

The Social Relevance of Puccini's *Turandot*¹

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Puccini certainly considered himself a vigorously contemporary artist. Each of his mature works seems aggressively modern; Sardou's melodramtic verismo in *Tosca*, David Belasco's sentimental orientalism in *Butterfly*, even the new fashion for the Western in the *Fanciulla del West*, also derived from Belasco. So it is a little surprising to find him going to the eighteenth-century writer Carlo Gozzi for his last opera, and to record that Gozzi's *Turandot* is itself based on a very ancient Chinese story.

Yet in some ways, Puccini's last masterpiece is the most contemporary of all his works. It is here that the figure of the modern Woman is most strongly drawn, in all her contemporary relevance. In spite of the fact that the Chinese princess is a male topos, starting with Carlo Gozzi's play *Turandot* in 1761, through the libretto of Renato Simoni and Giuseppe Adami, and ending up with Puccini's musical design in 1924, and in spite of being set within a legendary structure, she is a manifestation of racial, sexual and social Otherness at the turn of the century.

Though set in a legendary structure, princess *Turandot* symbolizes the revolutionary figure who appeared since the 1870s in creative works as an initiator and exploiter of her personal freedom. In the rhetoric of opera women of this sort, unlike previous heroines, were not stricken by one of those mysterious illnesses that

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“seemed to afflict powerful sopranos” (Smart 1995, p. 174). On the contrary, they were healthy and had controlling power over the people around them, and especially over the operatic language. To mention only a few of these protagonists; Bizet’s Andalusian gypsy Carmen, Strauss’s princess Salome and Electra, Saint-Saëns’s priestess Dalila, Massenet’s Herodiade, Rachmaninov’s gypsy Zemphira (in *Aleco*), Schostakovich’s Katerina Ismaylova and Berg’s Lulu.

Paradoxically though, these healthy and free minded women did not actually speak for themselves, but were spoken for by their male creators. Yet, as we all know, literary texts are not merely the products of their writers; texts are written by society, by the sublimated influence of mythology and the unconscious. Therefore, in the male narratives of the century, women were writing a new text with pens that were held in male hands.

In terms of feminist thought, this idea devolves upon a central issue, that is presented by Carolyn Abbate as a question which concerns opera criticism: “can we identify what might be called a musical *écriture féminine* as a female authorial voice that speaks through a musical work written by a male composer?” (Abbate 1993, p. 229). In other words, is it possible to interpret women’s representations in operas that were written by men, as women’s writings in which a positive representation of the feminine appears, and in which women’s various experiences form the poetic texts.

Écriture féminine is a category of female writing practiced by French feminists like Helene Cixous and Luce Irigaray. This sort of text mediates between the female identity and language; it is identified, not by a historical interpretation but by psychoanalysis that is conceived in feminist terms, on one hand, and by structural linguistics on the other (Buikema 1993, p. 9)(Example 1). As such it tries to find

positive terms in which women's dreams, their wishes and traumas form the source of their fictional work (Example 2).

Yet, manifesting dreams, wishes and traumas is not enough to create an autonomous poetic text. According to Julia Kristeva's literary theory, every narrative evokes two levels of text production, reflecting a dynamic process of signification based on two phases of human experience. The first level, *geno-text*, is the deeper layer of the narrative and is connected directly with the unconscious (Dame 1998, p. 237); it is thus related to drives and repression (*ibid.* loc.). It has its roots in the "mother/child bond" of every human being; the very first experiences and memories of sounds and rhythms which, eventually, lead to sign and syntax (Kristeva 1979/1986, p. 472).

On the intellectual surface of the *geno-text* we find the *pheno-text*; "a final text aimed at communication" (Dame 1998, p. 237). This level reflects the paternal zone, the symbolic, based on syntactic order and logical connection within the representation of emotion and expression. Once these phases (the semiotic and the symbolic) are joined together, an articulated poetic narrative is produced, which gives its user total control over its rules and metaphors. The meeting point of both phases is the moment of 'jouissance' (Kristeva 1977/1980, pp. 151, 154); when the semiotic and symbolic device are united in the speaking subject and consequently the highest degree of stylistic effort is reached (Example 3).

