

Naum Theatre: the lost opera house of Istanbul

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“It is about seven o’clock in the evening of a pouring December day, and the polite or impolite world of Pera are going as best they can to the opera. I cannot say that the opera of Pera absolutely claims a visit from the connoisseur. There is an unhealthy smell of dead rats about it; a prevailing dampness and dinginess; a curious fog; a loudness; a dirtiness, which induces me generally to prefer an arm chair and a dictionary - a cup of tea and a fire [...] I shall not have half so much fun in the theatre, where an English autumnal prima donna is tearing one of Verdi’s operas into shreds, and screaming in a manner which is inconceivably ear-piercing”.¹ This is how the *Household Words* magazine under the editorship of Charles Dickens (1812-1870) put Istanbul’s Italian opera on the world map, through the eyes of a “Roving Englishman”, in 1854, in the early stages of the Crimean War, when officers, soldiers and journalists flocked to the Ottoman capital. The war had badly hit the city’s opera, both financially and artistically.

Although almost completely forgotten now, the “opera of Pera” was Istanbul’s principal theatre mainly for the staging of Italian opera, with an exclusive licence from the Sultan, and was in existence from 1840 until it was completely lost to flames in the devastating fire of June 1870, which struck the neighbourhood. Also known as Théâtre de Pera, or Théâtre Naum after its proprietors, the brothers Michael (1800?-1868) and Joseph (1814?-1874) Naum, Christian Ottomans originally from Aleppo, the original makeshift wooden structure stood opposite the Imperial School of Medicine in Galatasaray, or today’s Galatasaray Lisesi in Beyoğlu. The seat of the once prosperous Levantine colony and palatial ambassadorial residences, Pera, with its first and unique municipal council, from mid-1850’s onwards, tried to model itself after European capitals in civic planning and the theatre which opened its doors to an enthusiastic public with a performance of Vincenzo Bellini’s (1810-1835) *Norma* in 1841, very much came under its jurisdiction in later years. However, on that evening the orchestra lacked players, no tenor could be engaged, the choir did not have enough singers and the thick smoke from pipes and hookahs engulfed the entire auditorium, but despite all, the news of this felicitous event was communicated to music journals around the world in the most enthusiastic fashion, so much so that the *The Musical World* of London reported: “Constantinople: The Italian Opera in this city which opened on the 18th of November with *Norma* has continued a successful career. The scenery and appointments are of the best description and the ensemble is in the most excellent style”.²

One of the most important factors behind Pera having its first permanent theatre inaugurated at that time, despite earlier attempts, with the aim of putting on regular seasons of Italian opera was undoubtedly due to the Tanzimat reforms of 1839, drafted by the Great Mustafa Reşid Paşa (1800-1858), the principal driving force of reform in the country, which brought greater financial and social securities under the protection of state law, to the non-Muslim minorities of the empire, giving them the same rights with the Muslims as equal

¹ Charles Dickens (Ed.), ‘The Roving Englishman at the Pera Theatre’, *Household Words*, 1854, Vol. 10, pp. 570-572

² *The Musical World*, 13 January 1842, No. II, Vol. XVII, p. 14

Ottoman subjects. As a consequence, a more self-confident merchant and subsequently banker middle class began to emerge among the Pera community and supported by the embassies, a more prosperous social life began to take shape, with an increasing demand for a lively entertainment scene, which hitherto did not exist as clearly highlighted by Giuseppe Donizetti (1788-1856) to his son Andrea in a letter, where he wrote in 1831: “in this country we are deprived of all the entertainments like theatre, opera and plays provided by civilised societies. I am sure if you were here, despite being with your mother and father, you would be bored stiff”.³

The fact that Giuseppe Donizetti, the eldest brother of the opera composer Gaetano Donizetti (1797-1848), had already arrived and settled in Pera as early as 1828 as “Istruttore Generale delle Musiche Imperiali Ottomane” (Instructor General of the Imperial Ottoman Music) was in itself a sign of the rapid cultural change that was about to take place in Ottoman Turkey at the time, initiated by the great reforming sultan of the era, Mahmud II (1785-1839; r. 1808-1839). In 1826 Mahmud successfully destroyed the corrupt and archaic corps of the janissaries who had become a stumbling block in the way of any kind of reform in a bloody conflict, which came to be remembered in Ottoman history as “Vaka-i Hayriye”, the Auspicious Incident. The path was now clear for the re-organisation of the empire’s armies along European models, which also incorporated European style military bands and hence the appointment of a Donizetti to oversee the transformation process. But more importantly what had started in the military was already beginning to permeate into the social court life and beyond. Mahmud who donned the Western uniform with aupolets and introduced the crimson fez in favour of the turban could now be seen in public, going to his weekly Friday prayers at the mosque to the strains of a Bellini, Rossini or Donizetti operatic number played by his regimental bands under the direction of Giuseppe Donizetti.

