

TURANDOT:
ENIGMA VARIATIONS
(COMPLETE TEXT)

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INTRODUCTION: AN OPERA ABOUT ENIGMAS CREATES TWO NEW ENIGMAS

Giacomo Puccini's final opera, Turandot, occupies a special place in operatic history.

It is the grandest of his operas, spectacular and immense in scale, his one opera that approaches the scope of traditional "grand opera." Turandot ventures into the realm of mythic characters, rather than Puccini's customary world where he portrayed the lives and emotions of everyday men and women.

Musically, Turandot represents a great advance both in orchestration and harmony, a synthesis of contemporary techniques developed by Debussy and Stravinsky with Puccini's own very personal musical style. It retains Puccini's essential lyricism and includes some of his most heart-wrenchingly moving music.

Turandot represents Puccini at the height of his powers. Even critics like Julian Budden, in his article in the New Grove Dictionary of Opera, conclude that "Turandot is rightly regarded as the summit of Puccini's achievement."

Turandot's special place in operatic history is not derived solely from its musical merit as the final masterpiece of the most popular operatic composer. It is the last great work of the Italian operatic tradition. It certainly is the last Italian opera to make its way into the standard repertory. The ever-valuable website Operabase lists Turandot as the 18th most performed opera in recent years, notwithstanding the enormous resources required to put it on and the scarcity of singers capable of singing the title role. To put this popularity in perspective, Turandot is performed with greater frequency than any opera by Wagner or Richard Strauss, and more often than Verdian masterpieces such as Otello, Falstaff, or Un Ballo in Maschera.¹

The great line of Italian popular operatic masterpieces, starting with Monteverdi at the beginning of the 17th century, comes to an abrupt end with the 1926 premiere of Turandot. William Weaver finishes his book The Golden Century of Italian Opera by stating that, notwithstanding various ongoing efforts to create new Italian operas, "the glorious line, Rossini, Bellini, Donizetti, Verdi, came to a glorious conclusion" with Turandot.² Recognizing this, William Ashbrook and Harold Powers subtitle their study of the opera "The End of the Great

¹Another way of putting the popularity of Turandot in perspective is to note that in the recent five year period covered by the Operabase analysis, there were more performances of Turandot than of all the operas of all living composers combined.

²W. Weaver, The Golden Century of Italian Opera, Thames and Hudson, 1988, at 242.

Tradition.”³

Turandot is an opera whose plot centers on the solving of riddles. Yet Turandot itself raises two enigmas of its own.

Turandot was not merely Puccini’s last opera; it was an opera he worked on for years but never completed. Puccini began thinking about this opera in March, 1920, but it remained unfinished when he died more than 4 ½ years later on November 29, 1924. More than a year earlier, by September, 1923, he had composed all of the music except for the concluding duet and final scene. He even had completed the orchestration for all of this music by March, 1924. But for months (and indeed years) he struggled over the text and the music for those final fifteen minutes. He rejected at least four versions of these scenes.⁴

Suffering from throat cancer, Puccini went to Brussels in November, 1924 for a harshly primitive (but then state-of-the-art) radiation therapy, carrying with him 36 pages of sketches for the final duet. The stress of the treatment caused his heart to fail.

Puccini’s family and Arturo Toscanini commissioned the composer Franco Alfano to complete the work working with these sketches and notes. The opera as generally performed today uses the shorter second version of the Alfano finale.⁵

This finale leaves many people unsatisfied, not merely because Alfano, respectable composer though he was,⁶ lacked Puccini’s special genius. The final duet was supposed to reveal the icy Turandot’s transformation from a cruel princess who condemns her suitors to death into a

³William Ashbrook and Harold Powers, Puccini’s Turandot, The End of the Great Tradition, Princeton University Press, 1991. See also, Gabriele Dotto, An Opera’s Many Enigmas, in Gabriele Dotto (editor), Turandot, Bertelsmann, 2015.

⁴Michele Girardi, Puccini, His International Art, University of Chicago Press, 2000, at 446.

⁵The original Alfano version once again became the focus of attention to a wider audience thanks to a study in 1979 by Jürgen Maehder. The additional text does make the ending somewhat more comprehensible, but some people object to the fact that this version adds music not suggested by Puccini’s final notes and sketches.

⁶Alfano had composed an opera set in India, La Leggenda di Sakutala, and his skill with “eastern” music was a factor in his getting the commission. The Puccini family did not want more famous composers like Mascagni, with a distinct style, to attempt the work. We are now rediscovering that Alfano was a composer of significant talent. A few years ago the Metropolitan Opera revived his opera Cyrano de Bergerac for Plácido Domingo. In 2017, the Wexford Opera festival put on to great acclaim Alfano’s earlier opera Risurrezione, based on the Tolstoy novel.

passionately loving woman. But this transformation is not credible in the standard performing version.

Further, there is a structural problem in the libretto which invests the empathy of the audience with a different woman, the slave girl Liù, rather than Turandot and her princely suitor. Consequently, in performance the audience is often left indifferent to the resolution of the relationship between the two principal protagonists.

Puccini's failure to complete the final scenes of the opera and the inadequacies of the denouement give rise to two intertwined riddles: (1) Why was Puccini unable to complete it? (2) Was there a more effective resolution to the drama, which Puccini struggled to find but failed to achieve before he died?

THE SOURCES FOR TURANDOT; SYNOPSIS OF THE LIBRETTO

Sources⁷

The legend of Turandot can be traced to one of the seven stories in the epic Haft Peykar (The Seven Beauties), a work of 12th-century Persian poet Nizami.⁸ This found its way into a Persian collection called The Book of One Thousand and One Days, which was translated in 1722 as Les Mille et un Jours by François Pétis de la Croix. In 1762, the Venetian playwright Carlo Gozzi adapted this story (with the locale now in China) as one of his *fiabe*, fairy-tale plays which tell fantastic stories while including traditional Italian commedia dell'arte figures who provided cynical commentary on contemporary life.⁹ Gozzi's fables were intended as a contrast to the more realistic comedies of manners written by his great Venetian rival, Carlo Goldoni.

⁷See generally the Wikipedia article on Turandot.

⁸The Persian origins of the tale are reflected in the protagonist's name. Turandot is derived from "Turan-Dokht" which means the daughter of Turan ("the Turk"), Turanian being a generic term for various Turkish speaking peoples.

⁹Gozzi's *fiabe* have been a significant fount of opera libretti. Wagner's first opera, Die Feen, was based on La Donna Serpente, and Alfredo Casella also wrote an opera based on this play. Prokofiev used L'amore delle Tre Melarance to create his Love for Three Oranges. More recently, Hans Werner Henze used Re Cervo as the source for Koenig Hirsch. Puccini was not the only opera composer to write an opera based on Turandotte; a few years earlier Ferruccio Busoni composed a very different Turandot in a one-act opera. And one of Puccini's principal teachers in the Milan Conservatory, Antonio Bazzini, wrote an unsuccessful opera called Turanda. Bazzini's music is all but forgotten today, but he was one of the composers whom Verdi invited to contribute to his project of a composite Requiem Mass for Rossini, writing the *Dies Irae* section. There is no evidence that Puccini knew his teacher's opera.

Puccini's friend Renato Simoni, who had written a play on Gozzi's life, suggested the story as a potential opera.¹⁰ Ironically, the version Simoni gave to Puccini was not the Italian play by Gozzi, but an Italian translation of an adaptation of the play by the classic German poet, Friedrich Schiller.¹¹ Puccini eventually became acquainted with Gozzi's original version.

The libretto created by Simoni and Giuseppe Adami contains important variances from the source plays, some of which were suggested by Puccini himself. These changes are highly relevant to the questions discussed in this essay.

Summary of Puccini's Libretto

Princess Turandot is the very beautiful and brilliant daughter of the Emperor of China. Unwilling to be married, she has persuaded her father to decree that Turandot will only wed a suitor of royal lineage who is able to solve three difficult riddles which she will propound. Any suitor who fails to solve these riddles will be executed. Many suitors have tried and failed. Their severed heads line the palace square in Peking.

The opera opens on the eve of the execution of yet another unsuccessful suitor, the Prince of Persia. The fickle crowd alternates between clamoring for the death of the suitor and pleading that he be granted clemency. In the crowd is an exiled prince, traveling incognito. He comes across his aged blind father, a king who had been deposed by a usurper. His father is accompanied by Liù, a slave girl who has cared for him throughout the painful exile. Liù explains to the prince that she has undergone this because once, long ago in the palace, the prince had smiled at her.

At the climax of the funeral procession, Turandot appears in all her beauty and regal splendor. She says nothing but gestures that the execution shall go forward. The unknown prince sees her and immediately falls in uncontrollable and irrational love. Neither his father nor Liù nor three cynical mandarins from the palace can deter the prince from striking the gong to announce that yet another suitor will risk death by confronting Turandot's riddles.

Before the entire court and the populace, Turandot explains that she rejects all suitors because of the memory of an ancestress who was brutally raped and murdered by foreign

¹⁰The subject of Turandot was "in the air" during the first decades of the 20th century. In 1911, the important German stage director, Max Reinhardt, created an innovative production for Berlin which subsequently was produced in London two years later. Puccini knew of this production and was very interested in what he had been told about its staging. Ferruccio Busoni composed a "Turandot Suite" in 1906, which he subsequently expanded into a one-act opera first produced in 1918.

¹¹The translator was Count Andrea Maffei, a very close friend and patron of Verdi's and the librettist for Verdi's I Masnadieri.

invaders. The unknown prince solves the three riddles. Turandot desperately pleads with her father to be spared from being thrown into the power of a man. At the climax of her plea, the prince says that he wants Turandot only if she truly loves him. He counters Turandot's riddles with one of his own – if she can discover his name he is prepared to die.

Turandot threatens dire punishments on the people if the prince's name cannot be discovered. The crowd captures his father and Liù, whom they had seen with the prince. Turandot appears and insists on torture to wrest the name from them. To spare the blind old man from torture, Liù says that she alone knows the name but will die rather than reveal it, believing that this will give Turandot to the prince. Unable to bear the torture, Liù grabs a dagger from one of the executioners and kills herself. Her body is taken off the stage in a funeral cortege.

This was the last music Puccini completed. The subsequent duet and final scene were composed by Alfano from Puccini's sketches.

Turandot is unmoved by Liù's death. The prince then rips off her veil and, ignoring her protests, grabs and violently kisses her. Turandot is shaken, but nonetheless tells the prince that he should go away, keeping his mystery with him. At this point, the prince voluntarily reveals that he is Calaf, the son of Timur. Turandot rejoices at knowing the answer to Calaf's riddle. She commands him to go with her before people and the royal court. In an exceptionally brief final scene, Turandot says "I know the stranger's name; it is love." The opera ends with general rejoicing and a full scale orchestral and choral recapitulation of the theme from the prince's third act aria, "Nessun dorma."

PUCCINI'S LIBRETTO SIGNIFICANTLY DIVERGES FROM THE SOURCE PLAYS

The drama composed by Puccini differs in several significant ways from the Gozzi and Schiller plays. Most of these changes can be attributed to Puccini himself and are highly relevant to the enigmas addressed in this essay.

