



Gustav Meier
Music Director
61st Season
5th Subscription Concert
Klein Memorial Auditorium
Saturday, April 21, 2007
8:00 p.m.

Gustav Meier, Conductor
Victoria Litherland, Soprano
Arnold Rawls, Tenor
Todd Thomas, Baritone
Curt Olds, Baritone

The Mendelssohn Choir of Connecticut and
The Fairfield University Chamber Singers
Carole Ann Maxwell, Artistic Director

PUCCINI

TOSCA (Concert Version)

Time

1800

Place

Rome

Act I

15 minute Intermission

Act II

5 minute Break

Act III

Special thanks to GBS Trustee Kathryn Hays for her narration of tonight's opera and to Emy Meier for writing this special synopsis.

Tonight's concert is made possible in part by generous gifts from the CT Commission on Culture & Tourism, the Greater Bridgeport Area Foundation, People's Bank and Sikorsky.

PROGRAM NOTES

TOSCA

Giacomo Puccini (1858 - 1924)

The writing of an opera is no simple matter. Even after a story has been picked, words (the drama), sounds (the music) and designs (the sets) - properties, in short, from all the fine arts - must be synchronized. Music cannot move as fast as words, so space must be allowed in the libretto for the sequences and repetition that music needs. Furthermore, the action will be interrupted when a character stops to sing some memorable melody reflecting his or her inner feelings. This potential for conflicting priorities was recognized in 1600 when Peri in the preface to his opera, *Eurydice*, wrote that his aim was "to imitate with singing whoever speaks (and without doubt no one ever spoke singing)." The Camarata in Florence, Italy, a group to which Peri belonged, believed that ancient Greek music by using a single voice with accompaniment in performances had expressed human nature in a clear and deep way, achieving "miracles of ethos or moral influence through music." Part of the High Renaissance humanist movement of the time, the development of opera got a boost from Monteverdi near its beginning. He had the genius to realize its dramatic possibilities and stated his aim, controversial at the time, of making "the words mistress of the music, not the servant."

Largely an entertainment for the nobility at the start, early opera plots made mythological, legendary and historical characters metaphors for aristocratic power plays and personal intrigues. When the first public theaters opened in Italy in 1637, the possibilities of prima-donna-ism, glamour and spectacle began to develop. In the 18th century everyday events provided some of opera's subject matter, a move in keeping with Enlightenment philosophy about the rights of the individual. The 19th century continued this tendency toward realism told directly to the point that Puccini's singing actress, Tosca, faces an attempted rape onstage. The enormous task of combining words, music and staging successfully in an opera is well illustrated by the role of the Sacristan (Custodian), sung tonight by Chris Olds. A minor role outside the main action, the grumbling Sacristan nevertheless has to notice (and covet) a lunch basket left for the painter Cavaradossi which the latter doesn't want, be startled by its removal and later emptiness and feed this information, unwittingly, to the Police Chief, Scarpia, who is suspicious that the escaped prisoner, Angelotti, is nearby - all the while complaining in his narrow way that Cavaradossi "scorns the saints and jests with the ungodly," the whole being set against the

background of a church foyer where a religious procession is about to take place. Decisions have to be made about such factors as; rhythm, should it be lilting or jagged; melody, balanced or asymmetrical; harmony, dissonant or resolving (in Tosca the very opening chord of Act I is resolved in minor in the last chord of Act III; words, How you hate me? or Do you hate me? (Tosca's most famous line, sung after killing Scarpia, "before him all Rome trembled" was at one point removed by one of the librettists, but Puccini put it back). When he needed to know the exact pitch of the bell in St. Peters, a Priest friend got it for him.

The performance of an opera is no simple matter, either. The singers all should be in good voice. Ideally, they should look and act their parts, as well as sing them. There is a near-endless list of what has to be considered for a successful production of an opera, but when this happens there is no greater spectacle in music or theater. Peri and Monteverdi's 300 year-old statements above about how to bring off what is basically sung speech in a stage work have many descendants. Samuel Johnson gave an 18th century view in his Dictionary (the first in English) when he wrote that opera is an "Exotick and Irrational entertainment which has always been combated," but which nevertheless "has always prevailed." As recently as 1986, Lord Harewood, reviser of the classic Kobbe's Opera Book, still felt it necessary to state that despite evidence to the contrary, I remain convinced that opera fulfils an aspect of human need, the transmission through music of one of the many forms of drama in which the human condition deals." Puccini's operas are the last from Italy to enter the permanent repertory. Taruskin felt that opera's position there as "primary medium of popular spectacular entertainment was usurped in the 20th century by movies." Interestingly, the new Director of the Met in New York, Peter Gelb, in his first season this year made some performances available live through HDTV transmission in movie theaters worldwide at a much lower cost than the out of sight prices in the house itself.

Victorien Sardou wrote the play, *La Tosca*, as a star vehicle for Sarah Bernhardt who took it throughout Europe after its premiere in 1887. Puccini saw it in 1889, but it was seven years before Illica (scenario) and Giacosa (verse) finished a libretto for him and January 1898 before he started the score in earnest. The play is set in Rome during the French Revolution with Napoleon in the ascendant, starting to invade all Europe. There are long narrative speeches giving the background of each character, not particularly suitable for music.

