

## Resplendent 'Butterfly'

**classical**  
review

Metro Lyric Opera celebrates 50th season

**BY RUTH BONAPACE**  
FOR THE STAR-LEDGER

Metro Lyric Opera's "Madama Butterfly" Saturday night was a fitting tribute to its 50th anniversary season in Asbury Park, an earnest production with mostly fine singing that was anything but old hat.

This plucky company seemed to be placing at least as much emphasis on the acting as the music, and the audience signaled its appreciation with a sustained standing ovation and cheers. Afterward, a woman in Bermuda shorts rushed to the stage door to greet the cast and, wiping her eyes, told soprano Tami Swartz, who sang the title role: "I'm still crying. It was so beautiful. Thank you!"

The praise was well deserved. Swartz sang with an authentic emotional range that transformed Butterfly from a shy child-bride buffeted by fate to a strong-willed woman fiercely navigating her destiny amid unthinkable cultural and emotional upheaval.

And why not? Swartz's own mother, Frances, is a Japanese singer who grew up not far from Nagasaki, the setting for "Madama Butterfly."

"She was my first voice teacher," Swartz said afterward, as her parents stood with her backstage, having traveled from their home in Harrisburg, Pa., for the performance.

It's also a role she's intimately familiar with. With her husband, the singer and composer Adam Klein, Swartz staged her own version of "Madama Butterfly" for the Harrisburg Opera three years ago. In that rendition, they reworked the surtitles and strove for historical accuracy.

While she didn't meddle with Metro Lyric's production, Swartz said the company kept a close dialogue with her in the weeks preceding the performance.

"I was able to breathe more life into it through our discussions," she said.

A special treat was Havana-born Raul Melo as Pinkerton, a role he sang in the 2006-07 season with the New York City Opera. Melo, a clear, strong tenor who sang with warmth and passion, also is a regular

cover (understudy) for principal singers at the Metropolitan Opera, and was featured on National Public Radio's "Prairie Home Companion" in May.

Stefanos Koroneos, a world-class bass baritone, was convincing as Sharpless, the U.S. consul, and Marybeth Hazel and Brett Noorigian Colby were also superb and entertaining in their secondary roles as the servant Suzuki and the marriage broker Goro, respectively.

Stage director Benjamin Spierman probably did the best he could on the company's shoestring budget. He opted for a minimalist set, using layers of large veils to differentiate indoor and outdoor space and add depth. The costumes, by Robert Stivanello, were traditional, and his decision to depict Butterfly in a Western-style dress after her marriage to the American Naval Lieutenant B.F. Pinkerton was well thought.

One touch that struck this reviewer as a bit awkward was the insertion of a dream sequence during the music bridging the second and third acts, when Butterfly valiantly tries to stay awake all night awaiting her lover's return, only to succumb to sleep as the hours drag on.

On the surface it made sense, since Puccini's score calls for a sustained instrumental section during which, in most productions, virtually nothing happens. Many companies deal with it by using Japanese screens, candlelight paths and deft changes in lighting as the sun fades to dusk, darkness and, finally, dawn.

Left without such theatrical luxuries, Metro Lyric's attempts to change the lighting were mostly ineffective and without the dream sequence, the passage would have been dull. Still, it seems like the dream was a creative idea that needed more work to be fully integrated into the production.

The constantly shifting surtitles, which frequently went out of focus, were irritating.

Anton Coppola, 91, was once again at the podium, conducting the orchestra at the Paramount Theater on the Boardwalk.



SAED HINDASH/THE STAR-LEDGER

**Soprano Tami Swartz brought tears to the eyes of at least one audience member as she sang the title role of "Madama Butterfly" with tenor Raul Melo as Pinkerton.**