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The Creation of *Tosca*

Toward a Clearer View

D E B O R A H B U R T O N

Parts of this article were published as program notes for the English National Opera's production of Tosca (1994–95).

HINDSIGHT is said to be flawless, yet ninety-six years after the premiere of *Tosca*, our collective vision of the opera's genesis is still blurred. Distortions and oversights continue to becloud accounts of how the opera was created and, although old rumors often make entertaining reading, they obscure historical truth.

This article will focus on three aspects of the opera's birth which have needed some clarification: how the composing rights for *Tosca* passed from Puccini to Alberto Franchetti¹ in 1894; how Puccini reclaimed them the next year; and how the publisher Giulio Ricordi felt about the final act.² By examining the actual correspondence, some of which is not well known, light can perhaps be shed on a few obfuscated episodes of this story.

The idea to fashion an opera from Sardou's play *La Tosca*³ came from either Puccini or the librettist Ferdinando Fontana⁴ as early as the winter of 1889, after they had seen two performances of the play, starring Sarah Bernhardt, its *dedicatee*.⁵ Puccini's publisher Ricordi began to deal directly with Sardou in the autumn of 1890,⁶ but no agreement came about until January 1891, when the publisher, at Puccini's suggestion, gave the hesitant Luigi Illica⁷ a contract to fashion a libretto from the play.⁸

At this time, Puccini was just beginning a career while Sardou was at the height of one. This posed somewhat of a problem for the French dramatist, who wanted to insure the financial success of any adaptation of his work. Ricordi believed in the young Puccini and was ready to risk the large sum Sardou asked for the rights. In this letter of 10 October 1891 to Sardou's agent, Théodore De Glaser, Ricordi goes to great lengths to allay the doubts of the dramatist and to inspire confidence in his protégé:

The works of the composer whom I would like to propose are not numerous for the simple reason (a very pleasant one for the composer

himself) that he is young!! Therefore it is a question of personal confidence; those who know him judge him to have talent of the first order. Our house has already bought two operas from M. Puccini, and it has engaged him for three others . . . M. Puccini is so enthusiastic about M. Sardou's drama that he attended performances in Milan and Turin. I do not believe it necessary to observe that the composer's conviction is . . . a good guarantee, if that conviction is accompanied by talent, and of that I am absolutely persuaded.⁹

Sardou responded quickly through De Glaser, requesting a "small sum" in advance and a percentage of the box-office receipts. In a letter dated 23 October 1891 Ricordi rejected the idea of the advance ("une petite somme pour M. Sardou peut très bien être une grosse somme pour nôtre maison") but agreed to give Sardou five percent of the receipts, making an exception to the publishing house's normal policies. A draft of the contract was drawn up and sent to Sardou on 26 November;¹⁰ Puccini signed it two days later.¹¹ On 13 December, the following announcement appeared on the front page of the *Gazzetta musicale*, Ricordi's in-house publication:

G. Ricordi & C. . . . announce that they have acquired from *Victorien Sardou* the rights to adapt *LA TOSCA* as an opera. The Maestro *Giacomo Puccini*, having fulfilled his obligations for this company, now has the new task of writing two other operas,¹² one of which will be *LA TOSCA*, on a libretto by *Luigi Illica*.

The following year, Puccini was involved in composing *Manon Lescaut* and traveling to Spain for a production of *Edgar* when, on 12 December 1892, a bombshell fell on the *Tosca* project in the form of a telegram from De Glaser: "Sardou is ill and after having heard Puccini's music, he is distressed that it is he who will compose *Tosca* — he is completely dissatisfied with it, finding the music wretched."¹³

This may or may not have been true: there is considerable evidence that Sardou was principally concerned by the financial failures Puccini had suffered with his two earlier works. Ricordi later claimed that the composer had known nothing of Sardou's opinion. But there must have been some reason for Puccini to have lost his excitement for the project.¹⁴ On 29 July 1893, more than seven months later, Ricordi wrote again to De Glaser: "I must take the opportunity to remind you of the *Tosca*-Sardou business, so well guided by you from the start; it has stopped. Puccini, who still knows nothing of M. Sardou's judgment, is offended by the long silence, and has completely renounced the poem."¹⁵

