



AN OPERA GUIDE TO

TOSCA

ANDREA BOCELLI
LE OPERE

by Giorgio De Martino

WHAT IS IT ?

It is an opera in three acts, a passionate and dramatic story of a tormented love, with a historical perspective, a political theme and heroic and erotic action which leaves the audience breathless. The opera is named after its female protagonist, Floria Tosca, an opera singer at the peak of her career who, in Rome in 1800 found herself in conflict with the ruling political powers as a result of her love affair with Mario Cavaradossi, a painter of Bonapartist leanings and libertarian principles. The opera describes sadistic characters (such as the chief of police, Vitellio Scarpia) and presents scenes of torture, an assassination, an execution by firing squad and a suicide. Strong colours, realistic details, impetuous and sensual melodic lines, an unrelenting and heart-rending narrative rhythm (which seems more cinematographic than operatic), a sequence of scenes alternating between tenderness and transgression, make Tosca remain one of the best-loved and most frequently staged operas in the world. Set in the “Eternal City”, the story takes place in authentic architectural locations: the first act is set in the church of Sant’Andrea della Valle, the second in the Palazzo Farnese and the third on the bastions of the Castel Sant’Angelo.

THE OPERA WHICH SEES IN THE NEW CENTURY

Tosca was performed for the first time on 14th January 1900 at the Teatro Costanzi in Roma. That same year, the composer Kurt Weill was born in Dessau, in Germany. Lev Tolstoy published Resurrection, Joseph Conrad published Lord Jim and Gabriele d’Annunzio published his novel Il fuoco. The German physicist Max Planck described quantum theory. King Umberto I of Italy was assassinated by an anarchist in Monza on 29th July. The following day Vittorio Emanuele III was named king.

WHAT IS IT ABOUT?

In Rome, in June 1800, the evil chief of police Vitellio Scarpia is persecuting the painter Mario Cavaradossi and his lover, the famous singer Floria Tosca, in order to capture the fugitive Cesare Angelotti, a political prisoner who has been given refuge by Cavaradossi. Tosca appears to accept a pact whereby she will give herself to Scarpia for one night to save the life of her lover. But then, before the chief of police can have his way with her, she kills him. To no avail because the feigned execution ordered by Scarpia was a trick: Mario falls to the ground under a hail of bullets and Tosca manages to escape from the police by throwing herself off the bastions of the Castel Sant’Angelo.

THE BACKGROUND

A brief description of the historic context may be useful: following the French Revolution the spirit of liberalism spread to Italy. After Ferdinand IV of Naples and his wife Queen Caroline declared war on France, Napoleon’s troops occupied Rome on 15th February 1798 forcing the Pope to flee. The “Roman Republic” was proclaimed on that day. A new Republican regime was also established in Naples, but the Queen (together with the English, Russians and Austrians) put up a counterattack from Sicily and succeeded in defeating the provisional government and regaining control of the capital. A cruel police regime was then established which relied on informers and spies. In Rome this was under the command of Baron Vitellio Scarpia, who, on 27th September 1799, ordered the arrest and imprisonment of the former Consul of the Roman Republic, Cesare Angelotti.

CLUES TO THE DATE OF THE OPERA

In the first act, inside the Roman church, a Te Deum of thanks is sung to celebrate the presumed victory of the Austrian troops under the command of general Melas over Napoleon at Marengo. In fact this was wrong information as the victory was entirely on the French side, as is later communicated in the second



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act, to the fury of Scarpia and the jubilation of Cavaradossi. It is therefore possible to deduce that the action of the opera takes place in the days of 15th and 16th June 1800.

WHO WROTE THE MUSIC?

Giacomo Puccini (1858 – 1924), Verdi's successor, is the composer who succeeded in expressing the spirit of the late romantic period of the end of the nineteenth century as well as the new stirrings of the early twentieth century. With only partial recourse to the turn of the century musical verismo, he created a truly original style of his own, enriched by his talent for writing melodies of arresting beauty. Always carefully tuned to the changing tastes of the audiences and even to new fashions, Puccini constantly strove to keep renewing his personal style. Curious, practical and ingenious, he would carry out research into the musical culture of the countries (or periods) where he set his operas. For example he explored Gregorian chants (precisely while composing *Tosca*), oriental themes (to give local colour to his *Madame Butterfly* and to *Turandot*), and motifs deriving from American folk traditions and native American Indian rhythms for *La Fanciulla del West*.

