GETTING CIVILIZED/GOING NATURAL

In 1907 Puccini made the first of two visits to New York, to supervise the first performances of Manon Lescaut and Madame Butterfly at the Metropolitan Opera. He was also in search of a subject for his next project. Accordingly, while in the city, and despite his very limited English, he attended numerous plays, including three by David Belasco, whose Madame Butterfly he had seen staged in London in 1900. One of the Belasco productions caught his eye, The Girl of the Golden West, which is the general subject of this chapter.1

In particular, I am interested in exploring some of the ways that Belasco’s play and Puccini’s opera invest in modernist ideologies governing what Norbert Elias called the civilizing process.2 To get at the issue, I take a concentrated look at how both Belasco and Puccini envisioned time-space relations, with specific regard to how each understood their characters’ place in history (hence time), place (hence space), and, above all, nature, which I want to consider as both a problem for, and opportunity within, the civilizing process.

Belasco’s play and Puccini’s opera are situated within California’s Sierra Nevada, perhaps the most dramatic landscape in the American West. The setting more or less constitutes a character in its own right, one of overwhelming power that shapes both action and people. Nature, that is, is the organizing metaphor of both the play and the opera—and as Michel de Certeau remind us, metaphors “are spatial trajectories.”3 Both works, literally and figuratively, are also travel stories: literally so, to the extent that the characters are very much on the move, having traveled across the seas and the continent to get

1

THE CIVILIZING PROCESS

Music and the Aesthetics of Time-Space Relations in The Girl of the Golden West

There are days which occur in this climate, at almost any season of the year, wherein the world reaches its perfection; when the air, the heavenly bodies and the earth, make a harmony, as if nature would indulge her offspring.

RALPH WALDO EMERSON, “NATURE” (1836)
to California to participate in the gold rush; and figuratively in that the characters journey toward moral redemption—though redemption is more a fundamental trope in Puccini’s opera than in Belasco’s play. The Sierra Nevada for Belasco and Puccini alike is a material site, inhabitable. It is likewise a psychic site, existing within the realm of the imagination as an ethereal reality.\(^4\)

In late-nineteenth-century America, no landscape received greater attention than the West, particularly the mountain West of the Rockies and the Sierra Nevada. The California mountains especially claimed a central place in the American imaginary, not least because of the imposing challenge to cross them to get to the promised land. The fate of the Donner Party during the winter of \(1846–47\), whose history quickly passed into legend, drove home the point. The gold rush, which quickly followed the discovery of gold in January \(1848\) at Sutter’s Mill, fully established the Sierra Nevada in the forefront of national consciousness, creating new western mythologies fueled by the promise of fortunes literally waiting to be scooped up from the gravels of the American River.

The actual mountains and their unimaginably gigantic trees produced particular awe (fig. 4), with Yosemite (early on known as Yo-Semite) serving as the focal point of the
larger whole. Indeed, the mountain West’s visual splendors seemed to defy the human imagination, though hardly for want of trying to come to terms with them. In 1864, Lincoln designated Yosemite as a wilderness preserve, the nation’s first; it was made a national park in 1890. In the decades that followed, Yosemite was endlessly written about, painted, photographed, and of course visited as a major tourist attraction. Currier and Ives produced lithographs marking a sense of Yosemite’s spatial vastness, just as photographers produced stereographs of views carefully selected to exploit the three-dimensional effects of the medium—a kind of vicarious substitute for the reactions of awe commonly experienced by visitors.5 In the immediate aftermath of the Civil War, Yosemite took on greater significance as a site of healing and reconciliation—a park in place of a battlefield, in the parlance of Frederick Law Olmsted.6 The writings of John Muir (1838–1914) in particular best expressed the spiritual impact of the Yosemite landscape.7

The American West had its dystopian realities, of course, as the fate of Custer demonstrated to a shocked nation in 1876, the news reaching the East, ironically, during the July 4 centennial celebrations. But the promise of American singularity on the whole played well against inconvenient arguments to the contrary, as the reception history of Frederick Jackson Turner’s famous paper read to the American Historical Association in Chicago in 1893, “The Significance of the Frontier in American History,” makes clear. “American social development,” Turner wrote, “has been continually beginning over again on the frontier. This perennial rebirth, this fluidity of American life, this expansion westward with its new opportunities, its continuous touch with the simplicity of primitive society, furnish the forces dominating American character. The true point of view in the history of this nation is not the Atlantic coast, it is the Great West.”8

The sublime drama of Turner’s Great West was ably captured by painters, among whom Albert Bierstadt (1830–1902) had few equals, though his fame was short lived and his critics, from the start, many.9 From his hand came monumental imaginings of a western Eden. As with Belasco and Puccini, three tropes in particular organize Bierstadt’s visionary representations: monumentality, unimaginably vast space (the effect of both often amplified by the enormous size of some of his canvases, the largest being nine and a half feet high and fifteen feet wide), and light (figs. 5 and 6). These tropes served as metaphors for the untrammeled purity of a world in a state of nature and as signs of nature’s redemptive agency for man after the fall from grace. In nationalist terms, Bierstadt’s images visually certified claims to the mythologies of American singularity. Here was a landscape at once aged and yet at the seeming moment of its creation, a visible sign of the “divine endorsement of American progress.”10

The West did not actually look like what Bierstadt painted, not least on account of the multiple perspectives encompassed in his canvases, a visually jarring effect that invites the eye to search out a compositional unity that does not in fact exist (a fact that sorely irritated his contemporaneous critics, who regarded the violation of convention as mere incompetence). But whatever his shortcomings as a painter, Bierstadt pedagogically led
viewers toward a particular way of seeing the western mountains. In the words of Lee Clark Mitchell, Bierstadt “imagined the West as a dramatic (and therefore moral) terrain rather than a geographical one.”11 His vision was of a spectacular and visually magnetic western sublime, whose results he put on display in exhibition galleries in the East and also made available in mass-produced prints.12

