

THE ONCE AND FUTURE TURANDOT  
A Comic Opera in Three Acts  
An Original Variation on the Turandot Story  
by Patricia Herzog  
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Summary and Synopsis

The Turandot most of us know is the eponymous heroine of Giacomo Puccini's opera, completed by Franco Alfano in 1926, two years after the composer's death: a spellbindingly beautiful woman utterly devoid of feeling, an ice princess, barbarously cruel, man-hating and man-slaying—until she herself is slain by love.

The versions of the Turandot story that most influenced Puccini and his librettists, Giuseppe Adami and Renato Simoni, are plays by Carlo Gozzi (1762) and Friedrich Schiller (1801). In these works, Turandot is still desperate not to marry, but her reasoning is different, as is her reason for accepting Prince Calaf. Puccini's Turandot vows never to be possessed by a man because the spirit of a female ancestor, dragged off and killed by a conquering invader, dwells inside her. There is no mention of such an ancestor in either the Gozzi or the Schiller. In the Gozzi, Turandot offers this explanation to Calaf: "... I am not heartless. But I abhor your sex, and I defend myself in the only way I know, so that I may remain free from men. Why should I not be as free as you are?"<sup>i</sup>

The enlightened Schiller goes him one better: "I am not cruel, as they say, but shun the yoke of Man's despotic sway. In virgin freedom would I live and die .... Shall I, the daughter of an emperor, not have that birthright which belongs to all? Be slave to brutish force, that makes your sex our lord? ... If nature dowered me with beauteous treasure you tyrants think t'was all to serve your pleasure. Why should my person, throne, and wealth be booty to one harsh, jealous master? No, all beauty is heaven's gift, and like the sun, should shine to gladden earth's children, and their souls refine. I hate proud man, and would like to make him feel he may not crush free woman 'neath his heel."<sup>ii</sup>

The opera and the plays ultimately derive from "Calaf and the Princess of China," a Persian tale of uncertain provenance related in *The Thousand and One Days* (1710-12) by François Pétis de la Croix. Here, too, Turandot hates men and refuses to marry. In the end, however, she judges Calaf on his merits and decides to accept his hand. Both the Gozzi and the Schiller are more like the tale in that there is less submission and more decision.

Only in the Puccini does a conquering hero (*Vincerò!*) seize and subdue the heroine—a fitting ending to a backstory of an ancestor being dragged off and killed by a conquering invader. Puccini's Turandot is also unique in being heartless. She looks on the death of the slave girl Liù with utter indifference, even going so far as to describe herself as inhuman, whereas in the other versions she is kind and forgiving towards her female rivals.

The comparatively tame and reasonable Turandots who come before Puccini's apotheosis of cruelty are preceded in turn by a very real Khutulun, the 13<sup>th</sup>-century Mongol princess. Khutulun is the warrior daughter of Kaidu, ruler of central Asia, and niece of rival Kublai Khan who established the Yuan dynasty in China. In the account related by Marco Polo, Khutulun refuses to marry any man who cannot best her in wrestling, exacting the price of horses, a very important Mongol commodity, not death. Khutulun remains undefeated and unmarried, much to her parents' disappointment. In other accounts, she marries, and in one of them she marries in order to quash the rumor that she's sleeping with her father. Turandot has no brothers in the opera, the plays or the Persian tale, but in at least one account of Khutulun there are fourteen brothers, all of whom the father regards as inferior to his daughter.

The fictional Turandot--literally the daughter of Turan, a region in central Asia--is the sole offspring of Altoum(n) Khan, ruler of China, whereas the historical Khutulun is daughter of Kaidu, archrival of the ruler of China, Kublai Khan. Both the story and the history take place in Peking, which Kublai Khan established as the capital of the Mongol empire in the 13<sup>th</sup> century.

The version of the Turandot story that I have written combines a number of elements from both the fictional and historical accounts. Like the fictional versions, there is a prince Calaf whom Turandot falls for in the end. In my version, however, she has no amorous rival; the intrigue comes from an enemy spy. Calaf does disguise his identity, at least at first. And there is a secret to be uncovered, although it does not pertain to his name. My Turandot has 14 brothers and is greatly preferred to them by their father. Their foolishness and inadequacies make up for the absence of the *commedia dell'arte* characters prominently featured in the Gozzi, Schiller and Puccini. Also in my version, like the Gozzi, the Schiller and the Persian tale, but unlike the Puccini, the suitors fall in love with Turandot's image first. Finally, in my version and all the others, Turandot strenuously resists marriage--not because she is cruel or hates men but because, rightly assessing her abilities and prizing her freedom, she would not be ruled.

Gozzi tell us that his tragicomic *Turandot* is based "on a Persian tale, the ridiculous story of Turandot."<sup>iii</sup> I have taken his statement to heart and written a libretto for a comic opera. The title of the opera takes its

inspiration from T.H. White's *Once and Future King* about the legendary King Arthur. May the legendary Turandot, who once was too wise and capable to be ruled by any man, point the way to the future!

## Act I

Scene 1. Peking. In front of the imperial palace. Turandot refuses to sit for yet another royal portrait broadcasting her unrivaled beauty to prospective suitors. She doesn't want to marry. She cherishes her freedom and thinks, not without reason, that a married woman is like a slave. Alas, however, Turandot is the only one of Altoum's children capable of rule, but a woman, no matter how capable, can't rule alone. When the painter arrives, Turandot puts on a mask: she'll sit only if the painter can't see her. He paints her anyway, from memory or imagination, and Turandot's father, Altoum-Khan, Emperor of China, says it's the best yet. Reluctantly, Turandot agrees to marry, but only if the prince can outwit her--a prospect she deems highly unlikely.