Tosca, Puccini's fifth opera, took shape following more than ten years gestation, moments of inspiration and other of reappraisal, and finally found expression with the power of his artistic and dramaturgical innovations. This was an opera in which Puccini was very daring, from the choice of a drama of such dark passions, to its musical representation, which resembles the atmosphere of the Grand-opéra with grafted aspects of verismo and with a profusion of "leitmotifs", of guiding themes. Finally, he is also daring in the harmonic treatment of a score which frequently consists only of recitatives and even of silences. Both violent and relentless, it has narrative rhythms with a premonitory cinematographic quality.

THE BACKGROUND TO THE STORY

On 24th November 1887 a new historical drama in five acts written by Victorien Sardou (1831-1908) was presented at the "Porte Saint-Martin" theatre in Paris: its title was *Tosca*. Puccini's first encounter with the character of *Tosca* can be dated to a couple of years after this event, in 1889, when he attended a presentation of Sardou's play presented at the Filodrammatici theatre in Milan in its original language, performed by the person to whom the work was dedicated, the legendary Sarah Bernhardt. Being unable to speak French, the composer understood precious little of the play but was nonetheless dazzled by the atmosphere of the plot and the great maelstrom of emotions which were conveyed to him.

At the time the thirty-one year old Puccini was working on two operas: *Le Villi* and *Edgar*. He fell in love with the subject of *Tosca* and asked Giulio Ricordi if he could buy the rights from the French dramatist. In May 1889 the composer wrote the following words to the publisher: "I implore you to undertake the necessary steps to obtain the authorization from Sardou, before giving up on the idea, which is something that would distress me greatly as in this *Tosca* I can see the opera I need". Various problems forced Puccini to abandon his efforts to proceed with *Tosca* in order to dedicate himself to *Manon Lescaut*, which opened on stage in 1893. In the meantime the rights to *Tosca* were finally acquired by Ricordi and the play was entrusted to the librettist, Luigi Illica, and the musician, Alberto Franchetti (famed for his *Cristoforo Colombo* in 1892).

Puccini was working on *La Bohème*, and in August 1895, while putting the final touches to this opera, he finally came into possession of the libretto of *Tosca* (as Franchetti had abandoned the project). Another two years passed before the text found its definitive form: Illica was joined by the versifier, Giuseppe Giacosa, who, however, expressed more than a few reservations on the suitability of such a grim story for the operatic stage. Eventually Puccini composed the music for the first of the three acts in the summer of 1898, and the remaining two the following year. With a final sprint the opera at last saw the light of day on 14th January 1900 in Rome, on 20th February at the Regio in Turin and on 17th March at La Scala in Milan (in this case under the direction of Arturo Toscanini), and almost im-



mediately became one of the most often requested and best-loved operas all over the world.

THE “FIRST NIGHT” IN FEAR OF ASSASSINATION

The very first night of *Tosca* at the “Costanzi” was something of a thriller. Some members of the cast had received anonymous threats and, moreover, it was also expected for Puccini’s rivals to be present in the theatre, who would have come to boo and disturb the proceedings and ruin the evening for the audience. But what was most serious was the threat of attempted assassinations. In fact Queen Margherita of Savoy was expected to attend the performance and, just a few minutes before the curtain rose, the director of the orchestra, Leopoldo Mugnone received a visit from a member of the police in his dressing room, who informed him that there was a risk of a bomb being thrown during the performance. In such an event, orders were that the orchestra was to immediately interrupt the Puccini score and strike up the Royal March. The orchestra director did not inform Puccini of this but went to take up his baton filled with anxiety. This was not diminished by the fact that already once in his career, in Barcelona, he had found himself conducting an opera which had been subject to an attack by an anarchist’s bomb which had left many victims.

That opening night did not end in a bloodbath. Nevertheless it did not set off entirely on the right footing: some late arrivals tried to force their way into the auditorium and the public, irritated by this intrusion, responded with a crescendo of protest, to the point that the director of the orchestra was forced to stop and then start once more from the beginning, this time without having to suffer further orders. Both “Vissi d’arte” and “E lucevan le stelle” received tumultuous applause and calls for an encore and in the end there was a total of seven such calls of which three were for Giacomo Puccini.