Specifically, the libretto diverges from the source plays in four important ways: (1) The opera has mythic scope and is far darker in mood, depicting a sterile and frozen world devoid of love. (2) Turandot's character is deepened. She is both crueler and yet more understandable. Her icy rejection of men is explained with a highly symbolic motivation. (3) A character not found in any earlier version, Liù, is given the most emotionally moving music in the opera. (4) Calaf voluntarily reveals his name to Turandot, unlike the source plays where she obtains this secret through the treacherous assistance of a slave.

The Opera Becomes Mythic and Far Darker in Tone

Puccini is cherished as the composer of operas dealing with love among ordinary people, characters with whom everybody can empathize. Until Turandot he never ventured into heroic or mythic territory. But in composing Turandot he sought to do more than merely write a fairy-tale

opera, simply setting the Gozzi *fiaba* to music. Rather, in this work he approached a quasi-Wagnerian mythic theme – how love can redeem a frozen and sterile world.

Thus, the China which Puccini depicts is not just a far-away ancient land of fable. This China is a cruel place. It is a country permeated and oppressed by Turandot's fears and hatred. The opera begins with an execution. The set is littered with the decapitated heads of failed suitors. The crowd howls for blood and looks forward to the appearance of the executioner. In a raucous Stravinskian-like chorus, the crowd chants that the work of the executioner never flags in Turandot's realm. In Act III the same crowd will furiously insist that Liù and the old man must be tortured to reveal the unknown prince's name. At the beginning of the trial scene Emperor Altoum, Turandot's father, laments that "the holy scepter I clasp is steeped in blood!"

In the Gozzi play Calaf's infatuation with Turandot is achieved by the hackneyed device of the prince seeing her portrait. But in Puccini's opera his passion is aroused in a far different manner with a tremendous but troubling *coup de theatre*. Turandot never sings in Act I. Instead, the mob calls for her appearance at the culmination of the funeral procession for the Prince of Persia. She shows herself in all her regal splendor and beauty; her sole action is a brusque gesture confirming the death sentence. Calaf falls immediately under her spell, but it is a hallucination with a cold woman obviously capable of serial killings.

Turandot's first appearance is heralded by a full force rendition of the principal musical motive associated with her, an ancient Chinese song called "Mo-Li-Hua."¹² This theme recurs throughout the opera in various guises, including the climax of Turandot's plea to her father after Calaf has solved her riddles.

When this theme is heard for the first time, the accompanying words are highly significant. An off-stage children's chorus sings of a frozen world in which nothing blooms, and expresses the hope that Turandot can somehow end this sterility.

"There, on the Eastern mountains,
the stork sang.
But April blossomed no more,
and the snow didn't thaw.
From the desert to the sea,
can't you hear a thousand voices
sighing: 'Princess,
come down to me!'
All will blossom again,

¹²Puccini discovered this theme (as well as others used in the opera) on a Chinese mechanical music box which was brought back to Tuscany by an Italian diplomat who was a friend of the composer.

all will be resplendent! Ah.”¹³

Puccini retains the three *commedia dell'arte* figures used by Gozzi. But they are no longer sarcastic exiled Venetians making oblique commentary about Italian life and politics. Instead, they are three world-weary Chinese mandarins, at times sentimental but often cynical and cruel – urging Turandot to torture Liù and Timur and wrench out with pincers the name of the prince. They warn Calaf that the graveyards in Turandot's realm are already quite full with mad foreign suitors. In their “intermezzo” before the Act II trial scene, the mandarins sing of the brutality of the loveless, dying world in which they must perform their duties.

“Kill...execute...
Slaughter...
Farewell to love!
Farewell to our race!
Farewell, divine lineage!”

In his seminal biography of Puccini, Mosco Carner writes of Turandot's “somber grandeur, barbarism and cruelty ... the executioners, the crowds screaming for blood.”¹⁴

Other commentators have focused on the symbolic nature of the world of this opera and the story it relates. For example, Father M. Owen Lee sees Turandot as a classic mythic figure, an “archetype” of the Jungian “destructive anima” and the “threatening female.” He likens her to other legendary women who challenge “maturing men” with riddles or other contests (the Sphinx, Portia, Atalanta), several of whom also threaten men with death if they cannot defeat her.¹⁵ The opera is redolent of classic mythic themes of eros and thanatos, love/death.

In short, Gozzi's fairly simple and rather sarcastic fairy tale and Schiller's mildly philosophical story were transmuted by Puccini and his librettists into something quite different – what Michele Girardi calls “the nightmare world of the Peking people.”¹⁶

Turandot's China is cold and bloodthirsty and inhuman. Some commentators have seen this as a reflection of the impersonal “machine age” that took shape in the years before and

¹³English translation by William Weaver, as are all of the translations of the Turandot libretto. See http://www.murashev.com/opera/turandot_libretto_english

¹⁴Mosco Carner, Puccini, A Critical Biography, 2nd Edition, Holmes and Meier, 1974, at 462

¹⁵M. Owen Lee, First Intermissions, Limelight 2002, at 208.

¹⁶Girardi, *op. cit.*, at 461.

shortly after World War I, which was reflected in the Italian avant-garde Futurist art movement.¹⁷ It is understandable that some directors have produced the opera with the populace turned into half-machines with tools like saws and wrenches for hands.¹⁸

The changed tone of the libretto depicts a universe in which Turandot's rejection of love and men has attained highly symbolic importance, and the prince's attempt to win her love becomes the universal quest to redeem a brutal and sterile world.

Turandot's Character Is Developed and She Is Given A Highly Symbolic Motivation

Puccini's concept of Princess Turandot is far more complex and frightening than in any of the source materials. Yet she is also more understandable and, properly portrayed, more sympathetic.

Calaf justly calls her at the beginning of the final duet "Princess of Death, Princess of Ice." He says that her spirit is far removed from humanity in her own "tragic heaven."

Turandot's capacity for cruelty is beyond doubt and far more in evidence than in the Gozzi or Schiller source plays. We witness the execution of the Prince of Persia. We see the impaled heads of dozens of previous unsuccessful suitors. She employs violence and terror. When the crowd shouts encouragement to Calaf in the riddle scene, Turandot commands the guards to "lash those wretches." In Act III, the mandarins warn Calaf: "Stranger, you don't know what the Cruel One is capable of. You don't know." She threatens the populace with death if the prince's name cannot be discovered. Turandot orders that the secret of the prince be wrested from Liù by torture. M. Owen Lee writes that when Liù tells the princess that "love" gives her the strength to endure torture, Turandot repeats this "as if she had never heard the word."⁵² While everyone else is moved by Liù's suicide, Turandot is enraged, seizing a lash from one of the executioner's men to whip the face of the soldier who allowed Liù to seize his dagger.

Yet, this beautiful and clever princess is not insensitive to erotic attraction. From the first time I heard the opera decades ago, I was struck by the essentially romantic nature of the theme

¹⁷In program notes to Lyric Opera of Chicago's 2018 production of Turandot, Susan Halpern sees the opera as dealing with the "apparent decline of the human in the Machine Age." She purports to find a "mechanical nature" in Turandot, and says that "In the early 1920s, to be 'mechanical' was to be modern, if inhuman." Susan Halpern, Turandot: Modernity, Orientalism, and Love, Lyric Opera Program Note, 2018.

¹⁸See, e.g., the 2002 David Pountney production in Salzburg, 2008 revival available on a TDK DVD.

⁵²Lee, *op. cit.*, at 206.

for the section of her Act II aria that starts with the words “mai nessun m’avra” (“no man shall ever have me”). This was a young layperson’s observation, but it is confirmed by Girardi’s informed comment that this music “reveals her sensual side.”⁵³

From the very beginning, as early as March 18, 1920, Puccini wrote about Turandot’s “amorous passion ... stifled under the ashes of her great pride.”

In the final duet, while still urging the prince to leave her and go home with his secret intact, Turandot confesses that from the moment she saw him at the trial she was moved by his courage and assuredness. In her final aria she expresses her emotional dilemma:

“And for that I hated you...
And I loved you for that,
tormented and torn
between two equal fears:
to defeat you or be defeated...
And I am defeated... Ah!
Defeated, not so much by the trial
as by his fever
that comes to me from you!”

The greatest difference in Puccini’s characterization of Turandot is that he and librettists gave her a powerful, but highly mythic, motivation for her rejection of men.

After her total silence in Act I, Turandot’s first words in the opera are in her great aria “In Questa Reggia.” She tells the prince and the assembled audience of officials, nobility and the general populace that she is motivated by an ancient horrible crime – the rape and murder of her pure “sweet and serene” ancestress, Lo-u-Ling, by invaders who sacked the Chinese capital.

Turandot unequivocally blames all men, not just foreigners or enemies, for this atrocity. She emphasizes that this crime was committed “by a man, like you, like you, stranger.” In Girardi’s words, Turandot is continuously reliving this ancient traumatic event.⁵⁴

Warning the prince off, she cries:

“O you princes,
with your long caravans
from every part of the world,
who come here to try your fate,

⁵³Girardi, *op. cit.*, at 474.

⁵⁴*Id.*, at 448.

in you I avenge
that purity, that cry,
and that death!
No one will ever possess me!
The horror of her assassin
is still vivid in my heart!
No, no one will ever possess me!”

This is strong stuff, far removed from Gozzi and Schiller, where Turandot’s rejection of men is based on disgust at “così fan tutti”— *i.e.*, an intellectual disdain of men who are insincere in their protestations of love, a scorn for fickle men who regularly shift their attentions from one woman to the other. In the words of Mosco Carner, in the Gozzi play Turandot “resent[s] male treating of women as sexual playthings for satisfaction of sexual pleasure, and abandonment.”⁵⁵

William Berger recognizes the mythic-symbolic nature of this motive, seeing Turandot as “the blood-drinking virgin moon goddess who accepts the sacrifice of young men as her due, and the all-too human woman who is exacting revenge for a crime thousands of years ago that somehow lives on in her.” He finds that in essence she is “avenging all women for all the crimes committed on them since the beginning of time.”⁵⁶

To some critics, Turandot is a fierce feminist *avant la lettre*, courageously challenging the patriarchy. In her powerful polemic, Opera, Or the Undoing of Women, Catherine Clément writes:

“Peuh, they say peuh! What is Turandot? ‘A girl with a crown on her head and a cloak with tassels. But if you undress her, there is flesh, raw flesh, something inedible!’ Turandot is the raw savage girl of nature who refuses to be ‘cooked.’ The ones who are cooked are the girls who accept being warmed over the burning fire of love and marriage.”⁵⁷

For Clément, Turandot is struggling against a brutal male-dominated world. Accordingly, Clément views Turandot’s ultimate acceptance of Calaf’s love as an act of surrender:

“[The mandarins reveal] the truth about the cannibal struggle. Who will eat whom? The man who cooks the woman or the raw woman. The opera begins with a cannibal night.

⁵⁵Carner, *op. cit.*, at 462.

⁵⁶William Berger, Puccini Without Excuses, Vintage, 2005, at 281.

⁵⁷Catherine Clément, Opera, or the Undoing of Women, University of Minnesota Press, 1988, at 100.

When the opera is over day breaks at last over Peking, relieved of darkness. What has happened? Nothing. Just a woman who gives up and gets married.”⁵⁸

Remarkably, Turandot’s expression of her motivation was not part of the original concept for the opera. The first version of the libretto did not have “In Questa Reggia” and Turandot’s first words were the enunciation of the three riddles.⁵⁹

Regardless, with “In Questa Reggia” Turandot acquires a new psychological depth and her actions obtain a mythic credibility, if not our complete empathy.

