Musical Clues to Deception, Desire, and Jealousy in Puccini's Tosca

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Giacomo Puccini (1858–1924)

The Psychological Function of the Leitmotif

This article is based on a chapter from The Psyche in Music, a book I am writing on Puccini's Tosca, in which I analyze how Puccini depicts the characters' psychology and personality structure through the stratification of the orchestra, primarily by means of their leitmotifs.



Cavaradossi: Lamberto Furlan. Angelotti: Sebastian Swane. Sydney Operaen

A leitmotif is a short, recognizable musical figure associated with persons, emotions, or ideas, enabling the composer to express psychological layers without words and to add further dimensions to the drama. The leitmotifs in Tosca are among the opera's most ingenious and subtle devices. There are more than forty of them, and most of the opera's music consists of these.

Unlike background music in film, which mainly reinforces what we already see and feel, leitmotifs become an independent language, through which each of the orchestra's approximately eighty musicians tells entirely different stories about what unfolds within the characters' psyche. They reveal repressions, deceptions, foretell catastrophes, hint at love before it is acknowledged, and communicate what the characters truly feel. This can expose hidden motives, open up double meanings, or allow a past emotional state to intrude upon the present. For example, a character may express love for another while the orchestra simultaneously plays the deception motif. We then understand that the character is dissembling and lying.

Puccini's motivic technique has been criticized as decorative, superficial, or as a confusing and contradictory amalgam of traditions, at times effective, at other times overly explicit, and occasionally directly disruptive. I find this criticism misguided. On the contrary, I contend that his motivic work has often been misunderstood and underestimated, and that it contains a far greater psychological and dramaturgical depth than has previously been assumed. In what follows, I will demonstrate this through a concrete example.

Familiarity with the music is not a prerequisite for understanding my arguments.

A Brief Synopsis of the Plot

The opera's three acts unfold over approximately twenty-four hours in Rome in June 1800.

The action revolves around three principal characters: the celebrated singer Floria Tosca, her lover, the painter Mario Cavaradossi, and the powerful chief of police, Baron Scarpia.

Napoleon Bonaparte's revolutionary armies are at war with much of Europe. Rome has temporarily been a republic supported by France but has now fallen to Austrian forces, which restore papal rule. The former consul of the republic, Cesare Angelotti, has escaped from prison and seeks refuge in Sant'Andrea della Valle, where his sister, the Marchesa Attavanti, has hidden the key to the family chapel so that he may conceal himself there.

Cavaradossi is working in the church on a painting of Mary Magdalene. In the aria Recondita armonia ("Hidden harmony"), he reveals to the Sacristan that the model's face is inspired by a woman he has seen praying in the chapel. He is not yet aware that she is the Marchesa Attavanti. After the Sacristan departs, Angelotti emerges and asks Cavaradossi for help.

Tosca arrives suddenly, calling out to Cavaradossi, forcing Angelotti to hide. Tosca, known for her jealousy, immediately becomes suspicious. He reassures her, but when she recognizes Attavanti's face in the painting, she accuses him of infidelity. He denies it, and once she has left, he offers Angelotti shelter in his garden well. They flee when a cannon shot signals that the escape has been discovered.

Shortly thereafter, Scarpia arrives and discovers the traces. Tosca returns, and Scarpia, having found a fan bearing Attavanti's initials, arouses her jealousy and insinuates that Cavaradossi is having an affair.



Tosca 1. akt.

The second act takes place in Scarpia's office in the Palazzo Farnese. Cavaradossi is interrogated and tortured in order to reveal Angelotti's whereabouts. Tosca attempts to stop the torture and is forced to negotiate with Scarpia. He offers to spare Cavaradossi's life in exchange for sexual favors. Tosca pretends to agree but kills him with a knife when he approaches her. She takes a document intended to secure Cavaradossi's freedom.



Tosca 2. akt.

The third act unfolds early the next morning atop Castel Sant'Angelo. Cavaradossi prepares for his execution, but Tosca arrives and tells him that the execution will merely be simulated. When the soldiers fire, he falls, but it proves to be a real execution. When Scarpia's murder is soon discovered and the soldiers attempt to arrest Tosca, she chooses to take her own life, throwing herself from the battlements.



Tosca 3. akt.

Cavaradossi's Infidelity and Tosca's Jealousy

The Disturbing Motif of the Marchesa Attavanti

In what follows, I will demonstrate how Puccini, through a single leitmotif, allows the presence of an unseen woman to disrupt the harmony that both Cavaradossi and Tosca strive to maintain. A harmony that may not be harmonious at all and may exist only within their own imaginations.

Cavaradossi sings his first aria, Recondita armonia ("Hidden harmony"), while standing on the scaffold and contemplating his own painting, created after an unknown woman in the church. At the same time, he holds Tosca's portrait in a medallion.

The text of the aria is as follows:

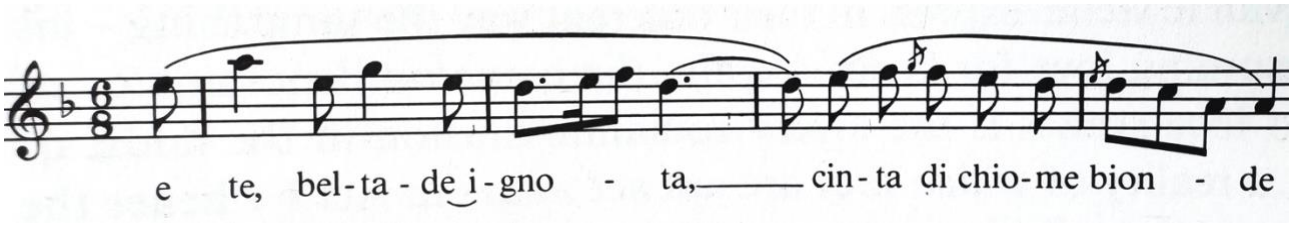
Italian	**English**
Recondita armonia di bellezze diverse!	Hidden harmony of different beauties!
È bruna Floria, l'ardente amante mia.	Floria is dark-haired, my ardent lover.
E te, beltade ignota, cinta di chiome bionde!	And you, unknown beauty, crowned with blonde hair.
Tu azzurro hai l'occhio…	Your eyes are blue…
Tosca ha l'occhio nero!	Tosca's eyes are black!
L'arte nel suo mistero le diverse bellezze insiem confonde;	Art, in its mystery, blends different beauties together.
ma nel ritrar costei	Yet while painting her,
il mio solo pensiero, Tosca, sei tu!	my only thought, Tosca, is you!

