

La bohème

A Grammatical and Literal Translation
by Jesse Leong

music by Giacomo Puccini
libretto by Luigi Illica and Giuseppe Giacosa
based on *Scènes de la vie de bohème* by Henri Murger

Preface

If you are a singer, pianist, accompanist, coach, conductor, director, producer, agent, the occasional devout fan, or any other number of individuals involved with this great business we know as opera, you have probably encountered the marvelous work of Mr. Nico Castel. When I first took an interest in opera it was 2012 and Mr. Castel was still alive. It is now 2015 when I am writing the first of what will hopefully be many of these documents, and Mr. Castel has recently passed away, to the great sadness of many. May he rest in peace.

I am unashamed to say that I have yet to work on a non-English and not used “the Nico” in some way. The sheer scope of his work is undeniable, and it provides an invaluable basis for delving into the language of opera.

However, I’m fairly certain that no one reading this will have ever heard, “No, you don’t need to translate – just use Nico!” (Yes, occasionally, you might do that if you find yourself in a tight spot with a last minute gig. Or, for singers, maybe for other people’s text that is both not about you and when you are not on stage.)

His work is filled with not-so-literal translations, vocal assonances that are not explained or noted in the IPA, no grammatical information whatsoever, and more typos than should be allowed by any good editor.

So what I’m aiming to do herein is to provide an *exact* (or as close to exact as I can possibly muster) translation of *every word* in the score, along with all of the relevant grammatical information.

Yes, I understand that, to many, this may seem pedantic. However, as a coach and conductor, I truly question the method that consists of writing every English equivalent word above every Italian word.

The dangers of this are twofold: Firstly, you are not truly understanding the painstaking amount of time that the librettist put into crafting his work. If we spend days and weeks and years on the details of one high note, one phrase, one moment of dramatic tension or comic relief, one scale, why should we spend mere minutes on figuring out where the librettist uses formal versus informal, the difference between *le grida* and *i gridi* (there is one!), bizzare archaic Italian pronouns, or the contemporary Italian equivalents of all these old, poetic words?

Secondly, the “write-the-English-above-the-Italian” method does not really help one *learn* the language. And no, not every great singer, conductor, pianist, director, etc. is a fluent speaker of every language in which they work and perform. I certainly am not. But look at it this way: Doing this amount of grammatical work will ultimately *save you time*. You will not have to look up the infinitive form of “ponga” anymore, because you will have written it down.

In conclusion, grammar is important! Yes, at the end of the day opera is about great singing. (Enter the the librettist, director, the designer, and the concertmaster, who all beg to differ. Alas, that is beside the point.) You will win more auditions in your lifetime because you sung a killer

top C or played a fantastic “No Word from Tom” cabaletta than you will because you knew whether that pronoun is direct or indirect. But I don’t think there is a single person who works in this industry who will disagree with this:

An understanding of the text – a *true* understanding of the meaning, not just the equivalent English word – will *always* set you apart from, above, and beyond all the rest!

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How to Use This Document

Throughout, you will find four “rows” per line.

Original Italian word

the “base word”

the closest English equivalent word

the grammatical information

The first row will always be bold; additionally, it will be italicized if it is prefatory text or stage directions (i.e. not sung or spoken by a character).

The “base word” refers to the masculine singular form of nouns and adjectives and the infinitive form of verbs.

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Grammatical Notes

- If a word in the Italian text is blue it means that something about it is irregular. If it is a verb, it simply means that it does not follow “regular” conjugation rules. If it is not a verb, it will be explained in the line.

- If the same word (and same usage) appears on the same line (often articles), I will leave out all the information except the original Italian word and the English equivalent word.

- When a past participle is used as an adjective, I will give its masculine singular form in the base word row and its root verb on an additional fifth row. When used in a compound tense, I will list both the base participle (if it is not the given word) and the root verb.

In a compound verb, both words will contain their respective designations, either *vaux* or *v – part pass*. With *avere* verbs, no gender and number will be listed; with *essere*, gender and number will be listed. The tense, person, and number will be listed as a fifth line under the participle. No translation will be given for the auxiliary verb, replaced instead by an *.

Ho	mangiato.	[Le donne]	sono	andate.
(avere)	mangiare		(essere)	andato/andare
*	(I) ate	[The women]	*	went
<i>vaux</i>	<i>v – part pass</i>		<i>vaux</i>	<i>v – part pass 3pl f</i>
	<i>pass pross 1s</i>			<i>pass pross 3pl</i>

See Appendix – Italian Compound Tenses

- In Italian there are what we call prepositional articles (*preposizioni articolate*). These combine the prepositions *a*, *da*, *di*, *in*, and *su* with definite articles. These are represented in the text by the separated words in the base word row and a slash [/] in the grammatical information row:

della
di la
prep / art – det fs

- In Italian there are what we call reflexive verbs (*verbi riflessivi*), verbs where the action is performed upon the subject (generally). There are four types of reflexive verb constructions:

1) Verbs that simply add -oneself in the reflexive form:

amare *utr* – to love

amarsi *vrif* – to love oneself

scrivere *utr* – to write

scriversi *vrif* – to write oneself

These are often *not* listed as separate entries in dictionaries.

These will be listed as separate words:

Lui	si	ama,
he	himself	amare
pron – sog 3s m	pron – ref 3s	loves
		v – pres 3s

2) Verbs that have a slightly different meanings in the reflexive form:

alzare *vi* – to raise
alzarsi *vrif* – to rise

svegliare *utr* – to awaken
svvegliarsi *vrif* – to wake up

This is by far the most kind of reflexive verb: transitive in both Italian and English; reflexive in Italian, intransitive in English.

