



British opera nut to rebuild Venice venue

A tax consultant has sold up to follow his dream of bringing back San Cassiano theatre, writes Tom Kington

Paul Atkin's eyes light up as he describes the moment opera music came of age in Venice in 1637, when the world's first public opera house opened, drawing gasps as elaborate machinery under the small stage changed sets in the blink of an eye.

"It was a magical place full of emotion, a century before opera houses grew larger and singers were forced to bellow to reach the back rows. In those early days you could understand the words and lose yourself in the drama," Mr Atkin, 55, an opera lover and tax consultant from London, said.

Mourning the loss of the fabled San Cassiano theatre, which was demolished in 1812, Mr Atkin decided he had to act, and sold his business to devote his life to a dream: rebuilding the opera house in Venice exactly as it was, to show

the world the raw power of opera's early days.

"At first the Venetians thought I was just a crazy English guy but I have shared my passion with them and they are starting to buy into the project," Mr Atkin, who now has the backing of the city, said.

Invented in Florence, opera really took off in Venice when the San Cassiano opened to the paying public as impresario and composer Francesco Cavalli led opera's so-called Baroque era in the city. "It was a gold rush with

11 theatres by the end of the 17th century in Venice," Mr Atkin, who has a doctorate in

music, said. "They were small and it was about expression, not volume. Centuries later you get to Wagner. I am a big fan, but by then operas were written differently for bigger orchestras and to fill great spaces."

Special effects created with wheel and rope contraptions inspired by technology in use at Venice's docks made dragons breathe fire and gods descend from the heavens.

With a determination reminiscent of Klaus Kinski's character in the 1982 film *Fitzcarraldo*, who dreams of building an opera house in the Amazon, Mr Atkin enlisted John Greenfield, the architect behind the rec-

Behind the story

The earliest surviving opera, Jacopo Peri's *Euridice*, dates from 1600, but it was only when the doors of San Cassiano in Venice opened in 1637 that opera really came of age (Neil Fisher writes).

That was because suddenly it was being peddled to everyone in society. It had to hold its own as commercial entertainment; not just for lords and ladies but for their maids and their gondoliers.

How could opera hold the attention of the masses? By covering the same subjects as today's popular TV dramas: politics, corruption and, above all, sex. So out went highfalutin retellings of ancient myth and in came salacious dramas with only a tenuous link to history.

Francesco Cavalli probably collaborated on Claudio Monteverdi's 1643 masterpiece *The Coronation of Poppea*, a Tarantinoesque romp featuring suicide, murder, infidelity, black humour and shameless eroticism.

The piece is about servants as well as their masters — the bawdy maids and jaded lackeys get almost as much airtime. Why? Because those lackeys were sitting in the theatre too, lapping it up.

The opera house in Venice will stage intimate Baroque productions using the technology of the time. Paul Atkin needs to raise €90 million



reation of Shakespeare's Globe theatre in London. Impressed by his dream, the Globe also signed on as a partner.

Detective work at Venice's state archives yielded the design of the original San Cassiano, confirming that it had an orchestra of no more than eight musicians and room for only 405 spectators, with five tiers of small boxes where people may have stood to watch the performance.

Mr Atkin has discovered that there are two theatres in Sweden and one in the Czech Republic occasionally putting on baroque operas today. "But in Italy, where there are 3,000 theatres, none is able to stage baroque opera with the stage machinery of the period, so we will be the first," he said.

His next task was enrolling Italian experts to join the team, convincing the town hall and launching fundraising to help reach the estimated €90 million cost of the project.

The way he sees it, the reborn San Cassiano means jobs and an injection

of culture in a city dying under the weight of too many day trippers buying plastic Chinese carnival masks. "They have seen we are trying to reclaim opera for Venice, offering a sustainable future to a city which is suffering," he said.

His wife and two daughters, aged 11 and 18, are backing him to the hilt. "My daughters are happy their dad is doing this crazy project," he said.

One hitch is that the original site of the theatre, near the Rialto bridge, is in a private garden. "We would ideally buy the site but we are also talking to the town hall about other sites," he said.

One possible location is behind a palazzo on the Grand Canal. "That would involve building in the garden of the palazzo, which is possible since the theatre is small, no more than 20 metres by 30 metres," he said. "And that is the beauty — when you watch a performance you can see the singers' eyes, and if they are moving you to tears, you can bet they are crying too."