The aria may, at first glance, appear to be a hymn to Tosca's beauty, yet beneath its lyrical surface tensions and undercurrents emerge, suggesting far more complex emotional and psychological layers. It is not merely a declaration of love, but an example of how Puccini, with surgical precision, allows music and text to articulate a divided consciousness and an emotional ambivalence.

The aria becomes a reflection on art's capacity to reconcile opposites, on the hidden harmony of beauty. What might be read as an innocent meditation on aesthetics in fact reveals an inner struggle. Cavaradossi highlights Attavanti with an unmistakable erotic fascination, "beltade ignota" ("unknown beauty"), supported by delicate melodic gestures: small delayed tones that create and prolong tension before resolving a fraction of a beat later. He then declares, almost convincingly, that his only thought is Tosca: "Il mio solo pensiero, Tosca, sei tu!" ("My only thought, Tosca, is you!").

At precisely the moment when he, in the text, praises the fair-haired unknown beauty, the orchestra discreetly weaves in the Marchesa Attavanti motif: "E te, beltade ignota, cinta di

chiome bionde!" ("And you, unknown beauty, crowned with blonde hair!"). He invokes art's ability to unite differences within a single image, yet the choice of motif tells us that his mind is drawn toward what is, in fact, not Tosca. It is as though the music reveals what the words attempt to deny. Cavaradossi appears susceptible, influenced not only by his muse, but by feminine beauty itself.



Puccini's use of the Attavanti motif in this aria is masterfully understated. It slips into both the vocal line and the orchestration without yet emerging as a clearly delineated motivic idea. Instead, it is woven into the musical fabric, as though Attavanti exists in the shadows, both within the opera's dramatic structure and within Cavaradossi's mind. Puccini's decision not to grant her a sharply defined motif at this point, but to embed it within the aria itself, points directly to her function as an absent threat and projection. She never appears physically in the opera, yet her presence continues to haunt the drama.

Is it then so strange that Tosca becomes jealous? Cavaradossi paints Attavanti as Magdalene, endowing her with precisely those classical features that attract him, and justifies himself through art's mysterious power to unite differences. What does it tell us that he not only paints her, but also lingers over her features in an aria ostensibly devoted to Tosca? Is his declaration, "my only thought is you, Tosca," an expression of conviction or an act of rationalization?

The ambiguity becomes even more striking when, just after Cavaradossi has proclaimed that Tosca is his only thought, Puccini allows the orchestra to quote the Attavanti motif once more in the aria's postlude, almost like a revealing protest from the unconscious. The music, unlike the words, seems not entirely persuaded by his fidelity.

This double meaning also casts light on Tosca's jealousy, which emerges not as hysteria, but as psychologically grounded.

It is equally noteworthy that Cavaradossi's first aria, Recondita armonia, despite its apparent tribute to Tosca's beauty, contains none of the love motif that later becomes so central to their relationship. Instead, Puccini conceals Attavanti's motif within the aria.

Cavaradossi's genuine love motif associated with Tosca appears only later, when he stands face to face with her and directly expresses his love: "Qual occhio al mondo può star di paro all'ardente occhio tuo nero?" ("What eye in the world could compare with your burning dark eyes?"). Only now does his love for Tosca acquire its own distinct musical identity. Not earlier, when he painted and idealized, but here, within the immediacy of direct emotional contact.

Their shared love motif arises as they continue their exchange. He calls her “Mia gelosa!” (“My jealous one!”), and she responds, “Sì, lo sento... ti tormento senza posa” (“Yes, I know... I torment you incessantly.”). This shared love motif recurs countless times throughout the opera. As their love becomes increasingly impossible, Puccini progressively destabilizes and dissolves the motif, both melodically and harmonically.

The absence of a true love motif for Tosca in Cavaradossi’s first love aria, Recondita armonia, together with the embedding of the Attavanti motif within the aria and its repetition in the postlude, mirrors the tension and doubt that underlie their relationship. Their love is passionate, yet not without fissures. In the music, as so often with Puccini, we hear the truth, even when the characters attempt to deny it.

The Return of the Motif as Inner Revelation

That the Attavanti motif does not remain merely a melodic fragment within Cavaradossi’s aria, but gradually assumes an independent musical presence, becomes evident at the moment when it detaches itself from its original context.

When Scarpia later discovers Attavanti’s fan bearing her initials, left behind at Angelotti’s hiding place, the motif is heard discreetly in the orchestra, functioning as an aural suggestion of betrayal. Significantly, neither Tosca nor Scarpia has previously heard the motif. It operates instead as a subjective quotation, echoing Cavaradossi’s earlier, erotically charged evocation of Attavanti in Recondita armonia. As the motif reappears, quoting a fragment of Cavaradossi’s aria, it begins to acquire its own motivic identity as a sonic return of his desire.

The moment grows darker still when Scarpia, in his characteristic sadistic manner, feigns disdain for Tosca’s intelligence and asks, “È arnese da pittore questo?!” (“Is this a painter’s tool?”), before calmly and deceitfully explaining that the fan was found “Là su quel palco” (“up there, on the scaffold”). The entire exchange is designed to wound and unsettle. At this point, the orchestra responds, almost like an accomplice, with a subdued repetition of the Attavanti motif, forming an inexorable counterpart to Tosca’s growing suspicion. A moment later, Tosca sees the initials. She understands.

Here the motif truly emerges in its own right. It is no longer simply part of the Recondita armonia aria, but assumes an independent psychological function. Yet this function does not point solely to Attavanti as a person, nor merely to Scarpia’s deception, but to the echo of desire already disclosed by Cavaradossi. Although one might assume that the motif appears to support Scarpia’s insinuation that Tosca has been betrayed, its role extends beyond that immediate dramatic purpose.

Neither Scarpia nor Tosca has heard the motif before, nor do they know its earlier significance. When Puccini allows it to return, it does not serve to identify Attavanti as a concrete rival, but to awaken the listener’s memory of the moment when Cavaradossi, enraptured, described her as “beltade ignota, cinta di chiome bionde,” the unknown beauty crowned with blonde hair.

