

Phenomenological intersections in the dramaturgical journey of the protagonist of the opera Tosca. A structural-hermeneutic analysis

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Abstract: *The paper proposes a critical evaluation of the dramaturgical profile of Floria Tosca, the protagonist of the homonymous opera by Giacomo Puccini, through a double methodological grid: structural and phenomenological. Going beyond traditional interpretations that place the work exclusively in the paradigm of raw verism, the study follows the way in which the affective experiences of the character Floria Tosca are organized in an existential path marked by tension, rupture and self-determination. The force and tension of this dramatic evolution are illuminated by the analysis of the musical text doubled by essential fragments from Puccini's epistolary correspondence. The research proposes an interpretation of emotion as an intentional act of consciousness and examines the intersections between love, jealousy, faith, violence and sacrifice in the dramatic construction of the character. Finally, the paper demonstrates how the protagonist's journey evolves from an aesthetic existence to a tragically pure consciousness, which reclaims its ontological freedom through the radical act of transcending immanence.*

Keywords: *soprano; musical dramaturgy; vocal interpretation; verismo;*

Introduction

Opera Giacomo Puccini's opera Tosca, first performed in Rome in 1900, is one of the most intense expressions of Italian verismo. The dramatic action takes place in a space dominated by political violence, institutional control and moral tensions, and the characters are placed in a universe where emotions reach extreme levels of manifestation. At the center of this construction is Floria Tosca, a dramatic figure emblematic of the conflict between passion, faith and freedom.

The importance of the character lies not only in its dramatic function, but also in the complexity of the inner experience it embodies. Its emotional journey can be interpreted as a succession of acts of consciousness, each of which restructures the subject's relationship with the world.²

From this perspective, Puccini's work becomes a privileged space for a phenomenological analysis. The primary source of this extreme dramatic concentration lies in the composer's own vision. Already in the project phase, in May 1889, in a letter sent to his editor Giulio Ricordi, Giacomo Puccini intuited the structural potential of Victorien Sardou's drama: „I am thinking of Tosca! In this piece I see the opera I need, one without excessive proportions, without a grandiose decorative spectacle, but which does not give rise to the usual outpouring of melody either.”³

This early rejection of the “outpouring of melody” in favor of a condensed action shows that Puccini was looking for a structure in which music would become the direct vehicle of acute states of consciousness. The objective of the paper is to demonstrate that the course of Floria Tosca is not just a succession of emotional reactions, but an authentic path of phenomenological

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² Mosco Carner. 1992. *Puccini: A Critical Biography*. New York: Holmes & Meier. p. 412.

³ Retrieved 2026, May 22, from <https://www.rodioni.ch/proscenio/cartellone/tosca/genes.html>.

deconstruction and reconstruction of the self. In the case of Tosca, each affective experience modifies the structure of perception and reorganizes the field of values. Love for Cavaradossi, jealousy, fear, anguish and despair are not isolated states, but components of a coherent existential path. For this reason, the present analysis aims to examine the relationship between the dramatic structure of the work and the affective structures of the protagonist.

The structural approach complements the phenomenological perspective by investigating the internal organization of dramatic conflicts. The character's trajectory can be understood as a succession of moments of equilibrium, rupture and catastrophe, specific to modern tragedy. This method aims to highlight the relationship between the architecture of the work and the emotional dynamics of the character.

This paper aims, on the one hand, to identify the dominant affective structures in the construction of the character, but also to correlate the emotional dimensions with the narrative evolution of the work.

1. Love and the Crisis of Suspicion

Act I Act one places the action inside the church of Sant'Andrea della Valle. From a structural point of view, the ecclesiastical space is not a simple decorative background, but a horizon of co-presence. For Floria Tosca, a deeply religious woman and at the same time a diva of the Roman lyrical scene, the church represents a familiar space, an extension of her own identity sanctuary in which art and faith coexist in an unproblematic symbiosis. This act of the opera introduces us to the affective universe of the protagonist through her relationship with the painter Mario Cavaradossi, love constituting the dominant structure of Tosca's identity and defining the way in which she perceives the world.

