

TEATRO LA FENICE

This month's essay (September, 2018) continues my annual series on great Italian opera houses. This year I focus on Venice's Teatro la Fenice which is one of the most famous and prestigious opera houses in Italy, if not in the world. It was especially important in the development of opera in the 19th century since it is where several operas of the four major bel canto era composers—Rossini, Bellini, Donizetti, and Verdi—had their premieres. These included Rossini's Tancredi (1813), Sigismondo (1814), and Semiramide (1823); Bellini's I Capuleti e i Montecchi (1830) and Beatrice di Tenda (1833); Donizetti's Belisario (1826), Pia de' Tolomei (1837), and Maria de Rudenz (1838); and Verdi's Ernani (1844), Attila (1846), Rigoletto (1851), La Traviata (1853), and Simon Boccanegra (1857).

The name “Fenice” means “Phoenix” in Italian. The name reflects the theater's durability in allowing the opera company to “rise from the ashes” despite losing the use of three theaters to fire: the first in 1774 after the city's leading house was destroyed and rebuilt, but not opened until 1792; the second in 1836, completely devastated the structure, but it was rebuilt within a year; the third fire, in 1996, was the result of arson and destroyed the entire theater, leaving only the exterior walls. It was rebuilt to the grand and magnificent condition we now see, and re-opened in 2004.



HISTORY OF THE THEATER

In 1774, the Teatro San Benedetto, which had been Venice's leading opera house for more than forty years, burned to the ground. La Nobile Società (the Venetian Noble Society) immediately proposed building a larger and more sumptuous opera house than the one which had been lost. They wanted it to become the symbol of their changing fortunes and their capacity for “rebirth.” They decided to call it “La Fenice,” like the mythical, immortal bird able to rise out of its own ashes, in order to symbolize the association's splendid rebirth after its misfortunes. The Society purchased the piece of land between Contrada Santa Maria Zobenigo and Contrada Sant'Angelo for the site and the private houses that were there were demolished.

In 1789, the Society issued a competition notice for the construction of a new opera house in Venice. A Venetian neoclassical architect, Giannantonio Selva, won the contest. [Neoclassicism was the intellectual current that, in contrast to the ornamental Baroque, found inspiration in the more modest models of ancient Roman and Greek art.] Selva proposed a neoclassical-style building with 170 identical boxes in tiers within a traditional horseshoe shaped auditorium,

which had been the favored style in Venice since its introduction as early as 1642. The building would face a small plaza on one side and a canal on the other, with an entrance which gave direct access backstage and into the theater.

Construction began in June, 1790, and by May, 1792 the theater was completed. La Fenice opened on May 16, 1792, with an opera by Giovanni Paisiello and libretto by Alessandro Pepoli entitled *I Giuochi d'Agrigento* (*The Games of Agrigento*). La Fenice immediately made its mark as one of the leading opera houses, noted in Italy and Europe both for the high artistic quality of its work and the splendor of its building.



During the French domination of Italy in the late 18th and early 19th centuries, the Fenice had to undergo some changes in order to function as a state theater. In 1807, a makeshift imperial loggia was built in order to welcome Napoleon. Following that, a new notice was issued for the construction of a definitive regal stand. A neoclassic painter, Giuseppe Borsato, won the contest. Borsato painted the decorations in imperial style: a triumphant Apollo surrounded by the muses that suggested Napoleon's victories. After this first reconstruction, the Fenice Theater reopened on December 26, 1808. Everyone praised Borsato's work, which was considered both sophisticated and original.

Although the Fenice had great premieres (see the first paragraph of this essay), the theater also required major reconstructions and renovations that were necessitated either by fires or by the aging of the structure, as in 1825–1828. Almost as if its name were the bearer of bad omens, on the night of December 13, 1836 the opera house was devastated by a fire caused by a recently installed Austrian heater. The newspapers said it took three days and three nights to put out the fire and that various hotspots were still smoldering among the debris 18 days later. The



flames completely destroyed the Fenice, and only the foyer and the Sale Apollinee (*at left*) were saved. The Nobile Società decided to proceed with its immediate reconstruction. It appointed the architect Giambattista Meduna and his engineer brother Tommaso to carry out the work, while Tranquillo Orsi was put in charge of the decorations. The work began in February, 1837 and performances were temporarily staged in the Teatro Apollo. Everything was completed in record time. By the evening of December 26, the new opera house, reborn in the new artistic style of



the age, was opened to the public. However, the speed of the work caused later problems to develop and led to urgent restoration work on the framework in 1854. At the same time, again under the direction of Giambattista Meduna, the Fenice was redecorated in a style that remained unchanged until 1996.

