

Verdi's *La Forza del Destino* ("The Force of Destiny") is set in 18th-century Spain. Alvaro has accidentally killed the father of his beloved, Leonora, during the lovers' attempted elopement. Separately, they flee. Leonora's brother, Carlo, swears vengeance on both her and their father's murderer. Leonora first seeks refuge at a convent, and then goes to live as a hermit in a cave. Carlo and Alvaro meet during a military encounter, and Carlo discovers the true identity of his adversary just after Alvaro is carried away, wounded. Alvaro joins the Church as a monk, but is followed by Carlo who enrages Alvaro to the point of a duel. They fight near Leonora's cave, interrupting her prayers, and she goes to see what is causing the commotion. As she emerges from her cave, the lovers recognize each other, and Alvaro cries that he has spilled the blood of yet another of her family. She rushes off to help her fatally wounded brother, but Carlo, with his last bit of strength, stabs Leonora, and she dies in Alvaro's arms. The Overture, utilizing several themes from the opera, reflects the strong emotions of the work, though it does not follow the progress of the story.

In 1883, the year that he graduated from the Milan Conservatory, Puccini submitted his first opera, the one-act *Le Villi*, to a competition sponsored by the publisher Edoardo Sonzogno. The work won nothing, but it did bring him to the attention of the composer (of *Mefistofele*) and librettist (of Verdi's *Otello* and *Falstaff*) Arrigo Boito, who, in turn, introduced him to the powerful publisher Giulio Ricordi. Ricordi sensed Puccini's genius, and on May 31, 1884, *Le Villi* was produced on his recommendation at the Teatro dal Verme in Milan with gratifying success. Ricordi started to pay the young composer a small monthly stipend against future revenues, and Puccini set to work on his second opera, *Edgar*, whose libretto the poet Ferdinando Fontana, author of the text for *Le Villi*, based on Alfred de Musset's five-act verse drama of 1832, *La Coupe et les Lèvres* ("The Cup and the Lips"). *Edgar* was premiered at La Scala on April 21, 1889 with only modest success – it closed after just three performances – and Puccini revised it thoroughly over the next three years, cutting almost the entire fourth act (some of which ended up in Act III of *Tosca*) but retaining its prelude to open the opera, and shortening several vocal numbers and reassigning others to different characters. This version was produced successfully in Ferrara in February 1892, but Puccini re-worked the score yet again, rewriting some of the vocal lines, making a few more cuts, and eliminating the Act I Prelude completely. This definitive three-act version of *Edgar* was first staged at a festival of Puccini's works in Buenos Aires on July 8, 1905.

The title character of *Edgar*, set in Flanders in 1302, is torn between the innocent village maiden Fidelia and his former lover, the exotic Gypsy girl Tigrana. Though he now prefers the pure love of Fidelia, Edgar is baited by Tigrana into defending her when the village spurns her, and they flee together. Edgar soon tires of his debauchery with Tigrana, however, and joins a passing platoon of soldiers. He survives a battle and returns to Fidelia, but the jealous Tigrana steals upon the happy couple and stabs the girl in the heart. Edgar throws himself across Fidelia's lifeless body as soldiers lead the Gypsy seductress away. The Act I Prelude from the 1892 version of *Edgar* opens with delicate music suggesting both the dawn setting of the first scene and Fidelia's guiltless love. It continues with dramatic music associated with Tigrana and a sweeping melody from an aria for Fidelia (cut in Puccini's extensive revisions) before closing with the return of the halcyon dawn music.

In *Edgar*, Fidelia's brother, Frank, is also in love with Tigrana, and he sings of his conflicted feelings in the passionate aria *Questo amor, vergogna mia* ("I want to reject and forget this love which makes me feel shame").

*Il Trovatore*, set in northern Spain at the beginning of the 15th century, is a melodramatic tale of nobles and Gypsies, and the vengeful circumstances that bring them together to share tragedy. Act II opens amid the fires and furnaces of the Gypsy camp in Biscay with *Vedi! le fosche notturne spoglie* ("See! The endless sky casts off"), the famous "Anvil Chorus."

