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Exoticism in *Madama Butterfly* and Modern-Day Performance Practice

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ABSTRACT

This thesis explores the creation of the opera *Madama Butterfly*, evaluating the composer's and librettists' intentions vis-à-vis the elements of exoticism and sexism, and laying out the implications for performing this opera appropriately today. Chapter One examines the origins of the opera *Madama Butterfly*, scrutinizing the calculated decisions made by Puccini and the librettists in portraying the characters and incorporating Japanese culture. Chapter Two surveys the current reactions and strategies of conservation surrounding *Madama Butterfly*, including case studies analyzing recent performances and suggestions of best practices for performing the opera in an informed manner.

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Chapter 1

Butterfly's Beginnings

In the mid-nineteenth century, exoticism and particularly Japonisme gripped the Western European art tradition. This exoticism as defined by Jonathan Bellman was “not about the earnest study of foreign cultures; it [was] about drama, effect, and evocation.”¹ Westerners at the time became enamored with the East and its enticingly exotic theatre, music, dance, and art. Though the Japanese visual arts took hold quickly, Japanese music followed slowly, as Western ears struggled to orient to its unfamiliar sounds. Western music and notation made it to Meiji Japan and in turn, Japanese music written in Western notation made its way back to Europe. A multitude of Japoniste productions followed: Saint-Saens’s *La Princess Jaune* in 1872, Jonas’s *Die Japeneserin* in 1874, Gilbert and Sullivan’s *The Mikado* in 1885, Jones’s *The Geisha* in 1896, and Mascagni’s *Iris* in 1898.²

Around this time, a young Italian composer by the name Giacomo Puccini began his opera career, one that would rival and nearly eclipse that of his predecessor Giuseppe Verdi. His rise in popularity stuttered at times and soared at others; by the time he arrived (rather late) to the Japonisme movement, he had several successes under his belt, namely *La Bohème* and *Tosca*.³ He felt underwhelmed by the Japoniste compositions of the nineteenth century, particularly Mascagni’s opera *Iris*. He wished to represent Japan more authentically and incorporate more

¹ Adrienne L. Kaeppler, “Music and Dance as Export and Import: A Case Study of Japan in Europe, and Hawai’i in Japan,” *Yearbook for Traditional Music* 45 (2013): 214.

² Arthur Groos, “Cio-Cio-San and Sadayakko: Japanese Music-Theater in *Madama Butterfly*,” *Monumenta Nipponica* 54, no. 1 (1999): 42-43.

³ George Richard Marek, *Puccini, A Biography* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1951), 228.

Japanese popular music.⁴ Perhaps to Puccini's surprise, *Madama Butterfly* propelled him to his greatest fame and handed him his most enduring legacy.⁵

Puccini's *Madama Butterfly* began with Pierre Loti's 1887 novel *Madame Chrysanthème*, which Charles Messager adapted into a light opera in 1893. A more direct precursor came in John Luther Long's 1898 short story *Madame Butterfly*, which David Belasco converted into a theater play in 1900. *Madame Chrysanthème* emerged from Loti's first-hand experiences in Japan, but Long's story originated from a story his sister heard while she lived in Japan, with clear influence from Loti's novel. Belasco added key details when converting Long's short story into a theater piece, including the iconic suicide and vigil scenes, perhaps the crucial components that charmed Puccini when he attended the play in London in July of 1900. After viewing *Madame Butterfly*, Puccini, overcome with emotion even though he could not understand English, immediately began the process of obtaining rights to transform it into an opera.⁶

Puccini, himself an accomplished composer by this time, enlisted two qualified librettists to aid him, Giuseppe Giacosa and Luigi Illica, with whom he collaborated on *La Bohème* and *Tosca*.⁷ They both had significant experience with exoticism: Illica wrote the libretto to Mascagni's opera *Iris*, and Giacosa frequently read Japanese poetry⁸. However, the three of them struggled to write together due to their diverging viewpoints and inconsistent source materials. Illica primarily used John Luther Long's short story in his libretto drafts; Puccini preferred Belasco's theater version of the story, which contained significant differences. Notably, Long's story portrays Pinkerton as egoistic and cowardly while Cho-Cho-San, a silly pidgin girl, takes

⁴ Groos, "Cio-Cio-San," 42-45.

⁵ Marek, *Puccini*, 229.

⁶ Jan van Rij, *Madame Butterfly: Japonisme, Puccini, & the Search for the Real Cho-Cho-San* (Berkeley: Stone Bridge Press, 2001), 19-78.

⁷ Burton D. Fisher et al., *Puccini's Madama Butterfly* (Miami: Opera Journeys Publishing, 2001), 14.

⁸ van Rij, *Madame Butterfly*, 82-83.

her child and flees. Belasco shifts the setting entirely to Cho-Cho-San's house, elevates her role as a main character, minimizes Pinkerton's role, and writes in her suicide instead of her escape.⁹ The composer and the two librettists faced important decisions as they consolidated information from these sources and attempted to reforge them into an opera, including characterizing the heroine and Pinkerton, choosing the setting, representing the American and Japanese cultures within the Italian opera tradition, and incorporating authentic Japanese music.

For Puccini, this meant research. He consulted many sources in order to obtain material, particularly Japanese music, for the score. One of his most important sources was Gustav Knopf, a Belgian musicologist with whom he corresponded in order to learn more about Japanese melody and rhythm.¹⁰ Puccini likely consulted previous Japoniste operas as well, perhaps in an attempt to outdo them with his new composition.

