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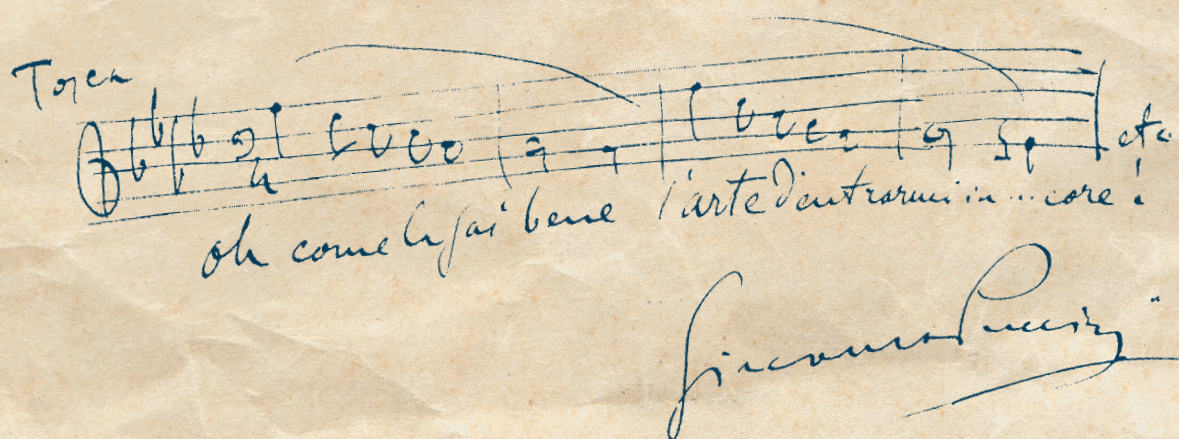


Stony Brook
University

XIII ANNUAL CONFERENCE

PUCCINI FOREVER!

THE MAESTRO'S CENTENNIAL
LEGACY IN THE ARTS



CONFERENCE PROCEEDINGS

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Fabio Binarelli

The American University of Florence

Conference Coordinator

Preface

It is with great pleasure that we present the proceedings of the 13th Annual Conference, Puccini Forever! The Maestro's Centennial Legacy in the Arts. The conference convened in Florence on December 6–7, 2024. Organized through the collaboration of Stony Brook University and The American University of Florence, the conference brought together scholars, performers, and students to honor the enduring cultural and artistic significance of Giacomo Puccini one hundred years after his passing.

This event was made possible with the support of The American University of Florence and the Center for Italian Studies at Stony Brook University.

The 2024 conference undertook the ambitious task of commemorating the hundredth anniversary of Giacomo Puccini's death. The task was particularly challenging, as the whole of 2024 had already been marked by celebrations throughout the year, and since our conference is usually held in December, my colleague Prof. Sofia Galli and I were aware that we would be among the last to join the initiative. Nevertheless, it was too great an opportunity to miss: celebrating the Maestro through the dissemination of knowledge among our international undergraduate and graduate student community. With this in mind, we began envisioning a bridge between distant yet still connected cultures. It was helpful that Puccini has had—and continues to have posthumously—a privileged relationship with the United States. The idea for the conference was warmly supported by Dr. Andrea Fedi, Director of the Center for Italian Studies at Stony Brook University, our partner in this initiative.

Giacomo Puccini traveled to New York twice, invited by the Metropolitan Opera for the premieres of his works, and could have gone a third time but was unable to. When the Maestro visited the Metropolitan Opera in 1907, he was warmly received by the audience, who repeatedly called him back to the stage in enthusiastic recognition. Three years later, on December 10, 1910, the Metropolitan hosted its first world premiere with *La fanciulla del West*, conducted by Arturo Toscanini, staged under the supervision of David Belasco, and attended by Puccini himself—an event that solidified his international reputation. The premiere of *Il trittico* followed in New York on December 14, 1918, but with transatlantic travel still perilous in the aftermath of the First World War, Puccini was unable to attend the debut of one of his operas for the first time (Morley). The composer's visits to the United States left a lasting impression on him. He expressed his deep gratitude for the enthusiastic reception he received in a 1907 recording, proclaiming, "America forever" (CE Noticias Financieras). Inspired by this heartfelt proclamation, we found the idea for the title of this conference. Vivid and forward-looking, Puccini embraced the technological progress of his time, delighting in innovations from cars to motorboats, and his admiration for America reflected the special connection he had with audiences and institutions there.

On a personal level, Puccini is tied to some very intimate memories. Puccini's operas, through the power of their melodies, have an extraordinary ability to bring forth the deepest emotions. One memory comes from a few years ago, during my university days. I often studied in the Music Room of the National Library—during the conference, one could see the building, particularly that room, through the window, forging a subtle spiritual connection. I was there when I once read an article: exactly one hundred years before the conference, in 1924, Arnold Schoenberg presented *Pierrot Lunaire* here in Florence. Florence a century ago was very different from the Florence

we know today, and the world of Schoenberg was vastly distant from the world of Puccini. Yet, that very year, Puccini made the six-hour car journey from Viareggio to Florence to hear that music, so conceptually and philosophically different from his own compositions. Despite any understandable hesitations, Puccini had words of praise for the Austrian-American maestro, demonstrating exceptional artistic sensitivity and an admirable open-mindedness, even in his final days. As Schoenberg recalled:

I had the honor that Puccini, who was not a connoisseur but someone who knew his craft, even though already ill, made a six-hour journey to hear this piece, and afterward he said very kind things to me; and this was beautiful, even if my music must always have remained unfamiliar to him.
(Schoenberg qtd. in Nicolodi, my translation).

It is with that same spirit of openness—intercultural and interdisciplinary—that we were pleased to welcome our distinguished guests at the thirteenth annual conference, fostering dialogue and exchange in celebration of Puccini’s enduring legacy.

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Sofia Galli

The American University of Florence

Academic Conference Coordinator

Preface

L'ispirazione è un risveglio, una fuga da tutte le facoltà umane, e si manifesta in tutte le grandi conquiste artistiche. Inspiration is an awakening, a flight from all human faculties, and it manifests in all great artistic achievements.¹

(Giacomo Puccini)

Inspiration, perceived as an awakening, serves as the guiding principle for the intellectual exchange you will find within these pages. It is with immense pride and profound gratitude that we present these proceedings, a tangible testament to the scholarly work that defined this conference. Our ambition was to transcend conventional boundaries, viewing Puccini's opera through a multifaceted prism. We invited scholars and students to explore his harmonies, dramatic structures, and cultural landscapes through lenses that bridged disciplines with intellectual freedom and artistic determination.

In my opening remarks, I drew a parallel between the intricate machinery of a conference and the symphonic complexity of an orchestra. As a viola player, deeply immersed in the world of ensemble music, I understand that a splendid performance is never the work of a single virtuoso, but the culmination of countless dedicated individuals, each playing their part with emotional drive and meticulous care. Our conference was precisely this: a grand orchestral performance, not only of sound, but of ideas, collaboration, and shared purpose.

The scholars who presented their papers lead with their profound knowledge and innovative research. The students, with their fresh perspectives

¹ Translated by Sofia Galli, 2025.

and eagerness to learn, formed the vibrant core of our ensemble, providing a crucial dynamic to the discussions. But like any great orchestra, our success depended equally on the participants behind the scenes: photographers, chefs, technicians, designers. Each individual, whether on stage or behind the curtain, contributed their unique piece to create a harmonious and unforgettable experience, much like the diverse instruments and talents required to bring an opera to life. This conference, and by extension these proceedings, would not have been possible without the tireless dedication of many. My deepest and most sincere gratitude goes to my fellow conference coordinator, Fabio Binarelli. Fabio, a passionate musician himself and an accomplished guitar player, brought not only his exceptional organizational skills but also a great understanding of the artistic spirit that underpins such an endeavor.

The papers collected within these pages represent the fruits of this remarkable collaboration. They offer a rich mosaic of current Puccini scholarship, providing new perspectives, challenging existing interpretations, and opening avenues for future research. From detailed analyses of his compositional techniques to explorations of his operas' social and political contexts, and from examinations of vocal challenges to discussions of his enduring popular appeal, these proceedings capture the breadth and depth of the discussions that animated our conference. It is our sincere hope that this volume will serve as a valuable resource for scholars, students, and opera enthusiasts worldwide, fostering continued engagement with Puccini's legacy. May these pages echo the vibrant spirit of our gathering, and may they inspire others to explore the profound beauty and dramatic power of Giacomo Puccini's timeless music.

Federico Grazzini

Conservatorio di Reggio Emilia e Castelnovo ne' Monti

**Directing for the Stage: Giacomo Puccini—Navigating Drama, Comedy,
and Tragedy in *Turandot*, *Gianni Schicchi*, and *Il Tabarro***

1. Introduction

Giacomo Puccini's music possesses a unique emotional resonance that transcends language, memory, and time. This phenomenon is something I have witnessed firsthand. My grandmother, suffering from Alzheimer's at ninety-three years old, had lost her ability to speak. Yet, the moment Puccini's melodies began to play, she would hum along, her eyes welling with tears. Similarly, during a performance of *La Bohème* at the Royal Opera House, I saw my wife crying at the finale, despite having seen the opera many times before. These moments reveal how Puccini's operas intertwine music and drama in an unparalleled way.

As a stage director, my challenge is to bring this power to life, ensuring that the dramatic potency of Puccini's works is fully realized on stage. Over the last decade, I have directed several of his operas, including *Gianni Schicchi* at the Teatro Regio in Parma (2014), *Turandot* at Opéra de Nice and Toulon (2016), and *Il Tabarro* for the Korean National Opera in Seoul (2017). Each of these works presents distinct directorial challenges due to their differing emotional landscapes: the grand mythos of *Turandot*, the sharp comedy of *Gianni Schicchi*, and the raw tragedy of *Il Tabarro*. Yet, they are all united by Puccini's exploration of love, power, and human vulnerability.

2. Directing *Turandot*: Myth and Spectacle



1

Fig. 1
Turandot,
“Gira la cote,”
- Opéra de
Nice, 2016.
Photograph by
Francesco
Niccolai.

Turandot presents a unique challenge for a director. The opera’s setting—a fantastical vision of ancient China—demands a balance between its grand scale and the intimate emotions of its characters. In our 2016 production, we envisioned the set as an abstract, spiritual fortress, akin to a temple or tomb, inspired by contemporary architecture. This choice reflected the opera’s central thematic conflict between light and darkness, intellect and passion, symbolized through the yin-yang dynamics found in the libretto. One of the major concerns when staging *Turandot* is its representation of Chinese culture. While the opera is deeply inspired by Chinese traditions, it remains a Western interpretation. Rather than attempting an “authentic” recreation, we opted for a symbolic, dreamlike setting that transcends geographical specificity, allowing for a more universal interpretation. Another challenge is the transformation of Turandot herself. She begins as an almost mythical figure, cold and unreachable. Through Calaf’s perseverance, she transitions into a character capable of love. This evolution must be credible without diminishing the opera’s epic scope. Our production reflected this transformation through lighting changes, and a gradual shifting of the stage from darkness to light as Turandot opens herself to love.

2

Fig. 2. Sketch
from *Turandot*
(Berio's finale),
Opéra de Nice,
2016.



Finally, *Turandot* remains unfinished. Directors must choose whether to use Franco Alfano's completion, Luciano Berio's alternative, or to create an entirely new ending. Our production opted for Berio's version, which provides a more nuanced and less triumphalist conclusion. We emphasized Liù's sacrifice as the catalyst for transformation, concluding with an image of her lifeless body bathed in dawn's light—a reminder that true transformation often comes at a cost.

3. Directing *Gianni Schicchi*: Comedy and Precision

In contrast to *Turandot*, *Gianni Schicchi* is a fast-paced, comedic opera. Its humor, however, is layered with social critique, making it essential for the director to maintain a delicate balance between farce and satire. Our production was heavily influenced by Italian cinema, particularly the *Commedia all'italiana* films of the 1960s and 1970s, which blend comedy with biting social commentary.