In *Il Trovatore*, the Count di Luna sentences the Gypsy Azucena to a fiery death at the stake on suspicion of spying. Manrico, whom Azucena has raised as a son without revealing to him that he is actually the brother separated in infancy from di Luna, sets off to rescue her in the aria *Di quella pira* ("The horrible flames").

In turn-of-the-20th-century Nagasaki, B.F. Pinkerton, an American naval lieutenant, takes as his bride the geisha Cio-Cio-San, known as Madame Butterfly. Soon after the wedding, Pinkerton leaves Japan and Butterfly. Three years pass with no word from him. Suzuki, Butterfly's maid, has abandoned hope for his return, but the former geisha remains certain that her husband will come back, as he promised, *Un bel di* – "One Fine Day." Butterfly constantly watches Nagasaki harbor for his ship with the child that she has borne him. Pinkerton's ship finally returns, and the tender *Humming Chorus* accompanies Butterfly's vigil as she waits, sleepless, through the night for Pinkerton's arrival. When Pinkerton appears the following morning, however, it is only to ask Butterfly to let him and his new American wife adopt her baby. Butterfly is shocked at the request, but agrees to surrender the child if Pinkerton will come back in a half-hour to claim the boy for himself. Left alone, Butterfly determines that the only honorable action is ritual suicide. She calls the child to her, smothers him with kisses, and places a small American flag in his hand. She steps behind a screen. A moment later, a knife is heard falling from her lifeless hand to the floor. Pinkerton, too late, arrives, calling her name.

*Tosca* is set in Rome, during two days in June 1800. The title character, the opera singer Florio Tosca, is in love with Mario Cavaradossi, a painter and a supporter of a republican movement against royalist oppression. Tosca arrives at the church of Sant' Andrea della Valle in Rome to arrange a meeting that evening with Cavaradossi, who is at work on a picture of Mary Magdalene that he has based on the face of the lovely woman who comes frequently to pray at the side chapel. Tosca and Cavaradossi sing of their love until she recognizes the face of the Marchesa Attavanti in his Mary Magdalene. Tosca accuses him of infidelity, but he convinces her of his faithfulness, and they leave separately. The Sacristan arrives with a report that royalist forces have defeated Napoleon's republican troops at Marengo. A special *Te Deum* will be sung immediately at Sant' Andrea, and the choristers and congregation hurriedly assemble. Their preparations are abruptly broken off by the arrival of Baron Scarpia, the treacherous chief of Rome's police, who has come searching for an escaped prisoner. He enters the side chapel and emerges with the Marchesa Attavanti's fan, which was mistakenly left behind. Tosca returns, looking for Cavaradossi. Scarpia, enflamed with lust for Tosca and set on destroying

Cavaradossi both for his republicanism and his love of the singer, incites her jealousy by showing her the Marchesa's fan and suggesting that the painter has left for a tryst. Tosca turns to the painting, declares that the Marchesa will not have her Mario, and runs off to surprise the supposedly guilty pair. Scarpia calls after her (*Va, Tosca* – "*Go, Tosca*") and then joins the brilliant *Te Deum* that closes Act I, but as an aside vows to satisfy his lust for the singer: *Tosca, mi fai dimenticare Iddio!* ("*Tosca, you make me forget God!*").

*Nabucco*, Verdi's first great success, concerns the faithfulness of the Hebrews to God during their Babylonian Captivity. The Overture is a potpourri of three themes from the opera. In the great chorus of the Hebrews, *Va, Pensiero* ("*Fly, Thoughts*"), they express longing for their lost freedom and their distant homeland.

Musetta's dazzling waltz-aria (*Quando me'n vo* – "*When I walk out*") occurs during the second act of Puccini's *La Bohème*. The scene is set in the Latin Quarter of Paris, bustling with noisy Christmas celebrations. The painter Marcello and his friends, the lovers Rodolfo and Mimi, join the revelry at the Café Momus just before the arrival of Marcello's old flame – Musetta. She is followed by the pompous and decrepit Alcindoro, her present patron. She flirts with Marcello, but he refuses to notice her, so she sings her seductive waltz to let him know that "when I walk along the street all the people stop and stare, and admire my beauty from head to toe." Marcello cannot remain indifferent to her enticements. She feigns pain from a tight shoe, and sends Alcindoro off to the cobbler for its repair. Marcello and Musetta embrace as he departs, order their supper, and then hastily leave. Alcindoro returns, only to find Musetta gone and the bill awaiting him.

