TURANDOT: THE ASSERTION OR NEGATION OF A MYTH?

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One wonders what made Puccini focus on Murger's *Scènes de la vie de la bohème* in the last decade of the nineteenth century. By all standards, it is a nondescript topic that, at that time, would not have been considered decorous for the grandness and excesses invariably associated with opera. A similar question arises some twenty years later, when Puccini finds himself alienated away from the "piccolo cose" of bohemian concerns, and drawn back to the grandiose, epic and almost mythical theme in *Turandot*.

One plausible answer to the initial question can be located in the fact that the *fin-de-siècle* saw a radical shift away from the mythical and the mythological. It is a change that was commensurate with what was happening in European literature at the time, namely, that Romanticism was finally defunct and the new focus is now on Realism and its more radical form, Naturalism. Originating in France, the main champions of this new movement were Flaubert, Dumas, Balzac, and others. It reached its peak in Zola who was not only its most radical practitioner but also wrote treatises on Naturalism. Verdi's 1849 *Louisa Miller* indicates the first stirrings of this new spirit in opera, and perhaps more notably, *La traviata* of 1853 has the audacity, as it were, to bring a morally dubious heroine who is sexually tainted on the operatic stage. Yet, perhaps, no other opera best places Naturalism more soundly on the operatic map than *Carmen*, Bizet's opera of 1875. It sets the benchmark for naturalist operas to follow and emulate in the subsequent decades. Following Bizet's example, Bruneau composes operas based on Zola, Massenet ventures into the domain with his *La Navarraise* of 1898, with Charpentier hot on his heels with *Louise* of 1900. In Italy, Naturalism is best known as *verismo* and the group of musicians who adhered to this new creed consisted of Giordano, Mascagni, Leoncavallo, and Puccini, the latter with *La bohème, Tosca,* and *Il Tabarro*. These composers were known as *Giovane Scuola Italiana*. Of course, Italian composers found a most fertile ground in the literature of their time, in writers who themselves had been inspired by the French. Among these one finds Luigi Capuana and, perhaps more importantly, Giovanni Verga, whose short story forms the basis for Mascagni's wonderful *Cavalleria Rusticana* of 1890.

Despite both the French and the Italian operatic repertoire at the end of the nineteenth century deal with Naturalist topics, yet there is an important difference between the ways this subject is treated by the respective composers. Throughout the French canon, one can trace a symbolic strain, a sort of an all-embracing meaning. For instance, Bruneau's more general message concentrates on the clash between physical and spiritual powers, a clash which, within Zola's philosophy which inspires Bruneau, a person endures. This conflict makes people suffer and eventually destroys them. Charpentier, likewise, focuses on contemporary issues such as the tension between parents and their offspring, the abject misery ensuing from poverty, free love – all seductions and attractions which the poverty-stricken people of Paris are tempted to fall for. This is all manifest in *Louise*, an opera in which the great cosmopolitan city of Paris itself becomes the symbolic protagonist of the work. On the other hand, contemporary Italian opera does not press such a pedal note, as it were. The Italians were more practical yet also more dynamic than their French counterparts. What mattered to them was the here and now, that realist aspect of their lives which occupied them on a daily basis. This was always portrayed in a one-dimensional story which almost always focused on the timeless conflict between man and woman. It hardly ever allowed a more abstract, universal, spiritual theme, let alone poetic allegory, to dominate or even intrude.

Verismo depends on extravagance and excess. This will eventually be conducive to murder, generally of a spectacular sort, and/or suicide. Climaxes unravel in quick succession and moods are violently counteracted. This means that in any one scene, one may find sharply contrasted characters and feelings pitted against each other. For the *veristi*, this was a cardinal rule. Characters are almost hyperbolic, larger than life, and are carried along in a volatile life dominated by sex and sexual jealousy. This constitutes one of the inner conflicts of *verismo* opera. Sexual desire is frustrated, leading to acts of insane envy and murderous revenge. The audience's feelings are never spared, and such behavior is seen on stage, with murder or suicide committed on stage. This is aimed directly at people's sensibility and creates an immediate rapport with them. In this way, in *Tosca*, the audience sees the execution of Cavaradossi happen in front of its eyes, as it had witnessed Scarpia's murder earlier. With classical decorum, in Sardou's drama these take place off-stage. Another example, this time from Belasco's *The Girl of the Golden West*, shows us that there is just discourse about killing Ramarrez. Puccini, however, in his reworking of this text into *La Fanciulla del West*, makes his audience see Ramarrez being taken to the gallows, having the noose put around his neck.[1] In the final moments of Bizet's *Carmen* Don José commits a crime of passion. It becomes the first in a long list of stabbing, shooting, strangling, and suicides enacted in full view of an audience getting used to the horrors and realities of *verismo*. What

the *veristi* are doing here has already been intimated in earlier operas, predominantly those of Verdi. Crimes of passion are the rule of thumb in *Ernani, Rigoletto, Il Trovatore,* and *Otello*. This, too, is realism, but one tinged with a romantic aura. *Verismo*, in fact, emerges out of elements found in the older composer. It is a sort of hypertrophic offshoot of these features. One should also bear in mind that the Italian vocal timbre is more than adequate for and suited to the intense passion of such roles and scenes. The virile intensity of such voices makes such acts of violence more realistic. On the whole, French voices are more nuanced and lack that raw emotion. *Verismo* juxtaposes the sensational with the sordid. In such plots, the fullness of desire ends in death and unlike traditional stories, good rarely triumphs over evil. The rational, which is the mainstay of the Enlightenment, and the sense of liberty and fraternity of Romanticism are overturned. Man is now presented as a victim of irrational impulse.

