



## ***MADAMA BUTTERFLY - REVIEWS***

**2007-2008 SAN FRANCISCO OPERA SEASON**

**San Francisco Classical Voice, 01 December 2007:**

### **Madama Butterfly: A Victim of Virtue**

By James Keolker

The current San Francisco Opera production of *Madama Butterfly* is pure Puccini perfection. Casting, conducting, and stage design are so ideally aligned that this is one of the most satisfying productions that I have ever experienced.

Foremost is the superior interpretation of Patricia Racette. While this artist has presented the role many times, she sang it with such freshness at last Saturday's opening matinee that it felt spontaneous. Racette has deepened her interpretation, making her Cio-Cio-San not only innocently deluded and overly trustful as the little Japanese bride, but proud, boastful, and confident as the new American that she feels she rightfully is. And Racette carefully realizes Puccini's intention, that *Butterfly* is a victim of her own virtue, her steadfastness.

Vocally she let her character mature from the early girlish sing-song when taken in "marriage" by the handsome American naval lieutenant, to a riveting rendition of her unwavering trust ("Un bel di vedremo" / One fine day he will return) delivered with such intensity that the audience burst into applause, spoiling the moment but relieving the pent-up emotion. And Racette's full-voiced hurt and rage after years of waiting with "Ah! m'ha scordata!" (Ah, he has forgotten me!), and the ensuing possibility of taking her own life ("Ah morta!"), were deeply moving.

This was equaled in every way by the thoughtful interpretation of Brandon Jovanovich in his San Francisco Opera debut as Lt. Pinkerton. (The 2007 recipient of the coveted Richard Tucker award, this young tenor may be recognized by locals for his roles as Don José in *La Tragedie de Carmen* and as Tom in *Susannah* a few seasons ago at Festival Opera of Walnut Creek.)

#### **An Ideal Pinkerton**

Jovanovich is ideal in the role, not only being tall and appealing, but also possessing a warm, virile voice in the manner of Placido Domingo. He brought forth a much more thoughtful American than most tenors do, as perplexed by the Japanese customs as he was impatient, as bemused as he was arrogant, as wrong-headed as *Butterfly*, thus assuring the inevitable tragedy. And his final "Addio fiorito asil" (Farewell, flowered refuge), sung prostrate at the marriage bed, was not the usual tenor grandstanding but was emotionally wrenching.

Mezzo-soprano Zheng Cao likewise gave a vocally rich interpretation as *Butterfly*'s attendant, Suzuki. More than a servant, Cao mirrored her mistress in happiness as well as in sadness, and when the two strew petals in their flower duet at the expectation of Pinkerton's return ("Tutta la primavera"), Cao's voice was as lovely as it was loving.

Baritone Stephen Powell was equally effective as Sharpless. This role is pivotal to the drama, for the American consul is the unfortunate go-between, and while Powell was excellent throughout, his reading of Pinkerton's letter to *Butterfly* was so tender, so sympathetic, that it gave new poignancy to the scene.

Adler Fellow Matthew O'Neill added to his increasing stature as a character tenor in the role of Goro, the Japanese broker who in this production is often on the take, and baritone Eugene Chan in his local debut as Prince Yamadori was impressive with a rich voice and appropriately dismissive demeanor. Katharine Tier was a compassionate Kate Pinkerton, Raymond Aceto forceful as the condemning Bonze, and choristers William Pickersgill and Jere Torkelsen effective as a Registrar and an Imperial Commissioner.

### Soaring Performance in the Pit

Much credit must be given to Maestro Donald Runnicles and the members of the San Francisco Opera Orchestra for their superb rendering of Puccini's score, from its opening flurry of incisive strings, to the massive, ominous chords for the arrival of Pinkerton's ship, the frequent tonal delicacy, the hammering of the timpani like shattered hopes, and the soaring finality at the opera's end. You will hear none better.

