The Golden Girl of America

Puccini’s *La Fanciulla del West* first premiered on December 1910, at New York City’s Metropolitan Opera. Based on David Belasco’s play *The Girl of the Golden West*, Puccini’s opera is a sweeping adventure and love story during the time of the “Wild West,” a romanticized period some hundred and fifty years ago when cowboys and miners reigned as the kings of the wild frontier and the heart of the United States seemed to be on the West Coast, with the promise of gold and a successful new life. *La Fanciulla* incorporates many Western elements, a first in Italian opera history and therefore an extremely publicized element and important selling point. While the opera was initially met with praise and hailed as an opera that has “every element necessary for a lasting and popular success” (Randall 121) it was soon clear that this opera would not be one of Puccini’s most famous works. Unlike *La Fanciulla del West*, most of Puccini’s works, including *La Boheme* and *Tosca*, are main staples in opera house repertoire. *La Fanciulla del West*, however, is much less produced and is often called “Puccini’s great step backward…taken in a moment when his idea of the world fell to the lowest level possible” (Phillips-Matz 209). Yet, regardless of its outward unpopularity, there are numerous recordings available on vinyl records and compact discs, a much acclaimed recorded version of a live performance of the opera starring Plácido Domingo and Carol Neblett, and an operetta movie version with Nelson Eddy and Jeanette MacDonald in the title roles. Regardless of scathing reviews, there are occasional performances around the world, and all major opera houses,

---

1 Unfortunately, I was unable to procure a copy of this movie for further analysis.
including the Los Angeles Opera and Opera Pacific, have paid homage to this work that honors the Golden West. Knowing the relative unpopularity of this work, why are there still constant reincarnations? What is the relationship between La Fanciulla and America? Belasco’s play essentially is a dream of the romance and adventure that has a place in the vast lands of the United States, a dream that is deeply imbedded in the heart of America. Puccini’s opera, although harshly criticized, embodies the elements of America that the people love. In the opera is the spirit of America as a land of opportunity, and the people are drawn to this. Time after time, La Fanciulla is remembered again, and a new production of the opera is begun; the glory of the American Wild West is alive again in Puccini’s beautiful music. La Fanciulla is the product of the mixture of Italian technique and Western inspiration, the exchange of ideas and beliefs of two completely different cultures. Through the spirit of the opera, the sweeping music, and the visual tribute to the Wild West, La Fanciulla del West appeals to the fundamental nationalist spirit of America.

In modern times, there is an unfortunate stereotype that Italian opera is a difficult form of music, meant only for the ears of older people. This would be a disappointment for all opera composers to hear; in their time, opera was a mainstream form of music, such as rock music is today. Opera was written for middle-class audiences as a form of visual entertainment, meant to delight the ears and eyes while conveying important messages or beliefs. Composers often chose political or social themes for their works, conscious of the effect they would have on society. In deciding to write La Fanciulla del West, Puccini chose a storyline completely different from his other storylines: an adventure of the American Wild West. Having completed Madama Butterfly in 1903, Giacomo Puccini was tired of writing the same kind of convoluted plots, and began searching for fresh material to write a new opera completely different from his past works.
(Osborne 176). On a trip to New York City to watch a performance of his *Manon Lescaut* and *Madama Butterfly* at the Metropolitan Opera, Puccini had the opportunity to see a play by David Belasco, the writer of the story that eventually became known as *Madama Butterfly*. This play was called *The Girl of the Golden West*, and immediately struck the fancy of Puccini. He found “truth and sincerity” in the drama, and saw a heroine who was “naïve and refreshing,” much like his Mimi in *La Bohème* (Puccini 47), but assertive and strong, unlike any of his other heroines. Puccini was also drawn to the idea of the California wilderness, with wide open spaces and the grandeur of nature surrounding the characters (Randall 45). After much deliberation, Puccini came to the conclusion that *The Girl of the Golden West* would be the subject of his next opera. Motivated by his personal visions of California as “the land of opportunity,” he imagined a “magnificent scenario, a clearing in the great Californian forest, with some colossal trees” (Puccini 176). Certain that *La Fanciulla del West* promised to be a second *Bohème*, but “more vigorous, more daring, and on an altogether larger scale” (Puccini 176), Puccini wrote his opera with the California landscape and the dream of the golden west as his inspiration.

