

Anthony Minghella and *Madama Butterfly*: A Conversation with Sir Mark Elder

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Anthony Minghella's production of Puccini's acclaimed *Madama Butterfly* at the Metropolitan Opera in 2006 starred Chilean soprano Cristina Gallardo-Domâs in the titular role of a fifteen-year-old (in Act I) girl from Nagasaki who converts to Christianity to marry a westerner only to learn that it is no more than a marriage of convenience for him. Acclaimed for Academy-Award winning films such as *The English Patient* and *The Talented Mr Ripley*, Minghella also had several plays to his credit and was as much a master of stagecraft as he was of cinema.

The production was conducted by Sir Mark Elder, who has been the music director of the English National Opera (1979-1993) and the Hallé Orchestra (1999-present) as well as the President of the London Philharmonic Orchestra (2014-present). The following conversation, conducted shortly after Anthony Minghella's death, contains Sir Mark's reflections on working with Minghella and on the challenges associated with bringing Puccini's masterpiece to the stage.

MM: How did Anthony Minghella's *Madama Butterfly* compare to your earlier experiences with Puccini's opera—for instance, with the two-act production you did in Berlin?

ME: Well, the *Butterfly* I did in Berlin was a new production, which evolved over a very long period of time. When I worked with Anthony, the production had existed for many months, and two other conductors had worked on it already—James Levine in New York and David Parry in London. I'm a very hands-on conductor; I'm interested in the process of how the production tends to evolve, and so I had to accept an enormous amount of what Anthony had done before. We had to get to know each other very quickly, which we did, and we became great friends. There were some difficulties putting on this opera in a short time, such as the availability of the famous tenor Roberto Alagna, who had never sung the part before, and who was rehearsing another opera at the same time. So Anthony and I had to cope as best we could, and that's how we got to know each other, in this situation of pressure and challenge. I enjoyed the experience of getting to know him and his wife Carolyn as well. We had a very hardworking, serious relationship, but we also made fun of each other very quickly, and we got on very well indeed. I grew very fond of him. I was incredibly impressed by his way of working, which was quite unusual. He never spoke very loudly. He had this extremely calm way of rehearsing. He left a lot of the details of the show to his wife—a lot of the creation of the Japanese rituals was hers. We had a very powerful soprano singing the title part—Patricia Racette, who is a great friend of mine as well, and our collaboration was absolutely terrific. And Anthony, I think, gained strength from the fact that she and I knew each other well.

MM: You have been quoted as saying, 'In another life, I must have been Italian.' Was this shared love of Italy something that helped you and Mr Minghella to share a vision regarding *Butterfly*?

ME: I think it helped us to understand each other's attitude to Puccini's style, and we came together over the music. We talked a lot about Italy, and about the problem of a northern

European person trying to understand the essential nature of Italian music. I've loved Italian music for a very long time. It's very hard to conduct well, and I realised that only by dedicating myself to finding out how to do it would I ever learn the secret of the style.

MM: How do you view the relationship between the director and the conductor in the staging of an opera, and how did this apply to *Madama Butterfly*?

ME: Well, it's very different when you're doing a revival, as opposed to creating something afresh from nothing. I had to see how the production existed already, and how my own conducting of it would bring something to it. The relationship between the director and the conductor in an opera is absolutely vital to its integrity. Anthony and I just sat there together through all the difficulties of putting this on, wondering when we could do a new project together from scratch when we could both help each other, when my interpretation of the piece would affect his interpretation, and vice versa. He saw that I was trying to bring out the tenderness and the romantic quality in the music. He responded to that very well; he was extremely imaginative and flexible. There were things that I had to swallow in the way the production was that I didn't like, but it didn't matter because I adjusted and tried to understand the spirit of the production, and in that sense it was a compromise for me. For example, I think the first scene, after the tumultuous introduction, should be very salacious. It shows the character of Pinkerton, the hero, very clearly because Goro, the marriage broker, understands what Pinkerton is after; he just wants a temporary good time. The broker wants to put him at his ease. I would want it much more lively, told from Pinkerton's point of view, and bringing out the dirty jokes in the text which are there so clearly.

MM: *Madama Butterfly* is widely regarded as the most popular opera in the world. What do you think accounts for its popularity?

