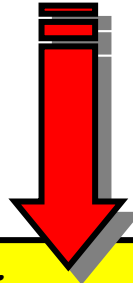




An Irreverent
Guide© for
ENJOYING:
*Des Moines
Metro Opera's
2009 Summer
Festival
Season*



Puccini: TOSCA *
Weber: DER FREISCHÜTZ *
Rossini: THE BARBER OF SEVILLE*

***Involuntary musical targets coopted
to demonstrate that "enjoying the opera" is NOT
an oxymoronic phrase!**

Acknowledgements

Greatly appreciated and effective in the development of this *Guide*, were the support, constructive comments and just plain, patient tolerance of:

- Dr. Robert Larsen, Founder and Artistic Director, DMMO;
- McB McManus, Director of Marketing and Public Relations, DMMO.
- Members of the DMMO audience who volunteered commentary on the 2008 Festival *Guide*.

**Constructive criticism of this
Irreverent Guide will be accepted,
(but probably not graciously).**

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J.P Cooney
and
Sondra S. Cooney

AN IRREVENRENT GUIDE
FOR ENJOYING THE
DES MOINES METRO
OPERA'S
2009 SUMMER
FESTIVAL SEASON



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**IRREVERENT GUIDES #30 (*Tosca*),
#31 (*Der Freischütz*) and
#32 (*The Barber of Seville*)
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Greetings!

Des Moines Metro Opera is pleased to again partner with Dr. James Cooney in offering these offbeat, amusing and informative roadmaps to the operas of the 2009 Summer Festival Season! Dr. Cooney has captured the essence of these three great operas in a way that entertains, educates and enlightens.

Many people are involved with the creation of an opera production, from the conductor to the singers to the backstage technicians, all to create a magical experience for you in the theatre. A great deal of thought and consideration has gone into each of the elements you'll see and hear on the stage. It is our hope that this Guide will help you to appreciate and enjoy these works of art, and that it makes your experience with us this summer even more memorable.

Thank you for showing your interest in these Irreverent Guides to Opera, and as always, thank you for your continued support of Des Moines Metro Opera.

Sincerely yours,



Robert L. Larsen
Founder and Artistic Director

Cautionary Caveats for our Consumers

At the invitation of the Des Moines Metro Opera, an **Irreverent Guide to Enjoying Opera** was first created for the company's 2008 Summer Festival. That document incorporated all three productions into one volume. For the 2009 Festival, discussions of all three productions are again integrated into one document.

Background on the eccentric evolution of the **Irreverent Guides** series is found on pp. 141-142. For the unwary and/or uninitiated reader, there are several generic sections common to each of the 2009 opera discussions. A brief description of the general objectives of these sections follows. Therefore, you will know what you are getting into, or--- what to avoid!


- In response to long ago whiny whimpers, the section(s) *Tersely Telling A Tuneful Tale* was begrudgingly developed as a standard part in each **Irreverent Guide**. In all honesty, it is a seriously stripped-down synopsis of our operatic opus and its major musical moments.

These *Terse Tales* target two commonly impatient sub-classes of our ribald readership: 1. those who have short spans of attention AND/OR 2. those who spent their educational years (and probably beyond) insisting they only had sufficient time to scan synopses of assigned materials and only at the last moments before a critical confrontation with reality like "the final exam" OR later in life, the stockholders' meeting or perhaps, --- an operatic performance.

Occasionally, a *Terse Tale* is presented in alliteration. You ask, why use this ancient and somewhat arcane poetic style? Well, it is fun to manufacture and judging from its "rah, rah" readership reception, it must be fun to read; or maybe we are all a bit weird. Whatever!

Why only "occasional" alliteration you ask? Well it all depends on where I was the night before composing the copy. That stuff requires a reasonably clear head. Capisce?

- Integrated into the *Terse Tales* section(s) are materials highlighting and briefly discussing major musical sections of the opera. To distinguish these musical musings from the *Terse Tale* telling, the following format styles will be used:

- ✓ Musings on the opera's musical highlights will be in this font type style contained in a 
- ✓ Each selected musical highlight (aria, ensemble, etc.) will be titled with its opening words in the opera's original language. That will be followed by an approximate English translation.
- ✓ Musical (but wordless) interludes (e.g. an overture) will also be described in this font style type/grey box format.
- ✓ On-stage plot events will alliteratively appear in this font type style, but without the benefit of being boxed-in.

- Opera, as any art form is a product of its society and culture at a specific point in time. As that temporal point regresses into history, the on-stage and off-stage circumstances creating the opera frequently vanish into an archival dustbin.

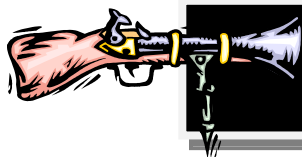
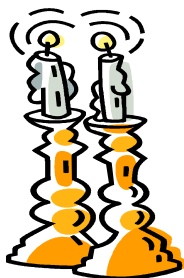
We argue that such absence is a loss to the understanding and enjoyment of an older piece when heard in contemporary times. Therefore, a *Background* piece has been developed for each of the three operas contained in this *Guide*. Each sets forth, albeit slightly, the sociology and perhaps, anthropology of the opera under the microscope.

The *Backgrounds* are designed to add to your opera viewing pleasure through enhancing understanding of how another time, place and circumstance probably influenced an artistic product. Enjoy!

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OF SEVILLE

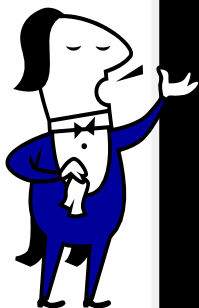
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Composer: **GIACOMO PUCCINI**

Librettists: **LUIGI ILLICA** and
GIUSEPPE GIACOSA*



TOSCA

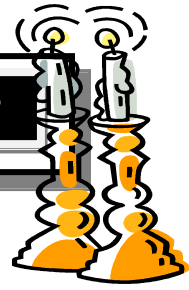
Castel Sant' Angelo, Roma

Original Language: ITALIAN

Première: TEATRO CONSTANZI, ROME

January 14, 1900

Where do I Find---?



**Pucciniesque Pursuit Palaver: Switching
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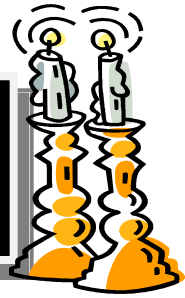
**Act I. June 17,1800; close to noon in the
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**Pucciniesque Pursuit Palaver:
Switching A Devious Diva's Shiv-
Shoving
From Speech to Song.**



A Melodramatic High from a Maturing Composer. Giacomo Puccini's *Tosca* differs significantly from some of our other *Irreverent Guides*. First, Puccini's "little shocker," as *Tosca* has been affectionately dubbed, is jammed full of the seamy side of life: murder, suicide, torture, political intrigue, attempted rape and illicit passion. As the song says, "Who could ask for anything more?"

Tosca extends the verismo pathway (raw, real life) established by Mascagni's *Cavalleria Rusticana*, beyond the peasant class and other hoi polloi folks. It spotlights gamey goings-on with hoi oligoi such as royalty, government officials, artistes and the church. Therefore, it offers to many observers, a unique peek under the tent of the rich and powerful. ---think Martha Stewart with church bells, vespers and a Napoleonic complex.

Second, the work is not a product of compositional youth and/or a first-time effort as were some of our previous subjects.¹ Puccini's total operatic output was an even ten.² *Tosca* emerged in 1900 at the halfway point of the maestro's assembly line. More importantly, it followed on the heels of two instantly and

¹ *Nabucco, Macbeth, Samson and Dalila, etc.*

² Counting as one work, the three one-act operas comprising *Il Trittico*.

internationally acclaimed works: *Manon Lescaut* and *La Boheme*. While *Tosca* did not gain the critical acclaim of those two, it holds a strong position in public affection.³ It is a mature work with the composer in full realization of his compositional strengths and weaknesses. It also shows Puccini in full command of the product of his librettists.

An Internationally Successful Play by an Internationally Acclaimed Playwright.

