

# **ACOUSTICS OF THE FORMER TEATRO “LA FENICE” IN VENICE**

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The acoustic characteristics of the former “La Fenice” theater has been analyzed. Binaural measurements of the IRs were performed on a large number of measuring points within the hall. Following the recent ISO standard 3382 [1], many mono and binaural acoustical parameters were calculated from the impulse responses, such as reverberation time, clarity, center time, strength, initial time delay gap, inter-aural cross correlation, and others. Finally, the Ando’s preferences maps were developed, taking into account two different kind of musical signals. The measurements underlined the peculiar acoustical behavior of the Theater, characterized by a greater initial decay of the reverberant tail, and a subsequent reverberation that allowed a remarkable *fusion* of the sound and sustain to the musicians.

## 1. HISTORICAL PREVIEW

In 1774, the San Benedetto Theater, which had been Venice's leading opera house for more than 40 years, burned to the ground. No sooner had it been rebuilt than a legal dispute broke out between the company managing it and the owners, the Venier family. The issue was decided in favor of the Veniers, with the result that the theater company decided to build a new opera house of its own on the Campo San Fantin. From the 29 architectural plans which were submitted, the one by Gian Antonio Selva was chosen. The construction began in 1790 June; by 1792 May the auditorium was completed. It was named "La Fenice" (The phoenix), in an allusion to the company's survival, first of the fire, then of expulsion from its former base. La Fenice was inaugurated on 1792 May 16, with an opera by Giovanni Paisiello entitled "I Giuochi di Agrigento".

The hall had a half-elliptic plain, modeled after -it seemed- the Teatro Argentina in Rome.

From the beginning of the nineteenth century, La Fenice acquired a European reputation. Rossini mounted two major productions in the theater and Bellini had two operas premiered there. Donizetti, fresh from his triumphs in Milan and Naples, returned to Venice--and La Fenice--in 1836, after an absence of 17 years. Thus the three greatest Italian composers of the period each affirmed the theater's preeminence, but in 1836 December it

was tragically burned down yet again. The following year Giambattista and Tommaso Meduna were commissioned to design a new theater, with decor by Tranquillo Orsi. La Fenice rose once again from its ashes, in Fiorito style, on the evening of 1837 December 26.

Many world-famous musicians wrote again music pieces for the “new” Fenice theater; Verdi’s association with La Fenice began in 1844, with a performance of “Ernani” during the Carnival season. Over the next 13 years, “Attila”, “Rigoletto”, “La Traviata” and “Simon Boccanegra” all were performed there. The theater attracted the world’s greatest singers, conductors, and composers, like Stravinsky, Britten, Berio, Nono and Bussotti, to write for La Fenice.

Many people wrote about the elliptic plain of a theater; Pierre Patte, in “Essai sur l’architecture théâtrale”, 1774, thought that the elliptic auditorium was the natural shape of a theater, because the human voice propagates as elliptic acoustic waves, as opposed to other acoustic sources, that are quite omnidirectional (such as the bell).

Although now we know that an elliptical shape is very dangerous, as it can cause focalizations and uneven sound distribution, it must be taken into account that fortunately the Italian theaters are not highly reflecting, having their walls covered with artistic painting and stuccos, especially in the neo-classical style, which prevents specular reflections and tend to give a diffuse sound field. So La Fenice gained a high reputation with regard to its acoustic

behavior, which was due to the particular association of an unusual shape and of properly adjusted absorption properties.

The theater maintained its characteristic charm until it burned again completely on 1996 January 29.

## 2. MEASUREMENTS OF ACOUSTIC PARAMETERS

Italian theaters are usually characterized by low reverberation times and high absorption of the hall. These circumstances created a suitable acoustic comfort for operas that were developed especially in Italy during the nineteenth century. Often Italian theaters are considered “*to sound*” very well for operas, but to be too “*deaf*” for music.

While during the last century Italian theaters were used to present operas exclusively, nowadays they are used for symphonic music. In that case, in a typical Italian theater the orchestra is located on the stage, and it appears that the acoustics of the hall are not perfect for this configuration.

The Venetian Teatro La Fenice, while having a remarkable acoustics with regard to operas, had some limitations for symphonic music, when the orchestra was located on the stage. As in many other opera halls, an orchestra shell was required to give proper coupling of the stage with the main hall during the performances of large ensembles, and to give stronger reflections to the stage.

In the summer of 1995, the artistic direction of the theater decided to perform measurements of the acoustic behavior of the hall, which had to be the basis for the acoustic design of the orchestra shell. The theater was under restoration to meet the European security standards, and the construction of an orchestra shell had been added to the list of proposed improvements.

## **2.1. GENERAL CHARACTERISTICS OF THE HALL**

The main hall, typically in the Italian style, had four tiers of balconies plus the last one, called “loggione”.

The scenic tower was equipped with technical devices of the baroque period such as the wooden grating, the flies, and the wooden stage area. The orchestra pit of about 77 m<sup>2</sup> was filled with practicables in order to align the floor with the stage during the symphonic performances.

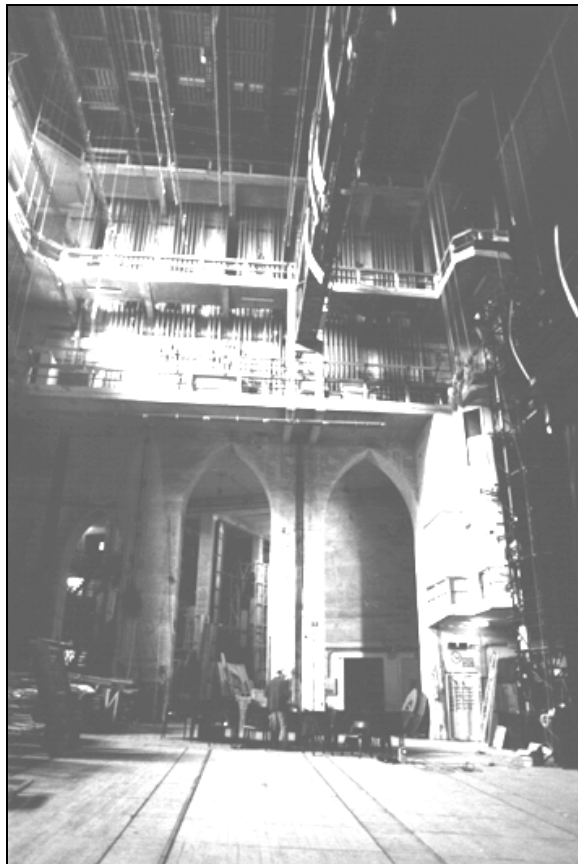


**Fig. 1** - Theater during the measurements

During the measurements, the proscenium was completely empty, with the curtain open and without any scenic arrangements on the stage.