The motif reappears as a kind of meta-commentary. The music itself suggests that Tosca's unease may contain more than a reflex of jealousy. Scarpia is not the only agent of disturbance. The orchestra whispers that something unresolved persists. What we hear is not Attavanti herself, but the underlying erotic susceptibility within Cavaradossi's psyche. The motif functions as an aural revelation of potential unfaithfulness.

It resurfaces in the second act when Cavaradossi is led in for torture and Tosca remains alone with Scarpia. No mention of Attavanti appears in the dialogue. The music therefore comments upon what remains unspoken. Attavanti continues to hover within the drama as an absent threat, an invisible rival nourished by Tosca's vulnerability, yet rooted equally in Cavaradossi's earlier musical confession.

Shortly thereafter, as Tosca and Scarpia stand together just before the torture scene, he asks with insinuating courtesy, "L'Attavanti non era dunque alla villa?" ("Attavanti was not at the villa?"), and Tosca replies, "No: egli era solo" ("No, he was alone."). The Attavanti motif is heard quietly beneath Scarpia's question, almost like an unspoken presence dominating the scene. When Tosca answers, it is striking that she herself now sings against the motif. Why invoke Attavanti's musical identity if Cavaradossi was indeed alone? Puccini reveals that doubt has already taken hold. The motif has become a wound rather than merely a sign of jealousy, a symbol of Tosca's fragility and her fear of losing emotional security.

A Psychodrama in the Voice of the Orchestra

Puccini's decision to integrate and conceal the Attavanti motif within Cavaradossi's first aria, and later to allow it to surface in vulnerable and revealing situations, constitutes a narrative in itself. It is musical psychodrama in its purest form: what is not shown becomes paramount. For the listener, the motif may suggest possible unfaithfulness or a latent desire, yet this is not necessarily an objective truth about Cavaradossi's emotions. It is a musical construction through which Puccini opens an interpretative space, a sonic subtext capable of arousing uncertainty and jealousy in Tosca while simultaneously inviting the audience to sense an underlying ambiguity in the relationship. In this very act of musical veiling, arising from a figure defined by absence, Puccini demonstrates how music renders the concealed perceptible and the repressed emotionally tangible.

Although the Marchesa Attavanti never appears on stage in Tosca, her presence is anything but absent. Through a few, yet striking musical gestures, Puccini establishes her as an invisible force within the drama's inner psychology. The Attavanti motif functions as more than a musical reference to a named woman. It becomes a reflection of Cavaradossi's possible attraction to other women, carrying undertones of desire, flirtation, and perhaps earlier infidelities. In the motif, Tosca hears more than the identity of an aristocratic woman. She hears the echo of every woman Cavaradossi might desire, may have desired, may have known too well.

For Tosca, the motif comes to embody the fundamental uncertainty inherent in love. Has he been faithful? Does he, in truth, long for something else? Musically, Attavanti thus becomes a catalyst for Tosca's growing anxiety and jealousy. She reacts not solely to an external

threat, but to something deeper and more archetypal: the presence of another woman within the beloved's mind, the unseen potential rival. Scarpia senses this dynamic and, with his characteristic instinct for psychological manipulation, exploits it repeatedly and with calculated cruelty.

Attavanti therefore ceases to function merely as a secondary character within the plot. She becomes a psychological projection, a sonic apparition haunting the fragility of the lovers' bond. In this way, she exists not in the external action, but within the characters' desires, insecurities, and unconscious impulses. She is the presence of feminine absence itself, and it is precisely this absence that speaks most powerfully through the music. A symbol of what may have been, or what might yet be.

She does not inhabit the stage, but lives within their psyche and within ours. For that reason, her motif becomes one of the most psychologically unsettling in the entire opera, not because of who she is, but because of what she awakens.

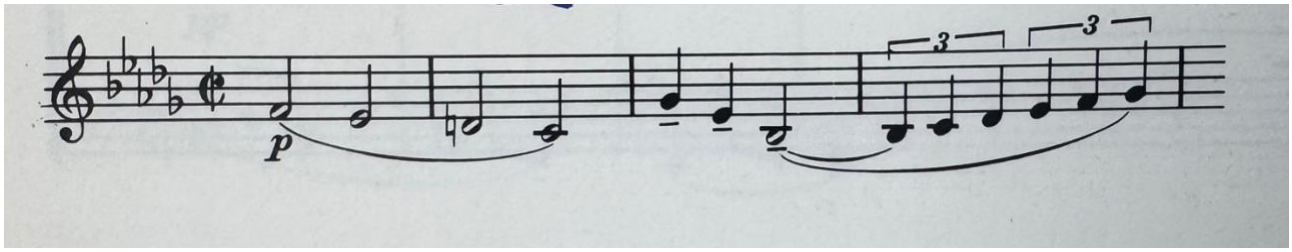
From Heroic Motif to Music of Violation

Puccini's Psychological Perversion of Cavaradossi's Motif in Scarpia's Fantasy of Domination

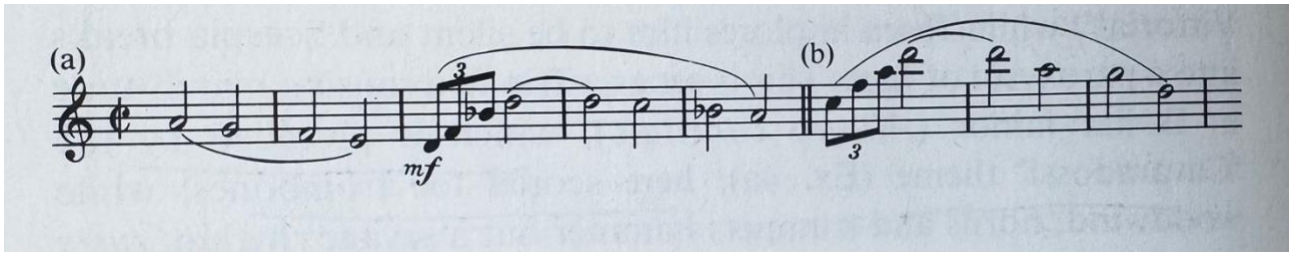
In the scene in which the negotiations over Mario Cavaradossi's life unfold between Tosca and Scarpia, Puccini reveals the full sophistication of his psychological motivic technique. Here, the method bears closer affinity to Wagner's motivic practice, where motifs are not merely reused but undergo melodic and semantic transformation in response to their dramatic context. This occurs through the so-called "price motif," a lyrical idea that on the surface appears to concern an exchange, yet in Puccini's hands evolves into a musical expression of something far more unsettling and perverse.

