

The silent maestro. Giacomo Puccini and the *Allgemeines Handbuch der Film-Musik*.

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The film music practice of the silent era of cinema (1895–1927) was characterized by live performances of musicians during film screenings. As a result, every single film had a number of different scores, as the pieces of music were usually not original creations inspired by the film they accompanied, but a selection of fragments chosen from the ›classical‹ and ›popular‹ repertoires, or even improvisations inspired by the images appearing on the screen. This kind of practice, a true ›tradition of innovation‹, was sometimes pointed out by early cinema detractors as an evidence of motion pictures being »a parasite feeding upon the arts of the theatre« (Belasco 1919, 205). Contemporary studies in film history, on the other hand, fully acknowledge the importance of pre-existing compositions in shaping the aesthetic of film music. For this reason, the so-called ›repertoires‹ or music catalogues, which were intended to help cinema musicians select the most appropriate score for a particular film sequence, are regarded today as important sources for the development and strategies of musical choices in the cinema of that period. Those musical selections offer information on the musical and audiovisual preferences in silent cinema's practice. The presence of a specific composition, and the absence of another one, can be understood as symptomatic of what was desirable or not during silent film screenings, in terms of musical form and genre, emotional emphasis or recognizable references to different kinds of entertainment.

The importance of such repertoires as documents shall be empirically tested by studying the presence of a single composer's creations in one of the most complete and complex catalogues of music for silent films: the *Allgemeines Handbuch der Film-Musik* (1927) by Giuseppe Becce, Hans Erdmann and Ludwig Brav.

The aim of the present article is to comment upon the expression and shifts of purpose that affected pre-existing music in the repertoire practice of the silent era by describing and analyzing a consistent selection of musical excerpts from the *Handbuch*.

Giacomo Puccini's case serves as an appropriate study sample, not least because the relationship between cinema and the music of the Italian composer is relevant for a number of aspects. First of all, since the early years of cinema there has been a rich tradition of films whose story was inspired by Puccini's operas. Then, one should note the widespread influence of the Puccinian style on many film scores composed during the years of the transition to sound cinema and beyond. As Sabine M. Feisst remarked:

Most film scores of the 1930s and 1940s are based on compositional principles of the mid and late nineteenth century and are influenced by the music of Wagner, Verdi, Puccini, Delius or Richard Strauss, to cite only the most prominent names.« (Feisst 1999, 105)

Feisst also recalls that Herbert Stothart, one of the most influential composers working for MGM during the 1930s, talked about Puccini's music with Arnold Schoenberg (Feisst 1999, 108). But above all we can ascertain that during the silent era Puccini's music was the subject of theoretical discourse and practical experiments related to cinema. A peculiar case, for example, was a performance that took place on 26 March 1923

(when Puccini was still alive), at the Rialto Theater in New York. Hugo Riesenfeld created a show where film screenings alternated with musical interludes called *Classical Jazz*: light improvisations and arrangements based on the ›higher‹ musical repertoire. On that day, among Chopin and Gounod, the selection included also Puccini; we do not know, though, which exact compositions were featured in the show. With respect to theory and critical discourse, it is also opportune to mention the expression *Kino-Oper*, used by some German idealists well before sound cinema, and in explicit reference to Puccini's theatre. In that expression lies an underlying criticism of the musical taste and of the popularity of the composer's operas (Seidl 1926, 58). This fact tells clearly how little those authors understood both Puccini and cinema; however, it is an important evidence for the perception of a close relationship of those two cultural objects. In fact, more recently scholars have identified ›premonitions‹ of a cinematographic language in Puccini's dramaturgic technique. Michele Girardi, for example, referred to the beginning of the Second Act of *La Bohème*, when the music sets up a teeming city scene where the many characters (mixed choir, children's choir, solo singers) manage to be separately perceived by the audience, with a clarity of narration and staging that recall a well-executed film editing:

[...] Puccini managed to control a [...] great deal of events, assigned to small choral groups and solos, and he did that with appropriate synchronies and instantaneous speed, with an almost cinematographic disposition. (Girardi 1995, 137)¹

Another reference relating to Puccini's ›cinematic sensibility‹ is the embarkation scene at the end of the Third Act of *Manon Lescaut*, where the roll call of the sergeant and the answer of the women create a continuous

¹ »[...] Puccini riuscì a coordinare una [...] quantità di eventi, affidati a piccoli gruppi corali e ai solisti, e lo fece assicurando al contempo le opportune sincronie e una fulminea rapidità, con un taglio quasi cinematografico«.

background for the individual vocal actions of the protagonists, resembling acoustic ›close-ups‹. The various *a parte* moments let the audience hear what Manon and De Grieux are telling each other, in the middle of a huge crowd scene, creating an impression of surreal intimacy which anticipates the narrative possibilities of the filmic close-up. Finally, even the use of non-musical sounds in the score of *Il tabarro* has a certain cinematographic quality: this expressive device was the result of ›naturalistic‹ experiments which already affected Puccini's insertion of the tolling bells in *Tosca*, and its overall configuration seems to be similar to the organic integration of music and effects which would become typical of the sound film.