ME: It's one of a small handful of operas that has remained popular over time. I wouldn't say that it was more popular than *La Bohème* or *The Marriage of Figaro*. *Butterfly*'s appeal is that it's a very believable story projected to the public in music of, in my view, genius. I believe that Puccini is a wonderful composer, and I think it's his greatest achievement. It treats the subject of the clash of Western and Eastern culture very seriously. The power of this opera is in *Butterfly* being a tragic figure, but she's not in the beginning; she becomes one because she falls in love with Pinkerton. She gives herself totally to him and commits herself to him because of her nature. She's a very passionate girl who has never had the opportunity for great passion, and her relationship with this man is out of all proportion to the way he sees his relationship with her. Puccini understood that and saw it as a great subject for music, and the music that he wrote shows his great respect for Japanese culture. He was very careful about collecting Japanese musical material while he was writing the opera to represent the period's long-standing, centuries-old culture and religion. He portrayed her growth to a tragic figure very movingly; when we first see her, she's still a young girl, but she grows up in the course of the opera through the birth of her child, and because of her commitment to Pinkerton. She believes that he will come back to her, and Puccini handles this with music of direct communicative power, and I believe this is why the opera is so moving and so eternally popular.

MM: Would you say there is a 'standard' interpretation of Puccini's opera, and in what ways did Anthony Minghella depart from it?

ME: The standard view, until the last twenty years, was always very sentimental. But over the last twenty years, there have been many productions that use some of the material that Puccini cut from the opera. It is not clear whether in fact he really wanted to make these cuts and to change and rewrite the opera. He was coerced into it by the opinion of some of his

closest allies, and what was written in the newspapers. In my view, he harmed his original conception very much indeed, and it is thought that some of lines that portrayed the Americans critically were changed in time for the opera's first tour of the US. Puccini was very sensitive to criticism, and now, a hundred years later, we can see that his original idea for presenting this great story was much more courageous and interesting, and more theatrically honest, than the version which is normally performed. For instance, the opera is less critical in its attitude to the environment in which *Butterfly* was brought up.

The most successful performances nowadays, in my view, are the ones that restore some of these passages. For instance, you should really present the opera in two acts, not three. This was something I discussed with Anthony, and he agreed. He had always wanted it to be in two acts, but the original soprano in London, when the production was created, needed two intervals. If you have two intervals, the evening is much longer. One interval and ten to twelve minutes of extra music makes the evening shorter but much more moving.

MM: Anthony Minghella seems to have steered clear of political subtexts in his interpretation—what do you think this brought to the production?

ME: He did, and what he did wasn't necessarily what the piece is 'really' about. But what he did was beautiful, theatrical and striking. It was all done with amazing skill and imagination. He went a little beyond what Puccini had imagined, but in the end, I loved conducting it. The effects with colour, the lights and the lanterns, were very beautiful and looked extremely effective on the huge stage of the Metropolitan, and the work with the dancers was marvellous. I think Puccini originally set out to create an opera where the tension in the drama between the East and the West was the main colour of the whole opera; in the original libretto, he was critical of the nouveau riche in Japan—the people who wanted to make money and success from the West—just as he was critical of the callous way in which Pinkerton treats the Japanese. Anthony took it into a very broad dimension and portrayed Japanese culture from a very decorative point of view. He built up a whole world of colour and decoration and imagination that, in a way, was more powerful than the heart of the drama, and I didn't completely agree with that. But I admired him immensely.

MM: In Anthony Minghella's cinematic narratives, he seems to introduce the 'primary colours' and then displace them, not allowing the audience to become complacent about them. Was there a sense of this in *Madama Butterfly*?

ME: No, I don't think he did that. In the opera the score is a 'given'. There is nothing primary about the colour scheme of Puccini's music, which is, right from the beginning, full of the most subtle shades; there's every possible pink and every possible red in the colours of the orchestra, and in the way that the music controls the drama. What Anthony set out to do was to find a visual world that responded to that. He used a great deal of very rich colour, richer even than Puccini's music. People who come from cinema sometimes find opera difficult because of the unmovable presence of the notes, and all that the notes mean. Anthony was fascinating about his response to what the music meant, and that is a wonderful quality in a director. He was not overwhelmed by the routine of singing. He was extremely interesting about what he thought the music was expressing, what he got from the singers, and how he wanted them to change. He didn't want the singers to be over-theatrical, and he wanted them to be disciplined and controlled. What he produced with Carolyn was astonishingly beautiful, and something that they profoundly shared.