Another important element of Puccini's research came from a Japanese theater troupe that toured Europe in the early twentieth century, headed by a former geisha named Sadayakko and her husband Kawakami. In particular, her performance in *The Geisha and the Knight*, which included a macabre suicide scene, likely inspired the one in *Madama Butterfly*.¹¹ Though Puccini never managed to meet Sadayakko personally, he attended the troupe's performance of *The Geisha and the Knight* and appreciated the efficacy of her staged death.¹² He likely acquired the company's musical repertory in their publication *La Musique japonaise* as well.¹³ Though Sadayakko's troupe presented Japanese kabuki-theatre, their performances exported Japanese

⁹ Kasper van Kooten, "'Closed, Efficient, Terrible!': Reflections on the Genesis and Dramaturgy of Illica's, Giacosa's and Puccini's *Madama Butterfly*." in *Music's Obedient Daughter: The Opera Libretto from Source to Score* (New York: Brill, 2014), 269-72.

¹⁰ Julian Budden et al., *Madama Butterfly, 1904-2004* (Milano: Ricordi, 2004), 24.

¹¹ Yoko Chiba, "Sada Yacco and Kawakami: Performers of *Japonisme*," *Modern Drama* 35, no. 1 (1992): 35-47.

¹² Groos, "Cio-Cio-San," 48-53.

¹³ Budden et al., *Madama Butterfly*, 24.

culture that European audiences could comprehend and incorporate into their culture without diminishing its inherent otherness.¹⁴ In fact, these performances often gave Europeans the distorted impression that Japanese theater focused on primitive violence.¹⁵ Westerners found in Sadayakko their Orientalized stereotype for a Japanese female: doll-like, childish, and emotional.

Puccini likely drew more of his musical inspiration from *A Collection of Japanese Popular Musics* by Ywai and Kenpachiro, a book of Japanese melodies published in 1891, than he did from *La Musique japonaise*, but Sadayakko's permeating cultural influence inevitably impacted Puccini's *Cio-Cio-San*.¹⁶

Yet another vital component of Puccini's research came from Madame Hisako Oyama, the wife of the Japanese ambassador to Italy. However, his encounters with Madame Oyama came only in 1903, when most of the opera had already been written. She sang ten well-known Japanese national melodies to him and aided him in accessing phonographs of Japanese music.¹⁷ She even went so far as to describe to him a story she knew a real-life account remarkably similar to that of *Madama Butterfly*.¹⁸ Unfortunately, even with consulting Madame Oyama on nomenclature and pronunciation, Puccini refused to change some of his non-Japanese character names, such as the alcoholic uncle Yakousidé. The ten melodies he acquired from her cropped up in the opera often, implanted to create oriental ambience.¹⁹ Scholars have remarked that Puccini went above and beyond preceding composers in making the score authentic; others

¹⁴ Kaeppler, "Music," 218-19.

¹⁵ van Kooten, "'Closed,'" 294-95.

¹⁶ Groos, "Cio-Cio-San," 52.

¹⁷ Groos, "Cio-Cio-San," 47.

¹⁸ van Rij, *Madame Butterfly*, 93-94.

¹⁹ Arthur Groos, "Return of the Native: Japan in *Madama Butterfly*/*Madama Butterfly* in Japan," *Cambridge Opera Journal* 1, no. 2 (1989): 170.

consider his pseudo-Japanese motifs comic, offensive, and just another attempt at irreverent orientalism.²⁰

Aside from the score, the *Madama Butterfly* team struggled to cobble together a coherent libretto out of their differing ideas for the opera. The opera's setting, initially split between Japan and North America, gradually pared down to being solely at Butterfly's house and the American consulate. Where the librettists wanted a strong tenor role in Pinkerton, Puccini pushed for a story centered around the heroine. The traditionalists in the group advocated for a classic Italian operatic style, full of excitement, conquest, and triumph, while the others maintained the opera would be sober and focus on the psychological drama unfolding around the heroine.²¹ By the time they finished the first draft of the opera, they had an incongruous and confusing work.

The premiere of *Madama Butterfly* at the Teatro alla Scala in February of 1904 resulted in catastrophe, what Puccini referred to as a "veritable lynching."²² In their efforts to include elements of psychological drama and anti-colonialism while incorporating both Italian opera style and a more static style, the composer and librettists produced an unstable and incoherent opera that both puzzled and disappointed audiences. Many even accused Puccini of plagiarism from his own opera *La Bohème*.²³ Perhaps audiences hoped for a conventional heroic male character, or they had grown accustomed to a two-dimensional depiction of Japanese theatre through Sadayakko and rejected the more nuanced Cio-Cio-San.²⁴ Though the exact reason for its failure remains unknown, the initial version of the opera, completed in December of 1903, underwent radical corrections before its second premiere in Brescia three months later. Though

²⁰ Budden et al., *Madama Butterfly*, 24-29; Helen M. Greenwald, "Picturing Cio-Cio-San: House, Screen, and Ceremony in Puccini's *Madama Butterfly*," *Cambridge Opera Journal* 12, no. 3 (2000): 237-38.

²¹ van Kooten, "'Closed,'" 276-85.

²² Fisher et al., *Puccini's*, 12.

²³ van Kooten, "'Closed,'" 285-86.

²⁴ Groos, "Cio-Cio-San," 69.

the Brescia premiere was considered a success, the opera continued to undergo revisions from 1904 to 1906, resulting in four different versions of *Madama Butterfly*: the Teatro alla Scala, the Brescia, the first British performance, and the first French performance.²⁵ The French version, performed in Paris at the Opéra Comique in 1906, has remained the most widely performed to date.²⁶

Some of the key revisions made by Puccini's team consisted of cutting swathes of the opera as well as some remnants of the scenes meant solely to evoke a Japanese atmosphere or setting. Puccini made sure to remove some of Pinkerton's blatant mockery of the Japanese culture.²⁷ The French stage director Albert Carré aided Puccini with many of these revisions, helping quicken the opera's pace with tasteful eliminations of unnecessary scenes and further thawing Pinkerton's one-dimensional imperialism. What Puccini and Illica initially intended to be satire for Pinkerton's character had backfired; they shifted their position to removing his less savory lines rather than trying to subtly denounce colonialism.²⁸ These revisions also solidified one of the key Japanese elements of the opera as they ensured the entire opera took place at Cio-Cio-San's house, a Japanese cultural analogue that lends it some authenticity.²⁹ With the help of Carré, the French debut of *Madama Butterfly* cemented the opera's score and libretto and its subsequent success across the globe.

