

Al sorger della luna

Beim Mondesaufgang

At moonrise

*Now comes a breeze too and rouses the treetops in the
grove.*

*Look! And now the shadowy image of our Earth, the Moon,
Comes too, secretly; the Night, the dream-laden one,
comes,*

*Full of stars and indeed little troubled about us,
Amazing, the stranger among the humans, she shines
up over the mountain peaks, in sorrow and majesty.*

Wondrous is her favor, most sublime, and no one

*Knows what she brings a person, and for how long.
Thus she moves the world and the hoping souls of mankind.*

*Not even a wise man understands what she intends,
Because the most supreme God, who loves you dearly,
wants it so.*

Therefore you prefer to her the sunny-calm day.

“Brod und Wein,” I-II

MOONLIGHTING IN *TURANDOT*

PIC after part 1 BW, opposite start of Ia: – stairs 27oct03 #411 (this is lo-qual version with front-fill lighting added); maybe switch with eclipse pic; if possible replace stairs with production pics showing them in isolation and as part of scene



#452 3 Nov03 lo qual (can go elsewhere [replace with girls talk about chorus])



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The bloodthirsty crowd walloped the score with wonderful intensity, whether addressing the severed head of the moon or demanding the next suitor's life. They moved as well as 80 people can when called to strike tableaux of fear, loathing and celebration.

The Oregonian, 10 November 2003

The palace guards yank the canary-yellow curtains from their easy-release "kabuki" hooks and frantically trail their armloads of cloth upstage and off right past me. (The easy releases had failed once in a dress rehearsal.) The assistant stage manager barks "Platforms go!" and gives an "Over the top!" wave; a capable martinet is she. Our team of four auxiliary choristers comprises three near-retirement Ph.D.'s and one beefy young music-major tenor. We have twelve measures – a scant thirty seconds – to muscle the wheeled, fourteen-foot high black-pipe tower platform from offstage left to twenty feet onstage and eight downstage, butt its front solidly against the Mandarin's stationary platform further downstage, and mate its side to the stairstep-platform that another team has been rolling out beside us. A hundred other people elsewhere on stage are doing much the same.

Unobtrusively – the audience is watching, illusion is all! – I trip the wheel-locks that immobilize our platform. Jim (day job: chemistry professor) covertly checks my work, and we the oppressed masses of Imperial Peking mill around. The stage director has told us how to behave: "asymmetric postures, body low-centered, feet constantly moving, paranoid – and always in the right place." He reminds me of a slender Dom DeLuise, who had a similar job in my favorite movie, Blazing Saddles.

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The Mandarin had been placed on his even higher platform before the curtain rose. From the staging rehearsals he is fairly accustomed to odd bumps from below. Fairly accustomed, I say; in another late rehearsal he had muffed his entrance. Tonight, and for the rest of the run, he doesn't. In eighteen measures, or forty-five seconds, his terse baritone declares the law: suitors of the Princess Turandot who fail to solve her three riddles shall die by the executioner's ax. With a forte and then a mezzo-forte "Ah!" we help move the action from the background realm of imperial law and history to foreground scenes of love and death, in ancient Peking, Italian style.

Now the Mandarin announces that the latest failed suitor, the Prince of Persia, shall be beheaded at moonrise. Eight measures, twenty seconds. Crazy by the prospect of another execution to feed our twisted passions and distract us from our socio-economic misery (we're depraved on account of we're deprived), we try to storm the palace and rouse Pu-Tin-Pao, the executioner. Guards with staves beat us back. Twenty-four measures, forty seconds – the tempo has increased. I take refuge and can catch some breath, kneeling head-down right behind my home platform.

