



# *Madame Butterfly*



*by Puccini*

**LEARNING GUIDE**

# TOC

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*Pre-Performance*

## INTRODUCING THE OPERA

### The Effects of Imperialism



Claude Monet: La Japonaise

Until recently Opera's center has been steeped in Western Europe with its most popular works written by white men. These works, including *Madame Butterfly*, were written in a period of imperialism and feature attitudes of the inferiority of women and the superiority of the white race that are not reflective of today's society. Non white characters and societies were stereotyped, demonized, or even ridiculed. Often, male composers fetishize the suffering of women. This is depicted in *Madame Butterfly* when the main character is a female depicted as powerless in her struggle to retain her husband and her son as she loses both and ultimately falls at the hands of her inevitable end.

*Madame Butterfly* was first written by John Luther Long during the Spanish American War. It is one of the quintessential orientalist narratives reflective of this movement growing in art and in music.

### Let's Talk About It

#### Consider these discussion questions:

*Madame Butterfly* is often linked with cultural appropriation - using another culture without personal experience. Can you name other works of art, literature, or music that uses cultural appropriation?

How might a modern composer/ artist use similar themes without crossing the line to Orientalism or cultural appropriation?

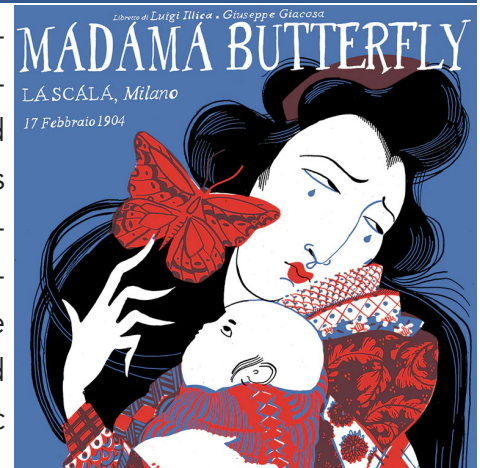


Pre-Performance

# INTRODUCING THE OPERA

## Orientalism in Opera

The narrative in which the main character, a self sacrificing Japanese heroine can't have her true love, the American Lieutenant Benjamin Franklin Pinkerton depicts both their tragic relationship and the gendered dynamics of the East- West relations. These relations were founded on unequal power relations. Following David Belasco's stage adaptation of the story, Italian composer Giacomo Puccini produced the now-famous opera *Madama Butterfly* in 1904, the year of the Russo-Japanese War. While *Butterfly* certainly echoed the numerous existing texts of European Orientalism, the specific narrative of *Butterfly* and the timing of its productions were also symbolic of America's power in creating its own Orientalism. We now understand this designation reflects a Western European view of the "East" and not necessarily the views of the inhabitants of



In art history, literature and cultural studies, Orientalism is the imitation or depiction of aspects of the Eastern world, usually made by writers, designers, and artists from the Western world. Orientalist painting depicts the Middle East, and it was one of the many specialties of 19th-century academic art, and the literature of Western countries was influenced by a similar interest in Oriental themes. In art history the term refers to the works of mostly 19th-century Western artists who specialized in Oriental subjects, produced from their travels in Western Asia, during the

19th century. In that time, artists and scholars were described as Orientalists.

From a modern perspective this work is a depiction of cultural appropriation. An Italian composer writes about and tries to depict elements of a country and culture he has never seen. He incorporates elements of Japanese (and even Chinese) musical motifs into his score-nothing less than a supporting effort in the west's attempts to dominate Asia politically. Furthermore, as we trace back to *Madama Butterfly* we see a conflict of power between the East and the West in its music. This idea of dual nationalism is seeped into the music as you hear at several points throughout the opera the tune of the Star Spangled Banner woven into the music.

## Let's Talk About It

How is Imperialism (war/politics) linked to Orientalism (art/music)?

What other music, literature, or art has been influenced by politics or war? Is that something that still happens today with moderns artists and writers?

## Pre-Performance

# SYNOPSIS

Note: The listening pieces have been integrated into the synopsis to allow students to listen to the pieces in context of what is happening in the opera.

Make sure you have the "Who's Who in Madame Butterfly" handout (on pg. 7) handy so you can explore it while you read the synopsis!

## The Story in Short

One of opera's most enduring stories of love and cultural bias, Puccini's moving score follows the true, tragic story of Cio-cio san, a young Japanese girl who falls in love with an American naval officer with devastating consequences.

