

# SEATTLE OPERA.

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## **Asian American partners inspire new understanding of *Madame Butterfly***

**Seattle Opera engages in the conversation on Asian representation,  
cultural appropriation, and more**

**Company presents *Butterfly*, plus community-engagement events:  
*An American Dream*, panel discussions**

SEATTLE – With stylized sets inspired by Japanese theater and lush, colorful *kimono* worn by singers, Seattle Opera’s grand production of [\*Madame Butterfly\*](#) coming this August may seem like business-as-usual. But there’s a dramatic difference that sets this *Butterfly* apart: the broader conversation taking place on cultural appropriation, yellowface, and Asian American representation. While certainly not new to many Asian and Pacific Islanders, these conversations have permeated the Puget Sound theater scene for the past several years following a production of *The Mikado* that made national news.

In many ways, this dialogue is a direct challenge to how opera has been done in the past—especially an opera like *Madame Butterfly*, where Asian characters are frequently portrayed by white performers. (Seattle Opera’s production will not

attempt to change a given singer's race through wig or makeup). As seen by The Metropolitan Opera's 2015 decision to drop the use of blackface in its *Otello* and other events, the opera world is just beginning to reevaluate its tradition of color-blind casting and starting to have more conversations about how the art form is changing. Considering **General Director Aidan Lang's** vision of serving the diverse people of Washington State, Seattle Opera will not shy away from critical voices in the community.

"We have work to do in order to become a company that truly stands for racial equity," Lang said. "Ultimately, we aim to preserve the awe-inspiring universal qualities of our art, while changing Eurocentric inequities. We know from our community-engagement works such as *As One*, a transgender story, and *An American Dream*, depicting the incarceration of Japanese Americans, that opera has the power to serve diverse groups. It's our responsibility to help make it happen."

In an attempt to listen and learn surrounding *Butterfly* (August 5-19), Seattle Opera has organized three community-engagement events, including performances of the opera *An American Dream*, and two panels featuring exclusively Asian American artists and leaders. In addition, during the performance run of *Butterfly*, large-scale lobby exhibits will provide greater context for what the audience member is about to see. The viewer will learn about Puccini's intentional criticism of American imperialism, and rampant anti-Japanese attitudes in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century when he was composing. Such attitudes would continue to have devastating consequences for people of Japanese ancestry, including the mass incarceration of 120,000 Japanese Americans, which is where *An American Dream* picks up.

In a heartbreaking tale of cultural imperialism, *Butterfly* depicts a trusting Japanese maiden who is abandoned by a reckless American naval officer. Four internationally acclaimed artists make company debuts in this exciting production. They include: Armenian soprano **Lianna Haroutounian** and Japanese soprano **Yasko Sato** (also her U.S. debut) as Cio-Cio-San, with Russian tenor **Alexey Dolgov** and American

tenor **Dominick Chenes** as Pinkerton. (**Alexia Voulgaridou**, who was originally scheduled to sing Cio-Cio-San, is now expecting her first child and has withdrawn). Returning artists for *Butterfly* include **Weston Hurt** (Sharpless), **Renée Rapier** (Suzuki), **Sarah Mattox** (Kate Pinkerton), **Rodell Rosel** (Goro), **Ryan Bede** (Prince Yamadori), and **Daniel Sumegi** (The Bonze). **Carlo Montanaro** returns to conduct, and director **Kate Cherry** makes her Seattle Opera debut with a production hailed as “sublime, visually fantastic, must-see” (*stuff.co.nz*).

***An American Dream*** composed by **Jack Perla** with libretto by **Jessica Murphy Moo** returns in fall 2017 as part of the company’s community-engagement work to introduce opera to new audiences. Presenting partners include **Densho** and **Seattle’s Japanese American Citizens League chapter**, who, through post-show discussions, will help take attendees deeper into the civil-rights implications of this story and its themes of wartime hysteria, racism, and xenophobia. Inspired by true stories from Puget Sound’s history, *Dream* depicts two intersecting narratives during World War II: a Japanese American family facing incarceration, and a German Jewish immigrant preoccupied by those she left behind. Details regarding the performance will be announced on [seattleopera.org](http://seattleopera.org) in the coming weeks.

