



Student Night at the Opera Study Guide

Madama Butterfly

Student Night at the Opera
Wednesday, April 24, 2024
San Diego Civic Theatre
6:30 P.M.

John Gabriel, Education Director
John.Gabriel@sdopera.org

Madama Butterfly is supported in part by Lead Production Sponsors Darlene Marcos Shiley and Lee and Frank Goldberg; Production Sponsors The Estate of James Algert (a true opera lover), Bill and Clarice Perkins, Qualcomm, and Stacy and Don Rosenberg; Artist Sponsors Candace Carrol, Esq. and Len Simon for Corinne Winters "Cio-Cio San"; Mary Ellen Clark for Stephanie Doche "Suzuki," Veronica and Miguel Leff for Maestro Yves Abel, and Heidi Munzinger and John Shott for Joel Sorenson "Goro." Student Night at the Opera is supported by the California Arts Council. Major support for San Diego Opera is provided by the City of San Diego Commission for Arts and Culture and The Conrad Prebys Foundation.

Madama Butterfly

Italian Libretto by **L. Illica** and **G. Giacosa**
Music by **Giacomo Puccini**

Characters

- **Madama Butterfly** (Cio-Cio-San)
- **Suzuki** (Cio-Cio-San's Servant)
- **Kate Pinkerton**
- **B. F. Pinkerton** (Lieutenant in the United States Navy)
- **Sharpless** (United States Consul at Nagasaki)
- **Goro** (a Marriage Broker)
- **Prince Yamadori**
- **The Bonze** (Cio-Cio-San's Uncle)
- **Yakusidé**
- **The Imperial Commissioner**
- **The Official Registrar**
- **Cio-Cio-San's Mother**
- **The Cousin**
- **Trouble** (Cio-Cio-San's Child)

Four things to know before attending *Student Night at the Opera*

1. Opera is a story that is sung. As you watch and listen to the opera, think about how the words and music mix together to develop character relationships, conflict, and an overall artistic effect. Opera composers use different voice types to create a dramatic or comedic effect. How do the singers' voices impact you as you experience the opera?
2. Opera singers sound very different from pop or rock and roll singers because they are not using microphones. Instead, they use their bodies as amplifiers. Opera singers have the rare gift of being able to make their voices soar over an orchestra and a chorus without any electronic support.
3. Opera is often in another language. It was the most popular art form in Europe before movies, so operas were written in the language of the people who first attended them. Read the synopsis and listen to the musical excerpts before coming to the performance. The Civic Theatre has supertitles above the stage for audience members to read along as the story is performed.
4. The opera you are going to attend is a live performance. The singers are as aware of you as you are of them. Make sure that any distractions (electronics or food) are turned off and put away so you can give the performance your full attention. You are going to have an amazing time!

Synopsis

In the late 19th century, Navy Lieutenant B.F. Pinkerton rents a house in Nagasaki, Japan and marries a Japanese geisha, Cio-Cio-San. The wedding celebration is interrupted by Cio-Cio-San's uncle, the Bonze, who gets angry at Cio-Cio-San for betraying her people. Cio-Cio-San takes the marriage very seriously, but Pinkerton does not. Soon after the wedding, he leaves Japan.

Three years have passed. Suzuki, Cio-Cio-San's maid, warns her that Pinkerton may never return, but Cio-Cio-San confidently predicts that one day his ship will appear on the horizon. Sharpless, the American Consul at Nagasaki, arrives one day to read a letter from Pinkerton. Prince Yamadori also arrives, hoping for Cio-Cio-San's hand in marriage, but he is quickly dismissed. Sharpless has trouble reading the letter because Cio-Cio-San is so excited, so he bluntly asks her what she would do if Pinkerton never returned. She rushes out of the room, returning with Pinkerton's child. She insists Sharpless tell Pinkerton about the boy, optimistic he will return once he knows about his baby. A cannon shot is heard from the harbor. Cio-Cio-San sees Pinkerton's ship and she and Suzuki excitedly prepare for his arrival.

The next morning, Pinkerton has still not arrived at the house. Suddenly, Sharpless arrives with Pinkerton and an unknown woman. Overcome by guilt, Pinkerton cannot face his Japanese wife and flees the home. Instinctively, Cio-Cio-San knows the woman is Pinkerton's wife. Cio-Cio-San agrees to surrender her child, but only if Pinkerton himself comes to pick him up. Ordering Suzuki away, Cio-Cio-San picks up the dagger her father used to commit suicide and reads the inscription on the blade: "Let him die with honor who can no longer live with honor."

Definitions of Voice Types

Cio-Cio-San is a **soprano**. The soprano is the highest of the female voice types and is almost always the 'heroine' or protagonist of an opera.

Suzuki is a **mezzo-soprano**. The mezzo-soprano is the lower-ranged female voice type, and is often used to convey mothers, maids, and older women.

