

Program Notes

by April L. Racana

Fri. July 22 The 882nd Suntory Hall Subscription Concert

Sun. July 24 The 883rd Orchard Hall Subscription Concert

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Giacomo Puccini (1858-1924) Opera “Madama Butterfly” (concert-style)

In London for the British premiere of *Tosca* in 1900, Puccini attended the American playwright, David Belasco's one-act play, *Madame Butterfly*, where the seeds were first planted for his idea to compose an opera based on the subject. Belasco, in turn, had based his play on the story by John Luther Long of the same name, whose sister had shared with him the experiences of a young Japanese girl in Nagasaki when she was there as a missionary. It seems Long may have also referenced Pierre Loti's novel *Madame Chrysanthème*, which was popular at the time and shares a very similar plot-line.

After returning to Italy, Puccini called on his librettists, Luigi Illica and Giuseppe Giacosa, (both of whom had worked with the composer on his two previous operas, *La Bohème* and *Tosca*), to develop a full operatic script, while the composer began composing the score. Puccini enlisted the assistance of the wife of the Japanese ambassador to Italy, as well, as he wanted to become familiar with traditional Japanese songs and try to incorporate some of the Japanese melodies and style throughout the work.

The premiere for *Madama Butterfly* came on February 17th, 1904 at La Scala

in Milan, Italy where it was received with jeers, apparently from adversaries to the composer who from the start wanted to undermine the success of the opera. As described in *Musice e Musicisti* the audience reaction included: “Growls, shouts, groans, laughter, giggling, [and the] usual single cries... designed to excite the public still more; that sums up the reception which the public of La Scala accorded the new work by Maestro Puccini... The spectacle given in the auditorium seemed as well organized as that on the stage since it began precisely with the beginning of the opera.”

In addition, there were other problems with the work, including the length (too long), as well as the divisions of the acts and the fact that there was no aria for the tenor, which was unheard of in operas of the time. Puccini ended up withdrawing the opera, returning his fee to the management at that theatre, and went on to revise the work. The second revision was premiered in Brescia, Italy in May that year where it was received warmly. This version included breaking the production into three separate acts, rather than the two longer acts in the first version, as well as adding an aria for the tenor in the final act. Puccini would go on to revise

the opera again in 1905 for the Covent Gardens performance, and even further revisions in 1906 for the Paris premiere, which has become the standard version most often presented. The TPO will be presenting this work for this concert series in two extended Acts, combining Act II and Act III into the final act.

In **Act I** an American Naval Lieutenant, Benjamin Franklin Pinkerton, has arrived in Nagasaki, where he is arranging to lease a house from Goro-san, who is also a marriage broker and has arranged for a Japanese-bride, Butterfly (Cio-Cio-san — pronounced Cho-Cho-san) as well. Pinkerton is accompanied by Sharpless, the American consul, and while talking, brags about the perceived temporary nature of this type of marriage. Sharpless warns him that his Japanese bride may take the commitment more seriously. However, Pinkerton continues with his brash ways, going on to state how he will one day return to America and have a ‘real’ wife there.

In the meantime, Butterfly arrives with a great processional of friends and family. She shares with Pinkerton some of her most cherished belongings, including the dagger her father used to commit *hara-kiri*. She tells her new husband-to-be that she has converted to Christianity for his sake and is willing to give up the beliefs of her own family in order to be with him. Immediately following the wedding ceremony, Butterfly’s uncle arrives and renounces her for abandoning her religion, calling on the rest of the family to do the same. Pinkerton steps in and demands that the uncle leaves, with the rest of the family and friends following him out. Comforting his new bride, the pair sing their first (and longest)

love-duet **“Bimba, Bimba, non piangere”** (Sweetheart, sweetheart, do not weep) to close the first act.