After taking into account these premises and considerations, we can state that the presence of Puccini's music in a repertoire for silents such as that in the *Handbuch* seems reasonable, because of the ›cinematographic‹ attitude often found by critics in the works of the composer.

The *Handbuch* presents one of the most advanced and complex systematizations of repertoire music for silent film. The work is divided into two volumes: the first one offers a theoretical premise, detailing the reasons behind the selection and setting the ambitious goal of a complete theory of film music, while the second volume holds the actual repertoire: a total of 3,050 titles constitutes the *Thematisches Skalenregister*, that is to say, the thematic catalogue, where each composition is presented via musical excerpts.

The presence of Puccini in the *Handbuch*, even if not overwhelming, is quite remarkable. Six of his operas are used. Their quotations are not taken from the original orchestral scores, but from arrangements for piano or small ensemble, which were more likely to be at the disposal of a silent film musician at that time. More precisely, they are quotations from the well

known ›opera fantasies‹, which became staples of the so called *musique de salon* at the beginning of the 20th century. They were musical summaries of the operas, using their most memorable themes to recreate, without the presence of singing voices, the dramaturgic structure of the work. In some cases, the order of the arias could be altered; Becce himself, who was responsible for the greatest part of the catalogue, specified that

Fantasia does not only mean ›fantasy‹, but also ›potpourri‹, ›mosaic fantasy‹, etc. A precise distinction between the different terms would have been difficult; also, it is not very relevant for the cinematographic practice. (Becce/Brav/Erdmann 1927, II, 108)²

In the case of Puccini, the quoted instrumental fantasies are the ones arranged by Emile Tavan, by Gaetano Luporini from Lucca (for *Manon Lescaut*) and by Adolphe Gauwin (for *La fanciulla del West*). In the index of the *Handbuch*, each fantasy is associated to a number, as follows:

1. *Gianni Schicchi*, Fantasy Tavan (Ricordi)
2. *La Fanciulla del West*, Fantasy Gauwin (Ricordi)
3. *La Fanciulla del West*, Fantasy Tavan (Ricordi)
4. *Manon Lescaut*, Fantasy Luporini (Ricordi)
5. *Manon Lescaut*, Fantasy Tavan (Ricordi)
6. *Manon Lescaut*, Minuetto dell'atto II from Fantasy Tavan (Ricordi)
7. *Suor Angelica*, Fantasy Tavan (Ricordi)
8. *Il Tabarro*, Fantasy Tavan (Ricordi)
9. *Le Villi*, Fantasy Tavan (Ricordi)

² »Fantasie ist nicht nur für Fantasie, sondern ebenso für Potpourri, Fantasie mosaïque usw. gesetzt worden. Eine genauere Unterscheidung zwischen den einzelnen Begriffen war praktisch schwer zu ermöglichen; sie ist übrigens für den Filmgebrauch von keiner großen Bedeutung«.

This selection completely omits operas like *Bohème*, *Tosca* and *Madame Butterfly* (and *Turandot*, which, admittedly, premiered only one year before the publication of the *Handbuch*). Those omissions rob the repertoire of a great deal of melodic moments of strong notoriety. The authors, instead, selected operas like *Il tabarro* and *Suor Angelica* that, notwithstanding their inclusion in the *Trittico*, were being more and more neglected by theatres during the 1920s (Girardi 1995, 382). The same goes for *La fanciulla del West* and *Le Villi*.

