

PROBLEM OPERAS SOLVED



1. WAKING UP

19 September, 2023

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PROBLEM OPERAS SOLVED is the title of our course, and for the most part I will be addressing issues intrinsic to the works themselves. One topic, however, has cropped up again in my research: the problem of adapting certain well-known operas to the sensibilities of a Woke generation. So I thought it would be worthwhile to tackle the issue up front, in today's class and to a certain extent in the next. So, after a brief preview of the course as a whole, we shall look at the problem of casting characters of color in opera and, equally importantly, giving performers of color the opportunities they deserve. In the second hour, we turn to Puccini's final opera, *Turandot*, whose vision of a mythical China delights audiences but may also perpetuate ethnic and gender stereotypes.

Because of its topic, this is the only class in the course to feature multiple clips rather than a single opera. *rb.*

A. SOME OPERA PROBLEMS

A final duet to serve as an overture, followed by a brief preview of the operas to be studied in this course, and some reasons why they might cause a problem in modern production: dramatic conventions that are no longer fashionable, subjects that belong to a different culture or are buried in the past, and plots or settings that make audience identification difficult.

- **Handel:** *Giulio Cesare*, final duet
Danielle de Niese (Cleopatra), Sarah Connolly (Caesar);
Glyndebourne, 2005; David Mc Vicar (d), William Christie (c)

B. THE ELEPHANT IN THE ROOM

In 2015, the Metropolitan Opera announced that it would no longer be using dark makeup for performers in the title role of *Otello*, a practice often condemned as "blackface." In response, Washington

National Opera convened a panel of five Black singers (with a noted Otello among them); their conclusions were somewhat surprising. We look further into this controversy with a glance at two other representations of people of color, one in the standard repertoire, the other by Black writers for Black performers.

- **Verdi: *Otello***, Act I, entrance of Otello (3 performers)
Plácido Domingo, Jonas Kaufmann, Russell Thomas
- **Verdi: *Aïda***, Act III, end of the Aïda–Amonasro duet
Leontyne Price, Simon Estes; Metropolitan Opera 1985
- **Blanchard: *Fire Shut Up in My Bones***, trailer
Metropolitan Opera, 2022

C. NOT MERELY MAKEUP

If time, a scene from a production of Mozart's *Così fan tutte* in Aix-en-Provence by director Christophe Honoré, who uses the dangerous implications of blackface to make even more provocative points about double standards in both racial and gender politics, and that the impulses of the libido are seldom governed by the romantic conventions of love and marriage

- **Mozart: *Così fan Tutte***, Act II, Guglielmo–Dorabella duet
Kate Lindsey, Nahuel di Pierro; Aix-en-Provence 2016;
Christophe Honoré (d), Louis Langrée (c)

D. CHINESE COMMEDIA?

Giacomo Puccini (1858–1924) took the 1762 play *Turandot* by Carlo Gozzi as the subject for his final opera, which he left unfinished at his death. The title character is a cold but beautiful Chinese princess whose suitors must answer three riddles correctly to avoid getting their heads cut off; most fail. Gozzi's background in *commedia dell'arte* is reflected in three courtiers, Ping, Pang, and Pong, who serve as a kind of Greek chorus.

Puccini's most colorful score lends itself to a feast of color on the stage also, and the opera has been a crowd-pleaser from the start. But it also perpetuates ethnic stereotypes which some audience

members have found disturbing. Spurred by a letter to a newspaper in Sydney from a Vietnamese-born woman, Cat-Thao Nguyen, we look at how various productions have handled the three *commedia* characters, incongruous survivors from another tradition.

- **Puccini: *Turandot***, Act II, scene 2, opening
- **Puccini: *Turandot***, Act I, Ping, Pang, and Pong
Met 1987; Franco Zeffirelli (d), James Levine (c)
- **Canadian Opera Company's *Turandot***
Toronto television news story, 2019
- **Puccini: *Turandot***, Act I, Ping, Pang, and Pong
Finnish National Opera, 2023; Sofia Jupither (d)
- **Puccini: *Turandot***, selections from Act I
Yuri Yurchuk (Mandarin), Aleksandra Kurzak (Liu), Brindley Sherratt (Timur), Roberto Alagna (Calaf), Leon Kosavic (Ping), Samuel Sakker (Pang), David Junghoon Kim (Pong). Royal Opera House, Covent Garden, 2017; Andrei Serban (d), Dan Ettinger (c)

E. CURSE OF THE ICE PRINCESS

Cat-Thao Nguyen's letter also addresses the opera's presentation of its principal sopranos in terms of a binary stereotype often applied to Asian women: Dragon Lady or Submissive Servant. We look at a scene from near the end of the opera where the two characters, Turandot and Liu, come head to head.

- **Puccini: *Turandot***, Act III, Turandot and Liu (brief)
Finnish National Opera, 2023
- **Puccini: *Turandot***, Act III, Turandot and Liu (full scene)
Royal Opera House, Covent Garden, 2017

For materials used in each class, see the instructor's website:

<http://www.brunyate.com/problem-operas/>

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