

Tosca

Music by Giacomo Puccini • Libretto by Giuseppe Giacosa and Luigi Illica

Study Guide to the Opera

The Battle of Marengo was painted in 1801 by Louis-François, Baron Lejeune (1775—1848), who actually participated in this battle and many others with Napoleon. The 180 X 250 cm oil painting can be seen in the Palace of Versailles.

https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Lejeune_-_Bataille_de_Marengo.jpg



Historical References in *Tosca*

by Jill Leahy

Puccini drew inspiration for his operas from many sources: history, current events, existing plays, and his own imagination. The inspiration for *Tosca* came from a play, *La Tosca*, written by the French playwright Victorien Sardou in 1887. After a lengthy negotiation, Puccini finally secured operatic rights to the drama and began composing his own *Tosca* in 1896.

While Sardou and Puccini cared greatly about authenticity and historical detail, they both employed “artistic license” to their benefit, in different ways. In the play *La Tosca*, although Sardou used names and backgrounds that contained historical allusions, Cesare Angelotti, Mario Cavaradossi, Floria Tosca, and Baron Scarpia are fictional characters. And although *Tosca* is considered the most famous of all “Roman” operas, none of the three major characters is Roman: Tosca was an orphan from the city of Verona, Mario Cavaradossi was not Italian by birth but rather was born in Paris to an Italian father and French mother, and Baron Vitellio Scarpia was purported to be from Sicily.

What remains constant in both the play and the opera—each taking place between noon on June 17 and dawn June 18, 1800—is the historical accuracy of references to the political climate in Italy between Napoleon sympathizers and the Bourbon-Naples-Austria supporters who wanted a return to imperial rule.

In Act II when Cavaradossi exclaims “Vittoria!” he’s referring to news about the outcome of the Battle of Marengo, which was fought on June 14, 1800 between the French army of Napoleon Bonaparte and an Austrian army led by General Michael von Melas. After bitter fighting throughout the morning and early afternoon, the Austrians forced the French army to retreat. However, French reinforcements arrived later in the afternoon and won the battle for Bonaparte. History changed course that day and the opera *Tosca* commemorates the political climate vividly.

Tosca Synopsis

ACT I. Cesare Angelotti, an escaped political prisoner, rushes into the church of Sant'Andrea della Valle to hide in the Attavanti chapel (**Ah! Finalmente!**). As he vanishes, a Sacristan shuffles in, praying at the sound of the Angelus. Mario Cavaradossi enters to work on his portrait of Mary Magdalene, inspired by the Marchesa Attavanti (Angelotti's sister). Looking at the portrait, he compares her blond beauty to that of his raven-haired lover, the singer Floria Tosca (**Recondita armonia**). The Sacristan grumbles disapproval and leaves. Angelotti emerges and is recognized by his friend and fellow liberal Mario, who gives him food and hurries him back into the chapel as Tosca is heard calling outside. Tosca asks suspiciously why the doors to the church were locked and then reminds him of their rendezvous that evening at his villa (**Non la sospiri la nostra casetta?**).



Church of Sant'Andrea delle Valle

Suddenly recognizing the Marchesa Attavanti in the painting, Tosca is instantly jealous, but Mario reassures her. When she has gone, Mario summons Angelotti from the chapel; a cannon signals that the police have discovered the escape, so the two flee to Mario's villa. Meanwhile, the Sacristan returns with the choir that is to sing a *Te Deum* that day (**Adjutorum nostrum in nomine Domini**). Their excitement is silenced by the entrance of Baron Scarpia, chief of the secret police, in search of Angelotti. When Tosca returns, Scarpia shows her a fan he has just found, bearing the Attavanti crest. Thinking Mario faithless, Tosca tearfully vows vengeance and leaves as the church fills with worshipers. Scarpia, sending his men to follow her to Angelotti, schemes to get the diva in his power (**Va, Tosca!**).

