

Recasting the Opera: Architecture, Power, and Performance in Early 20th-Century Rome

Dylan Oh
ohdylan76@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

The Teatro dell'Opera di Roma has been a symbol of Italian musical tradition and has staged performances by some of the greatest composers, conductors, and singers in operatic history for over 140 years. However, beneath the grandeur and facade of the opera lies a compelling legacy shaped during one of the most turbulent periods in modern Italian history. When Benito Mussolini (1883-1945) rose from obscurity to power in the 1920s, his regime sought control not only over the government but over the soul of the nation itself. Italy was the hub and birthplace of opera, and the prospects for his vision were colossal. While performances continued and the theater maintained its reputation, the meaning and function of the space shifted very subtly in a dynamic political landscape. Through its architectural redesign in simplified neoclassical fashion, its symbolic repositioning in the urban topography of Fascist Rome, and the strategic programming of operas that glorified nationalism, *including works that promoted romanità, the Fascist ideal of reviving ancient Rome*, the opera house was recast from a space of performance to a tightly controlled environment for political spectacle and ideological manipulation. By examining the historical archives and studying the opera house firsthand in Rome, this paper analyzes how Mussolini's Fascist regime used the Teatro dell'Opera di Roma's architecture and programming to construct a collective identity and subtly insert ideology into the experiential reality of art.

INTRODUCTION

On a warm February evening in 1928, the lights dimmed inside the Teatro dell'Opera di Roma as the audience fell silent. Sitting in the newly renovated theater, the crowd could emotionally and physically feel the nuanced adaptations of the building, adaptations that matched the world in which they were living. Even as the music of the opera *Nerone* started, a profound message had been sent: Italy was entering a new era, and the arts would march with the changes of the tides.

Nestled in the center of Rome, the Teatro dell'Opera di Roma has been a symbol of Italian musical tradition and has staged performances by some of the greatest composers, conductors, and singers in operatic history for over 140 years. However, beneath the grandeur and facade of the opera lies an interesting legacy that was manufactured during one of the most turbulent periods in modern Italian history. When Benito Mussolini (1883-1945) rose from obscurity to power in the 1920s, his regime sought control not only over the government but over the soul of the nation itself. Italy was the hub and

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birthplace of opera, and the prospects for his vision were colossal. While performances continued and the theater maintained its reputation, the meaning and function of the space shifted very subtly in a dynamic political landscape. Through the Teatro's architectural redesign in simplified neoclassical fashion, its symbolic repositioning in the urban topography of Fascist Rome, and its strategic programming of operas that glorified nationalism and imperial heritage, Mussolini's Fascist regime recast the opera house from a space of performance to a tightly controlled environment for political spectacle and ideological manipulation.

BACKGROUND

The Teatro dell'Opera di Roma, originally named Teatro Costanzi after commissioner Domenico Costanzi, was born in an era when Italy had recently unified in 1861 and was eager to showcase its cultural identity. With Italy long revered as the birthplace of opera, the establishment of a grand opera house in Rome was both a symbolic and strategic choice for the monarchy. Theater specialist and constructivist Achille Sfondrini built the theater in eighteen months with immense care for the acoustics of the theater. The inside of the theater was a horseshoe shape with three tiers of boxes. The design was modeled after Charles Garnier's Beaux-Arts Opera Garnier in Paris (built between 1861-1875) (Fig. 1), with its lavish and ornate gilded boxes, a central chandelier, and intricate ceiling frescoes (Fig. 2) (Garnier). The opulent decoration was not just aesthetic but also reinforced a message that Italy was not only politically unified but culturally equal to other great European nations. The theater opened with the opera *Semiramide* by Gioachino Rossini, which was performed in front of the monarchy (OperaVision). This highly ornamental layout epitomized not only the splendor of Italian high society but also the social and political hierarchies of the newly unified nation. From the outset, the opera house's architecture was already functioning as a cultural and ideological force (Fig. 3).

Even before Mussolini's reign of power, the opera house was a social stage that reinforced class divisions and offered a venue for self-fashioning. Although performances by famous composers were lauded for their artistry, the experience of attending the opera was just as much about participating in a ritual of consumption and prestige in a lavish opera house (Lechner). The elites used the opera to distinguish themselves as cosmopolitan, culturally literate, and fashionable, whereas the monarchy subtly used it as an instrument for soft diplomacy and civic cohesion. The function of theaters across 19th-century Europe surpassed their use beyond entertainment; they were ideologically charged spaces that reflected the values and hierarchies of their societies (Carlson 24). Regardless, the theater hosted numerous world premieres and successful performances, but the Teatro's pre-Fascist role was not ideologically neutral; it was already shaped by power and performance, which ultimately set the stage for its metamorphosis under Mussolini and the new ideology. Because the theater was a space of symbolic order long before Mussolini's rule, the Fascist reconfiguration of the opera house was not an abrupt metamorphosis but a radical continuation of its existing identity.

