

MADAMA BUTTERFLY
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In 1854, during Commodore Matthew Perry's second expedition to open Japan to U.S. trade, another American naval officer assigned to the expedition, George H. Preble, wrote in his diary that Japanese officials had assured him and his fellow officers that "when the treaty was signed we could have plenty of Japanese wives."

The Japanese were enticing the Americans with an institution the Dutch and Chinese had enjoyed for centuries, when they had exclusive trading privileges with Japan: the "temporary" or "Japanese" marriage. The practice disgusted moralists and missionaries, but merchants and naval officers found the temptation irresistible. Located somewhere between prostitution and concubinage, a "Japanese marriage" allowed a Westerner visiting Japan for an indefinite period to consort with a Japanese girl without contracting one of many unpleasant diseases rampant in the treaty ports. For about \$30 a month -- \$600 contemporary -- a roving young fellow could indulge in the widespread, late-nineteenth century European male fantasy of cohabitating with a docile, doll-like, Japanese wife -- or so they were advertised -- in a miniature house surrounded by exotic gardens and flowers. The marriage contract wasn't legally binding. In fact it was regarded by Westerners as a joke. The marriage could be abandoned at any time, and when the husband received a new posting it usually was. Sometimes the departing husband provided for his ex-wife's future, sometimes he didn't. Japanese wives had no legal rights to alimony, property, inheritances or children.

So why would any sane, self-respecting Japanese woman sign on? The history of Japanese women in the treaty ports is sketchy -- it's all about, and written by, the men. But it's likely these young Japanese girls were forced into sexual subjugation by many of the same social and economic realities that force young girls into the sex trade today: poverty, desperation, a desire to better one's life and the life of one's family. Though Puccini's fifteen year-old Cio-Cio-San, or Madama Butterfly, is typically costumed in a

formal kimono, carries a colorful sun-shade or painted fan, and wears her hair in a chignon, we shouldn't forget that she's actually a nineteenth century cousin of the malnourished, twenty-first century waif in miniskirt and halter-top prowling the red-light districts of Bangkok or Phnom Penh.

Butterfly's father is dead – the Mikado ordered him to commit *hara-kiri* – and her mother is poor. At one time Butterfly's family was rich, but now she's been reduced to working as a geisha. No easy life, flitting from client to client in the rough and tumble treaty port of Nagasaki, which was, according to a rare, morally-upstanding, fastidious sailor who disembarked from the U.S.S. Charleston in 1895, “the first city I have ever visited where I could not find a place to eat and sleep and rest when coming ashore without having to do so in a saloon, a gambling den, or a house of ill repute.” These joints were clustered along a narrow creek near the harbor. We can imagine the drunken, debauching sailors. We can imagine the stench of that creek. Enter Lieutenant Benjamin Franklin Pinkerton, fresh off the U.S.S. Lincoln, handsome, dashing, his pockets overflowing with greenbacks. He's smitten with Butterfly. He wants to marry her, Japanese-style, and shack up in a cute little place at the top of the hill, overlooking the harbor. It's easy to see why Butterfly might be inclined, for her own advantage, to say yes.

But this is an opera, and there's no opera without love. It was Butterfly's intense, genuine love for Pinkerton that inspired Puccini to make an opera out of David Belasco's play – a play inspired by a short story written by the American John Luther Long, which was in turn inspired by an anecdote told to Long by his sister, who had been married to a Christian missionary in Nagasaki in the early 1890's. Puccini saw Belasco's play in London in 1900, and though Puccini barely understood enough English to order a pint of lager he was struck by the scene in which Cio-Cio-San stays up all night waiting for the long-absent Pinkerton's ship to appear in Nagasaki harbor. It's helpful to know this bit of history, since it cues us as to what Puccini considered the emotional heart of his opera: Pinkerton's abandonment of Butterfly, and her enduring hope that he would return. We've all known a person like Butterfly. Or been one. A person who waited in vain. Who believed. Who wouldn't let go. That's what makes Butterfly so affecting as a character. Her faith, her trust, her terrible naïveté. Her suffering. There's something about people in

this state that just won't accept the world as it is – that insists, with a kind of self-mortifying idealism, that the world be better. That *people* be better. How can we blame them?

But there's more to this opera than simple unrequited love. The couple in question is an innocent, teenage, Japanese girl – fifteen in Act I, eighteen in Act II -- and a well-traveled, thirty-something, American man. The girl is a civilian, the man military. The girl is Buddhist, the man Christian. The man hails from a modern, industrialized, imperialist nation; the girl's nation aspires to become one (and will). So Butterfly and Pinkerton fall in love, or lust, across vast expanses of experience and maturity and age, across cultures and religions.