Turandot is desperately afraid of a world in which men cruelly dominate women and physically abuse them. She abhors their lack of respect or understanding, and is terrified losing her dignity, autonomy and self-identity.

Her fears are not unjustified. We do not have to restrict our focus to her archetypical tale of Lo-u-Ling’s rape and murder. The pervasive male view of women in Turandot’s China is well expressed by the three mandarins.

As Clément noted, they try to dissuade Calaf from his pursuit of the princess by telling him that she is just a woman, a female body, nothing special. Using the crudest and most venal images, they rhetorically ask “What is Turandot” and answer “A female with a crown on her head!” Far better for him to get one hundred mistresses if he is unable to give up lust for women:

“Or else take a hundred wives, after all
the most sublime Turandot
in the world has a face,
two arms and two legs, yes,
lovely, imperial, yes, yes,
lovely, but still only legs!
With a hundred wives, you fool,
you’ll have a surplus of legs!
Two hundred arms,
and a hundred soft bosoms
scattered in a hundred beds!”

The mandarins envision a world free of Turandot’s feminist illusions, where finally Turandot will find herself bedded by “a husband who reigns over you!”

⁵⁸Clément seems to echo some of the theories of the noted anthropologist Claude Lévy-Strauss summarized in Lévy-Strauss, We Are All Cannibals, Columbia University Press 2015.

⁵⁹Ashbrook and Powers, *op. cit.*, at 66. I have not located any letters from Puccini discussing the decision to insert Turandot’s aria into Act II.

One of the earliest great interpreters of the role, Dame Eva Turner, hit precisely on Turandot's dread as the key to her character. She says that Turandot's "overriding emotion is fear, a fear from which all her other qualities stem."⁶⁰ This astute observation is a key to one of our riddles about the uncompleted finale.⁶¹

Turandot is terrified of what she calls "l'aspro dominio" – the harsh domination by men.⁶² This fear is expressed most fervently in Turandot's powerful plea to her father and the prince after Calaf has solved her riddles and technically won the right to have her as his wife.

"Don't cast your daughter
into the stranger's arms! ...
Your daughter is sacred!
You can't give me to him, to him
like a slave, ah no!
to die of shame!
(to the Prince)
Don't look at me like that!
You, who mock my pride!
I shall not be yours! No, I will not! ...
No, don't look at me like that;
I shall not be yours.
No one will ever possess me!
Would you have me in your arms
by force, reluctant and enraged?"

This overwhelming scene climaxes with a full scale rendition of Turandot's theme, immediately followed by Calaf's crucial renunciation of his victory and subsequent proposal of the riddle of his name (anticipating the melody of his third act aria "Nessun dorma."). All of this goes to the heart of what I believe is the solution to the ultimate enigma of how the opera could have been successfully concluded.

⁶⁰Ashbrook and Powers, *op. cit.*, at 161

⁶¹The intertwining of love and fear is a mythic concept. See Wagner's Siegfried where the eponymous hero finally learns the meaning of "fear" when he encounters Brunnhilde.

⁶²In her program notes on Turandot, Susan Halpern comments: "In Eastern cultural tradition male dominated society considered women inferior, at times enslaving them or using them merely for sexual gratification." Halpern, *op. cit.* This is, of course, true, but astonishingly misses the universal relevance of Turandot's fears; these sexist attitudes are hardly unique to "Eastern" cultures, as anyone reading today's newspapers can readily perceive.

Liù: The “Piccola Donna” Who Seizes Puccini’s and the Audience’s Affections

The Genesis of Liù

In terms of plot, by far the greatest change to the source plays wrought by Puccini and his librettists was the creation of Liù, the slave girl who hopelessly loves Calaf and commits suicide under torture rather than reveal his name.

There is no equivalent to her in the Gozzi or Schiller plays. In these plays one of Turandot’s slaves and confidantes, Adelma, both loves Calaf and hates Turandot. She tricks Calaf into revealing his name and betrays it to Turandot in the hope that this will enable Calaf to become hers. (At this point Calaf, by order of the Emperor, is no longer at risk of death if Turandot solves his riddle).⁶³ Unlike Liù, Adelma, is princess herself. She was enslaved after her father unsuccessfully attacked China, seeking revenge after Adelma’s brother, yet another failed suitor, was killed pursuant to Turandot’s edict. Adelma first encountered Calaf when he was in exile, a servant himself in the service of her father who had concealed his name and rank.

Almost immediately after a first expressing interest in Turandot story, Puccini came up with the thought of adding what he called a “piccola donna” (little woman) to the plot.⁶⁴ This was to become Liù.

Puccini wasn’t quite certain how Liù would fit into the plot. Initially, he thought that Liù might either arouse Turandot’s jealousy or perhaps try to persuade her to love Calaf (something akin to the function of Zulima, another slave in the Gozzi play). Gradually, he came to the idea that Liù would have to undergo torture and die to save Calaf. He discussed this new concept in a November 3, 1922 letter to his librettist Adami.

“I think Liù must be sacrificed to some sorrow, but I don’t see how to do this unless we make her die under torture. And why not? Her death could help to soften the heart of the princess.”⁶⁵

⁶³Gozzi, but not Schiller, gives Turandot another slave, Zulima, who resembles Liù a bit more. But she is not in love with Calaf and urges Turandot to yield to her inner passion for the prince.

⁶⁴Ashbrook quotes a letter to Simoni, dated August 28, 1920, as first referencing the new concept of a “piccola donna.” William Ashbrook, The Operas of Puccini, Cornell University Press, 1968, at 201. Julian Budden suggests that Puccini already had this idea by March, 1920. Julian Budden, Puccini, His Life and Works, Oxford University Press, 2002.

⁶⁵*Id.*, at 206.

Puccini's Need for A "Piccola Donna"

Unlike the icy princess, Liù is a typical Puccini heroine, the character he needed in order to be inspired to write his most heartfelt music. As Mosco Carner writes:

“[T]he axis round which the imaginary world of his operas revolved was woman in true love, a heroine whose whole existence is consummated in her boundless devotion to the man.”⁶⁶

Carner finds that Manon, Mimì, Butterfly, Minnie, and Magda and the others, “are gentle, tender, affectionate and childlike, and they love to the point of self- sacrifice.”⁶⁷

Puccini insisted on having such a character in Turandot. He wrote to his librettists “Create something for me that will set the world weeping. They say that sentiment is a sign of weakness, but I like weakness!”⁶⁸

Vincent Seligman, the son of Puccini's closest confidante, Sybil Seligman, writes that “it is certainly true that his strongest inspiration derives from female loves and female suffering.”⁶⁹

Conrad Wilson is blunt on Puccini's need for a character like Liù in Turandot. “Puccini's ability to identify with his heroines, of cause, was a major feature, perhaps *the* major feature— of all his operas.”⁷⁰ Accordingly, “[Puccini's] recurring demands for what he described as ‘some sorrow’ was what made his inspiration tick. Because Turandot did not conform to this type, he needed Liù to help out.”⁷¹

Similarly, M. Owen Lee saw Puccini 's creation of Liù as a turn to “the character who never failed him in the past ... the suffering heroine.”⁷²

⁶⁶Carner, *op. cit.*, at 175.

⁶⁷*Id.*, at 274-5.

⁶⁸Budden, *op. cit.* at 422.

⁶⁹Vincent Seligman, Puccini Among Friends, Macmillan, 1938, at 54. This book contains much of the extensive correspondence between Puccini and his mother, and his translations of these letters are used herein.

⁷⁰Conrad Wilson, Giacomo Puccini, Phaidon Press, 1997, at 95.

⁷¹*Id.*, at 219.

⁷²Lee, *op. cit.*, at 203

Puccini clearly felt this need for a character like Liù, even if he could not precisely articulate its necessity. Shortly after reading the Schiller and Gozzi plays, he wrote Adami “you must rear another figure. I mean – I can’t explain.”⁷³

Outside of being extremely lovable and intensely loving, the typical Puccini heroine has a strong streak of self-abnegation, a diminished sense of self-worth. She reaches her true fulfillment only through her self-sacrificing capacity for love.

This is a trope running through the texts of his operas starting with his first masterpiece, Manon Lescaut. Manon responds to Des Grieux’s impassioned pleas to flee with him by saying “I am but a poor girl, no glow of beauty shines upon my face, my destiny is ruled by sorrow.” In La Bohème, at the end of the beautiful Act I aria in which Mimì attempts to describe herself, she meekly concludes that she is just an annoying neighbor who surely must have disturbed Rodolfo. In La fanciulla del West, Puccini did create an apparently strong heroine. Minnie keeps a saloon, has won the respect of the rough and tumble miners in a virtually all male environment, will cheat at cards to save her lover, and rides to his rescue gun in hand. Yet, at the moment she first encounters love, she characterizes herself as “a poor girl, obscure and worthless,” unworthy of a man with Dick Johnson’s presumed education and sophistication. In his bittersweet operetta, La rondine, Magda surrenders her dream of love and happiness because she feels herself unworthy and incapable of what she believes her lover’s mother wants in a daughter-in-law. She chooses her own great death-like abnegation (“strazio ... così grande che mi pare di morire”) because she feels she is not fit to enter Ruggiero’s family home.⁷⁴

Mosco Carner quotes the ditty of the street singer in Il tabarro as “the fundamental theme of Puccini’s operas,” the motto for all of Puccini’s self-sacrificing “piccole donne” heroines: “Chi ha vissuto per amore, per amore si morì” that is, “to live for love means to die for love.”⁷⁵

With a Freudian analysis, Carner concludes that Puccini was controlled by a feeling that

⁷³Julian Budden, Turandot, article in New Grove Dictionary of Opera, Stanley Sadie, ed., MacMillan Reference Ltd, London, 1998.

⁷⁴Critics have noted the parallels between Magda and Violetta in Verdi’s La Traviata. Both are Parisian courtesans who unexpectedly find a love they never believed was possible for them. Each sacrifices that love to protect the presumed needs and values of their lover’s family. But there is a crucial difference. Before yielding, Violetta fiercely resists the imprecations of Alfredo’s father with a strength and dignity that move him to honor and respect her. By contrast, Magda is not compelled by any demand from Ruggiero’s family to abandon her happiness. She does so out of her own sense of unworthiness. In this respect, she is a typical Puccinian “piccola donna.”

⁷⁵Carner, *op. cit.*, at 432.

love implicates guilt, which requires punishment for the beloved.

“[T]he Puccinian heroine is almost invariably a woman who by virtue of her very devotion unwittingly accumulates a heavy load of guilt which she must be made to expiate by slow suffering and the ultimate destruction of herself.”⁷⁶

“The Puccinian libretto is so fashioned as to render the heroine the pivot around which the whole drama revolves, a heroine one of whose specific character traits is her true and unbounded love. This, in the composer's view, seems to constitute a guilt for which she must be punished by physical or mental suffering, gradually grinding her down until she perishes.”⁷⁷

Whether or not one accepts the entirety of Carner's Freudian analysis, Puccini certainly does subject his “piccole donne” to enormous emotional, psychological, and even physical torture. In his first opera, Le Villi, Anna dies of despair when betrayed and becomes one of the will-o'-the-wisps, haunting her lover. The entire final act of Manon Lescaut is devoted to the heroine dying slowly of thirst in a desolate landscape. Mimì dies of tuberculosis in a freezing Parisian garret. Scarpia sadistically plays with Tosca's emotions by having her lover tortured, attempts to rape her, and then arranges to have her lover executed before her eyes. Butterfly commits suicide upon being betrayed and left without any hope for the future. Before La fanciulla del West can end happily, Minnie must first wager her body for her wounded lover's life in a card game. Magda is forced to abandon her dream of love. Suor Angelica is psychologically tormented by the callous and calculated treatment she is subjected to by her cruel aunt, the Princess.

