

# Egisto Macchi's 'Pocket' *La bohème*: Innovation and Tradition in the Reduction of Puccini's Masterpiece

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## INTRODUCTION

Opera Nova, a wide-ranging project that endeavoured to stage reduced, simplified versions of some of the best-loved works of the traditional operatic repertoire, was established in Rome around 1990 upon the instigation of Egisto Macchi.<sup>1</sup> Through this initiative the composer intended to trigger a virtuous circle that would make opera available to a broad audience by way of a new mode of opera performance, an itinerant 'pocket' format. To achieve this aim the composer decided to begin by thoroughly rethinking one of the best known and most acclaimed masterpieces of the entire operatic repertoire, Giacomo Puccini's *La bohème*. This reinterpretation involved modifying the instrumentation of the opera and to some extent its macrostructure, and also making use of electronic instruments.

It is important to emphasize that this was not the case of a free adaptation of Puccini's opera: the goal of Macchi's transcription was to propose a thorough, rigorous re-working of the original score, while at the same time faithfully reproducing both the spirit and the musical characteristics of Puccini's work. Moreover, it was the composer's intention to involve young artists of the highest

calibre, selected by way of auditions and competitions organised by Opera Nova across all of Italy. In fact, Macchi aspired to create a new Carro di Tespi, a travelling theatre that could offer quality opera performances that could easily be staged in urban areas, either inside a theatre or in the open air.<sup>2</sup>

To ensure the success of such an ambitious project, Macchi decided to involve another composer of Italy's avant-garde, Ennio Morricone, who was to make a similar transcription and reduction of *Tosca*, another cornerstone of the mainstream operatic repertoire.

Morricone, who had collaborated with Macchi since the days of the Gruppo di Improvvisazione di Nuova Consonanza,<sup>3</sup> had already contributed in the summer of 1990 to another project inspired by Macchi's creative drive: *Una Via Crucis*, an opera-oratorio with texts by Sergio Miceli that also included contributions from Michele dall'Ongaro and Antonio Poce.<sup>4</sup> The work of Opera Nova came to a halt with Macchi's premature death in August 1992, and the association disbanded not long afterwards; sadly, for this reason his little *Bohème* has never been staged.

Through a detailed analysis of Macchi's score and its related documents and notes, this article will attempt to briefly describe the structure of this immense sartorial *tour de force* commenting on some of the stylistic choices that Macchi adopted in his reduction of Puccini's original scoring. Particular attention will be given to the use of synthesizers and magnetic tape, and to the role that these assume in his reworking of the score. The analysis will be illustrated by a number of examples which, though they cannot provide an exhaustive account of the complexity of Macchi's thorough reworking of the original in his reduced version of *La bohème*, will nevertheless shed light on his stylistic choices, and on the expedients he adopted in order to reduce the instrumentation, as well as on the stimuli from contemporary theatre that led him to realise the project.

## THE REDUCTION OF *LA BOHÈME*

The operation of 'synthesis' that Macchi conceived for *La bohème* involves a vast reduction in the orchestra to a mere sixteen players, plus the addition of a few instruments typical of the musical avant-garde, namely the synthesizers. Macchi decided to use the sound potential offered by the synthesizers to enrich his small acoustic orchestra, which consisted of flute/piccolo, oboe/cor anglais, clarinet, bassoon, two horns, two trumpets, two trombones, two violins, two violas and two cellos. In addition to the synthesizers he also used magnetic tape as an instrument. Clearly, the idea for such a bold project required a great deal of imagination as well as a detailed study of Puccini's original score, especially in view of Macchi's

determination to keep the vocal lines as close as possible to the original.

First of all, to understand Macchi's compositional work it is essential to compare his version with Puccini's original score. Such a comparison allows us to identify the instruments that were replaced and the criteria for doing so, how they were re-integrated into Macchi's score with the aid of the synthesizers, and where they 'appeared' only by the use of magnetic tape.

Amongst other things, an analysis of the parts replaced by magnetic tape reveals the enormous respect Macchi had for Puccini's original score and highlights the composer's discretion in the use of non-conventional 'electronic' means in his re-elaboration of a work as popular as *La bohème*.<sup>5</sup> In order to reduce *La bohème* the composer had to inevitably sacrifice certain aspects of the work and make a number of modifications, which had repercussions on the overall dramaturgy. These alterations, however, affected neither the best-known arias nor the nodal points of the drama: any such changes would have involved too great a transformation of the heart of the work. Moreover, Macchi's modifications did not contradict his intention to remain as faithful as possible to Puccini's original: when he made cuts or alterations the scenes were not entirely eliminated, but merely 'synthesized'. Macchi generalizes the work he undertook in the following paragraph:

[...] In order to contain the unit cost of each opera performance we decided on a drastic reduction of the original orchestral forces to a minimum of 15/18 instruments. This operation should not be the result of a simple, automatic reduction in the number of players, but the result of a complete rethinking of the original score, which should be entirely rewritten in order to obtain the best possible result in terms of sound with the limited means chosen. The vocal lines, on the other hand, should remain unchanged, in the best of cases envisaging unimportant cuts, or alterations in the dramaturgy (anticipations, postpositions, inversions, doublings, substitutions, etc.) so as better to highlight the dramatic purpose of the opera.<sup>6</sup>

