

## CHAPTER FIVE



### *Puccini, Publicity, and the 1910 Premiere*

With the opera completed and the contract signed, *Fanciulla* moved toward its New York premiere guided by a new set of imperatives, which were determined by material concerns. Simply put, the Metropolitan could not afford for this event to be anything less than a sensation: the financial investment was huge and the cultural risk even greater. As the narrative of events presented in this chapter will show, *Fanciulla's* debut was also New York's debut on the world stage. By presenting the first-ever American premiere of an opera by a major European composer, the Metropolitan organization hoped to win legitimacy for New York as one of the world's great opera cities. The unprecedented amount of advance publicity, both in New York and abroad, shows that no expense was spared to guarantee the opera's success and to advance the Metropolitan's broader agenda.

The Metropolitan publicists succeeded in shaping pre-premiere opinion in a number of ways. They gave the press great access to Puccini, Belasco, Toscanini (see pl. 24), and the principal singers, resulting in a flurry of interview articles, and managed to make the premiere into a bona fide society event, guaranteeing that New York's wealthiest residents and most famous celebrities would attend the opera and that society newspaper writers would cover the event. A number of common threads run through the advance newspaper articles. One of the Metropolitan's favorite publicity angles was to claim that the opera blended together two different worlds—that *Fanciulla* represented a synergy of old and new, European and American. The publicity also stressed the Italian nationality of its authors and performers. Implicit in this coverage

was the selling point that *Fanciulla* was not just a European opera, but an unassailably authentic *Italian* opera, composed and conducted by Italians. It was, therefore, judged to be among the most valuable of operatic commodities.

At the same time the advance publicity was propagating the idea of the opera's quintessential Italianness, it highlighted the distinctly American features of the story and the producers' efforts to portray them realistically on the opera stage. Newspaper articles contained proud descriptions of uniquely American ways of walking, gesturing, and even kissing that the European singers found impossible to imitate. While the novelty of a western theme accounts in part for the press's preoccupation with the opera's American features, it is likely that publicists emphasized this dimension of Puccini's new work in the hope of exploiting the audience's familiarity with Belasco's stage play. The constant references to these features seemed designed to assure Belasco loyalists that the Americanness of the original play had not been overtaken by the Italianness of the opera.

Another common theme in *Fanciulla's* publicity was the portrayal of European capitals as envious of New York's premiere. New York critics appeared to relish the fact that they were displacing their European counterparts by being the first to review the opera and judge its merits. Newspaper writers repeatedly informed their readers of the historic nature of the event and lost few opportunities to assume the tone of the opera world's new standard-bearers. Reporters seemed to share the Metropolitan's financial and cultural objectives and printed stories that helped to sell tickets and echoed the organization's view of the opera's value.

The content of reviews proved more difficult to control than the tone and subject matter of advance publicity. It is clear that reviewers became obsessed with the "inauthentic" American qualities of the opera and gave only cursory attention to the remarkable experimental qualities of Puccini's work. This attitude was perhaps predictable, considering the hyperbole that *Fanciulla* was "the perfect blend of two worlds": it was only natural that the press would critique the opera on this point, having been led in that direction for months.

For better or worse, the content of premiere reviews long outlives the normally short life span of newspaper ephemera. *Fanciulla's* first critics' superficial and often pedestrian observations continue to resonate, and their notions of the opera's failings form the core of the work's interpretive history. While its American qualities are certainly important elements (this topic is treated at length in chapter 6), the critics' narrow preoccupation with it can be seen as an unintended result of the Met's massive publicity campaign. In other words, advance notices raised expectations of an operatic Americanness that Puccini never intended to create. Consequently, the 1910 New York reviews have dis-

torted the opera's critical discourse by focusing on *Fanciulla's* American aspects and failing to examine its more substantial features.

### "Great Success" Predicted

The American publicity machine for *Fanciulla* was in full swing by the summer of 1910. Stories appeared announcing the agreement between Puccini and the Metropolitan Opera to perform the work in New York, in addition to numerous articles about subjects relating to the premiere. When asked by the *Chicago Record-Herald* in August whether the new Puccini opera was finished, Caruso replied: "I think so, but I don't know a word of it. I hope to have the part soon, which I shall first create at the Metropolitan in New York. I hope it will suit me well, like the other tenor parts in former operas by Puccini, all of which I have sung with great pleasure from 'Manon' to 'La Bobème'; from 'Tosca' to 'Butterfly.'" <sup>1</sup> Two months later the tenor was singing in Berlin when he prophesied "great success" for *La fanciulla*: <sup>2</sup> "[the score] is an advance over anything that the creator of *La Bobème* and *Madama Butterfly* has ever done. . . . The entire score has caught the local American color admirably, and the rough atmosphere of the mining camp has not interfered in the slightest respect with the truly artistic scenario." <sup>3</sup>

American newspapers lauded the opera company for using Belasco, an "American dramatist," and for hiring local artisans to make the scenery, properties, and costumes in New York. There were stories about such behind-the-scenes participants as Edward Siedle, the Metropolitan's technical director, and James Fox, its well-known scenic artist, both of whom created an astonishing *mise-en-scène* for the opera's first performance. In a lengthy story, the *New York Times* reported:

The American composer may or may not be receiving his just due but at any rate the Metropolitan Opera Company will this year do honor to the American dramatist, scene painter, and costumer in an opera, which has an American subject. When Puccini's "Girl of the Golden West" receives its first production on any stage at the Metropolitan on

1. Special dispatch to the *Chicago Record-Herald*, 1 August 1910.

2. Puccini wrote the tenor role of Dick Johnson for Caruso, "and the tessitura, above all that of the brief solo 'Ch'ella mi creda,' seems consciously designed to emphasize his gifts. After his return to Italy following the triumphant premiere, in January 1911 Puccini sent the tenor some poetic lines of gratitude, highlighting the roles in which Caruso excelled (*Manon*, *La Bobème*, *Tosca*, *Fanciulla*)." It was the first time the composer had written a part expressly for Caruso. Girardi, *His International Art*, 281, n. 27.

3. "Rush in Berlin to Hear Caruso," *New York Herald*, 24 October 1910.

December 6—or later—there will be enough elements of local interest to make the opening notable on that account, even if people were not going to cross oceans to hear the first performance of a new work by the most popular of Italian composers.<sup>4</sup>

In late September newspapers reported that Toscanini and Puccini had met at Torre del Lago to study and work together on the score, preparing for the rehearsals that were scheduled to begin in October.<sup>5</sup> The journalist Charles Henry Meltzer of the *New York American* interviewed Toscanini:

The maestro has assimilated every note, every shading, every suggestion in the score. He could play “La fanciulla” in the dark.

“The opera,” said Toscanini, “is flooded with melody. And the melody is of the kind with which Puccini has already won us. But there are new things above all, exquisite new timbres, tones and colors in the instrumentation. It has more vigor, more variety, and more masculinity, than the orchestration of the composer’s earlier operas. It is more complex. In one word, it is more modern.”<sup>6</sup>

Full orchestral score in hand, Toscanini sailed for New York in October with other members of the Metropolitan’s company, including the assistant conductors Richard Hagermann and Francesco Romei and the chorus master, Giulio Setti. On 15 October Giulio Gatti-Casazza, the Metropolitan’s director, met the conductor at the pier and told reporters covering Toscanini’s arrival that he was looking forward with confidence to the premiere of the new opera.<sup>7</sup> By the end of October Toscanini had sent a telegram to the anxious composer saying that the first reading of his score at the Metropolitan had gone extremely well. Reports detailing Puccini’s anxiety about the opera abounded in the New York press before his trip to America:

Giacomo Puccini, always nervous, is more than ever so, now that the time for his visit to New York to produce “The Girl of the Golden West” is drawing near.

He has learned with pleasure that Madame Destinn, Caruso and

4. “Puccini’s New Opera to Be Seen First in New York,” *New York Times*, 25 September 1910.

5. Toscanini became artistic director of the New York Metropolitan Opera in 1908 and retained the position until 1915.

6. “Toscanini Discusses Operas New and Old,” *New York American*, 18 October 1910.

7. “Toscanini Brings Score of New Puccini Opera,” *New York Herald*, 16 October 1910.

Amato are to interpret the leading characters of his new opera, but he is as much agitated over the details of presentation as ever. Friends who have visited him at his villa at Bagni di Lucca, on the Tuscan hills, say that his nervousness is almost distressing, and they are trying to dissuade him from encountering the worries of rehearsals in New York.

