

**Opera, Ethnicity, and Class: Understanding the Social
Dynamics of Taste through Puccini's *Madama Butterfly***

by

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Introduction

This past summer, I saw my first full scale opera at the San Francisco Opera House. Despite years of education in and enthusiasm for classical singing, I had managed to put off seeing my first opera until age 21. Although this might seem unusual, it makes sense considering the fact that classical music, especially opera, has never been a preferred musical style by any member of my family. My education in classical singing and opera has always been an individual pursuit, an anomalous hobby compared to the activities of my other family members.

For a time, I reveled in this individuality, somewhat unconsciously disdaining the musical activities of my family members and peers, happy to be aligned with something I understood as a more elegant art for those cultivated enough to appreciate it. Ironically enough, finally seeing my first opera, which happened to be Giacomo Puccini's *Madama Butterfly*, the tragic love story of a geisha and an American naval lieutenant, complicated my relationship to this art form that I had formerly held in high esteem. When watching this opera, instead of the pure awe and aesthetic pleasure I had expected to experience, I felt a vague sense of moral shock and outrage at the ethically questionable narrative being performed by trained professional singers.

At the end of the opera, while everyone around me sighed and even became teary eyed, I sat shocked, processing a mixture of beautiful music and appalling racism, both from the show and the reactions of the audiences. As I walked out, people commented on the innovative set, the skill of the singers, and the tragic, yet pure, love expressed by the leading soprano. I walked in silence. Was opera merely

an exclusive performance for upper class western spectators, to the exclusion, or denigration of “other” peoples?

The complicated mixture of musical admiration and moral outrage that I felt during this performance of *Madama Butterfly* motivated the following essay, which explores the consonances and dissonances between my familial and musical histories. Considering the social history of opera and critical theories of social distinction, my reflections on the effects of my formal training in classical singing on my relationship to my family reveal how my perceptions of musical tastes located my family in social space and how my family, together my viewing of *Madama Butterfly*, located my musical preferences within the social dynamics of taste.

Family History

My story is one about my relationship to music and my family, and how the former illuminated my understanding of the latter and vice versa. A short history of my family is indispensable to understanding both how I came to appreciate opera and how I began to look upon it critically, a process tied up in my ethnicity and family history, and so I begin with a story of my family.

Like many other half Asians I know and have known, my dad is white and my mom is Asian. That is a fact about my identity in its most reductive form, but were I to relay it to anyone they would probably think, “Eh, makes sense—the dads are usually white.”

If I wanted to add nuance to this statement, I would say that my mother is from a landmass across the Pacific Ocean traced by manmade boundaries into the country now known as the Philippines. My father’s identity is similarly shaped along

multiple dimensions—like his cultural heritage, which bears no qualities similar to the static and boring nature of the color white. Similar to my mother, he was born of working-class immigrant parents who came from a place across the Atlantic Ocean known as Ireland. My parents are both colonized island people at heart, but their respective islands are differentiated by the gloom and intense catholic shame that runs far more rampantly in one than the other, despite the wider availability of first world privileges. I will start without the gloom.

My eldest maternal aunt, Terracita Macalino, made the maiden voyage of the Macalino clan to San Francisco, CA in the late 1960s. From what I have been told, she worked hard, secured an accounting job with the Alameda County government, and then sent for her parents and her eight younger siblings. Among them was my mother, Amelia Kareon Macalino. They eagerly followed my aunt to California. At the time, the United States did hold better economic opportunities than did the home countries of the people it allowed to penetrate its borders. They hoped, like many other immigrant families, that a life in the United States would open up still greater and more numerous opportunities for the generations that would follow them. My first cousins, their children, their children's children and I are all a testament to their success.

About twenty years earlier, in the northern hemisphere, my paternal grandfather, Patrick Daly, after fighting for the British in World War II, found himself a failed Irish business owner. With limited options left, he took a plane to California at the end of the 1940s. Once there, he met my grandmother, Margaret Folan, who, motivated by the same lack of economic opportunity in Ireland, forged

her illiterate father's signature to leave her family farm in Galway for a convent. From there, she traveled to London to become a nurse before traveling to San Francisco, CA, where she began a new life.

Margaret Folan and Patrick Daly married in Oakland, CA because what could two single Irish immigrants in the late 1940s do but get married and populate the United States in the name of God? It was in the name of an Irish Catholic god and hetero-normative, family-oriented society that Patrick and Margaret Daly raised a five-child family in a typical tract-home environment of 1950s America. In this deceptively placid cookie cutter environment, my father grew up facing both racism and classism as the child of working-class, Irish immigrants.

As a result, some time during his young adult life, my father developed notions of socioeconomic class structures and his standing within that framework. Upon his realization of his relative place in society as the child of working-class immigrants, he decided that he wanted to forge his life a little higher up in the inevitable social and economic order of American society. At the time, one route to social mobility was to become a lawyer, have kids, and send them to a better university than their relatives attended, so he set out to do just that. Like many individuals in my mother's family, he found a job with the government of Alameda County in its District Attorney's office, where he would eventually meet my mom.

By the time my dad met my mother, she had already married and divorced another "white" man and had a daughter, my older sister. Both involved in the local legal system (my mom held a pink-collar secretary job for the courts), Philip Daly and Amelia Macalino were in a favorable position to become acquainted, date, and

then get married and begin a family. They both came from immigrant backgrounds and held economically secure jobs within the government legal system—pensions and health insurance guaranteed. They added children, stirred in education, and created an economically secure middle class existence.

The preceding story illustrates the colorful beginnings of the Daly family and my life as I know it, but when people meet me—I simply present myself as half Asian and half white, with a white dad and an Asian mom. It is an easy story for most people I meet to consume, process, and then, repeat later, in order to explain me to other people.

