

# Take Madame Butterfly's Heroine as an Example to Discuss Puccini's Characterization Characteristics and Causes

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## ABSTRACT

Madama Butterfly, one of the ten most famous operas in the world, is one of Puccini's great realistic operas, and its cultural and artistic values are outstanding. This paper takes the tragic heroine in Puccini's Madama Butterfly as the starting point and tries to summarize the characteristics of Puccini's opera characters, i.e. "small characters - big sorrow", and analyzes the causes of this characteristic from three perspectives: the specificity of the time, the emergence of realistic opera, and personal motivation. He also analyzes the causes of this characteristic from three perspectives: the specificity of the time, the creation of realistic opera, and his personal motivation.

**Keywords:** *Madame Butterfly, small character - big sorrow, realist opera*

## 1. INTRODUCTION

The decade from Manon Lescaut to Madama Butterfly (1893~1904) was a prolific one for Puccini's operas, with three major masterpieces, The Artist's Career, Tosca, and Madama Butterfly, officially composed during this period. In the late 19th and early 20th centuries, the incomplete national liberation movement led to the intensification of social conflicts. Under the influence of this trend, which was reflected in the music, Italian realist operas were produced, and the playwright Puccini portrayed a number of "minor characters" against this social background and his own personal experience. He was good at capturing the joy, sorrow, grief and happiness of the "little people" from the life of the inconspicuous citizens, expressing the feelings and destinies of the people at the bottom of society, and exposing the "big sorrow" in the real world.

## 2. SMALL CHARACTER - BIG SORROW

### 2.1. Small character

Looking at Puccini's many operas, it is easy to find that most of the main characters in his operas are people from the lower strata of society who have suffered from the hardships of life, which is very different from the characterization and selection of characters in previous

operas of the classical or romantic periods. Why did Puccini not follow the traditional way of selecting and portraying the heroes in operas, but preferred the "little people", he said: "I love the nobody. I can only write about the nobody because they are real and passionate. I can only write about nobody because they are real, passionate and human, and they can reach the depths of the heart." [1]

Puccini said that Madame Butterfly was his beloved work and often said, "The music of Madame Butterfly was given to me by God." The subject is based on a short story by John Luther Long, "Madame Kikuko," which is said to be a true story: an American naval officer stationed in Nagasaki, Japan, marries a Japanese geisha according to Japanese custom purely for pleasure, but eventually he returns to the United States and abandons his lover and child. Subsequently, Velasco changed this short story into a play that was staged in London in 1900. After watching it, Puccini was moved by this sad and happy Japanese love story, and the idea for the opera Madama Butterfly ensued.

The heroine of the play is a lowly Japanese geisha, a humble person at the bottom of the social ladder. However, the philandering Pinkerton only wants to amuse herself in order to reduce the tedious life in a foreign country, and when he returns to America, he abandons her and marries the American Kate. But the infatuated Butterfly knows nothing of this and is

convinced that he will return. Three years later, Pinkerton returns to Japan with his American wife and asks to take the child he had with Madame Butterfly. Butterfly agreed to this shameless request, and in unbearable pain, she ended this tragic marriage by committing suicide, bidding farewell to a cold world that had never been friendly to her.

## **2.2. Big sorrow**

From the perspective of Puccini's heroines, they have one thing in common, namely, they live in the lower middle class of society and have a humble status, but their attitude towards love is mostly faithful. In the inability to resist the sudden "disaster", death is the most decent, elegant and helpless "relief".

Puccini's "small characters" all follow this dramatic pattern, but they have their own characteristics. The character of Mimi represents the image of an ordinary woman at the bottom of society at that time, the status of women is underground, and as working women can be said to be the bottom of society, their hard work is not respected by society. But the smallest characters also have great love, when happiness comes, they usually give all without regret, but the end is unbearable, unable to change their own fate, poverty, disease, broken dreams and other nightmares like a fatal cycle, sad to the extreme. However, the author's heartfelt compassion for Mimi and his sympathy for the people living in the lower strata of society is what soothes the heart in the midst of the low emotions, and he uses this to awaken the conscience of freedom, equality and love in people's hearts.

