

10 BEST PLACES

Opera houses worthy of an ovation

At the world's top opera houses, the appeal isn't limited to the action on stage. The buildings are works of art themselves, says author **Antoine Pecqueu**. "They're another world of beauty." The Paris-based bassoonist and *Le Monde* contributor visited many of the performance palaces for his coffee-table book, *The Most Beautiful Opera Houses in the World* (Abrams, \$60). He shares favorites with **Larry Bleiberg** for USA TODAY.

OSLO OPERA HOUSE NORWAY

North Sea oil money helped pay for this strikingly modern marble-and-glass opera house, which opened in 2008. Each seat back has a screen offering subtitles of the performance in eight languages. The building has quickly become a city landmark. "You can walk on the roof on this theater and you have a view of the fjords and harbor. The atmosphere is just perfect," Pecqueu says. operaen.no/en/

BOLSHOI THEATRE MOSCOW

This 19th-century building, home to both the famed ballet and opera, sits near the Kremlin and Red Square, and it once hosted assemblies of Soviet leaders. It was here the Soviet Union was proclaimed in 1922, and throughout his rule Stalin would attend the opening performance of every production. "It's the most political opera house in the world," Pecqueu says. The grand red and gold hall reopened in 2011 after an extensive renovation. bolshoi.ru/en/

METROPOLITAN OPERA HOUSE NEW YORK

One of the world's largest performance halls, the 3,800-seat Lincoln Center theater is also one of the grandest. The acoustics are outstanding, and Pecqueu also admires the sculptures and Marc Chagall murals. "In an opera house, it's very important you have a link between the arts," he says. 212-362-6000; metoperafamily.org

BAYREUTH FESTSPIELHAUS GERMANY

Composer Richard Wagner supervised the construction of this hall specifically for his operas, which are still performed here during an annual festival. The simple wood-and-brick building influences countless others because the orchestra is covered. "This is a revolutionary place," Pecqueu says. "For the audience, it's a little magical. You hear the sound, but you don't see it." bayreuther-festspiele.de

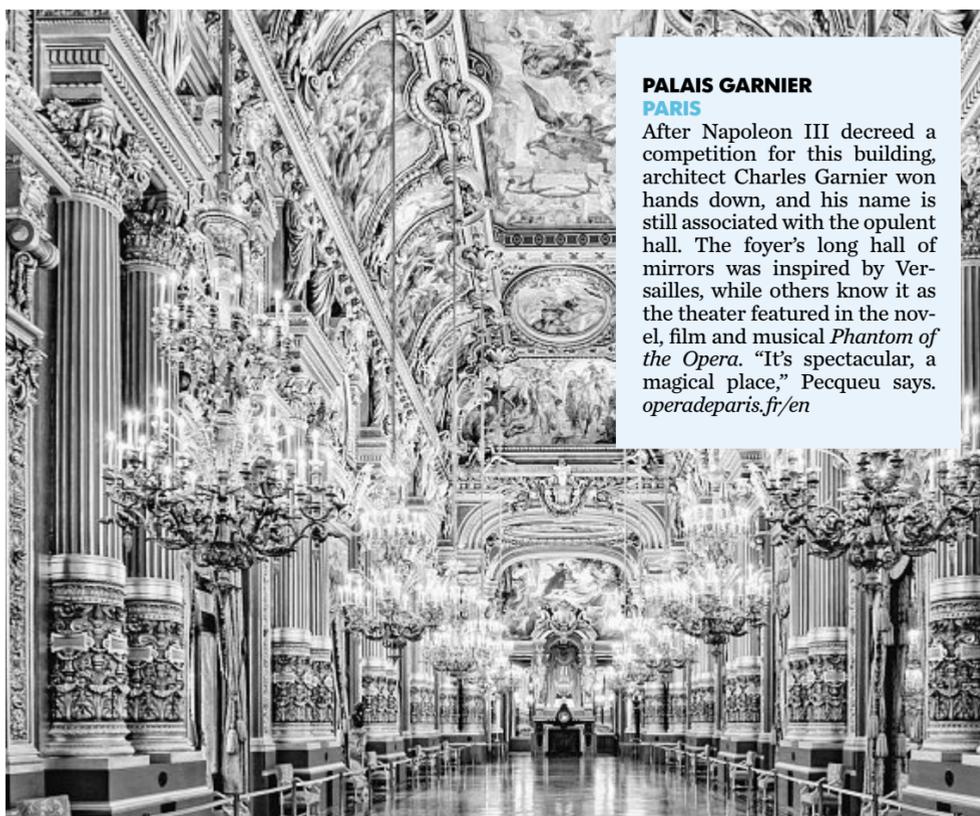
CHICAGO CIVIC OPERA HOUSE

Although the timing for the building wasn't great — it opened just days after the stock market crash of 1929 — Pecqueu says the art deco edifice has aged well. The acoustic design plays to the strengths of both the singers and the orchestra. "It's a masterpiece of the time and style," Pecqueu says. 312-419-0033; civicoperahouse.com

TEATRO OLIMPICO VICENCE, ITALY

This Renaissance theater was designed by Italian architect Andrea Palladio and is still used today. The UNESCO World Heritage Site dating to the late 16th century is considered an architectural masterpiece. It still contains the original faux marble stage set, which shows city streets receding in the background. "You travel in time with this building," Pecqueu says. teatrolimpicovicenza.it/en.html

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PALAIS GARNIER PARIS

After Napoleon III decreed a competition for this building, architect Charles Garnier won hands down, and his name is still associated with the opulent hall. The foyer's long hall of mirrors was inspired by Versailles, while others know it as the theater featured in the novel, film and musical *Phantom of the Opera*. "It's spectacular, a magical place," Pecqueu says. operadeparis.fr/en

GUILLAUME DE LAUBIER, CHOOSE CHICAGO



HAMILTON LUND, DESTINATION NSW

The Sydney Opera House in Australia is easily one of the most recognizable buildings in the world.

