

**PRIMING SPECTATORS FOR PIRANDELLO'S
SEI PERSONAGGI IN CERCA D'AUTORE (1921) THROUGH
PUCCINI FROM 1899**

Katharine Mitchell

On first thoughts, one would not presume to associate Pirandello with Puccini, despite the fact that they were more or less contemporaries.¹ To my knowledge, their paths never crossed nor did they ever correspond: one was a playwright, while the other was a composer—the last among the ‘greats’ of the Italian operatic tradition, ‘in which popular approval and instant emotional appeal were essential criteria for a work’s success’.² Geographically, they occupied different regions of the peninsula and identified with opposing artistic movements: Pirandello—an experimentalist who embraced modernism—was Sicilian, while Puccini—influenced by (but by no means limited to) the ideology of realism and ‘le piccole cose’³ in his musico-dramatic stage depictions—was Tuscan. Philosophy and breaking boundaries preoccupied one, while popularity and box-office success characteristic of the Italian operatic tradition drove the other.

And yet, both were world-renowned and broke new ground in their respective artistic fields. Following the success of the Paris première of *Sei personaggi* in 1923,⁴ Pirandello was met with universal acclaim and won a Nobel

Prize, while Puccini made his mark on the world following the success of his third opera, *Manon Lescaut*, after the immediate success of its first-night performance at the Teatro Regio in Turin, in 1893. Pirandello is recognized today as one of the ‘greats’ of modern Italian theatre, and his works continue to be performed in theatres across the globe. Similarly, contemporary performances of Puccini’s most popular operas dominate box office sales worldwide.⁵ Both artists were profoundly preoccupied with, and concerned to fathom the human condition through their *œuvre*—to find in life what Nietzsche described as some *meaning* in the suffering that to live entails. In 1920 Puccini in fact did toy with the idea of adapting a Pirandellian play for the opera stage,⁶ and there are indeed similarities between his final opera *Turandot* (first performed in 1926 at La Scala), and *Sei personaggi*: both draw on the *commedia dell’arte* Masks; both grapple with Freud’s psychosexual theories; both contain elements of melodrama.⁷ Moreover, and as musicologist Alexandra Wilson has argued, the peculiar ‘mechanical’ eponymous heroine of Puccini’s final opera was based on the ‘Italian machine plays’ of the *avant garde*, which in turn were influenced by Pirandello’s exploration of the relationship between characters and their authors in *Sei personaggi*.⁸ Thus it can be said that Puccini’s opinion of Pirandello as a ‘genius’ did influence Puccini’s artistic production.

Yet what of Puccini’s influence on Pirandello? A focus on violence and aggression—in the form of self-harm and murder enacted by Puccini’s suffering heroines—opens up common ground between the artists if we consider the period

of Puccini's output from the first-night performance in Rome of *Tosca* in 1899 onwards. For, forthwith, the concentration and frequency with which opera spectators were confronted with his suffering heroines committing murder (in the case of *Tosca*⁹) and enacting self-harm immediately before bringing the curtain down, was unprecedented in theatre auditoriums up until the year of his death in 1924. Moreover, coincidentally, it was in this year that Puccini had finished composing the music for his secondary, partially-invented character in *Turandot*, the slave girl, Liù, who commits suicide by stabbing herself with a dagger out of love for the hero, so as not to reveal his name to the Princess.¹⁰ Even though Puccini's realist operatic productions were set in far-off places and in the (sometimes distant) past, his on-stage candid and recurring *leitmotif* of the heroine's self-violence arguably 'primed' Rome's spectators for the shock of the removal of the fourth wall, and the alienation with which they were met on the first night of *Sei personaggi* at the Teatro Valle in 1921; and, more importantly, for the violence and aggression at the end of the third act: that is, the Little Girl drowning, and the Boy shooting himself with a gun.¹¹ Such high-intensity melodrama and brutality, with the sung words and accompanying music to anaesthetize the effect stripped away would have undoubtedly challenged spectators in ways that had not occurred previously in the spoken performance tradition. However, as I want to argue here, were it not for Puccini's brazen depictions of female self-harm and murder from 1899 onwards, the challenge to spectators would have been greater.