However, before further exploring the reasons behind those choices, we need to take a closer look at Becce's selection. Apart from all the quotations of the same music from different fantasies, we find a total of 87 Puccinian fragments. 12 are taken from *Gianni Schicchi*, 25 from *La fanciulla del West*, 14 from *Manon Lescaut*, 12 from *Suor Angelica*, 14 from *Il tabarro*, 10 from *Le Villi*. In comparison with the small weight of other opera composers who lived during Puccini's age, what really stands out is the huge selection of pieces by Giuseppe Verdi (10 operas, 133 fragments) (Becce/Brav/Erdmann 1927, II, 138), as well as the repertoire from Ruggero Leoncavallo (3 operas and 7 different compositions, with a total of 53 fragments) (Becce/Brav/Erdmann 1927, II, 122) and from Pietro Mascagni (4 operas and one waltz, 48 fragments) (Becce/Brav/Erdmann 1927, II, 124). By comparing the ratio between selected fragments and quantity of operas, we notice that Puccini's production is the most intensively exploited, notwithstanding the absolute numeric supremacy of Verdi.

The classification of the fragments within the *Handbuch* deserves closer consideration. The system is an improvement of the emotive/narrative labeling strategy, which was used since the days of the first cue sheets. The authors resort to a series of verbal labels organized in a hierarchical

structure. So, each fragment is identified by at least three expressions which specify the quality of the emotion expressed by the music with growing precision, eventually accompanied by a ›keyword‹ (*Schlagwort*) on the side of the music excerpt, which further specifies the description.³

Even if this classification seems clear and direct, its analysis presents several difficulties. The reason for this lies within a series of discrepancies and overlapping categories at the top of the hierarchical order. In fact, when reading the main index, the main narrative categories seem to be five: ›Dramatic Expression‹ (*Dramatische Expression*), ›Dramatic Scenes‹ (*Dramatische Scenen*), ›Lyric Expression‹ (*Lyrische Expression*), ›Lyric Incidence‹ (*Lyrische Incidenz*), ›Incidence‹ (*Incidenz*). However, reading the catalogue itself, we notice that on top of each page we find a reminder of the three levels of the hierarchy. The highest rank is recalled by initials on the left, while on the right (top first, bottom second) the second and third rank categories are specified. But in those reminders the first rank categories do not consist of five, like in the index, but of three categories: ›Dramatic‹, ›Lyric‹ (with a sub-category called ›Lyric Incidence‹, signaled by the initials ›LY IN‹) and ›Incidence‹, whose initials (from the original German words) are ›DR‹, ›LY‹ and ›IN‹.

DR <u>HÖHEPUNKT</u> <i>Katastrophe.</i>	LY <u>TIEFPUNKT</u> <i>Monotonie.</i>
IN <u>Staat und Kirche</u> <i>Grosse festliche Märsche.</i>	LY <u>Crioso-Liedhaft</u> IN <u>Melancholisch.</u>

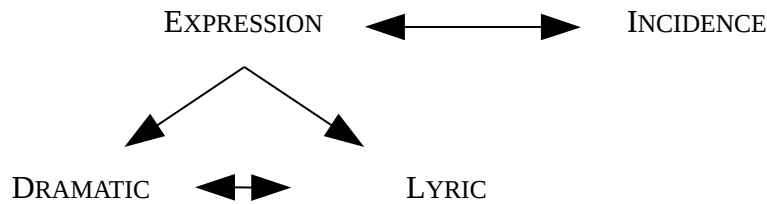
³ The hierarchy is summarized in an index published on pp. III–IV of vol. II; another index lists all the *Schlagworte* (Becce/Brav/Erdmann 1927, II, 142–154).

This situation might be clarified if we consider the five levels listed in the index as the highest rank of the hierarchy, which is thus not quoted by the reminders on each page, where only the levels from second to fourth are shown. However, the ›Lyric Incidence‹ sub-category makes these interpretations questionable: here it is as if the first and second rank were put together. Moreover, the index shows yet another problem in the ›Incidence‹ section. The levels under the second-rank label ›People and Society‹ (*Volk und Gesellschaft*) seem to be subdivided into further categories, creating even lower ranks. In fact, some of the third rank labels are underlined, and they appear to be meant as overall titles for the following series of labels. For example: ›Festive (civic)‹ (*Festlich (bürgerlich)*) is followed by labels such as *Polonaise, Mazurka, Walzer, Polka, Galopp*, and so on. This subdivision is however hinted at only in the index, and not in the catalogue.

In any case, even with those incongruities, the labeling system allows the reader to identify every entry by a very detailed series of definitions. For example, the aria »Tra voi belle, brune e bionde«, from the First Act of *Manon Lescaut*, is identified as follows: n. 1369 – ›Lyric‹ – ›Lyric Incidence‹ – ›Arioso-Like a song‹ – ›Serenade‹ – ›Graceful interior. Serenade in the manner of a menuet‹.⁴ The latter label includes the *Schlagworte*, the keywords. It is important to remark that no fragment in the catalogue is ever identified by words quoted from the opera's libretto, but only by a few bars of music from an instrumental arrangement.