The unknown Prince discovers his refugee father, tells him to be quiet, and then fairly loudly marks his vocal territory. He is a tenor with the blessing of Pavarotti, the PR fluff says, but he is not yet world-class. Liù modestly hints at her love for him, laying the basis for her strong showing against the Turandot diva. The chorus sees the executioner and his servants marching toward stage front with the grindstone and the ax, double-bitted, and each

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half-moon blade the size of a large pizza plate. Both are fashioned of plastic foam, but thanks to the stage director's reminder in rehearsals they are trudgingly borne as though they were dreadfully massive. Up from our passive grovel we burst, yelling "Turn the grindstone, oil it, grind it, let the blade flash, spurt fire and blood." "Flash" and "spurt" can rhyme in Italian – "guizzi, sprizzi" –, and the sibilants make the close-packed words somewhat comical. But I didn't think about that at the time, because they're also difficult to sing that way.

Two teams of five hustle-hobble up the towers to add spatial height to the ruckus below. I've made sure that family and friends know I'm in the tower team at stage left (audience right!). To get to my place I adopt an emaciated version of the distorted posture and hunched gait of a vintage horror-movie Igor. The stairs, parallel to the stage-front have no rails, and so there is a straight drop-off on the side toward the audience. But fortunately the platforms do have rails – a single horizontal pipe at thigh-height, no grillwork, not even a second pipe below the one.

We lust lyrically and promiscuously for blood. We beg the moon to rise, signaling the start of this latest execution. And our blood-read stage moon stage moon does rise – behind us. For dramatic effect we are facing the audience, and the moon can't be made to rise behind the audience. So we might appear to be peering 180 degrees in the wrong direction. Late in rehearsals the stage director solved that incongruity by deciding to have us stare not into the distant horizon but rather at our upraised hands, with our palms turned toward us, where they catch the red

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light coming from behind us. We then turn slowly to face the bloody phony moon projected on the screens at the back of the stage. Nice touch. Logical consistency is not required in opera.

Now that our stage moon has risen, we again turn, even more slowly, to face forward and, those of us on the platform, down. The youthful Prince of Persia, bound, is marched out to be condemned. He is dressed in white, with long hair and neat beard. In rehearsal some mock-reverently addressed him as "Jesus." I let the innocuous blasphemy pass. The chorus, now mock-sincerely marveling at his beauty, grace and courage, does an emotional flip-flop and begs for clemency, in vain of course. With my arms outstretched under a rail, and with upraised hands, palms toward myself, as we have been reminded more than once to hold them, I think I am very effectively posed. I have contrived to be placed where what I call my "claque" - my family and friends - can pick me out, despite the anonymous costuming, makeup, and cap. I am careful to shout "la grazia" ("mercy"), rather than "grazie" ("Thanks!"), a word that I have used far oftener in Italian.

Most of the time I can surreptitiously manage to glimpse, from the outer, lower corner of my right eye, and blurred by my severe nearsightedness, the conductor's arm, indicating the beat. Of course we can't appear to be looking at him. But because of the effect of distance on sound over the expanse of an operatic stage, that arm must be followed visually by all hundred-plus performers, the pit orchestra, and - connected by closed-circuit TV - the

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backstage banda of a dozen extra brass players whose job is to add those luxuriant accents that simply must be there.

A night in the opera has begun. Yet another production of Turandot, long ago called the last of the Italian Grand Operas but still going strong, even despite the End of Art Art Danto had declared. In aesthetic terms its mission is to give us royalty, empire, mystery, violence, infinite love, and whatever other emotions can be summoned up to help peel off the superego, let the id bluster and posture, and free the libido to engorge and throb.

Outside, by an amazing coincidence that ordinarily occurs only within operas, the full moon, just emerging from total eclipse, rises orange-red in the east, above Mt. Hood and the Willamette River – right where we had been facing when our backs were to the phony stage.

The show must go on. And now it can. ♪



Lunar eclipse, 8 November 2003

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Wagner is the Puccini of music.

