

Like all Italian Opera Houses, Teatro Malibran has a checkered biography.

Inaugurated in 1678, as Teatro San Giovanni Crisotomo it has changed owners and names many times.

It saw some great premiere: Rossini's *La Gazza Ladra*, Donizzetti's *L'Elisir d'Amore*, as well as Scarlatti, Vivaldi, Hendel Operas, as well as Verdi and Goldoni Operas (the latter once managed the House).

Respectables runs until 1755, when the Grimani family decided to open a smaller theatre and the Malibran had to present Opera, Operettas and even movies later on to stay in business, and because of its sorry condition it had to be refurbished in 1819.

Eventually it had, after further proprietary change, to close down and was bought in 1992 by the city of Venice, its present proprietary.

It reopened in 2001, and during the criminal fire of La Fenice and its reconstruction, all operas

seasons where held at the Malibran, giving it a second life.

Presently it is under the tutelage of La Fenice, the famous rich resplendent reigning Opera House of The Serenissima, with rare events.

Why Malibran? A Spanish name for an Italian treasure?

Well, the most famous mezzo soprano of her times, Maria Malibran, came to Venice to sing “La Sonnambula” in 1837.

When the sovrintendente went to see her after her glorious performance and handed her 2 shopping bags full of Italian *lire*, she gave him the money back: “Please, fix the Opera House” she told him.

The antic ceilings with the slightly washed out frescos of Donghi may have benefitted from the gift, as well as the famous curtain of Cherubini, a curtain in gold and silver yarn.

The stage is large and the enormous buca could fit the full Orchestra of La Scala, it has a large pool underneath to collect the Alta Marea and protect players and singers from swimming when the city is overflown.

The music is by Giorgio Battistelli, a well know Italian composer and conductor has written a contemporary Opera which vaguely recalls the Opera Buffa alla Rossini and is replete with psycho-pathological characters.

It does not resemble Verdi, except when voluntarily plagiarized, do we hear Bellini? Donizetti? Berlioz? Berio? Stockhausen?

There are some memorable conversazione-cantante but few distinguishable arias, and we are not going away with any cantabile melodies we might replicate in the shower.

There is one, tutti scene, when the whole cast is asking for Caffè'; Macchiato, Americano, Espresso, Lungo, we are taken to the whole gamut of the caffè' history and it's probably the most memorable musical writing.

Where does this Opera belong? To what school of music? Who are the forefathers? Berio?

Stockhausen? And who are the heirs to be?

The original story is by Napolitan actor-writer Eduardo Scarpetta, offered first in Napoli in 1908 and thereafter rewritten and adapted to a famous movie script as many opera of the years 1950/60 where.

Giorgio Battistelli, abundantly profiled in the encyclopedic libretto of the Opera (73 pages!!), is an opera director, at times orchestra conductor, director of conservatory, prolific composer and much decorated by grateful Italy and France as well as author of the score.

A close reading of his interview by this reader did not offer refreshing insight except that this was his 33rd Opera.

Did he say 33?

Yes.

The regia is inventive without being overwhelming as in many of today's Operas; the modern duplex where most of the action takes place might hint to the play's duplicity as well as that of the main characters.

Briefly: a no good future doctor, Ciccillo, instead of pursuing medical studies spends the money sent by his generous uncle gambling, drinking and chasing the opposite sex.

When his benefactor, Uncle Felice, and his wife, Concetta, decide to visit him, he is convincing the lady owner of the pension he is living in to call her place a psychiatric hospital, her tenants psychiatric patients, and himself the doctor in charge.

There are of course, like in all Italian Operas, a few amorous sub-plots. They are as little credible or convincing as the main plot.

Everything though finishes well and in a hurry, since there is only one hour twenty allowed for this production.

One friendly libretto commentator says “Il medico dei pazzi makes you laugh”.

No sir, it does not.

It is difficult to miswrite on singers who spend most of their useful life on a labour of love, but the acting of Amalia, the mother (Milena Storti) who have a full volume voice is really high school level gone uncorrected.

The figlia Rosina (Damiano Mizza) has given a full voiced soprano rendition with remarkable "aigus".

There are good male voices; the uncle Felice, Mario Rogiano, has a good baritone instrument, somehow he can not convince us that he has been fooled all along.

The young medical student (Ciccillo, Sergio Vitale) is a great role for somebody who is a virtuous fake, but the tenor, although in good voice, does not give us a convincing performance.

There are 11 singers, most of them of fair to good level, space restriction, unfortunately, does not allow personal comments.

The choir of the Fenice Opera is excellent and its costumes (policemen, cooks, sacerdoti, etc.) are amusing.

Orchestra and conductor handled this difficult score with great courage and dedication.

Of note the subtitles in Napolitan dialect which I found most entertaining in the midst of the elegant crowd that filled a good part of the hall (900 seats are difficult to fill up with classical music).

The Malibran Theatre with its modest façade is close to the Rialto bridge and station, 5-10 minutes at most, provided you are given intelligent direction how to reach it.

You can make up this evening of puzzling opera by dining, if money is no object, at the superb

“La Fiaschetta”, which is just in front of the Malibran.

Alternatively you can take a five minute walk to “the Calice”, a restaurant where you will be sitting next to the Gondolieri in their famous white-black striped shirt. They have brought to the restaurant the fresh fish they have just caught, too good to be true, and reasonably priced too.

Absolutely necessary to make reservation, especially at “the Calice” if you don’t want to cool your feet in the Alta Marea of the Serenissima.

And yes, please visit the Malibran among the tens (hundreds) of music making churches of various levels in spite of this mixed review.

We need to keep Operas and miss Malibran alive, least we will be submerged by retro-rap and similar so-called music.

Peter Hermes

MOSTLY MALIBRAN and the Opera IL MEDICO DEI PAZZI by Giorgio Battistelli

(Venezia, October 15th 2016)