



Photo: Opera Boheme NJ

Soprano Teresa Eickel will sing the title role in Festival Opera's *Madama Butterfly*, opening July 10.

Cio-Cio San's Choice: A Conflict of Culture

Set to some of the most romantic music of all time, the tragic story of *Madama Butterfly* has long enthralled opera audiences. In love with American naval officer B.F. Pinkerton, the young Japanese geisha Cio-Cio San defies her family and renounces her

religion as the ultimate gift for her husband-to-be, only to find herself callously discarded as just another girl in another port.

Justifiably called one of the most popular operas of all time, *Madama Butterfly* by Giacomo Puccini appears routinely every year in the list of top ten operas produced. The opera made its debut in 1904 at the famed La Scala in Milan but, whether the victim of a rumored plot or merely a bad performance, opening night was a fiasco – a public humiliation for the already successful composer. Puccini immediately withdrew the opera, reintroducing it with moderate changes a few months later in a smaller venue where it met with the success it has retained ever since.

Love Above All Else

“At the heart of this opera is the conflict between Cio-Cio San’s culture and religion, and her dedication to love or what she believes is love,” says Stage Director Brian Staufenbiel, who will make his debut with Festival Opera in this production. The scene where her family comes together to celebrate the wedding

“What she does for him and gives up for him is enormous, but in his arrogance he doesn’t see that.”

Staufenbiel sees as one of the great moments in the opera. It is a big and joyous occasion that ends up dissolving into anger. It is worth noting, he believes, that it is not until her family discovers she has renounced her religion that they reject her. Religion

defines her culture and, to a large extent, her family.

That Cio-Cio San was willing to give up everything for Pinkerton speaks volumes about her character – she was determined to live for her love. By the same measure, the fact that Pinkerton took all her sacrifices for granted speaks to the quality of his character. He gives no thought at all to how his actions might affect her life, only about how to manipulate the

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Knowing the Score

An Interview with Conductor Joseph Marcheso

Always a music lover, Joseph Marcheso wanted to become a conductor “as soon as I learned it was a job one could have.” When he bought his first opera score in the seventh grade, it also proved to be a turning point in his piano studies. He realized that the music he loved could be played off the score, and suddenly his parents no longer had to prod him to practice! Although he attended a regular high school and then Dartmouth College, he also attended music workshops at the Manhattan School of Music, where conducting classes cemented his desire to become a conductor.

After college, Marcheso conducted for various groups including Amato Opera, a small regional company in New York City, where he stayed for eight years, eventually becoming their music director. When he left Amato, he enrolled in the newly formed graduate-level conducting program at the San Francisco Conservatory of Music, where he came under the guidance of Michael Morgan.

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From the Chair: Cherishing Cio-Cio San

Madama Butterfly may be the most poignant opera about the despicable insensitivity that some men display toward women. The beautiful Cio-Cio San embodies love, trust, grace and generosity. She devotes her heart and soul to her husband's happiness. But Lieutenant Pinkerton, one of the most abhorrent characters in all of opera, marries Cio-Cio San only to relieve the tedium of his station in Nagasaki. He has no intention of continuing their relationship once he returns to America.

With Festival Opera's production of *Madama Butterfly* coming this July, I can't help but feel that Cio-Cio San and Festival Opera have many things in common. Festival Opera brings beautiful productions to life; we love what we do and we love our audience and patrons; we trust that our public will continue to donate money; we persist with grace come rain or come shine; and our staff, our artists, our chorus, our musicians, and our board of directors give of themselves generously.

I implore you; please don't treat Festival Opera like Pinkerton would. Please reciprocate with love, trust, grace and generosity. One of

our long-time patrons has coached me not to ask people for support; he wants me to ask for money. Of course, we need money. If everything goes perfectly this year, we will run a surplus of only \$2,500... and no season ever goes perfectly. So, please be like Cio-Cio San — generously give us your heart, your soul and your money.

We have great events coming up this year where you can help us raise money: May 6 is our fabulous wine tasting at Wine Thieves in Lafayette. Board members are selling tickets for \$35. October 25 is our second annual golf tournament at the Claremont Country Club, and December 1 is our annual Holiday Gala.