Thus, Puccini not only needed a tender loving “little” character like Liù, but also needed for her to suffer and die. M. Owen Lee remarks that “[Puccini] works to an overwhelming degree, on a single level and with a single interest – the sentimental examination of the mental and physical suffering of his heroines.”⁷⁸ Anthony Arblaster mentions “Puccini's obsession with woman as victim”⁷⁹ and finds these characters to be “quintessential male fantasizing”⁸⁰ As Susan Halpern comments: “Why must Liù die? Puccini's librettists created this self-sacrificial heroine

⁷⁶*Id.*, at 175.

⁷⁷*Id.*, at 273.

⁷⁸Lee, *op. cit.*, at 204.

⁷⁹Anthony Arblaster, Viva la Libertà, Verso, 1992, at 226.

⁸⁰*Id.*, at 227.

especially for him.”⁸¹

Indisputably, with Liù Puccini created the epitome of his passionately devoted “piccola donna,” the woman whose intense love makes her willing and capable of bearing incredible suffering, regardless of whether or not the man is worthy of her love and passion. In every respect Liù represents this character *par excellence*.

When Calaf asks who she is, she replies, like a typical Puccini woman: “I’m nothing. A slave.” Questioned by Calaf, Liù explains why she was willing to undergo enormous hardships in caring for the prince’s father. She tells the prince that she endured such anguish because long ago Calaf had smiled upon her, a mere slave, in the palace.⁸²

Calaf, of course, does not remember this moment which had transfigured Liù; indeed, he does not even recognize her. When he learns of the sufferings she had endured, all he can say is that, in memory of that “far-off smile,” she should continue to care for his father, while he maintains his fatal pursuit of Turandot. His aria, “Non piangere Liù” is one of the most tender and beautiful Puccini ever wrote, but its substance is about Calaf’s monomaniacal pursuit of another woman, fully aware that because of this he may never smile again.

For this hopeless passion Liù is willing to endure far more than any other Puccini character does for love⁸³—willingly facing torture and finally killing herself rather than betraying Calaf. Her words are heartbreakingly full of self-abnegation. Her self-sacrifice is consciously intended to enable the man whom she has loved so long to succeed in the pursuit of another

⁸¹Halpern, *op. cit.*

⁸²Significantly, the final version of her aria “Signore, ascolta” is far less assertive than the original version in which she expresses some anger about what she had to endure. Ashbrook and Powers, *op. cit.* at 68-9. Puccini clearly wanted to remove any traces of resistance in his tender creation.

⁸³Three other Puccini heroines also commit suicide, but in very different contexts. Tosca kills herself after she has been betrayed by Scarpia. Her lover has been murdered; she is trapped and chooses to die rather than be captured and punished for killing the villain. Butterfly, too, chooses to die when she realizes all is lost and she has no hope of either keeping her lover or her child. Angelica poisons herself hoping to be reunited with her dead child, momentarily forgetting that she has chosen to commit a mortal sin. However, Liù voluntarily dies – after willingly undergoing torture – to save a man who does not reciprocate her love, and indeed to assure that her rival will enjoy the love she will never obtain.

woman – her cruel and cold rival.⁸⁴

She tells Turandot that, in refusing to reveal the prince's name, that she is giving him to the princess, while losing all that matters to her. "Keeping my silence, I give him your love ... and I lose everything." Heartbreakingly, she recognizes that her love for Calaf was always an "impossible dream."⁸⁵ In her final aria, just before she seizes the dagger to kill herself, she again says that she will enable Calaf to win Turandot's love, even as she is prepared to never see him again.

"You, who are enclosed in ice,
conquered by such flame,
you will love him, too!
Before the dawn,
I will wearily close my eyes,
so he can win again ...
And I'll never see him more!"

Our hearts go out to Liù, this loving woman who sacrifices all for a prince who never knew or her loved her, a victim who never had the slightest hope of reciprocated love.⁸⁶

William Weaver aptly summarizes the role of Liù as Puccini's ultimate "piccola donna":

"Liù – a character who does not appear in the Gozzi play that is the libretto's primary source – is the final expression of the Puccinian ideal: humble, unselfish, loyal, submissive, but (when challenged) courageous. The dream girl, in other words."⁸⁷

However, for a feminist like Catherine Clément, Puccini's Liù represents the old male fantasy of woman as victim.

⁸⁴Liù's only words in Act II, "it is for love," are an expression of encouragement to the prince so that he can win the hand of another woman.

⁸⁵Although these words inevitably make modern audiences think of Man of La Mancha, there is no evidence of any conscious adoption by the librettists of the musical. And, of course, there is a substantial difference between Don Quixote and Liù; the former pursuing high ideals regardless of the odds, the latter pathetically self-abnegating.

⁸⁶In this respect she is the antithesis of the slave, Adelma, in the Gozzi play. Slave that she may be, Adelma is actually a princess and daughter of a king. She can justly envision herself as a fitting rival for her royal mistress. The Gozzi love-triangle thus resembles Aida.

⁸⁷William Weaver and Simonetta Puccini, eds., The Puccini Companion, W.H. Norton, 1994, at 121

“For, to cut the endless thread of the deadly repetition of Turandot’s dream, some woman’s blood is necessary. It will have to flow before the eyes of the princess to set an example for her ... a simple slave, Liù, the perfect victim. Heiress to the sacrificed women whom Puccini could make sing their hearts out, Liù stabs herself. Puccini stopped there – at the mournful procession singing the death of a woman to protect a man, in the presence of a woman who refuses her femininity.”⁸⁸

Needless Sadism and Sacrifice: Liù as Irrelevant to the Denouement of the Plot

Perhaps because Liù’s martyrdom is so selfless, in the total absence of any possible reciprocated love, the sadism of her on-stage torture generates particularly harsh critical comment.

Of course, in many Puccini operas there is an element of sadism, which Puccini inflicts on the female characters who also inspired his intense love. Carner comments about:

“[Puccini’s] predilection for inflicting suffering and torture on his heroines. How do we account for the fact that Puccini’s passionate love for them must always be accompanied by a sadistic impulse?”⁸⁹

In the New Grove Dictionary article on Turandot, Budden complains about “the unfortunate decision to have Liù die under torture.”⁹⁰ William Berger summarizes the general critical feeling: “nearly all commentators have complained that the on-stage torture of Liù was totally unnecessary.”⁹¹

The fundamental basis for this objection is the ironic reality that Liù is completely irrelevant to the plot and its resolution.

Puccini gave Liù the most moving music in the opera. She has three arias, more than either Calaf or Turandot. But Puccini did not find a way to make Liù matter in the drama. Puccini felt the need, which he couldn’t put into words, to create this quintessential loving and self-sacrificing character, but he never could figure out how to fit her into the plot. He toyed with various ideas before latching onto the thought that her love and sacrifice “could help to soften the heart of the princess.”

⁸⁸Clément, *op. cit.*, at 101.

⁸⁹Carner, *op. cit.*, at 275.

⁹⁰Julian Budden, Turandot, article in New Grove Dictionary of Opera, Stanley Sadie, ed., MacMillan Reference Ltd, London, 1998.

⁹¹Berger, *op. cit.*, at 281

But it doesn't. In the midst of her torture, Turandot asks Liù what power gives her the strength to endure such agony. Liù simply responds: "Love." Although it was not in the original libretto, Puccini composed a one word question for Turandot in response: "Love?" Only an incredibly talented singing actress playing the princess could invest this isolated word with the emotional weight to show that Liù has begun the process of melting Turandot's icy demeanor.

Nothing follows from this exchange.⁹² Turandot hears Liù's poignant aria and her response is to command the guards to "wrest the secret from her!" by still more torture. Turandot is not moved by Liù's suicide; she reacts ferociously to it by whipping the soldier who allowed it to happen. Everyone else is shocked and moved by this death. Not Turandot. When Calaf berates her for Liù's death, insisting that she contemplate the pure and innocent blood shed because of her, Turandot icily responds without any mention of Liù:

"How do you dare, stranger!
I am not human ...
I am the daughter of heaven
free and pure.
You clasp my cold veil,
but my spirit is there, aloft!"

Thus, Carner notes that, while in the end Liù "is the only character to touch our hearts," she nonetheless "does not advance the essential drama by one iota."⁹³ Arblaster comments that "Liù is hardly necessary to the plot, although she introduces a note of tenderness that the icy princess lacks, and her death is even more gratuitous."⁹⁴

But the problem goes far deeper than this. The emotion Puccini invests in Liù and her suffering ultimately derails the central plot line, which concerns Calaf's path to winning the princess' love. It is a principal source of the frustration many feel about the resolution of the opera.

Without realizing it, in creating Liù and vesting her with such emotional depth and appeal, Puccini had diverted the audience's interest and empathy away from the two central characters.

Mosco Carner notes that the portrayal of Liù constitutes "the most flagrant psychological

⁹²Ashbrook and Powers thus comment: Puccini had suggested that Liù's death was to have "powerful influence in bringing about the thawing of the Princess" but nothing is left in the libretto of this except for Puccini's adding the word "amore?" in response to Liù's assertion that love gives her strength. *Op. cit.*, at 152.

⁹³Carner, *op. cit.*, at 465.

⁹⁴Arblaster, *op. cit.*, at 227.

error Puccini ever committed as a dramatist, namely engaging our sympathies for the wrong heroine.”⁹⁵ He later explains:

“having roused all our sympathies for the little slave-girl, he asks us, in almost the same breath, to transfer them to the Princess whom, up to that point in the drama, he had done his Puccinian best to portray as an inhuman monster. This cannot be done — not at any rate in the manner in which it is actually presented to us.”⁹⁶

Budden writes in the New Grove Dictionary of Opera that the martyrdom of Liù undermines Calaf’s status as a hero: “Clearly the man who can persist in his wooing of a woman of whom he knows nothing, and has every reason to dislike, immediately after a slave girl has killed herself for his sake, is bound to forfeit our sympathies.”

Girardi feels the same, and notes that Calaf’s character is initially undermined by the very manner in which he falls in love, castigating “the perversity of a love born from seeing a woman condemn a man to death”⁹⁷ M. Owen Lee is scathing: “What kind of barbarians are this prince and this princess? Who cares if they fall in love.”⁹⁸

Ashbrook and Peters make a powerful and chilling analogy to the way Liù’s death transfers our affection away from the two principal characters. They find it as inappropriate as it would have been if Puccini had concluded Madama Butterfly with a love duet for Pinkerton and his American bride, just after Butterfly’s anguished suicide over Pinkerton’s betrayal.⁹⁹

Thus, by inventing Liù, the purest and most heartbreakingly pathetic of his female creations, Puccini satisfied a deep inner need, but imposed a major obstacle that he had to address in composing a conclusion to Turandot. As Gabriele Dotto notes, the character of Liù created a

⁹⁵Carner, *op. cit.*, at 277.

