

## The beginnings and development of Italian Opera

Opera began in Italy but it appears that nobody agrees exactly who invented it.

In the late 16<sup>th</sup> century there was a group of Florentine intellectuals and musicians known as the 'Camerata de Bardi' who met at Bardi's palace in Florence. Included were the musician Jacopo Peri and poet Ottavio Rinuccini. Classical Greek drama was of great importance to them and they were persuaded by another member of the group, who was considered the greatest authority on Greek drama that not only was the chorus part sung but also the whole text. Of course nobody really knew how Greek drama was performed.

In 1597 Jacopo Peri (1561-1633) and Ottavio Rinuccini wrote *Dafne* which can be said to be the first opera although the word opera did not come into use at that time. Most of the music is lost but *Euridice* written around 1600 survives.

Claudio Monteverdi (1567-1643) is often perhaps incorrectly credited with having written the first opera *La Favola d'Orfeo* performed in 1607 at Mantua. It was a great success and a repeat performance was arranged very quickly. If not the first opera *Orfeo* is regarded as the first work to show the potential of this new art form which combined singing, dance, theatrical effects and drama.

The part of Orpheus was sung by a castrato. Castrati were used for soprano and alto parts until the mid 18<sup>th</sup> century especially in Catholic countries. It was also considered that high voices were more suitable for representing kings and heroes. (**extract Orfeo part 1: 5-9 mins**)

Monteverdi wrote another opera *L'Arianna* in 1608. However, he had long wanted to move from Mantua and finally in 1612 he was able to move to Venice to become the maestro di cappella at St Mark's. Monteverdi wrote sacred and secular music as well as ballet and opera.

In 1637 the first public opera house in Venice was opened and this is probably when the term opera was first used. Venetian mercantile wealth was responsible for the funding of it. Prior to that opera was performed in palaces. A revival of *L'Arianna* was performed and Monteverdi wrote three new operas.

The last opera Monteverdi wrote was the *Coronation of Poppeae* in 1642 and it is the first opera to use actual historical figures. The subject is Nero and his desire to set aside his wife Octavia and to marry his manipulative mistress Poppeae. It is violent and full of passion and was written when Monteverdi was 76. The opera was performed in Venice at carnival time and was a huge success. (**Extract Coronation etc Part 1: 17-18 Danielle de Niese soprano & Sarah Connolly – mezzo soprano**)

There were now two forms of opera; opera seria for the nobility and opera buffa for the middle classes. Opera seria was based on classical texts whereas opera buffa owed more to the Commedia dell'Arte.

By the end of the 17<sup>th</sup> century there were sixteen new opera houses in Venice as opera was so popular. I found this eyewitness account very interesting.

"The Operas, which are performed every day, begin at 7:00 in the evening and last until 11:00 at night, after which most people go to the fancy-dress ball. Foreigners should not be ashamed to go to the orchestra section at the opera. Even princes, counts, and other persons of quality occasionally take seats there because you have a better view than in the boxes. Moreover, everyone wears a mask. But whatever you do, do not do anything wrong, because the people in the boxes, especially the upper ones, are at times so insolent they will do anything -- even spit -- particularly when they see someone using a small candle to read the libretto. The most insolent of all are the...common folk, who stand below the boxes on all sides. They clap, whistle, and yell so loudly that they drown out the singers. They pay no attention to anyone, and they call this Venetian freedom...It is customary to give the fellow who shows you to your place a few sols to keep him happy."

However Naples had now become the centre of Italian opera as the King of Naples built an opera house in his palace. Scarlatti (1660-1725) during the period of 1684-1702 wrote over 40 operas which were first produced at the Viceregal Palazzo Reale and then the public theatre of San Bartolomeo. Scarlatti's operas were in three acts in contrast to the five of the Venetian school. Venetian opera was based on mythological characters and stage machinery whereas Scarlatti's subject was the characterization of kings, lovers, servants and confidants. Scarlatti also developed the overture for opera into the three part form allegro-adagio-allegro which can be seen to be the predecessor of the classical symphony. Handel (1685 – 1759) spent time in Naples and was greatly influenced by the Italian opera he saw performed there. Under George I's patronage Handel was able to bring to London audiences his version of opera seria.

