Who Is Scarpia?: A Pre-Game Talk for the Met in HD Broadcast of "Tosca"

By Randye Jones (Presented Jan. 27, 2018)

Tosca is an opera in three acts by Giacomo Puccini, with the libretto by Luigi Illica and Giuseppe Giacosa. The opera was based on the play, *La Tosca*, by French playwright, Victorien Sardou. The opera premiered at the Teatro Costanzi in Rome on 14 January 1900 and premiered at the Met on February 24th of the following year.

Today's Met in HD broadcast is the 968th performance of the popular opera on the Met stage. In the century-plus since the opera premiered, *Tosca* has generated a lot of history, lots of stories to tell about its more infamous aspects. Even this production lends a great deal of grist for the mill, as it were. Just this excerpt from the January 1, 2018, *New York Times* review of *Tosca* suggests wonderful possibilities:

> First, months ago, its star tenor pulled out. Then its star soprano. Then her husband, who was slated to conduct. *His* replacement, James Levine, a fixture at the company for four decades, was suspended from the Met last month over accusations of sexual misconduct. And a few weeks ago, for good measure, the opera's villain canceled, too.

Still, I wanted to take advantage of this opportunity to talk about my favorite operatic character. Although I'm a soprano, my favorite character is actually the baritone, Scarpia. The role not only demands an excellent singer, but the singer has to have serious acting chops to play one of the most evil villians to ever cross an operatic stage.

Scarpia is a character of the era—the turn of the 19th Century—in which the opera was set. He sprang from an age of war and cultural upheaval. He was able to come to power and to flourish because there were those who saw a need for him and his peculiar proclivities at that time.

Author Deborah Burton commented about the violence portrayed in the opera, *Tosca*, and how it reflected the era and the people who wielded power during those horrific times:

> A word of warning is perhaps necessary to those readers who feel squeamish during the offstage torture scenes of Tosca. The history of the period, and the biographical details of the historical figures described herein, are far more savage and bloody. At that time, the two young republics of Naples and Rome had fallen, and the restored Bourbon monarchy was quelling any signs of antiroyalist, or Jacobin, sentiment. The Austrian-born Queen Marie-Caroline (sister of Marie-

> Antoinette) and her husband Ferdinand IV of Naples, were still battling Napoleon and felt no mercy toward the French, or the French-inspired republicans. There were innumerable summary executions, tortures, and other unspeakable horrors; most of the brightest cultural and intellectual leaders were lost. Brutal mob violence became commonplace,… and the Court-appointed judges and executioners showed not much more restraint.

In the opera, Baron Scarpia is simply described as the chief of police. Puccini's introductory chords form a *leitmotif* that musically expresses the violence and terror Scarpia brings to the story. Puccini's tenor, the artist Mario Cavaradossi, describes Scarpia as a "bigoted satyr who uses devoutness to hide his libertine lust and, to implement his lascivious talent, acts as both confessor and hangman." However, to really get a sense of who the character is, one has to look back at his original creator, Sardou. In the play, Cavaradossi's indictment of the policeman is more detailed: "'Ah, the wretch! Under an exterior of perfect courtesy and fervent devotion, with smiles and signs of the cross, what a vile scoundrel he is, sanctimonious and rotten, an artist in villainy, refined in his evilness, delighting in cruelty, blood-thirsty in his orgies! What woman, daughter or sister, has not paid with her honor for coming near this impure satyr?"

Sardou identified his character as: “Name: Baron Vitellio Scarpia. Rank: Regent of Police, recently dispatched to Rome by the Court of Naples. Description: Sicilian, with a reputation for dispensing merciless justice.”

It has been suggested that the playwright drew his characters from real historical figures, sometimes blending elements from the life of one person with those of another, with only minor changes in the spelling of the character’s name as a clue to the persons who inspired his or her creation.

One inspiration for Scarpia’s persona was a man named Gherardo Curci, who was called “Sciarpa,” or the scarf. It is said that he fought on both sides of the warring parties, switching sides when one was unwilling to pay him for his services. Multiple accounts of the period describe Sciarpa as a villain who presented himself as extremely devout. Novelist Alexandre Dumas described Sciarpa as an assassin, a killer and a thief who supported the royalist cause, and who was greedy, vengeful and bloodthirsty.

Other elements that went into the character Scarpia were drawn from a Sicilian named Vincenzo Speciale. Speciale served as a judge in Palermo as well as Fiscal Attorney of the Supreme Council of War in Sicily, tasked with the job of dispensing what was known as justice at that time. It was

said that he took special delight in overseeing the various forms of torture dealt to prisoners. One of Speciale's contemporaries, writer Francesco Lomonaco, described the impact of actions taken by men like Speciale:

> From one neighborhood another, one could hear the sounds of terror, which had already become epidemic: and there was no corner of those wards that had not been part of the most horrible tragedy of our hemisphere. While the neighborhoods were reduced to such a sad state, in the center of Naples the members of the State Junta, men as deprived of name and fame as they were filled with turpitude and ignominy, sentenced ten, twelve people a day to the gallows, not counting those who were butchered by the barbaric agents of [Queen] Caroline.

Burton gives this description of how justice was typically dealt under Speciale's direction:

> While the mob outside was burning and cannibalizing the unjailed republicans, Speciale, wrapped in ermine, sat on the velvet seats of the Tribunal, condemning the imprisoned ones to death. The trials were a sham; the sentences were decided beforehand. Any and all means were used to reach a guilty verdict. The defense had twenty-

> four hours to prepare, but even at that, its testimonies were often not admitted as evidence, there was no cross-examination of witnesses, no scrutiny of written evidence was permitted, and no allowances were made for age—even sixteen-year-olds were executed.

Speciale was not beyond using trickery to get a confession from prisoners, going so far in one case of telling a childhood friend that he would be released if he only wrote down what he had done. The friend was executed two days after writing the confession. Puccini seems to have drawn from this story when Scarpia invited Tosca first with the words, “And now let us talk like friends,” then by saying, “Would you like us to find a way to save him together?”

The famous ending of the opera in which Tosca meets her fate may well have been drawn from another infamous case where a prisoner brought before Speciale threw himself through an open office window. A guard who witnessed the incident said that he heard the prisoner exclaim as he to his death, “I am going! But not on your orders!”

The time period of Sardou’s play and Puccini’s opera was also known for the cruel treatment of the women connected with those unfortunate souls

caught up by men like Sciarpa and Speciale. Burton ends her characterization of Scarpia with the words of historian Pietro Colletta:

> The women, who were scorned, in ministers' chambers, driven from the prison Doors, subject to the outrageous and unfortunate lasciviousness of the scribes and the judges, patiently tolerated the offenses; and without impudence or cowardice, returned the next day to the same rooms, to the same doors, disguising their sickened reactions to those affronts with modesty or with tears. If anyone escaped his scheduled death, or if others reduced the penalty, it was due to the care and piety of women.

So, what it comes down to is that the Scarpia in Puccini's *Tosca* was a truly evil man whose only redeeming traits were all manufactured to fool others. The performer who takes on this role has to draw upon all of his skills as a singer and an actor to communicate all of the elements that make Scarpia who he is without overselling him. He has to allow us, his audience, to recognize how repulsive a character Scarpia truly is and to feel that justice has, indeed, been served when he meets his fate at Tosca's hand.