

## Program Note

**G**iacomo Puccini's greatest ambition was to excite his audiences, and with *Madama Butterfly*, he created an emotional force of nature. It's fair to say that after most performances there is barely a dry eye in the house. Seasoned *Butterfly* fans know exactly where and when the tears will fall, but that doesn't stop them from returning again and again. Puccini's masterpiece has long been a staple of the world's opera houses and is one of the most beloved works in the history of opera. How, then, is it possible that such a magnificent piece of musical theater failed miserably at its premiere?

Puccini suffered a great deal of angst as a composer in post-Risorgimento Italy. The root cause may well have been the fact that he had been born in the shadow of Verdi, national hero. As a young composer, he faced the enormous challenge of distancing himself from Verdi, even as Italy, newly unified, reinforced its cultural ties to opera. Verdi himself had embraced new musical trends in *Otello* and *Falstaff*, and Puccini needed to do likewise, but differently. While audiences delighted in his beautiful melodies, the press assailed his operas unmercifully. The passion and violence of *Tosca* were especially vulnerable to critics with a tabloid sensibility: They compared the opera to junk food, full of "hackneyed refrains ... rancid corny old tunes of the fairground ... the nauseating stench of candy-floss, of fried food and—above all—the hopeless odor of intellectual scum!" (Musicologist Joseph Kerman would later equate admirers of *Tosca* with fans of "chain-saw" movies.) Italian journalist Fausto Torrefranca dismissed Puccini outright and declared him a poster child for Italian cultural decline in the post-Verdian era.

Puccini's biggest flop, with both critics and audiences, however, was *Madama Butterfly*. One writer called it a "frame without a canvas," lacking "ideas, thought, [and] imagination." Others accused Puccini of being lazy: *Butterfly* was "no more than an encore of *La Bohème*, with less freshness and abundance of melodic ideas." In their view, Puccini deserved to be punished for sidestepping "traditional" operatic forms (there isn't a cabaletta in earshot). The opening-night audience at La Scala, bored by two long acts, did not withhold their displeasure. According to Alexandra Wilson, "The ominous silence that greeted much of Act I was replaced in Act II by contemptuous grunts, bellows, guffaws, and even bird and animal noises. The rumpus was so loud that the voices and instruments were inaudible, to the point that the leading lady, Rosina Storchio, was reduced to tears when she could not hear her cues."

A devastated Puccini wrote to his friend Camillo Bondi to express anger, but also his abiding love for *Butterfly*: "Those cannibals didn't listen to a single note. What an appalling orgy of lunatics, drunk on hate! But my *Butterfly* remains as it is: the most heartfelt and evocative opera I have ever conceived!" Nonetheless, Puccini withdrew this first version of *Madama Butterfly*, and by 1907, he had produced several revisions, each of which was tested in various locales, including Brescia, Washington, D.C., and, finally, New York. The last became the "standard,"

celebrated for its gorgeous vocal writing and orchestration, especially in the Act I love duet, Butterfly's "Un bel dì" in Act II, and the shocking Act III finale.

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Puccini composed *Madama Butterfly* at the end of an era obsessed with Japonisme following the opening of Japan in 1868. In addition to the numerous woodcuts and other artifacts that were exhibited at European World's Fairs, there were "Orientalist" operas, including Saint-Saëns's *La Princesse Jaune* (1872), Gilbert and Sullivan's *The Mikado* (1885), Messenger's *Madame Chrysanthème* (1893), Sidney Jones's *The Geisha* (1896), and Mascagni's *Iris* (1898). A recurring character in the tragedies among these works is the abandoned woman—in at least two instances, a real person. Messenger based *Madame Chrysanthème* on Pierre Loti's fictionalized memoir of his affair with a Japanese woman during his stint as a naval officer in Japan, while the plot of *Madama Butterfly* originated from an incident witnessed by an American missionary, Jennie Long Correll, who later published an article about it in *The Japan Times*:

On the hill opposite ours lived a little tea-house girl; her name was Chô-san, Miss Butterfly. She was so sweet and delicate that everyone was in love with her. In time, we learned that she had a lover. That was not so strange, for all tea-house girls have lovers, if they can get and hold them. Chô-san's young man was quite nice, but very temperamental, of a moody, lonely disposition. ... One evening, there was quite a sensation when it was learned that poor little Chô-san, and her baby, had been deserted. The man had promised to return at a certain time; had even arranged a signal so that Chô-san would know when his ship had come in; but the little girl-wife awaited that signal in vain. Many an hour and many a long night did she peer from her shoji over the lovely harbor, but to no purpose: He never returned.

Correll's experience was the impetus for a chain of precursors to Puccini's opera. In 1898, Mrs. Correll's brother, John Luther Long, published a short story in which he captured the essence of Pinkerton's arrogance:

With the aid of a marriage broker, he found both a wife and a house in which to keep her. This he leased for nine hundred and ninety-nine years. Not, he explained to his wife later, that he could hope for the felicity of residing there with her so long, but because, being a mere "barbarian," he could not make other legal terms. He did not mention that the lease was determinable, nevertheless, at the end of any month, by the mere neglect to pay the rent. Details were distasteful to Pinkerton; besides, she would probably not appreciate the humor of this.

