The reason why Puccini continues to occupy such a central position in the operatic repertory goes far beyond his gift for crafting indelible, pathos-charged melodies. These cast an irresistible spell over audiences, to be sure, but their effectiveness is ultimately rooted in the composer’s remarkable instinct for the theater: in his skill at delineating character and situation through music and in his pacing of details as they build toward an inevitable climax.

It can hardly be a coincidence that the initial inspiration for two of his best-loved operas, _Tosca_ and _Madama Butterfly_ , gripped Puccini during live experiences in the theater. In the summer of 1900, Puccini was in the middle of a six-week stay in London when he saw David Belasco’s recent one-act play _Madame Butterfly_ in the West End. Despite Puccini’s lack of English—reminiscent of his experience of Victorien Sardou’s play _La Tosca_ , which moved him even though he could not understand French—the immediate impression was overwhelming. Belasco himself later claimed that the composer had rushed backstage as soon as the curtain fell to meet him and requested rights to set the play as an opera. “I agreed at once,” Belasco said, “because it was impossible to discuss arrangements with an impulsive Italian who has tears in his eyes and both arms around your neck.”

As the new century rolled in, the fresh success of _Tosca_ was securing a reputation for Puccini, then in his early forties, as the preeminent heir to Verdi. Yet Puccini was anxious to avoid retreading old ground. And a lingering sense of post-Wagnerian, fin-de-
sicle uncertainty—which was soon to help pave the way for musical modernism—made him all the more obsessive in his search for the right subject to pursue for his next opera.

But it was the story of Butterfly as encountered during that evening of theater in London that began to preoccupy his artistic imagination. In the months after seeing Belasco’s play, Puccini continued to press his publisher, Giulio Ricordi, to secure the rights to develop it as an opera. This essential step—notwithstanding the playwright’s colorful backstage anecdote—was protracted, in part because Belasco had adapted a pre-existing short story of the same name published in 1898 by Philadelphia-based lawyer John Luther Long and itself drawing on the autobiographical 1887 French novel Madame Chrysanthème by Pierre Loti. Much of the play’s dialogue, which has Butterfly resort to a baby-like, pidgin English, was actually taken from Long, whose name is sometimes referred to as a co-author of the play. One significant change Belasco introduced, however, was Butterfly’s actual suicide. In Long’s account, just as she attempts hara-kiri, “the little maid came in and bound up the wound,” saving Butterfly.

“The more I think about Butterfly,” wrote the composer in the meantime, “the more excited I become.” At last, by the spring of 1901, the way was cleared for Puccini to enlist the same duo of librettists with whom he had so successfully collaborated for La Bohème and Tosca, his two preceding operas; Madame Butterfly marked the last time that all three worked together. The customary division of labor gave Luigi Illica the preliminary task of preparing the detailed scenario and a prose draft of the dialogue, while Giuseppe Giacosa, a renowned poet, was responsible for versifying the text.

Puccini, however, played a characteristically interventionist role in shaping the libretto, from initial conception through Butterfly’s numerous revisions. Indeed, the divergent angles from which the composer and his librettists approached the material helped generate some of the fundamental tensions that underlie the opera. Lt. B.F. Pinkerton’s reprehensible behavior, for example, is difficult to square with the conventions of a lead operatic tenor role. Even more significantly, the actions of Cio-Cio-San and Pinkerton alike can be interpreted as unfolding across a spectrum that ranges, at one end, from an impersonal “culture clash” between East and West, with the protagonists engulfed in incompatible points of view, while the other traces a highly personal psychological drama of tragic disillusionment.

In his thought-provoking study of the opera’s genesis and revisions, Arthur Groos suggests that the emphasis ultimately shifted toward the latter as Madama Butterfly evolved. Groos points out that the painfully ironic juxtaposition in Act I, when Pinkerton toasts the “real” American wife with whom he wants to settle down just before the approach of Butterfly and her retinue, epitomizes “the fact that the tragedy no longer lies exclusively in a clash of cultures, but also in a contradiction between the principals’ fantasies about each other and reality. Pinkerton’s adventurism has brought about this mock relationship; and Butterfly’s trusting heart will emboss it.” Pinkerton’s impetuous ode to enjoying the moment with his new Japanese bride, regardless of the consequences—“Amore o grillo” (“True love or fancy”)—represents in microcosm this contradiction at the heart of the opera.

As mentioned, Puccini was initially attracted to the theatrical version of the story conveyed by the one-act by David Belasco (1853–1931). Born in San Francisco to parents of Sephardic heritage, Belasco—known for his signature outfits of clerical black—had established himself as a trend-setting producer, director, and playwright. His meticulous attention to detail and to naturalistic ambience left a powerful stamp on American theater of the time. His plays would later incorporate influences from the emerging art of cinema and served as the basis for numerous film adaptations. (A young Cary Grant appeared as Pinkerton in the posthumous Hollywood version of his Madama Butterfly in 1932.)

Belasco originally staged Madama Butterfly as a star vehicle for the same actress, Blanche Bates, for whom he later wrote The Girl of the Golden West (which in turn served as the source for Puccini’s subsequent opera, La Fanciulla del West). He also used Butterfly to introduce one of his more daring experiments in lighting design, another area in which Belasco proved to be an especially innovative figure. Belasco dramatized Cio-Cio-San’s all-night vigil, in which she waits for Pinkerton to climb the hill and return to reclaim her, as a

Left: Italian soprano Rosina Storchi was the first Cio-Cio-San, appearing in the ill-fated 1904 premiere of Madama Butterfly at Milan’s Teatro alla Scala.

