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RENÉE FLEMING  
VERISMO

CORO E ORCHESTRA SINFONICA DI MILANO  
GIUSEPPE VERDI

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## PUCCINI AND BEYOND

Renée Fleming explores  
music of the *giovane scuola*

In savouring this programme, listeners are sure to fall in love once again with Puccini's *Manon Lescaut*, *Mimi*, *Suor Angelica*, *Magda* and *Liù*. The revelation will be to discover a similar allure in the other heroines Renée Fleming portrays here, representing little-performed operas by Puccini's contemporaries.

The disc's repertoire covers a very concentrated period in opera, from the premiere of *La Wally* (1892) to that of *Turandot* (1926). The output of the major Italian composers of this period was vast, yet so much of it remains sadly forgotten. "I was surprised by the number of operas composed in that period that we aren't familiar with," says Fleming. "There are so many terrific set pieces that aren't heard today, either because the opera's story is dated or because the entire piece doesn't work dramatically in the theatre. But the decades after Verdi's retirement were an amazingly rich period for operatic composition in Italy. Drama and passion are what these pieces are all about."

Italian opera went through an extraordinary transition from Verdi to the *giovane scuola* (literally "young school"). These musicians were responding to a movement toward naturalism that had originated in French literature, notably in the working-class milieus presented by Zola and Maupassant. Italy found its equivalent in Giovanni

Verga, author of the short story *Cavalleria rusticana*.

Mascagni's operatic setting of *Cavalleria* (1890) ushered in the *verismo* style — "verism" being the idea of realism and naturalism in the arts. One heard qualities not associated with Verdi and his predecessors: compressing of melodic lines, avoidance of vocal display, constant aggressiveness and urgency both vocally and orchestrally. The text was characterised by absolute simplicity and directness of address, with the drama presenting a recognisable world of common people.

Dramatically speaking, that original idea of *verismo* didn't last long; one quickly moved beyond the contemporary working class who inhabited *Cavalleria rusticana*, Leoncavallo's *Pagliacci* (1892), and other "pure" *verismo* works sporadically remembered today. Consider just the heroines over the next few decades: noblewomen (*Fedora*, *Gloria*, the nobly born nun *Angelica*), courtesans (*Stephana*, *Magda*), oriental waifs (*Iris*, *Liù*). More predictable perhaps are the Tyrolean village girl *Wally*, the rags-to-riches-to-rags *Manon*, and especially three working women: music-hall performer *Zazà*, seamstress *Mimi* and factory-worker *Conchita*.

Of the composers who gave these heroines vibrant life, the dominant figure of the post-Verdian era was Puccini. *Manon Lescaut* (1893) brought forth for the first time his own profound emotional connection to his female protagonists. In the despair of *Manon's* fourth-act aria (heard here for the first time in Puccini's original manuscript version) she touches the heart as

the hussy of Prévost's novel never could. The characterisation of *Mimi* in *La Bohème* (1896) emerges in both of her arias with a sincerity and naturalness that have contributed significantly to sustaining this opera's ever-fresh appeal. *Magda* in *La rondine* (1917) entrances with romantic nostalgia in the second — and much less familiar — of her two first-act arias, while the second-act quartet, led on this disc by Fleming's *Magda* and *Jonas Kaufmann's Ruggero*, lets listeners wallow in a lovestruck ecstasy unsurpassed by Puccini elsewhere. With *Suor Angelica* (1918), the nun's lament for her dead son shows Puccini blending expansiveness with intimacy to shattering effect. He would do so again in *Turandot* (1926), when *Liù* reveals her love for the unknown prince and then chooses to kill herself rather than reveal his name.

Puccini's ascent to prominence was desperately envied by *Catalani*, who was born in Puccini's own hometown, *Lucca*, and first studied with his younger rival's uncle. The tragic figure among *giovane scuola* composers, *Catalani* was dead before he was forty. He managed to score a success with his final stage work, *La Wally* (1892), known today chiefly for the heroine's first-act aria "Ebben? Neandrò lontana". *Catalani* brought similar fervency and greater expressive variety to *Wally's* third-act monologue, in which the tormented girl reflects on what kissing the hunter *Hagenbach* really meant to her.