SYDNEY OPERA HOUSE AUSTRALIA

This shell-shaped performance space could be the most famous building of the second half of the 20th century, Pecqueu says. "It's a symbol for the opera and it's a symbol for Australia." The building was a struggle for Danish architect Jorn Utzon, who won the commission in 1957 and resigned the project before its 1973 completion. "There were many political problems, many money problems." sydneyoperahouse.com

GUANGZHOU OPERA HOUSE CHINA

The female British-Iranian architect Zaha Hadid designed this stunning asymmetrical concrete, granite, glass and steel theater in the southern Chinese city. "It's a total wow," Pecqueu says. "It's a symbol that today the future of opera houses is in China. The sound's very rich and very perfect." gzdfjy.org

AMAZON THEATRE MANAUS, BRAZIL

In the late 19th century, Brazilians, flush with money from a boom in rubber, vowed to build an opera house in this city in the middle of the rain forest. This pink belle époque building was constructed with materials imported from Italy, France and Scotland. "In Manaus you are in the heart of the Amazon, and this place you have a beautiful center. It's totally crazy," Pecqueu says. visitbrasil.com

EXPERIENCE TRAVEL CRUISE

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At sea, music is what bands people together

Ashley Day
USA TODAY

Moments after the Norwegian Pearl pushes off from shore in Miami on a four-day Caribbean-bound cruise, three couples are engaged to be married on stage, and the sense that all the passengers would be getting to know each other better is sinking in.

If there's a common theme in cruising, it's that meeting new people is inevitable on a ship at sea, much as it is at a weekend music festival. And this music cruise combines the best of both.

The Grammy Award-winning pop-rock band Train is the headline act — their first on a cruise. And true to the social nature of the voyage, the band is joined on stage by a number of their music friends, from Ben Rector to Michael Franti to Vicci Martinez.

Not surprisingly, many of the passengers already have met fellow fans by following Train's 16 years of tours. Hearing "You were at Phoenix, right?" by people recognizing one another in the hallways is as common as "Hey, John Oates is eating at the buffet!" or "Pat Monahan's sister is sunbathing on the deck!"

Indeed, the trip adds such camaraderie, as well as a day in Grand Cayman, to an already once-in-a-lifetime concert. And with the lines blurred between on-stage and off, there is no curtain to close after each set.

That's the beauty of a music-themed cruise. It brings together popular performers with their fans on a seagoing voyage, where passengers can enjoy the music with like-minded cruisers and mingle freely with the performers off stage.

Most notably, the music never



PHOTOS BY CAPTAIN AND CLARK



Grammy Award winners Train headline Norwegian's Sail Across the Sun cruise from Miami to Grand Cayman in February.

stops. There are performances from stem to stern, from 1 p.m. to 1 a.m., or later if the crowd's still dancing.

In addition to two to three concerts by each act and a Q&A

session and karaoke with Monahan, performers on the Pearl can be spotted anywhere, from the gym to the casino.

"You get off stage and then you meet a person, then you're eating

Musicians from more than a dozen bands and fans mix and mingle on the Norwegian Pearl in a concert experience that's about as far as you can get from a stadium show.

even have brought their families on board. And the relaxed atmosphere allows for real conversations and reflections.

Michael Franti, for example, gives a boy with a brain tumor his first chance to crowd-surf and also is inspired by a paralyzed woman who has spent her life savings to sail with her favorite musicians. A couple have credited Pat Monahan's lyrics for saving their marriage, and another family says Train's songs got them through a time of loss.

"It's personal. It's been amazing," says Eric Goodwin, 46, of Phoenix, who booked his tickets two years in advance.

What's more, anyone can get on stage with Train by dressing up for themed nights, which range from '80s to mermaids. And Monahan appears in the casino and at the latest shows each night, if only for a few moments of dancing in the crowd, before being lifted out by bodyguards.

"A fan told me the best part of this cruise is hanging out with the artists," Franti says in his final performance. "But the best part for us is hanging out with everyone else."

Monahan agrees: "This is a boat filled with our friends, and our fans are our friends. The first goal was, can we get our friends on board with us, because the vibe means everything."

The musicians are as excited to meet each other — and by "each other" I mean John Oates — and to collaborate as they are to give back to their faithful fans. The later in the day a show, the more likely it transforms into a jam session with whomever is free hopping on stage barefoot and grabbing a cow bell to join in.

After all, there's nothing like music to bring people together.



Nashville singer/songwriter Ben Rector performs on the Norwegian's main stage.

breakfast the next morning and you see that person again," says James Trimble, frontman of Knoxville band The Dirty Guv'nahs. "And they come down and sit next to you."

Beyond selfies and autographs, fans are exposed to a personal side of the stars, many of whom