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Giacomo Puccini Epistolario, II 1897-1901, a cura di Gabriella Biagi Ravenni e Dieter Schickling, Firenze, Olschki, 2018 (Edizione Nazionale delle Opere di Giacomo Puccini – Epistolario), XXVII-701 pp.

As the years pass, and Puccini's operas never leave the stage – they are quasi-permanent fixtures of the operatic repertoire – I think about the early years of my Puccini research. In those days, to study the composer's correspondence, one had to consult a dozen or so different books (just to see the *published* letters), and then, after getting tips from a few people in the know, make personal trips to visit various archives and libraries to ferret out the unpublished ones. I remember visiting Castell'Arquato to see the correspondence of one of Puccini's librettists, Luigi Illica. The Fondo Illica then was 'housed' in a storeroom at the city hall, protected by a single door lock, and lumped together with the town's band instruments, tattered magazines, and some old costumes. I was left alone there unsupervised for several hours.

Fortunately, this is no longer the case. The Fondo Illica has a permanent, protected home in a museum, and much archival material is now available online, via the Internet Culturale and elsewhere, from the Istituto Musicale Boccherini in Lucca (where Puccini's father was director and where Giacomo got his first formal education), the archives of his wife's family (Fondo Pucciniano Bonturi-Razzi), and other sources of primary material. And, most importantly, scholarly projects, including critical editions of the composer's works, letters and subsidiary materials (such as the *disposizioni sceniche*) have been undertaken by the Centro Studi Giacomo Puccini in Lucca, supported by the Italian Ministry of Culture. There are twelve volumes of Puccini's correspondence planned – although that may have to be altered as new material is uncovered – which follow a strict chronological order, divided into multi-year segments. The second volume, which spans the years 1897-1901, has just been issued, and is the subject of this review. The *comitato editoriale* has done a marvelous job.

This volume of 855 items written by Puccini – including 326 letters published for the first time and 529 only partially known before (the result of intrepid detective work) – has been compiled to the highest scholarly editorial standards, as was Volume I. Even those letters published previously have now received fresh transcriptions based on new sources, and/or revised dating. The editorial criteria are clearly laid out in the preface (pp. XIX-XXIII), which also contains a very useful explanation of the abbreviations used by the composer. Each letter is accompanied by informative editorial notes, and the volume contains extensive scholarly apparatus: *personalia*, *localia*, a table of comparison for each letter derived from multiple sources, and illustrations (although the selection criteria for these is not clear) – all of which would have made this author's graduate research many years ago much easier!

The letters of Volume II create an intimate picture of a funny, loving, multi-talented, driven artist during the five years after the composition of *La bohème* – when it was new to the world – through the creation of *Tosca*, and the period leading up to *Butterfly*, at which time the maestro was exploring new subjects to

set for his next opera, such as *Marie Antonietta*, and *Tartarin*. It is with some irony that, looking back, we can appreciate Puccini's frustrated comments, in letter 666 to his wife that, though he is searching high and low for the right subject, «the only thing I have in my head is that accursed Butterfly, and I cannot get rid of her».

Puccini, who wrote tens of thousands of letters over his lifetime (in very bad handwriting), adorns his correspondence with jokes, riddles, drawings, and insider puns. The editors do an excellent job of presenting contextualizations for the inside jokes, decoding most of the riddles, and publishing semi-diplomatic transcriptions that show some of his drawings. In addition, dates and facts have been supplied or corrected from earlier publications, and clear criteria are set forth for how to deal with, for example, letters not in Italian. They write: «in the case of letters originally written in Italian, but known only thanks to publications in which they are translated into other languages, the edition reproduces them in the acquired language, without attempting a new translation into Italian, and they are transcribed in italics». There are consistently employed symbols for lacunae or doubtful data, and every letter is preceded by a number, its date (as closely as possible), the recipient, his or her location, the type of missive, postmarks, place of conservation or last known location, a transcription of any additional markings, where/how it has been published, the source of the transcription, and editorial notes. To give one example of this careful editorial process, letter 268 to Giulio Ricordi, dated 31 July 1898, had been previously published in the 1928 *Epistolario* of Giuseppe Adami, and the 1958 *Carteggi Pucciniani* of Eugenio Gara. The editors write that the two cited editions differ from each other, and there is currently no access to the original draft; so, the variants of the second version in Adami are shown in the notes.

