

AN OPERA GUIDE TO

MADAME BUTTERFLY

ANDREA BOCELLI
LE OPERE

by Giorgio De Martino

WHAT IS IT?

This is a “Japanese tragedy in three acts”, a passionate, beautiful and sad love story set in a reinvented Far East. It is the apotheosis of tragic love and of female sensibility. Performed for the first time in 1904, it remains to this day one of the best loved operas in the world. *Madame Butterfly* is a transposition into opera of that floral art nouveau style which had triumphed at the Paris Universal Exhibition in 1900 (and in Italy at the Turin Exhibition of 1902) and represents a blend of Verismo and exotism. It is an opera which is entirely focused on intimacy and seeks out “the poetry of small things” but it also has a score which features many famous melodies and is rich in exquisitely musical features: a fluid canto and music which has been described as “easy to remember but complex in its construction” and a skillful use of those “leitmotifs” which were the hallmark of the Wagnerian theatre.

WHO WROTE THE MUSIC

Giacomo Puccini (1858 – 1924), the heir to Verdi, is the composer who succeeded in expressing the spirit of the late romantic period of the end of the nineteenth century as well as the new stirrings of the early twentieth century. With only partial recourse to the turn of the century musical verismo, he created a truly original style of his own, enriched by his talent for writing melodies of arresting beauty. Always carefully tuned to the changing tastes of the audiences and even to new fashions, Puccini constantly strove to keep renewing his personal style. Curious, practical and ingenious, he would carry out research into the musical culture of the countries (or periods) where he set his operas. For example he explored Gregorian chants (while composing *Tosca*), oriental themes (to give local colour to his *Madame Butterfly* and to *Turandot*), and motifs derived from American folk traditions and native American Indian rhythms for *La Fanciulla del West*. When he wrote *Madame Butterfly* Puccini was forty-six years old. He was to describe his “Japanese” opera as “the most heartfelt and emotionally evocative opera I have ever devised ».

WHAT DOES IT TELL US?

Cho-Cho-San, the fifteen year-old Butterfly, is a “child bride” (with the beauty and grace of a butterfly), who is the victim of love and of her own blind faith in Western man. Pinkerton is the name of the naval lieutenant (the “vagabond yankee” - as he describes himself – “who enjoys himself with no regard for the risks he takes” (“che si gode e traffica sprezzando I rischi”). First he marries her and then abandons her and eventually, after three years absence, he even returns to Nagasaki (where the action takes place) with his real American wife, Kate. Cho-Cho-San, who had renounced her religion for this man and who was obstinate in her desire to love this man and to wait for him (dreaming that “one fine day” she would see “a thread of smoke” on the horizon from which Pinkerton’s white ship would then emerge) is forced to surrender to the evidence. She even agrees to hand over her son, born of her union with Pinkerton, to the American couple, but then cannot bear the pain and so kills herself with the same knife her father had used to commit *hara-kiri*. Upon the weapon are inscribed the words: “To die with honour when it is not possible to live with honour”.

The story therefore consists entirely of the slow progress from happiness to tragedy made by this very young geisha who had cost Pinkerton only one hundred yen and had been procured by Goro, that “precious broker”, who is nothing but a slimy go-between. In fact the opera begins with the marriage feast (albeit under the cloud of an omen, which we find in the curse pronounced by Cho-Cho-San’s relative) and then focuses on her hope and long wait (second act) finally progressing to the sad ending with the betrayal and her resulting suicidal response.

THE BACKGROUND TO THE STORY

To trace the literary sources from which the Japanese “butterfly” originates (thanks to the librettists Giuseppe Giacosa and Luigi Illica) one must go back to a French author, Pierre Loti, member of the Academie Francaise, who had been a naval lieutenant and therefore had personal experience of the ex-



otic locations he described in his novels. In 1885 Loti had been to Nagasaki and had heard that it was customary for western sailors to marry young Japanese women, partly as a result of the fact that such marital vows became invalid, by tacit agreement, when these husbands left that port.

It is likely that the French author had gone through this experience himself which he subsequently told in the form of a novel, *Madame Chrysantheme*, in 1887. *Chrysanthemum* is the name of his protagonist, Kihou-San. Cho-Cho-San is the name of the new geisha in the story which came to light ten years later in America as penned by the American John Luther Long.

The success of this tale led to many requests for the theatrical rights to the work, and it was David Belasco who succeeded in obtaining them and who made the fundamental change to the original story to include the dramatic finale of the suicide.

