

Virginia
Opera

Presents

Madama Butterfly

Composed by:

Giacomo Puccini



A Japanese Tragedy In Two Acts

Study Guide
2010-2011 Season

2010-2011 SEASON

Virginia Opera thanks the following
sponsors for their generous support:



Dominion[®]



**MAERSK LINE,
LIMITED**



NORTHROP GRUMMAN



SCHUMACHER FOUNDATION

Table of Contents

Premiere	2
Cast of Characters	2
Plot Synopsis and Musical Highlights	3
Historical Background	6
A Short History of Opera	10
The Operatic Voice	12
Opera Production	14
Discussion Questions	16

Premiere

Teatro alla Scala, Milan, on 17 February 1904 (revised version Brescia, Teatro Grande, 28 May 1904)

Cast of Characters

Madama Butterfly (also known as Cio-Cio-San)	soprano
B. F. Pinkerton, Lieutenant in the United States Navy	tenor
Suzuki, Butterfly's servant	mezzo-soprano
Sharpless, American Consul at Nagasaki	baritone
Goro, a marriage broker	tenor
The Bonze, Butterfly's uncle	bass
Kate Pinkerton	mezzo-soprano
Prince Yamadori	baritone
Imperial Commissioner	bass
Yakuside	baritone
The Official Registrar	baritone
Butterfly's mother	mezzo-soprano
Butterfly's aunt	mezzo-soprano
Butterfly's cousin	soprano
Dolore (Sorrow or Trouble), Butterfly's child	silent

Libretto by Giuseppe Giacosa and Luigi Illica, based on *Madame Butterfly*, David Belasco's drama based on a short story by John Luther Long, which in turn was based partly on Pierre Loti's tale *Madame Chrysanthème*.

The action takes place in 1904 in Nagasaki.

PLOT SYNOPSIS AND MUSICAL HIGHLIGHTS

Act 1

A hill near Nagasaki; in the foreground a Japanese house with terrace and garden. With the introduction of the “Nagasaki” theme, the curtain rises.

Lieutenant Pinkerton of the United States Navy is being shown his new house overlooking Nagasaki harbor by the marriage broker, Goro. Goro demonstrates how sliding partitions can make rooms appear and disappear. Sharpless, the Consul, arrives out of breath, having climbed the hill which presents him as a benign, good-humored person.

Pinkerton explains to Sharpless that he has bought the house on a ninety-nine-year lease that may be terminated at a month’s notice and sings of the roving Yankee who expects to have the fairest maidens of every land he visits as his own. The United States is toasted in English, using the tune of “The Star-Spangled Banner,” used as a recurrent motif throughout the opera. Pinkerton sends Goro to bring the bride to him and Sharpless warns Pinkerton that the young lady is treating the marriage very seriously. When Sharpless makes a toast to Pinkerton’s family in America, however, it is of his future American bride that Pinkerton is thinking.

Goro returns, announcing the arrival of Butterfly and her friends. They can be heard chattering in the distance. Butterfly’s voice is heard soaring above those of her companions as they process over the bridge to Butterfly’s new life.

Butterfly tells Pinkerton that her family was once rich but now live in reduced circumstances and that she has been forced to earn her living as a geisha. When Sharpless asks about her father, Butterfly’s friends all fan themselves in embarrassment and she replies abruptly: “Dead”.

Butterfly’s relatives arrive; they and Pinkerton regard each other with mutual suspicion. Butterfly begins taking her belongings out of the sleeve of her kimono but there is something she does not want everyone to see: the dagger sent by the Mikado to her father with the order to commit hari-kari. In a musical theme that has already been heard during Butterfly’s entrance, and which might be termed “Fate”, Butterfly confides to Pinkerton that she has converted to Christianity so that her fate might be more closely allied to his.

The marriage ceremony takes place, with Sharpless warning Pinkerton once again of Butterfly’s devotion. As everyone is drinking a toast, a distant voice furiously denounces Cio-Cio San. It is her uncle, the Bonze, cursing her because of her conversion. He arrives and demands that all the relatives renounce Butterfly. Pinkerton disperses them and they leave, muttering the curse.

