

2025|26 SEASON
PUCCINI'S

Tosca

Keynotes

Machinations and Misinformation

ALEX CHEN

Impressions of Tosca

ROBERT HOLLISTON

Q2 Impact Report

Upcoming Events



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TOSCA SET IN PROGRESS AT PACIFIC OPERA VICTORIA'S OPERA SHOP

Machinations and Misinformation

Misinformation and disinformation are rampant occurrences in our contemporary moment. Whether from social media, questionable purveyors of 'news' or a poorly-vetted AI chatbot output, we are constantly discerning what constitutes truth and fabrication.

While taking place over two hundred years ago, Puccini's *Tosca* is a drama that invites us to interrogate the consequences of mis- and disinformation. As personal and political intrigues unfold onstage, we are asked: At what moment do lies supplant our truths? How long does it take for us to reconnect with the truth? And what consequences do we reckon with in the intervening time?

The most moving answers to these questions can be found in the opera's romantic arc of Floria Tosca and Mario Cavaradossi. From the opera's outset, we are presented with an obvious truth: that Cavaradossi is deeply in love with Tosca.

Yet, misinformation supplied by Tosca's unfounded jealousy and further disinformation from the manipulative chief of police, Baron Scarpia, replaces the truth with a false image of Cavaradossi's unfaithfulness. In the brief time it takes for Tosca's understanding of the truth to be restored, we are left with sufficient carnage and consequence to populate the remainder of the opera. How do our shifting understandings of our personal relationships arm and disarm us against our fellow humans?

A subtler case study in the lag of truth comes from battlefield reporting regarding the Battle of Marengo, a historical

conflict between the ruling royalists and Napoleon's liberating republican forces (concurrent with the timeline of *Tosca*). In Act I, we are led to believe that Napoleon Bonaparte (to whom Cavaradossi is sympathetic) has been killed, inevitably leaving Rome in a continued state of oppression under the current political regime. In Act II, we're informed that, actually, Napoleon is alive and the royalists have just been served a crushing blow, foreshadowing the downfall of the current regime. Aside from a very ill-timed reveal of Napoleon's victory (if you know, you know), how else did the timeline of political misinformation shape the actions of Cavaradossi to disastrous effect? How does our perception of our current political environment drive us to action or inaction?



THE SET OF *TOSCA* IN PROGRESS

As exemplified by the despicable character of Scarpia, machinations of willful disinformation are simple tasks when power and authority are combined with corruption. After he deceives Tosca with lies about

Cavaradossi's infidelity, he takes pleasure in repeating, "Già il veleno l'ha rosa!" meaning "Already the poison has consumed her!" Tosca reminds us to be choosy in which 'truths' to drink and to remember what reliable foundations we can turn to when we need an antidote.

Personal or political, *Tosca* cautions us to interrogate the information presented to us before we act. Especially in contemporary society where our political environment is rife with larger than life drama, it pays to distinguish fact from fabrication.

ALEX CHEN

Impressions of *Tosca*

One evening in the spring of 1889, Giacomo Puccini attended a performance of Victorien Sardou's play *La Tosca*, a sensational success for the celebrated French actress Sarah Bernhardt which had already been touring Europe for two years. Despite the composer's lack of fluency in French - and the play's wordiness and excessive length - Puccini understood instinctively that this highly dramatic subject would translate effectively into the operatic medium. The process of translation turned into a lengthy one: the rights were finally acquired in 1895, with the entire following year devoted to reducing the text and shaping the somewhat unwieldy play into a concise, efficient libretto. In his determination that every word and note have a direct bearing

on the action of the drama, Puccini worked closely and ruthlessly with his librettists Giuseppe Giacosa and Luigi Illica. By the end of 1896 the text was complete, but the composer's professional obligations required him to spend most of the next year overseeing productions of *La bohème*. Thus, the opening page of the manuscript score for *Tosca* is dated 1898, with the première finally taking place on January 14, 1900 (Puccini was never a fast worker).