²⁵ Dieter Schickling and Robert Vilain, "'Puccini's Work in Progress': The So-Called Versions of *Madama Butterfly*," *Music & Letters* 79, no. 4 (1998): 527-28.

²⁶ "Plot and Creation: *Madama Butterfly*," *The Metropolitan Opera*.

²⁷ Schickling and Vilain, "Puccini's," 532.

²⁸ van Kooten, "'Closed,'" 289-93.

²⁹ Greenwald, "Picturing," 240.

A Synopsis of Puccini's *Madama Butterfly*

The story of *Madama Butterfly*, told in three acts, begins at the turn of the twentieth century. A US Navy Lieutenant named Pinkerton leases a house from a broker named Goro; it overlooks Nagasaki harbor and comes with a fifteen-year-old Japanese girl named Cio-Cio-San, or Madame Butterfly, and three servants. Pinkerton feels love for her but does not take their impending marriage very seriously, maintaining that he will someday find an American wife. Cio-Cio-San has different expectations for the seriousness of their marriage; her family fell from fortune, forcing her to work as a geisha. She willingly converts to Christianity for Pinkerton before they get married; her uncle Bonze and other relatives subsequently curse and denounce her. The couple consummates their marriage at the end of the first act.

The second act begins after three years have passed. Cio-Cio-San has faithfully waited for Pinkerton's return even though all signs point to his desertion. Her servant Suzuki prays to the gods to intervene, but Cio-Cio-San rejects her faith and instead trust in Pinkerton's promise. She rejects a marriage offer from the wealthy Prince Yamadori, staying true to her American husband and the son she bore with him. Sharpless, the American consul, reads a letter from Pinkerton and questions her about what she would do if Pinkerton did not return, and she explains that she would become a geisha yet again, or kill herself. She explains that her baby's name, "Sorrow," will become "Joy" once his father returns, and Sharpless promises her that he will notify Pinkerton about the child. The act ends with a cannon shot announcing a ship's arrival and Cio-Cio-San sitting vigil over the harbor with her son and Suzuki.

In the second part of the second act, Pinkerton and his American wife Kate arrive at Cio-Cio-San's house with Sharpless. Pinkerton becomes overcome by guilt and flees after Suzuki receives them, leaving Cio-Cio-San to discover Kate and realize that she is Pinkerton's American

wife. She decides to give her son to Pinkerton and Kate, choosing to die honorably by committing suicide with the same dagger with which her father ended his life. As she does so, her son enters the room; she takes the time to bid him farewell and blindfold him, finishing the deed just as Pinkerton arrives and calls for her.³⁰

Puccini's Progress

Although Puccini and his librettists took progressive steps to add depth to *Madama Butterfly* that his operatic predecessors failed to incorporate in their orientalist works, their efforts still fall short. Even within Puccini's interactions with Japanese people throughout his research process, he exhibited his own personal prejudice, referring to the Japanese as "the yellow race" and Madame Oyama as "pleasantly ugly."³¹

Puccini, Illica, and Giacosa made significant strides in toning down Pinkerton's character, giving the Japanese characters lines in Italian rather than pidgin, and ridding the opera of his most disparaging remarks.³² However, several lines survived the cuts. Pinkerton remains chauvinistic and callous, his opening aria describing how "all over the world, no business or pleasure, the Yankee scorns danger," implying that Americans had their pick of women wherever they went. He adds that he is "marrying the Japanese way: for nine hundred and ninety-nine years, and free to annul the marriage every month," displaying how little he respects the marriage. He then describes his attraction to Cio-Cio-San as being "assailed by a furor to pursue her even if I should break her wings," which illustrates his flagrant disregard for her well-

³⁰ "Plot."

³¹ Groos, "Cio-Cio-San," 55.

³² Marek, *Puccini*, 228.

being in comparison to his desires. He and his companion Sharpless toast to “the day of [his] real marriage to a real American wife” just before the wedding, showing Pinkerton’s intentions to desert his impending marriage. Upon meeting Butterfly, Pinkerton remarks that “she sets my heart aflame with her doll-like manner,” and Sharpless finds out that she is but fifteen years old. Even as Pinkerton meets Butterfly’s relatives, he laughs and mocks them for their bizarre appearance, while at the same time Butterfly defends Pinkerton as handsome to her disparaging relatives, yet another sign of her devotion and his indifference. Later on, after the wedding, Pinkerton describes Butterfly’s movements as “like a little squirrel,” calling her a “plaything” and a “little child.”³³ Butterfly continually professes her love and loyalty to Pinkerton throughout the opera, maintaining her new American beliefs. In contrast, Pinkerton remains misogynistic and paternalistic until the end of the opera, when he realizes his faults and flees: a coward rather than a conqueror.

Lastly, the score Puccini wrote for this opera exhibits his loyalty to Italian opera tradition and Japonisme, his willing participation in orientalism even as he sought to go beyond the status quo.³⁴ He did tastefully pair scenes or characters with melodies, such as the “Star Spangled Banner” (at that time the anthem of the U. S. Navy) when Pinkerton sings his first aria, the Japanese “National Anthem” when the officials arrived at the wedding, and a popular Japanese song called “My Prince” when Yamadori enters.³⁵ However, his incorporation of most of the Japanese melodies remained pseudo-Japanese as he inserted them throughout the opera indiscriminately, paying little attention to the actual meaning behind the songs.³⁶ Puccini wanted

³³ Fisher et al., *Puccini’s*, 17-59.