Remembered best for *Adriana Lecouvreur*, *Cilea* was hampered by an unconvincing libretto in *Gloria* (1907). More surgingly dramatic by far than either of *Adriana's* arias is *Gloria's*

monologue. Guilt-ridden over the burgeoning love she feels for her city's enemy, she laments her own cruel destiny, addressing her words to besieged *Siena* itself.

Mascagni and Leoncavallo have long been viewed in tandem and as one-opera composers, owing to the frequency with which *Cavalleria* and *Pagliacci* are performed together. Both men, however, produced many more stage works, with Mascagni proving especially versatile in his subject matter. Puccini had rejected the libretto of *Lodoletta*, but Mascagni revelled in it. This 1917 work, depicting both bucolic *Holland* and sophisticated *Paris*, is made memorable by its emotionally fragile protagonist; her final scene, orchestrated with exceptional sensitivity, is possibly Mascagni's most achingly affecting music. His *Iris* (1898), a tragedy set in *Japan*, is a somewhat uneasy mix of exotic orchestral colours and Italianate grandeur, with another especially vulnerable heroine. The work would have achieved wider currency worldwide were it not for the greater emotional and musical appeal of Puccini's *Madama Butterfly*.

Leoncavallo, too, suffered from Puccini's supremacy — at least, where *La Bohème* was concerned. (Before the two composers' falling-out over their competing versions of that work, Leoncavallo had, in fact, been one of seven contributors to the libretto of *Manon Lescaut*.) Leoncavallo's *Bohème*, adhering more closely to the *Murger* novel than Puccini's but premiered a year after it (in 1897), does boast some brilliant episodes, including *Mimi's* captivating description

of her friend Musette and Musette's somewhat earthier, more knowing description of Mimi. The rarity with which one hears Leoncavallo's *Zazà* (1900) can be traced mainly to the difficulty of finding a *spinto soprano* of sufficient vocal and physical charisma. *Zazà* tugs on one's heartstrings in the unexpected encounter with her married lover's little daughter, in which Leoncavallo cleverly integrates the soprano's sung lines with the child's spoken ones.

The *giovane scuola's* interest in "local colour" applies to Giordano's *Fedora* (1898), which covers three locales — St Petersburg, Paris and the Swiss mountains. How touching are the sweet tones of the mountain boy's song and his tinkling bells, when contrasted with the agony of Giordano's dying heroine. The Russian flavour the composer brought to certain scenes of *Siberia* (1903) does not, in fact, imbue Stephana's lovesick aria, the sweetest, gentlest and most endearing solo Giordano gave any of his heroines.

Puccini thought of setting the libretto of *Conchita*, which would hardly have suited him. It was eventually taken on by Zandonai, whose opera premiered in 1911. Its Spanish atmosphere is unmistakable — for example, in the dance rhythms enlivening the heroine's first-act aria. Unlike *Conchita*, the female half of a pre-*verismo* romantic couple had generally been a figure of noble attributes — say, Ponchielli's *Laura* (*La Gioconda*) or Verdi's *Aida* and *Desdemona*. Post-Verdi, romance frequently turned risqué, as with *Conchita*, one of numerous "loose women" populating this repertoire. Like many other *giovane*

*scuola* pieces, *Conchita* would probably earn the derision of audiences today with its wildly over-the-top emotionalism. In the brazenness of her sexuality *Conchita* is something of a *Carmen*, but her character possesses a neurotic streak — even a trace of sadomasochism — not associated with Bizet's gypsy. The listener cannot resist *Conchita*; however, when she regales her co-workers with a narrative telling how she dealt with the attentions of three different men.

These operas' composers favoured divas who (if recordings can be trusted) were dramatically incisive but vocally reckless. Greater fastidiousness emerged with Magda Olivero, then later with Maria Callas, Renata Scotto and Virginia Zeani. Unlike their predecessors, common to Callas, Scotto and Zeani was a foundation of technique developed through *bel canto* repertoire. They approached *verismo* with a care in execution that moved post-Verdian opera to a higher vocal plane. It is within that newer tradition of *verismo* — dramatic involvement aligned with complete vocal mastery — that this disc belongs.

Public appreciation of previously unfamiliar works such as *Rusalka* and *Thais* has been greatly enhanced by Renée Fleming's advocacy. Surely her performances here will blaze a new trail for other fascinating repertoire that has lain neglected for too long.

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