THE IDEA OF JAPAN IN MODERN OPERAS: TWO CONTRASTING CASES

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Abstract

Two operas set in Japan, *Madama Butterfly* and *Dan-no-Ura*, were created over a century apart in very different cultural contexts, one in its composer's time (early 1900s) and the other in the distant Heian period (in 1185). Although this makes the cultural entity represented in them markedly different, an interesting common thread can be found in many aspects of Japanese culture seen in the two works, from religion to traditional music. This study aims to find new perspectives on these operas through the lens of Japanese culture and to examine the validity of opinions on the topic in current literature. By exploring and comparing these works against their respective historical and social backgrounds, their composers' source materials and the shared understanding of Japan between them and the audiences, this study hopes to further the discussion of these operas and help inform future performances.

Keywords: Opera/ Orientalism in Music/ Japanese Aesthetics/ Religion in Japan

Introduction

Somtow Sucharitkul's English-language opera *Dan-no-Ura* (2012) is inspired by the account of the eponymous naval battle in the 14th-century Japanese epic poem *Heike Monogatari* (The Tale of Heike). The libretto was largely adapted from chapter 11 of the epic, preserving many of the original passages and adapting scenes from other parts of the

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epic to create coherent character arcs. With Wagnerian orchestration, *Dan-no-Ura* is one of the few major operas set in Japan by a non-Japanese composer after Puccini; like the Italian-language *Madama Butterfly* (1904), it employs traditional Japanese musical idioms within the context of common-practice-derived tonality.

Puccini's critics often took sides either to whitewash or to emphasise elements of sexism and Orientalism that he shared with his contemporaries. While not denying that influence, in light of Sucharitkul's work and its modern-day look at Japan, we should reconsider the retrospective value-judgements that have been directed at *Butterfly,* where a comparison with a culturally sensitive opera like *Dan-no-Ura* enables us to reappraise it. This study also aims to discuss evidence surfaced since the 1990s concerning the origin of musical materials used by Puccini. On the other hand, it hopes to initiate further discussion on one of Thailand's most artistically significant stage works.

Religion and aesthetic values are the most pervasive facets of Japanese culture in both operas. Section 1 argues that examining both operas through this lens can provide a deeper meaning to the characterisation, as well as to the way each work is structured. It also evaluates the validity of the modern-day reading of the operas through the lens of cultural appropriation and value judgements.

Section 2 looks at the influence of Japanese music itself in the musical language of each opera. I argue that – despite using Japanese sources differently – both portray Japanese culture with music effectively through motivic development and different strategies in placing Japanese music in the score.

1. Religion, Aesthetics and Cultural Issues

1.1 Religious syncretism

Much has been written to criticise the inaccuracies found in the representation of religion in *Butterfly* - tracing them as far back as its sources, J. L. Long's short story and David Belasco's play. Arthur Groos, for example, discussed in detail how Butterfly's prayer at the beginning of the play (equivalent to Suzuki's prayer at the beginning of *Butterfly*'s Act 2) jumbled the invocation of "Shaka" (Shakyamuni) with references to personal cleanliness and hand clapping, which he identified as a Shinto practice.[1] Groos does not mention other similar cases: in Puccini's version, Butterfly's monk uncle is seen invoking the Shinto deity Sarutahiko (corrupted as "Sarundasico") at I:105[2]. These inaccuracies may be distracting,

[1] John Breen and Mark Teeuwen, *A New History of Shinto* (Chichester: Blackwell Publishing, 2010), 3, 14.

[2] Act 1, rehearsal number 105.

at least to the modern Japanese audience, as evident in Tokyo's NPO Opera's "cleanup" of these details in a 2004 production.[3] Groos's criticism is understandablem coming from a twentieth-century standpoint that retrospectively denounces the fin-de-siècle Orientalist tendencies as ignorant and superficial. While such errors could have arisen from limited or inaccurate information, an attempt to systematically distinguish the practice between these two religions as suggested by Groos would be excessive, as it ignores the nature of religious syncretism in Japan.

Therefore, the confusions perceived in *Butterfly*'s libretto by Groos originate both in the variety of its fictional or quasi-fictional literary sources (Loti, Long and Belasco),[4] and in the reality of Japanese culture, in which the original author (Loti) had presumably observed the blending of the two belief systems in day-to-day practice. Nonetheless, it can be observed that Puccini and his librettists put more effort into researching and representing the reality of Japan than their sources: Groos noted the increasefd attention to detail in the Japanese aspects in the libretto. In this regard, the attempt that resulted in the jumbled name "Sarundasico" is perhaps a more commendable effort than naming a character "Kyoto" as seen in Mascagni's *Iris* (1898).

Similarly, *Dan-no-Ura* clearly demonstrates the Buddhist-Shinto syncretism during the flourishing of Buddhism in the Heian period, the same kind portrayed in *Butterfly*. For instance, in Part 14 of the opera, before the drowning of the child Emperor Antoku, his grandmother Nii Dono, in her final monologue, instructs him to:

Turn to the East / to the great [Shinto] Shrine of Ise, / and bid it farewell.

[...] turn to the West [India] / and murmur the name / of Amida Buddha.

Here, the theological functions of the two religions are clearly distinguished, but viewed as equals. This represents the religious attitudes of the Heian imperial family: by Shinto belief, the Emperor claims descent from the Sun Goddess Amaterasu,[5] whose dedicated place of worship is the Imperial Shrine of Ise. By parting with the Shrine in death, Antoku rhetorically signifies an end to his emperorship, the legitimacy of which derives from the relationship with Amaterasu. Meanwhile, the function of Buddhism here is seen on a more personal, salvific level. Antoku's prayer to the Amitābha ("Amida" in Japanese) represents the concept of *saṃsāra,* the cycle of rebirth, to which all humans are subject.

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[3] "The revised edition of Puccini's Madama Butterfly," Takao Okamura, NPO Opera del Popolo, Accessed in April 26, 2018, http://www.minna-no-opera.com/eng/opera/2004_btt_gui_e.htm.

[4] Arthur Groos, "Return of the native: Japan in Madama Butterfly / Madama Butterfly in Japan." *Cambridge Opera Journal* 1, no. 2 (July 1989): 170. https://www.jstor.org/stable/823590#metadata_info_tab_contents.

