

Western Expression of Chinese story: Turandot and Unconditional Love

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Abstract

Puccini's opera *Turandot* was composed under the background of China. In the past, research on this opera has mainly focused on cultural differences and exoticism. In this paper, I will discuss this opera from a new perspective: western expression of Chinese story. The Christian spirit of the West is the aesthetic secret of this opera. It is Calaf's unconditional love that dissolves the long-held hatred in Turandot's heart, and makes the cruel and ruthless Princess Turandot begin to transform into a new state of life.

Keywords

Puccini; Turandot; Chinese story; Western expression.

1. Introduction

Puccini's opera *Turandot* is undoubtedly one of the most striking foreign operas for Chinese people, because its plot and some musical materials come from China. Chinese music researchers have carried out multi-angle analysis of the opera from the aspects of cultural differences, oriental characteristics, and structural layout, and have initiated some practices of the sinicization of *Turandot*. Following the opera *Turandot* directed by Yimou Zhang at the Ancestral Temple in Beijing, a Chinese version of the music written by a Chinese composer emerged in the second half of the third act. These practices allowed the Chinese people to gain a better understanding on the opera, and also made the opera *Turandot* more in line with the Chinese people's tastes. However, I believe that the aesthetic secret of this opera is not due to sinicization. Puccini himself did not mean to write an opera that conforms to Chinese culture. He just used Chinese culture as the background for the opera and borrowed the musical elements of the popular Chinese folk song "Jasmine Flower". What really conveys in the opera is the unconditional love that is embedded in Christian culture. As Puccini said: "the opera will be not only original but moving." [1]

2. The hatred of Torandot

The first act of the opera *Turandot* begins with the scene of leading lady Turandot's revenge. The opera uses flashbacks at the beginning, setting the tone of bloody revenge. Relying on the cold, gloomy and noisy music with fragmented and scattered melody, coupled with cold light, the start generally gives audience a sense of coldness, brutality, and irrationality. Turandot does not appear on stage in the first act, but people can still feel her shadow. Her cruelty and ruthlessness are demonstrated through the official's decree, bloody execution, and the scene of how imperial officials Ping, Pang, and Pong persuade Calaf not to commit suicide. The reason of Turandot's revenge remains undisclosed until the second act. This design arouses people's curiosity for the progress of the plot.

"In Questa Reggia" is the most important aria of *Turandot*, and full of strong drama. In the aria, Turandot angrily states that her grandmother was taken by the invading Tatars and died tragically out of humiliation. In order to avenge her grandmother's death, she lured her admirers with marriage. If they cannot solve her tricky riddles, death is what they deserve. So

far, the reason for Turandot's revenge has been made clear. When facing hatred and sin, people's natural response is to take revenge, the most direct and instinctive way. The same is true for Turandot. When her grandmother was killed by the Tartars, Turandot's instant thought was to fight back with violence in a way of treating hatred with hatred, and evil with evil. This is the true psychological portrayal of Turandot at that moment.

However, hatred to hatred, blood to blood is human's instinctive behavior for handling hatred, but they may not be the most desirable behavior. Hatred turns Turandot into a wicked person. In the end, the hatred-to-hatred approach can neither reach her goal, nor achieve the redemption of herself. While punishing our enemy, we commit ourselves to the greater sin of humiliation and contempt for life. When we are wrapped in hatred endlessly, the human spirit gradually degenerates and shrinks, leading to the loss of ability to love. Turandot was undoubtedly in such a state before the awakening of her inner love. She tries to mercilessly kill those innocent admirers, but she does not expect that she has become the victim of hatred, instead of eliminating it.