With the brother of a famous opera composer in charge of his military bands, Sultan Mahmud, it appears, also did not hesitate to attempt to cultivate a taste for opera and Italian singing, since at an evening’s entertainment given by the French Ambassador, at which, to the great astonishment of the whole capital, he came and was seen rapturously applauding the vocal performers; “although he knew nothing of their language”, *The Times* did not hesitate to add with a cutting remark.⁴ Similar stories continued to circulate among the musical aficionados of London, astonishing many; *The Musical World* reported in the summer of 1839: “The gods have made his Sublimity, Mahmud, musical and in return he has determined to infuse his tastes into his harem. With this view he has recently given a concert to the fair ones, at which a young Turk, who had acquired his education at Paris, played among other pieces one of Beethoven’s sonatas with variations, which enraptured the assembly and drew down thunders of applause”.⁵

In the same season the newly emerging operatic and musical life of the Ottoman capital continued to fascinate the London society who was informed that “Italian music had become the rage among Mussulmans, and there was now a brilliant Italian opera at Constantinople”.⁶ A young and handsome Milanese by the name of Signora Edelina Fritsche, who made her rounds of professional visits in a magnificent litter, richly fitted up with crimson velvet and gold, carried by four black slaves, and preceded and followed by eight

³ Letter from Giuseppe Donizetti to Andrea Donizetti; Constantinople, 25 March 1831; MS at “St. Pietro a Majella” Conservatoire Library, Naples

⁴ *The Times*, 2 March 1835

⁵ *The Musical World*, 6 June 1839, p. 91

⁶ *The Musical World*, 19 September 1839, p. 331

others, was now giving singing lessons to young Turkish ladies of fashion. The large and splendid theatre was crowded nightly, despite high admission charges and the Turks, “notwithstanding their usual habit of going to bed with the fowls” sat motionless till the end of the entertainment, which was often past midnight.⁷ It was also reported that Sultan Mahmud himself at times attended performances and had operas performed within the seraglio, before the ladies of his court.

The repertoire of the theatre included Bellini’s *Straniera*, Meyerbeer’s *Crociato in Egitto*, and Rossini’s *Italiana in Algeri*; but the libretti were strangely altered to suit Turkish ideas: the *Italiana in Algeri* terminated with the marriage of Isabella and the Bey, and the punishment of poor Taddeo, who received the bastinado on the soles of his feet, drew shouts of applause from the audience, “since the Turks did not laugh”.⁸ Some of these strange reports even included a highly dubious story of the Sultan’s favourite wife going to the theatre in an ox-cart as far as the pit, as recounted extensively by John Reid in *Turkey and the Turks*: “I thought that they were strange visitors to the pit of a theatre; they were, however, very sensible animals, for as soon as they arrived at the place assigned them with the carriage, they quietly la[id] down with their eyes shut, and never opened them until the performance was over”.⁹

Despite these fanciful stories, Istanbul at that time clearly had several theatrical stages which appeared and closed, as these reports precede the inauguration of the Pera Theatre. The stage which eventually became the Naum Theatre was originally built by the famous Italian magician Giovanni Bartolomeo Bosco (1793-1863) from Turin, who with the intention of putting on variety performances, leased the land belonging to the Naum family and named his establishment rather aptly Théâtre Bosco. However, by the time *Norma* opened there in the autumn of 1841, Bosco had already left Istanbul to be followed by the successive impresari, who also came and went, until with popular demand from bankers, merchants and diplomats of Pera, anxious not to lose their opera season during its infancy, the landowner Michael Naum reluctantly had to step in as director in 1844. This action was eventually to earn him obituaries after his death in the columns of publications as far as the *Athenaeum* and *The New York Times*, the latter rather harshly summing him up as an “odd character”, due to the unusual course of unconnected events in his colourful professional life.¹⁰

