

OPERA REVIEW

'Madama Butterfly' soars with riveting attention to detail

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Palm Beach Opera's production of Giacomo Puccini's early 20th-century sweet then bitter tale of *Madama Butterfly* was played out in all its passion Friday evening at the Kravis Center against a backdrop that, by contrast, was simple, elegant and serene.

The story involves a callow American Navy lieutenant, B.F. Pinkerton, who, while stationed in Nagasaki, marries a young geisha named Cio-Cio-San (Madam Butterfly). His ship soon leaves. During his three-year absence, Pinkerton does not correspond with Cio-Cio-San — though he continues to pay the rent on the house they shared — and she bears a blue-eyed, tow-headed son and fanaticizes about the joyous and love-filled life they will have together when he returns. When he does, it is with an American wife. Cio-Cio-San has been abandoned, as her friends and acquaintances have been telling her. Humiliated and betrayed, she commits suicide.

Friday evening's production featured a young Japanese soprano, Chiho Oiwa, as Cio-Cio-San. She has a warm, lyrical voice and very expressive stage presence. The famous second act aria, *One Fine Day*, was wonderfully performed with compelling, expansive singing as was the impressive opening aria of Act I, which was actually thrilling. Her entire performance seemed conceptually consistent, as if the minutest details of this young girl's life had been internalized. And her emotions were always there for us to share, from the tentative, shy gestures when she first meets Pinkerton, through the wonderful

passion of her expressions of love for her cad of a husband, to the desperation and grief of her betrayal.

And the supporting cast was almost uniformly good. Jake Gardner as U.S. Consul Sharpless displayed a bright baritone voice that cut through the orchestra when necessary, yet was also lyrical. His demeanor was government-mannerly, yet relaxed, and his stage presence always was lively. Young Chinese mezzo soprano Yun Deng played Cio-Cio-San's servant, Suzuki, with great charm and a passion that matched Oiwa's. Her lower voice was warm and resonant, and her stage presence was always interesting.

And Cuban tenor César Ulloa as the marriage broker, Goro, provided humor as he attempts to persuade the abandoned Cio-Cio-San to wed his often married and just as often divorced client Prince Yamadori.

Only Mexican tenor José Luis Duval as Pinkerton disappointed. Though he has a nice, lyrical voice, it was not big enough to cut through the orchestra, and his acting, in contrast to the others, was stilted. He did not seem to feel comfortable (or at least *look* comfortable) in uniform, as if he had not quite assumed the persona of a Navy officer.

But all in all, it was a very satisfying production, both visually and vocally. The costumes were lovely. The lighting was exquisite. The staging was imaginative and well executed. And the orchestra provided substantial support under guest conductor Giuseppe Cataldo, although periodically — during the first act in particular — it played too loud and covered the vocalists.