

Deconstructing Desire

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In addition to his career as a filmmaker, Philipp Stölzl has directed numerous operas in Berlin (and elsewhere), and in each production he has revealed himself to be an uncommonly good architect of memorable, large-scale stage imagery; his visual mastery is often married to clever readings of the text that can shift our understanding of the scenario while remaining essentially accessible as works of narrative drama. If his interpretations shy away from excess revisionism, they are also usually free of obscurity.

The new production of *Turandot* at the Staatsoper Unter den Linden – which was also live-streamed to an open air audience in Bebelplatz as part of the annual 'Staatsoper für Alle' event – displayed many of Mr Stölzl's familiar virtues: it was a grandly-scaled spectacle, a well-crafted entertainment, and a reasonably astute critique of what remains a problematic text. The epic scope of the staging was reinforced by robust musical direction from Zubin Mehta, and a cast of powerful voices who made light work of the opera's demands. Even those who remain vaguely perplexed by the continued popularity of Puccini's operas could not have failed to be entertained.



Stölzl, *Turandot* © 2022 by Matthias Baus
Berlin, sábado, 18 de junio de 2022.
 Staatsoper Unter den Linden. Puccini:
Turandot. Philipp Stölzl, director. Elena
 Pankratova (Turandot), Siegfried Jerusalem
 (Altoum), René Pape (Timur), Yusif
 Eyvazov (Calaf), Aida Garifullina (Liù),
 Gyula Orendt (Ping), Andrés Moreno
 Garcia (Pang), Siyabonga Maqungo
 (Pong), and David Oštrek (Mandarin).
 Staatskapelle Berlin. Zubin Mehta,
 conductor



Puccini: *Turandot*. Zubin Mehta, conductor.
 Philipp Stölzl, director. Berlin, Staatsoper
 Unter den Linden, June 2022. © 2022 by
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For his staging, Mr Stölzl largely avoided the trappings of early-twentieth century oriental exotica, setting the story within a dark dystopia: crowds of oppressed townspeople wore identical grey uniforms, the brutal royal police wore jumpsuits of shiny red, and the trio of Liù, Timur and Calaf stood out primarily by virtue of being robed entirely in white. Although singer Elena Pankratova did not appear until the second act, the figure of Turandot was a central presence from the outset: the stage was dominated by a giant marionette controlled with a series of ropes and pulleys by a team of about a dozen puppeteers who remained on stage in the costumes of townspeople. It was a bold decision if only

because the technical complexity of the puppet gave the staging so many more ways of going awry; yet it ended up being both a technical and conceptual success.

It was this giant figure, idealised and unreal, with whom Calaf fell in love, and the fact that he continued to address his affections to the increasingly disconnected limbs of the puppet even after the singer had made her appearance on stage gave his infatuation a sense of fetishistic obsession. Puccini often portrayed love less as a lofty sentiment than a violent force of absolute destruction – consider Scarpia’s outsized passion for Tosca or Pinkerton’s quickly-cooled fever – and Mr Stölzl seemed to acknowledge that the dramatic flaw in *Turandot* is not so much the sudden softening of an icy princess as the ridiculous implausibility of Calaf’s persistence. The staging thus presented Calaf as possessed by an obsession which only grew more ridiculous as it proceeded to strip the object of his desire to its skeletal essence, then break it down into a series of abstract component parts. The treatment of Calaf’s destructive passion and Turandot’s reaction in the final scene, while not necessarily profound, brought the opera to a surprisingly plausible conclusion.

If the Turandot puppet dominated the visual and conceptual frame of the staging, it was supported by a succession of dazzling moments and well-conceived scenes. The chorus of citizens plays a considerable role in the drama and throughout the evening Mr Stölzl was able to situate the principal action against a background of dynamic crowd scenes. There was also something oddly delightful about the sight of Ping, Pang and Pong reminiscing about their lost estates seated atop a pile of skulls that once belonged to Turandot’s would-be suitors (death, in many guises, was a constant presence). For all that the staging relied on complex stagecraft for its visual splendour, it remained a taut, well-paced telling of a story that derives whatever force it may have from the parable-simplicity of its major incidents.

For its central characters, the production featured singers of considerable power and finesse. As Liù, Aida Garifullina made a strong impression in her opening scene, projecting effortlessly through the orchestra while maintaining an essential softness of line that gave her distant reminiscences of the prince’s smile their emotional weight. She was even better a few moments later, attempting to dissuade Calaf with beautifully wrought phrases given distinctive shape by finely shaded dynamic modulations. Her torture and death scene in the third act was no less impressive, and her attempt to explain the sensation of love to Turandot, accompanied by beautifully-played solo violin, offered a moment of genuine feeling in an opera often dominated by exaggeration. She was nobly mourned by René Pape’s Timur, whose appearance in the first act was somewhat overwhelmed the excitability of the surrounding crowd, but whose sensitive elegy over the body of Liù offered a perfect blend of regal poise and profound sorrow.

Throughout the evening there was no doubting the projective thrust of Yusif Eyvazov’s voice; rather than struggling to break through the wall of orchestral sound, it often seemed



Puccini: *Turandot*. Zubin Mehta, conductor. Philipp Stölzl, director. Berlin, Staatsoper Unter den Linden, June 2022. © 2022 by Matthias Baus.



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Philipp Stölzl, director. Berlin, Staatsoper
Unter den Linden, June 2022. © 2022 by
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as though his Calaf was holding himself back to achieve an optimal balance. While such effortless strength is fairly rare – and impressive in its own way – one was struck more by the presiding darkness of tone that allowed the lower passages to emerge with fluidity. Only in the boldest high notes could one sense a slight constraint, as though Mr Eyvazov was pulling back slightly from full power; his ‘Nessun Dorma’, however, built to an appropriately high level of excitement.

Elena Pankratova provided a reading of the title role that, without ever shedding the cool, imperious tone of her first appearance, grew more complex and captivating from one scene to the next. Although she had no difficulty floating high notes over the massed choir and orchestra and the end of the second act, and made her way through the demands of the torture scene with apparent ease, her performance was shaped less by the force of her delivery than the heightened severity with which she sketched the embattled pride of the character. Implacable to the end, the anguish in her magnificent final scene revealed the extent to which Calaf’s lust had destroyed a once-mighty princess.

Zubin Mehta has enjoyed a close relationship with *Turandot* for over half a century – he is, among other things, responsible for the 1972 recording which still stands as one of the most highly-regarded – but his familiarity with the score never resulted in complacency. Indeed his reading was often arrestingly vigorous in its evocation of the barbaric splendour of the imperial court. If his performance often tended towards a presiding tone of monumental solemnity, it was equally notable for the ease with which he was able to pivot between disparate moods, giving equal weight to the frenzied grandeur of the crowd scenes, the quiet intimacy of Ping, Pang and Pong longing for lost places, Calaf’s lustrous ardour and Turandot’s terrifying reproaches; even Puccini’s imagined orientalisms and passages of outright sentimentality were woven into an appealingly grand conception of the drama.

If *Turandot* is still viewed as a problematic work, its reputation may be due less to its setting or its unfinished state than to the implausibility of its conclusion: the cruel pride of Turandot and the selfish obsession of Calaf exist in such violent opposition to one another that any ending which suggests the possibility of redemption through love will necessarily ring false. While a strong cast will go a long way to smoothing over the narrative flaws – and the evening’s cast would have been just as impressive in a more traditional staging – the Staatsoper’s new production, in stripping away the redemption and highlighting the cruelty of its two protagonists, presented a vision of the drama both logical and credible.