

Styles of Opera through History

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What do you know about opera?

You probably know more about opera than you think you do. After all, opera has influenced nearly all other forms of popular entertainment—from Broadway musicals to Hollywood movies, and from television commercials to classic cartoons. It's hard to imagine major motion pictures—from *Star Wars* to *The Lord of the Rings*—without the Wagnerian, operatic sound of their passionate musical scores to sweep you away.

When it comes to the ultimate sensory experience, nothing feeds your ears, eyes, mind, and heart more than opera. Given today's multimedia-craving culture, no wonder this all-in-one performance art continues to be popular. But before you run out to discover the thrill of opera for yourself, it pays to do a little homework first to enhance your knowledge and enjoyment of what you're about to see. Read on.

Early Opera 1597-1780

Opera is born as Italian philosophers and artists in Florence attempt to revive the combination of poetry, music, and stage visuals that they believe characterized the theater of ancient Greece. They did not have a name for this new art-form—putting all the arts on stage at the same time—so they called it “work”; and the Italian word for “work” is “Opera”. A new multi-media art form was born, rather like the birth of the movies in our own day.

Opera soon spread from Florence to all of Italy and then to the court of Louis XIV in France, as audiences thrilled to the magic of music and poetic drama against the backdrop of beautiful stage-pictures.

The stories are drawn mostly from classical mythology and the history of ancient Greece and Rome. And the poetic theme is almost always Eros—the Joy of Love possessed, the Sorrow of Love lost, and the Glory of singing Love back. The most commonly told of all the opera stories is that of *Orpheus and Eurydice*: Orpheus and Eurydice are in love: she dies, and Orpheus descends into the underworld to sing his

love back to life. This kind of pattern—joy, sorrow, glory—is explored in thousands of operas composed during this period.

Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart 1756-1791

Developments in Opera

Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart:

Opera abandons Greek gods for contemporary plots with flesh-and-blood characters.

The story becomes as important as the music. Every note of music helps tell the story.

The Masterworks

The Marriage of Figaro:

Clever servants outwit their philandering master. A joyous masterpiece of comedy, sentiment, and-on the eve of the French Revolution-liberal politics.

Don Giovanni:

The story of a man who loves then leaves every woman he meets. Hilariously un-PC and terrifying at the same time.

The Magic Flute:

A prince tries to steal a princess away from a wizard, but winds up joining the wizard's brotherhood of light and truth. A fun-filled fairy tale as well as a profound allegory about the Age of Enlightenment.

Bel Canto Opera 1800–1840

Developments in Opera

The Napoleonic period gives birth to a style of opera that uses the beauty and dramatic power of the human voice to tell wildly melodramatic stories.

In serious opera, tragic endings become fashionable; in comic opera or *opera buffa*, slapstick is still king.

Gioachino Rossini, Vincenzo Bellini, and Gaetano Donizetti compete as the hottest composers.

The Masterworks

***Lucia di Lammermoor* by Donizetti:**

A dreamy young woman's unscrupulous brother destroys her love affair, her sanity, and eventually her life. Everyone's favorite *bel canto* tragedy.

***The Barber of Seville* by Rossini:**

Quick-witted Figaro (the same character who appears in Mozart's *The Marriage of Figaro*) helps a lovesick young count steal a girl away from a crotchety old man. One of opera's most beloved comedies.

Giuseppe Verdi 1840–1890

Developments in Opera

The works of Shakespeare, Hugo, and other great Romantics inspire action-packed melodramas filled with fascinating characters.

Italians so love Verdi's catchy tunes that his music becomes the anthem to unify Italy into one nation, and Verdi himself becomes a national hero.

Opera matures; rather than a collection of separate musical numbers, it starts to become a seamless whole in which the music flows from beginning to end, as in Verdi's *Aida*, *Otello*, and *Falstaff*.

The Masterworks

Rigoletto:

An evil duke's stooge, a pathetic jester, seeks revenge on his master, only to kill the only person who loves his innocent daughter. A gripping and grisly exploration of humanity's dark side.

La traviata:

A dying courtesan makes the ultimate sacrifice for the sake of the man she loves. Tuneful, heart-wrenching, and surprisingly modern.

Aida:

An enslaved Ethiopian princess falls in love with her father's enemy, the commander of the Egyptian armies. Majestic and grandiose (and in some productions, filled with camels and elephants).

Richard Wagner 1850-1880

Developments in Opera

A towering visionary and cult figure—reviled by some, worshipped by others—Wagner revolutionizes Western art.

His lengthy operas combine mythology, psychosexual undertones, spirituality, and overwhelmingly emotional music.

He composes music that grows organically and doesn't distinguish between arias, duets, and ensembles.

