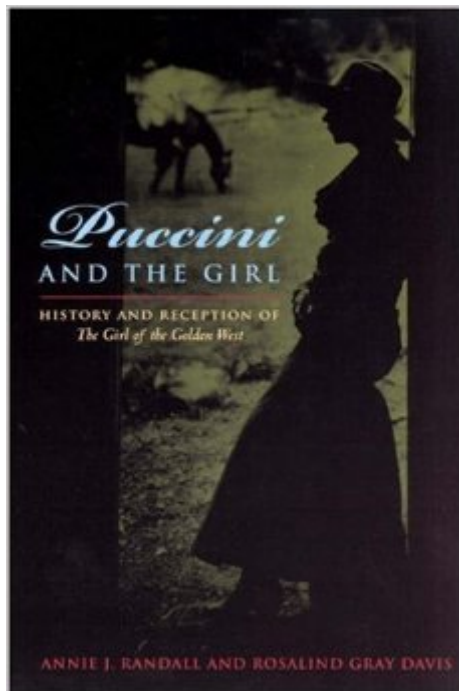


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# Puccini And The Girl: History And Reception Of The Girl Of The Golden West



## Synopsis

Set in the American West during the California Gold Rush, *La fanciulla del West* marked a significant departure from Giacomo Puccini's previous and best-known works. *Puccini and the Girl* is the first book to explore this important but often misunderstood opera that became the earliest work by a major European composer to receive an American premiere when it opened at New York's Metropolitan Opera House in 1910. Adapted from American playwright David Belasco's Broadway production, *The Girl of the Golden West*, *Fanciulla* was Puccini's most consciously modern work, and its Met debut received mixed reviews. Annie J. Randall and Rosalind Gray Davis base their account of its creation on previously unknown letters from Puccini to his main librettist, Carlo Zangarini. They mine musical materials, newspaper accounts, and rare photographs and illustrations to tell the full story of this controversial opera. *Puccini and the Girl* considers the production and reception of Puccini's "cowboy" opera in the light of contemporary criticism, providing both fascinating insight into its history and a look to the future as its centenary approaches. . . . An eminently readable, ideally direct and information-packed book. . . . William Fregosi, *Opera Today*

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## Customer Reviews

In *Puccini and The Girl* Annie Janeiro Randall and Rosalind Gray Davis open up a new look into a fascinating account of how the art of the opera transforms with its musical mastery so many elements of drama, history, literature, and ideas that capture the human imagination. They bring to

the fore previously unpublished material about the creation of Puccini's opera "La Fanciulla del West" and explains how this opera is much different in musical composition from Puccini's other more well know masterpieces. Most important for this review, however, is the story itself -in essence, a romance tale during the California Gold Rush where a young girl saves the reluctant outlaw to then join together, looking forward to prospects of their life in the Golden American West. The source of the story is David Belasco's New York stage play version of about 1907 of "The Girl of the Golden West". Puccini's 1910 opera "La Fanciulla del West", perhaps fortunately mistranslated carried the story to opera. Both artists a century ago recognized and built upon "the girl" as the essential element in the worldwide lure and tremendous excitement of the development of the American West. Puccini had seen Belasco's very successful New York City play in 1907 when he was visiting for his other popular operas. Without understanding English well, he quickly acquired the rights to use the story for a new fully American opera. The opera premier of "La Fanciulla del West" was at the Metropolitan Opera House on 10 Dec 1910, with Arturo Toscanini conducting and with Enrico Caruso singing. Puccini later said they received 55 curtain calls. The orchestral and choral parts involved new innovations for Puccini.

Randall and Gray Davis between them have given us a book which will permanently change the way we view Puccini and his most controversial opera, the "American" GIRL OF THE GOLDEN WEST, a work commissioned by NYC's Metropolitan Opera on the heels of the success of MADAME BUTTERFLY. Their research shows us that using David Belasco's Broadway hit as the basis for a libretto was by no means a foregone conclusion, and that many years passed before Puccini committed himself to the saga of Minnie. Indeed, part of the interest of the book is speculating what we missed out on when Puccini decided to do with Minnie instead of working up--the last days of Marie Antoinette! For a piece that he planned on calling, THE AUSTRIAN WOMAN. He also flirted with turning the HUNCHBACK OF NOTRE DAME into an opera; as well as considering two plays by Oscar Wilde. Perhaps our greatest regret is that he did not pursue THE WOMAN AND THE PUPPET, the searing, sexual tale of obsessive love that Von Sternberh later filmed with Dietrich as THE DEVIL IS A WOMAN (and later remade by Luis Bunuel at the end of his career). As Randall and Gray Davis indicate, the scandalized reception of Strauss' recent SALOME made Puccini leery of a similarly decadent subject. However, in his private life Puccini was experiencing a coruscating scandal which tore him apart and exposed his marriage for a living hell to the whole world. His wife, Elvira, became madly jealous of her own maid, Doria Manfredi, driving her to her death. After Doria's death an autopsy revealed that she had never had sex with anyone,

much less the blameless Puccini. Or was he blameless? It's easy to paint Elvira as a vicious, deluded shrew, but in my experience there's not much smoke without at least a little bit of fire.

Terrific tale of the maestro coming to New York with his new opera. Sure to provoke attention with 2010 in the near future when this work will be 100. The attention paid to the opening when New York burst with potency, bejewelled dames listening to world voices sort of put the Met on the map. Laughed out loud at the recreation of that scene of the opening. Now, we wonder what about that girl next door, Doria, who helped him recuperate from the auto accident, then with Elvira the Fricka-like wife screaming, having to deal with the tragedy of Doria's demise. This personal view of the master at home with his devils informs the interpretation of the opera and how it went over. The depiction of Belasco and early 20th century theater, the pre-Method method as it were, puts Puccini right in the middle of the mix that included but pre-dated the Stanislavski revolution, in fullest flower with Stanley's "Stella!" at the foot of the stairs. None of that here, actually, this a precise look at the work and its times, the publisher, the competition, the writers, the abandon with which people went to opera then, the end of the Whitman era and the the beginning of end of that world, only a few years after 1910 when all hell broke loose. It's historical, yes, but also hysterical how much is made of so little. There are in fact no arias in this opera, just rich orchestration and seemingly improvised conversation, very modern that way, a view to Strauss then, Adams now. It's like a couple hundred years of opera crystalized into one book, both too specific, (pages of music printed in a text), and not specific enough: do the authors think Elvira was right? The movie that must be made of this book will deal with this question.

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