MORE SOPRANO, PLEASE, MORE TENOR

My new favorite Prague ticket taker is the one
to whom I present myself for the Czech Philharmonic
concert which started at 7:30, only I have arrived
at 8:00, since the majority or at least the plurality
of every other musical event I have ever been to
in my entire life has started at that hour, and this is
because he, the ticket taker, says, “The second half
is the best—that’s the Dvořák.” The first half
was Brahms, about whom the less said, the better.
Well, not really. I like him fine now, though not
as much as I like Dvořák. And even when I thought
I didn’t like Brahms, my dislike wasn’t so strong
that I didn’t have to be reminded of it from time
to time. One Christmas my hardshell Baptist
brother-in-law is visiting with his six-year-old son,
and we are decorating the tree, and one
of the decorations is a tiny St. Peter’s Cathedral,
and the little boy says, “What’s this?” and Barbara
says, “It’s a church, a Catholic church,”
and the little boy says, “We hate Catholics,
right, Dad?” Back then, that’s the way I felt
about Brahms. Like everybody, I love Bach,
Beethoven, and Mozart, but whenever
I found myself flipping through the program
as I waited for the orchestra to begin and saw
Schubert, Brahms, Mahler, and the like,
I always pointed to Brahms’s name and said,
“We hate Brahms, right, Barbara?” and she
would say no, we just don’t like him as much
as we do the others. Actually, Brahms was pretty cagey:
when his Piano Concerto No. 1 in D minor, Opus 15
premiered in 1859, the audience didn’t like it
because it had an at-that-time-unfamiliar symphonic
character, and the people in the posh seats were
expecting something they were used to. The 25-year-old

Brahms thought better of his work than they did,
though, so he kept working it into performances
over the next several decades until it became
a standard in the repertoire of concert pianists
and today is one of the most popular piano
concertos of all time. Oh, wait, now he’s my hero.

I used to think I didn’t like Brahms, but now I do.

In truth, my new favorite Prague ticket taker
is my only Prague ticket taker, since I’ve been to
that storied city just once and heard the Czech
Philharmonic just once and spent the rest
of my days there wandering the streets and thinking
about music and the lives of the people
who make it and my own life and pausing from time
to time to drink slivovitz and eat sausages,
dumplings, strudel. The more you know,
the more you sympathize: the great love
of Brahms’s life was Clara Schumann, whom
he met when he was twenty and she not only
14 years older but married to Robert
Schumann as well as the mother of his six children

and pregnant with a seventh—talk about unattainable!
Yet Brahms soldiered on, producing one work
after another and convincing people to love them,
using the method outlined above. Actually, the one
composer for whom my affection has never wavered
in the least is Puccini, and of all his monumental works—

_Turandot, Tosca, Manon Lescaut_—
the most majestic is La Bohème, of which there is no
greater tale of woe, as Shakespeare said
of his own great tale of woe, Romeo and Juliet,
which itself became an opera by Charles Gounod,
though not a very good one or at least an opera,
which music critic Sutherland Edwards called,
following its first London performance in 1867,

“always pleasing, though seldom impressive.”

La Bohème is always impressive. Even bad
productions of La Bohème are good, though one
in my experience stands head and shoulders
above all others. You know the story: Rodolfo
the writer is freezing to death in his Paris garret
when Mimi, his neighbor, pops in to borrow
matches but faints and is brought back to health
by Rodolfo, who falls in love with her and vice
versa, even though Mimi is dying of tuberculosis.
The usual operatic ups and downs ensue, meaning
Rodolfo and Mimi are parted, though they are
reunited in the final act, at the conclusion of which
Mimi sinks into a happy sleep from which Rodolfo

expects her to awake. She doesn’t. Are you
familiar with the expression “not a dry eye
in the house”? That phrase was not coined
expressly for La Bohème, but to no opera,
symphony, novel, lyric poem, or epic poem is it
more applicable. And that’s just the basic version,
the standard one, the La Bohème you’d see

a hundred times were you to attend that many
stagings of Puccini’s immortal work. But once
I saw what I might call the one-hundred-and-first
version, a version with not one but two Rodolfos.
How is that possible, you say? It’s possible because,
as the curtain rises, the first character you see
is not a starving artist in a Paris garret but an old man,
one who appears to have succeeded in life, given his lovely clothes and the fine room in which he sits, but an intensely reflective and downcast old man who disappears after a few minutes, whereupon the opera proper begins, though the old fellow reappears at key moments as Rodolfo and his friends make merry, the lovers part and reunite, Mimi dies, and Rodolfo cries out her name as though a spear has entered his heart. And that’s when you realize that the old man is the wiser, sadder Rodolfo looking back on the young and happy one and pondering the follies of his younger days yet their richness as well, and as your eyes fill and your breath begins to come more quickly, you can’t help thinking that the old timer is not just one player in one opera but is all of us, since we’ve all loved and lost, and then you think, that old man is like me, or if you actually are me, you think that old man is Johannes Brahms, staggering half aware through his world and ours as one century puts its head on the pillow and another wakens. In America,

Geronimo surrenders. Walt Whitman dies, as do Melville and Frederick Douglass. In Saint Petersburg, Alexander II is assassinated when a bomb is thrown into his carriage. Belgium and Italy extend their empires in Africa. Austria-Hungary forms an alliance with Germany, and the world turns its bloody face toward World War I. Vincent

Van Gogh puts down his brush and kills himself in a wheat field, and Brahms can do nothing but think of Clara Schumann. “What have you done to me?” he says in a letter. “Can’t you remove the spell you have cast over me?”

Clara dies in 1896. Brahms writes a final cycle of piano pieces for her, and in less than a year,
he, too, is dead. Thank you, Giacomo Puccini.
Thank you for teaching me to love Brahms,
for reminding me that we’re mortal, that all lives change,
that one lover will say goodbye to the other.
Thank you, artists of every land and time.
Hearts break, you say to us. Love shatters,
you say, and the pieces fly everywhere.