

Portraying Oriental Female Roles in Italian Opera: An Asian Perspective

Jianing Li *

Municipal School of Music Claudio Abbado, Milan, Italy

* Corresponding Author Email: jianing.li@scmmi.it

Abstract. More and more Asian faces are emerging on the western opera stage. The focus of this paper is the advantages and challenges of oriental performers on the international stage, taking "Turandot" as an example. Based on the oriental elements in Turandot, the research is conducted through the character Liù, a representative Puccinian oriental female character. The paper analyses how opera singers can better portray their characters on stage, illustrating the advantages that Asian singers have in portraying oriental roles, but also the linguistic challenges. The study compares the vocal characteristics of Italian with those of Chinese, and takes "Signore, ascolta" as an example to illustrate, as a native Chinese speaker, the technical aspects of the Italian lyrics when singing this aria. The paper finds that opera singers need not only the effective characterization but also accurate linguistic proficiency, so that the music can enter the audience's heart and bring them a richer artistic experience.

Keywords: Turandot, Asian singers, oriental female roles, Italian opera.

1. Introduction

With the unprecedented prosperity of Sino-foreign music and cultural exchanges, more and more vocal learners are going out to Europe to learn opera singing. Familiar oriental faces can often be seen on the European opera stage. As a Chinese student studying opera singing in Italy, I aspire to stand on the western opera stage like other excellent Asian opera singers. Several questions always come to my mind: Do Asian singers have advantages while portraying oriental roles in western operas? What is the most challenging task as Asian to perform western operas?

Rodi discusses Puccini's extensive work in quoting authentic Chinese melodies in Turandot, and his surprisingly deep understanding of Chinese music [1]. Yi Pingze explores and identifies the background, types, constructions, and causes of Chinese aesthetic and cultural temperament in his article [2]. Rose Whyman's study of the background and influence of Stanislavski's system details that the higher goal of art is to inspire understanding and sympathy in others, and for this reason, art must be based on the artist's real-life experiences, and his study is instructive for this paper [3]. Chen Yanmei proposes the aesthetic characteristics of "masculinity" and "femininity" from the artistic level of poetry and opera in traditional Chinese culture and discusses the feminine temperament of women in traditional Chinese culture, providing a macroscopic viewpoint for this study. It also discusses the feminine temperament of women in traditional Chinese culture, providing a macroscopic perspective for this study [4]. Nicola Vaccai is an Italian composer as well as a vocal teacher, and in the preface of the book Practical Italian vocal method, she clarifies that Italian is favorable to singers of different nationalities for vocal training from the perspective of a vocal teacher [5].

Through literature review, the author found that the research on the oriental elements of "Turandot" and the musical performance of Liù's characterization have received more attention, but less research has been done in the direction of oriental female opera singers and Chinese native speakers. This paper analyzes the depth of theories related to music performance, traditional Chinese aesthetic culture, and language and vocal methods.

Firstly, this paper will investigate the use of oriental elements in "Turandot" and Liù's character image, and secondly, it summarises the advantages of oriental women in portraying oriental roles based on the basic qualities of actors under Stanislavski's theoretical system and the study of oriental aesthetics and culture. At the same time, the disadvantage of the Oriental identity lies in the language,

the author uses the method of comparative study to compare the vocal style of Italian and Chinese, and finally uses Liù's "Signore, ascolta" as an example of how Chinese native speakers deal with singing in Italian.

2. The Analysis of Oriental Elements in Turandot

In the history of Western opera, although there has been a long tradition of exoticism, Turandot occupies a special place as the only opera set in "China". Puccini has put an ancient oriental legend throughout the work, and the use of many Chinese elements gives the work a strong Chinese flavour.

2.1. Oriental Elements in Turandot

This opera not only stresses the presentation of Chinese elements in the theme, props and stage scenery, highlights the rendering of traditional Chinese Confucian and Taoist culture in the lyrics, pays attention to the manifestation of the five-tone musical qualities of traditional Chinese music and culture in the music ontology, but also embodies strong Chinese musical colours in the melody, harmony and orchestration, etc. First, the theme, props and stage scenery are all Chinese elements in the opera.

The first is the presentation of Chinese elements in the theme, props and stage set. The theme of the play is based on the ancient Chinese legend of "One Thousand and One Nights", and the historical background is Beijing in the Yuan Dynasty. In terms of props and stage design, Puccini uses ancient Chinese rituals and court architecture to create a solemn and sacred oriental atmosphere. The costumes are all classic Chinese traditional costumes, such as the cape of Princess Turandot; the emperor appears in a dragon robe with a crown on his head; the attire of the three ministers is that of a Chinese Taoist priest; and the common people are all dressed in coarse cloth. The subtle differences better characterise the characters and the storyline. These photographs from the first performance in Milan in 1926 show that the opera was performed with Chinese costumes and props, bringing an exotic experience to the Western audience.