B.F. Pinkerton is a **tenor**. The tenor is the highest of the male voice types and is often the lead male role, but not always.

Sharpless is a **baritone**. The baritone is the most common male voice and has a lower range than the tenor.

The Bonze is a **bass**. The bass is the lowest of the male voices often used for roles like servants or for more serious roles projecting nobility and wisdom.

Historical Context

America was a growing global power in the late 19th century. International trade had created a curiosity for what Americans and Europeans perceived as exotic cultures from distant lands. World Expositions held in Europe and America first focused on industrialization and trade, but then included art and culture as the idea of nation states (countries) was taking hold. The Japanese government was heavily involved in selecting the art that would represent Japan at the World Exhibitions in the late 19th century. The French term *Japonisme* was created by a critic in 1872 to describe the intense French interest in the interpretation of Japanese aesthetics. *Japonisme* had a tremendous impact since Europe and America looked to France to define Western aesthetics. The Dutch painter Vincent van Gogh and American painter Mary Cassatt were both moved by artworks like Katsushika Hokusai's early 19th century *ukiyo-e* woodblock prints. One major influence of Japanese art on the West was the idea that everyday objects could themselves be art.

Madama Butterfly is now often criticized for its misunderstood and stereotyped depiction of Japan and Japanese culture, both in the libretto itself and in culturally appropriating productions where members of the creative team (e.g. the director, costume designer, or choreographer) use cultural images or materials in a way that only serves their own desires to create an imagined Asian setting.

Italian composer Giacomo Puccini composed the opera during 1902 to 1904, after seeing the play *Madame Butterfly*, written by David Belasco and based on a story by John Luther Long. *Madama Butterfly's* composition and success is an example of *Japonisme's* influence on Western art during this time, and is also an example of obsolescent early 20th century Western conceptions of race, gender, and culture. Explore this subject further by researching the terms below and think about, discuss, or write about how these concepts apply to this opera.

Cultural appropriation

Orientalism

Unconscious bias

American Exceptionalism

Yellow Face

Group bias

Activities

1. Explore the influence of Japanese culture on American architect Frank Lloyd Wright.
2. Explore Japonisme in European art.
3. Learn about a popular writer, musician, or visual artist in a country you know little or nothing about.
4. Write a short poem, then explore how singing the poem in different ways affects its meaning or impact (you're writing an opera!).
5. Anticipate three emotions you will feel during Student Night at the Opera and why, then share with a classmate or a friend.

Vocabulary for San Diego Opera's Production of *Madama Butterfly*

Aria: a song that is sung by one character.

Adaptation: the process of taking an existing story and modifying it into another artistic form. As is the case of many operas, the libretto (or story and words) of *Madama Butterfly* came from several different sources. The librettists, Giuseppe Giacosa and Luigi Illica, worked from the David Belasco play, *Madame Butterfly*, which Puccini saw in London on one of his frequent trips abroad. The play was based upon a short story by John Luther Long which was also, in part, based upon the story *Madama Chrysanthème* by Pierre Loti.

Bravo: Italian for "excellent." This is sometimes shouted at the end of the opera if the performance was very good. (Say "Brava" if it is a female singer; say "Bravi" if it is a group of singers.)

Climax: the highest point of conflict in a story.

Character: one of the people portrayed in a book, film, or live performance. In a live performance characters are portrayed by actors or singers.

Chorus: a group of many voices singing together. A group singing "Happy Birthday" or "Las Mañanitas" is an example of a chorus singing.

Composer: the person who writes the music for the opera. They often work with a **librettist** who writes the words.

Conflict: the opposition of persons or forces giving rise to dramatic action in a play or opera.

Crisis: the point of no return for the central character in a story.

Denouement: the moment of art in a theatrical story, everything is made clear and no questions or surprises remain.

Design: the plan, conception, or organization of a work of art to form a coordinated whole.

Dramatic events: key moments in an opera when conflict causes the characters to change. As the characters change the story moves forward.

Dramatic structure: the theatrical form used to create an opera.

Duet: a song that is sung by two people at the same time. "Me!" by Taylor Swift is an example of a duet.

Ensemble: a group of individuals singing together. This group is usually smaller than a chorus.

Librettist: a person who write the words of an opera or musical.

Libretto: the story and words of an opera or musical.

Musical motive: a recognizable musical idea that is associated with a particular character, emotion, or environment in an opera. Musical motives create a sense of unity in an opera or piece of music. Listen for “Butterfly’s” and “Pinkerton’s” motives throughout the opera.

Orchestra: the group of musicians who accompany the singers. They play strings, brass, woodwind, and percussion instruments.

Opera: a story that is sung.

Plot: the sequence of what happens in a story.

Rising action: the dramatic effect of conflict.