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ESTHER M. MORGAN-ELLIS - REBA WISSNER
Dahlonega (GA) - Columbus (GA)

RACE, GENDER, AND PRESENTISM IN THE OPERA STUDIES CLASSROOM

In teaching music history, faculty sometimes must contend with students' reluctance to engage with materials that seem racist, sexist, or misogynist. Students, who are adept at reading such texts in the light of contemporary racial and gender politics, often find these historical theatrical works to be offensive – a reaction that should be treated with respect and sensitivity. However, what seems regressive to students today sometimes served liberatory ends for audiences and artists in other times and places. In societies such as the United States where young people are increasingly aware of and sensitive to contemporary and historical injustices, students can be quick to "cancel" composers who incorporate these themes into their music, forgetting that they are viewing such works through a contemporary lens. When instructors assist students in interpreting works through historical lenses, they provide insight into the oppressive structures and modes of resistance that have always characterized the production and reception of musical theater.

In this essay, we will take Giacomo Puccini's *Madama Butterfly* (1904) as an example. We will introduce primary and secondary sources that students can examine to better understand the politics of this opera at its premiere and throughout the twentieth century. Our purpose in doing so is not just to provide ideas about how to teach this work, but to outline a framework for teaching any piece of music that has meant different things to performers and audiences across time and place.

Premiere

While *Madama Butterfly* is a staple of the operatic repertoire today, students need to know that it was a total failure at its first performance in Milan on 17 February 1904, and they will be interested in weighing the musical, social, and commercial factors that contributed to its reception. Contemporary reports of the premiere describe complete silence in the first act and then heckling by audience members, including boos, hisses, laughter, and animal noises at varying points in the second act that were so loud the instruments could not be heard above them.[1] This reaction

[1] A. WILSON, "A Frame without A Canvas: New Perspectives on the Reception of *Madama Butterfly*", in *"Madama Butterfly". L'orientalismo di fine secolo, l'approccio pucciniano, la*

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was in stark contrast to that demonstrated by orchestra members after the dress rehearsal, who gave the composer a standing ovation.[2] Critics, however, accused Puccini of compositional laziness through self-plagiarism in the work, specifically citing his reuse of themes from *La bohème* as well as music by other composers. One article from Milan's *Il Secolo* newspaper on 18 February 1904 described these infractions and warned that having a second performance of the work would be like making fun of the audience, members of which could easily point out the pre-existing melodies.[3] Rivalry between Italian opera publishers certainly contributed dramatic tension to the occasion of the premiere, and it is even possible that a hostile claque was organized to lead the vocal audience reaction. Puccini certainly believed that the response was orchestrated in advance by his detractors.[4] All the same, he immediately withdrew the opera to undertake revisions, and the work would not be celebrated as worthy of international performance until the first revision was premiered in Brescia on 28 May 1904.[5]

Understanding that the work was not well-received during its initial performances can help us to navigate the critiques of the work by students. One place to start to help students to better understand the contemporary reception of *Butterfly* is the musical press. The newspaper articles anticipating and reviewing the work's premiere can tell us a lot about how society in turn-of-the-century Milan, where the opera premiered, viewed works that we now consider to be problematic. A good place to start is the 16 February 1904 article in *La Stampa*, in which an unnamed music critic discusses the opera in light of Puccini's other works.[6] This article not only foreshadows the opera's lack of success at its premiere, but it touches on the opera's plot and main characters, and gives us, the readers, a sense as to how contemporary audiences would have interpreted the work. The author treats the plot of the work very matter-of-factly, as a love story between two characters, and focuses primarily on an erudite musical analysis of the piece.

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ricezione, Atti del convegno internazionale di studi (Lucca - Torre del Lago, 28 - 30 maggio 2004), ed. by A. Groos and V. Bernardoni, Florence, Olschki, 2008, pp. 349-373: 349.

[2] J. PASLER, "Political Anxieties and Musical Reception: Japonisme and the Problem of Assimilation", in *"Madama Butterfly". L'orientalismo di fine secolo* cit., pp. 17-53: 17.

[3] While the real author of this article is unknown as it is unsigned, it is speculated that it may have been written by *Il Secolo*'s owner, Edoardo Sonzogno. See "*Madama Butterfly*", *Il Secolo,* 18 February 1904, p. 4.

