

Princeton Festival Opera Review: 'Madama Butterfly'

by Neal Zoren

The miracle at Morven last weekend was the resourceful and seamlessly successful teaming of two sopranos to play one role.

Toni Marie Palmertree's performance as Cio-Cio-San in Puccini's popular "Madama Butterfly" was highly anticipated since the Princeton Festival announced its season early this spring. Palmertree arrived with acclaim for her portrayal of Butterfly and multiple valentines to her voice.

The Princeton Festival audience saw Palmertree. She was onstage for practically every minute of Eve Summer's simple yet complete and engaging production of Puccini's classic.

It did not hear her. Though no explanation was given on opening night, pre-performance slides — and a hint from festival staff for me to make sure I heed them — announced that Palmertree would appear onstage as scheduled but that Cio-Cio-San would be sung by Brenna Markey, originally cast in the smaller role of Kate Pinkerton, Pinkerton's American wife, whose presence makes Butterfly fear the worst regarding her marriage to an American naval officer who leaves her in Japan, promising to return following a wedding ceremony.

In an Instagram post, I read Palmertree developed larynx problems that rendered her unable to speak, let alone sing.

In most cases, that would force the cancellation of a performance.

Luckily, the Princeton Festival was gamier than that, and Brenna Markey was remarkably brave. She had covered the role of Cio-Cio-San for Sarasota Opera in 2023, but she had never sung it onstage.

No matter. She knew the role. And went on, singing hidden amid the Princeton Symphony Orchestra while Palmertree mimed and lip-synced Cio-Cio-San for the audience. Festival stalwart Aubry Ballarò took the role of Kate Pinkerton.

A potential calamity became another fine performance in the annals of Princeton Festival Opera. Maybe a half-dozen times during Summer's production could anyone tell Palmertree was not singing. Her mouthing was so precise, and she was usually crossing the stage on the few occasions when she ended a note sooner than Markey did.

The miracle includes hearing a different lovely voice from the one expected. Brenna Markey was an extraordinary Butterfly. For someone who rehearsed another role, she provided color and texture that secured the heartbreak "Madama Butterfly" cannot help but cause.

Perhaps Markey had Palmertree as a model for her rendition. Undoubtedly, conductor Rossen Milanov, whose experience in opera would make him ready for anything, brought Markey and Palmertree's practically seamless partnership to glorious vocal fruition.

Markey was spared having to sing Cio-Cio-San in anger without having to worry about blocking. Imagine the great story she'll have for the rest of her career, about how one of her first, if not her first, full "Butterfly" was sung without her making a single stage appearance.

Meanwhile, Palmertree synced to perfection and had expressions and postures that accentuated Cio-Cio-San's plight.

Given the magnificence of Summer's cast in general, the subtle nuances in Milanov's conducting, everybody at Morven on what must have been a nerve-racking night came up a winner, especially the Princeton Festival audience.



Cast members (above) appear in The Princeton Festival's production of Puccini's "Madama Butterfly." At right, soprano Brenna Markey, who sang the role of Cio-Cio-San from the orchestra after Toni Marie Palmertree developed larynx problems that left her unable to speak or sing.



Eve Summer did not opt for a grand, monumental "Butterfly." She keyed to the potential intimacy of the piece and went for a quieter, perhaps more effective human side.

From the beginning of Summer's production, even while in anticipation of Palmertree's eventual entrance, it was clear all characters would get their due, and the gravity of Cio-Cio-San's situation would be established before you see or hear her.

Baritone Joel Balzun as Sharpless, the American consul to Nagasaki at the turn of the 20th century, and tenor Victor Starsky as Benjamin Franklin Pinkerton, the U.S. naval officer who is physically drawn to Butterfly but is cavalierly planning to abandon her, are given breathing space to give Summer's production a more solid foundation than most.

Usually, Cio-Cio-San is so focal and so ingrained in audience interest, the crucial opening scene between Sharpless, Pinkerton, and the pesky marriage broker, Goro (Nicholas Nestorak), doesn't take the time to reveal the predictable tragedy in store.

Summer and her cast reveal the stakes perfectly. From the first note, Balzun embodies Sharpless's caution and sense of right and wrong, while Starsky remains aloof and speaks matter-of-factly of all that the 15-year-old geisha, Butterfly, stirs inside him while just as carelessly saying the marriage is a convenience he will forget when he's ordered home and can find what he really wants, an American bride with whom to start a family.

Goro is complicit with Pinkerton. He sees in Cio-Cio-San a valuable commodity, a bride he can sell to a series of Pinkertons, or even a wealthy Japanese noble for ongoing profit. The servant secured for Butterfly, Suzuki (a touchingly loyal Kayla Nanto) overhears and is worried for her mistress from the start.

