
Musical Symbols of Death in *Tosca*

T H E O D O R E L . G E N T R Y

NEL pozzo, nel giardino" [In the well, in the garden]. The heroine utters this simple phrase in act 2 of Puccini's *Tosca*. Although an innocuous statement, in itself devoid of any special significance, it becomes a powerful expression of personal anguish and sinister meaning when fused with music. At this point, the same music used to accompany Cavaradossi's act 1 instructions regarding the hiding place in the well recurs verbatim. The identical ominous chord progression, based on a whole-tone scale, succinctly projects the danger Tosca's admission has produced. When divorced from the musical context, Tosca's line communicates little of the conflicting emotions and tensions that mark this moment in the opera. Even within the dramatic context, the phrase on its own does not reveal the depth of the human tragedy unfolding onstage. Yet these few words betray Angelotti's hiding place and change the course of the drama. Having achieved one of his political goals, Scarpia now turns his attention to a personal one, the conquest of Floria Tosca.

When such a scene evolves during the creative process, composers can draw from a number of musical devices to communicate the drama. Without diminishing the significance of the libretto, it is important to point out that the music often does more than the text to imbue the drama with tragic overtones. Because of the literary restrictions imposed by the time needed for musical expansion, an operatic libretto, when read on its own, usually sounds stilted and ineffective. When coupled with skillfully written musical symbols, the skeletal text is vivified. Most composers in the Western tradition, including Puccini, have relied on a body of well-defined topoi to elicit (or manipulate) responses and emotions that could not be generated by the words alone.

Puccini uses a number of such devices to envelop Sardou's melodrama *La Tosca* in an aura of tragedy. Throughout the opera Puccini weaves musical symbols into the score in order to suggest doom. These emblems, easily recognized (although often only subconsciously) by Western audiences, transmit tragic messages efficiently. Some conventions are obvious, such as the drum rolls that accompany the deaths of Scarpia and Cavaradossi. Others are more subtle but nonetheless quite forceful in communicating dark drama.

The whole-tone scale, for example, has been associated with death for nearly two centuries.¹ Puccini probably knew of whole-tone symbolism in other Italian operas of the period. Only eight years before *Tosca*, Catalani had used the whole-tone scale to accompany Hagenbach's deadly fall in *La Wally*. Puccini used it more extensively in *Tosca*. Even the dramatic chords that open the opera are based on the whole-tone scale. Shortly thereafter, it appears when Mario provides illegal assistance to Angelotti.² While Cavaradossi informs the refugee of the secret hiding place in his villa,³ the bassoons play a portion of the whole-tone scale three times in the bass line. Each time, the passage begins on C and descends stepwise a minor sixth to E. As the bassoons play, the flutes and oboes form an ascending series of major triads. The whole-tone scale may be observed in the roots of the five major chords (C, B-flat, A-flat, G-flat, and E). The string bass and timpani undergird the sustained E major chords with a pedal on low E (ex. 1). This instrumentation combines with the whole-tone scale, distantly related harmonies, and chromaticism to suggest danger. Placement of the whole-tone scale within a harmonic progression and in low registers is typical of Puccini's handling of the device. Although the whole-tone scale does not accompany a death in this instance, it underscores Angelotti's perilous position, which in fact has fatal consequences. To conclude this passage, a cannon shot broadcasts Angelotti's escape, adding emphasis to the whole-tone scale's tragic symbolism. Traces of this harmonic progression also appear in the final bars of act 2 as Tosca drops the crucifix on Scarpia's body. There the first two chords are played by strings exclusively; the third, by winds, percussion, and harp.⁴ The melancholy effect is boldly interrupted by a striking snare-drum roll.⁵

Earlier in act 2, twin statements of a whole tone-based passage enfold the villain's devious instructions to Spoletta regarding the "mock" execution of Cavaradossi. This passage is scored in a way that does not communicate fear or horror immediately; instead, it foreshadows tension. The four bars containing the whole-tone scale are played by strings and winds; some brass is added as the phrase progresses. It is a rushing passage that presents an air of expectancy through chromatic sonorities and crescendo. The passage is harmonically similar to example 1 in that the structures are, with one exception, root-position major chords. The first statement of this passage is followed promptly by some tension-filled bars containing string tremolos and ominous ascending-third motives played by lower brass. Puccini uses all of these elements as musical clues to Scarpia's true intentions. Scarpia cannot be explicit in his instructions to Spoletta; he must choose his words with the utmost care to conceal his treachery from Tosca. He does not want Cavaradossi to leave the prison alive; therefore he reminds Spoletta of the death of Count Palmieri, another of his victims, during an earlier mock execution of which Tosca knows nothing. Scarpia's words give no indication of his real purpose. Instead, Puccini uses timbre, the whole-tone scale, and motives to demonstrate the Machiavellian implication of the villain's lines.

