

GIACOMO PUCCINI

TOSCA

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This lecture is about our beloved Italian composer, Giacomo Puccini, and about the universal appeal that his operas enjoy to this day. Tonight we will concentrate on “***Tosca***” and I will try to explain why this opera touches the audience in a special way. Although “***Tosca***” is an opera dominated by beauty, love, poetry and prayers, it brings to a climax other feelings of lust, hatred, despise and despair.

Throughout his career Puccini's goal was to put real life on the operatic stage. He wanted *Life, Love and Death* and all the true, passionate and human *Little Things* that are called *Poesia* to touch our heart. He wanted the audience to find grace and beauty in sorrow and in death, even when death conquers at the end. And he succeeded in giving the audience the music of *Poetry* in the form of *Life, Art and Reality* on stage.

Puccini's operas are nothing more than poems of human emotions expressed in a very simple, straightforward everyday language. Unfortunately translations of his librettos (or any librettos) do no justice to the original versions, therefore it helps to know some Italian language in order to get a full appreciation of these emotions.

Or we can close our eyes and be transported to a different realm simply by his wonderful melodies.

Many universities in recent years have introduced a new Italian language course called: ***Italian through opera***, where opera arias are studied to learn the language. These courses are very successful and Puccini, among other composers, is the one who is studied the most mainly because his simple and

genuine scores make him a craftsman of the Italian language.

But it is also the same simplicity and effectiveness of the language, along with colloquial, simple and genuine expressions that make Puccini succeed in communicating the deepest feelings and the strongest human emotions.

As we move on to talk about Puccini's life, let's keep in mind the fact that the composer's art focuses on the intimate settings of human emotions and that all his protagonists, regardless of their background are characters to whom the whole world will always relate because they are also focused on true human experiences.

HIS EARLY LIFE

Giacomo Puccini was born in Lucca in 1858. He was the oldest son in a family which counted four generations of professional musicians. Driven by family tradition and by a very ambitious mother, he succeeded in becoming the fifth generation composer in his line. When his father died in 1864, little Giacomo was 6 and his mother at 34

was pregnant and with 7 other children to raise.

In 1880 Puccini was sent to Milano to the famous Conservatorium. It was the finest training school in Italy for composers and singers. Due to high competition, to be accepted at the Conservatorium of Milano was not easy. Age, previous musical education and availability of space also were strongly considered.

Earlier Verdi himself had been rejected at the age of 19; now Puccini is not only considered old at 22, but he is also a rather poor young man who has only to fulfill his mother's wishes in pursuing a musical career, as the tradition in the Puccini family dictated.

Wearing old clothes, worn shoes and with very little money, Puccini is studying in Milano to prepare for his admission exams.

In a letter to his mother, he wrote: “ When I have money, I go to the café, but on many, many evenings I don’t go, because a glass of punch costs forty *centesimi!*”

But Giacomo passed the exams, and his next three years in Milano shaped him as the composer whose existence as a poor student defined the characters and the situations of all his operas, especially “***La Bohème***”.

Influence of *Verismo*

While in Milano Puccini was influenced by a new form of sentimental ‘realistic’ melodrama called Verismo which appeared in Italy after Verdi.

This new style was introduced in opera by Mascagni and Leoncavallo and it later dominated the world’s opera stages with Puccini’s “***La Bohème***”, “***Tosca***” and “***Madama Butterfly***”, among others.

VERISMO had begun as a literary movement introduced in Milano in 1860 by the ‘*Scapigliatura Milanese*’ and it was to modernize Italian art, music and theatre. Many young artists labeled themselves ‘Scapigliati’ (the Disheveled Ones of Milano) and they all had a common goal of giving a more modern and realistic approach to the Arts.

As Puccini settled in Milano, he was introduced to Cleto Arrighi, the originator of ‘*Scapigliatura*’ and to Arrigo Boito, its chief propagandist and the most passionate advocate of a ‘new type’ of music.

Their idea was of transforming conventional opera into a ‘*poema sinfonico scenico*’ where each act would form a movement and in which scenery, costumes, libretto and singers

would function like individual instruments within an orchestra. The libretto would then be more of a 'poem' necessary to fill in the outlines of the plot in a language worthy of the subject. As much as this theory of Boito was rather cloudy and unrealistic, it did have a certain impact on the young Puccini, whose sensitivity and fresh musical imagination was receptive to the use of melodic simple phrases in the libretto.

