

DO YOU HEAR THE PEOPLE **SING?**

Dubai's new opera house marks its aspiration to be a serious cultural contender – but can it compete with more established venues? **Louise Quick** and **Tahira Yaqoob** look at how opera houses can transform the cultural landscape

Rendering of Dubai Opera House

Nestled among the shimmering skyscrapers of Downtown Dubai, already home to the world's tallest building and the world's largest shopping mall, lies Dubai Opera. Its gleaming bow juts out expectantly over the 24-acre Burj Lake, as if preparing to set sail at any second. But rather like the stormy seas which faced the ancient dhows it was modelled on, navigating the choppy waters of establishing a cultural icon in a notoriously lofty and esoteric industry is likely to be just as tricky.

While Dubai Opera is just the latest in a line of modern opera houses, the name is something of a misnomer, for the institution will follow in the steps of its counterparts like the Royal Opera House Muscat and the Sydney Opera House by staging a wide variety of popular acts, of which opera will make up just one part. It opened to great aplomb last month with a performance by the Spanish tenor Plácido Domingo and while the subsequent line-up includes Bizet's *The Pearl Fishers*, Jose Carreras and the Russian State Ballet of Serbia, it also features musicals, an illusionist show and concerts. When it was first announced in 2012, Dene Murphy, a cultural advisor to the project, said: "You could see not only shows like *Cirque du Soleil* or the *Lion King* in this venue. It could receive pretty much any show in the world" – all of which, no doubt, had snooty opera buffs peering through their opera glasses in horror and spluttering into their delicately gloved hands.

Undoubtedly, the critics will be lining up to challenge Dubai's aspirations to become a serious cultural contender. And while it has a credible team behind it, led by its chief executive Jasper Hope, formerly the chief operating officer of London's Royal Albert Hall, can it ever compete on the same international platform as the likes of the longer-established Metropolitan Opera in New York, London's Royal Opera House and La Scala in Milan, Italy? Those purists tend to stick to the operatic and ballet performances which have been their mainstays and are housed in grandiose buildings dating back centuries. They are admired the world over for their heritage – something new builds surely cannot compete with?

"Their lavish architecture and interiors are part of their charm," says Lucy Woodruff, the founder and director of Divas and Scholars, a non-profit organisation aiming to teach a love of opera. "The great opera composers were connected with these institutions and many of the greatest singers will have performed in these venerable buildings."

Dubai's art scene has flourished in recent years with countless gallery openings and the success of the decade-old Art Dubai. The performing arts have yet to catch up, although the city is working hard to establish itself as a cultural destination.

