MADA

by Jay Reise

The music of late Romantic composers such as Puccini is often condemned by "progressives" as old-fashioned and sentimental. As George R. Marek described the situation in 1951, "The sweetness of (Puccini's) music repels those who look for sterner stuff in their operatic experiences and who miss in Puccini the digging in search of the roots of suffering (*Puccini as Man and Musician,* Simon & Schuster, p. 321)." That this music has been most in demand by concert audiences ever since it was composed has made the situation worse, because its early public success resulted in its musical formulas and components being used for popular purposes. By the 1950's, film and television had so commercialized tonal music in general and Romantic chromaticism in particular that a good deal of Puccini's music, as well as much of the early 20th-Century repertoire, had become tainted in the minds of many who considered themselves sophisticates.

The popularity of Puccini has only increased with the decades. Legend has it that the Opera Company of Philadelphia's Emmy Award-winning television broadcast of *La Bohème* in 1982, with Luciano Pavarotti, was seen by more people than all of the *Bohème* audiences of the past combined. *Madama Butterfly* continues to be one of the all-time operatic best-sellers. Many of today's opera companies report that while they seek to be innovative with new works, local premieres and new productions, it is always the *Toscas* and *Butterflys* that sell out before the box office opens. One could argue that this phenomenon may be due to a certain kind of social pressure, where it is more desirable to say that you saw *Madama Butterfly* last night rather than, say, *Erwartung.* But it is to the glorious sensuality of Puccini's music that audiences ultimately return over and over again, as they are clearly addicted to the cathartic highs experienced in such moments as the great love-duets between Pinkerton and Butterfly, Mimi and Rodolfo, Tosca and Cavaradossi.

While Puccini's last opera, *Turandot,* is generally considered to have his most advanced or progressive music, it seems that *Madama Butterfly* has his most modern plot. An opera libretto concerning inter-racial marriage and colonial exploitation is strikingly relevant in today's world.

The original story "Madame Butterfly" was written by John Luther Long, a Philadelphia lawyer, and was published in the American *Century Magazine* in 1898. David Belasco, an American playwright/producer and showman *extraordinaire,* first mounted his play based on Long's story in 1900. Puccini saw the play in London when he was there for a production of *Tosca.* Amazing as it may seem, he did not understand English, but the basic plot and vivid iconography immediately so engaged his imagination, that he enthusiastically sought the operatic rights, which, after

Searching for the Roots of

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some protracted negotiations with the Belasco publishers, he succeeded in obtaining. (One cannot help but imagine that the then famous Belasco might have been less of a hold-out had he known that his name would be remembered in 1991 only in connection with the libretti of *Madama Butterfly* and *La Fanciulla del West.*) Puccini engaged Luigi Illica and Giuseppe Giacosa to write the libretto. The sensitivity and moral depth expressed by all of the five artists who shaped the story, play, libretto and opera are quite extraordinary, all the more since they were writing in an era that was seemingly less enlightened and sensitive over racial issues than we hope our own is.

Much has been written on *Madama Butterfly* as a metaphor for American colonial exploitation. But the social portrait of Japan drawn by Puccini and his librettists is equally fascinating, however, because it plainly reveals the exploitation of Cio-Cio-San in her own society. Cio-Cio-San is a *geisha,* a composite Japanese word from *gei* which means person, and *sha* which translates as art: thus, a person of the arts or an entertainer. The *geishas* were not necessarily courtesans, but Cio-Cio-San, in the Belasco play, apparently was:

> ***Pinkerton:*** *. . . I said to myself '. . . by this time she's ringing your gold pieces to make sure they're good.''' You know that class of Japanese girl . . .'*

Goro, the marriage broker, is clearly a pimp in the style of Rodrigo in Berg's *Lulu,* for it was he who arranged the annullable marriage contract between Pinkerton and Butterfly before the opening of the opera. Pinkerton is an American sailor who has apparently taken himself to the red-light district of Nagasaki, a counterpart to the famous Yoshiwara district of Tokyo. Legend had it that customers were forbidden to bring their weapons into such

