

Class 9: Tosca, twisting the screw

A. Setting, History, Music

1. [Title 1 \(website title\)](#)
2. [Section title A \(ROH trailer\)](#)

Tosca (1900) was the third mature opera by **Giacomo Puccini** (1858–1924), and for my money it is the best. **Joseph Kerman**, in his marvelous book *Opera as Drama* (1956), which first got me thinking about many of the ideas presented in this course, famously dismisses it as a “**shabby little shocker**.” Well, it is certainly a shocker. But you would have to watch the second and third acts to get the full measure of that, and I am only to show the first. But even that will show you that it is by no means little, and certainly not shabby! Let’s watch a trailer.

3. [Puccini operas](#)
4. [The Roman settings of *Tosca*](#)

The trailer I just showed comes from a production of *Tosca* at London’s **Royal Opera House, Covent Garden**. All but one of the clips I shall be using in this preview will come from that production. It uses a stage set that is pretty impressive, but makes no attempt to reproduce the real Roman settings that Puccini specified. So when I play the act complete, I will turn to a film shot entirely in the real places at the correct times of day. I put a couple of plot-summary videos on the website. In case you didn’t see it, here is the less frivolous of the two, made specifically for the London production.

5. [Puccini: *Tosca*, summary \(Royal Opera House\)](#)
6. [History 1](#)
7. [History 2](#)
8. [History 3](#)
9. [History 4](#)
10. [History 5](#)

The **historical background** is not easy to understand, but let’s see if I can summarize. In the later 18th century, Italy was a group of independent city-states. Rome was one of them, ruled from the Vatican by the **Pope**. In 1796, **Napoleon** invaded Italy and worked his way south to Rome, which he entered unopposed in 1798; the Pope went into exile. After setting up a caretaker **Republic**, governed by seven Consuls, Napoleon returned to France. Almost immediately, though, the forces of **Naples/Sicily** moved in to fill the power vacuum, imprisoned the Consuls, and established a police state. The action of *Tosca* begins the next year when **Cesare Angelotti**, one of those consuls, escapes from prison and seeks refuge in the church of **Sant’Andrea della Valle**. But Napoleon is already coming to the rescue. In the middle of the first act, we will hear that he has been defeated at the **Battle of Marengo**—hence the festive Mass

that brings the act to a close. In the second act, however, we will hear that Napoleon managed to turn the battle around (which is true) and is thus on his way south as victor. So the opera takes place in this brief period of tension before the police state is finally toppled.

11. Breakdown of scenes

Here is a breakdown of the sections in Act I. In simple terms, they fall into three sections. First, we meet the tenor hero, the painter and political liberal **Mario Cavaradossi**. Then we have an extended duet for him and his jealous lover, the singer **Flora Tosca**. Finally an even more extended scene for the police chief **Scarpia**, in part of which he plays on Tosca's jealousy before winding the act up in magnificent fashion. There is other stuff there too, of course, most notably the scenes with the church Sacristan and the escaped Consul Angelotti which intersect the Cavaradossi, and the upbeat music for the Sacristan and the choirboys as they learn of the upcoming service to celebrate Napoleon's apparent defeat.

12. Puccini CDs

13. Number breakdown, highlighting arias

This course is about how opera is a lot more than its individual arias. Now Puccini wrote a bunch of arias which are staples of collections like these ones. Moreover, he was canny enough to write them around 2½ minutes in length so that they would fit on a ten-inch 78, the standard single of his day. But in actual performance, they were far from the let's-stop-and-listen-to-the-singer mode. I'll play you one for each of the major singers in this act. In each case, the point is how the solo is shared, visually and musically, with someone else. In **Cavaradossi's** first aria, "Recondita armonia," in which he compares Tosca's features to those of the unknown woman he is using as a model for his painting of Mary Magdalene, you hear the grumbling comments of the **Sacristan** underneath him, though you may not see him. The singer in the London production is **Jonas Kaufmann**.

14. Puccini: *Tosca*, "Recondita armonia" (Kaufmann)

Near the beginning of her scene with him, **Tosca** sings a little aria "Non la sospira la nostra casetta?", reminding him of their little love nest in the country. It is not a famous piece you would find in anthologies, but it has a remarkable ending. It is clear that she is working up to a climax, but instead HE jumps in and sings it, a semitone higher and twice as broad. But instead of leaving it there and waiting for applause, Puccini tapers it off into a kind of fully-dressed pillow-talk. This is from a production two before the present one at the Met, with **Sonya Yoncheva** and **Vittorio Grigolo**.

15. Puccini: *Tosca*, "No la sospira la nostra casetta" (Yoncheva, Grigolo)

Scarpia's big number comes at the end of the act. He has succeeded in making Tosca suspect that Cavaradossi has another lover. He sets three men to follow her as she leaves, thinking (correctly) that she will lead them to Angelotti's hiding place. Then he delights in anticipating what he'll do with Tosca and Cavaradossi—one to his couch, the other to the scaffold. Once again, though, Puccini does not leave this as a solo aria. In a masterstroke, he sets it against the entire choir and congregation joining in the

festive *Te Deum*. It is one of the greatest act-endings in all opera. The singer, from Covent Garden again, is **Alexey Markov**.

16. Puccini: *Tosca*, “Tre sbirri, una carrozza” (Markov)

17. Sanctimony/Sadism, you’ve got it all!

B. The First Twist

One thing I didn’t mention is that Puccini makes much use of musical themes associated with each character, like Wagner’s **Leitmotifs** but used only for characters, not ideas. The five chords at the beginning, for example, belong to Scarpia, whose malevolent force shadows the whole drama, even when he is not onstage. The gentle melody for flute and harp we hear on Tosca’s entrance is associated with her throughout, and so on. So let’s watch this act complete; the singers, as you see, are **Placido Domingo**, **Catherine Malfitano**, and **Ruggero Raimondi**.

18. Puccini: *Tosca*, DVD cover

19. Puccini: *Tosca*, Act I complete

20. Number list with still from the above

Now let’s discuss.