Study Guide

October 4, 7, 10, 12, 2008
Cobb Energy Performing Arts Centre – Atlanta, GA
Music by Giacomo Puccini • Libretto by Giuseppe Giacosa and Luigi Illica
Sung in Italian with English supertitles • Directed by Bernard Uzan
Conducted by Joseph Rescigno • Designed by Jun Kaneko

The Atlanta Opera
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**WHAT TO EXPECT AT THE OPERA**

Are you unsure about how to act, what to wear or what you are going to see at the Opera? You are not the only one! Many others, students and adults, are nervous about their first trip to the opera. Read the truth behind some of the most popular opera myths and see if they answer some of your questions about the opera as well!

**MYTH #1 OPERA IS BORING AND STUFFY.**
Not true! Operas tell some of the most interesting, scandalous, and beautiful stories of all time. It is not unusual to find love triangles, murders, fatal illnesses, and messages from beyond the grave. It’s like *Days of Our Lives* set to music!

**MYTH #2 OPERA IS SUNG IN A FOREIGN LANGUAGE SO I WON’T UNDERSTAND THE STORY.**
We can help! It is true that many operas, like *Madama Butterfly*, are sung in languages other than English. Since most people in our audience do not speak Italian, we project English translations, called *supertitles*, of the opera on screens above the stage. This way, you can follow along even if you do not understand the language. You also can read the synopsis of the opera before you arrive. Knowing the story will also help you follow along.

**MYTH #3 I NEED TO WEAR A TUXEDO OR A BALL GOWN TO THE OPERA.**
While many people like to dress up when they go to the opera, it is definitely not required. Wear something that makes you feel comfortable, but remember that it is a special event and you may want to wear something a little nicer than ripped jeans and a sweatshirt!

**MYTH #4 IF I’M A FEW MINUTES LATE, NO ONE WILL CARE. AFTER ALL THE OPERA IS SO LONG, IT DOESN’T MATTER IF I MISS THE FIRST FEW MINUTES.**
You don't want to miss the beginning! At most opera houses, the ushers will not seat you if you arrive after the opera has begun, as it is disturbing to the rest of the audience and the performers. If you arrive late, you may need to wait until after the first act before you can enter the hall. And a lot happens in the first act!

**HERE ARE A FEW MORE TIPS TO MAKE YOUR TRIP TO THE OPERA MORE COMFORTABLE.**

1. Remember: the opera is a live performance. You can hear the performers on stage and that means they can hear you too! Please refrain from talking or whispering during the opera. It is distracting to others around you as well as to the singers. Please do not leave your seat during the performance. This performance of *Madama Butterfly* will be one hour with no intermission.

2. If you have them, please turn off all cell phones, pagers, beeping watches and anything else that may go “beep” in the night!

3. Please do not take photographs or video or audio recordings of the performance.

4. After the orchestra has tuned, the auditorium will become quiet. The conductor, or maestro, will then enter the pit. It is acceptable (and appreciated) to applaud the maestro's entrance. After all, he/she worked very hard to bring this performance to life!

5. If you like what you have seen and heard, let the performers know! It is okay to applaud at the end of songs, called arias, and at the end of a scene. If you *really* liked what you heard, call out “bravo” (to the men on stage), “brava” (to the women) and “bravi” (for all on stage). And of course, a standing ovation is always welcome!
Madama Butterfly
SYNOPSIS...

Act I
A Japanese House above Nagasaki Harbor
After a brief orchestral prelude, we see the American naval officer, Lieutenant Benjamin Franklin Pinkerton and the marriage broker, Goro. Pinkerton has just leased the house for 999 years, with the option to cancel on one month notice, and plans to live there with his new bride, Cio-Cio-San (Madama Butterfly), a geisha. While they wait for the bridal party to arrive, Goro shows the Lieutenant around the house and introduces him to the three servants. Soon the American Consul, Sharpless, arrives, out of breath from the steep climb on a hot day. As the men have a drink, Pinkerton explains the terms of his lease and boasts of the life of the Yankee who travels all over the world enjoying the best of each country, including its women. He adds that he will marry in the “Japanese fashion”, again for 999 years, with the option of an annulment every month. Sharpless is disturbed by this and warns him that Cio-Cio-San may take the marriage seriously. Pinkerton laughs it off, and toasts the day on which he will have a real marriage, with an American wife.

Cio-Cio-San, her bridesmaids, and her relatives arrive. Sharpless finds that the bride is only fifteen years old, that her family has come on hard times, so she had to earn her living as a geisha. She shows Pinkerton the few treasures she has brought with her, the most precious being the knife with which her father committed suicide. She also has some Ottoki, or small figurines representing the souls of her ancestors. However, she confides, she has been to the Christian mission in Nagasaki and renounced her Buddhist faith; she throws the Ottoki away.

