Synopsis

Act I

Legendary Peking. Outside the Imperial Palace, a mandarin reads an edict to the crowd: Any prince seeking to marry 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, vanquished King of Tartary. Only Liù has remained faithful to the king, and when Calàf asks her why, she replies that once, long ago, Calàf smiled at her. The mob cries for blood but greets the rising moon with a sudden fearful reverence. As the Prince of Persia goes to his death, the crowd calls upon the princess to spare him. Turandot appears in her palace and wordlessly orders the execution to proceed. Transfixed by the beauty of the unattainable princess, Calàf decides to win her, to the horror of Liù and Timur. Three ministers of state, Ping, Pang, and Pong, appear and also try to discourage him, but Calàf is unmoved. He reassures Liù, then strikes the gong that announces a new suitor.

Act II

Within their private apartments, Ping, Pang, and Pong lament Turandot's bloody reign, hoping that love will conquer her and restore peace. Their thoughts wander to their peaceful country homes, but the noise of the crowd gathering to witness the riddle challenge calls them back to reality.

In the royal throne room, the old emperor asks Calàf to reconsider, but the young man will not be dissuaded. Turandot arrives. She recounts the story of her beautiful ancestress Princess Lou-Ling, who was abducted and killed by a conquering prince. In revenge, Turandot has turned against men and determined that none shall ever possess her. Trumpets then herald the beginning of the riddles. Turandot poses her first question to Calàf: 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, and if it accepts you as a slave, makes you a king? Tense silence prevails until Calàf victoriously 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

At night 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, but Ping, Pang, and Pong try to bribe him to leave the city. As the fearful mob threatens him to learn his name, soldiers drag in Liù and Timur. 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. Soldiers torture her, but she remains silent. Impressed by her fortitude, Turandot asks what gives Liù the strength to resist. It is love, she replies. When the torture intensifies, Liù tells Turandot that she too will know the joys of love. Then, the girl snatches a dagger and kills herself. The crowd forms a funeral procession, and Timur follows as they take away her body. Turandot remains alone to confront Calàf, who impetuously kisses her. 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 that she knows the stranger's name: It is Love.

Giacomo Puccini

Turandot

Premiere: Teatro alla Scala, Milan, 1926

Puccini's final opera is a huge and melodious fairy tale set in a China of legend. It has its roots in various folk tales about a princess who tests the worthiness of her suitors by posing a series of riddles and has those who answer incorrectly killed. Puccini's art soars in this most unusual score, which features an astounding and innovative use of chorus and orchestra that stands with any achievement in opera. Yet for all this, *Turandot* is recognizably Puccini, bursting with the instantly appealing melodies that are at the core of his universal popularity. The unenviable task of completing *Turandot*'s final scene upon Puccini's sudden death fell to the composer Franco Alfano. Conductor Arturo Toscanini oversaw Alfano's contribution and led the world premiere. The opening night performance omitted the Alfano finale, with Toscanini ending the opera where Puccini had left the score when he died.

The Creators

Giacomo Puccini (1858–1924) was immensely popular in his own lifetime, and his mature works remain staples in the repertory of most of the world's opera companies. Franco Alfano (1875–1954) was recommended by Arturo Toscanini to complete *Turandot* based on the success of his 1921 opera *La Leggenda di Sakùntala*. His works are rarely performed today, though his *Cyrano de Bergerac* (1936) appeared at the Met as recently as 2017. The librettists for *Turandot* were the playwright and journalist Giuseppe Adami (1878–1946), who had previously worked with Puccini on *Il Tabarro* and *La Rondine*, and Renato Simoni (1875–1952), who had written libretti for other composers. The play *Turandot* (1762) by Venetian playwright Carlo Gozzi (1720–1806) served as the source material for their libretto. Gozzi wrote satirical fantasies and tragedies for the Venetian stage at a time of intense debate about the relative merits of realism and fantasy in dramatic art.

The Setting

Gozzi's play used the commedia dell'arte characters Ping, Pang, and Pong in their original form. In his play, they wandered from Italy to China, becoming members of the Imperial court of Peking. Their comments satirized Venetian politics and mores of the times. Puccini and his librettists dispensed with any such relevance. The China of this opera, set in "legendary times," is a mythic realm viewed from the exoticizing perspective of 20th-century Europeans.

