

# Structure, Theme and characteristics of Creation

## -- A Study on the creation of Puccini's opera La Bohème

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**Abstract:** La Bohème is one of Puccini's representative operas and is also the repertory of many opera houses around the world. Starting from the structure and theme of the play, this paper firstly discusses the content and scene layout of the opera, then analyzes the instrumental structure of the opera and the way in which the theme of "homogeneity" evolves, and then further expounds the characteristics of the integration of vocal music and instrumental music reflected in the work, and finally summarizes the musicality and dramatic features of the play.

**Key words:** structure; The theme; Creation characteristics; Puccini

## La Bohème

### First. The structure of "instrumental music" layout

The first act as a whole can be regarded as sonata form "vocalized". A large part of the first act is "thematic development" -- that is, each character performs a solo and then forms a chorus with other characters. In the final chorus of the first scene, the band appears Rudolf's opening melody, which is like a brief reenactment. The theme melody of Rudolf and Mimi can be regarded as the main and secondary parts. The theme of Rudolf's famous "Cold Little Hands" is bD major, which is motivated by the music of Rudolf's appearance (analyzed in the next chapter). Mimi's aria "People Call Me Mimi" is mainly in D major, and the Rudolf melody that the two sing together at the end is in A key, which can be seen as the main and secondary parts of sonata form and the reappearance of tonal unity.

The second act can be regarded as a lively "rondo". The main part is the chorus. The chorus plays a role of rendering the atmosphere, laying the foundation for the characters, and strengthening the musical motivation. The second part is sung by the main character in a chorus or solo. The climax of the act comes with Musetta singing "Walk the Streets", and then the music reinforces the "walk" motive, and then Marcello sings the melody again in the encores, and then ends with the chorus.

The third act is a turning point in the opera. The two couples conflict and Mimi gets sick, so the music is heavy and adagio is the main theme. The music has "tripartite nature": the first part is the scene description, which mainly depicts the winter night with strings and woodwind. The short chorus and Musetta's small solo show the joy of people in the room. This part mainly plays the role of introduction and preparation. In the second part, Mimi comes to Marcello. The music is based on narrative dialogue, and then Rudolf appears and tells Marcello the truth about Mimi's illness. The third part is explained by Rudolf and Mimi, while there are also conflicts between Musetta and Marcello. This part focuses on aria. Therefore, the development of "introduction of the band -- recitative -- aria" appears in music.

The music in the fourth act is the most varied: emotional ups and downs, lots of encores and dialogue, retrospectives of previous musical themes: The opening duet of Rudolf and Marcello recalls the "Musetta theme" of Act II, and ends with the deathly ill Mimi singing the classic "Cold little Hands" and "People call Me Mimi" of Act I, while returning to the main bB major of Act I. Both of the opera's most important melodies are replayed in Act IV. The status of its "final movement" is also obvious.

The whole opera is like a symphony between scenes. In the first act, the main characters appear one after another, and after each role's solo singing, there is a chorus, which is like the development of the theme. Meanwhile, the melody of the male and female protagonists is also like the main and secondary parts in sonata form, so the first act can be regarded as the first movement of the symphony cycle. Acts II and III are reversals of the typical symphony (a symphony is usually lyrical in two movements, adagio in three); The fourth act is the finale, the music is the most extensive and emotional, its status as the fourth movement of a symphony.

### Second. The theme of "homogeneity" and its evolution

"Homogeneity" refers to the fact that all important themes in the play have a fourth interval at the core, but different combinations create different characters.

#### 1. Vocal theme

The two most important themes in the play are without a doubt the themes of Rudolf and Mimi. The theme of Rudolf first appeared in bB major in the first act, and the tenor directly cut into the theme. The music was indomitable, passionate and full of vigor and vitality (music examples). The rhythm was dominated by points (long + short form), which showed Rudolf's vitality and enthusiasm. The core fourth is the ascending F-bB and the descending bE-bB

Example score: "Rudolf Theme" *un poco*



At the end of the first scene of the first act, the band plays “Rudolf theme” on the basis of the encores, which makes the first scene have the characteristics of reproduction.

In the second scene of the first act, the “Rudolf theme” morphs into the famous aria “Cold Hands”, which expands and transforms the first theme without changing the core tone and rhythm (example score). At this time, Rudolph’s image also transformed from the previous vigorous, affectionate, unswerving characteristics.

Example: Cold little hands



Example score: Tone in “Rudolf’s Theme”

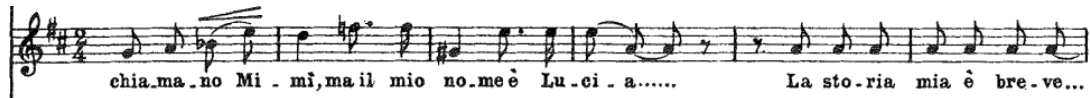


In Act 3, Mimi sings an aria that is also a variation of the “Rudolph theme” when she cries to Marcello about Rudolph’s “change of heart”, as she tells him that he loves her but is dissatisfied.

