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Abstract

Verismo is an Italian term that came to be used in reference to literature, theatre, and opera during the end of the nineteenth century. According to William Berger, "*verismo* is often translated as 'realism' but the word is closer to 'truth' in Italian." The term was applied to literature beginning in the 1870s, and began to be applied to opera during the 1890s. However, it has never been particularly well understood. Evaluating it today is especially difficult because the modern perceptions of the term are not quite the same as the original meaning. *La bohème* was composed by Giacomo Puccini in 1895 and was based on the novel *Scènes de la vie de bohème* by Henri Murger. Since it was written in the *verismo* period and was based on literature, *La bohème* has been categorized as a *verismo* opera by many. To others, on the other hand, *La bohème* does not fit the definition of *verismo* either in part or in whole. This paper will examine the original use of the term *verismo*, Puccini's original intentions, and *La bohème* itself. For research, this paper draws on the score of *La bohème*, biographies of Puccini, letters by Puccini, scholarly analyses, critical articles, and research on Italian operatic history. *La bohème* exhibits the characteristics of *verismo* opera based on these considerations.

Keywords

Music, opera, Puccini, *La bohème*, *verismo*

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Is *La bohème* a *verismo* Opera?

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V*erismo* is an Italian term that was used in reference to literature, theatre, and opera during the end of the nineteenth century. However, it has never been particularly well understood. Evaluating the term today is especially difficult because the modern perceptions of *verismo* are not quite the same as the original meaning. Written during the *verismo* period and based on the *verismo* novel *Scènes de la vie de bohème* by Henri Murger, Giacomo Puccini's 1895 opera *La bohème* has been categorized as a *verismo* opera by many. To others, however, *La bohème* does not fit the definition of *verismo* either in part or in whole. This paper will examine the original use of the term *verismo*, how *verismo* might be reflected in opera, the source and libretto of *La bohème*, and the musical content of *La bohème*. Based on the research that this author has conducted, this article will demonstrate that *La bohème* is a *verismo* opera based on the characteristics that it exhibits.

According to William Berger, “*verismo* is often translated as ‘realism,’ but the word is closer to ‘truth’ in Italian.”¹ The term was applied to literature beginning in the 1870s.² Authors associated with the term included Luigi Capuana, Federico De Roberto, and Giovanni Verga.³ These three writers had in common the fact that their *verismo* works featured socially low settings and subjects. Some of the adjectives used to describe these settings and subjects include “low-life,” “regional,” and

¹ William Berger, *Puccini without Excuses: A Refreshing Reassessment of the World's Most Popular Composer* (New York: Vintage Books, 2005), 8.

² Carolyn Abbate and Roger Parker, *A History of Opera* (New York: W. W. Norton and Company, 2012), 414.

³ Adriana Guarnieri Corazzol and Roger Parker, “Opera and Verismo: Regressive Points of View and the Artifice of Alienation,” *Cambridge Opera Journal* 5, no. 1 (March 1993): 39. doi:[10.1017/s0954586700003876](https://doi.org/10.1017/s0954586700003876).

“rustic.”⁴ Authors Adriana Guarnieri Corazzol and Roger Parker describe the effect of *verismo* in the following way: “Nineteenth-century realism in art, literature and music was in this sense a ‘bill of rights’ for low-life, brutal or ‘vulgar’ subjects—their entrance into legitimate culture.”⁵ Andreas Giger writes that literary *verismo* is characterized by:

the regional character and inherent pessimism of the stories; the blind passion of the protagonists; a quasi-scientific and detached approach to describing both the social, cultural, and political climate in which the characters function and their psychological thought processes; and the importance of a language appropriate to the social and geographical situation of the characters.⁶

Operas began to be described as *verismo* during the 1890s.⁷ Generally, the one-act opera *Cavalleria rusticana* (1890) by Pietro Mascagni, based on a short story by Giovanni Verga, is considered to be the first true example of *verismo* opera.⁸

