

TIME AS AN ACTION GENERATING FACTOR IN GIACOMO PUCCINI'S OPERA "TURANDOT"

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study is to examine the time coordinate as a tension/relaxation generator in Giacomo Puccini's opera *Turandot*. The work is replete with temporal suggestions, which are either inserted directly in the libretto, by linking the moments of the action to certain times of the day (the appearance of the Moon or the rise of the Sun), or used as structural devices in the score, whereby the perception of time's passage is accelerated or delayed through the use of traditional musical devices such as: the alternation of equal or dotted rhythmic values, melodic lines moving stepwise or in leaps, the alternation of Western tonality and pentatonic systems, of binary and ternary meter, of consonance and dissonance, or of homophony and polyphony. At the same time, the construction of the tensional moments takes into account the characters' psychology, so that the objective progression of time is altered by their inner states. The subjective perception of time occurs not only in terms of the relationship between the audience and the stage, but also in the expansion and contraction of time as perceived by the characters themselves.

Keywords: Puccini, *Turandot*, time coordinate, perception.

Since the emergence of the opera genre in Italian culture, the correlation of the new musical-dramatic performance to what had been known around the beginning of the seventeenth century about the ancient Greek tragedy, which this new type of performance aimed to restore, led to the incorporation of the spatial and temporal conditioning of the action: the unity of time and place. This pattern was also used in the French opera, which borrowed this conditionality from the French classical theatre. However, the concern for placing the action in a unitary spatio-temporal framework (usually during the course of a single day) has gradually declined over the centuries in the opera performance, first through the elimination of the mythological subject containing this intrinsic condition, but also through the escape from the time of the action itself, especially in lyrical passages (aria, duet, trio or choir), in order to either recollect the past or project the characters' aspirations into the future.

The gradual transformation of the Baroque model of opera performance towards the end of the eighteenth century, particularly in the Venetian opera, led to the branched dissolution of the fluency of the action, in favour of an increase in the number of lyrical parts (arias and duets). A similar process occurred in the French lyrical tragedy of Rameau's period, in which the standardized five-act opera model required, throughout the entire second act, sequences of ballet fragments, sometimes unrelated to the action, which also disrupted its fluency. The mid-eighteenth-century reform opera pioneered by Gluck and Calzabigi reinstated the unity, consistency and unidirectionality of action and time. In the next century, however, this unifying principle was to be undermined again by the Italian Romantic opera. It sometimes happens in the librettos of the famous early Italian operas, as well as in some of Verdi's operas, that the action suddenly 'freezes' in the most intense tensional moment, in order to make room for a lyrical one: an aria, a duet, an ensemble or even a choral moment. An illustrative example in this respect is Gaetano Donizetti's opera *Lucia di Lammermoor*, whose libretto, despite complying to the principles of fluency and coherence of the action and of unity of time and space, brings on stage an action that is intercut by "still frames" at the key moments of maximum tension: we mention here the famous sextet with chorus *L'ira frena in tal momento*, or the chorus *O qual funesto avvenimento* (both in the second act), which are interposed between Raimondo's aria announcing the murder of Arturo, Lucia's new husband, and the heroine's famous madness aria. "Still frame" moments also occur in Verdi's early works, as in the opera *Nabucco*, for example (the ensemble of soloists and chorus *S'appressan l'istanti d'un ira fatale* / The moment of wrath is approaching).

Another relevant aspect of the growing importance of time as an action generating element in the Romantic opera performance is the dramatic role of the

overture, which foreshadows the course of events by stating the main musical themes that accompany the key moments of the action, as it happens in the Prelude to Giuseppe Verdi's opera *La Traviata*, or in the preludes to Richard Wagner's musical dramas (*Tristan and Isolde*, *Lohengrin*). The overture thus becomes an essentialized musical version of the entire course of events of the action, but also a foreshadowing of the denouement.

No less significant from this point of view is the dramaturgical role of the *leitmotif* as a generator of temporal suggestions, as used by Wagner in his musical dramas. Similar prefigurative implications of the musical idea occur in Verdi's *Othello*: the soul-stirring words in the duet between Othello and Desdemona at the end of the first act, "... *un baccio, ancora un baccio*", will be heard again at the end of the fourth act, articulated by the same Othello, this time to a dead wife. This type of prefiguration also occurs in Verdi's *Rigoletto*, where each of the three acts ends with the words *Ah, la maledizione!* (Ah, the curse!), first as a premonition, then as a fatality.