The wedding ceremony takes place, supervised by the Imperial Commissioner and the Imperial Registrar. As the guests toast the newly married couple, a dramatic figure bursts on the scene: It is Cio-Cio-San's uncle, the Bonze, who is a Buddhist priest, furious on learning that she has changed her religion. He curses her and demands that her friends and relatives renounce her. As they all leave, Pinkerton comforts his sobbing bride. Helped by her maid, Suzuki, Cio-Cio-San changes into her white night attire and joins Pinkerton in the moon-lit garden where they sing a soaring duet.

Act II
Inside Cio-Cio-San’s house, three years later
Suzuki, Cio-Cio-San's maid, prays to Buddha for Pinkerton's return and to an end to her mistress’s unhappiness. Pinkerton has long since been recalled to America, promising to return “when the robins nest”. Cio-Cio-San, refusing to listen to Suzuki’s misgivings, sings the aria "Un bel di" (One fine day) in which she expresses her certainty that her husband will soon come back.

Sharpless arrives with a letter from Pinkerton in which he is told that Pinkerton will soon be returning with his “real” American wife, and asks Sharpless to tell Cio-Cio-San. Just the sight of the letter throws Cio-Cio-San into such a transport of joy that he cannot bring himself to relay the news to her. They are interrupted by the appearance of Prince Yamadori, a new suitor that Goro has been pressing on Cio-Cio-San. She indignantly asserts that she is already married, and that Pinkerton’s leaving does not constitute divorce. After the Prince has departed, Sharpless asks Cio-Cio-San what she would do if Pinkerton never returned. She replies that she might go back to her life as a geisha, but she would rather die. Rushing into another room, she emerges carrying her fair-haired, blue-eyed son, Trouble, whose name will be changed to Joy when his
father comes back. Completely overcome, Sharpless promises to tell Pinkerton about his son and leaves.

He has hardly gone before the harbor cannons announce the arrival of Pinkerton’s ship, the Abraham Lincoln. Suzuki and Cio-Cio-San happily decorate the house with flowers. As evening brings darkness, Suzuki and Trouble fall asleep but Cio-Cio-San remains standing and watching for Pinkerton’s arrival.

**Act III**

_The next morning_

Morning breaks with Cio-Cio-San still motionlessly gazing into the distance. Suzuki awakens and sends Cio-Cio-San off to rest. As Suzuki prays, she is interrupted by Sharples and Pinkerton. Her joy turns to dismay when she learns that the elegant lady waiting in the garden is Pinkerton’s wife. Sharpless asks Suzuki to convince Cio-Cio-San that it would be better to let the Pinkertons have the child. Surrounded by the proof of Cio-Cio-San’s unbroken faith and love, Pinkerton finally realizes what he did was wrong. After singing a regretful farewell to the little house where he had once been so happy, he rushes away. When Kate Pinkerton comes in, Cio-Cio-San immediately understands the situation. She agrees to give up the child if Pinkerton himself will come to collect him.

Cio-Cio-San sends the weeping Suzuki away, and then draws her father’s knife from the house shrine. She reads the words inscribed on the blade: “To die with honor when one can no longer live with honor”. She is about to use the knife to kill herself, when Suzuki pushes Trouble into the room. Cio-Cio-San sobs a heartbroken farewell to her son and then steps behind a screen where she stabs herself. Pinkerton’s three cries of “Butterfly” are heard over the ominous chords emanating from the orchestra.

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*The Atlanta Opera Student Shorts have been abbreviated for students and are performed without intermission. Because of time constraints for field trips, some of Act I, as described above, has been omitted.*
MEET THE COMPOSER…

Giacomo Puccini (1858 – 1924)

Giacomo Puccini was born in Lucca, Italy on December 22, 1858. Puccini’s was fifth in a family of seven girls and two boys. His father died when he was a young boy, leaving his mother to care for the Giacomo and his six siblings.

They had very little money, but his mother had great dreams for Giacomo. She arranged for his uncle, Fotunato Magi, to give him music lessons. Giacomo began work at age 11 as a church organist to contribute to the family’s finances, and later earned money by teaching music and playing in Lucca’s taverns. Puccini saw his first opera when he was 18 years old. Too poor for train fare, he walked 20 miles to see Verdi’s Aida, and it totally changed his life. He knew that he would not become a church musician like his father, but would turn to opera. He made plans to move to Milan, the center of Italian opera and the home of La Scala, the most famous opera house in Italy. Giacomo enrolled in the Milan Conservatory and began meeting the most influential people in the opera business, slowly working his way up the career ladder. During this time, Puccini lived the life of a poor student. He shared an apartment with two other artists, always scraping for money.