Since his first opera "*Le Villi*" in 1884, Puccini in a letter to his mother talks of a "*good little subject... in the symphonic genre that appeals to me a good deal, since I think I can succeed*". And in fact "**Le Villi**" was the first of many operas which made the critics declare that they had found the composer Italy had been waiting for.

With Puccini's operas the grandeur of Wagner and the nobility of Verdi are replaced with ordinary people living ordinary lives, real people who have to deal with the cold realities of the world, and the little things in life.

Opera now becomes a world poised between poverty and beauty.

"...*I love little things*", the composer wrote,

"...*and I only can and want to make the*

music of little things, if they are true, passionate and human, and go to the heart."

This is the fundamental truth in

"La Bohème" "Manon Lescaut" "Tosca"
"Madama Butterfly" and "Turandot".

Puccini's operas contain an unparalleled manipulation of orchestral colors, with the orchestra often creating the scene's atmosphere. The popular appeal of his operas is therefore the result of the emphasis on the melody.

While composing, Puccini often mentioned “*l’evidenza della situazione*” in his operas, as he referred to a situation which would enable the spectator to follow the drama and identify with the simplicity of the dialogue. He always demanded from the librettisti to leave space for spreading his colors more lyrically, for “*affectionate little phrases*”, for “*episodes delicate, tender, luminous, and exquisite*”.

His narrative style, where the characters sing short phrases one after another as if they were talking to each other, is the result of this distinctive quality of making the situation evident as Puccini wanted, and it also fulfills a requirement of the *Verismo* movement, for the ‘recitativo’ was one of its major elements.

As for the structure of Puccini's works, it is important also to pay attention to the scores and to how they present a strong sense of continuous flow and connectivity. He uses leitmotifs to define the characters, even when they are not on the stage. This happens at the very beginning of "**Tosca**", where the three initial chords

of the opera are used to announce the villain Scarpia. From the very beginning in fact the opera is dominated by the shadow of evil. The unseen presence of Baron Scarpia is announced by a frightening musical image, the motif of a sinister force. "**Tosca**" has been defined Puccini's best example of Verismo most of all for the depiction of the many facets of life and all its

passions, including violence and death.

“**Tosca**” is an opera of action, a drama of real life happenings, a sequence of events from which we learn the background of the main characters, a drama full of political and musical complexities. Many constant changing situations which leave no room for thoughts.

An opera in three acts, it is based on the play “La Tosca” written in 1887 for Sarah Bernhardt by Victorien Sardou.

The libretto is by Luigi Illica and Giuseppe Giacosa and it premiered in Torino at the Teatro Regio on January 14, 1900.

It takes place in Rome in June 1800, at the time of the collapse of the “Roman

Republic” which was trying to retake the city from the French. The action of the opera takes place between noon of June 17, 1800 and dawn of the following day, and during this time all of the major characters die violent deaths.

The main characters are:

- Mario Cavaradossi, a painter of liberal tendencies, born in Paris of a Roman father and a French mother, who now lives in Rome because of his devotion and love and for Floria Tosca.
- Cesare Angelotti, a political prisoner, who recently escaped from Castel Sant’Angelo where he was incarcerated.

- Vitellio Scarpia, the chief of Roman police, whose life is in danger if he fails to recapture Angelotti, but who aims at a second victory, the seduction of Tosca.
- Floria Tosca, a trained singer, formerly educated by the Benedictine nuns and now performing in leading theatres in Italy.

And as much as the love of Tosca and Cavaradossi forms the heart of the drama, the whole opera contains splendid dramatic situations which make it theatrically gripping from the beginning to the end.

Floria Tosca is madly in love with the painter Cavaradossi and very jealous of him, this jealousy is aroused and instigated by Scarpia whose lust is aiming at seducing Tosca.

In the celebrated lyrical passage “Recondita *Armonia*” * however, we find out that Tosca’s jealousy is unfounded, for Cavaradossi, while painting in the Church of Sant’Andrea del Valle sings of the beauty of the woman he loves. The various episodes of the love duet “*Mario, Mario*” * make this aria one of the most effective passages Puccini ever wrote.