The motif begins to take shape at the moment in Act II when Tosca asks Scarpia: "Il prezzo?" — "What price?" In the orchestra, we hear a figure that immediately recalls Cavaradossi's heroic motif, first introduced when he mounts the scaffold following his entrance, yet now altered through a displaced intervallic structure. This resemblance is deliberate. The motif signals how Scarpia begins to distort Cavaradossi's heroic musical identity, transforming it into an expression of the price Tosca herself must pay in order to save him.

The motif is repeated three times in the orchestra, sequenced across different pitch levels, while Scarpia sings: "Già! Mi dicon venal…" — "Yes! They call me venal…"



Cavaradossi's Motif



(a) Price-motif — (b) Desire-motif

Here Scarpia reveals his own moral decay. He is driven by power and lust, yet disguises this impulse as a matter-of-fact transaction. In this form, the motif is distorted into the price motif. Shortly thereafter, Scarpia explains: "ma a donna bella non mi vendo a prezzo di moneta." — "But for a beautiful woman, I do not sell myself for money." At this moment, the stepwise price motif suddenly expands with explosive energy across an octave in the orchestra.

Scarpia concludes his monologue with the words: "Agil qual leopardo t'avvinghiasti all'amante; ah! In quell'istante t'ho giurata mia!... Mia!" — "Agile as a leopard, you clung to your lover. Ah! In that instant, I swore you would be mine. Mine!" The motif now becomes highly expressive, articulated in both the orchestra and Scarpia's vocal line. It is expanded through violent octave leaps and culminates dramatically on a high G-flat, the highest note in his part.

What previously functioned as a musical expression of Cavaradossi's moral idealism is transformed into a sonic manifestation of Scarpia's perverted obsession and desire. It has become the fully developed desire motif, twisted out of Cavaradossi's musical identity through the price motif. It now stands as a musical imprint of Scarpia's lust, cloaked as negotiation.

Scarpia's desire is nourished not by female submission, but by resistance, passion, and hatred. He does not merely seek to possess the woman. He seeks to break and destroy her. His sadism unfolds as musical violence. Tosca's body, her pain, her jealousy as she clings to Cavaradossi, becomes precisely the stimulus that ignites his arousal. The moment is profoundly disturbing. At the very point where Tosca expresses her deepest love, Scarpia resolves to exploit and annihilate it.

The price motif is thus transformed into the very desire that must be satisfied. It does not function as a negotiation motif, but as an expression of sadistic control and sexual

domination. Through the desire motif, the orchestra reveals that the price is not money, but humiliation. Not an equal exchange, but a violation. Scarpia's excitation lies in possessing Tosca while her lover is executed. The simulated execution constitutes only the external deception. The true falsehood is deeper and infinitely more cruel. Tosca is not merely to be humiliated, but forced to recognize that the humiliation was futile, since Cavaradossi will be shot regardless. Tosca must surrender herself for nothing. In this duality lies Scarpia's ultimate sadistic triumph.

Scarpia eliminates his rival not only physically, but musically. He appropriates Cavaradossi's role, both as lover and as sonic identity. Musically, Scarpia replaces Cavaradossi, his sound, his life.

Here lies the most unsettling dimension. The transformation of Cavaradossi's motif does not merely depict a perverse power play, but a total appropriation. Scarpia installs himself in Mario's place. He destroys him not solely by taking his life, but by occupying his musical and sexual position. He becomes the figure who, within the music, possesses Tosca. Not through love, but through violence and degradation. It is as though he cannibalistically devours the rival's function, absorbing it into himself, until Cavaradossi's presence dissolves within Scarpia's body and sound.

In psychology, the concept of appropriation refers to the seizure of another's place or function. This is precisely what occurs here. Scarpia appropriates Cavaradossi's position as Tosca's lover. He does not seek to become Mario, but to occupy his relational role, forcing Tosca's love to stand under the shadow of his desire. It is not merely annihilation, but violent usurpation, through which Scarpia transforms Tosca's experience of love into an instrument of sadism.

Within the progression from heroic motif to price motif and finally to desire motif, we hear how Cavaradossi's musical identity gradually becomes Scarpia's. The transformation reveals that Scarpia assumes the lover's role once occupied by Cavaradossi, yet in a perverted form, where the language of love is converted into the music of violence.

Puccini's decision to let Scarpia enact this appropriation of Cavaradossi is not an isolated instance. A similar process unfolds earlier in the opera, when Scarpia himself sings Angelotti's motif in the first act, while informing the Sacristan that a prisoner has escaped from Castel Sant'Angelo. Had Angelotti's motif merely served as a reference to the person being discussed, it would have sufficed for the orchestra alone to present the theme. That Scarpia instead sings it himself introduces a far deeper significance. What was originally the melody of a dignified consul becomes a sign of domination. Scarpia appropriates Angelotti's motif as though musically occupying his position, stripping it of dignity so that the motif now resounds as evidence of authoritarian control. When the orchestra later unfolds the motif with renewed force, the displacement is unmistakable. It is no longer Angelotti's own voice, but Scarpia's appropriated version of it.

As with Cavaradossi, Scarpia appropriates Angelotti's motif in order to destroy him from within. He does not sing with him, but upon him. In this gesture lies a profoundly disturbing implication. Scarpia's power is not merely physical and political, but musical. He is capable

of appropriating the motifs of others, bending their function, and thereby erasing them twice: first as persons, then as musical identities.

The desire motif returns repeatedly throughout this act. Particularly striking is its appearance beneath Scarpia's words: "Sei troppo bella, Tosca, e troppo amante. Cedo. A misero prezzo: tu, a me una vita, io, a te chieggo un istante!" — "You are too beautiful, Tosca, and love too deeply. I yield. For a paltry price: you ask me for a life; I ask you for a moment!"