THE CRITICS’ FAILURE TO UNDERSTAND

The reactions of the audience to that opening night were positive, albeit not totally enthusiastic. In the audience, as well as the Queen, the Prime Minister and the Minister for Education, there was the cream of Roman aristocracy, a great many musicians (from Pietro Mascagni to Francesco Cilea), and journalists from the world over. It was precisely those critics who made vague and contradictory, when not downright negative, judgments, possibly as a result of being taken by surprise at being confronted by so much innovation by a composer who they thought they could still fit into a lyrical slot as represented by the intimism of *La Bohème*. The “Messaggero” reported: “There is not that intimate fusion, that precise correspondence between the action and the music”; “Avanti” stated: “*Tosca* is not suited to Puccini’s temperament” and the “Corriere della Sera” said: “In *Tosca* everything is dark, tragic and terrible”. Alessandro Parisotti, reviewing the opera for “Popolo Romano”, opted for a mannered prudence: “*Tosca* is a battle with daggers drawn between pre-eminently passionate situations and the colours of the melodic palette – and it is not always the melodic palette that wins.”

MAHLER ‘S MISTAKE

Even great composers can make mistakes: a colleague of Puccini as great as Gustav Mahler, attended a performance of *Tosca* in 1903 and the next day wrote the following words to his wife Alma: “In the first act there is a solemn procession with a continuous bell-ringing (...). In the second, a fellow is tortured with frightful screams and another is stabbed with a sharp bread knife. In the third there is a great deal more bell-ringing with a view over the whole of Rome, from the top of a citadel – and once again another sequence of bells – and a fellow is shot by a platoon of soldiers. I got up before this execution and left. Needless to add that all of this is put together as always in a masterly fashion. These days any bungler can orchestrate in a most excellent way”. Mahler coins a sarcastic word to criticise the opera: “*kunstmachwerk*”, combining “*kunstwerk*”, masterpiece, and “*machwerk*”, botched job, categorising *Tosca*, unreservedly, as a product of Italian musical Verismo.



THE TOSCA LOCATIONS

The depiction of the historic period and the geographic location of the opera, by means of the reproduction of real, existing buildings and monuments (the church of Santa Maria della Valle in the first act, the Palazzo Farnese in the second and the Castel Sant'Angelo in the third) is not exactly new in the operatic world. But here Puccini gives added emphasis to the formula: the audience can therefore make what is an imaginary journey but one which is rendered true to life by these elements providing proof of authenticity and even of “local colour”, such as the young shepherd’s song in local Roman dialect in the opening of the third act .

IS IT A WORK OF VERISMO?

The Tuscan composer’s creativity did not fit into labels neatly. With Tosca an assessment of the insistence on realistic detail, such as the emphasis on the cruel and gruesome effects at the end of act two, when Tosca reacts to the attempted rape by stabbing Scarpia, would suggest that there seems to be an evident incursion into the area of verismo. On the other hand, the tragedy and heroism of the opera, the sweeping range of some of the scenes, would also seem to reflect the tradition of the French Grand Opéra: just consider the end of the first act (with the procession for the Te Deum), or the second act (the Cantata which takes place off stage while Scarpia interrogates Cavaradossi), or the end of the opera, when the execution of the painter is carried out in front of Tosca, who was convinced it was all a pretence.

In Tosca, Puccini displays a personal search for stylistic renewal, looking towards France but also to Wagner, when the opera overflows with “leitmotifs”. As for the writing, it is fearless, full of chromaticisms, of chord progressions which take one very far, even as far as Debussy.

THE ARDENT LOVER (FLORIA TOSCA)

Both the libretto – which it seems the composer altered considerably himself – as well as the music depict astonishing characters starting with Floria Tosca (soprano), the passionate lover who does not hesitate to express her longing in church exploding in a fit of jealousy, only to then kneel down to worship the Virgin Mary. She is the great artist who knows how to plead humility and beg her persecutor for mercy. She is able to kill (and will eventually die herself) for love. Puccini gives Floria Tosca only one aria, “Vissi d’arte”, in the second act: grief-stricken, horrified by Scarpia’s vile and perverse demands, she releases her emotions with an impassioned plea.