Her entrance on stage immediately reconfigures the sonic substance of the opera. The musical theme associated with her is fluid, warm, characterized by wide, expressive intervals, denoting a consciousness that moves freely in a reality that I consider safe and transparent. She brings floral offerings and the scent of sublime sensuality into the church, sanctifying, in a way, the profane space of her daily existence through the ritual gesture.

For Tosca, Cavaradossi is the center of value of existence. However, this love is very quickly accompanied by jealousy, which introduces the initial crack in the emotional balance. Jealousy appears in the context of suspicion related to the presence of another woman in the picture made by Cavaradossi. Maurice Merleau-Ponty states that „jealousy is the awareness of the possibility of losing the other.”⁴ In this sense, Tosca's jealousy reveals the fragility of love and the unstable nature of affective certainty. This tension between love and suspicion configures the initial emotional structure of the character. It is impossible for Tosca to abandon herself completely to the feeling of love because the awareness of the possibility of loss is constantly present.

From a structural point of view, the first act functions as a moment of fragile equilibrium. Although the passionate and emotional atmosphere prevails, signs of the future conflict appear already from the moment Tosca enters the scene (*perche chiuso?*). Jealousy becomes a prefiguration of the crisis and introduces the theme of emotional instability.

Musically, Puccini constructs this duality through the alternation between lyricism and harmonic tension. The music reflects the character's inner oscillation and contributes to defining the affective psychology.

⁴ Maurice Merleau-Ponty. 1945. *Phénoménologie de la perception*. Paris: Gallimard, p. 378.

The relationship between Tosca and Cavaradossi goes beyond the sentimental dimension and acquires existential valences. Love is perceived as the foundation of identity, and the threat of loss produces a profound destabilization of consciousness.

Thus, from the first act onwards, the premises of the tragedy are set. The protagonist's emotional balance is precarious, and her affective universe is vulnerable to violence and manipulation. When Tosca meets Mario Cavaradossi, she does not find a faithful reflection of her own amorous intentionality, but a dissonance. Cavaradossi is agitated, he is hiding something (the political fugitive Angelotti). At this precise point, the first major phenomenological intersection occurs: the emergence of suspicion.

Tosca's gaze is intentionally reoriented towards the painting the painter is working on — the portrait of Mary Magdalene, inspired by the hidden features of the Marquise Attavanti.

Tosca's jealousy should not be interpreted exclusively as possessiveness, but as an experience of vulnerability, not as a simple weakness of character, but structurally, as a radical way of relating to the individuality of the other.

The appearance of Scarpia radically changes the affective structure of the dramatic universe. If until now love and jealousy prevailed, with the entry of this character an atmosphere dominated by fear and anguish is established. Scarpia uses the protagonist's love for Cavaradossi as an instrument of control. Thus, emotion becomes vulnerability, and affectivity is transformed into a mechanism of domination. The antagonist's power is not limited to the political dimension, but penetrates the intimate space of consciousness. The discovery of the fan belonging to the Marquise Attavanti offers him the perfect lever. By presenting the fan to Tosca, Scarpia does nothing but fuel and fix jealousy. The fan acts as an indexical sign, a material proof of the imagined betrayal. Therefore, the meeting with Scarpia represents the central moment of the existential crisis. The existential space of love is replaced by the space of fear and threat. Consciousness no longer perceives the world as a domain of affective possibilities, but as a space of constraint. Tosca is revealed the precariousness of her own condition. In front of Scarpia, all the values on which she built her identity become vulnerable. Scarpia introduces a logic of violence that destroys the moral order and forces the character to choose between impossible alternatives. Tosca is asked to sacrifice her own integrity to save Cavaradossi (*a misero prezzo tu, a me una vita, io a te chieggo un istante!*). This situation produces a profound existential rupture.

