

LYRIC OPERA

KANSAS CITY

TOSCA

BY GIACOMO PUCCINI | APRIL 18, 22, 24, 26, 2015

‘SILENT NIGHT’ PROOF OPERA IS NOT A DEAD MEDIUM

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By Kelly Luck

KCSTAGE

“Tosca” is a curious creation. A product of Puccini’s middle period, it comes between “La Boheme” and “Madame Butterfly”, completing a trilogy that may be seen as the composer at the height of his powers. It is notable for its use of leitmotifs ala Wagner, and for being the second of three works in a row which end with the death of the female lead (Mimi by consumption, Cao-Cao San and Tosca herself by suicide). Set during the Napoleonic invasion of Rome, it is tied inextricably to the political upheaval of that time and place, and yet barely gets into the details. Undoubtedly a tragedy, it nevertheless plays as lightly humorous for a considerable part of the first act. Nevertheless, it stands as one of the A-list operas, and one of the most popular in the world.

On the eve of Napoleon’s re-invasion of Rome (June 17, 1800 as the original playwright tells us), Cesare Angelotti (Ben Wager, Bass), an escaped political prisoner (due to his station in the erstwhile Roman Republic) staggers into the church of Sant’Andrea della Valle and into the Attavanti chapel. His friend, the painter Mario Cavaradossi (James Valenti, Ten) discovers him, and agrees to help conceal him. His lover, the singer Floria Tosca (Melody Moore, Sopr) arrives, there is some banter during which her intense jealousy is touched upon, and she arranges to rendezvous with him after the evening’s performance. Angelotti discovers the disguise left behind for him and flees, leaving behind a woman’s fan. Baron Scarpia (Gordon Hawkins, Bar) arrives looking for the escaped Angelotti and, discovering the fan, decides to use Tosca’s jealousy to lead him right to Cavaradossi, whom he suspects of concealing Attavanti.

The trick works: Tosca leads Scarpia’s spies straight to Cavaradossi. He is captured and tortured, with Scarpia threatening Tosca that he shall kill him unless she tells where Angelotti is hiding and give herself to him. Cavaradossi’s screams of pain are too much for her, and she acquiesces. Cavaradossi is marched off to be given a sham execution in the morning so that they may escape, and Scarpia writes a note of transit for the lovers, whereupon Tosca stabs him and runs away.

The next morning, she visits Cavaradossi, shows him the note and explains that the firing squad has been issued blanks. He is to fall to the ground when they fire, and not move until she gives the

all-clear. The firing squad come, shoot, and leave. She hurries to his side, congratulating him on his acting job – only to find that he wasn't acting, and that Scarpia double-crossed them both. Just then, Scarpia's body is found, and guards swarm in to arrest her. Tosca runs to the battlements, declares that she and Scarpia will stand in judgement before God, and throws herself over the edge.

The performance is a good one, overall. There was extensive use of chorus and supernumeraries, particularly at the end of Act I. The principals were all in good voice, and no real standout mistakes were noted during the performance. Mr. Hawkins makes for a very intimidating Baron Scarpia, really wringing out every bit of villainousness that he can. Ms Moore makes for a riveting Tosca, her acting chops really coming to the fore during the murder scene. At times her voice seemed a bit on the mezzo side, but this reviewer is inclined to think it works for the character, so no harm done. Julien Robbins' sacristan in Act I provides some nice comic work without going overboard.

Technically the production is an impressive one. R. Keith Brumley's sets and James Sale's lighting design are both very nice (even though the lighting didn't actually match up with the background in Act I). The sets are interesting in that they are given realistic textures and detailing, etc, but there is also an element of forced perspective, almost expressionist in a way, particularly with regards to the side walls. This gives the stage a slightly distorted look, and throws the viewer off just a bit. Costumes and so on are up to the usual Lyric standards (including some quite elaborate regalia for the "Te Deum"), and overall a considerable effort has been put into finishing off the season in a grand way.

Overall, "Tosca" is a very moving (if occasionally somewhat byzantine) work, full of politics and romance and torture and war, double-crosses and intrigues in the best operatic tradition. As a season closer, it is an interesting choice to be sure, but not a bad one by any means. Director Garnett Bruce and the rest of the Lyric team have finished this season on an impressive note, and it only remains for us lovers of opera to rest, recuperate, and look forward with anticipation to next season, which promises to be a very interesting one indeed.