

A portrait of a man with a mustache, wearing a grey suit jacket, a white shirt, and a red vest. He is looking directly at the camera with a serious expression. The background is a plain, light-colored wall.

Opera Meets New Media

*Puccini, Ricordi and the Rise
of the Modern Entertainment Industry*

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1.

Puccini and ____ Ricordi

*Twentieth-Century
Media: Challenges
and Opportunity*

Gabriele Dotto

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Puccini in his home at Torre
del Lago with Giulio Ricordi





By the time the twentieth century dawned, in the year following the premiere of *Tosca*, Giacomo Puccini had inherited from Giuseppe Verdi the mantle of the most renowned living composer of Italian opera. Indeed, the legendary Verdi passed away in the very first month of the twentieth century, a coincidence that seems like a dramatic device from an opera plot. As a further, remarkable coincidence – one that would strain credulity, were it not historical fact – Verdi's final operatic masterpiece, *Falstaff*, and Puccini's first true success, *Manon Lescaut*, premiered just weeks apart from one another. It was as though history itself were emphasizing the passing of the scepter from one "king of opera" to the next.

This *fin-de-siècle* concept is an important one, when we consider Puccini's career. Rarely in music history has an artist so successfully straddled two such distinctly different eras: in Puccini's case, from the Gay Nineties to the Tumultuous Teens and Roaring Twenties; from the style of Art Nouveau to the threshold of Art Deco; from the dénouement of the Belle Époque with its horse-drawn carriages, to the age of flight and the mass-market automobile. And of course, from the time of only live, in-person performances, to the proliferation of technologies (records, cinema, and later, radio transmissions) that would deeply impact the tradition-bound worlds of art-music and theatre.

Puccini's music would flourish astride these vastly different eras with unabated success, once his career was solidly established, even surviving the radical upheavals of the musical avant-garde of the early twentieth century. Indeed, Puccini was a keen student of these musical transformations: he eagerly kept abreast of new musical developments, from Richard Strauss' *Salome* to Arnold Schoenberg's *Pierrot lunaire*. And although he felt distant from these new musical languages in his own artistic conception, he kept a very open mind. His professional respect was reciprocated: Stravinsky, Ravel, and Schoenberg (who considered Puccini to be superior to Verdi) all expressed their admiration. Nor were the nuanced changes in Puccini's music in his mature period lost on contemporary music critics: reviewing the premiere of *Turandot*, a German journalist observed "Puccini certainly wrote the most refined music of his life's work here – it ranges from Strauss to Stravinsky via Mahler and Schoenberg; he knew everything, and could achieve almost everything, especially in *Turandot*."¹

Overall, Puccini kept true to his ideals of music and theatre and was rewarded handsomely for this consistency. This is not to say that his music language did not evolve, over the course of his career: *La fanciulla del West* (1910), *Suor Angelica* (1918) and the posthumous *Turandot* contain moments of surprising harmonic modernity, and in the more expansively scored of these, he employed masterfully complex orchestration. Yet, as the harmonic language of his twentieth-century operas grew more sophisticated, Puccini did not stray far from the chromatic complexities of extreme late Romanticism. This, coupled with his unequalled mastery of vocal expression and unforgettable melodies – very much in the tradition of the Italian opera giants who preceded him, like Rossini, Donizetti, Bellini, and Verdi – was a fundamental factor in his unparalleled success. Upon hearing *Fanciulla*, the modernist composer Anton Webern wrote to his teacher Schoenberg that he found it to be "a score with an *original* sound throughout, splendid, every bar a surprise... Not a trace of *Kitsch*... I must say I enjoyed it very much."² As the historian Julian Budden observed, "No composer communicates more directly with an audience than Puccini."³

Puccini's principal publisher, Casa Ricordi, was in those years a powerhouse among music publishers. And not only of music: with its celebrated Graphic Arts division Ricordi had become celebrated throughout Europe for its highly admired poster art and influential graphic design. By the early twentieth century the firm was coming out of the economic doldrums (both in Italy and internationally) of the early 1890s. Puccini's consolidation of success with *Manon*, followed by the hugely successful *Bohème* and, at the close of the nineteenth century, *Tosca*, came at a propitious time. With the new century, and returning economic prosperity, Ricordi found itself flush with increasing business, allowing the publisher to build an impressively large new production facility (begun in 1908) and, in 1910, acquire a multi-story building next to Milan's Galleria as its new headquarters.

