

Madama Butterfly ('Madam Butterfly')

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Tragedia giapponese in two acts by Giacomo Puccini to a libretto by Giuseppe Giacosa and Luigi Illica after David Belasco's play *Madame Butterfly*, itself based on John Luther Long's short story, which in turn was based partly on Pierre Loti's tale *Madame Chrysanthème*; Milan, Teatro alla Scala, 17 February 1904 (revised version, Brescia, Teatro Grande, 28 May 1904).

Cio-Cio-San [Madam Butterfly]	soprano
Suzuki <i>her maid</i>	mezzo-soprano
F. B. Pinkerton <i>Lieutenant in the United States Navy</i>	tenor
Sharpless <i>United States consul at Nagasaki</i>	baritone
Goro <i>a marriage broker</i>	tenor
Prince Yamadori	tenor
The Bonze <i>Cio-Cio-San's uncle</i>	bass
Yakuside <i>Cio-Cio-San's uncle</i>	bass
The Imperial Commissioner	bass
The Official Registrar	bass
Cio-Cio-San's mother	mezzo-soprano
The Aunt	soprano
The Cousin	soprano
Kate Pinkerton	mezzo-soprano
Dolore ('Trouble') <i>Cio-Cio-San's child</i>	silent
Cio-Cio-San's relations and friends and servants	
<i>Setting</i> Nagasaki, the beginning of the 20th century	

Puccini was seized with the subject after seeing Belasco's play performed in London in June 1900, and he immediately applied to Belasco for the rights. These, however, were not officially granted until September of the following year. In the meantime Puccini had sent a copy of Long's story to Illica, who drew up a scheme in two parts. The first, originally intended as a prologue, derived exclusively from Long and showed the wedding of Pinkerton and Cio-Cio-San (called Butterfly by her friends); the second covered the action of Belasco's play and was divided into three scenes, the first and last being set in Butterfly's house and the second in the American consulate. As Giacosa proceeded with the versification the prologue expanded into Act 1 and the first scene of the second part into Act 2, while Illica's intention of retaining Long's ending (with Butterfly's suicide interrupted by the arrival of her child and the maid Suzuki who bandaged her wounds) was overruled in favour of Belasco's final catastrophe. Not until November 1902 was the libretto complete, whereupon Puccini decided in spite of strenuous opposition from Giacosa to abolish the scene in the American consulate, and with it the contrast between a Japanese and a Western ambience desired by Illica. Instead the two remaining scenes of the second part were to be fused into a single act lasting an hour and a half. So convinced was Giacosa of the folly of this arrangement that he wanted the text of the missing scene to be printed in the libretto; but Ricordi refused. The composition was interrupted in February 1903 by a motor accident from which Puccini made a long and painful convalescence. The score was completed by December and the première fixed for February the following year with an outstanding cast: Rosina Storchio (Butterfly), Giovanni Zenatello (Pinkerton) and Giuseppe de Luca (Sharpless). The conductor was Cleofonte Campanini. Although the singers and orchestra showed much enthusiasm the first night was a disaster. Puccini was accused of plagiarism of himself and other composers. He at once withdrew the opera, and although convinced of its merits he made alterations to the score before allowing it to be performed elsewhere. He discarded several details involving Butterfly's relations in Act 1, divided the long second act into two parts separated by an interval and added the arietta 'Addio, fiorito asil' for Pinkerton. The second performance took place on 28 May that same year at the Teatro Grande, Brescia, Salomea Krusceniski replacing Rosina Storchio among the original cast. This time the opera enjoyed a triumph. Nonetheless further modifications were to follow, mainly affecting Act 1. These ended with the Paris première, which was given by the Opéra-Comique on 28 December 1906, and formed the basis of the definitive printed edition. At the suggestion of Albert Carré, the theatre director and husband of the prima donna, Puccini further softened Pinkerton's character, eliminating his more xenophobic utterances, and avoided the confrontation between Butterfly and Kate, who thus emerges as a more sympathetic character. Earlier that year, however, Ricordi had already brought out a vocal score in which many of the original passages can be found. Three of them, all from Act 1 were reinstated with Puccini's sanction for a revival at the Teatro Carcano, Milan, shortly after World War I (they were not, however, reprinted). Joachim Herz's production of *Madama Butterfly* in 1978 restored some of the original music from the autograph, and the earliest version was given complete at La Fenice in 1982 and at Leeds in 1991. Outstanding exponents of the title role have included Geraldine Farrar, Toti dal Monte (Toscanini's favourite interpreter), Victoria de los Angeles, Elizabeth Vaughan (in English), and later Renata Scotto and Mirella Freni, as well as several Japanese singers.

