

DT501/1 History of Music: Classical/Romantic

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Lecture 6: Opera/Vocal Music (1)

The Components of Opera

- **Recitative**: Speech-like solo singing without structured melodies and free in rhythm. In 18th century opera its function is to move the action along through passages of dialogue. There are two main types:
Recitativo secco: 'dry recitative' with continuo accompaniment. Used for passages of ordinary dialogue.
Recitativo stromentato: accompanied recitative with orchestra. Used for emotional highpoints.
- **Aria**: a closed, self-contained song for solo voice. Usually in ABA *da capo* form. They function as moments of reflection for the character to express their innermost thoughts.
- **Duet**: a closed, self-contained song for two voices. Often sung by pairs of lovers but may also express conflict.

The Components of Opera

- **Chorus**: a group of singers with more than one singing each part. Usually represents groups of soldiers, nymphs, peasants, priests, etc. that are integral to the story. Can often function as a commentator in the manner of a Greek chorus.
- **Ensemble**: a piece sung by more than one character. Can refer to a duet, trio, quartet. Usually used to refer to part of an opera where several characters are expressing different emotions simultaneously.
- **Overture**: a piece of instrumental music composed as an introduction to the opera. Early overtures function as a call to attention. After Gluck the overture becomes more integral to the drama, containing material that will appear later.
- **The libretto**: 'the little book' containing the words of an opera.

The Emergence of *Opera Buffa* and *Opera Seria*

- As it became a more publicly accessible genre towards the end of the 17th century, operas often contained comic scenes and characters inserted at various points in the drama.
- By the late 1600s several critics began calling for a new purified form of opera to restore it to its dignified classical roots. Librettists began to eliminate comic scenes from opera.
- In the early 1700s two distinct genres begin to emerge in Italy.

Opera seria (serious opera) – a type of opera without the comic relief scenes typical of late 17th century Italian opera.

Opera buffa (comic opera) – emerges as a genre in its own right first in Naples, then Rome and Venice. Spreads to the rest of Europe by 1750 rivalling serious opera in popularity.

Opera Seria's Reforms



- Led by the Arcadian Academy in Rome – a prestigious association of literary and musical connoisseurs. The Arcadians sought to cleanse opera of bawdy or comic scenes and return it to its original ‘classical’ purity.
- The dominant figure who emerged from this reform movement was the Italian librettist and poet Pietro Metastasio (1698–1782) who gave *opera seria* its standard form.
- During the 18th and early 19th centuries Metastasio’s texts were set over 800 times by over 300 different composers.

Characteristics of Metastasian *Opera Seria*

- Favoured plots based on tales from Greek and Roman classical authors such as Homer, Virgil, Ovid, etc. Such subject matter was deemed to impart a 'noble sentiment' – i.e. benevolent, magnanimous rulers – in keeping with the ideology of the ruling aristocracy.
- Formulated plots – generally six main characters (ex. Artaserse)
 - first couple (noble): *primo uomo* (usually castrato), *prima donna* (soprano or castrato)
 - second couple (also noble)
 - the 'remainder': confidants, servants, scheming villains, etc.
- Formulated distinction between arias and recitatives.
 - recitatives: addressed to the characters on stage (operate in clock time)
 - arias: addressed to the audience (operate in internal time). Function as an emotional time-out for the character to reflect.
- Movement from dramatic action (recitative) to emotional reflection (aria).

The Singers

- The central focus of the opera going public was on the virtuoso star singers and castrati rather than the composer.
- Castratos were boys who were castrated usually between the ages of 6 and 8 in order to preserve the alto or soprano ranges of their voice into adulthood.
- Singers were admired for their virtuosic abilities to embellish the vocal line with trills, scales, triplets, appoggiaturas, etc.
- Composers were expected to write music that pandered to the singers demands. In some cases, virtuosos brought showcase arias from other operas and demanded that the composer insert them.
- Arias fell into several standardised types:
 - *aria di bravura*: a showcase aria to display the singers virtuosic abilities.
 - *aria d'affetto*: for moments of introspection, typically full of long-held notes.
 - *aria cantabile*: for tender moments, long lyrical phrases.

Carlo Brochi 'Farinelli' (1705–82)



- The most famous castrato in history active between 1720 and 1737.
- His virtuosity influenced the ornate, florid style of writing in *opera seria* after the 1730s.
- Would often substitute showpiece arias (*pasticcio*) written by his brother Riccardo to display his vocal prowess.
- In 1737 retired from the public stage and entered the service of the Spanish court of Philip V and Ferdinand VI.

