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MODERNISM AND THE MACHINE WOMAN IN PUCCINI'S 'TURANDOT'

BY ALEXANDRA WILSON

AFTER ITS LONG-AWAITED posthumous premiere at La Scala on 25 April 1926, Puccini's *Turandot* was widely hailed as a triumph.¹ As the swansong of a national composer with no obvious successor it could hardly be anything less, but strip away the hype, and complex subtexts underpinning the encomiums emerge. 'Turandot does not exist', sing the three Masks in Act I, and as far as many of the critics set on portraying the opera as an unequivocal success were concerned, this might as well have been true. The aspect of the opera deemed to be most problematic was its eponymous heroine, a character Puccini's supporters seem to have been reluctant to discuss. 'Turandot', wrote Raffaello de Rensis, 'with her regal mantles, her tiaras, her beauty, was forgotten. Not one member of the public, in our view, wanted to see her again.'² The few critics who were prepared to talk about *Turandot* consistently emphasized her resemblance to a puppet, robot, or mask. At first glance this might be taken as an indictment of a stilted interpretation on the part of the prima donna, yet in fact several critics praised Rosa Raisa for her valiant execution of a thankless role.³ The antipathy that greeted *Turandot* transcended considerations of performance: what troubled the critics so profoundly was the wider shift in cultural values that this mechanistic figure seemed to represent.

This article scrutinizes the perception of *Turandot* as a machine woman, placing Puccini's final opera within the context of contemporary developments in the Italian spoken theatre. By the mid-1920s, puppets, robots, and masked figures had become emblems of the avant-garde, icons of a moment of cultural crisis,⁴ and the critics' hostile

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¹ For instance the journal published by Puccini's publishing house Ricordi declared: 'The night of 25 April 1926 will undoubtedly remain a memorable one for Italian music. That night, *Turandot*, the posthumous opera of Giacomo Puccini, the most glorious and most popular composer of our times, had its triumphal baptism at La Scala in Milan [La sera del 25 aprile 1926 resterà certo memorabile per l'arte musicale italiana. Quella sera, *Turandot*, l'opera postuma di Giacomo Puccini, il più glorioso e il più popolare compositore dei nostri tempi, ha avuto il suo battesimo trionfale alla Scala di Milano]'. Anon., 'Il trionfale successo di *Turandot*', *Musica d'oggi*, 8/5 (May 1926), 141–51 at 141.

² 'Turandot, con i suoi manti reali, i suoi diademi, la sua bellezza, è stata dimenticata. Nessuno del pubblico crediamo desiderasse rivederla.' Raffaello de Rensis, 'La prima rappresentazione di *Turandot* di Puccini alla Scala', *Il giornale d'Italia*, 27 Apr. 1926.

³ A typical comment was that 'Raisa gave her all in the arduous and unrewarding role of the lead [La Raisa nell'ardua e ingrata parte della protagonista ha dato tutta se stessa]'. Pino di Valmarana, 'Turandot di G. Puccini alla Scala', *Musica e scena*, 3/4 (Apr. 1926), 16–17 at 16. Raisa herself remarked that 'The general consensus of opinion was that this was indeed the most difficult task that Puccini ever assigned anyone: to render this difficult and tragic character understandable'; cited in Charles Mintzer, *Rosa Raisa: A Biography of a Diva with Selections from her Memoirs* (Boston, 2001), 131.

⁴ A discussion of modernist puppet theatre in Italy, France, Spain, Austria, Poland, Germany, Russia, and Czechoslovakia may be found in Harold B. Segel, *Pinocchio's Progeny: Puppets, Marionettes, Automaton, and Robots in Modernist and Avant-Garde Drama* (Baltimore and London, 1995). Over 200 20th-c. plays using masks as an integral part of the drama are considered in Susan Valeria Harris Smith, *Masks in Modern Drama* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, and London, 1984).

and fearful response to *Turandot* can be viewed as encapsulating their anxieties about the social and aesthetic implications of the apparent decline of the human in a machine age. As part of a deliberate process of distancing and detachment, many modernist artists consciously attempted to place a barrier between the characters and the audience, often literally concealing the performers' faces behind masks so that they wore an expression that was fixed. Metaphorically speaking, *Turandot* seemed to many early listeners to have the same sort of 'blank face', an idea that the musicologist Antonio Capri conveyed vividly: 'More than a character she is a mask underneath which one feels emptiness and inconsistency.'⁵ In contrast to the near silence that greeted *Turandot*, the chorus of adoration with which Puccini's supporters responded to the ultra-sentimental, self-sacrificing slave girl Liù was ecstatic. The critics depicted the opera as a battle for supremacy between the two female protagonists, which naturally was won by Liù.⁶ Indeed, Puccini had surely misnamed his opera, for the common consensus among critics was that 'to all intents and purposes the opera ends evocatively with the death of Liù. She becomes the real lead... In *Turandot* Liù triumphs.'⁷

A similarly fraught battle was played out in the reviews between those critics who wanted to dispense with operatic sentimentality and those who sought desperately to preserve it. My contention in this article is that Puccini himself was caught more or less midway between these two poles. I posit *Turandot* as a work that engages in a self-reflexive dialogue about the merits of the old and the new, and argue that the creation of a mechanical *Turandot* was to some degree a deliberate, if tentative, move on Puccini's part towards updating his operatic style, an exploration of the ways in which opera might engage with modernist preoccupations in the other arts. The debates that surrounded his two heroines resurrected long-standing anxieties about a perceived dichotomy in Puccini's style and his compositional 'sincerity'—the vexed question of locating a composer's personal voice. These in turn raised generic questions about changing notions of authorship, character, and theatricality in the modern age. The reception of *Turandot*, and the response to its two heroines in particular, provides a vital key to understanding the ambivalent Italian relationship with modernism in the 1920s.

GREAT EXPECTATIONS

Looking back in 1927, the year after the *Turandot* premiere, Guido Pannain wrote in the progressive music journal *Il pianoforte* that 'Nineteenth-century Italian opera was sentimental opera. Impulsive art, without intellectual reflection, without cerebral complications.'⁸ But in Puccini's music these characteristics had been preserved well into the twentieth century. Emotional directness and an ability to create a special bond of trust with the listener, posited as dearly cherished national character traits, were the key qualities upon which his reputation as a truly Italian composer had been built. Music that was comprehensible to all was habitually presented in the music press as embodying Latin 'sincerity'

⁵ 'Più che un carattere essa è una maschera sotto cui si sente il vuoto e l'inconsistenza.' Antonio Capri, *Musica e musicisti d'Europa dal 1800 al 1930* (Milan, 1931), 54.

⁶ The musicologist and critic Gaetano Cesari stated: 'In the lyrical domain, a fierce battle takes place between *Turandot* and Liù, won in the end by her who excels in terms of sentiment, that is to say Liù. Lyrically she occupies the front rank in the opera [Nel campo lirico, fra *Turandot* e Liù s'impegna una dura battaglia, vinta infine da colei che eccelle per sentimento, cioè Liù. Liricamente essa può apparire in prima linea nell'opera]; 'La prima della *Turandot* di Puccini alla Scala', *Corriere della sera*, 27 Apr. 1926.

⁷ 'L'opera termina virtualmente e suggestivamente con la morte di Liù. Questa diviene l'autentica protagonista... In *Turandot* trionfa Liù.' De Rensis, 'La prima rappresentazione di *Turandot*'.

⁸ 'L'opera italiana dell'ottocento fu opera di sentimento. Arte d'impulso, senza riflessioni intellettualistiche, senza complicazioni cerebrali'. Guido Pannain, 'L'opera italiana dell'ottocento', *Il pianoforte*, 8/5–6 (15 May–15 June 1927), 166–74 at 166.

and had been used as part of a campaign to create a homogeneous Italian culture in the years following Unification. Even as late as the 1920s, when, as we shall see, moving the spectator was no longer necessarily a criterion for theatrical success, music that ‘penetrated straight to the heart’ was still what Puccini’s supporters in the press and the majority of listeners expected and demanded from him. ‘Intellectual’ music, or music composed according to a ‘system’ (a consciously anti-Wagnerian term), was still actively disparaged by most Italian critics towards the end of Puccini’s life. The influential Fascist music bureaucrat Adriano Lualdi, for instance, was typical in lauding *La bohème* in 1923 for being ‘a work of theatre and not a university thesis’.⁹ Meanwhile, Arnaldo Bonaventura, in his 1925 biography of Puccini, wrote that a beautiful and admirable work of art is born only when an artist allows instinct to guide him, when he gives his imagination free rein, and most of all when he ‘sets the beating of his own heart to music’.¹⁰ Bonaventura confidently assumed that *Turandot* would be another such work based on emotion rather than intellect, in which the composer whom he called ‘the pride and glory of Italian art and the Italian nation’ would once again appeal directly to the sentimental Latin spirit.¹¹

The key Italian qualities Puccini’s music seemed to his admirers to exemplify—sincerity, humanity, and sentiment—were widely regarded as being most effectively communicated through his female characters. While Puccini’s heroes attracted scant attention, his suffering heroines—frequently referred to fondly by critics as his ‘daughters’—had come to epitomize the very essence of Puccini’s aesthetic, and were routinely presented as vessels for the expression of their creator’s ‘true voice’.¹² It is unsurprising therefore that Puccini’s obituaries in 1924 should have been devoted in large part to his female figures, with whom the composer was closely identified and effectively conflated. To cite just one example among many, Cesare Brighenti-Rosa wrote in *Il pensiero musicale* that Puccini’s imagination was coloured ‘by an almost feminine grace’ and that his best-delineated characters were his heroines. He concluded his obituary by imagining ‘the sweet figures of [Puccini’s] heroines surrounding his airborne spirit, holding him aloft in his flight to heaven’.¹³ Brighenti-Rosa went so far as to state that ‘the grace and elegance, the incomparable suppleness of the Puccinian melodic line cannot find adequate expression unless communicating feeling’.¹⁴ Likewise, Franco Salerno wrote in a 1928 pamphlet entirely devoted to Puccini’s heroines that ‘Ultra-human as he was, Giacomo Puccini could not shine except in the presence of characters in harmony with his sensibility’, characters who were exclusively female.¹⁵ Puccini had only one genuine

⁹ ‘C’è l’opera di teatro, e non la tesi di laurea.’ Adriano Lualdi, *Serate musicali* (Milan, 1928), 51. Lualdi (1885–1971), a conservative composer as well as a bureaucrat, played a key role in running national musical organizations during the Ventennio and in 1929 was elected a deputy to the Parliament as representative of the Sindacato fascista dei musicisti. He wrote for *Il secolo*, *La sera*, and *Il giornale d’Italia*, and has been described by Harvey Sachs as a Mussolini sycophant ‘full of hot air’; id., *Music in Fascist Italy* (London, 1987), 23.

