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# Opera



**Kurtág's 'Fin de partie' at La Scala**

**Christopher Maltman — fully weaponized**

**Singing is simple, but ... Part 2**

**Stuart MacRae on Birtwistle**

**'Caponsacchi' revisited**

**More Than Musical's *The Kiss of Tosca***

# China

## Hong Kong

Note to designers of *Turandot*: when fashioning the palace floor, avoid the red Mylar. There was much to admire in OPERA HONG KONG's new production at the HONG KONG CULTURAL CENTRE, but the most lasting impression came from members of the Edge 'n Pointe Dance Centre, whose elaborate footwork resulted in a hooper's equivalent of scraping fingernails across a blackboard, covering nearly 20 minutes of Puccini's score.

This was particularly distressing given that the conductor Paolo Olmi held his cast, the Hong Kong Philharmonic Orchestra and the Opera Hong Kong Chorus together in such utter musical cohesion. One could quibble with Olmi's general briskness—indeed, the children's chorus seemed to consider their performance something of a race—but ultimately, the pacing made his slower tempos all the more effective.

The casting on October 11 was a mixed bag. Gustavo Porta's Calaf was physically imposing, though not terribly animated in either voice or body. Mlada Khudoley took some time to blossom as Turandot, but negotiated effectively between the role's dramatic and lyrical demands. Natalya Pavlova's Liù was sympathetic without being saccharine.

The results on October 14 were considerably more effective. Oksana Dyka's Turandot was vocally large and supremely vibrant. Alfred Kim's Calaf rang with such clarity that his 'Nessun dorma' was less a wistful rumination than a defiant call. Valeria Sepe's Liù was the opposite, luring listeners close through a quiet intensity. Particularly notable among local singers (who repeated minor roles in both casts) were Sammy Chien's Ping, Chen Chen's Pang and Chen Yong's Pong, whose collective comic timing was deftly supported by Olmi in the pit.

The mind still boggles, though, over Michael Capasso's staging, a joint endeavour with New York City Opera. The Mylar flooring was merely a symptom of deeper shortsightedness. One could certainly argue for removing a realistic China from the proceedings—Capasso's programme note rightly indicated the story's Persian roots and pre-Puccini history on the Italian dramatic stage. The problem is that it didn't go far enough. Any production with enough insight to put several characters in *commedia dell'arte* masks but without referencing China's stage tradition of painted faces fails its local potential. Any costume design that so haphazardly mingles visual motifs from various dynasties and ethnicities with no apparent reasoning or subtext would seem less of a 'concept' to audiences here than yet another example of lazy Western ignorance.

MORE THAN MUSICAL's production *The Kiss of Tosca*, on the other hand, could not have made its concept any clearer. Hong Kong's fledgling chamber opera company has learnt a key lesson since its first outing with *La traviata*; the added 'kiss' warned audiences not to expect pure Puccini but rather a theatricalized experience. Whether or not presenting Puccini's 'shabby little shocker' on Halloween was part of the concept, the October 31 performance embraced its possibilities, not least in ironic costuming. Cavaradossi, visual artist and political revolutionary, topped his 19th-century garb with



■ *Nicholas Muni's compressed 'Tosca' in Hong Kong, with Karen Chia-Ling Ho in the title role and Carlo Kang as Scarpia*

a headscarf and sunglasses. Baron Scarpia, in stylish period black, wore slicked-back hair like an extra from *The Sopranos*. Tosca, the celebrated diva in a satin trouser suit, commanded the stage looking rather like a resplendent androgynous vampire. The director Nicholas Muni's 80-minute reduction compressed several minor roles, from Angelotti to Scarpia's henchmen, into a single entity identified only as The Monk, a grey-hooded figure recalling Death in Bergman's *The Seventh Seal*. From there, Muni's production

design turned THE ANNEX (by day a luxury showroom and event space in a shopping mall) into a stage area comprising a central podium with three surrounding floor-level stations (one containing a three-person pit band led by the pianist and music director Wei-En Hsu). High-definition projections provided the story's three iconic settings.

Though much stands to be lost in reduction, at least one moment was notably gained. Reapportioning the Shepherd Boy's aria—one of the few bits not given to The Monk—to Tosca herself referenced Sardou's original play, where Tosca was discovered as a singer while tending sheep. Elsewhere, any sacrifice in operatic grandeur was compensated for by theatrical immediacy.

The young cast smoothly calibrated opera-house volume and intensity to the audience's closer proximity. Karen Chia-Ling Ho's Tosca, with broad emotional shading, bore the lioness's share of the drama. Jung Soo Yun's Cavaradossi took some time to settle vocally. Carlo Kang's Scarpia was the picture of one-dimensional evil. Stefan Gordon's Monk maintained an appropriately haunting, shadowy presence throughout.

Lacking a dinner setting, Tosca stabbed Scarpia with her hairpin. Lacking a proper firing squad, Cavaradossi was executed by a throat slash. With the podium only a few inches from the ground, Tosca's suicide leap gave way to a brutal neck twist. Other directors playing fast and loose with the story's iconic deaths—most notably Christopher Alden for Opera North—generally clash with Puccini's score. By contrast, Hsu's pit trio was harnessed smoothly to Muni's concept. This *Kiss of Tosca* was hardly shabby; in fact, it proved that the story still has a few shocks left.

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