We would also welcome your participation on our committees. Our events committee meets every first and third Wednesday at the Festival Opera office at 7:00 pm. These are some of the most fun meetings in operatic history! Our development/outreach committee meets every second Tuesday at 5:45 pm in Lafayette. Please contact me if you have suggestions or would like to help. I look forward to seeing you on opening night. — Jim Bell ■

Alumni Notes

Since 1991, Festival Opera has watched with pride as exceptional singers who have helped make the company's productions so successful have gone on to wonderful careers. Here are a few exciting updates on artists Festival Opera audiences have been privileged to hear:



Kendall Gladen, who sang her first *Carmen* in her 2006 debut with Festival Opera, is quickly making the role her own worldwide. In addition to making her first appearance with Michigan Opera Theatre in the title role, she debuted with Los Angeles Opera in the role of Mercedes and assumed the role of *Carmen* for two performances during the run. This year she will appear as *Carmen* for Florida Grand Opera as well as in her debut with Deutsche Oper Berlin, before returning to Los Angeles Opera as Maddelena in *Rigoletto*.

Baritone **Igor Viera** has appeared with Festival Opera a number of times, most recently as Ping in last summer's production of *Turandot*. He has since been highly praised for his turn as Dulcamara in *L'Elisir d'Amore* with Sacra-



mento Opera and in Berkeley Opera's *Don Giovanni*, where he sang the role of Leporello. This year brings two exciting challenges to this talented artist. Viera will make his debut as a stage director for Pocket Opera, directing their production of *La Cenerentola*, and in the fall of 2010 will make his debut with San Francisco Opera as Happy in their new production of Puccini's *La Fanciulla del West*.



Highly praised last season as both Timur in Festival Opera's production of *Turandot* and as Mephistopheles in *Faust*, bass **Kirk Eichelberger** returned to Asia by way of Philadelphia this past February. Eichelberger appeared as the Emperor in the East Coast premiere of an opera that has been compared to *Turandot* in theatricality — Tan Dun's *Tea: A Mirror of Soul*. The production, presented by Opera Company of Philadelphia, was originally staged in Santa Fe two years ago to critical acclaim. ■

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situation to get what he wants. "Pinkerton's attitude of entitlement is what destroys her," says Staufenbiel. "What she does for him and gives up for him is enormous, but in his arrogance he doesn't see that."

While Pinkerton is perhaps not outright evil, he is astoundingly self-centered and completely oblivious to the power he wields as a man in her patriarchal society. The American Consul Sharpless, who understands the culture, cautions him not to take advantage of her but Pinkerton tosses off his advice. Perhaps Pinkerton believed that Cio-Cio San would simply move on as he did, but she spurns an offer of marriage from Prince Yamadori. Staufenbiel points out that, in addition to her natural beauty and grace, her dedication to Pinkerton in the face of all opposition is part of her appeal, demonstrating how special a person she is. Cio-Cio San is so intensely focused on her love however, that after his betrayal she sees no life for herself and can only believe it best to give up her child to secure for him a better life.

The character is so intense and absorbing that the famous soprano Renata Scotto, for whom Cio-Cio San was a signature role, once said that in the early years of her career she had to consciously remember not to get too emotionally involved with the character otherwise, "You suffer and you can't sing."

Transcending Time

One of the most exhilarating aspects of the art form is that even a familiar opera has the potential to deliver a new and powerful experience. Staufenbiel believes this is particularly true of an opera with the passion and drama of *Madama Butterfly*. "There is always an opportunity for audiences to discover an opera in a different way," he contends.

As head of the Opera Program at the University of California, Santa Cruz and resident concept designer and stage director for Ensemble Parallèle, Staufenbiel knows how to develop stories to maximize their creative potential. Earlier this year, he designed and staged Alban Berg's *Wozzeck* for Ensemble Parallèle at San Francisco's Yerba Buena Theater to critical acclaim. A difficult piece, both dramatically and musically, audiences found themselves quickly absorbed in the intense drama as Staufenbiel ably connected them to the characters on an emotional level. Equally acclaimed was his 2007

production of Britten's *A Midsummer Night's Dream* at UCSC, for which he was awarded first prize in the National Opera Association's opera competition in New York. *Madama Butterfly* will mark Staufenbiel's debut with Festival Opera, although he has worked with members of the production team on other projects.