But on 2 October 1893 De Glaser wrote to Ricordi with the startling news that Sardou had changed his mind: Puccini would do. Had Puccini's music improved, or had his recent professional and financial success with *Manon Lescaut* made his participation more appealing? The response of Casa Ricordi

Gaz

ANNO
N. 50. — 13 I

G. RICORDI

ROMA - NAPOLI
annunciano
Vittoriano Sardou
in dramma

Il maestro
terminato
Ditta stessa
carico di so
della quali
di *Luigi Illica*

C O

MILANO. —
certo del Quartetto
nienica e quanto

Il secondo cor
avuto soprattutto

Un programma
pita tutti i giorni
vadano a bella p
astruso nel loro
alla noia del pul
critici, i quali tre
periori d'intellig
ciò che la gente

Questa volta,
avvenuto proprio
mosso, s'è entus

Il Quartetto in
geniali, fresche d
positore, tedesco
l'indole della su
al Paisiello, al C
ne raccolse l'ere
dolcissime allo
serene melodie,
dell'uditorio, ci
biano avuto rag
in fatto di music
già conquistato i

Ann

Gazzetta Musicale di Milano

ANNO XLVI

N. 50. — 13 Dicembre 1891

DIRETTORE

GIULIO RICORDI

FOGLIO DI 16 PAGINE

Si pubblica ogni Domenica

G. RICORDI & C. Editori in MILANO

ROMA - NAPOLI - PALERMO - PARIGI - LONDRA
annunciano di avere acquistato da
Vittoriano Sardou il diritto di ridurre
in dramma lirico: *LA TOSCA*.

Il maestro *Giacomo Puccini*, avendo
terminato gli impegni assunti colla
Ditta stessa, ebbe da questa nuovo in-
carico di scrivere altre due opere, una
della quali sarà *LA TOSCA*, su libretto
di *Luigi Illica*.

CONCERTI

MILANO. — Società del Quartetto. — Secondo Con-
certo del Quartetto di Francoforte. — Quale successo do-
menica e quanto godimento vero, intenso per il pubblico!
Il secondo concerto del Quartetto di Francoforte ha
avuto soprattutto una felicissima fisionomia di serenità.

Un programma simile, diciamo francamente, non ca-
pita tutti i giorni; il più delle volte pare che i concertisti
vadano a bella posta a cercare tutto quanto vi ha di più
astuso nel loro repertorio e sembrano lieti, appagati che
alla noia del pubblico si contrapponga l'entusiasmo dei
critici, i quali trovano sempre il modo di farsi credere su-
periori d'intelligenza e capaci solo essi di comprendere
ciò che la gente grossa non comprende!

Questa volta, mantenendo un programma elettissimo, è
avvenuto proprio che il pubblico s'è divertito, s'è com-
mosso, s'è entusiasmato.

Il Quartetto in *re minore* di Mozart, è una di quelle opere
geniali, fresche della più bella gioventù del secondo com-
positore, tedesco di origine, ma italiano, italianissimo nel-
l'indole della sua musica, pari nello stile, nella fisionomia
al Paisiello, al Cimarosa, allo Zingarelli e al Rossini che
ne raccolse l'eredità prodigiosa! Noi, provando emozioni
dolcissime allo svolgersi incessante di quelle schiette e
serene melodie, e vedendo mal celato il godimento intenso
dell'uditorio, ci siamo confortati, e una volta di più ab-
biamo avuto ragione di ritenere giuste le nostre credenze
in fatto di musica. L'*Allegro moderato* e l'*Andante* avevano
già conquistato il generale applauso, ma il *Minnello* con

quel *trio* smagliante d'una italianità spiccatissima, finì per
infondere in tutta la sala un elettrizzante rapimento; furono
viste parecchie centinaia di teste accompagnare quel ve-
zosissimo *ritmo* di note legate a due a due, ma non
sappiamo davvero quale specie di critico oserebbe ancora
fare un addebito di ciò che rappresenta il più bel successo
della bell'arte dei suoni!