It returns again just before Scarpia utters: "Tosca, finalmente mia!" — "Tosca, finally mine!" — only a second before he attempts to violate her. Yet at the instant when Scarpia believes himself closest to fulfillment, the desire motif is brutally interrupted. Tosca's knife plunges into his chest. In a single stroke, the motif of desire becomes the accompaniment of death. Sex and death stand as archetypal forces: Eros and Thanatos in stark dramatic confrontation.

Puccini's psychological subtlety does not end here. The motif undergoes one final transformation. After the murder, immediately following Tosca's famous words, "E avanti a lui tremava tutta Roma!" — "Before him all Rome trembled!" — and before she retrieves the two candlesticks that she will soon place beside his body, the desire motif unexpectedly reappears. This time entirely cleansed of passion. Puccini explicitly instructs in the score that it be performed sostenuto. What we hear is no longer Scarpia's burning desire, but an emptied residue of it. The motif that once signified his power now survives only as a pale afterimage.

Puccini opens yet another layer of meaning. In the murder scene, Tosca cries out on unnotated tones: "Questo è il bacio di Tosca!" — "This is Tosca's kiss!" — and shortly thereafter: "E ucciso da una donna! M'hai assai torturata!" — "And killed by a woman! You have tortured me enough!"

She articulates the transformation herself. The kiss, desire itself, becomes a lethal weapon. When the desire motif subsequently returns in the orchestra, immediately after her declaration that all Rome trembled before him, it functions as a musical recollection of that kiss. No longer Scarpia's triumph, but Tosca's victory.

The motif ceases to signify Tosca's humiliation. It becomes the sign of her revenge. One might even hear it as the sound of a price paid. Not the price Scarpia demanded, her submission, but the price Tosca herself chooses: murder as payment for Mario's life. The motif that once embodied Scarpia's obsession is transformed into the sound of desire defeated.

Mosco Carner and Julian Budden both suggest that the motif here merely refers to Scarpia's desire. This interpretation, in my view, overlooks Puccini's deeper intention. Puccini clearly draws upon Wagner's technique of psychological transformation. A single motif illuminates the entire psychological drama. Cavaradossi's heroic motif is distorted into the price motif, which then evolves into Scarpia's desire motif. When the motif returns after the murder in the restrained sostenuto form indicated by Puccini, it no longer signifies Scarpia's impulse, but an exhausted shadow reshaped by Tosca's action.

The motif of desire, stripped of passion, now resounds as Tosca's price. She refuses to pay with her body and instead chooses murder as payment for Mario's life. It is as though the music declares: "Your desire cost you everything."

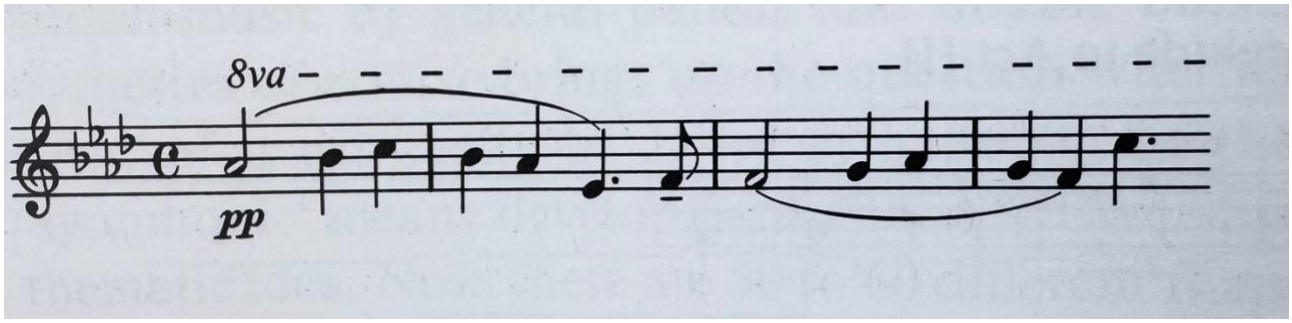
Thus emerges a final, chilling transformation. Scarpia, who sought to make Tosca the price, becomes it himself. His desire dissolves into an empty echo, while Tosca's act stands as the opera's ultimate reckoning.

In the opera's inexorable calculus, none escapes without paying the highest price. Tosca, Cavaradossi, and Scarpia all pay with their lives.

Floria Tosca's Motifs and the Aria "Vissi d'arte"

Following the two previous chapters, respectively on Marchesa Attavanti's motif and Cavaradossi's heroic motif, we now turn to Tosca's aria and motifs. Once again, I attempt to demonstrate that Puccini's motivic technique reaches far deeper than has traditionally been assumed. The motifs function not merely as musical markers of recognition or dramatic signals. Rather, they carry a far more subtle psychological content, through which the characters' inner lives and the forces that unconsciously shape their actions are revealed. The articles are a small excerpt from the book I am currently writing on Tosca.