Musical Beginnings

If I made judgments solely based on my family, there are two things I would assume about all Filipino and Irish people. The first would be that all Filipinos love karaoke and the second, that all Irish people are at least marginally observant Catholics because of some visceral fear of God deeply instilled on their personalities during early childhood. From this foundation, in an interesting combination of the sacred and profane, Catholicism and karaoke introduced me to music, and to singing, in particular.

It was karaoke, more prominently than liturgical singing, which introduced me to music as a dynamic art of performance. I developed what I would later come to understand as rhythm, pitch, and intonation, in front of large tube screens while a synthesizer accompanied me in the belting of famous melodies from Abba, the Bee

Gees, and Madonna. Up until the age of thirteen, I enthusiastically sang everything for my family in this easy-going environment of communal performance.

In this fashion, it happened that I became a singer, microphone in hand, reading words from a large TV screen in a family milieu of pop star idolatry. My aunts, uncles, cousins, and I fought for our chances to sing Madonna's "La Isla Bonita" or the Bee Gees "Saturday Night Fever" at nearly every family party. My family is extremely well versed in popular music; they revere popular singers in particular, almost to the point of fetishizing them. We love to talk up Madonna and the usual suspects, but we enjoy it even more if the singers are Filipino. Lea Salonga, Bruno Mars, and the "Filipino guy from the Black-eyed peas" were all frequent subjects of conversation. "My humps" cannot play through its entirety in a Macalino household without harmonizing with the statement, "One of the black guys is actually Filipino." In this environment of adoration for pop idols and avid karaoke, I had only a vague idea that a different form of singing existed, and only because I attended a Catholic elementary school where I was forced to attend a weekly mass in addition to attending church on Sundays.

At church and in school, I disregarded the silly dots and lines in the music books I encountered below the written melody and I begrudgingly sang in the style of what sounded to me like a chorus of old ladies. Little did I know, before my first voice lesson, that those dots and lines were, well, important, and that "old lady singing"—as I labeled it in my five-to ten-year-old head—was what much of the classical singing world still considers the only true type of singing.

At the age of the thirteen, as my voice changed, I became aware of the fact singing was perhaps more technical than how I had come to know and understand it, and I thought it imperative that I take lessons if I wanted to advance in a serious way. As many other parents would do for their demanding children, my mother asked another parent at my school if she knew of any good voice teachers in the area and, subsequently, my mother learned of a reputable teacher not far from our house. This was the beginning of my formal singing education. This first encounter began with a drive to the house of a woman who told me that everything I was doing was not only wrong, but also harmful to my voice, and not as “beautiful” as it should be. During my continuing experiences with training in classical singing, I would hear this word “beautiful” with great repetition, often interchangeable with the adjective “real,” to describe how classical singing ought to be understood and heard. My internalization of this idea of classical singing as the only “real” singing and its rigid forms of practice as the only “real” forms of musical practice would eventually drive a rift between my family and me, for reasons which I have only just begun to understand and which I explore in the following pages.

A Brief History of the Social Life of Opera

Considering opera’s history, entangled in elitism and class, from its birth in Italy to its social transformation in the United States, it is not surprising that my relationship with such a grandiose art form caused a change in my perception of my family, my self, and our relation to one another. At its roots, opera was the musical project of an elite group of male artists and thinkers from Florence, Italy, known as

the “Camerata.” As such, it was confined in its earliest performances to Florentine courts to lend an air of grandness to elite social occasions, such as marriages, births, or important visits (Walker 1990). The Camerata sought to unify music and Greek drama, a union exemplified in what is now considered the first opera, composer Jacopo Peri’s *Dafne*, the story of Apollo’s love for the nymph Daphne (Walker 1990). This first opera was only a short musical episode, or *intermedi*, and was first performed at the wedding of the Grand Duke Ferdinando de’ Medici and Christine of Lorraine at the Medici Court (Walker 1990).

As was stated, the lavish content of Greek drama provided the intellectual and artistic breeding ground for the Camerata to purposefully create a larger-than-life musical style of performance dedicated to supporting such lofty drama. These men, including the father of Galileo, Vincenzo Galilei, drew upon the high intellectual traditions of the Greeks to explore and develop the relationship of music to the performance of tragedy, as well as other forms of drama (Boyden, 1997). However, liturgical music of Christian worship also influenced this emergent art form with the style of oratorio, first exemplified in *La rappresentazione di Anima et di Corpo* (The Portrayal of the Soul and the Body) of Emilio de’ Cavalieri, who was the artistic supervisor of the Medici weddings (Boyden, 1997). In the early 1600s, Claude Monteverdi, the true founding father of opera, combined the innovations of Peri and Cavalieri, to create “opera’s first undisputed masterpiece,” *Orfeo*. This was the first “convincing dramatic whole” (Boyden, 1997: 3) of opera as an art form. Considering the elite origins of opera, it is fitting that this first full scale opera debuted at an Italian palace in 1607 (Boyden 1997: 4).

Monteverdi's operas, though born under the auspices of high intellect and lavish court entertainment, eventually reached wider audiences, and his final opera was a comedy parodying the aristocratic corruption of ancient Rome (Boyden 1997). Shortly after, in 1637, the first public opera house opened in Venice, which subsequently became the main European city for opera and, despite its elite beginnings, opera became "popular" (Boyden 1997). During this era, less lofty subjects, such as comic intrigue, became legitimate dramatic content for opera. During this period of popularization in the 1600s, opera spread quickly to France, Spain, Germany, and eventually Britain, largely through the international tours of Italian opera companies (Boyden 1997).

