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Tosca

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Virginia Opera
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AMONG OPERA SCENES considered sacrosanct by segments of the public and press, the post-murder, crucifix-and-candles ritual carried out by the impetuous heroine of Puccini's *Tosca* at the end of Act II with Scarpia's body doubtless ranks high on the list. But there's always room for variations on the norm, as Virginia Opera demonstrated in a forty-fifth-season-opening production, directed by Lillian Groag. Here, Tosca kept long white gloves on until the visually striking moment when, realizing they were now blood-stained, she took them off and slowly arranged them, cross-shaped, on the uber-villain's chest (nodding to convention, Tosca positioned a candelabra near the corpse, too). Groag popped in a few other individualistic bits, including a wee, impish boy as Cavaradossi's devoted and, in the closing moments, devastated assistant. Such additions enhanced theatrical interest amid comfort-food sets (Michael Yeorgan) and costumes (assorted sources). An appealing cast got to the heart of the drama on October 13 at George Mason University's Center for the Arts. Ewa Płonka brought a firm, sizable, cream-at-the-center soprano and persuasive acting to the title role. Although her straightforward "Vissi d'arte" didn't quite galvanize, she made her mark with plenty of freshness in her phrasing elsewhere. The last "muori" aimed at Scarpia, for example, was delivered with telling restraint, more of a pitiful question than the usual furious demand. And the Act III duet found Płonka summoning considerable variety of coloristic nuance, along with seamless legato, to make Tosca's vision of a blissful future sound all the sweeter.

A natural at conveying Cavaradossi's charm and self-confidence, Matthew Vickers gave the performance its first big musical jolt with a fervent, yet thoroughly elegant, "Recondita armonia" sculpted in long-breathed phrases. Some glint would have been welcome at the top end of the voice, but the tenor's overall suavity of tone and technique impressed throughout (holding onto his last note in "E lucevan le stelle" until quite a while after the orchestra stopped playing was a rare miscalculation).

Kyle Albertson's bass-baritone may have been a bit shy of visceral power, but the vibrancy and top-to-bottom smoothness of the voice provided plenty of fuel for his telling portrayal of Scarpia, reaching a peak in Act II, ever-attentive to subtleties of text and as adept at seductive glow as fiery outburst. The singer didn't ham up the Baron's sleaze, but got the point across with such simple gestures as, in Act I, flicking away the remnants of holy water on his fingers after making contact with Tosca's hand.

On double duty, bass-baritone Andrew Simpson offered urgent phrases as Angelotti and enhanced the Jailer's few lines with dark, round tones (more kind-hearted than usual, this turnkey returned Cavaradossi's ring at the last-minute). Joshua Arky revealed a light, promising bass-baritone as the Sacristan. Lively, if small-scale, singing came from Louis Alexander Riva (Spoletta) and Brett Bode (Sciarrone). The shepherd's distant song hardly evoked a boyish image, but Celeste Godin's ample soprano made an appealing effect. The chorus summoned sufficient heft for the Te Deum.

Conductor Adam Turner kept things taut and flowing (more spaciousness for the melodic peaks in the Act I love duet would have been welcome), while his usual appreciation for orchestral detail yielded rewards. An odd hiccup or two aside, the Virginia Symphony played the evergreen score with considerable finesse and warmth. —*Tim Smith*