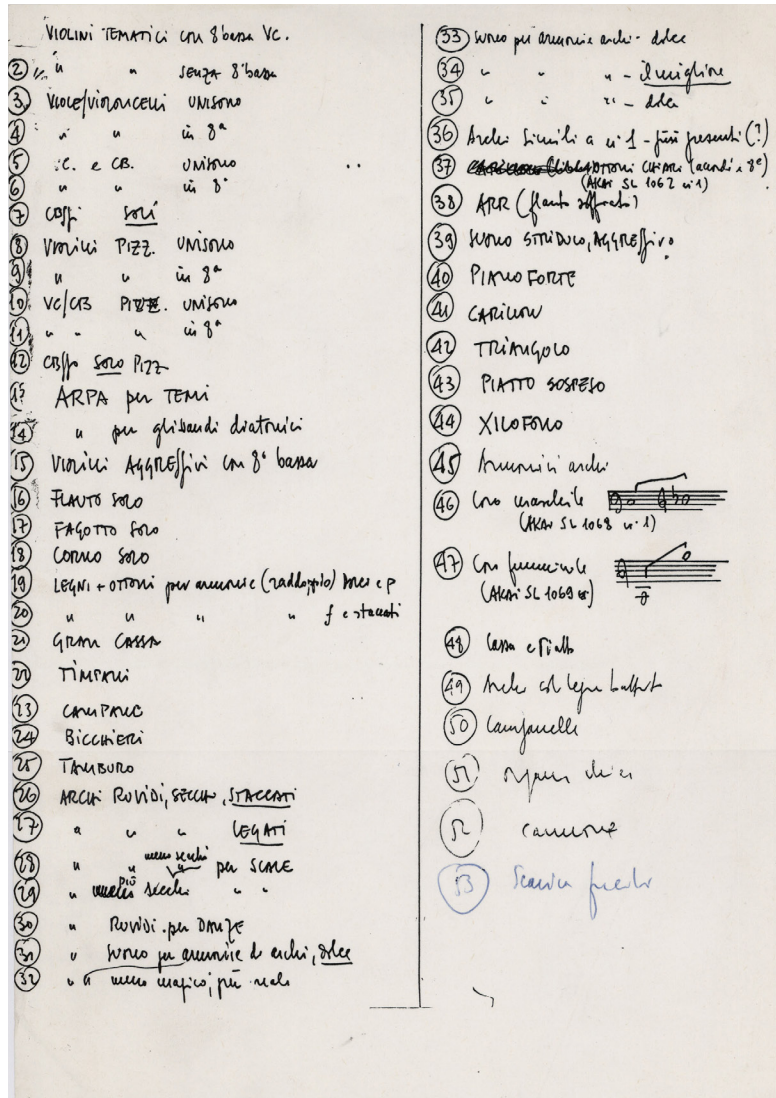
Macchi completed his transcription of *La bohème*, including work on the preliminary choice of the sounds for the four synthesizers together with the associated cataloguing and classifications, on 23 November 1991, as evidenced by the score published by Ricordi,<sup>7</sup> which presents the work in the traditional manner of an opera score, with the instruments divided into families and sections. In Macchi's orchestral score the staves are divided into those for the sixteen 'acoustic' instruments and the four for the synthesizers (Sint I–IV), and those the singers, including the parts entrusted to the magnetic tape. The parts for the synthesizers can be interpreted only by means of the sound key, whereas, fortunately, Macchi's attempts to render the little *La bohème* 'artificial' can still be heard today thanks to a copy of a few seconds of around thirty recordings that Macchi made in his

Pontevecchio studio in Rome, conserved in MP3 format in the archive of the composer at the Fondazione Giorgio Cini in Venice.<sup>8</sup> These ‘experiments in sound’ were recorded on Ampex magnetic tape. The list of sounds drawn up by Macchi (FIGURE 1) is a key source to obtain a range of information by way of two different comparisons: on one hand, a direct comparison with Puccini’s score enables the immediate identification of the type and number of new sounds; and, on the other, a comparison with Macchi’s score and the synthesizer parts can help us to analyse the latter.<sup>9</sup> The sound key catalogues around fifty sounds in great detail, each with a number linking the sound to both the score and the synthesizer parts. This classification provides a clear distinction between the sounds foreseen in Puccini’s original score and those specially selected and added by Macchi. This second series of sounds is the more interesting as it comes directly from the composer’s own experience with avant-garde music and is linked to the possibilities offered by the sound library of the synthesizers.

Macchi’s cataloguing also enables us to decipher the manner in which the composer lists and renames certain sounds to distinguish them from others, thus allowing us to recognise not only their nature or type, but also their function. The classification was presumably necessary for the purposes of writing the score, and therefore preliminary to Macchi’s meticulous rethinking of Puccini’s *La bohème*, since the cataloguing of each individual sound suggests the musical intention at the basis of the entire dramaturgy.

One example of some of the characteristic new sounds that appear both in the key and in the score, and which have an important dramatic function, can be found in Nos. 52 ‘cannone [cannon]’ and 53 ‘sparo di fucile [rifle fire]’. These appear in the finale of Act II, in which the army withdraws to camp: to make this more realistic Macchi wanted to make use of the sound of arms.<sup>10</sup> The composer’s experience in the field of cinema from the 1950s onwards, as well as in electronic music, came in useful in this case.<sup>11</sup> These two sounds, which are given to SINT IV, may in fact be defined as ‘acousmatic sounds’:<sup>12</sup> in the absence of sufficient physical space on the stage for the extras (in this case the soldiers), the sounds would have conjured up for the audience the impression of a military context. Another example of the sounds selected by Macchi that can be found in the key is No. 40 ‘pianoforte’: not only is this a ‘new’ sound, in that it is not present in Puccini’s original, its function in relation to the other acoustic instruments chosen by Macchi could also be described as ‘auxiliary’ to the balance of the sounds in the lower register. This timbre is a personal note, a touch which, alongside others and in relation to the other 16 instruments, reveals how Macchi brings the operatic tradition back to life in a new timbre and sound context.<sup>13</sup>

FIGURE 1. Egisto Macchi, sound key for *La bohème*. Fondazione Giorgio Cini (Venezia), Fondo Egisto Macchi.



