

NAMES IN DAVID BELASCO'S GIRL OF THE GOLDEN WEST
AND THEIR USE IN PUCCINI'S LA FANCIULLA DEL WEST

Martha O'Nan
State University of New York
College at Brockport

Puccini's opera La fanciulla del west is based on David Belasco's The Girl of the Golden West. In 1910, the world première of La fanciulla del west took place at the Metropolitan. Toscanini conducted a distinguished cast including Emmy Destin, Enrico Caruso, and Pasquale Amato in the principal roles. The price of seats was doubled for the occasion. The opera was superbly staged with action-laden scenes such as eight horses galloping on stage in the last act. After the Metropolitan, the opera was taken to the Covent Garden and then to Rome.

In Belasco's play, none of the gamblers, sheriffs, bartenders, gold miners, strangers, and travelers use their real names as they go about cheating, keeping law and order, mining, and looking for a fortune during the Gold Rush days of 1849-1850 at Cloudy Mountain, California. They all stop by the Polka Saloon owned and operated by Minnie who goes under the name of the Girl. She is aware of the assumed names of her saloon clients and one day, rejecting their constant proposals of marriage, tells them to their faces, "not one of you travelin' under your own name."¹

Belasco wrote a brief paragraph about each character. "Sonora Slim is very tall, emphatic" (p. 7). Sonora means sonant, voiced, uttered with vocal cords, and is suggestive of Sonora, Mexico. Slim is derived from Middle Dutch slimp 'crooked, bad.' A suggestion of his reckless, rowdy living comes from the song "Sonora Slim Blew into Town" which is sung at the beginning of Act II of the play and is one of the many old-fashioned songs hummed or played by the orchestra: "Camptown Races," "O Susannah," "Wait for the Wagon," "Clementine of '49," and "Echoes from Home" — Puccini uses the last song in "Che faranno i vecchi miei" ('What will the old folks do'). Another character is the Sidney Duck who is "fat, unctuous, cowardly, cheating, fawning, greasy, and utterly ~~without principles~~ — highly colored, as though he liked whiskey" (p. 7). He receives his personal name from Sidney, Australia, one of the many places he has visited, and his "family" name Duck comes from his character which has aspects of dead duck, lame duck, sitting duck, queer duck or duck in the sense of disappearing in the face of danger or observation, or in the sense of duck 'to dive,' an action descriptive of his working down in the gold mine or perhaps referring to such activities as jumping from a ship and swimming ashore in order to avoid immigration officials. There are no doubt other meanings. The name Billy Jackrabbit has totemic humor about a character who has long ears and runs around with various squaws, Wowkle being the latest, and who "forgets" on food and whiskey at the Polka Saloon. Billy is "a full-blooded Indian. . . . He never looks a man in the face when he talks to him — looks the other way or

down, at his feet; is shifty, beady-eyed, lazy and lying; toes in" (p. 7).

Not all of the characters in Belasco's play were used by Puccini's librettists, who, in general, gave the characters lines of standard Italian rather than an imitation of the folksy and frequently coarse language of the California forty-niners. In his score, Puccini is mindful of the meanings of the characters' names. An example is found in the Prelude which ends in the syncopated rhythm of a Spanish-American dance in order to foreshadow Ramerrez, a highwayman who has just committed a big hold-up in the vicinity of the Polka Saloon and who is being sought by a posse and an agent from Wells-Fargo. At the Polka Saloon, there is a notice of \$5000 reward for the bandit.

In Act I of the opera, a young man of gentlemanly appearance arrives at the Polka Saloon where he announces to the faro players that his name is Johnson. At this moment, the music repeats the Spanish-American dance of the Prelude in order to inform the audience that Johnson is Ramerrez. Ramerrez is suggestive of the Spanish surname Ramirez "son of Ramiro, a first name that describes the bearer as 'illustrious, militant, and famous.'"² The form Ramerrez is used by the Wells-Fargo agent and all the characters in the opera, a linguistic error committed perhaps because they do not know Spanish. But later in the opera, Ramerrez, by using the same form, reveals that he is not Spanish, that he has given himself a Spanish-sounding alias, and that like the other characters he is not "travelin'" under his own name. He is forgiven by the heroine, Minnie, for destiny has forced him to

become a highwayman, a robber like Victor Hugo's Hernani. Ramerrez:

(Johnson) says to her:

Sonø Ramerrez; nacqui vagabondo:

era ladro il mio nome

da quando venni al mondo.

· · · · ·³
Era quello il mio destino!

I am Ramerrez: I was born an outlaw:

my name has been thief

from the day I was born.

!

Such was my destiny!

Minnie, too, is not traveling under her family name because she does not know her father's real name. In Belasco's play, she says that his name was Smith:

My father's name was Smith. . . ,But wasn't his
right name. . . .His right name was Falconer. . . .

I think that was it, -- I ain't sure. That's what
he said it was. (p. 77)

Her father was a gambler according to her nostalgic song in the opera about her childhood in a smoky little room where her mother served the drinks and her father dealt the cards. Her last name is not needed by the miners and customers in the Polka Saloon -- all men who want to marry her and who are happy to call her Minnie, a pet-form of Mary.

Soon she falls in love with Ramerrez, the highwayman who would have been caught quickly at Minnie's cabin by Sheriff Jack Rance and

bartender Nick had Nick not saved him. Nick, a surname from Nicolaus and associated with St. Nicholas, the patron saint of children, sailors, pawnbrokers, and wolves, plays a "saintly" role as he serves whiskey to "save" men from their unhappy thoughts. But Sheriff Rance realizes that Ramerrez is in Minnie's attic when blood begins to drop from the bandit's wound. Then Minnie saves Ramerrez by cheating the sheriff in a card game. Soon afterwards, Sheriff Rance becomes the "shield" (from rand 'shield') of Ramerrez and does not reveal his whereabouts.

But Ramerrez is soon caught by the Wells-Fargo agent, and in the end it is Minnie who saves him and goes away with him for a new start in life under other names. In the years to come, no doubt, like Sonora Slim, the Sidney Duck, Billy Jackrabbit, and the other characters, she will become lost in history for not traveling under her own name. She represents

people coming from—God knows where, [who] joined forces in that far western land, and according to the rude custom of the camp, their very natures 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 today. (p. 3)

Martha O'Nan
State University of New York
College at Brockport

NOTES

¹David Balasco, The Girl of the Golden West (New York: Samuel French, 1915), p. 36. Subsequent references to this work will appear in the text.

²Richard D. Woods and Grace Alvarez-Altman, Spanish Surnames in Southwestern United States (Boston: G. K. Hall, 1978), p. 115.

³Libretto, La fanciulla del west, by Puccini, with Renata Tebaldi, Mario del Monaco, Cornell MacNeil, Giorgio Tozzi, cond. Franco Capuana, Chorus and Orchestra Academia di Santa Cecilia, Rome, London Records; A 4338, n.d., p. 16.