



Madam Butterfly by Giacomo Puccini

The real Madam Butterfly

Madam Butterfly was Puccini's sixth opera and was inspired by an American play that Puccini saw in London in 1900. That play was based on a true incident that had happened in Japan ten years before and, years later, the story was repeated on American radio by the woman who had witnessed it, Sarah Jane Correll. Here it is, in her own words. "On the hill opposite ours lived a little tea-house girl - her name was Cho-San, Miss Butterfly. She was so sweet and delicate that everyone was in love with her and in time we learnt that she had a lover - an American sailor. This was not so strange (for all tea-house girls have lovers, if they can get them) but one evening there was quite a sensation when we learnt that poor little Cho-San, and her baby, had been deserted. The man had promised to return at a certain time, he had even arranged a signal so that Cho-San would know when his ship would come in - but she awaited that signal in vain. For many a long night she peered over the harbour - but he never returned."

Mrs Correll did not say what happened to the girl, but her brother wrote the story up and added that the girl attempted suicide. He also added names - names so near the real ones that he received threatening letters from officers in the US Navy. The story is such a simple one that you might think the officers were over-reacting, however, the callousness of the American officer in the story makes uncomfortable reading, and many people at the time thought the tiny incident was far too true to life. It was this reality that attracted Puccini in the first place and, to understand his opera, we need to know something about life in Japan in the late 19th century, and the position of the *geisha*.

Geishas

A geisha was a courtesan. A girl who was attractive, graceful, who sang in the tea shops - and was prepared to agree to a temporary 'marriage' with a client. Such a marriage was legally binding for a month, and could be renewed indefinitely. Foreign sailors naturally took advantage of it and could always get somebody at the Customs House to fix them up with a geisha and a marriage contract. They were supposed to hire a house and servant for the length of time they were married, and pay the girl \$25 a month. The arrangement obviously suited both the men, who had all the comforts of married life ashore, and (apparently) the girls, who saved up their \$25 fees so they could get properly married later on. But the system did not always work. Sometimes the temporary nature of the contract was not understood, sometimes one of the

parties got more committed to the relationship than the other, and there was always the problem of children. The Japanese were not usually sympathetic to half castes, and the unfortunate children of these 'marriages' often found they had no place in Japanese society.

Madam Butterfly is about the tragic consequences of one such marriage.

The Opera, Act 1

The opera starts with Goro, a Japanese marriage broker, bustling round the stage showing an American officer his new house and servants. The American, Lieutenant Benjamin Franklin Pinkerton, has just acquired a wife, a house and a couple of servants for a month and he is so amused at the idea, that he refuses to take Goro (or the contract) seriously. The servants are merely 'natives' to him, and he laughs at their appearance.

Sharpless, the American consul, arrives. He is there to act as witness to the contract and is vaguely troubled at the prospect. He is a humane man and has actually seen the girl Pinkerton is to marry at the US Embassy. He asks Pinkerton if he has considered *her*, but Pinkerton ignores the question and calls for some whiskey.

He sings his first aria, it is easy going and tuneful, but its words are heartless. A Yankee sailor, he says, travels the world, picking up all the women he wants, and moving on. Sharpless comments, "That's an easy going Gospel, but it will bring disaster in the end." However, the orchestra breaks into "The Star Spangl'd Banner", and the two rise to toast America. The atmosphere changes as they sit down again, as beautiful, fragile, music heralds the arrival of Butterfly and her friends who are ascending the hillside to the house. You can just hear the women offstage, and, as they approach Pinkerton rises to propose a new toast, to the *real* wedding he will have one day and to his real American wife.

Butterfly arrives with her friends and relations, and Pinkerton is amused to discover that he has hired a whole collection of relations by the month as well. Sharpless, however, is painfully aware that Butterfly believes this is a real wedding. He starts to talk to her and discovers that her family has come down in the world - and that her father is dead.

As the relations mill round the house, Butterfly shows Pinkerton the possessions she has brought with her; and the orchestra describes her private world. When ever Butterfly does something particularly 'Japanese' Puccini creates a little oriental sound world for her and, here, it is made up of harp, flute, oboe and bells. The music is very quiet and exotic.

Butterfly shows him her fan, her pipe and her mirror, and something she swiftly hides, "That is sacred," she says abruptly. Goro takes Pinkerton aside, the sacred object is a Samurai sword, sent by the Mikado to her father. Such a gift is actually a command, and her father obeyed it by committing suicide. Butterfly also tells Pinkerton that she has been to the mission and become a Christian. Sharpless is right, the pseudo wedding is utterly real to her, and she

thinks she should take on her husband's religion as well as his name. Once the contract has been signed, she insists on being greeted, not as 'Madam Butterfly', but as 'Mrs B F Pinkerton'.

The celebrations are cut short by Butterfly's uncle, the Bonze (a Japanese priest). He erupts on the scene, horrified at her conversion, and denounces her. The family retreat in horror and Butterfly is left quite alone with her new husband. He comforts her, and their voices eventually join in a passionate duet as they enter the house.

Act 2

Three years have passed and Butterfly and Susuki are still living in Pinkerton's house. Clearly the money has stopped coming from America but Butterfly seems oblivious of what this means, and still identifies with her husband. Susuki on the other hand is completely realistic about their situation and remarks that *she* has never heard of a foreign husband returning to Japan. Butterfly is convinced that Pinkerton will return and tells Susuki that one fine day she will see a smudge of smoke on the horizon, hear the boom of the harbour cannon, and see Pinkerton's ship, the *SS Abraham Lincoln*, sail into port. Susuki would like to believe her and the women retire to an inside room as Sharpless arrives with Goro.