Ashbrook / Morton¹

“To write a mighty book, you must have a mighty theme,” declared Melville. So he wrote a whale of a book about a whale of a whale. I used to believe that a grand opera needed a grand overture. Kierkegaard says so. Aïda has one, as of course do Meistersinger, Freischütz, Don Giovanni, and Guillaume Tell with its “Lone Ranger” theme that still lives on now in the popular culture as a cell-phone ring-tone. Even within the classical music community some overtures outlive their operas, for example the gem that introduces Rossini’s La gazza ladra (“The Thieving Magpie?” – really now!).

Musicologists state that Turandot, though, has no overture. They are wrong. Overtures, like legs (here we’re moving, but only momentarily, from Melville to Lincoln), need only be long enough to accomplish their purpose. Turandot gives us a whale of an overture, though Melville would call it the “duodecimo” or miniature version of its genus. Anyhow. As an on-stage opera chorister I was kept quite busy by that miniature overture, and here I’ve serious aesthetic ground to cover.

The orchestra smites its triple-forte, andante sostenuto, quasi-oriental five-note motif, then repeats the motif, just single-forte, a minor third higher. Eerie through their accentuated monotony, a few measures of eighth-notes on the first and third beats – triple-forte, mezzoforte, fading to piano, help bring out the xylophone and the gong. In just those 12 bars, or that half a minute, before the curtain rises and the Mandarin sings, Puccini takes us away from Western tonalities, creates a military-imperial atmosphere, and evokes unnamed fears. The gong’s three clear but understated strokes, which will be repeated at the climactic end of the scene with massive and increasing volume, hammer

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the message home: music – not logic, not character, not words, not even plot, and much less ideology – will dictate the course of Turandot and should govern our emotional and aesthetic experience of it.

The “overture” takes less time than a reasonably thoughtful person needs to read this description, which is much shorter than the scholarly explications one finds in a university library.

Puccini’s handwritten scores are notorious for their near-indecipherability. Deciphered and printed, the full orchestral score of Turandot is still challenging, but now for its tower of instrument clefs, often with inserted short clefs for incidental instruments. Even aside from its exotic flavor, Puccini’s instrumentation probably out-Wagners Wagner, in its variety, if not in its sheer number of performers.

Here we need the names in the original language of the score, to suggest the wild cultural oscillation that is taking place. Besides the usual pit orchestra, there are the somewhat unusual controfagotto (contrabass bassoon) and trombone contrabasso.

The percussion section bears listing in full, and the Italian is clear enough. It is beautiful to the ears, of course, and the invasion of a German term into the Italian inventory also occurred in English long ago: timpani, triangolo, tamburo, gran cassa, piatti, tam tam, glockenspiel, xilofono, xilofono basso, campane tubolari, and gongs cinesi (the last consisting, in my Portland Opera 2003 production, of a dozen or so of such housed in a special extension of the pit).

Rounding out the east-west ensemble are celeste, 2 arpe, and organo, wedged into the pit somewhere. And the off-stage banda (opera groupies never say just “band” or “auxiliary orchestra”) lists 2 saxofoni contralti, 6 trombe, 3 tromboni, trombono basso, gong grave, and the tamburo di legno used to suggest the

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wood blocks that signal act and scene divisions in oriental drama. A colleague whose specialty is Japanese theater confirmed to me that Puccini's wood-block rhythm just before the Mandarin speaks is an accurate replication of a standard kabuki rhythmic phrase.

Puccini will recombine his instruments in a range of musical atmospheres that extends from the harmonic Western to the exotic Eastern, by way of atonalism and what at one point sounds very like a ••foxtrot in a smoky Weimar-era Berlin cabaret. Or you might be reminded of the hodge-podge of instruments and cultures and languages that takes over the Marx Brothers' A Night at the Opera, during the spaghetti feed on the ocean-steamer deck, before the Marx Brothers depart the deck to take over an entire opera.

