

Puccini's *Madama Butterfly*

Carol Crocca

In 1900 Puccini was in London and he went to the theater. The consummate dramatist, he was always looking for opera material, often exotic, which told its story clearly and directly. He neither spoke nor understood English, but was deeply impressed by the play about the very young geisha girl's (sham) marriage to an American naval officer.

The play was by David Belasco, who was also a director, and one of the first to exploit the new science of theatrical lighting. Especially affecting to Puccini and the whole audience was the "vigil" scene at the end of Act II, Part 1, during which Cio-cio-san, (who is Butterfly, "Farfalle" in Italian) awaits the return of Pinkerton. It depicts nightfall over Nagasaki, the emergence of the lights of the city, and the sunrise. This scene Puccini included in the opera, accompanied by the famous "Humming Chorus." It and the preceding "Flower Duet" of Butterfly and Suzuki, provide some beautiful moments of lyric relief before the tragic denouement.

Puccini returned to his home in Torre del Lago after the London visit and worked on the opera. His life was complicated by yet another amorous affair, and then an automobile accident. During his convalescence he was persuaded to renounce his new lover and marry Elvira, his domestic partner and the mother of his children, who was soon to be free because her husband had died. Not long after the wedding, he went to Milan in February, 1904 for the premiere of Butterfly.

Preparations had seemed to go well, but the fiasco that ensued was one of the worst ever witnessed at La Scala. From the beginning the audience was unreceptive and there were boos and catcalls. During the vigil scene, accompanied by birdsong at sunrise as it was in the play, the audience responded with its own bird sounds and crowing, and capped these at the end with actual mooing. An American audience of today must find it difficult to comprehend the passion, exuberance and creativity with which Italians applauded or derided their operas.

But opera was the Italian national pastime and the Italians had an international reputation to uphold. Perhaps after the epic works of Verdi, Puccini was seen as treating, in the verismo and more modern tradition of finding serious drama in the lives of ordinary people, subjects too sentimental and un-heroic. Or perhaps there was the all-too-common response orchestrated by a jealous rival or rivals (Mascagni?). Puccini overshadowed many of his contemporary fellow composers, and the competing music publisher, House of Sonzogno, sometimes blamed this on the dominance of its rival, Puccini's publisher, the House of Ricordi, over the Italian musical establishment.

Whatever the cause, said wealthy House of Ricordi compensated La Scala for the cancellation of further performances, and bought up copies of the already-distributed piano-vocal score.

Puccini and his librettists sat down to revise. (It was only the first of several rounds, and the opera, like others of Puccini, has several versions.) It was produced only a few months later in Brescia, a smaller city, but near Milan, where it was a resounding success. A triumph in Paris in 1905 (more revisions) cemented its reputation.

There are those who find Butterfly's naiveté and Pinkerton's caddishness hard to stomach. Is it because our anti-hero is American? Perhaps, but for the most part, this merely illustrates the obvious facts that our tastes are subjective and our suspension of disbelief, already strained in most opera, relative. I find both Butterfly (who is fifteen) and Pinkerton believable, and the tragedy determined by the situation.

Throughout the opera, themes from Japanese music represent the intrusion of reality on Butterfly's romantic fantasy. It is hard to accept Butterfly's relinquishment of her child, but consider: there was widespread cultural rejection in her country of those not 100% Japanese. And, although suicide is not considered honorable in our culture, the motto on her father's sword is "Let him die with honor who cannot preserve honor in life."

Reference: Berger, William, Puccini Without Excuses, Random House, NY, 2005

Carol Crocca, for the Opera Guild of Rochester