In the context of the stylistic and aesthetic innovations of twentieth-century modernity, the time parameter took on a new level of significance as an organizing element of events: in the modern performance, temporal linearity and continuity are altered again, this time not to serve the public taste, as in the Venetian Baroque opera, where the aria was the determining factor in the dissolution of continuity, but as a result of the new stylistic orientations and trends, i.e. Futurism, Pointillism, Expressionism, and of the post-modernist tendencies that annihilate the spatio-temporal continuity and call upon the subconscious to recompose the action from disparate parts, in the same way as it recomposes dreams, giving them continuity and a logical significance.

With regard to Giacomo Puccini's opera *Turandot*, which we have used as a model in our analysis, it straddles the line between tradition and modernity¹ in terms of the relationship between continuous/discontinuous, tension/relaxation, acceleration/deceleration of time, thus successfully illustrating the innovative preoccupation with speculating on the subjective perception of time both in terms of the audience's relationship to the stage, and of the configuration of the characters' inner tension and of the dramatic situations, and, on the other hand, the continuation of the line of tradition through the unidirectionality of the narrative.

We will summarize briefly the narrative of the opera: Princess Turandot, daughter of the Chinese Emperor Altoum, refuses to get married, because one of

¹ For a better understanding of the relationship of the opera *Turandot* to tradition and modernity, see Ashbrook, William Powers, Harold, *Puccini's 'Turandot': The End of the Great Tradition*, Princeton Studies in Opera, Princeton University Press, 1991.

her ancestors, Princess Lou-Ling, had been raped and killed by a foreign prince, thousands of years ago. For this purpose, she issues an imperial decree announcing that she will only marry a young man of royal blood who can correctly answer her three enigmas. The punishment for answering incorrectly is death. In the central square of Peking, an unknown prince finds his father (the vanquished King of Tartary), together with his slave Liù, after long years of exile. At the sight of Princess Turandot, he falls in love with her and decides to solve the three enigmas. The three ministers of the empire, Ping, Pang and Pong, try to persuade him to give up, as does his father and his slave, who, out of love for his son, was his faithful companion in exile. Although the Prince solves the three enigmas, Turandot still refuses to give herself into the hands of an unknown man, and so the prince in turn proposes her an enigma of his own, for he wants her to come to him willingly, out of love (*Ti voglio tutta ardente d'amor*¹), and not only because he won: if she can discover his name before sunrise, his destiny will be in her hands. Turandot commands that no one in the kingdom shall sleep until she has found out the suitor's name. The Prince's father is captured, and so is his slave, who resists torture and does not reveal the Prince's name. Impressed by the slave's sacrifice, who kills herself without confessing, Turandot discovers that her strength lies in love. The dawn is drawing near, and before sunrise, the Prince reveals his identity, thus giving the princess the chance to choose: his love or his death. Turandot, impressed by the newly discovered feeling of love, tells her people that she has found out the stranger's name: his name is Love.

The action of the opera takes place under the pressure of time. The libretto places the action in China, Beijing, in legendary times. Other temporal suggestions are gradually unmasked in the libretto: from the three ministers' trio at the beginning of the second act, for example, we learn that we are in the year of the Tiger, and that the curse of the imperial decree has already sent to death 12 young men who tried solve the enigmas in order to win the Princess's hand, but failed. Here, the heightening of the tension is achieved by means of pressure and gradation: the pressure comes from the growing number of victims, after the year of the Rat (six victims) and of the Dog (eight victims) and from the increasingly urgent need of the entire empire for mental relaxation, by overcoming the burden imposed by the imperial decree, which puts a lot of pressure both on the three ministers who are responsible for organizing the events and ceremonies – whether a wedding, or a funeral, depending on the candidate's performance (a fact that they complain about in the above-mentioned trio), but also on the people who vacillate continuously between their thirst for blood and their pity for the victims.

¹ "I want you ardent with love".

At the same time, all the key moments of the action are linked to certain moments of the day: the public execution of the Prince of Persia takes place right when the Moon appears, while the search for the unknown Prince's name ends at sunrise, when Turandot declares herself defeated and surrenders to his love.

