

Opera Stats

Julian Sachs (March 21, 2011)



While protests rise in Italy against the huge government cuts to the Fondo Unico per lo Spettacolo, numbers are out to shed some light on Italy's role in today's world of opera

I was born and grew up in Italy, and since I am an opera fan, I often meet other opera fans from other countries, especially the United States, who think of Italy as the land of opera, a country in which this art form plays a central role in the daily life of its citizens and maintains an important status among forms of entertainment. Unhappily, it always pains me to explain that this is not so.

It certainly used to be so. Italy has an amazing number of opera houses that are now either boarded up or converted into something else. Most Italians haven't got a clue as to what this art form is, and I wouldn't be surprised to learn that their only operatic experiences come from the background music

in television commercials.

Being a young opera lover in Italy is not like being a film buff; it means being an outcast, someone who loves something ridiculous, boring, elitist, and expensive. Why do most Italians think this? I believe it is because there is no music education in most Italian schools, which will make it impossible for future generations of adults to be as informed about opera as they will be about art history – which is mandatory in most schools – and cinema, which has played an important role in their daily lives since childhood.

The website www.operabase.com [2], a public site that has been documenting operatic activity since 1996, with over 260,000 performances on file, recently published a page of statistics regarding the world of opera, and it sheds some light on Italy's position.

According to statistics based on 23,000 performances, worldwide, during the 2009-2010 opera season, 7,892 (more than a third) of them took place in Germany. The United States is a distant second (1,935); Austria follows with 1,426 performances. Italy is still high on the list – in fifth place, with 1,206 performances during the season.

But this statistic does not take into account the size and population of each of these countries, which is why OperaBase also published a per capita statistic, resulting in Austria's amazing supremacy, and Italy coming in seventeenth, with Lithuania.

As far as cities are concerned, Vienna is by far the most operatic city in the world, with its four main opera houses producing most of its 617 performances, and it is followed by Berlin, with 521. The amazing fact is that among the top 100 opera cities, 47 are in Germany, 7 are in Austria (I can't even name 7 cities in Austria), 5 each in Switzerland and Poland, and only 4 in Italy (Milan at #54, Rome at #71, and Trieste and Verona barely making it into the top 100, respectively at #95 and #99).

Italian opera itself, though, still rules. Based on counts of performance runs over the last five seasons, our own Giuseppe Verdi is in the lead with 2,259 productions, followed closely by Mozart at 2,124 (although his popular singspiels, *The Magic Flute* and *The Abduction from the Seraglio*, are included); Puccini lags slightly behind at 1,732. Four of the top ten composers are Italian, alongside two Germans, two Frenchmen, an Austrian (Mozart) and a German/Englishman (Handel); these last two, of course, produced mainly Italian operas. In recent decades there has been a constant rise in interest for bel canto operas, as the high positions of Rossini (5th), Donizetti (6th), and Bellini (16th) demonstrate.

But Italian opera today is visibly in decline. In a list of the most performed living composers, only six Italians appear in the top 100, in contrast with 21 in the previous statistic.

As far as the operas themselves are concerned, *The Magic Flute* leads the way as the most performed work, followed closely by *La Traviata*, *Carmen*, and *La Bohème*. Mozart's three Da Ponte operas – *Le Nozze di Figaro*, *Don Giovanni* and *Così fan tutte* – are respectively 5th, 7th, and 11th. As expected, Puccini is present in the Top 10 not only with *Bohème* but also with *Tosca* and *Madama Butterfly*. Rossini's *Il Barbiere di Siviglia* (#9) completes the list. I was surprised to note that after *La Traviata* (#2), *Rigoletto* (#10) and *Aida* (#13), the most performed Verdi opera is *Nabucco* (#17), ahead of the popular *Il Trovatore* (#23).

I thought it would be interesting to share some of these statistics, but of course we must keep in mind that there are many other factors involved that produce these results. The main examples are production costs and talent requirement: a small opera company (and many large ones, as well) are able to stage *The Magic Flute* or *Il Barbiere di Siviglia* much more easily than a more massive opera such as Wagner's *Siegfried* (#50). This can be demonstrated by searching for German operas down the list, where one encounters first Humperdinck's fairy tale opera *Hänsel und Gretel* (#14) and



Wagner's *Der Fliegende Holländer* (#25), which precedes his most representative works and is, in fact, easier to put on stage. It is after the Top 30 that one finds two one-act operas, Strauss' *Salome* (#32) and Wagner's *Das Rheingold* (#33), Beethoven's *Fidelio* (#34) and, finally, *Die Walküre* (#36). I feel that in many parts of the world, opera is as alive as it ever was, and it is becoming more and more accessible to everyone, also thanks to new technological achievements in broadcasting. On March 12, Riccardo Muti, conducting *Nabucco* at Rome's Teatro dell'Opera, gave an encore (which he rarely does) of the “Va', pensiero” chorus after having criticized the government for cutting Italy's art budget (Fondo Unico per lo Spettacolo), the already feeble lifeline that barely keeps Italian opera companies alive. According to [Associated Press](#) [3], the conductor turned to the audience that was yelling “Bis!” and conceded the encore on the condition that the public sing along in the name of culture and patriotic spirit.

One hundred fifty years after the unification of Italy, Muti said, “I don't want, today, in 2011, for *Nabucco* to become a funeral hymn to culture and music. I tell the chorus, the orchestra, the technicians to keep up their work, but their salaries don't even let them pay their bills at the end of the month. Culture is seen as some kind of aristocratic bonus by too many politicians, instead of being intrinsic to the nation's identity.”

I hope that steps will be taken soon to re-establish music in general and opera in particular as “intrinsic to the nation's identity” by re-introducing them in the schools, on television, and in the national budget.

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