As has been observed in previous *Guides*, many operatic librettos were developed from existing books or plays --- especially if those sources ranked high in public popularity. *Tosca* was no exception. It was based on an 1887 play, *La Tosca*⁴ by Victorien Sardou (1831-1908). It served as a star vehicle for Sarah Bernhardt (as did many of Sardou's plays) and with great success, toured throughout Europe and the US. The young Puccini saw an early production of the play (circa 1889), was immediately smitten perhaps more by the star than the play, and resolved to transform it into an opera.^{5,6} The pathway to

³ It is claimed to be the fifth most frequently performed opera internationally--- but who is counting?

⁴ The use of "La" is Sardou's special deference to "la grande Sarah" - she was not just a star, she was "the" star (and his principal partner in turning the stage into a money machine).

⁵ At this point in his career, Puccini had only one mild success (*Le Villi* - 1884) and one failure, *Edgar* (1889) which he described as a "cantonata" ("a blunder"). Whatever the problem with *Edgar*, it scarcely put Puccini in a serious bargaining position with Europe's leading playwright for production rights to La Tosca.

⁶ Puccini was not a slow learner. *Edgar* may have been a blunder, but it forever sensitized him to the importance of the appropriate libretto for his music and triggered frequent open-warfare between the composer and his librettists. Those battles, he always won as it was begrudgingly admitted by his publisher (Ricordi) and his frequent librettists (Illica and Giacosa), the composer had an innate genius for determining what would play well. Puccini had recognized after the *Edgar* debacle that

discharging that resolve turned out to be more melodramatically convoluted than the theatre piece itself---but, that's opera!

Puccini's impression of Sardou after a long period of professional association translates into an arresting left-handed complement, "Quite a fellow, all life and fire, and full of historico-topographico-panaoramic inexactitudes." However, Sardou was known as a writer of carefully researched historical dramas and the author of some seventy very successful plays. He ruled the Paris stage and was given due deference on many others.⁷ At least one of his other plays, *Fedora* was translated into an opera by Giordano and still occasionally appears in the contemporary repertoire.

Sardu, as a culinary honoree. Apart from operatic librettos and stage gossip, Sardou's lasting contribution to our cultural life appears to be Eggs Sardou. This dish was created in honor of the author during the height of his popularity by the owner of Antoine's restaurant in New Orleans. It is a spin on Eggs Benedict and involves artichoke hearts, ham, anchovies, truffles and hollandaise sauce.

Sardou's treatment of *La Tosca* is massive compared to Puccini's version; it takes Sardou twenty-five major characters and five long acts to tell the same tale Puccini did in three acts with only three

one of the many musical strengths of Verdi was his ability to cover weaknesses in the libretto. Puccini also recognized, in parallel, that he did not possess that strength. His librettos must be perfect for the music to carry the day. Hence the continual and pitched-battles between librettist and composer.

⁷ Sardou's works have not aged well. Today, he is referred to as the least read among modern dramatists. His works almost never are found in production as their complexity of arcane detail of very long gone historical events does not play well in today's theatre.

major characters. Along the way, Sardou treats his audience to a long exposition on the political intrigues of the Napoleonic era and a romantic view of the French Revolution.

His structuring of a play, characteristic of French theatre of that period, was referred to as “la piece bien faite” / a well-made play. The term in its modern usage, especially by George Bernard Shaw, is pejorative, as it takes issue with the author’s continual interventions to create the dramatic tension, rather than letting “life” set the course. Fortunately, Puccini and the librettists knew what to dump of the Sardou baggage ---but first they had to gain the rights.

Oh, what a web we weave---. Puccini’s resolve to “have” *La Tosca* as an opera subject was more impassioned than pragmatic. He ignored that lady of Sardou’s for almost seven years after his first Bernhardt-fueled encounter.⁸ To his credit though, after his first viewing Puccini did write to his new publisher Ricordi suggesting it would make good operatic material. The composer then turned his attention to “other women”; first to Manon and then to *Boheme*’s Mimi. Tosca had been in the words of Manon, “seduced and abandoned.”

Based on Puccini’s recommendation, Ricordi though did enter into negotiations with Sardou for rights to the play. A contract was signed in 1891 and a designated librettist (Illica)⁹ began work.

⁸ Bernhardt always performed in French, no matter the language of her audience---reasoning that her acting was so explicit that she would be clearly understood despite a language barrier. Puccini, not a speaker of French at that time of his first Bernhardt encounter, seems to bear out the actress’s belief. He later said, “I understood few of her words, but the emotion of everything!”

⁹ In Puccini’s career, Illica was the composer’s most frequent librettist.

Apparently Puccini had not totally abandoned *Tosca* as he did present some music for the opera to Sardou. It was not to the writer's liking (Puccini was still without success). Puccini broke off that work and went back to *Manon*¹⁰ and *Mimi*.

In 1894, Ricordi contracted with a composer for *Tosca*: Baron Alberto Franchetti, a former classmate of Puccini's. Franchetti along with Ricordi and Illica went to Paris to review the libretto with Sardou. As fate would have it, Verdi was in Paris at that time preparing a production of *Otello* (circa 1895). Verdi joined the Sardou session; it is alleged, he was so impressed by the existing libretto that he would have taken on the project himself, except for his advanced age.

Evidently though, Verdi's expressed interest was sufficient to send Puccini sideling back to *Tosca* as by 1896, a "new" *Tosca* creative team was in place. It included, Illica who had already been reducing the massive Sardou epic into a Puccini-sized opera; Giacosa, who would translate the Illica's text into verse; Puccini (hard at work on *Boheme*); and Ricordi whose principal job was to keep the other three from killing each other.¹¹ But----- what about Franchetti, the original "composer"? There are several stories as to how he was "exited" from the *Tosca* scene (pun?), so take your pick:

- He found the project too daunting for his compositional skills and abandoned it; or---

¹⁰ *Manon* hit the stage in 1893 and made Puccini an international success; four years later, *Mimi* returned the favor. By 1896, Puccini was a major operatic force with which to be reckoned.

¹¹ Puccini actually did not begin work on the music until 1897

- He observed a clash between Puccini and Leoncavallo each of whom were composing a *La Boheme*. Leoncavallo's never made it out of the starting gate of public acclaim under the Puccinian assault. Having no stomach for such a battle, Franchetti simply abandoned the *Tosca* field.¹² Or---

- ¹³Franchetti and Illica came to loggerheads over the libretto as Puccini became "the" major rising star at Ricordi. Puccini was increasingly (re) drawn to the melodrama of *La Tosca* especially with its verismo overtones now in high vogue, and as a compositional antidote to the bittersweet softness of *Boheme*.

What the maestro wants, the maestro gets! However, how to get rid of Franchetti, blissfully unaware of the Puccini factor? The first thought among the Ricordi conspirators was buy him out. No, money wouldn't work ---- his mother was a Rothschild. Finally, Ricordi and Illica hit on the perfect scheme: they called Franchetti to a meeting and told him that after reflection, they felt that *La Tosca* was too brutal and inflammatory a subject for opera. Franchetti agreed with their perspective and gave up his rights. The next day, those rights were eagerly given to Puccini with Sardou in full support.¹⁴

¹² While this is a "nice" story about compositional protocol or perhaps "common sense," it is may be apocryphal as the dates of both *Boheme's* appearances (Puccini, 1896; Leoncavallo, 1897) run against the date of Franchetti's probably *Tosca* departure.

¹³ The most credible reason.

¹⁴ Why not? He was entitled to 15% of the gross result and Puccini by now was a certified hit maker. Sardou also did have veto power over the libretto, as shall soon be seen.

Dumping the Sardou Baggage. Sardou's La Tosca is a heady Francophile brew of real and fictional personages laced into a ponderous pageant of royal prerogatives and republican egalitarianism. The human story at the core of the play would have been lost albeit for Bernhardt's emotion. Puccini's experienced librettists¹⁵ assisted by Ricordi's mentoring oversight and occasional peacemaking forays knew exactly where to prune away the Sardouan excesses. While what ended on the cutting room floor would provide an informed education on textual differences between playable dialogue and singable opera, the basic message is that Sardou's whole historical cavalcade of real and fictional personages and events was removed. Left were three major characters: Flora Tosca, her lover the painter Mario Cavaradossi and their nemesis the Baron Scarpia. When these three are brought to life musically, they are a sufficient number and psychologically complex enough to create a taut and challenging evening of operatic theatre--- a cast of thousands is not necessary.

