



Opera returns home

Ambitious plans are afoot to rebuild the world's very first opera house more than 200 years since it was demolished, as **George Hall** reports

One of the most important moments in musical history came in the early 17th century, when the world's very first opera house opened in Venice. The recently invented art form had previously been presented at the palaces of Italian nobles as private, invitation-only affairs; now it was open to a paying public. Not far from the Rialto Bridge, and named after a nearby church, the Teatro San Cassiano was originally built in 1581 to stage plays. With the first performance there of *L'Andromeda* by Francesco Manelli and Benedetto Ferrari at the carnival in February 1637, its programming model changed – and the modern operatic public was born.

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By the end of the 1600s, several other theatres in Venice were staging opera, though the San Cassiano kept its position within a burgeoning industry until the end of the 18th century. It was finally demolished in 1812 – apparently on the orders of Napoleon as head of the occupying French forces.

More than 200 years later, Dr Paul Atkin, an English businessman and musicologist, is endeavouring to recreate this lost opera house, intending to reopen it to play a repertoire of works created during its nearly two centuries of existence. It's a bold enterprise, yet Atkin seems to possess the knowledge, enthusiasm and above all the necessary determination to carry it through.



Atkin himself is not only steeped in opera, but is also a lover of theatres, and over the course of his research has learned a great deal about them. He has already worked for five years on the San Cassiano project, spending half his time in Venice and the other half at his home in Richmond, Surrey. 'Our progress has been superb and beyond our dreams,' he tells me, 'though that's nothing to do with me: it's due to the need for the project.'

Italy, Atkin explains, possesses some 3,000 theatres, 'but they've modernised pretty much every single one of them, so that today we find ourselves without a single 17th-century theatre with period stage machinery and scene-sets. None of us has actually sat in a proper 17th-century Venetian theatre of the type that Monteverdi, Cavalli or Vivaldi would have composed for.' It is the value of the music – after all, an area of ever-growing popular interest – that has inspired him to build this historic reproduction. 'I believe that we need our own dedicated theatre, and that when we hear this music in it, it will be entirely intoxicating.'

Due to the limited size of its early theatres, says Atkin, Venetian opera evolved as a kind of chamber opera, 'so you had these very small orchestras. I'm not a purist, but I am particularly interested in historically informed performance. We do a lot of work on what was happening in the pit, but very little on what was happening



on the stage. I think we miss a lot in terms of the theatrical action, gestures and costumes. For me, Venice is all about tangible assets in terms of all these wonderful buildings. But we've forgotten the intangible assets.' One of his partners, the Marciano Library, possesses some 300 operatic manuscripts, works that have been left behind, mostly by composers who are no longer performed. 'They were the best of their time; the best composers and the best librettists. Their work needs to be performed and shared.'

But how much do we actually know about the San Cassiano itself? 'When I started the project we knew nothing,' he replies. 'There was no image of the original theatre – in fact there was no image of the theatre at any point other than a 1763 sketch of its front that was never realised.'

Atkin then started his research. 'I'd already spent many long hours in libraries in Italy, and especially in Modena, working on a composer called Antonio Gianettini. If you're going through a document and looking for the name Gianettini, you move straight over stuff that's not important to you. So I thought, let's start again, let's go back to those documents and see what we can construct. So we carried out an audit of the records and what we discovered was quite amazing.' In short, Atkin discovered material relating to the rebuilding of the San Cassiano in 1763. 'The architect was commissioned to create what was actually the fifth theatre on the site, and he kept detailed records of what had existed previously. Those measurements take us back to about 1690, and with them we can quantify this space precisely.' Atkin thus knows exactly where the theatre stood until its demolition in 1812. The former site, however, is privately owned, and permission to rebuild the San Cassiano on that original spot would never be granted (a situation not dissimilar to that of Shakespeare's Globe in London), but he has other and better options.

If he is able to bring his project to fruition – and he has already won the full support of the Venetian authorities – the rebuilt San Cassiano will be as exact a reconstruction of the world's first public opera house as possible, able to



Past glories: (opposite) a modern recreation of *L'ingresso alla gioventù* di Claudio Nerone by Gianettini, staged for the first time since 1692; (above) views of a model of the Teatro San Cassiano, Venice, alongside Dr Paul Atkin (above)



Major arias

Five Italian opera houses

Teatro di San Carlo, Naples

The world's oldest continuously active opera house first opened its doors on 4 November 1737. With six tiers of boxes, it used to seat more than 3,000, though the composer Spohr thought it was too large. It now seats 1,386.

