

# Turandot

Music by Giacomo Puccini • Libretto by Giuseppe Adami and Renato Simoni

## Study Guide to the Opera



Scenes from *Turandot* designed by Renaud Doucet and André Barbe. Photos by David Bachman, Pittsburgh Opera. Interview quotes courtesy Janelle Gelfand: <http://www.cincinnati.com/story/entertainment/2015/07/16/million-turandot-takes-stage-cincinnati-opera/30257903>

## TURANDOT and Chinese Numerology

by Jill Leahy

Set in an imaginary “ancient” China, *Turandot*, a *dramma lirico* by Giacomo Puccini, is an all-time favorite of opera audiences. The opera's story involves Prince Calaf, who falls in love with the icy Princess Turandot. She is searching for a suitor and will only accept the one who correctly answers her three riddles. If the prospective suitor answers incorrectly, he will die.

*Turandot* is often staged as a lavish production with dazzling sets and costumes. The co-production pictured above was created by scenic designer André Barbe and opera director Renaud Doucet; sets and costumes are co-owned by Pittsburgh Opera, Minnesota Opera, Cincinnati Opera, Utah Opera, and Seattle Opera. Doucet says, “*Turandot* needs to have spectacle but at the same time, it’s important for us that we are not focusing on the spectacle, but on the emotion.” Each element—every shape and color—has been carefully chosen for a reason. For example, when Princess Turandot condemns her suitors to be executed, the scene is drenched in the color red, symbolizing blood and death. But red is also symbolic of weddings in China.

The designers drew inspiration from the music, the composer, the period, and the characters, as well as books, visual art, and even a window display on the street. Doucet says that one of the most important influences in this production is “Chinese numerology. Maybe that’s why it’s a success. In fact, when I studied the score again, all of the numbers that Puccini writes, the number of people, everything, is absolutely following Chinese numerology.” The creative team incorporated some Chinese symbolism surrounding numbers and shapes into the design. Circles play a prominent role, and represent the circular journey of life. The number “3”—significant in Chinese numerology as the three stages of life: birth, marriage, and death—is prominent. There are three riddles, Calaf strikes a gong three times, and there are three ministers, named Ping, Pang, and Pong.

According to Doucet, “What people receive through their eyes and ears is processed through their hearts and their brains. So we need to do two things: We need to touch their hearts and we need to stimulate their brains.”

# Turandot Synopsis

**ACT I** At sunset, outside the Imperial Palace in Peking, a Mandarin reads an edict to the crowd: any prince seeking to marry the Princess Turandot must answer three riddles. If he fails, he must die (**Popolo di Pekino!**). The most recent suitor, the Prince of Persia, is to be executed at the moon's rising; bloodthirsty citizens urge on the executioner (**Gira la cote!**). In the tumult, a slave girl, Liù, kneels by her aged master, who has fallen from exhaustion. A handsome youth, Calaf, recognizes the old man as his long lost father, Timur, vanquished King of Tartary. When Timur reveals that only Liù has remained faithful to him, Calaf asks why. She replies that once, long ago, Calaf smiled at her. As the sky darkens, the mob cries again for blood but greets the moon with sudden fearful silence. The onlookers are moved when the Prince of Persia passes by, and they call upon the princess to spare him. Calaf demands that she present herself to the crowd. Turandot appears, and with a contemptuous gesture she orders that the execution proceed. Then she vanishes. As the death cry is heard from the distance, Calaf, transfixed by the beauty of the unattainable princess, strides to the gong that announces a new suitor. Suddenly Turandot's three ministers, Ping, Pang, and Pong, materialize to discourage him. When Timur and the tearful Liù also beg him not to risk his life (**Signore, ascolta!**), Calaf tries to comfort them (**Non piangere, Liù!**). But as their pleas intensify (**Ah! Per l'ultima volta!**), he strikes the gong three times and calls Turandot's name.

*Intermission*

**ACT II** In their Palace apartments, Ping, Pang, and Pong lament Turandot's bloody reign, praying that love will conquer her icy heart and restore peace (**Ola, Pang! Ola, Pong!**). The three let their thoughts wander to their peaceful country homes (**Ho una casa nell'Honan**), but the noise of the populace gathering to hear Turandot question the new challenger calls them back to reality.

Within the walls of the Imperial Palace, the old Emperor, perched on a high throne, vainly asks Calaf to reconsider. Heralded by a chorus of children, Turandot enters to describe how her beautiful ancestor, Princess Lou-Ling, was abducted and killed by a conquering prince; in revenge, she has turned against men and determined that none shall ever possess her (**In questa Reggia**). Facing Calaf, she poses her first question: What is born each night and dies each dawn? "Hope," Calaf answers, correctly. Unnerved, Turandot continues: What flickers red and warm like a flame, yet is not a flame? "Blood," Calaf replies after a moment's

## Characters

### Princess Turandot

[TOO-rah-n-doh-t]  
*dramatic soprano*

Looking for a prince to marry, but will only marry the prince who solves her three riddles.



### The Unknown Prince, Calaf

[KAH-laf] *tenor*

Son of Timur who was forced into exile. Solves Turandot's riddles; she declares his name is *Love*.

**Liù** [lee-YOO] *lyric soprano*

Slave girl who is faithful to Calaf; later she commits suicide.

**Timur** [tee-MOOR] *bass*

The exiled King of Tartary.

### The Emperor Altoum

[AHL-toh-oom] *tenor*

The father of Princess Turandot.



**Ping** *baritone*

Grand Chancellor of China.

**Pang** *tenor*

Supreme lord of provisions.

**Pong** *tenor*

Supreme lord of Imperial Kitchen.

