

The

TURANDOT

Puzzle



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Giacomo Puccini’s final and famously unfinished opera *Turandot* is about asking difficult questions, no matter the consequences. Indeed, producing *Turandot* on the American stage today evokes difficult questions that—unlike the famous “three riddles” of the opera—lack clear answers. *Turandot* is pageantry, comedy, and fantasy, but it is by no means a work about China or Chinese people. Rather, it derives from another time rife with bizarre notions of “Orientalism.” How should we in the 21st century approach this problem? How do today’s audiences, infused with greater awareness and sensitivity to Asian cultures, see these characters and situations on the stage? Is *Turandot* even possible today? Two Asian-American authors with impressive experience in the world of opera, David Henry Hwang and Amy Tan, try to help us through this maze.

First, we must understand what *Turandot* is before we can address the challenges in it. Puccini (1857–1924) was the most popular and commercially successful opera composer of his day. His three most successful operas—*La Bohème* (1896), *Tosca* (1900), and *Madama Butterfly* (1904)—made him an international household name and are at the center of every opera company’s repertory. Those operas and almost all his others were created with an eye toward operatic realism. The character of Butterfly or Cio-Cio-San, for example, was meant to be perceived as an actual person one might have met in real life. The action of *Tosca* takes place a hundred years prior to its premiere, but it was still meant to be understood as actual people in a real time and place, down to a specific location (an actual church in Rome), date (June 17, 1800), and time of day (Act I begins at 3 in the afternoon).

Most of Puccini’s other operas have the same atmosphere, that is, until *Turandot*. The libretto tells us we are in “Peking, in legendary times.” Right away we know we are in a different dimension compared to *Madama Butterfly* or *Tosca*.

There is a grand tradition of “exoticism” (from the Greek word for “foreign”) in 19th- and early 20th-century opera, often involving time (“way back then in legendary times”) as well as geography (“way over there”). This draws a magical frame around the story that makes impossible things possible, and therefore ancient Asia made a great background for operatic exoticism, e.g., Ceylon (Bizet’s *Les Pêcheurs de Perles*), Japan (Mascagni’s *Iris*), India (Massenet’s *Le Roi de Lahore*), and an imaginary Empire of the South Seas (Richard Strauss’ *Die Frau ohne Schatten*). The characters in these and other operatic exercises in

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Left: Umberto Brunelleschi's costume design for Princess Turandot, created for the 1926 world premiere at La Scala.

Clockwise from top: From the Company's 1927 season, Anne Roselle (Turandot) and Armand Tokatyan (Calaf) with the San Francisco Opera Chorus in the Act III finale at Civic Auditorium; soprano Birgit Nilsson in San Francisco Opera's 1964 Turandot; a 1977 backstage shot of Montserrat Caballé in the title role; the issue of casting according to ethnicity has rocked the opera world, as playwright and librettist David Henry Hwang (right, with Dream of the Red Chamber composer Bright Sheng) knows so well.



exoticism can do what "actual" people cannot, socially and even existentially. So debate over racist attitudes and cultural trivialization is irrelevant in fantasy operas, right?

Not necessarily, according to author David Henry Hwang, who warns us against using the legendary label of *Turandot* as a sort of "hall pass" to permit pernicious attitudes. "We tend to want to 'hide in plain sight' behind some story that gives us cover," he explains. "It is possible that the fantasy aspects of *Turandot* appeal to us precisely because they 'abstractify' the difficult issues into legend."

The modern equivalent of traditional European exoticism is science fiction: when modern auteurs want to tell a story that is slightly beyond what is possible, they set it not in legendary Asia but in outer space, as in "a long time ago, in a galaxy far, far away..." The racial issues and the specific associations of Asian characters with the forces of evil in early science fiction (the Han in *Buck Rogers* and the Emperor Ming of *Flash Gordon*, for example) are sufficient to demonstrate Hwang's caveat. There has even been debate about negative racial archetypes embedded in some characters of the *Star Wars* franchise, proving that "legendary" does not absolve a work from charges of toxic racial preconceptions.

