

09–Piazza della Scala

The Piazza della Scala was built in 1856 by Luca Beltrami, the same architect who directed the restoration work on the Sforza castle, in order to create a space which would be fitting as entrance to the most famous and prestigious theatre in the world at that time.

On the two sides of the piazza, facing one another, are the Teatro alla Scala and Palazzo Marino, today the Milan City Council building. In the centre is the monument to Leonardo da Vinci, by Pietro Magni. The other two sides are formed by the buildings of the Banca Commerciale Italiana, built at the beginning of the 20th century and included in the Beltrami project.

In order to open up the space for the piazza, many buildings that occupied the centre space had to be demolished, and this meant modifying one of the facades of Palazzo Marino to harmonise with the new design. This palazzo is the oldest building in the piazza and was built in the latter half of the 16th century by the Genoese banker Tommaso Marino, who assigned the work to an architect, also from Genoa, Galeazzo Alessi. Alessi designed the facade in via Marino as well as the very famous facade in piazza San Fedele. History has it that it was right next to the church of San Fedele that the rich banker met for the first time, Ara Cornàro, the fascinating Venetian aristocrat. When his offer of marriage was refused, he kidnapped and married her, and in his own manner, compensated by building her this princely home. The internal courtyard is not to be missed: it is an elegant four-sided arcade, with a loggia adorned with sumptuous carved decoration.

On the other hand, the Teatro alla Scala, was constructed in 1777 ordered by the Empress Maria Teresa of Austria and requested by the population of Milan. During Carnival night, the previous year, a terrible fire had destroyed the only existing public theatre in Milan which was located inside the Palazzo Reale. The architect Piermarini was called to build the new theatre, and the position selected was where the Church of Santa Maria della Scala once stood. This was a church that had been built in the 14th century by Bernabò Visconti and named in honour of his wife Beatrice della Scala, daughter of the great noble family of Verona: and this reveals the mystery of the reference to a staircase that has never existed. (Scala means "Staircase" in Italian)

The plain sober facade of the theatre has a pediment at the top decorated with a relief of the chariot of Apollo protector of the arts, while the ground floor has a short central columned entrance. On the left hand side, for the delight of music lovers, is the very well endowed Scala Museum, opened in 1911. The 14 rooms include keepsakes, marble busts and portraits, theatre costumes and jewellery, scenery and back-drops, theatre masks, puppets, books, autographs...in short, any souvenirs that are linked with the theatre.

Since its inauguration on the third of August 1778, the world's greatest artists have performed in the most famous works here to seal their career: ballerinas, conductors, composers, singers, scenographers, directors. On the 11th of May 1946, rebuilt in record time after the bombing during the Second World War, the theatre was inaugurated again with a concert directed by Arturo Toscanini.

The interior of the theatre with its perfect acoustics and elegant neo-classical furnishing, is in the form of a horse shoe; the four floors of opera boxes, the stall and the two circles can seat an audience of 3600. In 2001 the theatre remodelled, restored and modernised with new technical installations, restructuration and restoration. The interventions, including the incredible scenery tower and floors behind stage, were directed by the architect from Ticino, Mario Botta.