PUCCINI La Bohème



Jussi Björling • Victoria de los Angeles Robert Merrill • Lucine Amara • Giorgio Tozzi RCA Victor Chorus and Orchestra Sir Thomas Beecham



Great Opera Recordings

Giacomo PUCCINI (1858-1924)

La Bohème

Lyrical scenes in four acts

Libretto by Luigi Illica and Giuseppe Giacosa after *Scènes de la Vie de Bohème* by Henri Murger

todolfo Jussi Björling (tenor)
Mimì Victoria de los Angeles (soprano)
Marcello
Musetta Lucine Amara (soprano)
chaunard John Reardon (baritone)
Colline
Benoît
Alcindoro Fernando Corena (bass)
'arpignol William Nahr (tenor)
Customs Official Thomas Powell (baritone)
argeant

RCA Victor Chorus (Chorus Master: Thomas Martini) The Columbus Boychoir (Director: Herbert Huffman) RCA Victor Orchestra Sir Thomas Beecham

Recorded 16th, 17th and 30th March and 1st - 3rd, 5th and 6th April, 1956 in Manhattan Center, New York City
First issued on RCA Victor LM-6042 and HMV ALP 1409 and 1410

Reissue Producer and Audio Restoration Engineer: Mark Obert-Thorn

CD	1	79:36	14	Viva Parpignol! (Chorus, Marcello, Mimì, Schaunard,	2:11
	Act I	35:43		Colline, Rodolfo)	
1	Questo "Mar Rosso" mi ammollisce e assic (Marcello, Rodolfo)	dera 2:37	15	Oh! Musetta! (Rodolfo, Schaunard, Colline, Marcello, Chorus, Alcindoro, Musetta, Mimì)	3:17
2	Aguzza l'ingegno (Rodolfo, Marcello, Colline)	3:11	16	Quando men' vo soletta (Musetta, Marcello, Alcindoro, Mimì,	4:41
3	Legna! Sigari! (Rodolfo, Marcello, Colline, Schaunard)	3:42	_	Rodolfo, Schaunard, Colline)	
4	Si può? Chi è là? (Benoît, Marcello, Schaunard, Colline, Ro	4:35 odolfo)	17	Chi l'ha richiesto? (Colline, Schaunard, Rodolfo, Chorus, Marcello, Musetta, Mimi)	2:13
5	Al Quartiere Latin ci attende Momus (Schaunard, Marcello, Rodolfo, Colline)	2:10		Act III	25:06
6	Chi è là? (Rodolfo, Mimì)	2:35	18	Ohè, là, le guardie! Aprite! (Chorus, Sargeant, Musetta)	3:41
7	Oh! sventata, sventata! (Mimì, Rodolfo)	1:44	19	Sa dirmi, scusi, qual'è l'osteria (Mimì, Sergeant, Customs Official)	1:32
8	Che gelida manina! (Rodolfo)	5:00	20	Mimì! Speravo di trovarvi qui (Marcello, Mimì)	5:05
9	Sì. Mi chiamano Mimì (Mimì, Rodolfo)	5:12	21	Marcello. Finalmente. (Rodolfo, Marcello, Mimì)	1:22
10	Ehi! Rodolfo! (Schaunard, Colline, Marcello, Rodolfo, M	0:48 ⁄limì)	22	Mimì è una civetta (Rodolfo, Marcello)	1:28
11	O soave fanciulla (Rodolfo, Marcello, Mimì)	4:09	23	Mimì è tanto malata! (Rodolfo, Marcello, Mimì)	3:19
	Act II	18:44	24	Addio D'onde lieta uscì al tuo grido d'amo (Mimì, Rodolfo)	re 3:17
12	Aranci, datteri! (Chorus, Schaunard, Colline, Rodolfo, Mimì, Marcello)	2:59	25	Dunque è proprio finita? (Rodolfo, Mimì)	1:51
13	Chi guardi? (Rodolfo, Colline, Mimì, Schaunard, Marcello, Chorus, Parpignol)	3:23	26	Che facevi? Che dicevi? (Marcello, Musetta, Mimì, Rodolfo)	3:31