Not all agree that opera can be labelled *verismo*, however. In *A History of Opera*, Carolyn Abbate and Roger Parker note that critics hesitate to apply the term *verismo* to opera because the language used for librettos can obscure the realistic elements pulled from the source texts.⁹ Often composers must alter librettos based on texts to make them better suited for singing. Thus, since dialogue in opera is sung, it is still somewhat removed from real life even when the source text is mostly preserved. Not only that, but Italian musicians of the time viewed music as being primarily abstract, so some experts claim that Italian opera cannot truly represent human situations to the same extent that literature can.¹⁰ Giger writes, “On the basis of this textbook *verismo*, German musicologist Egon Voss concluded in 1978 that late nineteenth-century operas have

⁴ Corazzol and Parker, “Opera and Verismo,” 40.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 41.

⁶ Andreas Giger, “Verismo: Origin, Corruption, and Redemption of an Operatic Term,” *Journal of the American Musicological Society* 60, no. 2 (2007): 272. doi:[10.1525/jams.2007.60.2.271](https://doi.org/10.1525/jams.2007.60.2.271).

⁷ Abbate and Parker, *History of Opera*, 414.

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ *Ibid.*, 415.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

nothing to do with the ideas of *verismo* and that the composers of *verismo* operas were never even interested in the movement.”¹¹ If composers did not attempt to write in a *verismo* style, and they viewed their music as being primarily abstract, then it would be difficult to truly classify any opera as being *verismo*. Concerning *verismo*, Alan Mallach says, “When used narrowly as a defining term...it has at least the virtue of clarity, in that those operas are clearly the descendants, however attenuated in spirit, of the literary *verismo* of Verga and his contemporaries.”¹² Later, he writes, “In contrast to the depiction of social reality that Verga and his peers strove for, the *verismo* composers strove for what might be called a melodramatic reality.”¹³ While certain composers were influenced by *verismo* authors, they may not have attempted the same level of realism as their literary ancestors. Critics also claim that late nineteenth-century Italian opera better reflects mass literature, which was popular, but also sentimental and not considered “stark” enough to be *verismo*.¹⁴ Corazzol comments:

Note the similarity between opera and mass-market novels and plays: minimal formal elaboration and an excess of feeling; anti-naturalistic or 'Romantic' substance, a tendency towards escapism through adventures or exoticism; gothic novel stereotypes (the young girl pursued, the gentleman bandit); formulas from the *roman noir* such as disguises and recognition scenes. Indeed, *verismo* opera has much else in common with popular nineteenth-century fiction; it is, for example, both emotionally aggressive and socially aware, but nevertheless exotic in its portrayal of an historical, geographical or social ‘other.’¹⁵

According to this point of view, late nineteenth-century Italian opera is *verismo* in part because it is emotionally intense and accurately portrays society but fails to be *verismo* in full because it does not connect these things to the audience’s actual situation. Instead, it tends to center around

¹¹ Giger, “Verismo,” 275.

¹² Alan Mallach, *The Autumn of Italian Opera: From Verismo to Modernism, 1890–1915* (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 2007), 42.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 43.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 43–44.

¹⁵ Corazzol and Parker, “Opera and Verismo,” 44.

a foreign culture and characters. According to such a belief, the term *verismo* can only be properly applied to novels.¹⁶

In many ways, however, opera can reflect *verismo* literature. *Verismo* literature “uses ‘choral language’: the voice of a collective narrator, which requires the emotional and expressive participation of an anonymous narrator inside the story; or it uses the reflexive voice of individual characters in ‘free indirect’ discourse.”¹⁷ The following quote showcases the use of such a narrator and is taken from *Scènes de la vie de bohème*:

Touched by his nephew’s misfortunes, Uncle Monetti promised to mend matters; how, we shall presently see, if the ascent of six pairs of stairs does not dismay the reader. So let us grasp the handrail and climb...Ouf! one hundred and twenty-five steps! Here we are. One step more takes us into the room, another would bring us out at the other side.¹⁸

