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Vatican hosts Mary - the Musical

By David Willey
BBC News, The Vatican

An invited audience of more than 5,000 people warmly applauded the world premiere of a new Italian musical inside the Vatican, on the life of the Virgin Mary.

Pope Benedict XVI was not among them - but his number two, the Vatican Secretary of State Cardinal Tarcisio Bertone, was in attendance.



Alma Manera, left, is a former Miss Italy contestant

The Vatican had no role in producing the show, but clearly supported it, providing the venue and turning Saint Peter's Square - normally off-limits for cars - into a huge temporary car park for the audience.

The title of the show is Mary of Nazareth and its storyline is the life and times of Mary, the mother of Jesus.

First of its kind

The lead singer is Alma Manera. An Italian operatic soprano who trained in New York as a tap dancer, she once took part in a Miss Italy contest.

"It's a big emotion for me and a privilege and honour to play Mary" she told me in her dressing room before the performance, as her hairdresser prepared her coiffure with a curling iron.

“ Mary is a great role, a great experience for me in my artistic life ”
Alma Manera

"Mary is a great role, a great experience for me in my artistic life. I really feel this role."

She sang me some snatches of her favourite tunes from the show. "I really love the Magnificat," she said - referring to the hymn sung by Mary in Luke's Gospel.

Her mother, Maria Pia Liotta, runs a theatre company in Reggio Calabria, in Southern Italy.

The music was by Stelvio Cipriani, a pianist who trained at the Rome Music Conservatory and who has written hundreds of film scores.

Ms Liotta said it was the first musical of its kind.

"It can reach everyone's heart because it is made up of notes, melody, dance and gestures," she said.

A temporary theatre proscenium was erected inside Pier Luigi Nervi's Papal Audience Hall for the one-off performance, which was paid for by commercial sponsors, the Italian Senate, and local government in Calabria, where most of the performers live and work.

The Vatican did not contribute to the costs apart from providing the venue.

While the pope did not attend, Ms Manera told me he had expressed

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lively curiosity about the production at a private audience she was granted.

Southern flavour

But the audience included many cardinals, bishops, priests and nuns who work inside the headquarters of the Roman Catholic Church, along with thousands of Romans.

The musical begins with Mary's Jewish childhood.

Her father, singing in Hebrew, breaks bread on the Sabbath.

An angel and a demon have a fight, there is a harem scene, some vigorous folk dances with a strong southern Italian flavour, and a good deal of poetic licence is taken over the Gospel story.

But the Vatican sent along a top theologian, Father Stefano Di Flores, all the same, to make sure there were no errors or misinterpretations of Catholic doctrine in the script.



The performance was attended by the Vatican's secretary of state

He told a news conference earlier in the week that Mary - one of the most famous women in history - is seen as a living figure not only in the Catholic but also in the Muslim world, and her veneration is a point of contact with all religions.

The Vatican is clearly reaching out to find new ways to encourage popular devotion to the Virgin Mary.

The subtitle of the musical is "A story that continues". That this point needed to be made is one example of the decline in her cult.

Until fairly recently there used to be thousands of small roadside shrines to the Madonna all over Italy, particularly in the south.

Nowadays most have disappeared, after road widening, or simply through neglect.

You may see instead memorial tablets and a few flowers marking stretches of road where fatal accidents have occurred.

According to the producers of Mary - the Musical, the show may go on tour this autumn in Europe, Latin America and the Middle East, but no firm engagements have yet been announced.

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