Some time ago, Mario Messinis, the doyen of music critics in Italy, artistic director and Superintendent of Teatro La Fenice in the not too distant past, was interviewed by Giuseppina Manin from Corriere della Sera; he said, “all they talk about in opera houses nowadays is productivity and this results in a lack of projects with any true value. And that is how a patrimony as valuable as our historic Twentieth century has been squandered”. [VERSIONE ITALIANA] [wpvideo F6PT4ojK]

An analysis that is both merciless and alarming, carried out following a survey that Classic Voice carried out on opera institutions in Italy, which are being accused of showing a lack of courage and constantly offering traditional works in their programmes.

We wanted to discuss the situation our opera houses and Teatro La Fenice are in with the Superintendent Cristiano Chiarot in his little office on the second floor of the opera house in Campo San Fantin; the building still has the original façade by Selva although the entire interior was rebuilt after the terrible fire in 1996. With a degree in philosophy, an early career in journalism and an unrestrainable love for India, he has spent his life in the opera house. He began his career there in the communications sector, where he remained for many years, taking part in all the vicissitudes, both happy and dramatic, around him. He went on to attain the most important position, Superintendent.

Cristiano, you have been in charge of Teatro La Fenice for some years now, and its management is generally seen as virtuous. At the end of May you were also appointed President of Anfols, the association of all Italian opera-symphony foundations. Which problems does this sector have, and which problems does Teatro La Fenice have, where you are currently Superintendent?

In actual fact the problems the opera foundations are having are the same as those in companies that are currently seeking new productive and entrepreneurial paths in Italy, and that have no choice but to be involved with the public sector: ministries, regions and city councils. The main problem at the moment is to make people understand that this sector, which is made up of eight foundations that have declared a state of emergency as well another four that haven’t, is making huge efforts to get a situation that had almost taken them to the brink, under control. And these efforts involve an intense reprogramming of the opera, symphony and ballet seasons, diverse negotiations with the trade unions, and using communication and marketing means to seek out a new audience so that the opera foundations in Italy meet everyone’s expectations. The other
problem is that we draw up annual budgets and make three-year plans but at the end of the year we hardly ever know exactly how much public financing we’ll be receiving.

This kind of programme has to find all kinds of financing, going from the ticket office to private funding. But with this current crisis at the moment public financing is our main source. It’s obvious that we are always trying to find more and more sources of auto-financing but this kind of programme was not devised as part of an economic plan but rather as a utopia and throughout its development it remained as such. Everything increased: the staff, use of instruments, expense items and choirs. It isn’t like an American or London musical, or theatre that were devised on the basis of a precise economic model.

As Professor Brunetti said, we are the proof that the market has failed. There is nowhere in the world that opera is able to auto-finance itself through the ticket office. That’s the problem, having guarantees. While financing from the ministries is guaranteed, uncertainty regarding the financing from the regional and local councils leads to liquidity problems that mean we have to resort to bank loans. In the end, this all means we cannot draw up a programme in advance. There is also the problem of contract renewal in this sector and together with the vice president we are putting pressure on the ministry to resolve the situation.

Classic Voice has accused opera houses of lacking in courage and of opting for “safe products”. Although, if the truth be told, it does admit that the Fenice opera house has actually risked the most by including no less than eleven operas in its programme that were either new or renewed discoveries.

I ask myself why there is no end to the scrutiny of opera foundations. We are subject to continuous examination regarding all kinds of things. All variables should be taken into consideration, including the efforts we are all making to increase our audience. And that is what is happening. Increased revenue, which is happening. Increasing the audience numbers and revenue is something positive, isn’t it? I would rather the question was whether opera bodies are able to give back what they receive in terms of culture and programming. It’s true that more was done in the past. I have been working in this field for almost forty years and I was born with the idea that sooner or later the state would have paid off the debts. That is no longer the case. Now one expects opera foundations not only to be able to be financially independent but also to diffuse the culture of music to a wider general public.

Last March there was an article in the Economist explaining your successful management of the Fenice with the accusation of wanting to follow a Disneyland musical project. An article in the
Corriere della Sera spoke of the “arenaisation” of opera foundations. The press certainly doesn’t treat you with kid gloves.

