

A Brief History of Opera



Where?

- Florence, Italy



When?

- Late 16th/early 17th centuries (1573-1607)

Who?

- Florentine Camerata
 - Camerata: an academy or intellectual club
 - Met in a private home 1573-1592
 - Aimed to revive and transform Greek drama using music

How?

- Text sung by one singer
- Accompanied as simply as possible so words can be understood
- Words must be sung the way they are spoken (natural phrasing)
- The music must depict the emotions of the character who is singing

What?

- First opera created by members of the Florentine Camerata: *Dafne*, composed by Jacopo Peri (1597)
- Music has unfortunately been lost
- First great opera composer: Claudio Monteverdi (1567-1643)
- His first opera, *Orfeo* (1607) is considered the first opera masterwork
- <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZFe-xH7bbIQ>

Baroque Era (1600-1750)

- Opera flourishes throughout Europe at royal courts
- First public opera houses opened (Venice 1637)
- Opera Seria/Opera Buffa
- George Frideric Handel (1685-1759)
- <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WuSiuMuBLhM&list=PLwt1RI16QOWoSHYRZnpWSvJk4Kf8SoDc0>
- Going too far?

Opera Reform

- Led by Pietro Metastasio
 - Great librettist of the 1st half of the 18th century
 - Standardized his libretti into a formulaic procedure
 - Lots of rules
 - Dry recitative alternated with arias
 - Principle characters 1-2 arias per act
 - Secondary characters 1-2 arias per opera
 - Every opera has 3 acts

Classical Period (1750-1830)

- Christoph Willibald Gluck (1714-1787)
 - Born in Bohemia. Spent career in Vienna & Paris
 - Operas became the models for the next generation of composers
 - First—tell a good story
 - Second—simplify and streamline arias to reduce singers' abuses
 - Lastly—break up monotony and predictability

Giants of the Classical Era

- HAYDN (1732-1809)
 - 15 operas, most composed for the Esterhazy family
- MOZART (1756-1791)
 - Wrote in all the styles popular in his time
 - Many are staples of the repertoire:
 - Idomeneo (opera serie)
 - The Marriage of Figaro (opera buffa)
 - Don Giovanni
 - Così fan tutte
 - The Magic Flute

Romantic Era (1830-1900)

- Emphasis on emotion, personal feeling
- Middle class flocks to the theatre, providing a new, growing audience
- Literature (Shakespeare, Hugo, Goethe) a source of inspiration
- Exotic locations, evocative and memorable musical themes, high drama

Giants of the Romantic Period—Italy

- Bel Canto (literally “beautiful singing”)—vocal brilliance and ornamentation
 - Gioacchino Rossini (1792-1868)
 - La Cenerentola
 - https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BJTMB_yjjKQ (1-3:20)
 - Gaetano Donizetti (1797-1848)
 - La Fille du Regiment
 - Vincenzo Bellini (1801-1835)
 - Norma
 - <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Rg4L5tcxFcA> (1-4:00)

Giuseppe Verdi (1813-1901)

- Dramatic, moving texts
- Politically controversial topics
- Tuneful, memorable vocal melodies
- Exciting, moving, memorable characters
- Among his masterpieces:
 - Aida
 - Rigoletto
 - Nabucco
 - Il Trovatore
 - La Traviata
 - Otello

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IY8k9FsGQpA>

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SK-NUuTCras>

Richard Wagner—Germany (1813-1883)

- “Singlehandedly changed the course of opera with his huge ambition and talent by introducing new ideas in harmony, the use of leitmotifs and expanded use of the orchestra and operatic structure.”
- 15-hour, four-opera Ring cycle:
 - Das Rheingold
 - Die Walkure
 - Siegfried
 - Gotterdammerung

Puccini (1858-1924)

- Brings Italian grand opera tradition into the 20th C.
- “Verismo”—truth—style: everyday people caught in extraordinarily challenging and dramatic circumstances; a sense of realism
 - La Boheme
 - Tosca
 - Madama Butterfly
 - Turandot
 - La Fanciulla del West
 - <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5I9NRyramOY>

French Opera Tradition

- Begins in the court of Louis XIV
- Significant composers include:
 - Rameau (18th C)
 - Berlioz
 - Gounod
 - Bizet
 - Offenbach (operetta)
 - Saint-Saens
 - <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sq3H42NjmIU>

20th Century-21st Century

- Igor Stravinsky
- Benjamin Britten
- Dmitri Shostakovich
- Alban Berg
- Philip Glass
- John Adams
- Nico Muhly
- <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qMXp6ONpLkk>