In this quote, the presence of a narrator is indicated by the terms “we” and “us.” The author uses the narrator to guide the reader through the setting. Elsewhere, the narrator gives the reader information about the characters, their thoughts and emotions, and background information that may be needed to understand the plot. Due to the narrator’s relationship with the reader, the reader can often know more than the characters do. In Italian opera of this time, the orchestra is more important in helping to convey and advance the plot than in opera of previous eras.¹⁹ Corazzol refers to the orchestra’s role in these operas as that of a “narrator.”²⁰ Instead of simply supporting the singers, the orchestra tends to have a relationship with the vocalists that is one of equals, allowing them to have exchanges.²¹ The orchestra, then, often functions the same way in late nineteenth-century opera that the narrator does in *verismo* literature. Just as the narrator is intimately involved in the story quoted above, the orchestra has a rich participation in the events

¹⁶ Giger, “Verismo,” 275.

¹⁷ Corazzol and Parker, “Opera and Verismo,” 42.

¹⁸ Henri Murger, *The Bohemians of the Latin Quarter*, trans. Ellen Marriage and John Selwyn (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004), 65–66.

¹⁹ Corazzol and Parker, “Opera and Verismo,” 42.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Ibid.

of Italian opera. This can be seen especially in operas that use specific motives for specific characters, as many Italian operas of the time do. The orchestra's use of these motives can clue in the audience to what is happening, or about to happen, in the plot, even when the characters themselves do not know. Even the musical elements used by the orchestra reflect *verismo* literature. Corazzol writes, "The octave and unison doublings...the use of pedals and tremolos, and various ostinato formulas are redundant or iterative techniques that 'degrade' the writing, giving it an oral character, almost one of direct speech—gestural rather than abstract or logical."²² The following excerpt (Example 1) is from the opening of act I of *La bohème* and provides a quality example of this kind of writing.

Example 1: *La bohème*, act I, scene 1, mm. 67–75.²³

The image shows a page of a musical score, specifically measures 67-75 from the opening of Act I, Scene 1 of Puccini's *La bohème*. The score is for a full orchestra and includes parts for Flute (Fl.), Oboe (Ob.), Clarinet (Cl.), Bassoon (Bs.), Trumpet (Tr.), Trombone (Tb.), Tuba (Tu.), Triangle (Triang.), Arpa (Arpa), Harp (HAR.), Violin (Viol.), Viola (Vcl.), Violoncello (Vc.), and Contrabass (Cb.). The tempo is marked 'a tempo' and the dynamics are 'p' (piano) and 'pp' (pianissimo). The score shows a complex orchestration with many doublings and ostinato patterns.

²² Corazzol and Parker, "Opera and Verismo," 44.

²³ Giacomo Puccini, *La bohème: In Full Score*, libretto by Giuseppe Giacosa and Luigi Illica (New York: Dover Publications, 1987), 6.

Observe in Example 1 how many instruments are playing the same note in different octaves in mm. 1–4. Octave doublings are also present in the last five measures to a slightly lesser extent. Notice that the trumpet, harp, second violin, viola, and cello parts move up by step like a scale in mm. 1–5. Measures 5–8 use repetitive figures, rhythms, and pitches. Compared to other orchestral writing during the late nineteenth century, this seems rather simple. However, this simplicity serves a purpose by giving the music a more direct and oral sound. Thus, the orchestra is able to communicate with the audience and interact with the plot in the same way that a narrator in a story connects with the reader and characters.

Subject material is an obvious way in which opera can model *verismo* literature. Mallach argues that late nineteenth-century opera is often viewed as better reflecting popular literature than *verismo* novels because composers at the time considered it a commercial enterprise just as much as an artistic one.²⁴ Opera audiences were more likely to be familiar with popular literature, and to ensure financial success, composers sometimes catered, at least in part, to that preference. This does not mean, however, that such operas cannot be considered *verismo*. Mallach also says of these operas' subject material, "The traditional moral order has been replaced with a positivist view of human behavior, as significant a common ground among the composers of this period as the similarities in vocal technique or plot construction."²⁵ The audience must understand the moral world in which Mozart's operas occur in order to fully understand and appreciate them, but that moral world was largely rejected in late nineteenth-century operas. Burton Fisher, author of *A History of Opera: Milestones and Metamorphoses*, explains the societal reasons for this with the following words: "It was a time in which man questioned his inner contradictions about the meaning of life...the new age became spiritually unsettled and self-questioning."²⁶ This rejection of the moral world in opera further serves to demonstrate the desire of nineteenth-century composers to accurately portray the society in which they lived. A realistic connection with the audience on such a level indicates the true ability of an opera to be *verismo*.

