

Prima Donna in the Spotlight

By Azuma Atsuko



After winning the Achille Peri International Competition in Reggio Emilia, I began to sow the seeds that a prima donna needs for a bright future.

At the time, many people felt that because I am Japanese, *Madame Butterfly* would be a natural choice for my theatrical debut. But, contrary to what most people had expected, the opera chosen for me was *L'Amico Fritz* by Pietro Mascagni. The decision was made in view of the fact that the part of Suzel was perfect for my voice. The judges felt that Madama Butterfly would be too much of a strain for a starting singer.

My opera rehearsal began on January 15, with February 2 scheduled for the opening. I received special permission from the head of Parma's Arrigo Boito to be exempted from classes during my

debut training. Thanks to this exemption I was able to fulfill my debut contract without trouble. Since the choice for the opera was made shortly after the Achille Peri competition, I had a little less than two months to practice. The stage chosen for my debut was a snug, classic Italian theater in the shape of a horseshoe that could hold about 1,500 people—a music hall beloved by the people of Reggio Emilia. The theater, decorated with gold and scarlet red velvet, was more than an exciting place for me. To be able to debut on this stage as a prima donna was like a dream come true.

As a newcomer to the European stage and the world of theater, I felt blessed that the first conductor I met was Alberto Zedda. He had a very conscientious understanding of music composers.

Through practicing with him and his respectful approach toward Mascagni's music, I learned about the stage creations of *L'Amico Fritz* and gained a great deal of knowledge in terms of character roles, which became very helpful in the future.

Another thing I learned from actually being on stage was that there are things one simply cannot learn from books. I remember the day following my performance the hotel papers carried a critique reading, "Last night, at the theater, a Japanese made her debut as the first Japanese to sing in an European role. Although her voice was still somewhat immature, her singing was beautiful and fresh. It was indeed very impressive. Her performance fully captivated the audience and she was rewarded with explosive applause. What's more, her part in the

Cherry duet was particularly outstanding, winning her lasting applause from the audience in a request for an encore." The review was so full of praise that it was almost embarrassing. No matter how hard I try to recall the blood and sweat I went through for my debut 30 years ago, nothing seems to come back to me. What's left from this experience is only the newspaper clipping and the program from *L'Amico Fritz*. This indeed is a pity.

The butterfly spreads her wings

Shortly after my return to Parma, I received a request from Arrigo Boito Music College to play in the school's production of *Madame Butterfly*. The production was of the second scene of the opera, to be produced by the music students of the college and performed at Teatro Regio di Parma. The name listed for the director-in-chief of the production was the once famous soprano Miss Giulia Tess.

On June 8, the performance at Teatro Regio di Parma finally came to a close. I remember vividly that I could not hear my voice at all. During the curtain call, Miss Tess came on stage. Looking very pleased, she took my hand and whispered into my ear, "Well, it looks like a new *Madama Butterfly* is born. See, they are clapping to celebrate your birth." But as soon as we returned backstage, Miss Tess immediately reverted to her strict self, saying, "You know it is going to be tough from now on. You must follow me step-by-step to work towards becoming a more brilliant performer."

She tended to be a perfectionist. Besides, she came from the same generation as Miss Rosina Storchio and Miss Toti Dal Monte, both of whom had gained a reputation as *Madama Butterfly*. Miss Tess could not stand a performance any less perfect than that played by them. Since Miss Tess and I tried so hard to bear with each other during our practice, this made the taste of success all the more sweet. The close of my Teatro Regio di Parma performance was the beginning of a brilliant future for me.

A few days later, a telegram arrived at the convent where I was staying. It was a written request from Co. Li. Co. Bolzano, asking me to perform in *Madame Butterfly*, scheduled for September 13. I had heard that the other programs

scheduled by the same company for the fall season at Teatro Puccini in Merano included *Lucia di Lammermoor* and *L'Amico Fritz*. That being the case, why then did the association ask me to perform as *Madama Butterfly* instead of *Suzel*? I was full of doubts and could not leave myself in peace. After pondering for a while I realized that my performance in Reggio Emilia was taken straight from what was included in my competition programs. And in the case of Parma, my performance was more like a continuation of study at my music college.

What is more, in the case of Bolzano, the decision for me to play *Madama Butterfly* could best be seen as a resolution made from the point of view of show business. Yet, the butterfly born overnight in Parma, while barely out of the cocoon and still in need of direction, somehow, quite beyond its own design, was being directed straight to Merano. And awaiting there for her in Merano was the very first of a series of stage performances for *Madame Butterfly*. In the ensuing 20 years, I was to perform as *Madama Butterfly* more than 450 times in 27 different countries.

Bolzano is located in northern Italy, bordering the Tyrol Region. Autumn in this city is distinctively German and people speak a dialectal Italian mixed with German. Compared with the theater in Parma, the theater here was much smaller and simpler. Still, it was also in the shape of a horseshoe and had very good acoustics. In that sense, it made singing very easy. The butterfly, having been baptized in Parma, was able to debut as a professional in Teatro Puccini with much ease.

The costumes I wore had been sent from Japan. Singing in the beautiful costumes, I easily bewitched the local audience. But the costumes worn by the rest of the performers were a totally different story—they were made from cheap satin woven with appliqué. Worse yet, the man who played the role of Goro wore a short coat in the fashion of a Chinese rickshaw boy. Dragging behind him was a long braid, and to make his eyes look thinner, he used sticking plaster. What an odd looking sight that was. What's more, the folks in the chorus, not having seen any Japanese and thinking that they had yellow skin, painted all their faces an earthy yellow and drew their eyes slanted upward. Sloppily dressed in their cheap

satin kimono, they trotted in small steps. I was shocked to see all this—I realized this must be their image of the Japanese.

More surprises were yet to come. Once I was on stage, I was even more appalled—on the background screen, painted behind the small hill that faced the harbor of Nagasaki where *Madama Butterfly* was to wait for her love, was it not Mt. Fuji? In the house, a scroll was hung upside down. And sitting on the family altar was a naked, shiny golden God of Good Fortune holding his fat belly. I was so disappointed. To make things worse, these people had no concept of taking their shoes off and walked right on the tatami. They lowered their heads and greeted each other with their hands pressed together. I almost broke my back trying to correct all these mistakes. And from this theater, I began to receive one request after another to appear in major theaters in Germany.

It was during my performance in Bayerische Staatsoper that I finally lost it. Why? Because they had turned Chocho-san into a courtesan.

After I explained the situation carefully and had all the performers tie their obi in back instead of front, we set everything straight. Well, I realized there was a big gap between the East and the West. In this way, I slowly worked my way, correcting mistakes of this kind one by one while singing from country to country, until one day I received a telegram from the Metropolitan Opera House.

At the time, I was living in Milan and married to the sculptor Nitahara Eiji. From what I gathered later, the manager of the Metropolitan Opera House sent the telegram after viewing my performance with Plácido Domingo at the Humburg Staatsoper. I was so excited I couldn't wait to share the news with my husband. Full of high hopes, I left for New York in December of 1971. I was psyched up, getting ready for my debut at the world's finest theater—the Metropolitan Opera House.

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Azuma Atsuko made her debut as an opera singer at the Reggio Emilia Municipal Theater in 1963, and then has a 20-year stage career as a prima donna in Berlin, Vienna, New York, Munich, Hamburg, Buenos Aires, Moscow, etc.