MADAMA BUTTERFLY

Premiere

First performance on February 17, 1904 at La Scala in Milan, Italy.

Cast of Characters

Cio-Cio-San, a young Japanese woman  Soprano
Suzuki, Cio-Cio-San’s maid  Mezzo-soprano
B.F. Pinkerton, a U.S. Navy Lieutenant  Tenor
Sharpless, U.S. consul at Nagasaki  Baritone
Goro, a matchmaker  Tenor
Prince Yamadori, a wealthy Japanese man  Tenor
The Bonze, Cio-Cio-San’s uncle  Bass
Imperial Commissioner  Bass
Official Registrar  Bass
Kate Pinkerton, Lt. Pinkerton’s wife  Mezzo-soprano
Sorrow, Cio-Cio-San’s son  Silent

2023-2024 Season
Brief Summary

B.F. Pinkerton, a U.S. Navy Lieutenant is leasing a home in Nagasaki, Japan. The home includes servants and a geisha, Cio-Cio-San. He agrees to marry Cio-Cio-San, saying that he will later get a “real” wife once he returns to the United States. Cio-Cio-San, however, takes the marriage seriously. Pinkerton returns to the United States and does not keep in close contact with Cio-Cio-San. She rejects potential suitors because she is certain that Pinkerton has not deserted her. She and Sorrow, Pinkerton and Cio-Cio-San’s son, hear of the arrival of Pinkerton’s ship. They are excited to see Pinkerton. Once the ship docks, Pinkerton arrives at Cio-Cio-San’s home with his American wife, Kate. Devastated, Cio-Cio-San agrees to give up her son to Pinkerton. Unable to bear the grief and embarrassment, she kills herself.
Detailed Synopsis

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 the Nagasaki harbor by the marriage broker, Goro. Goro demonstrates how sliding partitions can make rooms appear and disappear. Sharpless, the Consul, arrives to meet them.

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.” This tune is used as a recurrent motif throughout the opera. Pinkerton asks 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 (Cio-Cio-San’s nickname) and her friends. They can be heard chattering in the distance. Butterfly’s voice is heard soaring above those of her companions as they proceed toward the house.

Butterfly tells Pinkerton that her family was once rich but they have recently fallen on hard times. Because of this, Butterfly 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 (a Japanese emperor) to her father with the order to commit hari-kiri (ritual suicide). 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 panic 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.

**Act 2**

Butterfly’s money is almost gone and her friends and relatives have all deserted her because of her conversion to Christianity. 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”). Butterfly says that 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 her name 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 die. She runs into an adjoining room and returns with a small child named Sorrow.

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 a 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 3

Dawn is gradually arriving 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.
About the composer

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, Italy and died in Brussels, Belgium 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 (The Bohemian), he lived a hand-to-mouth existence, sacrificing worldly comfort for his art. Shortly after his graduation, however, his first opera, Le Villi (The Fairies), 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 (1893), a work that made him a household name throughout Italy. He became even more famous and grew wealthy from La Bohème (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 (The Triptych), which consists of three diverse one-act operas, Il Tabarro (The Cloak), Suor Angelica (Sister 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 (The Girl of the 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 setting 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 (Rustic Chivalry), 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 of such plays include: *Madama Butterfly* from David Belasco’s play in English and *Tosca* from Victorien Sardou’s French vehicle for Sarah Bernhardt.
Historical Background

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 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.”

Like Puccini’s *Butterfly*, David Belasco’s one-act play, *Madame Butterfly*, was also based on John Luther Long’s short story. John Luther Long, in turn, was inspired by Pierre Loti’s *Madame Chrysanthème* (1887), which was one of the first artistic treatments of Japan in the Western hemisphere. Japanese culture was still relatively new in the Western hemisphere because Japan had only opened its ports to Westerners around 1860. *Madame Chrysanthème* is a first-person narrative telling the story of a young naval officer docks his ship, the *Triomphante*, for a three-month visit to Nagasaki. While in Nagasaki, 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 – this is the ending Puccini uses 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. This scene takes place while 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 tried to familiarize himself with Japanese culture. He consulted the wife of a 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).
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. He 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 premiere cast was an illustrious one: Rosina Storchio as Butterfly, Giovanni Zenatello as Pinkerton, Giuseppe de Luca as Sharpless, and Cleofonte Campanini conducting. The premiere itself, however, was a fiasco. The audience’s disruptive behavior was probably in large part organized by the composer’s enemies. 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 Japanese-inspired in the first act); additions (Pinkerton’s short aria in the second act, for example; Pinkerton 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 the Scala premiere but there was a new Butterfly (Salomea Krusceniski). The Brescia revision was a great success, with five numbers encored. 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.
A Brief History of U.S. and Japan Relations before WWII

In the early 1600s, the Japanese government enacted an isolationist policy called “sakoku.” This policy meant that, in most cases, Japanese people were not permitted to leave Japan. Foreigners were also not allowed to set foot in Japan, with some exceptions. Some Dutch and Chinese traders were allowed to temporarily dock in Nagasaki for short periods of time due to trading relationships that existed before the enactment of sakoku. The Japanese government also banned Christianity which forced Catholic missionaries to leave Japan. Though the U.S. tried intermittently to negotiate a trading relationship with Japan in the 1600s and 1700s, they never had much success.

