

**A MISUNDERSTOOD LITTLE BIRD:
PUCCINI'S *LA RONDINE***

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Unlike my previous presentations, tonight I am not going to address one of the towering staples of the repertory. Rather, I will consider the least successful work written by Giacomo Puccini in his maturity, *La Rondine*. First performed in 1917, *La Rondine* has had a rather skimpy performance history. For example, after a few performances in the '20s and early '30s it was not staged by the Metropolitan Opera until 2008, with a subsequent revival in 2013. That production was video-cast and is available on YouTube. In Chicago, *La Rondine* was seen at the Ravinia summer opera in the early '30s, probably because it had a favorite role for the beloved soprano, Lucrezia Bori. Chicago Opera theater produced it in 1981 and Lyric Opera mounted a production, its first ever with surtitles, in 1985.¹ But it has not been seen here in the ensuing thirty-five years. There was no production at all in Britain until 1965.²

This relative obscurity is unjustified. *La Rondine* is a misunderstood and underappreciated piece which should resonate with a sensitive listener.

Part of the problem is that *La Rondine* is hard to categorize. It is often called an “operetta” but, despite its origins and some minor plot parallels to *Die Fledermaus*, it is not a fundamentally humorous work. Some critics call it tragi-comic work³, and others find resemblances to French opera-comique.⁴ Puccini came closest to the mark when he wrote that it was “a light, sentimental opera with touches of comedy.”⁵ It is *sui generis*. One review described it as “a genre piece that transcends genre, an elegant Italian coupé built on a Viennese chassis.”⁶

The genesis of *La Rondine* explains its connection to the world of operetta. In October 1913, Puccini visited Vienna to see a German language performance of *The Girl of the Golden West*. He also went to see a new Franz Lehár operetta at the Karltheater. This is when he was given an incredibly tempting proposal by the directors of this operetta company, Heinrich Berté and Otto Eisenschütz. They offered him the sum of 200,000 Austrian kroner plus an award of the

Star of the Order of Franz Joseph to write some six to ten numbers for a new German language operetta which they would produce. In current dollars this would be about \$1,000,000. By comparison, a leading Viennese operetta composer, Leo Fall, had recently been offered less than a sixth as much for his extremely successful *Rose von Stamboul*.⁷

Even so, it took Puccini a while to decide to accept this offer, and his conception proved to be more serious than that intended by the Viennese. Although he was a personal friend and admirer of Franz Lehár⁸, whose inscribed photograph Puccini kept in his home in Torre del Lago, Puccini had no intention of writing a conventional operetta with a few numbers interspersed with lots of spoken dialogue. Nor did he want to write a piece filled with the frivolities and conventions of Johann Strauss and the Golden Age operetta style.⁹ He wrote: “I will never write an operetta; a comic opera yes.”¹⁰ Perhaps feeling challenged by the recent 1910 success of Richard Strauss in this genre, Puccini even said he wanted his new work to be “like *Rosenkavalier* but more diverting and more organic.”¹¹

Reflecting his demanding conception, Puccini rejected a proposed libretto, finding it was “the usual operetta clumsily made and banal ... with no characters shown in depth, without any originality and interest.”¹² In the end he chose to set a subject proposed by the experienced librettists Alfred Maria Willner and Heinz Reichert.¹³ Unlike most operettas of the day, the story he selected had a bittersweet rather than comic ending. Puccini employed Giuseppe Adami, who later worked with him on *Il Tabarro* and *Turandot*, to redo the text into Italian and to accommodate his insistent demands for theatrically effective language.

Puccini certainly did not treat the commission as “easy money” - a huge payment for quickly writing a few numbers. A leading commentator noted that “[a] less conscientious

composer would have just scribbled off the first thing that came into his head, and gratefully pocketed the cash.”¹⁴ But Puccini “settled to work with all his wonted care and circumspection.”¹⁵ He took over two years to compose a work with an orchestral brilliance and an often exceptional lyricism that reflected all the skills he had developed by his maturity. Puccini biographer Mosco Carner asserts that “*La Rondine* surpasses any operetta known to me in craftsmanship and attention to detail ... [It is] as accomplished in its technique as any of Puccini’s operas.”¹⁶

But these were hardly the optimal years for an Italian composer to be creating a work commissioned by a Viennese operetta theater. World War I broke out in 1914, and by May, 1915, Italy had entered the war – as an adversary of the Austro-Hungarian empire. Puccini was neither a jingoist nor an idealist about the war. He had friends in Germany and Austria and sometimes even called himself a “Germanophile.” He knew that the war would not be good for his income as a composer with works produced throughout Europe. But he also was disturbed by the cruelty and futility of the conflict at a time when most people were swept away by patriotic fervor. Shortly before Italy entered the war he wrote to his close confidante, Sybil Seligman: “War is too horrible a thing whatever the result; for whether it be victory or defeat, human lives are sacrificed. We live in a terrible world...”¹⁷