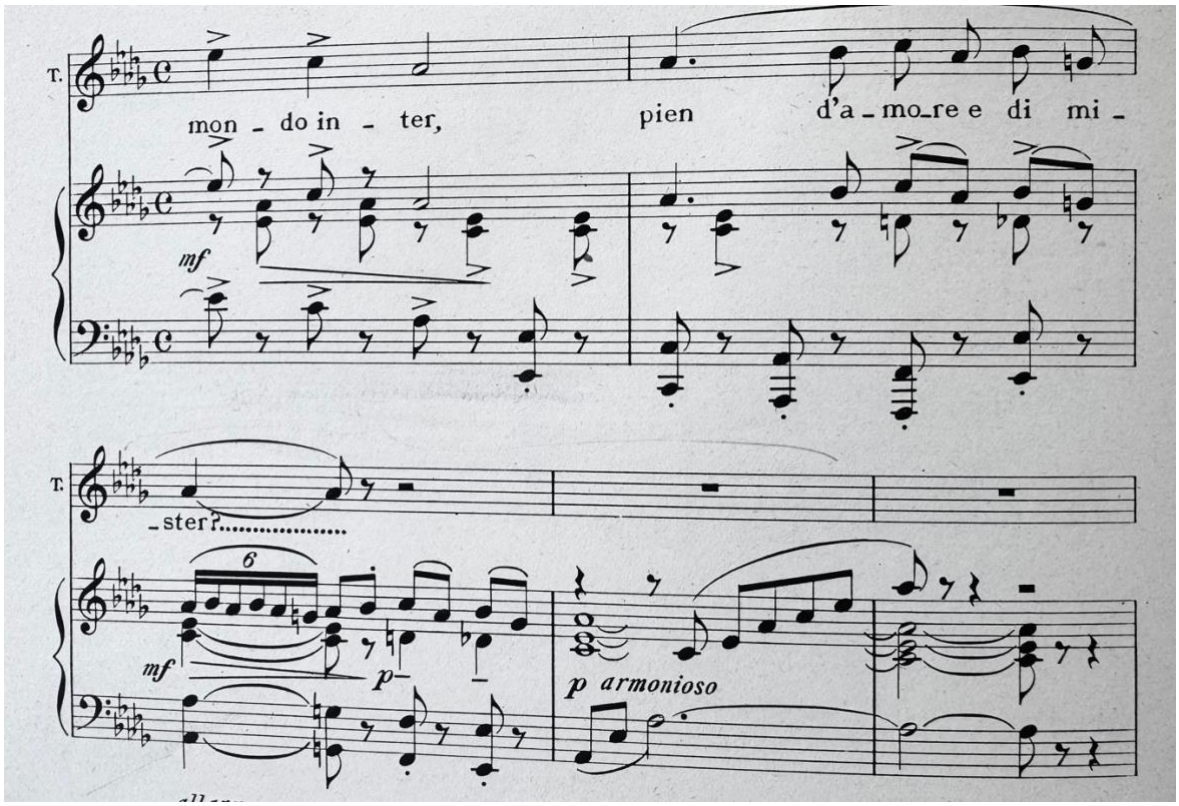
Tosca's motif emerges in Act I at her entrance into the church, carried by the lyrical tone of the flute, like a swaying veil over the sacred space, delicate with longing mingled with unease, containing a hint of jealousy's need for control. Beneath the flute line, the pizzicato strings prick like a restlessness that needles the listener, much like Tosca's own anxious questions to Mario: "Who were you speaking to?" This pricking quality contains both her insecurity and vulnerability, but also an irritable tone, because jealousy has already been set in motion.



Tosca's motif

This motif, which quickly becomes double-bound, branches into two aspects of Tosca's emotional world: her loving devotion and her jealousy. The sequential ending, with parallel

thirds accompanying the words “Altre parole bisbigliavi” (“You whispered other words”), telling us that she heard him whispering to another person, whom she assumes could be a female rival, is the signature of jealousy: a refrain that repeats itself in small variations throughout her arioso and like a rhythm in her mind, a spiral of mistrust, love, and possessive passion. This fusion of love and control recurs four times in her short arioso, a kind of inner refrain in which Puccini allows the jealousy motif to emerge in shifting lines. The first time on the text: “pien d’amore e di mister?” (“full of love and mystery?”). The second time on the text “che ammolliscono i cuori” (“that soften hearts”). The third time on the text “Arde in Tosca un folle amor” (“A mad love burns in Tosca”). And the fourth time immediately after Tosca sings “Mio amore!” (“My beloved”), where it is heard in the orchestra as an afterphrase.



Tosca’s Jealousy Motif

The jealousy motif is marked by burning passion. The text carries her great passion and infatuation, but because we have already heard the motif in the shadow of jealousy, it also resonates with a duality when it accompanies her most intimate declarations of love. It is therefore never entirely free from an undercurrent of anxiety. Every note contains not only devotion, but also the jealous lover’s fear of losing what, for her, is irreplaceable. In this way, even love’s highest expression becomes coloured by insecurity and possessiveness.

Later, Tosca returns to the church, alone and visibly distressed, only to discover that Cavaradossi has disappeared. Dramaturgically, this is fully justified. Her return does not arise from jealousy or a desire to control him, as is often mistakenly assumed. She comes to cancel their planned meeting, because she has just been engaged to sing for the Queen,

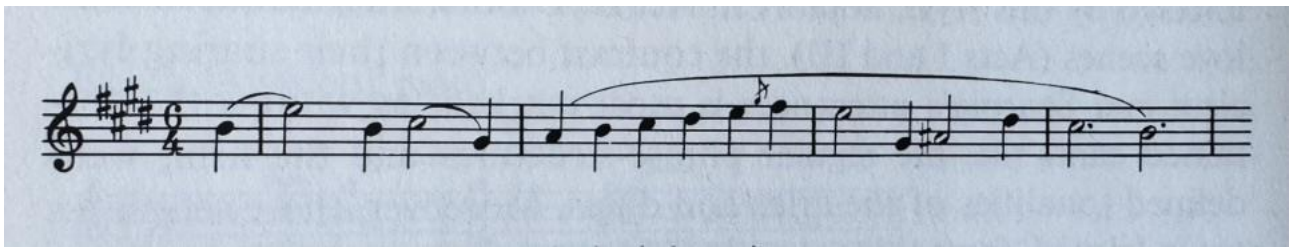
following the news that Napoleon has been defeated and General Melas has triumphed, which will later prove to be precisely the opposite.

When she discovers that he is not there, she exclaims: “Tradirmi egli non può!” (“He cannot have betrayed me!”), and here the jealousy motif is heard again. But this time as an ostinato (a melody repeated again and again) in the dark resonance of the bells. Immediately afterwards, she encounters the incarnation of evil power: Scarpia, and precisely here Puccini’s orchestra takes over the motif itself and allows it to mutate. It now becomes an underlying ostinato throughout Scarpia’s subsequent monologue. For 32 bars it is repeated, alternating with the ritual bells. Not because Scarpia himself has heard it, but because it is the composer who pulls the strings here: the jealousy motif shifts from Tosca’s inner world to Scarpia’s intrigue. The orchestra has heard what Scarpia senses, and progressively the motif becomes his weapon. Thus, the motif is kidnapped by the sadistic baron and transformed into one of the characteristic ostinati of Scarpia’s sphere, marked by rigidity, control, and a lack of emotional developmental forces.

Scarpia’s monologue unfolds in an almost trance-like cadence, in which he slowly develops his treacherous scheme. He insinuates that the lovers were interrupted, all while accompanied by the same repeated pattern. Tosca’s motif is captured by Scarpia and turned against her.

Here Puccini reveals his masterful psychological intuition: the jealousy motif, which belonged to Tosca, is, through musical repetition, rhythmic insistence, and tonal distortion, transformed into Scarpia’s sphere. It is no longer her voice, but his manipulation, that speaks through it. Iago does the same in Otello, where he allows Othello’s own jealousy to work for him.