Ennio Simeon offers a different interpretation for the label hierarchy of the *Handbuch*, summarized by this scheme:

⁴ Lyrische – Lyrische Incidenz – Arioso-Liedhaft – Serenade – Anmutiges Interieur. Menuettartiges Ständchen.



Supported by Erdmann's words in the first volume of the *Handbuch*, Simeon identifies a top rank category called ›Expression‹, subdivided into ›Dramatic‹ and ›Lyric‹. This category would include narrative situations requiring »an accordance between the expression of the feeling of the scene and the expression of the musical feelings« (Simeon 1995, 40).⁵ ›Incidence‹, instead, would ask for »accordance between setting or situation and music (for example, when it defines the place, the time or the circumstance [...])« (Simeon 1995, 40).⁶ Hence, Simeon reads the *Handbuch* scheme as divided into two main sections, based on a contrast between ›feelings‹ (or, maybe better, ›inner actions‹) and ›circumstances‹ (›external actions‹). The alluring agility of this simplification has a weakness, though, when it comes to the huge section of ›Lyric Incidence‹, which cannot be clearly assigned to one category or the other and is made up of 673 musical fragments. Simeon actually admits that his reduction does not describe precisely the catalogue and its hierarchy, where »fusions and superimpositions between categories may happen« (Simeon 1995, 41).⁷ However, for the sake of the present study, Simeon's proposal is useful to complete and explain Becce's

⁵ »Una concordanza tra l'espressione dei sentimenti scenici e l'espressione di quelli musicali«.

⁶ »Concordanza tra ambiente o situazione scenica e musica (ad esempio quando essa definisce il luogo, il tempo o la circostanza [...])«.

⁷ »Tra le diverse categorie si possono creare momenti di fusione e sovrapposizione«.

hierarchy (made of four levels plus ›keywords‹) better as it results from the index and the catalogue of the *Handbuch*.

Going back now to the study of the Puccinian selection itself, we note that it is distributed as follows:

- 14 fragments in the ›Dramatic‹ section: 1 from *Gianni Schicchi*, 4 from *La fanciulla del West*, 1 from *Manon Lescaut*, 4 from *Suor Angelica*, 2 from *Il tabarro*, 2 from *Le Villi*;
- 51 fragments in the ›Lyric‹ section: 4 from *Gianni Schicchi*, 15 from *La fanciulla del West*, 9 from *Manon Lescaut*, 7 from *Suor Angelica*, 8 from *Il tabarro*, 8 from *Le Villi*;
- 22 fragments in the ›Incidence‹ section: 7 from *Gianni Schicchi*, 6 from *La fanciulla del West*, 4 from *Manon Lescaut*, 1 from *Suor Angelica*, 4 from *Il tabarro*.

Those data already convey quite a clear impression of the ›cinematographic‹ Puccini imagined by Becce. By comparing the number of fragments quoted with the effective length of each opera, the most exploited work in the ›Dramatic‹ section of the *Handbuch* is *Suor Angelica*, followed by *Il tabarro* and *La fanciulla del West*. The supremacy in the ›Lyric‹ section is held by *Il tabarro*, with *La fanciulla del West* and *Suor Angelica* coming immediately behind it. The ›Incidence‹ section, related to everyday social situations, is swayed by *Gianni Schicchi*; *Il tabarro* is second in this category.

What becomes immediately evident is an almost too alluring correspondence between Puccini's *Trittico*⁸ and the emotive tripartition

⁸ Puccini's *Trittico* is a collection of three one-act operas (1918), to be performed as a set in this order: *Il tabarro*, *Suor Angelica*, *Gianni Schicchi*.

devised by Becce and his colleagues. However, this correspondence does not perfectly fit the actual contents of the operas. The *Trittico*'s dramaturgic sense lies in an exploration, through three consecutive single acts, of »the fixed rules of stage plays: to create interest, to amaze and move and to make you have a good laugh« (Adami, 1935, 177),⁹ as Puccini himself wrote. Therefore, it is not immediately clear how the ›interesting and amazing‹ *Il tabarro* is interpreted as ›lyric‹ by Becce, or how the ›moving‹ *Suor Angelica* becomes an inspiration of ›dramatic‹ feelings, while the parallel between ›a good laugh‹ and ›everyday life situations‹ remains acceptable with respect to *Gianni Schicchi*. Becce does not try to create a critical commentary to Puccini's work, though; he attempts to extract from each opera the musical moments which best lend themselves to cinema – a cinema that was still a silent one, devoid of human speech and thus unable to explicitly quote lyrics and narratives from Puccini's operas.

