

GIACOMO PUCCINI'S LAST OPERA: TURANDOT

By George K. Plohn, Esplanade house impresario

Giacomo Puccini was the last of Italy's great opera composers, a lineage that began in the seventeenth century with Claudio Monteverdi and progressed through Gioacchino Rossini, Gaetano Donizetti, Vincenzo Bellini and Giuseppe Verdi.

Born in Lucca, in Tuscany, not far from Pisa and Florence, in 1858, to a musical family, he began music studies at an early age, and when he reached 14, he began working as organist at the San Martino Cathedral in Lucca. It is said that at about the age of 18, he walked 13 miles to a theater in Pisa to hear *Aida*, the great Verdi opera, and immediately decided to become an opera composer himself. Later on, with a stipend from a grand-uncle, and a grant from the Italian Queen Margherita he was able to embark on serious musical studies at the Conservatory in Milan, where he studied diligently for the next three years. He learned composition in the class of Amilcare Ponchielli, the composer of the opera *La Gioconda*, who's lighter style was a great influence on Puccini.

His first try on an opera, *Le Villi* followed by *Edgar*, were complete failure at their premiere, but his next attempt fared much better: ***Manon Lescaut*** was deemed a great success, determining the playwright and drama critic George Bernard Shaw to hail Puccini as being the successor to Verdi. And indeed what followed proved him right, because what came next were the composer's best loved works —***Tosca, La Bohème and Madama Butterfly***, all three having been on our program here at Esplanade in the previous several months.

His next operas that followed were ***La fanciulla del West*** and the lovely ***La Rondine*** (translation: The Swallow) in 1917, and in 1918 *Il Trittico* a trilogy of three one-act operas, consisting of the drama *Il Tabarro*, the religious piece *Suor Angelica*, and the comic work *Gianni Schicchi*.

By then, the success of *la Bohème* made him famous and exceedingly wealthy. With the earnings, in 1900 he built a lake-side villa at Torre del Lago (translation: Tower at the lake) 15 miles from Lucca, where he could indulge his love of hunting. Now, it is a tourist attraction known as the "Villa Museo Puccini", open to the public and an annual Puccini Festival is held there in the nearby open-air theater. Puccini lived there until 1921, when pollution produced by peat works on the lake forced him to move to Viareggio, a few miles north.

And there in Viareggio, he started work on his next, which unfortunately was to be his final opera ***Turandot***, arguably **THE very last great Italian opera.**

The original story is based on a 12th-century Persian poem, while the name of the opera is based on Turan-Dokht meaning the daughter of Turan, a common name in Persian poetry for Central Asian princesses. Much later, the popular Italian playwright Carlo Gozzi made her story into a drama of a "tigerish woman" of "unrelenting pride." Then in a combined effort by two of the greatest literary talents of the era, Friedrich von Schiller translated the play into German as *Turandot, Prinzessin von China*, and Wolfgang von Goethe directed it on the stage in Weimar in 1802. Later on Puccini came across the story of ***Turandot*** via an Italian translation of the German play by Friedrich Schiller.

The opera's version of the story is set in China and involves Prince Calaf, who falls in love with the cold Princess Turandot. To obtain permission to marry her, however, a suitor has to solve three riddles; but any wrong answer would result in death. Calaf passes the test, but Turandot still refuses to marry him. He offers her a way out: if she is able to learn his name before dawn the next day, then at daybreak he will die.

Ever a perfectionist, Puccini wrestled with *Turandot* for four years (1920-1924), but sadly, cancer intervened and he died in 1924 before he could finish the piece. Composer Franco Alfano was chosen to complete the opera from the 36 pages of sketches that Puccini had left behind. It was an arduous process. Many of Puccini's notes were difficult to decipher and the publishers were insistent that the music sounds seamless — as if Puccini, not Alfano, had written it.

Turandot finally premiered at La Scala, Milan on 25th of April 1926, seventeen months after the composer's death, conducted by the composer's good friend and collaborator, **Arturo Toscanini**. This first performance included however only Puccini's music and not Alfano's additions, as in a truly historic moment, Toscanini laid down his baton in Act III after the last note that Puccini himself had written, turned towards the public and said: "*Qui finisce l'opera, perchè a questo punto il Maestro è morto.*" (translation: The opera ends here because at this point the Maestro died). That night the opera indeed ended there. On subsequent nights, the opera was presented in full, with the Alfano ending, and so is being done since then.

