

SAN CASSIANO RESURGANS

Brian Robins on the plans to rebuild the first public opera house

Venice, carnival season, 1637. A new theatre opens in the parish of San Cassiano, not far from the Rialto Bridge, on a site previously occupied by three (or arguably four) theatres built by the Tron family, one of Venice's great patrician dynasties. Public theatres for the performance of *commedia dell'arte* in Venice had been a spectacular commercial success for more than half a century, the theatre built by the Tron family in 1580 having heralded a succession of imitators, but the new San Cassiano was not built to stage comedy but opera, thus earning its place in history as the first public opera house anywhere in the world. The opera presented at its opening—the now-lost *Andromeda*, by the now-forgotten impresario and composer Benedetto Ferrari—also set a precedent for the future with its exceptionally lavish sets and stage effects, which included the hero Perseus flying down from the heavens to rescue the enchained Andromeda.

The immense success of *Andromeda* spawned not only further operas but also new rival opera houses in Venice and elsewhere in Italy. Opera became an industry. As commercial ventures such theatres came and went, often the victim of financial failure or fire. San Cassiano itself underwent an enlargement in 1767, and managed to survive until 1812, when it was demolished during the French occupation, its unique place in operatic history soon forgotten.

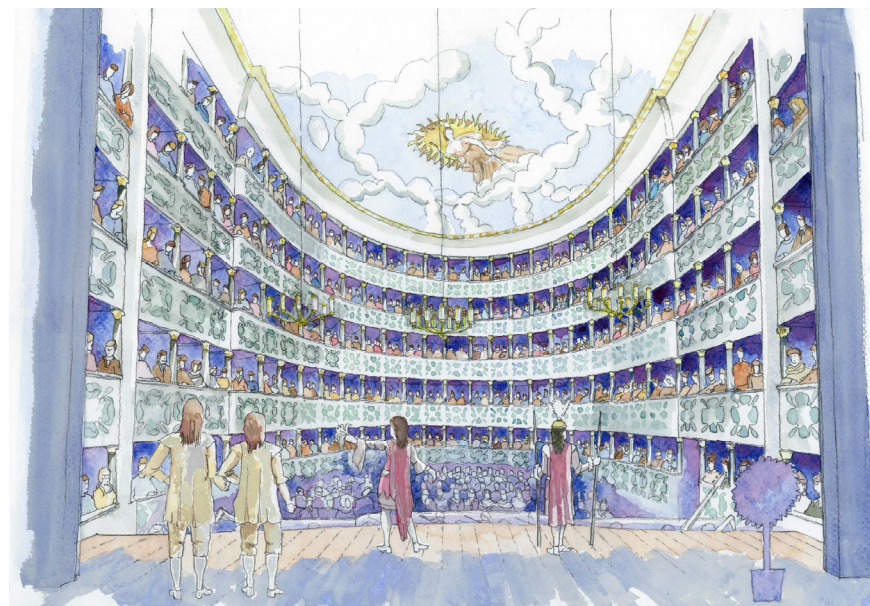
That is on the cusp of change if the plans of the British businessman and musicologist Paul Atkin can be brought to fruition. Atkin's immensely ambitious idea is nothing less than the rebuilding of the original 1637 San Cassiano as a working, historically informed

■ Paul Atkin, the moving force behind reconstruction of the Teatro San Cassiano



opera house with all its stage machinery, preferably on its original site, otherwise one close to it.

I met Atkin to discuss his project and first asked him how such a scheme had come to his mind. 'I had the idea back in 1999, although it had been formulating in my mind for several years before that. I was at a performance of *Julius Caesar* at the Globe. I'd studied it at school and seen a modern production and I really hadn't understood much, certainly not the nuance of the play. In that Globe performance everything suddenly became clear and it occurred to me that what the Globe does for Shakespeare we should be doing for opera—that if we could reconstruct the San Cassiano in Venice, the potential on so many different levels would be endless. There is a real need for a Baroque opera house in Italy. There is no monument or plaque to the



■ The restored San Cassiano, as envisaged by the architect Jon Greenfield

San Cassiano, only the garden where it once stood. There is no record of what Venice gave to the world in launching public opera performances and there is no continuation of that legacy. To bring the San Cassiano back to Venice will involve a way of staging Baroque opera today that goes beyond just being a museum, a way that takes it forward in a living context. I think that is essential and if you then make that a venue where you focus on study, the exploration and experimentation for the performance of opera, then you take it to another level. I'm very keen to bring the link through from musicological research to performance and recording to make it one continuous line. There is at present a terrible disjunction between musicologists and performers.'

Not the least of the problems surrounding Atkin's project is that there is little evidence of what the original San Cassiano looked like; there are no surviving plans, nor any written description of the theatre. Early on Atkin overrode suggestions that it might be better to build a generic historic opera house in Venice, insistent that it should be the San Cassiano. Now he has found strong supporting material. The architect's plans for the 1763 extension do exist and an examination of them has revealed that the architect helpfully included an outline of the original theatre. From this it has been possible for Atkin's architects to reconstruct a model of the 1637 theatre based on its dimensions and knowledge of the disposition of the boxes. His plans are now in a fully developed and advanced stage.

