



— 150 —
OPERA
HOUSES
YOU NEED
TO VISIT BEFORE
— YOU DIE —

By Léa Teuscher

Lannoo

'I like to be on the edge of the possible.'

— Jørn Utzon, architect of the Sydney Opera House

An encore-worthy opera performance combines plenty of drama, powerful arias, and flamboyant sets and costumes. It's a lot to cram into one show, and the same can be said of the opera building itself, which contains multitudes: good acoustics; unobstructed views (of both the stage and the audience, for the all-important people-watching); ample space for the orchestra, backstage and specialist workshops; and, of course, a grand – if possible, gilded – entrance.

Opera's heyday as mainstream entertainment might well have been in the 19th century, yet the opera house itself is as popular as ever: a must-have status symbol for any self-respecting city or country. You will find them everywhere, from the Amazon jungle to the New Mexico desert, and in all shapes and forms, from historic, art-filled venues turned tourist attractions to high-tech contemporary buildings designed by the likes of Norman Foster and Zaha Hadid.

The best performances can sometimes be found in the most unusual places, including Roman amphitheatres, a medieval Finnish castle, English manor house gardens and a Brazilian quarry. These repurposed settings bring a new energy to an art form celebrating the transformative power of a real-life, live experience and the carefully honed skills of musicians and craftspeople.

Many venues have stories worthy of their own opera: there are long construction sagas, dramatic fires and crazy performances like Stockhausen's *Helikopter-Streichquartett* in Salzburg, involving a string quartet and four flying machines. There are also endless political interferences (still a thing today, from Venice to Washington), as befits a form of entertainment first staged in Florentine palaces at the end of the 16th century to celebrate the power of the state.

Others have remarkable shapes, as eye-catching as the pyramids used as a backdrop for Verdi's *Aida*. There are many ways to hide a tall fly tower: Santiago Calatrava's Palau de les Arts Reina Sofia in Valencia, for example, resembles the helmet of a Valkyrie, back from the future. Certainly, opera houses have been designed, past and present, to be admired and gawped at, whether it is for the opulence of their decoration, the lavishness of their royal boxes or their futuristic silhouettes.

And the opera house-building craze is far from over: projects breaking new ground around the world today include Bjarke Ingels Group's designs for Hamburg and Kosovo, Snøhetta's creations in Düsseldorf and Saudi Arabia, Renzo Piano Building Workshop's opera house in Vietnam and Jean Nouvel's sinuous Shenzhen Opera House. *One fine day, we will see...*

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03 OPERA ANTWERP

Frankrijklei 1, 2000 Antwerp, Belgium

TO VISIT
BEFORE YOU DIE
BECAUSE

Watch mesmerising performances blending opera and ballet in the beautiful red-and-green hall of this turn-of-the-century building.

The first public opera performances in Antwerp took place in 1660 on the city's main square. The current opera house, however, dates from 1907 and is a neo-Baroque building decorated in Louis XVI style. It was very modern for its time, with its new electric lights and main entrance used by all visitors, even those with cheap tickets. Renovated in 2007 after three years of building work, its auditorium features a stunning ceiling fresco by Karel Mertens depicting Rhythmus and his nine muses. A team of 450 staff works on productions blending opera and ballet under the artistic direction of Jan Vandenhouwe; recent shows include Wagner's *Tristan und Isolde* by Philippe Grandrieux, and the world premieres of *The Convert* (Wim Henderickx) and *Brodeck* (Daan Janssens). Opera Ballet Vlaanderen's other base, Opera Gent, is currently under renovation but is equally worth a visit. Built by the city's rich industrialists to showcase their wealth, it's a no-expenses-spared horseshoe-shaped theatre with gorgeous chandeliers and salons.



04 GREEK NATIONAL OPERA

Stavros Niarchos Foundation Cultural Center,
Leoforos Andrea Siggrou 364, Kallithea 176 74, Greece

TO VISIT
BEFORE YOU DIE
BECAUSE

Housed in an award-winning solar-powered cultural complex, this high-tech opera house comes with a rooftop terrace and Mediterranean garden.

In 2017, the Greek National Opera moved into its new home, the Stavros Niarchos Foundation Cultural Center, marking the start of a new era with an ambitious take on Strauss's *Elektra* featuring acclaimed Greek mezzo Agnes Baltsa. It was a fittingly electric performance to match the state-of-the-art premises, a gift to the nation by Greek shipping tycoon Stavros Niarchos. Designed by award-winning architect Renzo Piano of RPBW, the centre also includes the light-filled National Library of Greece, a terrace with panoramic views, and a vast park with playgrounds and cafés. The opera wing is composed of two auditoriums: a 1,400-seat main hall for ballet, symphonic music and opera, plus a small stage hosting operas for children. Its elegant canopy roof is topped with solar panels, so the building is self-sufficient in energy terms during opening hours. Helmed by Giorgos Koumendakis, the opera continues to innovate with new productions such as Donizetti's *Anna Bolena* and performances in the Ancient Theatre of Epidaurus for the Athens Epidaurus Festival.



05

GRAN TEATRE
DEL LICEU

La Rambla, 51–59, Ciutat Vella, 08002 Barcelona, Spain

TO VISIT
BEFORE YOU DIE
BECAUSE

Barcelona's cultural beacon has been rebuilt time and time again, yet it continues to shine brightly as one of Europe's most important opera houses.

When it opened in 1847 on La Rambla, the Liceu was the largest opera house in Europe, with room for 3,500 spectators. Funded by private patrons, it had no royal box, but majestic interiors with gilded balconies. Its history is as full of twists and turns as Puccini's *Tosca*: a fire in 1861 destroyed the hall; then, in the 1890s, anarchists set off bombs to attack the local oligarchy. A century later, a conflagration completely wrecked the building. Popular support, bolstered by photographs of local superstar Montserrat Caballé crying in the ruined theatre, ensured another swift reconstruction. The Liceu was reborn in 1999 with *Turandot*, but the most-shown opera here is *Aida*, with over 440 performances, while Wagner is a perennial favourite. Italian couturier Valentino was so inspired by the crimson furnishings, well-dressed audience and costumes of the *Carmen* performance he saw here that red became his trademark colour. Recent highlights include a 2024 production of *Lady Macbeth of Mtsensk* complete with a water-covered stage.









Texts

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ASB (Atelier Sven Beirnaert)

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Back cover image

Jan Windszus / Komische Oper Berlin

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© Lannoo Publishers, Belgium, 2026

www.lannoopublishers.com

BISAC TRV016000, ART060000, ARC024010

D/2026/45/461

ISBN: 978-90-599-6543-0

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