The composer is taking the matter so much to heart that he is showing his age and New Yorkers will see a very much older looking man than he was when he visited that city in 1906 [i.e., 1907].<sup>8</sup>

### Puccini Sails for New York

Owing largely to Puccini's proprietary feelings about his work and his need for personal privacy, little information was released to the general public about the opera's music prior to rehearsals. However, he did send Seligman a copy of *La fanciulla* on 8 October, prior to its official publication, and asked her not to let any journalists see it. A few weeks later he set sail for New York with his son, Tonio, and Tito Ricordi (see pl. 25).<sup>9</sup> Ricordi was assuming more and more of his father's duties and was to be the official producer of the new opera.

The Metropolitan's management had booked the best suite aboard the new luxury liner *George Washington* for the composer. Elvira did not accompany her husband, probably to prevent any publicity that would detract from the opera, and public reports explained her absence by saying she had had enough of New York during her 1907 visit.<sup>10</sup> Puccini seemed to have a grand time aboard the *George Washington*, as evidenced in the letter he wrote to Ricordi:

November 10, 1910

My dear Signor Giulio,

Here we are, actually at sea. We have what is called the Imperial Suite. A princely bath, a room with two gilt bedsteads with various sorts of opaline-tinted lamps; a drawing-room with luxurious divans and mikado mirrors; dining-room with furniture in the best English taste, ingenious cupboards which are even lighted inside, everything

8. "Puccini Very Nervous over His New Opera," *New York American*, 24 September 1910.

9. According to Schickling, Puccini was in Paris from 6 to 9 November 1910 and, from there, he traveled to London, where he boarded the ship to New York. Schickling, *Giacomo Puccini*, 426.

10. Howard Greenfield, *Puccini: A Biography* (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1980), 205.

comfortable, large and spacious as in the most modern of hotels. Price 320 (pounds) for passage alone. Large windows with sumptuous silk curtains. In short, a stupendous suite! Praise be to the Metropolitan! . . . Enough for the present. Take care of yourself; I hope to find you on my return completely restored to health, and that the success of the *Girl* will have given you cause for rejoicing.<sup>11</sup>

Puccini and his entourage landed in New York on 16 November to much public fanfare. Not wasting a minute, he promptly began a whirlwind of social and promotional activities (see pl. 26). Elvira, on the other hand, was miserable waiting for news at Torre. She wrote Puccini several letters expressing her unhappiness. The following excerpts confirm that he had forbidden Elvira to join him:

November 29

You ask me what I am doing. What should I do? I am bored and always alone. Then I go out simply to escape solitude and sadness.

November 30

The fact that you did not allow me to go with you, and the way in which you expressed that prohibition, hurt me deeply. I shall not get over it. Remember this. You deprived me of a great satisfaction, that of participating in your triumph. . . .

Now you are a great man, and compared to you I am nothing but a pygmy. Therefore be happy and forgive me if I have annoyed you with my lamentations.<sup>12</sup>

Puccini himself was attending grand parties, sightseeing, shopping, and overseeing rehearsals. He wrote to his sister Ramelde shortly after his arrival, describing the scene: "We are staying at this immense hotel [the Knickerbocker] with fifteen or more floors and live like royalty. We have four rooms and two bathrooms with lots of light and magnificently refined meals, everything paid for. Rehearsals are going very well."<sup>13</sup> Although Puccini reveled in all the delights New York had to offer, he spent the majority of his time at the Metropolitan observing rehearsals from the back of the house, soft hat pulled down

11. Adami, *Letters*, 185.

12. Marek, *Puccini*, 259.

13. A. Marchetti, *Puccini com'era*, no. 385, p. 389.

over his eyes, “watching the child of his musical brain spring to life—but slowly.” He made notes to share with Toscanini and Belasco and when necessary jumped up with a protest or suggestion.<sup>14</sup>

### Belasco’s Contribution

Belasco’s contributions to the staging of *La fanciulla* were numerous and important. Considered one of the first significant directors in the history of American theater, he played a major part in helping to establish the principles of stage naturalism in the United States around the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.<sup>15</sup> Lise-Lone Marker characterizes the movement as “a complete rebirth of the theatre, replacing stagnation and rigidity with something vital and alive. . . . Naturalism sought to present the facts of man’s life and environment with a fresh, new, and rich explicitness.”<sup>16</sup> Belasco’s description of his genre was poetic and concise: “My chief concern is neither with ‘old’ art nor ‘new’ art—but true art. If it not be true art to reflect, depict and interpret Nature—then, indeed, I know not what art is.”<sup>17</sup> In addition to Belasco in the United States and André Antoine with the Théâtre Libre in France, other prominent directorial figures in this movement were Otto Brahm with the Freie Bühne, founded in 1889 in Germany, and Konstantin Stanislavski with the Moscow Art Theatre, founded in 1898 in Russia. This revolutionary movement was itself spawned by a political and technological revolution that, as Helen Greenwald says, reflected “not only the social problems arising out of the rapid industrialization of Europe (especially France), but also the rapid ‘industrialization’ of the theater itself.”<sup>18</sup> It was within this context that Belasco and Puccini forged their collaborations, bringing together their own independently developed “art forms,” each “from a similar point of view.”<sup>19</sup> In relation to *The Girl of the Golden West*, the strange dichotomy of the Wild West setting and the overpowering beauty of the western land-

14. *New York American*, 5 December 1910.

15. Naturalism in drama stressed naturalistic detail in scene design, costume, and acting technique. It attempted to abolish the artificial theatricality prominent earlier in the nineteenth century. The movement was most closely associated with Théâtre Libre, founded in Paris in 1887 by André Antoine. The Théâtre Libre became a model for experimental theaters throughout Europe and the United States. *The Columbia Encyclopedia*, 6th ed. (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002). [www.bartleby.com/65/.11](http://www.bartleby.com/65/.11) March 2002.

16. Marker, *David Belasco*, 8–10.

17. David Belasco correspondence, draft of article for 4 June 1921. Billy Rose Theatre Collection New York Public Library for the Performing Arts, series I, box I.

18. Greenwald, “Realism,” 279.

19. *Ibid.*, 283.

scape clearly seduced both Belasco and Puccini, each in his own way. In one of Belasco's many articles, he described how he integrated these two seemingly dissimilar atmospheres into a unified whole, a vision that clearly attracted Puccini enough to create an opera: "*The Girl of the Golden West* had the sordid setting of a saloon and a gambler's den on the frontier. I knew I must give it something of beauty, so I introduced a California landscape. Drenched in sunshine it lay blue, half tropical, an undulation of cerulean hills and green valleys that called forth the heroine's reverent exclamation: 'My California!'"<sup>20</sup>

As seemingly parallel as their viewpoints were, Belasco was faced with some unique production and interpersonal challenges in helping Puccini transform *The Girl of the Golden West* into an opera. As he recounted in his book, *The Theatre through Its Stage Door*,

It was necessary to harmonize this incongruous collection of nationalities and make them appear as Western gold-miners—to create through them an atmosphere of the wild Californian days of 1849. I was much in doubt whether grand opera singers who commanded princely salaries and were accustomed to special prerogatives unknown in the dramatic profession would be willing to submit to my dictation. I soon discovered my doubts had been without foundation. . . . Never before had I dealt with a more tractable and willing company of stage people.<sup>21</sup>

Wearing his customary clerical collar and black suit, the "Bishop of Broadway," as he was fondly known, took charge of many intricate details of the opera's staging. He attempted to inform singers who knew little if anything about the Wild West or matters of American speech and deportment during the rough and violent days of the California gold rush. There was only one American in the opera; the rest of the main cast included ten Italians, a Bohemian, a Pole, a Spaniard, a Frenchman, and two Germans. The *New York Times* reporter attending the rehearsals described the scene inside the opera house:

Somewhere in the darkened hall sits the man who is really responsible for every movement, every situation in the play. He is the stage director

20. "Beauty as I See It," *Arts and Decoration* (July 1923), 60. Theatre Collection, New York Public Library for the Performing Arts.