Tosca is technically a melodrama: that is, a dramatic work in which the plot takes precedence over detailed characterization. The three principals - Baron Scarpia (chief of police), Tosca (celebrated singer) and Cavaradossi (painter) - are stock types, representing respectively cruelty and lust, love and jealousy, youth and idealism. Yet while these characters may not arouse our sympathy as immediately as Rodolfo and Mimi do, their story is conveyed "with all the skill of a master-craftsman of the musical theatre [Spike Hughes]," and the score abounds in lyrical and dramatic passages, ingenious orchestration, and memorable melodies.

Despite an unsettling interruption during the opera's opening night at the Teatro Costanzi in Rome, *Tosca* became a public favourite immediately and has remained so ever since. Puccini's immense popularity with the public frequently led to his work being dismissed by highbrow critics, but contemporaries as diverse as Richard Strauss, Schoenberg, Ravel, and Stravinsky expressed sincere admiration for him.

Structurally Puccini's operas tend to be through-composed, avoiding the succession of arias alternating with recitatives that characterize earlier bel canto opera. In the manner of Verdi's late operas, the action in *Tosca* proceeds continuously, although there are two or three solo numbers that function very well as arias. *Tosca's* "Vissi d'arte" and Cavaradossi's "E lucevan le stelle" are the two most celebrated arias in the opera, and both allow the audience to experience a sympathetic connection with these characters at significant dramatic turning points in the plot.

In the manner of Wagner, though filtered very much through an innately Italian sensibility, Puccini creates a series of motives - fragments of melody that represent characters (even minor ones such as Angelotti and the Sacristan). One of the most arresting motives in the entire repertoire is that of the evil Baron Scarpia, which opens the opera even though Scarpia is the last of the principals to enter the stage. Several writers have suggested another possible Wagnerian influence in Puccini's orchestration - the large number of players required, the extraordinary attention to detail, and the role the orchestra plays in telling the story. Indeed, the towering presence of Wagner would have been impossible for any composer of the time to ignore. But again, it is Puccini's fundamentally Italianate musical personality that is heard in every bar, every motive, every orchestral colour.



DELICINA STEVENSON AS TOSCA AND PAUL FREY AS CAVARADOSSI IN PACIFIC OPERA'S VERY FIRST PRODUCTION OF *TOSCA*, 1983 PHOTOGRAPHER UNKNOWN

Although Puccini was passionate about concise, linear story-telling, he knew when to suspend the plot to create and sustain atmosphere. To quote Spike Hughes again: "The opening to the last act of *Tosca* is one of Puccini's most imaginative conceptions: with characteristic economy of means he gives us the sound of Rome as the dawn approaches: the shepherd boy singing in the distance (for whom Puccini had obtained an appropriate folk melody), the tinkle of sheep bells, and the growing symphony of church bells." With characteristic attention to detail, Puccini consulted an expert in church bells to identify which ones were rung for early services and to determine the exact pitch of the largest bell at St. Peter's Church; he also consulted a priest in Rome to obtain the correct version of the plainchant melody for the celebrated Te Deum in Act One.

Tosca is essentially a political thriller, originally set in Rome (hence the decision to première the work in that city) in 1800, during the Napoleonic wars, a period of tremendous instability when even the Pope was stripped of his power and held captive. As you take your seat in the Royal Theatre to enjoy our production, you may remind yourself that the entire action takes place in just under 24 hours!

ROBERT HOLLISTON

Living Opera

CULTIVATING CREATIVITY, ONE CLASSROOM AT A TIME

This fall, Teaching Artists Nadia Lurie and Geoff Malcom brought the magic of opera to more than **815 elementary students** across Greater Victoria, **visiting 20 schools** with **26 presentations** through our Living Opera program.

This session's theme, *"What it takes to write an operatic story and become librettists,"* invited students to step into the creative process of opera-making. A lively Q&A introduced the many artists who bring an opera to life: from composers and designers to directors, singers, and, of course, the librettists who craft the story. Nadia introduced the students to a Mozart melody, and presented a playful set of story prompts from our Opera



Geoff Malcolm and Nadia Lurie during *Living Opera* at The Baumann Centre, 2025. Photo by Arcade Pallot

Sprouts Initiative. The students eagerly voted on their favorite combinations, and then let their imaginations take over, transforming their choices into original lyrics that fit Mozart's timeless music. Every classroom created a completely unique story, bursting with creativity and personality. The workshops ended on a high note, with students proudly performing their completed verses, singing alongside Nadia and experiencing firsthand the joy of bringing their own opera to life.