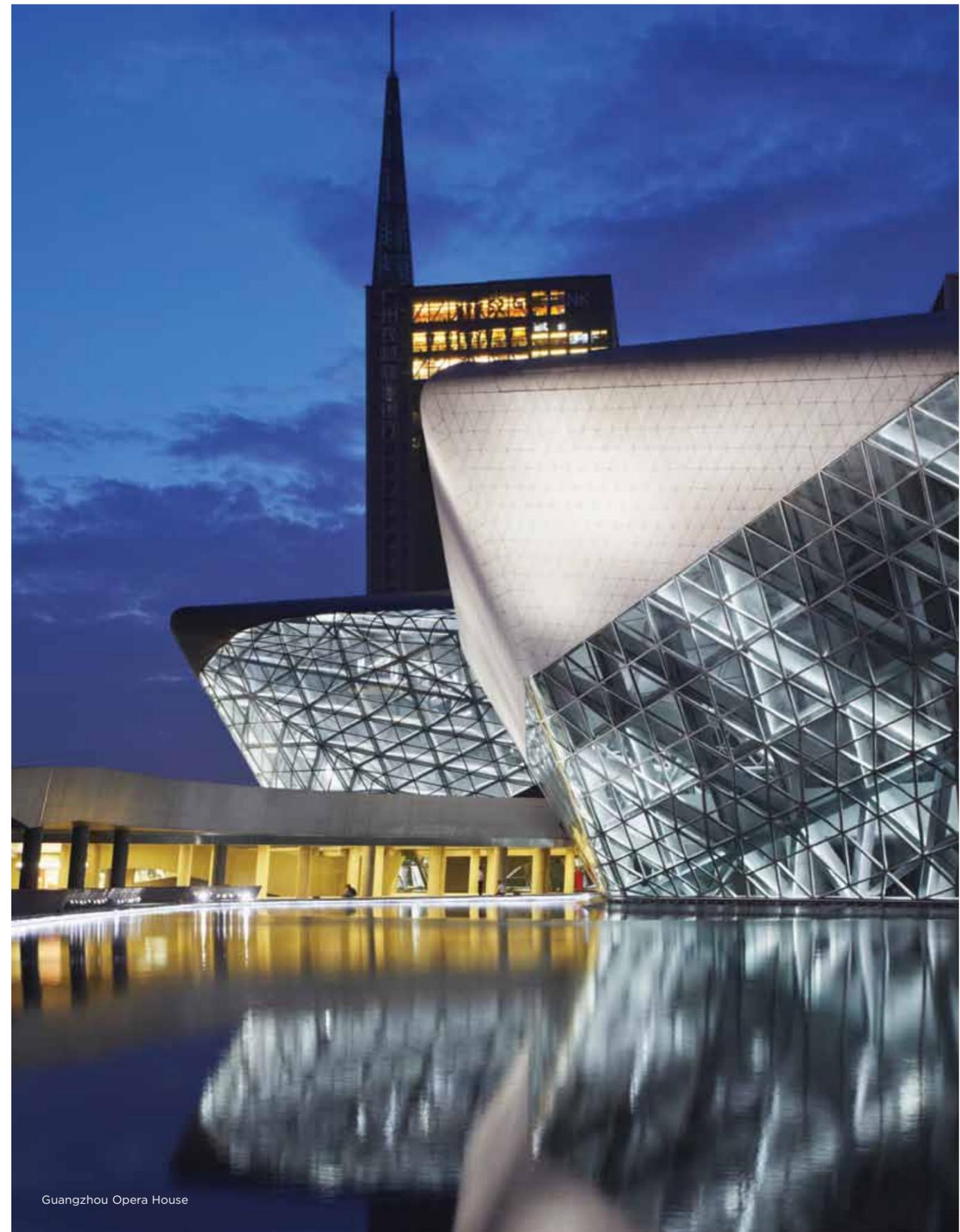
"Dubai has a reputation for art fairs but generally it is not seen by the world as a place of high culture," says Woodruff. "An opera house will change this and enhance Dubai."

Hope agrees: "The performing arts have to a certain extent been left behind in this development and a world-class venue in the form of Dubai Opera is therefore overdue."

Simply by having a large modern performing space, Dubai Opera is opening up opportunities to the city's culture lovers, who previously had to travel to see such performances.

"I do not think it is an understatement to say Dubai Opera is going to make a significant change to the quality of performances [that come to Dubai]," says Hope. "It has simply not been possible to contemplate bringing a full musical theatre production like *Les Misérables* from the London or New York stages to the region before."

And the opera house cannot come soon enough for some. Earlier lavish designs by the late, great architect Zaha Hadid in 2008, taking the form of swirling sand dunes and set to be built on the creek, were put on hold during the global recession. This incarnation has taken just four years after it was first unveiled by the Ruler of Dubai, Sheikh Mohammed bin Rashid Al Maktoum and was designed by the UAE-based architect Janus Rostock. It



Guangzhou Opera House



Alter Oper, Frankfurt



The Bolshoi Theatre, Moscow



La Scala, Rome



Sydney Opera House

will form the centrepiece of a new Opera District, complete with art galleries, restaurants and residential towers and signals the emirate's intention to create a world-class culture and performing arts hub.

New venues might lack the prestige that comes with centuries-old institutions but their modernity is not always a disadvantage. One reason Dubai Opera is able to host such a varied line-up is its mod cons. The 2,000-seater venue can be transformed into three different modes – theatre, event venue and concert hall – complete with adjustable towers, clever hydraulic engineering and reflectors for optimum acoustics. The same applies to design. The Royal Opera House in London has had several incarnations since it first opened in the 1730s and visitors admire its grand history-steeped architecture as much as the performances themselves. New build theatres, however, tend to embrace their modernity with contemporary, brave and often controversial designs.