Dopo il Mozart avemmo la fortuna di udire il nuovo
lavoro del Bazzini, un *Pezzo di concerto* per violoncello con
accompagnamento d'orchestra, pagina di molto valore,
meravigliosa per vigore, per coloriti orchestrali, per ispi-
razione; davvero che udendo tanta freschezza e tanta po-
tenza c'era da farsi l'illusione di una mente creatrice e
d'una mano fattrice giovanissima, e per poco non sorprese
il veder comparire, dopo gli applausi interminabili, il ve-
nerando Bazzini, più giovane nella sua tarda età di tanti
giovani intisichiti a vent'anni!

Il pezzo, egregiamente eseguito dal violoncellista Becker
e dall'orchestra guidata magistralmente dal prof. Guglielmo
Andreoli, fu bissato dalla seconda parte, lasciando in tutto
il pubblico una impressione di meraviglia è il desiderio che
il Bazzini tragga profitto di questo suo bel momento pro-
duttivo per dare all'arte nuove gemme.

Mozart tornò col suo *Adagio* a inebbriarci, a conquistarci;
a quelle note squisitamente sublimi parve spargersi per la
sala un profumo di fiorita primavera; in quel momento
come erano in ribasso i sermonisti delle *nébulosità*! E
manco male che la colpa era di un tedesco!

Il prof. Heermann suonò l'*Adagio* da pari suo, cioè stu-
pendamente.

Il Beethoven, quello della prima maniera, il Beethoven
nella pienezza del suo sterminato genio, nella preponde-
ranza della sua turbinosa gioventù, col *Quintetto*, op. 29,
mantenne caldo l'ambiente e coronò un concerto che avrà
il pregio di non esser dimenticato, come ebbe quello di
aver fatto veramente divertire, d'esser sembrato breve, d'a-
verci fatto provare tutte quelle emozioni che solo la mu-
sica può e deve far provare alla gente.

Il Quartetto Heermann-Becker eseguì tutto con una
finezza, uno slancio, un *entrain* speciali; pareva che quegli
esimi professori avessero capito che era un concerto indo-
vinato, e furono in compenso applauditi con entusiasmo.

Il prof. Andreoli prese parte nel *Quintetto* di Beethoven,
colla viola.

Nel pubblico, ammiratissimi, tre principi dell'arte: Ru-
binstein, Piatti e Boito, e nelle prime sedie la Stolz in
compagnia di una signora che fece per qualche tempo spe-
rare la presenza del re... dell'arte italiana! La signora Giu-
seppina Verdi, vogliamo dire; ma il maestro lasciò che lo
desiderassimo!...

E siamo usciti dal Conservatorio commossi e non ab-
biamo saputo resistere all'impulso di entrare in quella

— 799 —

*Announcement from Gazzetta Musicale, 13 December 1891, that Puccini
would compose Tosca. (Courtesy of Casa Ricordi Archivio Storico)*

to De Glaser makes it clear that the latter was the case: “. . . you express the opinion that after the success of *Manon Lescaut* by Puccini, it is possible to agree to choosing him as composer of *Tosca*.”¹⁶ But now Puccini (again, according to Ricordi) would not accept the project because he had been offended. Ricordi’s letter continues:

We feel obliged to communicate to you that although we have not breathed a word to M. Puccini regarding your dispatch and M. Sardou’s judgment of M. Puccini’s music, the latter has been offended by our silence. He has guessed rightly that only he could have been the cause of a refusal on M. Sardou’s part, and he has declared to us that he has completely renounced *Tosca*.¹⁷

In early November 1893, when Ricordi visited Sardou in Paris, perhaps the name of the wealthy composer Alberto Franchetti was mentioned, because by 5 January 1894 Illica wrote to Ricordi that he had sent Franchetti his outline and the French script.¹⁸ However, Franchetti did not decide to pursue the project immediately. Even months later, on 17 May, Ricordi sent him this telegram: “Need decision on Sardou business.”¹⁹ In July, the decision was finally reached to give *Tosca* to Franchetti, who would buy the rights for 25,000 lire.²⁰ Had Puccini given up all hope of working on *Tosca*, the transfer should have been a simple matter, but the following letter from Ricordi to Illica, dated 24 July 1894, implies that this was not the case:

