

**Cleveland Opera Theater to present  
*Madama Butterfly*: a conversation with  
soprano Dina Kuznetsova**

by Mike Telin



Based on John Luther Long's short story from 1898, Puccini's opera *Madama Butterfly* recounts the story of the young U.S. naval officer B.F. Pinkerton and his arranged marriage with the 15-year-old Japanese geisha Cio-Cio San. Although the premiere in February of 1904 was poorly received, Puccini's fifth version of the opera, premiered in 1907, has become a mainstay of opera repertoire.

On Friday, April 27 at 7:30 pm and Sunday, April 29 at 3:00 pm at the Maltz Performing Arts Center, [Cleveland Opera Theater](#) will present a fully-staged production of Puccini's heartbreaking opera. Tickets are available [online](#).

"It's traditional to say that *Butterfly* is about a clash of cultures, and of course it is — but not only that. It's about a clash of various kinds of love and expectations," soprano Dina Kuznetsova, who will perform the role of Cio-Cio San, said during a telephone conversation. The cast includes tenor Timothy Culver as B.F. Pinkerton, mezzo-soprano Sandra Ross as Cio-Cio San's maid Suzuki, baritone Young Kyang Yoo as United States counsel Sharpless, tenor Mark Eldred as the matchmaker Goro, and bass Jason Budd as Cio-Cio San's uncle Il Bonzo. Domenico Boyagian conducts the Cleveland Opera Theater Orchestra with stage direction by Scott Skiba. The production will be sung in Italian with English supertitles.

This week's performances will mark the third time that Kuznetsova has sung the role of *Butterfly*. The first was in the Anthony Minghella production for the English National Opera, about which the *Times* said, "It's Kuznetsova's unsparing musical performance that really turns you to jelly, however. *Butterfly* is really three roles in

one: the girl in over her head, the lover ferociously in denial, and the abandoned tragic heroine... Kuznetsova has ample volume, passion and intelligence to bring all three to life..." Of her performance for the Atlanta Opera, *ArtsAtlanta.com* wrote, "Dina Kuznetsova is the sort of singer who commands attention on stage... She has great charisma and a huge, ringing voice with a clarion top. She can portray powerful emotions just with her voice."

Kuznetsova said that portraying Cio-Cio San is an emotional marathon because she almost never leaves the stage. "All the transformations happen onstage," she said. "Just yesterday we were talking with the director about how detailed Puccini's writing is. He was such a genius of theater — he tells you when he wants the emotions to flow from one side of her to the other, and how much time he wants every transformation to take. On one hand, it is challenging because in order to be true to the score, it has to be done just so. On the other hand, his detail is rewarding because you *feel* what the composer wanted."

How does the soprano view the actions of Pinkerton, who chooses to abandon Cio-Cio San only to return three years later with his American wife, and demand that Butterfly give up her son: Is he a bastard?

"I was just thinking about that this morning," she said with a laugh. "We are still in the process of staging, so I was reviewing the score and trying to find various ways of thinking about all of this. He is a bastard inasmuch as he refuses to see the consequences of his actions, so to Butterfly he is. But one could certainly say that it is a cultural blindness, a blindness of youth — he is not Don Giovanni, for example. I do think that Pinkerton will be haunted by what he did for the rest of his life. And he probably will be a wonderful father to the son he had with Butterfly, and will be a good husband to Kate."

Kuznetsova also sees Pinkerton as a young man of privilege. "We hear stories about that even today — people who grew up rich and are used to going everywhere thinking that they rule the world. He sees himself as being superior to women and to other cultures. But I am having so much fun working with Tim. I've known him for a very long time, and he's a fabulous tenor."

Wrapping up our conversation, Kuznetsova, who is based in Akron, said that she is delighted to sing the role in Cleveland. "It's nice to sing at home with such a wonderful cast. And I'm so happy to finally be able to work with Scott and Domenico. They're both really good, so it's just a pleasure."

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