Nearly 45 years after opening, the Sydney Opera House is arguably Australia's most instantly recognisable landmark and is often cited as a masterpiece of 20th century architecture but when the Danish architect Jorn Utzon won a competition to design the building in 1956 (his entry was reportedly rescued from a pile of discarded submissions) it was hugely controversial. As the cost for building its gleaming white shells overran and there were street

Yet still we are drawn to haunting arias which express the human condition in ways which transcend language. That has happened across the planet. Turkey was an early Eastern adopter of opera with the first performance taking place in the Ottoman palaces in 1797 during the reign of Selim. When Mustafa Kemal Ataturk founded the republic in 1923, one of his first moves was a set of cultural reforms, under which young Turkish talent was sent to Europe to study the arts and return as teachers of music and the performing arts. The first Turkish opera, *Ozsoy*, was performed in 1934 and was followed by the State Opera and Ballet, which still operates in six major cities.

Where opera houses exist, they are often the heartbeat of cultural districts with awe-inspiring architecture, which acts both as a nerve centre and an icon on the landscape: think of the Hadid-designed Guangzhou Opera House in China, dubbed the “double pebble”. Opera's stuffy reputation can be blamed on its origins in royal courts so it might come as a surprise to discover it was originally a populist art form in the 18th and 19th centuries. Indeed, when Lilian Baylis inherited the English National Opera in 1912, she dreamed of creating a “people's opera house”. *The Times* newspaper described her Old Vic theatre in a working class neighbourhood as “offering opera of some sort to people who hardly knew what the word meant...under a wise, fostering guidance it has gradually worked upwards”. Meanwhile the early 18th century Royal Opera House in London grew its

“ The performing arts have to a certain extent been left behind in this development and a world-class venue in the form of Dubai Opera is therefore overdue. Dubai Opera is going to make a significant change to the quality of performances ”

demonstrations over its purpose and funding, Utzon resigned and the project took 26 years to complete. Significantly though, the New South Wales government at the time changed the function of the larger opera hall to a concert hall because musical performances were deemed to have a larger audience than opera.

Similarly, the Shanghai Grand Theatre in China – the home of the Shanghai Opera House – has staged thousands of performances since it first opened in 1998, of which opera forms just a fraction. Its line-up has included musicals, chamber music concerts, drama and Chinese operas. Meanwhile the historic Alte Oper in Frankfurt, Germany, has kept audiences coming back since 1880 with a diverse line-up, which includes musicals and classical concerts, drawing more than 450,000 visitors a year.



But why are we all so obsessed with opera? Robert Thicknesse once complained in *The Guardian* newspaper that the “supposed main event is actually a sideshow to a rigmarole of Issey Miyake shawls, mud-caked mules, champagne and salmon on the lawn” and grumbled: “Is there any other form of entertainment so frequented by people who do not like it?” The cost of public funding for lavish shows purportedly seen by a select few often raises eyebrows. And the debate over whether opera is elitist has been raging for decades – something modern opera houses can challenge with their diverse schedules.

audience, not just with Shakespeare and Handel but with performances from the likes of Joseph Grimaldi, a pantomime clown who amused with visual tricks and buffoonery. Mime acts and music hall shows were also popular – showing today's opera house line-ups mixing different artistic genres are far from a modern invention.

But is there an audience in Dubai for opera? Placido Domingo's opening show sold out in three hours, suggesting there is a market. Tiffany Schultz, the co-founder of the Courtyard Playhouse in Dubai's Al Quoz arts district, says the scene is yet to grow. The small volunteer-run theatre used to screen performances from the Met Opera but had to stop because of a lack of demand.

“There was a small but very appreciative audience,” she says. “I have no idea what the audiences are like for the new opera house performances but there are a limited number of classical music aficionados in Dubai.”

While the exact cost of Dubai Opera has not been revealed, a new opera house on a prime site is a massive investment to make, especially when there is a risk seats might not be filled. The Guangzhou Opera House, for example, cost an alleged \$202 million while other Hadid designs, such as the Cardiff Bay Opera House in Wales, were shelved due to a lack of funding. Meanwhile the National Centre for the Performing Arts in Beijing (dubbed the Giant Egg) caused controversy when its construction costs escalated and the Sydney Opera House, originally budgeted at

TAKE AN OPERATIC TOUR AROUND THE WORLD

LONDON

The magnificent 18th century Royal Opera House with its neo-classical facade is actually the third venue on the site; the previous two were destroyed in fires. Its September line-up is a delight for opera and ballet lovers with Bellini's *Norma*, *Il Barbiere di Siviglia*, *Così fan Tutte* and *The Wayward Daughter* on the billing.