For many children, *Living Opera* is their first encounter with the artform, and often this early exposure sparks a lifelong passion. **Teaching Artist Nadia Lurie, who once experienced the program herself as a child, reflects on its lasting impact:**

*"As a fifth grader at Doncaster Elementary, I remember Pacific Opera Chorus members coming to my class and giving us a presentation on *Le nozze di Figaro*. This was my first opera experience, and even at age 10 I was so taken by Mozart's beautiful music and the joy of the performers I knew that I wanted to be up on that stage one day. Fast forward 12 years and this experience has come full circle! I am now a part of the Pacific Opera chorus and leading my own school tours to inspire young artists. I am pleased to tell you that the future of opera is in good hands."*

-Nadia Lurie, Teaching Artist

Thank you for supporting opera in our community!

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Chorus Development Program

FROM LOCAL VOICES TO LEADING ROLES



Isaiah Bell (far right) during the masterclass at the Baumann Centre, 2025, photo by Kimberley-Ann Bartczak.

Through our *Chorus Resilience Initiative*, we nurture local and emerging talent by creating meaningful training and performance opportunities. Masterclasses with star performers are one such opportunity, giving artists a chance to refine technique, deepen performance skills, and gain stage experience with a working professional.

This fall, **Isaiah Bell** returned as guest mentor for the masterclass while making his debut in his first principal role on our stage as Peter Quint in *The Turn of the Screw*. The excitement to work with Isaiah, a former Pacific Opera Chorus member, was so great that we expanded the session from three singers to six, and extended its duration.

"I love how our chorus supports and learns from each other. Seeing local artists thrive and having chances for mentorship like this is so motivating and meaningful." -Chorus Member

ƘĂMƦILA TOTEM

LET US WRITE A NEW SONG TOGETHER



ƘĂmƦila in front of The Baumann Centre, 2025. Photo by Carey Newman | Nilus.

This fall, we proudly unveiled *ƘĂmƦila* (To Write a New Song), a public artwork by Kwakwaka'wakw and Coast Salish artist Carey Newman | Nilus, now standing tall in front of the Baumann Centre. Carved from 14 pieces of second-growth red cedar, the totem is more than a decade in the making and reflects both rich cultural traditions and urgent environmental realities. Conceived as "Totem 2.0," the project blends centuries-old carving practices with innovative mechanical assembly techniques developed in collaboration with *Camosun Innovates*, creating a form that honours the past while responding to a changing world.

At its core, ƘĂmƦila speaks to the fragility of our ecosystems and the need for cultural resilience. Standing as both a public landmark and an invitation, ƘĂmƦila asks all who encounter it to pause, reflect, and consider what songs we will write for future generations.

In bringing ƘĂmƦila to life, we are living our mission to create distinctive and inclusive experiences that inspire and engage. The totem fosters reflection, celebrates cultural heritage, and encourages communities to imagine new possibilities. It also embodies our values of innovation, collaboration, and inclusivity, while reflecting our new commitment to sustainability and crafting a greener future.

Opera Postcards

BRINGING MUSIC TO THE COMMUNITY

This holiday season, Opera Postcards brought live music directly into the community, sharing joy and connection where it was needed most. Featuring Pacific Opera Victoria chorus members Alex Chen, Michaela Dickey, Nadia Lurie, and Hannah Nickel, the program delivered free 15-minute concerts at BC Cancer, Victoria Hospice, and community organizations across Greater Victoria, reaching 325 attendees.