The Music

Drawing upon the innovative techniques being employed by a number of composers in the early decades of the 20th century, the opera's sprawling orchestration calls for a wide variety of instruments, including alto saxophones, celesta, bass xylophone, harps (originally designated to be muffled with pieces of paper between the strings), and an organ. Puccini uses the chorus to great effect, from the bloodthirsty rabble urging on the executioner in Act I to the sublime invocation to the moon immediately following. There are several genuine Chinese themes used in *Turandot* that are integrated into the score in a suave and brilliantly original manner. The big imperial anthem in Act II is based on a Chinese melody, but the orchestra plays harmonies derived from medieval European religious music, and the remarkable resulting sound is not specific to any single culture. The title character's commanding Act II aria, "In questa reggia," and her succeeding confrontation with Calàf create an effect of Wagnerian proportions while still remaining in a firmly Italian style. The opera also contains moments of sheer melodic beauty in Puccini's most lyrical vein, notably in Liù's plaintive aria from Act I, "Signore, ascolta," and the tenor's unforgettable hymn of triumph, "Nessun dorma," which opens Act III.

Met History

The Met gave the U.S. premiere of *Turandot* in 1926, shortly after the world premiere in Milan. Tullio Serafin conducted a cast featuring one of Puccini's favorite sopranos, Maria Jeritza, in the title role, paired with Giacomo Lauri-Volpi as Calàf. This impressive duo led most of the subsequent revivals through the 1929–30 season, after which the opera (which had been considered a stylistic departure for Puccini) disappeared from the Met stage for several decades. It returned with the legendary 1961 production designed by Cecil Beaton, featuring conductor Leopold Stokowski in his company debut and starring Birgit Nilsson, Franco Corelli, and Anna Moffo. The current production by Franco Zeffirelli had its premiere in 1987, starring Eva Marton, Plácido Domingo, and Leona Mitchell, conducted by James Levine. Other notable artists who have since taken on the leading roles include Gwyneth Jones, Jane Eaglen, Maria Guleghina, Nina Stemme, and Christine Goerke (Turandot); Aprile Millo, Teresa Stratas, Ruth Ann Swenson, and Angela Gheorghiu (Liù); and Luciano Pavarotti, Johan Botha, Salvatore Licitra, and Marcello Giordani (Calàf).

Program Note

Giacomo Puccini's *Turandot* has all the spectacular trappings of grand opera—rousing choruses, a colorful mise-en-scène, elaborate sets, and multiple show-stopping vocal displays. But early in the compositional process, Puccini decided to change direction; in a letter dated March 18, 1920, he told librettist Renato Simoni to create "a *Turandot* by way of the *modern mind*—yours, [co-librettist] Adami's, and mine." The idea of modernity was not lost on the public. Several critics who attended the premiere immediately saw in it something unfamiliar. Composer and conductor Adriano Lualdi, in particular, observed that Puccini had deviated from his usual path, noting that "in no other of the recent operas of Puccini more than in *Turandot* is the inspiration and the drive toward the new so moving and constantly evident. … The composer who had won worldwide fame and fortune with his verismo abandons his old platform and approaches in his 60s the theater of the imagination." The music critic for *La Stampa*, Andrea Della Corte, spoke of "harsh intervals," "strange modulation," and "tragic chords" but also questioned Puccini's departure from his usual choice of leading ladies: "Thus the 'new woman' was only dimly perceived by the composer who gave us Mimì and Manon. And it is to these gentle creatures that Puccini's name remains entrusted." What was this "theater of the imagination"? And who was this "new woman"?

By 1919, a year after the premiere of *Il Trittico*, Puccini was once again groping for a subject. As always, the process was painful, and no less so for his librettists Giuseppe Adami, who had written the texts for *La Rondine* and *Il Tabarro*, and Italian journalist and specialist on the Venetian theater Renato Simoni. On October 23, 1919, Puccini wrote to Adami, "Well, have you and Simoni come to grips? Put all your strength into it, all the resources of your hearts and heads and create for me something which will make the world weep." Together, the three pored through myriad plays and novels, including Shakespeare's *The Taming of the Shrew* and Charles Dickens's *Oliver Twist*, for which Adami and Simoni actually produced a scenario and libretto for one act. Simoni ultimately suggested Carlo Gozzi's play *Turandot* (1762). The story was well known; numerous composers and playwrights had been adapting it to their own artistic visions for decades. Friedrich Schiller translated it into German in 1801, and that version was translated back into Italian in 1863 by Andrea Maffei, poet and close friend of Giuseppe Verdi. Moreover, Giuseppe Giacosa, one of Puccini's frequent collaborators, had written his own play on the subject, *Il Trionfo d'Amore* in 1875, in which the would-be suitor had to scale a mountain as well as answer riddles in order to earn his beloved's hand. And during the 19th century, a host of composers, including Puccini's own composition teacher, Antonio Bazzini, created settings of the tale for the operatic stage.

