

Puccini's Piano Speaks

Years ago, I visited the small Italian town of Lucca, where 19th c. composer Giacomo Puccini lived. Seeing his lonely piano behind the velvet ropes in his living room haunted me.



Many lovers I have known. A parade of gentlemen and ladies have sat with me an hour – a dalliance to delight a crowd, or upon occasion, a blissful surrender that consumed the evening. But always transient – like candles, they ignite, taper, flicker, and are gone.

All but one. One who purchased me for his own and made his home with me. Solitary nights of a

thousand hours his candle burned undiminished, his elegant fingers upon me. Those nights, the sumptuous sofas and inlaid mahogany buffet were free from the clutter of guests and crudités. Our only company the echoes of arpeggios that chased each other like children around the rafters. Even the December air was warm and fragrant with harmonies that wall tapestries eagerly softened and absorbed. Some passages were foreplay – a caress of fingertips, a trill's tickle, a flirtatious *staccato* or tender *mezzo piano*. Sometimes scales blazed up my spine in a crescendo of *fortissimo*, *allegro vivace*. Such vigor, such vibrations made my spindly legs tremble.

The crystals of the massive candelabra tinkled and clinked and flung flecks of light like jittering fireflies against the crimson walls. Each evening the ten candles at my sides were lit, their amber glow heralding our evening ritual. As the evening lengthened, they grew short, languidly dripping wax in pools, tarnishing my ebony finish. I reveled in the stain – a secret fetish – the only imperfection he allowed. Fumbling and tentative, then with masterful abandon, he wove tapestries of sound worthy of palace walls. He cursed and wept, stopped short, made a start, slammed me shut as though I were to blame, and all would be well if I would just keep quiet. But he always returned – contrite, polite, ready to begin afresh. For endless measures, he bent over me as over a dying paramour in an Italian opera – one of his own, perhaps. I fancied myself his muse, his *Madama Butterfly*, whose arias he composed on my very keys.

Sometimes our intimacy was breached by revelers in silk and fur – perfumed arms propped on sofa pillows, shrimp elegantly pinched between two fingers. All silence and stillness, they sat as he held court, placed his fingers upon me, and made me immortal. All breath was held, forgotten, then sucked in with a gasp, and forgotten again. A scotch glass once left a ring on my veneer. He fumed, but I didn't mind. I felt myself the envy of the room.

But that was decades ago. My keys are now cold and ache for a touch, my paint unvarnished, and the crowds that shuffle by me swill no liqueur. They pay to view me imprisoned here – behind fraying velvet ropes. No music – only the clicks of their cameras to break the silence. My massive lid open like a coffin.