In the United States, opera became ubiquitous at the beginning of the 19th century, as European traveling opera companies, which appealed to many of the European immigrant communities familiar with operatic repertoire, penetrated its borders (Levine 1988). As Lawrence Levine explains in his book *Highbrow/Lowbrow*, opera was a dynamic art in the United States, enjoyed by all classes of people. Levine emphasizes that opera "...was not presented as a sacred text; it was performed by artists who felt free to embellish and alter, add and subtract" (1988: 90). At this time in the United States, people in every strata of society enjoyed opera and opera companies worked to appeal to socially mixed audiences through the translation of repertoire, as well as through the substitution of certain operatic arias for popular songs of the time (Levine 1988). Unfortunately, this style of opera as a living, dynamic, and popular art did not hold into the beginning of the twentieth century. Despite its popular beginning, the production of opera in the United States

took a deliberate turn, which halted its evolution in the sphere of popular entertainment.

During the latter half of the nineteenth century, groups of wealthy elites in large American cities made a concentrated effort to begin a “process of constructing a separate social space in which opera could be self-evidently high culture” (Storey 2003:12). Opera, as we know it today, confined to a few major centers of culture with a capital “C” (Storey 2003), was the outcome of this process; to become a bastion of high culture meant for the enjoyment of the cultivated few, it was deliberately removed from its role in the social space of mass entertainment.

From Boston to New York City, wealthy elites sought to take ownership of opera as an art form. As Storey describes, between 1825 and 1850, wealthy elites in New York City took intentional steps to gradually shift opera from a dynamic art to a static form of high culture. They did so, firstly, by physically establishing buildings specifically dedicated to opera; secondly, by creating strict codes of dress and behavior for attendance; and thirdly, by insisting upon the performance of foreign-language opera instead of English translations (Storey 2003). Paul DiMaggio cites similar instances in Boston, which effectively follow the pattern of actions taken by elites of New York City. He classifies the techniques into: one, entrepreneurship, or “the creation of an organizational form that members of the elite could control and govern;” two, classification, or “the erection of strong and clearly defined boundaries between art and entertainment;” and three, framing, or “the development of a new etiquette of appropriation, a new relationship between the audience and the work of art” (1986: 196).

By 1916, opera was described in a magazine of the time as, “ ‘...controlled by a few rich men who think it part of the life of a great city that there should be an opera house with a fine orchestra, fine scenery, and the greatest singers obtainable’ ” (Levine 1988: 101). Clearly, the aforementioned techniques worked to erect social and economic barriers to the mass popularity of opera, essentially transforming a popular form of entertainment into a high form of art that distinguished between social classes. Levine uses the term “sacralization” to describe this process, which elevated opera to the status of pure art, insusceptible to the social forces of popular opinion for mass entertainment (1988: 85-162).

This historically constructed, differentiating capacity of opera, and of “high” culture in general, has been explored by numerous social theorists, most notably, Pierre Bourdieu. With regards to art forms traditionally known as “high culture,” Bourdieu has used the term *legitimacy* to describe their effectiveness in differentiating between people of different socioeconomic backgrounds. As he puts it, “...there are none more *classifying* than the legitimate works of art, which, while distinctive in general, enable the production of distinctions...” (1986: 167). As he notes earlier in his seminal work, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste*, aesthetic preferences for “legitimate” works of art, or seemingly natural tastes for opera, classical music, and the like, serve as a means for the upper classes to distinguish themselves from the middle to lower working classes (1979). While Bourdieu maintains that tastes are “the practical affirmation of an inevitable difference” (1979: 56), manifesting themselves as naturalized markers of distinction, the history of opera shows that these differences are intentionally constructed.

By the time I had begun to sing opera, the effects of this intentional and historical sequestration of opera from popular social space had approximately a century to solidify. Considering this, it is not surprising that I, resistant to any meaningful self-reflection and ill equipped to intellectualize the meanings of taste in relation to social class, allowed my vocal education to drive a rift between me and my family.

First Separation: My Introduction to Opera

When we arrived to my first voice lesson, my mother went to sit in a room lined with shelves of numerous musical scores, at the center of which sat a table with copies of the *New Yorker* and *Time* magazine—forms of print media rarely, if ever, seen in my household. While I went in to meet my future voice teacher for the first time, my mother waited in this room of foreign wonders.

I was nervous at this first meeting with Hadley McCarroll. Prior to this lesson, she had asked me to prepare a song for her, something with a classical bent that would show off my range. The closest thing to a “classical” song I knew was “Think of Me” from *Phantom of the Opera*, so I sang that—rather poorly, in retrospect. She picked apart every aspect of my performance. My rhythm, my technique, my breathing—they were all woefully incorrect, but, she added enthusiastically, at least I had a nice voice and good intonation. If all else failed, I could still sing on pitch in a fairly pleasing way.

That day, Hadley accepted me as her student. Before I left her house, I heard for the first time a promise that I would hear in many different manifestations from

many different teachers, “Now you will begin to learn ‘real’ singing.” I still do not quite understand what exactly my teachers mean in labeling classical singing as “real,” but I believe it has to do with a sense of superiority as well as *legitimacy* over other types of singing, particularly pop and sometimes Broadway styles of singing.

As it applies to my story, the *legitimacy* of classical singing distinguished the musical activities of my various music teachers from the “lower” musical activities that my family enjoyed, revealing differences in manifested tastes in music. Clearly, there were many differences between singing into a television screen while your mother reads a copy of *People* magazine and singing to the accompaniment of a Steinway piano while she sits quietly outside, in a waiting room with a table of the most recent copies of *the New Yorker*. Music mediated and affected these different encounters, creating a newly recognized difference, or distinction, between my family and my music teachers. Economically, my family and my teachers might be somewhat similar, but culturally and socially, we clearly were not. This first voice lesson served as a catalyst for my growing and uncomfortable awareness of my family’s place in social space, which was different and distinct from the social position and disposition of my music teacher at the time and those of my music teachers and peers I would later meet.