The on-stage operatic characters however did not emerge from fictional whole cloth, but were brought to stage life by Sardou partially based on real persons:

- Tosca was an amalgam of several Italian women of the period including the soprano Angelica Catalani;
- Scarpia was thought to be a combination of a renegade military leader named Sciarpa famed for his cruelty and feigned piety, and a corrupt Sicilian judge, Vincenzo Speciale.

¹⁵ Illica and Giacosa were the major word and poetry architects of four Puccini triumphs: *Manon*, *Boheme*, *Butterfly* and *Tosca*.

- Cavaradossi appears to be pure fiction. However Sardou did create a credible background for him: French on his mother's side, he was an aristocrat and lived in France during the Revolution. He had anti-church, pro-Napoleon republican leanings. The portrait he is painting during the course of Act 1 is not the result of religious conviction, but a cover to allay suspicions about his revolutionary tendencies. Initially, the Puccini librettists turned him into a hero of the Italian Risorgimento (yet-to-be).¹⁶ Fortunately, Puccini gave not a fig for that movement primarily because at the time of *Tosca's* creation, that Italian unification issue was passé; it had long since been resolved. Mario therefore remained fatally attracted to French republicanism, not Italian unity.

- Angelotti while a minor character in both the play and opera is, in the view of Alfred Hitchcock, the McGuffin¹⁷--- the catalyst (together with his sister's fan) that places the whole *Tosca* plot into spin. In real life he appears to have been modeled on Angelucci, a consul for the short-lived Roman republic.

Sardou gives Angelotti a considerably more intriguing background than the rest of his play's characters. Several years prior to the start of the play, Angelotti had an accidental liaison with a lady in a London park. Post-park, it lasted for an extended period until he returned to France. Subsequently, she became a Lady by virtue of her marriage to Lord Hamilton, and later became more notorious as the mistress of Lord Nelson and a confidante of Maria Caroline, Queen of the Kingdom of the Two Sicilies – more

¹⁶ Shades of Verdi and *Nabucco*.

¹⁷ Also acceptably appears as MacGuffin, Macguffin, or Mcguffin. Hitchcock evidently was a spelling free spirit.

of her later. At the time of the play's action, Lord Nelson and Lady Hamilton are with the King's court in Naples. They are awaiting Scarpia's delivery to them of Angelotti for hanging as a republican and as pay-back time for the Lady's London dalliance time. Hence Scarpia's distress when Angelotti goes missing.

- Prisoner Palmieri is used by Scarpia as a red herring for Cavaradossi's feigned or perhaps not so feigned execution. Palmieri did exist in real life; his execution was not feigned.

That woman must die! Despite assigning rights to Ricordi and Puccini for his play, Sardou still retained an immense degree of control over the surgical efforts of the *Tosca*-team. As such, it was periodically necessary for the creative personnel to visit at the feet of the Parisian master playwright to secure his continued blessing. Despite the massiveness of the excisions, opera relationships with Sardou were pleasant and productive--- with one climatic exception.

Tosca's suicide ends the play. However, Puccini conceived along with the librettists a very different operatic ending. The lady becomes unhinged by her lover's actual execution and what the proposed would operatically ensue, is a mad scene par excellence. The scene actually exists in sketch text and partial music. It portrays Tosca on first viewing Mario's body, as re-imagining her murder of Scarpia, then imaging herself in a Venetian gondola where she is protecting the wounded body of Mario from creatures attempting to drag him out of the boat. The scene ends with Tosca pleading for quiet, so her dead lover can rest as the curtain falls.

Sardou's response to that scenario was, "The woman must die!" And die she did! The power of a successful playwright versus a

composer just coming into his clout! However, the world cheated of a Puccinan mad scene!

What is really going on here? With the extensive Sardou background removed, the remaining characters perhaps seem to the novice audience, somewhat buffeted by forces without reason. To help understand the urgency and high consequence of the action, the following “cheat” scenario is offered.

In 1797, three years prior to the very specific time and action of the opera, a struggle for the possession of Rome began between the French (think Napoleon) on one side. and almost everyone else on the other.¹⁸ In the ensuing back and forth, the Pope (Pius VI) was captured by the French and died in prison. The opera’s action takes place in this Roman period without a pope (sede vacante) . A new pope would arrive in the city two weeks after the close of the opera.

While the French held Rome by their fingernails (with Angelotti holding forth as Consul), Lord Nelson trounced Napoleon at the Battle of the Nile. The Lord then turned his attention to stiffening up the spine of the ruling monarchs¹⁹ in order to motivate them to attack the French on the Italian peninsula.

¹⁸In addition to the tenuous republican hold in Rome, two other embryonic republics simultaneously existed in Italy: the Cisalpine and the Parthenopean. Their appearance on the pages of history was so brief as to make it not worthwhile to even commit their labels to memory.

¹⁹ The monarchs at that time were Ferdinand IV (King of Naples and Sicily, a.k.a. Kingdom of the Two Sicilies) and Maria Carolina. Both monarchs were descended from the former Bourbon dynasty of the French but were very pro-British. Maria Carolina especially had an axe (Beware! Pun approaching) to grind with the French; she was a

King Ferdinand's forte seemed to be hunting and making children. The Queen saw to it that he was kept busy with those two hobbies, while she tended the empire with the strong guidance of Lord Nelson. Ferdinand had been urged to march on Rome, but he (truto-form) ended up fleeing from Italy to Sicily. It was during this evacuation that the brief life of Italian republics occurred, but unfortunately the Queen took very good notes on who was supporting whom.

The Bourbons made a successful counter-offensive in 1799 and at the time of the opera are back in control of Rome and Naples. The new Pope exists, but is under Austrian protection hiding in Venice. As the Bourbons reestablished their power base, the Queen launched bloody reprisals with the able assistance of the Baron Scarpia counterpart. This is the Queen before whom Tosca appears in the Act II cantata. Tosca also threatens Scarpia to appeal to the Queen to save Mario. The ever-ready Baron points out that in reference to that threat. Mario would be toast before Tosca could toddle towards the throne.

The opera begins very specifically at late morning on June 17, 1800 (the Angelus rings shortly after the curtain rises). Three days prior (Saturday June 14) Baron Michael Melas, an Austrian general had confronted the Napoleonic army at Marengo in northern Italy. During the course of Act I, the Sacristan brings the erroneous news of Bonaparte's defeat in that battle. That news triggers both the celebrating of a *Te Deum* that closes the first act and the occasion of the Act II cantata honoring Baron Melas as an alleged hero and featuring Tosca as soloist. It is only later during Act II that the

daughter of Maria Theresa of Austria and a sister of Marie Antoinette, the late Queen of France.

correct news arrives announcing a Napoleonic victory causing Mario's unfortunate outburst of patriotic fervor and his subsequent death sentence.

In any event, all this coming and going is resolved in the early hours of the next morning (June 18) with all major participants ending up quite dead, but by varied means. Unfortunately, all this turned out to be an expansion of useless energy. By the time Napoleon gained Rome, he had abandoned all his republican ideals and was squarely in the house of royalty. Ironically, had Cavaradossi and Angelotti stuck to their own royalist kind, they all could have sailed happily off in a gondola, into a Venetian sunset with Tosca in tow.²⁰



²⁰ Pun intended.

Bombs, Pizza and Puccini.

At the time of the *Tosca* premiere (1900), violent Italian times had not diminished much in the 100 years since the opera's actual events. Bomb-throwing was a frequent attention-getting Italian sport. Enough so that on evening of the premiere, the conductor was instructed by the police than in the case of a bomb, he should promptly play the national anthem. Immediately after the opera's "menacing chords" introduction there was a cry from the audience to stop the performance. The already shaky conductor fearing the worst, launched into the national anthem.

History later reports there was such a crush of persons in the streets trying to get into the opera house, that the outcry was actually an appeal for those yet to be admitted --- let them be seated first and then we'll sing! For the record, no bomb appeared--- even on-stage.

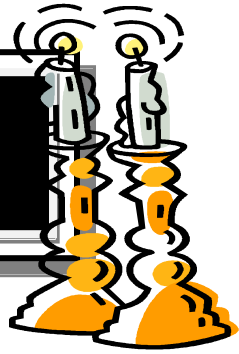
The whole operatic premiere melee was presided over from the royal box by Queen (of Italy) Margherita. Her husband Umberto I a frequent target of assassination, prudently stayed home than evening; Margherita was known as the "cooler" member of the duo anyway--- the King fought a lot of duels.

