

Introduction to Opera



What is opera?

An opera is a musical play performed on stage with costumes, scenery and props.

Opera began in Italy in the 16th Century and was performed at court to entertain royalty. It soon became the ideal musical style for celebrating mythological and historical characters and performing to public audiences.



Early operas tell the story of Greek drama and were sung in Italian. Italian dominated the musical form until the 18th Century.

By this time composers across Europe, such as Henry Purcell, were composing operas and establishing their own national traditions.

Now operas are sung in many languages including German, English and Spanish.



This form of vocal music was in contrast to the religious music being composed at the time. Instead of music that was safe and in a style that could be used mainly for church occasions, opera could express a range of strong emotions both musically and in staging, costumes and scenery.



Influential opera composers include:

Giuseppe Verdi - Italian composer whose work covered political themes, Shakespeare and historical and modern settings

Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart - introduced German language texts

Richard Wagner - introduced through-composed style of opera. Famous for his epic Ring Cycle of operas.



Operas consist of solo singers and a chorus. The orchestra that will provide the musical accompaniment to opera singers will consist of strings, woodwind, brass and percussion.



There is no speaking in an opera, only singing. Solo singers perform arias - solo songs that drive the narrative of the opera's story. The chorus will join in for the bigger songs and consist of a SATB choir who will sing mostly in harmony.

The parts that comprise an SATB choir are:

Soprano



Alto



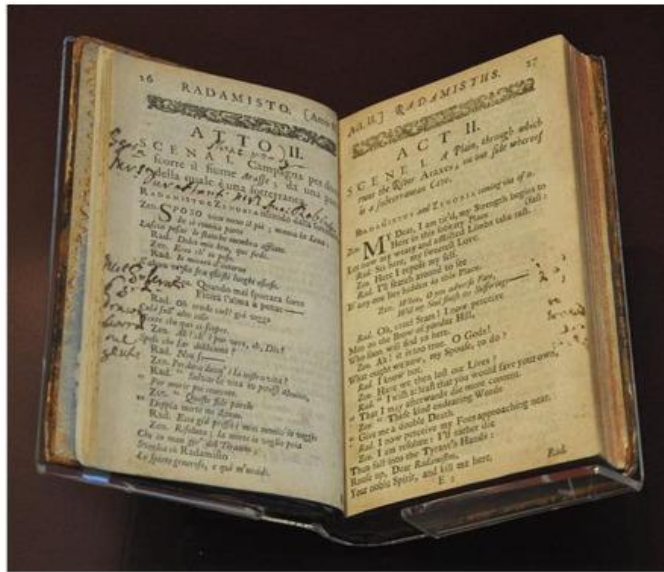
Tenor



Bass



The words of an opera are called the libretto. The libretto tells a story that can be made up or based on real events. Operas can be funny stories, romantic love stories, or sad stories.



A brief history of Opera

Baroque		Classical		Romantic		Modern		Contemporary	
1600	1700	1700	1800	1800	1900	1900	2000	2000	2100

Baroque Period (1600-1725): Opera was created in the early 17th century in Florence, Italy by a group of scholars wanting to emulate the sounds of ancient Greece. By linking existing musical pieces together with sung recitation, they laid the groundwork for what we now know as **Opera**.

This period is known for very **ornate** music (music with added flourishes) and stories about royalty or the gods.

Classical Period (1725-1820): By the eighteenth century the musical drama became the driving force in opera. The most important figure during the Classical Period of opera was Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart. Many of the **libretti** (the text of an opera, usually written by someone other than the composer) he chose reflected the new ideas of the enlightenment that were circulating throughout Europe and the Americas at that time.

This period is known for melodies that are beautiful and easy to hear over a chorded structured harmony. Mozart also expanded the art form's uses of duets, trios, and ensemble singing.

Romantic Period (1820-1900): In the nineteenth century's Romantic Period, opera suddenly fell into categories defined by the nationality of the composer. With this rise of nationalism, every major country in Europe started creating its own unique contributions to the art form.

The three countries with the most influence during this period include Italy, Germany, and France.

Modern Opera (1900-Present) New operas continue to be created around the world and are influenced by world events, literature, as well as other genres of music. In America, composers such as George Gershwin used the sounds of jazz to create his opera *Porgy and Bess*, while Carlisle Floyd was influenced by American literature in his opera *Of Mice and Men*, and John Adams' found inspiration from historic events in his opera *Nixon in China*.

LISTENING ACTIVITY

Listen and compare! Below are examples of operas from the different time periods discussed on the previous page. Describe what you hear, do they sound the same or are there big differences?

Baroque Period Recording example:

Handel's *Giulio Cesare*, Soprano Beverly Sills

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Qk28jl4lihg>

Purcell's *Dido and Aeneas* "When I am Laid in Earth" sung by Soprano Jessye Norman

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jOIAi2XwuWo>

Classical Period Recording example:

Mozart's *Le nozze di Figaro*, Act II finale, Ensemble

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fxm0lkoSMU4>

Mozart's *Così fan tutte*, Trio "Soave sia il vento"

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=f2ESkanjf5s>

Romantic Period Recording example:

Italian: Puccini's *La Boheme*, "Che gelida manina" Tenor Jose Carreras

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eiTHjfmSyQU>

German: Humperdink's *Hansel and Gretel*, duet from Act I

*(please note, the recording is translated into English)

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fX-qQh_PQ0

French: Bizet's *Carmen* "Habanera" Mezzo-Soprano Denyce Graves

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2V9woZuVIO4>

Modern 20th Century Period example:

Gershwin's *Porgy and Bess*, "Summertime" sung by soprano Harolyn Blackwell

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=O7-Qa92Rzbnk>
