

*Virginia
Opera*

PUCCINI'S
tŭkrandot

STUDY GUIDE

2004-2005 SEASON

TURANDOT

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Premiere

First performed on April 25, 1926, at Teatro all Scala in Milan, Italy.

Cast of Characters

Princess Turandot	Soprano
The Emperor Altoum , her father	Tenor
Timur , the deposed King of Tartary	Bass
Calaf , son of Timur	Tenor
Liú , a young slave girl	Soprano
Ping , Grand Chancellor	Baritone
Pang , General Purveyor	Tenor
Pong , Chief Cook	Tenor
A Mandarin	Baritone
The Prince of Persia.	Silent
The Executioner (Pu-Tin-Pao)	Silent
Turandot's ladies, children,crowds	Chorus

Brief Summary

Setting: Peking, during legendary times

Princess Turandot will consent to marry only if her prospective suitor can answer three riddles. The penalty for failure is death. While concealing his identity, Prince Calaf competes for Turandot's hand and correctly answers all the riddles. Turandot still scorns him so Calaf allows her an opportunity to avoid the marriage if she can discover his name. Turandot's guards scour Peking looking for clues to the Unknown Prince's identity.

The soldiers find Liú, a young slave who knows Calaf's true identity. Liú loves Calaf and kills herself to avoid revealing his name under torture. Calaf angrily confronts Turandot and breaches her defenses by kissing her. She is stunned and confesses her fear of him. In response to her honesty, Calaf reveals his name. The true meaning of Liú's sacrifice and Calaf's trust in her becomes clear to Turandot. She accepts Calaf by telling her people that the name of the Unknown Prince is Love

Full Plot Synopsis and Musical Highlights

Act I

With his final compositional masterpiece, Puccini remained firmly within his romantic roots, yet combined his lush melodies with modern elements such as bi-tonality, whole tone scales, pentatonic scales and modal harmonies. This allowed him a broad range of expression, organizing the opera into massive blocks, each based on motifs associated with situations rather than characters.

The opera opens with the full sound of the entire orchestra bursting forth with unison octaves, immediately establishing a dark and foreboding atmosphere. Sharp brass chords follow immediately, punctuated by a solo xylophone melody. In doing so, Puccini uses an instrument with an exotic tone color to represent the mystery of ancient Peking. Within moments a Mandarin addresses the assembled crowd in Peking, reading a proclamation which states that the Princess Turandot, daughter of the Emperor Altoum, will marry the first royal suitor who successfully answers her three riddles. Those who fail in their quest lose not only the Princess but their heads as well. Turandot's current suitor, the Prince of Persia, has failed the test and the Mandarin announces that with the rising of the moon he will be beheaded. The crowd, impatient and bloodthirsty, howls its approval as it rushes the gates of the Great Palace. One of Puccini's most expansive melodies is heard over the excitement of the crowd. Punctuated by trumpets, the guards of the place push back the crowd and a young slave girl, Liù, cries out that the old man she watches over has been knocked down. A handsome youth rushing to her aid discovers that the fallen man is none other than his own father, Timur, the deposed King of Tartary. Overjoyed at this unexpected reunion with his lost son, the blind old king is cautioned to silence by Calaf, who is also disguised in order to avoid capture by the usurper of the Tartar throne. Timur explains to Calaf that Liù helped him to escape certain death and has been his faithful guide and protector. In response to Calaf's question as to why she has chosen to share the fallen king's suffering, she replies, "Because one day, in the palace, you smiled at me."

Assistants to the executioner enter the stage, bearing the hone used to sharpen the great scimitar in anticipation of the beheading of the Prince of Persia. Their entrance electrifies the crowd of citizens to a frenzied ferocity and they sing a rhythmic accompaniment to the sharpening of the scimitar. The motif that accompanies the sharpening of the scimitar is one that is associated with the eagerly awaited appearance of Turandot. After reaching a fevered climax, the exhausted throng sings a mournful incantation to the moon, comparing its white disc with a severed head, and pleading with it to appear. A chorus of boys approaches, singing, "Là, sui monti dell'est," (There, in the mountains of the east). Puccini used a Chinese folksong, "Moo-Lee-Vha" as the basis for this melody and it is used to signal the entrance of Turandot in both the first and second acts.

