

One for All. The Luxury Not to Change: Floria Tosca's costume at the Vienna State Opera 1958-2021

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Abstract

Margarethe Wallmann's staging of Puccini's *Tosca* at the Vienna State Opera premiered on April 3, 1958, with set and costume design by Nicola Benois, starring the famous soprano Renata Tebaldi in the title role. Since then, it has been performed over 600 times at the Vienna State Opera with a list of celebrated sopranos as Floria Tosca—still wearing the same “old dress”; meanwhile, six more copies of the same design have been carefully conserved and altered by the seamstresses and wardrobe ladies of the repertory tailor shop on the sixth floor of the Vienna State Opera. This paper explores the anachronism of this dress and staging in the ephemeral and fast changing reality of theatre and opera: the luxury not to change and renew.

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Fig. 1. Box containing the *Tosca* costume accessories in the Vienna State Opera costume stock © D. Nicolai

Tradition and the Vienna State Opera

The opera has been the heart of Vienna and an important part of the city's identity for many generations. The opera in Vienna elicits the kind of passionate discussion other cities reserve for their soccer team. The famous “*Stehplatzkarten*” (standing tickets) ensure accessibility; they cannot be reserved in advance and can be purchased for the price of € 5 or €10 at a special ticket teller eighty minutes before the performance starts. For each performance, 567 standing tickets (of a total of 1,709 places) are available. The best standing places are at the rear of the



parterre (the pit). It is tradition for long queues of passionate opera lovers to form when famous operas or singers are scheduled. Each season presents about sixty different operas and ballets, among which about eight are new productions and the others are revivals. Approximately 100 productions are kept in repertory ready for performance, an unmatched extravagance for an opera house.

The current building was inaugurated in 1869 as the "Vienna Court Opera" (*Wiener Hofoper*) in the presence of Emperor Franz Joseph I and Empress Elisabeth of Austria replacing an older building dating from 1709, the *Kärntnertortheater*. It became known by its current name after the establishment of the First Austrian Republic in 1921.

Tosca, by Giacomo Puccini

Tosca is an opera in three acts by Giacomo Puccini (1858 in Lucca–1924 in Brussels) in the tradition of Italian *verismo*. It premiered at the Teatro Costanzi in Rome on January 14, 1900. The work, based on Victorien Sardou's 1887 French-language dramatic play, *La Tosca*, is a melodramatic piece set in Rome in June 1800, with the Kingdom of Naples threatened by Napoleon's invasion of Italy. The drama of torture, murder, and suicide plays out in the opera to the strains of some of Puccini's best-known lyrical arias. Adolf (Adolfo) Hohenstein (1854–1928)—the pioneer of Italian poster art and an exponent of the *Stile Liberty* (Liberty Style, or Italian Art Nouveau)—designed the costumes and sets for the premiere in Empire style, which has inspired all later designs. The opera takes place on June 17 and 18, 1800 in Rome: Act I at *Chiesa Sant'Andrea della Valle*, Act II in *Palazzo Farnese* and Act III in *Castello St. Angelo*.

Tosca at the Vienna State Opera

The opening of Margarethe Wallmann's staging of *Tosca* at the Vienna State Opera took place on April 3, 1958 with sets and costumes by Nicola Benois. Renata Tebaldi took on the title role. Since then, this staging has been performed 624 times, opening the 2021-22 season on September 3, 2021. Since that opening, ninety-eight sopranos have sung *Tosca* in this staging. They include a veritable "Who's Who" of sopranos—from Tebaldi through Anna Netrebko. All performed in the same dress design in this timeless staging, making it an outstanding anachronism in the fast changing, ephemeral world of the theater.

Margarethe Wallmann

Margarethe Wallmann (1901?–1992) was a dancer, choreographer, and opera director. Born in Berlin, she received a classical dancing education, before attending Mary Wigman's *Ausdruckstanz* (modern dance school) in Dresden from 1923 and dancing in Wigman's touring company. In 1928, she traveled to New York and held lectures there on Wigman's *Ausdruckstanz*. In 1929, she became head of the Wigman School in Berlin. She moved to Vienna in 1933, and became ballet master at the Vienna State Opera and head of its ballet school. In 1938, after the *Anschluss*, when Austria was annexed to Nazi Germany, Wallmann, being of Jewish descent, left Austria for Argentina and found work as ballet director at the Teatro Colón in Buenos Aires. In 1949, she returned to Europe and became ballet director of La Scala in Milan. Since 1952, she concentrated on directing opera. She successfully worked at La Scala, the Vienna State Opera, the Salzburg Festival, the Metropolitan Opera in New York and in Berlin—exceptional for a woman stage director in the 1950s and 1960s. Her staging, based on her background as a dancer and choreographer, brought dramatic movement to the stage in an era when singers mostly stood stiff and still at the edge of the orchestra pit. She was married twice and stayed agile until old age. On August 17, 2020 the artist Gunter Demnig installed a *Stolperstein* in her commemoration at the Haus für Mozart in Salzburg. *Stolpersteine*, literally "stumbling stone", is a sett-size, ten-centimeter concrete cube bearing a brass plate inscribed with the name and life dates of

victims of Nazi extermination or persecution. The *Stolpersteine* project aims to commemorate individuals at exactly the last place of residency before he or she fell victim to Nazi terror.

