

# Evolution of opera

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The immediate influences of the opera were such early dramatic forms as the late 16<sup>th</sup> century madrigals, madrigal cycles (madrigal comedies and the intermedio). The very first opera *Daphne* (which has now been lost) was written in 1597 by Peri. Around 1600, Peri wrote *Euridice* and Monteverdi wrote *L'Orphea* as the first operas still around today. The early operas can be described as a collection of recitatives separated by occasional orchestral interludes and the aim was to revive Greek drama.

The first move towards opera was the recitative. The need for a style of solo singing that could be used for dramatic purposes, created the recitative style. This was thought to be the correct way to set words as it would enhance the sound of natural speech. Peri, Caccini and Cavallieri were the pioneers of the new style of solo singing. Dissonant vocal lines over a static bass were used.

Opera took root in Rome the 1620s. In the music of Roman operas the solo singing was separated into two types, recitative and aria. While the recitative was more speech like, the arias were melodious, though some were on 'ground basses'. The recitative, dissonance and new musical effects created a more expressive, melodious vocal line often with regular phrases and triple meter (bel canto). Music started to become more important than the words. Some melodic sections with recognizable melodic form (aria) evolved from the recitative. In the early Baroque operas, the recitative and aria were not separated to the extent that the late Baroque composers did.

The opera tradition gradually moved to Venice. Monteverdi's last two operas and his student Cavalli's operas were written for Venice. The first commercial opera house was opened in Venice in 1637 (Teatro S. Cassiano) which would be run by Cavalli after 1639. Before that opera was only for the enjoyment of the musical elite. In these last two operas of Monteverdi, there was another innovation which would become in common in later operas: closing the opera with a love duet. Meanwhile, opera was spreading from Italy to other parts of Europe. By 1700, Vienna, Paris, Hamburg and London were also operatic centers.

The strophic variation, the representative aria form of the early Baroque opera, was at first retained in the middle Baroque opera, but became a fully audible form since the bass line was as distinctly organized as the melody so that the strophic repeats could be perceived by ear. Each repeat of the melody became an ornamental variation since the singer was supposed to improvise ornaments.

Virtuoso element in vocal singing became important. The brief da capo aria soon superseded the strophic variation and was established as a vocal form. In this form, the first part, unified by a clearly stated key and sequential motives, is juxtaposed with another key area, the middle part, after which the first part is repeated, usually with ornamental variations. At least equally important was the bipartite aria which consisted of only A and B or their variations. In contrast with the late Baroque opera and its rigid alternation of recitative and aria, the middle Baroque opera retained great formal flexibility. During the progress of opera from its primitive forms, the words started to lose their importance and the music was dominating over words again.

French opera was established by Lully (1632-1687) when he was the court composer to Louis XIV. He wrote tragedies-lyriques using Greek mythological subjects in which the vocal lines do not obscure the text, but rather support it. He cast them in five acts to remain as a French operatic tradition. Recitatives and arias merge into one another. The arias may be in binary form or through-composed but they are never on the scale of the later Italian da capo aria. Ballets played a major part in French opera. His recitatives are not harmonically rich. Lully's bass lines are more static than those of Italian composers. The chromatically descending bass lines and the extensive use of last-inversion dominant seventh chords typical of contemporary Italian recitative style are foreign to Lully's style.

Lully also established a form of opera prelude (French overture) consisting of a slow introduction in dotted rhythm followed by a fast fugal-allegro section (also used by composers outside France like Purcell '*Dido & Aeneas*' and Handel '*Messiah*' and '*Xerxes*'). His greatest successor was J.P. Rameau who used more sophisticated orchestral effects in balletic operas.

Although H. Schutz (1585-1672) had studied in Venice with G. Gabrieli and later with Monteverdi, and even staged his opera *Daphne* at Torgau in 1627 for a royal wedding, the structure of German society and the religious outlook in the country provided poor soil for opera and it was slow to flourish. In 1678, an opera company was started in Hamburg where R. Keiser was the leading composer of opera in German. Handel was influenced by his operas during his visit in 1703. German opera had to wait till the time of Beethoven and Weber to gain international fame.

Handel's forty or so operas written in the first half of the eighteenth century are almost exclusively in Italian. They are often criticized for the strictly da capo structure of their arias whose long repeats arrest the progress of the drama. In *Xerxes* (written in 1738), Handel had to abandon the stiff opera seria style in response to the success of the *Beggar's Opera* in 1728 and the collapse of his opera company the Royal Academy of Music as well as its rival the Opera of the Nobility in 1737. The rigid conventions of a character's exit after singing an aria, and the dominance of da capo arias were abandoned in *Xerxes*. Most arias were

now in strophic form as in ballad opera. Handel's contemporaries were Rameau in France and Alessandro Scarlatti (the father of Domenico Scarlatti) in Italy. A. Scarlatti first developed the distinction between recitativo secco for ordinary dialogue and recitativo accompagnato to awaken emotions. He also realized the importance of the aria for conveying poetic-operatic emotions. By now the opera became a series of arias connected by recitative passages. The recitatives had changed their character from those of Monteverdi. In such late Baroque operas, they serve the purpose of telling the story quickly. In other words, the action took place during recitatives and arias were merely an opportunity to reflect upon the events. In the operas of Scarlatti and Handel, the story is not that important and there is a little action. What is paramount now is the singer and the show pieces personally tailored for them.