*La Fanciulla del West*, from its completion, was destined to be an opening night success, if not for its musical qualities, then for its subject matter alone. When the opera officially premiered in New York in 1910, the Wild West was long ago enough in the past to be called a part of history, but current enough to be called a recent period of time. The Wild West was a time of opportunity for the American people, with the possibility of a lifetime of golden richness at the fingertips of every man. The Wild West, also known as the Golden West, was, above all, a time of hope and adventure. When *La Fanciulla* premiered in New York, the age of industrialization was in full power, and people were slowly turning away from the glory days of the Wild West. The American dream has always been generalized as a concept that allows all
men, regardless of age or social status, the chance to become successful and have a fulfilled life. When the Gold Rush finally ended and the ideal of the Wild West began to die, it seems the American people were loath to relinquish their beliefs and instead held on to threads of that dream. Puccini’s opera came at the time when America was beginning to surrender to the colder power of industrialization, and the Gold Rush was waning down. After hearing that Puccini completed his new opera, the director of the Metropolitan Opera bargained for the rights of premiering the opera at the Metropolitan Opera and succeeded. The publicity campaign centered on the title of the new opera, “La Fanciulla del West.” Literally translated as simply “The Girl of the West,” the publicists decided instead to call it “Puccini’s Girl of the Golden West,” choosing to juxtapose the famous Italian composer’s name with the ideals of the Golden West. The public fell in love at once with the prospect of the revival of their American dream. The Metropolitan Opera spent a massive amount of money and stopped at nothing to promote the premiere of La Fanciulla. The media emphasized the brilliance of the new work, melding America’s Wild West with the exoticism of Europe, yet still remaining a fundamentally Italian opera. America was entranced by this concept, its lingering affection for the Wild West still remaining, and tickets to the premiere were sold out months in advance. David Belasco wrote in an article that La Fanciulla made him proud, for “[he] himself is a Californian and his own father was a forty-niner. The scenes [he] loves so well, all the dear old memories, the pain and passion of long forgotten years, [are] glorified by the art of the greatest living composer, Giacomo Puccini” (Randall 122). For a short while, the essence of the story swept the audience into a frenzy, allowing them to once again relive the days of hope and adventure of the Wild West.

The simple tale is essentially a love story of California, a tale of good overcoming all evil. It appeals to people on a basic level, and the themes of the Gold Rush and the beauty of
California specifically appeal to Americans. The frontiersmen of the 19th century are considered pioneers and heroes, and America has always loved stories of honor and love conquering all obstacles. Part homage to the beauty of the United States, and part a wild adventure story, La Fanciulla successfully brings romance and adventure and honor together into a lyrical masterpiece. Unlike many of Puccini’s previous operas, this story has a happy ending, with the hero and heroine leaving safely in the distance with the promise of a new and fulfilling life. La Fanciulla del West is a story of redemption, of second chances, and it strikes a timeless chord in people. The heroine, Minnie, works at the Polka Saloon in the West during the time of the Gold Rush. An admirable character who maintains her ideals and speaks freely, yet is gentle and humorous, Minnie is loved by all the miners. The hero, Dick Johnson, is also known as the fearsome bandit Ramerrez, who plots to steal the money from the saloon. He sees Minnie in the saloon and they both realize their instant attraction to each other. He eventually abandons his plan to steal gold from the saloon because of his love for Minnie. The sheriff of the town, Jack Rance, is also in love with Minnie, and tries to arrest Johnson on trumped-up charges to reduce competition for her love. However, Minnie defends Johnson’s life with her own, and the miners vote to let their beloved Minnie go free with Johnson. The story ends with Minnie and Johnson going off into the distance with the promise of a new and wonderful life ahead of them (Fanciulla 1-192).

