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by Burton D. Fisher

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### About the Editor of the **OPERA CLASSICS LIBRARY**

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by **Burton D. Fisher**

Principal lecturer: *Opera Journeys Lecture Series*

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*Words performed through music  
can express  
what language alone had exhausted.*

- after Hugo von Hofmannsthal, noted lyric poet and librettist for six operas composed by Richard Strauss.

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***a Prelude.....***

## ***OPERA CLASSICS LIBRARY's***

### **A History of Opera: Milestones and Metamorphoses**

The history of modern opera is as rich and varied as the thousands of operas composed during the last 400 years. From the innovations of the Camerata, opera has continually been reinventing itself, the result of ingenious visions of creative artists, who recognized the emotive power of the art form: that words evoke thought, but music provokes feelings. Opera is a sublime fusion of words, music, and all the theatrical arts; it is powerful theater providing an impact on one's sensibilities that can reach into the very depths of the human soul.

Opera's modern history is a saga about musical and dramatic geniuses with agendas and missions: heroic figures in the history of the art form who were relentless in their pursuit of an ideal, and initiated transformations that became legendary and indelible contributions to the growth of the art form.

A complete and detailed history of opera and its composers and innovators would be monumental in scope. As such, this text is intended to explore those significant moments in opera history when innovations and transformations altered the course of opera history. The opera student or aficionado is urged to use this text as a guideline: an inspiration to explore those great transformations in more comprehensive depth and detail from the wealth of scholarly works available.

*OPERA CLASSICS LIBRARY* explores each significant period in opera history, beginning with the Camerata innovations of the early seventeenth century through twentieth-century serialism and minimalism.

Essentially, the text answers the following questions: Who was the innovator? What was the milestone or contribution? How did the innovation affect existing opera traditions and conventions? The text includes a commentary and analysis of specific operas that demonstrate the innovation, plus a *Story Narrative with Music Examples* of the specific opera.

This text was inspired by undergraduate and postgraduate students who attend the *Opera Journeys Lecture Series* at Florida International University, as well as the many music departments of academia who faithfully use *Opera Journeys* texts in their music and opera courses.

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**A HISTORY OF OPERA:**  
***MILESTONES AND METAMORPHOSES***



## ***CHAPTER ONE***

### ***The Birth of Modern Opera:***

#### ***The First 150 Years - 1600 to 1750***

### ***Opera! What is it?***

In the beginning, there was silence. In the beginning there were words. In the beginning there was music. The genius of man combined silence, words, and music, and created a magical art form: opera.

A drama conveys its story through words and action. Opera is a formal theatrical medium that expresses its dramatic essence by integrating its words and action with music. Like drama, opera embraces the entire spectrum of theatrical elements: dialogue, acting, costumes, scenery, and action, but it is the sum total of all of these elements — combined with music — that defines the art form called opera.

In its most ideal and literal form, opera is sung drama, or music drama. Words performed with music can express what language alone has exhausted, a combination that achieves an expressive and emotive intensity that neither words nor music can achieve alone. Opera unites those two expressive languages into its art form; at times it is sung speech, whose dramatic essence derives from music's intrinsic power to transcend words and heighten, arouse, and intensify emotions. In its most ideal form, opera is music drama.

Over the centuries, the opera art form has evolved into a variety of formats. In its ideal form, opera is a wholly sung art form, in which the ultimate goal is to achieve perfect music drama through an integration of words and music. However, the art form has traditionally been spiced with a variety of sub-genres. There are operas in which there is a continuous flow and integration of words and music, and there are works called operas which have their musical numbers separated by spoken dialogue: *opéra comique*, *singspiel*, and *operetta*. Nevertheless, all these varieties share one common denominator: their ultimate theatrical presentation combines both words and music to realize and drive their stories.

In every phase of opera's evolution over the last four centuries, the focus of its innovators and reformers has been to seek a musico-dramatic ideal. In opera's infancy, the play and its action served merely as an excuse for the music, the play's text serving as a superfluous convenience for the composer to exhibit his vocal and instrumental inventiveness: "Prima la musica e poi le parole" ("First the music, and then the words.")

But during these last four centuries, the conflict and tension has been between the importance — or balance — of opera's words and music: that debate has at times become as dramatic as the opera art form itself. Resolving the question of the balance, weight and importance of opera's text and music has been the driving force behind the major reform movements in opera's history, particularly the reforms of Metastasio, Gluck, and Wagner. In all instances, the objective of these catalysts and innovators has been to realize a musico-dramatic ideal, a unified musical and dramatic theatrical continuity, and a perfect and idealized marriage between text and music.

Opera cannot exist without a text; opera cannot exist without its music. In opera, the composer is the dramatist, his musical creations enforcing, enhancing, and realizing the text. Opera is — by its very unique nature — the sum total of its various artistic components: acting and gesture, action, scenery and design, poetry and prose, and music. Together, these elements provide opera with emotive expressive power.

### ***The Genesis of Opera: a theory***

Communicating a story through words and music is an instinctive form of human expression, a natural and inborn form of human articulation that can be traced to the most primitive impulses of the human race.

Imagine a scenario during the Stone Ages when a tribe may have returned with captives and spoils from their wars with another tribe. No doubt, they would have celebrated their victory with a triumphal feast. Certainly, at some point during the celebration, one of their heroes

would arise to describe the success of their adventure: the terror and evil of the foe, the virtue and valor of their immensely outnumbered comrades-in-arms, and the just retribution they exacted upon their enemies.

The celebration would stimulate emotional outbursts of pride, no doubt a series of approving grunts and shouts from the audience. As the narration would progress, the audience would become delirious: they would chant, howl, and express their joy and triumph by repeating inspired phrases. Certainly, as the celebration became more intense, they would leap to their feet, start dancing, roll their eyes, raise their spears and strike their shields. To support this primitive mayhem, they would use every instrument they possessed: tom-toms, seashells, and sticks.

That primordial tribal celebration was certainly a form of opera: words combined with music that conveyed a story. As primitive as it may have been, all the machinery associated with the opera art form was present: there was recitation (recitative) from the heroes, emotional declamations (“airs” or songs), the cheering from the tribe (the chorus), and the pandemonium of dancing (ballet) and instrumentation (orchestra). And at times, they would even glorify the event with inscriptions on the walls of their caves, providing a libretto (a documented book) for posterity.

So many commemorative ceremonies and rituals possess ingredients inherent in the opera art form. Traditionally, shamans would relate old folk and epic tales and ballads that have survived in the form of solo recital and choral refrain: throughout history man has relied on ceremony and action-filled stories and plays to provide amusement, entertainment, and the ritualization of his glorified past. Nevertheless, humanity early recognized the power of music to intensify the memory of those events.

### ***Opera’s Precursors in Ancient Greece***

The musical sounds produced by ancient civilizations, lacking notational evidence, remain a mystery. Portrayals of musical traditions exist in paintings, reliefs, texts, and in the preservation of some of the actual instruments themselves, but the actual melodies and sounds of ancient music are virtually unknown.

The ancient Egyptians called music “joy” and “gladness,” evidenced by hieroglyphics and painted reliefs that portray entertainment and religious ceremonies in which praying priests and priestesses used primitive instrumentation for accompaniment.

But to the ancient Greeks of 2500 years ago, music was a holy and divine gift from the Muses, the daughters of Zeus who inspired men and women to dance and sing; the word music derives from the ancient Greek word “mousike,” meaning “the art of the Muses.” As a divine blessing, music was deemed to have the power to transform, to fill and shape silence, to change moods, and to express that which is beyond words: the Greeks believed that by uniting humanity with sounds and music, man could achieve transcendence. And music also possessed logical order, its mathematical relationships considered synonymous with the divine cosmic order of the universe; therefore, music represented the metaphysical key to truth and beauty.

Greek philosophers viewed music as an integrated system of universal sound: they called that physical ideal the “Harmony of the Spheres,” in which the sun, moon and planets of the solar system produced unique musical notes through the speed of their revolutions. Together, those notes created a cosmic musical scale, or “harmonia,” which was deemed to represent the unifying principle in the universe. In the process of glorifying and divining music, the Greek mathematician Pythagoras became the first to investigate the mathematical relationship between musical intervals, ultimately developing a 7-note musical scale that became the basis for Greek — and later — Roman music.

Opera, a form of theatrical presentation that combines words and music, had its architectural foundations in ancient Greece: it would take many centuries for it to be nurtured to its modern grandeur in Italy, and to some, its maturity in nineteenth-century Germany.

In opera's prehistory in Greece, religious stories, myths, and poetic dramas, like those of Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides, were performed in amphitheatres: the plays would be combined with music, a chorus chiming in or declaiming commentary in order to emphasize elements of the story in progress. The drama was advanced by single voices articulating their words in single syllables and in single pitch, but accompanied by music.

That tradition of incorporating music as an integral part of a theatrical presentation continued into Roman times, but after the fall of the Roman empire in the fourth century, the Roman Catholic Church established the rules regarding music for the next thousand years. Music belonged exclusively to the Church; it became notated at the instigation of Pope Gregory (470-520 AD) in order to promote the spread of Christianity. The Church was ambivalent regarding music: secular music was either discouraged or outlawed, deemed a form of pagan art, but at the same time music became an integral part of church and prayer worship services, restricted for the most part to the monastic incantation of hymns, psalms, and prayers. Most church music was the "plainsong" or Gregorian chant, primarily monophonic vocal music of a single melodic line, either unaccompanied or instrumentally accompanied.

Toward the end of the Middle Ages, about 1600, the power of the church began to decline, the result of internal chaos and scandal, increased trade which nurtured secular power, the Reformation, the growth of urban centers, and Gutenberg's revolutionary printing press. Western European society entered perhaps its most momentous historical transition as the Renaissance and humanistic pursuits began to evolve. In the process, music became liberated, and the secular world, like the ancient Greeks, began to exalt the musical art form and recognize its emotive and expressive power.

### ***Musical Precursors of Opera***

Truth is a coefficient of power. During the Middle Ages the Roman Catholic Church essentially controlled temporal and secular power; the church controlled ideas, and secular music was deemed evil. But as the transition into the Renaissance progressed, Church power declined, and secular power began to replace temporal power: rational thinking was deemed transcendent, and philosophy and science became noble indulgences. Music became the great beneficiary of greater secular development, and music began to be recognized as a means to provide more dramatic emphasis to poetry and text. As a result, music received its first great inspiration, and more adventurous harmonic patterns and musical forms were explored and developed.

Secular music arose in the early Renaissance at the time of the first Crusades: minstrel knights, known as troubadours, traveled and entertained throughout Europe with their tales of courtly love and exotic lands, singing of their adventures to the accompaniment of stringed instruments. And in the Renaissance the *commedia dell'arte* evolved, troupes of professional actors who performed comedies and plays in the streets and used musical accompaniment as an integral and important part of their presentations.

For over a thousand years, the church's plainsong Gregorian chants — monophonic vocal music — represented the singular musical form. Eventually polyphony developed, the music of many voices that inspired the beginning of harmony; polyphony employed two or more voices, but in its early appearance, melodic lines were of equal importance, rather than contrapuntal.

Finally, homophony evolved, providing a melodic texture in which one melody predominated while others became secondary. With homophony, the framework for mature harmony with chord texture was established, and the extant musical forms were poised to be adapted into more complex presentations.

The musical forms that were the precursors of modern opera were pastorals and madrigals, originally developed to drive the stories of liturgical and biblical dramas, sacred church services, and miracle and morality plays.

Madrigals were extremely dramatic and harmonically complex choral works sung to serious lyrical poetry, always accompanied and integrated with music: the madrigal represented a form of word-painting in which the musical tones, through accent and dynamics, provided emphasis to the meaning of the words.

Pastorals, like madrigals, were poetic dramas set to a musical accompaniment. Their subjects were secular and usually dealt with shepherds or rural life, typically drawing a contrast between the innocence and serenity of the simplicity of country life, in comparison to the misery and corruption of city and especially court life; in their text, they would express conflicts of love, joy, and sorrows, often with the benevolent intervention of gods, demigods, and heroes.

Madrigals and pastorals were Renaissance musical genres in which poetry or drama was set to musical accompaniment, a word-music interaction that became the immediate resources that would become the architectural framework for the soon-to-be developed opera art form: the arts of poetry, drama, and music, the foundations of opera, were awaiting their development into this new revolutionary art form in which the drama and poetry would be realized through music.

### ***Camerata: Early 17th century Florence***

Historians of music and musicologists seem to agree that modern opera's roots first appeared in Italy during the early seventeenth century. In Florence, an informal academy met in the salon of Count Giovanni Bardi and formed the Camerata, literally, "those who meet in a chamber." The Camerata was essentially a think-tank of Renaissance intellectuals and patrons of the arts, although not primarily musicians or dramatists but scholars and humanists as well; among them, Jacopo Corsi, an amateur musicologist, and Vincenzo Galilei, father of the noted astronomer.

Primarily, the Camerata recognized the emotive power of music when combined with words. They aspired to restore and recreate what they believed were the ideals of ancient Greek drama: sung dialogues and choruses that were accompanied by musical instruments. Essentially, their point of departure became Aristotle's description of drama as "words sweetened by music," as well as those of Plato, who theorized that in drama song takes precedence over speech: "Let music be first of all language and rhythm, and secondly tone, not vice versa."

In setting drama to music, the Camerata would adapt existing musical genres and forms: madrigals and pastorals. However, these musical forms had to be linked together in order to integrate drama, action, dialogue and narration. To achieve this goal, the Camerata developed the "stile rappresentativo" or "stile recitativo": this was the recitation of the dramatic text that was declaimed in a single-voiced melody (monophony); it would mirror the natural inflections, rhythms, and syllables of speech, and be accompanied by musical instruments. In this "sung speech," a singer delivered a recitative melody with an actor's dramatic and oratorical skills, rendering the dramatic poetry in a clear and comprehensible form, and thus achieving the goal of providing emotional impact to the text through the support of music.

The recitative became the dynamic structural link between set-pieces, such as madrigal-style or pastoral-style choruses, or ballet or orchestral interludes. More importantly, the recitative provided a means to convey narrative and action, but it also provided reflective, emotive moments of individual expression that occurs in frozen time. The early recitative was an *arioso*, a musical passage mixed with recitative and song, that would be integrated with *ritornellos*: instrumental refrains that appeared between elements of the vocal composition. The *arioso* would become the precursor of the aria.

The recitative — or arioso — essentially provided a wherewithal to seam together the music drama's action with its other musical elements, and at the same time, it provided a sense of coherence or integration of the total music drama. Ironically, for the next 400 years, innovators and reformers of opera would become obsessed with integrating the recitative into its other elements in order to provide a seamless continuity to the music drama.

The first known stage work set to music from beginning to end was *Dafne* (1597), by Jacopo Peri, the story of Apollo and Daphne adapted from Ovid's *Metamorphoses*; Peri called his work a "dramma per musica" ("drama for music").

### ***The Myth of Orpheus***

The Greek myth of Orpheus is a drama about a musician and the power of his song: it is a drama whose underlying text cries for music, the means for the full realization of its text.

In Ovid's version of the myth of Orpheus, the hero was a Thracian lyre player whose magnificent song could bewitch all of nature. Orpheus and the beautiful Eurydice were about to be married. In his honor, the gods sent messengers to grace the marriage, but before they could consummate their wedding, Eurydice died from the bite of a poisonous serpent. Disconsolate and despairing, Orpheus descended into the underworld in search of Eurydice, where his song so enthralled the gods that they returned her to him. But the gods placed a condition on Orpheus as he left the underworld with his beloved Eurydice: that he could not look at her face until he reached the world above.

Orpheus feared that Eurydice might lose her way; he did look back, and suddenly Eurydice disappeared into the darkness, his attempts to rescue her opposed by infernal spirits. Orpheus was pained; he mourned his second loss of Eurydice with such intensity that he foreswore his love for her, causing the enraged Maenads of Bacchus to destroy him. After Orpheus's death, nature expressed its sorrow: the trees dropped their leaves, and the rivers welled up with tears. But Orpheus's lyre still sang as it drifted down the river to the open sea. Phoebus (Apollo), father of Orpheus, placed the singing lyre among the stars in tribute to his son.

Angiolo Poliziano, or Politian, a Renaissance dramatist of the late fifteenth century, was determined to breathe a new secular spirit into Ovid's story of Orpheus: his new drama was called *Favola d'Orfeo* ("The Fable of Orpheus"), perhaps the first drama written in the Italian language. The focus of Politian's drama was humanist rather than religious in nature: it was secular rather than sacred; Orpheus was not a saint who was martyred in his conflict with the forces of heaven or hell, but a man whose was raised to consciousness by the power of human love.

The myth of Orpheus represents an archetype of humanity's aspirations for love. In Politian's transformation it became a classic story that demanded music for its essence to be realized, not incidental music, but music essential to the drama of Orpheus colliding with powerful forces affecting his destiny: Orpheus must sing to lament the death of Eurydice; he must sing to persuade the gods to restore her to life; he must sing to mourn his loss of Eurydice; and he must sing of his own imminent death at the hands of the Bacchantes. By its very nature, the story of Orpheus possessed the entire spirit of the new opera art form that was awaiting its birth.

In the Camerata's next experiment with integrating words and music, Peri adapted Politian's *Favola d'Orfeo* that had been written a century earlier: his opera was called *Euridice* (1600): its text was modified to dispense with Orpheus's backward glance, and the hero successfully brings Euridice back from the underworld to the rejoicing of Arcadian shepherds and nymphs.

Peri's text was set to simple monophonic music, the "recitar cantando," or declamatory style of speech-song. The internal architectural foundations for the new opera art form was now in place, awaiting its next surge of creative development.

### Monteverdi: the first great opera composer

Following the guidelines of the Camerata, the first great figure in the history of opera was Claudio Monteverdi (1567-1643), a rare and extraordinary genius, who was the first to exploit the dramatic richness available in this new art form.

Monteverdi was a renowned master of polyphony (madrigals), who was encouraged to experiment with the new applications of monophony. He decided to set a drama to music and chose the myth of Orpheus: Monteverdi's *L'Orfeo, Favola in Musica* ("Orpheus, a Fable with Music"), premiered in 1607 in Mantua, the very court where the myth had been dramatized a century earlier by Politian.

Monteverdi believed that the Orpheus of his music drama must express himself in the most profound and compelling musical terms: Orpheus was an archetypal hero, a man capable of bending the will of the gods through song, and a lover whose despair was so profound that he was willing to face death because he had lost his love.

Monteverdi's conception of monophony was that its purpose was not merely to provide musical decoration for the text, but rather, that it was a means to convey emotion and passion. His monophonous recitative had to convey profound emotions, the underlying music supporting rather than obscuring the text. In Monteverdi's conception, the hero would express his individual grief as he encountered obstacles in the fulfillment of his love, but the underlying music would embellish the drama, the music serving to achieve a full realization of the text.

### Monteverdi's arioso

Monteverdi composed much of the dialogue of *Orfeo* as arioso, a mixture of free recitative and metrical song. It was not quite an aria, but rather an emotional recitation set to appropriate melodic pitches that stressed specific syllables.

In Act II of Monteverdi's *Orfeo*, Sylvia, the Messenger, announces to Orfeo that Euridice has died; her announcement is an arioso.

Sylvia (Messenger)

Las - sa, dun - que debb'i - o, mentre Orfeo con sue no -  
te il ciel con - so - la, con le paro - le mie passar - gli il co - re.

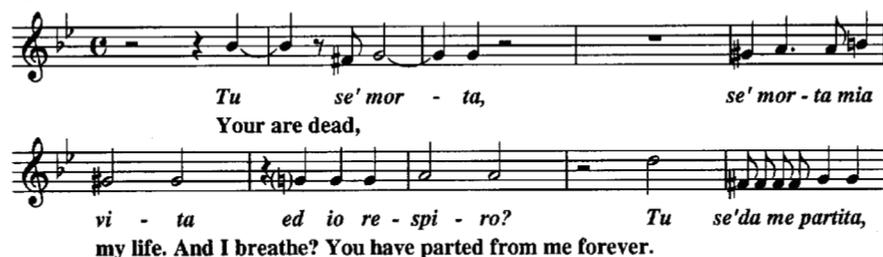
Sorrow, I must bring. While Orfeo soothes Heaven with his notes, my words pierce his heart.

Essentially, recitative's function was to move the dramatic elements forward. In that sense, recitative represented action music. However, Monteverdi developed his use of monophony so that the vocal line virtually approximated human speech, but he transcended speech by underscoring that vocal line with musical intensity and a daring chromaticism.

Orpheus reacts to Sylvia's announcement of Euridice's death with a monophonic declamation. He does not stop to reflect in an introspective moment in which time stops and deep-seated emotions are bared. Nevertheless, his *arioso* represents the precursor of the operatic aria, Monteverdi endowing his hero's emotion and heartbreak with a heretofore unknown expressiveness and feeling.

*Orfeo reacts to Euridice's death:*

**ORFEO**



Tu se' mor - ta, se' mor - ta mia  
Your are dead,  
vi - ta ed io re - spi - ro? Tu se'da me partita,  
my life. And I breathe? You have parted from me forever.

Monteverdi's *Orfeo* became a synthesis of extant Renaissance musical forms, the composer adapting and expanding madrigals and pastrols to suit the needs of his music drama, and endowing them with an intense expressiveness. *Orfeo* is set in paradisiacal Arcadia, so the descriptive music form is a pastoral; when Orpheus descends into the underworld, the instrumentation bears a solemnity that virtually imitates church music; and when the chorus comments in the final apotheosis, there are heroic trumpet fanfares.

Although *Orfeo* represents opera in its embryonic form, Monteverdi was indeed the first composer to grasp the essentials of music drama and translate the character's heightened emotions through music. Monteverdi's *Orfeo* utilizes many traditions that still dominate opera today: recitative, *arioso*, duet, choral and dance interludes, musical characterization, and continuity through leitmotif. But more importantly, he unified those structural forms of music with a profound beauty, subtlety, and fluidity.

Monteverdi also became a pioneer in dramatic instrumentation: he extended the resources of the orchestra, realized its unrivalled range, power, and varied tone colors, and recognized its power to enhance the dramatic representation; he claimed that the string tremolo and the pizzicato were his own discoveries.

Monteverdi's *Orfeo* was the first successful opera; it represented a synthesis of existing theatrical elements, such as stage scenic design, dance and ballet episodes, songs and ballads, madrigal-style and pastoral-style choruses, and recitative; all of these parts were integrated into an opera, a singular integration of all theatrical elements.

Monteverdi's other masterpiece, still performed today with much frequency, is *L'Incorazione di Poppea* ("The Coronation of Poppea") (1643).

### ***Venetian School and Neapolitan Schools***

Monteverdi moved to Venice and made the city the opera center of Italy. With the opening of the Teatro di San Cassiano in Venice (1637), opera became accessible to the general public, no longer the exclusive indulgence of royalty and the nobility: opera became the most popular art form and the most cherished form of public entertainment.

During the latter part of the seventeenth century, Alessandro Scarlatti (1660-1725), founded the Neapolitan School of opera, becoming its first great master, its guiding spirit, and the composer of an astronomical 115 operas, of which some 70 survive. Scarlatti is regarded as the founder of classical opera, a genre in which the underlying play was based on episodes from history, myth, and legend: this would eventually become known as opera seria.

Neapolitan opera developed unique characteristics: the Italian overture, the aria da capo, the accompanied recitative, and featured ensemble numbers, the chorus, and the orchestra. But it was in the Neapolitan School that the aria became crystallized: a self-contained composition for solo voice, with appropriate musical accompaniment.

The da capo aria became the primary feature of the Neapolitan School, a structure containing three sections, the third part repeating the first. Da capo literally means "from the head," so the structure was A – B – A, the last A, often not written out, but given to the singer with the instruction to go back to the head, or the beginning; it was similar to the sonata form of exposition, development, and recapitulation. Ultimately, operas were comprised mostly of da capo arias, each aria illustrating a single mood: pathos, anger, heroic resolve, or tender love. In order to express several emotions, a penetrating psychological portrayal of a complex character might demand five or more arias.

Eventually, da capo arias became the focal point of the operas, and the operas became showcases for virtuoso singers who glorified themselves as they displayed their virtuosity: arias became the singer's showpieces, and they would create cadences (cadenzas), in which they embellished and improvised passages at the end of the arias to display their vocal bravado. As a result, composers outdid each other in writing decorative arias for the singer's to display their vocal dexterity. In the end, the da capo arias became primary, and the opera story secondary: the ultimate result was the creation of fierce competition among the singing stars.

It was in these da capo arias that Italian castrati singers became the modern equivalent of film stars; they were the superstars who audiences came to hear, and no other element, either plot, chorus, or orchestra, could compete with their stature and popularity. The castrati were singers who were surgically altered at puberty to preserve and develop their soprano and contralto vocal range; hence, the term male soprano or male alto. These voices first appeared in church choirs at a time when boys were regularly castrated to preserve their high voices. The Roman Catholic Church condoned the practice on the grounds that in one of St. Paul's epistles, he had enjoined that women should remain silent in church.

Castrati were perhaps the most important singers of opera; they possessed vocal instruments that were more powerful, richer, and more flexible than women. Farinelli (1705-1782), one of the finest castrato, boasted superhuman techniques that were seemingly unrivaled. These castrati were idolized like our celebrated tenors and coloratura sopranos, and like today's pop stars, they inspired riots. In the end, the poetry and action of opera became subservient to virtuoso singers displaying their vocal dexterity. Opera was no longer in conflict as to its emphasis of words or music; it had descended from its lofty beginnings and dissipated into a stage for celebrity singers.

Huge numbers of operas were composed during opera's first century and a half, the years 1600-1750. But by the mid-eighteenth century, opera had deviated from the noble ideals of its founders and had become purely exaggerated entertainment, more spectacle than substance, and more effect than cause: productions involved large casts and lavish staging, but they sacrificed the quality of their texts and their dramatic essences in order to focus on virtuoso singing.

Nevertheless, opera was still young and in its infancy: its success had led to excess, but it was ripe for innovative reform. This new art form, the sum total of so many art forms, was in need of returning to the noble ideals from which it sprang.

### ***Metastasio: First Guidelines in the 18<sup>th</sup> century***

The first great opera reformer, who would restore the ideals of musico-dramatic truth to the art form, was the dramatist, poet, and librettist, Pietro Metastasio (1698-1782).

Metastasio was a prolific writer of opera texts whose many poetic dramas on classical and biblical subjects would later be set to music by an entire generation of opera composers: Handel, Gluck, Haydn and Mozart. His ingenious dramas were filled with intricate plots, flowery speeches, and grandiose climaxes, all appealing strongly to eighteenth-century taste. Italian opera was synonymous with opera seria: musico-dramatic recreations of Greek tragedy, myth, and ancient history, all presented in noble, heroic, or tragic settings; the moral dilemmas of the protagonists generally resolving happily and with due reward for rectitude.

Metastasio established the rules, guidelines, standards, and the formulae for eighteenth-century Italian opera seria. He crusaded against what he considered the outlandish absurdity of many opera texts, the excessive ornamentation of melodies, and the exaggerated importance of virtuoso singers. His reforms focused specifically on the underlying opera story: noble behavior was indeed to be portrayed by the nobility; the aristocracy alone was permitted to mingle with the gods; inner personal conflict was considered virtuous; outward displays of excessive emotion was forbidden; reason and virtue were to triumph over inconstancy and evil; endings were to be happy; and scenes with comic elements or theatrical spectacle were deemed irrelevant and frowned upon. In structure, there were to be three, tightly written acts in an opera: no classical mythology but only ancient history. His final requirement: the language of the libretto was to be Italian.

And Metastasio imposed many standards on the existing musical structure: dry recitative that was accompanied by harpsichord or cello was to alternate with arias; a limit of only one or two arias for a principal singer in an act, and no more than two for a secondary singer in the entire opera; the limitation of choral numbers — and even duets and other ensembles — except for the final number.

Metastasio categorized various styles of arias to demonstrate the singer's abilities: "aria cantabile" was a lyrical showcase; "aria di portamento" demonstrated breath and tone control; "aria di bravura" (or "aria d'agilita") would show off a singer's agility and vocal technique; "aria di mezzo carattere" was a compromise between "aria cantabile" and "aria bravura"; and "aria parlante" or patter aria, would demonstrate a singer's agility.

Metastasio's reforms revitalized the prevailing opera seria genre; they provided guidelines to achieve his ideal of musico-dramatic truth.

During opera's history, there were many ingenious composers and dramatists who catalyzed the art form, striving for musico-dramatic perfection by formulating innovations and reforms, improvising, improving, and developing and modifying existing traditions and techniques.

Opera's modern history is a saga about musical and dramatic geniuses with agendas and missions; heroic figures in the history of the art form who were relentless in their pursuit of an ideal, initiating transformations that became legendary and indelible contributions to the development and growth of the art form.

***CHAPTER TWO***  
***Handel and Baroque Opera***

## *Handel and Baroque Opera*

The musical style of Western European music between 1600 and 1750 was called Baroque, a description of a work that was elaborate, heavy and excessively ornamented. Typically, Baroque music was homophonic in texture, therefore, its melodic essence concentrated in one voice or part that was accompanied; it was distinct from polyphony, in which the melodic essence was distributed among all parts of the musical texture. Typically, in this homophonic texture, there was a soprano-bass polarity, in which the uppermost part carried the melody over a bass line, the latter provided by a thoroughbass, a basso continuo or figured bass, which was an instrumental bass line with the inner parts improvised chorally above it.

These Baroque operas were categorized as *opera seria* (serious opera), a description of their subject matter, which dealt with important historical or mythological subjects. The internal architecture of these Baroque *opere serie* was largely a sequence of arias for solo singers; there were very few concerted numbers, and a limited use of chorus.

Even though an *opera seria* plot strove for dramatic perfection and cohesion, its poetry and action still remained subservient to virtuoso singers showing off their wares. In the *opera seria*, Italian castrato singers had become the modern equivalent of entertainment icons, superstars who audiences came to hear: no other element, either plot, chorus, or orchestra, or even theatrical spectacle could compete with their stature and popularity.

Recitative — the narrative or action dialogue that was either accompanied or unaccompanied — would carry the story line, but it was the aria that became the vehicle for introspection, the wherewithal to express specific emotions and sensibilities. A perfect *opera seria* would seek to combine and blend a relatively strong dramatic story, but ultimately, the opera evolved into a combination of plot-carrying recitative and a host of crowd-pleasing arias.

By the mid-eighteenth century, the musico-dramatic and noble artistic ideals of *opera's* *Camerata* founders had sacrificed to commercialism: the quality of libretti had diminished considerably in order to meet the demands of theatrical spectacle, and opera had become a showcase for virtuoso singers.

At the height of the Baroque period, the most successful opera composer was George Frederic Handel.

Handel was born in Halle, Saxony, Germany; he died in London in 1759 at the age of 74. He was a prolific composer who left a large musical legacy that not only includes opera, but also sacred and secular dramatic oratorios. His Italian-style *opere serie* were composed for his English audiences, all achieving an incredible success that was attributed to a craftsmanship in portraying highly charged dramatic situations, a profound melodic inspiration, an adventurous use of harmonies, and an intense psychological insight into his characterization.

Handel began his career studying law, but soon realized his exceptional musical talents; eventually he developed into an accomplished organist and violinist. At the age of 21, after a short assignment as the *kapellmeister* in Hanover, he visited London where he found a raging appetite for Italian opera. He decided to remain in London, where he embarked on a thirty-year career of writing operas: these works served to endear him to the English, and they considered him their most celebrated musician; Queen Anne appointed him court composer, and later, artistic director of the newly founded Royal Academy of Music.

Nevertheless, controversy continually surrounded Handel's eccentric character: he was resented as a foreigner; he had a reputation as a cruel musical tyrant; he was envied as a pet of the nobility, and in the end, he was despised, considered by many a man of boorish manners. To counter Handel's popularity and success, enemies gathered around the powerful figure of the Earl of Burlington, who spearheaded a drive to import the celebrated Italian opera composer,

Giovanni Maria Bononcini. An enthusiastic rivalry ensued, but after the huge success of Handel's *Ottone*, the music war ended, his rival retreating permanently. Shortly thereafter, Handel became an English citizen.

Some of Handel's 40-plus operas are: *Almira* (1705), *Rodrigo* (1707), *Agrippina* (1709), *Rinaldo* (1711), *Radamisto* (1720), *Acis and Galatea* (1720), *Floridante* (1721), *Giulio Cesare* (Julius Caesar) (1723), *Tamerlano* (1724), *Rodelinda* (1725), *Scipione* (1726), *Admeto* (1727), *Siroe* (1728), *Partenope* (1730), *Poro* (1731), *Ezio* (1732), *Arianna* (1734), *Atalanta* (1736), *Berenice* (1737), *Faramondo* (1738), *Seerse* (1738), *Imeneo* (1740), and *Deidemia* (1741).

The opera seria genre was intended to represent musico-dramatic recreations of Greek tragedy, myth, and ancient history, always presented in noble, heroic, or tragic settings. The ruling nobility of the era identified with the characterizations and stories presented in these opere serie; as such, the main protagonists were generally noble and virtuous.

As the mid-eighteenth century approached, the popularity of the opera seria was unable to sustain its appeal and began to decline, the theater-going audiences considering the genre too stilted, too formal, and too lacking in dramatic interest, and some even considering it an irrational form of theatrical entertainment. But economics also contributed to its demise: these operas had evolved into super spectacles with high costs of production; and in addition, the castrati and prima donna singers were demanding and receiving exorbitant fees.

At its worst moment, the opera seria was frowned upon, the object of scorn and derision. In 1728, John Christoph Pepusch wrote *The Beggar's Opera*, which became a popular satire and blatant lampoon of the genre. Though the work presumed to be a serious opera, its purpose was totally satirical: to present the antithesis of the noble themes of the opera seria and ridicule them. As such, the opera presented a comedy about beggars in a setting in which its protagonists were thieves, prostitutes, and criminals, all of them speaking in loose language that was laced with vulgarity; and its creators further emphasized the satire by skillfully adapting popular songs by other composers of the period.

Handel fell victim to the demise of opera seria. After his last two operas, *Imeneo* (1740), and *Deidamia* (1741), failed to excite the London public's imagination, he decided to abandon the genre. The composer then reinvented himself and developed, innovated and mastered the new genre of the English oratorio, and proceeded to write a series of masterpieces that were strikingly different, yet equal in every respect to the quality of any of his stage works: *Messiah*, *Samson*, and *Semele*.

Despite this shift to a new genre, Handel's works — both opera seria and oratorio — all contain highly charged dramatic situations, together with a profound psychological insight that he expressed through his musical inventions. Many consider Handel the most instinctively theatrical opera composer falling into the vast — almost century-and-a-half — period between Monteverdi and Mozart.

Handel's most famous Italian opera seria, *Julius Caesar*, was the sixth of a series of operas he wrote for the Royal Academy of Music in the King's Theatre, Haymarket, the organization that became the springboard for his theatrical genius. No other opera of Handel's has been more successful — either in his own day or presently — than *Julius Caesar*.

The librettist for *Julius Caesar* was Nicolò Haym, the Royal Academy's official librettist at the time. His story source was rather eclectic in nature, drawing part of his plot from Plutarch, Francesco Bussana's libretto that had been set to music in 1677 by Antonio Sartorio, documentation of Caesar's life by historians, as well as Caesar's own writings describing his campaigns in Gaul, Italy, and Spain.

The opera text deals with characters and events rather fancifully, its plot at times so extremely complicated and cumbersome that in early performances the theater management provided the public with candles so they could follow the story in a printed libretto.

Historically, Caesar was engaged in a struggle with Pompey for the control of Rome, defeating Pompey in the battle at Pharsalia in 48 B.C. Pompey later fled to Egypt to seek help from its king, Ptolemy XII, but Caesar pursued him into Egypt.

Centuries earlier, after Alexander the Great died in 323 B.C., his empire was divided among his generals: Ptolemy asked for and was given Egypt. Afterwards, he was named king and created the dynasty that would endure for more than 300 years.

The Cleopatra of history, 69 to 30 B.C., was the last ruler of the house of Ptolemy. She remains one of the most charismatic figures of the ancient world, the ruler who above all, left a legacy of her determination to restore glory to her dynastic house. She died at the age of 39, and would have been 21 within the time-frame of Handel's opera.

As was the custom, she had been married to her younger brother, Ptolemy, with whom she ruled jointly, but later, she enlisted the support of the invading Roman emperor, Julius Caesar, in order to establish her sole rule of Egypt. She would later go to Rome as Caesar's mistress, and had not Caesar been assassinated, he would probably have put her on the throne of Rome with him. Following his murder, she returned to Egypt, her throne seemingly secure even though it was subjected to Rome. Then, she married her still younger brother, Ptolemy XIV. In the following years, she came close to ruling Rome a second time as a result of her liaison with Marc Antony, but he was defeated by the Roman legions.

**H**andel proved himself a superb musical dramatist in *Julius Caesar*, its story containing many expressive and explosive dramatic moments: the continuing changing fortunes of its characters represent an impressive theatrical construction. But more importantly, Handel's music breathes life, character, and individuality into each personage within the story.

The opera presents a magnificent tableau of human passions, conflicts and tensions: Caesar's sentiment at the loss and murder of Pompey; Cleopatra and Ptolemy's rivalry for power; Cornelia and Sextus' revenge against Ptolemy; the rivalries of Achilles, Ptolemy, and Curius for Cornelia's love; Achilles's betrayal of Ptolemy; and the engine that drives the drama, Cleopatra herself, who manipulates her erotic power as a weapon to seduce Caesar and secure his aid. Composer and poet, seeking more profound character development and expression, conspired to make their characters true to life: characters capable of profound expressions of emotion. As such, the image of Cleopatra is that of a powerful and determined woman, devious and seductive: that of Caesar, a bold and resourceful leader, warlike but amorous.

Handel provided Caesar and Cleopatra each with a string of musical jewels: eight arias each. These arias are among the finest solos Handel ever composed, each a self-contained masterpiece that serves as a multifaceted portrait of both the Roman conquering hero and the entrancing Egyptian queen. In these arias, the sensual side of both Caesar and Cleopatra — an important motivating facet of their characters — is particularly evident.

Cleopatra has been called Handel's "immortal sex-kitten." It is specifically in Cleopatra's rich and fascinatingly drawn music that Handel lavished his most enchanting musical resources. She is motivated to power and determined to occupy the throne of Egypt alone; as such, Handel endows her music with forcefulness, energy, and spirit.

Each of Cleopatra's arias displays a different aspect of her character. In her first aria, she is introduced as a spirited, ambitious young woman who delivers ironic instructions to her hated brother: "Non disperar, chi sa?" ("Do not despair, who knows?") She expresses profound emotion and the nobility of her grief in her penultimate aria when she vows lifelong mourning for the cruelty of her fate, the loss of her pomp and grandeur, and her declaration that even when dead, she will return as a ghost to haunt her tyrannical brother: "Piangerò la sorte mia" ("I will cry over

my fate.”) Her exquisite lovelorn aria, “Aure, deh per pietà” (“Breezes for pity’s sake”), and the aria “Tu la mia stella sei” (“You are my star”), overflow with excitement. And the beautiful and seductive “V’ adoro pupille” (“Adored eyes”), is a heartrending lament. Her sequence of eight arias represent Handel’s greatest achievement in terms of his insight into human character, as well as his genius in using his musical language to convey the motivations of a consumed woman.

Likewise, Caesar is provided with profound as well as heroic music: his bold denunciation of Ptolemy, “Empio dirò, tu sei” (“I shall declare you are wicked”); his smoothly menacing horn-accompanied hunting aria, “Va tacito e nascosto” (“Go silently and secretly”); his lamentation on the ashes of Pompey, “Alma del gran Pompeo” (“Soul of great Pompey”); and the bold resolution of the great warrior in “Al lampo dell’ armi” (“In the flash of arms.”)

But Handel also lavished grand music for the other characters in the opera: Cornelia’s stately, noble, and mournful music presents a moving portrait of an aristocratic Roman matron and grieving widow, a truly tragic figure for whom Handel designated most of her arias to the tempos of Largo and Andante; it is only her final aria, “Non ha più temere” (“My avenged soul has nothing to fear”), that she is allowed an Allegro. In contrast, her son Sextus’s music is mostly marked in Allegro, aptly fitting his one-dimensional obsession and youthful determination for revenge: “L’angue offeso mai riposa” (“The offended serpent never rests”), a profound expression of personal shame and his obsession for recrimination.

On the Egyptian side, the music for Ptolemy and Achillas is shiftily and energetic, surely befitting those treacherous and libidinous antagonists traditionally found in opera seria.

Musically, the *Julius Caesar* score makes a sensational effect through its sumptuous melodic richness and the fine balancing of its musical elements. Handel called for a very full and varied orchestra, no doubt in deference to the exotic Egyptian setting. Most of the arias in Handel’s operas, like those of other Baroque composers of his time, are accompanied just by the string instruments: often the violins are in unison and are supported by a bass continuo line with the wind instruments sometimes called in to double the strings.

In addition to the usual compliment of strings, oboes, and bassoons, Handel adds flutes, recorder, and surprisingly, four horns, (no valves in those days); the horns are used only at the very beginning and end of the opera. Oddly enough, in a work of such pronounced martial character, he does not use trumpets.

Perhaps the most picturesque orchestral writing in Handel’s entire output occurs in the Parnassus scene at the beginning of Act II: Cleopatra’s entertainment designed to enchant and seduce Caesar; the orchestral resources are spread lavishly, and include a stage band consisting not only of strings, oboes and bassoons, but also such “exotic” instruments such as the harp and viola da gamba.

The demanding virtuosic coloratura style of *Julius Caesar* is challenging to modern singers, but the rewards in singing this music of exceptional quality and construction far outweigh the difficulties.

The greatest problem in presenting *Julius Caesar* today — paradoxically the principal attraction for its contemporary audiences — concerns the technical capabilities required of its singers. To sing eighteenth century Baroque opera, singers must be arduously trained in the bel canto style and its inherent virtuosic techniques. The music is extremely difficult to sing: opera seria vocal music — particularly in *Julius Caesar* — contains abnormally long breath spans, the requirement for a singer to improvise elaborate cadenzas and ornamentation, and sometimes, the ability to sing two-octave ranges in one breath, or hold a note for several measures with an enormous crescendo and then diminuendo: what is termed *messa di voce*.

Handel ingeniously balances his alternation between recitative and arias, taking meticulous pain to fashion the dialogue that links the arias; his secco (literally “dry” or unaccompanied) recitative is expertly crafted to achieve a balance between melody and speech. These recitatives are important and serve to forward the plot and emphasize many of the grand dramatic moments in the drama: the presentation of Pompey’s head, Cornelia’s several suicide attempts, and Lydia’s revelation that she is Cleopatra. Handel even provided an accompanied recitative as a self-contained number: Caesar’s moving tribute to Pompey at the great Roman General’s tomb: “Alma del gran Pompeo” (“Soul of the great Pompey.”)

But maintaining the tradition of Handel’s time, the opera’s vocal music was sung by castrati, rich and powerful male voices whose talents reached superhuman levels. In later years, roles that had been written for castrati were either transposed for tenors or were taken by sopranos or mezzo-sopranos: trouser roles. More recently, many of those roles have been sung by the new wave of countertenors, singers who produce a similar sound without recourse to the surgeon’s knife.

The countertenor is a rare male voice — a vocal cousin of the castrato — with a range falling roughly between the tenor and soprano, and naturally produces its tones almost exclusively through the head-register voice. The technique has long been erroneously nicknamed falsetto, a designation that is totally misleading. The countertenor voice has the range, flexibility, and brilliance of the female voice, but contains the muscularity of the male voice. Today, the field for countertenors has been getting crowded, the number of male altos suggesting that they are far from a rare species.

The title role in *Julius Caesar* was originally created for the famous castrato, Senesino, (Francesco Bernardi), one of those high-earning mega-stars of the Baroque period, who is reputed to have been a singer with an incredible virtuosity. The music that Handel wrote for Senesino certainly demonstrates castrato qualities to the utmost; each of Caesar’s arias is a masterpiece not only of musical invention, but of characterization as well.