As a child in elementary school, I had been unaware of where my family might stand in the greater socioeconomic system. Most of my classmates were similar to me; many of us had come from first or second-generation immigrant families who were economically thriving, but perhaps not all upper-middle class. My father worked as a county lawyer and my mother as a secretary, so we did not struggle to make ends

meet economically, but I did not realize, as a child, that there is more to social class than having money.

The ostensible differences in tastes between my family and my first voice coach, manifested through the oppositions of *People* magazine versus *the New Yorker* and a television screen versus a Steinway piano, were stark examples of class divisions based on more than money, or economic capital. These distinctions in taste revealed differences in cultural capital—knowledge, which can be embodied or objectified, the acquisition of which requires cultivation, time, and inculcation (Bourdieu 1986). This type of capital often flows through generations of families who already have it and thus, seems to naturally reproduce people of the same social class with similar tastes and preferences (i.e. for classical music). In my case, my parents used their economic capital for my education. Through this continued education, I was gradually accruing a form of cultural capital, which I did not have “naturally,” through family inheritance. As I entered a world of music historically entwined with social status, I began to internalize and embody a disdain for what I saw as the “lower” forms of musical performance from my childhood, such as karaoke singing.

Spontaneity, community, and cheer characterize the act of karaoke in my family. My aunts, uncles, and cousins perform for personal and public enjoyment as soon as the microphone comes out, not worrying about the result. In my family, karaoke, as a musical form and social activity, epitomizes a refusal to “subject existence to economic calculation” (Bourdieu 1979: 180), or to restrict one’s actions in the present to that which will benefit them in the future. None of my mother’s siblings, so far as I know, have made any serious attempts at a career in music.

Instead, the Macalino family's great ambition was to begin a new generation in the United States. When they moved to California, they depended on their strong familial network. Karaoke has always been a social activity affirming the closeness of our family. Moving to California held no guarantees for economic or social success, but my mother's family succeeded in large part due to their connectedness, partially fostered through acts of mutual goodwill, like karaoke.

As such, karaoke was then, and still is now, a spontaneous good time, an expression of our familial camaraderie. Bourdieu discusses this type of camaraderie in his descriptions of working class food tastes and the affirmation of fellowship inherent to working class meal preferences. He writes: "The being-in-present which is affirmed in the readiness to take advantage of the good times and take time as it comes is, in itself, an affirmation of solidarity with others (who are often the only guarantee against the threats of the future)" (1979: 183). My mother and her family have greatly relied upon each other for social and economic security since their arrival in the United States. While karaoke is not a meal, it reflects what Bourdieu would call "popular taste" and in my family, it has often been a vehicle for the expression of solidarity between family members at parties and other types of gatherings.

Inasmuch as karaoke is the musical equivalent of working-class preferences for hearty but informal meals, my gradual disconnection from family Karaoke time may signify the success of the Macalino family in fostering a generation that had absorbed different class sensibilities. My refusal to participate in spontaneous pop Karaoke performances was largely due to warnings from my teachers that fostering

bad (a word synonymous with pop, if leaving the mouth of classical voice teacher) technique in recreational singing can be devastating to your vocal health in the future, and detrimental to learning “real” singing technique. In this way, by refusing to sing karaoke, I was making an economic calculation, sacrificing the present for a better vocal future. Unlike the rest of my family, I was born and raised in California to a middle class sense of security, so fostering fellowship through the active participation of “in-the-present” good times did not seem a necessity to me.

In my abstinence from these performances as a means of vocal preservation, I was deviating from the “common present,” or in Bourdieu’s words, embodying the “sobriety of the petit bourgeois” (1979: 183), deferring my gratification through performance for other settings, or future times, such as my performance at my late grandfather’s mass and then the following program in which I would participate in Siena, Italy. I was thereby rejecting the “spontaneous materialism” symbolized in karaoke. It would seem that my class *habitus*, as it developed with my embrace of the study of classical music and through the pursuit of my education in high school and at Wesleyan—different forms of cultural capital—began to separate me from my family on a social level.

Habitus according to Bourdieu is defined by the relationship between the “capacity to produce classifiable practices and works” and the “capacity to differentiate and appreciate these practices and products (taste),” and within this relationship different spaces of lifestyles are constituted (Bourdieu 1979: 170). Expanding and clarifying the concept of *habitus* in their book *Accounting for Tastes: Australian Everyday Cultures*, Bennett et al. assert that a *habitus* “...produces ways

of looking at the world and operating in it which are relatively common to the members of any particular social class and which is something like a ‘class unconscious’” (1999: 11). My musical education rendered visible the distinctly different *habitus* that I had begun to internalize as my own marker of difference from my Filipino family—my mother’s Filipino family that had experienced starkly different conditions of life than those under which I was growing up. This distinct *habitus* manifested in my easy refusal to participate in karaoke, as well as my apparently urbane tastes in music. The Macalino clan, then, had succeeded in raising at least one member of the new generation to become an “American,” or someone who saw and operated in the world based on a different understanding of social life.

Thus, gradually, but not unnoticed, I stopped singing karaoke—a habit that had already begun to severely dwindle for me—and started singing solely opera and other classical music. As I mentioned, when I started voice lessons, I had a sense that opera could not be sung in front of a TV screen with a little animated ball bouncing over words that turned red upon contact. My uncomfortable and ever growing awareness of the differences between my family and my voice teacher made that painfully clear. A piano was required, as was an audience of people who had the cultural capital and cultivated disposition to understand the performance. My singing “career” turned in a direction far from the familiarity of karaoke and 70’s pop. My family was still proud of my skill and had some sense of opera, probably more than I had before I started singing it but, unfortunately, this form of musical performance could neither be easily enacted, nor consumed during the occasions we shared together.

