



MADAMA BUTTERFLY

THEMES

With the opening of Japan in 1853 by the American Navy, led by Commodore Matthew Perry, the world's interest in the mysterious, exotic East blossomed. And, in 1900 at the Duke of York Theatre in London, Italian composer Giacomo Puccini also fell under the spell of *japonisme*. Puccini was in the audience for American playwright David Belasco's London premiere of *Madame Butterfly: A Tragedy of Japan*. Belasco's play, based on an 1898 Century Magazine short story written by American lawyer/writer John Luther Long, was soon obtained as the source material for a new Puccini opera. This twin historical preoccupation at the turn of the 19th Century - the public's fascination with all things Japanese and growing awareness of the rising power of the United States - gives *Madama Butterfly* a dual grounding in both realism and exoticism. The initial premiere of *Madama Butterfly* in 1904 at La Scala drew jeers and boos, for opera audiences much preferred a tragic love story to political commentary about American imperialism. Puccini reworked the opera, softening of the character of the American naval officer, Pinkerton, and the tragic romance of *Madama Butterfly* finally found success. Puccini's melodic opera set in Japan has entranced audiences ever since.

The Clash of Cultures: East meets West

Puccini's music uses melody and instrumentation to create the delicate, darting atmosphere for Butterfly's Japan. The young girl's entrance is accompanied by flute, piccolo, harp and glockenspiel, which Puccini's arranges to sound like Japanese instruments. *Campanelli giapponese*, Japanese bells, are used in the wedding scene. Sprinkled throughout the opera, Puccini's musical quotations of traditional Japanese folk melodies paint a sonic picture of a Japan rich with a unique culture. In contrast, the brash blare of trumpets announces the assured American naval officer Pinkerton. At that time, the patriotic melody was the Navy's Anthem, before the song now recognized as the Star Spangled Banner was named the national anthem of the United States in 1931.

From the story line in Illica and Giocosa's libretto to Puccini's musical compositions, *Madama Butterfly* explores the clash of two cultures. The East and The West are represented by the opera's two main characters, Cio-Cio-San and Lieutenant Benjamin Franklin Pinkerton. Much like the country of Japan fifty years prior, Cio-Cio-San's world in 1904 Nagasaki is opened and disrupted by the arrival of the Americans.

Love and Loyalty vs. Ownership and Power

It is clear from the opera's introductory scenes, that the Americans are portrayed as the aggressors. Pinkerton is clearly insensitive to his host culture. When he is introduced to the servants that care for his newly purchased home, Pinkerton mocks them. Refusing to call them by their names, which refer to the beauty in nature, he speaks to them derisively, as if they were interchangeable with no distinction. "Scarecrow first, scarecrow second, and scarecrow third!" Upon introduction to the consul Sharpless, Pinkerton boasts of the purchase of his new home for nine hundred and ninety nine years with a monthly option to cancel his contract monthly. He adds that a Yankee's life "is not worth living, if he can't win the best and fairest of each country." He describes his Japanese bride-to-be as if she were a possession, "almost transparently fragile and slender, dainty in stature, quaint," comparing her with a butterfly whose "frail wings should be broken." Cio-Cio-San, on the other hand, demurely, apologetically expresses her infatuation with the foreigner. It is apparent that she is not aware of his selfish nature.

BUTTERFLY *At the beginning, all he said was useless.
A stranger from America!
a foreigner! a barbarian!
Forgive me, I did not know...*

*... You're so strong,
so handsome! Your laugh
is so open and so hearty!
The things you say are so fascinating.
Now I am happy.
Yes, I am happy.*

Pinkerton crows that he is marrying in “Japanese fashion, tied for nine hundred and ninety nine years,” but he is “free, though, to annul the marriage monthly.” He speaks of property and contracts and “bus’ness profits,” and see the whole world as a place of “business and pleasure.” When he discovers that Cio-Cio-San is only fifteen years old, he compares her to the “sweetmeats” that he will serve at the wedding banquet. He watches as Cio-Cio-San’s family climbs over the hill to greet him, and says in an aside to Sharpless:

PINKERTON *What a farce is this procession
Of my worthy new relations,
Held on terms of monthly contract!*

In fact, both sides of the marriage are sizing up the partnership. Butterfly’s aunt sings of Pinkerton’s value.

AUNT *A finer man you never saw,
not in your dreams, not in your dreams.
I think him fine! He's worth a lot.
I think he is fine!*

A timid childlike Cio-Cio-San speaks to Pinkerton of her desire to lead a new life, to adopt another religion, and faithfully serve her new husband, “my dear master.”

The Price of Cultural Assimilation

It is revealed that once, Butterfly’s family was wealthy, but the marriage broker Goro offers her to Pinkerton, noting that she may be purchased for “nothing.” She is his for the price of a hundred yen.

