

REVIEW

by Prof. Dr. Tony Shekherdjieva-Novak,
lecturer at AMTII "prof. Assen Diamandiev,
professional field 8.3 Music and Dance Art,
for the dissertation work of Yi Lisha, a full-time PhD student at the Doctoral
Program "Music" of the NBU-Sofia, in the Department of Music, on the
topic:

"Vocal, Dramatic, and Stylistic Features of the Interpretation of Leading Female Roles in "Madama Butterfly" and "Turandot" by Puccini. A Comparative Analysis with Leading Female Characters in Chinese Opera"

For the award of the scientific and educational degree "Doctor", field of higher education 8. Arts, professional field 8.3 Music and Dance Art, with research supervisor. Prof. Dr. Milena Shushulova-Pavlova

(Vocal supervisor: Dr. Natalia Afeyan)

Brief biographical introduction of the PhD candidate:

Yi Lisha was born in People's Republic of China. She is a Visiting Professor at the Shenyang Conservatory of Music, a Visiting Fellow of the Italian Conservatory of Music in Rome, appointed by the Ministry of Education of China. Yi Lisha is a young faculty member of the National Training Program, a member of the International Education Forum of the National Finance Commission.

She has participated as a jury member in many competitions, some of which are China Golden Children's Record, Pattison Special Vocal Competition, National Einstein Vocal

Competition, Most Beautiful Children's Voice Competition, National Future Star Competition, etc.

She herself has won prizes at the Bellini International Vocal Music Competition, the Gut Impling International Singing Competition in Germany, and the Golden Bell Award for Chinese Music.

She has been awarded the Special Projects in the Arts Fund of the Study Abroad Fund Commission of the Ministry of Education, the National Incentive Scholarship. Yi Lisha is an outstanding volunteer at the Beijing Olympic Games and a distinguished graduate student of the Shenyang Conservatory of Music.

Academic publications related to the topic of her doctoral dissertation

1.Yi, Lisha. THE CHINESE COMPOSER XU ZHANHAI AND HIS OPERATIC MASTER PIECE "CANG YUAN": A FUSION OF THE EASTERN AND WESTERN IN MUSIC. In: Young Scientific Forum on Music and Dance, NBU Publishing House, vol. 18, 2023.

2.Yi, Lisha. ON THE SIMILARITIES AND DIFFERENCES OF SINGING METHODS BETWEEN EUROPE AND CHINA IN BELCANTO. In: Young scholarly forum on music and dance, NBU publishing house, vol. 17, 2022.

Presentation of the dissertation

PhD candidate Yi Lisha's dissertation on "Vocal, Dramatic, and Stylistic Features of the Interpretation of Leading Female Roles in "Madama Butterfly" and "Turandot" by Puccini. A Comparative Analysis with Leading Female Characters in Chinese Opera" is written in English

and consists of an introduction (preface), three chapters, a conclusion, contributions and a bibliography. The total length is 115 pages, including images, historical geographical maps, musical examples, historical illustrations and documentary photographs. References cited include a bibliography with 18 sources and 24 references concerning versions of the works studied, librettos, university editions, historical Chinese editions, anonyms, and various versions of productions by some of the most important opera houses. The literature used is mainly in English and Chinese.

In the introduction, the doctoral candidate comments on the choice of topic, stressing that "the interaction, collision, fusion and common development of Eastern and Western culture is an ongoing process" and that opera as an art has "many stages and many factors in the spread of this genre from Europe to the East" (p.6.) The purpose of this study is to explore and analyse the relationships and various aspects of the interpretation of the leading female characters in Far Eastern opera, seeking to reveal the richness and mystery of Eastern women shaped by their cultural and historical milieu.(p.6) The objects of this study are Puccini's two operas *Madama Butterfly* and *Turandot*, inspired by Eastern themes that shaped Western perceptions of Japan and China. According to the doctoral student, these works also give Eastern audiences a new understanding of how their cultures can be shown to the world. The Chinese composer Xu Zhanghai and the female lead in his opera *Cang Yuan* are also the subject of this study. Focusing on these three operas, Yi Lisha aimed to compare the vocal, dramaturgical and stylistic features in their interpretation indicated by the composers, as well as the steps in the construction of the female leads in their works.