2. Scarpia and the Establishment of the Existential Crisis

Act Two moves the action to Scarpia's study in the Farnese Palace. If Sant'Andrea della Valle was a space of openness, verticality and light, the Farnese Palace is a claustrophobic space, a labyrinth of interrogation. This structural claustrophobia was vigorously defended by Puccini to the librettist Luigi Illica. In a letter sent to him in March 1898, the composer insisted on the elimination of any poetic or political digression that would have diluted the raw terror of the second act: „I have gone through the hell of the second act. I beg you, write less, cut out the rhetoric! The movement must be rapid, merciless, and the action must flow like a torrent. Tosca must not waste time on speeches when Mario's life hangs by a thread.”⁵

Tosca is brought here in the position of a helpless witness. The dramaturgical structure reaches a high degree of refinement through the acoustic dissociation of the torture. Cavaradossi is tormented in the adjacent room, beyond the walls of the study. This architectural barrier does not diminish the cruelty, but rather intensifies it.

⁵ Giacomo Puccini. 2010. *Epistolario. II, 1897–1901*. Firenze: Leo S. Olschki Editore, p. 173.

Cavaradossi's groans of pain, which penetrate through the ajar door, become a direct physical stimulus to Tosca's body, each cry of Mario produces a somatic contraction in her own being. The pressure exerted by Scarpia is of an ontological nature: he asks Tosca to deliver a hidden truth in order to stop the physical destruction of the beloved being. When Tosca gives in and betrays the secret, she does so to restore the integrity of her world, but this act implies a profound guilt.

Following this capitulation, when Mario disowns her with sovereign contempt, and Scarpia explicitly states his price for the painter's life, Tosca's body, the protagonist collapses into a profound crisis of meaning.⁶ This is the moment when Puccini introduces the famous aria *Vissi d'arte, vissi d'amore*.

The genesis of this aria is closely linked to the intervention of the romantic soprano Hariclea Darclée, the first performer of the title role. The most blatant and documented impact of Hariclea Darclée on the structure of the opera is represented by the birth of the famous aria *Vissi d'arte*. In the initial libretto structured by Illica and Giacosa, the moment of interrogation and blackmail exercised by Scarpia flowed uninterruptedly towards the violent denouement. Darclée, analyzing the character's dynamics during the rehearsals in Rome in the winter of 1899, felt a deficiency in the character's internal logic. She drew Puccini's attention to the fact that a diva, an artist whose entire existence had been governed by beauty and music, could not undergo such physical and psychological degradation without a purely aesthetic reaction. She demanded a lyrical pause, a moment in which the passivity of suffering could be expressed through inner song. Puccini initially objected vehemently, arguing that an aria at that point would destroy the alert realism of the scene and suspend dramatic time. However, sensing the soprano's genius, the composer gave in and composed *Vissi d'arte*.

From a phenomenological perspective, this structural change is crucial, for without Darclée, Tosca would have remained a purely reactive victim within a mechanism of political terror. By introducing the aria at her suggestion, the character acquires metaphysical depth, the aria being interpreted as a suspension of dramatic temporality and an absolute interiorization of experience. Through this aria, Tosca brutally brackets the entire external reality and withdraws into her own pure consciousness. She analyzes her own essence through two defining coordinates: Art: *Vissi d'arte*, the purity of the creative act, and Love-Faith: *Vissi d'amore, non feci mai male ad anima viva!*, her ethical and religious identity. The aria is not a simple melodramatic lament, but a radical metaphysical interrogation addressed to the Divinity: *Perché, perché, Signor, ah, perché me ne rimunerai così?*.

Immediately after the end of the aria, when Scarpia returns to claim his reward, Tosca's consciousness has already operated the transmutation from passivity to action. She is no longer the object of the other's desire, but becomes the sovereign subject. The discovery of the knife on the table triggers an instantaneous somatic response. Scarpia's murder is a phenomenon of raw bodily liberation. It is not an ideologically premeditated murder, but a reaction of organic rejection of the imminent rape. The knife blow is accompanied by the terrible cry: This is Tosca's kiss! (*Questo è il bacio di Tosca!*). Symbolically, the act reconfigures the erotic semantics imposed by Scarpia: the kiss (gesture of abandonment) becomes death (gesture of the tyrant's destruction).

