

The background of the cover is a painting of a Japanese garden. In the foreground, a light-colored path curves through a lush garden with various plants and flowers. A wooden fence runs along the path. In the middle ground, there are several trees, including a prominent pine tree. In the background, a harbor or bay is visible with many boats and buildings on the distant shore. The overall style is reminiscent of traditional Japanese ink wash painting with a more colorful palette.

OPERA EXPLAINED

An Introduction to...

PUCCINI
Madama
Butterfly

written by
Thomson Smillie

narrated by
David Timson

The NAXOS logo consists of the word "NAXOS" in a bold, serif font, centered within a rectangular frame that has a decorative, classical architectural appearance with columns and a pediment.

8.558049D

An Introduction to...

PUCCINI *Madama Butterfly*

written by Thomson Smillie

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1	Introduction	8.46
2	Act I	5.46
3	Sharpless counsels caution	4.59
4	Introduction and Entrance of Butterfly	6.40
5	The Wedding Ceremony	3.18
6	Butterfly and Pinkerton	3.59
7	End of Act I	3.25
8	Act II – Introduction and ‘Un bel di’	6.24
9	Sharpless and Butterfly	2.59
10	Butterfly’s son	4.25
11	The return of Pinkerton	3.37
12	Waiting for Pinkerton – The Humming Chorus	5.35
13	Butterfly’s suicide	5.34

Total time 65:35

Other works in the Naxos ‘Opera Explained’ series

An Introduction to... ROSSINI *The Barber of Seville*, written by Thomson Smillie, narrated by David Timson (Naxos 8.558008)

An Introduction to... BIZET *Carmen*, written by Thomson Smillie, narrated by David Timson (Naxos 8.558010)

An Introduction to... PUCCINI *La Bohème*, written by Thomson Smillie, narrated by David Timson (Naxos 8.558011)

An Introduction to... VERDI *Rigoletto*, written by Thomson Smillie, narrated by David Timson (Naxos 8.558048)

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An Introduction to... VERDI *La Traviata*, written by Thomson Smillie, narrated by David Timson (Naxos 8.558050)

A complete recording of Puccini’s *Madama Butterfly* is available as a 2-CD set from Naxos:

Miriam Gauci / Yordy Ramiro / Gerog Tichy / Slovak Philharmonic Chorus
Slovak RSO / Alexander Rahbari (Naxos 8.660015-16)

Giacomo Puccini (1858–1924): *Madama Butterfly*

The word ‘opera’ is Latin and means ‘the works’; it represents a synthesis of all the other arts: drama, vocal and orchestral music, dance, light and design. Consequently, it delivers an emotional impact which none of the others can match. The only one of the arts whose origins can be precisely dated, it was ‘invented’ in Italy in 1597 as part of the Renaissance – the rebirth of interest in classical values. As an art form it is truly international, crossing all linguistic and cultural barriers, and it is probably the only one whose audience continues to expand, not in spite of, but because of developments in entertainment technology.

From its early origins in Italy opera spread across Europe, establishing individual and distinctive schools in a number of countries. France had an early and long-standing love affair with it – hence the term *grand opéra*, referring to the massive five-act creations that graced the Paris Opéra in the nineteenth century. Germany had an excellent school from as early as Mozart’s time, and opera perhaps reached its highest achievement with the mighty music dramas of Richard Wagner. Russia, Great Britain, and the Americas have also made their contributions.

But in the popular imagination opera remains an Italian concept – and no wonder. From its earliest years Italians dominated the art: Cavalli and Monteverdi were among the first to establish its forms; there was a golden age, called the *bel canto*, at the beginning of the nineteenth century when Bellini, Donizetti, and Rossini ruled supreme; Giuseppe Verdi was probably the most revered artist in

history; and, for many, Puccini represents, in every sense, the last word in this beloved genre.

Although the twentieth century has not been as lavishly endowed with opera composers, it can still boast a few, including Richard Strauss, Igor Stravinsky, and Benjamin Britten – and, maybe most significantly in the long run, those errant step-children of opera, the Broadway musical and the Lloyd Webber spectacular.

Madama Butterfly

It is one of the enigmas of opera that some of today's most popular, adored even, works in the repertoire were disasters at their premieres, *The Barber of Seville*, *Carmen*, and *Madama Butterfly* being the most notorious exemplars of the phenomenon. But it is axiomatic that they overcame their difficult deliveries to become healthy and robust specimens of the operatic race.

In the case of *Madama Butterfly* the scale of the disaster was, well, operatic. In 1904 Puccini, heir to the great Giuseppe Verdi, the most admired composer of his day, was at the peak of his considerable power. *Madama Butterfly* is part of a trilogy of works (*Tosca* and *La Bohème* are the others) which defines Puccini's status as surely as another contiguous trilogy (*Rigoletto*, *La Traviata* and *Il Trovatore*) defines Verdi's.

