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"Enigma Variations"  
By James K. Genden**

***TURANDOT:***  
**ENIGMA VARIATIONS**

**James K. Genden**

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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.

Spectacular and immense in scale, Turandot ventures into the realm of myth. 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 style. It retains Puccini's essential lyricism and contains some of his most heart-wrenchingly moving music.

Turandot's special place in operatic history is not derived solely from its merit as the final masterpiece of the most popular operatic composer. It is the last great work of the Italian operatic tradition, the last Italian opera to make its way into the standard repertory.

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

Puccini worked on Turandot for 4 ½ years but it remained unfinished when he died on November 29, 1924. More than a year earlier he had composed all of the music except for the concluding duet and final scene. For months (and indeed years) he struggled over the text and the music for those final fifteen minutes.

Suffering from throat cancer, Puccini went to Brussels 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. Franco Alfano was commissioned to complete the work from these sketches. We typically hear Alfano's shorter second version of the finale.<sup>1</sup>

This finale leaves many people unsatisfied, not merely because Alfano lacked Puccini's special genius. The duet was supposed to reveal Turandot's transformation from a cruel princess

into a passionately loving woman. But this transformation is not truly credible.

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

### **Summary of Puccini's Libretto**

The opera's libretto comes from an ancient Persian tale that was made into a play by Carlo Gozzi and subsequently revised by Friedrich Schiller.

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

The opera opens on the eve of the execution of yet another suitor. In the crowd is an exiled prince, traveling incognito. He encounters his aged blind father, a king who had been deposed by a usurper. His father is accompanied by Liù, a slave girl.

Turandot appears in all her beauty and regal splendor. She says nothing but gestures that the execution shall proceed. The unknown prince sees her and immediately falls in uncontrollable and irrational love. Neither his father nor Liù nor three cynical mandarins can deter the prince from striking the gong to announce that 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 invaders. The unknown prince solves the three riddles. Turandot desperately pleads to be spared

from being thrown into the power of a man. At the climax of this 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 torturers and kills herself. Her body is taken off the stage in a funeral cortege.

This was the last music Puccini completed.

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 to 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, and 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."

### **PUCCINI'S LIBRETTO SIGNIFICANTLY DIVERGES FROM THE SOURCE PLAYS**

The drama composed by Puccini differs significantly from the Gozzi and Schiller plays.

- (1) The opera has a mythic scope and is far darker in mood, depicting a sterile, frozen world devoid of love.
- (2) Turandot's is far crueller but her rejection of men is explained with a highly symbolic motivation.
- (3) A character not found in any earlier version, Liù, receives the most 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 ordinary people, with whom everybody can empathize. Until Turandot he never ventured into heroic or mythic territory. But in Turandot he approached a quasi-Wagnerian theme: how love can redeem a frozen and sterile world.

The China which Puccini depicts is not just a far-away land of fable. This China is a cruel place. The opera begins with an execution. We see the decapitated heads of failed suitors. Anticipating the executioner, the crowd howls for blood. The Emperor, Turandot's father, laments that "the holy scepter I clasp is steeped in blood!"

Turandot's principal musical motif is first heard when an off-stage children's chorus sings of a frozen world in which nothing blooms.

Puccini retains 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 world-weary 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.

The libretto thus depicts a universe where Turandot's rejection of love has 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.

Calaf justly calls her “Princess of Death, Princess of Ice.” Her capacity for cruelty is beyond doubt. We witness the execution of the Prince of Persia. She uses violence and terror. When the crowd encourages Calaf in the riddle scene, Turandot commands the guards to “lash those wretches.” She threatens the populace with death if the prince’s name cannot be discovered. She orders Liù’s torture. While everyone else is moved by Liù’s suicide, Turandot is enraged, whipping the face of the soldier who allowed Liù to seize his dagger.

Yet, this beautiful and clever princess is not insensitive to erotic attraction. In the final duet, while still urging the prince to leave her, she confesses that from the moment she saw him she was moved by his courage and assuredness.

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

Turandot reveals that she is motivated by an ancient, horrible crime – the rape and murder of her 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.”

Thus, to some critics, Turandot is a fierce feminist *avant la lettre*, courageously struggling against a brutal male-dominated world. One critic sees Turandot’s ultimate acceptance of Calaf’s love as an act of surrender:

“When the opera is over ... [w]hat has happened? Nothing. Just a woman who gives up and gets married.”<sup>2</sup>

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 of

losing her dignity, autonomy and self-identity.

Her fears are not unjustified. The pervasive male view of women in Turandot's China is expressed by the mandarins. They try to dissuade Calaf from his pursuit of the princess by telling him that she is just a woman with a body, nothing special. "A female with a crown on her head! ... raw flesh which you can't even eat." Far better for him to get one hundred mistresses if he is unable to give up lust for women. They dream of a return to a world free of Turandot's feminist illusions, where she will be bedded with "a husband who reigns over you!"