In the fourth act, Mimi lies on Rudolph’s bed on the verge of death and sings a duet with Rudolph, which is also a deformed development of the “Rudolph theme”. It implies that Mimi finally returns to her lover’s arms with Rudolph theme.

The “Mimi theme” appeared in the second scene of the first act, which was composed of two successive steps and then four bB-E jumps. The melody was graceful and graceful. Different from the voice entry of the “Rudolph theme”, the “Mimi theme” first appeared in the strings and clarinet parts, in sharp contrast to the former. After this, accompanied by every appearance of Mimi, the band (mainly strings) will play the “Mimi theme” in advance to hint, such as the beginning of the third act, the fourth act when people recall Mimi, and the second scene before the appearance of Mimi.

Example: “Mimi Theme”



Act 2 When Marcello asks Mimi what gift Rudolph gave her, the “Mimi theme” here evolves into a cheerful dance song, showing Mimi’s joy at the moment.

At the end of the fourth act, Mimi and Rudolph recall the scene of their first meeting. The music starts from the “Mimi theme”. Each of them sings a line, and then the theme is transformed to depict the warm and sweet memories.

In addition, the “Musetta theme” in the second act is also striking. The “Musetta theme” has no core fourth interval, but it is like the reflection of the “Mimi theme”. The following line is mainly advanced, and the fourth jump becomes the fifth, so “Musetta theme” belongs to the variation derivative of “Mimi theme”. The evolution and symbolism of the theme are similar to those of the first two themes: the intimation of Musetta’s personality at the beginning of the third act, Marcello’s singing of “Musetta” at the end of the second act to express his intention, and the duet sung by Rudolph and Marcello in memory of their girlfriends at the beginning of the fourth act are also from the b theme of Amble Down the Street.

Example: “Musetta Theme”



## 2. Band theme

As we know, the overture often has the function of summarizing the plot of the opera and sometimes quoting the tones in the opera. However, under the concept of “extreme beauty”, the Romantic school gradually has the tendency to make the instrumental music more vocal and instrumental. Therefore, the independent status of the overture began to be broken. In the La Bohème discussed here, the overture is just a piece of musical material and is directly integrated into the plot that follows. However, as the music that begins the play, the overture, or introduction, still contains some suggestive connotations.

The author divides the motivation of the band into two parts: the first half “dissonance motivation” and the second half “buffer motivation”. The “dissonant theme” refers to the odd introduction: the prelude is in C major, but the band begins in a mode of unsteady notes, then focuses on function, returning to the tonic in bar 25, with the core fourth being F-B, D-G. The author believes that there are two reasons for this: first, the opening verse is relaxed, and the first act is lively, so a nervous introduction is more likely to cause auditory contrast and stronger audibility, and subsequent repeated appearances can also promote the transmission of emotions in the works. Secondly, Bohemian is originally a tragic ending, with dramatic ups and downs. This motive is a hint of the tragedy of the work, which appears many times later, and is also a prelude to the ending.

Example: “Discordant motive”



The “buffer motive” is located in the second half of the downward fourth repetition. “Buffer motive” is usually used to cushion after stating (or transforming) the motive tone. On the one hand, it can balance the forward momentum of the dissonance in front; on the other hand, it also plays a transitional role, often transitioning to the singing of the male role (mechanism, lively side), such as Rudolph, which also developed into the trio of the first act.

Example: “Buffer motive”



Example: The trio in Act I in which the “buffer motive” develops

The image shows a musical score for a vocal trio. The top staff is for Rodolfo (ROD.) in treble clef. The middle staff is for Marcello (MAR.) in bass clef. The bottom staff is for Colline (COLL.) in bass clef. The lyrics are: "Le do . vi . zie d' u . na fie . ra il de . stin ci de . sti .". The score includes performance directions like *(gridato)* and *(con entusiasmo)*.

### Three. La Bohème’s creation characteristics

#### 1. “Homogenous” themes depict different characters

According to the previous paragraph, the main theme in La Bohème is “homogenous” -- that is, the central fourth interval. As a master of melody, Puccini was very good at portraying characters with melody, and the homogeneity of themes in his hands also appeared to be ever-changing. For example, the theme of Rudolf showed Rudolf’s frank and indomitable personality with fluctuating four-step jumps. Mimi theme also has four degrees of core interval, but Puccini changed the beginning of the progressive form, so that the theme of Mimi and Rudolph in sharp contrast, become quiet, soft; The Musetta theme, on the contrary to the Rudolph theme and the Mimi theme, is similar to the reflection of the Mimi theme. The following lines are mainly composed of the following lines, which are accompanied by the descending jump interval from time to time, to express Musetta’s confidence in his own charm. In general, although the theme tone has a certain “homogeneity”, but the image is different, each has its own characteristics. And through the change or expansion of the theme, the same melody has dual functions: the function of suggesting the personality and mood of the same person on different occasions and different characters on the same occasion. The former is like the Rudolph theme. In addition to playing the theme before Rudolph appears, the Rudolph theme will also appear when Mimi misses Rudolph. The latter is a Musetta theme that Marcello sings again after “Amble Down the Street,” reflecting Marcello’s affection for Musetta. However, although Puccini made good use of tones to suggest characters in the play, and even reflected different personalities through deformation, he did not form the “dominant motive” technique with distinct personalities like Wagner. Although Puccini’s thematic tones have the function of suggesting, they do not always accompany the appearance of the role, which is reflected in that many entos are not simply formed by the interlacing of characters’ tones.