⁹⁶*Id.*, at 486

⁹⁷Girardi, *op. cit.*, at 466

⁹⁸Lee, *op. cit.*, at 207.

⁹⁹Actually, one of the greatest of all operas does end with an extraordinarily beautiful love duet sung in the wake of the death and destruction of many lives caused by the lovers’ self-centered passion. Even while we are held spellbound by the ethereal music Nero and Poppea sing to conclude Monteverdi’s L’incoronazione di Poppea, we cannot quite forget the forced suicide of Seneca, and the exile and impoverishment of Empress Ottavia, Ottone and Drusilla. But the *frisson* caused by the juxtaposition of the lovers’ sensuous rapture with the callous cruelty which facilitated this sublime moment is intentional; indeed it goes to the essence of the brilliant and cynical libretto by Gian Francesco Busanello.

dramatic *cul du sac* with which Puccini struggled with but did not resolve before his death¹⁰⁰ – i.e., our two enigmas of why Puccini did not finish the opera, and how the *denouement* of Turandot's transformation might have been more effectively depicted.

Calaf Voluntarily Reveals His Name To Turandot

There is one other very significant way in which Puccini's libretto diverges from the source plays. In Gozzi and Schiller, Turandot discovers the answer to Calaf's riddle by treachery, with the assistance of Adelma, her slave with ambiguous loyalties. In these plays, learning Calaf's name means that Turandot cannot be forced to accept him as her husband. But since her father had decreed that Calaf would not die if the name riddle were solved, the revelation of his name does not put his life at risk.

But in Puccini's version the stakes of the riddle remain deadly. In proposing his riddle, Calaf explicitly pledged that "I will die at dawn" if Turandot can solve it overnight. She doesn't, thwarted by Liù's suicide. Yet Calaf voluntarily reveals his name, knowing full well the consequences, particularly after seeing the cruelties that Turandot had inflicted on Liù to obtain the secret. When he reveals his name to Turandot, he unequivocally acknowledges the risk he is taking:

"You ... can destroy me if you will.
My name and my life
I give you together.
I am Calaf, son of Timur!"

Turandot's reacts with triumph, exclaiming: "I know your name!" She fully appreciates that she now has him in her power. This is far more explicit in the text which Alfano set in his original draft for the final duet, but which was cut in the subsequent, generally performed, version: "Arbitra son del tuo destino" – I control your destiny. Significantly, Calaf's final words in the opera are "You have won."

This change in the path to the opera's denouement gives a highly significant clue to Turandot's otherwise all but inexplicable change of heart in the brief final scene, when she reveals his name to the assembled crowd – not Calaf, but Love.

ENIGMA #1: WHY DIDN'T PUCCINI FINISH THE OPERA?

We now can address the first of the two enigmas arising from Puccini's failure to complete Turandot. Why didn't he (or couldn't he) finish the opera? Puccini had worked for more than 4½ years to shape the libretto and compose the music. He completed everything up to the final duet, but spent over a year working on the structure and music for the final fifteen minutes of the

¹⁰⁰Dotto, *op. cit.*

opera. All in all, he went through at least five different versions of the text. Gabriele Dotto describes this struggle as “a significant ‘writer’s block’” with the final stages of the opera.¹⁰¹ The perplexing question is why Puccini couldn’t get over this last hurdle and complete his final masterpiece.

There are differing theories about this enigma.

Was There Actually Any Writer’s Block?

Some commentators are unconvinced that Puccini actually was stymied by a “writer’s block.” Puccini was a notoriously slow draftsman.¹⁰² He struggled with, and usually infuriated, his librettists on the texts for most of his operas. He was a perfectionist, who continuously revised and rewrote, both before and after his operas premiered.¹⁰³ Indeed, Puccini revised every one of his operas after their premieres except – obviously – Turandot. Three or four years was not an abnormal gestation period for a Puccini opera.

Conrad Wilson thus rejects the writer’s block theory. He finds that Puccini’s “libretto troubles” were “no worse than those he had endured with Illica and Giacosa [on Bohème, Tosca and Butterfly].”¹⁰⁴ To Wilson’s mind the simple answer to the enigma is that there is no enigma. Instead: “Puccini’s death, rather than any sort of psychological obstacle, was what prevented him

¹⁰¹Dotto, *op. cit.*

¹⁰²Puccini benefitted from working in an era when composers were able to collect performance royalties from subsequent productions. After the success of Manon Lescaut, and especially after the subsequent triumphs of his next few operas, Puccini could live comfortably on royalties and was not under financial pressure to complete new works. Earlier composers like Donizetti and Rossini (who supposedly wrote The Barber of Seville in thirteen days), did not have this luxury, and had to compose operas on a “production line” to earn the fees paid by impresarios, which generally were all they could hope to receive for their efforts. Puccini could afford to take his time.

¹⁰³Puccini’s one operetta, La rondine, exemplifies Puccini’s perfectionist temperament. He was commissioned by Viennese impresarios to compose eight or so numbers for a typical operetta. This could have been “easy money.” But Puccini rejected the simple formulas of Viennese operetta and wound up creating a carefully crafted and highly moving sentimental light opera, perhaps the greatest of all “Silver Age” operettas, if it can even be deemed to be an operetta. He anguished over the details of everything, and kept on thinking about revisions after the premiere.

¹⁰⁴Wilson, *op. cit.*, at 212.

from completing the last fifteen minutes of his last masterpiece.”¹⁰⁵

In a similar vein, Ashbrook and Powers note that Puccini’s race against time was impeded by the delays resulting from his librettists’ inability to promptly respond to his demands for changes. Puccini was difficult to work with. Adami and Simoni were important writers with other competing commitments and didn’t realize the true condition of his declining health. “They were tempted to put other considerations first.”¹⁰⁶

Yet even Ashbrook and Powers recognize that something more was at play: “much of the impasse stemmed from the composer’s postponing coming to grips with [the] crucial [final] scene, insisting on revisions of already revised revisions.”

Days before he departed for Brussels and the fatal throat cancer treatments, Puccini had received yet another version of the final scene. He professed to be happy with it, calling the verses “what I had dreamed of” — but still he noted problems with the structure of the last act, particularly the relationship between the final duet and the preceding scene in which Liù died.¹⁰⁷

While Wilson may be correct in asserting that the time Puccini spent on the opera was not abnormally long for him, nonetheless it is clear that there was something unique about the final scene which sets Puccini’s struggles apart from anything he had dealt with in composing his previous operas. Of course, in the end Puccini ran out of time, but there remains the question of why he couldn’t finish the work in the time he did have.

Psychological Theories

Puccini biographer Mosco Carner has proposed a fascinating Freudian analysis of why Puccini was unable to finish Turandot.

As noted previously, Carner felt that Puccini associated the passionate love of his gentle heroines with a sense of guilt that had to be expiated by suffering and death. Julian Budden pithily summarized Carner’s thesis as:

“a ‘mother fixation’ which views womanhood across an unbridgeable polarity between the madonna and the prostitute. Hence the projection of guilt on the woman who loves, such as can be expiated only by death.”¹⁰⁸

¹⁰⁵*Id.*, at 215.

¹⁰⁶Ashbrook and Powers, *op. cit.*, at 88.

¹⁰⁷*Id.*

¹⁰⁸Budden, *op. cit.*, at 476

Greatly simplified, Carner felt that there were two dominant women in Puccini's life who fell into the "madonna" role – his mother and his wife Elvira. They had strong, but very different, personalities. In Carner's mind, Puccini sought to escape from their strictures through his many affairs with other women, and similarly through the affection he lavished on his "little women" heroines. Carner felt that Puccini's repressed guilt at these feelings, which violated the sanctity of the "mother" image, was transferred to his loveable heroines, who had to pay for it with their suffering.

Until late in his career, however, the persecutor of his heroines and the cause of their sufferings was never depicted as a woman or a rival, *i.e.*, the madonna/mother figure. This changed in Puccini's last tragic opera before Turandot, with the creation of the harsh Princess Aunt in Suor Angelica, an austere and unforgiving woman. The Princess Aunt psychologically torments Angelica, who is desperate for news of the son she was forced to abandon to protect the honor of her noble family. The Princess Aunt is a truly frightening figure on stage.

Of course, the elderly Princess Aunt was not in any way a sexual rival for Sister Angelica. In depicting Turandot, Puccini did have to create a cold, powerful and beautiful woman who was the on-stage instrument of Liù's destruction. Since Liù was motivated by her "impossible dream" inspired by that far-away and long-ago smile in Timur's palace, the slave girl was both the "piccola donna" and the hopeless rival of Turandot herself.

Thus, Carner believes that the plot of this opera created a psychological problem and block that Puccini supposedly could not confront and overcome. Liù is the victim of Turandot – the rival woman that Puccini had to transform by the conclusion of the drama into someone lovable and loving.

In other words, in Carner's terms, composing the final duet between Calaf and Turandot and the final scene depicting the triumph of their love would be equivalent to depicting the triumph of the madonna/mother figure as a physical love object. Carner felt that Puccini could not overcome his subconscious resistance to overcoming the taboo of making love with his own exalted mother. Hence, the opera could not be completed.

Perhaps this psychological analysis is more than a bit overblown, but certainly the suicide of Liù does represent an effort on Puccini's part to confront a tragic incident in his own life which involved a confrontation between a strong unapproachable "madonna" woman and a "piccola donna."

Puccini's wife, Elvira, was notoriously jealous – and with good reason. Goaded by rumors, she began persecuting a young woman serving in the Puccini household, Doria Manfredi. Her hostile campaign was so intense and vicious that it drove the young girl to take poison, dying a horrendous and slow death. Ironically, this was one instance in which Puccini was not culpable

of an illicit affair.¹⁰⁹ An autopsy proved that Doria had died a virgin. At the insistence of Doria's relatives, Elvira was tried for slander and convicted. Puccini had to pay a substantial sum to the Manfredis to spare Elvira a prison term. It took a long while for the marriage to recover a semblance of normality.

Many commentators have noted the parallels between Elvira's persecution of Doria to the point of suicide, and Turandot's torturing of Liù to the point where she, too, commits suicide.¹¹⁰ It is noteworthy that this suicide was an addition to the libretto, not found in the source plays, and was inserted into the plot at Puccini's own insistence.

As was his norm, Puccini depicted with excruciating realism the persecution and suffering of his beloved "little woman." But he never managed to depict the amorous triumph of her persecutor.

Puccini Was Frustrated and Trapped By the Libretto

In dealing with the final duet and concluding scene, Puccini had to confront the structural problem resulting from his deliberate insertion into the plot of his archetypical "piccola donna" - Liù. For all that she was essential to inspiring his compositional talents also was a dramatic dead end: her suffering and death do not further the plot. Her needless sacrifice alienates the audience from the central drama of Calaf's efforts to win Turandot and to transform her from the icy princess of death into a passionately loving woman.

