



2006-2007 Student Night at the Opera Program

Study Guide for *Tosca*



1. The Composer – Giacomo Puccini

Giacomo Puccini was born in Lucca, Italy on December 22, 1858. He came from a family of church organists, choirmasters and composers. As a boy he studied music with an uncle, then with Carlo Angeloni. As a teenager he served as an organist to the area churches and played the piano as entertainment at social events. In March 1876 he walked over thirty kilometers to attend a performance of Verdi's latest opera success, *Aida*. This event changed his life's work.

In 1880 he enrolled at the Milan Conservatory; he worked diligently at his music and received his diploma in 1883. In that same year he entered a competition for an unpublished one-act opera. His work, *Le Villi*, was not even given an honorable mention. However, it caught the attention of music publisher and promoter Giulio Ricordi and librettist Arrigo Boito. They decided to fund a premiere production of the work. Ricordi later commissioned several of Puccini's most successful operas, and his publishing house handled the printing rights for Puccini's music scores.

Puccini collaborated with several librettists on his works, including Luigi Illica and Giuseppe Giacosa. His most famous operas include: *Manon Lescaut* (1893), *La Bohème* (1896), *Tosca* (1900), *Madama Butterfly* (1904), *La Fanciulla del West* (1810), *Il Trittico* (1918 – a collection of three one-act operas, including the comedy *Gianni Schicchi*), and *Turandot* (1926 – unfinished at the time of Puccini's death and later completed by Franco Alfano, one of Puccini's protégés).

Puccini was somewhat reclusive; he preferred his home in the country to hectic city life. He enjoyed hunting and long walks through the countryside. He was also a lifelong smoker, particularly of cigars, and in 1924 was diagnosed with cancer of the throat. Although he survived the surgery, he was no longer able to speak. He died of a heart attack four days later on November 29, 1924 in Brussels.

2. The Source of the Story

Tosca is based on the play *La Tosca* by the French playwright Victorien Sardou (1831-1908). Sardou's early works consisted mainly of comedies. He later turned to writing melodramas based on historical events. The passionate nature of these later works made them popular choices as the basis for operas. The most famous of these was *La Tosca*, which premiered in 1887. The title role was written for the famous French actress Sarah Bernhardt. Sardou collaborated with Luigi Illica and Giuseppe Giacosa on the libretto for Puccini's opera.

3. Background on the Opera

La Tosca first caught Puccini's attention in 1889, but it wasn't until he saw Sarah Bernhardt perform the title role in 1895 that he seriously turned his attention to creating an opera based on Sardou's play. The rights for turning the play into an opera had already been granted to another Italian composer, Alberto Franchetti. However, Giulio Ricordi, Puccini's publisher, persuaded Franchetti to abandon the project, and Puccini secured the rights shortly thereafter.

Puccini paid attention to the tiniest details in his writing of *Tosca*. He used the actual melody, which was sung in the Roman Catholic church for the "Te Deum", and researched church practices for the correct order of the procession at the end of the first act. He retained much of the primary action from the play, by eliminating several secondary characters, and condensed the five-act play to three acts for the opera.

Tosca premiered in Rome on January 14, 1900. It played to packed houses for 20 performances. Some critics took issue with the violent nature of the story, but it continued to be popular with the public. The American premiere of *Tosca* took place in New York at the Metropolitan Opera on February 4, 1901. Some notable

sopranos who have sung the role of *Tosca* over the years include Geraldine Farrar, Maria Jeritza (who was noted for singing her second act aria lying on the floor!), Grace Moore, Zinka Milanov, Renalta Tebaldi and Maria Callas.

4. What do critics know anyway?

Here's what a London newspaper critic had to say about *Tosca* on July 13, 1900:

“Those who were present at the performance of Puccini’s opera *Tosca*, were little prepared for the revolting effects produced by musically illustrating the torture and murder scenes of Sardou’s play. The alliance of a pure art with scenes so essentially brutal and demoralizing... produced a feeling of nausea. There may be some who will find entertainment in this sensation, but all true lovers of the gentle art must deplore with myself its being so prostituted. What has music to do with a lustful man chasing a defenseless woman or the dying kicks of a murdered scoundrel? It seemed an odd form of amusement to place before a presumably refined and cultured audience, and should this opera prove popular it will scarcely indicate a healthy or creditable taste.”