## Act 1



### Ah! Ah! Quanto cielo!

A moment of magic - we hear Cio-cio san and her friends approaching up the hill but with enough breath left for her to float our her happy thoughts over a backing of well-wishes from her fiends.

Set in Japan at the turn of the 20th century, Lieutenant Benjamin Franklin Pinkerton of the U.S. Navy inspects a house overlooking Nagasaki harbor. He is leasing from Goro who is a marriage broker. Along with the house come 3 servants and a geisha wife named Cio-cio san. Preparations are being made for a Japanese wedding between the Lieutenant and the geisha Cio-cio san, who is also known as Madame Butterfly. The lease runs for 999 years and the contract can be renewed or annulled month to month. The American consul Sharpless arrives. Pinkerton describes his philosophy of the fearless Yankee roaming the world in search of experience and pleasure. He is not sure whether his feelings for the young girl are love or a whim, but he intends to go through with the marriage ceremony. Sharpless warns him that the girl may not take her vows so lightly, but Pinkerton brushes off such concerns and says someday he will take a real, American wife.

Cio-cio san is heard in the distance joyously singing of her wedding. In casual conversation after the formal introduction, surrounded by friends, Cio-cio san tells Pinkerton how when her family fell on hard times she had to earn her living as a geisha. Her relatives chatter about

## Pre-Performance

# SYNOPSIS

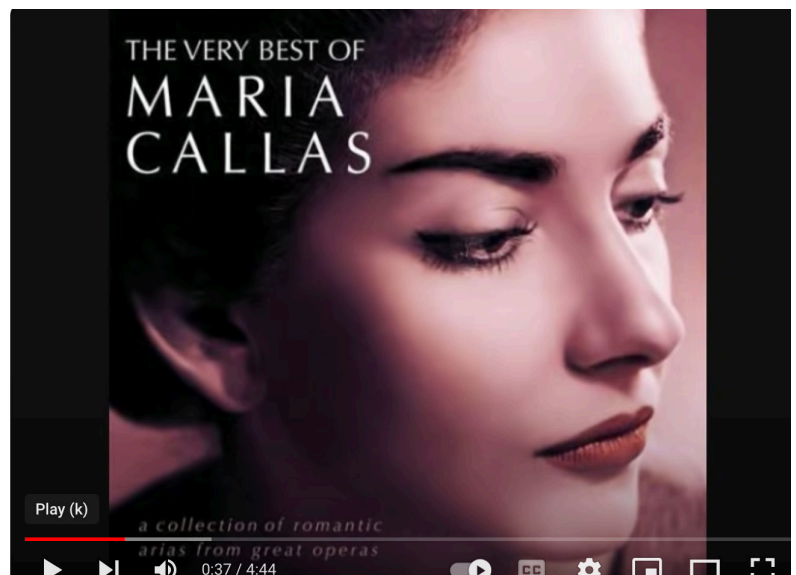
the marriage. In a quiet moment, Cio-cio san shows her bridegroom her few earthly treasures and tells him of her intention to embrace his Christian faith. The Imperial Commissioner performs the wedding ceremony and the guests toast the couple. Suddenly the threatening voice of Cio-cio san's uncle interrupts the celebration. Bonze, a priest, curses the girl for going to the mission and rejecting her ancestral religion. Pinkerton angrily sends the guests away and as they go, the Bonze and the shocked family members denounce Cio-cio san. Pinkerton tries to console Cio-cio san with sweet words. Suzuki helps her into her wedding kimono. Alone with Cio-cio san in the moonlit garden, he dries her tears, and she joins him in singing of their love.

## Act 2

Three years have passed since the wedding and Cio-cio san awaits her husband's return at home. Suzuki prays to the gods for help while her mistress stands by the doorway eyes affixed on the harbor waiting for her husband. Sharpless appears with a letter from Pinkerton but before he can read it to Cio-cio san, Goro arrives with the latest suitor, wealthy Prince Yamadori. He tells her that Yamadori will take her as his wife but she dismisses them both insisting she is still married. Left alone, Sharpless tries to read the letter. Cio-cio san politely serves the guests tea but insists she is not available for marriage—her American husband has not deserted her. She dismisses Goro and Yamadori. Left alone, Sharpless again starts to read the letter. He tries to soften the upcoming blow by first asking, "What if Pinkerton does not return?" In response, she presents the consul with the young son she has had by Pinkerton. She says that his name is "Sorrow," but when his father returns, he will be called "Joy." A cannon shot in the harbor announces the arrival of a ship. Cio-cio san and Suzuki take a telescope to the terrace and read the name of the vessel—it is Pinkerton's. Overjoyed, Cio-cio san joins Suzuki in decorating the house with flowers from the garden. Night falls, and Cio-cio san, Suzuki, and the child settle into a vigil watching over the harbor.

