

Puccini's *Tosca*

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These study materials are produced for use with the
Bob Jones University Opera Association production of *Tosca*

smart

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The finale to Act One of Puccini's Tosca, one of opera's most exciting scenes, is shown here in the University Opera Association's 1994 production.

An Introduction to *Tosca*

The year 2000 marked the 100th anniversary of the premiere of Giacomo Puccini's *Tosca*, one of the world's most popular operas. It was first performed on January 14, 1900, at Rome's Teatro Constanzi.

But the year 2000 also marked a bicentennial closely connected with the opera. The action of *Tosca* takes place in Rome precisely between noon on June 17, 1800, and dawn on the following day.

Puccini and his librettists inherited from their source play a setting tied to historical events now 200 years old but well-known to the opera's original audience. On June 17, 1800, reports reached Rome that Austrian troops had defeated Napoleon at Marengo, breaking the French stronghold in northern Italy.

One of the most spectacular scenes in all of opera, the finale to the first act of *Tosca*, takes place in Rome's Sant'Andrea della Valle church, which is full of worshippers and clergy who come to celebrate the crushing of Napoleon's army. The choir sings a glorious "Te Deum" while church bells ring and cannons boom.

"We'll be paid double wages—long live the king!" the choirboys shout, and the diva Tosca is engaged to sing for the queen at an evening celebration.

During the second act, however, news comes that Napoleon has turned apparent defeat into victory, and Roman troops are in flight. The conflicting reports of Napoleon's fortunes did, in fact, reach Rome on June 17-18, 1800, in much the same way as these events unfold in the opera.

Puccini's libretto also draws from history in its characterization of two fictional Roman republicans, or Italians who opposed royalist rule. Angelotti and Cavaradossi are revolutionaries who side with France. Their antagonist is the powerful and unscrupulous chief of the Roman secret police, Scarpia. His main adversary, in turn, is Cavaradossi's mistress, the opera singer Tosca, who, like Scarpia, is a royalist. Characters on both sides of the political conflict act dishonestly in their attempts to gain advantage over each other.

On the whole, however, *Tosca* is psychological rather than historical drama. Puccini's characters are more strongly motivated by personal than by patriotic concerns. Yet in the shocking culmination of the plot, the personal and the political are inseparable. In defending her honor as a woman, Tosca simultaneously strikes a blow for liberty that ends Scarpia's reign of terror in Rome.

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THE Plot

The action occurs on June 17-18, 1800. Each

ACT ONE: THE CHURCH OF SANT'ANDREA DELLA VALLE

Angelotti, an escaped political prisoner, hides in the Attavanti Chapel, his family's private chapel in Rome's Sant'Andrea della Valle church. His old friend and fellow revolutionary, Cavaradossi, arrives to work on a fresco of Mary Magdalene, modeled on Angelotti's sister, who often prays in the chapel.

The two men are happily reunited just before Tosca, Cavaradossi's jealous lover, enters the church. Recognizing that the painter has taken another woman as the model for his work, Tosca becomes angry. Cavaradossi attempts to reassure her of his love and then hurries her out.

Concerned for his friend's life, Cavaradossi urges Angelotti to flee and gives him a key to his villa.

As the choir prepares for a service celebrating the announcement of Napoleon's defeat at Marengo, the corrupt secret police chief Scarpia enters the church in pursuit of Angelotti. Failing to find the fugitive, Scarpia concludes that Cavaradossi has played a role in the escape and arrests him. He determines to play on Tosca's intensely jealous nature as part of a sinister plan to destroy Angelotti and Cavaradossi and win Tosca for himself.

The Sacristan, sung by bass Marc Rattray, prepares the choir for the "Te Deum" at the end of Act One.

Scarpia begins his Act Two interrogation of Cavaradossi.



OF Tosca

h act is set in a prominent landmark in Rome.

ACT TWO: FARNESE PALACE

Scarpia cross-examines Cavaradossi, who has been arrested, while Tosca sings below in a gala performance for the queen. He then summons and interrogates Tosca as Cavaradossi endures torture in the adjoining room. After a time Tosca becomes frantic and, in an effort to end Cavaradossi's suffering, betrays Angelotti's whereabouts.