A tenor, baritone, soprano, or countertenor can sing the role of Julius Caesar. The role of Sextus was composed for a female soprano, but at revivals, Handel himself recast it for a tenor, a voice that at that time was rarely used for heroic roles. In essence, modernizing the roles of these Baroque operas has simply become a function of intelligent transposition, a practice Handel himself often resorted to and advocated. With the considerable revivals and new enthusiasm for Baroque music, there has naturally been a resurgence of countertenors.

**J***ulius Caesar* is a great opera spectacle that can set the pulse racing. Its story is packed with raging passions, shedding tears, lovers vowing eternal and undying love, and strong emotions of courage, joy, and sorrow — the latter, Handel’s strongest asset as a musical dramatist. Beyond its magnificent catalog of arias, its choral rejoicing and battle music serve to spice the score.

The opera is continuously revived — often as the quintessential example of the Baroque period — and often performed in concert form. Modern audiences no longer look upon these Baroque works as dusty old museum pieces. Nevertheless, even with a strong cast, good musicians and deft direction, Handel’s operas performed in the modern opera house tend to confound critics and audiences, who at times seem to view the works as stylistic anomalies that are performed in the wrong theaters with the wrong instruments.

With some of these inherent disadvantages, the requirement is that modern audiences meet Handel and the Baroque opera seria with a discreet sense of open-mindedness and intelligence. Repeated hearings of Handel’s *Julius Caesar* tends to captivate the listener. It is not an earful of the sumptuous orchestration of Wagner, but its underlying music is indeed magnificent.

Surrendering to Handel’s subtle charm becomes a rewarding musical experience, to some, the beginning of a very special kind of obsession: what one could lovingly call the “Handel addiction.”

***Julius Caesar in Egypt***  
**“Giulio Cesare in Egitto”**

*Opera Seria* in Italian in three acts

**Music**

**by**

**George Frideric Handel**

**Libretto in Italian by Nicolò Haym,**

**after an earlier libretto,**

**by Giacomo Francesco Bussani**

**Premiere: The Haymarket, London, 1724**

*Principal Characters in Julius Caesar*

**Romans:**

Julius Caesar, Emperor of Rome	Countertenor, Bass, Baritone, or Soprano
Curius (Curio), a Tribune and his aide-de-camp	Tenor
Cornelia, widow of Pompey	Soprano
Sextus, son of Pompey and Cornelia	Countertenor or Soprano

**Egyptians:**

Cleopatra, Queen of Egypt	Soprano
Ptolemy, (Tolomeo), Cleopatra's brother, King of Egypt	Countertenor or Soprano
Achillas, (Achilla) an Egyptian general	Bass
Nirenus, (Nireno) Cleopatra's confidante	Countertenor or Soprano

Citizens of Alexandria, Roman and Egyptian soldiers

TIME: 48 B.C.

PLACE: Egypt

*Brief Story Synopsis*

The Egyptians acclaim Caesar their conqueror after he defeated his rival, Pompey, who had fled Rome after his defeat and allied with the Egyptian king, Ptolemy. Pompey's wife and son, Cornelia and Sextus, plead with Caesar to make peace.

Achillas, Ptolemy's general, presents the severed head of Pompey to Caesar as a present from the Egyptian king. Pompey's murder fills Caesar with horror: Cornelia, Pompey's widow, is overcome with grief; Sextus, Pompey's son, vows to avenge his father's murder.

Cleopatra rules Egypt with her brother, Ptolemy, whom she despises. She resolves to become sole ruler and decides to approach Caesar to seek his support. At the same time, Ptolemy and Achillas plot to murder the conquering Caesar.

Cleopatra, in the disguise of a maidservant named Lydia, meets Caesar; the Roman conqueror immediately falls in love with her. Ptolemy arrests Cornelia and Sextus, and Cornelia is confined to a harem so that Achillas, who has been promised her hand as a reward if he kills Caesar, can have access to her.

Ptolemy's armies are en route to kill Caesar. Cleopatra reveals her identity to Caesar and implores him to flee for his safety.

Cleopatra is taken prisoner after Ptolemy defeats her armies. After Caesar escapes death in a battle with Ptolemy's armies, Achillas, mortally wounded in the battle, confesses his treachery. Caesar rushes off to rescue Cleopatra after he seizes Achillas's seal, which gives him access to a hundred warriors.

Caesar and his soldiers rout the Egyptian guards at Ptolemy's palace and rescue Cleopatra. At the gates of Alexandria, Caesar and Cleopatra enter in a triumphal procession. Caesar crowns Cleopatra Queen of all Egypt. Caesar acclaims Sextus his friend for avenging Pompey's murder by killing Ptolemy. Caesar and Cleopatra affirm their love for each other and all rejoice.

Story Narrative with Music Examples

Act I: Outside Alexandria near a tributary of the Nile spanned by a bridge

After an Overture, the curtain rises to a chorus of Egyptians who acclaim the Roman Emperor, Julius Caesar, and his victorious legions. Caesar has just defeated the forces of his political rival and former son-in-law, Pompey. Caesar pronounces his divine destiny: “Caesar came, saw, and conquered.”

Pompey’s wife and son, Cornelia and Sextus, plead to Caesar for clemency for Pompey, announcing that in lieu of peace, Pompey is prepared to surrender. Caesar magnanimously accepts their offer to be reconciled with his rival, but only if Pompey comes to him in person.

Achillas, an Egyptian general, unveils a gift to Caesar from Ptolemy, the King of Egypt, who co-rules with his sister, Cleopatra: the gift is Pompey’s severed head. Ptolemy had sought to ingratiate himself with Caesar. But Caesar considers it an act of treachery, and is revolted and horrified by his political barbarism. He denounces Ptolemy’s impious act.

“Empio, dirò, tu sei”

CAESAR

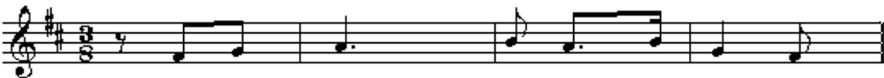


*Em - pio, dirò tu sei, togli ti a gli ochi mei, sei tutto crudelto,*  
I shall declare, that you are wicked,

Curius tries to console the grieving Cornelia with loving words and an offer to help her avenge her husband’s murder, but she declares herself beyond consolation: her own death can be the only solace for her sorrows.

“Priva son d’ogni conforto”

CORNELIA



*Pri - va son d’ ogni con - for - to,*  
I am deprived of every consolation,

Sextus impetuously swears vengeance on his father’s murderer.

“Svegliatevi nel core”

SEXTUS



*Svegliatevi nel core, furie d’un’alma offesa, a far d’un tradito aspra vendetta! Svegliatevi*  
Rouse yourselves in my heart!

Caesar vigorously denounces Ptolemy's crime and orders a noble funeral for Pompey. At the same time, Achilles becomes smitten with Cornelia's beauty.

***Cleopatra's room***

Cleopatra dreams of the prospect of becoming the absolute ruler of Egypt. Her confidante, Nirenus, brings news that her brother Ptolemy sent Pompey's head to the victorious Caesar. Cleopatra realizes that her brother's action was to curry favor with Caesar. She resolves to see the Roman emperor herself to secure his support against her brother.

Ptolemy arrives. He scoffs at Cleopatra, further intensifying the rivalry between brother and sister for the throne of Egypt. Cleopatra asserts that she possesses superior rights to the throne and denounces Ptolemy. Defying her brother, she sweeps grandly from the room, determined to try her charms on Caesar in order to enlist his aid against her brother. She expresses her determination: "Cleopatra: Non disperar, chi sa?" ("Do not despair, who knows?")

Achillas tells Ptolemy of Caesar's displeased reaction to his gift of Pompey's severed head. He offers to kill Caesar, requesting that his reward be Cornelia's hand. Ptolemy agrees to the terms and vows revenge on the Roman conquerors.

***"Empio, sleale, indegno"***

**PTOLEMY**



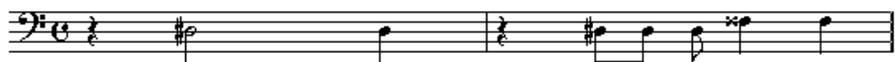
*L' - empio, sle - a - le, in - de gno,*  
**This disloyal, unworthy, wicked man,**

***Caesar's camp. An urn contains the ashes of Pompey***

Caesar broods over the ashes of his dead rival, Pompey. He recalls his great deeds, and somberly muses about life and fame.

***"Alma del gran Pompeo"***

**CAESAR**



*Al - ma del gran Pompe - o,*  
**Soul of the great Pompey,**

Cleopatra is disguised as her maid and calls herself Lydia. She arrives with Nirenus and pleads with Caesar to help Cleopatra overthrow Ptolemy.

After Caesar departs, Cleopatra and Nirenus hide as Cornelia and Sextus come to mourn the ashes of Pompey. Cornelia takes a sword from among the trophies beside the urn and vows to slay Ptolemy, but Sextus takes it from her, claiming revenge as his filial duty: "Cara speme, questo core" ("Dear hope, you begin to flatter my heart.")



**Cleopatra's Room**

As Cleopatra awaits Caesar, she invokes Venus, goddess of Love.

*“Venere bella”*

**CLEOPATRA**



*Ve - ne - re bel - la,*  
**Beautiful Venus...**

Caesar speaks affectionately to “Lydia,” and she proposes that they marry. Curius arrives to warn Caesar that Ptolemy’s armed men are in pursuit and plan to murder him. Cleopatra discloses her true identity, and urges Caesar to flee, but he resolves to remain and fight his enemies.

*“Al lampo dell’armi”*

**CAESAR**







***CHAPTER THREE***  
***Gluck: Returning to Ideals***

## Gluck: Returning to Ideals

The most significant break with the formulae of the Italian opera seria was made by Christoph Willibald von Gluck (1714-1787), a German composer who became a giant figure in the early history of opera. Gluck is regarded as the father of modern music drama: opera's first great reformer.

Gluck acquired sound musical training in Prague, and then became a private musician at the Court of Vienna. But like most German composers of the time, he completed his musical education in Italy, where his first opera, *Artaserse* (1741), was produced and received critical acclaim. As a performer, he made visits to London where he became renowned for his performances on the glass harmonica. He befriended Handel, who jeered at Gluck for what he considered his inferior talents in counterpoint: in truth, Gluck was never interested in counterpoint, thinking always in terms of homophonics. In 1752, Gluck was summoned to direct the Court Opera at Vienna and was appointed Kapellmeister; it was in Vienna that he associated with great artists of the time and began to shape his ideals about elevating the opera art form.

In 1761, Gluck composed the dramatic ballet *Don Juan*, its huge success providing a turning point in his musical career. And the following year, he composed the music for *Orfeo ed Euridice*: he was a late developer, composing his greatest work at the age of forty-eight. With that success, he embarked on composing a series of operas, each becoming a paradigm for his ideas to reform existing opera practices, and bring new conventions, standards and integrity to the musical stage: *Alceste*, *Paris ed Elena* (for Vienna); *Iphigénie en Aulide*, *Armide*, *Iphigénie ed Tauride* (for the French Court at Paris.)

Opera in the mid-eighteenth century claimed to represent the spirit of ancient Greece. But in Gluck's perception, it had become cliché-ridden with Metastasian formulas, undramatic, and dominated by vain, posturing singers. Gluck damned the conventions of his contemporary opera, its excesses and inherent absurdities,

At that midpoint in the eighteenth century, the Baroque genre was being superseded by a new inspiration toward Classicism, a trend toward simplicity rather than ornateness. Musicians had begun to break completely from Baroque's overwrought style and were composing in the "style galant," a simple melodic style devoid of excessive counterpoint. The age was strongly influenced by Rousseau, whose philosophy was espoused in his novels *Nouvelle Héloïse* (1760) and *Émile* (1762): that artistic expression return to nature and naturalness: the artistic expression not merely trees and sky, but of profound human emotion.

In 1764, Johann Joachim Winckelmann's popular history of Greek art reintroduced classical ideals to Western Europe, stressing that true art consisted of harmony and graceful proportion; those ideas greatly influenced the aesthetic ideals of the Enlightenment. Gluck was determined to achieve for opera what Winckelmann and Rousseau preached for art.

Metastasio had written numerous libretti, "dramme per musica," that almost every eighteenth century composer was setting to music. In particular, Gluck rebelled against the Metastasian traditions that were dominating the art form: those intricate melodramatic plots, flowery speeches and grandiose climaxes: traditions that were growing increasingly remote from what he perceived as the truth of human experience. In effect, Gluck parted company with the Italians and the ostentatious mannerisms and pompous artificiality prevalent in their existing opera seria tradition: in its place he sought to produce stage works with greater simplicity and more naturalism.

Gluck innovated reforms that banished the excesses and abuses of singers who altered the music at their whim to fit their egos and vocal styles: their florid da capo aria showpieces, their vocal pyrotechnics, and their excessive improvisational roudades.

Gluck returned to Camerata ideals: that opera was the quintessential means to artistically express human emotions and passions. He discarded Baroque opera and its embellishments, ornateness and vocal displays, and returned to the Classical ideals of purity, balance, simplicity, and even austerity. His goal was to express naturalism in his music: a touching sentiment, emotion, and a wealth of sympathetic feeling and understanding.

Gluck outlined his objectives: "The imitation of nature is the acknowledged goal to which all artists must set themselves. It is that which I too try to attain. Always as simple and natural as I can make it, my music strives toward the utmost expressiveness and seeks to reinforce the meaning of the underlying poetry. It is for this reason that I do not use trills, coloraturas and cadences that Italians employ so abundantly."

Gluck provided a retrospect of his ideals to the *Journal de Paris* in 1777: "I believed that the voices, the instruments, all the sounds, and even the silences (in my music) ought to have only one aim, namely that of expression, and that the union of music and words ought to be so intimate that the libretto would seem to be no less closely patterned after the music than the music after the libretto."

With Gluck, the unending debate was revitalized between the primacy of the opera libretto and the primacy of the music. In Gluck's perception, music and text had to be integrated into a coherent whole, yet music would serve the poetry.

Gluck's first step was to insist that singers remain in character throughout the opera. As such, he modified — and virtually abolished — the *da capo* aria: his arias became much shorter, and singers could no longer insanely improvise their arias; they had to sing exactly what the composer wrote. There was an increased amount of recitative that was a form of heightened speech and declamatory in nature, but it still functioned to further the stage action and bridge the sung numbers in the opera. However, Gluck discarded the recitative *secco* almost in its entirety, stating that the *secco*, accompanied merely by a chord or two played on the harpsichord was unworthy of the dramatic needs of the stage. Instead, he used the much more expressive "recitative *stromentato*," with its more elaborate accompaniment. And, he established the overture as an integral part of the drama.

Gluck's 46 operas became the models for the next generation of opera composers. His operas were all distinguished by a pronounced dramatic intensity, enriched musical resources, a poetic expressiveness, heightened character development, and an intimate integration between music and libretto. With Gluck's reforms, opera as lyric theater evolved toward another stage in its advance toward the ideal of music drama: the realization of the drama through music.

Gluck had composed more than thirty operas before he composed *Orfeo ed Euridice* in 1762. The archetypal *Orfeo* story became the vehicle for the composer to put his theories into practice; it would represent the model of the ideal music drama, a paradigm that would not only serve to eliminate contemporary opera's deficiencies and absurdities, but would provide the structure for the integrity of opera for the future. As such, *Orfeo's* plot lines are clear, the action essentially minimized, the poetry simple but lofty, the music stripped of all superfluties, and there is a harmonic simplicity with very few key changes and modulations.

For *Orfeo's* poem, Gluck collaborated with the Court poet and writer, Ranieri Calzabigi (1714-1795); both composer and librettist recognized the problems that were weighing on the opera seria, and both agreed that it was necessary to return to a more naturalistic musical and textual expression in order to eliminate opera's existing excesses. Each was convinced that the drama was primary, and that the music was the means through which the drama was to be realized. If anything, Calzabigi's poem of *Orfeo* was a lyric drama with inherent nuances in its declamatory elements, and craftsmanlike alternations of pace and vocal inflections: an aggregation of flowery descriptions and similes that eloquently conveyed the poet's impassioned moralizing. Even though the poem contained heartfelt language, it became the quality of Gluck's

music — dutifully faithful to the text — that saved Calzabigi's very fine poem from oblivion. Nevertheless, Gluck paid full tribute to his collaborator: "If my music has had some success, I think it is my duty to recognize that I am beholden for it to him, since it was he who enabled me to develop the resources of my art. No matter how much talent a composer has, he will never produce anything but mediocre music unless the poet awakens in him an enthusiasm, without which the production of all the arts are but feeble and languishing."

**T**he premiere of *Orfeo* took place at the Hofburg in Vienna in 1762. Unfortunately, it made concessions to contemporary tastes: Orpheus was sung by a contralto; instead of Hermes being the messenger of death, Cupid (Amor) was substituted; and after Orpheus's backward glance Euridice is restored to a second life, the happy ending, another concession to Viennese taste.

The Euridice and Cupid (Amor) were sopranos. Twelve years later Gluck recast the work for Paris and reset the role of Orfeo for a tenor instead of a contralto, thus causing the endless debate as to whether the part of Orfeo should today be sung by a male or a female voice: Is the drama more human when Orfeo is a man? Is the opera monotonous when the three principal characters are women?

Nevertheless, one of Gluck's greatest achievements for the Paris revise was the addition of the incredibly beautiful flute solo for the scene in which the hero enters the Elysian Fields, an instrumental writing that many consider a marvel of musical invention.

Gluck's *Orfeo* represented the composer's revolutionary opera manifesto, a reaction against the complicated Metastasian plots that had dominated the opera seria, and had reduced the art form to a spectacle of absurdities, senseless ostentation, and melodramatic overstatement. In particular, Gluck despised the pompous castrati and their extravagant da capo arias that had lowered the art form to a mere display of a singer's vocal virtuosity. So Gluck overturned the hubris of his contemporary operatic conventions and reinvested them with his acute dramatic instincts, all expressed in musical terms that continue to speak to modern audiences. The Abbé François Arnaud commented about Gluck's inspired musical inventions; "With that one might found a new religion."

Gluck was opera's first great reformer, the composer who set the stage for opera's dynamic evolution and transformation toward the ideal of music drama.

***Orfeo ed Euridice***  
**“Orpheus and Eurydice”**

**Opera in Italian in three acts**

**Music composed**

**by**

**Christoph Willibald von Gluck**

**Original Libretto by Ranieri Calzabigi**

**Premiere: Vienna 1762 and Paris 1774**

***Principal Characters in Orfeo ed Euridice***

Orpheus, a legendary Greek singer and musician	Contralto, Soprano, or Tenor
Euridice, his wife	Soprano
Amor (Cupid, or Love)	Soprano
A Happy Shade	Soprano

Happy Shades, Furies, Shepherds, Heroes and Heroines

TIME and PLACE: Legendary Thrace and Hades

***Brief Story Synopsis***

The musician Orfeo mourns the death of his beloved wife, Euridice. Amor informs him that Zeus will allow him to enter the underworld to plead for Euridice's return, but if she is released he must not look back on her until they have reached the living world.

Orfeo charms the Furies with the beauty of his singing. He finds Euridice among the blessed spirits and leads her away. However, Orfeo is seemingly indifferent and does not look at her, causing Euridice to threaten to return to Hades. Her distress moves him, and as he indeed looks upon her, she disappears into the shadows.

Orfeo laments his loss. Amor. She takes pity on him, and once again brings Euridice back to life.

***Story Narrative with Music Examples***

***Overture:***

A short overture introduces the opera, its music containing no specific recall of themes in the ensuing drama. The overture is followed by a fourteen-bar preamble.

***Preamble:***

**Moderato**



**Act I: The tomb of Euridice in a valley in Thessaly**

Nymphs and shepherds are adorning Euridice's tomb with flowers. Orfeo stands at the foot of a tree, mournfully abandoning himself to his despair and grief at the loss of his beloved Euridice.

*"Euridice!"*

**ORFEO**

Eu - ri - di - ce!

The chorus of nymphs and shepherds join Orfeo, the music maintaining the rhythmic scheme of the preamble that accents Orfeo's grief.

**Sopranos: "Ah! Se intorno a quest'urna funesta"**

**SOPRANOS**

Ah! se in - tor - no a quest' ur - na fu - nes - ta,  
This deathly urn is all around us.

**Chorus: "Ah! Se intorno a quest'urna funesta"**

**NYPHS and SHEPHERDS**

Ah! se in - tor - no a quest' ur - na fu - nes - ta,  
This deathly urn is all around us.

In a short recitative, Orfeo urges them to silence: that they should continue to adorn the tomb with flowers and leave him undisturbed in his sorrow.

With great solemnity, they circle Euridice's tomb.

**Circling the Tomb****Lento**

Orfeo laments his lost Euridice. But he complains that his grief is in vain, because his love does not respond to him.

*“Chiamo il mio ben così”*

**Andantino**<sup>1</sup>  
**ORFEO**



*Chiamo il mio ben co - sì, quando si mo - stra il dì*  
I call my lost beloved, when each day dawns.

The entire opening scene conveys an overwhelming sense of Orfeo's grief and pain. He bitterly reproaches the gods for their cruelty in taking Euridice from him. However, he decides that he will pursue Euridice and free her from the gods.

Amor (Love or Cupid) appears, advising Orfeo that the gods have taken pity upon him and will allow him to descend to Lethe (a river in Hades whose waters cause drinkers to forget their past). But Euridice shall return to him only if Orfeo can overcome the Furies with his song. However, the gods have imposed stark conditions: Orfeo may not look at Euridice until the pair have left the shores of the Styx; if he does look at her, he will lose her forever.

*“Gli sguardi trattieni, affrena gli accenti”*

**Sostenuto**  
**ORFEO**



*Gli sguar - di trat - tie - ni, af - fre - na gli ac - cen - ti,*  
Restrain your glances, control your words,

Orfeo affirms his resolve to dare the great adventure and rescue Euridice.

*Act II: The entrance to Tartaris. The river Styx flows in the distance.*

An orchestral prelude conveys Orfeo's resolution to rescue Euridice.

A chorus of Furies, their voices in unison, inquires who the mortal may be who dares to brave the terrors of their abode.

*“Chi mai dell' Erebo fralle caligini sull'orme d'Ercole”*

**Andante**  
**THE FURIES**



*Chi mai dell' E - rebo fralle ca - li - gi - ni sull'or - me d'Er - cole.*  
Who is in the midst of Hell, in the footprints of Hercules.

After they dance, the Furies resume their chorus, advising Orfeo that he is not a god, and therefore, his intrusion will result in a horrible fate for him.

*“D’orror l’ingombrino le fiere Eumenid”*

**THE FURIES**



*D’or - ror l’ingombri - no le fie - re Eu - men - idi,*  
 May the fierce Furies afflict you with terror,

Orfeo appeals to the Furies to have pity on his misery.

*“Deh placatevi con me!”*

**Più lento**  
**ORFEO**



*Deh placa - te - vi con me! Furie, larve, om - bre sde - gnose,*  
 Ah, be appeased! Furies, ghosts, scornful images,

But the Furies cannot be compromised; they roar their refusal, the orchestral basses suggesting the growling and barking of Cerberus, the three-headed dog who guards Hades.

Orfeo continues his appeal to the Furies with more urgency.

*“Mille pene, ombre sdegnose”*

**ORFEO**



*Mil - le pe - ne, om - bre sde - gno - se,*  
 A thousand pains, scornful ghosts,

And:

*“Men tiranne, sh! Voi sareste al mio pianot, al mio lamento”*

**ORFEO**



*Men ti - ran - ne, ah! voi sa - res - te al mio pianot, al mio lamen - to,*  
 You would be less cruel in the presence of my tears, of my sighs,



But Euridice tells him that death would be more preferable than life with such a heartless man. Euridice compounds her misunderstanding: she can no longer bear the thought that she has exchanged death and the serene oblivion of Elysium for this living misery. Euridice's agony causes Orfeo's resolution to collapse: in sheer desperation he turns his eyes upon her, and immediately the gods exact their penalty; Euridice sinks dead in his arms.

Once again, Orfeo pours out his grief and despair.

*“Che farò senza Euridice? dove andrò senza il mio ben?”*

**Andante espressivo**

**ORFEO**



*Che fa - rò senza Euri - di - ce? dove andrò senza il mio ben?*  
**What will I do without Euridice? Where will I go without my beloved?**

Orfeo is about to kill himself; in death he will follow Euridice. But Amor arrives to inform him that his constancy has earned him a reward from the gods.

Euridice is restored to him, and both lovers exult in the joy of their reunion.

In the temple dedicated to Eros, a ballet and a final chorus sing praises and celebrate the happy resolution to Orfeo's misfortune.



## **CHAPTER FOUR**

### ***French Baroque Opera: Lully and Rameau***

### French Baroque: Lully and Rameau

Jean-Baptiste Lully (1632-1687), although an Italian by birth, became the founder and first major figure of French opera, introducing a transformed style of Italian opera to the court of Louis XIV during the eighteenth century.

Lully was a skilled and exacting musical dramatist: he innovated the “tragédie lyrique,” or “tragédie en musique,” dramatic operatic settings of serious themes that normally contained a prologue plus five acts, their subjects drawn from Greek mythology or chivalrous romance.

Lully established specific traditions that departed significantly from the existing Italian styles of the opera seria: he placed greater emphasis on complex stage settings, developed the ballet, and utilized choruses extensively. He innovated a French declamatory style of recitative with accompaniment that closely imitated the specific inflections of the French language.

Lully introduced the French overture, (one movement with a slow and fast section), enriched harmonic, rhythmic, and instrumental writing (he introduced brass into the French orchestra), and simplified the formalized Italian arias by shortening them into more captivating “airs,” the latter becoming extremely popular and circulating throughout Europe in printed editions.

In collaboration with the renowned librettist Philippe Quinault, Lully produced his first opera that incorporated his ideas: *Cadmus et Hermione* (1674), regarded as the cornerstone of French opera. The best of Lully’s fifteen operas held the stage almost a century after his death: *Alceste* (1674); *Thésée* (1675); *Atys* (1676); *Isis* (1677); *Psyché* (1678); *Belle-rophon* (1679); *Proserpine* (1680); *Persée* (1682); *Phaëton* (1683); *Amadis de Gaule* (1685); *Roland* (1685); *Armide et Renaud* (1686); *Acis et Galatée* (1686).

Jean-Philippe Rameau (1683-1764), a theorist in search of a musico-dramatic ideal, progressed beyond the grandeur of Lully’s style with more profound musical characterization, unsurpassed musical elegance, and a wealth of harmonic and melodic expressiveness. Rameau’s extraordinary emphasis on opera’s musical elements caused a furor between partisan of French and Italian opera, and he was accused of sacrificing melody for the sake of harmony and orchestration.

Influential men, such as Jean Jacques Rousseau, became hostile to Rameau, subscribing religiously to Italian opera seria traditions. Rousseau wrote of Rameau, “the (his) French airs are not airs at all, and the French recitative is not recitative.” Contrarily, Rameau’s advocates, Voltaire in particular, claimed that “Rameau has made of music a new art. He will eclipse us all.”

In 1752, the struggle between Rameau’s followers and those of Italian opera buffa precipitated a polemic artistic war in France, known as the “guerre des bouffons” (“The War of the Buffoons.”) The Guerre mirrored the eighteenth century ideological spirit of the Enlightenment: it argued the merits and virtues of the solemn opera seria, or its French incarnation, tragédie lyrique, against the farce and sentiment of opera buffa. An Italian troupe had just performed Pergolesi’s renowned opera buffa, *La Serva Padrona* (1733), which Rameau’s opponents claimed was the ultimate ideal, while violently condemning Rameau’s operas for their intricacy and cerebralism. Rameau’s supporters claimed that the composer was establishing the foundation for a pure French opera art form featuring mélodie, an inimitable fusion of text and music.

By the end of his life, Rameau was vindicated and recognized as a master, his innovations in harmony and orchestration, and his synthesizing of the textual dramaturgy with music becoming his ultimate victory. Those innovations became significant advances in opera’s search for musico-dramatic integrity, and became the basis for the evolution of French opera.

Among Rameau’s significant operas are: *Hippolyte et Aricie* (1733); *Les Indes Galantes* (1735); *Castor et Pollux* (1737); *Dardanus* (1739); *Les Fêtes de Polymnie* (1745); *Les Fêtes de l’Hymen et de l’Amour* (1747); *Zoroastre* (1749); *Platée* (1749); *Acanthe et Céphise* (1751); *Zephire* (1754); *Anacréon* (1754); *Les Paladins* (1760).

***CHAPTER FIVE***  
***Mozart and the Classical Era***

### *Mozart and the Classical Era*

**D**uring the latter part of the eighteenth century, Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart innovated new perspectives for opera, imbuing his operas with portrayals of profound matters of the heart, all set against the explosive social and political struggles of Enlightenment Europe.

Mozart became the first psychologist of opera, conveying mood, situation, and character through his ingenious musical inventions. He unmasked his characters and exposed their souls, his musical characterizations providing a truthful expression of their virtues, flaws, and profound human sentiments.

**M**ozart (1756-1791) was born in Salzburg, Austria. His life-span was brief, but his musical achievements were phenomenal and monumental. He became one of the most important and inspired composers in Western history: music seemed to gush forth from his creative soul like fresh water from a spring. With his early death at the age of thirty-five, one can only dream of the musical treasures that might have materialized from his music pen.

Along with such masters as Johann Sebastian Bach and Ludwig van Beethoven, Mozart was one of those three “immortals” of classical music. Superlatives about Mozart are inexhaustible: Tchaikovsky called him “the music Christ”; Haydn, a contemporary who revered and idolized him, claimed he was the best composer he ever knew; Schubert wept over “the impressions of a brighter and better life he had imprinted on our souls”; Schumann wrote that there were some things in the world about which nothing could be said: much of Shakespeare, pages of Beethoven, and Mozart’s last symphony, the forty-first.

Richard Wagner, who exalted the emotive power of the orchestra in his music dramas, assessed Mozart’s symphonies: “He seemed to breathe into his instruments the passionate tones of the human voice ... and thus raised the capacity of orchestral music for expressing the emotions to a height where it could represent the whole unsatisfied yearning of the heart.”

Although Mozart’s career was short, his musical output was phenomenal by any standard: more than 600 works that include forty-one symphonies, twenty-seven piano concertos, more than thirty string quartets, many acclaimed quintets, world-famous violin and flute concertos, momentous piano and violin sonatas, and, of course, a substantial legacy of sensational operas.

Mozart’s father, Leopold, an eminent musician and composer in his own right, became the teacher and inspiration to his exceptionally talented and incredibly gifted prodigy child. The young Mozart quickly demonstrated a thorough command of the technical resources of musical composition: at age three he went to the harpsichord and played tunes he had just heard; at age four he began composing his own music; at age six he gave his first public concert; by age twelve he had written ten symphonies, a cantata, and an opera; and at age thirteen he toured Italy, where in Rome, he astonished the music world by writing out the full score of a complex religious composition after one hearing.

Mozart’s musical style and the music of the late eighteenth century Classical era are virtually synonymous. The goal of Classical era music was to conform to specific standards and forms, to be succinct, clear, and well balanced, but at the same time, to develop musical ideas to an emotionally satisfying fullness. As a quintessential Classicist, Mozart’s music has become universally extolled; his music represents an outpouring of memorable graceful melody that is combined with formal, contrapuntal ingenuity.

During the late eighteenth-century, a musician's livelihood depended solidly on patronage from royalty and the aristocracy. Mozart and his sister, Nannerl, a skilled harpsichord player, frequently toured Europe together and performed at the courts of Austria, England, France, and Holland. But in Mozart's native Salzburg, Austria, he felt artistically oppressed by the Archbishop and decided to relocate to Vienna. There, he received first-rate appointments and financial security that emanated from the adoring support of both the Empress Maria Thérèse, and later her son, the Emperor Joseph II. Opera legend relates the story of a post-performance meeting between Emperor Joseph II and Mozart in which the Emperor commented: "Too beautiful for our ears and too many notes, my dear Mozart." Mozart replied: "Exactly as many as necessary, Your Majesty."

Mozart said: "Opera to me comes before everything else." He composed his operas in all of the existing genres and traditions: the Italian opera seria and opera buffa, and the German singspiel.

During Mozart's time, the Italians set the international standards for opera: Italian was the universal language of music and opera, and Italian opera was what Mozart's Austrian audiences and most of the rest of Europe wanted most. Therefore, even though Mozart was an Austrian, his country part of the German Holy Roman Empire, most of his operas were written in Italian.

In opera seria, Mozart recognized its excesses; their cardboard-style characters who were rigid and pretentious, and their scores saturated with florid da capo arias, few ensembles, and almost no chorus. He would follow Gluck's guidelines and strive for more profound dramatic integrity; he parted from existing traditions and endowed his works with a greater fusion between recitative and aria, the use of accompanied recitatives, many ensembles, and greater use of the orchestra.

Mozart's most renowned opere serie are *Idomeneo* (1781), and his last opera, *La Clemenza di Tito* ("The Clemency of Titus"), the latter a work commissioned to celebrate the coronation in Prague of the Emperor Leopold II as King of Bohemia.

By Mozart's time, the opera buffa, nurtured by the Renaissance commedia dell'arte, had become a favorite genre, its first popular incarnation Giovanni Pergolesi's *La Serva Padrona* (1733), a work with only three characters, but a quintessential model of the genre: it contained lively and catchy tunes which underscored the antics of a servant tricking an old bachelor into marriage.

The greatness of all art forms is that they express the soul and zeitgeist of their times. The eighteenth century was dominated by the Enlightenment, a philosophic movement marked by a profound rejection of traditional social, religious, and political ideas, and an emphasis on rationalism; the Enlightenment inspired a rebirth in the ideals of human dignity and freedom.

Opera buffa provided a convenient theatrical vehicle in which those Enlightenment ideals of democracy and humanism could be expressed in art: opera buffa became an operatic incarnation of political populism. The ruling aristocracies identified and even became flattered by the exalted personalities, gods, and heroes portrayed in the pretentious pomp and formality of the opera seria, but in contrast, opera buffa's satire and humor provided an arena to portray very human characters in everyday situations; the genre presented an opportunity to examine and express class distinctions and the frustrations of society's lower classes.

As such, opera buffa became synonymous with the spirit of the Enlightenment and the Classical era of music: the genre was enthusiastically championed by such renowned progressive thinkers as Rousseau; its music was intrinsically more natural, and its melodies elegant, yet emotionally restrained.

Mozart delighted in portraying themes dealing with the inspired ideals of the Enlightenment. He was living and composing during a monumental historical period of social upheaval and ideological transition. It was a time in which the common man struggled for his rights against the tyranny and oppression of his aristocratic master. In particular, *The Marriage of Figaro* contains all of the era's social and political conflicts and tensions: its primary theme is its portrayal of servants who are cleverer than their selfish, unscrupulous, and arrogant masters. Because of the comic effectiveness of its underlying political and social themes, *The Marriage of Figaro* has earned the accolade of the perfect opera buffa. Napoleon would later conclude that *The Marriage of Figaro*, both the Mozart opera and Beaumarchais's original play, represented the "Revolution in action."

Mozart's opere buffe range from his youthful works, *La Finta Semplici* (1768) and *La Finta Giardiniera* (1775), to his monumental buffe classics composed with the renowned librettist, Lorenzo Da Ponte. The Mozart-Da Ponte collaboration produced *The Marriage of Figaro* ("Le Nozze di Figaro") (1786), described by both composer and librettist as a "commedia per musica" ("comedy with music"); *Don Giovanni* (1787), technically an opera buffa but designated a "dramma giocoso" ("humorous drama" or "playful play"), that is essentially a combination of both the opera buffa and opera seria genres; and *Così fan tutte*, ("Thus do all women behave") (1789), another blend of genres for which nothing could be more laudatory than the renowned musicologist William Mann's conclusion that *Così fan tutte* contains "the most captivating music ever composed."

Nevertheless, although Mozart was writing in the Italian opera buffa genre and in the Italian language, Italians have historically shunned his Italian works, claiming that they were not "Italian" enough; contemporary productions of Mozart "Italian" operas in Italy are rare events.

Mozart also composed operas in the German singspiel genre, a style that generally defines an opera containing spoken dialogue instead of accompanied recitative. Mozart's most popular German singspiel operas are: *Die Zauberflöte* ("The Magic Flute") and *Die Entführung aus dem Serail* ("The Abduction from the Seraglio.")

Mozart wrote over 18 operas, among them: *Bastien and Bastienne* (1768); *La Finta Semplice* (1768); *Mitridate, Rè di Ponto* (1770); *Ascanio in Alba* (1771); *Il Sogno di Scipione* (1772); *Lucio Silla* (1772); *La Finta Giardiniera* (1774); *Idomeneo, Rè di Creta* (1781); *Die Entführung aus dem Serail* ("The Abduction from the Seraglio") (1782); *Der Schauspieldirektor* (1786); *Le Nozze di Figaro*, ("The Marriage of Figaro") (1786); *Don Giovanni* (1787); *Così fan tutte* (1790); *Die Zauberflöte* ("The Magic Flute") (1791); *La Clemenza di Tito* (1791).

**M**ozart was unequivocal about his opera objectives: "In an opera, poetry must be the obedient daughter of the music." But although Mozart gave priority to his music, he indeed took great care in selecting his text and poetry, hammering relentlessly at his librettists to be sure they produced words that could be illuminated and transcended by his music. To an opera composer of such incredible genius as Mozart, words performed through his music could express what language alone had exhausted.

Opera portrays the emotions and behavior of human beings, and its success lies in its ability to convey and intensify human character through the emotive power of its music. Mozart understood humanity and ingeniously translated his incredible human insight through his musical language. Mozart became one of the greatest masters of musical characterization

and musical portraiture. Like Shakespeare, he ingeniously translated “dramatic truth” through his music; his musical characterizations portray complex human emotions, passions, and feelings, and bare the souls of his characters with truthful representations of universal humanity; in those characterizations, the composer exposes the entire spectrum of human virtues, aspirations, inconsistencies, peculiarities, flaws, and foibles. Although Mozart reveals the souls of his characters, he rarely suggests any puritanical judgment or moralization of their behavior and actions. That focus on action rather than philosophy prompted Beethoven to lament that in *Don Giovanni* and *The Marriage of Figaro*, Mozart had squandered his genius on immoral and licentious subjects.

Nevertheless, it is that spotlight on the individual that makes Mozart’s characterizations a bridge between eighteenth and nineteenth century operas. Before Mozart, in the opera seria genre, operas portrayed abstract emotion; often, the dramatic form imitated the style of the ancient Greek theater in which an individual’s passions and the dramatic situations would generally transfer to the chorus for either narration, commentary, or summation. But Mozart was anticipating the transition to the Romantic movement that was to begin soon after his death. He discarded the masks hiding the inner human soul; his music endows his characters with profound human sentiments and feelings, and distinctive and recognizable musical personalities.

Thus, Mozart clearly perceived the vast possibilities of the operatic form as a means of musically creating characterization: in his operas, great and small persons move, think, and breathe on a very truthful human level, and there are extraordinary and insightful portrayals of the conduct and character of real and complex humanity. It is in the interaction between those characters themselves, particularly in ensembles that are almost symphonic in grandeur that an individual character’s emotions, passions, feelings, and reactions stand out in high relief.

As a consequence, for over two-hundred years, Mozart’s treasured characterizations have captivated opera audiences: *Don Giovanni’s* Donna Anna, Donna Elvira, Zerlina, Masetto, Leporello, and Don Giovanni himself; *The Marriage of Figaro’s* Count and Countess, Cherubino, Susanna, and Figaro. All of these Mozartian characters are profoundly human: they act with passion as well as sentiment, yet they always retain that special Mozartian dignity.

In the end, like Shakespeare, Mozart’s characterizations have become timeless representations of humanity; they can be great, or they can be flawed. Nevertheless, Mozart’s characterizations are as contemporary in the 20th-century as they were in the later part of the eighteenth century, even though costumes and customs may have changed. So *The Marriage of Figaro’s* predatory Count Almaviva, attempting to exercise his feudal right of *droit de seigneur*, may hypothetically be no different than his twentieth century counterpart: a successful, if not arrogant executive, legally forbidden, yet desiring to bed his illegal alien housekeeper against her wishes.

**I**n order to portray, communicate, and truthfully mirror the human condition, Mozart became a magician in developing and inventing various techniques within his unique musical language. He expresses those human qualities not only through distinguishing melody, but also through the specific essence of certain key signatures, as well as rhythm, tempo, pitch, accent and speech inflection.

As an example, each musical key has an inherent power to convey a particular mood and effect. Mozart often used G major as the key to convey rustic life and the common people: A major as the seductive key for sensuous love scenes. In *Don Giovanni*, D minor, Mozart’s

key for “Sturm und Drang” (storm and stress), appears solemnly in the Overture and in its colossal final scene. When characters are in trouble, their key is far removed from the home key: as they get out of trouble, they return to the home key, reducing the tension.

In both Mozart’s *Don Giovanni* and *The Marriage of Figaro*, social classes clash, but with sentiment and insight. Mozart’s characterizations range from underdogs to demigods, but in particular, when he deals with peasants and the lower classes, his music is subtle, compassionate, and loving. Therefore, Mozart’s heroes are those bright characters who occupy the lower social levels, those Figaros, Susannas, and Zerlinas, characters whom he ennoble with poignant musical portrayals of their complex personal emotions, feelings, hopes, sadness, envy, passion, revenge, and yearning for love.

Mozart’s theatrical genius was his ability to express truly human qualities in music. His character inventions possess a universal and sublime uniqueness: in the end, Mozart achieved an incomparable immortality for himself as well as his character creations.

The commission for *The Marriage of Figaro* was received from Mozart’s faithful patron, Emperor Joseph II of Austria. In 1786, its premiere year, the opera experienced triumphant productions in both Vienna and Prague, even though, quite naturally, the aristocracy deemed its libretto as having emanated from the depths of vulgarity. Nevertheless, with respect to its Prague premiere, the city was not directly under the control of the imperial Hapsburgs, and, therefore, any censorship or restriction of its underlying thematic elements was limited, if nonexistent.

Mozart had chosen Lorenzo da Ponte as his librettist: that peripatetic scholar, entrepreneur, and erstwhile crony of the notorious Casanova de Seingalt, reputedly a contributor of sections of the later *Don Giovanni* libretto.

Lorenzo da Ponte, nee Emmanuel Conegliano, was born in Italy in 1749, and died in America in 1838. He converted from Judaism, and after his baptism took the name da Ponte to honor the Bishop of Ceneda. Da Ponte aspired to a life in the Church, but seminary life failed. Afterwards, he embarked on a picaresque life that bears an uncanny resemblance to that of his libertine romantic hero, Don Giovanni.

Da Ponte was always involved in scandals and intrigues. At one time he was banished from Venice; at another, he was forced to leave England under threat of imprisonment for his financial difficulties. Finally, in 1805, he emigrated to the United States and taught Italian at Columbia University, where he introduced Italian literary classics to America. He later became an opera impresario, who in 1825, may have been the first to present Italian opera in the United States.

In Da Ponte’s haughty biography, *Extract from the Life of Lorenzo Da Ponte* (1819), he explains why Mozart chose him as his inspirational poet: “Because Mozart knew very well that the success of an opera depends, first of all, on the poet than a composer, who is, in regard to drama, what a painter is in regard to colors, and can never do without effect, unless excited and animated by the words of a poet, whose province is to choose a subject susceptible of variety, movement, and action, to prepare, to suspend, to bring about the catastrophe, to exhibit characters interesting, comic, well supported, and calculated for stage effect, to write his recitative short, but substantial, his airs various, new, and well situated; and his fine verses easy, harmonious, and almost singing of themselves.....”

Certainly, in Da Ponte’s librettos for three of Mozart’s operas, he indeed ascribed religiously to those literary and dramatic disciplines and qualities he so eloquently described and congratulated himself for in his autobiography.

The Da Ponte-Mozart source for *The Marriage of Figaro* was the trilogy of plays written by Pierre Augustin Caron de Beaumarchais (1732-1799). Beaumarchais was as colorful a real-life character as those he created in his plays.

He was the son of a clockmaker and initially followed in his father's footsteps, subsequently appointed clockmaker and watchmaker to the court of Louis XV. He was also a musician, a self-taught student of guitar, flute, and harp, who composed works for these instruments, and eventually became the harp teacher to the King's daughters. After marrying the widow of a court official in 1756, he was elevated to the status of a nobleman, taking the name Beaumarchais and buying the office of secretary to the king.

