By Gordon Kalton Williams

TOSCA Triumphant

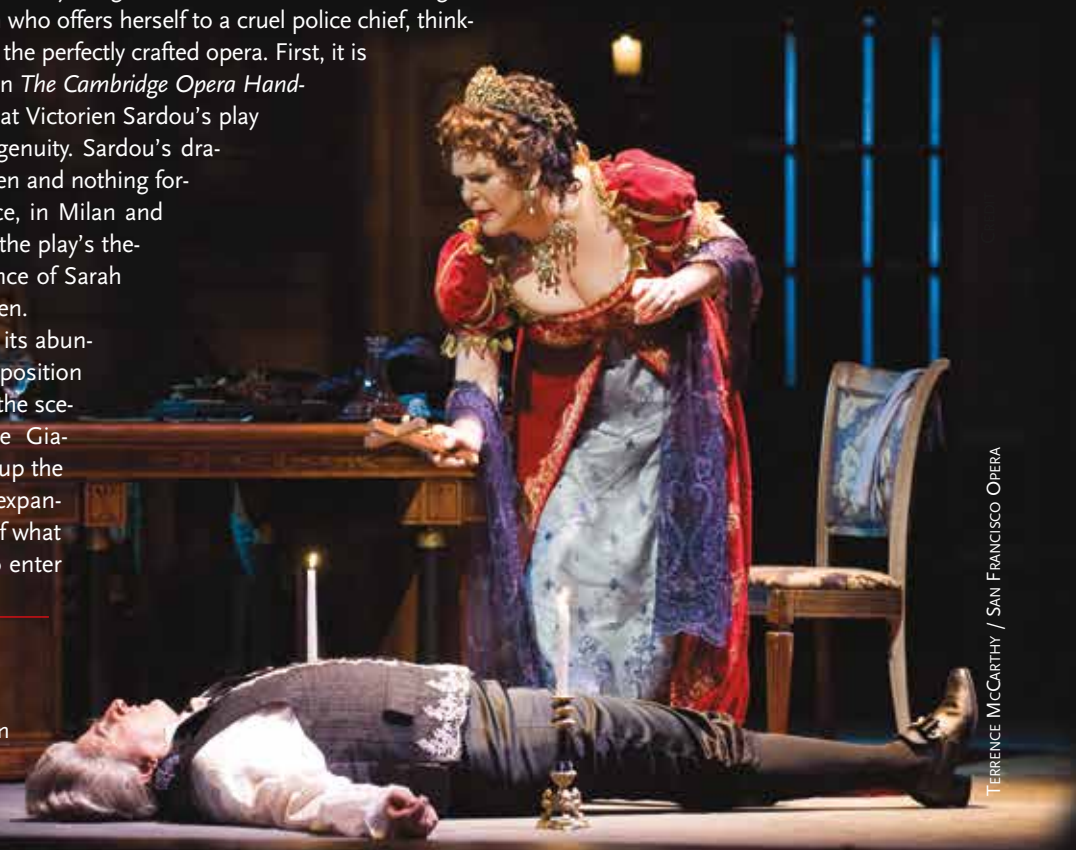
"Well, *Tosca* isn't for everyone," says the sinister Mr. White in the 2008 007 film *Quantum of Solace* as his criminal associates leave a performance of Puccini's opera. They're actually fleeing, these villains, because they realize James Bond is on to them. But it would be true to say that *Tosca* is not everyone's favorite. UC Berkeley professor Joseph Kerman, author of the classic 1956 text *Opera as Drama*, famously called *Tosca* a "shabby little shocker," while Gustav Mahler, seeing a performance in 1903, considered it a poor excuse for a masterpiece (*Meistermachwerk*). "Nowadays every shoemaker's apprentice is a master orchestrator," he wrote.

Filmed at the Bregenz Festival, the scene in *Quantum of Solace* incorporates *Tosca*'s Act I finale (one of opera's most brilliant coups de théâtre) but then—to the anguished "murder" music from *Tosca*'s Act II—there is a shootout sequence. Considering how well the music integrates this filmic violence, a person might sympathize with any critic's attempt to frame ethical questions over this opera, with its suicides, assassination, and execution.