It doesn't work out. It can't work out. Pinkerton doesn't even take the relationship seriously. He's callous and calculating. He speaks to Butterfly in the poetic language of love, but he's really describing, and masking, lust. He's not a cad, exactly – he's no Don Giovanni – but he openly admits to Sharpless, the more ethical American consul, that he intends to profit from the elasticity of the Japanese marriage contract, and even breaks into a boastful aria on the subject, reminding Sharpless that the Yankee “does what he pleases wherever he goes” and isn't “satisfied with life unless he can get the greatest enjoyment out of each place he visits.” By enjoyment we understand he's not talking about visiting Shinto shrines.

Butterfly, on the other hand, fears presciently that she might die of her love for Pinkerton. She pleads with him, “Love me, just a little, with the love of a baby, the love that is my due.” Pinkerton is more concerned about what's due him. He leaves Nagasaki after a short time. When he returns three years later, with his American wife, he intends to avoid Butterfly until he learns that she's born him a child in his absence. Pinkerton and his American wife promptly hike up to Butterfly's house with the intention of whisking the boy away to the United States. To Pinkerton's credit, when he sees Butterfly, he does feel remorse for what he's put her through. She's been counting the hours – three years of hours – until his return. She renounced her religion for him, her family, her country – the country that killed her father. She hoped that one day she and her child would accompany Pinkerton to America and live a stable, prosperous life under the rights and protections of American laws. Which leads to a little-discussed dimension of the opera: how America's

promise, America's offer of refuge and opportunity to the world's poor and oppressed, often collides with America's need to expand, to profit, to look after its own interests, to fulfill its own desires.

Of course you could ignore all this and just listen to the music and still have a sublime evening. The intricate weaves of melodies, the unpredictable, shifting textures, robust and heraldic, then suddenly sheer, gossamer, attenuated. The music underwrites and portrays the emotions of the characters with such precision and suppleness that we feel we're hearing flurries of neurotransmitters flitting across synapses, axons grazing dendrites. Listen to how gracefully Puccini does conversations, pursuing the turns and shifts with melodies and flourishes, tailoring the music to fit the curvatures of spoken exchange, creating excitement and momentum and color.

Reading the program notes for an opera shouldn't take as long as listening to the opera itself. But we can't leave out the premiere. La Scala opera house, Milan, February 17, 1904. Puccini's publisher had refused to allow the Italian press a glimpse of the score, and Puccini had barred the press from attending any rehearsals. They'd intended to whet the public's appetite, but they just made everyone mad. Possibly there was a conspiracy against Puccini. A good portion of the audience was hostile from the beginning. Italian opera fans were unforgiving, and when a melody in Act I reminded them of a melody from *La Bohème*, they began to hoot and shout, feeling that Puccini was borrowing from an earlier score. It was all downhill from there. Groans, growls, laughter, giggling, animal noises. Pandemonium. A belligerent cacophony. The love duet in Act I was drowned out. Throughout Act II the noise was so loud the singers complained they couldn't hear the orchestra. At one point Butterfly's kimono billowed up, and everyone began to shout that she was pregnant – a derisive reference to the soprano's widely publicized affair with the famous Italian conductor Arturo Toscanini. Accounts differ as to whether the final curtain fell to “glacial silence” or to more hoots and hissing, but either way it was a disaster. Puccini described it as a “lynching.”

It's hard to know whether to feel sorry for him. Puccini was a reckless, occasionally cruel man whose hobbies included hunting, card-playing, skirt-chasing and sports cars. Over the course of the previous few years he'd survived two car accidents, one of which had nearly killed him. He'd been diagnosed with diabetes. Two women

were competing furiously for his affections, a mistress who threatened to ruin him by handing over his love letters to the Italian press and a jealous, volatile, live-in lover of many years whose family was pressuring him to marry her. Picture Puccini at the age of 45, confined to bed, then a wheelchair, unable to sit at his piano, wracked by excruciating pain, desperately struggling to finish *Madama Butterfly* while his future in-laws circled. Wouldn't this Italian composer, whose affairs had injured more than a few women, have felt a furtive solidarity with the American Lieutenant Pinkerton – a man who is, by the end of Act II, similarly entangled in a mess of his own making? Could composing an opera whose purpose was to give eloquent voice to a shunned woman's suffering have been an act of empathy? Apology? Atonement?

It's a testament to Puccini's courage and resolve as an artist that the catastrophic premiere left him undaunted. He returned his fee of 20,000 lire to his publisher and huddled with his librettists the very next day to begin revisions. They cut material from Act I, divided Act II into two sections – the audience had found it too long – and gave Pinkerton a final aria. *Madama Butterfly* premiered again three months later in Brescia, Italy, where it was an unqualified triumph.