Puccini has arrived. . . . It will either be hand-to-hand combat or English boxing, but we must finish it once and for all!!! . . . I know that Maestro Franchetti has also arrived. I would like to finish everything today — when speaking about music let’s see if we can arrive at a



perfect ac-chord.²¹

These meetings took place within the next few days, and on 27 July, after eight months, Ricordi was finally able to write directly to Sardou:

Illustrious and dear Maestro, you certainly must have been surprised by my long silence! After having had the great honor of being received by you, quite moved by your kind welcome, I had hoped to be able to write to you immediately regarding our *Tosca* business. But, dear maestro, can you imagine that it was only yesterday that I was able to meet with Maestro Franchetti. . . . The business was important and delicate and had to be treated personally. Baron Franchetti is completely delighted and honored, and agrees with the greatest pleasure to compose an opera *Tosca*.²²

It has been written elsewhere that when Verdi expressed admiration for Illica’s *Tosca* libretto, Puccini’s interest in setting it to music reawakened. Also, some

the case: "... you express the Puccini, it is possible to agree with Puccini (again, according to me he had been offended.

Although we have not received your dispatch and M. Sardou's letter, I have not been offended by our correspondence. It could have been the cause of our disagreement, but I am pleased to us that he has

Sardou in Paris, perhaps the reason was mentioned, because by the way I sent Franchetti his outline and he did not decide to pursue the project. Ricordi sent him this telegram: "The decision was finally reached in favor of the rights for 25,000 lire.²⁰ Had the transfer should have been a success." Ricordi to Illica, dated 24 July 1894,

hand-to-hand combat or English. I know that I will be able to finish everything and we can arrive at a

and, on 27 July, after my return to Sardou:

I have been surprised by the honor of being received by you. I had hoped to be able to do business. But, dear Ricordi, today that I was able to see you was important and I am glad that Franchetti is completely satisfied. It is my greatest pleasure to

express admiration for Illica's work, which has been reawakened. Also, some

writers have suggested that Puccini and Ricordi then conspired against Franchetti to persuade him to relinquish the rights. Nothing could be further from the truth: the problems lay with Franchetti himself.

By March 1895, tensions had arisen between Illica and Franchetti. On 26 March, Ricordi wrote to Illica that the "Franchetti affair" must be dealt with: "So let's say plainly how things are: Maestro Franchetti is content, very content, with your outline, the scenes, the modifications, etc. etc. — but he [Franchetti] is telling me again — as has happened to him before — he is not able to write music for the lyrical parts."²³ The next day Giulio Ricordi acknowledged, in another letter to Illica, that Franchetti would not compose *Tosca*: "We face the necessity of furnishing Franchetti with a libretto in exchange for *Tosca*."²⁴ Franchetti also apparently felt that the work was not "worthy" of him, as this undated letter from Illica to Tito Ricordi, Giulio's son, suggests: "Your father will have told you by now of the truce between Franchetti and me, and of the strange way it occurred . . . without seeing each other. So much the better then, and if Franchetti wishes, we can think about a work worthy of him."²⁵

On 2 May 1895, Ricordi sent Franchetti formal notification of the latter's relinquishment of composing rights to Sardou's play. This letter also betrays Ricordi's concern for his firm and his annoyance with the baron:

Very Illustrious Signore Baron Alberto Franchetti, In response to your declaration to renounce the composition for Luigi Illica's libretto *Tosca*, derived from Victorien Sardou's homonymous drama, our company will have to provide an explanation to this illustrious author so that grievous consequences do not follow, especially in light of the new agreements made in Paris in your presence and with your consent . . .²⁶

Years later, in 1916, Franchetti explained to Illica why he had rejected *Tosca*:

I find myself today in the identical condition as in the period in which I had to compose *Tosca*. Then, as well, I was sure of the theatrical effect and the success of the libretto, but I had to give up because I did not feel [hear] the music in it.²⁷

* * *

It is impossible to specify the moment when *Tosca* reverted to Puccini, but despite heavy correspondence in the next few months, there is no mention of the opera until 26 July 1895, when Ricordi wrote to Puccini: "Think about *Bohème*, which will be followed by the vigorous *Tosca*, and then we will see our Doge,²⁸ with horse and carriage, carrying his old publisher around the town."²⁹ It was on 9 August 1895 that Puccini proudly announced to his friend Carlo Clausetti: "I will do *Tosca*, extraordinary libretto by Illica, in three acts, Sardou enthusiastic about libretto."³⁰

The above documents show that Franchetti voluntarily gave up the rights to the opera in the spring of 1895, and that, in all probability, Puccini did not claim them until July.³¹ Thus any suggestion of a shadowy conspiracy must be dismissed.

