

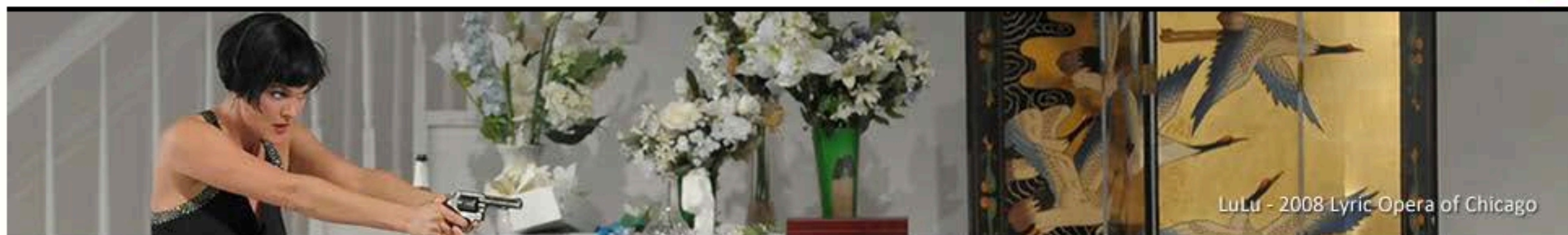
# Opera Warhorses

An appreciation and analysis of the 'Standard Repertory' of opera

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LuLu - 2008 Lyric Opera of Chicago

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## House of Puccini: Jun Kaneko's Enchanting "Madama Butterfly" Soars at War Memorial – San Francisco Opera, June 15, 2014

June 16th, 2014

There are many elements that go into a successful operatic performance. An array of brilliant elements were present in the imaginative 2006 production of Puccini's "Madama Butterfly", not seen previously in San Francisco, in which cast, conductor, orchestra and chorus, production design and staging all contributed to bringing Puccini's heartrending tale of delusion and culture clash to life.

[Below: *Cio-Cio-San* (Patricia Racette, left) is on the lookout for ships in Nagasaki Harbor as Suzuki (Elizabeth DeShong) kneels and four koken march behind her; edited image, based on a Cory Weaver photograph, courtesy of the San Francisco Opera.]



Patricia Racette sang the title role, exhibiting the confidence, dramatic instincts and vocal prowess one expects from this artist who has dominated this role at the San Francisco Opera during the eight years of the David Gockley's general directorship.

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Her co-principals were three stars who are rising into the operatic firmament – Brian Jagde as Lieutenant Pinkerton, Elizabeth DeShong as Butterfly's servant and confidante Suzuki and Brian Mulligan as the American consul Sharpless.

[Below: Patricia Racette as Cio-Cio-San; edited image, based on a Cory Weaver photograph, courtesy of the San Francisco Opera.]



Jagde has emerged as a first rate Puccini tenor, possessing the *spinto* weight expected of Pinkerton or a Cavaradossi [see [Echalaz, Jagde, Aceto Open Santa Fe Opera Season in Wonderfully Sung "Tosca" – June 29, 2012](#)] as well as the lyrical beauty to do justice to Puccini's richly melodic score.

Brian Mulligan, on whose impressive Yeletsky I had reported last month [see [Robert Carsen's Brilliantly Refocused "Pique Dame" – Zurich Opera, May 3, 2014](#)] showed how mellifluous Sharpless' melodic line can sound when entrusted to a sweet-voiced lyric baritone.

[Below: Sharpless (Brian Mulligan, left) warns Pinkerton (Brian Jagde, right) that his bride will take their marriage vows seriously; edited image, based on a Cory Weaver photograph, courtesy of the San Francisco Opera.]



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Elizabeth DeShong, so impressive in Lee Blakeley's production of the opera in Santa Fe [see [Kaduce's Incandescent Cio Cio San, Jovanovich's Injudicious Pinkerton, Emblazon Blakeley's "Butterfly" – Santa Fe Opera, July 16, 2010](#)] brings to the role her bountiful mezzo-soprano and affecting acting.

[*Below: Suzuki (Elizabeth DeShong, left) holds the child named "Sorrow" (Miles Sperske, right); edited image, based on a Cory Weaver photograph, courtesy of the San Francisco Opera.*]



#### ***Nicola Luisotti and the San Francisco Opera Orchestra***

Music director Nicola Luisotti has been working his way through the meaty classics of the Italian repertory for his San Francisco Opera audiences, adding his well-crafted interpretations of Verdi's "La Traviata" and Puccini's "Butterfly" during the first four weeks of San Francisco Opera's summer season.

"Butterfly's" orchestration is large, intensely melodic and pervades the opera's drama. The San Francisco Opera Orchestra is unsurpassed in this masterwork, and is at one with Maestro Luisotti's vivid presentation of the opera's lyricism and theatricality.

[*Below: Conductor Nicola Luisotti; edited image, based on a Terrence McCarthy photograph, courtesy of the San Francisco Opera.*]




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### ***The Kaneko Production***

During the Gockley tenure as the San Francisco Opera General Director, “Butterfly” has been presented in four seasons – twice (2006 and 2007) with the company’s own production, twice (2010 and 2014) with productions borrowed from other American companies.

Following the success of a wholly new San Francisco Opera production created from the imagination of artist and ceramicist Jun Kaneko [See [A Second Look: the Kaneko-Gockley Production of “Magic Flute” – San Francisco Opera, June 24, 2012](#)], Gockley decided to bring a production to San Francisco that Nebraska-based Kaneko had created for the Opera Omaha (and that has been presented previously by several smaller North American opera companies).

