

## 'Madama Butterfly' review: Patricia Racette lifts S.F. Opera

Joshua Kosman  
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Tenor Brian Jagde plays the faithless Pinkerton to soprano Racette's Cio-Cio-San in Puccini's hard-hitting opera. Photo: Cory Weaver, San Francisco Opera



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Trying to single out the best aspects of the San Francisco Opera's superb newly opened production of Puccini's "Madama Butterfly" is a daunting and dizzying task. When everything meshes as magnificently as it did at the War Memorial Opera House on Sunday afternoon - a consistently strong cast, a beautiful and inventive production, sumptuous orchestral playing and canny conducting - where do you even begin?

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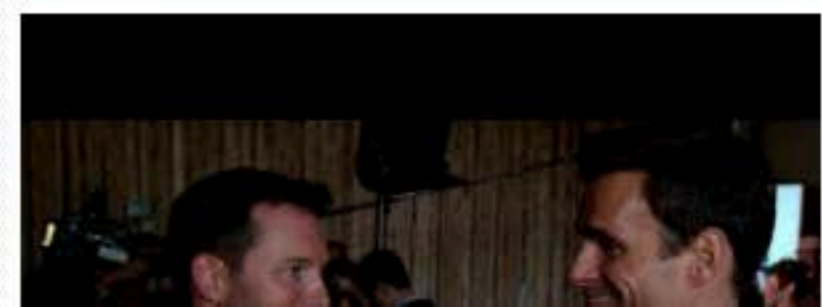
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Well, just on general principle, let's start with the leading lady.

Soprano **Patricia Racette's** vocal and theatrical gifts have been an essential

opponent of this company's activities for nearly a quarter century, and her indispensability took on almost comical dimensions this season when she took on roles in no fewer than four productions (including a last-minute leap into the title role of Tobias Picker's "**Dolores Claiborne**" in September).

Does her ubiquity reflect a lack of imagination on the part of General Director **David Gockley**, as some skeptics would have it, or some kind of sentimental favoritism by the company where her career began? No - it's the fact that whatever the repertory, Racette continues to turn in performances of unerring precision and imposing dramatic heft.

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Her Cio-Cio-San on Sunday - only the latest in a long, long string of San Francisco triumphs - encapsulated everything that is essential in Racette's artistry. As the teenage geisha who allows her love for a dashing American naval officer to cloud her judgment, Racette blended vocal ardor and sensitive phrasing with a fearless air of dignity.

### Buildup to devastation

The result was a characterization that was both graceful and deeply tragic at a level that can be too easy to gloss over. In the first act, Racette minced her way charmingly through Cio-Cio-San's wedding day but hinted throughout at the steel that would surface after intermission.

That strength of purpose was given vocal shape first in the love duet at the end of Act 1 - a persuasive amalgam of soaring, heartfelt melodic phrases and flexible rhythms - and then in the great Act 2 showcase "Un bel di," which received not one but two enthusiastic ovations. The final scene, delivered with a stony strength of purpose, was devastating.

To forestall the naysayers, let's acknowledge too that Racette's singing has not been impervious to the passing years, and that Sunday's performance included one or two worrisome moments (chiefly in the role's traditional trouble spots, Cio-Cio-San's vocally exposed first entrance and the initial notes of "Un bel di"). But not even the most determined nitpicker could have dwelt on those in the face of the overall brilliance of the performance.

Nor was Racette alone on the heights. Tenor **Brian Jagde** gave an ardent and often moving performance as the faithless Pinkerton; if his singing was a bit constricted in the opening scenes, he recovered for the love duet and for an expansive and wrenching account of the final "Addio, fiorito asil," Pinkerton's surge of remorse.



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Mezzo-soprano [Elizabeth DeShong](#) brought a wealth of vocal color and physical power to the part of Suzuki, Cio-Cio-San's longtime maid, and baritone [Brian Mulligan](#) sounded both warm and authoritative as the sympathetic American consul Sharpless. The Act 2 trio among these two and Pinkerton was a gorgeous tapestry of interweaving lines.

It was helped, as was most of the opera, by the lush playing of the [Opera Orchestra](#) and the careful and fluid conducting of Music Director [Nicola Luisotti](#). In a score that is alternately pointed and lyrical, Luisotti favored the latter to produce a reading of seductive beauty.

And that beauty was reinforced by the spare, colorful visual design of [Jun Kaneko](#), elegantly lit by [Gary Marder](#). Kaneko's winsome production of "The Magic Flute" two years ago - all whimsy and primary colors - was an enchanting introduction to his aesthetic, and this was the production, originally done for Opera Omaha, that first inspired Gockley to bring him on.

For "Butterfly," Kaneko has crafted a bare-bones set centered on a gently rising spiral that calls to mind the abstract symbolism of [Wieland Wagner's](#) designs for his grandfather's "Ring" cycle. Kaneko's world is wittier and more playful - one shoji screen suffices to conjure up Pinkerton's little house in the hills of Nagasaki - but there is a dark undercurrent as well, which is deftly evoked by [Leslie Swackhamer's](#) resourceful stage direction.

### Impressive support

In the smaller roles, tenor [Julius Ahn](#) made a rather underpowered company debut as the matchmaker Goro, but bass [Morris Robinson](#) took a furlough from his star-making turn in "Show Boat" for an explosive turn as the Bonze, and there were good showings by [Adler Fellows Efraín Solís](#) (Prince Yamadori) and [Jacqueline Piccolino](#) (Kate Pinkerton), and by Ian Robertson's Opera Chorus.

It's easy to complain about the current prevalence of warhorses on the San Francisco Opera's schedule, when it can sometimes seem as if every other work is a familiar one by Verdi or Puccini. But all it takes is a performance as fine as Sunday's "Butterfly" to remind you why we love these operas in the first place - and why we keep coming back.

**Madama Butterfly:** San Francisco Opera. Through July 9. \$23-\$385. War Memorial Opera House, 301 [Van Ness Ave.](#), S.F. (415) 864-3330. [www.sfopera.com](#).

*Joshua Kosman is The San Francisco Chronicle's music critic. E-mail: [jkosman@sfchronicle.com](mailto:jkosman@sfchronicle.com) Twitter: [@JoshuaKosman](#)*



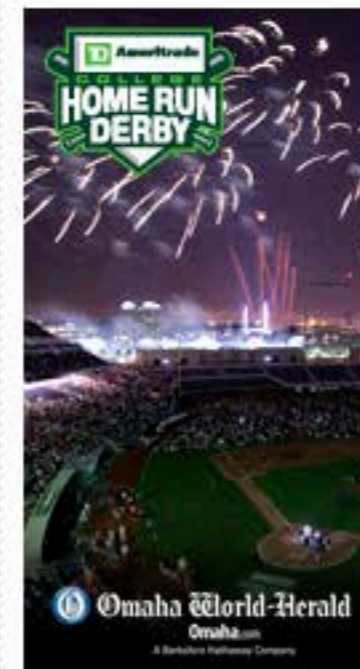
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