Figure 1. A photo of the first performance of Turandot, Milan, 1926, Act I [6]



Figure 2. A photo of the first performance of Turandot, Milan, 1926, Act III, Scene II [6]

Musically Turandot also uses a lot of Chinese melodies, Puccini used two approaches: Firstly, to collect Chinese tunes and quote them as the basis for the score, and to process them in depth, e.g. "Jasmine Flower", "Mummy, Mother, You're So Confused"; Secondly, to conceive tunes that are characterised by the Chinese pentatonic scale, e.g. "Signore, ascolta", "Olà, Pang! Olà, Pong! Signore, ascolta", "Olà, Pang! Olà, Pong!" and so on. In terms of orchestration, Puccini also made bold attempts to "Chineseise" the orchestra by expanding the orchestration and adding many Chinese-flavoured instruments such as Chinese drums, gongs and bells. For example, when Princess Turandot appeared on stage, gongs were used to portray the authority of the royal family, blending in with the orchestral acoustics to enhance the audience's listening experience.

2.2. The Traditional Oriental Female Figure "Liù" Constructed in Turandot

Liù is precisely a representative Puccini style female figure. The character traits and storyline of the opera fully demonstrate Puccini's compassion for the little people, which also becomes the most wonderful part of the opera.

Liù appears as a maid in this opera. She is simple, kind and loyal to Timur, following him in his wanderings without leaving him. When facing her beloved Calaf, she is afraid to express her feelings directly. When she learns that Calaf is going to solve the three riddles, Liù sings the aria "Signore, ascolta" to persuade her beloved to stop him, using her love for him and the affection of her aged father. The aria is heartfelt, and Puccini brings out the inner workings of a tender and affectionate girl [8]. Liù's worry and anxiety, made more urgent by her deep love for CALAF, her gentle humility and goodness and patience, all reflect the greatness and tolerance of the Asian female's heart. But when her beloved is in danger, she is strong and brave, loyal to love, even in the face of brutal torture, but also not compromise, is not the point of life and death. The transformation of the character before and after the role is a sharp contrast, but also the perfect epitome of Oriental femininity - delicate and gentle, charming but also loyal, brave and tenacious.

3. Advantages of Asian Opera Actresses in Playing Oriental Female Roles

Opera performance is very comprehensive and dramatic, which not only requires singers to have excellent singing skills, but also solid stage performance ability. Through effective characterisation,

they can show the emotions and personalities of the characters, so that the audience can fully understand and feel the meaning of the story.

In the study of the cultural roots of women's beauty, Yi Pingze explores and identifies the background, types, structures and causes of Chinese aesthetic cultural temperament, and conducts an in-depth study of the roots of Chinese aesthetic culture, i.e., the characteristics of the "feminine" temperament. The author argues that, in terms of the ideology of aesthetic culture, traditional Chinese culture favours the feminine or the graceful, and generally stresses the importance of both strength and flexibility. The author argues that in terms of the ideology of aesthetic culture, traditional Chinese culture favours the feminine or the beautiful, and in general emphasises the combination of strength and softness and the triumph of softness [2]. The "soft" nature and "strong" character of Chinese female opera singers, and the artistic temperament of this "softness and firmness", are precisely what the oriental female roles of the Western opera need. This kind of artistic temperament is exactly what the oriental female characters in western operas need [4].

3.1. Self-Cultivation and Artistic Foundation of Opera Singers

Opera, as a branch of theatre art, is a comprehensive stage performance art that combines singing and theatre elements. The author takes "Stanislavski system" as the theoretical foundation of this paper, research Stanislavski's reform in the field of opera, and explores that singers should cultivate quality and cultivation in opera performance.

The "Stanislavsky system" was created by Russian theatre artist Stanislavsky, formed in the late 19th century and the early 20th century, Stanislavsky advocated the idea of "experiential art". He said to the actor as an artist: "..... Only this kind of stage art, which is full of the living, organic experience of the human being, the actor, can express artistically all the inscrutable nuances and depths of the character's inner life. depth, artfully expressed." [3] He believes that only such art can fully capture the audience's heart, so that the audience not only figures out what is happening on stage, but also, and more importantly, is able to experience them authentically. This is the only way to enrich the audience's inner experience and leave indelible traces of time in their hearts.

