



In the Steps of Puccini: The land, the lore, and the music

BY CAROL STIGGER

My B&B in Lucca, Italy, for the 58th Annual Puccini Festival, should have reflected Puccini's mastery of music and life, so why was I stumbling around, jet-lagged and disharmonic for coffee? Did the owners not understand the second "B" means "breakfast?"

As I ambled along a cobblestone street, I discovered that by missing breakfast I had stumbled upon the coffee bar of my Italian dreams. The 1846 Belle Epoch-style Antico Caffè di Simo (Via Fillungo 47) not only serves great cappuccino and fresh pastries, it also served Puccini and literary luminaries such as Ezra Pound.

I broke my fast staring at a piano—replacing the piano Puccini played for friends and patrons. The café also serves lunch and is a popular wine bar in the evenings. I had come to Lucca to meet Puccini, and already we were having breakfast together!

An early morning tramp around Lucca, a walled and walkable Medieval city, revealed the importance of Puccini to the townsfolk. The expected bronze statue in a piazza was not a surprise, but the politically incorrect cigarette in his hand was. Where was the fig leaf that covers inconvenient parts of classical statues? I later learned that Puccini smoked 80 cigarettes and 5 cigars a day before dying of throat cancer at age 66.

Another surprise was the 12th century church of Santi Giovanni and Reparata where Puccini was baptized. It is built on the ruins of an early Christian church that was built on the ruins of a Roman bath. Here, Puccini concerts are held every day of the year at 7 p.m. (no smoking), but sometimes Verdi and other classical composers are honored instead. Even Puccini needs a break.

Puccini's house, a lovingly restored mid-19th century apartment, opened as a museum in 2011 and showcases a piano that

Puccini played when he was a boy. On display is Turandot's elaborate, original costume. Manuscripts, letters, opera scores, and other memorabilia are stored in archival drawers; and walls are covered with paintings of ancestors, photographs, and Puccini's family tree. The family dates back to the 1700s, and the Puccinis were a musical family from the beginning. Echoing the finales of his tragic operas, the last Puccini leaves no progeny.

Ristorante Puccini

After a day of Puccini sightings and the concert at Santi Giovanni and Reparata, dinner at the Ristorante Puccini in front of his house seemed obligatory. A friend suggested an outdoor table facing a piano, so I expected music. What I did not expect was the song "Buona Sera Puccini" written on a chalkboard. I thought it was the house wine or a special entree. But while I was enjoying lavender-flavored panna cotta [cooked cream] with candied gooseberries, a young woman in a turn-of-the-century gown sat at an outdoor table near the piano. A dapper Puccini with the ubiquitous cigarette in hand joined her. They performed a skit that strung together several of Puccini's arias.

In the hush following the final aria, I recalled that Springfield, Illinois, has sites celebrating its native son, Abe Lincoln, but his presence is not as pervasive as Puccini in Lucca. Culturally, this is understandable.

On a gastronomic note, Springfield champions the horseshoe sandwich, while Lucca's chefs turn fresh, local ingredients into culinary masterpieces such as turbot flan with a prawn center served with a sauce of cherry tomatoes, fresh basil, and locally grown olives.

The next day, I headed to the countryside expecting to find echoes of Puccini in the hamlet of Celle in Pescaglia so high in the hills you can smell the green. His ancestral home was already old when the Puccini progenitor, Jacopo, was born here in 1712.

Original furnishings and artifacts are displayed, including Puccini's crib and christening gown, the bed with a cornhusk mattress where he allegedly was conceived, and a gramophone from Thomas Edison. I heard more than an echo. I heard the only recording of Puccini's voice, but whatever he said in 1907 is in Italian. Celle's main street is two blocks long, but it supports a small restaurant (another Ristorante Puccini) that serves rustic Tuscan food. Puccini's house and the restaurant both overlook a valley of such green beauty it could inspire the dullest to a majestic moment.

Theaters small and large

Next, I drove on to a hamlet near Vetrano. An 1889 theater, affectionately called "Teatrino," was constructed in a barn and is the world's smallest historic theater still in use. The entrance and tiny ticket window face a cobblestone lane. To reach the two tiers of balconies, one enters through the roof. The diminutive playhouse retains the character of the original in every detail including the seats, which are padded kitchen chairs. The townsfolk brought their own chairs to performances. The theater seats 99. To accommodate one more, fire safety features would need to be installed, spoiling the meticulous reconstruction. Despite its size, performances include classical plays and concerts. The theater has a Puccini story, too. When he attended a performance, the townsfolk were so honored they sang to him. The maestro said, "If I had known you were going to sing, I would have brought my rifle."

Puccini's dream was to hear one of his operas performed outdoors at Torre del Lago on Lake Massaciuccoli—inspiration for much of his work. In 1930, "La Bohème" was performed on a stage built on piles in the lake. In 1966, an open-air theater seating 3,000 replaced the rustic stage.