The *Giovane Scuola Italiana*'s internal conflicts emanate from the philosophy of the *verismo* movement, and a few of its principles are also put into practice. Since the origins of opera in Italy, with Monteverdi in the seventeenth century, Realism as meaning the portrayal of dramatic truth was already in evidence. In fact, it is Monteverdi himself who insists that from now on, composers should build on the foundations of truth.[2] Yet, building on the foundation of truth is one thing, and portraying truth as it is gauged in actual life is another one. The first finds its source in imaginative truth, which is the loftiest trope of Realism. The second leads in the opposite direction, to naked Realism, which does not belong to opera. One remembers Verdi's strong comment: "Ah, realism, science! I too belong to realism, even Shakespeare did, but I am sure he was not aware of it. He was inspired to be a realist whereas now people are realists by calculation and design".[3] The stage is, quite literally, a platform on which the representation of reality is created. Its purpose is not to photograph reality. Added to this, one remembers that opera is the most artificial art form, the most contrived and representational. It has its norms and conventions, and a composer chooses to disregard these at his cost. In real life people do not sing arias, duets, trios, and sextets.

The philosophical objective of the *veristi* states that life as it is really lived should be translated conscientiously into opera. If this were true, then at best an opera would be constructed of endless recitatives, with sporadic cries and laughter. Surely, this is a surreal if now downright ridiculous proposition. Audiences enjoy music, larger than life characters filling the stage with their problems, conflicts, and gorgeous voices. They are less concerned with notions of dramatic truth.[4]

So far I have focused on the negative aspect of *verismo*. The positive side entails a study of what essentially constitutes drama, concentrating on lack of historical reference, sharp clarity of plot, and melodic dynamism and vitality: aspects that are all found in Puccini's *verismo* operas. One feels Puccini is being a disciple of Zola when the latter writes:

It is no longer fashionable to create suspense in a reader through a complicated but impossible plot. The only objective now is to record human action, to expose the workings of the mind and the body. Stories are more simple now: the first man to emerge on stage will suffice as the new hero. Look at him well, analyse him, and you will find a simple drama which gives full vent to emotion and passion.[5]

Gone, too, is the Aristotelian concept of the tragic hero as being a person of high estate. Now, a Willy Loman will do, as Arthur Miller insists in his play *Death of a Salesman*. From this, one gleans no fewer than four important points which are very relevant to the philosophy of *verismo*.

The first deals with the dismissal of what Zola above calls a "complicated but impossible plot". This means that rejection of an epic, historical, or dynastic story and instead focusing on themes gleaned from common, quotidian life: "the first man to emerge on stage will suffice as the new hero". Thus, almost naturally, these "new" heroes and heroines will be found in the lower echelons of society: hence the panoply of common men and women in the form of clowns, prostitutes, impoverished students, peasants, soldiers, artists, and more. In fact, *verismo* operas are replete with artists of all types: we come across an actress in *Adriana Lecouvreur*, clowns in *Pagliacci*, a singer and a painter in *Tosca*, and poets in *La Bohème* and *Andrea Chénier*. One can already trace this tendency in pre-*verismo* operas, perhaps best manifested in *La Bohème*, a work which convenes, as it were, a group of destitute artists and their lovers on the stage. Zola's third point involved giving "full vent to emotion and passion". The divine right of passion, therefore, is central to *verismo* opera. Last but not least, Zola's insistence on a simple plot and an uncomplicated drama finds no better illustration than in the librettos which Puccini set to opera between *Manon Lescaut* and *Turandot*. *Verismo* does not stay in Italy only. It travels into Germany with D'Albert's *Das Tiefland* and von Schillings' *Mona Lisa*. It is also hardly coincidental

that after *Tosca*, Richard Strauss produces *Salomé* and *Elektra*. It finally resonates in Janáček's *Kátya Kabanova* of 1921[6] and in *Lady Macbeth of Mtsensk* of 1936 by Shostakovich. Also, cannot one also find traces of *verismo* in Berg's *Lulu* and *Wozzeck*?