Opera overture and orchestral accompaniment followed the evolution of the vocal part. A. Scarlatti established *sinfonia* (Italian overture) in fast-slow-fast pattern as an orchestral introduction to his operas at the turn of the century. This genre is the forerunner of the symphony emerged later in the Classical era. The orchestra tended to replace continuo accompaniment in operatic arias of the late Baroque. Venice remained the most important center for opera. Opera seria signifies the Italian reform opera of the eighteenth century. At the end of the seventeenth century, certain poets, under the influence of the French drama, advocated that opera librettos be purified: divested of comic scenes and supernatural or other implausible elements in the plot. This reform -opera seria- is codified by Zeno (1668-1750) and Metastasio (1698-1782). The texts tended to exalt certain virtues and to be concerned with the triumph of these virtues (such as loyalty and patriotism) over obstacles and problems. The arias and recitatives were sharply separated. The arias were in the closed *da capo* aria form which inhibited the dramatic flow. From Handel to Mozart, many composers used librettos written by Zeno or Metastasio in their opere serie in the eighteenth century. Adolf Hasse was acknowledged as possibly the most eminent composer of the Metastasian kind of opera seria. By the time of high Classicism, following Gluck's operatic reforms, opera seria died out. Opera buffa and rescue opera took over (discussed below).

In the beginning of the eighteenth century, opera comique (opera buffa as opposed to opera seria) was created in Naples. It became extremely popular and successful in the early years of the eighteenth century in Naples in the works of such composers as Pergolesi. His intermezzo *La Serva padrona* (1733) achieved enormous popularity and affected the subsequent history of opera. Opera buffa was characterized by a raciness and exuberance, naturalness and spontaneity, a simple directness and charming fluency. Intermezzi and opera buffa differed fundamentally from opera seria in that they showed awareness of changing trends in drama and literature, and took account of them in their use of subject matter. Many of the plots gained a more down-to-earth nature. The *da capo* aria was disregarded in favor of less closed forms. Altogether, the dramatic nature of the opera was made more apparent.

Christoph Willibald von Gluck (1714-1787) and his followers upgraded the instrumental preludes in the opera. The overture had been a neutral piece without any link to the following opera (except some of Rameau's overtures). It now assumed a programmatic character, anticipating the mood of the first scene or portraying in pure sound the whole of the drama that was going to unfold. In the operas of the later Neapolitan School (Leo, Vinci, Jommelli), the use of virtuoso aria was so extended that the whole consisted of nothing but arias designed to exhibit vocal virtuoso. This abuse was the main point of attack of reformists. Gluck's operatic reform by purifying it of extraneous action and musical virtuosity resulted in a simple and classical style. He created a new, more vital, intensely expressive drama in which the music and the words were more closely allied than ever before. Gluck revived the serious approach to the arts, interest in classical -especially Greek- antiquity and a new feeling for nature and the natural. He portrays the emotions more simply, more truthfully, and in a manner more meaningful to the person of feeling and sensibility. In *Orfeo ed Euridice* (1762) and *Alceste* (1767) (his first Viennese operas), there was already a radical break both in form and style. as Copland summarizes 'Gluck made the dramatic idea (not the singer) supreme and wrote music that served the purposes of the text (not the singer).' Gluck's operatic reforms are:

1. Use of overture to prefigure the coming action,
2. Exclusive use of recitative accompanied by the orchestra (recitativo accompagnato as opposed to recitativo secco). The continuous sequence of linked numbers always had the orchestral support avoiding the unnaturalness of the change of texture when recitative had only harpsichord accompaniment,
3. Drastic shortening of most arias,
4. Suppression of vocal ornamentation,
5. Extensive use of ensembles and choruses stressing the collective nature of human emotion,
6. Flexibility of musical forms: recitative, aria, chorus and instrumental sections can be freely intermingled whenever the dramatic situation requires. (*Orfeo* has no da capo arias with elaborate writing for the voice; instead there are arias of unusually varied lengths whose scale and design are dictated by nothing other than the needs of the situation.)

Gluck rationalized the concept of opera. Following the reforms of Gluck, the basic dramatic unit in opera was not a single recitative-aria pairing but was often an entire scene allowing for ensemble and choral participation. In the beginning of the nineteenth century, while the formal aria was by no means absent, the typical unit of organization was a larger section, in which recitative, arioso, instrumental sections and choral passages might all occur. It, however, almost always leads

up to a formal musical number (either an aria or an ensemble). In summary, seventeenth century opera stressed words but eighteenth century opera stressed music (and nineteenth century opera stressed action).

