realm of the operatic overture, an area in which he excelled. Unlike his sprightly Italian overtures, the one for *Tell* does not adhere to modified sonata form, nor does it derive its momentum from a signature "Rossini crescendo." This one is divided into four segments, each with its own character. Five solo cellos open quietly, evoking the lovely Swiss countryside and painting an aural picture of calm before storm. The famous storm ensues, a masterly musical canvas of nature's dramatic summertime wrath. Next is a pastoral, featuring one of the most coveted English horn solos in the orchestral literature. Finally, the overture concludes with the martial and patriotic galloping section so well-known from the television show. Curiously enough, Rossini's signature music, this irresistible finale, began as a quick-step he composed in July 1822 for a Viennese military band! One wonders what Rossini would have thought of his music's extraordinary extended life.

“Che gelida manina” from *La Bohème* (1896)

“Mi chiamano Mimi” from *La Bohème*

Giacomo Puccini (1858-1924)

La Bohème is perhaps the most sentimental of operas. Set in Paris in 1830, it derives from an 1848 novel called *Scenes from the Bohemian Life*, tracing the stormy love lives of two young couples.

Rodolfo and Mimi meet in Act I on a bitterly cold Christmas Eve. They live in the same Parisian building, but have never crossed paths. Rodolfo's fellow lodgers have gone out to dine

in a café; he remains behind, assuring them he'll join them later. Descending the stairs from her attic room, Mimi drops her key just outside Rodolfo's garret, just as her candle goes out. She knocks on his door to ask for help. They are searching for the key in the darkness on the landing, when his hand touches hers. "Che gelida manina!" ["What a frozen little hand!"] he exclaims. "Let me warm it back to life." He sails into the aria telling her of his dreams and hopes as a poet.

She responds by relating to him a capsule version of her life story, beginning with a shy introduction: my name is Lucia, but they call me Mimi ("Mi chiamano Mimi"). She tells him of her work as a seamstress, embroidering flowers that remind her of nature and the countryside. Rodolfo and Mimi are, of course, enchanted with each other and, as can only happen in opera, they emerge from the two arias united in a duet and head over heels in love.

Intermezzo from *Cavalleria Rusticana* (1890)

Pietro Mascagni (1863-1945)

A one-act opera presents special challenges to the composer. Action must be compressed to the utmost, and scene changes effected with great efficiency. Particularly for a tragedy, any pause between scenes can defuse dramatic tension, which in turn compromises the effectiveness of the entire work. In *Cavalleria rusticana* ["Rustic chivalry"], Pietro Mascagni sought to avoid this problem by composing a four-minute *intermezzo* to separate his two scenes. *Cavalleria* is an example of *verismo*, a turn-of-the-century school of Italian opera that corresponds to French literary realism. Violence, melodrama and theatricality are hallmarks of the style. Mascagni's opera was one of the first examples of this new movement. The plot concerns a jilted Sicilian peasant girl. Her jealousy prompts a duel, leading to the tragic and bloody ending. The action

takes place outside an Italian church on Easter morning, throwing further emphasis on the violence of the action.

Mascagni's hymn-like Intermezzo is intended to evoke the peace of the Church, which represents a haven from the turbulent emotions that surge within the characters outside the holy edifice. Mascagni actually uses the Catholic hymn, *Regina coeli*, earlier in the opera, and bases the Intermezzo on the same melody, harmonizing it in a chorale-like style. Although it is only 48 measures long, the music captures the passion and intensity of the tale. Mascagni also compresses into these brief moments the soaring melodies that make Italian opera so memorable.

**“Che il bel songo di Doretta” from *La Rondine* (1917)
Giacomo Puccini**

Rondine (pronounced ROHN-dee-neh) means “swallow” in Italian: the bird known for its migrations. In Puccini’s opera, the swallow of the title is Magda, a kept woman who falls in love with a younger man and leaves her wealthy lover for him. Ultimately, she fails to make a permanent life with her true love because she cannot escape the reality of her tarnished past. The opera stands apart from the better-known Puccini blockbusters: *Tosca*, *La Bohème*, *Madama Butterfly*. A project of the World War I years, it originated as a commission from a Viennese theater, and was conceived in two versions: one German, one Italian. Despite its lyric beauties, it has never captured the popular imagination to the degree that Puccini’s other masterpieces have.

The aria ‘*Che il bel songo di Doretta*’ is certainly *La Rondine*’s most famous excerpt, in part because of its use in the soundtrack to the 1985 Merchant-Ivory film “A Room With A View.” In the opera, it is sung in the opening scene. Magda entertains Prunier, a poet, and several

ladies for tea. Prunier expounds on the virtues of romantic love, telling the story of Doretta, a girl who opted for love instead of a king's riches. Magda, caught up in the tale, improvises a second verse, in which the girl falls in love with a poor student. She is unknowingly foretelling her own sad future. Puccini's expressive melody captures her wistful longing.

**Polonaise from *Eugene Onegin* (1879)
Peter Ilich Tchaikovsky (1840-1893)**

If one only knows two excerpts from Tchaikovsky's greatest opera, *Eugene Onegin*, they are the unforgettable Waltz at the beginning of Act II, and the Polonaise that opens Act III. Waltzes and polonaises are both eastern European dances that enjoyed considerable popularity in 19th-century Russia. After the success of Tchaikovsky's opera, these two examples from *Onegin* became favorites in the concert hall as well as on the stage.