These were the main geometric characteristics of the former theater:

- Global Volume: 21800 m<sup>3</sup>
- Floor surface: (main hall and balconies) 1480 m<sup>2</sup>
- Total internal surface: (lateral walls, floor and ceiling) 7500 m<sup>2</sup>
- Seats: n° 819
- Proscenium: 13.3 m wide by 8.5 m tall



**Fig. 2** - Stage during the measurements

- Main Hall:                    19.0 m wide by 13.7 m high by 23.8 m long
- Stage:                        27.5 m wide by 28.2 m high by 18.6 m deep.

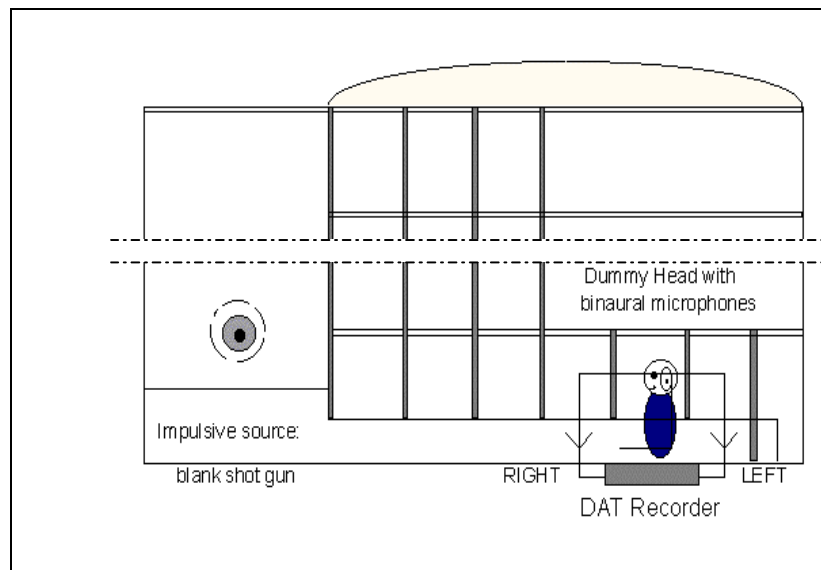
## **2.2. MEASUREMENT TECHNIQUE**

The measurements in the empty room were made during three days: 1995 October 14, 28 and 1995 November 4. The absence of the audience was not particularly important, as the seats were heavily upholstered, and some of them were covered with a thin tissue, which added some absorption. Although in the past no measurement had ever been made with the audience in this theater, experimental results obtained from the authors in other similar Italian theaters show that the reduction in reverberation time due to the audience is less than 0.1 s at midfrequencies.



**Fig. 3** - Main hall during the measurements

The experimental setup used at the theater (shown in fig. 4) consisted of a blank shot gun, a dummy head with binaural microphones (SONY DRW70C) and a DAT recorder (Aiwa St-1). In the laboratory, the impulse responses were transferred digitally in .WAV files, by using a digital audio board (Multi!Wav Digital Pro) and then analyzed by using a wave editor (COOLEEDIT 95) with home-made extensions (AURORA) and a specialized software (MLSSA 10.0C).



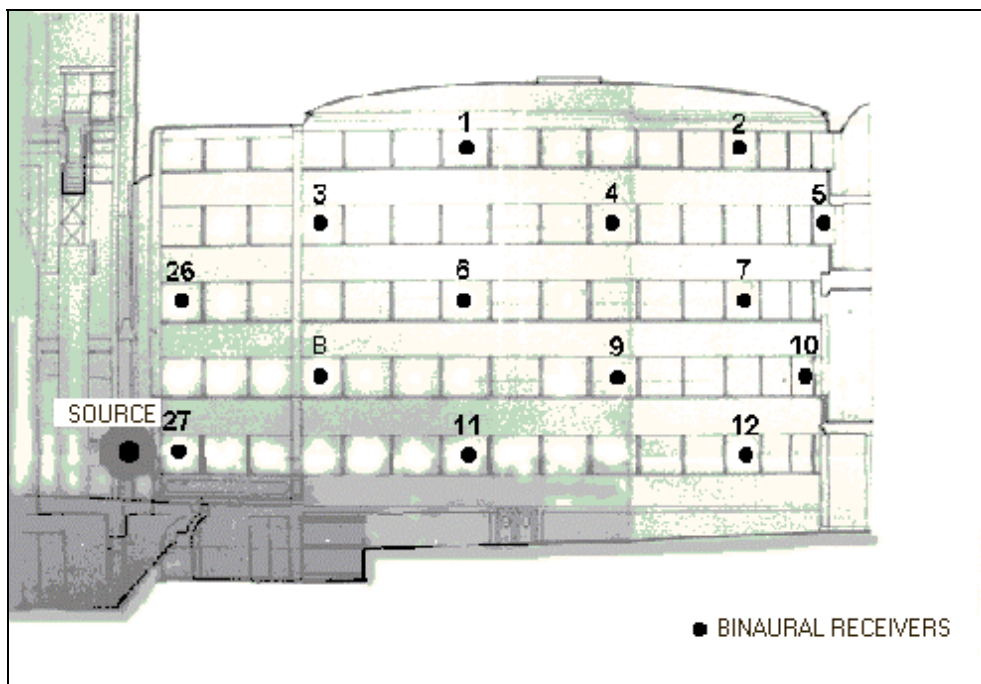
**Fig. 4** - Measuring system of binaural impulse responses

The basic measured quantities are 64-k sampled long binaural impulse responses, from which the acoustic parameters are computed according to

ISO 3382. A brief description of these objective parameters is given in Section 2.3.

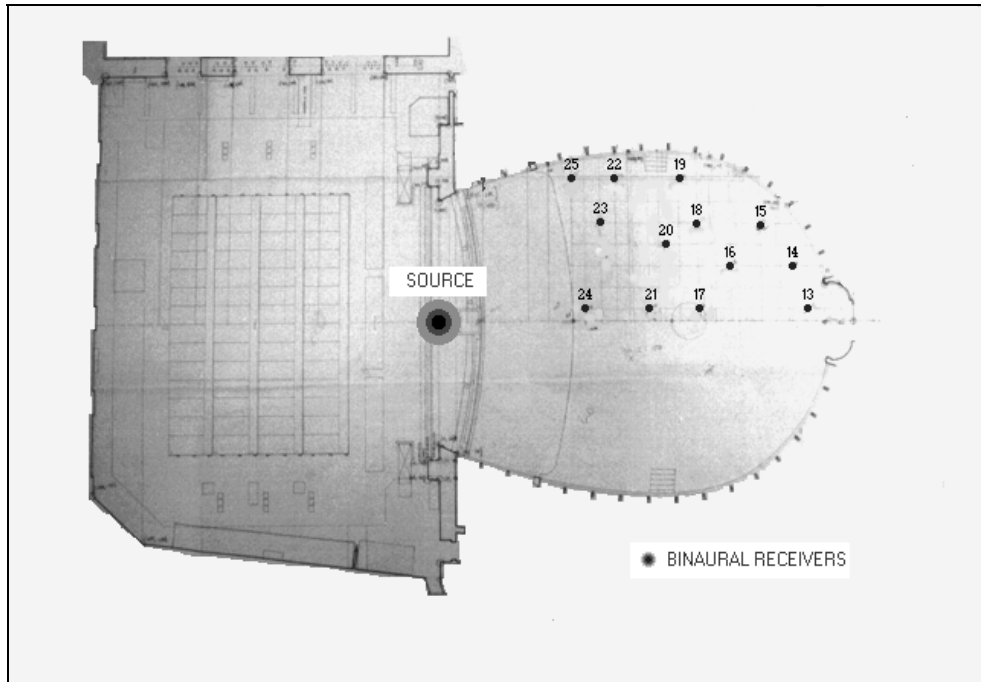
The sound source was located exactly in the center of the proscenium, under the fire curtain.

