

Cleveland Opera Theater to Present *Tosca*

by Mike Telin



Opera Per Tutti, founded by Andrea Anelli in 2006, made the bold announcement in December of 2014 that it would re-brand itself as Cleveland Opera Theater. The change was made with one purpose in mind: to create a sustainable model for an opera company in the 21st century in Cleveland. This is the first of three articles that will examine the many exciting endeavors the company is undertaking to make its vision to reality.

On Friday, May 8 at 7:30 pm and Sunday, May 10 at 3:00 pm at the Cleveland Performing Arts Center (formerly Masonic Auditorium), Cleveland Opera Theater will present its most ambitious production to date with Puccini's *Tosca*. Performed with full orchestra, chorus, and costumes, the production will feature sets designed by renowned Cleveland architect Richard Fleischman. To learn more about Cleveland Opera Theater's plans for the future, please visit their [website](#).

In a recent conference call with COT's music director Domenico Boyagian, artistic director Scott Skiba and education and outreach director Lisa Yanofsky, I asked the highly motivated and engaging conversationalists why *Tosca* is so wildly popular around the world, and why it made sense for the company to produce the opera at this time.

"When I was 17 this was the opera that made me realize that I needed to be a conductor," Domenico Boyagian said. "*Tosca* is life, everybody's life, and that's why people relate to it. They relate to the love story. They relate to the 'good guy, bad guy' thing. If you were to place this story in history, it could have happened yesterday. And considering that human beings never change, people will always be able to relate to it. Of course Puccini's music is so beautiful with it's lush long phrases."

Tosca tells the story of the love between Floria Tosca, an opera singer, and Mario Cavaradossi the painter and political activist (good guy). But the Baron Scarpia (bad guy) is determined to have Tosca for himself, and will stop at nothing to have her. Read a synopsis [here](#).

Director Scott Skiba agrees with Boyagian about the opera's relevance in the 21st century. "As the stage director it is my job to convince a modern audience that the story is relevant. My favorite curtain speech is to tell the audience that opera doesn't tell stories about things that happened hundreds of years ago, it tells stories about today. What makes *Tosca* so popular is the love triangle. You know who the bad guy is right away, and everybody understands sex, power, greed, lust, and death, and that's what it's about."

For COT's production, the company has planned many educational activities, and Education and Outreach Director Lisa Yanofsky thinks *Tosca* is the perfect opera for introducing young people to the art form. "One of the things that is nice about *Tosca* as a point of entry to opera is that it has universal themes. And the bad guy going after the good guy is at the heart of cartoons and super hero stories. But I don't think we need to be explicit about too many of the opera's themes because the story in and of itself is captivating."

The production will include a cast of young singers and Yanofsky is excited that they will have the experience of being immersed in the opera world as part of the cast. "During the staging workshops we've built into our residencies we will have a lot of time to talk about the character relationships with each other. For high school students *Tosca* is a great opportunity to discuss literary structure and tie it into the standards of the English and Language Arts Curriculum." Yanofsky said that other educational activities will include asking students to map out the character development and their relationship to the themes of the opera. "It's a great opportunity to do this through a piece of music because it's mostly done through literature."

Skiba added that making opera accessible to a younger audience can present a challenge because it often deals with adult themes. "A beautiful thing about opera is that the libretto is never profane. And the dialogue allows both adults and young people to enjoy it — they just take different things away from it."

Tosca marks the first COT production to be staged in a theater as large as the Performing Arts Center. "Because of the physical demands of *Tosca* we needed a larger space as well as more seating capacity. We've talked for a couple of years about producing in PAC and this seemed like the right time to make the move. The acoustics are beautiful, and there's a great organ in the space which is important to the opera's score."

The production sets are designed by renowned Cleveland architect Richard Fleischman. Skiba said the company was very pleased when Fleischman told them he wanted to become involved. “I looked at examples of his work and began to think about how his open structure concept could be used in the production.”

Skiba said the set structures will frame the physical space. The audience will be looking into the Sant’ Andrea della Valle as well as through the church and into the square. In act 3, which takes place on the roof of the Castel Sant’ Angelo, the audience will be able to see Vatican City in the background. The sets are also being built in Cleveland. The costumes, furniture and props will be circa 1800.

As excited as Boyagian, Skiba and Yanofsky are about *Tosca*, they are equally excited about having the opportunity to build a professional opera company in Cleveland. The three are also examples of artists who came to the area to study, and have chosen to call the city home.

A native of Boston, Lisa Yanofsky came to Northeast Ohio to study at Oberlin, where she earned a B.A. in Art History and Dance and a B.M. in Vocal Performance and Embodying Performance. She returned to Boston for graduate school, earning an Ed.M. in Art in Education from the Harvard Graduate School of Education. After teaching in the Boston area Yanofsky returned to Cleveland. In addition to her position at COT she is currently the Lead Resident Teaching Artist at the Center for Arts-Inspired Learning in Cleveland.

Yanofsky feels that her diverse educational background makes her uniquely qualified to work in opera. “As a young artist I find Cleveland to be very hospitable — the cost of living is so high in the Northeast. It’s appealing to be in an area where I can dig my heels in and devote all of my brain space to working as a teaching artist. And there are many artists who have world-class careers and have chosen to make Cleveland their base. On the education side, Ohio is an interesting microcosm of what is happening in the field of education across the country, and arts education is very much in the middle of that. I have the opportunity not only to be a teaching artist but also to be able to work with schools that are willing to try new things, which is great.”

Domenico Boyagian was born into opera. His father was the great baritone Garbis Boyagian, who Domenico said is his hero. Although he certainly knew about the rich cultural life of Cleveland before, it wasn’t until he moved from Italy to study at the Cleveland Institute of Music that he realized exactly how culturally rich the area is. “You can only learn about Cleveland when you live here. As amazing as The Cleveland Orchestra is, people don’t know that it is not the only thing that Cleveland has as far as music is concerned. There are a number of great professional orchestras in the area and

hundreds of wonderful artists. And the city has everything that an artist could want, from affordability to the presence of other great artists.”

Boyagian feels strongly that the community should embrace local artists in the same way it embraces the local food movement. “Restaurants promote their use of local meats and vegetables, so why shouldn’t we promote the use of local artists too? Look at The Cleveland Orchestra, so many members have studied at local conservatories like CIM, Oberlin and Baldwin Wallace. We are very lucky to have these recourses and since we do have them, we must take advantage of them. And we have to advertise that fact.”

Scott Skiba hails from Pittsburgh, which is something he said he tries not to say too loudly. “I’m very proud of my hometown, where I grew up in a blue collar family rooting for the Steelers.” Like Lisa Yanofsky, Skiba originally came to the area to study at Oberlin where, he earned a B.M. in Vocal Performance and a M.M.in Opera Theater. After he completed doctoral coursework in Voice Performance and Opera Stage Direction at the Indiana University, Skiba returned to Cleveland to be assistant professor of voice and opera workshop at the Baldwin Wallace Conservatory of Music. “Opera is so important to me that I want to bring opera training to singing actors who are interested. It was while I was at BW that I discovered Opera Per Tutti, and began working with them. To be able to have people like Domenico and Lisa come on board at the stage of Cleveland Opera Theatre’s development is amazing.”

The orchestra for *Tosca* will be a mix of veteran players who live here as well as the students. “Some of the musicians are still in school but this is not a student orchestra. Many of the players will be in major orchestras soon after graduation,” Boyagian quickly pointed out. “They will be the next world-class performers.”

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