³⁴ Christoph Irmscher, “‘The Absolute Power of a Man’? Staging Masculinity in Giacomo Puccini and David Henry Hwang,” *Amerika Studien/American Studies* 43, no. 4 (1998): 623.

³⁵ Fisher et al., *Puccini’s*, 18.

³⁶ Budden et al., *Madama*, 24-25.

to produce an authentic Japanese atmosphere, but in doing so, created the Japan of his imagination, full of appropriated exotic musical elements that he “Puccinified.”³⁷ In fact, Puccini biographer George Marek refers to the music as inauthentic because of its appropriateness, noting that the music remains essentially Italian with some Japanese features like whole-tone or pentatonic progressions embedded throughout.³⁸ As pure as Puccini’s intentions might have been, his usage of Japanese music occurred solely within an Italian musical context, thus preserving the “other”-ness of Japanese culture.

³⁷ Ping-hui Liao, “Of Writing Words for Music Which is Already Made: *Madame Butterfly*, *Turandot*, and Orientalism,” *Cultural Critique* 16 (1990): 39-40; van Kooten, ““Closed,”” 293.

³⁸ Marek, *Puccini*, 230.

Chapter 2

The Modern *Butterfly*

Madama Butterfly's enduring popularity implies the timelessness and inherently human aspects of the opera, what with it winning tenth place within the Top 10 Most Popular Operas in the World due to its 416 performances by 2016.³⁹ *Butterfly*'s story has undergone countless metamorphoses, from literature to theatre to film, even generating spinoff stories like David Henry Hwang's *M. Butterfly* and Broadway's *Miss Saigon*.⁴⁰ Unfortunately, the stereotype of Asian women perpetuated by *Madama Butterfly* has remained throughout the past century, lingering in our Western society. This lamentable remnant was exacerbated by the frequent whitewashing of Cio-Cio-San's role, as primarily white divas played the role.⁴¹ The Japanese reaction to *Madama Butterfly* and its rapid spread across the world consisted of both caution and pride: caution, because of the clear message communicated in the opera about the dangers of Westernism, and pride, because the opera proved that Japan had achieved a somewhat equal national and culture status with its Western peers.⁴²

The inherently racist and sexist elements of *Madama Butterfly* inevitably drew criticism as it coasted into the twenty-first century an essential component of opera company repertoires.⁴³ What appeared as charming and harmless exoticism in the early twentieth century now offended audiences and sparked heated debates about stereotypes, cultural appropriation, and whether or not the opera should even be performed. *Madama Butterfly* did not undergo this backlash alone:

³⁹ Trevor Gillis, "Top 10 Most Popular Operas in the World," *Opera Sense*, September 14, 2016.

⁴⁰ de Lauretis, "Popular Culture, Public and Private Fantasies: Femininity and Fetishism in David Cronenberg's 'M. Butterfly'," *Signs* 24, no. 2 (1999): 308-11; Sandra Kumamoto Stanley, "Settling Scores: The Metamorphosis of Madame Butterfly and Her Transnational Legacy," *Pacific Coast Philology* 42, no. 2 (2007): 257.

⁴¹ Mari Yoshihara, "The Flight of the Japanese Butterfly: Orientalism, Nationalism, and Performances of Japanese Womanhood," *American Quarterly* 56, no. 4 (2004): 976.

⁴² Stanley, "Settling Scores," 262. Yoshihara, "The Flight," 976-77.

⁴³ de Lauretis, "Popular Culture," 311.

many other operas, such as Puccini's *Turandot*, Bizet's *Carmen*, and Verdi's *Otello*, did as well.⁴⁴ As of 2020, an Instagram account titled "Opera is Racist" began sharing stories from opera performers about the racism they have endured in the industry and the problematic practices embedded in the opera tradition, popularizing the hashtag #TheShowMustBePaused and encouraging the opera world to become actively anti-racist.⁴⁵

Many articles have appeared in prominent venues like *The Atlantic*, *The New York Times*, *The Guardian*, and *The Conversation* discussing the problematic nature of *Madama Butterfly* and operas like it. Caitlin Vincent's writing in *The Conversation* focuses on the decline of opera's popularity in the twenty-first century partially as a result of opera's irrelevance, alienating audiences with its antiquated tales of racism and misogyny and tradition of yellowface and blackface. She challenges opera traditionalists to stop defending racism and sexism by labeling it as historical interpretation or composer intention, and to consider how opera companies should want audiences to feel.⁴⁶

Annilese Miskimmon writes in *The Guardian* of the internal battle audience members must endure when viewing a work like this, a tug-of-war between appreciation of great art and condemnation of sexual exploitation. She notes the inherent romance and allure of the music, its raw presentation of both beauty and brutality, and its near-mythic status.⁴⁷

Katherine Hu's comments in *The New York Times* draw attention to the opera house's responsibility to be both a museum and a classroom, a way to show audiences artwork from the

⁴⁴ Katherine Hu, "Classical Opera Has a Racism Problem," *The New York Times*, December 19, 2019.

⁴⁵ Brian Chang, "No More Whispers: Opera's Reckoning with Racism," *Ludwig Van*, June 24, 2020.

⁴⁶ Caitlin Vincent, "Opera is Stuck in a Racist, Sexist Past, While Many in the Audience Have Moved On," *The Conversation*, July 9, 2019.

