

## *Tosca*

Giacomo Puccini

*Tosca*, which had its premiere in Rome in January, 1900, followed Puccini's very successful *La Boheme* by almost exactly four years. It is based on the French play *La Tosca* of Victorien Sardou, which appeared in 1887. In order to understand what's going on in the opera, it's necessary to read the play, as the play's action was necessarily condensed in the process of compressing its five acts into the three acts of the opera. First some historical background:

*Tosca* takes place in the span of 17 hours, from noon on June 16, 1800 until 5:00 a.m. the following day. The French Revolutionary Wars (1792-1802) were then at their height, but the French presence in Italy was on the wane due to Horatio Nelson's destruction of the French fleet in the battle of the Nile (Aug. 1, 1798). Napoleon had successfully invaded Italy in 1796 and established the Cisalpine Republic in Northern Italy. After Napoleon's departure for his unsuccessful Egyptian campaign, his forces, under the leadership of Jean Etienne Chamionnet, pressed southward. They occupied the Papal States, conquering Rome and setting up the Roman Republic on July 15, 1798, forcing the Pope to flee in the process. They then proceeded on to Naples (a separate kingdom in those days, under Ferdinand IV) and after defeating the Neapolitan Army established the so-called Parthenopean Republic in January, 1799. (Parthenope, an ancient name for Naples, derived from the siren Parthenope who drowned herself after being unsuccessful in her attempts to seduce Ulysses.) The occupation of Naples lasted only until June of 1799, when coalition forces, including Lord Nelson, were successful in ejecting the French (amid tremendous slaughter) who, soon thereafter, were also forced to evacuate Rome. \*

Among the revolutionaries in Naples prior to its occupation by French forces was a Neapolitan, Cesare Angelotti (the first character who appears on the stage in the opera). As a young man he had lived in London, and had spent a week in the

embraces of a prostitute whom he encountered in the seedy area of Vauxhall. Imagine his amazement when he met this same woman twenty years later at a dinner party in Naples. She was now the wife of the British Ambassador, Lord Hamilton. (This Emma Hamilton is best remembered today for having been the mistress of Lord Nelson.) Lady Hamilton's hostility towards the revolutionists so infuriated Angelotti that he told the whole company of his encounter with her. This was a serious mistake, since Lady Hamilton was a favorite of the Queen of Naples, Marie Caroline (Sister of Marie Antoinette). The Queen sent her police after Angelotti who was lucky to escape Naples with his life. He returned when the French troops conquered Naples and served in the revolutionary government, but he was forced to flee again when the Second Coalition forces, retook the city and slaughtered most of the republicans

Angelotti escaped to Rome, but when the Roman Republic fell in Sept. 1799 he was incarcerated in the Castel Sant'Angelo for a period of about ten months. The new Roman chief of police, Baron Scarpia (he had been in town for only a week) determined to send Angelotti back to Naples where Lady Hamilton could have the pleasure of seeing him hanged. Scarpia was particularly concerned that Angelotti's sister, the Marchesa Attavanti (who lived in Rome), would somehow arrange her brother's release, in which case Scarpia would be in serious trouble with the Queen. The Marchesa did in fact bribe a jailer who allowed Angelotti to escape. Angelotti made his way to the church of Sant'Andrea della Valle (less than a mile from Castel Sant'Angelo) where he hid overnight in the Angelotti Chapel (*not* the Attavanti Chapel as in the opera) and was discovered the next morning by the painter Mario Cavaradossi.

Cavaradossi had been raised in France (of an Italian father and a French woman). He was a "liberal," a pejorative applied by the government of Rome (remember the Pope was its leader) to people who read Voltaire and other irreligious writers and, in general, opposed the Church. (And indeed the theme of *Tosca* is the "liberal" French republicans vs. the reactionary forces of the

Church.) Thus Cavaradossi was already on the police black list and Scarpia quickly suspected that he had assisted Angelotti to escape. These background facts set the stage for Act I of *Tosca*.

The battle of Marengo, mentioned in the opera, took place on June 14, 1800 (this is why we can pinpoint the exact date of the action). In this battle in Northern Italy the Austrian general Melas thought that he had carried the day early in the morning. However when Melas left the field Napoleon (by then returned from Egypt) rallied his forces to an overwhelming victory. Thus the conflicting battle reports. The *Te Deum* in Act I and the cantata in Act II are intended to celebrate the putative victory. The news of the defeat arrives during the torture scene later in Act II. (In the play the Neapolitan court composer Giovanni Paisiello writes the cantata but not in the opera.)

