

Tosca “con moltissimo brio”

Italian conductor Paolo Carignani delivers the energetic rendition of the Puccini classic

By Lydia Perovic

Paolo Carignani is a Milano-born, internationally-renowned conductor who is in Toronto this month, conducting Puccini's *Tosca* at the Canadian Opera Company. Following a long music directorship at the Frankfurt Opera, Carignani's freelance schedule is booked with engagements around the world reaching well into 2015. This is his first time conducting in Toronto. *Tosca* at the COC runs through February 25.

An opera novice who attended *Tosca* last week said that she found herself watching a Hollywood film.

Yes, there are all these vast orchestral colours, and there's also the libretto that is practically a thriller. If you're watching *Tosca* for the very first time, you don't know what's coming to you. For a lot of operas, you know how it's going to end after the first 100 beats. But Puccini is surprising you at every turn, both through the music and the libretto.

There are many critics who've described Puccini as a composer for the pleasure of the *borghesia Italiana*, and *Tosca* as ostentatious and vulgar.

But our life is vulgar as well. If you try to put your life on the stage, of course there will be parts with vulgarity, there will be blood and there will be shit. That is life. Puccini isn't entirely a *verista* composer, but he's one of the first who's starting to reproduce on the stage what is happening in our everyday lives. As for the music... OK, we can say that Puccini's is soundtrack music, but opera is always soundtrack music. For example in *bel canto*, you have the singer who's singing wonderfully and the orchestra is only playing a few notes to accompany the singer.

It is important for the “soundtrack music” to help us understand the goings-on on stage better. In *Tosca*, this means a no-holds-barred score. But there are moments of withholding even in *Tosca*. For example, the beginning of the Third Act, when the shepherd is singing off stage, and we hear the sounds of the old bells of Rome. What he did there with sound colours is similar to impressionism in painting.

Was Puccini entirely bourgeois? Not if you realize that *Tosca* takes on the Catholic church. There are still countless churches in Rome and priests and the priestly views of morality are still very present. Italy is still under the government of the Pope. We think of Italy as of a Republic, but that's not entirely true because people's mentality is still marked by Catholicism. Neither can you be elected the President of Italy if the Vatican doesn't want you. Still to this day. Then imagine how it must have been in Puccini's time. Yet in *Tosca*, we have



Conductor Paolo Carignani (photo by Barbara Aumüller)

the villain who is also the churchiest character in the story.

Arguments have also been made that his music is manipulative and always tells the listeners what exactly they should feel. The return of the chords of “E lucevan le stelle” at the end, for example, which makes no dramatic sense (the tenor dead many bars ago, Tosca calling on Scarpia before dying) but are sure to stay with the audience after they leave the theatre.

Ah, but the first time that we hear “E lucevan le stelle”, the melody comes as romantic and light, with the solo clarinet playing softly. But when *Tosca* jumps from the Castel Sant'Angelo, it acquires a different character: the whole orchestra is playing in unison, and the melody returns like an unforeseen destiny. The music's saying, Yes you can dream of something in a soft clarinet, but what the realization of that dream will be may surprise you. “Lu-

cevan” comes at the end in fast orchestral unison as the life against the dream.

Puccini also apparently had dicey relations with his librettists. He'd compose the music and then go to the Giacomini and say, This is the music, now supply the words with this many syllables. Is text an afterthought in Puccini?

All right, but what operatic libretto exactly bursts with beautiful writing? The only libretto that I really like on its own is the libretto of Alban Berg's *Lulu*, written by Wedekind. If you read Wagner's librettos, they're as awful as the music is fantastic. History of opera teaches us that a good libretto is a functional libretto.

If we look at the main characters of *Tosca*, the two romantic leads have lyrical arias, duos and set pieces, whereas Scarpia gets more chromaticism, no hummable melodies, and his recitatives and arias are closely merged. Is this an accurate impression?

Absolutely. Scarpia has no melody and no beautiful orchestral moments. He's been probably fighting his whole life to find his own melody, and is now trying to achieve some beauty with money and power. He's one of those people who have climbed to the top, have all the worldly possessions and power, but alas, no melody.

Can you tell us more about your tenure at the Frankfurt opera, where you've been the Music Director until fairly recently?

Yes, I left in 2008 after ten years. It's a very different job than it would be here, because the Frankfurt Opera house is the repertoire company. Here, as in Italy, you have the *stagione* system: you play one piece for a month, then another piece, and so on. Here, you have a lot of time. In Germany, for a new production it takes two months, but for a revival, you get one week. You play every night a different opera; I believe there are about 260 performances every season, plus the concerts. With such a huge repertoire you will have the Singers Ensemble at the opera house. It was great for somebody like me who comes from the *stagione* system to work in this kind of environment. I had a possibility to conduct not only the Italian opera, as Italian conductors tend to do, but also Wagner, Strauss, modern music, etc. When after Alban Berg you conduct Puccini, you get better at both.

What would you recommend to a young person reading this who might want to become a conductor? What will her or his path be like?

Germany is probably the best place for a young conductor to develop. In Italy that's not possible any more. In the time of Toscanini the conductors started to conduct at 50, before you've been a pianist

and an assistant for many years. Now if you're not conducting at 18, you're too late. You'll get reviews from the critics saying, ‘He is good but routine, too much set in his ways’. We wouldn't have had conductors like Tullio Serafin, Antonino Votto, Victor de Sabata if we didn't let them start conducting later in life. But no – today, if you're not conducting the Berlin Philharmonic at 18, forget it. It's all marketing; such is this business. People identify ‘young’ with ‘new ideas’, whereas often you'll have very old ideas coming from the young.