All of Puccini’s orchestral instructions and libretto changes, though he could not have intended it, secure more of a prolonged American interest in La Fanciulla. The libretto differs from the original play in that the libretto has three acts, while the play has four. Act III and IV of the original play were problematic for Puccini, because the material in the act conflicted with his vision of his characters (Weaver 211). Most important to Puccini was the preservation of the
romance element, the essential facet of the story that transforms the initially wicked robber into a loving, hopeful man. However, in the original play, Belasco characterizes Rance as a more sinister being, and Minnie as a more sarcastic, less gentle woman. Puccini combined the two acts of the play into the third act of his opera, making the focus of the last act the chase to capture Johnson, enabling the opera production to have an outdoor scene and do justice to the splendor of California. Puccini wanted a chance to show the beauty of the California wilderness, and kept this in mind when deciding stage directions and props. In a letter to his friend and manager Giulio Ricordi, Puccini specifically asked for “eight or ten horses on the stage” (Puccini 176). Desiring his libretto to have a Western flavor and be as true to his idea of “America” as possible, Puccini also instructed his librettists to incorporate English words like “howdy,” “Wells Fargo Agency,” and “Mister Johnson” throughout the lyrics. “Whisky,” one of Puccini’s favorite English words, frequently appears throughout the opera as the apparent alcoholic beverage of choice. Famous places in California, including the Sierra Nevada Mountains, Monterey, and Sacramento, are also mentioned casually throughout the libretto as if to confirm the accuracy and relevance of the opera. Deciding to write his own ending, Puccini developed the characters’ love for California, cutting out the potential romantic lines exchanged between Minnie and Johnson, choosing to emphasize the deep ties they both have with the West. The final lines of the hero and heroine, “Addio, mia dolce terra! Addio, mia California! Bei monti della Sierra, nevi, addio!!” (Civinini 243), are not declarations of love or revenge, but a farewell to their beloved home, “Goodbye, my sweet countryside! Goodbye, my California! Lovely Sierra Mountains, snows, goodbye!” Puccini wants to clearly emphasize that the California wilderness will always be a part of them, no matter where they go.
The incredibly detailed backdrops and scenery that La Fanciulla provides feed the imagination of America; in watching La Fanciulla, the audience is automatically transported to a time when pollution and crowds were not an issue. Instead, the characters are surrounded by nature, which plays a huge part in their lives. Besides having power in the orchestrations and libretto, Puccini had a very firm vision as to what he desired the stage to look like. According to Randall (56-57), Puccini tripled the number of miners on stage to form a visually impressive male chorus. Not content with only writing the music, Puccini insisted the final scene must be dramatic and “take place outside the Polka [Saloon] in a big wood, and in the background to the right there are paths leading to the mountains” (Randall 56). Obsessed about the need to convey the spaciousness of California, Puccini is controlled by “California-disease” (Puccini 59), and is determined that “it must be in the open air in a large clearing of a forest with colossal trees and with ten or more horses and sixty men!” (Puccini 59). La Fanciulla is an extremely costly production, with a large choral cast directly on the stage and maintenance of live animals for every show. However, the generous visual effects are so stunning that reviewers comment on Puccini’s “extraordinary gift of creating atmosphere” (Randall 119), and from that point, audiences consider La Fanciulla del West synonymous with resplendent scenery.

Musically speaking, Puccini’s newest opera is a mélange of both Italy and America, appealing to the American sense of nationalism with folk songs while feeding the desire for exoticism and adventure with Italian variations. While essentially Italian, the score is also uniquely Western in many aspects, and parts of the music could easily be mistaken for a modern “Spaghetti Western” theme. When Puccini started brainstorming motifs for the opera, he asked his friend Sybil Seligman to find some American music of the 1850’s as well as Native American music (Randall 54), and incorporated the most striking rhythms and melodies into his
Richard Aldrich, a respected music critic, comments that La Fanciulla also seems to have influences of Debussy, with use of the “whole tone scale and harmonies that associate themselves with it,” but nobody could mistake it for a work by Debussy because “there is plenty of personal note in what he has written” (220). This opera also marks the beginning of Puccini’s exploration of leitmotif, which is a type of special theme that appears in the music anytime a specific character appears on stage. The overture is a sweeping, dramatic, trumpet-dominated work, and many pieces, including Ferde Grofe’s “Grand Canyon Suite,” mimic the grandioso sweep of stressed strings and the resounding trumpet fifths combined with the snare drum taps and rolls. The strings provide a passionate melody in the overture, characterized by chromatic scales and tenuto-held notes. The score shows heavy influence of Native American music, with intense syncopated rhythm and harsh note intervals, dissimilar to the common harmonic intervals in Puccini’s other works. Puccini also used a Zuni tribal melody for an aria in La Fanciulla, and many motifs associated with the characters have hints of “Indian” rhythm and tonality (Randall 131). As DiGaetani suggests, Puccini was fascinated by the atmosphere of the California Gold Rush and used American folk songs of the period to add character in the opera (34). Musically, Puccini has brought the essence of both Italy and America together in La Fanciulla.