Cavaradossi reassures her of his love for her, even tries to kiss her; something she will not allow him to do in church, before the Madonna, until she has prayed and made an offering. Tosca is an actress, an experienced woman of the theatre, she is also very religious, (we know that she had been educated by the nuns) and the music around her always paints her devotion and serenity, even when she will kill.

She is the most accomplished and most rounded character of all of Puccini's heroines. From her first appearance she is a well defined '*persona*.' She is not a '*type*' like Mimi in "***La Boheme***" who reveals who she is by her own self description. As Tosca enters the stage, she is an individual who from the first scene fulfills herself with her poise, her disposition to jealousy, her loving nature and her theatrical experience.

At the end of Act I, with the aria "*Tre sbirri, una carrozza*" * Scarpia reveals to be the evil and sinister character earlier announced by the opening chords at the beginning of the opera. He is an hypocrite, secretly steeped in vice and falsely pious. He sings of his desire to possess Tosca which makes him renounce his hopes to Heaven. The scene takes place in church during the *Te Deum*; he cowardly bows in

reverence to the Cardinal while vindictively singing to himself: “Va, Tosca! Nel tuo cuor s’annida Scarpia.” Earlier he had ordered for Tosca to be escorted to his palace later that evening and the act ends with an effective climax set by this sinister and dominating Scarpia.

When Scarpia reveals to Tosca that Cavaradossi is being tortured because he is not revealing the whereabouts of Angelotti, and Tosca herself can no longer stand the suffering of his torture and his soon to be execution, Tosca asks at what price can Cavaradossi be saved. Scarpia now sings a passage of great power with “*Già. Mi dicon Venal.*” *The price for saving him is Tosca herself.

It is now that Tosca in despair and not knowing where to turn, sings the famous “Vissi d’Arte” * an aria of great eloquence about a life dedicated to art, love and religion.

Tosca will make one last plea to Scarpia while the news arrive that Angelotti has committed suicide and Scarpia is ordering Cavaradossi to be executed. She has no

choice, but to consent with a broken heart to the deal of having Cavaradossi killed by a mock execution and of being given a safe-conduct for the two of them to escape. As Scarpia is writing this document, Tosca sees a knife on the table and quickly a monstrous thought takes shape in her mind. Tosca plunges the knife into Scarpia as she turns into a cold killer, but she still remains

the dignified woman of religious upbringing when she places lighted candles on either side of his head and a crucifix on his chest. She calmly washes her hands, she arranges her hair in a looking glass, she looks for and finds the safe-conduct in Scarpia's dead fingers, she briefly surveys the body, she turns off the lights on the table and walks out of the room. This is the man

who made all of Rome tremble, she sings, as Act II ends. "*Io tenni la promessa*" * Cavaradossi in jail is told that he has one hour left to live and now sings the opera's most celebrated aria "*E lucevan le stelle*", the best orchestral statement of blackness and annihilation. From his first appearance on the platform he is under the shadow of death and his key words "*Muoio disperato*"

define the mood of the entire aria. This aria is definitely one of the best examples of Verismo; its melodic contour and its insistent accents produce a very convincing veristic delivery.* We all know that this an aria best sang by Pavarotti, who played the role of Cavaradossi at the Metropolitan Opera House 60 times in his life and **“Tosca”** was his last performance there in 2004.

After having left the palace Tosca comes to Mario to tell him how she murdered Scarpia, to show him the safe-conduct and to explain to him the mock execution. She is now the actress at her best, and with all her acting experience she tries to teach the novice Mario how to act at the shooting, how to fall and pretend to be dead. She truly believes to be in control of the situation

when she repeats to him her admonitions about falling quickly and without hurting himself. If only she had to do it herself, she says: 'Colla scenica scienza / lo saprei la movenza.' (with the experience of the theatre I would know the right moves). The firing squad fires and Mario does fall so naturally that she is truly impressed. 'Ecco un artista!' She has only to discover that

he is really dead. From here on music takes second place to action; there is the same sudden and quick reaction of Mimi's death when announced to Rodolfo. Now distant cries indicate that Scarpia's body has been found and as they come to arrest Tosca, she has already claimed to the top of the battlements, from which with a cry of 'Scarpia, avanti a Dio!' she throws herself below.

With all her strength, self-dignity and sense of justice, Tosca chooses to die. To the very end she is not done with Scarpia, perhaps having killed him was not enough; she will still seek revenge in front of God.