

## The Chelsea Opera Group

The COG, under the experienced baton of Peter Robinson, was in discovery form for this concert, given at Cadogan Hall, London on Saturday 2 November 2024 at 7 pm. Puccini's early life and career was explored through the three early works that still maintain a foothold in the repertoire.

Puccini was born in 1858, into a musical family and was spotted as being musically talented while in childhood. School days allowed him access to various musical activities such as working as an organist and playing the piano at the local spar. In 1876 he saw a performance of Verdi's *Aida* which set his heart and mind on pursuing an operatic direction in his career. On graduation he wrote the *Messa di Gloria*, giving plentiful evidence of his abilities, both choral and orchestral. He left his birth town, Lucca in 1880 to be enrolled into the Milan Conservatoire, beginning learning skills in chamber music and songs and surprising everyone on producing an ambitious orchestral work, *Capriccio sinfonico* for his graduation.

His next move was entry into a competition for one-act operas, and while his submission, *Le Villi*, failed to win he gathered enough financial support for a production at the *Teatro Dal Verme*. The success was tremendous and in the years that followed Puccini survived various tribulations, often of his own making. His opera, *Edgar* was a failure and it was not until 1891 that he had a triumph with *Manon Lescaut*, achieving eventual professional dominance which he enjoyed for the rest of his career.

In this concert, all three early works mentioned were performed. First the surprise graduation orchestral work, seemingly coming from nowhere: *Capriccio sinfonico*. It is full of surprises not least the early entry of the opening music to *La bohème*! The orchestra gave full reign to the many felicities in the score including a delightful theme that stuck in the memory.

The *Messa di Gloria* was Puccini's first work with any scale to it. Puccini was 22 years old and had an almost instinctive sense of writing choral music. The choir enjoyed the many opportunities for relishing the various sections, not least the ambitious *Credo* where the basses shone forth. The soloists were in excellent form; Charne Rochford had a strong tenor that easily carried into the far reaches of the Hall. Stephen Gadd, bass had the measure of the closing *Agnus Dei*.

This performance was a discovery well worth achieving for Puccini fans, noting early awareness to the composer's choral skills, which after hearing the work I have no doubt he possessed. But it was the later switch to operatic duties that defined his fame and fortune. The evening's performance of *Le Villi* gave certain clues well ahead of the later triumph of *Manon Lescaut*. But setting music to such a boring, nebulous libretto as possessed by *Le Villi* was not a good future portent. However Puccini overcame this aspect by writing some truly prophetic vocal music, not least for soprano. In this thinnest of plots Sejan Fermor-Hesketh, soprano, rode to our rescue. She possesses all the vocal skills needed for this and future Puccini operas. As soon as she sang I spotted Puccinian vocal traits that would ring out in future years to come. Here was *Mimi* from *La bohème* being heard in prototype. What a surprise! Sejan Fermor-Hesketh surely has a wonderful career ahead of her. The tenor of Charne Rochford also heralded future characteristic sounds from Puccini operas; his voice was full of glorious tonal strength, passionate and full bodied. Stephen Gadd took the less sensational role of *Narrator* after showing a rich and firm baritone as the *Head Forester*.

**Edward Clark**  
**Musical Opinion**