Anthropologist Mary Douglas points out that societies are imagined to have form, boundaries, and margins; in short, they have structure. But where society’s energy concentrates is “in its margins and unstructured areas,” precisely where “any structure of ideas is vulnerable.”13 It is this vulnerability that Belasco and Puccini confront via the liminal terrain of the American West, specifically the imagined boundaries separating civilization from its absence, and culture from nature.14 Both men perceived the West as a space defined by its relation to time—historical time and the now-time of early-twentieth-century modernity. Time—like nature, like space—as the product of history, is “a social institution.”15 Elias marks modern time as “the symbol of an inescapable and all-embracing compulsion.”16 Time in modernity has a life of its own; it reaches beyond our capacity to control it. Belasco and Puccini confronted modernity, despite the conservatism and even regression evident in their work. Their West was at once in the past, as a narrative of the gold rush, and a present, the literal reality of two worlds in stark
opposition: the East of frenetic, ultra-modern Midtown, and a West whose wildness was by then in actuality already well tamed apart from a few sanctioned sites set aside as national parks for eternal preservation, in regard to which Michael Johnson marks what he terms “postfrontier anxiety”: “A manifold phenomenon, it involved as well remorse, envy of forefathers, doubts about the nation’s democratic spirit and masculinity, misgivings about the future of industrial civilization—but most strongly that nostalgia for a
return to nature. And nature meant, eminently, the West, a place now conquered, much of its wildness lost and gone forever.”17

Modernism, Stuart Hall has suggested, is “modernity experienced as trouble.”18 Belasco and Puccini were reluctant, conflicted modernists, both romanticists at heart yet well aware of the new cultural world as articulated by Virginia Woolf. Modernist Belasco virtually fetishized electricity for what it offered the theater; modernist Puccini, who collected fast cars and speedboats, experimented with post-Romantic sonorities learned from Debussy and Strauss. Belasco left California for New York as a young man and rarely returned to his wild western roots; Puccini, whose life as an opera composer demanded endless journeys to urban centers, could never get back to his country estate fast enough to keep him happy.19 Both men, in their lives and in their work, were deeply ambivalent about modernity—an ambivalence that was manifested in the internal contradictions marking their respective settings of The Girl of the Golden West.

Belasco and Puccini both addressed the cultural displacements of modernity; both looked back in time to a defining phenomenon of modernity, the American westward expansion and the formation of an imagined sublime. They envisioned a paradise, but a modern one in which presence is already marked by the promise of absence and expulsion. Nevertheless, their narratives staged reconciliations, however momentary, of subject to object, man to woman, and culture to nature. Each sought to bind what Adorno called nature’s wound, though in the end the wound continued to bleed, which is precisely what guarantees their work a degree of historical, modernist authenticity.

The Girl of the Golden West was something of a cultural phenomenon in the early years of the twentieth century. The play itself was highly successful in the years following its 1905 opening (fig. 7). In 1911, Belasco produced a novel based on his play, a year following the première of Puccini’s opera (fig. 8).20 The book remained in print for some years thereafter and was reissued again in 2007. Its first printing included four colored illustrations of important scenes; later printings replaced the illustrations with stills from a now-lost film of the same title released in 1923 (fig. 9). In fact, between 1915 and 1938 four American feature films followed in the wake of Belasco’s play. The first, in five reels, shot in eight days in California in 1915, was by Cecil B. DeMille, then working in only his second year as a director.21 The 1923 silent in seven reels, directed by Edwin Carewe, starred popular actress Sylvia Breamer; and this film was remade in 1930 with sound, in ten reels, with Ann Harding in the title role (fig. 10). The 1923 film had a popular-music spin-off, a tune called “The Girl of the Olden West” (fig. 11), its cover sheet reproducing Breamer’s face hovering over a mountainous landscape.22 Other music publishers readily cashed in with songs whose titles closely approximated the title of Belasco’s play (figs. 12 and 13). The 1938 film was a Nelson Eddy–Jeanette MacDonald musical, the score by Sigmund Romberg.23 (There were other gold rush films throughout this period, Chaplin’s 1925 film concerning the Yukon Klondike narrative being the best known.) In sum, The Girl of the


*Figure 10*


*Figure 11*

Golden West spawned an opera, a novel, pop tunes, songs and song recordings, and four films (five, if you count a 1943 Italian version). It gave its name to a country music duo, the Girls of the Golden West, Dolly and Millie Good, who achieved considerable fame in the 1930s. The Girl of the Golden West was also the subject of souvenir ephemera, including postcards and stereographs (fig. 14), souvenir-type paintings, cigarette-pack insert advertising (figs. 15 and 16), an inscribed ceramic vase in the shape of the Girl's bonneted head, and even a decorated metal fruit tin—objects that crop up from time to time on eBay. In brief—and this is my point—the subject touched something of a collective cultural nerve.

BELASCO

David Belasco (1853–1931), born in San Francisco to immigrant parents, was involved in the theater throughout his childhood in the West. By the time he moved to New York in 1884, he was already widely experienced as an actor, prompter, and stage manager. In New York, where he remained until his death, he made his reputation as a producer, director, and playwright.24

First and foremost, Belasco specialized in a form of melodrama that emphasized naturalism. Indeed, every theatrical resource at his disposal was put to use in an effort to capture what he regarded as the essence of whatever place and time his plays represented. His often hoary plays, now notable for the strikingly old-fashioned tropes conventional to melodrama, were staged and acted out with the precision afforded by the most modern of stage technology, itself infected with an acute awareness of photographic and cinematic indexicality. Indeed, his special effects (and there were many) were as good as, or better than, those in period movies. His painted backdrops were sometime put in motion, not very different from what audiences experienced with the painted scenery of early cinema. Belasco’s wind devices replicated blizzards, produced howls, and blew window curtains. He used lighting to effect fire that was indistinguishable from the real thing—indeed, so threatening that authorities were once called to investigate.25 He even attended to the olfactory. In one play set in a forest he sprinkled pine needles on the stage so that when the actors moved about, crushing the needles, the scent wafted into the auditorium.26

