

TRADITION AND INNOVATION IN WORKS DEDICATED TO THE STRING QUARTET BY GIACOMO PUCCINI

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SUMMARY. Despite the fact that Italian music is most often associated with opera, and chamber music did not have such a strong tradition in Italy, nonetheless opera composers of the 19th and early 20th centuries have contributed to the repertoire of chamber ensembles with complex and unique compositions. The uniqueness and novelty of these works represents a genuine challenge for chamber ensembles, because these compositions were conceived in an orchestral manner (the orchestral apparatus, similar to the chorus, represents and active character within the unfolding of an opera, often calling for a full part of first violins, second violin, viola, or cello, not just a single instrument), or in a manner that resembles the vocal line. The desire of every instrument player is to imitate the human voice, especially within the works of those composers whose music is meant to emphasize the meaning of the words. The instrumental chamber compositions of Giacomo Puccini, *Crisantemi*, *3 Minuetti*, and his *String quartet* mirror the particularities of his operatic works. The current study aims to present the distinctive elements of the *3 Minuetti* and the instrumental prelude for string quartet *Crisantemi*, highlighting those aspects that endow the genres with novel features.

Keywords: Giacomo Puccini, Minuet, dynamics, tempo

Introduction

In the 19th century and early 20th century, Italian opera composers had a sporadic, but discreet contribution to the repertoire dedicated for the string quartet. The *6 sonate a quattro* composed by Gioachino Rossini and the 18 quartets by Gaetano Donizetti paved the way for the great Giuseppe Verdi,

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who composed his only quartet towards the end of his life, the sole work belonging to the sphere of lyrical compositions that would have a major impact on the repertoire dedicated to the string quartet. The *String Quartet in E minor* was composed in 1873, shortly after the completion of the opera *Aida*. After the work was published by Ricordi in 1876, the public premiere took place in Milan.

After almost two decades, in 1890, Giacomo Puccini dedicated one of his compositions to the string quartet. The elegy for string quartet, *Crisantemi* is often encountered in the repertoire of string quartets, as well as in that of chamber orchestras. Among the chamber compositions of Puccini, the *Tre Minuetti* must also be mentioned, edited by the Ricordi Publishing House in 1901, as well as his last composition, the *String Quartet in D Major*, discovered and revised by the Ricordi experts, and finally published in 2001.

3 Minuetti (1884)

The three minuets for string quartet have initially been published together with the version for four hand piano, in November/December 1884, by the small Milanese publishing house of Pigna. The Parisian Heugel edition contains only two of the three minuets, the first and the last. In 1901 Ricordi published these same two minuets, intentionally omitting the second one, owing to the fact that the first measures have been identically incorporated by the composer in his opera *Manon Lescaut*. Once his artistic personality was established, Puccini was able and could afford to reuse and process motifs from his early works, transforming these into complex and profound themes within his important operas. The minuets became known to the public due to their transcription for piano four hands, this version being easier to perform than the original one for string quartet.

These works can be considered lightly stylized divertissements, that aim to reconstruct the style of the 18th century in a manner full of imagination. The novel approach to classical compositional elements is also reflected in the dance lessons within the opera *Manon Lescaut*, or later in the gavotte from the opera *Tosca*, for example.

The three minuets are dedicated to important personalities from the region of Lucca, the birthplace of Puccini:

1. To her Majesty, Vittoria Augusta di Borbone, Princess of Capua;
2. To the eminent violinist and teacher Augusto Michelangeli;
3. To his friend, Maestro Carlo Carignani, the colleague who completed the voice and piano reduction of almost every opera by Puccini.

Even though the precise time when these works were composed is not known, it is highly probable that the 3 *Minuetti* could have been composed in the region of Lucca, around 1880, as proven by the precise information regarding the dedications that accompany the works, as well as the news concerning the performance of a minuet, perhaps one among the three, in 1881. On 18 September 1881 a concert was organized by the Società Orchestrale Boccherini, which opened with the *Coriolan Overture* by Beethoven, while the central piece of the performance, framed by two opera arias, was a minuet by Puccini. It is clear that this work must be understood as Puccini's tribute to his illustrious compatriot Luigi Boccherini and his famous minuet from the *String Quintet in A Major*, Op. 13, No.5.