After the murder, Tosca's behavior illustrates an astonishing survival of structures of religious meaning. She mechanically cleans the blood from her hands, retrieves the life-saving ticket of free passage from the corpse's clenched fist, and places two candles and a crucifix next to

⁶ „Tosca is not merely a jealous woman; she is a consciousness driven to catastrophe”. Julian Budden. 2002. *Puccini: His Life and Works*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, p. 287.

Scarpia. This behavior demonstrates that Tosca has not completely abandoned her original moral code, but has recontextualized it in order to survive the trauma. Her final glance at the corpse is accompanied by the famous spoken line: And before him all Rome trembled! (*E avanti a lui tremava tutta Roma!*). Oppressive power has been reduced to the state of mere inert, lifeless matter.

3. The final catastrophe and the annulment of meaning

The last act opens at dawn on the upper platform of Castel Sant'Angelo. This space possesses a powerful charge. Situated high up, open to the sky, it suggests the possibility of escape, but it remains equally a military fortress and a place of public execution. It is a veritable threshold between life and death.

The dramatic construction of this denouement was also the subject of heated disputes between the composer and the librettists. Giuseppe Giacosa and Luigi Illica had originally planned an extended monologue, a lyrical-philosophical dissertation delivered by Cavaradossi before his death. In a memorable letter to Giulio Ricordi in August 1898, Puccini expressed his total disagreement, defending the logic of the time lived in the face of poetic conventions: „I have great reservations about the third act. I do not want Mario to sing an conventional aria about art or politics in the face of death. A man who is about to be shot in a few minutes does not philosophize. He remembers the woman he loves, the moments of passion, her little body. Giacosa's text is beautiful, but it blocks the drama. I need simple words, an explosion of pure regret.”⁷ The result of this vision was the replacement of the rhetorical text.

While Mario, with the disturbing aria *E lucevan le stelle*, this heartbreaking farewell to the life and body of his beloved proves a melancholic lucidity, Tosca enters the scene carrying a radical illusion. She presents Mario with the free pass and explains the mechanism of the fake execution negotiated with Scarpia. She instructs him how to behave in front of the firing squad: „When they shoot, you fall... brave, lie down and do not move until the soldiers leave. Then we are saved!” (*prima sarai fucilato... per finta... ad armi scariche. Simulato supplizio. Al colpo... cadi... i soldati sen vanno... e noi siamo salvi!*).

Here Tosca confuses representation, the artistic act, with the raw factual reality. Being an actress by profession, she believes that life can be directed like an opera performance. She asks Mario to behave as if he were on the stage of the theater (*Come la Tosca in teatro*).

The moment of execution unfolds under the admiring gaze of Tosca, who praises the realism of Cavaradossi's fall: „What a look! What a magnificent fall!” (*Come è bello il mio Mario! La! Muori! Ecco un artista!*). However, after the soldiers leave, when she approaches his body and shouts: Mario, up, quickly! (*Mario, su, presto!*) she is confronted by the absolute opacity of death. The discovery of the blood and the rigid immobility of her lover causes the definitive and irreversible collapse of Tosca's world. Cavaradossi's real death causes a total collapse of meaning. The character understands that she has been deceived and that her sacrifice was useless. At that moment, all the values that had organized her existence are annulled.

Pursued by Scarpia's soldiers who have discovered the Baron's body, Tosca no longer has any option for survival within the immanent world. She flees to the edge of the castle parapet. Her suicide should not be understood as a cowardly gesture of despair; by refusing to let herself be captured and judged by the oppressive laws of men, Tosca claims absolute control over her own destiny and her own body. Her final words, shouted to eternity: O, Scarpia, see you before God! (*O, Scarpia, avanti a Dio!*) radically reconfigure the dynamics of the work. She moves the court

⁷ Giacomo Puccini, *op. cit.*, p. 229.

of justice from the immanent political plane to the transcendent eschatological plane. The leap into the void thus becomes an act of pure phenomenological liberation. She leaves the oppressive verticality of the earthly fortress to plunge into the metaphysical absolute, the only place where her identity and love for Mario can remain unaltered by the contingencies of history.