A sentimental or comic operetta hardly fitted the mood of those dark times.¹⁸ Worse still, Puccini was suspected by some Italians and Frenchmen as being too sympathetic to the enemy. He had not contributed a piece to a collection of musical pieces by leading Allied composers in response to the occupation of Belgium, variously claiming that he had not been asked or that he wanted to stay neutral, as Italy still was at the time. It didn’t matter that the Germans, too, began

to see him as one of the enemy and banned his operas. The fact that Puccini was writing a work for the Austrian foe was enough for Léon Daudet, the French right-wing nationalist and editor of *L'Action Française*, to brand Puccini as a traitor to the allies, “trafficking with the enemy.”¹⁹

Regardless, it was now totally impractical for Puccini to have a contract for a work which would be premiered in Vienna. Puccini had completed the score by early 1916 and he wanted to negotiate out of the contract. There were several meetings at Interlaken in neutral Switzerland. Puccini’s publisher, Casa Ricordi, was not interested in obtaining limited rights for the premiere or Italy. Perhaps this was because Puccini’s long-time patron, Giulio Ricordi, had died and the directorship of the firm was now held by Giulio’s son, Tito, a brusque businessman with a rather abrasive relationship with Puccini. Tito Ricordi disparaged the work as “bad Lehár” and declined to take on the contract.²⁰ In any event, Ricordi clearly did not want to share rights with the Austrians.

Puccini turned to Ricordi’s great rival, Casa Sonzogno, which eagerly took on the opportunity to publish a Puccini opera. Sonzogno acquired the rights for the world premiere with a division of subsequent performance rights among various European and American countries.²¹

Sonzogno determined the best place for the premiere would be Monte Carlo, since Monaco was technically a neutral country which also happened to have one of the most innovative opera companies of the era. The world premiere took place on March 27, 1917 with what was in many ways a dream cast, starring Puccini’s favorite soprano, Gilda dalla Rizza, and the exceptionally sweet-sounding tenor, Tito Schipa.

The reviews of the premiere were very favorable. The performance received twenty curtain calls. But matters soon went downhill. The Italian premiere in Bologna in June, 1917 was

tepidly received, and Puccini was disgusted by the first performance at La Scala, Milan under Leopoldo Mugnone, complaining that it had “no finesse, no nuance, no souplesse, three things so necessary in *La Rondine*!”²² After the war ended, the Viennese premiere, with the libretto translated back into German, was a fiasco.

The ongoing hostile critical attitude undermined Puccini’s hopes for *La Rondine*. Indeed, this attitude persisted for decades. When *La Rondine* finally premiered in New York in 1928, *New York Times* music critic William James Henderson called it “the afternoon off of a genius.”²³ Writers who normally wrote favorably about Puccini, such as Richard Specht, derided it as “feeble from beginning to end.”²⁴ Although in the ensuing decades scholars gradually came to recognize its musical merits, in 1985 the Lyric Opera program for its only mounting of *La Rondine* still took a surprisingly hostile attitude, noting that it was thought of as “the runt of [Puccini’s] operatic litter” and that as an operetta it was “seltzer water rather than champagne.”²⁵ Even in this century critics, while conceding there are excellent high points, have denigrated *La Rondine* as “second drawer Puccini” or “Puccini lite.”²⁶

Puccini was deeply troubled by the failure of *La Rondine* to achieve the success that all the other operas of his maturity had enjoyed. Gilda dalla Rizza relates that Puccini called *La Rondine* his dear forgotten child” and asserts that “he died with the wound of *La Rondine* in his heart.”²⁷ Puccini described it as “one of my most sincere compositions”²⁸ and “for me, perhaps, my best music.”²⁹ But at other times, he was frustrated, calling it “absolute trash” or “una solenne porcheria,”³⁰ a solemn pig’s mess, saying “I curse the day I made a contract with Vienna.”³¹

Puccini was uncertain whether there was a flaw in the drama. He drafted two revised versions, both changing the *dénouement* of the final act. The first revision, which was produced

in 1920 in Palermo, also transformed the secondary male lead, Prunier, from a tenor to a baritone and converted a previously composed song, *Morire*, into an aria for the principal tenor, Ruggero, about the excitement of Paris. The second revision, which made the finale much more confrontational and traditionally melodramatic, was never performed in Puccini's lifetime. However, this revision became the basis for a recent, radically re-conceived version produced by Marta Domingo in Los Angeles and Washington.

In the end, notwithstanding some mountings of Ms. Domingo's production, Puccini's original concept has become the performing standard. This consensus is justified. Puccini never ceased attempting to improve his operas. He revised every one except, for obvious reasons, the posthumously finished *Turandot*. But, in my view, a leading Puccini scholar, Michele Girardi, correctly concluded that, in trying to revise *La Rondine* "for the first time, Puccini's second thoughts seem worse than the original." As we shall see, the real issue is not with the plot but with the ability of audiences to recognize its real meaning and import.³²

The story of *La Rondine* is as follows:

Magda di Civry is the mistress of the banker Rambaldo. Among the guests at a soirée in her elegant Parisian home is the rather self-satisfied but oddly charming poet, Prunier.³³ Prunier mocks the news that sentimental love is back in fashion. To illustrate his point, Prunier begins reciting his new poem about a girl named Doretta who spurned the wealth offered by a king because she wanted true love. When Prunier says he hadn't found an ending for his tale, Magda takes up the challenge. In the best known aria of the opera, *Il bel sogno di Doretta*, Magda imagines how Doretta was inspired by the kiss of a student and insisted that love matters more than riches. Rambaldo, who puts little stock in romantic fantasies, responds by presenting Magda

with a pearl necklace which he had previously forgotten to give.

