

Reviews by Jeff Rapsis for Hippo Press

Granite State Opera's Madama Butterfly 5/11: IAs Butterflies go, this wasn't a bold and daring reinterpretation. And that, I think, made all the difference.

As performed last Sunday in Concord, Granite State Opera's original production of Madama Butterfly drew its energy from the classic elements of Puccini's familiar masterwork. This led to a performance that worked on every level—musically, dramatically, technically, and (the ultimate test for opera) emotionally.

Those who came for the music were richly rewarded. This sumptuously realized production, with its simple but effective staging, provided the perfect launching platform for a flat-out amazing cast of voices to take flight.

Led by GSO artistic director Phil Lauriat, with stage direction by Cincinnati Opera veteran James de Blasis, the result was a performance that easily matched what you'd expect from a full-time big city company staging a well-oiled production with many performances under its belt. It really was that good.

One element not to be overlooked was the excitement that came from Sunday afternoon's first-ever sold-out house for Granite State Opera at the Capitol Center for the Arts. The curtain was delayed for a half-hour due to a massive box office line and reports of scalpers circulated in the building. Lauriat often speaks of opera as an event; this Butterfly reached that level even before the curtain rose.

The crowd wouldn't have mattered, though, if Lauriat's cast and crew didn't rise to the occasion. The energy in the house, however, was also in evidence on stage. All afternoon, it fed on itself in both ways, which lent a special glow to the occasion, and also seemed to keep the cast pumped throughout.

And what a cast! In the title role, soprano Theresa Cincione worked a canny form of magic by singing with assurance and warmth but somehow projecting a quality of vulnerability and innocence at the same time. Cincione's performance interwove the musical and dramatic demands of the role with such seamless grace, the performance proved absorbing from her first entrance in Act I and provided a strong central focus throughout.

Yes, she was clearly not 15 years old (her character's age in the story), but that hasn't stopped generations of other singers from bringing the role to life. Last Sunday in Concord, a little suspension of disbelief wasn't too much to ask, and Cincione easily earned it. The performance was so completely natural, I barely realized when she began the classic Act II aria "Un Bel Dia." Cincione didn't shift or change emphasis or start singing "in quotes" just because it was time for THE aria—it seemed to arise naturally out of the situation, and was all the more powerful and refreshing for it.

Another virtue of Cincione's performance was that she wasn't a stand-out star. One of the great joys of this Butterfly was the wonderfully matched voices, which made for a great blend of combinations throughout the opera. No single voice dominated or was missing in action; among other consequences, this meant the singers didn't get in the way of the opera around them, which was another reason the performance worked.

Voices and acting were of a high quality throughout. As Lt. Pinkerton (Butterfly's short-timer husband), tenor Arnold Rawls pushed the limits of the part, wringing drama from the music's juicy spots without making his role a star turn. One sign that Rawls connected in his role of the callous husband was the lusty chorus of boos he earned at the curtain.

Baritone Philip Lima contributed solid work as Sharpless, the U.S. Consul, providing a rich foundation for multi-voice passages. As an actor, he showed great subtlety in projecting frustration over his inability to read the fateful letter in Act II—“not an easy thing to get across to the rear rows of the balcony, where I was seated.

As the loyal housemaid Suzuki, mezzo Janice Edwards (a Manchester-based singer) made an excellent complement to Cincione's

Butterfly. Their voices blended superbly; when singing together, the result was a rich dark mocha combination to which each contributed equally. On her own, Edwards was convincing in all aspects of the role, never overplaying her hand but always in the zone, both musically and dramatically.

Rounding out the cast was a group of talented performers, some imported and some local. Tenor Steven Carpenter was convincingly obsequious as Goro, while 6-year-old Alea Sargent did fine in the prominent non-singing role of Dolore (sometimes translated as "Trouble"), the young son of Pinkerton and Butterfly. Too often productions of Butterfly leave the child role to chance; all it takes is a kid waving to the audience or fidgeting on stage to spoil the spell, but there was none of that here.

The set, provided by Virginia Opera, was simple but effective. Lighting by Quentin Stockwell was a particular strength; the entire production seemed to be bathed in the golden glow of not-quite-twilight, which ebbed and flowed from scene to scene and never got tiring. Costumes were impressive in their color and variety, though designer John Lehmeyer resisted any urge to be over-elaborate. Props were a consistent plus, from the easily-lit lantern on stage right to the fanciful parasols used by the ladies.

Musically, this Butterfly held together like a bureau made with dovetail joints. From the pit, Lauriat guided the orchestra as a full partner in the production, but which at no point overwhelmed the singers on stage. Heard from the balcony, the balance was impeccable — you could hear everything clearly, and there was always a sense of purpose to the music.

The direction of de Blasis was admirable in its economy and effortlessness. No histrionics here; the strength came from the naturalness of the movement and the interaction of the characters. This made it possible to be engaged in the opera, which in turn lent this Butterfly power and impact as it unfolded.

Of all levels at which this Butterfly flew, perhaps the highest was in the emotional impact it delivered. Building slowly and inexorably, it swept the capacity crowd along with it, propelled by a clear vision of what it wanted to be and a cast capable of making it come together. During the big moments, not a peep was to be heard from the audience.

Complaints? The only shortcoming came in the staging of the final sequence of Act III. Not much music follows the title character's long-awaited suicide, but the way de Blasis staged Butterfly's death — a fast fall to the stage floor followed by an immediate blackout — took place way too fast to be a satisfying payoff.

For three hours we've been waiting for this moment, to see the grief-stricken Butterfly step off the ultimate cliff. Then, when she finally goes through with it, there was a definite need to linger on the scene for at least a few moments longer than what happened last Sunday afternoon.

Given the traditional look and feel of the production (all the way down to keeping the curtains closed during bows for the principals), I expected and desired and wanted a heavy curtain to fall majestically on the final scene, rather than an abrupt blackout — the only one in the opera. Instead, I felt short-changed, as if woken up prematurely from a deep and vivid and absorbing dream.

But that was only a small surface flaw on an otherwise glittering production, one that ranks among the most satisfying stagings of Butterfly I've seen anywhere and one that was a match for many of the recordings out there as well.

If you missed it, you missed a doozy — so next time go early and check with the scalpers.