

Opera House Bigotry



Madam Butterfly

by Phyllis Chesler

The Metropolitan Opera House in New York City has issued its first [“trigger warning”](#) for Puccini’s 1926 [opera](#), *Turandot*, which takes place in ancient Peking, China. Here’s the full warning, written by Christopher Bronwer, the Met’s associate editor:

We must also consider the criticisms that Turandot – and Puccini’s appropriation, reconfiguration, and reharmonization of Chinese music – has received in recent years. As Ping-hui Liao, a professor of literary and critical studies at the University of California, San Diego, argues, despite the composer’s attempts at authenticity, “when the material is drawn from another culture, as in the case of Madama Butterfly or Turandot, it is integrated and ordered so that it becomes intelligible, controlled, and agreeable ... the melodies are so well integrated that they lose their own

autonomy and become part of a larger whole. In distinguishing between East and West, [Puccini] makes the former subservient to the latter.” Or, as Carner wryly suggests, while the Chinese characters don “national musical costume throughout ... this costume may bear the trademark ‘Made in Italy.’” It shouldn’t be surprising then that many audience members of Chinese descent find it difficult to watch as their own heritage is co-opted, fetishized, or painted as savage, bloodthirsty, or backward.

No doubt, the Met will soon issue another trigger warning for Puccini’s *Madama Butterfly* which is set in Nagasaki, Japan.

I wonder if their trigger warnings will only concern race or whether they will also include the incredible, unacceptable sexism embodied in the character of American Navy Lieutenant, Benjamin Franklin Pinkerton who, with the help of a marriage pimp, has “married” the young and innocent Cio-Cio-San, who is also known as Madam Butterfly.

She does not know that her marriage contract can be cancelled at any time. Pinkerton impregnates her – and leaves. Cio-Cio-San has his child and will not hear about marrying anyone else, including Prince Yamadori. After all, she is an already married mother. Pinkerton returns, but with his American bride in tow. Heartbroken and defeated, Cio-Cio San offers her son to Pinkerton’s wife and then kills herself.

I have long hated – yes, hated – Pinkerton in his blazing white uniform, whose arrogant sense of male entitlement knows no bounds. Puccini has portrayed a Caucasian Western man as a villain. Yes? I sincerely hope that the Met gives me fair warning that misogyny most supreme will surely upset me, the more so because Puccini’s music is so very beautiful.

It does not stop at *Butterfly*. I want such trigger warnings for Donizetti’s *Lucia Di Lammermoor* which takes place in Scotland, in 1669. Lucia is in love with one man, Edgardo, but

her brother, Enrico, both tricks and forces her to marry another man. Arturo's wealth and power will save Enrico from poverty. He sells his sister. Legally, he has the right to do so. Lucia goes mad and, on her wedding night, stabs her groom. Lucia is probably committed to a mental asylum and Edgardo kills himself.

Will I be warned that the sale of sisters (or daughters) will upset me ever so much?

Oh my God! And what about Verdi's *Aida*, set in Egypt, in which Aida is condemned to a particularly horrible death – she is buried alive – just because Pharoah's daughter, Amneris, loves the same man, the military hero of Egypt, Radames. Poor Aida, her captured slave princess loves him too. Unluckily, Radames loves Aida, only Aida.

This trigger warning will be complicated because it involves a cruel and jealous Egyptian princess, and her vengeance against her helpless female slave. As the author of *Woman's Inhumanity to Woman*, I am not surprised about any of this but still, the matter is upsetting.

Carmen, *Lulu*, *Otello*, *Traviata*, *Tosca*, *Wozzek* – all tell stories of women being murdered by men – or driven to suicide by them. Enough said. After all, it's opera and nearly everyone ends up dead when the last note is sung.

But one more thing: As a Jew, I probably need trigger warnings for Saint-Saen's *Samson et Dalila*, and especially, Verdi's *Nabucco*, which features my people in chains and in captivity in ancient Babylon. Fromental Halevy's *La Juive*, rarely performed, is even more upsetting given the complicated but vengeful portrait of a Jewish Shylock-style father and the old Catholic habit of burning Jews alive.

Furthermore. what am I to conclude when black singers sing the roles of historical white figures – (Marion Anderson, Marta Arroyo, Kathleen Battle, Harolyn Blackwell, Grace Bumbry,

Denise Graves, Leontyne Price, Pretty Yende – and that's only *some* of the African female opera singers; the male stars and Asian and Hispanic divas merit their own article).

Why then have absolutely no white opera singers performed in *Porgy and Bess*? Or in *Fire Shut Up in My Bones*? Or in *X: The Life and Times of Malcolm X*? This is slightly ironic because the composer is a white man: Anthony Davis.

Perhaps I personally require a trigger warning about the conductor, who yet again, however brilliant, is just another white man? Few women conductors have been in sight until very recently and then rarely, oh so very rarely.

Will future operas, like plays, require that men sing women's roles? How will they do that unless they are counter-tenors? As to women singing male roles, how many can sing the bass and baritone roles?

Enough. It is politically correct, anti-racist uber alles madness.

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