Puccini's opera *Madama Butterfly* is based on the one-act play by the American playwright Belasco, with a libretto by Giacosa and Illica. The story is set in the Meiji era, near Nagasaki harbor in Kyushu, Japan. In it, Puccini uses Japanese folk songs, such as "Cherry Blossom" (Sakura), "Japanese Bridge Over the River," and "The Goddess of Ichigo," to represent, through the Japanese style, the identity of Cio-Cio-San and her innocent nature. In his opera *Turandot*, the composer applies the Chinese folk song *Jasmine* as a musical theme, which brings the audience to the necessary character situation with its folk elements. Puccini conveys the emotions of his characters mainly through the comprehensive artistic expression of singing, music and dance. Music and drama work hand in hand, stimulating each other, says Lisha Y. They stay within the framework

of Western music, but also embody the exotic colors of the East. There are many differences between Western and Eastern culture in the way they are expressed and interpreted, but there are also many unexplored commonalities. Chinese opera is an actor-centered art. It has corresponding requirements for singing, though, what it pursues is not exceptional sound quality but the unique understanding and innovation of singing events. The doctoral candidate expects her dissertation to promote "mutual learning and integration between Western and Eastern cultures in the field of music, which will make the scope of opera more diverse and rich" (p. 11).

Methods of research

Yi Lisha emphasizes that her research focuses on the interpretation of Eastern female imagery as the main research topic. Empirical and theoretical methods are used in this dissertation. The empirical ones include research and study of available literature, social surveys, field research and interviews, and observation. Theoretical methods are introduced through comparative research, analyses and summaries. The dissertation is a result of many interviews and meetings held to obtain information about the works, sheet music, video, audio and other materials, to achieve completeness in the data presented, and correctness of classification.

Chapter One presents a brief portrait of Puccini as author of the two works studied, analyses the characteristics of his dramaturgical and musical style, makes a kind of bridge in time, and comments on his influence on future generations. Throughout the historical and cultural development of the East, women's positions underwent significant transformations. Yi Lisha outlines that Puccini interprets various aspects of Eastern female characters through the prism of Western sensibility and attempts to analyse the complex processes of their internal changes and the way in which, in combination with various real-life factors, the obligatory conclusions of dramatic content are reached. At the same time, it analyses the various musical elements used in the operas. By comparing specific performance versions, focusing on the arias of the protagonists, the PhD candidate contrasts the requirements of different directors in terms of interpretation, showing the respective experiences instilled in the audience by specific realisations made in different time periods. The research done from a purely historical perspective concentrates on the time and circumstances surrounding the creation of the operatic work, the characterisation of the music and its stage realisation.

The Chinese opera *Cang Yuan* and Xu Zhanghai, its composer, are the subject of **Chapter Two** of the dissertation. Xu Zhanghai provides insight into the multifaceted traits of Eastern women from the position of Eastern cultural heritage. In the course of this chapter, the background of the work, composed in 1995, is examined, which stands out as "one of the most representative classical works in the history of Chinese national opera" (p. 72) and presents the grand patriotic epic of the great ethnic migration of the Chinese Mongol tribe of the Targuts, who lived for more than 140 years in the Volga River region of Russia during the Qianlong Dynasty. Xu Zhanghai's opera *Cang Yuan* was composed at the end of the 20th century, a period in which China greatly increased its embrace of Western culture thanks to years of cultural exchange. It is noteworthy that a 'common ground' was found between Western opera and distinctive Chinese culture, allowing mutual enrichment. The researcher emphasizes that *Cang Yuan* combines the typical structure of Western opera with distinct Chinese style and ethnic characteristics, achieving a perfect fusion of music and drama. The leading figure is Narengawa, who plays a key role in the whole plot. "She combines Butterfly's unwavering fidelity to love with a Turandot-like responsibility to her nation and ethnicity. She is incredibly devoted to love, full of hope and expectation for a brighter future and, at the same time, willing to sacrifice herself for the greater cause of her people's survival" (p. 85). In her music, Xu Zhanghai incorporates elements of traditional Chinese folk songs and musical techniques using the form of Western opera, effectively merging Chinese folk music with Western compositional techniques. Also included are elements of Chinese oral drama, traditional Chinese operatic rhythms and the four intonations of the Chinese language.

