

Classical review: *Turandot*, Royal Opera House, London

By Jessica Duchen

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Andrei Serban's 29-year-old production of *Turandot*, now enjoying its 15th revival, is the operatic crowd-pleaser par excellence: a visual spectacular once seen at Wembley Arena, complete with brilliant colours, masks, dancing, gigantic severed heads and a Chinese dragon.

There's always a hint of "if only" about this opera: left unfinished when Puccini died, its last act was completed by Franco Alfano, a fine composer yet simply not on the same level. And the stylised nature of the drama, set in ancient China, falls short in terms of character development of Puccini's magnificent achievements in, for instance, *Tosca* and *La Bohème*. This production – and its rendition here – does little to bridge the gaps. Sally Jacobs' designs still steal the show, yet perhaps provide too easy a resting place for its laurels.

Having so said, a couple of significant Royal Opera debuts promised much for the future. The stage presence and immensely powerful voice of the American soprano Lise Lindstrom made the elusive *Turandot* the magnetic force that she needs to be. A willowy and imposing figure, possessing a voice replete with brilliance and focus – and without excessive wobble – Lindstrom is a fast-rising star of the dramatic soprano repertory and absolutely one to watch.

The young Hungarian conductor Henrik Nánási, who has recently become general music director at the Komische Opera, Berlin, was the other fine newcomer; despite a few first-night glitches in the coordination of pit and chorus, he presented a reading of the score that was detailed and supple with a good strong backbone.

Unfortunately, though, it's the tenor on whom all eyes and ears are trained in this opera, because of 'Nessun dorma', and the evening's Calaf, the Italian tenor Marco Berti, offered a mixed bag indeed. He has strong top notes and can let rip when necessary; nevertheless, his singing seemed a little bumpy and unsettled in Act I, that big aria lacked the tonal finesse and sense of obsession that can lift it to the stratospheres – and acting, per se, didn't appear to have crossed his radar.

He was roundly outshone by the impassioned Liu of Eri Nakamura, whose 'Signore, ascolta' broke hearts galore; and the delightful skittishness of Ping, Pang and Pong – Dionysius Sourbis, David Butt Philip and Doug Jones prancing, dancing and bitching in bright silks.

But next time, how about a production of *Turandot* that probes the characters and their relationships to make the drama live a little more?