Night begins slowly to fall. The married couple is left alone. Cio-Cio-San changes into a white gown and the two begin to exchange vows of love. When Pinkerton likens her to a real Butterfly, she panics with fear, thinking of the treatment butterflies receive in America, where they are killed and pinned to a board. Pinkerton, however, assuages her fears and leads her inside to consummate their marriage. This is the longest and most elaborate love duet Puccini ever wrote.

Act 2, scene 1

Butterfly's money is almost gone and her friends and relatives have all deserted her because of her conversion to Christianity. A number of musical ideas from Act 1 are heard, for example the motive known as "The Curse." Butterfly, believing Pinkerton will return, describes to Suzuki how it will occur in the most famous aria in the opera, "Un bel di" (One fine day): A wisp of smoke will appear on the horizon and soon the white ship will reach port. Pinkerton, a tiny white dot at first, will slowly ascend the hill to her house, calling "Butterfly" from the distance. She, however, will hide from him for a bit, partly to tease him but also so as not to die from excitement.

Sharpless and Goro arrive at Butterfly's house. Sharpless only begins to read to Butterfly a letter from Pinkerton, asking Sharpless to prepare her for bad news. Butterfly interrupts, declaring she is delighted to hear Pinkerton is in good health, for she states that he has stayed away much longer than she anticipated. Goro laughs at this and Butterfly tells Sharpless how the marriage broker has constantly offered her suitors. The latest is Prince Yamadori, who is very rich. He appears and Butterfly sings a mock-passionate outburst, not taking him at all seriously.

After Yamadori leaves, Sharpless reads from the letter but cannot bring himself to read aloud the fateful news. He asks Butterfly what she would do if Pinkerton were never to return. Her answer: become a geisha again, or better die. She runs into an adjoining room and returns with a small, blond, blue-eyed child. To her child (named Sorrow, whose name will change to Joy once Pinkerton returns) she sings the aria "Che tua madre": will she have to carry him through rain and wind, begging and dancing, a geisha again? Is this to be her fate? No, rather than this, she would die.

Extremely moved, Sharpless promises to tell Pinkerton about the child. He leaves and Goro enters. He has claimed that in America Butterfly's child would live in total disgrace. Butterfly nearly stabs him with her dagger but is stopped by Suzuki. Goro escapes.

At that moment the cannon is heard firing in the harbor. Butterfly looks through a telescope and sees Pinkerton's ship, the Abraham Lincoln. "The Star Spangled Banner" motif is heard. Butterfly orders Suzuki to gather blossoms from their cherry tree and to bring in all the flowers from the garden so the house will smell of Spring. Suzuki reluctantly obeys and she and Butterfly strew the flowers all over the house.

Butterfly dresses in the robe she wore on her wedding night and has Suzuki close the screen separating the room from the terrace. In the screen Butterfly makes three tiny holes so that they may observe Pinkerton's arrival. The light fades as they gaze into the distance and the Humming Chorus is heard.

Act 2, scene 2

A prelude is heard using various motives from throughout the opera, interrupted by shouts of sailors in the harbor. Dawn is gradually arriving (Puccini has a scene at dawn in many of his works: *La Bohème*, *Manon Lescaut*, *Tosca*) and Butterfly still stands motionless, her gaze on the harbor. Following Suzuki's advice, Butterfly retires to get a bit of sleep.

Pinkerton and the Consul enter. Suzuki spies a lady in the garden and learns with horror that it is Pinkerton's wife, Kate. Sharpless asks Suzuki to comfort Butterfly and to ask her to give the child to Kate. Pinkerton, overcome with memories and remorse, sings a short aria, bidding farewell to this happy home and then departs, leaving the unpleasant task to Kate and Sharpless.

Butterfly rushes in, sees Kate, and immediately understands the situation. She knows what she must do--die with honor. She wishes Kate the best and tells her that she will personally give the child to Pinkerton if he comes in half an hour. The Consul and Kate leave. Butterfly tells Suzuki to close all the doors and curtains. Butterfly goes to the shrine, takes the dagger, and reads the inscription on its blade: "Death with honor is better than life with dishonor." She raises the dagger as Suzuki sends in the child. Butterfly hugs him, sings a farewell to him, blindfolds him, and gives him an American flag to play with.

She takes up the dagger and moves behind a screen. The sound of the dagger dropping is heard. As Butterfly crawls towards her child, Pinkerton, ascending the hill, is heard calling her name, "Butterfly! Butterfly." By the time he reaches her she is dead.