4. The musical dimension of affectivity in the construction of the character Tosca

In Giacomo Puccini's work, music does not only have an aesthetic or decorative function, but constitutes an affective language through which the characters' inner transformations are expressed.⁸

In the case of the protagonist, the musical dimension becomes an essential element of the phenomenological construction of emotion. Puccini uses the orchestra as a psychological instrument, capable of externalizing the tensions of consciousness. The musical motifs associated with Tosca are characterized by intense lyricism, contrasting dynamics and alternations between fragility and dramatic force. These elements contribute to the representation of a consciousness permanently located between passion and suffering

From a phenomenological perspective, music functions as an extension of affective experience. Emotion is not only narrated through text, but also becomes perceptible through rhythm, harmony, and orchestral timbre. In this sense, the spectator does not merely observe the protagonist's emotion, but participates in it.⁹

Theodor W. Adorno believes that modern dramatic music produces an interiorization of conflict and transforms the orchestra into a space of affective consciousness.¹⁰ In Tosca, the orchestra often anticipates the character's emotional states and creates dramatic tension before the verbal manifestation. The aria "Vissi d'arte" represents the culmination of this musical interiorization. The broad melodic line and tense harmonies simultaneously express the vulnerability and intensity of existential experience. The music suspends the dynamics of the action for a few moments and transforms the stage into a space of metaphysical reflection.

The relationship between voice and orchestra also reflects the conflict between the individual and the outside world. In moments of crisis, the orchestra becomes dominant and seems to overwhelm the human voice, suggesting the impossibility of controlling destiny.

The leitmotif associated with Scarpia introduces a sonic dimension of threat and power. The contrast between Tosca's lyrical motifs and the harmonic tensions associated with the antagonist highlights the opposition between love and violence.

Therefore, the phenomenological analysis of the character cannot be separated from the musical dimension. Emotion is simultaneously constructed through text, stage gesture and sound language, and Puccini's work becomes a total experience of affectivity.

5. Conclusions

The path of Floria Tosca is outlined as a rigorous deconstruction of naive identity in favor of a pure tragic consciousness. The tripartite structure of the opera corresponds to well-defined stages of phenomenological experience.

⁸ „Puccini understood the stage as a theatre of nerves”. In Julian Budden, *op. cit.*, p. 276.

⁹ „In Puccini, melody becomes psychological action” In Mosco Carner, *op. cit.*, p. 395.

¹⁰ Theodor W. Adorno. 1962. *Einleitung in die Musiksoziologie: Zwölf theoretische Vorlesungen*. Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, p. 117.

Giacomo Puccini demonstrates in *Tosca* a profound understanding of the dynamics of the human psyche exposed to limiting conditions. His epistolary struggle for dramatic condensation and the elimination of unnecessary rhetoric reveals a composer fundamentally concerned with the phenomenological truth of human experience. By perfectly correlating musical structures with dramaturgical evolution, the work offers an exemplary phenomenological study on the resistance of human subjectivity in the face of oppression. Floria Tosca remains the archetypal image of the artist who refuses to be a simple object of history, choosing the tragic sovereignty of her own death instead of spiritual slavery.

The structural analysis of the emotional path of the protagonist of the opera *Tosca* highlights the profound complexity of Giacomo Puccini's dramatic construction and reveals the existential dimension of the affective experience. The character Floria Tosca goes beyond the limits of a simple lyrical heroine and becomes the expression of a consciousness in a continuous process of inner transformation, determined by the confrontation between love, violence, freedom and death.