5. The Cast of Characters

Character	Voice Type	Description
Floria Tosca	Soprano	an opera singer
Mario Cavaradossi	Tenor	a painter
Baron Scarpia	Baritone	the chief of the Roman police
Cesare Angelotti	Bass	leader of the Republicans
The Sacristan	Baritone	
Spoletta	Tenor	a police agent
Sciarrone	Bass	Baron Scarpia’s orderly
Jailer	Bass	
A Shepherd Boy	Boy Soprano	
Soldiers, police agents, Ladies, citizens, chorus	Chorus	

6. The Story

The opera takes place in Rome in June 1800.

Act I – The Church of Sant’Andrea Della Valle

Before the opera begins, the Marchesa Attavanti has visited the church, supposedly to pray. Her real purpose, however, is to hide some clothing behind the statue of the Virgin Mary for her brother, Cesare Angelotti, former Consul of the Roman Republic before it was destroyed by the Royalists, and now a political prisoner. He enters the church having just escaped from the prison in Castel Sant’Angelo. He knows that his sister has left some women’s clothes hidden for him in the church as well as the key to the Attavanti Chapel, so that he can hide and disguise himself. After he hides, the painter Mario Cavaradossi enters to resume work on his painting and a strange lady who has been coming to the church lately (referring to the Marchesa Attavanti). Cavaradossi sings of the curious harmony of the strange lady’s beauty with that of his beloved Tosca.

Angelotti recognizes Cavaradossi as an old friend and political ally, and he comes out of hiding. Cavaradossi promises to help the fugitive, but their conversation is interrupted by the arrival of Tosca, and Angelotti once again hides in the chapel. Cavaradossi must now deal with the jealous Tosca, who has found the door to the church locked, and has heard voices and the rustling of clothes in the chapel. Her suspicions or “another woman” are finally put to rest, and the two agree to meet that evening at Mario’s villa just outside of the city. Tosca leaves and Angelotti again emerges from the chapel. A cannon shot is heard, which indicates that Angelotti’s escape has been discovered, and they both run off to Cavaradossi’s villa where Angelotti will hide.

The Sacristan arrives with the joyous news of Napoleon’s defeat at the hands of the Royalist general Melas at the Battle of Marengo, only to discover that Cavaradossi has gone. He calls the church choir together to urge them to prepare for a special cantata they are to sing that evening with the famous singer Floria Tosca, and to get dressed for the *Te Deum* which is to celebrate the victory of the Royalists. The sudden arrival of Scarpia and his henchmen silences them. Scarpia announces that Angelotti has been traced to the church.

Cavaradossi's empty food basket and the Marchesa Attavanti's fan are found in the chapel, and Scarpia realizes that the artist has helped Angelotti escape. Tosca returns to the church to tell Cavaradossi about the change of plans for their evening, and is disturbed at not finding him. Scarpia cleverly uses the fan to play on Tosca's jealousy and to trap her into leading his spies to Cavaradossi. Thinking the artist to unfaithful, she flies into a jealous rage and leaves for Cavaradossi's villa, unaware that Scarpia is sending Spoletta and his henchmen after her. While the *Te Deum* is sung, Scarpia expresses his dark desire to see Cavaradossi executed and to possess the beautiful Tosca.

Act II – The Farnese Palace

Scarpia is in his apartments in the palace. In another part of the building, the new cantata is being performed before the King and Queen as celebration of Melas' victory. Spoletta enters and tells Scarpia that Angelotti could not be found at Cavaradossi's villa, but that the painter himself was arrested, and has refused to say anything. Tosca, summoned by Scarpia, enters. In a whisper, Cavaradossi begs her not to reveal what she has seen at the villa. Scarpia orders that Cavaradossi be tortured; though the painter refuses to talk, Tosca, horrified at his suffering, discloses Angelotti's hiding place. Cavaradossi angrily reproaches her, but his anger turns to joy when Sciarrone, another of Scarpia's henchmen, comes in with the news that the Battle of Marengo has been won by Napoleon and not by the royalists, as first reported. Cavaradossi's gloating reveals his true political sentiments, and the infuriated Scarpia has him taken off to prison at the Castel Sant'Angelo to be executed as a traitor.

Tosca pleads in vain for mercy as Spoletta comes back to announce that Angelotti, rather than submit to capture, has killed himself. Once alone with Tosca, Scarpia offers her a repulsive bargain: if she will give herself to him, he will release Cavaradossi. She reluctantly agrees on the condition that she and Cavaradossi be permitted to leave the country as soon as possible. Scarpia tells her that he cannot simply release the artist, but that there must be a mock execution. While he is writing a letter of safe conduct for them, Tosca notices a knife on the table. As Scarpia approaches her, she stabs and kills him.

