

Music 320

Opera after 1850

Italy: Giuseppe Verdi (1813-1901)

- Late Operas benefited from exposure to others, e.g. Paris, Wagner
- After *La Traviata*, did lots of revising of earlier works, wrote just a few new ones between 1855 and 1871, but did lots of experimenting:
 - more adventurous harmony
 - solo, ensemble and chorus are very freely combined; duets become more prominent than solo arias, and free of cantabile-cabaletta
 - orchestral writing includes use of “reminiscence motives” (not used quite the same as Wagner’s: fewer of them, used less often, but it is the same idea). One example is a tune from overture to *Aida* that recurs in one of *Aida*’s arias; melody is associated with *Aida*’s love for Radames
- These experiments culminate in ***Aida*** (1871). This opera incorporates some of what he learned in Paris: the heroic quality and sound drama of French Grand Opera plus Italian traits of clear character development, pathos, wealth of melodic, harmonic and orchestral color.
 - Written for opening of Suez Canal/Opening of Opera House in Alexandria. Delayed by Franco-Prussian War.
 - Plot: Egypt in time of Pharaohs; *Aida* is daughter of King of Ethiopia, prisoner of Egyptians, made slave to daughter of the Pharaoh. The 2 princesses get along for a while until they find out both are in love with Radames, an Egyptian army officer. He prefers *Aida*, they exchange secret vows, but Pharaoh awards his daughter to R as victory prize. *Aida*’s father persuades her to get info from Radames on position of Egyptian army; he gives it without realizing, is overheard, condemned to death by suffocation in subterranean vault. *Aida* sneaks into it before it is sealed, they rejoice that though separated in life, they can be united in death.
 - Music:
 - Very continuous texture and action; true recitative is very scarce, rather arioso with flexible accomp.
 - OVERTURE opens with *Aida*’s love theme; harmony takes a few twists
 - another recurring theme from overture is “ominous descending figure”
 - high string ensemble is almost a signature of Verdi (think *Traviata*)
 - Listen to overture: *Aida* tune comes back at ~2:30
 - There are other recurring themes, used more systematically than in previous works
- After *Aida*, 16 years went by before Verdi wrote another opera. During this time, some other important operas were Wagner’s *Ring* and *Parsifal*; Bizet’s *Carmen*; Verdi learned from them

- Verdi's final 2 operas were: **Otello** (1887, tragedy), **Falstaff** (1893, comedy); each is his apotheosis of the genre. **Arrigo Boito** (1842-1918) was librettist for both
 - Otello uses elements from French and German Opera: French aspect is Shakespearean subject (favored in Grand Opera); German is that the musical texture is similar to Wagner's endless melody.
 - Falstaff's greatest strength is Ensemble (most characteristic aspect of comic opera in 19th century). Falstaff also uses Wagner as model:
 - all elements are equal (plot, music, orchestra etc.)
 - music is continuous (divisions between set numbers imperceptible)
 - thematic reminiscence is used (not really leitmotives)
 - aria is virtually replaced by ensembles
 - Last scene is typical: everyone on stage, dialogue very rapid, last minute plot points resolved, and moral ("The traps we lay for others are quite often the cause of our own downfall.")

Italy: Verismo: began as a literary movement in Italy, moved into opera. Means "Realism"

- most popular in the last decade of the 19th Century
- stories usually in rural settings, contemporary (late 19th century); characters usually very poor (as opposed to grand characters in earlier operas); not just poor but seamy side of life
- passions run high, leads to violence
- several verist operas were "One-opera composers" e.g. **Mascagni** wrote **Cavalleria Rusticana** (1890), **Leoncavallo** wrote **Pagliacci** (1892).
 - Pagliacci is a tragedy about love, jealousy, murder among band of touring clowns: based on an actual incident. Short opera (70 min), ends with play within a play during which jealous man and supposedly faithless woman are performing before audience; he thinks she's having an affair with another performer, stabs her in front of the audience, then says to them "La Commedia e finita!" (The show is over)

Opera in France: Georges Bizet (1838-75)

- Exoticism and Realism come together in France in **Carmen** (1875)
- Most familiar music of any opera anywhere
- Exotic: Spain seemed very exotic to the French
- Realism is gripping: women's chorus is the Cigarette Factory girls: they smoke, brawl, swear
Carmen is the grittiest of them all, also a gypsy (exotic and unpredictable, bad)
- Original score had **mostly spoken dialogue**; after Bizet died, his friend Ernest Guiraud composed recits to replace most dialogue; that version has become most popular.