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A tale of two Toscas diving deep into a diva

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She is the ultimate diva—and not in today’s definition of the word. The outsized title character of *Tosca* is at the height of her career, 1800 Rome’s reigning operatic singer—so big, in fact, it will take two different sopranos to tackle the role during the run of Giacomo Puccini’s famous work at Vancouver Opera.

Michele Capalbo and Tamara Mancini will alternate nights in the challenging part, juggling Floria Tosca’s flights of jealousy and rage with her moments of tenderness and longing. In the opera, Tosca loves the painter Mario Cavaradossi, but when the evil police chief Baron Scarpia imprisons him, he demands Tosca sleep with him to free her boyfriend. It leads to a violent end for everyone involved. Think lust, murder, and treachery on a grand scale, and a woman who’s ultimately courageous enough to take matters into her own

hands, even if it means spilling a little blood on them.

It’s a big part but, not surprisingly, the star sopranos are digging into the smaller details of one of Italian opera’s most compelling female characters.

Michele Capalbo finds vulnerability in the title role of *Tosca*
Trevor Brady

“The most interesting thing for me for all my characters is finding the vulnerability,” explains Capalbo,

speaking to the *Straight* from the home in Vancouver she’s staying at before rehearsal starts. “It’s easy to say *Tosca* is jealous and angry; that’s built in. She’s a diva in the proper sense of the word....So it’s important in the first act to make her a full character, and she’s charming and in love with Cavaradossi. She has a sense of humour and she teases him—and with my Cavaradossi we’re having a good rapport.”

Mancini emphasizes that the character is pure of heart, despite all the sinister political corruption and cruel acts that surround her in an opera whose violence caused a fuss when Puccini debuted it at the beginning of the last century.

“I don’t see it as dark at all for me. I don’t look at Tosca as a dark role,” Mancini emphasizes, speaking to the *Straight* from her hotel. “She has so much love to give....Everything she does in this opera is for love,” says the American singer, who remembers watching *Tosca* on PBS as far back as her early teens growing up with an intensely musical family. “Maybe some people think of it as dark, but I find her passionate and truly romantic. In the end all her motives are for one reason: love. She’s so incredibly alive; she’s very jealous but she loves life.”

Tamara Mancini looks to the famous character’s history.

For Mancini, a self-described “history geek”, it’s important to understand where Tosca comes from. Through studying the libretto and digging into the play that Puccini based Tosca on, Victorien Sardou’s *La Tosca*, she’s discovered the character is an orphan whom the Benedictine monks found herding sheep; they sent her to a convent, and it was there that she found her heavenly voice singing church music. Her orphan roots, Mancini figures, are what make love so important to her.

It’s the kind of nuance you’ll find in verismo opera, Puccini’s reality-based style. And it carries extra challenges in the vocal texturing of the dense score.

Says Capalbo, who has sung the part for companies including the Seattle Opera and New York City Opera: “Insomuch as she spends a lot of her time being very emotional, with little shrieks and screams here and there, there are such beautiful bits. It’s the full range of dynamics. Vulnerability is usually present in a love duet,” she says, adding there’s even a call to sing in *morbidezza*—the softest possible sound.

“It’s the same challenge of any of the roles I sing, which is pacing and efficiency—when to save the voice,” she adds of the part. “With Puccini, you have to cut through the orchestra—and it’s a really really thick orchestra.”

Capalbo has had to sing that role in shows that have done everything from sending her flying off a three-metre-high wall toward the audience to staging the entire production as a nightmare in the title character’s head. This Vancouver Opera version, she assures us, is a traditional, accessible one that will let the music tell the story.

Yet while the story remains the same, Mancini has found she often brings out a different Tosca with each rendition.

“The character constantly changes because you will constantly discover new things about her,” she says. As we said, Tosca is no ordinary diva.