

OPERA

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HUNGARIAN STATE OPERA



PUCCINI AND
THE HUNGARIANS

exhibition guide

PUCCINI AND THE HUNGARIANS

On 29 November 2024, the opera community paid tribute to Giacomo Puccini all around the world on the 100th anniversary of his untimely death. The temporary exhibition *Puccini and the Hungarians* also opened on this very day at the Red Parlour of the Hungarian State Opera, coinciding with the final performance of the new *Turandot* production. The focus of the display is on the visits of the Italian composer to Budapest as well as his relationships with Hungarian artists and his contributions to cultural life in Hungary.

Puccini was already a legend in his lifetime, something he owed to his touching operas and his personal charm. Apart from being a restless composer, he was a certain kind of manager, who was aware how important it was to appear at international premieres of his works. His presence not only boosted public interest, but it was also a guarantee of the highest standard if he could oversee the final rehearsals before a premiere. His travels earned him many friends, business partners, followers, and he could enjoy the favours of women.

Beyond the detailed presentation of his visits to Budapest illustrated with a large number of images, the exhibition is the first attempt to gather all possible connections between Puccini and Hungary, all the photos taken of him there, and further rarities.



HUNGARIAN PREMIERES OF PUCCINI'S WORKS

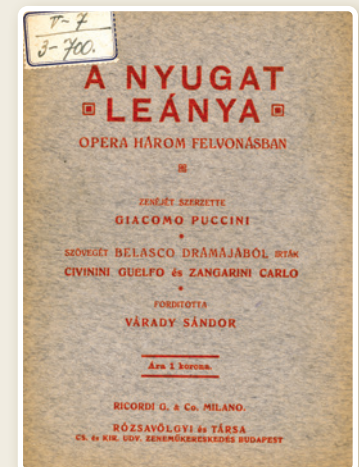
Internationally renowned Hungarian conductor Arthur Nikisch (1855–1922) was the first in Hungary to realise the talent of the up-and-coming Italian composer and he secured the rights to perform *Manon Lescaut*, making it the first opera by Puccini to be staged in Hungary in 1894. The success of the production ensured that Puccini's subsequent operas were all presented at the Hungarian State Opera shortly after they enjoyed their world premiere.

Some of his earlier works took more than a century to arrive at the Budapest Opera: the Hungarian premiere of *Edgar* took place in 2008, whereas *Le villi* and *Messa di Gloria* were first presented during the season dedicated to Puccini in 2019. The Puccini season also featured a special production entitled *Chrysanthemums, or The Death of Liù* by Hungarian playwright Balázs Szálinger, commissioned by the Hungarian State Opera, which is centred around a tragic episode in the composer's life.



Playbill of the 1922 Hungarian premiere of *Il trittico*

The first Hungarian libretto of *La fanciulla del West*



PUCCINI IN HUNGARY

During his travels, Giacomo Puccini visited Budapest four times between 1894 and 1912. Three times, it was on the invitation of the Hungarian Royal Opera (today: Hungarian State Opera), and once he came in incognito with his partner, Elvira Bonturi.

● 14 – 16 April 1894

Puccini was first invited to Budapest following the Hungarian premiere of *Manon Lescaut*. He arrived from Milan with his cousin, and they stayed at Grand Hotel Hungaria on the bank of the River Danube. On the day of his arrival, he met conductor and artistic director Arthur Nikisch as well as editors of certain newspapers before watching a performance of *Die Walküre* at the Opera House and having dinner at the Reutter Café (Deschler Palace, opposite the Opera House).

He spent the following morning sightseeing, visiting the Castle District in Buda, and boating on the lake in City Park. He attended the evening performance of *Manon Lescaut*, where the audience had *Madrigal* and *Intermezzo* reprised. In the intervals, Puccini had a chat with the Italian members of the Opera House and gave instructions regarding the tempi. The next morning, he left for Vienna.

● 8 May 1895

There is only one known report about Puccini's private visit to Hungary in 1895. He arrived in Budapest from Fiume with his partner Elvira Bonturi. According to the report, music critic Izor Béldi acted as their guide.



The Hungarian Royal Opera
around 1900



Arthur Nikisch

● 5 – 16 May 1906

Puccini returned to Budapest in 1906 as an internationally acclaimed composer. As opposed to the disastrous world premiere in Milan, the Hungarian premiere of *Madama Butterfly* was an absolute success.

In the first few days of his visit, he was preoccupied with the preparations of the premiere. He negotiated with conductor Rezső Máder, and following a piano rehearsal, he requested the postponing of the premiere. The rehearsals of the next days were full of tensions, he was dissatisfied with Máder. Puccini conducted, sang, directed, and gave scenic instructions. Apart from his work at the Opera House, he spent time with friends, some of the most outstanding artists of the age, and watched a performance of *La bohème*, where he had a curtain call between acts 3 and 4. The premiere of *Madama Butterfly* was postponed as requested, a performance of *Tosca* took place instead with Puccini and Máder taking a bow together at the end.

The premiere on 12 May was an undisputed success, a gala dinner for 300 was held at Hotel Hungaria. In the final days of his visit, Puccini attended a charity lunch organised in aid of the victims of an earthquake in Calabria, took a road trip to János Hill, visited the Music Academy, and attended another performance of *Madama Butterfly* that was included in the programme specifically for him.