Synopsis

ACT 1 A hill near Nagasaki; in the foreground a Japanese house with terrace and garden



Ex.1

An orchestral fugato sets a scene of bustling activity as Goro leads Lieutenant Pinkerton out of the house, demonstrating its various appurtenances, in particular the sliding panels – so ridiculously fragile, the lieutenant thinks. The domestic staff are presented to him: a cook, and his future wife's maid, Suzuki, who at once begins to bore Pinkerton with her chatter. While Goro is reeling off the list of wedding guests, Sharpless enters out of breath, having climbed the hill from Nagasaki. A characteristic motif establishes his benign, good-humoured presence. At Goro's bidding servants bring drinks and wicker chairs for Sharpless and his host. Pinkerton explains that he has bought the house on a 99-year lease which may be terminated at a month's notice. In his solo 'Dovunque al mondo', framed by the opening strain of *The Star-Spangled Banner* (later used as a recurrent motif), Pinkerton outlines his philosophy – that of the roving 'Yankee' who takes his pleasure where he finds it ('an easy-going gospel', observes Sharpless). After sending Goro to fetch the bride, Pinkerton dilates on her charms and his own infatuation. Sharpless recollects having heard her voice when she paid a visit to the consulate. Its ring of simple sincerity touched him deeply and he hopes that Pinkerton will never hurt her. Pinkerton scoffs at his scruples, so typical of unadventurous middle age. Both drink a toast to America (*The Star-Spangled Banner* again) and, in Pinkerton's case, to the day when he will take home an American wife. Goro announces the arrival of Butterfly and her friends, heralded by the distant sound of humming female voices. As the procession draws nearer the orchestra unfolds a radiant theme that begins with a series of rising sequences, each phrase ending on a whole-tone chord, then evolves into an extended periodic melody to which an essentially pentatonic motif of Japanese origin (ex.1) forms a hushed coda. Butterfly whose voice has been heard soaring above those of the female throng, has by now appeared. She bows to the two men. Sharpless questions her about her family and background. He learns that her people were once wealthy but have since fallen on hard times, so that she has been forced to earn her living as a geisha. She is 15 years old. Sharpless repeats his warning to Pinkerton. More guests arrive, including Butterfly's mother, a Cousin, an Aunt and Uncle Yakuside,

who immediately asks for wine. Meanwhile the women exchange impressions of the bridegroom (not all of them favourable) until at a sign from Butterfly they all kowtow to Pinkerton and disperse. Butterfly shows Pinkerton her treasures and mementos, which she keeps concealed in her voluminous sleeves – a clasp a clay pipe, a girdle, a pot of rouge (which she throws away in response to Pinkerton's mocking glance) and a narrow sheath which she hurriedly carries into the house. Goro explains that it holds the dagger with which Butterfly's father killed himself by the emperor's command. Re-emerging, she produces puppets that represent the spirits of her forebears. But she adds that she has recently visited the American mission to renounce her ancestral religion and embrace that of her husband. Goro calls for silence; the Imperial Commissioner proclaims the wedding and all join in a toast to the couple's happiness, 'O Kami! O Kami!'. (At this point in the original version there was a drunken arietta for Yakuside who broke off to chastise a badly behaved child.) The festivities are interrupted by the Bonze, who bursts in denouncing Butterfly for having forsworn her faith. As her relations scatter in horror the orchestra embodies Heir curse in a whole-tone motif (ex.2). Alone with his bride Pinkerton comforts her, while Suzuki can be heard muttering her evening prayers to the gods of Japan. There follows an extended duet for the lovers ('Viene la sera') woven from several melodic threads, now rapturous, now tender and delicate. Twice the 'curse' motif intrudes, first as Butterfly recalls how her family has cast her off, then when she remembers how the most beautiful butterflies are often impaled with a pin. The duet concludes with a grandiose reprise of the theme which accompanied her first appearance.

