

'Madame Butterfly' enthralls

Opera review

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Even though Puccini's "[Madame Butterfly](#)" was a flop at its premiere in 1904, audiences have thronged to see it ever since. Puccini's gorgeous score, colored with Japanese and American melodies, coupled with the role of Butterfly, an extraordinary vehicle for a soprano, continue to resonate.

So it was on Wednesday in Music Hall, as Cincinnati Opera opened its season with the company's 108th performance of "Madame Butterfly." Although the first act was slow to warm, the drama tightened into an enthralling performance. At its center, of course, was Butterfly, sung in her Cincinnati debut by Shu-Ying Li, whose vocal splendor and excellent characterization of the geisha who sacrifices herself for love, made this an evening to remember.

The New York City Opera production, staged by Mark Lamos and designed by Michael Yeargan, wasn't easy to love at first sight. But the spare set, with floor-to-ceiling sliding shoji panels, steps going up the stage and minimal props, **was made more evocative by Thomas Hase's atmospheric lighting. Butterfly's nightlong vigil, as the moon turned to sun against the backdrop of Puccini's "Humming Chorus," was simply stunning.**

As Cio-Cio San, Li, a native of China's Shandong Province, delivered a complete performance that was wonderfully acted and expressively sung. Her journey from innocence, as the 15-year-old child-bride, to desperation until finally, the moment of heart-stopping realization that she might as well be dead, was riveting.

The celebrated aria, "Un bel di," in which Butterfly dreams of the day they'll be together again, was beautifully felt and lyrical, while she also possessed the power to soar over the strings playing at full throttle.

The role of Lt. Pinkerton, the ultimate ugly American who marries Cio-Cio San and then callously abandons her – yes, he was booed – went to tenor Frank Lopardo. The staging didn't provide convincing evidence of his love or lust for Butterfly, but Lopardo's impassioned phrasing and robust tenor made up for his stilted presence. His love duet with Li was one of the evening's high points, and his final "Addio" was wrenching and emotional.

John Hancock made a deep impression as the kind-hearted American consul, Sharpless, whose warnings to Pinkerton and Butterfly went unheeded. As the maid Suzuki, Mika Shigematsu was genuine and sang warmly.

Tyler Backer, 6, stole hearts and nearly the show as 3-year-old Sorrow, as he romped through blossoms and played with his toy ship, while Butterfly dressed him in a robe made of the American flag.

If there's another character audiences love to hate, it's Goro, played by Steven Cole, who captured the flavor of the sleazy marriage broker. Also making strong impressions were Alain Coulombe, who cursed Butterfly as the Bonze, and Kelvin Chan, as Prince Yamadori. Audrey Walstrom's Kate was sympathetic.

In the pit, the Cincinnati Symphony Orchestra sounded excellent under the knowing baton of Edoardo Müller, if a bit heavy in Act I. The Act II interlude was richly dramatic, and orchestral soloists shone.

Lamos' staging became much more interesting after Act I – admittedly, a scene of formalities, but static, nonetheless. The chorus, while vocally well prepared by Henri Venanzi, didn't have much to do. And where

Butterfly bids farewell to Sorrow and goes behind a screen to “die with honor,” Lamos makes changes that may upset some, but which are ultimately effective. (I won’t divulge them here.)

The opera repeats at 7:30 p.m. Friday and 3 p.m. Sunday in Music Hall. (All tickets are \$50 on Sunday.)
Tickets: 513-241-2742; www.cincinnatiopera.org.