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

Giacomo Puccini, descended from a long line of composers and church organists, was the creator of a number of the world's most beloved operas. He was born in 1858 in Lucca and died in Brussels in 1924 of throat cancer. His music studies began in his native city with Carlo Angeloni at the Istituto Musicale. He held various positions as organist and wrote music for the church before becoming a student at the Milan Conservatory in 1880, where, like his characters in his opera *La Bohème*, he lived a hand-to-mouth existence, sacrificing worldly comfort for his art. Shortly after his graduation, however, his first opera, *Le Villi*, was produced and he began to receive commissions for new work as (such as his second opera, *Edgar*) and an annuity from Italy's leading publisher, Ricordi. His first great success was *Manon Lescaut*, premiered in 1893, a work that made him a household name throughout Italy. He became even more famous and grew wealthy from *La Bohème* (premiere 1896). *Tosca* (1900) and *Madama Butterfly* (1904) also became extremely popular and are mainstays of the operatic repertoire throughout the world. Puccini's final opera, *Turandot*, was left unfinished at the composer's death in 1924. Arturo Toscanini had the work finished by Franco Alfano and it was first heard under Toscanini's baton in 1926.

One of Puccini's works that has only fairly recently gained popularity is *Il Trittico*, which consists of three diverse one-act operas, *Il Tabarro*, *Suor Angelica*, and *Gianni Schicchi*. In addition to possessing traits of verismo, a number of Puccini's operas feature exotic locales and customs: *Madama Butterfly* is set in Japan, *Turandot* in fairy-tale China, and the opera commissioned by the Metropolitan Opera of New York, *La Fanciulla del West* (1910), is set in the California of the Forty-Niners. Both *Manon Lescaut* and *La Bohème* have French origins; indeed, among his full-length works, only *Tosca* has an Italian settings and an Italian heroine.

Puccini emerged as the leading composer among his contemporaries, a group known as "La giovane scuola" (The Young School) in the 1890s, a time when Italy was looking for the operatic heir to Giuseppe Verdi. The other members of this group include composers who--although they wrote a number of operas--are principally known for having had only one overwhelming operatic success: Pietro Mascagni with *Cavalleria Rusticana*, Ruggiero Leoncavallo for *Pagliacci*, and Francesco Cilea with *Adriana Lecouvreur*. Puccini's popularity has, on the contrary, grown immensely since his death and several of his works are not only standard to the repertoire, but dominate it. Some of the elements of Puccini's style that caused him to far outstrip his contemporaries are his great sense of theater, his conjunct (stepwise) melodies with their short, memorable phrases and clear rhythmic outlines, the idiomatic nature of his arias in the throats of great singers, the intense emotional content of his libretti and music, and the power of his orchestra to suggest and sustain mood. Puccini was always extremely concerned with finding exactly the right libretto, spending much more of his creative activity searching for and rejecting operatic subjects (he was a self-admitted "hunter of fowl and hunter of librettos") and demanding revisions from his librettists (five different writers worked on *Manon Lescaut* with none of them in the end receiving official credit) than he actually did composing. Moreover, he took infinite pains in polishing and revising his scores. He felt that a good play and opera should have "self-evident" action and set works that he had seen as plays in languages he barely understood but that had affected him

emotionally, notable examples being *Madama Butterfly* from David Belasco's play in English and *Tosca* from Victorien Sardou's French vehicle for Sarah Bernhardt.

In the summer of 1900 Puccini traveled to London in connection with the first English production of *Tosca*. There he was urged by the stage manager of Covent Garden to attend a performance of the American David Belasco's *Madame Butterfly*, a one-act drama, at the Duke of York's Theatre. Belasco's play had been an immense success in New York. As usual, the composer was on the lookout for a new subject for an opera libretto, but Puccini's English was not good enough to understand much of the play's dialogue. At this time he was considering other subjects, including Marie Antoinette, but in November he wrote to Giulio Ricordi: "The more I think of Butterfly the more irresistibly am I attracted." Here was another suffering woman--like Manon Lescaut and Mimi--whom he could bring to life in song; furthermore, the work offered the kind of exotic setting Puccini preferred.

