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# Maestro's love affair going strong

## Untainted 'Tosca' to mark 20th year with Florentine

By TOM STRINI  
Journal Sentinel music critic

Puccini's "Tosca," a staple of the Florentine Opera's repertoire, is a fitting vehicle for celebrating Joseph Rescigno's 20th season with the company. He will be on the podium starting Saturday, when the Florentine again takes up the tale of intrigue, lust, murder and revolution.

Rescigno couldn't be happier about it. On a recent chilly October morning, the maestro was chipper and enthusiastic as always, about both music and life. Rescigno, who lives in New York with his wife, Jeanne, and their three cats, enjoys his stays in Milwaukee. He likes to be tucked away downtown in the tiny Lakeside Inn, where the whole staff calls him by his first name.

He was steeped in operatic and orchestral music since the day he was born, in New York City in 1945. His namesake Italian immigrant grandfather played trumpet in the New York Philharmonic and the Metropolitan Opera. His mother was a singer and pianist. His paternal uncle, Nicola Rescigno, was a well-known opera conductor.

Rescigno speaks with intensity about performances he heard days ago and those heard 30 years ago. The conversation jumped from topic to topic, but settled now and then on the issues at hand, "Tosca" and the Florentine.

"In the '50s, say, you could hear different 'Toscas' at different houses," he said. "It wasn't until the '70s that the international way of doing things began to take hold. There are so many record-

ings, and it's performed so often, people don't go back and really look at the score. They just take up so-called traditions that they've heard. It's difficult, sometimes, to undo things."

For that reason, among others, Rescigno is happy to be working with soprano Robin Follman, who is doing her first Tosca. On Sept. 10, she dropped in on Rescigno in New York and to work on the part in his studio. Follman was there to sing at the New York City Opera (where, by the way, Rescigno is a frequent guest conductor). When NYCO rehearsals were canceled because of the events of Sept. 11, she spent more time at Rescigno's.

### Back to the source

Rescigno is being scrupulous about going back to the long-memorized score, rather than just turn on the autopilot. He wants to play what's really there. For example:

"The 'E lucevan de stelle' tune comes in five times in Act 3," he said. "The note values and tempo markings are different for every one. Yet there's a crazy tradition to play it all the same way. Why would a composer such as Puccini, who micromanaged his scores, write that unless he wanted it played that way? The same is true of the scene with the Sacristan and altar boys; some 'traditional' ritardandos make it easier to conduct and easier to keep together, but Puccini didn't put them in. There are a lot of things people do automatically that really aren't in the score."

The Florentine performances will be faithful to the score, but not straitjacketed by it.

"In opera, the form is so big that it's really important to hear the big structure," he said. "You have to know how the big sections



Rescigno

### IF YOU GO

**What:** Florentine Opera production of Puccini's "Tosca," in Italian with English supertitles

**When:** 5:30 p.m. Saturday, 7:30 p.m. Nov. 14 and 16; 2:30 p.m. Nov. 18

**Where:** Marcus Center Uihlein Hall, 929 N. Water St.

**Tickets:** \$22-\$112, Marcus box office, (414) 273-7206

Rescigno has time to work with singers and orchestra on details of rubato. It wasn't always so at the Florentine.

"When I first came here, we did everything in a week," he said. "We rehearse twice as much now, and we have time to polish the performances."

### Quality wish list

Rehearsal time was No. 2 on Rescigno's list of five ways that

fit together. Erich Leinsdorf once told me, "If you want to do rubatos, fine, but never do them where sections join."

The late Erich Leinsdorf was a big-time international conductor and one of Rescigno's mentors. Rubato is Italian for "robbing," which in musical usage means stealing time from one beat or note value and assigning it to another. In a more general sense, it refers to performers taking liberties with rhythm. Rubato can lead to nuanced expressive flexibility or overwrought self-indulgence.

With two to four weeks of rehearsal, Res-

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ignone has improved over the years. No. 1 was improved quality and uniformity of the casts.

"We used to have maybe two or three good singers in each production," he said. "Now all of them are good."

Higher quality in physical productions, more varied repertoire and improvement in the Milwaukee Symphony Orchestra, the Florentine's pit band, complete the list. He pointed out that Benjamin Britten's "A Midsummer Night's Dream" and Richard Strauss' "Der Rosenkavalier" — two of the three Florentine productions this season — are new to the company. He and general director Dennis Hanthorn are scheming for ways to commission an opera from a major American composer in the near future.

After two decades conducting one or two operas a year in Milwaukee, he feels very much in tune with the MSO.

"When I first came, they liked me to be a half-beat ahead of them," he said. "That's something that a lot of conductors cultivate but I always felt that in opera that can cause you to lose detail. Now they play just a split second after the stick, which is how I like it. You have to lead them, but you don't have to drag them."

"The MSO always had really good woodwinds, and there has been a big improvement in the string sound. It's great to have the MSO in the pit — very few operas have an orchestra such as the MSO to work with."

Rescigno has always had year-to-year contracts with the Florentine and expects to have a good many more.

"In an era where relationships don't last, I've had a 30-year marriage and a 20-year musical marriage," he said. "It's fantastic!"