[4] M. GIRARDI, *Puccini: His International Art* (1995), Eng. trans., Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 2000, pp. 197-199.

[5] D. SCHICKLING, "Puccini's 'Work in Progress': The So-Called Versions of *Madama Butterfly*", *Music & Letters*, 1998, LXXIX, n. 4, pp. 527-537: 530.

[6] "I caratteri della musica di *Madama Butterfly* di Puccini", *La Stampa*, 16 February 1904, p. 2.

Revisions

The characterizations exhibited in the canonical version of *Butterfly* do not necessarily represent the original vision of Puccini or his sources and collaborators. Instead, they reflect social pressures brought to bear by stakeholders intent on ensuring the opera's commercial success. Dieter Schickling has documented the many revisions of *Butterfly*, which underwent striking transformations across Italian, French, and English versions between 1904 and 1907.[7] The process through which *Butterfly* assumed its final form not only reflects the practical realities of commercial musical theater both historically and in the present day but also demonstrates how political and social messages are blunted in the pursuit of general appeal.

Students can read a clear summary of this process in a brief essay by Julian Smith that accompanies a 2011 guide to the opera.[8] In sum, the portrayals of Colonel Pinkerton and his American wife Kate were extremely harsh in the early versions, leaving no question about their ethical degeneracy, but were softened in 1906 at the request of director Albert Carré for the Paris premiere.[9] Although Puccini's publisher, Ricordi, encouraged him to hold his ground against Carré, the composer capitulated with surprising ease.[10] He seems to have concluded that elements of the opera that would offend Parisian audiences were likely also to offend other international audiences – and he could not risk another bad performance following the catastrophic premiere in Milan. The revisions also brought *Butterfly* further in line with the conventions of Italian opera and made the role of Pinkerton more attractive to tenors. As Smith concludes, "The original *Butterfly* was a daring opera, unconventional in its structure, and unsparing in its delivery of what, for its time, was an unusually pointed moral and social message. The Milan audience of 1904 rejected the former, and Albert Carré, on behalf of bourgeois Parisians, successfully diluted the latter".[11] The work was revised twice more: once in April 1904 for a performance the following month in Brescia and then twice again for performances in Britain and France. The opera would notably be performed at the Metropolitan Opera in New York in 1907, in an English translation of the third Italian version.

[7] SCHICKLING, "Puccini's 'Work in Progress'" cit., p. 528.

[8] J. SMITH, "Tribulations of a Score", in G. PUCCINI, *Madama Butterfly (Madam Butterfly)* ("English National Opera Guide", 26), ed. by N. John, Overture, Richmond (UK), 2011, pp. 15-24.

[9] *Ivi*, pp. 18-23. Michele Girardi argues that the reduction of Kate's role makes her seem even crueler, but concurs that "the contrast between the Japanese and Americans was much more crude" in the original version. GIRARDI, *Puccini* cit., pp. 221 and 256.

[10] SMITH, "Tribulations of a Score" cit., pp. 16-17.

[11] *Ivi*, p. 23.

While this was meant to be the U.S. premiere, Henry Savage scooped Met manager Heinrich Conried when he secured the right to perform an English-language *Butterfly* with his touring company in 1906 – a venture so successful that it was repeated the following year.[12]

Japonisme

We must help students understand that *Madama Butterfly* was a part of the contemporary Japonisme movement, in which artists across disciplines drew on Japanese themes in their works.[13] Japonisme was but one variety of musical Orientalism, a type of exoticism that generalizes Asian culture.[14] Puccini was not alone in this; other well-known works to emerge from this movement included W. S. Gilbert and Arthur Sullivan's *The Mikado* (1885), André Messager's *Madame Chrysanthème* (1893), Sidney Jones's *The Geisha* (1896), and Pietro Mascagni's *Iris* (1898). The sources used in the libretto for *Butterfly* were mostly culled from Japonisme works of literature. However, Puccini surpassed his contemporaries in seeking to engage closely with Japanese music and to stage a realistic portrayal of Japanese culture. During his research, the composer listened to Japanese speech, witnessed performances on the koto and shamisen, and studied records and printed scores. He also heard performances by geisha Sada Yacco on her 1902 European tour and consulted with Hisako Oyama, wife of the Japanese ambassador, who supplied both resources and criticism (although Puccini did not always follow her advice).[15] Puccini did not reference Japanese music as a novelty, but rather ensured that its inclusion was pertinent both dramatically and sonically. As Helen Greenwald has argued, Puccini also achieved remarkable fidelity to Japanese cultural values in his dramatic design, which centers on the home.[16]