La bohème itself contains many elements of *verismo* opera. First, Puccini's intentions can be seen through his compositional process and

²⁴ Mallach, *Autumn of Italian Opera*, 44.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Burton D. Fisher, *A History of Opera: Milestones and Metamorphoses* (Coral Gables, FL: Opera Journeys Publishing, 2003), 331.

point to an appreciation for and modeling of *verismo*. Fisher wrote the following about Puccini's relationship to *verismo*:

Throughout his career, Puccini identified himself with *verismo*, what he called the “stile mascagnano,” the Mascagni style first successfully portrayed in *Cavalleria rusticana* (1890). Swift, dramatic action and brutal, sadistic primal passions certainly underlie *Tosca* and *Il tabarro*. In other operas, such as *Manon Lescaut*, *La bohème* and *Madama Butterfly*, *verismo* elements are expressed in the problems and conflicts of characters in everyday situations and in identifiable contemporary venues.²⁷

Puccini wrote to his publisher about one of the librettists working on *La bohème*, “Illica will find valuable material for this if he will read Murger's novel.”²⁸ Puccini altered the libretto, much to the chagrin of his librettists, to fit the music and make it more natural and speech-like.²⁹ The end result is verses that have fewer rhymes, more irregular meters, and uneven numbers of syllables.³⁰ This was also done, in part, to distinguish who the main characters of a scene were, as they would be given more unaltered lines. It also allowed Puccini to use the melodies that he had already composed. Most importantly for determining whether or not *La bohème* is *verismo*, however, is the fact that Puccini made these alterations mostly to cause the libretto to sound more like everyday conversation and less like a formal dialogue that only exists in opera. Puccini's compositional process employed the techniques previously discussed to help the orchestral parts in his music sound similar to speech and a narrator. Given that Puccini chose to combine this particular source text with realistic dialogue and simple music, it seems safe to assume that he had the *verismo* style in mind while composing *La bohème*.

Second, the subject material of *La bohème* is *verismo* in nature. *Scènes de la vie de bohème* deals with the lives of several young, struggling artists living in Paris. The main characters include Rodolfo, a poet;

²⁷ Fisher, *History of Opera*, 326.

²⁸ Giacomo Puccini, *Letters of Giacomo Puccini: Mainly Connected with the Composition and Production of His Operas*, ed. Giuseppe Adami, trans. Ena Makin (New York: Vienna House, 1973), 89.

²⁹ Berger, *Puccini without Excuses*, 40.

³⁰ Tim Carter, *Understanding Italian Opera* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 219–222.

Mimi, an embroiderer; Marcello, a painter; Colline, a philosopher; and Schaunard, a musician. In act I of *La bohème*, the audience learns of the poverty of the four men who live together, and the opera begins with the burning of Rodolfo's manuscript in the stove to keep warm. Mimi and Rodolfo meet in this first act when she knocks on his door to ask him to light her candle. Act II takes place in the noisy, crowded, joyous Latin Quarter of Paris. Here, Mimi and Rodolfo join his roommates for dinner. In an amusing scene, Marcello's former lover, Musetta, sees him while out with her new man, Alcindoro. She attempts to make Marcello jealous, then tricks Alcindoro into leaving so that she can reunite with Marcello. Act III takes place a few months later. During this act, the audience learns that Mimi is ill while she has a secret meeting with Marcello to discuss leaving Rodolfo because of his jealousy. Rodolfo tells Marcello that he wants to leave Mimi because of her flirtatiousness. The act ends with a dramatic fight between Marcello and Musetta, as well as a decision for Rodolfo and Mimi to stay together until the spring. However, by act IV, Mimi and Musetta have left their lovers, and Rodolfo and Marcello are both quite lonely without them. Suddenly, Mimi and Musetta both return with the alarming news that Mimi's illness has become much worse. Mimi and Rodolfo have time to reminisce together before she dies, and the curtain promptly falls.³¹