Handel continued the development of the da capo aria. The da capo aria is in the aba form. The singer sings the first part (a) which is one idea. He then sings the second part (b) which is a new idea and then returns to (a) but is now expected to add ornamentation. (**Extract Julius Caesar Part 1: 21-22 & 25-26**)

Another non Italian Mozart (1756 – 1791) now enters the operatic stage. Mozart as a child prodigy had written two Italian operas by the time he was 14. Mozart as an adult wrote operas which still form an important part of the operatic repertoire. For example opera seria *Idomeneo*, opera buffa *Le Nozze di Figaro*, opera buffa, dramma giocoso *Don Giovanni* and singspiel *The Magic Flute*. Dramea giocoso is a sub genre of opera buffa. Dramea giocoso will have tragic as well as comic tones. Singspiel is literally a songplay. It is today used to describe 18th and early 19<sup>th</sup> century light or comic operas with spoken dialogue, of which Mozart's *The Abduction from the Seraglio* and *The Magic Flute* are examples. Italian opera was in Mozart's time already popular in Vienna but Emperor Josef II had set up a company to perform in German rather than Italian. It was called the Nationalsingspiel. Mozart's *Seraglio* was at the time its greatest success. Beethoven also wrote singspiel operas, *Fidelio* is a prime example and with the legitimising of this genre by the likes of Mozart and Beethoven the path was paved for Richard Wagner and the romantic German opera of the 19<sup>th</sup> century as well as the operettas of Johann Strauss II and Franz von Suppe.

It was said that the Italians were the masters of vocal music whereas the Germans were known for their instrumental excellence. Mozart can be said to have combined both and in his skill at combining the words, the instrumentation and writing beautiful music to have taken opera to new dramatic heights. (**Extract Marriage of Figaro Part 1: 32-36**)

Gioachino Rossini (1792-1868) was born a year after Mozart's death. He was influenced by Mozart and Haydn and was known as *il tedesco* (the little German) in Bologna as a teenager because of his devotion to Mozart. Rossini was a prolific composer of opera and wrote 40 operas in 20 years both opera seria and opera buffa. Rossini is said to have remarked, 'Give me a shopping list and I will set it to music'.

3The tenor voice was now 'the voice'. Castrati were no longer fashionable. The style of singing for the tenor and soprano was called 'bel canto' (beautiful singing). Singers were stars and needed great virtuosity to meet the demands of the arias that were now written. Rossini as well as Donizetti and Bellini are bel canto composers. Bellini (1801-1835) in particular is renowned for his flowing melodic lines. Bel canto singing started in Italy in the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> century. The Italian language is very fluid and lyrical with its vowels which can be extended when sung, giving the necessary continuous line. Of course breath control and technique also plays its part in achieving the required effortless phrasing and ability to reach the heights without straining.

Rossini is also known for the 'Rossini crescendo' where the singer starts very quietly and gradually sings louder and louder. Probably Rossini's best known opera is *The Barber of Seville*. (**extract Barber of Seville Part 1 46-48** Pietro Spagnoli baritone: 51-52 Joyce DiDonato mezzo: & 55-57 Juan Diego Florez tenor)

Donizetti (1797-1848) like Rossini was a prolific composer of opera and wrote over seventy operas both comic and tragic. *Lucia di Lammermoor* (1835) was a resounding success. He moved to Paris from Naples in 1840 and composed *La fille du Regiment* which was also an immediate success. He was subsequently appointed Court Composer in Vienna. *Don Pasquale* written in 1843 was his last opera. Donizetti dominated the Italian opera scene after Bellini's death up to the success of Verdi's *Nabucco* in 1842. (**Extract: Part 2 6-10 Lucia di Lammermoor** Joan Sutherland, Diana Damrau - soprano)

I am now going to hand over the baton to Nina so thank you for listening and I hope I will be forgiven for this race through musical history and the composers I have omitted.