I will not attempt to tackle the second question posed at the start of this paper. While Puccini is composing in the *verismo* style up till the 1880s, consciously or less so he switches allegiance, as it were, to the Symbolist one prevalent at the *fin de siècle*. What is the *fin de siècle*? Many centuries have ended, but there has been only one *fin de siècle*. The term is associated with France, like other un-translatable terms such as *je ne sais quoi*, *ennui*, *voilà*. However, its usage and the connections it brings up are not tied to national or cultural confines. Within our context, it is identified with a European long goodbye to the nineteenth century. It is a goodbye which, essentially, has already happened in most, long before the end of the century, and in other cases has still got to be done. Within the confines of the term 'Decadence', *fin de siècle* becomes suddenly burdened with layers of fatigue and decline, revolution and counter-cultural behaviour. It stops being a date and becomes a mood, or perhaps a mood in search of a date, opportunistically seeking out practices or ideas already in existence. In this manner, we find artists and performers, including poets, active at the *Chat Noir* café being labelled with the brand 'liberté *fin de siècle*'. Then we find Georges Rodenbach blaming the lost souls of Adolphe Murger's 'Bohème' (mid-century) for the damaging belief, later to become the Wildean creed, that an artist's duty is to live, rather than to produce, his art. In 1878 Robert Louis Stevenson, in an essay on Walt Whitman, has already seen the century come full circle, referring to the 'Maladie de René', in which "[y]oung gentlemen with three or four hundred a year [...] look down from their pinnacle of doleful experience on all the grown and hearty men who have dared to say a good word for life".[7] These models and metaphors – circles and pyramids, rising and setting suns, Paris and Rome – seem to hesitate between a sense of return, a sense of the cyclical, and a sense of culmination and finality.

Turandot in context

Puccini is tortured with his opera libretto *Turandot*. Schiller had adapted an eighteenth-century fairy tale, which served as the basis for Puccini. Originally, the fairy tale was called *Turandotte*, and was penned by Carlo Gozzi, an Italian dramatist and poet. It attracted Schiller's imagination who quickly set it to drama, giving its first premiere at the *German National Theatre* at the start of the nineteenth century. Unlike a large number of German Romanticists, Puccini had never been attracted to epic stories, fairy-tales, or legends, something that we find Verdi doing at the start of his career. He was not inspired by Baudelaire's notion of the bizarre despite the fact that his first foray into opera, namely, *Le Villi*, is replete with nightmarish elements. The major difficulty that the *Turdandotte* fairy tale presented Puccini with was the derisive quality of the three masks, which have a sort of *commedia dell'arte* aspect to them. More precisely, the difficulty lay in how best to give them the correct dramatic treatment. (Mario Corradi, in his insightful observations on these three 'clowns' provides an intriguing and challenging analysis on the subject). Despite its mythical dimensions, *Turandot* basically focuses on the perennial battle of the sexes, portrayed in the clash between the leading male figure, Calaf, who systematically chases his female object of desire, the heroine Turandot. She is not known to him and vice versa, but her indisputable physical attraction has completely overwhelmed him.

There are quite a few operas in the Puccini canon that end with tragedy when the love interest dies, bringing consequent despair on who remains alive, generally the lover. In an early opera, *Edgar*, Fidelia dies. So too does Mimì in *La Bohème* and Manon in *Manon Lescaut*. In all three instances, their lovers, namely, Edgar, Rodolfo, and des Grieux, fall into terrible despair. "Chi ha vissuto per amore, per amore si morì": these words are found in another Puccini opera, namely, the third of *Il Trittico* – *Il Tabarro*. In a nutshell they sum up the essence of the composer's initial six operas. These operas contain a frail or fragile heroine who perishes at the end of the story.[8] With them love perishes too. Failed or frustrated love also features as a subordinate theme in *Turandot*, where we find the slave-girl Liù sacrificing her life for the love she bears Calaf. Many see in this notion of failed love an autobiographical strain relating to Puccini's own life. This is mirrored in his art, and with it comes an unbearable sense of futility and despair. From this perspective, life and art are one and it is impossible to separate them.

Plagued by the desire to create this work of art between 1920 and 1924, Puccini finds himself working at a time when other great artistes are producing what become, arguably, the greatest works of art in the century. TS Eliot writes *The Waste Land* (1921), James Joyce *Ulysses* (1922), Virginia Woolf *The Waves* (1923), Stravinsky *The Rite of Spring* (1924), Picasso *Guernica* (1927). What all these writers, musicians, and painters are perhaps unconsciously trying to do is resurrect some kind of mythic perspective in their

works that would give some coherence and significance to an otherwise fragmented, elliptical existence. One of Eliot's epigraph to *The Waste Land*, taken from *The Satyricon* by Petronius, reads: "Sybil, what do you wish?" "I wish to die". *The Waste Land*, rising to universality and objectivity, is not merely the confession of a distraught sensibility caught in the conflicts of life, but the expression of the sorrows and sufferings of Eliot's age. In the throes of the First World War, Western sensibility, wrenched from its roots and ripped to shreds developed an obsessive mania for dissonance. Gone is the age of Edwardian eloquence and the syntactic precision of Soames Forsyte. Post-war neurosis craves syncopation, fragmentation and ellipsis, features with which it poignantly identifies.