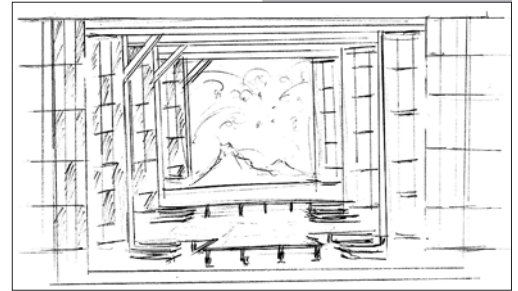
While there are times an opera lends itself to changed settings, according to Staufenbiel, *Madama Butterfly* places a clear focus on the culture and religion of that time period. "We are using a simplistic but dramatic set that will frame the action

and put the focus on the singers and the tragedy as it unfolds," he says. Staufenbiel describes the opera as "passionate," an aesthetic that will be brought to life by the creative and imaginative costuming, and by dramatic shadowed scenery arrayed around traditional shoji screens.

Staufenbiel's staging will have the effect of magnifying the characters' actions and interactions with each other. It will allow the audience to experience the intimate and profound emotions that accompany the transformation of the beautiful Madama Butterfly from submissive girl to passionately devoted wife to deeply despairing lover.

A Haunting Outcome

While turned extraordinary by Puccini's masterful music, the basic plot of *Madama Butterfly* is a sadly ordinary tale. "I think this opera highlights how very cruel we can be to one another," says Staufenbiel. "In the end, it is how we treat each other in our relationships that really matters." Cio-Cio San, with her unswerving loyalty and misguided devotion, understood this. She lived out the ideal that "death with honor is better than life with dishonor," as had been inscribed on the knife her father used to take his own life. Having given up everything else that mattered to her in the name of love, the loss of that love had the power to destroy her. It is somewhat consoling to believe that Pinkerton at last realized the role he played in her tragedy, and would remain as haunted by Cio-Cio San's death as the audience invariably is when the curtain falls on each performance. ■



Early set sketch for *Madama Butterfly* by set designer Matthew Antaky.

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Conductor Joseph Marcheso.

This will be Marcheso's third year with Festival Opera—he first served as assistant conductor for *Il Trovatore* in 2008 and again for *Turandot* in 2009. He is delighted to be able to return, this time as principal conductor for *Madama Butterfly*. As he says, “Some people go on vacation in the summer, I go to Festival Opera!”

FO: How did opera come into your life?

JM: *I have always particularly loved opera. Perhaps because the movie Amadeus came out when I was young, I started by learning the Mozart operas. I worked my way through all of them and then moved on to Rossini, Beethoven, Verdi. By the end of high school, something about Wagner clicked for me and I learned his operas. In college and later, came the American operas, which I love, especially Philip Glass. During my life, I've gone through an obsession with every era of opera. But there are still other operas!*

FO: Was your family involved with opera?

JM: *Not so involved, but they were very supportive and encouraged my interest. Because he headed a commercial real estate group, my father had season tickets to the Met every year. He didn't always go, but I did. And he would buy me recordings. I would ask for an opera I'd heard about and he'd go to the music store near his office and ask the man who worked there for suggestions. And I was very lucky because this man had wonderful taste and picked great recordings for me.*

FO: How do you prepare for an opera?

JM: *I start by trying to read the text through without hearing it. With something as familiar as this opera it's hard not to hear it in your mind, but it's important to understand the text. Even if it's a situation you wouldn't be in, try to find something to associate it with that you do understand. Then, when you get to the music, you can use it to express the real drama and emotions. Although I still have my score from when I first learned the opera, I can tell by looking at it that I'm in a different place in my conducting. I just bought a new score and I want to look at it again from the beginning, to start over.*

FO: *Madama Butterfly* is certainly familiar to most people.

JM: *It is. And it's hard not to just get carried along because you already know how it goes. You have to try harder to connect with*

the circumstances of the story. Think about the national anthem. When you hear it, it's easy to just sing along because you know it so well. You don't think about the words and what they mean. When it was first written, the words had real meaning to the people singing it. Now we know it so well, we have to make an effort to 'get off the train' so we don't just ride it down the familiar path.

FO: So, does that make this opera more challenging?