The Perry Expedition (1853-1854) was the first expedition that led to a long-term trade relationship with Japan. This Expedition was led by Captain Matthew Perry, an officer of the U.S. Navy. Perry was able to secure a trading relationship through the use of force – Japan’s isolation meant that they did not have contemporary technology and would not have been able to fight a U.S. Navy fleet. The Harris Treaty of 1858 built on Perry’s previous trade agreement. This agreement heavily favored the U.S. – the tariffs for American traders were very low and Americans were not subject to Japanese law while in Japan. The Japanese did not receive the same benefits. The Harris Treaty started a trend among other Western countries – they also set up unequal contracts with Japan. Japan consequently became a very active trading hub without reaping proportional financial benefits.

In the 1860s, Japanese diplomats attempted to amend the unequal portions of the Harris Treaty – they were not successful. Still, trade between Japan and the U.S. grew as did both respective economies. Japan in particular underwent extensive Westernization and the U.S. saw a huge increase in Japanese immigrants. Many of these immigrants sought plantation work in Hawaii and California between the 1880s and the turn of the twentieth century – the work was incredibly difficult and paid little. A desire to decrease Japanese immigration was one of the reasons that the United States government officially annexed Hawaii (Hawaii was, at this time, an independent kingdom), despite Japanese protests. The annexation made immigration to Hawaii nearly impossible for Japanese migrant workers.

The American west coast saw a boom in Japanese immigrants following the annexation of Hawaii. This led to anti-Japanese racism and xenophobia in the U.S., but particularly on the west coast. The president at the time, Theodore Roosevelt, wanted to both curb Japanese emigration to the U.S. and keep Japan as a global ally. The Gentleman’s Act of 1907, negotiated with Japanese and American diplomats, determined that Japan would stop sending workers to the U.S. or Hawaii. It also determined that there would not be racial segregation between Japanese people and white people in California. This Act seemed to satisfy both governments and Japan and the U.S. had a relatively smooth relationship until the end of WWI. Japan fought with the Allied powers and helped the Allies take control of German bases in China and in the Pacific. After years of negotiation among the U.S., Britain, China, and Japan regarding land holdings and self-sovereignty, the four countries reached a consensus in 1922.
The inauguration of American president Calvin Coolidge in 1923 soured the diplomatic relationship between Japan and the U.S. In 1924 he passed a congressional act that stopped all Japanese emigration to the United States. Though the United States annexed Hawaii to prevent Japan from becoming a major naval power, Japan began to emerge as a global power in the years leading to World War II. Japan began to drive out Western military forces from east Asian countries such as Vietnam and China. In 1941, Western Europe and the United States imposed aggressive trade embargoes and boycotts on Japan in an attempt to curb their activities. At the time, Japan was largely dependent on the United States for oil. The U.S. government hoped that cutting off much of Japan’s oil supply would be enough to curb their military activities. Such boycotts and embargoes were ultimately unsuccessful. Because the United States had a history of being unequal in their negotiations with the Japanese government, Japan had little hope for successful negotiations and continued with their expansion into China and other parts of east Asia. The United States declared war on Japan and entered World War II after Japan bombed the Pearl Harbor naval base in Hawaii.
**Madama Butterfly in Context**

Though several characters in *Butterfly* are Japanese, most of these characters have been historically portrayed by primarily white artists. At times, these actors wore something called “yellowface.” This style of makeup seeks to make a white actor look more like an east Asian person. This practice has a long history in both theatre and film. Katherine Hepburn wore yellowface to portray a Chinese woman in the 1944 film *Dragon Seed*. The 1915 film version of *Madama Butterfly* features Mary Pickford in yellowface. Several works of musical theater have also used this practice including: Gilbert and Sullivan’s 1885 operetta, *The Mikado*, and the 1989 musical, *Miss Saigon*, based on *Madama Butterfly*.

