



Cio-cio-san waiting all night till dawn for Pinkerton to return after a long absence, but in vain

A Tragic Love Story

By Dr Jipson Quah, Editorial Board Member

Review

Madama Butterfly
Singapore Lyric Opera
Esplanade Theatre
4 February 2013

Operas of the Western classical music tradition are the epitome of opulence, bringing together the finest vocalists and musicians with mighty egos for a moment of magnificence. Singapore Lyric Opera's (SLO) latest production of Giacomo Puccini's *Madama Butterfly* is truly a spectacle, of which Singaporeans can be rightfully proud of.

Puccini based his opera on the novel *Madame Butterfly* by American John Luther Long which shared similarities with the semi-autobiographical *Madame Chrysantheme* by Pierre Loti, a French naval officer-novelist. A heartbreaking tragedy of unrequited love set in Nagasaki, Japan, it was adapted by Claude-Michel Schonberg and Alain Boublil to a 1970s Vietnamese setting, giving the world *Miss Saigon*.

The opera, which premiered in La Scala, a world-renowned opera house in Milan in 1904, characterised the interest of the West towards the Orient. Puccini was captivated by the American theatrical adaptation of the novel and subsequently set about creating an epic, one that would cement his place in music immortality.

Three acts spanning three hours tell the story of an American military officer who finds himself a local bride of convenience while travelling in Japan. He unexpectedly

falls in love with the geisha but has to leave the country, just as she is pregnant with his child. She pines in hope for his return, and he eventually does – only with another wife and a plan to claim the child. She consents to his demand, knowing well that her child will have a better life in America. Having lost the love of her husband and child, she takes her own life in honour. My heart bled from beginning to end.

The lead Cio-Cio-san (known as Butterfly) was superbly played by Mako Nishimoto, a rising star from Shizuoka, Japan. In her debut international role, Nishimoto brought authenticity to the production and her voice was stunning. She was equally matched by the charismatic Spaniard Israel Lozano as Lieutenant BF Pinkerton. Singaporean Anna Koor was mesmerising as Suzuki, Butterfly's handmaid. Their duets dovetailed in quality and execution, a vocal masterclass in technique.

The SLO Orchestra was ably led by Joshua Kangming Tan, alumnus of The Julliard School and Eastman School of Music, and second prize winner of the Dimitris Mitropoulos International Conducting Competition. Many of the finest professional musicians in Singapore play in the SLO Orchestra and their orchestral accompaniment was impeccable.

The Bonze, Cio-cio-san's uncle, interrupting her wedding celebration and denouncing her for abandoning her culture and religion to marry Pinkerton



Pinkerton and Cio-cio-san expressing their love for each other through song



Cio-cio-san hugs her son, Sorrow



An unfortunate gripe would be the subtitles. The yellow subtitles for the opera, sung in Italian, were projected on small screens which reminded me that I have terrible myopia. Time to consider Lasik perhaps!

Nevertheless, my eyes were sharp enough to spot Prof Hugo Van Bever, a National University Hospital professor in Paediatrics, on stage. He had a delightful cameo as Butterfly's family attendant! To say that Prof Van Bever is an ardent opera buff is an understatement – he has also written several novels which explore medical and operatic themes.

A gem of a production, *Madama Butterfly* explores the cross-cultural exchanges between the West and the Orient, imbued in the heart-rending story of a teenage geisha and her foreign lover. On our humble shores, we have indeed a great stalwart of Western classical opera within the SLO.

P.S. I would like to apologise to other fellow medical professionals who may have been involved in *Madama Butterfly* but were not spotted. Email SMA News at news@sma.org.sg regarding your next performance and I will try to be there to cheer for you! **SMA**



Dr Jipson Quah, introduced as Dr Singalot in the Editorial column from last month's SMA News, is a keen observer of the music and arts culture in Singapore. He secretly believes that with more singing and dancing, patients and doctors alike would all be happier and healthier individuals.

Events to look out for in March - May 2013

1. Mosaic Music Festival 2013 – Tokyo Ska Paradise Orchestra
Venue: Esplanade Concert Hall
Date and time: 15 March (Friday), 7.30 pm
Genre: Alternative Pop
2. SSO Chamber Series: Fantasy for a Nobleman
Venue: School of the Arts Concert Hall
Date and time: 17 March (Sunday), 4 pm
Genre: Classical orchestral, Family
3. Rozhdestvensky•Rachmaninov (Singapore Symphony Orchestra)
Venue: Esplanade Concert Hall
Date and time: 22 March (Friday), 7.30 pm
Genre: Classical orchestral
4. Romantic Masterpieces – A Piano Recital by Kenneth Hamilton
Venue: Esplanade Recital Studio
Date and time: 7 April (Sunday), 7.30 pm
Genre: Classical solo
5. Shakespeare in the Park – Othello
Venue: Fort Canning Park
Date and time: 24 April - 19 May (Wednesdays to Sundays, except 30 April), 7.30 pm
Genre: Drama