

The façade

Bellini Theatre, designed by the architect Carlo Sada, was built between 1880 and 1890. The building was conceived in the eclectic style, typical of that period.

Following the nationalistic perspective, in a recently unified Italy, the tendency was to revisit ancient styles, from classic to baroque. The Theatre, in fact, is a harmonious blend of neoclassicism and neobaroque.

The central group of sculptures on the summit of the façade, that represents the Winged Glory crowning Music and Poetry with laurels, is by Eugenio Maccagni from Lecce.

The other sculptures are by Giulio Moschetti from Ascoli. Remarkable, in particular, the groups on each side of the central balustrade: Tragedy and Comedy.

In circular niches above the arches of the façade are twelve busts of famous musicians.

Among these, three Catanese, Vincenzo Bellini (Catania 1801- Puteaux 1835), Pietro Antonio Coppola (Castrogiovanni, Enna, 1793- Catania 1876) and Giovanni Pacini (Catania 1796- Pescia 1867).

A lyre is placed on the pediment and the tympanum holds the city's coat of arms.

The façade is richly adorned with couples of putti, figures with trumpets, eagles, griffins and various symbolic ornaments.

Carlo Sada designed the central porch that leads to the entrance hall and the two arches on to the lateral alleys to shelter the public from bad weather. The lateral openings of the porch allowed the transit and stopping of the coaches.

The theatre was inaugurated on the 31st of May 1890 with the opera *Norma* by Vincenzo Bellini. For that occasion, apart from operas (*Norma*, *Aida*, *La Gioconda*, *I pescatori di perle*, the latter substituted with *Faust*), various happenings (*Feste Belliniane*) were programmed: a great art exhibition in the town hall, a national fencing tournament with the most well-known Italian swordsmen, a floral exhibition, pigeon-shooting competitions, excursions on mount Etna, a cycle race, regattas, a Regional Oenological Fair, a convention of Sicilian Labour Movements (workers' societies), an artistic party in Bellini Theatre, firework displays.

As soon as the inauguration date became official, in spite of the very expensive tickets, a rush began to secure the best seats. This, inevitably, triggered off an intense touting activity.

The wait was feverish. For the occasion newspapers publicized the "Oriental pills", the only ones able to assure a star's shapely breast, with no harm to the health.

Soon after the gates opening, the theatre was overflowing with the public and, outside, the police had to contain the crowd who had flocked to see the show of the coaches parade.

When the gas lights dimmed, the conductor (Cesare Rossi) took his place on the rostrum and started Mercadante's symphony "Omaggio a Bellini" (Homage to Bellini). But the audience called for the Royal March and the symphony was interrupted. After this,

Garibaldi's Hymn was played. Finally the audience calmed down and the opera could begin. As the performance was ending, the curious crowd outside broke the police cordon and rushed into the theatre. The confusion that followed was unbelievable. Thinking an uprising was taking place, the orchestra suddenly stopped playing, several women fainted and the soprano, (Virginia Damerini as *Norma*), collapsed. Eventually the performance was completed.

Architect Sada, who designed the theatre, was called to the front of the stage together with the performers. The approval of the audience didn't prevent him and his family from paying the ticket, since his name wasn't on the guests list.

THE ENTRANCE HALL

The two busts in the hall represent the architect Carlo Sada, from Milan, and the painter Giuseppe Sciuti, from Zafferana Etnea. The latter painted the beautiful curtain that represents the victory of the Catanese over the Libyans, an imaginary episode to celebrate Etnean people. As a matter of curiosity, the first sketch, depicting the Battle of Himera (482 b.C.) was rejected due to three naked feminine figures designed for propitiatory sacrifice. The hall leads to the stall area and to two staircases that lead to the box seats.

The Foyer

In the upper floor there is a coffee house, still in use; a parlor, once used as conversation room by the town council, and the magnificent Foyer. This was used both for concerts and balls. Small orchestras took their place in the balcony above. The sumptuous mirrors are adorned with putti holding wreaths. They are framed with fine stuccos in baroque style and they reflect and multiply the golden glitter. The painting on the ceiling, representing the love of Aci and Galatea, is by Natale Attanasio (Catania 1845, Rome 1923).

