

Madama Butterfly

NEW YORK CITY

Chelsea Opera

6/8/12

The stage for Chelsea Opera's production of *Madama Butterfly* (seen June 8) was simply the altar of St. Peter's Church on West 20th Street, with the sixteen-piece orchestra arrayed at its base. The set consisted of a screen, a table, a couple of rattan stools and an arrangement of cherry blossoms, big enough to brighten a hospital room. But as soon as conductor Carmine Aufiero launched into the opera's bustling introduction, we were drawn straight into Puccini's Nagasaki, and into a performance in which attention to the work's musical dramaturgy easily compensated for the makeshift surroundings.

The tight playing space impeded the deployment of choral forces in Act I. But in Acts II and III — when *Butterfly* becomes an intimate opera indeed — director Lynne Hayden-Findlay achieved much that was delicate and insightful. "Un bel dì" was played not as the prima donna's Big Moment but as a part of a conversation between Cio-Cio-San and Suzuki. When Butterfly brought Trouble out to meet Sharpless, the consul tenderly bent down and addressed the child directly. Only in the opera's last moments did Hayden-Finley's fine instincts fail her. Here, Goro violently snatched the child from Suzuki — a nasty piece of business that drew focus away from the central tragedy.

The production boasted a strong cast, notably Christina Rohm in the title role. Her fresh, freely produced lyric soprano may well have been expressly developed as a vehicle for Puccini's soaring melodies. Rohm was rather a robust presence in Act I, more like Tosca in a kimono than a geisha of "quindici netti." But she was effective and touching as the mature heroine, the technical assurance of her singing letting her realize the music — and consequently, the character — without compromise. In the last act, her voice took on some surprising dark colorings, both appropriate to the tragic circumstances and beautiful in themselves.

Her Pinkerton was Daniel Rodriguez, the former NYC cop who came to prominence singing "America the Beautiful" in the wake of 9/11. He is now in the midst of a thriving pops-concert career, but he has yet to make his mark in staged opera. His stolid demeanor onstage offered a possible explanation of why this should be the case; so did a few musically approximate passages. But there was no question that his voice is the real thing, full of slancio, with secure, ringing high notes that all but overwhelmed the church's nave.

The dignity of Yajie Chen's Suzuki made her palpable distress at Butterfly's plight all the more heartbreaking. Justin Ryan was an unusually forceful Sharpless, using the full impact of his burly baritone to convey his anger at "quel diavolo d'un Pinkerton." Aaron Blankfield was the unctuous Goro; Isaac Grier made a powerful moment out of his brief appearance as the Bonze.

The orchestra, playing a reduced arrangement by Richard Balcombe, hit its share of bloopers, with moments of rocky ensemble that may well have been due to the awkwardness of their positioning. During the love duet, one wished that Aufiero had encouraged his players to lay back and breathe the perfumed night air. But it was a committed and ultimately moving performance. Modest in scale, the production gave us *Butterfly* in full.