To understand the opera house's transformation during the Fascist era, it is essential to scrutinize Benito Mussolini's background and his regime's ideological investment in cultural institutions. Mussolini was a former socialist journalist who broke off with his party during World War I to create the National Fascist

Party (Gregor 191). His unique view of fascism, which inspired Adolf Hitler (1889-1945), was characterized by ultranationalism, militarism, and the complete rejection of liberalism and socialism. He rose to power by exploiting the instability and nationalist sentiment after the war. In 1922, he led the infamous March on Rome with about 30,000 Fascist Blackshirts, after which he was appointed Prime Minister by the king, who asked him to form a new government (Steele). After being appointed Prime Minister, he swiftly ravaged democratic institutions in favor of a one-party totalitarian state (Italy Focus Guide). Fascism was not just a political system but a totalizing ideology that demanded control over every aspect of Italian life. He was a master of propaganda, and people were fed information by the government ("Totalitarian Propaganda").

Mussolini was also smart to understand that culture was one of the most efficacious tools for sculpting the soul of the nation, for he saw architecture, performance, and religion as means of inculcating discipline, hierarchy, and mythical national pride. He admired the Roman Empire and envisioned himself forming a new Roman Empire that replicated classical architecture and imperial grandeur (Ben-Ghiat 29-32). For Mussolini, the arts were a vital building block for Italy's ideological awakening, an awakening that took the form of *Romanità*, or the idea of emulating ancient Roman heritage (Sapic 97). Mussolini frequently attended opera performances and premieres because he understood that his visibility at these events would showcase his role as a cultural patriarch and connect the state and the arts in the public eye (Crisenbery 32-33). As we will see later on, Mussolini's adherence to the fascist system led to opera becoming a powerful stage to project the regime's values.

ARCHITECTURAL IMPACT

The 1926-1928 renovation of the Teatro dell'Opera di Roma under Mussolini's regime was a calculated architectural intervention that reconstructed the building into a conduit of Fascism. Benito Mussolini appointed the architect Marcello Piacentini (1881-1960) to renovate the 50-year-old opera house. Piacentini, as part of a larger reimagining of Rome, transfigured the theater's entrance from the south to the east and physically oriented it with the new urban axis built by the government (Teatro Reale dell'Opera). This emblematic repositioning placed the opera house closer to Termini Station and the Basilica of Santa Maria Maggiore, which led to the establishment of a triumvirate of civic, infrastructural, and religious might (Fig. 4) (Shen 60). This was not accidental because the new regime tried to integrate culture into the framework of Fascism by establishing the opera house as a state-controlled landmark that married cultural tradition to modern authoritarian aspiration. The reorientation of the building and its interconnection to other ideological landmarks led the opera to become a spatial image for the Fascist vision of a united and centrally governed new society. In Mussolini's transforming capital, nothing in public space was neutral; every building, monument, and landmark visible to the naked eye was mapped out to fortify a state-centered order. The opera house, as mentioned earlier, was not just a space for performances but a constant fixture in the government's architectural theater, which attested to the totalizing nature of the cultural program. The visibility and symbolic alignment of the opera house with other structures of state power quietly showcased that culture was now in alignment with the regime's ideology, just like infrastructure and religion (Fig. 5) (Baxa 4).

Piacentini's remodel also instituted a grand staircase and an expanded foyer that were contrived in a style that rejected decorative surplus in favor of unbending neoclassical geometry. This neoclassicism took inspiration from ancient Roman aesthetics but emptied them of humanist ornamentation to produce cold monumentality (OperaVision). Specifically, Piacentini's design echoed the symmetrical layout and axial structure of Greek and Roman temples.

In this environment, wealthy opera-goers could more openly flaunt their wealth and status than in the space of the original design, for here the Mussolini-approved classicism naturally evoked grandeur and elitism. The architectural design humbled the viewer and elevated the state by evoking the supremacy and persistence of the regime. These design decisions amplified the audience's experience as citizens of Fascist Italy; before even hearing a single note of music, the audience members passed through spaces that emphasized symmetry and ordered flow. This architectural choreography mirrored the ideological choreography of Fascism: individual movement was controlled, and spectacle was implanted all over the building, not just on the stage. The scale and austerity of the interior of the building fortified the idea that the state was at the essence of cultural life.