Having to work with one of the most familiar operas ever written is surely an artistic challenge, yet the production team never resorted to anything less than respect for Puccini's creation. Pinkerton states that the Japanese setting is "a house made of air," and Michael Yeargan's design was just that: spacious and airy as well as confining as a cocoon with its artful use of sliding screens. Stephen Strawbridge's lighting made the characters into moving sculptures, while Anita Yavich's designs looked like richly detailed clothing rather than costumes.

Kathleen Belcher's direction was exceptional, giving the audience a number of indelible moments: the marriage bed against a starry sky, the surreptitious selling of Butterfly's artifacts, the large American consul forced to sit upon tiny Japanese pillows, the looming hulk of the distant ship, the all-night vigil with a rising sun, the confrontation of East and West as Butterfly silently stands staring at Kate Pinkerton.

Attention must also be given to Jerry Shirk and Francesca Zambello's artistic translation for the supertitles, which reflected much of the libretto's poetry, some of which Puccini wrote himself.

But be prepared: Take plenty of tissues and expect to be emotionally wrung dry. It is a soul-searing experience.



## ***MADAMA BUTTERFLY - REVIEWS***

**2007-2008 SAN FRANCISCO OPERA SEASON**

**Bay City News Service, 01 December 2007:**

### **REVIEW: MADAME BUTTERFLY**

By Caroline Crawford

Puccini's "Madame Butterfly" opened Saturday afternoon with a performance for the books.

Who would have guessed that a Saturday matinee opening (at noon, no less!) of Puccini's great popular favorite, a late addition to the season roster, could be such a stunner, nearly perfect in every respect. The orchestra under Donald Runnicles played with heart-stopping drama, missing no musical detail and creating a kind of curtain-to-curtain electricity rarely seen on the opera stage. The well-balanced cast, led by Patricia Racette, sang with fresh and vibrant voices and acted the tragic narrative in a way that was completely convincing. And the stage setting, by its very simplicity, served the composer line for line and never intruded on the beauty of the music.

Patricia Racette, a former member of the Merola Program and a veteran Cio-Cio-San, has all the lustrous colors to express the joys and sorrows that make up the story of the fifteen-year-old for-sale Japanese bride who sacrifices all for Pinkerton, her crass American naval officer. Racette's voice takes a slight edge at times, and the soft tones sometimes trail off, but she masters and shimmers in the Puccini climax, and her acting is flawless. The audience rewarded her performance, including a stary rendering of "Un bel di" with a standing ovation such as this operagoer has rarely seen.

The Pinkerton, Brandon Jovanovich, is a newcomer here who won the Richard Tucker Award this year and appears often with New York City Opera. His high-flying tenor has a wide range and more than makes up for any lack of nuance with its brilliant colors and ardent delivery. The electricity between Pinkerton and Cio-Cio-San carried the day, extending to everyone else onstage as well as the audience.

Stephen Powell in his local debut was an exceptionally warm-voiced Sharpless, giving a nice vocal weight to the role of the U.S. diplomat who laments the destiny of the Japanese bride, and Zheng Cao sang the role of confidante Suzuki in lovely tones, acting the role in an understated way that made her devotion to Butterfly palpable. Adler Fellow Matthew O'Neill was a standout Goro.

Much of the success of this "Butterfly" is due to Kathleen Belcher's unobtrusive direction and Michael Yeargan's stage design: a simple stylized set of sliding Japanese screens. The shadowy projection of a giant Navy ship moving across the stage to signify Pinkerton's ominous return is powerful.

"Madame Butterfly" has four more performances (with a new Cio-Cio-San and a new Pinkerton for two of those) through December 8.



## ***MADAMA BUTTERFLY - REVIEWS***

**2007-2008 SAN FRANCISCO OPERA SEASON**



**The Examiner, 03 December 2007:**

**Entertainment**

**Review: A 'Butterfly' shock**

By Janos Gereben

What in blazes are these people doing all around me, sniffing, wiping their eyes, some even blubbering softly? Why are they carrying on like this? Why is my usually unsentimental companion sobbing? Why am I?