Nearly 40 years after the new theater's inauguration, I realized my dream of attending a performance there of "Madam

Butterfly." It was an extraordinary experience to arrive at the theater by boat, imagining the composer's ears tuned to the lap of water, the birdsong, and the rushing wind. The stage setting is minimalist with a large boulder suggestive of nearby quarries and a low, white Japanese-style table where Madam Butterfly erects her shrine to her faithless lover. The lake and hazy mountains that change to a starry sky make a perfect backdrop to the pathos of Madam Butterfly's transformation from rapture to grief. The music was glorious and an unforgettable reminder of why Lucca so passionately honors its native genius.

The Maestro and Michelangelo

Pietrasanta, meaning "Sacred Stone," was my last stop before entrusting my sanity to the airline industry. (Do not believe that you can make the Gatwick to Heathrow transfer in 3 and a half hours during the Olympics.) I would have been grateful for any level city, but Pietrasanta surpassed my expectations. This Medieval city is dedicated to the arts, particularly sculpture.

A decorous plaque on ancient brick explains that Michelangelo lived here while selecting marble from the nearby Carrara quarries, mined since ancient Rome. Today, the town exhibits the work of contemporary sculptors in its main square and in the Church of Sant'Agostino, built in the 14th century and deconsecrated during a Napoleonic invasion.

I imagine Michelangelo standing in the square, eyes on the bald Carrara Hills. Then Puccini strolls into the piazza, his arm around his cherished wife. He laughs and lights a cigarette, waiting until a small, admiring group forms. He exhales a cloud of smoke and proclaims, "If I'd brought my rifle, I would shoot it."

Carol Stigger is a Chicago-based writer specializing in developing-nation poverty, microfinance, and travel. She lives in India every winter and in Rome every spring.



LEFT: The main piazza in Lucca.

TOP RIGHT: Charming shops surround a piazza in Lucca that dates back to ancient Rome.

BOTTOM RIGHT: Puccini's ancestral home in the tiny hamlet of Celle.



The Consummate Traveler

Tips from a pro

To Tip or to Skip

BY MICHELE GONCALVES
EPOCH TIMES STAFF

Just the other day I ordered room service during my stay at a U.S. chain hotel in Latin America. Before placing my order, I followed my usual protocol of carefully reading the small print on the menu to see what service charges were included. I noted that a 15 percent delivery fee would be added to the bill, which I automatically assumed would cover any tip.

However, when my nice waiter arrived and delivered my food, I experienced the awkward linger and the giveaway sentence of, "Is there anything else I can do for you Ma'am?" Then I knew a tip was expected. Regrettably, I ran out of small notes in my wallet and there was no space on my bill to add a tip, so I just looked at him and sadly replied no. I could tell he was disappointed as he closed my door and left.

Tipping can be a tricky subject. In some countries, it isn't at all expected and could even be interpreted as an insult (hard to believe in our society today, but true), while in others it is automatically implied regardless of the quality of service provided. Here are my experiences and general advice for tipping while traveling abroad.

1. Get small bills soon after arrival:

The cash tips you are likely to be handing out immediately upon your arrival are typically small sums of money. However, when you exchange money at the airport or use a cash machine, you will only be given large bills. I always research the exchange rate of the currency of the country I am visiting to know the equivalent. This way I can be specific and request the appropriate notes from the local currency that I will need

when exchanging money or getting change. I also keep a stash of \$10 worth of U.S. singles in my wallet just in case.

2. One bag equals one dollar:

My general rule of thumb is to tip one dollar for each bag to anyone who helps with my luggage. This can be hotel bellhops or airport valets. On occasion, I add a dollar or two to the total if my bags are especially heavy. When dealing with taxi drivers, I follow the same rule, but I always ask whether a baggage fee is already added to the price. Often they round up the figure you see on the meter to include a tip for themselves.

3. Ask your hotel about local customs before dining out:

The hotel concierge is the best person to ask about tipping customs at local restaurants. The rules do vary greatly by country, and unless you are aware of them, you could easily end up overpaying or insulting someone. If you forget to ask, I have found that leaving 10 percent of the bill is a generally accepted estimate. Rarely will you find tipping rates of 20 percent, which is often what we use in the United States. If your bill is significant and you are not sure, ask your waiter if a tip has been added to the bill or not. I have always received an honest response to the question, and no one has ever seemed offended.

4. Tipping the maid:

One of my bosses worked as a maid in a hotel during her youth, and she told me how significant the tips were to helping her make ends meet. The dollar per day rule applies here as well. Since maids tend to be rotated, leave cash each day versus waiting until the end of your trip to ensure everyone benefits equally.

As always, I wish you Happy Travels everyone!

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