

Act Two, Chorus “Coro a bocca chiusa” (“Humming-Chorus”)

- Butterfly has spied Pinkerton's ship in the harbor, has readied the house for his arrival, and settles down with Suzuki and the child to wait for him. This wordless vigil lasts the entire night.
- Why would Puccini choose to set this scene with no words?
- Make a list of adjectives that describe the melody of this chorus.

Spotify Playlist for Listening Guide examples:

<https://open.spotify.com/playlist/5jgwsAy8BRmcy20X6vRZWI?si=43c73ff6d9224275>

STUDENT ACTIVITIES

Activity #1 – Write a Fan Letter

Write a letter to one or more of the performers from *Madame Butterfly*. What did you like most? What did the music sound like? Did the singers use props or costumes to help tell the story? Who was your favorite performer? If you prefer, draw your favorite part of the performance. Give the letter or the drawing to your teacher to send back to the New Orleans Opera.

Activity #2: The Five C's

CHARACTERS: Were they interesting? Believable? Are their actions, words, and thoughts consistent?

CONFLICT: What conflicts were established? How were they resolved?

CLIMAX: How did the conflict lead to the climax of the opera?

CONCLUSION: What is the conclusion of the opera? Was it consistent? Satisfying? Believable?

CONTEXT: What are the historical, physical, and emotional settings? What about the sets and costumes?

Using the Five C's, have your students respond to the following:

- Re-tell the story of *Madame Butterfly*.
- What were some of the recurring themes in the opera?
- If you were the stage director, would you have done something differently? Why?
- What were you expecting? Did it live up to your expectations?

Activity #3: Research!

Have the students study the history and politics of Puccini's time, particularly the year when *Madame Butterfly* premiered (1904). Which authors were popular? What scientific discoveries were being made? What was the social and political life in America and Japan at the time?

BIBLIOGRAPHY

This study guide was compiled from the following sources:

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Madame Butterfly

EDUCATIONAL STUDY GUIDE



THE BASICS

Madame Butterfly (Madama Butterfly)

First Version premiered on February 17, 1904 at La Scala in Milan Italy

Revised version premiered on May 28, 1904 at Teatro Grande in Brescia, Italy

Music: Giacomo Puccini (1858-1924)

Libretto: Luigi Illica (1857-1919) & Giuseppe Giacosa (1847-1906)

Based on the short story “Madame Butterfly” by John Luther Long

CHARACTERS

Name	Description	Voice Type
Cio-Cio-San	A young Japanese bride (<i>Madame Butterfly</i>)	soprano
Lieutenant B.F. Pinkerton	A U.S. naval officer	tenor
Suzuki	Cio-Cio-San's maid	mezzo soprano
Sharpless	U.S. consul at Nagasaki	baritone
Goro	A matchmaker	tenor
Prince Yamadori	A wealthy Japanese man	tenor
The Bonze	Cio-Cio-San's uncle	bass
Yakusidé	Cio-Cio-San's other uncle	bass
The Imperial Commissioner	Presides over Cio-Cio-San's marriage	bass
The Official Registrar	Also presides over Cio-Cio-San's marriage	bass
The Mother	Cio-Cio-San's Mother	mezzo soprano
The Aunt	Cio-Cio-San's Aunt	soprano
The Cousin	Cio-Cio-San's Cousin	soprano
Kate Pinkerton	Pinkerton's new wife	mezzo soprano
Dolore (“Sorrow”)	Cio-Cio-San's son	silent
Friends, family, servants, and soldiers		chorus

SYNOPSIS

ACT I

Lieutenant Pinkerton of the U.S. Navy inspects a house overlooking Nagasaki harbor that he is leasing from Goro, a marriage broker. The house comes with three servants and a geisha wife known as Madam Butterfly (Cio-Cio-San). The American consul Sharpless arrives breathless from climbing the hill. Pinkerton describes his philosophy of the fearless Yankee roaming the world in search of experience and pleasure. He is not sure whether his feelings for the young girl are love or a whim, but he intends to go through with the marriage ceremony anyway. Sharpless warns him that the girl's philosophy may not be as breezy as Pinkerton's, but Pinkerton brushes off such concerns and says someday he will take a real American wife. He offers the consul whiskey and proposes a toast, "America forever!" An eager Butterfly is heard climbing the hill with her friends for the ceremony. In casual conversation after the formal introduction, Butterfly admits her age of 15 and tells him how her family was once prominent, but she has more recently had to earn her living as a geisha. Her relatives arrive and chatter about the marriage. Cio-Cio-San shows Pinkerton her very few possessions, and quietly tells him she has been to the Christian mission and will embrace her husband's religion. The Imperial Commissioner reads the marriage agreement, and the relatives congratulate the couple. Suddenly, a strident voice is heard from afar. It is the Bonze, Butterfly's uncle, a priest. He curses the girl for going to the Christian mission and renouncing her ancestral religion. Lieutenant Pinkerton orders the Bonze and Butterfly's shocked relatives to leave at once. Butterfly is upset, and her new husband tries to console with sweet words. She is helped by Suzuki into her wedding kimono, and joins Pinkerton in the garden.

