

Puccini's *Madama Butterfly*

Puccini wrote three operas with American connections: *Madama Butterfly*'s protagonist, Lt. B.F.



Pinkerton was an American Naval Officer; *La Fanciulla del West* (*Girl of the Golden West*) was set in California during the 1849 Gold Rush; and *Manon Lescaut* had its third act set in the "deserts of Louisiana". Here we'll talk a little about *Butterfly*.

In 1900, Puccini was in London where he attended a performance of the play *Madame Butterfly* by David Belasco. Although Puccini was not fluent in English, he was nevertheless very much taken with the play and applied to Belasco for the rights to use it as the source of an opera.

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David Belasco was an American playwright, producer and impresario in New York's Broadway



Theater world. Between 1884 and 1930, he either wrote, directed or produced over 100 Broadway plays and was one of the most powerful people in the Broadway theater scene. Belasco was born in San Francisco in 1853 to a family of Sephardic Jews who had moved from London to San Francisco. He began his theater career in San Francisco and Nevada, working in a variety of theater-related jobs. Then, in 1882, he moved to New York working as a stage manager and then a playwright. His writing was so successful that by 1895 he was able to

set himself up as an independent producer. He is remembered today by the Belasco Theater on W44th Street that he founded in 1907 and remains today as one of the finest in the Broadway Theater District.

Belasco wrote his *Madame Butterfly: A Tragedy of Japan* as a one-act play. Belasco both wrote and produced the play and it eventually became one of his most famous works. It premiered in New York in March of 1900 and then played in London that same year, where Puccini saw it.

Belasco's play is derived from *Madame Butterfly*, a short story, by John Luther Long, published in



1898 in a monthly magazine called *Century Magazine*. John Luther Long, born in Pennsylvania in 1862, was a lawyer as well as a playwright and author. As an author, he once described himself as "a sentimentalist, and a feminist and proud of it", sentiments which are evidenced in the story. In Long's story, unlike Belasco's and Puccini's version, our heroine, (here spelled "Cho-Cho-San") survives her unsuccessful suicide attempt and leaves with her baby, presumably taking up Prince Yamadori's offer. The last words of Long's version are, "When Mrs. Pinkerton [Pinkerton's American wife] called next day at the little house on Higashi Hill it was quite empty."

Long's sister was married to a Methodist missionary who was serving in Japan. Long's short story was based on various accounts of Japan contained in letters from his sister. The story was also influenced by a novel of 1887, *Madame Chrysanthème*, by French author, Pierre Loti. It may be worth noting that *Century Magazine* was strongly oriented toward Evangelical Protestantism, and clearly the editors of the magazine considered the story appropriate to their outlook.

Long died in 1927 at the age of 66, having spent the last months of his life at the Clifton Springs Sanitarium in Clifton Springs, about 25 miles from Rochester. The Sanitarium has been long closed,

but its remarkable building was preserved and is listed in National Register of Historic Places. The structure now serves as a senior citizens apartment building.

Pierre Loti, pseudonym of Louis Marie-Julien Viaud, was a French naval officer and novelist, known for his exotic novels and short stories. He was born in 1859 in Rochefort in south-west France, and died in 1923. He joined the French Navy at age 17 and traveled to the South Seas as part of his naval training. After leaving the Navy, he began a literary career characterized by romantic stories set in exotic locations. In 1887 he published *Madame Chrysanthème*, a combination of narrative and travelogue. This novel of Japanese manners was a precursor to Long's *Madame Butterfly* and Puccini's *Madama Butterfly*.



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After Puccini saw Belasco's *Madame Butterfly* in London in 1900, while waiting for the rights from Belasco, he sent a copy of Long's short story to Luigi Illica, one of his frequent librettists. Illica and Giuseppe Giacosa, another frequent collaborator, proceeded to put together the libretto. Puccini completed the score in 1904 and the opera premiered at La Scala. The premiere was not a success and Puccini revised it five more times; the final version, the one that has become the standard today, premiered at the Teatro Carcano in Milan in 1920.

Madama Butterfly has gone on to become one of the favorite operas in the repertoire. According to OperaBase, it was the sixth most often performed title worldwide during the 2018-2019 season (tied with Puccini's *Tosca*), having been performed 522 times. The New York Metropolitan reports that it has been performed there 881 times since its US Premiere in 1907. It's always an audience favorite and any opera company can be sure of filling the house with *Butterfly*. *Madama Butterfly* was Puccini's sixth opera, written after *La bohème* (1896) and *Tosca* (1900) and before *La Fanciulla del West* (1910).

Still, it has its faults and its critics. Sir Denis Forman, in his admirable guide, *A Night at the Opera*, remarks

"It has its weaknesses. In the first act, *Butterfly*'s little-girlishness begins to get tiresome and indeed one wonders whether she is not seriously mentally retarded . . . But the main drawback is that Puccini's Japan is seen as a tragicomic Third World Country where funny little people have quaint little customs. . . "

He adds,

"Musically *Butterfly* tends to move in fits and starts; gone are the long gloriously unfolding melodies of *Bohème* and *Tosca*, and although always easy on the ear, there is not much in *Butterfly* that is easy to whistle."

Nevertheless, Sir Denis ends up awarding *Butterfly* a rating of "alpha", his second highest (after "alpha plus"). And so shall we.

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