But none of this criticism has affected *Tosca*'s popularity. San Francisco Opera has mounted *Tosca* 38 times since its founding in 1923. It was the opera that opened the War Memorial Opera House in 1932 and the first work performed in the renovated War Memorial in 1997. Further, many of the great opera legends of the past century have sung the principal roles here: no less than Claudia Muzio, Lotte Lehmann, Renata Tebaldi, Dorothy Kirsten, Leontyne Price, and Montserrat Caballé as Tosca, just to name a few sopranos; Cavaradossi has been performed by the likes of Mario Del Monaco, Jussi Björling, Franco Corelli, Plácido Domingo, and Luciano Pavarotti.

In many ways, Puccini's tale of a woman who offers herself to a cruel police chief, thinking, wrongly, she is saving her lover's life, is the perfectly crafted opera. First, it is based on dramaturgically sound material. In *The Cambridge Opera Handbook to Tosca*, author Mosco Carner says that Victorien Sardou's play *La Tosca* exhibits a "plot of the utmost ingenuity. Sardou's dramaturgy is impeccable: everything is foreseen and nothing forgotten." Puccini saw *La Tosca* at least twice, in Milan and Florence, in the early 1890s. He could test the play's theatricality, especially the powerful performance of Sarah Bernhardt for whom the play had been written.

Sardou's *Tosca* may be old-fashioned in its abundant characters, wordiness, and leisurely exposition (it is in five acts). But Puccini's librettists—the scenarist Luigi Illica and versifier Giuseppe Giacosa—did a magnificent job at ratchetting up the tension and then making room for lyrical expansion (e.g., love duets), adding something of what was missing in Sardou's original: space to enter



Terrence McCarthy / San Francisco Opera

Adrianne Pieczonka and Lado Ataneli in the Company's 2009 production of Tosca.

Opposite: The 2008 James Bond film Quantum of Solace *famously depicted* Tosca *from the Bregenz Festival's Floating Stage.*

Tosca is arguably the opera buff's opera *par excellence*

the characters' emotional worlds. One of their radical changes involved shifting the central act of Sardou's Act II—Tosca's performance of a cantata—into a poignant offstage counterpoint to Baron Scarpia's interrogation of his political suspect, Tosca's lover Cavaradossi (Sardou's Act III).

The opera begins later and more urgently than Sardou's play with prison escapee Angelotti arriving at the church where Cavaradossi is painting a Mary Magdalene. English musicologist Ernest Newman thought Puccini's librettists ignored important explanations and character motivations. But Illica simply has Cavaradossi exclaim, "The consul of the former Roman republic!" and a modern audience, accustomed to the efficiency of a screenplay, can deduce that Angelotti has fallen foul of his political enemies.

One of the advantages of this sort of filleting is that Puccini gets quickly to the first of the opera's big numbers. And for an audience (which decides the impact and durability of an opera as much as critics) these "hits" are undeniably a part of *Tosca*'s attractions.

Cavaradossi's "Recondita armonia," in which he compares his beloved Tosca's black eyes to the blue eyes of the Magdalene, can stand alone in a concert, but there you don't get to hear the Sacristan's pious asides, a perfect example of how Puccini uses music to delineate contrasting characters. "Mawkish" is the word used by Kerman to describe the "tone poem" at the beginning of *Tosca*'s third act, but the aria that arises out of it, Cavaradossi's "E lucevan le stelle," can be felt as honestly bereft as, condemned to die, he pens a farewell to Tosca. Originally Illica wrote here a paean to art and poetry, which greatly impressed Verdi when he heard a reading of the libretto in 1894. But, astutely, Puccini thought Cavaradossi's reminiscence of a happier time would strike a more suitable tone. The tragic tinge created by a solo clarinet is just one example of Puccini's many felicitous orchestral decisions. Granted any "shoemaker's apprentice" can manage orchestration, orchestral color is an important way for audiences to receive and enjoy information.

The opera's other big number is "Vissi d'arte" in the middle of Act II where Tosca matches wits with Scarpia who promises a fake execution for Cavaradossi if she surrenders to him. "Never did I harm a living creature," sings Tosca, wondering how she deserved this predicament. Puccini came to think "Vissi d'arte" held up the drama's flow. Maybe it does, but Carner described it as "a splendid piece, demanding of the singer a perfect *legato* and radiant, liquescent tone." Moreover, it softens a character whose initial jealousy (over the woman with the blue eyes) risks making Tosca less sympathetic than female leads in other Puccini operas.

And then there are the overwhelmingly impressive theatrical segments. Even behind a James Bond film, the Act I finale is diverting. Does theater offer a greater statement of religious hypocrisy? During a Te Deum, Scarpia gives vent to his twin lusts: to see Cavaradossi executed and Tosca in his paws. And though some might accuse Puccini of shallowness, he researched this scene deeply, tracking down liturgical details. He even selected a text that would give the chorus a murmuring effect under Scarpia's exultation.