Let us turn back to Rome in 1890 at the Teatro Costanzi to look at his precursor at the opening night of newcomer Pietro Mascagni's one-act adaptation of Giovanni Verga's *novella* of adultery and jealousy among the Sicilian *contadini* in 'Cavalleria Rusticana', which created a sensation.¹² Why? Because it was the first time in the operatic tradition in which a *verista* story of raw emotion had been staged as an opera.¹³ And arguably, the female central character Santuzza (Santa in the *novella*, who is a minor character) brings about her own *emotional* self-harm by desiring the womanizer-protagonist Turiddù, who loses his life in a duel with the cuckolded Alfio, husband to Lola, for whom Turiddù deserts Santuzza. Nine years later at the same theatre, Romanian soprano Hariclea Darclée (1860-1939) singing the title role of Tosca—herself a celebrated and sympathetic (judging by Puccini's melodious and harmonic music) singer—stabs to death with a knife the Chief of Police against the backdrop of the French revolutionary wars in Rome on the first night of Puccini's *Tosca*. The eponymous heroine ends the opera by hurling herself off the parapet of the Castel Sant'Angelo upon learning that her strategy to enable her lover's release from prison where he is brutally tortured has failed. In Victorien Sardou's version from which Puccini's opera is adapted, Tosca is presented as having been an orphan and goatherd, but in Puccini this aspect of her representation is omitted. Instead, Puccini positively iconifies her as an intelligent and tragic woman of the theatre, and in so doing transforms a leading character from her original source into a tragic heroine. Unsurprisingly, as with the first-night performance of *Sei*

personaggi, some spectators took exception to the brutality of the plot before the production was eventually selling to packed audiences throughout Italy and beyond.¹⁴

Puccini and his librettists—whom he micro-managed with instructions concerning the narratives¹⁵—in fact frequently transformed the female lead character from her original source text into a tragic, suffering heroine by subjecting her to moments of trauma and grief in the dramaturgy for the sake of spectator catharsis. Another example can be found in the character Cio-Cio-San in his *Madama Butterfly*. Puccini adapted David Belasco's one-act play *Madame Butterfly: A Tragedy of Japan*, which itself is based on John Luther Long's short story inspired by Pierre Loti's novel *Madame Chrysanthème* (1887). First performed in 1900 and set in present-day Nagasaki, Japan, Belasco's Cho-Cho-San is Othered insofar as she speaks in broken English, which renders her vulnerable to contemporary Western audiences seeking to feel superior. Puccini's iconization of, and sympathy for Butterfly (first performed in Milan in 1904), expressed through harmonic, drawn-out and melodious passages, likewise transforms her into a tragic heroine: the three years during which Butterfly awaits the return of Pinkerton, the American Naval Officer with whom Butterfly has fallen hopelessly in love and by whom she has had a child (unbeknown to Pinkerton for most of the time), become roughly twelve minutes of orchestral musical accompaniment to Butterfly's on-stage display of emotional inner

turmoil as she waits. Her suicide is enacted in the manner of *hara-kiri* to preserve her honour upon realizing that her husband has married an American woman.

Butterfly experiences extreme mental torture earlier on in the opera when Sharpless informs the geisha of Pinkerton's desertion in Act Two. In Puccini's final offering of his female self-immolation *motif*—the second of his three one-act operas from *Il tritico*, 'Suor Angelica', set in seventeenth-century Siena—the eponymous heroine suffers similar emotional pain when she is visited in the convent by her aunt, who informs her that her niece's young son (born out of wedlock) died two years previously.¹⁶ Unable to bear the news, for the second half of the one-hour opera, Suor Angelica sings of her suffering and pain before drinking poison and ending her life just before the curtain is rung down. *Il tritico* was first performed at the Metropolitan Opera in New York in 1918, but according to Puccini's biographer Mosco Carner it did not go down well with the critics. Nevertheless, it was received more favourably in Italy the following year when it premièred at the Teatro Costanzi, although the comedy 'Gianni Schicchi'—based on a reference to the *contadino* that Dante *personaggio* sees in Canto XXX of the 'Inferno' from his *Divina commedia*—was the critics' favourite.¹⁷

What the aforementioned female suicides—Tosca, Cio-Cio-San, Suor Angelica (and, after *Sei personaggi*, Liù)—have in common is agency: they all take charge of their own destiny by escaping the 'suffering that to live entails' (which, according to his biographers, certainly applied to Puccini¹⁸) with their

deaths, thereby providing audiences with the necessary catharsis, though not before enacting an apotheosis of suffering. We have a singer, a geisha, a nun, and a slave girl, each of whose social background was far removed from that of the typical contemporary early-twentieth century bourgeois heterosexual female spectator, whose full identification with the suffering self-harming heroines will have accordingly been hampered on some level. Though Pirandello's *Sei personaggi* was shocking to its first-night spectators also for its psychosexual themes and neuroses among a lower-middle-class contemporary (albeit masked) 'broken' nuclear family, prior to Pirandello, *verista* violence and aggression in the Italian operatic tradition had been predominantly the domain of lower-class characters, marked as Other to (mainly) bourgeois audiences. Or, in the case of *bel canto* tragic opera—for example Donizetti's *Lucia di Lammermoor* or Bellini's *Norma*—opera narratives typically concerned highborn families in far-off settings and places. If we can attribute any influence at all of Puccini's female self-immolation *motif* on Pirandello, it was the accumulation, repetition, and concentration of this self-determined act of self-denial. Replayed time and again from 1899 onwards in Puccini's popular *œuvres* in Italy, Europe and beyond, it was performed over a relatively brief timeframe in the history of Italian theatre, and yet it primed, and—to some extent, though we shall never know how much—prepared spectators for some of the shock with which they were met with *Sei personaggi* on its opening night.

