

Before God
By Rory Runnells

I lived for art, I lived for love. Perhaps there is a T-shirt somewhere proclaiming what seems a nice sentiment, but what would it really mean? When Tosca sings these words in her great second act aria, she knows what it means. It means a dedication most can only imagine; an intensity which makes each moment sacred; it means a spiritual awareness which the artist must carry, not only on the stage, but also in the theatre of real life.

The opera *Tosca*, like its title character, is all about performance. All the characters put on an act, to state it crudely, at one time or another. The paradox is that their 'act' is often the brutal reality of the moment when the hidden drama of each character explodes onto the stage of life. In the first act, the painter, Cavaradossi, has a beautiful duet with Tosca, but though his love is real, his thoughts are of getting her out of the way so he can help a prisoner escape from the supremely evil police chief, Scarpia. That villain is always acting, and can't see the difference between Tosca's genuine horror at Cavaradossi's torture, and her acting on stage. The last act has the greatest theatrical illusion of all when Cavaradossi's 'performance' in front of a supposedly fake firing squad becomes the final reality, which is death, and the stage becomes a tomb.

Yet for Tosca, the tomb also brings the central moment of clarity. For her, art and the love that must go with it are not just watched by the audience of the theatre, or those in the world which Shakespeare noted was a stage. She is before God. Her religious belief is as sincere as it is somewhat theatrical, but its sincerity is what matters. What Scarpia offends in Tosca isn't just her physical body, which is bad enough, but much more. It is her deepest core where art represents the soul, which means for her, quite simply, God's will.

Tosca at first seems distracted and distant, continuing the cliché of the grand prima donna to the public. She is jealous and a bit vain, even in her dedication to the Madonna she prays to after her entrance in the first act. Deep down, however, is the artist's singular devotion to life itself, which Tosca has in spades.

Her final cry before leaping to her death, one might almost say, her liberation, is "Oh, Scarpia, before God." She is ready to stake all on the only audience member she cared about. God is a tough audience, and Tosca is ready to be judged.