The final misconception to be cleared up is the assertion that Giulio Ricordi did not like the third act of *Tosca*. Although it is quite true that the publisher expressed dislike for the final duet scene, the episode should be placed in proper perspective, with subsequent communications also considered.

Giulio Ricordi had been looking forward to a *Bohème*-like third act: "I hope with all my heart that for this third act you will find one of those beautiful Puccinian moments which have had the power to touch half the world in your other operas! . . . Get going then, Sor Giacomo! and make thousands and thousands of people cry, amongst whom (alas!) I will include myself!"³²

Ricordi was bitterly disappointed, however, with Puccini's musical setting of the love duet. When he played through the submitted musical material, the publisher's hopes for a heartrending piece which would make "thousands and thousands of people cry" were dashed. On 10 October, Ricordi wrote Puccini a lengthy (and often quoted) letter expressing his disappointment in the fragmented nature of the scene and bemoaning the fact that Puccini had reused a melody from *Edgar*.³³ But Puccini defended his actions by responding the next day that the fragmentedness was intentional and appropriate to the dramatic situation. He added that the borrowing from *Edgar* was unimportant and "it is the first time that we do not find ourselves in accord. Therefore I hope and am sure that you will change your mind. We will see!"³⁴

Puccini was right. With the newly finished score in hand, Ricordi's opinion of the final act did alter, although he retained his doubts about "O dolci mani." On 20 October 1899, Ricordi wrote:

I read, re-read and re-re-read the complete third act! Relative to my impression, about which I wrote you, you responded with first-class reasons, observing after that it was the first time we were in disagreement! This sentence is not correct because there can be no disagreement between me and he who creates my *Tosca*!!! I told you my impression and this persists, more than anything else in the lyric piece: *O dolci mani, mansuete e pure*, since . . . perhaps I was mistaken, but I expected something else!! But the whole beginning of this act, and the whole final part (even with the *Edgar* brush stroke that you finish in such a delicious way) are magnificent!! The execution too is a real find, indeed a great inspiration!! The effect will be powerful!³⁵

With the complete act before his eyes, the publisher could visualize better how all the pieces fit together. Perhaps this information will enable the reader, in some small way, to see the creation of the opera with similar clarity.