CD 2 61:		61:36		Appendices	
	Act IV	28:52	11	Sir Thomas Beecham speaks about La Bohème	1:23
1	In un coupé? (Marcello, Rodolfo)	1:28		Recorded 1956 in New York City First issued on RCA Victor SRL-12-28 ("Showcase in Sound")	1.23
2	O Mimì, tu più non torni (Rodolfo, Marcello)	2:59		Act III	
3	Che ora sia! L'ora del pranzo (Rodolfo, Marcello, Schaunard, Colline)	2:20	12	D'onde lieta uscì al tuo grido d'amore *	3:36
_				Act IV	
4	Gavotta Minuetto Pavanella (Colline, Marcello, Rodolfo, Schaunard)	1:43	13	In un coupé?	1:29
5	C'è Mimì c'è Mimì	3:24	14	O Mimì, tu più non torni	3:07
	(Musetta, Rodolfo, Schaunard, Mimì, Marcello)		15	1 ~	2:24
6	He tente fields Comment in manifestal	3:01	16		1:41 2:57
О	Ho tanto freddo. Se avessi un manicotto! (Mimì, Rodolfo, Musetta, Marcello, Schaun		17		2:37
	(inim, rederie, indeedd, indeedde, genddi		18 19	Ho tanto freddo. Se avessi un manicotto Vecchia zimarra	2:35
7	Vecchia zimarra	2:23	20		3:02
	(Colline, Schaunard)		_	Mi chiamano Mimì il perchè non so	3:15
8	Sono andati? Fingevo di dormire (Mimì, Rodolfo)	3:17	22	Dorme? Riposa	4:52
	(Mini, Rodono)		Ro	dolfo Heddle Nash	(tenor)
9	Mi chiamano Mimì il perchè non so	3:20		mìDora Labbette (so	
	(Mimì, Rodolfo, Schaunard)			rcello John Brownlee (ba	
10	Dorme? Riposa	4:56		setta	
	(Musetta, Rodolfo, Marcello, Mimì, Schaunard, Colline)			lline Robert Alva (ba	

London Philharmonic Orchestra Sir Thomas Beecham

Recorded 25th November and 9th December, 1935 and *3rd April, 1936 in EMI Abbey Road Studio No. 1, London Matrices: CAX 7771-5*, 7684-1, 7685-1, 7686-3, 7687-2, 7688-1, 7689-2 and 7690-2

First issued on Columbia LX 523 through 526

8.111249-50

Giacomo Puccini (1858 - 1924) La Bohème

Puccini had achieved international fame with his version of *Manon Lescaut* following its première in Turin in February 1893. When exactly the composer began work on his next opera *La Bohème* is somewhat vague but it is known that he and his contemporary Leoncavallo met in Milan in March 1893 and revealed that both composers were in the process of writing an opera based on Henry Murger's novel *Scènes de la Vie de Bohème*, published in 1851.

It is known that the librettist Giuseppe Giacosa had begun working on a prose sketch for a libretto of La Bohème in late 1892 and later took on board Luigi Illica to work on the project. (Both composers had contributed to Manon Lescaut.) The resulting opera endured many problems in its creation not least because of Puccini's determination to get his own way. Eventually the work was completed in the latter part of 1895. Incidentally, Leoncavallo continued his version of the opera and this was eventually first given in Venice in May 1897. Sadly his version, whilst more truthful to Murger's original and musically most accomplished, lacks that touch of genius Puccini gave to his work. Puccini's opera was first produced at the Teatro Regio, Turin on 1st February 1896 conducted by the 28-year-old Arturo Toscanini. The British première took place in Manchester on 22nd April the following year, sung in English.

Set in Paris during the 1830s, the four short contrasting acts cover a period of little more than three months, from Christmas Eve to the following spring. The opera was to prove a turning-point in Puccini's career and in the ensuing century or more the work has laid claim to be one of the most popular operas. Why should it be so? It has comedy, tragedy, exuberance, warmth, cold, happiness, love, pathos, despair. The characters are so real that an audience can immediately be drawn into the plot and environment. Set in Paris in the Latin Quarter, the libretto catches the ever-changing character of Bohemian life in a masterly fashion. Then each act within its less than thirty-minute span contains such a wide variety of emotions and feelings. For example, the contrasting

exuberance of the inseparable quartet of Rodolfo the poet, Marcello the painter, Colline the philosopher and Schaunard the musician and their pranks with the landlord Benoît, against the delicacy and tenderness of Mimì and Rodolfo and their growing love. The noisy and boisterous second act, set in a square, and centred on the Café Momus, has street vendors, students, ordinary citizens going about their daily lives. children, the passing military parade contrasted with the larger than life character of Musetta, her aged roué Alcindoro and her former lover Marcello. The magical third act opens with the depiction of cold and falling snow at a gate-house of Paris on the road to Orléans. This is contrasted with the goings-on at the nearby tavern outside which Mimì and Rodolfo argue, make up and part, and the noisy and argumentative Musetta and Marcello. The wonderfully poignant closing moments of this act have the voices of Mimì and Rodolfo receding into the distance. The fourth act returns to the garret of the four male bohemians. The opening duet with Rodolfo and Marcello in which they voice their longing for their lost loves, is in contrast to the boisterous antics of all four men. dramatically interrupted by the arrival of Musetta and her announcement that Mimì is dying. The closing ten minutes of the opera are desperately sad, poignant and most moving. It is therefore little wonder that the opera has remained so popular when Puccini lavished on it such poignant and memorable music which so perfectly suits the text.