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."<sup>3</sup>

### **Liù: The "Piccola Donna" Who Seizes Puccini's and the Audience's Affections**

In terms of plot, the greatest change wrought by Puccini and his librettists was the creation of Liù, the slave girl who hopelessly loves Calaf and commits suicide to keep his secret.

There is no equivalent to her in the Gozzi or Schiller plays. Almost immediately after first expressing interest in the Turandot story, Puccini came up with the idea of adding what he called a "piccola donna" (little woman) to the plot.<sup>4</sup> This was to become Liù.

Puccini wasn't quite certain how Liù would fit into the story. Gradually, he came to the idea that Liù would have to undergo torture and die to save Calaf.

### ***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. Puccini's "piccole donne" have a strong streak of self-abnegation, a diminished sense of self-worth. They obtain fulfillment through a self-



sacrificing capacity for love.

Puccini subjects his tender heroines to enormous emotional, psychological, and even physical torture. Manon dies slowly of thirst, Mimì of tuberculosis in a freezing garret. Tosca is nearly raped after her lover has been tortured and then he is murdered before her eyes. Butterfly commits suicide after being betrayed. Minnie must wager her body for her wounded lover's life in a card game. Suor Angelica is psychologically tormented by her cruel aunt.

With Liù, Puccini created the epitome of his passionately devoted “piccola donna.”

When Calaf asks who she is, she replies “I’m nothing. A slave.” She endures hardships and torture because long ago Calaf had smiled upon her in the palace.<sup>5</sup> Calaf, of course, does not remember this moment which had transfigured Liù; indeed, he does not even recognize her.

In a macho culture, Liù is a “dream girl. For a feminist, she is the male fantasy of woman as victim.

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

The sadism of Liù's on-stage torture has generated particularly harsh critical comment. The critics focus on the irony that Liù is irrelevant to the plot and its resolution.

Puccini gave Liù the most moving music in the opera. Puccini felt the need, which he couldn't put into words, to create this quintessential loving, self-sacrificing character, but he was unsure 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.”

But it doesn't. In the midst of the torture, Turandot asks Liù what power gives her the strength to endure such agony. Liù simply responds: “Love.”

Nothing follows from this exchange.<sup>6</sup> 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. Everyone else is shocked and moved by this death. Not Turandot.

The emotion Puccini invests in Liù derails the central plot line, which concerns Calaf’s path to winning the princess’s love. Puccini inadvertently diverted the audience’s empathy away from the two central characters. Some commentators find Calaf’s wooing of Turandot after Liù’s death to be as inappropriate as it would have been if Puccini had concluded Madama Butterfly with a love duet for Pinkerton and his American bride immediately after Butterfly’s anguished suicide over Pinkerton’s betrayal.<sup>7</sup>

Liù thus fulfilled a deep inner need felt by Puccini, but created a dramatic *cul du sac* for the opera’s conclusion, with which he struggled but never could resolve.

### **Calaf Voluntarily Reveals His Name To Turandot**

Puccini’s libretto significantly diverges from the source plays where Turandot learns the prince’s name through the deceptions of one of her slaves. In these plays his life is not at risk because her father had decreed that Calaf would not die if the name riddle were solved.

But in Puccini’s version the stakes remain deadly. In proposing his riddle, Calaf explicitly pledged that “I will die at dawn” if Turandot can solve it. She doesn’t, thwarted by Liù’s suicide. Yet Calaf voluntarily reveals his name, knowing full well the consequences.

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.”

Turandot fully appreciates that she now has him in her power. This is far more explicit in text cut in the generally performed version of the posthumous finale: “I control your destiny.”

Significantly, Calaf's final words in the opera are "You have won."

### **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 couldn't he finish the opera? There are various theories.

#### **Was There Actually Any Writer's Block?**

Some commentators assert that Puccini was stymied by a "writer's block" while others are unconvinced, asserting that Puccini always was a notoriously slow draftsman, and that Turandot was left unfinished solely because of his untimely death.<sup>8</sup>

Nonetheless, it is clear that there was something about the final scene which sets Puccini's struggles to find a proper conclusion to the opera 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 proposed a fascinating Freudian analysis of why Puccini was unable to finish Turandot. Carner claims Puccini had a "mother fixation," viewing womanhood with polarized images of the madonna and the prostitute. Carner felt that Puccini had repressed guilt for loving his gentle creations, a love violating the sanctity of the "mother" image. He transferred this guilt to his heroines, who had to pay for it with their suffering.

Until late in his career, the persecutor of his heroines was never depicted as a female or a rival, *i.e.*, the madonna/mother figure.

But with Turandot, Puccini had to create a powerful woman who was the instrument of Liù's destruction and her rival for the Prince's love. In Carner's terms, composing the final

scene would depict the triumph of the mother figure as a physical love object. Carner felt that Puccini could not overcome his subconscious resistance to the taboo of making love with his own exalted mother.

### **Puccini Was Frustrated and Trapped By the Libretto**

Other commentators focus on how Puccini was stymied by the structural problem resulting from his insertion of Liù into the plot. For all that she was essential to inspire his compositional talents, she is also a dramatic dead end.