21. David Belasco, *The Theatre through Its Stage Door* (New York: Benjamin Blom, 1969), 102.

to whom everybody comes—Toscanini, Speck, Caruso, Amato, Destinn, even Puccini. This man dressed in black with flowing white hair has given up every other duty for the time being. You may find David Belasco only at the Metropolitan Opera House these days. Mr. Puccini speaks in Italian and so does Mr. Toscanini. Mr. Belasco speaks in English, and yet there very seldom is any need for an interpreter. They understand each other, these men. Composer Puccini and conductor Toscanini lean forward to catch every word, which falls from the lips of the “Wizard of the Theatre.”<sup>22</sup>

Belasco worked tirelessly with all the main singers. This included instructing Caruso on the fine art of western kissing: “No, he doesn’t grab hold of her roughly. He comes forward this way, see? With his arms out-stretched. Just a little one [kiss].”<sup>23</sup> As one rehearsal observer put it, “People will pay \$10 a seat and \$120 for grand tier boxes next Saturday night but they won’t see Belasco show Caruso how to kiss a young lady saloonkeeper. Money can’t buy everything. I saw it, and it didn’t cost me a cent.”<sup>24</sup>

Belasco was pleased with Emmy Destinn’s interpretation of Minnie.<sup>25</sup> She reportedly loved the opera:

The music is exquisite. I think Puccini has never reached this level of inspiration before and such perfection in the way he suited the music to what happens in the drama.

The comments of certain critics who said that he wasn’t able to capture the spirit of America are wrong. On the contrary, I strongly believe he knew how to interpret the American soul in a very splendid way. The part of Minnie, which I sing, is not as difficult as that of *Butterfly*; but it is certainly the most beautiful of all the principal female parts created by Puccini. When I sing Minnie’s part, it feels as though I am reliving my

22. “Teaching the West to Singers of Italian,” *New York Times*, 5 December 1910.

23. “Puccini’s Girl of the Golden West,” *New York Times*, 5 December 1910.

24. *New York Times*, 5 December 1910.

25. Destinn and the baritone Dinah Gilly, who sang Sonora in the premiere of *La fanciulla*, were involved in a long-term romance. Throughout the liaison Gilly was married to a Frenchwoman who apparently complained that he returned home only to father another child. The romance came to an end during World War I “while they were interned on her estate outside Prague. When a young air captain crashed on the grounds, Destinn nursed him back to health—and married him.” Gilly was interned for the duration of the war and never returned to the Metropolitan. See Robert Tuggle, *The Golden Age of Opera* (New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, 1983).

early childhood. My father was the owner of a mine in Bohemia . . . so when I sing Minnie it seems as if I am singing the happy songs of my youth.<sup>26</sup>

### “Rehearsals Are Excellent”

By the beginning of December the house of Ricordi had published the libretto and a piano-vocal score.<sup>27</sup> As for Puccini, he was delighted at the pace and the progress of the rehearsals, yet was still making last-minute changes to the vocal numbers and orchestration (see fig. 5.1). He described the process to Elvira:

New York, 7 December 1910

Dearest Elvira,

. . . The rehearsals are excellent. I think it will be a success and let's hope it will be a big one. Tomorrow we have the dress rehearsal . . . after the premiere there will be a dinner and reception at the Vanderbilt's place and maybe others. What happiness! . . . Tonio is well; I think he has a crush on a ballerina. Whenever he has a chance he takes off and I am left all alone. But this is good for him and we need to let him live his life. Fosca has written me a charming letter; I wish she had always been like this with me.<sup>28</sup> How are you doing? I hope you are feeling better. . . . The opera is turning out splendidly. The first act is a bit long but the second is magnificent and the third is majestic. Belasco has been at all the rehearsals with great interest and love. Caruso is magnificent in his part, Destinn isn't bad, but it will require more energy from her. Toscanini is perfection, kind, good, accessible. In other words, I have faith in my work and am hoping the best for it. But it is tremendously difficult as far as music and staging. The staging is very different in the details from what I imagined. I even made some changes in the instrumentation, some reinforcement, and a small cut in the first act, primarily because Destinn doesn't sing it the way I would like.

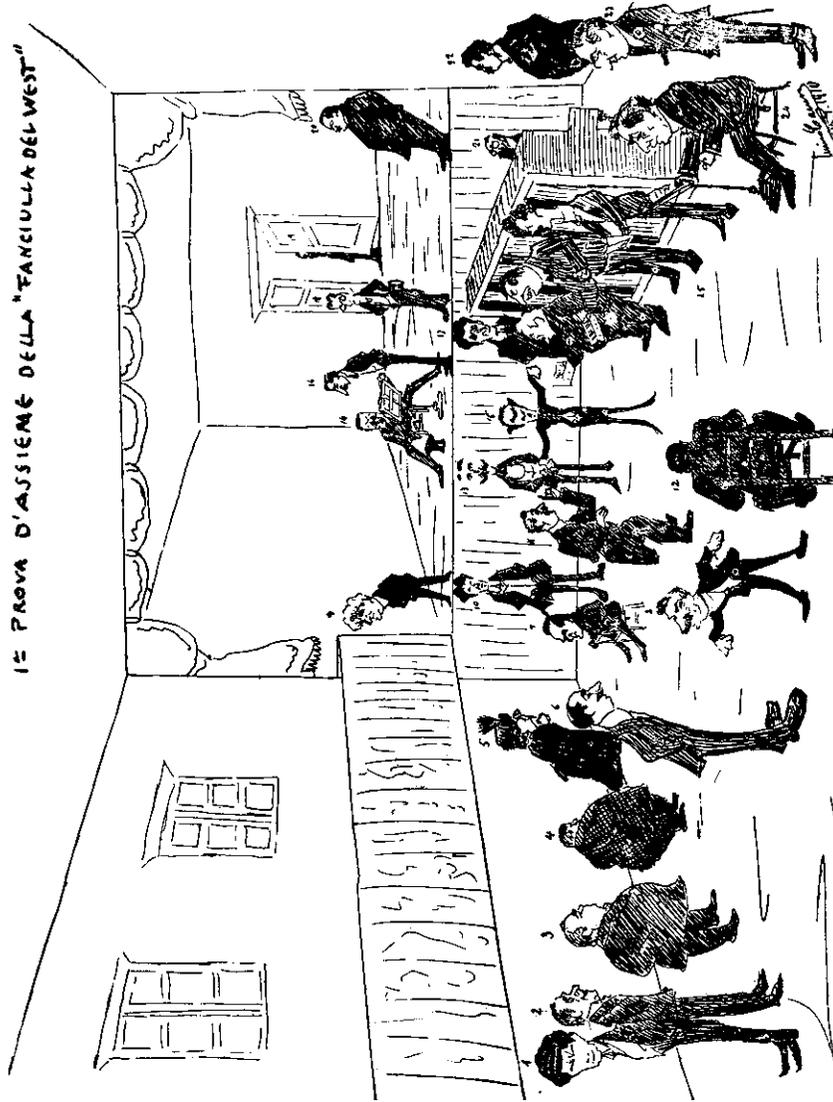
The staging is magnificent; you'll see it in Rome in June. I can't wait to see my little nuisance of a wife (I am too) don't get offended. Can we

26. *Corriere della sera*, 28 December 1910; see appendix B, no. 8.

27. Giacomo Puccini, *La fanciulla del West: opera completa per canto e pianoforte*, reduction by Carlo Carignani (Milano: Casa Ricordi, 1910).

28. Puccini believed that Fosca, Elvira's daughter by her first husband, was partially to blame for inflaming her mother's jealous feelings toward Doria. Fosca, like Tonio, sided with her mother during the scandal.

12 PROVA D'ASSIEME DELLA "FANCIULLA DEL WEST"



1 BIDU. 2 BORGESIU. 3 MISSIARD. 4 PINU-COASTI. 5 DESTIN. 6 ROMENI. 7 REIS. 8 SOTTI. 9 BELASCO. 10 GUCI. 11 POCCHETTI. 12 C. CARUSO. 13 MAX WELLMAN. 14 SPECH. 15 TOSCARINI. 16 PELLEMI PIUG. 17 ANATO. 18 BERNUI. 19 GAZZI-CARAZZA. 20 C. CARUSO. 21 TANKARA. 22 ROSSI. 23 ZAVUOLA. 24 MARCHESI. 25 GRUPPO CONISTI.

Figure 5.1. During rehearsals for the premiere of *Fanciulla*, the tenor Enrico Caruso created this detailed caricature of the opera's principal participants. (Metropolitan Opera Archives, New York)

go to Torre for a couple of days? I would like to go. Now I need to eat a bit [his diabetes had been bothering him in New York]. Think seriously about a good cook, really, look for one, find her and take her with you. Bye, kiss you.