People: this is "Madama Butterfly," for heaven's sake, the old Puccini potboiler, with music heard as often as "Jingle Bells" in December. Here, in the War Memorial Saturday afternoon, we are attending the "premiere" (this season, that is) of the pretty but decade-old Ron Daniels/Michael Yeargan production, with a fine cast, but most of them heard numerous times in these roles right here, in San Francisco, an allegedly sophisticated, blasé city.

So what's with general meltdown, and the ovation that followed the performance, a massive crowd staying through all the curtain calls, screaming for Patricia Racette, shouting "brava!" for Zheng Cao, hissing the debuting Brandon Jovanovich, one of the best Pinkertons in local history, vocally sensational, and such a mean - if handsome - cad that disapproval for his character is of the highest accolade. All this carrying on: so tearful, abandoned, happy, riotous...

What happened?

I wish I could explain, no, bottle and sell the stuff. It's one of the many mysteries of opera how an old warhorse can take the Kentucky derby by 10 lengths.

David Gockley sort of threw in five "Butterfly" performances at the end of the season, surely to help the box office (there was a good-size standing-room crowd even at the quaint noon opening curtain), and he cast it well, but even he must know that it was the opera gods that made it all work this amazingly well.

For many years now, Donald Runnicles has kept surprising new listeners with his Puccini; some 10 years ago, I found his "Humming Chorus" exquisite, on par with Wagner and Britten performances for which he is better known. His musical direction today was solid gold all the way through (the Bonze scene alone getting a bit too heated orchestrally), both passionate and restrained, playful and elegant, deeply-felt but not sentimental, "just right."

In Act 1, Jovanovich made an amazing debut, satisfying the tricky dichotomy of Pinkerton's vocal requirements: a strong lyrical/narrative sound with an (anti)heroic edge. The tenor - already well received locally as Don José in a recent Walnut Creek Festival Opera "La Tragédie de Carmen" - projected effortlessly in the 3,000-seat auditorium, with fine diction, and he cut a letter-perfect Pinkerton figure physically and dramatically.

Stephen Powell's debut as Sharpless added a self-effacing, selfless performance, fitting well into an ensemble bound by genuine, believable connections.

Patricia Racette has owned the role of Cio-Cio-San for many years here and around the world. With superb vocal and dramatic presence, she takes only a few minutes to overcome the challenge of portraying a 15-year-old. She and Jovanovich sang beautifully together, even if short on personal chemistry that would have improved the duet ending Act 1.

While one could "evaluate" the first act, the second half of the opera turned so heady that no brain could be applied to it properly. Debuting stage director Kathleen Belcher - showing the same restraint and excellence dramatically as Runnicles imposed from the pit - opened the curtain on Racette in an awkwardly reclining position, conveying the feeling of discomfort, pain even.

The soprano's voice opened fully, and she started pouring forth a golden sound of great beauty, but nothing "pretty" - music at its ideal, unaffected grace. Belcher and Racette "conspired" to deliver "Un bel di" in a simple, almost conversational manner, its impact far greater than that of a "big number."

Racette then kept building and building the role, in a seemingly impossible feat, having started from the highest plateau. Pinkerton's brief return showed Jovanovich in another character, but in the same great voice.

Then what happened through that known, unvaried, heavy, inexorable headlong rush into the expected tragedy somehow opened all those faucets to tears and deep emotions, creating a communal catharsis, on face of it not in the same universe with That Opera.

It was a "Butterfly" shockingly different, astonishingly grand. Without a single bizarre, outrageous act of "director's opera" infamy, the crew and cast of this production gave a shining example how simplicity, authenticity, and excellence can offer THE alternative to "static opera."



## ***MADAMA BUTTERFLY - REVIEWS***

**2007-2008 SAN FRANCISCO OPERA SEASON**

# **San Francisco Chronicle**

**San Francisco Chronicle, 03 December 2007:**

### **S.F. Opera stages mesmerizing 'Madama Butterfly'**

By Joshua Kosman

One thing that keeps music lovers (and music critics) on the alert is that there's never any telling when a great performance is going to sneak up on you. Saturday's superb opening matinee of "Madama Butterfly" at the San Francisco Opera caught at least one listener blindsided.

