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Madama Butterfly

CINCINNATI

Cincinnati Opera

7/24/14

Cincinnati Opera wrapped up its ninety-fourth season with Giacomo Puccini's *Madama Butterfly*, given a lovingly traditional production that was far from routine. Paul Shortt provided a breathtakingly beautiful set (applauded when the curtain rose), and Dean Brown's colorful costumes added to the spectacle, with Butterfly's awkward "American" shirtwaist and skirt in act two providing eloquent commentary on the dramatic situation. Marc Verzatt's direction demonstrated what can happen when a director approaches a work on its own terms and pays attention to the music. For example, Pinkerton unpacks and hangs an American flag on his newly leased house as "The Star Spangled Banner" is heard in the orchestra, and Suzuki's second-act prayer is used to alert a weeping Butterfly that Suzuki has returned. When Suzuki realizes what the reappearance of Pinkerton really means, she hurls the western-style chair from the house. Verzatt staged the final scene so that Pinkerton returns in time to witness Butterfly cut her throat (rather than disemboweling herself). Thomas C. Hase's lighting evoked the changing times of day, especially striking in the gradual dawn breaking after Butterfly's all-night vigil.

No matter how lovely the stage picture and insightful the directing, though, *Madama Butterfly* will not succeed without a strong title character, and in Maria Luigia Borsi Cincinnati had a powerhouse Cio-Cio San. From her entrance (complete with an ecstatic high D flat), she commanded the stage. Hers is an ample lyric soprano, with plenty of power held in reserve for climactic moments, and she is not afraid to sing softly. She projected Butterfly's initial shyness, her growing love for Pinkerton, a touching awkwardness in her attempts to become an American bride, and finally a steely resolved forged from desperation.

Callow and self-absorbed, B.F. Pinkerton is arguably the least appealing romantic lead in the standard operatic repertory. Shawn Mathey, previously heard in Cincinnati in a variety of Mozart works, took on the thankless role, singing with ardor and grace. The duet that ends the first act was one of the highlights of the evening. Once or twice, early in the evening, the voice seemed a bit slight for a house this size, but he gave a satisfying account of the music, and his devastation at the end of the opera was wholly convincing.

Roberto de Candia was a fine Sharpless, displaying a warm Italianate voice. His interpretation showed a good deal of growth, appearing to indulge Pinkerton in the opening scene, then showing an increasing understanding of Butterfly's plight and admiration for her. Previously heard in Cincinnati as Lorca in Osvaldo Golijov's *Ainadamar* in 2009, Kelley O'Connor was luxury casting as Suzuki. Her dark mezzo and warm stage presence were distinct assets, in a portrayal full of telling details. Her voice and Bosi's blended wonderfully in the Flower Duet.

In smaller roles, Steven Cole was an excellent Goro, avoiding caricature and presenting a more sympathetic portrayal than is often the case. In his brief appearance as the Bonze, Reginald Smith, Jr., revealed a powerful and attractive voice, delivering a crushing denunciation of Butterfly. Joseph Lattanzi (Prince Yamadori) and Adria Caffaro (Kate Pinkerton), both members of the Cincinnati Opera Young Artist program, completed the uniformly strong cast.

Ramón Tebar led the Cincinnati Symphony, in glorious form, in a nuanced reading that savored the many details of Puccini's orchestral writing. Often, the orchestral sound was remarkable transparent. Early on, the orchestra was occasionally allowed to cover the singers, but a good balance between stage and pit prevailed throughout the balance of the evening. As always, the Cincinnati Opera Chorus, led by Henri Venanzi, made a musically and dramatically rewarding contribution, particularly in the Humming Chorus in the second act. □

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