Puccini could not have succeeded without the friendship of Giulio Ricordi, the most important publisher in Italy. Ricordi saw great promise in Puccini, and believed he would become a great opera composer. He paid Puccini a stipend for several years and supported his early attempts at writing opera. His faith in Puccini was paid back beyond the wildest expectations. The Ricordi publishing house would own the performance rights to four of the most popular operas ever written: La Bohème, Tosca, Madama Butterfly, and Turandot.

In 1893, at age 35, Puccini premiered his first successful opera, Manon Lescaut. It launched his career and made him a front runner in the search for a successor to the great Giuseppe Verdi. Then followed two big hits, La Bohème in 1896 and Tosca in 1900. After their success, Puccini was in the limelight, overseeing productions of his operas in Europe’s greatest theaters. When Verdi died in 1901, Puccini became the future of Italian opera, and he knew that the opera world would expect nothing but the best. His next opera, Madama Butterfly, had to be a success.

Madama Butterfly did become a huge success, but it cost Puccini seven years of strife. The opera was cursed with delays, a car accident which severely injured Puccini, a disastrous premiere, and five revisions. In the end, Puccini triumphed with one of the world’s most popular operas.

With three tremendous successes behind him and a seat at the top of the opera world, Puccini entered a long period of creative struggling, experimentation, and limited successes. He took a six-year hiatus following Madama Butterfly, due in part to the suicide of one of his personal servants and an ensuing court battle. After the buzz died down, Puccini returned to the music world premiering La Fanciulla del West at the Metropolitan Opera in New York City in 1910. Though it had a lukewarm reception by American audiences, it remains a staple in Italian opera houses.

He would live another 17 years and compose five more operas but only one, Turandot, would match the fame of his “big three”.

La Bohème, Tosca, Madama Butterfly, and Turandot.
**Turandot** was Puccini’s final masterpiece. Diagnosed with throat cancer in 1923, Puccini battled to complete his most beloved project before his health failed. But he fell short, suffering a fatal heart attack after surgery in November, 1924. **Turandot** was completed by another composer. Unlike many composers, Puccini died a wealthy man, with an estate valued at $24 million in today’s money. His only direct living descendant is his granddaughter, Simonetta Puccini, a retired teacher of literature who devotes her time to researching her grandfather’s works. She owns and operates the “Villa Museo Puccini”, on the grounds of which Puccini is buried, along with his wife and son.

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**Puccini and Madama Butterfly**

In June of 1900 Puccini, already rich and famous, was in London for the first performance in England of his opera **Tosca**. He didn’t speak English but he went to see a performance of David Belasco’s play **Madame Butterfly**, which had already been a success in New York. While he could not understand the words, the beauty of the Japanese scenery and atmosphere of the play (especially the long vigil which Butterfly keeps after the return of Pinkerton’s ship) made a profound impression on him. Puccini immediately thought of this as a subject for his next opera. He persuaded librettists Illica and Giacosa that it would be worthy of their collaboration. It took several months for Puccini to get the rights to the play, but in early 1901 he received permission to make an opera of it.

Belasco’s play was based on a story by **John Luther Long**. A geisha was deserted by an American naval officer, to whom she bore a child after she had converted to Christianity, and then had been abandoned by him for a bride from his own country. It in turn was based on a true episode, confirmed by the wife of the Japanese ambassador to Italy. There are several versions given for the real identity of Cio-Cio-San and Pinkerton (he may even have been a Russian rather than American). It was also influenced by a popular novel **Madame Chrysanthème**, by Pierre Loti, in which he tells how the foreign naval officers were permitted to enter into temporary marriages with geishas which could be terminated at the end of the “husbands” leaves. In most cases, there was a mutual understanding between the couple and the “bride” was well rewarded; a “Butterfly” was rare.

The composer was fascinated by the Orient (his last opera, **Turandot**, would be set in what is now Beijing, China). Since he was worried that the music would sound “too Italian”, he sought advice from some Japanese acquaintances and studied Japanese folk music. He did not try to use Japanese instruments but instead tried combinations of the usual orchestral instruments to get the desired effects. The suicide theme is taken from an authentic Japanese tune, and the Japanese national anthem announces the arrival for the wedding of the Imperial Commissioner and the Registrar. A number of Japanese folk songs are also used.
The composition flowed fairly easily, even though it was interrupted for several months while Puccini recovered from a near-fatal automobile accident. The rehearsals at La Scala in Milan, Italy went well and all were sure that Madama Butterfly would be a great success. At the dress rehearsal, the orchestra gave Puccini a spontaneous ovation. What a shock it was for him, then, when the opening night on February 17, 1904, was an unmitigated fiasco*. The audience hooted and shouted and cackled with laughter, making so much noise that the music could not be heard. It is clear that Puccini’s enemies had hired a claque for the demonstration. (Claque is a French term that refers to an organized body of applauders in French theatres and opera houses.) Puccini was so upset that he took the orchestral score away with him so that it could not be performed again.

