




10b9. "Being Mario Cavaradossi," written with Plácido Domingo, Washington National Opera, Spring 2005 Season Book.



Being Mario Cavaradossi

“HE IS CAVARADOSSI, impulsive, revolutionary, idealistic and heroic.” So reads the review in the London *Sunday Telegraph* on July 14, 1991, describing the 20th anniversary of Plácido Domingo’s Royal Opera House Covent Garden debut in Puccini’s *Tosca*. Maestro Domingo, General Director of Washington National Opera, recalls that he has played Cavaradossi all over the world—on stage, in recordings, on live television, and in two films that were made on location in Rome. Domingo makes Cavaradossi real for us—and filming the opera at the real locations in Rome shows us the authentic milieu in which Cavaradossi lived.

AGAINST A BACKDROP OF THE CASTEL SANT’ANGELO, SETTING OF *TOSCA*’S THIRD ACT, WE PRESENT A PHOTO GALLERY OF PLÁCIDO DOMINGO AS THAT OPERA’S LEADING MAN, MARIO CAVARADOSSI. FAR LEFT, WITH HILDEGARD BEHRENS AT THE MET; NEAR LEFT AND TOP RIGHT, DOMINGO’S FIRST CAVARADOSSI; BOTTOM RIGHT, IN CHARACTER AT DEUTSCHE OPERA

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Tosca

But wait a minute—isn't Cavaradossi just a fictitious hero, and isn't the story just the plot from a star vehicle for the great Sarah Bernhardt written by Victorian Sardou? How can the opera and its characters seem so authentic? And how can Plácido Domingo's portrayal of Cavaradossi seem so real to us? How can it seem more *verità* (truth) than *verismo* (realism)?

The answer lies simply in attention to detail. Maestro Domingo takes such great care in preparing this role that no particular goes unnoticed. The *Telegraph* review reports, "No other singer of this role remembers, as he awaits execution in Act III, that he has been tortured a few hours earlier with a steel ring squeezing his temples. Domingo clutches his head, a man in pain, and staggers up the steps to sing 'E lucevan le stelle.'" And Maestro Domingo has combed the libretto for clues to Cavaradossi's character. He not only sings the part beautifully but searches for the right body language to express the character, as revealed in the libretto. Thus, the illusion is complete.

But attention to real details was part of the *Tosca* story from its birth. Sardou even gives his play *La Tosca* a precise date and time: "The action takes place in Rome on 17 June 1800." The playwright was known for his use of actual historical detail—tweaked just enough to make a good story. After meeting with the French writer, Puccini exclaimed, "What a character, full of life, fire, and historic-topographic-panoramic inexactitudes." One glaring "inexactitude" was that the Frenchman wanted the Tiber to flow on the opposite side of the Castel Sant'Angelo! Sardou explained his aesthetic succinctly, "I have never departed from this principle: that the theater is an art of fact and of exaggeration." And this technique of mixing fact and fiction worked well with the *verismo* school of opera composition, to which Puccini adhered: a work just needed an "aura of authenticity" in order for the essential "truth" of the situation to come through. The concept lives on today in films, "reality" television shows and recent innovative projects like HBO's *K Street*.

But, can the audience determine fact from fiction? Consider which one of these quotations about Italian political upheavals circa 1800 might come from an authentic historical source:

- "My house was searched, my papers seized, ransacked. ... But in my library, there were two volumes of Voltaire that a traitor's hand had slipped in ... for anyone who possesses a single work of Voltaire ... three years in the galleys!"
- "Victory! Liberty is rising, the tyrants are falling!"
- "We are all Republican citizens! ... Several rogues with guns ... shouting 'Jacobin, Jacobin,' killed a poor priest ... at the same time I could hear a bullet whistling past my head."

The first quotation is from the fictional escaped prisoner Angelotti's autobiographical speech in the Sardou play, explaining the political background that led to his imprisonment. The second is the hero Cavaradossi's reaction in the opera to Napoleon's victory at Marengo—a reference to a real battle transformed into an anachronistic appeal to Italian nationalism. The final quote—the "real" one—comes to us from Domenico Puccini, grandfather of the composer, who was in Naples during the revolutionary/counter-revolutionary chaos of 1799 and wrote to the family back in Lucca about the events he had witnessed. Like walking through a funhouse of distorting mirrors, one "fact" may turn out to be only a reflection of the truth.

In developing the character of Mario Cavaradossi, Sardou gives plenty of seemingly true details. He is the scion of an old Roman family. His father Nicholas spent most of his life in France, however, and married the French Mademoiselle de Castron, a grandniece of the philosopher Helvétius. While his father entered the social circle of the Encyclopedists, Mario attended school and remained in Paris throughout the revolution. He studied art in the studio of Jacques-Louis David, who was considered to be the Revolution's (and later Napoleon's)

official artist. Mario relocated to Rome just before the French ceded that city to the Bourbons, and he remains there, at great personal risk, because of his involvement with Floria Tosca. Although his democratic sentiments are betrayed by his clothing (no breeches or buckled shoes, but long loose hair and a beard), he has protected himself somewhat by offering to paint the wall of the church of Sant'Andrea *gratis*, thus making a peace offering to the papal authorities. But, despite this, he becomes involved with the authorities as the drama unfolds. He is tortured, imprisoned in the Castel Sant'Angelo, and finally executed.

