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## Puccini's *Tosca* as a representation of a freethinker's struggle against the corrupted power of the church

Veerle Verhagen

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Giacomo Puccini (1858-1924), the famous Italian composer, has been described as a cynic towards the Catholic Church, despite having been brought up in arguably one of the most Catholic countries of Europe. The Church was equally mistrusting of him, especially after the first performances of *Tosca*, one of his most famous works. In this opera his antipathy towards the Catholic Church as an institution is expressed clearly through the narrative, where the struggle of the individual against the corrupted power of the Church is represented as a personal struggle between two individuals who represent the opposite sides of this conflict. However, a more interesting aspect is how Puccini has employed musical techniques to dramatise the power struggle and reflect the shifting of power from one character to the other.

The opera *Tosca*, written by Giacomo Puccini and first performed in 1900, depicts a fierce power struggle between two of the main characters: the eponymous heroine Floria Tosca, a famous singer, and her main antagonist, the cruel chief-of-police, Scarpia. This struggle can be perceived both through music and visual features. An important example of musical reinforcement of a character's dominance is the use of *leitmotifs*, recurring musical themes that are associated with certain characters that can be repeated to imply a character's influence as perceived by the characters on stage. The way singers use their voice is another clear way of expressing power or powerlessness in the opera. Visually, stage directions indicate the characters' position – both their literal position on stage, and their metaphorical position of power or powerlessness. Although some visual aspects, such as clothing, can vary from production to production, there are certain elements which recur in many stagings that are employed to show the viewer which character has more power. Throughout the opera, Scarpia is certainly portrayed as the dominant character. However, as the story develops, the power briefly seems to shift from Scarpia to Tosca, and then back again to Scarpia. Each character uses what power they have against the other, and although Scarpia generally has the upper hand, Tosca undeniably has some power over Scarpia and manages to use it to her own advantage.

The power struggle between the two characters can be seen as a personal battle between two individuals; more importantly, it represents an individual's struggle against the corrupted power of the Catholic Church, which was an even more powerful institute in the Italy of

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Puccini's days than it is now. Puccini was not a particularly religious man<sup>1</sup>. Although he had received the customary baptism and lived in a time and place where religion was an important part of daily life, he was not much of a believer for most of his adult life. Puccini had two friends in the clerical world and both priests described him as a cynic towards religion. The Church was equally hostile towards Puccini and considered him a dangerous heretic, even more so after *Tosca*, in which the composer made use of religious music, taking it out of its traditional, sacred environment<sup>2</sup>. The three main characters of the opera represent three different standpoints: Scarpia represents the Church and its willingness to do wrong in order to defend its own system; Tosca represents a victim of this system, who trusts the system completely; Cavaradossi, Tosca's lover, has distanced himself completely from the church and is considered an enemy of the system by its supporters, much like Puccini himself. The story is set in Rome and takes place in less than 24 hours on June 17<sup>th</sup>, 1800. Puccini chose this particular date in history because it was around this time that the battle of Marengo was being fought: Napoleon, considered by some a liberator of the common man who was to do away with the aristocratic, oppressive rule that had Italy in its grip, was about to claim victory<sup>3</sup>. The Church considered him a grave threat to their power, and it is no coincidence that Cavaradossi, the enemy of the Church in this story, supports him. The struggle between Tosca and Scarpia, on a narrative level, can be seen as a personal struggle between two people, but the deeper political meaning of their conflict – that of the conflict between Church and freethinkers – must not be overlooked.

From listening to the music and by looking at the score, we can infer much about the distribution of power in the story. The overwhelming power that Scarpia has over the other characters in the opera is immediately established through music in the first moments of the work. The opera opens with Scarpia's *motif*, an easily recognisable theme made up of 5 tones. The fact that the opera does not open with an overture or prelude, as is common, but with Scarpia's *leitmotif*, suggests much about him and his position. From the very first moments of the work, there is no escaping Scarpia. Additionally, the way his theme is played at the beginning (*fff tutta forza* – or as loud as possible) is significant. It is played loudly and harshly, as if to overwhelm and intimidate the audience from the beginning with Scarpia's power and his violent nature. The chords that form his *motif*, as Keeffe writes, 'are not just violent; they are harmonically unrelated, and so symbolise the irrational acts of a psychopath'.<sup>4</sup> The music itself, therefore, tells the listener something about Scarpia's

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<sup>1</sup>J.L. DiGaetani, *Puccini the Thinker. The Composer's Intellectual and Dramatic Development* (Frankfurt am Main, 1987), 62.

