

LA RONDINE (THE SWALLOW)

Music by Giacomo Puccini

Text by Giuseppe Adami

From the German libretto by A.M. Willner and Heinz Reichert

Cast Of Characters

YVETTE (soprano), friend of Magda

BIANCA (soprano), friend of Magda

SUZY (mezzo-soprano), friend of Magda

PRUNIER (tenor), a poet

MAGDA (soprano), a 'demimondaine,' Rambaldo's mistress

LISETTE (soprano), her maid

RAMBALDO (baritone), a wealthy Parisian

PERICHAUD (bass-baritone), friend of Rambaldo

CREBILLON (bass-baritone), friend of Rambaldo

GOBIN (tenor), friend of Rambaldo

RUGGERO (tenor), a young man

MAJOR-DOMO (bass)

Students, Artists, Men-About-Town, Grisettes,* 'Demimondaines,' Dancers, Waiters, Flower vendors

Magda and her friends are 'demimondaines' (i.e. members of the 'demimonde' class of society), women of doubtful reputation or standing, often supported by wealthy lovers. They fall between the class of women of unquestioned respectability and the courtesan class.

*A grisette is a girl of the working class.

Notes on the historical context of the opera's setting and its premiere, as well as a discography, follow the synopsis.

Act I A salon in Magda's house in Paris, 1900

As the sunset fades, Magda and her lover Rambaldo are entertaining a few close friends. Prunier the poet, surrounded by the women, amuses them with witty conversation. Over their protests, he maintains that romance and love are the new fashions in Paris. Lisette, the maid, impetuously interrupts the conversation, saying that such an idea is nonsense. Prunier is indignant at this rude behavior, but Magda urges him to continue, admitting that she is interested in this new fad. When Prunier resumes his talk of sentimental love, Rambaldo, far too practical for such notions, remarks that this subject is passé. Magda comes to the poet's defense and asks Prunier to sing his new ode to romance. With the words "Chi il bel sogno di Doretta?" (Who can interpret Doretta's dream?), he begins narrating the story of his imaginary heroine. As she slept, Doretta dreamed that a king offered her riches for her companionship, but she refused, saying that gold alone could not bring her happiness. Prunier stops--he does not know how the dream ended. Magda does, though, and she takes up the song. She relates that Doretta next dreamed of a student who kissed her lips and whose kiss brought a revelation: the passion of love was the key to happiness. As Magda becomes enraptured with this dream of a true romance, the guests murmur their approval of her song.

Though moved by Magda's words, Rambaldo recovers quickly and presents her with a pearl necklace. Somewhat annoyed, she tells him that her ideals cannot be changed; love, not wealth, is what she seeks. Prunier notes, however, that Magda, unlike the imaginary Doretta, appears to be vacillating between the two. The poet complains about Lisette's manners as she comes in and

announces a visitor for Rambaldo. Realizing that it is the son of a childhood friend, Rambaldo asks that he be shown in.

The women gather around Magda, envying her good fortune and Rambaldo's generosity. She tells them that riches are not everything; surely they all long to be as happy as a grisette with her lover. In a touching aria, "Ore dolci e divine" (Sweet and divine hours), she speaks of her youth and the evening she escaped from home to go to the nightclub Bullier. The music begins a waltz as Magda sings of Bullier and the voice of love she heard there. The hostess relates how she met a student, danced and had a drink with him, and told him her name by writing it on the tabletop. He wrote his name next to hers, and the two sat silently gazing at one another, oblivious to their surroundings. "Could I but recapture the joy of the hour!" she concludes.

Prunier rejoins them, and the women recount Magda's adventure for him. He offers to foretell their destinies by palm reading, just as Ruggero, Rambaldo's visitor, enters. Prunier begins to read Magda's palm; perhaps, like a swallow ("Forse, come la rondine"), she will fly to a sun-filled land of dreams and love. Her fate draws her on, but destiny has two faces--one smiling and one anguished.