According to the dictionary of musical forms and genres, the minuet is a dance of French origin, which was performed with small steps (*pas menus*).² Gradually, the dance was introduced in operas and ballets (Rameau and Gluck), as well as in the suites of Baroque dances (Bach and Händel), then later as the third part of symphonies (Haydn and Mozart), finally being replaced by the *scherzo* in the symphonies of Beethoven. Throughout history, the structure of the minuet was altered. Initially, the minuet was in simple binary form, but gradually the second section was expanded, leading to the augmentation of the form to compound ternary. The second (or middle) minuet was endowed with contrasting features, in several directions:

1. Change of key:
The first minuet in Major key;
The second minuet in the homonymous minor key, in the key to the subdominant, or the relative minor key.
2. Change of themes:
The second minuet is governed by a new musical idea, often related to the first version, a role similar to that of the *double*.
According to these, the scheme of Puccini's 3 *Minuetti* is the following:

E.g. 1

	A	B (trio)	A
Minuetto 1	A Major	D Major	A Major
Minuetto 2	A Major	D Major	A Major
Minuetto 3	A Major	D Major	A Major

The key changes in Puccini's 3 *Minuetti*

² Bughici, Dumitru. *Dicționar de forme și genuri muzicale* (Dictionary of Musical Forms and Genres), Editura Muzicală a Uniunii Compozitorilor, București 1978, p. 182.

Dynamics and tempo indications as means of stylizing the *Minuetti*

Regarding the **dynamics**, the first and second minuet evoke the atmosphere of refined dance, emphasised by the composer's indication – *piano*. The instances are quite rare when a composition lacks indications regarding dynamics from its first bars, but the third minuet is one of these cases. The possibility of an editing mistake cannot be ruled out, although the Ricordi publishing house respected the manuscripts by consulting specialists in the field for the revision of the scores. The composer's handwriting was difficult to decipher and Romanian musicologist George Sbârcea considered that Puccini suffered throughout his life owing to his disorderly writing.³

The lack of dynamic indications may also be attributed to the young composer's lack of experience. Within the third minuet, up until the trio, there are no marks in this sense. The trio, however, is endowed with a particular expression, which places it outside the classical minuet. The trio encountered here is stylized, with emphasis placed on the syncopated rhythm (employed in almost every measure) through precise marks (accents).

The evolution of the Puccinian minuet in its three phases may be observed by following the terminology regarding **tempo**: from the classical dance presented in a moderate movement, to the minuet performed at a much faster tempo. The minuet composed for choreographic performances is played at a slower tempo than the purely instrumental minuet. Thus, Giacomo Puccini traces the evolution of the dance in just three works.

The first minuet lacks any other *tempo* indications, apart from a natural *rallentando* that occurs in the trio, prior to the return of the main theme. This first minuet was dedicated to Her Highness, Vittoria Augusta di Borbone, Princess of Capua. This could explain why the work fulfils the requirements of a classical minuet, composed for royal courts. It has the tempo of a social dance, beginning with a "reverence" from the two violins, suggestively realized through the short ascending melodic motion and a longer melodic descent (E.g. 2). It is also the only minuet in which Puccini employs the *trill*.

³ Sbârcea George, *Puccini, viața și opera* (Puccini, Life and Works), Editura Muzicală a Uniunii Compozitorilor 1966, p. 18.

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E.g. 2

Minuetto n. 1 *A S.A.R. Vittoria Augusta di Borbone
Principessa di Capua*



Violino I. *MODERATO*
Violino II.
Viola
Violoncello

Giacomo Puccini: 3 Minuetti. Minuetto n. 1 (bars 1-4): the “reverence” of the two violins, suggesting the elegant movement of the classical minuet

The second minuet is dedicated to the distinguished violinist Augusto Michelangeli and is intended to be performed at a higher dynamic level compared to the first minuet. The sheer association of the renowned violinist's name with a lively tempo outlines the image of a work of virtuosity. There are several indications related to the violin technique, for both the left hand and the right hand, which leads to the conclusion that Michelangeli not only received a dedicated work but also contributed to its composition (E.g. 3).

