

Humming Chorus Puccini

Arrangement: Helen Woods

Grading

Intermediate

About this song

The 'Humming Chorus' is from the opera Madam Butterfly by Giacomo Puccini. Madam Butterfly was premiered in 1904 and was Puccini's own favourite among his operas. The libretto (text of an opera) was written by Giacosa and Illica and is based on a short story of the same title written by John Luther Long (1898). The opera takes place in a house overlooking Nagasaki, Japan, between 1889 and 1892, just before the outbreak of the Sino-Japanese war. The 'Humming Chorus' is performed in Act Two and is sung by the chorus, off stage, showing the passing of time.

Vocal range

An 11th B♭ to E♭



Vocal format

2 part/Unison

Themes/subjects

- Opera
- Storytelling
- Tragedy
- Japanese-American Culture

Musical elements and characteristics

- Contrasts of **legato** (smooth) and **staccato** (detached)
- Humming/Orchestral sounds (onomatopoeia)
- Long sustained notes/Good breath control
- Recurring **motifs**/Orchestral arrangement

Recommended CànSing exercises

- Body Exercise 1 (sports exercise)
- Breathing exercise 1 (breathing)

Exercises

- Sing the first five notes of a **major scale** to the numbers 1 – 5 (eg 1 =middle C, 2 =D, 3 =E, 4 =F and 5 =G)
- Sing each note smoothly (**legato**) with no gaps
- Sing each note detached/short (**staccato**) with gaps between notes
- Sing each note except for number 4, leave a rest instead of singing eg F
- Sing each note except number 2 and 4, leave a rest instead of eg D or F
- You are now singing 1, 3 and 5, the major triad/broken chord
- Instead of singing the numbers, try a sound like 'nah', 'baa', 'me' and 'plm'
- Start your triad on a higher new note (eg 1 is now D, 3 is now F# and 5 is now A)
- Choose a new note one and a new word

Glossary

- Legato**: a smooth, melodic line.
- Major scale**: a seven-note scale with a characteristically joyful sound.
- Minor scale**: a seven-note scale with a characteristically melancholy sound.
- Motif or motive**: a short musical idea, a recurring figure, musical fragment or succession of notes that has some special importance in or is characteristic of a composition.
- Pizzicato**: a playing technique that involves plucking the strings of a string instrument eg violin, viola, cello and double bass.
- Staccato**: notes detached or separated from each other.



Humming Chorus

Learning the song

- Play the recording of the full performance of the 'Humming Chorus'. Learners should identify and focus on the different sections and the contrast between the **legato** of Voice 1 and the **staccato** of Voice 2. When are the parts the same?

- Play Voice 2 only and try to follow the melody in the air with your hand. When do the notes go down and when do they go up? How many different notes are sung in the first two bar phrase?



- There are four different notes in our first two bar phrase. We would suggest the use of pitch patterning to visually represent the notes.

- The first is the key note – the most important of all. Hold your hand chest level for this note. The second note is lower so the hand moves down towards our legs. Back to first chest level for repeat of key note. Now to a higher note so move hand to eye level. Then the highest note so hand moves above head (like there's a hat on your head), then back to eye and finally chest level. The pitch patterning movements would then be: chest, leg, chest, eye, hat, eye, chest.

Note: In the pitch patterning, avoid hand movements that are very high or very low. Try not to overemphasise the intervals as this will likely cause learners to strain their voice. If you feel confident with the pitch patterning technique, we would then recommend keeping the pitch patterning intervals between nose (for highest note) and navel (for lowest note).

- Repeat these are movements whilst playing Voice 2 from the Introduction.
- Once the pitch pattern is secure, sing with Voice 2. The sound to create is 'pim,' to mimic the sound of a **pizzicato** (plucked) strings of the orchestra. This will make each note **staccato**.
- Count how many times the characteristic rhythm/orchestra's **pizzicato motif** is heard in section A. Answer 3 times.

- In Section A there are two bars (bars 9 and 10) where the notes are higher and create a minor (sad) chord not major (happy) chord. The pitch patterning remains the same: Chest, leg, chest, eye, hat, eye, chest. You could choose to show that this minor tonality by pointing your thumb down on your pitch patterning hand. Sing these two bars with Voice 2.

