

Madama Butterfly Notes

It is a clash of cultures: a Japanese geisha bows in honor to her future American husband, whose awkwardness is palpable. A Japanese geisha sacrifices her religion to marry this American naval officer, whose ultimate intention is to marry an American wife. A Japanese geisha refers to her home as an American home and her country as the United States, while the American naval officer eventually wonders if she still remembers him. A Japanese geisha bears a child who resembles his American father, only to lose the child to the new American wife.

In *Madama Butterfly*, set to some of Giacomo Puccini's most memorable music, we witness the tragedy of a woman whose blissful happiness is manipulated to the point of suicide and the unforgivable nonchalance of a man whose personal amusements are transformed into remorse. Cio-Cio-San and Lieutenant Benjamin Franklin Pinkerton are as different as two characters can be, and their story demonstrates what can happen when two people truly do not understand each other's backgrounds, philosophies, and cultures.

Because the music is exquisite and the opera is famous, it can be easy to overlook the fact that Puccini's career was characterized by a chronic search for operatic subjects. No sooner did he find an idea and write an opera, he started all over again looking for a new idea. This is why few of his operas are original: *Manon Lescaut* and *La Bohème* are based on original texts, and *Il Tabarro*, *La Fanciulla del West*, *Tosca*, and *Turandot* were inspired by plays.

Madama Butterfly, first performed at La Scala on February 17, 1904, is even more unoriginal, because it follows in the footsteps of several earlier works. One is the short story "Madame Butterfly" by lawyer and writer John Luther Long, whose sister, Jennie Correll, told him about a visit to Nagasaki, where her husband was a missionary. During the late 1800s, they met a Japanese teahouse girl named Cho-San, who had been betrayed by a military officer.

The second source is the novel "Madame Chrysanthème" (the chrysanthemum is the national flower of Japan) by Pierre Loti, whose real name was Louis Marie Julien Viaud. Loti was a naval officer who wrote novels set in the places he visited, and this one takes place in Japan with a main character who wants a temporary Japanese wife.

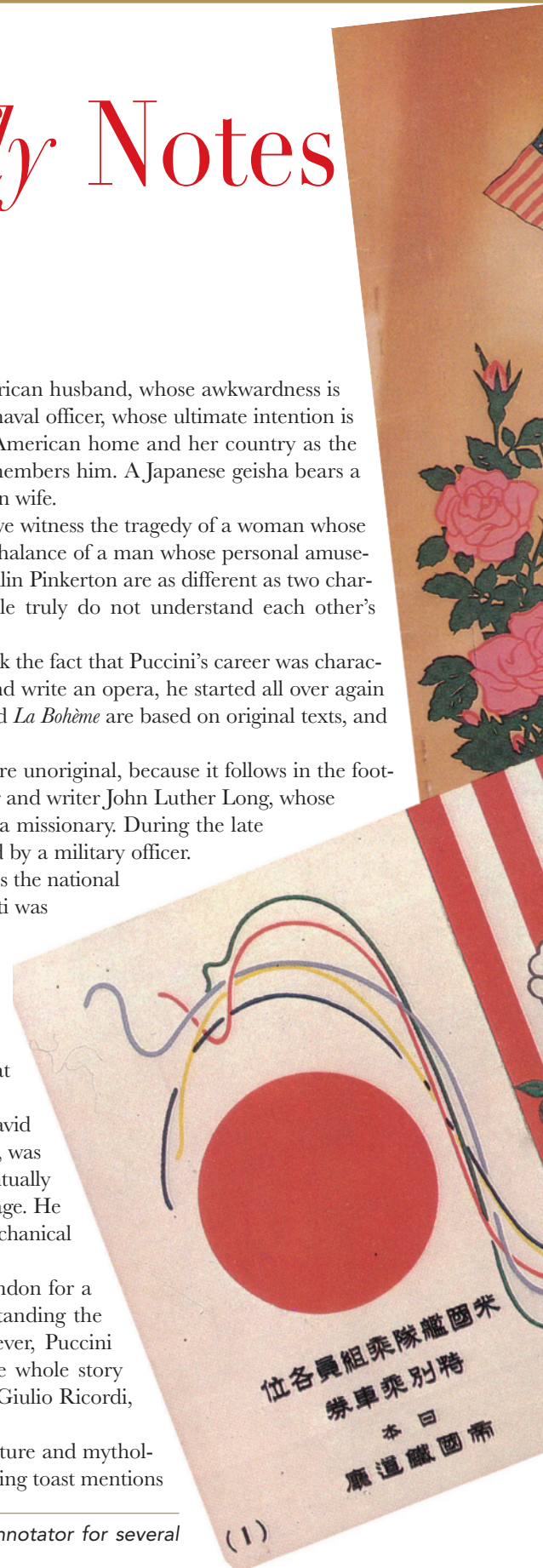
Interestingly, the popularity of these stories reflected America's interest in Japan following the Treaty of Kanagawa in 1854. President Fillmore put Commodore Matthew Perry of the U.S. Navy in charge of an expedition whose mission was to get the Japanese government to establish diplomatic ties to the U.S. That treaty marked the end of more than 200 years of Japanese isolation.