The end of Butterfly represents the destruction of goodness and the demise of love, a tragic drama in which a good heart is snuffed out. It profoundly reveals the tragic fate of women under the oppression of colonialism and imperialism, and reflects the great sacrifices women have made and suffered in their struggle for love, marital happiness, and individual freedom. It is also a vivid critique and profound reflection on the Western morality and values that often boast of a "civilized world" and "free thinking". Through the contrast between the infatuated butterfly and the irresponsible Pinkerton, it profoundly reveals the game between good and evil, good and evil, beautiful and ugly, and its contrast is self-evident. The contrast between good and evil, good and evil, good and ugly is self-evident. We can enjoy the opera without realizing that we have completed the baptism of the soul. Through the tragedy of the "little man", Puccini expresses his sympathy for the people living at the bottom of the society, eulogizes the quality of goodness and purity, and uses this desire to awaken the conscience of freedom, equality and fraternity in people's hearts.

Puccini, as a representative of realism, did not focus on class oppression and popular resistance in his works.

His operas seem to have no thrilling plots, no sublime and great characters, no heroic feats, but only a nearly peaceful narrative style, rich in lyrical and delicate descriptions, but we can still deeply feel the suffering of the oppressed people of that era and their heartfelt voices, which is the essence of realism.

## **3. THE CAUSES OF THE WAY OF CHARACTER BUILDING**

### **3.1. Background**

Usually, musical works are often a reflection of the characteristics of the time in which the composer lived. Beethoven, for example, was living in an era when the bourgeois revolution in Europe was on the rise, and the bourgeois democratic ideology of "freedom, equality and fraternity" became the political ideal pursued by Beethoven. The connotation of "heroism" in Beethoven's music and the initial motive of composing the "Heroic Symphony" were precisely the spirit of Beethoven's ideology and ideal pursuit.[2]

What was the context in which the playwright Puccini created a series of popular "small character"?

In the 1870s, the national revival movement in Italy was victorious, regaining independence and unity and establishing a constitutional monarchy in the Kingdom of Italy. However, due to the great compromise of the upper bourgeoisie with the feudal landlords, the unification of the country from the north to the south was accomplished against this background, but at the same time it led to a very unstable and considerably decayed political and economic base, so that the economic base and superstructure of Italy lagged far behind those of other countries in Europe that had completed the bourgeois revolution. The frenzy of the emerging bourgeoisie in the unjust and unfair accumulation of raw social capitalist wealth and the refusal of the decadent feudal classes to give up their decadent rights showed that the Italian bourgeois revolution was not yet complete. Although capitalism had developed rapidly in the northern cities, the vast rural areas in the south still retained backward feudal patriarchal relations, feudal remnants were still stubborn and feudal influence was still deep-rooted. As a result, instead of real freedom and emancipation, the masses of working people and petty bourgeoisie in Italy were trapped in a situation of double oppression and exploitation by capitalism and feudalism, with many social contradictions and conflicts, especially in the backward regions like Sicily. When the masses saw that their long and arduous struggle was still rewarded by the rule of capitalism and feudalism, they stopped believing in the illusory "romanticism".

In addition, the naturalistic literary trend born in France spread to Italy at this time, and its representatives inherited the positivist philosophical tradition, believing

that nature is all that exists, that there is no supernatural realm, and that everything in nature can be justified by the scientific method. Naturalistic literature was significantly different from its predecessors in that it began to observe, understand and represent man from a physiological point of view, valuing the natural side of his attributes. The most important characteristic of naturalism is its emphasis on the truthfulness of literature. According to Zola in *On the Novel*, "the Romantic imagination has changed from a compliment to a deprecation." [3] The sense of truth is the highest character of the novelist. [4] Zola brought authenticity to a high level, and he made it the purpose of literary creation to demand that "if you want to portray life, first of all, you should know it truthfully, and then convey an accurate impression of it." For example, the novels of the Goncourt brothers are mainly realistic, and most of the characters are real people. [5] In order to write "Sister Philomena", they had personally experienced life in the hospital and made detailed observations on the diagnosis of diseases and surgery. They were the first to introduce physiology into fiction, aiming to explore the relationship between illness and emotion. Although their descriptions were not as precise as medical information, they used the study of natural science to write fiction, which undoubtedly opened the way for the rise of naturalistic fiction, with detailed notes obtained from observation as information and material.

