

## Giacomo Puccini's *Madama Butterfly*

On this week's *Thursday Night Opera House*, we'll hear Puccini's *Madama Butterfly*. The original version of the opera, in two acts, had its premiere on February 17, 1904 at the Teatro alla La Scala in Milan, Italy. It was very poorly received in large part to the late completion and inadequate time for rehearsals. Puccini revised the opera, splitting the second act into two acts and making other changes. On May 28, 1904, this version was performed in Brescia and was a huge success. The exotic setting played a major role in the success of *Butterfly*. The lack of familiarity with Japanese culture served not only as a point of interest but also as a form of insulation from the play's tragic conclusion. The story upon which Giuseppe Giacosa and Luigi Illica's libretto is based is an amalgam of a narrative by John Luther Long, a Philadelphia lawyer, and the play derived from that narrative by playwright and theatrical producer David Belasco.

The opera is set in Nagasaki, Japan around 1904. The young American naval officer Lieutenant Benjamin Franklin Pinkerton (tenor **Luciano Pavarotti**) has arranged, through the marriage broker Goro (tenor **Michel Sénéchal**), to marry the beautiful teenager Cio-Cio-San (soprano **Mirella Freni**), an arrangement that he doesn't take seriously. Despite the warnings of her uncle the Bonze (bass **Marius Rintzler**), a Buddhist monk, Cio-Cio San renounces her family and religion and marries Pinkerton, to whom she gives her heart and soul. Shortly after the wedding, Pinkerton returns to America.

Although three years pass without any word from him, Cio-Cio-San (who now calls herself "Madame Butterfly") remains faithful to him, living with her devoted companion Suzuki (mezzo-soprano **Christa Ludwig**) and her adored son "Sorrow," whom she's given birth to in Pinkerton's absence. Butterfly rejects the advances of Yamadori (tenor **Giorgio Stendoro**) and other Japanese suitors. The American consul Sharpless (baritone **Robert Kerns**) breaks the sad news to Cio-Cio San, as gently as he can, that Pinkerton is returning to Japan with an American wife, Kate (soprano **Elke Schary**). She refuses to listen, however, and undertakes an all-night vigil with Suzuki, eagerly waiting for Pinkerton's arrival. The next day, when Pinkerton arrives with Kate, Butterfly has to face reality. Giving "Sorrow" an American flag to play with, Cio-Cio-San commits *hari-kari* (suicide).

**Herbert von Karajan** conducts the Vienna Philharmonic Orchestra and the Vienna State Opera Chorus in this 1974 Decca/London recording, CD number 421049.