Based on this theory, opera singers who want to portray vivid characters should, on the basis of their vocal expertise, systematically master the element of "internal experience" in opera performance. Truly experiencing the role of the character, merging their own emotions with the character's emotions, attaching importance to their own cultural cultivation and life accumulation, upholding the performance concept of coming from social practice, and going to life practice, to complete the character portrayal of the characters in the play [9].

3.2. Asian Female Shaping Oriental Characters

Eighteenth to nineteenth century in the western music works appeared in a number of "Oriental" as the theme of the opera. This is inseparable from the spread of exotic cultures at that time. Along with the European Enlightenment and the Rapids movement, and in the midst of colonial expansion, various texts and news about the Orient came into the Western world in a steady stream.

Art is somewhat national in character and is closely related to the endowments of a particular people. The key to achieving a creative reinvention of operatic art on the opera stage lies in the reconstruction of the actor's identity. Opera performers, as the communication link between the audience and the characters, will be influenced by different regional cultures, so the opera stage performance will show the tendency of diversified performance forms due to the different countries or nationalities of the performers.

Based on the theory of "Stanislavski System", a qualified opera performer needs to portray the role from the following four aspects: to know the role, to analyse the role, to create an active external environment for the role, and to create a vivid inner world for the role. Starting from the actor himself, he understands and expresses the character, looks for similarities with the character's personality, experience, emotion, and other internal elements, and uses this as a base for development and

continuation, forming a bridge connecting the actor and the character, and constantly injecting the character with vivid vitality.

Take Liù in Puccini's *Turandot* as an example, she has a subtle, quiet and soft image of an oriental woman, but in the face of persecution, she shows her stubbornness, bravery, and chastity by standing firm and sacrificing for love. It is the perfect character combining loyalty and love.

China boasts a five-thousand-year history, during which the dialectical philosophical concept of yin and yang has profoundly influenced the Chinese people, shaping their aesthetic ideals of "strong and soft" and promoting the integration of masculine and feminine qualities. This is also reflected in the aesthetic characteristics of Chinese female opera singers, who are good at portraying female characters on stage that are weak on the outside but strong on the inside.

Art is not a purely aesthetic consciousness but can be said to be the realisation of human spiritual achievements in history. This requires the performer to restore the characters of the play to the historical and cultural context of the time, so that the artistic expression can present the "homogeneity" of the work. *Turandot* has recreated the scenes of China in terms of stage and props: the Forbidden City, the streets of Beijing, the big red lanterns, etc. In terms of folklore, the lion dance performance is a great example of this. In terms of folklore: lion dances, wedding ceremonies, the twelve signs of the Chinese zodiac. The lyrics also involve Chinese elements about Chinese Confucianism and Taoism. All these require performers to have certain cultural background, cultural cultivation and life experience to support to perform more accurately.

Oriental female portraying oriental roles are more likely to realise the co-construction of the performer's identity and characterisation and achieve a true fusion between the actor and the character. It presents natural and real stage performance, triggers the audience's empathy and thinking, and brings the audience a richer, deeper and more meaningful artistic experience.

4. Challenges of Asian Opera Singers Playing Oriental Roles

As a native Chinese speaker, the author's Asian identity places a focus on language in singing training. Language serves as the foundation of singing, encompassing both form and content. Therefore, "the expansion and beautification of language is the foundation of singing aesthetics", despite the different nationalities and languages, singers form the ultimate point of view of "singing like talking". This is the most profound meaning of the presence of language in singing.

Bel Canto originated in Italy in the 17th century, and its vocal technique and Italian language have been fused to perfection for hundreds of years. Many classic operas have been handed down to the world, and Bel Canto has been borrowed by countries all over the world for its scientific vocal method and systematic theoretical system.

Anyone wishing to sing well should start by learning how to sing in Italian, not only because the Italian school of vocalisation is recognised as superior to all others, but also because the Italian language itself, with its pure and resonant tone of many vowels, will help the singer to achieve good diction and clarity of enunciation when singing in any language, whatever his nationality [5].

Chinese and Italian belong to different language systems, and their respective phonetic characteristics determine the differences in vocalisation and vocal states between the two languages, and the biggest challenge as a Chinese performer singing a western piece lies in the language.

