



Milano and La Scala (1778-1920)

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Introduction

The international diffusion of Italian melodrama in the 19th century also reached countries where there was no tradition for this kind of show and confirmed Milan as the capital of the *opera industry*.

The Teatro alla Scala is the center of this production system based in Milano. The theatre, inaugurated in 1778, was built thanks to the stubborn and tenacious determination of the most illustrious families of the Lombard aristocracy, after a fire had destroyed the Regio Ducal Teatro two years earlier.

The construction of the New Teatro alla Scala was entirely financed by the nobles who received in exchange a box and its dressing room.

The nobles, with their continuous and constant presence in the theatre, were the ones who guided the musical taste of the city, decreeing the triumph or fiasco of authors and works.

So, Stendhal writes: «The Teatro La Scala is the salon of the city. [...] I consider La Scala the first theater in the world, since it is the one that gives the most pleasure through music».

Behind the neoclassical façade, the architect Giuseppe Piermarini created a perfect example of a *Teatro all'italiana*, an architectural model of theatre that dominated in Europe until the end of the 19th century, i.e., a building with a large horseshoe-shaped auditorium (the stalls), a series of boxes (in Italian *palchi*) aligned in vertical tiers, a gallery or *loggione* with a separate entrance.

However, the Italian Theater is not only an architectural model, but it also represents a series of social functions and symbolic values the meaning of which are to be seen in the main unit which is the theater box.

The box at La Scala was for many years the faithful mirror of the Milan of its time, a status symbol, an exclusive show-case for the aristocracy, and a sign of belonging to the city's elite, where the box owners (Palchettisti) went almost every evening, not only to attend the performance, but also to converse, weave relationships, increase family assets through marriage alliances, cultivate clandestine love affairs for passionate lovers, or indulge in gambling, at least until these were banned.

The hierarchy of social classes is reproduced in the hierarchy of seats in the theatre. In descending order: boxes, stalls, gallery.

In the 18th century the box-owners of the first and second tier were all nobles. In the third and fourth tier the upper middle-class members are initially a minority presence; in fact, they occupy respectively five and twelve boxes. Only around the middle of the 19th century did the social composition of the Scaliger public change significantly and so also among the box-owners we find an increasing number of upper middle-class members in parallel with the development of the industrial revolution. The thirties and forties of the 19th century saw the unstoppable rise of La Scala to the rank of first opera house in Italy, a primacy that had been held by the San Carlo in Naples where in 1815 a brilliant impresario, Domenico Barbaja, had engaged the already famous Rossini as composer and director of the royal theatres.

The decline of Naples and its theatre, which began with the death of Barbaja (1841), became definitive with the unification of Italy and the consequent loss of the status of capital of a kingdom that had been the largest and most populous of the peninsula.

In the same years, the *opera repertoire* was being formed, a group of works by the greatest composers of the 19th century which came to constitute the *canon* and the sound representation of an imaginary museum, titles which still today continue to be present on the programmes of theaters all over the world. This entails the disappearance of one of the fundamental assumptions of the history of opera, i.e., the production of new works every year, as it happens today for cinema.

The city of Milan is then the headquarters of the main music publishers, from Ricordi, to Lucca, to Sonzogno.

Casa Ricordi, founded by Giovanni Ricordi in 1808 and grown from an artisan workshop to an important industrial reality, owns a large part of the music by the authors of 19th melodrama which constitute the central nucleus of the *opera repertoire* from which the publisher derives a substantial income through the sale of scores and rental of scores and orchestra and choir parts.

But the importance of the Publisher also manifests itself as a commissioner of works to the composer as he is often his privileged interlocutor, as it happens to Giulio Ricordi with Verdi.

The figure of the impresario-contractor declines, until it disappears completely - in the case of La Scala in 1920, with the establishment of the *Ente Autonomo*, Autonomous Institution - because it is the very idea of the theater-impresario as a profit-making activity that it is judged unacceptable.

The decision of the Società Esercente, to which the Municipality entrusts the management of the Scala after the crisis of 1897, to appoint Giulio Gatti-Casazza general and administrative director and Arturo Toscanini artistic director, even before solving the problems of ownership of the boxes and public financing, anticipates the choices that will lead to today's Milan and La Scala: a producer of musical culture at the service of society.

The qualifying point of this work is the fact that it has been able to draw on numerous and precious archival sources, both public and private, some of which have only recently been made accessible and are presented and discussed here for the first time.

I cannot describe the strong emotion one feels having access to unpublished documents; in deciphering them one has the perception of reading the events in their most direct and immediate form before their historical interpretation. Some of the thousands of documents consulted have been transcribed, almost entirely, in the final part of the text in the *Documents* section.

It was for me to embark on a journey (1778 -1920) whose destination I initially ignored, a fascinating and exciting journey, not without surprising aspects - such as the one on gambling - which gave some answers, but posed just as many questions.

A city, Milan, relatively small compared to Paris or London, builds a theatre, La Scala, which fifty years after its inauguration is the most famous in Europe and therefore in the world; the Italian melodrama of the nineteenth century, born between Naples and Milan, becomes *repertoire* in the Lombard city and from Milan goes on to conquer the five continents, elaborating a production model called *opera industry* by the Anglo-Saxons; a Publisher, Ricordi, which owes its fortune precisely to the *opera repertoire*, since the repertoire is largely made up of titles from its catalog which are performed in hundreds of theaters on various continents. And finally, the Italian language, so important that two Italian impresarios of the Court Theater (Barbaja and Merelli) were able to set up a *deutsche Saison* for Carnival every year for almost twenty years, which was followed in spring by an *italienische Saison*, dedicated to Italian opera and sung in Italian.

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