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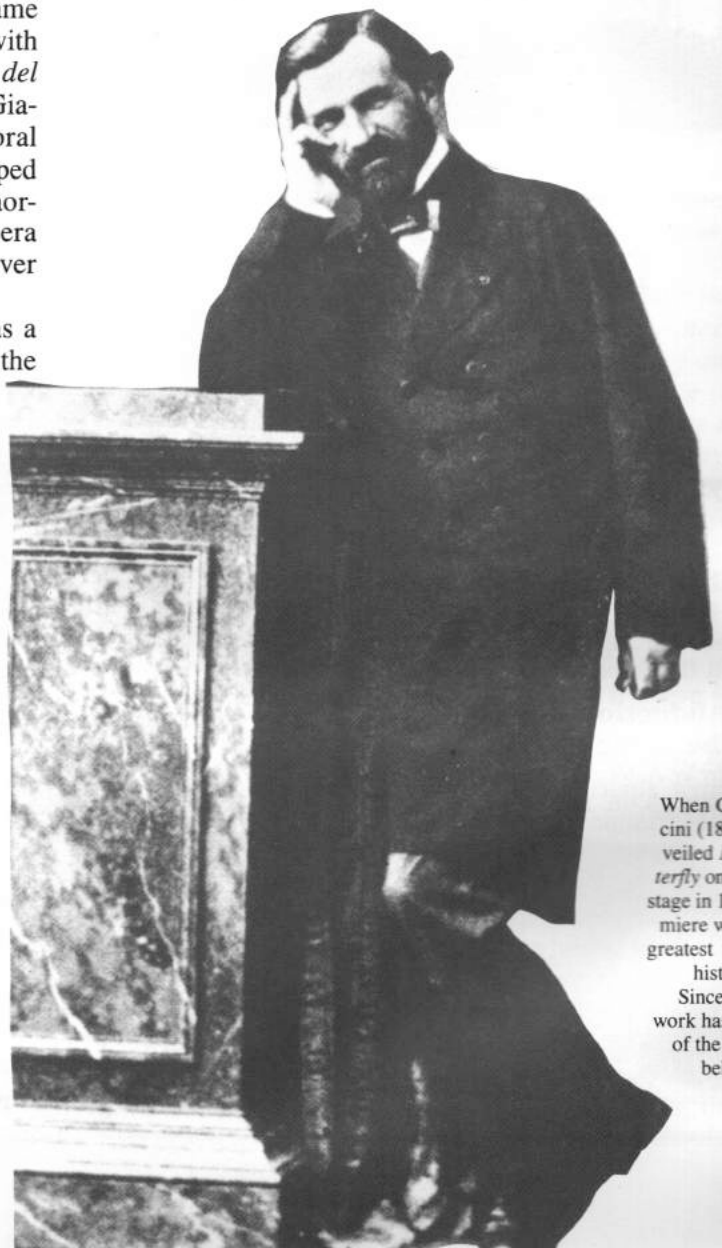
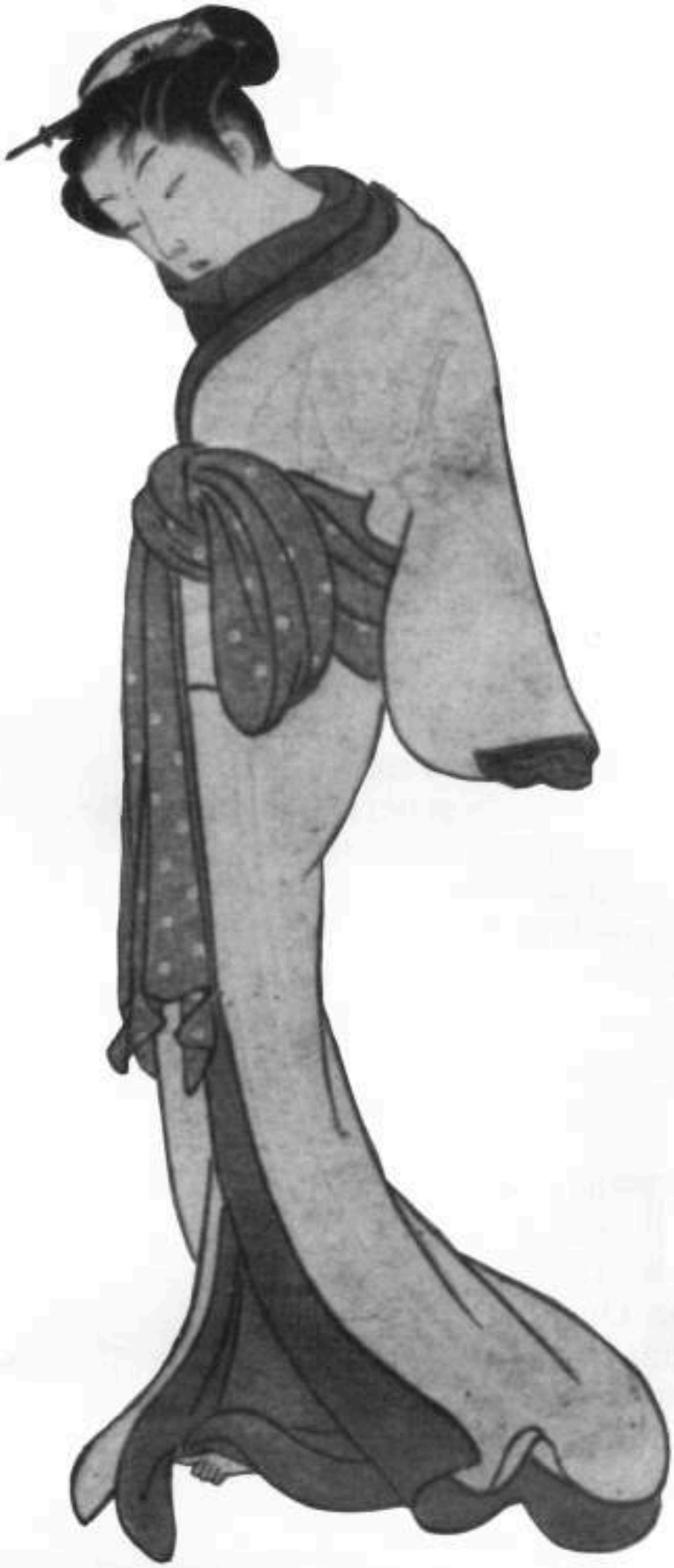