Teatro alla Scala, Milan

On 3 August 1778, Salieri's *Europa riconosciuta* welcomed the first audience to what has since become the world's most famous opera house (above), hosting many premieres, not least of Verdi and Puccini.

La Fenice, Venice

Built in 1792, Venice's La Fenice ('The Phoenix') hosted premieres by Bellini, Donizetti, Rossini and Verdi in the 19th century. It has twice completely burned down, in 1836 and 1996.

Teatro Massimo, Palermo

Italy's largest opera house in terms of area, if not number of seats, hosted its first performance in 1897. In 1974, a contentious renovation project closed the venue for 23 years.

Teatro Petruzzelli, Bari

This 1903 venue enjoyed a reputation for punching above its weight in terms of ambitious programming – until 1991, that is, when a fire ripped right through the building, leading to an 18-year closure.



Compare and contrast: how a production of Gianettini's opera might have looked in Teatro San Cassiano; (far left) the famous but far larger-scale Teatro alla Scala, Milan

accommodate 405 audience members, mostly in the 153 boxes that were part of the original auditorium. 'We did some work on the John Webb drawing which became the basis for the Sam Wanamaker Theatre at the Globe in London, and you can see that they're cousins. Jon Greenfield was the lead reconstruction architect for that project and he is ours too.'

Atkin believes that the rebuilt San Cassiano would be financially sustainable, 'and comfortably so, because we're in Venice: we

'This is as much about regeneration, impact and sustainability as it is about music'

couldn't do that if we were in some provincial place.' Venice, though, as he freely admits, is not an easy place to obtain building permission. 'It's a very complicated process, but if we can jump through all the hoops and see our vision through, our preferred site will give us enough space to build a new stand-alone theatre.'

The trust of the Venetians themselves has been crucial. 'From day one I've tried to learn the Venetian way of doing things, and we've been able to build really strong relationships. The key thing was that from day one I have worked with Venetians and all the documents we've prepared were drawn up in Venice. By the time we presented to the mayor, we had employed 26 different Venetian companies. When the theatre is fully running we have a projected employment of 160. This is as much about regeneration, impact and sustainability as it is about music.'

When Atkin's ambitious project was first announced, many people were sceptical: 'People

thought that the mayor would never back it; that we would never find a site; and that somehow Venice as a city would find some way of blocking it.' Yet so far Atkin and his collaborators have been moving steadily and confidently forward – or at least they were until Covid-19 struck. 'Of course, Covid has hurt me, but ultimately I think it's going to be a key player for me, because people have had to stop and think, "what do we want from Venice? What is it going to be?" Venice has two problems. One is a plummeting population, so they need to create jobs to encourage people to live there. We deliver that. Secondly, Venice is worn out by hit-and-run tourism. Our model is to put culture first. Anyone coming to our theatre has to stay the night, so they'll need a hotel and they'll need a restaurant.'

They're also likely to want to explore the city's wealth of culture, so in a larger sense it's about creating a cultural hub, of which the later and larger Teatro La Fenice (see box, left) is already a highly successful but essentially complementary component. 'Venice will be the only city in the world that can offer opera in a theatre suitable for the genre from its beginning until our own time,' says Atkin. 'It's not a question of *if* anymore: it's a question of *when* – though that doesn't mean that the journey will not be difficult.'

What about money? 'We were getting a launch process underway when Covid first struck: I had an investor lined up with the entire sum, but unfortunately his interest in the project died at that point. When we restarted, Covid hit us once more. But this time it's different. People know that we need to go forward, and nobody knows how to fight better than the Venetians. They now see that this has to happen.'

Thus far, Atkin himself has funded the project, but he is keen to bring in people with deeper pockets. 'Ultimately we will need about £65m, but let's take one step at a time. We are looking for the right person who will understand the importance of theatre as part of the city, of these intangible assets that we've got to recover, and about historically informed performance.'

Atkin looks ahead to full stagings of works from the Baroque and Classical periods in his purpose-built theatre. 'As well as our own productions, I want to invite others to come to us and bring their skills. It would be a great opportunity for us to be able to say to someone, you've had a run in Berlin; come and have three more nights, or six more nights, with us. I believe that together we really will make Venice once again the pre-eminent centre of Baroque opera! 🎭