The story was soon thereafter dramatized in a one-act play by David Belasco, which Puccini saw in London in 1900. The composer was enthralled by Belasco's stagecraft, especially in the scene of the vigil, in which Butterfly sits, nearly

motionless, throughout the night, waiting for Pinkerton's return. Belasco had portrayed the time-lapse of 12 hours from sunset to the following morning through changing lighting effects achieved through the use of colored silks. It was an elaborate process, devised by the playwright's lighting technician Louis Hartmann, who described it as follows:

The several colors of silk were in long strips. These strips were attached to the tin rollers; the rollers were set into bearings fastened to a wooden frame that slid into the color groove of the lamp. The turning of the rollers passed the colors in front of the light, and they were projected on the windows in a series of soft blends. As the orange deepened into blue, floor lanterns were brought on the scene and lighted, as the pink of the morning light as seen the lanterns flickered out one by one. The light changes were accompanied by special music. Music and lights were perfectly timed, and the entire change consumed less than three minutes.

Puccini had his librettists transfer Belasco's stage directions for the vigil scene gesture for gesture into the libretto, and he set it to a nostalgic offstage humming chorus.

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What Puccini's musical imagination needed most was visual stimulation, specifically the colors of foreign, and to him, exotic places, including Nagasaki at the turn of the 20th century. Puccini did more research on *Madama Butterfly* than he had ever done to find the right look and sonority of the opera: He consulted with his neighbor in Viareggio, Hisako Oyama, the wife of the Japanese ambassador to Italy; he attended performances of the Imperial Japanese Theatrical Company; and he visited with the Japanese actress Sadayakko during her Milanese tour. Puccini also devoted himself to capturing the "American-ness" of Pinkerton. As he wrote to music publisher Tito Ricordi in April 1902, he had been "laying stone on stone and doing my best to make Mr. [...] Pinkerton sing like an American," most obviously in the quotation of the music of "The Star-Spangled Banner" in Act I.

Today, however, Puccini's undeniable efforts to define his Japanese characters and setting authentically have been shown to be at times inaccurate; more troubling for the 21st-century audience, as Arthur Groos has put it, the opera is sometimes viewed as "an Orientalizing tragedy with a racially inflected representation of the heroine." Questions about cultural appropriation are frequently posed, specifically regarding whether or not non-Japanese artists, who have no relevant life experience, should portray Japanese people on the stage. Is it enough to understand the story as one of many iterations of a plot about a man's cruelty to a woman and simply enjoy Puccini's magnificent score?

The earliest performances of *Madama Butterfly* in Japan elicited more ground-level concerns about the Western origins of the opera: What could an Italian composer possibly understand about Japanese culture? The opera was

first performed in Japan in abbreviated form at the Imperial Theater in Tokyo in 1914, conducted by Takaori Shūichi, the husband of the lead soprano, Takaori Sumiko. The Takaoris were well travelled and familiar with European and American performances of *Madama Butterfly*. Shūichi, in particular, a well-respected man of letters in addition to being a musical eminence, sought to preempt concerns about potential offense at the work in an essay that was published in the journal *Ongakukai* in advance of the premiere:

We must sometimes overlook those things to some extent. If Westerners see our Shakespeare, Ibsen, and Maeterlinck productions, won't they have similar feelings as we? There are things we can laugh at or resent regarding misunderstandings of East-West customs, but such errors can only be dissolved by understanding each other's cultures. Humanity has nothing to do with East or West, past or present.

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Musically, Puccini's greatest personal challenge was defining the opening gesture of an opera, the right musical "hook" that would capture the ear with stunning immediacy. As he once remarked to playwright and librettist Giuseppe Adami, "The difficulty for me is to begin an opera, that is, to find its musical atmosphere. Once the opening is fixed and composed, there is nothing more to fear: The opera is [...] on its way." Puccini used diverse and often original strategies to capture the attention of the audience, for example, the brisk first four notes that catapult *La Bohème* into motion, the whoosh of wind in the high Sierras (*La Fanciulla del West*), and the heaving sobs of the Donati family that open *Gianni Schicchi*. Puccini took a unique approach in *Madama Butterfly*, intended to express his characters' cultural differences musically, as he wrote to librettist Luigi Illica in January of 1902: "I've now embarked for Japan and will do my best to portray it, but more than publications on social and material culture, I need some notes of popular music." He found a selection of melodies that not only employed non-Western scales but also had a distinctive rhythmic signature, the anapest—two short strokes followed by a long one. In *Madama Butterfly*, the anapest is a pervasive pattern and a subtle means to underscore the East-West dichotomy fundamental to the story. In his brief prelude to the opera, Puccini cloaks this social polarity in a vintage Western compositional technique—a fugue with an anapestic subject that begins in the strings and expands with the addition of winds and brass. The same anapest opens the prelude to Act III, but its most profound expression is its final, articulated fortississimo by full orchestra as *Butterfly* falls dead by her own hand.

—Helen M. Greenwald

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