



Welsh National *Opera*  
Cenedlaethol Cymru

# Madam Butterfly

Teacher Resource Material  
WNO MAX – 2009

[wno.org.uk](http://wno.org.uk)



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# Guidelines for teachers

Pupils will get more out of the performance if they have a good understanding of the plot, characters and musical themes of the opera. This pack is designed as a starting point and this, combined with the teachers inset will give you a sound basis for guiding your pupils through the opera. Please feel free to photocopy any useful parts of this pack for your pupils.

## Preparing your pupils for the opera

Coming to see a full-scale opera can seem bit daunting. However, most young people know and have heard more opera than you may think. The power of opera to convey extremes of emotion is immense – music from opera is used on a regular basis in films and advertisements. The successful West End musical *Miss Saigon* is based on (and inspired by) the story of *Madam Butterfly*.

## On arrival at Wales Millennium Centre, Cardiff

You will receive a letter nearer the performance date outlining the exact arrangements for the performance day but please arrange to arrive at the theatre at least half an hour before the performance start time. Please ensure that there are enough staff members to sit among students. If, on the day, you have any queries about the location of your seats, or other facilities you require, there will be a team of theatre ushers on hand.

## The performance

Total approximate running time 2 hours and 50 minutes

Act 1 – 1 hour

Interval – 20 minutes

Act 2 – 1 hour 30 minutes

## During the performance, remember:

- Food and drink is not allowed in the auditorium (except bottles of water).
- Try to be as quiet as possible because noise, talking and fidgeting can be very distracting to the people sitting near you.
- Make sure you use the toilets before the performance and during the interval, as you will not be allowed to leave the auditorium unless it is absolutely necessary.
- Latecomers are not allowed into the auditorium until the interval.
- The performance is a dress rehearsal, so the singers may not sing out all of the time. The conductor, Carlo Rizzi, may also stop the performance to re-rehearse a section. This all adds to the excitement of attending a dress rehearsal.
- Live opera is a real treat, so enjoy yourself!

# Opera

OPERA is a dramatic stage performance set to music. An opera is a theatre piece, like a play but instead of speaking the lines the characters sing them. In most operas there are no spoken words, everything is sung from beginning to end. An opera can take you on a rollercoaster of action, adventure, love, death, deceit and conflict. In many ways, operas are very similar to the soap operas that you see on TV.

An orchestra accompanies an opera and they introduce the main themes of the opera during the Overture, which is played at the beginning of the opera.

## Opera Lingo

**LIBRETTO** Italian for "little book", the text accompanying the music.

**SURTITLE** The translated text of the opera.

**OVERTURE** The instrumental beginning to the opera, that introduces the opera's main themes.

**ARIA** From the Italian word for "air". This is a song for a solo voice and is used to communicate the emotion of a character.

**OPERETTA** Light-hearted musical entertainment containing dance, spoken dialogue and practical jokes. A musical.

**CHORUS** At WNO 20 men, and 20 women, singing Soprano, Mezzo, Tenor, and Bass performing as an ensemble.

**DIVA** A female opera star. Translated into "goddess"; may imply a demanding or highly-strung star.

**BRAVO!** The Italian word of approval that is often shouted by the audience at the end of a performance.

## How can I tell what's going on?

The dialogue, or as it is known in opera, recitative, moves the action along and lets you know what is happening. The songs, or arias, don't advance the action but do let you know the emotion of the character or situation.

Sometimes it can be difficult to follow what the singers are saying, especially if they are singing in a foreign language. Don't worry about not understanding every word as handy surtitles are provided on screens above the stage that translate the dialogue.

**VIBRATO** The wavering tone added by a singer whilst sustaining a note.

**COLORATURA** A very high-pitched soprano that has extreme vocal agility and can perform highly elaborate fast and high singing with accompanying trills

### Voices (highest to lowest):

**SOPRANO** The voice of Cio-Cio-San, the highest female voice.

**MEZZO SOPRANO** The voice of Suzuki, the maid. A lower female voice.

**TENOR** The voice of Pinkerton, the highest male voice.

**BARITONE** The voice of Sharpless, lower than a tenor but higher than a bass.

**BASS** The voice of the Bonze, Cio-Cio-San's Uncle, the lowest male voice.

# Background & Synopsis

**Madam Butterfly** was premiered in 1904 and was Puccini's own favourite among his operas. The libretto was written by Giacosa and Illica and is based on a short story of the same title written by John Luther Long (1898). The opera takes place in a house overlooking Nagasaki between 1889 and 1892, just before the outbreak of the Sino-Japanese war.

## Act I

The American Lieutenant Benjamin Franklin Pinkerton is stationed in Nagasaki. To make the time pass more happily he contracts to 'marry' the geisha Cio-Cio-San, aka Madam Butterfly. Goro, who has arranged the 'marriage', shows him the house and servants which he has bought in with the deal and they are later joined by the American Consul, Sharpless. Pinkerton brags of the ease and convenience of the 'marriage' and Sharpless warns him to beware of hurting his bride's feelings, knowing that Pinkerton intends on finding a real wife back in America.

