

In Context: Tosca

Toward the end of the Romantic era, a new style of dramatic language appeared among opera composers: *verismo*, meaning "realism" from the Italian word "vero," meaning "true." Since its roots in the 1600s, opera evolved from presenting stories about gods and legendary heroes, to portraying the lives and struggles of ordinary people. Along this trajectory were important turning points including Mozart's *The Marriage of Figaro*: in 1786, the story of a cunning servant outwitting his master was so suggestive that the original French playwright was forced by court censors to set the story in neighbouring Spain so as not to give the French public any radical ideas.

By 1875, nearly a century—and several revolutions—later, Bizet's *Carmen* would go so far as to portray a murder on stage, paving the way for verismo, which most historians agree emerged with Mascagni's *Cavalleria Rusticana* in 1890. Verismo focused on the gritty underbelly of human action—obsession, corruption, and violence—in a new musical context that shed many formal operatic conventions of the preceding centuries. Arias were shorter, recitatives (patter-like sung dialogue) were replaced by impassioned, soaring phrases conveying ardent emotion, and the overlapping of lived experiences was conveyed by regular offstage singing and naturalistic effects like church bells ringing. Verismo allowed tragic stories to be told in as realistic a way as opera might allow.

Tosca has strong links to the musical style of verismo. Musically, composer Giacomo Puccini places destructive human behaviour and its consequences front and center: the opera begins not with Tosca's musical theme, but with that of Baron Scarpia, Rome's sadistic chief of police. The first three thundering chords that open the opera reappear as Scarpia enters the church, and in the tremendous Act I finale, which juxtaposes Scarpia's lustful madness with the chorus's calls of adulation to God. Scarpia's music also appears in other guises, similar to film composers who use a particular idea to musically connect one character's actions to another's, suggesting his influence seeps beyond even his physical presence.

Verismo was also a response to the ideals of Romanticism and captured a growing interest in the very real world around the listener. The character development of Tosca mirrors this trajectory: in her confrontation with Scarpia in Act II, she finally sees through Scarpia's facade of civility—and beyond her own innocent personal concerns—and realizes to her horror that her beloved is being tortured in a political interrogation room nearby.

Tosca also elevates these specific, gritty moments toward the universal in ways that are distinct from the verismo tradition. For instance, the principal characters are not from the working class, like other verismo operas. While Cavaradossi is a painter, he is at the same time from a noble Roman family and part of the aristocracy. Scarpia serves as chief of police and is the most trusted collaborator of the Neapolitan queen, while Tosca herself is elevated through her fame as an internationally renowned opera singer. The opera is also not confined to the interpersonal tension between individuals, but is set against a backdrop of historical events with political repercussions that ripple across the Italian peninsula. Both these characteristics help Puccini

raise the private events of Tosca and Cavaradossi to a more universal level, where the characters' aspirations to happiness are crushed by politics and higher-level events beyond anyone's control.

Interestingly, the story of *Tosca* is not set in the time period of the premiere of the opera (nor the original French play), but one hundred years earlier, during the Napoleonic wars. In fact, *Tosca* is an opera that is notoriously difficult to adapt to another time and place: the setting is very specifically the afternoon of June 17 through the early morning of June 18, 1800 in three existing locations in Rome and refers to actual historical events surrounding the Battle of Marengo. Political tensions were incredible high, and the life or death of a single person could have far-reaching implications. For instance, Cavaradossi swears to protect the political fugitive Angelotti with his life, not only because they are friends, but because Angelotti served as the consul of the short-lived Roman Republic. Angelotti's life could influence the birth or death of a nation struggling for self-rule. Likewise, when Cavaradossi learns that Napoleon's armies have won at Marengo, in his relief he calls out "Victory! Victory!" believing that Napoleon was ushering in an era of self-determination for people across Europe.

By contrast, Tosca herself is not concerned with political questions, but with interpersonal and spiritual ones. She expresses the lingering Romantic ideal that love can conquer all but grapples with the theological question of why God permits the suffering of the innocent. Her prayers and laments entwine throughout the opera, converging in one of opera's most beautiful moments of stillness and reflection: Tosca's cry of the heart "Vissi d'arte" ("I lived for art"). In fact, some scholars argue that Tosca's phrase "I prayed to the Madonna and the saints in vain" is the beginning of her disillusion.