The opera begins abruptly, without an introduction, prelude or overture, with a mandarin reading the imperial decree. The same announcement is repeated in the second act, right before the unknown Prince solves the three enigmas, this time at an accelerated pace, following the same musical line, but in diminished note values. At this moment, the tension is amplified by the imminence of the decision on the Prince's fate, depending on his answers.

The image shows a piano reduction of Act I, bars 4-10. The score is written for piano and xylophone. The piano part features a repetitive percussive chord in the bass, with dynamics ranging from *fff* to *mf*. The xylophone part is introduced in the second system with a *p* dynamic and a *cresc.* marking. The score concludes with the text "CURTAIN. SIPARIO." and a piano reduction mark.

Example 1: Act I, bars 4-10, piano reduction¹

As illustrated by the above example, the instrumental introduction that precedes the mandarin's reading of the imperial decree is based on the obsessive repetition of the same percussive chord – an overlapping of chordal layers with opposite gravitational tonal centres: *D minor* and *C # major*, creating an atmosphere of intransigence, frozenness, tenseness.

¹ The musical examples are taken from the Ricordi edition of the opera, in piano reduction (Guido Zuccoli), Milan 1929, which is in the public domain, www.imslp.org (accessed on November 3, 2016).

Expansion and contraction of time. The phenomenon of time expansion during the tensional moments is ripped straight from reality and is skilfully speculated by the composer in several moments of the opera, of which we will analyze three: the chorus *Perchè tarda la luna*, in the first act, Turandot's aria *In questa reggia*, in the second act and the moment when the unknown Prince solves the three enigmas, in the second act. Other moments of time expansion are not related to the heightening of the tension of the dramatic moment, but rather to the escape into a time or space of peace and quiet, as in the ministers' trio at the beginning of the second act, in which each of them nostalgically dreams of the calm and tranquility that ruled the empire before Turandot's birth, or about their oases of relaxation in the heart of nature (a cottage near a lake in Honan, surrounded by bamboo, the forests near Tsiang, or a garden near Kiù), far away from the world they have to live in, subject to the cruelty of Turandot's imperial decree.

As the first two moments of the opera that are herein under analysis have many elements in common, we will further examine them in parallel. The first one, *Perchè tarda la luna*, serves to gradually heighten the tension prior to the execution of the Prince of Persia, by apparently interrupting it through a static tableau. Here, the delayed appearance of the Moon is suggested by the *tremolo* in the strings, repetitive rhythms, *ostinato*, rhythmic structures with equal (and not dotted) values on repeated notes in the choral voices (i.e. linear melodic lines), and an isorhythmic and isochronous choral texture. At this point time expands, as a preamble to a moment of maximum tension, i.e. a public execution. The moment can also be placed in relation to the eagerness of the bloodthirsty people to watch another macabre spectacle of a person's death:

com_ing?
lu - na?

Rise in the heav_ens!
Mo.strati in cie - lo!

Shed thy light on us!
Fuc.cia pal.li.da!

Hasten! Quick.ly!
Presto! Vie - ni!

p

Hast - en!
Spun - ta!

O pal - lid vis.age!
O ie - sta moz.za!

Basses
Bassi

Di - aph - anous!
O squal - li - da!

Example 2: Act I, chorus, *Perchè tarda la luna*, piano reduction, p. 44.

It is scientifically documented in psychological literature that when a person is undergoing an intense stress related to an imminent danger, or is going through a traumatizing event, the perception of time in that person's subconscious mind is much slower, so that the memory can record every detail of that event, which, under different circumstances, the brain would perceive, but would not memorize.¹ Other suggestions of time expansion from this perspective occur not only in its musical coating, but even in the text of the chorus, which provides details about the victim: ... *O giovinetto! Grazia! Grazia! Com'è fermo il suo passo! Com'è dolce il suo volto! Ha negli occhi l'ebbrezza! Ha negli occhi la gioia!*²

The second moment of time expansion occurs in Turandot's aria *In questa reggia*, which precedes the moment when the three enigmas are solved. Here, the technical devices described for the chorus *Perche tarda the month*, i.e. izosorhythm and isochrony, linear melodic line, orchestral texture with sustained chords and pedal notes, are complemented by a fanned-out temporal dimension: the aria moves from reminiscing an episode from the far-off past of China, when

¹ Cf. Elisa Negretto *Expectation and Anticipation as Key Elements for the Constitution of Meaning in Music*, in: *Philosophy in an Age of Science*, editors Mario De Caro and David Macarthur, Harvard University Press, vol. XXXI/3, 2012, p. 153.