Audience members shared, *"I loved this because I often can't make it out to the opera,"* and *"It was so special hearing the voices up so close."*

Programming also included Extended Postcards, 45-minute concerts featuring music by Donizetti, Amy Beach, and Canadian composer John Estacio, plus a Dakota-language performance of Samuel Barber's *Sure on the Shining Night* from our Found in Translation project, with Kimberley-Ann Bartczak on piano.



Hannah Nickel, Nadia Lurie, and Alex Chen performing Opera Postcards at Chateau Victoria, photo by Kimberley-Ann Bartczak

Coming Up

Up next in our **Chorus Resilience Initiative** is a special masterclass with Paul Destrooper, Artistic & Executive Director of Ballet Victoria. This masterclass will focus on movement and choreography, giving emerging and local singers a chance to develop stage presence and performance skills. Orpheus & Eurydice will also feature Ballet Victoria, providing artists with an extra collaborative experience. Our goal is to support singers in all aspects of stagecraft in addition to musical training.

Thank you!

With your help, opera is reaching classrooms, nurturing local artists, and bringing live music into our community. Thank you for making these experiences possible.

Join the conversation

Your opinion matters! Share your reflections on our new quarterly Impact Report and let us know which areas of Pacific Opera Victoria excite you most, or you'd like to learn more about. We are always looking for ways to improve and connect with our community.

Send your feedback to chelsea@pacificopera.ca

Festa a Roma: Online Auction

A FUNDRAISER IN SUPPORT OF YOUTH & OPERA

Auction Opens February 16 @ 9AM
& Closes February 25 @ Noon



Every bid helps fund programs like Living Opera Workshops and the Opera Sprouts Initiative, inspiring BC students and nurturing the next generation of artists. Make an impact while treating yourself to unforgettable experiences such as two loge seats to Orpheus & Eurydice, an exclusive chef's tasting menu with wine pairings, and a luxurious multi-night stay in downtown Victoria. Or bid on our incredible selection of luxury getaways, cruises, and more, all in support of Pacific Opera Victoria's youth programs.

Register now to view a selection
of items on Hibid!



OPERA PACIFIC
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VICTORIA

Upcoming Events



LIVING OPERA: A FREE EVENT FOR KIDS, FAMILIES, AND EDUCATORS | MARCH 9

4:00 PM | The Baumann Centre

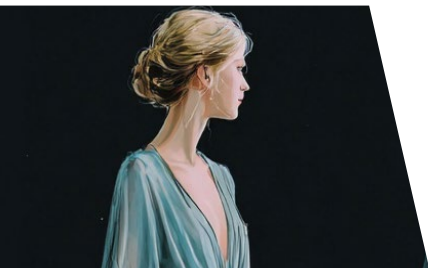
A free, family-friendly workshop for curious creatives of all ages. Through hands-on activities, participants explore storytelling, character creation, and the musical ideas behind opera, collaborating to create a mini-opera moment together. Originally designed for grades 3-5, this Pro-D Day workshop now welcomes families, educators, and the young at heart, no musical training required!



INSIDE OPERA: ORPHEUS & EURYDICE | MARCH 14

2:00 PM & 4:00 PM | The Baumann Centre

Join us for an engaging, hour-long, in-person talk with renowned host Robert Holliston, your guide to some of opera's most compelling works. You don't need to attend Pacific Opera Victoria's productions to enjoy Inside Opera, though it may inspire you to! This session explores Gluck's *Orpheus & Eurydice*, an opera of the timeless Greek myth of love, loss, and the power of music.



ORPHEUS & EURYDICE | APRIL 22-28

7:30 PM & 2:30 PM | The McPherson Playhouse

Based on the Greek myth of Orpheus, who uses music to journey into the underworld for love, this production brings audiences into the world of French Baroque opera and dance. In partnership with Ballet Victoria, and welcoming back soprano Suzanne Rigden, it also marks the Pacific Opera Victoria debut of Ukrainian-Canadian soprano Andriana Chuchman as Eurydice.

Eurydice costume sketch by *Orpheus & Eurydice* costume designer Sylvain Genois



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Pacific Opera Victoria works and creates on the traditional lands of the ɫəkwəŋən speaking people, now known as the Songhees and Esquimalt Nations.