

# Florence Italy

Behind the walls of a magnificent Florentine palazzo lies the perfect setting for a brand new opera festival. *Oliver Condy* pays it a visit



Grand setting: pianist Giuseppe Guarrera plays Beethoven's Piano Concerto No. 4 with Orchestra Senzaspine under Max Fane

Culturally, Florence seems to have it all. Michelangelo's *David*, the Uffizi, one of Europe's most important cathedrals, the majestic Ponte Vecchio and numberless architectural and artistic treasures. The Italian city also prides itself as the birthplace of opera. In 1598, Palazzo Corsi hosted the first performance of Jacopo Peri's *Dafne*, and opera houses that have sprung up over the centuries include the mid-17th-century Teatro della Pergola which premiered works by Donizetti, Mascagni and Verdi and, 200 years later, the Teatro Comunale.

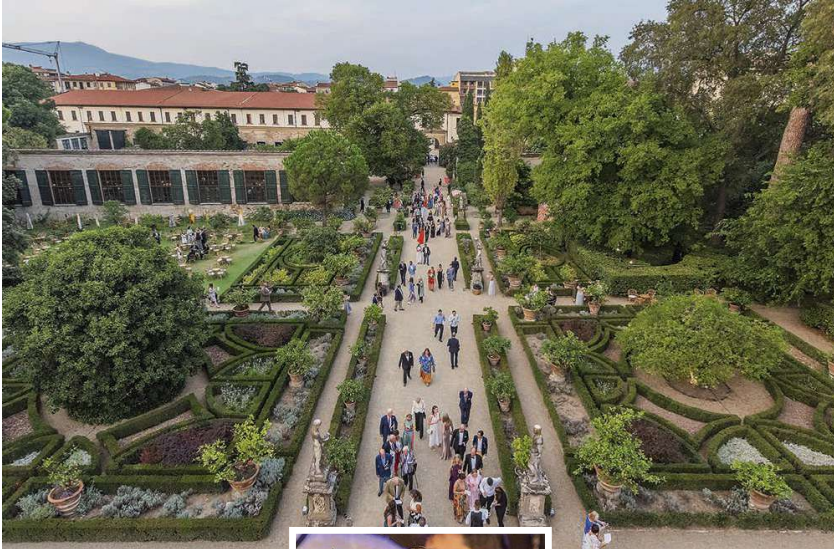
In 2011, Florence acquired a brand new opera house, the Teatro del Maggio Musicale Fiorentino (see box, right).

Over the past three years or so, a trio of enterprising young Englishmen led by conductor Max Fane have sought to swell Florence's operatic offerings. Inside the grounds of one of the city's most idyllic settings, the late-16th-century Palazzo Corsini al Prato, the New Generation Festival, four days of music, opera and theatre, has been taking place.

'I've always been involved with Italy – I've brought music here for many years,'

says Fane. 'Friends of mine from the Royal Conservatoire of Scotland [where he studied] would come here with me every summer and put on a little Rossini opera with a small orchestra. We met some wonderful Italians who helped out by hosting our performances.'

When, on his 21st birthday, Fane conducted a concert at the Palazzo Corsini, things really took off. The Corsinis threw open their doors and with the help of friend Roger Granville, Fane set about crafting a more permanent musical venture. 'Roger and I decided almost



Formal fun: (above) the garden at Palazzo Corsini looking towards the rear; festival co-founder and conductor Maximilian Fane

instantly that we wanted to create a festival, but we agreed that it was also important to support young artists at the start of their careers.'

So the New Generation Festival was born, its brand now spreading to Switzerland and the US. Here in Florence, the musicians that sing and play are almost all under 35. Singers can apply and are then handpicked while, Fane tells me, connections are being forged with conservatoires in Hamburg, Salzburg and Budapest, as well as competitions in Portofino and Montreal. 'They're a great way of talent scouting – it's a very organic process, but one with a lot of thought and collaboration behind it.' Rehearsals take place in the Palazzo itself, with its stables providing perfect areas for costume changes and scenery storage. It's a thrilling, chaotic mish-mash – an exciting hands-on experience for anyone starting out in opera.

The orchestra comes fully formed and is also made up of young musicians. Set up in 2013 by a couple of young Italians, Orchestra Senzaspine is based in Bologna and has over 450 young players to its name, 60 or so of whom make the journey to Florence. 'It's important for me to try and root ourselves into the Italian context,' says Fane, 'and the orchestra is a really good way of doing that. Also, it's much



greener – we're not flying people in from all over the world.' Fane works them hard over the four days: Schumann, Beethoven and Elgar orchestral works sit alongside two performances of Mozart's *Marriage of Figaro*, a production that makes use of every nook the palazzo has to offer.

The festival's setting is staggering. The palazzo's formal walled gardens are brimful of trimmed privets, vast potted lemon trees and an avenue

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lined with mature bougainvillea, fir trees, pines and plinthe statues that lead the eye up to the temporary amphitheatre facing the rear of the palazzo.

Towards the back of the garden, outhouses host dinners and bars while fine-food stalls dot the perimeter for pre- and post-concert nibbling. Save for the Mediterranean weather, the gentle scent of lemon and the after-partying which goes on well into the small hours, one could almost be at Garsington or Glyndebourne.

The story doesn't stop there, however. Either side of the festival madness, Fane




Main stage: the city's impressive new complex

## Florence's opera house Il Teatro del Maggio Musicale Fiorentino

In 2011, as part of the 150th-anniversary celebrations of Italian unity, Florence unveiled its brand new opera house, the Teatro del Maggio Musicale Fiorentino. Situated to the west of the city centre, the arts complex was designed by architect Paolo Desideri and houses three major venues: the opera house with 1,890 seats, a smaller auditorium seating 1,200 and a 2,000-seat outdoor amphitheatre. The new building houses Florence's annual opera festival, the Maggio Musicale Fiorentino, directed since 2018 by Italian conductor Fabio Luisi.

has been working at establishing an opera school. At the start of 2019, the palazzo next door became available for the first time in 30 years. With a spectacular ballroom and three more sizeable spaces, plus an extensive cellar, the scene is well and truly set. Fane has signed up course tutors and has students waiting in the wings. 'The course itself is completely free of charge,' he says, 'and we've found most of our artists a fairly decent contribution towards living costs through various different routes.'

Fane smiles the smile of someone whose plans have all come together. Festival, opera school, and all in one of the most beautiful cities in Europe. This New Generation is worth keeping an eye on.  **Further information:** 2020's New Generation Festival is due to take place 26-29 August. See the website at [newgenerationfestival.org](http://newgenerationfestival.org) for details