Nicola Benois

Nicola Alexandrovich Benois (1901–1988) was a stage designer, known for his work as principal scenographer and costume designer at La Scala in Milan. He was the son of Alexandre Benois, an influential artist, critic, historian and stage designer at the Mariinsky Theatre. The family lived near the opera house in their mansion, built by his grandfather Nikolai Benois. Nicola studied art and design under his father before attending the Academy of Fine Arts in Saint Petersburg. He emigrated to Paris in 1923, where he worked for Sergei Diaghilev as a set designer for several of the Ballets Russes productions. In 1935, he accepted the post of principal scenographer at La Scala. There he collaborated with Luchino Visconti, the powerful producer of La Scala, who insisted on genuine period jewelry and costumes for the performing stars. Benois was a master of period design. His stage works are remarkable for their mastery of line, form, and color scheme. In all, he designed about 300 ballet and opera productions for theaters of Turin, Milan, Rome, and other cities worldwide. I am very happy to present Benois' original costume rendering for Tosca's second act costume in this context with the generosity of the Teatro Alla Scala Archives in Milan. Deducing from the design, the Act II costume could be based on the famous Jean-Baptiste Isabey design for Empress Josephine at the 1804 coronation ceremony of Napoleon I.



Fig. 2. Above, left: Jean-Baptiste Isabey, "Grand Habillement de L'Impératrice," Livre du Sacre, 1804 © Bibliothèque nationale de France

Fig. 3. Above, right: Costume rendering for the second act by Nicola Benois for the Vienna *Tosca* Premiere at Archivio bozzetti e figurini Teatro alla Scala, Milan

Fig. 4. Right: Renata Tebaldi in the costume of Act II at the opening of the Vienna *Tosca* 1958
© Foto Fayer Vienna

**Floria Tosca's second act costume:
The costume inventory, the repertory
tailor shop, and the wardrobe service at
the Vienna State Opera**

Costume labels at the Vienna State Opera do not bear the name of a singer. They only show a number: in this case "126" for *Tosca*, meaning it is the 126th production after the re-opening of the Vienna State Opera in 1955 after the war, when this number system was introduced. The "2" stands for "second costume" of the first soloist character following the cast list. If there is a number after the slash behind the 2, it means it is the first, second and so on remake of the original costume.



Fig. 5. Left: Label of the original 1958 *Tosca* costume, Act II © D. Nicolai

TOSCA

126

neu inszeniert 3. April 1958.

TOSCA: FRAU RENATA TEBALDI

I. Kostüm: schw. Spitzenschleier, gelbe Frisur m. Knoten,
rosa ärmelloser Leinenleib m. aufgen.
blauen Leidenrips - Brustteil, angen. stello
Schurz, ~~gr~~ eingew. grüne Leidenripperschurz,
roter Samt mantel m. l. Ärmeln in. angen.
w. Georg. Fischli - Mantel - Schurz vorne offen 1
blauwe Pümpf m. Masche.

II. Kostüm: ro. Lidraß - Diadem
gelber Orgonca Schleier
gelber schw. Gold gest. Brokat - Schleppkleid } Eigentum
1 paar l. beige Lederhandschuhe } würde ge-
banft
schw. m. grüne Leide gef. Samt mantel m.
l. weiten Ärmeln, gr. Hermetik Kragen in.
Manschetten 2
Gold - Pümpf

III. Kostüm: blau-grüne Leidenrips Leib m. l. Ärmeln } Eigentum
angew. stello " Schleppschurz
lila m. roten " gef. Chan - Chan
Rochmantel m. Pelzine in. Kragen,
blau-grüne Reidihaüt 3
schw. Schuhe - Eigentum

Fig. 6. Handwritten costume list for Renata Tebaldi for the opening of Tosca, 1958

© D. Nicolai

All costumes for each production are carefully described by the wardrobe department, plus notations of all cast changes and individual costume adaptations. Today, all documentation is digitalized. The wardrobe service is separated into the men's department and the women's department. All costumes are kept separately and grouped according to male or female by stage gender, not the performer's biological one. Backstage at the Vienna State Opera, men's and women's dressing rooms are on either side of the stage and not accessible directly to each other. The two genders only meet on stage.



