



HoustonGrandOpera

STUDY GUIDE



MADAME BUTTERFLY

AN OPERA IN THREE ACTS, SUNG IN ITALIAN

MUSIC BY GIACOMO PUCCINI (1858-1924)

LIBRETTO BY LUIGI ILLICA (1857-1919) AND GIUSEPPE GIACOSA (1947-1906)

WORLD PREMIERE: MILAN, LA SCALA, 1904

Welcome to the Opera!

We have gathered interactive **lessons**, along with **information pages**, **summaries**, and an array of recommended **videos** here to invite young people, families, and teachers into the world of opera. The information below can be used to help prepare students and families before (or after) watching HGO's *Madame Butterfly* by Giacomo Puccini. You will also find answers to some basic questions about opera.

Looking for a chance to meet an opera singer? Email us at community@hgo.org to find out how!

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The Opera in One Sentence

Cio-Cio San falls deeply in love with a U.S. Naval officer named Pinkerton, but when he returns after many years away with another wife, asking Cio-Cio-San to give him their child, she seeks her final comfort through her father's seppuku knife.



Synopsis (*Spoiler Alert!*)

ACT I

Pinkerton, a lieutenant in the U.S. Navy, has arranged with the Nagasaki marriage broker Goro to marry a young girl named Cio-Cio-San, called Butterfly. By Japanese law, the groom is free to dissolve the marriage whenever he wants to, and though Pinkerton is clearly fascinated by his child bride, it is obvious that he doesn't take the marriage seriously. He says as much to Sharpless, the American consul, who warns him that Butterfly is a sincere girl and tragedy may ensue, but Pinkerton pays no attention. When the brief ceremony is over, Butterfly's uncle, a Buddhist priest, arrives in a fury, revealing that the girl has renounced her people's ancient faith and taken the American man's Christian god. The family, horrified, deserts Butterfly. She weeps bitterly, but Pinkerton comforts her, and soon all is forgotten as the two express their love.

INTERMISSION

ACT II

Pinkerton has been gone for three years. Everyone—even her faithful maid, Suzuki—tells Butterfly that he has forsaken her, but she steadfastly insists that he will come back, as he promised, “when the robins make their nest.” Goro keeps urging her to marry his wealthy client, Prince Yamadori. And

even Sharpless suggests that she accept this offer: he knows that, although Pinkerton is in fact coming back, he is bringing an American wife with him. Sharpless tries to prepare Butterfly for this news, but before he can do so, she reveals that she has had a child by Pinkerton, and the consul leaves without delivering his message. The harbor cannon then announces the arrival of a ship. It is Pinkerton's, the USS Abraham Lincoln. With Suzuki's help, Butterfly decorates the little house with flowers. Then, with Suzuki and the child, Butterfly awaits Pinkerton's arrival.

ACT III

Dawn. Butterfly has waited all night. Suzuki persuades her to go and rest, and in her absence from the room, Pinkerton and Sharpless arrive. They break the news to Suzuki and try to enlist her help in persuading Butterfly to give up the child to Kate, Pinkerton's new wife, who has also come but is discreetly waiting outside in the garden. Pinkerton then leaves: the memories of the house and his remorse are too much for him. Kate speaks with Suzuki and then goes out again. Butterfly enters and, horror-stricken, learns the truth. When Kate repeats her request, Butterfly answers that she will give the child to his father if Pinkerton will come back for the boy in half an hour. Butterfly blindfolds the child and then kills herself. She dies just as Pinkerton runs in, calling her name.

Cast



AILYN PÉREZ
CIO-CIO-SAN
soprano

A 15-year-old Japanese Geisha who is also known as "Madame Butterfly". She has no money and agrees to an arranged marriage with an American military officer by the name of Pinkerton. She sacrifices her culture and traditions for a new life; one that she hopes will bring her security and love.



RAQUEL GONZÁLEZ
(ALT. CAST)
CIO-CIO-SAN
soprano



YONGZHAO YU
PINKERTON
tenor

An officer in the United States Navy. He enters into a marriage contract with Butterfly. After the wedding, he leaves to continue his military responsibilities and is gone for 3 years.