The printed scene descriptions for each act of The Girl of the Golden West run to as many as five pages. The play’s electrical plot occupies eight pages of precise settings and cues. The list of properties requires seventeen pages in all, enumerated in nearly exasperating detail.27 The devices and materials for the second-act snowstorm, requiring a full page of instructions, provide the flavor of his concern for naturalism. The list includes wind machines, an air tank used to produce a “large shriek of wind,” another with whistle attachments “for canyon effect of wind,” and a “cluster of whistles attached to pipe and running to bellows under [the] stage.” To further effect howling wind, he calls for an electric fan to blow both the curtains of the bed canopy and some tissue paper stored under the bed. He lists rock salt to simulate sleet, to be used with “two snow effect appliances,” the salt to be blown against the cabin windows so that it can be both seen and heard. The instructions call for two offstage piles of snow, presumably flour, to be set in front of two fans and blown into the crevices between the cabin’s log walls. Other snow reservoirs are placed elsewhere. When Sheriff Rance brushes snow off his overcoat, some of it landing in the fireplace, a hissing sound is to be made. And so on. These and other storm effects in the second act required thirty-two stagehands to activate, all of it coordinated by a conductor who could be seen by the each member of the stage crew.

Music was integral to Belasco productions. “If the play has a musical accompaniment,” he wrote, “I read it to the composer I have engaged, indicating its moods and feelings. He
must interpret every scene and speech as if he were writing the score for a song.” Belasco incorporated a great deal of music into *The Girl of the Golden West*, a combination of on- and offstage singing of thirteen old songs (including “Camptown Races,” “O Susannah,” “The Days of ’49,” “Sonora Slim,” “Echoes of Home,” “Clementine of ’49,” and “Ole Dan Tucker”), employing two tenors, a baritone, and a bass, sometimes in costume on stage and at other times in the pit. An orchestra played a prelude (171 bars) at the start and also provided accompaniment to the male quartet between acts. Accompaniments were provided by the string orchestra, as well as by banjo and guitar, either solo or with orchestra. There are parts for other instruments as well—flute, clarinet, cornet, trombone, mandolin, accordion, piano, and drums—though their use was more restricted. Numerous brief musical cues occur throughout. The play’s original music was composed by William Wallace Furst (1852–1917), who also arranged orchestral versions of some of the old tunes.

Between acts, song medleys were performed. *The Girl of the Golden West*, in four acts, tells the story of a California mining camp during the gold rush. Called Cloudy Mountain, the settlement is populated solely by men, apart from one young woman, who until well into the play is referred to only as the Girl. Her name is Minnie and she runs the Polka saloon, the setting for the first act. Minnie is undereducated, virginal, and either soft or hard, as her situation requires. She has a heart of gold, and a ready trigger finger. Everyone loves her, and several of the boys are in love with her. The Girl, while saddled with the clichés of the domesticized professional virgin, is in other respects very much of the New Woman mold: self-reliant, fearless, and readily adaptable to changing situations. The local law, in the person of the sheriff, Jack Rance, intends to have her as his wife. He is the play’s heavy. The Girl’s (eventual) love interest is the road agent Ramerrez, a bad guy with his own heart of gold, who introduces himself to Minnie as Dick Johnson in act one, immediately sparking her libido. He first comes off as something of a dandy; he drinks his whiskey with water, which marks him as unmanly in the eyes of the miners, who take their drink neat. His half Mexican parentage renders him an Other. Belasco nonetheless represents him as a man of moral integrity, despite his profession and his ethnic heritage, which counted for little at the turn of the century. Minnie, played by the famous actress Blanche Bates, whom Belasco especially favored, mothers the men and guards their gold.

Act one, which occurs at night, establishes Minnie’s role in the camp. Johnson, intending to rob the gold, cases the joint, but sees Minnie and decides to ply for different treasure. They dance together; they fall in love.

Act two opens in the mountains, in the Girl’s log cabin at one o’clock that same night. Dick comes courting. A storm ensues, the full force hitting just as the pair kiss for the first time. Soon thereafter, Rance and his posse arrive looking for Ramerrez, having learned of Johnson’s real identity and suspecting him to be with the Girl. Minnie gambles at poker for Johnson’s life; if she loses, the sheriff gets Johnson for a hanging and Minnie for his wife. The Girl wins, but only by cheating.


Act three, set in the saloon’s adjacent dance hall a few days later, involves the recapture of Ramerrez and the passing of sentence for his execution by hanging. Minnie, coming in on the scene moments before Dick is to be killed, pleads for his life and wins over the miners.

Act four, about a week later, is set on “the boundless prairies of the West.” Little more than a tableau, the scene lasts only a couple of minutes, during which the reunited lovers bid final farewell to the Sierra Nevada and California as they head east for their uncertain future.

*The Girl of the Golden West* opened at the new Belasco Theatre in Pittsburgh on October 3, 1905, and in New York at the Belasco on November 14 the same year; it played for 224 performances. It was mounted again on Broadway during the 1906–7 season, with Bates still in the title role. It was this staging that Puccini witnessed. Thereafter, for three years, the play was extensively toured in the United States in dozens of towns and cities from the East Coast to the Midwest. It was also performed internationally, as far afield as Tasmania in 1909.

The remarks that follow are largely confined to two brief episodes from the play: its wordless opening, accompanied only by music, and its close, also with music, in the brief act four epilogue. What interests me is Belasco’s evocation of nature, which I will connect to my larger concern with time and space relations.
PICTURE PERFECT

The representation of nature, which literally bookends the play, is constituted as an allegorical sublime within and against which the characters measure their existence. The play opens with house lights up during an upbeat musical prelude provided by the pit orchestra. The stage is hung with a painted curtain, illuminated by footlights, representing a scene with large evergreens in the foreground and mountains at the back (fig. 20). A brilliant sunset shows just above a ridge of mountain peaks, its impact heightened by a spotlight. Near the end of the prelude, four bars into the last section, marked cantabile (a 3/4 moderato, serving as the Girl’s motive), the house goes dark and the prelude draws to a close, segueing to music in a quite different mood, an andante misterioroso played by muted strings. After four bars, the curtain is raised in darkness, in preparation for what Belasco called the “First Picture.” The music continues until the play proper begins.