The whole of the final scene of act two takes place in a feverish atmosphere, which can be traced to the literary tastes of the “Scapigliatura” artistic movement in Lombardy at the end of the nineteenth century and also to the nascent

Decadentism. Floria Tosca is the incarnation of the paradigm of the Puccinian character of the “woman in love”, frequently idealised through an exaltation of acts of sacrifice and courage.

THE HERO (MARIO CAVARADOSSI)

This is one of the most passionate roles to be found in any opera: Mario Cavaradossi, the artist, generous lover, loyal political partner, and man of courage who battles against injustice. Puccini dedicates two now universally renowned arias to him, “Recondita armonia” in the first act and “E lucevan le stelle” in the third. But there are other moments when his vocality is tinged with heroic tones, such as in the second act, when news arrives of the French military victory at Marengo, when Mario, whose fate is already decided, proposes his own “Canto di vittoria” with a gesture of pride and a march of great dra-



matic power. Undoubtedly the most famous piece for the tenor in the opera is “E lucevan le stelle”: a few bars for an excited recollection of erotic memories – introduced by a clarinet solo – which describe the amorous encounter of the protagonists by means of a passionate confession which highlights the senses: first starting with sight (“e lucevan le stelle”), then taste (“ed olezzava la terra”), hearing (“stridea l’uscio dell’orto”) and ending finally, voluptuously, with the sense of touch: “Oh dolci baci oh languide carezze, mentr’io fremente le belle forme disciogliea dai veli!”.

THE TORMENTOR (VITELLIO SCARPIA)

Sublime in his villainy, Baron Scarpia (baritone) is the tenor’s cynical and brutal adversary and he has a musically complex role which ranges from the cantabile of the flatterer to cruel declamation. His ambiguity lends him a dark fascination: in private he is a sinner, an evil oppressor of noble spirits and female charms, whereas in public he is the incorruptible defender of the State. At the end of the first act there is a striking episode of which he is protagonist when, at the “Te Deum”, he meditates on the question of how to get rid of Mario, his rival in love and political enemy, and how to seduce Floria Tosca. All this goes on in the baroque church, between prayers, and expresses his satanic drive combining wickedness and lust, to formidable theatrical effect.

ATTENTION TO DETAIL

At the time he set about composing Tosca, as well as working on the perfect Gregorian melody to suit the Te Deum in accordance with the Roman religious ceremonies – Puccini decided to go to Rome in person. Thinking about the third act, and particularly the musical description of the Roman dawn, he wanted to listen to the tones of the great bell of St Peter’s (the “campanone”), and also to the sounds of all the bells of the “Mattutino” (the “Lodi mattutine” in the liturgy of the hours) which can be heard from the Castel Sant’Angelo. With the work almost completed, Puccini then added a melancholy popular melody sung by a young shepherd. For the lyrics he did not turn to his own librettists but instead to the poet “Giggi” Zanazzo (1860 – 1911) who wrote in the local dialect, in order to give the piece folkloristic credibility.

THE SEXUAL TURMOIL

The musicologist, Leonardo Pinzauti, referring to the “glamorous fabric of Tosca”, emphasised that Tosca, “unlike any other opera by Puccini, reflects with great immediacy the torment and turmoil of sex, with a tension that even takes on sombre tones and makes it into a sort of unconscious damnation of the main characters”.

THE STORY OF PUCCINI’S LIFE

A true Tuscan, born and bred, Giacomo Puccini was born in Lucca on 22nd December 1858, into a family which had a professional involvement in music going back many generations. The excitement caused by a performance of Aida which he attended in Pisa made him decide to dedicate his efforts to the musical theatre. He moved to Milan in order to attend courses in composition at the Conservatorio and lived through difficult times owing to the financial straits his family suffered on his account. Having obtained his diploma he then took part in a competition announced by the “Sonzogno” presenting Le Villi, an opera in one act which the panel of judges did not however consider worthy of merit. It was nonetheless performed in 1884 and achieved some success with the public thereby enabling Puccini to secure a contract with the publishing house Ricordi. His second opera, Edgar, did not prove a particularly happy venture but the publisher, convinced of his young composer’s potential, encouraged him not



to give up. Ricordi's foresight is borne out by Puccini's third opera, *Manon Lescaut*, which was received triumphantly at the Teatro Regio in Turin in 1893. When first performed in 1896, *La Bohème* was met with some consternation as a result of musical choices which were deemed too innovative. However very soon the real merits of this opera were also understood.