In addition, Puccini is also good at using Musical Instruments to set off characters in orchestration: for example, when the theme of Rudolph appears, woodwind instruments are used to accompany the vocal performance, strings are in the position of accompaniment, and the agility of woodwind is used to show Rudolph’s personality; And Mimi theme is mainly strings, more use of violin with a very weak volume. At the same time, the band also has the function of describing the scene. For example, in the third act, the harp and string orchestra are used to express the quiet of winter night. The second act uses brass music to show the fun of the market.

#### 2. “Sonata” in Opera

The “Sonata” in vocal music has three aspects as follows. First, in the first act, Rudolf and Mimi meet, through the “Cold little hands” and “people call me Mimi” “two songs of love”, the two people also sing the theme of Rudolf, for A major, therefore, “Cold little hands” as “Rudolf theme” can be seen as the main theme, “Mimi theme” as the heroine becomes the deputy theme, Then, the chorus in the key of A of the two people has the characteristics of the unity of the main and secondary parts, which is the vocality of the first ensemble -- the first act can be regarded as a deformed sonata form.

The second is reflected in the fourth act, when Rudolf and Marcello reminisce about their girlfriends and sing a duet from the “Musetta theme”, which is now in C major (“Amble Down the Street” in the second act is in E major), which can be seen as the “Musetta theme” of the second act. After Mimi was seriously ill, her solo has appeared in the “people call me Mimi” and “cold little hand” theme tone, then the two tones have been in the band part of the stage-staggered, until Mimi is about to die when the tone finally stable in bD major, melody also stopped in the “cold little hand” tone, this can be seen as the first act of the theme of the reappearance. Therefore, the vocativeness of the second duet is reflected in: the first act is the main part, the second act is the secondary part, the third act is the interposition part, and the fourth act is the reproduction.

The third is reflected in the layout of the movement. As mentioned above, the four-act arrangement of *La Bohème* is like a symphonic cycle, but the four movements of the symphonic cycle are also applicable to the chorus cycle. Sonatas of many composers in the classical period are also written in accordance with this layout, so the vocal character of the third quartet is reflected in the setting of the scene.

### 3. The relationship between instrumental vocal music and drama development

Realism pursues tense dramatic plots and exaggerated emotions in art, so the plots of operas are often dramatic and legendary. Puccini’s integration of instrumental means into vocal music works does bring a lot of benefits: first, as a musical structure good at showing dramatic contrast, its fast-fast-slow-fast layout makes the contrast between acts and scenes obvious, and it is easier for the audience to have expectations; At the same time, the theme return in the first paragraph and the second paragraph of the first act is easy to make the paragraphs more clear and the story arc appears to have a beginning and an end. Thirdly, the orchestra of Puccini’s opera is very large, and the voices are often part of the orchestra in many cases. Therefore, in terms of details, Puccini is also good at creating dramatic points with musical means. For example, after Musetta’s solo performance of “Amble Down the Street” in the second act, the plot is only Musetta’s inner monologue, and the overlapping of chorus and the duet of the main character, which is about to get back together with Marcello. Let the music rise, and thus the dramatic tension to a peak, making this the climax of the second act. These can be said to be the impetus provided by the dramatic performance of “instrumental treatment”.

However, Puccini’s instrumental treatment of opera, which is an art with explicit scripts, sometimes seems too fast. Since the symphonic cycle is pure music, the contrastive arrangement of each movement is more acceptable in terms of creating the desired image and audibility. But as an opera, the first two acts of *La Bohème* are upbeat, the third acts are unannounced when Mimi is seriously ill, and the emotional transition between Mimi and Rudolph is abrupt. The relationship between Marcello and Musetta is clearer. And in the emotional tone of the third act, the dramatic contrast of the four male artists laughing and joking at the beginning of the fourth act is too superficial, and then Musetta rushes in to announce that Mimi is dying, and the music descends, and it feels too fast. Therefore, although “instrumental treatment” provides a lot of help for dramatic performance, it is not accurate enough to grasp the balance.

## Summary

This paper takes the structure and theme of Puccini’s opera *La Bohème* as the analysis point, and then discusses the following creative characteristics of the play: How the melody portrays the characters, how the “singing” in opera and the “instrumental vocal music” influence the development of the drama, and how the opera composers in the late Romantic opera combine the instrumental music and vocal music genres.

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