

AN IN-DEPTH GUIDE TO GIACOMO PUCCINI'S TOSCA

BY STU LEWIS

INTRODUCTION

"Puccini's shabby little shocker." Thus critic Joseph Kerman dismissed *Tosca* in his book *Opera as Drama*, echoing to an extent George Bernard Shaw's description of the play itself as "an old-fashioned, shiftless, clumsily constructed, empty-headed turnip ghost of a cheap shocker." For Kerman – whose narrow criteria for great art made no room for *Don Giovanni* or *Così fan Tutte* – a vulgar play like this was hardly material for an opera, and Puccini's inconsistent handling of his subject matter only made matters worse: "Puccini's faint emotionality is directed out over the footlights."

In other words, Puccini wrote with the public, not the critics, in mind. Puccini himself, no doubt, would have been delighted with this description of his art, as he once said, "I compose only to a successful and sensational drama; it is the best way to catch success." For him, an immediate emotional response from the audience was far more important than praise from the critics for his compositional skills.

Tosca is certainly one of the most immediately accessible operas ever written. Just as the play on which it was based was a star vehicle for French actress Sarah Bernhardt, the opera offers three roles that any singer in the required voice ranges longs to sing – a dashing heroic tenor, a villainous baritone, and a passionate dramatic soprano. Beyond the characterizations, there are great dramatic tableaux. In particular, the finales of the first two acts are unsurpassed in the entire repertoire in dramatic intensity.

If one looks more deeply at the opera, however, one will notice Puccini's increasingly sophisticated use of the orchestra as a means of telling the story, continuing the trend that was observed in *La bohème*. Unlike composers who came before him, Puccini did not simply use the orchestra to accompany the singers. In fact, one of the most memorable melodies in the entire opera – that used in the finale of Act II – is never sung.

For some reason, *Tosca* has been the source of some of the most bizarre anecdotes in the annals of operatic history, many of which may fall into the category of urban legends. Among them are tales of Tosca stabbing Scarpia with her fan when the stagehand forgot the knife, firing squads drawing real blood due to improperly prepared stage rifles, or mischievous stagehands substituting a trampoline for the mattress used to break Tosca's fall, causing the singer to bounce back into view after diving to her death. One narrative tells of a group of extras playing the firing squad who were absent from the dress rehearsals and as a result pointed their rifles at Tosca rather than Cavaradossi in the final scene; moreover, having been told to "follow the principals" offstage, they followed Tosca instead of Spoletta and disappeared over the parapet in an unintended mass suicide. In the early days of supertitles, Tosca's admonition to Cavaradossi to paint Mary Magdalene with dark eyes was once translated as "give her two black eyes," adding an extra touch of violence to an already violent story.

Such stories simply serve to highlight the larger-than-life quality of this opera, which has never fallen out of the standard repertoire since it opened over a century ago. It may not meet some people's criteria for great art, but it is nevertheless great entertainment.

THE CHARACTERS

Floria Tosca (soprano): a famous singer
(FLOW-ree-ah TOE-ska)

Mario Cavaradossi (tenor): an artist, Tosca's lover
(MAH-ree-oh ka-va-ra-DOE-see)

Baron Scarpia (baritone): Chief of Police
(SKAR-pee-ah)

Cesare Angelotti (bass): an escaped political prisoner
(CHE-za-reh ahn-jell-OHT-tee)

The Sacristan (baritone): functionary of the church

Spoletta (tenor): a police agent
(spo-LET-ta)

Sciarrone (bass): a gendarme
(sha-RO-nee)

A Jailer (bass)

A Shepherd (boy or female soprano)

Throughout the opera (and in this guide as well) the principal characters are referred to primarily by their last name.