Example 1. Whole-tone passage in Tosca, act 1

CAV.

a tempo

can - na un pic-ciòl var-co gui - da ad un an - tro o - scu - ro,
 pass - age con-nect-ing the old well with a spa - cious cel - lar,

a tempo

col canto

Twenty-two bars separate the whole-tone passages that frame Scarpia's instructions to Spoletta. The almost jocular style of the orchestral accompaniment is particularly ironic in light of the plot developments. After repeating his orders, Scarpia switches from treachery to another attempted seduction of Tosca by reminding her of their bargain. He lies when he tells her that he has freed her lover and kept his promise ("To tenni la promessa"). The music reveals that he has no intention of releasing the prisoner. The preceding whole-tone scale and the E-natural pedal provide the musical symbols. The vocal contour of Scarpia's statement is also interesting. The final word, "promessa," descends a minor third from B on the first syllable to a pair of G-sharps on the last two syllables, but this last pitch does not resolve the phrase. Instead, the incomplete structure insinuates that Scarpia now expects Tosca to fulfill her share of the bargain (although his treachery has sealed Cavaradossi's tragic fate).

The whole-tone scale appears most significantly after Tosca fatally wounds Scarpia.⁶ The villain screams for help and declares that he is dying ("Aiuto! Muoi!"), but Tosca coldly refuses his pleas for mercy: "Ti soffoca il sangue?" [Are you choking on your blood?]. The whole-tone scale and violin tremolos ideally reflect the harrowing drama (ex. 2). The whole tones progress in parallel major thirds planed above an A-flat pedal in the timpani and string basses. Violas, cellos, and winds play the descending thirds.⁷ Each chord in the rapidly descending series is sustained for a full bar. The presence of the whole-tone scale as Scarpia dies contributes immeasurably to the melodramatic effect.

A moment before Tosca cruelly asks Scarpia if he is choking on his blood, the timpani interject another symbol of death, a paeon pattern. Such a rhythmic motive constitutes a forceful signal of death. The same pattern, along with the anapest and the double resolved iambic, has been isolated in Verdi's oeuvre (ex. 3).⁸ All of the notes in these patterns are normally on the same pitch, but their rhythmic notation may vary. Although Frits Noske's study of them is limited

Example 2. Whole-tone passage accompanying Scarpia's death in Tosca, act 2

T. *san - gue? blood?* *Ah! Ah!*

SCAR. *A - iu - to! Help, help!* *Muo - io, dy - ing, I'm*

T. *Euc - ci - so da u - na don - na! And done to death by a wo - man!*

SCAR. *muo - io! dy - ing!* *A - iu - to! Help, help!*

dim.

dim. sempre

Example 3. Paeon, anapest, and double resolved iambic death motives*Example 4. Anapest death motive in Tosca, act 2*

SCAR.

na - ti. Il tem - po pas - sa!
 scaf - fold. And time is pass - ing!

mf *mf*

to the works of Verdi, rhythmic figures of death play an important role in post-Verdian Italian opera, primarily when executed by percussion instruments, particularly the timpani. One of these motives, or a variant thereof, may occur while a character is dying. More often, however, they anticipate death or imply its potentiality. For example, earlier in act 2, the paeon variant of the death motive appears as Tosca realizes that Scarpia is demanding that she yield herself to him in exchange for Cavaradossi's life. Tosca, preferring death to Scarpia's attentions, flees to the window and threatens suicide, heatedly singing, "Ah! Piuttosto giù m'avvento!" [Ah! I'd rather end up down there!]. Before the figure for Scarpia's demise is heard, the anapest version of the motive accompanies his insinuating threats to Tosca (ex. 4).⁹ Immediately prior to its appearance, Scarpia has tried to force her into his embrace. She eludes him until both are arrested by the sound of drums playing the death figure. Scarpia murmurs to Tosca that the drums signify that prisoners are being taken to their executions. He asks rhetorically whether she wishes the same fate for Cavaradossi. Two military drums play the death motive for forty-eight bars, during which a half-diminished-seventh chord resolves to a secondary dominant chord (which never resolves), and the unsettled harmonies reinforce the unsettled dramatic situation leading up to "Vissi d'arte."