In 1763, France was still seeking revenge for its loss of Canada, and was observing with great interest the development of the American "resistance movement." In support, the French government offered covert aid to the American rebels, but was determined to keep France out of the war until an opportune moment. Nevertheless, in the pivotal year 1776, a fictitious company was set up under the direction of the author Pierre Augustin Caron de Beaumarchais, its purpose, to funnel military supplies and sell arms to the rebellious American colonists.

Beaumarchais's specific fame and legacy were his literary achievements: the comedic theatrical trilogy, which includes *Le Barbier de Séville, ou La précaution inutile* (1775), ("The Barber of Seville, or the Useless Precaution"), *Le mariage de Figaro, ou La folle journée* (1784), ("The Marriage of Figaro, or the Crazy Day"), and the final installment, *L'autre Tartuffe, ou La Mère Coupable*, ("The Guilty Mother") (1792).

In these plays, Beaumarchais weaves together a cast of thinly disguised heroes, lower class characters whose only means to survive is through imagination and ingenuity. None is more admirable than Figaro — Beaumarchais himself — who is a master of sabotage and intrigue, and a clever and enterprising "man for all seasons." Villains and tormentors oppose Figaro, who are simultaneously in continuous conflict with one another: Figaro's antagonists are all members of the upper classes.

Figaro's witty and high-handed attitude toward his aristocratic master, Count Almaviva, in those days, a virtual omen of revolution, is clearly defined in Beaumarchais's play when Figaro speaks about the Count: "What have you done to earn so many honors? You have taken the trouble to be born, that's all." Beaumarchais's plays reflected the winds of change stirred by the Enlightenment: they satirized the French ruling class and reflected the growing lower class dissatisfaction with the nobility in the years preceding the French Revolution. Both Beaumarchais's *Le Barbier de Séville* and *Le mariage de Figaro*, in their caustic satire of prevailing social and political conditions, flatter the lower classes, and castigate the upper class nobility.

Beaumarchais's heroic output, the "Figaro trilogy," or the "Almaviva trilogy," indeed represents an historical canvas of the late eighteenth century zeitgeist. The plays sum up the era and overflow with social and political conflicts and tensions. In essence, they became the essential personification of the forthcoming French Revolution, which they not only reflect, but also influenced, inspired, and consciously or unconsciously set into motion. In these plays, the ancien régime is seen in declining grandeur and impending doom; social change and transition are imminent.

All of the plays center around the colorful character of the factotum Figaro, a jack-of-all-trades, whose savvy and ingenuity serve as the symbol of class revolt against the aristocracy. *Le barbier de Séville*, originally written by Beaumarchais as an opera libretto for the Opéra-Comique, was banned for two years before it was finally performed in 1775; it was a failure at its first performance, but it was catapulted to success after later revisions. King Louis XVI briefly imprisoned Beaumarchais for his blasphemous writings, but later acceded to public

pressure and placated him. In an ironic twist, the King agreed to a gala performance of *Le barber de Seville* at Versailles: his wife, Marie-Antoinette portrayed Rosine, and the future Charles X, portrayed Figaro. The second part of the trilogy, *Le mariage de Figaro* became such a triumph that it ran for eighty-six consecutive performances. Again, Louis XVI attempted to prohibit performances of *Le mariage*, but the masses, not in a mood to be trifled with in those times, demanded and received performances.

Mozart's opera *The Marriage of Figaro*, and later, Rossini's opera *Il Barbiere di Siviglia*, ("The Barber of Seville") (1816), would eventually assure literary immortality for Beaumarchais's masterpieces. It is noteworthy that each one of Beaumarchais's plays ends in a marriage, but not everyone lives happily ever after: each play seems to resolve more darker than the one before. In Beaumarchais's final installment, *L'autre Tartuffe, ou La Mère Coupable*, ("The Guilty Mother") (1792), the Countess Almaviva has a child by Cherubino. Mozart died before its premiere, and one is tempted to speculate how Mozart would have darkened that episode with his music had he attacked an opera on the subject.

Mozart's *The Marriage of Figaro* antedates Rossini's *The Barber of Seville* by thirty years. Rossini's work essentially owes its provenance to another opera based on Beaumarchais: Paisello's *Barbiere di Siviglia* (1780). But it was Rossini's admiration for Mozart's *Marriage* that strongly persuaded him to create his *Barber* opera, a work now acclaimed as the greatest opera buffa ever written, as well as the perfect companion piece to Mozart's *Marriage*.

Nevertheless, in Rossini's *Barber*, the political and social undercurrents of the late eighteenth century are understated. By 1816, the premiere year of *Barber*, the French Revolution had already become indelibly inscribed in history, and the Congress of Vienna had just implemented a new status quo for Europe. In fact, Rossini's libretto was considered so inoffensive to the aristocracy that his librettist, Cesare Sterbini, easily received the approval of the Roman censor. Although censorship remained a powerful instrument for suppression, the government made no effort or pretext to suppress it. As it turned out, opposition to Rossini's opera was purely personal, cloaked behind the opera public's devotion to the venerated Paisello, the composer of the first *Barber* opera; Paisello was still alive and revered by the public.

In truth, these two Figaro operas are perfect companions. Although the later Rossini work has none of the deep and tender sentiment which underlies so much of Mozart's creation, from a comic viewpoint, Rossini's work inherently deals with a more humorous phase of the entire trilogy: it possesses intrinsic humor, frolic, and vivacity as it portrays the Count Almaviva's adventures with Figaro as they outwit Dr. Bartolo and carry off the mischievous Rosina.

But in contrast, *The Marriage of Figaro* story offers a depiction of the transformation of the Count after his marriage to Rosina: his intrigues, suspicions, and philandering. The differences are certainly evident in Rossini's *Barber*, where the youthful and impetuous characters have an elemental freshness, but in Mozart, they have matured, become domesticated, and certainly have transcended youthful innocence. Nevertheless, these two operas are "marriages made in operatic heaven."

In addition to Mozart and Rossini, Beaumarchais's comedies were made into operas by Friedrich Ludwig Benda in *Der Barbier von Sevilla*; Paërrs in *Il nuovo Figaro*; and of course, in Paisello's *The Barber of Seville*.

Beaumarchais's heroic "Figaro trilogy" deals with despicable aspects of human character; transformation of the existing eighteenth century social structure was the very foundations of Enlightenment idealism, and that yearning for change became the undercurrent that led to the French Revolution.

The engines that drive the plots of *The Marriage of Figaro* — and *Don Giovanni* — are the moral foibles and peccadilloes of aristocratic men: Count Almaviva and Don Giovanni are the nobility, men who can almost be perceived by modern standards as criminals; men who are unstable, wildly libidinous, and men who feel themselves above moral law. Both operas focus on seduction: seduction that ends in hapless failure.

The class conflicts and their social and political realities, all unite and blend into a highly sophisticated battle of the sexes. *The Marriage* story takes place three years after the *Barber* story, and Count Almaviva has now become a predatory philanderer. Rosina, now the Countess, displays mature wisdom well beyond her youthful years. One part of the story revolves around Figaro's imminent marriage to Susanna. But the other part portrays the Count as a lecher, obsessed to seduce Susanna, even though he has abandoned his feudal right of *droit de seigneur*.

Figaro and Susanna must use their ingenuity to thwart the Count's lascivious intentions. The lower classes become the heroes of the story, using their wiles, wit, determination, decency and love — and a little bit of luck — to tip the scales against upper class arrogance and power. In the process, these lower class characters become divinely articulate harbingers of revolution. Although da Ponte removed elements of Beaumarchais's original text that he considered potentially offensive, the irony is that Mozart unhesitatingly represents those very same ideas in his musical language with clarity and boldness.

Nevertheless, class relations are presented *de facto*, and the underlying implication is that status in the social hierarchy is an accident of fortune rather than a reflection of native worth: these themes are clearly woven into the musical fabric of *The Marriage of Figaro*.

The two main female characters in *The Marriage of Figaro*, Susanna and the Countess, are portrayed with brilliant musical contrast. In Mozart's later *Don Giovanni*, he would likewise provide a profound musical portrayal of diverse femininity in the contrasting characterizations of Donna Anna, Donna Elvira, and Zerlina.

Susanna is indeed the heroine of the story: she is multidimensional and complex, and possesses a profound instinctive intelligence, like her Columbine forebears from the *commedia dell'arte*, and even Rosina from Beaumarchais's *Le Barbier*. She is a spirited character; she is sharp-witted, spunky, wily, and the master of irony. It is a brilliant climactic moment in the opera when she emerges from the closet and presents herself to the sword-wielding Count with feigned disingenuousness and masterful irony. But she also radiates assuredness and omniscience, whether in her conversations with the Countess, or in her attempts to fight off becoming a victim of the lecherous Count.

Susanna proves to be the one character in the opera who is stable and capable of sorting out everybody's troubles as well as her own. From the very beginning, she demonstrates her intuitive intelligence and insight when she opens Figaro's eyes to the Count's ulterior motives in placing their room so close to his quarters. But it is in the last act, when Mozart provides Susanna with that sensuous aria, "Deh vieni non tardar," that she overwhelms Figaro with great tenderness and emotion. Susanna's aria is one of those magnificent moments in opera when action and time stand still, and sublime music intervenes to convey humanity's aspirations of love and happiness.

That other great female character in *The Marriage* is the Countess, a seemingly pathetic, wounded woman. She is prone to melancholy, but always exudes a profound spiritual, noble, and moral presence. Her dignity has been pitifully injured by the Count, but she never at anytime considers staining his honor by vengefully taking a lover. Subconsciously she understands her husband, but consciously she cannot accept the philandering of a man seemingly bored by his wife, and unaware that he is victimized by a massive mid-life crisis.

Mozart gave the Countess's two great arias in which she movingly expresses resignation but profound dignity: "Dov'e sono" and "Porgi amor." Da Ponte's text for these arias are heartfelt expressions of a truly noble and aristocratic woman, but it is the emotive power of Mozart's music that reflects her true feelings and conveys genuine pathos.

**T**he finale of Act II is perhaps one of Mozart's most monumental musical inventions and designs. It is an episode of some 150 pages of score that is perhaps without parallel in opera; its 20-minute length virtually makes it a play itself. In this finale, Mozart continuously uses a variety of key changes that serve to alter the mood and provide surprise upon surprise. Eventually, eight characters appear on stage, and the ensemble builds steadily, but never with a false climax, inconsistency, or artificial stroke.

The engine that drives the Act II finale is complex misunderstandings. Who is in the Countess's closet? (Is it Cherubino as both the Count and Countess presume?) What are the contents of the dropped paper? (Figaro has to be primed by Susanna through the Countess to learn that it is Cherubino's commission.) Is the Countess having a clandestine rendezvous with a lover? (The Count's obsession to know who wrote the anonymous note.) And, who jumped from the window into the garden?

The ensemble is inaugurated when the Count begins to break down the closet door, convinced that it is Cherubino who is hiding, and that he is the Countess's lover. The only two characters on stage, the Count and the Countess, begin an acrimonious exchange. The Count erupts in rage and becomes overbearing and intolerably aggressive. The Countess becomes flustered in her attempts to reason with him as she tries to persuade him of her innocence, but she compounds his outrage by admitting that Cherubino is indeed in the closet — and only half dressed. The first surprise — to both the Count and Countess — is the emergence from the closet of Susanna, not Cherubino. Out of necessity, and recognizing a misunderstanding, the Count calms down, and has no other alternative than to ask his wife's forgiveness.

With Figaro's arrival, the ensemble builds to four characters. The Count, suspicious and confused, decides to question his wily valet, instinctively condemning him for being involved in the anonymous letter he received. And then the group becomes a quintet when the gardener Antonio arrives to announce that someone jumped out the window and ruined his flowerbed.

The comic confusion augments and reaches a climax with the entrance of Don Basilio, Dr. Bartolo, and Marcellina, the latter arriving to claim that Figaro must marry her because he has not paid his debt to her.

In this ensemble, all the characters sing individually and also in ensemble. Through Mozart's genius, the ensemble fuses like a symphony, the music's incremental changes creating new dramatic moments that convey sensibilities, truths, and underlying subtleties. Mozart emphatically highlights each surprise and revelation with a change in key, rhythm, and tempo. As such, one feels and senses shock; nevertheless, the sequence maintains a sense of delicacy and playfulness, and always hints of new revelations.

In this finale of Act II, Mozart proved that he was ingeniously innovative. No one before him had attempted such a long, uninterrupted operatic ensemble. In the eighteenth century opera composers traditionally wrote short numbers, all strung together with recitatives or spoken dialogues. But in this ensemble that concludes Act II, its musical numbers are all welded and integrated as one unit.

The engine that drives the *Marriage* story concerns an entire series of crises which evolve as a result of misunderstandings, a host of erroneous presumptions made from vaguely seen events, or overheard conversations not clearly understood. The characters are continually acting and reacting to their senses: they see and hear things from which they make presumptions, but they are never sure, and as a result, crises develop and envelop the characters.

Cherubino overheard the Count pressuring Susanna amorously; the Count overheard Basilio spread scandalous rumors about the Countess; the Count overheard Susanna proclaiming victory in Marcellina's suit against Figaro; Figaro believed he caught Susanna with the Count; and the Count believed he caught Figaro with the Countess. Conversations and misunderstandings drive the plot to its conclusion

Until the opera's conclusion, the end of what Beaumarchais titled a "Crazy Day," each character suffers because of misjudgments. He assumes a truth but it is not a truth, only the result of a vague visual or aural perception.

The opera's finale is 15 minutes long and is devoted to the weaving and unweaving of the story's comical complications and mistaken identities. Beaumarchais was a master technician in injecting these plot complications into his play. But it was Mozart who provided the emotive power of the musical language to invent incredibly descriptive music to comment on the characters' inner feelings and sensibilities during these crises.

In *The Marriage of Figaro*, eyes and ears become the instruments of illusion and delusion. But illusion and delusion oppose reality and truth, the ultimate source of knowledge. At the conclusion of this masterpiece, knowledge is achieved, the imagined world becomes the real world, and unfounded perceptions and misunderstandings become reality and truth.

*The Marriage of Figaro* is a social chronicle of its times. Its search for universal truth was originally penned by Beaumarchais, and later transformed into an opera libretto by Da Ponte. Ultimately, Mozart endowed the story with incredible musical inventions. It was the twilight of the Enlightenment, a time when humanity's craving for freedom and social justice would materialize and become engraved into Western history through events such as the storming of the Bastille and the French Revolution.

Mozart's music for *The Marriage of Figaro*, like its literary foundations, thunders for social reform, equality, and remains a lasting testament to humanity's greatest aspirations: freedom and justice.



# *The Marriage of Figaro*

“Le Nozze di Figaro”

Opera in Italian in four acts

Music

By

Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart

Libretto by Lorenzo da Ponte

after Beaumarchais’s play

*La Folle Journée ou Le Mariage de Figaro*

(“The Crazy Day or The Marriage of Figaro”)

Premiere: Burgtheater, Vienna, 1786

***Principal Characters in The Marriage of Figaro***

Count Almaviva	Baritone
Countess Almaviva	Soprano
Figaro, the Count's valet	Baritone
Susanna, a maid to the Countess, betrothed to Figaro	Soprano
Cherubino, a young page	Soprano
Dr. Bartolo, a lawyer and physician	Bass
Marcellina, Dr. Bartolo's housekeeper	Contralto
Don Basilio, music master	Bass
Antonio, a gardener, and Susanna's uncle	Bass
Don Curzio, a lawyer	Tenor
Barbarina, Antonio's daughter	Soprano

TIME: The late 18<sup>th</sup> century

PLACE: Count Almaviva's chateau in the countryside near Seville

***Brief Story Synopsis***

In the first episode of the trilogy, *The Barber of Seville* story, the young Count Almaviva courts Rosina, luring her from the jealous and self-serving guardianship of Dr. Bartolo through a series of subterfuges, intrigues, and adventures, all engineered with the help of Figaro, Seville's illustrious barber, factotum, and jack-of-all-trades.

In the second episode, *The Marriage of Figaro*, Count Almaviva is married to Rosina: she is now the Countess Almaviva; Figaro is the Count's valet, a reward he received for his services to the Count; and Dr. Bartolo has become the "doctor of the house." Dr. Bartolo seethes with revenge against Figaro for having outwitted him and enabling the Count to marry Rosina. Together with the housekeeper, Marcellina, who also harbors resentment toward Figaro, they conspire for vengeance against Figaro.

The noble Count Almaviva of *The Barber of Seville* story has become transformed into a philanderer with amorous designs on Figaro's bride-to-be, Susanna, the Countess's maid. The Countess, chagrined, betrayed and disconcerted by her husband's philandering, joins with Susanna and Figaro in a plot to embarrass the Count; as such, she hopes he will change his ways and renew his devotion to her.

*The Marriage of Figaro* story deals with eighteenth century social struggles between lower class servants and their aristocratic masters, the intrigues in their relationships complicated by sex, rivalries, jealousies, betrayals and revenge.

### *Story Narrative with Music Examples*

#### **Overture:**

The Overture to *The Marriage of Figaro* captures the spirit of the opera: its themes are specific to the Overture and do not appear elsewhere in the opera.

Mozart musically suggests the story's underlying ironies and satire with bubbling and delightful motives; the music conveys a sense of rollicking good humor, but also contains subtle suggestions of the story's intrigues and skullduggery.

#### **Presto**



#### **Presto**



#### **Act I: A room in the Chateau assigned to Figaro and Susanna**

Figaro and his bride-to-be, Susanna, are making last minute preparations for their wedding. The Count has assigned them to new quarters and presented them with a new bed. Figaro is preoccupied with measuring how the bed will fit in the room, while Susanna tries on a hat she has made to wear at her wedding: the traditional wreath of orange blossoms, known as "le chapeau de mariage." Susanna becomes irritated because Figaro takes no interest in her hat, but her petulance finally succeeds in getting his attention.

Intuitively, Susanna is suspicious of the Count's sudden generosity, in which he provided them with a room extremely close to his own quarters. At the same time, she is exasperated by Figaro's unsuspecting complacency, and his failure to realize that the proximity of their rooms may indeed be an intentional ploy by the lustful Count. Susanna awakens Figaro's mistrust of the Count by convincing him that the Count does not really want her close to her mistress, the Countess. On the contrary, she concludes that he wants Susanna conveniently located so that he could invent an errand that would dispense with Figaro, and then have her at his mercy.

The Count has become a philanderer who is no longer satisfied with salacious amusement away from home. On the contrary, he has decided that he has many opportunities for amorous adventure right in his own chateau. Susanna has heard from Don Basilio that the Count has intentions of renewing the *droit de seigneur*, or *ius primae noctis*, the old custom of the feudal right of the lord, a tradition by which the lord of the manor, in compensation for the loss of one of his female servants through marriage, had the right to deflower his feudal dependent before the husband took possession. Susanna has become the Count's intended victim, and with his customary despicable arrogance, he intends to achieve with consent from Susanna, the right he ceded by law.

Upon hearing Susanna's revelation, Figaro becomes stunned and outraged. He is unable to comprehend how the Count could betray him after he provided his unstinting help and friendship during the Count's courting of Rosina. Figaro becomes alarmed, and is now convinced that the Count, if he succeeds in becoming the ambassador in London, will send him off as his courier, and then have Susanna alone as his prey.

Figaro decides that he must outwit his master, and with his customary confidence, concludes that the Count will never be able to match his ingenuity. In his aria, "Se vuol ballare, Signor Contino" ("If you want to dance my little Count"), Figaro sums up the underlying tension of their class struggle, a conflict in which the lower classes require cunning to survive under aristocratic power. Although Susanna is confident she can control the lascivious Count, Figaro is more apprehensive, and even somewhat jealous.

*"Se vuol ballare, signor Contino"*

**Allegretto**  
**FIGARO**



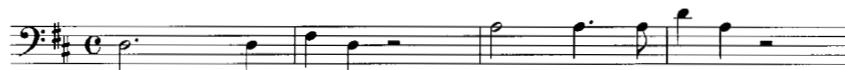
The musical notation is a single line of bass clef music in 3/4 time. It consists of eight measures. The notes are: G2, A2, B2, C3, D3, E3, F3, G3, A3, B3, C4, D4, E4, F4, G4, A4, B4, C5. The lyrics are written below the notes: "Se vuol bal - la - re, sig - nor Con - ti - no, If you want to dance my little Count,"

In a moment of desperation, Figaro borrowed money from Marcellina, Dr. Bartolo's housekeeper, however, lacking collateral, he casually promised to marry her if he could not reimburse her. Marcellina arrives to demand repayment from Figaro, and with the encouragement and assistance of Dr. Bartolo, intends to legally force Figaro to marry her. Likewise, Dr. Bartolo seeks revenge against Figaro for his past trickery in helping the Count lure Rosina from him. And further gratifying Bartolo is the opportunity to rid himself of the now extremely unattractive Marcellina, who, many years earlier, was his mistress and the bearer of his illegitimate son.

Marcellina and Dr. Bartolo unite and become impassioned accomplices in their conspiracy against Figaro: Bartolo concludes that his hour of revenge against "that rascal Figaro" may have finally arrived, and he expresses his exhilaration in the traditional grand buffo style, his patter aria: "La vendetta, oh, la vendetta!" ("Vengeance, oh vengeance!")

*"La vendetta, oh, la vendetta!"*

**Allegro con spirito**  
**BARTOLO**



The musical notation is a single line of bass clef music in common time. It consists of four measures. The notes are: G2, A2, B2, C3, D3, E3, F3, G3, A3, B3, C4, D4, E4, F4, G4, A4, B4, C5. The lyrics are written below the notes: "La ven - det - ta, oh, la ven-det - ta! Vengeance, oh vengeance!"

When Susanna reappears, Marcellina provokes her into a rivalry for Figaro by planting seeds of jealousy. The two women argue with mock courtesies, sarcasm, and feigned sincerity and politeness. But Marcellina cannot restrain her spite and disdain; she insults Susanna by calling her "the Count's beautiful Susanna." Likewise, Susanna responds by insulting Marcellina's advancing age.

After Marcellina departs, Cherubino, the page of the chateau, arrives. He is an adolescent suffering from youthful erotic awakenings, and a pulse that uncontrollably races when he encounters the opposite sex: the ubiquitous page's hyperactive hormones seem to place him in all of the wrong places at the wrong time.

Yesterday, in particular, Cherubino aroused the Count's anger when the Count caught him in a rendezvous with Barbarina, the gardener Antonio's daughter. The Count became enraged; after all, Cherubino was in truth his rival for Barbarina. The Count angrily warned Cherubino, and the page fears his fury and that he would be expelled from the chateau. Cherubino begs Susanna to intercede with the Countess and ask her to dissuade the Count's agitation.

However, true to his uncontrollable passions, the young Cherubino reveals to Susanna that he has fallen deeply in love with no less a personage than the Countess herself, his godmother. Ecstatic and inspired by his love for the Countess, he expresses his erotic passions, sensibilities that he cannot understand and confuse him.

*“Non so più cosa son, cosa faccio”*

**Allegro vivace**  
**CHERUBINO**



*Non so più co - sa son, co - sa fac - cio,*  
**I no longer know who I am, or what I do.**

Suddenly, the Count himself invades the new quarters of Susanna and Figaro. Cherubino, fearing the Count, particularly because he should not be in Susanna's quarters at all, hastily conceals himself behind a chair. The Count, believing that he is alone with Susanna, pleads for her love. He explains that he may receive an ambassadorship to London, and suggests to Susanna that his appointment would provide a magnificent opportunity for them to develop a relationship: of course, the unsuspecting Count's amorous proposition is overheard by the hiding Cherubino.

Approaching footsteps are heard. The Count, fearing a scandal if he is caught in Susanna's room, decides to hide behind the chair. Cherubino avoids him by scattering around and seating himself in the chair; Susanna covers the young page with her bridal dress.

Don Basilio arrives, the chateau's gossiping music master and ingenious fabricator of intrigues. He proceeds to make malicious — yet accurate — insinuations about Cherubino's rapturous flirtations and amorous behavior toward the Countess. The Count, hiding behind the chair, overhears Basilio's blasphemous accusations about his wife, emerges from behind the chair, erupts into a towering rage, and demands details and an explanation from Basilio.

In fear, Basilio retracts his accusations by excusing them as mere suspicion. Nevertheless, the seeds of jealousy have been planted in the Count's mind. And, he is outraged that his rival is the young page Cherubino, a continuing obstacle to his pursuits.

The Count describes how yesterday, when he was in Barbarina's room, he drew away a tablecloth in a moment of passion and discovered Cherubino hiding under the table. As he demonstrates his actions, he sweeps aside Susanna's dress from the chair, and in shock, surprise, and exasperation, for the second time in a mere few days, he finds Cherubino again in a compromising situation. The Count becomes outraged; Susanna expresses horror; and Don Basilio erupts into malicious delight and laughter.

The Count concludes that Cherubino and Susanna are having a clandestine affair, which serves to further infuriate him: not only has Cherubino overheard his failed attempts to seduce Susanna, but also the lad seems to have had more success with Susanna than he has had. The Count now realizes that he has an opportunity to avenge his cunning valet, so he sends Basilio to fetch Figaro so he can reveal his betrothed's infidelities.

Figaro arrives with a group of peasants, all ironically praising their magnanimous master: the man of virtue who abolished the ancient aristocratic privilege of *droit de seigneur*. Likewise, Figaro joins the praise and requests that at their wedding the Count should place the wedding veil on Susanna's head to symbolize the bride's innocence because he the Count has relinquished his former privilege.

The Count becomes thoroughly enraged with the omnipresent Cherubino. Susanna suggests that he forgive the innocent and naive lad. But the Count has a sudden inspiration, a strategy to rid himself completely of Cherubino. The boy will receive an officer's commission in the Count's Seville regiment and must leave immediately. Now delirious and elated with the impending resolution to his problem with Cherubino, the Count and the malicious Don Basilio depart.

Cherubino shakes in dreaded fear as Figaro taunts him, painting a vivid picture of the glories and terrors of military life: now, instead of flirtation and tender love-making, Cherubino will embark on a military career and be subject to weary drills and marching.

*“Non più andrai farfallone amoroso”*

**Vivace**  
**FIGARO**



*Non più andrai, far - fallon - e a - mo - ro - so,*  
**You'll no longer be fluttering around night and day,**

Figaro exults in the idea of Cherubino's departure: like the Count, his life will certainly be sweeter without the menacing presence of this impetuous young page.

## **Act II: The Countess's apartment**

The Countess, alone and pensive, meditates about her happy past, and her unhappy present. She deeply loves her husband, but she has slowly realized that she is not the only woman in his life. The Countess, touchingly and expressively, expresses her distressed feelings, praying for relief from her grief, and ultimately, that her husband's affections may be restored to her.



Just as Cherubino's female disguise is completed, the Count is heard angrily knocking at the door. Cherubino, fearing another encounter with his master, immediately hides in an adjoining closet. The Count arrives in agitation: he received the Countess's letter for a rendezvous with a secret lover and is now enraged by suspicions of her infidelity. And when he finds the Countess's door locked — an unprecedented action — his suspicions become further aroused.

The door is opened, and the Count immediately presents the letter to the Countess, fuming at her as he incriminates her infidelity. At the same time, the Count's suspicions are further aroused when he hears noises from an adjoining room — the hiding Cherubino of course. Nervously, the Countess tries to deter the Count, explaining that the noise is from Susanna who is dressing. But the Count is beside himself with jealousy, fears a scandal and the ridicule of a cuckolded husband. He suspects that the Countess's lover is hiding in the closet, and demands that Susanna — if it is indeed Susanna — come out of the room and allay his suspicions.

In desperation, the Count unsuccessfully tries to physically open the door. Thwarted in his attempts, he decides to secure tools to break down the door, but to avoid any skulduggery, he insists that the Countess leave with him. Both the Count and Countess depart, but beforehand, the Count locks the doors, in effect locking both Susanna and Cherubino inside.

After they have departed, Susanna fetches Cherubino. Cherubino is terrified and intimidated lest the Count should discovered her. With no other exit, Cherubino escapes through an open window, his jump witnessed by the inebriated Antonio, the gardener, who becomes puzzled and disconcerted at what he has just seen.

Susanna proceeds to hide herself in the adjoining closet and await the return of the Count and Countess. The Count arrives with an iron bar in hand, viciously intent to forcibly open the closet door. The Countess, unaware that Cherubino has escaped and that Susanna has replaced him in the closet, becomes anxious and nervous as she tries to deter her husband. She decides that she has no alternative but to confess that it is indeed the young Cherubino in the closet: at the same time she tries to persuade the Count that Cherubino is merely an innocent young lad who is unworthy of his anger.

Nevertheless, the Count is implacable; he is angry, inflamed with rage, and blind with jealousy, particularly after he received the letter revealing that the Countess planned a secret rendezvous with a lover. He disregards the Countess's anxious pleading, and becomes obsessed to learn the identity of the Countess's secret lover hiding in her closet.

*“Esci or mai, garzon malnato”*

**Allegro**  
**COUNT**



*E - sci o mai, garzon mal - na - to, scia - gu - ra - to, non tardar!*  
**Come out now, uncouth lad, scoundrel, and don't delay!**

Just as the Count is about to break down the door, and with his sword poised for the kill, the door opens. Susanna appears calmly at the threshold, her demeanor expressing wide-eyed innocence. The Count is dumbfounded, shocked and surprised that it was indeed Susanna in the room. The Countess is duly astonished but relieved by the resolution of a seemingly insoluble dilemma. In effect, Susanna's emergence has confirmed the Countess's original explanation that it was indeed Susanna dressing in the room. The Countess quickly clarifies

her earlier confession to the Count, explaining that the reason she told him Cherubino was in the room was merely a ruse to inflame his jealousy: she knew all the time that Susanna was in the room. The Count becomes humiliated, senses that he has been duped, and refuses to believe that Susanna was alone in the dressing room. He decides to enter the room and investigate further. While he is gone, Susanna advises the confused Countess that Cherubino escaped by jumping from the window.

The Count returns, confused and embarrassed that his suspicions were unfounded. He becomes contrite, asks the Countess to forgive his behavior and confirms his love for her. Nevertheless, he reproaches the Countess for the cruelty of her foolish jokes. But the Countess now becomes angry and unmerciful. She expresses her bitterness to the Count for his unfounded suspicion of her, and reminds him of his continuing neglect and indifference to her.

Nevertheless, jealousy has been implanted in the Count's mind. He still suspects that it was indeed Cherubino hiding in her room, and proceeds to demand an explanation of the anonymous letter. The Countess explains that it was all part of a harmless joke perpetrated by Figaro to provoke and tease him. The Count again begs her forgiveness, and this time, she grants it.

Excitedly, Figaro arrives to announce that the musicians have assembled; all the arrangements are in place, and their wedding can proceed. The Count is wary and suspicious of Figaro, and seizes the opportunity to question him about the infamous letter. The resourceful Figaro vigorously denies any knowledge of it, but his memory is sharpened by whispers from Susanna and the Countess; then Figaro admits to the Count that he was the writer of the letter.

Antonio arrives to further confound Figaro and present him with new problems. In a comically inebriated state, Antonio complains that someone jumped out of the window of the Countess's room, trampled his flowers, and broke a flowerpot. Figaro quickly admits that he was the culprit, and even shows them that he injured his leg in the process.

That being the case, Antonio confronts Figaro with a paper that he supposedly dropped in the garden during his jump: Cherubino's officer's commission. The Count senses chicanery. He grabs the paper from Antonio, and then interrogates Figaro, asking him to explain the contents of the paper. The Countess recognizes the paper, whispers to Susanna that it is Cherubino's commission, and Susanna in turn whispers its content to Figaro. Figaro, now prompted by the women, reveals to the Count that the paper is Cherubino's commission.

The Count inquires why the commission was in Figaro's possession, and again, the Countess prompts the answer through Susanna's subtle whispers. With great confidence, Figaro vindicates himself and announces that Cherubino gave him the commission to secure its missing seal.

Figaro now faces his most serious crisis. The malicious trio of Marcellina, Dr. Bartolo, and Don Basilio burst in and demand justice. Specifically, Figaro must honor his promise to repay Marcellina's loan to him, and if he cannot, he is legally bound to marry her. The Count becomes ecstatic: he now has found a means to have revenge against his wily valet; after all, with Figaro out of the way, he would have no obstacle in pursuing Susanna.

The Count announces that he will act as magistrate and adjudicate Marcellina's claim; it will be a biased decision that will enable the eager Count to settle accounts with his troublesome valet. The Count again postpones the marriage between Figaro and Susanna until all of the complications between servants and masters are resolved.







Susanna and the Countess arrive, each wearing the other's clothes. Figaro hides himself in the expectation of catching Susanna and the Count in flagrante.

Susanna, advised by Marcellina, knows that Figaro is spying nearby, decides to teach her mistrusting new husband a lesson. With poignancy, she addresses a song to the supposed lover whom she awaits, telling him how she anticipates this night of love. Figaro, aroused and inflamed, hears Susanna but cannot see her in the dark: he does not know that it is he, not the Count, who is the subject of her amorous reflections.

*“Deh viene, non tardar, o gioja bella”*

**Andante**  
**SUSANNA**



*Deh vie - ni, non tar - dar, o gio - ja bel - la,*  
**Come, don't be late, my heart's delight,**

The final scene is saturated with complications, confusion, and mistaken identities. The Countess is in disguise, wearing Susanna's clothes. Cherubino arrives, starts to make love to the Countess, believing that from the clothes she wears she is Susanna. Suddenly, the Count arrives, steps between them, and in the dark and confusion, mistakenly receives a kiss from Cherubino. Now enraged, the Count aims a blow to Cherubino's ears, but instead, catches the hovering Figaro. The Count is left alone with the woman he believes is Susanna and proceeds to plead for her love and embraces, little knowing that the woman he is attempting to seduce is his own wife, the Countess.

Figaro wanders about, finds whom he believes is the Countess (Susanna), and suggests that they together catch the Count with Susanna. But the Countess forgets herself for a moment and fails to disguise her voice. Figaro intuitively grasps the situation perfectly.

Nevertheless, Figaro seeks revenge. Theatrically, he begins to declare his passionate love for the woman now dressed as the Countess, which, in turn, infuriates Susanna, rouses her jealousy, and prompts her to rain blows on Figaro. Their argument ends with the newlywed's first loving reconciliation.

Then Figaro and Susanna enact their own charade for the benefit of the Count, enacting an impassioned moment of love while the Count looks on. He becomes irate when he sees Figaro and a woman he believes is his wife, but the Count, true to character, has more important priorities: he leaves the scene en route for his rendezvous with Susanna.

The Countess, now dressed in her own clothes, makes a dignified appearance, and clears up the chaos and confusion by advising everyone to cease their foolish games. Figaro, Susanna, and finally the Countess, explain the charade and open the Count's eyes. He has been caught in flagrante, trying to seduce his own wife. He realizes that he has been outwitted and that there is nothing he can do but acknowledge his folly with good grace. In a complete change of mood and heart, the Count begs the Countess's forgiveness, which she lovingly grants.

All the crises seem to have been resolved and reconciled: there is cause for celebration to begin in earnest as all the lovers are reunited.

Beaumarchais's "Crazy Day" ends, saved for posterity with Mozart's impeccable musical characterizations.



***CHAPTER SIX***  
***Carl Maria von Weber:***  
***German Romanticism***

### ***Carl Maria von Weber: German Romanticism***

In Germany, in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, Romanticism adapted a special quality: music, drama, philosophy and stagecraft were integrated into a harmonious union. As far back as the early seventeenth century, German opera was singspiel, a series of musical numbers connected by spoken dialogue. Although the action was usually comic in nature and the plots simple, occasionally a singspiel would reach tragic heights. Mozart composed many singspiels, a form of benediction of the genre from the Classical master. The singspiel genre served as bridge between Gluck's earlier reforms and the mature innovations of Richard Wagner.

In 1805, Beethoven's *Fidelio*, a story of injustices, noble love and sacrifice, brought a new intensity to the singspiel and German lyric theater. Carl Maria von Weber followed, molding elements of German melody and culture into romantic folk tales that possessed fantastic musical color and technical skill: in Weber's operas, the orchestra attained great prominence, commenting on the development of the drama through leading motives, or leitmotifs. But more importantly, Weber gave birth to German Romanticism; his operas dealt with popular German legend, medieval superstition, and elements of magic and mysticism.

The Romantic era is generally recognized as a period in Western music history that began in the early nineteenth century and lasted until the modernist innovations of the twentieth century. Essentially, Romanticism evolved as a rebellion against Classical traditions; but more specifically, it was a backlash against the failed ideals of the eighteenth-century Enlightenment.

The Enlightenment awakened the soul of Europe to renewed optimism. It nurtured the hope that democratic progress would consolidate egalitarian ideals, and that economically, the industrialization of Europe would decrease the disparity between wealth and poverty. It was the Enlightenment that inspired the French Revolution. Napoleon arose from its ashes, his primary crusade to destroy those traditional enemies of human dignity and freedom, the oppressive autocratic and tyrannical European monarchies: in particular, the Austrian Hapsburg Empire. (That goal was finally achieved one hundred years later at the conclusion of World War I.) But Napoleon was defeated by the victorious Grand Alliance: the coalition of England, Russia, Prussia and Austria. After their victory, the European powers sought revenge against the liberal and democratic ideals fomented by the French Revolution, ultimately exercising severe military force to quell discontent.

Napoleon and France had threatened the social order of Europe and upset its delicate political power balances. In the aftermath of Napoleon, the victors strove to consolidate and strengthen their national power: the Hohenzollern King of Prussia, Frederick William III, acquired the Kingdom of Saxony in an attempt to strengthen Prussian power and offset the traditional dominance of Austria in German affairs, a reward that was justified by the treacherous collaboration of Saxony's King Frederick Augustus I with Napoleon; the Austrian Hapsburgs, badly weakened by Napoleon, were prompted by Prince Klemens von Metternich to create a newly strengthened France that would balance Austrian fears of Russian opportunism.

In 1815, the Congress of Vienna attempted to stabilize Europe's balance of power by imposing a peace settlement with France that preserved it as a great European power, but the country was reduced to its ancient rather than natural borders. The German Confederation was reorganized by consolidating its original 300 states into 39 sovereign states, ostensibly providing a renewed strength that would represent a barrier against any future expansion by France into the Rhineland. With the balance of power established, the Congress of Vienna had created a bulwark of powerful states to thwart fears of possible future expansion of the Russian colossus

into Western Europe, as well as deter the reemergence of a threatening France.

But the ultimate reality of the agreements that emanated from the Congress of Vienna was that the Quadruple Alliance of Austria, Prussia, Great Britain, and Russia, had essentially imposed themselves as the unwanted guardians over most of the European states; they had become rulers of nations that were heedless to national cultural or ethnic inclinations of those states. As such, many nations were ruled by foreign powers: Greece, Czechoslovakia, Holland, Belgium, Poland, Hungary, Italy, and particularly, the German Confederation of States.

The Post-Napoleonic restoration of unwanted foreign rule fostered oppressive actions by the ruling autocracies, which in turn precipitated the growth of romantic dreams of nationhood and self-determination among the governed states; those subjugated nations adopted the idea that being kin, numerous and strong, was a means of achieving social progress and political stability.

In effect, the French Revolution had awakened dreams of human progress, and the dreams failed to be suppressed by Napoleon's defeat. As the nineteenth century unfolded, there was an impassioned clamor for social and political reform, the abolition of poverty, and the inauguration of economic freedoms. The ruling European monarchies promised reforms but failed to provide them. There was an uneasy political equilibrium: frustration and anxiety exploded into social unrest and revolutionary riots in virtually every major city in Europe. During the years 1815 to 1848, there were armed revolts by liberals, democrats and socialists, which the ruling authoritarian powers countered with fierce and oppressive repression.

The uprisings were twofold in purpose: firstly, they demanded social and political reform; and secondly, they represented outcries for national identity, self-determination, and liberation from alien rule. Nevertheless, the monarchies remained the unwanted custodians of nations, and were unhesitant to invite neighboring allied armies to intervene and quell domestic uprisings: the "Metternich System" that was created by the Congress of Vienna.

**T**hose failed utopian dreams transformed into profound pessimism and skepticism, a frustration that nurtured the underlying ideology of the Romantic movement in art, literature, and music, a period many historians place chronologically between the political and social turmoil that began with the storming of the Bastille and the outbreak of the French Revolution in 1789, and the last uprisings in European cities in 1848; however, many refer to the great flourishing of art during most of the nineteenth century as the Romantic era.

Essentially, Romanticism represented a pessimistic backlash against the optimism of the eighteenth-century Enlightenment and the Age of Reason; Rousseau, a spokesman of Enlightenment ideals, had projected a new world of freedom and civility. But the Romanticists viewed those failed Enlightenment ideals of egalitarian progress as a mirage and illusion, elevated hopes and dreams that dissolved in the Reign of Terror (1792-94): a despair that was reinforced by Napoleon's preposterous despotism, the post-Napoleonic return to autocratic tyranny and oppression, and the economic and social injustices nurtured by the Industrial Revolution.

But it was specifically the Reign of Terror and the subsequent devastation of the Napoleonic wars that totally destroyed any dreams for progress remaining from the Enlightenment. Like the Holocaust in the twentieth century, those bloodbaths shook the very foundations of humanity by invoking man's deliberate betrayal of his highest nature and ideals; Schiller was prompted to reverse the idealism of his exultant "Ode to Joy" (1785), which Beethoven later immortalized in the Chorale of his Ninth Symphony, by concluding that the new century had "begun with murder's cry." To those pessimists — the Romanticists — the drama of human history was approaching doomsday, and civilization was on the verge of vanishing completely. Others concluded that the French Revolution and the Reign of Terror had ushered in a terrible new era of unselfish crimes in which men committed horrible atrocities out of love not of evil but of virtue. Like Goethe's Faust, who represented two souls in one breast, man was considered a

paradox, simultaneously the possessor of great virtue as well as wretched evil.

Romanticists sought alternatives to what had become their failed notions of human progress, and sought a panacea to their loss of confidence in the present as well as the future. As such, Romanticists developed a growing nostalgia for the past by seeking exalted histories that served to recall vanished glories: writers such as Sir Walter Scott, Alexandre Dumas, and Victor Hugo, penned tributes to past values of heroism and virtue that seemed to have vanished in their contemporary times. Romanticists believed that intellectual and moral values had declined; modern civilization was perceived as transformed into a society of philistines, in which the ideals of refinement and polished manners had surrendered to a form of sinister decadence. Those in power were considered deficient in maintaining order, and instead of resisting the impending collapse of civilization and social degeneration; they were deemed to have embraced them feebly and without vigor.

Romanticists became preoccupied with the conflict between nature and human nature. Industrialization and modern commerce were considered the despoilers of the natural world: steam engines and smokestacks were viewed as dark manifestations of commerce and veritable images from hell. But natural man, uncorrupted by commercialism, was ennobled. So Romanticism sought escapes from society's horrible realities by appealing to nature and naturalism: strong emotions, the bizarre and the irrational, the instincts of self-gratification, and the search for pleasure and sensual delights. Ultimately, Romanticism's ideology posed the antithesis of material values by striving to raise consciousness to more profound emotions and aesthetic sensibilities.

Many Romanticists were seeking an alternative to the Christian path to salvation. The philosopher Immanuel Kant (1724-1804) strongly influenced early German Romanticism when he scrutinized the relationship between God and man, ultimately concluding that man — not God — was the center of the universe. Following Kant, David Friedrich Strauss wrote the extremely popular "Life of Christ" that deconstructed the Gospel. And finally, toward the end of the nineteenth century, Nietzsche pronounced the death of God. Theologically and philosophically, German Romantics believed in the existence of God, but they were not turning to Christianity's Heaven for salvation and redemption, but rather, to the spiritual bliss provided by human love; for the Romanticists, the spiritual path to God and human salvation could only be achieved through idealized human love, compassion, and personal freedom.

A popular early philosopher of the Romantic era was Ludwig Feuerbach (1804-72), who articulated his iconoclastic theories in "Das Wesen des Christenthums," in which he deemed all religions — including Christianity — as mythical inventions, creations of a nonexistent God who was manifested through imaginary projections, or an idealization of the collective unconscious. As such, the supposed divine fallibility of church and state was deemed pure illusion, a tyrannical authority that had no claim for its existence, and was ripe for destruction and replacement by a new social order that was based firmly on the principles of human love and justice; Karl Marx hailed Feuerbach as the unwitting prophet of the social revolution he prophesied.

