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Ressort: Kunst, Kultur und Musik

Tosca - Pasolinian Rome

La Monnaie, 29.06.2026 [ENA]

La Monnaie's revival of Giacomo Puccini's *Tosca* in Rafael R. Villalobos's production confirms the work's status as both a perfectly engineered thriller and a disturbingly pliable political allegory. Set in a mid 20th century Italy haunted by fascism and by the ghostly presence of Pier Paolo Pasolini, this staging turns Puccini's opera into a meditation on power, martyrdom and the seductive glamour of violence.

Villalobos relocates the story from Napoleonic Rome to the era of the "strategy of tension," overlaying the plot with Pasolini's biography and imagery. An onstage look alike of Pasolini drifts through the first act as a silent observer, negotiates with a male prostitute at the start of the second, and reappears in a shadowy reenactment of the director's murder on the beach at Ostia, folded into the shepherd scene that opens act three. The shepherd's song, sung here by a remarkable falsettist (Pieter De Praetere), takes on a double resonance: at once the traditional pastoral voice of Puccini's libretto and a lament for a contemporary martyr to political and sexual hatred.

This Pasolinian frame could easily feel heavy handed, but in practice it works as a kind of spectral commentary on *Tosca*'s obsession with spectacle, faith and transgression. The director's projected quotation—"I am a non believer who has kept a nostalgia for faith"—quietly rhymes with *Tosca*'s Vissi d'arte, transforming her aria into the lament of a woman who has invested her belief in the wrong gods: art, love, and perhaps even the Church. The political references are explicit—Scarpia's henchmen wear leather uniforms that unmistakably evoke fascist iconography—yet the staging remains more allusive than voyeuristic, gesturing toward Pasolini's *Salò* without reproducing its extremity.

Visually, the production is striking in its formal restraint. Emanuele Sinisi's sets, under Felipe Ramos's stark "surgical" lighting, are composed of semi circular structures, grids and arcades in black and white, punctuated only by flashes of red—the most memorable being *Tosca*'s blood coloured cloak. The moving elements of a revolving stage recombine into the church of Sant' Andrea della Valle, Scarpia's Farnese apartments and the battlements of Castel Sant' Angelo, allowing the action to flow seamlessly while preserving a sense of claustrophobia.

The cool geometry of this environment has a double effect. On the one hand, it throws the singers' bodies into sharp relief, making every gesture legible and heightening the physical stakes of torture, pursuit and execution. On the other, it deliberately dampens the opera's traditional religious sensuality; this is a Rome

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of corridors, grids and surveillance, less Baroque than carceral. Occasionally, the emotional distance leads to what one critic called “pudeur amoureuse distante”—a certain chill in the love duets that some may find at odds with Puccini’s voluptuousness. Yet that same chill underlines the production’s thesis: in this world, intimacy is always compromised by observation.

While this inevitably sacrifices some of the original’s luxuriant blaze, it brings a clarity of texture that suits Villalobos’s analytic approach: inner lines emerge, rhythmic details snap into focus, and the singers are allowed a greater dynamic range without forcing. Under Jordan de Souza’s energetic and attentive baton, the La Monnaie orchestra gives a performance described as “courageous and committed,” finding heat and momentum even within the leaner sonority.

The chorus, prepared by Emmanuel Trenque, sings from an adjacent space, coordinated via video and high fidelity audio, a logistical solution that might have felt distancing but instead creates an uncanny effect: the “Te Deum” of act one swells like a disembodied tide of faith around Scarpia’s blasphemous self consecration. The result is liturgical and unreal at once, consistent with the production’s fascination with mediated experience.

In the cast heard by reviewers, Leah Hawkins offers a Tosca more compelling in her physical and dramatic presence than in her strictly vocal polish. Her acting ranges from near animal jealousy before Cavaradossi’s to a frightening ferocity in the murder of Scarpia; the Vissi d’arte may show some strain in intonation and vibrato, but it is imaginatively shaded and integrated into her character’s trajectory from diva to desperate killer.

Stefano La Colla’s Cavaradossi is praised for stylistic finesse and a timbre well suited to Puccini, yet some observers wished for a fuller, more openly heroic projection in climactic moments—his “Vittoria!” in act two is notably cautious. Dramatically, however, he forms a credible counterweight to Scarpia: an artist whose political commitment is less rhetorical than lived, and whose solidarity with Angelotti and, by extension, with Pasolini’s spectral figure, is clearly drawn.

Lucio Gallo’s Scarpia is a chilling creation, more bureaucrat of cruelty than operatic monster, which makes his sadism all the more believable. If the lower register occasionally lacks resonance, the overall vocal character is incisive, and the physical presence—supported by the severe leather clad costuming—anchors the evening in a recognisable, all too human authoritarianism. Among the supporting roles, Li Huanhonig’s dark voiced Angelotti, Trystan Llyr Griffiths’s rough edged Spoletta and Kamil Ben Hsaïn Lachiri’s menacing Sciarrone are all singled out for their effectiveness.

Villalobos’s Tosca is not likely to please purists who seek only a sumptuous period melodrama; its Pasolini

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overlay, reduced orchestration and stylised visuals can feel, at moments, like a network of ideas superimposed upon Puccini's streamlined dramaturgy. Yet the production's very willingness to think with and against the opera makes it memorable. By binding Mario's fate to that of Pasolini, it insists that the violence of Tosca is not an operatic aberration but part of a continuum that stretches from papal Rome to the fascist decades and beyond.

Musically accomplished, visually rigorous and intellectually ambitious, this La Monnaie Tosca does what any contemporary staging of a classic should aspire to do: it reopens a familiar work to new readings without betraying its core. The result is an evening that is as absorbing for the mind as it is gripping for the senses—less a comforting repertory piece than a mirror held up to the unresolved violences of modern European history.

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