The presence of death motives might be expected in such a gripping murder scene as in this act, but they may also prefigure the end of life long before a character actually dies. In *Tosca*, the death motive appears for the first time in the fourth bar of act 1. The timpanist plays the paeon figure twice during the violent orchestral introduction to the opera, imbuing the drama with a foretaste of tragedy. The same figure is heard only a few bars later, after Angelotti's entrance. He furtively moves about the church, seeking a hiding place. The motive sounds immediately after he expresses his fear of the police, from whom he is escaping, and is used twice sarcastically during the comic exchange between the Sacristan and Cavaradossi before it regains its menacing overtones.¹⁰

The orchestral passage that accompanies Angelotti's entrance contains several tritones, associated since medieval times with death and evil. Puccini uses them here as a hint of the tragedy to come by subtly incorporating them in chromatic progressions. A descending series of harmonic tritones reflects the fugitive's fear and dramatically underscores his peril (ex. 5). A few moments later, after the Sacristan departs, the tritone returns as Angelotti discusses his plight with Cavaradossi.¹¹

Similarly, the introduction to Cavaradossi's "E lucevan le stelle," near the beginning of the final act, contains the subtle symbolism of a tritone. A secondary seventh chord weaves it into the harmonic fabric, where it helps charge the atmosphere with melancholy as Cavaradossi prepares to sing of his love for Tosca.

Puccini also incorporates the tritone in the act 2 altercation between Scarpia and Tosca. When Scarpia rejects Tosca's bribe, the cellos, basses, and bassoons play a descending diminished fifth in the bass line. The orchestral theme is repeated sequentially as Scarpia emphatically exclaims "No!" at the same point that the bass line drops a tritone. After Tosca kills him, the tritone resurfaces while she searches for the safe-conduct papers. In this instance, however, the diminished fifth occurs melodically in the violins, first bassoon, and English horn. Although the context in which the tritone appears is subdued (especially compared with the preceding violence), the tension remains pronounced because of such chromatic inflections.

Another important musical symbol is used effectively during this scene: the death pedal. Commonly heard near the precise moment of a character's death, it is closely associated with Italian operatic realism, particularly Puccini's. It turns up throughout the operatic literature, even in many love scenes. However, it is not indiscriminately used in the same manner for every dramatic situation. During an exultant love duet, it often supports a succession of chords. But a sustained, dynamically subdued pedal that supports a single vocal line usually suggests pensiveness, physical illness, depression, or death. Timbre normally reinforces the effect (as in the use of timpani or lower strings).¹²

The death of Scarpia contains one of the most notable examples of the pedal. A G-flat major chord played by tremolos in the lower strings immediately pre-

Example 5. Tritones in Tosca, act 1

(Enter Angelotti L. in prison-garb, harrassed, dishevelled, panic-stricken, wellnigh breathless with fear and hurry)

(He casts a hasty glance around him)

cedes the D minor pedal. The contrast between these chords makes the D minor sonority sound almost ethereal — an ironic effect, considering Scarpia's character. An extremely quiet (*ppp*) timpani roll provides the D pedal. The viola part and the repeated Ds of Tosca's vocal line reinforce this pedal. Her venomous words negate the ethereal quality of the D minor chord, and at the moment that the villain breathes his last, the timpani and violas are the only instruments remaining.

Another percussion pedal, using timpani, bass drums, and cymbals, accompanies the execution of Cavaradossi. The association of drum rolls with military discipline is pronounced here. Instead of the barely audible timpani at Scarpia's death, this pedal boldly blares forth. The vocal lines that Tosca declaims above the pedal are markedly different from the ones she sings over Scarpia's corpse. Convinced that Cavaradossi still lives, believing that their ordeal will soon be over, she can barely contain her joy.

Despite Tosca's hopeful abandon, the audience has been bracing for the sinister reality. Near the beginning of act 3, as Cavaradossi prepares to sing his aria, Puccini uses bells to signal the hopelessness of the situation. Bells or chimes are employed sporadically in the operatic literature, usually to set the hour (*Der*

Freischütz, *Rigoletto*, *Falstaff*) or for musical motives (*Parsifal*).¹³ Russian composers use bells extensively, as Glinka's *Life for the Tsar* and the prologue to *Boris Godunov* illustrate. Occasionally, composers add them to the instrumentation of a religious scene, but frequently they communicate a warning, an evil omen, the presence of danger, or death.¹⁴

Puccini's use of bells in the final act of *Tosca* is dramatically creative.¹⁵ Early in the act, tinkling sheep bells accompany the shepherd's song. The idyllic calm of this pastoral opening offers welcome relief from the tension of the preceding act. The audience's awareness that the tranquillity will be brief adds to the melancholy poignancy of the scene. As the boy completes his song, the sheep bells fade into the background. Puccini then effects a timbre change by switching to matin bells, heard for several minutes while the jailer prepares for Cavaradossi's execution. The bells play increasingly complex rhythmic patterns until Cavaradossi's entrance. The audience perceives the disturbance of the tranquil aura from the changes in the bells and also from the orchestration, as the composer employs a previously heard tragic theme in a new mode (from E major to E minor). The sense of impending doom is heightened by a slowly tolling bell heard four times. Neither sentimental, like the sheep bells, nor religiously evocative, like the matin bells, those four deep strikes, doubled by the harp, sound threatening when coupled with the orchestra's thematic material. A bass pedal on low E underscores all but one bar in this section, which destroys any sense of well-being that the scene's opening music evoked.