The son of a tobacco dealer, Michael Naum was one of the few surviving attachés of Lady Hester Stanhope (1776-1839), better known as the Queen of the Desert, and according to *The New York Times* when a boy of fourteen or fifteen he came to the notice of Lady Hester and was taken by her to Syria, where he remained with her for some years, being eventually dismissed “for too great assiduity in feathering his nest”.¹¹ He chiefly acted as her dragoman - interpreting and translating - but also seems to have had miscellaneous duties; including shaving her head on more than one occasion and making sieves in the English style for stable use from split reeds. But he remained faithful to her to the last day of his life, as “her passport, he attested, was acknowledged by the Greek privateers during the times of the war of independence, and he having been sent down to Rhodes in a coasting vessel to cash a draft was, on his return, captured; but on the production of my lady’s passport, the money

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ John Reid, *Turkey and the Turks, Being the Present State of the Ottoman Empire*, Robert Tyas, London, 1840, p. 221

¹⁰ *The New York Times*, 23 August 1868

¹¹ *Ibid.*

was returned, and he was dismissed to safety”.¹² After leaving the employment of Lady Hester, Michael Naum returned to Constantinople and went into the business of fez manufacturing for Sultan Mahmud II. Such was the scale of unconnected leaps in his career.

From its earliest conception, operas in the *bel canto* style made up the essential repertoire of the Pera Theatre and this tradition continued under the direction of Naum brothers when their first season was inaugurated in December 1844 with a performance of Donizetti’s *Lucrezia Borgia* to be followed by the popular operas of Rossini and Bellini for the rest of the season including *Il barbiere di Siviglia*, *Semiramide* and *Sonnambula*. In 1846 Giuseppe Verdi (1813-1901), the new and fresh voice of Italian opera, made his debut in Istanbul when *Ernani*, became his very first work to be staged at the Ottoman capital, two years after its premiere at La Fenice in Venice and a year before it opened in New York. Naum brothers were eager to follow the latest trends in Europe and before the start of each season Michael Naum personally went to Italy to engage artists for their theatre. But his greatest problem was due to the lack of sufficient facilities in the dated building, which the management attempted to tackle with not much success at the start of every season. Cramped seating, a small stage and lack of proper ventilation, as people smoked despite attempts to put a stop to the practice, drew bitter complaints from artists, as well as members of the public.

In January 1847 when a great fire struck Pera, not uncommon at the time, and the old theatre burnt down, the construction of a new and modern structure became inevitable. In actual fact prior to the fire, Naums had already raised some funds, plans had already been drawn for a new theatre and the old building was going to be pulled down at the close of the season, but a disaster of this nature made it possible for a petition, asking for financial support, to be presented to Sultan Abdülmeçid (1823-1861; r.1839-1861), the son and successor of Mahmud II. The young Sultan, already with a developed taste for European music and arts due to his father’s upbringing, on the advice of his ministers was not hesitant to make the necessary donation for the immediate start of the construction of Pera’s new and modern theatre, which was built by the British architect William James Smith, who was at the same time working on the construction of the British Embassy, known as Pera House. The foundation stone was laid on 5 July 1847, with Giuseppe Donizetti, also present among the attendees of the ceremony.

The new theatre, had three tiers of boxes, with another tier subsequently added and could seat nearly about a 1000 people. There was an Imperial box for the Sultan decorated in crimson and gold with its own street entrance and on the ceiling of the auditorium were portraits of famous opera composers encircled in medallions, as well as a grand central chandelier manufactured in London. The theatre was entirely cande-lit, until gas lighting was installed in 1857. The building was inaugurated on 4 November 1848 with Verdi’s *Macbeth*, which was conducted by the young and energetic Italian maestro Angelo Mariani (1821-1873) who had been engaged for the new season and who was subsequently to become one of Verdi’s greatest friends and promoters, with an eventual fall-out due to the composer’s alleged affair with his fiancée Teresa Stolz (1834-1902), who was also to appear at Naum Theatre. For the 1848-49 season Naum brothers were able to engage excellent artists, including sopranos Giuseppina [Josepha] Vilmot-Medori (1827-1906) and Emilia Cominotti. This was mainly due to the revolutions sweeping across Europe; but convincing the artists to come to Istanbul was no easy undertaking still; since the threat of cholera and fires in Pera were well known.