[5] Antoku's great-great-grandmother in the libretto.

As this is a passage not found in the original epic, Nii Dono's allusion shows Sucharitkul's understanding of the syncretic religious nature during this period.

1.2 Buddhism and impermanence

In *Dan-no-ura*, the message of impermanence in nature is seen on three levels: in the *wabi-sabi aesthetic,*[6] in character development, and in the music. A general aristocratic fashion during the Heian era was to constantly contemplate things transient (such as life and happiness) with melancholic feeling.[7] This is reflected in contemporary literature such as the *Heike Monogatari*, portraying the ephemeral power of the Heike. Much of this melancholic pathos in the original source has been preserved in the libretto. For example, the renowned opening passage, which laments the impermanence of things, is lifted into the libretto to form the text of the identical Parts 1 (Prelude) and 15 (Postlude). The text is sung by an omniscient chorus, acting as a thematic emblem at the beginning and ending, emphasising the opera's central message.

The life of Butterfly as portrayed by Puccini can also be seen as an example of impermanence. As Greenwald noted, Puccini's decision to set the opera in a single setting helps the audience track the protagonist's life-cycle from marriage to death.[8] Greenwald does not emphasise, however, how much this concept of impermanence actually resonates in Puccini's version, especially when compared to his sources. For instance, the Act 1 libretto shows Butterfly's initial entrance to her wedding saying "Io sono la fanciulla più lieta del Giappone" (I:39). This emotion is seen completely reversed towards the end, when Butterfly realises that Pinkerton is leaving with her son: "Ah! Triste madre! Abbandonar mio figlio!" (III:38). The imagery of Butterfly's transient happiness as a girl, which becomes anguish as a mother due to Pinkerton's abandonment stands in parallel with the Heike's short-lived power owing to their defeat to the Genji. It also stands in stark relief relative to Belasco's version due to the added marriage scene that emphasised Butterfly's happiness prior to subsequent events.

The motto motif of *Dan-no-Ura*, the most pervasive musical element in the whole opera, also portrays impermanence by symbolising the concept itself (Figure 1). The ascending third and stepwise descent symbolises the human attempt at acquiring worldly attributes,

[6] See 1.3.

[7] This is known in Japanese as "aware". Graham Parkes, "Japanese Aesthetics," in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, published December 12, 2005, https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/japanese-aesthetics.

[8] Helen Greenwald, "Picturing Cio-Cio-San: House, screen, and ceremony in Puccini's Madama Butterfly," *Cambridge Opera Journal* 12, no. 3 (November 2000): 237. https://www.jstor.org/stable/3250716#metadata_info_tab_contents.

then losing them through transience. This alludes to the Heike's temporary height as the imperial clan that is later lost to the Genji. Sucharitkul develops this motif extensively in a Wagnerian manner: it is found throughout the score in various keys and orchestrations either as a foreboding device or as an orchestral "comment" on any mention or action relating to the theme of impermanence.

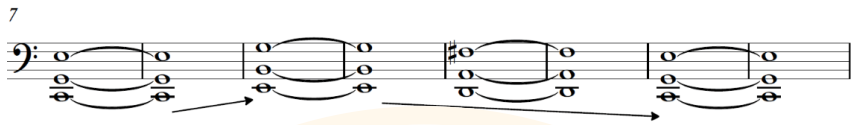

Figure 1 The "impermanence" motif, Part 1, *Dan-no-Ura*
Source: by author

In *Butterfly*, what Groos terms the "pseudo-ume-no-haru" motif (see 2.2 - Figure 7) is generally associated with Butterfly's fat. her or with the foreshadowing of death, functioning as an orchestral "comment" in a similar way to the above "impermanence" motif of *Dan-no-Ura*. Alternatively, this motif can be taken to signify Butterfly's impermanence as resulting from her karma. For instance, Groos interestingly noted the "pseudo-ume-no-haru" eruption at the end of "Io seguo il mio destino" (I:81), which he sees as predicting Butterfly's fleeting life as a Japanese woman who failed to assume a Western identity. What he did not realise about the placement of the "pseudo-ume-no-haru" motif (which he initially hypothesised as representing her fear of getting caught by her relatives for renouncing her traditional religion) is that he has been referring to the later 1906 version, and that the motif makes more semantic sense in the context of the opera's original 1904 version. Here, Butterfly ridicules her old religion by discarding dolls of her ancestors saying "E questi via!",[9] signifying her departure from her previous values. While Budden opined that the moment is only a "savage outburst" of the motif, what can be drawn from both Groos's and Budden's readings is that its placement here could also represent the notion of Butterfly's *karma*. The cascade of events leading to her death can be given an alternative interpretation—by which Butterfly's impermanence is her *karma* for abandoning her traditional religious ways. The idea is given a greater weight with the "pseudo-ume-no-haru" motif's menacing presence towards the end, at the point at which she pulls out the dagger belonging to her father, the most "ideologically Japanese" figure in the opera,[10] which can be taken to represent the return of the traditional values to her character in death.

[9] Julian Budden, *Puccini: His Life and Works* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 253.

[10] Jonathan Wisenthal, ed. *A Vision of the Orient: Texts, Intertexts, and Contexts of Madame Butterfly* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2006), 10.

1.3 Structure of the opera

The influence of impermanence on Japanese aesthetics can be seen in the ideal of *wabi-sabi*[11], which teaches to embrace transience, by celebrating wear-and-tear and asymmetry over perfection and geometrical ideals. This, along with other ideals, seems to influence the dramatic construction of both operas. Understanding the deeper-level construction through these concepts helps one understand how the resulting dramatic pacing achieved its effectiveness.