Puccini knew he had a problem. He rejected four versions of the final sections of the opera, and it is not clear that he was convinced that the fifth version, received only weeks before his death, had resolved the dramatic dilemma. Gabriele Dotto argues that Puccini found himself boxed-in, trapped in a *cul-du-sac* of his own making, and that, with time, he would have

¹⁰⁹An article in the British newspaper, The Independent, purports to uncover an ironic sequel to the Doria Manfredi story. It found reason to believe that, while Puccini did not have an affair with Doria, he did have an affair with her cousin, Giulia, and that Doria acted as their go-between. Like Liù, Doria refused to reveal a secret that could injure her master, choosing suicide instead. Adding further to the irony, The Independent article suggests that some 17 years later – indeed at the time of the composition of Turandot – Puccini resumed the affair with Giulia and fathered an illegitimate child. See Adrian Mourby, Scandalissimo! Puccini's Sex Life Exposed, The Independent, July 5, 2008.

¹¹⁰Many years ago, I saw a 1950s Italian movie biopic on Puccini's life, Two Loves Had I. If my much faded memory is correct, it cut from the story of Doria's death to a staging of Liù's funeral cortege from Act III of Turandot. More recently, in the 1980s, Tony Palmer directed a controversial production of Turandot for the Scottish Opera, in which Calaf was played as Puccini, Turandot became Elvira, and Liù became Doria.

“‘reconsidered,’ significantly, the cumbersome presence of Liù.”¹¹¹

Fear and Awe

As noted, Turandot was Puccini’s only attempt to venture into the realm of the heroic and the mythic. Various arguments have been adduced that Puccini’s failure to complete this opera was related to his reactions and frustrations in creating a work operating on this entirely new level of symbolic import.

Was “Turandot” Beyond Puccini’s Scope As An Artist?

The harshest criticisms conclude that the opera was not finished because it was a task beyond his abilities and an artist, and he knew it.

At its gentlest, this type of criticism argues that the mythic/heroic was simply not his style as an artist. Conrad Wilson argues that Puccini felt ill at ease writing a “harsh, abrasive fairy tale.” He was an artist accustomed to depicting ordinary people so that “the fact that [Turandot] didn’t ring true on a human level, as Puccini discovered, made it so hard for him to write.”¹¹²

Others note that, until tackling Turandot, Puccini carefully limited the scope of his operas to themes with which he felt comfortable. Budden quotes the comment of Alfredo Casella, an Italian composer of the first post-Puccini generation,¹¹³ that Puccini typically had a “wonderful, infallible sense of his own limitations” and concludes that this sense failed Puccini in the decision to take on the challenge posed by Turandot’s mythic/heroic scope, *i.e.*, a work which Budden says “call[s] for a sublimity to which his creative imagination did not extend.”¹¹⁴ Emphasizing that Puccini’s true genius was as the composer of “great sorrows in little souls,” Budden argues that:

“Only a miracle of transcendence could redeem the two principals; and that is something outside Puccini’s range ... Which is why the opera that represents the summit of Puccini’s achievement both as musician and as a music-dramatist was never brought to a satisfactory conclusion.”¹¹⁵

¹¹¹Dotto, *op. cit.*

¹¹²Wilson, *op. cit.*, at 218.

¹¹³Although, like many of his generation, Casella tended to avoid opera, he did compose an opera based on one of the Gozzi *fiabe*, La Donna Serpente, which he wrote in the years 1928-31, just shortly after Puccini’s death and the premiere of Turandot in 1926.

¹¹⁴Budden, *op. cit.*, at 479.

¹¹⁵Budden, *op. cit.*, at 472.

M. Owen Lee is of a similar opinion:

“Puccini was, if not out of his depth, at least out of his element in myth. The raw materials were there, but the meanings simply won’t come clear. And the composer finds he cannot set myth to music. He cannot feel his way into the new, forbidding areas the myth opened up to him.

I think the effort of it broke him.”¹¹⁶

Wagner’s Looming Shadow: “Poi Tristano”

While there may not be adequate grounds for the suspicion that Puccini’s ambitions for Turandot exceeded his grasp as an artist, it certainly does appear that Puccini was aware of the enormous step he was taking with this opera – and that it frightened him.

Almost from the beginning, Puccini was conscious that the final duet between Calaf and Turandot would have to be something unique. He immediately recognized that the resolution of the opera depended on finding a way to adequately express Turandot’s transformation. On November 8, 1921, a year after Simoni had given him a copy of the Schiller play and whetted Puccini’s creative desires, Puccini put his finger on the critical issue:

“I consider the duet as the *clou* – but it must contain some great, audacious and unexpected element and not simply leave things as they were in the beginning ...”

Less than a year later, on July 9, 1922, he wrote again about his vision for the final duet:

“I should like the icy demeanor of Turandot to melt in the course of the duet, or, in other words, I want a love passage before they appear *coram populo* – and I want them to walk together towards her father’s throne in the attitude of lovers and raise the cry of love while the crowd looks on in amazement. She says ‘I do not know his name,’ and he ‘love has conquered...’ And the whole ends in ecstasy and jubilation and the glory of the sunlight.”

More than two more years afterwards, as his death was approaching, Puccini still had not figured out how to accomplish this. He remained uncertain about the specifics of the text. In one of his last letters, written November 16, 1924 (two weeks before his death) to his librettist Adami, Puccini wrote about his vision for the final moments of the opera and connected Turandot’s transformation with the world’s redemption:

“These two almost superhuman beings descend through love to the level of mankind, and this love must at the end take possession of the whole stage in a great orchestral

¹¹⁶Lee, *op. cit.*, at 209.

peroration.”¹¹⁷

This letter is striking for its Wagnerian implications:

First, there is mythic/heroic concept of “almost superhuman beings” discovering love, and redeeming a cold and sterile world through that love. This is a theme that echoes Wagner; it is, of course, the ultimate subject of the Ring Cycle.

Second, there is Puccini’s astounding thought that this supreme moment could be expressed, not in words and by the voice, but through a “great orchestral peroration.” This is remarkable for a quintessentially Italian composer, who always had relied on the emotional power of the human voice to convey the deepest feelings.

These implications are underscored by the cryptic and heart-rending phrase found towards the end of the sketches which Puccini took with him to Brussels on his final journey: “Poi Tristano,” *i.e.*, “then Tristan.”

We obviously do not know precisely what Puccini meant, but in context it suggests that he envisioned something very different from his normal technique, with the power and perhaps the scale of the “Liebestod” in Wagner’s Tristan und Isolde. Yet, while his sketches contain some melodies for the two principals in the final duet, there are no sketches of that “great orchestral peroration,” the overwhelming climax that Puccini dreamt of. Whatever his final vision was for the end of the opera, he never attempted to compose it.

This poignancy of Puccini’s allusions to an ambition to achieve something of the symbolic monumentality of Tristan is intensified by our understanding of Puccini’s emotions in his final days. Both Budden and Carner relate the story of how, while struggling with the final moments of the opera, Puccini took down the score of Tristan and began to play the Prelude on the piano. After playing a bit, he put down the score, expressing his terror and awe:

“Enough of this. We are mandolin players, amateurs. This terrible music annihilates and makes us unable to achieve anything.”¹¹⁸

Puccini clearly felt the intimidating shadow of Wagner looming over him as he sought to find a fitting conclusion to this mythic opera. The task he had assigned himself left him in a

¹¹⁷See Ashbrook and Powers, *op. cit.*, at 88.

¹¹⁸Budden, *op. cit.*, at 433; Carner, *op. cit.*, at 171.

desperate state of self-doubt.¹¹⁹ In one of his last letters he wrote about how the *terribilità* of Tristan was annihilating his confidence:

“Hour by hour and minute by minute I think of Turandot and all the music I have written up to now seems a jest in comparison and pleases me no more.”¹²⁰

Indeed, there is a recurring theme throughout Puccini’s letters about his efforts to create Turandot, a motif of insecurity and indeed terror. The word “terrifies” comes up often in his letters throughout the long period in which he struggled with this opera.

It was only a matter of weeks after Puccini first read the copy of the play given to him by Simoni before he wrote Sybil Seligman on April 21, 1921: “my work terrifies me.” A few months later, on December 23, 1921, he wrote to Sybil again about his problems with constructing an appropriate libretto, saying “it is the type of opera that terrifies me.” Again, on March 20, 1923, he wrote Sybil saying “this infamous Turandot terrifies me, and I shan’t finish it, or if I finish it shall end in a fiasco.” In his final months he wrote to Sybil that he was trying to finish the Act III duet, expressing his ambivalent hopes and expectation: “It is difficult, but I shall end by doing it, and I hope it will give satisfaction – and then the opera (if God wills) will be finished.”¹²¹

Whether or not Puccini intended to resolve Turandot with a “great orchestral peroration” or a powerful and novel vocal duet, it is clear that he envisioned something far beyond anything he previously had written, and was stymied in the attempt.

Lord Harewood concludes his article on Turandot by writing:

¹¹⁹Puccini revered Wagner, particularly Tristan and Parsifal. He is said to have gone to Bayreuth with the intention of seeing the latter work on three successive days, savoring one act each day, but found himself so enraptured that he stayed for the entire opera the first day, and probably all the successive days. Carner, *op. cit.*, at 158.

Although Italian critics of the day would accuse any Italian composer who paid attention to orchestral writing of being Germanic or “Wagnerian,” Puccini’s style, with its emphasis on the human voice, is pure Italian. Of course, the intermezzo before Act III of Manon Lescaut does have a certain Tristanesque quality in it, “endless” and “unresolved” melody, as well as certain Wagnerian harmonies. But in the end, Puccini, for all his cosmopolitan interests in musical developments outside Italy, was a composer who had his own, truly Italian, voice to which he successfully assimilated these new developments. In this context, Puccini’s obsession with Tristan in his final days is a noteworthy sign of his longing to attempt something different and grander than he had ever attempted before.

¹²⁰Undated late letter quoted in Louis Biancoli, ed., The Opera Reader, Grosset and Dunlop, 1953, at 391. Probably written on or about February 24, 1924.

¹²¹Letter in private collection of author, which I have dated to April 17, 1924.

“The composer’s faith in the power of melody was unshaken; his last opera is extremely melodious. Yet he dreamt of something lovelier than he had ever written for the last duet, which was to be the crowning incident of Turandot, as the love-duet of Tristan is the central pivot of that opera. This he did not live to write.”¹²²

The various theories about the enigma of Puccini’s failure to finish Turandot are not entirely inconsistent.

Of course, we have no way of knowing for certain that Puccini would not have finished the opera if he had not died unexpectedly, before his librettists could give him a satisfactory new version of the finale.

Yet, it is clear that Puccini’s struggles and delays in composing Turandot were not of the same order as his previous perfectionist efforts. He knew that he was attempting something different and far grander in scope and significance than anything he had created before.

The fact that Puccini had not ventured into this territory in the past is not proof that it was beyond his capacity as an artist. In almost every aspect, the Turandot that Puccini managed to complete is an astonishingly new type of opera for him, daring in its scale and harmonic ventures, while retaining his fundamental melodious genius.

Even without the Freudian theory that Puccini was psychologically blocked in his efforts to resolve the opera, it is clear that he was affected, and often terrified, by the self-knowledge that he was attempting a work that exceeded the scope of anything he had ever done, that he was venturing into the realm of myth and Wagner. This, and the fact that the clock ran out on him, are the best explanation of why the opera was never finished. We are left with an enigma, but at least are consoled by the marvel of what we do have.

