

## Tosca

In what was famously described as his 'shabby little shocker', Puccini broke with past traditions to usher in a new century of operas that spoke directly and uncompromisingly to their audiences, as **Susan Rutherford** explains

As Tosca thrusts a knife into Scarpia, she exclaims: 'Questo è il bacio di Tosca!' ('That is Tosca's kiss!'). Her blade severed not only the life of her sadistic assailant, but also – at least for some critics – a particular image of Italian opera as idealised, poetic entertainment. 'In *Tosca*, all is black, tragic, terrible,' wrote critic Alfredo Colombani in the *Corriere della sera* following the opera's first performance on 14 January 1900. By the end of the work, all the major characters are dead: its body count includes two suicides, one murder and an execution.

This newly sombre approach to opera had its beginnings in a play by French dramatist Victorien Sardou. Written for Sarah Bernhardt in 1887, *La Tosca* (sic) had played to enthusiastic audiences in Paris. Two years later, Giacomo Puccini – then at the beginning of his career – declared to his publisher Giulio Ricordi that in the core of Sardou's text he had found 'the opera I need, with no overblown proportions, no elaborate spectacle'.

Yet the project only began to take shape after Puccini had composed the works that established his international reputation: *Manon Lescaut* (1893) and *La bohème* (1896). The librettists of both those operas, Luigi Illica and Giuseppe Giacosa, would continue their collaboration with Puccini on *Tosca*.

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## Tosca asks no pardon for Scarpia's death. Rather, it is she who pardons him for his crimes



### A problematic genesis

The development of the libretto was not without its problems, however. Illica and Giacosa became increasingly less convinced than Puccini that Sardou's play provided suitable material for an opera. Set over a precise 18-hour period during the Bourbon occupation of Rome in 1800, it relates the attempts of a singer (Floria Tosca) to save her lover (the artist and political activist Mario Cavaradossi) from the machinations of the corrupt chief of police, Baron Scarpia.

Puccini might have appreciated the drama's tautness, but its lack of large-scale set pieces, its mix of impassioned melodrama and realism, and its narrative structure all concerned his librettists. Giacosa complained to Ricordi in 1896 of the 'absolute unadaptability' of the play for lyric theatre. Despite its swift pace, he wrote, the plot was merely a 'monotonous' cycle of duets. More damning still, the drama consisted of 'coarse emotional events, without poetry'.

Giacosa reluctantly remained on the team, but disagreements continued. Particular tensions arose when Puccini insisted on removing a philosophical 'Farewell to Art and Life' penned by Illica for Cavaradossi at the beginning of Act III (a passage admired by Verdi some years earlier) in favour of the tenor's agonised, more personal 'E lucevan le stelle' ('The stars were shining').

above  
Sinéad Campbell-Wallace  
(Tosca) and Roland Wood  
(Scarpia) in *Tosca*, Scottish  
Opera, 2019.

Furthermore, Ricordi argued in a letter to Puccini on 10 October 1899 that the lovers' reunion just before Cavaradossi's execution ought to have produced 'a kind of hymn... a hymn of love', but instead disappointedly consisted of 'a few bars' of a 'fragmentary duet'. Where, the publisher demanded, was 'that Puccini of noble, warm and vigorous inspiration' who could respond to the 'stupendously lyrical moments' of the scene in a manner to move his audience to tears?

Puccini, however, held fast to his resolve. A conventional duet in those last desperate moments was implausible, he retorted. Tosca's attention was wholly on preparing Cavaradossi for the supposedly 'mock' execution, not on bidding him farewell. And indeed, those hurried exchanges are surely more intensely real and moving than any formal duet.

Such altercations illustrate the way in which a sense of theatre profoundly imbued Puccini's compositional perspective. While many composers primarily *heard* drama, he both heard and *saw* drama. His musical attention to visual detail anticipates much 20th-century cinematic music. And in *Tosca*, Puccini arrived at a greater sophistication in the use of motif as a subtext of associations between characters and events than in his previous operas. More than 50 motifs



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Roland Wood as Scarpia in  
*Tosca*. Scottish Opera, 2019.

thread through the score, the most famous of which is the descending pattern of three chords that opens the opera with compelling stridency, and which is later revealed as a musical embodiment of Scarpia and all he represents – power, terror, cruelty. The interval between the first and third chords, surely not coincidentally, is a tritone, whose dissonance was considered so disturbing in medieval times it was dubbed the 'diabolus in musica' (or 'devil in music').