The recordings of the gun shots were taken in 27 points, uniformly distributed on the main floor and balconies of the right side of the hall (which was perfectly symmetrical) as shown in Figs. 5 and 6. Some additional measurements were made to check the symmetry and the effect of different source positions.



**Fig. 5** - Sound source and receiver positions on the balconies

Fig. 7 shows the binaural impulse responses of a point in the middle of the main floor.



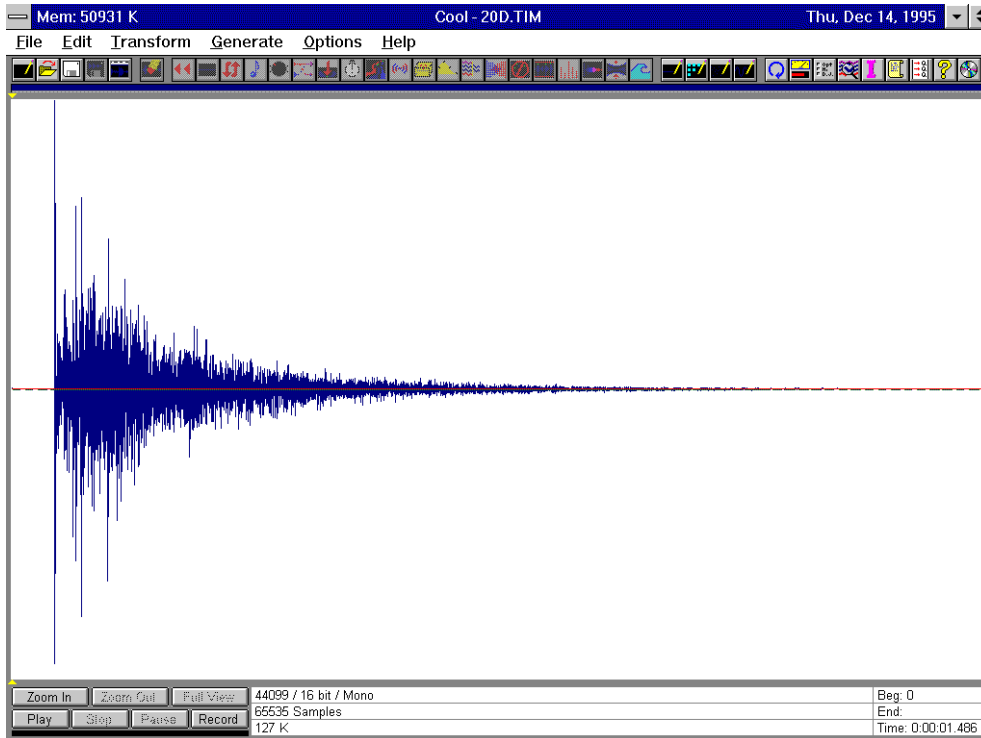
**Fig. 6** - Sound source and receiver positions in stalls.

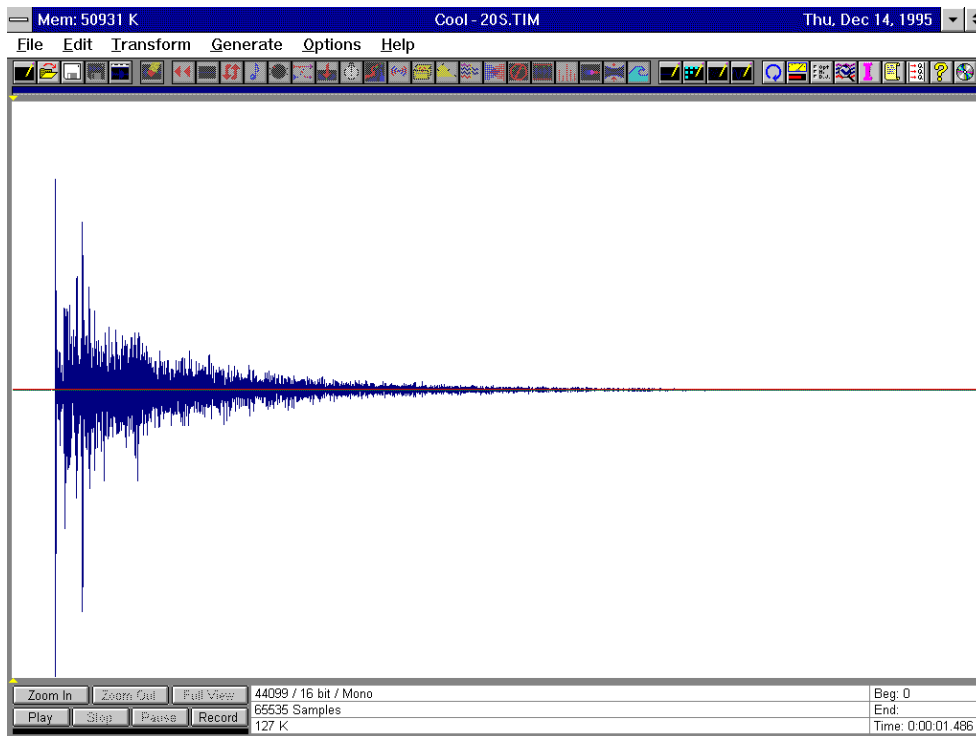
### **2.3. ACOUSTICAL PARAMETERS**

Since the first definition of Reverberation Time by W.C. Sabine, [2], many acoustic parameters have been developed to describe the acoustic behavior of a hall. According to the definitions contained in ISO 3382 [1], among the physical parameters already defined, the following were chosen for the analysis:

#### **2.3.1 $T_{15}$ , $T_{30}$**

Reverberation time calculated from the decay range between -5 and - 20 dB ( $T_{15}$ ) and between -5 and - 35 dB ( $T_{30}$ ) on the integrated Schroeder curve, in seconds.





