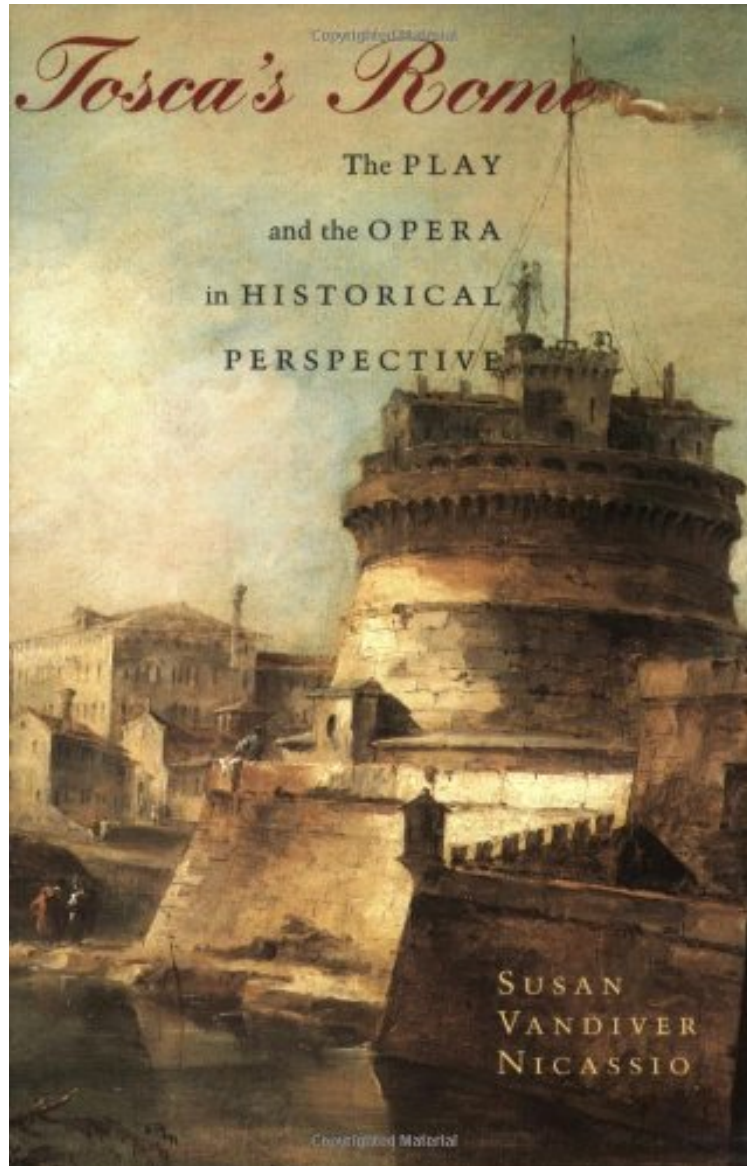


[Free pdf] Tosca's Rome: The Play and the Opera in Historical Perspective

Tosca's Rome: The Play and the Opera in Historical Perspective

Susan Vandiver Nicassio

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A timeless tale of love, lust, and politics, *Tosca* is one of the most popular operas ever written. In *Tosca's Rome*, Susan Vandiver Nicassio explores the surprising historical realities that lie behind Giacomo Puccini's opera and the play by Victorien Sardou on which it is based. By far the most "historical" opera in the active repertoire, *Tosca* is set in a very specific time and place: Rome, from June 17 to 18, 1800. But as Nicassio demonstrates, history in *Tosca* is distorted by nationalism and by the vehement anticlerical perceptions of papal Rome shared by Sardou, Puccini, and the librettists. To provide the historical background necessary for understanding *Tosca*, Nicassio takes a detailed look at Rome in 1800 as each of *Tosca's* main characters would have seen it: the painter Cavaradossi, the singer *Tosca*, and the policeman Scarpia. Finally, she provides a scene-by-scene musical and dramatic analysis of the opera. "[Nicassio] must be the only living historian who can boast that she once sang the role of *Tosca*. Her deep knowledge of Puccini's score is only to be expected, but her understanding of daily and political life in Rome at the close of the 18th century is an unanticipated pleasure. She has steeped herself in the period and its prevailing culture-literary, artistic, and musical--and has come up with an unusual, and unusually entertaining, history." Paul Bailey, *Daily Telegraph* "In *Tosca's Rome*, Susan Vandiver Nicassio . . . orchestrates a wealth of detail without losing view of the opera and its pleasures. . . . Nicassio aims for opera fans and for historians: she may well enthrall both." *Publishers Weekly* "This is the book that ranks highest in my estimation as the most in-depth, and yet highly entertaining, journey into the story of the making of *Tosca*." Catherine Malfitano "Nicassio's prose . . . is lively and approachable. There is plenty here to intrigue everyone--seasoned opera lovers, musical novices, history buffs, and Italophiles." *Library Journal*