⁴⁷ Annilese Miskimmon, "Sex, Betrayal, Suicide: Is *Madama Butterfly* Too Sordid to Stage Today?" *The Guardian*, June 5, 2018.

past without undue offense.⁴⁸ Lastly, Gwynn Guilford of *The Atlantic* recognizes the difficulty for opera performers to be part of the cast of *Madama Butterfly* and the challenges of avoiding stereotypes while presenting the opera. She quotes Naomi André, a professor at the University of Michigan, who acknowledges Puccini's efforts to "more kindly exoticize Japanese culture" while stating that he produced "a cartoon of submissive Asian femininity" in *Cio-Cio-San*.⁴⁹

This rise in awareness of racism in opera comes at the same time as widespread recognition of institutional racism throughout the United States and a concerted push for social justice. Now more than ever, our society is identifying and addressing both historic and current discrimination against minorities. When opera companies return to theaters post-pandemic, their audiences will have changed accordingly, i.e., they will be more sensitized to problematic aspects of traditional dramatic practices.

Regarding my own reaction to viewing *Madama Butterfly*, I am deeply invested in the topic of navigating old-world art in a current-world context, a topic I feel needs to be addressed and discussed by musicians. I firmly agree that this opera has enduring value and it deserves a place in opera canon and music history for both its music and plot. Though no easy answer or perfect method exists for bringing performances of this opera into the twenty-first century, opera companies and directors can take action to present some of the more inflammatory or egregious elements of *Madama Butterfly* in a new light. Reaching a general consensus on removing certain traditional performance practices and adding contextual details can prevent further backlash while preserving the opera's originality and artistic mastery.

⁴⁸ Hu, "Classical."

⁴⁹ Quartz Gwynn Guilford, "Opera's Old-Fashioned Race Problem." *The Atlantic*, July 23, 2014.

Case Studies of Modern Performances

Current conversations about *Madama Butterfly* accurately reflect the difficulty and nuance embedded in performing the opera. Every casting, staging, costuming, and acting choice presents a decision for an opera director: whether to adhere to traditional exoticist methods of performing or to strike a self-aware and modern tone. In order to formulate tangible opinions on current performance practices of this opera, I chose several recent productions to view and critique. I particularly focused on casting, costumes, makeup, and the set, which to me greatly define a production since the libretto and score does not usually vary. I sought productions that showed a range and variety of performance practices and that occurred within the last five years.

My first case study was a collaboration between the Pacific Opera Project and Opera in the Heights. This performance of *Madama Butterfly* took place at the Japanese American Cultural Center's Aratani Theatre in Little Tokyo in Los Angeles in 2019 and endeavored to reframe and reinvent the opera for the twenty-first century. Director Josh Shaw and conductor Eiki Isomura revised the libretto, with the Japanese characters speaking Japanese and the American characters speaking English. In an interview after the performance, Josh Shaw explained that after playing the role of Pinkerton several times he concluded that the opera made no sense: Pinkerton and Cio-Cio-San would not have understood each other's languages, let alone sung to each other in Italian. Additionally, he ensured that all of the Japanese characters in the opera were played by Japanese performers. In rewriting the libretto in two languages, Shaw and Isomura hoped to provide greater insight into each character and explore the language barrier further, though they retained most of the original libretto's lines.



Figure 1: Pacific Opera Project's *Madama Butterfly*. Act I: Cio-Cio-San and Pinkerton meet for the first time at their wedding. Credit: Martha Benedict.



Figure 2: Pacific Opera Project's *Madama Butterfly*. Act II: Cio-Cio-San, Sharpless, and Suzuki discuss when Pinkerton will return from America. Credit: Martha Benedict.

This performance bridged that crucial gap between *Madama Butterfly*, an opera from the early 1900s, and a twenty-first century audience. Audience members saw the text in English and Japanese supertitles. The cast wore traditional costumes—Pinkerton in his military uniform, the Japanese women in kimonos—but their makeup and hair were understated and quite simple

(Figure 1). The set contained Butterfly's house with multiple sliding screen doors and an American flag hanging on the wall as well as her garden nearby (Figure 2). As the opera progressed and the characters conversed with each other, Sharpless and Goro acted as translators for Pinkerton and Cio-Cio-San, as both characters sang in both Japanese and English. The performer playing Sharpless made a special effort to act as Pinkerton's moral compass and intercede on behalf of Cio-Cio-San, clearly emphasizing Cio-Cio-San's new adherence to Christianity and American culture. Pinkerton showed signs of remorse as he begged forgiveness for his misdeeds. Cio-Cio-San's portrayal cast her in a heroic light as she realized what had befallen her and steeled herself to take action. Though her blind faith in Pinkerton retained a childish or naïve quality, her resilience to her relatives' bullying and her decision to commit suicide revealed her innate strength. The staging of her death seemed particularly effective, as she committed suicide while standing directly in front of the hanging American flag, a clear nod to the connection between it and her demise.

In the intermission and post-show interviews, the cast reflected on the performance and their own experiences as opera performers. I found this especially interesting as it offered a glimpse into the motivations of the production, which generally aligned with mine in their goals to bring opera to audiences in a less traditional, more realistic way. In general, the cast members agreed that this performance offered a historically faithful look back to 1903 and how this story would have played out in Japan at the time. Several of the cast mentioned their time in Japan or their Japanese roots and expressed their excitement to perform Puccini in Japanese, which had likely never occurred before. Shaw pointed out that for opera to continue to live and breathe and

create, certain aspects need to be reinvented or updated, which he felt he achieved with this performance of *Madama Butterfly*.⁵⁰

Reviews of this daring opera performance lauded it for its creativity and uniqueness, an aspect that I, too, greatly appreciated. Humberto Capiro drew attention to the simple yet traditional set design, noting the shoji screen doors, Japanese scroll paintings, and Japanese costumes made by Sueko Oshimoto in his review in *Living Out Loud Los Angeles*.⁵¹ In his article for *San Francisco Classical Voice*, Jim Farber wrote about the remarkable sense of cultural accuracy in the performance, including the 45-star American flag, the ancient cultural customs of Japan, and the imperialist and racist representation of American diplomacy.⁵² Gordon Williams of *Opera Wire* opened up his review with an acknowledgement of the controversy surrounding *Madama Butterfly* and the 2017 Seattle Opera production that forthrightly educated their audiences about the origins of the story. He calls the POP performance a revelation and an enlightenment supplying new perspectives on nuances of the opera's characters.⁵³ All three reviewers expressed their hopes that this performance would gain further renown and make a broader impact on the opera world, hopes with which I agree wholeheartedly. This progressive and thoughtful production could well set an example for performing historically problematic opera worldwide.

