

# TOSCA, ONE OF THE MOST POPULAR OPERAS

Researched by George Kurti Plohn



My title attempts to reflect the fact that this Puccini melodrama, is an operatic thriller, with a volatile diva, an idealist artist in love with her, a sadistic police chief, real historical events, torture, a bloody killing and a final suicide; an opera that indeed electrified audiences all over the world for more than a century, and also because it has some of Puccini's best-known lyrical arias.

About Puccini's tempestuous life I spoke to you last month on the occasion of his other successful opera, *La bohème*, to which I would like only to add another juicy gossip, namely that Puccini married a lady by the name Elvira Gemignani, after her husband was murdered by one of his jealous mistresses. She, however, did not escape the turmoil of infidelity, as Puccini himself was a known womanizer. Another story is that later in life, Puccini was briefly acquainted with Benito Mussolini, but never personally joined the fascist party, even though they made him an honorary member without his blessing.

Suffice to say that Giacomo Puccini, who lived between 1858-1924, was one of the greatest exponents of a new trend, namely the operatic realism.

What was the historic background at the time when this opera takes place?

The Kingdom of Naples's control of Rome was threatened by Napoleon's invasion of Italy. At that time, Italy had long been divided into a number of small states, with the

Pope in Rome ruling the Papal States in central Italy. The Kingdom of Naples, between 1282 and 1816, comprised the part of the Italian peninsula south of the Papal States. Following the French Revolution, a French army under Napoleon invaded Italy in 1796, entering Rome almost unopposed in February 1798, and establishing a republic there, ruled by seven consuls; and in the opera *Tosca*, that is the office formerly held by the then fugitive Angelotti, who appears early in Act 1 of the opera. In September 1799 the French, who had protected the republic, withdrew from Rome. As they left, troops of the Kingdom of Naples retook the city, and the terror against the republicans of the previous regime started with vengeance, and this constitutes in essence the subject of our opera.

Composed between 1896-1899, when Puccini was 42, *Tosca* was first performed in January 1900 at the Scala in Milan, under the baton of then 33 years old Arturo Toscanini. The premiere was a national event. Many Roman dignitaries attended, as did Queen Margherita, the Prime Minister of Italy with several members of his cabinet and a number of Puccini's operatic rivals, including Pietro Mascagni. The opera was a great success. Puccini travelled then to London in July for the British premiere at the Royal Opera House, Covent Garden, following which the impresario Ricordi's London representative quickly signed a contract to take *Tosca* to New York. The premiere at the Metropolitan Opera was on February 4, 1901. The opera was subsequently premiered at venues throughout Europe, the Americas, Australia and the Far East; and by the outbreak of the war in 1914 it had been performed in more than 50 cities worldwide.

## **Synopsis**

According to the libretto, the action of *Tosca* takes place in Rome in June 1800, more precisely in the afternoon, evening, and early morning of the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> of June.

### **Act 1**

On that day of June of 1800, Rome is still ruled by fear, on the news that republicanism is collapsing, shifting back to royalism. Scarpia, the villain in our opera, a tyrannical chief of the secret police on the side of royalism commits many republicans to prison, and of those, Angelotti, succeeds in breaking out of prison, is rushing in the church of Sant' Andrea della Valle. There he meets with another republican, the painter Cavaradossi, who after singing the beautiful aria

*"Recondita armonia"* ["Hidden harmony"] harbors Angelotti in a secret hideout. After the two left, Scarpia looking for Angelotti, enters the church. He cannot find Angelotti, but meets Tosca there. She is a singer, and is Cavaradossi's lover. Scarpia tricks Tosca into going to Cavaradossi's house, and has his subordinates follow her.

## **Act 2**

In the Farnese Palace, Scarpia receives word that his subordinates unable to find Angelotti, have arrested Cavaradossi instead. He orders his immediate torture, but Cavaradossi refuses to reveal Angelotti's whereabouts. Scarpia then shows Tosca her lover's tortured state. Tosca, seeing that, gives up the route to the secret hideout to Scarpia.

But word comes then that Napoleon has won the Battle of Marengo, which means a defeat for the royalists. On the news of Napoleon's victory, Cavaradossi exclaims with delight *"Vittoria! Vittoria!"* [Victory, victory], following which Tosca sings her most beautiful aria *"Vissi d'arte, vissi d'amore"* ["I lived for art, I lived for love"]. Scarpia furious, decides to have Cavaradossi put to death.

Tosca begs Scarpia for her lover's life. Scarpia demands instead that Tosca yield herself to him in exchange for her lover's life, and she demands in return that her lover's life be spared. Scarpia agrees and orders that the execution should be done "as in a previous case". As Scarpia runs over to embrace Tosca, shouting: *Tosca, finalmente mia!* [Tosca, finally you are mine!], she at that very moment stabs him to death with a knife she grabbed from the table.

## **Act 3**

Cavaradossi confined now in the prison at the castle of Sant'Angelo, sings the famous aria *"E lucevan le stelle"* ["And the stars shone"]. Tosca runs in and tells him that everything will be all right; the firing squad will use only blank bullets. But, when that takes place, Tosca soon realizes that she was cheated, and that Cavaradossi was shot dead. When the cops rush in to arrest Tosca for Scarpia's murder, she kills herself by leaping down from the parapet of the castle.