In the case of *Butterfly*, cultural studies theorist Mari Yoshihari argues that yellowface and/or white majority casting prohibit a nuanced perspective of the complicated relationship and history between Japan and the United States. Japanese and Asian perspectives have historically not been included in *Butterfly* because of choices in creative and casting departments. This has led to prioritizing western European concepts of Japanese culture and history which only tells a portion of the story. Such casting and makeup practices also lead to limited character portrayals. Asian American studies scholar, Josephine Lee, argues that some white actors seem to depend on their makeup and costuming to do the acting for them when portraying an Asian character – they often do not pursue much research into their roles. These scholars’ arguments suggest that these practices of yellowface and/or casting white artists in Asian roles not only perpetuate harmful stereotypes – these practices also limit the depth and accuracy of Japanese characters and culture.

The practices of yellowface and of casting white artists in Asian roles have not been left in the twentieth century. Opera companies across the globe, even as recently as 2023, have faced criticism for their casting and/or makeup and costuming choices in their productions of *Butterfly*. Opera seems to be one of the few genres left that, on some level, permits racially insensitive practices that other mediums have banned. In a 2021 interview with NhiVan Tran and Hallie Xu of *The Colorization Collective*, opera scholar Naomi André argues that the longevity of yellowface in operas like *Butterfly* has inadvertently intertwined the two. When an opera company produces *Butterfly*, the use of white casting and/or yellowface seems automatic because opera companies have historically operated that way. André continues that contemporary opera companies need to develop their own practices and standards for producing operas such as *Butterfly*. Though yellowface and/or white casting has historically been the norm for *Butterfly*, contemporary opera companies have the ability to create new norms.

Opera companies such as the Boston Lyric Opera and the Royal Opera House in London have both launched initiatives to create new norms for *Butterfly*. Both companies staged their own versions of *Butterfly* in 2023 and 2022, respectively. Both companies cast Asian artists in Japanese roles. They also hired consultants to provide expertise on relevant elements of Japanese culture and fashion. Because previous productions of *Butterfly* did not hire artists or artistic team members with knowledge about Japanese fashion, culture, and history, these productions often featured inaccurate depictions of early 20th century Japan. Virginia Opera has also hired a creative team that has been able to advise us on costuming, makeup, and lighting.
We hope that these initiatives will encourage more accurate depictions of the diversity and depth of Japanese and Asian culture, history, and experience.
Discussion questions

1. Puccini used different music to represent different characters. For example, we often hear the “Star Spangled Banner” when Pinkerton is on stage. What does the music sound like when Cio-Cio-San is on stage? What instruments are used?

2. Music scholars sometimes have difficulty placing Puccini into a musical style. The Romantic style began to wane after the end of the nineteenth century. Puccini’s two most famous operas, Butterfly and Turandot were written in 1904 and 1924, respectively. Romantic music often had long, flowery phrases; experimentation with harmony and texture; emotionally expressive melodies; and large orchestras. Other scholars say that Puccini wrote in the verismo style. Verismo is Italian for realism. Composers who composed in this style wanted their operas to show more realism. This means that verismo works often featured death, poverty, and violence. Do you think Puccini writes Romantic music? Does he use verismo? Is he a mixture of both? Explain your answer.

3. Given Butterfly’s controversial history and the public’s renewed attention of contemporary productions, what kinds of steps do you think opera companies should take when taking on productions of Butterfly? Is this an opera that should be performed at all? What kind of casting, costuming, and creative decisions should be made?

4. Though Butterfly is about a relationship between Japan and the United States, it was still written by an Italian composer – Puccini was likely influenced by what was going on in Italy at the time. Italy was expanding its colonial projects into northern and eastern Africa. It was also a time of massive economic and industrial growth in Italy – generators and cars were becoming more common. This growth also led to mass protests by blue-collar workers for livable wages and safe working conditions. In the arts, verismo was becoming more popular as composers and other artists wanted to appeal to the masses. How does Butterfly reflect these aspects of life in Italy at the time? Are there elements of verismo? Do you think this opera would have appealed to the masses? Explain your answer.

5. In a letter to his friend, Tito Ricordi, in 1907, Puccini has a few complaints about the rehearsals for a production of Butterfly in New York. He said that the soprano cast to sing Cio-Cio-San, Geraldine Farrar, sang “out of tune” and that her voice was not big enough to fill the theatre. He also said that the director and the orchestra conductor did not know enough about the piece and were unable to control their staff. Puccini insisted that rehearsals only went well if he was heavily involved in them. Despite these shortcomings, this production received glowing reviews by Puccini’s own admission. Consider these different relationships among singers, composers, directors, and others. How involved should composers be with productions of their works? Do you think Puccini overstepped or was he right to be concerned?