ERIC TAYLOR
(ALT. CAST)
PINKERTON
tenor



MICHAEL SUMUEL
SHARPLESS
baritone

The American Consul in Japan and a friend of Pinkerton.



NAVASARD HAKOBYAN
(ALT. CAST)
SHARPLESS
baritone



SUN-LY PIERCE
SUZUKI
mezzo-soprano

Maid and confidant of Butterfly.



EMILY TREIGLE
(ALT. CAST)
SUZUKI
mezzo-soprano



RODELL ROSEL
GORO
tenor

The Marriage Broker who arranges the union of Butterfly and Pinkerton.



WILLIAM GUANBO SU
THE BONZE
bass

The uncle of Butterfly and a Buddhist Priest. He chastises Butterfly for abandoning her faith and her people after she marries Pinkerton.



ANDRÉ COURVILLE
PRINCE YAMADORI
baritone

The wealthy suitor for Butterfly's hand in marriage after it appears that Pinkerton has abandoned her.



ERIN WAGNER
KATE PINKERTON
mezzo-soprano

The American Wife of Officer B.F. Pinkerton.



CORY MCGEE
IMPERIAL
COMMISSIONER
bass

Officiates the marriage of Pinkerton and Butterfly.

For more cast details, please visit our website [HGO.ORG/ON-STAGE/MADAME-BUTTERFLY](https://hgo.org/on-stage/madame-butterfly)

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Setting

Nagasaki, Japan in the first decade of the 20th century.

Background

Puccini's opera is based on the play, *Madame Butterfly*, written by David Belasco. The play was an adaptation of the short story of the same title written by John Luther Long, an American attorney. It is supposed that Long was also very much influenced by the French Novel, *Madame Chrysanthème* by Pierre Loti. Loti was a well traveled military officer and wrote his novel based on his diary entries of actual events that occurred. Loti's writings significantly influenced the late 19th-century Western orientalist attitudes toward Eastern culture.

In 1900, Puccini was visiting London and attended a performance of Belasco's dramatic production. The play was performed in English, which Puccini could not understand, but he was greatly inspired by the production and the character of Madame Butterfly. At the turn of the twentieth century, much of the western world was fascinated with the Japanese culture, and Puccini was no exception. Japan had not been easily accessible to foreigners until the early 1860s, and much of the art, architecture, fashion, and traditions had been unseen and unknown until this time.

Puccini was unable to visit Japan during the time he was composing *Madame Butterfly*, but he was extremely diligent in using the resources he had at his disposal. He familiarized himself with Japanese music, customs, and design, and details were of extreme importance to him. After Puccini secured permission from Belasco to use his text as the basis for the opera, he then began composing. The libretto had been completed by 1902 by Luigi Illica and Giuseppe Giacosa, with whom Puccini had previously collaborated to write *La bohème* and *Tosca*. However, in 1903, Puccini was injured in a car accident, which slowed down the completion of the opera. It was finished by the end of that year and premiered at La Scala in Milan, Italy, in February of 1904.

Madame Butterfly was a complete failure when it opened at La Scala. It closed after its first performance and Puccini returned to work to make changes and modifications to the opera. The original two-act version painted Pinkerton even more cruelly than in later versions; Puccini rewrote the opera into a three-act version, with a slightly kinder Pinkerton. Several months later in May 1904, the opera was performed again at the Teatro Grande in Brescia, Italy, where it was very successful, and it went on to premiere in the United States in 1906 in Washington, D.C. That same year, Puccini modified *Madame Butterfly* yet again, and it was this version that premiered at the Metropolitan Opera in New York. Puccini continued to make vocal and orchestral changes to the opera in 1907 and completed what is known as the "standard" version, which is performed in opera houses across the world today. *Madame Butterfly* is one of the world's most often-performed and best-loved operas today.