A new version of the opera was prepared, making some cuts and adding music for Pinkerton. On May 28, 1904, it received a triumphant “second premier” in a small opera house in the town of Brescia before a distinguished audience. Madama Butterfly became the composer’s favorite of all his works, as well as one of the most beloved operas ever written.

*Fiasco can mean either a disaster or the Italian wine bottle wrapped in straw. Whenever Puccini had a failure he sent his mother a card with a picture of a fiasco.

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MEET THE CONDUCTOR...

Joseph Rescigno  
Atlanta Opera Debut: Pagliacci/Carmina Burana, 2006-2007

Joseph Rescigno has performed symphony and opera for over 50 companies on four continents. As Artistic Advisor and Principal Conductor of the Florentine Opera (Milwaukee, WI), where he recently completed his 25th season, Rescigno has conducted some of the more challenging repertory the company has mounted, including Elektra, Der Rosenkavalier, Tristan und Isolde, and Die Walküre, and has conducted subscription concerts for the Milwaukee Symphony Orchestra. Rescigno has meanwhile maintained a busy guest conducting schedule on the podiums of such companies as the Lyric Opera of Chicago, Washington National Opera, Hungarian State Opera in Budapest, Opera Theater of St. Louis, Seattle Opera, Glimmerglass Opera, Vancouver Opera, Opéra de Marseille, and L’Opéra de Montreal.

A proven orchestra-builder, Maestro Rescigno served as Artistic Director of Orchestre Métropolitain in Montreal for four years. With that orchestra and others, he has performed symphonies and concertos from the baroque to the modern era, sometimes conducting from the keyboard in works from the earlier eras. In symphony halls Rescigno has conducted masterworks of the choral literature such as Beethoven's Ninth Symphony, Verdi's Requiem, Dvorak's Stabat Mater, Mozart's Mass in C Minor, and Orff's Carmina Burana.

Mr. Rescigno is a native New Yorker and comes from a long line of musicians on both sides of his family. His uncle is the prominent conductor Nicola Rescigno, a founder of both the Dallas and Chicago opera companies. He earned his Master of Music in piano from the Manhattan School of Music, where he studied with composer Nicholas Flagello, among others. He did his undergraduate work in philosophy at Fordham University (Phi Beta Kappa), with a year in Rome where he studied at Università Gregoriana and privately at Santa Cecilia.

MEET THE DIRECTOR...

Bernard Uzan  
Atlanta Opera Debut: Roméo and Juliet, 2006-2007

Bernard Uzan's extensive background in the arts includes success as general director, artistic director, stage director, librettist, designer, actor, novelist, and most recently an artists’ manager. As a stage director and a producer, his productions have graced the stages of 50 opera companies in North America, France, Italy, Switzerland, and South America with more than 300 productions. He has co-designed more than 75 productions that continue to be seen throughout the world. As a librettist and stage director, Mr. Uzan most recently collaborated with composer David Di Chiera and conductor Mark Flint on the new production of Cyrano, which made its world premiere at the Michigan Opera Theatre and Opera Company of Philadelphia to acclaim.

A native of France, Mr. Uzan is a graduate of the University of Paris, with Ph.D.s in Literature, Theatrical Studies and in Philosophy. He began his career in the theater as an actor and director, and appeared in leading theaters throughout Europe. He emigrated to the U.S., where he established French Theater in America, which toured for ten years giving 200 performances
per year. He pursued an academic career as Professor of Literature, Acting, and Directing at Wellesley and Middlebury College in addition to his work as an actor and director. He was also the producer and the main French voice for many French academic books. Mr. Uzan’s first novel, The Shattered Sky, was recently published in both French and English.

MEET THE DESIGNER…

Sculptor and painter Jun Kaneko has emerged as one of the most respected artists of our time. Mr. Kaneko’s work has been exhibited world-wide in institutions such as the Museum of Modern Art in Osaka, Japan, the Banff Centre of Fine Arts in Canada, the Detroit Institute of Art, and the Smithsonian Museum of American Art. In 2006, Kaneko was awarded an honorary doctorate degree from the Royal College of Art in London at a ceremony at the Royal Albert Hall.

While visual artists have created operas in the past, it is highly unusual for one artist to create both stage sets and costumes. Kaneko decided to take on this challenge when approached by Opera Omaha. In preparation for this work, Kaneko studied drawings, film footage, musical score and libretto. He created hundreds of sketches, considering every aspect of the opera including setting, music, and characters. Two and a half years later, the work was complete.