² "O the youth! Mercy! Mercy! How steady is his step! How sweet is his face! Ecstasy is in his eyes! Joy is in his eyes!"

Princess Turandot's predecessor, Lou-Ling, had been raped and killed by a foreign conqueror, to the projection into the future: *Mai nessun, nessun m'avrà*¹.

The two moments of time expansion are also united by their sharing of the same gravitational tonal centre *D* (first in a major key, then in a minor key). Here, the delay in time perception has a different significance, namely that of the reaction of the crowd and of the unknown Prince upon seeing Princess Turandot: an almost cataleptic state of amazement, consternation. Equally significant is the fact that the Princess's appearance on stage is postponed for as long as possible, i.e. until the middle of the second act.

The third moment of time expansion – the scene of the three enigmas – is also the most effective one in terms of construction: each question is longer than the previous one, and so is the Prince's pondering time. This technical device is corroborated with the transposition of each subsequent question up by a semitone. The pondering time is interrupted by the encouragements of the crowd (*È per la vita! Parla! Non perderti, straniero! Parla!* or *Coraggio, scioglitore degli enigmi!*²) and by the Princess's cries of anger, ordering the guards to chastise them (*Percuotete quei vili!*³), during the second question. As the Prince is pondering over the answer to the third enigma, Turandot breaks the silence herself, trying to delay the inevitable, but also to psychologically destabilize the Prince: *Su, straniero! Ti sbianca la paura! E ti senti perduto!*⁴

Another element of time as a tension generating factor is the **overlapping of actions and time gaps**, achieved either by overlapping the action on the stage with that in the backstage, or by briefly overlapping the action sequences and thus creating a common time of present and future. To illustrate this technique, we will clip out three moments of the action, each with its specific features. The moment that falls into the first category, in which the action on the stage is overlapped with that in the backstage, is the moment when the unknown Prince (Calaf) is preparing to announce, with three strikes of the gong, his participation in the competition (stage). Turandot is sleeping (backstage) and the strikes of the gong are stopped by Turandot's maids, who order all to be silent, so as not to disturb the Princess's sleep. The execution of the Prince of Persia takes place in the backstage as well, so that Calaf is a direct witness of the execution, while the public is not. If from the spatio-temporal perspective of the participants in the action the execution takes

¹ "No one will ever possess me!"

² "Your life is at stake! Speak! Don't destroy yourself, stranger! Speak! Speak! Courage, solver of enigmas!"

³ "Lash those wretches!"

⁴ "Come, stranger! You're pale with fright! And you know you are lost!"

place here and now, the public perceives a different space, one they cannot see, which heightens the tension and distorts the perception of time.

Included in the same category of temporal gaps is **the temporal and spatial flexibility of the choral compartment as a collective character**. It acts in the present time of the action as a personification of the crowd, of the Chinese people, always participating in the action as a whole, without any dissensions or discord among them. This is reinforced in the score by the preponderance of the unison or of the isorhythmic chordal passages, to the disadvantage of the polyphonic-imitative ones, which occur particularly at moments of confusion: the beginning of the first act (*In dietro, cani!*¹, when the crowd is held in check by the imperial guards, or when the executioner arrives and starts torturing Liù. Otherwise, the chorus, as an actual character in the scenic present, acts as a “package” in terms of texture, with frequent isorhythmic interventions, or even by using the unison as a sonorous illustration of “in a single voice” (the chorus *Ungi, arrota, che la lama guizzi, sprizzi fuoco e sangue!*² in Act I, resumed in Act III from the backstage, during the ministers’ trio, as a reminder of the threat).

However, the choral interventions in the present time of the action alternate with vocal suggestions that are detached from the present: such a moment is the choral intervention in the first act, when Calaf hears the voices of those who died before him, coming from the other world, still singing their passionate admiration for Turandot’s beauty:

THE SHADOWS - FANTASMI

CHORUS OFF STAGE
CORO INTERNO

4 Tenors
4 Tenori

p Tar-ry no long-er!
Non in-du-gia-re!