After the initial run, however, Toscanini never conducted *Turandot* again.

As a trivia information, Benito Mussolini, the then prime minister, was invited by La Scala to attend the première, and he accepted on the condition that the Fascist hymn *Giovinetta* be played at the beginning. But Toscanini a staunch anti-Fascist gave La Scala an ultimatum. He would quit if the hymn was played! So La Scala decided not to play it, and Il Duce, the title that Mussolini gave himself, did not attend! Music overcame politics!

Aspects of Puccini's personal life

Puccini was a handsome and charming man, but he also possessed a melancholic side that he drew on to give depth to his characters. He was wholly uninterested in religion or politics, and enjoyed racing sports cars on his property and gambling at cards, and knew quite well his ways with ladies.

He was nearly killed in an automobile accident in 1903, but despite that, he managed to finish one of his most popular works, *Madama Butterfly*, during his convalescence.

As for his family life, at 26 Puccini began a life-long relationship with Elvira Gemignani, a married woman, with whom he had a son, Antonio. Only much later, after Elvira's husband was killed following one of his own amorous transgressions, in 1904, were Puccini and Elvira able to marry, and to legitimize Antonio.

The marriage between Puccini and Elvira was also troubled by infidelity, as Puccini himself had frequent affairs, including with well-known primadonnas such as the famous Maria Jeritzza, Emmy Destinn, Cesira Ferrani, and Hariclea Darclée.

In 1909, Puccini's wife Elvira publicly accused Doria Manfredi, a maid in the Puccini household, of having an affair with her husband, the composer. After being publicly accused of adultery, Doria Manfredi committed suicide. An autopsy determined, however, that Doria had died a virgin, refuting the allegations made against her. Elvira Puccini was prosecuted for slander, and was sentenced to five months in prison, although a payment to the Manfredi family by Puccini spared Elvira from having to serve the sentence.

As far as politics goes, unlike Wagner and Verdi, Puccini was not active in politics.

He had some contact with Benito Mussolini and the Italian fascist party in the year preceding his death. In 1923 the fascist party in Viareggio made Puccini an honorary member and sent him a membership card, but he never joined the Fascist party. The Italian Senate has traditionally included a small number of members appointed in recognition of their cultural contributions to the nation. Puccini hoped to attain this honor, which had been granted to Verdi, and undertook to use his connections to bring about the appointment. Puccini also wished to establish a national theater in Viareggio, a project which would have required government support. Puccini met with Mussolini twice, in November and December 1923, seeking support for the theater project. While the theater project never came to fruition, Puccini was named *senatore a vita* (translation: senator for life) a few months before his death.

A chain smoker of Toscano cigars and cigarettes, Puccini began to complain of chronic sore throats towards the end of 1923. A diagnosis of throat cancer led his doctors to recommend a new

and experimental radiation therapy treatment, which was being offered in Brussels. Puccini and his wife never knew how serious the cancer was, as the news was revealed only to his son.

Puccini died in Brussels on 29th of November 1924, at age 65, from complications after the treatment; uncontrolled bleeding led to a heart attack the day after surgery. News of his death reached Rome during a performance of *La bohème*. The opera was immediately stopped, and the orchestra played Chopin's *Funeral March* for the stunned audience. He was buried temporarily in Milan, in Toscanini's family tomb. In 1926 his son arranged for the transfer of his father's remains to a specially created mausoleum in the chapel inside the Villa Puccini at Torre del Lago. There, alongside the composer were buried later his wife and son who died later.