E.g. 3

Minuetto n. 2 *All'esimio violinista prof. Augusto Michelangeli*



Violino I. *ALLEGRETTO*
Violino II.
Viola
Violoncello

Giacomo Puccini: 3 Minuetti. Minuetto n. 2 (bars 1-2)

The final minuet is dedicated to Carlo Carignani, composer and conductor, who made the reduction of all Puccini's operas, from *Edgar* in 1889, to the *Il Trittico* in 1919. This minuet associates in a less common manner two expressive marks regarding tempo, *Assai* and *Mosso*, which place the work much closer to the ideas of the Italian *verismo*, embodied by Puccini's works (E.g. 4).

The term *Assai* is used to alter the tempo of a composition, while *Mosso* means movement, agitation. These two terms, placed side by side, suggest a very lively tempo. *Risoluto*, a term meaning determination and boldness, completes the already established flowing character of the work, which is naturally present in Puccini's creation. This last minuet is placed under the sign of boldness, breaking the mold of the classical genre: the boldness of stylizing a classical form, making it contemporary, and transposing into the present an instrumental musical genre that was born in an era of sobriety.

E.g. 4

Minuetto n. 3 *All'amico maestro Carlo Carignani*

ASSAI MOSO

The image shows a musical score for 'Minuetto n. 3' by Giacomo Puccini. The score is for a string quartet, with parts for Violino I, Violino II, Viola, and Violoncello. The key signature is two sharps (D major), and the time signature is 3/4. The tempo marking 'ASSAI MOSO' is written above the first staff. The score includes various musical notations such as notes, rests, and dynamic markings.

Giacomo Puccini: 3 Minuetti. Minuetto n. 3 (bars 1-4)

***Crisantemi*, Instrumental Prelude for String Quartet (1890)**

The **elegy** (a word of Greek origin, meaning *mourning*) is a poem in which feelings of sadness are expressed, ranging from melancholy to pain. According to Bughici, in his dictionary of musical forms, the elegy is a musical composition, either vocal or instrumental, with piano accompaniment, that conveys a feeling of pain or sadness. The elegy does not have a fixed form,

with composers adopting various structures depending on the expression and musical development; however, most often, the *lied form* is preferred.⁴

Crisantemi and the 3 *Minuetti* were composed during the early period of Puccini's creation and are among his first published works (Giulio Ricordi published the work in 1890, the year of its composition). The prelude *Crisantemi* is a musical elegy for strings composed in 1890, in memory of Amadeo di Savoya. Puccini sent a letter to his brother, Michele, in which he wrote about *Crisantemi*, referring to the work as a composition for string quartet that was performed with great success at the Milan Conservatory and in Brescia.

Crisantemi is a composition that did not remain a simple manuscript but found its way into the repertoire of chamber ensembles (in its original form), but also in the repertoire of chamber orchestras (in its transcribed form). The work was written in only one night, as tribute to his good friend, Amadeo I, duke of Spain. Chrysanthemums are flowers associated with the funeral rite, which explains Puccini's choice for the title.

The elegy does not have a fixed form, and it can easily be adapted to the requirements of expression and musical development. However, most often the work will be structured according to one of the *lied forms*, as is the case with the present composition. Puccini's *Crisantemi* is constructed according to the simple three-part *lied form*, ABA.

Puccini's elegy is a single-movement work, resembling a sigh composed in a minor key, characterized by a constant search for chromaticism. With the composition of this elegy Puccini established his own harmonic and expressive parameters, thus becoming a unique entity that is easily recognizable, but hard to match. The two themes of *Crisantemi* were the source of inspiration for the opera *Manon Lescaut*, begun in the same year 1890 and first performed in 1893 (rightfully dethroning the opera bearing the same name by Massenet).