4.1. Vocal Characteristics of Italian Language

Italian belongs to the Latin family and is a multi-syllabic language combining vowels and consonants. The alphabet of Italian consists of 5 vowel letters and 16 consonant letters. Italian has five vowels, namely a, e, i, o, u. Among them, e and o are pronounced with both open and closed mouths. In Italian, vowels are the backbone and core of the language, and they form the strength and rhythm of the language. When singing Italian songs, singers need to keep their throats open and use changes in the position of the tongue to ensure that the vowels are clear [10]. The consonants of Italian are divided into clear consonants and turbid consonants, the clear consonants are p, t, f, q, c, z, s, sc,

which are characterised by no vibration of the vocal cords and weak airflow transport; the turbid consonants are b, d, g, v, l, n, m, z, s, r, gl, gn, which are characterized by violent vibration of the vocal cords and strong airflow transport. Another linguistic feature of Italian is double consonants, where two identical consonants overlap, i.e. the vowel ends quickly and stops briefly before the consonant is emitted again. Composers often use this feature to match the score and emphasise the strong emotions in a song. In addition, the Italian language has a large tongue trill, r, which is produced with the tongue naturally flat against the gums and the breath blowing on the front of the tongue, causing it to physically flutter to form a trill [11]. Italian accents are usually on the penultimate syllable of a word, but also on the penultimate syllable or the third syllable. However, when singing, it is usually enough to follow the rhythmic accents of the music, because composers organise these accents phonetically into musical accents, which can be used to easily find the accents and to emphasise the emotion of the song.

4.2. Differences in Vocalisation Habits Between Italian and Chinese Language

The Chinese language is mostly consonants and compound vowels, which leads to the biting of words and vocal habits, usually with a low voice position, and the vocal state of the mouth is horizontal, which uses more laryngeal force [12]. The Italian language is mainly based on the vowel a.e.i.o.u, the vocal position is high, the larynx and the root of the tongue are more relaxed, the oral vocal state is vertical, the oral cavity opens the position is very high, usually when you speak, you can produce a certain mask resonance and cephalic resonance, so the Italians have a great advantage of innate articulation when they sing the American voice. Therefore, Chinese singers can try to change the habit of pronunciation in normal life, consciously keep the larynx relaxed when speaking, enlarge the oral space, and try to pronounce in the singing position. This can not only cultivate good speaking habits, but also use more resonance to achieve the effect of saving the vocal cords.

There is also the relationship between culture and national character. Italians are lively and cheerful by nature, and when they speak, their facial expressions are exaggerated and rich, with the upper lid of the mouth positively raised and the larynx naturally lowered, which has already possessed the state of singing. On the other hand, Chinese people are quieter and more stable, their facial expression is in a peaceful state most of the time, their lips and mouth are loose, and the upper mouth cover has no positive power to lift. So, the voice that comes out is also softer, the voice will not reach the position located behind the nasal cavity, resulting in a lack of mask and head resonance. Chinese singers need to pay attention to the moment of speaking and pronunciation to maintain the tension of the mouth muscles, consonants to do dry and fast with the vowel after the combination of the mouth to maintain a positive open state, so that the vowel is always in the cavity, so that the voice will be issued from the voice will be clear and pure.

4.3. Analysis of the Aria "Signore, ascolta" from a Performer Perspective

Liù sings the aria "Signore, ascolta" in the first act of the opera, in which Calaf risks his life to solve Turandot's riddle, and Liù sings the aria "Signore, ascolta" with mixed feelings because he does not want to let his beloved die. The aria is written in pentatonic scale and the accompaniment is woven with both Chinese folk tunes and Western harmonic functions. It makes the piece even more eloquent and moving, showing Liù's heartfelt persuasion of Calaf, and portraying Liù's kindness, deep love and steadfastness.

"Signore, ascolta" is characterised by its declamatory nature, beginning with pp, and the singing of the first line "Signore ascolta!" with a steady breath. The first line "Signore ascolta!", when the "si" sound is produced, make sure that the tongue touches the palate, then immediately open the mouth longitudinally to produce the "o" sound, holding the soft palate, so that the articulation becomes smoother, and the more blurred the connection, the "gn" sound is produced with the tongue. When pronouncing "gn", the tongue surface is lifted to the palate as far as possible, forming an obstruction so that most of the airflow comes out of the nasal cavity, which is a turbid consonant, and it is especially important to have the tongue surface's direction and strength. The "co" in the word