Scene 2. The harem. The women entertain themselves guessing at why Turandot isn't married. She won't own a slave, and no prince will have a princess without a slave, so perhaps that's the reason. She's stubborn. She's cruel. She was raped. Last but not least, she sleeps with her father, a vicious rumor that excites a lot of laughter.

Scene 3. Four portraits of Turandot, each of them by different artists, are planted atop stakes in front of the imperial palace. Four suitors enter and each of them attempts to woo a different Turandot portrait. The real Turandot enters and they are stunned. One by one, they attempt to outwit her with their ridiculous riddles, which the Princess easily solves. She is greatly relieved until an unanticipated fifth suitor appears. Handsome, self-assured and exceedingly clever, Prince Rashid--in reality, an enemy spy--stumps Turandot with a paradox to which there can be no correct answer. She has met her match. To her father's great delight, she will be married.

## ACT II

Scene 1. The next day. Altoum's private chamber. Turandot is bemoaning her fate to her father. Rashid enters, wanting to plan for the wedding. Turandot will have no part in it and leaves. Altoum warns Rashid that not only Turandot but also her brothers are reluctant about the wedding, as they resist being ruled by their sister. Rashid asks to speak with them alone. They are summoned and Altoum exits. Rashid tries to convince the brothers that he is entirely happy to leave the ruling to them, as his only desire is for

Turandot. He leaves and the brothers waiver. Ultimately, they decide they cannot trust him and vow to come up with a plan to defeat the wedding.

Scene 2 One week later. The night before the wedding, In front of the palace. A guard is fast asleep by the gate. A wandering minstrel--the disguised Prince Calaf seeking refuge at the court of Altoum--nears the palace, singing softly to himself. Turandot is too distressed to sleep. She hears him and steps out of the palace in her flowing nightgown. The minstrel is in tatters and not much to look at, but Turandot is taken with the beauty of his singing and his gentle, courtly manner.

The minstrel asks her why she is not asleep. Turandot tells him the miserable story of her marriage. Seeing that the minstrel is sympathetic, she offers him shelter inside the palace. He politely refuses, preferring to sleep outside under the starry sky. They say good-night and Turandot goes back in. The minstrel prepares a bed of leaves under a nearby tree. No sooner does he lie down than he hears a man approaching. The man is mumbling something to himself about an attack on the royal family at his wedding. First, he says, he'll have some fun and bed Turandot, even if it should be by force.

The minstrel leaps up and starts singing. Standing close by, he recognizes Carizma's spy. Rashid tries to push past him, but the minstrel is too strong. They tussle. The spy's tunic is torn and an insignia on a chain breaks and falls to the ground. They hear the palace door opening. Rashid runs away and the minstrel hides behind the tree.

Turandot's brothers file out, one by one. They are fretting because they still do not have a plan to thwart their sister's wedding. The minstrel steps out from behind the tree and reveals his true identity. He tells the brothers that the man who would wed their sister is an enemy spy, offering Carizma's seal as proof. Then he comes up with his own plan of attack on Rashid's men and the brothers agree to it.

### ACT III

Scene 1. Altoum's chambers, just before the wedding. In anguish, Turandot begs her father to release her from her vow. He would enslave her, she cries. Altoum is greatly pained at Turandot's distress but remains firm. The enemy is at the gate. He has seen ten men lurking about. Would she be free and enslave the entire nation? Turandot reckons the difficulty of her situation and prepares to marry Rashid.

Scene 2. The wedding. The interior of the palace courtyard. The wedding party processes. Arrayed in magnificence, Turandot enters last. Just as she

approaches the altar, Calaf, who is now disguised as a musician, raises his hand, signaling the brothers to attack. Just in the nick of time, they see the signal and attack with fierceness. Turandot eagerly joins them. She wrestles Rashid to the ground, pins him down with her foot, and is about to drive a dagger into heart when Calaf steps forward and asks to do the honors himself. Turandot recognizes the minstrel in musician's clothes, but she is completely mystified by his request. Brother One explains everything, whereupon Turandot hands the dagger to Calaf, who mercifully tosses it to Rashid and lets him kill himself.

Altoum offers Calaf whatever he wants, including slaves and a harem, and he laments that Calaf was not Turandot's intended. Calaf says he would never own slaves, which Turandot heartily approves of, and that his heart is full of love. All he wants is asylum. Altoum leaves to attend to the restive wedding guests. Meanwhile Turandot, who not used to having a rival in love, sets to wooing Calaf. She also continues to press him about her rival's identity. Not wanting to reveal his own love for Turandot, Calaf says something only about a secret pledge and an unnatural bond. The thwarted Turandot insists that no one sleep (*nessun dorma*) until she finds out. At this point, Brother One steps forward and confesses that he spread a nasty rumor about Turandot and their father, hoping to keep her suitors at bay so she wouldn't wed and couldn't rule. Calaf's love pours forth, the drunken guests pour back in, and Turandot is finally and happily wed.

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<sup>i</sup> Carlo Gozzi, *Five Tales for the Theatre*, edited and translated by Albert Bermel and Ted Emery (The University of Chicago Press: 1989), p. 144.

<sup>ii</sup> Friedrich Schiller, *Turandot: The Chinese Sphinx* (Editora Griffio: date?), p. 23.

<sup>iii</sup> Gozzi, loc. cit., p. 125.