THE STORY

ACT I:

Rome, The Church of Sant'Andrea della Valle. June 17, 1800

As is typical of Puccini, there is no overture, just a brief orchestral passage to set the mood. The opera opens with three jarring chords, a motif which will be associated with the villainous Scarpia. A series of descending chords introduces the escaped political prisoner Angelotti, looking for the key to the family's private chapel, which his sister had hidden away for him. Finding it, he exits to the chapel. The elderly Sacristan enters to a jaunty melody, descriptive of his uneven walk. He is grumbling about having to clean Cavaradossi's paintbrushes. He looks at the basket of food he had prepared for the painter and notices that it has not been touched (a fact which will be significant later). The Sacristan has many characteristics of a stock comic character, but as we will soon see, the consequences of his actions are far from comic.

Cavaradossi, who has been working on a mural depicting Mary Magdalene, enters and uncovers the painting. The Sacristan is horrified to realize that Cavaradossi has used a real-life worshipper at the church as his model. In the aria "Recondita armonia," Cavaradossi compares his blonde model with his beloved brunette, dark-eyed Tosca, while the Sacristan grumbles in the background about the improper mixing of the religious and profane. "Recondita armonia" demonstrates the way in which Puccini was breaking away from the use of formal set pieces in his operas. In one sense, it is not

strictly an aria but a duet – the Sacristan even gets to sing the final line – but the two vocal lines are hardly of equal interest. The Sacristan now lets us know (out of Cavaradossi's earshot) the real reason for his resentment: the painter's political leanings and lack of conventional piety. He then turns to the painter to remind him that a dinner has been prepared for him, but Cavaradossi replies that he is not hungry, and the Sacristan exits to the same melody associated with his entrance.

Hearing him leave, Angelotti emerges from the chapel, and Cavaradossi recognizes him as a leader of the recently overthrown Roman Republic. Hearing Tosca enter the church, Cavaradossi tells Angelotti to hide again, giving him the basket of food. Tosca, to an orchestral accompaniment of a musical theme which will be associated with her throughout the opera, enters, exclaiming, "Mario, Mario." She lays a bouquet of flowers at the feet of the statue of the Madonna and then sings a cheerful aria about a rendezvous she and Cavaradossi will have at his cottage, including a musical theme which will henceforth represent the cottage. As was the case with Cavaradossi's aria, this is not strictly a solo, as Cavaradossi's response is built into the completion of the melodic line.

Tosca then looks at the painting and recognizes the model as the Marchesa Attavanti, and she expresses her concern that Cavaradossi has fallen for her. In a free-flowing duet, which introduces a "love theme," Cavaradossi assures her that he loves only her, but Tosca admonishes him to at least paint

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her with dark eyes. She then leaves to prepare for her evening performance.

Angelotti reenters, and Cavaradossi explains that he asked Angelotti to hide because Tosca tells her confessor everything, and he clearly does not trust the priest to keep a secret. Angelotti tells how he has escaped Scarpia's grasp, as the orchestra restates the Scarpia theme heard at the opening of the opera. Cavaradossi offers to help him escape to his cottage (listen for the cottage theme), and they exit.

The Sacristan re-enters with a group of altar boys, telling them that a celebration is being planned to celebrate the news that Napoleon has been defeated at the battle of Marengo. The children create a commotion, which is abruptly stopped when Scarpia enters, accompanied by the chords we now recognize from the opera's opening, and admonishes them to show more respect for their surroundings. One critic has compared the sudden change of mood to that experienced by the Bohemians in *La bohème*, when Musetta interrupts their horseplay to inform them of Mimi's illness. Scarpia's entrance may seem to be a coincidence, but in Sardou's play it is explained that he was tipped off by a jailer that Angelotti was headed in the direction of the church. Scarpia's fanatical search for Angelotti is also explained more specifically in the play. He was relatively new on the job, and he was suspected of being at fault in allowing Angelotti to escape. His own future was on the line.

Scarpia finds a fan that the Marchesa had left behind, and the Sacristan, noting that Cavaradossi's food basket is now empty, helps Scarpia connect the dots. He hears Tosca enter. Referring to the story of Othello, he comments that just as Iago had a handkerchief to make Othello jealous, he can use the fan for the same purpose with Tosca. Church bells announce the beginning of the service, and Scarpia takes Tosca's hand to offer her holy water. Lying about where the fan was found, he arouses Tosca's jealousy, hoping to have her flee and inadvertently lead him to Angelotti's hideout. As she leaves, he orders his henchmen to follow her.

