

Madama Butterfly

Music by Giacomo Puccini

Libretto by Giuseppe Giacosa and Luigi Illica

Study Guide to the Opera

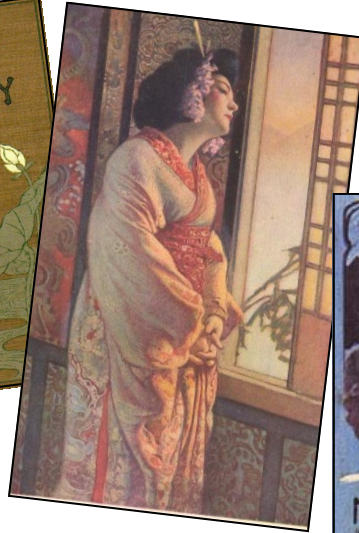
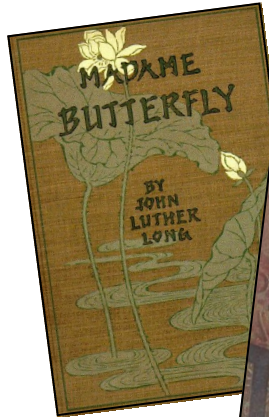
Artwork L to R: Cover of the 1903 edition of Long's *Madame Butterfly*, artwork by C. Yamall Abbott, published in *Century Magazine* in 1898 • Blanche Bates in Belasco's play *Madame Butterfly*, artwork by Sigismund Ivanowski, published in *Century Magazine* in 1900 • Poster by Adolfo Hohenstein for Puccini's opera *Madama Butterfly*

The Evolution of an Opera Story

by Jill Leahy

In 1887, French novelist Pierre Loti published *Madame Chrysanthème*, a semi-autobiographical **journal** of a naval officer who was married to a geisha while he was stationed in Nagasaki, Japan. The popular novel was translated into many languages and likely influenced how westerners viewed Japan in the early 20th century. *Madame Chrysanthème*,

transformed into an **opera** by the French composer André Messager, was first performed in Paris in 1893 and was widely performed for several years.



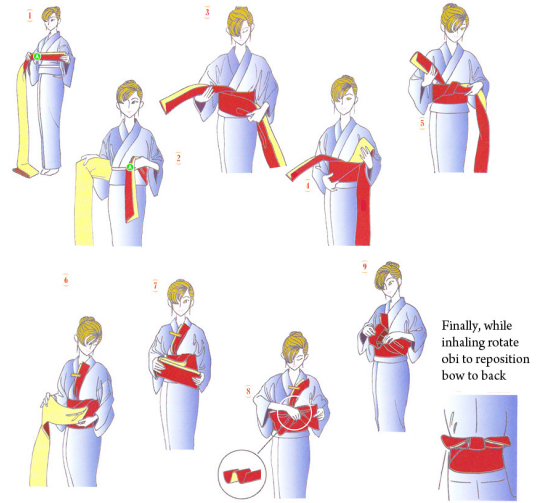
Around this time, American lawyer John Luther Long wrote a **short story** based on his sister's recollections of her time in Japan with her missionary husband. Long was probably familiar with Loti's work and may have included some details in the novella titled *Madame Butterfly*, which was first published in 1898 in the popular quarterly *Century Magazine*. Long asked David Belasco, a famous producer/playwright, to transform the story into a **play**. It premiered in New York in 1900. Historians note that when Giacomo Puccini saw the drama in London later that year, even though he didn't understand English, he believed that the story and tragic female character would work perfectly for his style of opera.

Working with librettists Luigi Illica and Giuseppe Giacosa, Puccini used Long's novella, Belasco's play, and maybe even some of Loti's journal to create what he considered one of his "best and technically advanced operas." However, at *Madama Butterfly's* premiere in Milan in February 1904, the audience showed its dissatisfaction loudly and the **opera** was deemed a fiasco. Puccini reworked the entire score and *Madama Butterfly* opened to success in Brescia in May 1904; the enthusiastic throng commanded that Puccini appear in front of the curtain ten times.

There are differences in the characters in each of these evolutions. John Luther Long wrote: *"The people read it, and said and wrote things about it—some good, some bad. But, happily, they who liked Cho-Cho-San were more than they who did not; and so she laughed and wept her way into some pretty hard hearts, and lived—not entirely in vain. And then she went upon the stage and made Miss Bates* and herself so famous that we had to write a bigger play for them. And they beckoned for her across the sea, where, in London, Signore Puccini saw her, and when she comes back she will be a song! Sad, sad indeed, but yet a song!"*

* Blanche Bates depicted in center illustration. See citations at left.