The story behind the making of this recording of La Bohème is, half a century on, remarkable and astonishing. Sir Thomas Beecham had returned to recording for EMI in November 1955 even before the start date of his new contract with the company, that took place with effect from 1st January 1956. It was then discovered that the conductor, the soprano Victoria de los Angeles and tenor Jussi Björling would all be in New York in March and April that year. EMI and their then American licensees RCA Victor immediately put in hand plans to make a studio recording of the opera during that period. No stage

performances took place prior to the recording and the three artists joined forces with various American singers to make this historic version with the chorus of the New York City Opera and a pick-up orchestral group which included various members of the Metropolitan Opera orchestra. The recording was made over a three-week period in the Ballroom of the Manhattan Center, a venue much used by RCA at the time. Sadly the recording was only made in mono sound, although RCA did use an experimental twotrack mono technique to record the voices on one and the orchestra on another, thereby allowing them the opportunity to rebalance the voices against orchestra after the recording, if necessary, and thus avoiding expensive studio time on rerecording. The resulting recording was hailed as a remarkably successful achievement and as such has remained available over the past half century.

When the recording was first released in Britain the reviewer in The Gramophone remarked of Beecham's reading of the score that "there is no more grandly eloquent handling of the adorable music" and further commented that "Beecham's power of reviving music is indescribable ... Time and again this score too is 're-heard' as one sees a picture 'with a rinsed eye' as the French say". Of the singers "Victoria de los Angeles sounds wonderful ... and Björling is likewise wonderful in being so reliable and stylish over every hurdle. Lucine Amara ... is a peculiarly sweet-voiced Musetta in character and Merrill's singing, as singing, delights me". The concluding sentence comments: "One goes head over heels in love with the opera all over again".

The Spanish soprano Victoria de los Angeles (1923-2005) was born in Barcelona and later studied in that city. Her formal début was in 1945 as the Countess in *Le nozze di Figaro*. After winning the Geneva International Singing Competition in 1947 she was invited the following year by the BBC in London to take part in studio broadcast performances of Falla's *La vida breve*, an event which aroused great interest and critical acclaim. She then appeared at the Paris Opéra, Covent Garden in London, La Scala in Milan and the Metropolitan, New York, in three successive years from 1949 onwards. She later sang at

Bayreuth in 1961 but thereafter began to confine her appearances to the concert hall. Her voice was one of great lyrical beauty and conveyed infinite tonal contrasts with an unusually warm lower register. She recorded extensively in both opera and song, particularly in the latter area, Spanish music of many centuries. She continued to appear in concert until her mid-sixties. She can be heard as Nedda in *Pagliacci* (Naxos 8.110258).

The American soprano Lucine Amara (b. 1927) was born of Armenian descent in Hartford, Connecticut. She studied first in San Francisco with Stella Eisner-Eyn and also sang in the chorus of San Francisco Opera (1945-46). Her concert début was in 1946 before she attended the Music Academy of the West (1947), Santa Barbara, California, She then enrolled at the University of Southern California (1949-50). She also appeared in the title-rôle of Ariadne auf Naxos and as Lady Billows in Britten's Albert Herring in 1949 before making her début at the Metropolitan Opera as the Heavenly Voice in Verdi's Don Carlo in November 1950. She would continue at this house until 1991, singing 56 rôles in 882 appearances. Amara sang at Glyndebourne (1954-55, 1957-58), the Edinburgh Festival (1954), the Vienna State Opera (1961), in Russia (1965) and China (1983). Her repertoire included Leonora in Il Trovatore, Aida, Madama Butterfly, Mimì, Donna Anna, Pamina, Tatyana in Eugene Onegin, Nedda and Ellen Orford. After retiring she was the artistic director of the New Jersey Association of Verismo in addition to giving master-classes in the United States, Canada and Mexico.