In the United States, La Fanciulla debuted in other major cities to more tempered success; nonetheless, it was extremely well received. After the initial success of La Fanciulla, popularity died down and reviewers begin to criticize the opera harshly, calling it “too elaborate and too modern in harmonic structure” and “musically far inferior to ‘La Boheme,’ ‘Tosca,’ and ‘Madama Butterfly’” (Randall 112). Although there are many purported causes for La Fanciulla’s unpopularity, the main cause is its digression from the “Puccini style” of opera. With no major arias, the opera relies heavily on the orchestra to carry the melody, which is scattered
throughout the opera and not as smoothly connected as his other works. Another setback is that
the critics, expecting a serious and profound Puccini opera, were taken aback with the action-
filled, humorous *La Fanciulla*. Blinded by their expectations, critics often did not see the humor
in the opera, and were unable to laugh at the slapstick comedy in some scenes. Ironically enough,
*La Fanciulla* is one of Puccini’s most developed and complicated plots, since it is extremely
difficult to incorporate action into a singing-based performance. Not merely a weak love story
where the heroine ends up dying, *La Fanciulla* has to chart the rebirth of a man who was born to
villainy but transforms into a hero because of love. *La Fanciulla* has so many facets that it is
difficult to generalize the spirit of the opera without short-changing an important aspect. At the
time of writing *La Fanciulla del West*, Puccini was very interested in the works of Wagner. He
highly respected Wagner’s character development in his operas, and acknowledgement of that is
present in *La Fanciulla*. In the final scene, Minnie storms in on the miners, galloping on a horse,
ready to save Johnson from death. This is almost identical to Brunhilde, the avenging Valkyrie
with the Viking hat and long golden hair from Wagner’s famous *Ride of the Valkyries*. The
critics, unable to see the humor in this and acknowledge it as the tribute it is, could only say
Puccini was being unoriginal yet again.

Americans have scorned *La Fanciulla*’s presumption of its ability to capture the essence
of an American era, because, after all, what could an Italian know about the true meaning of the
Wild West? Nonetheless, it is ironic to know that the very themes and elements in *La Fanciulla
del West* that are ridiculed are copied a thousand times over in every single Western, including
the popular Spaghetti Westerns. A Spaghetti Western is a Western film most likely directed by
an Italian director, and Ennio Morricone is the famous composer who created the soundtracks for
some of the most famous Spaghetti Westerns, including *The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly.* *La
*Fanciulla* has been called “the first Spaghetti Western,” and Ennio Morricone’s orchestral pieces have clearly been influenced by Puccini’s orchestrations. Since Puccini relied heavily on Native American rhythms and variations of American Folk Songs, Morricone’s themes are also Native American-inspired. Morricone often uses the same build-up of strings in a minor whole-tone scale as Puccini did, tempering the music with a few quiet strokes with snare brushes or percussion before having the trumpets blast a startling motif accentuated by the piercing shrillness of a flute or a piccolo.

In recent times, *La Fanciulla del West* has been recognized for the amazing work that it is. Although audiences may never fully appreciate the genius of Puccini’s work, it seems they have come to accept it with all its idiosyncrasies. Fixated on the fact that this is Puccini’s work about America, it is hard for audiences to do anything but criticize his view of our country. Nonetheless, America is drawn to La Fanciulla time and time again, entranced by its complexity, its campiness, its interpretation of one of the most exciting periods in our history. Four films have been made based on *La Fanciulla*, two of them dating back to the silent film era. There are more than 15 recordings of *La Fanciulla del West*, all sung by the most famous sopranos and tenors of this age. Daily music is influenced by *La Fanciulla*, be it Western themes or Broadway musicals. Andrew Lloyd Webber’s *The Phantom of the Opera*, the extremely successful musical, has apparent influences by *La Fanciulla*. Lloyd Webber’s famous song “Music of the Night” is eerily similar to the climax of Johnson’s first aria to Minnie in Act I, and there have been rumors of the Puccini estate suing Lloyd Webber for plagiarism. Drawn to the romance and adventure of the California Gold Rush, America cannot help but turn to *La Fanciulla* to relive the excitement. Although Puccini may not have been American, his spirit was in the right place, and his genuine enthusiasm for California is clearly felt throughout the work. Whether America can accept it or
not, it seems *La Fanciulla del West* has captured more of the essence of the California Gold Rush than we care to believe.
Works Cited