For instance, the *Jo-ha-kyū* ideal that governs the structure of traditional Japanese plays (Noh and Kabuki), calls for action to begin slowly, then accelerate, then end swiftly in order to leave a thrilling, lasting audience impression. The dramatic pacing across *Butterfly* agrees with this principle whereby Act 3, the shortest amongst all three acts, concentrates on Butterfly's anguish upon discovering her abandonment, leading to the climactic suicide. Groos observed that Puccini's construction of the build-up of Butterfly's death in Act 3 was inspired by Sadayakko's Kabuki performance in Milan, which impressed him in its "efficacy" in the race towards the ending[12] which was emulated in his own dramatic pacing of *Butterfly.* We can then postulate that Puccini was indirectly influenced by *Jo-ha-kyū.* Note that this three-act structure is by no means unique in Western drama: in his preceding opera, *Tosca,* Act 3 also leads up to the two protagonists' deaths. However, the main difference between both acts lies in the fact that in *Tosca*, the dramatic intensity only builds up after the end of Cavaradossi's aria "E lucevan le stelle" after long passages of "undramatic"[13] shepherd boy's song and bells spanning half of the act. Meanwhile in *Butterfly,* the gravity of her situation is immediately apparent from Pinkerton and Sharpless' entrance near the act's beginning, and is amplified towards the very end, which is more aligned with the *Jo-ha-kyū* principle of simple acceleration towards a climax.

The genesis of both works involved a major decision to remove a spatially or temporally detached act from the overall structure. In light of the above, we can comprehend the dramatic advantage that results. For instance, Sucharitkul demonstrated *wabi-sabi* in the structuring of *Dan-no-Ura.* The published libretto reveals a dramatically inert epilogue that had not been set to music, taking place in an isolated time frame many years after the

[11] Graham Parkes, "Japanese Aesthetics," in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, published December 12, 2005, https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/japanese-aesthetics.

[12] Arthur Groos, "Cio-Cio-San and Sadayakko Japanese Music-Theater in Madam Butterfly." *Monumenta Nipponica: Studies on Japanese Culture Past and Present* 54, no. 1 (January 1999): 53. https://doi.org/10.2307/2668273.

[13] Joseph Kerman, *Opera as Drama* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988), 14.

climax, at the same Imperial Palace in the Prologue (Scenes 2 to 4) whereby the surviving characters reflect on the tragedy of *Dan-no-Ura* and impermanence in life, being the core message in the opera. This scene (*) would have lent perfect symmetry to the whole structure (Figure 3), but its dramatic and temporal isolation from the main narrative of the work would greatly dilute the climactic impact of the suicide scene towards the end of Part 14 onto the audience, possibly leading to its omission. By removing the Epilogue, Sucharitkul achieves a simpler overall narrative structure. This can also be seen as a result of upholding the core *wabi-sabi* value as seen here in the asymmetry created in final new structure.

In parallel, Puccini's decision to remove the Consulate Act in *Butterfly* not only lessens the theme of East-West conflict that would arise from juxtaposing Butterfly's home against the American Consulate, as Groos argues,[14] but also achieves a more streamlined and compact dramatic structure overall by removing the one spatially detached portion that would otherwise disturb the single-set ideal: a continuous *Jo-ha-kyū* construction allowing a sharper focus on the exploration of the relationship between the protagonist's life-cycle and her own home, which supports Greenwald's reading.[15]

Table 1 Hypothetical symmetrical construction of *Dan-no-Ura*.
Source: by author

Chorus Prelude	Prologue at the Imperial Palace	Main scenes at the sea	(*) Epilogue at Imperial Palace	Chorus Postlude

1.4 The problem with Orientalisation

As both operas portray the Japanese culture in a non-Japanese context, it becomes a question to what extent this entails cultural appropriation or Orientalism, especially with *Butterfly* where the Japanese and their customs are contrasted against those of the Western characters. Most commentators suggest that *Butterfly* embodies the prevalent contemporary colonial attitude of a shallow, masculine West dominating an intriguing, effeminate East. McClary noted, for instance, that Pinkerton's allusion in the libretto to *Butterfly* as a delicate insect to be caught and pinned down, and her defloration at the end of Act 1, is unique

[14] Arthur Groos, "Return of the native: Japan in Madama Butterfly / Madama Butterfly in Japan." *Cambridge Opera Journal* 1, no. 2 (July 1989): 173. https://www.jstor.org/stable/823590#metadata_info_tab_contents.

[15] Helen Greenwald, "Picturing Cio-Cio-San: House, screen, and ceremony in Puccini's Madama Butterfly," *Cambridge Opera Journal* 12, no. 3 (November 2000): 237. https://www.jstor.org/stable/3250716#metadata_info_tab_contents.

to Puccini's version,[16] signifying Japan's (and women's) victimisation. Musically, his hedonistic, domineering behaviour is exemplified by a clearly defined entrance aria-space ("Dovunque al mondo"/"Amore o grillo") overshadowing and displacing Butterfly's identity,[17] as shown by her lack of a well-defined entrance aria.

These ideas are based on a questionable interpretation that assumes a degree of prejudicial intent. While Puccini depersonalises Butterfly's character by not clearly defining her entrance, attributing this structural difference to racism is a weak criticism. This strategy, whereby only the male protagonist is given an entrance aria, is not unique to *Butterfly,* but is also seen in Puccini's other operas including *Tosca*: Cavaradossi is given "Recondita armonia" when Tosca enters in the middle of the subsequent scene, but it is not claimed that this lack of an entrance aria is somehow related to the oppression of Tosca's character. To immediately assign a racial connotation to this aspect of *Butterfly* here in favour of the presupposed Orientalist image would neglect Puccini's aesthetic portrayal of Japanese values of *wa*, where characters blend into their surroundings in harmony. It can be seen instead as Puccini's dramaturgical device that ties in with Japanese aesthetic ideas in *Butterfly*, rather than signifying oppression.

Amongst *Butterfly*'s contemporary Milanese audience, there was still an implicit expectation of stereotypical Oriental qualities in portraying Japan.[18] *Dan-no-Ura*, created outside of this bias, shows an almost complete subversion of these values. The female characters hold matriarchal authority and moral bearings to a greater extent than the male ones. This is exemplified by Nii Dono who, amidst the Heike's impending destruction, shows an unimpeded sense of duty to abide by her code of honour in light of Tomomori's bickering:

Tomomori: Mother, / we are betrayed. / In a few heartbeats, / the Taira [i.e. Heike] will be no more.

Nii Dono: Look at you and your men, / waiting [...] like dogs. / [...] Are you men? I am but a woman, / yet I know where my duty lies.