¹² *Ibid.*

Mariani was later to remember his arrival at the port of Constantinople, on board the Austrian Lloyd steamer from Trieste, in his memoirs in the following fashion: “Our voyage was somewhat disastrous. We had no little stormy weather, and having gone ashore at Smyrna for a few hours to get something to eat, we found there more than a thousand cases of cholera a day. After leaving Smyrna we had, too, the misfortune to see cholera manifest itself on board [...] When we were in the Dardanelles, near the Isles of the Princes (it was night-time), we saw Pera in flames! You can’t conceive what a desolate impression this made on us; it was such that having disembarked from the Lloyd steamer, at the sight of that heap of smoking ruins we wished above all things to return to Italy. But the brother of the impresario Naum, suspecting our intention to repatriate, had recourse to the police to prevent us embarking”.¹³ Despite this awkward start Mariani remained in Istanbul for nearly three years, staying at the Russian Embassy. He played the violin at social gatherings, taught the piano to well-connected aristocratic ladies and commemorated his sojourn in a series of love songs, some based on the verses of Giacomo Casanova (1725-1798), and collectively titled *Rimembranze del Bosforo*.

Life among artists of the theatre was not always peaceful; prima donna rivalries and partisan behaviour among the audience at times nearly brought the seasons to a halt. For instance the news of a scandal involving a rivalry between Vilmot-Medori and Cominotti at the Pera Theatre even reached as far as the columns of the *The Knickerbocker* magazine in New York: “A good Italian company is now ‘in full play’ on its boards, and the enterprise has this winter been very successful. There has been, however, the usual ‘noise and row’ of such places, and a rivalry between the ‘Prima Donnas’. The result has been shown by wreaths of flowers showered in abundance on the stage, varied by *cadeaux* of turnip-tops, cabbage-leaves and a live gobbler! This latter, you will say, I suppose, is but natural in *Turkey*; and yet the unfavored Donna thought very differently. A duel ensued among the admirers, as bloodless as the cabbage itself, and now all goes on quietly again”.¹⁴ Not so, when a similar incident took place few years later involving Marcella Lotti (1831-1901) and Rosina Penco (1823-1894), both eminent singers of their time, which ended with a fatality of a member of the audience, whereafter the theatre was temporarily closed on the orders of the police.

Well known names continued to appear on the stage of Naum Theatre; in 1852 it was Anna Caradori, who built for herself a brilliant career in the world’s greatest opera houses from La Scala to Covent Garden and when *La Traviata* was premiered in Istanbul in the 1855-56 season it was Fanny Salvini-Donatelli (c.1815-1891) who sang Violetta, who actually created the original role when the opera was premiered at La Fenice in Venice on 6 March 1853. Though the original production was a catastrophe for Verdi since an obese soprano dying of consumption caused much ridicule, despite Salvini-Donatelli’s voice being exquisite. The famous actress Adelaide Ristori also starred in Shakespeare plays at the theatre in 1864. French soprano Adelina Murio-Celli (1825?-1900) who sang under Luigi Arditi’s (1822-1903) baton in the same season as Salvini-Donatelli, also became extremely popular with Constantinople audiences including the Sultan and ladies of the harem.¹⁵ Carlotta Patti (1840-1889) was also among the celebrities who appeared on Naum’s stage in 1869.

Apart from presenting Italian operas Naum’s Theatre was also a variety stage where ballet, magic shows, concerts, Mardi Gras balls in February before Lent were presented. In

¹³ Frank Walker, *The Man Verdi*, Dent, London, 1962, p. 293

¹⁴ *The Knickerbocker or New York Monthly Magazine*, Vol. XXXIII, June 1849, p. 546

¹⁵ Albert Parkes, ‘Great Singers of This Century’, *Godey’s Magazine*, 1896, Vol. 133, p. 293

general the theatre was seen as a place where people from different religions and ethnicities could meet; it was definitely not an exclusive venue for the Christian community; on the contrary Naum even scheduled Friday matinee performances on the Islamic holy day to enable the Muslim population to attend performances and the local French newspaper *Journal de Constantinople* commented “as theatre is one of the greatest achievements of mankind, may be one of these days we will have the Muslim population and the Europeans watching performances together, side by side”.¹⁶ The Sultan definitely took the lead in this matter and visited the theatre several times during his reign; seeing acts from *Ernani* and *Linda di Chamounix* there soon after the new building opened.

