

Music 320 - Nineteenth Century

Opera to 1850

Italy

- State of Opera at end of 18th Century: 2 categories:
 - **Opera seria**: Plots using ancient history or myths, emphasis on moral choices; music is just recit and da capo (exit) arias; few ensembles or choruses
 - **Opera buffa**: plots about real, present-day people; complications for the sake of comedy
 - Late in 18th C, some merging of the two, e.g. Don Giovanni: has comic and serious elements, ends with a moral; music is different for different kinds of characters
- **Gioacchino Rossini** (1792-1868) is culminating figure for the 18th century style
 - A child prodigy: sang in choir from age 10; started singing opera and accompanying on piano by age 12; wrote first opera age 14
 - By age 20, had his first opera performed at [La Scala](#) in Milan (summit of any opera composer's career)
 - Rossini's operas are the culmination of the Neapolitan style, **not romantic operas**.
 - Keys to success: great gift for melody, flair for stage effect
 - His operas were both serious and comic, but he is remembered for comic ones
 - Masterpiece is **Barber of Seville** (1816):
 - Musical characteristics: wide variety of melody types; clear phrasing; spare texture; clean orchestration; pungent rhythms; harmonic scheme that was not complex but still original: liked to use mediant keys juxtaposed against tonic
 - ensembles (very characteristic of comic opera) used to heighten comic effect;
 - Moved to Paris in 1824; produced French versions of some of his earlier operas, also wrote his one French Grand Opera, **Guillaume Tell** (1829)
 - Definition of **French Grand opera**: commissioned by *Academie Royale de la Musique* for presentation at Paris Opera; serious opera on historical subject; set completely to music (French comic opera had spoken dialogue)
 - William Tell was as close as Rossini came to romanticism
 - Rossini's **overtures**: have slow introduction with fast main section in shortened version of sonata allegro (development is just a short transition back to tonic); then a faster coda, usually marked *piu mosso*
 - Arias are similar to overtures in structure: usually start with slow intro, then allegro section, then *piu mosso* coda with lots of virtuosity.
 - Rossini didn't use many solo *da capo* arias, instead had scene complexes that included series of short arias.
 - Rossini called himself the last of the classicists. He quit writing opera at age 37
- **Vincenzo Bellini** (1801-35): Italy's closest thing to a romantic.

- Wrote almost exclusively opera, all serious.
- Died age 34; small output of 9 operas (Rossini and Donizetti had each written 30 by that age).
- Bellini had strong commitment to the “perfect union of words and music.” Result was recitatives were more flexible than his contemporaries’; also made dramatic scenes extraordinarily intense
- Known for beautiful arching melodies in *Bel Canto* style
- Masterpiece is *Norma*
- **Gaetano Donizetti** (1797-1848).
 - Very prolific: about 70 operas, also wrote chamber and orchestral works, church music
 - Wrote some operas while in military, they became so popular that in 1822 he was discharged and was free to pursue musical career
 - Just a few operas are still performed:
 - **Comedies:** *Elixir of Love* (1832), *Daughter of the Regiment* (1840), *Don Pasquale* (1843);
 - **serious operas:** *Lucia di Lammermoor* (1835), *Lucrezia Borgia* (1839)
 - Donizetti was very interested in English history, wrote several operas on English historical subjects and characters
 - Not the artist that Bellini was, but more lively; music is very lusty, vigorous, energetic. Also understood how to produce good theatrical effects
 - Some accuse him of “writing to formula” (cookbook approach)
 - The formula is called ***Cantabile-Cabaletta***: presents a scene in several sections:
 - 1) orchestral statement
 - 2) vocal statement
 - 3) orchestral or orch + choral interlude
 - 4) literal repetition of vocal solo
 - 5) *piu mosso* coda. Final section is called *cabaletta*; usually rapid tempo.
 - Structure can extend over protracted period.
- **Giuseppe Verdi** (1813-1901) composed for 60 years; operas between 1838-93 (55 yrs)
 - First big success was ***Nabucco***, performed at *La Scala* 1842
 - Recognized downfall of “cavatina opera” (formulaic approach) and tried to get away from that
 - Continued Donizetti and Bellini’s attempts to blur distinction between aria and recitative (*arioso* in place of recitative with more lyrical melody but still rapid text declamation)
 - Almost all Verdi’s operas are tragedies, but deal with real-life subjects and people (unlike tragedies of previous ages)
 - Verdi was writing during an important political movement in Italy: the “***Risorgimento***” was the movement to unify Italy. Verdi is sometimes said to have led the *Risorgimento* from the opera pit; he included songs from “The Young Italy” revolutionary movement in some of the operas; disguised it as “village band” music.
 - Verdi’s early period ended with the suppression of unification 1849; his operas of early 1850’s are the culmination of his early career: ***Il Trovatore***, ***Rigoletto***, and ***La Traviata***. They also are showing things that will happen in the future

- *Il Trovatore* and *Rigoletto* are 'action dramas' dealing with violent acts; will grow into **Verismo** opera later
- *La Traviata* is psychological drama