

Madama Butterfly

By

Giacomo Puccini

Opera Preview by

Maria J. Falco, PhD

Background

On April 12th and 14th, The New Orleans Opera Association will present Giacomo Puccini's most often performed opera, "Madama Butterfly," under the direction of Doctor Robert Lyall, Artistic Director and Conductor.

Derived from a play by David Belasco, itself drawn from a novella written by John Luther Long in 1898, Puccini became fascinated by the clash of cultures and religions depicted in the drama between the European/American/Christian and the Asian/Japanese/Buddhist landscapes so beautifully outlined in the play he first saw in London. As soon as he could get permission to do so, he had a libretto written by Giuseppe Giacosa and Luigi Illica wrote the music and arranged for its premiere at La Scala in Milan in February of 1904. Unfortunately there had been insufficient time for rehearsals when it first opened, and a three month delay was necessary for

him to revise whole sections before it could be successfully performed in Brescia that same year, to the great delight of the audience.

Three more revisions were made before Puccini accepted what is currently known as the “standard version” which is the one most widely performed today. The first performance of the opera in the United States occurred in 1906 in Washington’s Columbia Theatre, while the third version had its premiere at the Metropolitan Opera in New York in 1907.

How to stage an accurate depiction of that cultural clash is the compulsion that consumed him the most in the process of creating this, the seventh most performed opera in the world today. So popular did it become in Japan that a statue of her next to one of Puccini were erected in Glover Garden, Nagasaki, the site of the opera itself.

The Story

Act One opens with a Nagasaki marriage agent, Goro, displaying to US Naval Officer, BF Pinkerton, a home he has leased for 999 years, renewable month to month, for Pinkerton, three servants and a 15 year old Geisha named Cio-Cio San (Madama Butterfly) whom Pinkerton intended to marry temporarily under Japanese law. Butterfly was originally from a prominent high-born family whose father had recently gone bankrupt and committed Hara Kiri. Butterfly was

subsequently forced to support herself by working as a Geisha.

When Pinkerton boasts that he takes his pleasure where he finds it and eventually expects to marry an American wife, Goro warns him that Butterfly will likely take their marriage far more seriously. In fact Butterfly converts to Christianity before their wedding, as evidence of her sincerity and fidelity.

Shortly after the wedding, performed by the Imperial Commissioner in grand style and witnessed by the Official Registrar and most of her friends and relatives, her uninvited uncle, a Bonze or Buddhist priest, storms into the garden denouncing and cursing her for forsaking her ancestral faith. He drives the guests away, urging them to leave the premises and to renounce her for her scandalous behavior.

An extended love duet between Butterfly and Pinkerton follows (“Viene la sera”). Butterfly asks if it is true that in foreign lands a man will catch a butterfly and pin its wings to a table. Pinkerton admits that is true—so that it will not run away. He embraces her, declares that he has caught her and “you are mine.” She replies, “Yes. Forever!”

Act Two opens with Butterfly waiting for Pinkerton to return after a three year absence. Suzuki, her maid, is kneeling before the Buddha praying that Butterfly will soon stop crying. She tells Butterfly not to expect him

back, because foreign men seldom return to their Japanese wives, and they will soon be out of money. Butterfly replies with the loveliest aria of the opera (“Un Bel Di Vedremo”) claiming that Pinkerton will return “one fine day.”

Shortly afterwards, Sharpless, the American Consul, and Goro who has been trying to convince Butterfly to marry a wealthy Japanese man Yamadori, who has been married and divorced many times, arrive with news of Pinkerton’s return. When they greet her as Madama Butterfly, she responds with “Madame Pinkerton, please” and criticizes Goro for not recognizing that American marriages, unlike Japanese marriages, are for life.

When Sharpless asks Butterfly what she would do if Pinkerton were not to return to her, she responds, “e questo?” pointing to the blond haired two year old son she had borne him in his absence. She has every confidence that he will do so when he finds out. If not, then she will die. When Sharpless asks the child’s name, she replies, for now, it is “Sorrow” (Dolore), but when Pinkerton returns, it will be “Joy.”

At one point she hears a cannon shot and sees the name of Pinkerton’s ship, the Abraham Lincoln, as it glides into the harbor. She immediately orders the entire area to be filled with flowers while she puts on her wedding kimono. She stays up all night waiting for him to come to her, while the child and Suzuki fall asleep.

The “Humming Chorus” marks the transition from night to morning and the beginning of Act Three (no intermission). Suzuki awakes at dawn, finds Butterfly asleep and takes the child into the next room, singing a sad lullaby. Sharpless and Pinkerton arrive with Kate, his American wife, who has agreed to raise the child as his own. When he sees how Butterfly has decorated the house he realizes his mistake, admits he is a coward and cannot face her (“Addio fiorito asil”). He leaves it to Sharpless, Suzuki and Kate to break the news.

When she awakes she finds only Kate in the garden and after receiving the news, Butterfly responds by saying she will agree to give up her son only if Pinkerton himself asks her. She asks them to return in half an hour.

When alone, Butterfly prays to her ancestral gods and reaches for her father’s Hara Kiri dagger with the inscription “To die with Honor.” Suzuki pushes the child, into the room to stop Butterfly from committing suicide. Butterfly bids her son goodbye, blindfolds him, places a small American flag in his hands, goes behind a screen and slits her throat. She wraps a scarf around her throat, kisses her child and collapses, just as Pinkerton rushes in—too late! Kate asks Butterfly’s forgiveness. A Buddhist statue is revealed with the Motto: “Who cannot live with honor must die with honor.”



Director: Tomer Zvulun

Conductor: Robert Lyall

Cast:

Cio-Cio San (Madame Butterfly) – Maria Kanyova

B. F. Pinkerton – Bryan Hymel

Suzuki – Margaret Thompson

Sharpless – Jake Gardner

Goro – Casey Candebat

Bronze – Kenneth Weber

Yamadori – Jacob Penick

Kate Pinkerton – Caitlin Yadamec

Imperial Commissioner – Ivan Griffin

Official Registrar – Taylor Miller

Uncle Yakuside – Aaron Ambeau

Mother – Vickie Thomas

Aunt – Meg Frazier

Cousin – Cara Williams

Trouble – Kathleen Kania (Kanyova)

Composer: Giacomo Puccini

Librettist: Luigi Illica and Giuseppe Giacosa