This is the cultural environment that Puccini finds himself working in during his *Turandot* years. In the post-war world of fallen institutions, shattered ideals and nervous strain, life seems to have lost its seriousness and coherence. In such an atmosphere the memory of past greatness, as revealed in brief images distilled from tradition, adds to the torment of modern man. This fully captures Dante's lines from his 'Inferno': "Nessun maggior dolore che ricordarsi del tempo felice / Ne la miseria".[9] Literary protagonists pursue consciousness of history and of self to the furthest extreme. Turandot, like the Sybil, keeps her fear and hatred of men alive by being metaphorically mummified in the cold corridors of history, lamenting the fate of "Principessa LouLing, ava dolce e serena … LouLing la mia ava trascinata da un uomo come te, straniero".[10] The listener equates her emotional sterility with the protagonist's distance from historically meaningful action. Self-entrapped in her ivory tower, Turandot is the writer of her own story, finding inspiration among the fossilised remnants that are not well shored up against her own ruin. The artist's tragic vision is not confined to a reaction against the present age but it penetrates and permeates all ages.

For Puccini, the exotic East, with its mystery, charm, and ambiguity, proves a welcome respite from the sordid reality of the West, with its destruction and mass murder. Like Stravinsky, Eliot and Joyce, Puccini resorts to myth. Underlying the *Turandot* is the myth of the unconquerable heroine, displayed in Turandot's apparent inhumanity, fear, and insecurity. Puccini's setting of Adami and Simoni's libretto is a mythical, archetypal expression of living intuitions and perceptions. It concentrates and distils energies which, when manifested in visions, dreams, fantasies, tones and rhythms, alter its inner world. The modern composer has visions of a universal language which is understood by the more sophisticated people that form the cultural elite around him. The unifying thread of this idiom is the almost instinctive rapport with mythical references that the composer feels. Puccini envisages the dangers of mundane understanding of mythical allusion, and goes around the normal reference to avert the threat of conventionalisation. He thereby draws attention to the desire to reconfigure and shift the initial instinctive response. For him, the need to reconfigure this universal idiom becomes not an attempt to attain a concurrent identification of references in the entire artistic languages extant around him. Rather, he wishes to identify a universal perspective to how one responds to music, in the process of which the allusion develops into the common denominator not just of meaning. This process entails a personal reconciliation to the allusion, one that will be conducted in an endless orbit of elaboration and deviation.

The modern world is "an immense panorama of futility and anarchy" writes Eliot in his Preface to Joyce's *Ulysses*. Through myth, art can relate to the modern world because this world can be regarded from an idealised or dreamt perspective. This perspective can be compared to the cubists' fourth dimension. Thus, the modern world is changed in order for it to become amenable to art. This is achieved by creating a perspective on it. Myth, therefore, furnishes the *materia prima* which is used to project the artificial numinous dimension. In finding the common denominator among discrete myths by suggesting a shared origin, Puccini, in his treatment of the Joycean mythical method, identifies an abstract first myth, a monomyth. This originary, unique myth supplies a shared ground, what we have referred to as the fourth dimension, from where the artist can gaze on the modern world from enough distance to enable that chaos to appear ordered and stabilised. Simultaneously, or very quick succession, the artist is looking on the chaos that is contemporary history from their own subjective perspectives on and within it. By concurrently or in succession looking at the modern world from the ideal vantage point that myth affords or from a real perspective through a lived experience, the composer (or any other artist) allows dual vision.[11]

Mythic awareness is can be identified within the notion of transcendent experience. In *Turandot*, it operates as a balancing act to the relational understanding that secular knowledge relies on. In using such figures as the Emperor Althoum and his beautiful daughter Princess Turandot, Puccini is trying to enable the audience to go beyond the boundaries of a discordant and chaotic world, to take it to a

loftier standpoint that both incorporates and excludes the contemporary scenario. Any situation regarded from the inside only yields "a panorama of futility and anarchy".[12] However, the contemporary world is chaotic for another reason. It becomes incarcerated in a relational attitude. This is because it exists within a culture that embraces a cynical attitude towards the transcendent: for this type of mentality, the transcendent is either an old wife's tale or else is not relevant to its main priorities. The mysterious world of myth, legend and mystery answers a need in the modern artist, that of redemption. Mythical resonance enhances, enforces, and universalizes. Puccini not only brings myth to bear down on reality but, also, continually reasserts the dynamic power of the myth by the recurrence as leitmotifs of symbols associated with that particular myth. In this manner, the first Act of the opera presents and develops through leitmotif the death theme, which is applied both to man and deities. Fear of death is related through sex. Ancient myth in the figure of the beautiful Turandot, and modern image in the meek yet powerful Liù, meet and rise above the conventional setting of Peking. The introduction of myth and its recurrence as leitmotif helps the opera gain an emotional, visionary power.