The First Picture moves from day to night; the sunburst is gone, replaced by a moon transparency and soon followed by the ascent of an exactly described panorama. Here, in excerpt, is how Belasco outlines it (unfortunately, no photographs exist, although the production was otherwise extensively documented):

In the far distance a wild range of the Sierras peaks. . . . Near R., on a mountain, a cabin is seen, a winding trail coming up to it. We see that it is cloudy about the mountain. The mountains behind this cabin continue to a great height. . . . It is night and the moon hangs low over the mountain peaks. The scene is flooded with moonlight, contrasting oddly with the cavernous shadows. . . . The sky is very blue and cold. The snow gleams white on the highest peaks. Here and there pines, firs, and manzineta [sic] bushes show green. All is wild, savage, ominous. In certain places the mountains are very jagged—one deep sheer ravine is suggested, the purple mists rising up from the bottom. There is a faint light twinkling in the cabin of the girl. As this first impression gradually moves up out of view of the audience:

SECOND PICTURE: The exterior of the “Polka” saloon . . .

Belasco’s two “pictures” are, of course, moving painted panoramas. Panoramas had already been used in the U.S. theater for decades, but the canvas rolls were conventionally at the back of the stage, not at the front, and the movement was normally lateral. Belasco’s panorama moves upward, rising slowly and just behind the stage apron, revealing the described scene little by little, and in precise coordination with lighting cues, such as the light showing from inside the little cabin. The effect, which in cinematic terms would be a tilt down, was striking. That is, we first see the mountainous peaks, after which the view slowly descends to the valley in which the Cloudy Mountain camp is located.

The act curtain and subsequent panorama are critically important to the allegory that organizes the play’s narrative. What will become apparent by the end of the play is that
the sun marks several interlocking tropes. Fundamentally, Belasco’s use of sunlight works to reverse time: it rolls history backward. The stage is first seen with a metaphorical setting sun (the act curtain), which registers an ending and the uncertainty of what will follow, followed by the moonlight represented in the panorama. The sunset and moon glow, however inadvertently, mirror Frederick Jackson Turner’s then-recent proclamations about the closing of the American frontier. Darkness dominates in *The Girl of the Golden West*; indeed, the play’s first two acts occur on the same night. Act three, while set in the morning and brightly lighted, is metaphorically dark, the mood brightening only near the end when the hanging is averted; and this in turn leads to the epilogue, where Belasco’s handling of light matters far more than the short scene’s very few words.
Act four occurs at sunrise, completing the reversal of time while alluding to new life and a hoped-for better future. But this ending nonetheless reiterates a profound uncertainty. To be sure, the lovers face the sunrise, but they are moving against the tide of American history as laid out by Turner: they are heading east, away from the new and toward the old. More about this presently.

The opening panorama compresses time, just as it constitutes a journey. It begins, so to speak, in the clouds and drops to the mountain peaks; only gradually does it admit a human being, indirectly via the Girl’s cabin, and all she represents. It eventually “arrives” by leaving the sublime for something of the ridiculous, a mining camp in societal gender disorder, a perverse family: one Girl and her odd all-male brood.

Belasco invokes loss, history, and remembering before the curtain opens by means of a text that he quotes in the play’s program and again as his novel’s epigraph. The modernity of his subject lies less in its account of a localized version of manifest destiny and more in its insistence on society’s nonentities, people who perhaps were not so much forgotten as never remembered, people, as it were, “known only to God”: “In those strange days, people coming from God knows where, joined forces in that far Western land, and, according to the rude custom of the camp, their very names were soon lost and unrecorded, and here they struggled, laughed, gambled, cursed, killed, loved and worked out their strange destinies in a manner incredible to us to-day. Of one thing only are we sure—they lived!”

Thus, before the curtain goes up, Belasco evoked a kind of freeze-frame in a look back on the young nation’s still-younger days. His epigraph acknowledged loss (this is conventional to melodramas) and posited the West in 1905 as a site of enormous distance, but one less in miles than in time, hence history. Time consciousness, that is, girds the primeval nature that will shortly unfold to a troubled modernity defined by human anonymity, greed, and violence, which together seem to trump the allusions to pleasures and happiness. In brief, time and nature are in conflict. What the panorama and the epigraph together reinforce is a sense of loss, which the epigraph especially overdetermines. The gold rush, a mere fifty years in the past at the time of the play, presents itself as lost in the mists of legend. It can now only be imagined. Although by 1905 the West was well familiar to most Americans, Belasco’s invocation pushes it back into a territory of the unfamiliar, as though it were a foreign geography. In brief, Belasco sought first to estrange the now-familiar, then to allegorize it, and thereafter to render it precise via a material naturalism, only in the end once more to throw all of it back into uncertainty, in a kind of misterioso complaint against the very modernity that he otherwise technologically fetishized.

LIGHTING OUT

Belasco’s act four two-minute epilogue marks the departure of the lovers onto what Belasco describes as “the boundless prairies of the West. On the way East, at the dawn of
a day about a week later.” Act four is a looking back at paradise following the couple's self-imposed expulsion. The setting carried heavy weight for Belasco, despite its brevity and brief text, apparent not least in the number of photographs he had shot of it, proportionally much larger than those taken of the other, far longer acts.

The dialogue is little more than an afterthought, giving excuse for the scenery, the accompanying music, and, above all, the lighting. The music is a reprise of the tune “Old Dog Tray,” first heard at the play’s start and one that Puccini will make good use of as well, at least so far as the text is concerned, though he chose a different melody. It is a song about the loss of home. In act one, it is the home back east that has been left; at the end, it is the West—which is to suggest that there is no home.

The principal “character” of act four is light, on which Belasco lavished a great deal of attention, not to mention money. He understood light as a kind of hermeneutic medium marking the passage of time, through which changes are enacted—changes in his characters and changes in the nature that surrounds and shapes them. He employed light with great subtlety as regards both intensities and colors, which he conventionally carefully blended. Belasco’s light is never static. In order to effect nuanced change, he used extreme care in both the placement and types of lighting. The result resonates with Bierstadt; for Belasco and Bierstadt alike, light is at once expressive, dramatic, and apparently symbolic, however vaguely, an abstract entity that serves to define a kind of spiritual essence of both men’s sense of the western landscape.