ENIGMA #2: HOW PUCCINI MIGHT HAVE RESOLVED THE OPERA

Regardless of the enigma of why Puccini did not finish Turandot, the great and inherently unanswerable enigma is how he might have resolved the problems he confronted in the final duet and ultimate scene, in particular the question of how he could have convincingly conveyed Turandot’s transformation.

There are various theories, but I conclude that there is an implicit resolution to the story which would have resulted in a truly satisfactory ending. The question remains whether Puccini would have found this resolution.

¹²²Earl of Harewood, ed., The New Kobbé’s Complete Opera Book, G. Putnam & Sons, 1969. at 1205.

The “Macho” Resolution in the Standard Completion by Alfano

The resolution of the opera we are accustomed to is Alfano’s second, shortened, attempt to complete the opera. His version relied on Puccini’s sketches and the most recent revision of the libretto provided by Simoni and Adami.

Without considering the failure of this revision to deal with the dramatic problems caused by Liù’s suicide, Alfano’s depiction of Turandot’s transformation in this version is highly unsatisfactory to a contemporary audience.

In simple terms, the finale we are presented a rather appalling male chauvinist fantasy. It resonates with traditional “macho” values about the relationship between strong men and the women they desire. The libretto and the Alfano II finale posit a resolution that, even today, reflects the values and conduct of many powerful men, most notably the unspeakable person in the White House: the world in a which woman’s “No” really means “Yes.”

The finale suggests that, regardless of their outward protestations, women can be won by forcibly taking off their clothes (or at least their veils), ignoring and rejecting their objections, grabbing them and forcibly kissing them, if not more.

When Turandot says at the beginning of the Alfano duet that, although her body may be near, her spirit is far off on a higher plane, Calaf’s response is to rip off her veil. He tells her that her physical body is right next to him no matter much she claims that her spirit is far off. When she says “do not touch me,” he blatantly ignores what she says. He forcibly grabs her and violently kisses her. The orchestra loudly shudders to express the impact of this kiss on Turandot.

Immediately after being subjected to this unconsented kiss, Turandot melts, saying “what is happening to me ... [I’m] lost ” She then tells Calaf how much she always was attracted to him by his confidence and pride – while still pleading with him to please go away without asking more from her. Yet, in the end, she refuses to condemn Calaf to death even though she has learned his name. Rather, and without warning, she accepts him as her husband, telling her father and the assembled throng that “his name is love.”

Puccini certainly shared these macho values. He was a serial womanizer. He even wrote to his wife, Elvira, in a letter dated August 30, 1913, a self-justifying letter about his exploits with other women:

“[A]ll the artists cultivate these little gardens in order to delude themselves into thinking that they are not finished and old and torn by strife. You imagine immense affairs. In reality, it is nothing but a sport to which all men more or less dedicate a fleeting moment.”

Julian Budden thus concludes that the very physical resolution of the opera, as we are accustomed to seeing it, reflects the true values of Puccini and his librettists:

"Nothing in the text of the final duet suggests that Calaf's love for Turandot amounts to anything more than a physical obsession: nor can the ingenuities of Simoni and Adami's text for 'Del primo pianto' convince us that the Princess's submission is any less hormonal."¹²³

Puccini's letters indicate that he certainly did place great emphasis on the effect that Calaf's kiss – consented or not – would have on Turandot. As early as 1921, he was writing about the impact that this kiss would have.

"Calaf must kiss Turandot and show how much he loves her."

As Calaf contemplates how he will finally win Turandot in his aria "Nessun dorma," he sings: "my kiss will break the silence that makes you mine!" Ashbrook and Powers are correct in noting "Puccini's expressed belief in the universal power of physical love."¹²⁴

And yet, this clearly is too simplistic an analysis. Puccini's attitudes towards women clearly were far more sophisticated than pure machismo. All of his operas show great sensitivity to the nuances of a woman's feelings with respect to men and love. Indeed, hostile contemporary critics saw his operas as too "feminine" in their depiction of woman. Puccini was aware that a much more sensitive resolution was needed for his final opera.

The Resolution In the Source Plays

In Gozzi's play, Turandot also learns the answer to Calaf's riddle, but through treachery rather than Calaf's voluntary disclosure of the answer. Since the Emperor, her father, had decreed that Calaf would not die if his riddle were solved, she does not hold the power of life and death over the prince. We learn from Turandot's admissions to her slaves that she was greatly attracted to him because of his looks, courage and chivalry. Even so, she demands that Calaf leave the kingdom and find another wife. Unwilling to live without Turandot, Calaf pleads with the Emperor to enforce the old decree that Turandot's failed suitors must die, and then threatens to kill himself with his sword. At this point, Turandot relents and yields to Calaf, saying "Live then, live and be proud: I am your prize." Similarly, in the Schiller version, she also learns the name, but yields when Calaf despairingly threatens suicide, unwilling to face a life bereft of love, or at least bereft of Turandot.

This resolution is somewhat facile, and uses the common 18th century trope of a lover

¹²³See Wikipedia article on Turandot.

¹²⁴Ashbrook and Powers, *op. cit.*, at 137

winning his beloved by threatening to die for love.¹²⁵

The resolution in Puccini's libretto also relies on Calaf's readiness to die. But it is a far more powerful resolution because it does not depend on a hyper-dramatic (and thus somewhat dubious) threat of suicide, but on Calaf's decision to truly put his life into Turandot's hands.

Luciano Berio and Efforts To Compose a New Ending for *Turandot*

Several composers have attempted to deal with the problems of the ending of the opera by creating their own alternative versions to the Alfano endings. The Wikipedia article on Turandot mentions that the American composer Janet Maguire, convinced that the whole ending is coded in the sketches left by Puccini, composed a new ending. A Chinese composer, Hao Wei Ya, composed a version in which Calaf kisses Turandot tenderly, not forcefully, and expands her aria "Del primo pianto" to enable Turandot to explain more fully her change of heart. Neither of these efforts apparently have been put on the stage.¹²⁶

However, the alternative version of the ending composed by the well-known Italian composer, Luciano Berio, has had several significant stagings¹²⁷ and has been the subject of substantial critical review. Berio's version was authorized by the Puccini estate and its publisher, Casa Ricordi.

Although Berio was very much a modernist composer, his revision of Turandot is not musically radical. It uses a great deal of Puccini's own sketches, as well as the extant libretto. The latter was carefully edited by cutting certain lines but also included several crucial lines used by Alfano in his original version which had been omitted in the second ending that is generally what one hears in performance.

The real change wrought by Berio is the alternation of the mood of the final scenes, which become reflective and almost meditative, eliminating all the brashness of the Alfano finale. There is no triumphal final chorus or Broadway-style reprise of the hit tune from "Nessun dorma." Berio inserts several long orchestral interludes, particularly to give time for Turandot to react to

¹²⁵The same stratagem is used by Lorenzo Da Ponte (another cynical son of late 18th century Venice) in the libretto for Così Fan Tutte. Both Gozzi and DaPonte suggest that the surest way to a woman's heart is with a dagger – pointed at the male lover's own heart. In Così it takes two threats of suicide for Ferrando to break down Fiordiligi's resistance.

¹²⁶Wikipedia, "Turandot," 2017

¹²⁷Productions of the Berio ending have been seen in various theaters, including Milan, Salzburg, Amsterdam, Hong Kong and the Canary Islands. Two productions have been issued on DVD (*i.e.*, the Salzburg and Milan productions, directed by David Pountney and Nicholas Lehnhoff, respectively).

Calaf's far more gentle kiss, and also in the final moments after Turandot has confessed her love for Calaf. Notwithstanding some Tristanesque harmonies, these quiet pieces are far removed from any "great orchestral peroration."

Calaf not only volunteers his name to Turandot; he also offers her a sword with which she could kill him, a far more potent variation of the concept in the original source plays, where he merely threatens to stab himself. And Berio restores the important line which is cut in the usually performed second Alfano ending: "Arbitra son del tuo destino" – I control your destiny.

Berio said that he preferred "a more suspended, reticent conclusion." He added that he wanted to show how "the story of Turandot and Calaf resolves in a rapport between two solitary lives."¹²⁸

With the triumphal music omitted, and no grand final scene before the entire court, Turandot and Calaf walk offstage together, leaving the audience with the feeling that this couple has a great deal yet to resolve in their new relationship. One commentator, Maureen Buja, expresses frustration with this resolution:

"In Berio's setting, it's anticlimactic. Meh, it's 'love.' [D]espite the invisible chorus' 'ahs' in the background as the couple go off together, there's no feeling of consummation or happiness, or even love. The audience is truly left uncertain if she loves him or if this is just her way of finding an equally bloodthirsty partner."¹²⁹

Paul Robinson also stresses the ambiguity of the ending, but suggests that the audience reaction should be less harsh:

"In the Berio version, as Turandot and Calaf leave the stage together, there is no triumphal outburst from the assembled throngs, and the audience is left to wonder whether such flawed human beings could ever find happiness."¹³⁰

Writing for The Guardian, Andrew Clements similarly notes the tentative, non-heroic nature of the Berio ending:

¹²⁸Marco Uvietta, The Finale by Luciano Berio, in Gabriele Dotto (editor), Turandot, Bertelsmann, 2015

¹²⁹Maureen Buja, Does She Really Love Him; The Berio Ending for Turandot, Interlude, December 25, 2014

¹³⁰Paul E. Robinson, Happily Never After? Turandot Ending Enigmatic, Digital Review March 31, 2017

“the final moments of the opera are now far less assertive, ending with a series of wonderfully suspended orchestral chords that gradually reach resolution. What the future holds for this couple, the music now says, is hard to define.”¹³¹

The Berio revision is fascinating in its own right. Nonetheless, however respectful in his attempts to avoid modernist music, there is a stylistic disconnect with the rest of the opera. Berio may use Puccini’s sketches and themes, but his music cannot and does not sound like Puccini or any Italian late romantic Italian opera of the early 20th century.

Still, Berio’s resolution is significant and insightful for its use of a gentler discourse between the two principals, as well as for emphasizing that Turandot cannot be won by sheer force.

A Resolution Implicit In Puccini’s Own Changes to the Story

For this author, there is a resolution to the enigma of Turandot’s transformation which is implicit in the very changes which Puccini and his librettists made to the story they received from by Gozzi and Schiller.

In particular, the key to this enigma lies in (1) the characterization of Turandot, however cruel, as motivated by fear; and (2) the crucial plot change by which Turandot learns the answer to the unknown prince’s riddle directly from Calaf. *A fortiori*, two of the enigmas propounded by the principals (one traditional and one new to the opera) reinforce this potential resolution.

Calaf Removes Turandot’s Fear By Putting Himself in Her Power

As we have seen, in recounting the tale of the rape of her ancestress Lo-u-Ling, Turandot fears “l’aspro dominio,” the harsh domination of women by men which annihilates a woman’s physical and personal integrity. For Turandot, male love is unacceptable so long as it signifies defeat in a power struggle.

When the prince solves Turandot’s three riddles, she is terrified. She pleads with the prince and her father that she not be possessed by force, “reluctant and enraged.”

Calaf intuitively knows that there is no value in winning her on these terms. As her plea reaches its soaring climax, he both casts aside his victory and puts his life again in her power. He doesn’t just give her a second chance with his new riddle; he expressly promises that he will die if she can solve it.