Any opera lover visiting Rome should go to Castel Sant'Angelo (site of Act III) and then walk 20 minutes to the church of Sant'Andrea della Valle, where Act I takes place. About 200 meters from the church is the Argentine Theater where Floria Tosca performed. Two hundred meters in another direction is the Campo dei Fiori where Tosca bought the flowers she placed at the feet of the Madonna. Another 200 yards from that is the Palazzo Farnese, site of Act II, but the French embassy now occupies the palace and one can enter only on official business. Visiting these places makes the opera come alive; indeed, some of my very opera-literate friends had thought, before I enlightened them, that *Tosca* was fact, not fiction!

Here is a brief synopsis of the action. The opera opens with three chords marked *fff, tutta forza*, meant to symbolize the sinister Baron Scarpia. It is late morning. Angelotti appears, and hides in the Attavanti Chapel. Soon Mario Cavaradossi comes in, as he is painting a picture of the Madalenna for the church. He discovers Angelotti, and recognizing him as a fellow revolutionary promises to help him escape, by hiding him in his country villa. Soon Tosca enters to inform

Mario that she is free that evening (she is an opera singer, and there is no performance scheduled). Despite the fact that she is extremely devout, she suggests to Mario that they repair to his villa that evening for a little hanky-panky. Mario readily agrees. (By then Angelotti will have successfully escaped to Frascati, where his sister has a summer palace and where he will, hopefully, be beyond the reach of Scarpia.)

Tosca becomes jealous of the portrait Mario is painting, thinking he must be in love with the model who is actually the Marchesa Attavanti, Angelotti's sister, who comes to pray every day for her brother. Mario, not knowing who she is, has used her as a model, and in one of the only four arias in the opera, "Recondite armonia," compares the beauty of his dark Floria to that of his unknown model, sung before Tosca's arrival. (The jealousy of Tosca is the real crux of the plot, so much so that the opera might well have been entitled *Tosca's Jealousy*.)

When Tosca leaves to return to the theater for a rehearsal (after having placed her flowers at the feet of the Madonna) Angelotti emerges from the chapel and he and Cavaradossi take off for the villa where Angelotti plans to hide until dark. Soon Baron Scarpia appears, for he is suspicious of Cavaradossi, and suspects that he might be implicated in Angelotti's escape as already mentioned. He interrogates the Sacristan and then, importantly, finds a woman's fan that Angelotti has dropped. (It was part of the woman's costume supplied by the Marchesa as a disguise for her brother.) This confirms Scarpia's suspicions, and when Tosca reappears to inform Mario that she has to sing that night after all (so no hanky-panky) in a cantata, which the Queen will attend, hastily arranged to celebrate the supposed victory over the French at Marengo. Scarpia now produces the fan that Angelotti left behind, and uses it to arouse Tosca's jealousy, suggesting that Mario has been entertaining another woman in the church. As planned, Tosca, in jealous rage, leaves for Mario's villa in order to confront him, and Scarpia sends his secret police to shadow her. The act ends with a *Te Deum* sung by a huge chorus of choirboys, Theatine friars, nuns and

townspeople celebrating the (supposed) defeat of the French at Marengo while Scarpia, at the side, gloats over his successful cunning.

Act II, as mentioned, takes place in and near Scarpia's chambers in the Palazzo Farnese that evening. It opens with Scarpia's aria, intended to portray his totally depravity. He informs the audience, among other nice sentiments, that he much prefers rape to seduction, and can hardly wait for the time when he will be able to rape Tosca, for whom he has long been lusting (even though he has only been in Rome for a week--operatic license here). Soon his sinister henchman Spoleta appears, informing Scarpia that he had followed Tosca to Cavaradossi's villa, and found no sign of Angelotti (who was actually hiding in a well in the garden). He did however arrest Cavaradossi as he didn't like his attitude. "Good," says Scarpia. "Let's question him." (Translation: "Let's torture him.") So they begin the interrogation, carried out in counterpoint with the cantata Tosca is singing with the chorus offstage, in celebration of the victory at Marengo. (Listen to see if you can identify a gavotte as part of the cantata music.) The cantata ends and Tosca appears, while the torture goes on and on in an adjacent room. Cavaradossi's screams enlighten the proceedings. Eventually Tosca can take no more, and blurts out Angelotti's hiding place. Scarpia ends the torture then, and permits the lovers to meet, but when Mario finds out that Tosca has betrayed Angelotti he is furious. Just about then word comes that Napoleon had taken the field at Marengo and had snatched victory from the jaws of defeat! Cavaradossi, ecstatic, shouts out "Vittoria! Vittoria!" and Scarpia decides to have him put to death as a traitor and as a substitute for Angelotti who, the police discovered when they went to arrest him, has committed suicide.