As dawn breaks, the Girl tells her lover that the foothills are growing fainter, that soon they will be invisible. “That,” she says, “was the Promised Land.” Dick, rather less convincingly, assures her that “the promised land is always ahead,” a remark that is coordinated with the first glimmer of the rising sun seen on the foothills’ foliage. All the while, from first curtain of the act and then via a series of four gauze scrims rising one after another, the scene very gradually lightens, the sky blues, clouds roll slowly across the sky (projected from a stereopticon cloud machine), and shadows begin to form. The final, fourth gauze remains in place, keeping the scene in a kind of soft haze. Nowhere else in the play does Belasco call for this effect. By employing it here, the naturalism so consistently employed to this point throughout the play is retired; in its place, allegory is visually referenced as both time and space begin to be distanced. History retreats as we are reminded less of the past and more of loss, even as a new day dawns. The scrim emphasizes the allegorical function of the scene’s lighting, a modern expulsion from the promised land intermixed with the American myth of dynamic striving, but tinged more with regret than any convincing sign of conventional optimism about lighting out for the territory. As the first rays break above the hills, the Girl acknowledges the new day: “The dawn is breaking in the East—far away—fair and clear,” she intones. The lovers in turn acknowledge “a new life!” And then the Girl speaks her last lines as she moves to embrace Johnson one final time as the curtain falls: “Oh, my mountains—I’m leaving you—Oh, my California, I’m leaving you—Oh, my lovely West—my Sierras!—I’m leaving you! [Then turning to her lover, she closes] O, my—my home.” Minnie, dramatically gesturing (well captured in the act four
photographs; figs. 21 and 22), looks toward the distant mountains one last time, sadly acknowledging what she has surrendered.42

The ambiguity of the play’s ending is made clearer in Belasco’s novel. Acknowledging the personal paradise of the couple’s mutual love, in the same breath Belasco describes their location “at the edge of the merciless desert, stretching away like a world without end.”43 He then elaborates: “The Girl had ever been a lover of nature. All her life the mystery and silences of the high mountains had appealed to her soul; but never until now had she
realized the marvelous beauty and glory of the great plains. And yet, though her eyes shone with the wonder of it all, there was an unmistakably sad and reminiscent note in [her] voice.44

As she looks back on the faded view of the distant mountains, and as she acknowledges the need to look ahead, not back, her tone is one of “resignation.” She thinks of all she has left, the people and the place, and thinks of them, as she puts it, “like shadows movin’ in a dream—like shadows I’ve dreamt of.”45 Her words account for Belasco’s use of the final scrim, keeping things hazy to the play’s end.

PUCCINI’S ACOUSTIC WEST

La fanciulla del West (fig. 23) was the first world première in the history of the Metropolitan Opera, with music by the foremost living Italian composer. The stakes were high for all concerned; accordingly, no stone was left unturned to assure both notice and success.
Once the opera was secured for the Met (it was not a commission), the company’s publicity apparatus was set in high gear, beginning already in May 1910, nearly nine months before the December 10 opening, the result being stories in many of the New York dailies.46 The lengthy review of the first performance published in Musical America labors to reproduce an elevated sense of general anticipation. It opens as follows:

New York, Saturday, Dec. 10, 1910—7 p.m.—In hundreds of homes of society people, singers, musicians, artists, authors, bankers, lawyers, doctors, business men, men-about-town, they are getting ready for an event. Fine gowns are being laid out, exquisite toilettes are being prepared, the finest jewels are brought forth from safety deposit vaults. Florists are rushing off orders. Not alone the musical and social world, but the great world of business, the world where men think of millions, has been moved to the core. Even cold-blooded “society” has determined to be in the opening and to forget for once the unwritten law which makes it “bad form” to appear in the “horseshoe” [of the Met’s auditorium] before 9 p.m. [thereby staging a fashionably late entrance].47

The account of the evening makes clear that seemingly everyone of importance was present. By 8:15 p.m., the following:

It is a most extraordinary and cosmopolitan audience! Sailing down the aisle with an immense diamond tiara is Mrs. Clarence Mackay, and not far from her is Andreas Dippel’s beautiful wife. On another aisle you will see Louise Homer, the great singer, and her husband, the equally great composer.

Presently as you look round again you will make up your mind that everybody who is anybody is here. Look up and you will see J. Pierpont Morgan in a box in the horseshoe. There sits Josef Hofmann, quite subdued, with his studious face; Mme. Gadski and her husband. Over there is Humperdinck, whose new opera, like Puccini’s, will be produced for the first time in this very auditorium before many nights are over. In another place you see Blanche Bates, who created the original role of Minnie in the play. [And on it goes.]48

The first performances, with Emmy Destinn (fig. 24), Caruso (fig. 25), and Pasquale Amato in the principal roles and Toscanini conducting, were a stunning success, with dozens of curtain calls for the cast and conductor, as well as for Puccini and Belasco, who had coached the acting of the principals and chorus.49

La fanciulla del West is an instantiation of the West of the imagination, though not with regard to a sonoric invocation of natural sounds but instead addressing nature’s abstract temporal-spatial dimension in a state of crisis. The natural space—indeed, the natural paradise—of Puccini’s West, like Belasco’s, is mediated by the rawest form of cultural modernity registered in class distinction, ethnic and racial tension, economic destitution, jealousy, hatred, loneliness, greed, violence, and injustice. That is, in this opera the eternal sameness of a would-be perfect nature is confronted by modern history.
Emmy Destinn (1878–1930) as Minnie in La fanciulla del West, New York, Metropolitan Opera House (1910). Photo credit: The Metropolitan Opera Archives.

The limitless space of nature meets modern time. This is the opera’s modernity and of course its challenge to address.

