

Madame Butterfly— polished, exciting

Review by Schoyler Houser

It would be easier, paradoxically, to be less critical of Friday evening's performance of *Madame Butterfly* if it had been less good than it was. The cast was competent, polished and musically and dramatically exciting. At their best they were so good that they brought the production's weaknesses into high relief.

What are the production's strengths? First and foremost, the singing. Top honors for the evening go to William Wallis as Pinkerton. His voice has improved immensely since last year; the high notes are now free and ringing and clear. And loud—he had no trouble filling Kimball Hall, cutting through orchestra, chorus and occasionally the other principals.

Marilyn Cronin, as Cho-Cho-San, didn't get into high gear vocally speaking, until the middle of Act II. But when she was good she was very, very good, with lovely high pianissimos and the strength and richness required for the dramatic passages in the last act. She likewise spun out some beautiful legato lines.

Cindy McNally's Suzuki was a delight, vocally and visually; her Flower Duet with Cronin was a high point of the evening. John Brandstetter, as Sharpless, was consistently inaudible at the bottom of his range—a great pity, as his voice is a fine one and his characterization was very well conceived.

Special mention must also be made of the chorus; their sound was beautiful, fresh and warm. There have been worse in major opera houses.

The set and lighting were, of course, another major asset. They were vintage Dean Tschetter—almost distractingly lavish and pretty.

So with all these good things, what was there to complain about? Primarily, the director's view of the opera as a comedy that somehow goes sour in the middle. Thus the first act was riotously busy, with drunken relatives and a hyperactive marriage broker playing for laughs and distracting us from the lovers.

Cronin didn't help matters; she failed to distinguish between being young and in love and being simpleminded, and spent the whole act simpering and smiling like an airline stewardess. Admittedly, this approach made her transformation into womanhood in Act III all the more dramatic, but is this really what Puccini intended?

Then there was the awful translation they used. The cast's diction, unfortunately, was superb, so every single banality (sample: "A little liquor/will do it quicker") came through crystal clear.

But was it, on the whole, a good performance? Yes, it was a very good performance. Let's have more like it. Soon.

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