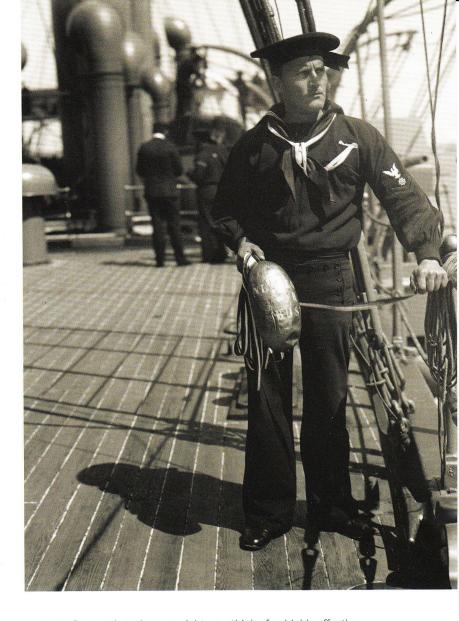# Madama Butterfly

David Kettle

The US magazine for opera connoisseurs *Opera News* ran a poll a few years ago, asking readers to vote for both their favourite and least favourite operas. Puccini's *Madama Butterfly*, surprisingly, came near the top in both categories. It's clearly an opera that you either love or hate.

In some ways, it's entirely understandable that *Madama Butterfly*'s tragic (some might say melodramatic) tale of callously spurned love, not to mention the sheer popularity that the opera has found with audiences worldwide, might make some feel slightly queasy. But likewise, there's no denying that in Cio-Cio San, *Madama Butterfly* holds one of the truly iconic roles in all opera. And despite its dark underlying themes of cultural and sexual imperialism, Puccini's emotionally charged work remains at heart a story about people — people that Puccini was determined to put forward as complex, rounded characters through some of the most subtle, expressive music he created.

The opera's origins lie in a turbulent time following the successful but stressful premiere of Puccini's *Tosca* in 1900. Eager not to expect audiences to wait too long for his next offering, the composer immediately began an exhaustive search for a storyline for what would be his sixth opera. Among the texts under consideration were Maeterlinck's *Pelléas et Mélisande* (although Puccini was aware that Debussy was already working on an operatic treatment), Victor Hugo's *Les misérables* and Dostoyevsky's *From the House of the Dead* (later transformed by Janáček into his final opera). Puccini was even mulling over a work based around the life of Marie Antoinette, suggested by his publisher Giulio Ricordi.

In London for the Covent Garden premiere of *Tosca* in June 1900, Puccini was taken by friends to see a play by the US director and producer David Belasco at the Duke of York's Theatre. It's questionable how much of the text of Belasco's *Madame Butterfly* he actually understood, but the work clearly had a profound effect. According to Belasco, Puccini burst into the green room after the performance, demanding operatic rights to the play. 'I agreed at once,' wrote Belasco in an autobiographical article in *Harper's Magazine*, 'and told him he could do anything he liked with the play, and make any sort of contract, because it is not possible to discuss business arrangements with an impulsive Italian who has tears in his eyes and both arms around your neck.'

Belasco, it has to be said, might not be the most reliable of sources. And the plays he produced were hardly considered high art — he'd gained

notoriety for creating what we might now think of as highly effective but insubstantial pot-boilers. Yet he was a hugely influential figure, known especially for the striking stage effects and lighting that gave his productions an almost cinematic realism. Another Belasco production, *The Girl of the Golden West*, went on to become Puccini's *La fanciulla del West* in 1910. And his *Madame Butterfly* had clearly captured Puccini's imagination.

