



Figaro successfully introduced its Simultext system to the Teatro degli Arcimboldi

Italian job: Milan gives the thumbs up to text displays

Italians are a passionate people. Passionate about their country, their food, their wines, and when it comes to the grand spectacle of opera, their passion takes on a fervour reserved in the rest of Europe for soccer. So when the decision to completely renovate Milan's Teatro alla Scala was announced, there was passionate concern voiced by La Scala's patrons, fearful that the renovations would destroy the unique historical character of the theatre. Controversy about every aspect of the renovation raged.

Renovation of La Scala's Piermarini Theatre would require closing the House for at least two years; however, Milan's new opera theatre, Teatro degli Arcimboldi, was nearing completion. La Scala's upcoming seasons could be performed while the work proceeded on its theatre.

Still, the controversy left management concerned that the company's existing

audiences might not follow La Scala to the new theatre, and even more unsure if the additional 800+ seats of Teatro degli Arcimboldi could be sold.

Hoping to broaden its reach to new audience segments, La Scala's management took a bold step. It decided to equip Teatro degli Arcimboldi with an individual text translation display system. The concept of such a high-tech addition, even to the new theatre, met with controversy among the traditional audience, but was grudgingly accepted, and Figaro's Simultext System was installed in time for the grand opening in January 2002.

Figaro's Simultext System met with instant approval, and soon, not only did demand for seats increase, Milan's opera 'fans' began to insist that a text display system be installed in the 'Old House'. The Italian newspaper *Corriere della Sera* reported: "2,400 displays with the opera text that runs in white over

a blue background have changed the Arcimboldi's seats to a lookout bridge. At the premiere the libretto displays won a majority approval... why not also install them in Piermarini's renovation?"

This truly operatic sea change created a serious problem for the city of Milan – the Piermarini renovation budget was already stretched to the breaking point, and now there was demand for even more expense. But in Italy, anything is possible if the passion is present. After extensive meetings and budget revisions, the funds to provide a text system in the world's most tradition-bound opera house miraculously were found.

A public tender was granted for the additional Simultext System, and Figaro was awarded the contract for La Scala's second text delivery system, which premiered at the grand opening of the renovated Piermarini Theatre in December 2004.

Two theatres: two design solutions

How Figaro met the technical and aesthetic demands of these two fundamentally different theatres required completely unrelated design protocols for each installation.



Figaro premiered its second text delivery system at the grand opening of the Piermarini Theatre in December 2004

Teatro degli Arcimboldi, a quintessentially modern Italian structure designed by architect Vittorio Gregotti, embodies a strikingly clean, spectacular form and appearance. In keeping with the auditorium's spare and balanced lines, the display monitors are situated in the ideal anthropomorphic location, just below the centre of the stage picture. The graceful form of the monitors elegantly blends with the theatre's architecture, at once a statement in its own right, but harmoniously integrates with the whole.

Because construction was already underway when the decision to install the system was made, Figaro had to integrate the necessary network devices and cabling into the existing structure without creating additional expense or delays. Figaro's years of experience yielded straight-forward problem solving, and the compact, modular Simultext System was superimposed on the existing design without visible evidence of the underlying infrastructure. The resulting appearance was as desired – clean and functional.

The 'Old House' presented another kind of challenge altogether. Teatro alla Scala, designed by Giuseppe Piermarini, opened in August 1778 replacing the Royal Ducal Theatre that burned down in 1776. La Scala was financed by selling theatre boxes to subscribers, which accounts, perhaps, for the Milanese concept that this is their opera house. These famous boxes remained privately held until 1921, when ownership was transferred to the Milan city council in order to avert an impending financial crisis.

Relatively few changes were made to the building during the last 200+ years, hence antiquated and inefficient stage technology limited the number of performances and two centuries of small changes to décor had

diminished La Scala's legendary acoustics. At the same time, original construction methods and materials did not meet modern fire-safety standards.

Intent upon preserving this historical jewel, management developed a plan to restore the auditorium to its original form, incorporating contemporary fire and safety requirements and current theatrical technology. Despite patrons' protests that renovations would compromise the historic La Scala, renovation proceeded.

Great care was taken to return the auditorium and acoustics to their previous glory, and a team of archaeologists began by removing centuries of paint to reveal the original colours and decorations. The entire stage and backstage was demolished and replaced, allowing scenery changes to occur quickly and efficiently. (Prior to the renovations, all scenery was hung laboriously on hemp ropes; and the stage elevators were operated by opening and closing large hydraulic valves under the stage by hand).

History, safety, economics and passionate public opinion converged on the La Scala renovation, placing extraordinary demands on the design and installation of the seat-back tilting system. Figaro determined that all the system components would be produced in the same colours as the surroundings, effectively disappearing into the décor. If necessary, all these components could be removed, returning the building to its original form.

The seats in the Platea were replaced with new chairs and the original layout preserved. Rows were arranged directly behind one another, making it possible to recess the display monitors into the seat backs, discretely

located in an optimal viewing position that did not intrude on the auditorium's appearance.

In the boxes, the monitors are hung from a velour-covered handrail that is attached to the front of the parapet. This simple design solution is unobtrusive, functional, and in full compliance with the guidelines for installing new items in historic buildings. The Presidential Box presented additional challenges: stone slab floors and priceless frescos decorating the walls precluded any installation work of any kind. Hand-held wireless monitors successfully provided the perfect display devices in a location where hard-wired infrastructure was impossible.

The outcome is an individual text display system that honours the aesthetic traditions of Piermarini, delighting growing audiences, and is now an enthusiastically welcomed aspect of the La Scala experience. Maestro Riccardo Muti, certainly the toughest critic, expressed his enthusiasm for the new system in an interview with *Corriere della Sera*, "I don't like them [sub-titles] when they are above or below the stage. The small displays on the back of the seats are different – they're democratic, and allow a choice between using them or not. They are the modern version of the score that in the old days, music-mad people would take with them to better follow the music with the help of little faint lights."

Every theatre presents unique requirements for the successful installation of individual text display monitors, and La Scala's two theatres were diverse and seemingly impossible design challenges. Figaro's years of experience and innovation provided the elegant and seamless integration of the Simultext System in both the Arcimboldi and Piermarini theatres, and satisfied a most passionate public – the Italian opera audience.

Figaro Systems Inc

tel: +1 877 263 2283

email: figaro@figaro-systems.com

www.figaro-systems.com

READER
ENQUIRY
REFERENCE
506