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CULTURIST

‘The tour that turned me into an opera buff’

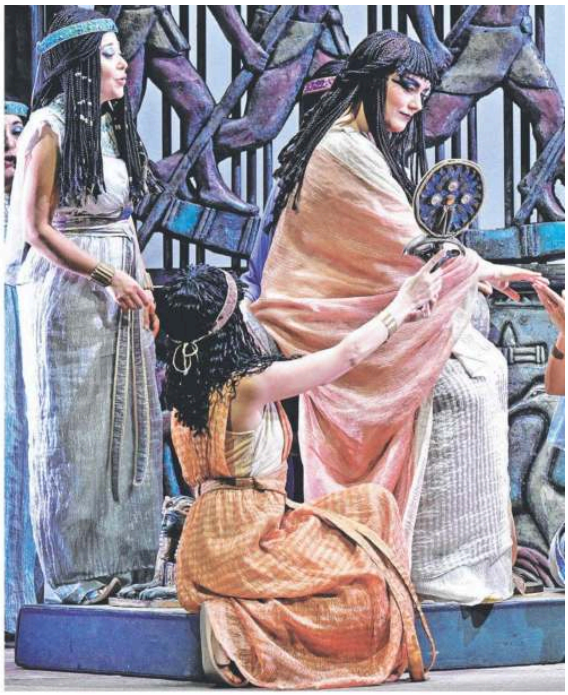
From a Verdi festival in Parma to virtuosic performances and backstage gossip, this richly layered itinerary brings Italian opera vividly to life. By Jane Cornwell.

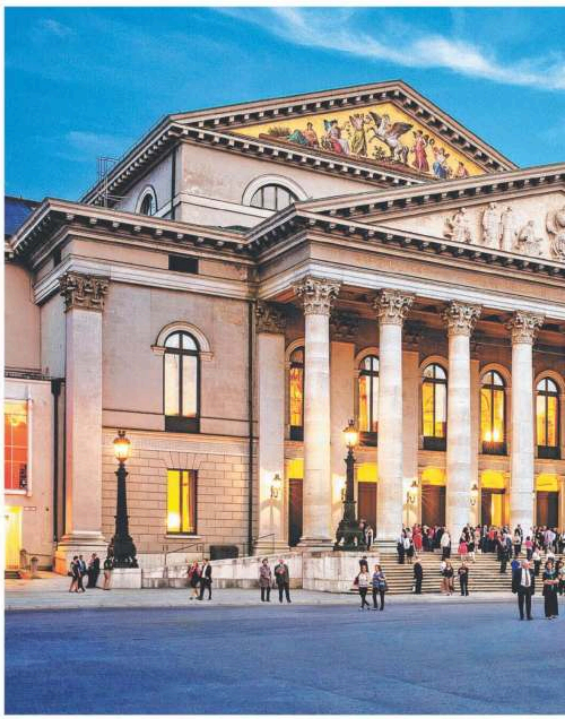


Abigaille takes off her helmet, shakes out her flaming curls and struts across the stage at Parma’s Teatro Regio, in long black boots and black leather hot pants, brandishing a sword. “Brave warrior! Are the weapons of love the only ones you know how to wield?” sings the power-hungry Babylonian princess in Italian, locking eyes with her rival and love interest, Ismaele. The music swells from the orchestra pit as she launches into a display of vocal gymnastics so powerful and furious that – from my seat three rows behind the conductor – I swear my hair is being blown back.

I’m in Parma for the annual Festival Verdi, travelling with Sydney-based Renaissance Tours on its Opera Bellissima tour of northern Italy. As a jazz fan, opera has never appealed to me; it seemed too rarefied, a bit elitist. But after a few days immersed in the rich, centuries-old history of this grand art form, with Giuseppe Verdi, the master of Italian drama, as my gateway composer, I’m a convert.

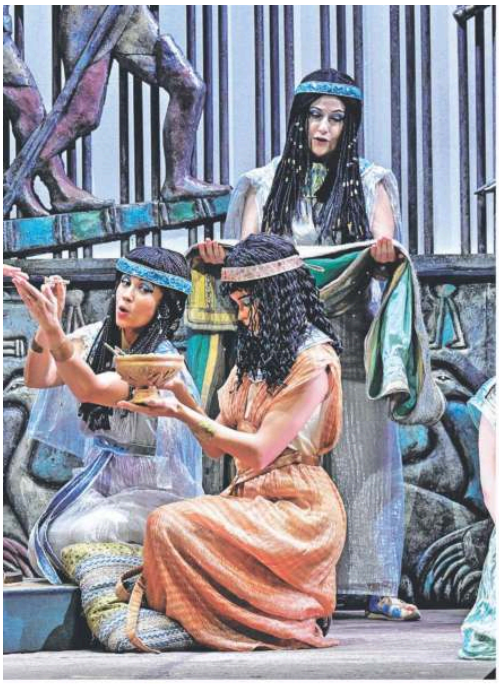
This visually striking performance of *Nabucco* comes towards the end of my week in Parma, and I’m embracing opera’s capacity to surprise and exhilarate. “Bravo!” I yell at curtain call, joining the applause filling all four baroque tiers of the stucco-adorned, horseshoe-shaped auditorium. Moments earlier, Abigaille – a role famously portrayed by Maria Callas and here performed by Russian soprano Lidia Fridman – has sung lightning-fast coloratura while collapsed, dying, on her side, as a massed chorus dressed in black, white and red falls dramatically to its knees.

