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Photo: Robert Millard

**Los Angeles Opera's 'La Rondine': I loved it!**

**GIACOMO PUCCINI  
LA RONDINE  
LOS ANGELES OPERA  
JUNE 7, 2008**

By: Carol Jean Delmar  
OperaOnline.us

“La Rondine” (“The Swallow”) isn’t one of Giacomo Puccini’s most important works, but it does show a different side of his character and compositional style. It is clearly an operetta-like opera with moments resembling “Der Rosenkavalier,” “The Merry Widow,” “La Traviata,” and Puccini’s own “La Bohème.”

Marta Domingo’s revival production for Los Angeles Opera is a perfect way for the company to end the season. “La Rondine” is Puccini’s version of Lehár, only in Italian, probably because of the opera’s rocky start. Puccini was approached to write a Viennese

operetta, but World War I broke out. Italy and Austria were on opposite sides, and Puccini didn't want to compose an operetta with spoken dialogue. The result was an opera with a German libretto that was altered and translated into Italian.

I thought that the sets and costumes were wonderful on opening night, but that could be because I am the daughter of Viennese parents, so anything that looks remotely like Viennese décor appeals to me, even though it was French. The stage was decked out with lavish cascading draperies, French doors, a prominent crystal chandelier, candelabras: Well, you get the picture.

That was the first act. The second act was reminiscent of Puccini's *Café Momus*, but it also resembled Flora's scene in *"La Traviata,"* only it was set in what looked like a discothèque. A party, can-can dancers, colorful costumes, gaiety, frolicking – the scene resembled LA Opera's traditional *"Traviata"* of two years ago.

The third act is the controversial one though. Puccini couldn't make up his mind about this opera, so he wrote three versions instead of one. In most productions, Magda, who was Rambaldo's mistress until she fell in love with Ruggero, decides that she cannot marry Ruggero because of her past as a grisette, even though he doesn't seem to mind. Thus she becomes a swallow of sorts and decides to leave him. That was the ending performed for the 1917 premiere in Monte Carlo. But in a later version, Rambaldo entreats Magda to leave Ruggero and come back to him. Ruggero discovers the truth about Magda and reproaches her until she realizes there is no hope for them. Marta Domingo expands upon this version by directing Magda to walk into the sea to drown herself. Whether or not Puccini had suicide in mind for Magda is uncertain. But she does die for Marta Domingo, who first staged this *"La Rondine"* in 1995 at the Oper der Stadt Bonn, in 1998 for Washington National Opera, and in 2000 for LA Opera. The tragic ending certainly added some dramatics to the tame story line.

The set in Act 3 was a major contrast to the other two -- a vacation house by the sea, bright lighting, a picnic area, and a stark blue backdrop. I kept thinking I was seeing Deborah Kerr and Burt Lancaster in *"From Here to Eternity,"* William Holden and Jennifer Jones in *"Love Is a Many-Splendored Thing,"* or wasn't there a movie called *"On the Beach"*?

I only know that this little operetta opera certainly left me speechless. I didn't like the starkness of the blue backdrop, and the third act setting seemed more modern in design than the previous two, which were set in the late nineteenth century. The more modern scenic design and costumes jolted me. But when Magda disappeared into the ocean with dried-ice fog being projected from the stage floor, all I could do was sit there in silence. I loved it.

Patricia Racette was a believable Magda. She had the requisite charm for the role, which was evident in her enchanting rendition of *"Chi il bel sogno di Doretta."* She was also able to add a feeling of hopelessness to her characterization so that Magda became somewhat multidimensional; however some of her high notes had a narrow thin quality I

found to be displeasing.

Marcus Haddock's Ruggero was young and energetic, and some of his high ringing tones made up for the lack of rounded warm top tones from Patricia Racette. Amanda Squitieri's Lisette was an adorable supporting character who sang with much appeal. Her Prunier, Greg Fedderly, was a well-suited match. David Pittsinger (Rambaldo) displayed the tones of a well-seasoned pro. Karen Vuong (Yvette) was a standout. Her voice was full and clear, she looked adorable in her beautifully designed period gown, and her acting was absolutely perfect. Even though her role was a small one, I found myself watching her because she was charming and brought a smile to my face. Very frou-frou French. The rest of Magda's and Rambaldo's entourage blended in well but didn't seem noteworthy.

Stephanie Landwehr and John Todd danced with precision, fine extensions and clean moves. The choreography was lovely.

Conductor Keri-Lynn Wilson was clearly in command. I could see the cast watching her at the end of Act 2, so my eyes gravitated from the stage to the pit. Her energy was evident from the moment she walked to the podium. The orchestra rose to the occasion.

