

Wagnerian influences at work in *La fanciulla del West*

It is possible to detect Wagnerian influences at work in *Fanciulla*, albeit in a carefully controlled way. Puccini was introduced to the music of Richard Wagner at the Milan Conservatory, and he attended the Bayreuth Festivals of 1888 and 1889. He once observed: 'Nothing of Richard Wagner has died: his opera is the yeast of all contemporary music, and there is yet something to germinate, later, in happier artistic times.' In *Fanciulla* he made his own use of leitmotifs, notably in relation to Minnie and the miners, and he used a form of 'endless melody' instead of set 'numbers' – something that admirers of his earlier operas did not necessarily welcome.

Of special significance from a musical point of view is a four-note motive that appears in the orchestra when Minnie decides to hide the wounded Johnson. This is repeated a number of times. It is a reference to the famous chromatic motive that opens *Tristan und Isolde*, through which Wagner expresses the inter-relationship of suffering and desire. Now harmonized in E-flat minor, Puccini uses it to describe the pain of Minnie and Johnson that is part and parcel of their love.¹

There are other parallels too: in the theme of the destructive consequences of a lust for gold, the redemptive role of a woman (Puccini deliberately strengthened this aspect of Minnie's character over Belasco's model); the awakening of the shared past of Minnie and Johnson *a la* Siegmund and Sieglinde; Rance's Hunding-like involvement; the symbolism of a door suddenly blowing open as an expression of the coming of love; Minnie's Act 2 response to the wounding of Johnson, reminiscent of Sieglinde's Act 2 delirium; Puccini's direction for 'eight to ten' horses in Act 3 paralleling Act 3 of *Die Walküre*, and Minnie's Valkyrie-like cry as she rides to Johnson's rescue. The radiant ending offers more than a nod to *Parsifal*, one of Puccini's favourite operas, an association reinforced by Minnie's words: 'Brothers, there isn't a sinner in the world to whom the path of redemption is not open!'

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¹ See Michele Girardi and Laura Basini, *Puccini: His International Art*, University of Chicago Press, 2000, p. 291.