The aria which follows, "Va, Tosca!," has no parallel in the original play. Scarpia, who is now revealed as one of the most spectacular operatic villains, sings of his desire to have Cavaradossi hanged and to sleep with Tosca, as the music of the "Te Deum" hymn (a text frequently used for celebrations) is heard in the background, punctuated by cannon shots in the distance. The blending of the diabolical aria with the music of the church underscores Scarpia's religious hypocrisy. "Tosca, you make me forget God," he exclaims at the conclusion of the aria, and he immediately follows these words by joining his voice to the words of the service as the curtain falls on the spectacular, bone-chilling conclusion of Act I.

ACT II:

The Farnese Palace, later the same day

The curtain rises on Scarpia, who is dining alone, awaiting Tosca's arrival. The window is opened, and he hears a Gavotte (a medium-paced French dance) in the courtyard below. As the orchestra plays the Act I love theme, he speaks of Tosca's love for Cavaradossi. He then launches into an aria in which he expresses his unsentimental view of sexual relations as a series of conquests with no element of romance, an aria which may call to mind Iago's infamous "Credo," in view of the fact that the analogy between the two men has already been made explicit.

Spoletta enters and announces that a search of Cavaradossi's cottage (listen for the cottage theme) has not yielded Angelotti, but Cavaradossi's demeanor has convinced him that the painter knows the fugitive's whereabouts, and Scarpia has taken him into custody.

A cantata, with Tosca as the lead singer, is heard in the background. Cavaradossi is brought in, and Scarpia interrogates him without success. Tosca, who has been summoned by Scarpia, now comes in, and Cavaradossi warns her to remain silent. Scarpia sends Cavaradossi off to be tortured, and as Scarpia interrogates Tosca, Cavaradossi's screams punctuate the dialogue. Tosca finally breaks down and reveals Angelotti's hiding place, and a bleeding Cavaradossi is

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brought in. The triumphant Scarpia orders his men to search the well, thereby letting Cavaradossi know that Tosca has revealed the secret.

Sciarrone now enters proclaiming the news of Napoleon's defeat had been greatly exaggerated. In fact, Napoleon had been victorious in the battle and his enemy was on the run. Cavaradossi exclaims "Vittoria" (victory), and sings a brief tribute to the cause of freedom. This gives Scarpia an excuse to condemn him to death as a traitor, though his fate probably had already been sealed in any event. Alone with Tosca, Scarpia now offers her an offer which has been so often depicted in folklore, telling her that he will spare Cavaradossi's life in exchange for a sexual encounter with her (in all the folklore situations I am familiar with, the lover is killed anyway, as will be the case in this story).

Left alone for a moment to consider her dilemma, Tosca turns to prayer, and in her famous aria "Vissi d'arte," she asks the question that has been central to religious thought throughout the ages – why do bad things happen to good people? She has devoted her life to art and love and moreover has always been generous to the poor. Why has she been placed in this predicament? Though not indicated in the original libretto, many sopranos have adopted the custom of performing this aria while kneeling. Puccini had second thoughts about this aria, worrying that it slowed down the action, but his original instincts were right, as this contemplative aria helps build tension by serving as the calm before the storm.

As the aria begins, there are hints of Tosca's Act I music in the orchestra. More significantly, the climactic line "Perché, perché Signore" ("Why, God?") is virtually a slowed-down version of the music we have identified with Cavaradossi's cottage. This underscores the subtle way in which Puccini used these recurring motifs for their emotional impact rather than as an intellectual exercise. There is no logical reason to use the cottage theme here. Rather, we associate this melody with the frivolous Tosca of Act I, and hearing virtually the same notes here in a

slower tempo shows how Tosca has grown emotionally in just a few hours.