We mentioned the concept of Puccini's career "straddling" two distinct eras: an overview of his output demonstrates how evenly split this was. In fact, curiously enough, his ten operas align evenly, on either side of the chronological (and metaphorical) divide: five in the nineteenth century (*Le Villi*, *Edgar*, *Manon Lescaut*, *La bohème*, *Tosca*) and five in the twentieth (*Madama Butterfly*, *La fanciulla del West*, *La rondine*, *Il trittico*,⁴ *Turandot*). The second part of that career, however, would unfold as new technologies upended the established order, offering significant opportunities (allowing opera repertory to reach large and previously untapped audiences) but also posing significant challenges (to revenues and rights management).

Like nearly every composer before him Puccini initially struggled to find success. In this, however, good fortune was with him. Were it not for the dogged determination of his publisher, Giulio Ricordi, to stand by the young composer in the face of the doubts expressed by Ricordi's own board of administrators, Puccini's career with Ricordi (or perhaps altogether) might have sputtered to a halt before it had had a chance to take wing. Giulio persisted in his support, notwithstanding the less-than-successful outcomes of Puccini's two first operas (the one-act *Le Willis* of 1884, later revised, at Giulio Ricordi's insistence, to a two-act "opera ballet" as *Le Villi*; and the four-act *Edgar* of 1889 also heavily revised, and ultimately trimmed to 3 acts by 1892, again on Giulio's advice), and stood steadfastly by this young man whose potential, he felt, was undeniable. He was vindicated (and his famous reputation as a "discoverer of talents" further reinforced) with the success of *Manon* in 1893, which catapulted Puccini to fame, consolidated soon thereafter by *La bohème* (1896) and *Tosca* (1900). As early as 1898 George Bernard Shaw, after seeing a production of *Manon Lescaut* in London, would write: "Puccini looks to me more like the heir of Verdi than any of his rivals".

New technologies bring new audiences

The rise of affordable recordings aligned with a renewed interest in "cultural betterment", both in Europe and abroad. This was especially true in the expanding middle class in America. "At the beginning of the century" writes the musicologist Mark Katz, "unique problems faced the project of disseminating classical music throughout America: the country's size, the government's laissez-faire attitude toward the arts, and the limited possibility of repeated exposure to 'good music'. The phonograph seemingly brought a solution to the fore. Recordings, because of their portability, affordability, and repeatability,



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Poster for the movie *Tosca* with Francesca Bertini, declaring it to be based both on Sardou's play and on Puccini's opera



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Puccini and Tito Ricordi II at the inauguration of the new Ricordi production plant in Viale Campania, Milan, 1910



made classical music accessible to all Americans.”⁵ The “repeatability” aspect had an interesting, unexpected advantage for classical music repertory. Psychologists, conducting experiments in 1924 and 1927, concluded “that while young people immediately enjoyed hearing popular selections like the ‘Kismet Fox Trot’ or ‘Sultan One Step’ their interest waned with repeated hearings; on the other hand, the subjects found the classical discs more appealing after each playing.”⁶

An additional, unexpected advantage was the rise of popularity of classical music, and especially opera, on recorded discs among audiences who previously had been marginalized. “Thanks to the portability of the phonograph” writes Katz, “African Americans were able to hear ‘that class of music’ at home, bypassing public venues from which they were often barred. In 1916 the *Chicago Defender* [an African American newspaper] remarked on the popularity of classical recordings among middle- and upper-class blacks: ‘During the Christmas holidays there were thousands of dollars spent by our people for Victrolas. They paid to hear Tetrizzini, Caruso, Paganini, Mme. Schumann-Heink, Geraldine Farrar and other noted artists.’ ... The pursuit of classical music was not only considered a marker of culture and gentility among blacks, it was also seen as a means to achieve equality with whites.”⁷

In the US the expansion of interest in opera was seen as a direct consequence of recorded sound. In 1917 the *National Music Monthly* wrote “Why has this great interest and enthusiasm for opera so suddenly developed? Almost every layman will answer with the two words, ‘the phonograph.’ People have heard in their own homes beautiful excerpts from the greatest operas, and have come to know their meaning in connection with the stories of the operas.”⁸ This phenomenon greatly aided the expansion of Ricordi’s opera repertory to the Americas in the early twentieth century. At the same time, however, the phenomenally rapid and exponentially expanding dissemination of that repertory via recorded sound, and to previously untapped audiences, caught most traditional music publishers unawares.