Your Giacomo

Tonio also wrote a short postscript to his mother:

Dear Mamma, I send you my best regards. I am giving this letter to a gentleman who is leaving tomorrow so it will get to you sooner.<sup>29</sup>

Italian newspapers reported details of the rehearsals and praised the orchestra under the energetic direction of Toscanini, who was referred to by cast members as “Napoleon” because of his commanding demeanor and short stature. As the day of the premiere neared, it seemed that every aspect of advance publicity had been exploited for maximum effect (see pl. 27). Robert Tuggle, the current Metropolitan Opera archivist, notes that not until the opening of their new opera house fifty-six years later did such extraordinary worldwide publicity surround an operatic event.

More than a thousand people attended the 9 December dress rehearsal. The *New York Telegraph* reported that it was “perfect” in every detail and added that the audience read like a who’s who of the operatic, theatrical, and social worlds—the directors and singers of the Metropolitan Opera and their families, New York’s high society, and Broadway’s best all clamored to watch this unusual musical and theatrical feat.<sup>30</sup> Blanche Bates, the actress who had played Minnie in the original Broadway play, attended and was overcome with emotion. “Tears were running down her cheeks, and when her companion said, ‘why Blanche, you can’t go out into Broadway with a face like that,’ she simply mopped her eyes some more.”<sup>31</sup> The usual subdued rehearsal etiquette was replaced with joyous enthusiasm, and the audience walked out of the opera house ecstatic. Following the performance Puccini hosted an impromptu lunch at his hotel, the Knickerbocker, with Gatti-Casazza, Belasco, Tito Ricordi, George Maxwell, and Tonio.

29. We are grateful to Gabriella Biagi Ravenni, a founder of the Centro Studi Giacomo Puccini in Lucca, for making the letter available to us; see appendix B, no. 9. The letter is preserved at the Museo Casa Natale Giacomo Puccini in Lucca, and is the property of the Fondazione Giacomo Puccini.

30. “Last Dress Rehearsal of *The Girl of the Golden West* Held in the Metropolitan,” *New York Telegraph*, 9 December 1910.

31. *Ibid.*

## Golden Tickets

Tickets for the premiere were sold out in advance, and the management of the Metropolitan tried to prevent speculation by devising an elaborate system of signing and countersigning for tickets. The buyer signed for the ticket at the time it was purchased, but it was not delivered until just before the performance, whereupon the ticket holder signed for it again before being allowed to enter the theater. It was impossible, however, to foil the speculators, who sold them for as much as thirty times the box office price. Indeed, tickets were already marked up by the Metropolitan to double the usual price. One speculator claimed there were “no tickets left at any price. . . . I have been offered \$100 for a single seat for the ‘Girl’ at least a dozen times a day. . . . But, we’re sold out, clean as a whistle. We could sell ten times as many seats as the house holds if we had ’em. And we could dispose of them at double and triple prices, too.”<sup>32</sup>

Numerous reports and anecdotes circulated in the New York papers about the demand for tickets:

Speculators who have been fortunate enough to secure subscription tickets for Saturday’s premiere expect to obtain fabulous prices for them. One sidewalk operator yesterday said he expected to obtain \$200 for a pair of orchestra chairs.<sup>33</sup>

A few seats for Saturday night have fallen into the hands of speculators, and these are being offered to would-be purchasers at prices ranging from \$75 and up. It is not probable that the announcement of a second performance will lower these rates, as many people who desire to hear the first performance have been unable to obtain seats.<sup>34</sup>

A speculator said yesterday that probably not more than a score of tickets have fallen into the hands of scalpers.

“I have six—a number greater than that of any man on Broadway,” said this speculator. “I secured these by a personal canvass of a number of subscribers. I paid an average of \$25 for each of these seats. I was offered \$75 apiece for two of them today. I refused to sell, as I am confident I can get at least \$100 apiece for them on Saturday.”<sup>35</sup>

32. “\$100 Offered for Seat to *Girl of the Golden West*,” *New York Press*, 9 December 1910.

33. “Speculators Expect to Get Rich at New Opera’s Premiere,” *New York Herald*, 9 December 1910.

34. “\$75 for Opera Seats,” *New York Times*, 9 December 1910.

35. *New York Evening World*, 9 December 1910.

Even Otto H. Kahn, chairman of the Metropolitan Opera board of directors, found it difficult to enter the theater the evening of the performance without a valid ticket:

One of the most amusing incidents of the evening was the refusal of a doorkeeper to admit Otto Kahn, the head of the Metropolitan executives. Mr. Kahn declined to be ruffled by the action of his subordinate.

"He did rightly," said Mr. Kahn. "It was quite proper for him to refuse me admission if he did not know me. I think his salary should be raised."<sup>36</sup>

### A Magnificent Spectacle

The long-awaited evening of 10 December 1910 finally arrived, and the premiere of *Fanciulla* was reported to have been spectacular in every way. Massive traffic jams, created partly by the necessity of verifying signatures, clogged the streets, and a tremendous crowd of onlookers waited in freezing weather for a glimpse of New York's affluent, which included the Guggenheim and Vanderbilt families, J. Pierpont Morgan, John Jacob Astor, and a host of musicians, composers, high-ranking military officials, and foreign diplomats. The New York society columnist Cholly Knickerbocker wrote enthusiastically in her column about the splendid showing of the elite, who, resplendent in glorious gowns and dazzling jewels, took their usual places in the great golden horseshoe of boxes.

J. Pierpont Morgan entertained his sister, Mrs. Walter Burns, of London, Lady Johnstone, wife of Sir Allen Johnstone, and his daughter Miss Anne Morgan. Mrs. Burns was dressed in heliotrope chiffon velvet with diamond ornaments. Lady Johnstone wore black velvet with diamonds, and Miss Morgan was in black velvet with netted lace.

. . . Mrs. Otto H. Kahn was in pale gray satin and silver and wore diamonds. Mrs. Morris Kellogg wore silver satin with embroideries of dull silver, and ornaments of diamonds and pearls.<sup>37</sup>

36. "Incidents of the Night," *New York Sunday American*, 11 December 1910.

37. "Society Flock to Greatest Opera Opening City Ever Saw," *New York Sunday American*, 11 December 1910.

Other newspaper accounts reported in pages of detail on the opulent costumes of the affluent:

Beautifully as the women of New York dress for the opera on regular nights, they seemed last night to have surpassed their previous efforts. Those in the “golden horseshoe” were radiant, but they had rivals in other parts of the house.

Mrs. Vanderbilt wore a costume of white satin with a necklace of large diamonds.

. . . Mrs. Stuyvesant Fish—Gray satin draped with black Chantilly lace, diamond tiara.

. . . Mrs. Oliver Harriman—Black velvet, the corsage bordered with silver lace.

. . . Mme. Nordica—Elegant costume of cloth of gold embellished with gold net and filet lace, necklace and tiara of emeralds and diamonds.<sup>38</sup>

The Italian press also reported on the spectacle:

As we got closer to the starting hour of the opera, the crowd increased until the theater seemed practically a beehive of activity. The curious people wanted to see the *grandes dames* arrive in their fancy automobiles at the theater door completely wrapped in cloaks and furs. But, it was hard to see anything because they were bundled up and all you could really see was the sparkle of diamonds, or the tip of a nose sticking out of a mass of feathers and reddened by the stiff wind. . . . The city is covered in snow and ice.<sup>39</sup>

Looking at the premiere from another, more serious, viewpoint, John C. Freund of *Musical America* saw the evening as epoch-making:

There is a subconscious feeling that this night marks an epoch in American life, for this night will give New York, and through her, the United States, a place by the side of Paris, London, Berlin, Vienna and Milan as a center of music and art, and, perhaps, in the not distant future lead the way so that the great composers will learn to make their first appeal for

38. “Society in Great Array Attends the Premiere; Women Wearing Gorgeous Gowns and Jewels,” *New York Sunday Herald*, 11 December 1910.

39. *Corriere della sera* (Milan), 12 December 1910; see appendix B, no. 10 (“American Enthusiasm”).

a verdict here, and so show the world that we have taken the lead in presenting the works of the masters, as other great cities of the old world have done hitherto.<sup>40</sup>

The curtain was announced for 8:00 P.M., but Toscanini delayed the start until 8:20 P.M. to give the latecomers a chance to find their seats in the hall, which had been lavishly decorated with Italian and American flags. Despite the confusion and cold outside, the opera was warmly received inside the theater. The audience's reaction seemed inevitable according to this account:

Applause. The whole night was a hurricane of applause. Who can describe that wondrous tumult as celebrity after celebrity, familiar or new, made his bow before the majestic curtain of old gold.