Rambaldo approaches the poet and asks him where Ruggero should spend his first night in Paris. Much to his consternation, Lisette once again interrupts Prunier with her opinions. In a brief but lively ensemble, the maid and Magda's friends persuade Ruggero to go to the Cafe Bullier, where he will surely find love. This talk of love drives Rambaldo away, and the other guests take their leave as well.

Magda, alone for a moment, muses over Prunier's prophecy, and decides to go to Bullier herself. As the 'demimondaine' retires to her bedroom, Lisette comes into the room carrying an extravagant hat and cape. Prunier sneaks in and meets her, and the two sing an amusing but tender duet, "T'amo! Mentì!" (I love you! You're lying!). Lisette forces the poet to admit that he loves her in spite of himself. He says that she must change her atrocious attire, however, or he will not be seen with her. She obliges him, and they leave quietly. Magda returns; she is dressed in the simple clothes of a grisette and has redone her hair so she will not be recognized. She gazes at herself in the mirror and, satisfied that no one will know her, leaves as the curtain falls.

Act II The Cafe Bullier, later that night

Bullier is bustling with activity, crowded with students, artists, grisettes, and 'demimondaines.' The nightclub is at its peak, full of people eating, drinking, dancing, and flirting as flower vendors and other peddlers sell their wares. In the midst of all the noise and confusion Ruggero sits alone. A group of grisettes approaches him and tries to entice him to join them, but he resists. Magda enters in her disguise and is immediately besieged by several young men who want to be her escort. In order to escape their attentions, she tells them that she is meeting someone; assuming that her rendezvous is with the young man who is sitting by himself, the students lead her to the surprised Ruggero and then leave the two alone.

In a dialogue beginning with the word "Scusatemi" (Excuse me), Magda apologizes for intruding and says she will leave as soon as the students are out of sight. Ruggero, not recognizing her as his hostess from earlier that evening, urges her to stay. He finds her different from all the other women at the cafe. "You remind me of the girls I knew at home," he says, "so timid and shy." Ruggero asks her to dance and they begin a delicate duet, "Nella dolce carezza della danza" (In the sweet caress of the dance). As the two move to the dance floor, the onlookers take up their melody and the crowd begins a waltz.

Prunier and Lisette enter as the dance nears its end. The poet blusters about Lisette's behavior, but she tells him that he must not be too upset if she flirts with others. He huffily replies that he is only trying to improve her, but she says that he is too demanding. Magda and Ruggero return to their table, warm and tired from dancing, yet full of happiness. As Ruggero orders drinks, Magda is reminded of her adventure long ago at Bullier. She dreams out loud, and the music recalls her Act I aria about the nightclub. Ruggero begins to speak of love, but he realizes that he does not know his companion's name. She writes it on the table top; 'Paulette,' he reads, and signs his next to hers. 'Paulette' begins a touching duet, "Perche mai cercate di saper?" (Why do you seek to know?), in which she says that Ruggero should not try to uncover her mystery, but should accept the destiny that brought them together. He tells her that, though he does not know who she is, his heart has been waiting for her. The music swells passionately as the lovers kiss. They are interrupted by Prunier and Lisette; the maid cries out as she recognizes her mistress. Prunier, quickly sizing up the situation, attempts to persuade Lisette that she is mistaken and asks Ruggero to introduce his lady friend. The young man does so, adding that, as predicted, he has found love at Bullier, for it was here that he met 'Paulette.' Lisette is finally convinced that this is not her mistress after all, and she and the poet join the other couple. After the four drink to love, Ruggero proposes a toast to 'Paulette.' With the words "Bevo al tuo fresco sorriso" (I drink to your ravishing smile), he salutes the woman who has won his heart. A magnificent ensemble ensues as, one by one, the others join in, each speaking of love and the happiness it brings. Magda says that her dream has come true; there could be no greater joy than this moment. "This moment will never die," exclaims Ruggero, "it is only the beginning of a future filled with love." Lisette tells Prunier to speak beautiful words of love to her so that she can compose her own poetry. The poet obliges by saying that her every kiss is a stanza, every glance a flowing rhyme. These passionate declarations of love are overheard by the crowd, which joins in and showers the lovers with flowers.