When news comes that Napoleon has actually won the battle at Marengo, Scarpia orders Cavaradossi's execution for treason. He then attempts to seduce Tosca by promising to release her lover after staging a mock execution on the following day. Word comes that after being recaptured, Angelotti has committed suicide.

After struggling with Scarpia, Tosca at last consents to his evil bargain. Then as he is signing her safe-conduct pass, she stabs him to death.

ACT THREE: CASTEL SANT-ANGELO FORTRESS

At daybreak Tosca has a short exchange with Cavaradossi before he is led to his mock execution. The firing squad shoots and then leaves. To her dismay, Tosca discovers that the execution has been, after all, a real one, the final treacherous trick by the cruel Scarpia. Grief-stricken at the death of Cavaradossi and aware that her murder of Scarpia has been discovered, Tosca hurls herself from a parapet to her death below.

Tosca exits, having murdered Scarpia at the end of Act Two.



As Cavaradossi lies dead, Tosca prepares to leap to her death.





SMART Enrichment Activity

In the opening scene of Puccini's *Tosca*, the painter Cavaradossi works on a portrait of Mary Magdalene for a fresco he is creating at Rome's Church of Sant'Andrea della Valle. Mary Magdalene, a Biblical figure who becomes Christ's faithful follower after His forgiveness of her great sin, is a favorite subject of religious art. "Mary Magdalen Turning from the World to Christ" by the Dutch painter Jan van Bylaert (1603-1671) is one of many fascinating works featuring Mary Magdalene in the Bob Jones University Museum & Gallery.

To schedule a tour of one of the most extensive collections of religious art in America, call 242-5100, extension 4206.



Sarah Bernhardt & *Tosca*

The French actress Sarah Bernhardt (1845-1923) scored one of her biggest successes in the role of Florio Tosca, opera singer, in *La Tosca* by Victorien Sardou (1831-1908). The script became the basis for the libretto of Puccini's *Tosca*. Bernhardt, perhaps the greatest international star of the late 19th century, was legendary for her flamboyance, volatile temperament, and eccentricities (she is said to have slept in a coffin). She was a master of stage technique in the grand manner, whose voice was often compared to a golden bell.

Introduction to *Tosca*, *continued*

Although Puccini did not understand a word of French, he became interested in Victorien Sardou's popular theatrical melodrama *La Tosca* as the subject for an opera as early as 1889. A giant of the French stage, Sardou was hesitant to entrust to a promising young composer a play that had also attracted the attention of Italian opera's greatest genius, Giuseppe Verdi.

During an interview in Paris many years later, however, Puccini made a positive impression by playing parts of *La Bohème* and *Manon Lescaut* for Sardou, who then signed a contract with the composer. Luigi Illica and Giuseppe Giacosa became the librettists for the project.

Sardou wrote *La Tosca* as a star vehicle for the famous French actress Sarah Bernhardt. The play blends fact with fiction, pitting a liberal revolutionary named Cavaradossi against a powerful villain of the old political regime, Scarpia. The captivating stage presence and beauty of Bernhardt in the role of a commanding yet vulnerable prima donna were major factors in the success of a melodrama about corruption,

murder, rape, and suicide in Napoleonic Rome.

In both the play and the opera *Tosca* is a flawed heroine, but the story of her love and courage is poetic and poignant, especially in tandem with Puccini's lyrical music. The score's expansive beauty never interferes, however, with the relentless progress of the simple plot.

Most notably, the music is distinguished by a dramatic realism that is effective and appropriate to the libretto's themes of jealousy, desire, coercion, and violence. Who can forget the opera's chilling opening chords that masterfully establish the brutality of its villain?

Tosca is a *veristic* rather than a romantic opera. As such, it is akin to naturalistic and realistic literature that depicts the daily, often desperate struggles of ordinary characters. In the words of Patrick Hughes, *Tosca* is "one of the most exciting, purely theatrical stories ever set to music."

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