



[Madam Butterfly](#) by [Welsh National Opera](#)

Reviewed by [Denis Joe](#) Feruary 2013

Of all the great opera composers **Puccini** ranks as the highest in the hearts of many people; not just opera audiences but those who have heard his arias on adverts or Classic FM, or as soundtracks to films. Italian football fans may draw on the inspiration of

**Verdi**

to suggest the physical might of footballing competition, but it was the BBC's use of

**Luciano Pavarotti**

's 1972 recording of

***Nessun dorma***

(

*None shall sleep*

, from Puccini's opera Turandot) that, as the theme song for the coverage of the 1990 FIFA World Cup, captured the passion of the game and the hearts of millions.

Beauty and unashamed romanticism runs through all of **Puccini's** operas, from *Se come voi*  
*piccina* from **Le**

**Villi**

to

*O mio babbino caro*

from

**Gianni Schicchi**

. But of the 13 operas that the composer created, two are amongst the most popular of all – if not the most popular – with the audiences today:

**La bohème**

and

**Madam Butterfly**

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Both capture the tragedy of a heroine in heart-breaking arias and unforgettable motifs. Yet **Puccini**'s

heroines were never one-dimensional. Like Wagner, Puccini dealt with love; but on an emotional level rather than an ideological one, making his approach more realistic (Verismo). And this, I believe, is why Puccini is so popular.

But however beautiful the singing; however great the music, it is the overall production of an opera that makes for a celebrated experience. This production, from **Welsh National Opera** has seen over 200 performances since 1978 and is probably the best British production you are ever likely to come across.

Seeing this Butterfly is like catching up with an old friend. I have seen this opera about six times and three of those occasions were this **WNO** production. This production is set in the original period, and opens with a Japanese house with three shoji (screen doors) that become an important prop throughout the opera.

U.S. Navy Lieutenant **B. F. Pinkerton** (*Gwyn Hughes Jones*) inspects the house he has leased from a marriage broker,

G

**oro**

(

**Phillip Lloyd Holtam**

), who has just procured him three servants and a geisha wife

**Cio-Cio-San**

(

**Cheryl Barker**

), known as

**Madama Butterfly**

(Questa è la cameriera /che della vostra sposa/fu già serva amorosa /Il cuoco... il servitor... /Son confusi del grande onore..). The servant,

**Suzuki**

(

**Claire Bradshaw**

), annoys Pinkerton by her chatter and Goro claps his hand to send them away.

Pinkerton asks about Cio-Cio-San's family. Goro as the American Consul and friend of Pinkerton, **Sharpless** (*Alan Opie*) arrives, breathless from the climb up the hill to meet them. Pinkerton tells his friend how he bought the house on a 999 year lease with a monthly renewal option. He is enchanted by Cio-Cio-San and brags about the life of the American mariner (*Dovunque al mondo lo Yankee vagabond/si gode e traffica sprezzando i rischi*). What is interesting here is the use of musical styles. Puccini was very much taken with oriental music (Chinese/Japanese) and incorporated the styles into this opera. The Japanese characters are each given a motif or sing in a music that suggests orientalism, whereas Pinkerton and Sharpless are identified with a very definite Western sound. This paints Pinkerton as an arrogant braggart, and that would be the impression we would get in our contemporary times - though less embracing of modernism I think. There is definitely an air of Pinkerton lording it over the, almost feudal culture he sees around him. And yet, later in the opera, Butterfly sings of her desire to escape the confining atmosphere of Japanese tradition.

