



THE LOVE ITALY GUIDE N. 007

Italian Opera Tradition

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On the seventh of December each year, the city of Milan stops for a feast day and an opera: the season at [Teatro alla Scala](#) opens on Sant'Ambrogio, the feast of Milan's patron saint, and a single bad note can still draw a hiss from the gallery. Opera is not a museum piece here - it is a living argument about taste, carried on for more than four centuries by audiences who treat singers as public property. This is Guide 007 in The Love Italy Guide series.

Where It All Began

Opera was effectively invented in Florence around 1598 by a group of poets, musicians and intellectuals known as the Florentine Camerata, who wanted to recreate what they believed was the sung drama of ancient Greece. The earliest work usually credited as an opera, Jacopo Peri's *Dafne*, is lost; his *Euridice* of 1600 survives as the oldest complete opera we still have. The form matured almost immediately in the hands

of Claudio Monteverdi, whose L'Orfeo (1607), written for the Gonzaga court in Mantua, is the earliest opera still regularly staged.

What turned opera from courtly entertainment into a popular art was Venice. In 1637 the Teatro San Cassiano opened as the first public opera house anywhere, selling tickets to anyone who could pay. Within decades the city had a dozen competing houses, and the template - a paying public, star singers, rival composers - spread across the peninsula and then the world.

The Great Houses

Italy's opera houses are working theatres, not monuments, and several claim remarkable histories. [Teatro di San Carlo](#) in Naples, inaugurated in 1737, is the oldest continuously active opera house in the world - older than La Scala and older than Venice's [Teatro La Fenice](#), whose name ("The Phoenix") proved apt after it burned down and was rebuilt twice, most recently reopening in 2004. La Scala itself opened in 1778 and houses the [Museo Teatrale alla Scala](#), a collection of instruments, costumes and portraits open to the public.

The tradition runs well beyond Milan and Naples. [Teatro dell'Opera di Roma](#), [Teatro Massimo](#) in Palermo - the largest opera house in Italy by volume - and Teatro Regio di Parma each anchor a serious local following. Parma's audience is legendary for its expertise and its severity, a reputation earned in Verdi country.

How a Night at the Opera Actually Works

Italian opera divides broadly into two great currents. Bel canto ("beautiful singing"), the early-nineteenth-century style of Rossini, Bellini and Donizetti, prizes agility, long lyrical lines and florid ornamentation. Verismo ("realism"), which emerged around 1890 with Mascagni's Cavalleria rusticana and Leoncavallo's Pagliacci, swapped gods and queens for ordinary people and raw, violent emotion. Puccini, the most-performed Italian composer worldwide, sits at the heart of this later tradition.

The audience is part of the performance. At La Scala the loggionisti - regulars in the cheap upper gallery, the loggione - are famous for their informed and sometimes brutal verdicts, booing a flat high note or a weak debut without hesitation. This is not rudeness so much as a very old contract: singers are judged in public, on the night, and applause is something to be earned rather than assumed.

The Composers Who Defined It

Four names carry most of the standard repertoire. Gioachino Rossini, born in Pesaro, was the comic genius of bel canto (The Barber of Seville) before retiring from opera at thirty-seven. Giuseppe Verdi became a national figure during the Risorgimento, his choruses adopted as unofficial anthems of Italian unification; Rigoletto, La traviata and Aida remain fixtures everywhere. Giacomo Puccini, from Lucca, gave the world La bohème, Tosca and Madama Butterfly.

Verdi's most personal legacy is not a score at all. He founded the Casa di Riposo per Musicisti in Milan, a rest home for retired musicians, and reportedly called it the finest work he ever did. He funded it with his royalties

and is buried there alongside his wife. Rome's [Accademia Nazionale di Santa Cecilia](#), one of the oldest musical institutions in the world, continues to train and present performers in that lineage.

Summer Festivals and Open-Air Opera

The Italian opera year does not stop when the great houses close for summer. The [Arena di Verona](#) Opera Festival stages grand productions inside a Roman amphitheatre built in the first century AD; the festival began in 1913 with a performance of *Aida* marking the centenary of Verdi's birth, and audiences of many thousands still light small candles at dusk before the music starts. For those tracing a composer to his source, the [Festival Puccini](#) at Torre del Lago performs Puccini's works beside the lake where he lived and wrote, and the [Rossini Opera Festival](#) in Pesaro is devoted to reviving his lesser-known scores in his home town.

Myths Worth Retiring

Myth: Opera singers always wear horned helmets. That image comes from Wagner's German Ring cycle and Norse costume design, not from Italian opera at all. Italian repertoire runs from Seville barbershops to Parisian garrets to ancient Egypt - the "fat lady in a helmet" is a cartoon, not the tradition.

Myth: You must dress formally and stay silent. Opera in Italy started as popular entertainment, and audiences have always reacted loudly - cheering, shouting "bravo", and booing when displeased. Opening nights draw formal dress, but a weeknight ticket in the gallery asks only that you turn up and pay attention.

Myth: La Scala is Italy's oldest opera house. It is world-famous, but Naples' Teatro di San Carlo opened in 1737, four decades before La Scala in 1778, and has run more or less continuously ever since.

Frequently Asked Questions

Do I need to understand Italian to enjoy an opera?

No. Most Italian houses now run surtitles - the translated text projected above or beside the stage - and many provide English alongside Italian. Reading a short plot summary beforehand matters far more than fluency; the music carries the emotion whether or not you follow every word.

How far ahead should I book tickets?

For headline nights at La Scala, San Carlo or the Arena di Verona, book as early as you can - months ahead for marquee productions and stars. Standard-repertoire performances and gallery seats are often available much closer to the date, and some houses release a limited number of same-day tickets. Buy directly from each theatre's own website to avoid resale mark-ups.

What is the difference between opera and operetta?

Opera is generally sung throughout and treats serious or dramatic subjects; operetta is lighter, mixes spoken dialogue with music, and leans toward comedy and romance. The Italian tradition is overwhelmingly full

opera, though comic opera - opera buffa, such as Rossini's The Barber of Seville - is very much part of it.

Official websites mentioned

Teatro alla Scala: teatroallascala.org

Teatro di San Carlo: teatrosancarlo.it

Teatro La Fenice: teatrolafenice.it

Teatro dell'Opera di Roma: operaroma.it

Teatro Massimo: teatromassimo.it

Accademia Nazionale di Santa Cecilia: santacecilia.it

Arena di Verona: arena.it

Festival Puccini: puccinifestival.it

Rossini Opera Festival: rossinioperafestival.it