¹⁰ Arnaldo Bonaventura, *Giacomo Puccini: l’uomo—l’artista* (Livorno, 1925), 45.

¹¹ ‘Fu vanto ed onore dell’arte e della patria italiana’; *ibid.*

¹² The curious mixture of sentimentality and veiled eroticism that characterized the way in which critics wrote about Puccini’s heroines would endure long after his death, as is demonstrated most strikingly by Mosco Carner’s questionable attempt at amateur psychoanalysis: ‘It was with these creatures of fantasy that Puccini formed the close attachments which were absent from his life in the real world. Manon, Mimi, Tosca, Cio-Cio San, Angelica and Liù—these were his true loves, and on his own confession he wept with “nostalgia, tenderness and pain” while composing their music.’ Mosco Carner, *Puccini: A Critical Biography*, 3rd edn. (London, 1992), 188.

¹³ ‘Non possiamo noi immaginare intorno al suo spirito trasvolante le figure dolcissime delle sue eroine nell’atto di sorreggerne il volo in alto.’ Cesare Brighenti-Rosa, ‘Giacomo Puccini’, *Il pensiero musicale*, 4/11–12 (Nov.–Dec. 1924), 170–2 at 172.

¹⁴ ‘La grazia e la squisitezza, la flessuosità incomparabile della linea melodica pucciniana non potevano trovare una espressione adeguata se non quando parlavano al sentimento’; *ibid.* 171.

¹⁵ ‘Umanissimo com’era, Giacomo Puccini non poteva vibrare che in presenza di figure rispondenti alla sua sensibilità . . .’. Franco Salerno, *Le donne pucciniane* (Palermo, 1928), 8.

voice, then—the voice of gentle feminine sentiment—and this is what listeners hoped to hear in his final opera.

Puccini's supporters approached *Turandot* with uncompromising expectations of what a composer's last work ought to do. Numerous critics referred to the opera as Puccini's 'artistic testament', the point up to which his entire career had been building, despite the fact that throughout much of *Turandot's* composition he had been unaware that it was to be his last work.¹⁶ The mythology surrounding late works dictated that Puccini was expected to be ultra-sincere, to express his personal voice most clearly in his last, presumed to be summative, opera. Sincerity, in Puccini's case, was widely perceived to equate with what critics called his 'first manner': as Renzo Bianchi observed, 'the public, as always happens, has fixed the personality of the musician in those operas that made him famous, disregarding all the rest of his oeuvre'.¹⁷ Thus although Puccini's endeavour to update his style was in principle welcomed by his patrons—their teleological world-view dictated that progress was necessary—they were ultimately discomfited by the result. Adami boasted that in striving for artistic self-renewal late in life, Puccini was following in the footsteps of a much fêted predecessor: 'He demonstrated that musical evolution which would have set him on the road to a second manner, as had happened to Verdi after *Aida*'.¹⁸ But in truth, what most critics wanted from Puccini in *Turandot* were reminiscences of his much-loved works of the turn of the century, despite the accusation frequently levelled at him earlier in his career (and most vehemently after the premiere of *Madama Butterfly*) of 'repeating himself'.

Turandot was certainly not a wholesale attempt on Puccini's part to liberate himself from old models, and sections of the opera did indeed fulfil the critics' hopes (particularly the music of the slave girl Liù, to which I shall return later). However, other sections of the score, notably *Turandot's* music, were characteristic of the more modern style that Puccini had been developing since the 1910s. These may justifiably be viewed as his response to a shifting artistic climate, which might have pointed the way to even more adventurous experimentation had death not intervened. Discussions of Liù and *Turandot* were a way of articulating debates about the merits of the first and second 'manners' that were felt to have characterized Puccini's career.

Turandot is an opera that plays out a discursive dialogue with itself, in which Puccini attempts to reassess his artistic oeuvre past and present. One contemporary critic labelled *Turandot* a work that 'bears witness to the entire musical life of its author, in the sense that it recapitulates all the evolutionary phases of [its] composer'.¹⁹ In this sense Puccini seemed almost to be writing his own epitaph, although it was not the one his advocates desired. Puccini's patrons evidently assumed the relationship between the

¹⁶ See e.g. G. C. Paribeni, *L'ambrosiano*, cited in *Musica d'oggi*, 8/5 (May 1926), 145.

¹⁷ 'Il pubblico, come accade sempre, ha fissata la personalità del musicista in quelle opere che lo hanno reso celebre, trascurando tutto il resto della sua attività.' Renzo Bianchi, in *L'Avanti!*, cited in *Musica d'oggi*, loc. cit.

¹⁸ 'Presentiva in sé quell'evoluzione musicale che l'avrebbe instradato verso una seconda maniera, come era accaduto a Verdi, dopo l'*Aida*.' Giuseppe Adami, *Il romanzo della vita di Giacomo Puccini* (Milan and Rome, 1942), 197–8. Lualdi meanwhile presented Puccini as 'an artist... for whom the concept "life" was indissolubly linked to the concept of "movement". To move, for him as for everyone, could not and cannot mean anything other than renewal. And so, in the posthumous *Turandot* the aspiration and striving for the new is obvious and tangible in every passage to a greater extent than in any of his other late works [Un artista... che al concetto "vita" univa indissolubile il concetto "movimento". Muoversi, per lui e per tutti, non poteva e non può significare che rinnovarsi. Ebbene, in nessuna delle ultime opere di Puccini come nella postuma *Turandot* è evidente e sensibile ad ogni tratto l'aspirazione e lo sforzo verso il nuovo]'. Adriano Lualdi, in *Il secolo*, cited in *Musica d'oggi*, 8/5, 144.

¹⁹ 'Abbiamo parlato all'inizio di testamento artistico, e infatti *Turandot* attesta dell'intera vita musicale del suo autore, nel senso che essa riepiloga tutte le fasi evolutive di un compositore che, pure rimanendo fedele a se stesso, non disdegna di osservare quanto l'insonne età andava ritrovando nel sentimento e nelle forme d'arte.' Paribeni, *L'ambrosiano*, cited as in n. 16 above.

composer and his loyal audience to be a static one, and many must have felt that in *Turandot* Puccini had reneged on his side of the deal. However, the reception of this opera and indeed the often rather complex responses to his earlier works illuminate the fact that this was a relationship that had constantly to be renegotiated. The gap between expectation and practice was to prove problematic in the debates that followed the premiere of *Turandot*. Some critics resorted to devoting large parts of their reviews to a celebration of Puccini's life and earlier works in order to avoid commenting explicitly on a score that they found baffling. And yet relatively recent experience had shown that composers did not always produce the last works expected of them. As James Hepokoski and Emanuele Senici have shown, Verdi's *Falstaff*, an even more progressive and self-interrogatory work, had also seemed perplexing to the critics set on portraying it as a national triumph.²⁰ Although Puccini's commitment to artistic renewal was more equivocal than Verdi's, and his anxiety to court popular appeal more intense, *Turandot*, like *Falstaff* before it, illustrates the fact that the new relationship between artist, art work, and audience that modernism demanded was unworkable within the traditional paradigms of Italian opera. The critics' puzzled reaction to both works raised questions about the extent to which artistic renewal was in fact any longer possible within the Italian operatic tradition.

A MECHANICAL HEROINE

The title role in *Turandot* was interpreted by the press as representing a retreat from the emotionalism which, for many of the critics, was not only Puccini's most characteristic and attractive asset but also an integral aspect of Italian opera. His supporters laid the blame vehemently at Gozzi's door, for creating a cruel, perverse, frozen, insensible creature, impossible to set to music.²¹ Such attempts on the part of Puccini's supporters to defend his compositional skills by dismissively attributing an opera's deficiencies to a poor choice of plot were common. Many wrote that *Turandot*, like *Tosca* before it, was an opera 'unsuited to Puccini's temperament',²² although such excuses would not have impressed the eminent Italian philosopher Croce, whose theories were highly influential in 1920s Italy. He had written in 1902: 'When art critics point out that a subject is ill-chosen, then, when that assertion has some foundation, it is not really a matter of blaming the subject matter but of blaming the way in which the artist has dealt with it, of blaming an expression which is unsuccessful by virtue of the contradictions it contains.'²³ Furthermore the femme fatale was an operatic commonplace—not to mention a staple of the most popular silent movies of the time—and other composers had succeeded in creating heroines whose wickedness was offset by a compelling allure. But Puccini had captured nothing of this. It was not so much *Turandot*'s malice that disturbed the critics as her mechanicalism, as Antonio Capri explained by way of comparison to recent operas by Strauss and Pizzetti:

In short *Turandot* should resemble *Salome*, *Phaedra*, *Elektra*; should be all flaming passion; have in her an implacable power of domination and destruction; be the centre of and motive for the

²⁰ James Hepokoski, *Giuseppe Verdi: Falstaff* (Cambridge, 1983); Emanuele Senici, 'Verdi's *Falstaff* at Italy's *Fin de Siècle*', *Musical Quarterly*, 85 (2001), 274–310.

²¹ See Salerno, *Le donne pucciniane*, 18.

²² e.g. 'Ancora una volta—si ricordi *Tosca*—egli ha voluto tentare la linea ampia e pomposa, contraddicendo al suo istinto.' De Rensis, 'La prima rappresentazione di *Turandot*'.

