

Operaphoria™

METROPOLITAN OPERA LIVE IN HD

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Asmik Grigorian
as Butterfly

Madama Butterfly By Puccini

Today's performance of *Madama Butterfly* is a revival of the Anthony Minghella production with its spectacular costumes and mesmerizing puppetry. Known and loved for its passionate music, including the 13 minute love duet, *Butterfly* is also recognized for its indictment of cultural insensitivity. Cio Cio San, known by her friends as "Butterfly," is the daughter of a formerly wealthy Japanese family in Nagasaki. Her

parents have sold her in marriage to the American Naval Lieutenant, Benjamin Franklin Pinkerton, who is comfortable with the idea of having a temporary wife in every port. He openly acknowledges to everyone (except Butterfly) that this is a temporary arrangement, until he can find a "proper American wife."

In the opening scene Pinkerton has rented a house on a hill outside Nagasaki, where he and Butterfly will live, along with her maid, Suzuki. The American Consul, Sharpless, has warned Pinkerton that the local people take marriage seriously, but Pinkerton brushes him off. Butterfly arrives, accompanied by family and friends, and states her intention to be a good wife to Pinkerton. In an attempt to please him, she has already renounced her native religion in favor of her new, preferred American God who, she believes, is not as fat and lazy as her former gods. Butterfly introduces herself to Pinkerton by showing him the things that are precious to her. One of her treasures is the ancestral ceremonial dagger that was used by her

father to kill himself honorably. At the end of the scene, she puts away her treasures and they sing their glorious love duet.

In the Second Act we learn Pinkerton had abandoned his love nest after a few months and returned to America. Three years have gone by, and Butterfly is still waiting for his return. He had told her he would return when the robins build their nests, and she is beginning to wonder how often robins build their nests in America. She has given birth to their son, and she and Suzuki have run out of money. She has been abandoned by her family and friends because of her rejection

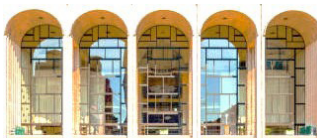


Photo: Metropolitan Opera

of the local culture. In spite of what everyone else has told her to the contrary, she still believes her American husband will return. Sharpless has tried to tell her that Pinkerton is unreliable, but she will hear none of it. "One fine day" he will return, she sings. We then hear the sound of the harbor cannon, signaling the arrival of a ship. Butterfly sees through her telescope that the ship is the USS Abraham Lincoln, Pinkerton's ship. With a joyous

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Operaphoria™: A state of ecstasy induced by opera

(continued from front)

“I told you so” she makes preparations to greet him. Butterfly does not realize that Pinkerton has returned to Nagasaki with his American wife, Kate.

Sharpless has informed Pinkerton that Butterfly has given birth to his son. In the following scene with Sharpless, Suzuki and Kate, Butterfly learns their intentions to take her son back to America for a “good American upbringing.” Her shock and grief are more than she can bear. However, she agrees to hand over the boy if Pinkerton himself comes to fetch him. She retrieves the ancestral ceremonial dagger and says farewell to her son. – GP

Butterfly and Geopolitics

Madama Butterfly is a love story overshadowed by the insensitivity of an American naval officer. At age 15, Butterfly was available for a Japanese marriage, so Pinkerton paid for the marriage while fully intending to abandon her when he shipped out. Butterfly was not aware Pinkerton was lying. By today’s standards we would describe Pinkerton’s behavior as criminal sexual conduct.

When this opera was first produced in 1904, real-life tensions in Japanese-American relations fueled the intensity of the drama. Both nations were attempting to cooperate while expanding their territorial claims in the South Pacific. Initially, there appeared to be some progress. For example, the U.S. and Japan had established the “Open Door” policy, which guaranteed Japanese immigrants the same rights as U.S. citizens. That made sense. Japanese and Chinese immigrant labor had built the infrastructure of America’s golden west.

