

Life Through Tears and Laughter: Suor Angelica and Gianni Schicchi

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Giacomo Puccini's one-act operas *Gianni Schicchi* and *Suor Angelica* could hardly seem more different. The first is the composer's only comic opera, while the second is an exploration of despair and salvation. Yet in both we see not only Puccini's mastery of music and emotion but also his innate sense of theatre: both works are intimate, focused, condensed and profoundly human, and both unroll in real time as we watch.

Together with the sober *Il Tabarro*, they form *Il Trittico*, three one-act operas which debuted together in December 1918, soon after the dark days of World War I. They debuted, interestingly enough, not in Puccini's native Italy, but at the Metropolitan Opera in New York. In these shorter works, Puccini's eschewed the overseas musical exoticism found in certain passages of his previous *Madama Butterfly* and *La Fanciulla del West*; *Gianni Schicchi* and *Suor Angelica* in particular are set back in Italy.

Of the three, *Gianni Schicchi* was the immediate hit. It tells a Florentine story, just hinted at in Dante Alighieri's *La Divina Commedia*, of the eponymous clever conman of lower class origins who engages in will-tampering and exploits family greed to line his own pockets. But *Gianni Schicchi* is also a story of young love. Lauretta's aria *O mio babbino caro*, in which she pleads for her father's help with the will so that her fiancé Rinuccio can afford to marry her, is one of Italian opera's most recognisable, not least because it features as background music in several Hong Kong television advertisements for luxury goods! (The aria admittedly does mention shopping.)

In *Suor Angelica*, Puccini returns to one of the underlying themes of *Madama Butterfly* - the anguish of a young mother forced to give up her child. The opera takes place in a convent, with music masterfully evoking everything from bells to birds. Angelica's calm demeanour belies a heart-wrenching secret: an illegitimate child torn from her at birth. After seven years as a nun, she receives her first visit from her Aunt the *principessa*, who forces her to sign away her inheritance in favour of her younger sister who is going about these things properly by getting married first. When no news of her child is forthcoming, Angelica insists. The *principessa* brusquely announces that he died: He fell ill. They did what they could.

Suor Angelica, composed for female voices alone, also contains a memorable aria, "*Senza mamma*", where Angelica sings to her lost son who died alone without his mother. While not as well-known as Lauretta's aria in *Gianni Schicchi*, it is, in context, compelling and just as unforgettable. In her despair, Angelica turns to her flowers, previously deployed for healing, to concoct a poison to allow her join her son. Suicide, she remembers in a moment of lucidity, is a mortal sin. Her pleas for forgiveness, ignored by those on Earth who should heed them, are — we are led to hope — heard in Heaven. Her name, Angelica, is not perhaps a coincidence.

Both works share an affinity for quaint daily details, from feeding breadcrumbs to the birds to the joy of eating fresh fruit. Both feature secondary characters of great personality and charm. And both are about discovering our basic humanity in the face of spite and prejudice: one succeeds in laughter and punishment, the other with tears and salvation.