Magda recounts to her rather ditzy girlfriends the one brief moment in her life when she broke free from conventional social restraints. In the aria, *Ore dolci e divine*, she tells how she once escaped from the watchful eye of her aunt to go to the dance hall Bal Bullier. There she met a young student. He ordered two bock beers and gave a large tip to the waiter. They then wrote their names on the table. In her imagination she heard a strange tune extolling love but warning that one pays for it with tears. And that was the entirety of her story.

Meanwhile, Prunier entertains the women by fortune telling. Reading Magda's palm, he tells her that she is like a swallow (*rondine* in Italian) who will leave the nest in search of happiness but ultimately return.

While this is happening, Ruggero, a young provincial from Montauban in the south of France, arrives at the party with an introduction from his father to Rambaldo. Magda does not actually see him. When Ruggero asks what would be the best way to enjoy a first night in Paris, Magda's spirited maid Lisette suggests going to the Bal Bullier. The guests leave. It turns out that Lisette is Prunier's lover and they have a charming duet.

Magda, who initially planned on retiring, sees the card where Ruggero wrote down the name "Bullier." Thinking of the Doretta story and her own memories, she impetuously decides to go there costumed as a working class girl. "Who would ever recognize me?"

Act II takes place at Bullier. It is a lively place, full of young people enthusiastically dancing. Magda arrives and tries to avoid the attentions of various young men. Thinking that she is waiting for someone, the revelers take her to the table where Ruggero is sitting alone, assuming that he, too, is waiting to meet someone. As Magda and Ruggero chat, he stresses that

he wants true love with an unpretentious girl like those he knew in his home town. They are smitten with each other. Magda and Ruggero join in the dancing and then sit down. When Ruggero orders two bock beers, Magda insists that he tell the waiter to keep the substantial change as a tip. When he asks her name she pretends it is “Paulette,” writing it on the table. She asks Ruggero to do the same.

In the meanwhile, Prunier arrives at Bullier with Lisette, who has adorned herself in Magda’s best clothes. Although Lisette is afraid that Magda has recognized her, Magda feigns ignorance while engaging in sarcastic banter with Prunier about his taste in women. Ruggero offers a toast, which expands into a quartet and then a magnificently lyrical concertato ensemble, one of the finest pieces Puccini ever wrote. In the ensemble Magda express her joy about how her dreams are coming true.

Suddenly Rambaldo appears, recognizes Magda and insists that she go home with him. Prunier has discretely led Ruggero away to avoid the confrontation. Magda desperately pleads that she has found love and that their affair is over. With surprising grace Rambaldo accepts her decision, while warning that she might regret it.

The lively evening slowly dies down. The party-goers depart, leaving Magda and Ruggero together. A distant voice sings, warning people to not trust in love which dies with the light of day. With the orchestra gently playing the theme of the concertato, Magda trembles with hope and fear. “I love you, but you don’t know. I am too happy. This is my dream and I am trembling and weeping.” As the orchestra grows ever softer the two new lovers leave, singing “My love!”

In Act III, Magda and Ruggero have created a lovers’ nest on the Côte d’Azur, but their

money is running out. Ruggero tells Magda that he has written to his mother for consent to their marriage. He depicts his ideal of a peaceful life together in the country with children, living near his family. But Magda can only think about how she has never let Ruggero know about her background as a Parisian kept woman. Ruggero goes off stage.

Lisette and Prunier arrive. At Prunier's suggestion, Lisette had attempted to become a cabaret actress but had been hissed off the stage in Nice. She wants to return to service with Magda, who agrees. Prunier lets Magda know that Rambaldo is still waiting for her to return and suggests that her apparently idyllic current life is not really suited for her.

Ruggero returns, overjoyed with the news that his mother has consented to his marriage with a pure and good woman who would be a fine mother for their children.

At this point Magda determines that their affair has no future. She gently, but determinedly, tries to break it off. "I can be your lover, but not your wife." In a tender and heartbreaking duet, the totally stunned Ruggero pleads with her. She responds to him as a mother would to a son, telling him that he will eventually overcome his heartbreak while she, like a swallow, will take her sorrowful flight to her old nest. *La Rondine*, "The Swallow," thus gently ends with Magda departing, singing one solitary syllable, a very soft final "ah."

Critics readily note the resemblances of this story to other operas. Notwithstanding Puccini's aversion to operettas, it contains various traditional operetta tropes such as a party with energetic dancing and a saucy maid. The scene where Magda meets Lisette at Bullier dressed up in her mistress's clothes is straight out of Johan Strauss Jr.'s *Die Fledermaus*.

Erudite critics have commented on plot similarities with Massenet's seldom heard but memorable opera, *Sapho*, where a provincial man falls in love with a worldly woman and later

learns of her background. She eventually leaves him.³⁴ Ironically, Massenet's plot derived from a story written by Alphonse Daudet, the father of the rabid French nationalist who so bitterly attacked Puccini for working with the Austrians on *La Rondine*.

There also is a slight resemblance to Richard Strauss' bittersweet comedy *Der Rosenkavalier* in the theme of the worldly woman who relinquishes a younger lover.