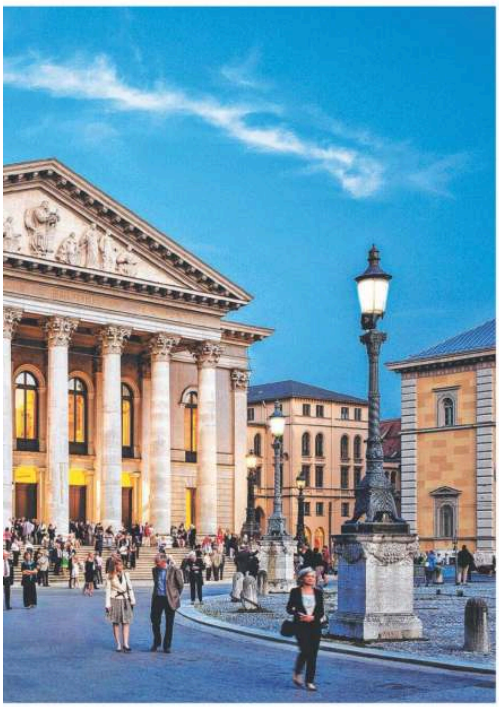






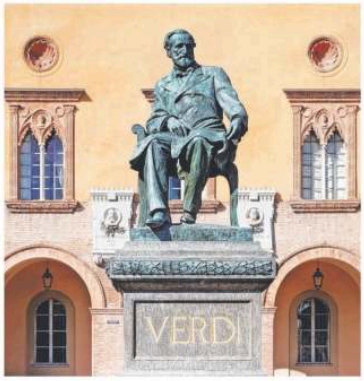
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Clockwise from far left: Teatro Regio opera house in Parma; Franco Zeffirelli's production of *Aida*; soprano Lidia Fridman in *Nabucco*; a monument to Giuseppe Verdi in Busseto; the Bavarian State Opera in Munich.



In the Regio the previous evening, I had clapped just as enthusiastically for *Alzira*, one of Verdi's less frequently performed works, with the orchestra led with angular verve by prominent American conductor James Conlon. Above us hung the one-tonne gilded-bronze chandelier known as the Astrolampo, beneath a ceiling featuring a dazzling fresco of poets and playwrights painted by Giovan Battista Borghesi in 1829.

Knowing something about each opera in advance added another dimension to the experience. "Verdi wrote 16 operas in 12 years, and 28 in total," says our tour leader, broadcaster and opera expert Mairi Nicolson, during that morning's lecture at our hotel, the Renzo Piano-designed Grand Hotel de la Ville. Witty, infectious and enthusiastic, she makes my first deep dive into opera all the more rewarding.

"*Alzira* was an early opera from 1845 that earned Verdi his worst notices. But there are wonderful moments," she continues, "and you will hear some of the outstanding qualities he consolidated in later works such as *Rigoletto* and *La Traviata*."

I begin listening for the way Verdi's driving rhythms propel the drama forward, and recognise his penchant for portraying institutional power struggles and fraught love triangles. Earlier in the trip, 40km away in the provincial town of Busseto, near Verdi's birthplace, we sat agog in private boxes inside the Teatro Verdi – an Italian opera house scaled down into a gorgeous 300-seat architectural miniature – to watch Franco Zeffirelli's opulent revival of *Aida*, Verdi's ancient Egyptian epic of political jealousy and forbidden love.

The production might not have the pageantry of an earlier Zeffirelli staging, complete with actual elephants and giraffes, but it was still monumental: towering pillars, giant statues of Anubis and Sekhmet, and the great burial chamber in which lovers Aida and Radamès are – sob! – sealed alive. With a chorus of 30 and guards with blue-painted faces, the production transports us into an entire lost world. Four hours, including three intervals for scene changes and prosecco breaks, whizz by.

