

'Real Orientalism' flies high with new Madame Butterfly

By Isabel Cristina Calcagno
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The plot is a typical one. A woman is in love, her husband leaves her, she kills herself. Many operas, no matter what the succession of events is like, are based on plots like this.

But there is much more than just a love story to Giacomo Puccini's "Madame Butterfly." This work, famous for its many theatrical elements, and for the beauty of its melodies, is also one of the greatest masterpieces ever conceived in its genre.

"Butterfly" is one of the few operas where the action is not based on long passages of beautiful solo music," said Carlos Riazuelo, music director of the production. "It is an opera that is a magnificent collage of short segments of music and action, weaved through the sensibility of Puccini towards the conflict of a woman."

The only way to make Madame Butterfly work as the masterpiece it really is, the director said, is to conceive it like little pieces and put all of them together not according to the music but to the plot.

This is the way Riazuelo sees "Madame Butterfly," and this is the way he will try to present it this week, as the second of the three productions that will form the Teatro Teresa Carreno's opera season.

"Madame Butterfly" was staged at the Teresa Carreno earlier this year, with a different cast and a different conception. It is being restaged, Riazuelo said, because it is the policy of the theater to repeat some of the works in its repertoire, to solidify them. But, with a change in the cast and production crew, the opera is really not the same the public had a chance to see earlier this year.

What Riazuelo considers the most important innovation in this production, he said, is that the lead role, the character of Butterfly, will be represented by Isabel Gen-



PINKERTON — Ivan Kiurkchiev was brought all the way over from Bulgaria to play the American Pinkerton.

tile, who born in Formosa, China, is very familiar with the Oriental culture, and who was brought over especially for this role.

"It is important to realize that 'Butterfly' does have Oriental elements, but that it is not a Japanese story. It is a story of people; it is the drama of 'Butterfly' as a woman, not a drama based on Japanese costumes," Riazuelo said.

The reason why people tend to think of this opera as "Japanese" is because "Puccini had to use a culture that was very different from the Western one, so a conflict could originate between the characters, but it really could have been any other culture that contrasted enough with ours."

The inclusion of Oriental music in the work, Riazuelo said, might also have been induced by the fact that Western culture had just started to discover "Orientalism," and Oriental elements were being used by many musicians, including Debussy and Ravel.

But "Madame Butterfly," Riazuelo said, did not originate from the wish to use "Orientalism." It originated from a story, which Puccini chose to use as a plot for an opera. Puccini worked this story as a drama, delving very deeply in the feelings of a woman who became the center and the motivation of the whole work.

The plot of "Madame Butterfly" is simple. Cio Cio San (Butterfly) is a Geisha who marries an American sailor named Pinkerton, a marriage arranged "Japanese style" by a man named Goro.

It is in the marriage ceremony that the conflict originates. Pinkerton marries Butterfly with the belief that he can leave her any time, as is typical of Geisha marriages. But Butterfly marries Pinkerton believing the marriage is American style, that is "till death do us part."

Pinkerton leaves, and Butterfly stays home with her son always thinking the boy's father will come back. Finally, he does, but Butterfly is told that he is not staying. The woman is confused, and doesn't understand why Pinkerton is not staying. She realizes he is now married to an American woman and wants to take her son away from her. Unable to accept this, she kills herself.

This plot, simple as it is, has given rise to a great drama. According to Riazuelo, "Madame Butterfly" is one of those operas where the music is totally subordinate to the plot, where there are very few arias, and where the interest and the action of the work circles entirely around Butterfly and her conflict.

"Of the operas I know, it is the one that does this the



ORIENTAL FLAVOR — "Madame Butterfly," which was staged earlier this year, is being performed again this week because it is the policy of the theater to repeat some of the works in its repertoire so as to solidify them. What Carlos Riazuelo, music director of the production, considers the most important innovation in this production is that the lead role, the character of Butterfly, will be represented by Isabel Gentile (above), who born in Formosa, China.

most, which makes it very interesting."

How much Butterfly's reactions, the essence of the opera, reflect Oriental culture, Riazuelo said, is hard to tell. However, Gentile said she thinks the drama is well based. "Even though many things have changed in the past years (in Oriental countries), it is still possible that a woman, today, has the same reactions as Butterfly in the opera."

people see an Oriental person in the role, they think it's better because they say it's real, and when they see someone who is not Oriental, even if she does the role well, they think she's faking."

Gentile doesn't have to work hard on Oriental mannerisms, she doesn't even need makeup to look Oriental and she does know how Oriental people are, how they act. This, Riazuelo said, gives the opera a realism that it

Kiurkchiev says he finds comfortable in the role, because he likes Pinkerton. He, unlike many people, sees the character not as a nation person but as a human being who creates a tragedy by mistake.

The other characters in the opera, are the same who staged it earlier this year. Scenery this time is by Eduardo Massera, who said he basically took the original Roman Chabaud conception, and added his personal touch to the work, respecting the plot of the story and the designed which was already laid out by the existing costumes by Anita Paredes and scenic design.

Appearing on stage with Gentile and Kiurkchiev will be Natalia Sabatini (Goro), Sergio Daniels (Sharpie) and Victor Lopez (Goro). Other members of the cast are Claudio Malabar, Agustín Listera Calder, Jorge Arilla, Cesar Flores, Gustavo Daniels, Samara Jaramilla and Alexandra Barbieri.

The cast will be accompanied by the Orquesta Sinfónica Municipal de Caracas, directed by Massera, and the Coro Operación Teresa Carreno, directed by Narciso Palacios de Soto.

"Madame Butterfly" will be staged at 8 p.m. Wednesday and Friday and at 8 p.m. Sunday at the Sala Simón Bolívar of the Teatro Teresa Carreno.

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For Gentile, who has interpreted the character over 30 times already, Butterfly is "the drama of a woman, a drama that I identify with even when I see the opera as a viewer, because it touches my feelings of maternity and womanhood."

For Gentile, as for Riazuelo, "Madame Butterfly" is a human story that presents a cultural misunderstanding. That the lead character in the opera is Oriental, Gentile said, does not make a production better or worse.

"It's just a matter of conception," she said. "When

couldn't achieve in the earlier production.

The character of Pinkerton, the American, will be represented by Ivan Kiurkchiev, a Bulgarian tenor also brought over especially for the role. Kiurkchiev, unlike Gentile, is debuting as Pinkerton. His experience with the character is small, yet he has a determined idea of what Pinkerton should represent in the opera.

For him, Pinkerton is a man who, far away from his people, falls in love with a geisha, and who, far away from the people, forgets her,