²³ Benedetto Croce, *The Aesthetic as the Science of Expression*, trans. Colin Lyas (Cambridge, 1992), 58.

drama. Instead she occupies only a relatively quite small part of the opera; remains a background figure, who presents herself only halfway through the second act, with rigid and cold features.²⁴

Writing in 1931, Capri echoed the comments made five years earlier by the first-night critics. Turandot was a heroine who seemed bewilderingly inexpressive from the moment the curtain rose. Whereas Puccini's heroines were customarily perceived as the bearers of his own genuine feelings, the critics' overriding impression was that Turandot was a character who 'said nothing'. This was, of course, quite literally the case during Act I, where Turandot remains vocally mute, a gesture that had dramatic logic but undoubtedly compounded the character's perceived inhumanity.²⁵ But in Act II, when Turandot finally does sing, her music still seemed to reveal nothing of her character. 'Musically', noted Michele Lessona, 'Turandot does not live: she merely sings, or hums; she speaks without saying anything, or says too little.'²⁶ And the dramatic inadequacy of Turandot's music was apparent not only to those, like Lessona, who analysed the score in some detail in the specialist music press for the benefit of a musically literate readership, but also to those writing in the daily press for a general readership. Gaetano Cesari, customarily Puccini's staunch supporter, grudgingly admitted in the *Corriere della sera* that 'The music does not succeed in making manifest the sphinx that is in Turandot, that is in translating into sensations, and even less into emotions, her obscure and immovable states of mind'.²⁷

Like one of Turandot's unfortunate suitors, Puccini had been confounded, reduced to a state of impotence by the Princess, as Raffaello de Rensis explained: 'The exquisitely delicate femininity of Puccini's art, which created characters whose names alone are enough to move us, was shattered when faced with the marmoreal and, we might add, anything but attractive Turandot'.²⁸ Puccini's death had, of course, robbed the work of its crucial denouement, but the first-night critics had little confidence that he would have been up to the task of effecting Turandot's transformation from icy disdain to flaming passion even had he survived to complete the work, as De Rensis suggested:

Turandot the cruel should have been transformed through fiery love. The cold and dry theme with which Puccini characterized her should have warmed up, sparkled, taken flame; should have taken on vast and infinite proportions and left its mark on the entire opera. Because without the redemption of Turandot the entire structure crumbles. But this redemption appears to have been a riddle even more difficult to solve than those set by the Princess for her suitors, and Puccini did not solve it, nor do we know whether he would have

²⁴ 'Turandot dovrebbe insomma assomigliare a Salome, a Fedra, a Elettra; essere tutta fiamma di passione; avere in sè un implacabile potere di dominio e di distruzione; essere centro e ragione del dramma. Invece essa non occupa che una parte relativamente assai breve dell'opera; rimane una figura di sfondo, che si presenta solo a metà del secondo atto, con lineamenti rigidi e compassati.' Capri, *Musica e musicisti d'Europa dal 1800 al 1930*, 54.

²⁵ As Julian Budden has pointed out, 'Whereas in *Gozzi*—and *Busoni*—*Calaf*, like Mozart's *Tamino*, falls in love with a portrait, in Puccini it is the sight of Turandot herself that first entrances him; and the impression is all the stronger if she appears as a silent vision.' *Id.*, *Puccini: His Life and Works* (Oxford and New York, 2002), 450.

²⁶ 'Turandot, musicalmente, non vive: canta soltanto, o canticchia; parla e non dice, o dice troppo poco.' Michele Lessona, 'Turandot di Giacomo Puccini', *Rivista musicale italiana*, 33 (1926), 239–47 at 244.

²⁷ 'Turandot... non riesce sempre a convincere quale principale energia drammatica dell'opera. I suoi enigmi appartengono al mondo delle fiabe e dei simboli, il quale pur potendo offrire elementi di poesia, difficilmente presenta materia esprimibile dalla sensibilità musicale drammatica. La musica non riesce a esteriorizzare la sfiga che è in Turandot, cioè a tradurre in sensazione, e tanto meno in emozione, i suoi oscuri e immobili stati d'animo.' Cesari, 'La prima della *Turandot* di Puccini alla Scala'.

²⁸ 'La delicatissima femminilità dell'arte pucciniana, creatrice di figure che al solo nominarle commuovono, s'è infranta dinanzi alla marmorea, e, diciamo pure, tutt'altro che affascinante Turandot.' De Rensis, 'La prima rappresentazione di *Turandot*'.

succeeded in solving it. The heroine so loved by him is of an icy, perfidious nature, quite beyond redemption.²⁹

Commentators agreed that it was the second act—the act dominated by Turandot—that had proved Puccini's greatest challenge. Pino Valmarana complained that the atmosphere of the enigma scene was 'too cold and decorative', that it had sapped Puccini of his creative energy.³⁰ Lessona alluded to the shallowness of the work by suggesting that all that remained of Gozzi's original tale in Simoni and Adami's libretto was merely the 'decorative' aspect.³¹ Such comments were ominously reminiscent of the charge of 'decoration' repeatedly levelled at the ill-fated first version of *Madama Butterfly*, a catch-all term denoting the fact that the opera was seen as too feminine, too frivolous, too bourgeois—in other words, all surface and no substance. The Ricordi camp may have claimed that in *Turandot* Puccini 'had said not merely his last word but his best word',³² but to many listeners this was an opera in which he did not seem to have said very much at all. Rather than baring his soul, as the critics expected him to do in his final opera, Puccini seemed to have concealed genuine feeling behind a number of deceitful masks.

MACHINES AND THE MODERN THEATRE

Aware of the commercial importance of an alluring heroine, Puccini expressed to his librettist Renato Simoni his desire to create a flesh-and-blood Turandot: 'With luck we will succeed in modernizing the old cardboard cut-out, in humanizing her with new feeling',³³ and 'Our Princess... will be delighted to see us united to subject her soul to extensive examination'.³⁴ On the surface, his avowed aim was to contrast the mechanicalism of the Masks—whose artificial nature he enhanced by giving them literally machine-made music borrowed from a Chinese music box—with what he saw as the psychodrama of Princess Turandot.³⁵ Whereas earlier settings of the Turandot story had presented the heroine as purely malicious, the story about Turandot's ancestress that Puccini's librettists invented for Act II was intended to justify her behaviour and render her increasingly sympathetic as the opera progresses. But the great difficulties

²⁹ 'Turandot la crudele doveva trasfigurarsi per virtù fulminea d'amore. Il tema freddo e secco con cui l'aveva caratterizzata Puccini doveva scaldarsi, scintillare, infiammarsi, doveva prendere proposizioni vaste, infinite ed improntare di se tutte l'opera. Perché senza la redenzione di Turandot crolla tutto l'edifizio. Ma questa redenzione appare un enigma ancora più difficile a sciogliersi di quelli che la Principessa proponeva ai suoi inammorati, e Puccini non l'ha sciolto né sappiamo se sarebbe riuscito a scioglierlo. L'eroina da lui tanto amata è di natura gelida, perfida, che non presuppone alcuna trasformazione a virtù.' Ibid.

³⁰ 'It seems, however, that in the second act Puccini found himself in an atmosphere that was too cold and decorative and his disposition suffered a feeling of weariness unfavourable to his fine creative spontaneity [Ci sembra invece che nel secondo atto Puccini si sia trovato in un'atmosfera troppo fredda e decorativa e il suo temperamento abbia subito una sensazione di stanchezza contraria alla sua bella spontaneità creativa]. Di Valmarana, 'Turandot di G. Puccini alla Scala', 16.

³¹ 'The libretto of Puccini's opera works neither as a drama nor as a fable: of this only a few elements remain, belonging, one might say, more to the decoration than to the substance of the action [Il libretto dell'opera di Puccini non è riuscito né un dramma né una fiaba: di questa non rimangono che pochi elementi, più appartenenti, direi, alla decorazione, che alla sostanza dell'azione]. Lessona, 'Turandot di Giacomo Puccini', 241.

³² 'Con *Turandot*, [Puccini] ha detto non solo la sua ultima ma anche la sua più alta parola.' Anon., 'Il trionfale successo di *Turandot*', 141.

³³ 'Magari si riuscisse a modernizzare, a umanizzare con nuovo sentimento la vecchia cartapesta.' Puccini to Simoni, cited in Adami, *Il romanzo della vita di Giacomo Puccini*, 225.

³⁴ 'La nostra Principessa... sarà felice di vederci uniti per vivisezionarne l'anima.' Puccini to Simoni, 28 July 1920, in *Carteggi pucciniani*, ed. Eugenio Gara (Milan, 1958), 492.

³⁵ See the Masks' entrance ('Ferma! Che fai?'). The music box also provided the 'Mo-li-hua' theme sung by the children's chorus, and the 'Imperial hymn': see William Ashbrook and Harold Powers, *Puccini's Turandot: The End of the Great Tradition* (Princeton, 1991), 94–6.

Puccini experienced in composing *Turandot*'s music have been well documented,³⁶ and, as we have seen, his supposedly 'human' heroine failed to convince the critics.

The challenge that faced Puccini was an exacting one, for there was something innately mechanistic about the whole subject. Over a century earlier Schiller had noted a puppet-like quality common to all the characters in Gozzi's play, not only the Masks: 'The figures have the appearance of marionettes operated by wires; there is a certain pedantic stiffness running through the whole thing which will have to be overcome.'³⁷ But later renderings of the *Turandot* story had failed to surmount this apparently inherent mechanicalism. In 1867, the opera *Turanda* by Antonio Bazzini (who was later to be Puccini's composition teacher at the Milan Conservatory) prompted the following disparaging comment from the *Gazzetta musicale di Milano*: 'The libretto is a dramatic absurdity—a fairy tale, which wants to give the appearance of an episode from real life, and precisely for this reason, by trying to be lifelike, self-destructs. Not one interesting character, not one moving scene.'³⁸ Fifty years later, however, it was precisely the robotic nature of the *Turandot* characters that was to draw Busoni to the subject when he was searching for a suitably 'mechanical' work as a companion piece for his commedia dell'arte-derived *Arlucchino* of 1917. Could this aspect of the *Turandot* story also have been a positive stimulus for Puccini, who by the early 1920s was consciously striving for a way in which to update his style, and wished to break with realism after the indifferent reception of *Il tabarro* in 1918?³⁹ I would like to shed new light on *Turandot* by suggesting that, for all Puccini's protestations about creating a human heroine, the robotic *Turandot* actually offered him a means of experimenting with an entirely new approach to operatic character and dramaturgy.

