

Teatro Malibran

The original Teatro Malibran goes back to the seventeenth century, it underwent considerable restoration and the structure we can see today goes back to 1890. It was opened during the 1678 carnival season and given the name Teatro di San Giovanni Grisostomo, the third theatre belonging to the Grimani family, the others being San Giovanni e Paolo and San Samuele.

The “biggest, most beautiful and richest in the city”, according to the “*Mercure Galant*” of March 1683, it was built behind the church of San Giovanni Grisostomo. The project for the new theatre was signed by Tommaso Bezzi, called lo Stucchino, an architect, engineer and painter working for the Grimani's.

The theatre of San Giovanni Grisostomo was opened with *Vespasiano* by Giulio Cesare Corradi and music by Carlo Pallavicino. It stood out due to the grandeur of its architectural structure and the elegance of its decorations.

The most active librettists here from the end of the seventeenth century and the beginning of the eighteenth century were mainly aristocratic dilettantes and well-read literary men. However, also the works of more up to date opera writers such as Alessandro Scarlatti (*Il Mitridate Eupatore*, *Il trionfo della libertà*, 1707) and Händel (*Agrippina*, 1709: performed no less than twenty-seven times in a row) were performed for the first time in this theatre. Around 1715 the stars of a new style of singing began to appear in this vast theatre that had already made its name for the high quality of its singers – Faustina Bordoni in 1716 and Francesca Cuzzoni in 1718. During the period of Neapolitan singers, including the outstanding castrato Nicola Grimaldi – it was decidedly scarce, but soon gained momentum during the following years when the audience was able to applaud Farinelli, Caffarelli, Tolve and other singers.

This theatre – described in the *Glories of poetry and music* by Bonlini (1730) as a “true kingdom of marvels [...] that due to the vastness of its magnificent dimensions can rightly be compared to the splendour of Ancient Rome” – housed the première of two of Metastasio's dramas, *Siroe* (1726, music by Vinci), and *Ezio* (1728, music by Porpora). Although the names of Apostolo Zeno and Pietro Metastasio stand out in this theatre's repertoire during the first half of the eighteenth century, one should also remember that young Carlo Goldoni was also active there as “theatre poet” from 1736 to 1741. He not only had the task of rewriting and adding arias and recitatives when requested by the singers, but also of co-ordinating the staging of the performances.

In 1751 the Imer company established themselves in the San Giovanni Grisostomo Theatre and opera was rarely performed until the end of the century. Imer was then succeeded by the Onofrio Paganini Company and then the Medebach Company, the latter was an important theatre-manager and its repertoire included both romantic works by Chiari, comedies by Goldoni and other tragedies and comedies of art. During the last twenty-five years of the century the theatre was entrusted to Maddalena Battaglia who continued to present an eclectic repertoire including French tragedies and dramas and some Italian novelties.

In the spring of 1797, after making its name as one of the best aristocratic theatres, it was entrusted to the provisional Municipality and from July 10th to October 1st it was transformed into the Teatro Civico and offered a Jacobin style repertoire.

In 1807 a decree by Ludovico di Breme of the Internal Ministry of the Italian Kingdom limited the number of Venetian theatres to four: apart from La Fenice, Teatro di San

Benedetto and San Moisè, this theatre was also chosen since it was extremely popular with the people.

In 1819 the Grimani family sold the theatre and some of the nearby houses to Luigi Facchini and Giovanni Gallo. The new owners immediately set about restoring the theatre to its former splendour and it reopened in 1819 with Rossini's *The Thieving Magpie*. Around a decade later, due to deterioration of the building, Giovanni Gallo decided to restore the theatre completely so that it could also be used for day-time performances. The restored theatre was then opened in December 1834 with Donizetti's *L'elisir d'amore*. In 1835 Gallo managed to engage the most famous singer of the time, Maria Garcia Malibran, for two evenings. One of the evenings went to La Fenice in exchange for half of the takings. Thus, on April 2nd Malibran gave an extraordinary performance at La Fenice and on April 8th in the festively decorated theatre an exceptional performance of *La Sonnambula*, with staging by Giuseppe Bertoja. To express his gratitude to the great singer, especially since she had also refused to be paid, Gallo called the theatre after the famous singer.

When Giovanni Gallo died in 1844 the theatre was passed on to his son Antonio, musician and orchestra conductor who was trying to increase the artistic quality of the performances and programme by dedicating more attention to the opera seasons. In Autumn 1852 he then wanted to restore the decorations of the theatre and to add a great "chandelier, that with the great copy of light, of all animating things, increases the magnificence and beauty of the performance". The most important artistic event in the following decades – during which the Malibran was also dedicated to operetta and plays in dialect – was certainly the performance of Giuseppe Verdi's *Messa da requiem* in July 1875 with outstanding singers, the choir of the Scala and the orchestra conducted by Franco Faccio.

In 1886 Teatro Malibran was auctioned off together with San Benedetto and was bought by a company created by Francesco Baldanello, Emerico Merkel and Giuseppe Patrizio. With various hereditary passages this company was able to maintain the ownership of the theatre until recently. The theatre was reopened in 1890 after radical restoration that changed the appearance of the concert hall with Egyptian-style decorations. In spring 1913 after an important opera season, the Malibran was closed once again due to the need to carry out certain security measures. A public competition was then announced for a project of internal restoration, the only bind being that the external walls of the theatre had to be kept. The winner was the young engineer Mario Felice Donghi. Due to the First World War work on the theatre was interrupted and it was only reopened in December 1919 with a greatly appreciated production of Verdi's *Otello*. With this, the theatre continued its renewed activity all through the first half of the twentieth century.

In the 1980's, thanks to an initiative of the Teatro La Fenice, many important performances and novelties took place in the Malibran, including the world première of Salvatore Sciarrino's *Cailles en sarcophage*, in collaboration with the Biennale Musica. In 1991 together with the La Fenice's company Teatro Danza, Carolyn Carlson presented her first performance, *Undici Onde*, created specifically for La Fenice. This was followed by Underwood. The ample scenic space of the Malibran has also seen performances by Pina Bausch, some of which were Italian premières.

When the Comune di Venezia bought the theatre in 1992 it marked a new phase in the theatre's history. The restoration of the roof was the start of overall restoration, an extremely detailed project that wanted to give back the city one of its most important historical theatres. When La Fenice was destroyed in a fire in 1996, Teatro Malibran became even more indispensable. With the conservative restoration of the historic curtain

by Giuseppe Cherubini, the association Amici della Fenice made an important contribution to the original design of the theatre that can now seat 900.

