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## Striking Visuals Are Just the Beginning of This *Tosca*

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 **United States Puccini, *Tosca*:** Soloists, Christopher Allen (conductor), Cincinnati Opera, Aronoff Center for the Arts, Cincinnati, OH. 23.7.2016. (RDA)



*Tosca* at Cincinnati Opera (c) Cincinnati Opera

### **Cast:**

Tosca – Evelina Dobračeva

Mario Cavaradossi – Marcello Giordani

Baron Scarpia – Gordon Hawkins

with Evan Boyer, Peter Strummer, Marco Cammarota, Samuel Smith and Christian Pursell.

### **Production:**

Director – Jose Maria Condem

Conductor – Christopher Allen

Designer – Robert Perdziola

Lighting designer – Thomas C. Hasse

Puccini would have been proud of the Cincinnati Opera's *Tosca*, which opened on Saturday night at the Aronoff Center for the Arts.

First, there are the sets by Robert Perdziola—imaginative and yet fastidiously accurate, starting with the Act I *Santa Maria degli Angeli* pulpit that spins to reveal the church's main altar for the *Te Deum* at the act's end. Act II is ideal for Scarpia and devoid of any unnecessary paraphernalia, except a gigantic map of Italy and a daybed which he uses to force himself on Tosca, and Act III has an early-morning view of Rome complete with St. Peter's dome in the distance. **And, at the risk of applauding the visuals for far too long, Perdziola's costumes are elegant and period-perfect, and Thomas C. Hase bathes everything with light to complete perfection.**

Director Jose Maria Condemmi brings a complete command of the text and the music—elucidating, clarifying and highlighting key moments. At the end of Act II, the killing of Scarpia and the aftermath are as well-staged as this writer has ever seen.

From the moment the three “Scarpia chords” appear (before the curtain goes up), a bolt of energy arrives from the pit, and comes back again and again, thanks to the idiomatic conducting of Christopher Allen. He draws every bit of Puccini's grandeur from the musicians and then delivers the key moments of lyricism with suppleness and sensitivity.

Evelina Dobračeva leaves no doubt that Floria Tosca is a diva, but her acting of the role is honest and down-to-earth. In addition to being a ravishing beauty, Ms. Dobračeva is an intelligent singer who inflects every word with meaning. And she can sing: the role is full of traps for any soprano not up to the task. Her two extended scenes with Mario and her Act II *Vissi d'arte* were beautifully sung, and her tug-of-war with Scarpia (also in Act II) allowed her to freely use *parlando* for those moments in which *bel canto* is not what's needed.

Marcello Giordani has the elegance of bearing and vocal equipment to bring home both his Act I *Recondita armonia* and the impassioned delivery needed for the final act's *E lucevan le stelle*. In between he holds his own in the company of a first-class cast, utterly believable as a dashing artist caught up in a political maelstrom. A superb *spinto* tenor, Giordani uses a carefree *squillo* to stylishly take on the high notes that abound.

Gordon Hawkins is a superb Scarpia: terrifying in the big moments, unctuous and reptilian in others, and he never resorts to barking. Instead, he but actually sings the notes, rock-solid over the entire two scenes Puccini allots him. The supporting roles were ably filled by Evan Boyer, Marco Cammarota, Samuel Smith and Christian Pursell, with bass Peter Strummer hilariously portraying the Sacristan.

The Cincinnati Opera keeps scaling new heights. Ensnared in the acoustically-superb Aronoff Center for the Arts for this and next season, the company should feel proud of its accomplishments and successes.

***Rafael de Acha***

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