Not that there should have been any particular mystery going in. It was only a year and a half ago, after all, that soprano Patricia Racette illuminated both the War Memorial Opera House and - in the first of General Director David Gockley's trademark Plazacasts - the Civic Center Plaza with an incendiary performance as Puccini's doomed geisha, and here she was again for another go-round.

Still, it seemed as if there was a slightly furtive air about this "Butterfly," brought back so soon and added to the company's season schedule almost as an afterthought for a bare week's worth of performances.

Not at all. When the curtain rose at the ungodly hour of noon, what emerged was one of the fall's most transfixing performances, a compelling and almost breathlessly taut rendition of this timeless tragedy.

Racette was the star, of course, reprising a portrait of Cio-Cio-San that paid as much tribute to the character's self-reliance and strength of purpose as to her unhappy fate at the hands of the caddish Pinkerton.

But the rest of the cast - including tenor Brandon Jovanovich and baritone Stephen Powell in memorable company debuts - conspired with her and Music Director Donald Runnicles to produce a performance that bristled with dramatic energy and vocal splendor, and made Cio-Cio-San's plight as affecting as it can be. (A second cast, featuring Marie Plette as Cio-Cio-San and James Valenti as Pinkerton with Julian Smith conducting, is scheduled for two of this week's performances.)

And while Runnicles' vigorous, impassioned conducting brought out all the ferment of Puccini's score, debuting director Kathleen Belcher infused the now-familiar Ron Daniels production - seen here several times since its introduction in 1997 - with vivid new life.

Again and again, her staging was studded with imaginative and telling details that underscored the unbridgeable cultural differences between the two principals. In Act 1 especially, she had Pinkerton committing one faux pas after another, but blindly - offering a handshake instead of a bow, or signing the wedding contract with Sharpless' fountain pen without even noticing the notary's proffered brush.

In Act 2, when Cio-Cio-San extended her hand to Sharpless in imitation of her adopted country, her almost willful naivete was encapsulated in a single heartbreaking gesture.

In general, though, Racette once again spurned the traditional vision of Cio-Cio-San as a porcelain doll ripe for shattering. Her singing was muscular and clean-limbed, with a wealth of bright tone backed up by sweeping phrases; her rendition of "Un bel dì," in which Cio-Cio-San envisions Pinkerton's return, was so potent she might have been conjuring him up from sheer force of will.

Jovanovich is not a stranger to Bay Area audiences - he has done his time with Opera San José and Festival Opera - but his Pinkerton hit with the force of a revelation. Tall, blond and ridiculously handsome, he moved through Act 1 with the ease and self-regard of someone whose entire life has been a breeze; for once it was easy to see Pinkerton not simply as a thug but as someone who has never known anything but getting what he wants.

His vocal performance, delivered with plenty of effortless power and deep, baritone colors, only emphasized the point. In the first-act aria, "Dovunque al mondo," Pinkerton's imperialist swagger became improbably charming; the self-recrimination of the concluding "Addio, fiorito asil" was all the more arresting for being obviously unprecedented.

Powell brought warmth and a sense of emotional stability to the role of Sharpless, the American consul, and sang with enough vocal heft to be heard in the low-lying melodies that too often fade into the background. Zheng Cao, nearly the only Suzuki this company has known for a decade, found new reserves of vibrancy in the role, particularly in the ensemble writing of Act 2. The rest of the cast included Matthew O'Neill as Goro, Raymond Aceto as the Bonze and Katharine Tier as Kate Pinkerton.