The performances are only part of the tour. We also get the gossip: Busseto society disapproved of Verdi's relationship with Giuseppina Strepponi, who had three children by different men before becoming his partner. Stones were reportedly thrown at their windows. "So, Verdi never set foot in the theatre built in his honour, despite helping to fund it," says Elizabetha, our Italian guide, as we tour Casa Barezzi, the home of Verdi's patron and father-in-law. A permanent exhibition includes a photo of the crowd of 300,000 at Verdi's state funeral in Milan, a spectacle so massive it looks AI-generated.

There is music everywhere we go: in museums, restaurants and fondazioni, and even from the balcony of Parma's Teatro Regio. At the free lunchtime Cucù Verdiano, part of the Verdi Off fringe program, conservatory singers perform Verdi arias, accompanied by a pianist behind an open French window. Gelati in hand, we catch a rendition of La donna è mobile from *Rigoletto*, alongside a gaggle of rapt Italian pre-schoolers.

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On our way to Milan, we stop in Cremona, Italy's violin-making capital, to visit Fondazione Casa Stradivari, the former residence and workshop of 17th-century luthier Antonio Stradivari. There, we enjoy a recital featuring one of his own violins, among the roughly 650 surviving instruments out of the more than 1000 he made.

In Milan, where I leave the 12-day tour after a week (oh, how I wish I could stay!), Nicolson is due to lead a backstage tour of Teatro alla Scala, but the opening night of Gounod's *Faust* is cancelled because of a workers' strike. The tour continues northeast to Vicenza, a city of Palladian villas, for a performance of Mozart's *The Magic Flute*.

Italy may be opera's historical home, but for travellers keen to combine great music with a sense of place, it is just the beginning. Opera tours offer a way into some of the world's great opera houses and music festivals, often with expert insights and access that enrich the experience beyond the auditorium.

Pick the composer or performance that most excites you, then arrange your travel around it. Love Richard Wagner? In May 2027, Wagner expert Antony Ernst will lead a Renaissance Tour to Munich, Bayreuth, Vienna and Leipzig, tracing the life, works and influence of the German composer.

Other operators offer similarly varied programs, many built around festivals. Music Lovers Tours' Southern Passion itinerary explores Sicily and Malta through their musical traditions. Hayllar Music Tours' itineraries include Opera in the English Countryside, taking in celebrated summer festivals including Glyndebourne. Limelight Arts Travel runs small-group journeys to events including the Baden-Baden Easter Festival in Germany and the acclaimed summer opera program in Aix-en-Provence, France, and in Salzburg, Austria, Mozart's spiritual home.

The world's great opera houses offer another way to build a trip around the music. Milan's La Scala, London's Royal Opera House and New York's Metropolitan Opera have programs spanning beloved classics and new productions. Vienna's State Opera and Berlin's three major opera houses provide a wealth of choice. According to Pettitt's 2026 Opera Experience Index, Berlin tops the list, followed by Paris, home to the ornate Palais Garnier. For open-air spectacles, Verona's Roman amphitheatre stages performances typically from June to September.

Some opera buffs choose according to company or conductor; others a favourite voice. Few voices loom larger in the Verdi repertoire than that of Renato Bruson, now 90, one of the great Italian baritones of the late 20th and early 21st centuries.

During our visit to the Fondazione Museo Renato Bruson in Parma we sit on chairs to watch two of Bruson's students, a baritone and a soprano, perform a note-perfect, wide-ranging duet that culminates in a full-blooded kiss. It's a remarkable performance at such close quarters. Then, behind us, stands the maestro himself, leaning on a piano in an adjoining room and regarding us benignly.

Bruson's volatility is part of operatic lore. During a tense exchange at the 1987 production of Verdi's *Otello* at La Scala, he reportedly threw a punch at conductor Carlos Kleiber that instead hit the Spanish tenor Placido Domingo.

This encounter brings the trip's many strands together – music, personalities and stories. I had wanted to demystify a genre I knew little about. I hadn't expected a guide to change the way I listened, the voices to raise goosebumps, or the backstage tales to rival the drama onstage. Clearly, my playlist will never be the same.

Above: Teatro Giuseppe Verdi in the Italian town of Busseto. Above left: conductor Vladimir Jurowski directs a performance of *The Ring Cycle* in Munich.

Photography by Drew Kelley (Vladimir Jurowski)

THE FINE PRINT

The writer was a guest of Renaissance Tours. Its 12-day Opera Bellissima tour of Italy, led by opera expert Damien Beaumont, returns to Milan, Parma, and Venice in October 2027. The itinerary starts at around $18,950 twin-share and features premium seating at Teatro alla Scala, La Fenice, and the Verdi Festival. *renaissancetours.com.au.*