But back to your question. An aspiring conductor should first of all develop their musical knowledge. You must play an instrument, or ideally several instruments, in order to understand the ins and outs of interpretation. How will you understand the orchestral Beethoven if you haven't experienced Beethoven as an instrumentalist? How will you understand what is a technical challenge if you've never tried to solve a similar problem as an instrumentalist?

Then, study composition. With knowledge of composition, you'll understand the score better, you'll understand why the composer used the clarinets at his particular place, why this structure, why these harmonies, etc.

And after that – connections and networking. You can go to a competition and win, but that won't be enough. And in any case, you are accepted to take part in competitions only if you already conducted before. But if I'm already conducting, I won't need a competition. This was my problem when I was starting out. Many years ago in Italy, in the mid-80s, I tried to register for a competition and it was near impossible. People told me, but you haven't conducted before and you don't have enough concert experience, so we can't accept you as a candidate. So I went to a friend who had a print shop and we printed a lot of copies of the program of an invented performance in an invented town that I had “conducted”. I sent that to the jury, was finally accepted as a participant and then won the competition.

But what happens after that. You get the award money, always good, fine. Two concerts with the orchestra, great, I do that too. Then I try to make myself known to people in other opera houses and apply for jobs. I even made a video recording of my conducting and sent it with my applications. Nothing. And not only do I not get engaged, but people who have not won competitions, who haven't studied composition, etc. do get engaged, thanks to the good connections.

So I say: public relations are very important. Build the connections, meet the influencers, and go step by step. It can be done. ♦

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The organization includes several programs, coaching sessions, and activities honouring Canadian operatic icons and showcasing young performers.

Tandem had the chance to ask Ann Summers Dossena a few questions about her career and commitment to the arts.

You've been an advocate for the arts for decades. Why are the arts important and why is it vital to keep the arts present in today's society?

Understanding and respecting each other's cultures is the best way to sustaining peace. Arts are the expression of culture for everyone. In our international arts conferences, some countries have stated that the arts have saved their society after major conflicts. The creators will always create and they need interpreters to bring their creations to the public. Without artists to bring these creations, whether its dance, theatre, music or visual arts into our lives, I don't think we could have peaceful coexistence.

On top of managing Ann Summers International you have also maintained a successful career as a presenter and producer for concerts, tours and events. How do you manage to do all this and keep a balance?

These activities are all related. I produced a lot of concerts in New York in all the concert venues, saw audience reactions, became a presenter in order to encourage other presenters to employ my artists, and worked with colleagues in various geographical locations. I was visiting Italian artists that I was touring in the US (including Severino Gazzelloni) when I realized young people were gathered on the Spanish steps in the summer with money to spend and nowhere to go. I brought to Rome a series I produced in New York called Concert Party in the garden of the Accademia Filarmonica Romana in 1968. I subsequently met my late husband, Armando Dossena who was a regista with Raiuno Telegiornale, married and left

New York for Rome.

You produced and presented the first concerts at Carnegie Hall and Lincoln Center. How does it feel to be the first to accomplish that and would you say you're a trailblazer for what came afterwards at these prestigious venues?

Until it was saved with the help of Isaac Stern, Carnegie was a rental venue. Because we all thought it was gone, it wasn't booked and the calendar pages were empty. Performances had to be arranged quickly and Mr. Stern asked me to create a series. We created four series, one of which, the visiting orchestra series, still exists. When the theatre and concert hall were built at Lincoln Centre I was asked to produce their first events. I entertained visiting presenters during their yearly conference in New York by giving receptions in each venue as it was completed. When the Metropolitan Opera was ready, they honoured me by giving me the first reception there. ♦

Theatre Listings

Swan Lake: State Ballet Theatre of Russia

Enjoy this beautiful classic ballet. First performed as a full-length ballet in St. Petersburg, Russia, the powerful solos and beautifully designed costumes and sets will once again come alive with this production of *Swan Lake*. The combination of dance and music will tell the story of love and a princess turned into a swan. The State Ballet Theatre of Russia has toured with productions of traditional Russian classics throughout Europe, India and Africa and has been touring in North America since 2006 and is dedicated to maintaining the tradition of superior Russian classical dance. Don't miss your chance to see this inspiring production. February 9, 7:30 p.m. at Hammerson Hall, Living Arts Centre, Mississauga.

I Love You Because

A twist on Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice*, *I Love You Because* is a hilarious take on this classic story. The new musical features newcomers, Joshua Salzman (music) and Ryan Cunningham (book and lyrics). It tells the story of a young, uptight greeting card writer and how his life changes when he meets a flighty photographer. Despite their differences, they learn to love each other and their faults. Mix in eccentric friends and siblings and you have a highly entertaining show! Runs from March 28 to April 15, 2012 at Angelwalk Theatre, Toronto.

Penny Plain

A marionette play written and performed by Ronnie Burkett, *Penny Plain* is a dark comedy about a blind woman waiting for the world to end. However, she is constantly interrupted as she hears survivalists, a serial killer, cross-dressing banker, talking dogs and more. This season marks the 25th anniversary of Burkett's award-winning Theatre of Marionettes. On now until February 26, 2012 at the Factory Theatre, Toronto.

Japan Benefit Concert

In honour of the victims of the March 11 earthquake in Japan, a benefit concert will take place on Thursday June 16. *Rising Like the Sun* will be a smorgasbord of sights and sounds. Preceding the musical performances of well-loved classical music, we will be presenting a short documentary showing communities rebuilding in Japan. We will also be hearing from two Japanese guests, Kazuko Moghul & Kouko Kikuchi, who have agreed to speak about how March 11 has affected them. Doors open at 6:20p.m.; show begins promptly at 7 p.m. at Christ Church Deer Park, 1570 Yonge St. Go to makiko.ishilhara@gmail.com.