Turandot is an opera compounded of myth and reality, theme and variation, motif and leitmotif, past and present, vision and drama, symbol and image, allusion and echo, prognosis and prophecy. The effect is one of polyphonic music, of counterpoint, where the entry of the different voices can be distinctly heard. Irony is created by collocation. Peking as a place-name contributes to one's sense of that ancient place shrouded in a semi-divine aura as a 'real' city, thus strengthening Puccini's stress on the opposite effect, the Baudelairean 'unreality' that abides even in the midst of throbbing streets and swarming crowds. This is the paradox that is the cause of horror. Perception of the diverse images and shapes that the city throws into relief reflects a heightened subjectivity, apart from extending vibrant tropes denoting historical change. Puccini takes the pulse of city life, as it were, and touches the nerve of urban anxiety. The diagnosis does not identify a secure pivot around which either the city or its society turn. It no longer functions as a social space but becomes, instead, an existential entity. Ultimately, the metropolis is not Peking, but becomes a metaphor. It allegorises the turbulent aspirations and anxieties of post-war twentieth century. Puccini succeeds in bringing about a unique synthesis of the metaphysical, the historical, the social and the personal. Both the modern and the legendary emotional wastelands depicted in the opera are the result of the violation of the pure, which initiates the process of secularization. This is superbly epitomized in Liù. This endearing character seems to peripheralise myth and centralize contemporaneity.

Puccini's use of myth operates on various levels. His mythical method, manipulating a "continuous parallel between contemporaneity and antiquity",[13] supplies what the modern mind could not. In his last years, Puccini finds no link between cause and effect, past and present; he sees no coherence in human personality or motive. However, implementing myth can redeem this conflict by implying that humans operate beyond time in a certain sense, that somewhere their awareness maintains some stability, some common analogy, despite the changes that time effects on their experience. Linking past and present, as Wagner and Stravinsky had done, this stability posits a more or less finite range of human nature. It also means that if experience lies within that orbit, so will its ramifications. Resorting to myth can sort difficulties out; it provides signification where the artist cannot locate any. It also gives meaning and coherence to "the immense panorama of futility and anarchy which is contemporary history".[14] Potentially, like beauty, myth can save the world. It can also liberate the modern mind from the bondage of historical awareness.

In this manner, historical awareness and aestheticism intersect. Aesthetic beauty had at first demonstrated how futile and displeasing time and material things are. Time is unredeemed without the intervention of art, and the material world remains a chaotic and dissonant spectrum of anarchic awareness. Myth provides a meta-language of affirmation, confirming historical and conscious structures. It endows art and time with value, establishing these entities in "a pattern of timeless moments"[15] gleaned from both history and culture, the conscious and unconscious legacy, as understood by modern methods. Thus, using myth by engaging with art enables the artist to locate not a dissolving but a resolving influence.

In *Turandot* there are basically two myths, both based on descent and return, but one focusing on rebirth and eternal life where the end is the beginning - Liù; the other focusing on the meaning of eternal death where the beginning is the end - Turandot. Puccini retains the sense of individual futility and despair as he does with previous protagonists, such as, amongst others, Tosca and Manon Lescaut, while placing individuals in a context of all time, and presents both the musing of daily routine and the terror of emptiness as part of a larger horror. The introduction of the riddles, myths, magic, and the fantasies of the unconscious as leitmotifs, open up a new seam and added a fresh dimension to the music. Puccini, like his

contemporary modernists, exploits all these discoveries. He advocates both tradition and innovation, self-control and liberalism. He refits old ships, as it were, using traditional structures but clothing them in new harmonies and even newer dissonances. These serve as his modern tools, enabling him to have new visions that investigate not only ideas and feelings but the nerves and sinews of contemporary thought, with a perception that was unheard of in the operatic world immediately preceding his, with the possible exception of Verdi's *Otello*. In Puccini's hands, myth becomes both a way of thinking and the object thought, and in both aspects it puts the listener in close proximity with the culture of the original man, the primitive in his natural habitat, as well as in community with his society, with what came before and what comes later. Ultimately, it brings him close to the divine. It gives to man and his acts a significance lacking in a world deprived of myth.

The sense of ultimate coherence achieved in and by *Turandot* is created not through dialectical tension, but via the miniscule levels by which the mythical system creates ripples of each image, ripples that overlap and overtake each other. Puccini contributes to a breakdown of the tyranny of linear historic time. Images ultimately meet themselves in the extended context of each other's image.[16] Puccini's mythic quality in *Turandot*, like Wagner's, Stravinsky's and Joyce's, is more than a question of allusion and thematic parallel. It is about mythic shape as well. Despite them being relevant as individual characters, yet, mythic entities are in the final count collaborators in an endlessly renewed elemental context. They show "history repeating itself with a difference".[17] Ancient deities perish and are resurrected endless times. Despite the fact that their indifferent eyes gaze into the darkness, yet, the grace of light is reaffirmed perpetually in the creative soul.

The ironic twist is, of course, that Puccini endows the simple Liù with mythic qualities, while he divests Turandot of her fragility, insecurity, hatred and fear, taking mythic shape only when she becomes human and, therefore, victorious. A feeling of detachment deprived of any value rests heavily on both sides of the mythical/realistic trope. There is no fluctuation in focus, just weary juxtaposition. If there exists a formulating structure, it consists of the image, hue, and movements that impressionistically represent the chorus' invocation to the moon in Act One within its urban environment.