The opera's true origins, however, go back further than that. Belasco had based his play on an 18-page novella by the Philadelphia lawyer and amateur writer John Luther Long, which first appeared in the January 1898 issue of *Century Illustrated* magazine. Long claimed that his story was in turn based on incidents related to him by his sister Jennie, the wife of a Methodist Episcopal missionary stationed in Nagasaki, who had told him the tale of a poor tea-house girl called Cho-San cruelly abandoned

Above: On board the USS *Raleigh* by Edward H Hart, fl. 1890.

by her Western lover. But it's hardly conceivable that Long wouldn't have been aware of the famous French novel *Madame Chrysanthème* of 1887 by Pierre Loti, a freely autobiographical work based on Loti's experiences as a naval officer who takes a temporary Japanese wife, a geisha, while stationed in Japan. (In fact, Loti wrote a series of novels based around his naval experiences – Délibes' *Lakmé* is based on his book *Le mariage de Loti*.)

So, Puccini had seen a play, based on a novella, based on a novel (probably), which in turn was almost certainly based on fact. For temporary wives were an astonishingly (and shockingly) widespread phenomenon in Japan at the end of the 19th century, when the country suddenly opened up to foreign contact following more than two centuries of effective isolation. In July 1853, Commodore Matthew Perry of the US Navy had sailed into Yokohama bay – together with four heavily armed warships – to persuade the Japanese shogunate to establish diplomatic and commercial relations with the US. The result was the Treaty of Kanagawa of 1854, under which Japan opened its ports to foreign trade – and those trading ships were often accompanied by US Navy vessels, sent as a gesture of intimidation to counter any continuing reluctance within the Japanese government. On those naval ships, perhaps moored for months in Nagasaki, one of the few Japanese ports open to Western ships, were officers who had no reluctance in taking advantage of the amenities that the country had to offer.

It's not clear to what extent Puccini was aware of the play's possible origins in fact. But once the contract allowing him to use Belasco's play was signed in September 1901, the composer's regular collaborators, Luigi Illica and Giuseppe Giacosa, immediately began work on the libretto, Illica planning the structure and drafting dialogue, then Giacosa polishing the text (as they had previously done with *La bohème* and *Tosca*). It wasn't straightforward: Illica had to wait several months before receiving an Italian translation of Belasco's play script, so was forced to begin work using only Long's novella, only incorporating details from the stage version so beloved of Puccini into the opera's second Act – and also adding material from Loti's *Madame Chrysanthème* throughout (including the character of the Bonze, Butterfly's vengeful uncle).

Nor was Puccini's work on the music straightforward, and it suffered a serious setback when the composer was involved in a road accident. His beloved automobile skidded off the road on a foggy February night near his home town of Lucca and plummeted several metres down an embankment. Trapped under the vehicle, Puccini suffered a compound fracture of his right shin bone, which left him with a serious limp, and it was two years before he could walk unaided.

In the end, and despite the composer's eagerness to begin work on his new opera, it took nearly three years to bring Puccini's vision of the

Butterfly story to the stage. As its turbulent premiere at La Scala, Milan, in February 1904 displayed, it was everything that his detractors dreaded — and everything that today's audiences, whether they love or hate it, can't fail to be moved by: full of glorious, heart-rending melody; possessed of a raw and unforgiving emotional directness; and devastatingly effective.

WHAT TO LISTEN OUT FOR

Right from the start, Puccini was determined to incorporate authentic Japanese musical elements into his score, and to that end he consulted both a Japanese actress who happened to be in Milan at the time, and the wife of the Japanese ambassador to Rome, a Mrs Oyama, who supplied him with many of the Japanese melodies he employed. (He may even have used Gilbert and Sullivan's *The Mikado* as a source — there's a copy of the score in his library with an Italian translation of two of its numbers in Puccini's hand.)

Admittedly, he took liberties in creating his own sonic image of Japan, using whole-tone and pentatonic scales to conjure a somewhat generically oriental sound world. But there are also as many as a dozen authentic Japanese melodies threaded through the score, notably in the use of the Japanese national anthem *Kimi ga yo* to announce the arrival of the Imperial Commissioner before Cio-Cio San and Pinkerton's wedding.

