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evening came from Italian bass Mirco Palazzi, making his American debut as Leporello. Palazzi is a graceful man of small physical stature but with a big, virile voice, more heroic, indeed more booming, than that of Szot, his nominal "master." Lyric soprano Ailyn Pérez made a wonderful Zerlina. Her "Vedrai, carino" was charmingly seductive — a kind of playful pseudo-striptease that never exceeded the bounds of good taste.

Like Palazzi, English soprano Claire Rutter (Donna Anna) has a big voice, perhaps too big. At forte level she made a strong impression, but she also produced some unattractive tones. Georgia Jarman (Donna Elvira) sang more expressively and with a greater range of color. Jonathan Boyd did well with Ottavio's two arias and took the repeat of "Dalla sua pace" on one knee, at a slower tempo, and with a sweeter, more ornamented delivery. Rounding out the cast, Ben Wager (Masetto) and Morris Robinson (the Commendatore) performed with appropriate dramatic effect.

WILLARD SPIEGELMAN

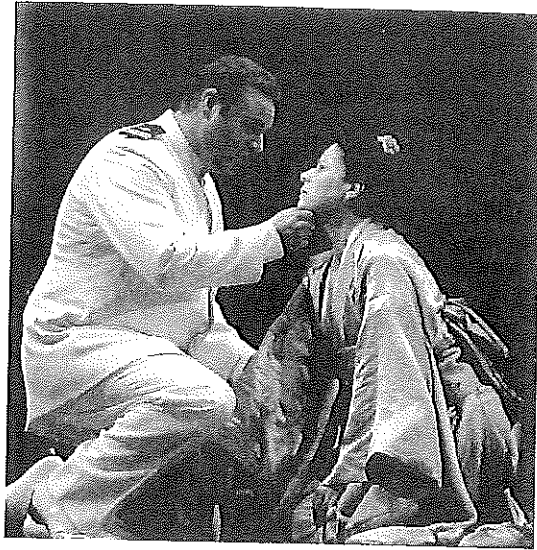
## HOUSTON

Houston Grand Opera opened its 2010–11 season on October 22 with Puccini's heartrending *Madama Butterfly*, presented in a visually entrancing new production led by HGO music director Patrick Summers and directed by Michael Grandage, in his company debut. This new *Butterfly*'s stylized setting of the house on a hill, designed by Christopher Oram — like Grandage and *Butterfly*'s lighting designer, Neil Austin, a Tony-winner for last season's Broadway production of John Logan's *Red* — ingeniously evoked traditional Japanese painting. The striking color-and-light transformation of that setting, from radiant gold to a gun-metal gray and from lucid sunlight to enshrouding fog, intensified the inexorable tragedy of *Butterfly*'s abandonment and despair.

Under Summers's direction, the HGO Orchestra handled Puccini's detailed and multi-hued score with admirable sensitivity, and the HGO Chorus painted remarkable scenes. Most memorable was the sweet reminiscence and hopeful expectation of *Butterfly*'s patient vigil at the end of Act II: the mood flowed from the perfectly blended but unseen voices of the

chorus, singing at just the right sotto voce dynamic to create a magical, otherworldly effect. In that moment, one could almost hope for a happy ending. Almost.

As Cio-Cio-San, HGO Studio alumna Ana María Martínez sang with a poignant



HGO's new *Butterfly*, with Calleja and Martínez

vitality that brought forth both the teenage *Butterfly*'s youthful innocence and, later, her darkest despair. Martínez's best moments coincided with *Butterfly*'s most desperate ones: the fragile quality to her singing in "Un bel di" underscored a deeply affecting, pitiful clinging to hope beyond all reason, and her hollowed out, hard, nearly lifeless timbre when Sharpless finally convinces *Butterfly* that Pinkerton has discarded her brought home the demise of hope in that moment. Both created scenes of gripping drama.

As the seductive but thoughtless Pinkerton, tenor Joseph Calleja, making his HGO debut, sang with silken, almost buttery tone. Even in the role's most challenging passages, the effortless beauty of Calleja's singing complemented Pinkerton's wholly self-absorbed nature. Mezzo-soprano Lucy Schauer, making her HGO debut as Suzuki, had a vibrant and strong tone throughout her remarkable range, which brought substance and depth to the role of *Butterfly*'s steadfast confidant. Another HGO debutant, baritone Levi Hernandez, realized all of the diverse facets of Sharpless — jovial comrade, scandalized but helpless witness and, ultimately, the conscience of the opera. The uniformly strong cast of singing actors was rounded out by tenor

Rodell Rosel, a crisp and business-like Goro; bass Robert Pomakov, an indignant but commanding Bonze; and two HGO Studio artists, baritone Boris Dyakov, a dignified Prince Yamadori, and soprano Rachel Sørensen, as the unwittingly portentous Kate Pinkerton. Trevor Casey, as *Butterfly*'s toddler son, Dolore, played his part flawlessly, inspiring audience murmurs of affection and regret.

Grandage's stylized stage direction offered mixed results. On the one hand, the economy of gesture and overall reserve among the characters evoked a formal and highly ritualistic Japanese society of a century ago; on the other, even the American characters seemed inexplicably immobile at times. For instance, Pinkerton expressed his impatient desire for his new bride as we saw the silhouette of *Butterfly* undressing behind a screen — a beautiful scene of tender eroticism during Act I — but his gestures were oddly inexpressive during that moment.

GREGORY BARNETT

## MILWAUKEE

Florentine Opera opened its seventy-eighth season with the company's first-ever world premiere, an undertaking regarded by general director William Florescu as an almost sacred obligation for a company named after the Italian city where opera itself was born (seen Oct. 24).

For this auspicious occasion, the company turned to an operatic newcomer, Don Davis, a composer who is highly regarded for a variety of work but especially for scoring films such as *The Matrix* and its sequels. Davis wanted his first opera to be in Spanish and created a scenario for *Río de Sangre* in which the idealistic leader of a mythical southern country, having just led a triumphant coup, is in turn brought to ruin through the treachery of a trusted aide. Kate Gale was enlisted to construct a workable libretto, which Alicia Partnoy translated into Spanish,



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