If we turn now from Macchi's list to the score he edited, in the latter we can observe numerous annotations by the composer: not only corrections, but also indications for the insertion of the sounds to be added to the synthesizer parts with a view to a performance. This suggests that after a performance the composer would have further retouched and improved the sound dimension through the use of synthesizers, after first testing the effectiveness of his 'mixed' instrumentation in live performance.

In order to understand how the composer intended to distribute the parts among the acoustic instruments, synthesizers and magnetic tape, it is useful to make a comparison between Puccini's orchestra and the ensemble envisaged by Macchi. In Macchi's working copy of Puccini's orchestral score we can see a pencilled list of his proposed instrumental ensemble beside that of the original. The same list, without any changes, can be found in Macchi's transcription of the score. A comparison with the original orchestral ensemble reveals that, in addition to performing the functions already described above, the four synthesizers also replace the percussion instruments, as well as cumbersome instruments such as the harp, thus rendering the orchestra more 'transportable'.

The list therefore provides an overview of all the acoustic instruments that Macchi sacrificed in favour of synthesizers and magnetic tape. Moreover, it gives valuable information about the use of the tape itself, to which the composer assigns the sounds of 4 fifes, 6 trumpets and 6 drums. The parts assigned to the tape in Macchi's score show no sign of including other string or wind instruments in order to strengthen the small band of 'real' players, therefore we may conclude that the composer considered the 16 players indicated in the score to be sufficient.

#### 'NEW' VOICES FOR *LA BOHÈME*

In 1965, the opening night of the fifth Settimana palermitana witnessed the first and only semi-staged performance of Macchi's *Anno Domini*.<sup>14</sup> On that occasion *Anno Domini* was performed in a reduced form with respect to the original version, which was scored for four choirs, a large orchestra, and the voices of the singers, narrators and extras.<sup>15</sup> For this semi-staged version performed in Palermo the choral parts were pre-recorded in their entirety and synchronised live during the performance, while the number of narrators and the orchestral forces were reduced; at the same time the staging was limited to a few essential, evocative elements, thus providing an important precedent for Macchi's vision of music theatre projects.<sup>16</sup>

There is one initial major difference that can be found when comparing the reduced version of *Anno Domini* with the little *La bohème*. That is, *Anno Domini* was originally conceived as a large-scale work, and the author's reduction for the smaller-scale scenic adaptation was only made later for logistical reasons, as a sort of makeshift solution to adapt to the venue. Thus, the impetus for the reduction was due to the unsuitability of the forseen venue in Palermo to stage a work of such large proportions, and was external to the conception of the work.

For his 'little *Bohème*', on the other hand, Macchi planned to record the chorus parts from the very outset of the project, and not only because reducing and synthesizing the work was his main objective: the operation reflected a stylistic choice that was carefully thought through, at once distinctive and peculiar to the work in question.

Another important difference that emerges when comparing the two works is the limited instructions given by the composer for the production of his score for *La bohème*. Unlike the case of *Anno Domini*, in *La bohème* it is not clear how Macchi planned the interaction between the recorded choruses and the interpreters in the context of a live performance. Except for very few handwritten instructions in his own score at the points where a singer's phrase ends and the taped chorus takes over<sup>17</sup> no other indications are given. This is not due to any lack of meticulousness on Macchi's part, but rather to the incomplete nature of the whole *Bohème* project as a result of the composer's death in 1992 while he was still working on it.

While preparing the little *Bohème*, Macchi did not foresee the 'physical' presence of an opera chorus on stage, but this does not mean that he did not intend to include the choruses. As mentioned above, recording all the choruses and using the tape in performance would overcome the challenge of managing the physical space for a production that was conceived from the outset as a travelling theatre. Not to mention that it would also reduce the production costs, since no extra performers would need to be paid. Macchi's young cast would thus have to interact with the chorus as merely a 'sound' presence. Unfortunately, the chorus parts of this little *Bohème* were never recorded. By analysing Macchi's score it is only possible to identify the contiguity with Puccini's choruses and the crucial role that the magnetic tape would have played in performance.

A critical analysis of the chorus parts also reveals that Macchi intended to remain faithful to the original plot, despite making some changes to its structure. In fact, in the general programme of Opera Nova the composer had already anticipated that some alterations to the score would be necessary so as to facilitate 'the entry on to the stage of the magnetic tape'. The indications present in the score suggest that the performance in a reduced form would be divided into two acts, instead of the four present in the original, and that the first act would be linked with the second, and the third with the fourth; the text, however, remained structured in a similar way to Puccini's.

Macchi's re-elaboration of the score includes the four *Quadri* (the acts or scenes) of Puccini's original, Quadro I *In Soffitta*, Quadro II *Al Quartiere Latino*, Quadro III *La Barriera d'Enfer*, and Quadro IV *In Soffitta*. At the end of each one there is a handwritten annotation that indicates the end of each act of the

original.<sup>18</sup> The two composite Acts that make up Macchi's work are arranged as follows: the First Act includes the whole of Puccini's Quadro I *In Soffitta*, and an instrumental synthesis of the introduction to Quadro II *Al Quartiere Latino*, after which the curtain falls.<sup>19</sup> The Second Act continues without interruption from the *Al Quartiere Latino* to Quadro III *La Barriera d'Enfer*, and again to *In Soffitta* Quadro IV, after which the final curtain falls.