Becce's take on the *Trittico* in the *Handbuch* is a stylized one. The work is reduced to a simple stream of emotions, particularly fitting to the ›abstraction‹ of silent film aesthetics.

More precisely, the outline of Becce's reduction of *Suor Angelica* is traced, first of all, by the foreshadowing C sharp minor theme, which appears while Angelica's aunt comes to visit her niece, starting with the lyrics: »È venuta a trovarvi vostra zia principessa« (n. 49). Becce labels this theme with the words ›Tension-Mystery‹ and ›Night. Fear‹, together with the keywords ›Impending doom, sinister‹. Appearing again in the section ›Tension-Mystery‹, in the subcategory ›Night. Menace‹, the *Handbuch* instead lists

⁹ »Leggi fisse in teatro: interessare, sorprendere e commuovere o far ridere bene«. Girardi correlates the ›interest‹ with *Il tabarro*, ›move and amaze‹ with *Suor Angelica* and, of course, ›a good laugh‹ with *Gianni Schicchi*, even if ›the macabre elements soils a little the laughter« (›l'elemento macabro sporca un po' la risata«; Girardi 1995, 378).

the anguished chromatic episode used by Puccini to comment upon Angelica's sorrow about the deceased son she never met («Mio figlio!» n. 64). The keywords are ›Impending doom, desperate outcome‹. The same episode, from a different moment of *Tavan's Fantasy*, which is being used by Becce as a reference, appears at n. 528, but is catalogued in a different way: ›Scenes‹ and ›extremely dramatic‹. Keywords: ›Heavy destiny, impending doom‹. ›Scenes‹ includes another quotation of this musical moment, but in the version that appears at the end of the opera, together with Angelica's horrified cry: »Ah, sono dannata!«, when she understands her unforgivable sin after having taken the poison. The keywords are, maybe somewhat unexpectedly, ›Prayer and cold denial‹.

Becce extracts from the original *Suor Angelica* only the strong sense of an ineluctable destiny. The musician born in Lonigo chooses from Puccini's score the moments more suited to musically represent fatal drama, giving special attention to the chromatic episode described above. Becce qualifies the first two fragments of this selection as *nocturnal*: this is a semantic addition, which suggests the notions ›invisible‹, ›implicit‹ and maybe also ›forbidden‹. This interpretation is not completely in contrast with Giovacchino Forzano's original libretto and may reveal that Becce regards Puccini as a composer whose style is not right for explicit and violent dramatic situations. Instead, his music, even when sweeping and emphatic, is related to situations where inner sensations prevail, and fantasies and hopes mysteriously surround the real events. *Suor Angelica* is a tragedy whose drama is outlined by seclusion, immobility, desire and fatality: Becce pertinently used it as a privileged source to address such emotional purposes in film scenes.

A similar disposition guides Becce's use of the opera which, within the *Trittico*, appears the most appropriate to express sanguineous and tragic pathos: *Il tabarro*. First mentioned at n. 65, again in the category ›Night. Menace‹, is the theme from the orchestral accompaniment that erupts after Luigi's line: »Io te lo giuro, lo giuro, non tremo«: a further passionate declaration of his love for Giorgetta. This episode, both quivering and solemn, is seen by Becce, once again, in terms of an unsettling omen: ›Impending doom‹ is the keyword. This seems appropriate if one recalls Luigi's destiny in the opera; furthermore, in the original work the quoted scene takes place at night. However, a compiler less meticulous than Becce might have catalogued this fragment in the ›Dramatic‹ category, maybe under ›Climax-Passionate‹ and more specifically in the section ›Passionate emotion‹. But in that place of the *Handbuch*, the selection features only a single excerpt from Puccini, »Tu, tu, amore, tu« from the Second Act of *Manon Lescaut* (n. 426). Instead, Becce's interpretation reconsiders Luigi's passion as a transitional narrative moment, marked by grievous waiting. The classification of the second fragment from *Il tabarro* is equally meaningful: »Ho sognato una casetta« (n. 135) is found under ›Tension-Mystery‹, with the title ›This is a sinister place‹ (without keyword). Even though in the opera this melodic moment mingles the serene hopes of Frugola with a quiet and resigned acceptance of death («rimedio d'ogni male«, ›cure for every evil‹), the libretto does not make any open reference to lugubrious menace. The preference accorded to this episode (with an underlying utopian meaning), instead of many other moments of *Il tabarro* that could have more easily contributed to the ›Dramatic‹ section, is peculiar. Once more, Puccini is understood as a master of dramatic atmospheres conveyed by desires and fantasies.