At my senior recital and various other occasions, during which I deemed it appropriate to perform for my family, the comments were always the same, some form of a compliment and the statement, “Your Nanay (Grandmother) used to sing like that, we used to hear her sing *Madama Butterfly*.” Members of my family used *Madama Butterfly* to bridge the gap between our distinct musical tastes and social worlds. Yet, oddly enough, this same opera, part of the art that caused our separation, would eventually precipitate a series of reflections on and reconnection to my musical and, ultimately, my social relationship to my family.

A Brief History of the *Madama Butterfly* Narrative

Dramatizations of the dubious romances between an oriental courtesan and a traveling western male have been a narrative staple of the western world since western men began the pursuit of constructing an Orient from their encounters with the countries they sought to dominate intellectually, economically, and even, sexually. As such, Puccini’s *Madama Butterfly* and its predecessors come from a long tradition of western cultural constructions of a feminine East. The particular story in Puccini’s *Butterfly* manifested through many mediums, first originating in Pierre Loti’s 1887 travel story, *Madame Chrysantheme*, then appearing in John Luther Long’s novella, *Madame Butterfly*, in 1898, and finally transforming into Belasco’s stage production of the novella in 1900, from which Puccini created his opera classic (Wisenthal 2006).

The opera opens with Naval Lieutenant B.F. Pinkerton and American Consul Sharpless discussing Pinkerton’s imminent marriage to a Japanese geisha, Madama Butterfly, also known as Cio-Cio-San. Lieutenant B.F. Pinkerton is ecstatic about the

prospect of a lenient marriage to a fifteen-year-old girl and a cheap lease to a little house, for which the contracts of both become subject to renewal each month. Consul Sharpless gently disapproves of this union, but Pinkerton views it as his right to leisure in a foreign land before he takes a proper American wife.

In the middle of the first act, the wedding between Butterfly and Pinkerton commences, and it is revealed that Cio-Cio-San, in anticipation of her marriage to a western man, has converted to Christianity in earnest, incurring the scorn of her family. This first act ends with the famous “Love Duet” between Pinkerton and Cio-Cio-San, the conclusion of which is the consummation of their marriage and Cio-Cio-San’s definitive loss of innocence.

The second act opens with Cio-Cio-San patiently waiting for Pinkerton’s return. It has been three years since she last saw him, yet her naïve love, as well as her young son by Pinkerton, have kept her faithful, even prompting her to refuse an offer of marriage from a wealthy Japanese man. Unfortunately for Butterfly, when Pinkerton returns, he brings his “proper” American wife, Kate. Upon realization that her marriage to Pinkerton is truly over, Butterfly commits suicide with her late father’s knife, deciding that she would rather die than live a dishonorable life.

In his essay “Inventing the Orient,” Jonathan Wisenthal reveals the link between Puccini’s operatic version of this story and its predecessors: a universal rendering of the Orient as “a feminized, infantilized, and aestheticized construct” (2006: 5). A naïve, girlish nature characterizes the main female character—an oriental woman—and exemplifies the essence of the Orient for the western man, and ultimately, for western audiences. Wisenthal argues that Puccini’s opera transcends

the inherent orientalism of this narrative by doing what other forms of the story do not—foregrounding and elevating Cio-Cio-San by giving her a voice, the main voice, of the entire opera (2006). Dramatically speaking, Wisenthal believes that the Cio-Cio-San of the opera commits suicide as an act of authentic choice, unrelated to her love for Pinkerton and in direct opposition to western ideals (2006). Still, after I watched the performance of *Madama Butterfly* at the San Francisco Opera, I could not help but feel that her voice, her story, and her choices, however beautifully elevated by music, were not her own.

Second Separation: My viewing of *Madama Butterfly*

This past summer, for the first time in years, I finally sang for my family at my aunt’s house in a very ritualized, sacred setting—the sixth anniversary mass for the passing of my grandfather. This experience was, of course, different from other times I had been asked to sing at my aunt’s house and had refused. As opposed to a more informal occasion, I felt more comfortable classically singing in this setting and my family felt more comfortable having me sing for this occasion, as I could produce an “elevated” art form for an “elevated” experience. Just as a performance of a highly deliberate and technical classical piece of music would be awkward and uncomfortable with a karaoke machine, so would pop singing have been inappropriate for a commemoration of a death. My family members thanked and complimented me—“Wow Margaret, now that was ‘real’ singing.”

Again, that expression rang through my ears as it had in so many of my voice lessons, “real” singing. Did this expression mean something different when my

family said it to me? I do not think they meant to proclaim classical singing as a superior form of singing to popular music; they practically worship Broadway and pop idols, and most likely enjoy listening to these types of music far more than opera. They distinguished my singing as “real” because of the meaning of the sentiment inherent to the setting. They were making the pointed distinction between a typical impromptu karaoke performance at a carefree family party and a work of highly deliberate and technical classical music for a sacred occasion. This distinction would have delighted me before, indeed, it had delighted me before, but this time, it only made me uncomfortable.

