

## NESSUN DORMA - Ode to Giacomo Puccini

by Carla Regina

1) SOLO piano I crisantemi



In Italy, chrysanthemums are the flowers of the dead. The

flowers, i Fiori ....., which are brought to the graves when visiting loved ones. At Giacomo's funeral they played exactly this composition of his: 'I crisantemi'.

When Giacomo and I met, it was love at first sight. But I was married, and I feared the scandal, the shame for my children.

So I became his girlfriend, his confidante.

Giacomo loved to write; about 10,000 letters have been written and received... A real graphomania! ...and 700 of these for me.

"No Sleep" Nessun Dorma! No one sleeps! Says Calaf in Turandot.

And this insomnia hasn't left me since the day of his death. I got to know Giacomo well and I remember everything as if it were yesterday.

I'll tell you about Giacomo, the Giacomo I knew.

But, oh how embarrassing..... Let me first introduce myself. I am Sybil Seligman, his girlfriend, his confidante and, for a brief, intense moment, his mistress.

Giacomo was born in Lucca, in 1858, into a family of four generations of composers. He wasn't doing well at school. Laughing, he told me how his uncle kicked him in the shins and said, "Accidenti, you're a talentless weakling!"

But that turned out very differently.

*"Summarizing my life? I wouldn't know how to start! I will only tell you that I felt blocked with music, but when I heard Aida in Pisa at the age of 17, I felt the musical door open. I went to the conservatory in Milan and got a place.*

*My poor mother – with her prayers and her constant attention to me – put me under pressure and made me finish my first work: Lé Villí!"*

Some friends managed to organize a first performance and so Giulio Ricordi, the most important Italian music publisher, included it in his catalog. The year was 1884.

## **2) "Nel villaggio d'Edgar" Edgar**

Commissioned by Ricordi, Giacomo worked for a very long time on his next opera: Edgar... No less than 4 years! He told me several times that it was a mess. The work ended up being a failure. That sometimes happens to artists.

Then Giacomo has another great passion, women, and that also had its influence. Yes. Since his adolescence, he was attracted to women, and throughout his life he had close girlfriends and mistresses who greatly influenced his mood and mind. The ladies did not let themselves go unnoticed 😊 either.

But let's not digress.

During Edgar's composition, there was both the sad event of his mother's death, and his meeting with Elvira.

Ah, Elvira Bonturi Gemignani.

Married with two children, she took piano lessons with Giacomo, so profound that...she became pregnant.

When her "belly" can no longer remain hidden, she runs off with him, takes her daughter with her and leaves behind a newborn child. She gives up a quiet life as a rich lady to become the irregular companion of a penniless artist.

Giacomo still doesn't earn enough to support her, her children, and their (illegitimate) son, so Elvira has to resort to the charity of her relatives.

It's clear from the start that Elvira is strong and passionate, but also devastating in her jealousy.

Despite the escapades, the love correspondence with Córi the Piemontése (even a minor), the jealous scenes of Elvira, the two love each other with an intense, but also very toxic passion.

### **3) Che gelida manina      La Boheme**

Because....

What does he do once he achieves economic security thanks to the success of Manon Lescaut? As soon as Elvira becomes a widow? He marries her!

### **4) "O soave fanciulla".      La Boheme**

Giacomo couldn't talk to Elvira about music, or about travel, or about opera subjects. And that's why I was there. Sybil Seligman, née Beddington, wealthy heiress, amateur singer, pupil of Francesco Paolo Tosti and girlfriend of Marcel Proust. In love with Italy and the Italian which I spoke fluently. I lived a rich, free, and carefree life with my husband, my children, and my friends, including Giacomo.

With winters in Nice, summers in St. Moritz, my birthday of course in Monte Carlo and opera in London.

*"I'm leaving for Torre del Lago tonight. These days will always be unforgettable for me! So I remember everything: the sweetness of your character, the walks in the park, the melody of your voice, and your radiant beauty."*

Thus began an almost daily correspondence. He wrote me very intimate things; his state of mind and his unhappy family situation.

*"Elvira's jealousy knows no bounds. She is perfectly capable of conducting an investigation and hiring spies and informants. She found a note from the soprano Cavaliere in the inner ribbon of my top hat after fruitlessly inspecting the pockets, linings, and even the cuffs of my pants. Imagine! She's crazy!*

*Yesterday I found her in the garden in the evening dressed as a man (!) with her huge umbrella to see if a young woman would come by and beat me up!*

*She's my police officer."*

The angry princess who became Turandot.

## **5) Tu che di gel sei cinta Turandot**

In 1903, Giacomo had an accident with his latest fast car and in his confusion he fell in love with a young and very beautiful girl: Dória Manfrédi.

Meanwhile, Elvira's disgust with him and his stories grows. She accuses her husband of paying too much attention to the girl.

Because of the far-reaching slander that Elvira throws about her, the girl eventually commits suicide.

Elvira has to flee to Milan; in Torre del Lago they are so furious that they can lynch her.

For Giacomo, it's the collapse. He writes:

*"I can't work anymore! I'm so discouraged! My nights are horrible [...] I always have the vision of that poor victim in front of my eyes, I can't get it out of my mind – it's a constant torment It's the end of my family, the end of Torre del Lago, the end of everything".*

Íllica, his librettist, advises him:

*"Giacomo, take the first steamer from Genoa to America, declare that you are going to inquire on the spot for the Fanciulla del West, and disappear. Finally leave Elvira to her fate!"*

But Giacomo, no, that's not how he was made.

He wanted to redeem Elvira, not turn her into an evil princess Turandot.

