

turning japanese

The director of *The English Patient* and *Cold Mountain* embarks on his latest saga.

MUSIC

Recently, **Anthony Minghella**, the Oscar-winning director of *The English Patient*, *The Talented Mr. Ripley*, and *Cold Mountain*, bought himself a new piano. It's a 25-year-old Yamaha concert grand in "beautiful condition," he says, over a drink at the Two Brydges, a discreet club in the heart of London's West End. Lest anyone get the wrong impression, Minghella is quick to assert that his is "a very poor talent." Well, that may be, but grappling with Bach's preludes serves an important purpose for the 52-year-old director: "The piano for me is a releasing instrument," he says. "Just having a hand on it seems to make me able to think."

Music, it turns out, has always been one of the engines driv- *music >80*

STANDING ROOM ONLY

Anthony Minghella, in a Gieves & Hawkes suit and Spencer Hart shirt and tie, at the English National Opera House.

Photographed by Uli Weber

Minghella won't exactly say that opera runs in his blood, but it's certainly in his brain.

MUSIC



BUDDHIST PRIEST

Cio-Cio-San's uncle, the Bonze, flies into a rage during the opera's first act.

ing Minghella. So perhaps it wasn't really so improbable when, in 2004, the English National Opera invited him to direct an opera for the stage. The result, a gorgeous production of Giacomo Puccini's *Madama Butterfly*, played to sellout crowds in London last season. Minghella's *Butterfly* is coproduced with the Lithuanian National Opera and New York's Metropolitan Opera, where it has been chosen to open the fall season.

When a film director turns his hand to opera, critics are bound to offer adjectives—as they did across Britain—like *cinematic*, *strikingly pretty*, and *sumptuous*. Minghella's first foray into opera meant developing a vocabulary that had less to do with movies and more to do with theatrical movement. And, of course, there was Puccini's music: “On my iPod, I think I had every recording of the opera I could find,” Minghella says. “I would listen to it on planes and drift off, and then make drawings on the sick bag.” Those modest transatlantic doodles formed his early ideas about staging. A

rough sketch of a little girl wrapped in ribbons, for instance, was the “chrysalis” that inspired Minghella to use aspects of Japanese Kabuki theater throughout the production, including an eerie and beautiful opening sequence featuring a silhouetted geisha against a blood-red wash of light. It sets the mood for the familiar, tragic story of fifteen-year-old Cio-Cio-San, who is wooed and then abandoned by the robust Lieutenant Pinkerton of the United States Navy. The opera, which explores what Puccini once called “great griefs in small souls,” premiered at La Scala in 1904.

Their bond goes way back to their student days in the University of Hull theater department. (“We have a very closely linked aesthetic system,” Minghella notes.) Working with Choa proved to be a happy commingling of Asian and Italian cultures, since *Butterfly* is an Italian opera speculating about the Far East: It's Puccini's romantic take on the exotic, inscrutable Orient. “My folks are Italian and my wife's family is

Chinese, and that has given us an interesting vantage point.” One of Minghella and Choa's striking East-meets-West innovations is the use of a Japanese Bunraku puppet to embody Butterfly's son, Trouble. Three men dressed in black operate the life-size, mute puppet, but the boy is heartbreakingly alive. “I find the puppet can be more real in these moments and more truthful,” Minghella says, “than a three- or four- or five-year-old child being choreographed on stage.”

This is not the first time Puccini has sparked the director's imagination. Minghella first mapped out *The English Patient*—his 1996 epic of love, betrayal, and politics set in Italy and North Africa—in music before shooting even began. “Puccini is the desert, and the monastery is composed by Bach,” Minghella says of the film's emotional geography. (Indeed, the soundtrack, written by his longtime composer, Gabriel Yared, is suffused with these contrasting musical styles.)

Minghella won't exactly say that opera runs in his blood, but it's certainly in his brain. He was born on the Isle of Wight in 1954 to Italian parents—“They sell ice cream; they still do now”—who loved opera and always played the likes of Puccini and Verdi on the family gramophone. “All of these arias I know not as opera,” he laughs, “but as songs that were played in my house when I was twelve years old.” For Minghella, it seems, finding himself at the helm of *Madama Butterfly* isn't so much a departure. It's more like coming home.

—DAMIAN FOWLER critics >82

RED DAWN

The haunting opening scene from Minghella's production of *Madama Butterfly*, which premieres at the Metropolitan Opera this fall.