Intermission

ACT II. In the Farnese Palace, Scarpia anticipates the sadistic pleasure of bending Tosca to his will (**Ha più forte sapore**). The spy Spoletta arrives. He has not found Angelotti, but has arrested Mario, who is brought in for Scarpia to interrogate while Tosca is heard singing a cantata at a royal gala downstairs. She enters just as her lover is being taken to an adjoining room; he will be forced to confess under torture. Unnerved by Scarpia's questioning and the sound of Mario's screams, Tosca reveals Angelotti's hiding place. Mario is brought in; realizing what has happened, he turns on her, but Sciarrone rushes in to announce that Napoleon has won the Battle of Marengo, a defeat for Scarpia's side. Mario shouts his defiance of tyranny (**Vittoria!**) and is dragged to prison. Scarpia now suggests that Tosca yield herself to him in exchange for her lover's life. Fighting off his embraces, she protests her fate to God, having dedicated her life to art and love (**Vissi d'arte**). Scarpia again insists, but Spoletta interrupts: faced with capture, Angelotti has killed himself. Tosca, forced to give in or lose her lover, agrees to Scarpia's proposition. The baron pretends to order a mock execution for Mario, after which he is to be freed; Spoletta leaves. No sooner has Scarpia written a safe-conduct document for the lovers than Tosca snatches a knife from the table and kills him, then wrenches the safe-conduct pass from the dead man's hand.



Palazzo Farnese, now the French Embassy

Intermission

ACT III. The voice of a shepherd boy is heard as church bells toll at dawn. Mario awaits execution at the Castel Sant'Angelo; he bribes the jailer to convey a farewell note to Tosca. Writing it, overcome with memories of love, he gives way to despair (**E lucevan le stelle**). Suddenly Tosca arrives, filled with the story of her recent adventures. Mario caresses the hands that committed murder for his sake (**O dolci mani**), and the two hail their future. As the firing squad appears, the diva coaches Mario on how to fake his death convincingly; the soldiers fire and depart. Tosca urges Mario to hurry, but when he fails to move, she discovers that Scarpia's treachery has transcended the grave—the bullets were real. When Spoletta rushes in to arrest Tosca for Scarpia's murder, she cries to Scarpia to meet her before God, then leaps to her death.



Castel Sant'Angelo, one of the most popular tourist attractions in Rome. From the rampart, Tosca could not have leapt into the river—the Tiber is several hundred feet away.

—Courtesy of *Opera News*, adapted

Characters of the Opera

In league with the Bonapartists

Floria Tosca *soprano*

[FLOR-yah TOH-skah]

Famous opera singer in love with Cavaradossi. Scarpia, the chief of police, coerces her into revealing the location of the escaped prisoner, Cesare Angelotti.

Mario Cavaradossi *tenor*

[MAHR-yoh kah-vah-rah-DOHS-see]

Painter, member of the minor aristocracy, and Floria's lover. He hides his friend and fellow liberal, Cesare, from the police.

Cesare Angelotti *bass*

[CHAY-zah-reh an-jeh-LOT-tee]

Leader of the Bonapartists and former consul of the Roman Republic. An escaped political prisoner, he is hunted by Scarpia.

Bourbon Government Supporters

Baron Scarpia *baritone*

[SKAR-pyah]

The treacherous chief of police who earnestly searches for Angelotti

Un sagrestano *baritone*

[oon sah-greh-STAH-noh]

The Sacristan of the Church of Sant'Andrea della Valle (the setting for Act I of *Tosca*)

Spoletta *tenor*

[spoh-LEH-tah] Police agent/spy

Sciarrone *bass*

[shah-ROH-neh] Policeman

Un carceriere *bass*

[oon kar-cheh-ree-AIR-eh]

Jailer at Castel Sant'Angelo

Others

Un pastore *soprano*

[oon pas-TOR-eh] Shepherd boy

Important Supernumeraries

- Cardinal and train of priests and altar boys
- Judge, Court reporter, Officer, Sergeant
- Firing Squad, Executioner

Chorus of choir singers and townspeople

Puccini Timeline

Puccini's biographer, Mary Jane Phillips-Matz, describes his life within his beloved Tuscany and the cutthroat opera business as one of artistic triumphs that earned him international celebrity and considerable wealth. He was a sophisticated composer who often drew upon exotic thematic material, as well as an elegant cosmopolite who loved his several villas, expensive cars, boats, and fine clothes. But, he was a person racked with indecision, self-doubt, bouts of depression, and private misfortunes. Following his passion for driving fast cars, Puccini was nearly killed in a major accident in 1903.



In addition to the invention of the automobile, many other important events occurred during Puccini's lifetime. It's extremely interesting to note these events and wonder what the composer was contemplating while composing his powerful operas.