## Un bel di vedremo

The opera's most famous aria (and one of the most popular works in the soprano repertoire), Cio-cio san forecasts Pinkerton's return one fine day and how he will dote on her.



## Act 3

Dawn breaks and Pinkerton still has not returned. Suzuki insists that Cio-cio san get some sleep. Cio-cio san carries the child back into the house singing a lullaby. Sharpless enters soon after with Pinkerton and his new American wife, Kate. When Suzuki realizes she collapses in despair. With some convincing, they persuade Suzuki to help them talk Cio-cio san into giving up the boy so he can have a better life in America. Seeing the house and Pinkerton pauses to remember his days there before running from the scene, overcome with guilt. Cio-cio san rushes in hoping to find Pinkerton but sees his soon-to-be wife, Kate, instead. Grasping the situation, she agrees to give up her son but insists Pinkerton return for him. Cio-cio san dismisses everyone. She takes out the dagger with which her father committed suicide, choosing to die with honor rather than live in shame. She is interrupted when her child comes in, but she says goodbye and blindfolds him. She stabs herself with the dagger as Pinkerton arrives and calls out for her.

### Io so che alle

Another moment of operatic magic - the trio of Sharpless, Pinkerton, and Suzuki grapple musically with the appalling dilemma of telling Cio-cio san about Mrs. Pinkerton. The three anxious voices move lyrically over a grave and solid tune, grounding their worrying thoughts for all to experience.





*Pre-Performance*

## WHO'S WHO IN MADAME BUTTERFLY

Directions: As you read the Synopsis, draw and label lines between characters to illustrate the relationships between them.

*Cio-cio san*



Hui He, soprano

*Pinkerton*



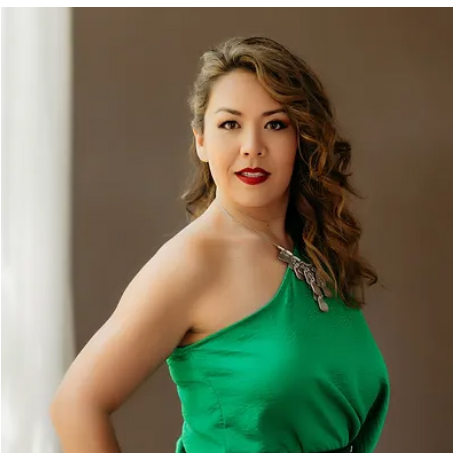
Jonathan Kaufman, tenor

*Sharpless*



Zachary Hugo, baritone

*Suzuki*



Nina Yoshida Nelsen, mezzo

*Goro*



Johnathan White, tenor

# ABOUT THE OPERA

Relay or review the following information:

Opera is a drama (play), that is sung!  
Opera uses many different art forms to tell stories.

## What to listen for/look for in *Madame Butterfly*

How could each of these art forms help to tell the story in an opera?

*Music   Lyrics   Dialogues   Costumes   Sets*

Look out for each of the above elements in the performance.

## Opera vocabulary to know for *Madame Butterfly*

**Aria** - opera song for one singer that has melody and usually gives insight on the character's feelings

**Baritone** - traditionally the middle male voice

**Bass** - traditionally the lowest male voice

**Chorus** - a large group of singers who typically portray townspeople, servants, military, etc.

**Duet** - a song written for two voices

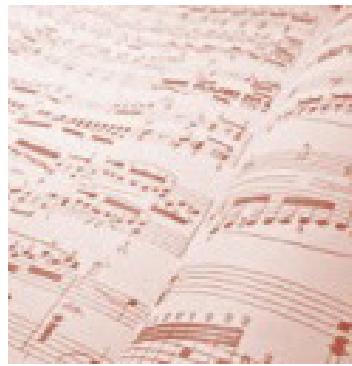
**Ensemble** - a group of singers (smaller than a chorus)

**Soprano** - traditionally the highest female voice

**Tenor** - traditionally the highest male voice

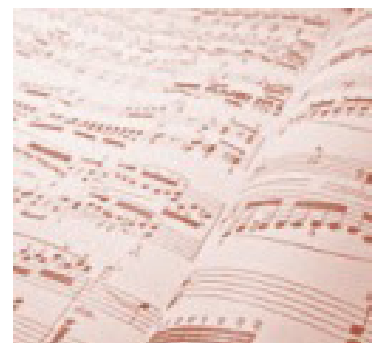
Don't forget to check out the composer Puccini on the next page!





