

Opera Essay : *Tosca and Napoleon*

Carol Crocca

Knowing the historical context of *Tosca* is not necessary to appreciate or understand its story. The themes of political oppression and deceit, passionate love, jealousy and abuse of power are dramatic elements which, in Puccini's masterful hands, continue to move us regardless of our distance in time from the creation of this work. But its context is worth exploring because of its connections to both the opera and the development of Italy as a nation.

Napoleon first invaded northern Italy in 1796, at which time the country was divided into ten states, ruled by different European powers: the Kingdom of Naples, which included Sicily; the Kingdom of Sardinia (Piedmont), the duchy of Milan (a part of the Hapsburg empire); the republics of Venice, Genoa, and Lucca; the Papal States (a large territory bisecting Italy with the Vatican as its capital); the duchies of Modena and Parma, and the grand duchy of Tuscany.

These states varied in every conceivable way and were ruled by different European nations. Some, such as Lombardy and Tuscany, had benefitted from Enlightenment-inspired absolute monarchs and some were still feudal in character. During the initial period of French domination, the conqueror installed new republics, and constitutions modeled after the French. Also inaugurated were civil liberties, including freedom of the press and of religion.

However, in early 1799, a coalition of various forces defeated the French and the old regimes were reinstated from February to September 1799.

But Napoleon needed to defeat Austria, which controlled much of northern Italy, in order to secure his grip on power in France, and so he re-invaded, engaging the Austrians at Marengo (near the city of Alessandria in Piedmont) on June 14, 1800. The Austrian general reported victory on the afternoon of that day, as relayed at the end of *Tosca*, Act I; but later in the day, the French forces returned and reversed the outcome.

That news is reported to Scarpia in Act II, immediately after Mario learns that Tosca has revealed the fugitive Angelotti's whereabouts. Scarpia, an officer of the police state of the Papacy, represents the old regime, while Napoleon's victory signifies the reduction of church power and the re-establishment of secular control. Angelotti is referred to spitefully by the police as a "republican" of Rome. By 1810, French rule was consolidated over all Italy except Sicily and Sardinia. When Verdi was born in 1813, his birth was recorded in Parma, a French duchy, as "Joseph Fortunin Francois Verdi." An effect of French rule pertinent to our musical interest is that the French abhorrence of

the castrato tradition was one of the several factors contributing to the gradual disappearance of those singers from the stage - in certain regions castrated boys were barred from school in order to discourage the practice.

Napoleon's many campaigns finally came to an end at the Battle of Waterloo in 1815 (which he lost to the 7th coalition of European forces aggregated to oppose him), and at the Congress of Vienna, Austria was restored to power in northern Italy. But the legacy left by Napoleonic rule was a powerful one, in a country which had experienced a unified government for the first time in many hundreds of years. The legal and fiscal systems, a strong central bureaucracy, and the inspiration to Italian revolutionaries to continue their campaign for a united Italy all furthered the process toward a modern, secular, and more egalitarian state.

Still, Italy was not fully unified until 1870, when Garibaldi entered Rome and finally ended the temporal power of the papacy against token resistance. By 1861 almost all the rest of the peninsula was joined together as the Kingdom of Italy under King Vittorio Emanuele, and Verdi was a deputy in the new Parliament.

The King himself had been excommunicated by Pope Pius IX after he waged war against the Papal States. But Rome had always been, and continued to be, the home of anticlericalism in Italy. Even after unification, there were continual conflicts between church and state, not surprising in a place where the Pope had been a temporal ruler for so long and was the wielder of international religious authority.

Although there is little overt ant-clericalism in the opera, the portrayal of Scarpia, one of the chief representatives of papal power in the City, as a depraved and corrupt official was right in tune with the times. A series of bank failures had caused economic unrest that threatened the new parliamentary democracy and led to the founding of Italy's first mass political party, the Italian Socialist Party. Counter-initiatives by the church, including lay activism and a militant Catholic press, were weapons in a struggle for control of the Italian working classes.

Puccini was not particularly interested in politics, but as a dramatist he was no doubt aware that the tensions generated between absolutist papal rule and the republicans Cavaradossi and Angelotti would resonate with the Italian public. The creation of his wonderful, also apolitical, heroine La Tosca, however, with all her passion, innocence, fury, and defiance, was surely what most moved the packed houses who came to the Teatro Costanzi in 1900.

Reference: Grab, Alexander, "The Napoleonic Legacy in Italy," in Tosca's Prism, Burton, Susan, et al., editors, Northeastern University Press, Boston, 2004



P.O. Box 244, Pittsford, NY 14534
eMail: info@operaguildofrochester.org