Their happiness is shattered by Rambaldo's arrival at the cafe. Prunier sees him enter and sends Lisette and Ruggero off on a pretext. Rambaldo, having observed Magda with Ruggero, approaches and confronts his mistress. He waves aside Prunier and asks Magda for an explanation of her behavior. She says that there is nothing to explain and tells Rambaldo that he does not understand what it is to thirst for love and find it; they must part so that she can follow her destiny. Stunned, Rambaldo departs, telling Magda that she may regret her actions. Alone and exhausted by her ordeal, Magda collapses into a chair and ponders her fate as dawn breaks. From the street outside comes a song, "Nella trepida luce d'un mattin" (In the pallid light of the morn), warning of the fleeting nature of love. Ruggero returns and gently tells Magda that it is time to go. She hesitates a moment, then, recovering her energy, embraces him. She is afraid, she says, yet happy, for her dream has come true. The two pledge their love as the curtain falls.

Act III Outside Magda and Ruggero's villa near Nice on the Cote d'Azur, several weeks later. As the act begins, Magda and Ruggero are listening to the sea and enjoying the afternoon sun outside their hideaway. They sing a waltz, "So l'arte strana" (I know a strange art), about their love and their happy life. Ruggero tells Magda that they have run out of money, so he has written to his family for aid. He has another surprise for her, as well--he has asked for their consent to marry. Magda is shocked, for Ruggero has never learned of her past and she is certain that his parents would not approve of their union. Barely able to speak, she tells Ruggero that his proposal is so sudden that she does not know what to think. He replies in a tender aria, "Dimmi che vuoi seguirmi" (Tell me you want to follow me), saying that he hopes she will go with him to his home. There they will be protected from all pain and anguish, and may one day have a child. With these words, Ruggero leaves. Beset with confusion, Magda struggles with herself and finally decides to reveal her past to Ruggero. Overcome with grief, she goes into the villa.

Lisette and Prunier are heard from a distance, searching for the hideaway. They enter, engaged in one of their typical quarrels. With Prunier's encouragement, Lisette tried a career as an actress, but her debut the previous night was a terrible fiasco. The former maid, the jeers still ringing in her ears, shrieks in terror, afraid that her angry audience is following her. Prunier tells her to stop raving; he will help her to secure her old position. Magda, summoned by the major-domo, returns, delighted to see her old friends from Paris. She readily accepts Lisette back as her maid, and the ex-actress hurries off to find her uniform. Prunier, alone with Magda, remarks that Lisette will be happy now that she has faced reality and abandoned her illusions; perhaps Magda should do the same and return to Paris and the one who waits for her there. Magda, tortured by Prunier's words, bids him stop speaking. Lisette reappears, and the poet says he will not see her again. Before he takes his leave, however, he makes a date with her for later that evening.

Ruggero enters in excitement, carrying a letter from his mother. Stunned, Magda asks him its contents. He makes her read it aloud, and she begins the touching aria, "Figliuolo, tu mi dici" (My child, you have told me). Magda, deeply moved by the words of Ruggero's mother, can scarcely finish the letter in which the older woman speaks of the sanctity of motherhood, her joy at Ruggero's prospective marriage, and the blessing she will bestow upon his wife if she be pure and virtuous. "Kiss her for me," the letter ends. As Ruggero leans over to do so, Magda can bear her secret no longer. She tells the stunned young man that she cannot marry him because of her past. "Who are you? What have you done?" cries Ruggero in a passionate outburst. The woman replies that she can no longer deceive him--she has sold her love for money and can never be the wife his mother expects. He has given her a treasure with his love, she says, but she must leave him. Ruggero pleads desperately with Magda, asking her "Ma come puoi lasciarmi?" (But how can you desert me?). She tells him not to despair; she will always love him but it is her destiny to fly away like the swallow. Bidding him a tender farewell, she says that the pain of parting will be with her forever. Ruggero sobs helplessly amid the shadows of the evening and the sounds of distant bells as the curtain falls.