Certainly there are echoes of Puccini's own *La Bohème*, another story about falling in love in Paris. The Bal Bullier scene inevitably recalls the celebration at Café Momus in Act II of *Bohème*. The gentle, romantic ending of Act II with Magda and Ruggero going off-stage singing "Amor" mirrors the magical ending of Act I in *Bohème*, while their final parting resembles the end of Act III in *Bohème* where Mimí and Rodolfo separate at the Barrière d'Enfer. Some commentators perceive the characters in *La Rondine* to be the protagonists of *Bohème* grown older and more realistic in a later, more cynical era.³⁵

Above all there are the very close parallels to the story of Verdi's *La Traviata*. Verdi's Parisian courtesan abandons her wealthy protector and her luxurious but sterile lifestyle for a romantic existence in the countryside with a provincial lover from the south of France. She is forced to abandon him because of the demands of social convention imposed by his father. But while Verdi's Violetta fiercely but futilely struggles to preserve her love and eventually dies, Puccini's Magda voluntarily relinquishes hers and lives to return to her very comfortable nest. As we shall see, critics who misunderstand the real meaning and power of *La Rondine* often ground their arguments on invidious comparisons with Verdi's tragic masterpiece.

Why then has *La Rondine* had such a difficult time achieving a success like Puccini's other operas?

This certainly cannot be justly attributed to the music. Although some early critics felt that it lacked Puccini's usual melodic inspiration³⁶, this is no longer the prevailing view. Subtle and beautiful throughout, the musical high points are truly magnificent.

A recent review asserts that *La Rondine* "has melodies as great as any Puccini wrote."³⁷ Magda's *Sogno di Doretta*, which was gorgeously sung by Dame Kiri Te Kanawa in the movie *A Room With a View*, has been called by an otherwise severe critic "one of the great soprano arias in all of Puccini, perhaps in all of the repertoire."³⁸ The quartet with chorus in Act II receives equally high acclaim. Michele Girardi calls it "an enthralling piece, in Puccini's best lyric vein"³⁹ while William Berger asserts it is "ravishing" and "one of the high points of Puccini's art."⁴⁰ The brief but piquant duettino between Prunier and Lisette in Act I also gets high praise.⁴¹ For me, the understated but emotionally-laden ending of Act II is overwhelming, and the powerful but restrained final scene is very moving.

The understated subtlety of these finales may disappoint those expecting *fortissimi* climaxes⁴², but this was intentional. Puccini wrote his librettist, Adami: "I have taken out all the histrionics and the end is reached ... without howling or insults from the orchestra."⁴³

Indeed, the orchestration of *La Rondine* has generated great praise. Befitting its genesis in the realm of operetta, there are waltzes and more contemporary dance tunes: a tango, a one-step and a slow fox-trot. The scoring is scintillating. Like the endings of the acts, Puccini's orchestration offers great rewards to those who pay attention. The program notes to the 2008 Lucca production mention "the delicate orchestra that demands the maximum attention from the public. A reserve and a delicacy to which Puccini had not accustomed us."⁴⁴ Musicologists also comment on the advanced harmonies in *La Rondine*, which Puccini continued to assimilate into

his personal style.⁴⁵ One critic even claims to find hints of Stravinskian bi-tonality or even Schoenbergian atonality, although this quite frankly eludes me.⁴⁶ William Berger gives perhaps the best summary of the music:

“Melodic fertility is seen to flower with renewed vitality without renouncing the harmonic conquests of the earlier operas, while his mastery of orchestral color is never shown to better advantage.”⁴⁷

In sum, *La Rondine* is an unfamiliar, understated and subtle work which requires and rewards serious listening. As Berger notes its “real treasures become apparent after repeated experiences.”⁴⁸ I assure you it is worth the effort.

If the problem is not in the music, then what? Certainly, this sentimental comedy was ill-starred to arrive in Italy in the midst of a brutal war. Some saw it as “a work of too little consequence for such grim times.”⁴⁹

In reaction to this theory at least one critic tries to argue that *La Rondine* is a work that actually was in tune with the weary zeitgeist of the world after 1914. William Hill contends that the “spiritual ennui” of Magda’s salon echoes “modernist art such as *Wozzeck*, Eliot’s *The Waste Land* and *Prufrock*, and *The Second Coming* by Yeats.” He hears in the vapid talk of Magda’s friends and the strained aestheticism of Prunier the tedious conversations in *Prufrock* where “women come and go, talking of Michelangelo.” He even finds significance that Eliot inserts the words “swallow, swallow” near the end of the *The Waste Land*.⁵⁰ This is exceptionally strained revisionism arguing for something that neither Puccini nor Adami intended. It is scarcely credible that anyone in the 1917 audiences perceived *La Rondine* this way.