THE FAMOUS CURTAIN OF TEATRO LA FENICE

One of the highlights of the Fenice is its elaborately designed curtain. During the theater's long history, the famous curtain underwent a number of major alterations, especially as the result of various remodels or reconstructions of the theater. The Fenice's original curtain was actually two curtains. The first, which was raised at the beginning of the performance, was the work of Francesco Fontanesi, who was also one of the main decorators responsible for the "old style" embellishments of stucco, arabesques, rosettes and gilded bas-reliefs in the original theater. The second curtain, which was raised and lowered during intermissions, was the work of Pietro Gonzaga.

Fontanesi's curtain very much resembled a tapestry, with floral decorations around the edges. In the center of the curtain were allegorical and mythological scenes, which depicted Venus, Cupid, Harmony, and various putti. Gonzaga's "second" curtain, on the other hand, recreated the foyer of a temple, although it, too, was filled with various muses, cupids, and statues of poets.

Following the reconstruction of 1836-37, the theater once again had two curtains: one was Cosroe Dusi's Allegory of the Phoenix; the other, by Giovanni Busato, depicted Enrico Dandolo Renouncing the Crown of the Orient. The first, which was allegorical-mythological in its theme, was meant to celebrate the miraculous rebirth of the theater, and the divine character of immortal art. The second, whose theme was historical, was intended to underline the moral and civic importance of the theater itself, as represented in Enrico Dandolo's noble gesture of refusing the crown of the Orient because "I would prefer to live and die a citizen of my Republic."

During the course of redecorating the theater in the 1850's under the supervision of Giambattista Meduna, yet another curtain was made, this time by Eugenio Moretti-Larese. His work was also based on a medieval theme: Doge "Domenico Michiel at the Siege of Tyre." Once

again, the choice of subject matter, insofar as the perilous political times would allow, was dictated by the need to portray both romantic and patriotic scenes. (It is well-documented that the Italian theater—particularly on the opera stage—played an important role in rekindling feelings of national pride as the Risorgimento was beginning.)

The last of the 19th-century Fenice curtains, which still exists today, was painted by Antonio Ermolao Paoletti in 1878. This work was commissioned because Moretti-Larese's painting had already begun to deteriorate only three years after it was installed. Despite considerable criticism of the artist, and a good deal of complaining on the part of the individuals who had to pay for it, the curtain was judged too badly damaged to repair, and with regret the theater commissioned a new one.



Once again, the curtain was given an historical, celebratory theme, but this time, since the country had already been unified, Paoletti was able to depict a true Venetian scene which depicted a glorious episode in Venice's history. It pictured the Ducal Palace, and in front of it, he portrayed the citizens' rejoicing at the news of the conquest of the Turkish fleet at Lepanto (*at left*). Entitled *Onfredo Giustiniani Bringing Back to Venice the*

News of the Victory at Lepanto, Paoletti's work was a grand combination of the waving of arms and banners, the milling about of the crowd, and the swinging back and forth of the booms on the ships—all this while the Lion of Venice stands out against the rose-yellow background of the palace.

Prior to the latest restoration (see below), the condition of the curtain had been visibly damaged by over a century of age and use, and aggravated by a type of paint which was not particularly resistant to the conditions of the theater. Its restoration was made even more difficult because of its enormous size, by the movement to which it had been subjected over the years, and by the less than optimal climatic conditions in the theater.

Paoletti's curtain is a vivid symbol of the changing taste of the times: no longer are we in the midst of a neo-medieval revival; we have moved toward a revival of the values of the Renaissance, in large part due to the changing political conditions of the country itself. The heroic "Risorgimento" style of the romantic age was now giving way to more rhetorical, opulent myths and representations.

THE LATEST (AND HOPEFULLY LAST) DESTRUCTIVE FIRE AND RESTORATION

On January 29, 1996, La Fenice was completely destroyed by fire. At the time of the fire, major restoration work had already begun on the theater. Many believed that the chaos which existed inside the theater during this reconstruction contributed to the destruction. Only its acoustics (since Lamberto Tronchin, an Italian acoustician, had measured the acoustics two months earlier) and Paoletti's curtain (which had been removed and stored off-site for the renovation) were preserved.



