

Opera

TOSCA LYRIC OPERA OF CHICAGO

Diva Doina

Doina Dimitriu steps into Renata Tebaldi's shoes — and Maria Callas's bodice — in the Lyric's *Tosca*.

By Elizabeth M. Tamny

Renata Tebaldi, who had what Arturo Toscanini called the “voice of an angel,” died in December. When I heard she was gone I had an overwhelming urge to be at the opera—the way I wanted to be in a church or a bar on 9/11 or in my mom's spare bedroom when I had the flu. She was loved to extremes, a genuine diva. She once had to put her coat over her costume to get people to stop applauding after a performance of *Otello*. I wanted to be around people who understood what had been lost.

That's one reason I went to the Lyric for the opening night of Puccini's heartbreaking warhorse *Tosca*, the last production of the season before *Götterdämmerung* and the rest of the Ring cycle starts. It pleased me to think that Tebaldi had sung the title role of *Tosca* more often than any other part by any composer—and twice at the Lyric.

Making her Lyric debut as the beautiful, doomed Floria Tosca was Romanian soprano Doina Dimitriu. The top of the vocal range of too many Toscas is often the only thing that holds up, but Dimitriu's middle and bottom are especially beautiful: sweet and clear in tone, not at all darkened, and expressive. It's an agile, ringing voice, and I never had to lean forward to try to catch it.

Her *Tosca* was young but more womanly and less coquettish than the norm. Her phrasing in “Vissi d'arte,” the show-stopping second-act aria, was contemplative, sad, almost baffled, rather than filled with pathos. (Cutting through the drama of the moment, sweet sotto voce Jesus, was a wheezing hearing aid. It bleated and buzzed telegraphically above the first two acts in a steady des-

cant.) Occasionally Dimitriu's pianissimos got a bit faint, but that may have been the orchestra overpowering her, as it did the shepherd boy's aria at the beginning of act three. “Vissi d'arte” is usually treated as a glorious interruption, but Dimitriu's performance put the focus on the female lead, making her life and religious struggles the heart of the opera.

Neil Shicoff, who starred as *Tosca*'s revolutionary/painter lover Mario Cavaradossi, took a short while to get warmed up. In an opera full of big entrances, he's required to charge in at 100 miles per hour with “Recondita armonia,” and he managed about 60. But after some swoopy attacks he proved himself a true heroic-tenor belter. “Vittoria!” in act two went on hilariously long, but I almost liked him for not knowing when to stop. He held his high notes spectacularly, and made the hair on the back of my neck stand up. The ladies behind me sighed, and the shouters impatiently, appropriately, let loose bravos.

Shicoff's character arguably has the shallowest depths to plumb of the three principals, but he's critical to our ability to believe in *Tosca*'s devotion. Shicoff was pretty constrained. One reason is that his face elongated into a set of exaggerated ovals when he sang, allowing little room for expression—he looked kind of like Little Orphan Annie. Like Dimitriu, he did a fair amount of vague scurrying about. His movement needed to be more economical, his gestures more deliberate.

Sometimes the acting was wonderful—the knife catching *Tosca*'s eye in act two was definitely a Moment—but overall it wasn't particularly cohesive. The obvious exception was veteran Lyric bass Samuel Ramey doing his kinky-malefactor best as Baron Scarpia, the cruel police chief who's determined to



Tosca

have *Tosca*. From his first commanding entrance—all demonic eyebrows and evil minions and jackboots (I don't think I've ever seen Ramey without jackboots)—it was hard to keep your eyes off him. I've heard him in better vocal form, but I felt like I'd been waiting my whole life to hear him sing at the end of act one, when Scarpia sinfully declares his intentions over the chorus's “Te Deum.” For all its melodrama this opera is daring in ways that seem contemporary: over the sounds of worship—the fabulous-as-always Lyric chorus—he ends his rant with the ringing “*Tosca, mi fai dimenticare Iddio!*” (“*Tosca, you make me forget God!*”)

The scene was a little cramped because the church set had to be herringboned into the Civic's

smallish stage. But the sets, which the Lyric recently bought, are gorgeous—Franco Zeffirelli designed them for Maria Callas's 1964 comeback at Covent Garden. At the time they were seen as surprisingly realistic, which is ironic given his later cast-of-thousands designs and given that they create pretty, static tableaux rather than intricate spaces that allow for fluid, verismo interactions. The third-act Castel Sant'Angelo pushed things right to the edge of the stage. But the main problem here is always getting *Tosca* over the parapet without looking like she's going to bounce back, and this one let her stay put.

It was eerie seeing the sets Callas had made famous, seeing her familiar act-two gown. Callas, the singer with whom Tebaldi will be forever yoked in

the longest-simmering and dearest-end soprano competition of all time. Callas, the singer who's become most identified with the role of *Tosca*, whose slight, masterful turn of the head or wave of the hand made it hard for her rabid fans to see anyone else in the role.

I was in the right place to offer up a sniffly little prayer for Tebaldi, but I found I wasn't pasting her voice over Dimitriu's in my head, certainly not seeing Callas flick her shawl. For all the ranking that goes on in the opera world, each production remains an immediate, overmastering experience. This one had some of the traditional first-night hiccups, but I screamed brava at the end along with the rest of the audience. I'd just have to say my good-bye to Tebaldi somewhere else. □

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