However, the year *Butterfly* premiered was the same year the San Francisco Board of Education enacted a policy segregating Japanese children in the public schools. A few years later, the U.S. Congress passed the “Alien Land Act,” banning Japanese immigrants from owning or leasing land

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(Butterfly and Geopolitics continued)

for more than three years. And then things got worse. Puccini had no way of knowing that the very same Nagasaki of Butterfly’s abuse would become, only forty years later, an international symbol of mass destruction.

Perhaps we have made some progress since then. To remind us of the devastating consequences of cultural insensitivities that mushroom into international conflicts, there are now memorials at Nagasaki, Pearl Harbor, Auschwitz, and too many other names for the shadow of death.

Madama Butterfly is also a memorial, of a different kind. Besides being brilliant music drama—Puccini at his best—we are confronted with its agonizing relevance for today. It is a devastating reminder of the crushing personal consequences of powerful persons dominating those of us who are weaker or more vulnerable. This opera also stands as a monument to the importance of musical art in our lives. At the final curtain, as we all struggle to compose ourselves, we are reminded that sometimes the best way to assure the survival of the goodness of humanity is to support the production of great art, such as this opera, because great art can teach us things we do not seem to learn in other ways. – GP

Production

Madama Butterfly by Puccini

Sat, May 11, 2024
12:55 p.m.



Conductor: **Xian Zhang**

Production: **Anthony Minghella**
Cio-Cio-San: **Asmik Gregorian**
Suzuki: **Elizabeth DeShong**
Pinkerton: **Jonathan Tetelman**
Sharpless: **Lucas Meachem**

Beloved *Butterfly*

Puccini's *Madama Butterfly*, like *La Traviata* and *The Barber of Seville* before it, failed bitterly at its La Scala opening. The principal reason for the fiasco was the same that tripped its distinguished forerunners: an unruly claque.

To us, the idea of a claque – i.e. paid troops stationed throughout the opera house to guarantee a warm or ugly reception – is so alien as to seem almost charming. But to earlier composers and performers, the claque was a force to be reckoned with; indeed, claque leaders commanded blackmail from impresarios, conductors

and singers. For *Madama Butterfly*, the La Scala claque was joined by rival composers and music critics, ready to strike at the first sign of weakness.

And strike they did, from early cries of “That’s from *Bohème!*” (when a melody bore the Puccini stamp) to barks, moos, and other animal calls. These latter were occasioned by the director’s use of birdcalls to heighten the realism of the Act II “Intermezzo,” as Butterfly awaits the dawn. But the most devastating thunder came as Rosina Storchio’s kimono billowed out during a quick stage turn; cries came up, “Butterfly is pregnant!” Pregnant or not, Storchio was widely known to be Toscanini’s mistress, and for a La Scala audience any nastiness would serve as revenge for the imagined insults dealt them during Toscanini’s iron-fisted reforms of their bad manners.

Nastiness and claque aside, there were artistic weaknesses in this first production. Structurally, *Madama Butterfly* was played in two acts, the second running over an hour and a half: far too long for Milanese audiences. In a rare act of bad theater judgment, Puccini insisted on playing it without a break. Worse yet, the lead tenor had almost no singing after the first act.

The critics had a field day. Milan headlines declared “Fiasco at La Scala,” “Puccini Hissed,” and one reviewer calmly laid *Madama Butterfly* to rest with the pronouncement: “The opera is dead!”

And, in part, he was right; the next day, Puccini withdrew the opera. But he was not finished with it, as he noted in his correspondence, “My *Butterfly* remains as it is: the most heartfelt and expressive opera I have conceived! I shall win in the end ...if it is given in a smaller theater, less permeated by hatred and passion.” Three months later, a fully revised



Butterfly gets married

Madama Butterfly opened at the Teatro Grande in Brescia, and the rest is history. Productions quickly followed in London, Paris, and New York, making *Madama Butterfly* a permanent part of every opera house in the world.