When Giacomo Puccini (1858-1924) unveiled *Madama Butterfly* on the La Scala stage in 1904, the premiere was one of the greatest fiascos in the history of opera. Since that time the work has become one of the world's most beloved operas.



Harunobu's *Courtesan on Veranda*, from the late 1760s, seems to suggest that in the pleasure quarter, there is sometimes a longing for another way of life.

places when they visited the girls, because the courtesans were so miserable behind their well-rehearsed smiles that it was feared they would commit suicide if given the chance — which of course sound very like the circumstances in *Madama Butterfly.* Some of the most well-known representations and documentations of life in the Yoshiwara exist in the thousands of 18th and 19th century woodblock prints executed by such famous artists as Haranobu, Utamaro, Hokusai, Kunisada, and Kuniyoshi, just to name a few. The girls — and most really are girls like Cio-Cio-San, who is fifteen in the opera, and seventeen in Long's story — are with few exceptions depicted as gay and care-free. They generally appear very much as an American visitor such as Pinkerton would expect. Some of the late 19th-Century prints even show Western visitors along with ships and sailors. The exploitation of these young Japanese girls clearly ran in both directions.

Because of the serious and ever more convincing social content of *Madama Butterfly,* it is puzzling that it has had such a reputation as a mere tear-jerker. It actually seems that its social message, though always acknowledged, has been generally ignored or misunderstood in relation to the music. One cannot deny that the famous love-duet, for instance, has some of the most blatantly emotional ''heart-on-the-sleeve'' music ever written, but due to the special context of the text and music at this point, it transcends mere sensuality and unashamed sentimentality. The music is indeed sweet, but sweet as only poisoned chocolates can be. The circumstances of the story, up to this moment, are far too nasty for us to suspend all that we know in favor only of reveling in the music. Pinkerton has been well-established as a cad throughout Act I:

Pinkerton: *. . . (a sailor's) life is not worth living if he cannot win the fairest treasure of every country . . . of every beauty her love . . . And so I'm marrying in the Japanese style for the next nine hundred and ninety-nine years. Free, though, to annul the marriage monthly! . . . (raises his glass) And here's to my real wedding day when I will marry a real wife from America.*

Utamano's portrait, *Courtesan Writing a Letter* (from the early 1800s), depicts renowned courtesan Yasooi holding a writing brush while she concentrates on a *billet-doux* she has begun composing to a lover.