ACT II

Three years have passed and Cio-Cio-San still waits for her husband's return. Suzuki prays to the gods for help, but Butterfly berates her for believing in lazy Japanese gods. She envisions the day when Pinkerton will return. Sharpless appears with a letter from Pinkerton, but before he can read it to Butterfly, Goro arrives with the latest potential husband for Butterfly, the wealthy Prince Yamadori. Butterfly insists she is not available for marriage as her American husband has not deserted her. She dismisses Goro and Yamadori. Sharpless attempts to read the letter and suggests that perhaps Butterfly should reconsider Yamadori's offer. "And this?" asks Butterfly, showing the consul her small child. Sharpless is too upset to tell her more of the letter's contents. He leaves, promising to tell Pinkerton about the child. A cannon shot is heard in the harbor, announcing the arrival of a ship. Through a telescope, Butterfly and Suzuki read the name of Pinkerton's ship. Overjoyed she has been proven right, Butterfly joins Suzuki in strewing the house with flower petals from the garden. Night falls, and Butterfly, Suzuki, and the child settle into a vigil over the harbor.

ACT III

Dawn breaks, and Suzuki insists that Butterfly get some sleep. Butterfly carries the child into another room. Sharpless appears with Pinkerton and Kate, Pinkerton's new wife. Suzuki realizes who the American woman is and agrees to help break the news to Butterfly. Pinkerton is overcome with guilt and runs from the scene, pausing to remember other times in the little house. Cio-Cio-San rushes in hoping to find Pinkerton but instead sees Kate. Grasping the situation, she agrees to give up the child but insists Pinkerton return for him. Dismissing everyone, Butterfly takes out the sword with which her father had committed suicide, choosing to die with honor rather than live in shame. Suzuki sends in the child, hoping to change Butterfly's mind, but Butterfly says goodbye to the child and blindfolds him. She kills herself as Pinkerton calls her name.

Puccini's Fiasco

Giacomo Puccini bequeathed us a magnificent musical legacy, despite the fact that many events during his lifetime didn't go his way. None of his later operas were an immediate success, including *La bohème* (1896), *Tosca* (1900), *Madame Butterfly* (1904), and *Turandot* (left unfinished when he died in 1924). *La bohème* was met with mixed reviews, while *Tosca*, though liked by audiences, was panned by critics. But the most often reported and most richly described fiasco was associated with the premiere of *Madame Butterfly* at La Scala theater in Milan in February 1904. Music historians Chadwick Jenkins and John Rizzo describe the scene like this:

19th-century Italian opera patrons took opera very seriously. Audiences were very familiar with the works of major composers and had high expectations for new operas. When audience members didn't like something, they expressed their feelings then and there—no waiting for published reviews. Also it was common for an organized body of professional applauders or detractors, known as a claque, to be hired to attend performances. That's the speculation about what happened at the sold-out premiere. The trouble began that evening at Butterfly's entrance. Some audience members shouted, "That's from Bohème!" Things were not helped either when a gust of air caused the prima donna's skirt to billow up, provoking a cry of "Butterfly is pregnant!" Puccini's "Humming Chorus" provided another opportunity for buffoonery. In an attempt to outdo Belasco's intense realism, the opera's producer placed performers with bird-whistles throughout the opera house to accompany the dawn after Butterfly's sleepless night. Unwilling to allow such a boon to pass unnoticed, the audience joined in with various animal sounds of their own, reducing the poetic gesture to lunacy.

It's a small wonder that Puccini closed the production, returned his fee, and reworked the score again and again, for Brescia, New York, and Paris. The fifth and final version is known as the "standard version" and is the one that's most often performed.

FUN FACT: Italian opera composer Giuseppe Verdi coined the word *fiasco* to describe a complete failure, especially a ludicrous or humiliating one. In mid 19th-century Italian, the phrase *fare fiasco* meant "to make a bottle," which took on the meaning "to fail in a performance."

LISTENING GUIDE

Act 1 Aria/Duet: "Dovunque al mondo...Amore o grillo" ("Throughout the world ... Love or fancy")

- Pinkerton tells Goro of his fascination with his soon to be wife.
- Listen for the quotes from "The Star-Spangled Banner." Why would Puccini have included that in this aria?
- What instruments do you hear in the orchestra? How do those instruments interact with the two singers?

Act Two, Aria "Un bel di, vedremo" ("One fine day we'll see")

- Cio-Cio-San is telling her maid Suzuki that Pinkerton will return for them and her child.
- Below is the translation of this aria. How does Puccini's music portray these lyrics?

*One fine day we'll see a wisp of smoke arising over the extreme verge of the sea's horizon...
Then the white ship will enter the harbour ... I shan't go down to meet him.
No, I shall stand there on the brow of the hill and wait
And from the midst of the city crowd a man – a tiny speck – will make his way up the hill.
He'll call, "Butterfly!" from the distance.
Not answering, I'll remain hidden, partly to tease,
and partly so as not to die at the first meeting ...
And this will happen, I promise you ... with unalterable faith I shall wait for him.*