Worry and dread become the prevailing moods of Summer's production because she uses this opening scene to inform the audience without doubt that for Butterfly, who we will see truly adores and trusts Pinkerton, no happy ending is

possible. The wedding we are about to witness is a sad mistake from the start.

While waiting to meet Cio-Cio-San, we already have pity for her. Her fate is sealed, especially because she believes so strongly in Pinkerton's faith and fidelity, attitudes Sharpless knows are false impressions. He tries to warn Cio-Cio-San. She's oblivious. Pinkerton, in the second act, will express surprise he found the one Japanese woman who would buy into a foreigner's love and expect the love and honor she bestows.

I emphasize the care Summer took to establish the basics Puccini and his librettists, Luigi Illica and Giuseppe Giacosa, provide (based on John Luther Long's 1898 story and David Belasco's subsequent play) to raise audience empathy for Butterfly from the beginning.

Summer also clarifies the basis for Butterfly's estrangement from her family — converting to Pinkerton's religion — and its subsequent effects — in a way that gives later scenes in her production, scenes in which Butterfly claims to have nowhere to turn, more weight and emotional underpinning.

Toni Marie Palmertree, when she makes an almost camouflaged entrance under a tent-like garland of flowers wielded by her relatives, does not strike one as a fragile 15-year-old. Instead, once you pick her out, she exudes the happiness of a bride and the giddiness of a girl fulfilling a dream.

While Starsky shows little emotion as Pinkerton and barely responds to Cio-Cio-San even while professing the power of her allure on his libido, Palmertree's eyes say what Sharpless has already heard from her. Her love for this American and her belief in his fidelity is real.

Summer is so meticulous at setting all bases, heartbreak pervades Morven's atmosphere before the sad second act begins.

Toni Marie Palmertree and Brenna Markey truly co-star and keep Princeton Festival's "Butterfly" so cohesive, there's no distract-

tion or sense that Cio-Cio-San's voice is coming from a distance.

Markey's singing of Cio-Cio-San accentuates the heartbreak Summer so deftly foreshadows. Palmertree's stricken looks of disappointment increase that heartbreak and ensure opera with tears.

Victor Starsky is a curious Pinkerton. Vocally, he is on a par with his magnificent castmates, including Markey and the hastily recruited Ballarò. Dramatically, he keeps Pinkerton remote, as if some military rigor keeps him from expressing his feelings or revealing any texture beyond his words.

This makes Starsky a frightening Pinkerton. You see his resolve to have his pleasure in Nagasaki, then head home to have his American dream forgetting Cio-Cio-San exists.

This refusal to betray anything going on in Pinkerton's head forms a basis for the dread Suzuki feels when contemplating Cio-Cio-San's marriage.

Kayla Nanto is a movingly splendid Suzuki. So much can be read in her face, her singing is dazzling, and she conveys a knowing care the audience can share.

Nanto's Suzuki is the person you would want by your side in a crisis. A realist by nature, Nanto turns Suzuki into the ultimate confidante who can pretend convincingly, for the sake of her mistress, to buy into Cio-Cio-San's romance when she knows it was doomed before it began.

Joel Balzun is a model for all portrayals of Sharpless. He is serious and staunch while having the diplomat's knack for bending and working to calm a catastrophe he sees in the making.

Balzun is the picture of honor and rectitude even as Sharpless fails to use his influence or power to protect Butterfly or Pinkerton from a fatal mistake. Balzun's Sharpless could be a valuable friend if anyone would listen seriously to him.

Nicholas Nestorak's Goro is the latest in sharply drawn, complex

portrayals this tenor brings to Princeton Festival opera clearly shows the shamelessness yet practical business of the duplicitous, finagling Comic and off-putting in judged turns, Nestorak earns a warm welcome at Morven.

You would never know Ballarò was not part of the troupe to begin with. She is a Kate Pinkerton, especially in her apology she shows in her expression.

Jacob Stafford Hanes strikes the right attitude and shows wit and madori, a wealthy suitor. Nestorak storms onto the stage with rigidity and anger as the Bonze, Cio-Cio-San's uncle and a religious leader, pallid at her conversion to Christianity for Pinkerton. Troy C. J. is expressive, adorable, and gentle as the child Pinkerton doesn't know Cio-Cio-San bore.

Blair Mielnik's paper-honeyed geometrical details that make more interesting than a simple sign. The use of stage left sometimes skewed the sight but the area served Palmertree in some of her most dramatic scenes. Neil Fortin's comedy made creative use of the American red, white, and blue on several costumes but used those colors sparingly on the coats worn by Pinkerton and Sharpless. Paul Kilgus's lighting enhanced many moments, especially as day breaks. Cio-Cio-San's vigil for Pinkerton.

Rossen Milanov and the Princeton Symphony Orchestra were meticulous and brought the dramatic in Puccini home while incorporating the national and other American patriotic into his score.

"Madama Butterfly" premiered its run at the Princeton