David Belasco's one-act play *Madame Butterfly* was billed as "by David Belasco from John Luther Long's Japanese story." John Luther Long in turn must have known *Madame Chrysanthème* by Pierre Loti, which was published in 1887 and one of the first artistic treatments of the exotic, hitherto unknown Japan, which had only opened its ports to Westerners around 1860. Loti was a French novelist and naval officer who traveled to exotic places. *Madame Chrysanthème* is a first-person narrative telling the story of a young naval officer whose ship, the *Triomphante*, pays a three-month visit to Nagasaki, where the officer Pierre enters into a temporary marriage with the geisha Madame Chrysanthemum. After three months they part with no regrets on either side. Long was a Philadelphia lawyer and writer. His story took up eighteen pages in the January 1898 issue of *Century Magazine*. Long claimed the story derived in part from a true incident narrated to him by his sister, the wife of a missionary stationed in Nagasaki. Long's Butterfly attempts to kill herself but fails. It is only in Belasco's play that Butterfly manages to kill herself, the ending taken for the opera. Another significant aspect of Belasco's play was that it is in one act, its two scenes linked by a rather extensive passage in pantomime (it lasts a bit over a quarter of an hour) during which Butterfly prepares for her American husband's return, waiting with her baby through the night until dawn breaks. Likewise, Puccini's second act--in the revised Brescia version--consists of two scenes linked by Butterfly's vigil with the famous humming chorus.

It was not until April of the next year, 1901, that Puccini completed what were difficult and protracted negotiations with Belasco for the use of *Madame Butterfly*. Puccini's librettists for *La Bohème* and *Tosca*, Giuseppe Giacosa and Luigi Illica, set to work. Illica planned the structure of the drama and Giacosa turned it into verse. Puccini had the complete three-act libretto by June of 1902. To compose the opera, he immersed himself in things Japanese. The composer was known for paying infinite attention to details. He consulted the wife of the Japanese Ambassador in Rome, who advised him on Japanese customs and procured some Japanese tunes for him. Puccini used at least seven Japanese tunes in composing the opera. He even took a look at Gilbert and Sullivan's *The Mikado* of 1885 (hardly authentic but an example of Western concepts of Japanese culture, which may have provided an object lesson in what not to do). Most importantly, his study of recent works of Claude Debussy were a decided influence on this score, and continued to be so for the remainder of Puccini's career.

Then in February 1903 personal disaster struck: Puccini's new car (he was among the very first to own an automobile in Italy) skidded off the road near Lucca on a wet and foggy evening and plunged down a fifteen-foot embankment. He was known to be a rather daring driver. The composer suffered a compound fracture of the right shin and took several months to recover. The bone was badly set and had to be broken and reset, leaving Puccini with a permanent limp. It was two years before he was able to walk unaided by a cane. Although unable to work on his new score for six months, the orchestration of the opera was completed by end of 1903 and in January of 1904 he traveled to Milan to supervise preparations for the premiere, which took place at La Scala on 17 February.

The first-night cast was an illustrious one: Rosina Storchio as Butterfly, Giovanni Zenatello as Pinkerton, Giuseppe de Luca as Sharpless, and Cleofonte Campanini conducting, but the premiere was a fiasco. The audience's disruptive behavior was probably in large part organized by the composer's enemies, those who were jealous of his success. The reaction included everything from hisses and catcalls to apathetic silence. When Butterfly's kimono accidentally billowed up in front of her, someone called out, "Butterfly is pregnant." Newspaper headlines read: "Puccini Hissed"--"Fiasco at La Scala"--"Butterfly, Diabetic Opera, Result of an Accident." This last was particularly cruel, as Puccini himself was a diabetic.