Becce's reading of Puccini's music is confirmed by the concentration of Puccinian fragments in the ›Lyric‹ section. There, as explained before, *Il tabarro* is the most extensively exploited work, but the greatest number of fragments comes from *La fanciulla del west*, followed by *Manon Lescaut*. *Suor Angelica* is accordingly present in this section too: it is the third most utilized opera here, considering the ratio between its length and the number of quotations, but in comparison with the ›Dramatic‹ section, the selection is slightly bigger (six fragments compared to four).

According to Simeon, ›Lyric‹ in the *Handbuch* is the place where musical episodes about feelings and ›inner actions‹ gather. The Puccinian portrait sketched by Becce can be further exemplified by studying the distribution of fragments in this section.

First of all, as far as the cinematographic use of the music is concerned, Puccini is mostly linked with positive emotions. An absolute majority of pieces, 41 out of a total of 51 in this section, are in fact associated with terms such as ›Love confession‹, ›Passion‹, ›Luck‹, ›Joy and Peace‹, ›Hymn‹ and ›Elegy‹. On top of that, more than half of the fragments from both the ›Lyric‹ and ›Dramatic‹ sections (the ones dedicated to emotional expressions, as opposed to the more neutral ›Incidence‹ section) are collected under those labels. Within this classification, we find a remarkable series of six fragments listed under ›Lyric Expression‹ – ›Tension-pathos‹ – ›Overwhelming pathos‹ (nn. 758–59, 788–91, marked by keywords ›Great passion‹, ›Love scene‹ and so on) and ›Lyric Incidence‹ – ›Arioso – Like a song‹ – ›Like a ballad‹ (nn. 1107, 1125–29; the keywords are related to ›telling‹ and ›narrating‹). ›Arioso – Like a song‹ includes also five selections (nn. 1367–71, four from *Manon Lescaut* and one from *Suor Angelica*) listed under the label ›Serenade‹. Those word choices

approximate the sense that the music is leaning towards the territories of love and nostalgic tales. According to this, it seems reasonable that most of Becce's Puccinian excerpts are taken from *La fanciulla del West*, a drama with a happy ending stemming from a »peace earned with love and labor« (Cottini, 1911, 3).¹⁰

In the *Handbuch*, *La fanciulla del West* is also linked to word choices referring to visions and dreams, somewhat unexpected with respect to the content of the libretto. Within the section ›Lyric Expression‹ – ›Anticlimax‹ (hinting at negative emotion), in the voice ›Monotony‹, the dactylic theme of Minnie is found. The keyword is ›Visionary‹ (n. 908). The same theme, at n. 1030, carries similar labels, but with a few hierarchical differences: ›Lyric expression‹ – ›Anticlimax‹ – ›Unreal. Visionary‹, keyword: ›Monotonous‹. It is preceded at n. 1029 by »No, Minnie, non piangete«, sung by Johnson at the end of Act I and here called ›Reverie‹. Only a short quotation from *Suor Angelica* is associated with ›dreamlike‹ sensations together with *La fanciulla del West*: the theme heard during the announcement of the ›miracle‹ of May (»È vero, fra un istante vedrem l'acqua dorata! E per due sere ancora!«). In this case, the association between the music and visions or dreams seems more immediate than in the excerpts from *La fanciulla del West*. However, many commentators described *La fanciulla del West* as a tale of unlikely events. This aspect was criticized since the New York premiere of the opera on 10 December 1910 (Gilman 1910, in Gara 1958, 381). Girardi stated that in *La fanciulla del West*

Puccini [...] experimented ways of intimate expression of the characters intended to cross the boundaries of the believable, almost coming closer to the poetics, which

¹⁰ »Pace conquistata con l'amore e l'operosità«.

the European theatre was already realizing on stage.¹¹
(Girardi, 1995, 285)

We do not know if Becce was aware of this when applying his classification. In any case, he showed an intuition and a sensitivity that are rarely encountered in a silent film music compiler. In this regard, the collaboration of Brav and Erdmann, both trained musicologists and acutely aware of music history and theory, should be taken into account.