Ever eager to keep up with the latest trends, Puccini would have known that in the late 1910s and early 1920s to be 'mechanical' was to be modern. Puccini's more progressive contemporaries, from Stravinsky to Schoenberg to Strauss, whose works he observed with interest, were all inspired by the marionette-like figures of the commedia dell'arte. Furthermore, puppets, both literal and metaphorical, were omnipresent on the spoken stage of the late 1910s and early 1920s, from the theatres of Moscow to the cabarets of Barcelona. After watching Vittorio Podrecca's Teatro dei Piccoli, an Italian puppet troupe that enjoyed international acclaim performing comic operas throughout the 1920s, one critic observed: 'The fact is that while Dr Podrecca's puppets are more lifelike than any before him, our present ballets, and some modern acting come nearer to marionette movements than ever before.'⁴⁰ From being a humble form of entertainment

³⁶ See e.g. the chapter on the opera's genesis, *ibid.*

³⁷ Cited in Antony Beaumont, *Busoni the Composer* (London and Boston, 1985), 80. Schiller's version of *Turandot* (*Turandot, Prinzessin von China*) provided the basis for Adami and Simoni's libretto, by way of Andrea Maffei's Italian translation.

³⁸ 'Il libretto della *Turanda* è un assurdo drammatico—una fiaba, che vuol darsi l'aria di un episodio della vita reale, e appunto, per la pretesa di realizzarsi, si annienta. Nessun personaggio che interessi, nessuna scena che commuova.' Antonio Ghislanzoni, in *Gazzetta musicale di Milano*, 22/3 (20 Jan. 1867), cited in Kii-Ming Lo, '*Turandot*' *auf der Opernbühne* (Frankfurt am Main, 1996), 206.

³⁹ After hearing Puccini's *Il trittico* in 1920 Busoni reported that 'In the first of the three one-acters—the verismo tragedy—Puccini has achieved (in my opinion) perfection in that for which he had striven in his earlier works. But, the moment he has found the key to mastery, the public gets tired of this genre and considers the work weaker' (letter of 16 July 1920 to Alicja Simon, cited in *Ferruccio Busoni: Selected Letters*, trans. and ed. Antony Beaumont (London and Boston, 1987), 316).

⁴⁰ G. A. Pfister, 'The Marionettes at the New Scala', *The Sackbut*, 3/11 (June 1923), 344–6 at 346. Podrecca's puppets, given voice by professional opera singers, performed *opere buffe* by Mozart, Rossini, Paisiello, and Pergolesi, as well as specially composed new works such as Respighi's *La bella addormentata* (1922), and were watched by, among others, Puccini, Busoni, and Stravinsky. The troupe, founded in Rome in 1914, developed out of a long and prestigious tradition of Italian puppeteering, led by the Lupi family in Turin and the Colla family in Milan, whose companies operated in lavish permanent theatres, attracted a middle-class audience, and parodied the repertory staged in the 'human' theatres and opera houses.

that played to the rural poor in fairgrounds and at roadsides, puppet theatre had come to form the core of contemporary highbrow theatre. The fusion of men with machines offered a vehicle through which a number of modernist preoccupations could be expressed: the falseness of contemporary society; the perceived loss of the individual in the modern faceless crowd; the implications of a post-Nietzschean Godless world; and (in Italy at least) concern about the machinations of an increasingly autocratic state. Puppet theatre offered an opportunity not merely for social commentary but for an aesthetic re-evaluation of traditional perceptions of the boundary between reality and illusion. Such experiments were a reaction against bourgeois theatre, psychological realism, and sentimentality: in short, against everything that Puccini's operas might at first seem to represent. And yet the questioning of what constituted artistic 'truth' that was promulgated in these works and, indeed, their quest for a new *sort* of truth, was a dialogue that was played out in Puccini's last opera as much as in the criticism surrounding it.

The use of puppet-like figures, masks, or robots as theatrical protagonists constituted a profound reappraisal of the nature of theatrical character and traditional ideas of performativity. In Italy, the disparate theatrical experiments of the 1910s and 1920s shared a common aesthetic aim: to demonstrate that dramatic 'realism' was in fact an illusion, and that the artificial puppet was the only 'sincere' theatrical protagonist. Thus, unlike Podrecca, the avant-garde did not use puppets to mimic humans; rather, the artificiality of the marionette was its very authenticity, and a puppet-like style of delivery and gesture became an ideal towards which progressive actors should strive. Let us briefly consider a number of manifestations of this new approach to theatricality, and Puccini's response to them.

Puccini could hardly have been unaware of the new machine aesthetic, which was all-pervading by the early 1920s, both on the stage and off it (such as in the robotic mannerisms—thrust-out chest, tensed jaws, and bellicose voice—cultivated by Mussolini).⁴¹ Indeed, there is evidence to suggest that Puccini was attracted by it. He was drawn to the *Turandot* subject after hearing accounts of a production of Gozzi's play in Berlin directed by Max Reinhardt. Significantly, what interested him most were the staging techniques Reinhardt had used. He wrote to Simoni: 'Yesterday I was speaking to a foreign lady, who told me about a production of this work given in Germany with very strange and original staging by Max Reinhardt. She will write and get photographs of this "mise en scène", and then we can see for ourselves what it's all about.'⁴²

The accounts Puccini heard of Reinhardt's production of *Turandot* must surely have dwelt upon the actors' robotic movements and impassive expressions, a style of acting that enhanced the mechanicalism of the characters. Reinhardt trained his actors to move and behave like puppets, in order to render them completely subordinate to his directorial will. In so doing he worked along similar lines to those advocated by the Florence-based director and designer Edward Gordon Craig, who between 1908 and 1929 used his journal *The Mask* and his progressive theatre school at the Arena Goldoni to expound his radical theory that puppets should be substituted for live actors. Craig advocated the use of puppets in order to effect a complete break with realism, which he

⁴¹ The journalist Ugo Ojetti described Mussolini's face when speaking as dividing into two seemingly disconnected portions, the upper half a 'Japanese mask', the lower a 'Napoleonic mask'. Ugo Ojetti, 'Mussolini Makes a Speech (Rome, November 8, 1921)', in *id.*, *As They Seemed to Me*, trans. Henry Furst, intro. Gabriele D'Annunzio (London, 1928), 158. Artistic depictions of the dictator such as the stylized 'Maschera di Mussolini' by the sculptor Adolfo Wildt (on display at the Galleria nazionale d'arte moderna in Rome) also emphasize this mechanistic quality that Mussolini sought to cultivate.

⁴² 'Ieri parlai con una signora straniera, la quale mi disse di questo lavoro dato in Germania con "mise en scène" di Max Reinhardt in modo molto curioso e originale. Scriverà per avere le fotografie di questa "mise en scène", e così vedremo anche noi di che cosa si tratta.' Puccini to Simoni, 18 Mar. 1920, in *Carteggi pucciniani*, ed. Gara, 490.

dismissed in an article entitled 'Some Evil Tendencies of the Modern Theatre' as mere 'caricature'.⁴³ Craig's contention was that acting, inferior even to photography as an art form, was 'a poor art and a poor cleverness, which cannot convey the spirit and essence of an idea to an audience, but can only show an artless copy, a facsimile of the thing itself', and he suggested that the theatre banish 'this idea of impersonation, this idea of reproducing nature', which Craig called 'the flashiness of displayed personality'.⁴⁴ Directors should replace the actor with the marionette that 'will not compete with life—but will rather go beyond it'.⁴⁵

Craig's promotion of the puppet as protagonist found echoes in contemporary Italian dramatic practices and debates. Most significantly, the concept of the synthesis of man and machine lay at the heart of the Futurist aesthetic. Paraphrasing Craig, Filippo Tommaso Marinetti protested that 'the dramatic art ought not to concern itself with psychological photography' and advocated that actors be subordinated entirely to the writer's or director's will.⁴⁶ Futurist art works were preoccupied both with machine-like characters and with a mechanistic style of declamation from which all human emotion should be purged. Marinetti instructed performers to 'completely dehumanise the voice, systematically doing away with every modulation and nuance', to 'dehumanise the face completely, avoiding every grimace', and to adopt a 'geometric' manner of gesticulation.⁴⁷ Marinetti's theories were applied not only to spoken theatre but to dance, which should be characterized by geometric gestures, as outlined in his 'Manifesto of the Futurist Dance' of 8 July 1917 and manifested in Depero's *Balli plastici* of 1918, performed by cubistic marionettes, and Ivo Pannaggi and Vinicio Paladini's *Futurist Mechanical Ballet*, performed in Rome in 1922.

The Futurist aesthetic was at odds with everything for which Puccini's operas stood; indeed Marinetti and his followers had staged several noisy protests against them and the bourgeois public who enjoyed them. It is therefore hardly surprising that this was a movement to which Puccini never felt inclined to ally himself. He did, however, toy with the idea of setting a work by one of the avant-garde Italian playwrights of the post-First World War era, whose works, while less radical than those of the Futurists, nevertheless envisioned a new type of theatrical character. In 1920, despairing at the slow progress that Adami and Simoni were making with the *Turandot* libretto, Puccini wrote to Renzo Valcarengi: 'Should I look for something else? Bring myself up to date and devote myself to some big new genius with a bit of style and a bit of imagination? Who? Pirandello? Rosso di San Secondo? Someone else? There are dozens.'⁴⁸ We can only guess at what sort of an opera such a partnership would have produced, but *Turandot*, with its mechanical anti-heroine, may provide some clues.

⁴³ Edward Gordon Craig, 'Some Evil Tendencies of the Modern Theatre', *The Mask*, 1/8 (Oct. 1908), 153.

⁴⁴ Edward Gordon Craig, 'The Actor and the Übermarionette', *The Mask*, 1/2 (Apr. 1908), 3–15 at 5, 9, 11.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.* 12. Craig's Nietzsche-inspired thesis was that the 'Übermarionette' had the potential to attain superhuman status: to put humans back in touch with God. He was also developing an idea expressed a century previously by Kleist, who had contrasted man's fall with the state of grace of the marionette in *On the Puppet Theatre* of 1810.

⁴⁶ 'The Pleasure of Being Booped', from *War, the World's Only Hygiene* (1911–15), cited in Filippo Tommaso Marinetti, *Let's Murder the Moonshine: Selected Writings*, trans. R. W. Flint and Arthur A. Coppotelli (Los Angeles, 1991), 122, 123.

⁴⁷ 'Disumanizzare completamente la voce, togliendole sistematicamente ogni modulazione o sfumatura'; 'Disumanizzare completamente la faccia, evitare ogni smorfia, ogni effetto d'occhi'; 'Avere una gesticolazione geometrica, dando così alle braccia delle rigidità taglienti di semafori e di raggi di fari per indicare le direzioni delle forze, o di stantuffi e di ruote, per esprimere il dinamismo delle parole in libertà': from *Dynamic and Synoptic Declamation* (11 Mar. 1916), reproduced in Marinetti, *Let's Murder the Moonshine*, 150–5 at 152.