In terms of temporality, the semiotic phase embodies female subjectivity as repetition and eternity; monumental and cyclical time. Once this is established, the individual is ready to enter symbolic paternal linearity and logical connections of sign and syntax (Kristeva 1979/1986, p. 472; 1992, p. 129); she becomes subjectively capable of taking on the law and rules of an articulated language which will,

eventually, produce a complete text “aimed at communication” (Dame 1998, p. 237). Time here, then, becomes linear and historical; the time of departure, progression and arrival.

In this paper I will try to show that Turandot’s *aria di sortita* “In questa reggia” (act 2, scene 2), though conceived by a male composer and his two male librettists, can be interpreted as *écriture féminine*; a new sort of musical writing in which the trauma of sexual violence is expressed. I will argue that the young princess takes upon herself the basic rules of a female author who wants to gain access to repressed femininity, by sharing the individual story of her ancestress’s rape, with the audience. By this act she creates a new experiential vocabulary of Otherness, which involves not only “inductive thinking” but also “hypothetical thinking” (Von der Fehr, forthcoming). In other words, by telling the story of abuse through the female voice this specific aria contains not merely the interpretation of what has happened, but creates new perspectives of thinking, concerning similar experiences of women in the future.

Mediating between female identity and language, “In questa” creates new vocabularies, textual and musical, which appear as two temporalities that are reconciled as the aria is accomplished; the symbolic that is preceded by the semiotic. The reconciliation of both, at the end of the aria, brings the Chinese princess to the point of ‘jouissance’ at which a dynamic process of signification is conceived. Turandot, then, becomes subjectively capable of establishing a fully developed language that is articulated, poetic, and autonomous. As a result she is given total control over its syntactic rules and its metaphors.

The dynamic process of signification, that is conceived in this specific aria, is intensified in the riddle scene which follows. After presenting the cause of her

demonism and its effect on her as a woman, Turandot displays her performance tendencies by creating a verbal maze that is directed to the unknown prince and is presented to the audience of Peking. Here, cyclical temporality as well as sign, syntax and the use of metaphors reach the highest point of her poetic language. Apparently her ability to create a complex text of this kind lies in her previous aria “In questa Reggia”.

In terms of *écriture féminine*, the central issue of “In questa” is not the Chinese princess’s caprice and her engagement with serial killing, but her resistance towards sexual violence that is displayed in public. This leads to a positive representation of Woman in culture; thus, Turandot is not just another femme fatale, a male projection that destroys men because of her obsessive intentions. She becomes the voice of all women, who are keen of their personal and physical freedom and consequently creates a new vocabulary concerning gender roles in general and female abuse in particular.

“In questa”, as I have mentioned before, becomes a model of experiential vocabulary of Otherness, which mediates between Woman’s identity and language. As such it involves “inductive thinking” and “hypothetical thinking” (Von der Fehr 1998); not merely a private interpretation of one woman and what has happened to her archaic mother, but a manifest which contains new perspectives of thinking about similar experiences of women in the future.

Clearly every woman can identify with the experience of sexual violence, even if she did not go through it physically. Apparently this sort of trauma is somehow included in women’s data whether as a personal experience or as an audible reality, which results from just having heard of it (Von der Fehr 1998). “What does not happen is also an experience”, says Drude Von der Fehr: “experience is not only the

cognition of what we have learned about ourselves as gender...it is also the multitude of possibilities of what could have been actualized if the circumstances had been different” (ibid. loc.).

The question that follows is how are all these expressed in music: how is the experience of sexual violence conveyed in music, and how does one imagine resistance to this act, with all the repression and trauma that accompanies it, in musical terms? It seems that the answer to these questions is quite complex, since there has not been a fully developed critical method concerning this sort of subjects in musicology. Yet, Carolyn Abbate’s theory concerning the “female authorial voice” in opera and Julia Kristeva’s literary theory of woman’s temporality have helped me formulate a conception which presents a different view of the New Woman’s voice.

