

**LIVE**  
FROM LINCOLN CENTER

**March 20, 2008, 8:00pm on PBS**

***Madama Butterfly***

**New York City Opera**



It has been some time since we visited the New York City Opera in its soon-to-be-transformed home, The New York State Theater. That, however, will change on the evening of Thursday, March 20, when our Live From Lincoln Center cameras and microphones will be there to bring you a performance of one of the most beloved operas in the entire canon, Puccini's "Madama Butterfly". At its premiere, however, "Butterfly" was a colossal failure...more of that later.

It all began with an article in an American magazine by a writer named John Luther Long. It told the story of an innocent teen-aged Japanese geisha married to an American naval officer who deserts her and returns some years later bringing along his American wife. The dramatic impact of the tale made an immediate impression on the playwright and director, David Belasco, who fashioned a highly successful play from the material. Along with a triumphant run in New York City, Belasco's "Madame Butterfly" opened at the Duke of York's Theatre in London where, in the summer of 1900, it became a big hit.

Coincidentally, Giacomo Puccini happened to be in London at that time for the British premiere of his "Tosca". At the urging of Covent Garden's stage manager Puccini attended a performance of the play and was immediately struck by its potential as an opera. Similarly to *Manon Lescaut*, *Mimi and Tosca*, here was a young woman victimized by forces beyond her control, forced to surrender to those forces. Puccini began to negotiate with Belasco for the operatic rights to the play, a process which took more than a year. Finally, in September, 1901 a deal was made and Puccini asked his collaborators, Giuseppe Giacosa and Luigi Illica, to fashion a libretto.

There was much back-and-forthing in the construction of the opera. Belasco's play was a one-acter. The first libretto for the opera was an unwieldy two-acter, with Act 1 running a little less than an hour and Act 2 running more than an hour-and-a half. This was the form in which "Madama Butterfly" was played at its premiere in February, 1904 at Milan's famed La Scala. As mentioned above, it was an abject failure: audience boos and catcalls punctuated the singing and the playing. A production in Rome was cancelled and composer and librettists went to work adjusting their opera.

They arrived at a 3-act version, and the premiere of the "new" "Madama Butterfly" was scheduled barely three months later for the comparatively small town of Brescia---a good distance from Milan. This time everything was different. From the very opening until the end of the First Act the audience was absorbed in the music and the action. When the First Act curtain came down, the applause and cheers continued until Butterfly and Pinkerton responded with a reprise of their Love Duet. From that moment on, "Madama Butterfly" has conquered the audiences and stages of opera companies the world over. Among the many magical musical moments are the Entrance of Butterfly and the Love Duet in Act 1; her optimistic but fateful aria, "Un bel di" and the Humming Chorus in Act 2; and her suicide aria, "Con onor muore" ("To die with honor") in Act 3.

The New York City Opera production of the opera assembles an international cast: soprano Shu-Ying Li is the doomed Cio-Cio San (Butterfly); mezzo soprano, Jennifer Tiller, sings the role of Suzuki, Butterfly's companion; tenor James Valenti is the American naval officer, B. F. Pinkerton; and baritone Michael Chioldi sings the role of Sharpless, the American Consul in Nagasaki. The production is by Mark Lamos and the conductor is City Opera's Music Director, George Manahan.

All the ingredients have been assembled for a memorable evening of opera on Thursday, March 20. As usual I leave you with the suggestion that you check with your local PBS station for information concerning the exact time and date of the telecast in your area.

Enjoy!

By MARTIN BOOKSPAN