

Brief History of Italian Opera

Italian opera is a musical art form that had its beginnings in Florence in the late 1500s. It was based on a number of performance genres that preceded it, including Greek Drama, monody (poems sung by a solo vocalist with single instrument backing) and madrigals (*a cappella* singing by 3-6 harmonizing vocalists).

Madrigals and their many variations were performed at court in between acts of a play – a custom known as *intermezzi* – and tended to be lavish spectacles featuring singing, dancing and elaborate sets.

The 16th Century: The Seeds of Italian Opera

Cristofano Malvezzi (1547–1599) was born in Lucca, Tuscany, but later lived in Florence. There he was *maestro di cappella* at the cathedral and wrote madrigals and numerous *intermezzi* for the Medici family's entertainments. It's speculated that he was a member of the Florentine Camerata, a group of progressive musicians and poets (who, in attempting to recreate the music of ancient Greece, created the first monody, a forerunner of the aria and essentially the genesis of opera).

The 17th Century: Opera is Born

The earliest known opera composition is *Dafne*, written by Jacopo Peri (1561–1633) in 1597. Peri was born in Rome but relocated to Florence to study music. In the 1590s, he met Jacopo Corsi, the leading patron of music in Florence, and they decided to recreate a form of Greek tragedy, following in the footsteps of the Florentine Camerata, which had produced the first experiments in monody. Peri and Corsi invited the poet Ottavio Rinuccini to write a text, and *Dafne* was the result.

Peri's later composition, *Euridice*, written in 1600 with Giulio Caccini, is the earliest surviving opera and was initially performed as part of the celebrations for a Medici wedding, thereby catapulting opera into the mainstream of court entertainment. Peri credited the madrigals of Emilio del Cavalieri as the forerunner of the operatic form.

Claudio Monteverdi (1567–1643)

Claudio Monteverdi was a native of Mantua, Lombardy, who wrote his first opera, *La Favola d'Orfeo* (The Fable of Orpheus), in 1607 for the court. Moving to Venice in 1613, Monteverdi subsequently enriched the performance of opera by adding an orchestra, more lavish costumes and sets, and a more dramatic vocal style. Monteverdi's work, often regarded as revolutionary, marked the transition from the Renaissance style of music to the Baroque.

The Roman Composers

Several decades later, opera had spread throughout the Italian peninsula, the result of touring companies who performed in all the major cities. In Rome, the prelate Giulio Rospigliosi (later Pope Clement IX) was an accomplished writer of poetry, dramas and libretti, as well as what may be the first comic opera. Other prominent Roman composers include Luigi Rossi, composer of two operas (*Il Palazzo Incantato* and *Orfeo* in 1647), Michelangelo Rossi (composer of *Erminia sul Giordano* in 1633 and *Andromeda* in 1638), Marco Marazzoli (composer of *L'Amore Trionfante Dello Sdegno* and various *intermedi*), and Virgilio Mazzocchi (composer of sacred vocal music for the papal chapels). The Roman composers increased the number of characters in their operas, which added to the drama and potential plot twists.

Opera In Venice

The first public opera house, the Teatro di San Cassiano, opened in Venice in 1637. Opera was no longer a court entertainment but a commercial enterprise open to the paying public. Additional opera houses soon opened throughout the city, performing a variety of works during Venice's *Carnivale* season. Claudio Monteverdi wrote three works for Venice's theatres: *Il Ritorno d'Ulisse in Patria* (1640), *Le Nozze d'Enea con Lavinia* (1641) and *L'Incoronazione di Poppea* (1642).

Opera in Europe

Italian touring companies brought opera to other European cities, including Warsaw and Vienna. Several Italian composers made their homes abroad. Poland's Prince Wladyslaw Vasa imported composers from Italy, while a former Italian monk, libretto composer Antonio Cesti, became a member of the court at Innsbruck in 1652. Cesti wrote an opera for the Habsburg court in 1668, which marked the beginning of Italian operatic dominance north of the Alps. Italian opera became the international style in the hands of composers such as Handel, Gluck and Mozart. Although local composers attempted to write operas in their own languages, this was not to be successful until centuries later.