Puccini's score comes to epitomise the most complete expression of human aspirations and achievement. In it one finds the embodiment of Puccini's ideals, both of abstract analysis and of human love, so that it can accommodate without contradiction the opposing tendencies of his own character, the tension between Eros and Noûs, and between the artist and the thinker. The poetry and the music both reveal an emotional vibrancy that is thoroughly integrated into the structural conception of the work. The formal preoccupations allow the emotional release while the abstract patterns themselves take on emotional significance. Therefore, Puccini's *Turandot* is not only an allegory of a state of mind but a direct portrayal of the working of the mind and its affective states, what Eliot calls an "objective correlative".[18] It is a work concerned with what Valéry calls "ce qu'il y a d'amour, de jalousie, de piété, de désir, de jouissance, de courage, d'amertume, d'avarice, de luxure dans les choses de l'intelligence".[19]

Liù – the real myth

In Liù, the listener encounters the language of myth and ritual, a language that is thick with metaphor from start to finish. It is metaphor chosen for imaginative value but which is soon crystallized into assertion. Great myths express, far more successfully than rational discourse, the permanent truths of human experience. A myth is a great metaphor, and it is far better able than logical argument to satisfy man in his search for truth. For the reader, the emotional desert of Turandot juxtaposed against the oasis that is Liù symbolises with unique power the redemption for which the human spirit longs. The myth communicates not only before it is understood but also without being understood, so natural and fundamental is that within man which responds to it. Myth, by its various associations, evokes and suggests: hence its symbolism. More importantly, as it appears in the figure of Liù, myth demands that the supernatural and transcendental elements should have moral significance. By her mythic force, Liù aims to transcend her mythic substance, to negate herself as myth and to establish herself as a mode of acknowledging in all triumphant humility the existence of Love – the one and supreme Myth.

In his portrayal of Liù, Puccini resorts to the use of leitmotif, a technique the listener has heard him employ in previous operas such as *La Bohème, Tosca, Manon Lescaut, Madama Butterfly*, amongst others. In *Turandot* the listener finds that Puccini is not very much concerned with implementing what is arguably one of his greatest strengths as a composer, namely, the leitmotif, except in the rather obvious cases such as the executioner's scenes. Here, the harmonic idea is analogous to the diminished

seventh chord that the German composer Carl Maria von Weber implements to allegorise the diabolical powers of Samiel in *Der Freischütz*. This is one of the most regularly used motifs in the opera (see figure 1). Puccini places it as a motto right at the beginning of *Turandot,* as he indeed does with the Scarpia theme right at the start of *Tosca*, when it is sounded before the rise of the curtain (see figure 2).

Figure 1: Executioner motif

Figure 1: Scarpia theme

This is what Puccini calls "il motive di prima intenzione",[20] and it can be found at the start of both operas. The first example above betrays no changes either in the harmony or the intervals. There is only transposition to different degrees of the whole-tone scale, together with slight modifications in rhythm and instrumental colour. This kind of treatment is unbending, and can already be perceived in the rigid development of three major triads which, tonally and harmonically, are unrelated. These are the triads of A, E#, and B. This progression is deliberate, and one believes it is meant to allegorise the terror that Turandot not only inspires in her people but one which also consumes her. To assert her indisputable power she needs an executioner.

However, Puccini seems to have completely dedicated his attention to using the leitmotif for Liù, and it is here that his use of the technique reaches Wagnerian proportions. In *Turandot*, leitmotif is not associated to its subject by a trope, as one would normally find in a code. The true Puccinian leitmotif acquires signification from the dramatic circumstances in which it is utilized. Generally, he uses motifs in a straightforward and meaningful way, as one would readily agree with regard to the theme associated with Scarpia above. However, Puccini's treatment of themes in his early operas is different in two salient aspects, especially when compared with Wagner's and Strauss' use of them. Firstly, in his early operas Puccini is not preoccupied with leitmotif as a consistent measure of his composition. Secondly, there are extremely rare instances when they are subject to either rhythmic or melodic modification, despite the emotional and dramatic intensity of the context in which that theme is heard for the first time.

Puccini first uses leitmotif mnemonically, a brand attached to a particular hero or situation. Wagner's use of the leitmotif serve both a dramatic and a symphonic purpose; Puccini's adhere mostly to the former. He is not interested in creating a symphonic network of interlocking ideas but juxtaposes themes, superimposed one upon the other as in a montage, unchanged but transposed to a different pitch and key. From the Wagnerian standpoint, with its grand notions of a *Gesamtkunstwerk*, this technique may come across as antiquated and regressive. Yet, this attitude would underrate the profound dramatic sense that is incorporated within Puccini's use of the leitmotif. For him, the singing voice was the primary dramatic subject to whom all else, including the orchestra, must remain subservient. Regarded in this way, it follows that the leitmotif of Puccini does not generate an intricate maze of thematic analogies. In the words of Gauguin, for Puccini "leitmotif, which like myth is vibration, is capable of attaining what in nature is most universal and consequently most elusive – namely its internal force".[21]

The first time Liù sings is during the mayhem that ensues when the Pekingese crowd is treated like an unruly mob and is beaten mercilessly by the soldiers.