That leads to the pertinent and inevitable question: how does Atkin intend to raise what will be a very large sum of money? Can he confirm his stated intention that this is a commercial venture that will not involve public funding? 'I am very happy to confirm on record that we are not seeking any public funding from Italy, the EU or anywhere else,' he replies. 'It became clear to me from day one that Venice could not sustain a fourth public theatre [in addition to La Fenice, the Malibran and the Goldoni] and that if we were

going to succeed the only viable route was the commercial one. The fun of that is that if we are going to rebuild the theatre in the way it was originally built and stage opera in it the way it was originally staged, then why not run it in the way it was originally run? From 1637 to 1812 the San Cassiano was a private commercial theatre. I think that suits us because it stops us drawing on Venice, it enables us to keep commercially independent of the other theatres and because we are recreating the world's first public opera house, and in Venice, we have the power to attract a public that will appreciate that. So we have done an awful lot of research and we have no doubts. We've looked at how the Globe works, how Glyndebourne works, both of which, although unlike us, are foundations operating commercially with negligible public funding.

'This October we are launching a proposal to raise £100 million. Again we looked at models that have proved to be successful. The obvious one was staring us in the face all the time, which is to say that if we go back to the 17th century we find that when plans to construct a theatre were put forward potential subscribers would come forward and choose their box before construction started, have their name written against it and pay their funds. What we want to do in the modern era is to link fundraising to boxes, but with a modern twist. We want to show respect to both Venice and the San Cassiano by creating a system of having an inclusive members club of the original founders. We are not so much selling the box space, rather we are selling the legacy of being a founder investor in the restoration of the San Cassiano to Venice. We think that is something very special and if we celebrate that by allocating a £1m investment for over 100 boxes across the first four tiers of the theatre and if we tie that to membership of the 'Accademia dei Fondatori (1637)' our founder investors will go down in history as being a unique group. They will be remembered for bringing the San Cassiano back to life. All our research suggests that we can deliver our target. So, yes, we have costed and road-tested this funding in the UK, in Italy and the US.'

I suggested to Atkin that we might perhaps project ourselves forward to opening night, asking him what kind of repertoire we might expect to see in the newly-risen San Cassiano. 'We've divided the repertoire into three areas. Following the model of La Fenice we will have well-known operas, like the three Monteverdi Venetian operas or, say, Handel's *Rinaldo*. Then there's a second category of neglected operas by known composers, so, maybe, a Vivaldi, but a lesser-known one. And finally there's my favourite category, my real passion, the forgotten operas, such as Antonio Gianettini's *L'ingresso alla gioventù di Claudio Nerone*, which I recovered as part of my PhD and which was done last year at Český Krumlov. I want that kind of revival to be an important part of our work. We are fortunate to have Andrea Marcon as artistic director, for whom, in his own words, this is a lifetime dream coming true. We will have his Venice Baroque Orchestra as our house orchestra. However, the San Cassiano has to be a melting pot for early opera, so we also want to invite the world's best performers to come to our theatre. By doing that we will start to have a conversation and to explore what it means. It is not for me or for our theatre to be the arbiter of what is correct. We will be quite pure in what we try to achieve, but we will invite all of the great and the up-and-coming names to perform at the San Cassiano and we will work together. What I would not want is for someone to come in and ignore its Baroque stage facilities. If you have those wonderful historic facilities there is a duty to use them.'

I'm intrigued by how the orchestra pit of the new San Cassiano will accommodate the range of repertoire that Atkin is discussing, pointing out that the space needed for an 'orchestra' in 1637 (six or seven players) is very different from that required for a Handel

opera. 'That's a really interesting question, one to which I don't think we yet have the answer. The theatre will be an exact representation of the 1637 theatre, and within that we know that the pit wall was probably a sort of deflecting barrier—not of course a sunken pit in the modern style. In theory you could take the wooden barrier away and you could extend that space by two rows more to enlarge the theatre. However the pit will be the size it was in 1637, as far as the information we have can tell us. We know from our records that the number of theatre boxes remained constant at 153 from 1637 to 1763. Being a wooden construction it is entirely possible that the theatre itself may have changed shape in that period but there is no record of the number of boxes changing until 1763, when an additional tier was added and two more boxes were squeezed into each level. It is clear that in 1763 the change was driven by a need to enlarge the stage and the orchestra pit, not the auditorium. Nevertheless up to that point they staged opera within the dimensions of the original theatre. Our job is not to rewrite history. If they staged opera in those circumstances it worked in those circumstances.'

The three hours or so I spent in Atkin's company revealed him to be a visionary, a man with a mission to which his commitment is total. Not the least impressive is his fervent desire to follow the pattern of British protection of the heritage of Venice. 'It is important for Venice in that the project will recreate an environment that allows Venice to transmit to the world that it is relevant today, selling what it does best—culture. It also creates a sustainable model that we can put against the non-sustainable model of millions of tourists coming in and spending their €1.50 per day.' Whether or not Atkin is successful in bringing Baroque opera back to Venice remains to be seen. If he is, it will be one of the most important developments in the opera world for many years.

Leoš Janáček

The most-performed Czech opera composer in the world lived and worked in Brno.
Can you name his operas?



Illustrations: Vendula Chalchikova, 2018-2019

And do you know Leoš Janáček?
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