This subdivision makes it easier to identify the role of the tape and suggests that its live synchronisation with the instruments was planned from the beginning of the second act. This in turn raises a number of questions as to how the stage space would have been modified with respect to the original.

Apart from the unprecedented use of synthesizers and the small number of instruments, the sections Quadro I and Quadro IV remain most faithful to Puccini's original and demonstrate Macchi's desire to emphasise the narrative ideas of the original version. The arduous task of portraying the conflicting emotional facets of these sections has been assigned exclusively to the instrumentalists and to the vocal interpretation of the protagonists. In Quadro I, for example, Puccini did not use the chorus or other extras: Macchi respects this aspect of the dramaturgy of *La bohème* and adds nothing to it; he chooses not to insert sounds or 'noises' using the tape, as one might have expected in the light of his overall project.

Quadro II and Quadro III, on the other hand, offer an ideal opportunity to identify the nature of the reduction made by the composer and to highlight two different mechanisms of synthesis. The first is the result of an arrangement inspired by the original theme of the opera in order to evoke the atmosphere of the original on the stage; Macchi uses only the synthesizers and acoustic instruments to achieve this.<sup>20</sup> The second mechanism involves the recording of the chorus parts and the decomposition and recomposition of the original parts.

The dynamism of the scenes in Quadro II and Quadro III of the original – which are set respectively in locations outside the *Soffitta*: in the Latin quarter, a crowded district full of people, and outside a cabaret, under the snow – is only found in the Second Act of Macchi's reduction. These locations are synthesised with the aid of sounds recorded on the tapes, presumably with the intention of using them to evoke the expressive and descriptive power of different locations in a staging with few illustrative props.

The main means of synthesis used by Macchi, briefly described here, can be found first and foremost in those scenes that involve the chorus, and are designed to focus the attention on the main characters, with considerable use of interaction *à deux*. As is clear in the score, when the curtain goes up on Act II certain moments of the opera are treated as mini movie frames of duets and quartets, in which the solo voices are enhanced thanks to the unprecedented use of synthesizers.



Moreover, the chorus tape is an expedient which enables Macchi not to disappoint the expectations of the audience, who, for instance, expect the entry of a varied 'crowd' at the opening of the second scene – a crowd which the composer, in fact, had no intention of forgoing. Macchi's score demonstrates that the *Quartiere Latino* is presented – with the aid of the tape – only in terms of its sound: the composer here decides to make use of sounds – and in this specific case, the sounds of voices – to recreate a collective experience; though only partly staged, it is a scene he did not wish to sacrifice.

Other examples also prove useful to gain a better understanding of this operation of synthesis. In the section of Macchi's score corresponding to Quadro II of the original, the composer planned a tape for the children's chorus during the entrance of Parpignol: the popular seller toy seller, together with his cart (if the production allowed for it), would have been accompanied by the pre-recorded voices of the chorus extras.<sup>21</sup> When, in Puccini's second Quadro, the seamstresses, students, street urchins and bourgeoisie all sing in unison 'Tutto splendore! Di Francia è il più bell'uom!'<sup>22</sup> Macchi's tape was to have reproduced the chorus line which, in this case too, would have represented the singers missing from the stage only in terms of sound. In the same way, the voices of the street sweepers

**Figure 2. Interaction of the customs officer (assigned to the magnetic tape) with the street sweepers. Giacomo Puccini, *La bohème*, transcribed for 16 instruments and 4 synthesizers by Egisto Macchi, Milano, Ricordi, 1991, p. 240, bars 70-79. Fondazione Giorgio Cini (Venezia), Fondo Egisto Macchi.**

The image shows a handwritten musical score for the interaction of the customs officer and street sweepers. The score is written on a page with a grid of measures. The top staff is labeled 'COLLINE' and contains a bass clef and a key signature of one flat. Below it are three staves for voices: '3. Sop. I', '3. Sop. II', and '3. Contr.' (Contralto). The next staff is labeled 'NASTRO (Coro)' and contains a series of rhythmic markings and notes. Below that are two staves for '2 Violini' (Violins) and two staves for '2 Viole' (Violas). The bottom two staves are for '2 Violoncelli' (Violoncellos). The score includes various musical notations such as notes, rests, and dynamic markings like 'pizz' (pizzicato) and 'vanga' (vanga). There are also handwritten numbers '1', '2', '3', '4', and '5' above the vocal staves, and a large '3.' at the bottom right. The page number '240.' is written at the bottom left, and '70.', '75.', and '3.' are written at the bottom of the score.

in Quadro III and the sleepy customs officer's exclamation 'Vengo', which in the original interacted with them, 'appear' on the stage in Macchi's version only by means of the tape; this is clear from Macchi's own score, in which the customs officer is struck through in the list of characters (FIGURE 2).<sup>23</sup>

It is clear from the above that the work carried out by the composer did not involve a straightforward re-proposal of the choruses as in Puccini's original, but rather their recording 'in synthesis', which inevitably meant some sacrifices in the phrasing and plot of the musical.<sup>24</sup>

The cuts shown on Puccini's score also point to Macchi's intent to use the tape to create soundscapes and recreate a setting, so as to 'physically' represent the most 'chaotic' scenes of the original, using the stage only for those elements that were absolutely indispensable. This is undoubtedly due to the logistical limitations of the size of the stage and the amount of space envisaged for a 'pocket' performance format; at the same time, this expedient reveals the composer's desire not to sacrifice the original narrative, so as not to affect to any significant extent the temporal continuity of the dramatic action.

