

REVIEW

TOSCA'S PRISM: THREE MOMENTS IN WESTERN CULTURAL HISTORY, EDITED BY DEBORAH BURTON, SUSAN VANDIVER NICASSIO, AND AGOSTINO ZIINO. BOSTON: NORTHEASTERN UNIVERSITY PRESS, 2004.

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Tosca's Prism is a collection of essays first presented at the “*Tosca 2000*” conference held in Rome on 16–18 June 2000. Organized by Deborah Burton, Susan Vandiver Nicassio, and Agostino Ziino, the event celebrated the centennial of the premiere of Giacomo Puccini’s opera *Tosca*, and the bicentennial of the historic events depicted in Victorien Sardou’s play *La Tosca*. The conference organizers served as editors of this wide-ranging study, selecting essays that examine the well-chiseled facets of Puccini’s oeuvre.

The numerous contributors reflect international and disciplinary diversity, with writers specializing in history, poetic and dramatic literature, musicology, music theory, and performance. The essays unveil new insights about sources, reexamine Puccini’s dramaturgical and musical aesthetics, link music theory and compositional practice, debunk current performance practices, elaborate on the relation between opera and its audience, address the role of the librettists, confront religion and anticlericalism in turn-of-the-century Italy, and more. In short, the collection offers an interdisciplinary perspective that contributes to a deeper understanding and greater appreciation of *Tosca*.

Northeastern University Press published *Tosca’s Prism* in a generous format, with ample margins and many musical examples. It is laid out in three sections: (1) Circa 1800, (2) Circa 1900, and (3) Circa 2000. I will discuss each of these in turn. By arranging topics in chrono-

logical order, the editors ensure *Tosca* is treated as a historical phenomenon situated within the intellectual, social, and economic context of its time and place. As the editors underscore early in the book, *Tosca* is not viewed as a museum artifact, but as a work worth engaging as a listener, scholar, and performer even today: “the focus on *Tosca* allows [these essays] to provide us with almost holographic, multidimensional images that reflect both forward and backwards in time” (xiii).

CIRCA 1800

In “The Napoleonic Legacy in Italy” (3–18), Alexander Grab discusses the political atmosphere in France at the turn of the nineteenth century and its repercussions in Italy, focusing on the many facets of social organization affected by the Napoleonic regime, such as the legal and fiscal regulations, the state’s control over the church, and the formation of a national army. Although detailed and exceptionally informative, the entire article contains but a single, fleeting reference to *Tosca*: “The battle of Marengo is mentioned twice in the opera *Tosca*” (6).

Central to Herbert Handt’s “The Life and Times of Domenico Puccini” (19–66) is the establishment of correlations (or an emphasis on the absence thereof) between *Tosca*’s *Te Deum* and the setting of the same text composed by Puccini’s grandfather in 1800. The essay is exhaustive, presenting documentation and facts well beyond expectations. A detailed inspection of the autograph manuscript of Domenico’s *Te Deum* was made possible thanks to the kind assistance of Dr. Simonetta Puccini (Giacomo Puccini’s granddaughter) and the Istituto di Studi Pucciniani in Milan. The essay also includes a new transcription and translation of a lengthy letter from Domenico Puccini to his father Antonio describing the entry of French troops into Naples in 1799.

Marina Formica's "The Protagonists and the Principal Phases of the Roman Republic of 1798 to 1799" (67–81) examines the difficulties faced by the Roman Republic at the end of the eighteenth century. Accompanied by a detailed account of events, Formica contemplates France's diplomatic relations with the Papal State, the Roman political life, and the activities of the new republic's legislative chambers and judiciary and financial organs while under the control of the French civil and military authorities. This essay offers substantial historical context, but makes little explicit connection to *Tosca*.

CIRCA 1900

In "From One *Tosca* to Another" (85–93), Eugen Weber finds analogies between Sardou's play *La Tosca* and Puccini's opera that pertain to the socio-political environment at the time of their respective premiers. For instance, he mentions the striking similarity between the turmoil in France when *La Tosca* opened in 1887, and the political unrest in Italy when *Tosca* premiered in 1900. Alternatively, Weber points to essential differences between the two works: "Sardou's *La Tosca* is about corruption in high places and brave soldiers who might set things right . . . while Puccini's opera . . . is about love and loss and torment and lashings of lovely sound" (90).