[16] Jonathan Wisenthal, ed. *A Vision of the Orient: Texts, Intertexts, and Contexts of Madame Butterfly* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2006), 22.

[17] Arthur Groos, "Cio-Cio-San and Sadayakko Japanese Music-Theater in Madam Butterfly." *Monumenta Nipponica: Studies on Japanese Culture Past and Present* 54, no. 1 (January 1999): 62. https://doi.org/10.2307/2668273.

[18] Arthur Groos, "Cio-Cio-San and Sadayakko Japanese Music-Theater in Madam Butterfly." *Monumenta Nipponica: Studies on Japanese Culture Past and Present* 54, no. 1 (January 1999): 54. https://doi.org/10.2307/2668273.

As this is taken verbatim from the *Heike Monogatari*, it has many implications; especially given the composer's denial of its subversiveness[19] (unlike David Henry Hwang's *M. Butterfly).*[20] For example, it implies that the perception of gender roles inside Japan is different to outside views, whereby female oppression may not actually be present, at least during the time period in the literature.

Butterfly's will to abide by her morals can then be compared with Nii Dono's heroism. Their suicides are a means of avoiding dishonour at the hands of men, viz. Pinkerton or the Genji. Like the Heike, Mimì or Manon Lescaut, Puccini designed Butterfly's death with a tragic exaltation to draw a strong audience reaction: a feature not found in earlier sources depicting Butterfly's character simply as a pathetic Asian caricature stemming from deep-rooted cultural misunderstandings. Instead, she is humanised and empathised through her flaws (such as her denial of reality). It can be postulated that, despite some contemporary influences on Puccini, much of the racial or gender issues previously attributed to *Butterfly* are collateral to its Japanese setting. Instead, it forms part of a running theme also present in many of Puccini's other heroines—from Manon Lescaut, to Liù—that dramatised and extolled their plight. The whole accusation that *Butterfly* exemplifies Orientalism can then be seen as an evidence of the modern projection of Western regret at its own colonial past, revolving only within the Western psyche. Thus, it is understandable that Parker's de-colonialist statement that *Butterfly* must not be performed due to its racist portrayal of Japan does not seem to be shared by the majority of Japanese critics themselves.[21]

2. Influence of Japanese Music in the Operas

2.1 Sources and utilisation of Japanese music

Whether Puccini and Sucharitkul utilised Japanese music true to its origin to portray the Japan in their works is a difficult question that needs to take into account whether it was the intention, or even necessary. It is true that *Butterfly* could be considered the most musically "true to origin" opera with foreign settings in the Western repertoire up to the point of its composition—with *La princesse jaune* (1872), *The Mikado* (1885) and *Iris* (1898) as predecessors—through the unusual length to which Puccini went to obtain his sources

[19] Sucharitkul "did nothing to challenge the worldview of the original characters." Personal communication with the composer.

[20] *M. Butterfly*. See Jonathan Wisenthal, ed. *A Vision of the Orient: Texts, Intertexts, and Contexts of Madame Butterfly* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2006), 10.

[21] "Opera expert says Puccini's Butterfly is 'racist'," Amy Iggulden, The Telegraph, February 14, 2007, https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/uknews/1542633/Opera-expert-says-Puccinis-Butterfly-is-racist.html.

for authentic melodies compared to other composers. His intention to "represent the true Japan, not like [Mascagni's] *Iris*" can be seen not only as a slight against his competitor, but also an aversion to merely portraying exotic music using superficial instrumentation as seen in Mascagni[22].

Groos discussed the original context of the various identified melodies in Puccini's score and in what way he fulfilled this "intention". However, his argument needs new evaluation in light of the surfacing new evidence on a hitherto unidentified melody. The "Young Butterfly" motif[23] had been identified by Groos as coming from a "1901 Bologna sketch". An old Chinese music box rediscovered in 2012, believed to have been owned by Puccini, contains not only the "Mo Li Hua" melody that he later used in Turandot, but also what is purportedly the original tune of the "Young Butterfly" motif - "Shiba Mo"[24] (Figure 2). The musical resemblance is much stronger here than in "Bologna sketch", which only bears a passing resemblance in the contour of two bars, strongly suggesting that he had indeed used the music box as the source.[25] As "Shiba Mo" is a Chinese melody (which Puccini would have realised), that he did not distinguish it from Japanese music unfortunately does little to exonerate him from the same Orientalising attitude that caused him to lump the "music of the yellow race" together, just as Saint-Saëns did with the Chinese-sounding music in *La princesse jaune.*[26]

[22] Mascagni only learned of Japanese music through Baron Kraus' instrumental collection. See Arthur Groos, "Cio-Cio-San and Sadayakko Japanese Music-Theater in Madam Butterfly." *Monumenta Nipponica: Studies on Japanese Culture Past and Present* 54, no. 1 (January 1999): 43. https://doi.org/10.2307/2668273. His score, however, did not employ any Japanese idiom.

[23] Jonathan Wisenthal, ed. *A Vision of the Orient: Texts, Intertexts, and Contexts of Madame Butterfly* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2006), 48.

[24] "Music Box as Muse to Puccini's 'Butterfly'," W. Anthony Sheppard, The New York Times, June 15, 2012, https://www.nytimes.com/2012/06/17/arts/music/puccini-opera-echoes-a-music-box-at-the-morris-museum.html.

[25] The A major key and arpeggiated accompaniment also resembles Butterfly's arioso, I:80, in which it is used.

[26] In addition, McClary noted that the "Un bel dì" melody is a *japonaiserie*. However, its pentatonic scale is clearly the Chinese type, not Japanese, which further substantiates Puccini's confusion. See Jonathan Wisenthal, ed. *A Vision of the Orient: Texts, Intertexts, and Contexts of Madame Butterfly* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2006), 24.