Puccini withdrew the opera after the first performance. He wrote to a friend: "I am still shocked by all that happened--not so much for what they did to my poor Butterfly, but for all the poison they spat on me as an artist and as a man. . . . That first performance was a Dantean Inferno, prepared in advance." He immediately made some revisions: deletions (many details of local color in the first act); additions (Pinkerton's short aria in the second act, for example; the tenor had practically nothing to sing in the original version of act 2); alterations (transferring most of Kate Pinkerton's part to the American consul, Sharpless); and the division of act 2 into two parts by an intermission. Three months later *Madama Butterfly* was given at the Teatro Grande in Brescia. The conductor and two of the principals were the same as at the Scala premiere but there was a new Butterfly (Salomea Krusceniski), as Storchio had gone with Toscanini to Buenos Aires to perform the role. The Brescia revision was a great success, with five numbers encoed. Puccini had to take ten curtain calls. Performances quickly followed in other countries and the work has become a beloved staple in the operatic world. Many famous sopranos have undertaken the role on stage and recorded the opera or at least selections from it: Geraldine Farrar, Emmy Destinn, Toti dal Monte (Toscanini's favorite exponent of the role), Maria Callas, Renata Tebaldi, Victoria de los Angeles, Montserrat Caballé, Leontyne Price, Mirella Freni, and Renata Scotto are among the most prominent.

of the country's folk music and legends. Composers such as Aaron Copland, Douglas Moore, Carlisle Floyd, Howard Hanson, and Robert Ward have all crafted operas that have been presented throughout the world to great success. Today, composers John Adams, Philip Glass, and John Corigliano enjoy success both at home and abroad and are credited with the infusion of new life into an art form which continues to evolve even as it approaches its fifth century.



The Operatic Voice

A true (and brief) definition of the “operatic” voice is a difficult proposition. Many believe the voice is “born,” while just as many hold to the belief that the voice is “trained.” The truth lies somewhere between the two. Voices that can sustain the demands required by the operatic repertoire do have many things in common. First and foremost is a strong physical technique that allows the singer to sustain long phrases through the control of both the inhalation and exhalation of breath. Secondly, the voice (regardless of its size) must maintain a resonance in both the head (mouth, sinuses) and chest cavities. The Italian word “*squillo*” (squeal) is used to describe the brilliant tone required to penetrate the full symphony orchestra that accompanies the singers. Finally, all voices are defined by both the actual voice “type” and the selection of repertoire for which the voice is ideally suited.

Within the five major voice types (*Soprano, Mezzo-Soprano, Tenor, Baritone, Bass*) there is a further delineation into categories (*Coloratura, Lyric, Spinto, Dramatic*) which help to define each particular instrument. The *Coloratura* is the highest within each voice type whose extended upper range is complimented by extreme flexibility. The *Lyric* is the most common of the “types.” This instrument is recognized more for the exceptional beauty of its tone rather than its power or range. The *Spinto* is a voice which combines the beauty of a lyric with the weight and power of a *Dramatic*, which is the most “powerful” of the voices. The *Dramatic* instrument is characterized by the combination of both incredible volume and “steely” intensity.

While the definition presented in the preceding paragraph may seem clearly outlined, many voices combine qualities from each category, thus carving an unique niche in operatic history. Just as each person is different from the next, so is each voice. Throughout her career Maria Callas defied categorization as she performed and recorded roles associated with each category in the soprano voice type. Joan Sutherland as well can be heard in recordings of soprano roles as diverse as the coloratura Gilda in *Rigoletto* to the dramatic Turandot in *Turandot*. Below is a very brief outline of voice types and categories with roles usually associated with the individual voice type.

	<i>Coloratura</i>	<i>Lyric</i>	<i>Spinto</i>	<i>Dramatic</i>
Soprano	Norina (Don Pasquale) Gilda (Rigoletto) Lucia (Lucia di Lammermoor)	Liu (Turandot) Mimi (La Bohème) Pamina (Magic Flute)	Tosca (Tosca) Amelia (A Masked Ball) Leonora (Il Trovatore)	Turandot (Turandot) Norma (Norma) Elektra (Elektra)
Mezzo-Soprano	Rosina (Barber of Seville) Angelina (La Cenerentola) Dorabella (Cosi fan tutte)	Carmen (Carmen) Charlotte (Werther) Giulietta (Hoffmann)	Santuzza (Cavalleria) Adalgisa (Norma) The Composer (Ariadne auf Naxos)	Azucena (Il Trovatore) Ulrica (A Masked Ball) Herodias (Salome)