The **third chapter** compares the three operas that are the subject of this study in terms of their historical backgrounds, characteristic features, and specific cultural distinctions. Whether Chinese or Italian opera, they belong to the category of dramatic art and gradually form their own characteristics based on their own unique theatrical concepts. Both arts are comprehensive theatrical performing arts in which singing is the main form of presenting the plot action. Italian opera strives for a compact structure and closely integrates the preparation to it. Borrowing the Western operatic style, incorporating elements of Chinese oral drama, traditional Chinese operatic rhythms and the four intonations of the Chinese language, Chinese composer Xu Zhanghai creates music compatible with traditional Chinese culture and content, making it understandable and acceptable to Chinese audiences.

In the process of writing her dissertation, PhD student Yi Lisha visited the Puccini Opera Theater in Italy on numerous occasions, participating in discussions concerning the research topic, diligently gathering the necessary literature, and initiating conversations about collaboration between Eastern and Western opera companies.

In the **Conclusion**, the doctoral candidate analyzes the results of her research and outlines the following contributions of her dissertation:

1. The study clearly identifies an appropriate method and direction of interpretation of central female roles in Eastern operas that would assist performers in their interpretation and musical understanding of Eastern female characters.

2. The study shows the historical and cultural aspects behind the characters identified and identifies key points of mutual influence.

3. This research leads to the creation of a number of learning platforms that would assist singers.

4. This dissertation introduces us to Xu Zhanghai, one of the pillars of contemporary Chinese music culture. The included interview, given by him exclusively for the purpose of this dissertation, reveals valuable insights into the development of national Chinese opera.

5. In connection with the research, the author engaged in in-depth discussions with Franco Moretti, director of the Puccini Opera House in Italy, on the characteristics of Eastern and Western musical operas. It lays the foundation for future collaboration in the creation and performance of relevant Eastern operas, deepening interaction and collaboration.

6. Yi Lisha considers that, thanks to the research, a means for mutual influence and exchange of performances of Eastern-themed operas between Italy, Bulgaria and China has been created.

The bibliography of the dissertation contains sources in English and Chinese, translated into English. I believe that the doctoral candidate is familiar with the state of the art, the literature used in the examples and citations, and all the reference sources mentioned.

The abstract correctly presents the main points of the dissertation text.

In support of what has been said, I give the following conclusion:

The dissertation has both scientific and applied qualities. I agree with the contributions outlined. The publications presented are fully sufficient and complement the research. Considering the fact that doctoral student Yi Lisha did a performance doctorate with performances in concerts and productions, I believe that the scope of the research is quite sufficient. The work is thorough, based on a serious study of a sufficient amount of literature, developed in accordance with the legal requirements for the award of the educational and scientific degree of Doctor. This gives me grounds **to propose to the esteemed scientific jury to award the educational and scientific degree "Doctor" in the professional field 8.3 Music and Dance Art to doctoral candidate Yi Lisha.**

I congratulate the scientific supervisor Prof. Dr. Milena Shushulova-Pavlova and the vocal teacher Dr. Natalia Afeyan. I wish success to doctoral student Lisha Yi in her future professional realization.

19. 05. 2024

Prof. Dr. Toni Shekerdjieva-Novak