

**Opera Previews, Fall, 2011:  
In Memoriam:  
Salvadore Ednard Panzeca**

**By  
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**This year, we are dedicating our Opera Previews to the memory of Sal Panzeca, beloved former President of the New Orleans Opera Association, and Chairman of the Advisory Board of the American-Italian Federation of the Southeast, who passed away on July 5.**

**The first opera to be performed this fall by the New Orleans Opera Association under the direction of Robert Lyall, Artistic Director, is “Turandot” by Giacomo Puccini, on October 15.**

**Puccini was born in Lucca, Italy to a long line of musical composers. After seeing Verdi’s “Aida” at the age of 17, he was determined to compose operas instead of organ and orchestral music. At the age of 18 he was admitted to the Conservatory of Milan and wrote two failed operas until “Manon Lescaut” in 1893. This was closely followed by “La Boheme” in 1896, “Tosca” in 1900, and “Madama Butterfly” in 1904. Having demonstrated almost an obsession for *verismo* style stories about flawed women (sick, insanely jealous,**

and/or innocently faithful), he became determined to seek even more exotic settings like the one in “The Girl of the Golden West” (*La fanciulla del West*) in 1910, about a young woman of the American frontier, who read the Bible to gold miners in her saloon but cheated at cards to save the life of her beloved. This was followed by “*La Rondine*” (*The Swallow*) in 1914, which never really rose to the level of popularity of his other operas. In 1918 he tried something different once again: three one act operas (*Il Trittico*) of which “*Gianni Schichi*” is perhaps the most memorable, with its gorgeous aria “*O mio babbino caro.*” [This was last performed in New Orleans in November of 2007.]

A heavy smoker, Puccini was diagnosed with throat cancer in 1923 while in the midst of creating his final, and some say, his best opera, musically and dramatically, “*Turandot*”. He never finished the last act but a young composer, Franco Alfano, was commissioned by the publisher to finish the last two scenes based on Puccini’s notes. Arturo Toscanini, who had earlier conducted the premier performances of *La Boheme* and *La fanciulla del West* at La Scala in Milan, decided to edit Alfano’s score himself, before performing it.

At the initial performance in 1926, two years after Puccini’s death, Toscanini stopped the orchestra where Puccini left off, saying “Here the Maestro lay down his pen,” and did not perform the ending he preferred until the following night. Today, that is the most widely used

ending for the opera, which Robert Lyall, Artistic Director of the New Orleans Opera, has concluded is best as well.

## **Turandot**

**This opera, set in ancient China, is an amazing story about a beautiful but dangerous (some might say “screwed up”) Princess who, in commemoration of an abused ancestor, is determined never to marry. She has devised a series of questions which she poses to each of her suitors as a test of their worthiness, reminiscent of the Riddle of the Sphinx from Greek mythology. If they fail to answer all three questions correctly, they are executed on the spot.**

**Prince Calaf, son of the blind Timur, deposed King of Tartary from central Asia, arrives in Peking in time to witness an unsuccessful contestant, the Prince of Persia, being led to his death. Nevertheless, upon seeing the beautiful Turandot, Calaf is determined to win her or die in the attempt. His father and his faithful slave girl, Liu`, do their best to dissuade him, but he rings the gong to announce his intention to join the competition without his father’s approval.**

**To everyone’s amazement, he answers all three questions correctly, but takes pity on the distraught Turandot and makes her a counter-offer. If she can**

**discover his name by sunrise, he will set her free of her oath and will submit to his own execution.**

**Immediately Turandot orders no one to sleep that night while her servants attempt to discover his identity. This gives rise to the most memorable aria of the Opera, “Nessun Dorma”, sung magnificently in past performances by Luciano Pavarotti.**

**Eventually Calaf’s two companions are seized, to be tortured until they reveal his name. But the faithful Liu`, determined to save both Calaf’s father and him, shouts out that she alone knows the Prince’s name, and after being brutally tortured, proclaims that his name is “Love!” and commits suicide.**

**To prevent further anguish, both to Turandot and to himself, Calaf embraces Turandot and whispers his name in her ear so that, if she still wishes to do so, she can condemn him to death. Instead, she realizes the unique character of the man before her, and sings triumphantly that his name is “Love,” and agrees to marry him.**

**If this story does not leave you breathless, nothing will. Nevertheless, the next Opera to be performed this Fall can’t help but come close.**