Second place in the ›Lyric‹ section, in terms of absolute quantity of pieces, holds *Manon Lescaut*, as already mentioned. In this case, too, Becce's use of the opera is not banal at all. Only a few fragments are listed under the categories of ›Pathos‹ and ›Passion‹, while the most ›gallant‹ and ›XVII century‹ features of *Manon* are pointed out. The famous minuet from the Second Act and the introductory theme, taken from the *Three Minuets* for string quartet composed by Puccini in 1884, are placed in the ›Incidence‹ section (nn. 2024 and 2130), ›People and Society‹ – ›Festive (courteous-noble)‹ – ›Menuet‹. In the ›Lyric‹ collection, Becce rarely goes beyond the Second Act, and when he does, he finds sentimental grace even in the most tragic and romantic episodes. For example in the well-known theme from Act Four (foreshadowed during the *Intermezzo*), sustaining Des Grieux' desperate cry (›Son io che piango‹, n. 1146): Becce here lightens the drama, suggesting to use it as a ›Melancholic serenade‹ (›Lyric Incidence‹ – ›Arioso – Like a song‹ – ›Sentimental‹). Becce's *Manon* is confined in her somehow childish world of grace, dances and courtesy, far from the pains of love and once again lost amidst the territories of dreams and ideals.

Il tabarro is the most quoted work in the ›Lyric‹ section, compared to the

¹¹ »Puccini [...] sperimentò forme d'espressione intima dei personaggi che fuoriuscissero dai contorni del verosimile, quasi a convergere sempre più verso poetiche che il teatro europeo già andava inverando sulle scene«.

length of the opera and the number of fragments. Becce's interpretation of Puccini is confirmed again. Eight moments are selected from an opera which lasts only one hour, but they have lost most of their original violent and almost grotesque undertones. This is peculiarly evident with n. 899: Michele's *arioso* moment »Ero tanto felice« is linked to the keywords ›Joy and peace. Lucky ending‹, which sounds uncannily ironic for an opera like *Il tabarro*. In Becce's selection there is a place for the sombre theme that appears as the murder scene approaches, however, the same theme from Michele's *romanza* »Scorri fiume eterno« from the first version of the opera (n. 686, keyword ›Grave sorrow‹). Open references to murders or forbidden passions are hidden, though, thanks to a hierarchy marked ›Lyric Expression‹ – ›Tension-Pathos‹ – ›Desperate cry‹, and then completely erased when the same fragment reappears in the section ›Incidence‹ at n. 1762, under the labels ›State and church‹ – ›Procession‹ – ›Grave sorrow. Funeral procession‹. Doubt and adultery are sublimated into an official occasion, controlled by the rules of social life. The opening theme of the opera is instead classified as an ›Anticlimax‹ and as an indicator of ›Melancholy‹, together with the duet »Com'è difficile esser felici« (nn. 952–53). The passion between Giorgetta and Luigi is evoked at least once by quoting the aria »È ben altro il mio sogno« at n. 790 (›Lyric expression‹ – ›Tension-Pathos‹ – ›Overwhelming Pathos‹, keyword: ›Great passion‹). On the other hand, from the same part of the opera, the episode »Al mattino, il lavoro che ci aspetta« (describing Giorgetta's delusions of a peaceful life) is instead placed at n. 1087, marked ›Arioso-Like a song‹ and ›Melancholic‹, with the keyword ›Happy tale-Melancholic song (folk song)‹, in the ›Lyric Incidence‹ catalogue. The reference to a ›folk song‹ might recall the ›working class‹ setting of *Il tabarro*, even if other evidence suggests that Becce is instead trying to conceal any remnants of the original work. In this

respect, it is useful to quote the rustic *Trinklied* sang by Luigi, inviting gaiety and, indirectly, oblivion and resignation (later in the opera, Tinca, the drinker states: »Si affogano i pensieri di rivolta: ché se bevo non penso, e se penso non rido!«: ›The rebellious thoughts are drowned; for if I drink I do not think, and if I think I do not laugh!‹). Becce puts it at n. 1247, under ›Lyric Incidence‹ – ›Arioso-Like a song‹ – ›Graceful. Simple‹, keyword: ›Merry dance song‹. Similarly, one can consider the mocking, dissonant street organ whose sound Puccini renders with flutes and clarinets playing a diminished octave apart. Becce allocates it to the ›Incidence‹ section (n. 2217), with the titles ›People and Society‹ – ›Festive (civic)‹ – ›Waltz‹, keyword: ›Waltz in an ancient manner‹. Moreover, Tavan's arrangement softens the impact of the dissonance a great deal, as the flute part becomes a series of acciaccaturas to the E flat major melody.