But perhaps the best way to appreciate the engaging portrait of Puccini presented here in these letters is to offer a few highlights.

Even in Volume I we had seen Puccini the jokester: when composing *Tosca*, he wrote a quintuple pun to Illica in the line «Giacosa fa la partita a scacchi con Ricordi, prolungando il nero sul bianco toscano» ([Giuseppe] Giacosa is playing a chess game with [Giulio] Ricordi, prolonging the Toscano black on white). It refers to 1. Tuscan (i.e., about *Tosca*), 2. the black and white of a chess game, 3. the black on white of writing on paper, 4. Giacosa's drama *A Chess Game* [*Una Partita a Scacchi*], and 5. Tuscan black and white geometrical architecture. [Volume I: n. 728]

There are plenty of «Tosca/Tuscan/toxic» puns in Volume II as well. One of these is «Ora ho tra la grinfie Tosca che m'attosca l'esistenza per la sua difficoltà» (Now I have in my claws *Tosca*, whose difficulty is toxic to my existence), which is part of a remarkable autobiographical letter (n.118, October 1897) that the composer wrote to Eugenio Checchi, who was writing an article about him. In its description of his early life, Puccini's letter is fascinating enough to reproduce here nearly in its entirety, in English translation (mine). I have also included some of the editors' comments, because they not only place it in context, but show that Puccini was veering from the truth, perhaps inventing the public story that his first biographers promoted.

Dear Eugenio,

Spin the story of my life? I was resistant to music, and it was at the age of 17, that hearing *Aida* in Pisa opened the musical window for me.

[the editors note: “The ‘resistance’ to music until seeing Verdi’s *Aida* [...] that Puccini confesses to here, and picked up with great emphasis by his first biographers, contrasts with documentation that attests to an intense musical activity before that date. See, for example, Guidotti 2017.”]

I went to Milan and presented myself at the counterpoint course, letting them see the counterpoints and the mass that I wrote in Lucca under Angeloni, and I got permission to enter the conservatory.

Bazzini and Ponchielli were my teachers – but for Ponchielli I wrote little or nothing because the assignments I brought him were old ones that I had [already] given to Bazzini – I used a fugue 3 or 4 times, changing the key – everyone did this – good old Ponchielli was so distracted!

Finally, they let me out with a *Capriccio Sinfonico* that achieved great success: up to the final rehearsals Ponchielli told Bazzini that I had made a *pasticcio* that made no sense (I had brought him my composition a bit at a time); instead, at the performance, the results were a very great and rare reception – Then came *Le Villi*, which I finished [only] because my poor mother made me complete it, with prayers and staying constantly on my back – I didn’t want to finish it because there were only 15 days left [eds: “of the contest” was inserted], until December 31 ‘93 [eds: 1883] and I still had one act to go, as well as the orchestration of the first [act] – I finished on December 30 at midnight! You know the story of *Le villi* – after it was suggested to me by Fontana, I accepted that *pasticcio* of a libretto called *Edgar* – after which I wanted to choose the subjects for myself – I chose *Manon* and *Bobème*.

Now I have in my claws *Tosca*, whose difficulty is toxic to my existence – God willing I can succeed... I am very behind because these trips keep my mind off the idea and the possibility of diligent work – now I hope that autumnal tranquillity will help me move ahead.

Returning back to the era of before *Bobème* and after *Le Villi*, I can tell you that I was bound to Mascagni day and... night because sometimes he came over at 4 in the morning in winter, always poor and undernourished [mangiava a chiodo] – there was a time when, in order to eat, I and two other of my companions, daily pawned either an umbrella or an overcoat – However, externally we made a good impression – my poor brother was the house servant and yet very chic with an old English suitcase. When he went to buy 10 kilos of wood, he looked like he had just returned from London – In order to take a dancer [eds: in another hand is written «signorina»] that I cherished to dinner, I pawned the overcoat, it was December – 3 months of Alaska without gold.