Mussolini also had a Latin inscription carved into the proscenium (Fig. 6): "Vittorio Emanuele III Rege, Benito Mussolini Duce, Lodovicus Spada Potenziani, Romae Gubernator Restituit MCMXXVIII-VI." It is significant that the proscenium was above the stage, visible to every audience member, where it framed their understanding of every performance. The inscription bears the names of Vittorio Emanuele III, the last king of Italy, and Benito Mussolini. This inscription, which is still extant today, is a visible reminder of the connection between the origins of the opera and the changes it went through with Fascism. The opera house was built due to the Italian monarchy, but later renovated because of Fascism and a new regime, and so these two names illuminate the past and present. Also, the date stands out because the VI represents the six years that had passed since the March on Rome, making visible and permanent the event that changed the political system forever. With its newly improved spatial logic of a new entrance, grand staircase, and spacious foyer (Shen 60), the renovated opera house staged its spectacle of strength and submission by disciplining its visitors to carry out Fascist social roles. Ultimately, the very design of the opera house personified the belief of Benito Mussolini that the essence of beauty should bend to authority and that public architecture should function as political education.

MUSICAL IMPACT

Just as architecture was used to embody Fascist principles, the operatic repertoire curated during Mussolini's regime was designed to express ideological messages by favoring narratives of national greatness and cultural purity while simultaneously dismissing unfavorable works. One of the most explicit examples of ideologically aligned programming was the decision by Benito Mussolini to perform *Nerone* by Arrigo Boito at the grand reopening of the newly renovated and renamed opera house. *Nerone* dramatizes the reign of the Roman emperor Nero and was selected to be performed on the grand reopening, not for its aesthetic value but for its potent symbolism. The opera empowered Mussolini's fascist regime to make a direct link between the height of ancient imperial Rome and its potential modern political rebirth to greatness (Shen 61). This was in line with Mussolini's wide-ranging efforts to elucidate

his dictatorship as a rebirth of Roman greatness during ancient times. This was a tactic that served nationalist myth-making and the centralization of cultural messaging. The regime was not just thinking about Fascist ideology but forcefully generating it through cultural performance. This was done by choosing an opera set in imperial Rome for such a politically charged occasion. In *Nerone*, the prevalent themes of order, violence, and destiny buttress a narrative of history driven by strong, centralized power, which parallels Mussolini's self-image (Crisenbery 25-26). The play ends with the Great Fire of Rome in 64 AD, which leads Nero to blame Christians for the fire and their subsequent persecution ("Did Nero Really Fiddle"). The persecution of the Christians connects to Mussolini's own Racial Laws enacted in 1938, which discriminated against Italian Jews and aligned with Hitler's views of Jews (Ben-Ghiat).

With the architectural backdrop of the opera house, this was not just a musical performance but one of political mythology, which merged the aesthetic with the ideological for a totalizing cultural event fit for the inaugural performance. Aside from reviving operas that glorified national identity, the fascist government endorsed new operas that praised militarism and spiritual togetherness. Meanwhile, Mussolini himself also censored or discouraged modernist operas such as Gian Francesco Malipiero's *La favola del figlio cambiato* for its satirical approach to royalty and the state (Ricci). This outright exclusion of works that did not align with the views of Mussolini and the state elucidated the larger campaign to cleanse the arts of ideological impurity. However, Malipiero sought to regain Mussolini's favor by deliberately composing a new opera based on one of Mussolini's favorite subjects. *Giulio Cesare* was premiered in 1936, and Mussolini even sent Malipiero a congratulatory telegram, though Malipiero still never earned the status he desired (Crisenbery 65). This particular example showcases the lengths that composers would go to to please Mussolini and the new landscape of fascist Italy.

Verdi's patriotic operas were celebrated at the opera house because they could be reinterpreted to serve the narrative of fascist resurgence (Prud'homme 108). Artistic freedom was dismissed because of the state's ideological machine, and Malipiero's case clearly illustrates the coercive cultural environment spawned by Mussolini's regime. The outright rejection of *La favola del figlio cambiato* and the reluctant embrace of even *Giulio Cesare*, which was tailored for Mussolini, emphasizes the regime's strict requirement for constant political allegiance and artistic compliance. Thus, the opera house became a venue where artistic ambition and concession were put to the test of terror, for even fawning gestures could not erase one from the stain of previous disloyalty. The sudden elevation of Verdi's older patriotic works served to canonize a version of Italian history that was emotionally poignant yet ideologically manageable. *I Vespri Siciliani*, a play about the struggle of Sicilians against the French, was celebrated, and the Teatro even held two cycles that were dedicated to Verdi (Prud'homme 112-13). Consequently, the Teatro dell'Opera's purpose as a performance venue for dynamic, bold, and original expression ended; instead, the opera house operated as a propaganda machine that augmented voices that substantiated the regime's worldviews while shunning those that challenged it. Through censorship and selective celebration, Mussolini's regime transmuted opera from a stage for artistic dialogue into a spectacle of ideological bolstering.

