



## Getting to the heart of Tosca: Michele Capalbo on challenges, rewards of role

OTTAWA CITIZEN **By Steven Mazey**

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She's a passionate, hot-tempered diva who sings beautifully, is wild about her man and knows her way around a dagger when the occasion calls for one. The title character in Puccini's *Tosca* is a professional singer who over the course of the opera gets to show that she's madly in love with the artist Cavaradossi, wildly jealous when she suspects him of being involved with another woman and fiercely protective when she learns his life is in danger for helping to hide an escaped political prisoner.

She is forced to listen as her beloved is tortured, she stabs an evil police chief, and when she learns of Cavaradossi's killing, *Tosca* decides (spoiler alert!) to toss herself from the nearest ledge.

She's one of opera's tougher cookies, and *Tosca* is often played in broad strokes, as a stereotypically moody diva. Canadian soprano Michele Capalbo, who will sing the role in Opera Lyra Ottawa's production, says she tries to find and express more in the character.

When it opens Sept. 6 at the National Arts Centre, it will mark the 12th production of *Tosca* for Capalbo, who grew up in southwestern Ontario and began her professional career 15 years ago, after winning the Liederkrantz Competition in New York. Her first engagement was singing Verdi in front of thousands in New York's Central Park, and she has since sung for companies that include San Francisco Opera, Canadian Opera Company, Vancouver Opera, Quebec Opera, and orchestras and opera houses in Italy, France, Belgium, Mexico City and Norway.

Capalbo sings the most demanding roles of Verdi and Puccini and was praised by *Opera News* magazine as "a world-class Aida." She says she tries to bring shadings to *Tosca* and show the character's heart, tenderness and vulnerability.

"Everyone expects that *Tosca* is a diva, that she's jealous, but just to hang on to those words in your performance is not helpful. She is also vulnerable and funny and she loves," Capalbo said in a telephone interview from her Ottawa hotel.

"The challenge is to make her not seem like a murderess and to find the vulnerability." When Capalbo sang *Tosca* for Vancouver Opera last year, a *Georgia Straight* critic praised her "rich patina and intensely nuanced colorations. Her well-known aria *Vissi d'arte* spans

vulnerable, tremulous quiet and rafter-shaking fire. She also exudes a good balance of playfulness and heat.”

One of the challenges, Capalbo says, is that the main opportunity to help the audience understand the characters and what follows for the rest of the opera is through the love duet with Cavaradossi (Canadian tenor David Pomeroy will sing the role for Opera Lyra). She says it can be a challenge to get so much across in limited time.

“We have a 10-minute duet to set up the entire opera, to show how much she and Mario love each other, and how this is a linchpin for everything else to happen.”

Capalbo says it helps to be working with familiar colleagues for Opera Lyra. Pomeroy was her co-star in Vancouver Opera’s *Tosca* and she has worked with American baritone Todd Thomas, who sings the role of the police chief, Scarpia. Capalbo has also worked with Tyrone Paterson, who will conduct the production, and she praises his supportive way with singers.

“There are enough challenges in this business, so it’s nice when you have easy aspects and people you know. David is a pleasure to work with, and Todd is a great colleague and knows the part so well. I’m looking forward to working with these guys again.”

Capalbo says her favourite moments in *Tosca* include “duet moments that are sublime” and *Vissi d’arte*, the soaring, heartbreaking Act Two aria in which *Tosca* wonders what she has done to deserve such unhappiness.

Capalbo says she loves to sing the aria, though sometimes the staging immediately before can present challenges.

“If the director has you being thrown around and running around and then maybe the baritone decides to improvise something in the moment, you think ‘OK, in 30 seconds I have to sing *Vissi d’arte*. Thanks a lot,’” she says with a laugh.

“It’s something that I have to pace. It can be a challenge to get there, but once I get there, if I have been given enough tools and allowed to paint it properly, then it’s sheer joy to sing.” Capalbo, whose current season also includes Poulenc’s *Stabat Mater* with the Edmonton Symphony, lives near Manhattan with her husband, who works for a film distribution company. When she isn’t performing, she enjoys spending time with student singers, coaching or adjudicating at music festivals of the kind she entered while growing up in the Kitchener and London, Ont. areas.

Capalbo says she discovered her talent for singing partly because of feedback at music festivals and from high school teachers who encouraged her. She later studied voice at the University of Western Ontario and then in New York with voice teacher Arthur Levy for several years.

“A couple of months ago, I was in British Columbia adjudicating classical voice provincials. I do that because that’s how I started. I went through the Kiwanis Festival system. I am particularly attracted to guiding and building good Canadian voices. I was lucky to have some wonderful mentors. I enjoy listening to students, learning from them and offering suggestions about what good classical singing is about, whether they go on to become singers, opera lovers or concertgoers. That’s important.”