

### TEATRO DELL'OPERA DI ROMA

*This month's essay continues an annual topic I cover this time of year corresponding with the start of the San Francisco Opera season. We have looked at Italian opera houses and their histories in this series, such as [Teatro la Fenice of Venice](#) and [Teatro alla Scala of Milan](#). This month we look at the opera house of Rome, which serves not only as an opera house but also as a performance venue for ballets and concerts. Rome's opera house*

*appeared later than those in other major Italian cities, although opera was performed before its construction in less ideal and smaller venues around the city.*



**TEATRO DELL'OPERA** opened on November 27, 1880 with a performance of *Semiramide* by Gioachino Rossini. (In the audience for the opening were the Italian king and queen consort, Umberto I and Margherita of Savoy-Genoa). It was originally known as the Teatro Costanzi, named after the contractor

who built it, Domenico Costanzi (1810-1898), who had migrated from Umbria to Italy's new capital in 1870 in search of new business opportunities. By 1874, Costanzi had bought a great deal of land in the area that led to Via del Corso from the new Termini Train Station. At first, the entrepreneur built a luxurious hotel (the Hotel Quirinale). Then, after several years, he began building the new opera house. Costanzi financed the entire project himself, and commissioned Achille Sfondrini (1836-1900) (*below*) to design it. Sfondrini was a young architect from Milan who had recently designed the Teatro Carcano in his hometown. The construction was very fast; the new opera house was ready in 18 months, and was constructed on the site where the Emperor Heliogabalus' Villa had stood in ancient Rome. The hotel and the opera house were connected via a subterranean passage, which artists liked because this passageway provided them with full privacy going and coming from the theater.

Different from many other opera houses of that era, which were designed in a neoclassical style, the Teatro Costanzi was built in Renaissance-Revival fashion. (The Renaissance-Revival, or neo-Renaissance, style took inspiration from the architectural style of Italian buildings from the 15th century, including some of the features of the Baroque era).



Designing the theater, Sfondrini paid particular attention to the acoustics, and was less concerned with visual elements. He conceived the interior structure of the theater as a “resonance chamber” which would produce wonderful acoustics that were helped by the design of the horseshoe-shaped interior. Originally, the theater had a seating capacity of 2,212; it had three tiers of boxes, an amphitheater, two separate galleries, and stalls. All this was surmounted by a dome adorned with splendid frescoes by the Perugian artist, Annibale Brugnoli.



Costanzi originally was obliged to manage the theater himself. However, because of maintenance expenses of the structure and production costs, Costanzi’s enterprise did not prove to be lucrative. Costanzi brought in investors to help finance the theater’s expenses. In addition, the first operas staged at the theater were not very well-attended, with performances often cancelled due to lack of public support. Romans, unlike investors, considered the new theater out of the way, and preferred to continue attending the historic Roman theaters—the Apollo, the Valley, and the Argentina.

But Costanzi did have great taste in music, and continued to publicize the theater and to stage opera productions. It was with his staging of the world premiere of Pietro Mascagni’s *Cavalleria Rusticana* (May 17, 1890), the now renowned opera based on the novel by the great Sicilian verista (realist) writer Giovanni Verga, that the theater became a successful enterprise. With this staging and the re-staging of several other *verismo* (realist) operas, he established the Teatro’s reputation as a shrine to *verismo* opera.

Domenico Costanzi died in 1898. His son, Enrico, took over management of the opera house for a short period of time. Enrico gained renown by organizing another world premiere of a *verismo* opera, *Tosca* by Giacomo Puccini, on January 14, 1900. This furthered the reputation of the theater among the opera public.

In 1907, the Teatro Costanzi was purchased by the impresario Walter Mocchi (1870-1955) on behalf of the Società Teatrale Internazionale e Nazionale (The International and National Theater Company). In 1912 Mocchi’s wife, Emma Carelli, became the managing director of the Impresa Costanzi (Costanzi Company), the new name given the theater following various changes in the company structure. During the 14 years of her tenure, major works that had not been performed before in Rome (or even in Italy) were staged. These included *La Fanciulla*

*del West (The Girl of the West), Turandot and Il Trittico (The Triptych)* all by Giacomo Puccini; *Parsifal* by Richard Wagner; *Francesca da Rimini* by Riccardo Zandonai; *Boris Godunov* by Modest Mussorgsky; *Samson et Dalila* by Camille Saint-Saëns and many others. Expanding the theater's offerings to include ballet, Diaghilev's Ballets Russes also performed.

In November 1926, the Costanzi was bought by the Rome City Council and was renamed Teatro Reale dell'Opera (The Royal Opera Theater). A partial rebuilding ensued which lasted for 15 months, led by architect Marcello Piacentini (1881- 1960) (*right*). Piacentini made several major changes to the original building. The entrance was relocated from the street that was formerly known as Via del Teatro (where the garden of the Hotel Quirinale is now located), to the opposite side, where Piazza Beniamino Gigli exists today. In addition, a fourth tier of boxes (now the third tier) and the balcony were added to the amphitheater inside. The interior was embellished by new stucco-work, decorations, and furnishings, including a magnificent chandelier measuring six meters (about 20 feet) in diameter and composed of 27,000 crystal drops. Above the proscenium arch is a plaque commemorating the rebuilding: "Vittorio Emanuele III Rege, Benito Mussolini Duce, Lodovicus Spada Potenziani, Romae Gubernator Restituit MC-MXXVIII—VI." Confusingly, the dates appear to be going backwards: "1928-6". However, the VI refers to the sixth anniversary of the Fascist's March on Rome of 1922. (Piacentini was a Fascist and one of the main proponents of Italian Fascist architecture). The theater re-opened on February 27, 1928 with the opera *Nerone (Nero)* by Arrigo Boito.