The question becomes how best to produce this work on stage in practical terms, especially the casting of the roles. The issue of casting according to ethnicity has thundered on Broadway, as playwright Hwang (*M. Butterfly*) knows so well. Is this a way to address the exoticism in *Turandot*? Author Amy Tan doubts that casting according to ethnicity is appropriate in this case.

"It boils down to a question of responsibility," she explains, "to the audience, to the artists, and the work itself. Since this is an opera, the music—which is what people love about *Turandot*—must reign supreme." This cannot mean the music removes responsibility for all non-musical issues in the work, an argument that the opera world's experience with Richard Wagner (to cite the most obvious example) has shown to be untenable. It means that the work must be understood first and foremost from the point of view of the music's needs. "The first



Puccini's models for the characters of Ping, Pang, and Pong weren't Chinese, but rather were from the *commedia dell'arte* tradition. A late 19th-century French poster (top) is set against a photo from the Company's 2011 production of *Turandot* (bottom).

requirement for the role of Turandot is that she be able to manage the music," says Tan. For *Turandot*'s music is extremely difficult, even by operatic standards. "You need to have the best singers for the role regardless of their ethnicity," Tan continues. "Otherwise, it's unfair to them and to everyone. It becomes comical in the wrong way."

Tan knows when there is an appropriate time for casting along ethnic lines at the opera. She wrote the libretto for the opera *The Bonesetter's Daughter*, based on her 2001 novel of the same name, with music by Stewart Wallace. Produced by San Francisco Opera in 2008, it starred the late Zheng Cao, a Chinese-born American singer whose signature role was, in fact, Suzuki in *Madama Butterfly*. The role in *The Bonesetter's Daughter* is double: Ruth, a Chinese-American woman, and her "old-country" mother named Lu-Ling (recalling, interestingly, a long-dead character, Lo-u Ling, mentioned in Act II of *Turandot* and said to be "reborn" in the title character). Cao's character is meant to be understood as alive today. This is very different from *Turandot*, says Tan. "There is nothing representative in *Turandot* that is Chinese. ... To have casting tied to it would be forcing a point that makes no point."

Hwang reminds us that the *Turandot* story ultimately derives from a Persian source. ("Turandot" is, in fact, a Persian word and means "the daughter of Turan.") So what role does that provenance play in finding cultural truth in this complex tale? And then there is the "Tartar" (central Asian) identity of three of the main characters. In fact, the story as we know it contains an even more complex ecumenism. The direct source is a play by the 18th-century Venetian Carlo Gozzi, who, we note with more than passing interest, was celebrated for writing "fantasy" plays in opposition to his rival Goldoni who championed theatrical realism. In Gozzi's play, characters from the Italian *commedia dell'arte* tradition wander into China and attain positions in the court, as their historical Venetian predecessor Marco Polo claimed to have done. These absurd characters become the opera's Ping, Pang, and Pong, whose very names prick our ears to possibilities of racist reductions. But their comic relief (depicted in syncopated rhythms, an Italian tradition in comic music) tells us that the clowns of the story are Italian—or at least as Italian as anyone is anything in this world. "If we look at this as a Chinese story, we're going to have to send it back for major rewrites," Tan says bluntly.

Casting the roles in *Turandot* along ethnic lines—even if it were possible—is not a solution in itself. Hwang believes we need a bigger vision of inclusion throughout the opera world and beyond. "We want to see casts that reflect the population of our country," Hwang says. "It involves larger issues of training artists and



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employment opportunities. You can't just deal with these issues at the level of a major opera company. ... You have to open [the] training of singers to diverse populations from an early age and in every place. I think there's some work going into making this a future reality, and we all have to commit to this."

Speaking of the future, Tan points out how the role of time affects our perception of cultural conflicts. "In a hundred years, we will see these things differently," she says. "The landscape shifts beneath the issues and changes the meaning of our actions." Casting *Turandot* or *The Bonesetter's Daughter* would be a different issue because we will be different people. "If the United States is more involved and integrated with China, economically and culturally—which seems likely—then ethnicity itself would play out in a different way," says Tan. Exoticism was defined differently when *Turandot* premiered in 1926 than it is today, and will be still something else in the future. The opera world will need to keep asking difficult questions to keep up with this changing landscape. 🌻

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