Far more credible is the likelihood that audiences then – and indeed most contemporary audiences – have a hard time dealing with a work that is *sui generis*. Many critics recognize that

it is a hybrid and, being neither a true comedy nor a high tragedy, it “falls between two stools.”⁵¹

Micaella Baranello places *La Rondine* “in a purgatory between opera and operetta.”⁵²

Marta Domingo’s radical revision of the *La Rondine* exemplifies the attitude of those who feel that *La Rondine* could not succeed unless it were either side-splittingly comic or melodramatically tragic. Taking off from Puccini’s never-performed third version, she further revised the plot. Rather than seeing Magda as an intelligent woman in a dull relationship with a wealthy gentleman, she imagines (without any basis in any version of the libretto) that the relationship was abusive and humiliating.⁵³ Similarly, she gives Ruggero a vicious temperament at odds with everything in the libretto which shows him as gentle and naive. Completely altering Act III, she has Ruggero discover evidence of Magda’s relationship with the banker, flying into a classic macho fury and rejecting her. Magda does not return to her nest; she drowns herself in the Mediterranean.⁵⁴

This approach is wrong-headed. As one commentator says, it “tips the balance of what Puccini labeled a lyrical comedy... into verismo-style tragedy.”⁵⁵ An article in *Opera News* is more blunt and precise. Ms. Domingo’s version “is a betrayal of all that has preceded it.”⁵⁶

The same mistaken belief that *La Rondine* fails because the ending is not tragic is the core of arguments that denigrate it by comparison with *La Traviata*. The normally perceptive scholar Julian Budden calls it “a *Traviata* from which all the larger issues have been banished.”⁵⁷ Another critic dismisses it in part because he sees it as “an elegant but more superficial *La Traviata*, allowing his courtesan heroine to remain poignantly but definitely alive at the end.”⁵⁸

These comments reflect the fundamental misunderstanding about the real value and meaning of *La Rondine* and its relevance to modern audiences.

This is not an opera about heroic stands or the sadness of death. To the extent that it concerns a woman whose dreams are impeded by social conventions, it is neither tragic nor an operetta where those conventions are miraculously circumvented to enable a happy ending.

Verdi's Violetta struggles with heroic dignity to defend her integrity against the insistence of her lover's father that a woman with her past cannot be accepted in a "good" family. Even so, she must yield when she is forced to acknowledge the overwhelming power of the social mores of her era.

Magda may have a similar past, but no family or social pressure compels her to end the relationship with Ruggero. In fact, she knows that his family consents to their marriage, although they are ignorant about her background.

La Rondine is an opera about an intelligent woman who, without outside pressure, ultimately considers whether her dreams are realistic. It is supremely about ordinary people – that is, almost everybody in the audience. Ordinary people do not have melodramatic or tragic lives but at some point most do confront painful choices between realistic self-recognition and the pursuit of dreams.

It is highly significant that, in an opera with this central theme, the word "sogno" ("dream") recurs so frequently, especially at the key moments of the drama.

Magda's great aria is about "*il sogno di Doretta*," the fictional Doretta's dream. Its remarkable structure highlights the extent to which Magda is really singing about her deepest hopes and fantasies. Accompanying himself at the piano, Prunier starts but does not finish his poem. He sings it to the same beautiful melody which Magda will take up to express her idea of how Doretta's story should end. However, the highest notes of the melody are heard only in the

orchestra, while Prunier mumbles banal trivialities such as “lovely creature” and “sweet enchantment.” But when Magda gets to this point in the aria her voice soars to the top of her register with a sustained high C as she exclaims with unforgettable emotional force “ah, mio sogno, ah, mia vita ” (“ah, my dream, ah, my life”).

When Prunier reads Magda’s palm to predict her future, he foretells that like a swallow she will “travel beyond the sea to a bright dreamland.”⁵⁹

Magda’s aria, *Ore dolce e divine*, recounts her one evanescent moment of escape, when she met a student at Bullier. This is her persistent fantasy. When she meets Ruggero at Bullier she desperately tries to recreate that dream as soon as he fortuitously orders two bock beers. She insists that, as in her idealized memory, Ruggero pay with a big coin and give the change as a tip. As in that memory, she writes her name, or rather her pretend name, on the tabletop and asks Ruggero to do the same.

In the magnificent ensemble developed out of Ruggero’s toast, Magda sings “my dream is coming true!”

Act II ends incandescently with Magda overwhelmed by the possibility that she actually could realize her dream. As the orchestra tenderly repeats the melody of the ensemble, she sings “[T]his is my dream and I am trembling and weeping.”⁶⁰

In Act III, as Magda steels herself to abandon her relationship with Ruggero, she contemplates how “with a single gesture I would destroy dreams, happiness, passion and love.”⁶¹

Why does Magda break off the relationship with Ruggero? The best answer is that the relationship was founded on an illusion. From the moment she met Ruggero, in circumstances redolent of her dream and in the very place where she had her one fleeting emotional encounter,

she tried to to fit him into her fantasy rather than considering Ruggero as he really was.

