

Madama Butterfly

Simple story and complex emotions are brought to life through Puccini's heart-wrenching music



Dutch soprano Annemarie Kremer sees her character, Cio-Cio-San or Butterfly, as complex emotionally and rewarding vocally.

Stefan Hard/Times Argus

By **Jim Lowe** Times Argus Staff - Published: June 15, 2007

"Madama Butterfly," Puccini's tale of a young Japanese girl seduced and abandoned by an American naval officer at the beginning of the 20th century, has long been one of the most popular and recognizable operas. "It's a story — a really well-told story," explained Timothy Vernon, who will conduct the opera at the Barre Opera House. "And it's told with great skill and precision. Puccini's music is so precise as well as passionate."

"When I think of Puccini, I don't think of him so much as a composer, I think of him as a great man of the theater," added Brian Clay Luedloff, director of the production. "There is something about Puccini that touches the human heart." Green Mountain Opera Festival's production of "Madama Butterfly," Friday, June 22, at 7:30 p.m., and Sunday, June 24, at 3 p.m., at the Barre Opera House, will feature an international cast of young up-and-coming singers from Canada, the Netherlands and the United States. Sponsored by the Green Mountain Cultural Center, the production will feature a professional 30-piece orchestra, traditional costumes and staging, and it will be sung in its original Italian with simultaneous translation projected above the stage. Among the principals is Montpelier baritone Simon Chaussé and the local chorus is directed by Piero Bonamico of Berlin.

Giacomo Puccini (1858-1924) remains the most popular and accessible opera composers of the 20th century, creator of the beloved "La Boheme," as well as "Tosca" and "Madama Butterfly." His music is characterized by a beautiful lyrical style and colorful orchestration used effectively for dramatic effect. His stories and characters are romantic, and have had continual public success.

"Madama Butterfly," though, was a failure at its 1904 premiere, but a revised version several years later enjoyed a huge success, which continues to this day. The libretto by Giuseppe Giacosa and Luigi Illica was based on a play written by American playwrights David Belasco and John Luther Long which, in turn, was based on one of Long's short stories.

In Nagasaki in the early 1900s, an American naval officer by the name of Pinkerton has arranged, through a marriage broker, Goro, to wed the young and beautiful Cio-Cio-San, called Butterfly — an arrangement he doesn't take seriously. Despite the warnings of her family, the 15-year-old girl renounces them and her religion to marry Pinkerton.

After a short and passionate beginning, Pinkerton must return to sea. It is three years, Pinkerton still hasn't returned, though his and Butterfly's union has yielded a son. Attended by her ever-faithful servant Suzuki, Butterfly rejects the marriage broker's efforts to persuade her to marry the wealthy Prince Yamadori. She remains steadfast in her loyalty to Pinkerton.

Finally, Butterfly hears the cannon from Pinkerton's gunboat. Before Pinkerton arrives, though, Sharpless, the American consul, comes to warn her that not only has Pinkerton married an American woman, he plans to take the child. Dutifully and politely, Butterfly surrenders her boy to Pinkerton and his new wife. Finally, despite Sharpless and Suzuki's consolation, Butterfly takes the only honorable way out for a Japanese woman — she kills herself.

"She's 15 years old, and that's already a problem, with the music and emotion being so mature," explained soprano Annemarie Kremer, a Dutch native now living in France, who is playing Butterfly.

"You have to combine this," Kremer said. "One of the ways of doing that is realizing that, even though she is only 15, she has gone through a lot already. Being a geisha, or nearly a geisha, that's a hard life. She might already even have had experiences with men. She's still a child, of course, but in that society, 15 is not a child anymore. For the Americans she is."

Although this is primarily a business arrangement for Pinkerton, and perhaps for Butterfly as well, she has fallen deeply in love with her American husband.

"Also in a desperate way," Kremer said. "She also knows by renouncing her traditional faith, she gives her whole happiness, being, everything to him. By that, she has to love him. There is also a sense of duty but, also I think, genuine love."

Does Butterfly really believe Pinkerton is coming back?

"At first she just believes it," Kremer said. "But, of course, three years is a long time. In the second act, she's really having a hard time believing it."

Doubt has crept into her heart, and Sharpless and Goro, each for their own reasons, try to convince Butterfly that her position is futile.

