Study guide to Giacomo Puccini’s Japanese tragedy

MADAME BUTTERFLY

Presented by Michigan Opera Theatre at the Detroit Opera House, November 15-23, 2014

THE WHO, WHAT, WHERE, AND WHEN

- Opera in two acts, the second act in two parts
- Set in and around the house bought by Lieutenant B. F. Pinkerton on a hilltop in Nagasaki, Japan, overlooking the sea; early 20th century
- Premièred at Teatro La Scala in Milan, Italy—February 17, 1904
- Text by Giuseppe Giacosa (1847-1906, b. Colleretto Parella, near Turin, in northern Italy) and Luigi Illica (1857-1919, b. Castell’Arquato, near Piacenza, in northern Italy)—their 4th and final opera for the composer (previous two for him were his other most famous operas, La bohème (1896) and Tosca (1900))
- Music by Giacomo Puccini (1858-1924, b. Lucca, in Tuscany, northern Italy)—his 6th opera
- Based on the one-act play Madame Butterfly: A Tragedy of Japan (1900) by American dramatist and theatre impresario David Belasco, itself based on the novella Madame Butterfly (1898) by American lawyer and writer John Luther Long, which was inspired by stories told to Long by his sister Jennie Correll, who had travelled to Japan with her husband to undertake Christian missionary work
- Sung in Italian with English translations projected above the stage
- Running time about 2½ hours

SING SOFTLY AND CARRY A BIG STICK: The creators of Elektra (from left), composer Giacomo Puccini and librettists Giuseppe Giacosa and Luigi Illica.
THE STORY
(Adapted from Opera Stories by Henry L. Mason, 1910, Boston, MA):

Act I
B. F. Pinkerton, an officer in the U.S. Navy, is in command of a ship stationed in Japanese waters. He has rented a house in the city of Nagasaki, and with it, a Japanese bride—the 15-year-old geisha Cio-Cio San, or “Madame Butterfly” (Cio-Cio translates as “butterfly” in Japanese). After a while, Pinkerton must return to America. He promises Butterfly (who has become deeply attached to him) that he will return to her “when the robins nest.”

Act II
With loyal devotion, Butterfly awaits Pinkerton’s return, ignoring, meanwhile, more than one Japanese suitor. The American consul, Sharpless, visits Butterfly to tell her he has heard from Pinkerton, who has meanwhile married an American woman. But Sharpless is so touched by her affection for Pinkerton that he cannot bring himself to relay the dreadful news. She shows him her young son, whose father is Pinkerton.

A cannon is heard. To the great joy of Butterfly, she and Suzuki (her maid) see Pinkerton’s ship pulling into the harbor. They decorate the house with flowers for his return. All through the night, Butterfly watches in vain, waiting for Pinkerton’s arrival. Suzuki finally begs her to rest, and Butterfly retires to another room to do so. After a moment, Sharpless, Pinkerton, and Pinkerton’s new wife Kate appear. As Pinkerton hears of Butterfly’s devotion, he flees in shame, leaving his wife and Sharpless to meet Butterfly. Butterfly meets Kate and quickly understands the truth. Taking her father’s sword, she kisses her son goodbye and kills herself.

“BUT—HE IS A MIRACLE! YES!”
An illustration by C. Yarnall Abbott from John Luther Long’s novella Madame Butterfly, the source for the opera. In the image, Butterfly shows off her and Pinkerton’s baby, named “Trouble” (in the opera, “Dolore,” meaning pain, sorrow).
THE CAST OF CHARACTERS (AND SINGERS)

Cio-Cio San, aka Madame Butterfly, a young Japanese woman
- Moldavian lyric soprano Inna Los (November 15, 19, 22)
- Italian lyric soprano Donata D’Annunzio Lombardi (November 21, 23)

B. F. (Benjamin Franklin) Pinkerton, an American naval lieutenant
- American tenor Noah Stewart (November 15, 19, 22)
- Canadian tenor Adam Luther (November 21, 23)

Sharpless, the American consul in Japan
- American tenor Michael Mayes

Goro, a marriage broker
- Korean-American tenor Julius Ahn

Suzuki, Butterfly’s maid
- American mezzo soprano Kimberly Sogioka

The production at the Detroit Opera House will feature the Michigan Opera Theatre Orchestra and Chorus, the latter directed by MOT Assistant Music Director and Chorus Master Suzanne Mallare Acton. American conductor Stephen Lord and French stage director Bernard Uzan lead the artistic staff.
BOOS FOR BUTTERFLY:  
NOW A CLASSIC, BUTTERFLY WAS A DISASTER AT ITS PREMIÈRE

How soon we forget, in all our starry-eyed reverence for the world's artistic treasures, that these works were not always so dearly beloved. In 1848, London critics derided Emily Brontë’s classic novel *Wuthering Heights* as “a strange, inartistic story.” *Detroit Industry* has attained in our fair metropolis a near-holy status, with Motowners from afar making pilgrimages to the Detroit Institute of Arts just to study up-close the colorful array of laborers and machinery. But in 1933, when the murals were revealed, there was outcry from every corner, with newspapermen claiming the work was “anti-Catholic,” “communist,” or “cartoonish.”