My memory of the San Francisco Opera’s staging of Puccini’s *Madama Butterfly* was then only a few weeks old. I had not yet fully confronted my particularly mixed intellectual and visceral reactions to the performance at this point, but my musings were reignited after one of my cousins uttered the familiar comment, “You know Nanay (grandmother) used to sing like you do, she would sing the song from *Madama Butterfly* back in the Philippines all the time.” Puccini’s *Madama Butterfly* is a three-hour string of songs, but I knew that she referred to the paradigmatic aria of the opera, “Un Bel Di,” or, “One Fine Day.” This song is the critical moment of the story, as it highlights the fundamental tragedy of the opera: Cio-Cio-San’s undying devotion to and faith in Pinkerton, a man whom the audience knows to be a deceiving and arrogant lout. Dressed up in the music of a classical aria, Cio-Cio-San’s devotion, delusional as it may be, bears the aura of the purely sublime, or sublimely pure—it is presented as pristine, divine love, expressed through a technically difficult, but musically beautiful, vocal melody.

While I watched this particular aria and many other songs of the opera, I had mixed emotions and reactions to the performances I was witnessing. I found it simultaneously orientalist and offensive to my family identity and multicultural heritage, as well as musically powerful and appealing to my classical singer sensibilities. Even now, the way I rationalize my encounter with this opera continues to develop and transform as I work through the complex tensions in my relationship to my diverse family, my social status, and my love for classical music.

Prior to the opera, I prepared to be dazzled and impressed; it was my first time seeing a performance at the San Francisco Opera. However, after the opera began and, as it progressed, it became clear that my reactions would be more complicated than I had anticipated. On the one hand, on the basis of my cultivated aesthetic disposition to appreciate classical singing, a form of cultural capital acquired over years of vocal and musical instruction, I quietly admired the vocal and acting skills of the performers as well as the technical and creative prowess of Puccini's music. On the other hand, another disposition, related to my ethnic background, my parents' marriage, as well as my own educational background in anthropology, made me feel increasingly suspicious, uncomfortable, and withdrawn from the performance as the narrative progressed.

Particularly in the viewing of legitimated classical works like *Madama Butterfly*, cultural capital is of utmost importance, as it affects a spectator's ability to understand or, "decode" said work (Bourdieu 1984). As I stated before, a work such as *Madama Butterfly* bears *legitimacy* because, historically, elite social groups have intentionally used it and other operas to distinguish themselves from other social

groups on the basis of manifest taste preferences (Bourdieu 1979). I met this performance with years of education and training in classical singing—the necessary cultural capital and “artistic competence” (Bourdieu 1984: 216) necessary to appreciate such a legitimate work of art; yet, I was unable to rely solely on this intellectual disposition to decode *Madama Butterfly*, an inability that negatively tempered my reactions to the opera.

Post-performance, in an attempt to decompress, I immediately emailed my voice teacher, expressing surprise at what I perceived as the racism of the performance. My exact words were, “My friend and I rushed *Madama Butterfly* yesterday. It was very beautiful musically and in terms of the set and lighting design but I couldn't help but feeling like it was a little racist. Don't get me wrong, I still enjoyed it, but it was pretty upsetting. Although, I guess that's the point.” Her response characterized how a certain part of me wanted to understand the show. She replied: “It's totally racist!! I love the music too. Very dated, but everyone just ignores that aspect because it's such a beautiful piece.” From her reply, one can tell that my teacher judged *Madama Butterfly* on the basis of opera's “sacralization” into pure art, a display of cultural enlightenment and elite taste rather than a dynamic art form, a status that has exempted it from critical change. Why attack the racism when it bears merit as a beautiful relic of classical music? Still, surprisingly enough, even my friend with whom I saw the show, who did not possess the same sort of cultivated aesthetic disposition for the appreciation of opera, displayed a similar reaction as my teacher. After the show, she said to me, “Well, it was definitely racist, not just the

story but also the relation of the performance to a mostly white audience, but I got over that quickly and enjoyed myself very much.”

What had kept me from being able to decode and consume this opera as my voice teacher and friend had done? Bennett et al., although recognizing the immensely rich capacity of Bourdieu’s work on the class dimensions of cultural taste, point out his lack of attention to race, gender, and ethnicity and their roles in shaping taste preferences (1996). My friend and my voice teacher did not feel the same connection to the performance on the basis of ethnic identity as I had I felt. As a Filipino American woman, with a Filipino mother and an Irish dad, I was viscerally enraged by the orientalist portrayal of an Asian female hopelessly in love with a western lout. I consumed and interpreted this narrative, in part, as a static, offensive form of representation of my own family history, and subsequently became dubious of an art I had formerly respected. Having come to this understanding, I brought this suspicion with me to a classical music program in Siena, Italy, during which my encounters with conservatory and liberal arts students alike solidified my realization that there are multiple forms of cultural capital, or codes, one can employ to evaluate even the most untouchable, or “sacralized” classical music.

Many of the students I met in Siena, Italy had come from families with extensive classical music backgrounds and were themselves deeply involved in the world of young aspiring professional musicians, an expensive one filled with the inflated price tags of private lessons, young artists programs, and prestigious conservatory tuition in New York City. Among these musicians I met was a cellist studying at Mannes Conservatory, whose brother was the youngest violinist for the

MET orchestra and whose mother worked as an accompanist for the prestigious Curtis Institute in Philadelphia. Another musician whom I met, a soprano with whom I worked closely, was deeply involved in the inner world young opera singers, enrolled in a pre-college conservatory program by the financial support and encouragement of her very musically inclined French parents. Because of my residence outside of this very European, upper-class world of classical music, I felt alienated from my peers at this program. Firstly, I was one of only two Asian students, the only two people on the program from non-European backgrounds; and secondly, I was the only person from a family that had very little to no interest in classical music. Still, I found no problem in bonding with everyone over our mutual love of classical music, but I happened to become the closest with a girl I met from Vassar College, who came from a similar liberal arts educational background.

