

Opera Santa Barbara

A transformative, lean *Tosca*

Soprano **Eleni Calenos** as ToscaReview by **Daniel Kepl** / VOICE

THE BLOOD-CURDLING FATE MOTIF in low brass and percussion which launches Giacomo Puccini's *Tosca* (1900) and sets a mesmerizing horror story in motion, brought a full house at the Granada Theatre last Saturday to hushed silence for over two hours, as Opera Santa Barbara opened its 2022-2023 season with a one-performance-only production steeped in high drama and filled with glorious music. Artistic and General Director, Kostis Protopapas, has helmed his company through the vagaries of the past two years with sometimes stubborn, often visionary, but always resolute determination to serve his audience and their understanding of the world around them. It's called selecting repertoire to meet the times in which we live, and *Tosca*, though enveloped in historical events from the past, is a universal story about the upheaval of wars and the resiliency of womanhood.

Set design saw the OSB Orchestra on stage, visible but hidden discreetly behind a couple walls of open scaffolding on which various points of action would take place. A large screen, suspended in front of the orchestra and behind the scaffolding, was used to excellent effect for video projections that accompanied, without overwhelming, the psychological messaging of the opera.

Set in war-torn Rome circa 1800, the beginning skirmishes of what would become the Napoleonic Wars (1803-1815), *Tosca* is at one level, about the fates of people caught up in political upheaval and military struggle. Victors and vanquished chase and dodge one another throughout the three acts of Puccini's musical drama. Artists, politicians, the head of the secret police, a famous and strong-willed singer: these characters and their disparate needs and interests shift and churn in an elastic milieu of give and take, success and failure, life and death. Power, deception, betrayal, murder, self-sacrifice, lust, and karma form the glue of the opera's complex subtext.

In the title role of Floria Tosca, Greek soprano Eleni Calenos easily took command of the stage as well as her character. A classic Puccini heroine, Tosca becomes increasingly self-aware and courageous as the opera progresses and circumstances become more threatening. So too Calenos, whose voice became powerfully steely as Tosca's act of just murder and self-sacrifice takes its inevitable course. Tenor Adam Diegel as Tosca's lover, the painter Mario Cavaradossi, enjoyed a bright and persuasive high tessitura, notwithstanding a slightly frayed moment or two around the edges of his voice during sustained high tones on Saturday. Diegel's acting, his confidence on stage, and his penetrating vocal timbre, made for a near perfect Cavaradossi.

Baritone Wayne Tigges as Baron Scarpia, chief of the secret police of the Kingdom of Naples which has recently occupied Rome after the withdrawal of Napoleon's troops, took the role and ran with it. Possessing a resonant, amber vocal color and superbly thoughtful

acting sensibilities, Tigges dominated each of his scenes, as well he should – his character is a colorful badass.

OSB's Chrisman Studio Artist Program alum, bass Colin Ramsey, was a keen presence on stage in the role of Cesare Angelotti, former Consul of the Roman Republic installed by Napoleon, now on the run from Baron Scarpia and the Neapolitan authorities. Ramsey's voice, a deep pool of sound, could not be ignored as he took on the Angelotti persona brilliantly. Bass Ben Lowe (Sacristan/Jailer), tenor Matthew Peterson (police agent Spoletta), and Kyra Maal-King (Shepherdess) aided the action with strong vocal and acting finesse.

Stage Director Layna Chianakas, familiar to OSB audiences for directing smaller pieces for the company between 2019 to 2022, grabbed the reins of this, her first full length opera for the company, and made sure the action stayed at a level of electrifying tension and terse choreography throughout. Yuki Izumihara, in charge of Projection and Set Design, crafted a collage of video imagery by Filmmaker Zach Mendez that discreetly married visuals to the action taking place on her efficient set.

Helena Kuukka, Lighting Design and Director of Production, gave dimension, color, and meaning to each scene in Puccini's sprawling masterpiece. Heather Sterling (Hair/Makeup Design) and Stacie Logue (Costume Manager) authenticated the look of *Tosca* with spot-on

stylings circa 1800. The OSB Chorus under the masterful coaching of Principal Pianist and Music Administrator Timothy Accurso, packed a powerful vocal wallop, and the Ojai Pixies chorus (altar boys and girls) under the direction of Julija Zonic, fulfilled their tasks musical and theatrical, admirably. Special kudos to the Opera Santa Barbara Orchestra under the alert conducting panache of Artistic and General Director Protopapas - a splendid, deliciously overwhelming immersion in Puccini's magnificent music.

Daniel Kepl has been writing music, theatre, and dance reviews or Santa Barbara publications since he was a teenager. His professional expertise is as an orchestra conductor.

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Tenor **Adam Diegel** as Mario Cavaradossi

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