

# The Beauty of Female Characters in Turandot

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**Abstract:** *Turandot is an opera adapted by Puccini based on an Arab folk fairy tale, and its melody is based on the Chinese folk song Jasmine. Moreover, the two female images in the play—Turandot and Liu, as the primary bearers of the dramatic tension in this work, promote the development of the plot. After analyzing the main arias of the two characters, we can try to find the images of Chinese female characters from the Western perspective a hundred years ago, and feel and experience the beauty in them. This also provides a basis for the singer to understand better and shape the character's image.*

**Keywords:** *Puccini's Turandot, Liu's Characters, Turandot's Characters*

## 1. Introduction

All of Puccini's operas are based on realistic short stories, and love is the eternal theme. His operas are full of tense dramatic conflicts. Puccini has successfully created many classic operas from the gentle Mimi and Cio Cio San to the strong personality Tosca to the playful love of Manon Lescaut. His works not only inherit the leading traditional spirit of Italian opera, but also are good at using new musical techniques, so people love his creations. The two female characters in the opera Turandot are "Turandot" and "Liu." In the early stage of the play, Turandot is a cruel, frosty, ignorant and male-hating princess, while Liu is a pure and kind maid who believes in love and is willing to sacrifice for love. The whole opera is intertwined with joy and sorrow. The author guides people to think about love from the stories of two female characters of different social statuses in the same era background. In the following, the author will analyze the characters of Turandot and Liu from the text materials in Turandot, and provide theoretical thinking for vocal singers.

## 2. Image Analysis of Liu

Having a distinctive character is one of the essential factors for successfully shaping characters in opera works, and character traits are also important in determining an opera's image. Only characters with beautiful personalities can attract the audience's attention and arouse the audience's interest to understand the work further. In the opera Turandot, Liu's character is also gradually revealed with the development of the plot, and her character traits are also shown in every line of her lyrics and actions.

### 2.1 Analysis of Liu's Aria Background and Lyrics

Liu, is the personal maid of the old king of Tatar, she is low in status but kind and loyal. At the beginning of the play, Liu helps the old king to walk in the chaotic street, the crowd was in a commotion, and the old king accidentally fell down in the panic. Liu alone could not lift the old king up, so she asked the crowd for help, and Liu called for help in a low voice, "il mio vecchio è caduto, Pietà! Pietà!". When the male protagonist supported the old king, Liu's eyes were full of gratitude, showing her loyalty and sincerity to the master. And when they met the hero, we also learned from the old king's recitative that the old king lost the battle and fled, it was Liu's guidance all the way that made him safe "Ed io cadevo affranto e m'asciugava li pianto mendicava per me." From here we can also see Liu's kindness and loyalty, following and protecting the king all the way. As for Liu's answer "Perché un dì, nella reggiam'hai sorriso", Liu fell in love with the old king just with a smile, and because of this, Liu was not afraid of hardships and dangers, and took care of the old king meticulously along the way. From this short dialogue, we can feel that Liu is a character who is passionate, kind, and able to face difficulties positively.

The composer arranged two arias for Liu, "Signore Ascolta" and "Tu Che Di Gel Sei Cinta", these

two arias are also the author's most impactful expression of Liu's character. In particular, "Tu Che Di Gel Sei Cinta" produced a vast dramatic impact, which provided the possibility for a later change in the ending.

The aria "Signore Ascolta" appears in the play's first act. When the prince saw Turandot for the first time, he was attracted by Turandot's beauty and insisted on solving the riddle despite his father's dissuasion, so Liu, who loved the prince deeply, begged the prince and sang this aria. In the expression of the lyrics, the content of the lyrics can be divided into two parts. In the first part, Liu narrates the pain of exile, but she feels hopeful when she thinks of Calaf, showing the importance of the prince in her heart. The second part is Liu's persuasion, expressing that he and the king finally escaped through life and death, but Calaf wanted to guess riddles, and everyone might lose their lives because of his choice. Liu doesn't want the prince to take the risk of solving riddles, and doesn't want her beloved to die, but she still wants to hide her love for the prince in her heart. So she said cautiously emotionally: "Ei perderà suo figlio, io l'ombar d'un sorriso!" to convey her objection to Calaf's decision.

And the aria "Tu Che Di Gel Sei Cinta" is Liu's farewell before committing suicide in the third act. In order to know the name of the prince, Turandot captured the king and Liu and tortured them in every possible way. To protect the prince, she was not afraid of pain and oppression, denounced the princess' words and deeds, and committed suicide with a knife after singing this aria. According to the meaning of the lyrics, the whole song can be divided into two parts. The first part is a rebuke of Turandot's words and deeds, and she thinks she is ruthless. At the same time, Liu believes that the princess will be melted by Calaf's enthusiasm and fall in love with the prince. The second part concerns Liu's will to sacrifice her life to protect Prince Calaf, hoping to fulfill the prince, and willing to dedicate herself to the prince's success. But at the same time, she also expressed her dissatisfaction with the prince.