Madama Butterfly Synopsis



How to tie an obi around a kimono

ACT I. Nagasaki, around 1900. U.S. Navy Lieutenant B. F. Pinkerton inspects the house he has leased for 999 years from a marriage broker, Goro. Included with the house are three servants including Suzuki, the maid. They are expecting the bride, Cio-Cio-San, known as Madama Butterfly, whom Pinkerton has purchased for 100 yen. To the American Consul, Sharpless, Pinkerton describes the carefree philosophy of a sailor roaming the world in search of pleasure (**Dovunque al mondo**). For the moment, he is enchanted with the fragile Butterfly, but when Sharpless warns that Butterfly may not take her vows so lightly, Pinkerton brushes aside such scruples, saying he will one day marry a “real” American wife. Butterfly is heard in the distance joyously singing of her wedding (**Ancora un passo or via**). Entering surrounded by friends and family, Pinkerton’s fifteen-year-old bride tells him how she had to earn her living as a geisha when her family fell on hard times. In a quiet moment (**Vieni, amor mio!**), Butterfly displays her few possessions—including figures of her ancestors—and then reveals that she has converted to Christianity. The celebration is interrupted by Butterfly’s uncle, a Buddhist monk, who curses Butterfly for having renounced her ancestral religion. Pinkerton angrily sends the guests away. Alone with the distraught Butterfly, he dries her tears (**Viene la sera**) and they proclaim their love under the immense starry sky (**Vogliateme bene, un bene piccolino**).

Intermission

ACT II. Scene 1 Three years later, Butterfly waits for her husband’s return. As Suzuki prays (**E Izaghi ed Izanami**), her mistress stands with her eyes fixed on the harbor. When Suzuki shows her how little money is left, Butterfly urges her to have faith—one fine day Pinkerton’s ship will appear on the horizon (**Un bel dì vedremo**). Sharpless brings a letter from the lieutenant, but before he can read it to Butterfly, Goro appears with a handsome and wealthy suitor, Prince Yamadori. Brusquely dismissing both broker and prince, Butterfly insists her husband has not deserted her. Sharpless tries again to read the letter and suggests Pinkerton may not return (**Ora a noi**). Butterfly triumphantly carries in her child, Trouble, proclaiming that as soon as Pinkerton knows he has a son he surely will come back. If he does not, she would rather die than return to her former life. Both moved and frustrated by her blind faith, Sharpless leaves without revealing the rest of the letter. Butterfly, on the point of despair, hears a cannon shot. Now delirious with joy on seeing Pinkerton’s ship entering the harbor, she orders Suzuki to help fill the house with blossoms (**Flower Duet: Una nave de guerra**). Expecting Pinkerton to come running, Butterfly settles down to wait with Suzuki and little Trouble (**Humming Chorus: Coro a bocca chiusa**).

Scene 2 When Pinkerton still has not arrived at dawn, Suzuki insists that Butterfly rest. Before long, Sharpless enters with Pinkerton and Kate, his American wife. When Suzuki realizes who the woman is, she tearfully agrees to aid in breaking the news to her mistress. Seized with remorse, Pinkerton bids an anguished farewell to the scene of his former happiness (**Addio, fiorito asil**) and then rushes away. When Butterfly comes in expecting to find him, she finds Kate instead. Guessing the truth, the shattered Butterfly agrees to give up her child if his father will return for him. Then, sending even Suzuki away, she takes out the dagger with which her father committed Seppuku and bows before a statue of Buddha, choosing to die with honor rather than live in disgrace. As she raises the blade, Suzuki pushes the child into the room. Sobbing farewell, Butterfly sends him into the garden to play, then stabs herself (**Con onor muore**). As she dies, Pinkerton is heard calling her name.

Adapted from *Opera News*

Characters of the Opera

Cio-Cio-San (*Madama Butterfly*)

[choh-choh-SAHN] *soprano*
A 15-year-old geisha who marries Pinkerton. Their son is called Sorrow, Trouble, or Dolore [doh-LOH-reh].

Benjamin Franklin

Pinkerton *tenor*
A lieutenant in the U.S. navy who marries Cio-Cio-San during his time in Nagasaki. He promises he will return to her "when the robins nest".

Trouble

Son of Cio-Cio-San and Pinkerton.

Suzuki

mezzo-soprano
[soo-ZOO-kee]
Butterfly's faithful servant and friend.

Sharpless

baritone
U.S. Consul at Nagasaki and friend of Pinkerton who warns him about the seriousness of marrying Cio-Cio-San.

Goro [GOH-roh]

tenor
Arranges a marriage between Pinkerton and Cio-Cio-San.