.com A cheap, meretricious shocker or a probing and profoundly moving essay in human psychology? Debate about the merits of *Tosca* continues, but thanks to this fascinating book, we now have a new angle from which to consider one of the most popular operas in the repertory. Indeed, as Susan Vandiver Nicassio explores in *Tosca's Rome*--a triumph of interdisciplinary studies--the stakes go far beyond the conventions of 19th-century melodrama to tap into the central political myth of modernity: the myth of progressive revolutionaries ("good guys") versus repressive reactionaries ("bad guys"). A former opera singer and avowed *Tosca* enthusiast, historian Nicassio pulls out all the tools of her trade as well as those of several others--including archival research, art history, musical analysis, and textual close reading--to place this "portmanteau of cultural icons" within the original historical context of the tale it tells. Nicassio in fact examines various contextual tangents here: the familiar opera of Puccini; Victorien Sardou's "well-made" play--a hit vehicle for Sarah Bernhardt--that was the opera's basis (and the telling differences between the two); and the actual, specific setting of Rome in which the tragedy takes place in June 1800 following the fall of the Roman republic. Rather than make pedantic points about historical inaccuracies, Nicassio untangles the far more revelatory layers of creative misprision that both Sardou and Puccini (together with his two librettists Giacosa and Illica) committed in choosing to anchor *Tosca* so firmly in the milieu of the French revolutionary/Napoleonic era, in which corrupt state power and the Church are perceived as dual aspects of a superstitious ancien regime. The result is to plug into a powerfully resonant myth of cultural patterns that also managed to ignite Puccini's self-avowed "Neronic instinct." (Verdi, the author notes, had likewise declared a desire to operatize Sardou's play, had he not already entered into retirement.) Ultimately, for Nicassio, *Tosca* is a "20th-century story, and part of its power lies in its preview of totalitarianism." It's a pattern, incidentally, that Nicassio believes is itself beginning to face a paradigm shift in our own time--though that is an issue beyond the scope of her book. In developing her portrayal of the historical context of Rome as each of the chief characters might actually have experienced it, Nicassio pulls off a magnificent coup of cultural analysis. She offers information about artistic and musical life with legal history, theology, and shifting attitudes toward the use of torture--all woven together into a marvelous polyphony. Her lively, jargon-free style and common-sense approach ensure that these exegeses are anything but dry, while numerous first-hand sources as well as intriguing visual documents add further layers to our picture of a complex, labyrinthine Rome. She's particularly interesting on the differences between Sardou's standard-issue anticlericalism and Puccini's rather more contradictory attitudes toward religiosity. A good half of the book is taken up with close readings and elaborations of each scene in the opera, with wide-angle ruminations on its overall structure. Nicassio proves herself a very astute music critic as well as historian, commenting, for example, on the contrast between the music given to the two lovers and Scarpia's sound world: "One could even say that the musical conflict of the opera is between declamation and lyricism." She considers the meaning of Puccini's shift from the overtly (and stereotypically) political angle of Sardou to a more "existential" approach. On the controversial choice to end the opera with the melody from Cavaradossi's "E lucevan le stelle," Nicassio offers a particularly intriguing interpretation, positing that *Tosca* is, ultimately, a work about "the illusory nature of happiness" in which the "great world of politics and institutions is indifferent to that happiness." The intersection that Nicassio suggests between historical specificity and universal artistic resonance is more food for thought in a book that provides a veritable feast. --Thomas May From *Library Journal* Nicassio's critical look at

Puccini's *Tosca* (one of the most popular and "historical" operas ever written) arrives just in time for its January 2000 centennial. An academic historian who has actually performed the role of Tosca, Nicassio is perfectly suited to deal with the opera's political and musical complexities. She divides her study into three large sections. In the first, she reviews Roman life in the late 18th and 19th centuries, paying considerable attention to how Puccini's own prejudices shaped his story and how Sardou (the French playwright) reinterpreted the historical realities that the opera treats. In the second section, she looks at how Rome circa 1800 was viewed through the eyes of a painter, a singer, and a policeman (the occupations of the opera's three main characters). This section, and the nextAa scene-by-scene analysis of the operaAare continually revelatory and illuminating. A valuable appendix very clearly shows the parallels (and discrepancies) between the play and the opera. Nicassio's prose, though intensely scholarly, is lively and approachable. There is plenty here to intrigue everyoneAseasoned opera lovers, musical novices, history buffs, and Italophiles. Highly recommended for all collections.ALarry A. Lipkis, Moravian Coll., Bethlehem, PA Copyright 1999 Reed Business Information, Inc.From the Inside FlapIn *Tosca's Rome*, Susan Vandiver Nicassio explores the surprising historical realities that lie behind Giacomo Puccini's immortal opera, *Tosca*-a timeless tale of love, lust, and politics. For this paperback edition, Nicassio has added an appendix analyzing recently discovered working papers for the libretto.