A truly nice production – LA Opera's "La Rondine" is for the veteran opera lover who wants to hear something lighter than the customary Puccinian fare, and for the freshman operagoer who will be incited to become a sophomore next season with "Il Trittico" and "Madama Butterfly."

Libretto: Giuseppe Adami, based on the German libretto  
by Alfred Maria Willner and Heinrich Reichert  
Orchestral realization of the third act by Lorenzo Ferrero  
Production conceived and directed by Marta Domingo  
Conductor, Keri-Lynn Wilson  
Designer, Michael Scott  
Lighting Designer, Mary Louise Geiger  
Choreographer, Kitty McNamee

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### **Addendum: About those different versions of 'La Rondine' . . .**

By Carol Jean Delmar

I've found many interpretations written about the various versions of Puccini's "La Rondine" in books, newspapers, dictionaries and encyclopedias as I surf the web, and many of them are wrong. I wasn't specific in my review of "La Rondine" because frankly, it didn't seem to matter. But after sending e-mails back-and-forth to composer Lorenzo Ferrero, who provided orchestral material for the third version, and after

speaking to director Marta Domingo on the issue, I have decided to take a stab at clarifying some of the misconceptions.

The first version of “La Rondine” premiered in Monte Carlo on March 27, 1917. It had a rocky beginning since Puccini originally was approached to write an operetta for the Karltheater in Vienna, but wanted to write a comic opera without dialogue instead. When World War I broke out, the production was in jeopardy, and the Austrian management gave up certain rights so that Puccini could premiere it in Italy. The two Austrian/German scenarios by Alfred Maria Willner and Heinz Reichert were not to Puccini’s liking and were subsequently adapted into Italian by Giuseppe Adami.

A second version was performed at the Teatro Massimo in Palermo on April 10, 1920. In this version, Prunier became a baritone; an aria was added to the first act for Ruggero; there were simple plot changes; and some passages in Act 3 were revised.



Marta Domingo. Photo: Robert Millard

More changes were incorporated into the Austrian/German premiere of “La Rondine” at the Wiener Volksoper in October 1920. Adami’s libretto was translated into German by Willner and Reichert even though the tenor sang Ruggero in Italian.

In December 1920, Puccini wrote a third version which wasn’t performed until June 1987 at the Teatro Comunale in Bologna, with piano accompaniment only, since the orchestral passages, mostly in Act 3, had been lost during World War II and were probably destroyed when the publisher, Casa Musicale Sonzogno, was bombed in 1943.

Lorenzo Ferrero was commissioned to compose the missing orchestral passages. The third version was then performed for the first time with orchestra on March 22, 1994 at the Teatro Regio in Turin. For the most part, Acts 1 and 2 reverted back to the first version; Prunier became a tenor again; and there were substantial changes to the libretto and plot in Act 3, including a new ending.

#### The Three Endings

In the first version, Magda decides against marrying Ruggero because she believes that her past as a grisette could taint his family name, so she leaves him.

In the third version, an offstage prelude of a woman's voice is added to Act 3. Rambaldo visits Magda and entreats her with a swallow-shaped pin to return to him, then leaves her a wallet full of money. Ruggero learns the truth about Magda's past as a demimondaine, is unable to come to terms with it, sees the wallet, reproaches her and leaves her without hope.

But there is still a fourth version of sorts with a third ending. It is Marta Domingo's version, which was first performed at the Oper der Stadt Bonn in 1995, then at Washington National Opera in 1998, Los Angeles Opera in 2000, and again at Los Angeles Opera in 2008. The Domingo ending expands upon the third version finale. Magda's feelings of rejection overwhelm her and she decides to "fly toward the sea" like a swallow, according to Los Angeles Opera's program note. Thus as the fog rises to envelop her, she walks into the sea to her death.

When researching the opera before directing it in Bonn, Domingo told me that she had found material which indicated Puccini had considered suicide for Magda, but had never included it. Since she didn't believe that the ending would impinge on the integrity of the composer, she added it to the third version, as well as additions from the other versions, including three duets between Rambaldo and Magda, and an aria for Ruggero in Act 1.

Directors today enjoy leaving their mark on their productions. Locales are changed; times and costumes are updated; and Eurotrash is the fad in Berlin. In my mind, productions should be kept fresh with the goal of enticing new audiences, but the freshness should never trespass on the composer's original vision.

"I still want to make the audience cry," Puccini once wrote in a letter regarding "La Rondine."

Marta Domingo has put a new spin on the opera which makes it seem even more Puccinian than Puccini.

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Sources include:

Girardi, Michele, and Laura Basini, trans. "Puccini: His International Art." Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000.

William Weaver, ed., by Simonetta Puccini. "The Puccini Companion." New York: W. W. Norton & Company, Inc., 2000. Contributor: William Ashbrook.