Success. This opera was a popular success before it was written. It was never intended that it should be anything else.<sup>41</sup>

There were no fewer than fifty-five curtain calls throughout the premiere performance. During the first act, the audience interrupted the singing twice and erupted in a spontaneous burst of applause at the curtain. Fourteen curtain calls followed. At the close of the second act, there were nineteen more and "the singers, Mr. Toscanini, Mr. Puccini and Mr. Belasco were brought out repeatedly before the curtain, and were completely buried in the mass of floral tributes that were passed over the footlights."<sup>42</sup> As the audience quieted, Gatti-Casazza presented Puccini with a huge solid silver wreath designed by the jewelry firm of Tiffany & Co., a gift from the directors of the Metropolitan Opera. Toscanini and Belasco also received large wreaths from the directors, and Puccini was again called to accept another floral tribute, this one in the shape of a horseshoe with his photograph in the center.

The third act opened after the intermission fanfare, and it was reported that at its end the house applauded for more than fifteen minutes. Feeling jubilant during the final curtain calls, Caruso amused the audience by drawing his revolver out of his holster and rubbing his neck where the lynching rope had passed around it. Observers said he appeared to love being a cowboy and looked quite dashing in his costume, "Mr. Caruso was indeed at his best . . .

40. "First Production of Puccini's Opera," *Musical America* 13, no. 6 (17 December 1910): 1.

41. Tuggle, *Golden Age*, 71.

42. "Curtain Calls Frequent, Belasco and Puccini Respond to Brilliant Audience," *New York Tribune*, 11 December 1910.

playing the part with the dignity of the old-time Westerner, who expects to die with his boots on."<sup>43</sup>

Behind the scenes, Puccini told the cast and conductor, "My heart is going like a contra-bass, but I am unutterably happy. The performance has been perfect. I have no doubt now of its success."<sup>44</sup> Gatti-Casazza called it a great historical event for the Metropolitan, lauding the efforts of all the singers and of Maestro Toscanini: "It is a great success. The acting of Miss Destinn, of Mr. Caruso, of Mr. Amato, of Mr. Gilly is a revelation."<sup>45</sup> Belasco was "divinely happy."<sup>46</sup> Before the performance, George Maxwell presented Belasco with a lavish vellum-bound copy of the opera's score. A gift from Tito Ricordi and Puccini, it was autographed by Puccini, Toscanini, Ricordi, and every member of the cast. The next day in the *Sunday American* the Bishop of Broadway wrote:

I may be pardoned if I confess that I was proud and happy as I watched "The Girl of the Golden West" last night. It was the child of my brain—a child begotten of a thousand memories, of tales heard at the fireside and born of the years of experience amid the scenes and the people depicted in the drama. For I myself am a Californian and my own father was a forty-niner. My earliest recollections are the stories my father and mother told me of those perilous days. As a boy I had been a member of a strolling company of players, and I had played in the barrooms that were exactly like that in which Caruso and Emmy Destinn and Amato sang so gloriously last night. The scenes I loved so well, all the dear old memories, the pain and passion of long forgotten years, were glorified by the art of the greatest living composer, Giacomo Puccini.<sup>47</sup>

Following the opera, a large formal reception provided an opportunity for New York society, leaders of American industry, and well-known artists and musicians to meet the celebrated composer.

An interesting feature of the night was the reception for Mr. Puccini given by the Metropolitan's Board of Directors following the performance, in the foyer, which was specially decorated for the occasion.

43. "Dramatic Singing in Dramatic Scenes," *Sunday New York Times*, 11 December 1910.

44. *New York Sunday Tribune*, 11 December 1910.

45. Ibid.

46. Ibid.

47. "Operatic Performance Described for the *Sunday American* by David Belasco," *New York Sunday American*, 11 December 1910.

Palms and plants in bloom were in the corners and the walls were hung with vines of Southern smilax. It was in a measure informal, refreshments being served by Sherry from a buffet.

It brought together those who were in every way representative of New York Society, art, the drama and music were all included in the hundreds who went to congratulate the composer and those who were concerned in the presentation of this grand opera founded on an American theme.

Mr. Puccini lingered back of the scene after the last note was heard, conversing with some of the singers. Meanwhile the foyer was being filled. Mr. Puccini speaks no English, and French and German were the medium of the rapid words of congratulations and praise.

Compared with many operas which have their place in classic repertory, "The Girl of the Golden West" has a cheerful ending, and the guests were in a joyous mood as they discussed it with the composer. He conversed with social leaders of this and other cities, singers, actors, critics, longhaired and bald, painters and sculptors and theatrical managers.<sup>48</sup>

### The Critics Comment

On Sunday morning, in the daily newspapers, words like "brilliant," "sensational," and "a triumph"<sup>49</sup> heralded the success of the new opera (see pl. 28); however, the critical reviews that followed were mixed. The reviewers of the *Tribune*, the *Sun*, and the *World* appear to agree in their assessment of the opera: "Signor Puccini has achieved surprising, let us say even amazing effects with his harmonies and his orchestration; he has failed utterly to suggest the feeling which is native to Mr. Belasco's play" (*Tribune*); "The opera is lacking in what the painters call 'quality.' The Puccini quality is there, but it is restrained" (*Sun*); "The music, generally speaking, strikes one as constrained, too elaborate and too modern in harmonic structure to suggest the primitive elemental types whose thought and action it is intended to illustrate" (*World*);<sup>50</sup> "The whole opera is musically far inferior to 'La Bohème,' 'Tosca' and 'Madama Butterfly.' What the public has always wanted, wants now, and always will want in any opera, above all things is melody. . . . There is surprisingly little of this in 'The Girl of the Golden West.'"<sup>51</sup>

48. "Reception Given for Mr. Puccini," *New York Herald*, 11 December 1910.

49. *New York Evening Post*, *New York Tribune*, *New York Telegraph*, 11 December 1910.

50. "Puccini's Operas as Heard by Critics," *New York Herald*, 12 December 1910.

51. "What the Critics Said About It [*Fanciulla*]," *Musical America* 13, no. 6 (17 December 1910): 5.

Richard Aldrich, author and respected music critic of the *New York Times*, was more judicious in his approach, complimenting the cast as the “perfect ensemble,” the Metropolitan Opera for providing its finest talent even in the opera’s minor parts, and the orchestra’s performance as superb. He believed the immediate success of the work was due in large part to the dramatic significance of the libretto: “The play has been skillfully arranged for the use of the musician—the librettists’ names are C. Zangarini and G. Civinini. They have kept the really essential features that distinguish Mr. Belasco’s work and have made them count as far as they could in its operatic form.”

As for the music, Aldrich recognized that the opera was a logical next step in the composer’s development:

In *Madama Butterfly* it was observed that he had ventured far into a region of new and adventurous harmonies. He has now gone still further into this field of augmented intervals and chords of higher dissonance. He has made much use of the “whole tone” scale and the harmonies that associate themselves with it. In a word, there is a marked predilection for the idiom that is coupled particularly with the name of Debussy. Mr. Puccini has himself avowed it—it was one of the first things he said to the reporters when he reached these shores.

