

# Chewers by Masticadores

Editor: Nolcha Fox// Director of Masticadores: J Re Crivello

## “Sweet Melancholy” by Matias Travieso-Diaz

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*The “Adagietto” [of Mahler’s Fifth Symphony] demonstrates  
anguish and ecstasy  
— the ways in which they exist together, the reason love is so  
bittersweet.  
Coco Rich*

The last time the couple listened to Puccini’s *La Bohème* together was right before she was diagnosed with the cancer that, a few months later, would kill her. Afterwards, he could not bring himself to see the opera or play a recording because every note of the music brought back a hundred nostalgic memories of the times they saw the work performed onstage and the many times they listened to the opera at home or during one of their car trips. They had copies of their favorite version (featuring Jussi Björling and Victoria de los Angeles as Rodolfo and Mimi, the leading characters) on vinyl, cassette, and CD, so it was always available to play whenever they were in the mood to listen to it.

Every time they heard the opera, they were drawn to tears as they reached the scene at the end of Act 3, which takes place during a cold winter’s night. In that final scene, Rodolfo and Mimi – who recently separated – agree to come back together and delay their parting until the Spring: they sing in unison “*Ci lasceremo alla stagion dei fior*” – *We’ll part when it’s the season for flowers*. Their pledge is heart-wrenching because by that time, she is close to dying, and

both know it, yet they are willing to engage in a tacit denial of reality. They cling to their doomed love with a tenacity that is heart-rending because of its futility.

That was the progress of the main storyline in the opera – two lovers whose mutual affection knew no bounds except for the inevitable separation of death. As their final parting drew closer, the anticipation of sorrow must have accompanied their every embrace.

Many watchers and listeners to *La Bohème* are deeply moved by Mimi's death at the end of Act 4 of the opera. Our couple was less affected, because they already grieved at the lovers' futile attempt to ignore the fast-approaching ending.

Perhaps it is all in the nature of human love. Every embrace, each tender moment, is accompanied by an undertone of sorrow because the joy is transitory and will inevitably lead to a bitter longing later, once the lovers are separated.

And yet, people continue to fall in love and, more often than not, remain steadfast in their affection, even when their links to their loved ones are severed by death or prolonged absence. We do not know how Rodolfo of *La Bohème* would have carried on after losing Mimi. Being young, chances are that he would have transferred his affection to a new love, perhaps established a family, and raised children. Regardless, it is fair to expect that the image of the flower-making girl he once knew and loved deeply would remain embedded in his memory for as long as he lived.

Five years after his wife's passing, the husband in our couple drew enough courage to listen to *La Bohème* once again, and experienced an ineffable sense of longing, yet derived some quiet pleasure at remembering their shared emotions in response to the drama. He went on to survive his wife for a number of years and continued to lament her death until his final day, but the very pain caused by her remembered absence was a tribute to their love and was accompanied by many cherished memories, like that of listening to *La Bohème* together – a sweet melancholy that made the remembered loss a bit more tolerable.

Therein lies the genius of the human spirit: we are born with the ability to experience love and comprehend the magnitude of the loss once a dear one leaves us. At the same time, we are also gifted the ability to remember, even if imperfectly, our interactions with the departed one and are thereby able to mitigate our sorrow.

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DEATH, LA BOHÈME, LOVE