Fig. 7. Above, left: The seven Tosca costumes (including the original) vary in their design interpretation © D. Nicolai

Fig. 8. Above, right: Extra sleeves, pleated ruffles for the *décolleté*, and extensions for the belt, kept for alterations in the repertory tailor shop © D. Nicolai

The 1958 Tosca costume was constructed using “classical” theater tailoring technique; it was “period” only on the outside. Precious materials were used: a shimmering gold brocade combined with the finest black velvet, decorated with stenciled golden laurel wreaths and appliqued rhinestones. The costume is made up in “modules” and individually assembled to the needs of the singer. Open seams allow for quick alterations without having to undo the whole dress. The huge seam allowances allow size alterations to range from small to generous. Inside, like “streets” left and right of the side seam, the traces are named with the famous singers’ names, recalling who wore this costume (**Fig. 9**). The train is a separate piece. It is added to the fitted dress. The repertory tailor shop keeps bits and pieces to vary the same design for each singer to make them feel comfortable. One singer may prefer a longer ruffle for the *décolleté*. Another may opt for no ruffle at all. A sleeve may be lengthened. Extensions allow the belt to be expanded for a larger waist. Meanwhile, seven different dresses of the same design are in use, for taller and shorter singers. They all try to

imitate the original design but vary in the choice of fabric. The big brooch in front is detachable; there is only one for all seven dresses. But the original, made in 1958, is still the favorite of all singers, even today. They want to wear the original, imbued with the magic of all the famous singers who wore it before them.



Fig. 9. Inside side seam with the traces named by the singer. In the armhole, the dress shield protects the costume from sweat © D. Nicolai

The trend today is to provide a new costume for a new singer, but for years it was customary to have one costume that was shared. Rarely would a singer bring her own Tosca costume, as the American soprano Leontyne Price did in the 1950s—an exception made possible because the main design concept for all traditional Tosca stagings was Empire style.

Though new materials are used in construction, copies of the original dress aspire to maintain its character. The wardrobe department and repertory tailor shop also take care of the cleaning, repairing and storage. Huge dress shields are sewn in beforehand and removed after the performance to be washed. Each dress has a perfectly fitted hanger. All dresses hang from a high rack, to keep the fabric from creasing. The staff loves this production and protect the costumes carefully from the wear and tear of each new performance.



Fig. 10. Previous page left: The original fabric with the stencil of the laurel wreath.
Fig. 11. Previous page right: A newer fabric.

Fig. 12. Right: Velvet coat only for the entrance of Act II. On the left, the original 1958 coat, stripped of the fur trimmings, which have been mounted onto the new one (right). © D. Nicolai

For her dramatic entrance in Act II, Tosca wears a voluminous black velvet cape with a high-standing collar over her dress. The original 1958 coat is used for rehearsals and stripped of its fur trim, which imitates ermine. The fur is attached to the new coat; it is a singular garment. There are no other versions. The wardrobe supervisor told me she carefully spreads out the trains of the dress and the coat while the singer is waiting in the wings for maximum effect at the entrance.

The costume accessories

A box (Fig. 1.) contains all accessories that complete Tosca's costumes: the long satin gloves in different shades of gold, a fan of ostrich feathers, the jewelry that includes a selection of earrings and necklaces, to suit the singer's taste.

The original 1958 tiara is still in use. It is constructed in traditional theatre *trompe l'oeil*: a tulle base mounted on a wire frame, embroidered with pearls and rhinestones. This technique is lightweight and flexible and avoids too much metal (most singers do not feel comfortable with metal close to their head). The tiara is pinned with a horsehair strip to the wig of the singer.



Fig. 13. & Fig. 14. Previous page and right: The original 1958 tiara is pearls and rhinestones sewn to a tulle base mounted on a wire frame © D. Nicolai



Toscas and their costume

Each singer adapts the dress to her own comfort level. Eliane Coelho was famous for wearing the "old" tiara upside down and eliminated all the frills from the *décolleté* (**Fig. 15**). Mara Zampieri had her own dress made, avoiding all velvet in the train and coat, and replacing it with satin (**Fig. 16**). The timeless design still functions after more than sixty-three years. Costume and opera enthusiasts may want to watch the many video clips of the Wallmann production on YouTube, with its hit parade of famous sopranos through the decades.



Fig. 15. Eliane Coelho as "Tosca" und R. Bruson as "Baron Scarpia" in *Tosca*, Staatsoper, 8.2.1994 ©Theatermuseum Wien



Fig. 16. Mara Zampieri as "Tosca" und N. Shicoff als "Cavaradossi" in *Tosca*, Staatsoper, 5.11.1991 ©
Theatermuseum Wien

Epilogue: Austrian Theatre Museum

When a Vienna State Opera production is *skatiert*, meaning that it is taken from repertory, the original soloist costumes will find their place in the Theatermuseum, ready to tell the story of famous singers and opera roles and costume designers in regular exhibitions.

The Theatermuseum, situated in the vicinity of the Opera House, highlights the magic moments on stage forever. More than 1,000 stage models, 600 costumes and props from three centuries, more than 100,000 drawings and prints, as well as more than 700,000 theater photos are among the holdings of the museum.

Acknowledgements

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Useful links

<https://www.theatermuseum.at>

<https://www.wiener-staatsoper.at>

<https://www.mip.at>