Although the characters are artists, the book is more about finances and relationships than about philosophy or art. Although some aspects of the plot are changed and characters are altered in the libretto for *La bohème*, the underlying themes remain the same. The characters encounter problems that they are not always able to remedy, as in the case of Mimi, a main character who dies at the conclusion of the opera. These problems and realistic scenarios involve characters who have no special status or abilities. As such, it is easy to empathize with them. Berger says of *La bohème*'s characters:

La bohème is definitely *verismo* but...it is not about emotionally extroverted peasants in 'those places over there, where they act so weird'...It is about modern, urban people of no particular distinction whatsoever who have real emotions about events and situations any one of us could recognize. There are no knives drawn in

³¹ Giacomo Puccini, *La bohème*, trans. Ellen H. Bleiler (New York: Dover Publications, 1962), 24–32.

Bohème, there is no code of honor, and there is no exoticism. It was about the audience, as it still is.³²

Mallach seems to agree:

Bohème is an urban opera, the first opera to put the world inhabited by the urban bourgeoisie on the operatic stage, and present the rich panorama of that world in its full variety and flavor. Although nominally set in 1830s Paris, there is nothing about the setting of *Bohème* that could not be 1890s Milan.³³

In contrast to most operas prior to *La bohème*, all of *La bohème*'s main characters are part of the lower classes of society. The opera portrays the urban life of these classes well and in a way that is applicable to many societies. In the preface to *Scènes de la vie de bohème*, Murger wrote that the characters are like people who have lived in different places and times:

The Bohemians of this book are by no means a race of to-day; they have existed all over the world ever since time began, and can lay claim to an illustrious descent.³⁴

The original audience could personally connect with the characters, but so can most people from other cultures and eras. This is likely why *La bohème* has remained so popular since its premiere.

Third, the musical content of *La bohème* can be considered *verismo*. Puccini's writing is relatively simple and concise, which fits well with a theme of everyday life. Berger says of *La bohème*'s simplicity, "The events, characters, musical constructions, and objects of *bohème* are all mere details. But life...is made of such details."³⁵ Instead of the grandeur of operas of previous ages, the simplicity of *La bohème* is able to imitate real life. The music's simple, narrative character helps the plot feel more realistic and thus impacts the audience more than overly complex and grand music would. Additionally, the music is fluid in nature and freely moves to match what is occurring on stage. This is another way, besides

³² Berger, *Puccini without Excuses*, 41–42.

³³ Mallach, *Autumn of Italian Opera*, 130.

³⁴ Murger, *Bohemians*, xvii.

³⁵ Berger, *Puccini without Excuses*, 111.

the speech-like qualities, in which the orchestra can sound like a narrator. Instead of independently performing, the job of the orchestra is to interact with the characters and plot to help advance the story of life being told. Richard Specht writes of this fluidity, “The incessant rubato, the short and long pauses (*Haltungen*), and the sudden break into hurried successions of notes after sustained ones, all go to produce a sense of unrest that palpitates with life.”³⁶ The mood of the music changes to match the events taking place on stage, sometimes transitioning slowly, but also transforming quickly when the characters change moods quickly. Sometimes the music does not specifically match the moods of the characters but reflects the feeling of the overall situation. This can help the audience determine the significance of certain events.

Additionally, the score of *La bohème* uses specific motives for specific characters. Other composers, such as Wagner, frequently used this compositional technique, but the way they used themes for characters did not allow the orchestra to be as involved in the plot as the way that Puccini used themes for characters.³⁷ Puccini’s use of themes especially allows the orchestra to act as a narrator for the opera. These themes announce the arrival of characters before they appear on stage, echo the emotional state of characters, and interact with each other. In this way, foreshadowing occurs in the music akin to how it would in literature. Also, the orchestra, like a narrator, can portray to the audience an in-depth description of the character’s feelings. The way the themes interact with each other mimics the way the characters interact or the way they feel about each other. Examples 2–7 below illustrate this:

Example 2: *La bohème*, act I.³⁸

80

Cl. in La Lento

Mimi (bussa timidamente alla porta) (di fuori) Senza. In grazia, mi s'è spento il lume.

pp dolciss. cresc.

