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Butterfly Honour

The director of Puccini's opera *Madama Butterfly* talks about genius, colonialism and why suicide may be more honourable than living.



Puccini's *Madama Butterfly* has transfixed and touched audiences since its debut in 1904. Lo King-man, producer and director of the latest "extremely beautiful" version to grace Hong Kong's stage, is clear about what he believes accounts for its enduring popularity.

"There is no question about it – the value, the beauty, the popularity lies entirely in Puccini's genius," he says. "It's the music, the creation of the timing, the theatrical sensibility as expressed in the music. Many operas have excellent stories, books and lyrics but if the music is lousy then they never maintain their hold within the repertoire. Puccini's music is fresh, memorable, progressive and attractive all the time."

When I ask if he intends to be different and put any of his own original twists into the opera, Lo is quick to counter: "To be different is not my aim; to be artistically excellent is my aim. I don't study what other people do in order to be different. It's not artistically desirable to my mind to start with wanting to be different."

In fact, Lo believes modern classical composers can rarely compete with the likes of Puccini precisely because of this desire for originality. "Each composer wants to establish himself and tries to be different, tries to create a language which is 'my own, me, I am important!' This is where over-emphasising differences and originality hits a snag. I think this is the reason why they [modern composers] cannot sustain the wide acceptance that Puccini and the best composers of his time maintain."

Lo is much keener on discussing how he plans to make his production relevant. "The tragedy in my interpretation arises from this predominantly outward extrovert aggressive Western attitude of the time – basically a colonial mentality," he says. "And the culture of finer things, small things, important tiny sentimental feelings of the common people in a land untouched yet by Western

civilisation intensifies the cultural conflict. *Butterfly* builds an illusion for herself grafted on the fact that she is in love with this American [Pinkerton], who treats being in Japan as an entrepreneurial enterprise, taking advantage of Japanese customs. This conflict of concepts, believing in something which is not shared by the person you love [means] the disillusionment is so strong that *Butterfly* feels his entire honour has been destroyed."

This brings us to arguably the most famous part of the opera – *Butterfly*'s suicide. Original versions of the story did not always end with her death (although Lo reprimands me for thinking that Puccini might have known this, since he based his opera mostly on Belasco's play) but Lo is adamant the suicide is vital. "The tragedy is based on the fact that if one does not live with honour, it is better to die with honour and this is what I regard as the main theme of *Butterfly*'s character," he explains.

So is her suicide selfish? "No! No! No! All suicide is in some way a selfish act but honour is such an important element that a lot of people would rather die for honour than live with dishonour. So if you happen to build your belief on honour, then even though killing yourself might be a selfish act, not killing yourself is even more selfish. It's a tragic choice – there is no choice other than this path and this path is created by character rather than fate."

Debate has also raged about Pinkerton – is he a heartless cad or just misunderstood? Lo believes that depends 'on your own interpretation, not just mine', but does offer his thoughts on the character. "He is a reflection of the chauvinistic and colonial attitude of that time, believing that his own value is everything. So it is a growing process from that kind of attitude towards the end, when he realises that his sense of value is not the only one in the world and that there are more valuable things in the world for other people. This is what sparks off the remorse, rather than because he is a good guy or not a good guy. He grows older, becomes warmer towards matters of human value."

Whatever the complexities of character and plot, which can be endlessly debated, the music remains the most potent force. As Lo puts it, "It is the music that makes everything work." And it is hard to argue with that.

Puccini's *Madama Butterfly* plays at the Hong Kong City Hall from January 2-4. Performances in Italian with Chinese and English subtitles start at 7:30pm, with a matinee at 2pm on January 4. Tickets cost between \$600, \$450, \$300 and \$120 and are available from www.urbtix.hk, 2734 9009.