Kaneko uses the sets and costumes in Madama Butterfly together to create a “painting with movement”. There were many considerations in the creation of the production, from the impact the singer’s interactions with one another, the scenery and moving projection screens, down to the fabric for the costumes. Kaneko designed elaborate costumes with intense colors that he died himself in order to create the exact shade he imagined. The fabric for the costumes was all hand-dyed and screen printed under Kaneko’s guidance so that the end product appears to have been hand painted.

“The Butterfly production…grafted Mr. Kaneko’s sculptural sensibility and vivid, distinct palette of patterns and colors into a vibrantly visual experience of the opera, at the same time modern and timeless.”
-- The Wall Street Journal, March 2006

Kaneko is considered one of the most important visual artists working today. Extraordinarily versatile, he is a sculptor and painter whose work has defined contemporary art for close to four decades. Because of overwhelming success with the Madama Butterfly production, Kaneko just completed designing his second opera production, commissioned by Opera Company of Philadelphia, a contemporary interpretation of Beethoven’s Fidelio. It is set to premiere in October 2008.
A HISTORY OF OPERA IN ATLANTA

Opera has been beloved in Atlanta since 1866! Though there hasn’t always been a local opera company, audience members throughout Atlanta have been enjoying opera for over 137 years.

It began when the Ghioni and Sussini Grand Italian Opera Company presented three operas in Atlanta in October 1866. They were well received and soon after, small touring companies began to bring full-length operas to Atlanta. When there wasn’t a touring opera company in town, people would throw parties where they could entertain, often with musical presentations. Even without the presence of an opera in town, audience appreciation for opera was growing!

In 1910, New York’s Metropolitan Opera first brought its opera tour to Atlanta. By this time, Atlantans were in love with opera. Once a year, for a full week during spring, people flocked to the city to see the Metropolitan Opera’s wonderful performances and enjoy the many parties that were hosted throughout the city in celebration of the operas’ arrival. It was a magnificent time! The opera was the place to see and to be seen, with people crowding the lobbies and balconies. This continued for nearly seven decades, with the exception of 1931-1939, when the Metropolitan was unable to tour due to the Depression.

Soon, citizens of Atlanta began to yearn for their own opera company, to represent and support local talent, as well as to provide performances throughout the year, instead of only once in the spring. Several smaller, local opera companies began to crop up. With the arrival of local opera companies, and with troubles of its own, the Metropolitan Opera discontinued its nationwide tour, giving its last Atlanta performance in 1986.

In 1980, The Atlanta Civic Opera was born as a result of two smaller companies merging together, the Atlanta Lyric Opera and the Georgia Opera. Since then, the company has changed and grown tremendously!

The Atlanta Opera was the first resident company in the new Cobb Energy Performing Arts Centre upon completion of the facility in fall 2007. Patrons and performers alike are extremely happy with the new theater, acoustically designed for opera.

Besides our mainstage performances, The Atlanta Opera has many services to offer. There are balls and galas to attend, dinners, concerts, opera classes and talks. The Atlanta Opera Studio, founded in 1980, brings children’s opera (complete with sets and costumes) opera workshops and master classes to schools throughout the state in an effort to teach students about opera.

The Atlanta Opera strives to present quality opera productions, while educating and fostering a sense of appreciation for the opera within the community. So long as there are those in Atlanta who love music and the art of opera, we can continue to perform and to grow!
SPECIAL THANKS

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Contributors
Portions of this education guide have been contributed by the following opera companies:
Fort Worth Opera
San Diego Opera
Hawaii Opera Theatre
OPERA: THEN AND NOW

INTRODUCTION
Opera combines all of the fine arts: music, drama, visual art, and dance. The performance of an opera includes many craftspeople: costume designers, seamstresses, stagehands, makeup artists and wigmakers; the musicians in the orchestra, the singers in the chorus, and the dancers on stage; the artistic director, stage director and choreographer; the engineers running the computers and lighting. How have major inventions over the centuries affected the opera performances we see? Let’s find out!

FOREIGN LANGUAGES
If so many operas are in foreign languages how can we understand the story, the humor, or the dramatic situations in which the characters find themselves? Throughout history, on-stage conventions have helped audiences understand the stories of their favorite operas. Period costumes, magnificent stage sets and elaborate dances describe the time and place in which the opera is set. The stage direction and choreography communicate elements of the story. The music conveys emotions and the subtexts of the story. Many opera companies, however, offer their audiences a little more help, with the aid of modern technology. Using large screens above or beside the stage, English translations are projected. These Supertitles do not include every word that is sung, but enough to understand the story. As the technology advances, opera companies have begun to move from using slide projectors to computers to project the Supertitles onto the screens.