The 18th Century: *Opera Seria* vs *Opera Buffa*

Towards the end of the 17th century a new genre, *opera seria* (serious opera), became dominant in Europe. This was in response to the popularity of the Neapolitan invention, *opera buffa* (comic opera), that had spread throughout Italy during the mid 1700s. *Opera Seria* aimed for simplicity of style, classical themes, poetic ideals and life affirming values.

Opera Buffa, on the other hand, owed much to farce and the *Commedia dell'Arte*, and featured simple plots, modest scenery, small casts and orchestras, colloquial language, plays on words, action and humor. But all this changed in the second half of the 18th century when playwright Carlo Goldoni and composer Baldassare Galuppi modified the comic opera form to include two to three acts, more complexity of plot and character, and social themes. Goldoni and Galuppi's most famous collaboration is *Il Filosofo di Campagna* (1754). Goldoni later collaborated with composer Niccolò Piccinni to create another new genre called *opera semiseria*, which typically featured two *buffo* characters, two serious characters and two in-between. Additionally, the one-act *farsa* (farce) was a condensed version of a comic opera that gradually evolved into a genre in its own right.

German composer Christoph Willibald Gluck later simplified *opera seria* in an attempt to avoid the traditional vocal embellishments and emphasis on spectacle. He advocated that the music must be subservient to the drama. Weber, Mozart and Wagner were all influenced by his approach. Mozart wrote a series of comedies, including *Così Fan Tutte*, *The Marriage of Figaro* and *Don Giovanni* (with Lorenzo Da Ponte) which remain among the popular operas today, but he was less successful when writing *opera seria*.

The 19th Century: The Romantic Period

In the early 19th century composer Gioacchino Rossini (1792–1868) modified the dramatic excesses which typified the theater of his era to initiate opera's Romantic period. His first success was an *opera buffa*, *La Cambiale di Matrimonio* (1810), followed by *The Barber of Seville* and *La Cenerentola*. He also wrote serious opera, including *Otello* (1816) and *Guilliam Tell* (1829).

Other notable Romantic Opera composers include:

Vincenzo Bellini (1801–35) was born in Catania, Sicily, and known for his long-flowing melodies. Bellini is considered the quintessential composer of *bel canto* opera.

Gaetano Donizetti (1797–1848) was born in Bergamo, Lombardy, but wrote in Rome, Milan and Naples. Donizetti achieved some popular success in the 1820s but became famous throughout Europe when his *Anna Bolena* premiered in Milan. *L'Elisir d'Amore*, a comedy produced in 1832, is considered one of the masterpieces of 19th-century *opera buffa*, as is his *Don Pasquale* (1843). *Lucia di Lammermoor* (1835), is his most famous opera, and one of the high points of the *bel canto* tradition.

Giuseppe Verdi (1813–1901) was one of the most influential composers of the 19th century. Verdi experimented with musical and dramatic forms, and transformed the whole nature of operatic writing during his career. In 1877, he created *Otello* which is described by critics as the finest of Italian romantic operas. Verdi's last opera, *Falstaff* (1893), defied convention by using the patterns of ordinary speech.

The 20th Century

Giacomo Puccini (1858–1924) wrote some of the greatest Italian operas of the 20th century, including *Manon Lescaut*, *La Bohème*, *Tosca*, and *Madame Butterfly*. Born in Lucca in Tuscany, he enrolled in the Milan Conservatory in 1880. *Manon Lescaut* (1893), his third opera, was his first great success. *La Bohème* (1896) is considered one of his best works as well as one of the most romantic operas ever composed. It is, together with *Tosca*, one of the world's most popular operas. *Madame Butterfly* (1904) was initially panned, but was reworked to become another of his most successful operas. Puccini also wrote orchestral pieces, sacred music, chamber music and compositions for piano and voice.

Italian opera remains a popular form of entertainment throughout the world, with works by its most eminent composers being performed every day on a stage somewhere. The Three Tenors brought opera to the attention of the general populace, and many of us changed our minds about what this music had to offer. Whether we understand the lyrics or not, pieces like *Nessun Dorma* can affect us in a way that other music can't. In that moment, a long dead composer reaches across time and touches our souls.