Bass pedals often accompany unpitched utterances during death scenes. Certain vocal expressions, some rooted in spoken drama, also function as death topoi in opera. Screams and shrieks are especially traceable to the theatrical realism of Sardou, Belasco, and D'Annunzio. An unpitched scream was rare in opera before the rise of dramatic realism.¹⁶ Even Gilda's scream of pain after her stabbing by Sparafucile in *Rigoletto* comes closer to romantic song than the terrified utterance such an act would provoke in real life. Late-nineteenth-century composers continued to write pitched screams; in Cilea's *La Tilda*, for example, the title heroine sings "Ah" on high C when stabbed by Gastone. Unpitched screams, however, became increasingly common during this period. In the closing bars of Nicola Spinelli's *A basso porto*, Ciccillo, after being stabbed, twice cries for help in the final seconds of his life. Spinelli wrote a suggested rhythm for the words but no pitches. After Tosca stabs Scarpia, many of his screams and moans are unpitched, too, and their frequency contributes significantly to the dramatic impact of one of opera's most realistic murder scenes.

Puccini achieves a similar effect at the very end of act 2. After killing Scarpia, Tosca retrieves the safe-conduct papers from the hand of the corpse. Then, above a C-sharp (dominant) pedal, she intones, "E avanti a lui tremava tutta Roma!" [And all Rome trembled before him!]. This phrase is notated on repeated C-sharps, but sopranos often declaim rather than sing it. Sometimes spoken with malevolence, sometimes with resignation, it is similar in effect to the famous line

Example 6. Phrygian cadence at the conclusion of *Tosca*, act 2

(places one candle to the right of Scarpia's head, and the other to the left)
Lentamente

(again looks round her, and, seeing a crucifix hanging on the wall takes it down and, kneeling, places it reverently on the breast of the corpse)

(roll of distant drums)

(rises and departs cautiously, closing the door after her)

(quick curtain)

End of Act II

that rings down *Pagliacci*'s final curtain. In both operas, the use of speech at the end of particularly tense moments underscores the horror of the drama. But even when sung as written, *Tosca*'s line makes its dramatic impact, perhaps because in contour it so closely mirrors similar spoken utterances.

Both the *Pagliacci* and the *Tosca* scenes illustrate the evolution of realism in music as the distinction between opera and spoken drama became blurred at the turn of the century. The cessation of music often provides dramatic climax. As Herbert Lindenberger observes, "In certain operas of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, climactic moments occur when the orchestra becomes muted or stops altogether to allow a character to enunciate a few words in direct or slightly intoned speech."¹⁷

The conclusion to *Tosca*'s second act contains another subtle yet powerful symbol of death. The relatively unusual harmonic progression of the eleven-

bar *lent amente* forcefully projects an aura of tragedy as it moves from B-flat major to A-flat major and then, unexpectedly, to E minor.¹⁸ The E minor triad is built on the lowered leading tone of F-sharp minor (the tonic chord and harmonic goal), a Phrygian technique used for similar dramatic effect at the conclusion of *Manon Lescaut*. Prior to the final tonic chord, the orchestra plays a unison dominant (C-sharp), readily associated with tragedy (ex. 6).

Whether through such understated musical devices as the whole-tone scale and the Phrygian cadence or through more graphic tools, such as rhythmic motives and pitched speech, Puccini and composers like him efficiently communicate vital dramatic information that the libretto alone might not project. Indeed, their works depend on these aural codes for dramatic impact and clarity. By employing them judiciously in *Tosca*, Puccini makes the essence of Sardou's play readily perceptible to the audience while raising the text of his "shabby little shocker" to tragic heights.

NOTES

1. Mosco Carner, tracing this association back to such Russian works as Glinka's *Ruslan and Lyudmila* (1842) and Dargomyzhski's *Stone Guest* (1872), demonstrates its use in the Angelotti and Scarpia motives (*Giacomo Puccini: "Tosca"* [New York: Cambridge University Press, 1985], pp. 93–94, 154).

