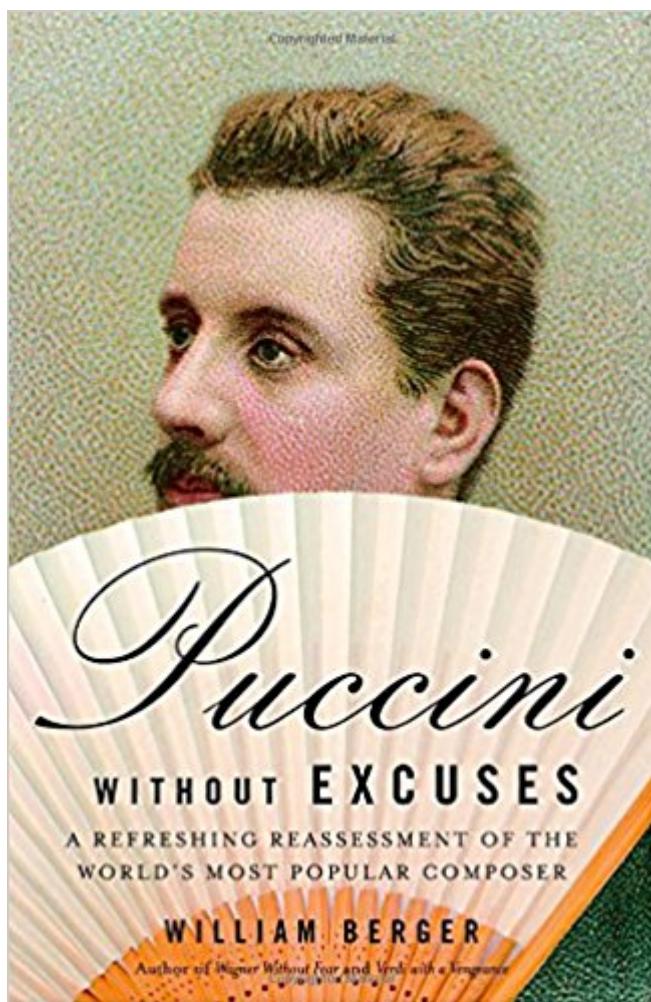


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# Puccini Without Excuses: A Refreshing Reassessment Of The World's Most Popular Composer



## Synopsis

Puccini is the most beloved composer of opera in the world: one quarter of all opera performances in the U.S. are of his operas, his music pervades movie soundtracks, and his plots have infiltrated our popular culture. But, although Puccini's art still captivates audiences and the popularity of such works as *Tosca*, *La Bohème*, and *Madama Butterfly* has never waned, he has long been a victim of critical snobbery and cultural marginalization. In this witty and informative guide for beginners and fans alike, William Berger sets the record straight, reclaiming Puccini as a serious artist. Combining his trademark irreverent humor with passionate enthusiasm, Berger strikes just the right balance of introductory information and thought-provoking analysis. He includes a biography, discussions of each opera, a glossary, fun facts and anecdotes, and above all keen insight into Puccini's enduring power. For anyone who loves Puccini and for anyone who just wonders what all the fuss is about, *Puccini Without Excuses* is funny, challenging, and always a pleasure to read.

**INCLUDES:** Why Puccini's art and its message of hope is crucial to our world today\_ How Anglo audiences often miss the mythic significance of his operas\_ The use of his music as shorthand in films, from *A Room with a View* to *Fatal Attraction*\_ A scene-by scene analysis of each opera\_ A guide to the wealth of available recordings, books, and videos

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## Customer Reviews

Puccini, the celebrated composer of *La Bohème*, *Tosca* and *Madama Butterfly* (together, the three make up perhaps a quarter of all U.S. opera performances) is often regarded as a "guilty

pleasure," too melodic, too "easy." Not so fast, says Berger, who proceeds to demonstrate exactly why attention must be paid. This is the third in the amusing, educational opera series by the popular NPR commentator and radio host, following *Wagner Without Fear* and *Verdi with a Vengeance*. The informal, sometimes slangy tone assumes readers' ignorance (but willingness to learn) and coaches them in everything they need to know. The formula follows that of the earlier books: first, a brief biography of the artist; then a breakdown of each opera (eight here) with comments, introducing the characters and explaining what kind of singer each part calls for; then an act-by-act summary with instructions on what to watch and listen for. Next, Berger veers off into three idiosyncratic essays, including one on Puccini's influence on modern show biz (on *Bohème* knockoffs: *Moulin Rouge* was good; *Rent*, not so much). Then it's back to instruction: singers to recognize, recordings to buy or rent, books to read and a glossary of musical terms, many Italian. Copyright © Reed Business Information, a division of Reed Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved.

William Berger was born in California and studied Romance languages and music at the University of California at Santa Cruz. He worked for five years at the San Francisco Opera Company, where he acquired for the company's recorded music collection. He is the author of *Wagner Without Fear: Learning to Love and Even Enjoy Opera's Most Demanding Genius* and *Verdi With a Vengeance: An Energetic Guide to the Life and Complete Works of the King of Opera*. He is a frequent lecturer and radio commentator and has recently been a regular host for New York Public Radio's *Overnight Music*. He has written libretti, performance pieces, and articles on a wide variety of topics including architecture, religion, and, of course, music. He is a music host for WNYC radio and lives in New York.

