



# SFERISTERIO

MACERATA



## ARENA SFERISTERIO: THE ARCHITECTURE

The Sferisterio is the symbol of the city of Macerata and it was opened to the public in 1829, after almost 10 years of construction works. It was designed to fit perfectly into urban fabric of the city centre. Nowadays visitors are amazed by its magnificent brick facade, and they are even more surprised by the unexpectedly wide interior, which remains hidden from the outside. It is an enormous 90 by 36 metres arena, surrounded by a spectacular sequence of 56 elegant columns, ending with a majestic 18 by almost 90 metres wall. The structure was financed by a private sodality of wealthy families of Macerata – the so called “Cento Consorti” –. The Sferisterio was built as a permanent sports arena, as well as for public events and shows. The structure was designed by the young architect Ireneo Aleandri (from San Severino Marche), who was famous for the theatres he had built in the Papal State. The building was designed as a urban space for the amusement of all the citizens: it could accommodate more than 8000 spectators in the elevated terraces, in the two tiers of boxes and in the stone balcony (where it is still possible to have a beautiful panoramic view of the rolling landscape and the old town). Today the Sferisterio is considered one of the most important monuments of the late European Neoclassical period and it is inspired by Classical and Renaissance architecture, by Palladio's work in particular.

## SFERISTERIO: SPORTING USE

The Sferisterio was designed as a sports arena, mainly for the game called “Ball and Bracelet” (Pallone col Bracciale or Palla al Bracciale). The game was played by two teams of three players each, it was similar to tennis but it used a peculiar wooden bracelet with spikes as a kind of bat.

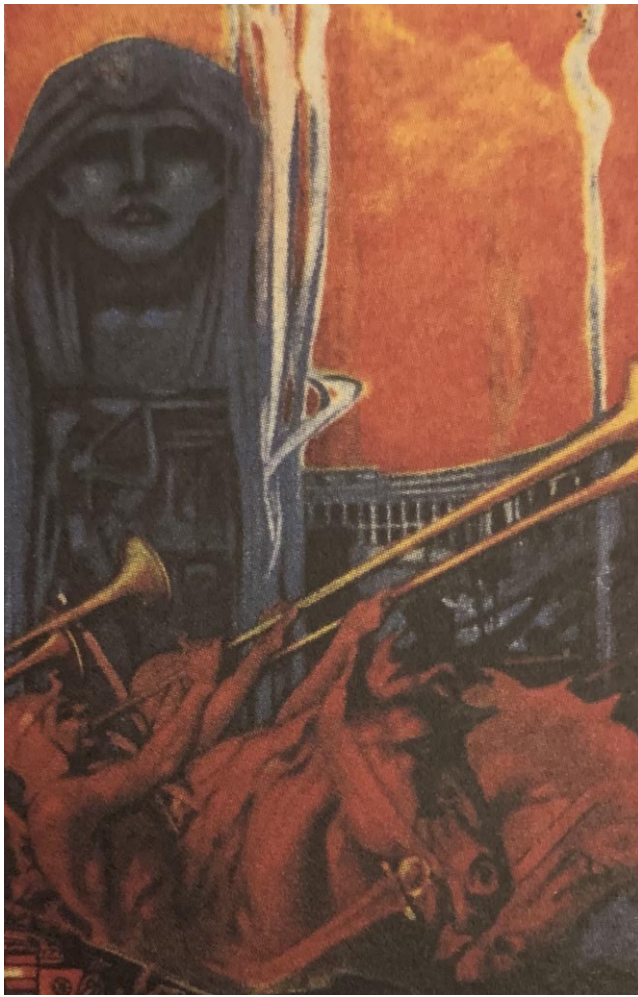
During the game the players hit a leather ball in the direction of the opposing side, using the large wall for serving or bouncing the ball off. The game was so popular in Italy that it has been immortalized in poetry by Giacomo Leopardi in 1821 (Ode to Ball Player).

Moreover the building was used for other events and shows like jousting tournaments and bull fights, the bulls entered the arena from the entrances under the terraces to face bullfighters or especially trained dogs, and inevitably their death.

Occasionally, the Sferisterio was used for circus sideshows like the launch of hot air balloons, spectacular fireworks or fairy lights, theatrical performances and political demonstrations to which thousands of spectators flocked.

Some significant personalities came to its shows like Pope Pius IX (1857) and King Vittorio Emanuele II (1860). Over the decades, however, its primary function as an arena for the Ball and Bracelet game began to decline in favour of other sports like football and tennis.





## SFERISTERIO: TODAY

The Sferisterio today In 1922 the Citizens Committee organized the second opera season with the staging of "La Gioconda" by Amilcare Ponchielli, but the initiative turned into a failure. Nevertheless, during the following years the Sferisterio hosted one of the greatest performers of Italian "bel canto": on 31st August 1927, Beniamino Gigli performed in an evening concert which made history, as the inscription above the entrance reminds us. In 1929, on the occasion of the 100th anniversary of the Sferisterio, the famous tenor from Recanati returned to the arena in a show for charity where once again he was applauded by an exultant crowd of fans. Macerata then had to wait until 1967 for the return of the opera to the arena with the introduction of a regular annual opera season which today has reached a total of 50 editions and it is known as The Macerata Opera Festival. In almost half a century the Sferisterio has hosted important performers of the opera world, often memorable events. Amongst the performers that can be named: Mario Del Monaco, Franco Corelli, Luciano Pavarotti, José Carreras, Plácido Domingo and Montserrat Caballe. Every summer the arena also holds other musical events like Musicultura, an important festival dedicated to popular music and song writers, as well as ballet recitals and concerts of some of the most famous contemporary national and international musicians and singers. Thanks to the quality of the open air performances and the evocative and scenic interior, the Sferisterio continues to charm a big audience from all over the world

## THE AIDA, 1921

The structure of the Sferisterio has remained almost unaltered over the years and even if its functional role has changed, it has continued to play a leading role in the social and cultural life of the town. 1921 was the year of a radical change in the history of the Sferisterio. In the wake of similar experiences along the peninsula, like the Arena of Verona, it was decided to transform it into a 'temple' for the opera, and the first performance was the 'Aida' by Giuseppe Verdi. The first opera season was organised by Pier Alberto Conti, president of the Citizens Society. He wanted to use this enormous space to bring the general public (often excluded from the traditional theatrical circuits) closer to opera, it was with this purpose in mind that he chose an opera of such strong appeal. Appropriate service facilities were provided for the event and a stage was built upon which a majestic backdrop of an Egyptian setting was constructed. Three passages were opened in the wall to allow the animals and more than one thousand extras to move easily on the stage. The 'Aida' was inaugurated on 27<sup>th</sup> July. It was a great success and was repeated for over 17 times until the last performance on 15<sup>th</sup> August. It attracted a total of approximately 70,000 spectators. The perfect visibility and the unsurpassed acoustics that characterize the Sferisterio guaranteed the success of the venture, that turned this structure into the house of music once and for all.



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