As the moon slowly rises, the dignified young Prince of Persia is led to the scaffold. Moved with sudden compassion for the intended sacrifice, the fickle crowd pleads for his life to be spared but with a single silent gesture Turandot seals his fate and the doomed man is led from the stage.

Calaf curses the cruelty of the Princess but is enraptured with her beauty and resolves that he must attempt to win her hand. Turning a deaf ear to the pleas of both Timur and Liù, he moves to strike the gong, signaling his intentions. His path is blocked, however, by the sudden appearance of three eccentric figures, Ping, Pang and Pong, Emperor Altoum's three chief ministers, who are respectively Grand Chancellor, Grand Purveyor and Grand Cook. Fragments of the Chinese national hymn (1912) are heard in the background as they also attempt to dissuade Calaf from what they consider to be a course of certain doom. Calaf is unimpressed by their arguments. A group of Turandot's maids appears on the balcony demanding silence because their mistress is sleeping. As Ping, Pang and Pong continue to entreat Calaf, phantoms representing the tortured spirits of previous suitors begin to appear as they declare their undying love for Turandot from beyond the grave. Ignoring the phantoms and undeterred by the Executioner who now appears bearing the bloody head of the Prince of Persia, Calaf persists in his desire to face the icy Princess. In a short aria based on the pentatonic scale, "Signore, ascolta, "(Sir, please listen to me), Liù pleads with him to abandon his intention, explaining that thoughts of him have been her only comfort during exile. Calaf strives to console her in the aria, "Non piangere, Liù," (Do not cry, Liù) and instructs her to always care for his father. Disregarding the final attempts of Ping, Pang and Pong, Calaf rushes to the gong, seizes the hammer, and strikes it three times in an ecstatic outpouring of love and desire. "Let him go," the three Ministers say to one another. "It's useless to shout either in Sanskrit, Chinese or Mongolian. When the gong is sounded, death rejoices." The three Ministers run off, laughing and crying.

Act II

Ping, Pang and Pong greet each other and not knowing whether to prepare for a funeral or a wedding, discuss the pathetic condition of China since the reign of Turandot. In the Year of the Mouse there were six executions, in the Year of the Dog eight, and in the current year, the Year of the Tiger, already thirteen. The three longingly reflect on their country homes, far from Peking and its bloody excesses. They remember the Prince of Samarkand, the Prince of the Kirghiz, and others from India, Burma and Tartary, all beheaded when they failed to answer Turandot's riddles, and they envision how cheerful China could become if only a suitor could be found to solve the riddles. The trumpets, announcing the beginning of the ceremony in which Calaf will be tested, recall them from their reverie and they go off to do their duty.

The assembled crowd heralds the arrival of the Mandarin, the Eight Wise Men (who carry the scrolls that contain the answers to Turandot's riddles), and finally Ping, Pang and Pong. A theme, based on pentatonic Chinese motifs, both imperial in nature and majestic in its rich sound, accompanies the Emperor Altoum. This theme is repeated often with full orchestra and chorus, signaling important events. The emperor enters and takes his place on the throne as Calaf enters and stands before him. Altoum confronts Calaf and begs him not to undergo the test. Three times he attempts to dissuade Calaf from this undertaking and three times Calaf answers, "Son of Heaven, I ask to undergo the trial". The Mandarin repeats the earlier proclamation as the boy's chorus is heard, signaling the entrance of the beautiful Princess Turandot. She begins her great and vocally challenging aria, "In questa reggia," (In this palace) without orchestral introduction. She explains, in arioso style, that thousands of years ago her ancestor the Princess Lo-u-Ling was raped and killed by foreign

invaders. In a gradual upward climb that culminates with high “C’s,” Turandot states that she believes she is the reincarnation of Lo-u-Ling and is destined to avenge her death. No man will ever possess her. Puccini continues to heighten the tension of the aria by continually heightening the pitch as Turandot states, “The riddles are three and one is death.” The competition between Turandot and Calaf continues as the pitch is heightened once again as the fearless Calaf replies that “The riddles are three and one is life.” As they spar the assembled court joins in urging the test to begin.

