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La Scala: More Than Just a Night at the Opera

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As the world's most famous opera house, Teatro alla Scala is a mecca for music lovers the world over. What many don't realize is that visitors can experience Milan's La Scala in more ways than one costly night sitting on a red-velveteen chair listening to Verdi.



A PRODUCTION AT LA SCALA SHOWS THE CRAFTSMANSHIP OF ITALIAN COSTUME DESIGN AS WELL AS VOCAL SKILLS.

Of course La Scala is synonymous with opera, and advance planning, [online booking](#), and deep pockets can usually snare you a performance at the world's most renowned opera company. (Less likely are tickets to the jewel-encrusted opening nights, available to corporate sponsors or passed down from generation to generation by long-time subscribers).

VISITING LA SCALA



A VISIT TO THE OPERA HOUSE REVEALS NICHES AND CORNERS OF ATMOSPHERIC BEAUTY, PRISTINELY RESTORED.

Lower-cost options are not as well known:

- *ScalAperta* (Open Scala). This program offers a limited number of tickets for 20 ballet and opera performances at half price. These tickets are available about one month before the actual performance, and you have to show up personally at the box office – you can't send a surrogate.
- *Scala under 30*. If you are under the age of 30, you can buy tickets or season passes at steep discounts. A preview ticket is €20 and some dress rehearsals may be free altogether. You have to prove your age and if you are accompanied, the other person must also be 30 or under.
- *Great performances for children*. Children under 18 can attend specific opera, ballet, and concerts conceived with young audiences in mind for the symbolic price of one euro. Accompanying adults pay from five to 40 euro depending on the performance and seat. Check online for program and availability.

The world of La Scala encompasses these children's spectacles, a world-class ballet company, a symphony orchestra, solo and chamber music recitals, a museum, a library, workshops, and a complex of schools for voice, ballet, and a range of theatrical arts. Performances, lectures, and behind-the-scenes tours are all available.



DAZZLING COSTUMES FROM PAST OPERAS CAN BE SEEN DURING A BEHIND-THE-SCENES TOUR AT LA SCALA.

Since its doors opened on August 3, 1778, the theater has changed its named (the original was Nuovo Regio Ducale Teatro alla Scala), restructured its interiors (most recently in a massive renovation between 2001-2004), expanded its property holdings, and created its spinoff activities. The ballet school celebrated its 200th birthday in 2013, and the museum marked 100 years of operation that same year. There is a choral program for secondary school students, a separate course of study for a handful of aspiring opera singers, and a two-year orchestra program for students in their 20s.

The participants in these programs give performances that showcase their talents. Audiences enjoy music at La Scala without high ticket prices, and they may be early witnesses to future superstars. Former ballet students include Roberto Bolle and Carla Fracci. Alumni singers include soprano Anja Kampe, mezzo-soprano Anita Rachvelishvili, tenor Leonardo Cortellazzi, and baritone Christina Senn, among many others.



MUSIC AT LA SCALA IS RECITALS AND CHAMBER MUSIC AS WELL AS FULL-SCALE PRODUCTIONS.

The La Scala [Museum and Library](#) also celebrated their 100th birthday in 2013 and the former still resides at its original address adjacent to the theater. The museum houses more than 350 paintings and sculptures, 50 miniatures, over 150 porcelain figures, a mixture of puppets, musical instruments, and artisanal objects, and 150,000 books and related items. The original idea was to create a *pinacoteca*, a gallery where La Scala patrons could go to browse interesting objects during the intermissions of the opera.

Curiosities include Puccini's watch, Rossini's glasses, locks of Mozart's hair, a cast of Chopin's hand, and – among many items of Verdiana – his first spinet, his grand piano, and 200 personal letters written by him. Although Verdi was born near Parma, not Milan, the Milanese consider him *theirs*.

The building was renovated between 2001-2004 (along with La Scala itself) and the decor recreates the original Belle Époque architecture. This decision was made after vigorous discussion: should the museum retain the ambience of the past or break with tradition and move into the future? Pier Luigi Pizzi, a noted set designer and director at La Scala, opted for a re-creation of the atmosphere of the museum when it was first opened. Pictures of the original were used to evoke its atmosphere, without slavishly recreating it. But never fear – the bathrooms were all modernized, and digitalization is improving the visitor experience and the research of serious scholars.



ARTISAN DETAILS ARE PART OF THE CREATION OF OPERATIC SETS.

Speaking of research, when the museum officially opened in 1913, it had 10,000 volumes of music criticism, biography, and musical scores. The Livia Simoni Library became its own entity in 1952, when Italian music critic Renato Simoni donated 54,00 books to La Scala in honor of his mother. Today the library includes 10,300 letters from composers, directors, and singers, 2,255 sketches of theater scenes, 3,000 posters, 6,000 libretti, 30 complete opera manuscripts, and 7,000 photographs.

Together, the museum and library engage a staff of 10 to handle permanent, temporary, and traveling exhibits, and more than 230,000 visitors a year. The museum is open every day except December 7, 24, 25, 26, and 31, January 1, Easter Sunday, May 1, and August 15. Entrance fee varies depending on age and group affiliation; a full price ticket is € 7. The archives are open free of charge to **scholars** by prior arrangement.



SET DESIGN IS A MAJOR UNDERTAKING FOR AN OPERA AT LA SCALA.

A recent enrichment of the La Scala experience is the opportunity to visit the [Ansaldo Workshops](#), where theater magic is born. Most of the handmade works for the production — set design, sculpture, carpentry, mechanics, set assembly, costume design and creation (including a repository for 60,000 costumes) — are carried out there. The workshop tours can accommodate individuals as well as groups in a number of languages. Guides explain the various stages of a theater production, so you don't have to be an opera buff to enjoy the visit . . . but it helps to love stagecraft. Arrangements must be made in advance, especially for non-Italian tours. A full price ticket for an individual is € 10.

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Written by Claudi Flisi for [EuropeUpClose.com](#) Photos courtesy of La Scala.



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