

# Opera's magical 'Butterfly' soars on star's power



Janelle Gelfand, [jgelfand@enquirer.com](mailto:jgelfand@enquirer.com) 12:32 p.m. EDT July 25, 2014



Pinkerton (Shawn Mathey) and Cio-Cio-San (Maria Luigia Borsi) celebrate their wedding in Cincinnati Opera's production of "Madame Butterfly." (Photo: Provided/Philip Groshong)

## Story Highlights

- Maria Luigia Borsi is the complete package – natural acting ability and a voice of luminous beauty
- "Madame Butterfly" repeats at 7:30 p.m. Saturday in Music Hall.

A stellar cast, gorgeous set and Puccini's glorious music have come together for a magical "Madame Butterfly" to end Cincinnati Opera's summer festival season.

It's easy to see why this opera has remained a favorite in Cincinnati, with more than 110 performances. The tale of the lovely geisha in turn-of-the-century Nagasaki who marries a U.S. Naval officer only to be deserted by him continues to resonate. (It was seen on Broadway as "Miss Saigon.")

You need a convincing leading lady, and luckily, Cincinnati has that in Maria Luigia Borsi. This soprano is the complete package – possessing natural acting ability and a voice of luminous

beauty, with thrilling high notes and the power to soar over the Cincinnati Symphony Orchestra in Puccini's biggest moments.

On Thursday, she gave a mesmerizing performance, from her shy entrance as the 15-year-old child-bride, through desperation for her plight and the final realization that she might as well be dead. Her shame was palpable as she crumpled to the ground after her relatives denounced her.

Her expressive powers came to the fore in the celebrated aria, "Un bel di" ("One Fine Day"), in which Butterfly dreams of the day Pinkerton will return.

Tenor Shawn Mathey was excellent in the role of Lt. Pinkerton, the cad who marries Cio-Cio San and then callously deserts her to find a "real" wife in America. (Yes, he was booed.) His presence was dashing and his phrasing impassioned as he wooed his young bride. He possesses an ardent, effortless tenor, that easily reached into the stratosphere. His final "Addio" was wrenching and emotional.

The love duet was one of the evening's highlights, beginning shyly and finally igniting into a passionate embrace. You could only revel in those great melodies sung by two exceptional voices soaring into every corner of Music Hall.

The character of the kind-hearted American consul Sharpless can be hard to get right. Roberto de Candia found the ideal tone, giving him a strong personality and communicating with intensity as he warned Pinkerton about what he was doing.



Cio-Cio-San (Maria Luigia Borsi) and Suzuki (Kelley O'Connor) sing the "Flower Duet" in Cincinnati Opera's "Madame Butterfly." (Photo: Provided/Philip Groshong)

As Butterfly's maid Suzuki, Kelley O'Connor sang warmly. She made it utterly clear that she knew Butterfly's predicament meant her mistress must "die with honor." In the final scene, Suzuki is the one who covers the child's eyes.

For some it may have been hard to hold back tears at the entrance of Butterfly's child, Sorrow, performed by Alexander Montello, 7. He charmed the audience and romped through falling blossoms. (His 4-year-old brother, Riley, will play the role on Saturday.)

The opera has smaller but impressive roles. As the Bonze, Reginald Smith, Jr., was formidable as he denounced Butterfly with uncommon vehemence. Steven Cole returned as Goro – a role that audiences love to hate – and brought winning character to the part of the sleazy marriage broker. Joseph Lattanzi was a charismatic Prince Yamadori, and Adria Caffaro was sympathetic as Kate.

Then there was the genius of Puccini's music. Among the highlights was the "Flower Duet," featuring Butterfly and Suzuki singing in tandem while slowly dropping cherry blossoms. The "Humming Chorus," as Butterfly begins her vigil, was a moment of singular beauty.

The chorus, well prepared by Henri Venanzi, sang with lovely color and pristine ensemble.

In his company debut, director Marc Verzatt provided seamless staging. The chorus (Butterfly's relatives) arrived in flowered kimonos over the bridge, and fanned out to allow her entrance. Fans and parasols became part of the choreography.

He also made changes to the traditional staging of Butterfly's death – powerful imagery but it may bother some.

The audience applauded Cincinnati Opera's softly romantic set, designed by Paul Shortt in 1992. With a painted backdrop of Nagasaki harbor, it features weeping willows, a graceful bridge and Butterfly's little house with sliding shoji panels.

**Thomas Hase's evocative lighting added depth, and the deepening beauty of the vigil scene, as the moon turned to sun, lingered long afterward.**

In the orchestra pit, Ramon Tebar was a fine leader. It's too bad the orchestra swamped the singers in the first act. But balance improved. The extended "vigil" music was beautifully shaped and the orchestral sound was stunning.

"Madame Butterfly" repeats at 7:30 p.m. Saturday in Music Hall. Tickets: 513-241-2742; [www.cincinnatiopera.org](http://www.cincinnatiopera.org)