

The Pescadero Opera Society presents

Turandot



Music by Giacomo Puccini
Libretto by Giuseppe Adami & Renato Simoni

Last duet and finale of the opera
completed by Franco Alfano

Lyric Drama in Three Acts
after Carlos Gozzi's fairy tale, *Turandotte*

Setting: Peking, China
in legendary times

Characters

Princess Turandot (dramatic soprano).....Eva Marton
Liù, a young slave girl (lyric soprano)..... Leona Mitchell
Caláf, the unknown Prince, Timur's son (tenor)..... Plácido Domingo
Timur, deposed King of the Tartars (bass) Paul Plishka
Emperor Altoum (tenor) Hugues Cuenco
Ping, Grand Chancellor (baritone)..... Brian Schexnayder
Pang, General Purveyor (tenor) Allan Glassman
Pong, Chief Cook (tenor)..... Anthony Laciura
Mandarin (baritone)..... Arthur Thompson
The Executioner, Pu-Tin-Pao (silent role)..... Roger Koch
Prince of Persia (silent role)..... Scott Forrest
Imperial guards, the executioner's men, boys, priests, mandarins, dignitaries, eight wise men, Turandot's handmaids, soldiers, standard-bearers, musicians, ghosts of suitors and a crowd

Conducted by James Levine
Directed by Franco Zeffirelli
The Metropolitan Opera Chorus and Orchestra

Première performance at Teatro alla Scala, Milan, Italy on April 25, 1926

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Synopsis

Act I

A Public Square in Peking, near the Forbidden City

A Mandarin reads an edict: “The Princess Turandot shall wed the first suitor of royal lineage who succeeds in solving her three riddles. Those who fail will be executed. Her latest suitor, the Prince of Persia, is to be beheaded at the rise of the moon.”

Bloodthirsty citizens urge the executioner on, and, in the tumult an old blind man is knocked to the ground. Liù, the slave girl accompanying him, calls out for help. A handsome stranger comes to their aid and recognizes the old man as his long-lost father, Timur, exiled King of Tartary. Both are in flight from their country’s enemies. Timur’s companion is the slave-girl, Liù, who decided to share the family’s sufferings. The old man tells his son, that only Liù has remained faithful to him. The youth asks her why. She replies that it is because once, long ago, Caláf smiled on her.



The mob again cries for blood, but the moon emerges, and they fall into sudden, fearful silence. The doomed Prince of Persia passes on his way to be executed. The young man’s looks and dignified bearing move the crowd to pity. They call on the Princess to spare his life. Turandot appears and, with a contemptuous gesture, bids the execution proceed. The procession moves to the place of execution, and from far off the Prince of Persia cries out, “Turandot!” with his last breath.

Timur, Caláf and Liù are alone in the square. Caláf has become overwhelmed by the Princess’s beauty and is now determined to win her as his bride. He boldly strides to the gong to proclaim the arrival of a new suitor. He is about to strike the gong and issue his challenge when he is suddenly blocked by Turandot’s three ministers, Ping, Pang and Pong, who try to discourage him. The balcony the Princess’ handmaidens call for silence — their mistress is sleeping. The Ministers pay no heed and continue their persuasions. The ghosts of former suitors materialize on the battlements, each bewailing his unrequited love. The Ministers point to where the Executioner appears bearing the severed head of the Prince of Persia. Timur joins his plea to theirs. Liù makes a last appeal (“Signore, ascolta”), to which Caláf, deeply moved, replies (“Non piangere, Liù”), recommending Timur to her care should he himself fail the test. As he continues to hold out, the music develops into a broadly swaying tug-of-war based on alternating chords and reinforced by the full chorus singing offstage. At the climax Caláf strikes the gong three times. Liù and Timur are in despair. The contest has begun.

Act II

Scene 1: In a Pavilion of Ping, Pang and Pong



Ping, Pang and Pong are preparing for either eventuality — a wedding or a funeral. They reflect on China’s misery ever since Turandot came to power. From Ministers of State, they have become servants of the Executioner. Each recalls his home in the peace of the countryside. Memories of Turandot’s past victims, evoked by an unseen chorus, give way to hopes that the man has been found who can tame her and restore tranquility to the land.

The palace wakes to life to the sound of trumpets. As the populace gathers to hear Turandot put the riddles to the new challenger, the Ministers are called back to harsh reality.