Spoletta enters and informs Scarpia that Angelotti committed suicide rather than allowing himself to be captured, and that preparations are being made for Cavaradossi's execution. Tosca finally consents to Scarpia's demands. He agrees to write an order of safe passage for the couple, but he explains that people must believe that Cavaradossi has been executed. In Tosca's presence, he orders Spoletta to arrange a "fake execution" with blanks, just as had been done with Count Palmieri. In order to be sure he understands, Spoletta makes Scarpia repeat the order twice. In case the audience does not guess the innuendo, it later becomes clear that Count Palmieri's "fake execution" had turned into a real one, and Spoletta wanted to be sure that the same fate was intended for Cavaradossi.

Spoletta leaves, and the orchestra takes up a somber theme suggesting that some momentous event is about to occur. As Scarpia writes out the safe conduct, Tosca sees a knife on the table and picks it up. Scarpia approaches her exclaiming, "Tosca, you are finally mine!" and Tosca replies, "This is Tosca's kiss," stabbing him. His faint cries for help are of no avail, and he soon expires. Tosca takes the document from his hand and, kneeling over his dead body, says in monotone "And before him all of Rome trembled" (contrary to the score, many sopranos speak this line). As the somber music continues in the orchestra, Tosca turns the assassination into a ritual by placing a pair of candlesticks by Scarpia's head and a crucifix on his chest. She then hurries out as the curtain falls.

ACT III:

The next morning on the rooftop of Saint Angelo Castel

Following the turmoil of the previous act, there is a complete change of mood. After a brief melody on the horns, a shepherd boy is heard offstage singing a melody based on the pentatonic (five-tone) scale, suggesting an ancient folk song. Various church bells are heard in the distance.

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Puccini personally visited the site to be sure that he accurately captured the sounds of the bells. However, the opening tableau does more than simply provide local color. Puccini seems to be reminding us of how beautiful life could be if we could learn to live with each other in peace.

The mood changes as the orchestra introduces the somber melody of the aria we will hear soon from Cavaradossi, "E lucevan le stelle" ("When the stars were shining.") A jailer leads Cavaradossi in, telling him he has an hour to live. Cavaradossi refuses the services of a priest and asks instead for the opportunity to write a letter, bribing the jailer with his ring in exchange for his promise to deliver it to Tosca. As he writes, the orchestra plays some of the Act I love theme, followed by a solo clarinet playing "E lucevan le stelle." The aria follows an unusual pattern. In most arias, the singer voices the melody from the beginning, whereas here the orchestra takes the lead while Cavaradossi begins his contemplation in a virtual recitative (partly a monotone) over the orchestra, joining the melody with the last line of the first verse. He recalls his love for Tosca, saying that he now dies in despair at a time when he never loved life more.

He is surprised by Tosca's entrance (accompanied by her Act I music). She tells him what has happened (as she describes the killing, we hear the melody that accompanied it). She tells Cavaradossi of the plans for the fake execution and warns him to play his part well. The two sing a duet, during which Cavaradossi marvels that such delicate hands could accomplish such a brutal deed.

The firing squad enters to a melody which seems to suggest their almost matter-of-fact attitude.

GIACOMO PUCCINI

Giacomo Puccini was born in 1858 in the Tuscan village of Lucca, Italy. While he came from a long line of musicians, he was the first in his family to become involved in secular rather than church music. He first encountered opera when he walked seven

Whereas in the original play Tosca does not witness the execution, the opera heightens the dramatic tension by having her present. The soldiers fire, and Cavaradossi falls. Not wishing Tosca to learn the truth until they leave, Spoletta orders the captain to bypass the *coup de grâce* (the final shot that would prevent the prisoner from suffering a slow death). The soldiers leave, and the orchestra falls silent for a moment. Tosca rushes to Cavaradossi and tells him it is time to get up, only to discover that the bullets were in fact real. As music of growing intensity is heard in the orchestra, Sciarrone and Spoletta rush in, announcing that Scarpia's murder has been discovered and that they realize Tosca was the perpetrator. She rushes to the edge of the parapet and, crying defiantly "O Scarpia, avanti a Dio!" ("O Scarpia, we shall meet before God!"), she leaps to her death as the orchestra reprises "E lucevan le stelle."