Figure 3: 'Liù leitmotif'

The ravishing beauty of the melody is equally weighted by emotions of terror and love – Turandot and Liù, the fossilised myth and the throbbing one. As the motif develops throughout the opera, it becomes increasingly associated with the tenderness, resilience and loyalty of Liù so that any connotations it had had with the terror that reigned in Peking eases off. Leitmotif allows the audience to develop the dramatic idea and this is only possible because it is used as an expressive link in the chain. It operates like a metaphor, collaborating with the dramatic thought and bringing it into the music where it then becomes amenable to further progression. The leitmotif yields to this development, thus becoming a flow of sonority, increasingly getting more intense and, through associations with other themes, creating further relationships. This possibility emanates from Wagner's technique, one that sees polyphonic allegorizing intricate levels of consciousness. Through recurrence at various pitches, the Liù leitmotif becomes more intense dramatically, unifying the fragmented consciousness of the opera's synecdoche and relating the various parts to the whole. This enables the opera to experience a shadowy and profound unity; that sphere where universals and primordial images live inchoate. Eventually, the mysterious world of myth, legend and mystery answers a need in Turandot and her people, that of redemption. Here, the indissolubility of sound and sense is based not upon the coming together of definable qualities, one in the sound and one in the meaning, but precisely in provoking the impression of certain qualities in the context of the artistic work. Their indefinability, as separate values, guarantees their indissolubility.

The leitmotif, that characteristic theme which, deceptively, appears to be always the same, supports the vast fabric of the opera. While it expresses fragmentation and asserts the primacy of the single life, of individual points of view, when associated with the terror of Act 1, it celebrates the energy of a nature that proceeds by opposites while making the listener mentally travel, in an organized manner, through a landscape of consciousness when it works itself in an upward motion into the great aria before the suicide of Liù. Here, it explores the split of mind and nature while looking for ways to transcend that split.

Figure 4: Liù's theme in an upward motion

The Liù leitmotif, alludes to, represents, and is identified with three basic dimensions of experience. The first is the dimension of ordinary awareness, which Puccini characterizes as distraction. This is represented in the anguish Liù suffers when she realises that the man she loves, Calaf, has set his aim on winning Turandot's heart. The second is the dimension of depth-awareness, which is exemplified by the special fleeting moment in the Grand Palace of Emperor Althoum, as that moment is confronted in its original ambiguity. The third is the explicitly spiritual, dimension of awareness, exemplified in the transfiguration through which the special moment becomes a moment of epiphany in the third act. Liù realises that Calaf's fate depends on her and she sacrifices herself for his well-being. It is in this last dimension that Love, namely, Liù, is understood as the reality leading an affirmative orientation towards temporal existence. Liù asserts herself as myth, thereby dissolving that of Turandot, in her sweeping, soaring phrase "Tanto amore segreto e inconfessato", through which the slave-girl Liù teaches the divine Turandot a lesson in the most basic and human of needs, Love.

Figure 5

By incremental repetition of the original motif, now firmly asserted in the major mode, Puccini gives intensity even to the abstract diction of the poetry. The music inherent in this particular leitmotif is not easily understood in terms of harmonic, melodic and rhythmic structures. This is not the familiar Puccini melody that charms with its beauty, or breaks the heart with its poignancy, as the listener has heard in 'Signore ascolta' in Act 1. The phrases form multiple layers of parallel construction that, by their cumulative effect, load the texture of the music with an almost unbearable intellectual and emotional intensity. Not unlike the Eb chord of the *Prelude* to Wagner's *Das Rhinegold*, more than an actual melodic strain the music in this developed leitmotif comes across as an acoustic idea. It can be understood as an acoustic trace of the transposition between different levels of linguistic discourse. Liù, as she appears and tries to fit in in *Turandot*, is valuable as a representational metaphor whose value lies in its ability to enable interpretation. Thus, the audience can examine the discursive space in which the sanctioning metaphor, that is, Liù, exists, and of attempting to create an analogy between the important aspects of that space and the musical processes that characterise the leitmotif. This correlation moves in two directions. It compresses the discursive space into the musical texture while simultaneously reconfigures the language through musical means. The language and the music do not engage into a text-context correlation; theirs is a correlation of dialogical correspondence.[22]

For a clear understanding of the Liù leitmotif in *Turandot* the listener realizes that although the leitmotif idea creates a more intimate and more specific connection between music and text than had ever been thought possible, it alone is not sufficient to produce a structural whole in opera. By filling the score with obvious motivic references, the higher structural postulate that the compositional course has to be formed in thematic consistency and thematic logic is by no means entirely fulfilled. In this view, one sees in *Turandot* an almost double thematic picture not unlike that encountered in Berlioz's *Symphonie fantastique*: a surface picture formed by the frequent reiteration of the less obvious picture brought about by the normal imitations, variations and transformations of the basic material. This is exactly what Puccini does with the Liù theme. It enables Puccini's structural conceptions to be mainly centred on the external leitmotif technique, his achievement of forging an opera into one architectural whole by inner thematic consistency. In practice, the two principles cannot always be clearly distinguished. With characteristic brilliance Puccini, on the one hand, whenever possible

allows leitmotif to emerge as parts of the organic thematic design and, on the other hand, endows ordinary thematic phrases with leitmotivic effects. In this way, Puccini develops a convincing entity from two phenomena that are separate in principle, namely, thematic structure and thematic symbolism.