**Fig. 7 - Impulse responses at point n.20**

Schroeder [3] found that the reverberant decay can be described by a backward integration of the impulse response:

$$\langle p^2(t) \rangle = N \int_t^{\infty} h^2(\tau) d\tau \quad (1)$$

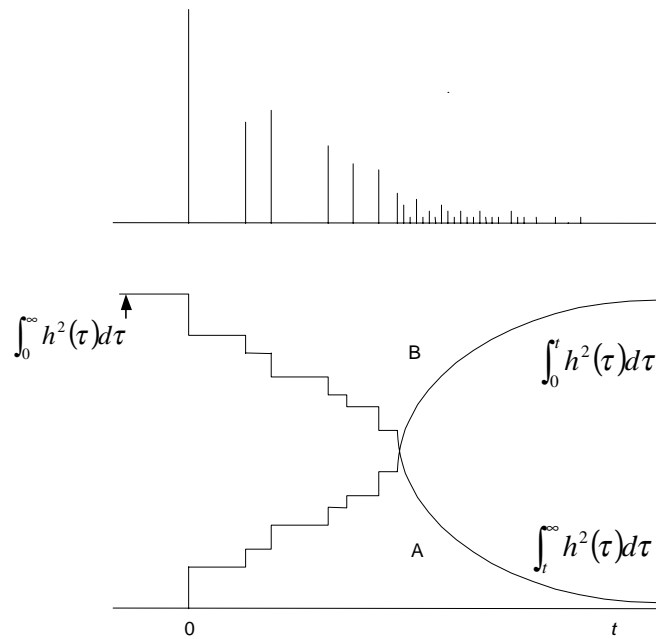
Where:  $\langle p^2(t) \rangle$  = average of a infinite number of decay

$h^2(\tau)$  = impulse response.

Eq.(1) can be written as:

$$\langle p^2(t) \rangle = N \left( \int_0^{\infty} h^2(\tau) d\tau - \int_0^t h^2(\tau) d\tau \right) \quad (2)$$

Eq. (2) can be represented in a  $(p^2, \tau)$  diagram, as shown in fig. 8



**Fig. 8** - Schroeder plot as represented by Eq. (2)

### 2.3.2 *Early Decay Time (EDT)*

Since Jordan [4] demonstrated that the subjective perception of reverberation is correlated more strongly with the initial decay of the reverberant tail, he suggested to calculate the reverberation time from the decay range between 0 and -10 dB on the integrated Schroeder curve, in seconds.

### 2.3.3 *Center Time $t_s$*

It was defined by Kürer [5], as *Schwerpunktzeit*, in the following equation:

$$\tau_s = \frac{\int_0^{\infty} \tau h^2(\tau) d\tau}{\int_0^{\infty} h^2(\tau) d\tau} \quad (3)$$

It is the first-order momentum of the squared pressure impulse response, expressed in milliseconds.

#### 2.3.4 Initial Time Delay Gap (ITDG)

Defined by Beranek, [6], it is the delay of the first reflection from the direct wave, expressed in milliseconds. It is usually calculated directly from the impulse response.

#### 2.3.5 Inter-Aural Cross Correlation (IACC)

As suggested by Ando [7], it is the normalized correlation coefficient between the first 50 ms of the pressure impulse responses measured at the two ears of the binaural microphone.

From the definition of the cross-correlation function, given by:

$$\rho(\tau) = \frac{\lim_{T \rightarrow \infty} \left( \frac{1}{2T} \int_{-T}^T h_d(\tau) \cdot h_s(\tau + t) d\tau \right)}{\lim_{T \rightarrow \infty} \left( \frac{1}{2T} \sqrt{\int_{-T}^T h_d^2(\tau) d\tau \cdot \int_{-T}^T h_s^2(\tau + t) d\tau} \right)} \quad (4)$$

and taking into account that the limitations of the integral are often 50 ms, the IACC is defined as the maximum value of Eq. (4), that is,

$$IACC = \left| \rho(\tau) \right|_{MAX} \quad \text{where } \tau \leq 1 \text{ ms.} \quad (5)$$

### 2.3.6 Strength (G)

It is the difference between the measured sound pressure level, and that produced by the same omnidirectional source in a free field, at 10-m distance from its center, and is expressed in decibels. It was defined in ISO 3382, and expressed in the following equation

$$G = 10 \log \frac{\int_0^{\infty} h^2(\tau) d\tau}{\int_0^{\infty} h^2_{10}(\tau) d\tau} \quad (6)$$

### 2.3.7 Klarheitsmass or Clarity $C_{80}$ and $C_{50}$

It is defined [8] by the equation

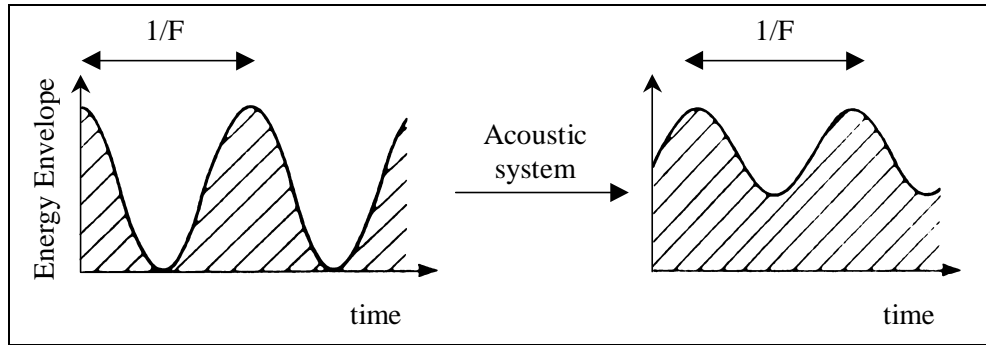
$$C = 10 \log \frac{\int_0^{80ms} h^2(\tau) d\tau}{\int_{80ms}^{\infty} h^2(\tau) d\tau} \quad (7)$$

When the clarity is related to the musical perception, the time interval is limited to 80 ms, whereas if the clarity is related to speech, the time interval is set to 50 ms. Reichardt, Abdel Alim and Schmidt defined such an acoustic parameter in order to relate the “transparence” of the music to an energetic parameter.

### 2.3.7 Speech Transmission Index (STI) and Rapid Speech Transmission Index (RASTI)

These parameters were defined by Houtgast and Steeneken [9]-[11]. They are computed from the values of the modulation transfer function (MTF).

This quantity is defined by the ratio of the received modulation amplitude to the original modulation amplitude, making use of an excitation signal obtained by an octave-band filtered pink noise, having an energy envelope (squared amplitude) slowly modulated at frequency  $F$ , as shown in fig. 9.



**Fig. 9** – Modulation of energy envelope at input and output

At the receiving microphone, the sampled signal presents an energy envelope with reduced modulation depth. The ratio between the output modulation amplitude and the input modulation amplitude is the MTF,

$$m(F) = \frac{m_{out}}{m_{in}} \quad (8)$$

The value of  $m(F)$  can be computed for each modulation frequency  $F$  in the one-third-octave increments from 0.63 Hz to 12.5 Hz, covering the range of the human voice modulations. Furthermore, the octave-band filtered carrier signal can be produced for any octave band from 125 Hz to 8 KHz. Thus, a complete set of MTF values for seven octaves is obtained.

The STI is computed from the seven MTFs.

Although the *STI* is an exhaustive acoustic parameter, describing the intelligibility of concert halls, Houtgast e Steeneken [11] found out that it

was not necessary to obtain a detailed set of MTFs to quantify the intelligibility of an enclosed space. Hence they defined a shorter parameter, the rapid speech transmission index (RASTI), limiting the analysis to a restricted number of data. The procedure is very similar but the carrier's frequencies are referred only to the octave bands of 500 Hz and 2000 Hz.