What to Listen For

The U.S. National Anthem, "The Star-Spangled Banner," appears throughout the score of *Madame Butterfly*. When Puccini composed the opera, the anthem was not yet the national anthem, but was the official anthem of the U.S. Navy—a fitting soundtrack for B.F. Pinkerton, a Naval lieutenant. The music appears most prominently about five minutes into the opera in a grand fanfare of brass and winds, right before Pinkerton's boastful Act I aria "Dovunque al mondo," in which he sings of American bravado. It returns later in his aria when he sings, in English even within an Italian libretto, "America forever!"

Listen closely in the second act, when Goro tries to convince Butterfly to take Prince Yamadori as a husband. Goro explains that Japanese law allows for desertion to be treated as divorce, meaning she is no longer beholden to her vows to Pinkerton. Butterfly responds, "Japanese law...but not the law of my country, the United States." When she sings "Japanese law," Puccini quotes the melody of the Japanese national anthem, "Kimigayo," and when she calls the United States her country, the orchestra returns to "The Star-Spangled Banner."

Fun Fact:

The *coro a bocca chiusa*—translated to “chorus of closed mouths,” and commonly called the Humming Chorus—was added by Puccini in his first revision to the score as a transition from the second act to the third. Musical theater fans may notice how similar the melody of the Humming Chorus is to the song “Bring Him Home” from *Les Misérables*. Parts of the melody are identical, and though Claude-Michel Schönberg, the composer of *Les Mis*, has not publicly commented on the melody’s inspiration, he later wrote the music to the hit musical *Miss Saigon*, which itself is an adaptation of *Madame Butterfly*.

THE COMPOSER GIACOMO PUCCINI

Giacomo Puccini (1858-1924) was born on December 22 in Lucca, Italy, where his family had lived for generations. His great great-grandfather had been choirmaster and organist at the cathedral there, and the job had been handed down to successive generations of male Puccinis. Giacomo was expected to follow this family tradition, but his real talent proved to be in composition.

As a youngster he preferred getting into mischief with his friends over serious study at school. Although he had studied the music from several operas at school, he was eighteen years old before he saw an opera performed. He and some friends walked to Pisa, a nearby city, to see a performance of Verdi’s *Aida*. That performance convinced him that composing operas was what he wanted to do with his life, and he settled down then to serious study.

While attending the Milan Conservatory, his school days were filled with homesickness, and sometimes hunger, but he always made good grades. That was where he lived the Bohemian life he portrayed so well in *La bohème*. Always on the brink of financial disaster, he was kept alive by hope, a zest for living, and good friends. After graduation, he made his first two attempts at opera writing, but neither was successful. It wasn’t until his third attempt that he achieved fame and financial fortune when *Manon Lescaut* became a huge success.

Through his collaboration with playwrights/librettists Giuseppe Giacosa and Luigi Illica and publisher Giulio Ricordi, Puccini produced three of his most famous operas - *La bohème*, *Madame Butterfly*, and *Tosca*. However, Puccini was a difficult man to work with: he suffered from doubt and lack of confidence, he interfered with the librettists, and he would abandon work in progress and cast about composition for other projects.

Puccini produced 12 operas in his lifetime; for him, composing an opera was a lengthy process. His home life was partly responsible for this. Handsome and popular with women, he frequently aroused the terrible and justified jealousy of his wife, Elvira, making his life at home dramatically unhappy. To escape, he traveled a great deal and put his work aside. He was moody, prone to depression, and uncertain about his talent. He smoked cigarettes constantly and drank vast amounts of coffee as he worked in the quiet of the night—often wearing a hat!

Restless and unhappy, unless he was involved in a project, he was rarely totally satisfied with his creations. His temperament was little suited to the portrayal of heroic figures; he was best at, as he said, “the little things,” such as the death of the seamstress Mimi. Puccini had an extensive knowledge of the demands of the stage and an instinct for theatrical effect that rarely failed him. He wrote music that appealed to the heart and treated realistically the emotional problems of everyday life.

