

TEATRO ALLA SCALA

In the September 2016 Bulletin my essay was about the oldest working opera house in the World—Teatro di San Carlo (1737) in Naples. In this month's essay, I will look at what is considered by many to be the most renowned opera house in the world—the Teatro alla Scala (or La Scala) in Milan. This is to coincide with Kip Cranna's talk to us on October 7 about the current season of the San Francisco Opera.

La Scala was founded, under the auspices of the Empress Maria Theresa of Austria (*right*), to replace the *Teatro Regio Ducale* (*Royal Ducal Theater*), which had been destroyed by fire on February 26, 1776 and had until then been the home of opera in Milan. It was originally known as *Nuovo Regio Ducale Teatro alla Scala* (*New Royal-Ducal Theater alla Scala*). The cost of building the new theater was borne by those who owned the boxes at the old opera house, in exchange for possession of the land on which stood the Church of Santa Maria alla Scala (which had to be destroyed to make room for the new theater), and also for renewed ownership of their boxes in the new theater.



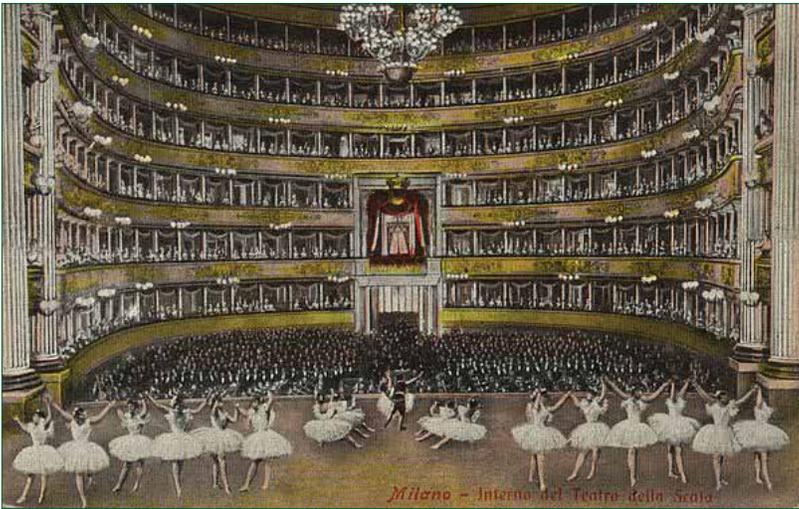
Portrait by
Martin van Meytens, 1759

It was designed by the architect Giuseppe Piermarini, who was born in Foligno, then part of the Papal States in central Italy. La Scala was his most famous project; the one he would be most remembered for (so much so, that the “the Piermarini” is sometimes used in Milan as a synonym for La Scala). Piermarini was a neoclassical architect; thus, he preferred sobriety to the artifices of the baroque style. (La Scala has undergone several reconstructions and renovations over the centuries since its beginning, so that today the parts that mirror his original vision are the general structure and the façade of the theater). The construction took two years to complete, and the theater opened on August 3, 1778 with Antonio Salieri's opera *L'Europa Riconosciuta* (“Europe Recognized”) with the libretto by Mattia Verazi.



La Scala soon became the preeminent meeting place for noble and wealthy Milanese. In the tradition of the times, the main floor had no chairs and spectators watched the shows while standing up. The orchestra was in full sight of the audience since the orchestra pit had not yet been built. As with most of the theaters at that time, La Scala was also a casino with gamblers sitting in the foyer (gambling was allowed in theaters only during performances!).

Conditions in the auditorium could be frustrating for the opera lover, as the author Mary Shelley discovered in September, 1840: “At the Opera they were giving Otto Nicolai’s *Templario*. Unfortunately, as is well known, the theater of La Scala serves, not only as the universal drawing-room for all the society of Milan, but every sort of trading transaction, from horse-dealing to stock-jobbing, is carried on in the pit; so that brief and far between are the snatches of melody one can catch.”



La Scala’s original features caused an immediate sensation. It had an enormous stage and more than 3,000 seats; both of which were unlike other theaters in Europe. Six levels of boxes were built. The boxes were decorated according to their owners’ (and theater funders’) preferences. Above the boxes was a gallery—called the *loggione*—where the less wealthy could watch the performances. Over the years, the gallery has been typically

crowded with the most critical opera aficionados, known as the “*loggionisti*”, who could be ecstatic or merciless towards singers’ perceived successes or failures. It is the *loggionisti* who also decide the success or failure of an opera. For their failures, artists receive a “baptism of fire” from these aficionados, and singers’ fiascos are long remembered. (Over the centuries down to the present, many a singer has been booed unmercifully off the stage during a performance. Such an indignity not only embarrasses the singer at the moment, but also tarnishes the singer’s reputation for years).

La Scala was originally illuminated with 84 oil lamps mounted on the stage and another thousand in the rest of theater. To prevent the risks of fire, several rooms were filled with hundreds of water buckets. (In time, the oil lamps were replaced by gas lamps, which were ultimately replaced by electric lights in 1883).

Another feature of the theater that caused an immediate sensation at its opening was its superb acoustics, which made it one of the best theaters in Europe for non-amplified performances (which opera traditionally is). To this day, its acoustics are considered outstanding. In order to improve the acoustics, Piermarini used two original devices: the columns that separated the boxes were smaller than was usual in such theaters, and a wooden vault created almost-perfect audibility from any corner of the theater.