Scene 2: The Palace Courtyard

Gradually a crowd assembles. The various dignitaries take their places, among them the eight wise men, each bearing three scrolls with the answers to the riddles. The aged Emperor Altoum, seated on a high throne in the Imperial Palace, asks Calàf to give up his quest — but to no avail. A solemn choral hymn wishes him 10,000 years of life. Figure 1



Birgit Nilsson as Turandot

Once again the Mandarin reads aloud the Imperial decree. Turandot enters. Her powerful aria, “In questa reggia,” tells the story of her ancestor, Princess Lou-Ling, brutally slain by a conquering prince. In revenge Turandot has turned against all men, determining that no man shall ever possess her.

She poses her first riddle to Calàf: “What is born each night and dies each dawn?” “Hope!” Calàf answers correctly. Unnerved, Turandot continues with the second riddle: “What flickers red and warm like a flame, yet is not fire?” After a moment’s pause Calàf replies, “Blood!” Shaken, Turandot delivers her third riddle: “What is like ice but burns?” A tense silence prevails. Turandot descends the stairs and taunts the Prince. After a long delay Calàf triumphantly cries out, “Turandot!”

The crowd gives thanks. Turandot begs the Emperor Altoum to release her from her vow, but he refuses. Turandot then turns to Calàf for mercy. In reply, Calàf offers Turandot a riddle of his own: If, by the following dawn, she can discover his name, he will consent to be executed. Everyone hails the Emperor Altoum, who hopes to be able to welcome Calàf as his son-in-law.

Act III

Scene 1: Night in the Palace Gardens

Distant heralds repeat the Princess’ command: “No one shall sleep on pain of death until the Prince’s name is revealed.” The Prince muses on his impending joy, resolves that his secret shall never be disclosed. He sings the famous aria, “Nessun dorma,” whose principal strain testifies to Puccini’s undiminished lyrical gifts.

Ping, Pang and Pong emerge from the shrubbery and offer Calàf various bribes to withdraw his challenge and leave the country — young half-naked girls, jewels, promises of fame — but he rejects them all. The crowd has meantime gathered and threatens him with their daggers in order to learn his name.



Suddenly the Imperial Guards appear dragging in Timur and Liù. Alarmed, Calàf tries to convince the mob that neither knows his name. The Princess is summoned. Turandot appears. She orders the interrogation of Timur. Liù steps forward, claiming that she alone knows the stranger’s identity. Turandot has her bound. Ping has her arms twisted in order to make her talk. She remains silent. Impressed by such endurance, Turandot asks Liù’s secret. “Love has given me the power to resist,” the girl replies. Her mournful melody continues throughout the painful ordeal. The Princess signals the soldiers to intensify her torture. The Executioner arrives. Nearing the end of her strength, Liù snatches a dagger from one of the guards and kills herself. Blind Timur is told of her death. He joins the solemn procession that bears her body away.

At this point Puccini himself dies and Alfano’s reconstruction takes over. Turandot, now veiled, remains alone to confront Calàf (“Principessa di morte”). She is at first haughty and unyielding, but succumbs when Calàf rips off her veil and takes her in his arms, forcing her to kiss him. Humiliated, she begs him to leave, taking his secret with him. Turandot weeps for the first time. Confidentially, the Prince reveals his name, telling Turandot that he is Calàf, son of Timur. The Princess at once she recovers her pride, realizing that she still holds his life in her hands. A female chorus punctuated by brass flourishes leads into the final scene.

Scene 2: The Palace Courtyard

The Emperor, his courtiers and the people have assembled once again. As the people hail the Emperor, Turandot approaches his throne with Calaf by her side. Turandot declares that she knows the Prince's name — "His name is Love." Chorus and orchestra unite in a triumphant reprise.

Giacomo Puccini

Born: Lucca, December 22, 1858 — Died: Brussels, November 29, 1924



Giacomo Puccini was born in 1858, the son of the musical director of the Cathedral of San Martino in Lucca, the fifth generation of a family of professional musicians and composers, living and working in and around Lucca, Tuscany Italy. When he was just five years old his father died. Puccini eventually took over his father's position of choirmaster and organist at San Martino Church. It was expected that Giacomo follow in the path of his ancestors who were church composers and organists, continuing the long family tradition.

All that changed for him one night in 1876 when he and a friend walked thirteen miles to the city of Pisa to see a production of Verdi's *Aida*. From that moment on Giacomo knew that his true passion would be opera.