The fictional Cavaradossi is half-Roman and half-French. Both of the historical figures who could have served as models for this character also have bi-national backgrounds. One, Joseph Chinard (1756-1813), was French, but he lived and studied in Rome. The other, Giuseppe Ceracchi (1751-1801), was Roman but spent much of his life (including the moment of his dramatic death) in France. Both men were artists, both had ties to the artist David, and both were quite celebrated in their day for their political activities, especially their confrontations with the authorities.

Chinard had come to Rome from Lyons where he studied sculpture. By 1791, he had embraced the ideals of democracy, and while still in Rome, had created some artwork that had a revolutionary spirit. One of these was a depiction of Jove striking down the allegorical figures of



THE FARNESE PALACE IN ROME, SETTING OF TOSCA'S ACT TWO DINNER WITH SCARPIA

Theocracy and Religion. The pontifical government now looked upon him with suspicion.

On the evening of September 22, 1792, Chinard and a friend named Rater were arrested, accused of religious impiety and of spreading subversive propaganda. The two were soon taken to the Castel Sant'Angelo. The "Chinard-Rater affair" almost became a serious international incident between Italy and France because Chinard's French mother had some social prestige and influence. But, they were ultimately released. Sardou would certainly have known of this story and may have used it as a basis for his play.

The history of Giuseppe Ceracchi does not have such a happy ending. Ceracchi was part of the burgeoning Roman intellectual elite that included the French colony. In the opera, Angelotti and Cavaradossi had known each other before. If Cavaradossi were based on Ceracchi, and Angelotti on Liborio Angelucci (who had indeed been a consul of the overthrown Roman Republic), then they certainly would have been acquainted since Ceracchi had sculpted a bust of Angelucci's wife.

After becoming more revolutionary, Ceracchi left Rome in 1790 for the United States, where he knew George Washington, Alexander Hamilton, Thomas Jefferson, John Adams, and John Jay. He created busts of some of these men, which are held today in the collections of the Metropolitan Museum, the Peabody Art Collection, the Museum of the City of New York, the British Museum, and the United States

Supreme Court. Washington had displayed Ceracchi's statue of him in his Philadelphia home during his presidency.

In 1795, Ceracchi went to Paris, where he became a counselor to Napoleon, admired by the Corsican for the "purity of his patriotism." Unfortunately, these unshakable democratic sentiments led to his downfall. When he saw that Bonaparte was heading toward absolute power, his love for the man became hatred, and he plotted to assassinate him. The attempt took place on October 11, 1800 at the opera (of course!). Ceracchi was sentenced to death when it failed. Before he went to the guillotine, he refused to ask Napoleon for a pardon, declaring "I will ask it of the Supreme Being, but never of a man." A true hero who—again—would have been known to Sardou.

Tosca is an opera based on hundreds of real historical details, altered just enough to "protect the innocent" (or, in some cases, the guilty). Maestro Domingo believes that it is the only opera that can be performed under truly "authentic circumstances." But how real is Cavaradossi? Can a singer really "be" Mario? If Maestro Domingo can completely convince audiences all over the world of his authenticity, then he is real indeed!

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Plácido Domingo on Mario Cavaradossi

"Mario Cavaradossi" has had an extremely significant place in my career. I immediately recognized in him the ideal role for a tenor.

When I look back on my life, I realize how lucky I was to have performed this role for the first time in 1961, when I was only 20 years young! I was almost in ecstasy while discovering every facet of this glorious part.

"Cavaradossi" has been blessed by Puccini not only with two of the most inspired arias of the operatic repertoire, but with music in general, which is totally ravishing, heroic, ardently romantic, and vehement.

He inspired me from the very beginning to be a hero: fearless and brave—"La vita mi costasse" or "Vittoria, vittoria." A lover: passionate and tender—"Ah m'avvinci nei tuoi laci mia sirena" or "Oh dolci mani..." and, last but not least, by twice being mentioned in the libretto how handsome Mario is! I

realized how crucial it was, in order to honor the compliment, to make him believable through attitude and posture, and in general, through the importance of the body language.

"Cavaradossi" has been one of my signature roles and how well he prepared me for all my future heroes and warriors.

I have sung Mario 225 times on stages all over the world, recorded him three times, performed him on a *Live from The Metropolitan Opera* telecast, and portrayed him in two feature films that were shot on the real locations in Rome, one of which

was also a live telecast at the actual chronological time in which the action takes place within the *Tosca* story, the one and only opera that can be performed under such authentic and unsurpassable circumstances.

"Mia Tosca idolatrata, ogni cosa in te mi piace..." Please believe me, every time I sang these phrases, I put my soul in them.

**"Mario Cavaradossi"—I may not be able to
thank you enough for all that you have given me,
but I always did my best to serve you well.**