Margherita was also noted for popularizing pizza (then, a Naples tomato pie specialty) among Italians and to the world beyond--- she is alleged to have added the cheese. She was a closeted pizza eater until accidentally exposed by the royal baker. It seems to be that her historical lot comes down to being remembered as the "Pizza Queen." So the next time you indulge, raise your slice to Queen Margherita.



Finally, the Opera!

Who are these Raging Romans, Reveling in Multifarious Mayhem and Melody?*



* In more dignified documents, a.k.a. the Cast,

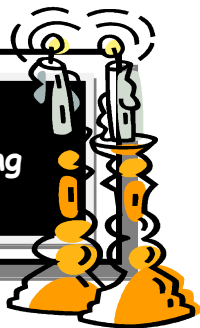
- **Floria Tosca (soprano).** A celebrated Roman singer gifted not only with a great voice, but poor judgment and a volatile, jealous personality. A bad and ultimately fatal combination.
- **Mario Cavaradossi (tenor).** Our "hero". He and Tosca have a thing for each other. Of French descent, he is masquerading in Rome as a painter (portraits, not houses). Under that masque, he is championing the Napoleonic brand of republicanism. As things fatally turn out, he does both badly.
- **Baron Sarpia (baritone).** Our "villain." Part-time chief of police for the Royal Court in Rome and full-time libertine. As things fatally turn out for him, he also does both badly.
- **Cesare Angelotti (bass).** The "McGuffin" guy. His major function is to set *Tosca's* overheated operatic plot in motion. A former Consul of the short-lived Roman Republic, he is on

the lam from prison and the Baron. He fatally only succeeds at one.

- **The Sacristan (baritone).** Basically, the priest in charge of sanitary engineering (a.k.a. janitor) at Rome's Sant'Andrea's Church. Also, the opera's semi-comic relief.
- **Numerous others including but not limited to---** the Baron's inept enforcers, an off-stage boy soprano shepherd, a semi-corrupt jailor and a large, lusty-voiced chorus of diverse Romans.



**Tersely Telling a Tuneful Tale
Mingled with Minute Memos Mentioning
Memorable Musical Moments.**



Time. *Generally*, during the European expansion phase of Napoleon's territorial intentions, not to mention his philosophical flip-flop from republicanism to imperialism.

Specifically, Beginning three days after the June 14, 1800²¹ Battle of Marengo.²² The opera starts at about noon the morning of June 17 and ends shortly after dawn the next morning, June 18,

Setting. *Generally*, Rome (as in Italy) at a very specific point in its history where it was known as a "lawless place." The Pope had fled and was hiding in Venice; anti-Napoleonic royalists in semi-control, were happily-bloodily stomping out the opposition at every opportunity.

²¹ It was not just coincidence that *Tosca* premiered exactly one hundred years after the actual events underlying the opera: the false Bourbon victory at the Battle of Marengo. It is postulated that Puccini planned it that way.

²² A Napoleonic victory, falsely reported as a defeat.

The Plot and Other Miscellany.

Tosca's Tuneful Trio of Menace.

The action begins in the orchestra with three slashing, menacing chords. These, a musicologist tells us are used some twenty-seven times during the course of the opera both as a theme of the Baron Scarpia and/or a talisman of his menace to the entire enterprise. Even after his murder, the theme predominates as a not-so-subtle reminder that the evil men do, lives after them.

Act 1: Close to noon in the Church of Sant'Andrea della Valle.²³

- At the first crash of those three Puccinian chords, the curtain gets out of the way of an escaped political prisoner (Angelotti) dashing furtively²⁴ onto our set, the nave of a Roman church. He locates in a basket, the key to a side chapel and a convenient disguise all hidden there by his sister, He then skulks into the side chapel, which coincidentally is one his family built.
- Hot on the prisoner's heels but unaware of our skulking escapee, the Church's janitor-Sacristan bustles on stage complaining that the Church's in-residence artist and our hero (Mario), has not eaten his lunch-- also conveniently left in another basket.²⁵
- The Angelus bells ring and there is a pause in the complaining for prayerful penance on the parquet.

²³ The Church itself is a very real part of the Roman religious scene; its dome after St. Peter's, is the largest in the city. The Angelotti family and their Attavanti chapel, an Act I component of the Church, are fictional but quite functional as the plot rolls into motion.

²⁴ It is possible!

²⁵ Keep your eye on these baskets. Their movements contribute considerable chaos--- depending on your political affiliation.

- Then, in blustering tenor style, our hero makes his entrance. He explains, as Italian tenors are wont to do, about the Church picture he has been painting.²⁶ He has used as his model, a woman who frequently prays in the Church. She does not know she has been his model, but that is ok because he does not know that when she is not modeling, she hides baskets with keys and disguises.

Recondita armonia / Oh hidden harmony of contrasting beauties—

As our hero works on his portrait, he musically muses that through art he has been able to combine the desirability of his lover, Tosca with the beauty of an unknown woman. The Sacristan periodically adds his more religious observations to those of Cavaradossi, which he views as “lust.”

- The tenor’s musical story-telling goes on so long that the janitor clears out for lunch and the furtive prisoner (in the chapel, remember) comes back on thinking the stage is his alone.
- The furtive, fugitive guy and the painter/hero recognize each other as fellow spies in a common pro-Napoleon cause.²⁷ Their reunion and remembrances of 007 escapades past is cut short by the arrival of our heroine (Tosca)²⁸ demanding entrance to the Church.
- The prisoner-pal is promptly pushed back into his chapel concealment, but since he is in need of nourishment, the basket with

²⁶ The subject is Mary Magdalene.

²⁷ In the surgical excision of the Sardou gilding, some details of logic are operatically obscured. One of them is, are Angelotti and Cavaradossi old friends or just old spies? The play is quite clear, yes; the opera less so. In addition, everybody in town seems to recognize Angelotti’s sister in the Magdalene painting except Mario. Such an oversight can prove fatal and does.

²⁸ It is a small but interesting characteristic of Puccini that he introduces many of his major female characters vocally off-stage before they physically appear on stage: Mimi, Tosca, Butterfly and Minnie. In the case of Turandot, the process is reversed--- she is seen long before she is heard.

bread and brie becomes his concealment chow since he isn't calorie counting.

- Unfortunately, the Church doors are latched, so our diva decides that our hero is having some off-altar hanky-panky with another woman. Mario manfully braces himself for a barrage of diva demeanor and, lets her in.

Non la sospiri casetta / Do you not long for our little house?

Tosca enters full of jealousy and theatrical tricks. What ensues though is a long, lovely Puccini duet. In it, the lovers kiss and make up (eventually) and then, plan their evening's rendezvous at Mario's villa (la nostra casetta) after Tosca's palace performance in a cantata for the Queen.

- Our temperamental Tosca is perfectly pacified by her portrait painter's performance, but then she gets a peek at the portrait. Boy, our heroine is off on another jealousy jag! She knows that dame!²⁹ However, our guy knows his nasal notes will neutralize the dawning of the diva's nascent nastiness. So, he sings (again)!

**Quale acchio al mondo puo star di paro /
What eyes in the world can compare---**

This hero guy as we will find out, is not too bright when he speaks, but when he sings--- Mamma mia! Needless to say, his song down peddles our diva's destructive demeanor.

- The hero's hormonal-hyped harmonies make our heroine happy, happy, happy! So, she lovingly leaves her lover for the cantata gig.³⁰
- However in her parting, she does pause at the portico to postulate one p.s. --- make the portrait's eyes, dark, like Tosca's!

²⁹ She is the Marchesa Attavanti, the sister of Angelotti. Tosca has sipped soup with her!

³⁰ Another missing detail. At this point in Act I, the cantata "to be sung" will celebrate the supposed Marengo victory that has yet to be announced. The Sacristan will spill those beans albeit, shortly. Oops?

