

## **OPERA MATTERS: *TOSCA***

*By Robert Vineberg, Manitoba Opera, Board of Trustees*

A look at the background to the operas produced by Manitoba Opera and what was happening in the world and in Winnipeg at the time of those operas were first produced.

### **Why Would the Story of *Tosca* appeal to Puccini?**

Giacomo Puccini, born in 1858, grew up with the newly united Italy. However, by the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century, the initial hopes of a new type of country and a new nationality had been tempered by the indolence of the Italian monarchy, continued political influence of the Roman Catholic hierarchy, and the corruption, cynicism and inefficiency of the Italian Parliament. There was an almost instinctive wistfulness for the republican promise of the Napoleonic era. The rather crude play *La Tosca* by Victorien Sardou would have appealed to Puccini as it described the promise of a sectarian republic, based upon the revolutionary principles of *liberté, égalité et fraternité*.

In truth, the reality of the city of Rome in 1800 was precisely the opposite. Rome benefited from quite enlightened government by the Vatican. Rome in 1800 was a small city, largely living in the crumbling glories of its imperial past. Its population had dropped from over a million at the height of the empire to some 150,000. Its major industries were religion and tourism. Indeed, Rome has been described as the first modern tourist destination. After some 1,500 years of rule by popes, the Roman people were comfortable with the relationship. The Papacy provided schools, hospitals, welfare, and even food for the destitute, and the populace lived in complacent contentment as the world around them was convulsed by revolution and war.

The small papal army was no match for the French and a republic was established in 1798. With the trappings of a republic, it was essentially a repressive military dictatorship under which Romans suffered greatly. It also did not last long. By the spring of 1799, the anti-Napoleonic coalition had been heartened by Nelson's destruction of the French fleet at the Battle of Aboukir and the Austrians, from the north, and the army of the Kingdom of Naples, from the south, closed in on the Roman Republic. It fell to the allies in September and was occupied by the forces of the King of Naples. This was the administration in power in Rome at the time of the opera.

*(Source: Nicassio, Susan Vandiver, Tosca's Rome, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1999, pp 27-47 passim.)*

### **An Opera Set in a Real Time and in a Real Place**

*Tosca* is a classic *verismo* opera in which real life is portrayed starkly and, sometimes, brutally.

The opera opens in the church of Sant'Andrea della Valle and *Tosca*, who is performing at the Teatro Argentina, visits the painter Cavaradossi there. How realistic is this? Actually, very realistic. The theatre is located only about a hundred metres from the church.

The entire opera takes place within the space of some 18 hours from noon on June 17, 1800 to dawn on June 18, 1800. It is set to the backdrop of the Battle of Marengo which was fought in the north of Italy on June 14, 1800, and marked the resurgence of French arms as Napoleon defeated the Austrian army and opened the way for French forces to retake the Italian peninsula.

The occupying forces of the King of Naples and the government they had established in Rome, clearly hoped that the Austrians could hold off the French. And, indeed, at first it looked as if that would be the case. Not expecting the Austrians to take the offensive, Napoleon had split his army and sent a substantial part of his army, under the command of Major General Louis Desaix to cut off the Austrian's line of retreat. To Napoleon's surprise, the Austrians attacked early in the morning of the 14<sup>th</sup> and came close to defeating him at Marengo. It was early reports of an Austrian victory arriving in Rome three days later, on June 17<sup>th</sup>, that resulted in the order to churches to perform the *Te Deum* in Act I and the gala at which Tosca was to sing that evening was to celebrate that supposed victory. However, at the outset of the battle, Napoleon sent urgent orders to General Desaix to rejoin his forces. He and his fresh troops arrived at about 3 pm and the reinforcements turned the tide of the battle. Italy was open to the French and by July, Rome had fallen to the French once more.

The news of the French victory reached Rome in the evening of June 17<sup>th</sup>. Act II is set in the Farnese Palace. The palace was built by Alessandro Farnese, who became a cardinal, due to the influence of his sister, who was the mistress of Pope Alexander III. Farnese himself became pope in 1534 and expanded the palace in keeping with his new status. The Farnese male line died out in 1731 and the palace eventually found itself the property of the King of Naples. As such, it became the effective royal palace in Rome during the occupation by the Neapolitans. It was in the palace that Cavaradossi was held and tortured and it was there that Scarpia, the police chief, and his prisoner heard the news that the French had won at Marengo. It was in reaction to this news that Cavaradossi cried "Vittoria!" This outcry led to his death, by firing squad at dawn on the 18<sup>th</sup> after which Tosca also leapt to her death from the ramparts of Castel Sant'Angelo, the fortress that was also used as a prison.

The church of Sant'Andrea della Valle, the Teatro Argentina, the Farnese Palace (now the French Embassy) and the Castel Sant'Angelo all still exist. Puccini and Sardou situated their "realistic" story in real locations.

### **What was happening in Winnipeg when Tosca premiered in 1900?**

Winnipeg was in the midst of its greatest period of growth. It grew from 8,000 in 1881 to almost 26,000 in 1891 and then to 42,000 by 1901. Then a decade of explosive growth came that took the population to 128,000 by 1911.