At that time, Puccini had not yet won over the audience, accusations regarding his lack of originality hovering over each new work he presented. As for *Manon Lescaut*, he could have been even more susceptible to criticism, not only because of the thematic material employed, but also because of the opera's title.

Crisantemi can be considered an interlude of the opera, the thematic material employed by Puccini describing the death of Manon at the end of the work. Wagner's influence of Puccini's instrumental writing makes *Crisantemi* a genuine exercise in chromatic technique, a work of great maturity within the genre of chamber music.

⁴ Bughici, Dumitru. *Op. Cit.*, 1978, p. 102.

The *Intermezzo* between the two acts of the opera *Le Villi*, in which the thematic development represents one of the most important elements, proves Puccini's inclination towards symphonism, which lead the experienced Verdi to state as early as 1884 that Puccini's melody differs both from the old and new styles. Because symphonic elements predominate, great care must be taken to avoid falling into the trap of composing symphonic fragments for the sheer pleasure of making the orchestra sound. Four decades later, the conductor Arturo Toscanini took part in a study conducted by a music magazine, that aimed to identify the best contemporary Italian symphonists. The results revealed that Puccini was placed in the top ranks, had he not exclusively dedicated himself to musical theater. However, Puccini heeded Verdi's advice and attributed to the instruments the role of completing those features that were not sufficiently outlined in the vocal line.

Aspects Regarding the Performance of *Crisantemi*

Puccini's approach when composing this chamber work, dedicated to the four stringed instruments of the quartet, transforms the elegy into an intimate artistic performance. Nonetheless, the characteristics of Puccini's operatic music, where the word is paramount and the instruments complete the featured not thoroughly outlined by the vocal melody, are present from the first note to the final breath of the composition (represented by the fermata placed at the end) – E.g. 5.

E.g. 5

Crisantemi Giacomo Puccini (1858-1924)

The musical score for 'Crisantemi' is written for a string quartet (Violin I, Violin II, Viola, and Cello). The tempo is marked 'Andante Mesto' and the key signature has two sharps (D major). The score begins with a rest for the first measure, followed by a series of eighth and sixteenth notes. Dynamics include 'pp dolce' and 'rit.' (ritardando). The score ends with a fermata over the final note.

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Giacomo Puccini: *Crisantemi* SC 65. Bars 1-5 (first) and 94-99 (final)

In each of the initial measures of the work the presence of syncopations or an anacrusis can be observed. The symmetrical syncopation on the beat in the line of the cello evokes the motif of existence of this elegy. The term *syncopation* carries the same connotations of restlessness and uncertainty, both in music and literature. A single repeated note, a low note, clearly attributed to the cello, uttered in a faint voice (*pp* with diminuendo) and in emotional imbalance (represented by the syncopation), suggest the utterance “*He is dead!*” (E.g.5).

Verdi's advice, of assigning the instruments the role of completing the features of the vocal melody, is clearly outlined in the opening bars of the present work. The soloist's voice is represented by the cello, whose melody is later taken up (in terms of the intervention of the other voices before the cello's quarter note on the first beat of the second measure has ended) and developed by the orchestra, represented by the two violins and viola.

This elliptical intervention on part of a stressed beat combines with the syncopation to create auditory images of imbalance. There are isorhythmic laments in an ascending chromatic progression expressed in a faint nuance of piano dolce, which demand the return of time, even if just for a moment, through a *ritardando* (slowing of the tempo) at the end of the second bar (E.g.5). Harmonically, one can observe uncertainty; the work does not begin with the tonic function, but with the dominant function, creating suspense in the first two measures, which will be resolved by the cello in the third measure, inevitably descending to solve the tension of the dominant.

From an **agogic** perspective, the second bar has an uncertain tempo. Normally, before a *ritardando*, if it is not encountered at the end of a phrase, there should exist an *accelerando* to maintain the general tempo consistently. Thus, in the first bar, the tempo cannot be detected with certainty; however, the second bar (in its first half) requires an acceleration of the eighth notes for the *ritardando* in the last beat of the measure to set the tempo for the third

measure and the entire work. The dynamic and agogic changes are subtly made; the elegy is not characterized by extreme changes in tempo or nuances. *Ritardando*, according to the *Dictionary of Musical Terms*, represents a slowing down after an accelerando, as previously explained. On the other hand, *rallentando*, a term found in bar 7, will gradually slow down the musical discourse, but starting from the base tempo (E.g. 6).