### Centuries of Roman history

Fittingly, Ricordi arranged *Tosca's* premiere for the Teatro Costanzi in Rome. An opera set in Rome at the beginning of one century (1800) would receive its first performance in the same city at the beginning of another (1900). Indeed, the 'elaborate spectacle' that Puccini had thought to be happily missing from the play turned out to be Rome itself. No other Italian city displays the visual layering of its long history quite so dramatically. Puccini and his designer, Adolfo Hohenstein, made considerable efforts to reproduce Rome accurately on stage.

They dispensed with Sardou's choice of the Sant'Andrea al Quirinale (which does not have a chapel) in Act I, in favour of the lavish interior of Sant'Andrea della Valle, designed by Gian Lorenzo Bernini in 1658. Curiously, as the opera progresses, its settings move further back in time, rooting the spectators ever deeper in Rome's history. The Palazzo Farnese, one of Rome's grandest palaces – designed around 1517 and containing architectural features later added by Michelangelo – provided the location for Act II. The final act takes place in the Castel Sant'Angelo, an imposing reminder of ancient Rome on the banks of the Tiber. Commissioned in the second century CE by the Emperor Hadrian as a mausoleum for himself and his family, it subsequently became a fortress and a prison until 1901 (just a year after *Tosca's* premiere), when it was turned into a museum.

Hohenstein's designs made imaginative use of these environs. But life beyond the immediate confines of those settings also intrudes via 'noises off', sometimes establishing mood, at other times driving the action. In Act II, for example, Scarpia's room in the Palazzo Farnese is filled with the music drifting up from the concert below. When Cavaradossi is brought in for questioning, Scarpia interrogates him against the background of Tosca's singing. And when it's Tosca's turn to be interrogated, Scarpia employs the added pressure of the torture audibly inflicted on Cavaradossi in an adjoining room.

Act II's horrors of torture and death are contrasted with the serene opening of Act III, just before dawn: outside the castle walls, a shepherd boy is heard singing. As his voice recedes, Rome's bells sound the call

to morning prayers. Puccini made a special trip to the city to get these sounds exactly right. There are 11 different bells in total in his scoring. The lowest is pitched in E, reproducing the sound of the Great Bell ('il Campanone') at St Peter's Basilica. In effect, Puccini expands the opera's aural perspective, enabling us to hear into the distance, beyond the stage picture.

### Assertiveness and murder

In terms of dramatic action, *Tosca* was akin to a 'rescue opera', the genre that had emerged in the wake of the French revolution. Its twist, however, is the sheer malevolence of Scarpia. He does not merely desire Tosca but revels in her resistance, proclaiming that 'violent conquest' has a stronger flavour than 'easy surrender'. Men who demand a sexual price for helping a woman (usually a matter of sparing her lover or family member from death) had long stalked their way through Italian operatic history. Often, their targeted victims turn their anguish on themselves: Leonora in Verdi's *Il trovatore* chooses poison; Gioconda in Ponchielli's *La Gioconda* avoids Barnaba's clutches by stabbing herself. Tosca, however – embodying ideas of female liberty aroused by the French Revolution from the time of the opera's setting, as well as the figure of the 'nuova donna' ('new woman') circulating in Italy during the opera's inception – takes a more assertive line.

Women die but rarely kill in 19th-century Italian opera. Those few who do so usually commit their violence off stage, as in Donizetti's *Lucia di Lammermoor* (1835) and *Maria di Rudenz* (1837), or Verdi's *Il corsaro* (1848). (A notable exception is Odabella's politically nuanced centre-stage dispatch of Attila in the final bars of Verdi's *Attila* of 1846.) Such women, unlike their male counterparts, were expected to demonstrate repentance for the taking of a life – even when their actions might occasion the audience's understanding. Gulnara (*Il corsaro*), for example, kills the man who enslaved her in his harem and now threatens her life and that of the man she loves. Writing to the soprano Marianna Barbieri-Nini before the opera's premiere, Verdi was careful to stress that in the final terzetto she must never forget that she has 'killed a man' nor cease to demonstrate her remorse.