*[Below: production designer and ceramicist Jun Kaneko creating a ceramic painting; edited image, based on a copyrighted 2005 publicity photograph.]*



If I had imagined that the whimsical ideas that so enlivened Mozart’s fairy tale opera would not translate into the melodrama of Puccini’s story, then I would have conceded that such concerns were unfounded.

In fact, I believe that when one steps away from the traditional ways of presenting Puccini’s *fin de siècle* 19th century Nagasaki, one has the opportunity to flood one’s senses in the waves of musical ideas that flow one after another.

It also permits one to consider the story less literally and more metaphorically. Yes, Butterfly is deluded in the idea that she is an American military wife who will find happiness on American soil, but one can find analogies between her plight and that of every woman who has convinced herself that her status in time will change from kept woman to lady of the house.

*[Below: Cio-Cio-San (Patricia Racette, center, with fan) arrives for her wedding ceremony; edited image, based on a Cory Weaver photograph, courtesy of the San Francisco Opera.]*



[Below: Cio-Cio-San (Patricia Racette, center, with fan) arrives for her wedding ceremony; edited image, based on a Cory Weaver photograph, courtesy of the San Francisco Opera.]



Kaneko's sets and costumes share some ideas of other productions on which I've reported, that are influenced by the conventions of classical Japanese theater, such as the use of black-dressed *koken*. Such productions include those of Robert Wilson [[Liping Zhang Resplendent in Robert Wilson's L. A. "Butterfly" – October 1, 2008](#)] and Moffatt Oxenbould [[Australia Opera's "Butterfly" Charms Pittsburgh – October 19, 2007](#)].

[Below: Pinkerton (Brian Jagde, front left) enters into a marriage contract with Butterfly (Patricia Racette, right); edited image, based on a Cory Weaver photograph, courtesy of the San Francisco Opera.]



### ***Puccini, Wagner and the War Memorial Opera House***

But as reviewers detail their performance impressions, some may neglect to give proper due to the symbiosis of two of the elements that made the performance a brilliant experience – Puccini's dramatic music and the acoustics of the War Memorial Opera House.

The two most successful operatic composers in applying the Wagnerian concept of utilizing a large symphony orchestra as an essential element of dramatic storytelling were Richard Wagner himself and Giacomo Puccini.

The latter, along with his colleagues in the Italian *verismo* movement, adopted the device of using musical themes, each generally associated with a dramatic idea, that, at moments of high tension might blazon forth from the orchestra in a "wall of sound".

[Below: Pinkerton (Brian Jagde, seated) waits while Cio-Cio-San (Patricia Racette, above as a shadow) prepares for their wedding night; edited image, based on a Cory Weaver photograph, courtesy of the San Francisco Opera.]





The War Memorial Opera House is so constructed that these great orchestral moments in the operas of Wagner and Puccini resound in the opera house. This is reinforced by the large-sized orchestras required for these works taking place in an open (uncovered) orchestra pit.

The history of the San Francisco Opera that has performed in the War Memorial Opera House since 1932 (built for opera just a decade after the company's founding) is intertwined with Italian opera in general and Puccini in particular.

The three most performed operas in the company's history are, in order, Puccini's "La Boheme", Puccini's "Madama Butterfly" and Puccini's "Tosca". Each of these three operas is scheduled to be performed in this house during calendar year 2014, allowing operagoers the opportunity to experience these three great operas in an opera house that caresses each of them.

#### ***Other cast members and credits***

The large supporting cast of *comprimario* artists included the brief, but arresting, appearance of Morris Robinson (who plays Joe in the summer's mounting of Kern's "Show Boat") as the Bonze.

[Below: *The Bonze* (Morris Robinson, right) repudiates the action of Cio-Cio-San (Patricia Racette, left) disavowing her religion; edited image, based on a Cory Weaver photograph, courtesy of the San Francisco Opera.]





Korean tenor Julius Ahn was Goro. The Adler Fellows performing in *comprimario* roles were Illinois soprano Jacqueline Piccolino as Kate Pinkerton, California baritone Efrain Solis as the Prince Yamadori and New Zealand baritone Hadleigh Adams as the Imperial Commissioner.

San Francisco Opera Chorus member Jere Torkelsen was the Official Registrar. His colleagues from the chorus, Laurel Cameron Porter (the Mother), Virginia Pluth (the Cousin), Janet Campbell (the Aunt) and Christopher Jackson (Yakuside), took on the small roles of Cio-Cio-San's relatives that assemble for her wedding in a charming passage that is, regrettably, traditionally cut.

The staging was created by Florida director Leslie Swackhamer, who supervised its mounting in San Francisco. Gary Marder was lighting designer and Melissa Noble the choreographer.

### ***Recommendation***

I enthusiastically recommend this production and cast both for veteran opera-goers, especially those who have not experienced Puccini operas at the War Memorial, as well as all persons who might be new to opera.

***For my interview with Brian Mulligan (Sharpless), see: [Rising Stars: An Interview with Brian Mulligan](#).***

***For my interview with Maestro Luisotti, see: [A Maestro of Music and Metaphor: An Interview with Nicola Luisotti](#).***

***For further discussion of Puccini at the War Memorial, see: [House of Puccini: Striking San Francisco Opera "Tosca" with Pieczonka, Ataneli and Ventre – June 14, 2009](#).***

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