

# LA OPERA: *MADAME BUTTERFLY*

## USC LIBRARIES RESOURCE GUIDE



USC students will take a trip to the LA Opera to see *Madame Butterfly*. In Puccini's classic opera, a love that knows no boundaries goes horribly wrong in a fateful meeting of East and West. What begins as an idyllic liaison in an enchanting land of cherry blossoms turns into the heartbreaking tragedy of an abandoned bride forced to make an excruciating decision. This spectacular production has never been seen before in Los Angeles.

**ROSS SCIMECA** of the USC Libraries has selected the following resources to help you learn more about Puccini and his opera.

### Introduction

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The LA Opera has done a number of productions of Puccini's tragic opera *Madame Butterfly*. A stunning production by Ron Daniels, never before seen in Los Angeles, melds sumptuous costumes with evocative period scenery. This will be most appreciated after the colorless former production by Robert Wilson from past seasons.

### Synopsis

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The following synopsis of the opera is reproduced from the LA Opera website.

#### ACT ONE

Outside a house in turn-of-the-century Nagasaki, Benjamin Franklin Pinkerton, an American naval officer and admitted Yankee vagabond, arranges with Goro to lease a residence for himself and his new bride Cio-Cio-San, also called Butterfly. He is then introduced to Butterfly's servants, one of whom is Suzuki. While talking to Sharpless, the American consul, Pinkerton reveals that he purchased his bride for a hundred yen and that he can bow out of the marriage contract whenever he wishes. Sharpless tries to warn the officer that his teenage bride might really love him, but Pinkerton ignores the consul, drinking to the day when he will marry an American.

Butterfly arrives with friends and relatives, greets Pinkerton, and shows him her paltry belongings, including the dagger her father used to kill himself. She confides to Pinkerton that she secretly converted to Christianity the day before so that she could worship the same God as her husband, for whom she is willing to forget her own people.

As they celebrate their wedding, the Bonze, Butterfly's devout uncle, storms in. He has found out that she converted and denounces her for abandoning her faith and her family. They renounce her, and Pinkerton demands that they all leave. Night falls and Butterfly joins Pinkerton outside, where she rapturously confesses her love. He leads her into the house.

#### ACT TWO

Three years have passed since Pinkerton sailed away for America. The devoted Butterfly tells Suzuki that one day soon they will see Pinkerton's ship enter the harbor. Sharpless, who knows that Pinkerton will soon arrive in Nagasaki with his new wife, tries to persuade Butterfly to marry Prince Yamadori, but she refuses to listen. She shows the American consul the son that she has borne Pinkerton, convinced that her husband would never

abandon her or his own child. The harbor cannon announces the arrival of Pinkerton's ship, and an elated Butterfly prepares for his imminent arrival.

Butterfly, her son and Suzuki wait all night for Pinkerton, who finally appears the next morning with Sharpless and his new wife, Kate. Butterfly is resting, so Suzuki meets them. Suddenly overwhelmed by remorse, Pinkerton leaves because he cannot face the wife he abandoned. While Kate asks Suzuki to explain to Butterfly that Pinkerton's son would be better off in America, Butterfly awakens and emerges, seeing the strange woman in her garden. Sharpless tells her that the woman is Pinkerton's wife. Distraught, Butterfly retreats to the house to stab herself with her father's dagger. She parts sorrowfully from her son. Pinkerton is heard calling out her name in anguish, as Butterfly dies.

## Recommended Books

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### ***The Romantic World of Puccini: A New Critical Appraisal of the Operas* (2008)**

By Iris J. Amesen

**Music Library: ML410.P89A66 2009**

### ***Puccini: His Life and Works* (2002)**

By Julian Budden

**Music Library: ML410.P89B83 2002**

### ***Madam Butterfly: A Guide to the Opera* (1979)**

By Mosco Carner

**Music Library: ML410.P89C27**

### ***Puccini: A Biography* (2002)**

By Mary Jane Phillips-Matz

**Music Library: ML410.P89P52 2002**

### ***Madame Butterfly: Japonisme, Puccini, and the Search for the Real Cho-Cho-San* (2001)**

By Jan von Rijn

**Music Library: ML410.P89R55 2001**

## Recommended Recordings

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There are over 70 recordings of *Madame Butterfly*. Herbert von Karajan has recorded this work three times. There is an outstanding video recording from the Vienna State Opera with Mirella Freni, Christa Ludwig and Placido Domingo [**MUSDVD 529**], as well as his recordings of this work for EMI with Maria Callas from the late 1950s [**9331mus**] and for Decca in 1974 with Mirella Freni, Christa Ludwig and Luciano Pavarotti [**9101mus**]. John Barbirolli's recording for EMI from 1966 with Renata Scotto and Carlo Bergonzi has always been a favorite among opera buffs [**9088mus**]. Visit the Music Library—located on the ground floor of Doheny Memorial Library—to check out these recordings.