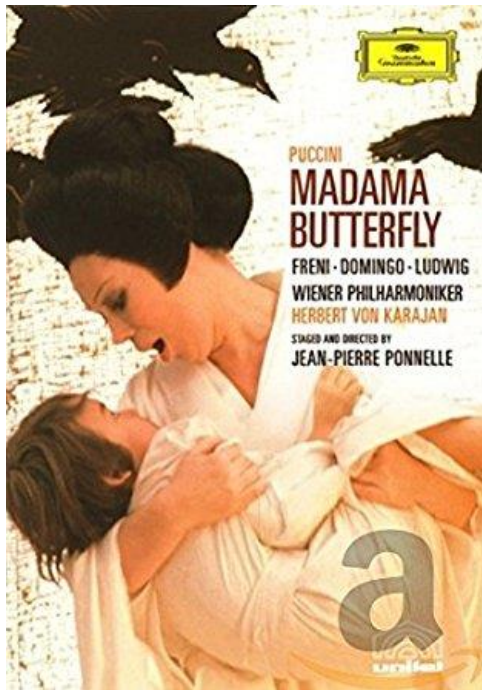


# THE OPERA THAT MAKES US ALL CRY: MADAMA BUTTERFLY

Researched by George Kurti Plohn



**Giacomo Puccini**, who lived between 1858 and 1924, was an immensely popular composer in his own lifetime, and his mature works remain staples in the repertory of most of the world's opera companies. His opera *Madama Butterfly* followed his previous three greatly acclaimed operas, *Manon Lescaut*, *La Bohème* and *Tosca*.

This opera takes place in the Japanese port city of Nagasaki at the turn of the last century, at a time of expanding American international presence. Japan at that time was hesitantly emerging of a long lasting self-imposed isolation, and Nagasaki was one of the country's few ports open to foreign ships.

Throughout this opera, the librettist and the composer focus on the mutual misunderstanding between the much unknown East and the so-called advanced West, including the nefarious practice of Westerners to arrange temporary marriages with attractive, even underage Japanese women. Puccini indeed tailored the action and his music to evoke this clash of cultures, while relentlessly turning the screw of the audiences' pity to the self-deluding *Madama Butterfly*, the heroine of this opera.

The title character of *Madama Butterfly*, by her Japanese name Cio-Cio-San—a young Japanese geisha who clings to the belief that her arrangement with a visiting American naval officer is a loving and permanent marriage—is one of the defining roles in this opera. The lyric beauty of Puccini’s score, especially the music for the thoroughly believable lead role, has made *Butterfly* timeless, as an opera.

Puccini achieved a new level of sophistication with his use of the orchestra in this score, with subtle colorings and sonorities throughout. The opera rests squarely on the performer of the title role; on stage for most of the time, Cio-Cio-San is the only character that experiences true, and in the same time tragic development. The singer must convey an astounding array of emotions and characteristics, from ethereal to carnal to intelligent to dreamy-bordering-on-insane, and finally to so tragically resigned in the final scene of this opera.

The world premiere of *Madama Butterfly* took place in 1904 at the Teatro alla Scala, in Milan. The MET premiere was on February 11, 1907 in the presence of its composer, Giacomo Puccini, who came to the United States for this occasion. The then famous Geraldine Farrar sang the title role, and her 139 appearances in this opera remain a Met record. Non other than Enrico Caruso was her B.F. Pinkerton and Louise Homer was Suzuki, While in New York, Puccini attended a Broadway performance of David Belasco’s play *The Girl of the Golden West*, which would become the basis for his next opera *La fanciulla del West*.

Synopsis

## **ACT I**

Time: 1904. - Place: Nagasaki, Japan.

Lieutenant Benjamin Franklin Pinkerton of the U.S. Navy inspects a house overlooking Nagasaki harbor that he is leasing from Goro, a marriage broker, who has also arranged his union with a young geisha named Cio-Cio-San, known as Madame Butterfly. The American consul Sharpless arrives for the wedding ceremony and Pinkerton describes to him his philosophy of the fearless Yankee roaming the world in search of experience and pleasure. He is not sure whether his feelings for the young girl are love or a whim, but he intends to go through with the wedding. Sharpless warns him that the girl may view the marriage more seriously, but Pinkerton brushes off his concerns and declares that someday he will take a