rob.org.uk

STAY in one of Jumeirah's three London properties. jumeirah.com

FRANKFURT

The Renaissance-style Alte Oper was opened in 1880 and hosted a number of premieres, including Carl Orff's *Carmina Burana*. It was destroyed during World War II and was nearly demolished but reopened 24 years later after Frankfurt residents launched a campaign to save it. This month there is a production of Gershwin's *Porgy and Bess* in the Great Hall. alteoper.de

STAY in the Jumeirah Frankfurt a short walk away, which has a special deal with the opera house. It includes box seats, a deluxe room, a table during the interval and breakfast for two. jumeirah.com/frankfurt

SHANGHAI

The 10-storey Shanghai Grand Theatre hosts an eclectic mix of national and international shows, from Swan Lake to orchestral concerts and traditional Peking opera. It is one of the largest and best-equipped stages in the world. A packed September schedule includes Debussy's *Pelleas and Melisande*, the Chinese classic *Thunderstorm* and *Deng Shichang*. sbgtheatre.com

STAY in the Jumeirah Himalayas Hotel in Shanghai. jumeirah.com/shanghai

ISTANBUL

Turkey has a long history of fostering opera and a love of the arts. The Istanbul State Opera and Ballet often stages events in the Sureyya Opera House in Kadikoy, originally opened in 1927 as a cinema and revamped as an opera venue in 2007. The site has hosted classical music, ballet and opera. dobgm.gov.tr

STAY in the Pera Palace Hotel Jumeirah in Istanbul, itself steeped in history. jumeirah.com

DUBAI

A new opera house at the heart of the city's new Opera District, it is shaped like a dhow with the stage, orchestra and premium seats in the bow and an elongated hull. It is the first dedicated opera house in the UAE and seats 2,000. This month it is showing *The Pearl Fishers*, *The Barber of Seville*, *Opera Without Words*, *Coppelia* and *Giselle*. dubaiopera.com

STAY in one of Dubai's eight Jumeirah properties. jumeirah.com

The Royal Opera House Muscat



\$5.3 million, eventually cost \$72million. It is safe to say that opera houses are not cheap - so why build them?

"Cities build opera houses in part to display wealth and sophistication," says Woodruff. "These institutions reflect the importance of a city as a centre of high arts. Affluent populations want public entertainment with the very best international artists."

The precedent has already been set with Oman, whose ruler Sultan Qaboos bin Said Al Said opened its impressive 1,100-seater opera house in 2011. What might have seemed like a flashy statement is now, in its fifth year, well into its stride. The Omanis are as proud of this immaculate, gleaming landmark as they are of the Sultan Qaboos Grand Mosque – the two actually share the same architects – and the venue is on its way to becoming a hub of performing arts in the region. This season it will even run its own in-house productions for the first time and while it will feature some international performers, it is a clear step away from acting as host.

Doha's Katara Opera House, which opened in 2010 in the city's cultural quarter, hosts visiting musicians as well as providing a platform for the home-grown Qatar Philharmonic Orchestra. Despite these efforts across the region, there is some overlap in the schedules of the Muscat and Dubai opera houses. *Domingo* and *West Side Story* are appearing on both stages while *Domingo* was also Muscat's opening night performer. Therein lies the problem: modern opera houses like Dubai Opera are clearly capable of attracting international attention but in order to leave a lasting mark on the cultural map, they have to do more than simply import big names from the US and Europe. They need to encourage local talent.

Schultz is hopeful the opera house will work closely with the grassroots scene and invest in local talent. "Of course, it is amazing to be able to witness world-class productions live and that can only help inspire younger generations but if there is no investment in developing local talent and giving them that platform, those talented youngsters will simply go overseas."

The Royal Opera House Muscat has already increased the local talent it puts on stage. In addition to its in-house productions and its long-standing Royal Oman Symphony Orchestra, the opera house is staging a number of Arabic acts, including the Arab Idol winner and Palestinian pop star Mohammed Assaf and Lebanese violinist Jihad Akl. Qatar too has its own musical academy, opened in 2011 to nurture the country's young talent. Dubai Opera is a clear stepping stone in the city's determination to be considered a well-rounded world player. It has already included one Emirati singer, Hussain Al Jassmi, in its autumn line-up. Now it simply remains to be seen whether it can build on feeding the city's nascent arts scene.