The type of programming, unique to Naum Theatre, was also quite eclectic, which could perhaps be only expected at an opera house in such a multi-ethnic and multi-cultural city like Constantinople. At a concert given on 30 March 1859, in aid of Callisto Guatelli (1818-1900) and Giuseppe Figlinesi, conductors of the theatre (the former also taught members of the Ottoman royal family, was composer of celebrated marches and subsequently became Guatelli Pasha), the programme commenced with Guatelli’s *Marche Impériale* and was followed by the second act of Mercadante’s opera *Leonora*. This was immediately followed by *Ah! Effendym, Ah! Sultanem!* (Ah Efendim! Ah Sultanım!) and *Oh Deukulen Coumral Sach!* (O Dökülen Kumral Saç), traditional oriental airs harmonised by Guatelli. The second half introduced the *cavatine* from Verdi’s *Ernani*, followed by the director of Ottoman Imperial Music, Necip Pasha’s three traditional songs: *Chemsel Housny* (Şemsi Hüsnü), *Ei afitaby pour jia* (Ey afitab-ı pür ziya) and *Ei chiay milquy letafet* (Ey şamil ki letâfet). And finally the third part brought the concert to a close with the final act of *La Traviata*. Soon after this concert Guatelli disappeared. A search party for him was organised; but it appeared that he had eloped with one of the Sultan’s favourites from the Imperial harem, Sersefras Hanım, and together they fled to Geneva. Their story reached as far as London and made the headlines in *The Times* as “The Turkish Elopement”. “The beautiful Sersefras, it is said, possesses a splendid voice, which the Sultan admired greatly; and as she has gone away with an Italian maestro, it is not impossible that she may some day appear in the theatres of Western Europe”, the newspaper commented.¹⁷ Guatelli must have given a valid excuse for the incident, for a year later he was restored to favour.

In latter years Naum Theatre’s repertoire included French grand opera with the production of major works by Meyerbeer, although not with much great success. Wagner operas were never presented; his orchestral music, however, was played at concerts with a Wagnerite conductor, such as Henry Ketten (1848-1883) in charge of the artistic direction. Among the great names who passed through the theatre’s doors, one today remembers Henryk Wieniawski who played Mendelssohn’s famous violin concerto in E minor, and Pablo de Sarasate, who appeared as a member of Carlotta Patti’s company. Gustave Flaubert (1821-1880) saw *Lucia Lammermoor* there in the autumn of 1850 and later incorporated the opera to *Madame Bovary*, where the setting became the Opera House in Rouen. The theatre occasionally hosted European royalty as well. In April 1869, Sultan Abdülaziz (1830-1876; r.1861-1876) accompanied the Prince and Princess of Wales on their state visit, to a gala performance of Meyerbeer’s *L’Africaine* and a few months later the Austrian Emperor Franz Joseph came to watch a performance. A state visit to the Istanbul opera had also been organised for Empress Eugénie of France, when she stayed at Beylerbeyi Palace in the same year, but was subsequently cancelled due to her busy schedule on the day.

¹⁶ *Journal de Constantinople*, 4 November 1848

¹⁷ *The Times*, 15 September 1859

Michael Naum died on 5 June 1868; as a result of which in the last two years of the theatre's existence, his brother Joseph took over the management. By a strange and sad coincidence 5 June also marked the final date for the theatre, for in the summer of 1870, the great fire which swept Pera destroyed almost half of the neighbourhood and along with it reduced to ashes its historic opera house in a matter of hours. What the flames started, time finally finished off; Pera's lost opera house was gradually confined to the oblivion and erased from people's memories. The community which supported it most, also gradually dispersed and vanished. On today's İstiklâl Street, Çiçek Pasajı stands in its place and a marble plaque humbly commemorates its once glorious and chequered past.

Emre Aracı's book on the history of Naum Theatre, *Naum Tiyatrosu - 19. Yüzyıl İstanbulu'nun İtalyan Operası*, was published by Yapı Kredi Yayınları in June 2010. (Available only in Turkish)