The Swedish tenor Jussi Björling (1911-1960) was born in Stora Tuna in the district of Dalarna. As a boy he toured and recorded with the family quartet, in addition to visiting the United States (1916-26). His adult teachers were his father David, John Forsell (1928-30) and the Scottish tenor Joseph Hislop. He was a member of the Royal Opera in Stockholm from 1930, making his début in the small rôle of the Lamplighter in Puccini's Manon Lescaut. His 'official' first appearance was as Don Ottavio in Mozart's Don Giovanni later that season. Two years later he began his international career in Germany.

followed by Vienna (1936), Chicago (1937), the Metropolitan Opera in New York (1938) and Covent Garden the following year. He continued to appear regularly in New York, except in the war years, until 1959. Björling was regarded as the foremost Italiansounding tenor of his day in the spinto rôles of Puccini and Verdi, and he also excelled in French opera. His work was highly respected for its high artistic qualities, even if his acting ability was somewhat stilted and stiff. He recorded extensively from the mid-1930s until his early death in 1960. His poor health in later years was caused by heart problems. His ten complete operatic recordings include Il Trovatore (Naxos 8.110240-41), Pagliacci (Naxos 8.110258), Manon Lescaut and Aida.

Brooklyn-born Robert Merrill (1917-2004) first studied with his mother who had been a concert singer, then with Samuel Margolis and Angelo Canarutto. Following his stage début in 1943 as Amonasro in Aida in Trenton, New Jersey, he won the Metropolitan Opera Association Auditions of the Air. which brought about his first appearance in that house in December 1945 as Giorgio Germont in La Traviata. It was here that the larger part of Merrill's career was spent over a period of thirty years, appearing in nearly 750 performances of 21 rôles. He flirted briefly with Hollywood in the early 1950s before returning to the opera house. His repertoire included Enrico Ashton in Lucia di Lammermoor, Figaro in Il barbiere di Siviglia, Rigoletto, both Silvio and Tonio in Pagliacci, Iago, Scarpia and Don Carlo in La forza del destino. Generally considered to have possessed one of the finest lyric baritone voices of his time, he also sang in opera in San Francisco (1957), Chicago (1960), Venice (1961) and London (1967). He recorded extensively, including many of the principal Verdi baritone rôles. His recordings on Naxos include Silvio in Pagliacci (8.110258) and Manon Lescaut (8.111030-31).

New York-born baritone John Reardon (1930-1988) studied at Rollins College before working with baritone Martial Singher and soprano Margaret Harshaw. His début was as Dr Falke in Die Fledermaus at the New York City Opera in October 1954, and he appeared first at the Metropolitan as Prince Tomsky in Tchaikovsky's *The Queen of Spades* in September 1965, remaining on the roster there until 1977. His other rôles included Escamillo, Pelléas, Mercutio and Albert in *Werther*. He sang parts in the United States premières of Prokofiev's *The Nose*, Henze's *The Bassarids*, and Gottfried von Einem's *Dantons Tod*, and in the first performances of Levy's *Mourning becomes Electra* and Lee Hoiby's *Summer and Smoke*. Reardon was a splendid actor and used his lyric baritone voice with great control and finesse. He later worked in Santa Fé and directed the opera workshop at the Wolf Trap Summer Theater in Virginia. His recordings include Nick Shadow in Stravinsky's own 1964 version of *The Rake's Progress*.

The Chicago-born bass Giorgio (originally called George) Tozzi (b. 1923) began his vocal studies at the age of thirteen. As a biology student at De Paul University, he also continued instruction with Rosa Raisa, Giacomo Rimini and John Dagget Howell. He made his début in the baritone rôle of Tarquinius in the Broadway première of Britten's The Rape of Lucretia in December 1948. The following year he appeared in London in the musical show Tough at the Top. He then went to Milan to study with Giulio Lorandi, moving from baritone to bass before making his Italian début as Rodolfo in La Sonnambula at the Teatro Nuovo, Milan. He sang Stromminger in Catalani's La Wally at La Scala in 1953 before making his first Metropolitan appearance as Alvise in La Gioconda in March 1955. He would sing at this house until 1975 by which time he had given almost 400 performances of 37 rôles: these included Ramfis. Pimen, Boris, Philip II, Daland, Pogner, Hans Sachs and Rocco. Tozzi created the part of the Doctor in Barber's Vanessa in 1958, later repeating his interpretation at the Salzburg Festival. He possessed an imposing stage presence and conveyed warmth and intelligence in his characterisations. From 1991 he has taught at the Indiana School of Music in Bloomington. His many recordings included Handel's Messiah with Beecham.