Music has long played an important role in myriad practices associated with cultural and ethical assessments of time and its use or abuse. Music itself functions as a timing device, either to work with or against the clock time that in modernity so completely controls people’s lives. Experienced in time and, in essence, of time, music invites a heightened experience of, but also an engagement with, temporality. Adorno once suggested that music has time as its problem and that its responsibility is to “act upon time, not lose itself to it.” In *La fanciulla del West* Puccini addresses time’s impact on the civilizing process. The lengthy “Preliminary Note” appended to both the libretto and score describes the opera as “a drama of love and of moral redemption against a dark and vast background of primitive characters and untrammeled nature.” The opera, that is, works toward a reconciliation, but one, as it turns out, with a considerable price to pay.

Modernity emerged through the conjunction of space and time recognized as interrelated parameters for development—dynamism supplanting stasis. Since music is by definition both a temporal and spatial art, it is hardly surprising that it was early and often called upon to represent modernity—often to cheer modernity onward but sometimes to engage it critically. One response, often in protest, was the valorization of nature, increasingly placed in binary opposition to culture; this was especially evident in the music of the nineteenth century—the music, that is, that accompanied the industrial revolution and the hegemony of industrial capitalism.

Puccini noted that he intended his music as an evocation of the California primeval forest dominated by giant sequoias, in a mountain range that includes the highest peak on the continent outside of Alaska—none of which he had ever seen (he knew the Sierra Nevada from pictures; indeed, for the third act he provided his librettist with a postcard and photographs of the gigantic trees). For Puccini, the West was experienced only at the greatest geographical and psychic distance, which itself may well have helped to provoke his fascination for it, alongside the challenge to invoke in sound a sense of its vastness as well as its seeming untamed essence—as it were, space remaining in the State of Nature.

In *La fanciulla del West*, Puccini had to deal with the seeming boundlessness of pristine western nature for the better part of two and a half hours, since everything that happens in the opera in one way or another is determined by this overwhelming setting; indeed, the characters themselves are transformed by the locale, which is largely foreign to them—until, at the end, the setting metaphorically morphs into the homeland that the lovers must leave, and very much against their will.

*La fanciulla del West* is different from Puccini’s other mature works in that it begins with a one-minute prelude of thirty-four bars. Within that time frame Puccini introduces several tropes that govern the whole, foremost among which is an evocation less of nature than of nature’s force, specifically in relation to human beings. The prelude constitutes a musical struggle, which in the end instantiates resolution but only in the final triumphant chord, introduced with an abruptness that does not fully convince.

Marked *allegro non troppo, con fuoco,* the prelude begins almost brutally, a *fortissimo* with upward sweeping arpeggios, wind- and stormlike, climaxing on augmented chords held with fermatas, then falling back, only to repeat, in quick succession—all of it very un-Puccini-like, a kind of sonic calling card telling his auditors that what they are going to hear is not Puccini as usual. The prelude alternates among three musical ideas, the second, a whole-tone motif, associated with the lover’s first kiss (act two, rehearsal no. 27 m. 3 and thereafter),53 and it is this motif that gyrates in competition with the opening chords (ex. 1). The third motif, whose entrance is somewhat jarring, in syncopated cake-walk rhythm, is heard only three measures prior to the final chord; later it sounds again with the first appearance of Dick Johnson (ex. 2). The first two motifs unite nature with the Girl, less in competition and more to show what is immanent to both: strength, uncertainty, changeability, and forces that cannot be contained.54 Into this alliance comes the man, rhythmically swaggering, a smart-ass know-it-all who, in a confrontation with both nature and the Girl, will himself be remade, be redeemed.
Everything about the prelude projects multiple acoustic instabilities—of nature, character, experience, and emotion. The *tutti* ending, marked *violento*, ends on a C-major chord with considerable finality, which turns out to be ironic. No such musical triumph ends the opera. The final chord of act three, a barely audible E-major triad, played only by the first and second violins and bass, proclaims nothing and evokes only uncertainty. (In like fashion, the opera’s first act concludes on a C-major chord, with the addition of the second and seventh scale degrees; in three bars the final chord diminishes from *fortississimo* to virtually inaudible, in apt reflection of all that remains unresolved.)

*La fanciulla del West*, more than any other opera Puccini had previously written, is filled with dissonance, often with delayed resolutions or simply without resolution. Major and minor seconds and ninths are common, as are tritones. Vocal lines have wide tessituras (Minnie’s is more than two octaves), and the vocal writing, especially for the Girl, is peppered with wide intervallic leaps. Vocal outbursts at high dynamic levels are common as well, more so with Minnie than with her lover, though he too is assigned passages of great drama. All of this carries over into the orchestra, Puccini’s largest prior to *Turandot*.

The orchestra essentially serves as another character, something like a Greek chorus, whose musical metaphors are registered in the score with a striking range of markings, and especially ones that indicate force, violence, and brutality, as Mosco Carner has duly noted: *allegro incisivo, allegro brutale, allegro feroce, come gridi* (like shouts), *con strazio* (tearing), *robusto, strepitoso* (noisy, boisterous), *staccatissimo, martellato* (hammerlike), *marcatissimo*, and so on. In like fashion, tempos change frequently, and the shifts deliver a jolt.

In brief, *La fanciulla del West* is an opera whose modernity is marked by instability and rapid change; accordingly, there are relatively few moments where action stops for the commentary typical of arias. Indeed, the lack of conventional arias was a regular complaint in the opera’s early reception: Puccini did not sound like Puccini was supposed to, evident in the fact that very few of the opera’s “numbers,” apart from “Ch’ella mi creda,” have been individually recorded.

Puccini unquestionably understood tonality as a kind of sonic geography, a historical map tracing modern subjectivity and desire. But in *La fanciulla del West* he exploited tonal instabilities, laying bare his self-consciousness about the limits of conventionalized musical practice to represent the modern world. Sonically speaking, he recognized tonality’s closing frontier and elected to head west, however tentatively, toward the outer boundary of the familiar, seeking the energy available at the margins of acoustic modernity.