⁵⁰ Pacific Opera Project, "Madama Butterfly in Japanese and English," Livestreamed April 14, 2019, YouTube video, 3:08:18.

⁵¹ Humberto Capiro, "Review: Pacific Opera Project and Houston's Opera in the Heights Team Up for Glorious and Faithful Production of *Madama Butterfly*," *Living Out Loud Los Angeles*, April 9, 2019.

⁵² Jim Farber, "It's 'One Fine Day' for Pacific Opera Project's *Madama Butterfly*," *San Francisco Classical Voice*, April 9, 2019.

⁵³ Gordon Williams, "Pacific Opera Project 2018-19 Review: *Madama Butterfly*," *OperaWire*, April 10, 2019.

My second case study is the Metropolitan Opera's 2016 production of *Madama Butterfly*, specifically the production first headed by the late film director Anthony Minghella. The production first opened in 2006, with the 2016 revival directed and choreographed by Minghella's wife Carolyn Choa and featuring veteran performers Dwayne Croft as Sharpless and Maria Zifchak as Suzuki. Roberto Alagna sang the role of Pinkerton, and Kristine Opolais, Butterfly.⁵⁴ The broadcast opened with Deborah Voigt introducing the opera as the story of a teenage geisha, Puccini's lovable adolescent, dying for love. This description seemed to me to be an overly romanticized view of this tragic tale.

Certain stylistic choices in this production suggested a heavy-handed attempt to construct a Japanese atmosphere. The performance began with an East Asian woman in an opulent kimono performing an elaborate fan dance during the overture. The set was minimalistic: no house or structure existed besides several sets of sliding screens that looked similar to those typically found in Japanese houses. The color red was clumsily emphasized in enormous red Japanese lanterns, an ever-present red backdrop, Butterfly's wedding sash, and piles of red flowers strewn about for Pinkerton's return. The costuming, likewise, was garish: the bright colors and patterns of the kimonos, the enormous headpieces that curved high above the performer's heads, and the bold makeup created a dizzying scene of superfluous decoration (Figure 3). Though it collectively had a dramatic effect in its showiness, the production went overboard in manifesting a Japanese atmosphere. In particular, the makeup of the marriage official and Uncle Bonze shocked me in its disfiguring and clichéd nature—the eyebrows turned upwards at the end, the eyes extended into slits (Figure 4-5). Similarly, Prince Yamadori's entrance presented him in an over-the-top costume and excessive makeup (Figure 6).

⁵⁴ Ako Imamura, "Kristine Opolais Breaks Hearts in Met's *Madama Butterfly*," *Bachtrack*, March 18, 2016.

This production also contained a conflicting element in its presentation of Butterfly and Pinkerton's son, Trouble, or Sorrow. Rather than a human child, Trouble was a Bunraku puppet operated by three men (Figure 7). This nod to Japanese Bunraku puppetry, an important Japanese cultural tradition, both surprised and pleased me, especially in the skill with which the performers operated the puppet to make it seem like a human child. However, the puppet's appearance gave me pause—the face of the puppet bears a striking resemblance to stereotypical cartoons of Asian men, similar to Cousin Chin-Kee in Gene Yang's graphic novel *American Born Chinese*.⁵⁵ The libretto of *Madama Butterfly* does mention Sorrow's features tying him physically to Pinkerton (e.g. blond hair), but the blatant Asian stereotype written all over the puppet's face failed to adhere to that plot point.



Figure 3: The Metropolitan Opera's 2016 production of *Madama Butterfly*. Act I: Butterfly and her wedding party arrive.

⁵⁵ Joshua Barajas, "This Chinese-American Cartoonist Forces us to Face Racist Stereotypes," *PBS News Hour*, September 30, 2016.



Figure 4: The Metropolitan Opera's 2016 production of *Madama Butterfly*. Act I: The imperial commissioner officiates.



Figure 5: The Metropolitan Opera's 2016 production of *Madama Butterfly*. Act I: Uncle Bonze arrives at the wedding.



Figure 6: The Metropolitan Opera's 2016 production of *Madama Butterfly*. Act II: Prince Yamadori asks for Butterfly's hand.



Figure 7: The Metropolitan Opera's 2016 production of *Madama Butterfly*. Act II: Butterfly, her son Sorrow, and the three puppeteers.