Figure 6

Turandot does learn the lesson that Liù teaches her through song. In her giving in to Calaf, Turandot, perhaps subconsciously, reworks the Liù leitmotif, bringing to a dizzy height the technique that made Puccini all that the listener remembers him for: sheer beauty of melody coupled with a taut grip on compositional technique.

1   Compare this with what Richard Strauss said to Josef Gregor, the librettist of his *Daphne*: "Nothing must take place off-stage, not even the killing of Leukippos. Theatre and not literature". Letter written on 4 February 1925, published in *Correspondence of Richard Strauss*, trans. by L. Whittan (Oxford: Blackwells, 1972), p. 311.

2   Quoted by R. Gregory, *Monteverdi: The Man and the Composer* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995). P. 41.

3   In a letter to Ricordi, 20 November 1880. Appendix to *Copialettere* (Milano: Rizzoli, 1913), p. 559.

4   cf., La Harpe's saying about Gluck's *Alceste* : "All the arts are based on conventions, on given assumptions. When I go to the opera, it is to hear music. I am aware that Alceste did not pay farewell to Admète by singing an air; but, since Alceste is on-stage in order to sing, if I find her sorrow and her love in a well-turned air, I shall enjoy her song, thus becoming interested in her misfortune" in *Sur la musique théatrale'*, in *Oeuvres*, 10 vols (Paris: Gallimard, 1820), V, p. 154.

5   From a speech to the Congrès scientifique held at Aix-en-Provence in 1866, in which Zolá surveyed the development of the novel from the earliest Greek specimens to the nineteenth century. Quoted by F.W.J. Hemmings in *Emile Zolá* (London: Methuen, 1953), p. 46.

6   Janáček had already created a Czech brand of Realism in *Jenůfa* (1904).

7   R.L. Stevenson, *Familiar Studies of Men and Books*, vol., 16 (London: Palala Press, 2004), p. 58.

8   These are Anna (*Le Villi*), Fidelia (*Edgar*), Manon (*Manon Lescaut*), Mimí (*La Bohème*), Tosca (*Tosca*), and Cio-Cio-San (*Madama Butterfly*).

9   Dante, 'Inferno', Canto V, vv. 21-2, *Divina Commedia* (Milano: Mondadori, 1994), p. 41.

10   *Turandot*, Act 2, Scene ii.
11   With this in mind, one may better understand Puccini's use of the three 'masks' who, although objective spectators and not indeed 'characters' per se, are the most important personage in the poem, uniting all the rest. What Ping, Pong, Pang see, in fact, is the substance of the opera.
12   T.S. Eliot '*Ulysses*, Order and Myth', *Dial*, 75 (November 1923), 480.
13   Ibid.
14   Ibid., 482.
15   T.S. Eliot, 'Little Gidding', *Four Quartets* (London: Faber & Faber, 1997), p. 42.
16   It is in this way that, amongst others, Coleridge's gradual formulation of a private system rendered it capable of "external validation". See, L. Coupe, 'Reading for the Myth', *EngR*, 4:4 (April 1984), 6-9 (p. 9). Internal explication of this kind might seem to raise the problem of allegory, of reduction of myth to a separable meaning. However, understood as a universally applicable comparative method, one myth explicated in terms of another becomes an end in itself. Each image becomes itself by gradually passing into another until the web is complete and each is every other in the whole that is the end of vision.
17   *Ulysses*. 1922. (London: Everyman's Library, 1992), pp. 1525-6.
18   T.S. Eliot, 'Hamlet', *Selected Essays* (London: Faber & Faber, 1986), p. 77.
19   *Cahiers*, XIX, p. 68. When Valéry longs to recreate the effects of music in poetry, it is to evoke "le mouvement de l'âme … dans une infinité de combinaisons". See also *Cahiers*, XVIII, p. 881, where Valéry refers to music as "un partie opératoire pure".
20   In a letter to Ricordi, 17 June 1922 Appendix to *Copialettere* (Milano: Rizzoli, 1925), p. 208.
21   'Lettre' no 170, quoted by I. Stravinsky and R. Craft in *Dialogues* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982), p. 56.
22   Here I am using the term "dialogical" in the Bakhtinian sense, a process in which different modes of expression at once presuppose, question and interpret each other. See M. Bakhtin's essay 'Discourse in the Novel' in The *Dialogical Imagination*, trans. by C. Emerson & M. Holquist (Texas: Austin, 1981), pp. 56-79.