

OPERA EXPLAINED

An Introduction to...

PUCCINI

Tosca

written by
Thomson Smillie

narrated by
David Timson

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Giacomo Puccini (1858–1924): *Tosca*

The word ‘opera’ is Latin and means ‘the works’; it represents a synthesis of all the other arts: drama, vocal and orchestral music, dance, light and design. Consequently, it delivers an emotional impact which none of the others can match. The only one of the arts whose origins can be precisely dated, it was ‘invented’ in Italy in 1597 as part of the Renaissance – the rebirth of interest in classical values. As an art form it is truly international, crossing all linguistic and cultural barriers, and it is probably the only one whose audience continues to expand, not in spite of, but because of developments in entertainment technology.

From its early origins in Italy opera spread across Europe, establishing individual and distinctive schools in a number of countries. France had an early and long-standing love affair with it – hence the term *grand opéra*, referring to the massive five-act creations that graced the Paris Opéra in the nineteenth century. Germany had an excellent school from as early as Mozart’s time, and opera perhaps reached its highest achievement with the mighty music dramas of Richard Wagner. Russia, Great Britain, and the Americas have also made their contributions.

But in the popular imagination opera remains an Italian concept – and no wonder. From its earliest years Italians dominated the art: Cavalli and Monteverdi were among the first to establish its forms; there was a golden age, called the *bel*

canto, at the beginning of the nineteenth century when Bellini, Donizetti, and Rossini ruled supreme; Giuseppe Verdi was probably the most revered artist in history; and, for many, Puccini represents, in every sense, the last word in this beloved genre.

Although the twentieth century has not been as lavishly endowed with opera composers, it can still boast a few, including Richard Strauss, Igor Stravinsky, and Benjamin Britten – and, maybe most significantly in the long run, those errant step-children of opera, the Broadway musical and the Lloyd Webber spectacular.

Tosca

All the qualities that caused Puccini's *Tosca* to be derided by pundits and academics as a 'shabby little shocker' are, of course, the very ones that have contributed to its immense popularity. It is a superbly dramatic story – even melodramatic. *Tosca* has wonderful melodies, huge set pieces, great characters and enough politics, passion, torture and tragedy to keep the daytime soaps in business for life.

In terms of Puccini's great career, it comes between the twin colossi of *La Bohème* and *Madama Butterfly*. But where these two are warmly sentimental, the appeal of *Tosca* is deeper and more alluring.

It centres of course on the title character, Floria Tosca, who was in real life an opera singer. She is a glamorous figure, variously kittenish yet tiger-like, warmly affectionate yet intensely jealous, devout yet murderous. In fact, everything one hopes for in a prima donna.

It is no small wonder that the role became associated with Maria Callas, its greatest exponent, whose own passionate and scarred life mirrored Tosca's tragedy.

But *Tosca* is no one-woman show. Cavaradossi, the tenor hero, is a powerful

character, and has wonderful music including two show-stopping arias, and in Baron Scarpia, chief of Rome's secret police, Puccini orchestrated one of opera's great villains. It is an irony that in some ways Scarpia is the most lifelike of the three principals, yet he is the only one who is a complete creation of the playwright Victorien Sardou, on whose play, *La Tosca*, Puccini based his opera.

Tosca scores also in its historical and geographical setting. The action takes place in the year 1800 at the height of the Napoleonic era, when General Bonaparte, as he still was, favourite son of the French Revolution, was striking terror into the hearts of the reigning classes including, maybe especially, the Pope, whose vast temporal empire was still based, like the opera, in Rome.

Any tourist to Rome can visit the actual settings of *Tosca* in a morning: the vast baroque church of St Andrew in the Valley, the Palazzo Farnese (then the Neapolitan, now the French Embassy) and that glorious antique pile, the Castle of the Holy Angel, from whose battlements *Tosca* makes her final, fatal exit.

But it takes a master like Puccini to fashion from the politics and the topography such brilliant set pieces as the great 'Te Deum' which ends the first act, the intensely dramatic confrontation between Scarpia and *Tosca* which is at the heart of the opera's second act, and the atmospheric and deeply touching last scene with the 'mock execution' of Cavaradossi atop the Castel Sant'Angelo.

Love, jealousy, passion, politics, torture and executions, spectacle, duplicity and menace are woven together into a superb tapestry, and then coloured by a great Italian master of melody. *Tosca*, after 100 years, retains the power to shock. 'Shocking', yes. 'Shabby', never!

Notes by Thomson Smillie

Thomson Smillie began his career in the early days of Scottish Opera and has been artistic director of the Wexford International Festival, general manager of the Opera Company of Boston, and general director of Kentucky Opera. He now makes a career as a writer, speech-writer, and public speaker. He has a strong belief that people mature into a love of opera and travels the world encouraging a love of the art form. His other passions are travel, languages, and friendships. He has written several other titles in the Naxos ‘Opera Explained’ series.



David Timson studied acting and singing at the Guildhall School of Music and Drama. He has performed in modern and classic plays through the UK and abroad, including *Wild Honey* for Alan Ayckbourn, *Hamlet*, *The Man of Mode*, and *The Seagull*. Among his many television appearances have been roles in *Nelson's Column* and *Swallows and Amazons*. For Naxos AudioBooks he has recorded, to date, three volumes of *The Adventures of Sherlock Holmes*, and directed *Twelfth Night* as well as playing Feste. On Naxos, he takes the part of the Narrator in Stravinsky's *The Soldier's Tale*.



OPERA EXPLAINED

This series introduces, in words and music, the plot and background of major operas. Using the principal themes and arias, taken from the Naxos recording of the complete work, Thomson Smillie is informative yet entertaining, enabling the listener to get more from this remarkable art form.

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