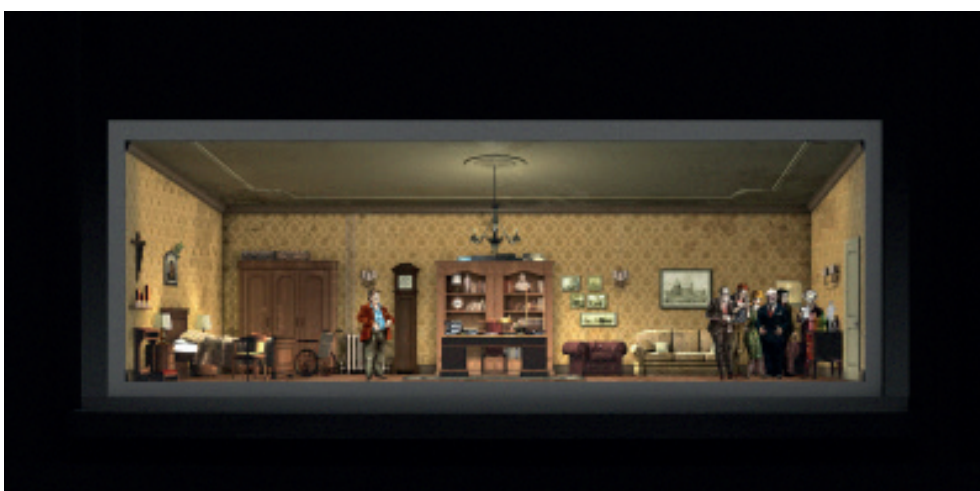


Fig. 3. Sketch from *Gianni Schicchi*, Teatro Regio di Parma, 2014.

The set design recreated a realistic 1960s Florentine apartment, inspired by my own grandmother's home. The connection between *Gianni Schicchi* and Italian family dynamics allowed us to create characters that felt both exaggerated and deeply familiar. The fast rhythm of *Gianni Schicchi* requires impeccable comedic timing. Each character must have a distinct personality, ensuring they do not blend into a chaotic ensemble. At the heart of the opera is the inheritance dispute—a theme that remains timeless. By transposing the setting to a period of social change, we underscored the tension between traditional elites and ambitious newcomers like Schicchi. Despite its humor, *Gianni Schicchi* ultimately carries a moral lesson. Inspired by Dante's *Divine Comedy*, where Schicchi is condemned for his deception, Puccini reimagines him as an antihero. The opera closes with his direct address to the audience, asking for indulgence—a final wink that makes this farcical, yet poignant, story enduringly relevant.

4. Directing *Il Tabarro*: Realism and Tragedy

Returning to tragedy, *Il Tabarro* is one of Puccini's most visceral works. Set among barge workers on the Seine, the opera's confined setting creates an atmosphere of entrapment. Our production emphasized this through a rotating warehouse platform, symbolizing the workers' repetitive, stagnant existence. Unlike the mythic grandeur of *Turandot*, *Il Tabarro* thrives on

subtle emotional tension. Inspired by film noir, we played with shadows and close physical interactions to heighten the sense of secrecy and suppressed desires. Every glance and silence became as meaningful as the sung text,

4



Fig. 4. Sketch
from *Il Tabarro*,
Korea National
Opera, 2017.

culminating in the shocking climax—the brutal murder of Luigi.

In many ways, *Il Tabarro* is a study in oppression—economic, emotional, and psychological. Michele’s act of violence against Giorgetta is not just a crime of passion but a manifestation of the crushing weight of his own despair. In today’s world, where discussions of gender-based violence are increasingly prominent, *Il Tabarro* serves as a chilling reminder of the destructive power of repressed emotions.

5



Fig. 5. *Il
Tabarro*, final
scene, Korea
National
Opera, 2017.

5. Conclusion: The Director's Role in Uniting Puccini's Worlds

Despite their vast differences in tone, setting, and scale, *Turandot*, *Gianni Schicchi*, and *Il Tabarro* share thematic threads that a director must carefully weave together. They explore transformation—whether Turandot's emotional awakening, Schicchi's cunning ascent, or Giorgetta's shattered dreams. Each opera examines power struggles, whether through political might, familial deception, or economic hardship. Above all, they delve into human vulnerability—how love, greed, and despair shape our choices. As a director, my role is to create a bridge between Puccini's world and our contemporary reality. His operas remain deeply relevant because they illuminate universal truths about human nature. Whether through grand spectacle, biting humor, or stark realism, Puccini's music and drama continue to move audiences, reminding us of the complexities of our own emotions and relationships.

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Jonathan Bell

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Revisiting Turandot: Cultural Appropriation, Politics, and Gender in Modern China

1. Introduction

This article aims to outline a reinterpretation of *Turandot* while simultaneously exploring why the opera has been the subject of extensive discourse, identifying its problematic aspects, and examining its enduring relevance in contemporary society. *Turandot* serves as a quintessential example of Edward Said's concept of *Orientalism* (Said)—a constructed vision of the East shaped by European colonial fantasies. However, while acknowledging this framework, reducing *Turandot* solely to an argument about decolonization risks oversimplification. Revisiting *Turandot* is first and foremost a pretext to reconsider China—the country that provides the opera's setting. *Turandot* constitutes today a compelling case study for examining cultural appropriation, political narratives, and gender representations in a modern Chinese context. Similar to Bizet's *Carmen*, the fusion of patriarchal and Orientalist perspectives in a central operatic work prompts us to question how such myths should be considered in contemporary contexts.

We will explore *Turandot* from multiple perspectives, beginning with an investigation into Puccini's decision to center his opera on a murderous Chinese princess and the broader misunderstandings of China that this reflects. From there, it will delve into the opera's gender dynamics, particularly its portrayal of women through the "Dragon Lady" stereotype and the theme of castration as a metaphor for power. The discussion will then expand to the political realm, considering how *Turandot* resonates in the context of contemporary tensions between China and the West, from trade disputes to fears of a new Cold War. Finally, the essay will examine the historical

significance of the 1998 *Turandot* production at the Forbidden City, directed by Zhang Yimou and conducted by Zubin Mehta. This production, with its unique blend of Western opera and Chinese cultural identity, highlights the complex relationship between opera, politics, and historical reinterpretation.

1

Fig. 1. A modern adaptation of *Turandot*, entitled *Turandot in Florence*, is available here: <https://youtu.be/Rqixu5EQ42E>



2. Misunderstanding China: Puccini and his Contemporaries

The portrayal of China in *Turandot* reflects a broader pattern of cultural misunderstanding in Western artistic traditions. As theorists such as Jacques Derrida, Umberto Eco, Marcel Duchamp, and Roland Barthes have argued, art is often shaped by misinterpretation, with meaning emerging not solely from the creator's intent but through the lens of the audience and its cultural context. Puccini's *Turandot* exemplifies this phenomenon, as his depiction of China is less an authentic representation than an exoticized construction shaped by Western perceptions of the "Orient."

This issue is particularly evident in contemporary audience responses to Puccini's operas. One student, after attending a performance of *Madama Butterfly*, remarked in a review that it was "written during a time where people were less educated about other cultures outside of one's own." Similarly, in an essay on *Turandot*, the same student criticized the opera's portrayal of both

race and gender, arguing that “it is the harmful portrayal of women tied with harmful racial stereotypes that gives this opera a distasteful outlook.” Such reactions highlight the extent to which Puccini’s work can be perceived as problematic when viewed through a modern, critical lens.

One of the most glaring examples of this racial stereotyping in *Turandot* is the trio of ministers—Ping, Pang, and Pong. The very names of these characters raise questions about racial caricature and the potential for “yellow-facing” in the opera. Under what circumstances, one might ask, could such names be considered humorous rather than offensive? The issue is not merely one of linguistic playfulness but of broader cultural assumptions and the ways in which Western composers have historically represented the East.

Perhaps most significantly, *Turandot*’s conclusion reinforces a troubling dynamic of domination rather than resolution. The opera’s supposed theme—the triumph of love over hatred—is ultimately realized through the triumph of Calaf over Turandot. His final cry of “*Vincerò!*” (“*I will win!*”) underscores the opera’s gendered power structure, in which Turandot’s defiance is overcome not by genuine emotional transformation but by submission to the male protagonist’s will. This raises the question: does *Turandot* truly offer a resolution of love, or merely a reaffirmation of patriarchal conquest?

This misunderstanding of non-Western cultures is evidently not exclusive to Puccini; it is worthwhile to briefly compare how he and his contemporaries assimilated exotic influences. Composers such as Richard Strauss, Claude Debussy, and George Gershwin each engaged with foreign musical elements in distinct ways, reflecting broader trends in early 20th century composition.

One of the most recognizable Chinese melodies in *Turandot* is *Mò Lì Huā* (*Hǎo yī duǒ měi lì de mò lì huā*), which Puccini integrates into the score. However, when considering his approach in relation to his contemporaries,

a striking contrast emerges. Both Puccini and Gershwin, unlike Strauss and Debussy, are less aligned with modernist academic traditions—particularly those upheld by institutions like the Paris Conservatoire. This raises an interesting pedagogical question: why is the harmonic language of Strauss and Debussy rigorously studied, while that of Puccini and Gershwin remains on the periphery of formal music theory curricula?

Strauss, unsurprisingly, incorporates little that could be considered “exotic” in the sense of cultural borrowing; his German Expressionism is primarily concerned with the breakdown of European tonality rather than with external musical traditions. In contrast, Debussy’s modernism draws on non-Western influences more explicitly. His use of Greek modes, pentatonic scales, and gamelan-inspired sonorities aligns with the framework of Orientalism as described by Edward Said—an aesthetic fascination with an imagined, stylized East rather than an authentic engagement with its musical traditions.

Gershwin presents yet another form of cultural assimilation, one that differs from both Puccini and Debussy. Rather than exoticizing a distant culture, he immerses himself in African American musical traditions. As he famously stated, “*I wrote my own spirituals and folk songs. But they are still folk music—and therefore, being in operatic form, Porgy and Bess becomes a folk opera.*” His approach raises its own set of questions regarding cultural appropriation and authenticity, but unlike Puccini’s treatment of China, Gershwin’s work emerges from an attempt—however problematic—to place himself within the tradition he sought to represent.

3. Gender in Chinese Opera, Turandot, and Under Colonial Rule

Chinese opera has a unique approach to gender representation, exemplified by the tradition of *dan* roles, in which female characters were portrayed by male actors, often highly trained but not castrated. Unlike

eunuchs in the imperial court, who wielded significant political influence, these performers were purely entertainers. Among them, Mei Lanfang became one of the most iconic figures in this tradition, renowned for his refined gestures, delicate vocal techniques, and ability to embody feminine grace on stage.

Given the significance of Chinese opera as a cultural institution, it is intriguing to consider whether it could have influenced *Turandot* in the same way that it later shaped Bertolt Brecht's theatrical theories. Mei Lanfang's performances deeply impressed Brecht when they met in Moscow in 1930, leading him to incorporate elements of Chinese opera into his *Verfremdungseffekt* (alienation effect). However, Puccini never had the opportunity for such an encounter, as he died in 1924, before Mei's international tours. Still, the stylized nature of gender performance in Chinese opera raises fascinating parallels with operatic traditions in the West, where castrati once played a similar role in embodying an idealized, otherworldly femininity.

From a musical perspective, another intriguing point of comparison lies in the relationship between tonal languages and vocal projection. In Mandarin, intonation plays a crucial role in conveying meaning—illustrated by the classic example of *mā, má, mǎ, mà*, where the same syllable takes on different meanings depending on tone. In Peking opera, this tonal sensitivity interacts with the heightened vocal techniques used in performance, shaping how text is delivered musically.

A notable example of this interplay can be found in Mei Lanfang's famous portrayal of a courtier flattering a ruler, echoing the rhetorical elegance often found in diplomatic discourse. As Singaporean diplomat Kishore Mahbubani once remarked, "Diplomacy is the oldest profession in the world." Mei's character praises the general, saying:

將軍 (jiāngjūn) - General / military leader

乃 (nǎi) - is / truly / indeed

盖世 (gàishì) - unmatched / unparalleled

英雄 (yīngxióng) - hero

皇朝 (huángcháo) - imperial dynasty / royal court

棟樑 (dòngliáng) - pillar / mainstay (*figuratively, “pillar of society” or “backbone”*)

Thus, the performance of gender and power in Chinese opera extends beyond theatrical conventions to reflect deeper cultural and linguistic nuances—offering an interesting counterpoint to *Turandot* and its own operatic representations of gender, exoticism, and authority. “*General, indeed an unparalleled hero, and the pillar of the imperial dynasty.*”

2



Fig. 2.
Legendary
Chinese
Opera Actor;
Mei Lanfang;
Available at:
[https://youtu.be/Rqixu5EQ42E?](https://youtu.be/Rqixu5EQ42E?t=8)
t=8

The following section will engage with several uncomfortable questions surrounding intimacy, power, and gender, echoing the feminist assertion that “*the personal is political.*” At the heart of this discussion lies a central question: what does it mean for Puccini to stage a bloodthirsty princess? Catherine Mitchell (Mitchell) argues that the decapitation of

Turandot's suitors in *Turandot* serves as a symbolic enactment of the male castration complex, reflecting the anxieties of both Puccini and the patriarchal society in which he lived. As Mitchell asserts, "*Decapitation in Puccini's Turandot [...] is the site upon which fears of castration on the part of Puccini and the patriarchal society to which he belonged are played out.*" Building on this perspective, she argues that: "decapitation in Puccini's *Turandot* — that is, the beheading of Turandot's suitors — functions as an enactment of the male castration complex. As such, it is the site upon which fears of castration on the part of Puccini and the patriarchal society to which he belonged are played out."