The values of  $m(F)$  can be computed directly from the impulse response of a system, provided that it is a linear, passive, time-invariant system, as shown by Schroeder [12]. These hypotheses correspond to the assumption of a very little background noise, so that the modulation depth reduction is due only to the room's reflections, echoes and reverberation. This assumption is certainly met in this case, because the theater was very silent, and no external noise could affect the listening conditions.

Since the effective signal-to-noise ratio is of no influence, there is no problem employing a sound source with a spectrum different from the normalized spectrum defined in the original works of Houtgast and Steeneken [9]-[11], or those defined in the new IEC 268-16-16 [13]. The only problem connected with the use of an impulsive source (a gun shot in this case) is the directivity of the source, which does not resembles the normalized directivity of the human voice since it is almost perfectly omnidirectional. Furthermore, the recording of the impulse response is not made with an omnidirectional microphone, but with a binaural one. These deviations are, to a certain degree, compensating reciprocally. Furthermore,

the measurements under these conditions are probably more representative of the real listening conditions in a theater, where the listeners are always facing the stage, while the speaker is moving around on it.

To compute each value of  $m(F)$  from the impulse response  $h(t)$ , an octave-band filter is first applied to the impulse response, in order to select the carrier's frequency band  $f$ . Then  $m(F)$  is obtained with the formula

$$m(F) = \frac{\int_0^{\infty} h_f^2(\tau) \cdot \exp(-j \cdot 2 \cdot \pi \cdot \tau) \cdot d\tau}{\int_0^{\infty} h_f^2(\tau) \cdot d\tau} \quad (9)$$

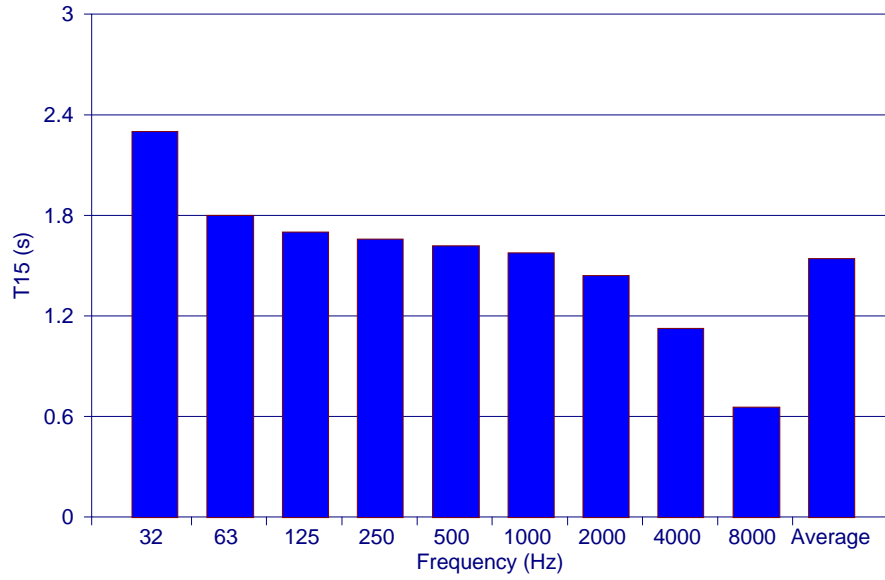
#### 2.4. DISCUSSION OF THE EXPERIMENTAL RESULTS

Fig. 10 shows the  $T_{15}$  and  $T_{30}$  values ( $T_{15} \approx 1.75$ ). These values are well suited for operas and symphonic music, with on average better results than those of other Italian theaters (for example, Milan's La Scala) which sound often too "dry" for ensemble performances. This is certainly one of the reasons for the good acoustic reputation held by the La Fenice theater.

In fig. 11 the values of the early decay time and of the center time are shown. The EDT value ( $EDT \approx 1.25$ ) is lower than  $T_{15}$  &  $T_{30}$ , showing that the first part of the impulse response carries much more energy than the late part. This causes the Schroeder-integrated decay curve to exhibit a double-sloped shape, with a fast initial decay, followed by a slowly decaying tail, as shown in Fig. 12. This behavior is useful in a multipurpose theater because

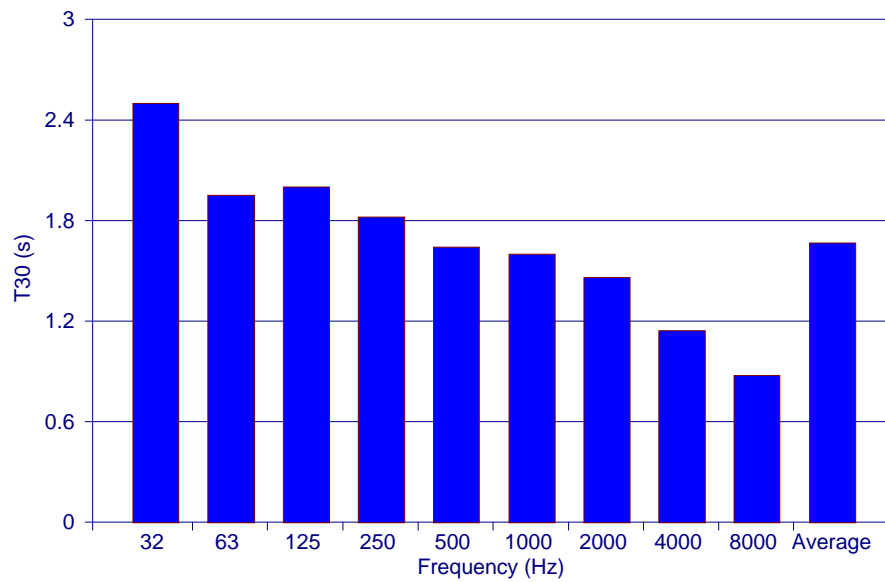
it produces good clarity and intelligibility for speech and songs, while the musical performances can benefit of the liveness and blending caused by the high reverberation time.