<sup>2</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>3</sup>*Ibid.*, 64.

<sup>4</sup>B. Keeffe, 'The music of Puccini's "Tosca"', in (ed.) N. John, *Tosca* (London, 1982), 17.

character. Repetition is another means by which Scarpia's theme expresses the power he has over the other characters. The theme recurs throughout the opera, even when Scarpia himself is not present on stage. Much as the opening with his theme signals his omnipresent threat, whenever Scarpia's threat is perceived in particular by one of the characters on stage, or when his name is mentioned, we hear his *leitmotif*. For instance, in Act I, when Cavaradossi and his friend Angelotti, a political refugee, are discussing how the latter's sister helped him escape Scarpia's men, Angelotti sings 'Tutto ella ha osato // onde sottrarmi a Scarpia scellerato'<sup>5</sup> ('She has dared to do anything in order to keep me from the wicked Scarpia'<sup>6</sup>). At the exact moment that Angelotti starts pronouncing the name Scarpia, Scarpia's *motif* starts and it is stretched out over 'Scarpia scellerato' ('wicked Scarpia'). It is then repeated again and again as Cavaradossi speaks of Scarpia: it is repeated twice, but quietly, *pianissimo*, as he calls the chief-of-police 'Bigotto satiro' ('bigot satyr'), then again whilst Cavaradossi describes Scarpia's wicked deeds, and one last time, but powerfully, *fff*, as Cavaradossi says 'fa il confessore e il boia!'<sup>7</sup> ('he is both confessor and executioner'). Even when he is physically absent, therefore, Scarpia represents a threat, and it is clearly a formidable one as it is constantly emphasised by the repetition of his theme. The fact that his theme recurs throughout the opera so frequently and is even heard after the death of his character reflects that his power over the other characters is considerable.

However, it is not necessarily Scarpia as an individual that poses a threat, it is what he represents: the corrupt power of an extremely influential institution. In the scene mentioned above, Cavaradossi alludes to the corrupt power of the Church and the clergy. When Tosca is about to enter the church, Cavaradossi tells Angelotti to hide: 'E' buona la mia Tosca, ma credente // al confessor nulla tien celato // ond'io mi tacqui. E' cosa più prudente.'<sup>8</sup> ('My Tosca is a good person, but she is religious. She keeps nothing from her confessor. That is why I said nothing – it is more prudent.') To Cavaradossi this faith in clergy is foolish, as he knows that the privacy and secrecy of the confessional are held less sacred by this Church than the defence of its own power<sup>9</sup>. Puccini expresses his own cynicism towards the Church repeatedly throughout *Tosca*, generally, as here, through the character of Cavaradossi, who is, not unlike the composer himself, a freethinker who mistrusts the Church.

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<sup>5</sup>G. Giacosa and L. Illica, *Tosca*. Composed by Giacomo Puccini. Published by English National Opera Guides (London, 1982), 44.

<sup>6</sup>This and all subsequent translations are by the author.

<sup>7</sup>Giacosa & Illica, *Tosca*, 44.

<sup>8</sup>*Ibid.*, 43.

<sup>9</sup>DiGaetani, *Puccini the Thinker. The Composer's Intellectual and Dramatic Development*, 65.

When Scarpia himself finally enters the stage, he is accompanied musically, as is to be expected, by his own *motif*<sup>10</sup>, and on stage by a sinister group of henchmen, usually similarly clad in black, who do his every bidding. The way in which Scarpia makes his entrance once more reinforces the idea of his absolute power, as it interrupts a rather cheerful cantata. Just before Scarpia's appearance, the sacristan has heard some good news: the defeat of Napoleon at Marengo, which represents a victory of the Church over freethinkers. The sacristan has just shared the news with a group of choir boys who have started dancing wildly in celebration; although he tries repeatedly to quiet them, the sacristan is unable to restore the church's serenity. However, the moment that Scarpia enters, his musical theme completely cuts off the music that was being played, and the boys' cheerfulness evaporates. That which the sacristan, a person who is meant to have some authority over the boys, was not able to do even when he tried, Scarpia does naturally with his mere presence. In most productions he is shown as an imposing figure, usually dressed in dark clothes, sometimes wearing a large cape that billows out around him, reinforcing visually the image of a powerful and imposing personality – but no matter what we see on stage, the music by itself leaves no doubt as to his overwhelming presence. As the baritone Bryn Terfel says: 'Do I stride in purposefully? Do I have a mean, horrible face? No, it's all in the music.'<sup>11</sup> The music leaves no doubt as to Scarpia's power, as it is overpowering in itself, silencing the music that was heard before he appeared on stage.