Puccini with cast and creative during the general rehearsal of *Madama Butterfly*

• 8 February – 2 March 1912

Puccini's final visit, which lasted almost a month, coincided with the 1912 Hungarian premiere of *La fanciulla del West*. Although things at the Hungarian Royal Opera were in turmoil (Count Miklós Bánffy had just been named general director, the opera set in the Wild West was too much for the company in terms of acting, and the soloist to sing the role of Jack Rance had been taken ill), Puccini enjoyed his stay in Budapest.

Apart from his work at the Opera House, he found the time to renew friendships, attend dinners and various performances, and get acquainted with Richard Strauss, who was also on a visit to Hungary.

At the Opera House, during the rehearsals, he requested the singers to act more realistically. When the soloist to sing the role of Jack Rance premiere fell ill, the date of the premiere was postponed. Thus, Puccini was compelled to postpone his trips to Munich and London, which gave him the opportunity to see the revival of his *Madama Butterfly* and *Der Rosenkavalier* by Strauss. With the arrival of baritone Domenico Viglione Borghese, the premiere of *La fanciulla del West* could finally take place in the presence of various dignitaries and Princess Auguste. The composer, the soloists, the director, and the conductor received 30 curtain calls.

It was the last appearance of Puccini in Hungary, the plans to invite him for the Hungarian premiere of *Il trittico* in 1922 were never realised.



At the gala dinner
after the premiere of
La fanciulla del West

At the general rehearsal of
La fanciulla del West



PUCCINI AND THE HUNGARIANS

The exhibition pays tribute to several outstanding Hungarian personalities who were acquainted with the Maestro.



Count Miklós Bánffy (1873–1950) had just been appointed general director of the Hungarian Royal Opera before Puccini's fourth visit to Budapest in 1912. He was one of the most visionary intendants, it was under his tenure that two stage works, *The Wooden Prince* and *Bluebeard's Castle* by Béla Bartók enjoyed their world premieres.



Kálmán Alszegehy (1852–1927) was a member of the Opera House for over 40 years, and he was responsible for staging all the Hungarian premieres of Puccini between 1894 and 1912.



Puccini, who was famous for his fondness for (and affairs with) women, first saw Elza Szamosi (1881–1924) as Mimi in 1906. The soprano then went on to become the first "Hungarian" Cio-Cio San later that year. Rumours of an affair are not proven, but Szamosi was cast in an English-language performance of *Madama Butterfly* in North America – at the recommendation of the composer.

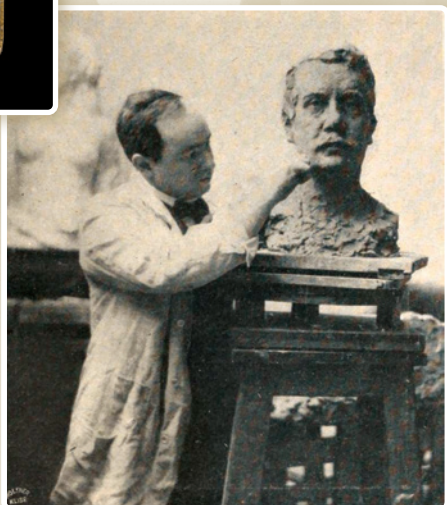


Writer and painter, Margit Vészi (1885–1961), the first wife of famous Hungarian author Ferenc Molnár, was in correspondence with Puccini for a decade after their first encounter in Paris in 1911. The true nature of their relationship is unknown, but they later met in London and Berlin, and she was also invited to Torre del Lago.

EXHIBITION HIGHLIGHTS

The exhibition features some true relics including busts and a plaque of Puccini as well as photos and documents signed by the composer himself.

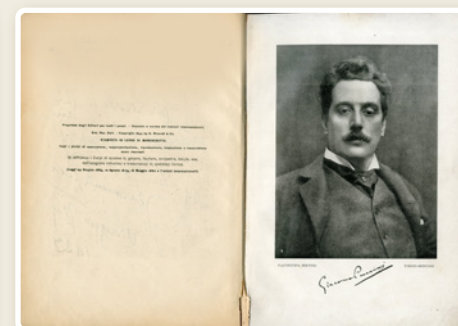
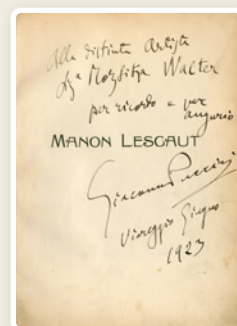
On his visits to Budapest, Puccini was a guest at the studios of renowned artists of the age. In 1906, he sat for Ede Telcs, the small plaque on display is the only original depiction of the composer in Hungary that was not based on a photo or memory. In 1912, Puccini also sat for sculptor László Hűvös, but the whereabouts of the bust is currently unknown. However, Gyula Szigeti, a restorer at the Hungarian State Opera “revived” the sculpture based on photos, and visitors are welcome to compare its likeness to the one seen in archival images.



Several photos and documents signed or written by Puccini during or in connection with his visits to Hungary exist in various collections. One of the most important of these found in the Hungarian State Opera archives is a portrait made by photographer József Kossák: the composer dedicated it to Mrs Gizella Flatt, the first-ever Hungarian Kate Pinkerton in 1906.



The pride of place among these invaluable objects is a score of *Manon Lescaut*, dedicated to Rózsi Walter in 1923. A leading soprano for decades, Walter sang all the dramatic heroines of Puccini from her 1921 debut as Tosca until her retirement in 1948. Although there is no proof that she had actually met the composer in person, she treasured the score of *Manon Lescaut* until her death. It was acquired by the Hungarian State Opera in 2024, and it is for the first time it has been on display in public.



PUCCINI AND THE HUNGARIANS

The exhibition at the Red Parlour of the Opera House is open during guided tours and performances.



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