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## 'Tosca' review: Melody Moore riveting

Joshua Kosman

Updated 7:22 p.m., Friday, November 16, 2012

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Melody Moore, singing the "Tosca" title role for the first time after soprano Angela Gheorghiu fell ill, brought clarity and power to more intimate passages. Photo: Kristen Loken / SF



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Before her knockout performance at the San Francisco Opera on Thursday night, soprano Melody Moore had never sung the title role of "Tosca." She still hasn't gotten around to Act 1.

Moore, a former Adler Fellow, was standing by on opening night, when the Romanian soprano Angela Gheorghiu - after making her way a little wanly through the first act of Puccini's blood-and-thunder

melodrama - was stricken by an intestinal flu and taken to a nearby hospital. Just before the curtain went up for Act 2, General Director [David Gockley](#) came onstage, looking a little shell-shocked, to announce that Moore would go on in her place.

That extended the intermission another 25 minutes or so, as the understudy got into costume. But once she took the stage, Moore wasted no time in making the role her own.

She attacked her assignment with a wonderful combination of vocal power and dramatic fervor, embodying the role of the high-powered diva right down to the ground. I kept looking for the signs of a performer thrust suddenly onto unfamiliar turf; I couldn't detect any.

What we got instead was a voluble, richly communicative performance that confirmed yet again the judgment of those (including Gockley) who have backed Moore from the start. And Tosca is an ideal role for her, drawing on her ability to launch potent, full-bodied high notes without screaming while still bringing power and clarity to more intimate passages.

The latter gift came through in her superb account of "Vissi d'arte," the famous Act 2 showpiece in which Tosca bemoans her cruel fate as an artist caught up in a deadly web of political intrigue. Moore shaped the aria's phrases with limpid purity but also a sense of cunning artifice, since the character herself is crafting her little song of self-pity for an imagined audience.

Moore was no less impressive in the big dramatic moments, blazing in anguished fury against the sexual predations of the villainous police chief [Baron Scarpia](#) and bringing romantic ardor to her Act 3 scene with her doomed lover, the painter and political radical Cavaradossi.

The audience at the [War Memorial Opera House](#) must surely have been rooting for Moore's success - how could they not, under the circumstances? - but there was no hint of charity in the tumultuous applause that greeted her at evening's end. She had risen to the occasion triumphantly.

(Gheorghiu is scheduled to return to the production on Sunday afternoon, health permitting. "Tosca" continues in alternation with a second cast featuring soprano [Patricia Racette](#), tenor [Brian Jagde](#) and baritone Mark Delavan.)

Moore's role debut was exciting, but unfortunately the soprano switcheroo was the lone bit of excitement in what was otherwise a mediocre account of the sort of bread-and-butter repertoire that Gockley has promised to treat with greater respect.

In the pit, Music Director [Nicola Luisotti](#) led the most mannered and idiosyncratic performance he's ever given in San Francisco, adopting mostly sluggish tempos (Act 1 went by at a laborious crawl) that would suddenly become frenzied without any obvious motivation. Director [Jose Maria Condemni](#)'s staging did little to alleviate the sense of hidebound tradition conveyed by the company's ultraconservative production.

Nor did the other principals help out much. Tenor [Massimo Giordano](#) brought sweet but undistinguished tone to his company debut as Cavaradossi, emphasizing each syllable as if singing for an audience of beginning lip-readers and making his way to every high note by first clambering onto a comfortable perch halfway up. As Scarpia, baritone [Roberto Frontali](#), who was such a vibrant Jack Rance in "La Fanciulla del West" a few seasons back, raged fiercely but without much vocal color or dramatic specificity.



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Stronger contributions came in the smaller roles, beginning with Dale Travis as the Sacristan; Travis' comic ingenuity and vocal prowess have been enlivening these character parts for decades, and he never fails to delight. There were good performances too from Joel Sorensen and Ao Li as Scarpia's henchmen, and especially from young Etienne Valdez as the shepherd boy in Act 3, who inspired an unprecedented emotion: a wish that the boy's song might last a little longer.

**San Francisco Opera:** "Tosca." Through Dec. 2. War Memorial Opera House, 301 Van Ness Ave., S.F. \$22-\$340. (415) 864-3330. [www.sfopera.com](http://www.sfopera.com).

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