As an example, let us examine his use of the tape at the point at which the band enters, greeted by a chorus of children singing 'La ritirata' (FIGURE 3).<sup>25</sup>

**FIGURE 3. Giacomo Puccini, *La bohème*, transcribed for 16 instruments and 4 synthesisers by Egisto Macchi, Milano, Ricordi, 1991, p. 219: section relating to 'La ritirata'. Fondazione Giorgio Cini (Venezia), Fondo Egisto Macchi.**

The image shows a page of handwritten musical notation for the opera *La bohème*, specifically the section 'La ritirata'. The score is arranged in a system with multiple staves. At the top, there are vocal staves for BENOIT, SCHUNARD, and COLLINE. Below them is the NASTRO (Coro) staff. The bottom section contains the orchestration for 2 Violini, 2 Viole, and 2 Violoncelli. The notation includes various musical symbols such as notes, rests, and dynamic markings. There are handwritten annotations in red and black ink, including '1-2', 'Tremolo', and 'ppp'. The page number '219' is visible at the bottom left, and '27' is written at the bottom right. The score is transcribed for 16 instruments and 4 synthesizers.

Macchi planned to pre-record the band – which in Puccini’s version appears on stage – on tape for practical reasons, so as to obviate the need to have a lot of ‘unwieldy’ instruments on the stage. The information regarding the presence of this ‘fictitious’ band can be gleaned from a pencilled note in Macchi’s hand on his own working copy of Puccini’s score (FIGURE 4): at the entry of the band on to the stage the composer wrote ‘Nastro Banda [Band Tape]’.<sup>26</sup>

FIGURE 4. The notes on Macchi’s manuscript relating to the parts of the magnetic tape to insert or cut, as in his personal copy of Puccini’s *La bohème*. Fondazione Giorgio Cini (Venezia), Fondo Egisto Macchi.

220 (LA RITIRATA - è lontanissima, e andrà sempre avvicinandosi a poco a poco)  
 Allegro (alla Marcia) ♩ = 132

4 Fiff. (sul palco)  
 6 Tr. (sul palco)  
 6 Tamb. (sul palco)

ROD. (osservando il conto) (tastandosi le tasche vuote)  
 Ca.rol Fuori il da.na.ro!

SCHAU. Fuori il da.na.ro! Col. li.ne, Ro.

COLL. (osservando il conto)  
 Ca.rol Fuori il da.na.ro!

Cb. Allegro (alla Marcia) ♩ = 132

4 Fiff. (sul palco) (avvicinandosi a poco a poco)  
 6 Tr. (sul palco)  
 6 Tamb. (sul palco)

ROD. Ho tren.ta soldi in

MARCELLO Siamo all'a. sciu.to!

SCHAU. .dol.ro e tu, Mar.cel? Co. me?

SARTINE (sortono precipitosamente dal Caf. fé Momus)  
 Sop. La Ri.ti.ra.ta!

STUDENTI (Ten.) La Ri.ti.ra.ta!

MONELLI (accorrendo da destra)  
 La Ri.ti.ra. ta!

Cb.

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## MODELS FOR STAGING AND DIRECTING MACCHI'S *LA BOHÈME*

The notes on the score and the documents relating to the reduction of *La bohème* enable us to delve more deeply into the genesis of Macchi's work, and to trace the factors that shaped his conception of other aspects of this type of travelling show, including how it was to be staged and directed. The influences deriving from coeval models on Macchi's own intuition as he strove to define a *modus operandi* for his reduction of *La bohème* reveal the composer's keen awareness of the contemporary situation that he was operating within. One document that implicitly constitutes a source of inspiration for Macchi was a 1988 newspaper article describing the success of Folkoperan, an unusual opera company from Stockholm; consisting of an orchestra of just twenty-six players, a very small chorus, and simple scenery and costumes. The company undertook the challenge of staging a 'slim' version of *Turandot*, an opera of vast proportions. Renamed *Turandot fai-da-te* (a *Do-it-yourself Turandot*), this Swedish version of Puccini's opera served as a good starting point to confirm Macchi's own intuitive ideas as he searched for an alternative way to produce such a popular work as Puccini's *La bohème*.<sup>27</sup>

Another interesting document that sheds light on Macchi's theatrical poetics is the draft of a letter to the theatre director Robert Wilson in which the composer suggests their joint collaboration. Besides the involvement of the American director, the letter is relevant to this study because in it Macchi admits to being favourably impressed by features of the work of another director, Peter Brook, in his *Tragédie de Carmen* (1981). From Macchi's perspective the stylisation of the scenography and the similar operation of reduction are of particular relevance in this stage work (which was turned into a film two years later).<sup>28</sup> The composer, however, clarifies in his letter to Wilson that the inspiration for his own 'little *Bohème*' owed nothing to Brook's work in as much as the two projects were contemporaneous and independent of each other.<sup>29</sup> The composer's reference to Brook's *Carmen* in his letter seems instead to confirm the validity of his own intuition, as it points to the success of a similar reduction to chamber music proportions of Bizet's opera, and of a modern take on one of opera's great classics.

Macchi also sees a noteworthy precedent in Peter Brook's adaptation and reduction of Bizet's *Carmen*, particularly with regard to the scenic dimension. Brook's stylised sets are 'reduced' to the bare essentials and tend towards a kind of suspended, magical atmosphere, an effect that the director consciously worked for in his reduction.

