

A Brief History of Opera

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Opera has existed for more than four hundred years. Opera incorporates all varieties of other art forms; dance, visual arts, music, costumes, sets and make-up. The word "opera" meaning "a work" is essentially a story told to music. Operatic stories come from many sources; history, mythology, fairy tales, folk stories, literature and drama. What all of these stories have in common is that something about their musical and/or dramatic qualities inspired a composer to set it down in music.

Stories and story telling seem to tap into a basic human need and all cultures have story telling traditions. They teach us about life and death, love and hate, good and bad; in short, the human condition. Music is also found in every culture and when used in combination with a good story can clarify, define, elaborate on or even contradict the original story. It is this combination of music and story that makes opera and all forms of musical theater so powerful.

Opera has survived wars, collapsing monarchies, depressions, and plagues, to expand beyond all geographic and cultural boundaries to remain one of the most exciting and creative of all the performing arts. Since opera does not exist within a "bubble", included in this operatic history are also world events that helped to shape opera into the form we are familiar with today.

One could argue that opera actually had its beginnings during the height of ancient Greece when a chorus would be included as part of a dramatic performance, usually at the beginning or end of an act. However, most historians place the birth of opera at the end of the 16th century. This was the great flush of the **Renaissance**, when Shakespeare was at the height of his powers, Spain had launched another unsuccessful armada against England and most of Europe was either at war with each other, or bidding to colonize the Americas. The Roman Catholic Church had lost much of its hold on Europe, in particular Germany with Martin Luther and his Protestants, and the relative freedom of expression was in full swing. It was into this time of upheaval and great creativity that opera was born. A group called the **Florentine Camarata**, headed by Vincenzo Galilei (father of the famous astronomer), published *a Dialogue about Ancient and Modern Music* in 1581. In this book, Galilei stated that multiple vocal texts, melodies and rhythms could never clearly express the text and instead created a chaos of contradictory impressions. Therefore, the correct way to set words was to use a solo melody, "monody", which would enhance the natural speech inflections. Galilei did set some verses from Dante's *Inferno* for tenor solo with accompaniment, but the music was not preserved. The first example of a true opera DAFNE was written in 1597 by Peri, a singer who did not adhere to Galilei's theory, but did continue writing in the monodic style. However the best known operatic composer at this time was **Claudio Monteverdi** (1597-1643). Most of his operas were performed in Venice where opera mania became as great as Beatlemania in our own time. By the middle of the 17th century, opera was being heard all over Italy and had spread to France and Germany. Even two of the popes wrote operas and at its height, Venice had over 30 opera houses and premiered over 1,700 operas. Thus ends the

Renaissance and begins the Baroque period.

The explosion of art and music throughout Europe was staggering with various monarchies and noblemen competing to see who could build the most opera houses and work with the most important artists of the day. The **Baroque period** (approximately 1600 - 1725) saw the paintings of Rembrandt van Rijn, writings of Descartes, Moliere and John Locke, the establishment of Boston by Puritans (1630), the building of the Taj Mahal (begun in 1653), the reign of Peter the Great in Russia, the Salem witchcraft trials (1692) and the music of **Johann Sebastian Bach, Georg Friedrich Handel** and **Antonio Vivaldi**. The Baroque Opera flourished throughout much of Europe with the Italian school prevailing in most of the opera houses and royal courts. This time period is often called the "**Age of Enlightenment**" and the operas which were written and performed during this period were clear, simple, rational, of universal appeal, and were used as purely entertainment. Handel was the most famous opera composer of his day and his operas were performed throughout Europe.

The 18th century brought opera to its baroque height with an incredible number of works being written and performed which then led to the classical period of **Franz Joseph Haydn, Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart** and **Ludwig von Beethoven**. The **Classical period** (approximately 1725-1827) was a time marked by the toppling of monarchies and the exploration of our world. The French Revolution (1789-1794) reshaped its government and sunk its population even further into poverty, the American Colonies declared independence from England, George Washington became President, Napoleon began (and ended) his conquest of Europe, and Lewis and Clark began their expedition across the United States.

Opera continued to flourish throughout the Classical era, though it went through some changes of its own. Italian composers began to bring opera into harmony with changing ideals of music and drama, making the entire design more natural, more flexible in structure, deeper in content and more varied in other musical resources. The orchestra became more important for both its sake and for adding harmonic depth to accompaniments. The consummation of this new style of opera was in the work of **Christoph Gluck**. He began writing operas in the Italian style, but was deeply influenced by the reform in the 1750s. He collaborated with the poet Calzabigi to produce *ORFEO ED EURIDICE* (1762) and *ALCESTE* (1767). Other composers during this time period tried their hand at writing operas, Haydn wrote more than 75 for the Esterhaus family, and Mozart supported himself with several popular operas; *THE MARRIAGE OF FIGARO*, *DON GIOVANNI* and *THE MAGIC FLUTE*.