In feminist criticism terms, then, “In questa” becomes a representation of female writing in which both temporalities, historical and monumental, linear and cyclical, are reconciled; these establish a complete musical text that is produced by a woman who becomes the vocal authority in this opera. Thus, the Chinese princess is not merely another passive operatic heroine, whose music is imposed on her by a male creator; she becomes the central voice of the opera, an “audible reality”, in Abbate’s terms, who creates sound and is aware of what she is doing (Abbate 1993, p. 255).

In purely musical terms, then, this aria is not merely another operatic monologue produced by a female protagonist, but a perfect musical performance in which a new musical language is formulated. It encapsulates a complete poetic language that contains both the semiotic and the symbolic; this coincides with the evocation of women’s voice within a direct discourse with the audience and the other protagonists on stage.

In the first section of “In questa” Turandot is totally influenced by maternal drives which reflect the semiotic phase of her development. Textually her unconscious is revealed; her repressed feelings that result from the archaic memory of the trauma of female abuse. Musically it is set in monumental time that is represented by key symbolism, and in the rondo-like harmony that conveys cyclical time. Once the semiotic is displayed the symbolic level is prepared; the princess is ready to progress towards the paternal, where the communicative act of expression and the logical connections of sign and syntax take over. In musical terms it is manifested by harmonic progression, which establishes the linearity of historical time. By the time the aria is accomplished both temporalities are reconciled and ‘jouissance’ is achieved; the pleasure and bliss of a complete text.

A thousand, thousand years ago, the princess tells us in the first section of the aria, in the same palace where she herself lives, a desperate cry resounded; the cry of princess Lou-ling, who reigned in pure joy, until the kingdom was defeated. It was then when on a dark night she was silenced by a man, who dragged her away, and eventually ravished and murdered her (see Example 4, lines 10-16). Here, Turandot confronts the images of the maternal, that do not “involve the real mother but the ‘archaic’ mother who is buried under the patriarchal culture” (Bradiotti 1993, p. 175). She narrates the story of her ravished ancestress, Lou-ling, while revealing her own repressed femininity, which has its roots in the archaic memory of rape.

Though it happened in the very far past this young woman is subconsciously so effected by the traumatic memory, that for a moment we wonder whether she is talking about herself or of her archaic mother. One of the signs of this symbiosis is her referring to the story of abuse in the third person; she presents a monologue that treats the ancestress as *she*. This kind of narration, which evokes her vocal persona as

partly narrator, partly outsider, which according to Kristeva's theory is essentially "external to the act of discursive communication" (Kristeva 1977/1980, p. 279). Apparently expressing a motherly love, she is really giving voice to her own narcissism.

The third person relationship changes into an I-You reference in the second section of the aria (see Example 4, lines 17-28). Here the young princess starts to move towards what Braidotti defines as the "liberation of the female libido" (Braidotti 1993, p. 175), by connecting *her own* body to a new poetic language. In so doing a more characteristically communicative language sets in; the language of body and gesture. The third person gives way to her own direct voice as she becomes a theatrical persona who, in feminist criticism terms, supports the logic of her speech (Schermbeek 1993, p. 89).

She apostrophizes the princes who come from all over the world and says: "I have my revenge against you!" meaning, against the desecration of Woman, the purity, the cry of the abused and her horrible death. And we all know that her revenge takes place within language, the metaphoric language of the riddles, which she presents to each and every one of them once the aria is accomplished. By addressing them directly and revealing the cause of her demonism and the effect it has on her as a woman the young princess becomes an "audible reality" (Abbate 1993, p. 255), who supports the logic of her speech by her operatic body (*ibid.loc.*). Furthermore, she approaches the essence of *écriture féminine* by presenting herself not as a demon woman as viewed by her male creators, but as a positive valued Other who has access to cultural order.

The first part of the aria is controlled by indirect discourse. The princess, who is captured in the painful past, presents a monologue in which she narrates the story of

abuse that marks her existence. The non-communicative discourse is interrupted towards the end of this section, when she addresses the unknown prince directly, as if holding him responsible for sexual violence: “E Lou-ling, la mia ava, tracinata/Da un uomo come te, come te, straniero” (and my ancestress, Lou-ling, was dragged away, by a man like *you*, like *you* stranger)(see Example 4, lines 13-14). Her short direct approach is a preparation for the next section of the aria in which her solipsistic discourse is replaced by a communicative language.