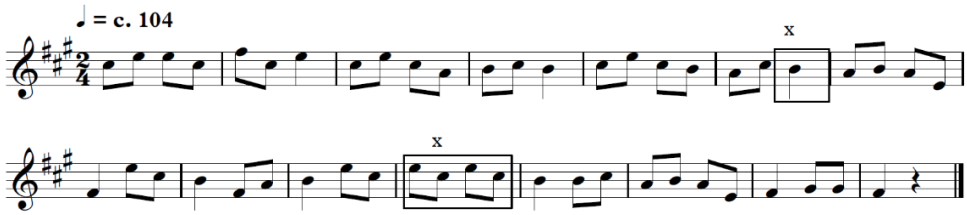

Figure 2 Aural transcription of "Shiba Mo" from Chinese music box. (x) denotes Puccini's own modification.
Source: by author

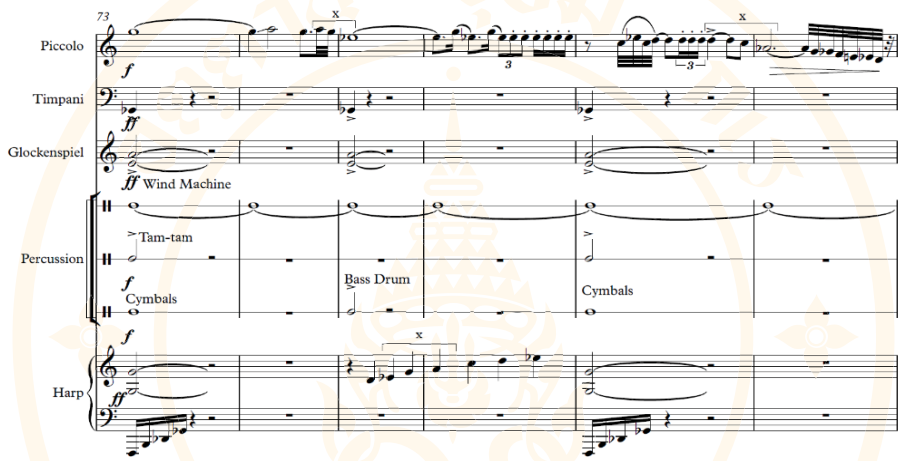

Figure 3 Part 1, *Dan-no-Ura.* (x) denotes intervallic trope.
Source: by author

Unlike *Butterfly*, Sucharitkul's score is not subject to the "pan-Far East" issue on account of his familiarity with Japanese music. It does, however, present stylistic incongruities as he juxtaposes many disparate genres of Japanese music. This phenomenon is most apparent in Part 1 Chorus Prelude (Figure 3). The type of music most appropriately representing the Heian aristocrats in *Dan-no-Ura* is the imperial court music *gagaku*, which is appropriately invoked here: the various percussion strikes represent the characteristic metal gong *shōko* and drum *tsuri-daiko* while the harp imitates the zither *koto* on the pentatonic *yō* scale. However, the piccolo, although appropriately imitating the flute *ryūteki*'s characteristic pitch bending, it employs the *in* scale not found in *gagaku*, and resembles only the instrumental music from a much later Edo/Meiji period during which most of the melodies in *Butterfly* originate. Despite being anachronistic here, this displays Sucharitkul's informed artistic license as the piccolo's melodic structure aptly captures the descending major 2nd ⟶

major 3rd interval, forming overall tritone (x) that is so characteristic of *in* scale and has become a trope synonymous with Japanese music, meeting the audience expectation of the Japanese idiom.

Puccini himself was also likely to be aware of this distinctive sonority[27]: he weaved it into the melodic lines in a very similar, descending sequential fashion to *Dan-no-Ura* in "Tu, tu piccolo iddio", as well as implying it with a heavy use of minor sixth chords (Figure 4), showing a more integrated idiom in the score than simply having the melodies grafted onto it.

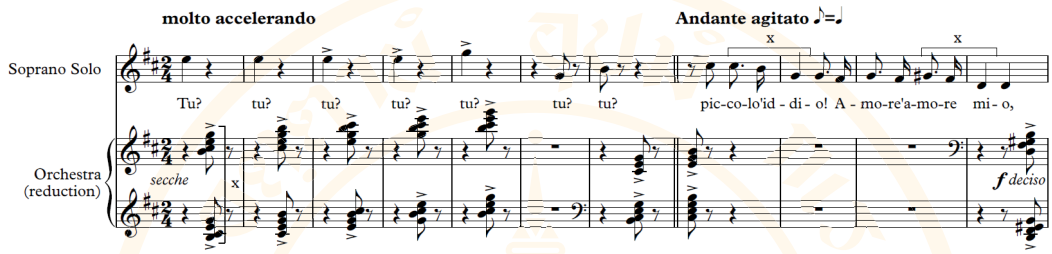

Figure 4 "Tu, tu piccolo iddio", Act 3, *Madama Butterfly*. (x) denotes intervallic trope. Note the similarity between the descending tritone here and in *Dan-no-Ura* Figure 3.
Source: by author

There is no evidence, however, that Puccini was aware of the meaning of most of the melodies that he quoted, save the national anthem "Kimigayo"[28], which he used in the Imperial Commissioner scene. As a result, for example, we see "Takai-yama", a work song, appropriated as Suzuki's prayer in Act 2, with no relation to its original tone or meaning. This creates a number of problems in Puccini's music, at least to the discerning listener. Firstly, those who are aware of the original songs' context would be unduly drawn to their decontextualized appropriation in the score, causing detachment from the drama onstage.[29] Secondly, Puccini's originality needs to be called in question due to the extent to which these melodies are employed. For instance, the melodic structure of *Butterfly*'s Act 2 aria "Che tua madre" is based entirely upon three melodies "Jizuki-uta"," Suiryō-bushi" and "Kappore-hōnen"[30], making this aria one of Puccini's least original. This fact would have

[27] Notably seen in "Sakura" and "Echigo-jishi", etc. in his source.

[28] Which he learned directly from Madame Ōyama, wife of Japanese ambassador.

[29] The Japanese melodies indeed did not go unnoticed by the 1923 Tokyo premiere audience. Arthur Groos, "Return of the native: Japan in Madama Butterfly / Madama Butterfly in Japan." *Cambridge Opera Journal* 1, no. 2 (July 1989): 178. https://www.jstor.org/stable/823590#metadata_info_tab_contents.

