

## Giacomo Puccini, *I Crisantemi*

*Alla Memoria di Amedeo Di Savoia Duca D'Aosta*



The elegy *I Crisantemi* (Chrysanthemums) was written in 1890—in a single night—as a response to the death of the Duke of Savoy, Amedeo.

The composition is scored for a string quartet, most frequently performed by a string orchestra, and is approximately 6 minutes long.

**Giacomo Antonio Domenico Michele Secondo Maria Puccini** (December 22, 1858 – November 29, 1924) was an Italian composer whose operas, including *La bohème*, *Tosca*, *Madama Butterfly* and *Turandot*, are among the most frequently performed in the standard repertoire. Some of his arias, such as *O mio babbino caro* from *Gianni Schicchi*, *Che gelida manina* from *La bohème*, and *Nessun dorma* from *Turandot*, have become part of popular culture.

Puccini was born in Lucca in Tuscany, into a family with five generations of musical history behind them, including composer Domenico Puccini. His father died when Giacomo was five years old, and he was sent to study with his uncle Fortunato Magi, who considered him to be a poor and undisciplined student. Later, Puccini took the position of church organist and choir master in Lucca, but it was not until he saw a performance of Verdi's *Aida* that he became inspired to be an opera composer. He and his brother, Michele, walked 18.5 mi (30 km) to see the performance in Pisa.

In 1880, with the help of a relative and a grant, Puccini enrolled in the Milan Conservatory to study composition with Amilcare Ponchielli and Antonio Bazzini. In the same year, at the age of 21, he composed the *Messa*, which marks the culmination of his family's long association with church music in his native Lucca.

While studying at the Conservatory, Puccini obtained a libretto from Ferdinando Fontana and entered a competition for a one-act opera in 1882. Although he did not win, *Le Villi* was later staged in 1884 at the Teatro Dal Verme and it caught the attention of Giulio Ricordi, head of G. Ricordi & Co. music publishers, who commissioned a second opera, *Edgar*, in 1889.

From 1891 onwards, Puccini spent most of his time at Torre del Lago, a small community about fifteen miles from Lucca situated between the Tyrrhenian Sea

and Lake Massaciuccoli, just south of Viareggio. While renting a house there, he spent time hunting but regularly visited Lucca. By 1900 he had acquired land and built a villa on the lake, now known as the "Villa Museo Puccini". He lived there until 1921 when pollution produced by peat works on the lake forced him to move to Viareggio, a few kilometers north. After his death, a mausoleum was created in the Villa Puccini and the composer is buried there in the chapel, along with his wife and son who died later.

Puccini's style is a subject that was once treated dismissively by musicologists. This can be attributed to a perception that his work, with its emphasis on melody and evident popular appeal, lacked "depth." Despite the place Puccini clearly occupies in the popular tradition of Verdi, his style of orchestration also shows the strong influence of Wagner, matching specific orchestral configurations and timbres to different dramatic moments. His operas contain an unparalleled manipulation of orchestral colors, with the orchestra often creating the scene's atmosphere.

The structures of Puccini's works are also noteworthy. While it is to an extent possible to divide his operas into arias or numbers (like Verdi's), his scores generally present a very strong sense of continuous flow and connectivity, perhaps another sign of Wagner's influence. Like Wagner, Puccini used leitmotifs to connote characters (or combinations of characters). This is apparent in *Tosca*, where the three chords which signal the beginning of the opera are used throughout to announce Scarpia. Several motifs are also linked to Mimi and the bohemians in *La bohème* and to Cio-Cio-San's eventual suicide in *Butterfly*. Unlike Wagner, though, Puccini's motifs are static: where Wagner's motifs develop into more complicated figures as the characters develop, Puccini's remain more or less identical throughout the opera (in this respect anticipating the themes of modern musical theatre).

Giacomo Puccini himself acknowledged that his true talent lay "only in the theater," and so his non-operatic works are understandably few. But there are more of them than the average concertgoer might imagine. The string quartet was a medium for which Puccini had a certain undeniable affinity, and over the years he composed some five works or groups of pieces for it. All of these string quartet pieces have been virtually forgotten except for the elegy *I Crisantemi* that Puccini wrote in 1890—in a single night, he said—as a response to the death of the Duke of Savoy.

*I Crisantemi* is a single, dark-hued, continuous movement. Puccini found his two liquid melodic ideas worthy enough to re-use in the last act of his opera, *Manon Lescaut*, of 1893. Almost never heard in its original string quartet guise, *I Crisantemi* frequented the music stands of the world's orchestras in an arrangement for string orchestra throughout the twentieth century.