

Riccardo Muti's resignation: Does Italy have an opera problem?

Conductor Riccardo Muti's departure from the Rome Opera exposes the cultural crisis that Italy is in, says Jessica Duchen

Wednesday 24 September 2014

When the conductor Riccardo Muti walked away from Rome's Teatro dell'Opera the other day, citing a lack of "serenity", one could scarcely blame him. Beset by financial cutbacks, strikes, deficits, alleged corruption, booing and more, it can often seem that Italy's opera-world experiences more melodrama off stage than on – despite the country being the birthplace of the art form and home to many of its greatest composers over the centuries, from Monteverdi to Puccini.

"Despite all my efforts to contribute to your cause," Muti wrote to the management, cancelling his participation in two forthcoming stagings and effectively resigning as chief conductor, "there are no conditions to ensure the serenity necessary for the success of the production."

Muti, 73, is himself Italian and among opera's most sought-after maestros, as well as music director of the Chicago Symphony Orchestra. He was appointed to the Rome Opera in 2010 and named Honorary Conductor for Life in 2011. In his resignation letter he declared that he was leaving "with great regret, and after long and tormented reflection". Responding in a public statement, the theatre's general manager Carlo Fuortes and the mayor of Rome, Ignazio Marino, said that Muti was "undoubtedly influenced" by "continual protests, internal conflicts and strikes that have lasted months".

To judge from this catalogue of conflict, Muti's decision may have been a while in the making. This summer, after ongoing rumbles throughout the season, the orchestra went on strike to protest at a planned reduction in its number of players – leaving a performance of *La Bohème* at the spectacular Baths of Caracalla to be accompanied by solo piano – and it was reported that the management board was meeting to consider liquidation. Fuortes, who was appointed in December 2013, has had to pull out all the stops to put it back into the black after losses of around €12m in 2013.

But trouble is so deeply embedded in this culture that it will take a lot more than a head for numbers to put things right. Indeed, the Rome Opera has been plagued with strikes and instability for at least the past quarter of a century. In the decade between 1989 and 1999, it experienced seven changes of management; and in 1999 the mayor of Rome threatened to pull the entire summer season after a strike forced the cancellation of its opening night. At that point, the house still received a vast government subsidy, yet operated at a loss.

There is no doubt that the *modus operandi* of opera in Italy needs urgent modernisation. Yet with the degree of the funding cutbacks on the one side, the trenchant unions on the other, and a lack of a private fundraising tradition to help bridge the gap, the necessary compromise looks almost impossible to achieve. Italy's culture minister, Dario Franceschini, responding to Muti's departure, commented: "With a profound bitterness, I must say I understand the reasons that have led to this decision, which is painful to everyone. I hope, at least, that this will open the eyes of those who obstruct [...] the commitment to engender the change for which Italian opera has for too long been waiting." This is not the first time Muti has left an Italian opera house under a cloud. Nine years ago, he resigned his 19-year directorship of La Scala, Milan, again following industrial disputes and deeply damaging strikes. That same year, 2005, Silvio Berlusconi announced that state funding for opera would be cut by €164m over the following three years, affecting all of the country's opera houses. He singled out La Scala for special criticism over its alleged wasteful spending. The unions at the theatre supposedly set out for revenge. Muti, it was reported, had supported efforts to make the theatre more commercial in outlook. He was rewarded with a vote of no confidence.

Muti has sometimes been criticised for an abrasive management style, yet he is no friend to cutbacks. In 2011 at a performance he was conducting of Verdi's *Nabucco* – which features the famous Chorus of the Hebrew Slaves, "Va pensiero" – he used an encore to make a speech condemning the Berlusconi government's cutbacks. "I'm not a politician but I can say that if our culture goes on being killed, our Italia will be "si bella e perduta" ("so beautiful and lost"), he declared, quoting the chorus, before rousing the audience to stand and join in a reprise. A massive ovation followed; chorus members were seen wiping away tears. Afterwards, Muti told Milan's *Corriere della Sera* that "killing culture in a country like Italy is a crime against society. Culture is the spiritual glue that holds a people together."

The trouble continues. Last month the opera house in Bari, the Teatro Petruzzelli – the fourth largest in Italy – cancelled two productions for this autumn, citing lack of money. Genoa's Teatro Carlo Felice was last month reported by *Newsweek* to be €5m in the red. Some stars are said to be staying away from Italy for fear of not being paid.

Fuortes and Marino have commented, in their statement that they hope for Muti's return "once the problems that still afflict the theatre, and the world of music in Italy in general, are overcome". They may have to wait a long time.