This review of uses of Puccini's scores is completed by an outstanding rethinking of a moment from *Suor Angelica*, maybe the most extreme consequence of Becce's approach to compiling and classifying. At n. 1684, one reads ›lyric Incidence‹ – ›Nature‹ – ›Pastoral in a Christmas style‹, keywords: ›Religious. Pastoral. Christmassy‹ – and those words are used to describe Angelica's sorrowful goodbye to her sisters, to seclusion, to life: »Addio, buone sorelle, addio. Io vi lascio per sempre«.

The study of the Puccinian selection from the *Handbuch* shows an approach that is certainly consistent, even if not very respectful of the original dramaturgical meaning of the catalogued materials. The resulting portrait of Puccini would not be easily accepted by a music or theatre historian. However, such a perspective is not useful to understand Becce's true intentions. In fact, the final destination of this anthology was not a theatre or a concert hall, but the cinema: a place where Puccini's music and stories had

to accept, like many other musical works before them, to be at service to a different art form. By 1927, the cinematographic art was completely aware of the necessity of an audiovisual aesthetic regulating the role of music. Hans Erdmann, in the first volume of the *Handbuch*, directly addresses this aesthetic, by writing that the best film music cannot be appreciated on its own, as it flows without separation from the film image (Becce/Brav/Erdmann 1927, I, 45). This is a fairly modern concept, which guided film music composition after the advent of film sound: the moving image must be created with regard to its future joining with music, and the score must be born from the image, just like a musical interpretation springs from the act of reading written music. In case of a musical illustration constructed with a preexisting repertory, it is of course impossible to have a perfect and detailed correspondence between the ›visual score‹ and its musical equivalent. The latter is instead destined to naturally evoke shadows of stage performances, personal memories of opera goers, echoes of the lyrics, of the libretto: that is to say, a heritage that on the one hand carries the looming taste of a Proustian *madeleine*, while on the other hand it provides a dangerous element of distraction from the film screening. Film illustrators in the late 1920s were aware of this danger and tried to avoid it by choosing lesser-known pieces in their compilations of music.

Therefore, we might regard Becce's transfiguration of Puccini's operas as a work of ›positive dissimulation‹. The new contextualization of the selected fragments which ignores their original meanings on purpose and not because of ignorance, helps the cinema audience to experience them as if for the first time. Becce examines the shimmering surface of the Puccinian language, that is to say the melodies, the rhythmic figures, the suggestive harmonies; then, he extracts their essence from them, disembodying forms, schemes and large structures, keeping just the fascination and the allure of

their sound, devoid of the dramatic depths of the scores. As a consequence, this music accumulates the semantic fields of fantasy and free imagination, in stark contrast to the rational classification of Puccini found in the first volume of the *Handbuch*, where the three authors add him to the (questionable) category of ›realist composers‹, together with Leoncavallo, Mascagni and Eugene D'Albert.

By accepting this interpretation, it is more easily comprehensible why Becce 'ignored' operas like *Bohème*, *Tosca* and *Madame Butterfly*. Because of their notoriety, the influence of their words and narrative situations would have had too many extra-musical connotations for silent films unrelated to them. Similarly, it becomes evident why in certain places of the catalogue, where one would have expected Puccinian quotations (for example ›Lullaby‹, or ›Japanese. Chinese‹), the Italian composer is absent. The allusions would have been too open and, maybe, excessively naïve.

In conclusion, the study of this Puccinian anthology reveals some of the cognitive value hidden within a silent film music repertoire. The present analysis does not assume to be a complete decryption of Becce's intentions, nor a definitive map tracing the architecture of the catalogue. However, it could be argued that it proves, at least, how the apparent ›parasitic‹ attitude of silent cinema towards music nurtured rich creative intuitions instead, guided by an audiovisual sensibility that foreshadowed the practices of sound film composers. Puccini's music, in the *Allgemeines Handbuch der Film-Musik*, contributed to the consolidation and explication of an important aesthetic tendency in early film music. It managed to do so by a detachment of its dramatic sense and its verses. In the cinema hall Puccini became a silent maestro, who gave a life and a future to flickering shadows on a luminous screen.

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