<i>Tenor</i>	Count Almaviva (Barber of Seville) Don Ottavio (Don Giovanni) Ferrando (Così fan tutte)	Alfredo (La Traviata) Rodolfo (La Bohème) Tamino (Magic Flute)	Calaf (Turandot) Pollione (Norma) Cavaradossi (Tosca)	Dick Johnson (Fanciulla) Don Jose (Carmen) Otello (Otello)
<i>Baritone</i>	Figaro (Barber of Seville) Count Almavira (Le nozze di Figaro) Dr. Malatesta (Don Pasquale)	Marcello (La Bohème) Don Giovanni (Don Giovanni) Sharpless (Madama Butterfly)	Verdi Baritone Germont (La Traviata) Di Luna (Il Trovatore) Rigoletto (Rigoletto)	Scarpia (Tosca) Jochanaan (Salome) Jack Rance (Fanciulla)
<i>Bass</i>	Bartolo (Barber of Seville) Don Magnifico (Cenerentola) Dr. Dulcamara (Elixir of Love)	Leporello (Don Giovanni) Colline (La Bohème) Figaro (Marriage of Figaro)	Buffo Bass Don Pasquale (Don Pasquale) Don Alfonso (Così fan tutte)	Basso Cantate Oroveso (Norma) Timur (Turandot) Sarastro (Magic Flute)

Opera Production

Opera is created by the combination of myriad art forms. First and foremost are the actors who portray characters by revealing their thoughts and emotions through the singing voice. The next very important component is a full symphony orchestra that accompanies the singing actors and actresses, helping them to portray the full range of emotions possible in the operatic format. The orchestra performs in an area in front of the singers called the orchestra pit while the singers perform on the open area called the stage. Wigs, costumes, sets and specialized lighting further enhance these performances, all of which are designed, created, and executed by a team of highly trained artisans.

The creation of an opera begins with a dramatic scenario crafted by a playwright or dramaturg who alone or with a librettist fashions the script or libretto that contains the words the artists will sing. Working in tandem, the composer and librettist team up to create a cohesive musical drama in which the music and words work together to express the emotions revealed in the story. Following the completion of their work, the composer and librettist entrust their new work to a conductor who with a team of assistants (repetiteurs) assumes responsibility for the musical preparation of the work. The conductor collaborates with a stage director (responsible for the visual component) in order to bring a performance of the new piece to life on the stage. The stage director and conductor form the creative spearhead for the new composition while assembling a design team which will take charge of the actual physical production.

Set designers, lighting designers, costume designers, wig and makeup designers and even choreographers must all be brought “on board” to participate in the creation of the new production. The set designer combines the skills of both an artist and an architect using “blueprint” plans to design the actual physical set which will reside on the stage, recreating the physical setting required by the storyline. These blueprints are turned over to a team of carpenters who are specially trained in the art of stage carpentry. Following the actual building of the set, painters following instructions from the set designers’ original plans paint the set. As the set is assembled on the stage, the lighting designer works with a team of electricians to throw light onto both the stage and the set in an atmospheric as well as practical way. Using specialized lighting instruments, colored gels and a state of the art computer, the designer along with the stage director create a “lighting plot” by writing “lighting cues” which are stored in the computer and used during the actual performance of the opera.

During this production period, the costume designer in consultation with the stage director has designed appropriate clothing for the singing actors and actresses to wear. These designs are fashioned into patterns and crafted by a team of highly skilled artisans called cutters, stitchers, and sewers. Each costume is specially made for each singer using his/her individual measurements. The wig and makeup designer, working with the costume designer, designs and creates wigs which will complement both the costume and the singer as well as represent historically accurate “period” fashions.

As the actual performance date approaches, rehearsals are held on the newly crafted set, combined with costumes, lights, and orchestra in order to ensure a cohesive performance that will be both dramatically and musically satisfying to the assembled audience.



Discussion Questions

1. Discuss the character of Lt. Pinkerton. How does Puccini show his shortcomings? Does he redeem himself?
2. Puccini worked hard to portray Japanese culture as accurately as he could. What are some examples of Japanese culture in the opera?
3. What purpose does the character Suzuki serve? How is her music different from Butterfly's?
4. Would the story have ended differently if Pinkerton had arrived on the scene a few minutes **before** Butterfly's suicide?
5. What is a geisha? How is a geisha viewed in Japanese culture as opposed to Western perceptions?
6. Butterfly sings her great aria, "Un bel di" in Act 2. What does it tell us about Butterfly's character?
7. Compare the two American men in the story, Lt. Pinkerton and American Consul Sharpless.