⁴⁸ 'Cercare altri? Svecchiarsi e attaccarsi a qualche nuovo ingegnaccio che abbia un po' di garbo e un po' di fantasia? Chi? E Pirandello, e Rosso di San Secondo altri? E ce ne sono a diecine...'. Puccini to Renzo Valcarengi, Torre del Lago, 17 Sept. 1920, cited in Lo, 'Turandot' auf der Opernbühne, 294.

Pirandello's *Sei personaggi in cerca d'autore* (1921) explored such issues as the nature of character, acting, and authorship, and the boundaries of reality and illusion. Piermaria Rosso di San Secondo, along with his contemporaries Luigi Chiarelli and Massimo Bontempelli, created a genre known as the *teatro grottesco*, in which they aspired to parody the hypocrisy and shallowness of pre-war society and theatre, often using the image of a mask to demonstrate that true humanity existed only beneath the surface of bourgeois conventions. Their plays reflect upon the fact that an entire generation seemed to have been reduced to the status of puppets manipulated by the hand of fate. Chiarelli's *La maschera e il volto* (The Mask and the Face), which established the *grottesco* genre in 1916, was described thus by the author of a book on contemporary Italian drama in 1927: 'All this play's originality lies precisely in the way in which, by treating the old protagonists of bourgeois drama ironically, it has been able to render them human: the deformed artifice that humanity has turned into.'⁴⁹ In order to accentuate this sense of 'deformed artifice', the protagonists of the *grottesco* plays were portrayed as impersonal blank canvases, such as the 'the man in grey' and 'the woman in the blue fox' in Rosso di San Secondo's *Marionette, che passione!* (1918). Bontempelli, the founder of the influential literary journal '900, went a step further in critiquing both traditional gender representations and the very nature of theatricality in *Nostra Dea*. In what was a striking gesture in a country where the theatrical system was dominated by star actresses and the cult of personality, Bontempelli created a heroine who is a living doll, whose actions and voices are determined by the different outfits she wears, and who acquires a new personality with each dress she dons.⁵⁰ First performed in 1925, the play came too late to have been seen by Puccini, but nevertheless sums up the new theatrical ethos of the age: that character was all artifice.

All these experiments, then, envisioned a new sort of character, and particularly a new sort of *female* character, the sentimental heroine having come to epitomize the effeminate, bourgeois theatre that the avant-garde wanted to jettison. The Italian machine plays of the time, many of which were highly misogynistic, strove to purge society and culture of all traces of the 'degenerate' carnal woman and of romantic sentimentality. Marinetti wrote that 'We scorn women conceived as the sole ideal, the divine reservoir of *Amore*, the woman poison, woman the tragic trinket, the fragile woman, obsessing and fatal'.⁵¹ In his own art works he went so far as to experiment with eradicating the feminine altogether, as witnessed in his early work *Mafarka the Futurist* (1910), in which the male protagonist gives birth, unaided by woman, to an automaton son. Other artists of the era were less extreme but would use the new metallic and mechanistic type of heroine as a key part of the modernist renunciation of sentimental excess, a particularly effective vehicle through which to sever links with the art of the past. This trend is exemplified particularly clearly by the works of 'Fillia' (Luigi Colombo), such as *Sensualità* (1923), *Adulterio futurista* (1925), *Il sesso di metallo* (1925), and *La morte della donna* (1925), which were concerned with the synthesis of women with machines, a concept taken to literal extremes in

⁴⁹ 'Tutta l'originalità di questa commedia... risiede appunto nella maniera in cui egli, ironizzando i vecchi protagonisti del dramma borghese, ha saputo renderli umani: l'artificio deformato che diventa umanità.' Giacomo Antonini, *Il teatro contemporaneo in Italia* (Milan, 1927), 107.

⁵⁰ Bontempelli wrote that Dea should at times speak in 'the voice we might imagine coming from a dressmaker's dummy', and that 'there is something abandoned and at the same time rigid about her appearance, like a store window mannequin'. Cited in Jane House and Antonio Attisani (eds.), *Twentieth-Century Italian Drama: An Anthology. The First Fifty Years* (New York, 1995), 255.

⁵¹ Marinetti, 'War, the World's Only Hygiene' (1911–15), cited in id., *Let's Murder the Moonshine*, 80.

L'uomo senza sesso (1927), in which a female racing driver fuses her body with the metal of her car.⁵²

Turandot seemed to reviewers to be more akin to the protagonists of the contemporary experimental plays than a traditional operatic heroine. She was a character to whom one could not relate; indeed to whom one did not seem meant to relate. As such she was, in a way, a highly fitting emblem of her era, the heroine Puccini had promised when he wrote of his ambition to create 'a Turandot filtered through the modern mind'.⁵³ But this was of course highly problematic, for the modernist eschewal of sentiment and empathy was profoundly at odds with the Italian operatic tradition, in which popular approval and instant emotional appeal were essential criteria for a work's success. As Emanuele Senici has noted: 'empathy, identification with the characters, is precisely what the nineteenth-century tradition of Italian opera . . . considered its highest goal, its very *raison d'être*, what the audience expected and longed for'.⁵⁴

CONTESTING *TURANDOT'S* MODERNITY

But what was the response to Puccini's latest work by the more progressive critics, those less attached to affective empathy as the linchpin of Italian opera? While traditionalists found Turandot objectionable because she seemed representative of an emotionally sterile modernism at odds with the entire Italian operatic tradition, the progressive critics responded equally coldly because they saw Puccini's efforts to update his style as unconvincing. Just as Stravinsky's stylistically eclectic works were attacked for being, in W. Anthony Sheppard's words, 'parodistic masks, casually assumed',⁵⁵ so too did Puccini appear to be simply playing with a range of superficial musical masks, not perceived to be sincerely felt. He seemed to critics to have engaged with a more modern style of composition at only the most cursory of levels—an attack that arguably seems justified given the rather nonchalant tone of the letter about Reinhardt's production of *Turandot* cited above. If artistic renewal were to take place it must be honest rather than forced, whereas Renzo Bianchi hinted that Puccini was merely going through the motions: 'At the age of fifty an artist can achieve any evolution—a revolution, even—but must succeed in achieving it solely in himself: in his own brain, in his own blood, in his own nerves.'⁵⁶ For Guido M. Gatti, a committed champion of the modernist movement, *Turandot* represented 'the torment of an artist who wants to transform himself',⁵⁷ as Puccini, incapable of assimilating the musical language of Debussy, Stravinsky, and Schoenberg, merely peppered his score with a few quasi-modern phrases. Indeed, for Gatti, *Turandot* marked a veritable stylistic regression:

⁵² Mechanistic women were not confined to the stage. The critics watching and listening to what they perceived to be the 'robotic' Turandot would also have found an echo of her in the automaton-like heroines of numerous international films of the 1920s, including Fritz Lang's *Metropolis* (1926), and, even more strikingly, Marcel L'Herbier's *L'Inhumaine* (1924), with music by Darius Milhaud, which concerns the transformation of an 'inhuman' femme fatale—an opera singer—into a loving woman. In the visual arts too, mechanistic women were a dominant motif, as seen in the mannequin-like female figures of Mario Sironi, Giorgio De Chirico, Carlo Carrà, and Giorgio Morandi.

⁵³ 'Una Turandot attraverso il cervello moderno, il tuo, d'Adami e mio': Puccini to Renato Simoni, 18 Mar. 1920, in *Carteggi pucciniani*, ed. Gara, 490.

⁵⁴ Senici, 'Verdi's *Falstaff* at Italy's *Fin de Siècle*', 298.

⁵⁵ W. Anthony Sheppard, *Revealing Masks: Exotic Influences and Ritualized Performance in Modernist Music Theater* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, and London, 2001), 59.

⁵⁶ 'A cinquant'anni un artista può compiere qualsiasi evoluzione—anche una rivoluzione—ma deve riuscire a compierla unicamente in se stesso: nel proprio cervello, nel proprio sangue, nei propri nervi.' Renzo Bianchi, 'L'ultima opera di Giacomo Puccini: *Turandot*', *La fiera letteraria*, 2 May 1926, 3.

⁵⁷ 'A volte—e soprattutto in *Turandot*—si rivela il tormento dell'autore che vuol trasfigurarsi.' Guido M. Gatti, 'Rileggendo le opere di Puccini', *Il pianoforte*, 8/8 (15 Aug. 1927), 257–71 at 268. Gatti edited the *Riforma musicale* (1913–15) and later founded and edited the progressive *Il pianoforte* (from 1920) and its successor, the *Rassegna musicale* (from 1928). He was the secretary-general of the first Maggio musicale fiorentino.

[Puccini's] language did not substantially change or become richer between *Manon* and *Turandot*: on the contrary, one might say that in certain respects it became more impoverished'.⁵⁸

Thus for the modernist critics as much as for Puccini's supporters, *Turandot* represented a compromised vision. Puccini had not fully liberated himself from the past, and some critics felt that he ought to have embraced the machine aesthetic more wholeheartedly. Vittorio Gui, writing with hindsight in the 1940s, argued that Busoni had handled the *Turandot* subject more effectively precisely because he had emphasized the intentionally 'robotic' aspect of Gozzi's play, retaining 'the caustic, satirical, humorous flavour, the "mechanicalism" of the characters, who are and want to be artificial, symbols of life more than images of real life'.⁵⁹ Gui mocked Puccini for his attempt to humanize *Turandot*, demanding 'How can one think of taking a character as grotesque and absurdly fictitious seriously? ... As a ludicrous symbol of female frigidity, combined with physical beauty, she might have existed; as a living woman, never.'⁶⁰ The message that critics such as Gui were trying to articulate was that Puccini had engaged with the 'modern' fantasy world of the *Turandot* legend at only the most shallow of levels. Ever drawn to the visual,⁶¹ Puccini had been attracted to the *Turandot* subject by dint of its picturesque atmosphere and colour, but had failed to take account of its complexities of character.⁶² Just like Bazzini, he had attempted to treat the fairy tale as verismo, and thereby created a character who, far from being lifelike, had become the least human of all operatic heroines. Saverio Procida argued in the *Nuova antologia* that 'materially and psychologically the Maestro belongs to that realistic world of which he is the faithful echo', and that Puccini's music was informed by his own subjectivity to such an extent that he was unable to step outside himself, to 'split himself in two'.⁶³ Michele Lessona argued that whereas the central scene of Act II ought to be 'where the essence of *Turandot*'s soul is situated', the music did not fit the drama: Puccini had simply lapsed into his usual trivial realist vein. 'In questa reggia' began in a 'sing-song manner, like a lullaby',⁶⁴ and 'The thought that *Turandot* addresses to her unfortunate ancestress does not transport us into the world of fairy tale, nor into that of tragedy; that invocation to her "sweet and serene ancestress" could be, in an opera with a contemporary subject and realistic treatment, the

⁵⁸ 'Il suo linguaggio non mutò nè si arricchì sostanzialmente da *Manon* a *Turandot*: anzi si può dire, sotto certi riguardi, che si impoverì.' Gatti, 'Rileggendo le opere di Puccini', 268.

