

# A fright at the opera: soprano faces down the spectre of Callas at La Scala

James Imam Milan

For half a century, a ghost has stalked the boards and balconies of the home of Italian opera.

*Norma*, Vincenzo Bellini's masterpiece, with a leading role seen as one of opera's most demanding, premiered here in 1831. For the past 48 years, however, no one has dared to play the druid princess on the hallowed stage of Milan's La Scala because of the "spectre" of Maria Callas – the legendary Greek-American soprano who had made the role her own. Until last month.

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soprano who took on the challenge of reviving *Norma* on June 27. "Anybody who sings this role is compared to Callas," she said.

When Callas – known as La divina in Italy – stepped on to the stage in 1952, contemporary critics said she vanquished once and for all the audience at the Milan house, famed for booing and jeering any performer who fell short of their standards.

In 1977, the Spanish soprano Montserrat Caballé was the last at La Scala to take on *Norma* with its showpiece aria *Casta diva*. Now a bubbly Latvian soprano has braved the boos.

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Rebeka admitted she was nervous on opening night. She likens the theatre's atmosphere – of raucous reaction interspersed with moments of intense concentration – to a football match. "La Scala is not just the singers, the composers, or the stage director: La Scala is also its audience," she says. "It's one of the most engaged audiences anywhere in the world."

The *loggionisti* – opera fanatics who buy the cheap tickets high in the theatre – are responsible for the most ferocious booing. They help define a performance's

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Marina Rebeka in the title role of *Norma* – “the Everest of opera”



perceived level of success. "At times we applaud, at times we whistle and at times we boo," said Giuseppe Minoia, 80, vice-president of the powerful Friends of the Loggione association, which he said represents about 800 of the die-hard fans. "We believe we have a right to express our views."

Some of the world's best-known operas – including Verdi's *Nabucco* and Puccini's *Madame Butterfly* – were written for La Scala's stage and the conductors Arturo Toscanini and Daniel Barenboim have been among its noted music directors.

Rebeka describes her La Scala debut – in 2008 with Rossini's *Il Viaggio a Reims* – as "terrifying". She also knows how brutal La Scala can be.

Two years ago, during Verdi's *I vespri siciliani*

(1855) one exasperated spectator shouted: "Rebeka, shoot the director!"

Many of the classic operas most closely associated with La Scala are of the *bel canto* genre dating from the 19th century. Andrea Estero, editor of the Classic Voice opera magazine and president of the national association of music critics, has a theory about why opera is central to Italy's national identity, which lacked a literary tradition to rival Germany or France. "In Italy, the national conscience was forged not by novels but by opera," Estero said.

While the La Scala premiere of *Norma* was coldly received, the work soon became a staple; its story, about a druid priestess who secretly bears the children of a Roman governor and contemplates killing her offspring in revenge, serving as a powerful vehicle for some of the greatest voices in operatic history.

Marco Vizzardelli, a 66-year-old *loggionista*, said the work had been in hibernation because of audiences' attachment to Callas. "The

mentality is that the past is always better than the present," he said. "Herein lies the problem of not being able to perform *Norma*."

The title role is widely regarded as one of the most difficult, requiring exceptional vocal control and an ability to convey a broad spectrum of emotions. The great Italian soprano Renata Scotto called it "the Everest of opera".

On the night of *Norma*'s return, the air was thick with tension. Rebeka's big moment, *Casta diva*, comes about 20 minutes in.

The singer's nerves were evident as her voice trembled through her opening aria. But she soon settled and her famously steely voice grew in expressiveness and poise.

She was rewarded at the curtain call ... with one lone boo. Rebeka said: "I had a boo ... and I'm ready for that, it's part of this place."

"I am not artificial intelligence. I don't sing perfectly. 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."