In spite of the problems of design and staging, this production effectively captured Pinkerton's final sentiments of guilt and his realization of the consequences of his actions. The feelings of regret and torture were clear on Alagna's face as he sings and flees the scene. Another aspect I appreciated was the staging choice for Butterfly's death scene, which made it poignant and memorable: she faces away from the audience and holds her arms out as if on a cross. Then, when her child runs in with an American flag in hand, she blindfolds him before stabbing herself, her red sash unraveling as if it were blood. This staging communicated a central message of the work: Butterfly did not merely kill herself; rather, the effects of American imperialism drove her to suicide. Puccini and the librettists did endeavor to incorporate this commentary in the opera, and I felt the Met both staged and acted it appropriately.⁵⁶

Reviews of this production generally celebrated its scenic artistry and compelling acting while praising Minghella's interpretation and staging. Eric Simpson remarked in the *New York Classical Review* that the choreography and puppetry solved some narrative challenges inherent in the work, and lauded the production as brilliant, dazzlingly lit, and deep.⁵⁷ Ako Imamura noted in his *Bachtrack* review that the production used figures clad in black to move props, called kuroko in traditional Japanese theater. He celebrated Opolais for her performance as Butterfly and applauded Minghella's direction for its cinematic and exotic quality.⁵⁸ Though I would generally agree with these assessments, I felt the production to be performative rather than authentic; without explanation or contextualization of the traditional Japanese elements, general audience members would not fully understand their implications and background.

⁵⁶ The Metropolitan Opera, *Madama Butterfly*, Performed April 2, 2016, Video, 2:44.

⁵⁷ Eric Simpson, "Opolais and Alagna at Their Heights in an Unforgettable Met *Butterfly*," *New York Classical Review*, March 18, 2016.

⁵⁸ Imamura, "Kristine."

The Vienna State Opera's 2017 production of *Madama Butterfly* directed by Jonathan Darlington, featuring Murat Karahan as Pinkerton and Mariá José Siri as Cio-Cio-San, offers insight into how European and American opera companies differ in performing *Madama Butterfly*. Particularly striking in this production is the elaborate and beautiful set, complete with a small house, bridge, and a backdrop of the harbor. Though most of the performers appeared to be Caucasian, they wore minimal makeup, and the clothing looked Japanese but not ostentatious. Parasols and fans were used as props, and as Cio-Cio-San and her wedding party fluttered the fans, they looked almost like butterfly wings (Figure 8). After Act I, the set changed to the inside of Cio-Cio-San's house. Whereas the first act takes place shortly after her arrival at the house for the wedding, the second act unfolds entirely within her house and thus offers a look inside Cio-Cio-San and her state of mind, both metaphorically and literally. The production included many details within the house, including a prayer shrine, furniture, artwork, and a backdrop of the harbor once again (Figure 9). Additionally, Cio-Cio-San's son was played by a young boy with blond hair, as described in the libretto (Figure 10).



Figure 8: The Vienna State Opera's 2017 production of *Madama Butterfly*. Act I: Cio-Cio-San and her wedding party arrive at the house.



Figure 9: The Vienna State Opera's 2017 production of *Madama Butterfly*. Act II: Cio-Cio-San welcomes the consul Sharpless into her home.



Figure 10: The Vienna State Opera's 2017 production of *Madama Butterfly*. Act II: Cio-Cio-San sings to her son before committing suicide.

Beyond the staging and costuming choices, I felt this production successfully communicated the more psychological and emotional aspects of this opera. Siri's portrayal of Cio-Cio-San emphasized her age and naiveté. The end of Act I occurred almost entirely in the dark as Pinkerton and Cio-Cio-San sing together—perhaps signifying the fantastical and fleeting

nature of their wedding night, as both Pinkerton's face and his true intentions were obscured. During the vigil, Suzuki, Cio-Cio-San, and the child face away from the audience towards the backdrop rather than facing the audience, which could represent Cio-Cio-San's fixation on Pinkerton's return and her blind devotion to him. Cio-Cio-San and Suzuki's interactions clearly show them as very close friends, which strengthens the intensity of Suzuki's despair when she finds out about Pinkerton's wife.⁵⁹ In general, I felt that this production focused primarily on the psychological drama of the opera and did so appropriately, with particular emphasis on Cio-Cio-San's inherent strength and Pinkerton's final regret.

⁵⁹ Wiener Staatsoper, "Murat Karahan *Madama Butterfly*," Livestreamed November 24, 2017, Youtube video, 2:47:24.

Applications for Modern-Day Performance Practice

Whereas the Metropolitan Opera production of *Madama Butterfly* added contemporary details and unconventional staging, the Vienna State Opera proceeded based on tradition, but lacked the progressive elements employed by the Pacific Opera Project to propel the opera into the twenty-first century. However, each production offered a different lens through which to view the opera, shedding light on various details and artistic choices that all enhanced the overall performance.

Though the Pacific Opera Project's efforts to present *Madama Butterfly* in two languages are admirable, most opera companies around the world have neither the resources nor the time to ask performers to learn the libretto in English and/or Japanese. However, a likely and attainable compromise could be managed through a slight staging change. In the Pacific Opera Project's performance, Goro and Sharpless served as translators for Cio-Cio-San and Pinkerton. Though both characters sing in Italian, it would be beneficial to have Goro and Sharpless mime the act of translating to make the language barrier apparent, even if it does not literally exist. This small adjustment would establish a crucial element of historical authenticity and realism within an otherwise fantastical drama.

Similarly, their goal to cast Japanese performers in the Japanese roles, though admirable, poses difficulties worldwide, especially in countries with fewer Japanese performers than in America. To this, I would suggest at least having the initial round of auditions be blind, to focus primarily on vocal ability. Auditioning and casting have created quite a controversy within the classical music world in the past year. Especially in opera, where acting does play a significant

role, it seems counterproductive to relegate performers into roles based on their ethnicities when in the past, non-Caucasian performers were not cast in any roles at all. In either situation, performers would be limited by their appearance—thus, blind casting opens up every role to every performer, if done correctly. Provided performers avoid makeup like yellowface and mannerisms that uphold or exaggerate stereotypes, and opera companies avoid whitewashing and typecasting, I believe roles like Cio-Cio-San and the other Japanese characters in the opera should be open to all.