The time was apparently ripe for this quest. Just a few years earlier, in 1905, Richard Strauss had done much the same thing in *Salome*, in which, however, the margins are sexual rather than geographical. As Lawrence Kramer has suggested, modernity is the subtext of the exotic distance of *Salome*, which places the opera at “modernity’s cutting edge.” *La fanciulla del West* places a bet on modernity (and modernism) as well, although its investment in shock hardly achieves Strauss’s level (no striptease, no severed head).
DISTANCE AND DISTANCING

Time, critical to the cultural discourse of La fanciulla del West, is compressed. Whereas Belasco’s play involved the passage of a week, Puccini’s opera unfolds in twenty-four hours, but it is not a day in the Aristotelian sense of dramatic unities. Puccini’s time compression is one manifesting the urgencies of what Benjamin later coined as Jetztzeit, a Now-Time that exceeds what is contained in the concept of Gegenwart. The opera’s time compression, in sync with the rapidity of change in modernity, is neither celebratory nor historicist.

Among the musical devices that define the opera’s allegory, one in particular stands out. Puccini made the decision to evoke the vast California wilderness by producing for his audience a sense of distance, and by that means to articulate not only space but also—and crucially—time and memory. Puccini’s West, above all, evokes time through space; it is this relation that controls his understanding of the West’s essence—as would be the case a generation later in the films of John Ford, albeit by means of the backdrop of Utah and Arizona’s Monument Valley rather than the Sierra Nevada.

The opera’s characters enter as if in a never-never land: when they arrive, they bring history with them; when they leave, history exits as well. What remains is a natural paradise, yet it is a paradise only so long as it is unpeopled: when it is only imagined or remembered. Puccini marks the phenomenological spatial excess that defines everything important about the opera by means of what I will call the fade-in and fade-out. Repeatedly, his characters are heard acoustically well before they are seen on stage, and the voices are invariably on the move, as though making their way through the deep forest. Indeed, the opera’s first voices come from offstage, what Puccini describes as voci lontane, distant voices, and to achieve this effect he sometimes altered what Belasco called for in the play and later described in his novel. Thus at the opera’s start, and at a distance, the miners returning to camp late at night boisterously greet each other with hellos, and then one of them quotes a tuneful lament, also about distance—and loss: “Là lontano, là lontan, quanto piangerà! . . . ” (roughly: “Back home, far away, she’ll cry for me”). This same trope is soon thereafter repeated, and amplified, in one of the opera’s few real arias, “Che faranno i vecchi miei.” Choosing an aria form, one whose character is strikingly simple and folklike, in an opera that otherwise virtually abandons conventional arias, marks a past, a history—that the opera itself musically supersedes. The aria is the most strikingly old-fashioned music in the entire opera, a nostalgic sonic look-back. It is sung, andante tranquillo, by the camp minstrel, one Jake Wallace, a character based on a camp singer whom Belasco knew from his youth in California. In the play, Jake Wallace is inside the Polka saloon when he sings his song. In the opera, by contrast, Jake starts the song as he approaches slowly from offstage. He is physically distant from the homely saloon, and what he sings immediately marks lontano, in a slow-moving and sorrowful lament about faraway home, sad parents, and a faithful dog that might no longer recognize him. Before long, the rest of the men echo the lament in chorus, the previous hard-edged boisterousness turned soft (act one, rehearsal nos. 20–22). The loss, that is, is general, just as the distance is
overwhelming, to the point that one of the miners, young Larkens, breaks down crying. The song's sentiment, its lontano, its distance, marks a general condition. What begins the opera, as it turns out, will be precisely what will end it as well.65

TURNING IN CIRCLES

By the opera's end, Minnie is a woman, no longer the child of nature who in act two tells Dick about her innocent life in the mountains, galloping her pony among the flowers—flora that do not in fact grow in the Sierra Nevada (Belasco gets the plants right; Puccini's librettist cluelessly substitutes jonquils and carnations and, for good measure, adds jasmine and vanilla).66 Minnie's morph, however, begins much earlier. In the first act, she and Dick come together physically for the first time in a dance, a ritual metaphor of love and lovemaking, in essence establishing a bond that will make a new home—later, if temporarily, staged in the second act where the relationship is sealed with a fateful kiss, one duly and dramatically marked in the orchestra and by Minnie's high-C reaction (ex. 3). In the play, Minnie declines a waltz, saying she doesn't know how. Instead she polkas, or as she puts it, "polkys."67 William Furst, Belasco's composer, initiates a waltz tune at first mention of that dance, only to break it off for the livelier and rather less romantic polka. Puccini dispenses altogether with the polka, writes a waltz, and alters the story further by having the Girl apologize that she has never once previously danced
at all. She is nonetheless game, and, to the accompaniment of the men singing along softly and clapping the rhythm, the pair comes together. The tune as first sounded, to which Minnie and Dick dance, is folksy and disarmingly simple—to a fault. As the miners chime along, even lightly tapping their feet as they sing and clap, the orchestra softly evokes the rhythms associated with the gliding and whirling movements common to the dance. Dick and Minnie literally turn in circles, the uncertain outcome of their “progress” thus duly marked, even though they cannot take their eyes off each other.

The waltz marks a future and potential. The simple tune, like the budding relationship between the man and the woman, can become much more than it currently is, and the tune can be the acoustic vehicle for both producing and reflecting the change. The cultural associations between love and the waltz are soon thereafter exploited, as soon as the lovers-to-be are alone for the first time near the end of the act. Here the melody immediately gains the character necessary for advancing the relationship. It’s first heard in the orchestra, with a sweet edge provided by seconds in quarter-note suspension. The waltz has become lovely and, in a word, poignant (ex. 4, mm. 5–6). Soon thereafter, in a one-minute arietta, Dick sings the entire melody to Minnie, with a text that speaks of dancing, hearts, trembling, and strange joy. In essence, taking the lead in the ritual dance of love, he acknowledges the thrill of sensing her trembling during their embrace. The tune, first heard in E major for the dancing, migrates to A major for the second iteration, and finally to G-flat as the arietta (ex. 5). In Belasco’s play, at the moment when the Girl sets eyes on Dick, her first utterance is an inarticulate “H’mpl!,” followed quickly by a single word: “Utopia!” Puccini’s waltz accomplishes the same effect, but rather more gradually.