## **2.2 Analysis of Liu's Character Image**

Suppose we analyze the above Liu's aria, first of all, from the perspective of her life. In the first act of the play, Liu helps her master to walk on the street, but the old king fell to the ground in a panic. Liu couldn't help her master by herself, so she asked for help. We can find that Liu is a weak character, hardworking, loving, able to face difficulties positively, and full of kindness towards life and other people. From the perspective of love, Liu is brave, faithful, and willing to give everything for love, because a smile has become all her motivation and hope for her in the face of difficulties. Judging from the role's positioning, Liu's identity does not match that of the prince, but Liu is brave enough to express herself in "Signore Ascolta" and plead with Calaf. After Calaf decided to solve the puzzle, she still supported Calaf's choice in action. In order to protect Calaf's life, she committed suicide to fulfill Calaf's life. In the face of love, Liu is no longer a weak girl on the outside, but a brave girl who can dedicate her life to protect her love and is not afraid of power. Therefore, in terms of love values, Liu is an image that love is supreme and love can conquer everything.

## **2.3. Analysis of Liu's Aesthetic**

Liu's indomitable sacrifice for love, nobility and tragedy, and the commonality and individuality with the public in the face of love, portray the image of Liu particularly brilliantly, which can resonate with the audience. <sup>[1]</sup>

The first is sublimity. Sublime means majestic and tall, and at the same time it is a kind of aesthetic category. It has a solid artistic charm and can significantly improve people's spiritual realm. The sense of sublimity comes from the spiritual power displayed by people in fighting against relatively weak forces representing justice and powerful hostile forces. The image of Liu in this play is very noble. First of all, Liu's image from the first act, Liu can't help the old king up alone, so she portrays a weaker female image in appearance. Later, in order to protect Calaf, she did not hesitate to fight against the mighty princess. Faced with the princess's various tortures, she did not give in. Instead, she completes her resistance to the princess's power by committing suicide. This fearless spirit of giving up her life for love makes the audience feel sublimity in the character of Liu. In the end, Liu exchanges her death for her lover's happiness, so this role, after shocking the audience, can arouse the audience's love for her. It is precisely because it produces the intertwining of various emotions in the audience that this sublimity reaches its peak when the character finally dies.

The second is tragicness. Tragic beauty is a unique category in aesthetics. It is a means of expressing dramatic conflicts and finally inspiring people to think more deeply. Tragic can arouse people's pity and emotional touch and bring more thinking and shock. The tragedy of Liu plays a vital

role in the plot's development and aggravates the drama's conflict. When she expressed her thoughts in "Signore Ascolta", she paved the way for the tragic ending that followed. "Tu Che Di Gel Sei Cinta" is the culmination of the tragedy of the character of Liu. This aria accuses Princess Turandot of her heartlessness, sings of her love and reluctance for Calaf, and her fortitude and fearlessness that transformed her initially weak character. The suicide after singing raised Liu's tragedy to a higher level, and it is precisely here that for the audience, the feeling left behind is shocking and thought-provoking at the same time.

The third is typicality. The role of Liu is a typical maid, which can also be said to be a microcosm of a small part in the lives of thousands of people. She faces the positiveness of life and yearns for love faithfully, and it is also a reflection of most of the female images in life. Through the portrayal of minor characters in life, the development of the entire plot is promoted, thereby strengthening the dramatic conflict, so the character of Liu is particularly critical, and she is enough to mobilize the audience to resonate with it. The heroine of this play is Turandot, but under Puccini's adaptation, the role of Liu is even as important as the protagonist Princess.

### 3. Image Analysis of Princess Turandot

In Puccini's creation of operas, he believed that music is used to convey emotions. He said: "I don't want to watch nor do I want mythological dramas or oratorios, like Wagner's 'Parsifal'; I want to find something more emotional, human nature, and close to the audience." [2] Therefore, Puccini did not have an evident attitude towards politics, and took "love" as the theme of his opera creation. Turandot, as the opera's heroine, was originally a tragic setting amidst fear and torment, and finally completed the transformation from hatred to love under the outside world's influence. This has become the charm of this character, expressing the goodness in human nature and introducing deep thought.