But the opera's direct inspiration was the one-act play "Madame Butterfly" by David Belasco, adapted from Long's story. Belasco, who also produced and directed theater, was born in San Francisco and worked in San Francisco theatre early in his career, eventually moving to New York where he set new standards of production for the American stage. He paid attention to minute details and was known for realism, extravagant sets, mechanical effects, and new forms of lighting—and he always enjoyed technical challenges.

Puccini saw Belasco's play at the Duke of York's Theater in 1900 while in London for a production of *Tosca* at Covent Garden. He understood the story without understanding the language and knew he wanted to make it the subject of his next opera. However, Puccini wanted his version of the story to make more sense. "It is essential to bind the whole story together with a closer logic than there is in Belasco's play," he wrote in a letter to Giulio Ricordi, according to the book *Letters of Giacomo Puccini*, edited by Giuseppe Adami.

In addition to the Japanese setting, the opera includes references to Japan's culture and mythology. For example, the national religion is Shinto ("Way of the Gods") and the wedding toast mentions

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kami, for which there are several meanings: the spirits within objects, gods associated with forces of nature and a family's ancestor gods.

“To understand the associations of the word kami,” writes W. Scott Morton in his book *The Japanese: How They Live and Work*, “leave out the ideas of exalted holiness...associated with God. The notion of divinity in kami is connected with anything remarkable or notable in nature...almost anything which inspires the feeling of awe.” We learn that Cio-Cio-San’s father was instructed by the Mikado to commit hara-kiri, a ritualized form of suicide that causes a slow, painful death. In Act II, Suzuki prays to Izanami, one of the goddesses of creation and death.

Then, of course, there are Cio-Cio-San’s nickname and occupation. Pinkerton compares her to a butterfly because of her delicacy, and, in Japanese art, the butterfly can symbolize the soul; generally, it symbolizes good luck. The concept of the geisha, “art person,” owes its existence to Chinese culture spreading to Japan, a culture that blossomed during China’s T’ang period, approximately 1,200 years ago.

During the 1600s, Edo—a village where fishermen and farmers lived, now named Tokyo—was transformed into Japan’s new military capital. The old Imperial capital of Kyoto, whose customs date to the elegant Heian Courts, influenced the comforts of daily living because the city’s artistic and cultural influences on Edo lasted until the end of the century. From the late 1680s until the early 1700s, Edo experienced a golden age of development, and a rivalry existed between Edo and the port city of Osaka.

The wealthy merchants of Edo and Osaka wanted to gratify their pleasure, and theater was one of the primary outlets. Geishas came into being as entertainers for actors, courtesans, and their patrons (people started using the word “geisha” around 1750). According to the registry office, which issued their certificates, geishas could wear only plain materials and their hair could be decorated with one comb, one large pin, and one small pin. The main criteria for selecting a woman as a geisha were her artistic skills and talent; most of her appeal was not based on attractiveness, but on the way she walked, talked, and dressed.

These women were trained from childhood to play instruments, sing, and dance. They needed to excel in dancing because of its importance in Japanese culture; it involved mime, the ubiquitous fans, and posturing. Geishas learned to play and sing with the *samisen* (also spelled *shamisen*), a stringed instrument imported from China that visually resembles a lute. The *samisen* became part of Japanese culture in the 1500s, and its music was composed to accompany the human voice. What made learning these skills more difficult was that the process required memorization. What you observed and heard was what you practiced until perfection.

Realism was important to Puccini in his operas, such as the Roman buildings where the acts of *Tosca* take place, the sound of early morning church bells in Rome, and the spirit of Christmas Eve in Paris in *La Bohème*. For *Madama Butterfly*, Puccini consulted both a Japanese actress, who was in Milan, and the wife of the Japanese Ambassador to Rome, who advised him on names. One name stuck, despite her objections that it was feminine and otherwise inappropriate: Prince Yamadori.

To understand and appreciate how Puccini uses music to emphasize, foreshadow, and recall events and ideas is to understand his technique of repetition. Many melodies are repeated, although

Actual souvenir items printed in 1908 on the occasion of the American Fleet’s visit to Japan.



CAROLYN MASON JONES



BILL COGAN

Left: Sandor Konya as Pinkerton and Leontyne Price as Cio-Cio-San in the 1961 production

Right: Sena Jurinac starred in the 1959 production of Madama Butterfly, one of the few times she sang the role.

not necessarily with the same orchestration or in the same act. He speeds up and slows down melodies, sometimes beyond the point of easy recognition. In that sense, his use of the orchestra is Wagnerian: Almost every motif is a theme that refers to something, or it is a melody attached to what a character says.

