

Puccini's *Turandot*

The Story of the Story

Today, when we think of “Turandot”, we ordinarily think of Puccini’s depiction of the cold-hearted, spellbindingly beautiful woman utterly devoid of feeling, barbarously cruel and man-hating. But the story is much older than Puccini, and the previous Turandots were quite different than Puccini’s Ice Princess.

We can start with a sort of real-life “proto-Turandot”, described by Marco Polo in his *Travels* (ca. 1300). In Polo’s account, her name was Khutulun. She was a warrior daughter of a certain Mongol Khan Kaidu and niece of the legendary Kublai Khan. Khutulun refused to marry any man who could not defeat her in wrestling, exacting a price of a certain number of horses, not death, for any loser. According to Polo, she remained unmarried, much to her parents’ displeasure.

Our version of the tale of Turandot first appears in Europe as a collection of Persian tales in 1712 in a translation by a French scholar named François Pétis de la Croix. De la Croix published it under the title, *The Thousand and One Days*, representing it as a “faithful, albeit selective translation of a Persian work”. (Note, this is not the *Thousand and One Nights*, that we know as *The Arabian Nights*.) Subsequent research found that this work was an adaptation and translation of a 15th Turkish collection. Among the tales in this collection is one entitled “Prince Khalaf and the Princess of China”, which is a version of the tale we are all familiar with: the infatuated prince and the princess who doesn’t want to marry.

Further scholarship traces de la Croix’s tale in part back to a 12th century epic *Haft Peykar* (*The Seven Beauties*), a work of 12th-century Persian poet Nizami Ganjavi, who lived from 1141 to 1209. In Nizami’s version, the Princess is Russian. While Nizami’s tale possibly pre-dates Marco Polo’s account of Khutulun, there’s a general consensus that de la Croix’s Chinese Turandot is partly based on Polo’s account of the Mongolian Khutulun as well as Nizami’s.

The tale then gets taken up by the 18th century Venetian playwright Carlo Gozzi. Gozzi lived from 1720 to 1806 and was highly successful in his time. He was an advocate of the traditional *Commedia dell’arte*, an early form of professional theatre that was popular in Europe from the 16th to the 18th century. It was a highly stylized form of theater, featuring traditional social types and stock characters, such as foolish old men, devious servants, or military officers full of false bravado. These characters wore characteristic stylized costumes and were referred to as “masks”. Think of Leoncavallo’s *Pagliacci*, or the traditional English *Punch and Judy* shows. While the plots and characters were highly stylized, productions were very much improvised and sometime actually unscripted, and thus could often be, and often were very satirical.

By Gozzi’s time *commedia dell’arte* was beginning to fall out of favor – Gozzi tried to revive the form. He wrote a series of *Fiabe Teatrali*, (Tales for the Theater). One of these was *Turandot*, based on the story from de la Croix’s collection. It was written in the *commedia dell’arte* form and was a comedy, described as having having a “light, sarcastic tone”. It premiered in Venice in 1762.

Turandot, like most of Gozzi’s other *fiabe*, was highly successful. The play was adapted by other playwrights and composers. Most importantly, it was translated into German and adapted by the German poet, philosopher, and playwright Friedrich Schiller who lived from 1759 to 1805. Schiller is an important figure in 19th century opera as several of his plays were adapted for the opera. In Gozzi’s and

Schiller's stage; these include: Verdi's *Don Carlo*, *I Masnadiero*, *Simon Boccanegra*, and *Luisa Miller*; Rossini's *William Tell*; Donizetti's *Maria Stuarda* and others. Schiller's *Turandot* premiered in 1801.

Puccini first began working on *Turandot* in March 1920 after meeting with librettists Giuseppe Adami and Renato Simoni. They provided him with a copy of Schiller's adaptation of the Gozzi play. After reading it, Puccini instructed them to begin work on it, but with two important modifications. One was the addition of the character of Liù, the devoted slave-girl faithful unto death; the second was the elimination of the "masks", the *commedia dell'arte* characters that Gozzi had inserted and Schiller kept. As it turned out, the role of Liù became central. The masks were retained in a highly subdued fashion as Ping, Pang and Pong, the Royal functionaries (who end up revealing their true humanity in Act 2).

Puccini's *Turandot* is very different from all of her predecessors. In Gozzi's and Schiller's versions, *Turandot* is determined not to marry, but the reasons are quite different from Puccini's. Gozzi's *Turandot* says, "I am not heartless. But I abhor your sex, and I defend myself in the only way I know, so that I may remain free from men. Why should I not be as free as you are?". Schiller, in keeping with his enlightened philosophy, has her say, "I am not cruel, as they say, but shun the yoke of Man's despotic sway. In virgin freedom would I live and die. Shall I, the daughter of an emperor, not have that birthright which belongs to all?".

But Puccini's *Turandot* explains herself in her aria, "In questa reggia" where she relates how, "...thousands of years ago", her ancestress, Princess Lou-Ling, was "dragged away / by a man like you, like you, / stranger, there in the terrible night / where her young voice was stifled!" And so, because of an event "thousands of years ago", *Turandot* has hated men and rejoiced as they gave their lives for her.

So how did Gozzi's and Schiller's models of feminist independence turn into the cruel albeit breathtakingly beautiful princess? And from where came the slave girl Liù, who does not appear in any of the predecessors at all?

In 1903, Puccini and his wife Elvira had established a home in the town of Torre del Lago in Tuscany. A 16 year old village girl named Doria Manfredi, the daughter of a poor widow, came to work for them as a servant. However, Elvira formed the notion that Puccini and Doria were having an affair. Puccini denied it and there was no evidence of such. Elvira spied upon and hounded the girl until she left their service. Elvira continued to hound and harass the girl whenever they met in the village. Doria became reclusive, fearing to leave her home. She appears to have been under suspicion even in her own home. She finally committed suicide in 1909, by swallowing a corrosive poison. It took 5 days for her to die, in terrible pain. A subsequent autopsy on the girl confirmed that she was a virgin. Criminal and civil charges were lodged against Elvira; Puccini paid a great deal of money in fines and penalties.

The affair affected Puccini deeply, and it has been suggested that in his version of *Turandot*, the Princess of Fire and Ice is patterned after Elvira and the faithful Liù after poor little Doria. Puccini didn't live to complete the opera, having composed only up to the death of Liù in Act 3. The opera was completed by the composer Franco Alfano.

And so this tale that begins in 12th century Persia evolves into one of Puccini's most intensely personal statements. One which he, sadly, never lived to complete.

Art Axelrod for the Opera Guild of Rochester
September 2019