The use of this melody for the conclusion has been the source of some controversy, including Joseph Kerman's oft-quoted remark that "the orchestra screams whatever comes into its head." Mosco Carner explains his objection more rationally, pointing out that this melody is associated with Cavaradossi, whereas the focus of the final tableau should be on Tosca herself. Julian Budden takes the opposite approach: "That Puccini should choose the blackest theme of the opera to sum up the final tragedy is therefore perfectly logical." Others see it as a positive statement, pointing out that this is also the music to the line "I have never loved life more," suggesting a posthumous triumph for Cavaradossi. All this analysis, however, is quite beside the point. No one attending this opera for the first time would ever question Puccini's use of this melody for the conclusion. It may not seem right intellectually, but it feels right, and that for Puccini would have been the ultimate criterion.

hours to sneak into a performance of *Aida*. Recognized early in life for his musical talent, he studied composition formally for several years while living a Bohemian existence reminiscent of the characters in *La bohème*. During these years he

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developed close friendships with two other composers who were also to have a lasting impact on the direction opera was to take after Verdi – Leoncavallo and Mascagni – and he shared a room with the latter for a number of years.

Though he occasionally wrote other forms of music, Puccini is known almost exclusively today for his operas, numbering twelve in all. He began his career with *Le Villi* in 1884, which he initially entered in a contest sponsored by the publishing house of Sonzogno. Losing that contest may have been the luckiest break of his life, for it brought him in touch with the rival publisher Giulio Ricordi, who was to play a critical role in shepherding Puccini's career. While *Le Villi* is rarely performed today, it was popular enough to mark Puccini as a composer to be watched. In the words of one contemporary critic, "We honestly believe that Puccini may be the composer for whom Italy has been waiting for some time."

About this time, Puccini began a relationship with Elvira, the woman whom he would eventually marry. At that time, however, she was still a married woman, a fact which did not prevent the two from living together and having a child. Following the death of Elvira's estranged husband, the two did eventually marry, but throughout Puccini's life he would be linked romantically with numerous other women.

Puccini's next opera, *Edgar* (1889), was somewhat a step backward, as beautiful music was overshadowed by an awkward libretto. The composer, however, turned this into a valuable learning experience, and throughout his life he demonstrated an obsessive concern with finding the best subjects for his future operatic projects. One biographer has commented that he rarely read a book or attended a play unless he was examining it as a potential subject for a future opera. The downside of this concern was a vast number of unfinished projects, perhaps explaining Puccini's relatively small operatic output; of his dozen operas, four consist of a single act each.

Puccini's first lasting triumph came in 1893 with *Manon Lescaut*. The audience especially loved the tenor arias which established the style that was to mark much of his later music, in which a free-flowing melody follows the text rather than having the text fit into pre-determined musical patterns.

Puccini followed this success with an even greater one in *La bohème* (1896), based on an episodic novel about the free lives of a group of starving artists. In addition to its appealing story, this opera represented a major step forward in Puccini's technique, as he placed less emphasis on solo aria and more on a seamless narrative supported by the music.

Following this triumph, Puccini set his sights on *Tosca*. He had first become interested in the play in 1889, and in 1890 he saw a performance with the legendary Sarah Bernhardt. Though he knew virtually no French, he felt the power of the drama. However, he did not immediately follow up on the idea of adapting it as an opera. This talent for feeling the impact of a drama without understanding the words was to be exhibited later in his career as well, as he was able to sense the potential of both *Madama Butterfly* and *The Girl of the Golden West* even though he understood very little English.

The story of Puccini acquiring the rights to the story of *Tosca* is somewhat clouded in controversy. According to one popular account, Ricordi originally assigned the libretto to Alberto Franchetti, but when he heard of Puccini's interest, he tricked Franchetti by convincing him that the story was not refined enough for him, only to offer Puccini the project as soon as Franchetti relinquished it. Franchetti made this accusation late in life, even claiming that some of the music of the first act was his. This story is contradicted by other accounts, which suggest that Franchetti himself abandoned the project because he did not feel that he could compose music for such a melodramatic subject. Today, most historians consider Franchetti's claim a case of sour grapes. It is hard to believe today, but before the opera was written many people doubted the potential of the melodramatic tragedy as the subject for an opera.