After Cavaradossi is dragged off to jail to await execution, Tosca and Scarpia are left alone. Tosca begs for her lover's life, and Scarpia offers a bargain: Mario's life for Tosca's body. Tosca briefly thinks of obtaining a pardon from the Queen, but as Scarpia points out, the Queen can't pardon a cadaver. (Translation: Scarpia will see that Cavaradossi is executed before the Queen has time to act.)

Tosca then sings her big aria “Vissi d’arte,” (I lived for art) in which she asks God why, after all her good deeds, putting flowers at the feet of the Madonna, giving alms to the poor, etc, does He repay her in this fashion. (She never mentions to God her hanky-panky with Mario.) Since God fails to answer, Tosca agrees to Scarpia’s proposition, but Scarpia tells Tosca that he is unable to release Cavardossi unconditionally; a fake execution is necessary so no one will suspect that such a dangerous criminal had been set free. He gives orders to Spoleta to proceed with the fake execution “as in the case of Palmieri.” Tosca then demands that Scarpia sign a safe-conduct for her and Mario so that they can get out of Rome. Scarpia agrees, but while he is signing Tosca notices a knife on the table where Scarpia had been dining earlier. When he turns to embrace her, she stabs him to the words “*This* is Tosca’s kiss!” Scarpia dies, and Tosca carefully crosses his arms over his chest, placing a crucifix on them and then turns towards him and scornfully utters the signature words of the opera: “E avanti a lui tremava tutta Roma!” (And before him, all Rome trembled.) She grasps the safe conduct and departs, as the curtain falls on Act II.

Act III takes place on the roof of Castel Sant’Angelo, and opens with a shepherd boy singing a folk song (in local Roman dialect) and a cacophony of all the church bells of Rome ringing, for it is dawn. (Puccini apparently spent considerable time studying the Roman church bells so that he could faithfully represent them.) Mario is in his cell, awaiting execution. He persuades the jailer to provide him with pen and paper so that he can write a farewell note to Tosca. While writing it he sings the famous aria “E lucevan le stelle” (And the stars were shining) in which he recounts the blissful moments he and Tosca have enjoyed in the past, alone in his villa. Tosca enters, tells Mario that he is saved, and explains the fake execution to him, warning him to be a good actor, and not to hurt himself when he falls down. This is all part of a rapturous duet the lovers sing until the soldiers appear. They shoot Mario, ostensibly with blanks, but when Tosca calls to him to get up, he doesn’t move. Tosca realizes that the fake execution was itself a fake, and that Mario is dead. Just then she hears shouts

from soldiers and police running up the stairs. Scarpia's body has been discovered, and they are coming for Tosca. She thereupon jumps off the roof, calling out as she commits suicide "Scarpia, avanti a Dio!" (Scarpia, we will meet before God!) And the final curtain falls.

It is customary for operatic characters to die violent deaths, but *Tosca* is unique in that all of the four main characters die violently. There are operas with mass deaths (e.g. *Dialogue of the Carmelites*, *The Sicilian Vespers*, *Les Huguenots*) but the dead consist mostly of members of the chorus or comprimario singers, not principals.

\*An interesting aside: After his victory in Naples, Lord Nelson and his mistress Lady Emma Hamilton set out for England. The Mediterranean was too full of French ships for safe passage, and obviously they couldn't travel overland through France. So they swung to the east, traveling to the Netherlands, via Hungary and Austria, where they were entertained by the Esterhazy's. Lord Nelson was welcomed as an ally against the common foe, France, a country which not only was attempting to abolish the institution of royalty but had also beheaded the Emperor's (Francis II) aunt, Marie Antoinette. While Lord Nelson was in Esterhazy, he and Emma are presumed to have heard the "Lord Nelson Mass" which Haydn had composed in 1798 about the same time as Lord Nelson's victory over Napoleon in the battle of the Nile, and so-named as a result. This Mass, considered by many to be Haydn's greatest choral work, is one that many of you have probably sung. I myself have sung it (in the chorus) twice.