Feuerbach embraced anticlericalism, firmly believing that church and state authority had an inherent unnaturalness and inhumanity that conditioned man away from his natural human instincts of creativity and love. During the Enlightenment, Rousseau wrote: "Man was born free, and everywhere he is in chains," a conception that nurtured the ideal of the "noble savage," an implication that natural man possessed virtues that were uncorrupted by the evils of civilization. Many Romantics — and particularly German Romantics — reasoned that man's instinctive need for love and fellowship explained its creation of myths and art. And if the great myths were projections of humanity's highest ideals and aspirations, then religion served to impede man's natural inclinations by imposing an arbitrary system of rigid dogmas that supported the

state rather than man; the enemy of man was the authoritarian state and the church that opposed man's natural instincts, and particularly his freedom to love.

In "Civilization and its Discontents," Freud later postulated that there was a perpetual conflict between humanity's instincts for life — and love — that were being opposed and destroyed by man's aggressive and self-destructive instincts: authoritarian state power was considered a by-product of that aggression. As such, in man's struggle for survival, the weak ceded to the aggression of the strong, which served to repudiate humanity's nobler aspirations. In aggression-bred authoritarianism man became exploited, subjected by the strong, and abused by a privileged few who imposed their will on the many. Freud concluded that it was considered natural for instinctive man to live in a free society, and unnatural for man to live in a law-conditioned authoritarian state. Therefore, the state's rule became a crime against human nature, and therefore against nature itself.

Feuerbach's denunciation of the tyrannical church and state authoritarianism, combined with the idea of man's natural instincts for love and freedom, represented the core ideals of the nineteenth-century Romantic movement: man's instinctive desire for love and freedom.

Essentially, Romanticists yearned for a world of idealized spiritualism that would replace mundane values. In Germany, Romanticism manifested its own unique character. Germans possessed a prideful form of cultural nationalism that they believed ennobled the intrinsic spirit of its people: an ideology termed "volkish" ("of the people").

Germans specifically worried that industrialization would displace the cultural core of their society: farmers, artisans, and peasants. They believed that their people possessed the noble "volksseele" ("folk's soul"), a specific national ethos that was shared by kindred Germans and united them through customs, arts, crafts, legends, traditions, and superstitions, values and virtues that had been passed on to them from generation to generation.

In the anthropological sense, Germans believed they possessed a unique — if not superior — "Kultur" (culture), which manifested itself in lofty spiritual achievements in art, literature, and history. As such, their "volk" (folk) heritage made them different from the rest of Europe in terms of their identity, communal purpose, and organic solidarity. Early German Romantics, such as J. G. Herder (1744-1803), the author of *Ideas on the Philosophy of History and Mankind* (1784), proposed that the "volk" had produced a living culture, which, despite its humble beginnings among peasants and artisans, represented the seedbed of the unique German Kultur; it was an exalted personality that was portrayed in art, poetry, epic, music, and myth. As such, German culture was individual and different, and possessed its own particular "volksgeist" ("folk spirit") and "volksseele" ("folk's soul.")

The German conception of Kultur was synonymous with nationalism; it represented the antithesis of Zivilization (civilization), a French perception of politeness and sophistication, urban society, materialism, commerce and superficiality. But German Romantics were seeking a cultural renaissance, and yearning for independence from their perceived slavish adherence to alien intellectual and cultural standards: in particular, French cultural values and the *philosophes*, which imposed literary and artistic values that contradicted the very essence of the German "volk" culture.

Although Germans were divided politically into separate states, they were united by language and culture. Romanticist Germans opposed French Zivilization and urged Germans to return to their cultural past and awaken their powerful mythology that chronicled their roots and represented their vast spiritual history. Schiller aptly evoked the spirit of the German cultural renaissance: "Schöne Welt, wo bist du?" ("Beautiful world, where are you?") During this raising of their historical and cultural consciousness, writers, artists, philosophers and musicians revived previously neglected German ancient literature, sagas, legends, ballads, and fairy tales. They believed that this vast heritage of their "folk soul" possessed virtues of

naturalness, a depth of knowledge, and spiritual human values that they deemed more profound than those existing in the surrounding world: the essence of German Romanticism.

The most notable nineteenth-century excavators of the German past were the Grimm brothers, who energetically recovered myths and legends of the ancient German and Teutonic peoples. Through them, the twelfth-century Nibelungenlied was first translated into modern German, a spiritual epic, or German Iliad, that Romanticists believed captured the soul of German culture: Richard Wagner would later adapt the saga for his epic *The Ring of the Nibelung*.

**J**ohann Wolfgang von Goethe (1749–1832), was not only one of the literary architects of German Romanticism, but also one of the most powerful and versatile figures in the cultural and intellectual history of Western civilization. He was indeed a colossus of literature, and his literary humanism was considered by many to be an entire culture in itself. Goethe's monumental *Faust, Part I* (1808), and *Faust Part II* (1833), became the inspiration for a legion of artistic creations in concert music, opera, ballet and fine art.

Germany's golden age of literature, which began in the eighteenth century, was spearheaded by Goethe and his noted contemporaries Schiller, Herder and Schlegel. Their revolution was called "Sturm und Drang" ("Storm and Stress"), an emotion-centered ideology that challenged the values of German society; "Sturm und Drang" is synonymous with the German Romanticist movement.

German Romanticism represented a backlash to the fundamental Enlightenment ideals of rationalism; in German Romanticism, subjectivism opposed the rational. As such, it rejected conventionality, defied authority, promoted greater naturalness of expression, and praised the irrational side of human experience. Imagination was paramount; as such, many artistic themes were dreamy, fantastic and melancholy. Aesthetic sensibility was considered a religious experience, a spiritual ecstasy that purely expressed complex emotions.

Goethe's first novel, *Die Leiden des jungen Werthers* (*The Sorrows of Young Werther*) (1774), became the inspiration for Massenet's opera *Werther*; it is an intimate romantic tragedy in which emotions and passions overcome reason and thus lead to tragic consequences. In German Romantic literature, longing ("Sehnsucht") became the common ground for both spiritual elevation and love: that same longing and yearning for love became the central focus of Wagner's later masterpiece, *Tristan and Isolde* (1865). To some, *Sorrows* may be the first psychological novel, since it is Werther's psyche from which his world emanates; he constantly projects his subjective states into his surrounding world, and those projections affect his mood swings.

The novel was written at a time when Germans were dissatisfied with the material and spiritual conditions of existence. It mirrors a generation of people living before the French Revolution who yearned to escape from their perception of an antiquated social structure: it was the new ideology called German Romanticism, and Goethe was one of the most powerful forces of the movement.

**G**erman Romantics were in opposition to the earlier Classical traditions. Their ideology was based on an almost mystical conception of a work of art and the artist as a divine creative spirit. Because art possessed the power to evoke the transcendent world, they considered the creators of art beyond the ordinary human sphere; the creative artist responded to his inspirations, and therefore, must be free from Classical restrictions and conventions.

These Romantics emphasized the infinite and the indefinable, opposing Aristotelian concepts of beginning, middle and end. As such, works would intentionally be fragmentary in character, seemingly an improvisation: musical pieces would either be lengthy to the extreme, or brief, such as short piano pieces or art songs.

In its anti-Classical mode, Romantic composers created new effects by exploring adventurous

harmonic patterns, new tonal relationships and textures and instrumental sonority. Performers were no longer encouraged to add creatively to a composition through their own ornamentation or improvisation, but rather, the composers were exalted, and the performers were required to religiously convey the composer's intentions.

In the Romantic era, music was freed from any preexisting notions that it possessed no intrinsic meaning. And, Romantic music became more closely allied than ever to literature and the musical language because it was believed that music could express an indefinable and transcendent essence. Thus, Romantics innovated new musical forms and genres: Liszt's symphonic poems; Berlioz's program symphony.

In opera, German Romantics in particular developed a folk-oriented form of national culturalism that expressed their perceived ethos: a sense of their national soul that was first achieved by Carl Maria von Weber.

**W**eber was born in Germany in 1786; he died in London in 1826. He was a sickly child who was born with a hip disease that gave him a lifelong limp. Despite his infirmity, he was forced to travel continually with his parents; his father was a violinist in various small orchestras. His father compelled him to study music industriously, determined to develop his son into a prodigy. At eleven, the young Weber studied in Salzburg and Munich. Shortly thereafter he completed his first opera, *Die Macht der Liebe und des Weins* (1798); his second, *Das Waldmädchen* (1800) was a complete failure.

In 1803, Weber studied in Vienna, and two years later received a post as conductor of the Breslau Opera, where he was in perpetual conflict with the management and the company because of his dissolute and irresponsible behavior; at the same time, he aroused the hostility of the public. After Breslau, he received a post at Stuttgart, which came to a sudden end when he was accused of stealing funds. Afterwards, Weber traveled, appearing often as a concert pianist.

In 1811, he composed a comic singspiel opera for Munich, *Abu Hassan*, his first major success. Weber himself referred to the opera as "the kind of opera all Germans want — a self-contained work of art in which all elements, contributed by the arts in cooperation, disappear and reemerge to create a new world."

In 1813 Weber settled in Prague and became director of the opera. Three years later, he was engaged as musical director of the Dresden Opera, a post that proved so successful that it was confirmed for life.

Weber's mature operas heralded the birth of German Romantic operas, and marked a turning point in German musical history: *Euryanthe* (1823), *Oberon* (1826), and the comedy *Die Drei Pintos* ("The Three Pintos"), the latter begun in 1821, but completed by Mahler in 1888.

**W**eber's *Der Freischütz* became one of the most significant works in the history of German opera: it laid the foundations of German national opera, influencing Marschner, Lortzing, and above all, Wagner, who transcended Weber in his development leitmotiv techniques, dramatic recitative, and the symphonic use of orchestra.

At the end of the eighteenth century, most of the German courts had shown a preference for Italian over German opera. Weber's experiences at Dresden as music director was one long struggle against those Italian musical invaders, a preference supported at the time by the royal family and most of the aristocracy.

But while in Dresden, Weber's implacable idealism about the opera art form intensified — as well as his German patriotism. He became inflamed with an ideal and decided to compose a

truly national opera, a new conception that would represent a compromise between drama and music, which he concluded had become trivialized by Italian as well as French opera.

Weber was strongly influenced by Spohr, whose *Faust* (1813) he conducted at its premiere in Dresden; it was an opera heavily infused with recurring musical motifs that were woven like delicate threads, uniting the entire work artistically and dramatically. Later, E. T. A. Hoffmann's *Undine* (1816) achieved similar objectives. Weber adapted those techniques, but he would transcend them with music of unsparing tonality and intensive orchestral color.

In 1810, Weber discovered the subject of *Der Freischütz* in a collection of tales by Johann August Apel and Friedrich Laun: *Gespensterbuch* ("Book of Ghost Stories.") He immediately recognized its operatic possibilities and requested that his friend, Alexander von Dusch, write the libretto. The endeavor was shelved for some seven years, during which time Weber was kapellmeister in Dresden, honing both his musical skills and kindling his patriotic spirit.

In 1817, he resumed the project, but this time his librettist was Friedrich Kind (1768-1843), a fellow member of the Dresden literary "Liederkreis," and a rather vain and over-ambitious lawyer and man of letters. Kind had treated a similar subject in his novel, "Die Jägersbräute" ("The Hunter's Bride"), and within ten days, enthusiastically presented the libretto to Weber; it was provisionally entitled *Der Probeschuss* ("The Trial Shot"), later changed to *Die Jägersbraute* ("The Hunter's Bride."). But just before the opera's premiere in 1821, apparently at the urgent solicitation of Count Brühl, the director of the Royal Opera in Berlin, the opera was renamed *Der Freischütz*; a term that actually has no definitive English equivalent, but is generally translated as "The Free-shooter"; nevertheless, the opera's creators immediately recognized the superiority of this title.

*Der Freischütz* became the first musical piece to be staged at the new Schauspielhaus in Berlin. The premiere generated conflict and controversy: the public was wildly enthusiastic, but the critics were less favorable. There were critics who could not understand why the opera had succeeded, many of them claiming that it was a "colossal nothing created out of nothing," or "the most unmusical racket ever put on stage." But the opera appealed to the affections of the German people, an affection for the work that has never diminished.

The underlying story of *Der Freischütz* is founded on an old legend among huntsmen in Germany: the man who sells his soul to Zamiel, the demon hunter, or Black Huntsman, would receive seven magic bullets; the bullets always hit their mark, but the seventh bullet belongs to the demon, who, after three years, will use it at his will to kill the huntsman who had sold his soul to him. However, if the huntsman is able to find a substitute victim for the demon, his life will be extended and he will receive a fresh supply of magic bullets.

The action of the story takes place during the period following the Thirty Years' War. Weber was determined to apply a more profound interpretation to the original folk tale. He avoided conflicts with the censorship authorities by recreating elements of the tale, and provided much of the characterization in accordance with his own impulses.

Originally, the opera libretto was in four acts, the first act divided into two scenes. The first scene was to take place at the Hermit's house in a forest: the second before the tavern. Weber deleted the Hermit scene. The old Hermit was to be seen praying before an altar. He has had a dream of the devil lurking in the darkness and stretching out his terrifying hand towards an unspotted lamb: that lamb is Agathe, and the demon is also trying to ensnare her bridegroom, Max. The holy man implores the grace of Heaven to protect the innocent lovers from the demon.

As the Hermit reflects anxiously that he has not seen Agathe for three days, she suddenly appears, bringing him a pitcher of milk, and followed by her cousin Äennchen, who carries a small basket of bread and fruit. After Äennchen leaves, the Hermit inquires about Max, Agathe's betrothed; he learns that Max is uneasy about the shooting trial that is to take place the next day. The Hermit reveals his horrifying vision, which he interprets as a warning of danger to Agathe. He then exhorts Agathe to preserve the purity of her heart, and in return, she begs him to remember her in his prayers. As she is about leave, an inner voice compels the Hermit to give her a gift. He turns to a rose bush, the first cutting of which had been brought to him long ago by a pilgrim from the Holy Land: each summer he collects and presses the leaves, to which the peasantry attribute supernatural powers of bodily healing and protection from harm. He gives Agathe some of the consecrated roses as a bridal gift, and dismisses her with a further exhortation to be virtuous.

Weber had doubts about the effectiveness of opening the opera with the Hermit scene, but librettist Kind insisted on its retention, declaring that without it the work would seem like a decapitated statue. However, Weber consulted his fiancée, Caroline Brandt, an opera singer whose sense of drama and the stage Weber respected immensely. She was emphatic in her opinion: "Out with these two scenes! Plunge right into the life of the people at the very beginning of the opera and start with the scene in front of the tavern."

Thus fortified, Weber approached Kind again; he pointed out to him the novelty of the Hermit scene, and the fact that the opera would begin by giving too much importance to the minor character of the Hermit; and, he had doubts whether many German theaters had access to so rich a bass voice as he required for the Hermit's role. Kind reluctantly conceded, but his pride of authorship made him print the discarded first act in later years; in 1871, Oskar Möricker set it to music, using Weber's original musical motives.

There can be no doubt that the opening of the opera had been improved by the sacrifice of the original Hermit scene; but it is also true that without it the events at the conclusion of the opera are not fully intelligible. Nevertheless, the libretto does fill in those details; Agathe explains her visit to the Hermit in Act II, and the holiness of the roses is explained in Act III-Scene 2.

**D***er Freischütz* was a milestone in the evolution of German opera, thoroughly German in spirit, subject, ideals, characterization, setting, and music. Its story derives from one of those immemorial folktales whose origin reaches back to the genesis of the early German peoples: a lifestyle that was simple and wholehearted, a people who were compassionate and sincere, and huntsmen and villagers who share their characteristic joys and pleasures. The German people recognized themselves in the opera story, their country and their culture, the opera summing up German aspirations towards their own identity, traditions, and background. And the subject dutifully captured the German delight in elements of superstition, the supernatural, and the diabolic: the Wolf's Glen scene of *Der Freischütz* thoroughly captures the essence of mysterious and arcane powers. Wagner later commented that *Der Freischütz* is "the most German of all operas."

The opera's colossal success was a tribute to the genius of Weber, but also that of a nation's yearning to express its unique culture and identity through musical theater. One of Weber's biographers, F. W. Jähns noted that the premiere of *Der Freischütz* took place on June 18, 1821, also the anniversary of the Battle of Waterloo: the parallel drawn was that the emancipation of Germany from the domination of Napoleon coincided with the liberation of German opera from its bondage to Italian and French influences. Although German opera did not immediately succeed in extinguishing Italian and French influences, the nation had erected a rival from which foreign genres never quite recovered.

The overture to *Der Freischütz* is an acclaimed masterpiece; it employs motives and melodies that reappear in the opera, forecasting important dramatic moments. It was a technique that

was certainly a striking novelty for its time because it was seldom that composers presented the chief melodies and themes of their scores in their overtures: Mozart was that rare exception, using the music from *Don Giovanni*'s Supper scene in his overture. Certainly, Weber's success helped to propagate the practice, and quite obviously influenced the later overture masterpieces composed by Wagner for *Tannhäuser* and *Die Meistersinger*.

The overture reflects Weber's genius as a musical dramatist as well as his inventiveness and skill as an orchestrator: its music possesses an unprecedented dramatic depth and brilliant melodiousness. His ingenious skill in orchestration certainly contributed to the development of subsequent orchestral expressiveness: the color values of his woodwinds, and the picturesque use of horns unique for their times.

The opera contains many German folk songs and dance tunes as well as original folk-like songs composed by Weber, the latter's melodies and rhythms sounding so authentic that they seem to represent the authentic voice of the German people: simple melodies that continue to speak to their audience with refreshing vigor and directness.

Agathe's music is saturated with romantic sentiment and tenderness; it also dutifully captures her sense of fear of unknown dangers. And Äennchen's lightheartedness, as well as Caspar's roguishness are realistically captured in the music.

Every part of the Wolf Glen's scene achieved a new plateau in terms of music's descriptive power: its vivid realism, diabolism, and nocturnal terrors. Despite the limitations of its libretto, the opera is an example of Weber's extraordinary ability to compose effectively for the theater, a talent he honed by years of work in revitalizing the opera companies in Prague and Dresden.

**I**n 1823, Weber's *Euryanthe*, was composed for the new opera in Vienna and was critically acclaimed. His last opera, *Oberon* (1826), was composed for Covent Garden, conducted by Weber, and described by the composer as "the greatest success of my life." The stress and pressure of producing *Oberon* in London undermined his health, and he died in his sleep just before making his journey home. He was buried in London, but 18 years later his body was transferred to Dresden; for this second burial, Wagner wrote special music and delivered the eulogy.

The road from the German Romanticism of Weber leads directly to Wagner, as Wagner himself conceded. Before Wagner, more than any composer, Weber made significant use of leitmotifs, and gave greater symphonic importance to the orchestra, and captured the very essence of the German soul in his opera subjects. *sturm und drang*

Weber's *Der Freischütz* — as well as *Euryanthe* — are singspiels that represent a significant bridge between Gluck's earlier reforms and the more mature innovations of Wagner. With Weber, the groundwork had been prepared for opera to evolve toward its most significant metamorphosis: music drama.

# *Der Freischütz*

(“The Free-shooter”)

Opera (*Singspiel*) in German in three acts

Music

by

Carl Maria von Weber

Libretto by Johann Friedrich Kind,  
after *Gespensterbuch* (“Book of Ghost Stories”) (1810),  
by Johann August Apel and Friedrich Laun

Premiere: Schauspielhaus, Berlin, 1821

***Principal Characters in Der Freischütz***

Max, a ranger (forester)	Tenor
Kilian, a peasant	Baritone
Cuno, head, or chief ranger	Bass
Agathe, Cuno's daughter	Soprano
Ännchen, Agathe's cousin	Mezzo-soprano
Caspar, a ranger	Bass
Zamiel, the Black Huntsman (the Devil)	Speaking role
Bridesmaids	Sopranos
Ottokar, a Prince of Bohemia	Baritone
A Hermit	Bass

Hunters, peasants, spirits, bridesmaids, attendants

TIME: at the end of the Thirty Years War

PLACE: Bohemia

***Brief Story Synopsis***

The story of *Der Freischütz* is founded on an old tradition among huntsmen in Germany: the huntsman who sells his soul to Zamiel, the demon-hunter, would receive seven magic bullets that always hit their mark, but the seventh bullet belongs to the demon and will be used by the demon to kill the huntsman. However, if the huntsman can find another victim for the demon, his life will be extended and he will receive a fresh supply of magic bullets.

In a shooting contest against Kilian, a peasant, Max, a young forester and master marksman, has been embarrassingly defeated, missing every target. Cuno, chief forester of Prince Ottokar, stops a fight that is about to erupt between the two men, but he warns Max that he will not be allowed to marry Agathe, his daughter, unless he wins the shooting competition tomorrow.

Max no longer has confidence in his marksmanship abilities. Caspar, a ranger who has secretly sold his soul to Zamiel, the Black Huntsman, yearns to have Max and Agathe destroyed; he was spurned by Agathe, and is envious of Max's marksmanship. Caspar gives Max his gun, and to his surprise, he immediately kills an eagle, which he was hardly able to see. Caspar reveals that the bullets were magic, and that Max can obtain more if he meets him at the Wolf's Glen at midnight. Max agrees.

In Agathe's house, a portrait of the ancestral Cuno fell from the wall and injured Agathe, causing her to be fearful of future dangers. Max arrives and claims that he must go to the Wolf's Glen in order to retrieve a dead stag, but he is hiding the truth that he is to meet Caspar to forge magic bullets: assurance of his victory in the shooting contest, and his marriage to Agathe.

At the Wolf's Glen, Caspar offers Max's soul to Zamiel, the Black Huntsman, in exchange for his own; Zamiel accepts the exchange. When Max arrives, both mold the magic bullets; when the seventh bullet is cast, Zamiel appears to claim his possession.

The next day, the Prince sets a white dove as the target for the shooting contest. Agathe arrives, nears the dove, and tries to stop Max from shooting. The dove flies into a tree where Caspar hides; Max shoots and fatally wounds Caspar, who dies, while cursing God and Zamiel.

Max confesses the evil pact he made with Zamiel to secure the magic bullets. The Prince offers prison or banishment as punishment. But the Hermit pleads for Max, suggesting that if he behaves piously for one year he should be pardoned and allowed to marry Agathe.

The Prince agrees and all praises the triumph of good over evil.

### Story Narrative with Music Examples

The overture to *Der Freischütz* is a masterpiece of the genre; it employs motives and melodies that will reappear in the opera, and forecasts important dramatic moments. The technique certainly represents a striking novelty for its time, for it was seldom that composers presented the chief melodies and themes of their scores in their overtures. Mozart was that rare exception, using the music from *Don Giovanni*'s Supper scene in his overture. Certainly, Weber's success helped to propagate the practice, and quite obviously influenced the later overture masterpieces composed by Wagner for *Tannhäuser* and *Die Meistersinger*.

The overture reflects Weber's genius as a musical dramatist, as well as his inventiveness and skill as an orchestral colorist: its music possesses an unprecedented depth, brilliance, and a variety of tonal qualities.

The principal musical themes represent the underlying conflicts of the opera: the clash of the powers of virtue with the opposing dark forces evil; good triumphs, and the overture concludes in a mood of rejoicing.

The overture begins with an adagio that captures the romantic spirit of the German forest: strings and woodwinds convey a mood of spiritual calm.

#### Adagio



Horns introduce a melody associated with the huntsmen.

#### Adagio



The terror of the Wolf Glen is suggested by strings and clarinets playing a sinister tremolando, followed by a wailing melody played by cellos.

#### Adagio



Music suggesting Max's Act sense of hopelessness is recalled, followed by the music associated with the Black Huntsman and evil powers.

**Molto vivace**



The full orchestra recalls the gruesome Wolf's Glen, when Max reacts in terror to the horrors surrounding him.



Violins and clarinets recall Agathe's aria from Act II, in which she expresses confidence that Divine grace will provide her ultimate happiness, and that Max will triumph in the shooting contest.



The entire overture conveys the essence of the forthcoming drama: the mysterious depths of the German forest; the conflict against the powers of evil; Max's horror and despair; Agathe's trustful innocence; and the final triumph of good over evil.

***Act I: An open area of the Bohemian forest before a tavern***

Max sits alone at a table; he is deeply depressed. A tankard is before him, and his gun is in his arm. In the background there is a target, surrounded by a crowd of peasants. Kilian, a peasant, has just triumphed over Max in a shooting competition, evoking shouts of approval from the crowd.

Max despairs and strikes the table bitterly. As the crowd organizes itself into a celebration, he becomes even more despondent and discouraged, confounded as to why his skill as a marksman has suddenly deserted him.

The victorious Kilian is given trophies and decorated with flowers and ribbons, the latter bearing the stars he has just shot from the target. Peasants, marksmen, and women and girls march around Max, laughing, mocking, and taunting him for his failure.

Max springs up in rage and draws his dagger threateningly; he seizes Kilian and orders him to leave peacefully. Cuno, the chief ranger, arrives with Caspar and several other foresters; they intercede to prevent a fight between Max and Kilian. Cuno inquires about the cause of the trouble. Kilian announces that they were just fulfilling an ancient custom: teasing Max because of his failed marksmanship. Max is further humiliated when he must admit that Kilian's charge is true: that he has indeed lost his skills at marksmanship.

Caspar is Max's rival, seething with jealousy because Agathe rejected him for Max. Aside, he mutters expletives; in revenge, he has made a compact with Zamiel, the Black Huntsman, to destroy Max and Agathe, their spell is the reason for Max's failed marksmanship.

Cuno reveals that he is confused. Max was the best marksman among the rangers, but he has not been successful for four weeks. Caspar offers a glib explanation for Max's failure: that someone must have cast an evil spell over Max and bewitched his gun. Mockingly, he proposes that Max call upon the dark powers of witchcraft for assistance in breaking the evil spell: the supernatural powers of the Black Huntsman. In truth, Caspar has made a pact with the Black Huntsman, but his term of grace has ended and to save his life he must deliver another soul to the Huntsman: Max. Cuno reproaches the unsavory Caspar, threatening him with dismissal. He turns to Max and cautions him that if he fails to win the shooting contest tomorrow he will lose the hand of his daughter, Agathe, as well as the succession to Cuno's post as the chief forest ranger. The peasants and huntsmen appeal to Cuno to tell them the ancient origins and significance of the shooting contest.

Cuno explains that it is a trial for the man who is to inherit the chief ranger's position. He tells of his great-great-grandfather, also named Cuno, who was the chief forester and one of the Prince's bodyguards. One day a man was tied to a stag, the usual ancient punishment for someone who broke the forest laws. But the Prince pitied the man's plight and promised that whoever could kill the stag without wounding the man would be made a hereditary ranger. The original Cuno was unconcerned with the reward but was deeply compassionate toward the wounded man. He fired at the stag and brought him down without inflicting any injuries to the man.

But enemies told the Prince that the deed had been accomplished by means of a "free" (or magic) bullet that could only have been acquired through a pact with the demon hunter. Kilian explains that there are seven bullets: six magic bullets always hit their mark, but the seventh, the "free" bullet, belongs to the demon himself, who guides it at his will. Afterwards, the Prince ordered that in the future, anyone aspiring to become the chief forester must undergo a shooting trial on the day when he is to marry; his betrothed must be of irreproachable character and must appear in a virginal wreath of honor.

After Cuno's story, Max remains despondent, expressing his foreboding at the forthcoming shooting trial. Cuno admonishes him to collect himself and have faith in his marksmanship skills. Others proceed to encourage Max, but Caspar tempts him to evil, insinuating that there are other powers than those of his own hand and eye that he can call to his aid. Cuno enthusiastically offers Max a final word of encouragement and departs with the huntsmen and foresters.

As darkness approaches, Kilian sarcastically wishes Max luck in the contest. He invites Max to join him in the tavern: a glass of wine and a dance with the girls to drive away his melancholy. But Max refuses, feeling too depressed to participate in superficial gaiety. Kilian and the others enter the inn.

Alone, Max addresses his misfortunes; he cannot understand what crime he has committed that has caused this punishment and horrible fate. Until now, his shooting talents were uncontested, and anything he aimed at fell before his gun. And when he returned in the evening with his booty, Agathe awaited him with love.

*"Durch die Wälder, durch die Auen"*

**Moderato**  
**MAX**



*Durch die Wälder, durch die Auen zog ich lei - chten Sinns da - hin!*  
**Through the forests, through the meadows, joy was wont with me to stray!**







in shock: “She looks as she did in her coffin! She is imploring me to go back with warning glances!”

Caspar laughs at Max’s fears. He urges Max to look again so that he can better see what has frightened him: the apparition of his mother has disappeared, and in its place there is Agathe, her hair loose and her form strangely adorned with straw and leaves. She is distraught and is about to plunge into the waterfall. As Max cries out that he must follow her, the apparition disappears.

Caspar urges Max to join him within the circle, assuring him that it will protect them against the surrounding spirits. As the moon fully disappears into the night sky, Caspar picks up the crucible and orders Max to watch him so that he may learn the art of casting the magic bullets. Caspar removes various ingredients from a pouch and throws them one by one into the fire: “First the leads, some broken glass from church windows, quicksilver, three used bullets, the right eye of an ancient hoopoe (bird), and the left eye of a lynx. *Probatum est!* And now a blessing on the bullets!”

Caspar prostrates himself to the earth and invokes Zamiel, exhorting him to bless the deed. The contents of the crucible begin to hiss; the only light is the greenish white flame rising from the fire, and a glow from the petrified tree.

Caspar proceeds with the casting of the magic bullets, and between each of the seven castings, supernatural apparitions appear, each evoking a sense of mounting horror. Anxiously and nervously, he begins to count.

“One!” He casts the first bullet and drops it out of the mold. Night birds fly down and gather around the circle, flapping their wings and hopping about.

“Two!” A black boar crashes through the underbrush.

“Three!” A storm rises, breaking the tops of trees and sending sparks flying from the fire.

“Four!” There is a rattling of wheels, fiery sparks, and the cracking of whips and trampling of horses.

“Five!” The sound of barking dogs and neighing horses fill the air. In the heights there is a rush of invisible hunters on foot and on horseback.

“Six!” The sky becomes completely black as the storm intensifies. There are crashing bursts of fearful lightning and roaring thunder as rain begins to fall in torrents. Dark blue flames spring from the earth. Trees are uprooted. The waterfall foams and rages. Pieces of rock are hurled downward from the mountain. From all over there is turmoil, the earth seeming to shake and shudder. Caspar shrieks as he trembles: “Zamiel! Zamiel! Help!”

“Seven!” Caspar is thrown to the earth. Max is tossed around by the storm. He leaps from the circle, seizes a branch from the tree, and screams for help.

The magic bullets have been cast. As the storm abates, the Black Hunter appears where the tree stood. He seizes Max’s hand and cries out in a terrifying voice: “Here I am!”

Caspar faints. Max makes a sign of the cross and falls to the ground. In the distance the clock strikes one. There is sudden silence. Zamiel disappears.

### *Act III: Scene 1 - In the forest*

#### **Molto vivace**



(Act III - Scene 1 is entirely in spoken dialogue and is almost always omitted in performance. It explains why the single bullet that Max will fire in the shooting contest was the seventh bullet cast at the Wolf's Glen: that Max had four bullets, and Caspar retained three. Each now has one left: Max made three marvelous shots that morning, and his last is for the contest, the one that Zamiel will be directing. Caspar used two of his bullets while hunting and has just fired the last bullet.)

### *Act III - Scene 2: Agathe's room. It is the day of her wedding*

On an altar there is a vase containing a bouquet of white roses. Agathe is alone, wearing white bridal attire with a green band in her hair; she is to be married as soon as Max wins the shooting contest.

Agathe prays tenderly before the altar for Divine care and protection.

*“Und ob die Wolke siever hülle”*

**Adagio**  
**AGATHE**



*Und ob die Wol - ke sie - ver hüh - le, die Sonne bleibt am Himmelszeit,*  
**Although a cloud has spread over the heavens, the shines high in splendor,**

Äennchen enters, also in bridal dress, but without flowers. (Neither Äennchen nor any of the other bridesmaids carry flowers because Agathe, for her bridal adornment, must take the holy roses that confer immunity against the magic bullet.)

Agathe is unnerved and crying, overcome by her fears of imminent danger. Äennchen consoles her, assuring her that she is merely expressing the tears of a bride. Agathe relates her nightmare: that she was transformed into a white dove and was flying from branch to branch. Max fired at her and she fell, but just in time, she was transformed into human form. However, at her feet there was a great black bird of prey wallowing in its blood.

Äennchen tries to dispel Agathe's fears with a ready explanation of her nightmare: that last night she was working late on her wedding dress and no doubt was thinking about it before she went to sleep; it was the eagle's feather on Max's hat that made her think about the bird of prey.

Agathe is not easily pacified and retains her gloomy thoughts. Äennchen again tries to dispel her cousin's fears. She relates a tale about her aunt who was once frightened just before going to sleep because she believed that she saw a terrifying ghost approaching; its eyes were all afire and it was rattling a chain. She called for help, but when servants arrived with lights they found it was only Nero, the watchdog.

Agathe gradually yields to Äennchen and quiets her fears. Äennchen leaves to fetch the bridal wreath. The bridesmaids enter to provide cheer for the bride.

*“Wir winden dir den Jungfernkranz”*

**Andante quasi allegretto**  
**BRIDESMAIDS**



*Wir win - den die den Jungfernkranz, mit veil - chen - blauer Sei - de,*  
**We bind the bridal wreath for you, with silken thread of azure,**



Agathe is led to a small mound, where Max falls on his knees in contrition. Attention turns to Caspar, who was fatally wounded by Max's shot and struggles convulsively, bathed in his own blood. Caspar says, "I saw the Hermit beside her. Heaven has won, my time has come!" But Caspar has become the victim of his evil bargain with the Black Huntsman: he was unsuccessful in delivering Max to the demon to buy his pardon: the last magic bullet, directed by Zamiel, struck Caspar.

Unseen by the others, Zamiel has risen from the earth behind Caspar. Caspar addresses the Black Huntsman, who is visible to him alone, begging him to take his soul to hell. Caspar raises his hand and curses God, Heaven, and the treacherous Zamiel. As Caspar falls and dies, Zamiel instantly vanishes. The Prince orders the evil Caspar's body thrown into the Wolf's Glen.

The Prince turns his attention to Max, and gravely orders him to explain the mystery. Humbly, Max confesses his wrongdoing — the four bullets he fired that day were "free" bullets, cast together with the dead Caspar. All are astonished and shocked by his revelation. In punishment, the Prince angrily offers Max prison, or banishment forever from his dominion; he shall never have Agathe's hand. Max breaks out into reproachful self-pity. Cuno and Agathe intercede for him, supported by the others. But the Prince is intransigent; Max must either flee the land or go to prison.

Suddenly, in a majestic entrance, the Hermit appears; all salute him respectfully. The Prince appeals to the Hermit's holiness and asks him for judgment. The Hermit preaches about the fallibility and weakness of mankind. He urges that the trial shooting and its temptations be abolished. He preaches the virtue of tolerance and asks which among them has the right to throw the first stone at any sinner: vengeance is the right of Heaven alone.

*"Leicht kann des Frommen Hertz"*

**Adagio**  
**HERMIT**



***Leicht kann des Frommen Hertz auch wanken und überschreiten Recht und Pflicht?***  
**What man is free from sin or error, or heart swayed by earthly passion?**

And as for Max, the Hermit attests that his heart has always been virtuous. He advises that Max be placed on a year's probation; after that time, if he proves himself, he may be given Agathe's hand.

The Prince consents: that if Max proves himself during the probation, he will personally officiate at Max's wedding to Agathe. Max and Agathe voicing their gratitude, and all express their happiness and praise God's mercy: good has triumphed over evil.

***CHAPTER SEVEN***  
***Rossini and Opera Buffa***

## Rossini and Opera Buffa

During the pre-French Revolution and pre-Romantic eras, aristocrats identified with the extremely popular opera seria genre: these operas portrayed lofty personalities whom the aristocracy perceived as flattering portraits of themselves. In these opere serie, there were massive scenes involving pageantry and glory; musically they were married to the highly complex Baroque genre, featuring ornamented arias that would exploit the virtuosity of individual singers.

But the eighteenth century was dominated by the ideology of the Enlightenment: the awakening of humanistic ideals, and the recognition of individual freedom, democracy, and man's inherent right to social justice. Opera buffa developed during the latter part of the eighteenth century: it was a more realistic genre that portrayed more human characters in everyday situations. The lower classes, in an almost uncanny extension of the classical commedia dell'arte, preferred the satire of the opera buffa, which, like its predecessors, was usually concerned with love intrigues involving cuckolds, deceiving wives, and scheming servants. In certain respects, the opera buffa genre's themes and subjects provided a democratization in the performing arts, which enabled the lower classes, mostly through comedy and satire, to parody their masters and vent their frustrations at the social injustices they were experiencing. Opera buffa was populist entertainment.

Giovanni Pergolesi (1710-1736) is regarded as the father of Italian comic opera: opera buffa. His most famous work remains *La Serva Padrona* (1833), a comedy that owes its provenance to the commedia dell'arte, and is notable for its sharp rhythms, lively and delightful melodies, and vocal writing with wit and fine characterization.

Gioacchino Antonio Rossini (1792–1868) was the most important Italian opera composer during the first half of the nineteenth century, and a master of the opera buffa genre. A whole generation of music lovers, virtually from his first opera in 1810, to his last in 1829, acclaimed Rossini the undisputed king of opera composers, living or dead. In the eyes of the opera world of the first half of the nineteenth century, he was idolized and adored, towering significantly over the shoulders of his immediate predecessors, Mozart, Gluck, or his contemporaries, Beethoven, Bellini, and Donizetti.

Though Rossini is best known for his opere buffe, his comic and satiric operas, he also composed opere serie, operas with serious themes. But whatever the particular opera genre, all of his music contains a unique melodic inventiveness, energy, and rhythmic vitality: those special features became the inspiration for his illustrious bel canto contemporaries, Bellini and Donizetti, as well as the young Verdi.

Rossini was born in Pesaro, Italy. At the age of twelve, he displayed exceptional musical talent, which earned him entry into the Bologna Conservatory. In 1810, at the age of eighteen, Rossini wrote his first opera, *La Cambiale di Matrimonio* ("The Marriage Contract"), but the opera that catapulted him to his first substantial success was composed two years later: *La Pietra del Paragone* ("The Touchstone"), introduced at La Scala and given fifty performances in its first season. *Tancredi* and *L'Italiana in Algeri* ("The Italian Girl in Algiers") followed, and were even greater triumphs. By the age of twenty-one, with these early successes, Rossini had established himself as the idol of the Italian opera public as well as its icon.

In 1815, he was summoned to Naples — then a major opera capital — where he was engaged to write new works as well as direct two opera companies. His first opera under that arrangement was *Elisabetta*, written expressly for the popular Spanish prima donna, Isabella Colbran, the former mistress of the King of Naples, and later the woman who would become his wife for whom he would write several operas.

Rossini wrote his celebrated opera buffa masterpiece, *The Barber of Seville*, produced in Rome in 1816. Even though a combination of circumstances spelled disaster for the opera at its premiere, the opera was acclaimed on its second evening, and with each successive performance, it gained new admirers. Today, it is generally considered the greatest comic masterpiece in the entire operatic canon.

In 1822, after marrying Isabella Colbran, Rossini left Italy for Vienna where his operas were the rage with audiences. Two years later, he went to Paris to direct the Théâtre des Italiens. Rossini's popularity in Paris was so great that Charles X gave him a contract to write five new operas a year; and at the expiration of the contract, he was to receive a generous pension for life.

During his Paris years, between 1824 and 1829, Rossini created the comic opera *Le Comte Ory* and serious grand opera, *Guillaume Tell* ("William Tell"), the latter a political epic adapted from Schiller's play (1804) about the thirteenth century Swiss patriot who rallied his country against the Austrians. The stylistic innovations Rossini introduced in both these works would eventually influence composers as different as Adam, Meyerbeer, Offenbach, and Wagner.

Rossini's contemporary audience considered his music like vintage wine, always improving with age, and never growing sour or flat. His music was always fresh, gay, simple, and saturated with bubbling melodies and an inexhaustible joie de vivre; it was music that was easily understood at first hearing, and never required the discovery of an underlying significance.

In 1829 Rossini completed *William Tell*; he was thirty-eight years old, and had already composed thirty-eight operas. Rossini would put down his operatic pen, retire, and live for thirty-eight years more, never again writing another note for an opera. He was at the height of his creative powers and a world-renowned figure, yet in those subsequent four decades he produced only some sacred music, a few songs, and some instrumental and piano pieces.

Certainly, Rossini did not fit into the conventional picture of the starving composer: few composers in their lifetimes ever enjoyed such phenomenal success, and he literally sat on top of the music world, becoming pleasantly intoxicated with his well-deserved success. Rossini's sudden withdrawal from the world of opera composition has inspired much conjecture. Some scholars have concluded that Rossini's indolence and laziness had gotten the better of him after he had achieved such immense wealth: others claim that the initial failure of *William Tell* had embittered him; that he was disappointed that his fame had become overshadowed by the popularity of those grand opera spectacles of Meyerbeer and Halévy which competed with his opere buffe; and still others suggest that Rossini's neurasthenia, a mental disorder characterized by fatigue and anxiety, as well as his debilitating bout with gonorrhea, had become too serious after 1830 and prohibited him from work.

Nevertheless, while in his retirement, Rossini became *the* major figure in the social and cultural life of Paris. He had become esteemed as Europe's leading composer, and his overtures had become so popular that they were even compared to those of Beethoven. He relished the title, "the music emperor of Europe," and he certainly lived like one, maintaining homes in Italy, Paris, and a summer villa in rural France. Rossini had become rich, famous, and gourmand-stomached.

After finally marrying Olympe Pélissier, a woman whom he had loved for years but could not marry until his first wife died, he reigned like a nineteenth-century prince in his luxurious Paris apartment: he entertained friends in the grand manner, granted audiences, held court, and offered commentaries. Legend reports that the great classical composer, Camille Saint-Saëns, would be anxiously sitting in one corner of Rossini's home waiting his turn at the piano, and in another, a famous singer would likewise be preparing to entertain the bejeweled ladies.

Rossini's death was brought about by complications following a heart attack. He was buried

in Père Lachaise cemetery in Paris, but at the request of the Italian government, his body was removed to Florence where he is buried in the cemetery of the Santa Croce Church.

Thirty-eight years was a long retirement, and a long time to be devoted to Rossini's legacy of gourmand eating, attractive women, and sharp witticisms. Nevertheless, the most famous opera composer of his generation preferred to remain silent musically, and in spite of his personal problems and illnesses, one could easily conjecture that perhaps he was satisfied that he had said all he ever wanted to say in the last dramatic scene of *William Tell*: it was a passionate cry for liberty during an historical time of severe conflict and tension between reform and revolution.

**B**ut when Rossini was composing operas, he was indeed remarkably productive, completing an average of two operas per year for nineteen years, and in some years writing as many as four operas. There is much legend about the time it took Rossini to compose *The Barber of Seville*; most musicologists seem to agree that the composer could not have taken more than three weeks to compose it, but Rossini would boast to Wagner that he had written the opera in thirteen days. Nevertheless, his amazing creative facilities, his fluent technical resources and capabilities, his nimble craftsmanship, and his fertile melodic inventiveness facilitated his prolific rate of opera composition.

Rossini was constantly balancing between the tensions of mediocrity and genius. Much of his voluminous output is attributable to his capacity for making compromises. As such, critics conjecture that Rossini had the temperament of a hack, often using poor material to overcome a lack of inspiration or "composer's block." It is rumored that he even permitted other composers to interpolate numbers of their own into his works, and he often conveniently borrowed ideas from his older operas, although that practice is and was universal for all composers: *The Barber of Seville* Overture is derived from a medley of themes from his previous opera, *Aureliano in Palmira*, which also furnished the melodic framework for Rosina's aria, "Una voce poco fa."