He therefore pays a huge amount of money to Elvira's relatives and isolates himself with the music.

Dória will be a source of inspiration for the composition of the central work of his

Trittico:

Suor Angèlica.

## **6) Senza Mamma**

## **Sour Angelica**

After a few months, Elvira returns to Torre del Lago and everything seems as before. Giacomo loves Torre del Lago immensely, but Elvira hates the villa and the city. She becomes unkempt in her clothes and her appearance and no longer keeps up with her husband's musical and artistic life. In fact, she doesn't care anymore.

And so Giacomo begins to travel. Il Trittico, La Rondine, Tosca are on a bill in several cities around the world at the same time.

New York, London, Vienna....his fame explodes. Giacomo was an international star at the time.

I accompanied him on evenings in London at Covent Garden, where his works triumphed, and I saw him, regal as a peacock, ever richer, more fascinating, more elegant and more refined. My friend Alma Mahler, who knows all about it when it

comes to men, said that Puccini was one of the most beautiful men she had ever seen.

It was true. But deep down... so tormented.

He left and wrote to me:

*"You know, I have the great misfortune of being too sensitive and I also suffer from the fact that many misunderstand me and that almost no one seems to be able to really comprehend my work. But.... If I'm not allowed to be in love, then life ends for me."*

## **7) "Vogliatemi bene"      Madama Butterfly**

For the truth was this: in order to write beautiful music, he had to be in love and constantly experience that sense of pleasure, optimism, emotional tension and rapture that comes from love.

Now... that list of women, with all due respect to Elvira and her bayonet umbrella. Rose Adler, the first Turandot.

Baroness Josephine von Stengel, who was even taken to the lion's den, to Torre del Lago!!

Fortunately, the war ruined all plans for this romantic get-together and Von Stengel returned to Switzerland.

Torre del Lago is increasingly becoming his retreat, while Elvira spends a lot of time in the Milan apartment.

Around the 'Doge', as Ricordi Giacomo used to be called, a circle of painters and non-artists from Livorno arose in Torre del Lago, who devoted themselves to art, fishing, card games, heavy wine drinking, abundant libations and hunting.

Giacomo doesn't have to lead a social life, here he has silence and space to live day and night.

Music that was welcomed by audiences all over the world.

This is where he has his friends, the Club La Boheme, inspired by his favorite creature, La Boheme. She was his ideal image of a woman, his favorite character, Mimi.

## **8) Sì, mi chiamano Mimì La Boheme**

In 1924 Giacomo worked on a new opera: Turandot. With difficulty because he has a swollen throat. Swallowing is difficult and he can't even close the collar of his shirt.

*"The doctor said radiation will cure me,"* he told me. But that wasn't true. The doctor called Antonio and told him the truth:

Giacomo had inoperable laryngeal cancer.

But Antonio, stubborn like his father, took him to Brussels to try everything.

*"I have high hopes for this trip. I have a suitcase full of notes about Turandot's final duet with me. It will be the triumph of love, victory over cruelty and death."*

They put a collarband full of radiation on him and he seemed to recover for a while. And then they tried an operation that turned out to be so invasive that he couldn't speak.

*"I'm serious! You can imagine my soul. (...) What a misery! Turandot? Meh! It pains me that I have not finished this work. Will I be cured? Will I be able to finish it in time?"*.

I have suffered for him.

He didn't know it, but he was dying.

I can still see it all in front of me, his fear, his enormous mood swings, those last sheets of music paper in his grasp. Turandot is present in his letters until the end: the women. His life.

In my head I hear the words of an aria from Tosca:

*"The hour has passed and I am dying in despair!*

*And I've never loved life so much. Loved life so much"*

## **9) E lucean le stelle**

## **Tosca**

A few days after the operation, Giacomo suffers a heart attack... and he is no longer with us.

It was November 29, 1924.

The news of his death immediately spread around the world, announced in the Senate, of which Giacomo Puccini had been senator for life for a few days.

Then the funeral with great pomp and circumstance: Turin, Milan. Churches and squares full of dignitaries and commoners, endless flags and crowns.

Finally, the final resting place: Torre del Lago. Without Elvira because she was sick. Here, too, a huge crowd, Mascagni on behalf of the government. The hunters and peasants of the village who had almost deluded themselves that "Sor Giacomo" could not die.

And me? I didn't attend his funeral. I stayed in my villa in Switzerland, alone with my pain, with our letters.



Only this aria kept me company, its perfection, its beauty. From his last complete work. His final applause Een paar dagen na de operatie krijgt Giacomo een hartaanval... en is hij niet meer onder ons.

Het was 29 november 1924.

### **10) O mio babbino caro      Gianni Schicchi**

You will want to know how many times I have visited his grave.      Never.

I will never visit Giacomo's grave in Torre del Lago. Why should I?

I got to know him well, Giacomo, and that's enough for me. "I lived for art, I lived for love" says Tosca Vissi d'Arte, vissi d'Amore...

This was Giacomo.

For me, he lives, he fills my last days through all these letters, 700 little compositions of love and friendship.

They will stay with me as long as I live and then they will disappear into oblivion, at the insistence of my children. For them, I finally gave up Giacomo, life itself.

Nessun dorma! No one sleeps!

The memories, no one can erase them.

They're mine.

And no one will ever be able to erase Giacomo's immortal music. It belongs to all of us.

*But my mystery is locked in me*

*No one will know my name.*

*Vanishing or night, setting or stars,*

*At dawn I will win.*

And he will surely be victorious!

### **11) Nessun dorma      Turandot**