

## Review: Opera San Jose's powerful 'Madama Butterfly'

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Puccini's "Madama Butterfly" has been breaking hearts for over a century. The story of Cio-Cio-San, the faithful Japanese teen who waits for her unfaithful American husband to return to Nagasaki, is irresistibly sad. Saturday, it charmed and shocked all over again at the California Theatre, where Opera San Jose opened a new production of "Butterfly" that runs through March 2.

The production marks the last go-round of conductor David Rohrbaugh as the company's music director. Each time he stepped into the pit, he received a warm ovation, and rightly so. Rohrbaugh, who will retire when the production closes, has helped guide this company for 30 years, and his performance Saturday with the orchestra was consistently sensitive, whisking along the action onstage.

Directed by Brad Dalton, this elegant staging boasts much powerful singing.

The heart of the opening night cast was soprano Jennifer Forni as Cio-Cio-San, the fragile "Butterfly," who is only 15 when we meet her, innocent and love-struck -- and ready for her betrothal to U.S. Navy Lt. B.F. Pinkerton, whose ship the Abraham Lincoln is anchored in Nagasaki. Forni sailed through this demanding role with a warm plush tone and exquisite high notes. Her "One Fine Day" aria was lovely, rising and falling on her long solid breaths. In the opera's final agonized moments, she delivered the goods with earthy power.

(The second of two rotating casts, with the fine soprano Cecilia Violetta Lopez as Cio-Cio-San, debuted Sunday. This reviewer attended only Saturday's performance.)

Tenor Christopher Bengochea sang with full-bodied Italianate ardor as Pinkerton, though one sometimes could hear a few gears grinding as he moved into his upper register.

Layered voice

Mostly it was a commanding performance; Bengochea's voice has taken on layers over the years. His acting was at its best in the first act, when he played this patronizing Ugly American -- ready to marry Butterfly for the sex, and then to abandon her -- with a 1960s-ish "Mad Men" insouciance. Rolling his sleeves up on their wedding night, this leading man was all libido, ready to break her wings.

As Sharpless, the American consul, baritone Evan Brummel sang with warm robust tone, and his acting fully conveyed the compassion that marks the consul, who warns callous Pinkerton that his marriage scheme will lead to no good. As Suzuki, Butterfly's maid, mezzo-soprano Nicole Birkland once again showed off her dark, full dramatic voice, and waited, appropriately, until that agonizing last act to sing with the uninhibited power she so readily can summon. The company is lucky to have her.

The strong supporting singers included tenor Robert Norman as the oily marriage broker Goro; his singing flowed, easy to enjoy. As the Commissioner, bass Silas Elash, whose voice can be solid like granite, went for some lighter and more floating effects in this performance, a pleasing change of pace.

With lighting by Pamela Gray, costumes by Alyssa Oania and sets by Kent Dorsey, the production is

elegant to behold -- minimalist, splashed with color, hinting at a clean Japanese visual aesthetic. There is a raked stage and only a few props. Lanterns line the space on either side. There's a table on which a cross is set, signifying Butterfly's conversion to Christianity. There are some shoji screens that descend now and then from the fly-space above.

Mostly, we are left to imagine Butterfly's home and the surrounding hills of Nagasaki in the early 20th century. But our imagination is assisted by an ingenious touch: Dorsey has designed a horizontal window that nearly spans the width of the stage and forms a backdrop to the action.

### Worthy production

In the first act, Dorsey fills this window with the blazing red, white and blue of the American flag; and there in his uniform stands Pinkerton (like George C. Scott in "Patton") who then steps out into the action. But the window soon turns pure red and white, the colors of the Japanese flag.

Then it fills with stars, representing love and hope, and finally it depicts a dark snowy night, signifying Butterfly's misery. She soon realizes that she is about to lose her 3-year-old son (the product of her brief union with the lieutenant) as well as her marriage. For, yes, Pinkerton has returned after three years -- with an American wife, and they will take the boy (played by the adorable Owen Neuendorffer) back to the United States.

If you don't want to learn about the opera's final seconds, stop reading here. But if you would like to know how director Dalton has changed the ending, read on.

Not only does Butterfly grab a knife and commit ritual suicide (as stated in the libretto), but Pinkerton rushes in (also in the libretto) and, aghast, grabs the knife from her hands (definitely not in the libretto). At this moment, his son, who has been playing with his toys some distance away, suddenly senses the tragedy, races toward his dying mother -- and sees his father crouched over her with the knife. A look of horror passes over the boy's face; he thinks Pinkerton is the murderer. He will never love this man.

It's an audacious move by the director: Pinkerton meets his karma; that's the message. Opera purists may resent the license the director has taken here. But don't be too put off. However you feel about the ending, this production is well worth seeing.

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### 'Madama Butterfly'

Presented by Opera San Jose; music by Giacomo Puccini; libretto by Luigi Illica and Giuseppe Giacosa

Through: March 2

Where: California Theatre, 345 S. First St., San Jose

Tickets: \$51-\$111; 408-437-4450, [www.operasj.org](http://www.operasj.org)