Puccini is not a composer with whom one would readily associate the quintessentially English conductor **Sir Thomas Beecham** (1879-1961) but he had known the composer personally and had discussed La Bohème in great detail with him in London in the 1920s. The conductor had spent a huge amount of time (and money) in the opera house in the years leading up to the First World War and immediately afterwards. He was in overall control of the International Seasons at Covent Garden from 1933 until 1939 and during his years in the United States between 1941 and 1944 had conducted opera at the Metropolitan in New York. His post-war operatic operations were confined to a series of BBC studio broadcasts, Strauss's first version of

Ariadne auf Naxos at the 1950 Edinburgh Festival, two operas at Covent Garden (Die Meistersinger and Balfe's The Bohemian Girl in 1951), Delius's Irmelin at Oxford in 1953, and a memorable season at the Teatro Colón in Buenos Aires in 1958. He also made commercial studio recordings of Gounod's Faust (Naxos 8.110117-18) in 1948 and Bizet's Carmen in 1958-59 in addition to this celebrated and much loved version of La Bohème in 1956.

Malcolm Walker

Synopsis

CD 1

Act I

The scene is a garret in the artists' quarter of Paris. There is a large window, from which the roofs of houses can be seen, covered with snow. In the room there is a fireplace, a table, a small cupboard, a bookcase, four chairs, an easel, a bed, two candlesticks and many packs of cards. Rodolfo, a young poet, is looking out of the window, while Marcello is at work on his painting, *The Passage of the Red Sea*. His hands are cold, and he blows on them from time to time, to warm them.

Arcello complains of the cold, but jokingly suggests revenge by drowning Pharaoh in the Red Sea. Rodolfo admires the view from the window, the smoke from the chimneys, although their own stove is cold. Marcello continues his complaints about the cold and about the falseness of Musetta, and Rodolfo points out that love is like a stove that needs fuel. Marcello suggests burning one of the chairs, but Rodolfo has a better idea:

A he will burn the play he has written, and the two sit warming themselves in front of the burning pages. The door opens and their friend, the philosopher Colline, comes in, stamping his feet. He throws a bundle of books on the table and complains that he has been unable to pawn anything because it is Christmas Eve, and the three of them joke about burning the play, as the second act goes on the fire. Rodolfo

laments the end of his play and Colline moralises. The third act goes the way of the rest, as the flames die down.

[3] Two boys come in, one of them carrying food, wine and cigars and the other wood for the fire. The three friends seize on the provisions and Colline adds wood to the fire. The musician Schaunard comes in and throws down some coins, telling them of his good luck, how an English nobleman has employed him to play and sing to his parrot. The others interrupt his story, more interested in the provisions Schaunard has brought. He suggests that they should drink first at home and then go out to celebrate. Rodolfo locks the door and they go to the table and pour out wine.

There is a knock at the door and their landlord Benoît announces himself. After a brief consultation they let him in and offer him a glass of wine. He has come for the quarter's rent, but the young men constantly fill his glass and jest with him over his supposed amatory conquests. Benoît confesses his liking for a buxom girl, and at this point Marcello pretends to be angry, accusing him of immorality, and they push him towards the door, ironically wishing him a happy Christmas.

5 Now the friends make ready to leave for the Café Momus. Rodolfo, however, must stay behind to finish an article, which will only take five minutes, and he holds a candle for the others to go down the stairs. Coming in again he shuts the door, clears a corner of the table and prepares to write, breaking off from time to time for thought.

6 He is not in the mood for writing. There is a timid knock at the door and their neighbour Mimì comes in,

seeking a light for her candle. She has a fit of coughing and is about to faint. Rodolfo makes her sit down and brings water to revive her. He offers her wine, which she reluctantly accepts and then makes to leave. She thanks Rodolfo and wishes him good evening.

As she is leaving, Mimì finds she has dropped the key to her room. Her candle, which Rodolfo had lit for her, is blown out, and Rodolfo runs to bring his own from the table, but that too is blown out by the draught from the stairway. The room is in darkness. Rodolfo shuts the door and the two of them search for Mimì's key, which Rodolfo finds and pockets.

B While they are still searching, Rodolfo touches Mimi's hand, which he holds, telling her to wait until the moon shines brightly enough for them to see again. While they wait, he will tell her who he is, a poet and

a writer, a man of imagination.

Mimi tells her own story. Her real name is Lucia and she is a seamstress, embroidering flowers like the flowers of poets: she lives alone in a garret, where, after winter, she can welcome the first light of spring. She breaks off to apologise: she is just an importunate neighbour.