SAN FRANCISCO  
OPERA EDUCATION

## ***MADAMA BUTTERFLY - REVIEWS***

**2007-2008 SAN FRANCISCO OPERA SEASON**

**Contra Costa Times, 06 December 2007:**

### **Classical Notes**

By Georgia Rowe

'BUTTERFLY' SOARS: The San Francisco Opera opened "Madama Butterfly" as the final production of its fall season on Dec. 1 at the War Memorial Opera House. Talk about ending on a high note: Patricia Racette returned to sing the title role of Puccini's evergreen favorite, and she was in especially glorious voice for the performance. But the big news at this opening was Brandon Jovanovich. Making his company debut, the tenor gave an outstanding performance as Pinkerton. Tall, blond and handsome, Jovanovich (local audiences will remember him as Don Jose in Festival Opera's "Carmen" a few years back) looks the part of the all-American cad, and he sang with firm tone and genuine ardor. The rest of the cast -- Zheng Cao's touching Suzuki, Stephen Powell's sturdy Sharpless -- was ideal; with Donald Runnicles leading a thrilling performance in the pit, this "Butterfly" soared. Racette and Jovanovich return for one additional performance, 1 p.m. Dec. 8; soprano Marie Plette and tenor James Valenti assume the roles of Cio-Cio San and Pinkerton 7:30 p.m. Dec. 6 and 8 p.m. Dec. 8. Tickets are \$15-\$275. 415-864-3330, <http://www.sfopera.com>.



## ***MADAMA BUTTERFLY - REVIEWS***

**2007-2008 SAN FRANCISCO OPERA SEASON**

**TheOperaCritic.com, 6 December 2007:**

**Revealing the riches of an opera classic**

By Michael J. Vaughn

Although I was disappointed to miss a personal favorite, Patricia Racette, in the lead role (SFO is alternating their Butterflies and Pinkertons, owing to a tight schedule), I was delighted to discover soprano Marie Plette, an alumna of SFO's Merola Opera Program who has performed Cio-Cio-San many times. Plette exhibits an enchanting shimmer in her top notes (a hard-to-define combination of a perfectly spaced vibrato and an assured lyric production), and she also possesses a petite stature and vulnerable demeanor that serve to intensify the effect of the geisha's impending train-wreck. I knew how terrific her "Un bel di" would be long before she sang it (and it was).

Tenor James Valenti brought a similar combination to Pinkerton - a tall, strapping physique and a broad lyric voice that filled up the stage. His beginning to the lovers' duet, "Viene la sera," was gorgeous, as was the later "Addio, fiorito asil," Pinkerton's tormented remembrance of his Japanese honeymoon.

For that matter, there wasn't a role in the production that didn't seem freshly re-thought. Baritone Stephen Powell's Sharpless was much more fierce and angry at his young compatriot's thoughtlessness. Tenor Matthew O'Neill played the matchmaker Goro stripped of his usual comic gimmickry, giving the character much more humanity, simply a businessman desperately getting by on his wits.

As for Suzuki, mezzo Zheng Cao was superlative, especially in the transmission of her grief at the news of Pinkerton's marriage to his "real," American wife. And the women of the SFO Chorus, one of the world's best, brought genuine passion to the scolding of Butterfly after she forsakes their native religion.

The production was augmented by many smaller touches. Butterfly wakes up in Act II with her pipe in hand, implying that she has been smoking opium to deal with her abandonment. In the suicide scene, Plette appeared to drive the blade of her sword into the back of her neck and then pull it out slowly and painfully before collapsing to the floor, further fraying the nerves of her already deeply involved audience. (And opera fans just love this torturous, tragic empathy, don't we?)

Conductor Julian Smith led his orchestra in an intense, tightly played attack, the brass fortes simply exploding from the pit. The ever-discoverable score, meanwhile, gave up yet another of the secrets to its glorious criss-crossing motifs and emotional motifs: the timpani beats that go off like a ticking time bomb the moment our heroine has decided to kill herself. I expect you could see Butterfly a thousand times and still be finding these small treasures.



## ***MADAMA BUTTERFLY - REVIEWS***

**2007-2008 SAN FRANCISCO OPERA SEASON**

**The Bay Area Reporter, 06 December 2007:**

**A 'Butterfly' for weeping**

**Puccini gives timeless voice to tragic love**

By Jason Victor Serinus

Why do we continue to flock to Puccini's *Madama Butterfly*, even though so many of us have seen it on multiple occasions? Is it perhaps because, like the proverbial Tin Man, we feel impelled to constantly check for our hearts, to make sure they remain intact? Or is it because, living in an era where sentiment is constantly exploited for profit, we long for intense emotional expression and release that we know to be real?