Polonaises are generally stately, with a pronounced and repeated rhythm in steady triple time. This one has flair, with large orchestral gestures and the kind of catchy tune that one hums for weeks after a concert. In Tchaikovsky's opera, the *Polonaise* takes place during an elegant ball in the home of a wealthy Russian noble. We hear an exuberant fanfare summoning the guests to the dance. The brasses continue to punctuate Tchaikovsky's *Polonaise* with crisp dotted rhythms; woodwinds and cellos offer contrast in the gentler middle section.

Overture to *Die Fledermaus* (1874)
Csárdás* from *Die Fledermaus
Johann Strauss II (1825-1899)

The family name of Strauss is inextricably linked with the culture of nineteenth-century Vienna, and more specifically with the immense popularity of the waltz. The older Strauss, Johann Sr. (1804-1849), was a conductor and violinist as well as a composer. By 1829 he had founded his own orchestra, providing a convenient vehicle for promoting his own compositions.

All three of Johann Sr.'s sons became successful composers, but in Johann II the family genius flowered most brilliantly. By 1844, when he was 19, Johann II was his father's most significant rival, forming his own dance orchestra. After the elder Strauss's death in 1849, Johann II merged the two ensembles. Between 1856 and 1886 he toured widely throughout Europe, also traveling to Russia, England and the United States.

Beginning in 1870, Johann II produced a series of 3-act operettas for Vienna's fashionable Theater an der Wien. He was then at the peak of his career, and many of his finest dances are to be found among these rich vocal scores. Nowhere is his brilliance more evident than in *Die Fledermaus* ["The Bat"], the quintessential Viennese operetta. From the overture's opening champagne-cork flourish, this irresistible masterwork sweeps us up in its riotous good humor, captivating our ears with a veritable cornucopia of scintillating melodies.

Rosalinda, one of two principal female characters, appears mostly in ensembles in *Fledermaus*, but she does have one solo moment in the spotlight, and it is a showstopper. Masquerading as an Hungarian countess at an opulent ball, she sings a dazzling *Csárdás* in order

to persuade the assembled guests of her Eastern European authenticity; at the same time, Strauss persuades us that he can write fiery Hungarian music with the best of them.

Prelude and Aragonaise from *Carmen*

“Flower Song” from *Carmen*

Intermezzo from *Carmen*

Georges Bizet (1838-1875)

There is a saying among musicians that no one writes better Spanish music than the French. Georges Bizet is surely the premier example in defense of that tenet, and *Carmen* his most compelling proof. The entire opera exudes the vibrant, exotic colors of Spanish and Gypsy culture -- ironically, in adaptation of a French novella by Prosper Mérimée. So captivating are the Spanish numbers within *Carmen* that they have acquired an active life of their own independent of the opera house. Indeed, Bizet's uncanny gift for the perfectly formed miniature led to orchestral adaptations of several vocal numbers within the opera, eventually yielding sufficient material for two orchestral suites.

Ms. Tamarkin has selected three excerpts that sample the Spanish flavor and the rich lyricism of Bizet's score. She opens with the Prelude – the actual prelude to the opera – and Aragonaise, which precedes the opera's last act. Combined as we hear them here, they constitute the opening movement of the Suite No.1 from *Carmen*. The music opens with the “fate” motive, which foreshadows Carmen's violent end. Bizet soon moves to a lively *jota*, a traditional dance with origins in the northern region of Aragon.

The hero Don José sings the “Flower Song” in Act II of the opera. After being released from prison for allowing Carmen’s escape, José has caught up with her at the tavern of Lillas Pastia. When José hears the bugle call summoning him back to his regiment, Carmen taunts him. He reminds her of the flower she tossed him when they first met, and shows her its dried remains, a symbol of his passion and devotion.

Bizet’s Intermezzo is the *entr’acte* before Act III, opening with a lovely duet for flute and harp. The deceptive calm of the music harks back to the simple village world that Don José has abandoned in favor of a life of banditry with Carmen and her cohorts.

“Vogliatemi bene” from *Madama Butterfly* (1904)

Giacomo Puccini

One of Puccini’s most beloved operas, *Madama Butterfly* treads a fine line in terms of political correctness. The plot concerns an American naval officer who seduces a fifteen-year-old Japanese geisha and marries her in a ceremony that she takes seriously but he does not. He then abandons her. She bears him a son, the fruit of their wedding night. When he finally returns three years later, he has an American wife in tow – a “real” wife. Realizing his betrayal, Cio-Cio San, the Butterfly of the title, does the only thing Japanese honor dictates: she takes her own life.

The situation is grim, and damning for the devil-may-care rake Pinkerton. Not only are we dealing with inflammatory cross-cultural issues, but we also have an apparently heartless American man treating a vulnerable Japanese woman – our heroine, no less – abominably.

This is opera, however; and therefore we must suspend reality and the value system of 2012 in favor of a world more than a century earlier. At the beginning of the opera, Pinkerton is clearly infatuated with this teenage Japanese beauty, and she is deeply and truly in love with him. That is the point at which we encounter them in the excerpt that concludes this evening's opera gala.

All the great Puccini operas close the first act with a love duet. "Vogliatemi bene" is the second half of the extended duet between Cio-Cio-San and Pinkerton on their wedding night. The music weaves together several themes, including two iterations of a curse motive that hints at the tragedy to come. The duet culminates in a rapturous reprise of Butterfly's music from her first entrance. For the moment, on this night of bliss, both of them are happy.

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