And this is precisely why it is so terrifying. The motif, which initially expressed her fear of losing her beloved, has now become bound to the language of power. It is only when Tosca cries out, “Che? D’amore? Le prove!” (“What? Of love? The proof!”), that it stops, and a new phase of the manipulation begins. Cunning and manipulative, Scarpia asks: “Is it perhaps a paintbrush?”, holding the fan up before Tosca. The orchestra briefly quotes Tosca and Cavaradossi’s love motif from their earlier duet together. Precisely for this reason, it cuts all the deeper: for while the motif reminds Tosca of the love she lives for, she simultaneously feels the fear of losing it. In this double movement, the presence of love and its threatened disappearance, lies the psychological refinement of Scarpia’s manipulation.



Tosca and Cavaradossi’s Love Motif

It is striking how sparingly Puccini employs Tosca’s motif throughout the opera, in sharp contrast to Scarpia’s, which permeates the score like an inescapable shadow in many

variations. Her motif, by contrast, reflects her hope for a world in which love and aesthetics still hold value.

Yet precisely because the motif is used so rarely, it acquires a particular weight of meaning. Its absence is itself an expression. For Tosca's motif cannot fully unfold within the musical space precisely because she is not allowed to be the Tosca whom the motif portrays. In Scarpia's universe, a universe of surveillance, manipulation, and violence, not only her will is suppressed, but also her musical identity. She is reduced to an object, a pawn in his game. Her motif is displaced by his, both dramatically and musically.

Tosca's Aria: Vissi d'arte

The place in the opera where Tosca's motif truly returns is in her great aria in Act II, Vissi d'arte. But before it is heard, it is as though time hesitates in the aria's introduction. As if a window opens onto another world, where prayer and despair merge. The opening tones lie like floating shadows in the space: the strings play tightly voiced chords in first inversion, that is, with the bass note raised from the root through 13 bars, giving the music an elevated, prayerful sonority.

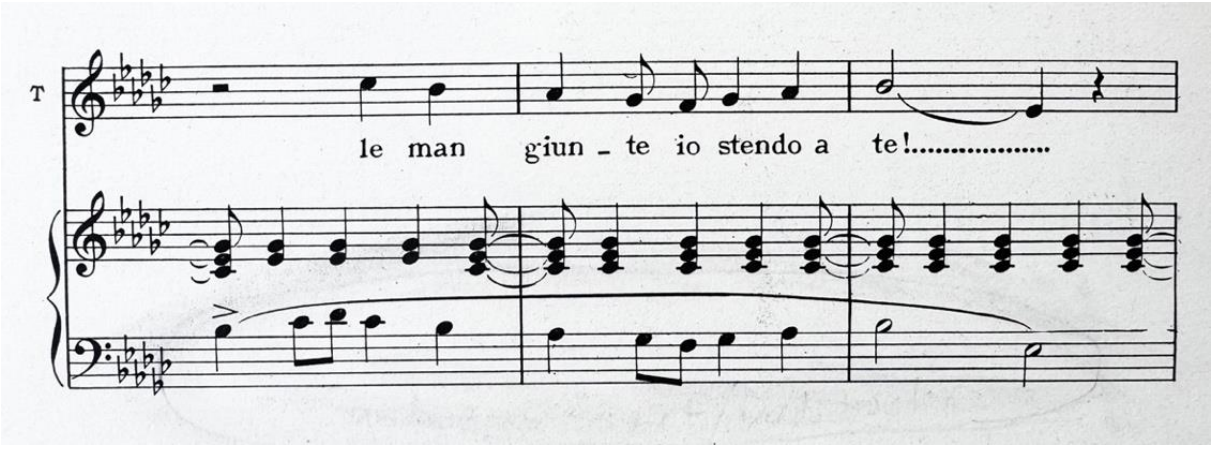
Harmonically, these chords create an atmosphere reminiscent of the old church-musical practice called faux bourdon, a technique from medieval and early Renaissance music in which voices move in parallel sixths and thirds, thereby creating a gentle, organic flow of harmonies. Rather than building upon contrapuntal tension, faux bourdon seeks a meditative, flowing consonance.

Puccini, who, through his family, possessed a profound knowledge of ecclesiastical traditions and the liturgical sound world and was anything but naïve, employs this idiom over the inner liturgy of a Catholic believing woman. Here, it is not the Church that speaks, but Tosca herself, whose mind carries the remnants of the sacred, in a musical form resonating from her youth in the convent.

Vissi d'arte is often called, though not entirely accurately, a "preghiera", a prayer. But it is not a prayer in the traditional sense. It is not submission, nor praise, but a reproach directed toward the heavenly power she feels has abandoned her. It is a letter of complaint to God, written in tones and sent out into a space where no answer is given. She who lived for art, who loved and helped others, now stands before power, not the divine, but the earthly and sadistic, incarnated in Scarpia. And she does not understand why her faith has led her precisely here.

But her real prayer, the desperate appeal that truly seeks mercy, is directed not toward God, but toward Scarpia, and comes only in the following arioso. Here the tones hang in mournful fifths, come un lamento, like a lamenting echo in the darkness as she sings "Vedi... le man giunte io stendo a te!" ("See, I stretch my folded hands out to you!"). Beneath this prayer, the death-threat motif is heard in the orchestra, which we first heard when Scarpia threatens Tosca that Mario has only one hour left: "Non resta che un'ora di vita." ("There remains only

one hour of life.”). The music reveals what she scarcely dares to know herself: that her fate has already been sealed.



The Death-Threat Motif

In Vissi d’arte, however, at the point where the climax occurs, she sings: “perché, perché Signore” (“Why, why, Lord?”), and here, interestingly enough, the jealousy motif returns. The motif that had previously been directed toward Mario and hinted at her fear of a rival is now transformed into an existential protest against God Himself, the authority that, in Tosca’s worldview, represents the moral order of the universe. Why me? Why do You allow precisely this to happen to me?

Jealousy thus changes character. It is no longer directed toward a specific woman, but toward the very distribution of grace and suffering in existence itself. Tosca, who has lived for art, for love, and for God, now experiences that her devotion does not protect her. Instead, she is cast into the arbitrariness of brutality. Jealousy therefore becomes directed toward all those who do not undergo her suffering, toward those who seem to be spared the fate that she herself must bear.