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One of Puccini's librettists, Giuseppe Giacosa, remarked that whereas *La bohème* was all poetry and no plot, *Tosca* was all plot and no poetry.

The opera had its world premiere in Rome (the city in which it was set) on January 14, 1900. While critical response was lukewarm, the public loved it, and it soon took its place in the repertoire.

During a visit to England, Puccini, who was always in search of a new work to adapt, attended a performance of American playwright David Belasco's *Madame Butterfly*, and while few biographers accept at face value Belasco's account of Puccini embracing him after the show and begging for the rights to the story, it is true that the composer immediately began thinking of how he could adapt this drama. The opera had its premiere in 1904, and after it underwent some significant revisions, it also took its place in the repertoire.

With Puccini's reputation firmly established, *La fanciulla del West* ("The Girl of the Golden West," 1910) was another triumph, though due to its more complex style of composition, it has unfortunately never achieved the lasting popular appeal of the three operas which preceded it. It was during this time that Puccini experienced a horrific tragedy, one that would haunt him the rest of his life. Knowing his penchant for pretty young women, Elvira openly accused him of carrying on an affair with Doria Manfredi, the couple's teen-aged maid. Her repeated hysterical

accusations eventually drove the young women to suicide. An autopsy revealed that the young woman had never had sexual intercourse. Only a generous financial settlement with the girl's family kept Elvira from serving prison time for slander. Though not guilty of this particular incident, Puccini realized that his previous affairs were the cause of Elvira's jealousy and that he therefore was at least partially responsible for the girl's death. Many critics have seen the focus on the theme of redemption in *La fanciulla* as an expression of Puccini's own longing for forgiveness.

Based on his friendship with Franz Lehár, Puccini then considered composing a Viennese-style operetta, but writing songs joined by spoken dialogue was not Puccini's style, and while *La rondine* (1917) has some features of operetta, it is nevertheless an opera. A year later this was followed by *Il trittico*, a compilation of three one-act operas: *Suor Angelica*, *Gianni Schicchi* (his one purely comic opera), and *Il tabarro*. *Turandot*, an ambitious mythological work expressing the redemptive power of love, was to be Puccini's crowning achievement, but he died in 1924 from laryngeal cancer, leaving the third act incomplete. Franco Alfano dutifully used Puccini's sketches to complete the score. It was first performed in 1926, though as a memorial to Puccini, the conductor Toscanini chose to omit Alfano's conclusion at the world premiere, stopping with Liu's death and proclaiming, "Here the maestro put down his pen."

THE WRITERS

For the libretto of *Tosca*, Ricordi and Puccini again turned to Illica and Giacosa. They divided the labor much as writers of today's Broadway musicals do, assigning one writer to write the "book" or story line while the other writes the lyrics to the songs. In this pair, Illica was considered the stronger dramatist while Giacosa was known as the greater poet.

Luigi Illica (1857-1919), a sailor earlier in life, became one of the major literary figures of his day. He wrote thirty-five libretti for a variety of composers

and was known for straightforward writing perfectly suited for the *verisimo* (realistic) style which dominated Italian opera at the time. In addition to *La bohème* and *Tosca*, he also worked with Puccini on *Manon Lescaut* and *Madama Butterfly*. He was also responsible for the libretto for Giordano's *Andrea Chénier*, which, unlike most operas of the time, was an original play and not an adaptation.

After Giacosa's death, Puccini turned elsewhere for his librettos, feeling that Illica was not capable of writing sufficiently high caliber works on his own.

THE WRITERS CONT.