[30] Kunio Hara, "*Puccini's Use of Japanese Melodies in Madama Butterfly*" (Master's thesis, University of Cincinnati, 2003), 81.

been lost on his premiere Milanese audience, due to an equally limited exposure to Japanese music, thereby showing that Puccini's use of Japanese sources is, like Sucharitkul, kept the extent of their knowledge in mind.

In contrast, by avoiding the use of existing melodic materials, Sucharitkul could not only able to flexibly incorporate the Japanese idiom into the score in a more integrated manner, but also averted the aforementioned side effects, especially towards an audience that likely would be somewhat acquainted with Japanese music. This is evident in a review of *Dan-no-Ura* that noted the opera as not being a "pastiche of Japanese music",[31] which justifies that strategy.

Nevertheless, Puccini's own Japanese material may have influenced his overall harmonic language more than some critics suggest. For instance, Budden[32] and Carner[33] propose that Debussy heavily influenced his use of whole-tone scales. However, neither of them seems to note the similarity of the whole-tone construction between the ending phrase of "Jizuki-uta" as found in Pinkerton's cry "Butterfly!" near the end, and the Bonze's motif (I:102) or Goro's scene (II:27 bar 9), for example (Figure 5). While there is likely no semantic connection between any of them, the similarity in timbre shows that the influence of whole-tone construction that imparts *Butterfly*'s score may have equally resulted from a traditional scale as seen in "Jizuki-uta". One way to see this is that the use of whole-tone scale in both Puccini and Debussy (who himself had a strong interest in Asian music) could ultimately derive from Japanese music similar to this song here.

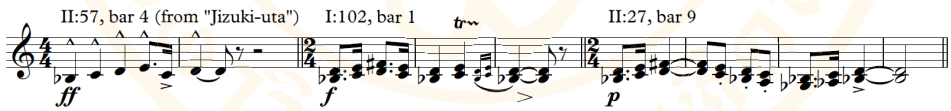

Figure 5 Comparison between whole-tone motif from Japanese source and other similar ones, *Madama Butterfly*.
Source: by author

Sucharitkul attaches symbolic meaning to Japanese musical idioms more intricately than Puccini as he considered the historical association of his source materials, and not their musical face value. This is demonstrated in Part 11 whereby he alludes to Amaterasu's divinity with the sound of *gagaku* mouth organ, the *shō.* In ancient *gagaku* theory, the high-

[31] "Review of "Dan-no-Ura", Thailand Cultural Centre, 11th and 12th August," Michael Proudfoot, Somtow, Accessed in April 26, 2018, http://www.somtow.com/new-page-2.

[32] Julian Budden, *Puccini: His Life and Works* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 271.

[33] Mosco Carner, *Major and Minor* (London: Duckworth, 1980), 139.

pitched dissonant clusters of the *shō* represent light from the heavens[34] (from which Amaterasu is descended). It is portrayed with long, closed-voicing violin chords, creating sonority starkly different from what the audience would normally associate with Japanese music. The expressive *gagaku* sonority seems to further signify the harrowing moment in Part 10 when Shigeyoshi is discovered to betray the Heike, seen here in the long string cluster of fourths resembling the *"Bō"* chord[35] (Figure 6).

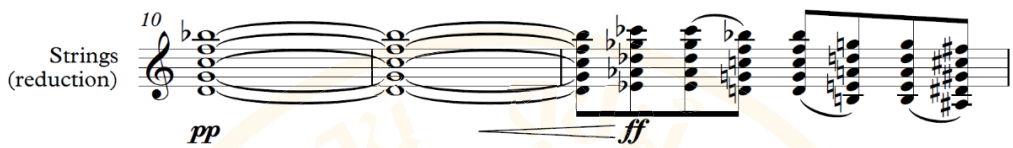

Figure 6 Part 10, *Dan-no-Ura*.
Source: by author

It is hard to imagine that many in the audience would recognise these symbolisms owing to a limited public exposure to *gagaku* as a genre, which is almost exclusively used in connection with the Imperial family. Commoners of the Meiji era, in *Butterfly*, for instance, would perhaps not recognise it, but would recognise the popular melodies used in Puccini's score. Another symbolism can be drawn here that the melodies in *Butterfly* aptly represents the common people portrayed in it, while *gagaku* represents the Heian nobles in *Dan-no-Ura*. Sucharitkul's *gagaku* allusion, therefore, not only demonstrates a well-informed addition of details below the surface, but also exemplifies the difference in music found between the two social classes in Japan across 700 years.

2.2 Motivic development

The difference in source materials that both composers used directly influenced their different strategies in motivic development. As Puccini derived most Japanese elements in *Butterfly* from traditional melodies, he had significantly less flexibility in fragmentation and attaching dramatic connotations to create a leitmotif, while that is not the case for Sucharitkul. However, that is not to understate the semantic significance of such motifs as the "pseudo-ume-no-haru". It can then be seen that this is the most Wagnerian motif in the opera because of its varied dramatic foreshadowing function.

[34] "Sho," Sonica, Accessed in April 26, 2018, http://sonica.jp/instruments/index.php/en/products/sho.

[35] Robert Garfias, *Music of a Thousand Autumns: The Tōgaku style of Japanese Court Music* (London: University of California Press, 1975).

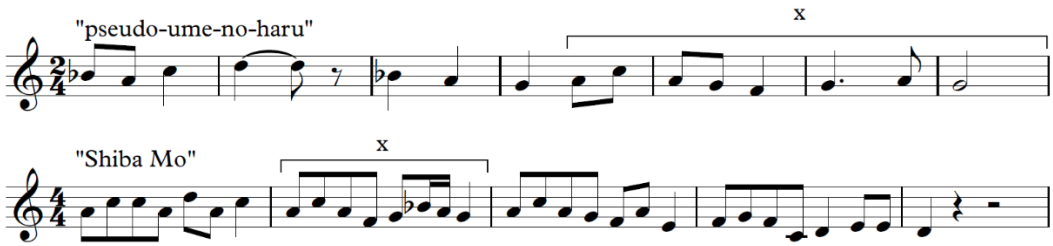

Figure 7 (x) denotes similarity between "Shiba Mo" and "pseudo-ume-no-haru" motif.
Source: by author

To date, however, this motif has not been convincingly identified in any of Puccini's sources, and it is not unreasonable to surmise that Puccini devised it himself. If true, this may help prove that an original motif is inherently better suited to leitmotivic activity, as *Dan-no-Ura* aptly demonstrates (see below). In fact, "Pseudo-ume-no-haru"'s motivic associations may be more wide-ranging than previously thought, as none of Puccini's commentators seem to recognise the similarity of this motif with the "Shiba Mo" melody[36] (Figure 7). Although hitherto unsubstantiated, it is conceivable that "pseudo-ume-no-haru" had been a partial motivic derivation of "Shiba Mo". If so, this would greatly lessen criticisms of the superficiality of Puccini's motivic approach.

