

GIRL OF THE GOLDEN WEST

(La fanciulla del West)

Composer: Giacomo Puccini

Libretto: Carlo Zangarini & Guelfo Civinini
(based on a drama by David Belasco)

Language: Italian

Premiere: New York, 10 December 1910

On his first visit to the United States, in 1905, Puccini saw a performance of David Belasco's horse opera *The Girl of the Golden West* and was fascinated by the old stage wizard's tricks with moving scenery and an elaborate snowstorm. He was also fascinated by the rather simple-minded melodrama of playing poker for the stakes of a man's life and a woman's body. Finally, he was fascinated by the warmth of the reception that America accorded him.

But it was not till he had returned to Italy that he finally decided to make this play the vehicle for his next operatic score. He had his customary trouble hiring and firing librettists till he got just what he wanted, and he also had serious domestic trouble. His wife became hysterically jealous of a maidservant, accused her publicly of being Puccini's mistress (which was not true), and drove the girl to suicide. There was a trial; Mme. Puccini was found guilty; the case was appealed; and then withdrawn by the girl's family. The Puccinis were, however, both severely punished; they were separated for a long time, and the misery they went through left its mark on both of them.

Had not Puccini, years later, composed the scores of *Gianni Schicchi* and *Turandot*, one might conclude that this experience had broken his spirit and ended his career as a first-class opera composer. For *The Girl*, despite the brilliant success of its premiere, is a tired opera. It does have its dramatic moments - particularly during the poker game scene - but it notably fails in the one virtue the composer claimed for it. "For this drama," he said, "I have composed music that, I feel sure, reflects the spirit of the American people, and particularly the strong, vigorous nature of the West." But it is almost all pure second-rate Italian opera, and when the Wild West dialogue intrudes ("Vells Fargo! Vells Fargo!" shout the cowboys in Act I), it is difficult not to laugh. Yet, the opera was revived in Chicago in 1956.

Act I

The bar-room of "The Polka" inn is a favorite spot for the roughnecks of the gold rush to whoop it up, and Minnie, its owner and presiding genius, has the practical assistance of a couple of Indians named Billy Jackrabbit and Wowkle. The opening local color includes a game of faro, in which one of the miners is almost strung up for cheating.

There is a Western ballad singer named Jake Wallace, and there is also Ashby, an agent of the Wells Fargo Transport Company, who says that he is on the lookout for a gang of robbers led by one Ramerrez. Rance, the sheriff and local big shot, claims that he is going to marry Minnie; his claim is disputed by the others; there is a free-for-all; and it is Minnie herself who enforces peace at the point of a gun. Now the Wells Fargo post arrives with a letter for Ashby telling him that Ramerrez will be in the neighborhood shortly. While Rance, with Italian passion but without success, pleads for Minnie's love, a stranger named Dick Johnson comes in and immediately arouses the dislike of Rance. "Stranger, what's your business?" he asks, sweeping Dick's drink to the floor, and it is only Minnie's intervention once more which saves Dick - for he, being the leading tenor, has immediately caught her fancy.

While Dick and Minnie are in the next room dancing, Castro, a captured member of the Ramerrez gang, comes in and promises to lead the boys to the hiding place in return for his own life. A moment later Dick returns, and Castro recognizes him as none other than Ramerrez himself. He manages to tell his boss that he has given away no secrets; the boys are merely waiting for the sheriff to go away before they raid the place.

When they all go off, Dick is left with Minnie, who is guarding all the gold for the miners. In the duet that closes the act, Dick not only gives up his villainous project for the love of a good woman, but promises to defend her against any attack. Still not knowing the real identity of her new flame, she invites him to come up later and see her in her cabin.

Act II

Up in Minnie's room, Wowkle is singing a lullaby to her child, and discussing with Billy the advisability of making it all legal. Their domestic discussion is interrupted by the boss-woman, who is getting ready to entertain Dick Johnson with a Western supper. The guest arrives; they discuss life, they decide Dick had better spend the night (in a separate bed) on account of a terrible snowstorm, when a gang of the boys interrupts. Dick, hiding behind a curtain, hears them tell Minnie that they have found out that Dick Johnson is Ramerrez himself; but she laughs at them and manages to shoo them out. Now she turns around and upbraids the bandit. He admits who he is; he pleads his sad history in extenuation (his father's death left him no alternative in life if he was to support his dear old mother and the other kids); and he says that the sight of Minnie made him decide to turn over a new leaf. Thereupon he rushes out into the night - only to return a moment later, shot by Rance.

Quickly Minnie hides the wounded man in the loft, and, when Rance enters, insists that there is no one with her. Rance cannot find his quarry, but he harshly accuses Minnie of loving the bandit. As they argue, a drop of blood falls from the wounded man; he comes down the ladder and collapses; and Minnie tries one last desperate strategem. Knowing Rance for an inveterate gambler, she suggests three hands of poker. If she wins, Dick goes free; if Rance wins, he can have Dick - and Minnie, too. They play, and each wins one of the first two hands. Minnie's last one, however, is weak, and while Rance is obligingly getting her a drink, she substitutes five cards from her stocking for the deal she got. Thus, when Rance shows three kings, Minnie lays down a full house, aces high. The lovers are left alone.

Act III

In a clearing among the giant redwoods of California, a gang of the boys is again hunting for Dick Johnson, who has been nursed back to health only to have to go on the lam once more. Twice there are false alarms of his having been caught; but at last one of the miners, Sonora, brings him in. A rope is prepared for him; everyone takes a turn at accusing him of various crimes; and he replies that he has always stopped short of murder. Finally, they allow him a last word, which turns out to be the one well-known aria of the opera, *Ch'ella mi creda libero* ("Let her believe me free"), in which he begs that Minnie should never know of his inglorious fate but be allowed to believe he may someday return to her.

Rance's reply is to strike him in the face and prepare to pull the rope. But just at this moment in rides Minnie on a horse (if the leading lady is up to it) and brandishing her pistol. Hasn't she always done everything for the miners? she pleads. And won't they do one thing for her now; let off the man she loves so that he may begin a new life with her? They do.