Turandot poses her first riddle. "What is the name of the phantom which spreads its wings at night over the black infinity of humankind, which is invoked by all, but which disappears at dawn? What is this thing which is born every night and which dies every day?" Calaf does not quaver and confidently answers, "Hope!" The shocked Wise Men open their first scroll and confirm that the answer is correct. Incensed, Turandot proceeds to the second riddle. "It flickers like flame, but is not flame. Sometimes it rages, sometimes it is languorous. When one is defeated, it grows cold, when one is victorious it is hot." After a few moments of suspenseful hesitation Calaf answers, "Yes, Princess, it both flames and languishes in my veins when you look at me. It is Blood!" The Wise Men confirm that once again Calaf is victorious and when the crowd encourages him Turandot angrily orders the guards to silence them. Embittered with rage at the Unknown Prince, Turandot urgently poses her third riddle. "Ice that sets you on fire, but which becomes icier from your fire. One who, setting you free, makes a slave of you. One who, taking you as a slave, makes you a King. What is this frost which gives off fire?" With an even longer pause Calaf ponders the final riddle. He then proclaims that he is victorious. The answer is Turandot! The Wise Men once again confirm that he has answered correctly and the crowd acclaims the Unknown Prince. The music praising Calaf is Turandot's own music, the boy' chorus, using the full orchestra and chorus.

Turandot makes an anguished petition of her father not to throw her into the arms of a stranger but Altoum denies her request replying that the oath is sacred and must be upheld. Turandot furiously insists she will not be possessed. She asks Calaf if he really wants her against her will and with hatred in her heart. The Unknown Prince replies that no, he wants her ardent, with impassioned love. In an unexpected turn of events, he allows Turandot a chance to escape her fate. He reminds her that he has answered her three riddles, but that he will require of her the answer to only one. What is his name? If Turandot can discover his name before the sun rises, he will offer himself to her as a sacrifice. The Emperor agrees and expresses the hope that at sunrise he will have gained a son. As the curtain falls, the crowd professes its honor and reverence to the Emperor with the same imperial march heard at the beginning of the scene.

Act III

Offstage voices herald the decree by Turandot that no one in Peking is to sleep until the name of the Unknown Prince is discovered. As he awaits the dawn alone in the garden, Calaf sings the memorable aria, “Nessun dorma” (No one sleeps), reflecting on Turandot's anguish, his unwavering love for her and the victory that awaits him with the rising of the sun. The simplicity of the melody is underscored by a lush and relaxed string accompaniment. Ping, Pang and Pong approach. They offer the Unknown Prince wealth, beautiful maidens and precious jewels if he will leave Peking. The angry crowd enters,

dragging with them Timur and Liù whom guards have been tormenting in hopes of extracting the name of the Unknown Prince. As Calaf persuades the crowd that neither Timur nor Liù knows him, Turandot appears and begins to question Timur. Liù steps forward to protect the old king, saying that she alone knows the stranger's name. The crowd cries for her to be tortured until she reveals it. Calaf tries to protect Liù, but Turandot orders the guards to seize him. As Liù is tortured she says she would rather die than reveal the Prince's name. Turandot asks what has given her such strength, to which Liù replies that it is love, her love for the Prince. She relates all in the aria, "Tu, che di gel sei cinta," (You who are girdled with ice) Liù predicts that before dawn Turandot will come to love him also. Fearing that under torture she may be forced to reveal Calaf's name, she quickly seizes a dagger from one of the guards, and stabs herself, inflicting a mortal wound. Liù stumbles over to Calaf, still restrained by the guards, and falls dead at his feet. The mournful melody of her aria continues as the crowd of citizens tenderly bears her body away. The blind old king walks alongside, holding on to the hand of his dead companion.

Left alone, Calaf confronts Turandot accusing her of grievous cruelty toward Liù. Icily, Turandot says she is the Daughter of Heaven, whose spirit is aloft, beyond his reach. Calaf replies that her spirit may be beyond his reach, but her body is not. In an impassioned embrace he kisses her, and Turandot, stunned by his touch, confused and softened, finds herself weeping for the first time in her life. She confesses to Calaf that she has feared him from the moment she first saw him because the light of a hero was in his eyes. She begs him to go, and to take the mystery of his name with him. Calaf tells her he no longer has a mystery, for he has indeed conquered her. She can destroy him if she wishes, but he will give her his name. He is Calaf, son of Timur. As the trumpets announce the dawn and the new trial, Turandot confidently leads Calaf away as they approach this final trial together.

