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Term Paper

Puccini's Prized Princess  
A Look at *Turandot*, Puccini's Unfinished Masterpiece

Giacomo Puccini was certainly a musical genius. Many of his operas are included in the standard repertoire today. *Turandot*, his final opera, brings much speculation to the musical world, as Puccini did not live to finish it. Franco Alfano was chosen to complete the story of the ice princess, using Puccini's abandoned sketches as a guide, but many people in the music world argue that his ending does not fit into Puccini's idea. Multiple composers have tried their luck at finishing Puccini's final work, but Luciano Berio has been the most successful and recognized. His modern interpretation, completed in 2001, bears much resemblance to Alfano's ending in many ways, but also varies greatly, most notably towards the end.

Giacomo Antonio Domenico Michele Secondo Maria Puccini was born December 22, 1858 in Lucca, Italia. He had one brother and seven sisters, one sister who died in infancy and another at age eight. He was close to all his siblings, though his sister Nitteti was the only one to outlive him. Michele, Puccini's younger brother, wished to follow in Puccini's footsteps and followed him to Milan. He never finished his studies there, and instead moved to South America with friends, where he died of yellow fever (Weaver and Puccini 28-38). Puccini's father, Michele, died in 1864 when Puccini was six, leaving his sickly mother and a young wife, Albina, to care for his eight children (Weaver and Puccini 8). Puccini was born into a family with a history of musical talent and was sent to Albina's brother, Magi, to study, though the two did not get along (Weaver and Puccini 10-11). His mother used to say, "If he doesn't become a worthy

composer like his father and his ancestors, he'll still be something! The important thing is to continue the generations of musicians” (Weaver and Puccini 11). When Magi failed to harness the potential of the young Puccini, they sent him to Carlo Angeloni. Eventually Puccini moved from Lucca to study at the Milan Conservatory, thanks to his mother Albina, who wrote a letter to Queen Margherita di Savoia, asking her for a scholarship for Puccini to study music (Weaver and Puccini 12). His first work, *Capriccio Sinfonico*, was performed as his final examination at the Milan Conservatory and led people to the assumption that he should write an opera. Thus became *Le villi*, Puccini's first opera, and though not a success at first, in time it broke Puccini into the compositional world (Weaver and Puccini 15-18). Puccini had a strange relationship with Elvira Bonturi Gemignani. The two lived together beginning in 1886, but were not married until 1904 when Elvira's husband died.

Puccini is best known for his glorious operas, the most well known being *Manon Lescaut*, *La Bohème*, *Tosca*, *Madama Butterfly*, and *Turandot*. His lesser known operas include *Le Villi*, *Edgar*, *La fanciulla del West*, which takes place in California during the gold rush, *La rondine*, and *Il trittico*, or the triptych (generally a piece of artwork, split into three sections), which includes *Il tabarro*, *Suor Angelica*, and *Gianni Schicchi*. European and exotic folklore often influenced romantic literature, and many of Puccini's operas are set in fantasy worlds and far off lands. Political and economical expansion in the 19<sup>th</sup> century also exposed Europe to the Near East (Carner 45). Puccini's operas *Madama Butterfly* and *Turandot* are both set in Eastern countries, with music highly influenced by the orient. Puccini also wrote 20 songs and other vocal works, including a mass and requiem, and 14 instrumental pieces, including string quartets and symphonies. There is much lost music and anonymous musical pieces that have been credited to Puccini by certain experts (Girardi 495-98).

In 1920, with the completion of *Il Trittico*, Puccini began the search for a new story. He intended to use a libretto by Giovacchino Forzano, whom he had worked with before on *Gianni Schicchi*. The libretto was called *Cristoforo Sly*, a story expanded from the prologue of Shakespeare's *Taming of the Shrew*. But Puccini was unable to use the libretto because Forzano was not happy with his own work (Budden 421). Puccini decided to collaborate with librettists Giuseppe Adami and Renato Simoni to "create something...that will set the world weeping" (Budden 422). Adami suggested a libretto based on Dickens's *Oliver Twist* that would focus on Nancy, but Puccini was quick to change his mind. In an effort to make the partnership work, Simoni gave Puccini a copy of Carlo Gozzi's *Turandot*. Puccini wrote,

"I've read *Turandot* and I do not think we should abandon the subject...for my part I would advise sticking to the subject. Simplify it as regards to the number of acts so as to make it run smoothly and effectively; and above all heighten the amorous passion of *Turandot* which she has smothered so long beneath the ashes of her pride."  
(Budden 424)

