

THE HEART OF ITALY: MILAN, LA SCALA, AND OPERA

Italia: a country full of culture, history, and life. I am lucky enough to study abroad in this amazing place and to be exposed to all that it has to offer. I am based in Milan, a bustling, modern city full of busy people; but there is one old tradition that remains beloved, and that is opera.



Above: Haley in the foreground, La Scala in the background
Opposite page, top right: The view from one of the box seats inside the theatre. Center right: The program for *Die Fledermaus* displayed on the outer wall of the theatre. Bottom right: The cast takes their final bows at the end of the performance.

Origins

More than four hundred years ago, opera was born in Florence, Italy. The Renaissance brought together a group of artists, writers, and musicians known as the Florentine Camerata who created the earliest versions of what we now know as opera through reviving Greek drama. Since then, Italian composers through the ages have been leaders of the genre—even Mozart wrote some operas in the Italian tongue. Gioachino Rossini, Giacomo Puccini, Gaetano Donizetti, Vincenzo Bellini, and Giuseppe Verdi are famous Italian operatic composers much beloved by Italians for creating works of art that are appreciated to this day. Arturo Toscanini, one of the most acclaimed conductors of all time, called the La Scala theatre his home.

A national treasure

La Scala Opera House, or *Teatro alla Scala*, in Milan is a national treasure. Inaugurated in August of 1778, La Scala has presented many of the finest singers and performances from all over the world and is regarded as one of the world's most prestigious opera and ballet theatres. Verdi himself had a special relationship with the theatre and conducted his *Requiem* there in May 1874. La Scala is where the premieres of his last two operas were held: *Otello* and *Falstaff* in 1887 and 1893, respectively. Despite being nearly destroyed by fires and later bombings from World War II, the theatre stands strong and beautiful.

Today, La Scala's two thousand and thirty seats nearly sell out for each performance. When showtime is coming up, people can be seen on the streets outside streaming toward the theatre from all directions, all in their best clothes. It is still proper to dress your best when going to the opera in Italy; this way, the elegance of the performance and the gorgeous red velvet and gold hall is reflected in the audience, wearing their finest jewelry and garments.

Accessible, elegant, relevant, costly

In February, I attended a performance of *Die Fledermaus* (composed by Johann Strauss in 1874) at La Scala. Having never attended an opera in person before, I was

unsure what to expect. Thankfully, electronic displays are installed in front of each seat so audience members can follow along reading the German libretto in either Italian or English, so even foreigners like me can feel at home. As soon as the orchestra began to play, I knew I was in for a treat.

An intricate ballet number began the performance during the overture, and the first act revealed a modernized set. It was clear to me that great care had been taken to ensure that the costume and set design brought the story to life. Contrary to many misconceptions about opera, the story was quite easy to follow and made sense in a modern context. I thoroughly enjoyed myself and was amazed by the talent and skill displayed by the performers both on stage and in the pit.



Although to Americans the convention of attending the opera may seem to have faded from its former glory, in Italy opera is still the heart of elegant life and leisure. The themes and topics explored in opera are actually quite relevant to the

modern person. Opera can be sexist, messy, extravagant, or slow—but when done right, the dialogue can make you laugh until your stomach hurts while the arias make you cry your heart out.

I would like to attend another performance during my stay in Milan, but unfortunately tickets do not come cheap. Attending the opera is now a rather high class affair, which people are willing to pay a lot of money to see, understandably. I consider myself extremely fortunate to have been able to experience such an important element of the culture in Italy!

