

Two Puccini Operas: Bohème and Butterfly

Spoiler alert: if you don't want to know the endings, read no further!

When I go to an opera, I must admit I still don't know most of the lyrics, even if I have seen the opera several times. This is because first of all, I love scenography, lighting, and all the arts of stagecraft. I immediately enter the imaginary magical world created on the stage even before the music begins. Then the orchestra performs the overture and the music with its thematic structure helps me dive into the entire story. At this point, the characters come onto the stage and the plot starts to flow. One of the reasons I love opera is because it is a complete art form, engaging me on many levels. Opera is very personal and everyone can approach it in their own way. Focusing only on the lyrics can sometimes lead you to miss the rich meta-communication offered by this unique art. Opera is not just about the words.

L'Bohème begins in a Parisian artists' garret, around 1830. It's cold and grey in the city and four artistes are at work: Marcello is painting while Rodolfo composes poetry. There is also a philosopher, Collin, and a musician, Schaunard. On Christmas Eve, the friends decide to go to Cafè Momus, but Rodolfo is still at home finishing his poem when a neighbor, Mimì, knocks on his door. Her candle has gone out, and when he tries to relight it, she drops her key. Their hands touch. It's love at first sight. They go to the café where Rodolfo introduces Mimì to the others, and Marcello's girlfriend Musette arrives. A few months later, Musette brings Mimì to the artists' garret, where Mimì overhears Rodolfo say that he can't love her because she has tuberculosis (consumption) and he is too poor to help her. Some time later, Musette returns with the dying Mimì, who wants to die by Rodolfo's side. His friends rush out to buy medicine, but it's too late. The ending is tragic, but Puccini had a realistically romantic attraction to the artist's life in Paris, as we all do.

Madama Butterfly takes us to Nagasaki, Japan in the late 1800s, at the time of early commercial contacts with America.

The scene opens upon a traditional world: people wearing kimonos, living in paper and bamboo houses, serving tea ceremoniously, and obeying the rules and rituals of their culture. Into this scene, the American Naval lieutenant Pinkerton briskly arrives, dressed as a sea captain, and with bearing and demeanor that reinforce his social role. He is offered a property on long lease with geisha wife included, and enchanted by the young Cio Cio San (Butterfly), he welcomes the marriage. He considers this a frivolous matter, but it is taken seriously by Butterfly and the Japanese, who warn her against marrying an outsider. Still, they marry, and when he leaves on his ship, as he must, he promises to return. Butterfly keeps the candle burning and has his baby. Despite social criticism, she continues to wait. When Pinkerton finally does return, announced by cannon blasts at the seaport (offstage), Butterfly and her servant Suzuki happily bustle about to get ready to meet him. He walks onto the stage with his American wife, but soon runs off, ashamed. Butterfly collapses in misery, saying goodbye to her son. Devastated, she commits suicide in the Japanese way, with a knife to her heart.

At Torre del Lago this month for *La Bohème* (3 August):

Director Dejan Savic / Scenery & costumes Leila Fteita
Mimì, Tinatin Mamulashvili
Rodolfo, George Oniani
Musetta, Evgenia Vukert

for *Madama Butterfly* (10 August):

Director Hirofumi Yoshida / Scenery Kan Yasuda
Cio Cio San, Amarilli Nizza
Pinkerton, Hector Mendoza Lopez

(Note: On these dates *Grapevine* has organized a boat trip to attend these operas.)

Puccini Gala, Lucca 27 July 2018

photo by Sue Perry



Singers (left to right): Lorenzo Decaro,
Donata D'Annunzio Lombardi,
and Giuseppe Altomare



photo by Silvano Simi

Beatrice Venezi
conducting the
Teatro del Giglio
Orchestra with the
Polifonica Lucchese
chorus



photo by Sue Perry