Throughout his life, Puccini wrote many letters, which have since been transcribed and translated for music enthusiasts to read. During the composition of *Turandot*, Puccini wrote often to Adami. It is obvious from reading the letters the agony he suffered in creating what would be, though unknown to him, his final opera. He loved his work like no other, and was aching to break free of the drama in his ordinary life and quench his restless spirit. In his letters, he constantly struggled with health issues as well as emotional and motivational battles over *Turandot*. With a story chosen, Puccini craved to breathe life into the unwritten libretto. He would write such things to Adami as "You would give me back my calm and confidence," (Puccini "Letters" 265) and "Greetings and think little of this voluntary prisoner" (Puccini

“Letters” 271).

Puccini was a heavy smoker, and often sickly. In early 1924 he began to complain of throat pain and was diagnosed with throat cancer. In October, he wrote to Adami, “I am going through a terrible time...Will it be an operation? or medical treatment? or sentence of death? I cannot go on any longer like this. And then there’s *Turandot*” (Puccini “Letters” 316). He was scheduled for an operation to remove the cancer in mid November, and in his final letter to Adami he stated, “Some days ago I had lost all hope of recovery. And what hours and days I have passed! I am prepared for anything.” (Puccini “Letters” 318). On November 26 Carlo Clausetti, a close friend to Puccini, wrote to Adami, “Puccini en sortira”, meaning “Puccini will pull through” (Puccini “Letters” 319). His progress looked promising until two days later, the 28<sup>th</sup>, when Puccini suffered from a heart attack due to complications with the surgery. How ironic that the composer leave this world simultaneously with his character Liu, leaving *Turandot* unfinished. Franco Alfano was chosen to finish the opera using the 36 pages of sketches Puccini left behind. Though Alfano completed the opera to the best of his ability, the premiere did not include his compositions. On April 25, 1926, Puccini’s *Turandot* was performed at La Scala in Milan. According to Italian music critic Gaetano Cesari,

“The artist was among us yesterday with the sadness of his own tragedy. “If I do not succeed in finishing the opera”, he had said one day, with the presentiment of his approaching death, “some one will come to the front of the stage and say, ‘Puccini composed as far as this, and then he died’”. The opera stopped yesterday at the point where Puccini had had to leave it.” (254-255)

And so it was. After Liu’s death, the conductor laid down his baton, announced, “Here the opera ends, because at this point the maestro died”, and the curtain closed (Moravcsik).

*Turandot* is a fairy tale; its China is an unreal country. Carlo Gozzi's play, based on a Persian folk story, is the libretto's prime source (Weaver and Puccini 121). Though *Turandot* ends with triumph, passion, and love, Puccini did not like happy endings. Only four of his operas can be considered to have happy endings, and each end in compromise. *Turandot* is probably the most heart breaking of his operas with Liu's suicide in the third act (Ashbrook 263). Only two of Puccini's operas have two female central characters: *Edgar*, an early opera, and *Turandot*, with Liu and Turandot (Weaver and Puccini 120).

The opera takes place in a fantasy version of Peking, China in legendary times. The princess Turandot (soprano) is a cold, but beautiful woman destined to wed the royal suitor who can correctly answer the three riddles she asks him, by decree of a sacred oath. Thus far all have failed, for which the punishment is beheading. In Act I the Prince of Persia is being beheaded and a crowd has gathered to plead for mercy. Timur (bass), blind and aging, the fallen king of Tartar, and his faithful servant Liu (soprano), come across the Unknown Prince, the Calaf (tenor), who is revealed as Timur's son, thought to be killed in battle. As Turandot appears, the Prince instantly falls in love and decides to try his luck. Despite the assertions of Timur, Liu, and the Princess's three ministers Ping (baritone), Pang (tenor), and Pong (tenor), the Prince calls for Turandot and strikes the gong, signaling that he has stepped up as the new suitor.

In Act II Ping, Pang, and Pong discuss the current circumstances in Peking, mainly the increasingly frequent beheadings, and find each other reminiscing and longing for home. The Prince prepares to face Turandot's trial of riddles and the ancient Emperor, Turandot's father, tries to discourage him from the task. Turandot emerges, claiming that none shall possess her for she must avenge her ancestress, murdered by the Tartars long ago. The Prince successfully answers all three riddles and Turandot, defeated, begs her father to reconsider. The Emperor

states the oath must be fulfilled. The Prince wants Turandot’s love and will not take her by force, so offers to release her, should she ascertain his name before dawn.

