

## Memorable, Beautifully Executed Moments Abound in LVO's 'Madama Butterfly'

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By Sarah Bobson

The night belonged to Melody King. Singing the title role in Livermore Valley Opera's current production of *Madama Butterfly*, which opened Saturday night at the Bankhead Theatre, King simply captivated the audience. She looked and acted the part of the submissive, 15-year-old geisha bride with a playful innocence that was engaging and enchanting. This is all the more remarkable since this is her first time in the role.

There are few female operatic characters as naïve and self-sacrificing as Cio-Cio San, nicknamed Butterfly, and few male characters as unrepentant and despised as that of B. F. Pinkerton, the older, worldly American Naval officer she marries. *Madama Butterfly* tells the clash-of-cultures tale of a young girl whose heart is broken by a callous, opportunistic outsider.

In this most beloved and beautiful but heart-wrenching opera, Pinkerton does not take seriously his marriage in tradition-oriented, turn-of-the-century Japan to Cio-Cio San. He needs a place to stay while he's in Nagasaki. What could be better, and more practical and economical, than to rent a house and get a girl to go along with it? In Act I, the consul Sharpless tries to warn him to be careful and not play with the delicate 15-year-old's heart, but to no avail.

Presenting the potential pathos so early in the opera not only foreshadows Butterfly's tragic end, but heightens the ensuing drama in her every move and gesture. Puccini's lush orchestration and exquisitely beautiful melodies, a counterpoint to Pinkerton's callousness, further serve to tug at the heart strings. There is no composer who plays on the emotions like Puccini.

Butterfly is a difficult role. For one thing, the lyric soprano is onstage throughout most of the opera, which is not only emotionally taxing, but physically taxing, even when she's not singing. She must get up and down frequently from a kneeling position, which plays havoc with the knees. For this reason, many sopranos wear knee pads, never seen under the kimono. The role often is double cast, as it is in this production, with Carrie Hennessey.

Cio-Cio San is one of the rare characters who actually transforms over the course of the opera. She goes from a naïve newly-wed who sacrifices her family, ancestral religion, and Japanese honor to marry a foreigner, to a woman who must give up her child to the husband who betrays her trust when he doesn't take his marriage vows seriously. As such, she must express the wide ranging emotions of a delicate, young girl and yet sing unrelenting music of hurricane force. In "Un bel di," King's full-bodied, rich lyric soprano invested the famous aria with a longing that went far beyond simple sentimentality.

Contemporary audiences hate Pinkerton, and with good reason. They would have hated him even more in 1904, when the opera premiered at La Scala. In addition to being a cad, he was a boor and a racist and even harder to take. The opera flopped, so Puccini withdrew it and made cuts and changes. One of the changes was to tone down Pinkerton. Several months later, the opera re-opened to resounding success.

In the LVO production, Christopher Bengochea's portrayal of Pinkerton, as insensitive and lascivious, a man who can't wait to get his hands on Butterfly, seems closer to the original characterization. Bengochea sang the part of the ugly American with a robust tenor voice. While he belted a few of his early top notes a bit too much, as the opera progressed, he settled into the solidness of his strong voice. A commanding performer, he brought a virile, energetic quality to the character that is not often seen in stylized versions where the actors move with stolid deliberation.

Mezzo-soprano Michele Detwiler was a warm-voiced Suzuki. Baritone Nicolai Janitzky, as Pinkerton's compatriot Sharpless, displayed a handsome, resonant voice. Alex Taite's characterization of Goro was suitably obsequious.

Bass-baritone Carlos Aguilar was an impressively stentorian Bonze, standing behind the scrim, representing the shadow of Butterfly's ancestors. Emmanuel Franco, as Prince Yamadori, portrayed Butterfly's suitor with relish, undercutting the character's pompousness by strutting on stage with such long pants that they dragged on the stage and resembled a seal's front flippers.

Other supporting cast included Joel David Sutliff as the Imperial Commissioner, Jennie Litster as Kate Pinkerton, and Noelle Woodward as Butterfly's small son Dolore. The chorus admirably sang its small part.

Madama Butterfly sets are usually simple and stark, lighting effects ethereal. Jean Francois Revon's sets were even more minimal, with a slightly elevated platform center stage; a beautiful background scrim painted with black tree branches, delicately lit as a glowing "skyscape"; and a table. Butterfly's house was cleverly represented by stand-alone shoji doors. The one drawback: Instead of the shoji sliding sideways, they were lifted into the air, all without blackout, which broke the illusion. Silhouette, though, was used to good advantage. Pinkerton's returning ship becomes larger as it draws nearer the harbor. The Bonze is seen only as a large, looming shadow in the background.

There were so many memorable, beautifully executed moments in Stage Director's Brian Clay Luedloff production: Pinkerton spreading the arms on Cio-Cio San's kimono as if they were butterfly wings; confetti representing cherry blossom petals floating delicately, carpeting the ground; Butterfly dropping her outer kimono before retreating to the marriage bed.

Under Music Director Alexander Katsman's leadership, the orchestra produced a generous amount of detail without sacrificing the overall arch and thrust of Puccini's melodic line.

All performances take place at the Bankhead Theater, 2400 First St., Livermore.

Tickets for the Saturday evening performance, March 19, at 8:00 p.m., and the Sunday matinee, March 20, at 2:00 p.m. are available at the box office, at 925-373-6800, or at [www.livermoreperformingarts.org](http://www.livermoreperformingarts.org).

Prices are: \$39-\$64. Students \$10 off on all days. Included in the ticket price is a pre-performance lecture one hour prior to curtain. A traditional artist's reception is held in the lobby immediately following each performance.

For more information about LVO, visit the website [www.livermorevalleyopera.org](http://www.livermorevalleyopera.org)

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