Gluck is the first composer where music is fully representative of the classic style of the late eighteenth century. Spontini carried further the seriousness in opera established by Gluck. Gluck's reforms influenced Mozart, but until Berlioz and Wagner, he did not have a true successor. Most people think of Mozart as the great symphonic writer (Symphony No. 40), or the composer of beautiful piano concertos but he was a truly operatic composer. His 22 operas include *Idomeneo*, *Die Entführung aus dem Serail*, *Le nozze di Figaro*, *Don Giovanni*, *Così fan tutte*, *La clemenza di Tito* and *Die Zauberflöte*. He was not a reformist but a natural opera composer. His main contribution to the operatic form was the operatic finale. In his operas, the final scene usually consists of all main characters singing altogether (not necessarily the same thing) leading to a grand climax. This was so effective that almost all composers use it since then.

With growing Romantic spirit and because of the violent events of the French revolution, the public interest changed from the Gluckian type serious opera to rescue operas and heroic operas (Cherubini's *Medee* [1797], Mehul's *Joseph* [1807] and Spontini's *La Vestale* [1807]). The rescue opera became popular during the war and distress in Europe between the French revolution and the eventual fall of Napoleon (1789-1815). It was a subdivision of opera-comique. Early examples were *Les Rigueurs du Cloître* by Berton (1790), and *Lodoiska* by Cherubini (1791). The first rescue opera staged in Vienna was *Lodoiska* in 1802. Cherubini's *Les Deux Journées* (1800), and Pierre Gaveaux's *Leonore, ou l'Amour conjugal* (1798) provided examples for the classic rescue opera *Fidelio* (1805) by Beethoven. In rescue operas, the principal character is in prison as a result of a political act. The rescue should be achieved by ordinary human characters in a realistic way. Themes deal with survival rather than death. The rescue opera is classified as a Romantic operatic genre rather than Classical. Carl Maria von Weber (1786-1826) is usually credited with having been the father of romantic opera in Germany. In his best-known operas *Der Freischütz* (1821) and *Oberon* (1826), the music is lyrical, rich in tone, and descriptive; themes describe certain characters (predecessor of Wagner's leitmotives); and music is fused with words and action (rather than being a series of arias).

The following trend was the Grand Opera which was initiated by Spontini in Paris (*La Vestale*, 1807). Meyerbeer (1791-1864) maintained the grand opera tradition of Spontini. He was the most successful composer of this type (*Les Huguenots*, *L'Africaine*, etc.). This tradition was somehow restricted to Paris perhaps because the visual spectacle was so important in French opera but not so prominent in Italy.

The main opera genres in the eighteenth century were the Italian opera seria and opera buffa and the French tragedie-lyrique and opera comique. The equivalents

of opera buffa (or opera comique) were singspiel in Germany and ballad opera in England. The nineteenth century Romantic opera was a result of cross-influence between Italian and French styles, intermixing of serious and comic genre characteristics and the absorption of traits from contemporary symphonic music. The main sources of Romantic opera lay in the comic opera traditions. Romantic opera drew its dramatic immediacy, sentimentality and freedom from stereotyped musico-dramatic conventions, use of popular (folk-like) material and its preference for subjects drawn from contemporary life or recent history. Italian opera in the nineteenth century remained a 'number opera', and division of the drama into clear-cut forms continued. Choral and orchestral contribution gained importance. The French grand opera was based primarily on plots from recent European history. It was a combination of stage spectacle, music involving large ensemble-choral scene complexes and stunning ballets alongside the usual recitatives, arias, duos, etc. of the traditional opera. It is usually cast in five acts. In the dramatic unit -tableau- of the grand opera, there is no neat alternation of action and repose, as in traditional recitative-*da capo* aria structure, but rather a gradual intensification of the dramatic pace up to a climax. Perfect cadences with structural importance occur only at the end of each tableau. As a result of French operatic ballet tradition, the orchestration is more colorful than its Italian counterpart.

Although the aria remained in favor of opera composers -not necessarily as the unit of dramatic action- throughout the first half of the nineteenth century, Wagner discarded it more or less completely while Verdi continued to use it except in his last two operas (*Otello* and *Falstaff*). In such operas, it is hard to separate an aria from the music as the whole act is the unit of continuous drama. Richard Wagner, the last great reformist in opera history, visualized the form as a union of arts: poetry, drama, music, staging. He renamed the opera as music drama. The uncompromised continuity brought realism in the dramatic form. He is also the creator of leitmotif which by associating a musical motif with a character, idea or event, brings cohesion to the opera. In Wagner's operas, the orchestra became part of the whole drama. It is said that Wagner brought the symphony orchestra to the opera house. Although Wagner emphasized the equality of the arts in his operas, it is the music which is supreme.