Belasco was an astute and enterprising man of the theatre who adapted the story of *Butterfly* for the performances presented at the Herald Theatre in New York in March 1900 which captivated Puccini in the summer of that year.

Puccini was enchanted by the very sad story, with that “small soul suffering such great sorrow” which so recalled his own Mimi (from *La Bohème*), but he was also particularly impressed by the staging, the direction and the Japanese setting. This was also due to the fact that he did not understand a word of English and so was certainly not able to appreciate the dialogue of the play.

Puccini and Belasco’s meeting in the dressing room of the theatre was witnessed by Belasco’s biographer. He relates how the composer, whose eyes were glistening with tears, embraced the dramatist and begged for authorization to set the play to music. Belasco himself, recalling the encounter, reported: “I immediately said yes, he could do what he wished with the play: it was not possible to talk business with an impulsive Italian like that, with tears in his eyes and throwing his arms around your neck”.

PUCCINI’S ORIENT

In this opera it is often possible to pick up that musical exoticism that was so carefully researched by the Tuscan composer (and taken up again twenty years later in *Turandot*). Puccini studied the Japanese culture and customs. He contacted the Japanese ambassador and had collections of recordings sent to him of oriental folkloric music. He even took care to personally listen to the quality of the timbre of the Japanese female voice, by listening to a “mother-tongue” actress who was on tour in Europe. In *Madame Butterfly* we find the characteristic pentatonic scales, as well as some melodies which were taken from Japanese tradition, many instrumental effects of clearly exotic flavour, produced by the use of the xylophone, bells, and the treble register of the flute.

THE PLOT

First Act – The action takes place at the beginning of the twentieth century in Nagasaki. Benjamin Franklin Pinkerton, in his naval uniform, and with an attitude of amused superiority, is visiting the bellows house (or rather the sliding panels) with Goro, the slimy middleman. The American has bought it to serve as his temporary love nest, as he is about to enter lightly into a marriage of sorts with the child geisha. The first guest, his friend Sharpless, the Consul (baritone), arrives at the ceremony. The two friends chat over a glass of whisky and, with the introduction of the theme of the American anthem “the Star-Spangled Banner”, Pinkerton sets out his cynical “yankee” philosophy. He wants to live life to the full, even at the cost of riding roughshod over the feelings of others.

A reprimand from Sharpless, who describes this declaration as an “a philosophy of convenience”, is to no avail. *Butterfly* arrives, accompanied by her friends, and she tells her story: she confesses that she was forced to become a geisha, being from an aristocratic family which had fallen on hard times. She lives with her mother but her father is dead, having committed *hara-kiri* upon the Emperor’s invitation with a dagger which today she jealously guards. But Cho-Cho-San is happy to marry Pinkerton and she loves him so much that, unbeknownst to her relations, she has repudiated her gods, the day before her wedding, in order to embrace her husband’s religion. Her relatives are numerous and “colourful”.



We also meet her faithful servant Suzuki (mezzosoprano) and eventually the marriage ceremony takes place. While Pinkerton impatiently tried to rid himself of the oriental visitors, her uncle, the Bonze, a Buddhist priest, bursts into the wedding ceremony. He knows about Cho-Cho-San's change of religion and he shouts this out to the other relatives and curses her. Pinkerton throws all his guests out and Butterfly's cry "rinnegata e felice" ("cast out and happy") is softened by Pinkerton's sweet words of love. He says "bimba non piangere" ("do not weep little one") and – blocking her ears – she asks if the echo of her relations' threatening voices can still be heard. Pinkerton still remains an unscrupulous sailor in search of adventure but for this moment of the opera he is cast in a fleeting romantic light ...

