

A NEW ENDING FOR *MADAMA BUTTERFLY*
Patricia Herzog

There is no sadder story in all of opera than the story of Cio-Cio San in Puccini's *Madama Butterfly*. An only child born into high station, Cio-Cio San is reduced to poverty after her Samurai father commits suicide following a military defeat. She works as a geisha to support her mother, who encourages her beautiful and charming daughter to enter into a so-called temporary marriage with an American stationed at port, Lieutenant Benjamin Franklin Pinkerton.

Puccini's 1904 opera has antecedents, both literary and historical. Pierre Loti's widely circulated *Madame Chrysanthème*, a semi-autobiographical recounting of the author's three-month-long marriage to a Japanese woman while stationed in Nagasaki, first appeared in France in 1887. John Luther Long's short story *Madame Butterfly* appeared in *Century* magazine in 1898. It drew inspiration from Loti's account and also from a temporary marriage related to Long by his sister, who had lived for a time in Nagasaki. Long's story was adapted for the stage by the American playwright and impresario David Belasco. Belasco's *Madame Butterfly, A Tragedy of Japan*, first opened in New York in 1900. Puccini saw it later that same year in London and was inspired to write his own *Madama Butterfly*.

In the treaty ports of Japan that were opened up to the West in the last half of the 19th century, temporary marriages were not uncommon. They were contractual agreements, explicitly arranged by a broker, between the young daughters of impoverished families—the operatic Butterfly is only fifteen—and the mostly military personnel stationed at port, often for months at a time. In exchange for her services, the girl usually got money, gifts and a temporary house for her and her husband to live in. The marriage ended when the man set sail again, or any time sooner, if he wanted.

At first, Butterfly resists the idea of entering into a temporary marriage with a foreigner. But then she sees Pinkerton and everything changes. Butterfly worships Pinkerton and everything he stands for. He is her god, her *American* god, and she is intent on seeing their marriage as real.

Before their marriage, Butterfly tells Pinkerton that she has gone to the Mission "all alone in secret" (*tutta sola in segreto*) to inquire about converting to his religion. He barely notices what she says, but her Buddhist monk uncle has spied her at the Mission and shows up at the wedding denouncing her before everyone for renouncing her ancient faith. The others join in: "You have renounced us and we renounce you!" *Ci hai rinnegata e noi ti rinneghiamo!*

Butterfly is not deterred. In the *Viene la sera* love duet that ends Act I, she ecstatically proclaims that she is *Sola e rinnegata! Rinnegata ... e felice!* "Alone and renounced! Renounced and happy!" Poor Butterfly! How pitiful her misguided and unbounded faith in that self-described Yankee vagabond!

Pinkerton's ship sets sail again and Butterfly remains in their temporary house with what little money she has left and her unshakable conviction that Pinkerton will come back for her when the robins nest in the spring. No one else thinks this--least of all Pinkerton himself, who toasts with the American Consul Sharpless to a time when he will be married for real to a real American bride (... *al giorno in cui mi sposerò con vere nozze a una vera sposa americana*).

At the beginning of Act II, Butterfly's servant Suzuki, bearing witness to her mistress's suffering, tells Butterfly that a foreign husband returning to his nest is unheard of. Butterfly will have none of it. She tells Suzuki to shut up or she will kill her. She insists they *both* say Pinkerton is coming back. Suzuki starts to cry, Butterfly reproaches her for lacking faith, and then she sings the great *Un bel di vedremo*: "One fine day, we will see a trace of smoke rising on the far horizon of the sea, and then the ship will appear, then will it enter the harbor thundering its salute. Do you see? He has come! ..." *Un bel dì vedremo levarsi un fil di fumo sull'estremo confin del mare. E poi la nave appare --- poi la nave Bianca entra nel porto, romba il suo saluto. Vedi? È venuto!*

In his thoroughly-researched *Madame Butterfly: Japonisme, Puccini, and the search for the real Cio-Cio-San*, Jan van Rij says that Butterfly's belief in Pinkerton's return, the belief on which the entire plot hinges, is a fundamental defect of the story. "Butterfly's ... expectation that Pinkerton will reciprocate her love and be her loyal husband is an inexplicable error of judgment. This fundamental defect was present in Long's novel and was carried over into the opera without any serious effort to correct or explain it. In the libretto, Butterfly remains incapable of understanding the irreconcilable contradiction between her real feelings for Pinkerton and the contract they signed. Her real tragedy is that she does not grasp the immensity of her mistake, which then leads to the unavoidable final disaster. Certainly, Butterfly's personality is as attractive as it is dignified but her misperception of reality is unbelievably naïve."

I think we can see Butterfly's belief in a different light. Her conviction that Pinkerton will return is born not of naiveté but of a desperate desire to escape the life she had known, a life that *before* Pinkerton was hard but *after* Pinkerton had become impossible. *Un bel di* is an act of faith, not a failure to grasp reality.

"I have known riches," she says. "But storms uproot the sturdiest oaks ... and we became geishas to support ourselves.... I don't hide it, neither do I feel hard done by. Why do you laugh? It's the way of the world." Why *does* Pinkerton laugh? And why does he then say to Sharpless: "With those childlike ways, when she talks she sets my blood on fire."? Could it be that what sets Pinkerton's blood on fire is the

vulnerability of a defenseless child?