"ascolta" is very easy to leak when pronouncing, and will be affected by the Chinese pronunciation, the state of pronunciation is easy to relax, and habitual laryngeal muscle force, resulting in the vowel "o". The sound of "o" is backward and low. For this reason, singers are required to bite down on the "o" immediately after producing the "c", keeping the mouth positively open. In the next line, "Liù non regge più", there is a double consonant "gg" in "Regge", so we need to sing out the sense of obstruction of the double consonant. "Spezza", "Cammino" and "Labbra" do not have double consonants in Chinese, so when Chinese singers encounter double consonants, they must pay special attention to sing them accurately. So, when Chinese singers encounter double consonants, they must pay special attention to singing them accurately. Doing so will enhance the sense of rhythm and rhyme in the singing voice, as well as better interpret the character traits and emotions of the characters in the opera. Although the melody of "col tuo nome nell'anima" is identical to that of "col nome tuo sulle labbra", it is still important to compare the treatment. The second line is marked with a "p" and a "rit", so after the first line is sung in a weak voice, it is necessary to slow down a little on the second line to elongate it, and to repeat "Tuo" when singing it. When you sing "Tuo", you should repeat "u" and sing every vowel "u" and "o" clearly, and you should not synthesise two vowels into a single sound, which would make the lyrics sound the lyrics will sound fuzzy.

The transition from "ma se il tuo destino doman" to "sarà deciso" is the most important part of the song, and you should change it before you start singing it, by increasing the volume a little bit and making your tone of voice firmer. There is a line on the three notes of "sti", and to sing it naturally and coherently from E flat to A flat, it must be accompanied by an internal expansion of the mouth and a push of the breath to express Liù's concern and fear for the fate of Calaf. From the end of this line to the next, "noi morrem sulla", there is a shift in intensity, from weak to strong, and the "rrem" needs to be sung with a widening and lengthening of the mouth, opening it up quickly to bring out the fullness of the voice.

The line "Ei perderà suo figlio, io l'ombra d'un sorriso!" seems to be calm, but it is the climax of the whole piece, which needs to be expressed with the power of the pp, and the singer must support each note with a strong breath. The singer must support this with a strong breath, releasing it slowly at the beginning of each note, and its lowest note, E flat to D flat, needs to be sounded close to the hard palate and with nasal resonance, to avoid leakage of breath and weakness due to the loss of position, and to maintain the consistency of the singing. The second line is more condescending, and should be sung as slowly as possible to bring out the earnestness of Liù, who doesn't want to lose Calaf's smile or break the heart of an aging father. The word "sorriso" has two "rr's" and the singer needs to make a distinct tongue trill, "so" here [s], but when it's between two vowels. But when it's between two vowels, it's [z]. The tempo changes to *lento* at "Liù non regge più", and the upward octave jump is both a difficulty and a highlight, and the articulation of "Liù non" is very important when singing this line. When singing "Liù", the lips and mouth should be taught and then open, the soft palate should be actively raised when singing the high notes, the breath should be strongly supported, and most importantly the larynx should be lowered, so that the breath can form a counter force with the high notes. The word "regge più", which corresponds to a downward octave from soprano to bass, is intended to express Liù's despair, and the singer can use the downward slump to simulate her crying voice and thus emphasise the change of mood, while the final "pietà" corresponds to a weak soprano, and the final "pietà" corresponds to a weak soprano, with the soft palate actively supported by the breath. The final "pietà" corresponds to a weak soprano, and here the singer needs to control the volume precisely by controlling the breath. If the voice is too strong, it will not be in keeping with Liù's status as a lady-in-waiting, and if it is too weak, it will not reflect Liù's courage and loyalty.

5. Conclusion

The author takes "Turandot" as an example, and analyses the oriental elements in the libretto and the score, as well as the character of Liù. Through the analysis, the author clarifies the advantages of

oriental female opera singers in portraying oriental female roles based on the theory of "Stanislavski System". Advantages are usually accompanied by challenges. The author elaborates on the characteristics of Italian vocalisation and compares them with Chinese vocal habits. Finally, Liù's first aria "Signore, ascolta" is analysed as an example, with the focus on the biting of the lyrics. The author concludes that if Eastern opera singers want to gain a foothold on the Western opera stage, they should not only make good use of their own cultural background, but also realise the audience's emotional resonance and deeper understanding and reflection through acting techniques and characterisation. They also need to pay attention to language learning and biting to support the singing, so that the music enters the audience's heart and brings them a profound artistic experience.

The paper contributes to a better understanding of the abilities that opera singers should have. And it illustrates systematically the singing techniques in terms of speech and diction which might be helpful for other young singers. Other qualities that opera singers should have been not comprehensively included in this paper, such as the ability to co-operate with the orchestra and stage partners, and the ability to study the libretto and the score. A further in-depth study could be conducted on the above-mentioned contents.

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