As early as 1905 Tito Ricordi was enthusiastically proposing the idea of the publishing house possibly partnering with an up-and-coming Italian record producer, the “Società Italiana di Fonotipia”; though his father Giulio was more cautious, the Ricordi Board approved the plan. Soon thereafter, another mechanical-reproduction technology also seemed to be capturing the public’s attention: player-piano rolls. Giulio wondered if this other technology might align more closely with one of the music publisher’s traditional businesses, that of selling pianos. Since their principal Milanese rival Casa Sonzogno seemed intent on getting into the piano roll business as well, Tito was charged with exploring the possibility of getting into that field, setting aside a considerable sum for potential investment. Ultimately, however, that project was destined to die out; a stroke of luck for Ricordi, as it turned out, since in a few short years the piano roll market itself would be eclipsed by the public’s far stronger interest in recordings.⁹ In hindsight, the episode offers a fascinating glimpse into the early phases of technological change, where a plurality of possibilities are offered (as continues to happen in our own day) and choosing which will succeed often requires more luck than foresight. Ultimately, the “disruptive factor” of recordings posed a much greater challenge to the publisher’s business model: whereas piano rolls might have an effect on the venerable tradition of “domestic music making”, recordings of the most famous vocalists risked keeping audiences out of theaters altogether.

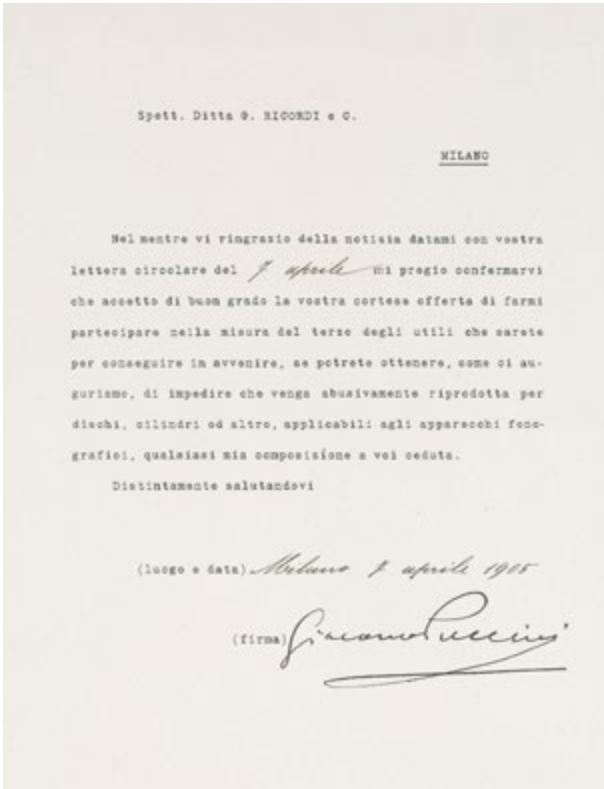
Over time, even Tito Ricordi, who had been much more excited than his father Giulio about the opportunities offered by the new world of recorded sound, became wary of its potential impact on the publisher's more traditional revenue streams. By the time of the New York premiere of *La fanciulla del West* (1910), Tito, as a contemporary American magazine reported, "refused to permit American talking-machine companies or music roll houses to reproduce mechanically any of the music of *The Girl of the Golden West*. Selections from *Tosca*, *Bohème*, and *Madame Butterfly* have a large sale in player-piano rolls and talking-machine records. Some of the interest taken in *The Girl* by the public is shown by the fact that out of 1,000 scores sent to this country, not one was unsold by the end of the first week."¹⁰ (Although that article hypothesized that Ricordi had worried that phonograph records and piano rolls might reduce the sales of its vocal scores, it is far more likely that Tito's concern was over the unresolved issues, in the US at that time, of adequate copyright protection and compensation to the rights-owners – the composer and his publisher – from the sale of mechanical recordings produced by third parties.)¹¹ In the end, Casa Ricordi's indirect participation in the business of producing records was gradually set aside in favor of increasing its efforts to ensure intellectual property rights (and performance-rights revenues) were protected, when dealing with the new technologies.