Half a century later, however, Tosca's placing of a crucifix in Scarpia's dead hands and her framing of his body with candles (a mime created by Bernhardt in the theatrical version and retained by Puccini) are far more ambiguous gestures. She asks no pardon for his death. Rather, it is she who now pardons *him* for his crimes ('È morto. Or gli perdono!', 'He is dead. Only now can I forgive him!'). The laying out of his body in religious fashion is an acknowledgement of the rites of her faith, not an expression of regret.



But Scarpia's signature on the warrant for Cavaradosi's execution enables him to continue his torture of the lovers from beyond the grave. In fact, their double tragedy distorted one of the oldest of operatic conventions: the prison scene. In his satire on Italian opera (*Il teatro alla moda*, 1720), Benedetto Marcello had advised poets that:

'If a husband and wife are imprisoned together, and if one of them should have to die, it is absolutely necessary to have the other stay alive so that he or she can sing a cheerful aria. This will raise the audience's morale and make them realise that it is all only make-believe.'

In *Tosca* there is no such sop to an audience's sensibilities. Had he had his way, however, Puccini would have ended things differently. In a meeting with Sardou, he argued for Tosca's collapse into crazed grief instead of death:

'This morning I spent an hour at Sardou's... He wants that poor woman dead at all costs. Now that Deibler [France's last executioner] has had his day, the Magus [Sardou] wants to *take his place!* He accepts the madness, but would have her faint away, die exhausted like a bird.'

above  
Gwyn Hughes Jones as  
Cavaradosi in *Tosca*. Scottish  
Opera, 2019.



In the end, Puccini capitulated. Tosca leaps in defiance of the pursuing soldiers, with her last cry of 'Scarpia, avanti a Dio!' ('Scarpia, we shall meet before God!') making it clear that she will hunt him down even after death.

### **The meaning of Tosca's death**

In truth, once captured with Scarpia's blood on her hands, what other option did Tosca have? As she launches herself into the void, however, it's worth remembering the hideous deaths other women accused of subversive activities endured under Bourbon rule in southern Italy. In Naples in 1799, Eleonora Pimentel Fonseca was first hanged and then suspended by her feet without her undergarments in a public square. A year later in Palermo, Luisa Sanfelice's head was literally hacked off with a knife after the attempt to hang her was bungled. Like Angelotti earlier in the opera, Tosca's final act of resistance was to deny the authorities control of her death.

Despite palpable anticipation, the first night of *Tosca* in Rome was somewhat subdued, with a bomb threat having disrupted the theatre. Subsequent performances built admiring audiences, however, and within five months the opera was on the international circuit. Yet critical reception often echoed the earlier concerns of Puccini's librettists and publisher. Not only had the notion of opera as pleasure been derailed by the brutality of *Tosca's* narrative, but the work also seemed to threaten opera's very identity as poetry set to music. Vincenzo Morello implied as much in *La tribuna*:

'For half an hour we listened to two characters singing in monosyllables, exclamations, swear words, short phrases and truncated words... How is it possible to prolong this fragmented dialogue for so long? ... Musical characters need to have something to say, need the words to express their own thoughts and feelings: gestures and grimaces are not enough!'

Aren't they? *Tosca* ushered into the new century a correspondingly new idea of opera: one that tackled more uncompromising subjects in a less formal style, and one that spoke more directly to its audiences. And as the new century's years unfolded, as the promise of a new epoch shuddered under bombardment on Europe's fields or cities, or bled to death in prison cells of regimes where countless Scarpias worked their evil, it became evident that *Tosca* was not, after all, an opera about the past. It was one about the future.

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Gwyn Hughes Jones as  
Cavaradossi in *Tosca*. Scottish  
Opera, 2019.

Photography by  
James Glossop.

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