3. The Love of Calaf

However, this brutal act of revenge is altered by Calaf's unconditional love. The great thing about human beings is that we possess not only the emotion of hatred but also sympathy. Instead of taking revenge on our own enemies, we give them mercy, love and care. This is the inevitable choice of human beings. This choice is what Beethoven mentioned "it must be so"; it is what Kundera described "the burden of life". We know that only in this way the world will gradually become brighter and warmer. This is unconditional love. It is non-utilitarian and transcendent. It makes people to realize the existence of human beings: giving, instead of taking. The scene of Calaf kissing Turandot in the opera is often criticized by some Chinese audience. They think that this manner does not conform to the "reserved expression of sentiments" in Chinese culture. The fact that Turandot is moved only by this kiss is not only inconsistent with the Chinese etiquette, but also abrupt. However, this is not surprising as Puccini's expression favors Western audiences. Furthermore, Calaf's love is not only expressed by that kiss, but also his courage to love. Before Calaf, more than a dozen princes were executed, but he resolutely decides to take the risk to solve the riddle. His bravery shows the strength of love. When Calaf guesses the three riddles correctly, he does not force Turandot to keep her promise, but instead saying, "I will not force you, I only want you to truly love me!", and let her guess his name as the last bet. This shows the tolerance of love. The three ministers not only tempt Calaf with beauties, gold and silver treasures, but also threaten him with death in order to make him give up the so-called "love", but Calaf remains unmoved, which shows the innocence of love. All these scenes seem inconsequential, but they all help set the stage for Turandot's eventual transformation. The thing that touches Turandot the most is Liù's "death for love." In order to show her love for Calaf, Liù would rather choose to commit suicide instead of telling her master's name. Princess Turandot asks in disbelief: "What makes you so firm? Why are you willing to die for others?" Liù's words made the cold Turandot shocked: It's love, sweet love. I would like to pay all costs, princess. Please grant my death, and I will be grateful. Here, princess Turandot is moved by Liù for dying for love, even though she doesn't show it. This can also be evidenced in the composer Puccini's letter to Adami: "To our sorrow, I think Liù must be sacrificed, but I don't see how to do this unless we make her die under torture. And why not? Her death could help to soften the heart of the Princess..." [2]

Next, the most amazing scene appears. Liù's death would undoubtedly increase the hatred between Calaf and Turandot, but Calaf does not take revenge like what Turandot did, but instead gives Turandot the most enthusiastic kiss. This kiss becomes the last straw, inspiring Turandot's inner love. When facing hatred, Calaf takes a more mature solution than Turandot:

to prevent the ongoing hatred between people, and to face hatred with love. Calaf's love not only dissolves Turandot's frozen heart, but also awakens her humanity. Calaf sings affectionately: "Love is like the sunshine of the spring, even if you are as cold as frost! Your eyes are like flowers and trees in spring, and the water waves are shining with the light of love! Ah, how beautiful, how moving, I finally got love!" Indeed, love is like the sunshine, it not only brings light to good, but also brings light to evil, so that the whole world will be bathed in the warmth of love. Therefore, the famous aria "Nessun Dorma" touches us not only with its long and broad lyrical melody, but also the declaration of Calaf's love with saving grace. In addition, the end and the beginning of the opera are in sharp contrast to each other: the light changes from cold tone to warm tone, and the music becomes harmonious and enthusiastic. When the second half of the aria "Nessun Dorma" starts again, it becomes a chorus: people praising the sun, life, eternity, the world, and the light of love. This beautiful picture delineates the realm of life.

4. Turandot's Resurrection of Humanity

With pure, strong, tolerant and dignified love, Calaf melted the icy heart of Princess Turandot, awakening her sleeping soul, making her to abandon the hatred inside and to become a brand new person. When it comes to Turandot's revival of humanity, we have to revisit the third act of the opera, where cues to Turandot's change in characteristic lie in. Puccini stopped writing when Liù died, so it was obvious that the play had not yet been completed, and the continuation of the writing became a problem waiting to be solved. However, continuing others' work is a hard task. Among all the sequels, Franco Alfano's sequel is the most widely adopted version in performances. Although it is a bit blunt, especially in the part where Calaf kisses Turandot, it is basically in line with the development of the drama. Puccini once talked about the great duet towards the end the opera: "two almost superhuman beings [which] descend through love to the level of mankind." [3] In this part, the hatred in Princess Turandot has subsided, and love comes along just in time. For the first time, Turandot sheds her eyes with tears, feeling the happiness she never had before and singing softly: "How many people have died for me, I have been indifferent. But your eyes have taken away my soul, and my heart is like a deer running wildly. I have been conquered by your enthusiasm, and all pride is gone." Turandot sincerely tells Calaf that it is not his riddle that conquered her, but his enthusiasm. At the end of the opera, she proclaims loudly to the king: Dear father, I already know the name of this stranger: his name is love. Just as Miguel de Unamuno said: "And love, above all when it struggles against destiny, overwhelms us with the feeling of the vanity of this world of appearances and gives us a glimpse of another world, in which destiny is overcome and liberty is law. [4] The "another world" is the transcendent world above the real world, the world of unconditional love. The opera reaches its climax at this point, and the play reaches its happy ending.

