

The libretto in brief

Traduzione di Rodney Stringer

Act I

The walls of the great Purple City.

In the main square of Peking, at an unspecified point in time, a mandarin reminds the crowd of the edict issued by the cruel Turandot. The princess will marry only the man who can solve the three riddles put to him by her. If he fails, however, the suitor shall be put to death. This fate already now awaits the unfortunate prince of Persia, who is preparing to die at the hand of the executioner when the moon rises. Loud noises come from the crowd, excited by the imminent spectacle of death. Jostled by the throng, the old Timur, accompanied by the young slave girl Liù, is thrown to the ground. The prince Calaf rushes to his aid and recognizes his own father, the deposed king of the Tartars. Both, to escape the hatred of the usurpers, are compelled to maintain their incognito. Calaf learns from Timur the story of his escape and asks Liù the reason for her disinterested help. She replies that she has shared the old king's suffering only because one day the prince Calaf in his palace has smiled at her. Their conversation is interrupted by the crowd, who impatiently call for the execution to be carried out. The moon has appeared. Preceded by the song of a group of boys and by a procession of priests and high dignitaries, the prince of Persia is led to the block. The crowd is deeply moved by his appearance and loudly asks for him to be reprieved. But Turandot, who makes a brief appearance on the loggia, confirms his execution.

Calaf is struck by the princess's beauty and is indeed so fascinated that he decides to submit to the ordeal of the riddles. In vain Timur, and then Liù, followed by the three ministers Ping, Pong and Pang, attempt to dissuade him. The prince refuses to change his mind, neither on hearing a description of the evil deeds committed at court, nor the heart-rending entreaties of Liù, nor at the sight to the decapitated prince of Persia's head. Bewitched by the princess's face, Calaf publicly announces his decision by striking the gong three times, and goes off to meet his fate.

Act II

Scene one

A pavillon formed by a vast tent, decorated with fantastic Chinese figures.

Ping, Pong and Pang lament the decadence of China. Abandoning themselves to memories of happier times, when the cruel princess was not yet born, they recall with nostalgia their peaceful lives far from the court. While the preparations for the new trial by riddles are in full swing at court, the trio hopes that Turandot may at last discover love, and that heads may cease to fall. Meanwhile they picture preparing the alcove for the princess's first night of love. A march announces the ceremony of the riddles.

Scene two

Square in front of the palace.

The imperial court is seated on the flight of steps at the centre of the square in front of the royal palace. The eight wise men carry scrolls bearing the solution to the riddles. Little by little the crowd fills the square. The old emperor, tired of so much bloodshed, beseeches Calaf to give up the trial and to withdraw, but in vain: the prince has made up his mind. Turandot advances, looking coldly at her unknown suitor. She explains the reasons for her cruel conduct by telling the story of one of her female ancestors, who was betrayed by a foreign conqueror who had sacked the city and carried her far away into exile, where she died of grief. She now puts the three riddles to Calaf, which the prince solves one after the other. Turandot is not prepared to accept defeat, so she asks her father not to hand her over to the foreigner. But it is Calaf himself who generously declares he's ready to forfeit his victory. In his turn he proposes a test to Turandot: if by tomorrow's dawn the princess can guess his name, he shall die, as if he had not solved the riddles. The princess consents, while everybody hopes that the foreigner will triumph.

Act III

Scene one

Garden of the palace.

It is night. The heralds' voices announce Turandot's orders: no one in Peking shall sleep, on pain of death, until the name of the unknown prince has been discovered. Calaf waits, calm and confident of victory, for the sun to rise. Ping, Pong and Pang come to offer him, in exchange for his name, everything a man may desire: beautiful maidens, wealth, glory and freedom. But the prince is untouched either by their promises or by their threats. Upon his final refusal, a group of soldiers bring in Timur and Liù, who are suspected of knowing the mysterious man's identity. Turandot orders that Timur be tortured, but Liù steps forward and declares that she is the only person who knows the name of the unknown prince. She faces Turandot, does not yield under torture, and finally commits suicide rather than betray the secret of the man she loves. The crowd is impressed by the girl's sacrifice. Turandot and Calaf remain alone. The prince reproaches her for her cruelty, then tears off her veil and clasps her in his arms with passion, kisses her and breaks her resistance. Turandot weeps in the arms of the prince who has at last taught her the meaning of love to her. It is dawn by now. Calaf tells the princess his name and thus puts his fate into her hands. Trumpet peals announce that the court is to assemble.

Scene two

Outside the imperial palace.

The emperor is seated on his throne, surrounded by the court and by the populace crowded into the square. At the top of the steps Turandot appears, declaring that she has learnt the name of the unknown man: it is "Amore".