Above: A newly graduated ensign saying goodbye to his fiancée at the Naval Academy, Annapolis, Maryland, 6 June 1929.

Puccini was equally keen, however, to paint a vivid sound picture of the West — and a bright, brash, confident one that stands in stark contrast to the tender, fragile sounds he uses to portray Japan. He illustrates Pinkerton's vocal lines with occasional snatches of *The Star-Spangled Banner* (at the time of composition the US Navy's anthem — it only became the country's national anthem in 1931), and the frenetic counterpoint with which he opens the opera seems to suggest the heartless business transaction that's about to take place.

Yet Puccini employs his Japanese and Western sound evocations to make some telling points. Butterfly seems to want to confirm her supposedly American status in singing a very Western-sounding 'Un bel dì', the opera's big aria, but she reveals her Japanese sensibilities with a distinctive whole-tone, oriental-sounding phrase on the words 's'avvia per la collina' ('he's setting out for our hilltop') — lusciously harmonised by Puccini, of course.

The opera's other most famous segment is the Humming Chorus, which guides us through the night before Pinkerton's return with only wordless singing and pizzicato strings. In his stage production, Belasco achieved a *coup de théâtre* at this point with a 14-minute silent vigil, simply using slowly changing lighting effects, in which Butterfly waits for Pinkerton. Puccini's four-minute version doesn't test the patience quite as much, but nevertheless indicates his desire to integrate his music closely into

Above: Citizens of Yokohama boarding the SS *Manchuria*, 1905.

the staging and lighting design – as do the detailed stage instructions he writes in the score at this point. Likewise, the strident orchestral prelude that comes immediately afterwards, rather than describing the hopes of a glowing dawn, seems directed at the audience, with the intention of waking them up after the nocturnal vigil, setting the scene for the final section in which Butterfly must face the horrible truth.

Even the opera's explosive final chord tells a story. Puccini seems to be heading towards a dark and resolute B minor for his cataclysmic ending, then unexpectedly adds the foreign note G to the harmony, not only mirroring the opera's shocking conclusion, but also indicating that the tragedy is far from over – as Butterfly's young son is taken away to an unpredictable future in America.

RECOMMENDED RECORDINGS

Antonio Pappano; Gheorghiu, Kaufmann, Shkosa, Capitanucci, Orchestra and Chorus of the Accademia Nazionale di Santa Cecilia (Warner Classics)
A hugely passionate, driven account from Antonio Pappano, big on drama in its thrilling climaxes, yet with some magical quieter moments, too – the famous Humming Chorus, for example, is smooth as velvet. Angela Gheorghiu makes a surprisingly mature, self-aware Butterfly, but she's no less effective for that, and Jonas Kaufmann bristles with energy as a cold-hearted Pinkerton.

John Barbirolli; Scotto, Bergonzi, Panerai, di Stasio, Rome Opera House Chorus and Orchestra (EMI)
Barbirolli's warm affection for Puccini's score shines through in this classic recording from 1966. The rather boxed-in sound quality might not always match today's standards, but with Barbirolli's beautifully sculpted phrasing and tiny yet telling details, that hardly matters. Renata Scotto is touching and thoughtful in the title role, and Carlo Bergonzi brings a stylish swagger to Pinkerton.

Herbert von Karajan; Freni, Pavarotti, Kerns, Ludwig, Vienna State Opera Chorus, Vienna Philharmonic Orchestra (Decca)
It's Mirella Freni's fresh, youthful Butterfly who really stands out in this 1974 recording – and the vulnerability she brings to the role makes Karajan's rich account all the more poignant. Luciano Pavarotti's Pinkerton, interestingly, is the most emotionally complex, even endearing of the three selected here – and delivered with superb technical facility. The Vienna Philharmonic's playing is simply glorious.

David Kettle is a music critic for *The Scotsman* and *The Telegraph*, and he has written about music for a broad range of publications including *Classical Music*, *The Strad*, *The Times* and *BBC Music Magazine*.