

**Review of Townsend Opera's production of
Madama Butterfly**

**Performed April 29 and May 1, 2011 at the
Gallo Center for the Arts**

By

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The Townsend Opera production of Puccini's *Madama Butterfly* at the Gallo Center for the Arts performed April 29 and May 1, 2011 was nothing short of this company's finest effort in memory. I have attended TOP productions for well over a decade and have seen a number of very successful performances in the past which often featured excellence in almost all parameters. However, the exceptional quality of this Butterfly production resulted from a happy marriage of excellent musical and dramatic direction, a well-rehearsed and well-conducted orchestra, effective sets and costumes, a fine chorus, and the critical factor of consistently outstanding lead performers across the board. There wasn't a weak link among all of the performance elements, and the result was a completely convincing success both musically and dramatically. As a side note, I should mention that I also attended San Francisco Opera's *Butterfly* production last fall, and can say with all honesty that the TOP production exceeded San Francisco's in almost all parameters, and did so on a budget that was undoubtedly a fraction of that of San Francisco's.

In particular, Christine Steyer's rendition of Cio-Cio San was notable for gorgeous, satisfying vocal production from top to bottom, consummate musicianship, and charming stage presence. However, for me, what made her performance completely convincing and satisfying was her ability to project an enormous range of emotions in her singing and acting with minimal theatricality. The Butterfly role is so well known there is an inherent danger that any interpretation will almost seem to be a cliché of others we have heard unless it obviously attempt to deviate from the norm. Steyer's version did not need to resort to any manipulative ploys for our sympathy because her emotional presence came across as absolutely honest and heartfelt. From the first notes wafting from off-stage at her first entrance, we sensed her deep understanding of Cio-Cio San's innocence and loveliness, vulnerability and sadness, and believed her completely from that moment on. By the end of the opera, we shared her devastating pain as personally and directly as if she were someone we knew as intimately as family.

Matthew Edwardson's Pinkerton provided a matching musical and dramatic presence to Steyer's Butterfly. Edwardson sang beautifully and played a somewhat more complex version of Pinkerton than one sometimes sees, one which portrays not merely a callous and dastardly man, but also one that is colored a bit by naiveté in his understanding of the pain he would cause by his shortsightedness. David Cox as Sharpless provided a rich baritone voice and a sympathetic, warm persona that fit the role perfectly. And Nova Safo was born to play Goro: his vocal and physical type was ideal, as was his darkly comedic ability to convey the false salesman-like manner necessary for the role to be successful. Michael Ventura as the Bonze struck terror into all that heard him to the back of the hall with his huge energy and booming bass. In utter contrast, Porter Thompson's silent presence as the little boy Sorrow melted everyone's hearts with an evidently sweet, compliant nature that drew attention to the sad fate of the defenseless child of Pinkerton and Butterfly.

Kudos are due to the entire TOP production team, especially to Ryan Murray for passionate and flexible leadership of the orchestra, Jennifer Grover for thorough preparation of the chorus, Eric Broadwater for an effective set design on what was likely a conservative budget, and Megs Lydon for the colorful, evocative costumes. Special congratulations are due to Matthew Buckman for energetically and safely piloting the entire company through the treacherous economic waters of the past several years, and to Joseph Wiggett for his world-class artistic direction. Modesto is very fortunate to have a team of artists who are willing and able to make such a significant contribution to the region and community for all the right reasons, namely the desire to serve from a place of deeply committed understanding of the value of the arts for everyone. Townsend Opera deserves everyone's support, and everyone deserves to enjoy what the company has to offer.