

The many faces of Turandot

There is a particular richness of musical invention in Puccini's *Turandot*, but richer still is the variety of ways in which the old tale of the 'ice princess' has been used throughout the centuries. In fact, few subjects have inspired so many theatrical interpretations, ranging from the *commedia dell'arte* of the 18th century to the 20th century's Theatre of the Absurd. Of the twelve operas that have been written about Turandot (thirteen if one counts a *vaudeville* of 1729), no fewer than six were composed during Puccini's lifetime. His is the only version still performed on a regular basis.

In the Near East, the story has been known for close on a thousand years, and even today, folk-tales persist in the Iranian region about an irresistible princess of China and her potentially fatal challenges to unwanted suitors.

Turandot (Turan-dox, Turandoct, Tourandoct or Turandokht) is a Persian name meaning 'the daughter of Turan' - Turan being the Persian name for Central Asia. Persia fell to Genghis Khan's Mongols in the thirteenth century and then, in the following century, to the Tatar ruler Timur, known to Europeans as Tamerlane. This Timur was a military genius (albeit an exceedingly brutal one) who died during a campaign against the Ming dynasty. His son visited China in 1420. The Timurid dynasty survived until 1857 as the Mughal dynasty of India.

One of the principal sources of the story of Turandot is a collection called *The Thousand and One Days*, or *The Persian Tales*, a counterpart to *The Thousand and One Nights*. A translation by the pioneer French orientalist **François Pétis de la Croix** (1653 – 1713) was published in several volumes between 1710 and 1712, and this was subsequently translated into other European languages. Pétis claimed to have heard these tales from their collector, Dervish Moqlas while living in Isfahan in 1674 -1676, and he entitled one of them: ***Histoire du prince Calaf et de la princesse de la Chine*** ('The story of Prince Calaf and the Princess of China').

For European explorers of the 16th and 17th centuries, Persia was the gateway to the East, and it was through this gateway that they glimpsed the even more distant 'fairy-tale' kingdom of China.

Alain-René Le Sage (1668 -1747), a French satirical dramatist, wrote ***La Princesse de Chine*** as an operatic parody (a precursor to *opéra-comique*) in 1729, in collaboration with **Jacques-Philippe d'Orneval** (d. 1766). Music for this work would have been selected from familiar operas or more popular sources. Le Sage was a friend of Pétis de la Croix and assisted him with his translation of *The Thousand and One Days*.

Count Carlo Gozzi (1720 -1806) was a Venetian dramatist who produced a series of plays based on fables, in which characters from the *commedia dell'arte* appeared. One of these plays was ***Turandot*** (1762), described as a 'tragicomic Chinese theatrical fable in five Acts'. Gozzi, like most Europeans at that time, was a bit vague about China and, indeed, Asia generally. *Turandot's* immediate source appears to have been François Pétis de la Croix's *Histoire du prince Calaf et de la princesse de la Chine*.

Other plays by Gozzi were *La donna serpente* ('The Serpent Woman'), used by Wagner in 1833 for his first opera *Die Feen*, *Fiaba dell'amore delle tre melarance* ('Fable of the Love for Three Oranges'), used by Prokofiev in 1919 for his opera, and *Il re cervo* ('The King Stag') used by Hans Werner Henze for *König Hirsch* in 1955.

Another early version of the Turandot story is by one of the greatest poets in Persian literature **Nizami** (1141 -1209) in ***The Story told by the Russian Princess on Tuesday in the Red Pavilion of Mars***. The princess is asked by King Bahram to tell him the story of Turandot's riddles. [The name 'Turandot' does not appear in the original but was supplied by later translators.] According to this story, the protagonist is as beautiful as she is intelligent, and considers that no man is worthy of her. Her suitors are required to answer certain riddles correctly on pain of death.

Friedrich von Schiller (1759 -1805), German poet, philosopher, historian and dramatist wrote ***Turandot, Prinzessin von China*** in 1801. It was first performed in the Hoftheater at Weimar in 1802. Although Gozzi's work provided the basic material for this, there are important differences. Gozzi's focus is comical and satirical, but Schiller created a symbolic epic with an idealised moral perspective. Gozzi's princess seems motivated by caprice and cruelty whereas Schiller's follows moral and ethical imperatives. Although she appears to be free, her heart is not. She must struggle with the conflicting forces of pride and love, head and heart. Puccini and his librettists followed Schiller. Schiller's *Turandot* also had a strong influence on Hofmannsthal and Strauss for *Die Frau ohne Schatten*.