SYNOPSIS

The action of the opera takes place in the mythical Peking/Beijing

ACT I

Outside the Imperial Palace in Peking, a mandarin, which was a government bureaucrat in imperial China, reads an edict to the crowd to the effect that any prince seeking to marry the princess Turandot must answer three riddles. If he fails, he will die. The most recent suitor, the Prince of Persia, is to be executed at the moon's rising. Among the onlookers are the slave girl Liù, her aged master, and the young Calàf, who recognizes the old man as his long lost father Timur, the vanquished King of Tartary. When Timur reveals that only Liù has remained faithful to him, Calàf asks why. She replies that once, long ago, Calàf smiled at her. In the meantime, the mob cries for blood but greets the rising moon with a sudden fearful silence. When the Prince of Persia is led to his execution, the crowd calls upon the princess to spare him. Turandot appears, and with a contemptuous gesture orders that the execution proceed. As the victim's death cry is heard from the distance, Calàf, transfixed by the beauty of the unattainable princess, strides to the gong that announces a new suitor. Suddenly, Turandot's three ministers, Ping, Pang, and Pong, appear to discourage him. Timur and the tearful Liù also beg him not to risk his life singing the aria "Signore, ascolta!" (translation: Sir, listen). Calàf tries to comfort her "Non piangere, Liù" (translation: Don't cry, Liù), but then strikes the gong and calls Turandot's name.

ACT II

Inside the palace, Ping, Pang, and Pong lament Turandot's bloody reign, praying that love should conquer her heart and restore peace. The noise of the people gathering to hear Turandot question the new challenger, calls them back to reality. The old emperor asks Calàf to reconsider, but he will not be dissuaded. Turandot enters and describes how her beautiful ancestor, Princess Lou-Ling, was abducted and killed by a conquering prince. In revenge, she has turned against men and determined that none shall ever possess her. Facing Calàf, she gives him her first question: What

is born each night and dies each dawn? “Hope,” Calàf answers, correctly. Turandot continues: What flickers red and warm like a flame, yet is not a flame? “Blood,” Calàf replies after a moment’s thought. Shaken, Turandot delivers the third riddle: What is like ice but burns? Tense silence prevails until Calàf triumphantly cries, “Turandot!” The crowd erupts in joy, and the princess vainly begs her father not to give her to the stranger. Hoping to win her love, Calàf offers Turandot a challenge of his own: if she can learn his name by dawn, he will forfeit his life.

ACT III

In the Imperial Gardens, Calàf hears a proclamation: on pain of death no one in Peking shall sleep until Turandot learns the stranger’s name. Calàf is certain of his victory exploding in the famous aria “Nessun dorma!” (translation: No sleep), but Ping, Pang, and Pong try to convince him to leave the city. As the fearful mob threatens him to learn his name, soldiers drag in Liù and Timur, Calaf’s father. Calàf tries to convince the crowd that neither of them knows his secret. When Turandot appears, commanding Timur to speak, Liù replies that she alone knows the stranger’s identity and will never reveal it. She is tortured but remains silent. Impressed by such fortitude, Turandot asks Liù’s secret. It is love, she replies. When the soldiers intensify the torture, Liù tells Turandot that she, too, will know the joys of love. Then she snatches a dagger and kills herself. The crowd forms a funeral procession and the body is taken away. Turandot remains alone to confront Calàf, who impetuously kisses her followed by their duet “Principessa di morte!” (translation: Princess of death). Knowing emotion for the first time, Turandot weeps. Calàf, now sure of winning her, reveals his identity. Once again before the emperor’s throne, Turandot declares she knows the stranger’s name: it is Love.

And so ends this very special opera.

Our DVD is a 1988 recording of a Metropolitan Opera live performance with the eminent Hungarian soprano Eva Marton in the title role as the Princess Turandot, the Spanish tenor Plácido Domingo as the unknown prince Calaf, the American soprano Leona Mitchell as the young slave-girl Liù, and the venerable American, in fact **New Jerseyan** bass Paul Plishka as Timur, father of Calaf, the deposed king of Tartars. Other roles are those of the Emperor Altoum, father of Turandot, the ministers Ping, Pang and Pong, and many more.

The conductor is maestro James Levine.

Stage production and set design: Franco Zeffirelli

Sung in Italian, with subtitles in English. The duration of the entire opera is 2:06.

Today we are presenting Act I and Act II, lasting 1:25. Next Sunday will be Act III for 0:40.

A trailer of our DVD can be viewed at:

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SdfvMBvLm_o

Turandot – Nessun Dorma – Pavarotti – 2006:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=O0Sx5lbVIQA>

GIACOMO PUCCINI

(1858-1924)



VILLA PUCCINI - TORRE DI LAGO



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