With these kinds of sentiments, it is interesting to assess Pinkerton's role in the love-duet. To the listener conditioned by the great and famous Tristan/Isolde, Mimi/Rodolfo, Otello/Desdemona music of passion, the Butterfly/Pinkerton duet musically sounds like two typical operatic lovers extolling their happiness. Marek, in his synopsis, describes it: ''Rapturously, they sing of their love . . . and as the stars begin to fill the sky, they slowly enter the house.'' The London Records recording plot summary: ''. . . they gaze out at the starry night and pour out their ecstasy in music of tremendous urgency.''

Although neither of the quotations above directly represents the duet as one of the, ''I-love-you-and-you-love me'' sort (though Marek comes close), it is fairly obvious that the assumption is implied. Puccini and his librettists, however, were very careful and explicit in their choice of text, and what Butterfly and especially Pinkerton do *not* say is as important as what they do say:

Pinkerton: *My Butterfly! How they have named you well . . . Tenuous Butterfly.*
Butterfly: *They say that beyond the ocean, when each butterfly falls into the hand of a man, it is transfixed with a pin and fastened on to a board!*
Pinkerton: *That is slightly true. And do you know why? So it won't fly away.*
Pinkerton: *I've caught you and hold you fluttering. You're mine.*
Butterfly: *Yes, for life.*
Pinkerton: *Come . . . Come . . . Away from your soul with all of the pain and fear. It is a serene night. Look: everything is sleeping. Ah! Sweet night! How many stars!*
Butterfly: *I've never seen them so beautiful. Trembles, shines each star with the sparkle of an eye. Oh! How many eyes stare. Every star that shines is watching everywhere up the heavens, away from the beaches; away from the sea. How many glances laugh in heaven.*
Pinkerton: *Everything ecstatic with love laughs in heaven.*

Unlike most other lovers in opera, Pinkerton and Butterfly here are singing two very different things from two very different points of view. Pinkerton is in love with the moment, or perhaps with love or love-making itself; he has caught his butterfly-trophy and is reveling in the experience. He does specifically *not* lie to her by promising eternal fidelity. Butterfly, on the other hand, is sincere; to her this is true love: ''Yes, for life.'' She responds to what she wants to hear, to what she *thinks* he is imparting to her.

If the music were that of a symphonic poem and thus without a sung text, it would evoke images of typical Romantic love in the manner of the throbbing garden scene in Berlioz' *Roméo et Juliette.* However, this music

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Hokusai's woodblock print of two Japanese women, executed in the late 1790s.

turns out to be appropriate equally to both characters' interpretations of the state of their *amour,* as does their common verbal metaphor: the starry night. The distinction between Butterfly's kind of love and Pinkerton's is crucial to keep in mind because it makes one reconsider what often has been misinterpreted as the unadulterated saccarine quality of the music.

Up to this point in the act, we have been made continually aware of the lethal truth hiding behind the sensuous facade of the Butterfly/Pinkerton relationship, and we should continue to be aware of the sinister elements underlying the sensuous "facade" of the music. We and Pinkerton know the black truth of the future; only Butterfly remains "in the dark" of the starry night.

But Puccini's final and most impressive *coup* is that we too, through his glorious music, are like Pinkerton seduced by the beauty of this awful moment. We all-too-willingly forget the reality of Butterfly's tragic situation as we experience the narcotic effect of the music. Thus Puccini, rather than presenting us with strong moral lessons *à la* Marek's "sterner stuff . . . digging at the roots of suffering," actually goes beyond making us merely rue the capricious treachery of Pinkerton as we empathize with the fate of Cio-Cio-San: through the distraction of his compelling music, Puccini makes *us* commit the same error as Pinkerton, as we are tempted to forget the moral considerations of the text in the presence of the beauty of the music.

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