To conclude this discussion on gender, it is useful to turn to the work of anthropologist Ann Laura Stoler, whose scholarship further underscores the entanglement of personal and political dynamics. A leading specialist in European colonialism in Asia and Africa, Stoler explores these intersections in *Carnal Knowledge and Imperial Power: Race and the Intimate in Colonial Rule* (Stoler). Her analysis reveals the ways in which intimate relationships—whether through marriage, sexuality, or domestic arrangements—were deeply embedded within the structures of imperial dominance. In this context, she draws attention to the enduring consequences of colonial power, including the militarization of intimacy and the rise of exploitative systems such as sex tourism in former colonial territories. Stoler's work thus provides a broader theoretical framework for understanding how power operates through gendered and sexualized hierarchies. Just as *Turandot* reflects patriarchal anxieties through the symbolic violence of decapitation, Stoler's research exposes how historical structures of power have shaped, and continue to shape, the regulation of bodies and desires on a global scale.

4. Politics: Historical and Political Context of *Turandot*

Beyond its exploration of gender, *Turandot* is deeply embedded in

a complex political and historical framework. The opera's title originates from the Persian *Turandokht* (meaning “daughter of Turan” in Farsi), drawn from *Haft Peykar* by Nizami, in which King Bahram visits one of his seven wives each night of the week. In this tale, Turandot is the Russian princess, associated with Tuesday and the color red—one of the seven royal consorts depicted in 15th-century Persian miniature paintings. Puccini's decision to transpose this legend to China creates a striking geopolitical triad—Iran, Russia, and China—three nations that remain central to contemporary global politics. This historical layering adds another dimension to *Turandot*, linking its fictionalized world to broader discussions on cultural representation and political power.

3

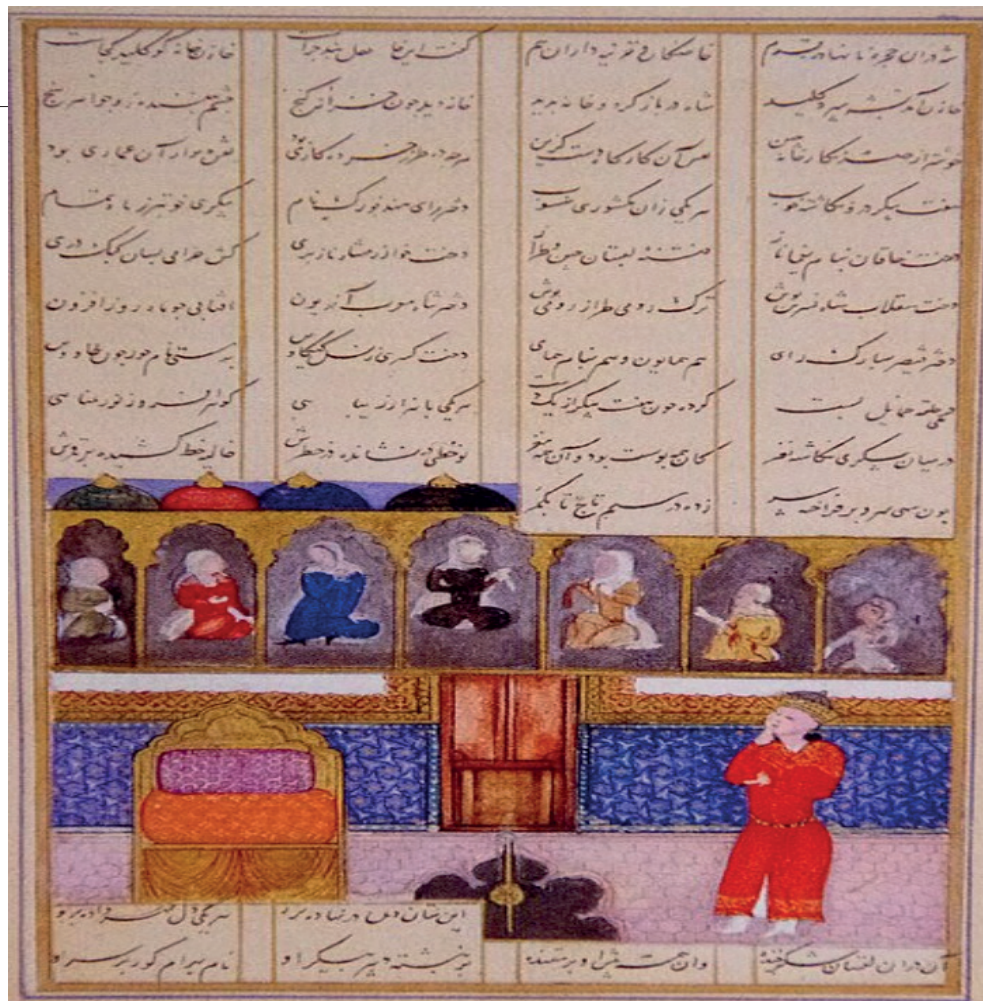


Fig. 3. Bahram
sees the
portraits of the
seven beauties.
Behzad School,
1479.
Nizami
Museum of
Azerbaijani
Literature,
Baku.

The opera epitomizes an Orientalist fantasy, offering an exoticized

vision of the East rather than an attempt at historical accuracy. However, its extraordinary violence raises significant questions. The image of a bloodthirsty princess executing suitors is extreme even within the conventions of opera. What led Puccini to construct such a narrative? More broadly, why so much blood in a portrayal of China set in the 1920s? This fascination with violence may reflect not only Western anxieties about the East, but also China's turbulent historical reality during this period.

The early 20th century marked one of the most difficult chapters in China's history, often referred to as the "Century of Humiliation." When Puccini died in 1924, leaving *Turandot* unfinished, China was struggling with the lasting consequences of the Opium Wars, the Boxer Rebellion, and a series of unequal treaties imposed by Western powers. The fall of the Qing dynasty in 1911 had only exacerbated political instability. Yet, China today is in stark contrast to the nation that inspired *Turandot*. As an emerging global superpower, it directly challenges Western dominance, an evolution that continues to reshape international relations and cultural perceptions.

5. Conclusion: *Turandot* at the Forbidden City (1998)

The historical, political, and gendered complexities explored in *Turandot* provide essential context for understanding the groundbreaking 1998 production at Beijing's Forbidden City, directed by Zhang Yimou and conducted by Zubin Mehta. This performance was not merely a grand operatic spectacle, but a moment of cultural and political significance, marking a pivotal shift in China's engagement with Western artistic traditions. By staging *Turandot* in one of China's most symbolically charged locations, Zhang Yimou reclaimed an opera long critiqued for its Orientalist distortions and transformed it into a dialogue between past and present, East and West. This event reflected China's growing confidence on the global stage, signaling its ability to reinterpret and appropriate Western cultural artifacts on its own terms.

The production's significance lies in its ability to reframe *Turandot* within a distinctly Chinese artistic vision. Zhang Yimou, known for his meticulous attention to historical and aesthetic detail, infused the performance with elements of traditional Chinese theater, architecture, and design, bridging the gap between Puccini's imagined China and its historical reality. The result was an operatic experience that resonated deeply with contemporary Chinese audiences, offering a reinterpretation that both acknowledged *Turandot*'s problematic heritage and asserted a renewed cultural identity. Moreover, the event coincided with China's increasing openness to global cultural exchange, aligning with the nation's economic and political rise.

By revisiting *Turandot* within this broader historical and political context, the 1998 Beijing production becomes a landmark in the opera's evolving reception. What was once an artifact of European Orientalism was, in this staging, transformed into an assertion of Chinese agency over its own cultural representation. This reappropriation underscores the opera's enduring relevance—not as a relic of exoticized fantasy, but as a site of negotiation between history, power, and identity in an ever-changing global landscape.

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**From *Madama Butterfly* to *M. Butterfly*: A Tale of Identity and Power
Between East and West**

1. Introduction

The 19th century, marked by the height of imperialism and orientalist thought, was especially prone to the artistic portrayal of intercontinental encounters. One of the most notable and enduring representations of this East-West love dynamic is *Madama Butterfly* by Giacomo Puccini, an opera that premiered in 1904 and has been abundantly played, recreated, and even subverted since: its romanticized and exploitative aspects, as well as its theatrical inheritance, have been commented on through critical writings as well as creative and artistic recreations. David Henry Hwang's 1988 play *M. Butterfly*, later adapted into a 1993 film by David Cronenberg, encapsulates this reception and subversion desire by reinterpreting and interrogating such a narrative. *M. Butterfly* indeed revisits this famous opera through the lens of the then-emerging field of postcolonial studies. Similarities and mirror effects abound between these two works, both infused with unsettling political, musical, and artistic dynamics. These similarities can be explained, in part, by their comparable origins but also by the contradictions and conflicts inherent to the periods they depict—periods whose flaws they seek to expose.

2. From Chrysanthème to Butterfly

Though both Puccini's opera *Madama Butterfly* and Cronenberg's movie *M. Butterfly* were inspired by true events and based on theatrical material, their stories, structures, and stakes appear comparable, if not similar. Both works stage a tragic love story between a Westerner and an Easterner, and both rely on stereotypical gender power dynamics to narrate this tragic encounter. Both works also operate a blurring effect on Western and Eastern

identities, which facilitated their public reception in Europe and in the United States as well as lightened their socio-political impact, and probably led to a partial misunderstanding of their respective purposes.

The story of *Madama Butterfly* has a complex genealogy, evolving through several iterations before reaching its iconic operatic form. Its origins can be traced back to Pierre Loti's 1887 novel *Madame Chrysanthème*, a semi-autobiographical account of a French naval officer's brief affair with a Japanese woman in Nagasaki. Loti's narrative, steeped in Orientalist tropes, established the template of the submissive Eastern woman and the callous Western man, a dynamic that would resonate through subsequent adaptations. John Luther Long's short story "Madame Butterfly," published in 1898, further developed this narrative, adding a layer of sentimentality and tragedy to the character of Cio-Cio-San. These literary sources provided the foundation for Giacomo Puccini's opera, with a libretto by Giuseppe Giacosa and Luigi Illica. Puccini's musical interpretation cemented the story's place in the Western cultural imagination, solidifying the image of the tragic Butterfly as a symbol of Eastern vulnerability and Western dominance. The opera tells indeed the tragic and well-known story of Cio-Cio-San, a young Japanese geisha who falls in love with B.F. Pinkerton, an American naval officer. Pinkerton marries her in a ceremony he views as temporary, while she sees it as binding for life. The couple expects a son, but Pinkerton soon abandons her and ships off to America. When he eventually returns to Japan with his new American wife to take their son back to his home country, Cio-Cio-San, heartbroken and humiliated, takes her own life.

3. A Tale of Two Mutations

Nearly a century later, David Henry Hwang revisited this narrative, not to adapt it, but to reflect and comment on it. Hwang's play, *M. Butterfly* (1988), takes the familiar story of East-West romance and turns it on its head. Inspired by a real-life incident, Hwang's work became a deconstructive

“*Madama Butterfly*,” as the playwright himself described it. Like Puccini’s opera, *M. Butterfly* is based on true events: a real-life affair between French diplomat Bernard Boursicot and Chinese opera singer Shi Pei Pu, which was revealed as a decades-long deception. Hwang transformed this real-life story into a broader critique of colonial power and the performative nature of gender and identity.

M. Butterfly tells the story of a French diplomat, Gallimard, who believes he is having an affair with a Chinese opera singer named Song Liling, whom he imagines to be a submissive and loving woman. The play further interrogates these fantasies through the dramatic twist where Song is revealed to be a man who has used Gallimard’s position to obtain sensitive private and political information for China’s Communist Party. A rupture in the scheme is achieved by inverting the power dynamics and revealing the constructed and gendered nature of both Eastern and Western identities, but also by twisting the storyline itself. The climax of *M. Butterfly*, where Gallimard assumes the role of the geisha and performs a form of hara-kiri in front of his cellmates, starkly underscores the performative nature of gender highlighted in this play. By embodying the feminine character himself, Gallimard reveals that the geisha, central to both his desires and his delusions, was never a true person but a performance, constructed and maintained by both his fantasies and Song’s calculated acts. This theatrical gesture of self-destruction illustrates how the feminine and the Oriental identity at stake was never authentic or autonomous but rather a fabricated role, one that Gallimard ultimately adopts as his own, tragically blurring the lines between performance and reality. As Song himself explains in the play: “Why, in the Peking Opera, are women’s roles played by men? Because only a man knows how a woman is supposed to act.”

