

Cio-Cio San: Object Butterfly

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Madam Butterfly is Puccini's best known and, according to some commentators, most hackneyed work (cf. Drummond, 1980; Kerman, 1956). Such an evaluation is not inconsistent with the opera's popularity; quite the opposite may in fact be the case. Fortunately the parameters of this discussion allow us to eschew consideration of arguments regarding the aesthetic merits of the opera. Its popularity on the other hand certainly precipitates, for a social scientist, the search for its social meaning which, apart from its musico/ dramatic worth (questionable or otherwise), can be assumed to constitute at least part of the basis of its appeal. It is the contention of this paper that images of both gender and race are evoked by the main figure of the opera, Cio-Cio San (Madam Butterfly herself), and that it is the power of those images with all their connotations, brought forth by the dynamics of the music, that impresses and draws the opera's audiences.

The object of the present discussion, then, is a hermeneutic reconstruction of the dramatic and musical presentation of Butterfly. The hermeneutic process is a self-conscious engagement with the objects of perception in such a way as to transform them into personal constructs, to be relocated in the original context with the additional meaning taken into account. The image of Butterfly in a kimono singing her heart out, to us of another race, is a dynamic conception the sight and sound of which carry more significance, as communicative events, than is required by their formal relationships within the work as a whole. It is this significance towards which the hermeneutic effort here is directed.

Opera can be defined as 'staged drama unfolding integrally in words and music' (Donnington, 1981:20). Therefore the analysis of any such work cannot be restricted to the plot and the characterisations, as they unfold in the libretto (as well as through the specificities of any particular production). We must also consider the music, its integral part in the opera as a constituted 'ideal object' (Schutz, 1976) of perception and, taking the foregoing Schutzian account of music further, its effect on the 'real object' of a particular performance. This 'real object' (of our perception, as in the case of the 'ideal object') is constructed in action by both performers and audience in a web of shared as well as personal attitudes, beliefs, feelings

and judgements. It is not argued here that this web is constitutive of the work as such; there is, after all, its existence as an 'ideal object' in the above sense, and, in addition, there is also a material aspect of any actual performance which takes place within the distinct boundaries of a specific spatial arrangement and consists, in that material sense of the sounds and the bodies which produce them (cf. Supicic, 1970). It is suggested, however, that this web constitutes, interactively and dynamically, the social meaning of opera which social science (as distinct from musicology, say) can seek to elucidate.

The dimming of the auditorium lights and the brackets of the proscenium symbolises the way in which the audience and, in a somewhat different manner, the performers suspend belief in their everyday common-sense knowledge of the world and enter the world of 'special time and place' (cf. Skadra, 1979) created on the stage and in the orchestra pit. Indeed, it is largely under the auspices of the music that this state of *epoche*, as it were, is accomplished. Under the influence of music, an 'island experience' arises out of everyday life (cf. Schutz, 1964); it is surrounded by, and simultaneously separated from, the life-world. The acts of daily existence are set aside, as is the concern with its objects and the attention is diverted to another plane of consciousness (cf. Schutz, 1978). It is the music that makes us apprehend opera as something more than the telling of a story. Fuelled and forged by sound, the images so created are capable of resonating at a deeply felt level, with associations freed from the evaluative framework of the common-sense understanding of the world. Yet in this process ubiquitous everyday experience is reached and illuminated.

It may be that the music makes repetition not only tolerable but desirable. Most opera attenders listen and go to opera performances frequently, hearing the same works a number of times. Perhaps it is the case that the bourgeois social milieu fosters such behaviour, which Adorno views critically as 'fetishism', suggesting that 'opera offers a paradigm... that is incessantly consumed' (Adorno, 1976'81) by those who have been designated as opera audiences by the structures of capitalist society. Undoubtedly there is a host of extrinsic factors which are involved in opera-going as social action; their consideration, however, is tangential to the present discussion. What is relevant here is the repetition, insofar as it means the audience of an opera, on the whole, knows the story the opera tells and can anticipate its musical sequences. Each moment of every performance takes place in full awareness of the total pattern of the work. This does not diminish the aesthetic and dramatic effects - on the contrary, it enhances them by enriching the perception with meaningful expectations. In this experience the music is the strongest integrating factor as it addresses the senses in a most immediate and imperative fashion. There is a dynamic relationship between this pressing immediacy and its embed-

dedness in the process of the inevitable unfolding of an already known pattern - and that relationship enables us, the opera audience, to cast off the syntagmatic chains which normally bind us to a plot in ordinary linear time. We are freed to explore, on the wings of song, the paradigm before us.

Thus it can be said, without fear of contradiction, that in such a frame of mind we can see the ultimate statement concerning the central character of *Madam Butterfly*, Cio-Cio San, to be in Part II of Act I: the aria '*Un bel di*' (One fine day...). Here Cio-Cio San speaks the words of hope and confidence that her lover will return; but we in the audience already know that even as she sings, S.M. *Abraham Lincoln* is sailing into the bay with Captain Pinkerton and his American wife on board. Progressively through the aria the orchestra creates for us undercurrents of unease and rumblings of warning sounds which, in dialogue with Butterfly's song of love and hope, affect us most profoundly as we are already aware of her final tragic fate. In this context of meaning, Butterfly's aria becomes an ode to illusion that sustains a life in the house of bondage where she is waiting, trapped and suspended.