While Puccini never openly embraced atheism—contrary to his librettists—he still shared their strong anti-clerical views. Through the portrayal of the Sacristan, the opera's creators openly condemned the bigotry they saw in the Catholic Church and, through Scarpia, the use of religion for evil purposes. While Tosca's religious devotion is not easily shaken, Scarpia's unbridled cruelty challenges her understanding of justice, which emerges in the irony of her pardoning his ruthless actions. From this moment forward, Tosca's choices are limited, but she is determined to make them her own.

Ultimately, the pathos of Tosca's final moments rings out like any great Shakespearian tragedy, demonstrating the devastating consequences of a society where power is misused. Puccini as well as the librettists Luigi Illica and Giuseppe Giacosa amplify not the victimhood of Tosca—as some historians may mistakenly argue—but her determination to resist it. They call for us to awaken to the moral decay in Tosca's Rome and challenge us to prevent these circumstances in our own world.

Continue the discussion before and after the performance by exploring additional resources:

Brief, Informative, and Accessible

Tosca: Plot, music, interesting facts | Watch [here](#)

A quick five-minute primer on *Tosca*—an easy-to-follow overview of the plot with helpful visuals, incorporating key musical moments, and additional insights.

Tosca | Read [here](#)

Music historian Sarah Rutherford contextualizes the creation of the opera *Tosca*, and relates historical developments to important musical and dramatic moments in the opera. Highly informative!

San Diego OperaTalk! Tosca | Watch [here](#)

San Diego Opera's longtime director of Education and Community Engagement Nick Reveles shares the history of the opera along with musical highlights, critical acclaim, recommended recordings, and more in this 30-minute featurette.

O|A Insights: A listening guide to Tosca | Watch [here](#)

Opera Australia's former Associate Music Director explores musical motives of the opera, such as the themes for *Scarpia*, *Tosca*, and the Love Theme. This video uses excerpts from the 2013 Opera Australia production of *Tosca*, an adaptation of the opera that was set during the Nazi occupation of Rome during WWII.

Deep Dives

The Operas of Puccini by William Ashbrook | Borrow [here](#)

A deep dive that links biography with musical, textual, and dramatic analysis, which is especially valuable for Puccini, who revealed many of his personal contradictions in his music and whose sense of detail can be appreciated by close study of the scores and characters. Best suited for those with familiarity with musical terms.

The Complete Operas of Puccini by Charles Osbourne | Borrow [here](#)

Another read through the operas of Puccini, this time with a closer focus on historical perspectives and suitable for audiences with all levels of musical familiarity.

Tosca's Rome by Susan Vandiver Nicassio | Borrow [here](#)

A comprehensive and engaging look at the historical context of Puccini's *Tosca* written by a professor of history and former opera singer who has sung the role of *Tosca*.

Giacomo Puccini: *Tosca* by Mosco Carner | Borrow [here](#)

An overview of several key areas of inquiry related to Puccini's *Tosca*: the original source material, genesis of the opera, musical style and dramatic structure, and more. A special essay is included by the baritone Tito Gobbi, one of the finest interpreters of *Scarpia* of the 20th century.

Puccini the Thinker by John Louis DiGaetani | Borrow [here](#)

Unconventional and thought-provoking interpretations of Puccini's personal beliefs and convictions and how they influenced the creation of his operas, their stories, and characters.

The Opera

Tosca | Watch [here](#)

A beautiful production and traditional interpretation of Giacomo Puccini's opera *Tosca* sung in the original Italian with English subtitles and adapted for film. Riveting performances by Maria Caniglia (acted by Franca Duval), Franco Corelli, and Giangiacomo Guelfi (acted by Afro Poli).

Tosca | Watch [here](#)

Another classic production with an all-star cast, featuring Bulgarian soprano Raina Kabaivanska in the title role.

Advanced Study

James Conlon's In-Depth Look at "Tosca" | Watch [here](#)

Los Angeles Opera Music Director James Conlon reviews the plot and offers a highly detailed analysis of the opera's musical motives.

La Tosca by Victorien Sardou | Read here [Act I](#) [Act II](#) [Act III](#) [Act IV](#) [Act V](#)

An annotated English translation of the original French play on which the opera *Tosca* is based.

Tosca: Piano-Vocal Score | Read [here](#)

A useful Italian-English resource for those wishing to review or play through parts of the opera.