

Tosca Puccini

ICELANDIC OPERA
REYKJAVIK

Music ★★★★★
Staging ★★★★★

Review by Neil Jones
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Icelandic Opera performs at the country's Harpa Hall, an exceptional concert venue but with no proscenium for opera. The company stages imaginative works in spite of the obvious theatrical limitations of its home venue, but in this new production of *Tosca* it excelled itself with a set – designed by Alyson Cummins – that would have made an impression even on a purpose-built opera stage

With four tall pillars and a truly massive stained-glass window at the rear of the stage, Cummins created a splendidly atmospheric church of Sant'Andrea della Valle, setting the opera in 1922 (when Mussolini seized power in Rome) and populating the scene with Fascist troops even as the audience filed in.

As the Fascists filtered off the stage, the first of the main players, The Sacristan, entered – quietly sung but beautifully played by a delightfully camp Bergþór Pálsson, together with some fellow priests to tidy up the upended pews. Enter the exhausted political prisoner on the run, Angelotti, delicately sung by Ágúst Ólafsson; and then Mario Cavaradossi who, judging by his extremely smart three-piece suit and trendy shoes was doing pretty well as an revolutionary artist! Icelandic Opera cast tenor Kristján Jóhannsson in the role. With a substantial international career under his belt, Jóhannsson is rarely in his home country these days and he received a hero's welcome from the audience. He certainly played up to it – perhaps a little too enthusiastically.

In contrast, Ólafur Kjartan Sigurðarson's Scarpia was initially understated, with his initial appearance as Bishop of Rome underlining his grip on power. But it wasn't until later in the opera that he demonstrated any overt megalomania, having metamorphosed into his position of Chief of Police. Sigurðarson,

an Icelandic Opera stalwart, has a splendid voice and is a fine actor and ensured that the whole performance didn't end up as a two-horse race.

So to *Tosca*. The company brought in the renowned English soprano, Clair Rutter, to sing the role. And what a *Tosca*! Rutter possesses a big, beautiful voice that could match Jóhannsson's full-throttle approach; but her *Vissi d'arte* was where the full range of colours and elegance really showed, in a performance that was haunting and ravishingly lovely – worth a trip to Iceland in itself!

Iceland's National Symphony Orchestra does double duty as the opera company's orchestra and it performed magnificently under the baton of Bjarni Frimann Bjarnason, subtle and delicate where necessary, strong and vibrant elsewhere.

This was a splendid production, ambitiously staged by Australian director Greg Eldridge, with a strong cast supporting two world-class stars, beautifully played music, and excellent choreography by Jo Meredith. For the few people who stayed in the auditorium through the intervals, there was some added entertainment to be had as an impressive team of technicians engaged in some frantic rejigging of the sets for each act.

► Setting the scene: *Tosca's* staging expanded the technical possibilities of Harpa Hall





▲ Claire Rutter: haunting and ravishingly lovely as *Tosca*



▲ Local hero: Kristján Jóhannsson as Cavaradossi



▲ Getting a grip: Ólafur Kjartan Sigurðarson as Scarpia