Whatever our personal motivations, those of us who attended San Francisco Opera's Dec. 1 Noon matinee opening reprise of *Madama Butterfly* found ourselves drawn to our feet at opera's end. Our cheers and tears were as much a collective release from the heartbreak of our age as an acclamation of Patricia Racette's increasingly tragic, riveting portrayal of teenager Cio-Cio-San (*Butterfly*).

Blessed with a voice that grows in drama and color as it ascends the stave, Racette delivers a perfectly-paced, beautifully sung portrayal that taps into a universal well of truth. Though she neither looks nor sounds innocent and childlike in the opening act — hers is a *Butterfly* prone to suffering from first note to last — the 42-year-old artist grows progressively more convincing as the action proceeds. By the time the curtain has risen on the opera's second and final act, the tragedy that could not help but surface amidst the perfumed phrases of Act I has come to the fore, enveloping *Butterfly* and all who witness her suffering. Even orchestral playing that, under Donald Runnicles' baton, seemed rushed as the curtain rose, and scarcely breathed during Act I, broadened and became more lyrical, as though no one could possibly remain unmoved as *Butterfly* finally acknowledges impending doom. Runnicles and the opera orchestra especially come to the fore during the long, lyrical outpouring that accompanies *Butterfly*'s silent, overnight vigil as Pinkerton's ship enters the Bay of Nagasaki.

This *Butterfly* does not begin and end with Racette. Complementing the triumph of the 1998 Richard Tucker Award-winning soprano, 2007 Richard Tucker Award-winning tenor Brandon Jovanovich wins us over in his San Francisco Opera debut. Tall, handsome, and well-built, Jovanovich's manner and voice proclaim *STUD* in capital letters. His virile instrument, powerful throughout the range yet uncommonly sweet on top, seems tailor-made for Puccini's love-struck, lyrical heroes.

As directed by Kathleen Belcher (also making her debut), Jovanovich's Lt. B.F. Pinkerton proved such a strong-minded, two-faced cad as to elicit boos during curtain calls. Those of us who praised the man's sterling tenor during his seasons at Festival Opera now discover that he has matured into an artist who has already debuted at La Scala, and is set to conquer the world's major stages. (For two of *Madama Butterfly*'s remaining performances, Pinkerton will be played by James Valenti, another tall, slender, handsome tenor slated for an imminent La Scala debut. Soprano Marie Plette, whom I have not seen, bows before him as the alternate Cio-Cio-San.)

The production's other triumph belongs to mezzo-soprano Zheng Cao, whose ever-effacing portrayal of Butterfly's maid Suzuki is so sympathetic and affecting that no one can resist being drawn in. Beyond the beauty of her voice, Cao's Suzuki is so loyal, devoted, and intensely aware of the tragedy to come that her every gesture and facial expression adds to the pathos of Butterfly's predicament. Brava.

In his San Francisco Opera debut, baritone Stephen Powell delivered a well-sung, serviceable Sharpless, a bit too formal and hands-off to make an indelible impression. Perhaps that's the nature of the Consul. Perhaps due to Belcher's direction, bass Raymond Aceto's Bonze also failed to make a mark. Tenor Matthew O'Neill, looking a bit like a college kid dressed up in Japanese garb, delivered a lightweight, minor character Goro with little of the obnoxious behavior that characterizes many portrayals of the officious matchmaker. Little Dylan Hatch, who at one point seemed to require some coaxing to run across the stage, was a blond-haired, blue-eyed charmer as Butterfly and Pinkerton's son, Trouble.

In their sixth outing since debuting in the Golden Gate Theater in 1997, Ron Daniels' production, Michael Yeargan's sets, and Anita Yavich's costumes succeed with their authentic minimalism. Resurfacing in a season of productions that call attention to themselves, their achievement deserves gratitude for bowing in deference to Puccini's genius. With music at the fore, we bow as well, acknowledging Puccini's extraordinary ability to give voice to love.