During the 1820s, a new "class" who highly valued individual expression and freedom arose out of the ashes of the French Revolution and the Napoleonic Empire - the middle class. Thus a new type of opera was needed to appeal to this relatively uncultured audience who thronged the theatres in search of excitement and entertainment. New operas that underscored the public's "new" interests were required and composers scrambled to find topics. Many found inspiration in the literature of the time and instead of using Greek mythology as a basis for the opera, composers were using Shakespeare, Goethe and Victor Hugo. This became Grand Opera which used all artistic elements such as ballets, choruses and crowd scenes, to appeal to its new audience.

Opera comique, which was less pretentious than grand opera, flourished along side the grand opera. Opera comique required fewer singers and players, and was written in a much simpler musical idiom; its plots presented straightforward comedy or semiserious drama instead of the huge historical pageantry of grand opera. Opera bouffe emphasized smart, witty and satirical elements of comic opera and appeared in Paris in the 1860s. Other composers took note and began developing operettas in other countries; Gilbert & Sullivan in England composing THE MIKADO, THE PIRATES OF PENZANCE and HMS PINAFORE, Johann Strauss, Jr. in Vienna composing DIE FLEDERMAUS, and eventually Victor Herbert in the United States composing BABES IN TOYLAND and NAUGHTY MARIETTA. Another type of opera began to emerge called "lyric opera" which combined earlier opera comique with the current style of the grand opera, though on a much smaller scale. The landmark of lyric opera was CARMEN. Composed by Georges Bizet in 1875, CARMEN followed the traditional path of late 19th century Romantic opera; exotic locations, spare in texture and beautifully orchestrated.

There has been some "controversy" over the exact end of the Classical period and the beginning of the Romantic period. Most points agree that Beethoven was a pivotal figure in this transition in that his compositional early style was definitely rooted in the Classical tradition but his later works were trending towards a Romantic period style. For these reasons, this paper has listed the end of the Classical and beginning of the Romantic periods as 1827, the year that Beethoven died.

The **Romantic period** (approximately 1827-1900) touched off a second explosion of creativity throughout Europe, Russia and the United States. In the late 19th century art community, Edouard Manet, Edgar Degas, Claude Monet, Auguste Rodin and Renoir were the rage with **Impressionism**. In literary circles, the populations of Europe and the United States were reading Emerson, Thoreau, Melville, Whitman, Twain, Stevenson and many more. While in the musical community, composers such as Brahms, Berlioz, Tchaikovsky and Bruckner were changing the symphonic form and Wagner, Verdi, Rossini and Puccini were changing the opera.

Perhaps this explosion was due to the fact that throughout most of Europe, Russia and the United States, the last 40 years of the 19th century were relatively quiet. Aside from the Franco-Prussian war, most countries were enjoying a respite from conflict and many used the time to find ways of bettering mankind. Bell invented the telephone (1876), Edison invented the phonograph (1877) and the incandescent electric light (1879), Koch discovers the tuberculosis germ (1882) and Pasteur begins inoculating against rabies (1884). America gets the Statue of Liberty (1886), Wilhelm Roentgen discovers x-rays (1894), Queen Victoria is the longest reigning monarch in England's history (1837-1901) and Russia crowns its last tsar, Nicholas II (1894).

Some of the best known and loved operas were created during this time period. Italy had its own explosion of native composers such as **Rossini**, **Bellini** and **Donizetti** all of whom had a penchant for both the dramatic and comedic operas. Gioacchino Rossini's THE BARBER OF SEVILLE is perhaps the best example of Italian comic opera of the earlier 19th century with witty dialogue, unforgettable characters and beautifully crafted music. However, the most famous of all the Italian opera composers during the Romantic period was **Giuseppe**

Verdi (1813-1901). With the exception of a few songs and a string quartet, all of Verdi's works were written for the stage. Verdi became so popular throughout Italy, that his name became a patriotic symbol and rallying cry "Viva Verdi!" Verdi viewed opera as human drama to be conveyed through the use of simple, direct, vocal solo melody. With the exception of one, all Verdi's operas deal with serious subject matter from Shakespeare's OTHELLO to Victor Hugo's RIGOLETTO. Bellini, Donizetti, Rossini and early Verdi all composed in the **BEL CANTO** style which was characterized by long, fluid, melodic lines throughout the opera.

This marriage between music and literature was one of the distinguishing marks of the 19th century opera and German composers in particular used this to their full advantage. The culmination of German opera came in the form of **Richard Wagner** who not only created a new genre of operatic theater, but whose influence was so profound, it is still being felt today. Wagner felt that the function of music was to serve the ends of dramatic expression, therefore his operatic scores vividly outlined what was happening on stage. **The Ring cycle**, consisting of four operas, is Wagner's masterpiece which uses Norse mythology as its story base. To keep consistency between all four operas, Wagner used the leitmotif. The leitmotif is a musical theme or motive associated with a particular person, thing, or idea in the drama. This idea is used today in movie scores. In the Star Wars series, written by John Williams, each main character has a theme, as does the idea of "the force" and "the empire". These themes are woven throughout the picture as characters and ideas appear, thus giving the score some musical cohesion.