Second act - Three years have gone by and we are at Butterfly's house. Sharpless arrives, in the company of Goro, to prepare Butterfly for a terrible shock which is contained in a letter from Pinkerton. (It states that he has married again). But before the Consul finds the courage to read it to her, the young woman asks, with touching candour, when the robin red breast builds his nest again in America. "Here – she says, referring to his promise to return – he has rebuilt it again a full three times, but it may be that there the custom is to nest less often". Goro bursts out laughing and so Cho-Cho San throws back an accusation at the marriage-broker for all the slippery ways he uses to ply her with new husbands. One of her suitors is the wealthy Yamadori who soon arrives on the scene. In spite of his promises of wealth and fidelity, she proudly declares herself to be married already and rejects him. The Consul advises her to accept him explaining that Pinkerton might not return. Then the young girl runs into the next room and comes back with a blonde baby who is her own child. Sharpless is moved by this. He promises to inform Pinkerton and, shaken, he takes his leave. The sound of a cannon announces the arrival of a ship into the harbour. It is the American gunboat, the "Lincoln". Butterfly seems wild with joy: "They were all lying – she bursts out – I was the only one who knew, I who love him". She puts on her wedding dress, fills the house with flowers and then, as night falls, she makes a hole in the paper walls of her house and looks out of it, waiting up all night long. At dawn (after a wonderful chorus and an orchestral interval which also includes a simulation of birdsong) Suzuki persuades her to rest. Deluded in her certainty that her lover will arrive with the rising sun, she goes back to her bedroom with her child in her arms. In the meantime Pinkerton has arrived in Nagasaki with his American wife, Kate. He comes to Butterfly's little house with Kate and Sharpless in order to persuade his Japanese bride to entrust their child to Kate. The two men hope that Suzuki will be able to prepare Butterfly for this terrible shock. Overcome with remorse Pinkerton moves away. Kate and the Consul remain waiting for Cho-Cho-San to wake up.

Disturbed by their voices, Butterfly bursts in and looks around for her husband in vain. Then she sees Kate and understands everything. Kate asks her forgiveness and demonstrates her willingness to look after the child and provide for his future. Butterfly, stunned by the shock, states that she will hand over her child but only to Pinkerton himself if he will come to ask him from her in person in half an hour. Then she orders Suzuki to close the shutters ((«troppa luce, di fuori, troppa primavera») "too much light outside, too much springtime") and to keep the child company while he plays. She kneels down and takes out her father's dagger. She already has the knife pointed at her throat when the child comes into the room having been pushed in by Suzuki. Butterfly let's the weapon fall and embraces her little one murmuring terrible words of adieu. She says: «tu piccolo Iddio, amore mio, fior di giglio e di rosa, non saperlo mai: per te, per i tuoi puri occhi, muor Butterfly, perché tu possa andare di là dal mare senza che ti rimorda ai dì futuri, il materno abbandono» ("You little god, love of mine, flower of the lily and the rose, must never know: for you, for your innocent eyes, Butterfly dies, so that you can go beyond the seas without feeling hurt by your mother's abandonment in the future"). After a last kiss she pushes him away and pretending to play she puts a little American flag in his hand which she had prepared for his father's return. Then she withdraws behind a screen. The sound of the weapon hitting the floor indicates that she has performed harakiri. The tragedy is concluded as we hear Pinkerton approaching calling out for her three times.



THE SPECTACULAR FLOP OF THE FIRST NIGHT

Caro nostro e grande Maestro, / la farfallina volerà: / ha le ali sparse di polvere, / con qualche goccia qua e là, / gocce di sangue, gocce di pianto... / Vola, vola, farfallina, / a cui piangeva tanto il cuore; / e hai fatto piangere il tuo cantore... / Canta, canta, farfallina, / con la tua voce piccolina, / col tuo stridire di sogno, / Fievole come il sonno / soave come l'ombra, / dolce come una tomba, / all'ombra dei bambù: a Nagasaki e a Cefù.

(Dear great Maestro of ours/the Butterfly will fly:/she has wings dusted/with a little drop here and there,/ droplets of blood, droplets of tears.../ Fly, fly little one/ whose heart was so heavy with tears;/and you made your writer weep.../ Sing, sing, little butterfly,/ with your little voice/ with your dreamlike squeaking,/as soft as sleep/ as gentle as the shadow/ as sweet as a grave,/in the shadow of the bamboo: in Nagasaki and in Cefù.)

These are the verses of the poet Giovanni Pascoli, published in the *Giornale d'Italia* on 20th April 1904, about two months after the spectacular flop of the first night of *Madame Butterfly*. That terrible night was described in the *Musica e Musicisti* magazine published by Ricordi as follows: “Growls, roars, howls, laughter, bellowing, guffaws, the usual solitary shouts for an encore deliberately intended to further provoke the audience, this in summary is the way in which the audience of La Scala welcomed this new work”.

A flop in the presence of critics including foreign reviewers and many important personalities (in the first row were the composers Umberto Giordano and Pietro Mascagni), for a work which after just three months would take off and become a classic on billboards all over the world. According to some of Puccini's biographers this fiasco was organized by Puccini's detractors and by a “claque” (a deliberately primed audience that in certain periods in the history of opera had turned into veritable bands of artistic cut-throats who could decree a work's success or failure) in the pay of rival colleagues.

