

My opera city ...

## Milan

Carlo Rizzi



**M**y opera city could only be Milan. It's where I was born and it's the home of probably the most famous opera house in the world. La Scala equals Milan and Milan equals La Scala. It's not only a great theatre but a very important landmark. Piazza della Scala is also today a gathering place for all sorts of reasons: political rallies, and sometimes unfortunately riots with people objecting to opera, saying that it's elitist. I remember when I was 14 or so, I was going to the opening night of the season and I had my best suit on but on top of that, I had my big coat as was the fashion with young people in those days; it was called a Montgomery. The police stopped me and asked where I was going, and I said, 'to the opera,' and they just laughed. But I showed them my ticket and

managed to convince them. They still watched me to make sure as I went, not to the main entrance for the best seats, but round the side for the 'piccionaia' (the top gallery).

My first opera was maybe a year before that. It was the dress rehearsal for *Un ballo in maschera* and that time I was sitting in the stalls. The reason was because La Scala is part of the Comune di Milano; the mayor of Milan was also president of La Scala and they gave tickets to my music school. Of course the music was wonderful and the singing was glorious, but for me the astonishing thing was the staging, by Zeffirelli. This enormous curtain opened, and my mouth was open too. The last scene started with this bare, square studio and then it just changed into a scintillating rococo ballroom with candelabra, masks, confetti, all in an instant. It was magical and that single scene hooked me on opera.

For years after that I went to every performance that I could and I heard and saw some incredible things. There was *The Love for Three Oranges* for the first time in Italy, a wonderful tour by the Royal Opera with Colin Davis and *Benvenuto Cellini*, *Otello* with Carlos Kleiber, and of course Abbado, who was phenomenal. Another thing I remember at that time was screaming 'brava' at the top of my voice for Marilyn Horne in *L'italiana in Algeri*; and years later I conducted her very last performance of it, at Covent Garden.

At that time, Milan had four orchestras, RAI (Radiotelevisione Italiana), La Scala, the Pomeriggi Musicali and the Angelicum, so when I was growing up I was exposed to an incredible amount of music. I never went to a disco but I did go to a concert or an opera almost every night.

It is quite something to be heading back to La Scala now, to conduct Giordano's *La cena delle beffe*. It hasn't been done for decades so is new for everyone involved. It feels like a tabula rasa and every rehearsal will be a new discovery.

For me, having been music director of Welsh National Opera for many years, Cardiff is very special and always will be, but Milan is my musical home.

*Carlo Rizzi conducts the new production of Giordano's 'La cena delle beffe' at La Scala next month, opening on April 3.*