Nevertheless, Rossini was also a genius who could bring the most sublime melodic inspiration into his writing, what Verdi would call, "an abundance of true musical ideas." Many of his bold experiments brought significant innovations to the opera genre: he perfected what is today called the Rossini crescendo, earning him the pseudonyms "Signor crescendo" and "Signor accelerando." Those techniques took a phrase and repeated it over and over in rapid tempo with no melodic variation, but only an increase in volume: the technique facilitated an explosion of patter and genuine excitement in his scores, and to this day, represent his unique, identifying musical signature.

Rossini was one of the first composers to write out cadenzas instead of allowing the singer to improvise them: he was a pioneer in accompanying recitatives with strings instead of harpsichord; and he developed his ensembles to almost symphonic proportions. His more profound use of orchestra, together with his inventive orchestral effects and coloration, provided a more profound expressiveness. In particular, his overtures, staples on the concert stage, remain examples of his outstanding achievements: *La Gazza Laddra*, *Semiramide*, and, of course, the *William Tell* overture, familiar to millions as the "Lone Ranger Theme."

Rossini's greatness lies in the fact that he not only composed great comic operas, but serious operas as well. The best pages of his serious operas have power and passion, and his best comic operas are marked with a dashing spontaneity, verve, and gaiety. In those comic operas, in particular, Rossini was a master of perfecting the art of mixing humor with pathos. Among his most important operas are: *La Scala di Seta* (1812); *La Pietra del Paragone* (1812); *Il Signor Bruschino* (1813); *Tancredi* (1813); *L'Italiana in Algeri* (1813); *Elisabetta* (1815); *Il Barbiere di Siviglia* (1815); *Otello* (1816); *La Cenerentola* (1817); *La Gazza Ladra* (1817); *Armida* (1817); *Mosè in Egitto* (1818); *La Donna del Lago* (1819); *Zelmira* (1822); *Semiramide* (1823); *Le Siège de Corinthe* (1826), *Le Comte Ory* (1828); and *Guillaume Tell* (1829).

Rossini, together with his contemporary composers Bellini and Donizetti, were the Italian triumvirate that represented the bel canto opera tradition that dominated early nineteenth century Italian opera: bel canto literally means “beautiful singing”; nevertheless, the ideals of bel canto singing were underlying principals of Italian opera from its very modern beginnings in the early seventeenth century.

The bel canto style is voice concentrated, and demands singing with beauty, elegance, flexibility, an assured technique, bravura, vocal acrobatics, and virtuosity. At the beginning of the nineteenth century in Italy, music meant opera, and opera to the Italians meant singing: an art form that was a vehicle to show off the technical virtuosity of the voice that was combined with the Italian gift for melody.

Rossini composed exclusively in the bel canto tradition: all of his music contains beautiful melodic lines, which require singing virtuosity. Often bel canto, coloratura, and even fioritura are synonymous terms used interchangeably, but primarily, they all stress an elaborate and brilliant ornamentation of the vocal line in which the concentration remains focused on the voice and melody.

Bel canto and its vocal fireworks, when performed intelligently, inherently provide dramatic poignancy and eloquence: in this style, it is the voice and vocal line, together with vocal fireworks, virtuosity, technique, and bravura, that become the preeminent features of the art-form. As a consequence, lyricism dominates, and by necessity, the orchestra becomes a secondary ingredient, generally an accompanist that is subdued when the singer is singing, regardless of what is going on dramatically.

Modern audiences, generally more inclined toward opera as music drama, at times have difficulty in absorbing the dramatic intensity of many bel canto librettos: in the bel canto tradition, drama and dramatic continuity were generally secondary considerations to the art of singing. In retrospect, many of those librettos could be considered humdrum and hackneyed, even though extremely talented and original craftsmen wrote an abundant number of them.

Nevertheless, it has been the freshness of their underlying music that has compelled many operagoers to overlook what may be lacking dramatically in those librettos. Contemporary champions of the bel canto tradition have proven that there can be real drama in these works. In this style, dramatic effects and pathos are expressed primarily through the inflection of the vocal line: therefore, those coloratura passages achieve their dramatic effects through dynamics, becoming bent and flexed, stretched, speeded up, or slowed down.

The opera seria, or genre of operas dealing with serious subjects, had reached its peak during the mid-eighteenth century. These operas provided an exquisite means to display and glorify the voice: drama was exquisitely expressed through vocal bravura: operas such as Handel’s *Julius Caesar* (1723), and Mozart’s *Idomeneo* (1781). In later romantic melodramas of the bel canto era, the voice similarly became the primary instrument to convey drama: the sleepwalking heroine in Bellini’s *La Sonnambula* (1831), or the Mad Scene in Donizetti’s *Lucia di Lammermoor* (1835).

Those three great masters of bel canto, Rossini, Bellini, and Donizetti, have left a legacy of bel canto operas for posterity, and the preeminence of their works on our contemporary stage remains proof that the art form is not only captivating, but a classic art form capable of continuous rejuvenation. Certainly, the bel canto art form is very much alive in the contemporary opera theater, as proven by the success of recent superstars of the genre: Maria Callas, Alfredo Kraus, Marilyn Horne, Joan Sutherland, and currently, Cecilia Bartoli.

In the bel canto period, it was the singer’s day: opera existed for the express purpose of showing off the voice, and in each of Rossini’s thirty-eight operas, he proved that he was one of the greatest and foremost practitioners, as well as innovators, of the bel canto art form.

**T**he *Barber of Seville* story owes much of its provenance to the Renaissance commedia dell'arte genre, as well as to the great French comedy playwright, Molière, who was renowned for animating the absurd on stage, particularly in his masterwork, *Tartuffe*. Specifically, Rossini's opera is based on Beaumarchais's play, *Le Barbier de Seville* (1780)

The commedia dell'arte genre — literally translated, “artistic-play” — originated as satirical entertainment. The tradition existed for centuries, most prominently performed by troupes of strolling players throughout Italy during the Renaissance. At that time, its underlying satire and irony were important and popular theatrical forces, and ultimately, they would shape the development of comedy on the dramatic as well as lyric stages.

The art form originated in market places and streets where performers traditionally wore masks in order to conceal their identities: their protection was necessitated by the fact that they were satirizing and ridiculing their contemporary world; performers clowned, insulted, and ridiculed every aspect of society and its institutions by characterizing humorous or hypocritical situations involving cunning servants, scheming doctors, and duped masters.

In order to draw attention to themselves, they generally wore exaggerated and comical costumes. Plots would contain very few lines of set dialogue, and much of their performance contained spontaneous improvisation. The standard characters were the Harlequin, Columbine, and Pulchinello. In Italy, the characters became affectionately known as “zanni,” no doubt the root of our English word “zany,” meaning funny in a crazy or silly way, or a silly person, clown, or buffoon. The commedia dell'arte became the theatrical foundation and predecessors of opera buffa:

Pergolesi's *La Serva Padrona* (1733) was one of the earliest opera buffa's, and almost a century later, Rossini's *The Barber of Seville* would serve as the model for all future opere buffe, followed by Donizetti's *L'Elisir d'Amore* (1832) and *Don Pasquale* (1843); Verdi's *Falstaff* (1893), and Puccini's *Gianni Schicchi* (1918).

These comic traditions would later become the prototype for vaudeville and slapstick, exemplified by Chaplin, the Marx Brothers, Buster Keaton, Harold Lloyd, and today, Mel Brooks and Gene Wilder.

**C**omic and satiric opera buffa must be distinguished from its more serious predecessor, opera seria. The opera seria generally dealt with historical, legendary, or mythological themes, and usually ended happily with due reward for rectitude and good deed. Quintessential examples of opera seria are Handel's *Julius Caesar* (1724), Gluck's *Orfeo ed Euridice* (1762), and Mozart's *Idomeneo* (1781).

Mozart ingeniously used the inherent satirical style of the opera buffa genre to reflect the changing social and political upheavals awakened by the Enlightenment: the demise of the ancien régime that would vanish at the end of the eighteenth century. Mozart's *The Marriage of Figaro* (1786) is considered one of the greatest in the opera buffa genre: a satiric portrayal of the political and social conflicts existing within his contemporary society. To achieve his objectives, Mozart created incomparable musical characterizations: his heroes became the lower classes, such as Figaro and Susanna, and his antiheroes became those contemptible aristocrats, such as the Count Almaviva and Dr. Bartolo. Mozart brilliantly exploited the opera buffa genre; his ingenious musical inventions breathed life into his characters.

In contrast to the opera seria, the opera buffa preferred simplicity in design. Generally, a few characters would be portrayed against an uncomplicated setting with commensurate simplicity of underlying melodies and tunes. Yet in its musical characterization, there would be much stylistic contrast: the use of rhythmic, staccato passages to emphasize individual mood and temperament. Opera buffa featured extended act finales with sophisticated ensembles (taboo in the opera seria), and many set-pieces, such as duets and trios, that involved the participation of many characters.

Patter songs became a vocal feature of opera buffa: these are tongue twisters delivered at

presto speed; these songs are an art in itself that requires an acute sense of comic timing in order for the singer to make the words intelligible, and a vocal virtuosity equivalent to words coming out of a typewriter at breakneck speed. In its practical sense, patter is nothing more or less than rapid fire articulation, similar to those popular tongue-twisters: “She sells seashells at the seashore,” or “Peter Piper picked a peck of pickled peppers.” In most classic opera buffe, the patter usually portrayed old busybodies, and were usually sung by basso buffos who would be chattering and grumbling incessantly. Rossini’s opere buffe created the role-model for patter songs and made them de rigueur: in *The Barber of Seville*, Figaro’s “Largo al factotum” is an example of quintessential patter.

The essence of good comedy is not that it has necessarily happened, but that it could happen. Therefore, comedy must have a link with reality so that it does not degenerate into farce. In order to be convincing and believable, real or imagined situations must convey a sense of credibility, if not reality. The essence of opera buffa is to provide farce, burlesque, satire, and irony, together with moments of seriousness and real human emotion and pathos: a magnificent blend of heartfelt comedy and humor together with sentiment and tenderness so that the comic action achieves credibility.

Rossini was the master of opera buffa, once noting: “I was born for the opera buffa.” His *Barber* is pure opera buffa, and an ingenious writing within that genre and style. Like Donizetti’s *Don Pasquale*, both are nineteenth century works: pure commedia dell’arte plots that are presented with musical and dramatic tastefulness, elegance, refinement, and never bearing the faintest hint of vulgarity.

**P**ierre Augustin Caron de Beaumarchais (1732-1799), was at times a clockmaker and watchmaker to the court of Louis XV, a self-taught musician and harp teacher to the King’s daughters, and an adventurer who became an arms dealer to the American revolutionaries.

However, the ultimate fame of the picaresque Beaumarchais rests on his literary achievements: the comedic theatrical trilogy *Le Barbier de Séville, ou La Précaution Inutile* (1775) (“The Barber of Seville, or The Vain Precaution”), *Le Mariage de Figaro, ou La folle Journée* (1784) (“The Marriage of Figaro, or The Day of Craziness”), and the final installment, *La Mère Coupable* (1784) (“The Guilty Mother.”)

Beaumarchais’s trilogy represented an Enlightenment manifesto; it was a caustic satire of contemporary French social and political conditions that ultimately reflected the growing dissatisfaction with the ruling class and nobility in the years preceding the French Revolution. In retrospect, his writings did much to influence, and even precipitate the Revolution, prompting Napoleon to later comment that they were indeed the “revolution already in action,” an omen clothed in comedy and satire that was forecasting the demise of the ancien régime.

Beaumarchais’s plays center around the colorful character, Figaro, a factotum or jack-of-all-trades, whose ingenuity serves as the symbol of class revolt against the aristocracy. In effect, the characterizations within his plays flatter the lower classes while at the same time, castigate the nobility. Mozart’s opera, *The Marriage of Figaro*, and Rossini’s opera, *The Barber of Seville*, both adapted from Beaumarchais’s original plays, would eventually assure immortality for these literary masterpieces.

These plays bring into focus the realities of class separation and its inherent conflict and tension; at the same time they evolve against a background of a highly sophisticated battle of the sexes. The villains and tormentors are in continuous conflict with one another. But there is an underlying implication that social hierarchies are accidents of fortune rather than reflections of native worth. In *The Marriage of Figaro*, Figaro maintains a witty and high-handed attitude toward his aristocratic master, Count Almaviva. In Beaumarchais’s original, Figaro speaks about

the Count: “What have you done to earn so many honors? You have taken the trouble to be born, that’s all”: the essence of eighteenth century political and social conflict that was the underlying force propelling the French Revolution. In Beaumarchais, the lower classes exercise of subtle wiles, wit, determination, decency, love — and a little luck — can tip the scales against aristocratic arrogance and power.

So much of the real Beaumarchais became the immortal Figaro. Beaumarchais’s plays are autobiographical; Beaumarchais in real life was Figaro, the real hero of the story, a master of sabotage and intrigue, and an inventive “man for all seasons” whose enterprising cleverness elevates him above the rest of society. Like his Figaro, Beaumarchais was always in conflict with others, but practically always became the victor by virtue of his superior adroitness and his satiric tongue and pen. After Beaumarchais married a rich widow eleven years his senior, she died some eighteen months afterwards, but much of the money he inherited from her was lost in lawsuits with her relations. Nevertheless, he was able to hold on to one piece of landed property that carried the title de Beaumarchais, and that is the name with which he chose to be known throughout his life. (When he was once questioned on his claim to an aristocratic title, he replied, “If you don’t believe me, I’ll show you the receipt.”)

Beaumarchais himself became the victim of the infamous type of “Calumny” he so brilliantly portrayed in *Le Barbier de Seville*. A friend owed a substantial amount of money to Beaumarchais, but the friend died, and his heirs refused to honor the debt. They spread scandalous rumors about Beaumarchais, as well as forged letters that accused him of poisoning his wives; in the end, Beaumarchais was financially ruined. (Voltaire, an admirer of Beaumarchais, commented: “Don’t tell me that this man poisoned his wives; he’s much too gay and amusing for that.”)

In another lawsuit, Beaumarchais lost decisively, the victim of aristocratic intrigue and power. Beaumarchais completed *Le Barbier de Séville* in 1772, but a combination of his scandalous lawsuits together with rumors that the play contained attacks on the French judiciary, prevented its premiere until 1775. Certainly, the French administration of justice finds its echo in the third act of *The Marriage of Figaro*, that solemn breach of promise in the case of Marcellina vs. Figaro, Bartolo’s intervention, and the solemn trial of Figaro by that moral pillar of society, Count Almaviva.

**F**igaro, like Beaumarchais, tried his hand at everything. In Madrid he had been in the service of the rich young Count Almaviva, who, although admiring his talents, did not trust him; the Count’s first words to Figaro upon recognizing him outside Bartolo’s house are “Why, it’s that rogue Figaro!” Afterwards, Figaro gives the Count an account of his life since they last met. Almaviva had recommended him for a government post, but he was given a medical job, not in the hospitals as he had expected, but in the Andalusian stables, where, he claims, he dosed humans with medicines intended for horses; not only did he provide some remarkable cures, but he put much money into his pocket. If occasionally some of his human patients had died, Figaro philosophically remarks, “there’s no universal remedy.” (Figaro’s medical experiences explain why he is a dispenser of medicines at Dr. Bartolo’s house.)

Figaro was also writing madrigals and contributing them to the papers, but jealous ministers dismissed him, he claimed. When the Count smilingly remarks that when Figaro was in his service he tended to be a bit of a rascal, and was lazy and disorderly, the Count receives a biting response: “Monseigneur, with your high ideal of the virtues necessary to a servant, how many masters, would you say, are fit to be valets?”

And the Figaro fills in his life story since last meeting the Count. He had returned to Madrid where he attempted writing drama. He could not understand why he failed because he had done everything possible to ensure success, employing all of the arts, paying a claque, and

getting himself talked about in advance in cafes. Nevertheless, plots succeeded in defeating him, and his play was hissed off the stage.

After this theatrical ventures failed, Figaro found himself out of funds and very much in debt, and decided that the razor was preferable to the pen; thus, he traveled across Spain practicing his new profession, and at last, settled in Seville. Figaro announces that he is ready to serve the Count, assuring him philosophically that he is the product of his misfortunes; he forces himself to laugh at everything to keep himself from weeping. This was the point in life where Beaumarchais found himself at the time of the writing of *Le Barbier de Séville*.

**T**he comedy abounds with the parallel purposes in its portrayal of the struggle between these two hierarchal forces of society. Count Almaviva and Dr. Bartolo both pursue Rosina, and each pursues his goal by paying a clever assistant; respectively Figaro in the employ of the Count, and the clever music master, Don Basilio, in the employ of Dr. Bartolo.

The intrigues between these forces become are complex as trickster fights against trickster, ruse develops against ruse, and rogue struggles against rogue. Figaro's first problem is to place Almaviva in the Bartolo household, fully aware that Bartolo had ordered that no one but Basilio was to be admitted while he was out.

Beaumarchais humorously solved this problem: Figaro, because of his many services to the Bartolo household, has undeniable access to the house. Figaro explains to the Count that Bartolo is his landlord, but his rent is gratis: in return he provides services for Bartolo; he is the barber, hairdresser, apothecary, consultant and surgeon, the latter derived from his earlier veterinary practice. So Figaro convinces a servant that he is ill and provides a sedative so potent that the servant can only yawn for the next few hours (Ambrosio). To another servant (Berta), he administers a pill that induces tears, sneezing and vomiting. With the servants essentially immobilized, Figaro devises the means for his pseudo-soldier to arrive without objection.

But Bartolo is certainly no fool. While in Madrid, he indeed becomes aware that a gallant was pursuing Rosina and trying to make her acquaintance. And, Bartolo became duly suspicious when the letter supposedly containing extracts from the aria from "The Vain Precaution" mysteriously disappeared in the empty square in front of his house. Bartolo does not know that the Count is in Seville and pursuing Rosina. Nevertheless, his intuitive suspicion forces him to accelerate his marital arrangements to Rosina — the very next day. Basilio is making those wedding arrangements, and that is why he calls on Bartolo, and is told to remain until Bartolo returns.

**B**eaumarchais's *Le Barbier de Séville*, originally an opéra-comique, or a mixture of spoken play with music, had its premiere in 1775, three years after it was completed. It failed decisively on its first night, but Beaumarchais was a realist who immediately recognized its faults and made revisions; the second performance was a brilliant success.

Mozart and his brilliant librettist, Lorenzo Da Ponte adapted Beaumarchais's second installment of his trilogy, which resulted in the brilliant comic opera, *The Marriage of Figaro*. The Mozart-Da Ponte opera represents a profound portrayal of contemporary class conflict. There is no subtlety in its characterizations: the Count and Bartolo are despicable villains, the Countess (Rosina) is a conflicted soul who regrets her husband's relentless philandering, as well as her need to employ her servants to win back her husband's affections, and Figaro and Susanna, are servants portraying all the wit and cunning necessary for the social underclass to survive in those times.

But Rossini's opera adaptation of *The Barber of Seville* premiered in 1816, an entire generation

after France's political and social upheavals, the heat of the revolutionary fires had diminished, and nothing of any political or social consequence was deemed offensive in the opera's text. In fact, the libretto had the obliging approval of the Roman censor, and neither the government nor the aristocratic powers, now relishing their restoration by the Congress of Vienna and the defeat of Napoleon, posed any pretext whatsoever to suppress it.

Although Rossini's opera may lack some of the deep and tender sentiment that underlies so much of Mozart's music, his *Barber* contains much more humor and an elemental freshness and energy; it is quite more frolicsome, scintillating and vivacious than Mozart's opera. And certainly, by its very subject matter, Rossini's *Barber* suggests an inherently livelier and lovelier charm by recounting Count Almaviva's adventures in pursuing the mischievous Rosina while outwitting Dr. Bartolo, as opposed to *Marriage's* the depiction of the domesticated Count's intrigues, suspicions, and philandering after the Count's marriage.

In many respects, Rossini's *Barber* owes its provenance to Giovanni Paisiello's widely acclaimed *Il Barbiere di Siviglia* (1782), an earlier adaptation of Beaumarchais's play, and an opera for which the composer had achieved his renown. Rossini was unconscionable in mirroring virtually every event in Paisiello's opera. There are only subtle differences in the text, mostly in focus and concentration: all the events leading to the lovesick Count's attempts to get into Bartolo's house are portrayed, but there are some more slapstick elements such as the trio with Bartolo and his yawning and sneezing servants. Nevertheless, Bartolo and Basilio attempt to malign the Count in an aria, "La calunnia, mio signore" and its clever depiction of rumor growing, a similar "pace e gioia," a "buona sera scene, and an orchestral storm scene.

Nevertheless, Paisiello's *Barber* is itself a masterpiece, but nothing could surpass Rossini's opera. Paisiello was not a master of orchestration like Rossini, and as such, his orchestra functions mostly as an accompaniment; Rossini's vocal writing is much more brilliant, and his harmonic vocabulary was much richer and more imaginative. Nevertheless, Paisiello was indeed a master of comic opera, and his opera buffa remained the rage with audiences before Rossini introduced his version of the story. Nevertheless, Paisiello gave his consent to the use of the subject, believing that the opera of his young rival would assuredly fail. At the same time he wrote to a friend in Rome asking him to do all in his power to create a fiasco for the opera. Rossini's enemies were not sluggish. All the whistlers in Italy seemed to make a rendezvous at the Teatro Argentina on the premiere night.

So it was not surprising that in deference and respect to Paisiello, as well as the animated respect Paisiello received. In order to avoid a rivalry, Rossini directed his librettist, Sterbini, to entirely versify anew and also that new situations should be added for the musical pieces, considering that modern theatrical tastes had changed since the time when the renowned Paisiello work was composed. Rossini gave his opera a different title: *Almaviva, or the Useless Precaution*, but that failed to placate Paisiello's followers: at the premiere in Rome, there was a cabal of noisy opposition from Paisiello's friends and disciples that proved that the old composer was indeed venerated and had a devoted following.

The malicious intents of Paisiello's followers were helped by other disastrous problems faced Rossini's opera at its premiere. The premiere audience literally rolled in the aisles, not at the humor in the opera libretto, but because of the unfolding of a monumental series of disasters. The tenor, the illustrious Garcia, in order to provide local color, persuaded Rossini to permit him to sing a Spanish song to his own accompaniment on a guitar under Rosina's balcony in the first act rather than what is now the opening serenade "Ecco ridente in cielo" The tenor forgot to tune his guitar, and he wound up setting the pegs in the face of a waiting public. Then a string broke and a new guitar was brought in as the audience broke out in laughter: the Don Basilio fell and bruised himself badly during his entrance, and became distracted as he attempted to stop blood

from flowing from his nose during his “La Calunnia” aria; and a cat entered the stage during the second act and jumped into Dr. Bartolo’s arms. All in all, Rossini’s *Barber* received a big tide of disapproval at its premiere.

Nevertheless, in the hindsight of opera history, Rossini’s *The Barber of Seville* has become one of the greatest masterpieces of comedy in music. Rossini’s music, together with Sterbini’s shrewdly contrived libretto, dutifully captures all of the humor, wit, and gaiety of the original Beaumarchais.

In *The Barber of Seville*, Rossini’s melodies and music attain a perfection of form, an utter spontaneity, sparkle, and charm, that are always enormously faithful to character and situation. This opera has certainly survived the test of time, even though *La Cenerentola*, *Turk in Italy*, *The Italian Girl in Algiers*, and *William Tell*, are indeed magnificent scores.

In homage to Beaumarchais, the *Barber*’s real dramatic intensity evolves from the explosion of a tug of war between extremely clever and resourceful people, particularly Figaro, who provided Rossini with opportunities for those volcanic musical eruptions that became the hallmark of his unique style: Figaro’s description of the location of his emporium, “Numero quindici” is a piece that can even be more rollicking than his introductory “Largo al factotum.”

The ensemble ending Act I is a Rossini coup de théâtre. Three episodes progress in sequence and increase the curve of excitement as they gradually accelerate and increase in volume: it is Rossini’s genius that achieves greatness in this ensemble as opposed to cacophony. Initially, the drunken soldier (the Count) becomes more and more furious, and after Figaro’s appearance and a typical opera buffa fight scene, the police intervene and bring everything to a standstill; a new episode leads to the arrest of the soldier and the apparent triumph of Dr. Bartolo’s forces.

When the Count reveals his true identity to the officer he salutes smartly and stands at attention. Dr. Bartolo remains motionless and thunderstruck, hardly able to believe his eyes: the ensemble “Fredda ed immobile come una statua” captures the essence of this great comic moment. Rossini then initiates his final storm: a demonstration of his grand art of crescendo and accelerando. Dr. Bartolo protests vigorously, and in the final *vivace* section, all the participants explode into thunderous, comic mayhem.

In the second act, after Figaro and the lovers, with the help of a bribe, have persuaded Don Basilio that he is ill and ought to be home in bed, the farewell — “Buona sera” — starts off calmly enough, but like the pop of a champagne bottle, bubbles with humor. Rosina and Count Almaviva mildly hint to Don Basilio that he should be on his way, but when he is slow about taking the hint, the lovers and Figaro grow impatient, and it is not long before Rossini, with his customary ebullience, accelerates the emotions: “Maledetto seccatore, seccatore.”

Similarly, the sparkle permeating the last act ensemble truly tops off the action, and celebrates the victory over obstacles that threatened the happiness of the young couple: love triumphs and gaiety is the order of the day.

In 1822, the young, thirty year-old Rossini, wealthy, arrogant and buoyant, succeeded in meeting Beethoven: Beethoven was fifty-one, deaf, cantankerous, and in failing health. Communicating through scribbled notes, Beethoven noted: “Ah, Rossini. So you’re the composer of *The Barber of Seville*. I congratulate you. It will be played as long as Italian opera exists. Never try to write anything else but opera buffa; any other style would do violence to your nature.”

Rossini reminded him that he had already composed a large number of serious operas, some of which he had sent to Beethoven to examine.

But Beethoven replied with his accustomed tactlessness: “Yes. I looked at them. Opera seria is ill-suited to the Italians. You do not know how to deal with real drama.”

As Rossini was departing, Beethoven called out to him: “Remember give us plenty of *Barbers*.”

Seven years later, Rossini retired and proceeded to enjoy his fortune: he gave lavish parties, entertained composers, singers, and critics, and nursed his various illnesses.

Rossini died at the age of seventy-six: he did not heed Beethoven and gave us no more *Barbers*.

# *The Barber of Seville*

**“Il Barbiere di Siviglia”**

**Opera in Italian in two acts**

**Music**

**by**

**Gioacchino Rossini**

**Libretto by Cesare Sterbini**

**adapted from Beaumarchais’s**

*Le Barbiere de Séville* (1775)

**Premiere: Rome, 1816**

***Principal Characters in The Barber of Seville***

Count Almaviva, a nobleman	Tenor
Figaro, a factotum	Baritone
Rosina, the ward of Dr. Bartolo	Soprano
Dr. Bartolo, Rosina's guardian	Bass
Don Basilio, a music teacher	Bass
Fiorello, a servant of the Count	Bass
Berta, a servant of Dr. Bartolo	Mezzo-soprano
Ambrosio, a servant of Dr. Bartolo	Tenor

Officer, soldiers, policemen, a notary

TIME: 18<sup>th</sup> century

PLACE: Seville, Spain

***Brief Story Synopsis***

The young and beautiful Rosina is the ward of the elderly Dr. Bartolo, her jealous guardian who shelters her in virtual imprisonment and insulates her from the outside world; he plans to marry her so he can secure her dowry. The young Count Almaviva has seen Rosina and become bewitched by her charms. Rosina likewise has become enamored by the Count, a man she believes is a poor student named Lindoro.

Obsessed to meet Rosina, the Count hires Figaro, Seville's famous factotum, barber, and jack-of-all trades, who plans an intrigue that will enable the Count to enter Dr. Bartolo's house.

First the Count is disguised as a soldier who demands to be billeted in Bartolo's house. He manages to make himself known to Rosina, exchanges letters with her, but when discovered, escapes arrest by making his true identity known to soldiers.

Afterwards the Count disguises himself as Don Alonso, a music teacher substituting for the supposedly ill Don Basilio. When Don Basilio suddenly appears, Figaro persuades him that he has a raging fever. Basilio, inspired by a purse he surreptitiously receives from the Count, politely dismisses himself. But Bartolo discovers the charade and the intrigue fails.

Figaro has obtained the balcony key, and arrives with the Count at midnight to rescue Rosina. After they arrive, their plan is thwarted when they discover that their ladder has disappeared. But when Basilio arrives with the notary, he is persuaded by the point of a gun to witness the marriage between Rosina and the Count.

Although seething at his loss, Dr. Bartolo is content when the Count gives him Rosina's dowry. In this war between rivals for the hand of Rosina, all of Bartolo's efforts were in vain: useless precautions. In the end, Bartolo showers the young lovers with his blessings for their happiness.

*Story Narrative with Music Examples*

**Overture:**

The music in the overture to *The Barber of Seville* is unrelated to any other music in the opera, but it captures the vivacity and exuberance of the entire comedy.

The overture begins with a short, sustained andante melody:

**Andante sostenuto**



It is followed by a second theme, also andante sostenuto:

**Andante Sostenuto**



The tempo changes to allegro, introducing a buoyant, typically Rossinian theme:

**Allegro**



And then another allegro follows:

**Allegro**



The allegro and andante themes merge and develop. Then they are repeated in the typical Rossinian style: the tempo accelerates, and the volume increases to a thunderous fortissimo.

*Act I - Scene 1: A square in Seville just before dawn*

Old Dr. Bartolo guards his young and beautiful ward, Rosina, seeking to marry her and secure her considerable dowry. But the handsome young noble, Count Almaviva, saw her and fell passionately in love with her. Every morning, the Count has waited outside the Bartolo house to get a glimpse of his secret love when she walks out on the balcony to absorb the morning air.

In Bartolo's house, the windows are barred, and the blinds are closed. Fiorello, the Count's servant, approaches the house cautiously, accompanied by a group of musicians with their instruments. The Count joins them, preparing to offer a serenade to Rosina.

The musicians delight in the quietness in the square, and urge each other to be cautious and silent. "Quiet, quietly, and no talking." Fiorello advises them sagely that no one in the adjacent houses will hear them: only the young lady for whom the music is intended.

The musicians tune their instruments, and shortly thereafter the enraptured young Count launches his serenade to the breaking dawn, imploring the young lady to awaken, come out on the balcony, and show herself to the man who adores her.

*"Ecco ridente in cielo"***Largo****COUNT ALMAVIVA**

*Ec - co ri - den - te in cie - lo*  
**Here, the sky smiles as it brings the early dawn,**

The Count pays his musicians generously, but has difficulty dismissing them; they crowd around their patron and enthusiastically kiss his hands and cloak. Fiorello intervenes and stops their interminable chorus of appreciation, warning them that they will awaken the entire neighborhood. Finally the musicians leave.

But the Count is crestfallen and frustrated; Rosina has not come out on her balcony to thank him for his impassioned serenade. He decides to wait a while longer, musing that his love for her is so profound, that he is prepared to make her his Countess, even though he knows nothing of her social station, or even her name.

While the Count lingers dejectedly near Dr. Bartolo's house, pandemonium heralds the noisy approach of Figaro, the barber of Seville. Count Almaviva conceals himself until he learns the identity of the newcomer.

Figaro, his guitar suspended from his neck, arrives in high spirits. He is happy that it is dawn when the serious business of the day can begin.

Figaro merrily describes the various aspects of his business; he is a factotum or jack-of-all-trades, and all of Seville craves for his services.

*"Largo al factotum"***Allegro vivace****FIGARO**

*Lar - go al fac - to - tum del - la cù - tà, lar - go!*  
**Make way for the city's great factotum!**

Figaro congratulates himself, wondering if there indeed could be any better life conceivable than that of the greatest factotum in Seville? “Bravo, Figaro, bravissimo, fortunatissimo!” Figaro’s talents are manifold, but if his razors, combs and shears should fail him, he is equally indispensable to help a young girl of Seville if she wants to marry, or help a widow if she is anxious for another husband, or be a messenger who delivers a love letter: “Figaro here! Figaro there, Figaro everywhere!”

Figaro continues his catalogue of virtues and the delights of his profession, priding his wonderful life in which there is little to do, plenty of fun, and always money in his pockets. His talented services are available by day, and at night, for the appropriate fee, he serenades clients. In Figaro’s profession, he is incomparable, a man who possesses the magnificent blend of brains and audacity.

Just as Figaro is about to go off to his emporium, Count Almaviva emerges from hiding. The Count recognizes Figaro, vividly remembering the veritable rascal who had served him in Madrid. Upon questioning, Figaro vindicates his roguish reputation by assuring the Count that he has not been in any particular trouble with the magistrates, and that his momentary chubbiness is attributable to his poverty.

The Count explains to Figaro the reasons he is in Seville. It seems that some six months ago, while in Madrid, he saw a beautiful young girl on the Prado and instantly fell madly in love with her. He was told that she was the daughter of an old feeble doctor. When they left Madrid, he followed them to Seville, and he has spent his days and nights parading before her balcony.

Figaro congratulates the Count on his extraordinary good fortune, explaining that in his profession he is persona grata in this very house: he is their barber, wig-maker, surgeon, herbalist, apothecary, veterinary, and general handyman. And, the young lady in question is not the doctor’s daughter, but rather, his ward.

Figaro’s explanation is interrupted by the appearance of Rosina and Dr. Bartolo on the balcony. Rosina wonders why her unknown admirer has seemingly not made his usual appearance. Unknown to her guardian, she has written a letter to him, but does not know how to convey it to him. Bartolo notices the letter and inquires about its contents, and the quick-witted Rosina assures him that it contains the verses of an aria from the successful new opera: “The Vain Precaution.”

Overhearing them, the Count becomes delighted by her feminine artfulness, repeating laughingly, “the vain precaution.” Similarly, Figaro expresses his delight that the innocent-looking Rosina is truly a fellow intriguer. Bartolo responds by scorning contemporary opera; they are long-winded, melancholy, and reflect the barbarous taste of a degenerate civilization.

Rosina lets the paper fall from the balcony, and the grumbling Bartolo rushes away to retrieve it. After he has left, she urges her unknown admirer to quickly seize the letter, but just as he does, Bartolo appears in the square, searching in vain for the letter. Bartolo returns and interrogates Rosina about the letter’s disappearance, and she cleverly explains that the wind must have carried it away. Wily old Bartolo becomes suspicious and annoyed, suspecting that he is being fooled. He harshly orders Rosina into the house, all the while swearing that he will have the balcony walled up.

At the Count’s bidding, Figaro reads the letter. Her letter reveals her curiosity about the mysterious serenader, and requests his name, social status, and intentions. In the letter, Rosina boldly declares that she lives under the oppressive guardianship of a tyrant, and she will do anything and everything to escape. The letter is signed, “the unfortunate Rosina.”

Dr. Bartolo, protecting his prize, and appreciating Rosina’s beauty as well as her dowry, barks strict orders to the servant, Berta, that no one is to be admitted into his house except the music teacher and lawyer, Don Basilio. Bartolo leaves the house, further ordering that if Basilio arrives, he is to be detained until his return. He hopes that with the aid of the cunning Don Basilio, he can speed up his wedding arrangements and marry Rosina this very day.

The Count asks Figaro about Bartolo. Figaro describes him as possessed by the devil: “He’s an old demon, stingy, suspicious, and a grumbler. He’s like a hundred years old, but he thinks he’s a gallant. Just imagine! He’ll devour Rosina and all her inheritance; that’s why he’s made up his mind to marry her.” And then Figaro describes Don Basilio, Bartolo’s co-conspirator: “He’s an intriguer of weddings, a sneaking scoundrel, a true hypocrite, and always without money. Now he’s the music-master who teaches the young girl.”

Almaviva explains to Figaro that he wants to woo Rosina without her knowing his name and rank, so that he is sure that she loves him solely for himself.

Figaro notices that Rosina hides behind the shutters, and urges the Count to sing a second serenade. The Count announces to Rosina that he is indeed madly in love with her, but he hesitates to reveal his name and station in fear that Rosina would be influenced by the glamour of his aristocratic status. So he reveals that he is Lindoro, a man of poverty, but rich in the emotions of love and the constancy of his passion.

“*Se il mio nome*”

**Andante**

**COUNT ALMAVIVA**



*Se il mio nome saper voi bra-ma - te, dal mio labbro il mio nome ascoltate.*  
**If you yearn to know my name, listen for it to flow from my lips.**

With equal ardor, Rosina begins to reply to “Lindoro,” but her words break off suddenly and she disappears, obviously interrupted by someone entering the room.

The Count vows with ardent determination his yearning to enter the house and see Rosina. He turns to Figaro, the master of intrigue, and urges him to provide the means, a service he will reward with the promise of money.

Figaro is certain that he can succeed for the Count, because as Seville’s greatest factotum, his multiple professions provide him entry into the homes of people of all stations: in particular, he is Rosina’s hairdresser and Dr. Bartolo’s barber.

Assured that money will be forthcoming, Figaro praises gold, the ultimate stimulant for his genius.

“*All’idea di quel metallo*”

**Allegro maestoso**

**FIGARO**



*Al -l'i - dea di quel me-tal-lo por - ten - toso, onni possente,*  
**The thought of that mighty metal, so overpowering,**

Figaro devises an intrigue that will enable Count Almaviva to enter inside Dr. Bartolo’s house. He announces that the colonel of the regiment is a friend of Almaviva, and the regiment has just arrived in Seville: the Count can disguise himself as a soldier and insist that he be billeted in Bartolo’s house.



And if by magic, Rosina's wishes are fulfilled with immediacy: Figaro suddenly appears. Rosina complains to Figaro about her virtual imprisonment; she is sealed up between four walls; she might as well be in her tomb. Just as Figaro is about to make Rosina privy to his intrigue, Bartolo is heard approaching, and Figaro conceals himself, intent on eavesdropping.

Bartolo mutters to himself. He curses Figaro as a rascal who has transformed his house into a hospital by prescribing doses of opiates that have caused bleeding. Bartolo calls in his servants, Berta and Ambrosio, to inquire if Figaro has been talking to Rosina. But the servants have already become the victims of Figaro's devious trickery; Figaro gave them medicines that cause them to sneeze and yawn. And Rosina further infuriates Bartolo by defending Figaro as very sympathetic, boldly admitting to her guardian that she has just seen him.

Don Basilio enters with important news for his conspiring employer; he announces that he has discovered that Count Almaviva is in Seville. Intuitively, Bartolo concludes that it is the Count who has been haunting the neighborhood and serenading Rosina.

Basilio suggests a way in which to get rid of Almaviva, a technique of his own invention that never fails. He suggests that they invent rumor and scandal to destroy the Count's reputation: by vilifying and defaming Almaviva, Basilio is confident and certain that Rosina — and all the townspeople — would reject him.

Basilio begins describing his plan to Bartolo, in a quiet and hushed voice. Calumny, he declares, begins as a gentle breeze that imperceptibly increases in force: it is slander that passes from mouth to mouth, and from ear to ear. What begins as an inaudible hiss becomes a horrifying roar that shatters the air: "Come un colpo di cannone" ("an explosion like a shot from a cannon.") In the end, the victim finds himself crushed under the weight of public disgrace and hatred.

### "La calunnia"

#### Allegro BASILIO

La - ca - lunnia e un ven - ti - cel - lo,  
Slander is a light wind, a zephyr so gentle,

In principle, Bartolo agrees with Basilio's scheme, but in the interests of time, he concludes that to solve the problem of her amorous escapades, he should immediately marry Rosina. The conspirators, certain of success, go off to another room to prepare a marriage contract for Dr. Bartolo and Rosina.

However, the hiding Figaro has overheard their nefarious plans, and proceeds to warn Rosina that her guardian is determined to marry her against her wishes: tomorrow. Rosina reacts defiantly. But at this moment her thoughts are preoccupied with Lindoro, the handsome serenader who appeared under her balcony this morning. She reminds Figaro that she saw him this morning in the square, and inquires about the identity of the young man. Figaro identifies the stranger as his cousin, a fine young man who has come to Seville to complete his studies, and hopefully, to make his fortune. But at this moment, he has one problem: he is lovesick. Rosina's eager enquiries enable Figaro to tease her; he tells her that the object of his cousin's love is a beautiful young lady who remarkably looks just like Rosina, and in fact, bears the same name.

Rosina becomes ecstatic at the welcome news, and becomes eager and impatient to meet Figaro's cousin. Figaro assures her that if she sends him a note of encouragement, he will find a





Figaro, the insider in the intrigue, chuckles ironically over Bartolo's defeat and embarrassment: "Look at Don Bartolo!"

All confess their consternation at this new turn of events. When Bartolo and Basilio attempt to speak to the guard they are roughly told to be quiet. In confusion, the act comes to a rollicking and rambunctious conclusion, everyone's head pounding as if being struck by a hammer.

*"Mi par d'esser colla testa"*

**Vivace**  
**ALL**



Musical notation for the song "Mi par d'esser colla testa". The notation is on a single staff in treble clef, 2/4 time, with a key signature of one flat (B-flat). The melody consists of eighth and quarter notes, with some slurs. The lyrics are written below the staff.

*Mi par d'esser colla testa*  
My head seems like it's being pounded

### *Act II: The library in Dr. Bartolo's house*

It is evening. Dr. Bartolo sits quietly in contemplation, congratulating his success in ridding himself of the blustering, drunken soldier. But he is still worried because his enquiries about the soldier revealed that the regiment knows no such person. Bartolo surmises that the soldier was a spy for Count Almaviva who was seeking information about Rosina.

Although their soldier scheme failed, Almaviva and Figaro are undaunted. They have invented another intrigue to enable the Count to enter Bartolo's house: this time, he will appear as Don Alonso, a substitute music teacher replacing the presumably ailing for Don Basilio.

A knock on Dr. Bartolo's door introduces Don Alonso (the Count), arriving to give Rosina her music lesson. Polite sarcasm and exaggerated deference follows the interchange between Don Alonso and Dr. Bartolo, the newcomer invoking peace and joy on Bartolo's household for a thousand years.

*"Pace e gioia sia convoi"*

**Andante moderato**  
**COUNT ALMAVIVA (as Don Alonso)**



Musical notation for the song "Pace e gioia sia convoi". The notation is on a single staff in treble clef, 3/4 time, with a key signature of two flats (B-flat and E-flat). The melody consists of quarter and eighth notes, with some slurs. The lyrics are written below the staff.

*Pa - ce e gio - ia sia con vo - i,*  
May peace and joy be be with you.

Bartolo is bewildered. He senses that he has seen the music teacher's face before, but he cannot seem to place him. After Bartolo finally persuades Don Alonso to end his incessant barrage of compliments, the music teacher identifies himself.

Don Alonso reveals that he is Don Basilio's pupil, and since his master has suddenly taken ill, his pupil has come in his stead. Bartolo instinctively rises to rush to the side of the sick Basilio, his most important ally in intrigue, and Alonso has difficulty in dissuading him, feigning anger.

Alonso proceeds to explain his "true" purposes. He informs Bartolo that he lodges at the same inn as the Count Almaviva, and this very morning he found a letter that had been in the Count's possession, the letter that Rosina had written to her secret lover, Lindoro. Alonso gives the letter to Bartolo who clearly recognizes Rosina's handwriting. Alonso cautions Bartolo that Don Basilio knows nothing of this letter.

Don Alonso wins Bartolo's confidence and offers to become his ally. He convinces Bartolo that if he is given access to his ward, he can prove to her that her lover was betraying her affections, and that his real intention was to deliver her to the lascivious Count Almaviva.

Bartolo excitedly agrees, commenting that Alonso has presented a magnificent calumny; he is most assuredly a worthy pupil of Basilio. Bartolo thanks Alonso effusively, embraces him, and assures him that he himself will make sure that Rosina sees the letter and is made aware of the truth.

Bartolo summons Rosina for her music lesson and introduces Don Alonso. Rosina becomes shocked and astonished when she recognizes Lindoro in the disguise of the music teacher. She staggers, recovers, and excuses herself by explaining that she had a cramp in her foot. With professional gravity, Lindoro assures her that her music lesson will be a fine cure for her momentary ailment.

