

Review

Opera Western Reserve: *Tosca* at Stambaugh Auditorium

By Robert Rollin



Youngstown's Stambaugh Auditorium hosted an exceptional Opera Western Reserve production of Giacomo Puccini's *Tosca* on Friday evening November 11. The company presents one production per year and limits it to a single performance. Apparently this concept works well, as there was a full house. The production, perhaps because of financial limitations, was set in Mussolini's 1940's Italy instead of the original version's early 1800's. In no way did this change affect the dramatic and musical flow. Staging and blocking were imaginative and effective, and the carefully prepared score was presented with clarity and wonderful continuous flow by Music Director Susan Davenny Wyner and the fine orchestra.

Scarpia, whose unabashed evil persona drives the opera's darkly melodramatic and Byzantine plot, is Rome's Secret Police Chief and on the side of reactionary forces. He pursues his political foe Angelotti, Consul of the former Roman Republic. Mario Cavaradossi, a painter practicing his art in the *Church of St. Andrea della Valle*, hides Angelotti at his villa. By threatening to execute Cavaradossi for his transgression, Scarpia, whose evil is rarely matched in the genre, blackmails Tosca, a professional singer and Cavaradossi's lover, into revealing Angelotti's hiding place and into agreeing to submit to his licentious advances. Scarpia signs a bill of safe passage for the two lovers and agrees to use fake bullets in Cavaradossi's execution. Before Scarpia can execute his plot, Tosca stabs him to death. In the morning Cavaradossi faces a firing squad using real bullets in Scarpia's final act of treachery. In reaction to her lover's demise and as the troops pursue her, Tosca throws herself from the parapet of *Castle St. Angelo*.

The talented lead singers were Marian Vogel as Tosca, Alex Richardson as Cavaradossi, and Michael Young as Scarpia. Vogel has a Carnegie Hall soloist debut to her credit and has sung soprano leads in many important operatic and concert appearances. A surprisingly powerful, controlled voice belies her delicate proportions. She was terrific throughout the opera, most notably in Act Two. Her balcony solo with chorus simulated a religious service, as the rest of

the action continued onstage. This was truly one of Puccini's most inspired moments. Later she was beautifully expressive in the famous *Vissi D'Arte*. She poured real passion into the sad aria when Tosca speaks of devotion to music and religion, yet is deserted by God in her deepest misery.

Richardson, a tenor who has a wonderful dark vocal quality, stole the show in the Act Three aria *E lucevan le stelle*. The setting is just before his execution and after he writes a letter to Tosca declaring his undying love. Here Richardson sang with remarkably ardent emotion and skill. Young effectively portrayed Scarpia's perfidious nature in the Act Two aria *Già mi dicon venal*, singing that he does not crave money, but rather the evil pleasure of forcing himself on a reluctant woman. His stage presence was excellent and he certainly seemed detestable in the role. Balance throughout the opera was exceptional. Of the three soloists, only Young's baritone was eclipsed a few times by the full orchestrations.

Other notable parts were sung by bass Max Pivik, who played both Angelotti and the Jailer, and bass John Simsic, as the Sacristan. Pivik had fine vocal quality and pacing. Simsic, who also had a strong voice, chose to play the Sacristan as a doddering, almost slapstick figure, providing some needed comic relief from the darkly sad plot.

This marvelous production was a team effort. Chorus master Hae-Jong Lee oversaw the combined forces of the Opera Western Reserve Chorus, the Girard City Schools Youth Choir, Sue Ellen Harris, director, and the Salem Youth Chorus, John Simsic, director. All the choruses were excellent and all changes flowed beautifully. Production Director David Vosburgh's inventive use of the hall to provide a variety of entrances and exits for the singers and choruses was very clever and effective. Conductor Susan Davenny Wyner showed remarkable knowledge and understanding by never allowing the music and action to flag, by skillfully balancing instrumental and vocal forces, and by insuring that the singers were consistently audible against the musical flow. Vosburgh in his early days sang at the Met and rescued a chair from being discarded after being used as Scarpia's seat in an early New York production. The chair reappeared years later in the current show, exemplifying the care and skill given this opera.

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