The assembled crowd sings the imperial hymn as the Emperor and Turandot and Calaf reappear. Turandot announces that she alone has discovered the name of the stranger. With triumph in her voice she states that his name is Love. As Turandot and Calaf join in an eager embrace, the Emperor Altoum, Ping, Pang, Pong and the crowd rejoice in Turandot's newly discovered love and the dawning of a new day for China. The music accompanying the final moments is a triumphant restatement of the theme from Calaf's aria "Nessun Dorma."

Historical Background

Prior to its first performance at La Scala, *Turandot* was shrouded in controversy. Puccini's final masterpiece had remained unfinished as the maestro lay dying and the means to its completion would not be smooth. The Italian composer Zandonai was suggested by Toscanini to complete the work. This was rejected by Puccini's son, Tonio, who did not want a well established composer to complete his father's opera. The name of Franco Alfano was then placed into nomination and agreed to by all parties. The original premiere date was postponed for a year and Alfano was given the task of completing the opera.

Puccini had been laboring over *Turandot* for more than two years and by 1923 had completed both the first and second acts and begun the orchestration. He complained of a throat ailment which would eventually lead to his death from throat cancer on November 29, 1924. By that time, Puccini had completed the third act through the death of Liù. However, it was the final duet between Calaf and Turandot, the content and structure of which had continually eluded him that was left unfinished. Though numerous sketches for the duet had been made, Puccini left no definite indication as to the final version. Toscanini, who had been working with Puccini throughout the entire compositional process and was to conduct the premiere, presented Alfano with a version of the duet but then admonished him to expand it with the thematic material which had been sketched by Puccini. It took Alfano six months to complete his task and the opera was scheduled to premiere on April 25, 1926. Toscanini, unhappy with the Alfano ending, halted the premiere performance at the conclusion of Liù's death in Act III, turned to the audience and announced, "At this point, the master lay down his pen." Toscanini further revised the Alfano ending, and it is that revision which is commonly performed today.

It was 1920 when the librettists Giuseppe Adami and Renato Simoni suggested a fairy tale by Carlo Gozzi as a possible subject for Puccini's next opera. Gozzi's play, written in 1762, had been used at least seven times previously by opera composers during the nineteenth century. Adami also presented Puccini with a copy of Friedrich von Schiller's dramatic adaptation of the fable. Puccini, who was always on the lookout for promising operatic subjects, immediately asked the team to start to work. They began what would prove to be a difficult journey. Puccini was unhappy with the verses provided by the librettists and continually sent them back for further revision. The original play was trimmed down from five acts, with Puccini himself vacillating between a two-act and a three-act version. Finally, the librettists were able to persuade him to present the opera in three acts. After much discussion and revision some of the original characters were eliminated. Four characters in Gozzi's fable were traditional figures from the Italian *commedia dell'arte*, Pantalone, Tartaglia, Brighella and Truffaldino. These characters are also referred to as "masks" (from the Italian word, *maschere*). They were originally abandoned, subsequently revived and then reduced in number to create the roles of Ping, Pang and Pong. The slave girl, Liù, was Puccini's invention to act as a dramatic foil against the icy Princess. The compositional work moved apace with Puccini writing musical sketches by 1921 with the help of a Chinese musical box he had borrowed from a friend and some Chinese folk music supplied to him by his publisher, Ricordi. For the next two years he was pleased with his progress until he was stymied by how to resolve the final

confrontation between Calaf and Turandot. Nothing the librettists provided pleased him, and the question of the final duet and finale remained unsolved until after his death.

Giacomo Puccini was the last of the widely popular composers of Italian opera. To many he was the successor of Giuseppe Verdi, the nineteenth century giant of Italian opera, whose final opera premiered in 1893. Among Puccini's operatic achievements are three of the most popular operas ever written. Puccini had a way with women, both on stage and off. He was something of a womanizer in his private life and in his professional life wrote operas with compelling female heroines with human frailties with whom the public could empathize. Puccini's operas still resonate with the public because his music makes a direct connection with their emotions and they are enthralled with his luxuriant melodies and supreme orchestrations.