In the era of *Le villi* there was a famous tavern (a real cave) called *Aida*, a meeting place for all of the most-boomed singers, most of whom were Tuscan – It was at *Aida* that I took my evening meals with Pietro [Mascagni] – I paid monthly, but after I finished my studies, the tenuous scholarship I had

from the Roman congregation of charity ended [eds: Puccini first received a scholarship from Regina Margherita, then from Nicolao Cerù] – and I found myself without even the tip of a cent – I didn't have a piano in the house (actually I had 4 because I lived on the 4th piano [floor] brrr...). At the *Aida*, I owed 300 lire for boiled meat and beans. They scowled at me – I ordered no more! In front of me was thrown a piece of meat that I think was hippopotamus and 32 to 34 undercooked beans, which were the only piano that played in my room the next night! Then came *Le villi* and I paid the bill with a 1000-lire note! It was one of my greatest satisfactions.

I don't know what else to tell you because I can't remember so many little details that happened in the era let's call "bohemian" – [...] I'm stopping because I have to go out with some people here with me – pardon the shitty handwriting and the disconnected style of solemn baby stuff – We know each other and I'm writing down whatever comes to mind. [...]

P.S. I will send you an interesting letter that Ponchielli wrote to my mother when I finished my studies – [eds: the letter from Ponchielli was written on 14 July 1883, the day of the performance of the *Capriccio Sinfonico*, he predicted a positive future, assured her of his support, and also that he would speak with Casa Ricordi].

This letter was published by Checchi, and the editors of the present volume carefully note that «on the autograph text, written in ink, are numerous editorial comments (additions and corrections) in pencil, in Checchi's hand, for the publication in 1910». Elsewhere, they note that Checchi corrected some of Puccini's grammar.

In December 1897, a few months after Puccini sent the autobiographical letter to Checchi, his article entitled «Giacomo Puccini» appeared in the Italian magazine «Nuova Antologia», based on a personal interview with the musician, which must have supplemented the information in the letter cited above. The article also illuminates numerous details of *Tosca's* genesis. For example, Puccini had recounted to Checchi how Illica had wanted to change the end of the opera, to have Tosca go mad instead of killing herself. At a meeting in Paris with Sardou, the playwright objected on practical grounds, stating that the audience would not want to stay to hear a long mad scene so near the end, that they would get up to get their coats. Puccini, who had the script in his hand, showed Sardou the last page where the musician had written «questa è l'aria del 'paletot'» (this is the 'overcoat' aria). Jumping to his feet, Sardou grabbed Puccini's hand saying, «I see you are a man of the theater». The mention of Puccini's phrase «overcoat aria» should ring bells in the minds of opera goers: this is precisely, literally, what happens at the end of *La bohème*, as Coline sings farewell to his overcoat – another Puccinian in-joke.

Regarding musical matters, the Checchi article gives a clear picture of how far Puccini had advanced on his composition of the opera *Tosca*. Checchi writes that Puccini sat down at the piano and played directly from the libretto, including the third-act prelude (the last part of the opera to be completed in the autograph score.) But Puccini then nervously closed the piano, saying: «Nothing is writ-

ten down. Detached sheets, unattached thoughts, and many erasures. I will need more time...I cannot say how much. You see, this time, it is true that he who goes slowly, goes safely».

Once he had read the article, Puccini wrote again to Checchi, in letter 138, of 12 December 1897: «Dear Eugenio, I read it. You made me happy with your sweet words and I approved the contents, blushing at the kind expressions about me – you, the magician of the pen, knew how to sketch this poor fool of a hunter with efficacy and moreover with great love – I thank you from my most humble heart and send you an affectionate embrace, declaring myself forever and ever your aff.».