The Japonisme movement can be connected with contemporary musical trends unique to the United States. Musicologist Erinn Knyt has compared engagement with Native American music and culture by Edward MacDowell, Antonín Dvořák,

[12] J. MCPHERSON, "The Savage Innocents: Part 2: On the Road with *Parsifal*, *Butterfly*, the *Widow*, and the *Girl*", *The Opera Quarterly*, 2003, XIX, n. 1, pp. 28-63: 41-42.

[13] Y. CHIBA, "*Japonisme*: East-West Renaissance in the Late 19th Century", *Mosaic: An Interdisciplinary Critical Journal*, 1998, XXXI, n. 2, pp. 1-20: 2.

[14] H. M. GREENWALD, "Picturing Cio-Cio-San: House, Screen, and Ceremony in Puccini's *Madama Butterfly*", *Cambridge Opera Journal*, 2000, XII, n. 3, pp. 237-259: 238.

[15] A. GROOS, *Madama Butterfly/Madamu Batafurai: Transpositions of a "Japanese Tragedy"*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2023, p. 188. ID., "Return of the Native: Japan in *Madama Butterfly/Madama Butterfly* in Japan", *Cambridge Opera Journal*, 1989, I, n. 2, pp. 167-194: 169-170.

[16] GREENWALD, "Picturing Cio-Cio-San", p. 240.

and Ferruccio Busoni. In her analysis, she places the three composers on a spectrum ranging from least to most committed in their pursuit of deep understanding and authentic representation.[17] Although all three were art music composers working in a Euro-American concert idiom, she demonstrates that Busoni took his interpretive task far more seriously than the others, and also suggests ways in which the study of his works can open the door to direct encounters with Native American music in the classroom. This approach can be applied directly to a variety of exoticist works from the same era, including *Butterfly*. Students will be interested to read Arthur Groos's balanced account of Puccini's engagement with Japanese music and culture. As Groos demonstrates, while Puccini did indeed surpass the surface-exoticists efforts of his contemporaries by engaging directly with Japanese music and advisors, he relied on literary sources created by Europeans and brushed aside efforts by his key Japanese informant to correct certain details, such as the garbled names of Shinto deities to whom Suzuki prays.[18] Puccini, however, was keenly aware that he was writing Italian music, not Japanese music, and he was explicit about the importance of retaining his own style. That makes *Butterfly* an exceptional work for teaching students about the cultural specificity of Western art music.

U.S. Reception

The study of reception creates an opportunity to connect a musical example with the place where your students live and learn. Both authors happen to teach at institutions in the U.S. state of Georgia. It is therefore particularly interesting for our students to consider early performances of this work both in New York City, where it premiered on 11 February 1907,[19] and locally, given that the production visited the Grand Opera House of Augusta, Georgia on 30 December 1907, and that *Butterfly* was featured in Atlanta Opera Week several times in the 1910s. Considering the U.S. reception also allows students to examine primary sources written in their own language.

Simple searches in the Georgia Historic Newspapers database produce a trove of fascinating materials.[20] Students can either undertake these searches themselves

[17] E. E. KNYT, "'Song of the Spirit Dance' and Native American Songs: Teaching about Appropriation in Late Nineteenth- and Early Twentieth-Century Symphonic Compositions", in *Navigating Stylistic Boundaries in the Music History Classroom: Crossover, Exchange, Appropriation*, ed. by E. M. Morgan-Ellis, New York, Routledge, 2024, pp. 62-84.

[18] GROOS, "Return of the Native" cit., p. 170.

[19] "*Madama Butterfly*", *New-York Daily Tribune*, 12 February 1907, p. 7.