While initially it may be hard to observe semantic connections between the two, we can posit that they are related and complementary. "Shiba Mo" marks important points in Butterfly's life-cycle: declaring her individuality at her entrance[37] (I:41) and her defloration (I:136). At the same time, "pseudo-ume-no-haru" represents the next stage, that is her death. The two motifs, therefore, represent the two sides of Butterfly's life. To the listener, appreciating this connection would allow an appreciation of deeper meaning to Puccini's compositional thoughts than previously credited by many critics.

Dan-no-Ura employed a very similar dual motivic relationship whereby two complementary Japanese-sounding motifs illustrate different aspects of the concept at hand. Part 7, especially, when the Genji are first introduced, brings about two new motifs. The first, a short descending-ascending figure in *yō* scale, reflects the Genji's warrior-like quality and heralds their entrances (Figure 8). This motif alternates with a shorter, brisk ascending-descending motif in *in* scale, first introduced in a fugal exposition (Figure 9),

[36] Puccini seems to strongly associate the F#-A-F#-A-B melodic figure and Japan. Julian Budden, *Puccini: His Life and Works* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 265.

[37] Arthur Groos, "Cio-Cio-San and Sadayakko Japanese Music-Theater in Madam Butterfly." *Monumenta Nipponica: Studies on Japanese Culture Past and Present* 54, no. 1 (January 1999): 62. https://doi.org/10.2307/2668273.

its busy semiquaver-rich nature representing the Genji's relentless pursuit of the Heike.[38] The two motifs' opposite contour is obvious, with each highlighting the two main aspects of the Genji mentality. Moreover, the use of these fragmentary motifs, analogous to the "impermanence" and "shadow realm" motifs, enabled Sucharitkul to interweave them into complex orchestral parts, creating a score with a subtler but more dramatically meaningful use of Japanese materials in general compared to Puccini.

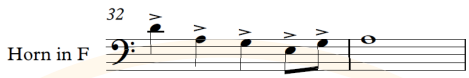

Figure 8 The "warrior" Genji motif, Part 7, *Dan-no-Ura*.
Source: by author

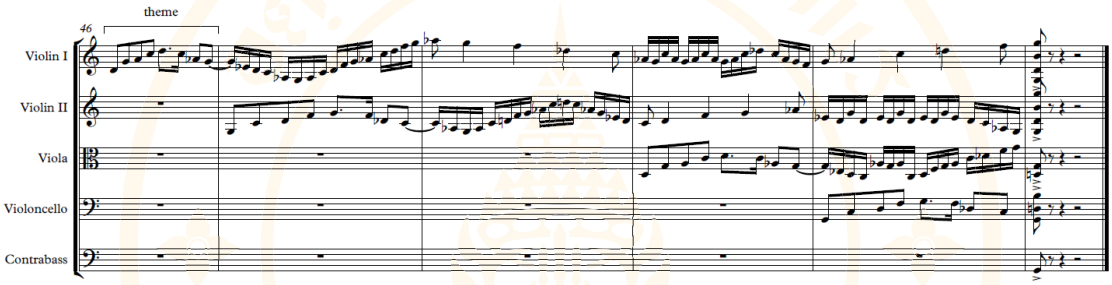

Figure 9 The "pursuit" Genji motif, Part 7, *Dan-no-Ura*.
Source: by author

2.3 Social delineation in the music

The social conflicts underpinning the drama in *Dan-no-Ura* stems from a two-faction political dispute, with class difference being collateral, while in *Butterfly* they ultimately stem from the East-West cultural differences. The Japanese element in the scores differentiates this to a certain degree. Music defines the cultural separation between America and Japan in Puccini's opera even more than the preceding Long and Belasco's versions, as this dimension is unavailable in their respective media. Bernardoni posits that in Puccini's exotic operas, the conflict between exotic sounds and his diatonic, "Italian style" is contrasted by the fundamental differences in musical language.[39] Furthermore, relative cultural differences between Puccini's "normative" realm and the different ethnicities/nationalities

[38] As tension onstage grows, this motif is placed on a stretto in its third appearance, displaying Sucharitkul's awareness of the fugal technique and its drama-heightening function.

[39] Mervyn Cooke, ed. *The Cambridge Companion to Twentieth-century Opera (Cambridge Companions to Music)* (Cambridge University Press, 2005), 31.

in his operas can be perceived on a spectrum of musical compatibility. In this case, the 'Japanese' music in *Butterfly* would be more distant on this spectrum due to its emphasis on tritones and minor sixth chords from the *in* scale, as well as other non-diatonic harmonies (Figure 10). Meanwhile, the Americans are portrayed with familiar idioms such as diatonicism and arpeggio, as Budden suggests.[40]

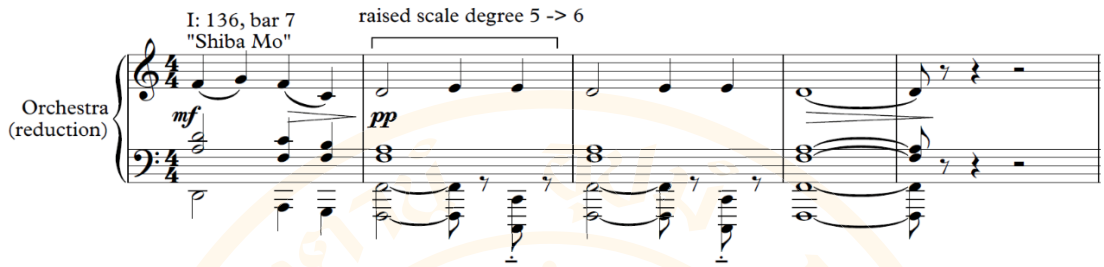

Figure 10 Example of harmony unique to passages derived from Japanese[41] sources, *Madama Butterfly*.
Source: by author

While the Japanese element pervades the orchestral and vocal textures (Figure 11) of *Dan-no-Ura*'s score more thoroughly, it presents less of a stylistic conflict with Sucharitkul's fundamental harmonic language. This is understandable, as the subject matter does not provide space for the musical portrayal of any cultural conflict, which is the case with Puccini's. However, we can instead use the parameter of class and faction to examine how Sucharitkul varies the use of the Japanese idiom.