THE SINGERS
Over the years, the singers have changed, too! In early Italian operas, singers did very little acting on stage, focusing on showcasing their voices. Operas often resembled concerts, more than plays. By Mozart’s time in the late 18th century, however, singers were encouraged to play out the action in the story, adding the dramatic element that we see on stage today. At that time, the singers sometimes did not always “look the part” they were singing. The singers sometimes did not look like princesses or lovely young maidens, and the prince may not have looked young and handsome. The bel canto style of singing, which literally means “beautiful singing,” was favored in Italian opera, especially in the operas of Rossini, Bellini and Donizetti. This style focuses on the voice as the most important expressive element in the opera. It is more important than the words and even the orchestra. In later operas by Wagner and Berlioz, the orchestra became a partner with the singers, rather than an accompanist. This meant that the singers had to produce even more power to be heard over a large, rich symphonic orchestra.

THE ORCHESTRA
And what about the huge orchestra in the pit? The orchestra provides a framework for the opera by playing recurring themes and providing dramatic clues to the drama while accompanying the singing. But the orchestra wasn’t always as we see it today. In the 17th century, some operas were intended for entertainment at private parties, primarily at weddings (Monteverdi’s Orfeo begins with a wedding scene). The principal accompanying instruments were a continuo (a small organ) or harpsichord and a few viols (stringed instruments). In the 18th century, Mozart began to write his operas for an orchestra of 20 musicians and...
harpsichord and he was the first composer to add clarinet to his opera orchestra. The small-scale accompaniment, however, was still often used during a recitative, a musical selection in which the singing imitates the sound of spoken words and helps to move along the story line. (Arias, on the other hand, are more melodic and are often written to express strong emotion, rather than to tell parts of the story.) By Wagner’s 19th century, the opera orchestra had increased in size, mostly due to large symphonies composed by Beethoven (b. 1827). Wagner referred to opera as “music drama” and is one of the few composers who wrote the libretto (the book or story of the opera) as well as all the stage directions and music! Many composers work with colleagues to complete one or more of these elements. [FYI: Beethoven only wrote one opera, Fidelio. Just as he persistently made changes and corrections in his other works, Beethoven composed four different overtures for this one opera.]

THE STAGE
Power to the stage! Even before electricity was available, Monteverdi used torches to light his early opera, Orfeo, in 1607 and all of Mozart’s operas (1769 – 1791) were staged with candle-powered and reflected oil lamps around the front of the stage. While Wagner’s Festival Theatre at Bayreuth (1870’s) had one of the first electric generators in all of Europe, electricity continues to enhance fantastic opera performances in many ways in opera houses around the world. At the Metropolitan Opera at Lincoln Center in New York, for example, four stages move hydraulically: one stage lifts and moves to the side as another replaces it with the scenery for the next act. This changes work the stage crews need to do and allows for more elaborate and grandiose sets and smoother scene changes. Engines controlled by computers make this possible as well as controlling lighting and special effects on stage.

THE OPERAS
Where do the stories for operas come from? Are all operas based on fairytales and myths? Are they all love stories like Madama Butterfly? Throughout the history of opera, their stories have come from many sources, including myths and history, are funny and tragic, take place hundreds of years ago or in modern times, and address topics including love, death, and fantasy.

Myths have been the inspiration to many composers for highly imaginative operas. Monteverdi’s Orfeo was based on the Greek myth that was a familiar story during the Renaissance. Ideas of the ancient world, primarily from the Greeks, were popular themes in architecture, painting and drama at that time. Even in the 19th century, Wagner was fascinated with many of the same tales, though they had since evolved into Nordic folktales. “The Lord of the Rings” stories are very much like many of Wagner’s “music dramas,” including greedy dwarves and the precious golden ring that makes one invincible.

Traditional stories of medieval kings and queens, magicians, and great knights are favorite topics for opera. Classic literature has also provided the basis for many operas. Popular themes from literature include various Shakespeare plays and the adventures of Don Quixote. Some operas, especially in more recent times, have been inspired by actual events. Andrea Chenier (1896) by Umberto Giordano was based on the life of the poet Andrea Chenier, a supporter and then victim of the French Revolution and Nixon in China by John Adams reflected actual events in the 1970’s. There is even an opera written in the 1960’s based on the life of Lizzie Borden!
**Grand opera** is a term that is often heard in opera circles. Grand opera means grand everything: big stage sets, big voices, big orchestra! Grand opera was popular in Europe in the mid-19th century. Grand operas include huge crowd scenes and feature a wide range of emotions and events, including heroic feats, great passion and intense suffering within a religious or romantic story. One of the best-known grand operas is Verdi's *Aïda*.

Composers from different countries and periods of history use different styles of writing. In his writing, Puccini matches specific instruments and combinations of instruments to dramatic moments, allowing the orchestra to create the atmosphere for the scene. Music scholars agree that Puccini’s style of writing emphasizes melody, and he uses leitmotif to connect characters (or combinations of characters). A leitmotif is a recurring musical theme, associated with a particular person, place, or idea. Wagner also used this tool in his operatic works. Another distinctive quality in Puccini's works is the use of the voice in the style of speech: characters sing short phrases one after another as if they were talking to each other.