Both *Madama Butterfly* and *M. Butterfly* explore the complex power dynamics inherent in cross-cultural encounters. In Puccini’s opera, the power

imbalance is clear: Pinkerton, the American naval officer, represents the dominant West, while Cio-Cio-San, the young Japanese geisha, embodies the colonized East, though these two countries do not actually rely on a diplomatic or strictly colonial relationship. Pinkerton's casual disregard for Cio-Cio-San's feelings and his ultimate abandonment of her exemplify the exploitative nature of such relationships. *Madama Butterfly* reinforces these power imbalances through its narrative and musical representations. Cio-Cio-San's suffering became indeed a kind of proof of her "authenticity" as the Oriental woman *par excellence*, which the opera invites its Western audience to fetishize.

Hwang's play challenges this traditional power structure. Gallimard's infatuation with the stereotypical image of the submissive Oriental woman blinds him to the reality of Song's true identity and intentions. This delusion becomes a metaphor for the West's misreading of the East, a misreading that reverses the power balance and ultimately leads the West to its own downfall. The deception at the heart of *M. Butterfly* twists the familiar power dynamic, exposing the fragility of Western assumptions and the agency of the East.

4. Language and Diegesis: Constructing the "Other"

Though the role of language in both works has not been commented on, it appears to play a crucial role in constructing the "Other." In *Madama Butterfly*, the linguistic barrier between Pinkerton and Cio-Cio-San should indeed reinforce their cultural divide. Pinkerton's limited understanding of Japanese culture and customs allows him to impose his own interpretations and desires onto Cio-Cio-San, further solidifying his position of power. Cio-Cio-San's imperfect use of English prevents her from understanding the subtleties and double entendres used by Pinkerton. While Song Liling initially uses her knowledge of Western culture and language to seduce Gallimard, she also strategically employs silence and ambiguity to maintain her deception. Her mastery of the English language ends up working to Gallimard's disadvantage.

Both *Madama Butterfly* and *M. Butterfly* invite a deeper examination of their construction and premises, especially through the lens of language and cultural translation. *Madama Butterfly* is a collaboration across cultures—a French novella transformed into an Italian opera about an American in Japan—whereas *M. Butterfly* involves a Chinese American playwright using a French diplomat’s affair with a Chinese spy to challenge orientalist conventions. A Canadian filmmaker later adapted this play into a film, telling this inherently multilingual story in English. These layers prompt questions about how language and music, as tools of narrative and power, shape the connection or disconnection between audiences and characters.

Which language, for instance, are these characters “supposed” to speak? Cio-Cio-San and Pinkerton would presumably communicate in Japanese or English, yet their story unfolds in Italian, a choice that reflects the opera’s European origin and audience. The characters in *Madama Butterfly* appear to exist within a linguistic and cultural space entirely shaped by Western perspectives and fantasies, even as the narrative purports to offer an authentic portrayal of Japan. Similarly, *M. Butterfly* foregrounds language as a colonial tool. Although the story takes place primarily in China and France, the dialogue is in English, emphasizing the global dominance of Western norms.

5. A Deconstruction of Orientalist Fantasies and Gendered Identities

Each country, it seems, can interrogate the colonialism and cultural domination of its neighbors—be it Europe’s scrutiny of America’s global hegemony or America’s reflections on European imperialism. Yet, both works remain hesitant to fully reckon with their own tendencies to impose, consume, and dominate through their artistic production.

Cronenberg’s film adaptation of *M. Butterfly* further amplifies the play’s critique of Orientalist fantasies and gendered identities. Cronenberg’s use of close-ups, framing, and editing intends to trap the viewer in Gallimard’s

perspective, highlighting his delusion and his inability to see Song Liling for who she truly is. In an interview given for a re-editing of the movie in 2009, David Cronenberg explains that the film's final reveal is not merely about Song's gender but about the collapse of Gallimard's entire identity:

The twist in *M. Butterfly* is not the gender revelation. The twist is that Gallimard has been constructing his identity and his entire relationship with Song based on a fantasy he has created. His sense of power and masculinity is entirely built on his own illusions, which come crashing down when the truth about Song is revealed. This is the real tragedy—Gallimard's loss of the self-image he has built for decades.

Cronenberg's depiction of this psychological unraveling highlights how power dynamics shape the way identities are constructed and performed. Both Gallimard and Song appear to be trapped in roles dictated by the colonial and gendered fantasies of the West.

6. From the Stage to the Screen: Naturalism and Exoticism

This likely explains why the depiction of both China and France in *M. Butterfly* feels somewhat “off” to viewers. David Cronenberg himself addressed this, shedding light on the production process, which involved shooting in various locations that doubled for Beijing and Paris. This choice was driven by both practical and artistic considerations, blending cultural authenticity with logistical convenience while maintaining a thematic alignment with Cronenberg's fascination with strangeness, duality, and psychological depth. Cronenberg described the experience of shooting in Beijing as particularly memorable:

The Chinese ... couldn't understand why we wanted to shoot there, because to them, that was the sort of the bad old history of Beijing and represented poverty and mismanagement. Whereas for us, the textures and the sense of history were

fantastic, and photographically it was wonderful.

He also admitted being drawn to the story's unique setting in 1960s Communist China and the world of Peking Opera, where men traditionally perform women's roles. He saw the Peking Opera as a "hothouse version of a very specific, very unique culture." As Cronenberg recalled, when he pitched himself to the producers, they were surprised at his interest. He answered: "This story is about identity, and it's also about an intensely formed cultural group—the Peking Opera. Really, in that way, I thought that *M. Butterfly* was, in fact, not such a stretch for me."

This approach aligns with Cronenberg's signature style, which often explores the uncanny—the familiar made strange—and delves into psychoanalytic themes like identity, transformation, and the unconscious. This explains why the film left out some explanatory and strongly opinionated scenes where Song Liling's character gives away his motivations or elaborates on the power imbalance between East and West. While these aesthetic choices aimed at authenticity remain not entirely free from Orientalist or at least exotic influences, Cronenberg's portrayal of Asia in the film comes across as more grounded and respectful than his depiction of Europe. Indeed, much of what appears as Paris was actually filmed in Budapest, particularly the Paris Opera scenes. As Cronenberg noted, the Hungarian State Opera House, with its vague resemblance to the Paris Opera House and significantly lower costs, served as a practical stand-in.

7. Puccini's Musical Exoticism & Shore's Score: A Nuanced Evolution

In both works, music becomes an important tool to frame the locations where the characters belong and evolve. The score serves as a vehicle for emotional engagement but also as a narrative tool by evoking a lyrical and exotic atmosphere. Instead of directly mimicking Japanese music, and in order to create a sense of the unfamiliar, Puccini integrates what Western audiences of the time perceived as "Eastern" musical elements, such as

pentatonic scales and stylized rhythms. The opening orchestral theme introduces this pentatonic flavor, setting the tone for the opera's Eastern setting, and it is augmented by instrumental choices like bamboo flutes and gongs. It also exemplifies a synthesis of the exotic and the familiar, taking the form of a *fuga*, a highly European—and specifically German—compositional structure.

Madama Butterfly

Introduccion

G. Puccini 1

Allegro

Piano

ff *vigoroso*

Pno.

rubidamente

Pno.

Pno.

Pno.

Fig. 1.
Madama
Butterfly,
Introduccion,
G.Puccini

Howard Shore's use of music in *M. Butterfly* was conceived both in respect to Chinese music, played during the scenes set at the Peking Opera, and in close relationship with Puccini's operatic legacy. Cronenberg himself highlighted the subtlety of Shore's score, noting that it avoided being "clichéd or kitschy" in its references to Puccini's music and Chinese culture. Instead, Shore's music was designed to reflect the "inner life of these complex characters." Shore's incorporation not of Puccini's themes, but of Verdi's *La Forza del Destino*, excludes Puccini's attempts at exoticizing a European score while also introducing an atmosphere of inevitable fate.

2

Fig. 2. Theme
for *M. Butterfly*



3

Fig. 3. Fate
Theme, *La
Forza del
Destino*



Gallimard's wife, Helga, in one of their rare interactions, naively asks her husband about *Madama Butterfly* and its reception in Asia: "Why can't they just see it as a piece of beautiful music?" This question, intended by David Henry Hwang's writing to sound naive, is further ridiculed by David Cronenberg's deliberate theatrical choices, making it feel out of place and futile. While such a mindset was once pervasive, it would be difficult to ask the same question today. However, its very lack of irony underscores an essential truth: the purely formal appreciation of art is inseparable from an understanding of the cultural stakes that music and performance carry. Thus, both *Madama Butterfly* and *M. Butterfly* interrogate the nature of artistic

identity, inviting a reevaluation of cultural assumptions and power structures. What was once presented as beautiful, sentimental, and emotionally engaging in *Madama Butterfly* is transformed in *M. Butterfly* into a medium for cultural deconstruction and artistic renewal.

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Turandot and Empress Lü: Women in the Chinese Imperial Court between Dramatization and Reality

1. Introduction

Chi quel gong percuoterà

Apparire la vedrà,

Bianca al pari della giada,

Fredda come quella spada

È la bella Turandot!¹(Turandot, Act I)²

Giacomo Puccini's posthumously premiered opera, *Turandot*, which premiered at La Scala in Milan in 1926, centers on the eponymous Princess Turandot, the formidable and merciless daughter of Emperor Altoum. The narrative unfolds within the opulent yet perilous setting of imperial Beijing, where the populace congregates in anticipation of the public execution of a foreign prince who has failed to decipher Turandot's three riddles. This spectacle, a recurrent event within the opera's dramatic framework, underscores Turandot's reputation for implacable severity.

The dramatic tension arises from the juxtaposition of the crowd's empathetic pleas for clemency and Turandot's unwavering adherence to her decree: any suitor who fails the riddle challenge forfeits his life. This rigid enforcement of her edict, showcased throughout the first two acts, paints Turandot as a figure of chilling cruelty, devoid of conventional feminine compassion. While *Turandot* is a work of operatic fiction, its depiction of a powerful, ruthless female ruler resonates with certain historical narratives, particularly those found within the Chinese historiographical tradition.

¹ The following is a translation of the Italian text: *Whoever strikes that gong will make her appear; white as jade, cold as that sword, thus the beautiful Turandot stands.*

² All the libretto quotations from *Turandot* are derived from: Adami, G. & Simoni, R. 1920-1924. *Turandot*, music of Puccini, G. premiered in 1926, Milan.

Notably, the figure of Empress Lü (241-180 BC), consort to Emperor Gāo Zǔ (256/247-195 BC), founder of the Western Han dynasty, presents a compelling point of comparative analysis (Vogelsang). From 191 to 180 BC, Empress Lü exercised *de facto* control over the Han Dynasty court, and potentially held *de jure* authority as well: this opinion is supported by the 1968 discovery of a jade seal bearing an inscription identifying her as “Empress” which provides compelling evidence for her formal assumption of imperial power (Vogelsang 119). Consequently, Lü is often regarded as the first empress regent to effectively govern China. The *Shǐjì* (“Records of the Grand Historian”), a historical text authored by Sima Qian, provides a detailed, albeit potentially biased, account of Empress Lü’s reign. Within the *Shǐjì*, Empress Lü is portrayed as a figure of exceptional political acumen, yet also one marked by extreme ruthlessness. Her alleged actions, including the brutal torture and execution of rivals, may have solidified her reputation as a paradigmatic example of female malevolence within the imperial court. This historical representation, while subject to scholarly debate regarding its accuracy and potential misogynistic undertones, provides a tangible historical precedent for the depiction of powerful, cruel women within Chinese historical and cultural narratives. Beyond the specific attribution of cruelty, the broader historical context within Chinese historiography reveals a recurring motif: the depiction of women as agents of political crisis and catalysts for dynastic extinction (Sabattini 15). This narrative trope, deeply ingrained in Former Han political rhetoric, posits that female influence, particularly within the imperial court, constitutes a destabilizing force, capable of undermining the established order and precipitating societal collapse. Thus, these women, often depicted as embodying moral and political transgressions, serve as negative examples, illustrating the catastrophic consequences of rulers’ malfeasance and the subsequent erosion of dynastic legitimacy (Sabattini 15-16). As MacMahon states, “Empress Lü was an early and classic example of

a strong female ruler whose reputation was deeply clouded by her cruelty and interference in imperial succession” (68).

2. Empress Lü and Tradition: Between Praise and Slander

Ungi, arrota, che la lama guizzi,

Sprizzi fuoco e sangue!

Il lavoro mai non langue

Dove regna Turandot!³ (Turandot, Act I)

The ninth chapter of the *Shǐjì* is dedicated to Empress Lü, therein recognized as Empress Dowager, thereby signifying her acquisition of independent authority following the death of Emperor Gaozu (Sabattini 19). Empress Lü’s historical reputation is indelibly stained by accounts of extreme cruelty, most notably her act of vengeance perpetrated against Consort Qi, a favored concubine of Emperor Gaozu. A brief summary of this deed from Sabattini is presented below:

The Empress Dowager cut her [Lady Qi’s] hands and feet, gouged her eyes off, and forced her to drink poison to make her mute. The Empress summoned the Emperor Xiao Hui to show him the lady. At first, the Emperor couldn’t recognise her and cried so much that got ill. The Emperor started drinking and refused to attend the morning audiences (“Donne di potere...” 20).