Act III – The Castel Sant'Angelo

Cavaradossi is brought to a parapet of the castle and left to await his execution. A shepherd is heard singing as dawn slowly breaks. Cavaradossi thinks about his love for Tosca, and about his life that is about to end. Tosca arrives and gives him the good news that they have a letter of safe conduct and can escape after the mock execution. Tosca confesses that she has killed Scarpia. She gives Cavaradossi instructions on how he must pretend to die. They sing of their love and their future together. The soldiers enter and prepare Mario for his execution. They fire and he falls. After the soldiers leave, Tosca runs to the fallen Mario and tells him to get up, only to discover that the bullets were real – she has been cheated by Scarpia! Spoletta, having discovered Scarpia's body, rushes up the stairs with soldiers to arrest Tosca. With a cry of "Scarpia, I go before God" she jumps off the ramparts of the fortress, killing herself before she can be captured.

7. The Opera Connection

Opera brings all of the performing arts together in one incredible art form (vocal music, orchestral music, dance, visual arts), but it also encompasses other areas of interest, such as history, political science, literature, language arts and religion. Here are some suggestions for additional study, which you can do on your own!

History/Political Science

Tosca takes place during the Napoleonic Wars of the late eighteenth century. Italy was then a collection of separate city-states, each of which had its own local duke or king. The country as a whole had been ruled by Austria, for many years. The French claimed to sympathize with the oppressed Italian people, who looked to Napoleon as a liberator who would sweep away the old ruling system and help to establish a new united government. Look up further information on this period of European history. Why was the Battle of Marengo important to the struggle for Italian independence?

Art

At the beginning of the opera Cavaradossi is working on a portrait of Mary Magdalene. He uses the Marchesa Attavanti as the inspiration for his religious subject. Find out who the prominent Italian artists were around

1800. What were their subjects sacred or secular? In the case of paintings or sculptures, did someone other than the actual subject pose (i.e., a model)?

Literature

Sardou's play *La Tosca* is mostly known today as the basis for Puccini's opera, but in his day he was a fairly prominent playwright. Which other European playwrights and authors were popular in the late nineteenth century? Have any of their works been turned into operas, musicals or movies?

Religion

Puccini did his homework on Roman Catholic liturgical practices, and made certain that all details relating to the procession at the end of Act One were accurate. How important was the organized church in nineteenth century Europe?



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Toledo Opera
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Toledo, OH 43604-1080

8. Resource/Reference Books

Boyden, Matthew. Opera: The Rough Guide. London: Rough Guides Ltd., 1997.

Note: This contains recommended recordings of many of the operas it describes.

DiGaetani, John Louis. An Invitation to the Opera. New York: Doubleday/Anchor Books, 1986.

Freeman, John W. The Metropolitan Opera Stories of the Great Operas. New York: W. W. Norton and Company, 1984.

Note: This contains most of the popular operas that many American opera companies perform. There's a Volume Two of this book, published in 1997, containing many twentieth century operas.

The Metropolitan Opera Encyclopedia: A Comprehensive Guide to the World of Opera. Edited by David Hamilton. New York: Simon and Schuster, 1987.

The New Grove Book of Operas. Edited by Stanley Sadie. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1996.

Note: This is a condensed version of the information found in the New Grove Dictionary of Opera listed below.

The New Grove Dictionary of Opera. Edited by Stanley Sadie. Volumes Three (Puccini) and Four (Tosca). London: Macmillan Reference Limited, 1997.

The New Kobbe's Complete Opera Book. Edited by the Earl of Harewood and Anthony Peattie. New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1997 (11th edition).

Plotkin, Fred. Opera 101: A Complete Guide To Learning And Loving Opera. New York: Hyperion, 1994.

Pogue, David and Speck, Scott. Opera For Dummies. Foster City, CA: IDG Books Worldwide, Inc., 1997.

Note: Yes, this is one of the "...For Dummies" books. It contains a compact disk containing 13 audio tracks and 1 midi track (if you have the right software!).

Rudel, Anthony J. Tales From The Opera. New York: Simon and Shuster, 1985.

Rosenthal, Harold and Warrack, John. The Concise Oxford Dictionary of Opera. London: Oxford University Press, 1987.

Sardou, Victorien. La Tosca (The Drama Behind the Opera). Edited and translated by W. Laird Klein-Ahlbrandt. Lewiston, NY: The Edwin Mellen Press, 1990.

Note: This book was found at BGSU's main campus library.

Simon, Henry W. 100 Great Operas And Their Stories. New York: Doubleday/ Anchor Books, 1957.