He seemed then to be forestalling criticism; but why should there be criticism of such a course on the part of a modern composer? It has often been said that Debussy has added a new form of harmony and of melodic outline, a new idiom, to the available means of musical expression, as other composers have done before him as far back as the dim twilight of the beginnings of art. . . . Mr. Puccini has but taken rightfully what is his to take, if it suits him to take and use it. But he has used it in his own way and filled it with the contents of his own ideas. There is plenty of the personal note in what he has written, and nobody would suspect it of being Debussy’s. Yet it may be doubted whether any who knew the composer only through *La Bobème* would recognize him in this, so far has he traveled in thirteen years.<sup>52</sup>

The Italian press reported on the premiere’s great success in New York; but critics such as the well-known Primo Levi had harsh words for the opera, call-

52. Richard Aldrich, review of *La fanciulla del West*, *New York Times*, 11 December 1910. The review is also in his book *Concert Life in New York, 1902–1923*, ed. Harold Johnson (1941; reprint, New York: Books for Libraries Press, 1941).

ing it an exaggeration of voices and instruments.<sup>53</sup> Others were more positive, noting the score's modern approach coupled with the characteristic Puccini sound:

The music of *La fanciulla* is profoundly Puccinian. Someone hearing it without knowing anything more about it would not have difficulty identifying the composer. The frequent use of certain characteristic chords, which almost seem to be discords, now and then remind one of *Butterfly* and *Tosca*. . . . However, *La fanciulla* represents a new stage in Puccini's music, characterized by a refined harmony and a boldness of orchestration that make performing and conducting it very difficult.<sup>54</sup>

In the Roman music publication *Musica*, the critic Enrico Begni called Minnie the "little sister of Madame Butterfly" and predicted the opera would be well received in Italy.<sup>55</sup> But, as Girardi observes, "No one noticed . . . that *La fanciulla* represented an important turning point in Puccini's oeuvre, a move away from his previous style toward new, unexplored paths."<sup>56</sup>

The opera had its second performance at the Metropolitan the following Saturday and the ticket prices were again double the published rate for the premiere. The rush for seats did not compare with that of opening night, and speculators were forced to sell seats at regular box office prices. Critics found the second performance to be more "eloquent" than the first, attributing this to the cast's improved disposition once the tension of the world premiere had passed. Belasco was not present for the performance, but Puccini and Toscanini were acknowledged once again with fierce applause during the opera's many curtain calls.<sup>57</sup>

### Italy Beckons

Finally, on 28 December 1910, after all the acclaim, Puccini announced that he would return to Italy accompanied by his son. Tito Ricordi remained behind

53. Gara, *Carteggi pucciniani*, 391. The Primo Levi referenced in this text was a well-known critic who wrote about *Fanciulla*, most notably in his *Paesaggi e figure musicali* (Milan: Fratelli Treves, 1913), 468–83. He is not to be confused with the respected Italian novelist, essayist, and scientist Primo Levi (1919–1987), whose works were influenced by his imprisonment at the Nazi concentration camp Auschwitz during World War II.

54. *Corriere della sera* (Milan), 12 December 1910; see appendix B, no. 11 ("The Music").

55. "La fanciulla del West a New York," *Musica* (Rome), 18 December 1910.

56. Girardi, *His International Art*, 282.

57. For a history of Metropolitan Opera performances of *Fanciulla*, see appendix D.

to attend additional performances in other American cities and to follow up on company business. The composer spent New Year's Eve on board the *Lusitania*,<sup>58</sup> fresh from his professional, personal, and financial triumph in New York. The worldwide coverage of the event created a larger market for Puccini's work at opera houses around the globe, delighting his publisher. During the voyage, the composer wrote to several friends and associates, including Clausetti and Carla Toscanini.<sup>59</sup> To Signora Toscanini he expressed gratitude for the conductor's brilliant work and for the family's kindness toward him:

I'm thinking and rethinking of those days [in New York], about the rehearsals, the premiere. . . . Everything is over now, but what is left is very strong and good feelings for all of you, and this will remain with me forever. You were so good and kind to me, so sweetly thoughtful. Toscanini is such a patient and affectionate friend.

The remainder of the letter expresses Puccini's melancholy and pensiveness about his life and his future:

I keep thinking of you both, and I envy you. I would like to be like you, with your family bond so strong, with your children who love you so much, and surrounded by friends who support you. I, unfortunately, feel so lonely in this world and it really saddens me. Yet I've always tried to be loving, but I have never been understood, or rather, I have always been misunderstood. . . . Please preserve our friendship so I will have some nice, intelligent friends who tolerate and understand me. Thank you for everything you have done for me, and believe in my eternal affection for you.<sup>60</sup>

Although Puccini was one of the most celebrated composers in the world, he missed the warmth and closeness of family life and still felt alienated from his wife as a consequence of the Doria Manfredi tragedy. His letter to Clausetti, written on 1 January 1911, had a decidedly different tone:

58. The *Lusitania* was immortalized five years later during World War I when it was torpedoed off the coast of Ireland by a German submarine. The surprise attack sank the ship in less than twenty minutes, causing more than one thousand casualties.

59. On board the *Lusitania*, Puccini wrote a letter to Elvira stating that the Toscaninis had been gracious hosts to him in New York, and that Carla Toscanini had helped him pack for the voyage home. Marek, *Puccini*, 265.

60. Gara, *Carteggi pucciniani*, no. 572, p. 383.



Figure 5.2. Enrico Caruso created this self-portrait, which includes Puccini and Toscanini, in 1911. Puccini appears to be holding the puppet figure of a cowboy under his arm. (Cavallari, *L'avant-scène opéra*, Paris: Editions Premières Loges, 1995)

I am coming back. Tomorrow evening I will be in London, where I will stay for two days, and then straight to Milan.

. . . The whole opera turned out well. . . The first act is a little long . . . and there is no way to interrupt it with applause. . . It lasts for an hour and five minutes. The second and third acts speed along like automobiles at eighty [km] per hour. The musical execution is magnificent and the *mise-en-scène* is astonishing. Caruso great. Destinn, very good. Amato, excellent. Toscanini, immensely good, a true angel.

The third evening more than a thousand people were turned away. During four performances (including the third in Philadelphia) the opera made 340,000 lire.<sup>61</sup>

*La fanciulla del West* was performed nine times at the Met during the winter season, with the last performance on 27 March 1911 (see fig. 5.2). Caruso's final season appearance was during a matinee on 4 February, although he returned to sing the role of Johnson again in the autumn. Amedeo Bassi, who replaced Caruso, made his debut in March and did three more performances during the 1910–11 season, including one on 18 March at the Brooklyn Academy of Music with the complete cast and Toscanini conducting. *Fanciulla* was played as

61. *Ibid.*, no. 573, p. 383.

part of the Met's repertory through the 1914 season and was not revived there until 1929 with the great Moravian soprano Maria Jeritzka (Minnie), Giovanni Martinelli (Johnson), and Lawrence Tibbett (Rance), Vincenzo Bellezza conducting (see pl. 29).

*Fanciulla* was well received in other U.S. cities, giving American audiences in various sections of the country a chance to hear the work before it premiered in Europe, an unusual occurrence at that time. Performances in Philadelphia, Boston, and Chicago were especially notable; the Philadelphia production, on 20 December 1910, featured the complete Met cast with Toscanini conducting, and in Boston *Musical America* reported that the performance "was a great event. . . . Puccini has caught his public, and is holding them in an iron grasp. . . . Carmen Melis, as Minnie, seems to have added an unforgettable portrait to her already extensive gallery."<sup>62</sup> On 27 December in Chicago, the soprano Carolina White made headlines singing the role of Minnie; the *New York Times* reported that "Miss White's pleasing personality won favor with her audience even before her full and fresh soprano voice had awakened the interest of the critics. . . . Miss White's interpretation was a distinct success, and she sang with such expression and power that the audience greeted her with enthusiasm."<sup>63</sup> Bassi sang Johnson, and Maurice Renaud sang Rance; Cleofonti Campanini conducted the Chicago-Philadelphia Opera Company.<sup>64</sup>

### *La fanciulla* Performed in Europe

The first European production opened at London's Covent Garden on 29 May 1911 and Puccini, who dedicated the score to England's Queen Alexandra,<sup>65</sup> was present to supervise the rehearsals. Some members of the London press had already praised the music and singing from the Metropolitan's production, but apparently there was a mild undercurrent of resentment in Europe at New York's growing importance in the musical world.<sup>66</sup> A report in

62. "Boston Stirred by *The Girl*," *Musical America* 13, no. 12 (28 January 1911): 5.

63. "Carolina White as Minnie," *New York Times*, 28 December 1910.

64. During the fall of 1911 Henry Savage opened an English-language version of *Fanciulla* at the Park Theatre in Waterbury, Connecticut. Savage's Company visited 117 cities in the United States and Canada with three conductors and five sets of principals. The announcement in *Musical America* called it "Grand Opera in English with a gloriously beautiful and impressive production, greater even than his memorable special ones of *Parsifal*, *Die Walkure*, *Aida* and *Madam[a] Butterfly*," *Musical America* 14, no. 23 (14 October 1911): 126, 133.

65. Queen Alexandra and her husband, King Edward VII, were devotees of opera. One of the queen's favorites was *La Bohème*.

66. "Press Is Almost Unanimous in Its Praise for *The Girl of the Golden West*," *New York Herald*, 12 December 1910.

