

HOW SCOTTI PERFECTS A MASTER RÔLE

Famous Metropolitan Baritone Gives the Interviewer a Tabloid Demonstration of the Process by Which He Has Worked Out the Details of Operatic Acting in His Memorable Interpretation of "Scarpia" in "Tosca"—Correlation of the Musical and Dramatic Elements in the Opera's Tense Second Act



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Antonio Scotti as He Appears in Real Life and as Portrayed by the Sculptor's Art. The Center Picture Shows Mr. Scotti During a Studious Hour in His Living Room. The Other Figures Are Photographic Reproductions, from Different Angles, of a Bust of the Noted Baritone as "Scarpia" by the Neapolitan Sculptor, Cifariello, and Now on Exhibition at the Canessa Galleries, 1 West Fiftieth Street, New York

Of all the scenes in grand opera there is none which possesses more concentrated, vivid drama—call it melodrama, if you will—than does the second act of "Tosca." Of the contributors to that drama the most vital one is undeniably the character of *Scarpia*. Among the many baritones who have sung this rôle there has been none who has excelled Antonio Scotti (and who has equalled him?) in the delineation of the part.

It was for these reasons, then, that we sought out Mr. Scotti the other day and asked him to tell us something of the way in which he had coordinated the dramatic and musical elements of the part. We felt that what he would have to say would not only be of interest to students of opera as a profession, but might prove illuminating to opera-goers in general as showing "how the wheels go 'round" in the mechanism of operatic acting.

Summing up the impressions of our conversation with the noted baritone, we would point out that Scotti's interpretation of *Scarpia* is the most perfect type of art in that, without sacrifice of spontaneity, it is so carefully thought out, to the minutest detail. When one listens to the second act of "Tosca," the various bits of the action dovetail into each other with such absolute naturalness that one never has the slightest feeling that these apparently spontaneous effects have been worked out with such premeditation and care. It is this "art concealing art" that makes Scotti's *Scarpia* a model of operatic portraiture.

Changes in Interpretation

Mr. Scotti informed us that his interpretation of the part had undergone many changes since he first started singing it. "I'm rather amused," said he, "when I think of some of the details in my earlier impersonation, for, of course, an artist's ideas of a part broaden as his art matures."

It was Puccini's wish that Scotti should create *Scarpia* in the world première of his opera, but this was prevented by a misunderstanding between the two men which, although not based upon serious causes, was not cleared up for a long period. It occurred just before Mr. Scotti's first coming to America, when he had gone to London for some special appearances at Covent Garden. While rehearsing "Bohème," Scotti was await-

ing word from Puccini concerning the première of "Tosca" in Italy, but in the interchange of congratulatory greetings with the composer following the "Bohème" performance, there was no message from Puccini to Scotti. In the meantime Maurice Grau had been urging Scotti to come to New York, and, not hearing from Puccini, Scotti signed a contract to appear at the Metropolitan.

Thus the première of "Tosca" was given with another baritone, Giraldoni, as *Scarpia*, and it was not till considerably later, in London, that Scotti first played the part. He attacked the rôle in the same fresh state of mind as if he had been, indeed, creating it as the composer had wished, for he had seen but one performance of the opera, having journeyed to Genoa for the purpose.

The Public as Judge

When Scotti and Puccini finally came together again the baritone learned from the Maestro that the latter's failure to communicate with Scotti—as he had been expected to do—was due to the troubled condition of his mind in connection with his finishing the composition of "Tosca." Puccini had sent the score for the inspection of his publisher, Giulio Ricordi, and the latter had informed him that he liked the opera in general, but felt that the last act "would not do." Puccini thereupon went to Milan and played over the final act for Ricordi, who, with the added insight into the composer's interpretation was more favorably impressed with the opera's closing scene—although not enthusiastic. When it came to the première, however (as Mr. Scotti told us), the first two acts were received in a lukewarm manner by the public, and it was the enthusiasm generated by the last act which made the opera a success.