William Laird Kleine-Ahlbrandt's "Victorien Sardou and the Legend of Marengo" (94–113) discusses the plot and reception of Sardou's *La Tosca*, with particular attention to how the battles of Marengo and the Napoleonic doctrine impinged on the audience's expectations. Although there is no explicit reference to the foregoing essay by Eugen Weber on a similar topic, Kleine-Ahlbrandt expands on the characteristics that set Sardou's play apart from Puccini's opera. While addressing intent rather than outcome, he underlines that "Sardou wrote the play

primarily to entertain, not to provoke. But he also wanted to educate” (106). As the title suggests, the entire chapter is devoted to Sardou and his play, with no explicit reference to Puccini’s *Tosca*.

Julian Budden’s outstanding essay, “The Two *Toscas*” (114–120), presents a comparison of the play and the opera in terms of plot, depiction of characters, and overall themes and mood. Echoing Weber’s and Kleine-Ahlbrandt’s claim, Budden calls attention to Puccini’s favoring a narrative based on psychological rather than political motivations: “Throughout the opera, [Puccini] plays down the political aspect of the plot, being interested only in the personal relationships of the characters” (118). Ultimately, Budden argues that Puccini adapted (and improved) the original to render a more appealing, more humane work, and, as a result, assured his own stardom.

Dieter Schickling’s “Fictional Reality” (121–134) offers insight into Puccini’s dramaturgical and musical aesthetic, as well as the composer’s ability to transform reality into operatic theater while blending literary models with true historic events. Schickling concentrates on *Tosca’s* lack of historical accuracy. He suggests that while Sardou was preoccupied with the veracity of facts, attempting to impart an aura of authenticity, Puccini and his librettists found it suitable, even convenient, to disregard historically accurate details. Indeed, recollection of past events (a century after their occurrence) appears not to have been Puccini’s intention; instead the composer aspired to construct “a compelling human story out of a quasi-historical piece” (125). Schickling is meticulous about all details in the opera; for instance, he alludes to Puccini’s compositional ability to provide subtle references to reality: the ringing of the bells found at the beginning of the third act ends with the note E, which corresponds to that of the lowest bell of Saint Peter’s Basilica.

In “The Political and Cultural Worlds of Puccini’s *Tosca*: Anticlericalism in Italy at the Turn of the Century” (135–146), John Davis discusses historical details that would have held particular immediacy for Puccini’s contemporary audiences. In particular, he focuses on the themes of religion, tension between church and state, and anticlericalism. For the most part, the reader is left to flesh out connections between these themes and specific aspects of the work itself.

Deborah Burton’s “*Tosca* Act II and the Secret Identity of F \sharp ” (147–166) engages in theoretical and historical points of interest that extend beyond a close harmonic and formal analysis. Burton attends to long-range motivic and harmonic correspondences, but her most significant contribution to an understanding of the opera is her argument that motivic ideas become symmetrical longer-range harmonic structures in the second act of Puccini’s *Tosca*. To support her interpretations, she presents a middleground graph of the entire second act. Clearly, the parsing and interpretation of foreground events are crucial to her middleground decisions, but the graph is difficult to evaluate without an exhaustive analysis of smaller sections and clearly stated criteria for significance. Similarly, her claim that “main tonalities” follow “a very clear pattern of repeatedly falling and rising third” (156) contradicts conventional understanding of diatonic harmony, but does echo suggestions in William Rothstein’s essay on “Common-Tone Tonality in Italian Romantic Opera” (published elsewhere).¹ These “main tonalities” are themselves established via surprising nontraditional means (according to Table 9.1 [161–162] and Example 9.13 [163]), often limited to appearances of the opening pitch of a melody, the root of a dominant

¹ William Rothstein, “Common-Tone Tonality in Italian Romantic Opera: An Introduction,” *Music Theory Online* 14/1 (2008), <http://mto.societymusictheory.org/issues/mto.08.14.1/mto.08.14.1.rothstein.html>.

seventh chord, or the bass note under a half-diminished seventh chord.² Burton's worthwhile associational links between selected pitches and dramatic significance deems the prolongational graph somewhat superfluous; a richer view of the harmonic underpinnings of the opera might be the product of a future expansion of the essay.³ Although Burton's writing is uniformly excellent, the musical examples would have benefited from an editorial hand. A careful comparison with Ricordi's 1956 piano-vocal score shows mistaken notes and omitted accidentals in several of the scores included in the article.