BUTTERFLY *The Fates have willed it.
For me you spent a hundred yen,
But I shall take care to be most frugal.
And to give you more pleasure,
I can almost forget my race and kindred!*

*... There's no one likes to own that he was born in poverty;
Is not ev'ry vagrant, when you listen to his tale,
of ancient lineage? But yet indeed
I have known riches. But the strongest oak
must fall, when the storm wind wrecks the forest...
and we had to go as geishas to earn our living.*

With her pending marriage to Pinkerton, the young girl incurs the wrath of her uncle, The Bonze, who denounces Cio-Cio-San for turning her back on her religion, family and culture. Butterfly tells Pinkerton that she is “scarcely grieved by their desertion.” Flushed with feeling, she stoops to kiss his hand and speaks of “that abroad where people are more cultured,” and the gift of someone’s hand is the “token of the highest honour.” Pinkerton expresses his delight by comparing his wife to a “pretty plaything.”

As the two lovers embrace under the stars, Act I closes with the young girl’s sudden sense of foreboding.

BUTTERFLY *They say that in your country
If a butterfly
[with an expression of fear] is caught by man,
He'll pierce its heart with a needle,
[with anguish] And then leave it to perish!*

Pinkerton responds by agreeing that there is a truth in what she says. Butterfly is his, caught and pinned.

PINKERTON *You're mine now,
I ah! come, come you are mine now
Some truth there is in that,
And can you tell me why?
That you may not escape.
See, I have caught you...
I hold you as you flutter.
Be mine.*

Honor and Dishonor

Act II opens with Cio-Cio-San standing in semi-darkness denouncing the “lazy and idle” Gods of Japan, and Suzuki praying before a statue of Buddha. Three years have passed. Starving, with little money, Cio-Cio-San has been left behind by Pinkerton in a house secured with American safe locks. Still, Butterfly is confident of his return, and she sings the well-known aria, *Un Bel Di*, as she visualizes his reappearance “one fine day.” Sharpless arrives to deliver a letter from Pinkerton, and Goro comes with Prince Yamadori, a wealthy suitor. Goro reveals to Sharpless that Cio-Cio-San is “poor as she can be,” having been cast off in disgrace by all of her relatives. For Butterfly, marriage to Yamadori is out of the question for she is not bound by Japanese law, as the wife of an American. Yamadori honors her wishes and leaves his “heart heavy with sorrow.” Sharpless attempts repeatedly to tell Cio-Cio-San that Pinkerton has no intentions of returning to her, and the consul is stunned and moved to hear that she would sooner die, if her love was never to return. Cio-Cio-San reveals her child, named *Trouble*, telling Sharpless that the boy will be renamed *Joy* when his father returns. An emotional Sharpless swears to her that Pinkerton will be told.

In Scene 2 of Act I, Sharpless keeps his promise to Butterfly and confronts Pinkerton, pointing out his callous treatment of his former bride. Finally, Pinkerton exhibits a hint of remorse.

SHARPLESS *I warned you, you remember?
When in your hand she laid hers:
“Be careful! For she believes you”
Alas! how true I spoke!
Deaf to all entreaties,
deaf to doubting, humiliation,
Blindly trusting to your promise,
Her heart will break...*

PINKERTON *Yes, in one sudden moment,
I see my heartless action
And feel that I shall never, ah never
Free myself from remorse,
no never more! no!*

Sharpless reveals to Suzuki that not only has Pinkerton returned, the American has gotten what he truly desired, a “real marriage - a real wife - a wife from America.” The cowardly Pinkerton can not face Cio-Cio-San to reveal the truth, and the duty falls to Kate, Pinkerton’s new American wife. Kate swears to Suzuki that she will care for Butterfly’s child, as if he was her own, and she is allowed to speak directly to Cio-Cio-San about taking the child to a new life in America. The two women agree that Pinkerton may take his son, if he will come in half an hour.

Cio-Cio-San is left alone with Suzuki who weeps for her friend. Suzuki is ordered her to leave and Butterfly takes up the object that she holds most sacred — the dagger left to her by her father, the same blade that he used to kill himself in order to maintain his family’s honor.

She reads the inscription on the sword.

*Death with honour is
better than life with dishonour.*

Suzuki tries to prevent her friend from killing herself by sending the child to his mother, and Cio-Cio-San reveals the reason why she is willing to die — to prevent her son from dishonor.

*Though you ne'er must know it
'Tis for you, my love, for you I'm dying,
Poor Butterfly
That you may go away
Beyond the ocean,
Never to feel the torment when you are older,
That your mother forsook you!*

The declamatory trumpets that accompany the death of Butterfly in the opera’s final scene are Puccini’s own melding of American and Japanese flavors in melody, rhythm and instrumentation. The orchestra sounds the opera’s final chords, and Pinkerton falls to his knees before the fallen Butterfly. As the curtain descends, the audience witnesses the final transformation of Cio-Cio-San. No longer a child, Madama Butterfly emerges as a motherly figure of strength and honor and a reminder of the tragic human cost caused by the inevitable conflict that occurs when disparate cultures collide.