#### 3.1. Analysis of Princess Turandot's Aria Background and Lyrics

Turandot, the princess of the Yuan Dynasty, is an entirely different character from Liu. Turandot is a princess of a big country with supreme power, but her ancestors being taken away left a shadow on her and made her ruthless. She began to hate men, and used solving riddles as an excuse to kill all the men who came to propose marriage. And this ruthlessness is only her mask. In her heart, she longs for love but dares not believe in love, so she is also struggling in pain. As soon as Princess Turandot appeared in the play, the composer delicately portrayed Turandot's supremely powerful, cold, and ruthless image. In the first act, before Turandot appeared on the stage, the official libretto to the emperor's decree created the image of a ruthless princess for us. We learned from the official's speech that if someone can solve the three questions the princess gave, the princess will marry him, and if she fails to guess correctly, she will kill him. Because the Prince of Persia didn't solve the right problem, the executioner will kill him when the moon rises. While paving the way for the storyline from this libretto, it outlines the image of a ruthless princess with supreme power. And the first appearance of the princess did not arrange the libretto, but when she killed the prince of Persia, she executed the prince without the slightest emotion in the face of everyone's pleading. In the opera's second act, Turandot's brutality is also hinted at in the aria of the three courtiers. After Turandot started looking for a husband at the age of 16, in addition to festival sacrifices, the ceremony officials held more sacrifices for the dead. "L'anno del Topo furon sei, L'anno del Cane furon otto, Nell'anno in corso, il terribile anno della Tigre siamo già al tredicesimo", we can see from this paragraph that too many princes are killed every year because of solving riddles, and the cruelty of Princess Turandot is also reflected here.

The composer arranged two arias for Turandot, namely "In Guesta Beggia" and "Del Primo Pianto". The two arias were sung by the author in the second and third acts of the opera, expressing the inner thoughts of Princess Turandot and giving Turandot more human beauty under the cold appearance. In particular, "Del primo pianto" directly allows us to see Turandot's inner struggle and the contradictory psychological process when his personal beliefs collapse. The following author will analyze the lyrics of the two arias of Princess Turandot in detail.

"In guesta beggia" is Turandot's first aria, which appears in the second scene of the second act of the opera. It was the square in front of the palace where all the audience gathered to watch the guessing ceremony, Turandot appeared arrogantly, when she passed by the prince, she gave the prince a cold look and then sang. It mainly tells about what happened to her, and at the same time explains the reasons why she did so. At the same time, this aria also shows the princess's arrogance, fierceness, and domineeringness from the content. This aria can be divided into 5 parts from the content of the lyrics.

The first part tells about the ancient legend as the introduction of the content. The second part tells how the ancestor Princess Luling ruled the kingdom wisely and bravely, and the country was peaceful under her rule, and expresses Turandot's own respect and love for Princess Luling. The third part states the tragic scene at that time. The main idea of the lyrics: "But at that time, a war suddenly broke out, swords were everywhere, and gunpowder smoke was everywhere! The enemy annexed our land. When the princess was captured, she was bruised and bruised, and she was dragged out and killed by a young man like you. Her beautiful voice has disappeared since then." The fourth part explains the purpose of the puzzle. The main idea of the lyrics: "Ah! Princes! You travel and dust, come from all over the world, take the risk to propose to me, I want to avenge the princess on you, for her virtue, for her cry and death!" The last fifth part is to express his attitude towards solving riddles and his determination to get revenge. "No one can possess me! The hatred of the ancestors has been hidden in my heart, no, no one can possess me! Ah, her pure pride, reborn in me again! Stranger, don't take risks, three riddles, but only one death! "

The aria "Del primo pianto" is sung by Turandot in the third act. Facing Liu's suicide, Princess Turandot's faith was shaken for the first time. Then in the duet quarrel with Prince Calaf, Prince Calaf's kiss completely shook Princess Turandot's heart, and Turandot was finally influenced. She sang the aria after shedding her first tear. The main content of the aria is to express one's own love and the torment of one's inner choice, it is an aria for Turandot to show his inner contradictions. This aria can also be divided into four parts according to the content of the lyrics. The first part is that Princess Turandot expresses her inner fluctuation by expressing her love. The main idea of the lyrics: "The first tears, ah! The first tears, yes, stranger, when you came, I was full of distress, and the cruel fate was clearest this time. Many princes died for me, I despise them, but I am afraid of you! "The second part is to tell the reason why I was moved. Love conquers everything. Lyrics to the effect: "Because your eyes shine with assurance! Yes, because your eyes shine with victory, and therefore I hate you and love you!" The third part shows that my inner choice and the suffering of making a decision are finally resolved because of love. The main idea of the lyrics: "Everywhere is torn, two conflicting fears, conquer or be conquered, at last I am conquered by you, ah! Not because of my three riddles, but because of the burning love you gave me! "The fourth part is the return of Princess Turandot's humanity. She understands the true meaning of love, and she is willing to sacrifice herself instead of losing her life. Therefore, she persuaded Calaf to leave and was willing to let him go. The main idea of the lyrics: "This is the answer you want, now you know, don't look for a bigger victory! Go, stranger! Go away with your secrets that no one knows!"