The Opera House as a Social Structure

- The audiences for opera were generally a mixture of the aristocracy and upper middle classes who used the venue for social interaction as much as for listening to the music.
- ‘The theatre boxes are, so to speak, rooms for receiving company; indeed, gentlemen go from box to box to pay court to the ladies, and the ladies visit with one another...It is part of good manners to step regularly into each box every evening. The corridors resemble streets; moreover, people play cards in the boxes, eat their evening meal, and the noise is such that one can hardly hear the orchestra. The attention of the audience, while distracted in so many ways, can nevertheless be attracted, and the star singer performing a big aria will be able to instil silence’.

Giacomo Durazzo, *Lettre sur le mecanisme de l’opéra italien* (Florence, 1756)

Further Reform

- By 1750 *opera seria* had long since exhibited something of a disconnect between the stated ideals of the reformers and *opera seria* as practised.
- Composers sought to rid *opera seria* of decorative artificiality and the vanity of star singers and make the unfolding of the drama once again the central aim.
- In keeping with Enlightenment thought the aim was to impart a more naturalistic tone in keeping with the classical ideals of harmony and simplicity.
- In terms of plot, noble themes were retained but divested of heavily ornamented coloratura singing.

Christoph Willibald Gluck (1714–87)



- Studied music and law in Prague and entered the service of Prince Lobkowitz as a chamber musician.
- Studied with Sammartini in Milan. Adopted aspects of the new 'galant' style which stressed homophony over counterpoint.
- Success with *Artaserse* in 1741 followed by a series of successful Italian operas in 1740s.
- Visits London in 1745, toured Germany with an opera troupe between 1746 and 1749.
- Became court composer to Emperor Charles VI in Vienna in 1754.

Christoph Willibald Gluck (1714–87)



- Influenced by reform movement of the 1750s.
- Became embroiled in the intrigues of Count Durazzo who sought to undermine Metastasio's dominant position.
- In *Orfeo ed Euridice* Gluck attempted to subordinate all components of opera to the drama.
- The publication of *Alceste* (1769) contains a preface which states the fundamental principles of reform opera.

Preface to *Alceste* (1769)

When I began to write the music for *Alceste*, I resolved to free it from all the abuses which have crept in either through the ill-advised vanity on the part of the singers or through excessive complaisance on the part of composers with the result that for some time Italian opera has been disfigured and from being the most splendid and most beautiful of all stage performances has been made the most ridiculous and the most wearisome.

I imagined [...] that between the aria and the recitative there should not be too great a disparity, lest the flow of the period be spoiled and rendered meaningless. [...] I believed further that I should devote my greatest effort to achieving a noble simplicity; and I have avoided parading difficulties at the expense of clarity. I have not placed any value on novelty, if it did not emerge naturally from the situation and the expression; and there is no rule I would not have felt in duty bound to break in order to achieve the desired effect.

Preface to *Alceste* (1769), translated by Stewart Thompson.

Orfeo ed Euridice (1762)

- Act 1, scene 1, chorus, Orpheus's recitative.
 - After the overture in C major, the music switches to C minor for the opening chorus. Stately crotchets in the bass, use of trombones. The whole atmosphere is one of restrained grief. Orpheus's entire part reduced to three exclamations of 'Euridice'.
 - The following recitative uses accompanied recitative. Traditionally this was only used in *opera seria* for moment's of high tension to distinguish it from the pattering dialogue of a *recitativo secco*. Here Gluck once again makes a component integral to his 'noble simplicity' ideal. There is no continuo in this opera, no recitativo secco, hence no 'ordinary' dialogue.
- Act II, scene 1 (will be on your listening test)
 - 2 orchestras: The first (oboes, horns, strings, harpsichord and later cornetto and trombones) accompany the ballet and chorus sections in which the Furies block Orpheus's progress. The second (plucked strings – harp, pizzicato strings, harpsichord) imitates Orpheus's playing on the lyre as he attempts to subdue the wrath of the Furies.

Orfeo ed Euridice (1762)

- Listen for the repeated rhythmic motive representing the hostility of the Furies
 - Dramatic use of unprepared diminished and dominant seventh chords in the interjections of the Furies which interrupt Orpheus's singing.
- Act III, scene I: 'Che farò senza Euridice'.
 - Elegant C-major melody with accompaniment using simple harmonies.
 - Structure is a *rondeau* rather than a *da capo* aria.
 - Does it effectively do justice to the emotional content of the scene?