In Act III she realizes that Ruggero is a kind, decent and loving man with very conventional aspirations. It finally hits her that he is a provincial who dreams of nothing more than having a closely knit family, living with wife and kids in the backwaters of Montauban, with Maman always nearby. Magda recognizes that life with him would put her in the traditional role of a small-town wife and mother – a role completely different from the luxurious life she enjoyed when she gave soirées in glamorous Paris. Practical reality confronts her; her dream had omitted the reality that an eternal love nest is not possible. In the end, Magda concludes that the life she had previously led, her old nest, really fitted her better than where following her dream would ultimately land her. Michele Girardi perceptively notes that Ruggero “offers his beloved a life of family affection, to be lived in the provinces until death. What woman of the world would take this step lightly?”⁶²

Until then, Magda was “reliv[ing] in her fantasies her exciting of a *nuit d’amour* that happened long ago.”⁶³ Maria Giovanni Miggiani concludes that “she goes from seeking to renew a magic adventure of her past” into addressing “her fear of being imprisoned in an inescapable and suffocating mechanism.”⁶⁴ Another critic calls it “a fling ... which cannot weather the bright light of reality.”⁶⁵

Furthermore, in Act III Magda confronts financial reality. Just when she learns that Rambaldo will have her back, she faces the blunt fact that her idyllic love-nest with Ruggero is running out of cash.⁶⁶

Magda also internalized social values, and suffered from self-doubt, a feeling that she was inadequate for the life she had dreamed. And who among us does not sometimes feel unworthy

of our fondest dreams?

Gino Zampieri, who created a very intelligent production of *La Rondine* in Lucca to commemorate the 150th anniversary of Puccini's birth, precisely noted the central theme of the opera in an essay entitled "the triumph of the principle of reality." For Zampieri, this means the conflict between dreams and common sense.⁶⁷ For him this is not a trivial issue, but one weighted with intense pain. Zampieri writes:

"[H]er common sense makes her understand without possibility of escape that there is no place for her in the future with her young lover so dependent on his family. And the dream is extinguished. Like all those dreams which inevitably end at dawn. But how much pain!"

Miggiani notes that the conflict between dream and reality is also mirrored in the subplot. Magda's maid, Lisette, tested her dream of becoming an actress. The catcalls of the audience proved to Lisette that to her former life was more realistic. She, too, returns to her nest.

Miggiani emphasizes that the conflict between dreams and reality theme is highly relevant to today's audience. "Less retro than it might seem at first glance, this work tells us about the distance between dream and life, the unattainable and painful aspiration of all people to happiness."⁶⁸

Magda is the dominant protagonist of the opera. But a perceptive audience also should pay attention to Ruggero. At first glance, Ruggero is not very interesting, since he is essentially a person on whom Magda imposes her persistent fantasy. Despite his prominent role in the great Act II concertato, Ruggero's sole aria is perhaps the least inspiring moment in the score.⁶⁹ Perhaps this was deliberate on Puccini's part. As Michele Girardi comments, Ruggero's vision of domestic happiness in this aria is intended to show that he has "capacity only for insipid

tenderness.” Ruggero is naive and gullible; he apparently never questioned Magda about her background, nor even learned her real name.⁷⁰ William Berger comments that “[o]n paper Ruggero reads as the biggest nerd in all opera.”

Nonetheless, Berger concludes that, with a performance of ardor and innocence, Ruggero “can come off as a very sympathetic and attractive character.”

Indeed, Ruggero is a character with whom most of us should find great empathy. Few of us are so lucky as to never have had a romance fail, to never have had to suffer a beloved telling us that it is all over and cannot work out. Like most of us would be, Ruggero is devastated, certain that the loss is irreparable. But Ruggero does not react with operatic verismo violence. Like most of us, he just suffers. And, of course, Magda is right when she tells him that in time he will recover. If sensitively performed, it is a situation which should ring emotional bells of recognition.

Those who fail to appreciate *La Rondine* do not realize how meaningful it should be to a contemporary audience. One such critic, who loves most of Puccini’s operas, complains that “the grand moments of raw emotion ... never come, because Puccini has deliberately short-circuited the tears.”⁷¹

It is true there are no heat-breaking death scenes and that the story is presented with, for opera, great understatement. *La Rondine* is not a tragedy or a melodrama. Instead, it is something special in the operatic canon. “[I]t is a sophisticated story, and a very modern one.”⁷² One sensitive commentator concluded the flaw is not in the dramaturgy of Act III but in the expectations and misconceptions of the audience.⁷³

This is a beautifully set opera that should ring true for every one of us who has dealt with

the crushing of what others might consider to be merely mundane hopes and dreams, but which nonetheless meant so much to us. For all of us who ever have had doubts about our own self-worth and whether we are entitled to seek the fulfillment of our innermost hopes. For all of us who must compromise our dreams with reality.

La Rondine is an opera about us. And there is so much beautiful music.