An important theme that refers to an object is the first music we hear. The fast-paced, scurrying Japanese melody in the strings, then woodwinds, represents the house that Pinkerton is leasing from Goro. This music continues for a while during their conversation, and it returns when Pinkerton explains his 999-year agreement to Sharpless.

Several themes refer to ideas, one of which comes at the end of Cio-Cio-San's explanation of having renounced her religion. This music is played again, fortissimo, after the interruption of her uncle, the Bonze (a Buddhist monk), and her family's renunciation of her. However, typical of Puccini's gift for modifying a motif, that same harsh music becomes quiet and romantic when Pinkerton comforts her during their first moments alone together. The final incarnation appears when Cio-Cio-San reads the words on the blade with which she will commit suicide.

The most famous is "Un bel di," Cio-Cio-San's belief and prediction that, one fine day, Pinkerton will return. The melody to which she sings "un bel di, vedremo" returns as the orchestral climax of the aria. Later, when Sharpless asks the child's name, the theme resurfaces when Cio-Cio-San says "del suo ritorno Gioia mi chiamerò"—that his name will be Joy on the day of Pinker-

ton's return. And the theme is again heard after the cannon in the harbor are fired, and she identifies his ship.

Right before the child's temporary name is revealed as Trouble, Puccini introduces the crucial melody of death when Cio-Cio-San says she would rather die than return to her former life as a geisha, singing and dancing for strangers. There are renditions for woodwinds and percussion, and full orchestra, with her declaration of "Morta!" This music will end the opera in a tragic orchestral statement with cymbals, timpani, and gong.

Another idea is established as Sharpless attempts to read Pinkerton's letter, that of waiting. With Cio-Cio-San's instruction of "Incominciate," the strings play pizzicato just as they will during the Humming Chorus that concludes the second act. In the case of the letter, we find out she has been waiting three years for Pinkerton to return, plus there is the element of waiting for Pinkerton's main message in the letter, which Sharpless never manages to reach because of her premature excitement. The peacefulness of the Humming Chorus, then, is the transition as she waits for Pinkerton to appear after arriving in port.

Aside from objects and ideas, Puccini invents three contrasting musical moods to introduce Cio-Cio-San and the Bonze, in the first act, and her child, in the second act. This is notable because Pinkerton is onstage when the curtain rises, so his theme becomes the fragments of the Star-Spangled Banner sprinkled through the opera.

Simply put, Cio-Cio-San's entrance is ravishing. The delicacy and ethereal nature of her voice and the other women's voices

soaring above the orchestra match her state of mind as the happiest woman in the world. As we hear later, the melody of the climax of her entrance matches the melody of the climax of the love duet that concludes the first act. Furthermore, the gorgeous music of that love duet is repeated in the second act when Cio-Cio-San is convinced that Pinkerton is returning because he is protecting her with safe locks on the house and when she asks Suzuki to retrieve her wedding garment.

The Bonze enters in a style reminiscent of Scarpia in *Tosca*, as his imposing demeanor and threatening music interrupt the wedding toast. And although the Bonze does not appear again, his brief harsh words of renunciation stay with Cio-Cio-San for the rest of the opera.

As for Cio-Cio-San's child, Puccini uses music that might be described as a combination of triumph, maternal pride, and anticipation because the music is rousing and emotional, and we don't quite know where it is leading until Cio-Cio-San appears in the doorway with their son. Here we have the ultimate, climactic proof that Pinkerton went as far as he could with the "temporary" marriage, making the tragedy of this opera all the greater.

His remorse finally is evident in the final minutes of the opera,

the music of which is foreshadowed in the orchestral prelude to the third act—an extended passage unusual in Puccini's operas. Dawn breaks and the story comes full-circle as Sharpless and Pinkerton try to enlist Suzuki's help with the child—a trio that quotes a passage from *La Bohème*—now that "real American wife" Kate Pinkerton is on the grounds.

Another of Puccini's gifts: Cio-Cio-San's discovery of Kate is just about the only time in the opera when a crucial element of the plot is accompanied by quiet music. The drama of this moment is underscored by the awkwardness between characters and the emptiness now pervading Cio-Cio-San's heart and life. She realizes, first with Kate and then the question of relinquishing her child, the bottom has dropped out from under her and she has nothing left.

As Cio-Cio-San says farewell to her child, a horrible task that no parent should ever have to think about, much less experience, and as the orchestra hammers out the final motif of her suicide, it is impossible not to recall her first, rapturously happy appearance and desire to be called "Madama B.F. Pinkerton." That happiness—an ecstasy of love, devotion, and finding a new beginning—is what we should remember after the final curtain falls.



LACKENBACH

Licia Albanese portrayed Cio-Cio-San in ten San Francisco Opera seasons between 1941 and 1961. She is pictured here in the 1956 production.