The Golden Girl of America: An Annotated Bibliography

**Bereson, Ruth. The Operatic State. New York: Routledge, 2002.**

The author argues that opera represents a “physical demonstration” of the political, economic and social status of the states in which the operas were funded and written, almost as a “cultural monument” (Bereson). There are many direct quotations in the work, providing credibility to her argument. The author argues her point, and then provides a letter or a newspaper article to provide evidence. This book focuses on the cultural significance of these operas.


The authors argue that opera is a very complex form of art; not only are they musical works, they also have social and political meanings. The authors provide various reproductions of letters and scores. The Metropolitan Opera Guild has allowed the authors to reproduce photographs that illustrate important events in opera history. This will provide me with a scholarly look at the power and the influence opera had on the social and political events of its time.

**Civinini, Guelfo, and Carlo Zangarini. La Fanciulla del West (Libretto). Hamburg, Germany: Polydor International, 1978.**

This is the original Italian libretto (script) of the opera accompanied by a rough English translation. This will provide insight into the particular aspects of the opera that Puccini especially wanted to be incorporated into the play, and will give me a greater understanding of the story.

**Charlton, David, ed. The Cambridge Companion to Grand Opera. UK: Cambridge UP, 2003.**

David Charlton has combined primary and secondary source articles in this book, giving different opinions and critiques of the opera process. These articles chart the process of producing an opera, from its funding to its eventual performance. The contributors to these books are all musical scholars, and most have written scholarly articles. This work will provide me with various outlooks on the cultural impact of opera.


The author argues that most of Puccini’s operas were a product of the “most dominant political movement in Italy during his childhood: the Risorgimento” (DiGaetani). The author provides reproductions of Puccini’s letters to and from his family, indicating the personal element of the opera writing process. This will provide me with a look at the intricate process a composer must go through to write his opera.

**Fanelli, Jean Grundy. Opera for Everyone. Maryland: Scarecrow Press, 2004.**

Dr. Fanelli has diplomas in composition and piano at the London College of Music and degrees and doctorate at the University of London. She has written numerous scholarly articles. The author provides a historical and social look at many famous operas, discussing why the
composers chose their particular subjects for an opera and the reception with which they were received. The author provides photographs and copies of libretti and scores to support her claims. This book provides a historical context for operas, describing the composers’ historical background and their influences on the types of operas they wrote.

Provides an intellectual yet non-technical point of view of Puccini’s operas. The author breaks down key phrases and analyzes them according to the time period in which they were written. This book provides historical context for the opera, specifically historical music standards and rhythm and melody characteristic of a specific era.

The author puts Puccini’s operas, specifically *La Fanciulla del West*, into perspective by describing world events as the opera is written. This book provides a historical background as to the reactions of audiences and the effect of the opera.

A collection of Puccini’s personal correspondence with family and friends, discussing details and personal thoughts as his famous operas are being written. These letters span his entire career as a composer and are connected with his operas. This collection is in an epistolary format.

Randall is a professor of musicology at Bucknell University, and Davis is an award-winning journalist and an independent scholar (Randall). The authors document the process in which *La Fanciulla del West*, a Puccini opera about the Gold Rush, was written. Historical documents are provided throughout the book and support the claims made by the authors. This book provides an in-depth look at one of the most Western-influenced operas ever written.

A compilation of scholarly articles detailing different aspects of Puccini’s opera-creating process.

A compilation of famous opera librettists’ and composers’ correspondence throughout the opera-writing process. These letters offer a personal and true view of the composing process. This is in an epistolary format.