NOTES

1. I saw both the Chicago Opera Theater and Lyric Opera of Chicago productions. I also had the opportunity to see (twice) a rather poor production of *La Rondine* at the Teatro dell'Opera in Rome in 1972, and a much better production in 2008 in Puccini's birthplace, Lucca, which was part of a celebration for the 150th anniversary of Puccini's birth. There is an old but fairly nice video starring Teresa Stratas, but I recommend the excellent and stylish Metropolitan Opera video with Angela Gheorghiu and Roberto Alagna.
2. In researching this paper during the COVID-19 pandemic, I requested from the Evanston Public Library a copy of Spike Hughes' book, Famous Puccini Operas, Dover Press, 1959. When I finally obtained access to this book I found that *La Rondine* was the only mature Puccini work not included, because the author concluded that "it cannot be said to be said to qualify as a 'famous' Puccini opera." *Id.* at 173.
3. Conrad Wilson, Giacomo Puccini, Phaidon Press, 1997 at 174.
4. Richard Traubner, Operetta, Oxford University Press, 1983, at 432.
5. James C. Whitson, "Puccini Without Tears", Opera News, January, 2009; [https://www.operanews.com/Opera_News_Magazine/2009/1/Features/Puccini_Without_Tears\(2\).html](https://www.operanews.com/Opera_News_Magazine/2009/1/Features/Puccini_Without_Tears(2).html); cf. George Martin, The Companion to 20th Century Opera, Dodd Mead 1984 ("the opera is bittersweet, more sentimental than comic").
6. Whitson, Opera News, *op. cit.*
7. Micaela Baranello, "The Swallow and the Lark": *La Rondine* and Viennese Operetta" at 114, in Arman Schwartz & Emanuele Senici, eds., Giacomo Puccini and His World, Princeton University Press, 2016. A few years ago Chicago Folksopera gave a well-received staged performance of *Rose of Stamboul*.
8. It has been suggested that Lehár was one of the composers who was considered by Puccini's estate and publishers to complete *Turandot*. William Weaver and Simonetta Puccini, eds., The Puccini Companion, W.H. Norton, 1994, at 253.
9. In the period between 1912 and the early '20 several others among the leading Italian opera composers turned to operetta. Leoncavallo, *Reginetta delle Rose* (1912) and *La Candidata* (1915); Mascagni, *Si* (1919), and Giordano, *Giove a Pompeii* (1921). See Traubner, *op. cit.*, at 422. This seems to argue against the theory that audiences in the wartime and immediate post-war era were not attuned to operetta.
10. Wilson, *op. cit.* at 116; cf. Luigi Ricci, "Puccini and La Rondine," Chicago Opera Theater program, 1985.
11. William Ashbrook, The Operas of Puccini, Cornell University Press, 1968, at 156.

12. Mosco Carner, Puccini, A Critical Biography, 2nd Edition, Holmes and Meier, 1974 at 415, quoting a letter Puccini wrote to a German colleague on December 14, 1913.
13. Micaela Baranello, *op. cit.*, suggests that this libretto may have been initially conceived for Lehár.
14. Vincent Seligman, Puccini Among Friends, Macmillan, 1938, at 255.
15. Carner, *op. cit.*, at 204.
16. Carner, *op. cit.* at 418.
17. Carner, *op. cit.*, at 210, quoting a letter dated on Puccini's 56th birthday, December 22, 1914.
18. However, one commentator manages to see the character of Rambaldo, the banker patron of Magda, the opera's protagonist, as reminding the 1917 audiences of the war profiteers of that era. William Hill, "Puccini, Modernism and 'La Rondine'", Island City Opera, 2016 <http://islandcityopera.org/puccini-modernism>. This is quite a stretch.
19. William Weaver and Simonetta Puccini, eds., *op. cit.* at 247.
20. Wilson, *op. cit.*, at 182.
21. The successful negotiations by which Puccini and Sonzogno obtained the rights to the premiere enabled Puccini to respond to Daudet's charges of treasonable dealings with the enemy: "I withdrew from our enemies something which was their property and I gave my opera to an Italian publisher. If this is my crime, I have reason to be proud of it." Michele Girardi, Puccini, His International Art, University of Chicago Press, 2000, at 349. This did not appease Daudet, who was not only a virulent nationalist but also a rabid anti-Semite. The eminent director of the Monte Carlo Opera, Raoul Gunsbourg, was Jewish. *See*, Baranello, *op. cit.* at 122.
22. Schwartz & Senici, eds, *op. cit.* at 255.
23. Roger Dettmer, "La Rondine" Lyric Opera of Chicago Program, 1985.
24. *See* Charles Osborne, The Complete Operas of Puccini, DaCapo Press, 1981, at 208.
25. Detmar, *op. cit.*
26. Chris Pasles, "Rondine" is Puccini Lite". Los Angeles Times, June 9, 2008 <https://www.latimes.com/archives/la-xpm-2008-jun-09-et-rondine9-story.html>; Robert Cummings, "La Rondine" 2009, <http://www.classical.net/music/recs/reviews/n/nxs10266dvda.php>.
27. Mary Jane Phillips-Matz, Puccini, A Biography, Northeastern University Press, 2002 at 246.