And Puccini, distressed, writing to a friend five days after the “premiere”, said: “I am still stunned, not so much for the hatchet job done to my poor Butterfly as for the venom spat out against me as an artist and as a man”. He wrote to Luigi Illica about the “Milanese perfidy” inveighing against the enemies he described as “cowards, pigs, with neither heart nor good sense”.

Three months following that disastrous first night the opera was performed in Brescia to huge acclaim. This was also thanks to some significant amendments which the composer had made to his work. He divided the two long acts into three (a choice which was subsequently abandoned) and introduced a new aria into the third act: “Addio fiorito asil”.

THE GEISHA: AN ARTIST, NOT A PROSTITUTE

The word “geisha” is not synonymous with prostitution. In the etymological roots of the word there are two words which mean “art” and “person”. Therefore, in the Japanese tradition, from the seventeenth century onwards, a geisha is a professional artist, specialised in the art of entertainment. She would be removed from her family as a child and sent to a school where she would study music, dance, singing, acting, traditional games, how to use a fan, the tea ceremony, calligraphy and flower arranging. She would also learn the art of seduction and be instructed in the use of a gentle, courteous wile. At the same time she would study classic and modern literature thus becoming highly cultivated.

PINKERTON, THE “YANKEE VAGABONDO”

Pinkerton is a singular character, identified by the American national anthem (which serves as a leitmotif), who is very different from the tenor roles of other Puccini operas. A superficial young man who allows himself to be caught up in a love affair with the young geisha and only too late comes to realize how his own imprudence and that “temporary marriage” he entered into have tragically and irrevocably marked Cho-Cho-San's young heart and her very life.



“UN BEL DÌ VEDREMO... “

This is the best known aria from the opera but it is also one of the best-loved pieces in the whole history of opera.

It is sung by Cho-Cho-San at the beginning of the second act. Her maid Suzuki prays to the gods asking for her mistress to stop weeping, then she thinks about how little money is left to run the household and expresses great scepticism regarding the return of Butterfly's husband. But Butterfly who has spent three years waiting without receiving any news still hopes one day to see a «fil di fumo sull'estremo confin del mare» (a “thread of smoke on the far horizon of the sea”) and she imagines Pinkerton's return. The text's structure based on a series of images describes the arrival of the ship in a cinematographic way. After bringing to mind “the line of smoke”, the text makes the image clearer: “And then the ship appears”. “Then the white ship” (describing its colour) “comes into the harbour”. “Her greeting resounds” (thus distinguishing the sound of the ship) . And the description continues: “See? He has come! I will not go to meet him, no I won't. I will wait on the brow of the hill, I will wait for a long time and it will not weigh on me. A man emerges from the city crowds, a small dot makes its way towards the hill. Who can it be? And how will it get there? What will it say? It will call Butterfly from afar. I will remain hidden without answering, partly in jest and partly in order not to die. An with the words “not to die” the main theme is resumed. This theme, sung by the soprano together with the orchestra, is a long and heartrending descending progression.

THE STORY OF PUCCINI'S LIFE

A true Tuscan, born and bred, Giacomo Puccini was born in Lucca on 22nd December 1858, into a family which had a professional involvement in music going back many generations. The excitement caused by a performance of Aida which he attended in Pisa made him decide to dedicate his efforts to the musical theatre. He moved to Milan in order to attend courses in composition at the Conservatorio and lived through difficult times owing to the financial straits his family suffered on his account. Having obtained his diploma he then took part in a competition announced by the “Sonzogno” presenting Le Villi, an opera in one act which the panel of judges did not however consider worthy of merit. It was nonetheless performed in 1884 and achieved some success with the public thereby enabling Puccini to secure a contract with the publishing house Ricordi. His second opera, Edgar, did not prove a particularly happy venture but the publisher, convinced of his young composer's potential, encouraged him not to give up. Ricordi's foresight is borne out by Puccini's third opera, Manon Lescaut, which was received triumphantly at the Teatro Regio in Turin in 1893. When first performed in 1896, La Bohème was met with some consternation as a result of musical choices which were deemed too innovative. However very soon the real merits of this opera were also understood.

At this point in his career, Puccini was already being recognised as Verdi's most worthy successor, and, with Tosca (1900) his fame began to spill over national frontiers. With Madama Butterfly (1904) he succeeded in writing an opera set in the contemporary period but in a country as distant as Japan. Greatly impressed by the dramatic potential of the Far West, Puccini decided to use this as the setting for his next opera, La Fanciulla del West, in which it is already possible to detect the musician's interest in the expressive innovations of the post-Debussian musical language.