MM: Anthony Minghella's *Madama Butterfly* opened the first season of the Met's new era under general manager Peter Gelb—how was this significant?

ME: There's no question that it was a very astute production for Peter Gelb. It was a very flamboyant production of a very well-known opera. It provided the Met with an unexpected success, and gave Peter Gelb the chance to show his hand as if to say, "this is the sort of show we're going to be seeing in the future." It took a very popular opera and re-dressed it in an extravagant, exciting, spellbinding way. Anthony was going to do other operas too, and we talked about them.

MM: You've listed Bach's *St Matthew Passion* as one of your inspirations; a piece that was very dear to Mr Minghella as well. Was this something on which you connected?

ME: Absolutely. We talked about doing it together. It was very important in our friendship. As for so many people in the world, the *St Matthew Passion* is one of the earliest great pieces that 'get' to you. It got to me because, as a boy, I was a soprano in the cathedral choir at Canterbury, and we performed the *St Matthew Passion*. I can still recall the phenomenal excitement of that concert, and how engaged I was with every page. In a different way, that was the case with Anthony as well. The *St Matthew Passion* was very deep inside him from a very early age. When we talked about it, I had not conducted it, but I was preparing it for my orchestra in Manchester, and we did it at Easter this year. We had talked about him coming to stage it, or present it in some way with me as part of the Manchester festival. He also talked to the English National Opera about doing it in London.

MM: What is it, then, about Bach?

ME: Bach, more than Mozart, more than Haydn, has the ability to stretch the forms and conventions of his time to the absolute extreme of musical feeling. He worked within a particular musical style, but his creative gifts took that style further than anybody else. His music has this wonderful combination of formal rigour and expressive intensity; much great music has the intensity but not the rigour. I think Bach's humanity was expressed very powerfully in his music. As the years go by, his music becomes more and more important to me. I think Anthony felt this as well; that the strength of Bach's music is very moving, that the *St Matthew Passion* has an enormous universal importance quite beyond the Christian faith. It is, in a sense, the most romantic music ever written.

MM: Anthony Minghella's portrayal of *Butterfly*'s young son, Trouble, by a puppet controlled by three black-clad Bunraku puppeteers has been much talked about. What are your views on it?

ME: When I first saw the production in London, I thought that the handling of the child was the most successful thing about it. My view of that was intensified even more when I conducted the production in New York. It was a brilliant solution to the problem of presenting a very young child on stage; it was extremely expressive, very musical, and brilliantly done. It was an idea of genius, because the little boy is normally never expressive enough if he is young enough, and if he *is* expressive, it's because he's too old! I think the relationship between the arts of puppetry and music has not yet been explored as much as it will be.

MM: Anthony Minghella seemed deeply interested in making his portrayals of people and places as authentic as possible. How did he achieve a sense of authenticity with *Butterfly*, particularly in terms of its combination of Western and Japanese theatrical elements?

ME: By being married to Carolyn [Choa] is the simple answer. She was brilliant in finding the right style for this tragedy. The authenticity was centred on playing it as a Noh play in traditional Japanese theatre.

Anthony and I became very close over the whole process. He was my newest friend. We laughed together an enormous amount, and had a wonderful friendship. We were planning to work together again. I think he was very pleased with the results we got, and he found qualities in the cast that delighted and moved him. Given that this was not his normal milieu, I had to help him cope with the fact that we were in a repertory theatre; the Met has a very big changeover of operas and singers, and he thought it was ghastly that he couldn't get all the singers in all the rehearsals. He was a very unusual personality in the opera world. He had a supremely benign quality, a quiet strength. He was very calm, and never lost his temper, even when things got difficult. I think that together, we produced an atmosphere within the cast and the company that was very special and very positive. When the singers and everyone concerned with a production observe the trust and respect that can exist between the director and conductor, it gives the production immense energy. For me, working with Anthony was a delightful experience, and it is something I'll never forget.