Yet, in her first part Turandot is still in the semiotic phase which states static and reversible temporality. This is represented in the music by the repetitive nature of a rondo-like harmony; D major-f# minor-d minor-f# minor (Example 5), and by the special signification of the opening key; D major. Both tonalities mark the female subjectivity that is still influenced by the mother/child bond.

The D major is associated, in the opera as a whole, and in this aria in particular, with Moon Woman; the spinner of time and destiny who weaves human lives. The moon, according to lunar mythology, is “the most chaste of all the fiery heavenly bodies” (Frye 1957/1971, p. 152), which can not be translated into masculine terms; it signifies Woman as spinner of Time and Destiny, says Mircea Eliade (Eliade 1958, pp. 45-46). In some ancient cultures, according to this writer, it is connected to the nocturnal work of women, which connects mystically between female initiations, spinning, and sexuality; first menstruation, marriage, first pregnancy (ibid. loc). This sort of work has to be performed almost in secrecy in order to preserve its special intimacy that should not be invaded by a man’s eye; thus, it is performed in the night, far from the sun which symbolizes Man (ibid. pp. 29, 42, 45).

This recalls another femme fatale, whose actions are connected to the moon; Richard Strauss's Salome. The moon, in Strauss’s opera, plays a leading

role, just like another character; it appears in the opening stage directions as one of the main significations of the princess and the strange atmosphere that surrounds her. As in *Turandot*, this fiery force is connected not only to Salome's fatal features, but also to her chastity.

The rise of the moon in *Turandot*, however, marks the beginning of the deadly ceremony, executed by the icy princess; it is presented in D major, a key that becomes throughout the opera the mutual musical symbol of the fiery body and the demon princess's executions. One of the first typical examples to this tonal connection, is portrayed in the first act when the D major appears as the people of Peking are awaiting the rise of the moon which will execution of the Persian prince (Example 6).

In terms of *écriture féminine* the D major, which appears as the first key of "In questa" (Example 7), hints at *Turandot*'s initiatory structure. It is associated with monumental time which connects between the archaic past and the young princess's present and future. In other words, this tonality does not signify merely *Turandot*'s executions of her suitors, but becomes the symbol of a strong bond between women; the archaic princess Lou-ling and the young princess who is motivated by the memory of abuse and takes revenge in the name of the silenced woman. With this act *Turandot* actually expresses her wish to liberate her "female libido" (Bradioti 1993, p. 175) by portraying femininity as a positive value that can be represented in culture.

The next stanza, in F sharp minor (see Example 8, and Example 4, lines 17-21), reassures us that *Turandot*'s cruelty developed as part of the trauma of female abuse. This tonality represents throughout the opera the cruelty of the Chinese crowd in general (as it appears in the executioner's assistants chorus in act one), and with the "princess taking pleasure in pain" (Ashbrook 1991, p. 101) in particular. In the

opening bars of the opera (see Example 9, bars 1-3) it appears as a chord that concludes Turandot's main motive in the opera which signifies her demonism and associates her with the executioner.

The F sharp minor that concludes this section serves actually as both departure from the semiotic phase of section A of the aria and the opening tonality of the second phase, the symbolic, of section B (see Example 4). The cyclicity of the harmony of the first section is supported also by a movement of parallel sevenths in the violins and violas (in eight notes), while the cellos move back and forth from dominant to tonic (in half notes)(Example 10). The "declamatory ballad style" (Carner 1958, p. 25) in the vocal line, which in the rhetoric of opera usually signifies dramatic progressiveness, is clearly non-progressive here.

In other words, although the musical elements are formulated in the ordinary sense of meter, rhythm and succession, the music of this first part of the aria states static and reversible time as coined by Monelle (Monelle, forthcoming); when the "speaking subject is engendered as belonging to both the semiotic and the symbolic device, and that accounts for its eventual split nature" (Kristéva 1977/1980, pp. 7, 151, 154). It is as if to state that the mythical memory of the past reigns not only over the present of the young princess, but may also threaten her.

