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# OPERA NEWS



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## Showing Emotions Eva Marton faces the enigma of Turandot

by Thomas P. Lanier

Injuries suffered during a fall from Minnie's horse, a chipped tooth from Tosca landing where a matress should have been, collapses of scenery and voices in *Turandot*, all have been chronicled. Puccini can be hazardous to a soprano's health. Just ask Eva Marton, who on the occasion of her first Tosca at the Metropolitan Opera, on October 20, 1986, had her jaw dislocated by an aggressive elbow during

her second-act scrape with Scarpia. That Mrs. Marton—her married as well as career name—was able to finish the performance attests to her strength and professionalism and made *The New York Times*' front page. Jaw back to normal, content with the success of her new CBS Puccini disc and the Met run of *Toscas*, during which she racked up her 150th performance of the title role, looking forward to more challenges in the new production of *Turandot*, the Hungarian diva was scarcely at a loss for words on such favorite topics as Puccini and her career. "The idea of my singing *Turandot* was suggested to me first by Birgit Nilsson, in 1981. I had seen the opera only once, in Budapest, with a fat soprano who yelled every note, so my impression for many years was negative. My God, I thought, how can this ugly woman, who does nothing but scream at this poor fellow, arouse sympathy from an audience? So when the chance came to do the role, I went over the score for all the possibilities of nuance—*piano* and *pianissimo*. Lorin Maazel, who conducted my first *Turandot*, at the Vienna State Opera, and I worked together very well. He was just the right maestro to bring out this strong and dramatic reading but with proper softer, changing colors and contrasts.

"I am always asked about the difficulties of *Turandot*. The most problematic part is the steps. This is always so, but never more so than on the fire escape of that Vienna production, which I had to climb up and down with a heavy costume, encrusted with jewels and mirrors. I really enjoyed working with the director, Hal Prince, however—a complete man of the theater. I will never forget the day I sang the music through for the first time, in full voice. It was in a rather small rehearsal room. The entire cast and chorus were there. When we reached the end, Maazel closed the score and said, 'Now let us all go to church. We must pray you remain in good health, so you can sing just like that at the performance!'" Marton's first *Turandot*—June 12, 1983, during the Vienna Festival—answered the conductor's prayers.

"I built my characterization carefully, asking why this woman is so bitter, so cold. As the second most influential person in all China, she has enormous power. She knows very well that whoever possesses her, possesses China. In my opinion, she is not only cultivated and intelligent but also rather playful—the three

riddles, for example. She asks these riddles of every suitor, but only when she has seen Calaf does she sing 'In questa Reggia.' She has never made public these deep feelings about her violated ancestor, and in telling him the Princess Lou-Ling still lives in herself, she gives a clue to the answers to the riddles. It also gives Calaf time to compose himself for the test. Why does she do this? Subconsciously, she feels love for him."

In less than four years, Marton has sung in nine productions of *Turandot*. The new one at the Metropolitan Opera is her tenth, and its first night marked her sixtieth performance of one of the most taxing roles in the Italian repertory. In the first year alone, she did five stagings, the second of these in her present home base, Hamburg, with Giancarlo Del Monaco as director, Giuseppe Patanè as conductor and Franco Bonisolli as Calaf—again a triumph, as it was later in the city of her birth, Budapest. She worked in Boston with Sarah Caldwell and in Denver with Nathaniel Merrill, where she had her only theater-in-the-round experience. "I had to keep turning and turning so everyone could hear me, as if *Turandot* is not already difficult enough!" Then there were San Francisco performances in a staging by Bliss Hebert, with sets by Allen Charles Klein, that she describes as "beautiful but not exactly my taste," followed by Barcelona and Turin.

"In each of these, I tried to find other facets of the character, but the basis of my *Turandot* had crystallized from the first performance. I will eliminate anything that doesn't belong. I'm open to suggestions, but in the final analysis, when I stand onstage, it's all right there, straight out—I know this woman completely. She is really sympathetic and must touch the audience. There are not many moments to show this, but I try to take advantage of each of them. One especially stands out—when she implores her father not to give her to the prince. Calaf must be moved by her plea and understand that in crying 'No, non guardarmi così!'—don't look at me like that—she protests too much. Their eyes should meet, only briefly, but these seconds should tell. In my opinion, *Turandot* and Calaf already know they belong to each other.

"In the third act, at the death of Liù, *Turandot* realizes everything—that to be loved is not enough, one must also love. From whom could she have learned love? We assume her mother has been dead for years. Her father is so old, almost a god, so removed from her, and she has never known a man. After all, she has been raised as the 'daughter of heaven.' She has a good character, and I am glad her story, unlike that of most Puccini heroines, has a happy ending. True, she has been responsible for the death of many men, but death is not a negative concept in Oriental belief. Death means after-life, a new, happier existence. She is pure, inexperienced, frightened of this unknown emotion, love. In the Zeffirelli production, this transformation from icy princess to loving maiden is made clear. Immediately after Calaf answers the third riddle, the three maskers remove her crown and robes, and there she stands, a simple human being imploring mercy.