Despite its difficult birth, TURANDOT is one of the most popular titles in the operatic repertory. The role of Turandot is one of the greatest challenges for a dramatic soprano. The demands of the title role have made it a "star vehicle" for many of the world's greatest sopranos. Lotte Lehmann, Maria Jeritza, Maria Callas and perhaps the most acclaimed portrayer of the role, Birgit Nilsson, have all been associated with this most demanding role.

Discussion Questions

1. Discuss why the slave-girl Liú would choose to share the deprivations of a homeless exile who is blind and on the run?
2. When Calaf asks Liù the same question stated above, her answer was, “Because one day, in the palace, you smiled at me.” Why would this be so meaningful to her?
3. Why does Puccini use the voices of children to introduce Turandot?
4. What musical elements or instruments contribute to a “Chinese” or exotic sound?
5. Is Puccini successful in his musical portrayal of “ancient” China?
6. The “people of Peking” are portrayed as very fickle. How is this achieved?
7. Turandot says she won’t be possessed by any man to avenge the spirit of her murdered ancestress. Is that her real reason or an excuse?
8. How does the character of Liù change Turandot?
9. What is the purpose of the characters Ping, Pang and Pong?
10. Because of Puccini’s death, a different composer wrote the final scene. If you were to write the end of the opera, how would you end it?

of the country's folk music and legends. Composers such as Aaron Copland, Douglas Moore, Carlisle Floyd, Howard Hanson, and Robert Ward have all crafted operas that have been presented throughout the world to great success. Today, composers John Adams, Philip Glass, and John Corigliano enjoy success both at home and abroad and are credited with the infusion of new life into an art form which continues to evolve even as it approaches its fifth century.



The Operatic Voice

A true (and brief) definition of the “operatic” voice is a difficult proposition. Many believe the voice is “born,” while just as many hold to the belief that the voice is “trained.” The truth lies somewhere between the two. Voices that can sustain the demands required by the operatic repertoire do have many things in common. First and foremost is a strong physical technique that allows the singer to sustain long phrases through the control of both the inhalation and exhalation of breath. Secondly, the voice (regardless of its size) must maintain a resonance in both the head (mouth, sinuses) and chest cavities. The Italian word “*squillo*” (squeal) is used to describe the brilliant tone required to penetrate the full symphony orchestra that accompanies the singers. Finally, all voices are defined by both the actual voice “type” and the selection of repertoire for which the voice is ideally suited.

Within the five major voice types (*Soprano, Mezzo-Soprano, Tenor, Baritone, Bass*) there is a further delineation into categories (*Coloratura, Lyric, Spinto, Dramatic*) which help to define each particular instrument. The *Coloratura* is the highest within each voice type whose extended upper range is complimented by extreme flexibility. The *Lyric* is the most common of the “types.” This instrument is recognized more for the exceptional beauty of its tone rather than its power or range. The *Spinto* is a voice which combines the beauty of a lyric with the weight and power of a *Dramatic*, which is the most “powerful” of the voices. The *Dramatic* instrument is characterized by the combination of both incredible volume and “steely” intensity.

While the definition presented in the preceding paragraph may seem clearly outlined, many voices combine qualities from each category, thus carving an unique niche in operatic history. Just as each person is different from the next, so is each voice. Throughout her career Maria Callas defied categorization as she performed and recorded roles associated with each category in the soprano voice type. Joan Sutherland as well can be heard in recordings of soprano roles as diverse as the coloratura Gilda in *Rigoletto* to the dramatic Turandot in *Turandot*. Below is a very brief outline of voice types and categories with roles usually associated with the individual voice type.