At this point in his career, Puccini was already being recognised as Verdi's most worthy successor, and, with *Tosca* (1900) his fame began to spill over national frontiers. With *Madama Butterfly* (1904) he succeeded in writing an opera set in the contemporary period but in a country as distant as Japan. Greatly impressed by the dramatic potential of the Far West, Puccini decided to use this as the setting for his next opera, *La Fanciulla del West*, in which it is already possible to detect the musician's interest in the expressive innovations of the post-Debussian musical language.

The *Trittico*, in 1918, represents a curious attempt to present the audience with a number of different emotions within one single production. The three short acts are in fact all extremely different to each other both in terms of plot as well as in their style: *Il tabarro* tells an intensely dramatic story in a style of raw realism; *Suor Angelica* develops a story based on themes of tender lyricism while *Gianni Schicchi* is a light-hearted excursion into the comic genre. The composition of the next opera turned out to be particularly arduous as Puccini could not find a libretto which corresponded to his way of seeing the development of the drama. And yet the tale of the cruel *Turandot* and the exotic Chinese setting had immediately fascinated him. Perhaps Puccini was beginning to feel the effects of the incurable disease which was implacably consuming him. He moved to Brussels to undergo new medical treatment which turned out to be ineffective and painful. Puccini died (on 29th November 1924) without managing to finish the last pages of *Turandot*. The opera was completed by Franco Alfano. In 2001 Luciano Berio also turned his hand to a new finale for Puccini's masterpiece.

WHO WAS VICTORIEN SARDOU?

He was born in Paris on 5th September 1831 into a middle class family. He abandoned medical school in order to dedicate himself to the theatre. After many years he finally achieved success and from 1860 until his death in 1908 he remained the uncontested master of the Parisian theatrical world. A consummate manipulator of language and of theatrical techniques, highly skilled in the construction of plots and sensitive to the psychological traits of his characters, in his plays Sardou managed to achieve a significant synthesis of the tastes of the French audiences in the last decades of the nineteenth century. The extraordinary success of his works, which had inspired not only Puccini but also Umberto Giordano (*Fedora*), was also due to their historic performances by the actress Sarah Bernhardt.

WHO WAS GIUSEPPE GIACOSA?

He was born in the province of Turin on 21st October 1847, and was the most important Italian playwright and librettist during the reign of King Umberto. His was a name which had achieved international popularity thanks to his collaboration with Giacomo Puccini and his librettist colleague Luigi Illica, in drawing up the libretti for *La Bohème* (1896), *Tosca* (1899) and *Madama Butterfly* (1904). But his name was also to be found among those who had contributed to the libretto of *Manon Lescaut* in 1893. Giacosa had originally graduated in law in 1868 and had begun to practice in his father's law firm in Turin. He mixed with literary circles and made friends mainly with those writers who frequented the "Dante Alighieri" society, which included Boito and Camerana.

Following a successful theatrical debut with the romantic piece set in medieval times *Una partita a scacchi* (1873), he went on to historical dramas with *Il Conte Rosso* (1880). In 1888 he moved to Milan and became director of the Amateur Acting School and professor of dramatic literature and acting at the Conservatorio. The success of the *Signora di Challant* (1891), performed by Eleonora Duse in Italy and Sarah Bernhardt in New York, made him decide to give up his academic posts to concentrate on writ-



ing plays on contemporary themes as he had already done in *Tristi amori* (1888). Thus followed *I diritti dell'anima* (1894) and the successful *Come le foglie* (1894). In his house in Colleretto (where he would die in 1906) he welcomed guests like Giosuè Carducci, Benedetto Croce, Gabriele D'Annunzio, Edmondo De Amicis, Antonio Fogazzaro, Giovanni Pascoli, Luigi Pirandello, Giovanni Verga and Émile Zola. A contemporary of Ibsen and Strindberg, Giacosa brought the requirements of the bourgeois theatre to Italy and, with the realism of his dramas, he contributed to the transformation of the tastes and interests of Italian audiences.