Act III, scene I: 'Che farò senza Euridice'.

5

p

Che fa - rò sen-za Eu - ri - di - ce? do-ve an
What is life to me with - out - thee? What is

p

fp

9

drò sen-za il mio ben? — Che fa - rò — do - ve an - drò — che fa -
left — if thou art dead? What is — life, — life — with - out thee? What is —

cresc.

sf

sf

Characteristics of *Opera Buffa*

- Emerged in the early 1700s as a result of the Arcadian reform movement to banish comic scenes from serious opera.
- Plots centred on real life and ordinary people in contrast to the heroic or mythical subjects characteristic of serious opera. Stock characters resembling the *commedia dell'arte* – the traditional Italian theatre of masks and clowns. Often parodied the pretensions of serious opera.
- Written for the public theatre and aimed at the emergent middle classes as opposed to the courtly aristocratic circumstances of serious opera.

Intermezzo

- Originated in Naples and Venice in the early 1700s when comic scenes were being purged from serious operas. Many buffo singers were thus deprived of their specialised niche roles.
- The intermezzo developed out of the need for comic relief between the acts of an *opera seria* production.
- Usually in two short acts (called *parte*) inserted between the standard three-act format of a typical *opera seria*.
- Plots usually involved two squabbling stock characters usually a soprano and a bass who in each *parte* are given an aria each and a finale duet. The arias are separated usually by *secco* recitatives, less often accompanied recitatives.

Giovanni Battista Pergolesi (1710–36)



- Studied at the *Conservatorio dei Poveri di Gesù Cristo* in Naples.
- Suffered from ill-health throughout his life. Most likely died from some form of tubercular disease.
- The first composer to achieve posthumous fame.
- His intermezzo *Le serva padrona* performed throughout Europe .
- His most famous work, a *Stabat Mater*, was reprinted more times than any other 18th century work.

Pergolesi: *La Serva Padrona* (1733)

- Act II, Serpina's aria 'A Serpina penserete'.
 - contrast between Serpina's 'serious' *largetto* phrases and the interspersed ironic jigs directed to the audience.
- Act II, Uberto's aria, 'Son imbrogliato io già'.
 - short changeable phrases reflecting his chaotic fleeting thoughts.
 - rapid pattering quavers in the aria the hallmark of the *basso buffo*.

Examples of musical irony.

- Uberto's fretting recitative is accompanied, a type usually reserved for dramatic situations in *opera seria*.
- later cadential passage where the vocal line reaches a low F pokes fun at Uberto's momentary posture of profundity over the words 'Uberto, pensa a te' – 'Uberto, think of yourself'.

Querelle des Bouffons 'War of the Buffoons' (1752–54)

- A press war that erupted in Paris in 1752 after an Italian troupe caused a sensation with performances of Italian comic opera including *La serva padrona*.
- Several intellectuals including Rousseau attacked the stilted, old-fashioned French opera (the *tragédies lyriques*) and argued in favour of the perceived 'naturalness' of Italian opera and its ability to express a wide range of human emotions.
- In 'The Merits of Italian Opera' Rousseau argued that complex contrapuntal melodic writing could not have the same emotional impact of simple homophonic writing.
- The attacks on the traditional royal musical establishment and his appeals to natural virtue can be further read as a veiled attack on the monarchy and the established order.

The Influence of *Opera Buffa*

- A major vehicle of change in the transition from the Baroque to the Classical.
 - Short range contrasts to convey changes of mood.
 - Short tuneful periodic melodies balanced into antecedent and consequent phrases.
 - Simplified accompaniment favouring homophony over polyphony.
- In short it was *opera buffa*'s constant changeability, its preference for raw simplicity over ornamentation and its ability to express several emotions over a short-range time-span that heralded the transition from the Baroque to the Classical period.

Prescribed Listening

Christoph Willibald Gluck

Orfeo ed Euridice: Excerpt from Act II, Scene I (as contained in your Norton Anthology).

Prescribed Reading

Chapter 21 'Opera and Vocal Music in the Early Classical Period' in *The Norton History of Western Music*, (9th edition), pp. 477 –493. Corresponding chapter in other editions.

Gluck's Preface to *Alceste*

Quoted in full in Downs, Philip G., *Classical Music: the Era of Haydn, Mozart and Beethoven* (London/New York: W. W. Norton, 1992), pp. 186 –188.

Taruskin, Richard, *Music in the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010, pp. 432–444 and 452 –462.