Felice Casson (left), the prosecutor charged with finding those responsible for the fire, first focused on the city officials he felt were negligent in keeping order on the project. There were a number of problems he found that facilitated the destruction of the theater. Some of these were: a lack of restrictions on access to the site; the presence of equipment and

flammable materials left scattered around the site by work crews; the disabling of fire alarms due to the renovation work going on inside the theater, thus delaying detection and notification of the emergency responders; and the lack of water in the adjacent canal, which had been drained as part of a canal improvement plan, resulting in loss of valuable time because water from another canal had to be pumped to the scene of the fire.

Casson eventually turned his investigation to focus on the workers at the site. In the end, he charged with arson two cousins who were associated with the company hired to carry out the electrical work on the Fenice. Enrico Carella (the owner) and Massimiliano Marchetti (an employee) were both found guilty of the crime in March, 2001. They appeared to have set the building ablaze because their company was facing heavy fines if it did not meet an upcoming work deadline.

The mayor of Venice at the time of the fire, Massimo Cacciari, promised that the Fenice would be rebuilt “*com’era, dov’era,*” (as it was, where it was), which had been applied to the rebuilding of San Marco’s bell Campanile, exactly the same as the original and taking ten years after it had collapsed in 1902. This was easier said than done because of the difficulties of construction work in the middle of a city without roads. All the building materials had to be brought in by boat, and a large platform had to be built in the main thoroughfare of Venice, the Grand Canal, upon which cement mixers and large equipment were stored. After stops and starts and after the project had changed management mid-stream, the new Fenice reopened on December 14, 2003 with an inaugural concert of works by Beethoven, Wagner, and Stravinsky directed by Riccardo Muti, in front of an audience that included Italy’s president, Carlo Azeglio Ciampi. The first staged opera was a production of *La Traviata*, in November, 2004.

TEATRO LA FENICE TODAY

The fire of 1996 completely destroyed the five tiers of boxes, the stage and the ceiling, leaving only the perimeter walls of the original house. Reconstruction was based on the architect Aldo Rossi's design, and was facilitated by the comprehensive treatise on the reconstruction which had been drawn up by the Meduna brothers detailing their restoration work following the fire of 1836. Reconstruction of the Rococo-style decorations was based mainly on the large photographic collection of the opera house held in the theater's historic archive. In order to speed up the work, two procedures were adopted. Reconstruction of the masonry and wooden framing of the building was carried out in the opera house itself by hundreds of workers employed 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. The decorative components were constructed at the same time in various external workshops so that these would be ready for application once the structural work had been completed. The same 19th century materials were used: papier-mâché, wood and plaster. The guiding principle was that of recreating the original house, particularly its specific technical acoustic style based mainly on the use of wood, carefully chosen and treated to obtain the best acoustic response. The big "sound box" of the wooden house was enclosed in a protective envelope of masonry and reinforced concrete floors. The only decorative element built at least partly on site was the ceiling, which reproduced the original design giving the optical illusion of a vaulted ceiling. It featured paintings of several female figures, some of whom are carrying musical instruments, and young maidens representing the Graces, Music, Dance, and Aurora. The chandelier was a reproduction of the English original in gilt bronze, commissioned by the Meduna brothers from craftsmen in Liverpool in 1854.

La Fenice has a seating capacity of over 1,000 people, and boasts excellent acoustics (improved in the restoration work), a 98-member orchestra and 66-person opera chorus. It is a leading creative venue, staging more than 100 opera performances per year; a major symphonic season conducted by prominent conductors from around the world; the full cycles of symphonies by, among others, Beethoven, Schumann, Brahms, and Mahler; a contemporary repertoire focused especially on Venetian artists such as Nono and Maderna; ballets; and chamber music concerts.



The theater is owned today by the Municipality of Venice and managed by the Fondazione Teatro La Fenice (The Fenice Theater Foundation), a private body whose members include the State of Italy, the Veneto region, the Municipality of Venice and numerous public and private institutions. The foundation also runs a second theater, the Teatro Malibran (formerly known as the Teatro di San Giovanni Grisostomo), which dates back to 1678.

The trials and tribulations of Teatro la Fenice over its almost two centuries of existence bear witness not only to the resurrection and resilience of one of Italy's architectural masterpieces, but have made its name symbolic of the great desire and achievement of the people of Venice to continue their love of music and opera.

Adapted by James J. Boitano, PhD from: BV Events website;

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