The Trittico, in 1918, represents a curious attempt to present the audience with a number of different emotions within one single production. The three short acts are in fact all extremely different to each other both in terms of plot as well as in their style: Il tabarro tells an intensely dramatic story in a style of raw realism; Suor Angelica develops a story based on themes of tender lyricism while Gianni Schicchi is a light-hearted excursion into the comic genre. The composition of the next opera turned out to be particularly arduous as Puccini could not find a libretto which corresponded to his way of seeing the development of the drama. And yet the tale of the cruel Turandot and the exotic Chinese setting had immediately fascinated him. Perhaps Puccini was beginning to feel the effects of the incurable disease which was implacably consuming him. He moved to Brussels to undergo new medical treatment which



turned out to be ineffective and painful. Puccini died (on 29th November 1924) without managing to finish the last pages of *Turandot*. The opera was completed by Franco Alfano. In 2001 Luciano Berio also turned his hand to a new finale for Puccini's masterpiece.

WHO WAS GIUSEPPE GIACOSA

He was born in the province of Turin on 21st October 1847, and was the most important Italian playwright and librettist during the reign of King Umberto. His was a name which had achieved international popularity thanks to his collaboration with Giacomo Puccini and his librettist colleague Luigi Illica, in drawing up the libretti for *La Bohème* (1896), *Tosca* (1899) and *Madama Butterfly* (1904). But his name was also to be found among those who had contributed to the libretto of *Manon Lescaut* in 1893. Giacosa had originally graduated in law in 1868 and had begun to practice in his father's law firm in Turin. He mixed with literary circles and made friends mainly with those writers who frequented the "Dante Alighieri" society, which included Boito and Camerana.

Following a successful theatrical debut with the romantic piece set in medieval times *Una partita a scacchi* (1873), he went on to historical dramas with *Il Conte Rosso* (1880). In 1888 he moved to Milan and became director of the School of Amateur Dramatics and professor of dramatic literature and acting at the Conservatorio. The success of the *Signora di Challant* (1891), performed by Eleonora Duse in Italy and Sarah Bernhardt in New York, made him decide to give up his academic posts to concentrate on writing plays on contemporary themes as he had already done in *Tristi amori* (1888). Thus followed *I diritti dell'anima* (1894) and the successful *Come le foglie* (1894). In his house in Colletterto (where he would die in 1906) he welcomed guests like Giosuè Carducci, Benedetto Croce, Gabriele D'Annunzio, Edmondo De Amicis, Antonio Fogazzaro, Giovanni Pascoli, Luigi Pirandello, Giovanni Verga and Émile Zola. A contemporary of Ibsen and Strindberg, Giacosa brought the requirements of the bourgeois theatre to Italy and, with the realism of his dramas, he contributed to the transformation of the tastes and interests of Italian audiences.

WHO WAS LUIGI ILLICA

He was born on 9th May 1857 in Castell'Arquato in the province of Piacenza and was among the leading librettists of the post-Verdian period. He worked for Giacomo Puccini, Alfredo Catalani, Umberto Giordano and other composers. He was a journalist, a good versemaker and a member of the Milanese "Scapigliatura" movement and already as a boy had displayed a rebellious temperament. At the age of twenty he went to sea and spent the next four years in the navy. During this period he took part in the battle of Plevna against the Turks. In 1879 he settled in Milan where he became a reporter for the "Corriere della Sera". He later transferred to Bologna where he cofounded the radical publication "Il Don Chisciotte" inspired by Carducci. He returned to Milan in 1882 and began to publish his own writings and plays. From 1889 Illica added the writing of opera libretti to his activity as a playwright. This new occupation led to a very intense period of work and his growing success was crowned in 1891 when he joined the Casa Ricordi publishing house. Over the next two decades Illica wrote for the finest composers of the age producing some thirty libretti, amongst which *Germania* (1902) and *Siberia* (1903) for Giordano, *Iris* (1898) and *Isabeau* (1911) for Mascagni, *Bohème* (1896), *Tosca* (1900), *Madama Butterfly* (1904) in collaboration with Giacosa and *Manon Lescaut* (1891-1892) for Giacomo Puccini. In 1915, at the age of 58, he enrolled in the army as a volunteer and left for the front. The following year a bad fall from a horse forced him to retire to his house in the country near Castell'Arquato where he died on 16th December 1919.



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