

Choral progression

How the Opera di Roma turned things around

It is now one of two major Italian opera houses to be making a profit



ITALY gave birth to opera, but in its home country the art form now carries a distinct air of *maledizione* (curse). Of Italy's 14 major opera houses—the ones supported by the federal government—12 are in the red. Last September, a strike over pay forced Genoa's opera house to cancel its first production of the season. The Teatro Petruzzelli in Bari has also cancelled performances due to lack of funds, and in February the general manager of the Opera di Firenze resigned (<http://www.firenzetoday.it/cronaca/bianchi-lascia-maggio-musicale.html>) after trade unions refused his proposed pay cuts.

Opera houses, dark on performance nights: what an irony in the country where Jacopo Peri established the genre with “La Dafne” over four centuries ago. Even without cancelled performances Italy lags behind most of Europe: it has 23 opera performances (<http://operabase.com/top.cgi?lang=en&splash=t>) per million residents, compared to 139 in Austria and 83 in Germany. Even Latvia has nearly twice as many performances. Cuts by governments since the 1990s are partly to blame, but opera still accounts for 44% of the government’s culture budget. Cities and regions help with funding too.

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At American and British opera houses, corporate sponsors and philanthropists top up public funding. Once upon a time, wealthy families like the Medicis underwrote artistic pursuits, but Italy has no recent history of musical philanthropy. And while it does have thriving businesses in the industrial north, opera managers in Italy’s south would struggle to find corporate sponsors. It’s no coincidence that La Scala, which solicits both private and corporate gifts in Milan, Italy’s financial capital, is the only opera house consistently turning a profit.

Elsewhere the answer would be to cut labour costs, but that is where Italian opera managers often hit the wall. Staff are accustomed to generous working conditions, and their trade unions forcefully defend their perks. The long-established benefits include full-time salaries—rather than seasonal contracts—for orchestral musicians.

When Carlo Fuortes arrived as Opera di Roma’s general manager in December 2013, the house was plagued by many of the same problems. The illustrious opera house, where “Tosca” premiered in 1900, suffered from debilitating deficits and frequent employee strikes. Mr Fuortes, an Italian economist and veteran manager of cultural institutions, quickly dismissed the chorus and orchestra. “It was explosive situation,” he explains. “The productivity was low, and in addition our audience was ageing. We had to change or die.” Mr Fuortes gave the chorus members and orchestra players the option of returning under new contracts, which they did.

The gamble paid off: the opera house is saving €4m (\$4.46m) annually and there have been no new strikes. Mr Fuortes has added cheap youth tickets and increased

the opera house's number of performances. Rome has now joined La Scala as one of only two Italian companies not running a deficit.

The Opera di Roma has been catching up elsewhere, too. Last year they launched a young artist programme, similar to those that exist in Britain and America, where aspiring singers perform in the house's productions. While helping talented graduates establish their careers, young artist programmes also save money by providing singers at a lower fee.

Opera di Roma's Young Artists also perform as part of another Fuortes initiative, the [OperaCamion](http://www.operaroma.it/en/roma-opera-aperta/figaro-opera-camion/) (<http://www.operaroma.it/en/roma-opera-aperta/figaro-opera-camion/>) ("lorry opera"). Singers and a youth orchestra travel to public squares around Rome, where they perform shortened versions of famous operas. Attendance is, of course, free of charge, and designed as a taster to lure interested individuals to the house itself. By increasing the number of corporate sponsors, Mr Fuortes plans to expand the project to four lorries, which will tour the entire country.

Mr Fuortes's innovations seem to be working. According to a recent survey by [Doxa](http://www.doxa.it/) (<http://www.doxa.it/>), a polling company, 43% of Opera di Roma's audience only started attending in the past two years. In that same period, audience numbers have risen by 28%, subscriptions by 30% and box office revenues by 51%. The audience is no longer ageing, either: 30% of the Opera di Roma's patrons are under the age of 30. Some long-time season audience members may dislike Mr Fuortes's strategy but they are in the minority. Doxa found that 75% of respondents considered the changes to be a force for good.

Though cuts to labour contracts mean opera workers have to do more for less money, if Italy's opera houses are to emerge from their fiscal holes a Fuortes-style plan may be their best hope. Young Artist programmes can work anywhere in Italy, insists Eleonora Pacetti, who directs the Rome programme: "We offer work and money, and they get access to every activity in the theatre." Reut Ventorero, an Israeli mezzo-soprano and an Opera di Roma Young Artist, says she chose Rome because "I'm working full-time in an opera house with so much history, and in the country where opera was actually born." That reasoning works for any opera house in the country.

Opera is booming in new markets such as China and South Korea, but Italy has a responsibility to keep the genre alive. Mr Fuortes argues that opera has to return to

being an art form for the people, “especially if it wants to keep being financed by the public”. Last year the Opera di Roma persuaded Sofia Coppola to direct “La Traviata”, with costumes designed by Valentino, a fashion house. Another production had digital sets. By following the Opera di Roma’s example, other houses may see the *maledizione* lifted.