Puccini's letters are sprinkled with his own verse, as with a letter (n. 104) to Giulio Ricordi of 21 September 1897 in eight stanzas, from Vienna where *La bohème* was to have its premiere. The following is one stanza, cited here in the original Italian and in English translation:

– anacreontica viennese –
Ormai il destino mio mi tiene a Vienna
e il mio pensier si volge sempre a Giulio
e ad esprimerlo a te prendo la penna
che scorre sulla carta come Amulio

[– Viennese anacreontic –
Now my destiny keeps me in Vienna
and my thoughts keep returning to Giulio
and to express them to you I pick up a pen
that flows across the page like Amulio]

The editors helpfully explain in the notes that Amulio was the horse who had won the Gran Premio di Milano in 1889.

In another, more humorous poetic letter to Giulio Ricordi (n. 110 of 26 September 1897), also from Vienna, Puccini indicates 'secret' (untranslatable) profanity by underlining the letters of «fica» and «culo»:

Eccelso Giulio amico ed editore
con gioja inenarrabile mi giunse
la lettera da versificatore
Miraculo davver che mai mi punse.
[Sublime Giulio friend and editor
with unspeakable joy the letter
from the versifier has arrived.
A truer miracle has never stung me.]

On December 9, 1900, Puccini wrote to the impresario Luigi Cesari (n. 694) who had previously asked Lorenzo Stecchetti to write some verses in honor of the composer.

Stecchetti's laudatory verses were:

Accarezza Mimì, Musetta ride,
 Muore Manon amando, e Tosca uccide.
 Chi sa il mistero che s'asconde in questa
 Onda di voci alate e fuggitive?
 Passan le note, ma il ricordo resta
 Passa morendo il suono, ma l'arte vive!

[Mimì caresses, Musetta laughs,
 Manon dies loving, and Tosca murders.
 Who knows the mystery hidden in this
 Wave of winged and fleeting voices?
 The notes pass, but the memory remains
 The dying sound passes, but art lives!]

Puccini responded with his own poem, in a less lofty vein:

È dolce Mimì, Musetta è pazza,
 Manon muore cantando, e Tosca ammazza.
 Chi sa il mistero che s'asconde in questa
 Onda di voci alate e fuggitive?
 Passan le note, ma caro il mio Cesàri
 di tutte e quattro ti restano i denari.

[Mimì is sweet, Musetta is crazy,
 Manon dies singing, and Tosca kills.
 Who knows the mystery hidden in this
 Wave of winged and fleeting voices?
 The notes pass, but my dear Cesàri,
 from all four, you keep the money.]

Another previously published letter contains both a riddle and a drawing: it is n. 223, to Alfredo Caselli in Lucca on 14 May 1898. The drawing consists of a long serpentine line (unreproducible here) after the word «fil», indicating the Lucchese main street of Via Fillungo. In this letter, the solution to the riddle is so simple, the editors refrain from explaining it:

Rice vu tala tuaca ris simalet tera etc. ne ringra zio tan toca roami co d'el fil_____.

(= Ricevuta la tua carissima lettera, etc. ne ringrazio tanto caro amico del Fillungo)

[I received your dear letter, etc., thanks for it, my very dear friend from Fillungo.]

Another letter to Alfredo Caselli, (n. 264, 22 July 1898), from Monsagrati was written in two hands, first by Giuseppe Razzi (Puccini's in-law), then Puccini, then Razzi again. Around the same, Puccini writes another humorous letter to Caselli (n. 267), this time asking Caselli for the "le verità dolorosississississime" [the very, very, very, very sad truths.] and illustrated with an annotated drawing of the ghost of Lucida Mansi, an ancestor of his host at Monsagrati, who was said to have made a pact with the devil (and who perhaps could have been a Puccini heroine). Fortunately, the drawing is one chosen to be reproduced (several times) in this volume.

One of the rarest of Puccini's correspondents is his wife, Elvira Bonturi. One possible reason for this is that they were together for much of the time; however, it is also quite likely that most of their correspondence has been kept within the family. Many readers will already know of the scandalous start to their relationship, when Elvira left her husband in Lucca to run away with young Giacomo, and of the sad episode later in life when Elvira, in a jealous rage, accused the young housemaid Doria Manfredi of having an affair with her husband, and which ended in Doria's suicide and postmortem evidence of her virginity. So it is particularly affecting to glimpse into their relationship through the ten letters to Elvira that are included in this volume.

