

Thoughts on Turandot

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The circumstances which surrounded the premiere of Puccini's last opera were fittingly dramatic. During the performance, with a coup de theatre Toscanini stopped the orchestra after Liu's death, turned to the audience and promptly told them that he had ended the opera because at such point the Maestro Puccini had died. His terse yet affecting speech held added resonance for the conductor as in 1924 Puccini had prophesized to him that exactly such an event would occur: "The opera will be performed incomplete and then someone will come on stage and tell the audience: 'At this point the Maestro Puccini died.'"

I think it is also interesting and important to point out that a completed version of the work by Franco Alfano had already been composed especially for this premiere and that Toscanini was fully aware of its existence, but chose not to have it performed. Toscanini was in fact instrumental in both selecting Alfano for the difficult task of finishing the opera and in addition was responsible for the numerous cuts which Alfano's score underwent. That despite these facts Toscanini was still unwilling to conduct Alfano's realisation of the final part of Act three somewhat illustrates the real difficulties he had with this completed version. And I think it has to be said that many (including myself) still share these difficulties. For on reflection, it seems to me that two persistent problems accompany *Turandot*: namely the sheer inadequacies of Franco Alfano's attempted completion and secondly, and perhaps more significantly, that *Turandot* as penned by Puccini remains inherently unfinishable due to deep structural problems in the actual libretto.

Perhaps though, some background is in order. Puccini and his two librettists Giuseppe Adami and Renato Simoni first began work on the opera in 1920. As William Weaver notes, "the libretto of *Turandot* was born in a burst of enthusiasm around a luncheon table in Milan in the summer of 1920." So from this fateful lunch to the end of his life, the opera was to occupy Puccini and cause him much rumination and artistic

struggle resulting in several re-writes from his librettists. When he died on November 29th 1924, he had only completed the work in full score up to the point immediately following Liu's death. On the advice of Toscanini, the publisher Ricordi then offered the job of completing the opera to the Neapolitan composer Franco Alfano, but from letters of correspondence it is also clear that Alfano did not accept the commission right away. Nonetheless, by August 25th 1925, a contract between Alfano and Ricordi was signed and by January 1926, Alfano had completed the score, though at the request of Toscanini, he was forced to make some drastic cuts. It seems that Giuseppe Adami was given the unfortunate task of then explaining these revisions to Alfano and that this fact may have somewhat influenced the nature of the cuts that were eventually made.

Thus the already difficult problem of having Alfano produce a completed realisation of Puccini's opera was further compounded by the fact that the addendum itself was now in two separate versions – the one Alfano originally penned and the revised one based on the cuts suggested by Toscanini. Moreover, neither version really fulfilled its original purpose: namely to bring the opera to a satisfying conclusion. Jurghen Maehder in his essay, *Puccini's Turandot: A Fragment*, explores the background to this in great detail (that is, Alfano's composition of the final section, its subsequent revisions and its relationship to Puccini's own sketches). Through an extensive and penetrating analysis, Maehder uncovers the rather rash and impetuous nature of the revisions made to Alfano's original score which included 24 scissors-like cuts made without any regard for the internal logic of Alfano's music – all of which resulted in a reduction of Alfano's score by no less than 109 bars. As Maehder points out, one can only assume that Toscanini rejected Alfano's score on the basis that it differed completely from his recollections of how Puccini played the finale to him during a visit he made to Viareggio in October 1924.

But, this is a little baffling I think when one considers that the cuts made in 1926 did not allow for a re-integration of large amounts of music composed by Puccini (I believe just 23 bars of music in the end were derived directly from Puccini's sketches, 11 of which were of dubious quality). As Maehder puts it, "the operation forced upon Alfano by Toscanini aimed exclusively at a reduction of the percentage of Alfano's music without offering any alternative solution to the many problems created by the

carelessness of his cuts.” One almost detects in Toscanini’s behaviour a touch of over-protectiveness. It is as if he was unhappy with the whole idea of someone else daring to complete Puccini’s work in the first place and was therefore impatient with such posturing palimpsests.

Nor is this to imply that Alfano’s original addendum was some kind of misunderstood work of greatness. For the original version sent to Ricordi contains major stylistic, thematic and orchestral elements that are profoundly incongruous with what Puccini had already written – and some scholars are really quite devastating through their critiques in this regard. Michele Girardi for example describes Alfano’s “spectacular vulgarity” in his use of the horns and trumpets during the finale whilst adding: “we can only guess that Puccini would have found a better way of realizing his sketches, especially since Alfano displayed a taste more suited to Hollywood in the concluding pages.”

But at such juncture, I feel compelled to express some sympathy for the situation in which Alfano found himself. For example, although there are records of meetings between Alfano and Guiseppi Adami, there does not seem to be any evidence of such a correspondence with the other librettist, Renato Simoni. In addition to this, and incredible as it may seem, Alfano did not even know Puccini’s full score when composing the final part of the opera. And when one bears in mind that Puccini had struggled for several years with the work, it is small wonder Alfano was unable to concoct a wholly satisfying ending within a highly pressurized five month time frame. Moreover, I think Alfano’s work displays a certain coherence of its own and while it may lack inspiration, it is not entirely devoid of merit. After all, there are worse things than Hollywood.