“Popolo di Pekino...” The Mandarin declares the law of the riddles, and from here on it is – take your pick, if you feel you need to – a bizarre or else a fairy-tale law and world. Since the opera would soon be finished, not just beginning, if someone had already solved the riddles or were going to solve them soon, everyone knows, after all of twenty measures more, or about fifty seconds, pretty much what's going to happen in the next couple of hours. Another ten measures, or twenty-five seconds, suffice to announce the upcoming execution of the latest failed aspirant, the Prince of Persia. Then – not even two minutes after the first note – the crazed crowd can start filling the stage with rage and fear, and the chorus which portrays that crowd can deliver to the audience and critics the shock and awe that fit so well the year 2003. †

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I subscribe to a narrative of the history of modern art in which pop plays the philosophically central role. In my narrative, pop marked the end of the great narrative of Western art by bringing to self-consciousness the philosophical truth of art. That it was a most unlikely messenger of philosophical depth is something I readily acknowledge. ... I must say I was stunned.

Danto, 122-3

IN OUR COUNTRY AND TIME, when you stage an Italian opera that is set in a Western caricature of Imperial China, where heads are lopped off by an executioner whose name, Pu-Tin-Pao, sounds like the featured chicken dish in a Chinese restaurant; where there is a trio of characters called Ping, Pang, and Pong; where the male lead conquers the fearsome princess diva much the same way that Rhett ravishes Scarlett: then you are begging to get on a fast track into culture-war territory. At the same time you are rushing headlong into what theater people call a “romp” – an entertaining trifle with some digs at the stereotypes of your genre.

If, for an American production of that Italian opera you hire, as our city opera company did, a Chinese tenor to sing, in Italian, the role of a disguised barbarian prince among the Chinese Imperialist oppressors, you’ve got some cultural paradoxes and some nested-box identity puzzles. Add two African-American soloists, one of them playing the father of the Chinese tenor who, remember now, is singing in Italian and is cast as a non-Chinese, and the other singing, as her first lines, again in Italian, “I’m nothing, just a slave,” and you’ve got either a PC-minefield or else some genuine multiculturalism. Top – or bottom – it off with an American professor of German singing some more Italian in the chorus, and you’ve got comic relief.

If, then, the professor has long since departed professorial literary scholarship for a career-focus on language teaching, where people still believe in meaning and com-

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munication, and is thus somewhat behind the times in his aesthetics, and so he chooses for some of his summer reading, in the backyard hammock and at rehearsals, *After the End of Art: Contemporary Art and the Pale of History* (1997), by the philosopher-cum-art critic-cum-one-time-artist Arthur Danto, then you've got one very confused and hard-thinking singing professor or professoring singer. The puzzled skewing of his own eyebrows will be exaggerated by the ones painted over and above them. After all, *Turandot* is not just the *Mikado*. But then again, neither is the *Mikado*.

The professor-singer will try to fathom why art, or even just the history of art, can be over, while art still seems to go on, at least in the world of music and in literature, if not some or all of the visual arts (which are, after all, not his responsibility, but rather Danto's). He will puzzle why our Here and Now are so special, or so unfortunate, as to be the time and place for the history of art to end. He will wonder indeed why supposedly educated people find in that same Here and Now, in Western civilization (and thus in themselves), history's most horrible racists and imperialists, just as he, much younger, agonized about why he himself was so special, or else so especially bad, before he realized that he wasn't – at least not in the way he understood it then.

In the singing professor's casual reading and in his mind as he experiences *Turandot*, are Peter Gay's *Schnitzler's Century*, Peter Hall's *Cities in Civilization*, Felipe Fernández-Armesto's *Civilizations*, Frederick Turner's *In the Land of the Temple Caves* (such an effective counterweight to Danto!), Page Stegner's *Winning the Wild West* (so very PC!), Noble Cunningham's *The Life of Thomas Jefferson*, Frans de Waal's *The Ape and the Sushi Master*, Francine Prose's *The Lives of the Muses*, Angus Calder's *Revolutionary Empire*, Kay Redfield Jamison's *Touched with Fire: Manic-Depressive Illness and the Artis-*

tic Temperament (uncomfortably close to the mark and yet also reassuring to him), Jacques Barzun's *From Dawn to Decadence*, Shelley Wachsmann's *The Sea of Galilee Boat* (not for anything about opera, but because the professor-singer builds canoes), David Quammen's *Wild Thoughts about Wild Places* (same reason), one of Bernard Lewis's books about the Middle East, and Thomas Friedman's *Longitudes and Attitudes* (same subject as Lewis's, and on everyone's mind, then and now).

