

OPERA VILLE

SUNDAY, FEBRUARY 16, 2014

A Graceful, Quiet Butterfly in San Jose



Opera San Jose
Puccini's *Madama Butterfly*
February 15, 2014

In the regular comparisons of Verdi and Puccini, Puccini is often criticized for not having Verdi's capacity for addressing issues of power and politics. But occasionally, as in OSJ's understated, elegant production of *Madama Butterfly*, one sees Puccini's ability to address these issues on a smaller scale. It's up to use to extrapolate it to a larger context.

On the day of his wedding to a Japanese bride, to the music of "The Star-Spangled Banner," American sailor Benjamin Franklin Pinkerton raises a toast to the day that he will take home a "real" American wife. Could there be a more stunning illustration of the callousness of imperial countries toward their subject states? (This micro-to-macro view finds further grounding in David Belasco, the playwright who provided the raw material for both *Butterfly* and *La Fanciulla del West* - and who honed his craft in San Jose, a few blocks from this very production.)

Stage director Brad

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Dalton leads his opening-night cast through a fairly conservative production that leaves room for the subtleties of both score and story. His principal advantage is tenor Christopher Bengochea, who has performed the role of Pinkerton hundreds of times and now seems to wear it as a second skin. He delivers his



warm lirico spinto with tremendous ease, displaying facile top notes in the Yankee Vagabond song ("Dunque al mondo") and adding artful bits of phrasing even in the chaos of the turbulent final act. Bengochea also extracts the most from Pinkerton's character, beginning the evening with a likeable gregariousness and finishing with the most weaselly third act I've ever seen. In the end, you just want to slap him, which is precisely the reaction that Pinkerton should inspire.

At first, Jennifer Forni's Cio-Cio-san seems a little *too* subdued, but then one begins to notice the tremendous warmth of her tone and the opportunities that her understated approach opens up. The famed "Un bel di" sprouts from a simple conversation (as it should), and the silent spaces of the third act grow in their ominous power. Her performance is supported by secondary players with unexpected gravitas: baritone Evan Brummel as Sharpless, particularly in his reading of the dreaded kiss-off letter from Pinkerton; and mezzo Nicole Birkland in Suzuki's fierce defenses of Butterfly, and her reactions when she realizes the terrible ending to come. (Puccini, the greatest string-puller in opera, underscores Butterfly's order for Suzuki to leave the room - a certain prelude to her suicide - with a bone-chilling roll of timpani.) As Goro the wedding arranger - perhaps the most widely interpreted role in the opera - tenor Robert Norman opts for a persnickety hyper-anxiousness that probably best reflects reality.

Kent Dorsey's set designs are accomplished largely through flats and screens, and produce some lovely effects, particularly the vision of Butterfly, Suzuki and Trouble (Owen Nevendorffer) standing before a star-spangled night sky as they await the return of Pinkerton. David Rohrbaugh and his orchestra excel in that scene as well, performing Puccini's fragile, lovely theme (previously used to underscore

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ABOUT ME



 **MICHAEL J. VAUGHN**

Michael J. Vaughn is the author of six novels, including *Frosted Glass* (Dead End Street, Seattle) and *Rhyming Pittsburgh* (LBF Books, Pittsburgh). His poetry has appeared in more than fifty journals, including *Skidrow Penthouse* and *The Chaffin Journal*, and he works as a judge for several *Writer's Digest* competitions. He lives in San Jose, and plays drums for the San Francisco rock band *Exit Wonderland*.

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Sharpless's letter scene) along with Andrew Whitfield's backstage chorus.

Through March 2, California Theatre, 345 S. First St., San Jose. \$51-\$111. Alternating casts. www.operasj.org, 408/437-4450. OSJ's 2014-15 season will include the world premiere of Mark Weiser's *Where Angels Fear to Tread*.

Images: Soprano Jennifer Forni as Cio-Cio-san. Tenor Christopher Bengochea as BF Pinkerton and baritone Evan Brummel as Sharpless. Photos by Pat Kirk.

Michael J. Vaughn is a 30-year opera critic and the author of the novels [Operaville](#) and [Gabriella's Voice](#).

POSTED BY [MICHAEL J. VAUGHN](#) AT 3:58 PM

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