The same motif that in Act I bore the character of an almost petty and neurotic suspicion toward a rival thus acquires a far deeper meaning. It becomes a musical expression of a theological and existential crisis: If love, faith, and beauty do not protect human beings, then what does?

Here, “Signore” (“Lord”) is not merely a polite form of address, but a heartfelt cry to heaven, an attempt to make contact with the transcendent that ought to guarantee justice. Here the motif is allowed to emerge in its full existential depth and as an inner voice that has long been stifled. In the aria, we catch a glimpse of the Tosca who might have been: the artist, the lover, the believing and sensual woman. And this is precisely why it feels so tragic, for it is not the Tosca of reality, but a utopia, a version of herself that is never allowed to live.

The jealousy motif also returns at a particularly refined moment in Act III. When Cavaradossi offers his ring to the jailer: “esso è vostro” (“it is yours”), it is not merely a practical gesture, but a moment charged with symbolism. The ring is the last thing he owns, and precisely for that reason it must be understood as a pledge of his love for Tosca. That he hands it over

to a stranger immediately awakens a psychological echo in the music: the jealousy motif. It is presented in a crescendo and strongly accented in the strings. It is as though the music registers an inner shadow in Mario's transaction. Outwardly, he displays nobility and generosity, but beneath the surface one senses a feeling of guilt, almost an unconscious sense of having betrayed love by relinquishing its symbol.

Thus, the ring becomes not only a symbol of love, but the very act of giving it away becomes a new symbol in the form of a dramatic underscoring that love can no longer endure. Precisely because it is the ring, and not a random possession such as a gold watch or a coin, the scene points toward the final rupture: love is doomed because he himself is doomed. It is characteristic of Puccini to allow a motif to evoke precisely this ambiguity.

The jealousy motif laments that the ring, the symbol of love, is handed over to a stranger. Within the motif's own logic, a brief triangular relationship is thereby created in the music. That which belongs to Tosca alone, the symbol of her love, is now given to another. Therefore, the jealousy motif is awakened, not as suspicion of infidelity, but as a sonic reaction to the fact that the sign of love is leaving the one who alone has the right to it.

To understand the full significance of this motivic moment, however, one must remember where the jealousy motif originally comes from in the opera.

In Act I, jealousy was Tosca's own feeling. In Act III, it has become a tragic commentary from the music itself, but at the same time it comes to acquire a deeper and more terrifying meaning. The motif reminds us of the fragility that has always existed within their love, and which now becomes definitive. Mario loves no one else. Yet the third party Tosca feared nevertheless enters their relationship: a far more merciless rival, death.

Thus, Puccini closes a dramaturgical circle. The jealousy motif, which in Act I might have seemed almost petty and neurotic, reveals itself in Act III to have been a foreshadowing of the tragedy and of the theological crisis when Tosca, in Act II, asks why love, faith, and beauty do not protect human beings from suffering.

But to return to Tosca's aria Vissi d'arte in Act II. The aria ends on the catastrophe motif, which casts its inexorable glow over the opera's most unbearable moments. We first heard it during the torture scene, when Tosca breaks down and cries out: "Cessate il martir! È troppo il soffrir!" ("Stop the torment! The suffering is too much!").

It is heard again after the torture scene, when Cavaradossi, half-conscious and dripping with blood, has been told that Napoleon has won at Marengo. In an outburst of defiant triumph, he cries "Vittoria! Vittoria!" ("Victory! Victory!"), pouring forth his desperate cry of revenge and malicious joy over Scarpia's defeat. But Scarpia responds by ordering the prisoner to Castel Sant'Angelo, implicitly for execution. At the moment when Cavaradossi is dragged away, Tosca screams her heart-rending high C like a primal cry, and in the orchestra the catastrophe motif surges forth like a black river beneath her suffering and despair.

But this motif's most dreadful return occurs at that moment in Act II when Scarpia, in a crescendo of sadistic desire and lust for power, reaches out for Tosca in order to take her by force. At the moment when she cries "Aiuto!" ("Help!"), and he shouts "Mia! Mia!" ("Mine!

Mine!”), the catastrophe motif once again pours forth from the orchestra, like a waterfall that has broken through a barrier.

The catastrophe motif is charged with fate, with physical and spiritual violation. It is not a motif of transformation, but of inevitability. When it reappears in Vissi d’arte, at the moment when Tosca sings: “Perché me ne rimuneri così?” (“Why do You reward me in this way?”), it is no longer a complaint directed toward human beings, but toward the divine. The catastrophe motif elevates her pain into an existential lament: Why are love and faith not enough to escape suffering?

It is like a dark shadow that has travelled from the screams of the torture chamber to the aria’s existential cry. The pain in the body has become pain in faith. There is no longer any God to rely upon, only an empty heaven in which the question resounds.

The catastrophe motif thus becomes not merely an audible reference, but the aria’s hidden structure, its gravitational field. In Vissi d’arte, Puccini transforms the motif from physical suffering into spiritual ruin. And this is precisely what makes the motif’s presence so overwhelmingly powerful: it reminds us that Tosca is not only losing her beloved, she is losing her cosmic safety net, the belief in justice upon which her life has otherwise rested.

In this way, the motif becomes a musical manifestation of everything that deprives Tosca of her individuality, her agency, and her love. It is linked to torture, to the victim’s cry of pain, to the death sentence, and to the threatening presence of rape.

Thus, Vissi d’arte gathers four layers of Tosca’s inner world into an intimate liturgy in a God-forsaken space where art, love, and faith suddenly become powerless: from the church-musical chords that reflect her faith, through her own lyrical motif as lover and artist, through jealousy’s painful accusation against God, and finally to the catastrophe motif, which is an echo of a woman sinking into a reality where both faith and love have been betrayed, only to fall silent in the abyss at the opera’s end.

Richard Bonynge on the Article

After reading the English version of the article, the internationally renowned conductor Richard Bonynge, husband of the legendary soprano Dame Joan Sutherland, offered the following response.

Bonynge wrote that he had greatly enjoyed the article and found its observations about Tosca so fascinating that he had read them more than once. He said that Tosca was an opera he had never really fully understood, but that the article had made him think deeply about the work and had helped him understand it much more fully.