

'Tosca' a triumph of singing, visual splendor



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Tosca (Evelina Dobračeva) comforts Cavaradossi (Marcello Giordani) in Cincinnati Opera's new production of Giacomo Puccini's *Tosca*. (Photo: Provided/Philip Groshong)

"Scarpia, we will meet before God," cried Evelina Dobračeva as Tosca, as she crossed herself and jumped off the parapet at the conclusion of Cincinnati Opera's "*Tosca*."

A stunning new production, a radiant soprano in the leading role and Puccini's unforgettable melodies added up to a thrilling "*Tosca*" at Cincinnati Opera on Saturday.

With a uniformly excellent cast and sublime playing by the Cincinnati Symphony Orchestra in the pit, this "*Tosca*" would rival any production of the crowd favorite, anywhere in the world. The audience of 2,253 at the Aronoff Center roared their approval.

The company unveiled a sumptuous, \$1.4 million production designed by Robert Perdziola (a co-production with Michigan Opera Theatre), which earned ovations as the curtain rose. The realistic backdrops – including a skyline of Rome – and the imposing scale of the set design offered an effective setting for the tale of political intrigue and the power of love.

The role of Floria Tosca, a beautiful diva who is in love with the artist Mario Cavaradossi (sung by Marcello Giordani) is one of the most demanding in the operatic repertoire. In her American operatic debut, Dobračeva proved to be an artist who possesses immense vocal gifts as well as natural dramatic instincts.

Perhaps most refreshing was the vibrancy she brought to her character. This was a Tosca who was young, in love and full of vitality. In her charming display of jealousy at the portrait of Mary Magdalen, she unveiled a creamy voice that was able to soar over the large orchestra without a note of harshness.

She magnificently communicated Tosca's emotional journey, singing fearlessly as she confronted the villainous police chief Baron Scarpia. Then there was the famous aria, "Vissi d'arte," a deeply affecting prayer, sung with mesmerizing beauty and palpable heartache. In the final act, she riveted as she conveyed to Cavaradossi how she had plunged the blade into Scarpia's heart, soaring effortlessly to the high notes as the orchestra swelled.

Dobračeva and Giordani, in the role of the romantic painter-revolutionary Cavaradossi, made a charismatic couple, and director Jose Maria Condemmi staged their duets with passionate kisses.

As Cavaradossi, Giordani made an ardent lover who sang with Italianate color and ringing high notes. His tenor was slightly under-powered in the Act 1 aria "Recondita armonia," as he discussed the blue-eyed beauty in his painting. But he soared through his great scene in Act III, "E lucevan le stelle," the picture of anguish as he bid an emotional farewell to Tosca.

I'm not sure I've ever seen such a powerful Scarpia as that of Gordon Hawkins, who cast a formidable presence whenever he was onstage. His voice could be both mellifluous and chilling, especially when noting that he preferred "violent conquests over mutual consent."



: Scarpia (Gordon Hawkins) ensnares Tosca (Evelina Dobračeva) in Cincinnati Opera's brand-new production of Giacomo Puccini's *Tosca*. (Photo: Provided/Philip Groshong)

In the role of the Sacristan, Peter Strummer stepped in at the eleventh hour for Thomas Hammons, who was unable to perform one of his signature roles due to illness. Strummer arrived in time for the opening, and delivered a witty, fully developed performance without the benefit of a full rehearsal.

Among the other roles, Evan Boyer turned in a fine performance as the escaped political prisoner Angelotti.

One of the joys of this grand opera is its spectacle. The Act I "Te Deum," in which throngs filled the church to tolling bells, was something to behold. The chorus, prepared by Henri Venanzi, added to the splendor, as did the charming red-robed members of the Cincinnati Boychoir (Christopher Eanes, director).



The Act I Te Deum in Cincinnati Opera's splendid new production of Giacomo Puccini's Tosca. (Photo: Provided/Philip Groshong)

Condemi effectively froze the action in the "Te Deum" scene, making Scarpia's monologue vowing to win Tosca all the more menacing. The drama gripped from beginning to end. In Act II, as the police chief sang of the desire that consumed him, Tosca frantically tried all of the doors in his apartment, underscoring her predicament. (Oddly, though, there were no candles in the ritualistic murder scene.)

Perdziola's richly effective scenic design was both traditional and timeless. **It was enhanced by atmospheric lighting (Thomas C. Hase).** An inventive stroke came when the artist's scaffolding swiveled to reveal the church's altar, a realistic replica of the actual altar in Rome's Sant'Andrea della Valle. Period costumes, also by Perdziola, had exquisite detail.

In the pit, the orchestra turned in a glorious performance under resident conductor Christopher Allen. One of the most unforgettable moments was the prelude to Act III, with its stunning horn calls. Allen knew just how to breathe life into Puccini's magnificent melodies, and the audience went home humming.

Cincinnati Opera's "Tosca" repeats at 7:30 p.m. July 27 and 29, Procter & Gamble Hall, Aronoff Center, Downtown. Tickets: 513-241-2742, my.cincinnatiopera.org; also at Aronoff Center Box Office.