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Ressort: Kunst, Kultur und Musik

Tosca

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The famous opera of Puccini's *Tosca* has rarely lacked theatrical force, yet its impact at the Oper im Steinbruch in St. Margarethen acquires an almost elemental intensity. In the vast quarry, where the natural rock face rises with monumental, indifferent grandeur, the opera's world of love, tyranny, faith and political violence seems not merely represented but physically embodied.

This new production transforms Puccini's compact Roman thriller into a genuinely immersive open-air spectacle—lavish in visual scale, but, importantly, never entirely losing sight of the devastating intimacy at the work's core. Director and set designer Thaddeus Strassberger understands that *Tosca* does not require conceptual over-elaboration to speak powerfully to a modern audience. The opera's dramatic architecture is already extraordinarily direct: a fugitive seeks refuge; an artist risks his life for political loyalty; a jealous diva is ensnared by a sadistic official; and private passion is crushed by the machinery of state power.

Strassberger presents these conflicts with clarity and a sure sense of theatrical momentum. His staging draws on the opera's historical Roman locations—the church of Sant'Andrea della Valle, the Palazzo Farnese and the Castel Sant'Angelo—while using the quarry's imposing terrain to magnify their symbolic weight. The result is a Rome in which religious splendour, aristocratic privilege and authoritarian menace coexist in uneasy proximity. The sheer size of the setting gives Scarpia's regime a chilling visual authority: the characters appear vulnerable against stone, architecture and darkness, as though their lives were being watched and judged by forces beyond their control.

Yet the production's greatest achievement is that this monumental frame serves the drama rather than overwhelms it. Puccini's opera remains a tragedy of faces, glances, desires and irreversible decisions. Giuseppe Palella's costumes contribute substantially to this effect. Their historical richness evokes the Rome of 1800 without turning the stage into a decorative museum. The contrasts are especially telling: *Tosca*'s glamour and theatrical femininity stand against Scarpia's dark severity, while the church and court scenes suggest a society in which ceremony and cruelty are inseparable. The visual language is grand, but it also makes a clear dramatic point: beauty, in *Tosca*, offers no protection from power.

At the centre of any successful performance lies the title character, one of Puccini's most demanding creations. *Tosca* must be ardent, volatile, devout, proud and ultimately tragic; she cannot simply be a victim, because the opera depends on the force of her will. The production's alternating cast brings several

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distinguished artists to the role, allowing for different vocal and dramatic emphases across the run. What matters is that Tosca emerges as a woman whose emotional intensity is never superficial. Her jealousy in the first act, her terror in the second and her final surrender to despair form a compelling psychological progression.

Cavaradossi, too, benefits from the production's refusal to reduce him to a conventional romantic tenor. He is a painter and lover, but also a man of political conscience. His protection of Angelotti is the act that sets the tragedy in motion, and his tenderness toward Tosca gains poignancy because it is shadowed from the beginning by danger. In "E lucevan le stelle," Puccini concentrates memory, erotic longing and the fear of death into one of opera's most exposed moments. In the open-air setting, that private farewell gains extraordinary resonance.

The figure who dominates the evening, however, is Scarpia. He is not simply an operatic villain but the embodiment of a corrupt political order—one in which desire, surveillance, religion and violence are fused. The quarry proves an ideal landscape for this character. Against its immense rock walls, Scarpia's authority appears almost geological: ancient, oppressive and difficult to escape. The Act I Te Deum, supported by the Philharmonia Chor Wien and the children's voices of the Gumpoldskirchner Spatzen, becomes the production's overwhelming visual and musical climax, a terrifying collision of public worship and private evil.

Valerio Galli leads the Piedra Festivalorchester with an idiomatic feeling for Puccini's shifting colours and sharply judged dramatic pulses. The score needs both sweep and discipline: its lyricism must breathe, but its violence must strike without warning. Galli's direction supports the singers while preserving the inexorable movement of the tragedy. He allows Puccini's great melodic lines their full emotional space, yet keeps the orchestral textures alert to the score's nervous, cinematic detail. This Tosca succeeds because it recognises that spectacle and sincerity need not be opposites. The St. Margarethen quarry provides scale, atmosphere and unforgettable imagery; Puccini provides emotional truth.

At the Oper im Steinbruch in St. Margarethen, Puccini's Tosca finds an extraordinary visual home. The quarry's immense stone walls and open sky do not merely frame the drama; they make its atmosphere palpable. Thaddeus Strassberger's direction and stage design turn this remarkable natural arena into a Rome of grandeur, danger and spiritual unease. Monumental images emerge from the rock, while the scale of the setting gives Puccini's conflict between private love and public tyranny an exceptional force.

The creative team brings this vision to life with impressive cohesion. Giuseppe Palella's exquisite Empire-inspired costumes lend the staging historical richness and theatrical lustre, defining the world of Rome with colour, texture and elegance. Driscoll Otto's lighting deepens the quarry's natural drama,

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shaping the evening through striking contrasts of shadow, fire and illumination. Under Valerio Galli, the musical direction supplies the necessary urgency and emotional breadth, allowing Puccini's melodies to soar across the vast space.

What makes this Tosca so compelling is that its spectacle never feels empty. Every visual element serves the opera's human heart: Tosca's passion, Cavaradossi's idealism, and Scarpia's menace. The result is a magnificent synthesis of landscape, imagination, music and theatrical craftsmanship—an unforgettable celebration of opera on a truly spectacular stage. In conclusion, this Tosca at Oper im Steinbruch is far more than an open-air opera production: it is a spectacular meeting of Puccini's emotional genius, bold theatrical imagination and the incomparable grandeur of the St. Margarethen quarry.

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