As Sabattini reports, Sima Qian does not explicitly attribute Empress Lü’s actions to personal jealousy (21). Rather, the narrative emphasizes her strategic objective of securing the succession for her son, Liu Ying. This interpretation highlights Lü’s political motivations, specifically her determination to counteract concubine Qi’s efforts to elevate her own son, Liu Ruyi, to the imperial throne. The actions of Empress Lü must be contextualized within the prevailing political culture of the early Han Dynasty, wherein acts

³ *Grease it, sharpen it, let the blade dance and spark fire and blood! The toil never ends where Turandot reigns!*

of vengeance served as a mechanism for safeguarding familial lineage and consolidating political power. This practice reflects the strategic utilization of retribution as a tool for ensuring dynastic stability and eliminating potential threats to succession (Sabattini 21).

The *Shǐjì* depicts Empress Lü as a strong and resolute figure who played a pivotal role in the establishment of peace during the reign of Emperor Gaozu. Moreover, she appears to be a guarantor of a period of relative stability and tranquility within the Han Dynasty; conversely, Sima Qian characterizes her son, Emperor Hui (Liu Ying), as lacking the requisite strength and decisiveness for effective rulership, portraying him as weak and fragile (Sabattini 23). However, despite the absence of explicit characterization as a usurper within the *Shǐjì*, subsequent historical traditions have portrayed Empress Lü as such. According to Sabattini, this new depiction of the Empress, particularly her portrayal as a disruptive and cruel figure, can be traced to Ban Gu's *Hànshū*, a text composed subsequent to the Xin Dynasty (9-23). This dynasty, retrospectively classified as an interregnum⁴, terminated in social disorders and rebellions, with its founder, Wang Mang, being designated a usurper and inadequate to rule: the consanguinity between Wang Mang and Lü this served as a pivotal factor in her subsequent historical denigration (37-38).

3. Chinese Women and Tradition: Three Dependencies and Four Virtues

Non v'è in Cina, per nostra fortuna,

Donna più che rinneghi l'amor!

[...]

Gloria all'ebbrezza e all'amore che ha vinto

*E alla Cina la pace ridà!*⁵ (Turandot, Act I)

Traditional Chinese mythology posits a patriarchal social structure wherein the absence of a male figure within a family unit is believed to

⁴ The Xin dynasty is considered an interregnum because it divided the Western Han and the Eastern Han dynasties.

⁵ *Fortunately for us, now no woman renounces love anymore in China! Glory to the victorious euphoria and love, which bestow peace upon China!*

precipitate familial and, by extension, broader societal disorder. This disorder manifests as a breakdown of hierarchical authority, specifically characterized by the perceived insubordination of women and children to established moral and social norms, thereby endangering the maintenance of the prevailing socio-political order (Pissin 49). This socio-gender order is articulated by the 2nd century B.C. Confucian philosopher Dong Zhongshu's expression *Three Dependencies and Four Virtues*.⁶ This motto significantly shaped the understanding and regulation of women's social position and interpersonal relationships within the Han Dynasty and subsequent Chinese society, thereby defining women's roles primarily within familial and relational contexts. The *Three Dependencies* delineated the prescribed hierarchical relationships governing a woman's life: obedience to her father in childhood, submission to her husband in marriage, and deference to her sons in case of widowhood (Pissin 50). Concurrently, the *Four Virtues* outlined the idealized behavioral and ethical standards for women, specifically emphasizing: virtuous conduct, appropriate speech, graceful demeanor, and diligent domestic skills (Pissin 50). These virtues collectively aimed to regulate women's actions and contributions within the domestic sphere, reinforcing their roles as wives and mothers.

The Empress was ideally positioned as the embodiment of the ideal wife and mother, serving as a moral epitome for the empire. Her primary duties, including the governance of the inner court and the performance of ritual ceremonies, were not merely domestic but were considered essential contributions to the Emperor's maintenance of proper imperial order: this order was conceived as a microcosm of the universe's order (Guida 72). Therefore, the Empress' adherence to her prescribed roles was vital for the harmonious functioning of both the imperial court and the broader universe (Guida 73).

⁶ 三從四德 *sāncóngsi dé*.

Within the context of Han Dynasty succession practices and the patriarchal structure defined by Confucian principles, a widowed woman's security was often contingent upon her son's attainment of, or continued presence upon, the imperial throne. Empress Lü's decisive actions to secure the succession for her son, and her subsequent elimination of potential rivals, including threats posed by Concubine Qi's son, reflect this dynamic. The possible ascension of Qi's son, not only would have jeopardized Lü's own position and security, but also it would have probably resulted in her murder.

4. Conclusion

Turandot non esiste!

Come tutti quei citrulli, tuoi pari!

L'uomo! Il Dio! Io!... I popoli!...

I sovrani!... [...]

Non esiste che il Tao! (Turandot, Act I)

In concluding this paper, I would like to underscore the complex interplay between historical reality and its representational construction, using two illustrative examples. Firstly, we can consider the operatic figure of Turandot, as conceived by Puccini. While an opera character, Turandot serves as a vehicle to make a parallelism between the fictional depiction of a female ruler and an actual Empress who ruled China for 15 years.

The historical Empress Lü has been subjected to a narrative framing that positions her as a cruel and bloodthirsty woman, inadequate to rule who caused disorders within the Chinese empire. This demonization can be attributed to dynastic and gender biases inherent within the established historical tradition: however, it is important to underline that "regencies of empress dowagers existed in Chinese history as an established institution, which, though occasionally prohibited and criticized, was often resorted to as a measure of emergency and expediency," (Yang 53). Certain actions, notably the execution of Lady Qi and the subsequent withdrawal of Emperor

Hui from courtly duties, were interpreted as destabilizing forces, threatening the established order. This interpretation must be contextualized within the broader framework of Chinese dynastic history. While acts of cruelty and vengeance were not uncommon among male emperors, these were often rationalized as necessary measures to maintain imperial stability. In contrast, Empress Lü's actions were used by the historiographical tradition to transform her into a cautionary figure.

Therefore, our understanding of these women, whether historical or fictional, is contingent upon the *images* we possess. These images, functioning as semiotic signs, offer a partial and often distorted reflection of reality. The historical tradition, in its role as a narrative constructor, has functioned as a *distorting mirror*, transforming Empress Lü into a mythical paradigm of female cruelty. This process of mythologization underscores the importance of critical engagement with historical and cultural narratives, recognizing that representations are not transparent windows into reality but rather constructed artifacts that reflect the biases of their creators and their creators' times. I would like to conclude with a quote from Roland Barthes' 1957 *Mythologies*: "Myth is neither a lie nor a confession: it is an inflexion."

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Storytelling Techniques in Puccini's Vision of America

1. Introduction

At this conference in honor of Giacomo Puccini, I would like to offer a brief analysis of the storytelling techniques that shape his vision of America. This may seem like an ambitious undertaking, but it all begins with a simple question: what did America represent to Giacomo Puccini? While the question itself seems straightforward, the answer is anything but.

If we look at Puccini's operas in which America plays a role – *Manon Lescaut*, *Madama Butterfly*, and *La fanciulla del West* – we can observe that they span a significant period of Puccini's career. They also reflect different stages in his personal and artistic development. When he composed *Manon Lescaut*, he had not yet traveled the world; he was an Italian composer writing for an Italian audience. By the time he composed *La fanciulla del West*, he had been commissioned by the Metropolitan Opera to write a work for an American audience, marking the first time the Met premiered an original opera, rather than a work that had already debuted in Europe. This transition, from the idea of America as a distant and desolate land to the writing of an opera for the main theater in New York, is crucial to understanding Puccini's evolving representation of the New World.

2. Manon Lescaut, The End of Love and Hope in a Far Desert

To begin with *Manon Lescaut*, which premiered in Turin in 1893, it is evident that at this stage, America is not yet fully characterized in Puccini's work. His representation of it is shaped by his source material: *L'Histoire du chevalier des Grieux et de Manon Lescaut* (1731) by A.F. Prévost, better known as Abbé Prévost. In Prévost's novel, America is portrayed as a distant colony – a perception shaped by a European colonialist view and the author's

lack of direct experience with the continent. America appears as a vast, inhospitable desert, a place of exile rather than a land of opportunity (Basini). Puccini deliberately retains this depiction. It is worth mentioning that in Jules Massenet's *Manon* (1884), there is no reference to America: Manon dies in the port of Le Havre, and the American setting is omitted altogether (Niccolai). Puccini, on the other hand, chooses to let the geographical references correspond to the novel ones. However, in the stage designs for the final act, there are no distinct markers of an American landscape, only an undefined desert (Pastorino). America in this context is not a real place but a symbolic space: it represents exile, desolation, and the end of European dreams.

3. *Madama Butterfly*, the West Defiling the Exotic World

The second opera in which America plays a role is *Madama Butterfly*, though the opera is set in Japan. Here, the colonialist gaze I mentioned earlier is strongly evident, not toward America, but toward Japan. Between *Manon Lescaut* and *Madama Butterfly*, Puccini's perspective on America shifts: I believe it is reasonable to think that, rather than being a distant, foreign land, America is now "us," the Western lens through which the audience views the rest of the world.

The opera is based on a chain of adaptations: a short story by John Luther Long (1898), the play *Madame Butterfly: A Tragedy of Japan* by David Belasco, and, indirectly, Pierre Loti's *Madame Chrysanthème* (1887). In *Madama Butterfly*, America is embodied by the characters of Pinkerton and Sharpless. These characters are explicitly identified as Americans: they sing patriotic songs and their status as U.S. citizens is emphasized. However, if we consider their behavior, attitudes, and military uniforms, they could just as easily be French, British, or any other Western nationality (Williams). What is significant here is that America is no longer a distant, unknown land: it is the West itself, imposing its gaze upon Japan. This raises an important question: is the America in *Madama Butterfly* a historically accurate depiction, or is it merely a symbolic construct?

4. La fanciulla del West, Behind a Stereotypical Western

The most fascinating case, in my view, is *La fanciulla del West*. Unlike *Manon Lescaut* and *Madama Butterfly*, this opera was explicitly intended to be an American opera. Commissioned by the Metropolitan Opera, it was based on another play by David Belasco, *The Girl of the Golden West* (1905). However, Puccini's treatment of the subject matter is markedly different from Belasco's: while Belasco's play presents the American West as a moral landscape where virtue is rewarded and vice is punished, Puccini shifts the focus to the emotional and musical possibilities offered by the setting (Fairtile). The harsh Californian landscape becomes a place where hope, love, and despair can coexist; an environment in which characters experience profound emotional truths (Chegai). It is possible to say that this is the exact opposite of *Manon Lescaut*, where the American desert signifies the death of all hope.

One particularly interesting theme in *La fanciulla del West* is homesickness: the miners, cowboys, and other characters frequently express this feeling for the homes they have left behind. Their longing is conveyed through both text and music, reinforcing the sense of displacement and emotional suffering (Iuliano 56). However, the depiction of these American characters seems highly stereotypical (Lockhart 151): the first cast, led by Enrico Caruso and mostly composed of Italian singers, was dressed in exaggerated Western attire, resembling characters from what we might now call a "spaghetti Western" (Polzonetti). This exaggerated portrayal did not resonate with American audiences, who felt that their history and identity were being filtered through a European point of view (Iuliano 60). Why did Puccini adopt such a stereotypical representation? My hypothesis is that these characters were not meant to be "real" Americans, but rather symbolic figures. If we consider the opera's context – an Italian work, in the Italian language, performed by Italian singers, conducted by Arturo Toscanini – it becomes clear that *La fanciulla del West* is not truly an American opera,

but an Italian opera about America (Kobbé 11). There is a telling anecdote about this opera: the Metropolitan Opera initially promoted it as *La fanciulla del West: An American Opera*, but when Puccini saw the posters, he was reportedly offended, insisting that the work was *un'opera italianissima*, “a profoundly Italian opera” (Polzonetti 23). This suggests that Puccini was not attempting to depict America as it truly was, but rather to explore themes of identity, nostalgia, and the immigrant experience.