12  
operas written

Madame Butterfly was Puccini's sixth opera and was quite poorly received. Three months later he re-released the opera to much acclaim.



**Giacomo Antonio Domenico Michele Secondo Maria Puccini** (1858 – 1924)

# *Pondering Puccini*

What a name! He may have a long name, but Giacomo Puccini is one of the first names that comes to mind when you talk about opera. Our composer was born in Lucca, in the Tuscan region of Italy, to a family five generations deep in music, after all of whom he is named. Like many famous composers, Puccini began studying music at an early age; when he was five years old his father died and Puccini was made to continue his studies with his uncle Fortunato, who thought he was a poor student. It wasn't until he saw Verdi's opera *Aida* (1876) at age 20 that he decided to dedicate his life to composing opera.

Puccini set off to school in Milan at the Conservatory (the Milan Conservatory, a big deal) and there wrote his first opera, *Le Villi*, which earned him enough notice to get a second opera commissioned. This second work, *Edgar*, had a lousy

story and mediocre libretto (the text of the opera), which taught Puccini a valuable lesson about choosing librettists wisely. He went on to write new, successful operas, including his most successful works: *La Bohème*, *Tosca*, and *Madama Butterfly*. He was considered the head of the table among the *giovane scuola* (the young school of Italian composers) after completing such international hits. He was even commissioned to write an opera for the Metropolitan Opera: *La Fanciulla del West*.

Puccini was working on his twelfth opera, *Turandot*, at the time of his death from complications of throat cancer. Franco Alfano finished the opera shortly following Puccini's death, and a new ending was composed in recent history (2002) by Italian composer Luciano Berio.

# CLASSROOM EXTENSION ACTIVITIES

The following standards-linked exercises have been designed as a classroom supplement for teachers of upper grades classrooms and/or homeschool groups.

## *Pre-Performance*

### HISTORICAL SETTING + CONTEXT

Students may read the information on pages 2-3 and either discuss the questions that follow in groups or answer the questions in written form individually, depending on the needs of the class. (CCSA.ELA-LITERACY.RL.1.1)

## *Pre-Performance*

### ACTIVATE WITH ARTS: ACT IT OUT!

Teachers are encouraged to use this activity in place of reading the synopsis and filling out the "Who's Who" worksheet. Activate with the Arts activities enhance student engagement and learning through arts-based skills, giving teachers more "bang for their buck" for their instruction time. (CCSA.ELA-LITERACY.RL.1.7; CCSA.ELA-LITERACY.CCRA.L.6)

#### **Madame Butterfly in Three Minutes**

Student volunteers silently act out an abbreviated plot.

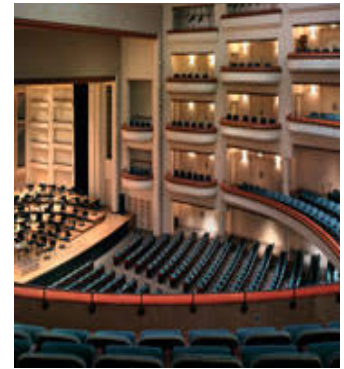
1. Students should be placed in small groups (we suggest groups of 7).
2. Students read the provided synopsis and distill it into an 8 sentence or less "speed-synopsis."
3. Each group's narrator reads their script while the rest of the group silently acts it out for the rest of the class.
4. Remind student actors to think about the following as they act out the scene:
  - their body position in relation to the other actors
  - their facial expressions

## *Post-Performance*

### REFLECTING ON THE OPERA EXPERIENCE

The following questions may be used for classroom discussion or written reflection after the performance. (CCSA.ELA-LITERACY.RL.1.3; CCSA.ELA-LITERACY.RL.1.1)

1. What is one thing you learned about opera or this time period in history that you didn't know before?
2. What do you think were the main themes from Madame Butterfly? Use examples from the opera to support your answer.
3. Can you think of ways the opera expressed Orientalism through Imperialism? What evidence from the story or background on the opera can you use to support your thoughts?
4. The following questions from the Pre-performance section could be revisited or answered for the first time after the performance:
  - How might a modern artist/composer avoid cultural appropriation but still use a similar story?
  - How is Imperialism (war/politics) linked to Orientalism (art/music)?
  - What other music, literature, or art has been influenced by politics or war? Is that something that still happens today with modern artists and writers?