In 1880, Puccini completed his studies at the Pacini Institute in Lucca. He had just finished composing a mass, *Messa di Gloria*. This encouraged his great-uncle to help support his musical education. A scholarship was also granted from Queen Margherita at Milan's Conservatorio. Milan, with its famous Teatro alla Scala, was the place to be for all young up-and-coming composers.

For three years (1880-1883) Giacomo continued his studies at the Conservatorio. As a graduating exercise he composed an orchestral piece, *Capriccio sinfonico*, which was performed by the student orchestra. It achieved great success at its performance and foretold the gifts that were to be — of operas blending intense emotion and theatricality with tender lyricism, colorful orchestration and a rich vocal line.

Meanwhile, the music-publishing firm of Edoardo Sonzogno announced the first of several competitions for a one-act opera. (Mascagni's *Cavalleria Rusticana* was discovered in this way in 1889.) Puccini, then still a pupil of the Conservatorio, decided to take part in it. A young librettist and journalist, Ferninando Fontana, suggested that he compose an opera around the story *Le Villi* (the Witches). Though Puccini didn't win, the opera was produced successfully in 1884 at Milan. As a result, the great Milanese music publisher, Giulio Ricordi, acquired the rights of *Le Villi*, and commissioned Puccini to write a new opera, again with the young Fontana as his librettist. This was the beginning a life-long association of Puccini and Ricordi, in whom he found a fatherly friend and wise guide.

Puccini's first operas were true to 19th Century Italian harmonies with drama that portrayed balance of action. Puccini's operas were strong in emotional appeal and conflict, but they also contained gentler segments of repose and reflection. An example of such balance is suggested by Puccini's "farewell" and "death" arias that are marked with passionate lyrical melodies contrasted against underlying tones of morbidity.

Puccini was a perfectionist, writing just eight full-length operas, compared to Verdi's 28. He set high standards for himself and everyone else involved in his operas. His early works show German influence. Later his works show the influence of Debussy, and even a touch of the atonality of Schoenberg. But he never strayed too far from his melodic Italian roots or lost his attachment to his native Tuscany.

He worked tirelessly with the sopranos who played his heroines. Maria Jeritza, Puccini's favorite Tosca, recalled, "Sometimes he would make me so angry I wanted to cry. He would say, 'If ever I wake you at three in the morning and ask you to sing a high C, you will sing a high C.'"

When he was financially able, he bought a villa at Torre del Lago, living there much of his life. He was eventually driven away by the smell of a peat factory built during World War I. Puccini took no interest in politics and thought the war a mistake from the start. His lack of enthusiasm for the war was one reason for his falling out with his fiercely patriotic friend, conductor Arturo Toscanini.



Puccini (center) with his librettists

Puccini was fond of hunting and smoking, and was fascinated with the mechanical marvels of his day. He owned a wireless and a phonograph and corresponded with Thomas Edison. He also owned several automobiles and motor yachts. He barely survived one of the first car crashes in Italy. He once described himself as a "mighty hunter of wild fowl, operatic librettos and attractive women."

Puccini was a notorious lady's man, but he was innocent of the scandal that most shook his marriage. Convinced he was having an affair with a maidservant, his wife, Elvira, drove the young girl from the house and publicly denounced her. The girl was so shaken that she committed suicide, whereupon it was

determined that she was in fact a virgin.

Toward the end of his career, Puccini was influenced by the compositions of Rimsky-Korsakov, Strauss, Schoenberg, and Stravinsky, early forerunners of the Impressionistic Music Era. As Impressionistic music diverged from traditional harmonies, Puccini endeavored to assimilate a more contemporary style into the writing of *Turandot*, by far his most grand opera, replete with climaxes, choruses, and full pageantry. Marek wrote, "He became a frightening taskmaster, not only with his librettists but, above all, with himself. He was bent on doing something new, determined to write music of much larger scope, of legendary stature and philosophic implication." In the opinion of some critics, he nearly succeeded.

By March 1924, Puccini was suffering constantly from a throat condition, which was finally diagnosed as cancer. At a Brussels clinic, he underwent a grueling operation that brought on heart failure. On November 29, Puccini died. As his body was taken back to Milan, Italy plunged into mourning. At his funeral, Toscanini and the company of La Scala performed the Requiem music from his opera, *Edgar*.