As a response to French naturalistic literature, there were also literary trends against Romanticism in Italy, such as Luigi Capuana (1839-1915) and Giovanni Verga (1840-1922), who drew on real life, with the main characters being mainly the lower class people, reflecting real life and exposing social contradictions through the stories of small people, which provided literary materials for Italian realistic operas and enriched the basis of creation.

In short, "Romanticism" lost the support of reality and the naturalistic literary trend advocated the creative principle of "authenticity", which paved the way for the birth of "realism".

### 3.2. The emergence of realist opera

The "realism" opposed the illusion of Romanticism and sought to truly reflect the sorrow, happiness and poverty of the underclass, thus exposing the dark side of society. In 1890, Italian composer Pietro Mascagni set Verga's novel "The Country Knight" to an opera of the same name, creating the first "realist opera", and then Leoncavallo joined the ranks with his opera "The Scandal". The first "realist opera" was created by Leoncavallo with his opera *The Scandal*. Puccini then took the realist opera from the rise to the climax, and *Madama Butterfly*, *Tosca* and *The Artist's Career* are known as Puccini's three great works, all three of which were composed under the influence of the "realist" trend.

Realist opera is a product of the influence of realism, and realist opera provides realistic support for the realist trend. In terms of characterization, realist opera reflects the fact that realism is no longer like "romantic opera", which selects mythological and heroic characters to choose the "little people", but takes real life as the background and uses music to portray the sorrow and happiness of ordinary people. Instead, it takes real life as the background and uses music to portray the sorrow, joy, anger and sadness of ordinary people, showing more naked human nature, among which, there is no lack of horror, death and jealousy.

In the first act of *Madama Butterfly*, for example, Puccini intersperses melodic motives such as "death", "curse" and "suicide" with the melody of "love".

Starting with *Madame Butterfly's* entrance, it can be seen as a description of her initial attainment of her longed-for love and happiness, the first appearance of her musical image. In the chorus of "I'm the happiest girl in the world" with her girlfriends, the wide and long, upward and downward beautiful melody shows her hope for the coming happiness and her longing for life, fully reflecting her beauty and innocence. Especially the butterfly motive that appears for the first time, her love is as delicate and inscrutable as a butterfly, seemingly in the hands of others. Example of the score is Figure 1.



Figure 1. The first butterfly motive appeared

Sharpless asks Butterfly about his life, and Butterfly begins to tell his life story, using another important

motive, the motive of death, when referring to his father's death. An example of a score is Figure 2.



Figure 2. The motive of death

Relatives arrived, among them Butterfly's mother, aunts, uncles, cousins and others. The relatives and friends chattered about Pinkerton, some of them said he was precious and wanted to be a king; others, however, said he was not very beautiful, that the marriage would not be happy, and that the two would eventually divorce.

Butterfly called Pinkerton aside and showed him some things for maidens and a long box, saying it was her holy relic. This is where Goro secretly tells Pinkerton that it is the sword that the Emperor used when he told her father to commit harakiri. At this point, the motive for suicide appears in its full form. Example of the score is Figure 3.



Figure 3. The motive for suicide

The butterfly immediately sings his own theme, telling him how he has abandoned his religion. The monk's scolding then appears in an unquiet phrase that reinforces the atmosphere of the butterfly's cursing and

abandonment by its relatives. This theme is played continuously until the relatives and friends leave. Example of the score is Figure 4.