## GET THERE

Visiting Center City doesn't have to be a tough trip.

Blumenthal Performing Arts Center  
130 N. Tryon St  
Charlotte, NC 28202

**Ride.** Hop on the Lynx Lightrail. Check out the options [here](#).

**Drive.** Directions from door to door [here](#).

**Park.** Participating garages are just \$10. Find details [here](#).

## THE BELK THEATER

**MAKE ANY SEAT IN THE HOUSE THE BEST ONE**

Attending an opera in the Belk Theater is an experience not to be forgotten. The performance you are attending is the final dress rehearsal in which the cast performs one last full run through of the opera before opening night. Just like a regular performance, there will be an intermission(s) between acts.

Upon entering the theater, notice the production crew's station in the orchestra level seating (the lowest level of seating). The crew is set up with computers and headsets to allow them to communicate with people backstage to ensure that the performance runs smoothly. During this final rehearsal they will be making sure all cues and technical features of the performance are in place. Also notice the supertitles

(English translations of the lyrics being sung) that are projected onto a screen above the stage.

Please remember that this is a working performance and the performers on stage are very aware of their audience, especially a distracting audience. The polite audience member should always refrain from talking and stay seated during a performance. Nothing shows more respect and appreciation for the performers on stage than giving them your full attention.

### Shout Out

Give a shout out to the cast after a beautiful aria or at the end of the evening – literally! Shout **"Bravi!"** for a job well done to the whole cast, **"Brava!"** to the diva who aced it, or **"Bravo!"** to the guy who left it all on the stage.



# Opera Carolina

INVESTED IN OUR COMMUNITY AND ITS LIFE



## Then, now, & years from now

Let's take a journey back to 1948: the Charlotte Music Club is formed by a handful of arts enthusiasts who realize that Charlotte's artistic landscape –but more importantly, cultural community– would be enhanced by opera performances. Fast forward to today: Opera Carolina is a 73 year-old company that's still blossoming, hitting new highs with each season of glorious music, drama, and all that encompasses the operatic art form. Your resident Opera continues to bring high-quality standards of the operatic repertoire to stages near you, but is also continually striving to perform lesser-known gems.

What does our future hold? A rich commitment to our community –which we take seriously– to continue enriching the lives of citizens from all walks of life; a continual quest to produce excellent opera from all eras on our stage; and, most importantly, to connect our community.

## The people

In the early days of Opera Carolina, volunteers designed the sets, built costumes, sang in the chorus, filled leading roles and, of course, sold tickets and held fundraisers to support the company.

Now a fully professional company that not only produces Opera performances on a big scale but also travels programs into local schools and community venues, we never forget the legacy of the original volunteers who made this company the what it is today. Opera Carolina is rooted

in the Carolinas; 90% of our company live and work right here in our region, complementing the international artists who join the resident company to perform on our mainstage. We guess you can say we've got Carolina on our mind.

## The House

If the paragraphs before didn't sell you on our commitment to our community, maybe information on the Opera Center will. Opera Carolina now resides in the historic Biberstein house, in the Elizabeth neighborhood. The last remaining historic home in the Uptown radius, Opera Carolina's digs are as much a part of the community as is the company.

Built in 1906, the Biberstein House was designed and lived in by R. C. Biberstein, one of the noted mill architects of the Southeast. Mr. Biberstein is credited with building many of the mills in the Charlotte region, including the Highland Park #3 mill. Mr. Biberstein eventually moved his business into this house, his talents and self-designed home playing a role in the New South Industrial movement. Today, the home is registered as a Charlotte-Mecklenburg Historic Landmark.

The house has since been adapted into offices and is now the proud home of Opera Carolina. The Opera Center hosts the company's administrative offices but also serves as space for auditions, recitals, and more. **Our doors are always open.**