WHO WAS LUIGI ILLICA?

He was born on 9th May 1857 in Castell'Arquato in the province of Piacenza and was among the leading librettists of the post-Verdian period. He worked for Giacomo Puccini, Alfredo Catalani, Umberto Giordano and other composers. He was a journalist, a good versemaker and a member of the Milanese "Scapigliatura" movement and already as a boy had displayed a rebellious temperament. At the age of twenty he went to sea and spent the next four years in the navy. During this period he took part in the battle of Plevna against the Turks. In 1879 he settled in Milan where he became a reporter for the "Corriere della Sera". He later transferred to Bologna where he cofounded the radical publication "Il Don Chisciotte" inspired by Carducci. He returned to Milan in 1882 and began to publish his own writings and plays. From 1889 Illica added the writing of opera libretti to his activity as a playwright. This new occupation led to a very intense period of work and his growing success was crowned in 1891 when he joined the Casa Ricordi publishing house. Over the next two decades Illica wrote for the finest composers of the age producing some thirty libretti, amongst which *Germania* (1902) and *Siberia* (1903) for Giordano, *Iris* (1898) and *Isabeau* (1911) for Mascagni, *Bohème* (1896), *Tosca* (1900), *Madama Butterfly* (1904) in collaboration with Giacosa and *Manon Lescaut* (1891-1892) for Giacomo Puccini. In 1915, at the age of 58, he enrolled in the army as a volunteer and left for the front. The following year a bad fall from a horse forced him to retire to his house in the country near Castell'Arquato where he died on 16th December 1919.

TOSCA, SARDOU'S FINALE

Floria: (...) Quickly, now!... Quickly!... Quickly! ... (She turns and sees him immobile). Get up!... Can't you hear me?... Mario!... Mario!... (Frightened, she runs to him). Fainted?... Mario?... (She quickly turns the body over, Mario's head appears ashen, and his arm turns in the air and falls to the floor with a dull thud). Blood!...Dead!...My Mario!... Killed!... They have killed him!... (Spoletta reappears with Schiarrone, the sergeant and the soldiers. She hurls herself at him). Assassin!... Assassin, and you were supposed to save him!...

Spoletta: I was ordered to make you believe that and then to execute him, like Palmieri: those were my orders from my superior.

Floria: Ah, the beast!... And I can't kill him now!... (General confusion)

Spoletta, Schiarrone and an officer: Kill him?

Floria: Yes, I have killed your Scarpia!... Killed him, do you understand? Stabbed in the heart with a knife. And I would like to be able to thrust it in him again and to turn it!... Ah! You shoot ... the stall ... (Spoletta makes a gesture and two men rush out to the left). Yes, go... go and see what I have done with that monster ... whose corpse remains a murderous assassin ... (She kneels down by Mario and holds him in her arms)

Schiarrone (trying to hurl himself towards Tosca): Wretch!

Spoletta (stopping him): Can't you see that the pain has confused her brain and that these are her imaginary rantings she is uttering?

Schiarrone: But what if she really had killed him?

Spoletta: With her life she would pay too little for it.

Floria (getting up again): Take it then!... So that I should never again have to suffer the horror of seeing you bandits committing such crimes!... putrid people who accept them ... vile sun for shining on them!... (Confused voices. Shouting off stage. Drum rolls)

Spoletta (agitated): What now?

Ufficiale: It's true!

Tutti: Oh!

Spoletta: Stabbed?

Ufficiale: Dead!

Angry shouting.

Spoletta (to Floria, who has meanwhile fled towards the parapet): Ah, the devil!... I will send you to join your lover!

Floria (standing up on the parapet): I am going to join him, you scum!... (She throws herself into the void. Spoletta, Schiarrone and all the soldiers rush towards the parapet).

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<http://www.librettidopera.it/tosca/tosca.html>

<http://opera.stanford.edu/Puccini/Tosca/libretto.html>

<http://www.librettidopera.it/zpdf/tosca.pdf>

http://www.teatroregioparma.org/stagionelirica2009/tosca/tosca_libretto.htm



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