

BAROQUE OPERA

INTRODUCTION: IMMEDIATE RISE IN POPULARITY

The emergence of opera in the late Renaissance/Early Baroque eras saw an immediate rise in popularity right from the first operas performed. Opera did not remain confined to court audiences for long; the emergence of the large numbers of ticket sales in Venice showed that the public hungered for this type of performance. Claudio Monteverdi's last two operas were composed for the Venetian theater; his most important follower Francesco Cavalli helped spread opera throughout Italy. These early operas blended broad comedy with tragic elements, sparking the first of opera's many reform movements.

Before such elements were forced out of opera seria, many libretti had featured a separately unfolding comic plot as sort of an "opera-within-an-opera." One reason for this was an attempt to attract members of the growing merchant class, newly wealthy, but still less cultured than the nobility, to the public opera houses. These separate plots were almost immediately resurrected in a separately developing tradition that partly derived from the commedia dell'arte, (as indeed, such plots had always been) a long-flourishing improvisatory stage tradition of Italy. Just as intermedi had once been performed in-between the acts of stage plays, operas in the new comic genre of "intermezzi", which developed largely in Naples (city in Italy) in the 1710s and '20s, were initially staged during the intermissions of opera seria. They became so popular, however, that they were soon being offered as separate productions.

ITALIAN OPERA

OPERA SERIA

The libretti of the poet Metastasio helped define opera seria which was the leading form of Italian opera until the end of the 18th century. Opera seria was elevated in tone and highly stylized in form, usually consisting of "secco" recitative interspersed with long "da capo" arias. These afforded great opportunity for virtuosic singing and during the golden age of *opera seria* the singer really became the star. The role of the hero was usually written for the castrato voice as well as female sopranos; these performers were much sought after for the power and control of their voices. Italian opera set the Baroque standard. Italian libretti were the norm, even when a German composer like Handel found himself writing for London audiences. Italian libretti were also important in the Classical period. Italian libretti remained dominant in the classical period as well, for example in the operas of Mozart, who wrote in Vienna near the century's close. Leading Italian-born composers of opera seria include Alessandro Scarlatti, Antonio Vivaldi and Porpora.

BEL CANTO OPERA

Bel canto means "beautiful singing." The term has several different meanings and interpretations.

FRENCH OPERA: TRAGEDIE LYRIQUE

France was the only country that did not follow the rise of Italian opera, which spread all over Europe. Instead, French composers set out to fashion their own national style (strong sense of nationalism). Using their traditions of court ballet and classical tragedy, they created their own style of opera, the tragedie lyrique, which featured much dance and choral writing. Jean-Baptiste Lully was the most important composer of the tragedie lyrique. Lully's operas used expressive recitative which matched the contours of the French language. Lully's most important successor was Jean-Philippe Rameau, who composed several tragedies en musique (musical tragedies), as well as numerous works in other genres, such as opera-ballet.

ENGLISH OPERA: SEMI-OPERA AND MASQUE

In England, opera came from, in part, the jig, an afterpiece which came at the end of a play. The jig consisted of dialogue set to music arranged from popular tunes, and anticipated the ballad operas of the 18th century. The approach of the English Commonwealth closed theaters and made it difficult for those in opera and the theater to further the establishment of English opera. The English Restoration allowed foreign musicians to settle and write and compose in England.

Henry Purcell was a leading composer of English Baroque opera. Rather than writing in strict opera style, he wrote in semi-opera format, where isolated scenes and masques (forms of courtly entertainment) are contained within the structure of a spoken play. He was rarely able to develop his characters through song due to the main characters of the play generally not being involved in the musical scenes. Purcell's aim was to establish serious opera in England, which ended with his early death.

OPERA CROSSOVER: GERMAN OPERA: SINGSPIEL

Opera crossover occurred in Germany in order to appeal to a new audience. The German answer to ballad opera was Singspiel, a sung play. Singspiel is presented with spoken dialogue between the folklike tunes. From this tradition of song and speech the European operetta evolved, which paved the way for American musical theater as we know today.

SOCIETAL CHANGES: BEGINNING OF OPERA BUFFA

Opera buffa took place as a result of the social changes in the 18th century; these changes took place all over Europe. The shift in opera was large; it became outdated and unrealistic. As a result, there were two distinct groups of people: ones that favoured the traditional French court opera and those who favoured Italian comic opera, called "opera buffa", which was new and more realistic. Opera buffa was known for its expressive melody and natural sentiment and did not use contrapuntal style as did opera seria.