Franz Seraph von Destouches (1772 – 1844) was a German composer, pupil of Haydn. His incidental music to Schiller's ***Turandot, Prinzessin von China*** was performed in Weimar in 1804.

Carl Maria von Weber (1786 – 1826) wrote incidental music for Schiller's ***Turandot, Prinzessin von China*** in 1809 but this had its origins in 1804-05 when he discovered a Chinese melody in Rousseau's *Dictionnaire de musique*. He composed an *Overtura Chinesa* using that theme. Subsequently, he wrote on the manuscript of his incidental music: 'The Overture is based on the Chinese theme which I found in Rousseau's *Dictionnaire* In 1943, when **Paul Hindemith** composed his *Symphonic Metamorphoses on Themes by Carl Maria von Weber*, he called the second movement '***Turandot, Scherzo***' and it is based entirely on Weber's *Turandot* theme.

Karl Blumenröder (b. 1789), German composer, wrote the *Tragikomische Oper* in Two Acts ***Turandot, oder die Rätsel*** ('Turandot, or the Riddles') in 1809. The first performances took place on 13 October 1809 at Munich. Today, the work is known only through secondary sources and reviews.

Franz Danzi (1763 – 1826) was a German cellist, composer and conductor. His ***Turandot, Singspiel nach Gozzi Turandot*** was composed in 1816 and performed at Karlsruhe in 1817.

Carl Gottlieb Reissiger (1798 – 1859) was a German conductor and composer. He became Music Director of the Dresden Opera in 1826 and Hofkapellmeister in 1828. His Grand Opera in Two Acts ***Turandot, tragikomisches Oper nach Schiller*** was performed at Dresden on 22 January 1835. He was Wagner's colleague and rival in Dresden between 1842 and 1849, worked on performances of *Rienzi* (though not *Der fliegende Holländer* or *Tannhäuser*) and resented Wagner's appointment to a position of equal rank. Wagner considered him two-faced, lazy and incompetent.

Johann Vesque von Püttlingen (1803 – 1883) used the pseudonym Johann Hoven (after 'Beet-hoven' perhaps?). He was an Austrian pianist, composer and writer, and a part-time concert director for the Gesellschaft der Musikfreunde in Vienna. He befriended Franz Schubert and Felix Mendelssohn and composed over 330 songs, some twenty quartets and ten operas. His opera ***Turandot, Prinzessin von Shiraz***, was written in 1838 and was first performed at Vienna.

Herman Severin, Baron Løvenskjold (1815-1870), a Danish composer, wrote *Turandot*, a Romantic Singspiel in two Acts, to the text of **Hans Haagen Nyegaard** (1824 – 1893). The work had its premiere at Copenhagen on 3 December 1854.

Karl Ferdinand Kohn (1833 –1884) used the pseudonym Karl Ferdinand Konradin. He was an Austrian conductor and composer of Lieder and operettas. His operetta *Turandot* was performed in Vienna on 29 November 1866.

Antonio Bazzini (1818 – 1897) was an Italian violinist, composer and teacher. He taught at the Milan Conservatory where his students included Puccini, Catalani and Mascagni. His opera *Turanda*, with text by **Antonio Gazzoletti** (1813 – 1866), was performed at La Scala, Milan in 1867. It is set in Persia rather than China, and the hero is an Indian prince called Nadir (cf. Bizet's *Les pêcheurs de perles* of 1863). In many respects it follows Gozzi. After its initial twelve performances it was never revived again. Of it, Giulio Ricordi wrote: 'The libretto is stupid and without interest, with an absolute absence of any genre whatever, no form that is either old or new.' Puccini was probably aware of Bazzini's work, although he might not have known the music. His librettists did consult Gazzoletti's text but few details survived in Puccini's opera. [See William Ashbrook and Harold Powers, *Puccini's Turandot - the End of the Great Tradition*. Princeton 1991, p.54.]

Adolf Jensen (1837 - 1879) was a German composer, best known for his Lieder. He maintained close friendships with Bulow, Brahms and Berlioz, and his earlier music reflects his admiration for Schumann and Chopin. He became an enthusiastic admirer of Wagner, as his later compositions attest. His opera *Turandot* was unfinished at the time of his death and was completed in 1888 by **Wilhelm Kienzl** (1857 – 1941), who had worked with Wagner at Bayreuth.