The earliest one (n. 134, 23 November 1897) is signed «Topisio», a pet name for Giacomo, which indicates the pair were on good terms. Two years later, letter n. 387 (February 1899), shows that they are still loving, and it is written in verse:

Perchè tu tardi?
O mio dolore!
Parti col primo
treno diretto
che io t'aspetto
con braccia aperte...

scrivo e strumento
faccio gli sbonchi
zampe di mosca
per la mia Tosca.

[why do you delay?
O my pain!
Take the first
direct train
I will wait for you
with open arms...
I am writing and orchestrating
I scribble
fly tracks
for my Tosca.]

Other sources tell us that, around this period, Elvira had a miscarriage, so they were still romantically involved with each other. In letter 638, from 10 July 1900, Elvira is addressed with the pet name «Topisia» and he signs it «to you 1000000 from Topisio, who is going to bed», which might indicate that all is still well.

But only a few days later (n. 640, 16 July 1900, partially published in English in Marek), Puccini writes, «you deliberately oppose my plans and whatever I wish remains a dead letter». And by October of the same year (the date has been adjusted by the editors from Marek's of 1903), there are signs of real trouble in letter 666: «I am guilty, I know it. Mine is the guilt. But it is my destiny that I must be guilty. I wish that our serenity might return and that we could pass through a life less trying, a life of tranquillity... We will see and let us hope for better days. I suffer so to see you in this state. But I never planned to do you so much harm, my poor Elvira. May God give back calmness and health to my little wife. Good-bye, Elvira. Please try to be less agitated. Be hopeful and think of me. I am not so much without heart as you believe».

Of course there is much material here of use to musicologists and opera lovers, such as the correspondence with the priest Pietro Panichelli digging up realistic data for *Tosca*, including the true pitch of the Vatican's Campanone, and the verses sung by the celebrants of the Te Deum. While these letters are widely known, it is quite helpful to have them in the same location as lesser known ones, such as letter 379 to Puccini's librettist Giuseppe Giacosa, giving him the meter he requires for music already written, in dummy verses for the duet in *Tosca's* Act III, which will substitute for the now-excised Latin Hymn:

[...]
 Vien con me!
 voglio portarti
 con forze arcane
 colle mie braccia
 fino a Corfù
 sarai madama allor
 ed io sarò monsiù

[Come with me!
 I want to take you
 with mysterious power
 with my arms
 to Corfù
 You will then be madame
 and I will be monsieur]

Another letter (n. 258, 3 July 1898), to Giacosa's co-librettist, Illica, discusses a review of *La bohème* by Ernest Royer after the Parisian première at the Opéra Comique that lauds Puccini's use of (forbidden) parallel fifths, which are heard

at the openings of the second and third acts: «He finds my fifths are delicious and they will change the face of our harmonic system – tell this to the German Baron [Alberto Franchetti] who always chews the perfect interval without being able to digest it». The editors helpfully include a long quote in French from Royer's review of 26 June, which actually goes beyond Puccini's boast: «There are successions of octaves, chains of unexpected chords, disquieting modulations and ninths with added sixths that plummet in a gust of wind... There are enough pages in his score where one can recognize the lively and practised pen of a musician, whom we would be wrong to reproach as not knowing his craft, for a few peccadillos... His fifths... have made his fortune, and our harmonic system could well be changed by them».

There are limits, however, to how far this vast assembly of letters can go. Particularly frustrating are those that hint at tantalizing, missing information, such as letter 161, to Arrigo Boito on 28 January 1898: «I enclose Toscanini's response» – with no further information. Or letter 163, to Illica, whose complete text is: «Milan 3 February 1898, Dear Illica, Your affectionate, GPuccini». Here, the editors write, «it is conceivable that the note, not sent by post, accompanied the delivery of material not specified». Probably, but is it necessary to include this in the collection, then? Letter 234, to Alfredo Caselli ends with «Viva Deo – Pipo – Lappore». How helpful is it for the editors to write, «Deo and Pipo are nicknames of unidentified people»?

