

I faced ghost of La Scala to bring opera's most challenging role home

In a performance for the ages, Marina Rebeka took on Norma at the world's most unforgiving venue — but did the crowd still boo?

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Marina Rebeka plays Norma at La Scala opera house until July 17

TEATRO ALLA SCALA

In 1977, the Spanish soprano Montserrat Caballé, in the shadow of Callas, was the last at La Scala to take on *Norma* — a cornerstone of the Italian bel canto genre famed for its showpiece aria, *Casta diva*. No one has since braved the boos. Until June 27 this year.

"I have defeated the [blessed ghosts of Callas](#), of *Casta diva*, of the perfect pianissimo," says Marina Rebeka, the Latvian soprano who took on the challenge of reviving Norma.



Rebeka has impressed at La Scala before, but never in the role of Norma

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"It's extremely difficult because you are totally exposed," Rebeka explains. "The orchestra forms the basis but you are the melody — nobody doubles you."

On the night of Norma's return, the air was thick with tension, La Scala habitués speculating about whether Rebeka would survive her trial by fire.

Her big moment, *Casta diva*, comes about 20 minutes in, after a fiery recitative followed by a two-second silence that, on the night, felt like an eternity, Rebeka recalls. "You hear your heart going thump-thump, thump-thump," she says, pumping her chest. "I'm not capable of being blasé about it."

There was only one boo following the performance

TEATRO ALLA SCALA

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The singer's nerves were evident as her voice trembled through her opening aria's marathon legato lines. But she soon settled — her famously steely voice purring into action as she climbed through wafting ornamentation to a floated high note — and grew in expressiveness and poise thereafter.

She was rewarded at the curtain call, a lone boo from the *loggione* a minor blemish. She also largely won over the critics, with La Repubblica declaring that "Norma is back in La Scala's repertoire". On the other hand, ear-splitting jeers and shouts of "shame on you", were reserved for Olivier Py, the French director whose staging was not appreciated by many in the audience.

Rebeka remains sanguine about the isolated dissent. "I had a boo ... and I'm ready for that, because it's part of this place."

But Rebeka, who set up her own classical music record label in 2018, says listeners



"Anybody who sings this role is compared to Callas," she says in perfect Italian during a blistering hot rest day at the theatre, half a week after the production opened. She is a laid-back, bubbly soprano who is in her prime with a string of triumphs at the opera house under her belt.

Even Rebeka admits she was nervous on the opening night, partly because of one of the peculiarities of La Scala — its rowdy audience. Rebeka likens the theatre's atmosphere — raucous reaction interspersed with moments of intense concentration — to a football match.

"La Scala is not just the singers, the

Giuseppe Minoia: "We have a right to express our views"

La Scala's status owes partly to its history. Some of the world's best-known operas — including Donizetti's *L'Elisir d'Amore*, Verdi's *Nabucco* and Puccini's *Madame Butterfly* — were written for its stage. Titan conductors Arturo Toscanini, Claudio Abbado, [Riccardo Muti](#) and Daniel Barenboim have all served as music director.

Rebeka describes her La Scala debut — in 2008 with Rossini's *Il Viaggio a Reims* — as "terrifying". "I thought, 'Oh my God, I'm singing at La Scala,'" she recalls.

But the Latvian soprano has form with reviving Callas classics, and knows how brutal La Scala can be. Last year, the theatre booked her for Cherubini's *Médée* (1797), closely associated with Callas, ending a 62-year absence from the repertoire. The year before, during a staging of Verdi's *I vespri siciliani* (1855) that left many disgruntled, one exasperated spectator shouted: "Rebeka, shoot the director!"

But Rebeka, who set up her own classical music record label in 2018, says listeners are wrong to compare live singers with greats from the past heard on disc. That, she suggests, is unfair, given studio recordings usually show performers at their best.

And while some of La Scala's audience remain wedded to ideals of perfection derived from recordings, opera's beauty, she says, resides in its imperfection.

"I am not artificial intelligence. I don't sing perfectly. I'm not perfect," Rebeka says. "The only thing I can do in every performance is give it my all, with as much honesty as I can. The rest is out of my hands."