IMPORTANT COMPOSERS AND THEIR PREMIERES AT LA SCALA

La Scala became the principal opera house for Italian “*opera seria*” with the premiere of Gioachino Rossini’s *La Pietra del Paragone* (1812). With this work Rossini became Italy’s most important composer. Following this opera, Rossini had several operas performed at La Scala for the next decade, among them the premieres of *La Gazza Ladra* (1817) and *Il Turco in Italia* (1814). Others that were performed after their premieres in other Italian theaters were: *La Cenerentola*, *Il Barbiere di Siviglia*, *La Donna del Lago*, *Otello*, *Tancredi*, *Semiramide*, and *Mosè in Egitto*.

After the wave of works composed by Rossini, a new phase in the history of opera was born. This phase celebrated the new compositional style which is known as “*bel canto*,” and frequently featured the operas of Gaetano Donizetti and Vincenzo Bellini. Donizetti’s premieres at La Scala were *Chiara e Serafina* (1822), *Lucrecia Borgia* (1833), *Gemma di Vergy* (1834), and *Maria Stuarda* (1834). Bellini’s premieres at La Scala were *Il Pirata* (1827), followed by *La Straniera* (1829) and *Norma* (1831).

The one composer who became identified with the grandeur of La Scala the most was Giuseppe Verdi (*right*). Verdi premiered seven of his operas there, beginning in 1839 with *Oberto, Conte di San Bonifacio*. This was followed by: *Un Giorno di Regno* (1840), *Nabucco* (1842), *I Lombardi alla Prima Crociata* (1843), *Giovanna d’Arco* (1845), *Otello* (1887), and *Falstaff* (1893).

When *Un Giorno di Regno* proved to be a failure, Verdi appeared to be unable to write good comic music because he was mourning the loss of his first wife and their two children, all of whom had died from disease. However, Verdi’s fortunes turned on March 9, 1842, on occasion of the premiere of the *Nabucco*. This opera, an allegory of the captivity of the Italian nation under Austrian rule, was immensely popular and ran sixty-four times during its first

year. After this success and the successes of his two following works (*I Lombardi alla Prima Crociata* and *Giovanna d’Arco*), Verdi left La Scala for twenty years. Depending upon which side’s explanation one accepts, the reasons given for this hiatus were two. The management of La Scala had reproached Verdi for producing operas that were too expensive and he did not take into consideration the budget restrictions of the theater. Verdi argued that some of his music had been modified (he used the term “corrupted”) by La Scala’s orchestra in the production of *Giovanna d’Arco* in 1845. Whatever had caused the rift, by 1887 all animus had been put aside, and the fruitful collaboration between the composer and the Milanese theater had



been restored. Verdi in that year returned to La Scala for the premiere of his *Otello*, followed by the premiere of his *Falstaff* (his penultimate opera) in 1893.

La Scala also played an important role in furthering the career of Giacomo Puccini. His first opera premiere at La Scala was *Edgar* (1889). This was followed by the premieres of *Madame Butterfly* (1904) and *Turandot* (1926).

PHYSICAL CHANGES TO THE THEATER

In the 20th Century, physical improvements to the original structure were required. The original structure was renovated in 1907, when it was given its current layout with 1,987 seats. In 1943, during World War II, La Scala was severely damaged by Allied bombing. It was rebuilt and reopened on May 11, 1946, with a memorable concert conducted by Arturo Toscanini—twice La Scala’s principal conductor and an associate of the composers Giuseppe Verdi and Giacomo Puccini—with a soprano solo by Renata Tebaldi (*right*), which created a sensation.



La Scala underwent a major renovation from early 2002 to late 2004.

It closed following the December 7, 2001 season’s opening performances of *Otello*, which ran through December. (La Scala’s season traditionally begins on December 7, the feast of St. Ambrose, who is the patron saint of Milan). From January 19, 2002 to November, 2004, the opera company transferred to the new *Teatro degli Arcimboldi*, built in the Pirelli-Bicocca industrial area located 4½ miles from the city center.

The renovation by architects Mario Botta and Elisabetta Fabbri cost a reported €61 million, and left a budget shortfall that the opera house finally overcame in 2006. The renovation proved controversial since preservationists feared that historic details would be lost. However, the opera company was satisfied with the improvements to the structure and to the sound quality, which was enhanced when the heavy red carpets in the hall were removed. The stage was entirely rebuilt; the backstage area was enlarged to allow more sets to be stored, which permitted more productions to be presented during the opera season.

Seats were installed with monitors for the electronic libretto system (provided by the Italian company, Radio Marconi) that allowed audiences to follow opera libretti in English and Italian, in addition to the original language.

La Scala re-opened on December 7, 2004 with a production, conducted by Riccardo Muti, of Antonio Salieri’s *Europa Riconosciuta*, the first opera that had been performed at La Scala when it originally opened in 1778.

TODAY

La Scala continues to be one of the premier theaters of the world for the production of operas and concerts. To perform on its stage is to unite the singer/orchestra player with the great personages who have been associated with this historic building over the centuries. Truly, the history of opera is contained within its walls.

Adapted by James J. Boitano, PhD from: Teatro alla Scala website, Basket Viaggi (BV) Events website, Kiss from Italy website, Revolvly website, and Wikipedia.

