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Chinese Composer Gives 'Turandot' a Fresh Finale

By Louisa Lim

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Princess Turandot appears at a staging in Shanghai of the Puccini opera that bears her name. This version of the opera has a new ending penned by Chinese composer Hao Weiya. Puccini died without finishing the opera. This is the third ending written and the first by a Chinese composer.

leaving 23 sheets of manuscript sketches.

To date, the most-performed ending of *Turandot* was written by one of his contemporaries,



Enlarge Louisa Lim, NPR

Chinese composer Hao Weiya was asked to write a new ending for *Turandot* while studying opera in Italy. "It's my destiny, my fate," he says.

All Things Considered, April 29, 2008 - For 84 years, opera buffs have puzzled over how the Italian composer Giacomo Puccini meant

to end one of his best-loved operas, *Turandot*, which is set in a mythical China.

Puccini died before he finished writing the music,

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Franco Alfano.

Now, a young Chinese composer has written a new ending.

Performing *Turandot* in China is rife with political difficulties. The opera tells the story of a tyrannical, blood-thirsty princess, Turandot, who has unsuccessful suitors beheaded. Partly because of this depiction of China, the opera wasn't performed in the country for nearly seven decades.

Inaugurating Arts Center

But when Beijing wanted to inaugurate its new, massive National Center for Performing Arts, officials decided to stage *Turandot* — the only Western opera set in China. And they wanted a new ending written by a Chinese composer. They chose 36-year-old Hao Weiya, who was then studying opera in Italy.

"When I think about it, I think it was my destiny, my fate," Hao says.

He wasn't scared, he says, because it was "only a job." But he did worry about doing it well, because he was writing for the "very important" performing arts center.

Hao studied Puccini's texts and the opera for about a month. Then, in just six weeks, he penned an 18-minute ending. It was then revised seven times, with help from experts from the Puccini Foundation in Italy.

One big difference is a new aria he wrote for Princess Turandot. It attempts to tackle the opera's main difficulty: how can the cold-hearted ice princess Turandot fall suddenly and deeply in love with her suitor, Calaf? The new aria aims to give psychological depth to Turandot's transformation while staying faithful to Puccini's original music.

"We wanted to respect Puccini's style and finish the work in the same way. We didn't want my contribution to be completely Chinese or completely modern or completely different from Puccini," Hao says.

Composer Built on Tradition

The music from *Turandot* is known — even among people who never go to the opera — for the aria "Nessun Dorma." In the traditional ending, it finishes the opera triumphantly.

But Hao went in a different direction. He decided to end with the traditional Chinese folk song, "Jasmine Flower," which Puccini uses throughout the opera to foreshadow appearances by

 Louisa Lim

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Turandot.

Hao believes it is "correct" to end with "Jasmine Flower," likening it to putting the most important character, Princess Turandot, at the end.

"In my last use of it, I made the tune of 'Jasmine Flower' bright and glorious, like the last few words of the opera — 'love lights up the world,'" he says.

Revision Draws Mixed Reviews

Hao's new ending was greeted with almost unanimous approval in China. One reviewer, Xu Ziaozhong, called it "an extremely significant artistic feat."

But opera critic Andrew Moravcsik, who has seen the performance twice, calls parts of it "kitschy" and "Metro Goldwyn Mayer all the way."

"Puccini just didn't write that way. Guys in Hollywood wrote that way," he says.

Moravcsik describes the new ending as a noble effort that falls short — but is striking for what it represents.

"There's a little bit in it that's modern, a little bit that seems traditionally Chinese, a little bit that's glitzy, a little bit that's commercial, a little bit that's sincere," he says. "But in the end, it isn't coherent. That's very much like China is today. It's on its way to finding a coherent identity, but it hasn't found it yet."

As Moravcsik points out, this is a sophisticated and audacious production — especially for a country like China, with no tradition of Western opera. That it has come from almost nothing to a world-class production in just three short decades shows that China — in opera, like in much else — has world-class ambition.

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