

The Rhythms of Puccini's *Fanciulla del West*

by Deborah Burton

*Waltz in, waltz in, ye little kids, and gather round my knee,
And drop them books and first pot-books, and bear a yarn from me. [...]*

*But as from school yer driftin' by, I thout ye'd like to hear
Of a "Spelling Bee" at Angels that we organized last year. [...]*

*The first word out was "parallel," and seven let it be,
Till Joe waltzed in his "double l" betwixt the "a" and "e;"
For since he drilled them Mexicans in San Jacinto's fight
There warn't no prouder man got up than Pistol Joe that night —
Till "rhythm" came! He tried to smile, then said "they had him there."
And Lanky Jim, with one long stride, got up and took his chair.
O little kids, my pretty kids, down on your knees and pray!
You've got your eddication in a peaceful sort of way;
And bear in mind thar may be sharps ez slings their spellin' square,
But likewise slings their bowie-knives without a thought or care.*

- from Bret Harte, "The Luck of Roaring Camp" (1892)¹

This scene of rough-hewn Wild West types getting their "edication" conjures up images of David Belasco's 1905 *Girl of the Golden West*, even down to its misspelled

¹ Bret Harte also wrote a short story about an independent woman thriving in the Wild West who ran an establishment called the Polka Saloon, and who could have been a model for Belasco's Girl: Bret Harte, "Miggles" *Overland monthly and Out West magazine*, 2/6, June 1869: 570-576. Other stories of women of the West can be found at: <http://theatry.org/women-of-the-west-story-archive/story-archive-overview>.

renderings of homey utterances.² And when the terms “waltz,” and “rhythm” sashay in, they point to Puccini’s *Fanciulla* as well: this opera’s score has a rhythmic vitality that is most evident in the dance rhythms of the work: the waltz, the polka, and the bolero.³

But *Fanciulla*’s dances might have been inspired by the incidental music Puccini heard in 1907 when he attended two Belasco dramas, *The Girl of the Golden West* and *The Rose of the Rancho*, both set in the West of the same period. Between the two plays, the audiences would have heard a cachuca,⁴ two waltzes, a polka, two boleros, a manzanillo, and a habanera.

Some of the incidental dance tunes that Puccini heard in these Belasco plays might also have served as models for his operatic melodies. For instance, the second full measure of the play’s polka in G major is strikingly similar to Puccini’s theme associated with the Polka Saloon in G minor,⁵ which first appears at I/5/0.⁶ [Ex. 1 a and b]

² Belasco’s novelization of his play is accessible at: www.fanciulla100.org, along with many source materials for this opera, scholarly articles, video clips and interviews with performers.

³ In Puccini’s score, the bolero is marked “alla spagnola” at I/38/1, and reappears as motivic markers for Latin characters, at I/46/16, I/75/0 and III/19/4.

⁴ This type of dance also appears in Gilbert and Sullivan’s 1889 operetta *The Gondoliers*. Belasco was not inventing the emphasis on dancing as a pastime in the period: miner William Perkins kept a journal in which he describes seeing a samacueca (“a kind of minuet”) and the Jaleo. William Perkins, Dale Lowell Morgan, James R. Scobie. *Three years in California William Perkins’ journal of life at Sonora, 1849-1852* (Berkeley: U. of California Press, 1964), p. 163.