- Listen and pitch pattern to Voice 2 Section A and remember to add thumbs down for bar 9 and 10. Sing Voice 2 Introduction and Section A.

- Listen to the **legato** melody of Voice 1 (nah) in Section A. You can also show the melody shape with pitch patterning. Start at chest level to show that both voices start on the same note (E \flat).

- You could add in the lyrics.



- Section A, notes are long, notes are long. Sing these words to practice the melody of Section A.
- Ensure that singers take a good breath (without raising their shoulders) and sustain the long notes as indicated by the voices on the tracks.

- When Section A Voice 1 (nah) is confident, change to Voice 1 (hum).

- When you Hum the voice is redirected into the nasal cavity. The voice does not exit through the mouth but through the nose. You can experiment with open and closed mouth humming, keeping jaw relaxed. The quality of the tone and resonance of the hummed notes should improve if the soft palate (roof of the mouth) is arched upwards. This position, along with a relaxed jaw and chin slightly pushed back, greatly increases the space within the oral cavity.

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- Put Voice 1 and 2 together for the Introduction and Section A. Perform again and this time let the track continue through Section B and C.
- Listen to section B, Voice 2 has a new pattern. For this you could use pitch patterning again to visually represent the pattern eg up, down, up, down, up, down, up.
- Play, listening and pitch patterning with Section B, Voice 2 and when confident add in the voice 'plm'.
- You could add in the lyrics.



- Section B, it goes down, then goes up. Sing these words to practice the melody of Section B.
- As with section A, ensure that singers take a good breathe (without raising their shoulders)

and sustain the long notes as indicated by the voices on the tracks.

- When Section B Voice 1 (nah) melody is confident, change to Voice 1 (hum).
- Section C is all **legato** and in unison (Voice 2 joins Voice 1). It is the longest section and probably the most dramatic. What lyrics would work well here? Try some different ones out. Are there lyrics that will help to know when to take a breath?
- When the melody is confident change to 'nah' for each note. When notes and breathing are together, change to 'hum'.
- Try the whole piece. Do we sound like the calm passing of time? Think about the balance between Voice 1 (melody) and Voice 2 (accompaniment)? Do the **pizzicato** strings in Voice 2 need to be quieter so they don't overpower the humming in Voice 1?



Reflection/appraising

- Is the mood of this song happy or sad? What influences your answer? eg tonality (major/minor), tempo (fast/slow) or orchestration of the accompaniment?
- How does this piece of music convey the story with no words being sung?
- How else could a theatre/opera maker show the passing of time?

- Explore the links between this opera and the musical theatre pieces **Miss Saigon** (story is based on **Madam Butterfly**) and **Les Misérables** (the song 'Bring Him Home' uses the same **motif** as section B in the Humming Chorus).
- There is a triplet in this piece can you find it? What is a triplet?

Humming Chorus



The story of *Madam Butterfly* is based on a short story of the same title written by John Luther Long. It takes place in Nagasaki, Japan between 1889 and 1892.

Act One

An American Lieutenant, Pinkerton is stationed in Nagasaki and decides to happily pass the time while in Japan by marrying the geisha Cio-Cio-San (Madam Butterfly). He tells the

American consul, Sharpless, that he still intends to find a 'real wife' when he returns to America. The ceremony takes place but is disrupted at the end by Butterfly's uncle – cursing her for renouncing her religion. Her

family and friends turn on her and she is rejected. They leave and Pinkerton is left alone to comfort his new bride.

Act Two (Part One)

Three years later, Pinkerton has gone but Butterfly waits patiently for the return of her husband (her servant Suzuki doesn't believe he will return). Butterfly is right, he will return. But with his American wife, Kate. Sharpless is sent to Butterfly to break the news to her. He and Suzuki try to prepare Butterfly but Butterfly and Pinkerton have a child together. The harbour cannon heralds Pinkerton's ship.

Intermezzo

The Humming Chorus was Puccini's way of musically showing the calm patience of Butterfly. It is sung, off stage, by the chorus.

Act Two (Part Two)

Suzuki greets Pinkerton, Kate and Sharpless. Kate insists on adopting the child and Pinkerton leaves rather than face Butterfly. Pinkerton gives Sharpless money to pay Butterfly off but she refuses. Butterfly says farewell to her child and kills herself with her father's knife just before Pinkerton returns to collect her son.