	<i>Coloratura</i>	<i>Lyric</i>	<i>Spinto</i>	<i>Dramatic</i>
<i>Soprano</i>	Norina (Don Pasquale) Gilda (Rigoletto) Lucia (Lucia di Lammermoor)	Liu (Turandot) Mimi (La Bohème) Pamina (Magic Flute)	Tosca (Tosca) Amelia (A Masked Ball) Leonora (Il Trovatore)	Turandot (Turandot) Norma (Norma) Elektra (Elektra)
<i>Mezzo-Soprano</i>	Rosina (Barber of Seville) Angelina (La Cenerentola) Dorabella (Così fan tutte)	Carmen (Carmen) Charlotte (Werther) Giulietta (Hoffmann)	Santuzza (Cavalleria) Adalgisa (Norma) The Composer (Ariadne auf Naxos)	Azucena (Il Trovatore) Ulrica (A Masked Ball) Herodias (Salome)
<i>Tenor</i>	Count Almaviva (Barber of Seville) Don Ottavio (Don Giovanni) Ferrando (Così fan tutte)	Alfredo (La Traviata) Rodolfo (La Bohème) Tamino (Magic Flute)	Calaf (Turandot) Pollione (Norma) Cavaradossi (Tosca)	Dick Johnson (Fanciulla) Don Jose (Carmen) Otello (Otello)
<i>Baritone</i>	Figaro (Barber of Seville) Count Almavira (Le nozze di Figaro) Dr. Malatesta (Don Pasquale)	Marcello (La Bohème) Don Giovanni (Don Giovanni) Sharpless (Madama Butterfly)	Verdi Baritone Germont (La Traviata) Di Luna (Il Trovatore) Rigoletto (Rigoletto)	Scarpia (Tosca) Jochanaan (Salome) Jack Rance (Fanciulla)
<i>Bass</i>	Bartolo (Barber of Seville) Don Magnifico (Cenerentola) Dr. Dulcamara (Elixir of Love)	Leporello (Don Giovanni) Colline (La Bohème) Figaro (Marriage of Figaro)	Buffo Bass Don Pasquale (Don Pasquale) Don Alfonso (Così fan tutte)	Basso Cantate Oroveso (Norma) Timur (Turandot) Sarastro (Magic Flute)

Opera Production

Opera is created by the combination of myriad art forms. First and foremost are the actors who portray characters by revealing their thoughts and emotions through the singing voice. The next very important component is a full symphony orchestra that accompanies the singing actors and actresses, helping them to portray the full range of emotions possible in the operatic format. The orchestra performs in an area in front of the singers called the orchestra pit while the singers perform on the open area called the stage. Wigs, costumes, sets and specialized lighting further enhance these performances, all of which are designed, created, and executed by a team of highly trained artisans.

The creation of an opera begins with a dramatic scenario crafted by a playwright or dramaturg who alone or with a librettist fashions the script or libretto that contains the words the artists will sing. Working in tandem, the composer and librettist team up to create a cohesive musical drama in which the music and words work together to express the emotions revealed in the story. Following the completion of their work, the composer and librettist entrust their new work to a conductor who with a team of assistants (repetiteurs) assumes responsibility for the musical preparation of the work. The conductor collaborates with a stage director (responsible for the visual component) in order to bring a performance of the new piece to life on the stage. The stage director and conductor form the creative spearhead for the new composition while assembling a design team which will take charge of the actual physical production.

Set designers, lighting designers, costume designers, wig and makeup designers and even choreographers must all be brought “on board” to participate in the creation of the new production. The set designer combines the skills of both an artist and an architect using “blueprint” plans to design the actual physical set which will reside on the stage, recreating the physical setting required by the storyline. These blueprints are turned over to a team of carpenters who are specially trained in the art of stage carpentry. Following the actual building of the set, painters following instructions from the set designers’ original plans paint the set. As the set is assembled on the stage, the lighting designer works with a team of electricians to throw light onto both the stage and the set in an atmospheric as well as practical way. Using specialized lighting instruments, colored gels and a state of the art computer, the designer along with the stage director create a “lighting plot” by writing “lighting cues” which are stored in the computer and used during the actual performance of the opera.

During this production period, the costume designer in consultation with the stage director has designed appropriate clothing for the singing actors and actresses to wear. These designs are fashioned into patterns and crafted by a team of highly skilled artisans called cutters, stitchers, and sewers. Each costume is specially made for each singer using his/her individual measurements. The wig and makeup designer, working with the costume designer, designs and creates wigs which will complement both the costume and the singer as well as represent historically accurate “period” fashions.

As the actual performance date approaches, rehearsals are held on the newly crafted set, combined with costumes, lights, and orchestra in order to ensure a cohesive performance that will be both dramatically and musically satisfying to the assembled audience.