Puccini died, leaving *Turandot* unfinished at Liù's death scene. Toscanini asked Puccini's friend, Franco Alfano, to complete opera from Puccini's thirty-six pages of rough sketches. At the La Scala premiere in 1926, however, only Puccini's music was performed. After Liù's death, Toscanini, who was conducting, turned to the audience and said, "At this point the Maestro laid down his pen." There was silence, then a cry of "Viva Puccini," and a passionate ovation. The next evening the opera was played with Alfano's ending.

Turandot

None of the operas that Puccini wrote gave him as much heartache or caused him as much disappointment as *Turandot*, the opera he never lived to finish.

In 1920, after searching a long time, Puccini finally found a story that he felt would fulfill his need to write a truly "grand" opera. This story, "*Turandotte*," was a fairy-tale, written by Carlo Gozzi, the eighteenth-century Venetian playwright. It was suggested to Puccini by one of his librettists, Renato Simoni, as something that was fantastic and unreal, but which had human emotions. After seeing a production of the play, Puccini decided to base his opera on it.

His friend, Franco Adami, supplied the composer with a copy of Schiller's adaptation of the play in the Italian translation by Andrea Maffei. Puccini returned it to him with the instruction to make it the basis of the libretto, adding "But on it you must rear another figure; I mean — I can't explain!" Clearly he was groping his way towards the conception of the slave-girl, Liù.



Birgit Nilsson as Turandot

"If I do not succeed in finishing the opera, someone will come to the front of the stage and say, Puccini composed as far as this, and then he died.

In 1924, Puccini went to Brussels for an operation and took with him a rough draft of the final act. Unfortunately, just as he had feared, he was unable to complete the opera. He had gotten as far as Liù's death scene when he himself died.

Toscanini asked Puccini's friend, Franco Alfano, also a composer, to complete the love duet and final scene to the score from thirty-six pages of rough sketches on which Puccini had already worked. Alfano meant the gesture as an act of honor to the great composer. He added no new music. This is the way the opera is usually heard today.

Approximately two years after Puccini's death, on April 25, 1926, *Turandot* was had its premiere at La Scala Opera House in Milan, Italy. Puccini's old friend, Toscanini, conducted it and insisted on performing the opera just as Puccini had left it. Remembering his dying friend's request, he stopped the music shortly after Liù's death, turned to the audience and said sadly, "It was here that the Maestro laid down his pen." There was silence, then a cry of "Viva Puccini," and a passionate ovation. The next evening the opera was played with Alfano's ending.

Turandot was a huge success and was brought to the United States a few months later, to make its debut at the Metropolitan Opera House on November 16, 1926. It did not appear there again until 1929. Because of its great demand on singers and staging, it was not given again at the Metropolitan until February 24, 1961, thirty-one years later. *Turandot*, having been translated into over fifteen different languages, is now performed very frequently in the United States and in many other countries all over the world.

Although *Turandot* was Puccini's last opera, it was also his most original. The Chinese atmosphere which he so successfully created was not China as it is, but China as he imagined it. It was his most advanced musical work. Even though incomplete, *Turandot* contains some of Puccini's greatest music. It proved that the composer was growing artistically all the time and that he had the courage, in his own words, "to try new paths." It is a shame that *Turandot* took so long to complete, for had it been actually finished and polished by this master of opera, *Turandot* might now be considered one of the greatest operas of this century.

Turandot: The Video (1988)

Starring: Eva Marton, Plácido Domingo and Leona Mitchell; James Levine, conductor



The sheer opulence of this Franco Zeffirelli production will overwhelm almost any opera lover. The sets are massive, richly detailed and an aesthetic feast — his choreography leaves nothing to be desired. The performances are equal to the sets. Marton is outstandingly apt for the role of Turandot. Though she isn't a great opera actress, she *is* a great soprano. Domingo makes an ardent lover and Mitchell gives a touching portrayal of Liù. James Levine is faithful to Puccini's music, handling Franco Alfano's ending as well as possible. It is a great tragedy that Puccini died before completing Act III. The scene of Liù's death is as inspired in its own right as the Liebestod in Wagner's *Tristan und Isolde*. Then the chords introducing Calaf's "Principessa d'iglessa," where Alfano takes over, hit you like a diatonic jolt. Other than that, this production of *Turandot* is truly grand opera at its best!