### ***3.2. Analysis of Princess Turandot's Character Image***

From the analysis of Turandot's aria text above, we can find that the positioning of Turandot's role conveys the theme that love can conquer everything.<sup>[3]</sup> In the first act at the beginning of the opera, the heroine Turandot didn't even have a libretto, but through the singing of other characters, Turandot was portrayed as a cold, ruthless princess. But this image did not come for no reason, and the composer also gave a very reasonable explanation for the formation of this image. Because her ancestor, Princess Luling, was killed by foreign enemies, she hoped to avenge her ancestors in this way, so she designed riddles and ruthlessly killed princes from other countries. From this point of view, Princess Turandot is not a cold image, but blinded by hatred. She is in awe of her ancestors, and for her princess status, he understands her responsibility: she must live proudly forever. In terms of love, Turandot didn't believe in love at first, she was afraid of love, and she hated the men who pursued her. In the latter part of the play, under Liu Er's suicide and Karaf's confession, she was finally conquered by love and completed the transformation of human nature. Regarding the values of Turandot, she maintains her personal beliefs, and she can do this regardless of the cost, and refuses to look back on what she believes. She wants to take revenge on those men and fight for the status of women in her own way. At the same time, she is also wise. No one can answer the questions she asked, which also shows that she has beauty and wisdom simultaneously. It's just that the matter of revenge has deeply occupied her heart to the point of a paranoid pathology, and she closed herself up. She is arrogant and overbearing, and facing the old man Caraf's father and the weak maid Liu, she has not retreated in any way, and she has continuously tortured them in order to achieve her goals, without any mercy. When the hero came to the emperor, even the emperor tried his best to persuade her, showing his helplessness, which also showed that the princess was very stubborn, and even her father couldn't do anything about her decision. In order to find out the name of the male protagonist, she even gave an order: No one in the capital can sleep today, unless the names of strangers are found out before dawn; otherwise they will die. She does whatever it takes to get what she wants. Also, because of such a strong belief, it is challenging to shake her values, which reflects that revenge has become the whole of her life for her,

which contrasts the return of the princess's humanity later.

### 3.3. Analysis of Princess Turandot's Aesthetic

The character Turandot itself has a specific feminist color, and she and Liu are interdependent and compared with each other, and jointly promote the development of the plot. The most extraordinary charm lies in her transformation from hate to love, from not knowing what love is to learn how to love. Therefore, the contrast between the front and back of this image has become the main line of the development of the whole story, which arouses people's thinking about goodness and human nature.

Dramatic Turandot's character set is theatrical. Due to the changes in the outside world, Turandot's heart has undergone a huge reversal. In the first act of the drama, the author creates a ruthless image of Princess Turandot through the singing of supporting roles. At the same time, the composer did not arrange an aria for her in the first act, but only waved his hands when the people interceded for the prince. This can also arouse the audience's doubts about this character, especially when the innocent and lovely Liu finally commits suicide in the play; the further escalation of this contradiction directly arouses the audience's disgust for Turandot. Liu died for love and Prince Calaf's perseverance inspired her understanding of goodness, breaking Turandot's fear of men's love, and at the same time, giving the character itself more rationality. In the end, Turandot's humanity returns, and she understands love, forming a sharp contrast before and after, thus completing the theme of conveying to the audience that love can conquer everything.

Typicality, in a certain sense, Turandot is also the incarnation and reflection of the characters in people's lives. She is inflexible and paranoid about the things she decides, which also reflects the injustice against women in society. The character became a representation of a feminist image, not believing in love. After being moved by Liu Er and Karaf, her humanity has been restored, and she does not want to sacrifice innocent lives, and understands that love is not possession, and sacrifice is also a kind of happiness. In the face of love, she is no longer afraid, and finally gets happiness with Calaf. The author's best answer to solve hatred in this role is "love." This role can arouse the audience's reflection; immersing in hatred will restrain the people around them and themselves, encourage everyone to believe in love and kindness, and believe that everyone can obtain happiness through love and compassion.

## 4. Conclusion

From the analysis of the plot development of the opera, we can find that the composer has a certain degree of opposition and contrast between the two characters. The two female characters seem to be representatives of good and evil, but both characters are fundamentally kind and soft. Princess Turandot was blinded by hatred, so she became ruthless and avoided love, but after facing a lot of guidance and shocks, she finally chose to embrace love. In other people's singing, Princess Turandot represents power, but in fact she is cowardly. When facing love, she is timid and retreats. On the other hand, Liu is a fragile female image in life, but she is not afraid in the face of power, is uncompromising, and dares to fight for the love in her heart. The impression given to her here is tall. It was her who taught the powerful princess love and bravery. In this opposition and difference, the two characters rely on each other, achieve each other, and jointly convey the mighty power of love to the audience.

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