Yet, in spite of the threat of the past, the young princess moves on towards the second section of the aria, in which the symbolic sets in, manifesting progressive temporality. Here, a more communicative discourse is conveyed; the princess reveals the effect of sexual abuse on her as she addresses directly the royal males who come from all over the world to try their luck: "O principi che a lunghe carovane/d'ogni parte del mondo/qui venite a gettar la vostra sorte/io vendico su voi, su voi quella purezza/quel grido e quella morte!" (O princes who in long caravans, from every part

of the world, come to try your fate; I have my revenge against you in the name of that purity, that cry and that death). The direct approach is emphasized as she turns to the unknown prince: “Straniero”, she warns him, “Non tentar la fortuna!/Gli enigmi sono tre, la morte e una!”(Stranger! Don’t tempt fate! The riddles are three, death is one!).

Although this section passes through the keys which are associated with the previous cyclical and monumental temporalities (F sharp minor and D major)- the harmony essentially moves towards the symbolic phase. It is constructed on four main keys, all of them in the *major*, Gb-Eb-F#-Ab, which manifests progressive time (see Example 5, and Example 11a-c). From the F sharp minor which connects the two sections and marks the beginning of the second part of the aria (see Example 4, lines 17-21), the icy princess moves into a wide-ranging Gb major, which is actually an F# major (Example 4, lines 22-25). She swears not to marry ever. But when she addresses Calaf directly and asks him not to risk his luck, she moves into a distant Eb major (see Example 11a and Example 4, line 28), which sounds threatening; “Gli enigmi sono tre”, she says to Calaf, “la morte e una” (the riddles are three, death is one!).

From this point on, modulating sequences follow, and reassure us that we are moving into the symbolic. Calaf accepts the challenge of the icy princess; indeed, he says to her, the riddles are three, but perhaps what you, dear Turandot, perceive as death and darkness can be easily replaced by the opposite pole. Hence “Gli enigmi sono tre [but] una e la vita!” (the riddles are indeed three, but *life* is one!). In order to persuade the princess to perceive things in the opposite way, the unknown prince takes her threatening death sentence and changes the text, rising on to an F# major chord (Example 11b). It is not death but life, which will follow the riddles.

Undoubtedly this modulating rising sequence is a clear break-through of linear time into the previous cyclical time; it takes the aria to its final Ab major (Example 11c), which creates a tritone with the beginning of the aria (which started in D major). The tritone, in the opera as a whole, is Turnandot's demonic signature; but here, unlike the cyclical movement of previous tritones as a harmonic basis, it appears as diachronic. Harmonically, textually and communicatively she can now enter into the entire range of symbolic manifestation, and can pass over into paternal linearity. This, in Kristeva's terms, is the moment of 'jouissance'; when both phases, feminine and masculine, are reconciled and create a new poetic vocabulary for the expression of female abuse.

It is amazing that on the edge of the 21st century, when we are so often confronted with the subject of sexual abuse, the icy princess of ancient China still seems such a contemporary figure. Her new poetic vocabulary, which expresses resistance towards sexual violence, presents Turandot as a contemporary figure that relates between the epistemology of experience and feminist thought. . She becomes the representation of racial and social Otherness in language who creates different norms and categories, which are primarily connected to women's self-representation and to the experience of their subjective identity. By displaying publicly the cause and effect of her destructiveness, the young princess does what some abused women are doing in our times; they tell the world what happened not merely as an act of purification from a traumatic experience, but mostly because they hope that bringing it out in the open will prevent other possible outrages of this sort.

Obviously, revealing the story in public is in itself a process in which the woman moves from her own feelings, through the stage of interpretation of what happened, until she reaches the stage of learning and recognition. Within these stages

she moves from mere reaction to brutal experience, to hypothetical thinking; as such it is not merely a reflection of what has happened but it involves the formation of attitude and activities concerning similar experiences in the future. Once a woman, like Turandot for example, exposes the painful memory of the past, the process of learning and growing up starts. As it expresses her personal truth and her conceptions concerning female abuse, it becomes an aspect of women's Otherness, creating new perspectives of thinking and reacting towards future similar experiences.

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