Right: An undated photo of David Belasco, the author of the one-act play Madama Butterfly. Born in San Francisco to parents of Sephardic heritage, Belasco was known for his signature outfits of clerical black.
wordless scene lasting an astonishing quarter hour, with gradual changes in the lighting to indicate the transition from night to a hope-filled dawn accompanied by chattering birdsong.

Clearly this scenic tour de force left a lasting impression on Puccini, who wanted the opera’s denouement to replicate—with tragic irony—the sense of inevitable momentum encapsulated in this natural shift from dusk to dawn: “No entr’acte, and arrive at the end keeping the public nailed to their seats for an hour and a half! It’s extraordinary, but it’s the lifeblood of the opera.” Puccini later acceded to the suggestion to add an interval within the second part, placed between the vigil and Butterfly’s final day (hence the division into acts two and three which is sometimes encountered in stagings of Madama Butterfly). San Francisco Opera’s current production, however, reverts to the composer’s original desire to present the second part without interruption. The music corresponding to Belasco’s staged vigil is in two parts. First is the wordless “Humming Chorus” (for sopranos and tenors alone), whose material is taken from the accompaniment to which Sharpless had futilely attempted to read Pinkerton’s letter but which now infuses Cio-Cio-San’s steadfast illusion of love with a radiant, simple dignity. The second is a symphonic intermezzo that reworks several of the opera’s motifs in a kind of stream of consciousness depicting the heroine’s meditations before the music brightens with the promise of the new day.

Crucial as Belasco’s version of the story was for him, however, Puccini was not interested in merely “translating” it into operatic terms. He determined early on to counterbalance the play—which corresponds to the opera’s second act—with a preliminary act to establish the background of the marriage and to highlight the contrast between the American and Japanese perspectives. (Puccini initially even suggested setting Act I in North America.) For his initial draft of the proposed first act, Illica harvested material from Long and Loti, including a sequence of caricature-like depictions of Cio-Cio-San’s boorish relatives during the wedding ceremony. Pinkerton expressed an arrogant disdain for the Japanese milieu, comparing his new acquaintances to insects and mocking the wedding refreshments as “candied flies and spiders, julep nests.” Most of this material was eventually deleted as Puccini, over several revivals, continued to revise the score into its best-known form. Adherents of the original version—which has seen several revivals over the last few decades—find its distinctly less-sympathetic Pinkerton to represent a more “radical” challenge to operatic convention, while his softening as the opera was revised marks a concession to “bourgeois” tastes that would prefer not to be confronted by the ugliness of imperialist attitudes.

By the same token, Puccini agreed to a set of revisions that French impresario Albert Carré stipulated for the Paris production given in December 1906 (which became the basis for the final published version of the score). Most significantly, Carré attenuated Kate Pinkerton’s role so that she becomes less insensitive to Butterfly’s plight. Instead of highlighting yet again the gulf between these two cultures, her brief, subdued appearance represents the critical turning point when Cio-Cio-San’s illusion must yield to reality.
One arguable exception to this process of theatrical fine-tuning—besides the matter of the interval later inserted into part two—involves the short exit aria Puccini and his librettists gave to Pinkerton ("Addio, fiorito asil") after the opera’s notoriously disastrous premiere at Milan’s La Scala on February 17, 1904. Madama Butterfly shares with The Barber of Seville and La Traviata the dubious distinction of having been jeered by its first audience as an utter fiasco. Yet his confidence remained unshaken. A revised version of Madama Butterfly, including Pinkerton’s added aria and some cuts to the first-act caricatures, proved a complete triumph when it was unveiled at Brescia a mere three months later.

Some commentators continue to view “Addio, fiorito asil” as a mere concession to make Pinkerton less odious. The idea for just such a number, however, had already been floated by Giacosa before the premiere. The poet countered Puccini’s rejection of this as an interruption of the dramatic momentum by drawing a parallel with a similar moment of lyrical pause just after Cavaradossi learns from Tosca of his supposed liberation. As it now occurs, the aria reaffirms the opera’s recurrent theme of willful illusion. Pinkerton’s sudden acknowledgment of what has guided his behavior entails a tragic echo of the luminous love music of the first act. The very rapture of that extended scene had lent his feelings a persuasive veneer of sincerity. Moreover, Puccini undercuts Pinkerton’s heroic lyricism with tattered, disruptive fragments of the “Star-Spangled Banner” leitmotif which is associated with his “facile creed” as the “Yankee vagabond.”

Puccini’s musical strategy repeatedly plays up ironic parallels between the opera’s first and second parts. Both, for example, begin with brief fugato preludes: the first, bustling with a scherzo-like, comic energy, the second hollow and wraithlike. The first act builds in anticipation of the appearance of Cio-Cio-San, who is first viewed in the context of her relatives before she is outcast and left alone with Pinkerton; in the second, she in turn awaits Pinkerton. Reality, though, collides with fantasy in each case.

Ricordi, Puccini’s publisher, expressed misgivings about the Madama Butterfly project from the onset, finding the story itself to be nothing more than an insipid tearjerker unworthy of the composer—a verdict repeated frequently ever since. Yet for Puccini, the source material offered a way to sharpen his theatrical instincts while expanding his orchestral palette and refining his command of a coherent, psychologically involving, post-Wagnerian leitmotif system. As biographer Julian Budden suggests, Butterfly moreover allowed Puccini to synthesize the poetic ambience of La Bohème with the relentless, violent theatrical force of Tosca while sustaining greater and more-prismatic focus on his tragic heroine than he had ever attempted before. According to the composer’s own view, as he defied the humiliation of that opening night in Milan, “My Butterfly remains as it is: the most heartfelt and evocative opera I have ever conceived!”

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Thomas May is a longtime contributor to San Francisco Opera Magazine and the author of Decoding Wagner: An Invitation to His World of Music Drama. This essay was published in a previous edition of San Francisco Opera Magazine.