Butterfly arrives surrounded by swathes of geishas and relations. She shares with Pinkerton her few treasures and tells him of her intention to convert from Buddhism to Christianity. The marriage ceremony is conducted and the financial details concluded but the ceremony is interrupted by Butterfly's uncle, a Buddhist Priest, who bursts in cursing his niece for having renounced her religion. Furiously Pinkerton sends the guests away and he is left alone to comfort Madam Butterfly.

*Interval*

## Act II part I

Three years later, Pinkerton has long gone, but still Butterfly waits patiently for her husband. Her maid, Suzuki believes he will never return, but Butterfly is convinced that one day his ship will appear on the horizon. In fact she is right, for Pinkerton really is returning on duty to Nagasaki, accompanied by his new American wife, Kate. Sharpless has been sent ahead to break the news.

Her servant Suzuki and Sharpless try to prepare Butterfly for the worst, as for when Pinkerton does return it will be with his new American wife, Kate. Butterfly has bore Pinkerton a child. This is interrupted by Goro who brings a new suitor for Butterfly, Prince Yamadori. The harbour cannon heralds Pinkerton's ship.

*Intermezzo*

## Act II part II

Suzuki greets Pinkerton, his wife Kate and Sharpless. Kate insists on adopting the child and Pinkerton chooses to leave rather than face his betrayed bride. He gives Sharpless money to pay her off but Butterfly refuses the money. She informs Sharpless that Pinkerton can take the child if he returns in half an hour. Butterfly says farewell to her little boy, takes her father's knife, and kills herself, just before Pinkerton returns to collect the child.

# Characters

**Cio-Cio-San / Madam Butterfly** *Soprano* Geisha who is contracted to marry Pinkerton

**BF Pinkerton / BP** *Tenor*, US Naval Officer who is posted in Nagasaki

**Suzuki** *Mezzo Soprano*, maid to Butterfly

**Sharpless** *Baritone*, US Consul at Nagasaki

**The Bonze** *Bass*, Butterfly's Uncle and a Buddhist Priest

**Goro** *Tenor*, a matchmaker

**Prince Yamadori** *Tenor*, a prospective suitor to Butterfly

**Kate Pinkerton** *Mezzo Soprano* American wife of BP



# Storyboard

Setting: A house in Nagasaki, between 1889 – 1892

## Act I

BF Pinkerton (BP) contracts to 'marry' Butterfly – to help the time pass easier.

Sharpless warns BP to be careful of his 'bride's' feelings.

During ceremony Butterfly renounces her religion as a Buddhist and intends to convert to Christianity.

Her Uncle, a Buddhist priest curses her.

BP sends wedding guests away and spends the night comforting Butterfly.

## Act II part I

(Three years later, Butterfly has bore BP a child).

Butterfly eagerly awaits the return of BP. Suzuki believes he will never return.

BP returns to duty in Nagasaki, with his American wife, Kate.

Sharpless is sent ahead by BP to break the news of BP and Kate's arrival.

Goro, the matchmaker, tries to introduce Prince Yamadori to Butterfly.

## Act II part II

Suzuki greets BP, Kate and Sharpless.

Kate insists on adopting the child.

BP cannot face Butterfly and asks Sharpless to pay her off.

Butterfly refuses the money and says that BP can return in half an hour for their child.

Butterfly says farewell to her little boy and kills herself.

Pinkerton returns to collect the child.



Act 1 – Pinkerton contracts to marry Madam Butterfly

Act 2 – Madam Butterfly waits with her child and Suzuki for Pinkerton to return.

Act 3 – Madam Butterfly says farewell to her child and kills herself

# Teaching Ideas

## Exploring Characters

**Ask students to read the synopsis and make basic observations on a character and consider the following:**

- What is the character's relationship to others?
- What can you assume about the character?
- What physical characteristics suit the character?
- What psychological characteristics does the character portray?
- Why does the character make the choices they do?

## Exploring the Plot

**Sometimes changing the names of the characters can make the story a lot easier for young people to grasp. Benjamin Pinkerton could become BP, Cio-Cio-San – Butterfly, Suzuki – Suzy and so on...**

Encourage the pupils to explore the different twists and turns of the piece and how the clashes of culture between East and West are portrayed:

- How is Japan portrayed?
- How is America portrayed?
- Japan is portrayed as fragile and feminine, against the powerful and masculine American.

## Preparing pupils for the music

- Listen to an orchestral piece and ask pupils to write down the different instruments they can hear.
- Discuss the different types of instrument families and label the layout of orchestra.
- Listen to a piece from the opera and ask pupils to identify the different voice types and link them to the characters.
- Puccini researched Japanese music and culture before writing the opera. The orchestra includes bells, gongs and the high woodwind instruments that are prominent mirroring traditional Japanese temple music.