From a realistic point of view, hatred is stronger than love, and violence will overcome love, but from the perspective of human development, love is eternal. In fact, unconditional love is the aesthetic secret of this opera, and is also the actual "swan song" given by Puccini. Furthermore, this is also the secret of many great works of art. For instance, after the performance of Beethoven's *Ninth Symphony* in d minor, Schumann commented: Don't say any more, we sincerely adore this noble soul. Although life has given him so little, he always gazes at life with infinite love. [5] The love in Schumann's word is unconditional love, which is more fully embodied in Beethoven's later works. The Elder Zosima in Dostoevsky's *The Brothers Karamazov* also proves this: A person is often very confused when he encounters a certain thought, especially when he sees people committing sins, and ask yourself: do you want to subdue with force? Or with gentle love? You should always choose: with gentle love. If you manage to do this persistently, you can conquer the whole world. Gentle love is a formidable force. It is stronger than everything, and nothing can compare with it. [6] Indeed, love awakens

the gentlest, the most innocent, the most forgiving, the brightest, the strongest part of us. It is an ability that we possess after experiencing the hardship in reality and our own finiteness. It focuses on an existence beyond ourselves, seeks redemption outside of human beings, finds a way out of nowhere, seeks the infinite in the finite, and keeps hope in suffering. It makes us realize that only the existence outside the realm of causality in time and space has an eternal nature, which encourages people to settle down and rely on the soul. [7]

Love is the ultimate state of existence. Instead of being subjugated by hatred, love enables us to embrace it and shine on it. It is not about passively receiving, but rather actively giving; it is not the opposite of hatred, but lies above it; it is not based on our own feeling, but the feeling of everyone. Love means that there is always a pure existence of divine supremacy, signaling the encounter of individual with this pure existence of divine supremacy. Love is self-sacrifice; love is unconditional patronage; love is devotion to every life encountered. It never ceases to flow to every soul, every beloved, and to bring the beloved into a new state of divine life. Love is both within and beyond the reality. People find the basis and meaning of life with it, filling themselves with strength and courage. James Reid, in his *Facing life with Christ*, quoted Browning's words. He pointed out that the world is like a chessboard, which some people call black squares with white squares, while others call white squares with black squares. There are people who see the world as a place of evil, just embellishing with a little bit of goodness. The more people stare at the dark side of the world, the more ingrained view they have, so that they see life itself as a frustrating and dangerous thing in which misfortune can happen at any time. Luckily, others see the world as a place of love. What they see is the bright side of the world, and darkness is just the inconspicuous black dots scattered around this light world. The more they look at things that are hopeful, the more they see hope all over the world. This view makes the foundation of their lives been bathed in the radiance of love and goodness. [8] Indeed, as long as we always feel warmth, light and love in our hearts, we will be bathed in warmth, light and love, and we will not retaliate in the face of hatred and darkness. It is Calaf's constant warmth and love that arouses the love of Turandot and let her give up her revenge. She eventually married Calaf, the prince of the Tatars who killed her grandmother.

5. Conclusion

With above discussions, I hope to establish that unconditional love is the true aesthetic secret of this opera. It allows us to truly believe that without love, there is no redemption, and without forgiveness, there is no future. Puccini uses the story from China to convey the love of Christ in the Western world.

References

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