

(from the Bertelsmann Intranet BENET)

The archive, part of Bertelsmann since 1994, is Italy's most important private music archive.

200 Years Of Opera History: The Archivio Storico Ricordi in Milan

Milan / Berlin / Gütersloh

Milan's Biblioteca Nazionale Braidense, one of Italy's 47 national libraries, seems made for storing precious books and old manuscripts – from the outside, the magnificent 17th-century palazzo already gives a taste of the historic treasures inside it. Since 2003, it has contained not only valuable first editions but also one-of-a-kind cultural assets: the holdings of the Archivio Storico Ricordi, a collection that is virtually unique in the music world. The archive encompasses the estate of the Ricordi publishing house, founded in Milan in 1808 and taken over by Bertelsmann in 1994. When the Group sold its then music business to Universal in 2006, the archive remained in the possession of Bertelsmann. Its holdings, and especially the unique testimonies to the history of Italian opera, will now be made available to the public in Germany for the first time: in the exhibition "The Enterprise of Opera," which opens on Aug 30 at Bertelsmann Unter den Linden 1 in Berlin.

The archive stocks currently contain 7,800 original scores from more than 600 operas – including precious original manuscripts by Giuseppe Verdi and Giacomo Puccini – and some 10,000 librettos, the "lyrics" to a wide range of pieces of music, close to 6,000 historical photographs as well as the company's complete business correspondence from 1888 to 1962 – more than 100,000 archival documents in all. "The Archivio Ricordi houses a wealth of exquisite treasures, and it has been part of Bertelsmann for many years," says Bertelsmann Chairman & CEO Thomas Rabe. For us, this means a distinct responsibility to treat this culturally and historically significant legacy with great care, and to ensure its preservation for posterity. We are indexing and preserving the archive's inventory according to the latest scientific and technical standards, and will open up access to these unique cultural treasures for a wide audience with the exhibition and an extensive digitization project. Bertelsmann is showcasing the Ricordi Archive as an example of music's rich tradition, while actively shaping the digital future of music with the new BMG."

Liz Mohn, spokeswoman for the Mohn family which owns Bertelsmann, founder of the internationally NEUE STIMMEN program to promote young opera talent, and longstanding patron of music and the arts, welcomes the commitment: "I think it is very important that Bertelsmann gets involved here. We treat such cultural assets with great care and make them accessible to a wide audience. Music is a universal language. It connects people across nations, cultures and religions."

To access the valuable Archivio Storico Ricordi collection, which is regarded as a national cultural heritage in Italy, visitors to the Milan archive have to burrow deep into the interior of the Biblioteca Nazionale Braidense. A series of narrow, winding passages, at the end of which the actual archive awaits, lead ever deeper into the cellar of the old sandstone palazzo. And then, there they are, behind bars and secured with an alarm system. Close rows of narrow shelves, densely packed with the only seemingly unspectacular, and in fact greatest treasures of Italian opera culture: handwritten scores, often containing corrections and stage directions of the composer, libretti to the most famous works of opera, personal letters on yellowed paper, in the handwriting of old masters, business correspondence and invoice folios of the Ricordis, designs for opera costumes with swatches of cloth still attached, and artistically designed opera posters in the most beautiful Art Deco.

Here you will find, for example, the folders on Verdi's world-famous opera "Aida", which was premiered in Cairo in 1871, next to them are the same shiny golden "Aida trumpets" for the triumphal march, and a few more steps take the visitor to several yards of shelving containing the works of Puccini, Donizetti and Bellini. Some of the ancient documents' secrets are revealed only during restoration – for example when the taped-over sheet of a Puccini score was carefully removed, revealing not only a discarded earlier draft, but also the famous composer's handprint, left while he pressed the paper against the glue.

In addition to vast stores of printed and written papers, the Archivio Storico Ricordi also contains some surprising exhibits. Archivist Maria Pia Ferraris, who has worked here for decades and knows the stock like no other, can present some unusual objects, such as the death mask of the famous composer Verdi. His relationship to Casa Ricordi and especially to the publishing boss Giulio Ricordi was eventful indeed. Ricordi was always aware that Verdi was by far his most important artist, while Verdi knew just as well that in Ricordi, he had far and wide the most influential and most circumspect publisher at his side.

After the archive was an integral part of the Casa Ricordi company for nearly two centuries, used primarily for business purposes – such as the issue of "critical editions" – its transformation into an archive for historical research has recently been advanced. As a media company, Bertelsmann has taken on the responsibility for this globally significant cultural asset. Since February 2011, a project group has worked on a long-term concept for the development and long-term preservation of the archival materials. The Corporate Archives staff at Corporate Communications in Gütersloh is working with the Ricordi team in Milan on the ongoing restoration and digitization of the archive. The aim is to develop the Archivio Storico Ricordi, domestically and internationally, into a "best-practice case" for publicizing cultural history archive materials in the Digital Age, and to make the unique archival holdings accessible not only to academia but to a wider audience.