University of Strathclyde

- 1 Pirandello's dates are slightly later (b. 1867, Agrigento, d. 1936, Rome), while Puccini was born in Lucca in 1858 and died in Brussels in 1924.
- 2 Alexandra Wilson, *The Puccini Problem: Opera, Nationalism, and Modernity* (Cambridge, CUP, 2007), p. 210.
- 3 Mosco Carner, *Puccini: A Critical Biography* (New York, Knopf, 1959), p. 231.
- 4 Jennifer Lorch, *Pirandello: Six Characters in Search of an Author* (Cambridge, CUP, 2005), p. 54.
- 5 See <http://operabase.com/top.cgi?lang=en#opera> [accessed 11 July 2017], under 'Composers': 'The top of the list [of composers] is dominated by Verdi, Mozart and Puccini, each with over 2000 performance runs over five seasons (2011/12 – 2015/16)'.
- 6 Wilson, *The Puccini Problem*, p. 208. Writing to Renzo Valcarengi while waiting for his librettists to produce an adaptation of Gozzi's *Turandot*, Puccini asked: 'Should I look for something else? Bring myself up to date and devote myself to some big new genius with a bit of style and a bit of imagination? Who? Pirandello? [...]', p. 208, cited in Kii-Ming Lo, *'Turandot' auf der Opernbühne* (Frankfurt am Main, Peter Lang, 1996), p. 206.
- 7 Elsewhere I have argued that decapitation in Puccini's *Turandot* functions as an enactment of the castration complex: see Katharine Mitchell, 'Making

the World Weep?’ Decapitation/Castration in Puccini’s *Turandot*’, *Romance Studies*, 30:2 (2012), 97-106. The obvious reference to the psychosexual in Pirandello’s *Sei personaggi* is through the suggestion of an incestuous relationship between the Father and the Stepdaughter.

- 8 Wilson, *The Puccini Problem*, p. 209. *Turandot* was first performed at La Scala, Milan, in 1926.
- 9 Tigrana in *Edgar*—first performed at Milan’s La Scala in 1889, though not a success—also commits murder against Fidelia, a secondary female character, who is in love with Edgar. The opera is set in 1300s Flanders among a farming community.
- 10 Taking pity on Princess Turandot after he has provided the correct answers to her three enigmas, Calaf sets her a challenge to discover his name before dawn. The opera is set in ancient times in Peking.
- 11 Dario Niccodemi (1874-1934), whose *compagnia* staged the première of *Sei personaggi*, wrote in his diary entry on 9 May after the first night performance at the Teatro Valle: ‘Il pubblico fece prodiga d’attenzione per penetrare nel groviglio di bizzarrie cerebrali di questo potente lavoro; e ci rimase per due atti; ma al terzo, come se quel che avveniva in scena oltrepassasse tutte le comprensioni e tutte le pazienze, si ribellò. E fu la battaglia. Poche volte ho veduto maggior passione di dissidio in un teatro’. ‘The audience made great efforts to come to grips with the strangeness of this powerful work, and held out for two acts. But in the third, as if what

was happening on stage surpassed all comprehension and patience all hell broke loose. And it was war. On very few occasions have I witnessed such dissent in a theatre'. See Alessandro D'Amico, introduction to *Sei personaggi in cerca d'autore* in *Mn* II, 631.

- 12 Carner, *Puccini*, p. 36. The *novella* was published by Treves in Milan in 1880, and was followed by Verga's play adaptation in 1884, which premièred in Turin at the Teatro Carignano.
- 13 Bizet's *Carmen*, first performed in Paris in 1875 and based on Prosper Merimée's realist *novella*, had come close, but given that the narrative is told from the perspective of the bourgeois French soldier it resists classification as *verismo* literature. More importantly, *verismo* is an Italian-invented literary movement concerning narratives of the *contadini* and the harsh realities of everyday rural life in Southern Italy at the turn-of-the-century.
- 14 Carner, *Puccini*, p. 112: 'Like their Italian colleagues, the English critics directed their main attack at the libretto; they found the torture scene particularly objectionable and accused the composer of degrading the art of music by making it express physical agony'.
- 15 *Ibid.*, 'Preface', p. xi.
- 16 The triptych is made up of 'Il tabarro', 'Suor Angelica', and 'Gianni Schicchi'. Each one-act opera lasts for around sixty minutes. What unifies them is that each 'mini opera' deals with a concealed death.

- 17 Carner, p. 201: ‘The comedy had an immediate success, but the other two operas were received with marked coolness, especially *Suor Angelica* [...]’.
- 18 Carner, *Puccini*, p. 157: ‘The ground-base of Puccini’s life and art was an ever-present melancholy [...] *un gran sacco di melanconia*’. Cited in a letter to one of his librettists, Giuseppe Adami, for *Turandot* dated 10 November 1920.