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When Too Much Is Terrific

Cincinnati Opera's *Tosca* travels familiar territory with enormous style

Review By [Tom McElfresh](#)

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The "L" words are in order when discussing the *Tosca* that opened Cincinnati Opera's 86th summer season Thursday night at Music Hall: Lush. Lustrous. Lyrical. Oh, yeah, and a couple of "T" words: Traditional. Totally traditional.

Soaring sets. Soaring music. Soaring emotions. Every thought, every pose and every gesture Technicolored up to several times larger than life. Or as a serious opera lover might put it: Enough's enough, too much is way better and much too much is what opera's all about.

Which means that as the company sang this 106-year-old Puccini standard for the 62nd time in its history, its new artistic director, Evans Mirageas, is off to a flying start. (Even though the process of assembling and contracting the elements of this production would have been well under way before he came on board.) Thursday's *Tosca* showed evidence of assurance at the helm as it exposed Cincinnati audiences to four debuts -- two on stage, one in the pit and one in the director's chair -- plus the superior return of baritone Mark Delavan (*Traviata*, 2003) as the Iago-esque arch villain of the piece, Baron Scarpia. Voice and villainy nicely etched the role.

The evening's most noteworthy debut, of course, was this first Cincinnati appearance by one of the Metropolitan Opera's reigning divas, Aprile Millo. Her rich, full, ringing soprano is everything advance word suggested it would be. Likewise, it is everything needed to create the passionate, devout woman whom Floria Tosca needs to be.

Like the production, Millo is about tradition. She is the full-figured opera star of the past, meaning that while she's far from fashionably svelte, her voice -- which is opera's point, after all -- emerges with bottomless support all across her register, with seeming reserves to spare and seemingly without effort. Again, in opera's grand tradition, she is a bit more singer than actress, but the acting is strong enough to support the voice which is an absolute joy to hear. At a guess, this is the kind of voice Puccini heard as he imagined the great, lifting lines of *Tosca's* Act Two aria, *Vissi d'arte*.

Almost as notable was the debut of tenor Antonello Palombi as the artist-activist Cavaradossi to whom Tosca gives her heart, her support in his resistance to a corrupt government and his aide to rebel Angelotti (Wayne Tigges) -- and for whose lost love she ultimately gives her life. Most of Palombi's major appearances have thus far been in Europe; on Thursday's evidence, time will quickly build a U.S. rep for him.

He sang with both nuance and authority -- well in the Act One arias and especially well in the sequence with Tosca in Act Three -- as debuting conductor Giordano Bellincampi enriched their recitative "dialogue" with a haunting orchestral reading of the supporting melody.

Debating director Mark Verzatt, who has credits with companies across the country, chose tradition in his staging of the piece. There was a bit of comedy in veteran Thomas Hammons' excellent reading of the Sacristan. There was more than a bit of pomp in the processional and ceremonial moments that end Act One.

The towering, densely detailed sets, on loan from San Diego Opera, certainly prompt pomp. There was plenty

of drama in the staging of the Act Two confrontation that leads Tosca to murder Scarpia. But Verzatt allowed nothing, repeat *nothing*, to get between the singing and the listener.

So this is a *Tosca* out of the fond memory books, not something for the record books. No new ground was broken, but familiar territory was traveled with enormous style. **Grade: A**

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**Tosca, presented by Cincinnati Opera, continues Friday at Music Hall.**

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