In 1920, Puccini began work on his final opera, *Turandot*. He encountered the usual difficulties and slowdowns, and photographs of the time show him looking ill and drawn. In fact, he was suffering from throat cancer, and he entered a hospital in Brussels for treatment. Weakened by the treatment, he died of heart failure three weeks later on November 29, 1924. To this day he is revered as one of the great twentieth-century opera composers. He left a legacy of operas that are performed regularly in the great opera houses all over the world.

THE LIBRETTISTS

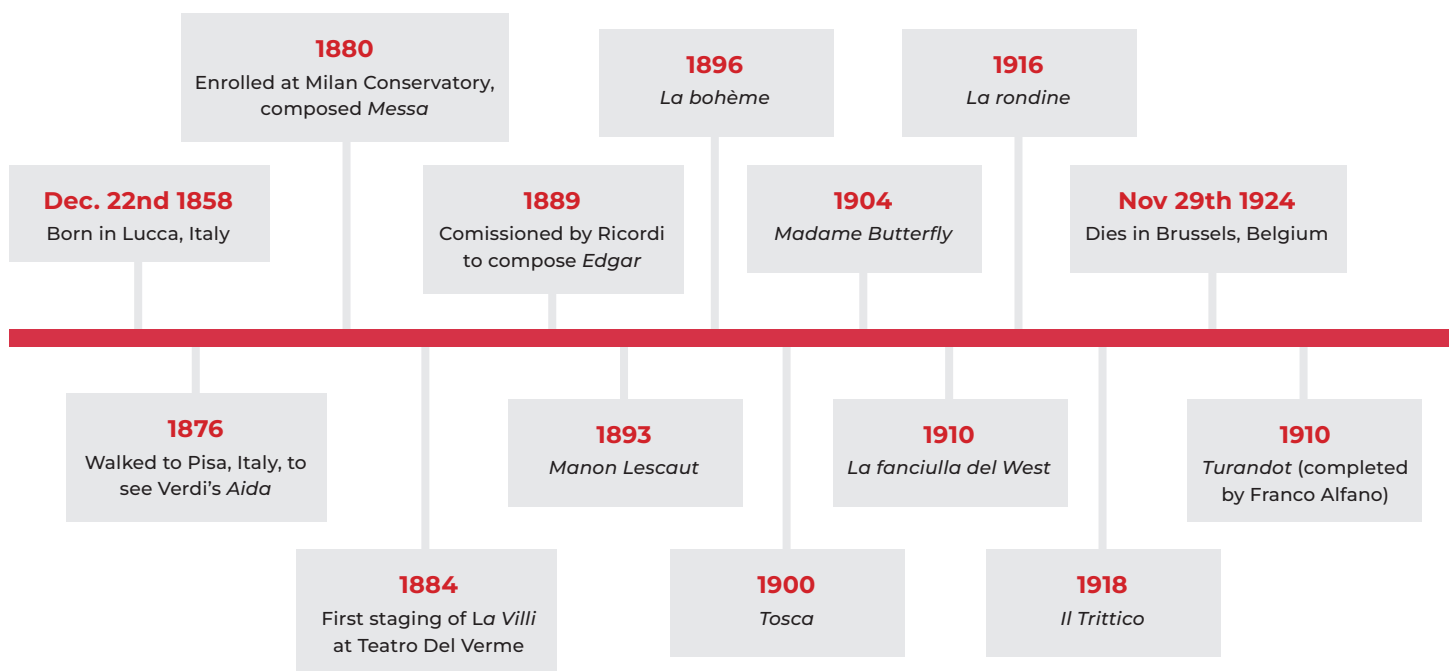
LUIGI ILICA

Luigi Illica was born on May 9th, 1857, in Castell'Arquato, Italy. He was known as a rather rebellious child and left his studies at Cremona College at age 20 to join the navy. Illica spent four years in the military before returning to Italy and making his home in Milan. He became a journalist and wrote columns for various newspapers. He briefly moved to the city of Bologna, where he continued writing and became politically active. When Illica returned to Milan in the year 1882, he began to expand his writing to poetry, satire, and plays. Many of his plays were performed in Italy, especially *L'Eredita del Felis*, his best-known work. Illica's career as an opera librettist began in 1889. For nearly 20 years, he worked with many great opera composers and completed work on close to 30 different productions. Illica wrote for famous opera composers such as Alfredo Catalani (*La Wally*), Umberto Giordano (*Andrea Chénier*, *Siberia*), and Pietro Mascagni (*Le Maschere*, *Isabeau*). He was one of several librettists who wrote for Puccini's opera *Manon Lescaut*. Along with librettist Giuseppe Giacosa, Illica wrote the libretto for three of Puccini's most famous operas: *La bohème*, *Tosca*, and *Madame Butterfly*. In his later years, he became a volunteer with the Italian military. Illica passed away on December 16th, 1919, after returning to his hometown of Castell'Arquato.