I enjoyed the aspects of traditional Japanese culture incorporated in the Metropolitan Opera production, particularly the Bunraku puppetry and fan dances. However, the fan dances often occurred in the background to set the stage or create an “authentic” atmosphere. Additionally, many of the dancers appeared to be East Asian, whereas most of the main performers were not, which arguably constitutes tokenism. The puppet used as Sorrow could have looked more realistic and less like a caricature, especially considering his mixed-race heritage. Skilled puppeteers may be tricky to recruit for most productions, but at the same time, employing a child to act onstage creates its own difficulties too. I would advise against incorporating elements of Japanese culture like these solely as a way to create ambience, unless these fan dances were a dedicated part of the action on stage. In reality, practices like authentic costumes, modest hairpieces, and minimal makeup go much further than unnecessary tokenizing elements like enormous hats, fan dances, and Bunraku puppetry.

Additionally, Cio-Cio-San’s house has significant meaning to her and connects to Japanese culture. However, the Met Opera’s set design did not include a recognizable house—instead, it consisted of several sets of sliding screen doors. Though I appreciated the minimalism and drama of the Met Opera’s staging, the house is an essential element of the opera and should

not be left out. The Vienna State Opera's performance effectively represented the house, especially the interior as shown in the second act. However, the Met Opera production communicated the anti-imperialist sentiments in the opera extremely clearly, with its placement of the American flag in Trouble's hand in the final scene, an aspect of the opera I feel truly embodies Puccini's good intentions and brings meaning and depth to what seems like a classic romantic tragedy.

Beyond staging and costuming choices, it is crucial for productions to include an educational segment to reveal the inherent racism and sexism present in this opera. The Seattle Opera's 2017 production of *Madama Butterfly* had an additional open discussion with Asian American artists, activists, and community leaders as well as an evening of plays written by Asian American women. Prior to the performance, they hosted a poster exhibition in the theatre lobby, displaying racist portrayals of Asian people in the media, such as Mr. Yunioshi from *Breakfast at Tiffany's* and *Miss Saigon*. This way of contextualizing *Madama Butterfly* and preparing and informing audiences does not intrude upon the performance itself but serves a crucial educational role.

Hate crimes against Asian Americans have risen sharply in the past year, likely due to the Covid-19 pandemic's origins in Wuhan, China. Reports of these incidents have had consistent themes: people accusing Asian Americans of bringing the virus to the States and people suddenly and violently attacking Asian Americans in public.⁶⁰ The organization Stop AAPI Hate received 3,795 complaints of racism and discrimination against Asian Americans in the past year, with over five hundred of those occurring in the months of January and February of 2021.⁶¹ Recently,

⁶⁰ Nicole Hong and Jonah E. Bromwich, "Asian-Americans Are Being Attacked. Why are Hate Crime Charges So Rare?" *The New York Times*, March 18, 2021.

⁶¹ Nicole Chavez, "Asian Americans Reported Being Targeted At Least 500 Times in the Last Two Months," *CNN*, March 18, 2021.

a white male shooter murdered eight spa workers in Atlanta, six of which were Asian American women.⁶² Especially in 2020, these hate crimes and race-motivated harassment were only exacerbated by statements made by then-President Donald Trump, who frequently used terminology like “kung flu” and “China virus.”⁶³ Even the numbers released from Stop AAPI Hate may not accurately reflect the true number of hate crimes within the last year due to a likely lack of reporting. Asian Americans have frequently been treated differently than other groups due to their model minority status, but events of the past year have shown that Asian Americans, and especially the women and the elderly, are just as vulnerable to racially motivated hate crimes.

Madama Butterfly may seem like a story from the distant past, when imperialism and Japonisme flourished, but its cultural influence has persisted throughout the twentieth century into the twenty-first. In particular, the fetishization and hyper-sexualization of Asian women remains, and some might even say that *Madama Butterfly* helped to generate the stereotype of submissiveness and childishness in Asian women. This stereotype was further perpetuated in the media, especially in pornography, and terms like “Asian fetish” or “yellow fever” began to circulate to describe those with a romantic or sexual preference for Asian women. Media and our society have long equated Asian women with geishas in that they exist to serve and entertain men and must be passive, subservient, and seductive all at the same time.⁶⁴ In many ways, this picture of Asian women fits perfectly with the character Cio-Cio-San.

⁶² Jordan Freiman, “8 Killed in Shootings at 3 Atlanta-area Spas, One Suspect in Custody,” *CBS News*, March 17, 2021.

⁶³ Khaleda Rahman, “Donald Trump Repeats ‘China Virus’ Slur on Fox News on Same Night as Atlanta Shootings,” *Newsweek*, March 17, 2021.

⁶⁴ Celeste Ziehl, “Yellow Fever: The Problem with the Sexual Fetishization and Exotification of Eastern Asian Women,” *Medium*, May 27, 2020.

In light of these recent events and the continued racism and sexism against Asian women first established via exoticism and Japonisme, the way opera companies perform *Madama Butterfly* matters more than ever. The applications I presented previously do not mitigate every problematic element of the opera—if they did, the opera would not be performed at all. However, they serve to make the performance more historically realistic and avoid practices like cultural appropriation or tokenism. Presenting *Madama Butterfly* offers an opportunity for directors, performers, and audience members to engage with history and become better educated about the roots of racism against Asians. This opera now bears the responsibility of being both a museum and a classroom rather than a dramatized reflection of reality. Thoughtfully staged productions could also open up a dialogue in communities related to the opera's influence and the work that still needs to be done today. Now is the time for awareness, thoughtful discussion, and concrete implementation to transform *Madama Butterfly* into an opera that does not leave audiences with a bitter taste in their mouths.

Appendix A

Madama Butterfly Libretto

To access the libretto of *Madama Butterfly*, follow this [link](#).

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Pitch Exploration Lab, Penn State January 2020 – May 2021

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