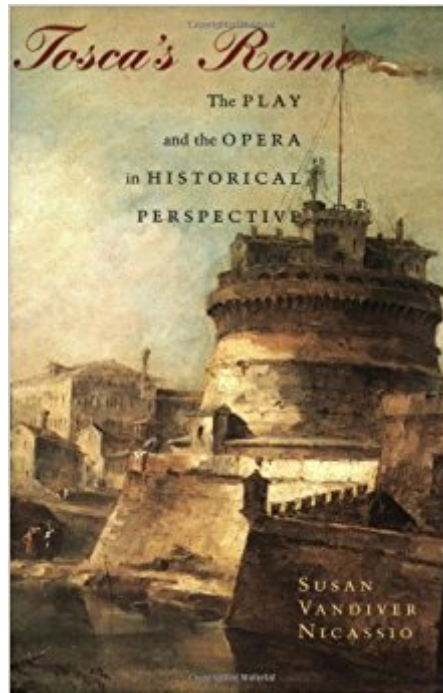




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# Tosca's Rome: The Play And The Opera In Historical Perspective



## Synopsis

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

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

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 régime. 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 --This text refers to the Hardcover edition.

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.A

Larry A. Lipkis, Moravian Coll., Bethlehem, PA Copyright 1999 Reed Business Information, Inc. --This text refers to the Hardcover edition.

Great Read! Vandiver-Nicassio does an excellent job telling the history of the play and opera. A little help for those not up to speed on operas would have helped.

This is not a dry, academic , history. This boiok works on many different levels, history music etc.

Thoroughly researched, but entertaining background comparing historical events, the Sardou play written for Bernhardt, and the opera. A must-have for Puccini fans.

Actually, this scholarly but lively book is about much more than Tosca. Theauthor goes into great detail about Roman life at the time of the opera'saction--the religious structures, law enforcement, art, music, and so on.Only then comes a detailed study of the opera, with plenty of references toSardou's play, especially where plot action was compressed, so one learnssomething on a rare subject, the adaptation of plays into music dramas--which,after all, was the business model for nineteenth-century and earlytwentieth-century opera. Even the most knowledgeable Tosca fan will learn agreat deal about this fascinating piece, and the book climaxes verysatisfactorily with a long sequence considering exactly why the work endswith the "wrong" music. A great read.

This book is a sumptuous confection for either the opera-lover or the historian, since it can be read from either viewpoint. Susan Vandiver Nicassio has wrirren a rarity, a backgrounder on one of the world's famous operas that does not simply bog down in retelling the story as so many do.After a Preface that should on no account be overlooked, Nicassio divides the book into two halves, a social history and a musical analysis. Tosca is rare among operas in being set in a specific historic time and place: Rome during the few months between the fall of the ramshackle Roman Republic of 1798-99 and the return of Pope Pius VII, a brief interval during which Rome was occupied and ruled by the Bourbon royal family of Naples. Sketching the situation in Rome at the time and the damage inflicted on the city by the Republicans and their French tutors, she goes on to examine the contemporary scene in chapters giving the viewpoint of its three main characters: an artist, a musician, and a policeman. The result is in many ways more enlightening than a mere straight history. The second part of the book is a more orthodox musical analysis of the opera by themes, motives and motivations, but even here her dramatic analysis persistently strays back to material laid down in the first half.One of Nicassio's intriguing ideas is that Puccini in fact turned the historical situation on its head to serve his own political and philosophical agenda, something of which many opera composers have been guilty. The papal government that Puccini blames for the deaths of his hero and heroine was actually, she notes, an amiably inefficient structure that had doddered along for decades, rarely killing anybody for anything -- in fact, in less than two years the

French-sponsored Republic carried out more executions than the Papacy had in the entire previous century. Americans tend to associate Scarpia in their minds with the dreaded Inquisition, but in fact the Roman Inquisition had never been nearly as cruel as that of Spain, and in any case by 1798 was a ghostly shell of itself. But Puccini (and the French author Sardou, who wrote the overheated and long-winded play on which Puccini based his opera) were writing a century later, at a time when the Popes were "prisoners of the Vatican," secluding themselves in that structure and refusing to recognize the existence of the Kingdom of Italy. Both the playwright and the composer were fiercely anti-religious and (although Puccini had to keep it discreet) republican, so they depicted their protagonists as caught in the toils of a fiendish papal government that never existed, rather than admit that the true persecutors and executioners of the time had been the Roman Republic that they both worshipped. The result is an immortal opera, but one that is founded on myths and ideology rather than historical fact.

Fans of Puccini's opera *Tosca*, myself included, will adore this in-depth, historically accurate study on Rome at the time of the opera's setting- Napoleonic War time Italy in the early 1800's. The author Susan Vandiver Nicassio is herself a retired soprano who sang the part of *Tosca* and knows not only the music but the historical background. This book is crammed with detailed information about Rome of this period. The sites mentioned in *Tosca* - the Church of San Andrea De La Valle, Palazzo Farnese and Castel San Angelo, are still standing in Rome today. This book takes us on a historic journey and delves into the political and cultural time set of the era. Victorien Sardou was a late 19th century playwright who upon seeing Sarah Bernhardt performing in Paris theatres wrote *La Tosca* as a vehicle for her. The play is long and complex, a perfect 19th century example of what we now call a "well-made" play. It is virtually an epic. *Tosca* was a country girl, a shepherdess who was put into a convent for her wild ways and when the Pope heard her sing he cried and decided she should be an opera singer. She comes to Rome and makes it big, renowned for her voice as well as her beauty. *Tosca*'s theatrical world is described in historical terms and in vivid precision. In Napoleon days, opera was still the biggest form of cultural artistic expression. In Italy, Spontini was writing such hits as *La Vestale*. Rossini was beginning to write his first major hits. Beethoven wrote his only opera *Fidelio* and in Germany, Webber was writing German fantasy operas. *Tosca*'s world was one of service to high art but she would have suffered the stigma of being lusted after by several powerful and licentious men or become the mistress of a VIP and regarded as loose. In *Tosca*'s case, she maintains a purity despite her rich lifestyle. She attends Church and "brings flowers and prayers to the Madonna". Mario Cavaradossi, in the play, is a pupil of Jacques Louis

David and is not only an artist but a revolutionary. He believed, like many artistic idealists and intellectuals did- Beethoven included- that Napoleon's rise to power signaled a new reign of Enlightenment and social progress. This was before Napoleon crowned himself Emperor and proved to be a tyrant and the European intelligentsia's vision of a Utopia was shattered. Not only do we see the life of a singer and an artist, but the life of the likes of Baron Vitellio Scarpia, the dread Chief of Police, a man for whom "all Rome trembled." Scarpia exemplifies the devoted Royalist, a ruthless and corrupt member of the empowered class that men like Cavaradossi despised. Very well made book involving the real life of characters from the opera.

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