The heir to Wagner was another German composer, **Richard Strauss**. Though he was influenced by Wagner, Strauss had even more lush orchestrations and often used dissonance or would completely abandon tonality to emphasize a particular scene in his operas. His most famous operatic works include SALOMÉ (1905), ELEKTRA (1909), DER ROSENKAVALIER (1911), ARIADNE AUF NAXOS (1912), and DIE FRAU OHNE SCHATTAN (The Woman without a Shadow) (1919). Strauss' symphonic works were equally stunning in their orchestration and scope, often including enormous numbers. His final tone poem, ALPINE SYMPHONY (EINE ALPENSINFONIE - 1915) included 123 players, a huge number for most orchestras who typically range between 60-75 players on average.

The end of the Romantic period brought about significant change to all musical forms. The idea of tonality was being stretched in France by **Claude Debussy** and **Maurice Ravel**, while in Italy, **Giacomo Puccini** was writing dramatic operas which used a new style called "**verismo**" which means realism or naturalism. Puccini would choose a libretto that presented everyday people in familiar situations acting violently under the impulse of primitive emotions and wrote in a musical style that was appropriate to such a libretto. The veristic opera was the grandfather of television and cinematic shock drama. It was typical of the post-Romantic period which used dissonance, hugeness and other musical devices to titillate the now jaded audience. LA BOHEME, TOSCA and MADAMA BUTTERFLY all had elements of the veristic opera.

The **20th century** was a turbulent time, both in the world and within the musical community. Much of this century has been spent at war, population increases, fighting disease, and developing medical miracles. Musically, opera continues to grow and expand beyond the traditional boundaries of Europe and Russia to include other countries

such as Australia, Canada and South America. The great names of early modern opera include **Kurt Weill**, **Igor Stravinsky**, **Benjamin Britten**, **Paul Hindemith**, and **Anton Berg**, to name just a few. There had never been a more exciting age operatically, when every taste wanted to be satisfied and curiosity for the unfamiliar was constantly increased.

Early 20th century opera was moving from the veristic style of Puccini to a broader experimentation with sound, polytonality (the musical use of more than one key simultaneously) and tone clusters (a musical chord comprising of at least three consecutive tones in a scale). Opera composers were now experimenting with polytonality, minimalism and the blurring of the lines between musical theatre and opera. Noted composers of this period include **Claude Debussy** (*Pelléas et Mélisande* 1902), **Arnold Schoenberg** (*Erwartung* 1924), **Alban Berg** (*Wozzeck* 1925), **George Gershwin** (*Porgy and Bess* 1935), **Benjamin Britten** (*Peter Grimes* 1945), **Carlisle Floyd** (*Susanna* 195, *Of Mice and Men* 1970 and *Cold Sassy Tree* 2000), **Igor Stravinsky** (*The Rake's Progress* 1951), **Leonard Bernstein** (*Candide* 1956), **Philip Glass** (*Einstein on the Beach* 1976 and *Akhnaten* 1984), **Stephen Sondheim** (*Sweeney Todd* 1979), **John Adams** (*Nixon in China* 1987, *Death of Klinghoffer* 1991), **John Corigliano** (*The Ghosts of Versailles* 1991), **Mark Adamo** (*Little Women* 1998), **Tod Machover** (*Resurrection* 1999) and **William Bolcom** (*A View from the Bridge* 1999).

The 21st century appears to be just as exciting for new operatic compositions as previous centuries. Everything and anything is possible in terms of subject matter, technology in staging, and compositional styles. Noted composers include **Jake Heggie** (*Dead Man Walking* 2000, *The End of the Affair* 2004 and *Moby Dick* 2010), **John Adams** (*Doctor Atomic* 2005), **Mark Adamo** (*Lysistrata or The Nude Goddess* 2005), **Oswaldo Golijov** (*Ainadamar* 2005), **Tan Dun** (*The First Emperor* 2006) and **Paul Moravec** (*The Letter* 2009).

The most important thing to remember about the history of opera, as with art and music, is that it is a reflection of world events. Early opera combined a humanistic outlook with a blending of mythology and "every day" realism. It became the most important of all art forms during the Baroque period when it was spectacular, but not intellectually or spiritually challenging. The classical age of opera was linked to enlightenment and philosophers like Rousseau and Voltaire. The Romantic revolution turned opera in a new direction, away from ancient history to works of Shakespeare, Goethe, Schiller and Victor Hugo and it was often involved with national, revolutionary and political history. During the 20th century, opera became part of the era of Picasso, James Joyce, Freud and astonishing new worlds uncovered by science. And now into the 21st century, opera has no limits in terms of inspirations or aspirations.

Opera is truly a reflection of the human condition and whether the story is Shakespeare, Aesop or Hugo, it will continue to delight audiences of all ages and cultures, because on the most basic level, opera is telling the story of our lives.