The *Viene la sera* ("Night is falling") is laced with the erotism of Butterfly's vulnerability.

Pinkerton *My Butterfly!
How aptly you were named,
Fragile butterfly!*

Butterfly *It is said that overseas
if it should fall into the a man's hands
a butterfly is stuck through
with a pin
and fixed to a board!*

Pinkerton *There's some truth in that;
and do you know why?
So that it shouldn't fly away again.
I've caught you...
Quivering, I press you to me.
You're mine.*

We can thank Puccini and his librettists for a Butterfly worthy of the *Viene la sera*. In all but the opera, there is no love scene; nor is there a Butterfly who could have inspired one. The intensely passionate *Viene la Sera* go some ways towards explaining Butterfly's faith in Pinkerton's return. Yet well before, with her secret visit to the Mission, Butterfly signals an intention to take her marriage seriously.

In other ways, too, Butterfly signals a readiness to imagine life with Pinkerton as more than a temporary extension of the life she has known. Her continued refusal to marry the wealthy Yamadori, even after coming face-to-face with Pinkerton's real wife Kate, is further and final evidence of her wanting out. She will not go back to the life of a geisha. She will not marry a man who can divorce her at will. She will leave everyone and everything behind, even if the only means of escape should be death.

*And as she used to do,
the geisha will sing!
And the gay and merry song
will end in a sob!
Oh no, no, never!
Not that profession
which leads to dishonor!
Rather let me die! To dance no more!
I will cut my life short rather!
Oh, let me die!*

Butterfly's shield against desperation, the sublime faith of the *Un be di vedremo*, has finally fallen. The only thing left for her is death. Poor Butterfly!

In Long's story, Butterfly does not die. She starts to kill herself but then Suzuki rushes in with the little boy and Butterfly drops the knife. When, by arrangement, Kate comes the next day to fetch the boy and take him to America, she finds "the little house on Higashi Hill ... quite empty."

[Her ancestors] ... had taught her how to die, but he had taught her how to live—nay, to make life sweet. Yet that was the reason she must die. Strange reason! She now first knew that it was sad to die. He had come, and substituted himself for everything; he had gone and left her nothing—nothing but this.

Long's story ends there, and we are left to wonder what will become of Butterfly and her taste for life's sweetness as she and her boy continue to live among those who had taught her how to die. Let us therefore imagine a new life for Butterfly. Let us imagine Butterfly in America!

San Francisco, 1907, three years after Butterfly and Pinkerton meet (a date that I have made coincide with the opera's premier) and one year after the great San Francisco earthquake and fires. Pinkerton's warship *Abraham Lincoln* enters the Port of San Francisco with Butterfly hidden aboard. Through the good offices of the American Consul Sharpless, she has a passport authorizing entry for her and the boy. Pinkerton, Kate and the boy stand at the railing, waiting to disembark. The boy is waving a little American flag. Already ashore, Butterfly looks up at them unnoticed.

"America forever!" Pinkerton exclaims. "America forever!" rejoins Butterfly, echoing Pinkerton's exchange with Sharpless in Act I. They see her. The boy breaks free and scrambles down the gangway to his mother. Butterfly reprises "Trionfa il mio amor!" from *Un bel di vedremo*, addressing now her boy instead of Pinkerton. Pinkerton cries out the last words of the opera: "Butterfly! Butterfly! Butterfly!" Butterfly doesn't hear him. She and the boy have moved away from the ship and are disappearing into the crowd.

Where are Butterfly and her boy going? To a court of law so she can claim her imagined rights? Not a chance! Like her fellow *Issei* or first-generation Japanese Americans, Butterfly is an "alien permanently ineligible for U.S. citizenship." The law works *against* her.

Butterfly will marry a fellow Japanese American, allowing her to stay in the country (Gentleman's Agreement, 1907-08). She will live simply and work harder than she ever could have imagined. Years later, her family will start to enjoy a measure of comfort and success. And then the Japanese will bomb Pearl Harbor and Butterfly

and all the other Japanese Americans living on the West Coast will be forcibly removed from their homes and interned in concentration camps. They will not be allowed to return to their homes until the war ends—until, that is, the U.S. drops the H-bomb bomb on Butterfly’s homeland Nagasaki.

“... storms uproot the sturdiest oaks” Butterfly’s life in America will be very hard indeed. There is no dishonor in that. The dishonor is all on the side of the country whose laws Butterfly felt sure would protect her but betrayed her instead, just like Pinkerton.

About the words and the music.

The material I have used in adapting and reinterpreting *Madama Butterfly* is almost all from the existing opera. Words and music have been pulled apart and rearranged—literally recomposed. A New Ending for *Madama Butterfly* reflects back on, analyzes and reinterprets the existing opera. It works over material in a way that preserves the character of the original while allowing for a substantially different outcome.

Two exceptions. The first is the transition to the final scene where I have inserted sound effects and interwoven the well-known “San Francisco, open your Golden Gate ...” from the 1836 movie *San Francisco*, starring Jeanette MacDonald and Clark Gable and set at the time of the great earthquake and fires. The second is the *E vincerò!* (“And I will triumph!”) from the great *Nessun Dorma* in Puccini’s *Turandot*.