10 Rodolfo's friends shout out to him from below in the courtyard and he opens the window, allowing a few rays of moonlight into the room, and shouts down that he has nearly finished his work and will join them at the café with a friend.

He sings in praise of Mimi's beauty, as she stands in the moonlight: they are in love.

Act II

T2 The scene is a square in the Latin Quarter of Paris. Here many streets meet and here stands the Café Momus. The square is crowded with people, soldiers, servant-girls, children, students, working girls, gendarmes and so on. There are street-vendors, hawking their wares. Rodolfo and Mimì walk together, while Colline has a patch sewn on his old coat, Schaunard bargains with a scrap-dealer for a pipe and horn, while Marcello wanders from one vendor to another. The shops are decorated with tiny lamps,

while outside the Café Momus there is a huge lantern, with customers sitting at tables outside the café. We hear the sound of the crowd, the hawkers selling oranges, chestnuts and trinkets, the crowd exclaiming in appreciation and street urchins adding their own noise to the din. Schaunard tries out the horn he has bought, which he thinks out of tune; Colline examines the repair now made to his coat and Rodolfo and Mimì move towards a bonnet shop, while Marcello delights in the busy scene.

[3] Mimi and Rodolfo talk together, while Marcello, Schaunard and Colline ask a waiter for a table, which is prepared for them. The voice of the hawker Parpignol is heard, while Rodolfo introduces Mimi to his friends, to their amusement.

Parpignol approaches pushing a barrow of toys, decorated with flowers and paper lanterns. He is followed by an enthusiastic crowd of urchins. Mothers of children attempt to drag them away, but the children resist. The friends loudly order food and wine and Parpignol moves on, followed by the children. Marcello asks Mimì what Rodolfo has bought for her and she shows him her new bonnet. The others comment on Rodolfo's talents as a lover, but a remark by Mimì briefly revives Marcello's bitterness. They drink a toast, but as Marcello catches sight of his beloved Musetta, followed by a fussy, over-dressed, pompous old gentleman, he calls instead for poison.

15 The old man, Alcindoro, follows her breathlessly, like a servant, as he remarks, and Musetta takes the table next to the friends, where she makes her Lulu, as she calls him, sit down. They comment on her expensive clothes, while she tries to attract their attention, with increasing irritation. She calls the waiter, complains that the plate smells and throws it on the ground, while Alcindoro tries to calm her. Marcello tells Mimì that the girl is called Musetta and that she is notoriously fickle. Alcindoro tries to keep Musetta quiet and she complains that he is boring, while still seeking to attract the attention of Marcello. A group of working girls see her with her old admirer and burst out laughing. Eventually she can restrain herself no longer and addresses Marcello directly, to the delight of his friends, although Rodolfo and Mimi remain preoccupied with one another.

[6] Musetta, gazing at Marcello, now tells of her life, wandering along the street, admired by all the men. Alcindoro is horrified. Musetta continues to celebrate her conquests and the old man becomes more and more agitated. Mimi realises that Musetta is really in love with Marcello. Schaunard and Colline stand up to watch the scene and Marcello too is about to go, while Rodolfo and Mimi continue their own conversation. Suddenly Musetta calls out, pretending to feel a violent pain in her foot, and sends Alcindoro off to find a pair of boots for her instead of the tight shoes she is wearing. As soon as he goes, Musetta and Marcello fall into one another's arms.

[7] A waiter brings the bill and the friends hand it round, as a march is heard in the distance. They feel for money, but have nothing. Musetta calls for her bill, as the marching patrol draws nearer, and tells the waiter to put the two together and give it to her friend Alcindoro, who will pay. The patrol marches into the square, led by a stalwart drum-major, and as they pass on they are followed by Marcello and Colline, carrying Musetta, without her shoe, Rodolfo and Mimi, with Schaunard blowing his new hunting-horn. Alcindoro comes back, carrying a carefully wrapped pair of new shoes, to be greeted by the waiter with the bill.