Giuseppe Giacosa (1847-1906) was educated as a lawyer and worked in that capacity until the success of one of his plays convinced him that he could write full time. He likewise was involved in *Madama Butterfly*. He was one of the leading playwrights of his day. Nicknamed “the Buddha” because of his calm personality, he successfully kept the other members of the creative team working together despite the numerous disagreements they encountered along the way.

Victorien Sardou (1831-1908), the dramatist whose play *La Tosca* was the source of Puccini’s opera, was born in Paris. Along with Eugène Scribe, he was best known for the development of the “well-made play,” dramas based on elaborate plot devices. His early writing met little success. Paradoxically, a serious illness turned his fortunes around, when a friend who was nursing him back to health took an interest in his career and introduced him to some of her theatrical acquaintances (she was later to become his first wife). His career began to flourish in

the 1860s with a series of successes, writing in a satiric vein that appealed to the Parisian audiences of the day. He was elected to the l’Académie française in 1878.

Sardou was also known for his ability to create star vehicles for the leading actors of his day. *Fédora* (1882) was written specifically for the famous actress Sarah Bernhardt, who was later to create the role of Tosca. Like *La Tosca*, this play was also adapted into an opera, with music by Umberto Giordano. It also gave birth to the word “fedora” for a style of hat. It was Bernhardt’s performance in *La Tosca* (1887) that represented the greatest success for both actress and playwright, and with the operatic adaptation (in which he took an active role) his literary immortality was assured.

Even in his own day, some critics considered his plot devices overly artificial. George Bernard Shaw coined the term “Sardoodledom” to describe his method of writing. Like Puccini, however, Sardou was intent on pleasing the public, not the critics.

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

Though set in a specific time and place, *Tosca* is not a historical drama. It is, however, largely consistent with the historical events of the time in which it was set. For about two years prior to the events of the opera, Rome had been ruled by the Parthenopean Republic, under the influence of the French during which time the Pope had been driven into exile (the establishment of an independent Italian nation was still decades in the future). While beloved of the intelligentsia (a status class composed of the university-educated people of a society), the Republic lacked popular support and was soon overthrown, leading to an oppressive regime which sought to stifle all opposition and had several sympathizers of the Republic executed.

The battle of Marengo happened pretty much as depicted in the opera. Napoleon’s troops were surrounded, leading to a premature report of his defeat, but he was saved by the arrival of some last-minute reinforcements, and the anti-Napoleon

factions in Rome soon learned the bitter truth. At the time, many of the intelligentsia in Europe were supporters of Napoleon (though several became disillusioned later) and, like Cavaradossi, would have cheered the actual result. In the play, Cavaradossi was partly of French ancestry, a fact which also would have contributed to his political leanings.

Historian Deborah Burton has identified counterparts for some of the characters in the play. There was a counsel of the Republic with a similar name to Angelotti’s, Liborio Angelucci. Fortunately for him, he successfully escaped Rome after the fall of the Republic. Some years later a man named Francesco Angelotti was imprisoned for anti-government activities and was killed during an escape attempt. Like Angelotti, the character of Scarpia also appears to be a composite of two historical figures. There was a real-life baron who went by the pseudonym “Sciarpa” (the scarf). Like

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his counterpart in the play, he masked his cruelty with a show of outward piety. In some ways, however, Scarpia bears a closer resemblance to Vincenzo Speciale. Like the Scarpia of the play, he was from Sicily and presided over courts which condemned numerous suspected enemies of the state to death, though he worked in Naples rather than Rome.

Among the victims was Eusèbe Palmieri, whose execution is also referred to in the opera.

PUCCINI & RELIGION

During the early stages of *Tosca's* composition, Puccini asked his librettists to place an increased emphasis on the religious elements of the story, and indeed the church looms large in this story. Two of the acts conclude with God's name, and the other ends with a personal religious ceremony as Tosca places a crucifix on Scarpia's chest. The heroine's most memorable aria is a prayer, and a crucifix is prominent in Cavaradossi's cell in the final act.