[20] The Georgia Historic Newspapers database is open access for anyone worldwide who would like to consult it: *https://gahistoricnewspapers.galileo.usg.edu/* (last access to this link and to the others in this essay 27.08.2024).

or be provided with selected articles for examination and discussion.[21] They will not only encounter publicity that plays up the opera's exotic setting, especially in the form of photographic spreads framed with typical Orientalist iconography (see Figure 1), but also language that emphasizes how *Italian* the opera is – another layer of significant ethnic identity for U.S. consumers. In a 1907 notice, for example, *Butterfly* is described as "in all respects a typical work of young Italy".[22] Georgia papers also published synopses that tended to emphasize both the remorse (and possible reform) of Pinkerton and the childlike pitifulness of Cio-Cio-San. One account told potential Georgia theatergoers in 1926 that "upon arriving back upon the scene of his love, [Pinkerton's] heart is torn with grief for what he has done and he cannot control himself",[23] while an article by Geraldine Farrar written for Georgia audiences and titled "Butterfly as I See Her" described the heroine as "a dainty human petal, fragrant as the cherry blossoms in her garden, frail as the slender knife that pierces her loving body, the embodiment of woman's love and unswerving devotion – such is Cio-Cio-San, sweetest, dearest and most pathetic of little women!"[24] Finally, Georgia papers positioned *Butterfly* within the U.S.-based Japonisme movement. One account of the New York premiere describes how *Butterfly* "brought in its train an added taste for things Japanese", resulting in "Japanese parties becoming the rage wherever this delightful opera is given".[25] The article suggests that Augusta socialites would do well to follow the lead of New York luminaries in hosting Japanese-themed events to celebrate the performance of the opera.

[21] While it is best to have students find their own primary sources, we have made a selection of Georgia newspaper articles available here: *https://bit.ly/3LHUijo*.

[22] "Madam Butterfly", *Atlanta Georgian and News*, 21 December 1907, p. 10.

[23] "Mme. Butterfly", *Banner Herald*, 21 July 1926, p. 3.

[24] G. FARRAR, "Butterfly as I See Her", *Atlanta Georgian*, 6 May 1910, p. 1.

[25] "About Plays and Players", *Augusta Herald*, 27 December 1907, p. 3.

1A

1B

FIGURE 1A - 1B: These photographic spreads appeared in the *Augusta Herald* on 22 and 29 December 1907, in advertisement of the upcoming performance at the Grand Opera House.

Any consideration of U.S. reception must also address the fact that racist immigration laws had enshrined stereotypes of Asian women as submissive and sexually available since the passing of the Page Act in 1875.[26] As Eric Hung describes it, the law "effectively barred 'Oriental' women from entering the country on the assumption that they were coming for 'lewd and immoral purposes'".[27] The stereotypes depicted in productions of *Butterfly*, therefore, were not confined to literature and drama. They impacted the lives of countless women and their families, laid the foundation for the mass incarceration of Japanese Americans during World War II, and nurtured an environment in which violence continues to be enacted against U.S. women of Asian descent in the present day. Anyone teaching *Butterfly* – especially in the U.S. – should first read Hung's essay, in which he argues that we must "seriously discuss how racism, sexism, and colonialism combined to create the 'lotus flower' stereotype" to effectively guide students' engagement.[28] This is not a "presentism" that dismisses the opera's original context, but rather an approach that combines consideration of historical sociopolitics with an acknowledgment of present-day repercussions. Our students, after all, live in the present, and it is in the present that this opera is performed. We cannot dismiss our students' experiences with sexism and racism, nor can we dismiss the role of historical works in perpetuating stereotypes and violence.

Casting and Reclamation

Any classroom presentation of *Madama Butterfly* must address its reception in Japan, which is detailed in Arthur Groos's recent monograph, *Madama Butterfly/Madamu Batafurai: Transpositions of a "Japanese Tragedy"*. Japanese audience members were present at early performances of *Butterfly* in Europe and the United States, and they were naturally sensitive to the many errors made in representing Japanese dress, custom, and music. The hilarity (or offense) of these errors was amplified when Italian troupes presented the opera in Japan, such as an infamous production by the Carpi Opera Company that was performed several times in the 1920s. As one reviewer summed up the response, "Whenever *Madame Butterfly* was

[26] Puccini's librettists indicate that Cio-Cio-San chose to become a geisha explicitly to avoid the life of a prostitute, and she is therefore quite the opposite of a "sexually available" Asian woman. The nuances of this situation, however, are not necessarily conveyed on stage or perceived by audiences. GROOS, *Madama Butterfly/Madamu Batafurai* cit., p. 98.

