

Puccini's *Turandot*

The Persecuted Servant Girl and the Opera That Didn't Get Finished

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In 1884, Narciso Gemignani, a prosperous businessman and music lover in Lucca, Tuscany, asked Puccini to give piano lessons to his wife, Elvira. The two promptly fell in love and began an affair. They kept it secret at first, but then in the autumn of 1886, Elvira ran off with Puccini. Their relationship was life-long, although they didn't marry until 1904, 10 months after Gemignani's death. However, their relationship was also quite stormy, since Puccini was a womanizer and had several notorious affairs. Elvira sometimes reacted violently to these affairs and was sometimes physically violent.

Puccini and Elvira set up home in Torre del Lago, near Lucca, Tuscany, in 1890. Now considered Puccini's "hometown," when Puccini and Elvira first moved there it was a backward fishing village on the Ligurian coast. Elvira often expressed her dislike of the town.

Doria Manfredi was a village girl who came to the Puccini villa as a servant, at the age of 16. The daughter of a poor widow, she arrived in the household in about 1903. All objective reports described her as a good, respectful and devoted servant. However, Elvira formed the notion that Puccini and Doria were having an affair. He vehemently denied it and there was no evidence, but Elvira spied upon and hounded the girl until she left their service.

Elvira continued to harass the girl whenever they met in the village. Doria became reclusive, fearing to leave her home; it appears she was under suspicion even there. She finally committed suicide in 1909, by swallowing a corrosive poison. It took 5 days for her to die, in terrible pain.

Village authorities ordered an autopsy, before witnesses. The doctor who had treated her performed the autopsy and reported that Doria had been a virgin. Even so, Elvira refused to express remorse, and the Manfredi family brought civil and criminal charges against her. The Court found her guilty and sentenced her to prison, but Puccini was able to effect a costly cash settlement. The whole episode was a local and national scandal. Puccini left Elvira for a time, but through the efforts of friends they were eventually reconciled. Clearly, this episode had a profound effect upon Puccini.

During the late 18th century, Carlo Gozzi (1720-1806) of Venice was a leading playwright in Italy, best known for writing “*fiabe teatrali*,” theatrical fairy tales. One of the most famous was *Turandot*, which was translated into German by Fredrich Schiller as *Turandot, Prinzesin Von China*, in 1802. This, in turn, was translated back into Italian by Andrea Maffei, a leading scholar of the time (and a friend of Verdi and one of his librettists).

In 1819, Puccini and two of his librettists, Giuseppe Adami and Renato Simoni, decided that Gozzi’s *Turandot*, as translated by Maffei, would be their next work.

He continued working on it until his death in 1924. He had suffered from a chronic sore throat which was repeatedly misdiagnosed, until it was correctly identified as cancer of the throat. He traveled to Brussels to undergo a then new and revolutionary method of treating cancer using radium, but he died in November of 1924 from complications of the treatment itself.

At the time of his death, Puccini had completed the opera up to the death of Liù in the last act. The final climactic duet, “*Principessa di morte! Principessa di gelo!*” (“Princess of Death! Princess of Ice!”) existed only as rough notes. His publisher, Ricordi, and Puccini’s son, Antonio, arranged to have Franco Alfano, himself an opera composer, complete the opera and bring it into the form we know today.

There can be no question that the tragic affair of poor Doria Manfredi profoundly affected Puccini. Many scholars think that the characters of *Turandot*, the Princess of Fire and Ice, and Liù, the servant girl, faithful unto death, are patterned after Elvira and Doria. And some believe that Puccini’s inability to complete the work was due, not so much to his death, but because for him, the drama ends with the death of Liù. The final duet of reconciliation between Calaf and *Turandot*, therefore, failed to resonate with his own emotions.

Turandot was premiered in La Scala, Milan in 1926, conducted by Arturo Toscanini. Toscanini, one of the greatest conductors of his time, was also a friend of Puccini. On that evening, after the scene of Liu’s death, he stopped the action, turned to the audience and announced, “Here, the maestro laid down his pen.” (But for all subsequent productions, he played it all the way through as is done today.)

When toward the end of Act III, you watch Timur, the blind king, walk off stage following the corpse of his faithful Liù into “that night that knows no dawn,” spare a thought for poor Doria and for the anguished composer who could not finish his opera.