

“And shed a bitter tear”

Kathleen Zweifel and Paul Zweifel
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Boheme is the only opera that always makes me cry. We've cried during the last act of *La Traviata*, to be sure, but only to the dramatic heroics of a Maria Callas or an Elizabeth Futral. Similarly, the mad scene of *Lucia* can provoke tears, but only when sung by the right soprano. But the tears just don't stop during Mimì's death scene, no matter who's singing. In these notes we try to explain.

Give Puccini's librettists, Giuseppe Giacosa and Luigi Illica most of the credit. (Of course, Puccini does his part by fitting the music perfectly to the words.) As soon as Mimì starts to sing she is pictured as a lonely child adrift in a merciless world; her being yearns for the spiritual and beautiful. Who can help loving her? Certainly not Rodolfo, and certainly not the audience either. And it's not tear-jerking bathos making us cry. Rather it's a beautifully woven story of the tragic heroine that makes her almost a part of our lives.

Let's look at her Act I aria. First, she tells us that her name is Lucia although everybody calls her Mimì. She makes her meager living embroidering, not just *anything*, but specifically flowers, lilies and roses. And embroidering flowers makes her happy, because they speak to her of love, and of spring. They speak of dreams, and hopes, of all things that are called poetry.

We're all hooked by now, but Mimì pauses to ask us, and Rodolfo to whom she's singing, if we understand her. “Yes,” Rodolfo mutters. Six bars later Mimì tells us she always eats alone, and while she doesn't always attend Mass, she prays to the Lord a lot (*assai*).¹ She lives all alone, in her little white room, and she looks out her window at the roofs and the sky so that when the snow finally thaws, the first rays of the sun belong to her. She has a rose in a vase, and watches the buds flower, leaf by leaf. How sweet is their perfume. But the flowers that she embroiders, alas, they have no aroma!

It's no wonder that Rodolfo, whose original intentions towards Mimì were less than honorable, is by now hopelessly in love, as is the audience. After all, Rodolfo is a poet, and Mimì speaks to him of poetry. But deep down all

of us (or at least those of us who attend operas) are poets at heart, and so we share Rodolfo's emotions.

A few moments later, Mimì shyly asks Rodolfo if she might accompany him to the Café Momus to celebrate Christmas Eve with him and his friends. Rodolfo reluctantly agrees; he'd rather be alone inside with her. So we move on to Act II in which Rodolfo buys Mimì a Christmas present, a bonnet embroidered with pink lace. This is something, she says, that she has wanted for a long time, because it goes so well with her brown hair. The great pleasure that Mimì takes in this simple gift only adds to our feelings for her.

In the same act we meet Musetta; she is nothing but a flirtatious little siren (as Marcello, her boy friend, addresses her). And in Act III she comes over even worse, as a nagging shrew. But in Act IV her love for Mimì will transform her into a ministering angel, and we finally see her tender side.

Going on to Act III, we learn how Rodolfo adores Mimì when he explains to Marcello that he is forced to leave her because of her terrible illness. His squalid little room, with no fire, the wind blowing through the cracks, is making her worse. Although he doesn't say so explicitly, he is hoping that she'll find a rich lover who can afford to give her better living conditions and perhaps find a cure for her (incurable) illness, tuberculosis.² Mimì, who has overheard this conversation, agrees to part with Rodolfo in her beautiful aria *Addio, senza rancor* ("Farewell, without bitterness.") In this she asks Rodolfo to gather her pitifully few possessions, her little gold bracelet (perhaps a gift from her dead parents) and her prayer book. The only other thing she has is the bonnet Rodolfo gave her for Christmas, which is hidden under her pillow. She tells him to keep it if he likes, as a memento of their love. However, Mimì and Rodolfo decide to say together until spring—the season of flowers—because they can't bear to part, especially as they listen to Marcello and Musetta engaging in a knock-down drag-out battle at the same time, in the famous third act quartet.

By Act IV the two have indeed parted, and Mimì has found a rich lover, a Viscount. However she has left him (more likely he has thrown her out) as her illness has worsened, and she is near the end. Musetta has searched the city for several days, finally finding Mimì in the streets. She brings her to the garret where the four Bohemians are again in residence, and the death scene begins.

All five of Mimì's friends are solicitous in the extreme. *Everyone* loves Mimì. Colline sells his coat to buy medicine; Musetta gives her diamond earrings to Marcello, instructing him to sell them and use the money for brandy (the only available remedy in those days) and to bring a doctor. She, on second thought, decides to accompany Marcello to buy Mimì the muff she longs for; she needs to warm her hands, with the chill of impending death already upon them. Later, after having given the muff to Mimì, Musetta prays to the Virgin, begging Her to spare the poor child who doesn't deserve to die. "Blessed Madonna," she continues, "I am unworthy of pardon, but Mimì is an angel from heaven." A different Musetta from Acts II and III!

Meanwhile Mimì and Rodolfo engage in an extended duet, recalling their past happiness. Mimì reprises the beginning of her Act I aria, and then cheers up somewhat when Rodolfo produces her little bonnet, and puts it on her head. She goes on to describe their first meeting, telling Rodolfo that it was dark, so that he couldn't see her blushing. Then she reprises the beginning of Rodolfo's aria "Your little hand is frozen, let me warm it up" and she adds "It was dark, and you took my hand..."

By now the entire audience should be in tears, but the best is yet to come. Musetta enters with the muff and Mimì chides her for being a spendthrift, but tells Rodolfo that now her hands are warm, and she can sleep. And then, singing *dormire* ("to sleep..."), she quietly dies. (Musetta's prayer, described above, is too late; Mimì is already dead.) Immediately after the prayer comes the most heart-rending line in all opera: Rodolfo says to Musetta "I still have hope. Does it seem serious to you?" Musetta lies, saying she thinks it's not [serious], just as Schaunard whispers "*Marcello, è spirata.*" ("She's dead.") Almost immediately Rodolfo learns the truth, and the opera ends as he cries out in despair "Mimì, Mimì." At this point there's not a dry eye in the house.

So we cry because we have lost a loved one. Other operatic heroines die tragic deaths, Violetta, Aida, Lucia... But we haven't fallen in love with them the way we have with Mimì, because the librettists haven't captured our emotions the way Giacosa and Illica have. The exception is Cio-Cio San, but that shouldn't be a surprise: same librettists, same composer!

- 1. I've seen this line mistranslated in supertitles as "I seldom go to Mass" which is an entirely different thing.**
- 2. This is the same disease that killed Violetta in *La Traviata*.**