ACT 2 Part i *Inside Butterfly's house*

Three years have gone by. Butterfly is alone with Suzuki, who is praying to the Japanese gods that her mistress's sufferings may soon end. Butterfly retorts that such gods are lazy; Pinkerton's God would soon come to her aid if only He knew where to find her. Their funds are nearly exhausted and Suzuki doubts whether Pinkerton will ever return. Furious, Butterfly reminds her how he had arranged for the consul to pay the rent, how he had put locks on the doors, and how he had promised to return 'when the robins build their nests'. In a celebrated aria ('Un bel dì vedremo') she pictures the scene of Pinkerton's return and her own joy. Goro arrives with Sharpless, who brings a letter from the lieutenant. Butterfly gives him a cordial welcome, and asks him how often the robins build their nests in America. Sharpless is evasive. Prince Yamadori enters and makes Butterfly an offer of marriage, which she mockingly rejects: she is a married woman according to the laws of America, where divorce, she says is a punishable offense. Yamadori leaves and Sharpless begins to read the letter, breaking the news that Pinkerton intends to go out of Butterfly's life for ever, but she misunderstands the letter's drift and he abandons the task. He asks what she would do if Pinkerton were never to return, and she replies that she could resume her profession as a geisha, but that she would rather die by her own hand. Sharpless angers her by advising her to accept Yamadori's offer, but then she hurries to fetch her son by Pinkerton; astonished and moved, Sharpless promises to inform the father and leaves. Suzuki drags in Goro, whom she has caught spreading slanderous rumours about the child's parentage. Butterfly threatens to kill him, then dismisses him with contempt. The harbour cannon signals the arrival of a ship. To an orchestral reprise of 'Un bel dì' Butterfly seizes a telescope and makes out the name *Abraham Lincoln* – Pinkerton's man-of-war. She and Suzuki proceed to deck the house with blossom in a duet ('Scuoti quella fronda di ciliegio'). After adorning herself 'as on our

wedding day' she, Suzuki and the child settle to a night of waiting, while an unseen chorus of wordless voices recalling the theme to which Sharpless attempted to read Pinkerton's letter, evokes the slowly fading light.

ACT 2 Part ii

An interlude, originally joined to the previous humming chorus, depicts Butterfly's restless thoughts; then, to the distant cries of the sailors the sun rises to disclose Butterfly, Suzuki and the child seated as before. Butterfly sings a lullaby and takes the boy to another room, where she quickly falls asleep. Pinkerton appears with Sharpless. Suzuki catches sight of a woman in the garden and Sharpless tells her that it is Pinkerton's wife, Kate. Their concern, he tells her, is to ensure the child a good American upbringing. He reproaches the lieutenant for his heartlessness. Pinkerton pours out his grief and remorse in the *romanza* that Puccini added for Brescia ('Addio, fiorito asil') and leaves, unable to face the bride he has betrayed. Butterfly enters, to confront Sharpless, Suzuki and Kate. When the situation is explained to her she bids them retire and return in half an hour. She takes a last farewell of her child and stabs herself behind a screen with her father's dagger. Pinkerton is heard desperately calling her name.

No other Puccini opera testifies more strongly to his ability to discern the possibilities for music drama in a trivial play performed in a language of which he hardly understood a word. In *Madama Butterfly* he and his librettists (working as always under his own direction) fleshed out Belasco's pathetic but ridiculous puppet into a genuine figure of tragedy who proceeds during the action from child-like innocence to an adult understanding and a calm acceptance of the destiny which her code of honour enjoins upon her. Butterfly is the apotheosis of the frail suffering heroine so often encountered in Puccini's gallery; and he would return to her only once more in the slave-girl Liù in *Turandot*.



Ex.2

By making use of at least seven Japanese folk melodies the composer both evoked the Far Eastern ambience and enlarged his musical vocabulary, since every one of them is assimilated into his own personal and by now highly sophisticated style. The scale of musical thought is likewise grander than ever before, the love duet in Act 1 being the longest and most elaborate that Puccini ever wrote. Though the organization remains for the most part motivic the motifs are no longer always referential in the Wagnerian manner. Ex.2, as already mentioned, is not always associated with the Bonze, while ex.1 receives its fullest treatment where Butterfly tells Pinkerton about her visit to the American

mission in order to embrace her husband's religion ('Io seguo il mio destino') - an event that has no bearing on the theme's first appearance. In his later operas Puccini tended more and more to use motifs without hard and fast associations.