real, American wife. Butterfly is heard climbing the hill with her friends. In casual conversation after the formal introduction, Butterfly admits her age, 15, and explains that her family was once prominent but lost its position, and she has had to earn her living as a geisha. Her relatives arrive and chatter about the marriage. Cio-Cio-San shows Pinkerton her few possessions and quietly tells him she has been to the Christian mission to convert to her husband's religion. The Imperial Commissioner reads the marriage agreement, and the relatives congratulate the couple. Suddenly, a threatening voice is heard from afar—it is the Bonze, Butterfly's uncle, a Buddhist priest. He curses the girl for rejecting her ancestral religion. Pinkerton orders everyone to leave, and as they go the Bonze and the shocked relatives denounce Cio-Cio-San. Pinkerton tries to console Butterfly with sweet words. She is helped by Suzuki, her maid, into her wedding kimono, and joins Pinkerton in the garden, where they make love.

## **ACT II**

Three years have passed, and Cio-Cio-San awaits her husband's return. Suzuki prays for help, but Butterfly berates her for believing in Japanese gods rather than in Pinkerton's promise to return one day. Sharpless appears with a letter from Pinkerton, but before he can read it to Butterfly, Goro arrives with the latest potential husband for Butterfly, the wealthy Prince Yamadori. Butterfly politely serves the guests tea but insists she is not available for marriage—her American husband has not deserted her. She dismisses Goro and Yamadori. Sharpless attempts to read Pinkerton's letter but is repeatedly interrupted by Cio-Cio-San in her excitement to hear from her husband. Finally giving up, he asks her what she would do if Pinkerton never returned. The shocked Butterfly replies she would either become a geisha again, or better die. Sharpless, resigned, suggests that perhaps she should reconsider Yamadori's offer. Butterfly is outraged and runs out, returning with her small son. Sharpless, too upset to tell her more of the letter's contents, leaves, promising to tell Pinkerton of the child.

Then a cannon shot is heard in the harbor announcing the arrival of a ship. Butterfly and Suzuki take a telescope to the terrace and read the name of Pinkerton's ship. Overjoyed, Butterfly joins Suzuki in strewing the house with

flowers. As night falls, Butterfly, Suzuki, and the child settle into a vigil watching over the harbor.

### **ACT III**

Dawn breaks, and Suzuki insists that Butterfly get some sleep. She then carries the child into another room. Soon Sharpless appears with Pinkerton and Kate, Pinkerton's new wife. Suzuki realizes who the American woman is and agrees to help break the news to Butterfly. Pinkerton is overcome with guilt as he remembers his days in the house and runs from the scene. Cio-Cio-San rushes in hoping to find Pinkerton, but sees Kate instead. After a moment, she grasps the situation. Now left without hope, she agrees to give up the child but insists Pinkerton return for him. She dismisses everyone and takes out the dagger with which her father committed suicide, choosing to die with honor rather than live in shame. She is interrupted momentarily when her son comes running in. After saying an emotional goodbye, she blindfolds the child. Then she stabs herself as Pinkerton is heard from outside calling her name.

Madama Butterfly online

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EgHOHLrN3eQ>

The action on our DVD is actually not taking place on an opera stage, but it is a film produced in 1974 at what looks like an outdoor setting, using many camera angles ranging from close-ups peering into Cio-Cio-San's eyeballs to strange shots of people fading into fuzzy distance.

In the cast the famous Italian soprano Mirella Freni is Cio-Cio-San a.k.a. Madama Butterfly, the great Spanish-born tenor Plácido Domingo is B.F. Pinkerton, Suzuki, the maid is the German dramatic mezzo-soprano Christa Ludwig, Robert Kerns, an American baritone is the consul Sharpless and the eminent, Romanian born bass is Marius Rintzler is in the role of Il Bonzo, the priest.

This recording is a chance to see and hear Domingo and Freni early in their careers, he at 33 and she at 38, and they are superb.

Mirella Freni is considered to be the best soprano ever to have sung Butterfly! On the occasion of her 80th birthday, in 2015, at a celebration on the stage of La Scala, the General Manager of La Scala, Alexander Pereira, dropped on his knees before her to announce that for the day, the theater would be named La Freni di Milano in her honor.

The conductor Herbert von Karajan, one of the foremost maestros in the world, is conducting the Vienna Philharmonic Orchestra. The film was staged and directed by Jean Pierre Ponnelle, one of the most successful of present-day operatic directors.