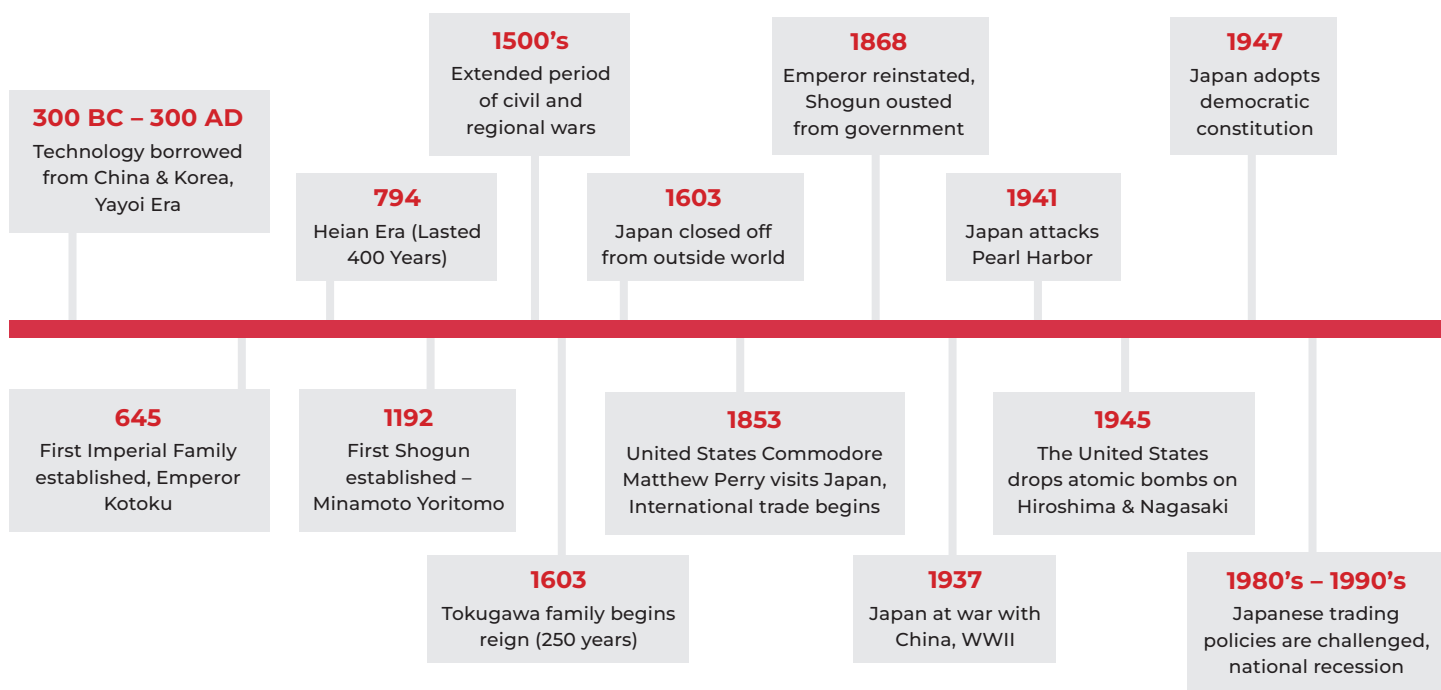
GIUSEPPE GIACOSA

Giuseppe Giacosa was born in Turin, Italy, on October 21, 1847. Giacosa followed in his father's footsteps and studied law. He worked in his father's firm and was also a member of a literary organization and associated with many writers. Giacosa wrote poetry and became quite successful with his collection titled, *Chess Game (Una Partita a Scacchi)*. He wrote novels and stories but became well known for his plays and had continued success with *The Lady of Chollant* in 1891, which he wrote for American actress Sarah Bernhardt (who also produced the play in New York). Giacosa gave up his law career and focused on his writing and the theater. He experienced continued success with such works as *Rights of the Soul (Tristi Amori)* and the comedy *As the Leaves*. Giacosa collaborated with Luigi Illica and several others in writing the libretto for Puccini's opera *Manon Lescaut*. He partnered with Illica in writing the librettos for *La bohème*, *Tosca*, and *Madame Butterfly*. Two years after the premiere of *Madame Butterfly*, Giacosa died on September 1, 1906, near his home of Turin, Italy.

Timeline of life and major works of Puccini



Timeline of Japan from 300 B.C. to 1945



Classroom Connections & Activities

Adapted from MET Opera

MUSIC, HISTORY AND SOCIAL STUDIES, HUMANITIES

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

- To introduce and/or reinforce knowledge of musical terminology
- To listen to musical examples critically and to recognize their harmonic influences
- To explore the notion of “exoticism” in music
- To use new musical vocabulary to create and describe a personal musical style

Puccini’s initial inspiration for a new opera often came from settings that included a strong local flavor or ambience. Whether a bohemian attic in the Parisian Quartier Latin in *La bohème* or a mythic version of ancient China in *Turandot*, these places influenced Puccini to evoke the setting in his musical representation and to compose music that was part of the same world as the opera’s characters. In *Madame Butterfly*, the composer intentionally created a sound world that would transport listeners to Japan—an aural setting that further joined Cio-Cio-San’s world with that of Pinkerton. Puccini incorporated Japanese and Chinese folksongs into the musical fabric of the score and