

LIVE FROM LINCOLN CENTER
New York City Opera: Puccini's *Tosca*

Wednesday, March 29, 2000 8-11 PM on PBS

Program Notes by MARTIN BOOKSPAN

If you were to ask a typical aficionado to name the five most dramatic operas in the repertory, chances are Puccini's "Tosca" would figure high on the list, with opinions equally divided as to whether that is due to the intensity of its conflict or the beauty of Puccini's score. However, critical opinion has not always supported public affection for the work. Joseph Kerman, author of *Opera as Drama*, a book that was published in 1956, concluded that "Tosca" is a naively undramatic piece of work, "the penultimate demonstration of Puccini's insufficiency before the demands of Sardou's obvious melodrama." The ultimate demonstration, according to Kerman – at the time an Associate Professor of Music at the University of California at Berkeley – is the "curiously passionless dialogue with Tosca" that occurs between Floria Tosca and Cavaradossi at her entrance in the last act. The final *coup de grace* is applied by Kerman near the end of his book, when he describes the opera as "that shabby little shocker."

Can this be the elegant, urgent and--yes, dramatic--work of the musical theater that has moved audiences for a century now? Those of us who consider the music and libretto of "Tosca" to be a touchstone in passionate, communicative power can only shake our heads and decry Kerman's attitude. One hundred years after its premiere in Rome (January 14, 1900), "Tosca" continues to maintain its position among the best-loved and most frequently-performed operas ever composed. And it is "Tosca", in the provocative staging by Mark Lamos for the the New York City Opera, that will be our next LIVE FROM LINCOLN CENTER telecast on PBS, Wednesday evening, March 29.

It all began with a play titled "La Tosca" by Puccini's contemporary, the French dramatist, Victorien Sardou. A letter of 1895, written by Puccini to his publisher, Giulio Ricordi, states that "we are off to Florence, where they are giving (Sardou's) 'Tosca' tonight." It was that performance, apparently, that set Puccini on his own "Tosca" course.

There was a complication, however: Luigi Illica, who had collaborated with Giuseppe Giacosa on the libretti for Puccini's "La Boheme" and "Madama Butterfly," had already prepared a "Tosca" libretto for another Italian composer, Alberto Franchetti. But Puccini insisted that the "Tosca" opera had to be his or no one's. Ricordi also happened to be Franchetti's publisher; sensing greater financial returns from a Puccini "Tosca" rather than one by Franchetti, librettist and publisher duped the innocent Franchetti into believing that the story would be unsuitable for the operatic stage. Within a day of Franchetti's departure from

the project, a contract was signed between Ricordi, Illica, and Puccini for THEIR "Tosca," and again Giacosa was brought in as libretto collaborator.

Sardou himself seems to have played a considerable role in the development of the opera. He is said to have remarked at one point that the libretto was in fact an improvement over his original drama. But there is no question that it was Puccini who was boss over the entire affair. When the librettists wanted to write a "torture aria" for Cavaradossi in the Second Act, Puccini insisted that the torture had to take place offstage, with occasional screams from Cavaradossi punctuating the bargaining between Tosca and Scarpia. Likewise, those chilling last words of Tosca in the Second Act--"E avanti a lui tremava tutta Roma" ("And before him all Rome trembled")--declaimed in speech rather than song, was also Puccini's idea.

"Tosca" has contributed some of the best-loved arias in all opera to the concert repertoire of sopranos and tenors. Near the beginning, Cavaradossi, who is painting a portrait of the Magdalen, sings of the resemblance of the image on the canvas to his beloved, the actress Floria Tosca. This is the aria "Recondita armonia." Near the beginning of the last act, Cavaradossi, on the morning of his scheduled execution, recalls better days in the aria "E lucevan le stelle." And when Tosca visits him soon afterwards, the two of them exult in the rapturous duet "O dolci mani." Perhaps the aria most identified with the opera is Tosca's "Vissi d'arte."

Speaking of that beautiful aria, "Tosca" has also contributed some of the greatest anecdotes to opera lore. In rehearsal one day the soprano Maria Jeritza, a famed early interpreter of the role, accidentally slid off the couch and sang the aria while lying on the floor. Puccini immediately approved, and thus was born the tradition of "Vissi d'arte" on the floor! Another time, when the tenor scheduled to sing Cavaradossi became unavailable, Puccini was persuaded to listen to an unknown tenor audition for the role. After listening to him sing "Recondita armonia," Puccini inquired: "Who sent you to me? God?" The tenor's name was Enrico Caruso.

I said at the outset that the New York City Opera's new "Tosca" is a provocative one. Director Mark Lamos has moved the action from the Napoleonic period of 1800 to the Fascist period in Italy in the 1920s. Though I normally resent such "updatings," in the case of "Tosca" it works, and it works amazingly well. "Tosca" deals fundamentally with political power and its abuse (the constancy of Tosca's love for Cavaradossi is a powerful redeeming element). And from the beginning of time the abuse of political power has defined and defiled the history of the world. Yes, Sardou set his tale at the turn of the 19th century when a corrupt and evil government held sway in Rome; but many people alive today have vivid memories of a time in the not-so-distant past when a similar evil ruled in Rome. By moving the action of the opera into a period nearer our own time, Lamos points up the universality of the theme and events portrayed in "Tosca."

And the music, far from sounding anachronistic in its new time frame, seems actually to gain in emotional "wallop."

See for yourselves on Wednesday evening, March 29, on our next LIVE FROM LINCOLN CENTER telecast. As always, check your local listings for the exact time and day in your area.