- With her gone, our portrait painter's next problem is that the fugitive is discovered to be missing from the local hoosegow. A dragnet is thrown up, but our hero grabs the fugitive and they make a dash for the hero's villa outside of town.
- They are no sooner off-stage when our villain enters announced as always, by his menacing music trio.³¹ He is really evil, but very clever in a Sherlock Holmes kinda way. With all those baskets and keys etc., he adds two and two and gets right to four! He knows our hero is his "bad guy", but one that will lead him to the fugitive---- and the diva will lead him to the hero! He also has designs on the diva, but that comes later.
- He instructs his inept enforcers to follow our Flora on her flight to have a fight with her fancy fellow. (Flora's fury has been fueled by that baleful Baron who told our Tosca an untruthful tale that Mario's messing with a Miss in his Roman hills hideaway.) When the inept enforcers finish following, they will find the fellow and his friend the fugitive.
- At any rate, all the coming and going and intrigue and jealousy are speedily displaced by a massive *Te Deum* sung on-stage by at least half of Rome.

Te Deum laudamus---. / Praise to God---

During this final sequence of the Act, the Church begins to fill with celebrants for the *Te Deum*. It offers to the stage director and his "vision," a moment of very operatic opera—budget permitting.

In addition to throngs of celebrants from all walks of life, cannon begin to boom in the background accompanied by church bells. By the end of the scene, the entire mélange has built to an explosive climax----and, that is GRAND opera!

³¹ The musical theatrical spontaneity of Scarpia's appearance parallels that of Otello's final operatic appearance in Desdemona's bedroom.

- In the middle the religious rhapsodizing, the villain's wits begin to wander towards a torrid tussle with Tosca sometime soon!

Va, Tosca / Go, Tosca.

The villain's vaguely pornographic playfulness is a powerful piece. However, suddenly realizing where he is, he kneels singing, "Tosca, you make me forget God," as the chorus intones the final lines of the *Te Deum*.

- Curtain down. Off to the wine bar

Act II. Baron Scarpia's business and social suite in Rome's Farnese Palace.³² Early evening of June 17.

- As the menacing musical trio triggers the Act II traffic. Scarpia is seen shoveling down a soufflé. Carcophony³³ from Queen Carolina's celebration wanders in through a wide-open window.
- Even though Tosca is tardy for the cantata gig and the Baron's boys are not back from their trek thru the Roman hills, the Baron contemplates a torrid post-cantata tussle with Tosca.

³² The Palace, one of Rome's major Renaissance landmarks, was originally designed by Sangallo an assistant architect on St. Peter's; Michaelangelo was subsequently recruited to redesign and finish the Palace. Construction began in the early 16th century financed by a cardinal (later Pope Paul III) of the Farnese family. The Bourbon Kings of Naples later inherited the property from the Farnese. Hence its use by Scarpia in the opera. It is currently still in use as the French embassy in Rome.

³³ The first music heard is actually a gavotte by Puccini's brother. Nepotism is nice! Later, when the cantata begins Tosca's voice will be heard.

In the play, the famous 18th century Italian composer Paisiello is a character. The cantata to be sung was one he had written. For the opera, Puccini substituted some minor work of his own in place of Paisiello's piece. Paisiello had operatically lost out before as he was the composer of *The Barber of Seville* which preceded Rossini's version by many years. Paisiello's was internationally popular until Rossini's hit the boards. It has seldom been heard from since. See p. 91 for more Paisiello palaver.

Ella verra per amor del suo Mario! /

She will come for her love of Mario!

The Baron with disturbing delight, fantasizes about his coming forced conquest of the singer. “---the violent conquest has stronger relish than the soft surrender.” Yuck!

- Scarpia knows the singer will show to sing, so he sends her an urgent invite to join him in a secluded soiree when she has quit the cantata's cacophony. Little does he know that that tete-a-tete will quickly cause his quietus. Cool!
- Well, next thing we know, the Baron's bumblers are back with Caravadossi in cuffs 'cause of a bad attitude; his companion is still concealed in the countryside casa.
- Our hero will not honor up to where he has hid his James Bond buddy. So, our Scarpia shouts to his servile servants, "Squeeze out his secrets!"
- So that these Farnese fellows can facilitate finding their fugitive, terrible torture is turned onto our taciturn hero. Unfortunately Tosca, whose timing is never terrific, toddles in just in time to hear (but not see) our hero's hollars!

Orsu, Tosca pariate, / Come Tosca, speak!

This sequence is probably one of the most psychologically chilling events on an opera stage. The voices contrast: Scarpia alternatively silkily smooth and threatening; Tosca pleading for her lover and rising to near hysteria; and, Mario alternatively crying out in pain and warning Tosca to remain silent.

The orchestra underscores the actual torture--- a spiked steel band being tightened around our hero's head.

- The hero does not sing³⁴, but the diva does--- telling one and all the fugitive is well hidden in a well at the hero's villa. Damn!³⁵

³⁴ Pun intended.

- Via one of the Baron's servile staff, the on-stage operatic operatives are notified that Napoleon was not nuked, it was Melas! That provokes our hero to a poorly-timed and really loud proclamation of Napoleonic support. Needless to say, that gets him condemned by our villain, to be swung from a scaffold. .
- Our heroine knows the villain has a price for her lover's release. She is smart that way and right. However, it is her on his auction block.

Se la giurata fede / I want other recompense.

This grippingly dramatic musical and physical confrontation between Tosca and Scarpia reaches its vocal and violence apex in a near rape. It also in its exposition has one of those accidentally great opera one-liners. Tosca starts the pair's combative encounter with the word, "Quanto?" (How much?). Scarpia responds with an appropriate villainous laugh, that he never takes money from women; he has something else in mind.

- Our heroine knows she has been had; caught in a catch-22, she concedes. However, she considers her conundrum's consequences in one of the most magnificent arias in Oproyland.

Vissi d'arte, vissi d'amore / I lived for art, I lived for love.

This Puccinian gift to the soprano repertoire is, at its essence, a "poor little me" lament by Tosca. "I have been so good all my life, why am I in such a mess now?"

Puccini did not like the aria as he felt it slowed down the action. It does however provide a welcome release from the tension of the previous confrontation(s). One suspects though, sopranos would kill before canceling the aria.

Because of the rough stuff between Scarpia and Tosca immediately before the aria, sopranos frequently begin the piece from a prone position on the floor. An added touch of vocal skill "show-off." You go for it girl!

³⁵ Another of those little libretto inconsistencies. Earlier, Mario has said that he tells Tosca nothing of his "work." She tends to be a tell-all. Yet, as he is being bundled off to be tortured he signals her to say nothing. In the end, it turn out she knows the big secret of the well. Oh well!

- If things were not miserable enough, a mealy-mouthed minion marches on and makes it known that our fugitive fellow's been felled by unfriendly fire--- done dead while wallowing in the well.
- Our Baron bellows, "Hang that damp republican shill anyway!" Scarpia sure knows how to hold a grudge.
- When queried what to do with his companion-in-crime (our hero) who is not in a well, but not well, there is a pregnant pause in the proceedings.
- It's Tosca's turn to tout her terms. "Make me an offer I can't refuse," the Baron barks!
- The diva declaims her desired details and the Baron buys blithely in.
- The terms worked out? The bad guy Baron mandates Mario's "mock" execution and gives our gal (and her guy) a safe conduct pass out of town.
- What's Tosca's "quid pro quo" for her tormenter you inquire? If you have to ask, either you have not been paying close attention or you are far too young to be at this opera. Name your poison!
- Let the buyer beware! As our villain moves in for his contractual conquest, the lyrical lady plants a table knife into his chest---- remember, he was at dinner when all this started.
- Her lethal thrust is delivered along with another great one-liner: "This is Tosca's kiss!" (Questo e il bacio di Tosca!).
- Adding insult to injury,³⁶ our lyrical lady luxuriates in watching the Baron's bloody bye-bye. "Is your blood choking you? Die! die! Die!," she happily hisses.
- (Now until the Act's curtain, we have no more words, just Puccini's soft, sinister and characteristic chords coupled with some terrific, traditional stage action.)

³⁶ Puns definitely intended!

Act II Finale

(All music, no words)

The music undergirding this action combines melodic lines from the opera, but rescored to accentuate the rather grisly, sinister stage business. The overall atmosphere is one of edge-of-your-seat evil expectations.