But the summer fare is not all light reading. Once again the professor will try to get through Walter Benjamin's *Das Kunstwerk im Zeitalter seiner technischen Reproduzierbarkeit*. This time, he thinks, he will be more motivated, since he is now a producer of software and electronic books, though in an environment where publishers still are not at all sure how to make that switch to technological reproducibility. But once again he fails with Benjamin, as he has also failed with Wittgenstein and practically the whole Frankfurt School. That may or, much likelier, may not be to his lifelong shame and regret. His life keeps getting shorter as it gets longer, and so the *Turandots* become ever more important than the Schools, whether Frankfurt or other.

History, ideology and what Danto has to suggest about Western Civilization; the pain and anger that come from a career defeat; and also what goes on around him in the real world of terrorists, war in Iraq, the Quarrel of the Sexual Orientations, the attempt to redefine families, and, once the fall quarter begins, in that other bizarre or fairytale world of faculty senates – all this will force him away from his refuges in his hammock and the opera house to wonder how *Turandot* and Danto (such a euphonious duet-duel!), the end of Italian Grand Opera and the end of art history, relate to each other and to American society and Western Civilization, which seems to be surviving its much-rumored death and some wicked hatchet-job cul-

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tural executioners, even after the Marxes and the Fukuyamas have repeatedly declared the end of history itself – and lived to tell the tale, collect the kudos, and – the modern end-declarers at least – rake in the royalties.

The professor and the human being will yearn for August 4, 2003, the first rehearsal of the *Turandot* chorus. In the meantime, he will now and then feel like a duodecimo version of that aristocratic, noble, erudite, ambitious, frustrated, muddled, yet supremely perceptive Professor Henry Adams. Late in life he (meaning Adams, of course) confronted the brave new modern world and, in his autobiography, pictured himself “lying there with his historical neck broken, like a chicken.” Adams, whose wife committed suicide (the autobiography makes no mention of it) confronted *la morte* in his culture and his life, though not nearly so heroically and melodiously as the Chinese tenor on the stage where the professor sham-fully rages and cowers, relishing his anonymity and the outlet for his negative emotions.

Offstage, the professor has taken the first real steps toward retiring. When those who love him find him in his hammock that summer, he will wryly call it, referring to events in Iraq, his “spider hole.” Or he will half-joke that he is merely molting, irritably shedding a layer, implicitly to emerge with new plumage; but his mind will quickly hear how similar that word is to “mold” and “moldering.” At other times, though, the professor’s life and his response to his culture and his opera will be filled with *Amor*, which is where we find *la vita* – if we can just solve all the riddles.

Some months after *Turandot* the professor, for reasons then and still unclear to him, changes his mind about retiring. But that is to happen later. Fate and fortune have granted him a summer for song in his (let us say, let us hope) maturer time of life. It is a moment so beautiful he will not let it go.

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It ain't over until it's over, not even when the fat lady does sing, as she most assuredly did during those nights at the opera. Even now, and as long as he's still alive, it's still not over. Almost painfully, as it indeed was in the confined space of the rehearsal studio, the diva's voice still re-sounds in the professor's head at night. On the make-believe stage in his mind, and elsewhere in the for-real world of the present and in the past as he knows it from his earnest readings and narrow personal experience, the mobs surge about the palaces and the ignorant armies battle by night. ☺