



## **Opera = fat ladies singing loudly in opulent surroundings? No, not quite!**

Have you ever watched pieces of an opera and wondered what was going on? People are singing to each other--sometimes on top of each other--in Italian but what are they singing about? If you're not already an opera lover, let's learn a little about all this commotion!

Opera was born in Italy around the year 1600 and Italian opera rules until today. Works by native Italian composers of the 19th and early 20th centuries, such as Rossini, Bellini, Donizetti, Verdi and Puccini, are amongst the most famous operas ever written.

Opera is divided into two main types: "Opera seria" (dramatic or tragic) and "Opera buffa" (comedies).

It's sometimes viewed as a hobby for the rich, who dress up in tuxedos

and fancy ballgowns to attend "the season." OK, so a lot of opera singers weigh a lot and are difficult to understand, even if singing in English. And some folks identify a musical as an "opera" if someone starts singing after being stabbed.

But the stories that follow the continuous singing are interesting, intriguing, and to say the least, dramatic. We're going to take a look at a few operas in the Nutshell messages, explain what's going on, and give you a few snippets of the music. Some arias (solos) are intensely memorable and sung by the most famous singers we know.



We'll start with Turandot. An odd name for a bumpy romance set in China. Turandot is actually about a haughty princess with many suitors who all end up beheaded. Let's take a look at why all of them met untimely deaths.

In front of the walls of the imperial palace in Beijing, a proclamation is read announcing that the Princess Turandot will marry only a suitor of royal blood who can answer her three riddles. Suitors who fail to answer correctly will have their heads lopped off. The Prince of Persia just failed and is on his way to the gallows. Some of the crowd waits for the execution eagerly while the others call the princess to stop the bloodshed. As he is led to the scaffold the crowd is taken with his good looks and young age. They beg the Princess to pardon him. Turandot appears for an instant and icily signals the execution to begin.

A slave girl named Liu suddenly cries for help when her elderly master, Timur, is pushed to the ground. Out of the shadows comes a strapping young man to help them (it's Prince Calaf). He recognizes Timur as his long-lost father, the deposed King of Tartary, now occupied by Chinese rulers.



Afraid for his life, Prince Calaf tells Timur never to say his name out loud. Both men are still running from the enemies who

vanquished them from their own kingdom. Timur tells Prince Calaf that Liu has been his only faithful servant. When Prince Calaf asks her why, she tells him it was because Calaf once smiled upon her many years ago (she loves him).

Calaf suddenly catches sight of Turandot. He is smitten and taken in by her beauty--it is love at first sight. He must answer the riddles and marry her. Timur begs his son to run away and save his life but Calaf refuses. He approaches the palace gates, strikes the gong three times and tells Turandot he will accept the challenge that has taken the heads of many before him.



Although many attempt to sway him, no one can change Calaf's mind--not even Turandot herself. A long time ago, she says, a foreign king ravished her ancestress and then killed her. Her game is to avenge the horrible deed, for she vows that no man shall ever have her.

And so she begins her test.

**The first riddle:** "What is born each night and dies at dawn?"

"Hope," Calaf says.

**The second riddle is tougher:** "What flares warm like a flame, yet it is no flame?" "Blood," he responds.

Turandot is not happy as no suitor has ever made it this far and there is only one riddle left. Will he answer correctly?

**Her third question seems to seal the prince's fate:** "What is like ice, but burns?" she asks. Calaf, thinks, hesitates and seems stumped but then claims his victory. "Turandot herself!"

The people hail the victorious prince but Turandot begs her father: she does not want to marry the prince. The Emperor cannot help his daughter; the bargain was struck.

But Calaf comes with a counter proposal: he will ask the princess one riddle: "If before morning you can discover my name, I shall forfeit my life." Turandot accepts the challenge.

Turandot sends her messengers through the city to find out the prince's

name. No one shall sleep tonight, she decrees, until the name is found out. If she does not learn his name, everyone in the city will be killed.

In the palace garden, Calaf waits for morning, singing one of the most famous and beautiful arias in operatic history: *Nessun Dorma* (No One Shall Sleep). The song declares that no one will sleep that night, that his secret is safe, and that his "kiss will dissolve the silence that makes you mine!" At dawn, he sings, he will WIN!

To listen to this beautiful and memorable aria, [click here](#).

So what is Turandot to do?

Timur and Liù are captured, and at Turandot's direction orders that Timur be tortured until he reveals the name. Liù steps forward and says that she knows the prince's name but will keep it as her eternal secret. She will never disclose it because of her love for him. Snatching a dagger from one of the guards, she stabs herself and dies. Calaf berates the Princess for her cruelty and calls her the Princess of Death.

He tears the veil off her face and kisses her passionately; it's her first kiss and the one that finally melts the ice princess. She confesses that from the beginning she has feared and loved him. She hopes Calaf is happy to know she loves him and asks him to leave. But Calaf reveals his true identity to Turandot putting his life in her hands. She rushes to summon the Emperor and the people, announcing "I have discovered the stranger's name—it is Love!" Turandot and Calaf kiss and the crowd is overjoyed.



And that's the story of Turandot.

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