The magnificence of the Foyer recalls the style of the Opera in Paris that often inspired Carlo Sada.

The bronze statue of Vincenzo Bellini, placed between the columns, is by the Catanese sculptor Salvo Giordano (born in 1907).

The Stall area

Bellini Theatre is a typical "Italian musical theatre". It has a stall area, 4 floors of boxes (103 in total), a Royal Box between the 2nd and 3rd floor, a gallery in the upper floor, 14 small boxes and 16 round windows called "occhialoni", 8 boxes on the sides of the proscenium (barcacce).

The stall area is 22m. long, 19m. wide and 22m. high.

The Royal Box has on the summit the coat of arms of the House of Savoy and, on the drape that covers the balcony, the emblem of the city of Catania. King Vittorio Emanuele III was seated there on three occasions (1907, 1911, 1930).

The vault is surrounded by 15 chandeliers that can be lowered for cleaning.

The acoustics are excellent, amongst the best in Europe, thanks to the ideal proportions and to the roofing made with canes from Simeto river, placed arch-wise, so to match top to bottom and covered with poured plaster.

The famous tenor Beniamino Gigli (1890-1957) considered the music hall of Bellini Theatre as the best in the world as far as acoustics were concerned.

The music hall is richly ornated.

The paintings of the vault are by Ernesto Bellandi from Florence. In the center is the Apotheosis of Bellini, painted with a particular perspective technique so that the figures appear to go beyond the vault.

The four medallions represent four of the most famous operas of Bellini, with the date of the first performance: Norma, Capuleti e Montecchi (March 10th 1830 and not May 10th as written), La Sonnambula and I Puritani. The medallions alternate with four small lunettes representing the seasons.

Eight other medallions portray the musicians Pacini, Coppola, Donizetti, Verdi, Cimarosa, Rossini and the dramatists Alfieri and Goldoni.

Looking above the proscenium, there are the elephant, symbol of the city, and the goddess Athena.

The clock on the arch of the proscenium is enclosed by two rows of dancing putti, symbolizing the hours (six on each side, representing the hours of the day and of the night). On the sides of the proscenium arch there are two mascarons: Comedy and

Tragedy. All sculptures are by Giulio Moschetti. The decorations are by Luigi Stella from Trieste.

The boxes have an anteroom, which, once, the owners could furnish as pleased.

Architect Sada had also planned an ingenious cooling system thanks to an interspace that runs all around the building and allowed the fresh water of the Ameno river to flow inside.

(The Ameno underground river is still visible in the fountain in Piazza Duomo).

Unfortunately, this corridor was filled with debris during restoration work and is no longer usable.

Sada had also provided the theatre with an anti-fire system, very advanced at that time, by placing a water supply on the summit of two turrets. The height ensured that the water was always available at the right pressure.

A natural ventilation system is still working. A rotation and lift apparatus of the central dome allows air exchange with the exterior, through rectangular openings closed by bronze gratings.

General information

Countless are the celebrities who performed in Bellini theatre. Just to mention a few: Maria Callas, Toti Dal Monte, Mirella Freni, Renata Scotti, Montserrat Caballè, Beniamino Gigli, Luciano Pavarotti, Mario Del Monaco, Giuseppe Di Stefano, Leo Nucci, Georg Solti, Lorin Mazeel, Riccardo Muti, Giuseppe Sinopoli, Yuri Temirkanov.

In 1906 Mascagni himself conducted two of his operas, *Cavalleria Rusticana* and *Iris*.

In 1955 Josephine Baker performed here.

On the 23rd of November 1963, Igor Stravinsky dedicated the concert to John Kennedy who was killed the day before.

In the same year, the Kessler twins, stars of television shows, performed in the opera *Vivi* by Franco Mannino. The theatre was sold out, an extraordinary event for a contemporary opera.

In 1991 the theatre became a set for some scenes of the movie *Johnny Stecchino* by Roberto Benigni.

Traduzione a cura di Marina Borgo