Scott noted that, as a form of musical prejudice in exotic operas, lower class characters are more ethnically rooted, and so are portrayed with a more locale-appropriate music.[42] The Japanese element is especially concentrated in Part 7 with the introduction of lower ranking Genji, as discussed above. On the contrary, it is found in a lesser degree in the Heike protagonists' music, especially high-ranking ones e.g. the Emperor and the Sun Goddess. The entirety of Part 11 duet, for example, has clear common-practice influences, reflecting Sucharitkul's fundamental style.

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[40] Julian Budden, *Puccini: His Life and Works* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 250. Arpeggios seem to be a trait Puccini assigned to music for the Americans.

[41] "Shiba Mo", is actually Chinese, as discussed. Note also the raised scale degree 5 ⟶ 6 at the end of Act 1, also found in original music box, is paralleled by the final chord of the opera (G-major6/3), which may be influenced by it. A possible semantic parallel that signifies a relationship between life-cycle imagery of Butterfly's consummation and death requires further study.

[42] Derek B. Scott, "Orientalism and Musical Style," *The Musical Quarterly* 82, no. 2 (Summer 1998): 323. http://www.jstor.org/stable/742411.

Therefore, a subtle form of characterisation by varying the "concentration" of Japanese music in the score is seen at play here, whereby more Western-sounding music represents the Heike, and a more Japanese idiom the Genji. Alternatively, a more Western idiom is associated with the higher-class characters—the immediate imperial family or the gods—but not to the same extent with the minor warrior characters. Interestingly, therefore, Sucharitkul's use of Japanese music creates a sense of "otherness" to the characters with whom the audience are less likely to identify, which would be opposite to Puccini's situation whereby the music of Butterfly and other Japanese protagonists instead utilises the Japanese idiom to a greater extent.

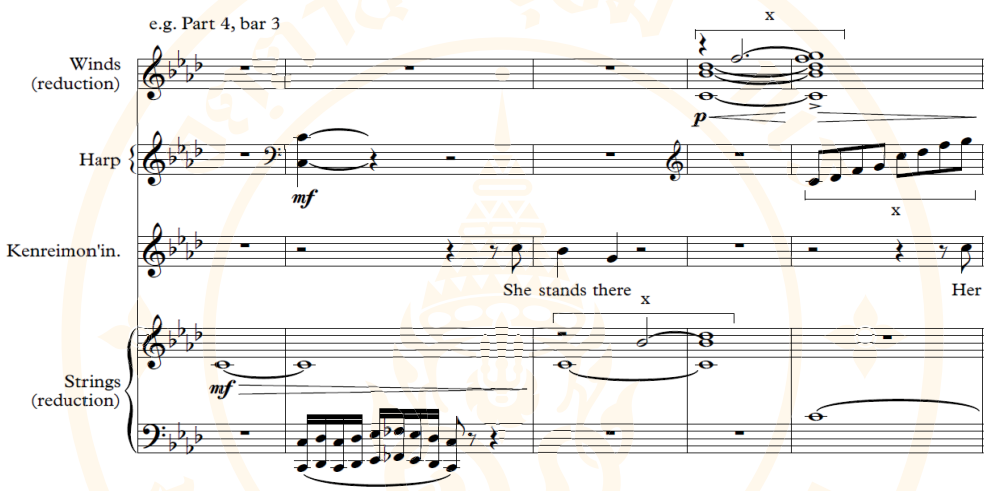

Figure 11 Examples of Japanese idiom in vocal and orchestral textures[43], *Dan-no-Ura*.
Source: by author

On that point, Groos noted that Japanese melodies in *Butterfly* are most concentrated in Act 1 when Goro introduces Butterfly and her family, or when "indigenous activities" are displayed, e.g. when Butterfly introducing her possessions. The original 1904 Milan version shows that many more of these Japanese-related scenes had been cut (the nephew's antics, Yakuside's drunkenness etc.), and with it are discarded many Japanese musical passages. Fairtile's discussion on this topic only focuses on the cut's effect on reshaping Butterfly's character to become "less Japanese" by 1906, but did not note the resulting loss of Japanese music along with it. Therefore, the Japanese characters themselves in the 1906 Paris version, which since became standard, are seen to become less musically delineated overall.

[43] Note the *gagaku shō*-style chord in the winds, and *in* scale on the harp.

Conclusion

This study hopes to show that, by comparing the different portrayal of Japanese culture with *Dan-no-Ura*, *Butterfly* depicts it more faithfully than previously said. Moreover, although we cannot deny a general Orientalising attitude during Puccini's time, *Madama Butterfly* is not an inherently prejudiced opera. There are also deeper meanings in the structure, motivic development and characterisation in both operas that can be derived when examined alongside each other. Nonetheless, Puccini's depiction of Japan is not nearly as accurate as that of Sucharitkul who used Japanese literature directly as a basis of his opera. *Dan-no-Ura* displays a deep understanding of religion, the Heian-period culture and genres of Japanese music. However, Puccini's shortcomings are understandable given the lack of contact with Japan. Nevertheless, his efforts produced a depiction that was more culturally grounded than previous Japan-based operas.

By comparing the two, we see an increase in global awareness in which, over time, opera composers become more knowledgeable in the culture of the locales in which their works are set, which in turn produces more faithful depictions. Sucharitkul's music deserves further study, but at the same time, much of the critical literature that retrospectively value-judged Puccini must be re-evaluated.

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