Act III begins in restlessness. In Peking, no one sleeps, for the Princess has ordered that the name of the Prince be found before sunrise, otherwise “heads will roll” (Weaver and Puccini 411). The three ministers attempt to bribe the Prince with women, wealth, and worth, but he refuses. Turandot sends for Timur and Liu and orders Liu to be tortured. As she finds herself waning, Liu pulls a dagger and kills herself. All but Turandot and the Prince follow her body off. The Prince claims that love will melt Turandot’s icy heart, and they kiss. Turandot confesses her weakness, she indeed loves him, and the Prince reveals himself as Calaf and the son of Timur. The crowd gathers in anticipation of the fate of Turandot and the Prince. Turandot reveals that she does not know his name, but defeated, professes, “His name...is love!” The opera concludes in celebration with a reprise of arguably the most romantic aria of all time, “Nessun dorma”.

In his letters to Adami, Puccini indicated that the influence for the music would be taken from Chinese folk melodies (Budden 426). He visited Baron Fassini Camossi, a former diplomat in China, who had a music box that played Chinese melodies. Puccini used three of the melodies, including an ancient Imperial Hymn (Example 1). This pentatonic melody was translated into one theme that is used throughout the opera (Example 2), and, when sung by the children’s chorus, represents the innocent side of Turandot (Girardi 452).

#### Example 1 (Carner 52)

Beginning of the “Song in Honor of the Emperor” (Chinese Imperial Hymn).  
cf. “Turandot,” Act I, 19.



## Example 2 (Puccini “Score” 8)

Ov - er the hills, far a - way, doth the -  
 Là. su - i mon - ti del - l'est, la ci -

stork - sing her lay, But no spring has  
 - co - gna can - tò, Ma l'a - pril non -

flow - er'd yet, and the snow lies cold and wet  
 ri flo - ri, ma la ne - ve non sge - lò

He also took four other melodies from von Alast's *Chinese Music* (1884), sent to him by Carlo Clausetti (Budden 427). "But what drove him most forcefully towards exotic material was its strange world of unfamiliar sounds, which exercised an irresistible charm upon his keen, over-refined sense of hearing" (Carner 47-48). Though Puccini used exotic material for his themes, what made his work so successful was his ability to relate those themes to the musical style of the time period and place in which he was composing. "An exotic melody is set harmonically and is "tucked" into the Western chordal system. In applying this method Puccini brings to full bloom his superior skill as an ingenious harmonist" (Carner 55).

Though Franco Alfano was asked to finish Puccini's opera, he took many liberties with the thirty-six pages of musical sketches Puccini left behind. Even Alfano's ending was cut and altered to the liking of Arturo Toscanini, who conducted the premiere. According to Barry Brenesal,

"...It is not his [Alfano's] conclusion that is performed in productions of *Turandot* but only what the premiere conductor Arturo Toscanini included from it... Puccini had

worked for nine months on the following concluding duet and at his death had left behind a whole ream of sketches... Alfano had to reconstruct...according to his best assessment...and with his imagination and magnifying glass”.

About a decade ago Luciano Berio, one of Italy’s leading contemporary composers, thought he could better decipher and transcribe the sketches Puccini left behind. With a sanction from the Puccini estate, Berio was allowed to produce and stage his ending to *Turandot*. Both opera buffs and critics have been unhappy with Alfano’s ending because it does not quite fit with the melancholy atmosphere created by Liu’s death. Berio’s approach better reflects the anger of Turandot in her quest to avenge her ancestor and the compromise of Liu’s life in exchange for the Prince’s happiness (Inverne).

Berio begins his ending with Liu’s aria in the third act, which is more or less the same as Alfano’s interpretation. Discrepancies begin at marker 35 in Act III, scene 1, which corresponds with 7:28 in the Berio recording. Berio inserts a mysterious interlude that builds up to the Prince’s anger. Here, Alfano’s orchestration had a fuller sound in the strings, but Berio’s bass line is not as pronounced and the notes on beat two are accented more heavily. The duet between the Prince and Turandot is similar to Alfano’s interpretation and at marker 38, 10:10, both composers use material from Turandot’s aria “In questa reggia”, though the exclamations from the Prince are not found in Berio’s ending. One would wonder if those exclamations were written in the libretto. At 10:40, Berio writes a very odd suspension through the first two beats that is not found in Alfano’s ending. Again, one would wonder if it were a mistake in Puccini’s notes or in Alfano’s interpretation. The next two minutes are quite strange. A passionate kiss is written in the score, but Alfano leaves four measures, whereas Berio’s interlude is a dramatic whirlwind of music with some thematic material (Example 3) thrown in at 12:30.