Teatro La Fenice - Venezia  
Reverberation Time T15



(a)

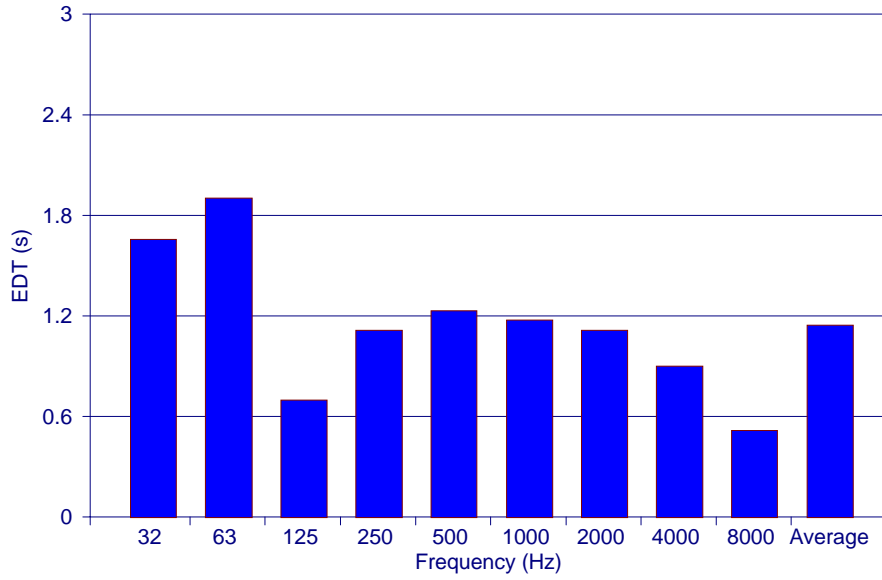
Teatro La Fenice - Venezia  
Reverberation Time T30



(b)

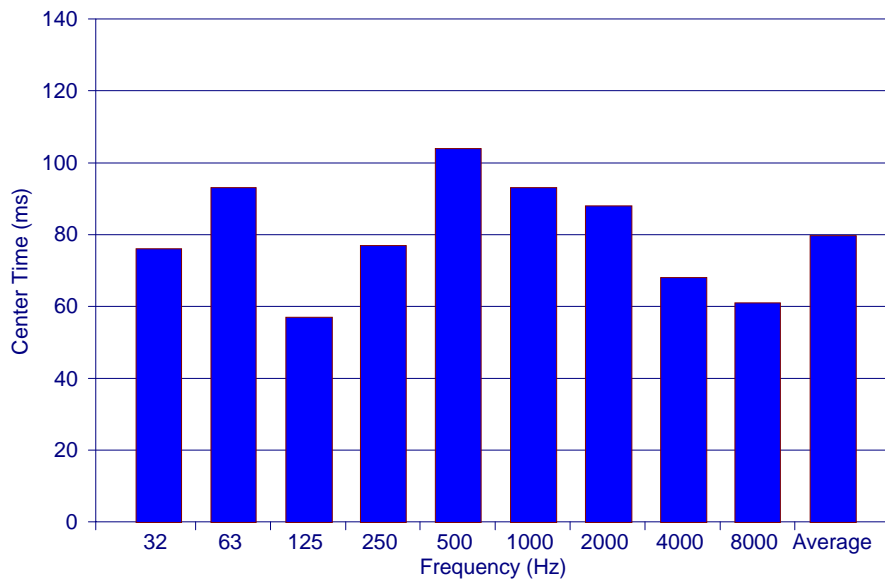
**Fig. 10** - Reverberation time in octave bands for la Fenice.  
(a) T15 (b) T30

Teatro "La Fenice" - Venezia  
Early Decay Time EDT



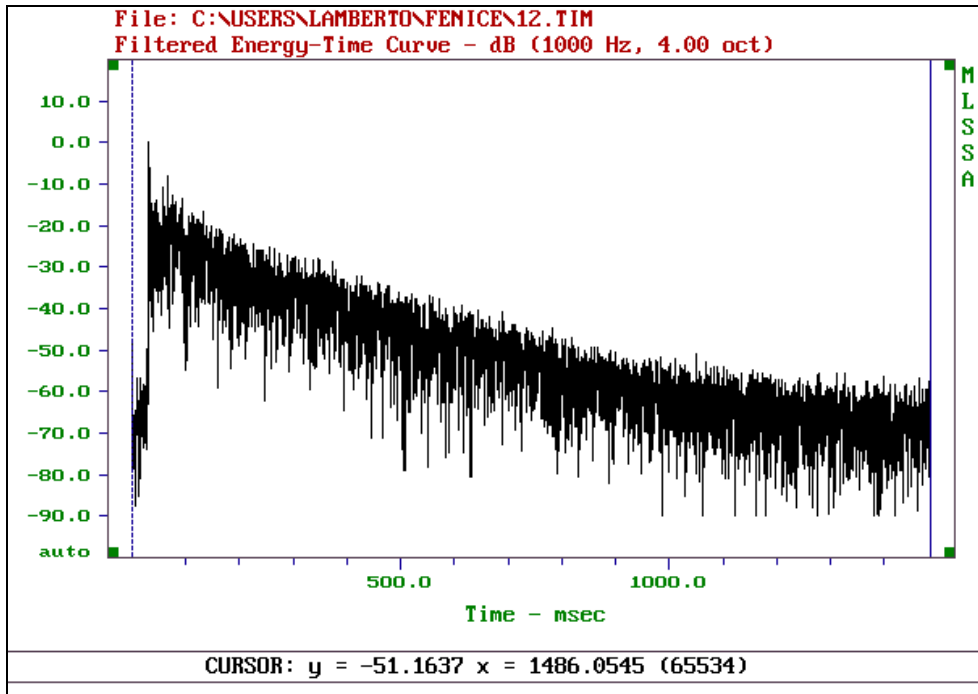
(a)

Teatro La Fenice - Venezia  
Center Time  $T_s$

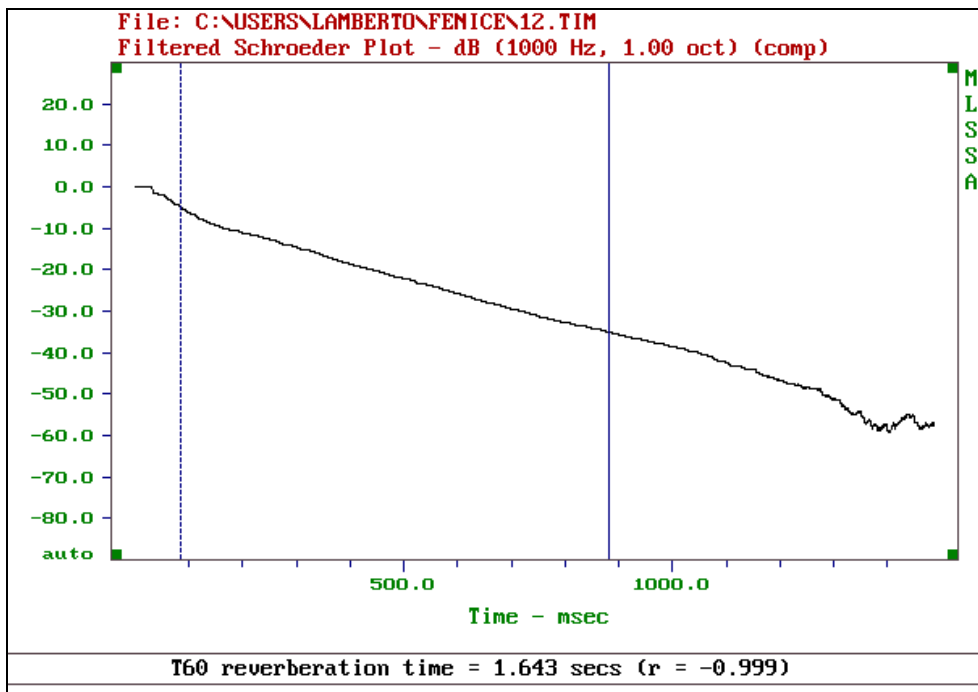


(b)

