

# Madama Butterfly

Music by Giacomo Puccini  
Libretto by Giuseppe Giacosa and Luigi Illica

## Study Guide to the Opera

Images: Cover of the 1903 edition of Long's *Madame Butterfly*, artwork by C. Yamall Abbott, published in *Century Magazine* in 1898 • Blanche Bates in Belasco's play *Madame Butterfly*, artwork by Sigismund Ivanowski, published in *Century Magazine* in 1900 • Ar-nouveaux poster by Leopoldo Mellicovitz for the 1904 world premiere of Puccini's *Madama Butterfly* • 2023 Cincinnati Opera production photo by Philip Groshong

## The Evolution of an Opera Story

by Jill Leahy

In 1887, French novelist Pierre Loti published *Madame Chrysanthème*, a semi-autobiographical journal of a naval officer who married a geisha while he was stationed in Nagasaki, Japan. The popular **novel** was translated into many languages and influenced how westerners viewed Japan in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. *Madame Chrysanthème*, transformed into an **opera** by the

French composer André Messager, premiered in Paris in 1893 and was widely performed for years.

Around this time, American lawyer John Luther Long wrote a **short story** based on his sister's recollections of her time in Japan with her missionary husband. Long was probably familiar with Loti's work and may have included some details in the novella titled *Madame Butterfly*, which was first published in 1898 in the popular quarterly *Century Magazine*. Long asked David Belasco, a famous producer/playwright, to transform the story into a **play**. It premiered in New York in 1900. Historians note that when Giacomo Puccini saw the drama in London later that year, even though he didn't understand English, he believed that the story and tragic female character would work perfectly for his style of opera.

Working with librettists Luigi Illica and Giuseppe Giacosa, Puccini used Long's novella, Belasco's play, and perhaps some of Loti's journal to create what he considered one of his "best and technically advanced operas." However, at *Madama Butterfly's* premiere in Milan in February 1904, the audience showed its dissatisfaction loudly and the **opera** was deemed a fiasco. Puccini reworked the entire score and *Madama Butterfly* opened to success in Brescia in May 1904; the enthusiastic throng commanded that Puccini appear in front of the curtain ten times.

There are differences in the characters in each of these evolutions. John Luther Long wrote: *"The people read it, and said and wrote things about it—some good, some bad. But, happily, they who liked Cho-Cho-San were more than they who did not; and so she laughed and wept her way into some pretty hard hearts, and lived—not entirely in vain. And then she went upon the stage and made Miss Bates and herself so famous that we had to write a bigger play for them. And they beckoned for her across the sea, where, in London, Signore Puccini saw her, and when she comes back she will be a song! Sad, sad indeed, but yet a song!"*

Fast forward to 2023, when Cincinnati Opera premiered an innovative production of *Madama Butterfly*, created by an all-Japanese and Japanese American creative team. Butterfly's story is transported to a fantastical modern-day realm where reality and dreams intersect through **virtual reality**. *Madama Butterfly's* story has evolved and been reimagined throughout the decades, but the faithful geisha continues to tug at our heartstrings.



## Madama Butterfly Synopsis

**ACT I** In the present day, B.F. Pinkerton enters his apartment and dons a VR headset to escape into a fantasy. Within moments, he rejoins a game that transports him to Nagasaki, where he embodies his avatar as a U.S. Navy lieutenant. He inspects a house that he will occupy with his young bride, Cio-Cio-San (a.k.a. Madame Butterfly). Sharpless, the U.S. Consul, arrives, and Pinkerton shares his vision of a sailor in search of pleasure and the beautiful Japanese girl who has captivated him (**Dovunque al mondo**). Sharpless tries to warn him of this view, but Pinkerton laughs, toasting the American girl who will someday be his “real” wife.

Cincinnati Opera production photo by Philip Groszhong.



Butterfly, her colleagues, and family arrive for the wedding (**Ancora un passo or via**). She tells Pinkerton that since her father’s death, she now earns her living as a geisha (**Vieni, amor mio**). She also has secretly converted to Christianity. The Imperial Commissioner performs the marriage ceremony. Then, Cio-Cio-San’s uncle, the Bonze, bursts in. He curses her, inciting the crowd. Protecting Butterfly, Pinkerton orders the guests away. Butterfly weeps and her new husband consoles her (**Viene la sera**). As night falls in this pleasure fantasy, the lovers share a moonlit duet (**Vogliateme bene, un bene piccolino**).

