

# LADIES IN DISTRESS

Opera Commentary by former San Diego Opera Board President John “Patrick” Ford

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It seems that an appropriate theme for the 2016 San Diego Opera season would be ladies in distress. The three major productions for the season are focused on three very impressionable women that face life’s challenges with mixed results.

Tosca opens the series as the beautiful and powerful woman who is forced to murder her seducer to protect her honor and to save her lover’s life. Cio Cio San (Butterfly) is the betrayed wife of a naval officer who considers his Japanese marriage to be a trifle despite siring a son while on overseas duty. Arden Scott is a prominent opera star who undertakes the challenge of saving her hometown opera company despite the competition from a sports team.

All three women showed great courage, and in the first two operas forfeit their lives. Fortunately, the opera star in the third production survives and renews an old romance for a happy ending, unusual for grand opera.

“Tosca” and “Madame Butterfly” have been performed several times by San Diego Opera. Both productions for 2016 are new and both are popular with audiences because of the glorious music by Giacomo Puccini. “Great Scott” is a world premiere by the successful American composer, Jake Heggie, whose popular opera “Moby Dick” was seen here in 2012.

The opera season began early with two recitals, René Barbera and Patricia Racette to help fill out the programs. Still to come is the popular Ferruccio Furlanetto in concert with the San Diego Symphony singing many of his famous basso roles, including several performed here in prior years.

The opening opera on February 13, 2016 is the powerful “Tosca,” a story about an artist and his lover, a diva who has caught the eye of the evil chief of police for Rome. During the Napoleonic wars Italian patriots were resisting foreign rule and a powerful police force. The artist Mario is a suspect that falls into the clutches of Baron Scarpia who uses Tosca as bait to trap her lover. Tosca is forced to submit to his lecherous demands in exchange for her lover’s release.

After a dramatic scene in the baron’s private quarters, Tosca negotiates a path to freedom then kills the culprit expecting to get away with her lover. Of course, operas don’t often provide a joyful resolution, so the artist is the victim of a faux execution while Tosca leaps to her death to escape the soldiers chasing her.

The second opera opening on April 16 sends a great deal of compassion for a trusting young Japanese bride who is abandoned by an American naval officer. “Madama Butterfly” is one of Puccini’s enduring masterpieces that actually was a failure at its original performance in 1903.

After a few revisions, the opera was re-staged and received its deserved popularity in today's repertory.

At the time of the opera's premier, very little was known of Japan because of centuries of isolation from outside influence under the strict rule of the Shoguns. When Admiral Perry sailed his naval fleet into Tokyo Bay and opened the country to foreign commerce, the presence of American naval personnel in restricted areas of Japan attracted attention.

The basic scenario for this opera is based on a New York play by David Belasco attended by Puccini. A happy-go-lucky naval officer sets himself up with a Japanese "bride" to provide his comforts while posted overseas. Unfortunately, the young geisha girl Butterfly provided for him considered the marriage to be a permanent relationship, even though she knew he would return to America leaving her behind until the next time his ship came in.

Many of the same situations developed after World War II when American military personnel took Japanese brides while in Japan but could not bring them back to the United States. Several films in the postwar period depicted the plight of the abandoned families, but "Madame Butterfly" still remains the classic tale of the abandoned mother who had to make a personal sacrifice to protect her honor and that of her child.

Relief from the tragedies of two women in distress by a light-hearted opera with some elements of comedy is provided by the third production of "Great Scott" opening on May 7. The West Coast premiere by American composer Jake Heggie and librettist Terrence McNally is a contemporary staging of an opera that competes with a Super Bowl game. It might well be the only opera in the general repertory that features a champion football team.

Arden Scott is an international diva who returns to her hometown to help save a failing opera company by producing a bel canto opera by a legendary 19<sup>th</sup>-century composer but never performed. Most of the action takes place backstage during rehearsals with opening night flashes to the Super Bowl game being played at the same time.

The conflict puts the diva in a stressful situation while renewing an old love affair and dealing with an ambitious understudy soprano who is pushing her career. Critics reporting on the world premiere in Dallas on October 30 generally agreed that this new work by Jake Heggie will join his two popular operas "Dead Man Walking" and "Moby Dick" in the standard American opera repertory.

Tickets for all performances at the Civic Theatre and the concert at Copley Symphony Hall are available on line at [www.sdopera.com](http://www.sdopera.com) or by calling 619 533 7000.

*Ford is a past president of San Diego Opera and supports the opera archive at San Diego State University*