JM: *Puccini's operas are very familiar and appeal to many people, but the music is much harder than it sounds. I think Puccini is the composer most likely to get a sloppy performance because people think it should be easy—they know it so well and so many people do it. Something like Wagner is not as popular, plus it's simply not something everyone can sing, so people approach it with more fear. They don't have that kind of fear with Puccini...even if they should.*

FO: But isn't that familiarity part of what makes it so well loved?

JM: *That is a good thing about it, you know what's coming so there's a comfort in that whether you're performing or just listening to it. But if you're singing, or playing, or conducting it, you have to find a balance between using that comfort and just going along automatically. Someone who examines the work closely knows, or quickly learns, that Puccini is not easy. Especially conductors—with singers and musicians and directors, they have many people telling them when something is off! But the challenge is always exciting and I am so glad to have the opportunity to conduct this piece for Festival Opera.* ■

Adopt A Singer!

A few of our out-of-town artists will need a place to stay for several weeks during rehearsals and performances this summer. If you can offer an extra room, open apartment, or guest suite, hosting a Festival Opera singer is a great way to get to know a little more about how opera looks from the inside, while getting to know a talented young professional. If you can help, contact Helen Sheaff in the Festival Opera office, 925-944-9610.

Up Close to Opera

Sitting in the audience listening as the soprano and tenor blend their voices in a seemingly effortless display of talent, have you ever wondered just how much effort it really takes? The artists who appear on Festival Opera’s stage, have typically spent years and years in preparation. From early years of music classes, to focused study during college or conservatory, these are singers who have more than mastered the technical aspects of singing. While they may have pursued other careers or worked other jobs along the way, virtually everyone on stage, from lead role to chorus member, has made singing a significant part of their life.

As an organization, one of the greatest joys Festival Opera has is encouraging and nurturing singers’ careers, allowing them to discover new roles or refine ones they have already performed. By supporting Festival Opera, you also play an important role in this process and have an opportunity to get up close to the process as the opera takes shape.

A Variety of Viewpoints

This year for the first time, the company will hold an open chorus rehearsal. Under chorus director James Toland, Festival Opera’s exceptional volunteer chorus has been increasingly cited as a company strength. Chorus members are auditioned each year as every production has different requirements for chorus size, gender, and vocal range. Rehearsals begin as much as six months in advance, and chorus members are responsible for learning their parts from scores they provide themselves. The new open chorus rehearsal will be scheduled in late spring and guests will have an opportunity to hear them refine their sound as they work portions of the opera. As this will be a fund raising event for Festival Opera, there will be an entrance fee. Date, time and location will be announced soon, please call the office for more information.

Festival Opera supporters at the Sostenuto level also receive invitations to staging rehearsals where principal artists work with the director on their interpretation of the role both vocally and through their movement and expression. This is a fascinating step in the production process – hearing the guidance, discussion, and interaction between the director and singers provides a level of connection that makes seeing the final product on stage that much more thrilling. Due to the size of the rehearsal hall,

attendance at these events is limited so if you are interested and are a Sostenuto member or would like to become one, please let the office know well in advance.

Sostenuto members are also invited, along with guests of the cast, to attend the final dress rehearsal. At this “preview” rehearsal, the opera is typically run without interruption. The production staff responsible for what you see on stage – sets, lighting, make-up, and costumes – sit in the theater, making changes, taking notes, and sometimes, though rarely, going up on stage to adjust placement or costumes. Although some people prefer the mystery of opening night, if you like getting a glimpse of how it all comes together, this is a great opportunity for a behind the scenes look.



Photo: Michael Harvey

The Ultimate Role

For those who truly want to participate in bringing an opera to life, sponsoring an artist can connect you with the production in a very special way. You’ll have an opportunity to get to know the artist and be invited to staging rehearsals, as well as receive a backstage tour during “Tech Week” prior to opening night. You can also sponsor the director, conductor, or members of the orchestra. If you are interested in the ultimate opportunity to get up close to opera, contact Helen Sheaff at the Festival Opera office to discuss available sponsorships for the coming season.

No matter how you enjoy opera, whether you prefer to just sit in the audience marveling at the singers’ vocal artistry, or you like to witness the real work and effort that makes it all possible, don’t miss Festival Opera’s 2010 season – it promises to be an exciting and engaging experience from any viewpoint. ■

Members of the Festival Opera women’s chorus in rehearsal for Turandot with conductor Bryan Nies.



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Roberta Emerson
Editor



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