"When I sang *Turandot* at La Scala, Prince Charles and Princess Diana were in the audience, and I greeted them in their loge. I was asked to sing the premiere of this production in December 1983, but I had already signed for *Fidelio* at the Met at the same time. It was the chance of a lifetime to perform this fabulous role in Milan, where the world premiere took place—a new production, opening night at La Scala, the opportunity of working with Zeffirelli. But the Met told me I could not miss even one *Fidelio*—

Color photos: Steven Mark Neuman

if I did, all my contracts in America would be broken. I was tempted to leave anyway, because I didn't feel the Met's answer was in the interest of an artist who seldom if ever has such an opportunity. I was embittered, but then I thought of my public in the U.S. I don't speak against the Met or Klaus Tennstedt, who was making his Met debut and wanted me. My complaint is that there is not more cooperation between theaters. This attitude hardly develops artists or improves artistic standards.

"At present I have, thank God, no technical problems vocally. Those come with time, with the first sagging muscle. Turandot is a hard part—just try it. You may be able to sing it once or twice, but then..." Her voice trails off but suddenly is back, recalling a conversation with Elena Obraztsova. "This extraordinary mezzo was determined to do Tosca and asked me if I thought she could. 'Naturally you can,' I answered, 'but how often, and later how?' What makes Turandot so difficult is that you don't have time to warm up, and because it is a short role, you have only a few chances to give everything. It's full of *hochdramatische* high notes—either you have them or you don't. I had good schooling, and I sang many Donna Annas, which is the right preparation for the high tessitura of Turandot."

Marton considers herself a singer of the Italian repertory. Her roles in it are numerous—Verdi's two Leonoras, the *Ballo in Maschera* Amelia, Aida, Elisabetta, Desdemona, Fedora, Maddalena in *Andrea Chénier*, Manon Lescaut. "I built my voice slowly and carefully with these parts, which is why today it is not *kaput*. I think I am also a good Strauss singer, and time will tell how good I am at Wagner—this is not for me to say."

**F**rom *Don Carlo's* Celestial Voice at the beginning in Budapest, more than twenty-five years ago, to the present summit, Eva Marton has trotted out the dramatic soprano roles in glorious parade. There are still other heroines to come—Lady Macbeth, Salome, the *Walküre* Brünnhilde, Elektra, Isolde. "I have sung maybe seventy roles, and there are more. One of my dreams is *La Fanciulla del West* at the Met. There have been chances to do this opera in Vienna and at La Scala, but sometimes I lose too, even with my name and position. Such things happen to us, and we must laugh it off."

In conclusion, Marton spoke of the thrill of finally working with Zeffirelli. "I just finished reading his autobiography, and I cannot find words to express how I feel about him. Of course I am no 'La Divina,' no 'La Stupenda,' so I have to look over the fence to see what's going to be. I am curious, because I think I have found a new Turandot. I use more mezza-voce now in all my roles. I like to think my possibilities are limitless.

"The happiest moments of my life are onstage, giving and giving. My public is important to me. Some colleagues complain that audiences are uninformed. I do not say that. People come to the theater with different expectations, and many are tired after a day of work. They want to be refreshed with lovely melodies, to relax, perhaps to sink into sleep. With me you are guaranteed not to get this. That damn Marton insists you work with her. I want every person to be Tosca, to suffer with her and me. I want to lift people out of themselves through my feelings, to bring them out from the dreary daily struggle—especially in America, the business, money, money, money! There is something else, such as art and beauty. People forget the wonderful release of showing emotions. They are glad to laugh at a TV comedy, but they forget they can also cry and be touched. When I am told 'Oh, you sing so beautifully,' that's fine, but when I hear 'This woman works and lives through her role, and we experience it with her,' that's when I am satisfied and proud to be a singer." □

## Turandot The Players



*Turandot* holds special memories for **PLACIDO DOMINGO**, whose initial performance as Caláf marked his debut in Italy. "It was also the first time I appeared with Birgit Nilsson," recalls the Spanish tenor. "I faced more challenges than Caláf!" Domingo considers the role one of the most taxing in the Puccini canon. "I don't like to sing many performances of it, because it's so demanding vocally. I have done it maybe thirty-five times. I have enormous respect for the part and won't take on anything else while I am doing it. Des Grieux is probably the most all-around difficult role in Puccini, but if *Turandot* is not conducted right, Caláf becomes the hardest. The scoring is very heavy, especially in the third act. If the conductor does not consider this, the orchestration becomes like a big iron curtain, and the audience cannot hear the singers. I hope that Jimmy [Levine] will do the work in a very transparent way, as a fairy tale should be," says Domingo, who in the past few years has been on the Metropolitan Opera's roster as a conductor as well as singer, most recently for *Roméo et Juliette* last winter. Despite the vocal demands, Domingo enjoys Caláf immensely and first sang the role at the Met in 1970. "He is stubborn, sure of himself and

fun. He is completely a rebel, the kind of character that loves danger, like a racing-car driver. Before he sees Turandot, he is very angry at everything she has done. Then he falls in love at first sight. He's infatuated with her, but he also enjoys the risk of being able to stop all the nonsense. And he is so self-confident that he knows from the very beginning he is going to win. That is why he gives Turandot one more chance after he solves the three riddles. He does not want his victory to be so easy." One of the casualties of the battle of wits between Caláf and Turandot is Liù, and Domingo explains why he feels it would have been impossible for the Unknown Prince to save her: "Liù is the delicate creature of Puccini. She sings very beautiful music. And since we are all such sentimental people, we would like to see her rescued. But Timur is a king. He's persecuted. So if Caláf would try to become a hero and prevent her death by saying, 'Here is my name,' it would mean the death of all three of them. They would all be killed. Caláf tries to defend her from torture, but he cannot do more than that. And he doesn't expect that Liù is going to kill herself."

**LEONA MITCHELL** describes the role of Liù as "very gratify-