As has been said, Mr. Scotti's conception of *Scarpia* has constantly been broadening since he first undertook the rôle. In studying the character he has not been content with digging out of the libretto and the music every bit of light that seemed to illumine the action of the sinister Baron—he has gone further back than that. "I do not rely merely on the score," he informed us, "for I base my interpretation upon *Scarpia* as Sardou drew him in the *comédia* on which the opera is founded.

"For instance, the irascibility of *Scarpia* in the second act is not mere bad temper—it is combined with a sheer desperation. In Sardou's play there are

two more acts than the opera contains, and in one of these *Scarpia* appears before *Queen Caroline*. She asks him if he has captured *Angelotti* and he replies that the conspirator has eluded him. In intense anger the *Queen* then declares that if he does not succeed in apprehending *Angelotti*, she will remove him from his post as chief of Rome's police.

The Desperate "Scarpia"

"When *Scarpia* is revealed at the beginning of Act Two in the opera, he has just come from this audience with the *Queen* and is smarting under her rebuke. Therefore, you must go below the merely superficial to understand the ill temper of *Scarpia* as I play him in this scene. He is exasperated by the unsatisfactory reports from his agents of their search for *Angelotti*, and his ruthless treatment of *Tosca* and *Cavaradossi* is due not only to the brutality of the man, but to his desperate feeling that he must learn the whereabouts of *Angelotti* from them or lose his position.

"Again, in my costuming of the part I draw upon Sardou's play. The music that you hear through the window in the second act comes from the reception of *Queen Caroline*, which is shown in the *comédia* and at which *Scarpia* has his audience with the *Queen*. Now, my costume in the second act is what *Scarpia* wore at this reception, and is the same as the first-act costume, except that I wear a special set of buttons, appropriate to the occasion and to *Scarpia's* office, and a jewelled order around the neck, also suited to the character."

Mr. Scotti is scrupulously exact in all details of costume, properties, etc. "These buttons," he added, "are entirely correct for the period of the opera, as I have copied them from designs in a collection that I possess. You might think that it was not worth while to bother about such details, but if they are noted by only five or six in the audience, I am content, for I feel that I satisfy myself—that is the essential consideration."

A Treatise on the Part

After Mr. Scotti had given us some of his ideas concerning *Scarpia* he took up his copy of the score and ran hurriedly over most of the action of the second act, showing us how he utilized the stage directions supplied by the authors and supplemented them with his own illuminating contributions. We regret that the inadequacy of cold type prevents our

reproducing for you the way in which—now and then with swift play of voice or gesture—he visualized for us the whole scene. If such a reproduction could be made, it would constitute a practical treatise on the interpretation of *Scarpia* in this act.

Chief of the impressions which we formed from this analysis was that of the skill with which he fills out the pauses where there is no vocal part and where the libretto gives no directions as to *Scarpia's* stage business. In each case he showed us how he contrived some action which was natural, logical and entirely within the picture. In one spot, while seated at his table, he sips a glass of wine reflectively. "Or," he added, "I may brush my lips with the napkin as I sit thinking—different bits in different performances, as the mood dictates. In such a situation, using the same business every time would mean mechanical acting. It is because of this varying the action with the moods that one performance in the part may seem to the audience better than another."

At another moment, two or three measures of orchestral music find *Scarpia* walking a few paces along the floor, contemptively, while a similar pause in the voice part a second later is accompanied with a continuation of the same business—always spontaneous in effect and preserving the continuity of the whole. Further, his movements are so synchronized with the music that it seems as if the composer had written that part of the score as a setting to this very action, and yet it is not in the least mechanical.

Timing the Action

Mr. Scotti is so saturated with the music of the entire opera that he almost sub-consciously times the action to the music. For instance, he fits the business to one orchestral passage so neatly that just as the final note of this passage is played he sinks into a seat with an effect just like that of a period which punctuates a sentence. He is also able, on occasion, to give one of his fellow players a hint as to the exact moment for a particular bit of business. For example, after *Tosca* has killed *Scarpia* and when she has returned to the body in order to extract the passport from his clenched fist, the baritone, having nothing to do but lie there, and with

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