Bonze

bass
(Bonzo) [BOHN-zoh]
Butterfly's uncle, a Buddhist priest who curses her for renouncing Buddhism, the faith of their ancestors.

Kate Pinkerton

mezzo-soprano
B. F. Pinkerton's American wife.

Prince Yamadori

baritone
[yah-mah-DOH-ree]
A wealthy prince who wishes to marry Cio-Cio-San.

Imperial Commissioner
Yakuside
The Official Registrar
Relatives and servants

Madama Butterfly continues to appear in the standard operatic repertoire and it ranks as the 7th most-performed opera worldwide.

Operabase

Puccini's Famous *Fiasco*

by Jill Leahy

Giacomo Puccini bequeathed us a magnificent musical legacy, despite the fact that many events during his lifetime didn't go his way. None of his later operas was an immediate success, including *La bohème* (1896), *Tosca* (1900), *Madama Butterfly* (1904), and *Turandot* (left unfinished when he died in 1924). *La bohème* met with mixed reviews, while *Tosca*, though liked by audiences, was panned by critics. But the most often reported and most richly described fiasco was associated with the premiere of *Madama Butterfly* at La Scala theater in Milan in February 1904.

Music historians Chadwick Jenkins and John Rizzo describe the scene: *19th-century Italian opera patrons took opera very seriously. Audiences were very familiar with the works of major composers and had high expectations for new operas. When audience members didn't like something, they expressed their feelings then and there—no waiting for published reviews. Also it was common for an organized body of professional applauders or detractors, known as a **claque**, to be hired to attend performances. That's the speculation about what happened at the sold-out premiere.*

The trouble began that evening at Butterfly's entrance. Some audience members shouted, "That's from Bohème!" Things were not helped either when a gust of air caused the prima donna's skirt to billow up, provoking a cry of "Butterfly is pregnant!" Puccini's "Humming Chorus" provided another opportunity for buffoonery. In an attempt to outdo Belasco's intense realism, the opera's producer placed performers with bird-whistles throughout the opera house to accompany the dawn after Butterfly's sleepless night. Unwilling to allow such a boon to pass unnoticed, the audience joined in with various animal sounds of their own, reducing the poetic gesture to lunacy.

Small wonder that Puccini closed the production, returned his fee, and reworked the score again and again, for Brescia, New York, and Paris. The fifth and final version is known as the "standard version" and is the one that's most often performed.



Giacomo Antonio
Domenico Michele
Secondo Maria **Puccini**
(1858—1924)

Giuseppe Verdi coined the word **fiasco** to describe a complete failure, especially a ludicrous or humiliating one. In mid 19th-century Italian, the phrase *fare fiasco* meant "to make a bottle," which took on the meaning "to fail in a performance."

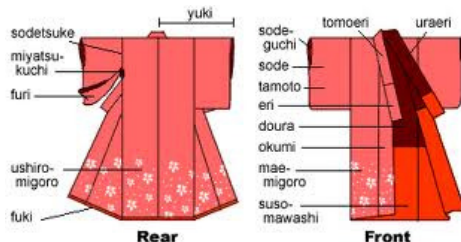
Fascination with Japanese Culture

by Jill Leahy

After Commodore Matthew Perry negotiated a treaty to open Japan to the west in 1854, interest in Japan blossomed in Europe and America. Puccini's *Madama Butterfly* provided some glimpses into Japanese culture, dress, and customs.

The **Kimono** is a traditional garment worn by men, women, and children. The word "kimono" literally means a "thing to wear" (*ki* "wear" and *mono* "thing").

Kimonos are T-shaped, straight-lined robes worn so that the hem falls to the ankle, with attached collars and long, wide sleeves. They're traditionally made from a single bolt of fabric called a **tan** measuring about 14 inches wide and



<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Geisha-kyoto-2004-11-21.jpg>

12½ yards long; the entire bolt is used to make one kimono. Kimonos are wrapped around the body, **always with the left side over the right** (except when dressing the dead for burial) and secured by a sash called an **obi**, which is tied at the back. The **yukata kimono** is a light cotton kimono worn during the summer and at festivals.

Geisha are professional entertainers who attend to guests during meals, banquets, and other occasions. They are trained in various traditional Japanese arts, such as dance, music, and games, as well as in the art of communication.

Seppuku (stomach cutting) is a form of male Japanese ritual suicide, originally reserved as an honorable way for a samurai to die, rather than fall into the hands of an enemy. The practice is also known incorrectly as hara-kiri.



Jigai is the Japanese word for female ritual suicide, performed by cutting the jugular vein with a sword. This is what Cio-Cio-San traditionally chooses in *Madama Butterfly*.

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