Marcello Conati's succinct essay, "Guide Themes and 'Reminiscences' in Puccini's *Tosca*" (167–182), contemplates the role of quasi-leitmotivic procedures in *Tosca* while evaluating the consistency of chronological time in the origin and evolution of dramatic scenes. He draws on the twenty-six guide themes (and supplemental "semimotives") established in Burton's Ph.D. dissertation.⁴ In comparing Puccini's treatment of guide themes to Wagner's leitmotifs, Conati asserts that "the special quality of Puccini, the theater musician, lies not so much in his use of guide themes as signifiers—which is often even banal—but rather in the combining (or better, the flowing together) of reminiscences that are apparently unrelated to each other" (178). Equally interesting is Conati's consideration of the relationship between voice and orchestra in Puccini's musical language as a syntactic process of musical conversation.

Pier Giuseppe Gillio's "*Ci sarà talamo guizzante gondola: New Sources for the History of the *Tosca* Libretto*" (183–220) is a detailed and novel study of the history of *Tosca* with

² Nicholas Baragwanath provides an interesting discussion of linear-contrapuntal reductive analysis framing dramatic correlations in "Analytical Approaches to Melody in Selected Arias by Puccini," *Music Theory Online* 14/2 (2008), <http://mto.societymusictheory.org/issues/mto.08.14.2/mto.08.14.2.baragwanath.html>.

³ For an in-depth discussion of Puccini's harmonic language with respect to the representation of female characters (including *Tosca*, *Mimi*, *Mussetta*, *Butterfly*, *Turandot*, and *Liu*), see Ya-Hui Cheng, "The Harmonic Representation of the Feminine in Puccini" (Ph.D. dissertation, Florida State University, 2008).

⁴ Deborah Burton, "Puccini's *Tosca*: A Heuristic Approach to the Unifying Elements of the Opera" (Ph.D. dissertation, University of Michigan, 1995).

particular attention to the libretto's gestation. In considering the intricate issue of sources for the libretto, Guillo illuminates how Puccini chose freely from his sources, slowly fitting together varied, historically unconnected (and frequently contradictory) pieces. As an addendum, he includes a summary of the preparatory materials for the *Tosca* libretto preserved in the Archives of the Casa Giacosa and Archivio Storico di Casa Ricordi. The archives include a number of worthwhile materials that are sure to result in future scholarship, including complete letters and passages from the first draft of the libretto.

Giorgio Sanguinetti's "Puccini's Music in the Italian Theoretical Literature of Its Day" (221–245) engages in the history of theory and composition as they relate to the preparation of *Tosca*, providing a virtuosic treatment of the subject. His familiarity with principle facts and the many secondary sources on the topic is remarkable. Sanguinetti elaborates his argument with informative and perceptive insights into the compositional and analytical practices of Puccini's time, maintaining that "an awareness of an authentic theory . . . can be of assistance in formulating an adequate analytical method" (221). Sanguinetti's treatment of the symmetrical divisions of the octave, with focus on harmonic novelty, is of interest to both the analyst and the composer. After identifying singular "hexaphonic" chords, Sanguinetti proceeds to account for their structural meaning. Fascinating as these findings might be, they are presented abstractly, without the benefit of concrete music examples from *Tosca*. Sanguinetti's argument would have been even stronger had he pursued the notions of rhetorical and semiotic functions of harmonic structures advanced by Italian composer Domenico Alaleona (1881–1928). Alaleona hints at this direction in a quotation included in the essay: "Let Puccini use this chord *poetically*, instead of in an ornamental, decorative position, as he will see what sort of effect he can draw from it" (231). This extramusical signifying capacity of chords is also emphasized in a quotation by Valdo

Garulli: “Here are some examples of generating chords as they are to be found in art music with reference to dramatic situations that are defined, in common theatrical jargon, as ‘seduction scenes’ and ‘love duets.’ All of the examples express tenderness, abandon, longing, rapture, voluptuousness” (237). To conclude, Sanguinetti delineates fundamental differences between past and current approaches to analysis and composition, and their significance in preserving Italian identity.