Act III

B The third act opens at the Barrière d'Enfer, by the toll-gate, with a tavern and streets leading off in either direction. The tavern sign is Marcello's painting, The Passage of the Red Sea, with the title underneath At the Port of Marseilles. Light shines from the tavern window into a gloomy February dawn. The ground is covered in snow and the trees are grey and gaunt. There is an occasional sound of revelry from the tavern. A gang of street-sweepers approaches the toll-gate, calling for admission into the city, and one of the guards stirs himself and goes to open the gate. The men pass through and he closes the gate again. The sound of merriment comes from the tavern, singing accompanied by the clinking of glasses, followed by

the voice of Musetta. A group of milk-women approaches the gate, which is opened for them, as the dawn grows lighter. They are followed by peasantwomen, carrying baskets. The guards move their bench and brazier and at this moment Mimì appears. She reaches the first of the trees and bursts out into a violent fit of coughing.

in She approaches the sergeant and asks him the name of the tavern where the painter is working. He shows her and as a serving-woman comes out of the tavern, she asks to speak to Marcello. Other people pass through the toll-gate and the matins bell of the Hospice of Ste Thérèse is heard. It is day at last, a gloomy, winter day.

Queen the tavern, followed by Marcello, who greets Mimi in surprise. He explains that he earns his money by painting and Musetta by teaching the customers to sing. Mimì is looking for Rodolfo, who loves her but has left her, out of jealousy. Marcello advises her to part from Rodolfo for good and explains how he and Musetta are united by their own good humour. He will help her finally to part from Rodolfo, who now lies asleep on a tavern bench. She breaks into a fit of coughing again, to Marcello's alarm, and tells him how Rodolfo has left her that night, telling her everything is finished.

[2] Mimi hides, as Rodolfo comes out, telling Marcello that he wants to leave Mimi, now that his love for her is dead, only to revive when he looks into her eyes. Marcello advises separation, if love brings such misery and jealousy.

22 Rodolfo complains of Mimi's behaviour, which Marcello doubts. Rodolfo is bound to agree.

23) He goes on to declare that he really loves her, explaining about her illness and increasing weakness and approaching death. Mimi overhears all this. Rodolfo blames himself for the poor conditions in which she must live with him. She is like a rare flower, wilting in his poor room. Mimi is racked by another spasm of coughing and Rodolfo anxiously rushes towards her. Musetta's laughter is heard from the tavern, as she flirts with the men there, and Marcello goes in.

Mimì bids Rodolfo farewell: she must die and now she asks him to send her the few possessions she has

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left in his room, the presents he has given her. He can keep the little bonnet that she has treasured as a souvenir of their love.

25 Rodolfo sadly parts from her.

While they tenderly remember their love, there is the sound of breaking plates and glasses, and Marcello is heard angrily quarrelling with Musetta. The altercation between one pair of lovers accompanies the sorrowful parting of the other. Musetta's quarrel with Marcello ends in her fury, as she shouts angrily at her lover and storms off, while he goes back into the tavern. The scene ends with the gentler parting of Rodolfo and Mimi.

CD 2

Act IV

The four friends are together again in the garret where they all live again. Marcello is painting and Rodolfo is sitting at the table trying to write. Rodolfo has seen Musetta riding in a carriage and finely dressed, and she has told him that she has no feeling of love: her finery is compensation enough. Marcello tries to force a laugh, but is upset. He tells Rodolfo that he has seen Mimi riding in a carriage, and dressed up like a queen. Rodolfo is equally annoyed and curses his pen, which he throws onto the floor, as Marcello throws down his brush and secretly takes out a bunch of ribbons that he kisses.

Rodolfo, to himself, laments the loss of Mimì, taking out the bonnet that he keeps to remember her by. Marcello too is haunted by his memory of Musetta. Schaunard comes in carrying bread and accompanied by Colline with a paper bag, from which he takes out a herring.

They all sit down at the table and pretend that they are at a banquet, water serving for champagne, the salted fish for salmon and the bread for parrots' tongues.

The mock banquet is to be followed by singing and dancing, as Schaunard announces, and the mock-ball

begins, leading to a feigned quarrel and duel with fireirons between the musician and the philosopher.

[5] Their merriment is interrupted by the sudden arrival of Musetta, who brings with her Mimì, now seriously ill and unable to climb the stairs unaided. The men help her in and make her as comfortable as they can on a bed that they drag forward. Musetta explains to the others how she had heard that Mimì had left her protector, the old viscount, and was destitute and dying. She has just found her, exhausted and begging to be taken once again to Rodolfo so that she may die near him. Mimì is happy now and embraces Rodolfo. Musetta asks what they can give Mimì, but the friends have nothing, no wine and no coffee.

[6] Mimì complains of the cold: she has no feeling in her hands, which Rodolfo, as once before he had done, tries to warm in his own. Schaunard and Colline sit apart, sadly, while Musetta takes off her ear-rings and tells Marcello to go quickly and sell them, to buy medicine for Mimì and to pay for a doctor.