While the editorial criteria for including all of Puccini's letters and how to treat them are very clearly stated, the situation is somewhat murkier for the additional material in the notes and illustrations. For example, nos. 206 and 208, to Alfredo Caselli, are illustrated postcards, the former «with female figure leaning on a shell above a heart as background» (and Puccini's text «Here is a clever Parisian»), and the latter «with female dancers doing the can-can, subtitled "La Moulin Rouge"». Why not show these photos, especially since there are other postcards reproduced in the back of the book? It is probable that a decision was made that the ones reproduced are more closely linked to Puccini and his work, however the criteria for inclusion and exclusion are not made explicit.

Letter 231 to Giulio Ricordi concerns rehearsals for *La bohème* in Paris, Puccini's need for money, and that he is going to see *La Tosca* playwright Victorien Sardou at his chateau in Marly-le-roi. In their notes, the editors provide Ricordi's response about sending money, and cite two of Illica's letters to Ricordi about Sardou already published in *Carteggi*. Why mention these responses and not others?

In fact, the issue of excluding responses to Puccini's letters was raised in some reviews after the publication of the first volume, and the editors address this in their preface: «Some critics complained about the omission of letters received by Puccini. The global approach – epistolary and not correspondence – was decided at the beginning of the project, more than twenty years ago, for two reasons: access to the Puccini archive at Torre del Lago, where it was presumed that the large part of of the letters sent to Giacomo Puccini were conserved, seemed then like a mirage. And, in any case, the integration of the received letters would

be haphazard, running the risk of restoring only part of the intervening communications and misrepresenting it).

They continue: «Since the first volume, however, we have systematically furnished many quotations of received letters in the notes, if they are known and pertinent. The possibility of accessing the Puccini Archive of Torre del Lago, thanks to the inventory realized by the Soprintendenza Archivistica Regionale della Toscana, became finalized in the late spring of 2017, and the consultation, still very partial, of the archive has furnished important acquisitions, mentioned in the notes of the present volume, in order to be very precise». Yes, but... to truly get a full picture of a moment in Puccini's life or career, it is necessary to read both sides of the conversation, which means returning to older volumes that supply some responses.

Clearly, though, the present state of Puccini studies is much improved over the past – and the two volumes of the *Epistolario* are central to that improvement. But what about the future?

With the death in December 2017 of Simonetta Puccini, the last direct descendant of the Puccini dynasty, the archives at the Museo Puccini at Torre del Lago have become more accessible, although the full extent of the material there is still only partially known. I have heard rumors, though, that there are about 1000 letters, previously unknown or partially known, in addition to autograph scores and other vital material for study. As great a boon as this is to Puccini studies – and there will undoubtedly be even more Puccini letters turning up all over the world – what does it do to the carefully planned hard-copy volumes of the *Epistolario*? Most likely, the *comitato editoriale* will decide to publish supplements to those volumes already in print. While this would be a worthy effort, it too cannot be a definitive solution for posterity.

To truly address the needs of this ongoing project, the *Epistolario* must have a digital component, as so many other collections do (see, for example, the Digital Mozart Edition of the Mozarteum). The editors have already responded to this call-to-action in their preface to Volume II: «The *Epistolario* project, and the methodology developed accordingly, had foreseen from the beginning the possibility of a double publication, digital and paper. We are convinced however that, in the overall context of the Edizione Nazionale delle Opere di Giacomo Puccini, the hard copy version remains indispensable».

Agreed, but for the important and wonderful work that has been done for Puccini studies by the *Epistolario* project to remain a perennially relevant and fresh as Puccini's operas are, these volumes cannot collect dust on a bookshelf and need to be reborn, as soon as possible, in digital format. As Puccini asked on 9 July 1911: «Rinnovarsi o morire?» [Reinvent yourself or die?].

The answer is yes.

DEBORAH BURTON