



Tosca's Rome: The Play and the Opera in Historical Perspective by Susan Vandiver Nicassio
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“race, nationalism, and Christian faith combine in an allegory about the founding of France out of the Celtic spirit” (p. 326).

The book, then, focuses on what French composers took from Wagner to further their own musical goals, not why Wagner became “the most frequently performed composer at the Opéra after 1890” (p. 21) nor the extent to which Wagnerian influences determined success or failure in the complex world of musical reception. In provocative and important ways, Huebner rectifies the imbalance in our understanding of late-nineteenth-century French opera, and his book will serve as a dependable reference tool for years to come. My only regret is that it was not more beautifully produced, better marketed, and made available at a more reasonable price so that it might reach the wide audience it deserves.

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Tosca’s Rome: The Play and the Opera in Historical Perspective. By Susan Vandiver Nicassio. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999. [xix, 335 p. ISBN 0-226-57971-9. \$45.]

There is apparently an addiction to Giacomo Puccini’s *Tosca* that can lure a career in its wake after even a brief exposure to the opera. The author of *Tosca’s Rome*, historian Susan Vandiver Nicassio, was a fellow at the American Academy in Rome when, with the help of a broken leg, she dropped a “normal” academic inquiry and began to research the historical background of this opera and the play by Victorien Sardou on which it is based. This engrossing book is the result of that work.

Tosca dependence has a peculiar side effect: the desire to make the opera “realer” than realistic, more *vera* than veristic. Nicassio’s opus accomplishes this by tracking down the facts behind every detail of the plot. But she is not alone in this endeavor. Take the case of Tito Schipa Jr. (son of the famous tenor), who advocated only rock opera until the Callas–Gobbi–Di Stefano recording of *Tosca* (Angel 3508 BL, 1953) crossed his path: since then, he has dedicated years of his life to recreating that his-

toric performance in computer-generated virtual reality. Witness, too, Susan Sontag’s historical novel *The Volcano Lover: A Romance* (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1992), in which the *Tosca* character Scarpia interacts with the real Lady Emma Hamilton. And a recent Italian book, *La Tosca: Resoconto attorno a quei famosi fatti*, by Giorgio Bosello (Rome: Fratelli Palombi, 1997; 2d ed., 1999) out-Sardoodles Sardou (*pace* G. B. Shaw) by tying up every loose end left by the author. (If you ever wondered what happened to *Tosca*’s jewels, Bosello will tell you.) Bosello’s work is a fantasy, but his copious historical notes, time-lines, and contemporary maps bring his book into the same territory as Nicassio’s.

What if *Tosca* were rewritten to be historically accurate? Nicassio informs us that the escaped prisoner Angelotti would have had the right of sanctuary in the church of Sant’Andrea and so would not have needed to flee (p. 131), and that, since there was no pope in Rome at the time, the *Te Deum* spectacle held there could not have included a papal procession (p. 166). Further, Cavaradossi would not have died “desperato” on top of the Castel Sant’Angelo facing a firing squad, but instead would probably have won his legal case against the state (p. 199). But even if the opera’s hero had received capital punishment, he would have been hanged, and every effort would have been made to reconcile his immortal soul to the church’s teachings. Certainly the condemned man would not have heard a mournfully sweet shepherd song at dawn; according to Nicassio’s research, the shepherd tunes of the time were “deafening and disagreeable,” ending in a “screaming monotone” (p. 226). So much for atmospheric scene setting.

There is a lot of material to deal with here: information about the opera, the play, and all the historical items. The question is how to organize it all. Nicassio’s solution was to devote the first chapter to revealing how Sardou’s late-nineteenth-century viewpoint colored his historical vision, and here the author’s historical sophistication shines, immediately distinguishing her book from other similar attempts. The following four chapters describe the real Rome from the perspectives of the church and the city’s artists, singers,

and police. This first part of the book places historical research front and center and is fascinating to read. Nicassio not only corrects the factual errors Sardou perpetrated, but places those very errors within the milieu and mindset of Sardou's own time. In other words, she shows us *why* the distortions are there: "If the work can be seen as a historical document (and it can), that document tells us less about 1800 than about the *perception* of 1800 that was current in France in the late 1880s" (p. 3). In the second half of the book, Nicassio supplies a guide to the opera, fitting into a plot summary the "historical perspective," musical commentary, and notes about the play.

Tosca's Rome is a labor of love, and love can sometimes be, if not blind, then a bit myopic. There are three main areas in which some eagle-eyed editing might have helped. First, billed as an interdisciplinary work, the book demonstrates Nicassio's mastery of the historical much more than the musical, her brief career in opera notwithstanding. Regarding the opera guide, she admits that "the present author makes no representations as to musical expertise" (p. 5). In putting together this guide, apparently at the suggestion of one of her publisher's readers, Nicassio has rather naively relied on some sources that are shaky at best, and she has included some outright errors, such as a misidentification of the final tonic of act 2 (p. 220).

Second, the details gathered together in the opera guide from historical records, the play, and the opera tend to run together. In the following passage, for example, references from all three sources are combined: "[I]n mid-June the prisons would be full of men who knew Angelotti [from the play and the opera] (Angelucci) [from history] and knew his friends. . . . During the afternoon of 17 June the Sacristan is summoned, interrogated, and then released [from the play]. Cavaradossi's assistants, including the boy Gennarino, are arrested [from the play but treated as history]" (p. 171). By contrast, Bosello has organized his book in a way that makes it easier for the reader to keep track of fact and fiction: he provides the background information in more than two hundred endnotes and thus keeps it separate from the novelization.

There is a wealth of fascinating detail in *Tosca's Rome*. One reads the weather report and discovers that, in fact, there was no full moon under which Tosca and Cavaradossi could have kissed. One finds out how much church musicians were actually getting paid at Sant'Andrea—in the opera, their delight in getting double pay is entirely realistic—and how Tosca, as an orphan and a performer, would have been quite vulnerable to sexual assaults such as Scarpia's. The reader learns of the rich tapestry of life that was Rome in 1800 and the biographies of scores of its citizens. But can one have too much of a good thing? Do we really need to know, for example, about a scrap metal dealer who hid lead in his well (p. 175), or about a theft of items from a church that took place six weeks before the action (p. 131)? More attentive editing would have helped in other situations as well: Nicassio falls into the easy trap of crediting Puccini for all creative decisions in the making of the opera, often ignoring the contributions of librettists Luigi Illica and Giuseppe Giacosa, and there are numerous small errors, many of which will hopefully be corrected in the forthcoming paperback edition. A consistent translation policy would have been helpful as well.

The main audience for this book will be the legions of Toscaholics, plus, as the book's jacket states, "Opera lovers, lovers of Rome, and anyone seeking an accessible, interdisciplinary introduction to the history of late-eighteenth-century Italy." For these groups and for performers, directors, and opera historians, the book will be of great interest. Because of Nicassio's background in history, it will also appeal to professionals in that field. In this way, Puccini, who has often been snubbed by the musicological establishment, might now slip into the academy through another door. A book that treats his compositional techniques with the same sophistication in music that Nicassio shows in history has yet to appear. Scholarly presses and journals still deeming his operas too popular to be worthy of serious study continue to shoot themselves in their collective foot. The current success of Nicassio's book might help adjust their aim.

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