**AMBIGUITY**

Distance is evoked throughout the opera, and to its very conclusion. Thus, near the end, Minnie, at first singing offstage as if from some distance, rides into the scene astride a
horse, accompanied in the orchestra by a repeated staccato rhythm meant to resonate with the sounds of the galloping animal. Her voice, audible well before she herself is visible, dramatically excites the miners (act three, rehearsal no. 29 m. 1 to 31 m. 8). Sheriff Rance, sensing an impending rescue, repeatedly demands that Johnson be hanged immediately.

The rescue comes, of course, and that triggers a final lontano, but in this last instance, what has been near will now become far; accordingly, sound will little by little fade away to nothing. In other words, the opera is book-ended by two forms of distance and distancing. At the start, action and history, so to speak, come onstage for us to experience; sounds get louder, becoming increasingly audible. At the end, distance increases and action ceases into a staged stasis once the lovers depart, their voices trailing off into the haze of history.

In each of the three acts, offstage voices reach our consciousness as if from nowhere, from great distances, slowly—ever so slowly—approaching the acoustic proscenium separating opera from audience. In one sense, the obvious one, they approach camp from working their staked claims, but in another sense, they approach as if being recalled from a faded memory of a time long past—spatial and temporal nostalgia in the heart of bustling 1910 Midtown, the epicenter of industrialized modernity in its prewar self-satisfied self-confidence. The gap between the New York setting of the world premiere and the scene onstage, in the first really major opera about America, carries a significant ideological burden. The vastness of the opera’s natural setting holds out the promise of an American paradise: eternal, without boundaries, a utopia of striking visual splendor—and this despite the fact that the old-growth forests of the Sierra Nevada had already long since been savaged (figs. 26–28). In other words, Puccini’s West of the imagination, aesthetically speaking, provides modernity’s rapaciousness with the deniability it ethically craved.

The voices in the wilderness and from the past make their appearances, speak their peace—and then vocally fade away. Puccini’s repeated use of motifs from “Echoes of Home” more or less constitutes the opera’s defining leitmotif, the citation marking a perfect coincidence of time, space, and place, on the one hand, and memory in relation to loss, separation, and alienation, on the other.
**Figure 26**


**Figure 27**

The third act of the play is set in the dance hall attached to the Polka saloon. Puccini set his final act in a forested wilderness. (Roughly speaking, Puccini collapsed Belasco’s third and fourth acts, eliminating much of the third.) But in this instance nature matters so much that an overdetermined invocation is essential. As he put it to Giulio Ricordi: “I have a grand scenario in mind, a clearing in the great Californian forest, with colossal trees” (fig. 29).73

The opera’s ending, a departure, is, perforce, “happy.” The scene occurs at dawn with the sunrise, thus reversing the sunset with which the opera opened.74 Minnie, whom we hear well before we see her, rides in, vocalizing her desperation and fury, Valkerie-like—in essence so as to ride off forever with her lover. (As every operagoer knows all too well, Puccini conventionally killed off his sopranos, whereas no one actually dies in La fanciulla del West, odd for a western.) Sonora, one of the miners, helps to convince his mates that the lovers are deserving; he hands off Dick to Minnie, fittingly to fragmentary strains in the orchestra from the act one waltz music (act three, rehearsal no. 44 mm.1–5). The lovers astride their horses slowly depart, their voices only very gradually fading as the dawn breaks. In short, the lovers move forward into time and history—but not necessarily with a sense of new beginnings. The audience is left less with a climax and more with the dynamic decay and inevitable disappearance of music itself. With the music’s fading, as the miners lament Minnie’s loss via a fragment of tune from Jake Wallace’s act one “Old Dog Tray,” the opera’s own time fades into the timelessness of the vast forest that swallows up the departed lovers, who themselves head off into uncertainty, and in duet:

---

**Figure 28**

Addio, mia dolce terra!
Addio, mia California!
Beì monti della Sierra, nevi, addio!

The distinctive and often dissonant rhythmic percussiveness that marks much of the opera, and which delineates the real time experienced by the characters—modernity’s freneticism, or something like that—fades into a virtually rhythmless drone in the orchestra’s strings, as the lovers’ voices trail off above this line. They fade, like time and like memory; next to nature, they are nothing. Nonetheless, as they voice their goodbyes to their beloved California, what is striking is less the happy reunion of the young lovers—that fact seems rather an afterthought—and far more the sense that their mutual terrestrial salvation comes at a high price: their expulsion from a natural paradise that they had experienced in a perpetual state of paradox, if not dialectical contradiction. All that’s left are the ageless trees, timeless like the mountains.

The grand allegory that Puccini alleges represents the civilizing process, which is notably akin to what some years later Horkheimer and Adorno articulated as the defining moment of Western consciousness of what it is to be human. To be human, they suggested—that is, to be civilized—had been worked out at considerable cost. As they put it:
At the moment when human beings cut themselves off from the consciousness of themselves as nature, all the purposes for which they keep themselves alive—social progress, the heightening of material and intellectual forces, indeed, consciousness itself—become void, and the enthronement of the means as the end, which in late capitalism is taking on the character of overt madness, is already detectable in the earliest history of subjectivity. The human being’s mastery of itself, on which the self is founded, practically always involves the annihilation of the subject in whose service that mastery is maintained.77

Puccini’s opera, and for that matter Belasco’s play, acknowledge the reality that the civilizing process is not a guarantee of progress. Puccini’s Sierra Nevada itself reflects a wish rather than a reality. The forests of his imagination have not already been clear-cut, as was in fact the case; the landscape has not been mined for all it could give up in favor of the closing of the frontier. In one sense, of course, both Puccini and Belasco acknowledge this reality, if indirectly. They make their characters leave the promised land, thereby preserving the dialectic: Nature-Culture, barbaric-civilized, binaries whose collapse can be imagined but whose realization remains at best not more than a distant probability, perhaps ever out of reach.