NOTES

1. The composer Franchetti (1860–1942) was best known for his operas *Asrael* and *Cristoforo Colombo*.
2. Ricordi (1840–1912), the head of Casa Ricordi, was also a composer, using the pseudonym J. Burgmein.
3. Victorien Sardou (1831–1908), whose play *La Tosca* had its premiere at the Théâtre de la Porte Saint-Martin, 24 November 1887.
4. Fontana (1850–1919) was a poet, playwright, and librettist; he cooperated with Puccini on his first two operas, *Le villi* and *Edgar*. Fontana later complained to Luigi Illica that making an opera from *La Tosca* was his idea. “When I heard you were working on *La Tosca*, I hoped that you would have turned to me since, as everyone knew—above all Puccini—that that subject was first suggested by me, and I had already exchanged letters with Sardou. Instead, you chose Giacosa!” But contradictory evidence exists that the suggestion to compose a *Tosca* was originally Puccini’s.
5. Puccini and Fontana saw the play together in Milan on 14 February 1889 and again in Turin on 17 March. In all, Puccini saw Bernhardt in the role three times; he went again to see her in Florence in October 1895.
6. *Copialettere*, Archivio Ricordi: Ricordi–De Glaser, 23 October 1891: “I have spoken for a year to M. Sardou about *Tosca*.” This letter, like all the Ricordi–De Glaser correspondence, is in French.
7. Luigi Illica (1857–1919) wrote in “Confessioni di un librettista italiano,” *La Tribuna* (Rome, 13 November 1908): “[Puccini] added that Ricordi had acquired the rights for him to turn Sardou’s *La Tosca* into an opera, and he asked me to do the libretto. He gave me the script since I did not then know the drama. I got a very poor impression of it. When Puccini saw me again I resolutely warned him against it. Indeed, I recall that in order to overcome his resistance, I said to him, ‘But don’t you see that it is a work built upon two artifices? The fan and the basket. If by chance Angelotti isn’t hungry, the drama doesn’t happen.’” Mario Morini quotes this with alterations in “Nuovi documenti sulla nascita di ‘Manon Lescaut,’” Teatro Comunale dell’Opera di Genova (1983), p. 97.
8. William Ashbrook, *The Operas of Puccini* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, rep. 1985), p. 67.
9. *Copialettere*, Archivio Ricordi, 10 October 1891.
10. *Ibid.*, Ricordi to De Glaser, 26 November 1891.
11. Mario Morini, “*Tosca* all’anagrafe della storia,” 49° *Maggio Musicale Fiorentino* (Florence: 1986), p. 60.
12. This conflicts with what Ricordi had told Sardou earlier; namely, that Puccini had been contracted to write three more operas.
13. Morini, “*Tosca*,” p. 63.
14. In a letter to Ricordi the following month (January 1893) Illica attempts to explain it as a character flaw: “Puccini’s instability is nothing new. Just remember the enthusiasm for *La Tosca*. And then? I do not have to tell you that *La Tosca* does not please him any more.” Although difficult to verify, it seems likely that Puccini knew or sensed that there was trouble with his *Tosca* project.
15. *Copialettere*, Archivio Ricordi, 29 July 1893.
16. *Ibid.*, 13 October 1893.
17. *Ibid.*
18. Eugenio Gara, ed. *Carteggi pucciniani* (Milan: Ricordi, 1958), p. 96.
19. *Copialettere*, Archivio Ricordi, 17 May 1894.
20. Letter dated 16 May 1892 from the late Arnaldo Franchetti, the composer’s son, to this writer.
21. Fondo Illica, Biblioteca Passerini-Landi. Ricordi-Illica, 24 July 1894. The original Italian pun was “accordo perfetto.” Ricordi also wanted to resolve questions with Puccini about *La Bohème* at this meeting.
22. *Copialettere*, Archivio Ricordi, 27 July 1894.
23. Fondo Illica, Biblioteca Passerini-Landi.
24. Morini, “*Tosca*,” p. 64.

25. Library of Congress, Music Division, ms. 683.

26. *Copialettere*, Archivio Ricordi, 2 May 1895.

27. Morini, "*Tosca*," p. 64. The Italian verb *sentire* can mean either "to feel" or "to hear."

28. "Doge" was one of Ricordi's affectionate names for Puccini.

29. Riccardo Cecchini, ed., *Lettere pucciniane* (Florence, 1988 n.p.), p. 285. Reprinted from George R. Marek, *Puccini* (London: Cassel, 1952).

30. Gara, *Carteggi*, p. 117.

31. Arnaldo Franchetti claimed that his father gave Puccini all of his *Tosca* materials, including music for the opening scene. The younger Franchetti claimed, therefore, in a telephone interview with this writer in

January 1993, that his father was the real composer of the "Scarpia" chords and Angelotti's entrance. But he also insisted that his father loved [*amava*] Puccini, and never felt mistreated by him. It is highly unlikely that this claim of plagiarism is justified, because Puccini had used the "Scarpia" chords in act 4 of *La bohème* and because the two composers' styles were quite different.

32. *Copialettere*, Archivio Ricordi, 19 July 1899.

33. Gara, *Carteggi*, pp. 176–78. The melody from *Edgar*, deleted from that score when Puccini shortened it, appears in *Tosca* at the words "Amaro sol per te" (act 3).

34. *Ibid.*, pp. 179–80.

35. *Copialettere*, Archivio Ricordi, 20 October 1899.