In 1946, following the end of World War II and the subsequent end of the monarchy, the name of the theater was simplified to Teatro dell'Opera. In 1958, the building was once again remodeled and modernized. The Rome City Council awarded the contract to Marcello Piacentini, the same architect who had directed the renovation 30 years before. He radically altered the building's style, especially the facade, the entrance and foyer, each of these taking the form we see today.

The theater's legendary acoustics still bear comparison with any other auditorium in the world. After some major changes to the interior to comply with new security regulations, the

opera house can seat 1,600 people. The house was retrofitted with air-conditioning subsequent to restoration, which provided improvements to the interior. The stucco work was completely restored, the great proscenium arch strengthened, and a parquet floor of solid oak blocks laid to replace the previous one. (The name “Teatro Costanzi” remains officially in use and refers to the main auditorium).

## SOME INTERESTING ITEMS OF THE POST-WAR PERIOD

On January 2, 1958, the theater was the venue for a controversial performance of Vincenzo Bellini’s *Norma* starring the celebrated soprano, Maria Callas. At the end of the 1st act of the gala performance, [Callas walked off the stage](#), claiming health problems. The audience, which included the President of Italy (Giovanni Gronchi) and most of Rome’s high society, were irate. To make matters worse, the opera company had not engaged an understudy for her. So, the musical evening was curtailed. (Callas, known for her volatile temperament, was sharply criticized).



Since its last renovation, the Teatro dell’Opera experienced both artistic successes and economic difficulties. Famous opera performances included two operas conducted in 1964 and 1965 by maestro Carlo Maria Giulini and directed by Luchino Visconti: *Le Nozze di Figaro* by Mozart and *Don Carlos* by Giuseppe Verdi.

Since the 1990s the opera house has collaborated with top Italian fashion designers such as Giorgio Armani and Valentino, reinforcing the “Made in Italy” brand.

From 2001 to 2010, the music director and chief conductor of the company was Gianluigi Gelmetti. In August, 2009, Ricardo Muti was named to succeed him in these posts. However, Muti demurred, citing in *La Repubblica* in October 2010, “general difficulties that are plaguing the Italian opera houses.” He especially referred to the lack of government economic support for the arts. Later, Muti assumed a role similar to that of music director but without title. Notable productions under his guidance have included Gluck’s *Iphigénie en Aulide* (2009), Verdi’s *Nabucco* (2011), *Simon Boccanegra* (2012) and *Ernani* (2013).

Muti was quite open about his feelings regarding the perennial problem of government cut-backs to cultural enterprises. One example: on March 12, 2011, the celebrated conductor broke

opera protocol and, at the end of the aria, “Va’ Pensiero” from Verdi’s *Nabucco*, delivered a speech in which he asked, with success, the audience to sing along during the encore to protest against the government’s cuts to culture.



In 2016 Sofia Coppola (*left*) directed Verdi’s *Traviata* which—in addition to being her debut as an opera director and a major coup for Rome—generated the highest box office take in the theater’s history.

In recent years, the opera house has staged numerous high-profile productions, many of them by foreign directors, including a contemporary reworking of Mozart’s *Così Fan Tutte* by Britain’s Graham Vick, Hector Berlioz’s *Benvenuto Cellini* with the anarchic touch of American-born Terry Gilliam, and Alban Berg’s *Lulu*, with more than 500 projected ink drawings, by South Africa’s William Kentridge.

In 2013, Carlo Fuortes was appointed the Sovrintendente (Superintendent) of Teatro dell’Opera di Roma. Fuortes has not only managed to increase the audience, especially by bringing younger people to performances, and balance the budget; he has combined the classical traditions of the past with the innovations of today, raising the profile of Rome’s opera house to a new international standing.

Daniele Gatti first guest-conducted with the company during the 2016-2017 season. He returned for subsequent guest engagements the following two seasons. In December 2018, the company announced his appointment as its new music director.

#### OPERA COMPANY’S SUMMER VENUE

The outdoor theater at the ancient Baths of Caracalla, with the Roman ruins as the backdrop, is the venue for the opera company’s summertime presentations in Rome. It began on August 1, 1937 with Gaetano Donizetti’s *Lucia di Lammermoor*, conducted by Oliviero de Fabritiis. Toti Dal Monte and Beniamino Gigli gave memorable performances in the three presentations. The next performances were two presentations of *Tosca*. Seven thousand people were in attendance at the five evenings of the experimental season, which became an instant success. The season expanded to almost 40 performances in 1938, staged over the entire summer.

An auditorium capable of seating 20,000 people was built and the stage was moved from the tepidarium to the more spacious calidarium. Then Verdi’s *Aida* made its debut among the magnificent ruins; it is the opera most frequently performed at Caracalla, and it is certainly the most popular.

The summer performances have continued every summer since. The only break came in the period 1940-45 during which no performances took place due to World War II. The Baths during this time were given over to kitchen gardens supporting the war effort. The magnificence of the stage settings, the careful choice of titles, directors and artists have made millions of opera lovers and the merely curious, flock to see today's 11 cycles of performances.

*Adapted by James J. Boitano, PhD from:*

*BV events Website;*

*"Callas Walks out of Performance."This Day in History: January 2, 1958. History.com Website;*

*"Caracalla."Opera Roma Website;*

*HiSoUR (Hi So You Are) Website;*

*Wanted in Rome Website;*

*Wikipedia Website.*