For if you
Se chiami, ap-

38 Lento ♩ = 40
leggermente arpeggiato

mf *pp*

due Ped.

Example 3: Act I, *Non indugiare* (chorus), piano reduction, p. 106.

¹ “Stand back, dogs!”

² “Oil it, sharpen it, let the blade gleam, spatter!”

The atmosphere of a time and space in which the world of the dead interferes visually and acoustically with that of the living is illustrated in the score by the overlapping of *F major* seventh chords with the *C augmented* chord, the resulting harmonic tension being contrasted with the repeated attack of this chord, like a rhythmic pedal, realized in an arpeggiated, isochronous form, with reduced dynamics and the timbral colour of muted strings and harp. The performance indication for the chorus (the voices of the princes who died before Calaf) are: *misterioso, come da lontano, strascicando il suono, facendo tutti riparo colle mani a conchiglia sulla bocca*¹), for the text *Non indugiare! Se chiami, appare quella che, estinti, ci fa sognare! Fa ch'ella parli! Fa che l'udiamo! Io l'amo! Io l'amo!*² At this moment of the action, the choral timbre requires four mezzo-soprano voices and four tenor ones, a combination which, in conjunction with the antiphonal interpretation of the lines, contributes significantly to the creation of the atmosphere.

Other examples of temporal and spatial flexibility in the choral sections are the interventions of the children's chorus at three essential moments of the opera: the moment preceding the execution of the Prince of Persia, the moment preceding the three enigmas and the love duet at the end of the opera, where, in Franco Alfano's view, who completed the unfinished score from Puccini's sketches, the recurrence of the children's voices suggests a world of purity and innocence of love. Each recurrence of the children's chorus is marked by the same oriental-pentatonic melody, sung in unison, as a way of interrupting time, of projecting the action into the timeless realm of a secure and carefree childhood. Here is, for example, the accompanying text of the children's chorus in the final duet: *L'alba! Luce e vita! Principessa, tutto è puro! Tutto è santo! Che dolcezza nel tuo pianto!*³

¹ Mysterious, as if from a distance, with a lethargic sound, making a shell around the mouth with the hands.

² "Don't hesitate! If you call, she'll appear – she who makes us dream, though we are dead! Make her speak! Let us hear her! I love her! I love her!"

³ "Dawn! Light and life! Princess, all is pure! All is holy! What sweetness in your weeping!"

CHORUS OFF STAGE
CORO INTERNO

Ragazzi

Tenori

Morn - ing! Light and glor - y! All is rad - iant
L'al - ba - lu - ce e vi - ta! Tut - to è pu - ro!

Morn - ing! Light and glor - y! Hap - py Princ - ess
L'al - ba lu - ce e vi - ta! Prin - ci - pes - sa,

2 E^b Alto Saxophones - 2 Saxofoni Contralti Mib

a tempo (ma poco meno) ♩ = 72

poco affrett.

pp

mano a mano cresc.

All is hol - y! Sweet - ness mingles in thy weep -
Tut - to è san - to! Che dol - ces - sa nel tuo pian -

sweet - ness ming - les in thy weep -
che dol - ces - sa nel tuo pian -

rit:

dim:

Example 4: Final duet between Turandot and Calaf, Act III, piano reduction, p. 363.

If the first appearance of the chorus is on the tonal centre *E flat*, with the pentatonic melody sung over a Mixolydian accompaniment (Act I, the moment when the Prince of Persia is taken to the place of execution), upon its second appearance the centre moves to *D* (Act II, the moment preceding the three

enigmas), in *B mixolydian* mode, with a focused, brilliant sound, imbued with an aura of hope.¹

A significant example of overlapping time gaps, whereby the present and future are bound together, is the moment when Liù has already killed herself without disclosing the stranger's name, while the crowd is still shouting *Parla, parla, il nome, il nome!*², in an attempt to draw out the stranger's name from her lips, as if she wasn't dead yet, as if the present, right under their eyes, has not yet become past, and the future is not yet present.

