

Turandot

by

Giacomo Puccini
(1858-1924)

libretto by Giuseppe Adami and Renato Simoni
based on the play *Turandot, Prinzessin von China* (1801)
by Friedrich von Schiller (1759-1805),
which was based in turn on the play *Turandot* (1762)
by Carlo Gozzi (1720-1806)

First performance: Milan, Teatro alla Scala, 25 April 1926

Characters:

Princess Turandot, daughter of Altoum, emperor of China - Soprano
The Unknown Prince (Calaf) – Tenor
Timur, father of Calaf, an exiled Tartar King - Bass
Liù, a young slave girl – Soprano
The Emperor Altoum – Tenor
The Prince of Persia – Tenor
Pu-Tin-Pao, the executioner - Tenor
Ping, the Grand Chancellor – Baritone
Pang, the General Purveyor – Tenor
Pong, the Chief Cook – Tenor
A mandarin – Baritone

Imperial guards, priests, mandarins, officials, executioner's assistants, the eight Wise Men, slaves, musicians, ghosts of the dead, soldiers, the populace of Beijing

Setting – Beijing, China, in legendary times (Beijing has been the capital of China almost continuously since the early fifteenth century, but only sporadically a principal and secondary capital for various Chinese governments during “legendary” periods before then, and never a principal capital for native Chinese rulers from the start of the imperial period of Chinese history in 221 B.C. until the reign of the third Ming emperor in the early fifteenth century; these details were likely not known either to the librettists of *Turandot* or Schiller and Gozzi in the eighteenth century)

Synopsis

Act I

Near the walls of the city of Beijing, a mandarin reads a proclamation announcing that Princess Turandot will marry the first man of royal blood who is able to answer three riddles posed by her. Those who fail to answer will be beheaded. The heads of numerous unsuccessful suitors are seen

impaled on poles erected along the bastions of the city. The latest one, the Prince of Persia, awaits execution at dawn.

Among the crowd is Timur, the old blind Tartar king, with the slave girl Liù. They are being pursued by Timur's enemies and have concealed their identities for safety. When they call for someone to help the old man who has fallen, the young man who does step forward turns out to be Calaf, Timur's son, who is also present in disguise for fear of his life. The three experience a joyous reunion. The crowd, however, is vicious. They cry for the blood of the Prince of Persia, but when they see his beautiful physique and pathetic appearance, they appeal to the Princess for mercy. Calaf would like to curse her for her heartless cruelty, but when he actually sees her, he is completely enraptured by her beauty, just like so many men before him. She assents to the execution of the Prince of Persia in a curt manner, but that does not deter Calaf from resolving to woo her himself, nor do the entreaties of his father, Liù, and the ministers Ping, Pang, and Pong. He strikes a gong three times to signal that he is ready for the challenge. Calaf has not offered his name, and his identity is not known to anyone but his father and the slave girl Liù.

Act II

Scene 1 takes place in the ministers' pavilion. Ping, Pang, and Pong muse on the course of China's history up to the appearance of Turandot, who has made it so that almost all anyone does any more is wait for the next execution. They regret the bloody excesses over the centuries and long for a return to the pleasant lives they used to enjoy on their country estates. Outside, the crowd is excited about the prospect of another execution.

Scene 2 takes place in a large square in front of the palace filled with people. The emperor is shown at the top of an imposing staircase. He also tries to dissuade Calaf from attempting the riddles, but with no more success than the others. Turandot now appears, and she explains that many years before, an ancestress of hers was abducted and raped. In revenge, she will take the life of any man who dares to desire her. She then poses the riddles. First, she demands the name of the phantom that vanishes at dawn to be reborn in every heart. It is born anew every night and every day it dies. Calaf answers correctly, "Hope." Then she asks for the name of something that kindles like a flame but is not a flame. Again, Calaf comes up with the correct answer, "Blood." The last riddle is the name of something frozen that gives Calaf fire, but which his fire freezes even more. Calaf also provides the correct answer, "Turandot." The crowd is stunned and delighted that somebody has finally solved the riddles, but Turandot is horrified. She is afraid to be loved. She asks her father if she may avoid marrying Calaf and is told that the emperor must keep his word. Nonetheless, Calaf tells her that if she is able to discover his name before dawn, she will not be compelled to marry him, and he will die.

Act III

Turandot has commanded that nobody may sleep in the city until the stranger's name is revealed. In the palace gardens, the ministers offer everything Calaf could possibly desire if he will only forget Turandot, but he refuses. The crowd threatens to kill him if he does not tell him his name. Timur and Liù are dragged in simply because they were seen talking to him in hopes that they might know his name. To protect Timur, Liù claims that only she knows the name. Under threat of torture, she refuses to reveal it. Turandot orders the torture, but Liù commits suicide rather than be subjected to it. The crowd, aware of Liù's motivations, watches her body carried away with respect. Calaf and Turandot are now left in the gardens alone. He reproaches her for her cruelty, then tears away her veil and kisses her passionately. All of Turandot's fortitude then melts away. She explains that Calaf's self-confidence made her fear him and love him since she first saw him. As dawn breaks, Calaf reveals his name to Turandot. In the last scene, the couple appears before the emperor. Turandot tells her father that she has learned the stranger's name: Love. Their imminent happy marriage is implied.