In 1904, the CPR opened its magnificent station on Logan Ave (now the Aboriginal Centre of Winnipeg) and began construction on the Royal Alexandra Hotel which opened in 1906. The Canadian Northern and Grand Trunk Pacific built the Union Station on Main Street in 1909. The Dominion Theatre and the Manitoba Club both opened their doors in 1904 and the Walker Theatre in 1906. The City of Winnipeg built three new firehalls in 1904, befitting the needs of the burgeoning city (Number 3 on Maple Street,

Number 5 on Sherbrook Street and Number 6 on Burrows Avenue), and the following year, a new Carnegie Library at 380 William. Not to be outdone, the City of Saint Boniface built its Hôtel de Ville, Fire Station Number One, the Post Office and, of course, the Cathedral, in this decade. The old YMCA building on Portage Avenue (old Birks Store) was built in 1900. The Province opened the Land Titles Building on Broadway in 1904 and the both the Normal School on William Avenue and the Manitoba Agricultural College (later Fort Osborne) in Tuxedo in 1906. The Federal Government built a huge immigration building (demolished in 1975) capable of housing over 500 immigrants on Maple Street, beside the Canadian Pacific Station and the Customs Examining Building on McDermot.

Among the commercial buildings completed in the 1900s, the most prominent were the Union Bank (Royal Bank) on Main Street in 1904, the Eaton's store and the Eaton's catalogue building which were completed in 1906, the Grain Exchange Building which opened in 1908, and the old Bank of Nova Scotia at Portage and Garry in 1910. Among religious buildings, Augustine United Church, St. Luke's Anglican Church, McDermot Avenue Baptist Church, and the Trappist Monastery in St. Norbert were all built at this time. Now that's a building boom! (Source: University of Manitoba's Winnipeg Building Index: <http://wbi.lib.umanitoba.ca/WinnipegBuildings> retrieved on July 24, 2010.)

As Winston Churchill, who visited Winnipeg in 1901 noted, "Fancy, 20 years ago there were only a few mud huts-tents: and last night a magnificent audience of men in evening dress and ladies half out of it, filled a fine opera house...Winnipeg has a wonderful future before it." (Cited in Dilks, David, *The Great Dominion, Churchill in Canada, 1900-1954*, Thomas Allen, Toronto, 2005, p 27)

### **Photo Credits:**

#### Sant Andrea della Valle Church

1. Facade: from Wikipedia article on Sant Andrea della Valle Church: [http://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/2/23/SantAndreaDellaValle\\_Facade.JPG](http://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/2/23/SantAndreaDellaValle_Facade.JPG)
2. Interior: from Wikipedia article on Sant Andrea della Valle Church: [http://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/0/0e/SantAndreaDellaValle\\_Interior.JPG](http://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/0/0e/SantAndreaDellaValle_Interior.JPG)

#### Teatro Argentina

3. 1826 Facade: from Wikipedia Commons - photographer: S. Eustachio: [http://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/thumb/b/bf/S\\_Eustachio\\_-\\_teatro\\_Argentina\\_1010120.JPG/736px-S\\_Eustachio\\_-\\_teatro\\_Argentina\\_1010120.JPG](http://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/thumb/b/bf/S_Eustachio_-_teatro_Argentina_1010120.JPG/736px-S_Eustachio_-_teatro_Argentina_1010120.JPG) (In 1800, theatres in Rome could not have a facade that identified it as a theatre. The facade of the Teatro Argentina was built in 1826, after the law was rescinded.)
4. Modern Interior: from Alexis Arts: <http://www.alexisarts.it/public/upload/teatro-argentina-big.jpg>

5. Original Interior: from PalazzOlivia: <http://www.palazzo-olivia.it/it/barbiere-siviglia/teatro-argentina-roma.php> (The painting by Giovanni Paolo Pannini depicts the musical fête given by the Cardinal de la Rochefoucauld at the Theatre Argentina, Rome, on 15 July 1747 in honour of the marriage of the Dauphin of France-Musée du Louvre, Paris.)

#### Palazzo Farnese

6. Today: Photographer: Myrabella from Wikipedia article on the Farnese Palace: [http://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/b/ba/Palais\\_Farnese.jpg](http://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/b/ba/Palais_Farnese.jpg)
7. 18<sup>th</sup> Century Engraving from Wikipedia article on the Farnese Palace ; [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Palazzo\\_Farnese\\_Vasi.jpg](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Palazzo_Farnese_Vasi.jpg)

#### Castel Sant Angelo:

8. Today: Photographer: Andreas Tille from Wikipedia article on the Castel Sant Angelo : [http://fam-tille.de/italien/rom/2004\\_029.html](http://fam-tille.de/italien/rom/2004_029.html)
9. 18<sup>th</sup> Century View of the Tiber Looking Towards the Castel Sant'Angelo, with Saint Peter's in the Distance by Giuseppe Zocchi (c. 1711-1767) from Wikipedia article on Tosca: [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:View\\_of\\_the\\_Tiber\\_Looking\\_Towards\\_the\\_Castel\\_Sant%27Angelo,\\_with\\_Saint\\_Peter%27s\\_in\\_the\\_Distance\\_\(adj\).jpg](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:View_of_the_Tiber_Looking_Towards_the_Castel_Sant%27Angelo,_with_Saint_Peter%27s_in_the_Distance_(adj).jpg)