Shortly after this dramatic entrance, Tosca returns to the church. Scarpia had come to the church in search of Angelotti, and he correctly suspects that Cavaradossi helped him escape. He assumes that, if he can find Cavaradossi, he will find Angelotti as well, and he sets about a plan to trick Tosca into leading him to her lover. Angelotti's sister had been coming to the church rather frequently, as she had to hide some objects in her family's chapel to help her brother to make his escape. On one of her expeditions, she inadvertently left her fan in the church. Scarpia has found it and recognised it by the crest as hers. Knowing Tosca to be a jealous woman, he shows her the fan whilst insinuating that its owner and Cavaradossi are having an affair. Tosca is both heart-broken and infuriated, and as Scarpia had suspected, she goes straight to Cavaradossi's villa to confront him. Scarpia has his men follow her, so that they may know Cavaradossi's whereabouts. Scarpia has used his knowledge of Tosca's personality in order to exert pressure on her. He has gained a little power over her by trickery and by exploiting one of her weaknesses. In the music and particularly by the use of voice in this passage, the audience may recognise the power Scarpia has over Tosca, and precisely her

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<sup>10</sup>M. Carnner, *Giacomo Puccini: Tosca*. (Cambridge, 1985), 22.

<sup>11</sup>A. Pappano (cond.) *Tosca* (2011) Giacomo Puccini (comp.). 'Puccini – Tosca (2011)'. Video. YouTube, 30 December 2011. Available: <<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9xXJyfe2qxo>> [Accessed 29.1.13]

own lack of power: Scarpia's lines are always calm and composed, as he is in perfect control of the situation, whilst Tosca more than once lashes out, having lost control over the situation.

By the music in Act I Scarpia has been established as the dominant character of the opera. However, he also has a weakness: he madly desires Tosca. Although she is unaware of it until later, she has a certain degree of power over Scarpia. It is not until events unfold in Act II that she starts to use this power, but it is introduced to the viewer in Act I: after Tosca leaves, Scarpia sings about the snare he has set for Cavaradossi, using Tosca's ingenuity, and how he will kill the one, possess the other. Although these words support the image of absolute power over Tosca and Cavaradossi, they are contrasted by Scarpia's final words of this Act, 'Tosca, mi fai dimenticare Iddio!'<sup>12</sup> ('Tosca, you make me forget God'). Although Scarpia is, at that time, still in the church, surrounded by the chorus singing the *Te Deum*, Tosca occupies his mind to an extent where he becomes unaware of his surroundings and loses himself to his fantasies. This instance also illustrates the hypocrisy of the Church as perceived by Puccini: Scarpia, a servant of God, forgets who and where he is in a moment of lustful passion. Fundamentally, however, it demonstrates Scarpia's obsessive desire for Tosca, and, if she were aware of these feelings and were to use them against Scarpia, the power she could have over him.

In the first half of the second Act, Scarpia is still the dominant figure. His men have found Cavaradossi and have him locked up in a torture chamber. Tosca is soon seized and taken in, to witness her lover's torture. She manages to end Cavaradossi's torment by giving Scarpia the information he wants, which, however, enrages Cavaradossi, who had beseeched her not to speak. Moreover, the danger has not passed for the couple: Scarpia now threatens to have Cavaradossi executed. His price for Cavaradossi's life is Tosca herself. Tosca's loss of control is at its most dire when she sings her famous aria *Vissi d'arte* ('I lived for art'), in which she asks God why he has crushed her with such misfortune after she has led a pious life<sup>13</sup>. Everything in this aria suggests powerlessness. The aria begins *ppp dolcissimo* (quiet and slow), and Tosca's voice, as she utters the first words of the aria, is the musical equivalent of a miserable whimper as she sings to no-one in particular. Not only is Tosca's hopelessness expressed through the music, it is also often shown on stage by the position of the soprano singing Tosca's part: the aria has often been performed from a prone position on the ground, reinforcing visually the image of a woman who feels crushed by her hopeless situation.