The letter that Macchi intended to send to Wilson is a valuable document also because it includes indications from the composer himself concerning how the work was to be directed. It is instructive to note that one similarity to be found

in both Macchi and Wilson's theatrical aesthetics lies in their mutual interest in Japanese Noh theatre. The principal feature of this form of theatre in terms of its staging lies in its essentiality: the movements and the specific gestures of the actors, unnatural and extremely stylised, aim to interpret the scene as if it were frozen in time.<sup>30</sup>

Macchi explicitly garners stimuli from Peter Brook's *Tragédie de Carmen*, from the Swedish Folkoperan opera company, and from Robert Wilson that he reworks into his little *Bohème*: it is as if these examples served as valuable lessons for a new aesthetics of the theatre. It would appear that Macchi's observation of contemporary models provided a theoretical basis for his own intuition in his search to create a travelling opera theatre. Starting from opera as a fertile field for study, his aim was to reduce it to its essential foundations, both in terms of its music and its dramaturgy, while at the same time maintaining its values and its original essence intact. Through the use of a number of carefully considered expedients, in Macchi's opinion, the ideal director should reflect in his/her staging the same stratagem that he, the composer, had adopted in his score: preserving the values of Puccini's whole and bringing them back to life on stage in a reworked, reduced form. Macchi's choice of director for bringing the project to life on the stage was Giuliano Montaldo, whose name appears as director of the 'piccola *Bohème*' in the brochure presenting the projects of Opera Nova.<sup>31</sup>

Other documents written by or belonging to the composer suggest that Macchi was searching for a 'formula' that could also be applied to the reduction of two other great classics of the traditional operatic repertoire (*Rigoletto* and *La sonnambula*). This formula would apply of methods and stylistic choices similar to those that would subsequently be used in drawing up the Opera Nova project, in particular the utilisation of magnetic tape to synthesise the choral parts.<sup>32</sup>

## CONCLUSIONS

The tight structure of Puccini's *La bohème* enabled Macchi to reduce the original without affecting its dramatic cohesion. It was not by chance that Macchi chose this masterpiece. His decision to use *La bohème*, which had little to do with any 'utilitarian' considerations such as the work's popularity, suggests he reflected with great discernment on the project. On one hand it provides us with information regarding Macchi's aesthetic tastes, and on the other it confirms how well the original structure of Puccini's opera lends itself to reinterpretation and reduction. One of the features inherent to the musical narration of Puccini's masterpiece is the universal nature of the story it tells; equally fundamental are the evocative

power of his music and the expert pacing of the dramaturgy. In Michele Girardi's words:

All the emotions that the death of a loved one can provoke are arranged in such a way as to arouse the deepest response from the broadest possible audience. Such universality is not solely due to the evocative power of the music, but also to the expert formal strategy that governs the work: the return at just the right moments of the themes that depict Mimi's character and emotions makes her both familiar and unforgettable. Furthermore, the music, in recapitulating the recent past, suggests the passing of real time, gathering together every semantic nuance of the text and reconstituting a new entity, a collective memory, on the basis of the order in which the themes are restated.<sup>33</sup>

Girardi's analysis also reveals the musical logic of *La bohème*, which is structured in sections according to the prevailing emotions expressed, as well as Puccini's capacity to narrate the events of the plot in music, linking them together by means of association and cross references in almost cinematographic style.

In the context of a modern adaptation of the opera as envisaged by Macchi, such a structure cannot but serve the purposes of its reduction; maintaining the 'emotional framework' of the development of the drama, albeit in its reduced form interpreted with the aid of synthesizers and magnetic tape, Opera Nova's *La bohème* would have moved its audience simply by following as closely as possible the emotional hues of Puccini's original.

By adding instruments borrowed from the musical avant-garde throughout his reworking of *La bohème* Macchi stamps his distinctive signature on a new methodology for the contemporary reinterpretation of a great opera. As we have seen above, the composer's re-elaboration involved major changes in the orchestration, especially as a result of his use of synthesizers and magnetic tape. As these elements indicate the presence of 'new music' in the final sound, they offer an additional added value that allows innovation and tradition, acoustic and electronic instruments, and synthesis and extension to exist side by side. The reduction itself is thus not the only novel element in Macchi's reworking: the instruments used and the stylistic choices he adopts are all part and parcel of his revision of the original work. The orchestra conceived by Macchi is not merely the result of the removal of acoustic instruments and their replacement with the sounds of the synthesizers, but it seeks to present an alternative to the musical language of the original opera.

An analysis of the parts given to the magnetic tape highlights the points at which the composer had decided to alter the structure of the original score – useful in planning its subsequent synchronisation – as well as reveals some of the

moments in the original narration which Macchi decided to dispense with, and the solutions he adopted to make up for his own cuts. Even though 'doing without' might appear to be a violation of the original, the decision to keep and make the most of one scene rather than another leads us to reflect on the poetics of this composer-director. How Macchi approached the substantial task of summarising and reducing the main features of the work to the bare essentials, and how he decided what to cut and what not to cut provides us with an idea of how he saw the story of *La bohème*, and of what, from his point of view, were the most important elements to include in a reduced performance for an audience unaccustomed a characteristic narration and staging of traditional opera production.