28. Wilson, *op. cit.*, at 183; *cf.* Whitson, *Opera News*, *op. cit.*
29. Ashbrook, *op. cit.*, at 161, quoting a letter a letter to Gatti Cazzaza, dated August 12, 1921.
30. Philipps-Matz, *op. cit.* at 232.
31. Giuseppe Adami, Ena Makin Ed., *Letters of Giacomo Puccini*, George G. Harrap & Co., 1928, at 198, quoting a letter dated September 9, 1914. Of course, both this statement and the “solemn porcheria” quote reflect Puccini’s frustrations while writing *La Rondine*, rather than his disappointment with its lack of success after the premiere.
32. Girardi, *op. cit.*, at 364.
33. Several commentators see Prunier as a parody of the Italian poet Gabrielle D’Annunzio. *See, e.g.*, Girardi, *op. cit.*, at 342.
34. *See* Baranello, *op. cit.* at 117; Girardi, *op. cit.* at 339.
35. *See* Pasles, *op. cit.*, discussing an essay by Barrymore Laurence Scherer, entitled *A Bird in a Gilded Cage* included with the Loren Maazel recording of the opera. *See also* Daniele Folena: “*La Rondine*: Un Libretto Inutile,” Teatro del Giglio Lucca program, 2008, finding parallels to the characters in *La Bohème*, “but more cynical, opportunistic, more superficial and less generous,” in tune with the ethos of the *belle époque*.
36. *See also*, Carner, *op. cit.* at 416.
37. William Burnett, “Reflecting on Puccini’s *La Rondine*,” www.operawarhorses.com/2007/11-30. (Burnett I)
38. Pasles, *op. cit.*
39. Girardi, *op. cit.*, at 352.
40. William Berger, *Puccini Without Excuses*, Vintage, 2005, at 228.
41. Berger, *op. cit.*, at 225; Osborne, *op. cit.*, at 211.
42. Roger Parker, ““Finesse, nuance, souplesse: the story of *La Rondine*,” EMI CD notes, 1997.
43. Girardi, *op. cit.*, at 362, quoting a letter from Puccini to Adami dated August 22, 1915; *cf.* Whitson, *op. cit.*
44. Gino Zampieri, “*La Rondine*, o il trionfo del principio di realtà”, Teatro del Giglio Lucca program, 2008.

45. See, e.g., Wilson, *op. cit.*, at 183.
46. William Hill, "Puccini, Modernism and 'La Rondine'", Island City Opera, 2016 <http://islandcityopera.org/puccini-modernism/>.
47. Berger, *op. cit.*, at 218.
48. *Id.*
49. Ian Luce, "Puccini: *La Rondine*" <http://www.musicweb-international.com/classrev/2000>.
50. Hill, *op. cit.*
51. See Carner, *op. cit.* at 416; Luce, *op. cit.*; see also, Seligman, *op. cit.* at 257: "this poor hybrid swallow, during its checkered flight, was always to suffer from its dubious origin; it could never quite make up its mind what sort of bird it was meant to be – operetta, or operatic ... and fell between the two."
52. Baranello, *op. cit.* at 112.
53. Commenting on the grace with which Rambaldo accepts, in Act II, Magda's determination to drop him for Ruggero, William Berger calls Rambaldo "the nicest, most civilized 'dirty old baritone' in all opera." Berger, *op. cit.* at 219.
54. See William Burnett "Marta Domingo's Reconceptualization of *Rondine* Returns to L. A. – June 7, 2008", operawarhorses.com, 9 June 2008 (Burnett II); Pasles, *op. cit.*; Whitson, *op. cit.*
55. Pasles, *op. cit.*
56. Whitson, *op. cit.*
57. Budden, *op. cit.* at 344; cf., Detmar, *op. cit.*: "patently patterned on *La Traviata* without having stirred the passion, or the compassion, that Verdi poured into his work." See also Baranello, *op. cit.* at 213.
58. Pasles, *op. cit.*
59. "Forse come la rondine migrerete olte il mare, verso un chiaro paese di sogno."
60. "Ti amo!...
Ma tu non sai... Tu non sai!...
Vedi, ho tanta paura!...
Sono troppo felice!
È il mio sogno, capisci?
Tremo e piango... Mia vita... Mio amore!"

61. “Con un solo mio gesto far crollare sogni, felicità, passione, amore!”
62. Girardi, *op. cit.*, at 363.
63. Burnett I.
64. Maria Giovanna Miggiani, *La Rondine*, Teatro del Giglio Lucca program, 2008.
65. Dettmar, *op. cit.*
66. Julian Budden cynically notes: “Magda enjoys perfect health; all she lacks is money of her own to keep her and her lover afloat.” Cf. Burnett, *op. cit.*, “her fantasy fling has become an economic disaster for her partner.” While both focus on the financial reality, they seem to disagree on who has been paying the bills. Of course, in *La Traviata*, money matters also play a significant role. For some reason, Alfredo Germont never realized his luxurious lifestyle was being supported by Violetta’s sale of her assets. By the final act, Violetta is almost penniless, down to 20 louis. Still she tells Annina to split this pathetic sum and give half to the poor. Of course, Violetta is dying and realizes that she shortly will have no use for money. Magda, “in perfect health,” cannot be so impractical.
67. Zampieri, *op. cit.*
68. Miggiani, *op. cit.*
69. As noted, in his first revision, Puccini inserted an additional aria for Ruggero in Act I. This was not an inspired change. The reworded song “Morire,” transformed into an paean to the excitement of discovering Paris seems out of place and slows down the story. It generally is omitted in current productions. Indeed, there is something weird about how a song about dying could depict the anticipated excitement of seeing for the first time *la ville lumière*. But such transformations do occur in opera. For example, Musetta’s waltz in *La Bohème* was written to celebrate the launching of a ship, and Rossini had previously used the overture to his comic opera, *The Barber of Seville*, for two tragic operas.
70. See, Ashbrook, *op. cit.* at 163; Girardi, *op. cit.* at 348. Even Puccini was concerned. Thinking about revisions of the libretto, he wondered about Ruggero’s naiveté, asking “Where did he find Magda? In a convent, perhaps?” He asked Adami to try to make Ruggero seem “less stupid.” Quote from Osborne, *op. cit.* at 206.
71. Whitson, *op. cit.*
72. Burnett I.
73. Burnett, *op. cit.*

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