Yet the premiere in February 1904 at the world's most prestigious opera house, La Scala in Milan, was a howling travesty as the audience booed and whistled the piece into inaudibility. The reasons, in brief, were: the exotic, therefore unfamiliar, setting of the piece; the overlong Act I; the unsympathetic portrayal and general short-changing of the tenor; and the strangeness of the music. Eliciting our sympathy for the 'minority' figure rather than the 'white' hero was as radical as Verdi's championing a call-girl in *La Traviata*. And the music, with its repeated use of the pentatonic, or five-tone, oriental scale sounded odd to Italian ears – or so they say in hindsight. Mob mentality is too complex an issue for full discussion in a CD booklet.

Puccini withdrew the piece, split Act I into two parts, toned down the racism, gave the tenor an aria, and relaunched *Madama Butterfly* three months later in the comparative obscurity of Brescia, where it took off. It has gone on to establish itself as one of the central works of the international repertory and one beloved of operatic impresarios, who adore its winning combination of economy and box-office appeal.

Puccini loved women, in art and in life, and named many of his smash hits after his heroines: an oddly overlooked fact. *Butterfly* is not only the central character of the opera, she is the opera itself. From the moment of her intentionally delayed entrance – and what an entrance! – she is rarely off the stage. Other characters matter only insofar as they relate to her, and her astonishing combination of childish delicacy (she is allegedly fourteen years old, a real challenge to the singer-actress) and immense power of character and voice makes her one of the most compelling figures in opera.

Puccini was, it cannot be said too often, a supreme master of theatre, and had an unerring sense of what ‘works’. So when he was taken to see David Belasco’s smash-hit play *Madama Butterfly*, despite not speaking a word of English, he sensed instinctively that it would make a brilliant opera.

Things oriental had been in vogue throughout the later nineteenth century ever since Commodore Perry ‘opened up’ Japan in 1854, a phrase which reveals a typically occidental mind-set. ‘Opened up’ to whom? ‘Far East’ of what? The theme of the brash young American who sows his wild oats and seeks to avoid the consequences was to fuel many later, including Vietnam-era, works, but at the time was a real shocker to late Victorians. But once again it is the combination of outstanding characters (or maybe just one particularly outstanding character), a deeply moving plot (if you don’t weep at the closing pages of the score ask for your money back!), and music of overwhelming power that guarantees the opera’s success. Even those with hearts of stone find themselves moved by the exquisite Entrance of *Butterfly*, stirred by the highly

erotic love duet, thrilled by the great aria ‘One Fine Day’, and crushed by the mighty pentatonic chords that hammer out Butterfly’s death agony. Strong stuff!

Notes by Thomson Smillie

Thomson Smillie began his career in the early days of Scottish Opera and has been artistic director of the Wexford International Festival, general manager of the Opera Company of Boston, and general director of Kentucky Opera. He now makes a career as a writer, speech-writer, and public speaker. He has a strong belief that people mature into a love of opera and travels the world encouraging a love of the art form. His other passions are travel, languages, and friendships. He has written several other titles in the Naxos ‘Opera Explained’ series.



David Timson studied acting and singing at the Guildhall School of Music and Drama. He has performed in modern and classic plays through the UK and abroad, including *Wild Honey* for Alan Ayckbourn, *Hamlet*, *The Man of Mode*, and *The Seagull*. Among his many television appearances have been roles in *Nelson’s Column* and *Swallows and Amazons*. For Naxos AudioBooks he has recorded, to date, three volumes of *The Adventures of Sherlock Holmes*, and directed *Twelfth Night* as well as playing Feste. On Naxos, he takes the part of the Narrator in Stravinsky’s *The Soldier’s Tale*.



OPERA EXPLAINED

This series introduces, in words and music, the plot and background of major operas. Using the principal themes and arias, taken from the Naxos recording of the complete work, Thomson Smillie is informative yet entertaining, enabling the listener to get more from this remarkable art form.

An Introduction to...
PUCCINI
Madama Butterfly

written by **Thomson Smillie**
narrated by **David Timson**

Madama Butterfly really does run the gamut of operatic emotion. The title heroine has a fragility wonderfully expressed in her entry music, deep sexual instincts as shown in the love duet, and immense tragic stature in her last hours. The fate of *Madama Butterfly* – married to an American sailor and then abandoned – engages our emotions, as it obviously did Puccini's, to a degree equalled by few other opera heroines. The oriental setting and the exquisite orchestral and choral writings are treasured bonuses.

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