## Notes

- 1 All the unpublished documents mentioned and described in this article are conserved at the Fondazione Giorgio Cini of Venice, Istituto per la Musica, Fondo Egisto Macchi (hereinafter FEM). The extracts from these documents used in this article are reproduced with the consent of Macchi's heirs and of the Fondazione Giorgio Cini. This study draws on my Master's Thesis: *Un avanguardista melomane: Egisto Macchi e «La bohème»*, Università Ca' Foscari, Venezia, 2019, 210 pp. With reference to the foundation of Opera Nova, none of the documents consulted gives an official date.
- 2 With regard to the tradition of the Carri di Tespi, see Michela Niccolai, "La Scala sotto la tenda". *La Bohème* inaugura il Carro di Tespi lirico', in: *Italian Music during the Fascist Period*, ed. by Roberto Illiano, Turnhout: Brepols, 2004, pp. 267–282.
- 3 With regard to the experience of Egisto Macchi and Ennio Morricone in the Gruppo di Improvvisazione di Nuova Consonanza, see Daniela Tortora, *Nuova Consonanza. Trent'anni di musica contemporanea in Italia (1959–1988)*, LIM: Lucca, 1990, pp. 123–142.
- 4 In terms of various initiatives and work for the theatre the period from 1989 to 1991 was very prosperous for Macchi. Besides Opera Nova we can cite some of his most interesting works here. These include a 1989 production of Claudio Monteverdi's *Il Combattimento di Tancredi e Clorinda* in Halle, Germany (in which Macchi was both director and production designer); and, in the following year, a production of Jacopo Peri's *Euridice* for the Teatro Romano di Fiesole, in collaboration with Fausto Razzi. In this same period he composed *Luoghi della luce* (1989) for a mixed choir of 8 voices and two male choirs, and the incidental music for Giuseppe Manfredi's *Elettra*, which also premiered at the Teatro Romano di Fiesole. For an overview of Macchi's work see Daniela Tortora, 'Catalogo delle opere', in: *Archivio. Musiche del XX secolo*, Palermo: CIMS (Numero monografico dedicato a Egisto Macchi), 1996, pp. 77–127.
- 5 The composer reiterated his wish to remain faithful to the spirit of the original opera in a number of documents relating to the project, starting with 'Il programma di Opera Nova, progetto di opera portatile'; several copies of this typewritten text, all undated but with the Opera Nova logo, are preserved in FEM, fasc. 'Bohème–Montpellier'.
- 6 Draft of a letter written by Egisto Macchi to Robert Wilson; undated, unpublished typewritten document consisting of two pages (FEM, fasc. 'Bohème').
- 7 The observations that follow refer to Puccini, *La bohème, trascritta per 16 strumenti e 4*

- sintetizzatori da Egisto Macchi*, Milano: Ricordi, 1991, 'writing completed on 23 November 1991', henceforward referred to, in both the text and the notes, as Macchi, *Bohème* (FEM).
- 8 A handful of fragments of this 'little *Bohème*', recorded between April and May 1991 on 16-track magnetic tape, are preserved at FEM. These trial recordings were transferred into MP3 format by the composer's son, Lamberto Macchi. This tape should not be confused with the one foreseen for the recordings of the choruses mentioned several times in the composer's notes and also in his score.
  - 9 The document in FIGURE 1 is a handwritten sheet containing a list of the sounds selected by the composer in numerical order. Other versions of this document, including typewritten versions, exist; in these some of the annotations differ. For this analysis the handwritten version has been chosen; this, which contains a total of 53 sounds recorded by the composer, is conserved in FEM, fasc. 'Bohème'.
  - 10 See Macchi, *Bohème*, p. 227 (FEM) and Giacomo Puccini's orchestral score, *La bohème*, Milano: Ricordi, © 1920, p. 231 (Macchi's working copy. FEM. Hereinafter Puccini, *Bohème*).
  - 11 With regard to Macchi's experience in the field of music for the cinema, see Marco Cosci, *Nuovi suoni sullo schermo: Egisto Macchi compositore per il cinema*, Doctoral Dissertation in Musicology, University of Pavia at Cremona, 2015, 316 pp.
  - 12 Acousmatic (a word of Classical Greek origin brought back into use by Jérôme Peignote and theorised by Pierre Schaeffer) means 'that is heard without seeing the original cause of the sound' or which 'makes us hear sounds without seeing their cause. [...] Radio, records and the telephone, which emit sounds without revealing their source, are by definition acousmatic sounds'. The quotation is taken from Michel Chion, *L'audiovisione. Suono e immagine nel cinema*, a cura di Dario Buzzolan, Torino: Lindau, 2001, pp. 74–75 [or. *L'audio-vision. Son et image au cinéma*, Paris: Nathan, 1990].
  - 13 See Macchi, *Bohème*, bar 1, p. 1, SINT III (FEM).
  - 14 For information concerning the genesis of *Anno Domini*, see Daniela Tortora, 'Saggio critico', in: *Archivio. Musiche del XX secolo*, pp. 13–54: 40–47. For a general overview of the period in which *Anno Domini* was composed, see Alessandro Mastropietro, *Nuovo Teatro Musicale fra Roma e Palermo, 1961–1973*, Lucca: LIM, 2020, pp. 267–291.
  - 15 The libretto for *Anno Domini. Tredici testi per un'azione teatrale* was completed by Antonino Titone in 1961. The correspondence between Titone and Macchi reveals that as early as July of the same year the composer was particularly keen on the use of a tape with a pre-recorded radio voice which would be synchronised live during the stage performance. Macchi completed the score of *Anno Domini* in 1962, but the considerable proportions of the work prevented its immediate staging. For the same reason other attempts to produce the work also came to nothing: in Palermo in 1963 for the fourth Settimana palermitana, and then again in Bergamo in 1964 for the Stagione di Teatro Sperimentale (Teatro delle Novità). See Tortora, 'Saggio critico'.
  - 16 For details of the Sicilian festival, see Floriana Tessitore, *Visione che si ebbe nel cielo di Palermo: le Settimane internazionali Nuova Musica, 1960–1968*, Roma: Rai-Eri, 2003. This work is a valuable source of information with regard to the history and origins of the Settimane palermitane thanks to the inclusion of transcriptions of all the articles which appeared in the local Palermo newspapers during those years, as well as the programme notes of the Settimane; it also provides a comprehensive picture of the historical, cultural and musical scene of 1960s Palermo.
  - 17 An analysis by Alessandro Mastropietro reveals an aspect of the score of *Anno Domini* that is particularly relevant to our discussion: the precision with which Macchi highlights details concerning aspects of the staging including the actions and the lighting, which are