"When the others come and say these things, she gets really angry because she already has this doubt in her heart," Kremer said. "But she's still clinging to this dream. The Japanese, I think, are dutiful people and she has to hold on, she has too. There's no way back."

Why does she give up her son without a fight?

"It's part of the same thing," Kremer said. "She has to obey him. And also, love for her child, because her child will have a better life. That happens today."

This will be Kremer's debut in this role, and despite its length – Butterfly is on stage throughout the opera – it seems a fortuitous one."

"I haven't found a hard part," she said apologetically. "I really feel that it's the perfect part for me right now. It's not a hard experience in any way – it feels natural."

Kremer has sung major roles at opera houses across Europe, and performed as soloist with major symphony orchestras. But, Butterfly, is the gem.

"Every time I sing it, it makes me so happy," Kremer said. "You cannot escape the music – you have to feel all the time, always. It fulfills you every time."

Less heralded, Suzuki is on stage virtually every moment that Butterfly is. And though she sings little in the first and second acts, the self-effacing servant is a strong presence throughout the opera.

"She's quiet and strong," explained Julie Nesrallah, who plays Suzuki. The mezzo-soprano, who lives in Montreal, has performed major roles, including Carmen, across the United States and Canada, and will move to Paris this fall.

"She is an older geisha who is retired and now in the service of Butterfly, who I feel she treats like a younger sister, almost motherly," Nesrallah said. "So she is this very strong, silent and very grounding character for Butterfly, who desperately needs someone to love her unconditionally and be by her side unconditionally."

Suzuki's quiet but powerful role in the opera creates an additional challenge for Nesrallah, who is, after all, first and foremost, a singer.

"You have to bring out your actor chops because you don't have to sing very much, but you have to concentrate very, very hard, staying in character, staying focused when you're not singing," she said. "I never leave the stage – I'm on the stage as much as Butterfly is."

Another big challenge for Suzuki, and the performer, is her dual role of big sister-mother and servant.

"She's not in a position to give Butterfly a reality check," Nesrallah said. "They're friends, but she's still the servant – and Butterfly pulls that card out all the time. So, in that sense, Suzuki enables Butterfly's temper tantrums, her unrealistic hopes and dreams about Pinkerton. ... She's kind of forced into that situation. That is exhausting as well."

"It's not just that she has to put up with this teenager," Nesrallah said, "it's also painful, if you care about the person, to see them going through that. So there are a lot of very complex emotional levels going on here." In many ways, Suzuki's feelings reflect everyone's in the opera. "Suzuki goes through everything that Butterfly goes through," Nesrallah said. "Act two can be described as that moment before you're going to cry – that kind of pain you feel when you can feel your throat swelling up. All of act two is like that for Suzuki." Act three is where everything goes over edge for everyone, including Suzuki.

"Sharpless and Pinkerton come to her before they take the child," Nesrallah said. "So the burden is always on Suzuki. In this trio she sings with Pinkerton and Sharpless, and you see this emotional release. She begins to cry. "If you try to think about how this would feel in real life, this is devastating," Nesrallah said. "These are the things that people don't recover from."

This is the Green Mountain Cultural Center's Green Mountain Opera Festival's second year. Last year, despite only two weeks of preparation, the fledgling company presented one performance of Rossini's "The Barber of Seville," which packed the Barre Opera House, as well as several concerts at the Joslyn Round Barn in Waitsfield. This year, the festival has three weeks to prepare for the two performances of "Madama Butterfly," as well as four concerts. Not surprisingly, that has doubled last year's budget of \$50,000 to \$100,000.

"So we've had to do some major fund-raising," explained Taras Kulish, the festival's founder and artistic director. "It's going very well. We're very lucky to have our angel-sponsor, Sheila Johnson. Thank God for that. As someone said, she's buying us time as we build the festival – and that's the truth."

Kulish intends to use that time to build up patronage and corporate sponsorship in the Mad River Valley, as well as Barre and Montpelier. Kulish's choice of "Madama Butterfly" was also for much the same reason. "It is one of those operas that just about everybody absolutely loves, has heard of and knows of," he said. "It's one of the most popular operas. I'm trying to build an audience base for this festival, so I chose it because I knew it would be popular — and it's a great piece."