Act II, comprising battles of wit between the protagonists, has an admirable symmetrical structure. At first, Scarpia tries to get Cavaradossi to reveal Angelotti's whereabouts while Tosca sings her cantata outside in a courtyard. Then Scarpia tries to convince Tosca to give herself to him while the sounds of Cavaradossi's torture emerge from elsewhere in the palace. The act ends with Tosca stabbing Scarpia to death once she has bargained from him a safe conduct for her and Cavaradossi. Her adornment of Scarpia's dead body with candlesticks and a crucifix was apparently something Bernhardt cleverly invented to remind viewers of Tosca's basic religious beliefs.

Kerman made substantial criticisms, however. In his 1986 revision of *Opera as Drama*, he regretted once discussing Tosca as a "chain-saw movie," but stuck by a charge of musical emptiness: the music doesn't have the strength to generate real drama, he thought.

Strong criticism was levelled at the Act III beginning where Puccini's tone poem of an early morning in Rome replaces the detailed and dry stage description prefacing Sardou's last scene. Puccini made a special trip to Rome to test the realistic effect of morning church bells from the Castel Sant'Angelo where in the opera Cavaradossi is kept under guard, and he asked the poet

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Far left: In San Francisco Opera's 1934 Tosca, *the roles of Cavaradossi and Tosca were sung by Dino Borgioli and Lotte Lehmann; left: Dorothy Kirsten performed the title role a record 28 times with the Company, including here in 1960 with Tito Gobbi; middle, left: Plácido Domingo and Eva Marton from 1960; middle, right: From 1963, Leontyne Price as Tosca. Bottom: Harvey Milk saw San Francisco Opera's production of* Tosca *just days before his assassination on November 27, 1978. Sean Penn starred as the San Francisco Supervisor in the 2008 film* Milk.

Luigi Antonio Zanazzo for some verses that would sound like a shepherd's song of the Roman countryside, creating an oasis of calm before the act's tragic events. Cavaradossi, facing death within the hour, asks his jailer permission to write to someone dear to him. But Kerman believed Puccini's effects could be accomplished just as easily by literal folk-songs and tape recordings of Sunday mornings. Nothing much happens here in plot nor music, he thought, comparing it unfavorably with the last act of Verdi's *Otello* where Desdemona's "Willow Song," sung with the threat of death over her, contains genuine suspense.

But I cannot help recalling the director Peter Brook's lines about theater: "A man walks across this empty space whilst someone else is watching him, and this is all that is needed for an act of theater to be engaged." Don't Kerman's criticisms undervalue the contribution of interpreters?

One fortunate result of thinning out Sardou's play is three of the greatest roles in the repertoire. Aficionados endlessly debate their favorite singers. *Gramophone* magazine might speak of José Carreras' "poetic ardour" as Cavaradossi. Many remember Tito Gobbi: "You're reminded that Scarpia is an aristocrat," said *New York Times* critic Anthony Tommasini in an article titled "The Best Opera Recording Ever Is Maria Callas Singing Tosca." Maria Jeritza (apparently Puccini's favorite Tosca) appeared in San Francisco Opera productions in 1928 and 1937 and was renowned for stage business. When she finished "Vissi d'arte," reports Puccini biographer Mary Jane Phillips-Matz quoting critic Max de Schauensee, mascara coursed "down her cheeks in two black streams, as many in the audience wept with her."

While Carner in his *Cambridge Handbook* concedes that Puccini's music doesn't completely make up for the emotion missing in Sardou, the missing portion is supplied by performers. In the classic 1953 recording of *Tosca*, says Tommasini, "[Callas] gives us more than jealousy. Her opening cries of 'Mario' are also panicked, almost desperate." Here is the vulnerability we need from the character. Kerman might have been justified to complain about musical shortfalls such as ending the opera with a reprise of "E lucevan le stelle" which has unclear relevance to Tosca's death, but admitted, in 1986, to *Opera as Drama*'s "total absence of any discussion of performance values." Can opera really be judged without considering the whole effect?

Act I of Stewart Wallace and Michael Korie's 1995 opera *Harvey Milk* features music that is recognizable as the brutal Scarpia motif that opens *Tosca*. Why? Because it denotes violence? Or because City Supervisor Harvey Milk loved opera and *Tosca* is arguably the opera buff's opera *par excellence*.

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