- integrated with the music to facilitate the synchronisation between the different components. Furthermore, the composer pays detailed attention to indicating the voices and the sounds that were to be performed live and those which were to be recorded. See Alessandro Mastropietro, “Lo voglio alla Nino”: Titone, Macchi e l’“idea di un nuovo teatro musicale” all’inizio degli anni ‘60’, in *Trasformazione. Rivista di Storia delle Idee*, V/2, 2016, pp. 209–239. Available: <http://www.intrasformazione.com>.
- 18 Macchi, *Bohème* (FEM). The relevant composer’s handwritten notes can be seen in the score on p. 133 (Fine I Atto), p. 232 (Fine II Atto), p. 309 (Fine III Atto), and p. 402 (Fine IV Atto).
  - 19 Puccini, *Bohème*, p. 132 (FEM). Macchi wrote a note relating to the curtain and to the timing: ‘Sipario, 60’ dall’inizio [Curtain, 60’ from the beginning]’.
  - 20 Macchi would appear to have carried out a sort of *musical synthesis* of the original instrumental introduction for the ‘real’ players and the synthesisers alone, to which we could attribute the function of anticipating the change of location that will take place in the scene that follows. See Macchi, *Bohème*, pp. 134–154 (FEM).
  - 21 Macchi, *Bohème*, p. 163, bar 250 (FEM).
  - 22 Puccini, *Bohème*, p. 235 (FEM).
  - 23 Macchi, *Bohème*, p. 240, bars 70–79 (FEM).
  - 24 Puccini, *Bohème*, pp. 121–146 (FEM). The handwritten notes in these pages are fundamental to understanding what of the original material the composer was proposing to cut. Using acronyms, Macchi indicates the beginning and the end of the cuts directly on the bar lines; arrows show which parts have been given to the tape, and which parts remain to be reworked.
  - 25 Macchi, *Bohème*, pp. 219–221 (FEM). The score details the entry of the band, which is recorded by the composer, and which is not present on the stage.
  - 26 The composer’s pencilled notes may be read in his working copy of Puccini, *Bohème*, pp. 219–220 (FEM).
  - 27 News of this unusual theatrical venture reached Macchi in 1988. The composer was particularly struck by a number of attributes that would subsequently become features of his own *La bohème*: the simple staging and the use of functional lighting for a ‘pocket’ production, the greatly reduced size of the orchestra, and the democratic character of the whole project. See Aridea Fezzi Price, ‘Una Turandot “fai-da-te” ha conquistato Edimburgo’, *il Giornale*, 21 August 1988 (FEM, fasc. ‘Bohème–Viareggio’).
  - 28 Brook’s *Carmen* is the result of a dramaturgical combination of the versions of the story by Prosper Mérimée, and Henri Meilhac and Ludovic Halévy; the mix of the original short story, the libretto and the score was the work of Jean-Claude Carrière, Brook’s usual collaborator for his theatrical works. See Paolo Puppa, *Teatro e spettacolo nel secondo novecento*, Bari: BUR–Laterza, 1990, pp. 236–237. Brook’s *Carmen* is also mentioned in an essay by George Banu as an example of a renewal in the spread of the values of the theatre through stagings conceived for non-theatrical spaces. Georges Banu, ‘Fare e vedere teatro: un’azione indivisibile’, in: *Robert Wilson, o il teatro del tempo: l’opera di un maestro raccontata al Premio Europa per il Teatro*, a cura di Franco Quadri, Milano: Ubulibri, 1999, pp. 131–134.
  - 29 Draft letter from Egisto Macchi to Robert Wilson, undated, ff. 1–2: 1 (FEM, fasc. ‘Bohème–Preventivi Bohème’).
  - 30 With regard to Macchi’s interest in Nō theatre, see Angela Carone, ‘Gettare nuova luce sul passato. Le regie di Egisto Macchi per l’*Euridice* e *Il Combattimento di Tancredi e Clorinda*’, *Philomusica on-line*, XVI/2, 2017, pp. 227–247: 237.
  - 31 Giuliano Montaldo was not the only member of his family to be called upon for the *Bohème* project: his daughter Elisabetta was responsible for designing and creating the costumes, some

sketches for which may be seen in FEM, fasc. 'Bohème'. Macchi's idea for the stage costumes was that they should not be tied to a specific time, but that they should be simple and evocative in their elegance.

- 32 See the document (without author, undated) 'Proposta di trascrizione per voci e 15 strumenti e riduzione in un solo grande atto delle opere: Rigoletto di Giuseppe Verdi e La sonnambula di Vincenzo Bellini' (FEM, fasc. 'Bohème-Vario materiale e preventivi').
- 33 Michele Girardi, 'La poetica realtà della *Bohème*', in: *La bohème di Puccini*, Parma: Teatro Regio, 2004, pp. 65–108: 106 (revised Italian version of chapter IV, "La Bohème": The Poetic Reality', in: Michele Girardi, *Puccini: His International Art*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000, pp. 99–144).

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