No less a challenge was posed by the enormous growth and increasing technological growth of cinema, an artform that early on showed a keen interest in the opera repertory. Here, however, there was little question of whether a music publisher should consider entering the realm of production: at issue were rights protection, and the new concept of licensing.¹²

The expansion of marketing, and creating a "brand" around its star composer

Marketing and promotion were key factors in Ricordi's success, and in this area Ricordi was at the forefront among music publishers.¹³ The *New York Times*, in a remarkable full-page article published soon after the world premiere of *La fanciulla del West* titled "The Music Trust that Reigns Over Italian Opera," gushed with unbridled admiration about the "Ricordis of Milan" who "have been factors in operatic history for a hundred years." Comparing the promotional and marketing work of Casa Ricordi in the US to that of other publishers, the newspaper asked "where is the publisher?" after the world premiere of Engelbert Humperdinck's *Königskinder* was produced at the Metropolitan opera; the same for *Ariane et Barbe-bleue* by Paul Dukas: "Will the publisher come? Is the publisher showing any interest?" Ricordi, on the other hand, "is here on the spot carefully supervising every step taken" and "hardly had conductor Arturo Toscanini ... put aside his baton as the curtain fell on the last act of the 'Girl' before [Tito Ricordi] was on his way to Chicago to superintend the production of the opera there. As soon as the first performance was over" in Chicago, Tito was rushing eastward, "this time heading for Boston, preparatory to its premiere" there. As the journalist underscores, Puccini's "success is more overwhelming and complete because he has behind him the physical and moral support of an enormous commercial force, a force that no other composer living can calculate upon, and that is the Ricordi publishing house. With an unexampled energy and a mercantile perspicuity unequalled in its line,

In this letter of 7 April 1905 Puccini states he is pleased to accept Ricordi's kind offer of a 33% share of royalties from recordings and satisfied by their commitment to block production of unauthorized records of his music



07 - The New York Times, 8 January 1911

THE MUSIC TRUST THAT REIGNS OVER ITALIAN OPERA



Giulio Ricordi, President of the House, Grandson of the Founder.

EXACTLY 100 years ago today—on Jan. 8, 1816—a collection of musical compositions with the title "The Success of the Year," four songs for French guitar, by Giovanni Ricordi, was published in Milan, Italy. It was the first item of stock that ever left the hands of G. Ricordi, music publisher.

Since then 141,000 copies of music have been sold abroad. The most recent in the genre of Puccini's new opera, "The

The Ricordis of Milan, Who Control "The Girl of the Golden West," Have Been Factors in Operatic History for a Hundred Years.

"One by Giovanni Ricordi" is its subtitle. Eight days after—Jan. 16, 1816,—Ricordi and Felice Pavesi signed a solemn partnership agreement, heavily laden with words and official stamps. The amount of capital put in by the original partners of the partnership, now had branches all over the world—was \$50.

That began G. Ricordi & Co. The original of that contract is now preserved in the archives of Casa Ricordi's general press-working offices in Milan.

Success came suddenly in the ambitious youth who had signed the names of the firm to bring his idea to completion. In 1840, ten years after starting his business, Giovanni Ricordi secured, for the same amount, from his first office, consisting of two small rooms, Ricordi moved to a little shop in an obscure side street. Then he happily installed himself in one of Milan's main thoroughfares. Here he found offices, destined to become celebrated throughout the musical world, close to the Scala Theatre.

Thirty years later, young and modest, with the name of "Ricordi" under his arm, still dreaming that nine years later the same publishing firm would be paying him a princely sum for "Falstaff." "Thirty Ricordi" turned his shop one day, having in fact an unknown youth whose acquaintance he had somehow made—a youth called Giuseppe Dessiani, who later went to Ricordi as a partner, called "Laska," was a certain secret to it.

Ricordi bought young Verdi's early work—for a few dollars probably. "It made a hit. The young man was completely unknown. He wrote to the publisher offering to sell all his future operas for a certain fixed sum. Ricordi refused the offer.

may not be worth the thousandth part of it." Verdi bowed to the publisher's businessness and signed his pact.

Not many years later the procedure between Verdi and his publisher had become reduced to this: As soon as the great composer finished an opera he notified the Ricordi firm. The latter sent him a blank contract form. Verdi filled in the date and wrote how it whatever amount he desired for his new work. The money was immediately paid over without a moment.

Even when his office had been moved to the heart of Milan, Giuseppe Ricordi got his 50 cents. While Giuseppe wrote in and Verdi sat, a daughter of the household sat quietly knitting in a corner of the shop. As the publisher brought out some new opera, Verdi never did stand corner after corner on the way to town, but quitted because the crate of Giuseppe's manuscript, at which the greatest musical lights of the day were present. For one of these nights composed a "Harcourtsian Overture," with parts for orchestra.



