

Tosca shock treatment

Puccini's *Tosca* has been radically updated from the Late Romanticism and placed in the modern era. **William Yeoman** reports.

None of Puccini's operas has aroused more hostility than *Tosca*, by reason of its alleged coarseness and brutality; yet its position in the central repertory has remained unchallenged," says the Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians.

It is fitting, then, that a radical updating of *Tosca* should attract its own share of controversy, with Christopher Alden's production, premiered by Opera North in 2002, dividing Opera Australia audiences in Sydney last year with its unvarnished portrait of Berlusconi's Italy.

Reviewing the Opera North production in the Independent in Britain, Anthony Arblaster found the transposition very effective: "The gain is that the story is dragged out of the comfortable never-never land of Late Romanticism and placed in our time, when torture and murder are the stock-in-trade of many states.

"The results are suitably shocking." German-born soprano Anke Hoppner, last heard in Perth as Minnie in WA Opera's *La Fanciulla del West*, will be singing her first *Tosca* in the same UK and Sydney production when it opens in Perth next month. Hoppner says it's a challenge for performers to come to terms with new productions — but a worthwhile one.

"This production is very different from your traditional interpretation and not without its challenges," she says during a break in rehearsals. "But every new production highlights different aspects of the score and enriches your overall experience of the music."

And what glorious music it is, with Puccini's lush score featuring such famous arias as *Vissi d'arte* and *E lucevan le stelle*.

Hoppner will be joined by Argentinean tenor Dario Volonte as *Tosca*'s lover Cavaradossi, and Teddy Tahu Rhodes, who makes his WA Opera debut as the evil Baron Scarpia.

"Teddy is wonderful to work with," says Hoppner, who previously worked with him in Mozart's *Don Giovanni* for Opera Australia. "And this time it's his first Scarpia and my first *Tosca*, so we're equal."

Tosca, originally set in Rome in 1800 and premiered in that city in January 1900, documents the downfall and ultimate destruction of *Tosca*, Cavaradossi and Scarpia, victims of politics, lust and their own jealousy. This presented another problem for Hoppner. "Tosca is so incredibly jealous. It's stupid. But I didn't



CRACK TEAM From left to right: Thomas McQuillan, Lachlan Greig, Finn Pearson, Quinn Nation, Michael Lukin, James McQuillan, Nicholas Camer-Pesci, Jack Halvorson, Myles McQuillan (in front with dark hair), Sam Bougher (behind with blond hair), James Booth, David Woods and WA Opera's principal repetiteur Tommaso Pollio at the piano. PICTURE **WILLIAM YEOMAN**

go into this business because I discovered I had a beautiful voice; I was interested in how other people tick. And you learn that either by drawing on your own experiences or, as is the case here, watching other people. That's why I love the rehearsal process so much, and working with different partners."

Hoppner, who studied with Professor

Renate Faltn at the Hanns-Eisler Conservatorium in Berlin before going on to win numerous awards, including a Helpmann for best female operatic performance in Richard Mills' *Batavia* in 2001, admits she was a little intimidated about singing *Tosca*. "It's a daunting prospect," she says. "So many famous singers have done it: Callas, Tebaldi, and

my favourite, Leontyne Price. I'm thrilled about it but there are huge expectations." She agrees that classic operas such as *Tosca* still have the power to move contemporary audiences.

"People haven't changed," she says. "Tosca is all about power and people who want power and use it to get their own way. They overstep the mark and power becomes

Time for a lark in angelic choir

One musicologist called Puccini's operatic masterpiece *Tosca* "a shabby little shocker". One thing's for sure: with its depictions of rape, torture, murder and suicide, the first thing that comes to mind isn't family entertainment. Yet *Tosca* contains some of Puccini's most beautiful arias — and a wonderful cameo for choirboys.

WA Opera repetiteur Tommaso Pollio is preparing a crack team of young singers, many of whom are part of St George's Cathedral choir, to join "barihunk" Teddy Tahu Rhodes and German soprano Anke Hoppner in WA Opera's production.

"Training them for the part is a really wonderful experience and the boys are so full of life," said Pollio. "It's pretty full-on actually."

Boys being boys, Pollio said he could only work in short bursts before mischief beckoned. "Any longer than 15 minutes and you're in trouble," he said. "So we play lots of games — word games in Italian and playing at conducting."

Pollio said there were also different skill levels, making it even harder to keep everybody focused. "Some of the boys are musically fantastic — geniuses, in fact — while others are maybe not so developed."

And the violence in the rest of the opera? "Most of it's off-stage," he said. "And the great thing about having an angelic choir in the opera is it provides some light relief."

lust. That hasn't changed. You only have to look around you." With Berlusconi again in the news, this bold production of *Tosca* couldn't have come at a better time. ☺

Tosca is at His Majesty's Theatre from April 2-16.