2. Ray S. Macdonald, *Puccini, King of Verismo* (New York: Vantage Press, 1973), p. 71.

3. "Se urgesse il periglio, correte al pozzo del giardin. L'acqua è nel fondo, ma mezzo della canna, un picciol varco guida ad un antro oscuro, rifugio impenetrabile e sicuro!"

4. In his biography of Puccini, Mosco Carner suggests that the "peculiar scoring" of the Scarpia theme at the act's conclusion depicts "a spectre rising above the stage" (*Puccini: A Critical Biography* [London: Gerald Duckworth, 1958], p. 358).

5. William Ashbrook believes that the timbral variations of this chord progression in differing dramatic contexts demonstrate Puccini's growing mastery of orchestration. He describes the orchestral treatment of these passages in detail in *The Operas of Puccini* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1968), pp. 91–92.

6. Macdonald alludes to this device in *Puccini, King of Verismo*, p. 71.

7. The orchestration for the whole-tone scale in *La Wally* is similar. Although Catalani does not use winds, he does, like Puccini, avoid the highest and lowest members of the string family. Only violas and cellos play the whole-tone scale following the act 4 avalanche in which Hagenbach is killed.

8. Frits Noske, *The Signifier and the Signified: Studies in the Operas of Mozart and Verdi* (The Hague: Marinus Nijhoff, 1977), p. 172.

9. The death figure occurs in other Puccini operas as well. In the final act of *La fanciulla del West*, the anapest version occurs four times as Rance supervises the preparations to lynch Johnson. During act 3 of *La bohème*, it occurs as Rodolfo discusses his discouraging relationship with Mimì, which will culminate in her death by the opera's conclusion.

10. The scene is comic to the audience but not to the characters. The Sacristan, indignant at the apparent sacrilege of Cavardossi's rapturous comments regarding Tosca, mutters in an aside that they are an affront to the Madonna. The death motive appears when he alludes to their satanic origins.

11. Both Carner and Roger Parker briefly mention the tritone's association with Angelotti. See Carner "Style and Technique" and Parker, "Analysis: Act I in Perspective,"

both in Carner, *Giacomo Puccini: "Tosca,"* pp. 94, 134.

12. The final scene of *Manon Lescaut* also contains death pedals, but their timbre differs from those of *Tosca*.

13. Some nineteenth-century playwrights also incorporated bells in death scenes. After the court condemns Mathias in act 3 of Leopold Lewis's *Bells*, he staggers and collapses as a bell begins to toll. A bell also tolls in the final scene of *Maria Marten* (anonymous) after the ghost of Maria frightens Corder into making the confession that leads to his execution. For the complete text of *The Bells*, see *Hiss the Villain: Six English and American Melodramas*, ed. Michael Booth (New York: Arno Press, 1977). For that of *Maria Marten*, see Michael Kilgariff, *The Golden Age of Melodrama* (London: Wolfe Publishing, 1974).

14. Bells may also be heard in completely different contexts, for example, in act 3 of Wolf-Ferrari's *I gioielli della Madonna* and in act 2 of Zandonai's *Francesca da Rimini*.

15. When he first saw *Tosca* in 1903, Gustav Mahler, an ardent foe of Puccini's music, reserved some of his most virulent comments for the use of bells in the orchestration. Referring to a performance in Lemberg (now L'viv, in western Ukraine), he said: "A most

excellent production in every way. . . . But the work! In the first act a papal procession with continual clangour of bells (especially brought from Italy) — Act 2. A man is *tortured* with horrible cries, another stabbed with a pointed bread-knife — Act 3. A view over all Rome from a citadel and again mighty tintinnabulations from a fresh set of bells. A man shot by a firing-squad. I got up before the shooting and left. Needless to say, the work was another sham masterpiece [*Meistermachwerk*]. Nowadays any cobbler orchestrates to perfection" (Alma Mahler, *Gustav Mahler: Memories and Letters*, ed. Donald Mitchell, trans. Basil Creighton [London: Murray, 1968], p. 225; cited in Carner, *Giacomo Puccini: "Tosca,"* p. 70).

16. Zerlina's scream in the act 1 finale of Mozart's *Don Giovanni* is a rare exception.

17. Herbert Lindenberger, *Opera: The Extravagant Art* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1984), p. 87.

18. During this progression, Tosca places a crucifix on Scarpia's breast. John Louis DiGaetani suggests that she is blaming God for the death, since he did not come to her aid as she requested in "Vissi d'arte" ("Puccini's *Tosca* and the Necessity of Agnosticism," *The Opera Quarterly*, vol. 2, no. 1 [spring 1984], pp. 81–82).

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