•  
Mandarin  
Prince of Persia  
Guards  
Priests  
Handmaidens  
Ghosts of Suitors  
Children  
Executioner

pause. Shaken, Turandot delivers the third riddle: What is like ice but burns? Tense silence prevails until Calaf triumphantly cries, "Turandot!" While the crowd expresses thanks, the princess vainly begs her father not to give her to the stranger (**Figlio del Cielo!**). Hoping to win her love, Calaf offers Turandot a challenge of his own: if she can learn his name by dawn, he will forfeit his life.

### Intermission

**ACT III** In the Imperial Gardens, Calaf hears a proclamation: on pain of death no one in Peking shall sleep until Turandot learns the stranger's name (**Nessun dorma!**). Calaf foresees victory for his love, but Ping, Pang, and Pong try to bribe him to leave the city. As the fearful mob threatens him with daggers to learn his name, soldiers drag in Liù and Timur; Calaf tries to convince the mob that neither of them knows his secret. When Turandot appears, commanding the dazed Timur to speak, Liù cries out that she alone knows the stranger's identity and will never reveal it. Though tortured, she remains silent. Impressed by such fortitude, Turandot asks Liù's secret. "Love," replies the girl. When the soldiers intensify the torture, Liù tells Turandot that she, too, will know the joys of love and then snatches a dagger and kills herself (**Tu che di gel sei cinta**). The crowd, fearing her ghost, forms her funeral procession. Turandot, veiled by her attendants, remains alone to confront Calaf, who tears the covering from her face and impetuously kisses her (**Principessa di morte!**). Knowing emotion for the first time (**Che è mai di me?**), Turandot weeps (**Del primo pianto**). Calaf, now sure of winning her, reveals his identity.

Once again before the Emperor's throne, Turandot declares she knows the stranger's name: it is Love (**So il tuo nome!**). The court salutes the power of love and life.

—Adapted from *Opera News*

## Meet the Composer

by Jill Leahy

### Giacomo Antonio Domenico Michele Secondo Maria Puccini

(December 22, 1858 – November 29, 1924)

was a fifth generation musician and was considered, after Giuseppe Verdi, to be the most important composer of Italian opera.



Giacomo Puccini and Arturo Toscanini  
By Menerbes - Archives Arturo Toscanini, Parma, Public Domain,  
<https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=5112818>

Puccini is credited with bringing the *verismo* style to opera because his subjects and characters portray everyday life. His operas are known for their memorable melodies, which are even recognizable to people who don't listen to opera. Remember the film music that soared in the background in *Moonstruck*, or the climactic scene in *Bend it Like Beckham*?

During a lunch in March 1920, Puccini and the librettists Giuseppe Adami and Renato Simoni discussed the story of *Turandot* for an opera and agreed to collaborate. Over the next few years, Puccini completed Acts I and II. By March 1924, he completed the orchestration for all of Act III up to the death of Liù. It was there that he struggled with the final duet between Turandot and Calaf. In a letter to Adami, Puccini wrote that the duet "must be grand, bold, unforeseen" and that it "must cling to the fantastic to the limit. It must be something great, audacious and unexpected, and not leave things simply as they are. It must be a great duet—these two beings, who stand, so to speak, outside the world, are transformed into humans through love and this love must take possession of everybody on the stage in an orchestral peroration." Sadly, Puccini died of throat cancer before he could fulfill his wishes.

Composer Franco Alfano completed the opera by composing the final duet and the concluding choral scene, based on Puccini's sketches. At *Turandot's* premiere at La Scala in Milan on April 25, 1926, conductor Arturo Toscanini ended the performance with Liù's death, laid down his baton, and announced:

**"Qui finisce l'opera, perché a questo punto il maestro è morto." ("Here the opera ends, because at this point the maestro died.")**



## Meet the Librettists

by Jill Leahy



Simoni, Puccini, and Adami

**Renato Simoni** (September 5, 1875 – July 5, 1952) was an Italian journalist, playwright, writer, and theater critic. Simoni suggested the fairytale *Turandotte* (by the

Venetian author Carlo Gozzi) to Puccini as suitable material for a lyric opera. Simoni devoted his entire career to theater. He was an editor and critic at *L'Adige*, a Veronese newspaper in his hometown. In 1902, he wrote one of his best comedies, *La Vedova* (*The Widow*), followed by four other plays. In 1914, he succeeded John Pozza as an author and critic at *Corriere della Sera*, one of Italy's oldest newspapers. Simoni became one of Italy's foremost drama critics and also held a position as a director for a weekly magazine, *La Tradotta*. In 1952, Simoni donated 40,000 volumes of his writings and reviews to the Museum Library of La Scala and dedicated them to his mother, Livia.

**Giuseppe Adami** (February 4, 1878 – October 12, 1946) was an Italian playwright, librettist, and journalist best known for his collaborations with Puccini on *La rondine*, *Il tabarro*, and *Turandot*. Adami was born in Verona and studied law in Padua. He worked as a theater critic for the *Arena di Verona* and later became a playwright and film director. In 1911, Adami met the publisher Giulio Ricordi, who suggested his partnership with Puccini. Adami later worked as a music critic for *La sera* in Milan and for *La comoedia*, and as a publicist for Ricordi. Adami's books include a 1928 edition of Puccini's letters, a 1935 biography of Puccini, and his memoirs of Ricordi, *Giulio Ricordi e i suoi musicisti*.

www.classicalnotes.net/opera/turandot.html  
www.roh.org.uk/people/giuseppe-adami

## The Riddles of Turandot

### 1 Straniero, ascolta!

What is born each night and dies each dawn?  
The answer is "Hope."

### 2 Guizza al pari di fiamma

What flickers red and warm like a flame, but is not fire?  
The answer is "Blood."

### 3 Gelo che ti da foco

What is like ice, but burns like fire?  
The answer is "Turandot!"

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