**Fig. 11** - Early decay and center time for La Fenice. (a) EDT (b)  $t_s$



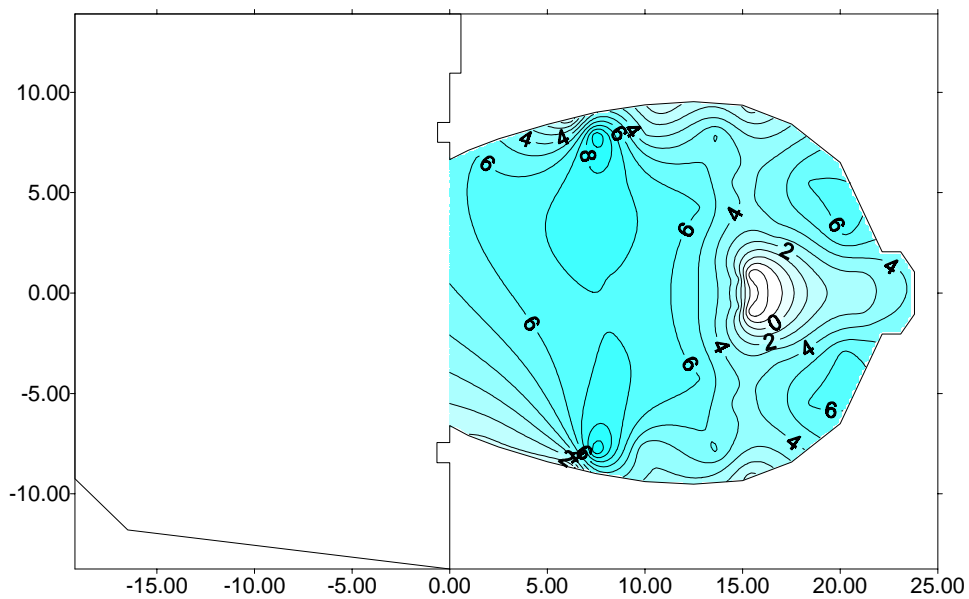
(a)



(b)

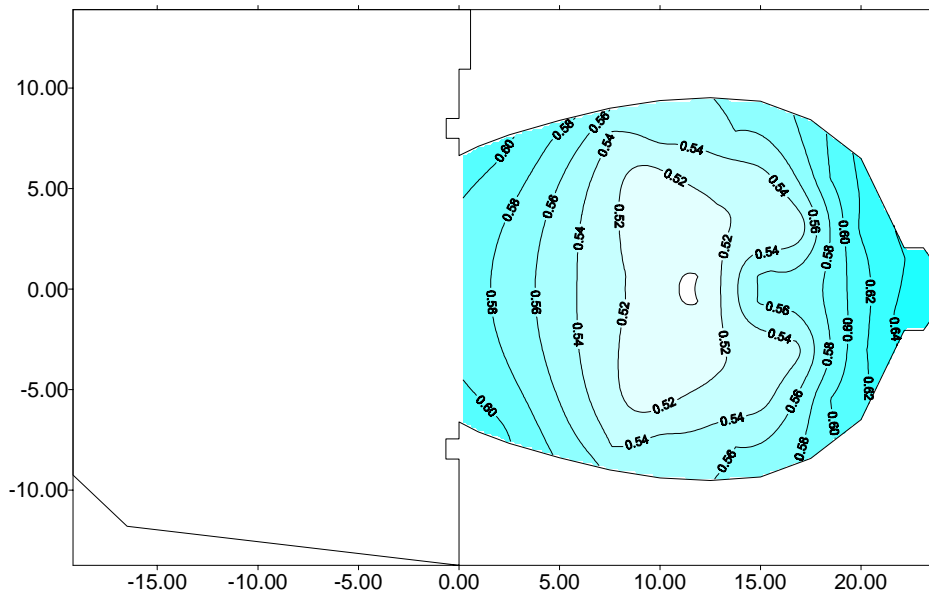
Fig. 12 – (a) Energy-time curve at point n. 12. (b) Schroeder plot at point n. 12

Fig. 13 shows the map of strength  $G$ . It can be seen how the spatial distribution of  $G$  is quite uniform on the main floor. Instead of the focalization, which affects many horseshoe-shaped Italian theaters, there is little reduction in sound level in the center of the rear part.



**Fig. 13** - Spatial map of Strength  $G$ .

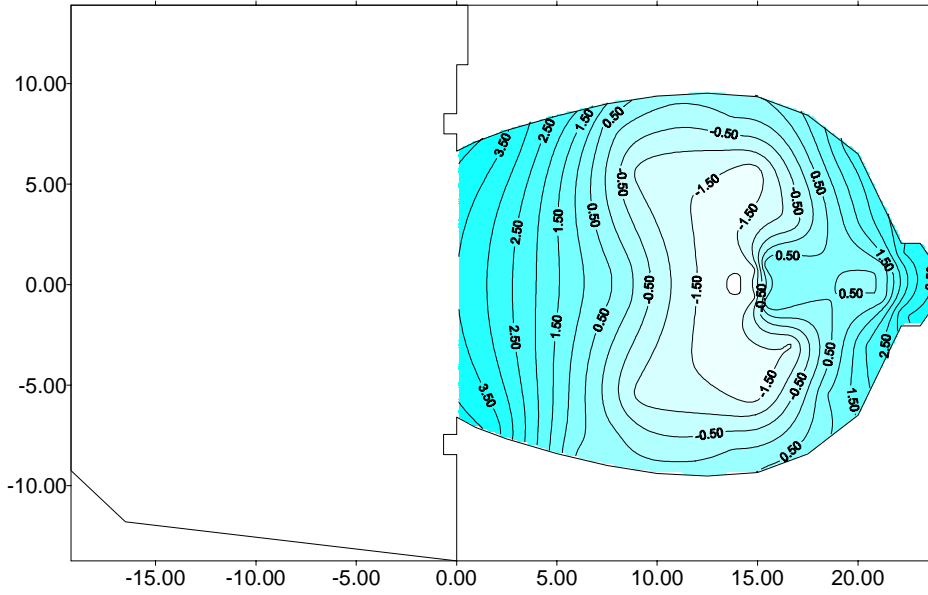
The intelligibility index RASTI is distributed uniformly. The highest values were found in the seats close to the walls, as shown in Fig. 14. This is typical for these positions which benefit from wall reflections with a short delay.