**Madama Butterfly**

Puccini's *Madama Butterfly* first premiered in the US in Washington, D.C. in 1906. The opera is set in the city of Nagasaki and, according to American scholar Arthur Groos, was based on events that actually occurred there in the early 1890s. Japan's best-known opera singer Tamaki Miura won international fame for her performances as Cio-Cio-San. Her statue, along with Puccini's, can be seen today in Nagasaki's Glover Garden.

Today, the opera is enjoyed in two acts in Italy, while in the US the three-act version is more popular. As a staple of the standard operatic repertoire, it appears at Number 1 on Opera America's list of the 20 most-performed operas in North America.
WHAT HAVE YOU LEARNED?

Name the four fine arts.

__________________  __________________  __________________  __________________

In what language is Madama Butterfly written and performed? __________________

What do the singers do that helps the audience understand what is happening in the opera?
_____________________________________________________________________________
_____________________________________________________________________________

What are Supertitles? ___________________________________________________________

Name two ways in which stages were lit in the early days of opera. _________________
_____________________________________________________________________________

What is a recitative? __________________________________________________________
_____________________________________________________________________________

What is bel canto? When was it popular? __________________________________________
_____________________________________________________________________________
_____________________________________________________________________________

What is leitmotif? ___________________________________________________________

What are two themes/story ideas that are often seen in opera? _______________________
_____________________________________________________________________________

Do you think that Madama Butterfly is an example of grand opera? Why or why not?
_____________________________________________________________________________
_____________________________________________________________________________
_____________________________________________________________________________
CHARACTER ANALYSIS

IT’S ALL IN HOW YOU SAY IT!

Objective: Students will learn about different characteristics through experimenting with vocal interpretations. Students will then analyze character traits of Cio-Cio-San and Lieutenant Pinkerton from the opera Madama Butterfly.

Materials: List of Characteristics, Madama Butterfly Student Short synopsis.

I. CHARACTERIZING THROUGH VOCALIZATION

When trying to characterize people in books or plays, we not only look at what they say, but we listen to how they say it. Sometimes, the inflection in the voice can change the meaning of a simple sentence. In opera or musical theater, the inflection can be dictated through the musical line: for example, an “ah” sung in a very high register and very loud could be an exclamation of fear or surprise, while the same “ah” sung in a low register and quietly could be a sigh or contentment or sadness.

A. Have your students take a simple phrase like “Well, that’s the way it is” or “I don’t know about that” or a sentence of your choosing, and say it with different inflections to change the meaning. Students may refer to the character list to give them ideas about how to deliver the line. Remember that more than one characteristic can fit an inflection. Go around the room and have each student deliver a line choosing a characteristic and then discuss the different ways to say it.

B. Write a brief, 4-8 line dialogue between two characters. (Use simple, emotion-neutral statements such as “Hello. How are you? Some weather we’re having.”) Have pairs of students interpret and deliver this same dialogue. Discuss how each group interpreted and delivered the scene differently. What did the different interpretations tell us about the relationship between the characters, their moods, their characters, etc.

C. On the blackboard, list the different emotions the students demonstrated and discuss how these emotions could help them make judgments about different individual’s character.

II. CHARACTER ANALYSIS

When going to see an opera that is in another language, it is important for the students to know the story before they get to the theater so they can understand what’s going on onstage. Knowing the characters and how they react to one another is an important aspect of understanding a story.

A. Have students read the synopsis of Madama Butterfly. Discuss the students’ impressions of the characters and storyline. Ask the students to predict how Puccini may portray the character traits and storyline through music. What character traits might he accentuate? How might those traits be illustrated by the performers?
B. Divide the students into four groups and assign each group the following questions to discuss.
   a. How does Cio-Cio-San change from the girl introduced in Act I to the woman who gives up her child in Act III?
   b. Do you think Cio-Cio-San’s actions were honorable?
   c. How do you think Pinkerton felt when he discovers Cio-Cio-San has killed herself?
   d. What do you like about Cio-Cio-San’s character? What do you dislike? What about Pinkerton’s character do you like and dislike?