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<sup>12</sup>Giacosa & Illica, *Tosca*, 52.

<sup>13</sup>Carner, *Giacomo Puccini. Tosca*, 112.

As for the deeper struggle of the individual with a powerful but corrupt institution, this scene illustrates rather clearly Puccini's ideas. On the stage, in Scarpia's office, where this Act is set, a large crucifix usually adorns one of the walls: although Scarpia is only the chief-of-police, he is a servant of God who answers to the pope<sup>14</sup> and as such, he is an extension of this powerful system. Puccini wants to show his audience the hypocrisy of clerical authority, which hides behind a mask of godliness whilst it will allow anything to preserve its own power. Moreover, the torture that Cavaradossi has been subjected to has become a religious affair as Cavaradossi is coming closer to death. Just before Tosca gives in, sobbing softly, Spoletta, Scarpia's most important henchman, chants a prayer in the background: 'Iudex ergo cum sedebit, Quidquid latet, apparebit: Nil inultum remanebit', which comes from the *Dies Irae*, a hymn customarily sung in the Catholic Requiem mass for the deceased, which in this case bodes ill for Cavaradossi. However, the particular phrase that Spoletta sings and repeats has another meaning: 'When the judge takes his seat, whatever is hidden shall become apparent: nothing shall remain unpunished'. In the hymn this refers to the final judgement of Christ, but in this case it obviously alludes to Tosca's imminent confession that Scarpia is forcing from her with violence. The power of God is mixed up with the corrupt power of an institution. Moreover, the prayer reflects that the torture is sanctified by the Church<sup>15</sup>, drawing a comparison between Tosca's confession to Scarpia with that of a sinner to Christ.

After the aria, Tosca strikes a bargain with Scarpia: her lover's life, for her own modesty. At this point Tosca starts to take control and to use the little power she has over Scarpia: not only does she want her lover to be spared, she also demands a passport for both of them with which they can escape the country. Scarpia agrees. Although he says he cannot openly let Cavaradossi go free, instead of having him hanged, Cavaradossi will face a firing squad, but the execution will be fake: he shall be shot with blanks. After Scarpia has signed all the necessary documents, he advances towards Tosca and grabs her in a violent embrace, not aware that she is hiding a knife that she has taken from the dining table behind her back. As he tries to rape her, she stabs him in the heart, reversing their roles instantly, seizing all the power and leaving Scarpia with none. He screams for help ('Soccorso! Aiuto!'<sup>16</sup> – 'Help! Rescue me!'), but to no avail. From one moment to the next, the dominant character of the two is utterly powerless, whilst the subjugated one has risen to a position of power over the other. Tosca screams at Scarpia – and in reality, the soprano sings, *fortissimo*, to the baritone: 'Questo è il bacio di Tosca!'<sup>17</sup> ('This is Tosca's kiss!'), reinforcing with this imagery her momentary victory over him. Scarpia had exerted pressure on her to get what he wanted –

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<sup>14</sup>DiGaetani, *Puccini the Thinker. The Composer's Intellectual and Dramatic Development*, 64.

<sup>15</sup>*Ibid.*, 67-8.

<sup>16</sup>Giacosa & Illica, *Tosca*, 70.

<sup>17</sup>*Ibid.*



sexual favours – but gets something quite different from a kiss. The irony in these words supports the total reversal of the characters' positions.

However, Tosca is a pious woman. Although the physical threat that Scarpia posed has been removed, there is now a sense of guilt that will continue to haunt her. Instead of removing herself from the system which she has just defeated, Tosca immediately turns to it for help. Having defeated Scarpia, or rather the clerical oppression that he stood for, she chooses not to renounce it and remains in its power. The first thing Tosca does after the murder is to perform an improvised ceremony: she places two candles beside Scarpia's corpse and takes a crucifix from the wall (or in some versions, for instance the 2011 Pappano production, from her own neck<sup>18</sup>) and places it on Scarpia's chest. The physical power that Scarpia had over her may be gone, but his death has not necessarily improved Tosca's situation – his influence is still there. This, again, is supported by the music: Scarpia's theme recurs even in the third Act, after his death<sup>19</sup>.