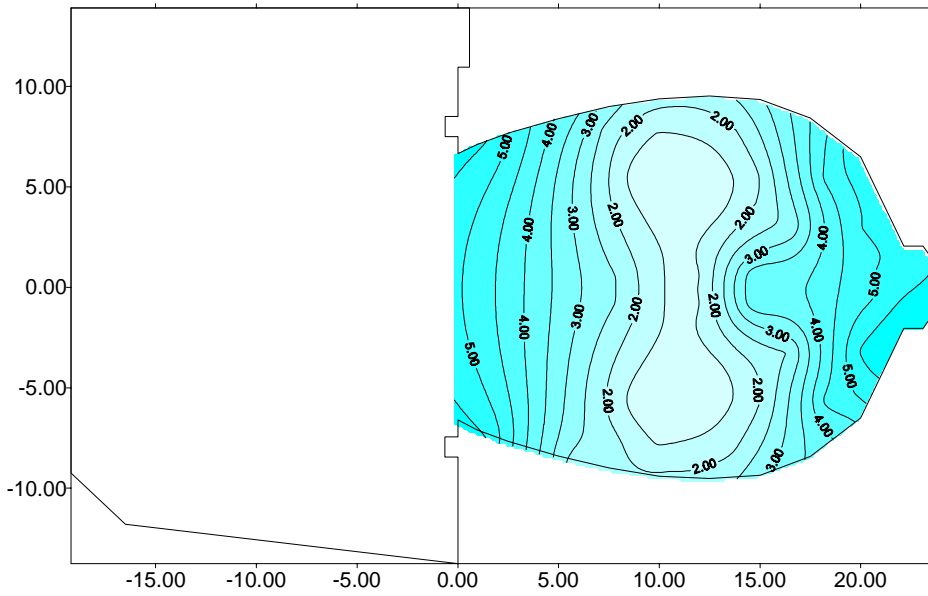
**Fig. 14** - Spatial map of RASTI.

The clarity, measured on 50 and 80 m, is more suitable for speech and operas than for symphonic music, being around 0.24 and 3.8 dB, respectively (Fig 15 and 16). The same holds for the center time  $t_s$ , shown in Fig. 17, with an average value of 80 ms.

The Inter Aural Cross-Correlation  $IACC_{50}$ , having a value around  $0.2 \div 0.3$ , is quite low, ensuring a good spatial impression and envelopment of the listeners (Fig. 18). This was certainly one of the better acoustic characteristics of the theater, as usually it is difficult to have low values of IACC coupled with high values of clarity, and it is well known that a good spatial impression is the most important parameter for the overall musical acoustic quality.



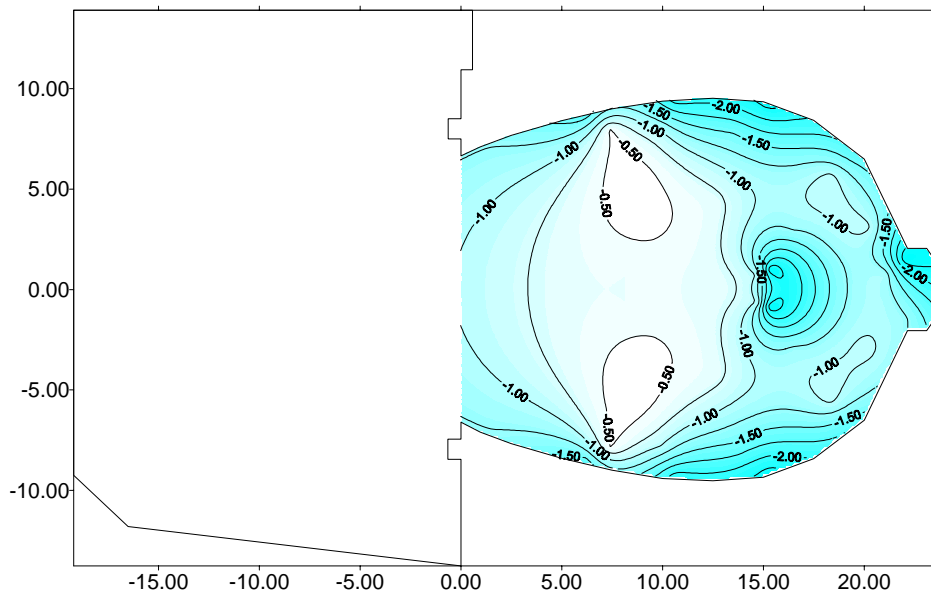
**Fig. 15** - Spatial map of Clarity  $C_{50}$ .



**Fig. 16** - Spatial map of Clarity  $C_{80}$ .



software, taking into account the temporal characteristics of a well-known music piece, the *Sinfonia Jupiter*, K551, by W. A. Mozart, which has an effective duration of the autocorrelation function  $\tau_e=38\text{ms}$ . The contour map of the Ando's preference index is visible in Fig. 19. The values are high, ranging between -1.5 and -0.5, which means that this room was perfectly suited for the kind of music represented by this  $\tau_e$  value.



**Fig. 19** - Ando preference' index (S) (Mozart Sinfonia Jupiter, K.551,  $\tau_e=38\text{ms}$ ).

### 3. COMMENTS AND CONCLUSIONS

The acoustic assessment of the former theater “La Fenice” in Venice included many objective measurements to define the properties of this theater.

The measures evaluated were reverberation time ( $T_{15}$ ,  $T_{30}$ , and EDT), center time  $t_s$ , initial time delay gap (ITDG), interaural cross correlation (IACC), strength (G, level distribution), clarity ( $C_{80}$ ) and speech transmission index (STI). An analysis of the results showed the following.

1) *Reverberation Time*: The reverberation time  $T_{30}$  showed an average value of 1.8 s with a regular distribution over the frequency range. This value is perfectly suited for operas and speech, while it seemed too low for symphonic music. The mean value of EDT is still lower, showing that the initial slope of the decay is steeper than the subsequent tail. This is a favorable condition for a multipurpose theater, as the speech intelligibility is not affected while the music is blended and sustained by the reverberant tail.

2) *Clarity and Center Time*: The clarity and center time values are optimal for speech and operas, but they exhibit a sound field a little too defined for symphonic music, particularly for a certain kind of music characterized by a low tempo and consequently a very long value of the effective duration of the autocorrelation function  $\tau_e$ .

3) *IACC and ITDG*: The  $IACC_{50}$  amounts to a value of 0.25 at most positions. This is due to lateral reflections. This ensures a good spatial sensation. The ITDG values (ranging from 7 ms close to the walls, to 25 ms in the middle of the hall) confirm the benefits of lateral strong reflections.

4) *Strength*: The distribution of the strength on the main floor is quite uniform. Maximum level differences of 6 dB are found but typically only 2

dB. The horseshoe shape of the theater does not show a big focus effect because of the presence of absorption at relevant places

5) *STI*: The uniform distribution of the STI (0.50-0.60) is related to a fair to good intelligibility. This is essential for an auditorium such as required for opera use. The uniform distribution of the STI also indicates a uniform distribution in the temporal properties of the hall. Close to the walls the STI value increased slightly. This effect is typical as reflections close to the wall increase the effective signal-to-noise ratio.

The objective acoustical properties of the theater agree quite well with the subjective reputation of this hall, which had been gained over a time period of more than 100 years.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Special acknowledgment is due to Giovanni Farolfi, who had to plan the acoustic chamber of the theater, and to Alessandro Cocchi, who encouraged us to write this paper.

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