The **past – present – future** relationship and its essential function in shaping the action are revealed particularly in the aria sections. A recurring pattern of this temporal relationship can be seen in all the important arias of the opera: both of Liù's arias (Act I and Act II), Calaf's two arias (Act I and Act III), Turandot's aria (Act II) and the ministers' trio at the beginning of Act II. The temporal structure of the arias starts from evoking the past, passes through the present moment of the action and ends with a projection into future:

	Calaf's Aria (Act I)	Turandot's Aria (Act II)	Liù's Aria (Act II)
Past	<i>Non piangere, Liù!</i> <i>Se in un lontano giorno</i> <i>io t'ho sorriso</i> (“Don't weep, Liù! If one far-off day I smiled at you”)	<i>In questa Reggia,</i> <i>or son mill'anni e mille,</i> <i>un grido disperato</i> <i>risuonò.</i> <i>E quel grido</i> <i>traverso stirpe e stirpe,</i> <i>qui nell'anima mia si</i> <i>rifugiò!</i> (“In this Palace, Thousands of years ago, A desperate cry rang out. And that cry After many generations,	<i>Tanto amore, segreto e</i> <i>inconfessato,</i> (“Such love, secret and unconfessed”)

¹ As a matter of fact, there are rhythmic and melodic suggestions of this traditional Chinese song (the name of the piece is *Mo-Li-Hua*, translated as *Jasmine Flower*) that also occur at other moments of the opera. For the 9 occurrences of this theme in the opera *Turandot*, see <http://www.oocities.org/vienna/strasse/1523/chinese.htm> (September 18, 2016) and Grace Cho's article, <http://opera20thcent.blogspot.ro/2004/10/chinese-melody-mo-li-hua-in-turandot.html> (September 18, 2016). Several studies on this subject have been performed by the American musicologist Mosco Carner, in his publications *The Score*, in *ENO Opera Guide 27: Turandot and Puccini: A Critical Biography*, and by the Italian writer Albert Innaurato, in his article *The Gong Show*, *Opera News*, vol. 56, Issue 10, February, 1992.

² Speak! The name! The name!”

		Took shelter in my spirit!")	
Present	<i>per quel sorriso, dolce mia fanciulla, m'ascolta</i> ("And for that smile, My sweet girl, Listen to me")	<i>Principessa Lou-Ling [...] oggi rivivi in me! [...] O Principi, [...] io vendico su voi quella purezza, quel grido e quella morte!</i> ("Princess Lou-Ling Today you live in me again! O you Princes, In you I avenge That purity, that cry and that death!")	<i>grande così che questi strazi son dolcezze per me, [...] Perché, tacendo, io gli do il tuo amore... Te gli do, Principessa, e perdo tutto! Persino l'impossibile speranza! [...]</i> ("So great that these torments are sweet for me, because, keeping silent, I give him your love, I give you him, Princess, and I lose everything! Even my impossible hope")
Future	<i>il tuo signore sarà domani forse solo al mondo... Non lo lasciare, portalo via con te!</i> ("Your master tomorrow will be perhaps alone in the world... Don't leave him, Take him away with you.")	<i>Mai nessun m'avrà! L'orror di chi l'uccise vivo nel cor mi sta! No, no! Mai nessun m'avrà! [...]</i> ("No one will ever possess me! The horror of her assassin is still vivid in my heart! No, no one will ever possess me!")	<i>Tu, che di gel sei cinta, da tanta fiamma vinta l'amerai anche tu! Prima di questa aurora, io chiudo stanca gli occhi, perché egli vinca ancora... Per non vederlo più!</i> ("You, who are enclosed in ice, Conquered by such flame, you will love him, too! Before the dawn, I will wearily close my eyes, so he can win again... and I'll never see him more!")

A possible extension of this research would be the relationship between time and space in this opera, as well as in other works by Puccini. The timbral suggestion, along with that of the tonal-modal centres with temporal and spatial implications, serve as another starting point for an inquiry into the temporal and spatial aspects of Puccini's works. The composer paints a specific world in each one of them, rich in metaphors and utterly unique in its spatial-temporal

atmosphere; whether he speaks of Japan, in *Madama Butterfly*, Paris, in *La Bohème*, or faraway America, in *The Girl of the Golden West*, or he evokes his recent past or the medieval times, in *Triptych*, the spatial-temporal suggestion is the backbone on which his works are built and breathe.

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