CIRCA 2000

“The Eternal Politics of *Tosca*” (249–263), by Susan Vandivier Nicassio, stands out as particularly noteworthy. A meticulous researcher, Nicassio intelligently places sources in context to reveal a contemporary engagement with Puccini’s opera. She attends to permutations, adaptations, interpretations, and revisions of *Tosca* to conform to (or reflect) current ideological concerns (mostly political and religious in nature). Some of the versions include: a production by Argentinean director Tito Capobianco in 1957 Buenos Aires, offering an evidently anti-Peronista *Tosca*; a 1999 production in Pittsburgh (Pennsylvania), with a set framed by images of tyrants, including Julius Caesar, Adolf Hitler, Saddam Hussein, and Fidel Castro; an anti-clerical 2000 production at the New York City Opera; and a 1998 production set in a deliberately anachronistic South Africa. As a bonus, Nicassio provides an invaluable appendix with a comparative outline of the play and the opera.

Nicassio’s fine essay is followed by Alfredo Mandelli’s “*Tosca*: Bivalent Harmony and Vocal Calculations” (264–280). Written by a music critic, this essay lacks the theoretical rigor that most musicians and scholars expect, although it has the casual spirit for which opera lovers might long. Mandelli eschews the more concise rhetoric of other essays in this collection, opting

instead for the long entangled sentences often favored by literary critical interpretations of opera: “In this arrangement of the total chromatic, the slowness of presentation creates a sensation of vagueness that seems to fade into itself, so much so that the F \sharp -minor cadence takes a strange character, although it is the key that was in place before ‘E avnti a lui tramava tutta Roma’ [And before him all Rome trembled] and for five bars thereafter, up to rehearsal number 65” (270). The challenging prose is accompanied by unconventionally treated terminology, which may lead some readers astray. To conclude his essay, Mandelli embarks on issues of performance practice, directing the reader to numerous examples from various recordings. This last section has the potential to be extremely useful, but could have been fruitfully expanded with the names of performers, conductors, and track numbers.

The book concludes with “Who is Tosca?: A Discussion among Modern Interpreters” (281–296). Moderated by William Weaver (translator and author), with Magda Olivero (soprano), Giuseppe di Stefano (tenor), Luigi Squarzina (theater director and scholar), and Gioacchino Lanza Tomasi (music critic and opera director), this essay presents an enlightening conversation about their personal and professional connection to the Tosca character.

The editors state that *Tosca's Prism* “will be of interest to historians, musicians, and opera lovers alike” (xv). Indeed, there is enough in this book to capture the interest of a diverse audience, as it unfolds a well-integrated and critical view of Puccini and his music that is unlike any other available study. The book’s comprehensiveness is at once its greatest source of compliment and complaint. Not all the essays sustain the reader’s interest equally; some essays, while illuminating to the historian, might leave the music scholar unsatisfied. The book as a whole is devoted to interdisciplinary history, although not every essay aims to articulate this interdisciplinary view. While presenting a diverse perspective, dialogue between collaborators in

the collection could have served to address (or filter) contradictory generalizations that undermine the validity of arguments found in the essays in the book. For instance, Sanguinetti maintains that “analysts in those days rarely let their attention range beyond the dimensions of a chord or the connection between one chord and another. Such issues as long-range tonal organization were totally ignored” (232). On the other hand, Burton’s position is that “it is large-scale motivic structures, not traditional surface harmonies, that control [*Tosca*’s] organization” (147). Still, the merit of this collection of essays may not reside as much in the specific content of each one, but in the aggregate achievement. Though it might not be a definitive musicological study, *Tosca’s Prism* fills a definite gap. Despite some of the reservations expressed above, Professors Burton, Nicassion, and Ziino deserve our thanks for producing a work that I suspect will rekindle scholarship on Puccini’s *Tosca*.

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