3) Verbs that have the *exact* same meaning in the reflexive form.

volgere *vi* – to turn, turn towards
volgersi *vrif* – to turn, turn towards

4) Verbs that *only* exist in the reflexive form:
librarsi *vrif* – to hover

Types 2-4 will be listed as the same word:

Lui	si alza
he	alzarsi
pron – sog 3s m	rises
	vrif – pres 3s

Lui	si volge
he	volgere
pron – sog 3s m	turns
	vrif – pres 3s

Lui	si libra
he	librarsi
pron – sog 3s m	hovers
	vrif – pres 3s

A Note on Page Numbers

The page numbers in the upper left corner of the main portion of this document correspond to the page numbers of the following volumes:

Ricordi vocal score

CP99000/05 and CP 99000/04

1896 Universal Music Publishing Ricordi S.r.l.

2005 Universal Music MGB Publications S.r.l.

Ricordi vocal score

CP 115494/05 and CP 115494/05

1896-1898 Universal Music Publishing Ricordi srl

1913-1917 Universal Music Publishing Ricordi srl

2008 Universal Music MGB Publications srl

The full score

The pagination of all full scores I have come across is exactly the same (Ricordi, Dover, Broude Brothers, Kalmus)

Nico Castel

The Complete Puccini Libretti – Volume 1

These are preceded by a bold number referring to the rehearsal number.

Grammatical Abbreviations (Categorical)

Basic parts of speech

nm – nome maschile (masculine noun)

nf – nome femminile (feminine noun)

v – verbo (verb)

agg – aggettivo (adjective)

avv – avverbio (adverb)

pron – pronome (pronoun)

conj – coniugazione (conjugation)

art – articolo (article)

prep – preposizione (preposition)

inter – interiezione (interjection)

escl – esclamazione (exclamation)

Verb terms

inf – infinito (infinitive)

ger – gerundio (gerund)

part pres – participio (participle)

part pass – passato (past)

pres – presente (present)

imp – imperfetto (imperfect)

pass rem – passato remoto (absolute past)

fut – future semplice (future)

pass pross – passato prossimo

cong – congiuntivo (subjunctive)

cond – condizionale (conditional)

impv – imperativo (imperative)

vtr – verbo transitivo (transitive verb)

vi – verbo intransitivo (intransitive verb)

vrif – verbo riflessivo (reflexive verb)

vaux – verbo ausiliare (auxiliary verb)

Pronoun terms

sog – personale soggetto (subject personal pronoun)

do – diretto (direct object pronoun)

io – indiretto (indirect object pronoun)

ref – riflessivo (reflexive pronoun)

pos – possessivo (possessive pronoun)

dem – dimostrativo (demonstrative pronoun)

indf – indefinito (indefinite pronoun)

rel – relativo (relative pronoun)

int – interrogativo (interrogative pronoun)

imps – impersonale (impersonal “si”)

psv – passivante (passive “si”)

disj – pronomi tonici (disjunctive or “stressed” pronouns)

Vocabulary terms

ant – antiquato (antiquated)

form – formale (formale)

inform – informale (informal)

lett – letterario (literary)

fig – figurato (figurative)

obs – obsoleto (obsolete)

arc – arcaico (archaic)

fam – familiare (familiar)

col – colloquiale (colloquial)

pot – poetico (poetic)

Other

irreg – irregolare (irregular)

det – determinato (determinate)

ind – indeterminato (indeterminate)

pl – plurale (plural)

dim – diminutivo (diminutive)

agg pos – aggettivo possessivo (possessive adjective)

expr – espressione (expression)

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Grammatical Abbreviations (Alphabetical)

agg – aggettivo (adjective)
agg pos – aggettivo possessivo (possessive adjective)
ant – antiquato (antiquated)
arc – arcaico (archaic)
art – articolo (article)
avv – avverbio (adverb)
col – colloquiale (colloquial)
cond – condizionale (conditional)
cong – congiuntivo (subjunctive)
conj – coniugazione (conjugation)
dem – dimostrativo (demonstrative pronoun)
det – determinato (determinate)
dim – diminutivo (diminutive)
do – diretto (direct object pronoun)
escl – esclamazione (exclamation)
expr – espressione (expression)
fam – familiare (familiar)
fig – figurato (figurative)
form – formale (formale)
fut – future semplice (future)
ger – gerundio (gerund)
imp – imperfetto (imperfect)
imps – impersonale (impersonal “si”)
impv – imperativo (imperative)
ind – indeterminato (indeterminate)
indf – indefinito (indefinite pronoun)
inf – infinito (infinitive)
inform – informale (informal)
int – interrogativo (interrogative pronoun)
inter – interiezione (interjection)
io – indiretto (indirect object pronoun)
irreg – irregolare (irregular)
lett – letterario (literary)
nf – nome femminile (feminine noun)
nm – nome maschile (masculine noun)
obs – obsoleto (obsolete)
part pass – passato (past)
part pres – participio (participle)
partv – partitivo (partitive articles)
pass pross – passato prossimo
pass rem – passato remoto (absolute past)
pl – plurale (plural)
pos – possessivo (possessive pronoun)
pot – poetico (poetic)

prep – preposizione (preposition)
pres – presente (present)
pron – pronome (pronoun)
psv – passivante (passive “si”)
ref – riflessivo (reflexive pronoun)
rel – relative (relative pronoun)
s – personale soggetto (subject personal pronoun)
v – verbo (verb)
vtr – verbo transitivo (transitive verb)
vi – verbo intransitivo (intransitive verb)
vrif – verbo riflessivo (reflexive verb)
vaux – verbo ausiliare (auxiliary verb)

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