1858 Giacomo Antonio Domenico Michele Secondo Maria Puccini born December 22 in Lucca, Tuscany, Italy

- 1859 Darwin publishes *Origin of Species by Natural Selection*
The famous New Orleans Opera House opens
- 1861-65 American Civil War
- 1862 Claude Debussy, French composer, born
- 1867 African-American men granted right to vote in Washington, DC
Amy Beach, the first major American female composer, born
- 1868 Professional baseball begins in America
- 1869 Westinghouse Air Brake Company opens in Pittsburgh
- 1871 Verdi's opera *Aida* premieres in Cairo
- 1876 Puccini, age 18, sees his first opera, *Aida***
First telephone call from Alexander Graham Bell to Watson
First complete performance of Wagner's *Ring of the Nibelung*
- 1877 Edison invents phonograph
First tournament at Wimbledon
- 1878 Edison makes electricity available for household use
- 1880 Edison and Swan develop first practical light bulb
- 1893 Puccini, age 35, premieres first hit, *Manon Lescaut***
Henry Ford builds his first car
Verdi's last opera, *Falstaff*, premieres
- 1896 Puccini's *La bohème* premieres**
- 1900 Puccini's *Tosca* premieres in Rome**
- 1901 Theodore Roosevelt renames "Executive Mansion" to "The White House"
- 1902 First public demonstration of radio
- 1903 Wright brothers' first flight at Kitty Hawk
- 1905 Albert Einstein introduces the equation $E=mc^2$
- 1912 Sinking of the *Titanic*
- 1914 Panama Canal opens
- 1914-18 World War I (8.5 million killed)
- 1920 19th amendment gives US women the right to vote
- 1921 First regular radio station begins—KDKA in Pittsburgh
- 1924 Puccini dies November 29 in Brussels, Belgium, leaving *Turandot* unfinished**
- 1925 First demonstration of television by Baird in London
Hitler publishes *Mein Kampf*, reorganizes Nazi party
- 1926 Puccini's *Turandot* premieres at La Scala in Milan**
(Completed by Franco Alfano)
- 1927 Babe Ruth hits 60 home runs for the Yankees

Realism in *Tosca* “from the real places at the real times”

Edited by Jill Leahy



Puccini looked at even the smallest details in order to achieve a near perfect correspondence between stage action and historic reality. Puccini researched the liturgical practices in Rome for the *Te Deum* of the first finale. The morning bells of Act 3 required a list of all the churches surrounding Castel Sant'Angelo and their bells, including the respective pitches. The librettist Illica wrote, "the great fuss and the large amount of money for

the bells have constituted an additional folly, because it passes completely unnoticed." Nevertheless, the bells provide a source of trouble and expense to opera companies performing *Tosca* to this day.

The soprano Maria Jeritzka told how Puccini asked her to work out something so the audience would be swept away. During a rehearsal of Act II, Scarpia was carried away with the part and when he threw her down on the floor, she landed on her nose. Thinking that her nose was bleeding, she hesitated before starting the aria "Vissi d'arte." Then, she slowly but surely started to rise to a kneeling position and sang from there. Puccini came rushing on the stage, hugged her and said "Cara, carissima, thank you, oh thank you so very much for the wonderful idea you had." Jeritzka told him it was an accident. Puccini's response was, "Never mind, promise me that whatever happens you will always sing it in this accidental way." Even in some of today's productions, after struggling with Scarpia, *Tosca* falls to the ground and addresses her aria to Heaven.

Tosca's popularity, its realism, and its high-voltage finale provide the perfect background for a tradition of (in)famous accidents. There are plenty of anecdotes about the theater, but where *Tosca* is concerned, they become mythical. The most popular is **the bouncing *Tosca***: *Tosca* as usual jumped from the walls of Castel Sant'Angelo. But the stage workers had improved her security by replacing the mattress with a trampoline, so that *Tosca* appeared two or three times from behind the wall. And the **collective suicide**: the stage director was giving last-minute instruction to the supers hired as soldiers. There had been no stage rehearsal, and he gave them the usual instruction "exit with the principals." When *Tosca* leapt from the parapet, seeing no other principals left on stage, the supernumerary soldiers all dutifully jumped after her, giving a Shakespearean greatness to the final tragedy.

Based on materials from *Tosca's Rome* by Susan Vandiver Nicasso

Radio interview with Maria Jeritzka in December 1958. <http://www.singerslegacy.com/mariajeritzka.htm>

<http://opera.stanford.edu/Puccini/Tosca/backgd.html#cap6>

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