

Turandot a masterpiece of laughter and tears

Monica Leong

Turandot, a masterpiece of Italian music and literature, the last opera written by Italian composer Giacomo Puccini will be staged at the Macau Cultural Centre for four shows starting tomorrow as the opener to the 30th Macau International Music Festival (FIMM).

The opera's finale was left unfinished at the time of Puccini's death in 1924. It was Italian composer and pianist Franco Alfano who, based on Puccini's posthumous manuscripts, completed "Turandot" in 1926.

Since then, many versions have been put on but Italian stage director Giancarlo del Monaco is bringing to Macau Alfano's classic version.

Based on an Italian fairy tale written by Italian playwright Carlos Cozzi, Turandot is set in Beijing and tells the story of Princess Turandot who uses three riddles to help her find a husband. The person who answers the riddles correctly can marry her but those who fail to answer correctly will die. Prince Calaf, who is in love with the princess, passes the test but the princess refuses to marry him.

The opera features popular arias such as the renowned Nessun Dorma ("None Shall Sleep"), further highlighting the contrast of how a Western composer approaches Chinese culture that helped Chinese folk melodies such as Mo Li Hua ("Jasmine Flower") become internationally known.

"Turandot is a very dramatic work, but at the same time features some very funny characters, like Ping, Pong and Pang who can make you laugh," del Monaco told *MPD Weekender* in a recent e-mail interview. "It is just like in life, there are things in life that can make you laugh and things that can make you cry."

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(From left) "Turandot" Music Director and Principal Conductor
Lü Jia, Stage Director Giancarlo del Monaco and Set and
Costume Designer William Orlandi pose for a photo on stage set
for Turandot at Macau Cultural Centre yesterday.

Photo: Monica Leong

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While the opera has a Chinese background, del Monaco said that there also was a dose of Greek tragedy for a contrasting effect.

“There are many ways to tell a story. It can be told the real way, or the surreal way – like a fairytale, dramatic story, or the emphasis can be placed on the comic-dramatic situation of the work. We chose to follow the theatrical sense of the Greek tragedy, with a Chinese background,” del Monaco said, pointing out, “Therefore, we use Chinese effects, as well as effects from Japanese and Chinese theatre. It creates a big contrast, funny contrasts, actually. In Puccini we often encounter comic and dramatic dramaturgy.”

Del Monaco explained that in *Turandot* there are masks of tragedy, of the Greek tragedy, but also funny masks of “commedia dell’arte”.

“Commedia dell’arte” is a theatrical form characterised by improvised dialogue and a cast of colourful stock characters that emerged in northern Italy in the 15th century and rapidly gained popularity throughout Europe.

“I believe that a good director should make the audience laugh and cry, which is exactly what I have been trying to do,” del Monaco said, “Generally, there are directors who better express themselves in dramatic works, and directors who are good in comedy works. In my career, I have worked on both. In *Turandot*, I have the opportunity to mix both expressions.”

Del Monaco, accompanied by the music director and principal conductor Lü Jia as well as set and costume designer William Orlandi, met reporters yesterday at the Macau Cultural Centre where they revealed more details about the opera.

Del Monaco said that although the opera is set in China, there won’t be any over-the-top Chinese decorations and fanfare.

“The more you put on stage, the fewer space there is for the performance,” del Monaco said, explaining, “This is an opera, you don’t just see the stage, you have to listen to the opera, that’s the most important part.”

The stage design will be kept to a minimum, but it doesn’t mean it is not “monumental”, Orlandi said, pointing out that the giant staircase will be the centrepiece of the stage and there will be elements taking inspiration from the Forbidden City.

“The huge staircase was in the debut performance and will be here on stage throughout the performance,” Orlandi said.

Orlandi has opted for shiny black vinyl flooring and dark surrounding walls, which he said adds a sense of mystery to the atmosphere.

The dark setting on the stage also resonates the death of Puccini before he could finish writing the finale, which del Monaco will be incorporating into the opera.

When *Turandot* premiered in 1926 in the renowned La Scala opera house in Milan, conductor Arturo Toscanini only included Puccini’s original part, even though Alfano had already finished the opera by writing the finale.

Del Monaco said that in the local performance, there would be a “blackout” in Act 3 to commemorate Puccini’s death.

“There will be a photo of Puccini and chrysanthemums next to it with concert music, it will be like the performers singing to Puccini and not performing in the opera,” del Monaco said, explaining that after this, the curtain rises with light coming in on stage to start Act 4, which is the finale written by Alfano.

There will be four nightly performances of “*Turandot*” from tomorrow. It is the opening show for the Macau International Music Festival (FIMM), an annual programme organised by the Cultural Affairs Bureau (ICM). For more information about *Turandot* or the FIMM programme, log on to www.icm.goc.mo/fimm



◀◀ “*Turandot*” costumes, designed by William Orlandi, are shown yesterday.

▲ Stage Director Giancarlo del Monaco speaks during yesterday’s media briefing at Macau Cultural Centre.



▼ A photo of Giacomo Puccini and chrysanthemum are seen on stage at the Macau Cultural Centre yesterday.

Photos: Monica Leong



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