

Turandot

Giacomo Puccini

1858 – 1924

The last Puccini opera abandons his verismo style. He takes us to a mythical China many years ago, one populated by an ice princess, an impetuous prince, a faithful servant, and three commedia dell'arte figures. Today as our world becomes more multi-cultural we recognize that our understanding is sometimes limited by the context in which we experience other cultures. In this opera Puccini creates China as he wishes it to have been, but he also creates a compelling vision of the complexities of love. It is this vision that makes the opera a perennial favorite.

Puccini's own experience of love was complex at best. He was widely known as promiscuous, happily accepting favors offered. His belief in love at first sight is borne out by examining the scandals that surrounded his life, especially at his lakeside home in Torre del Lago.

Perhaps the incident that most affected Puccini's construction of this opera involved his own marriage. It was not a simple marriage of two similar young people which survived many bumps along the way. Instead it began as an affair between Elvira Bonturi and Puccini. Elvira was married to a school friend of Puccini's. She left her husband in 1886 to live with the composer. Divorce was not possible in Italy at that time.

Into the domestic mix insert a young lady Puccini fell in love with on sight and was currently obsessed with, a bad car accident for Puccini (February 25, 1903; it was the first one reported widely by the press in Italy) and the death of Elvira's husband the next day. Life is very complicated, and private detectives and confrontations abound for a time. Into this mix comes a young servant name Doria Manfreda who cares for the bedridden composer as he recovers from the accident.

Things were resolved between them and Puccini and Elvira married in 1904. Doria remained in the household, serving them but not involved with the composer. Elvira was jealous and suspicious and hounded the girl about having an affair with Puccini. Finally Doria quit, but Elvira would not be dissuaded. She confronted the girl in public, calling her a whore. Doria committed suicide in 1909 by taking corrosive sublimate, a mercury compound. Her outraged family requested an autopsy which revealed the maid was a virgin. The family sued Elvira, who was found guilty and sentenced to five months and five days in prison. A payment to the family by Puccini bargained the sentence away.

Turandot was not written during the time period of the scandal. It was written later, and was based on a play by Gozzi which had been set once as an opera in Germany by Busoni. However in the earlier versions of the story the servant Liu does not exist. Puccini added her to the opera, and in many ways she is the more attractive of the two female lead roles. Her love is pure and from a distance. It forms a reason for her actions in caring selflessly for the old king. Perhaps she reminded the composer, suffering as he was from cancer, of his former maid. Turandot on the other hand is so frightened of love that she resists any situation that might possibly lead to it.

The other interesting insertion in this opera are the characters of Ping, Pang and Pong. They are not traditional Chinese characters, but characters from Italian Commedia dell'Arte. Indeed, among all the characters of the opera they are the only ones who point to common sense. They offer a lightness to the mortal drama that might overwhelm us should we only hear the endless death of Turandot's decrees. Greenfield in his book Puccini, Keeper of the Seal quotes Puccini in an interview about these characters that admits their place in Italian tradition:

“There is a semicomical element in *Turandot*. Instead of our usual Masks, I have introduced Chinese masks. This exoticism will also serve to justify a task I assign to these three figures. In the opera, they represent good sense.”

That three comic characters in an ultimately tragic but triumphant love story are the voice of common sense seems a clear description of the place of opera in the world of reality. Opera rarely offers us our own “real” world, but the feelings, hopes, dreams and experiences offered there are a condensed form of reality. Clowns may be sensible, and ice princesses may find love.