And this brings to end this great opera.

This opera's story is fiction, but it has its setting in real places in today's Rome. Visiting Rome, you can enter any time in the church of Sant'Andrea della Valle, where the action of the opera takes place in act 1. The same at the Farnese Palace, where act 2 takes place, which presently is the building that houses the embassy of France. Then the castle of Sant'Angelo, in act 3, where Cavaradossi's execution and Tosca's suicide takes place, is one of the most famous sightseeing spots in Rome, a towering round structure on the banks of river Tiber, built in antiquity, in 130 A.D., having been commissioned by the Roman Emperor Hadrian as a mausoleum for himself and his family.

\*\*\*\*\*

Tosca's popularity, its realism, and its high-voltage finale provided the perfect background for some famous and notorious accidents.

One was when Pavarotti had a misadventure which happened to him in this opera. Mistaking the starting time, he believed it was 8 pm, instead of the actual 7:30; he was still in his dressing room in his underwear when the conductor lifted his baton in the pit. Since Cavaradossi is on stage almost immediately, this caused a crisis that ended only by bringing down the curtain due to "technical difficulties" according to the announcement, and then starting again. Then, in act 2, seated on a steel-reinforced stool following the torture scene, when Tosca, then the soprano Hildegard Behrens, losing her balance flung herself on top of him, instead of merely embracing him. Inevitably, the stool collapsed. It looked like, said gleefully Pavarotti later, that Tosca and her lover are making it out right there and then on the stage.

Another such event was when on the front-page headlines in Italian newspapers was: "Cavaradossi has been shot!"; indeed at the Macerata summer festival in July 1995, when the tenor was shot in the 3rd act - as usually, supposedly with blanks. But this time when Tosca rushed to him as her

role calls for, she heard a whisper from him: "Call an ambulance!...", and then she fainted at the sight of his blood. Because of a blank was charged with too much powder, it had pierced Cavaradossi's boot and hurt his leg. It is possible that the gun was overcharged because of another accident at the same festival, some years before, when the headlines read: "Cavaradossi dies from heart attack instead of bullets" (as the guns did not go off!). Then five days later, going on stage at the beginning of act 2, the same tenor's crutch slipped, causing a double fracture of the other leg...). Wasn't that too much?!

Tosca's finale seems to be prone also to less lethal accidents. The most popular is the *bouncing Tosca*: Tosca as usual jumps to her death from the parapet of Castel Sant'Angelo. But the stage workers had improved her security by replacing the soft mattress used previously, with a trampoline, so that Tosca appeared 2 or 3 times from behind the wall... where up and down she went.

And then the *collective suicide* story: the stage director was giving last-minute instruction to the extras hired as soldiers. There had been no previous stage rehearsal with them, so he gave them the usual instruction "exit with the principals". When Tosca leapt from the parapet, seeing no other principals left on stage, they all dutifully jumped after her, giving a Shakespearean greatness to the final tragedy.

Then, I also have an anecdote from the great baritone, perhaps the greatest Scarpia ever, Tito Gobbi's memoirs: Maria Callas was Tosca, and during the 2nd act she came too near the candles burning on Scarpia's desk and ignited her hair (or wig). Gobbi immediately improvised a raptor-like motion: he jumped on Tosca, embraced her and extinguished the flames. Tosca, remaining in role, rejected him with disgust, while whispering to him "thank you, Tito"... just before killing him with the knife.

Our DVD is a live 1978 recording from the Metropolitan Opera, with James Conlon conducting with the great soprano Shirley Verrett in the title role, the legendary Italian tenor Luciano Pavarotti as Cavaradossi, the baritone Cornell Macneil as Scarpia, and the bass baritone John Cheek in the role of Angelotti.

Now, please lean back and enjoy this fabulous opera as interpreted by our great singers. The chandeliers at the MET are slowly dimmed and drawn up

toward the ceiling...A call for the conductor "Maestro, to the pit" – sounds behind the stage – and the music soon begins for Tosca by Giacomo Puccini.

A final word about the soprano who was to be the first Tosca at the opera's premier. She was the celebrated Romanian operatic soprano **Hariclea Darclée**, who had a three-decade-long brilliant career.

Puccini asked her to sing the role of Tosca at the premiere, and she accepted with one condition: to write an additional aria for her to be sung at the end of Act 2. Puccini immediately obliged and composed that wonderful aria: "*Visi d'arte, visi d'amore*" in this opera.

Puccini, the composer of also Manon Lescaut, reportedly considered hers to have been "the most beautiful and exquisite Manon" ever. Darclée was considered the equivalent, in the opera world, of Sarah Bernhardt in the theatre.



Giacomo Puccini at the time of Tosca's premier



Castel Sant'Angelo - Rome

Pavarotti – Tosca – Act 1- Recondita armonia:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OR-3jUWP6e8>

Luciano Pavarotti & Shirley Verrett - Mario, Mario, Mario!; Tosca, Act 2:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Z3MJBRMsOS4>

Rehearsal:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KVLeo0zTCpw>