C. Follow Up: After attending the opera, have the students revisit their character analyses. Did The Atlanta Opera portray the characters as they had expected? Did the Opera’s production shed new or different light on the individuals?
A List of Character Traits

absent-minded
gentle
sharp-witted
adventurous
gloomy
shiftless
ambitious
greedy
short
awkward
helpful
shrewd
boastful
honest
shy
bold
humble
sneaky
bossy
humorous
soft-hearted
bright
intelligent
spunky
brave
jolly
stern
calm
keen
stingy
careless
kind
stubborn
care-free
lazy
self-centered
cautious
leader
selfish
changeable
light-hearted
mischievous
charming
loud
conceited
nagging
coy
keen
conceived
leader
confused
mischievous
confused
nagging
confused
contented
contented
cooperative
contented
cooperative
courageous
cooperative
cowardly
light-hearted
cruel
loud
hard-working
nagging
hard-working
curious
nagging
dainty
neat
daring
organized
daring
dark
patient
dark
demanding
playful
demanding
dependable
polite
dependable
determined
poor
determined
dreamy
quarrelsome
dreamy
dull
quick-tempered
dull
expert
quiet
expert
fat
reasonable
fat
fearful
reckless
fearful
fierce
relaxed
fierce
follower
respectful
follower
forgetful
restless
forgetful
forgiving
respectful
forgiving
friendly
respected
friendly
funny
sad
funny
fussy
self-centered
fussy
generous
selfish
generous
sentimental
sentimental
serious
sentimental

Lesson II
Page 3
TOPICS FOR WRITING AND DISCUSSION

1. Should Cio-Cio-San have married Prince Yamadori? Why or why not?
2. What are the differences between Pinkerton’s and Cio-Cio-San’s attitudes about their marriage?
3. What was Cio-Cio-San’s life like before she married? After she married?
4. In Madama Butterfly, Cio-Cio-San believes that Pinkerton will come back when everyone else tells her he will not. Have you ever believed that something would happen when many other people told you that it wouldn’t? Did you prove everyone else wrong? How did you feel? Describe the situation.
5. What would you have liked or disliked about living in Japan if you had lived there at the time of Madama Butterfly? What about now?

Characters – Are they interesting and believable? Are their actions, thoughts, and speeches consistent?

Conflict – What are the conflicts that are established? How are they resolved?
- Conflict between Pinkerton and Cio-Cio-San’s backgrounds and religions
- Conflict between Cio-Cio-San and her family, especially the Bonze
- Conflict between Cio-Cio-San and Suzuki as to whether or not Pinkerton will return
- Conflict between Suzuki and the Americans who want her help in convincing Cio-Cio-San to give up her child

Climax – To what climax does the conflict lead? How effective is it?

Conclusion – How well does the conclusion work? Is it consistent with the characters and the conflicts? Is it believable and satisfying?

Context – What is the setting, historical, physical, and emotional? Do the sets and costumes communicate the proper context?

Discuss the following feelings displayed by characters in Madama Butterfly.

Love
- Cio-Cio-San’s love for Pinkerton
- Cio-Cio-San’s love for her child
- Differences between love (Cio-Cio-San) and infatuation (Pinkerton)

Hope
- Cio-Cio-San’s hope that Pinkerton will return

Sadness
- When Cio-Cio-San’s family abandon her
- When Suzuki believes that Pinkerton will not return

Joy
- When Cio-Cio-San marries Pinkerton
- When Cio-Cio-San sights Pinkerton’s ship

Despair
- When Cio-Cio-San realizes she must give up her child
- When Cio-Cio-San gives up her child

Pride
- When Cio-Cio-San shows Sharpless her child
- When Cio-Cio-San uses her father’s dagger to commit suicide

RESEARCH TOPICS FOR UPPER GRADES

1. History of the relationship between Japan and the United States. Include Admiral Perry and his role in opening Japan to the West.
2. The history and tenets of Buddhism.
3. Traditional roles for men and women in the East and the West.
4. The concept of honor.

SOME SUGGESTIONS FOR THE CLASSROOM

I. Give the students a synopsis of the opera by telling them the story in your own words, or by making copies of the synopsis in this book for each student. Ask questions to check their comprehension and retention.
II. Present and discuss the composer.
III. Discuss the historical background, emphasizing those points which will help the students’ understanding of the opera and which relate to their other studies, especially those in the visual and performing arts and the history-social science frameworks.
IV. Divide the students into groups and assign each group a discussion question. Have a spokesperson report the results to the class.
V. Assign topics for written research reports. These can be related to the opera itself, its composer, its literary sources, etc., or they can be on the historical period, on other people who lived at the time, the geography of the locale. Essays can also be written on ethical questions raised by the plot.

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BE AN OPERA CRITIC

You are the opera critic. Think about the performance you just saw of Madama Butterfly and write your thoughts like you might see in the newspaper or an online review. Remember that a critic reports both the positive and negative features of a production. You might want to focus on one part of the opera that you particularly liked or disliked. Keep in mind that reviews express the opinions of the person who writes the review and different people will often have different ideas about the same performance!

Write your headline here:

Write your subtitle here:

By: _________________________________

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Critic’s Rating for this performance: ________

Rating Scale:

Three notes = Bravo!

Two notes = OK

One note = Ho-hum