

Plot

Scene One - The Gong

Peking, at the time of fairy tales. The Emperor of China brings up his beautiful daughter, Turandot, who, much to his great displeasure, very soon becomes a moth princess with a heart of ice. His people are forced to live a sad and grey existence as "insect" subjects under the heartless decisions of the fearsome princess; they never smile.

In order to vindicate her ancestor Lou-Ling, who was rejected by a foreign man centuries before, the princess has made a terrible proclamation: to every prince who asks for her hand in marriage, she will give him three riddles. If he manages to answer them he will become her husband, but if he loses the contest, he will pay with his life. One day from a faraway land Calaf, a valiant prince, presents himself at the court of Turandot, determined to resolve the three riddles.

His elderly father, Timur and the young servant Liù, whom he meets up with after a long exile, in vain try to dissuade the prince from his dangerous proposal but their prayers come to nothing. The prince, whose name nobody knows, decides to play the gong and accept the terrible challenge.

Scene Three - The Dream of Freedom

Ping, Pong and Pang, faithful subjects of Turandot, dream of returning to live in a coloured world, of freeing themselves of the cocoons that imprison them and of retrieving their own identities as happy men. The list of the suitors who have lost the challenge becomes longer every day and in the kingdom of Turandot a cold and dark night continues to rule.

Scene Three - The Riddles

The princess subjects the prince to three riddles, which until now have remained unsolved. To the great surprise of Turandot, Calaf manages to answer them one after the other. Her subjects rejoice witnessing love rather than death. But the princess, hurt and humiliated by the defeat, implores her father the Emperor not to bestow her in marriage to the stranger. The prince decides to allow a rematch: if the princess manages to discover his name before dawn, he will lose and will pay with his life.

Scene Four - Love

The prince is certain that he will manage to kindle love in the cold heart of the princess. But the princess, who has been unable to find out the name of the prince, orders the guards to capture the other two strangers, Liù and Timur, in order to force them to tell her his name. To save Timur from being tortured, Liù confesses that she is the only person who knows the name. Liù knows that if she kills herself nobody will be able to discover the identity of the prince and so he will win the contest and his life will be saved.

In an act of extreme generosity she kills herself in the name of the unconditional love which she holds in her heart. The prince is touched by her great altruism and, certain that even Turandot cannot remain indifferent, he decides to put his life in the hands of the princess and he tells her his name: Calaf. A pale ray of light is kindled in the darkness of the heart of the moth princess: now she can decide whether to reveal the name and win, or lose the contest and abandon herself to the love of Calaf.