CONCLUSION

As the curtains rose on *Nerone* at the grand opening of the Teatro dell'Opera di Roma, the audience witnessed a redefinition of Italian culture under Fascism. Everything in the vicinity had been carefully manipulated to bolster Benito Mussolini's unlikely vision of a powerful and obedient population of Italy, from the colossal neoclassical facade to the meticulously curated opera performance programming. Not so long ago, the magnificent theater was used for artistic experimentation and leisure. But the perpetually changing seas had turned the opera house into a sphere of state ideology and propaganda, where a dominant coalition of architecture subdued the body and music subdued the mind. Calculated redecoration and emblematic performances turned the opera house into a monumental stage for purposes transcending "mere" music for the enactment of the movement of fascist power itself.

The transfiguration of the Teatro dell'Opera di Roma provides a specific example of how Mussolini's Fascist regime assimilated a cultural institution to serve its political ends. Opera was not a mirror of nationalistic feelings, but an instrument for them. Architecture was not just for beauty and aesthetics, but a blueprint for obedience. And performance was not an escape from the reality of fascism but a rehearsal for fascist myth. To this day, Mussolini's Latin inscription above the proscenium of the opera house attests to the politics forever engraved into this landmark. The legacy of the Teatro during the rule of Fascism encourages every single person to contemplate the unbending power of the arts to not only manifest society, but also to shape it. With its constant change of name, the ever-shapeshifting theater elucidates that this musical space was not neutral. It became a battleground where imagination and identity intersected.

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FIGURES



Figure 1: Charles Garnier; Opera Garnier, 1861-1875, Paris, France



Figure 2: Charles Garnier; Opera Garnier, 1861-1875, Paris, France

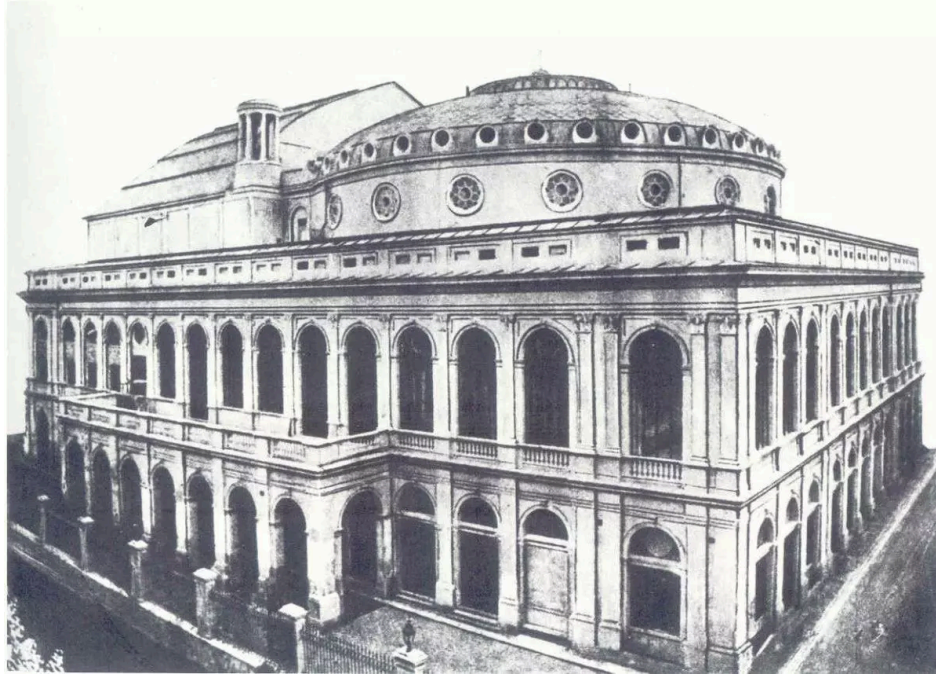


Figure 3: Achille Sfondrini, Teatro Costanzi, 1879-1880, Rome, Italy



Figure 4: Teatro dell'Opera di Roma, Santa Maria Maggiore, and Roma Termini



Figure 5: Marcello Piacentini, Teatro Reale dell'Opera, 1926-1928, Rome, Italy



Figure 6: Proscenium inscription: "Vittorio Emanuele III Rege, Benito Mussolini Duce, Lodovicus Spada Potenziani, Romae Gubernator Restituit MCMXXVIII-VI"