*Musical America* expressed this viewpoint on its front page: “The London press prints glowing accounts, sent from New York, of Puccini’s new opera, ‘The Girl of the Golden West.’ An undercurrent of resentment is displayed, however, in the fact that both Puccini and [Engelbert] Humperdinck are giving New York the first productions of their new works.<sup>67</sup> Some of the writers seem to think that New York is becoming altogether too important as a musical center.”<sup>68</sup> The reviews following the Covent Garden performances were mixed, with most of the critics predicting the opera would have limited popularity.

The *London Times* reviewer recognized Puccini’s “extraordinary gift of creating an atmosphere,” calling the new work “a very exciting melodrama—in fact, the game of poker under the oil lamp in the mountain cabin, with Rance gloating over Minnie and Johnson lying fainting on the table between them, is one of the most exciting scenes of its sort in any opera, and most of the action is very rapid.”<sup>69</sup> In addition to applauding the composer’s theatrical ability, the critic also praised the singing of Emmy Destinn (Minnie), Amedeo Bassi (Johnson), and Dingh Gilly (Rance). Puccini, staying at the Hotel Savory for most of May, oversaw the Covent Garden rehearsals along with conductor Cleofonte Campanini (Toscanini was already in Rome preparing for the Italian premiere). But the London critic, like so many of his American counterparts, disliked what he called

the absence of the lyrical element. . . . The melody is kept mainly to the orchestra and is confined to fragmentary themes repeated with changing tonality. . . . In the second act the lyrical element is subordinate rather than predominant, and in numerous places, where Puccini in old days would have written a swinging melody, we are now given declamation over a shifting, delicately-coloured background. The two methods are not properly fused.<sup>70</sup>

The London reviews began setting a tone for the European premieres that followed, like dominos falling one after another. In essence, reviewers failed to recognize the change in Puccini’s style, expecting instead the lyrical music and

67. The world premiere of Engelbert Humperdinck’s *Königskinder* was held at the Metropolitan Opera on 28 December 1910.

68. “London a Bit Resentful of New York’s Operatic Prominence,” *Musical America* 13, no. 6 (17 December 1910): 1.

69. “Puccini’s New Opera,” *The Times* [London], 30 May 1911.

70. *Ibid.*

arias that were such a hallmark of his earlier operas. Reporting on the performance from an American perspective, the *New York Times* called the opera *The Girl of the Golden West* rather than *La fanciulla del West*, saying that the London audience “testified to its enjoyment of this melodrama set to music by repeated calls for the composer, the conductor, Campanini, and . . . Emmy Destinn, who repeated her New York triumph.”<sup>71</sup>

Months before the London event, Puccini expressed his concern about *Fanciulla*’s first Italian performance. In correspondence to Toscanini on 23 March 1911, he outlined fears that his favorite tenor for the role of Johnson, Caruso, would not be able to perform at the crucial Roman premiere due to an illness.<sup>72</sup> Ultimately, the event took place on 12 June 1911 at the Teatro Costanzi without Caruso, who was replaced as Johnson by Amedeo Bassi (who had sung the role in the London premiere); Eugenia Burzio sang Minnie, and Pasquale Amato, from the New York cast, sang Rance, with Toscanini as conductor. During this period, Puccini also wrote to Toscanini consulting him about revisions—or, as Budden suggests, “refinements”—to the opera.<sup>73</sup> The Italian premiere was well received by the audience, and King Victor Emmanuel III and Queen Helena invited Puccini into their box to offer their congratulations for a magnificent opera.<sup>74</sup> Although the Italian critics were, on the whole, complimentary about the composer’s newest work, their comments were at times cautious, and many were perplexed by the opera’s music. Giovanni Pozza of the *Corriere della sera* commented:

It was a triumph. We can say this with joy and without restraint. . . . And, Italy, from Rome has decreed it a triumph at the Costanzi [Theatre] tonight. *La fanciulla del West* won a magnificent victory: a victory which established itself little by little, act by act in a continuous crescendo of emotion and enthusiasm and to which this magnificent theatre, that welcomed the most elite portion of the public, not only from Rome, but all of Italy, has given this [opera performance] a character of true solemnity.

71. “London Sees Puccini Opera,” *New York Times*, 30 May 1911.

72. New York Public Library for the Performing Arts, Music Division, the Toscanini Legacy, Puccini Letter: Torre del Lago to Toscanini, New York, 23 March 1911, series L, part 1: correspondence (folder L30, subfolder A-1).

73. New York Public Library for the Performing Arts, Music Division, Puccini Letter: Torre del Lago to Toscanini, N.Y., 2 February 1911, series L, part 1 (folder L30, subfolder A-1); Puccini Letter, n.p., to Toscanini, n.p., 1 June 1911. See Gabriele Dotto, “Opera, Four Hands: Collaborative Alterations in Puccini’s *Fanciulla*,” *Journal of the American Musicological Society* 42, no. 3 (Fall 1989): 604–24.

74. “King Praises Puccini,” *New York Times*, 13 June 1911.

I don't know if in *Fanciulla* one should actually recognize a new style in the composer. Many have said so; I don't believe it. But of one thing I am sure, that never as in this opera has Puccini demonstrated a more confident mastery over his genius and his art.

. . . The new opera is without a doubt the most perfect that contemporary Italian music has given us.<sup>75</sup>

Gaetano Cesari, from *Il secolo*, noted the composer's increased mastery of the orchestra, while Nicola d'Arri, critic of the *Giornale d'Italia*, remarked that Puccini's rich instrumentation made *La fanciulla* among the most exquisite and robust of his scores. Alberto Gaseo, of the *Tribuna*, complimented the librettists for creating a workable text from such unusual material and added: "The opera has every element necessary for a lasting and popular success; it was written for the public at large . . . who will understand and love it, just as they loved *Tosca* and *Butterfly*. Once again, Giacomo Puccini was able to reach the zenith of his artistic talent."<sup>76</sup> On the other hand, critics such as Levi and the reviewer of *Il messaggero*, who questioned the viability of *Fanciulla*, were unable to appreciate Puccini's new artistic expression. Following the reviews, Puccini felt the need to explain his modern approach to the critics:

I hold that the "Girl" is an opera completely different from the others preceding it, in spite of the fact that many insisted on finding in it reminiscences of "Bohème" and "Tosca." It is my strongest opera, and the most full of color, the most picturesque, particularly in orchestration. As a melodramatic composition [*struttura*] it seems to me my most modern opera, and the most advanced from the harmonic point of view. Besides, being conscious of all this while I was writing it, I endeavored to keep whole and entire that Italian melodic definiteness [*finalità*] which no Italian composer should forget, and I think that I have succeeded.<sup>77</sup>

In late August, *La fanciulla* was performed in Brescia's Teatro Grande with both Zangarini and Civinini in attendance. Puccini was well received by the townspeople and personally greeted by the mayor. One report noted that as the composer arrived at the theater for rehearsals, "he received an ovation

75. *I giudizi della stampa* (The Judgment of the Press), from the program for the production of *La fanciulla del West* at the Teatro Grande di Brescia, 1911; see appendix B, no. 12. All the reviews quoted here from the Roman premiere were printed in the Brescia program. Similar comments appear in Gara, *Carteggi pucciniani*, 390–92.

76. *I giudizi della stampa*; see appendix B, no. 13.

77. "Rome Satisfied with Its *Fanciulla*," *Musical America* 14, no. 8 (1 July 1911): 18.

from conductor [Giorgio] Polacco and all the musicians.”<sup>78</sup> The cast included Melis (Minnie), Martinelli (Johnson), and Domenico Viglione-Borghese (Rance). Shortly thereafter, in September, it was performed at the Teatro del Giglio in the city of Puccini’s birth, Lucca. The Lucca program included a section of sentimental poetry written by an unidentified author and dedicated to the town’s favorite son:

Melody, who once here in melancholy lulled  
 your infant whimperings with her maternal voice,  
 your genius gave back to us happy,  
 having taken the loveliest path from country to country.