Rosina artfully elects to sing the aria from "The Vain Precaution" which arouses Bartolo's ire. He again inquires about "The Vain Precaution," and she again explains that it is the title of a new opera that has become the rage. Don Alonso seats himself at the clavichord to accompany her, while Bartolo seats himself in a chair.

Rosina's song, the ironical subject of the "lesson," relates the story of a tyrant who is powerless to influence the heart of one who is in love. Her song, of course, is autobiographical; she is the woman who is the victim of frustrated desire, the words of her song appealing to Lindoro, and begging his assurance that he will not fail her.

Bartolo erupts into outrage, proclaiming that the song is rubbish. In a comic and grotesque exhibition, he proceeds to sing an example of what he considers a fine aria. While he sings, Figaro enters, his barber's basin under his arm, and mimics Bartolo from behind. Bartolo turns and inquires why Figaro is present, and the barber explains that he has come for Bartolo's morning shave. Bartolo tries to postpone his shave until tomorrow, but Figaro produces a notebook, and protests that it would be impossible to change the appointment because his calendar is filled with numerous engagements: he must shave regimental officers, fit the Marques Andronica's wig, fix Count Bombè's toupee, provide doses for the lawyer Bernadone's dyspepsia, et al. Figaro also complains that his entire morning had been wasted because he had arrived in the morning to shave Bartolo, but the house was in an pandemonium. Feigning indignation, Figaro suggests that if Bartolo considers him to be just any barber, let him choose another artist. That said, Figaro proceeds to take up his basin and leave.

Figaro's bluff succeeds. Bartolo decides to fetch the linens himself, but Bartolo becomes wary of leaving the roguish Figaro alone with his rebellious ward, and he is certain that Figaro delivered Rosina's letter to Count Almaviva; old Dr. Bartolo is too wise to be caught twice in the same trap. Bartolo hands Figaro the keys to his closet and instructs him to fetch the necessary linens. As Figaro departs, he whispers to Rosina that if he can seize the vital balcony key, they will triumph.

A loud crash is heard. Frantically, Bartolo rushes out to investigate the damage. He returns with Figaro whom he accuses of smashing of his china. Figaro, using his usual guile, points out that the accident was Bartolo's fault; the old doctor keeps the place in such darkness that it was

only the mercy of Providence that prevented him from smashing his head against the wall. In an aside, Figaro excitedly shows the Count the balcony key.

Bartolo seats himself in the chair and orders Figaro to begin shaving him. Figaro lathers Bartolo's face and stands before him to block his view of Rosina and Lindoro, both enraptured as they exchange hurried words of love.

To everyone's shock and amazement, Don Basilio appears at the doorway. The unsuspecting Basilio becomes frankly astounded when Bartolo inquires about his health. In order to protect their charade, Figaro and the Count push Basilio aside, trying to prevent him from expressing more surprise and asking questions. At the same time Alonso urges Bartolo to get rid of Basilio before he blurts something indiscreet; after all, he reminds Bartolo, Basilio knows nothing of the letter he gave him.

Dutifully, Bartolo orders Basilio to leave. Don Alonso claims that Basilio is as yellow as a corpse. And Figaro feels his pulse and expresses horror at its irregularity; he diagnoses scarlet fever. Alonso advises the bewildered Basilio to return home and immediately take some medicine. He surreptitiously passes Basilio a purse with money; the cumulative testimony that he is mortally ill may have confounded Basilio, but the purse convinces him to leave. Basilio makes a diplomatic but hasty departure as prolonged farewells compound the humorous situation.

*“Buona sera”*

**Moderato**  
**COUNT ALMAVIVA**



*Buo - na se - ra, mio si - gno - re,*  
**Good evening, my dear sir,**

After Basilio departs, Figaro begins shaving Dr. Bartolo, completely preventing his view of the lovers by splashing soap generously into his eyes. The lovers seem to be absorbed in the music, but they are planning Rosina's elopement. Lindoro whispers to Rosina that she should not fear, because now that they have the balcony key they will fetch her precisely at midnight. Rosina promises to be ready.

Figaro does his best to help the lovers and distract Bartolo; he pretends to have something in his eye, which he asks Bartolo to examine. But Bartolo is concerned with the intimacy he notices between Alonso and Rosina. He slowly approaches them, and his suspicions are confirmed when he overhears them talk about love. Bartolo has discovered the masquerade and realizes that he has been duped again. In a rage and fury, he orders Figaro and Alonso from his house. All try to calm him, but he continues to curse and threaten them.

Alone and fuming in outrage, Bartolo rings for his servants and order Ambrosio to fetch Don Basilio at once; his immediate priority is to consummate a marriage to Rosina. Not trusting Berta, he decides to guard the door himself. Berta, left alone, complains of having to serve in such a mad house where absurd and silly old men pursue younger women. Yet, she concludes, love is universal; she herself, mature as she is, is certainly not immune from it.

Later that evening, Bartolo and Basilio conspire in earnest. Basilio disclaims all knowledge of "Alonso" whom Bartolo now suspects to be an agent of Count Almaviva. The shrewder Basilio, citing the evidence of the purse, is convinced that it was the Count himself in the disguise of the music teacher. Bartolo agrees, and insists that his marriage to Rosina must be concluded this very day, and he orders Basilio to hurry off to the notary to have the contract drawn up.

Basilio refuses, claiming that the downpour makes it impossible to go out, and also, that Figaro has already engaged the notary for the marriage of his niece. Bartolo's suspicious rise again, for he knows that Figaro has no nieces. Suspecting trickery, Bartolo gives Basilio the key to the front door, and then sends him off to fetch the notary.

Alone, the worried Bartolo reviews the confounding events of the day. Nevertheless, he must quickly marry Rosina, by force or strong persuasion. Then he is struck with a brilliant idea: Alonso unintentionally gave him the ideal weapon for his purpose: Rosina's letter that was in the Count's possession.

Rosina enters and Bartolo immediately unmask his intrigue. He shows Rosina her letter that has providentially come into his hands. He proclaims that she placed her innocent trust in a pair of rogues — Figaro and Lindoro — who are conspiring to surrender her to the infamous Count Almaviva.

Rosina feels betrayed and explodes into a fury: in revenge, she offers to marry Bartolo at once. And, she further admits to Bartolo that Lindoro and Figaro had planned to escape with her this very night. Further, she insists that Bartolo have them arrested when they arrive.

Bartolo immediately plans to bar the door, but Rosina tells him that they will enter through the window (the balcony door), for which they possess the key. Bartolo fears that they may be armed, so he advises Rosina to lock herself in her room while he runs off to inform the police that he has information that two thieves plan to break into his house. Rosina grieves over her sad fate, but accedes to Bartolo.

The stormy weather that Basilio alluded to in his earlier conversation with Bartolo now erupts into a violent thunderstorm. After the full fury of the storm subsides and then dies away in the distance, Figaro and Almaviva enter Dr. Bartolo's house through the balcony.

Figaro lights his lantern and the sleeping Rosina becomes visible. The Count tries to embrace her, but she repulses him indignantly — and in outrage. She reveals that she has discovered that he is a perfidious deceiver, a man who pretended love so he could sacrifice her to the insidious Count Almaviva. The Count becomes delighted by Rosina's revelation, confirmation that she is unaware of his real identity, that she truly loves the poor Lindoro, and that she is ignorant of his wealth and rank. Then he reveals his true identity to Rosina, and the lovers embrace in reconciliation.

Figaro notices two people outside and vainly tries to persuade the happy lovers to limit their moment of rapture and escape. After he finally convinces them, all turn their thoughts and actions to silence and flight.

*“Zitti zitti, piano piano”*

**Allegro**

**ROSINA, COUNT, FIGARO**



*Zit-ti zit-ti, pia-no pia-no, non facciamo confu-sio-ne;*  
**Quietly, softly, don't make a commotion;**

As they start their escape, they find that the ladder is gone, and also that someone is approaching. They hide in the background, Almaviva wrapping his cloak around himself, and exhorting Rosina to have courage.

The surprise visitors are Don Basilio and the notary. Figaro recognizes them, emerges from hiding, and confronts them. He reminds the notary that he had been engaged to draw up a marriage contract for his niece and a certain Count Almaviva. He points to the lovers, advises the notary that they are ready to be wed, and the notary unwittingly produces the marriage contract.

The Count removes a ring from his finger, draws a pistol, and gives the bewildered Don Basilio his choice between a bribe and bullets in his head. Reason overcomes Basilio and he has no difficulty making his choice; ever the practical survivor, Basilio signs as a witness to the marriage, and Figaro becomes the other signatory.

As Figaro locks Basilio in a derisive embrace, Dr. Bartolo arrives with the police and orders the intruders arrested. The Count once more settles the matter by revealing his identity and rank. Bartolo, although overcome with moral indignation, surrenders his fight.

The Count becomes overwhelmed with joy and congratulates his new wife, Rosina, on her escape from her tyrant.

*“E tu, infelice vittima”*

**Andante**

**COUNT ALMAVIVA**

*E tu, in - fel - ce vit - tima d'un reo po - ter ti - ran - no,*  
**And you, unfortunate victim of a wicked, tyrannical force,**

Against a chorus of felicitations, the Count continues to pour out the happiness in his heart.

*“Ah il piu lieta, il piu felice”*

**Moderato**

**COUNT ALMAVIVA**

*Ah il più lie-to, il più fe - li - ce è il mio cor de' cori a - man - te;*  
**The most blessed, the happiest is the heart of profound lovers;**

Bartolo, recovered somewhat from shock, accuses Basilio of betraying him. But Basilio candidly points out that he was merely following the dictates of reason: Count Almaviva produced arguments (a pistol at his head and a purse) that were overwhelmingly irresistible. Nevertheless, Bartolo curses himself for his stupidity in removing the ladder, reasoning that its removal facilitated the marriage.

Figaro reminds everyone about the vanity of precautions when love is profound. Bartolo protests that he is incapable of providing a dowry for Rosina, but the Count explains that under no circumstances would he or his bride accept anything; in fact, the Count graciously gives Bartolo a purse, the equivalent of her dowry.

Figaro cynically comments that rogues are the happy survivors in this world, and Dr. Bartolo decides to accept his fate philosophically.

The irrepressible Figaro bestows garrulous good wishes on the newlyweds, and all celebrate love and happiness.



***CHAPTER EIGHT***  
***Romanticism in Italian Opera:***  
***Early 19th century***

### *Romanticism in Italian Opera: Early 19th Century*

The primary focus of Italian opera, going back to its Camerata foundations in the early seventeenth century, was that the human voice represented the noblest and most ideal musical instrument, an instrument capable of expressing the entire range of human emotions and passions, aspirations, yearnings and desires.

Bel canto opera became the materialization of the ideal that the voice was a divine and sacred gift; as such, singing was considered both an art and a science, and bel canto operas were composed first and foremost as showcases for singers to demonstrate feats of vocal virtuosity: as a result, dramatic and theatrical elements generally became secondary considerations, the underlying literary values of the librettos generally insignificant, and the dramas rarely bearing any organic relationship or integration with their underlying music. In bel canto operas, the art of singing was the priority, not heightened dramatic conflicts and tensions.

In the bel canto tradition, in both opera buffa and serious operas, drama and dramatic continuity were generally secondary considerations to the art of singing, the inherent drama of the work created specifically through vocal technique and inflection rather than its underlying text. In retrospect, many of those librettos are viewed today as humdrum and hackneyed, even though extremely talented and original craftsmen wrote an abundant number of them.

Bel canto opera's internal structure featured "numbers" or "set pieces" (arias, duets, trios, ensembles) that were integrated with recitative, all composed within existing standard conventions and formulae: cavatinas (a simple or short aria for the principal singer), cabalettas (a brisk last section of an aria or duet, usually with several sections), and strettas (a speeding up of tempo to create a climactic moment). By design, rather than technical limitations, the orchestra in most bel canto operas was reduced to its utmost simplicity, often just an accompanist: melody dominated, and by necessity, the orchestra generally became subdued when the singer was singing, regardless of internal dramatic conflicts.

Because the soul of bel canto opera was voice and melody, the art form demanded singing with beauty, elegance, flexibility, an assured technique, and a certain degree of bravura and vocal acrobatics. Often the designations bel canto and coloratura — and even fioritura — are synonymous terms that are used interchangeably, but primarily they all define an elaborate and brilliant ornamentation of the vocal line. A singer's virtuosity and vocal fireworks became the preeminent features of bel canto and singers dominated the art form, prompting composers to become dutifully obliged to cater to their vocal superstars. In effect, singers became the composer's austere clients, so in order to guarantee achieving an immediate success with audiences, composers often wrote their operas for renowned contemporary virtuoso singers, dutifully and conscientiously modifying elements of their music to suit the singer's whims and technical capabilities.

In the bel canto style, dramatic effects are expressed through vocal inflections rather than through harmonic nuance or orchestral commentary: therefore, a singer achieves drama through coloratura passages and dynamics of the vocal line, the passages at times bent, flexed, stretched, speeded up, or slowed down. In general, the intrigue of bel canto opera is dependent upon the singer's ability to deliver vocal fireworks, and when performed with intelligence and virtuosity, can achieve a profound dramatic poignancy, eloquence, and intense passion.

The inherent freshness of the underlying music of bel canto operas has compelled many operagoers to overlook the occasional weakness of their drama and librettos. Historically, many bel canto operas were relegated to opera museums during much of the latter part of the nineteenth and first half of the twentieth centuries. But at midpoint of the twentieth century, champions of the tradition arose, proving have proven that there was indeed more drama in these works than had ever been suspected. Certainly, bel canto is very much alive in contemporary repertoires, proven by the extraordinary successes of recent superstars of the genre such as Maria Callas, Alfredo Kraus, Marilyn Horne, Joan Sutherland, and currently, Cecilia Bartoli and Jennifer Larmore.

Those great nineteenth-century masters of bel canto, Rossini, Bellini, and Donizetti, left a legacy of some 150 operas: the preeminence of their works on our contemporary opera stages remains proof that the bel canto art form is not only captivating, but a classic genre that is capable of continuous rejuvenation.

**G**aetano Donizetti was born in Bergamo, Italy, in 1797. Together with his contemporaries, Rossini, Bellini, Mercadante, and Pacini, they dominated Italian opera during the first half of the nineteenth century; they were the vanguard of the Italian bel canto genre, a style literally meaning “beautiful singing,” or “fine singing,” that emphasized vocal virtuosity and clear melodic lines embellished with ample musical ornamentation.

At an early age, despite his family’s ambition for him to pursue a legal career, Donizetti turned to music. His exceptional talents earned him a scholarship to study with one of the leading opera composers of his day, Simon Mayr: Mayr became Donizetti’s mentor and recognized his musical gifts; he trained him diligently in composition, theory, and harmony, and encouraged him to compose operas. Throughout Donizetti’s entire life, he expressed his devotion and appreciation to Mayr, referring to him as his “second father.”

At 17, with financial support arranged by Mayr, the budding young opera composer undertook more advanced music studies at the Bologna Conservatory. Four years later, his first opera, *Enrico di Borgogna* (1818), earned appreciable praise for its originality, and served to stimulate him toward opera composition. In the 1830s, after an astonishing series of triumphs, he moved to Paris, then the recognized center of the opera world, where his many successes prompted Berlioz to pen the rather envious quip: “One can no longer speak of the opera houses of Paris but only of the opera houses of M. Donizetti.”

During his lifetime, Donizetti composed an astounding 69 or 72 operas, the actual total depending on the musicological and historical source. Nevertheless, he composed within a brief time-span, dying in 1848 at the age of 51. Like the early deaths of Mozart or Chopin, one wonders what musical treasures would have been created had Donizetti lived longer. Nevertheless, his voluminous output represents a commanding legacy, an undeniable accomplishment that establishes him as one of the foremost composers of nineteenth-century opera.

**I**n 1818, when Donizetti began his career, Gioacchino Rossini was the icon of Italian opera; Rossini’s operas were the rage of audiences. As such, Rossini became the primary architect and major influence who influenced all contemporary opera: he revitalized, refashioned, and established all the structural guidelines for the opera buffa (comic) and opera seria (serious) styles. To assure success, composers such as Vincenzo Bellini and Gaetano Donizetti obediently conformed to Rossini’s rigid formulae and florid styles until they later developed their own specific musical signatures.

Donizetti possessed unique resources and capabilities, composing prolifically, like Rossini, in both the comic and serious opera genres. He exhibited extraordinary dramatic insight, was a fluent technician, a skillful craftsman, and manifested a fertile melodic inventiveness: his music is noted for its eminent melodic beauty, and simple but adept orchestration. If there is anything that distinguishes Donizetti’s music it is his exquisite vocal lines, a lyricism possessing incredible, melodic beauty. He insisted, with almost religious conviction, that the one overwhelmingly important ingredient of music was beautiful melody, and ultimately, beautiful melody became the cornerstone of his musical philosophy and output.

Donizetti’s best comic operas are marked with a dashing spontaneity, verve, and gaiety, all integrated with a masterful mix of tenderness and pathos. His sentimental, syrupy comedy, *L’Elisir d’Amore* (1832), just like Rossini’s *The Barber of Seville* (1816), is considered a classic of the opera buffa genre. Likewise, *La Fille du Régiment* (“The Daughter of the Regiment”) (1840),

and *Don Pasquale* (1843) are considered comic masterpieces, the latter, an opera that possesses an almost Mozartian adroitness in its musical characterizations.

Donizetti's serious or tragic operas have powerful passion and swift dramatic action: *Anna Bolena* (1830); *Lucrezia Borgia* (1833); *Roberto Devereaux* (1837); *La Favorite* (1840), the latter a grand work of Gallic elegance that many consider his finest serious French opera. And *Lucia di Lammermoor* (1835), to many, is the archetype of early Italian Romantic opera.

Many legends naturally follow a composer with such a prodigious career. It is rumored that he was a master of musical file maintenance, supposedly kept a neatly organized index of unused musical material, as well as scraps and brief sketches of pieces that were not fully developed; for Donizetti, it was sacrilege to let an unused note go astray. But within this panorama of voluminous operatic output, there exists an entire range of musical criticism: there are some operas that are considered great, some good, and some bad and even ugly; those considered trite and superficial have long been forgotten.

Donizetti's compositional muse worked swiftly: *L'Elisir d'Amore* apparently premiered 2 weeks after he received its commission; and in *Lucia*, Edgardo's final aria, "Tu che a Dio spiegasti d'ali," was admittedly composed in 1/2 hour during moments of respite when the composer was nursing a headache while playing cards with friends. *Lucia di Lammermoor* was supposedly composed in 36 days.

In sum, Donizetti left a robust legacy of bel canto masterpieces, many of which, after a period of neglect and critical disdain, have reemerged and become prominent fixtures in the repertoires of contemporary major opera companies.

Italian opera expressed the tensions and conflicts of Romanticism through the bel canto genre. The Scottish poet and novelist, Sir Walter Scott, 1771 – 1832, was the first to write in captivating detail about the customs and history of his country, then a strange and little known land situated just on the very edge of Europe. During the early nineteenth-century Romantic era, Scott's depiction of turbulent political and social events in sixteenth and seventeenth century England and Scotland, were being read in translation all over Europe: as an ultimate tribute, many were imitated by such renowned dramatists as Goethe and Schiller.

Scott's novels were vivid in their dialogue, contained an assured narrative flow, and combined rich historical details with a sense of geographical realism. They proved excellent for stage adaptations, because their heroic characters seemed all too realistic, yet their historical time period was set sufficiently far in the past to animate the romantic spirit of the times.

Scott's works inspired over 60 operas, most of which were composed during the early nineteenth century Romantic period: Rossini's *La Donna del Lago* (1819) adapted from *The Lady of the Lake*; *Ivanhoe*, adapted by Marschner, Pacini, Nicolai, and Sullivan; Flotow's *Rob Roy* (1836); Bizet's *The Fair Maid of Perth* (1867); Auber's *Leicester* (1823) based on *Kenilworth*, as well as Donizetti's *Elisabetta al Castello di Kenilworth* (1829), also based on *Kenilworth*.

Scott based his romance, *The Bride of Lammermoor* (1819), on an actual historical event which took place in Scotland in 1669: Janet Dalrymple attacked her bridegroom, David Dunbar, whom her father insisted she marry instead of Dunbar's uncle, Lord Rutherford, to whom she was secretly betrothed. Scott changed the characters' names, shifted the locale, and invented a complex plot.

The heroine is Lucy Ashton, the daughter of the unscupulous Sir William Ashton, who used legal chicanery to bring about the financial ruin of Lord Ravenswood. Lucy and the Ravenswood's son, Edgar, fall in love, vowing their eternal devotion at the Mermaid's Fountain. But while Edgar is away, the Ashton's force Lucy to marry the dissolute Laird of Bucklaw; on her wedding night, Lucy critically stabs and wounds her bridegroom and dies the following day. Edgar, on his

way to duel Lucy's brother, is lost in the quicksands of Kelpies Flow.

Before Donizetti's treatment of Scott's *The Bride of Lammermoor*, it had become the basis of three earlier Italian operas: Carafa's *Le Nozze di Lammermoor* (1829), Rieschi's *La Fidanzata di Lammermoor* (1831), and Mazzucato's *La Fidanzata di Lammermoor* (1834).

**T**he Neapolitan born Italian librettist and playwright, Salvatore Cammarano (1801-1852) had been moderately successful as a painter and sculptor, but suddenly and inexplicably turned to the theater: he wrote many plays during the 1820s which were all saturated with an unusual blend of comedy and melancholy.

He eventually became a stage director, integrating his early training in art with his writing talents as a poet: he began as an editor and writer of plot outlines, and then graduated to writing opera librettos. In 1838, he left Naples for Paris and became one of the most esteemed and sought after Italian librettists of his day, eventually writing over 50 librettos for some of the most important composers of the period, who included: Mercadante (nine libretti including *La Vestale* (1840) and *Il Reggente* (1843), and Pacini (six libretti including *Saffo* (1840).

Donizetti insisted on using Cammarano for *Lucia di Lammermoor*, *Roberto Devereaux* (1837), *Poliuto* (1848), *L'Assedio di Calis*, *Maria di Rohan* (first performed in 1943), *Maria de Rudenz* (1838), *Belisario* (1836), and *Pia d' Tolomei* (1848). Cammarano also became Verdi's favorite poet, writing the librettos for *Alzira* (1845), *La Battaglia di Legnano* (1849), *Luisa Miller* (1849), and *Il Trovatore* (1853), the latter uncompleted before his death. The relationship between Verdi and Cammarano vacillated, at times tense, and at times harmonious. Nevertheless, Cammarano was Verdi's poet of choice for the *King Lear* opera, which remained a dream throughout his entire life but never came to fruition.

Cammarano epitomized the operatic poets of his generation: he was a meticulous craftsman and writer of carefully polished mellifluous verses, possessed a poet's concern for the sound of his lines, had a highly developed sense of dramatic structure, often relished the opportunity to add variations and obscurities to a story, and was astutely adept at molding his plots for the composer's adaptation into arias and ensembles. He is traditionally faulted for writing stilted and monotonous expressive prose, a result of his penchant for flowery diction that was so typical of the old fashioned "libretto Italiano" tradition of the time: bells were never bells but "sacred bronzes," and midnight was traditionally the "hour of the dead."

Nevertheless, Cammarano left a legacy of great literary achievements in opera history: he was the poet for two of the most popular romantic melodramas of the nineteenth century: Donizetti's *Lucia di Lammermoor*, and Verdi's *Il Trovatore*, an operatic immortality none of his contemporaries ever achieved.

**D**onizetti's music and Cammarano's text unite perfectly to capture the enchantment and dramatic passions unleashed in Scott's *Bride*, dutifully projecting the melancholy of the Scottish ambience, as well as the mysterious and even Gothic atmosphere of the story. Donizetti may have been inspired toward Scott's *Bride* because of his own ancestry: his grandfather, Donald Izett, is reputed to have been a weaver who emigrated to Italy from Perthshire, Scotland.

In adapting Scott's powerful plot, Cammarano trimmed away much of Scott's accessory details in order to maintain a dramatically focused plot and keep it starkly taut and tense. In his adaptation, the characterization of Lucy is virtually identical to Scott's literary heroine, the quintessential victim of romantic illusion as she progresses toward psychological destruction; Edgar, who is melancholy and restrained in the novel, bears the typical persona of Romantic bel canto opera heroes, continually erupting into exaggerated and hysterical outbursts of passion. But Cammarano altered the plot to suit his own tragic muse: Arthur is fatally stabbed by Lucy, Lucy

dies in the throes of her mental derangement, and Edgar, heartbroken when he learns of Lucy's death, kills himself.

However, librettist and composer made perhaps a most drastic transformation of Scott's drama: Scott's most memorable villainess, the evil genius of the novel, Lucy's mother, Lady Ashton, does not appear in the opera.

In the novel, Lady Ashton is a diabolical character. She is one of the most detestable mother's in all of literature: haughty, ambitious, incessantly dominating, despising of her weak-willed and vacillating husband, intensely hateful of the Ravenswood's, and particularly resentful of Edgar's ancestry, which she perceives as more noble than that of her own husband. She also bears a deep contempt for her daughter, Lucy, whom she considers devoid of social ambition, particularly in her unwillingness to marry the man she has chosen for her.

Scott's literary Lady Ashton is a typical operatic demon, but without a musical leitmotif, certainly a character equal to other cruel and wicked soul-mates from her gender: the Queen of the Night, who tries to force Pamina to murder Sarastro; Elektra's mother, Clytemnestra, and Herodias, Salome's evil mother.

Nevertheless, Cammarano and Donizetti omitted Lady Ashton as a character in their opera. Musicologists speculate on their reasons and suggest that Italian opera dramatists do not seem eager to portray the "terrible mother." Traditionally, in Italian operas, mother is the "loving mamma," with perhaps the one notable exception of Bellini's *Norma*, the mother who plans to murder her children, yet in the end becomes humanized and cannot force herself to kill them. Generally, in most Italian operas, there are rare characterizations of cruel and nasty mothers: in Rossini's *Cinderella*, the evil mother is transformed into a stepfather; in *La Gioconda*, the vulnerable and blind mother generates pity; in *Il Trovatore*, Azucena's mother can be viewed as a victim of cruelty, and even generate sympathy; and in *Falstaff*, Nanetta's mother, Alice Ford, is portrayed as smarter than her husband.

Italian "opera mothers" are rarely diabolical and detestable. Therefore, perhaps respecting the tradition, as well as cultural antipathies, Donizetti and Cammarano omitted the "terrible mother": Lady Ashton is dead when the opera begins, and Cammarano's text even suggests that she was a fine person whose loss Lucy laments with intense grief; in the very opening lines of Act I, the cleric and tutor Raymond Bide-the-Bent begs Henry not to press his sister into marriage because Lucy is a "Dolente vergin, che geme sull'urna recente di cara madre" ("The poor girl is still mourning her beloved mother.")

Nevertheless, Scott's Lady Ashton is a villainess supreme: "Lady Ashton was of a family more distinguished than that of lord, an advantage which she did not fail to use to the uttermost, in maintaining and extending her husband's influence over others, and, unless her husband's influence over others, and, unless she was greatly belied, her own over him. She had been beautiful, and was stately and majestic in her appearance. Endowed by nature with strong powers and violent passion, experience had taught her to employ the one, and to conceal, if not to moderate, the other. She was a severe and strict observer of the external forms, at least, of devotion; her hospitality was splendid, even to ostentation; her address and manners, agreeable to the pattern most valued in Scotland at the period, were grave, dignified, and severely regulated by the rules of etiquette. Her character had always been beyond the breath of slander. And yet, with all these qualities to excite respect, Lady Ashton was seldom mentioned in the terms of love or affection. Interest — the interest of her family, if not her own — seemed obviously the motive of her actions; and where this is the case, the sharp-judging and malignant public are not easily imposed upon by outward show. It was seen and ascertained that, in her most graceful courtesies and compliments, Lady Ashton no more lost sight of her object than the falcon in his airy wheel turns his quick eyes from his destined quarry; and hence, something of doubt and suspicion qualified the feelings with which her equals received her attentions. With her inferiors these feelings mingled with fear; an impression useful to her purposes, so far as it enforced ready compliance with her requests and implicit obedience to her commands, but detrimental, because it cannot exist with affection or regard."

Scott continues: “Even her husband, it is said upon whose fortunes her talents and address had produced such emphatic influence, regarded her with respectful awe rather than confiding attachment; and report said, there were times when he considered his grandeur as dearly purchased at the expense of domestic thralldom. Of this, however, much might be suspected, but little should be accurately known: Lady Ashton regarded the honor of her husband as her own, and was well aware how much that would suffer in the public eye should he appear a vassal to his wife. In all her arguments his opinion was quoted as infallible; his taste was appealed to, and his sentiments received, with the air of deference, which a dutiful wife might seem to owe to a husband of Sir William Ashton’s rank and character. But there was something under all this which rung false and hollow; and to those who watched this couple with close, and perhaps malicious scrutiny, it seemed evident that, in the haughtiness of a firmer character, higher birth, and more decided views of aggrandizement, this lady looked with some contempt on her husband, and that he regarded her with jealous fear; rather than with love or admiration.”

Lord Henry Ashton represents the diabolic, scheming character of Scott’s Lady Ashton in Donizetti’s opera.

**T**he *Bride of Lammermoor* story takes place in the late seventeenth century when marriages between heads of states, the nobility, or the landed, represented — among other things — a means to end wars, supply needed financial or political security, and even provide status in society. In either case, the bride or groom was nothing more or less than a chattel that became a victim of a family or ward’s will; and any opposition to that will was futile.

In the Cammarano opera version of Scott’s novel, Lucy’s brother, Henry replaces the diabolical Lady Ashton: Henry bears the mantle to achieve the Ashton family’s political objectives, and advocates all the causes originally espoused by Scott’s Lady Ashton. In the opera, Henry is the head of the Ashton family, the replacement of Lady Ashton’s diabolical persona, the substitute for Lucy’s father and mother, and even for her other brother; Sholto is also omitted from the opera.

As the replacement of Lady Ashton, Henry becomes the evil demon of the story. Yet, Henry’s crisis certainly seems reasonable and worthy of sympathy and understanding. He anticipates that he will become a fatal victim of the impending change in Scotland’s government when Mary ascends the throne of England, and he is desperate and anxious to escape political disaster and financial ruin. In Act II - Scene 1, he explains his dilemma to Lucy with seeming logic and obvious persuasiveness: “King William is dead. Mary will ascend the throne. The party I followed has fallen from power.” Henry continues: “Only Arthur can rescue me from total ruin.”

Historically, the opera story takes place during the latter part of the seventeenth century, the period immediately preceding the “Glorious Revolution,” or Civil War of 1689: James II succeeded to the throne of England and was resolute to restore Catholicism; he was replaced by the champions of Protestantism, William of Orange and his wife Mary, both of whom ruled jointly from 1689 to 1702. It is Henry Ashton’s mention of the ascendancy of Mary to the throne of England that will affect his political fortunes and becomes the cause célèbre for forcing Lucy into a marriage of expediency with Lord Arthur Bucklaw.

**L**ucy responds to Henry’s demands by advising him that she is pledged to another man. Henry explodes into a rage, and then proceeds to paint a gruesome picture of the consequences that will befall her if she refuses to marry the rich and influential Lord Arthur: all of his explanations are intended to invoke Lucy’s guilt and disloyalty; if Lucy betrays him, he will be decapitated by the axe, and she will be haunted for the rest of her life as the cause of her brother’s death.

Several months before, Lucy and Edgar swore eternal faith to each other, “al cielo innante” (“before heaven.”) They exchanged rings, and promised to write to each other while Edgar was overseas on a diplomatic mission to France. Their glorious duet, “Veranno a te sull’aure,” which concludes the first act, not only invokes their ecstatic rapture with each other, but their joy in anticipating the exchange of love letters while Edgar is away.

However, prior to Lucy’s Act II confrontation with Henry, Edgar had been gone for many months, and Lucy received not one single letter from him: Henry has intercepted them. Because of Edgar’s silence, Lucy is now overcome with doubt, and is therefore, vulnerable to Henry’s wishes.

But Lucy is unaware that she will become the victim of Henry’s deceit. With the aid of Norman, Henry has not only intercepted Edgar’s letters, but he has forged a letter in which Edgar claims that he has abandoned Lucy and is about to marry another. Unaware of Henry’s forgery, Lucy concludes that she is the betrayed victim of a faithless lover.

In the following scene, the good minister, Raymond fuels Lucy’s suspicions. He is unaware that Edgar’s letters were intercepted by Henry, but reveals to Lucy that he tried to contact Edgar to enlighten him about Henry’s plans for her to marry Lord Arthur Bucklaw. However, Raymond never received an answer from Edgar, unaware that Edgar did not receive his letter because it coincided with his return to Scotland. Raymond decides to support Henry’s cause and urges Lucy to perform her duty and make a noble sacrifice for the sake of her brother, her family, as well as the memory of her dead mother; he assures the distraught Lucy that she will be rewarded in heaven. After Lucy becomes worn-down from pressures and doubts, she is finally persuaded to sign the marriage contract with Lord Arthur Bucklaw: Lucy becomes the despairing and agonized victim of Ashton family politics, a doomed woman who can only resolve her dilemma through revenge.

The coup de theater occurs as soon as Lucy signs the marriage contract. To everyone’s consternation, a great noise announces the arrival of Edgar, who blatantly forces his way in and interrupts the festivities. Lucy sees the ring on his finger, gazes at her own, and collapses into a dead faint.

The ensuing Sextet, which Puccini concluded was the most magnificent operatic ensemble ever composed, is an introspective tableau expressing individual compassion and self-pity. It begins with a duet: Edgar and Henry, enemies to the core, instead of arguing and preparing to fight (as in Scott’s novel), indulge in meditation.

Edgar begins: “Chi me frena in tal momento?” (“What restrains me at this moment?”) Simultaneously, Henry utters “Chi raffrena il mio furore?” (“What restrains my fury?”) Both men, overcome with rage, are surprised at their inability to act. Henry, who so frantically urged his sister to marry to save his political future, becomes overwhelmed by profound compassion for his sister: “È il mio sangue! L’ho tradita!” (“She is my own blood! I have betrayed her!”) (Scott’s Lady Ashton would have never voiced such sentiments.)

Lucy laments, confused and powerless, while others observe that she seems to be hovering between life and death. As the Sextet builds to its climax, the sensibilities and sensitivities of the characters intensify. The bitter hostility and hatred between Edgar and Henry is awakened and they are now prepared to resolve their enmity in combat. Blood is spared as they are restrained by the good minister Raymond, who intervenes to invoke the Christian injunction: “He who strikes with the sword, shall perish with the sword!” All obey, and sheath their weapons.

After the Sextet, the action progresses and hastens with sound and fury. Henry finds Edgar’s intervention contemptible and audacious. Edgar claims that his right arises from Lucy’s vow of fidelity to him. Raymond shows Edgar the marriage contract and invokes ecclesiastic authority: he annuls their vows. Edgar, in shock and disbelief, gives Lucy back her ring and demands the return of his ring.

Edgar demands to know whether Lucy actually signed the marriage contract. Lucy attempts to explain, but Edgar wants no explanation: he only wants to know if it is indeed her signature on

the contract. In despair, Lucy reluctantly admits that the signature is indeed hers. Edgar faces the devastating truth: Lucy has betrayed their love.

Edgar becomes insane with fury, curses the day he became Lucy's lover, and accuses her of being a typically deceitful and dishonest member of the Ashton clan. He draws his sword and attempts to kill Lucy, her husband Lord Arthur, as well as her brother. But then Edgar throws down his sword, dares, and even urges his enemies to kill him. Then, the betrayed lover vehemently curses Lucy: the ground on which she treads will be stained with his blood; Lucy will be trampling to the altar over his blood.

The Sextet and its ensuing ensemble capture moments of exploding human passions, the tour-de-force of the entire opera, if not Donizetti's entire canon.

In the bel canto tradition, the heroine's dismay and anxiety are usually expressed through tormented melody accented with brilliant coloratura passages: a moment of delirium intensified by the emotive power of music. These heroines become prisoners of their incomprehensible thoughts, their utterances become pathetic, fantastic, and incoherent as they try to escape from their psychological distress. Their dilemmas become resolved through madness, the only reconciliation of their personal dilemmas.

In other bel canto masterpieces, Donizetti's *Anna Bolena* (1830), Bellini's *Il Pirata* (1827), *La Sonnambula* (1831) and *I Puritani* (1835), there are scenes portraying forbidden loves, as well as the agonizing memory of lost loves. These inner conflicts lead the heroines into a raving delirium, fainting, sleepwalking, and eventually, to an anguished frenzy that transforms them into states of insanity.

Likewise, in Lucy's Mad Scene, the blood-soaked murderess appears in a state of madness, a moment which provides the soprano with an opportunity to demonstrate her technical prowess: at one time, this scene's inherent requirement for vocal virtuosity regarded as the sole *raison d'être* for the opera's survival. Nevertheless, the Mad Scene is an extraordinarily profound musico-dramatic moment in the opera: it contains outbursts of powerful passions that are expressed with lavish yet delicately balanced melodic phrases.

The Mad Scene consists of two major episodes which are joined and overlapped: the choruses before and after Raymond's narrative, and the extended recitative and double aria: "Ardon' gli incensi" ("They're lighting the incense"), and "Spargi d' amaro pianto" ("Spread your bitter tears over my earthly remains"). Lucy continues her recitative while the orchestra introduces the melody of her *largetto*, the segments succeeding each other seemingly without a sense of disruption. Lucy's disorientation and loss of mental coherence, suggested by her interchange with the flute, is ingeniously captured by the repetition of melodies heard earlier in the opera: she recalls the music from the Act I duet, "Verranno a te sull'aure," the only melody she seems to be able to keep straight in her confused and disoriented mind.

Lucy hallucinates and becomes incoherent: she fantasizes about the dead girl in the fountain, and envisions that she and Edgar have been reunited, the lovers who were separated in their life on earth finding eternal bliss in heaven. Lucy cannot reconcile her world, nor can she justify reality, except in the final moments: the ultimate reconciliation of Lucy's confusion becomes death.

The finale scene in the opera, the Tomb Scene, conveys an atmosphere of foreboding, tragic loss, and impending doom. In Scott's novel, Edgar perishes in the quicksands of his native moor while riding on horseback. But *Lucia* is a quintessential Italian opera from the Romantic era: in Donizetti's death-scene, the sad and despairing Edgar stabs himself on the tombs of his ancestors, confident that he is on his way to heaven to join the woman he loves: in many respects, it is the tenor counterpart to Lucy's Mad Scene.

To some, the Tomb Scene is an anticlimax to Lucy's Mad Scene, the reason the opera house often empties immediately thereafter. But to others, the Tomb Scene represents the high point of the whole score: it indeed contains some of the most beautiful music in the opera.

**L***ucia di Lammermoor* is a grand, tragic opera that is dutifully consistent with the romantic themes and sensibilities of its era; it is arguably Donizetti's best and finest score, and is considered the archetype of Italian Romantic opera, and consequently, an archetype of Italian bel canto opera.

At its premiere in 1835, it was a huge success, Donizetti commented to his publisher, Ricordi: "(that) every piece was listened to in religious silence and honored with spontaneous vivas." *Lucia di Lammermoor* remains today Donizetti's most famous and most popular opera. Its first performance in the United States was in New Orleans (1841) in French); in New York in 1843 (in Italian).

If anything, Lucia stands out in Donizetti's oeuvre because of its tautness of construction, the manner in which the music consistently serves the drama, and the sheer prodigality of the composer's musical inventions; it seems that Donizetti was pouring into his score the very soul of Italian bel canto.

The heroine role of Lucy has been central in the repertory of every soprano with the gift for coloratura, or fioritura: Nellie Melba, Luisa Tetrazzini, Amelia Galli-Curci, Lily Pons, Maria Callas, and Joan Sutherland. And thanks to examples set by the judicious interpretations of Maria Callas and Joan Sutherland, its story is recognized as containing profound dramatic substance; it is no longer considered solely a vehicle and war-horse for great virtuoso sopranos.

Donizetti insisted with almost religious conviction that the one overwhelming important ingredient of music must always be beautiful melody. "If you want to find out if a certain piece of music is good, play the melody without the accompaniment." Melody was the cornerstone of Donizetti's musical philosophy, and no matter what criticism befalls his works; he is vindicated by the enduring success of his melodies.

Words provoke thought; music stimulates feeling. The essence of the opera art form is that the emotive power of music intensifies the inherent power of words. In bel canto opera, powerful passions and drama are conveyed through its music, but more particularly, through the artistry of the singing voice. The voice, the noblest and most perfect musical instrument, is capable of expressing the entire range of human emotions and passions: the voice can express the entire spectrum of life, its aspirations, its yearnings, and its desires.

The great American poet, Walt Whitman, believed that music, when expressed through the singer and the orchestra, possesses a cosmic power that is capable of reaching into the inner soul.

In one of his poems, *The Mystic Trumpeter*, Whitman wrote a tribute to opera:

*Sing to my soul, renew its languishing faith and hope,  
Rouse up my slow belief, give me some vision of the future,  
Give me for once its prophecy and joy,  
O glad, exulting, culminating song!  
A vigor more than earth's is in thy notes.....*

Whitman's homage to opera could well have been directed specifically to Donizetti's *Lucia di Lammermoor*: an operatic masterpiece possessing consummate dramatic power and unrivalled musical beauty.

# *Lucia di Lammermoor*

## “Lucy of Lammermoor”

*Dramma tragico* (“Tragic drama”)

Opera in Italian in three acts

Music

by

Gaetano Donizetti

Libretto by Salvatore Cammarano

after Sir Walter Scott’s novel

*The Bride of Lammermoor* (1819)

**Premiere: Teatro San Carlo, Naples (1835)**

The American premiere of *Lucia di Lammermoor* took place in New Orleans in 1842, presented by a touring company from Havana. It was the second opera performed during the opening season of the Metropolitan Opera in New York on October 24, 1883.

***Principal Characters in Lucia di Lammermoor***

Lucia of Lammermoor	(Lucy Ashton)	Soprano
Enrico	(Lord Henry Ashton)	
Lucy's brother		Baritone
Edgardo	(Edgar of Ravenswood)	
Lucy's lover		Tenor
Arturo	(Lord Arthur Bucklaw)	
Lucia's bridegroom		Baritone
Raimondo	(Raymond Bide-the-Bent)	
a Calvinist cleric and Lucy's spiritual advisor and tutor		Bass
Alisa	(Alice)	
companion to Lucy		Mezzo-Soprano
Normanno	(Norman)	
Captain of Ashton's guard		Tenor

Ladies, knights, retainers and servants, pages, soldiers, and wedding guests

TIME: Late 17<sup>th</sup> century, during the reign of William and Mary

PLACE: Scotland, the grounds and castles of Ravenswood and Lammermoor

***Brief Story Synopsis***

In Scotland, at the end of the seventeenth century, Lord Henry Ashton (Enrico), seeks to assure his political stability by arranging a marriage for his sister, Lucy (Lucia), with the influential Lord Arthur Bucklaw (Arturo). Lucy refuses her brother, admitting to him that she has pledged her love to Edgar of Ravenswood (Edgardo), Henry's enemy.

Edgar leaves Scotland on a diplomatic mission to France: Henry intercepts his letters to Lucy, and then presents her with a forged letter revealing that Edgar plans to marry another woman. Devastated and discouraged, Lucy accedes to her brother's demands and agrees to marry Lord Arthur.

Immediately after Lucy and Lord Arthur sign the marriage contract, Edgar suddenly appears, denounces Lucy as unfaithful, and curses the Ashton family. Henry and Edgar agree to a duel.

After the new bride and groom retire for the night, Lucy becomes insane and murders Arthur. She emerges from the bridal chamber in a state of delirium: she hallucinates and fantasizes that she and her beloved Edgar have finally wed. Afterwards, she collapses and dies.

Edgar learns of Lucy's death. In his grief, he takes his own life, certain that in death, he and Lucy will be united in heaven.

### Story Narrative with Music Examples

For many years, Lord Henry Ashton has been implacable and unrelenting in sustaining the ancient feud against between the Ashton and Ravenswood families: Henry is obsessed to break their power, seize their ancient castle and lands, and destroy Edgar, the surviving scion of Ravenswood.