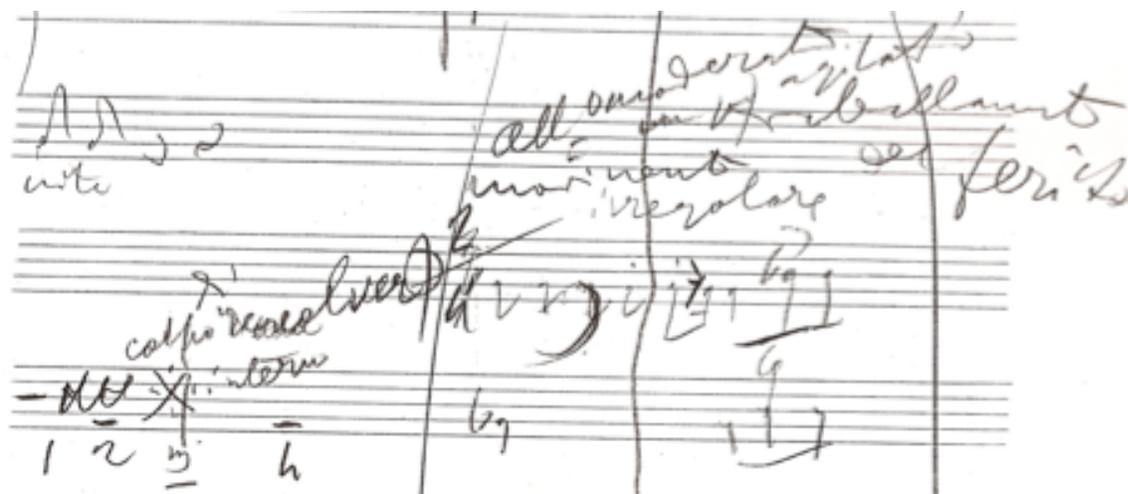
⁵ Budden feels that Puccini’s “Polka” theme derives from George M. Cohan’s “Belle of the Barber’s Ball”; however, the only similarity between the passages is in the syncopated beginning of the Cohan, which is a standard ragtime introduction. Julian Budden. *Puccini: His Life and Works*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 307.

⁶ All locations in the musical score are indicated by Act/Rehearsal number / Measures after, so that I/5/0 refers to Act I, zero measures after rehearsal number 5.

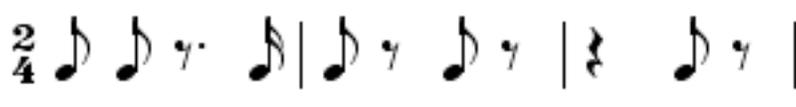
Carner also mentions having seen some of Puccini's rhythmic sketches for this opera that showed experimentation with syncopated and dotted figures.⁹

Puccini aspires to rhythmic mimesis when he writes that the rhythm at I/58/0 should imitate a horse's gallop¹⁰ and, in a sketch housed at the Beinecke Library at Yale University, Puccini works out the rhythm for depicting the moment in Act II when Johnson re-enters Minnie's cabin after being shot, lurching and stumbling. The composer writes, "irregular movement / staggering from the wound." [Ex. 4]

Ex. 4: Puccini's sketch of *Fanciulla*, II/56, Beinecke Library, Yale University: "Revolver shot off-stage / All[egr]o moderato un po' agitato / irregular movement / staggering from the wound [colpo revolver interno / All[egr]o moderato un po' agitato / movimento irregolare / traballamento del ferito]"



The rhythm in this sketch is  while the final version

became: . But the irregularity of

⁹ Mosco Carner, *Puccini: a Critical Biography*. (New York: Holmes and Meier, 2nd. ed., 1974, rep. 1988), 408.

¹⁰ [Imitando il galoppo d'un cavallo]

the rhythm is apparent in both versions. And Puccini's direct association of rhythm with physical sensation is also clear in his off-hand comment to the *New York Times* after *Fanciulla's* premiere: "My heart was beating like the double basses in the card scene,"¹¹ where there are rapid staccato sixteenth notes.¹²

Puccini also experimented in early versions of *Fanciulla* with using multiple simultaneous meters. In the Lehman continuity draft housed at the Morgan Library, as noted by Atlas,¹³ the vocal line at I/2/6 is written in 4/8 while the accompaniment is in 6/8. In addition, in the final version of the second act, at II/59/8, Minnie's "Resta! Resta! Resta!" sounds in triple meter, while it is written in duple. According to Ricci's account of this section, Puccini told him, "I would have wanted to write the orchestra part in 2/4 and the voice in 3/4; but this marking is not part of my writing system. Such a notation does not exist in any of my operas, so to less-informed audience members it could seem like a pose."¹⁴

In *Fanciulla*, we can also find unusual meters (such as the marking 5/2 at II/27/2), and many odd phrase lengths (such as three-bar units at III/7/6).¹⁵ Syncopation and dotted notes are in evidence almost throughout the work and hemiolas are often part of a theme, such as at the opening of Act II, the rhythm of which Puccini called "grotesque."¹⁶ [Ex. 5]

Ex. 5: *Fanciulla*, II/0/3: hemiolas

¹¹ "Great Welcome for New Opera" *The New York Times*, 11 December 1910.

