

MUS 323/523 Opera History

COMIC OPERA FORMS

Each major European country or region developed its own form of comic opera, with regional characteristics, with certain basic elements in common from place to place:

- broad, low-brow entertainment
- characters from present day, everyday life

Italy had 2 comic forms: **intermezzo** and **opera buffa**

- **Intermezzo**: short play performed between acts of a serious opera
 - In early 18th century, *opera seria* deleted comic characters and plots; gradually these were used in separate productions
 - Intermezzo shows preference for bass voices, reducing use of castrato
 - Most famous intermezzo is **Giovanni Battista Pergolesi's** (1710-36) *La Serva Padrona* (1733)
- **Opera buffa**: full length comic opera, usually in 3 acts
 - More complex plots than intermezzi
 - Range of characters from different social levels; their levels are reflected in the music they sing
 - Important prototype librettist was **Carlo Goldoni** (1707-93; also wrote comic plays); typically had 7 singing roles, range of social strata
 - Goldoni was the "architect" of the **ensemble finale**, which would become very important late in the century. This has most of the cast on stage together; very different from what is usually found in opera seria
 - Italian comic forms are sung throughout; other countries' comic forms all have **spoken dialogue**

France: *opéra comique*

- Used spoken dialogue instead of recitative.
- In 1700 there were **comedies en vaudevilles**: spoken plays with popular tunes or *vaudevilles* (with new texts added); also dancing, instrumental pieces and sometimes parodies of Lully's operas.
 - These were performed at *Theatres de la Foire* (fair or carnival): all subsumed under *opera comique* in 1715
 - Fair Theaters were very popular; the Paris Opéra and the Comédie-Française (venue for spoken comedies) were the government-sponsored "monopolies," but feared the competition and tried to restrict *opéra comique*
- Another French controversy: **Querelle (or Guerre) des Bouffons**: an argument over which was a better language for singing: French or Italian.
 - The **Comédie-Italienne** was re-established right after Louis XIV died, providing venue for Italian operas in Paris
- Italian models influenced the *Opéra Comique* in mid-century; **Jean-Jacques Rousseau** composed an Italian-style intermède in 1752, just like an Intermezzo, but in French. Sung throughout

- Another Italian influence: gradually vaudevilles (simple popular songs) were replaced by “**ariettes**,” newly-composed Italian style songs, often in *da capo* format. Sometimes referred to as **Comédies mêlées d’ariettes**: these were spoken plays with added Italian-style songs
- In 1762 *Comédie Italienne* and *Opéra Comique* merged
- Through 18th century, *opéra comique* gradually took on more serious plot points or plots dealing with social issues
- Toward end of century, a new genre known as **Rescue Opera** developed, with added “romantic” adventures
 - In Rescue Opera, a major character is rescued from natural disaster or villain
 - Popular in France in last decade of 18th century, spread to Italy and Germany for brief periods
 - Most famous example is Beethoven’s **Fidelio** (1805): in German but typical story

England: Ballad opera

- Used spoken dialogue
- Similar to *opéra comique* in that musical portions included some popular tunes, some newly-composed song and some borrowed from operas
- Plots usually reflect English taste for **satire**, esp. political satire. Like French form, Ballad opera gradually became more serious during 18th century
- Most famous example is **The Beggar’s Opera** (John Gay, 1728); a satire on English life, particularly an attack against English government:
 - Characters are criminals in London; action emphasizes criminal activities, lack of any morality
- **Beggar’s Opera** made ballad opera so popular that London audiences preferred the genre to serious opera; serious opera collapsed, Handel turned to writing oratorios

Germany: Singspiel

- There was general disapproval of opera in Germany: itinerant troupes were seen as similar to other traveling entertainers, e.g. charlatans
- In first half of century, musical/theatrical entertainment remained an event for fair seasons, with some translations or adaptations of comic operas from Italy, France or England
- In the later 18th Century, the **Singspiel** developed: a spoken play with simple songs in German and comic or “sentimental” plot. Late in century, plots turned to exotic and supernatural
- Northern Germany: Singspiel gradually became more serious or sentimental; eventually merged in 19th century with German Romantic opera
- In south (e.g. Vienna), more farcical type was popular; this is the kind used by Mozart