The fact that the story had already been sliced and diced numerous times in the opera house was of no consequence to Puccini; throughout his career, he consistently and notoriously sought evidence of a subject's prior success before

accepting it. An outstanding example is *Manon Lescaut* (1893), composed less than a decade after Massenet's *Manon* (1884). In early spring 1920, a very pleased and confident Puccini wrote to Simoni, "I have read *Turandot*; it seems to me that it would be better not to part with the subject. … Rework it so that it is swift and effective; above all, heighten Turandot's amorous passion, which for so long has been stifled under the ashes of her great pride. In short, I believe that *Turandot* is the most normal and human play in all Gozzi." The labor on the new opera was, however, long and tortured, typical for Puccini, who not only found it difficult to get started, but was loathe to relinquish a final product—he composed only 12 operas in 40 years. Worse, he complained bitterly throughout the process. His letters to Adami and Simoni even seemed to moan out loud: "I am sad and disheartened! Thinking about *Turandot*! It's because of *Turandot* that I feel like a soul lost in murky space!," he wrote in September 1921, and in March 1924, "I think of *Turandot* hour by hour, minute by minute, and all the music I have written up to now seems a joke and no longer pleases me."

What eventually emerged is something more serious than the work of Gozzi, who dismissed his fable as a piece of fluff, a "nonsensical tale, lacking magic and transformations." Moreover, Gozzi tailored his play to its Venetian audience. For instance, the answer to Turandot's final riddle attests to the locale: "Tell me the name of the kingly beast / Who makes the world tremble," demands the princess. "The mightiest power in all creation," responds Calàf, "the Lion of Venice!" Puccini, however, envisioned something more universal, and only the skeleton of Gozzi's comedy survives in Adami and Simoni's libretto: A bereft prince in a foreign land avoids beheading by answering riddles and wins the hand of an aloof princess.

Furthermore, in this new adaptation, the title character becomes the "new" woman, elusive and mysterious, and her domain is the "theater of the imagination": the "violet" Imperial City of Peking at sunset, dissolving into moonlight. Moon imagery pervades the tableau, evoking a severed head not unlike that in Schoenberg's *Pierrot Lunaire* (1912), which had fascinated Puccini. Those who wish to undertake the challenge of the riddles must strike a gong—another moon image—and the instrument itself seems to glows in an eerie half-light. Riddles are posed at night, but Calàf vows success in the light of day: "No, no, upon your mouth I'll say it when the light shines! … At dawn I'll win!"

The story thus unfolds over the life cycle, articulated here as "sunset, sunrise," as the music also expresses oppositions of night and day—the pounding of the executioner's drums, the harsh angularity of Turandot's Act II aria "In questa reggia," and the riddle scene on the one side, and the plaintive sweetness of Liù and the breathtaking romanticism of Calàf's "Nessun dorma" on the other. The sun casts its glow upon a joyful conclusion, as the euphoric crowd exclaims, "Love! O Sun! Life! Eternity!" It was an ending that Puccini himself designed. In his letter to Adami of July 9, 1922, he wrote, "I'd like Turandot's iciness to melt

in the course of the duet; namely, I want some amorous intimacy before they appear in front of the people. … [The couple] finish in ecstasy, jubilation, the glory of sunlight …"

But the composer did not live to see that transformation on stage. In fact, one early biographer, Claudio Sartori, called *Turandot* "The opera that killed [Puccini]." The composer had been diagnosed with throat cancer, and on November 4, 1924, he went to Brussels for radiation treatment but died there on November 29. The duet and finale were never finished. Puccini's publisher, Tito Ricordi, chose Franco Alfano to develop the remaining music from Puccini's sketches. (The challenge of the opera's finale has remained alive for nearly a century now, with several composers attempting completion, most recently Luciano Berio in 2002.)

The events of the first performance of *Turandot* have become legendary. The world premiere took place at Milan's Teatro alla Scala on April 25, 1926. Arturo Toscanini conducted, and when he arrived at the last portion of the score that Puccini had completed, he lowered his baton, turned to the audience and said, "Here the opera ends, because at this point the maestro died." The first complete performance took place the following night.

—Helen M. Greenwald

Helen M. Greenwald is chair of the department of music history at New England Conservatory and editor of the Oxford Handbook of Opera.