Henry anticipates political problems: Mary is about to ascend the throne of Scotland, placing his future stability in danger; his disfavor with the new monarch could lead to his banishment and exile. He is determined to reverse his impending misfortunes by masterminding a marriage between his sister, Lucy and Lord Arthur Bucklaw, a man whose influence at Scotland's court will ensure his political security. Henry vows that Lucy must fulfill her duty to family and wed the distinguished and powerful Lord Arthur.

#### Act I - Scene 1: "The Departure" The grounds of the Ravenswood Castle

In the gardens of Ravenswood Castle, Lord Henry Ashton and Retainers are hunting near the castle of Henry's hated enemy: the Ravenswood's. Henry admits his fears of impending ruin and announces his plan to save the Ashton family through an expedient marriage for his sister, Lucy. Raymond Bide-the-Bent, a Calvinist cleric and Lucy's tutor, vigorously protests Henry's intentions, complaining that "The poor girl is still mourning her beloved mother. At this time, how can she think of love or marriage?"

Norman, Henry's captain of the guard, sarcastically advises him that Lucy has a lover, a man with whom she has been having a secret rendezvous with every morning. The man saved her life, killing a wild boar that was threatening to attack her: that man is Henry's his archenemy, Edgar of Ravenswood.

Henry becomes enraged at the news of his sister's love affair, and vows mortal vengeance against his hereditary enemy

#### "Cruda, funesta smania"

Larghetto  
HENRY



*Cru - da, fune - sta sma - nia tu m'hai svegliato in pet - to!*  
What a cruel blow, and what fury this arouses in me!

Raymond's plea for mercy and compassion for Lucy are unheeded by Henry. Huntsmen return to report that Edgar has been seen on the grounds: Henry reiterates his implacable obsession to destroy the Ravenswood clan.

#### "La pietade in suo favore"

Allegretto moderato  
HENRY



*La pie-ta - de in suo fa - vor - re, mi-ti sen-si in - van mi det - ta.*  
It's useless to speak to me of compassion.

All depart, Lord Henry Ashton inflamed with vengeance.

**Act I – Scene 2: A park at Lammermoor Castle with a fountain**

It is twilight. Lucy appears at the fountain in anticipation of a rendezvous with Edgar. Her companion, Alice, accompanies her: both express agitation and fear that they will be seen.

But Alice specifically cautions Lucy that her adventure is imprudent: if her brother Henry discovers her love affair with his enemy, his hostility toward the Ravenswoods will lead to disastrous retribution.

Lucy looks toward the fountain with trepidation. She describes to Alice how an ancestor was murdered by a Lammermoor in a jealous rage; she is frightened because she has recently seen her ghost, and the waters of the fountain turned blood-red.

**“Regnava nel silenzio”**

**Larghetto**  
**LUCY**

Re-gna-va nel si - len-zi - o al - ta la notte e bru - na.  
Everything was silent. It was late, and the night was dark.

In vain Alice attempts to dissuade Lucy from her love for Edgar and urges her to renounce him. But Lucy yearns to meet with Edgar and warn him of the imminent danger to his life. Ecstatically, she anticipates the arrival of her lover, the man who has brought her love and consoled the sorrows that have enveloped her after the death of her mother. Lucy has become enraptured by Edgar’s burning love for her

**“Quando rapito in estasi”**

**Moderato**  
**LUCY**

Quando ra - pi - to in e - stasi del più co-cen - te ardo - re,  
I'm caught in the rapture of his burning love.

Edgar arrives and Alice hides nearby, keeping watch.

Edgar regretfully informs Lucy that duty has called him to leave for France on a diplomatic mission; he must leave before dawn. Edgar recounts his vow of vengeance against her family: after all, they slew his father and stole his lands. But because of his profound love for Lucy, he has become placated and relented. Edgar has decided to end their family feud, seek peace with Henry, and pledge lasting friendship: with their feud ended, he will ask Henry for Lucy’s hand in marriage.

Edgar’s intentions unnerve Lucia; she is frightful of her brother Henry’s fury and intense enmity. Although their family feud has been inspired by hatred and has bred cruel injustice, she fears that Henry cannot be appeased: Lucy dissuades Edgar from approaching him and persuades him to keep their love secret.

Edgar reminds Lucy that he swore to be avenged on his father’s grave; his anger has become appeared because of their love for each other, but his oath remains unfulfilled. After Lucy calms Edgar’s anger, he places his ring on her finger, a symbolic claim that from this moment they are married. Enthralled, Lucy gives Edgar her ring.

The two lovers, undaunted in their passion for each other, embrace ecstatically, vow eternal love, and yearn for the day when their family's enmity will end. They bid farewell to each other, and Edgar promises that he will write to her daily, assuring her that the breezes will carry his loving sighs to her from France.

**Duet: "Veranno a te sull'aure"**

**Moderato assai**  
**LUCY and EDGAR**



*Ver-ran - no a te sul - l'a - u - re i miei so - spi - ri ar - den - te,*  
**The breeze will carry my loving sighs to you.**

As Edgar departs, the lovers vow their eternal love.

**Act II - Scene 1: "The Marriage Contract"**

**Lord Henry Ashton's apartments in Lammermoor Castle**

Although Henry is undaunted in his determination for Lucy to Lord Arthur Bucklaw, he suspects and fears that she will oppose it. Henry has conspired with Norman to make Lucy believe that Edgar has abandoned her. Norman has intercepted Edgar's letters from France, and forged a letter in which Edgar states that he has abandoned Lucy for another woman; under those circumstances, Henry is confident that Lucy will agree to marry Lord Arthur Bucklaw.

Lucy and Henry confront each other. She has been anticipating her brother's demands and is extremely agitated. Henry that he is well aware that she grieves because she opposes his marriage plans for her, and tries to convince her that the marriage represents his wish for her happiness.

Lucy announces that she has pledged her heart and faith to another. Henry counters Lucy's rejection by showing her a letter, the forged letter in which Edgar states that he has taken another bride. Lucy trembles in disbelief, shocked, brokenhearted and devastated by the news.

**"Soffriva nel pianto"**

**Larghetto**  
**LUCY**



*Soff - rir - va nel pianto, langui - a nel do - lo - re.*  
**What pain I suffered. What misery I endured.**

Henry demands that Lucy scorn Edgar, reminding her that Edgar's decision to marry another should persuade her that he is a faithless and perfidious man, a man who never truly loved her.

In the background, the music signals the beginning of the wedding festivities and the anticipated arrival of Lord Arthur Bucklaw, Lucy's bridegroom. Henry advises Lucy that the hour approaches, admonishing her that it is her duty to save him and her family from ruin: his political situation is

perilous, and only an alliance with Arthur Bucklaw can save him; if Lucy betrays her brother, he will surely be executed, and his blood will be on her hands.

“*Se tradirmi tu potrai*”

**Vivace**  
**HENRY**



*Se - tra-dir - mi tu po - tra - i, la mia sorte è già com - pi - ta,*  
If you betray me, my fate is sealed.

Henry rushes out to greet Lord Arthur. Raymond admits to Lucy that he knows that her letters to Edgar were intercepted. However, he managed to have one of her letters delivered to Edgar, yet, it remains unanswered. He concludes that Edgar's silence implies that he is faithless: the cleric releases her from her rashly spoken vows to Edgar; that the exchange of rings was invalid in the eyes of God. Raymond attempts to persuade Lucy that her love for Edgar was merely a fleeting passion, but Lucy is adamant and confesses that she still loves Edgar.

Raymond also counsels Lucia that yielding to her marriage represents her duty to her family as well as to the memory of her beloved mother: her sacrifice will be duly recorded in heaven.

“*Ah! Cedi, cedi*”

**Cantabile**  
**RAYMOND**



*Ah! Ce - di, ce - di, o più scia - gu - re,*  
Yield, or you'll suffer.

With a heavy heart, Lucy's resistance crumbles and she tearfully yields: she agrees to marry Lord Arthur Bucklaw.

### Act II - Scene 2: The Great Hall in Lammermoor Castle

The wedding festivities are in progress. All hail the joyous day and welcome the groom, Lord Arthur Bucklaw, with wishes of good fortune.

“*Per te d'immenso giubilo*”

**Moderato mosso**  
**CHORUS**



*Per te d'immenso giu - bi - lo, tut - to s'avviva in - tor - no.*  
We're gathered here in great joy.

With smugness, Lord Arthur claims that the fortunes of Lammermoor will soon improve. He seeks his absent bride: Henry advises him that she will soon arrive, but she scorns all thoughts of joy, remaining in sorrow and grief because she is still mourning her mother's death. Arthur questions Henry about rumors he has heard about Edgar and Lucy, but Lucy suddenly arrives, and Henry is saved from answering Arthur.

Lucy is crestfallen, shuddering, and supported by Raymond and Alice. When she is presented to Lord Arthur, she recoils away from him: in an aside, the wary Henry warns Lucy of the importance of her marriage and that she should not be incautious. Arthur becomes confounded by Lucy's behavior: she should be joyful on this day, but she acts strangely, constantly weeps, and hardly speaks to her intended husband.

Henry guides Lucy to a table where she hesitatingly and reluctantly signs the marriage contract. She comments despairingly; that she has just inscribed her doom.

Suddenly, there is an uproar as Edgar suddenly bursts in on the festivities. Lucy faints and falls to the floor; she is revived by Alice and led to a seat. Edgar has returned from France to claim his betrothed, but he becomes devastated when he learns in dismay that he has arrived to witness Lucy's marriage to another. In the shock of the moment, each expresses their conflicting emotions: Edgar and Henry, bitter enemies, cannot understand what restrains their furor; Lucy expresses her desperation and loneliness; Raymond pleads for mercy; Alice prays for pity; and Arthur seeks heavenly guidance.

### The Sextet:

#### Larghetto

#### EDGAR and HENRY

EDGAR: *Chi mi fre - na in tal mo - me - to?*  
What restrains me at this moment,

HENRY: *Chi raf - fre - na il mio fu - ro - re,*  
What restrains my fury,

Lucy is distressed and confounded, causing Raymond to become emotionally stirred by her pathetic dilemma, and Henry is humiliated by Edgar's contemptuous intrusion. Henry and Arthur order Edgar to leave, but he is defiant and insists that he has the right to remain and claim Lucy, his bride who vowed eternal love to him. However, Raymond advises Edgar that his right has been nullified, because Lucy has been promised to another.

Raymond shows Edgar the marriage contract. Edgar becomes appalled. He turns to Lucy and demands to know if the contract indeed bears her signature. Reluctantly, Lucy responds, "Yes!" Lucy's confession provokes Edgar to tear off his ring and throw it to the ground. Lucy, scarcely in control of her actions, removes her ring, which Edgar maliciously seizes. He curses the moment he fell in love with Lucy, her betrayal of him, and vows that he will be undaunted in seeking revenge against the Ashton's.

Arthur, Henry, and the guests unsheathe their swords and again demand that Edgar leaves instantly. But Raymond dissuades their fury by invoking law, respect, and honor: "Chi di ferro altrui ferisce pur di ferro perirà" ("He who lives by the sword, shall perish by the sword.") As Lucy prays for mercy, Edgar throws down his sword and declares that he has no more desire to live. Edgar casts his sword away and defiantly dares them to strike him. Lucy pleads for mercy and then collapses. Edgar departs in fury.

**Act III - Scene 1: A dilapidated hall in the Ravenswood Castle**

It is night and a storm rages. Edgar is in deep thought, brokenhearted and overcome with sadness and grief. Suddenly Henry arrives, gloating that as he speaks Lucy is entering her bridal chamber with Lord Arthur.

*“Qui del padre ancor respira”*

**Moderato**

**EDGAR**



*Qui del pa - dre ancor-re - spi - ra l'ombra inulta, e par che fre - ma!*  
**Here my father still breathes, his ghost shuddering!**

Henry announces that he has come to avenge his family's honor. But Edgar contradicts him, claiming that it is he who deserves justice, because he has been the victim of the Ashton's hatred and persecution.

Henry and Edgar agree to a duel: mortal combat until death that will be fought at dawn in the Ravenswood's graveyard. Each proclaims that he will be the victor, a triumph in the name of vengeance, justice, and retribution.

**Act III – Scene 2: The Great Hall at the Lammermoor Castle**

As wedding guests continue their celebration. Raymond appears and stops their merriment; he is pale and grief-stricken. He shocks the guests by announcing dreadful news: Lucia, distraught and anguished, became insane and killed her husband, Arthur. She stood before the corpse and smiled at him while she held a bloodstained dagger. Then she inquired where her bridegroom was.

Lucy then appears. She wears a white gown bloodstained gown, and her hair is disheveled; she is ashen and bears a frantic and unearthly stare in her eyes: Lucy has lost all of her senses, her mental derangement suggested by the flute. She is delirious and hallucinates, believing that she is about to wed Edgar. She urges Edgar to rest by the fountains and exchange rings, their vows of eternal love. Then she becomes fearful as she remembers her vision of the ghost arising from the fountain.

Lucy then hallucinates, imagining that she and Edgar have finally arrived at the altar to wed.

Henry returns from his confrontation with Edgar. At first he is furious at Lucy's vengeful state, but Raymond convinces him that she has gone insane, the victim of Henry's cruelty toward her; Henry becomes contrite and foresees Lucy's imminent death.

Lucy continues to hallucinate, assuring the imagined Edgar when they are joined together in Heaven.

“Spargi d’amaro pianto”

Moderato  
LUCY

Musical score for Lucy's aria. The score is written on two staves in treble clef, 3/4 time, with a key signature of two flats (B-flat and E-flat). The melody is marked 'Moderato'. The lyrics are: 'Spar - gi d'a - ma - ro pian - to, Spread your bitter tears il mio ter - re - stre ve - lo, over my earthly remains.' The first staff ends with a fermata over the word 'to,'. The second staff ends with a fermata over the word 'lo,'.

Henry bids Alice to remove his afflicted sister, but Lucy collapses in Alice’s arms. Raymond rebukes Norman for being the cause of all this bloodshed.

Act III - Scene 3: The Tombs at Ravenswood

It is night, and Edgar appears at the tombs of Ravenswood for his duel with Henry. Edgar is unaware of Lucy’s death, and broods over her betrayal and marriage to Arthur. He has decided to let Henry kill him in the duel: his passion for Lucy endures, and without her, life is meaningless; death can only reconcile his despair. Edgar bids farewell to life on earth.

“Fra poco a me ricovero darà negletto avello”

Larghetto  
EDGAR

Musical score for Edgar's aria. The score is written on a single staff in treble clef, 3/4 time, with a key signature of one sharp (F-sharp). The melody is marked 'Larghetto'. The lyrics are: 'Fra po - co a me ri - co - vero da - rà negletto a - vel - lo, Soon I'll find refuge in a forgotten tomb.' The score features a long melisma on the word 'avello'.

Mourners appear, commenting that the day had begun joyfully but ended in sadness. Edgar learns that Lucy is near death and is calling for him. The funeral bells toll. Edgar becomes determined to see Lucy, but Raymond restrains him, announcing that Lucy died.

Edgar feels guilt, believing that he wronged her and caused her death: he begs forgiveness, pity, and mercy. But now his thoughts turn to heaven; they were separated on earth but they will be united in heaven.

“Tu che a Dio spiegasti”

Moderato  
EDGAR

Musical score for Edgar's aria. The score is written on a single staff in treble clef, 6/8 time, with a key signature of one sharp (F-sharp). The melody is marked 'Moderato'. The lyrics are: 'Tu che a Dio spiega - sti l'a-li, o bel - l'alma innamo - ra - ta. Now you will unfold your wings before God, my beloved angel.' The score features a long melisma on the word 'l'alma'.

Edgar is resolved to die. He draws his dagger and stabs himself, his thoughts invoking his beloved Lucy.



***CHAPTER NINE***  
***French Grand Opera: 19th Century***

### **French Grand Opera: 19th Century**

**D**uring the first half of the nineteenth century, “grand opera” was born in France against the background of the new Romantic movement in art, and the social and political yearnings for a new world order that had been anticipated by Post-Napoleonic Europe. Grand opera’s dramatic action integrated great passions of the heart, with powerful historical events: its philosophical foundation was that we learn from history, rather than learn about history, therefore, its epic portrayal of history provided its audience with a continuity between the past and the present. Because the genre was born during a period of emerging democratic transformations, it presented allegories of historical social and political conflicts that served to dramatize contemporary social and political conflicts and tensions. Grand opera’s portrayal of huge crowds in revolt or insurrection provided a fresh urgency to the fears of its nineteenth-century bourgeoisie audience: the portrayal of the horrors of fanaticism, anarchy, and war, provided a frightening reminder of their own political and social discord that would erupt into the Revolutions of 1830 and 1848.

Essentially, the designation “grand opera” defined a work suitable for performance at the Paris Opéra: a serious work based on a historical subject, in four or five acts, with chorus and ballet, and without spoken dialogue, its text fully set to music.

The Paris Opéra’s objective was to stimulate and titillate the imagination of its newly rich bourgeoisie audiences, which it would achieve through magnificent visual spectacle and total scenic illusion; in these “grand” productions the eye would become as important as the ear. There were ample resources at the Paris Opéra to facilitate its lofty goals: fine leading performers, outstanding dramatic craftsman, remarkable scene painters, the finest ballet choreographers and dancers, and competent and experienced composers, such as Auber, Halévy, and Meyerbeer.

Grand opera represented a complex integration of many artistic elements: a unity of virtually every material and human resource. Like Hollywood’s escapist fantasies, spectacles, and epics, grand opera stressed the scenic and structural as much as it did the musical; but at times, grand opera’s spectacle and effects seemed to be the dominating elements. In grand opera, all the components of the art form were enlarged and magnified into spectacle, implying a lavish use of theatrical and musical resources: the opera stage would be filled with complex scenery, large casts and choruses costumed elaborately, a vastly expanded orchestra, and sumptuous ballets. In earlier French Baroque opera, ballet had always been a presence, but in grand opera, ballets were de rigeur, intended to be dramatically relevant, rise naturally from the action, and fit integrally into the opera’s story: at times the ballets would portray the celebration of a battle victory, a masked ball, or a dance to evoke local color.

Grand opera composers achieved incredible effects with the immense choral resources of the Paris Opéra. But it was specifically those huge choruses that put the “grand” into grand opera; it was the embodiment of crowd power that dominated the stage by force of voice as it depicted insurrections, mass resolve, riots, praying or religious rituals, celebrations, and processions. Likewise, in later incarnations of the genre, such as the triumphal scene of Verdi’s *Aida* (1871) and the coronation scene of Mussorgsky’s *Boris Godunov* (1873), the chorus — in addition to supernumeraries — provided the illusion that an entire nation was united on stage; in a sense, the inherent suspension of belief suggested reality.

Conceptually, French grand opera was concerned specifically with awe and spectacle: in that sense, the musico-dramatic ideals that consumed opera’s founders and reformers became secondary considerations.

**T**he precursors of grand opera were the grandiose eighteenth century French Baroque works of Rameau and Gluck. As grand opera evolved, many Italian expatriates were composing operas in France and catering to the French appetite for exaggerated scenes

and spectacles, ballets, and melodrama. Among the vanguard of Italian composers during the period were Luigi Cherubini (1760-1842), whose *Médée* (1797) is still performed with frequency in contemporary times, and Gasparo Spontini (1774-1851), composer of the acclaimed *Fernand Cortez* (1809), an historical panorama of the Spanish conquest of Mexico, in which the more powerful Christians defeat and destroy the weaker Aztec culture amid the passions of a cross-cultural love.

During the 1820's, Lord Byron had aroused fervent European support of Greece in its War for Independence (Turkish rule ended in 1827): that historical event provided the inspiration for two early grand operas that depicted Christian-Muslim conflicts: Meyerbeer's *Il Crociato in Egitto* (1824) ("The Crusader in Egypt"), and Rossini's *Le Siège de Corinthe* (1826) ("The Siege of Corinth"). While Rossini was director of the Théâtre Italien of Paris, he composed *Guillaume Tell* (1829), a grand opera that provided an historical account and celebration of the birth of the Swiss nation in the thirteenth century.

Daniel-Francois-Esprit Auber (1782-1871) was a student of Cherubini, and the composer of 36 opéra comiques; his most famous and enduring work was the grand opera, *La Muette de Portici* (1828) ("The Mute Girl from Portici"), a five-act spectacle that related the seventeenth-century Neapolitan revolt against its Spanish oppressors, a populist message that appealed to contemporary revolutionary sentiments. Auber would follow with *Gustave III* (1833), an historical opera about the court intrigues that led to the assassination of Sweden's King Gustaf; Verdi later borrowed the story for *Un Ballo in Maschera* (1859) ("A Masked Ball"). And François-Fromental Halévy's (1799-1862) *La Juive* (1835) ("The Jewess") recounted the tragedy of a Christian who disguised himself as a Jew in order to pursue his beloved Rachel, a Jewess.

**T**he principal apostle of French grand opera was the German-born composer, Giacomo Meyerbeer (1791-1864), whose operas possessed a special magical blend that appealed to the French taste for spectacle: heroic dramas with plentiful stage action, lush and stunning visual effects, dazzling marches with pomp and pageantry, overpowering climactic scenes, a gigantic orchestra, almost every style of singing, and sumptuous ballets. (Meyerbeer's *Robert le Diable* (1831) featured *The Ballet of the Nuns*, signaling the beginning of the Romantic period in ballet.)

In the retrospective of opera history, Meyerbeer's works have been controversial: some consider his stage effects and orchestral virtuosity ingenious, a composer whose music possesses intense dramatic power and inspired lyricism. There are others who consider Meyerbeer's spectacles an insult to the ideals of music drama: melodies that are short-winded, and music and dramatic situations that are rarely insightful. One critic condemned his music with the comment: "the inflated form leads to inflated music." Wagner, who harbored personal hatred toward Meyerbeer, would bombastically condemn Meyerbeer's operas as "effects without causes." Nevertheless, Meyerbeer's works dominated the French opera stage for more than 50 years, all sensational successes in their time. In addition to *Robert le Diable*, his most popular operas were *Les Huguenots* (1836), *Le Prophète* (1849), and the posthumously staged *L'Africaine* (1865).

**H**ector Berlioz (1803-1869) erupted from Meyerbeer's shadow and composed three operas: his first opera, *Benvenuto Cellini* (1838) was a complete failure; his second opera, the lighthearted *Béatrice et Bénédicte* (1862), based on Shakespeare's *Much Ado About Nothing*, and his masterpiece of enormous dramatic scope, *Les Troyens* (1863). These works possess distinguishing characteristics: a profound musical and dramatic intensity and soaring and arching melodic lines. Berlioz's revolutionary orchestrations have earned him accolades as the inventor of the modern orchestra, certainly elaborating on the grandeur of his

predecessor, Beethoven. But in terms of opera, he laid the groundwork for the symphonic orchestral explosions that Wagner and Strauss would soon bring to the opera art form.

Later works in the French grand opera tradition were: Wagner's *Rienzi* (1842), Verdi's *Don Carlo* (1867) and *Aida* (1871), and Mussorgsky's *Boris Godunov* (1873); all are quintessential grand operas in terms of their spectacle, huge choruses, and their underlying themes of man's impotence before the awesome power of state and religion; operas that are even grander when their spectacle becomes secondary to their composer's ingenious musical expression of towering human passions.

## ***CHAPTER TEN***

### ***Verdi: Towering Romantic Passions***

### Verdi: Towering Romantic Passions

By 1851, the year of *Rigoletto's* premiere, the 38 year-old Giuseppe Verdi was acknowledged as the most popular opera composer in the world. He had established himself as the legitimate heir to the great Italian opera traditions that had dominated the first half of the nineteenth century, those *bel canto* operas of his immediate predecessors: Rossini, Bellini and Donizetti.

Viewing that opera landscape at mid-century, Verdi was unequivocally opera's superstar: Bellini died in 1835; Rossini had retired from opera composition; and Donizetti died in 1848. In France at mid-century, Meyerbeer's grand opera spectacles were dominating the lyric theater (*Le Prophète* premiered in 1849), and in Germany, Wagner's *Lohengrin* premiered in 1850.

Verdi composed 15 operas during his first creative period, the years 1839 to 1851. His first opera, *Oberto* (1839), indicated promise and hope that an heir had surfaced to foster and continue Italian opera's great traditions, but his second opera, the comedy *Un Giorno di Regno* (1840), was received with indifference, a failure that has been attributed in part to his depression after the recent death of his wife and two children, and virtually signaled the end of his dreams to become an opera composer.

Nevertheless, Verdi's muse was awakened and re-inspired when he was presented with the libretto for *Nabucco*; the opera premiered in 1842 and was an immediate triumph, transforming Verdi overnight into an opera icon. He followed with *I Lombardi* (1843); *Ermani* (1844); *I Due Foscari* (1844); *Giovanna d'Arco* (1845); *Alzira* (1845); *Attila* (1846); *Macbeth* (1847); *I Masnadieri* (1847); *Il Corsaro* (1848); *La Battaglia di Legnano* (1849); *Luisa Miller* (1849); and *Stiffelio* (1850). Eventually, Verdi would compose 28 operas during his illustrious career, dying in 1901 at the age of 78.

The underlying theme at the foundation of Verdi's early operas concerned his patriotic mission for the liberation of his beloved Italy, at that time, suffering under the oppressive rule of both France and Austria. In temperament, Verdi was a true son of the Enlightenment, an idealist who possessed a noble conception of humanity. He abominated absolute power and deified civil liberty; his lifelong manifesto was a passionate crusade against every form of tyranny, whether social, political, or ecclesiastical.

Verdi was consumed by humanistic ideals and used his operatic pen to sound the alarm for Italy's freedom. Each of his early opera stories was disguised with allegory, metaphor, and irony, all advocating Italy's independence as well as individual freedom: the suffering and struggling heroes and heroines in his early operas were his beloved Italian compatriots.

For example, in *Giovanna d'Arco* ("Joan of Arc"), the French patriot Joan confronts the oppressive English and is eventually martyred, the heroine's plight synonymous with Italy's struggle against foreign oppression. In *Nabucco*, the suffering Hebrews enslaved by Nebuchadnezzar and the Babylonians were allegorically the Italian people, similarly in bondage by foreign oppressors.

Verdi's Italian audience easily read the underlying message he had subtly injected between the lines of his text and music. At *Nabucco's* premiere, at the end of the Hebrew slave chorus, "Va pensiero" ("Vanish hopes"), the audience actually stopped the performance with inspired nationalistic shouts of "Viva Italia." The *Nabucco* chorus became the unofficial Italian

“National Anthem,” the musical symbol of Italy’s patriotic aspirations. Even the name VERDI had become an acronym for Italian unification; V E R D I stood for Vittorio Emmanuelo Re D’Italìa, a dream for the return of King Victor Emmanuel to rule a united Italy.

But as the 1850s unfolded, Verdi’s genius had arrived at a turning point, a new period of artistic evolution and maturity. Verdi felt that his noble patriotic mission for Italian independence was soon to be realized, sensing the fulfillment of Italian liberation and unification in the forthcoming *Risorgimento*, the historic revolutionary event of 1861 that established the Italian nation, as we know it today.

Verdi was satisfied that he had achieved his patriotic objectives, and decided to abandon the heroic paths and nationalistic themes of his early operas. He was now seeking more profound operatic subjects: subjects with extreme boldness; subjects with greater dramatic and psychological depth; and subjects that emphasized spiritual values, intimate humanity and tender emotions. Verdi would be ceaseless in his goal to create an expressiveness and acute delineation of the human soul that had never before been realized on the opera stage, an endeavor that preoccupied him throughout his entire compositional career.

The year 1851 inaugurated Verdi’s “middle period.” It became a defining moment in his career, the moment when his operas would start to contain heightened dramatic qualities and intensities, an exceptional lyricism, and a profound characterization of humanity. Starting in this “middle period,” Verdi’s art flowered into a new maturity, and the result became some of the best loved operas of all time: *Rigoletto* (1851); *Il Trovatore* (1853); *La Traviata* (1853); *I Vespri Siciliani* (1855); *Simon Boccanegra* (1857); *Aroldo* (1857); *Un Ballo in Maschera* (1859); *La Forza del Destino* (1862); *Don Carlo* (1867); and *Aida* (1871). In his final works, he continued his advance toward a greater dramatic synthesis between text and music that would culminate in what some consider his greatest masterpieces: *Otello* (1887), and *Falstaff* (1893).

**I**n 1851, Verdi was approached by the management of La Fenice in Venice to write an opera to celebrate the Carnival and Lent seasons. In seeking a story source for the opera, Verdi turned to the popular romanticism of the French dramatist, Victor Hugo. Seven years earlier, in 1844, Verdi had a brilliant success with his operatic treatment of Hugo’s *Hernani*: Verdi’s *Ernani*.

Victor Hugo’s play, *Le Roi s’amuse* (“The King has a good time”), premiered in 1832; it depicted the libertine escapades and adventures of the pleasure-loving King François I of France (1515-1547), but the drama featured as its primary force, an ugly, disillusioned and malicious hunchbacked court jester named Triboulet.

Hugo was a dynamic writer of the Romantic era, a period that coincides chronologically with the political and social turmoil that began with the storming of the Bastille and the outbreak of the French Revolution in 1789, to the last urban uprisings that erupted in almost every major European city in 1848.

Romanticism represented a pessimistic backlash against the optimism of the eighteenth century Enlightenment and the Age of Reason; Rousseau, a spokesman of Enlightenment ideals, had projected a new world order dominated by a heightened sense of individual freedom, civility and justice. But the Romanticists viewed those Enlightenment ideals of egalitarian progress as a mirage and illusion, a failure of elevated hopes and dreams that dissolved in the Reign of Terror (1792-94); that despair was reinforced by Napoleon’s

preposterous despotism and the ensuing wars, the post-Napoleonic return to autocratic tyranny and oppression, and the economic and social injustices nurtured by the Industrial Revolution.

The Reign of Terror totally destroyed any dreams of human progress remaining from the Enlightenment. Like the Holocaust in the twentieth century, those bloodbaths shook the very foundations of humanity by invoking man's deliberate betrayal of his highest nature and ideals; Schiller was prompted to reverse the idealism of his exultant "Ode to Joy" (1785) by concluding that the new century had "begun with murder's cry." To those pessimists — the Romanticists — the drama of human history was approaching doomsday, and civilization was on the verge of vanishing completely. Others concluded that the French Revolution and the Reign of Terror had ushered in a terrible new era of unselfish crimes in which men committed horrible atrocities out of love not of evil but of virtue. Like Goethe's *Faust*, who represented "two souls in one breast," man was considered a paradox, simultaneously the possessor of great virtue as well as wretched evil.

Romanticists sought alternatives to what had become their failed notions of human progress, and sought a panacea to their loss of confidence in the present as well as the future. Intellectual and moral values had declined, and modern civilization was perceived as transformed into a society of philistines, in which the ideals of refinement and polished manners had surrendered to a form of sinister decadence. Those in power were considered deficient in maintaining order, and instead of resisting the impending collapse of civilization and social degeneration; they were deemed to have embraced them feebly. As such, Romanticists developed a growing nostalgia for the past by seeking exalted histories that served to recall vanished glories: writers such as Sir Walter Scott, Alexandre Dumas, and Victor Hugo, penned tributes to past values of heroism and virtue that seemed to have vanished in their contemporary times.

Romanticists became preoccupied with the conflict between nature and human nature. Industrialization and modern commerce were considered the despoilers of the natural world: steam engines and smokestacks were viewed as dark manifestations of commerce and veritable images from hell. But natural man, uncorrupted by commercialism, was ennobled. So Romanticism sought escapes from society's horrible realities by appealing to strong emotions, the bizarre and the irrational, the instincts of self-gratification, and the search for pleasure and sensual delights.

Ultimately, Romanticism's ideology posed the antithesis of material values by striving to raise consciousness to more profound emotions and aesthetic sensibilities; for the Romanticists, the spiritual path to God and human salvation could only be achieved through idealized human love, individual freedom, and compassion for others.

Victor Hugo was an arch-Romanticist, the reigning king of the new literary forces, who was seeking to portray a truth of human existence. He was fascinated with extreme contrasts of human character, and boldly announced that he would no longer parade one-dimensional protagonists who were either all-virtuous, or all-villainous. Hugo now created new types of characters, complex and ambivalent personalities, whom he believed were truthful representation of flawed humanity; he would label these new repulsive characters "grotesque creatures."

In Hugo's play *Le Roi s'amuse*, in particular, he created his quintessential "grotesque creature," the ambivalent jester Triboulet, a tragic man with two souls: he was physically monstrous, morally evil, and a wicked personality, but also a man who was simultaneously

magnanimous, kind, gentle and compassionate. Hugo's Triboulet — Rigoletto in Verdi's opera — was outwardly a deformed and physically ugly hunchback, a mean and sadistic man. But inwardly, Triboulet was an intensely human creature, a man filled with impassioned love that he showered boundlessly on his beloved daughter. (The name Triboulet is descriptive, derived from the French verb *tribouler*, meaning to guffaw, or to be noisy, hilarious, or boisterous.)

Verdi, an avid and intellectually curious reader, had read Hugo's *Le Roi s'amuse*, but certainly had never seen the play on stage. Hugo's play survived only the one night of its premiere in 1832; its next performance did not occur until 50 years later in 1882. Censors had banned the play from French, German, and Italian stages, compounding their criticism by determining its content overly abundant in immorality and repulsiveness.

**A**t the dawn of the 1850s, Verdi was now in his crusade to seek more intense operatic subjects, and he recognized in Hugo's play those sublime operatic possibilities to stir moral passions. He considered the Triboulet character a creation worthy of Shakespeare, a character who took human nature to its limits, and through whom, new levels of consciousness would be awakened. The character was a romanticist's dream hero: complex, twisted internally and externally, and saturated with picturesque misery.

Verdi wrote about the Hugo play — and the Triboulet character — to his favorite librettist of the time, Francesco Maria Piave, his librettist for his earlier operas *Ernani* and *Macbeth* — and later *La Forza del Destino*:

*I have in mind another subject, which, if the police (censors) would allow it, is one of the greatest creations of modern theatre. The story is great, immense, and includes a character that is one of the greatest creations that the theatres of all nations and all times will boast.*

*The story is 'Le Roi s'amuse', and the character I mean is Triboulet.*

There was intense hostility and animosity in the artistic marriage of Hugo's dramatic sources and Verdi's musical treatment of them. Earlier, Hugo had vigorously denounced Verdi's operatic adaptation of his play *Hernani* — as he would later do with *Rigoletto*. When Verdi's *Ernani* was staged in Paris, Hugo did everything within his power to prevent public production of what he considered a literary mutilation of his work, even unsuccessfully initiating legal action in the Paris courts to prohibit performances.

Hugo was admittedly resentful — and even envious and jealous — of Verdi's popularity, nevertheless, his complimentary comments about the famous Quartet from *Rigoletto*'s final act represented his reluctant admission of Verdi's operatic genius, as well as his tribute to the unique expressiveness of the operatic art-form. Hugo commented: "If I could only make four characters in my plays speak at the same time, and have the audience grasp the words and sentiments, I would obtain the very same effect." But it became Giuseppe Verdi, who would apply the evocative power of his music to Hugo's text that would ultimately provide immortality for Hugo's *Le Roi s'amuse*.

The post-Napoleonic period was a period of political unrest and social tension. After the peace treaties evolving from the Congress of Vienna (1813-1815), the victorious allies established strong political alliances that would protect the status quo of their respective autocracies, all of which were being threatened by ethnic nationalism, and the Enlightenment appeal of individual liberty and freedom: new ideological forces evolving from the transformations caused by the French and Industrial Revolutions.

Truth is a coefficient of power, and the stability and continuity of the continental powers was directly proportional to their ability to control artistic truth. Censorship was their means to control ideas expressed in the arts, a government power that regulated and determined that nothing should be shown upon the stage that might undermine their authority, or in the least fan the flames of rebellion and discontent; it was an era in which revolutions and uprisings were erupting in every major European city. Indoctrination and propaganda controlled ideas; kings, ministers and governments all reflected an apparent paranoia, an irrational fear, and an almost pathological suspicion of any ideas they suspected of undermining their power. It was through censorship that nineteenth-century monarchies exerted their power and determination to protect what they considered “universal truths”: human progress would be reigned in through conservatism and the governmental control of ideas.

In France, Hugo’s play *Le Roi s’amuse* became an immediate victim of censorship in action, a work that the authorities deemed subversive and therefore necessary to suppress. Despite the French Constitution’s guarantee of freedom of expression, the censors’ expressed their justification to ban the play, a judgment made without recourse or argument. The censorship authorities considered Hugo’s subject immoral, obscenely trivial, scandalous, and its underlying theme subversive and threatening. Similarly, in Verdi’s Italy, ruled in the 1850s by both France and Austria, censors controlled ideas expressed in the arts, and rejected and prevented performances of works whose ideas they considered in opposition to their power, or a threat to the social and political stability of their society.

The Verdi/Piave adaptation of Hugo’s *Le Roi s’amuse* was initially titled *La Maledizione* (“The Curse”). Curses can have a powerful dramatic effect: in Wagner’s *The Ring of the Nibelung*, Alberich’s curse on the Ring after the Gods seize it from him provides the dramatic — if not dynamic — thread for the entire four music dramas.

Likewise, in Verdi’s opera, Monterone’s curse on Rigoletto becomes the engine that drives the drama, its resolution the core and central dramatic force upon which the entire plot evolves. The aged Monterone appears before the Duke to vilify the licentious aristocrat for dishonoring his daughter, a rape by the debaucher for which Monterone invokes divine vengeance. After the Duke orders Monterone’s arrest, Rigoletto impudently mocks the old man’s anguish and agony, causing the outraged Monterone to curse both the Duke and Rigoletto: “Ah, siate entrambi voi maledetti!” (“You are both cursed!”) But Monterone vents his full rage at the impudent Rigoletto: “E tu, serpente, tu che d’un padre ridi al dolore, sii maledetto!” (“And you serpent, who mock a father’s agony, be accursed!”)

Monterone’s curse demonizes and condemns the slanderous Rigoletto, causing the jester to be overcome with incomprehensible fear; Monterone’s curse becomes the engine that haunts Rigoletto throughout the drama, its music echoing ominously each time Rigoletto attempts to explain the tragic events that befall him: “Quel vecchio maledivami” (“That old man cursed me!”) The dramatic effect of the curse is even more profound when each recurrence of the theme is in the same key and with the same instrumentation. The curtain

falls three times to the underlying curse theme: at the end of Act I - Scene 1 when Monterone invokes the curse; at the end of Act I - Scene 2 after Rigoletto realizes that Gilda has been abducted; and at the very end of the opera when Gilda's death confirms that the curse has been fulfilled.

Verdi and librettist Piave were not naive about the censors' powers over their art; both were very much aware that their *La Maledizione* would provoke the Venetian censors. (Venice was then ruled by the Austrian Empire.) Indeed, just three months before the scheduled premiere of *La Maledizione*, composer and librettist became engaged in a battle to rescue their opera. The Austrian censors exploded in protest and totally rejected the work; they forbid its performance and expressed their profound regret that Verdi and Piave did not choose a more worthy vehicle to display their talents, specifically citing what they considered the story's revolting immorality and obscene triviality.

The church always considered curses antithetical, an invocation of a divine power to exact retribution through harm or misfortune. And the Austrian monarchy, a not-so-subtle theocracy uniting church and state, considered the curse theme to be blasphemously offensive and an impropriety. Nevertheless, Verdi and Piave remained hopeful that they might be able to bring the Hugo story to the opera stage without the censor's severe mutilation or alteration of the story's dramatic substance.

Their first concession to the censors was to change the opera's title from *La Maledizione* to *Rigoletto*; with the curse eliminated from its title, the opera now bore the name of its title character, a name derived from the French word "rigoler" ("to guffaw.") Another problem concerned the underlying story's portrayal of the obscene and despicable misdeeds and frailties of the sixteenth-century French King François I, a monarch who was dutifully depicted in the Hugo story as unconscionable, debauched and promiscuous. The censors cautioned that royal profligacy could not be exposed so conspicuously; that a king could not be portrayed as the seducer of a courtier's wife (Countess Ceprano); that a royal could not frequent a tavern and be seduced by a gypsy (Maddalena); and most of all, that a king could not be manipulated by a crippled jester and eventually become his intended assassination victim. Verdi's concession became the substitution of the Duke of Mantua for King François I: in effect, the Duke bore the anonymity of any Mantovani, an insignificant ruler of a petty state rather than an historic King of France; the story was now removed from the realm of French history to that of pure Italian fiction.

In addition, the relentless censors demanded that Rigoletto's daughter, Gilda, should be substituted with his sister; that the sleaziness of Sparafucile's Inn in the final scene should be altered to eliminate its aura of social evil; and finally, that they eliminate the repulsiveness of packing Gilda — or his sister — in a sack in the opera's final moments.

Defeat seemed to loom for the future of Verdi's newest opera. But a stroke of operatic Providence redeemed Verdi and saved *Rigoletto*. The Austrian censor, a man named Martello, was not only an avid opera lover, but a man who venerated the great Verdi as well. Martello made the final decision and determined that the change of venue from Paris to Mantua, and the renaming of the opera to *Rigoletto* adequately satisfied censor requirements.

From the point of view of both Verdi and Piave, *Rigoletto* had arrived back from the censors "safe and sound, without fractures or amputations."

The core of the *Rigoletto* drama concerns conflicts and tensions between parent and sibling: Rigoletto the father, and Gilda the daughter. Rigoletto imposes his incontrovertible will over Gilda's life, shielding her from the horrible evil and hostile world of which he is so familiar, a world of inhuman evil that he experiences daily at the court of the Duke of Mantua.

But Rigoletto is a powerful father figure, and consciously or subconsciously, father figures dominate almost all of Verdi's operas. In many scenarios, fathers and their offspring are seemingly alone in the world, or the fathers obsessively overprotect their children, or the fathers dominate their children tyrannically. In *Rigoletto*, Gilda and Rigoletto are threatened by another man, at times suggesting that their relationship is incestuous.

Were Verdi's powerful father figures metaphors for his subconscious search for psychological truth? Verdi's relationship with his own father was full of constant conflict, tension and bitterness. He claimed that his father never understood him, at times even accusing his father of jealousy of his phenomenal artistic successes, and envy of his social and intellectual development. Those tensions virtually estranged Verdi from any affectionate relationship with his father, and his inner self yearned for fatherly affection and understanding. And Verdi's children died when they were very young, preventing him from lavishing parental affection on his own children, an ideal that lies deep within the soul of Italian patriarchal traditions.

Verdi used his art to express the paternal affection he yearned for, and the paternal affection he could never give to his own children; his unique musical language expressed the aftershock of those paternal relationships he lacked and yearned for in his own life.

In Verdi operas, there is a whole gallery of passionate, eloquent, and often self-contradictory father figures, fathers who are passionately devoted to, but are often in conflict with their children. Those father figures — almost always the darker voices of baritones or basses — express some of the most poignant moments in all of Verdi's operas: fathers who gloriously pour out their feelings with floods of intense emotion and passion.

And in many of those operas, fathers provide the emotional engine to drive the dramas and churn their cores. In *La Forza del Destino* ("The Force of Destiny"), the tragedy of the opera concerns a dying father who invokes a curse on his daughter, Leonora, as the heroine struggles in her conflict between her love for her father versus her love for Don Alvaro, the man who just killed her father. In *La Traviata*, Alfredo Germont's father develops a more profound respect and love for Violetta, the woman whose heart he has broken because of his errant son, than for the son for whose sake he has intervened; the elder Germont's "Piangi, piangi" ("I am crying"), represents Germont weeping for Violetta as if she were his own daughter. In *Don Carlo*, a terrifying old priest, the Grand Inquisitor, approves of King Philip II's intent to consign his son to death, the father agonizing and weeping in remorse and desperation over his son's perfidy. And in *Aida*, a father, Amonasro, uses paternal tenderness — as well as threats — to bend his daughter Aida to his will; she must betray her lover Radames because of her duty to country.

In Verdi operas, fathers are powerful and ambivalent personalities, men with tempestuous passions; suffering sons and daughters often sing "Padre, mio padre" in tenderness, or in terror, or in tears. And those same powerful fathers and their conflicts with their children intrigued Verdi to such an extent that throughout his life he would contemplate — but not bring to fruition — an opera based on Shakespeare's *King Lear*; one of the greatest of father figures: it is only coincidence that *Rigoletto* and *King Lear* are dramas about paternity that feature a court buffoon.