The Masterworks

Tristan and Isolde:

The tale of frustrated lovers who achieve the ultimate union by dying for love. Arguably the most important opera ever written, Wagner's masterpiece paved the way for modern art.

Die Meistersinger von Nürnberg (The Master Singers of Nuremberg):

In the process of recounting a love story, Wagner's only comedy manages to illustrate art's need for new ideas and respect for older values. Its shoemaker Hans Sachs is one of opera's wisest and best-loved characters.

The Ring of the Nibelung:

The Ring is a mythic, four-opera saga about a world of gods, dwarves, giants, dragons, and everyday humans all fighting for possession of a magic golden ring. Its operas (*Das Rheingold*, *Die Walküre*, *Siegfried*, and *Götterdämmerung*) can total over 16 hours in length.

French Opera 1850–1900

Developments in Opera

French operas are written to ensure the audience will understand every word.

The budget at the Paris Opéra allows for lavish productions with huge orchestras, gargantuan spectacle, and special effects ranging from ice-skating ballets to exploding volcanoes.

The most important composers are Charles Gounod (*Faust*), Georges Bizet (*Carmen*), Jacques Offenbach (*The Tales of Hoffmann*), Jules Massenet (*Manon*, *Werther*), and Claude Debussy (*Pelléas and Mélisande*).

The Masterworks

***Faust* by Gounod:**

Old doctor Faust sells his soul to the devil to win youth and the beautiful Marguerite. This traditional tale is enveloped in Gounod's sweet, poignant, and catchy tunes.

***Carmen* by Bizet:**

Opera's sexiest gypsy *femme fatale* seduces and then spurns a down-and-out soldier, who then kills her. Perhaps the most popular opera ever, with strong characters, intense drama, and instantly recognizable tunes.

Richard Strauss 1900–1920

Developments in Opera

Wagner's heir:

German opera becomes delightfully wicked, decadently romantic, and sometimes downright shocking.

Strauss operas feature big orchestras that produce both deafening noise and pretty waltz tunes. (Don't confuse this Strauss with Johann Strauss, Jr., "The Waltz King," who wrote *Die Fledermaus*.)

His non-operatic work, the fanfare from "Also Sprach Zarathustra," became famous as the music from *2001: A Space Odyssey*.

The Masterworks

Salome:

A wanton princess of ancient Judea becomes sexually obsessed with John the Baptist. Decadence and madness set in the exotic Middle East.

Der Rosenkavalier (The Knight of the Rose):

The Vienna of our dreams that probably never was. A sophisticated comedy in which an older woman gracefully accepts age by surrendering her young lover to the girl who has captured his heart. The girl's ill-mannered fiancé provides a comic touch.

Giacomo Puccini 1858-1924

Developments in Opera

Surely the most popular opera composer of all time, Puccini breaks our hearts with his passionate, poetic, and evocative masterpieces about suffering women. Rivaling Andrew Lloyd Webber's popularity, Puccini offers opera's most accessible, frequently performed and tuneful masterpieces.

His operas tell simple, realistic stories about down-to-earth characters in love. And most importantly, when you come to a Puccini opera, be prepared to shed a tear.

The Masterworks

La bohème:

A moving, high-spirited story of four young artists and a love affair ending in poignant death. Some of the most beautiful love music ever written.

Tosca:

An evil police chief destroys the lives of a famous soprano and her painter boyfriend. A spine-tingling thriller set to a perfectly exciting score.

Madama Butterfly:

The tragic tale of a Japanese girl who commits suicide after being seduced and abandoned by an American sailor. Sad, noble, and beautiful all at once.

Modern Opera 1900–NOW

Developments in Opera

Opera becomes a world-wide art form with great operas emerging from a variety of countries.

Many modern operas concern the anxiety and alienation of twentieth-century life.

Modern opera explores contemporary themes using techniques drawn from twentieth-century musical, visual, and narrative art forms.

The Masterworks

***Wozzeck* by Alban Berg:**

A simple soldier is chewed up and destroyed by the oppressiveness of "the system." Berg's masterpiece uses a raw musical language to supreme emotional and theatrical effect.

***Jenufa* by Leos Janáček:**

A stepmother murders her unwed stepdaughter's child so the girl will be able to marry and have a chance at happiness. One of the great Czech operas.

***Porgy and Bess* by George Gershwin:**

A homeless, crippled man rescues a battered woman from an abusive relationship, only to lose her to a drug dealer. The first great popular opera in America.

***Peter Grimes* by Benjamin Britten:**

A loner in a small British seaside town seeks success and marriage but three of his apprentices die and the town blames him. Suicide is his way out. Britten's first great success and most melodically satisfying opera.