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But more importantly, I think the real difficulty concerning the ending of Turandot has perhaps more to do with what was composed before Alfano came along, rather than after. The libretto itself was the result of numerous re-writes all due to Puccini’s distinct unhappiness with the finished product. From the beginning the libretto metamorphosed from its original source – Carlo Gozzi’s play – into a vastly different

beast. The play by Gozzi consists of five full acts, whilst Turandot was compacted into a mere three. No doubt under instruction from Puccini, Adami and Simoni changed many of the characters from Gozzi's original and eliminated others altogether. So for instance, while the characters of Barach, Adelma and Zelima were completely removed from the libretto, they were ultimately replaced by a single composite character (by this I mean a character whose traits were mined from material supplied by the original three characters) which they then called 'Liu'. Along with altering the roles of Timor and Altoum, the two librettists also changed the function and scope of the characters Brighella, Pantalone and Truffaldino: where these latter roles were lightly sketched under Gozzi's hand, in Turandot they became the famous trio of Ping, Pang and Pong, who as a group play a much more important role in the work's overall structure and design. And in addition to this, they increased the heroic status of Calaf and significantly heightened the cruelty and iciness of Turandot. It seems clear in fact that Gozzi's drama served more as a mine of ideas for Turandot rather than a strict model for adaptation. And I think by recasting the play to such an extent, Puccini and his librettists were in effect creating a completely new drama – something which was to have deep ramifications.

Looking at their treatment in particular of the characters of Turandot and Liu is especially revealing. In Gozzi's play for instance, the character of Turandot is given a humanity that is almost entirely absent from Puccini's creation. Through the use of asides to the audience, the original Turandot articulates her private thoughts and gives us crucial glimpses into her inner emotional world. We the audience get to see how the young prince Calaf affects Turandot. And though it is a simple device, I think that as used by Gozzi, it has numerous consequences. To begin with we see Turandot's iciness not as gratuitous cruelty but rather as a consequence of her natural pride. She is protecting herself in a harsh, male world. Secondly and I think crucially, we inevitably look forward with great anticipation to the moment of her transformation. By showing us the contrast between her inner and outer life as a character, Gozzi cleverly prepares the audience for the moment of her dramatic change, thereby making it credible and believable when it eventually and inevitably happens.

Puccini's Turandot on the other hand shows, as a character, hardly any sign of humanity towards anyone, until the very moment of the transformation itself –

something left to poor old Alfano to sort out on his own. Bizarrely and I think with disastrous miscalculation, the librettists laid hardly any preparation for this pivotal moment in the opera. Instead, they simply made Turandot's character even more aloof, more distant and less human than the heroine found in Gozzi's work and such a lack of preparation only served to undermine the sheer credibility of the heroine's consequently sudden transformation. To make matters worse, so much of the opera's overall credibility hinges on this moment that their failure to make it work dramatically, seriously undermines not only the ending but ultimately the opera itself.

The character of Liu is no less problematic either, though for entirely different reasons. Although she has no direct counterpart in Gozzi's play, as I mentioned earlier she is clearly mined from (if not inspired by) the characters of Adelma, Barach and perhaps Zelima. Again though, it seems the 18th century playwright is more successful in his handling of these three characters than Puccini, Adami and Simoni are with just the one. Gozzi gives his creations a rich past, concrete commitments and definite aspirations. For instance Adelma, who falls in love with Calaf, is given a history that strongly resembles his and is filled with clear aspirations to escape slavery and regain control of her kingdom. As a character she displays ingenuity and resourcefulness along with a steely will to survive. In contrast to her though, Liu seems helpless, lost and pitiful. Her aspirations never seem to develop beyond a hopeless wish for Calaf's love. Worse still, her death achieves little other than the continuation of a secret which Calaf then voluntarily reveals. Whilst her thus virtually incidental death undoubtedly excites our pity and outrage, such is its emotional drama that the opera seriously loses its dramatic balance. The death of Liu in itself might have made a good curtain as we watch in horror an innocent young woman die in Turandot's barbaric world; but the opera is supposed to be about Turandot and Calaf and it is as if the authors, suddenly remembering this original aim, frantically set about trying to bring Turandot and Calaf together.

It is a bizarre and perverse scene which follows. In the rush to bring about the union of Turandot and Calaf, Alfano was forced to dramatise a kind of perverse seduction scene (if one could call it this), the implications for which hardly bear thinking about such is its blatant and disturbing male chauvinism: Turandot is now revealed to be just some kind of bizarre male fantasy, whereby despite her claims of disinterestedness in

Calaf, she secretly wants him to overpower her. That Turandot up to this point doesn't even like Calaf or in fact men generally, well ... *ca ne fait rien*. According to Adami and Simone, it seems gentlemen, that *No* means *Yes* after all.

In a sense, the librettists boxed themselves into this corner when they altered Gozzi's play in the way that they did. In wanting to keep the opera's original ending despite all their changes up to this point, the solution they arrived at is almost inevitable if somewhat grim. I think, however, that they failed to genuinely consider another possibility for the opera: that Turandot really *is* this monstrously cruel person and this really *is* a barbaric world in which the characters find themselves. Up until the transformation, this is the world they successfully created. And it is within this awful world that there is the character of Liu: pitiful, lost, and helpless, yes; but also very human. In their determination to play Turandot's game, the other characters lose their humanity, and yet it is this very quality which Liu somehow retains. In this sense, her death holds a special resonance which jars with what the opera eventually becomes through its ending. Perhaps a better ending would have seen Calaf renounce the ice queen after Liu's death and look to leave such a barbarous land – perhaps even in the hope of returning to his native land and creating a more humane kingdom. A stern lesson thus learnt from the life and death of Liu.

But as it stands, no such lessons are learnt. Liu sacrifices her life for nothing and the two leads somehow get together and the whole awful spectacle ends with a celebration of this virtual *folie a deux*. Perhaps Toscanini was right after all to simply end the opera after Liu's death: for not only does it avoid the problematic ending, but it might just hint at the only true conclusion to the work as it stands.