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Dreaming on the Edge of the World

Vienna State Opera, 13.12.2025 [ENA]

Puccini's Madama Butterfly is an opera that tests the emotional, musical and theatrical limits of any house. In the Vienna State Opera's current revival of Anthony Minghella's now-classic production, those limits are embraced with a rare sense of coherence and beauty. The performance on 12 December 2025 unites a world-class cast – Eleonora Buratto (Cio-Cio-San), Luciano Ganci (Pinkerton), Daria Sushkova (Suzuki), Leonardo Neiva (Sharpless) – under the baton of Giampaolo Bisanti, in the stunning visual universe created by Minghella and choreographer-director Carolyn Choa.

This production, originally devised for English National Opera and the Metropolitan Opera, has long been recognised as one of the defining Butterflys of our time. Minghella's concept is not a literal reconstruction of Nagasaki but an exquisitely stylised dream of Japan: a steeply raked stage by Michael Levine, sliding screens and mirrored spaces that open and close like a series of lacquer boxes, and a chorus of black-clad figures who silently manipulate props, screens and even characters. The effect is both cinematic and deeply theatrical; we seem to be watching Butterfly's story unfold in her own memory, as much as on a physical stage.

Han Feng's costumes are a key part of that spell. Critics have repeatedly singled out the "splurge" or "optical feast" of rich kimonos and ceremonial dress that fill the opening wedding scenes with colour, set against Levine's more austere architecture. In Vienna, that visual contrast comes across with particular force: the first act shimmers with cherry blossoms, fans and vibrant silks, only for the second act to narrow into the pale interior of Butterfly's waiting house, where time has slowed and hope has become a form of self-hypnosis. Peter Mumford's lighting sculpts this journey with great sensitivity – from the warm glow of the love duet to the cold, almost surgical light of the final scene.

One of the most distinctive aspects of Minghella's staging is its use of Bunraku-inspired puppetry, created by Blind Summit Theatre. The most famous of these is the puppet that portrays Butterfly's child, manipulated by three visible puppeteers. Reviews of this production in London and New York have repeatedly noted how extraordinarily expressive this child becomes – his hesitant walk, his trusting glance back at his mother – and Vienna inherits the full emotional impact of that creation. The puppet allows the production to suggest a real child while maintaining the production's stylised, almost ritualised tone; the relationship between Cio-Cio-San and Sorrow feels, paradoxically, even more tender and fragile.

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At the podium, Giampaolo Bisanti is an ideal guardian of Puccini's score. He has already established himself in Vienna and elsewhere as a conductor who combines rhythmic discipline with a keen sense of theatre, and his Butterfly here continues that reputation. The opening pages – with their bitonal clashes and busy motifs – are given a nervous, almost breathless energy; one feels Pinkerton's blithe excitement and the machinery of colonial power whirring in the background. Yet Bisanti can also let the music breathe in the great lyrical arches of the love duet and the vigil in Act II, encouraging the Vienna State Opera Orchestra to play with supple phrasing and glowing string tone.

The famous Humming Chorus, floating from the pit and chorus while Butterfly waits for dawn, becomes a suspended moment of collective breath. At the centre of the evening stands Eleonora Buratto's Cio-Cio-San. In recent seasons she has emerged as one of the most admired interpreters of the role, hailed in Berlin and at the Metropolitan Opera as an outstanding Butterfly whose voice combines warmth, clarity of line and the ability to sustain the role's long emotional arc. Buratto's instrument is a true lyric-spinto, capable of blossoming over the orchestra at climactic moments without losing the softness and tenderness that make Butterfly so moving.

What makes her portrayal particularly compelling is her refusal to play Cio-Cio-San as a doll; the girlishness in Act I is real but never naive, and by Act II she has grown into a woman whose steadfastness has a quiet, almost heroic resolve. "Un bel dì, vedremo" becomes less a dreamy fantasy than an act of will – a vision she is determined to believe in, even as the world around her tells a different story. As Pinkerton, Luciano Ganci brings a bright, Italianate tenor that rides clearly over the orchestra, with the easy top and ringing projection one expects from a singer who has made his name in demanding Verdi and Puccini roles.

What gives his Pinkerton bite is the sense of genuine charm in the phrasing – he phrases "Dovunque al mondo" with an appealing swagger – while never disguising the character's moral shallowness. In the final act, when Pinkerton returns and is confronted with the consequences of his actions, Ganci's vocal colouring darkens just enough to suggest remorse without trying to excuse the character. That balance is crucial: the audience feels the sting of his betrayal all the more acutely because the production does not caricature him.

Opposite him, Brazilian baritone Leonardo Neiva is a luxuriously cast Sharpless. Known for a warm, flexible voice and strong stage presence, he shapes the consul's music with long, legato lines and a genuine sense of concern for Butterfly. In his Act I scene with Pinkerton, his attempts to warn the American officer are phrased almost like chamber music: one hears, in Neiva's careful emphasis on the text, the voice of conscience that Pinkerton refuses to heed. Later, when he realises the full extent of the tragedy unfolding, his helplessness becomes one of the evening's most human touches.

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Suzuki, often under-valued, is here a real dramatic partner rather than mere confidante. Russian mezzo-soprano Daria Sushkova, a member of the Vienna State Opera's Opera Studio, brings both vocal richness and youthful immediacy to the role. Her timbre blends beautifully with Buratto's in their Act II duets, and her reactions – from scepticism about Pinkerton's return to heartbroken support in the final scene – anchor Butterfly's world in something tangible and humane. T

The rest of the ensemble is equally strong: Matthäus Schmidlechner makes Goro a sharply etched, almost dangerously cheerful fixer (a role he has been praised for in previous Vienna performances), while Alex Ilvakhin (Yamadori), Matheus França (the Bonze) and Andrei Maksimov (the Imperial Commissioner) contribute strongly characterised cameos.
One of the hallmarks of this production is the way it choreographs emotion. Carolyn Choa's movement direction uses the vocabulary of traditional Japanese dance – the precise angles of the fan, the tilt of the head, the slow kneel – but deploys it in a fluid, contemporary way.

The long vigil scene, with Butterfly, Suzuki and the child waiting through the night, is staged almost like a living scroll: screens glide, shadows lengthen, and the figures at the centre seem smaller and more fragile against the encroaching darkness. At the climax, the now widely discussed image of red ribbons flowing from Butterfly's body as she dies remains one of the most haunting visual metaphors in modern opera – at once stylised and brutally clear.
What ultimately makes this Madama Butterfly so affecting is the unity of its components.

The score, under Bisanti, breathes and surges with a sense of inevitability; the visual world Minghella created, with Levine, Han Feng and Blind Summit Theatre, offers a poetic frame that heightens rather than distracts from the drama; and the cast, led by Buratto, embodies Puccini's characters with vocal generosity and psychological depth. In a city where Madama Butterfly has a long and rich performance tradition, this 2025 revival stands out as something special: a meeting of an already beloved production with a fresh, distinguished cast at the height of their powers. It offers not just tears – though there will be many – but an evening in which music, theatre and visual art combine to remind us why Puccini's "Japanese tragedy" continues.

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