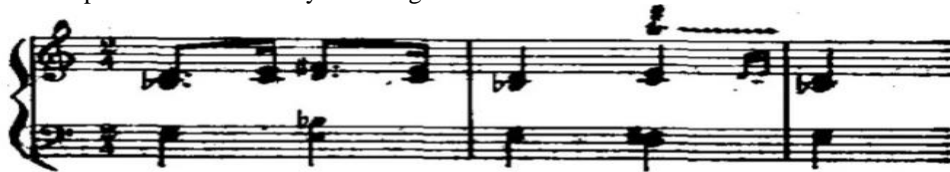


Figure 4. The motive of curse

After the family and friends dispersed, Pinkerton and Butterfly's "Love Duet" was considered one of the most beautiful passages of the play. The night is early summer, and all is quiet. In the spirited and smooth dream-like music, the newlyweds talk intimately about their earthly

marriage, from the earthly marriage to the landing of the fairy in the moon. This piece contrasts sharply with the noise and chaos of the preceding wedding ceremony. The score is shown in Figure 5:



Figure 5. "Love duet"

3.3. Puccini's motivation for creation

In 1900, while preparing the premiere of Tosca in London, Puccini went to the theater, as he always did, even though he did not speak English, in the hope of finding new operatic themes. At the Duke of York's Theatre, Puccini saw American director and writer David Belasco's Madama Butterfly. In a letter to Ricordi (1840-1912), a leading Italian score publisher, Puccini said, "The more I think of Madama Butterfly, the more I am drawn to it by an irresistible force." [6] When Puccini saw Belasco's Madama Butterfly in London, the Japanese style was in full swing in Europe. At this time, a Japanese theater company was celebrating a successful tour in the United States, the star of which was the much-heralded Japanese prostitute Sadayakko Kawakami, known as "Japan's greatest sentimental actress". By this time, Puccini had already begun composing the music for Madama Butterfly, and he saw the performance in Milan, where he hoped to speak with Sadayakko, even though she did not speak the language, but Puccini was determined to make her a tragic Japanese woman.

The story of Kawakami Sadanu can be said to be the prototype of Madama Butterfly. Kawakami Sadanu's family is well-off and her mother's family runs a large store. Her father joined the family to inherit the family business. However, after the opening of the port, the economic situation changed drastically and the family's fortunes fell. Sadanu Kawakami entered a brothel at the age of 4, and her family received a compensation. As a geisha, Sadanu Kawakami had to learn how to put on

geisha makeup, how to dress and how to move her hands in a specific way, practice the common tea ceremony and learn to sing in order to prepare for entering high society. The owner of the geisha house has to earn back the high cost of training geisha from their first night, so the man who gets the right to their first night usually pays a very high price. If the man belonged to the upper class, he would usually continue to provide for her and give her monetary support. Only a man of high social status like Prime Minister Ito was eligible for Kawakami Sadanu's first night. For the next three years, Kawakami Sadanu remained Ito's lover, then she took a general, and finally tried to find a man who would marry her while she was young and attractive like other geisha, however, geisha were considered inferior and were discriminated against by society.

In the music composition of Madama Butterfly, Puccini directly adopted Japanese folk songs such as "Edo Nihonbashi", "Lion Dance" and "Sakura" to portray the image of Butterfly and express her innocent and lively character. Among them, the fragment of "Lion Dance" was sung by Sadanu Kawakami.

4. CONCLUSION

Based on the case study of the heroine of Madama Butterfly, this paper concludes that Puccini's operas present the characterization characteristic of "small characters, big sorrow", and analyzes the causes of this unique characterization from three aspects: the background of the time, the influence of realist operas and

personal motivation. In this context, Puccini focused his attention on the "little people" at the bottom of the society and incorporated his own tragic viewpoint, forming the "Small character - Big Sorrow". In this context, Puccini focused on the "small character" at the bottom of society and incorporated his tragic vision, forming the characterization of "Small character - Big Sorrow".

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