And similarly, on the 17th of February, 1904, Giacomo Puccini’s *Madame Butterfly* premiered at Milan's La Scala to howls and hisses of the most passionate and ill-tempered Italian flavor. Theories abound as to why the audience reacted the way it did, with some citing the singers' deficient talents or the (now-revised) decision to perform the piece in two uninterrupted acts, and others contending that the booing was deliberately engineered by an artistic rival Puccini.

Puccini, however, remained confident of his work, knowing that it would prove a success one day (as indeed it did, after being revised and revived just a few months later). It was the composer's favorite of all his operas. Whatever the cause for its original sour reception, the astounding fact remains that *Madame Butterfly*, the most-performed opera in America today, received at its introduction what Puccini later looked back on as “a veritable lynching.”

Question for students:  
Think of a recently released creative work, whether a song, film, book, etc. How did critics respond to it? How about your friends? How did you respond? What might account for the differences in reception to the work? Can a work be truly *bad* or *good*, or does all art just have different appeal to different people?
BUTTERFLY FLITTING THROUGH THE AGES

Our production’s Cio-Cio Sans, Inna Los and Donata D’Annunzio Lombardi, have some tremendous wooden sandals to fill...

Moldavian soprano Inna Los has been praised for her “round middle voice with a luscious, silvery upper register.” She will need all that shimmering silver quality when she portrays Butterfly, who boasts to Pinkerton while wearing her wedding kimono, “Somiglio la Dea della luna, la piccola Dea della luna che scende la notte dal ponte del ciel” [I am like the Moon Goddess, the little Moon Goddess who descends at night from the bridge of heaven].

Italian soprano Donata D’Annunzio Lombardi last appeared in Detroit in May 2014 as the sympathetic slave girl Liù in Puccini’s other Asian-set opera, Turandot. Opera News wrote of that performance, “D’Annunzio Lombardi’s spinning, nearly endless pianissimos [moments of very quiet singing] convinced us of the softness of Liu’s heart.” Doubtless she will put this same skill with tender moments to good use when she brings us into Butterfly’s world.

Italian soprano Rosina Storchio originated the role, but vowed to never sing it again in Italy after the first-night fiasco. Her decision hurt Puccini deeply, and he wrote to her on February 22nd, 1904, “I think that Butterfly without Rosina Storchio becomes a thing without soul. What a shame!”

Italian soprano Renata Scotto, who now works as a stage director (she directed MOT’s production of Vincenzo Bellini’s La Sonnambula [The sleepwalker] in 2008), made her Met debut as Cio-Cio San in 1965. Her audio recording of the role is considered one of the finest.
AN INTERVIEW WITH “DR. OPERA”

Dr. Wallace Peace, a professor of history, gives the always-enteraining “Opera Talks” for free at every MOT opera performance, an hour before curtain. In them, he gives his thoughts on the music, tells the story of the opera, and plays excerpts of his favorite singers’ recordings. We caught up with the venerable Dr. Peace in his opera library at home to get his thoughts on *Butterfly*.

Some have accused *Madame Butterfly* of being anti-American. How do you respond to the claim?

DR. PEACE: At the end of *Butterfly*, you can’t help but feel the horror of the thing. Great Cio-Cio Sans, like Renata Tebaldi or Renata Scotto or Leontyne Price, made a whole career of having you just dissolve in tears when they “got it” in the end. And the man the soprano is playing against must be dreadful in order for her to do her work. So I’d say the opera is perhaps anti-“terrible man,” but not anti-American.

Is Pinkerton’s American wife, Kate, the most thankless role of all opera?

Oh, there’s nothing you can do with that role! The audience doesn’t like you. Suzuki doesn’t like you, and I don’t know how Pinkerton feels, because he leaves you to pick up the mess. And when Kate walks over to *Butterfly*, she says just about the worst thing she could possibly say and then exits. You won’t be elected Miss Opera for singing that one!

*Butterfly’s* servants have some wonderfully unusual nicknames: “Miss Gentle Breeze of Morning,” “Ray of the Golden Sunbeam,” and “Sweet-Scented Pine Tree.” What would your Puccini nickname be?

Well, there’s a name that I would pick out, and a name that my students would pick out! But my godson’s mother gave me the name “Dr. Opera,” and that has stuck. I even use it for my e-mail address.

We hear that *Butterfly* was the piece that first turned you on to opera.

Yes, I was watching the Bell Telephone Hour, a popular show in which a classical artist would come out and perform for the evening. When [Italian soprano] Signorina [Renata] Tebaldi came out in her *Butterfly* costume and sang “Un bel di,” I thought it was absolutely glorious. She could sing even better than Miss Grace Hayes, the soloist at St. Ambrose Episcopal Church in Raleigh, North Carolina, where I grew up.

Later, I went to the classical records shop and asked the owner if he had heard of Tebaldi. Don’t forget, I was 15—if she was new to me, she was new to everyone else. And they indeed had *Butterfly* with Tebaldi, but it was $5, a week’s salary. So I put down a dollar a week, and after five weeks, I bought the record. He let me off the sales tax.