5. Conclusion

Puccini's evolving representation of America reflects broader themes within his work. In *Manon Lescaut*, America is a vast, barren exile, then in *Madama Butterfly*, it becomes the dominant Western perspective, and finally in *La fanciulla del West*, it is both an exoticized setting and a reflection of Italian identity. Musically, these shifts are also evident: in *Manon Lescaut*, the American desert is conveyed through vast, slow musical phrases that evoke emptiness and despair (Basini 75f.). In *Madama Butterfly*, American and Japanese musical themes collide, reinforcing the opera's cultural contrasts. In *Fanciulla*, this vision is conveyed primarily in the finale: Puccini eliminates Belasco's original final scene, in which Minnie and Johnson attempt to build a new life, and instead ends the opera with the couple riding off into the sunset, while the choir sings the most nostalgic of farewells. It is reasonable to argue that this finale is quintessentially Western, yet, at its core, very Italian.

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The Negative Reception of Giacomo Puccini in America

One hundred years have passed since the death of Giacomo Puccini (Brussels 1924), and his fame is no longer in question. However, even though Puccini's success and influence are now widely recognized and established, it would be a mistake to assume it has always been this way. While the public's appreciation of his music has changed little—mainly, remaining firmly devoted to his works—what has changed is the esteem the composer had among the critics.

On the one hand, he was seen as 'too popular' to receive serious critical attention; on the other, he was reproached for using a musical language considered outdated; or, as Joseph Kerman once described it, his operas were perceived as nothing more than a "shabby little shocker." He thus became the subject of a real "Puccini case," a long-standing labyrinth of negative reception among musicologists and critics, in which the disdain for a supposedly elitist and a supposedly commercial genre often coexisted. Considering this, it is worth revisiting the history of Puccini's negative reception in the United States. The central idea of this paper is that critical tradition can help to understand important aspects of the subject. This is particularly true for Italian opera in general: since it is a form of art deeply tied to public reception, it often creates a communal sense of belonging among enthusiasts, while simultaneously prompting almost radical rejection from others.

This paper takes its starting point in the early twentieth century, specifically around the time of the American premiere of *La fanciulla del West* (1910). Up to that point, Puccini had not yet been widely performed in the United States; indeed, as late as 1897, *The Musical Courier* offered a desolate picture of the state of his works in the United States, writing that

“[...] of Puccini we know nothing except by hearsay.”¹

So, when approaching this analysis, first we must abandon the idea that the artistic value of Puccini’s operas is unchangeable. Instead, we should adopt a historical perspective, recognizing that reception *is* a historical phenomenon—without, however, delegitimizing the negative opinions of those commentators. Different eras express themselves differently about the same works. Rather, what we aim to observe is how attitudes toward Puccini’s operas shift across different periods, seeking evidence of the persistence or re-emergence of certain ideas.

In this sense, Puccini is an interesting case because resistance to his works remained strong even as his fame and respectability grew, in the second half of the twentieth century. Probably, he never fully shed the reputation of being a sentimental composer: the criticism that emerged in the early decades of the twentieth century continued to shape critical opinion for a long time afterward.² Consider the well-known statement by Joseph Kerman, who in *Opera as Drama* (1956) dismissed *Tosca* as a “shabby little shocker,” underscoring his belief that music should provide a true dramatic experience rather than present a ‘silly story’—something Kerman saw in Puccini’s operas. Similar ideas had already been articulated by Henry Edward Krehbiel (*Chapters of Opera*, 1908) and, a few years later, by Paul Rosenfeld (*Musical Portraits: Interpretations of Twenty Modern Composers*, 1920). Both criticized Puccini’s work for choosing an overly immediate and simplistic emotional response from the audience, rather than offering genuine musical and narrative depth (and these criticisms were even harsher when Puccini was compared to a figure as revered as Wagner).

The (undeniable, we must admit) melodramatic and sentimental

1 In ‘Modern Musical Italy’, «The Musical Courtier», 4th of August, 1897; cited in Agugliaro, Siel. “From Grinder to Nipper: Opera, Music Technology and Italian American (Self-) Representation.” *Cambridge Opera Journal* vol. 35, n. 2, 2023. At the time this article was published, none of Puccini’s operas had yet been performed in New York.

2 Wilson, Alexandra. *The Puccini Problem. Opera, Nationalism and Modernity*, Cambridge, 2007, pp. 1-10.

elements of Puccini's operas which audiences so deeply appreciated, failed to find similar support among reviewers. It is clear that the popularity of the composer was viewed negatively by critics, who associated it with a lack of prestige. Even in Mosco Carner's fundamental monograph similar assessments can be found; the musicologist questions the place of a composer who has "never been boring, neither sublime." This resistance persisted even as the composer's esteem grew during the second half of the twentieth century. It seems that he never truly escaped his label as a sentimental composer. His operas (and their popularity) were perceived as a symbol of nascent mass culture: not refined enough, not sufficiently 'sublime,' lacking significant contributions to the operatic genre, and ultimately—like mass culture itself—something to be opposed.

There is some truth in this. Italian musical theatre is a genre that can be seen as both 'high culture' and 'low culture' at the same time. It belongs to high culture because of the literary value of the librettos, but at the same time, it can be viewed as "too popular," as it is something closely related to (mass) consumption and entertainment. This also applies to Puccini's operas. They are often perceived as "too popular," and as a result, the composer himself is accused of excessive simplicity. This idea persisted for decades, from Willa Cather to the (Italian) composer Luciano Berio, who criticized Puccini's excessive sentimentalism; however, despite his reservations, he rewrote the ending of *Turandot* in 2002. Most of the time, these reviewers recognized the modern elements of Puccini's musical language, but criticized the librettos, often seen as fairy tales with Hollywood-style happy endings. American writer Willa Cather (1873–1947) accused Puccini of "artificial emotional manipulation" in his operas. In her letters (*The Selected Letters of Willa Cather*), she expressed her disapproval of the "overly constructed" dramatic approach in his works, which she felt lacked authenticity. She criticized the use of melodramatic effects designed to "move audiences at

all costs;”³ particularly disliking the emphasis on melodramatic elements, which she believed conflicted with the artistic sincerity she admired in other composers.

The peculiar idea of the “manipulation of emotions” can also be found in Virgil Thomson’s writings as well. Thomson—who is well known for his biting style and often severe opinions on various composers—was particularly critical of Puccini. Although he considered Puccini a technically skilled composer, he believed his musical vision was less profound compared to other great composers, like Wagner or Verdi, seeing him as, once again, overly dramatic and superficial. Gertrude Stein, writer and close friend of Thomson (who even used one of her texts as a libretto for the opera *Four Saints in Three Acts*), was also somewhat critical of Puccini. Although she appreciated the typical plot with heroes and heroines suffering their sad fate, she considered his music not particularly modern, too traditional, and conventional.

This leads us to another topic: was Puccini a modern or a traditional composer? Puccini was often accused of lacking modernity—something that, in my opinion, should be set aside. Although his female characters often fit within the late-Romantic framework, rather than the modern female portrayal that was emerging in the Germanic world (with Lulu or Salome, just to name a few), his modernity can be found in another significant element: his choice to compose one-act operas. He composed three one-act operas at a time when this form was considered highly modern: as Abbate and Parker wrote in their history of opera, to choose one-act operas in that time suggests the model of *Salome* and all those other “self-consciously modern works.”⁴

The first significant episode of negative reception for Puccini in the United States is tied to the world première of *La fanciulla del West* at the

3 Cfr. Cather, Willa. Jewell, Andrew. Stout, Janis. *The Selected Letters of Willa Cather*; Knopf Doubleday Publishing Group, 2013.

4 Abbate, Carolyn. Parker, Roger. *A History of Opera. The Last Four Hundred Years*, Penguin Group, 2012, p. 561.

Metropolitan Opera in 1910. As Annie J. Randall and Rosalind Gray Davis have demonstrated, the money invested in the opera's première was such that it could not afford to be anything less than a triumph.⁵ But, while the public generally enjoyed the work, reviewers almost unanimously questioned the authenticity of the supposed "American" atmosphere of the opera. Once the initial excitement died down, critics expressed a distinct sense of disappointment. This Puccini opera was "not Puccinian enough," and his so-called "American opera" did not seem genuinely American—ironically, at the same time, Italian most notorious detractor of Puccini, Fausto Torrefranca, was formulating a diametrically opposite view, accusing the composer of being excessively international.⁶

This American "press failure" offers an excellent opportunity to understand how complex and contradictory American audiences could be. Through rhetorical questions circulating in newspapers—pondering if "Is it American?" or "How could Puccini write an American opera?"—it is evident that critics objected to the opera's lack of any real "American" quality. As one critic wrote:

Is it American? Not in the least. It is an Italian opera based on an American story. Everything American in the opera is Belasco's work. The thematic foundations of the score stem from the plains of Lombardy, not the Wild West; from the slopes of the Maritime Alps, not from the Sierras.⁷

Gustav Kobbé was even harsher, criticizing *La fanciulla del West* for its failure to realistically depict the characters and setting of California:

Puccini's opera is not The Girl of the Golden West. It is, without a doubt, *La fanciulla del West*. Indeed, the

⁵ Randall, Annie J. Gray Davis, Rosalind. *Puccini and the Girl: History and Reception of The Girl of the Golden West*, University of Chicago Press, 2005, pp. 97, 133-6, 147.

⁶ Cfr. Torrefranca, Fausto. *Giacomo Puccini e l'opera internazionale*, Fratelli Bocca, 1912.

⁷ Randall, Annie J. Gray Davis, Rosalind. *Puccini and the Girl*, op. cit. The contribution is written by W. J. Henderson.

composer has written a thoroughly Italian score on an entirely American subject. [...] The fact is that Puccini's gold miners are really Italians in American disguise. [...] It is as though an Italian painter, having portrayed a scene from the Apennines and relabeled it 'California,' was asking us to accept it as an American landscape.⁸

The failure in describing America was an issue of obvious interest as the nation was, in fact, still creating its cultural identity. The only aspect recognized as genuinely American by most critics was a few brief musical references to ragtime. Yet these reviews highlight two key points about the opera—in fact, if certain ideas have persisted without interruption, it is difficult to dismiss them merely as prejudice or misunderstanding. It is evident that there is something intrinsic in his work that sparks conflict for certain audiences. First, Puccini attempted to replicate what he had done in *Madama Butterfly*, where he tried to create a Japanese reality using a variety of melodies and sources that were sometimes stereotypical. Secondly, it seems likely that the primary reference point of *La fanciulla del West* was still Italy, as Puccini drew on the popular image of America that Italians had at the time.

When Puccini portrays the New World, with scenes from harsh life in the United States and the fate of European migrants, he does not create an image so very different from Verdi's portrayal in *Un ballo in maschera* (1858): a world hurt by mistrust, violence, and murder. Such an image continued to align with the view Italians had of America, still considered a land of "frontiers." Puccini used Italian musical language because he was, in fact, appealing to Italian audiences, catering to their fascination with the American myth. In the end, while for America the opera was not American enough, for Italy it wasn't Italian enough. And, as often happens, this hostility endured over time. In 1977, Harold Schonberg wrote an article noting that, a

⁸ *Ibid.*

generation ago, *La fanciulla del West* was not discussed in intellectual music circles. The libretto was considered too embarrassing, and that was enough to kill it.⁹

And so, what value and meaning should we assign to negative opinions and critiques of a canonical composer? What role do these opinions play in the complex history of an artist's reception and legacy? In reception studies, negative reactions are always an important focal point, especially when they come from influential figures themselves.

Obviously, the goal is not to focus on single cases but rather to find coherence and continuity in these judgments. The importance of analyzing negative criticism lies in how it reveals that the critical tradition is not just an arena of consensus but also a domain of contention and reappraisal of artistic values—furthermore, examining negative judgments from the past implicitly underscores the consensus that has since emerged. The matter becomes relevant if we can observe a substantial body of negative judgments and recognize their persistence over time.

Barbara Herrnstein Smith, who also had a great influence on musicology studies, wrote about the negative judgments related to Shakespeare's poems, stating that "value alters when it alteration finds. The texts were the same, but it seems clear that, in some sense, the poems weren't."¹⁰ This is something we can apply to Puccini's case as well: the notes were the same, but in some sense, the music was different.

These initial ideas should not lead us to criticize or dismiss those who have criticized Puccini. Rather, they should prompt us to recognize the pluralistic nature of musical theatre. After all, opera—especially in its late nineteenth-century form—was primarily created to appeal to the public, rather than to satisfy the critics.

⁹ Annie J. Randall, Rosalind Gray Davis, *Puccini and the Girl*, op. cit.

¹⁰ Bracci, Francesco. *Italiani contro l'opera*, Marsilio 2020. The sentence contains an allusion to Shakespeare's Sonnet 116: «Love is not love / Which alters when it alteration finds ».

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A Farrar Version of *Madama Butterfly*?