We sound your music to the heavens  
 and we shout your name alongside hers;  
 so that to all the world is revealed  
 our sweet homeland, as sweet as your song.<sup>79</sup>

After a warm reception in Lucca, Puccini traveled to Britain for an English-language performance in Liverpool on 6 October, where he wrote to Seligman that *Fanciulla* was produced “with reduced dimensions,”<sup>80</sup> the reduced orchestra version created for smaller theaters and budgets; the composer, of course, preferred the full version, although Tito Ricordi supported the versatility of the contracted one. After a successful production in Turin on 11 November, the next performance was at the San Carlos Theatre in Naples on 5 December, from which Puccini wrote Seligman complaining that although it had gone well, the conductor, Leopoldo Mugnone, was not suitable for the opera, “which needs life, whereas he is flabby and drags out the *tempi* to indecent lengths. But the performances are always crowded and that is the important thing.”<sup>81</sup>

The new year found Puccini in Budapest for the Hungarian premiere on 29 February 1912. On 2 April *Fanciulla* premiered in Monte Carlo; the Monte Carlo Opera Company also performed the French premiere in Paris on 16 May during their guest season. Tullio Serafin conducted the Paris Opéra production, in Italian, with Melis, who played Minnie in Boston, Caruso (Johnson), and Titta Ruffo (Rance). The *New York Times* reported that the opera was ex-

78. “Italians Pay Homage to Puccini,” *Musical America* 14, no. 18 (9 September 1911).

79. *La fanciulla del West*, program from Teatro del Giglio di Lucca, September 1911; see appendix B, no. 14.

80. Seligman, *Puccini among Friends*, 210.

81. *Ibid.*, 212.

tremely well received: "Among those present were Prince Albert of Monaco and many Americans. The Monte Carlo Opera Company interpreted the opera. Caruso . . . was in excellent voice."<sup>82</sup> The next major hurdle for the composer and his opera was the first performance at La Scala in Milan, the site of *Madama Butterfly*'s disastrous premiere. On 17 February 1904 *Madama Butterfly* was greeted with boos and shouts of protest by hecklers in La Scala's audience. Puccini suspected that his enemies had sabotaged his Japanese tragic opera and never forgave or forgot the incident. In fact, the composer never permitted *Madama Butterfly* to be performed again at La Scala during his lifetime.<sup>83</sup> Reluctant to let his latest opera face the potentially hostile Milanese audience, Puccini withheld *Fanciulla* from La Scala until 29 December 1912, after it had already been performed in many European capitals (as well as Buenos Aires, in July 1911). "Finally," wrote a Milan critic, "an opera by Puccini will return to La Scala with *La fanciulla del West*."<sup>84</sup> It was performed there thirteen times with Martinelli (Johnson), Ernestina Poli-Randaccio (Minnie), and Carlo Galeffi (Rance), and Serafin conducting. The work received a mixed reception.

*Fanciulla* did not premiere in Germany until 28 March 1913 at Berlin's Deutsches Opernhaus, where, according to the *New York Times*, it was "greeted with respectful attention" by the public. Critics were less enthusiastic: "the audience which filled the house was lukewarm. The types represented in the opera are as incomprehensible to a German as men from Mars would be. The pieces strike them as crude melodrama. The critics, moreover, find little to praise in the music. They say that Puccini is steadily going down hill and has reached his lowest level in this opera."<sup>85</sup> Another report said that months before the performance, talk in Berlin's opera circles suggested that *Fanciulla* was "much inferior both musically and dramatically to other Puccini works, notably 'La Boheme' and 'Madama Butterfly,'"<sup>86</sup> and following the performance the music critic of the *Tageblatt*, Leopold Schmidt, commented that "we had expected nothing good from Puccini's new opera."<sup>87</sup> Perhaps anticipating the German reaction, Puccini complained bitterly about the opera's cast and conductor. In a letter to Elvira ten days before the premiere, Puccini described the rehearsals as "so-so. I suffer because I do not see things progressing, as they

82. "Paris Likes Puccini Work," *New York Times*, 17 May 1912.

83. For a detailed account of *Madama Butterfly*'s premiere at La Scala, see Girardi, *His International Art*, 195–99, and Budden, *Puccini*, 240–43.

84. "Ultime notizie," *Corriere della sera* (Milan), 13 July 1911.

85. "The Girl Puzzles Berlin; Germans Don't Comprehend Its Types, or Like Puccini's Music," *New York Times*, 29 March 1911.

86. "Slap at Berlin Critics," *New York Times*, 1 January 1911.

87. "Critiques of *The Girl of the Golden West* Show German Feeling," *New York Times*, 6 April 1913.

should. Today we are changing the baritone; the one we are going to take has a small and ugly voice, but at least he is more of an artist. The prima donna is a nincompoop. The conductor is a mischief-maker. They don't understand a word either of Italian or of French. It is a tremendous effort for me."<sup>88</sup> Curiously, he wrote Elvira eleven days later that the performance was a "magnificent event." However, one can, indeed, come to the same conclusion as Budden that "the company was evidently second-rate and the prospects of success doubtful."<sup>89</sup> Most accounts show that the German press and public at the time did not understand or appreciate the dramatic boldness, the western esthetic, or the new direction of the opera. The work was produced in some twenty German theaters before a successful premiere on 24 October in Vienna with Jeritzka as Minnie and Alfred Picaver as Johnson. In a letter from the Met archives, Puccini described her performance, which was at the beginning of her career, as "dignified"; she later became a celebrated interpreter of this role and a favorite of Puccini's.

### "Misunderstood Masterpiece"

Although *La fanciulla del West* made the rounds of the world's leading opera houses, it failed to find a place in the standard repertoire alongside Puccini's other popular operas. Early Puccini biographers proffered many different reasons for this lack of immediate acceptance. Some, like Vincent Seligman, speculated that the interruption caused by the Doria Manfredi tragedy negatively affected the composer's inspiration and confidence. He also felt the hiatus in Puccini's composing had an impact on the work: "I often wonder to what extent 'Minnie and her friends' suffered from their temporary abandonment. It seems reasonable to suppose that the 'lack of genuine inspiration,' of which the critics were later to complain, was due, at least in part, to the breaking of the original thread."<sup>90</sup> Others blame the Wild West setting, with its complex action, or the expense of mounting such an elaborate production, with its large sets and costly staging, and the need for four tenors. Yet another reason offered is the work's so-called happy ending. But the opera's early critics were unable to appreciate or accept the work's unquestionable originality; and, as Budden says about Puccini and his remarkable opera, "Now at last time has caught up with him and accorded *La fanciulla del West* the place in the

88. Marek, *Puccini*, 272–73.

89. Budden, *Puccini*, 341.

90. Seligman, *Puccini among Friends*, 184, 199.

Puccini canon it deserves.”<sup>91</sup> In the past fifty years, *La fanciulla* has been viewed with renewed interest by opera lovers and opera houses throughout the world, and has been performed and recorded numerous times (see pl. 30).<sup>92</sup> Musicologists have come to see the work as “an opera that has been too generally underestimated,”<sup>93</sup> indeed, “one of the most fascinating of Puccini’s operas.”<sup>94</sup> Girardi concurs, adding that *Fanciulla* should be counted among those “masterpieces that have been misunderstood for too long.”<sup>95</sup> In reality, it is Puccini’s unmistakable style, as Gary Tomlinson says, that “stands comparison with any other operatic idiom from the 40 years after Wagner’s death. And to my hearing, the best single act Puccini ever wrote is the first of ‘*La fanciulla del West*.’”<sup>96</sup>

Such commentaries suggest that *La fanciulla* has come back to life after being virtually buried by the avalanche of publicity and narrowly focused interpretations of the opera’s early critics. It would seem that Belasco’s 1910 wish that “*The Girl of the Golden West* will live in music”<sup>97</sup> may be realized through the efforts of conductors and directors who recognize *Fanciulla* not only as a major turning point in Puccini’s career but also as the composer’s “stylistic leap”<sup>98</sup> into the new musical language of the twentieth century.

91. Budden, *Puccini*, 304.

92. See appendix E for a discography and videography of *La fanciulla del West*. Fittingly, *Fanciulla* was the first opera performed in the newly built Metropolitan Opera House: in April 1966 it was used for an acoustic test of the new theater. Appearing on that occasion were Beverly Bower (Minnie), Gaetano Bardini (Johnson), and Cesare Bardelli (Rance). On 16 September 1966 Samuel Barber’s *Anthony and Cleopatra* officially opened the new house.

93. Ashbrook, *Operas of Puccini*, 146, 150.

94. Osborne, *Complete Operas of Puccini*, 190.

95. Girardi, *His International Art*, 326.

96. “Puccini Turns Respectable,” *New York Times Book Review*, 15 December 2002, 14.

97. “Operatic Performance Described by the *Sunday American* by David Belasco,” *New York Sunday American*, 11 December 1910.

98. Girardi, *His International Art*, 316.