

Madama Butterfly

“Tragedia giapponese” [“a Japanese tragedy”] in 3 Acts

by

Giacomo Puccini
(1858-1924)

libretto by Giuseppe Giacosa and Luigi Illica
based on the play *Madame Butterfly: A Tragedy of Japan* (1900)
by David Belasco (1853-1931)

First performance: Milan, Teatro alla Scala, 17 February 1904

Characters:

Cio-Cio San (*Madama Butterfly*) - Soprano
B. F. Pinkerton, a lieutenant in the United States Navy - Tenor
Suzuki, Cio-Cio San's servant – Mezzo-soprano
Sharpless, the American Consul at Nagasaki - Baritone
Goro, a *nakodo* (marriage broker) – Tenor
Kate Pinkerton, American wife of B. F. Pinkerton – Mezzo-soprano
Prince Yamadori, a suitor of Cio-Cio San – Baritone
The Bonze, Cio-Cio San's uncle, a Buddhist priest – Bass
Yakusidé, another uncle of Cio-Cio San – Baritone
Cio-Cio San's mother – Mezzo-soprano
Cio-Cio San's aunt – Soprano
Cio-Cio San's cousin - Soprano
The Imperial Commissioner – Bass
Registrar – Baritone
Sorrow, Cio-Cio San's child (to be re-named “Joy” once his father returns to him) – silent role

Cio-Cio San's friends and relatives, servants

Setting – Nagasaki, Japan, about the turn of the twentieth century

N.B. Belasco's play was based on the short story “*Madame Butterfly*” by John Luther Long (1861-1927) that appeared in the *Century Magazine* in 1898; Long's story was inspired by the true story of a Japanese geisha who married an American naval officer, but was abandoned after he married a new bride in the United States; Long learned of the incident from his sister, the wife of an American missionary stationed in Nagasaki; elements of his story also appear to be based on the novel *Madame Chrysanthème* by Pierre Loti (1887)

Synopsis

Act I

On a hill above Nagasaki, Pinkerton is being shown the particulars of a house he has just leased from Goro, the marriage broker. Pinkerton has purchased a wife from him as well, Butterfly, and he is waiting for her to arrive with her wedding party. The Consul Sharpless is present to toast the impending wedding. Pinkerton makes it clear to him that Butterfly is intended only as an interim wife, and that he intends to acquire an American wife later. When the wedding party arrives, Butterfly tells Pinkerton about herself. She is only fifteen years' old, and of a wealthy family, but her father has died. Due to the family's poverty, she has had to work as a geisha. She proclaims that she has converted to Christianity in order to share her new husband's religion. Her uncle, a Buddhist priest, condemns her viciously for doing so after a brief wedding ceremony, and her relatives reject her. Pinkerton takes her into his house and tries to calm her down as night falls. It is clear that they have both fallen deeply in love.

Act II

It has been three years since Pinkerton left Nagasaki. Butterfly has been left with her maid Suzuki to care for Pinkerton's son. Their money has almost run out, but Butterfly is content to wait for her husband to return. Goro arrives with Sharpless, who wants to read a letter to Butterfly from her husband. For the time being, she does not let him even start it. Prince Yamadori then enters, and Goro proposes that she marry him, since he is in love with her. According to Japanese custom, she is considered divorced as an abandoned wife, but she refuses to marry Yamadori, even though offered riches to do so, preferring to stay loyal to Pinkerton. Yamadori leaves and Sharpless tries again to read the letter to her from Pinkerton. So overcome with emotion himself, he is unable to finish it for its disturbing contents, which foretell Butterfly's abandonment. Butterfly still believes that Pinkerton will return shortly, and she brings out her son. Pinkerton's ship is indeed seen in the harbor of Nagasaki. Butterfly is overjoyed. She puts on her wedding dress and decorates the house with Suzuki in celebration of his return. At the end of the scene, Butterfly, Suzuki, and the boy all wait for Pinkerton to return.

Act III

As dawn breaks the next day, Butterfly is still waiting for Pinkerton to return, while Suzuki and the boy have fallen asleep. When they wake up, Suzuki persuades Butterfly to go off to sleep with the boy. While she is sleeping, Pinkerton and Sharpless enter. They tell Suzuki that they want to take the boy to America and hope for her help in making this happen. Pinkerton's new wife is seen waiting outside the house in the gardens. Urged by Sharpless, Pinkerton rushes off, hoping that the others will conclude the arrangements. Butterfly awakens after hearing voices and looks for Pinkerton. In the presence of Suzuki, Sharpless, and Mrs. Pinkerton, she only receives evasive answers to her questions about what is going on and guesses the truth herself. In response to Mrs. Pinkerton's request that she turn over her son to her, Butterfly says that she will give him up only if Pinkerton will arrive to pick him up personally. Sharpless and Mrs. Pinkerton leave. Butterfly tells Suzuki to leave the room and play with the boy. Then, she picks up her father's ceremonial sword. She is preparing to kill herself when Suzuki pushes the child into the room. Butterfly says goodbye to her son, blindfolds him, and leaves him to play while he withdraws behind a screen to kill herself. She falls to her death after stabbing herself as Pinkerton and Sharpless burst into the house.