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## ARTS &amp; ENTERTAINMENT

# How Europe's Opera Houses Won Over Millennials

With an escape game and networking events, La Scala and the Paris Opera are attracting under-30 audiences

By Jennifer Clark

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## Milan

When Niccolò Bulgarini moved here from Florence last year, one of the first things he did was join a group for young opera fans that gave him special access to fabled Milan opera house Teatro alla Scala.

“My grandfather used to hum a bit of Verdi and Puccini,” says the 34-year-old Mr. Bulgarini, a data scientist by training. “I wanted to go to La Scala, and to be able to see the rehearsals.”

Opera is unexpectedly hip among many European young people. Through a series of innovative efforts, European cultural institutions like La Scala and the Paris Opera are attracting a younger set. La Scala's longtime special season premieres in its Under30 program—with tickets at €20 (\$23.22)—have proved to be wildly popular. The Paris Opera has introduced a similar program and in June debuted a “Phantom of the Opera” game that lets players roam through its historic venue. Membership in the youth chapter of the nonprofit Milano per la Scala foundation has risen by 60% since a new youth outreach coordinator was appointed last year.

Opera houses, ballet companies and orchestras in Europe and the U.S. face steep challenges in attracting younger audiences, and many are experimenting with new formulas to attract them. London's Royal Opera is planning to expand its youth program next season. New York's Metropolitan Opera in 2015 started Fridays Under 40 with performances paired with a pre- or post-performance event, at \$100 for an orchestra seat.



Guests at a Fridays Under 40 event at the Metropolitan Opera in New York, a program introduced in 2015. PHOTO: RUSS ROWLAND/METROPOLITAN OPERA

“Attracting new and younger audiences is critical to the future of the Met, as it is for all other performing arts companies,” says Tim McKeough, a Met spokesman, adding that 3,000 tickets were sold through Fridays Under 40 for the 2017-18 season. More than 700,000 people attend

performances at the Met every season.

Show discounts go only so far, organizers say. Theatergoers attracted simply by lower prices are likely to purchase tickets only sporadically, according to a 2017 study by the Audience Agency in the U.K.



The Milano per la Scala foundation and the Under30 program have put a focus on creating a clubby, social atmosphere for younger attendees.. PHOTO: TEATRO ALLA SCALA

At the Paris Opera, Stéphane Lissner—who took over as general director in 2014, moving there from La Scala—started a program offering preview performances at €10 to those under the age of 28. Overall, youth tickets at a variety of prices drew 95,000 audience members, he says, of total ticket sales of one million. However, to get these people to come back, “we have to develop a relationship with them,” Mr. Lissner says.

As part of that effort, on June 9 the Paris Opéra threw open the doors of its landmark Palais Garnier for “Inside Opéra,” an escape game based on the Phantom of the Opera produced by Paris-based live-game specialists Team Break. Players roam through the theater to try to lift the curse of the Phantom by solving a series of puzzles. Mr. Lissner says he decided to go ahead with the event, which runs in sessions until Sept. 2, because it would appeal to people who would ordinarily never come. Initial ticket sales were at 20,000, he says.

Even at La Scala, the high temple of opera in Italy, in the country that is practically synonymous with opera, it takes a big effort to attract a new generation. Mr. Lissner as director pioneered the Milan opera house’s Under30 ticket discounts program in 2008. He said he was shocked at the price for tickets at La Scala’s opening night—up to €2,500 for a premium seat. Even the seats in the uppermost gallery “with the pigeons,” as regulars call them, can go for €100.

“I realized it was impossible to pay for this ticket, for everyone,” he says. “And for young people it amounts to a kind of discrimination.”

The Under30 program offers three tickets for the price of one, and a “primina”—a full-costume performance that takes place before the official premier. A certain number of tickets are reserved for Under30 members, and some for the youth chapter of the Milano per la Scala foundation—the rest are snapped up online or by young people who wait in line, often overnight.

Under30 members also have access to happy-hour events with singers before some performances, and can attend certain rehearsals. Membership is also valid for ballet and concerts.

Taking over last year as coordinator of the under-35 chapter of the Milano per la Scala foundation Valeria Mongillo looked for new ways to draw and keep younger members.

When she saw her first opera at La Scala in 2012 at the age of 24, she was so carried away by the music and the gilt-and-scarlet decor that she bought the Under30 pass. But she couldn’t find anyone to go with. “I had a hard time finding people my age who wanted to come,” she says. “Opera is not very well-known, and it’s expensive.”



Stephane Lissner, director of the Paris Opera, has put in place programs for young people similar to those he pioneered as director of La Scala. PHOTO: ELISA HABERER



The Paris Opera recently threw open the doors of its landmark Palais Garnier for 'Inside Opéra,' a game based on 'The Phantom of the Opera,' aimed to attract young people. PHOTO: DAVID MERLE

Over the past year the youth chapter has grown to about a third of the foundation's 600 members. The key, she says, is creating a clubby atmosphere with trips to see opera in other European capitals, meetings with the singers, and museum visits. "You need to create a group, or else they leave," she says.

Ms. Mongillo, who also has a seat on the board, set up partnerships with local institutions including the Brera Fine Arts Academy. She created a coordinating committee of young people to brainstorm ideas about social events. And she sought tighter links with Juvenilia, a Europe-wide network for young opera lovers in which members take turns hosting events and travelling to them.



A packed house for one of La Scala's events for the under-30 crowd; tickets are a hot item. PHOTO: TEATRO ALLA SCALA

Scala's youth and elderly attendance has increased by 30% over the past three years and now some 20% of the theater's tickets are sold to these two age groups, says Alexander Pereria, the theater's manager and artistic director. He points to a new program of hour-long, simplified matinee performances of classic operas he introduced for children and their parents.

"You have to accept that you lost some of the public in the past," he said. "If you don't accept that, you get worked up about it and distressed. I said, let's start from zero. Let's start with the 4-to-10-year-olds."

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