¹² This is an early example of nondeterminacy, as Puccini instructs the double basses at II/77/1 to continue playing the pattern as the poker game requires [seguitando il movimento secondo le esigenze del giuoco]. Ricci, reporting Puccini's interpretative practice, writes that indeed in that moment "the pulsation of Minnie's poor heart is limned." [adombrata la pulsazione del povero cuore di Minnie.] Luigi Ricci, *Puccini Interprete di se stesso* (Milan: Ricordi, 1954, Rep. 1980), 164.

¹³ Allan Atlas, "Lontano-Tornare-Redenzione: Verbal Leitmotives and their Musical Resonance in Puccini's *La fanciulla del West*," *Studi Musicali*, 21/2 (1992), p. 364.

¹⁴ ["Avrei voluto scrivere la parte dell'orchestra in 2/4 e il canto in 3/4; ma questa grafia non rientra nel mio sistema di scrittura. Tant'e' vero che in nessuna delle mie opere esiste una siffatta notazione, che ai poco provveduti potrebbe sembrare una posa."] Ricci adds, "Puccini, then, if it were not for his usual modesty, which kept him apart from any apparent eccentricity, would have wanted to write it thus." [Puccini, insomma, se non fosse stato il solito pudore che lo teneva lontano da ogni apparente stramberia avrebbe voluto scrivere cosi.] Ricci, p. 162. Puccini did make some innovations in his writing technique for this opera, however. As Girardi observes, for the first time he uses a graphic sign at I/88/14 that indicates sliding off a note: this will appear in a later opera, as the dying Suor Angelica sees her child. Girardi, p. 304.

¹⁵ For a description of unusual phrase lengths in Jack Rance's aria "Dalla mia casa son partito" see Deborah Burton, "Men Who Love Too Much: Operatic Heroes and the Metric and Tonal Disturbances that Follow them." In *Schenker Studies IV*. Lynne Rodgers and Poundie Burstein, eds. New York: Olms, forthcoming.

¹⁶ Puccini: "The second act, in Minnie's cabin, opens with a duet of Indian servants, a short page of staccato music with a rhythm which has a strain of the grotesque." "Puccini here; his opera views," *New York Times*, 18 November 1910.



It is also not inconceivable that Puccini was encouraged to such heights of metric complexity, not only by the many dance themes he had heard in connection with the Belasco plays, but also by the transcriptions of Native American songs he owned, Alice Fletcher's *Indian Story and Song from North America*, and Natalie Curtis's *The Indian's Book*.¹⁷ In the Fletcher book, the meter of "Ghost Dance Song," for example, was transcribed with five-bar phrases, and the lullaby "Kawas, thy baby is crying" shows alternating 6/8 and 9/8 meters;¹⁸ the Curtis collection also contains many examples of such indirect metric dissonance,¹⁹ such as the transcription of "Kisaka: Woman's Song of Rejoicing" that alternates 2/8 and 3/8.²⁰

But how should we consider the syncopated, so-called "cakewalk" rhythm:



) that has been linked by several writers with ragtime, and thus with that genre's African-American roots. Such a reference seems completely out of place in this opera, since no African-Americans appear, and especially since the motive is usually associated with the hero Johnson/Ramerrez.²¹ Fairtile goes further: "the hot rhythm of Johnson's

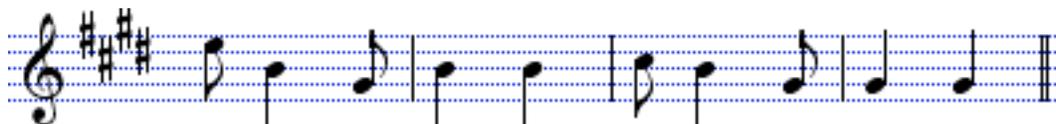
¹⁷ Alice C. Fletcher, *Indian Story and Song from North America* (Boston: Small, Maynard, 1900), and Natalie Curtis *The Indian's Book* (New York and London: Harper, 1907). These books are extant today in the Museo Puccini at Torre del Lago, Italy.