Act III is situated on the *Castel Sant'Angelo*, the Roman prison where Cavaradossi is being kept. In this Act, Cavaradossi sings his famous aria *E lucevan le stelle* ('And the stars were shining'), in which he recalls his happy moments with Tosca. After the aria, Tosca enters and tells him of the murder and her plan to escape. Together they plan how Cavaradossi will fake his own death, how he must fall so as to make it look real. After this duet, the firing squad enters. Cavaradossi is led away and Tosca hides to watch the mock execution. Here she is still under the impression that she has truly conquered Scarpia, and that all will end well for her and Cavaradossi. But Scarpia has tricked them, and Cavaradossi is shot with real bullets instead of blanks. Cavaradossi's death reinstates Scarpia as the dominant character. Instantly the power that Tosca had claimed is taken away from her, and returned to Scarpia - or if not to the man himself, then to the oppressive system that he represents. Furthermore, as Tosca is still weeping over Cavaradossi's body, Scarpia's men are closing in on her. Scarpia's body has been found and she, having been the last person with him, is an obvious suspect. She is at the top of the *Castel Sant'Angelo*, a tall building, and the only exits are blocked by Scarpia's men. She has, therefore, two options: to surrender, or to jump. Tosca chooses the latter. This in itself can be seen as a restoration of her own power. Rather than to surrender and be at the mercy of the torturers she has been fighting throughout the opera (whether in the shape of Scarpia himself, or the system that he represented), Tosca chooses to die with her lover. As she jumps, we hear the melody of *E lucevan le stelle*, Cavaradossi's aria, rather than Scarpia's

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<sup>18</sup> A. Pappano (cond.) *Tosca* (2011) Giacomo Puccini (comp.). 'Puccini – *Tosca* (2011)'.  
<<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9xXJyfe2qxo>> [Accessed 29.1.13]

<sup>19</sup> Keffe 'The music of Puccini's "*Tosca*"', 17.



*motif*. This grants some support to the view of Tosca extricating herself from Scarpia's power with her fatal leap. Another aspect of this scene that grants plausibility to that view is that before jumping to her death, Tosca shouts 'Scarpia, davanti a Dio!'<sup>20</sup> ('Scarpia – before God!'), suggesting that she is prepared to face judgement and just punishment for her actions only from God and not from anyone else – not even from those who are meant to represent God on earth. Even a woman as religious as Tosca must realise by now that the system in which she has placed her trust has misused its power. She undermines Scarpia's faction by depriving them of the opportunity to try her, and punish her, for his murder.

The question must be raised, however, what sort of choice did Tosca really have? Although she managed to escape Scarpia's men, she had to take her own life in order to escape. Seeing that neither of her options were what she would have done if given free choice, her suicide cannot really be considered a restoration of her own power. It would appear that even after his death, Scarpia is still in control. Cavaradossi has been killed by Scarpia's trickery, and Tosca herself is driven to suicide by those who did his bidding and continued to do so after his death. Although the power shifts from Scarpia to Tosca in Act II, it is taken back by Scarpia at the last. Even if Tosca denies Scarpia's side a certain power over her, the fact remains that the corrupt force that he represented has not yielded.

The power struggle, in conclusion, is settled in favour of Scarpia, who is established in Act I as the dominant character and whose power is undermined only briefly in Act II. His *motif* that keeps recurring throughout the opera demonstrates that, despite his physical removal from the stage, his power has not diminished. When Tosca tries to use the limited power she has over Scarpia against him, the situation escapes her control and she loses everything. Although Scarpia dies by Tosca's hand, his power is too well-established and far-reaching to be defeated so easily. Scarpia represents a whole system of corruption and evil, whilst Tosca is, and remains throughout the work, a solitary character, a lone victim of this system. The dominant, more powerful character, therefore, must be Scarpia. It is interesting to see what this tells us about Puccini's own thoughts on the system in the real world that his fictional Scarpia represented: the Church. The Church is in this work associated with brutal, cruel powers that show no mercy to the individuals they are meant to protect, and it retains its power until the end of the opera. It would seem, therefore, that *Tosca* dramatises not only a defeat of the individuals Tosca and Cavaradossi by Scarpia, but also that of the freethinker by the Church.

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<sup>20</sup>Giacosa & Illica, *Tosca*, 77.

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