⁵⁹ 'Il sapore caustico, satirico, umoristico, il "meccanicismo" dei personaggi, che sono e vogliono essere artificiali, simboli di vita più che immagini di vita reale.' Vittorio Gui, 'Le due *Turandot*', in id., *Battute d'aspetto: meditazioni di un musicista militante* (Florence, 1944), 156. This article dates from between 1940 and 1944; the exact date is not given.

⁶⁰ 'Come si può pensare di prender sul serio un personaggio caricaturale e assurdamente immaginario come la Principessa *Turandot*?; "come simbolo caricaturale della freddezza femminile alleata con la bellezza fisica, avrebbe potuto esistere; come donna viva, no" (ibid. 150–1). Gui added: 'how on earth can one explain how Puccini ... , only a few years after writing the grim and ultra-realistic *Tabarro*, could have fallen in love with a fairy tale which is so absurd, so inhuman, so far removed from truth, without feeling the slightest need to colour it, as Gozzi did, with humour and to treat it as no more than a joke? [Ma come mai si spiega che Puccini ... abbia potuto innamorarsi, pochi anni dopo aver scritto il truce e realisticissimo *Tabarro*, di una favola così assurda, così poco umana, così lontana dalla verità, senza per lo meno sentire il bisogno di colorirla, come Gozzi ha fatto, di umorismo e prenderla unicamente come uno scherzo?]' (ibid. 149).

⁶¹ When asked by Ugo Ojetti whether he heard the music or saw the images on stage when he composed, Puccini replied: 'I see, above all I see. I see the characters and the colours and gestures of the characters. I am a man of the theatre. I make theatre.' Ugo Ojetti, *Cose viste*, ii (Milan, 1923), 122.

⁶² Gatti wrote that Puccini 'sees the scene, but he doesn't see the characters' ('vide il quadro, ma non vide i personaggi': 'Rileggendo le opere di Puccini', 268).

⁶³ 'Il Maestro appartiene, materialmente e psicologicamente, a quel mondo realistico di cui è l'eco fedele.' Saverio Procida, '*Turandot* nel teatro di Puccini', *Nuova antologia*, anno 61, fasc. 1300 (May 1926), 180–8 at 183; 'Egli comunica idealmente col mondo che individua. Questa sensibilità estrema informa la sua musica a un subiettivismo continuo, che non consente a Puccini di esteriorizzarsi, di sdoppiarsi' (ibid. 182–3).

⁶⁴ 'Il lungo brano col quale essa si presenta nell'azione, colla scena centrale del secondo atto, dove appunto dovrebbe concentrarsi, per così dire, l'essenza dell'anima di *Turandot*, comincia e si svolge per buon tratto con un andamento da cantilena, di ninna-nanna.' Lessona, '*Turandot* di Giacomo Puccini', 244.

memory a good girl has for her affectionate grandmother . . .'.⁶⁵ Of 'mai nessun m'avrà', arguably the most sensuous passage in the score, Lessona wrote: 'The musical phrase is warm, strong, rising, but reveals to us nothing specific; it is the sort of phrase that one can very well imagine in many love duets; and sure enough there is such a duet at the end of the opera, and we find [the phrase] there.'⁶⁶

This, then, was what made *Turandot* so profoundly contradictory—the dislocation between her music and what it was apparently intended to express. Puccini's attempt to update his musical style was presented in the reviews not as spontaneous, but as something that had simply been tacked on to his existing aesthetic. Lessona's compliment that 'in this opera the technique is almost perfect, always' was therefore backhanded, as his subsequent words reveal: 'it is of no use insisting upon the particular merits of the technique, when the opera in its entirety lives only a false and wretched existence, doesn't touch us, and adds nothing either to our artistic heritage in general, or to the preceding output of the same author'.⁶⁷ In other words, the substance of the work was dislocated from the technique with which it had been elaborated. Domenico De' Paoli singled out *Turandot* for particular attack in his study of the 'crisis' that had befallen Italian music in the first three decades of the twentieth century: 'Every technical renewal not accompanied by a corresponding evolution in feeling has the sole result of accentuating the contrast between the new form and the substance that no longer corresponds to it (from this point of view a study of the posthumous *Turandot* is particularly revealing).'⁶⁸

Critics such as Lessona and De' Paoli, writing for a select educated readership, would doubtless have been aware of the theories of Benedetto Croce. For Croce, content and form were inextricably bound together: the work and the technique of the work were one and the same, and if the two could be separated then the art work was flawed. Croce wrote in his *Estetica* (1902): 'It is impossible . . . to distinguish intuition from expression. The one issues forth in the same instant as the other, because they are not two but one', and 'the technique of a playwright is one and the same with his dramatic conception'.⁶⁹ Fausto Torrefranca, in his 1912 diatribe against Puccini, had drawn upon Croce's theories for inspiration when he identified the separation of technique and content that he detected in Puccini's works as a manifestation of decadence: 'Now decadence can signify only this: that art, from being spontaneous, becomes forced; from being a complete expression, it shrinks back towards that which is no longer expression but merely the desire to express.'⁷⁰

⁶⁵ 'Il pensiero che Turandot rivolge alla sua infelice antenata non ci trasporta nel mondo della fiaba, nè in quello della tragedia; quell'invocazione all'"ava dolce e serena" potrebbe essere, in un'opera di soggetto contemporaneo e tratta dalla realtà della vita, il ricordo che una buona fanciulla ha della nonna affettuosa' (loc. cit.).

⁶⁶ 'La frase musicale è calda, forte, ascendente, ma non ci rivela nulla di specifico; è una frase che figurerebbe egregiamente in molti duetti d'amore; e poichè ce n'è uno alla fine dell'opera, essa vi trova luogo senz'altro' (ibid. 244).

⁶⁷ 'Appena occorre soggiungere che in quest'opera la tecnica è pressochè perfetta, sempre'; 'D'altra parte a nulla gioverebbe insistere sui pregi particolari della tecnica, quando l'opera nel suo complesso non vive che di una vita stentata e grama, non commuove, non aggiunge niente nè al nostro patrimonio artistico, in generale, nè alla produzione anteriore dell'autore stesso' (ibid. 246.).

⁶⁸ 'Ogni rinnovamento tecnico non accompagnato da una corrispondente evoluzione di sensibilità ha per solo risultato di accentuare il contrasto fra la forma nuova e la sostanza che non corrisponde più ad essa (da questo punto di vista lo studio della postuma *Turandot* è singolarmente rivelatore).' Domenico De' Paoli, *La crisi musicale italiana (1900–1930)* (Milan, 1939), 182. De' Paoli (1894–1984) was a musicologist and composer, who was living in Paris when he wrote this book.

⁶⁹ Croce, *The Aesthetic as the Science of Expression*, 9, 25.

⁷⁰ 'Ora decadenza non può significare altro che questo: che l'arte, di spontanea, si faccia sforzata, che dall'espressione compiuta, si ritragga verso ciò che non è ancora espressione, ma soltanto volontà di esprimere.' Fausto Torrefranca, *Giacomo Puccini e l'opera internazionale* (Turin, 1912), 26. For a detailed consideration of Torrefranca's book and its cultural context, see Alexandra Wilson, 'Torrefranca vs. Puccini: Embodying a Decadent Italy', *Cambridge Opera Journal*, 13 (2001), 29–53.

Turandot seemed a work divided into two parts: one looking backwards (widely perceived as honest), the other looking forwards (perceived as dishonest). For the more conservative commentators, the very act of attempting to ‘split himself in two’ was seen as undermining Puccini’s sincerity. The simultaneous coexistence within one text of two apparently irreconcilable manners was inimical to the critics’ enduring attachment to the idea of organicism as a marker of musical beauty. Furthermore, the persistence of a quasi-Romantic faith in the inseparability of an artist from his art meant that a composer was expected to speak in a single ‘voice’, to have a distinct musical ‘physiognomy’, an idea that Puccini’s critics and biographers had stressed repeatedly throughout his career. Puccini’s blending of familiar and more adventurous styles of music made it impossible to ascertain which parts of the score represented the ‘authentic’ Puccini, with the result that those sections that did not conform to expectations were discreetly ignored in the reviews. Critics eager to depict *Turandot* as an unmitigated success and Puccini’s oeuvre as homogeneous called the work ‘*puccinianissimo* among Puccini operas’, an opera that ‘the public greeted like a dear old friend’, and a work in which Puccini had ‘remained faithful to himself’, but such approving comments were based on a highly selective—arguably insincere—reading of the score.⁷¹

LA DONNA VERAMENTE DONNA

Thankfully there was another character in *Turandot* who fulfilled the critics’ criteria for an acceptable operatic heroine. In Liù, Puccini had created a character who provided a refuge for those critics reluctant to accept the abandonment of feeling that being modern seemed to necessitate. At the dramatic level, Adriano Lualdi argued that it was only by becoming a sacrificial victim along the same lines as Liù that Turandot stood any chance of making herself acceptable to audiences: ‘The Prince does not know what to do except embrace and touch the beautiful body of this snake-tongued woman. He should have slapped her, beaten her. Some women enjoy this means of gentle persuasion. Perhaps Turandot was one of them. As a victim in her turn, it might have finally been possible to foster a little sympathy for her.’⁷² And at the musical level, Liù’s music provided the lyricism that nostalgic reviewers craved: one referred to ‘Signora ascolta’ as a refreshing stream that ‘moistens the arid earth’ of the surrounding pages of music.⁷³

Liù was repeatedly referred to as ‘the most Puccinian character of the opera’—unsurprisingly, given that the character does not appear in earlier versions of the *Turandot* story and was invented specially for Puccini by his librettists.⁷⁴ The inclusion of such a character, the self-sacrificial heroine par excellence, suggests a reluctance on Puccini’s

⁷¹ ‘*Turandot*... è puccinianissima fra le opere pucciniane’ (Anon., ‘La prima di *Turandot* alla Scala’, *Il teatro*, 6/3–4 (1 Mar.–30 Apr. 1926), 17); ‘L’opera porta impressi chiari e inconfondibili i segni dell’arte pucciniana: e il pubblico l’accoglie come una cara e già vecchia conoscenza’ (Anon., ‘Gli avvenimenti scaligeri’, *Musicalisti d’Italia*, 6/5 (30 May 1926), 4–8 at 4); Puccini ‘sia rimasto fedele a sé stesso. Il melodista è morto melodista. Il latino è morto latino. Il cantore soave è rimasto cantore soave’ (Innocenzo Cappa, ‘*Turandot* alla Scala’, *La rivista illustrata del Popolo d’Italia*, 4–5 (May 1926), 58–61 at 59).