The ingenious plot of Puccini's *Gianni Schicchi* was drawn from a tiny reference in Dante's *Inferno*, where the opera's title character was sentenced to the eighth level of hell for apparently doing the poet out of an expected inheritance. The one-act opera, set in 13th-century Florence, opens just after the death of the wealthy Buoso Donati, an event eagerly anticipated by his voracious family. The relatives devour Donati's will immediately upon his demise, and are appalled to discover that he has left his entire fortune to the church. Before Donati's passing is publicly announced, they call in Gianni Schicchi, a wily peasant who knows every loophole in the law, and plead with him to get the will changed at any cost. Lauretta, Schicchi's daughter and the fiancée of Donati's nephew Rinuccio, clinches the family's argument with her lovely song, *O mio babbino caro* – "*O, my dear daddy*." Schicchi relents, and agrees to impersonate Donati and dictate a revised will to the notary. Instead of leaving the family their requests, however, the sly Schicchi bequeaths the most valuable items to himself while they stand by, furious but unable to protest. The opera ends as Schicchi announces that he will use his new wealth to help Lauretta and Rinuccio begin their married life together.

*Don Carlo* is set during the 16th-century Spanish Inquisition. The chorus *Spuntato ecco il di d'esultanza* ("*The exultant day has dawned*") is the music sung by the crowd gathered in Madrid to witness an *auto-de-fé*, the public burning of heretics.

Don Carlo, Infante of Spain, and Elisabetta of Valois are in love, but she has been forced to marry Carlo's father, King Philip, for reasons of state. In Act I, Carlo's friend Rodrigo, Marquis of Posa, urges him to forget his love for Elisabetta and dedicate himself instead to ending Philip's oppressive rule of Flanders. In their stirring duet, *Dio, che nell'alma infondere* ("*Oh God, who wished to instill love and hope in our souls*"), they pledge themselves to the cause of liberty as Carlo tries to conceal his feelings when Elisabetta arrives with Philip and monks pray before the tomb of King Carlo V, Don Carlo's grandfather.

Don Carlo and Rodrigo have fomented a revolt in subjugated Flanders. Rodrigo has contrived to have all the guilt fall upon him to save Carlo, and the two meet in Rodrigo's prison cell on the eve of his execution. Rodrigo sings of his devotion to Carlo in the aria *Per me giunto è il di supremo* ("*This is my last and greatest day*").

*Turandot* is based on Carlo Gozzi's play set in mythical China. The Princess Turandot will marry any man who can answer three riddles. Anyone who fails must forfeit his life, and the Imperial Palace at Peking has been the scene of many resultant executions. Prince Calaf, unknown in Peking, accepts Turandot's challenge, and answers her riddles. Faced with the necessity of marrying Calaf, Turandot begs him to release her from her promise. He offers to do so only if she can discover his name by the following dawn. Turandot commands that no one in Peking shall sleep until the name of the Unknown Prince is revealed. In *Nessun dorma*, Calaf comments on the situation and sings of his love for the icy Turandot, whose heart he vows to melt with a kiss. Turandot is stirred by the depth of Calaf's love, and the two are united at the end of the opera.

*La Traviata*, set in Paris and environs, circa 1850, opens with a party scene in Violetta's elegant city house. Among her guests is Gastone, who introduces her to a young man, Alfredo Germont, who, Gastone tells her, has admired her from afar for some time. Gastone asks Alfredo to sing the company a drinking song, but he is reluctant to do so until Violetta adds her voice to the request. Alfredo begins a "Brindisi" (the "drinking song," *Libiamo ne' lieti calici*), and soon Violetta and all the guests join in praise of the pleasures of wine.

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