

renovated *and* reborn



La Scala



La Fenice

Julia Chiarella Genoni looks at the two opera houses La Scala and La Fenice, both due to open within the next few weeks

Venice and Milan: two distinct and awe-inspiring cities. Both share strong culture, history and beauty. Both are also linked musically, especially now that their opera houses La Fenice and La Scala are at last fully renovated and ready to begin the opera season.

First originating in Italy as part of the wedding celebrations of wealthy families during the 16th century, early composers like Monteverdi started the public's love affair with opera and this passion carried on through to the latter part of the 19th century with the universally popular composers Verdi and Puccini.

In the 1700s, opera houses were built throughout Italy, adorned with gilded stuccowork and elaborate accents in gold. These opera houses developed into places where composers and artists were tested and became well known in their field. It was these creative people who made the names of opera houses like La Scala and La Fenice.

In Milan, La Scala was built on the former location of the Santa Maria della Scala church, after which it was named. Under the auspices of Maria Teresa of Austria, Giuseppe Piermarini began the design in 1776 and the opera house opened on August 3rd, 1778 with a performance of Antonio Scalieri's *L'Europa Riconosciuta*.

During the Second World War La Scala was bombed but was rebuilt three years later. Despite its valiant fight back from war damage the building was beginning to suffer from over 200 years of wear and tear. It finally had to close in January 2001 for a full renovation that just could not be postponed any longer. The Teatro degli Arcimboldi was built specifically so that La Scala's performances could continue while the old building underwent its makeover. Financed by the Milan Municipality and the Foundation Teatro alla Scala, the three-year project was allocated funds of 55.8 million euros. The restoration was supervised by the Comune di Milano and internationally renowned architects Mario Botta and Elisabetta Fabbri (the latter also in charge of the La Fenice renovations from 2002).

The renovations of La Scala revealed many decorative elements that had been partly lost over the years, such as original tiled floor in the boxes, and the Venetian-style and marble-effect floors in the corridors. Every effort was made to preserve and enhance any décor from the building's original construction. La Scala will reopen on Milan's traditional date, December 7th, (the feast of Sant'Ambrogio, its patron saint), with the same opera that celebrated its inauguration in 1778.

PHOENIX RISING

Venice's La Fenice opera house came into being as the result of a contest announced in 1789 by The Noble Society to redesign the city's

San Benedetto theatre. Giannantonio Selva's design won the competition and, like La Scala, La Fenice took two years to build, opening in 1792. After a fire in 1836, brothers Tommaso and Giovan Meduna were hired to oversee the rebuilding project. This work was just one of many attempts at reconstruction and renovation over the years and the opera house gradually became a combination of neoclassical and neobaroque styles.

After a second more destructive and deliberate fire in January 1996, La Fenice was burned down to almost nothing and remained untouched for some time following several setbacks. True to its name – La Fenice means 'the phoenix' – the house began to rise from the ashes as architect Aldo Rossi and Aldo Rossi Associates finally began its reconstruction and it opened in December 2003, although no opera has yet been performed there. Its official opening will be November 2004 when La Fenice's walls will resound once more to the sounds of the work performed at its first reopening in 1853 – Verdi's *La Traviata*.

BETTER THAN EVER

As the designers have stated, the opera houses were not reconstructed, they were renovated and enhanced. Cleaning work and updates for safety regulations played a major role in the projects - La Scala will now be equipped with a lift for disabled people, for example. The curtains in La Fenice have been replaced with better quality fire proof ones that match the décor of the stage. The projects were able to highlight the original features of some areas while improving the overall quality of the architecture. As Massimo Scheurer of Also Rossi Associates says: 'We have reproduced something close to the original, but with up-to-date improvements in acoustics, rehearsal space and stage machinery.'

Now more than ever, Italy is making major efforts to preserve its historic monuments. With full knowledge that tourism will never slow down, the communities of Italy are doing the most they can to keep their cultural heritage alive and well. These opera houses are a definite start. La Scala and La Fenice will surely be welcomed back from their long sabbaticals, continuing to represent music, culture and tourism in Italy. ■■■

FURTHER INFORMATION

La Fenice, Palafenice, Isola del Tronchetto, Venezia Servizio cortesia
Teatro La Fenice: (+39) 041 786575 www.teatrolafenice.it
www.veniceonline.it www.ricostruzionefenice.it/english/index.asp
La Scala, Via Filodrammatici, Milan, Lombardy 20121
Infotel Scala : 02 72 003 744 (10 lines.) www.lascala.milano.it
www.cantierescala.it/home.htm