Musetta and Marcello leave the room and Colline philosophically plans to part with his coat to raise money. He and Schaunard leave the lovers together.

B Mimi opens her eyes and asks if the others have gone: she has much to say to Rodolfo and embraces him. She asks if she is still beautiful and he tells her that she is as beautiful as dawn.

9 Together they recall their first meeting and their love for one another, as she repeats his words to her, as he first held her hand. Schaunard returns.

10 He is followed by Musetta, who asks if Mimì is sleeping. Marcello has brought medicine and Musetta gives Mimì her muff, which she thinks is from Rodolfo. Mimì seems to sleep, while Musetta prepares the medicine with a spirit lamp on the table and murmurs a prayer. Schaunard approaches Mimì and realises that she is dead but Rodolfo is the last to see the truth, as he throws himself on Mimì's body in his final grief.

Keith Anderson

Producer's Note

This release might well be called "The Ultimate Beecham *Bohème*," as it brings together for the first time the conductor's prewar and postwar recordings of the score as well as his spoken comments on the work, taken from a promotional LP issued at the time of the release of the complete recording.

This 1956 set rightly ranks alongside the Callas/De Sabata *Tosca* as one of the greatest studio recordings of an opera ever made. It has been transferred from the best portions of four RCA "Shaded Dog" pressings, which preserve the openness and impact of the original master tapes. The pitching has been left as it was on the original LPs when played back at 33.3 rpm, where it hovers around A = 440 Hz (as opposed to recent EMI CD editions of the recording, which go as sharp as A = 445 in places). The 1935 set of Act 4 (which originally credited Labbette under her operatic stage name, "Lisa Perli") was transferred from mid-1930s American Columbia small-label "Master Works" pressings.

Mark Obert-Thorn

Mark Obert-Thorn

Mark Obert-Thorn is one of the world's most respected transfer artist/engineers. He has worked for a number of specialist labels, including Pearl, Biddulph, Romophone and Music & Arts. Three of his transfers have been nominated for Gramophone Awards. A pianist by training, his passions are music, history and working on projects. He has found a way to combine all three in the transfer of historical recordings.

Obert-Thorn describes himself as a 'moderate interventionist' rather than a 'purist' or 're-processor,' unlike those who apply significant additions and make major changes to the acoustical qualities of old recordings. His philosophy is that a good transfer should not call attention to itself, but rather allow the performances to be heard with the greatest clarity.

There is no over-reverberant 'cathedral sound' in an Obert-Thorn restoration, nor is there the tinny bass and piercing mid-range of many 'authorised' commercial issues. He works with the cleanest available 78s, and consistently achieves better results than restoration engineers working with the metal parts from the archives of the modern corporate owners of the original recordings. His transfers preserve the original tone of the old recordings, maximising the details in critical upper mid-range and lower frequencies to achieve a musical integrity that is absent from many other commercially released restorations.

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NAXOS Historical

De los Angeles • Björling • Merrill • Beecham

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PUCCINI

La Bohème

Mimì	Victoria de los Angeles
Rodolfo	Jussi Björling
Musetta	Lucine Amara
Marcello	Robert Merrill
Colline	Giorgio Tozzi
Schaunard	John Reardon

The Columbus Boychoir • RCA Victor Chorus and Orchestra Sir Thomas Beecham

Recorded 16th, 17th and 30th March and 1st - 3rd, 5th and 6th April, 1956 in Manhattan Center, New York City

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Playing Time 2:21:12

CD I		79:36
1-11	Act I	35:43
12-17	Act II	18:44
18-26	Act III	25:06
CD 2		61:36
1-10	Act IV	28:52
	Appendices:	32:43
11 12-22	Beecham speaks abo Beecham conducts " and the complete Act	Mimì's Farewell"

(1935-36 recordings)

This release brings together for the first time Sir Thomas Beecham's prewar and postwar recordings of La Bohème as well as his spoken comments on the work, taken from a promotional LP issued at the time of the release of the complete recording. Beecham had known Puccini personally and had discussed La Bohème in great detail with him in London in the 1920s. Featuring Victoria de los Angeles and Jussi Björling in glorious form, the 1956 set ranks alongside the Callas De Sabata Tosca (Naxos 8.110256-57) as one of the greatest studio recordings of an opera ever made. When it was first released in the UK The Gramophone reviewer remarked that "Beecham's power of reviving music is indescribable.... One goes head over heels in love with the opera all over again".

Reissue Producer and Restoration Engineer: Mark Obert-Thorn Cover photo: Victoria de los Angeles and Jussi Björling (Private Collection)