On February 11, 1907, *Madama Butterfly* by Giacomo Puccini premiered at the New York Metropolitan Opera House; the opera had been already performed in English in the USA by the Henry Savage Grand Opera Company, but this was the US premiere in the original Italian language. Puccini had travelled to New York in January to attend a festival of his operas at the Met that had a huge success; he also attended the *Madama Butterfly* rehearsals and premiere. The iconic Geraldine Farrar as Butterfly/Cio-Cio-San, Enrico Caruso as Pinkerton, Antonio Scotti as Sharpless and Louise Homer as Suzuki were the main singers.

Sometime around 1908 and 1909 the original Metropolitan cast recorded for the Victor label extensive *Madama Butterfly* excerpts. It has been observed (Ashbrook 116) that in recording the second Butterfly solo, *Che tua madre* (Youtube, Farrar), Farrar sings a text not belonging to any published version of the opera. Is there a possible explanation?

Madama Butterfly was published by the Ricordi firm in Milan; the old boss there, Mr. Giulio Ricordi, was a sort of executive producer. He commissioned the opera to Puccini and his libretto writers Illica and Giacosa; at the time hiring fees for the music performance materials (that is to say, scores and orchestra parts) were the main source of income to publishers and authors, so music publishing was the foundation of the opera business. Full (conducting) scores and orchestra parts for hire were, at least initially, handwritten by a team of music copyists; the vocal/piano scores were engraved, printed and sold for professional and general public use.

For the first performance of *Madama Butterfly* at La Scala, Milan, February 17, 1904, a piano score of the opera (Schickling Catalogue 266,

74.E.1), was engraved and put on sale; let us call it the Scala score (IMSLP, 1st version). As that evening was one of the biggest flops in opera history, the following day Ricordi with Puccini, Illica and Giacosa decided to recall the score after only a single performance.

The opera was done again in Brescia, May 1904. By that time, Puccini had done a lot of changes to the original score: extensive cuts, improvements in melodic lines, and the addition of a tenor aria. Ricordi had to update the performance material and print a fairly different “Brescia” piano score (Schickling Catalogue 268, 74.E.2), issued in May 1904 and for several years the one and only official *Butterfly* piano score (IMSLP, 2nd version).

But Puccini was unsatisfied with his opera and kept tweaking it for years. No other scores in Italian language were issued, but for a minor change within the Brescia printing run. In the original Belasco drama, the name of the tenor character was “Benjamin Franklin Pinkerton”; somehow Illica inverted the B.F. initials to F.B. and at La Scala and in Brescia he was named “Sir Francis Blummy Pinkerton.” Sometime in 1905, the name was reverted to its original form; Brescia scores printed later than middle 1905 have this correction.¹ Puccini experimented with much more extensive changes to the musical text; but these were implemented only in the hired performance materials.²

As changing the performance materials was difficult and expensive, Ricordi was unsatisfied and pressed for a definitive edition. While we can document some occasional changes after Brescia, for example the changes in the 1906 English language edition printed for the Savage company (Schickling

¹ Schickling reports in his Catalogue that reprints of the Brescia piano score had some modifications, but he does not account for the *Francis Blummy* change. Examining the scores deposited for copyright notice at Conservatorio di Milano in 1904, it looks like the very first print run of the Brescia version had *Francis Blummy* and only later the name switched to the original *Benjamin Franklin* (IMSLP 2nd version 101). The modification is not consistent in the whole text and was clearly a hasty correction on engraving plates.

² The original handwritten hire performance materials were likely retired and archived when, in time, Ricordi switched to engraved orchestra parts as a large number was needed. They are now lost, probably in a wartime bombing.

Catalogue 271, 74.E.3), usually Puccini was quicker than the printing press and most tentative versions are undocumented.

A new important edition was the French translation issued in late 1906 (Schickling Catalogue 273, 74.E:5). This was done for a production at Opéra-Comique in Paris. The producer there, Albert Carré, who was also the husband of the leading lady, asked Puccini permission to cut what he considered as unnecessary material, and to rewrite some passages for different meanings.³ He cut for example some comedic moments, some gross racial slurs, but above all, he transformed an opera about Westerners exploiting Japanese people into a huge drama of a tiny girl. Illica, one of the libretto lyricists, commented: “the [French] production is beautiful and moving; while some Italian effects are not achieved, there are other effects in details and little indefinable things that are in good taste and good art,” (Gara 336). We will call the score issued for this production the 1906 French score (IMSLP 5th version, French). What is important to us is that Paul Ferrier, that officially was only the French translator, actually changed the meaning of *Che tua madre*, the solo aria we are going to talk about; in the old text, Butterfly fantasized about her son meeting the Japanese Emperor and being made a prince, in the French version she complains that she has no way back and she would rather die than go back to working as a geisha – much more dramatic.

Now we have two different texts for the same aria: the Scala/Brescia version and the French version. Puccini liked very much the new French lyrics and it was decided to retranslate them in Italian for the definitive version; therefore, the “Final” Italian version, 1907 (Schickling Catalogue 276, 74.E.7) (IMSLP 5th version, Italian), keeps most of the cuts of the French version (but not all of them) and is at times a retranslation of the new lyrics with new meanings. The working of this version is quite obscure – for

3 The Paris 1906 has been very well documented, not only by issuing a new version of the piano score and a French translation of the libretto in print, but also by extremely detailed production notes for future reference (Carré).

example, Illica threatened to sue Ricordi as they were doing the retranslation without his consent (Archivio Ricordi LLET000229). We can tell for sure that the engraving was still to be completed in April 1907, as Puccini wanted to expand a little two-voice choir to three voices, but had still not done it (Archivio Ricordi CLET001142). At the end, we have four main piano scores in print: Scala 1904 – Brescia 1904 – French 1906 – Final Italian 1907 (a fifth one, less important, is the 1906 English version).

Now, let us move to New York, January 1907. The cast is rehearsing for the February premiere. Which edition are they using for their study? Scholars – the most important being Dieter Schickling – have argued that it would be impossible for Puccini to go back after the French version and somehow he had to use the final version in NY (Schickling and Girardi 39). We are going to argue this was not the case.

First, the final version still did not exist in January 1907; the cast had to use Brescia scores as they were the only Italian scores available in print. Also, the NY Times on February 12 reported that the American lieutenant (that is, the role sung by Caruso) was named “Sir Francis Blummy Pinkerton” (New York Times); so it looks like the Met company was using scores from the very first Brescia printing run.

When Farrar later recorded the opera excerpts with Victor, she sang her first act solo *Ieri son salita*, another passage that had changed meaning in Paris, with the old La Scala/Brescia lyrics; this seems compatible with her learning this new role from a Brescia score. But what about *Che tua madre*? This is our original question.

First, Farrar places a big cut in the middle of the aria. Let us not give it much significance; I think something had to be cut to fit the aria into the maximum length allowed by early recording technology. Puccini had always found *Che tua madre* too long in its original form and had formerly recommended to Toscanini a cut, nicknamed *taglio imperiale*, as some words

about the Emperor got cut (Gara 300); what is interesting, with the new French lyrics, the aria was much more dramatic, and after 1907 Puccini felt no more need to cut it.

As for the lyrics, the beginning of the aria is the same in all versions; but then the French version switches to Butterfly declaring that she would be better dead than going back to working as a Geisha. Farrar somewhat sings this concept, singing “Morta!” several times, so her text no more fits the Brescia version, sounds like the French version – but it still does not belong to the final Italian version.

¹ **Brescia 1904**
 Che tua madre dovrà prenderti in braccio
 ed alla pioggia e al vento andar per la città
 a guadagnarti il pane e il vestimento.
*[Ed alle impietosite genti ballando de' suoi canti al suon,
 gridare: Udite, udite la bellissima canzon
 delle ottocentomila divinità vestite di splendor.]*
 E passerà una fila di guerrieri coll'Imperator,
 cui dirò: Sommo Duce ferma i tuoi servi e sosta a riguardar
 quest'occhi, ove la luce dal cielo azzurro onde scendesti appar.
 E allora fermato il piè l'Imperatore d'ogni grazia degno,
 forse farà di te il principe più bello del suo regno.
 Ah!

["imperial" cut, optional]

Farrar
 Che tua madre dovrà prenderti in braccio
 ed alla pioggia e al vento andar per la città
 a guadagnarti il pane e il vestimento.
 Ed alle impietosite genti ballando de' suoi canti al suon,
 gridare: Udite, udite lo strazio del mio cor.

[Cut]

Non più, non più questo pensier, ah, non più!
 Ah no! no per pietà! questo mestier, no, perché mai?
 Morta! Morta vorrei cader! Piuttosto cader morta!
 Ah! Morta! Morta!

French 1906
 Que ta mère t'emportant dans ses bras,
 de la misère reprit encor le dur chemin
 Et par le froid d'hiver et soud la pluie,
 Bravant le refus qu'on essuie pour son enfant tendit la main!
 Faut-il la mort dans l'âme et des sanglots dans la voi,
 Reprende, pauvre femme, pour substister le métier d'autrefois?
 Et Butterfly, jouet des destin barbare, il revoit Geisha!
 Aux accent des samisens comme autrefois la Geisha dansera.
 Et le joyeux refrain qu'elle dira dans un sanglot s'achèvera!
 Oh, non! non! pas cela! Pas ce métier que la honte escorte!
 Morte! Morte! Mais point Geisha! Plustot cent fois je voudrais être morte!
 Ah!

Final 1907
 Che tua madre dovrà prenderti in braccio
 ed alla pioggia e al vento andar per la città
 a guadagnarti il pane e il vestimento.
 Ed alle impietosite genti la man tremante stenderà
 gridando: Udite, udite la triste mia canzon
 A un infelice madre la carità, muovetevi a pietà.
 E Butterfly, orribile destino, danzerà per te,
 e come fece già la Ghesha canterà!
 E la canzon giuliva e lieta in un singhiozzo finirà!
 Ah no, no! questo mai! questo mestier che al disonore porta!
 Morta! morta! mai più danzar! Piuttosto la mia vita vo' troncar!
 Ah! morta!

Fig. 1.
M. Butterfly,
Brescia, 1904.
and M.
Butterfly,
French, 1906.

There is a simple possible explanation to the Farrar text. Puccini himself had been in Paris, he was aware of the changes, he knew a new edition was being – slowly – prepared; in New York he likely improvised some verses for Farrar to sing, knowing by instinct that shouting that Butterfly should be dead would be much more effective on stage than the old text, no matter what the details were. So, I believe we are likely in front of an original Puccini modification, documented only by the recording, that was superseded in a few

months by the new 1907 edition; but Farrar went on singing the opera the way she had learnt it, with the old Brescia text in some places and this variation, and this way she recorded it for the phonograph.

Are there alternative hypotheses? An alternative explanation could be the change in text to be editorial, that is made by the Ricordi staff; but this is much less likely. In his memories, Farrar says having been very confused by the contrasting advice of Ricordi and Puccini in rehearsals (Farrar 93). But this should be a false memory: no one from the Ricordi family was present in New York. Mr. Giulio Ricordi was too old for travel, and his son Tito was at the time obviously in Milano, quarrelling with Illica and receiving letters from Puccini in New York (Archivio Ricordi LLET000343 and Archivio Ricordi LLET000344). So the only person in New York being aware of a new French text and its new meaning was Puccini himself.

The score of the new Italian version, usually heard in opera houses now, went on sale around July 1907; it did not supersede the Brescia edition suddenly, but for some time both versions travelled between opera houses in parallel.

Other divas went on singing the Brescia version they had previously studied even after the final version came out, but we can only tell about the ones that have recorded it. Emmy Destinn sang *Butterfly* in front of Puccini in London, July 1905, and in 1912 she was recording *Che tua madre* still in the old Brescia version (Youtube, Destinn). Even a recording as late as Mafalda Salvatini, 1919, displays the Brescia version (Youtube, Salvatini) twelve years after it was made obsolete. But Destinn and Salvatini recorded the unedited Brescia version; the only soprano to record a composite version was Farrar, because she was the only one who learned the role in that short stretch of time when the final version was due but still not ready. She had been stuck in a time bubble – sort of.

Puccini did not really like Farrar, did not like the Met conductor,

the producer, he did not like even Caruso at that time (Archivio Ricordi LLET000344), but the Metropolitan production was anyway a huge success and established Geraldine Farrar as a true American soprano diva. *Butterfly* became one of her signature roles; at present, she still is the leading lady that sang it more times than any other at the Met, in spite of her retiring from opera more than one century ago.