I have been a fan of William Berger's books on opera composers since I came across "Wagner without Fear". He writes well, often with considerable wit, and does an excellent job of putting the composers and operas in historic context while relating them to the modern world. This is particularly evident in "Puccini Without Excuses". Puccini's work spans decades of enormous change in Europe and America, which is addressed insightfully in Berger's analyses. I re-read his chapter on "La Bohème" before attending a performance recently, and I got a great deal more out of the opera than on several previous occasions. (Coincidentally, the program notes included an article by Berger, derived from but expanding on the corresponding chapter in the book.) I heartily recommend Berger's books to opera-goers. New-comers to opera will find them a comfortable and engaging introduction to the conventions, foibles, and rewards of the medium, while veterans will

find Berger's insights offer a thoughtful and thought-provoking perspective on works they thought they knew.

Make no mistake about it, this is an absolutely delightful, informative book! It is wonderful reading for the opera neophyte as well as the opera expert. Opera has always been my favorite musical form. I've studied it many years and in all humility, consider myself more than qualified to discuss this subject. Case in point: I have fully illustrated three complete opera librettos in graphic novel form, one being Puccini's Madama Butterfly. These illustrated librettos are available exclusively at The Metropolitan Opera Gift Shop and here on :[The Fully Illustrated Libretto of Puccini's Madama Butterfly](#) [The Fully Illustrated Libretto of Ravel's L'Enfant et Les Sortileges \(Librettos\)](#) [The Fully Illustrated Libretto of Gian Carlo Menotti's the Medium](#) Although I thought myself to be familiar with Puccini and all his operas, Mr. Berger's book gave me an entirely new perspective and now look forward to listening again as if it were the very first time! Berger's writing style is informal, easy to understand and direct. The first section deals with Puccini's life, times, and the artistic matrix of Italy in which he lived. The next section deals with the individual operas in chronological order. First a list of the characters and a short psychological study of each one, then the plot interspersed with the author's own comments laced with humor and wit. Part 3 of the book is called 'The Puccini Code' and deals with 'Issues in Puccini and the Perception of His Works'. It begins with the Myth of Tosca...other reviewers found this section to be superfluous, but I found it to be one of the most fascinating parts of the book. It begins with a history of the Italian culture starting with the Byzantine Pope Gregory I all the way to the Napoleonic era. The reason for this digression is to explain to the reader how all this history affected the psychology of the characters in Tosca and why they relate as they do. It also points out the symbolic elements of this opera such as wine and blood including the tidbit of Maria Callas, who's fingers walked on the table as she followed the trail of spilled wine which led her directly to the knife with which she stabs Scarpia. Wow. I recommend to anyone unfamiliar with Tosca, to listen to the opera first, then read this section. Following this is another delightful and entertaining section of famous productions of Puccini's operas and what you might expect to see. It was surprising that the author omitted the hilarious blunder of a performance of Tosca at the Met, when Zinka Milanov threw herself over the castle wall, only to bounce back up on stage!! The book continues with author's opinions of singers and available recordings. It is interesting to know what Mr. Berger thinks, as I do not always agree 100%. For example, he feels that the Nielson-Corelli recording of Turandot is by far the best. While it is true that Corelli was one of the most handsome, appealing tenors that ever lived, I cannot imagine that any recording could

surpass the earlier Bjoerling recording, also with Nielson. Oh well, personal opinions are always personal opinions; not facts. All in all, a superb book which I highly recommend to anyone and one of the very few books I plan to read again.

Loved this book! I have been a fan of Puccini since my mom first played Taddei singing 'Tre Sbirri, Una Carrozza' from the Karajan conducted Tosca. Love, love Puccini opera's! This was a very nice book to accompany my love for his opera's. Recently, I bought tickets to see Sondra Radvanovsky sing Tosca at the Met, and this book was a helpful, interesting read before seeing the opera. If you enjoy Puccini and want to know more about his opera's then I definitely recommend this book.

A totally enjoyable and rewarding biography of Puccini. His operas are explained - and reviewed - with a light but informative touch.

This is a very good book, you must really pay attention to some of it to get what was going on during the life of Puccini and what went on leading up to his opera's. Very good goes over each opera and has made a better listener of me.

This is a very interesting and detailed analysis of this great composer; ranks with this author's book on Wagner for anyone who wants an intro or anyone who wants some details. Highly recommended.

Great book and delivered as the seller advised.

Suggested by a young tenor who stayed with friends as he sang as a "festival of the voice". Lucky friends and lucky us! We asked what he thought of this or that about Puccini and singing. After we had finished interrogating him, he recommended this book as a way to get deeper into opera. Great! I'm hooked. A glorious world of an art I had mostly ignored...William Berger has persuaded us that it is past time to get to the Met this season!

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