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Tosca — Opera San Jose

by Heather J. Morris

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The new season at Opera San Jose opened with a favorite of many opera fans -- Puccini's Tosca. This production with its traditional set design and costumes is firmly set in 1800 when Rome was in chaos, without a clear ruler. Napoleon was attempting to establish a secular Roman Republic and the chief of police, Baron Scarpia, has set about ruthlessly eliminating French sympathizers. With its excesses of passion and emotion the plot is peopled with larger than life characters, who revel in torture, deceit and political intrigue.

Such a story requires the leading protagonists to be able to change mood on a dime and this they did on opening night – superbly. The title role of Tosca is one of the most theatrical figures in opera. As the capricious girlfriend of the doomed painter Cavaradossi she never forgets that she is a diva and Olga Chernisheva, making her debut with the company, captured those excesses with dramatic outbursts and powerful virtuosity. In the first act her occasional glances at the conductor were noticeable and there were moments of uneven pitch but the beauty of her voice is outstanding. Yes, it has power to set the historic California Theater ringing, but it also has a wealth of color not only on the high C as she plunges the dagger into Scarpia at the conclusion of Act 2, but also in her lower range which oozes a sultry passion. Her stage presence, befitting the diva she portrays, is magnetic in her

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interactions with Cavaradossi and Scarpia, but the chemistry between Tosca and her lover just wasn't there. For his part Kirk Dougherty as Cavaradossi was at his finest in the role's two arias, familiar to all Three Tenors aficionados, Act 1's 'Recondita armonia' and Act 3's poignant *E lucevan le stelle* which, accompanied by a beautiful clarinet solo, was the highlight of the production. But their body language on stage felt practiced and staged rather than spontaneous.

More theatrically convincing was the powerstruggle taking place between Tosca and Scarpia. Matthew Hanscom is one of the most versatile performers in Opera San Jose's resident company, having roles in all four of last season's productions. As the big bad villain in Tosca he has in turn to order the torture of Cavaradossi and seduce Tosca, and he approaches both those challenges feet first, with nothing less than absolute relish. With his splendid baritone voice, both authoritative and deceitfully persuasive he is a true match for Tosca's strength and vivacity.

Under the secure baton of maestro Joseph Marcheso and the direction of Brad Dalton there were no distracting novelties, which sometimes filtered in to the company's Magic Flute last season, and the balance between orchestra and singers was finely tuned. Brian James Myer gave a highly spirited performance as he opened the action attempting to escape the evil Scarpia, and Carl King as the Sacristan played with just the right amount of buffoonery. Michael Boley's Spoletta and Daniel Cilli's Sciarrone were successful and convincing performances.

Though never successful as a play the operatic version of Tosca has charmed audiences since its opening in 1900, and according to [Operabase](#), it ranks as fifth in the world with 537 performances given in the five seasons 2009/10 to 2013/14.

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