Autograph Letter to Giovanni Ricordi and Music by Dessiani.

Giovanni Ricordi, Founder of Casa Ricordi.

the Ricordi firm sustains Puccini to a degree that defies and defeats competition. ... Thanks to the Ricordi impulse, it is claimed that Puccini, if all goes well, will make more money out of *The Girl of the Golden West* than [Richard] Strauss has made up to the present out of all his operas, among which are such sensations as *Salome* and *Elektra*.” Without a hint of exaggeration, the paper observes, with delightfully well-chosen musical metaphors, that “so clamorously have the trumpets of fame proclaimed Puccini during the last fifteen years [i.e., since the premiere of *La bohème*] that hearers often fail to remark the Ricordi note in the chord which those trumpets sound. But very important it is nonetheless; if not the keynote, it is certainly the dominant. None knows this better than Puccini himself; none better than those Italian composers of to-day who have no Casa Ricordi behind them.”¹⁴

Preserving and continuing a legacy

Even though the composer passed away before he could complete his final work *Turandot*, his publisher worked to ensure that this final masterpiece would reach the stage. It was a complex undertaking but a fitting crown to the composer’s legacy: the opera’s premiere at La Scala was a triumph, albeit bittersweet (on the opening night the conductor Arturo Toscanini concluded the performance at the point where the composer himself had stopped writing: only in subsequent performances was the newly composed ending, based on Puccini’s final sketches, included). Deservedly, even this unfinished masterpiece would enter the standard repertory, an ongoing testament to Puccini’s enduring popularity.¹⁵ In an interesting reflection of the new media upheavals of the twentieth century, Puccini’s contract for *Turandot* was his first to include a clause allowing the publisher to authorize adaptations for the cinema.

A testament to a symbiosis

Puccini’s musical style aligned well with the taste of his times and its popularity has endured undiminished for a century beyond his death. Fully half of his operas (*Manon*, *Bohème*, *Tosca*, *Butterfly*, *Turandot*) have remained fixtures of opera-house seasons the world over, year after year. Their fundamental attractiveness – the fact that “no composer communicates more directly with an audience”, as Budden observed – ensured their permanence in the repertory. That said, however, it would be a fantasy to imagine that any composer might attain, all on his own, the level of *financial* success Puccini enjoyed, without the backing and skilled commercial acumen of a publisher such as Ricordi had become at the time of the second half of Puccini’s career.

By the twentieth century Puccini was on his way to becoming one of the most economically successful classical music composers in history. At the time of his death his estate was estimated to be, in 2024 equivalent, over 210 million Euros.¹⁶ Such a patrimony would have been unimaginable for a composer of art-music in earlier times. What had changed, in Puccini’s day, was the evolving panorama in the protection and exploitation of intellectual property rights, the growth of modern marketing techniques, and his great good fortune of having coupled his career to a publisher among the most aggressive in proposing and

protecting those rights, as well as at the forefront of innovation in production and promotion.

At Ricordi, beyond the challenges of protecting intellectual property in the face of new technologies, and ensuring fair commercial remuneration, there was a clear awareness that marketing and promotion tactics and techniques also had to adapt to meet the challenge (and opportunity) of popularizing its opera repertory among a potentially vast global audience that may never have attended (and indeed may never intend to attend) an opera in-person in a theater. Records, movies, and later, radio transmissions, all opened this time-honored art form (and repertory) to appreciative and enthusiastic masses the size of which would have been unimaginable just a few decades earlier.

A theatrical art form created in Italy at the end of the sixteenth century had moved from an exclusive entertainment for elites in stately court settings (or rarified intellectual societies) to larger, specially built theatrical venues for the upper classes through the seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, to a broader popularization among the merchant classes and bourgeoisie in the early nineteenth century. From the time of aristocratic commissions to the era of impresarios programming repertory for private or civic theaters, to the time of publishers-as-entrepreneurial organizers, it all seemed part of a natural evolutionary progression. But now, at the beginning of the twentieth century, came changes with a level of impact no one could have foreseen.

To be sure, Ricordi's investment in Puccini's career paid off handsomely for the publisher. It is therefore in the context of this symbiosis, between high art and skilled entrepreneurship, that the story of the rapid technological disruptions of the early twentieth century takes on a special fascination. In the essays of this catalog, the authors explore several aspects of these new challenges, their development, and how both the artist and his principal publisher addressed them.