E.g. 6



Giacomo Puccini: *Crisantemi* SC 65 (Bars 6-10)

The elegy is a work from the early period of Puccini's creation, when the composer allowed himself to be carried away by the orchestra's possibilities; however, the human voices were always present in the composer's mind. *Manon Lescaut* is the only opera that "*never caused him any sorrow*", as Puccini himself claimed. It is the opera in which, even though the score indicates sung notes in the third act, the characters speak with a more impressive naturalness than in any aria. The traditional *recitativo secco* of the Italian melodrama gives way here definitively to the puccinian *parlando*.

As a violinist passionate about opera, the author of the current study recognized in *Elegy* several moments that the composer would certainly have written as *parlando*, if this work had been intended for lyric artists. Moreover, the endeavor to imitate the human voice is essential in order to achieve the most faithful rendition of the musical intentions conveyed by the composer. Giacomo Puccini perfectly combines what Giuseppe Verdi and Richard Wagner constructed before him — Italian melodicism and instrumental technique — which makes him equally a fine connoisseur of both voices and instruments. The moments of *instrumental parlando*, easily recognizable in bar 5, in the lines of the first violin and viola, are marked by the composer with *detache lines* under *legato* (E.g. 5). The vocal intention is very well translated instrumentally through the punctuation marks.

In other chamber works by Puccini, musical terms referring to affect are used, such as *affrettando*, *trattenuto*, and *andante mesto*. These terms are less commonly encountered in instrumental scores. Giacomo Puccini writes a similar term, *un poco affrettando*, in bar 21, followed by *allargando* and *sostenuto*, which are specific indications for instrumental scores. *Affrettando* falls under agogic terms, indicating an acceleration of the tempo; however, the purpose of this acceleration at the climax of section A is not just the increase in tempo, but the conveying of a specific feeling, which, evidently, is communicated through the alteration of the tempo. It must be emphasized that it is not the correct execution of these indications that must come first, but rather the key is to understand the musical text and translate this into images and emotional states. The notations can serve as guides, but once the musical message is perceived, they should be executed intuitively.

The two terms, *affrettando* and *allargando*, lead to the first dynamic indications of *f* and *ff*, which are used within the same bar (bar 24). This is the only moment in the entire work (except for the return of section A) that is marked with *f* and *ff*. Puccini marks *sostenuto* to maintain the dramatism of the climax (E.g. 7).

E.g. 7

Giacomo Puccini: *Crisantemi* SC 65 (Bars 19-31)

To the previously discussed term *parlando*, very well transposed instrumentally, Puccini now adds the declamatory moment. Bar 23 (E.g. 7) perfectly demonstrates this technique through:

- rhythmic unison, with a syncopated rhythm and accentuation of the eighth notes, using both the symbol and the term *crescendo*;
- the dynamic palette starts from *p* and reaches *f*;
- the use of *allargando*.

Parlando and *declamation* are exemplified in both the A and B sections:

- *parlando* in section A, bar 5, first violin – second beat, viola – fourth beat; bar 11, second violin (E.g. 5).
- *parlando* in section B, bar 37-28 (E.g. 8)
- *declamation* in the A section, bar 23, unison (E.g. 7).

E.g. 8



Giacomo Puccini: *Crisantemi* SC 65. Bars 36-40

Conclusions

Giacomo Puccini dares to approach the classical minuet through the lens of the conceptions of the Italian *verismo*, promising its liberation from the boundaries of the classical tradition and making it contemporary even in the 1900's. However, the greatest act of boldness is represented by the fact that Puccini approached the genre of the string quartet at a time when Italy refrained from encouraging the composition of chamber music, as it was more focused on the operatic stage. Giacomo Puccini concludes the list of Italian opera composers who had the curiosity to explore the genre of chamber music.

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