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## **Opera lives!**

by [FigandFlan](#) on Monday, Jan 9th, 2012 at 1:49 pm

True, the grand productions at the Met are thrilling, but sadly (as the NYC Opera is in today's news) opera as we used to know it is becoming extinct, so it is exciting to see the art form rising from its own ashes to live a new life in this new century. Butterfly began as a short story in the late 19th century, and Belasco wrote a one act play based on the story - but his play focused only on what is now the last act of the Puccini opera - it opens with Butterfly awaiting Pinkerton's return, and her decision to give up her son to Pinkerton and his new "real" American wife. Puccini expanded the story, drawing from other sources as well, and fleshed out the background, producing a full length story providing a basis for his lush music. Today, the music remains lush and thrilling, and while the plot still evokes tears it seems a bit shallow and faded these days. This new version by Ray Luedeke (premiered now in NY after earlier runs in Canada) breathes new life into the Puccini work as a real piece of theater, and may mark the direction for opera to take as a living art form in the coming century. The use of a chamber group to provide music and participate in the show reflects the compromises needed to produce live music and theater in the modern world. Yet we should be mindful that through much of its history opera was performed by relatively small groups and in intimate venues, so there is no radical departure here, and anything lost in the reduction of the orchestra is made up in the more intimate production, as well as the greater musical focus resulting from the chamber quartet arrangement. More on that later. As to the story, this version brings back some of the dialogue from the Belasco play. The story is framed, opening with the mature Trouble - Butterfly's son - and then tracking back to his origin, which is of course where the Puccini opera begins. From there, we are taken through the Puccini opera in a fairly straightforward fashion, until the last act, where, again, Trouble enters the story and Butterfly's conflicts are explored in a fuller manner than in Puccini, mainly through dialogue, either from the Belasco play or elsewhere. While the present version of this work is quite successful, we can hope that it will continue to be produced and edited further. It is difficult to reconcile our expectations from the Puccini opera with the final conflict in this version. Puccini is all pathos and melodrama, and we associate the music with these extreme emotions. The more thoughtful dialogue in Luedeke's work conflicts with these expectations. Wisely, this dialogue is kept fairly compact, but it is difficult to determine exactly what points are being made while we are focused on wondering when Butterfly is going to kill herself. Perhaps a bit more editing

could smooth out this problem. As for the production itself, it is almost uniformly wonderful, with a few details that could be attended to in the future. The set, clearly done on a tight budget, works well and does not have the incomplete look we often see in such productions. The use of projections onto the set fills out the show effectively. The show as a whole is nearly flawlessly directed by Heidi Lauren Duke. Our only comment would be that the single actor gets a little frantic with costume changes in the opening sequence, and perhaps a streamlining of that process would make it a little less distracting. Julianne Park as Cho-Cho San is more than outstanding. Her voice is flawless and generously fills the small theater, and her acting is a perfect compromise between stage and operatic drama. John Tedeschi's Pinkerton is one of the best we have seen, and he brings real life to a character we usually see at a distance. He also hints effectively at all the reasons we should dislike Pinkerton while simultaneously maintaining a rosy demeanor. He sang beautifully, but unfortunately when we heard him his voice tightened up uncomfortably on the top notes that should soar. Hassan Nazari-Roboti, the single actor who plays Trouble and a host of other characters, deftly shifted from character to character, so we never lost track of who he was. His Sharpless was stunningly realistic and brought a great perspective to the story as a whole. The only slight drawback was the decision to have him change costumes repeatedly in the opening sequence. The chamber group, led by Jemmy Chen on keyboard, provided a nearly flawless musical grounding for the work, and also stepped in for several characters and as a sort of chorus from time to time. Edmund Bagnell on violin made us remember why that instrument is the basis for so much Western music, providing a virtuosic reading of a complex score with innumerable shades of voice and tone. Jonathen Cohen on Clarinet and Bobbie Lee Crow III on Cello ably rounded out the quartet. Finally - the music, We could not tell where Puccini left off and Luedeke stepped in, but suffice it to say that we felt nothing was lost from the original, but there also seemed to be a great deal that was added. This qualifies as an original composition, and ranks with the best of new music that is being written.