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Giacomo Puccini's Legacy on the Italian Post-War Avant-garde

In 1974, in commemoration of the half-century of Giacomo Puccini's death, the prominent journal *Nuova Rivista Musicale Italiana* solicited and published a series of reflections by contemporary Italian composers on the older composer's legacy. The submission by avant-garde composer and dramaturge Sylvano Bussotti is an experimental rhapsody that frames Puccini as the "forerunner" to post-war modernism "who ran the most" (Berio et al. 358); though difficult to decipher and certainly idiosyncratic, Bussotti's contribution is typical fodder for such commemorative articles. His lavish praise makes the ambivalent submissions from his colleagues all the more startling: out of the four published responses, those by Luciano Berio, Franco Donatoni, and Luigi Nono make little of the opera composer's influence on post-war music, acknowledging in a few paragraphs or less his common presence in Italian households during their youth, but ultimately shying away from claiming any direct lineage. Given Puccini's firm presence in the classical canon as well as his renaissance with popular audiences following the war, it is striking that three prominent composers would dedicate so little space to the titanic legacy then dominating both the worlds of classical and mainstream music. It is even more striking to remember Berio's later large-scale project of a finale for Puccini's opera *Turandot*, at which point the younger composer shared much warmer words and sentiments regarding his predecessor.

The seeming ambivalence of the 1974 responses ultimately hint at the unique and complicated problems that Puccini's influence posed for the generation of Italian intellectuals and composers to emerge following the Second World War. For composers like Berio and Nono, a figure such

as Giuseppe Verdi could serve as a paragon of nineteenth-century Italian Romanticism and *italianità*, representing nationalistic and aesthetic values to be embraced or rejected as modernism took root on Italian soil. Puccini however straddled the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, taking cues from the likes of Giacomo Rossini and Gaetano Donizetti while injecting Wagnerian chromaticism and whiffs of the nascent dodecaphonic techniques of the Second Viennese School. As a conservative composer with an interest in the modernist techniques of early-twentieth-century Europe, Puccini drew on the aesthetic worlds of Romanticism and early-century modernism in tandem and was thus much more difficult to situate in terms of style and cultural period.

Puccini's position in national culture was equally thorny. His surviving reputation as a composer of the bourgeoisie, along with his unclear ties to Fascism, troubled his reception with the largely leftist avant-garde while his brand of operatic spectacle and the cruel treatment of heroines laid the groundwork for critiques of society crafted during the regime and following its fall. Puccini has maintained his presence in the popular imagination during and following the war, and the period underwent a favorable academic reassessment of popular culture by prominent thinkers like Umberto Eco. Not only did avant-garde composers face problems of periodization with Puccini's output, but they found themselves forced to reckon more broadly with the ethics of Italian opera which, by the decades following the war, had been co-opted by Fascism yet also provided instruments for critiquing the regime and speaking directly to popular audiences.

During the Fascist period, Italian opera was invoked by Mussolini as a crucial node for Italian national identity. The Ministry of Popular Culture made use not only of discrete performances and composers as emblems of a populist national identity, but also of operatic spectacle through rhetoric and propaganda films about Italian national history like 1937's *Scipio Africanus*. During the fifteen years before the conclusion of World War II, the aesthetics

and archetype-defining gestures of Romantic and early-modern Italian opera were adopted and mimicked in state-sanctioned cinema and theater, and operas drawing on the style of Verdi and Puccini (e.g. Pietro Mascagni's *Nerone* (1935) and Gian Francesco Malipiero's *Giulio Cesare* (1936)) were enthusiastically premiered under the regime. Angela Dalle Vacche notes how Fascist spectacle adopted Italian opera's spectacular gestures, those with "low information value, but high expressivity" (33), as a means of monumentalizing characters, often rendering them psychologically under-defined yet highly expressive archetypes. Fascist spectacle aided in cementing the connection between opera's emotionally-drenched historical epics and the imaginative and populist retelling of national history.

Puccini's creative output and mammoth reputation played an important role both in the expansion of Italian opera audiences following the war and the cultural linkage of operatic spectacle with Fascist ideology. The composer himself made no secret of his political conservatism, though his direct ties to the Fascist regime are few and hardly conclusive (Schwartz 33-4). Puccini in fact died the year before Mussolini solidified his dictatorship, and the composer's relationship to the codified regime ultimately remains a matter of speculation. Following the composer's death in 1924, the regime was however quick to adopt and celebrate Puccini as a national hero as well as an ideal means for exporting Italian cultural products (i.e. opera) to the rest of the world. As Alexandra Wilson has noted, Fascist music critics eulogized Puccini in the imperialist and virile rhetoric often used to describe Mussolini, and the non-Fascist critics praising Puccini within these same terms were seasoned enough to toe the party line (185-91). Mussolini himself expressed official approval for Puccini's works and praised him as a national treasure just following the composer's very public funeral.

The Fascist embrace of Puccini as a national icon was the pragmatic option given the composer's broad popularity and the national sympathy he

garnered following a premature death. It also helped to solidify Puccini's position as a "national treasure" and a composer for mass audiences, particularly for the Italian bourgeoisie (191). The reputation followed Puccini reception for the duration of the regime, as well as the decades immediately after; as Arman Schwartz writes, Puccini's death was described even by contemporaries as the end of Italian opera as a developing genre, and the continued dominance of performances of works by Puccini and Verdi only reaffirmed this even as the cultural institution of opera continued finding new avenues of distribution through film and television (Schwartz 29-30; Barron 140-7). By the end of the war and into the decades following it, Puccini was a key figure in the production of high-brow art with mass appeal.

Puccini's presence in post-war musical life was undeniable, yet his prevalence in mass popular culture made him hard to digest for an avant-garde that was already ambivalent about opera as a cultural institution. Theodor Adorno, whose critical theory had a major impact on post-war Italian thought, produced the essay "Bourgeois Opera" in 1955 in which he largely blames mass reproduction for draining the operatic canon of its aesthetic and social relevance. Just under a decade later, Italian writer and semiologist Umberto Eco published his epochal *Apocalittici e integrati*, calling for a reassessment of mass media as a valid and even sophisticated means of understanding cultural consciousness. In his volume, Eco negatively compares critics who bemoan the widespread of mass culture, made newly available through evolving mass media, with the artists actively working within and even championing the new "low brow" media (4-7). For Eco's avant-garde colleagues, including Berio and members of the Italian literary avant-garde, the decision to embrace or reject mass culture and popular art was not only an aesthetic choice but a highly political one. It is therefore not surprising that many composers of the younger generation found it prudent to minimize any explicit connections to Puccini, even as they continued to be surrounded by his music and theater.

Puccini's operas however continued to serve as a model for staged suffering and sadism as artists and musicians turned their attention to dramatizing the urban and psycho-social devastation wrought by Fascism and the horrors of World War II. Cruelty and sadism during the war were thematized as early as the first Italian neorealist novels that began to appear in the last decade of the war, and broader audiences were exposed to these themes with the advent of Italian Neorealist cinema, key examples being Roberto Rossellini's *Roma città aperta* (1945) and Vittorio de Sica's *Ladri di biciclette* (1948). As the alienating strategies of Bertholt Brecht's theater and the "committed literature" (*"littérature engagée"*) of Jean Paul Sartre took hold of the Italian avant-garde imagination, so did the necessity of realistically depicting the psychologically complex suffering of characters in new, creative works. It is no coincidence that the most notoriously disturbing cinematic depiction of abuses committed under the banner Italian Fascism, Pier Paolo Pasolini's *Salò* of 1975, takes its plot and subtitle from Sade's *The 120 Days of Sodom*.

Sadism underwent something of a rebranding in the years after the end of the war, evolving from the potent, yet under-defined sexual cruelty of the Marquis de Sade to a theoretical and aesthetic category. In her controversial essay of 1953, "Must we burn Sade?" Simone de Beauvoir reads Sade as a great "moralist" who may offer an alternative ethics of transgression in line with an existentialist philosophy regularly challenging societal and gender norms (75). Though this notion did not necessarily catch on with de Beauvoir's peers, it did spur on a reconsideration of the value of Sade as a writer and thinker. In 1971, Roland Barthes published the volume *Sade/Fourier/Loyola* in which he argues that the Marquis's violent, erotic tales engendered a private language of hedonism (15-17); Barthes was eagerly read and referenced by Italian avant-garde members including Eco and Berio, and dressing up the Marquis's idiosyncratic style and subject matter in the

gossamer of structuralism made it attractive fodder for post-war artists, many of whom were deeply invested in semiotics and structuralism ramifications for aesthetics. Illustrating the shift in attitudes and general popularity of Sade's writing, the popular Italian journal *Il Verro* published a humorous piece by Eco in 1972 in which a publishing company rejects Sade's famously lubricious and violent *Justine* for being too pedantic:

I found an avalanche of words, page after page, about the philosophy of nature, with digressions on the cruelty of the struggle for survival, the reproduction of plants, and the cycles of animal species. The second time: at least fifteen pages on the concept of pleasure, the senses and the imagination, and so on. The third time: twenty pages on the question of submission between men and women in various countries of the world... I think that's enough. We're not looking for a work of philosophy. Today's audience wants sex, sex, and more sex. In every shape and form... Let's leave the highbrow stuff to Indiana ("Regretfully..." 40).

Given this renewed interest in the Marquis de Sade and a reappraisal of sadism as an aesthetic and structuralist tool, regular references to Puccini's sadistic tendencies are more nuanced than they initially appear to be. Between the summers of 1974 and 1975, the Italian national broadcast network, RAI presented a radio series of imaginary interviews, appropriately titled *Interviste Impossibili*, between a member of the Italian literary avant-garde and a major figure from history. In a broadcast from August of 1974 led by author Alberto Arbasino, a resurrected Puccini meditates on the equal influence of the Marquis de Sade and Giuseppe Verdi as he developed his own "*sadismo pucciniano*" (6:04). Arbasino's Puccini admits a personal taste for all manners of suffering that his daughters undergo, though that the violent and tragic ends suffered by every Mimi and Tosca have precedence

in Verdi's catalogue of doomed heroines: "poor Gilda in a sac, poor Aida in a tomb buried alive, poor Azucena at the stake, poor Desdemona under a pillow!" (6:11). Later in the interview, the ventriloquized composer notes that the core difference between himself and the Marquis de Sade is all a matter of marketability; Sade had "neither an industrial nor a corporate mentality" (14:45) and, unlike Puccini, he misunderstood the world of mass culture and consumption. Through reckoning with his own reputation of viciousness, Arbasino's Puccini traces a foundational legacy of sadism in Italian opera with himself as simply its most recent practitioner.

The post-war avant-garde association of Puccini with sadism was further concretized by Bussotti's previously-mentioned enthusiastic response to the 1974 *Nuova Rivista Musicale Italiana* article. Himself, a champion of Sade as well as Puccini, Bussotti expresses an admiration of a presumably obvious "somasochistic matrix" underlying Puccini's creative output and ensuring the composer's place in the modernist canon (Berio et al. 361). Bussotti was involved with several stagings of Puccini's operas throughout his career, and the reference to Sade is not made lightly; in 1965, he composed the opera *La Passion selon Sade* ("The Passion According to Sade") and assumed the roles of director, set designer, and choirmaster himself. Appropriately, the general themes of the opera play on the relationship between love, sex, and cruelty.

Post-war Italian composers who refrained from acknowledging an aesthetic debt to Puccini nevertheless depended on his models for staged suffering. Luigi Nono's *Intolleranza 1960* is an exercise in staged cruelty at the service of political critique, and Luciano Berio's works of the late 1950s and early 1960s, particularly his collaborations with singer, composer, and then-wife Cathy Berberian, frequently evoke Sadean themes of erotic and gendered violence with works like 1961's electroacoustic *Visage* and, most explicitly, the staged work *Passaggio* of the following year. In *Passaggio*,

a protagonist named only *Lei* (the feminine singular third-person subject pronoun, equivalent to “she”) is constantly and severely berated and abused by choruses both onstage and distributed throughout the audience. While the lavish sets of *Madama Butterfly* may have been furthest from these composers’ minds in the decades following the end of the Fascist regime, Puccini’s aesthetic style of staged, often gendered cruelty was fundamental for a generation exploring for new modes of depicting harsh reality with a critical eye and ear.

In the decades following the war, depictions of suffering traceable to the influence of Sade, but also inherited from an operatic tradition of spectacular cruelty and violence, helped shape aesthetic reflections on post-war society and culture. For the avant-garde generation, both themes were directly tied to Puccini, and therein lies something of an aesthetic irony: the avant-garde was compelled to adopt the tools and tropes of mass culture in order to critique the dangers of populist power and mass identity. This short survey of avant-garde reactions to Puccini is not a linear history of influence nor is it by any means a conclusive tracing of the composer’s legacy. Rather, this cultural history suggests how Puccini may begin to be situated in an aesthetic network that emerged following his death: a composer for the upper-middle class straddling the network of musical late-Romanticism and modernist experimentation with an idiosyncratic style of dramatic staging which was uniquely his while still being situated within the violent legacy of Italian Romantic opera. As with any such network, there are nodes that remain unearthed and under scrutiny, but bringing our attention as scholars and listeners of Puccini’s operas to these points of influence and intersection tell us a great deal about how Puccini’s legacy survived and evolved following the composer’s death.

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