When Scarpia has expired in true operatic fashion, Tosca moves in for the clean up. Ever the diva, she checks herself out in the mirror re-arranging her hair; rinsing the blood off her hands etc.

With a great theatrical touch, she places the candles from the table on either side of Scarpia's body; removes a crucifix from the wall and places it on his chest.

She then steps back and views her handwork, observing sarcastically, "E avanti a lui tremava tuta Roma!" ("--and before him, all of Rome trembled").

She looks for the pass and finds it still in the Baron's now dead hand. She removes it (delicately) and then herself from the room.

Bernhardt is alleged to have requested the costume designer to construct an extra long-train for her gown in this scene. The purpose being, when the actress left the stage, the gown would follow her at some distance sinuously---like a snake.

- Wine bar interlude!

Act III.

Shortly before dawn, June 18 on the platform roof of Castel Sant'Angelo,³⁷ just below the great bronze statue of St. Michael the Archangel.³⁸

³⁷ The Castel on the banks of the Tiber, was built early in the 2nd century A.D. by the Emperor Hadrian as his family mausoleum. It continued as a lavish burial chamber for Roman emperors and their families until the 5th century when it was trashed during one of the frequent sackings of Rome by the Goths et. al. The Castel became property of the Catholic Church and an early pope turned it into a fortress with a connecting underground passage to the Vatican. Subsequently, it became a prison, its use during the opera. Today it is a museum and one of Rome's penultimate landmarks.

³⁸ Depending on the "vision" of the set designer, the Basilica of St. Peter's and the Vatican Palace can often be seen behind the Castel.

- Belying the bloodshed and other such stuff that will soon be seen, the Act begins in a peaceful pastoral mode. The bells of Rome's churches chime in a call to morning prayers;³⁹ a shepherd boy tending sheep in a meadow behind the Castel, sings of his spurned offer of young love.
- Our hero down to his last hour is penning some prose to his diva doll. Puccini in this morose moment, gifts this guy and other Italianate tenors, a terrific tune.

E lucevan le stele ed olezzava/

And the stars shone and the earth was perfumed.

In the aria, Mario recalls his love for Tosca. He has wasted so much of his life and now---this is the end! His memories eventually overcome his music and the piece ends as he dissolves in typical Italian tenor sobs. Great music though and a perennial concert hall favorite.

- As the tenor's tears terminate, Tosca rushes onto the roof. "Great news: The Baron is now bye-bye because I butchered him just after he gave us a free pass to Pisa, Palermo and all those pretty places."⁴⁰
- "Best of all though, big boy, your execution will not be fatally executed. The fatal firing will be faked!" Sure!⁴¹

³⁹ Puccini ever the stickler for authenticity is alleged to have requested of the Vatican, the exact musical pitch of St. Peter's bells for this scene. They did comply. That's clout!

⁴⁰ Actually she sings/says they have a super stateroom on a ship that will take them out to sea and safety! Unfortunately, that announcement does not arrange well in alliteration. So, a bit of artistic license.

⁴¹ Opera folks get exercised about some of the darndest things. Here is a case in point: an on-going debate among tenors who play Caravadossi is, does Mario believe Scarpia has out-foxed Tosca; the execution will not be a sham? The weight of "tenor-ite" opinion over the years has been only Tosca does not know what the bang! bang! outcome will really be. Everyone else has Scarpia figured out.

**O dolci mani mansuete e pure /
Oh sweet hands pure and gentle.**

Puccini puts forth this one final florid flourish for our doomed duo. A musical quid pro quo if you will, for their trials and tribulations with the baleful Baron even as he passed into Perdition, masticating Meatballs Milianase!

In this lovely duet, our hero cannot believe his diva done in the bad guy. He probably is saying to himself, "Better be careful big boy, this singer would slice you into salami if you ever slip up!" She in turn says, "Forget it! We're going on a world cruise. --- but watch your back!"

- Now, let us cut to the chase. The "fake" firing folks fatally finish our tenor. Body count so far: the republican James Bond now dripping dry on a gibbet; the villain already also quite dead with his head in the haricots verts; and, our hero stretched out on the stones with a really surprised look on his face.
- The Baron's buddies have now found that the Baron has bled out into the bouillabaisse. Those Bourbon bumpkins therefore come to drag our diva into durance vile.
- However, she has been doing wind sprints seriously so she can winsomely win next month's Mafia Memorial Marathon. Consequently, she cuts quicker than these pathetic police, to the prison parapet.
- As Tosca terminally tumbles herself towards the Tiber, she vengefully and voluminously vows to meet our villain before God! (O Scarpia, avanti a Dio!).
- WOW! That is what I call an "exit line." Almost better than that clownish killer Canio's "La commedia è finita!"⁴²



⁴² As in *Pagliacci*

Titillating Talk about Tosca's Termination.

Tosca's last scene, probably because it involves blank ammunition and sopranos flinging their often ample selves into open space, seems to collect a great number of classic mishaps, more so than other operas.

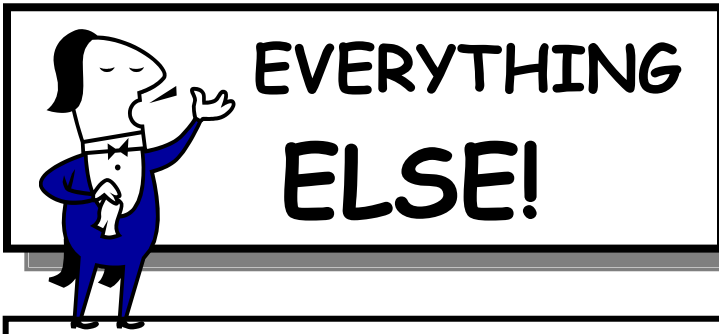
One well known gaff has the tenor actually being shot (messily, but not seriously) by a misplaced blank. The soprano in viewing the "corpse" discovered real blood and promptly fainted sans suicide. Tenors seem to be nicked frequently with errant blanks; frequently enough to make you wonder were those blanks really errant? Soprano pay-back time or possibly critics' revenge?

We have seen truly fearless sopranos literally thrown themselves off parapets very high above the stage floor – that is great faith in feather pillows. As an alternative however, one *Tosca* was observed at Convent Garden folding herself into what appeared to be a very small Otis elevator and slowly descending out of sight into Perdition.

The classic exit though has to be the happily unnamed soprano who stagehands thought to do a favor. They substituted a trampoline for the usual mattresses. Unfortunately, as she hit the trampoline, she escaped their clutches. Before she was brought to earth, she bounced back above the parapet----- multiple times in full view of the audience.

A tired stage manager inadvertently provided a memorable finale. When asked by the supernumeraries how to exit the final scene after chasing *Tosca* into space, the manager thoughtlessly responded, "Follow the principal off the stage." They quite literally did so, treating the audience to the spectacle of a mass suicide orchestrated by Puccini.

Well, why not?



A CONCLUDING COGITATION

19th Century Nights at the Opera: An Orgiastic Experience.

"Opera once was an important social instrument -- especially in Italy. With Rossini and Verdi, people were listening to opera together and having the same catharsis with the same story, the same moral dilemmas. They were holding hands in the darkness. This has gone. Now perhaps they are holding hands and watching television?"

Luciano Berio, Italian composer, 1989.

Good News, Bad News. Once upon a time, opera was the only major entertainment¹⁶⁴ game in town. Today, a similar prospect could be considered really bad news and---scare the devil out of a lot of people!

History dictates that opera, in a primitive form,¹⁶⁵ began in Italy at the close of the 16th century. It rapidly matured in form and spread quickly

¹⁶⁴ We know! In some circles opera is regarded as an almost religious experience. However, at its essence--- it is entertainment!

throughout Europe. It gained an early hold on the public's attention for the simple reason that any other big alternative "bread and circus" events readily accessible to us today, had yet to be invented. For at least another 300 years post-1600, there were not to be any football, baseball or other big sporting events (a.k.a. entertainment). Movies, TV or big rock concerts also would not be in evidence. Perhaps worst of all, there was no publicly participatory politics to pump up the polis. The ruling royals undemocratically kept a lid and monopoly on that lively art. Reduces revolutionary excesses, you know. The good news however is that opera despite being the only entertainment option for several hundred years, was also very democratic--- especially the Italian form.¹⁶⁶ The opera house was accessible (physically and financially) to the hoi polloi (a.k.a. us members of the great unwashed mob), not just the hoi oligio (a.k.a. the upper crust).¹⁶⁷

Noshing and Schmoozing. In brief, what one could do (decently) between 16th to 20th century dusks and dawns when the daily day jobs were done, was attend the opera!¹⁶⁸ However, in those long gone halcyon days, people did not especially come to opera only to listen to

¹⁶⁵ The first opera is credited to be *Dafne* composed in 1597 Florence by Jacopo Peri. It's music and libretto are lost somewhere in history's dustbin---maybe just as well.

