



***Madama Butterfly* returns to Lesher Arts Center for first time in almost a decade**

Opening July 10, Festival Opera's presentation of Puccini's timeless romantic tragedy to feature soprano Teresa Eickel

One of the most popular operas of all time, Puccini's enthralling *Madama Butterfly* is returning to the Lesher Center for the Arts for the first time since 2001.

Beginning July 10, the Festival Opera production will showcase a world class cast headed by New York soprano Teresa Eickel as the tragic Cio-Cio San, one of opera's most coveted roles for its famous aria, "Un bel di" ("One Fine Day"). Eickel makes her seventh turn as Puccini's young Japanese geisha, who unwittingly falls in love with an American naval officer, only to be grief-stricken when she later discovers that for him the marriage was merely an arrangement of convenience to pass the time while stationed in Nagasaki.

Among other critical praise, Eickel's performances have been called "extraordinary" by the *Charlottesville Daily Progress* and "dazzling" by the *Mobile Register*, which also noted that "from her stern-funny impersonation of a judge...to her heart stopping duet with the servant-girl Suzuki, the stage belongs to her. So do our hearts."

It's little wonder why. The petite 5' 2" singer painstakingly transforms herself into a 19th century geisha long before she steps onto the stage. "Geishas move a specific way, so I train with a geisha coach in New York before every production. We practice everything – walking, turning, kneeling, you name it! All of the motions need to be delicate and graceful, including getting up and down from your knees," Eickel says of the role that launched her career in 2004.

Believe it or not, the three-time Sergio Franchi Competition winner and Metropolitan Opera National Council Regional Finalist says she couldn't even carry a note when she was young. "I started singing in the 8th grade in the chorus. And I was *terrible!* I mean, really awful. I was so bad that the other kids used to make fun

of me. I decided to take voice lessons because I wanted to be in the high school musical. I loved acting and have always been drawn to great stories, so I thought if I could just sing *a little*, I could do the chorus.”

The hard work paid off. “It took eight months and then I finally made this *sound*. And it was a *good* sound. My teacher stared at me in shock. I stared back. She said, “That came out of you!” I replied, ‘I know!’” Several years later, the same teacher concluded Eickel had the talent to make a career out of opera. She was delighted because “it was a perfect blend of singing and acting.”

Have there been sacrifices? Mostly financial, she says. “You don’t have as much money as other people for quite a while. I don’t have any regrets, though – when you are singing and part of an amazing musical experience, it is all totally worth it.”

What would she be doing today without opera? “I’m honestly not sure. I’ve always been so determined. During my first week at the Hart School of Music, the educators brought all the freshman into one room. There were over 200 of us. They gave us a long speech about hard work and sacrifice, and then said, ‘Out of all of you, only two of you will become professional musicians.’ I looked around the room and everyone was staring at their shoes, looking absolutely dejected,” she recalls with a laugh. “I wasn’t looking around to gauge reactions, however. I was wondering who the other person was.”

Performances of Festival Opera’s *Madama Butterfly* are scheduled for 8 pm on July 10, 13, and 16; and at 2 pm on Sunday, July 18. All performances will take place at the Leshner Center for the Arts, 1601 Civic Drive, Walnut Creek. Tickets are \$39 to \$100, and now available three ways: Online at www.LeshnerArtsCenter.org. By phone: (925) 943-SHOW. And in person at the Leshner Center box office and Barnes & Noble Bookstore in Walnut Creek. For more information, visit www.FestivalOpera.com.

Performing with Eickel will be former San Jose Opera resident artist Christopher Bengochea (tenor) as B. F. Pinkerton, former Adler Fellow and Merola alumnus Philip Skinner (bass-baritone) as Sharpless, and Nicole Takesono (mezzo-soprano) as Suzuki.

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PHOTO ID: Teresa Eickel as Madama Butterfly; photo courtesy of Boheme Opera NJ.

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