The protagonist's emotions do not represent simple psychological reactions or effects of dramatic situations, but fundamental forms through which the world is perceived and understood. Each affective experience reorganizes the relationship between the subject and reality, modifying the structure of consciousness and the meaning of existence. Love for Mario Cavaradossi constitutes the starting point of Tosca's affective identity and defines the way in which she relates to the world. In the first moments of the opera, existence appears as a space of passion and relative harmony, even if this harmony is already fragile and threatened by suspicion and jealousy.

Jealousy represents the first rupture in the protagonist's emotional balance and functions as a prefiguration of the subsequent tragedy, revealing the vulnerability of affective consciousness and the impossibility of guaranteeing absolute love. Tosca discovers that the relationship with the other permanently implies the possibility of loss, and this awareness profoundly modifies the structure of her emotional experience. Thus, from the first act, the character is introduced into a space of affective instability and existential tension.

The appearance of Scarpia produces the radical transformation of the dramatic universe and marks the beginning of the true existential crisis. He is not just an individual antagonist, but the expression of a political and moral order dominated by violence and corruption. In relation to Tosca, Scarpia becomes the symbol of power that invades the intimate space of consciousness and transforms emotion into an instrument of manipulation and domination.

The confrontation with Scarpia forces the character to experience anguish in an existential sense. The world no longer appears as a space of love and meaning, but as a domain of threat and constraint. It is impossible for Tosca to maintain the unity between moral values and concrete reality. In this limit-situation, freedom becomes tragic, because any choice implies sacrifice and destruction.

The aria *Vissi d'arte* represents one of the most profound expressions of modern tragedy in musical literature. Through this aria, Tosca does not only formulate a personal lament, but also questions the meaning of existence and the relationship between morality, faith and suffering. The character cannot understand why a life built around love and art inevitably leads to violence and moral degradation.

The act of killing Scarpia constitutes the turning point in the emotional and existential evolution of the protagonist, this gesture representing a radical rupture in the structure of her identity. Tosca exceeds the limits of the moral order that had previously defined her existence and

assumes a tragic freedom. The crime is not just a defensive act, but the expression of an existential decision that definitively transforms the relationship between consciousness and the world.

At the same time, the act of murder highlights the ambiguity of human freedom. Although Tosca acts to save love and dignity, her act does not lead to authentic liberation, but to a deepening of the tragic. The character remains captive in a world dominated by violence and the impossibility of reconciling fundamental values.

The end of the work represents the culmination of the process of disintegration of existential meaning. Cavaradossi's death cancels the last possibility of hope and causes the total collapse of the protagonist's affective universe.

The final suicide can be interpreted as a final act of freedom. By refusing capture and submission, the character claims his existential autonomy and refuses to accept the degradation imposed by the outside world. The final gesture thus becomes the expression of a tragic form of transcendence, in which death appears as the only way to preserve one's own dignity.

The structural analysis of the work demonstrates that the protagonist's emotional journey follows a rigorous dramatic organization, based on the progressive intensification of the inner conflict. The structure can be summarized by the sequence of the following stages: affective balance, emotional tension, existential crisis, radical decision, catastrophe and annulment of meaning. Each stage inevitably prepares the next and contributes to the construction of a coherent tragic model.

Also, the musical dimension of the opera plays an essential role in building affectivity and in representing the character's consciousness. The orchestra does not function only as accompaniment, but becomes the sound expression of inner tensions and existential conflict. Puccini's music transforms emotion into a total experience, in which voice, harmony and rhythm simultaneously contribute to the representation of affective experience.

The character Tosca thus acquires symbolic and universal value. She becomes the expression of the modern individual confronted with the impossibility of reconciliation between love, morality and the violence of the historical world. Her tragedy does not belong exclusively to the dramatic context of the opera, but reflects the fundamental tensions of the human condition.

In conclusion, the phenomenological intersections between love, jealousy, fear, revolt and despair transform the protagonist's emotional journey into a model of modern tragedy. The opera Tosca demonstrates that emotions are not simple passing states, but constitutive structures of consciousness and identity. Through this character, Puccini offers a profound reflection on the fragility of existence and the difficulty of maintaining meaning in a world dominated by violence and contradictions.

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