As we already know that considerable time has elapsed since Butterfly last saw her lover, the kind of perpetual pregnancy in Puccini's music here (cf. Grout, 1947) makes Butterfly's song a *cri de coeur* of all women whose lives have been defined by waiting since time immemorial: waiting for their men, husbands, sons, fathers, lovers and brothers to return from their labours, roamings and wars; waiting for their children to be born, for their bodies to go through their pre-determined phases; waiting for events outside their ken and control; waiting for one fine day... So, Butterfly also waits - she who is other than the man for whom she waits, not only different in her sex but also in the fundamental characteristic of race by virtue of which he is able to make a plaything of her, easily and without undue psychological discomfort. She is charming, guileless and literally childlike, as desirable women (as well as workers, black slaves and colonial natives - so de Beauvoir (1960) reminds us) have often been portrayed.

Yet Pinkerton feels, and in the end responds to, the power of the mystery which Butterfly, 'the love-sick little maiden' (Adami, 1973:155) represents for him; she remains unrevealed to him in her fecundity as in her death. Pinkerton's caddishness is typically masculine and his somewhat feeble suffering at the moment of Butterfly's tragic death, culturally incomprehensible though it must have been for him, is not simply a white man's guilt; rather, it is the suffering of all men who feel unable to reach into the impenetrable and inconceivable female psyche - so much the antithesis of her flesh - and are threatened by it. In this sense, Butterfly's kimono-clad image is a metaphor. She is the quintessential female figure - alien, oppress-

ed, ignorant of the conditions which govern her existence, dependent -and yet, unfathomable and out of reach.

Puccini in effect turns a racial stereotype into an archetype. Butterfly's signature aria relies for its effect on our recognition of this at the level of responding with a complex of ideas, images and emotions which the music enables us to take a long way beyond the manifest content of the scene. When Butterfly sings the climactic refrain at the end of the aria: '*Io con sicura fede l'aspetto*' (I with unchangeable faith will await him), 'the music records a frenzied despair. Butterfly's subconscious mind is in a state of fear' (Osborne, 1982:168) and as the orchestra plays in the postlude, *fortissimo* and *largamente*, the melody of the first eight bars of the aria, the real meaning of Butterfly's song and of the image from which it emanates is finally delivered by the sound of the instruments to our already sensitised awareness.

For this interpretation to be feasible, it has to be assumed that Puccini has taken for granted, however unselfconsciously (as one does in the life-world), the connotations of race which his work evokes. His actual conscious intentions in this respect are, of course, inaccessible to us but we may imagine that the undercurrents of the meanings we perceive in the work to-day have been captured, even unwittingly, by the composer, as the creative process naturally interacts with submerged systems of socio-cultural relevancies. That is, the creative act connects previously unrelated dimensions of experience - initially at least at a sub-conscious level (cf. Koestler, 1966). Opera clearly bears out Koestler's contention that in this process 'the artist's aim... is to turn his audience into his accomplices (Koestler, 1966:403). That this can be achieved even posthumously is intelligible in the context of a cultural tradition which we assume can be seen as a continual selection and reselection of ancestors, interpreted through our own current experience (cf. Williams, 1980).

Of course none of this denies that music as sound is important in itself. But music as an experience, in relation to both the audience and the composer, is woven into the pattern of a total way of life which this inquiry presupposes to have some continuity between our time and that of the composer. His inspiration springs spontaneously from personal and social sources, however beholden for their expression these may be to means of technical and rational elaboration.

The artist's personal predilections will naturally influence the choice of significant themes and images to be elaborated in the work. Puccini was preoccupied with women - their nature, their eternal suffering and their voices. Part of this may have been due to his melancholy nature (cf. Adami, 1973); deep-seated psychological dynamics may have endowed him with

heightened sensitivity to particular aspects of women's existence. It has even been suggested that there is a frequent conjunction of some of the greatest arias for his heroines with moments of their greatest debasement (as, for example, in *Tosca*, *Manon Lescaut* as well as in *Madam Butterfly*) (cf. Carner, 1958). Certainly in the scene where Butterfly sings 'Un bel di', her degradation is profound (more complete than when she dies at the end of the opera, rejected and hopeless, yet dignified). Here we perceive most sharply the self-deception and the powerlessness, born out by the futility of her arduous vigil which at times the orchestra conspiratoriously communicates to an audience that already shares with the composer the secret of Butterfly's fate. We already understand, much better than Butterfly, that she is the victim of the contradictions of love, extrinsic in terms of the strains on social bonds that love almost always entails, and intrinsic in its inherent ambivalence.

In so far as imputed inferiority is an aspect of racial stereotyping, Butterfly's Japanese-ness adds another dimension to the associative links in the audience's consciousness through which her complex plight is felt. There is a dialectic between these dimensions of the scene and some of the musical moments of the aria which consist of great climactic surges, with orchestra and voice both alternating and acting in unison. This dialectic brings to mind Freud's view regarding the great orgasmic potential of a debased sexual object: '...the man almost always feels his respect for the woman acting as a restriction on his sexual activity; and only develops full (physical and psychic) potency when he is with a debased sexual object' (Freud, 1977:254). If this is a significant aspect of sexuality, it suggests a psychological dimension the recognition (perhaps unconscious) of which may have enabled Puccini to portray so incisively the objectification of Butterfly.

The theoretical terms of the foregoing discussion are very general and its example is limited in scope. Such a configuration suits the two main intentions of this paper: first, the broad theoretical references merely raise the possibility of a sociological approach to the meaning of opera which attends to music as a significant aspect of the process within which this meaning is produced; and secondly, the single example in its complexity may suggest that no general pattern can be expected to account for the way in which aspects of race and gender are absorbed, fused and reflected in cultural forms.

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