Compare and contrast oratorio and opera. Your opinion is valuable. Please expand on what you have read here and elsewhere. Paraphrase the comparison and refer to the listening examples to help make your point. Remember, this lesson extends into the Viennese and Romantic periods. In your answer, consider whether the later operas follow the traditions of the early opera by Monteverdi.

Two new styles of music, oratorio and opera, emerged during the 1600’s, which blended text and emotion in a unique way. The opera was comprised of performers demonstrating their vocal ranges and pushing them to the limits, while instrumental overtures and interludes were woven between verses. Two prominent characteristics of an opera are the arias and the recitative. The arias are “emotionally charged moments” where the character expresses their feeling to the audience. The recitative would produce or tell about an action that led to the character’s emotions. The oratorio shared all these characteristics. The arias and recitative were a prominent part of these compositions, and the singers displayed wide vocal ranges with great emotions.

While they originated around the same time and share similar aspects, there are distinct differences between an opera and oratorio. The biggest difference is that oratorios were based on religious subjects, not the life of everyday people. If one were to simply look at the list of oratorios that Handel wrote, they would notice that each is named after characters from the Christian Bible. The titles are as follows: *Deborah, Esther, Messiah, Samson, Joshua, Solomon,* etc. The recitative set the stage for the Biblical story line, while the arias developed the emotional response to the events that occur. When the emotions reached “sacred” tones, the arias were replaced by a chorus, which was performed by several vocalists. One example of such a chorus is seen in Handel’s *Messiah* chorus, “Hallelujah.” The opera, on the other hand, told dramatic stories and used elaborate staging and costumes for the performances. While earlier oratorios used this play-like style, most were written in concert format without costumes and acting performances. The early operas were serious performances; a place where talented singers could display their skills to the world and be recognized. When one listen’s to Monteverdi’s piece, *L’Orfeo*, the audience can feel the power and intensity in the songs. Early in the piece called “Tu se’ morta, se’ morta, mia vita,” the performer quickly displays his vocal range by singing each syllable as a separate note (known as dry recitative). The oratorio was usually more polyphonic, not highlighting individuals.

Though there are differences between the opera and oratorio, opera itself never had a clear definition. Over the next two centuries, the genre would mold and evolve to encompass many difference types of musical pieces. As I mentioned, the early operas were serious and structured. Then, the “ballad opera” arrived in England, where the pieces were more relaxed and humorous. This led to a decline in popularity for the original Italian operas. In the second half of the 18th century, the reform opera arrived. These styles softened the contrast between the recitative and the arias. These performances sought to seamlessly “blend music, drama, and dance as a theatrical whole.” This style also found competition from the comic operas, which used “folk” songs and popular music to tell their story. While these operas do not demonstrate the serious tones or flamboyant theatrical staging from the early forms, they still follow the similar composition techniques (like arias and recitatives) and display the singer’s vocal range. I believe an opera’s main goal is to feature individuals’ talent in vocal range/control and tell a story through these performances. All these styles fit this criteria and should be classified as operas.