Puccini knew he had a problem. He rejected four versions of the final scene 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.

### **Fear and Awe**

The harshest critics conclude that the opera was not finished because composing a highly symbolic, mythic opera was a task beyond Puccini's abilities as an artist, and he knew it.

### ***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 letters show that he realized that he had to find a way to express Turandot's transformation in a duet unlike anything he had written before.

As his death was approaching, Puccini still had not figured out how to accomplish this. He wrote about his vision for the final moments of the opera:

"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 peroration.”

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 an 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 do not know precisely what Puccini meant, but in context it suggests that he envisioned something very different from his normal style, 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 monumentality of Tristan is intensified by our understanding of Puccini’s emotions in his final days. While struggling with the final moments of the opera, Puccini opened the score of Tristan

and began to play the Prelude on the piano. After 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.”<sup>9</sup>

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 desperate state of self-doubt.<sup>10</sup> 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.”<sup>11</sup>

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

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.

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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 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 melodic 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 inherently unanswerable enigma is how he might have resolved the problems of the conclusion and how he might have depicted Turandot's transformation.

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

### **The “Macho” Resolution in the Standard Completion by Alfano**

Turandot's transformation in the generally performed version is highly unsatisfactory to a contemporary audience. In simple terms, we see a rather appalling male chauvinist fantasy,

reflecting the values and conduct of many powerful men, most notably the unspeakable person in the White House: a world in which a woman's "No" really means "Yes."

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

When Turandot says at the beginning of the final 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. When she says "do not touch me," he blatantly ignores what she says. He grabs her and violently kisses her, while 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 am] lost." She then tells Calaf how she always was attracted to him – while still pleading with him to please go away without asking more from her. She refuses to condemn Calaf to death even though she has learned his name. Instead, she announces to her father and the assembled throng that "his name is love."

This conclusion fits the macho values of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. Puccini himself was a serial womanizer. Puccini's letters indicate that he did place great emphasis on the effect that Calaf's kiss – consented or not – would have on Turandot.

And yet, this is much too simplistic an analysis. Puccini's attitudes towards women were far more sophisticated than pure machismo. All of his operas show great sensitivity to the nuances of his heroines' feelings. Indeed, hostile contemporary critics saw his operas as too "feminine" in their depiction of woman.



### **The Resolution In the Source Plays**

In Gozzi's play, Turandot learns the answer to Calaf's riddle through treachery rather than Calaf's voluntary disclosure. Since the Emperor 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.

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. At this point, Turandot relents and yields to Calaf.

The resolution in Puccini's libretto also relies on Calaf's readiness to die. But it is far more powerful 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.

### **A Resolution Implicit In Puccini's Own Changes to the Story**

For me, there is a resolution to the enigma of Turandot's transformation which is implicit in the very changes Puccini and his librettists made to the story.

I believe 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. Moreover, 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 from her tale of the rape of her ancestress, Turandot fears male domination 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 that she not

be possessed by force. 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.

Turandot cannot solve the prince's riddle, but still remains an unwilling conquest. At this point, crucially, Calaf surrenders. For the second time, he relinquishes his victory. He reveals his name and once more puts his life his life in her power. He is fully aware of what he is risking.

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 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."<sup>12</sup>

She now can love him as his equal, not his conquest.

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, and having obtained this power through his own free will. Alas, whether it was to be that "orchestral 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.

As it stands, although the key to Turandot's transformation is not 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.

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

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

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 is a powerful and recurring legend in the folklore and literature 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.<sup>13</sup>

In Egyptian mythology, the goddess Isis learned the name of the sun god, Ra, and was able to overthrow him. 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.”<sup>14</sup> Odysseus recklessly reveals his

name to Polyphemus. This enables him to curse Odysseus to his father, Poseidon, with catastrophic results. The idea that uncovering a concealed name transfers power and control is also found in various Norse legends, Wagner's Lohengrin, and folk tales such as Rumpelstiltskin.

According to T.S. Eliot's whimsy, a concealed name is equally essential to 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  
Effanineffable  
Deep and inscrutable singular Name."<sup>15</sup>

Calaf's riddle invokes 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.

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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, 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.

We can only fantasize about the wonderful music that might have depicted this – perhaps that never composed “orchestral peroration” or perhaps a sublime conclusion to the duet between Calaf and Turandot.

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 for 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 of Italian opera have sounded like had Puccini been able to complete it?

## 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 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, Milan.

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## NOTES

1. The 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.

2. Catherine Clément, Opera, or the Undoing of Women, University of Minnesota Press, 1988. Clément 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.

3. William Ashbrook and Harold Powers, Puccini's Turandot, The End of the Great Tradition, Princeton University Press, 1991, at 161.

4. William Ashbrook 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.

5. Significantly, 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.

6. Ashbrook 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.

7. Actually, 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.

8. Puccini 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.

9. Budden, *op. cit.*, at 433; Mosco Carner, Puccini, A Critical Biography, 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition, Holmes and Meier, 1974, at 171.

10. Puccini 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.

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

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

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

14. Arrigo 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.”

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