

THE BAROQUE ERA

VOCAL

OPERA

Baroque opera developed from the stories of ancient Greek tragedy. Italian musicians sought to express the emotion and depth of these Greek tragedies and thus integrated them into their own modern form, the opera.

There are certain things that make up an opera. The music, orchestra, libretto, performers, costuming, and stage design (complete with scenery and lighting). There would almost always be some sort of solo part, whether it be a solo aria, duet, or trio. The opera would open with the overture, the instrumental piece that the orchestra would play to introduce the performance. Along with the orchestra a chorus was also present in the opera.

Italian Opera

Florentine Opera

At the end of the 1500s, a group of Florentine noblemen wanted to bring back ancient Greek tragedy. Calling themselves the Camerata, they created the *stil rappresentativo*, or theater style. This was a new style of singing of drama, and, consequently, became the earliest operas. This new form of music developed because composers of the *polyphonic madrigal* style were looking for ways to convey dramatic expression. This new "theater style" became prevalent and was used consistently in opera.

Roman Opera

In the 1630s, Rome became the center of opera. Roman opera differed from the Italian form in that it focused more on religious subjects than on Greek mythology. Roman opera also employed the use of its chorus to a greater extent. The aria and the *recitative* were beginning to become more distinct and greatly differed from one another. The *intermezzi*, a comedic interlude between acts, would be the model for the future comedic opera style.

Venetian Opera

Venice became the center of Italian opera in the early to mid 1600s. In 1637, the first public opera house, the Teatro San Cassiano, opened its doors in the city of Venice.

The Venetian opera had its own special attributes. It used less choral and orchestral music and placed more emphasis on formal arias as well as on elaborate stage machinery. The *bel canto*, or "beautiful singing" style, started to appear. This style placed more focus on vocal elegance than on dramatic expression. Two final characteristics of venetian opera were its complex and improbable plots and the prototype of its overture, which was a short instrumental fanfare performed at the beginning of the opera.

Neopolitan Opera

European opera was dominated by the Neopolitan opera form during the later 1600s and early 1700s. During this period, operas became more artificial and formalized from the dramatic standpoint. An A-B-A sectional structure, called the *da capo* aria, and a *siciliana*, another aria in a minor key with six-eight meter and slow tempo, were widely used. As far as other components of the Neopolitan opera, the orchestra's role was greatly diminished and the chorus was almost

nonexistent. Recitatives were now being used, although they did not hold the same level of importance as the aria. The recitativo secco, or dry recitative, which had a declamatory melody with sparse continuo accompaniment, and the recitative accompagnato, which used and orchestral accompaniment were featured.

A compromise between these two main types of musical form, the aria and the recitative, emerged in the creation of the arioso. Male sopranos, or castratti, were the "superstars" of opera, with their showy and often improvisational use of vocal technique. The sinfonia, or Italian overture, was developed with a fast-slow-fast scheme. It would later develop into what is now known as the classical symphony.

French Opera and Ballet

French opera didn't develop until the second half of the 1600s. It was inspired by popular French dramas and from court ballet. The French took opera and made it their own, by putting unique characteristics into the basic Italian opera's mainframe. The French overture became common. It placed a unique spin on the traditional overture. It was made up of two repeating sections; the first was in slow tempo and dotted rhythm, while the second was in lively tempo and fugal texture.

French opera also made less use of virtuosity and paid attention to the accentuation of the literature. It used shorter and simpler dance-like airs, more expressive and melodic recitatives, and put greater importance on the drama. It also added ballet and increased the use of the orchestra.

BALLET

During the Renaissance, it was typical in France for court dances with scenery and costumes to take place. This was an early form of ballet. However, the first actual "ballet" or extant ballet didn't occur until 1581. It was called the Ballet Comique de la Reine. It is important to note that in the beginning, royalty would take part in the ballet, a tradition that started at the court of King Louis XIV at Versailles. Additionally, Lully and Moliere worked together to create a new form of ballet, the Comedie-ballet, a combination of a play and ballet. Beginning with Lully, ballets were entered into operas. He called this tragedies-lyriques or opera-ballets.

OPERA IN ENGLAND

English Opera never advanced the popularity it had in both France and Italy. Since Italian operas were typically performed in the city of London, the English did not feel the need to make their own operatic form. Instead, they were more involved in theater music forms, especially that of the Masque, Incidental and Entr'acte.

Masque

A Masque was an extravagant play performed privately for nobility. It was a play based on an allegory or mythology and had songs, dances, poetry, sometimes recitatives, and instrumental pieces.

Incidental and Entr'acte music

Incidental music was composed to be played during the action scenes in plays. Entr'acte music was to be performed between acts or scenes in a play, with instrumental pieces called curtain tunes or act tunes. Some incidental and entr'acte music was so complete and developed in some works, that the play could almost be seen as a true opera.

COMIC OPERA

The opera seria was little too serious for some, and, consequently, the comedic opera appeared in the early 1700s as a way to lighten the emotions of the time. In it, parody, satire, and humor were present.

Comedic opera had some general characteristics. Spoken dialogue replaced the recitatives of serious opera, except in Italian comic opera. The characters, aria texts, and melodies of serious operas were often parodied, and subjects were now light, frivolous, and humorous. Small ensemble groups and choirs were used at the conclusion of acts. Commonplace characters replaced the exalted or heroic figures of serious operas and popular tunes replaced the dramatic and formal arias.

Some famous types of comedic opera are the Italian opera buffa, the French opera comique, and the English ballad opera.

VOCAL CHAMBER MUSIC

This was a form of music that was non-theatrical less important than opera, and composed for a few performers and an intimate audience in a small room.

Solo Song

Solo song was vocal music that was a solo piece for one performer. By the 17th century, a huge number of solo songs had developed. This form was most famous in Spain, England, Germany, and Italy. Often, it would have lute accompaniment to go along with the performer's voice.

Chamber Cantata

The Chamber *cantata* developed after 1650. It was a non-theatrical composition, short in length, and based on texts of a narrative character. It was written for one or two solo voices with an accompaniment by the basso continuo. It had secco recitatives alternating with da capo arias, usually two or three of each.