I think the Economist would have been better off directing that kind of criticism at the English opera houses. It could say such a thing of Covent Garden, the Paris National Opera, and La Scala. They are doing exactly the same as us. We stopped using the old opera house management model; we wanted to experiment and we were successful. What the Economist said is wrong, and they should have analysed what we are doing more carefully. There are no opera houses that have sixteen different productions or eight new productions a year. The English opera houses aren’t putting on operas by Cavalli or by Caldara, etc. I don’t care what the Economist says, we’ll carry on offering 33 performances of Traviata because it is thanks to this that we can guarantee music research and novelty. Every year during our symphony season we programme four new music commissions that we promote; during the festival we have a marathon with forty world premières and this year we will have numerous composers from all over the world at La Fenice. We offer operas for children. Many other opera houses are following our example. Let me ask you a question. What should we be offering our tourists if not masterpieces from the Italian music repertoire? They stay in the city for two or three days and make reservations for every evening to see three operas. For example, our programme in September when we offered Traviata, Tosca and Rossini’s L’occasione fa il ladro. The opera house is booked out months in advance. We not only want to be a cultural production centre, but also to offer the city an economic return of what we have been given.

Don’t you think that the transformation of opera bodies into foundations with the ensuing addition of private figures on the boards of directors impoverished the cultural offer in some way? Absolutely not; that isn’t what happened. Unfortunately, the private figures didn’t join in the numbers we hoped. Italy doesn’t have the culture of patronage that other countries have, where the private sector has withdrawn from many fields, not just from opera. And in those countries patronage is a source of pride. We are living in a world in which we are competing with Peking, Los Angeles, Paris and San Francisco. There is great competition to get the artists. And the market rules are different. For example, in Germany 80 to 85 per cent of financing is public so it’s clear they have guarantees that we don’t have. I’ll soon be publishing the results of a study that
“La Fenice is flying high despite the hard times”. Interview with Cristiano Chiarot

shows that our productivity is much higher in view of all the variables involved. Considering that we receive less financing than the Germans and the French, but produce more. I’d say that our sector is experiencing a vitality that it has never had before, paying attention not only to the music, but also to production and economic factors.

What future do you envisage for the Fenice? Will it carry on having its own orchestra or do you think other organisation models may be possible?

If we want to maintain our position and not be invaded by foreign orchestras we have to think about stability. At La Fenice we have an orchestra with about 98 musicians and a choir of 72. Since 2010 we have increased our opera productions by forty per cent; in other words, we have given a meaning to permanent sections. We have doubled the revenue from the ticket office, without increasing costs. Whilst respecting the contract, we have used the orchestra and choir more. However, it is the underlying cultural project that allows us to reach the maximum of productive capacity. With the new contract that has been signed we now have more flexibility, so that the permanent sections can be used even more on the stage; so that the opera house is always open and can fulfil its social function to the full.

You experienced the fire in ’96 and the entire reconstruction phase that followed. With hindsight, do you still agree with the idea of rebuilding the opera house “where it was and how it was”, or would you have preferred to have one today that allows you to offer a more varied repertoire?

You know, I’m happy with the opera house I have. Here we can do all the repertoires we like. Gae Aulenti’s project, which came first, was probably the one that gave us the greatest guarantee from a productive point of view. Aldo Rossi’s, which was then chosen, received more points from an architectural point of view. However, regarding the equilibrium of production-costs etc., Gae Aulenti’s project was better. Aldo Rossi’s is one that slightly penalises the lack of spaces and maintenance costs. This creates several problems because the upkeep of this opera house is very high. Furthermore, in this phase of productive expansion we really suffer from the lack of space. The visiting groups are often amazed at the spaces we are working in and ask us how we can offer three performances on that stage. I certainly cannot dream of having all the space that German opera houses have, but I’m sure that in the future we might have something in the city that will improve the quality of our productions.
“La Fenice is flying high despite the hard times”. Interview with Cristiano Chiarot

(translated by Tina Cawthra)