The other activities surrounding *Butterfly* include two panels. The first, [\*\*“Asian Arts Leaders Respond to Madame Butterfly”\*\*](#) on July 9 at SIFF Cinema Uptown 2, is moderated by **Frank Abe**, co-founder of Seattle’s Asian American Journalists Association. **Angel Alviar-Langley**, a queer Filipina American street-styles dancer, will perform and also serve on the panel, which will include **Kathy Hsieh**, a celebrated actor and arts leader; **LeiLani Nishime**, an Associate Professor of Communication whose research focuses on Asian American representation among other topics; **Matthew Ozawa**, opera stage director; **The Shanghai Pearl**, internationally-beloved burlesque artist; **Roger Tang**, the “Godfather of Asian American theatre” (*A. Magazine*); and **Karl Reyes**, a frequent performer in Seattle Opera mainstage productions, as well as a longtime member of the Seattle Opera Chorus.

Later in the month, “**Reversing the *Madame Butterfly* Effect: Asian American Women Reinvent Themselves Onstage**” will take place on July 28 at Cornish Playhouse Studio Theatre. The evening will include three short plays by Asian American women playwrights as well as conversations on reclaiming Asian female representation in art and entertainment. The event is curated by **Kathy Hsieh** and presented in partnership with SIS Productions.

Of course, these plans are simply a start toward greater equity and inclusion, and creating a more welcoming environment for everyone to be able to experience opera.

“I can’t speak for all people of Japanese or API ancestry—some of whom love opera and love *Madame Butterfly*,” said **Sarah Baker**, President of **Seattle’s Japanese American Citizens League**. “But I can say that *Butterfly* is frequently a hurtful and problematic work to many in our community. Seattle JACL hopes you will let your voice be heard at Seattle Opera’s panel discussions. Let’s help create a better future for the arts. Ultimately, Asian Americans and all people of color need to see our own narratives onstage, brought to life by performers, storytellers, and directors who include people from our own communities.”

*Madame Butterfly* opens Saturday August 5, and runs through Saturday, August 19. Tickets are available online at [seattleopera.org](http://seattleopera.org), by calling 206-389-7676, or in-person at the box office located at 1020 John Street (two blocks west of Fairview). Box office hours are Monday-Friday between 9 a.m. and 3 p.m. Prices start at \$25. Groups save at least 20 percent: 206.676.5588 or [groups@seattleopera.org](mailto:groups@seattleopera.org).

## **Madame Butterfly**

Music by Giacomo Puccini

Libretto by Giuseppe Giacosa and Luigi Illica

In Italian with English captions

Marion Oliver McCaw Hall

Performances: August 5, 6, 9, 12, 13, 16, 18, 19, 2017

Approximate Running Time: 2 hours and 55 minutes with one intermission

Evening performances begin at 7:30 p.m., matinees at 2:00 p.m.

Premiere: Feb. 17, 1904, at Teatro alla Scala

Previous Seattle Opera Performances: 1966, 1970, 1977, 1995, 1982, 1989, 2002, 2012

**Cast:**

Cio-Cio-San	Liana Haroutounian* (Aug. 5, 9, 13m, & 18) Yasko Sato* (Aug. 6m, 12, 16, & 19)
Pinkerton	Alexey Dolgov* (Aug. 5, 9, 13m, & 18) Dominick Chenes* (Aug. 6m, 12, 16, & 19)
Sharpless	Weston Hurt (All dates)
Suzuki	Renée Rapiér (All dates)
Kate Pinkerton	Sarah Mattox (All dates)
Goro	Rodell Rosel (All dates)
Prince Yamadori	Ryan Bede (All dates)
The Bonze	Daniel Sumegi (All dates)
Imperial Commissioner	Jonathan Silvia (All dates)
Registrar	Kwangsuk Ku (All dates)

Director	Kate Cherry*
Conductor	Carlo Montanaro
Production Design	Christina Smith*
Lighting Design	Matt Scott*

\* Company Debut

**Production Sponsors:**

**Tagney Jones Family Fund at Seattle Foundation  
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**About Seattle Opera**

Seattle Opera is a leading opera company, recognized both in the United States and around the world. The company is committed to advancing the cultural life in the Pacific Northwest with performances of the highest caliber, and through innovative education and community programs that take opera far beyond the McCaw Hall stage. Each year, more than 95,000 people attend Seattle Opera performances and the company's programs serve more than 400,000 people of all ages (including school performances, radio broadcasts and community engagement initiatives). Seattle Opera is especially known for its acclaimed works in the Richard Wagner canon, and has created an "international attraction" in its presentation of Wagner's epic *Ring*, according to *The New York Times*. Connect with Seattle Opera on Facebook, Twitter, SoundCloud and through the [Seattle Opera channel on Classical King FM. 98.1](#).