On one of our days off, I met up with the rest of the musicians from the program at a local café. As I arrived, my friend from Vassar asked me to talk to her outside. She was clearly upset, and as we walked outside she irately exclaimed, “I’m so angry at him; why doesn’t he understand that using Native Americans as a mascot is extremely racist and offensive?!” What ensued was a conversation about how education at a musical conservatory does not equip people with certain critical perspectives in different social issues—in this particular instance deconstructing the racism in using a group of people as a mascot for the football team, the Washington “Redskins.” My friend, who is of primarily European descent, had gotten into an argument with one of our fellow musicians about the inherent racism of the football team’s mascot. She ended her charged narrative with the statement, “Out of everyone

here, I knew that you would understand the most.” I took her to be referring to the fact that, as student of anthropology at a liberal arts institution similar to Vassar, I would have encountered similar critical perspectives that add political sentiment to seemingly mundane things, such as the mascots of sports teams. Additionally, although I do not know for sure, she may have also been referring to my ethnicity, as I was one of two participants not of purely European descent. While, as a whole, our group could harmoniously rally behind a consensual appreciation for music, our differences in styles of education and ethnic background manifested through heated disagreements, like the one between my friend and our colleague over the Washington Redskins. This moment became important to my retrospective reflections on *Madama Butterfly* and the multiplicity of perspectives one can bring to understanding such a work and its meaningful relationship to classical music as a value-laden art form with a social life.

In his essay, “Outline of a Sociological Theory of Art Perception,” Bourdieu argues that if a viewer does not bring sufficient aesthetic competence to decoding a work of art, or the correct *habitus* that would align with a proper understanding of a certain art, according to certain tastes, “illusory comprehensions based on a mistaken code” (1993: 216) can occur, the likes of which can be superficial, or grounded in simplistic everyday perception. Contrary to what would be Bourdieu’s analysis, my angered, critical comprehension of the *Madama Butterfly* was not based on a “mistaken code,” nor a superficial analysis, but on one code amongst a multiplicity of valid codes from which to draw when looking at a particular work of art. In the face of this multiplicity of codes, Bourdieu’s assertion that *legitimate* works of art

distinguish between people of different socioeconomic classes on a uni-linear axis of high to low, in terms of the possession of cultural and economic capital, does not hold true. I may have been lacking in musical cultural capital, which distinguished me from many of my peers from more musical families, but my ability to critically reading *Madama Butterfly* and understanding the racism implicit the Washington Redskins' mascot reflected a type of educational cultural capital that only my friend and I had accrued through our liberal arts education, which also distinguished us from the rest of our peers. The possession—or lack thereof—of either type of cultural capital to employ in understanding art and culture, is not reflective of a single spectrum of low to high class. Instead, there exist a multiplicity of dispositions from which people draw in order to understand art, which are informed by different types of cultural capital, including gender, race, or critical understandings of art and society. These different dispositions reflect a multidimensional set of axes from which people are distinguished within the space of lifestyles, axes that do not necessarily follow a single spectrum from low to high class.

Considering this multidimensionality of identity and dispositions in social space, I feel confident that, as an opera singer, multiracial woman of Filipino and Irish descent, and student of anthropology, I can develop a holistic critique of *Madama Butterfly*, without compromising any aspect of my identity.

Critical Understandings of *Madama Butterfly*

As I note earlier in my brief history of *Madama Butterfly*, scholar Jonathan Wisenthal argues that the operatic form of the Butterfly myth can be distinguished

from and, even elevated, over its preceding forms on the basis of two traits: the first is its combination of resistance to essentializing the Orient in a single female character and its reduction of the West to a monolithic ideological identity; the second is its “genuinely tragic elevation of Butterfly at the end” (2006: 10). I disagree with this reading entirely, partly because of his definition of a “variety” of Oriental characters, which run on a spectrum of more Western (the Goro) and least Western (Cio-Cio San’s father). While there is a spectrum of “Oriental characters,” the spectrum is defined from a viewpoint of Western assimilation, and does not allow for the so-called “oriental characters” to develop on their own terms.

Regarding his second distinguishing trait in the opera, I assert that Cio-Cio-San’s suicide is neither a “genuinely tragic elevation” (2006: 10) of her character, nor an “autonomous act of authentic choice” (2006: 10). Wisenthal claims that Butterfly’s dramatic soprano singing of her own death gives her a dignified voice not present in any of the Butterfly myth’s predecessors nor critical successors, since she apparently chooses to die with honor, on her own terms. If one confines his understanding of the tragedy solely to its constructed, narrative world, then the story can indeed be read this way. However, opera and other works of art live in a multidimensional world of meanings and are interpreted through encounters with spectators from specific social spheres, who possess specific *habitus*. Understood in this way, the opera does not give Butterfly her own voice, but rather, a voice from the western composer, Puccini, that is almost exclusively consumed and interpreted by western audiences. This voice is one part in a whole narrative that has the potential to be shaped, interpreted, and received in multiple ways by people of different social and cultural contexts.

Feminist and post-colonial musicologist, Susan McClary, expands on this type of critical reading of *Madama Butterfly*, writing in her article “Mounting Butterflies” that “...musicologists don’t own meanings and cannot police the consequences music has in the real world.... the myth of *Madama Butterfly* has had a pernicious effect on the ways Asian women are viewed and treated in the West” (2006: 28-29). It might be unproductive to critically assault Puccini on his own terms in the context of Western opera, but it is important to consider the real world effects of the work’s reception outside of the neatly vacuum-sealed opera universe, which can often be negative. For instance, despite Pinkerton’s clear portrayal as a lout, “Caucasian males have frequently aspired to inhabit his subject position, to acquire a docile Asian plaything all their own”(McClary 2006: 29). As McClary notes, far from constructing a strong female character in Cio-Cio-San, *Madama Butterfly* reinforces the representation eastern women as passive and coquettish, existing for purpose of acquisition by western males.