quoted the Japanese national anthem. He also utilized Japanese gongs in the percussion parts and approximated the sound of Japanese music through the use of pentatonic scales. For Pinkerton, in contrast, he developed a characteristically “American” sound. For audiences both past and present, the musical representation of the cultures that collide in the opera’s story increases the dramatic tension and embodies the dueling desires within the person of Cio-Cio-San herself.

In this activity, students will:

- Become familiar with some of the musical ways that Western composers and artists have evoked Asian culture
- Listen to and analyze a selection of musical excerpts
- Relate some of Puccini's musical choices to character, plot, and the emotional arc of the opera

STEPS

Students will identify three musical selections outside of *Madame Butterfly* that utilize and prominently incorporate traditional Japanese and/or Chinese musical settings. Students will present their findings by listing the name and composer of the musical selection, year of creation, and a YouTube link to a performance of the work. Students should also include a paragraph consisting of three or more sentences that describe what elements of Japanese or Chinese traditional music are prominently featured in the work. This activity can be done in groups or as an individual assignment. Additionally, it can be presented in class with an opportunity to allow students to play 15-20 seconds of the work/piece/song or submitted without presentation.

ADDITIONAL CROSS-CURRICULAR CONNECTIONS

VISUAL ART

Analyze traditional Japanese art styles like Ukiyo-e (woodblock prints) and their influence on European artists during this period.

LITERATURE

Explore the original short story authored by John Luther Long that served as the inspiration for the opera.

THEATER

Examine the cultural influence of operas set in distant and unique settings, such as Verdi's *Aida* or Bizet's *Carmen*.

HISTORY

Recognize how Japan is depicted in the opera and the possible perpetuation of Orientalist misrepresentations from that era. Encourage your students to delve into Japanese history, traditions, and aesthetics within the Meiji period (1868-1912), the opera's historical backdrop. Engage in discussions about subjects like arranged marriages and the Geisha culture.

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