¹⁶⁶ Other European countries especially France and what became Germany and Austria had their operatic entertainments also. However, they tended to be more formalistic and focused than those of the Italians. Therefore, we are going to stick singularly to the Italian style in deference at least Puccini and Rossini. Also pragmatically, we have limited space and time for dawdling digressions. Those are our rationales to cut out inter-cultural comparisons. OK?

¹⁶⁷ While almost all levels of society could see the show, through artful architecture the "hoi polloi" were allocated to alternative areas from the "hoi oligio." Such an architectural achievement did affect the opera house, its operas and their performances. More on those substantive affects shortly.

¹⁶⁸ The 300+ year life span of opera wherein it was a attraction for a major part of the population is said to have ended with the premiere of Puccini's *Turandot* (1926). That "end of the run" occurred in a large part due to the development of multiple other entertainment forms that captured the public's attendance. However, it was also said to result from a compositional hiatus of melodic, romantic operas. A large segment of the opera-going public rapidly lost interest post-Puccini, in newer 12 tone or atonal modernistic operatic forms.

fancy vocalizing. It can be convincingly argued that the music was strictly background. Noshing and schmoozing big time with your neighbors was the main event!

A night at the opera¹⁶⁹ was a social occasion encompassing not only the on-stage occurrences, but an opportunity to sumptuously and continuously dine and down potent potables in your box or from a basket, schmooze with friends during entr'actes and/or, gamble in the outer lobby.¹⁷⁰ In those times, the prudent composer spun out sufficient melodies to last well past midnight. Such length added bonus points to a critic's review and public perceptions.

So What? “All that sounds like fun,” you seem to say, “But what does it have to do with our operas?” Well, it has a great deal to do with the on-stage occurrences. The opera house's customary off-stage activities dictated what should be seen and heard on-stage. It was those long-ago dictates that have created many of what we today consider operatic eccentricities. Compositional creativity did not bring forth all that music and scale scaling. Much of it was imposed by 18th and 19th century rules for the operatic road.¹⁷¹ The following are offered as examples of those “road rules.”

- Overtures apart from artistic design, became de rigueur to quiet the considerable socializing and shut down the serpentine wandering throughout the auditorium. Overtures per se morphed into lengthy overtures to assure a leisurely finish to the current banquet course being

¹⁶⁹ Edith Wharton opened her Pulitzer-prize winning novel *The Age of Innocence* describing a 19th century New York City night at the opera.

¹⁷⁰ A considerable portion of Rossini's fortune came from his cut of the opera houses' outer-lobby gambling table action during performances of his works. His cut was always a negotiated part of his contract with the opera house.

¹⁷¹ As discussed on p. 94, the Code Rossini was a strong compositional governing force for at least the first half and then some, of the 19th century

consumed--- do not want to rush the dinner guests into heartburn you know.¹⁷²

- Many on-stage vocal customs and character movements were dictated by off-stage social or culinary requirements. One of the more intriguing is the so-called aria di sorbetto. The on-stage on set of this piece was the equivalent to the last call in a contemporary bar. Therefore, the music occurring during this on-stage point was considered disposable; no one would be listening as they were taking a last run at the buffet line or the champagne bucket.¹⁷³

- Until Rossini and Verdi rose to compositional clout, singers ruled! The voice was all! Composers had little voice (pun!) in the performance as it spun out. Audience interest was in the performance of principals, usually not the rest of the on-stage “stuff.” Since each composer developed his opera for specific individual’s voices, arias were strategically placed in a performance to permit those stars to shine. It also explains some of the odd placement¹⁷⁴ of such moments throughout the piece.

- As a further variation on the “singers’ rule,” once an opera had premiered, what subsequently was performed on stage under the name of that opera, was anyone’s guess. There were no copyright laws, no licensing of productions, etc. Therefore anyone in the opera “business” vocal or managerial, with sharp elbows was free to abridge and/or insert what, where and however they wanted.

As curious as all this “frolicking” may seem to modern eyes, before we get too smug, let’s think of our modern sports arenas, their private boxes with high priced décor, booze, broads and chow. There are omni-present vendors for the great-unwashed crowd that is boxed out of the private boxes, but keeps in constant physical and verbal movement. Similar to the 19th century Italian opera house, no? Only the venue has changed,

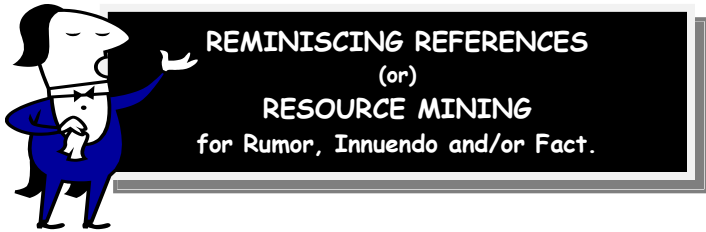
¹⁷² For notations on the wandering *Barbiere* Overture and Rossini's compositional habits related thereto, see p.,95 and p. 105.

¹⁷³ For a discussion of this aria type and how it affects *Barbiere* see p. 129.

¹⁷⁴ Vis-à-vis libretto logic.

and there is no fat lady singing, unless “Take Me Out to the Ballgame” counts!

Plus ça change, plus c'est la même chose!



In this comparatively advanced technological age of information access, the persistent data digger can usually find more about a given subject, than the human brain can effectively process. That is both good news and bad. While such a surfeit permits a maximization of information for a minimum of effort, it also exposes the weak underbelly of archival information and the need to separate the chaff from the wheat in a field of conflicting “facts.”

It is continually amazing to discover through cross-referencing how assumedly simple rock solid facts can wildly vary among references. Due diligence on “factual” selection is therefore mandatory up to a point. Then, it becomes a matter of, “Oh, what the hell! This is my best guess.”

Individual **Irreverent Guides** are not designed to be exhaustively referenced academic treatises. However, they are semi-conscientiously constructed to optimistically demystify opera while entertainingly informing members of a potential audience. Consequently, they are built on the best basis of factual assessment among often-warring alternatives

For the reader, now having been warned about possible pot-holes in at best, a rocky narrative road, listed below are some reference resources used in construction of this current multi-opera **Irreverent Guide**:

General references:

- David Hamilton (Ed.), The Metropolitan Opera Encyclopedia, Simon and Schuster; 1987. This is a smorgasbord of operatically and musically-related factoids. While the individual entries are brief, overall the reference is comprehensive, up-to-date and accurate.
- Roger Parker (Ed.), The Oxford Illustrated History of Opera, Oxford University Press, 1994. More in depth than the Met Encyclopedia, it provides excellent historical background, but was not designed as a handy-dandy reference, if that is what you are looking for.

Composer/ opera specific references:

- Karl Kohrs (Ed.), The New Milton Cross'Complete Stories of the Great Operas; Doubleday and Company, 1955.
- Milton Cross and Karl Kohrs, The New Milton Cross More Stories of the Great Operas; Doubleday and Company, 1955.

These two basic texts of operatic plots and associated information originated with Milton Cross, the longtime host of the Saturday afternoon broadcasts of the Metropolitan Opera. They have been frequently revised and updated. Their telling of the plots is quite complete, but not excessive. Unfortunately, care needs to be exercised in using the newer editions, as some errors have randomly crept in that Mr. Cross would not have tolerated.

- Philip Gossett et.al. (Eds.), Masters of Italian Opera (Rossini, Donizetti, Bellini, Verdi, Puccini); WW Norton and Company, 1983. Good basic information on the lives and works of five major Italian composers. Quite useful and readable. Its style cuts to the chase and doesn't overburden the researcher with excessive peripheral detail.