¹⁸ Fletcher, pp. 100, 109.

¹⁹ *Metric dissonance* occurs where there are conflicting patterns in rhythm or meter. For example, duple vs. triple dissonances can occur on the rhythmic level (two eighth notes placed against a triplet), on the metric level (2/4 against 3/4, or by the use of hemiola) and on the hypermetric level (groups of two or four measures placed against a nonduple group, such as Beethoven's "ritmo di tre battute" from the scherzo of the *Ninth Symphony*). The concept of *metric or rhythmic dissonance* has been explored most notably by Richard Cohn in his articles "Metric and Hypermetric Dissonance in the 'Menuetto' of Mozart's Symphony in G minor, K. 550" *Intégral* 6 (1992): 1-33, and "The Dramatization of Hypermetric conflicts in the Scherzo of Beethoven's Ninth Symphony" *19th-Century Music* XV/3 (Spring 1992): 188-206, as well as by Harald Krebs. *Fantasy Pieces: Metrical Dissonance in the Music of Robert Schumann*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1999.

²⁰ Curtis, p. 135.

²¹ See, for example, Girardi, *Puccini: His International Art*, pp. 288-289: "At the end of the prelude a brief fragment appears in cakewalk rhythm: the popular Afro-American dance gives a touch of local color to the statement of the tonic"; Allan Atlas, "Lontano-Tornare-Redenzione: Verbal Leitmotives and their Musical Resonance in Puccini's *La fanciulla del West*," *Studi Musicali*, 21/2 (1992), p. 360: "Johnson [is] ...characterized by an aggressively syncopated, ragtime-like motive that suggests something of his reckless abandon.;" Linda Fairtile "Real Americans Mean Much More": Race, Ethnicity, and



Puccini also heard this rhythm in the incidental music²⁵ to two of the Belasco plays he attended in 1907. [Ex. 7 a-c]

²⁵ Incidental music to Belasco's *The Girl of the Golden West*, composed by William Furst, Belasco collection of incidental music and musicals, ca. 1890-1931, New York Public Library, Performing Arts Research Collections. JPB 93-4, *ZB3254, reels 1 and 2.

Ex. 7: “cakewalk” rhythms in incidental music to Belasco’s *Girl of the Golden West*

a)

Flute

b)

c) “Entr’acte”

Allegro

The incidental music collection for Belasco’s *Rose of the Rancho* also includes the “cakewalk” rhythm in a published piece entitled “Manzanillo/Danza Mexicana”²⁶ in a habanera style, and in the music for Act III, number 4. [Ex. 8 a and b]

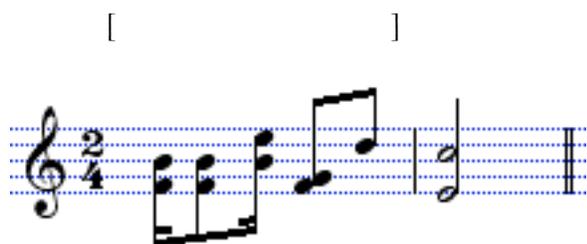
²⁶ “Manzanillo / Danza Mexicana,” composed by A. G. Robyn, arranged by Otto Knaeble Balmer and Weber Music House, 1891, [<http://library.duke.edu/digitalcollections>]

Ex. 8: “cakewalk” rhythms in incidental music to Belasco’s *The Rose of the Rancho*

a) “Manzanillo/Danza Mexicana”



b) Act III, n. 4, *The Rose of the Rancho*²⁷



Why did Puccini give so much attention to the rhythmic and metrical aspects of *Fanciulla*?

Perhaps because these *motions* were, for him, analogous to *emotions*. Or perhaps, as the composer himself said, our “inner metronome” is the heart.²⁸

²⁷ Incidental music to *The Rose of the Rancho*, composed by William Furst, Belasco collection of incidental music and musicals, ca. 1890-1931, New York Public Library, Performing Arts Research Collections. JPB 93-4, *ZB3254, reels 1 and 2.

²⁸ [il Maelzel che sta dentro di noi] Quoted in Ricci, p. 12.