Because of the largely negative view of the Catholic church not only in this opera but in several other Puccini operas, some writers have asserted that Puccini was anti-religious (We should note here that even though Puccini did not write his own libretti, he had enough input into the writing that we can assume that the operas reflect his own philosophy). Yet it is important to make a distinction between anti-clerical views and anti-religious ones. It is not Christianity or religion in general that comes under attack, but rather the corruption of religion by the Church.

Puccini's anti-church sentiments are clear in *Tosca*. Scarpia represents the Papal authority, whose hypocrisy is underscored by the mixture of lust and false piety in the first-act finale, a scene which has no parallel in Sardou's play. The torture of Cavaradossi is clearly condoned by the Church. The outwardly comic Sacristan is a sinister informant in league with Scarpia. Cavaradossi refuses the services of a priest before his execution, and when he says that Tosca tells everything to her confessor, he implies that he does not trust the priests to honor the confidentiality of the

Historian Susan Vandiver Nicassio has argued that the events of the play, in fact, better describe the situation in Naples than that of Rome, but the Roman setting appealed more to Sardou (and later to Puccini) because Rome represented the oppressive power of the Church, appealing to Sardou's political liberalism and Puccini's anti-clericism.

confession booth.

Nevertheless, the religious element in this opera runs deeper than these negative images would imply. In the first act, Tosca is seen as a conventionally pious young woman, bringing flowers to the statue of the Madonna and speaking of the statue as if she is a real person. By the second act, however, she has already come to question her beliefs. Why, she asks, would God allow a good, pious person to suffer? Her aria ends with a question that for the moment remains unanswered. It is only in the final moments of the opera that this issue is resolved. With her lover dead and her own imminent death assured, she utters a line that has no parallel in Sardou's play: "Scarpia, onward to God." It is not God but human institutions which have failed her. She dies with an assertion that God's justice will ultimately prevail.

At least one critic has argued that the musical repetition of Cavaradossi's aria at the opera's conclusion is an ironic comment on her statement of faith. But to view the opera this way is to deprive it of much of its meaning. Likewise, if we assume that anti-religious views are prevalent in Puccini's other operas, we must also assume that Puccini meant to mock not only Tosca but many of his other heroines.

Organized religion never fares well in Puccini's operas. Convents are not seen as places for women who desire a contemplative life. They are rather prisons to which women are assigned by their families. The title character in *Manon Lescaut* escapes with a lover to avoid the cloistered life, and the title

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character of *Suor Angelica* is sent to a convent to atone for the sin of bearing a child out of wedlock. The title character of *Gianni Schicchi* cleverly alters a will to deprive a monastery of an inheritance and directly asks the audience for a sign of approval (which is always granted in the form of applause). Butterfly, in *Madama Butterfly*, converts to Christianity for superficial reasons, seeing it as the American religion of success and power.

On the other hand, Puccini generally treats the genuine religious feelings of his heroines sympathetically. Mimi, in *La bohème*, seems to be the ideal, describing herself as a woman who rarely attends mass but frequently prays to God. Musetta's prayer in the final act, accompanied by an act of charity, shows us a sympathetic side of her character which we do not see earlier in the opera. Angelica commits a mortal sin by taking her own life when she learns of her son's death, but despite the teaching of the Church, she is rewarded with a vision of her son

accompanied by the Virgin Mary. Butterfly demonstrates genuine piety when, in her moment of despair, she rejects her adopted religion and returns to the faith of her ancestors.

Besides *Tosca*, the opera in which religion plays the largest role is *The Girl of the Golden West* (*La fanciulla del West*), though there is not a church or minister in sight. In Belasco's play about the Gold Rush, the tavern-keeper Minnie seeks to educate the miners with lessons about classical literature. In the opera, her "school" is replaced by a Bible class, where she teaches lessons of repentance and forgiveness. In the final scene, begging the miners to pardon the man she loves, a repentant leader of a gang of thieves, she reminds them of the lesson she taught them, moving one of the miners to declare, "Your words come from God," as he frees him. This, and not the pageantry of the Church service depicted at the conclusion of the first act of *Tosca*, was the sort of religion that Puccini could accept.

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