The power of this ingrained western idea of docility and daintiness as qualities inherent to all Asian women reveals itself poignantly in the American reception of the Japanese opera singer, Tamaki Miura, in the role of Cio-Cio-San during the early twentieth century. American audiences considered Tamaki’s performance of Cio-Cio-San “...as ‘natural’ and ‘innate’ simply because of her race and ethnicity.... Therefore, the same exoticizing and orientaling discourse about the *character* of Cio-Cio-San was used to describe Miura the *performer*” (Yoshihara 2004: 981). American audiences regarded Tamaki’s performance as an authentic display of submissive Asian femininity, despite the reality that she was, in fact, actively defying

Japanese traditions of female modesty by traveling unaccompanied by a man to perform opera internationally (Yoshihara 2004). Regardless of Puccini's intentions for the honor or dishonor of Butterfly's character as a Japanese woman or musicologists' understandings of these intentions, audiences have never and will never interpret the character of Cio-Cio-San, or *Madama Butterfly* in its entirety as an opera, in a cultural vacuum. The case of Tamaki Miura demonstrates that western spectators, already amenable to the idea of an essentialized, feminine Orient and imbued with ideas of American imperialism, simply used the opera to bolster their ideas of oriental women as submissive, and Asian countries as feminine. It is clear, then, that although Butterfly may have the most beautiful, foregrounded voice in the opera, she still remains vulnerable to the biases that western audiences use to perceive her—biases that may reflect racism, orientalism, and sexism.

As the previous critiques, as well as my own experiences illustrate, individuals, as consumers of art, bear numerous dispositions, or *habitus*, informed by a variety of factors, which they use to interpret and understand aesthetic works. From my perspective, the narrative of *Madama Butterfly* felt like an assault on the validity of my identity and the union between my mother and my father. My mother is both a shrewd Asian woman and the “proper American wife” of my father, and she would never faithfully tolerate the loutish behavior of any white man. Her first marriage, which ended in divorce, fittingly demonstrates this fact. Yet, watching *Madama Butterfly* caused me significant moral discomfort because it evoked memories of judgments passed by people assuming that my parents married each other on the basis of my father's inability to find a white woman and my mother's desire to be with

specifically a western, white man. Consequently, the fact that my parents' marriage is often judged through the orientalist lens of western imperialism lends credence to McClary's salient assertion that musicologists cannot regulate meanings of operas, as these operas have the ability to influence society in ways that reinforce oppressive worldviews.

Unfortunately, when one considers opera's historical separation from the dynamic world of popular art and entertainment during the late nineteenth century, it is not surprising that international opera companies continue to perform *Madama Butterfly* all over the world with little to no regard for the criticisms explored above. As a classical singer of Filipino descent and a student of anthropology, I am critical of opera's immunity to social criticism on the basis of the *legitimacy* of high culture. I sincerely hope that, in the future, opera can transgress the boundaries of this "sacralization" (Levine 1988) in which it currently resides.

As my experiences and analyses have shown, a piece like *Madama Butterfly* is taken for granted as a "sacred source of cultural enlightenment" (Levine 1988: 104) to the detriment of people of non Western cultural backgrounds and lower socioeconomic statuses. If, as Charles Lindenberger writes, opera is currently "...a museum displaying masterpieces in many period styles" (1984: 251), it is vital for both performers and consumers of classical music to begin to scrutinize these works under new aesthetic and critical understandings in order to question the "masterpiece" status of such dubious narratives cloaked in musical sublimity and social legitimacy.

Conclusion

During this past December, in a dimly lit karaoke bar in San Francisco, I sang “Think of Me” for a drunken audience in which my brother, sister, and cousin were present. Indeed, I felt awkward following a comic rendering of George Michael’s “Faith” with an operetta classic, but I definitely improved upon my performance of this song from the first time I sang it for my voice teacher, and furthermore, I actually enjoyed myself. There was neither a Steinway piano, nor an experienced pianist present to accompany me, but the audience was nonetheless visibly and audibly appreciative of my performance.

Having transgressed the boundaries of classical and popular singing practice once already, I sang “Ave Maria” on Christmas Eve at my eldest maternal aunt’s house, in the presence of my entire immediate and extended family. Just as I had done as a child, I read the words off of the giant screen of a television, microphone in hand. Needless to say, my family greatly appreciated my unconventional performance and I received more praise for my singing ability than I ever would have received from any of my voice teachers. Rather than look upon this praise as originating from a lack of ability among my family members to identify a “real” operatic performance, I prefer to think it originated from an equally valid way of understanding and enjoying dynamic musical performances, albeit from a different perspective. As I have learned, there is nothing inherent to opera that renders necessary its separation from mass entertainment and thus, it cannot be devalued by being performed in a style traditionally dominated by popular music, or for people who are not familiar with classical repertoire. Singing is never more or less “real,” “beautiful,” or “legitimate,” on the basis of any one set of ideals for musical performance and setting.

Consequently, through these two acts, I very consciously and awkwardly defied the musical *habitus* instilled in me from years of formal training and education in classical singing, attempting to overcome the continuing legacy of a century and a half of the use of classical music as a mechanism for social distinction. In the absence of this legacy, perhaps the opera world could begin a process of critical reflection that would halt the persistence of non self-reflective performances of harmful narratives such as the one in Puccini's *Madama Butterfly*. Hence, by actively disobeying the technically rigid practices of opera, perhaps I could, as a classical singer, break down the boundaries of "sacralization" that currently separate classical music from popular entertainment, if not for the good of the art form, then for the good of my relationship to my Filipino and Irish family.

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