**Un Ballo in Maschera**  
**(A Masked Ball)**  
**By Giuseppe Verdi**

**Originally, this was to have been the re-telling of the story of Gustav III, King of Sweden, who was assassinated in 1792 at a Masked Ball. But so concerned were the censors of the major Opera Houses of Naples and Rome about the repercussions of depicting the assassination of a monarch in 19<sup>th</sup> century Italy, especially after the attempted assassination of Napoleon III in 1858, that Verdi was forced to change the venue as well as the names of the chief characters and the Opera itself, more than twice. In desperation, he moved the location out of Europe altogether and placed it in colonial Boston! So it should be no surprise at all that Robert Lyall, Artistic Director and Conductor of the New Orleans Opera Association, has decided to re-locate the opera to New Orleans during Mardi Gras for the two performances scheduled here on November 18<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> of this year.**

**Riccardo, the Provisional Political Leader of Louisiana in the 1890s, is making preparations for a huge ball to be held at his residence. Although much loved by the citizenry, in this period of political turmoil and intrigue, there is a conspiracy brewing among the landholders to retaliate against him for some of his decisions. When he sees the name of the beautiful Amelia on the invitation**

list he is filled with ecstasy, but is immediately embarrassed when his Creole political advisor and best friend, Amelia's husband Renato, appears to tell him about the conspiracy.

Meanwhile a judge demands the immediate banishment of a fortune teller, Ulrica, a local voodoo sorceress (like Marie Leveau) for practicing witchcraft. But when his trusted page, Oscar, begs that she be permitted to stay, Riccardo decides to see for himself the kinds of enchantments she practices. He disguises himself as a fisherman and urges several members of his court to meet him at Ulrica's residence.

When he arrives there he sees Amelia approach to consult Ulrica, so he hides himself and listens to their conversation. Amelia confesses that she is tormented by a guilty love and wishes to be cured of her obsession. Ulrica tells her to pick a certain herb at midnight that grows at a desolate frightening place in a nearby cemetery. Riccardo resolves to be present when she does so.

After she leaves, Riccardo presents himself to Ulrica to have his palm read. She tells him that the next person to shake his hand will kill him. Laughing, he reveals himself and reaches out to his courtiers to shake their hands—which none of them does. Renato arrives shortly afterwards and shakes his hand in greeting.

**At midnight Amelia goes alone to the cemetery to pick the magic herb. When Riccardo arrives Amelia repulses his advances and urges him to respect her good name. He insists that they declare their love for one another. At that moment Renato rushes forward to tell Riccardo that the conspirators are in hot pursuit. Amelia covers her face, Renato agrees to escort her back to town and Riccardo flees. When the conspirators arrive, they struggle with Renato, and in the melee, Amelia drops her veil. The conspirators ridicule Renato as a cuckold, and in shock, he asks two of the conspirators, Samuel and Tom, to meet with him the next day.**

**At home, Renato is resolved to kill his wife for infidelity, but she insists that she has not broken her vows and wants to see her son one last time. Renato relents and declares that it is not she who should die but Riccardo. In a famous Aria “Eri tu” he accuses Riccardo of staining her innocent soul. When Samuel and Tom arrive, he asks to join their conspiracy and pledges the life of his own son to prove his sincerity. They then draw lots to see which of them will carry out the deed. Amelia is forced to draw the winner’s name—Renato. Oscar the page then arrives with invitations to the Masked Ball and the three decide that that will be the venue for the assassination.**

**Meanwhile, Riccardo decides to renounce his love for Amelia and to allow the couple to leave on an assignment to a foreign country. Oscar arrives with the news that the assassination attempt will take place at**

**the Ball, but Riccardo ignores the threat in order to see Amelia one last time.**

**At the Ball, Renato tricks Oscar into telling him what costume Riccardo is wearing, and he unwittingly does so. Meanwhile, Riccardo has spotted Amelia, tells her his decision and says goodbye. Renato sees the two of them together and immediately stabs Riccardo. In dying, Riccardo announces that Amelia has never broken her marriage vows and pardons all the conspirators. Renato cries out in remorse, and everyone mourns the death of their much loved leader.**

**In the Spring Edition of the Italian American Digest of New Orleans, we will preview the third Italian Opera to be performed this season by the New Orleans Opera Association on April 27 & 29: Pagliacci by Ruggiero Leoncavallo.**



**Giacomo Puccini**  
**1858-1924**



**Giuseppe Verdi**  
**1813-1901**