

## Brief History of Western Opera

An art form that has existed for over 400 years, classical opera originated in Florence, Italy in the 1590s (i.e., towards the end of the Italian Renaissance). Jacopo Peri, a member of the Florentine Academy (*Accademia Fiorentina*) is thought to have composed the first opera "**Daphne**", little of which remains today. However, Claudio Monteverdi's "**Orfeo**" remains intact and is thus, considered to be the first opera ever.

As we enter into the Baroque Period (approx. 1600-1744s), composers such as Antonio Vivaldi (Venice), Jean-Baptiste Lully (France) and Henry Purcell, George Friedrich Handel (England) composed operas which are occasionally performed today.

In mid-1700s or the very beginning of the Classical Period, Willibald Gluck (1714-1787) took baroque opera in new directions, expanding the structure, harmony and narratives away from the highly formalized forms that had dominated the previous 150 years. He made the orchestra more integral by developing the "*recitativo accompagnato*" (spoken parts accompanied by full orchestra, rather than by just a continuo or harpsichord). Franz Joseph Haydn and the genius of Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart (1756-1791) carried classical opera to a much higher level. Some of Mozart's operas (e.i, "**The Marriage of Figaro**", "**Don Giovanni**" and "**The Magic Flute**") are wildly popular and standard repertory in all major opera houses today.

In the evolution of opera many consider the great Italian composer Gioacchino Rossini (1792-1868, "**Il Barbiere di Siviglia**" "**La Cenerentola**") to have straddled the Classical and Romantic Periods. He cleverly integrated solo, ensemble and orchestral writing, his sharp character delineation providing an important link between the work of Mozart and that of Giuseppe Verdi (a later Romantic). Rossini together with Gaetano Donizetti (1797-1848, "**Lucia di Lammermoor**", "**Anna Bolena**") and Vincenzo Bellini (1801-1835, "**Norma**", "**I Puritani**") perfected the technique of "*Bel Canto*" (or "Beautiful Singing", where notes in sung arias are given considerable freedom of expression by way of runs, leaps and trills)

The Romantic (or Revolutionary) period (1850s-1920) of opera (also considered its "Golden" period) includes the two titanic composers of all time, Giuseppe Verdi (1813-1901, Italy, "**Nabucco**", "**La Traviata**", "**Rigoletto**", "**Aida**") and Richard Wagner (1813-1883, Germany, "**Tristan und Isolde**", "**The Ring Cycle**", "**Parsifal**"). It is an interesting fact of operatic history that many opera aficionados have considered themselves either "Verdian" or Wagnerian", sadly disregarding one or the other. In fact, both had enormous consequences in the evolution of two different music styles that, to a large extent were the result of strong nationalistic ideas and feelings as unification of Italy and Germany were taking place. After Verdi, Giacomo Puccini (1858-1924) inherited the Romantic mantle of Italian operas. His "**La Boheme**", "**Tosca**", "**Madama Butterfly**" "**The Girl of the Golden West**" have become among the most beloved operas of all times playing in most opera houses every year.

It is noteworthy to indicate that Romantic operas were not the exclusive domain of Italy and Germany, as composers in France (George Bizet, 1838-1875, "**Carmen**", Hector Berlioz, 1803-1869 "**Les Troyens**") and Russia (Pyotr Tchaikovsky, 1840-1893, "**Eugene Onegin**"; Modest Mussorgsky, 1839-1881 and "**Boris Godunov**") also produced remarkably beautiful operas that are among favorites of today's aficionados.

Following Puccini and the end of the Romantics, 20th century composers of Modern and Contemporary Opera works have relied on more intimate and psychological dramas in post- WWI and II societies, in contrast to the emotionally charged themes of the 19th century. Richard Strauss' "**Elektra**" is an early 20th century example inspired by the work of Sigmund Freud. Alban Berg (1885-1935) and Arnold Schoenberg (1874-1951) experimented with dissonance for chilling dramatic effects. Looking for inspiration to ancient cultures and Eastern music from India, Japan, etc.), as well as minimalism in style are some works by Phillip Glass (1937- , "**Akhenaton**", "**Marnie**") and Benjamin Britten (1913-1976, "**Peter Grimes**"). And so, the evolution of opera continues today and is very much alive!!!

Jose Rafols (notes from Fred Plotkins' Opera 101