- Susan Nicassio, Tosca's Rome, The Play and The Opera in Historical Perspective. University of Chicago Press, 1999. An always-intriguing discussion of the Puccini and Sardou works, with a scholarly lodging against the actual history of Rome and as it relates, Europe. The text largely encompasses the historical time period of the opera/play. A fascinating read, even if you are not researching.
- Charles Osborne, The Complete Operas of Puccini, DiCapo Press, 1981. Intriguing narratives of Puccini's operas and backgrounds on their creation. Succinct, but full of interesting and informational details.
- John Wood (Trans.) Beaumarchais's Barber of Seville and The Marriage of Figaro. Penguin Books, 1964. The original source plays for the Mozart, Rossini and Paisiello operas; also contains an excellent introduction by Dr. Wood detailing Beaumarchais's career, the creation of the plays and the history of their times.

Recordings (including their accompanying background essays and librettos):

- Tosca; Callas, DiStefano and Gobbi, Orchestra and Chorus of La Scala, Victor de Sabata, 1984.
- Der Freischütz, Behrens and Kolla; Bavarian Radio Chorus and Orchestra, Rafael Kubelik, 1980.
- Il Barbiere di Siviglia
 - Rossini version. Merrill and Peters, Metropolitan Opera Orchestra and Chorus, Eric Leinsdorf, 1958 (re-mastered 1986)
 - Paisiello version. Laki and Gulyas, Hungarian State orchestra, Adam Fisher, 1985.

The Internet (queried widely and wildly). Too many citations reviewed to list individually. WARNING for the careful researcher: cross-referencing, culling and correcting are musts! The web abounds with inaccuracies and informational conflicts.



A Guide to *Irreverent Guides*

Encouraged by several probably misguided regional opera companies, the **Irreverent Guides to Enjoying the Opera** series was initiated over six years ago. To date **Guides** for thirty-two operas have been produced. The majority of these were done pro bono for the companies to use in their educational and/or fund-raising programs. The rest were done for unwary and slower running family, friends or just unfortunate strangers in the street.

Each *Irreverent Guide* is designed for those of us who enjoy the operatic sound and spectacle, but do not necessarily understand (or really, want to understand) the technical nuances underlying the musical, visual and/or and vocal fireworks.

The *Guides* originated in an oral tradition. Individual operas selected for their slightly off-the-wall stories (but great music) were translated into jaundiced and irreverent narratives. The first audiences for these were younger family members being lured into quasi- voluntary operatic attendance.

As time passed, the narratives began to show some signs of success (e.g. the kicking and screaming stopped). The audience drawn into the narrative circle expanded to include spouses of the original but now "adult" children, grandchildren as they appeared, and non-related adults--- primarily our slowest running friends and/or (again) unwary strangers on the street.

As larger audiences came back of their own free wills for more than one narrative session, the original oral tradition proved impractical. It was replaced by a written writ about the operatic occasion. Over time, the number of targets grew and **voila (!)**, the *Irreverent Guides'* slightly dysfunctional family was born.

Each *Guide* targeting one opera includes the full flavor of the traditional bad puns and sophomoric observations of the original oral sessions. It is leavened though with

a lot more historical, social, musical, political and (ho boy!) hanky-panky background than was formerly the case. Retirement unfortunately promotes research---especially given the present quality of the narrator/author's golf game.

Currently our operatic victims are selected more by whim than systematic design. However, past selective options have included annually changing repertoires of regional opera companies,¹⁷⁵ dyspeptic moods of the author and/or creative bribery.

Our Operating Philosophy and Audience Personae. Built with a clear eye on Rube Goldberg's *Principles of Design*,¹⁷⁶ each *Irreverent Guide* is dedicated to the premise that "enjoyable opera" is not an oxymoronic phrase. Honoring that premise, as an overall collective, individual *Guides* are designed to be "entertainingly educational" as well as "irreverently informational,"--- and those are not oxymoronic phrases either!

The *Guides* are jerry-built with thigh-slappingly arcane and convoluted knowledge that will resonate **only** with a special few potential opera-going folks. Specifically, those who have a highly developed sense of curiosity about circumstances that drive artistic creativity (apart from impending starvation); the capacity to suspend disbelief; a tolerance for the improbable; and finally, an antic sense of humor.



If we still have your attention,
you obviously qualify for our
select readership.
So read, laugh and learn!

¹⁷⁵ They shall remain nameless. Legal action by them is always a potential.

¹⁷⁶ Primarily those entertainingly defying logic and common sense,

About the Authors

So our indiscriminate readership is aware which member of the **Irreverent Guides** "creative" team (JP or Sondra Cooney) is responsible for which gaffs, the division of work between the pair is, he writes them, but she makes them readable.

J.P. Cooney, while holding a PhD, definitely was not educated as a musicologist. Also, not a native Iowan, he does claim default citizenship of the state by virtue of family genealogy, marriage and University of Iowa degrees. He is several years retired from a long, but probably questionable professorial career in graduate health care education and research. However, most important for current purposes, he is a long-standing opera enthusiast about that art form's wacky, but rewarding wonderments.

S.S. Cooney a native Iowan, does have a musical background by virtue of education and training. She holds a graduate degree from UCLA and though (semi-) retired, she has had a long successful career in teaching, educational research and policy-development. She is a knowledgeable and fanatic lover of a wide range of musical types. Opera does make that list--- somewhat. For their (to-date) fifty-three years of marriage, equipped with a flaming red, felt-tipped pen, she has diligently pursued and purified JP's errant and "gone missing" commas, grungy syntax and banally baroque sentence structures. She perpetually persists in her quixotic editorial quest, as he never learns.

The Cooneys currently are most happy residents of a small island off Hilton Head (SC), breachable only by boat or Michael Phelps. In this idyllic but eccentric existence, they are companioned by the grumpy ghost of their formerly long-lived liver-spotted Dalmatian.

Major additional enjoyment to the island's idyllic atmosphere is provided by frequent forays onto and most importantly, off the island by other immediate family members. That traveling road show now touts up nineteen second and third generational members--- most of whom are at least willing to tolerate the opera, and some actually love it.

The Irreverent Guides Series

(Issues already released or scheduled to be shortly released,
into a potential but skittish opera-going public.)

COMPOSER	OPERA	ISSUE	DATE
Bernstein*	Candide	#21	4.08
Bizet	Les Pêcheurs de Perles	# 7	10.05
Blitzstein***	Regina	#24	6.08
Britten*	Albert Herring	# 8	4.06
De Falla	La Vida Breve	# 13	1.07
Donizetti***	L'Elisir d'Amore	#22	6.08
Donizetti	Lucia di Lammermoor	# 2	5.04
Gilbert & Sullivan	The Pirates of Penzance	# 15	4.07
Gounod**	Faust	#25	9.08
Gounod**	Roméo et Juliette	#17	10.07
Leoncavallo	Pagliacci	# 12	1.07
Mozart**	Le Nozze di Figaro	#27	3.09
Mozart	Die Zauberflöte	# 6	5.05
Mozart**	Don Giovanni	#19	3.08
Offenbach*	Les Contes d' Hoffmann	# 16	4.07
Poulenc*	Dialogues des Carmélites	#28	4.09
Puccini	Madama Butterfly	# 11	7.06
Puccini	Tosca	# 5	3.05
Puccini***	Tosca (a déjà vu view)	#30	6.09
Puccini**	Turandot	#29	4.09
Rossini**	Il Barbiere di Siviglia	#26	1.09
Rossini***	Il Barbiere (once more with feeling)	#31	6.09
Rossini	La Cenerentola	# 10	3.06
Saint-Saëns	Samson et Dalila	# 4	2.05
Strauss**	Die Fledermaus	#20	4.07
Verdi**	Aida	#18	1.07
Verdi	La Traviata	# 9	1.06
Verdi	Macbeth	# 3	10.04
Verdi	Nabucco	# 1	10.03
Verdi	Rigoletto	# 14	3.07
Verdi***	Un Ballo in Maschera	#23	6.08
Weber***	Der Freischütz	#32	6.09

Developed for: *Atlanta Opera Theater at Georgia State University
 **Opera Carolina
 ***Des Moines Metro Opera.