[27] E. HUNG, "Toward Socially Responsible Music History Pedagogy: A Rant, Some Theories, and a Few Resources", in *Sound Pedagogy: Radical Care in Music*, ed. by C. Renihan, J. Spilker, and T. Wright, Champaign, University of Illinois Press, 2024, pp. 137-151: 138.

[28] *Ivi*, p. 139.

presented the audience was so overcome with uncontrollable mirth that neither could the music be heard for the titters nor the opera be seen for the tears of laughter in the eyes of the spectators. For to a Japanese, whatever the merits of the music may be, the opera as presented by a Western company [is] one extraordinary burlesque".[29] Inept productions, as well as shortcomings in the plot and score, inspired Japanese singers and theater producers to reimagine the opera from a Japanese perspective. A 1930 production by the Japan Opera Association made sweeping changes to *Butterfly*, "correcting" errors that were latent in the opera. Offensive scenes were eliminated, including nearly forty percent of the first act, and adjustments were made to the score to reduce the negative effect of passages in which Puccini used Japanese melodies that were inappropriate for the scene being depicted. The plot was reimagined to erase its shameful grounding in treaty-port prostitution, instead presenting Butterfly as "an exemplar of Japanese womanhood".[30] Finally, all Japanese characters were portrayed by Japanese singers while Western characters were portrayed by Western singers – and each performer sang their role either in Japanese or English, as appropriate to the character and situation.[31] Students will appreciate the opportunity to consider this radical reimagining, which was the first of many to be staged by Japanese performers for Japanese audiences. The decisions made by Japan Opera Association, as well as the reception of their production, invite questions about the nature of exoticism and authenticity, as well as the possibilities for reimagining dramatic works.

Students should consider the social significance of casting *Madama Butterfly* not only in Japanese productions but also in its various premieres and later performances in Europe and the United States. Newspaper reviews provide a rich resource for this reception. On this topic, we recommend the work of Kunio Hara, who has published an essay about teaching *Butterfly* on the *Beyond Tokenism* website.[32] Hara includes an assignment that asks students to consider the reception of three singers in the title role: the white American soprano Geraldine Farrar (1882-1967), who starred in the Metropolitan Opera premiere; the Japanese soprano Tamaki Miura (1884-1946); and the African American soprano Leontyne Price (b. 1927). Through an examination of these reviews, students are encouraged to consider the construction and impact of race both within the drama and in the lives of the singers

[29] GROOS, *Madama Butterfly/Madamu Batafurai* cit., p. 195.

[30] *Ivi*, p. 196.

[31] *Ivi*, p. 198.

[32] K. HARA, "Reframing Musical Exoticism: Ideas for Teaching Puccini's *Madama Butterfly*", *Beyond Tokenism. Dsimantling, Rethinking & Reframing Narratives in Music History Pedagogy*, https://musichistoryredo.wordpress.com/redoing-mh-pedagogy/reframed-narratives/reframing-musical-exoticism-ideas-for-teaching-puccinis-madama-butterfly/.

themselves. Students also see the power that performers can exert in determining the meaning of a work. As Hara explains elsewhere, Miura identified closely with the character of Cio-Cio-San, embracing the role on a personal, even autobiographical, level.[33] And she did so with artistic agency, not as a capitulation to Western artistic hegemony. Her individual exertion of ownership over the work was contemporaneous with the national movement in Japan to claim *Butterfly*. As Mari Yoshihara demonstrates in a 2004 article appropriate for undergraduate readers, the Japanese Butterfly was much more than a Japanese female singer playing the character created by Western men. The Butterfly played and claimed by the Japanese was also a performance of the Japanese nation-state as a modern, civilized peer of the Western powers, a performance of Japanese women's newly gendered identity in multiple publics, and a performance of Japanese people abroad intent on proving their status to their neighbors.[34] This act of reclamation resonates across times, places, and musical genres, and students might be interested in connecting it with the music and artists they value in their own lives.