³⁶ Richard Specht, *Giacomo Puccini: The Man, His Life, His Work*, trans. Catherine Alison Phillips (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1970), 136.

³⁷ Puccini, *La bohème*, 33.

³⁸ Puccini, *La bohème: In Full Score*, 80.

In Example 2, the clarinet line plays Mimi's theme as she enters for the first time, well before she sings the same melody. This theme continues to appear throughout the rest of the opera.

Example 3: *La bohème*, act I.³⁹

MIMI
...ton-de? (commence) Mi chiama-ro Mi: mi: il per-chè non so.
BOD.
St.
Viol.
Vle
Vo.
Lento
pp

In Example 3, Mimi sings her theme after the orchestra has already introduced it.

Example 4: *La bohème*, act I.⁴⁰

(MIMI dalla rue d'Enfer: entra guar.
6
Fl.
Cb.
Arpa
Viol.
Vle
Vo.
Cb.
con sordina
arco
rall.
pp
6

The first violin part in mm. 8–9 of Example 4 begin Mimi's theme before she enters in act II. Example 5 continues the theme.

³⁹ Puccini, *La bohème*: *In Full Score*, 101.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 250.

Example 5: *La bohème*, act II.⁴¹

The continuation of the theme begun in Example 4 extends in the first violin part from mm. 1–4 of Example 5. When Mimi enters in the last measure, it is with new material, not her theme. Still, the orchestra has introduced her using the motif associated with her character.

Example 6: *La bohème*, act I.⁴²

Rodolfo begins an aria in m. 3 of Example 6. He is singing to Mimi.

⁴¹ Puccini, *La bohème: In Full Score*, 251.

⁴² Ibid., 89.

Example 7: *La bohème*, act IV.⁴³

The musical score for Example 7 from *La bohème*, act IV, shows the vocal parts for Mimi and Rodolfo, and the instrumental parts for Violin, Viola, Violoncello, Flute, Clarinet, Arpa, and Piano. The music is in 3/4 time and features a melodic motif that Mimi and Rodolfo both sing. The score includes dynamic markings such as *ppp*, *pp*, and *f*, and tempo markings such as *rall.*, *And. affettuoso*, and *4 soli*. The lyrics for Mimi are: "...sor non ci ve - de - va..." and "«Che ge-li-da ma - ni-na... Se la...". The lyrics for Rodolfo are: "lasci riscal-darl..." and "E-ra bu-lo, e la man tu mi pren-de - vi...".

In this example from act IV, Mimi sings to Rodolfo the same melody and words that Rodolfo sings to her in act I. This begins in m. 4 and continues through m. 8. At this point in the plot, Mimi is near death, and she is reflecting with Rodolfo on their past relationship. The music and lyrics used throughout this scene serve as reminders of previous scenes.

⁴³ Puccini, *La bohème*: *In Full Score*, 396.

Based on the considerations of the original use of the term *verismo*, Puccini's compositional goals, and the music, libretto, and plot of *La bohème* itself, this essay has demonstrated that *La bohème* is, in fact, a *verismo* opera. Although some scholars have produced compelling arguments for why *La bohème* should not be labeled *verismo* opera, the arguments for why it should be called *verismo* are more convincing and better reflect the facts. *Verismo* was first used for literature, but it is fitting that its usage be extended to include certain operas, *La bohème* in particular. Based on his letters, interactions with librettists, choice of source text, and use of compositional techniques, Puccini seems to have intended for *La bohème* to be a *verismo* opera. Finally, *La bohème* itself exhibits the trademark qualities of *verismo* opera through its subject material, characters, and music.

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