⁷² ‘Null’altro sa fare il Principe che abbracciare e palpare il bel corpo di quella donna basilisco. Schiaffeggiarla, bastonarla avrebbe dovuto. Ad alcune femmine piacciono questi mezzi di pacifica persuasione. Forse Turandot era di quelle. Vittima a sua volta, noi avremmo potuto nutrire finalmente, per lei, un po’ di simpatia.’ Lualdi, *Serate musicali*, 248.

⁷³ ‘Una pagina fresca come un rivolo che bagna l’arida terra’. Ettore Montanaro, ‘*Turandot* di Giacomo Puccini al “Costanzi” di Roma’, *Musica*, 20/7–8 (30 Apr.–15 May 1926).

⁷⁴ ‘Il personaggio più pucciniano dell’opera’. Di Valmarana, ‘*Turandot* di G. Puccini alla Scala’, 17. In an account of the many different versions of the *Turandot* story, Lazzaro Maria De-Bernardis described Liù as ‘that delicate female figure, who sprang from the minds of the librettists, to create a character specially adapted to the musical temperament of the Maestro [questa delicata figura femminile, sorta dalla mente dei librettisti, per creare un personaggio particolarmente adatto al temperamento musicale del Maestro]’. Lazzaro Maria De-Bernardis, *La leggenda di Turandot: Note di storia letteraria* (Genoa, 1932), 151. This was only one of several books on *Turandot*’s literary antecedents to appear in the aftermath of Puccini’s opera; another was Letterio di Francia, *La leggenda di Turandot nella novellistica e nel teatro* (Trieste, 1932).

part to forsake his old sentimental world altogether, demonstrated in his instruction to Adami in 1919 that he and Simoni must 'Put all your strength into [the *Turandot* libretto], all the resources of your heads and hearts, and create for me something which will make the world weep. They say that emotionalism is a sign of weakness, but I like to be weak! To the *strong*, so-called, I leave the triumphs that fade; for us, those that endure.'⁷⁵ Liù seemed to supply a link to the 'real' Puccini because she provided a connection both dramatically and musically to what critics called Puccini's 'first manner'. Even a progressive reviewer largely critical of *Turandot* such as Lessona, writing in the *Rivista musicale italiana* (an academic journal that customarily gave Puccini's music short shrift), rejoiced that Puccini had at least created one 'creatura umana' in his opera, whose music was the 'spontaneous and sincere expression of the Maestro's soul'.⁷⁶ Liù was depicted by the press as the most Puccinian of the Puccini women, a model for *all* women, even, with one critic calling her 'la donna veramente donna'⁷⁷—a high accolade given what his heroines had come to embody.

How convenient for the hagiographers, then, that the last page of music that Puccini had reputedly written was Liù's death scene, the pathos of which was intensified for many by memories of Puccini's own recent demise. Character and composer were depicted as virtually synonymous in most of the reviews. Lualdi mused: 'The soul of Liù. Or perhaps the soul of Giacomo Puccini who, having taken his last little creature by the hand, and accompanied her piously to rest, expired upon her tomb.'⁷⁸ Indeed, the evening seems to have taken on the character of a wake for its late composer. Reports of the premiere were characterized by a quasi-religious tone, with abundant references to the work's 'baptism' and 'consecration'; several commentators claimed that the audience felt Puccini to be with them in spirit in the auditorium.⁷⁹ Almost all the first-night reviews recounted the anecdote of Toscanini laying down his baton after Liù's funeral, at the precise point where Puccini was reported to have laid down his pen. A few days after the premiere, *Turandot* was staged with Franco Alfano's ending in Rome, but the performance was halted once again after Liù's death, as the result of a supposedly spontaneous reaction from the audience: 'At the end of Liù's scene, just after the funeral, the audience, as if obeying a command, fell silent and rose to its feet, remaining for a moment in collective silence, thus greeting with regret the moment at which the author had been forced to break off from orchestrating the work. A voice, from a box, exclaimed: "Peace and glory to the Italian soul of Giacomo Puccini!"'⁸⁰ Through Liù's music, then, the critics claimed, Puccini had remained himself to the end. According to Salerno, it was through Liù's music that Puccini had revealed himself in his last opera as 'the most sincere, human, and above all Italian Puccini we have hitherto known'.⁸¹

⁷⁵ Puccini to Adami, 23 Oct. 1919, in *Letters of Giacomo Puccini*, ed. Giuseppe Adami, trans. Ena Makin (New York, 1973), 260.

⁷⁶ 'Liù . . . è creatura umana, vivente di una semplice ma intensa vita sentimentale: un grande amore, devoto, silenzioso, in un'anima umile e mite, che per esso si trasfigura e diventa eroica.' Michele Lessona, '*Turandot* di Giacomo Puccini', 243; 'Nella parte di Liù sono le pagine più genuinamente pucciniane dell'opera, espressione spontanea e sincera dell'anima del maestro' (ibid. 245).

⁷⁷ Giulio Mario Ciampelli, 'Ricordi e rimpianti: Puccini e la *Turandot*', *Il teatro*, 6/3–4 (1 Mar.–30 Apr. 1926), 12–17 at 15.

⁷⁸ 'L'anima di Liù. O, forse, l'anima di Giacomo Puccini che, presa per mano la sua piccola creatura ultima, e accompagnatala piamente al riposo, sulla tomba di lei si estinse.' Lualdi, *Serate musicali*, 261.

⁷⁹ See e.g. Anon., 'Il trionfale successo di *Turandot*', 141; De Rensis, 'La prima rappresentazione di *Turandot*'; and Di Valmarana, '*Turandot* di G. Puccini alla Scala', 16.

⁸⁰ 'Alla fine del quadro di Liù, scomparso il funerale, il pubblico come ubbidendo a un comando, si è taciuto e si è alzato in piedi, rimanendo per un minuto in raccolto silenzio, salutando così con rimpianto il punto in cui l'autore aveva dovuto troncare la strumentazione del lavoro. Una voce, da un palco, ha esclamato: "Pace e gloria all'anima italiana di Giacomo Puccini!".' Anon., 'Il trionfale successo di *Turandot*', 143.

⁸¹ Salerno, *Le donne pucciniane*, 17.

For the conservative critics, ‘sincerity’ and ‘sentiment’ were terms used interchangeably, but, according to their ideological opponents, their failure to understand Turandot was attributable to an unwillingness to engage with a changing understanding of the notion of sentiment. According to Domenico De’ Paoli, these ‘zealous conservatives’ had failed to take account of the fact that ‘during the war (even before this, to tell the truth) human “sentiment” had changed character considerably and... the notions “sentiment” and “expression” did *not*, necessarily, any longer have a *sentimental* value’.⁸² Sentiment, regarded as a praiseworthy artistic quality in earlier eras, had indeed taken on a new character during the first decades of the twentieth century: it was now being widely interpreted as more self-indulgent and manipulative than ‘sincere’.⁸³ Modernist artists were increasingly contemptuous of the instant popular appeal cultivated by most nineteenth-century dramatists, Marinetti declaring ‘disdain for the public’ and writing that ‘we despise all those works that merely want to make people weep or to move them’.⁸⁴ Times were changing, and sentiment occupied an uneasy position in the Italian spoken theatre by the 1920s. An Italian opera without feeling might seem to be an anomaly, yet in 1923 Gino Roncaglia cited the ‘superficial and effeminate sentimentality of certain Puccini melodies’ in the progressive journal *Il pianoforte* as evidence that ‘sentimentalism is the degeneration of sentiment’.⁸⁵ Thus the reviews of *Turandot* reveal a profound divide among music critics between those who regarded the ability to move the audience not as sincere but mawkish, and those who continued to be guided by public taste when judging a work of art, claiming that unschooled audiences were the best critics. By the time of *Turandot* the more progressive critics seemed to be winning, to the extent that one Puccini-loving commentator wrote bitterly that listening to his music in the 1920s had become an indulgence to be enjoyed only in secret.⁸⁶

Perhaps even Puccini’s old model of sentimentality, as represented by Liù, was not sincere but something feigned. The label ‘sentimentalist’ can in fact be used pejoratively, to denote one who *affects* sentimentality, who indulges in an exaggerated, inappropriate, or *insincere* display of feeling. Seen in this light one might regard Liù, created especially to indulge Puccini’s most sentimental and dated side, rather than Turandot as the real ‘puppet’. One critic did, after all, call her ‘a simple, attractive figurine’, a comment doubtless intended to suggest that she was decorative, fragile, and charming, but which also conveys a sense of inanimacy—that she was a mere plaything, cynically manipulated

⁸² ‘Durante la guerra (anche prima a dire il vero) il “sentimento” umano aveva sensibilmente mutato carattere—e... le nozioni “sentimento” ed “espressione” non avevano più, necessariamente, un valore *sentimentale*.’ De’ Paoli, *La crisi musicale italiana (1900–1930)*, 124.

⁸³ Sentiment could certainly be politically expedient: Fascist propaganda consciously sought to control the masses by appealing to the irrational instincts rather than to the intellect, and Mussolini wrote that the theatre was ‘one of the most direct means of getting through to the hearts of the people’. Benito Mussolini, letter to Gastone Monaldi, 22 June 1927, cited in Günther Berghaus, ‘The Ritual Core of Fascist Theatre: An Anthropological Perspective’, in id. (ed.), *Fascism and Theatre: Comparative Studies on the Aesthetics and Politics of Performance in Europe, 1925–1945* (Providence, RI and Oxford, 1996), 97.