Aptly named, *Madama Butterfly* focuses almost exclusively on Cio-Cio-San’s character development. From that glorious moment when she first appears until her final sacrifice, she is the center – musically and dramatically – of all stage activity, as we watch the fragile Butterfly, transformed from Pinkerton’s child bride and exotic playmate to tragic heroine. All the other characters serve to highlight this central purpose: we recognize Pinkerton’s callous arrogance the moment we meet him; and likewise, we see in the faithful Suzuki and despairing Sharpless two supporting players in the tragic unfolding of Butterfly’s fate.

It is no surprise Puccini loved *Madama Butterfly* above all his other operas; indeed, it was the only one he could listen to time and again. And that is because of all Puccini heroines who suffer for their devotion and love, his beloved Butterfly surpasses them all in faith, trust, and vulnerability. – GD

The Met: Live in HD 2024-25 Schedule

October 5, 2024

***Les Contes d'Hoffmann*, by Offenbach**

Offenbach's only opera, fantastical and gloriously musical. The three heroines will be sung by Erin Morley, Pretty Yende, and Clémentine Margaine, with Benjamin Bernheim (last season's Romeo) as Hoffmann and Christian Van Horn as the Four Villains. The Bartlett Sher production, with Marco Armiliato conducting.

October 19, 2024

***Grounded*, by Jeanine Tesori** **A Met Premiere**

Emily D'Angelo stars as a hot-shot fighter pilot in an opera that takes on the psychological and emotional issues of modern warmaking. A powerful new opera addressing an important contemporary issue. A Michael Mayer production, conducted by Yannick Nézet-Séguin.

November 23, 2024

***Tosca*, by Puccini**

The phenomenal Lise Davidsen stars as the passionate diva in the revival of David McVicar's production. Freddie De Tommaso makes his eagerly anticipated company debut as Tosca's revolutionary lover, Cavaradossi. Quinn Kelsy is the sadistic chief of police, Scarpia. Maestro Xian Zhang conducts.

January 25, 2025

***Aida*, by Verdi**

This is a new production by Michael Mayer, conducted by Yannick Nézet-Séguin. American soprano Angel Blue sings the Ethiopian princess torn between love and country, with mezzo Judit Kutasi as her rival, Amneris. Dramatic tenor Piotr Beczala is the conflicted lover Radames, who opens the heavens with his "*Celeste Aida*."

March 15, 2025

***Fidelio*, by Beethoven**

Lise Davidsen returns to the Met, this time as Leonore, the faithful wife who risks everything to save her husband from the clutches of tyranny. David Butt Philip is the political prisoner Florestan, and Tomasz Konieczny is the villainous Don Pizarro. The classic veteran German bass, René Pape sings the jailer, Rocco. Susanna Mälkki conducts this simulcast.

April 26, 2025

***Le Nozze di Figaro*, by Mozart**

A revival of the Richard Eyre Production. Conductor Joana Mallwitz makes her Met debut of this timeless comedy with a sparkling cast. Michael Samuel is the clever Figaro who will marry his beloved Susanna (Olga Kulchynska) if he can handle the contrary intentions of Count Almaviva (Joshua Hopkins). It all works out, of course, and everybody is happy at the end.

May 17, 2025

***Salome*, by Richard Strauss**

Yannick Nézet-Séguin conducts A new production that promises to shed new light on the biblical story dramatized by Oscar Wilde. Elza van den Heever is Salome and Gerhard Siegel is Herod. Michelle DeYoung sings Herodias, and Peter Mattei is the victimized prophet Jochanaan.

May 31, 2025

***Il Barbiere di Siviglia*, by Rossini**

A revival of the Bartlett Sher production completes the other half of the Figaro story, this one conducted by Giacomo Sagripanti. Andrey Zhilikhovsky is Figaro. Rosina is sung by Aigul Akhmetshina, who recently sang a run of Carmen at the Met. Jack Swanson is Count Almaviva.