Intermission

**ACT II** Three years later, modern-day Pinkerton and his American wife have grown distant. His only means of escape is through gaming, where he can manipulate his Japanese bride’s future. In the virtual world, Cio-Cio-San patiently waits for him. Her servant Suzuki implores the gods for aid (**E Izaghi ed Izanami**), but Butterfly bids her to have faith—one day, Pinkerton will return and embrace his wife again (**Un bel dì vedremo**).

Sharpless enters with a letter telling of Pinkerton’s marriage to an American (**Ora a noi**). Before he can tell Butterfly, Goro interrupts along with a suitor, Prince Yamadori. Cio-Cio-San refuses his marriage proposal. She brings forth her young son, Trouble, and insists that as soon as Pinkerton knows of him, he will return. If not, she would rather die.

A cannon roars from the harbor, and Butterfly discovers Pinkerton’s ship coming into port. She and Suzuki strew the house with blossoms (**Flower Duet: Una nave de guerra**). As evening falls, she prepares to keep vigil through the night (**Humming Chorus: Coro a bocca chiusa**).

Modern-day Pinkerton turns off the game and goes to bed. In the middle of the night, the game turns on, luring him back to play the next level, where he chooses how he will impact Butterfly’s destiny. Pinkerton chooses an American wife avatar, Kate. As the level continues, Butterfly still waits, though Suzuki persuades her to rest. Soon, Sharpless, Pinkerton and Kate arrive. Suzuki realizes who the woman is and reluctantly agrees to inform Butterfly. Pinkerton, now aware of Butterfly’s devotion, bids an anguished farewell and rushes away (**Addio, fiorito asil**). Cio-Cio-San hurries in expecting to find her husband, and instead finds Kate. She instantly guesses the truth and touchingly wishes Kate happiness. She says that Pinkerton may have his son if he will return for him.

Butterfly orders Suzuki and Trouble away. She has no choice but to escape this nightmare, and she pulls out the dagger with which her father committed ritual suicide. As she raises the blade to her throat, Trouble appears. Cio-Cio-San drops the knife and embraces him. She then blindfolds him, takes the dagger, and stabs herself (**Con onor muore**). As the fantasy dies, Pinkerton desperately tries to hold onto his creation, Butterfly.

Adapted from Cincinnati Opera

## Characters

**Cio-Cio-San** (*Madama Butterfly*)  
[choh-choh-SAHN] *soprano*  
A 15-year-old geisha who marries Pinkerton. Their son is called Sorrow, Trouble, or Dolore [doh-LOH-reh].

**Benjamin Franklin Pinkerton** *tenor*  
A lieutenant in the U.S. navy who marries Cio-Cio-San during his time in Nagasaki. He promises he will return to her "when the robins nest".

**Trouble**  
Son of Cio-Cio-San and Pinkerton.

**Suzuki** *mezzo-soprano*  
[soo-ZOO-kee]  
Butterfly's faithful servant and friend.

**Sharpless** *baritone*  
U.S. Consul at Nagasaki and friend of Pinkerton who warns him about the seriousness of marrying Cio-Cio-San.

**Goro** [GOH-roh] *tenor*  
Arranges a marriage between Pinkerton and Cio-Cio-San.

**Bonze** *bass*  
(**Bonzo**) [BOHN-zoh]  
Butterfly's uncle, a Buddhist priest who curses her for renouncing Buddhism, the faith of their ancestors.

**Kate Pinkerton** *mezzo-soprano*  
B. F. Pinkerton's American wife.

**Prince Yamadori** *baritone*  
[yah-mah-DOH-ree]  
A wealthy prince who wishes to marry Cio-Cio-San.

Imperial Commissioner  
Yakuside  
The Official Registrar  
Relatives and servants

## *Madama Butterfly* Orchestration

Flutes, piccolo, oboes, English horn, clarinets, bass clarinet, bassoons, French horns, trumpets, trombones, bass trombone, timpani, cymbals, triangle, snare drum, bass drum, bells, tam-tam, Japanese gong, Japanese Bells, and keyboard glockenspiel.

Onstage instruments: little bell, tubular bells, viola d'amore, bird whistles, tam-tam, bass tam-tam, harp, and strings.

