

Strike threat at Venice's La Fenice opera company over new conductor linked to neo-fascist Meloni government

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Musicians and staff at the world-famous La Fenice opera house in Venice are continuing to threaten strike action over last week's announcement that Beatrice Venezi would be the new music director of the company.

The 35-year-old Venezi is a favorite of Italy's neo-fascist prime minister, Giorgia Meloni. Meloni has praised Venezi, describing her as "a talented and courageous artist who refuses to bow to the dictatorship of thought and language." Meloni, closely allied with Donald Trump, is copying the US president's campaign to impose a fascistic stamp on cultural life, characterized by ultranationalism, superpatriotism and undisguised hostility to the left-wing views of the majority of artists. A recent exhibit on Futurism was organized so as to present the Mussolini regime in a positive fashion. Certain high-profile museum and musical appointments saw Italians replacing international figures.

Venezi, who is already music adviser to the culture ministry in Meloni's Brothers of Italy coalition government, is also the daughter of a former regional leader of Forza Nuovo, another Italian neo-fascist party. She is scheduled to take over in Venice in October 2026, for a term ending in March 2030.

Venezi is clearly Meloni's choice, although the prime minister has not said that in so many words. While she may not display the same flamboyance as the fascist in the White House who appointed himself the president of the Kennedy Center in Washington, Meloni assuredly shares his aims. As one critic remarked about Venezi, who has never conducted at any of the major European opera houses, "Venezi is not a famous conductor who happens to be right-wing. She is famous

because she is right-wing." The newly appointed music director has also achieved some fame for her appearances in shampoo ads on television.

La Fenice's history goes back 250 years, and it was among the most well-known venues for performances of works by the 19th century's four most famous Italian opera composers—Rossini, Bellini, Donizetti, and the greatest of them all, Giuseppe Verdi. With 1,126 seats, it is significantly smaller than the typical opera house, and is especially renowned for its acoustics. The name translates as "the Phoenix," which is apt, considering the fact that it has been destroyed three times by fire, most recently in 1996, but has risen from the ashes each time.

A letter signed by all of the Fenice musicians, addressed to superintendent Nicola Colabianchi, demanded that Venezi's appointment be revoked. Colabianchi, who had earlier promised to consult the orchestra, feigned concern and met with the staff. He subsequently defended the appointment. "She's excellent, she's young, she's a woman," he said, in a crude appeal to feminist sensibilities. Accusing the musicians of "rigidity," he added, "She can help La Fenice chart new paths that will attract young people."

The musicians responded, "Just twenty-four hours after the announcement, long-standing season ticket holders have cancelled..." They angrily declared that it was "unacceptable to sacrifice the trust of a loyal audience, built and maintained over time even through enormous difficulties...We are unable to recognize [Venezi] as the leader of our theatre."

The main union at La Fenice accused management of misleading conduct. Rappresentanza Sindacale Unitaria (RSU) issued a furious statement after the appointment

was announced, as reported on the SlippedDisc website. “Just five days ago, during an official meeting,” the union declared, “Superintendent Nicola Colabianchi assured that the names on his desk were still being evaluated, with no final decisions being made. Today, however, we find ourselves faced with a decision that was evidently already made, and then matured over the last weekend, which resoundingly contradicts the Superintendent’s words... Our audience is the pride of La Fenice, as are the caliber of its orchestra and its international reputation. With this decision, these values ??are seriously called into question,” reads the letter signed by the orchestra.

Solidarity with the musicians of La Fenice came from the rest of staff, who gathered in an assembly and said they reserve the right to call strikes, demonstrations and sit-in to “defend the professionalism of its artists and respect for democratic rules in the management of the Foundation.” They demanded “the immediate revocation of the appointment, which was made in a manner that trampled upon every principle of dialogue and transparency.”

Last Saturday, staff distributed leaflets outside La Fenice before a concert, and a member of the orchestra read a statement inside calling for the “immediate revocation” of Venezi’s appointment. The statement was greeted with huge applause and ovations.

The Turin and Milan opera houses issued statements coming in defense of their colleagues in Venice. As reported on OperaWire, the statement from Turin declares, “...Teatro Regio in Turin expresses its full solidarity with the workers of the Fondazione Teatro La Fenice, who have recently been openly protesting the appointment of director Beatrice Venezi. This appointment was imposed from above, without consultation, and is in direct conflict with the internal professionalism and the very dignity of those who daily build the theater’s artistic identity.” It added, “We are convinced that culture, if it is to remain alive, cannot be reduced to a stage to please the powers that be. Instead, it must return to being a critical, open and communicative place. And this can only happen if workers—the true guardians of the continuity and identity of institutions—are listened to and respected.”

La Scala Milan, the most famous opera house in Italy, “expressed full and sincere solidarity with our colleagues at the Fondazione Teatro La Fenice, who are

currently carrying out their protest with determination and courage against the appointment of the Music Director, which was made without transparency... Opera houses are common goods, the heritage of the community, built over time thanks to the work of artists, technicians, and craftsmen. The choices that shape the future of such important institutions must arise from dialogue and respect for internal expertise, not from decisions imposed by logics unrelated to art and culture. Under these conditions, it becomes extremely difficult, if not impossible, to build the relationship of trust and artistic harmony that is the essential prerequisite for any authentic cultural project.”

The president of La Fenice, Luigi Brugnaro, has called a meeting at the theatre for next week in order, he says, to “promote dialogue” and “find a solution.”

The threat of strike action in Venice coincides with the strikes and protests across Italy in response to the Gaza genocide and, specifically, the illegal interception of the latest flotilla by the Israeli navy. The unions have called for a general strike for Friday.



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