## Example 3 (Puccini “Score” 8)

The image displays four pages of musical notation for Example 3. The top-left page is marked 'Largo sost.to' with a tempo of 58 and a dynamic of 'ff'. It features a piano part with a melodic line in the right hand and a more rhythmic accompaniment in the left hand. The top-right page continues the piano part with a melodic line in the right hand and a more rhythmic accompaniment in the left hand. The bottom-left page continues the piano part with a melodic line in the right hand and a more rhythmic accompaniment in the left hand. The bottom-right page is marked 'affrett. rall.' and features a piano part with a melodic line in the right hand and a more rhythmic accompaniment in the left hand.

At 13:28, the music matches up again with marker 39. At marker 40, the line sung by the women’s chorus continues in Berio’s ending, whereas Alfano transfers the line to a woodwind instrument. At 15:10, Berio writes a dramatic outburst for the Prince with percussion and brass, but Alfano’s interpretation is much smaller, as if the Prince is speaking to himself. As the Prince continues, the melody differs from Alfano’s ending and some of Turandot’s lines are missing. At 15:50, Turandot’s aria “Del primo pianto” begins like Alfano’s but quickly moves in another direction. It would appear that Puccini had not clearly mapped out her aria, and any composer would be challenged to interpret his scribbles. At 16:36, things get back on track between the two interpretations, if only for a few measures. At 17:12, Turandot sings “So il tuo nome!” (I know thy name!) and Berio takes a theme the Prince sang in Act II, almost as if she is mocking him (Example 4).

## Example 4 (Puccini “Score” 245)

THE PRINCE  
IL PRINCIPE

Yes! Born a - gain! 'Tis born a - gain ex - ult - ing and  
Si! Ri - na - sce! Ri - na - sce i - ne - sul - tan - za mi

THE PRINCE  
IL PRINCIPE

car - ries me a - way, Tur - an - dot: for 'tis Hope!  
nor - ta via con se, Tu - ran - dot, la Spe - ranza!

“La mia Gloria” is very different between the two composers and then at 18:20 Berio lines up with Alfano’s ending, marker 50. There is some added percussion and Berio echoes the treble voices with the bass line. At 18:36, there is a quiet, suspenseful pause in the music, and then a triumphant theme of the opera returns (18:45). Berio precedes the choral entrance with an instrumental of what is then sung. A variation of the theme from Example 3 comes in at 19:36, and at 19:45 the theme that was missing from marker 51 pg. 379 comes in. At 20:10, the chorus repeats again, much softer. Berio uses the Prince’s line, Example 4, again at 20:34 as Turandot exclaims, “I know the same of the stranger! And his name is love!”

Berio adds quite a few instrumental interludes to his ending. If Puccini had intended to have those interludes, I imagine he would have a dramatic purpose for them. However, the most obvious discrepancy between the two endings is Alfano’s triumphant and declamatory reprise of “Nessun Dorma” by the entire cast, while Berio’s ending is a subtle instrumental recap of the thematic material. One may argue that Berio’s interpretation holds more ambiguity in such a reserved ending, which better suits Puccini’s dislike for happy endings. The tonality of Berio’s final two minutes better illustrates Puccini’s idea of compromise for love, in this case Liu’s death, which represents the compromise for Turandot’s love. Alfano’s ending certainly glorifies

the idea of true love with such a dramatic restatement of the prince's aria. In Berio's ending at 20:08, he brings in the theme from Example 3 yet again. Interestingly enough, Berio quotes from "Nessun Dorma" at 21:30, leaving me to believe that there is validity in Alfano's reprise of the aria.

Honestly, who is to say what Puccini had intended for his final fairy tale? Personally, I believe that both endings work in unique ways. Alfano's lush finale is undoubtedly a crowd pleaser and fit for the hopeless romantics, while Berio's ending better accommodates the needs of music aficionados. Interestingly enough, *Turandot* was banned from China until 1998 because they claimed it portrayed the Chinese culture poorly (Moravcsik). Yet, even now the Chinese have let Puccini's legendary princess into their world. There is truly something captivating about Puccini's work, and it is impossible to tell just how he would have ended *Turandot*. Even if Puccini had lived to finish his work, there would still be critics digging for something to pass judgment on. Alfano did his best with what he was given, and Berio brought a new twist to the unfinished project. Regardless of the uncertainty in *Turandot's* ending, I find Puccini's writing to be some of the most beautiful, passionate music I have come across in my 22 years.

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