## Puccini's Famous *Fiasco*

by Jill Leahy

**Giacomo Puccini** bequeathed us a magnificent musical legacy, despite the fact that many events during his lifetime didn't go his way. None of his later operas was an immediate success, including *La bohème* (1896), *Tosca* (1900), *Madama Butterfly* (1904), and *Turandot* (left unfinished when he died in 1924). *La bohème* met with mixed reviews, while *Tosca*, though liked by audiences, was panned by critics. But the most often reported and most richly described fiasco was associated with the premiere of *Madama Butterfly* at La Scala theater in Milan in February 1904.



Giacomo Antonio  
Domenico Michele  
Secondo Maria **Puccini**  
(1858—1924)

Music historians Chadwick Jenkins and John Rizzo describe the scene: *19<sup>th</sup>-century Italian opera patrons took opera very seriously. Audiences were very familiar with the works of major composers and had high expectations for new operas. When audience members didn't like something, they expressed their feelings then and there—no waiting for published reviews. Also it was common for an organized body of professional applauders or detractors, known as a **claque**, to be hired to attend performances. That's the speculation about what happened at the sold-out premiere.*

Giuseppe Verdi coined the word **fiasco** to describe a complete failure, especially a ludicrous or humiliating one. In mid 19<sup>th</sup>-century Italian, the phrase *fare fiasco* meant "to make a bottle," which took on the meaning "to fail in a performance."

*The trouble began that evening at Butterfly's entrance. Some audience members shouted, "That's from Bohème!" Things were not helped either when a gust of air caused the prima donna's skirt to billow up, provoking a cry of "Butterfly is pregnant!" Puccini's "Humming Chorus" provided another opportunity for buffoonery. In an attempt to outdo Belasco's intense realism, the opera's producer placed performers with bird-whistles throughout the opera house to accompany the dawn after Butterfly's sleepless night. Unwilling to allow such a boon to pass unnoticed, the audience joined in with various animal sounds of their own, reducing the poetic gesture to lunacy.*

Small wonder that Puccini closed the production, returned his fee, and reworked the score again and again, for Brescia, New York, and Paris. The fifth and final version is known as the "standard version" and is the one that's most often performed. *Madama Butterfly* is now one of the ten most-performed operas worldwide and has been produced at Pittsburgh Opera 18 times.

# Fascination with Japanese Culture

After Commodore Matthew Perry negotiated a treaty to open Japan to the west in 1854, interest in Japan blossomed in Europe and America. Puccini's *Madama Butterfly* provides opportunities to learn about Japanese culture and customs.



**Bonsai** [Japanese: literally "potted plant"] is the art of aesthetic miniaturization of trees by growing them in containers.



**Butterflies** are seen as symbols of transformation and rebirth. Their metamorphosis from caterpillar to butterfly represents personal growth, change, and the cyclical nature of life.



**Calligraphy**, the art of writing characters on paper with brush and ink, is known as *shodo* [literally meaning the "way of writing"].



**Geisha** are professional entertainers who attend to guests during meals, banquets, and other occasions. Geisha are trained in dance, music, and games, as well as in the art of communication.



**Instruments** used in traditional Japanese folk music include strings (*koto*, *kugo*, *biwa*, *shamisen*, *kokyū*), winds (*fue*, *shakuhachi*, *hocchiku*), and a variety of percussion instruments.



**Kabuki** [Ka (singing); bu (dancing); ki (art)] is a form of traditional Japanese theater known for the stylization of its drama and for the elaborate make-up worn by its performers.



**Kimono** is a traditional garment worn by men, women, and children. Kimono literally means a "thing to wear" [*ki* "wear" and *mono* "thing"]. They are wrapped around the body, with the left side over the right (except when dressing the dead for burial) and secured by an obi.



**Noh** or *Nōgaku* is a form of classic Japanese musical drama that has been performed since the 14<sup>th</sup> century. By tradition, Noh musicians and actors never rehearse for performances together.



**Origami** [*ori* meaning "folding", and *kami* meaning "paper"] is the ancient art of Japanese paper folding, transforming a flat square sheet of paper into a finished sculpture through folding.



**Seppuku** is a form of male Japanese ritual suicide, originally reserved as an honorable way for a samurai to die. The concept of dying with honor is different from views on suicide that have been influenced by religions and the meaning of life.



**Tea ceremony** [*chadō* or *sadō*, "the way of tea"] is a traditional ritual influenced by Zen Buddhism. Powdered green tea, or *matcha*, is ceremonially prepared by a skilled practitioner and served to a small group of guests in a tranquil setting.

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