

# Tosca

An opera in three acts

Sung in Italian, with English supertitles

Music by: Giacomo Puccini

Italian libretto by Luigi Illica and Giuseppe Giacosa

Based on Victorien Sardou's *La Tosca*.

Premiere: Rome, January 14, 1900

Program notes by Gene Cropsey

In Milan in 1887, Giacomo Puccini saw Victorien Sardou's play *La Tosca* with Sarah Bernhardt in the title role. In a letter to his publisher, Giulio Ricordi, he wrote, "In *Tosca*, I see the opera which exactly suits me, one without excessive proportions, one which is a decorative spectacle, and one which give opportunity for an abundance of music."

At that time, however, Puccini had written only one opera, *La Villi*, which enjoyed only moderate success at its 1884 premiere. This opera had given him merely a tentative entrée into the world of Italian opera, and Ricordi dismissed Puccini's idea as being foolish and premature.

Ricordi was interested, however, in seeing the play *La Tosca* made into an opera and, in 1893, commissioned librettist Luigi Illica to turn Sardou's play into a libretto. It was to be used eventually by another composer, Albert Franchetti. In the mean time Puccini went on to compose *Manon Lescaut* and *La Boheme*, the premieres of which catapulted him into international fame.

When Puccini heard about *Tosca* libretto being offered to Franchetti, his early interest in composing the opera himself returned. The fact that libretto was now owned by someone else made the subject more desirable to Puccini and spurred his ambition. Ricordi was faced with a problem. Puccini had become one of Italy's most promising and famous composers and now wanted a property that had been pre-empted by another composer. With Puccini's insistence, Ricordi and Illica convinced Franchetti that the plot was too violent and not suited to his talents. Franchetti relented. Puccini's acquisition of the *Tosca* libretto was one of the few dishonorable episodes in his life.

Illica, now partnered with Giuseppe Giacosa, set about revising the libretto to suit Puccini's demands. He insisted the original play be simplified, reduced from five acts with 23 characters to three acts and only nine characters. He wanted all the political episodes removed so it would become simply a melodramatic love story. The preparation was long and troubled. But when Giuseppe Verdi was shown the final revision of the libretto, he said only, "Fortunate is the composer who has that work in his hands!"

The premiere of *Tosca* took place on Jan. 14, 1900, at Teatro Contanzi in Rome. Puccini, as well as the cast and conductor, was especially nervous that night. To put on an opera

with thinly disguised political undertones at that time in a city already politically charged could mean trouble in the galleries.

Prior to the premiere, word, came that a faction of rival composers and their adherents was going to explode a bomb in the theater. Everyone's fears were especially heightened since Italy's Queen Margherita and Prime Minister Pelloux would be in attendance.

The conductor was determined to start on time. Shortly after the harsh chords of the prelude were sounded, he hears shouts of "stop" and "lower the curtain." He stopped the performance and ran out of the pit in a panic. The disturbance, however, occurred only because many of the spectators hadn't yet arrived at their seats.

Although the performance was not as good as Puccini had hoped, the audience was charmed by the melodies and fascinated by the violence. Puccini was called out 22 times. The critics, however, were in their usual disparaging mood. Most tried their best to promote the idea that *Tosca* could never carry Puccini very far toward immortality. But *Tosca*, like *Boheme*, became popular immediately and, within months, established itself internationally as a staple of the operatic repertoire.

Many anecdotes abound. When the legendary British soprano Eva Turner sang *Tosca* in America, she made a spectacular leap to her death from the walls of Castel Sant'Andrea della Valle. But she quickly appeared above the walls twice more. The customary mattress had been replaced by a trampoline for her safety. At the Metropolitan Opera, Montserrat Caballe, whose girth precluded a lead of any kind, decided not to chance it. According to a New York critic, "Miss Caballe simply walked off the stage, looking all the world like Queen Victoria out for a stroll."

*Tosca* was premiered at the Metropolitan Opera on Feb. 4, 1901. It was first performed by Opera Tampa, conducted by Anton Coppola, on May 14, 1999.

### **Historical perspective**

When *Tosca* premieres in 1900:

- The first electric bus becomes operational in New York City
- United States President William McKinley places Alaska under military rule
- Hawaii officially becomes a territory of the United States.
- The Gold Standard Act is ratified placing United States currency on the gold standard.
- New York City Mayor Van Wyck breaks ground for a new underground "Rapid Transit Railroad" that would link Manhattan and Brooklyn.
- Queen Victoria is queen of the United Kingdom.
- The first automobile show in the United States opens at New York's Madison Square Garden under the auspices of the Automobile Club of America.
- Oscar Wilde dies.