Theobald Rehbaum (1835 – 1918) was a German violinist, composer and writer on music. His opera *Turandot, komische Oper...frei nach Gozzi* was completed in 1888. He wrote his own librettos.

Ferruccio Busoni (1866 – 1924) was an Italian composer, pianist, teacher and conductor, best known as a great virtuoso and arranger of Bach for the piano, and for his contrapuntally complex compositional style. His suite for orchestra *Turandot* (1905), probably his most popular orchestral work, was used as incidental music for Max Reinhardt's staging in Berlin in 1911 of *Turandot, Princess of China - a Chinoiserie in Three Acts* by Karl Gustav Vollmöller. Busoni expanded this music into his opera *Turandot* in 1917. The libretto is in German.

Karl Gustav Vollmöller (1878 – 1948) was a German playwright and screenwriter (notably of *The Blue Angel*). He adapted Gozzi's play as *Turandot, Princess of China - a Chinoiserie in Three Acts*. This was produced by Max Reinhardt in Berlin in 1911. Productions in an English translation by **Jethro Bithell** were staged in London in 1913 and in New York the same year. The New York Times carried the following review:

'Take one Arabian Nights Tale, rub well with Italian garlic, stuff with English slang, sprinkle with schmierkase, bake in Chinese earthenware - and you have 'Turandot'. Originally it was a perfectly good old oriental tale. In the Gozzi-Vollmoeller-Bithell version it is difficult to say what it is.'

Percy MacKaye (1875 - 1956) was an American dramatist and poet who wrote the play *A Thousand Years Ago*, after Gozzi's *Turandot*. The characters are mainly as they appear in Gozzi, and the play opened at the Shubert Theatre, New York on 6 January 1914. It was well received at the time.

Giacomo Puccini (1858 –1924) and his librettists **Giuseppe Adami** and **Renato Simoni** began thinking seriously about *Turandot* in March 1920. Simoni had already adapted Gozzi's play for the stage, and Puccini and Simoni had discussed the idea a year earlier, including the changes they would make when adapting the play as an opera. Their main source was Andrea Maffei's Italian translation of Schiller's German version of Gozzi's play. *Turandot* finally opened at La Scala on April 25, 1926, seventeen months after the composer's death.

Everything in the score except the closing scene was finished by March 1924, but the final duet between Calaf and Turandot was still to be written when the composer died in November. **Franco Alfano** completed the opera, drawing on fragmentary sketches. It is Alfano's ending (heavily pruned by Toscanini) that continues to be performed. In recent years, alternative endings have been composed by **Luciano Berio** (2001) and by the young Chinese composer **Hao Weiya** (2007). Hao's ending was performed in March this year at Beijing's new National Grand Theatre.

Cécile Ines Loos (1883 – 1959) was a Swiss writer, whose novel *Die Rätsel der Turandot* ('The Riddles of Turandot') was published in 1931.

Gerhard Lamprecht (1897 – 1974) was a German Film Director. His film *Prinzessin Turandot* was made in 1934. The screenplay is by **Thea von Harbou** and music by **Franz Doelle**.

Gottfried von Einem (1918 - 1996) was an Austrian composer. His ballet in two scenes *Prinzessin Turandot*, to a scenario by Luigi Malipiero, was composed in 1942-43. It had its premiere in Dresden in 1944.

William Havergal Brian (1876 - 1972) was an English composer whose output included five operas and 32 symphonies. In 1949-51 he wrote the opera *Turandot, Prinzessin von China*, described as a 'Ein tragikomisches Märchen nach Gozzi von Schiller' ('A tragicomic fable after Gozzi, by Schiller'). The libretto, in three Acts, is in German. From the opera, Brian derived *Three Pieces for Orchestra*, and *Suite for Orchestra*.

Bertolt Brecht (1898 – 1956) was a German poet, playwright and theatre director. He wrote the play *Turandot oder Der Kongreß der Weißwäscher* ('Turandot, or the Whitewashers' Congress') in 1953-54 and it was first performed at Zürich in 1969. It is based on Gozzi's play via Schiller, but its treatment is uniquely Brechtian.

Wolfgang Hildesheimer (1916 – 1991) was a German writer identified with the Theatre of the Absurd. His radio play *Prinzessin Turandot*, was written in 1954, and his comedy *Die Eroberung der Prinzessin Turandot* ('The Conquest of Princess Turandot') was first performed in 1960.

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