The consul has had a letter from Pinkerton; he has remarried in America and has asked Sharpless to break the news to Butterfly. Goro is at his wits' end with Butterfly - he cannot get her to understand that she is deserted and (therefore) divorced. Worse, she refuses to have anything to do with a wealthy (if rather dim) suitor he has found for her, Yamadori.

Yamadori himself arrives at this point (to the sound of a Japanese Imperial anthem) and is indignantly rejected by Butterfly. Goro whispers to Sharpless that Pinkerton's ship is approaching harbour and Sharpless hastily attempts to read Pinkerton's letter to Butterfly. He doesn't get very far, Butterfly is far too delighted to attend and she keeps interrupting. Eventually, despairing of finishing the letter, and dreading telling her the bad news, Sharpless asks her what she would do if Pinkerton *never* returned. Butterfly answers him by producing a small boy - Pinkerton's child. He is called 'Trouble'. Like many lovers, Pinkerton and Butterfly have a private language, they call things by their opposites and the boy's name really means 'Joy'. It is anyway merely temporary, Japanese children were often given temporary names as babies and Butterfly is obviously expecting Pinkerton to re-name him.

Butterfly says that if she were deserted she would return to work as a Geisha - or die. Sharpless, fed up with doing Pinkerton's dirty work, grimly promises that he will tell Pinkerton about his son and leaves. As he does so, Susuki drags in Goro accusing him of spreading the rumour that Trouble is a bastard. Goro protests that he merely gossiped about the child's miserable future as a half caste, but Butterfly silences him. She is on the verge of realising what is likely to happen, but she puts the thought from her head. Surely Pinkerton *will* return. As if in answer to her fears, the harbour cannon booms and she sees the *SS Abraham Lincoln* steaming into port. Joyfully, the two women fill the

house with flowers and the act ends with the whole tiny household, Butterfly, Susuki and Trouble, settling down to wait for Pinkerton's arrival.

Act 3

Daybreak finds the trio still waiting, and Butterfly retreats to the back of the house with her sleeping son. As she does so Pinkerton and Sharpless creep cautiously in. To their relief they find Susuki up, and Pinkerton explains himself to her. He has come with his American wife (Kate Pinkerton) to see if Butterfly will allow them to take the little boy back to America, to bring him up as their own son. Susuki agrees to talk to Mrs Pinkerton in the garden and leaves Pinkerton alone in the house. There he realises, at last, what he has done and he pours out his remorse in a burst of impassioned music; even so he hasn't got the courage to face Butterfly, and he leaves hastily as he hears her voice offstage.

Butterfly runs on, expecting to find her husband, but all that greets her is Sharpless, and a strange lady. Susuki and Kate approach, they tell her that Pinkerton is well but will not be coming up to see her. Butterfly can only stare at Kate, "Who is this lady that terrifies me?" she asks. Very tactfully Kate explains her errand, she says that she will care for Trouble as if he were her own child - and Butterfly believes her. She gives her a message for Pinkerton, he *may* have his son if he comes to collect him, himself, in half an hour.

Left alone Butterfly gives way to emotion, but recovers herself swiftly and orders Susuki to leave the room. She takes down her father's sword and prepares herself for ritual suicide. Susuki (guessing what is going on) pushes the little boy on stage, but the sight of her son merely strengthens Butterfly's resolve. She gives him a little American ship to play with, and stabs herself; Pinkerton rushes on just in time to whirl the boy away from the sight of his dying mother.

The ENO production

Madam Butterfly is produced by the film director, Anthony Minghella. He said in a recent interview that he didn't want to do anything to Puccini's opera, just let the story tell itself. Even so his version is startlingly new. It is extremely visual, as you'd expect from a film director, and very Japanese. There are Japanese costumes, boughs of cherry blossom, houses made of paper screens – everything you would expect – and some Japanese extras that perhaps you wouldn't. They are provided by a troupe of black draped Buraku actors, actors who move the screens, bring on the props and, at one point, fly a flock of little origami birds.

Puppets

Even more surprising is Butterfly's child, Trouble. He is obviously about 2 in the story – and quite impossible to cast. A real two year old would never stay still for a moment on stage and most theatres either cast him as a prop baby (which suggests that Trouble is permanently asleep) or bring in the smallest 5 year old they can find. In this production Trouble is a puppet. He is moved by three draped figures and is so well lit that you barely notice the puppeteers. Butterfly too makes an appearance as a puppet in a dream sequence. In fact

the whole show is full of moving props and actors, waving lanterns, manipulating puppets or just coming on as banks of flowers. Even so the stage looks spare, simple and beautiful. It's all very Japanese.

“Madam Butterfly is a perfectly judged piece, heartbreaking and full of emotional authenticity, and one that appeals to the heart and the head. Directing Puccini’s opera allows me to move into an arena where music is paramount, a transition that feels organic since there’s always been a strong musical thread running through my work. The production is being driven by a series of collaborations with people I really care about. My associate director, Carolyn Choa, has produced and choreographed opera, while conductor David Parry, an old and close friend, is responsible for nurturing my love of the art form. Michael Levine (set designer) is an extraordinary director in his own right, bringing invaluable experience to the project. Collectively, we’ve always admired the austerity of Japanese staging and how incredible precision is used to achieve great beauty. Our challenge is to create transparency through an unadorned yet beautiful series of images. We don’t want to interfere with the composer’s intentions, rather expose them in a moving evening of music. It’s a wonderful opportunity.”
Anthony Mingella

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ENO Baylis
London Coliseum, St Martin’s Lane, London WC2N 4ES
Telephone +44 (0)20 7632 8484 Fax +44 (0)20 7845 9443
email baylis@eno.org www.eno.org/baylis

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English National Opera’s Education Team