Act II (Part 1) opens after three years have passed. Butterfly has been waiting patiently for the return of Pinkerton, while caring for their son. Suzuki, her maid, tells Butterfly that she is worried that they are running out of money and tries to warn her mistress that often American husbands do not return to Japan once they have left. Butterfly is adamant that Pinkerton’s ship will soon arrive and sings of his imagined return in one of the opera’s most well-known works **“Un bel di Vedremo”** (One beautiful day, we will see). Sharpless enters with a letter from Pinkerton, that tells of his return with his American wife. However before he can share the news with Butterfly, he tries to convince her to accept an offer of marriage from a Japanese Prince, Yamadori, which has been proposed by Goro-san. She refuses, firmly committed to her ‘marriage’ to Pinkerton.

The sound of a cannon from the harbor can be heard in the distance, indicating the arrival of Pinkerton’s ship. Butterfly, still unaware of the circumstances of her husband’s return, orders Suzuki to help decorate the house with blossoms, singing **“Scuoti quella fronda”**. Throughout the night Butterfly waits and watches for Pinkerton’s return, during which the Humming Chorus is performed by the operatic chorus members in the background.

Act II (Part 2) opens at dawn. Suzuki is the first to notice the arrival of Sharpless with Pinkerton and his American wife. In a trio ensemble, Suzuki and the two men sing of how best to handle the situation and to

let Butterfly know of the new wife, as well as what to do about their son. Sharpless criticizes Pinkerton for putting Butterfly in such a difficult circumstance and especially for the hurt he has caused her. Pinkerton sings briefly of his regret in **“Addio fiorito”** (Farewell, flowery refuge of happiness and love), before leaving, unable to face the Japanese wife he had abandoned so callously. Kate, the American wife, asks Suzuki to suggest to Butterfly that perhaps her son would be better off with them in America.

Butterfly enters the garden from the house, looking for her husband and wondering who the American woman is. Sharpless finally informs her and once she realizes the gravity of things, sends them all away, telling them to have Pinkerton return in half an hour to claim his son. She returns to the house and takes out the dagger her father had used, reading the inscription which states: “In honor dies he who cannot live in honor.” Suzuki senses the dire circumstances and sends the son into the house to interrupt his mother. Butterfly then sings **“Piccolo Iddio!”** as a fond farewell to her son before sending him away. She then kills herself just as Pinkerton arrives, calling out her name “Butterfly”.

Puccini’s musical setting incorporates intonations from both Japan and America. Melodies from both countries’ national anthems are incorporated into the score at key points in the action. “The Star Spangled Banner” is heard within the tune **“Dovunque al mondo”** (Throughout the World) in Act I to highlight the American perspective of Pinkerton. Later the melody for the American anthem can be heard

again when Butterfly sings of her devotion to Pinkerton after she spots his ship arriving in the harbor in Act II (Part 1).

In addition a number of Japanese traditional folk song melodies were used. For example, in Act II (Part 1), when Goro-san is presenting the wealthy Japanese Prince Yamadori to Butterfly, one can hear the melody for the Japanese folk song “Miyasan” as part of the processional music. Also the Japanese folk song “Jizuki-uta”, (a work song) is believed by some scholars to have inspired the melody for one of Butterfly’s arias. These were interspersed along with melodies Puccini composed in a Japanese style, including instrumental sounds from the orchestra’s bells, gongs and wind instruments to lend an air of authenticity to the scenes.

With Puccini’s mastery of the subtle use of timbres and sonorities in the orchestra, as well as his sparing use of the chorus only when needed, (at the entrance of family and friends in Act I and again at the end of Act II (Part 1) with the ethereal Humming Chorus), all set the scenes with great musical skill. These together with the memorable melodies sung by the soloists all gave new life to this sad story of unrequited love, and allowed it to become one of the most well-known operas performed, in spite of such a seemingly catastrophic premiere.

Instrumentation: 3 flutes (3rd doubling on piccolo), 2 oboes, English horn, 2 clarinets, bass clarinet, 2 bassoons, 4 horns, 3 trumpets, 3 trombones, cimbasso, timpani, percussion (snare drum, bass drum, triangle, cymbals, glockenspiel, chimes, Japanese bells, Japanese tam-tam, tam-tam, bird whistles), harp, strings