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Allan Atlas

Graduate Center of the City University of New York

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Abstract: Crossed Stars and Crossed Tonal Areas in Puccini's 'Madama Butterfly'

Abstract

Abstract for a paper given at a joint meeting of the American Institute for Verdi Studies and the Greater New York chapter of the American Musicological Society, Feb. 3, 1990.

Keywords

Giacomo Puccini, Madama Butterfly, tonal analysis

Abstract*: Crossed Stars and Crossed Tonal Areas in Puccini's *Madama Butterfly*

Allan Atlas, Graduate Center of the City University of New York

Even a casual reading of the libretto of *Madama Butterfly* makes it clear that the marriage of Pinkerton and Butterfly is a match made anywhere but heaven. Throughout the opera, the would-be lovers stagger blindly through their roles, failing to communicate with one another, and always acting at cross purposes.

Puccini's music mirrors this sense of bi-polar opposition and dramatic cross purposes. Specifically,

he uses two keys: G-flat major and A major, and assigns to each of them one pair of contradictory semantic associations in connection with Pinkerton, for whom G-flat equals renunciation and A equals affirmation, and another, with keys and meanings now precisely reversed, in conjunction with Butterfly, for whom G-flat equals affirmation while A equals renunciation.

Four other related issues are addressed: (1) the

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transposition of the trio in Act II/Part 2 from G major to G-flat major; (2) the dramatic meaning of the recurring clashes between the pitches G-flat and G natural; (3) the use of G-flat major to articulate a sense of tonal-structural parallelism at similar points in each act; and (4) the two instances in which But-

terfly's A major seemingly rubs against my crossed-stars/crossed tonal areas equation.

In all, I propose that *Madama Butterfly* displays a sense of tonal-dramatic coherence (which is *not* the same as either tonal unity or tonal hierarchy) that has gone unobserved until now.