

Celebrate Valentine's Day with Puccini's Greatest Hits

by Diane Wittry

Valentine's Day - a very special day that we want to spend doing something memorable with someone that we love. The question each year is, "what should we do for Valentine's Day?" Well I have a wonderful suggestion. Come to the Allentown Symphony's concerts of "Puccini's Greatest Hits!"

When planning a weekend of Valentine's Day concerts, I felt that Giacomo Puccini was the obvious composer to feature. His music is so beautiful, lyrical and romantic in character. It is like having a great big hot fudge Sunday with whip cream and lots of chocolate fudge syrup. Sweet and delicious, where you savor every bite. I can't think of a better way to spend Valentine's Day. These concerts will take place Saturday, February 13, 7:30pm and Sunday February 14, 3:00pm, at Miller Symphony Hall, in downtown Allentown.

No opera composer has so thoroughly captured the hearts and spirits of the American listener as Giacomo Puccini. His opera "La Boheme" is perhaps the most popular and best loved opera in the United States. His famous aria "Nessun Dorma," from his final opera "Turandot," is used for commercials, movies, television shows, and is familiar to virtually everyone.

Puccini explores all the avenues of love in his many operas. The love of a daughter for her father with "O mio babbino caro" from "Gianni Schicchi;" or the jealous love of Tosca for the painter Mario Cavaradossi in the opera that carries her name; to the unrequited love in "Madame Butterfly."

"La Boheme" is the opera that really established Puccini's career and it is one that all artistic types identify with, as it features four young Bohemians - a poet, a painter, a musician, and a philosopher. They are poor and starving, chasing their dreams, and falling in love. We will perform the scene where Rudolph, the poet, meets and falls in love with Mimi, the seamstress.

"Tosca" was written in 1800, just four years after "La Boheme" but with this work, Puccini expanded his dramatic compositional style by developing musical motive for each character. The love scene between Tosca and Cavaradossi, while he is painting a Madonna picture in the local church, shows both Tosca's jealousies and her deep romantic love for this man.

"Madame Butterfly" is an opera that is set in 1904 in Japan. The young naval officer named Pinkerton, marries the 15 year old Cio-Cio san, pronounced "chocho" which means "butterfly." They have a child together, and then he leaves for America and returns 3 years later with his American wife to claim the child. Not perhaps the best love story for Valentine's Day, but an opera that is full of beautiful and passionate music.

The concert will feature all of the most famous arias from Puccini's most famous operas and it will include video set projections behind the Allentown Symphony Orchestra, and special lighting to help create the mood for each aria or scene.

In order to have a concert of all Puccini Opera favorites, however, one must have exceptional singers. I have found four that you definitely want to hear. They are all currently at the Academy of Vocal Arts in Philadelphia.

The Academy of Vocal Arts was founded in 1933. It is a tuition-free school for vocalists of the highest caliber to train with top performers and teachers for professional careers on the international operatic stage. I call it the "finishing" school for the Metropolitan Opera in New York. Many of its graduates have gone on to major careers.

For this concert, we will be featuring four of their top singers, all of whom have already won major international competitions. Soprano Marina Costa-Jackson will perform arias from Tosca and Madame Butterfly with Tenor Dominick Chenes. Scenes from La Boheme, Gianni Schicchi, and La Rondine will feature Soprano, Vanessa Vasquez, and tenor, Galeano Salas. Salas will also perform the very famous aria "Nessun Dorma" from Turandot.

I am sure that all of these singers will go on to major international careers and I am so pleased to be featuring them with the Allentown Symphony on Valentine's Day weekend for our "Puccini's Greatest Hits" concerts. It will be a wonderful way to celebrate this special day and you will be able to say you heard them when they were just starting out!