

## A tale of two Italian opera cities

Austerity was out of sight in Milan last week as a starry Don Giovanni opened La Scala's first season under Daniel Barenboim. There's an operatic renaissance in nearby Turin, too, led by Milanese maestro Gianandrea Noseda



**Fiona Maddocks**  
The Observer, Sunday 11 December 2011



Anna Netrebko, Giuseppe Filianoti and Barbara Frittoli in Don Giovanni at La Scala. Photograph: Brescia-Amisano/Teatro alla Scala

Police with riot shields cordoned off the streets. Crowds jostled to glimpse passing politicians and fashionistas. The season's opening night at **La Scala**, Milan, the world's most illustrious opera house – and offstage, with its long history of strikes and walkouts, one of the most excitable – is a traditional haunt for protesters and publicity-seekers. Every Italian knows exactly where the world's TV cameras will point on 7 December each year, the feast of Milan's patron St Ambrose, but also "La Prima" at La Scala when gold-dust tickets cost – on this night only – €2,400.

In a week which saw the new "technocrat" prime minister Mario Monti announce a £20bn austerity package which left the welfare minister in tears, the irony of the timing was lost on no one. This season's opener, a new *Don Giovanni* with a deluxe cast including the Russian superstar Anna Netrebko in her house debut, Bryn Terfel as the Don's sidekick Leporello, and Daniel Barenboim in his inaugural season as music director, offered the ultimate truffle

Yet protesters and booers, with isolated exceptions, stayed away. For the first time in memory – ex-PM Berlusconi having, like ex-PM Blair, a minimal track record at the opera – the two most powerful men in the country were in attendance for this iconic national occasion. Standing together in a royal box festooned with vast swags of white roses, Monti and president Giorgio Napolitano were rewarded with a prolonged standing ovation.

Later, this box would become the dramatic centre of the action in Robert Carsen's all-inclusive staging, its occupants vanishing to give way to an eerie "stone" statue. For now the message from the floor seemed to be: Italy is poised for change. And thanks to live streaming and telecasts, millions witnessed this political moment the world over.

So far, so good. But who was this tall man in black tie and tails striding through the auditorium, rudely late and muttering, just as Mozart's doom-laden opening chords were sounding? The audience stiffened. If you have ever seen a Robert Carsen show, you had a head start: it was Don Giovanni in the handsome, outsized guise of Peter

Mattei, the Swedish baritone who launched his international career in the role at Scottish Opera.

Once he had scaled a pillar, climbed on stage, torn down the false curtain and revealed a wobbly back-wall mirror in which he, we, Barenboim, the politicians and celebrities, the flowers and gold-and-ivory splendour of the theatre were all distortingly reflected, we knew the show had begun. No need to spell out the metaphors. It was a fabulous visual coup, the best of many in a slick, smart, occasionally indulgent production.

Barenboim, who has effectively been music director since Riccardo Muti left hastily in 2005, chose steady, almost old-fashioned tempi and a majestic sound. The orchestra glowed in response and filled the large auditorium with muscular, full-blooded playing. This was not, it seemed, the place to try any brisk period instrument shenanigans, alas. Much of the playing was unquestionably magnificent, emphasising the "seria" side of Mozart's elusive, dark-light opera. But this broad approach tested the breath control and ensemble of the singers to the utmost.

Some were found wanting, especially when having to project from further back on the stage. The poetic but uneven Italian tenor Giuseppe Filianoti (Don Ottavio) nearly collapsed vocally in "Il mio tesoro" – a piece of exquisite time-wasting, as Ian Bostridge once observed when pondering why Mozart tenors always get short shrift, which "can do for Don Ottavio". It did.

That weightiness suited Carsen's debut staging, in which proscenium arches receded nightmarishly into a distant horizon in Michael Levine's stage-within-a-multiplicity-of-stages set. Modern dress was overlain with red-velvet 18th-century costumes for any form of disguise. The Don made scurrilous, jokey love to Leporello wearing a dress over his own clothes. Carapaces of all kinds were constantly peeled away. The point was exhaustively made, if hardly a novelty.