But the plot is realistic also; there is an offstage suicide, an audible torture scene, an onstage attempted rape which leads to a murder, an execution and a final onstage suicide - and this fit late 19th century naturalism well! The literary qualities of the play did not give much room for poetry and lyrical expression. These had to be created by the librettists. "Have ready for me emotions," Puccini wrote to Illica in 1896 before a visit. Originally a mad scene was proposed for Tosca at the end, undramatic considering the fast-moving action. Sardou was delighted, recognizing that Puccini was a "man of the theater." The three principle characters are Mario Cavaradossi, a painter with liberal sympathies, Floria Tosca, a volatile actress and singer ("all heart and no brain" - Budden) and Scarpia, the elegant, but venal chief of police ("half religious bigot and half satyr" - Budden). Cavaradossi and Tosca are lovers, Scarpia desires her; the plot therefore revolves around his intention, indeed political necessity, to crush republican rebellion (represented by Mario and the escaped former Consul of the short-lived 1798 Republic, Angelotti,) and satisfy his designs on the actress. She is uninvolved in the process of rebellion, but caught in its web through her lover, Mario. When a person of unsavory appetites such as Scarpia also has power, watch out!

As Julian Budden writes, "With *Tosca* Puccini confronts for the first time an opera of action. Therefore the pace is swifter, the recurring motifs are shorter, sharper...the constantly changing situation precludes those pages of sustained growth of *Manon* or *La Boheme*." With no overture or prelude, the opera opens with the forbidding chords that will represent Scarpia, the curtain goes up and Angelotti in prison garb enters to seek refuge in his family's chapel in the Church of Sant' Andrea. His sister, the Marchesa Attavanti, has hidden a key for him. Mario is painting a Mary Magdalen in the foyer and has unconsciously used a combination of the Marchesa, who often comes to pray, and his lover, Tosca, for models. He and Angelotti are fellow republicans and the painter will help him hide in an old well at his villa - which is in walking distance. He gives the prisoner the lunch basket. Tosca knocks. Volatile and given to jealousy, she knows nothing of the escape and is suspicious that Mario is seeing another woman. This sets the stage for the entrance of Scarpia who manipulates the drama throughout. He incites Tosca's jealousy with a fan the Marchesa has left behind, puts two and two together that Mario knows something about Angelotti's whereabouts and sends minions to investigate. He then joins the magnificent Te Deum which a chorus is singing to celebrate a supposed victory over Napoleon at Marengo. A cardinal is in the congregation.

In Act II Mario has been arrested. Tosca is singing a victory cantata in the courtyard below Scarpia's apartment. He prepares an elegant supper for her after the concert. After she arrives, Mario is tortured offstage until she reveals where Angelotti is hidden, which by this time she knows. Word comes that Napoleon won at Marengo, contrary to reports. Mario exults in the news. Carted off to be executed, the price to save him is for Tosca to submit to Scarpia. She sings *Vissi d'arte*, "I have lived for art and love, why, O God, do you reward me this way?" There is to be a false execution with blanks, but while Scarpia writes out a safe conduct for her and Mario, she spies the sharp knife with which Scarpia peeled an apple and stabs him to death as he comes to seize her. She leaves after placing candles at his head and a crucifix on his breast.

In Act III, the Roman dawn is beautifully evoked with a shepherd singing in the distance and church bells ringing, while Mario awaits execution in the foreground. Tosca comes in and instructs Mario how to fall, but the bullets turn out to be real - Scarpia's duplicity - and Mario dies. By this time Scarpia's murder has been discovered, Tosca throws herself off the parapet to her death, singing "Scarpia, we will meet before God."

Puccini's heroines are the central figures in his operas. Vulnerable, they often fall victim to circumstances not of their making, - disease, poverty, loss of honor, political pressures. "Soft, wilting heroines" (Budden)... "victimized by an implacable situation and slowly tortured to death, bring the inherent hidden sadism of dramatic representation dangerously near the surface of consciousness" (Taruskin). It is worth remembering that Freud who gave clinical names to many personality disorders was 44 when *Tosca* was written. Taruskin further asks, "Is the fact that the art of the turn of the (19th) century was so full of sadistic representations the result of decadence or of greater candor in dealing relatively openly with matters formerly cloaked in hypocritical metaphor"...or again..."was the habit of representing women in art as sacrificial victims the result of a new male brutality or was it an early reaction to the social emancipation of women?"

Puccini's operas were a popular success almost from their beginnings, give or take a few slow starts, they remain firmly entrenched in the repertory and he became a wealthy man. He didn't especially add to style or begin a new direction, but he is the last great representative of Italian lyric theater to date. He was accused of pandering to common taste. But, like Rachmaninoff who was similarly charged, he has his own truth - the ability to write a melody that goes to the point of a situation - which is an unassailable attribute. Level heads prevail and this eventually gets recognized by most everyone.

-Burton Hatheway