Butterfly has also prompted an avalanche of conflicting interpretations by scholars of various backgrounds and disciplines, several of whom present arguments grounded in the historical context of the narrative. Sandra Kumamoto Stanley engages the complexity of late-19th-century international relations to portray Butterly as "a woman caught in a cultural imaginary that subscribes solely to neither Japanese nor American identities […] Set adrift at a time when the American national narrative refuses to accommodate her",[35] while Vera Micznik considers the social function and psychological makeup of the geisha or "rented wife", explaining how the character of Cio-Cio-San came to deviate from historical reality.[36]

Contemporary Staging

Any encounter with *Butterfly* or a similar work should culminate in the question, "How are productions staged today, and how *should* they be staged?" Puccini's opera offers rich material to spark discussion. In 2019, Knoxville opera staged a *Butterfly*

[33] ID., "The Death of Tamaki Miura: Performing *Madama Butterfly* during the Allied Occupation of Japan", *Music & Politics*, 2017, XI, n. 1, pp. 1-26: 13.

[34] M. YOSHIHARA, "The Flight of the Japanese Butterfly: Orientalism, Nationalism, and Performances of Japanese Womanhood", *American Quarterly*, 2004, LVI, n. 4, pp. 975-1001: 976-977.

[35] S. K. STANLEY, "Settling Scores: The Metamorphosis of *Madame Butterfly* and Her Transnational Legacy", *Pacific Coast Philology*, 2007, XLII, n. 2, pp. 257-263: 259-260.

[36] V. MICZNIK, "Cio-Cio-San the Geisha", in *A Vision of the Orient: Texts, Intertexts, and Contexts of "Madame Butterfly"*, ed. by J. Wisenthal, S. Grace, M. Boyd, B. McIlroy, and V. Micznik, Toronto, University of Toronto Press, 2006, pp. 36-58: 40.

featuring white singers in "yellowface", which involves the use of makeup to simulate stereotypically Asian facial features.[37] The same production used Asian women in its advertising campaign, even though none were included in the cast. Students might contrast Knoxville Opera's tepid response to criticism with that of the New York Gilbert & Sullivan Players, who staged an Asian-led production of *The Mikado* in 2016 following backlash to yellowface the year before.[38] Yellowface is also a problem in contemporary staging of other Western works of the same era—perhaps most notably Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky's ballet *The Nutcracker* (1892), which remains a perennial favorite in the U.S.[39]

Conclusion

It is worth noting that neither of the authors are opera scholars or have any special expertise concerning this work. Although we both teach music history survey classes covering all periods, our research primarily concerns U.S. music and culture of the mid-20th century. What we are advocating here is an approach to situating "problematic" works in their historical context that can be applied to any example, and our experience putting together this case study has demonstrated its viability. It was not difficult, despite our comparative ignorance, to assemble an array of primary and secondary sources concerning *Butterfly* to which our students have free and easy access, and to ground our teaching of the work in its local reception. We made a point of only engaging digital and physical sources that are available to our students, and instructors at other institutions might make different choices about what to include.

At the end of this experience, students might still feel that we should no longer perform (or possibly even teach) *Madama Butterfly*. However, they will hopefully be able to draw on a range of historical sources and perspectives in articulating their point of view and will also understand that the meaning of a stage work is never fixed, but rather negotiated and renegotiated by creators, performers, and consumers.

Esther.Morgn-Ellis@ung.edu
wissner_reba@columbusstate.edu

[37] C. PETERSON, "Knoxville Opera Forgets It's 2019 and Opts for Yellowface for *Madame Butterfly*", *OnStage Blog*, November 10, 2019 https://www.onstageblog.com/editorials/2019/11/10/knoxville-opera-forgets-its-2019-and-opts-for-yellowface-for-madame-butterfly.

[38] E. KIM, "An Asian-American Reimagining of Gilbert and Sullivan's *The Mikado*", *The New Yorker*, 26 December 2016 https://www.newyorker.com/culture/culture-desk/an-asian-american-reimagining-of-gilbert-and-sullivans-the-mikado.

[39] *Resonances: Engaging Music in Its Cultural Context*, ed. by E. M. Morgan-Ellis, Dahlonega, The University of North Georgia Press, 2020, pp. 120-121.