Netrebko's Donna Anna was thrilling in her nobility and ease of execution. She is on grand form. The role suits her vocally but, by its nature, uses only part of her acting ability. The real histrionics are left to Donna Elvira, played with vivid neurosis by Barbara Frittoli who perhaps lacked some of her usual vocal bloom but still gave a compelling performance. Bryn Terfel, in a rare detour from his current Wagner journeyings, found humour and despair, frustration and embarrassment, tenderness and blind fury in his convincing "outsider" Leporello.

In the title role Mattei has the looks and the voice. He makes little of Da Ponte's humour but compensates by being credible as the louche, aristocratic chameleon who is all things to all women. At the end he defiantly wanders on smoking a cigarette, while those other, better humans plunge down to their own mere oblivions. If far from rapturous, the applause was enthusiastic. Flowers rained down on the performers like stair rods.

Milan will always be Italy's most famous opera house, the home of so many Verdi premieres and now, with the arrival of Barenboim, new open-access schemes and the promise of livelier productions, enjoying new vitality. It is not alone, however, in its renaissance. In nearby Piedmont, the similarly historic **Teatro Regio** in Turin, where *La bohème* was premiered in 1896 in the old theatre, is marching forward impressively.

One reason for this upturn is the astute appointment of [Gianandrea Noseda](#) as music director in 2007. With a track record embracing the Mariinsky, St Petersburg and the Metropolitan Opera, New York, as well as Manchester's BBC Philharmonic and, recently, the LSO and OAE, Noseda's career is in fast ascent. Turin is recognised as a well-run, professional outfit, but now it is raising its artistic game. Opera's honchos, among them the Met's head Peter Gelb, are taking note.



Gianandrea Noseda: 'Opera is in the Italian DNA.' Photograph:

Chris Christodoulou

It helps, too, that Turin is considered the most European-oriented of Italian cities. Famously home of Fiat, but also of Lavazza, Martini and Ferrero Rocher, its situation at the foot of the Alps gives it an international flavour. A former home of royalty, its buildings are aristocratic, its atmosphere, despite busy tram life, elegant. Against trend, tourist numbers are growing. The opera house enjoys a formidable 94% box office, with many fans from France and Switzerland crossing the border for Sunday matinees – in nice counterpoint to La Scala where, despite its international reputation, nearly half its public live less than a mile away.

Noseda, who has worked regularly with the likes of Netrebko and Frittoli, is bringing some of his charisma to Turin. Gergiev and the Mariinsky will come this season. Noseda is implicitly establishing stronger links with La Scala too, where he will conduct *Luisa Miller* this season, and in 2015 a world premiere by Giorgio Battistelli based on Al Gore's *An Inconvenient Truth*. This week Noseda and film director Mario Martone opened a new production of Beethoven's *Fidelio*. I saw the dress rehearsal which was extremely promising, especially musically, with the British tenor Ian Storey (a recent Tristan at La Scala) as Florestan and Ricarda Merbeth as Leonora. These are exciting times for the operatically inclined Torinese – who, judging from the audience profile, is just about anyone of any age or class.

"Opera is in the Italian DNA," Noseda told me last week. "It's not ornamental. It's vital for the success of the state of Italy – and I mean for business as well as cultural and artistic reasons. Opera now, as never before, can put Italy on the map of the world. I understand from this government that we can expect change... I hope, despite everything, for the better."

The old days of Italian-run artistic enterprises being "all genius and no rules" are long gone. "We can't get away with that any more. In Turin we've only had two strikes in the past 15 years. The last time, not exactly a strike, we flung open the entire theatre so the public could come in and see backstage, wigs, props, costumes – all the hidden industry that goes into every opera, with the musicians as guides."

Extrovert Milan and diffident Turin could hardly be more different. Aren't these generalisations just nonsense? Noseda chuckles and moves the sugar bowl in front of him. "I move this bowl? I want everyone to know about it. But you see, I am Milanese..." This marriage of opposites could ignite a new era in the rich history of Italian music.