⁸⁴ Marinetti, ‘The Pleasure of Being Boored’, from *War, the World’s Only Hygiene* (1911–15), in id., *Let’s Murder the Moonshine*, 122, 121.

⁸⁵ ‘La sentimentalità alcune volte troppo superficiale e femminea di certe melodie pucciniane può sedurci con una commozione che è ben lontana dall’emozione puramente musicale. Il sentimentalismo è la degenerazione del sentimento e dell’emozione vera e propria.’ Gino Roncaglia, ‘Il problema dell’arte dal punto di vista musicale’, *Il pianoforte*, 4/7–8 (July–Aug. 1923), 169–73 at 171.

⁸⁶ ‘Ah, with what delight can the cultured public of La Scala finally quench their arid lips in secret at a stream of new, sincere Puccinian melody—and I with them! In secret, so that the champions of the great ultra-modern Word don’t notice [Ah con quanto diletto poté finalmente il coltissimo pubblico della Scala dissetare in segreto le labbre aride a un rivolo di nuova schietta melodia pucciniana: —ed io con lui!—In segreto: chè i predicatori del grande verbo modernissimo non se n’avvedano].’ Anon., ‘Gli avvenimenti scaligeri’, 8.

by her creators in order to stir the audience's feelings.⁸⁷ That Puccini regarded Liù as a 'type' is revealed by the fact that in the early stages of the compositional process he referred to her simply as the 'piccola donna'.⁸⁸ In common with virtually all of the critics, the modernist critic Gatti likened Liù to Puccini's earlier heroines, but, unlike the majority, his aim was to condemn rather than to praise. He argued that Mimi, Manon, and Butterfly were 'poetic' figures only in a deceptive sense: 'they place the spectator in that state of *sensiblerie* that is close to emotion, to that emotion, you understand, that has nothing to do with art, and which manifests itself with tears and sighs, above all among the female public'.⁸⁹ For Gatti, the moments in Puccini's works which moved the listener to tears were in fact the least successful aspects of his operas, in which Puccini the musician gave way to Puccini the man of the theatre, putting in the minimum effort to gain the maximum effect. This Puccini would be applauded by all the audiences in the world, but would be of no significance in the history of music.⁹⁰ In Gatti's opinion this Puccini was not sincere.

Sentimentality seemed no longer to equate to sincerity by the late 1920s, but perhaps in truth it never really had. The critics' quest for artistic sincerity in Puccini's last opera reopened old anxieties about the sincerity and homogeneity of his earlier works. Puccini's supporters had long boasted of his 'sincerity', and yet paradoxically an insincere streak, apparent even to his champions, had long been heard in his music. Several critics drew specific comparison between *Turandot* and *Tosca*, another work in which Puccini was widely portrayed as having resorted to bombast rather than honest expression.⁹¹ The reception of *Tosca* was dominated by the perception that the opera was fraudulent at all levels, from its obvious dramatic deceptions to the belief that it was cheap melodrama posing as high art, to the critics' feeling that the music was contaminated by a surfeit of foreign influences, to its wooden characters: Mario Thermignon dismissed Cavaradossi's death with the pejorative term 'burratinesca'—'puppet-like'.⁹² And even the hyper-sentimental *Madama Butterfly* had in its first incarnation failed to move audiences and was attacked as 'a work that cannot be taken seriously because neither in conception nor in practice does the artist's honesty preside, but rather the criterion of easy and immediate success',⁹³ and one in which Puccini had written 'almost exclusively in what one might call a "manner", more with the brain than the heart, more with the calculation of theatrical experience than the anguished fever of inspiration'.⁹⁴ Puccini, whose reputation had been built on his sincerity, had in fact been regarded

⁸⁷ 'Una figurina semplice, simpatica'. Cesari, 'La prima della *Turandot* di Puccini alla Scala'.

⁸⁸ See e.g. his letter to Simoni of 28 Aug. 1920, in *Carteggi pucciniani*, ed. Gara, 495.

⁸⁹ 'Mettono lo spettatore in quello stato di *sensiblerie* ch'è vicino alla commozione, a quella commozione, s'intende, che nulla a fare con l'arte, e che si manifesta con lagrime e sospiri, soprattutto nel pubblico femminile.' Gatti, 'Rileggendo le opere di Puccini', 265. According to Gatti, Liù belonged to the same family as Mimi, Manon, and Butterfly because 'she speaks with the same slightly rhetorical and mannered accents; has modest ideals; is incapable of elevated thoughts: knows only how to hide behind others and disappear [Liù appartiene, come personaggio drammatico, alla stessa famiglia cui appartengono Mimi, Manon e Butterfly: è una loro sorella: vive la loro stessa e fragile vita, parla con gli stessi accenti un poco retorici e manierosi; ha ideali modesti; è incapace di alti pensieri: sa soltanto farsi piccina e scomparire]' (*ibid.* 269).

⁹⁰ 'In questi momenti il musicista si è tratto in disparte, è scomparso, ed ha ceduto il posto all'uomo di teatro, che vive più nel mondo pratico-economico che in quello estetico e che ha per massima "il minimo sforzo col maggior rendimento". E Puccini, come uomo di teatro, può essere applaudito da tutti i pubblici del mondo: ma non interessa la storia dell'arte musicale' (*loc. cit.*).

⁹¹ 'Ancora una volta—si ricordi *Tosca*—egli ha voluto tentare la linea ampia e pomposa, contraddicendo al suo istinto.' De Rensis, 'La prima rappresentazione di *Turandot*'.

⁹² Mario Thermignon, 'La "brutalità" in Puccini', *Musica*, 5/42 (1911).

⁹³ Camaroni, *La lega lombarda*, quoted in Nicola d'Atri, 'La prima rappresentazione di *Madama Butterfly* alla Scala di Milano', *Il giornale d'Italia*, 19 February 1904.

⁹⁴ Ippolito Valetta, *Madama Butterfly a Milano*, *Nuova antologia* (Mar.–Apr. 1904), 146.

by some as a puppet-master from the outset. But for such concerns to re-emerge in 1926 at what should have been a moment of national celebration was little short of disastrous.

Only some years after the *Turandot* premiere would the Italian critics—and even then only the most forward-thinking—be prepared to accept that the cold, mechanical *Turandot* might actually represent the new, real Puccini. Writing in the forward-looking *Rassegna musicale* a decade later, Renato Mariani proposed an alternative reading of Puccini's work. Despite the fact that 'it was always asserted and it is still asserted that the real Puccini, the best Puccini, the authentic Puccini is expressed completely only in *Manon*, in *Bohème*, and in *Butterfly*',⁹⁵ Mariani's personal, controversial, opinion was that Puccini's ignored, criticized, and misunderstood late style—as found in *La fanciulla del West*, *Il tritico*, and *Turandot*—was the composer at his most sincere: 'The authentic musician is here: the artistic and human toil that led him from *Mimi* to *Turandot* was necessary and urgent; without such labour his oeuvre would have appeared, today, decidedly incomplete. . . . To deny this Puccini, to deny in *Turandot* the positive values of healthy, living modernity, of absolute indisputable contemporaneity, is to fail to appreciate the best of his art.'⁹⁶

Amid the fanfares that surrounded *Turandot* in 1926, it seemed that Puccini had in fact pleased few listeners with his much hyped, supposedly most 'sincere' work. Despite the gushing words of his publishers, it seems unlikely that his supporters genuinely believed *Turandot* to be the monument to Puccini for which they had so desperately longed. Rather, it was an opera characterized by tensions and dichotomies at every level, between the two heroines, between the human and the machine, between the two stylistic manners, between past and present, between what Puccini intended and what the critics perceived—more of a transitional work than the decisive end point that a last work ought to be. The critics fought over which of Puccini's 'voices' in his last opera was 'sincere', but both female principals in *Turandot* were, in their own way, different sorts of mask, used by Puccini as part of a cautious re-evaluation of his aesthetic approach, a critique of his own artistic strategies in a work of stylized gestures which seemed to send up the very excesses of opera itself. *Turandot* can be seen both as a re-evaluation of the aesthetics of opera in the twentieth century and as an illustration of the contingent, constructed nature of modernity. Multivalent conceptions of what it meant to be modern were jumbled together both in the reception of *Turandot* and in the opera itself, with Puccini's use of several different musical voices destabilizing the idea that there was one particular way in which 'modern' ideas might be expressed. Within such a work, any quest to find the 'real' Puccini was futile.

ABSTRACT

Giacomo Puccini was hailed as a national hero at his death in 1924, and again seventeen months later at the posthumous premiere of *Turandot*. However, close scrutiny of

⁹⁵ 'Si è sempre affermato e si seguita tuttora ad affermare che il vero Puccini, il miglior Puccini, l'autentico Puccini si è espresso compiutamente solo in *Manon*, in *Bohème* e in *Butterfly*.' Renato Mariani, 'L'ultimo Puccini', *La rassegna musicale*, 9/4 (Apr. 1936), 133–140 at 134.

⁹⁶ 'L'autentico musicista è qui: il travaglio artistico ed umano che da *Mimi* lo ha condotto a *Turandot* gli era necessario e assoluto; senza tale travaglio l'opera sua apparirebbe, oggi, decisamente incompleta. . . . Negare questo Puccini, negare di *Turandot* i valori positivi di sana viva modernità, di assoluta indiscutibile contemporaneità vuol dire misconoscere il meglio dell'arte sua' (ibid. 139–40).

the *Turandot* reviews reveals complex subtexts underpinning the patriotic encomiums. Of particular concern to the early critics was the opera's eponymous heroine, who seemed symbolic of an emotionally sterile modernism. The implications of the perception of *Turandot* as a 'machine woman' are considered here against the backdrop of contemporary developments in the Italian avant-garde spoken theatre.

This article posits *Turandot* as a highly self-interrogatory work, in which Puccini experimented with new approaches to operatic character and dramaturgy, and reflected upon his oeuvre past and present. *Turandot* and *Liù* were presented by critics as representing Puccini's late and early compositional manners, leading to concern about an apparent dichotomy in his style that was unwelcome in a final work. Discussions of the two heroines were used to articulate debates about Puccini's compositional sincerity; about changing attitudes towards operatic sentimentality; and about how the challenges posed by modernism were to be confronted within an Italian context.