But this is not all. Turandot remains terrified of “l’aspro dominio.” In a line cut from the

¹³¹ Andrew Clements, I Think It’s Over (review of Berio ending), The Guardian, unknown date.

traditional Alfano ending, she sings early in the final duet of her recurrent fear: “The anguish of my ancestress will not be renewed!”¹³²

Turandot cannot solve the prince’s riddle, but still remains an unwilling conquest, notwithstanding his passionate kiss.

At this point, crucially, Calaf surrenders. For the second time, he relinquishes his victory. He reveals his name and once more puts his life in her power. He is fully aware of what he is risking by putting himself entirely within Turandot’s power.

A line cut in the shortened Alfano finale makes Calaf’s understanding of what he has done even more explicit: “Take [my life] then. Death is more beautiful. Make me die!”¹³³

And Turandot knows this. In the shortened Alfano finale, the significance of her understanding is undercut by cropping the text to just “I know your name!” But the full text, used both in the longer original Alfano ending and by Berio, is more explicit and does much to explain why she finally feels free to love Calaf.

“I control your fate.
I have your life in my hands.
You have given it to me. It is mine! Mine!”¹³⁴

She now can love him as his equal, not his conquest: “I will no more have to bow my crowned head before you. I know your name.”¹³⁵

Having put his life into her hands, Calaf is prepared to face his fate, and his last words are “you have won.”

This would appear to be the point where Puccini knew he had to compose something extraordinary to express Turandot’s feelings at having this brave and passionate man totally within her power through his own free will. Alas, whether it was to be that “orchestral

¹³² “Dell’ave lo strazio non si rinoverá.”

¹³³ “Prendila dunque, e pur bella la morte! Fammi morir!”

¹³⁴ “Arbitra son del tuo destino.
Tengo nella mia mano la tua vita
Tu me l’hai data, e mia, e mia!”

¹³⁵ “Non piu dovra piegarsi inanzi a te
la mia fronte recinta di corona.
So il tuo nome! Ah!”

peroration” or to be expressed vocally by Turandot in either a solo or a full-blown duet with Calaf, this crux of the entire opera was never set to music by Puccini.

This is sadly ironic. From the beginning, Puccini instinctively knew that the final duet resolving the story and realizing Turandot’s transformation had to go beyond a mere forceful kiss, and required Calaf’s surrender by revealing his name. On October 20, 1921, he had written:

“After he has kissed her with a kiss that lasts some long seconds, he must say ‘Nothing matters now, I am even ready to die,’ and he speaks his name to her lips.”

As it stands, although the key to Turandot’s transformation is not just physical passion but Calaf’s willingness to put his life in Turandot’s hands, the concept is at best blurred, and never properly presented with the music Puccini dreamed of composing.

“Nessun dorma” And Its Mixed Message About How To Win Turandot’s Love

Calaf’s famous third-act aria “Nessun dorma” epitomizes this blurring of concepts about the resolution of the opera. As dawn approaches, Calaf contemplates how his effort to win Turandot will be achieved. He realizes that he can win only if he surrenders by revealing his name:

“You, too, o Princess,
in your cold room
look at the stars, that tremble
with love and with hope!
But my mystery is shut within me;
no one will know my name!
No, I will say it on your mouth
when the daylight shines!”

But immediately after this he reverts to the expectation that Turandot can be won by his physical passion.

“And my kiss will break the silence
that makes you mine!”

The heroic conclusion of the aria, with its anticipation of triumph, is justly famous, but its emphasis on “winning” is nonetheless a bit of a wrong note, even if it enables the tenor to show off his high note.

“Vanish, o night!
Set, you stars!
At dawn I will win!”

I will win! I will win!”

The same concept, of Turandot being transformed into a loving woman once Calaf has put his life and being in her power, is prefigured in a cruder way by Gozzi and Schiller, *i.e.*, when Calaf seizes a dagger and proclaims he will kill himself if he cannot have her. But in these plays, we do not know whether Calaf really would go through with his hyper-dramatic threat.¹³⁶ In the opera, we fully realize that Calaf has willingly entrusted his whole being to Turandot without any assurance that this will finally end her frozen fear and realize his goal of obtaining her love.

The Riddles in the Opera Reveal the Answer to the Riddle of the Opera

The answer to the enigma of how to explain Turandot’s transformation is found in two of the riddles which she and Calaf propounded to each other.

In Gozzi and Schiller, Turandot’s own riddles are literally bloodless and academic, with answers like the sun, the year, the Lion of Adria (Gozzi), and the year, the eye, and the plough (Schiller). In Puccini’s operas the riddles are emotionally powerful and relate directly to Calaf’s challenge. The answers are hope, blood, and Turandot.¹³⁷

The words used in Turandot’s final riddle – “what is the ice that inflames you, stranger?” – suggest the answer that Calaf must learn to truly win her love. Part of the riddle says,

“If she sets you free,
she makes you a slave!
If she accepts you as a slave,
she makes you a king!”

Here, Turandot cryptically gave Calaf the key to overcoming her great fear. Calaf can win her and become ruler of China only if he is willing to be her slave, not her master. With a willingness to become powerless he will become a king. Only by surrender can Calaf truly win.

The other crucial riddle is Calaf’s: Turandot must discover his name. This riddle is consistently used in all versions of the story, but it obtains a deeper significance in the context of an opera which has transformed the tale into the darker realms of symbolism and myth.

The quest to discover a concealed name has been a powerful and recurring legend in the

¹³⁶The Lehnhoff production of the Berio finale has Calaf give Turandot a dagger to kill him if she chooses. This further highlights Calaf’s willingness to put himself in her power.

¹³⁷A comparison can be made to Wagner’s *Siegfried*, where Wotan mocks Mime because he failed to pose riddles whose answers would be important to the resolution of Mime’s dilemma of how to regain the Rheingold.

literature and folklore of almost every culture. This is because a concealed name traditionally contains the essence of the self and is the source of both its power and its vulnerability.¹³⁸

Thus, Orthodox Jews have made the name of Yahweh an unspeakable taboo, to prevent anyone from invoking its power.

In Egyptian mythology, when the goddess Isis learned through a trick the name of the sun god, Ra, she was able to overthrow him and place her son Horus on the throne.

In Goethe's Faust, Faust demands that the demon who has suddenly appeared before him reveal his name. When Méphistophélès derides the question as puerile and unworthy of a scholar, Faust replies that "the name can reveal the Essence"¹³⁹

In the Odyssey, when Odysseus (who had previously concealed his true name and identified himself as "NoMan") recklessly reveals his name to Polyphemus, this knowledge enables his enemy to curse Odysseus to his father, Poseidon, with catastrophic results.

The idea that uncovering a concealed name transfers power and control is similarly found in various Norse legends, and folk tales such as Rumpelstiltskin. In Wagner's Lohengrin, Elsa is enjoined to never seek to learn her hero's name; when she does, Lohengrin's mission is undermined and Elsa dies. Tolkien utilized this mythic concept in The Hobbit, where Bilbo Baggins resorts to trickery because he knows that there would be serious consequences if the dragon, Smaug, learned his name.

The intimate essence of the self that is contained in a concealed name was delightfully expressed by T.S. Eliot in a poem that wound up in the Lloyd Webber musical, Cats:

"But above and beyond there's still one name left over,
And that is the name that you never will guess;
The name that no human research can discover--
But THE CAT HIMSELF KNOWS, and will never confess.
When you notice a cat in profound meditation,
The reason, I tell you, is always the same:
His mind is engaged in a rapt contemplation
Of the thought, of the thought, of the thought of his name:
His ineffable effable

¹³⁸The following discussion of the significance of a concealed name uses some of the many wonderful examples covered in the Wikipedia article "True Name."

¹³⁹Arrigo Boito's opera Mefistofele closely adheres to this dialogue, with Faust telling Mefistofele: "In voi, messeri, il nome ha tal virtù che rivela l'Essenza."

Effanineffable
Deep and inscrutable singular Name.”¹⁴⁰

Calaf’s riddle invokes all of this legendary potency. When Calaf requires Turandot to learn his name, he actually is pleading with her to find out who he is as a human being, to intimately discover the essence of his soul, to obtain both understanding and power over him.

The real answer to Calaf’s riddle is the same as the question in Turandot’s final riddle: Calaf can only triumph by losing, by putting himself in Turandot’s power. These two protagonists will find release and happiness only in mutual surrender. In a cruel world of fear and domination, the path to redemption and love is through mutual respect, equality, and trust and confidence in one’s partner, even to the extent of putting one’s life in her hands.

We will never know whether this is how Puccini intended to resolve the problems posed by his last opera. We are forced to speculate whether he would have felt the need for yet another version of the libretto to make Turandot’s transformation more comprehensible and less abrupt and dramatically implausible. We can only fantasize about whether he would have accomplished this task through wonderful new music – perhaps that never composed “orchestral peroration” or perhaps a sublime conclusion to the duet between Calaf and Turandot.

We will never know. All we have to work with today is a choice among not truly satisfying alternatives – the two Alfano finales, and attempts like Berio’s to re-imagine from Puccini’s sketches a different ending with a different mood, which is something that will never truly sound like the ultimate creation of the last great master of Italian opera. Regardless of the version that is produced, the success of the ending must depend on the genius of the director and the singers to make credible the music which we do have.

Yet, I am convinced that redemption through mutual surrender is the best resolution for the final enigma of Turandot’s transformation. It is implicit in the texts we have. Puccini’s letters and the changes he made to the presentation of the story are evidence that, at least subliminally, he was groping towards this solution of the riddle of her transformation. But whether Puccini actually would have recognized and achieved this solution, is something we will never know.

The ultimate enigma remains impossible to solve – what would the last masterpiece Italian opera have sounded like had Puccini been able to complete it?

¹⁴⁰T.S. Eliot, Old Possum’s Book of Practical Cats, Faber & Faber, 1939.

SELF-INDULGENT APPENDIX

I have been enthralled by Turandot since I first discovered this opera in early 1964, when I was fifteen years old. Even then I was puzzled, yet deeply moved, by the meaning of the opera and its ending. A few months after I first encountered the opera I even ventured, with the brashness of youth, to write a few poems about this. Although in the ensuing fifty-four years I have read a great deal more about the opera, my original viewpoint was surprisingly close to the conclusions reached in this essay, as can be seen from the following exemplar of juvenalia.

Nessun Dorma

Cast thy spell, haunting, shadowy night,
Night besprinkled with soft, fleeting drops of light.
Cast, o night, thy spell: that none shall sleep.
None shall sleep! All shall toss the dark awake,
Awake, reft of sleep, yet ensnared in dreams.

And in your pure, yet incomplete chamber,
You too, my love, shall billow without sleep,
Haunted by the eternal cry of lovers' sky.
Awed by the dreadful solitude of one lone soul,
So incomplete ... so wrong against nature's laws.
Sleep not, my love. Feel the meaning of the spell.
And be you drawn to me – as all nature wills.

And cast, too, o night thy spell on me
That a force greater than my tremulous heart
May master my fears of so intense a passion.
Let me reveal my love, release my soul!
O night, cast thy spell of truth. None shall sleep!
And I, made whole, conquered, conqueror shall be.

August 8-9, 1964



Poster for the *prima assoluta* of Turandot.
LaScala Museum,
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