Rigoletto represents one of Verdi's quintessential father figures, and the jester's passionate paternal love for his daughter Gilda unquestionably inspired the magnificence of Verdi's music score for *Rigoletto*, music whose poignancy and emotional power dig deep into the human soul.

The essence of Rigoletto's character is his profound ambivalence; the two puppets he wears on his costume provide the metaphor for his dual personality. He is the victim of irreconcilable inner contradictions, tensions and conflicts. Like Goethe's *Faust*, Rigoletto possesses two souls in one breast: virtue and evil, but virtue is venerable and evil is repulsive.

As such, Rigoletto epitomizes the essence of Hugo's "grotesque creatures," those paradoxes of character, in which one human being can be both beautiful and ugly, good or evil, or hero and villain. Like Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde, or Shakespeare's Macbeth, Rigoletto epitomizes moral ambivalence and duality. But behind Rigoletto's obsessive hate and wickedness and evil, he is a man consumed by profound love.

Rigoletto's personal agony derives from his physical malformity: his hunchback and physical ugliness has set him aside as a curiosity, an object of humiliation in the discompassionate court of the Duke of Mantua; he is, like Merrick's *The Elephant Man*, a man condemned by nature to physical abnormality, and that ugliness causes society to look upon him as the "other," a fate in which a deformed man is condemned to a living hell.

In Act I - Scene 2, immediately following Rigoletto's encounter with Sparafucile, the assassin-for-hire, Verdi brilliantly provides Rigoletto with a platform to expose his anguished soul: the soliloquy "Pari siamo" ("We are the same!"), is essentially a narrative or recitative, but a segment that Verdi ingeniously injected with the poignant power of an aria. Rigoletto compares his own lethal evil to that of the sword-bearing assassin Sparafucile: "Pari siamo! Io la lingua, egli ha il pugnale" ("We are the same! I use my tongue, he uses the sword.")

Rigoletto proceeds to lament his destiny, a court jester who is commanded to provide laughter for others, which only intensifies his own personal sorrow. But in this self-introspective moment, Rigoletto admits that he has transformed into incarnate evil, a mean spirit who is unscrupulous, odious, brutish, and malicious: "Quanta in mordervi ho gioia!" (My only joy is to taunt you!")

Therefore, Rigoletto blames the courtiers for his malevolence: "Se iniquo son, per cagion vostra è solo." ("If I am vile, it is because of you.") Rigoletto blames his vile nature and his hatred of the world on the corrupt Duke and the court to whose service his deformity has condemned him. In his world, evil is the rule rather than the exception, so Rigoletto compounds the evil of the court, readily corrupting his master, and willingly aiding and abetting his master's seductions. In Act I - Scene 1, it is Rigoletto who suggests the means for the Duke to be free to remove any obstacle to his lust for the Countess Ceprano: imprison her husband, exile him, or even behead him. It is specifically Rigoletto's malice that inflames and provokes Count Ceprano and the courtiers to seek revenge against the villainous and spiteful court jester, and Rigoletto has been merciless in rubbing sadistic salt in Count Ceprano's wounds.

Rigoletto fights fire with fire. He feels justified in mocking the courtiers because they represent the other evils in the world, or perhaps because these men are not deformed with humps on their backs. As a jester and a merciless cynic, he is unconscionably ruthless and mean; each of the courtiers has at one time or another been his victim and has felt the jester's

sting. And not even Rigoletto's false faith in his master can protect him from those he has scorned; in the end, Rigoletto becomes the victim of his own scorn.

Although Rigoletto hates his corrupt and evil surrounding world, he is dominated by his own self-hatred and fully realizes that he is as evil as those he hates. Because of his deformity, Rigoletto has become a mean, bitter and spiteful man, seeking revenge against humanity and Nature.

Rigoletto's caustic treatment of Monterone, the father whose daughter was raped, is nothing less than wicked and cruel; he sneers with gleeful contempt at this unhappy father, deriding a man who is outraged by his daughter's victimization by the Duke. But Rigoletto's heartlessness toward Monterone is the crux of the story, the story's magnificent dramatic irony; it is specifically Rigoletto's callousness toward another man's love for his own daughter and her honor, which becomes the essence of Rigoletto's own tragedy with his own daughter.

Nevertheless, Rigoletto has his one moment of glory, the triumph of his vengeance against the world. In Act III, after Sparafucile delivers the sack to Rigoletto, he erupts into vengeful joy: "Ora mi guarda. o mondo! Quest'è un buffone, ed un potente è questo! Ei sta sotto i miei piedi! È desso! Oh gioia!" ("Now world look at me! This is a jester, and indeed a man of power! And he remains under my foot! It is true! What joy!") But of course Rigoletto's moment of joy is immediately shattered when he hears the voice of the Duke in the distance: "La donna è mobile qual piuma al vento," an ominous signal that his revenge has been betrayed.

**T**he counter-force to Rigoletto's hatred of the Duke and the courtiers is his passionate love for his daughter, Gilda: that love represents the essential ambivalence in his character. The misshapen jester keeps just one part of his evil nature pure, a sensitive and passionate love that he reserves for his beloved daughter. The power of that love serves to redeem and reconcile him, at times forcing us to vacillate in our feelings about him; on the one hand, he repels us as a man of evil, but on the other hand, we are gradually drawn to him in sympathy, empathizing with his very human suffering.

Rigoletto keeps Gilda isolated from the vice of Mantua. He teaches her only virtue and goodness, and nurtures her in innocence, faith and chastity. His greatest fear is that she may fall into evil, because being evil himself, he knows what it is, and he knows what suffering it causes. Therefore, Rigoletto's treasured Gilda is secluded behind high walls, hidden, shielded and sheltered from the realities of the wicked world surrounding her. She has been commanded never to leave the house except to go to church under the protection of Giovanna, her nurse. Gilda, the light of Rigoletto's life, has become his bird in a cage, a victim of a father's overprotection that can almost be interpreted as an incestuous perversion of a father-daughter relationship disguised as pure paternal love.

On the surface, Gilda is naive, simpleminded, and an angelic innocent, but her romantic fantasies and her unconscious erotic desires and yearnings all come to life in the ecstasy of her first love. Gilda becomes overwhelmed — and passion overcomes reason — when she meets her first suitor, the Duke in the disguise of a poor student, a man she accepts at face value and without question.

In a certain sense, as the plot progresses, sweet Gilda is not all that sugary, nor is she exactly snow-white in her purity, certainly not a sainted, innocent maiden. Gilda can be seen as nothing more or less than a mutinous — if not rebellious child — who defies parental

authority. Gilda not only falls in love with an anonymous man she does not know, but surrenders to him consensually, what Rigoletto will interpret as the Duke's rape of his daughter.

From the very beginning of this story, Gilda is a disobedient daughter: she lies to her father in Act I when she fails to respond to his interrogation and reveal to her father that she has been followed home from church by a stranger; she will further disobey her father in the final act by returning to the scene of her lover's treachery and watch with broken-hearted incredulity as the libertine Duke tries to seduce Maddalena, Sparafucile's gypsy sister and accomplice. But Gilda has surrendered her heart to her new-found lover: in her "Caro nome" aria, she vows eternal constancy and her determination to be true to her lover until her last breath. Gilda will not only surrender her heart to a man unworthy of such devotion, but she will surrender her life for him willingly, and with courage and resolution. Afterwards, she will ask her father's forgiveness not only for what she has done, but also for the man who betrayed her.

The supreme irony of this father-daughter relationship is that Gilda has even been shielded from Rigoletto himself: she has no knowledge of who her father really is, or what he does. Therefore, perhaps the most pathetic moment of the opera occurs in Act II when the freshly ravished Gilda sees her father in his court jester costume for the first time; it is indeed a tragic moment in which shame overcomes both father and daughter.

**I**t is Monterone's curse that is invoked not only on Rigoletto in his role as the mocking, cynical court jester, but is also intended to strike Rigoletto as a father. Rigoletto, just like Monterone, becomes the tragic father who likewise loses his treasured daughter to the evil of the court and the outside world. In the irony of this story, the same Duke whom Rigoletto urged on to indiscriminate libertine escapades, dishonors Rigoletto's daughter, striking down the jester in his role as father in exactly the same manner as Monterone.

Rigoletto challenges defeat with denial. He is unable to face the bitter truth that the Duke ravished Gilda, and certainly is unable to believe that she became enamored by the Duke and willingly consented to consummate their love. Rigoletto is unable to believe that the evil in the world has invaded his life, or that the pedestal upon which he has placed his daughter has crumbled.

Rigoletto can only vindicate himself by exacting justice through personal revenge on the Duke. Revenge is the failure of reason: it is when savagery overcomes the savage; when hatred is recycled; and when inherent morality transforms into chaos. Rigoletto justifies his revenge when he responds to Sparafucile's request to know the victim's name: "Egli é Delitto, Punizion son io" ("He is Crime, I am Punishment"), revenge justified as an eye for an eye rather than turning the other cheek. In the end, the poignant tragedy of this story is pure irony, because revenge has been foiled when this vanquished father finds himself alone with the corpse of his beloved daughter, and the jester is reminded again of Monterone's haunting and portentous curse.

In that final scene, Verdi's music soars upwards, rising to heaven with Gilda. Screams and melodramatic passion are superfluous as Rigoletto's beloved Gilda dies in her father's arms, a cathartic and poignant moment, but yet another impassioned portrayal of father-daughter suffering and agony. Hugo ended his drama as Triboulet screams his final pathetic anguish: "I've killed my daughter." In Verdi, Rigoletto's final anguish is: "Ah! La maledizione" ("Ah! The curse"). For Rigoletto, Monterone's curse, not his own evil actions, is the cause of

his personal tragedy; Rigoletto's disaster and catastrophe are revealed in the fury and frustration of his final outburst, an expression of his ultimate impotence and the failure of his will.

The Duke is that quintessential operatic cad so familiar to opera-lovers in the roles of Don Giovanni, Pinkerton, or Baron Ochs. He is unquestionably a villainous libertine, a man with a devil-may-care philosophy, and a skirt-chaser who lives for conquest. His signature mottoes are expressed in his two arias: "Questa o quella per me pari sono" ("This woman or that woman, they're all the same"), and "La donna è mobile" ("All women are capricious.")

The Duke, like Rigoletto, is also an ambivalent character. In Act II, the Duke expresses apparent heartfelt tenderness as he laments his presumed loss of Gilda, a longing certainly inconsistent with the crudeness of his historical behavior. In that short, transitory moment of ambivalent sentiment and compassion, the repugnant rake surrenders to his profound inner feelings, however fleeting or momentary those emotions may be; at this moment, he praises Gilda as the one person in the world who had inspired him with a lasting love and the fulfillment of his desire: "Parmi veder le lagrime scorrenti da quel ciglio" ("I seem to see tears running from those eyes.")

Sparafucile, although a minor character in the drama, also possesses ambivalent attributes. He is a prideful and workmanlike professional assassin who promises satisfaction to his clients. He approaches his profession with a sense of honor, becoming highly indignant when his sister Maddalena pleads for the Duke's life; after all, he has accepted a fifty percent down payment to complete the job, and he cannot renege on his promise. He asks Maddalena: does she think he is a crook? And when Maddalena suggests that he dispatch Rigoletto instead of the Duke, he rants that she has perhaps lost her senses, because she knows that he would never double-crosses a client. Yet Sparafucile has a sentimental streak in him. Maddalena's tears weaken him, and they become the force that persuades him to agree to kill a substitute, should one appear before midnight.

**A**fter Verdi launched his "middle period" in 1851 with *Rigoletto*, his quest for more intense human passion on the lyric stage continued into his next opera, *Il Trovatore*. In this opera, his central character became the swarthy and ominous gypsy mother, Azucena, a character obsessed with revenge, who dominates the opera story as she savagely recounts the vivid horror of how her mother was brutally led to execution.

For Verdi's nineteenth century audiences, archetypal, or beautiful heroines and handsome heroes were the only acceptable characters to be seen onstage: villains could be ugly, but they could only be secondary figures. Nevertheless, with Rigoletto and Azucena, Verdi introduced exciting wicked people with tragic souls: shocking and repulsive figures. Verdi proved that in making these underdogs of society major protagonists, he was willing to go quite far in his search for the bizarre. In certain respects, these characters, consumed by bloodthirsty passions, represented the prelude to realism in opera: the *verismo* that would highlight the Italian opera genre toward the end of the nineteenth and beginning of the twentieth centuries.

Verdi understood well that common man suffers the need for revenge as genuinely as kings, gods and heroes. As his "middle period" of composition began, he was determined to introduce suffering humanity to the opera stage: Rigoletto, the cynical and mocked hunchback, and Azucena, a hideously ugly and reviled gypsy. For both characters, the mainspring of their actions is revenge. But for both, revenge leads to a tragic irony: Rigoletto's actions bring

about the death of his own daughter, killed by the assassin he hired to murder the Duke; Azucena causes the death of her adored surrogate son Manrico, first by admitting under torture that she is his mother, and second, by hiding from her arch-enemy di Luna, the fact that he and Manrico are actually brothers, an admission that could have saved Manrico.

Rigoletto and Azucena are thus the male and female faces of revenge that become defeated: a revenge that ultimately brings about fatal injustice and tragedy. Both operas, *Rigoletto* and *Il Trovatore*, are therefore masterpieces of dramatic irony. The final horror for both Rigoletto and Azucena is that these protagonists believe they are striking a blow for justice. Essentially, Rigoletto's final justification is "Egli è Delitto, Punizion son io" ("He is Crime, I am Punishment"); Azucena repeats her mother's plea "Mi vendica." ("Avenge me.") However, in the end, both fail and witness their children lying dead, and the only difference between them is that Rigoletto may live on in agony, while Azucena will surely die at the stake as did her mother.

Verdi composed *Rigoletto* at almost the identical time that Wagner was theorizing his *Gesamtkunstwerk*, the ideal that the opera art form was the sum of its parts: a total artwork that integrated its text, music, and all the other theatrical elements. For the next quarter-century, Wagner's lyric compositions would revolutionize and transform opera into music drama: *The Ring of the Nibelung*, *Tristan und Isolde*, *Die Meistersinger*, and *Parsifal*.

Likewise, Verdi was intuitively evolving his art form from its *bel canto* origins toward a more integrated form of music drama: *Rigoletto* represented the beginning of that evolution. Nevertheless, *Rigoletto* contains many links to the Italian *bel canto* traditions; there are many "hit-parade-style" set-pieces, and many dance-style rhythmic accompaniments, internal structures that were certainly anathema to the Wagnerian ideal. But *Rigoletto* is a transition opera, in which Verdi bound its musical and textual elements into a more profound organic unity than he had ever achieved in any of his earlier operas. There is a more perfect balance between lyrical and dramatic elements, and the orchestra is not just the traditional accompanist, but also an integral part of the drama. In addition, *Rigoletto* contains many beautiful melodic inventions that link recitative to aria, eliminating that no-man's land or barrier between the end of an aria, and the beginning of another set-piece; all of *Rigoletto*'s music is essentially unified, and as a result, each scene swiftly speeds the opera from one breathtaking climax to another.

In essence, the success of *Rigoletto*'s musical inventions became Verdi's springboard for his Italian music drama of the future, particularly his final four masterpieces: *Don Carlo*, *Aida*, *Otello*, and *Falstaff*. But *Rigoletto*'s greatness lies in the vitality of its music, a veritable treasure chest of glorious and lush music possessing powerful passion. Verdi's new musical language for *Rigoletto* was now speaking with a new momentum, an intensity and energy that at times seems to overflow with violence, raging emotions, and even murderous glee.

*Rigoletto* is an Italian opera to the core, and in that sense, it reverently and piously follows the great traditions of the genre: it is a work in which the voice reigns supreme, and it is saturated with beautiful melody and music with vivid beauty and spontaneous power; the Duke's "Questa o quella" and "La donna è mobile," Gilda's "Caro nome" and confessional "Tutte le feste," Rigoletto's "Pari siamo" and "Cortigiani," the "Si vendetta" duet, and, of course, the final act "Quartet," the latter universally acknowledged a marvel of musical

invention, in which the diverse conflicts of the characters are exposed in a brilliant, coherent musical unity.

And although *Rigoletto* provides the vocally charismatic roles of the Duke (tenor) and Gilda (lyric coloratura), it is the title role of Rigoletto (baritone) that remains one of the greatest operatic roles ever composed. Verdi developed the high baritone voice for his earlier *Macbeth* (1847), pushing the expressiveness of the lower voice range even higher through his musical scoring. But for *Rigoletto*, Verdi transcended any of his previous musical inventions for the high baritone voice; the role is saturated with a full range of vocal expression, from moments of ecstatic rapture, to moments of profound agony.

Verdi himself described *Rigoletto* as revolutionary, if not a landmark in his career: “the best subject as regards theatrical effect that I’ve ever set to music. It has powerful situations, variety, excitement, pathos; all the vicissitudes arise from the frivolous, rakish personality of the Duke. Hence, Rigoletto’s fear, Gilda’s passions....”

*Rigoletto* always remained Verdi’s favorite work, a work saturated and integrated with strong dramatic and lyric beauty, poignant expressions of emotion and pathos, despair, romantic agonies, passions of love, and, of course, that tempestuous fury that churns the opera: revenge.

*Rigoletto* is one of Verdi’s supreme lyrical masterpieces. Beginning with *Rigoletto*, the composer would surge forward into his “middle period” to create some of the most enduring works of the operatic canon, operas he composed in a totally new spirit with bolder subjects and characterizations that would possess greater dramatic and psychological depth.

Nevertheless, Verdi’s *Rigoletto* represents, in effect, the sum and substance of Italian opera, and, as such, it survives as one of opera’s supreme masterpieces; it is a magical chemistry of great music and text and that expresses profound human emotion, passion and pathos.

# *Rigoletto*

**Opera in Italian in three acts**

**Music**

**By**

**Giuseppe Verdi**

**Libretto by Francesco Maria Piave,**

**based on Victor Hugo's play,**

*Le Roi s'amuse*

**("The King has a good time")**

**Premiere: Gran Teatro La Fenice, Venice, 1851**

***Principal Characters in Rigoletto***

Rigoletto, a court jester	Baritone
Gilda, Rigoletto's daughter	Soprano
Duke of Mantua	Tenor
Giovanna, Gilda's nurse	Soprano
Sparafucile, a hired assassin	Bass
Maddalena, Sparafucile's sister	Soprano
Monterone, a nobleman	Bass

Count Ceprano, Countess Ceprano, Borsa,  
Marullo, and courtiers

TIME: 16th century

PLACE: The city of Mantua, Italy

***Brief Story Synopsis***

*Rigoletto* is a grim and brutal melodrama. Rigoletto, deformed and hunchbacked, is a jester in the sixteenth century Court of the Duke of Mantua. Rigoletto mocks and outrageously insults the husbands and fathers of his master's amorous conquests, eventually provoking the noble Monterone, whose daughter had been raped by the Duke, to invoke a father's curse on him; the curse haunts Rigoletto throughout the drama, and ironically, the curse is fulfilled when tragedy overcomes Rigoletto.

Rigoletto has a young daughter, Gilda, whom he overprotects by secluding her from the outside world. Unknown to Rigoletto, Gilda falls in love with the Duke after she meets him in church; he is disguised as a poor student. The courtiers of the Mantuan court, seeking revenge against the despised court jester, believe Gilda to be Rigoletto's mistress. They conspire to abduct her and deliver their prize to the libertine Duke.

Rigoletto finds Gilda in the palace and vows revenge against the Duke after he learns that he has raped his beloved daughter; he hires the professional assassin, Sparafucile, to murder the Duke. Sparafucile's sister and accomplice, Maddalena, becomes infatuated with the Duke and persuades her brother to fulfill his murder contract by killing the next person who enters their inn.

Gilda sacrifices her life for her newfound love and becomes the victim of Sparafucile's sword. In a tragic irony of failed revenge, the corpse delivered to Rigoletto is his own beloved daughter, Gilda, not the Duke of Mantua.

### Story Narrative with Music Examples

#### *Prelude:*

A short prelude, somber, ominous, and menacing, musically presages the forthcoming tragedy. In Act I - Scene 1, after Monterone condemns the Duke for raping his daughter, Rigoletto mocks the aged nobleman. In return for his insolence, Monterone invokes a father's curse on Rigoletto.

The main musical motive of the prelude is the curse theme that underscores Rigoletto's fear and horror, and haunts him throughout the drama: "Quel vecchio maledivami!" ("That old man cursed me!")

#### **Andante sostenuto**



#### *Act I - Scene 1: A salon in the Duke of Mantua's palace*

An elegant assemblage of courtiers, ladies, and pages, are gathered in a magnificent salon in the Duke's palace. The festive air is accented by lighthearted, elegant dance music heard from another room of the palace. The trivial gaiety is a profound contrast to the grotesque reality of the scene, which is saturated by decadence, banality, evil and depravity.

#### *Dance Music:*

#### **Allegro con brio**



The libertine Duke of Mantua strolls through the crowd while in conversation with Borsa, one of his courtiers. He enthusiastically speaks about a beautiful young girl he saw in church, whom he has been pursuing incognito for the past three months. He relates how he followed her to her small home located in a narrow lane in a remote part of the city, but he has been confounded by the appearance of a mysterious man who visits her every evening.

The Duke's attention wanders to a group of women who pass before him. Among them is the Countess Ceprano, whose beauty he praises, and for whom he has implacable lust. He is heedless to Borsa, who cautions him that her husband, the Count Ceprano, must not overhear his amorous intentions toward his wife.

The Duke responds to Borsa's caution by expounding his libertine, chauvinist philosophy about women: "Questa o quella per me pari sono" ("This woman or that woman, they're all the same.") For the cynical Duke, one pretty woman is the same as any other; today this one pleases him, tomorrow another. He speaks of fidelity with scorn: "a tyranny of the heart."

And he affirms his freedom to love according to his whims, while arrogantly ridiculing the anger of cuckolded and jealous husbands.

*“Questa o quella per me pari sono”*

**Allegretto**  
**DUKE**

The musical notation is a single staff in treble clef, 6/8 time signature, and B-flat major. It begins with a quarter note G4, followed by a quarter note A4, a quarter note Bb4, and a quarter note C5. A slur covers the next four notes: a quarter note Bb4, a quarter note A4, a quarter note G4, and a quarter note F4. This is followed by a quarter note E4, a quarter note D4, a quarter note C4, and a quarter note Bb3. The final notes are a quarter note A3, a quarter note G3, and a quarter note F3. There are accents (>) over the first G4 and the final F3.

*Questa o quella per me pari so- no a quant'altre d'intor - no,*  
**This woman or that woman, they're all the same.**

Indifferent to Count Ceprano's jealousy, the Duke fervently continues his flirtations with the Countess, kissing her hand and telling her that he is intoxicated by his passion for her. The Duke and Countess Ceprano wander off casually to an adjoining room.

Rigoletto, the hunchbacked court jester, arrives. Immediately, he begins to taunt and provoke the furious and raging Count Ceprano, adding fuel to his outrage by implying that the Duke is enjoying the willing favors of his wife. Rigoletto then goes off to follow the Duke and the Countess Ceprano.

The courtier Marullo arrives. To the merriment of the other courtiers, Marullo announces the news that he has discovered that the ugly old jester has a mistress, a woman whom he visits every night. The courtiers react in disbelief, suggesting to Marullo that pandering by this sexually repulsive hunchback must surely be a hilarious joke.

The Duke returns to the festivities, followed by Rigoletto. He confides to Rigoletto that the Countess Ceprano would be a wonderful conquest, however, her husband is an impediment to his desires for her, and he would like to get rid of him. The malevolent Rigoletto adds fuel to the fire and casually suggests prison, exile, or even execution for the Count, saying with nonchalance: "so what, what does it matter?" Ceprano overhears their nefarious conversation and fumes with revenge, barely able to restrain himself from drawing his sword against the malevolent Rigoletto.

The Duke scolds Rigoletto, suggesting that his jesting has been excessive; nevertheless, the jester feels secure that the Duke will always protect him. All the courtiers have at one time or another been victims of the malevolent derision of the contemptuous court jester. But this time, Rigoletto's jibes at Count Ceprano have pushed the envelope, and at Ceprano's urging, the courtiers readily agree to meet later that evening to plot revenge against Rigoletto. Their revenge will be ironical; they will abduct Rigoletto's "mistress," following the same advice the vicious jester just offered his master.

The stern voice of the aged Count Monterone is heard from outside, demanding to be admitted. Monterone confronts the Duke and denounces the profligate libertine for seducing his daughter. Rigoletto mocks and ridicules the old man, but Monterone continues his protest and declares that dead or alive, he will haunt the Duke for the rest of his days.

In response, the Duke orders Monterone's arrest. But the relentless Rigoletto continues to insult the outraged father, ultimately inflaming Monterone to curse both the Duke and the villainous court jester. Monterone, the austere voice of divine justice, then invokes his total fury on Rigoletto: "E tu, serpente, tu che d'un padre ridi al dolore, sii maledetto!" ("And you,

serpent, who mock a father's agony, be accursed.") It is Monterone's second curse, directed solely at Rigoletto, which terrifies the jester.

The courtiers resume their festivities as guards lead off Monterone. Rigoletto trembles with fright and recoils in fear; Monterone's curse has become firmly implanted in his soul.

### *Act I - Scene 2: A dark and deserted street*

Rigoletto walks toward his home, almost totally disguised by his cloak. He has become paranoid by Monterone's curse and expresses his haunting fear: "Qual vecchio maladivami!" ("That old man cursed me!")

Rigoletto is followed by an ominous figure, who introduces himself as Sparafucile, a professional assassin-for-hire. Sparafucile describes his profession with the self-conscious rectitude of an honest tradesman. He offers Rigoletto his services at reasonable fees should he ever need to get rid of any rival for the young woman he keeps under lock and key.

*Sparafucile's theme:*



Sparafucile explains the intrigues of his trade to Rigoletto; he and his sister, a gypsy temptress, lure their victims to their Inn and then dispose of them. Rigoletto dismisses Sparafucile, indicating no present need for his services, but he indeed makes a point of learning how the assassin can be found should a future need arise.

Alone, Rigoletto is again haunted by returning thoughts of Monterone's curse. He then reflects on his chance meeting with the assassin for hire, comparing himself as his equal: "Pari siamo! Io la lingua, egli ha il pugnale" ("We are the same! I use my tongue, he uses the dagger.") Both men indeed share evil: both men are paid to wound their victims with their lethal weapons: one with his tongue, the other with his dagger.

*"Pari siamo"*

**Adagio**  
**RIGOLETTO**



*Pa - ri sia - mo! io la lin - gua, egli ha il pugna - le.*  
**We are the same! I use my tongue, he uses the dagger.**

In his soliloquy, Rigoletto curses fate and nature for bringing him into the world as an ugly and deformed man. He further blames the vile courtiers as the cause of his own wickedness, hatred and evil. But again his mood is shaken as Monterone's curse returns to haunt his thoughts. Suddenly, the tender echo of flute music returns his thoughts to his beloved daughter, Gilda.

Rigoletto enters the courtyard of his house. Gilda rushes joyfully to embrace her father.

*Gilda welcomes Rigoletto:*

**Allegro vivo**



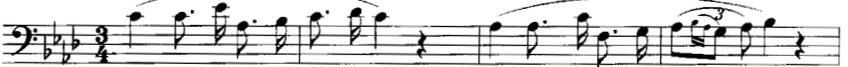
Gilda senses her father's sadness; he is uneasy and agitated. Rigoletto turns to panic, and immediately asks Gilda if she has been out of the house, fearing that she would fall victim to one of the courtiers or the evils of the city.

Gilda tries to assuage her father's anxiety by expressing her deep love for him. Then she asks to know more about him and her family. Why does her father never tell her his name? When she asks about her mother, Rigoletto is unable to speak of his grief at her loss.

*“Deh non parlare al misero”*

**Andante**

**RIGOLETTO**



*Deh non parla-re al mi-se-ro del suo perdu-to be - ne.*  
Don't speak of the grief of that terrible loss.

Rigoletto passionately explains to Gilda that she is his only treasure left in this world. Preoccupied by fears, Rigoletto turns to the nurse Giovanna and reminds her to carefully protect his beloved child; Gilda is to remain within the walls of their home and never to venture into the town except on that one day when the nurse is to accompany her to church.

*“Ah! Veglia o donna”*

**Allegro moderato assai**

**RIGOLETTO**



*Ah! Veglia o don - na, questo fio-re che a te pur - ro confi - dai.*  
Lady, guard this innocent flower who I place in your trust,

Noises are heard from the street. Rigoletto panics and rushes out to investigate. After he leaves, the Duke slips into the courtyard, sees the nurse Giovanna, and throws her a purse to buy her silence. When Rigoletto returns, the Duke hides.

Unable to allay his fears and suspicions, Rigoletto questions Gilda if anyone ever followed her from church. Gilda responds negatively, assuring her father that he need not fear for her safety; her mother — an angel in heaven — is always protecting her.

Rigoletto bids a touching farewell to Gilda, his parting words “mia figlia” (“my daughter”), overheard by the hiding Duke; the revelation that she is his daughter surprises the Duke.

After Rigoletto departs, Gilda confesses to Giovanna her remorse at not having confided to her father that a handsome young man has frequently followed her from church. As she reveals her love for this mysterious suitor — “t’amo” (“I love you”) — the Duke emerges from hiding. He embraces Gilda, and then explodes into a rapturous declaration of his love for her.

“È il sol dell'anima”

Andantino  
DUKE



*È il sol dell'anima, la vita è a-more sua vo - ce è il palpito del nos-tro core.*  
Love is love, the sun of the soul, its voice the throb of our hearts.

Gilda tries feebly to resist the Duke's ardor, but she surrenders. In response to Gilda's curiosity, the Duke tells her that his name is Gualtier Maldè, a poor and struggling student.

The voices of Borsa and Ceprano — preparing the courtier's intrigue to abduct Rigoletto's mistress — cause Giovanna to warn the lovers that someone is outside. Gilda is also fearful that her father may be returning and insists that her newfound lover depart. Gilda and Gualtier Maldè — the Duke — sing a passionate farewell.

“Addio, addio, speranza ed anima”

Vivacissimo  
DUKE



*Ad - di - o ad - di - o spe - ran - za ed anima.*  
Farewell, farewell, you alone are my hope and soul.

Alone, Gilda sighs joyfully about the poor student she has fallen in love with: Gualtier Maldè, a name that is now carved in her heart.

*“Caro nome”*

**Allegro moderato**

**GILDA**

The image shows a single line of musical notation for a vocal part. It is written on a treble clef staff with a key signature of three sharps (F#, C#, G#) and a common time signature (C). The melody consists of several measures, with some notes beamed together. Below the staff, the lyrics are written in two lines: "Ca-ro no-me che il mio cor" and "fe-sti pri-mo pal-pi - tar." The first line of lyrics is aligned with the first measure of the music, and the second line is aligned with the second measure. The lyrics are in a mix of Italian and English.

*Ca-ro no-me che il mio cor      fe-sti pri-mo pal-pi - tar.*  
**Dearest name, the first love to throb in my heart.**

Meanwhile, the courtiers — disguised and masked — have assembled in the dark night outside Rigoletto’s house. From hiding, they notice Gilda on the balcony and comment on the beauty of “Rigoletto’s mistress.”

Rigoletto unexpectedly returns and runs into the courtiers. They calm his fears and suspicions by telling him that their mission is to abduct Ceprano’s wife for the Duke. Rigoletto erupts into perverse delight at the intrigue; he points them to Ceprano’s house and offers them his help.

The courtiers insist that Rigoletto must also be masked. Thoroughly confused and blinded by the mask, Rigoletto unwittingly holds a ladder for the courtiers against what he believes to be the wall of Ceprano’s house, but in reality, he is holding the ladder against his own house.

The courtiers enter Rigoletto’s house and abduct Gilda.

A moment later, Gilda’s cries for help are heard in the distance, followed by shouts of victory from the escaping courtiers. But Rigoletto, his ears covered by the mask, hears nothing. Now thoroughly confused and bewildered, he tears off the mask and discovers that he is in his own courtyard. He notices Gilda’s scarf on the ground, and then notices that the door of his house is wide open. Frantic with fear, he rushes into his house and finds that Gilda has disappeared.

He emerges from the house dragging the terrified Giovanna. He staggers in shock, realizing that he has helped bring disaster upon himself. In agony, he remembers Monterone’s curse, and then blames the curse for his misfortune: “Ah! La maledizione!” (“Ah, the curse!”) Then, Rigoletto faints.

**Act II: A drawing room in the Duke’s palace**

The Duke is agitated and distraught. He had returned to Rigoletto’s house, but instead of finding Gilda, he found the house deserted. He is certain that Gilda was abducted, but he has no idea who the perpetrators were. He is torn between rage that anyone should have dared to cross him, and his pity for the young woman whom he now claims has awakened in him — for the first time — genuine feelings of affection. The Duke expresses a heretofore-unrevealed sense of sincerity and compassion for his lost love.

“*Parmi veder le lagrime*”

**Adagio**  
**DUKE**



*Par - mi veder le la - grime scorren - ti da quel cig - lio,*  
I seem to see tears running from those eyes,

Marullo, Ceprano, Borsa, and other courtiers enter the drawing room and gleefully — and heartlessly — narrate their adventures of the previous night, cynically describing Rigoletto’s unwitting collaboration as they abducted the young woman they believed was Rigoletto’s mistress. The Duke realizes that they are referring to none other than Gilda, and he becomes delighted when he learns that the courtiers have brought her to the palace. He dashes off to the conquest, intending to console his new love who is awaiting him.

The grief-stricken Rigoletto enters the salon, self-controlled, pretending nonchalance, and cynical as he tries to conceal his distress and anxiety. The courtiers greet him with ironical good humor and mock him. In a pathetic spectacle, Rigoletto searches for clues to the whereabouts of his daughter, quickly snatching up a handkerchief from the table in the hope that it may belong to Gilda.

Certain that Gilda is with the Duke and in the palace, he tries to enter the Duke’s quarters, but the courtiers bar his way, telling him that the Duke is asleep and cannot be disturbed. But then a page announces that the Duchess wishes to speak to her husband. The courtiers pretend that the Duke has gone hunting, but Rigoletto pierces through the veil of their charade and intuitively senses the truth: he concludes that Gilda is in the palace.

Behind a laughing exterior, Rigoletto continues his search for Gilda. The courtiers mock him, telling him to look for his “mistress” somewhere else. In a fury, Rigoletto astonishes them by revealing the truth, crying out: “Io vo’ mia figlia” (“I want my daughter.”)

Alternating between threats and pleas — and even attempted force — to enter the Duke’s quarters, Rigoletto vents his fury and frustration by violently denouncing the courtiers, simultaneously lashing out at their cruelty with pleas for mercy.

“*Cortigiani vil razza, dannata*”

**Andante mosso agitato**  
**RIGOLETTO**



*Cor - ti - giani, vil razza da - nnata, per qual prezzo vendeste il mio cor?*  
Courtiers, damned vile race, for what price have you sold my treasure?

Suddenly, the freshly ravished Gilda emerges from the Duke's apartments and throws herself into her father's arms. Rigoletto's first reaction is one of relief, convincing himself that she is safe, and that perhaps it was all a joke.

Gilda sees her father for the first time in his jester's costume, and each, in a shocking moment of revelation, realizes their shame. Gilda's tears convince Rigoletto that the events that have occurred are more serious. Gilda makes a request to her father: "I want to blush before you, alone." Rigoletto dismisses the courtiers.

Gilda confesses everything that had happened, sadly admitting her guilt. She relates how a young student she had seen in church followed her home, and how she later fell in love with him. When she was abducted and brought to the palace, she was surprised to find that the Duke himself was that young man: in her innocence, she had fallen in love with him, and then abandoned herself to him consensually.

*"Tutte le feste al tempio"*

**Andantino**

**GILDA**



*Tutte le fe - ste al tem - pio                      mentre prega - va Id - dio,*  
**At the festivals at church, while I was praying to God,**

During Gilda's poignant exposition, Rigoletto tenderly attempts to comfort his distraught daughter. But he is confused, and refuses to believe what she has told him; Rigoletto is in denial. While under guard, Monterone passes by on his way to prison. He pauses to vent his outrage and anger at a portrait of the Duke: "So, my curse has been in vain, neither a thunderbolt or steel has entered your breast. Duke, you still live happily!"

As Monterone is led away, Rigoletto calls to him, assuring him that they will both be avenged. Rigoletto becomes transformed into a savage fury. He swears a frightful vengeance against the Duke, while Gilda begs in vain that he forgive the man she deeply loves.

*"Si vendetta tremenda vendetta"*

**Allegro vivo**

**RIGOLETTO**



*Sì, ven - det - ta, tre-men - da ven - det - ta,*  
**Yes, a frightful vengeance is all that this soul desires,**

**Act III: Sparafucile's Inn on the deserted banks of the Mincio River**

Sparafucile sits inside the Inn, polishing his belt. Outside, Rigoletto and Gilda watch through a small opening in the wall (or window.)

Still full of romantic protestations, Gilda persists that she passionately loves the Duke, and that she truly believes he will return her love. But Rigoletto believes he can cure her affectation for this licentious libertine by bringing her to Sparafucile's Inn; he well knows that what she will witness inside will prove to her that her lover is a capricious, worthless profligate.

The Duke, disguised as a cavalier, is inside the Inn, ordering wine and a room for the night. Gilda now hears her lover in his true character, the libertine Duke advancing his cynical, chauvinist philosophy about the fickleness and capriciousness of women.

**"La donna é mobile"**

**Allegretto**  
**DUKE**



*La donna è mobile qual piuma al vento, muta d'ac-cen - to e di pen-si - e - ro,*  
**All women are capricious, like a plume in the wind, changing their thoughts,**

Sparafucile's sister, Maddalena, a gypsy enchantress, had lured the Duke to the Inn. She now joins her prey. Gilda and Rigoletto remain outside and watch incredulously as the Duke attempts to seduce Maddalena.

The Quartet begins with "Bella figlia dell'amore" ("Pretty daughter of love.") The individual passions of each character stands out in high relief: outside the Inn, Rigoletto repeats his obsession for revenge against the Duke, while Gilda naively expresses her love for him and her willingness to forgive him; inside the Inn, Maddalena halfheartedly repels the Duke's advances, but the Duke pulsates with amorous passion, prepared to offer her anything, even marriage, to succeed in his amorous conquest.

Concealed in the darkness outside, Gilda witnesses the amorous interplay between the Duke and Maddalena, slowly becoming heartbroken and grim as she witnesses how lightly he speaks of love.

**Quartet: "Bella figlia dell'amore"**

**Andante**  
**DUKE**



*Bel - la figlia del - l'a - mo - re, schiavo son de'vezzi tuo - i,*  
**Beautiful daughter of love, I am a slave to your charms,**

Rigoletto persuades the disillusioned and heartbroken Gilda to return home, change into male attire, and set out for Verona where he will meet her the next day.

After Gilda leaves, Rigoletto summons Sparafucile and hands over half the assassin's fee to murder the Duke; he promises to pay the remainder when the body is delivered to him in a sack at midnight. Sparafucile offers to throw the body in the river himself, but Rigoletto wants personal satisfaction, insisting that he will return at midnight for the body.

Sparafucile curiously asks Rigoletto the victim's name, and Rigoletto antagonistically replies: "Vuoi saper anche il mio? Egli è Delitto, Punizion son io" ("Do you want to know my name as well? He is Crime, and mine is Punishment.")

Meanwhile, inside the Inn, the flirtations between Maddalena and the Duke grow more intimate. A storm has gathered, forcing the Duke to stay the night at the Inn.

Gilda has returned and overhears Maddalena and Sparafucile discuss their forthcoming plan to murder the Duke. Maddalena reveals that she has fallen in love with the young cavalier, seduced by his charms. She attempts to dissuade her brother from murdering her newfound love, but Sparafucile fails to understand his sister's sudden sentiment; after all, their only concern is the twenty crowns they will receive for performing the deed.

Maddalena suggests to her brother that he kill the hunchback instead of the man she now endearingly refers to as her "Apollo." Citing his honor, Sparafucile refuses to betray his employer: one does not murder his own client. Maddalena's tears touch Sparafucile and he offers his sister a compromise: if another stranger should chance to call at the Inn before midnight, the hour of Rigoletto's return, he will become the murder victim. In either case, the hunchback will still receive a corpse for his money. But if no one appears, Maddalena's new love must die.

Gilda has overheard Maddalena and Sparafucile discuss their sinister murder plans, a choice of death for Gilda's lover, or their client, her father Rigoletto. Gilda fears for her lover's life and resolves to sacrifice her own life for him: with conviction and determination, she decides that she will be the next person to enter the Inn.

Lightning and thunder crack as the storm increases with sudden and overwhelming fury. Gilda summons up her courage, knocks on the door, and calls out: "Have pity on a beggar who wants shelter for the night." As the door opens, she pathetically exclaims, "God forgive them." Gilda enters the Inn, and is immediately stabbed by Sparafucile's sword.

The storm becomes more violent, and then subsides. All is silent.

As midnight strikes, Rigoletto returns to the Inn. Sparafucile delivers the sack containing the dead victim. He offers to throw the sack in the river, but Rigoletto claims his privilege and satisfaction; he wants to savor the triumph of his vengeance.

The gloating Rigoletto drags the sack toward the river. In his moment of victory, he proclaims:

"Ora mi guarda o mondo! Quest'è un buffone, ed un potente è questo! Ei sta sotto i miei piedi! È desso! Oh gioia!"

("World look at me now! Here is a buffoon, and a powerful buffoon! And standing under my foot, it is him! Oh joy!")

Rigoletto trembles when he hears the Duke's voice in the distance: "La donna é mobile." In disbelief, he cries out that it must be a dream or an illusion. But if not, who is in the sack? It is pitch dark with occasional lightning providing the only visibility. Rigoletto tears the sack open, and a sudden flash of lightning reveals Gilda's face. He cannot believe his senses, but the faint voice from the sack reveals that it is indeed his beloved Gilda.

Gilda is dying from her wounds, but with her last breath, she begs Rigoletto to forgive the Duke, and also to forgive her, explaining that she indeed loved him so much.

**"V'ho ingannato"**

**Andante**

**GILDA**



*V'ho ingannato colpevole fu - i l'amai troppo ora muoio per lu - i!*  
**I have deceived you. I was guilty. I loved him too much. Now I die for him!**

In a touching farewell, "Lassù in ciel" ("Up there in Heaven"), Gilda pours out her love for her father, assuring him that she will be united with her mother in Heaven, where they will both pray for him.

**"Lassù in ciel"**

**Andante**

**GILDA**



*Lassù in cielo, vi - ci - no al - la madre, in e - terno per voi preghiero,*  
**Up there, in Heaven, near my mother, I will forever pray for you,**

Rigoletto cries out, "She is dead." His screams reveal the utter futility of this tragic moment of fury and frustration, his explanation for the collapse of his world uttered in his last words: "Ah! La maledizione" ("Ah, the curse.")

Monterone's curse has been fulfilled: Gilda's death overcomes Rigoletto with disaster and despair; he has become a victim of his own evil.



***CHAPTER ELEVEN***  
***The French Lyrique***

## The French Lyrique

French opera possesses its own unique musical signature, generally a concentration of an expressive and refined lyricism and extremely sensitive harmonies: the French “lyrique.” The school began with Charles Gounod, whose operas accent profound human values and an emotionalism that is far removed from the ornate grand opera spectacles of his predecessors: Meyerbeer, Halévy and Auber. With Gounod, human passion was no longer merely the motivating factor within an opera story; it became the primary subject of the action.

Gounod inspired a host of great practitioners to this new school of French lyricism: Ambroise Thomas composed *Mignon* (1866) and *Hamlet* (1868), injecting his operas with florid and ornate arias for the new lyric-coloratura style; Léo Delibes composed *Lakmé* (1883) likewise introducing coloratura showpieces such as the opera’s “Bell Song”; and Camille Saint-Saëns composed *Samson and Delilah* (1877), an opera that has been criticized for its excessive oratorio-style, but whose second exudes an almost incomparable intensity of passion. And George Bizet’s *Carmen* (1875) was a groundbreaker in introducing explosive instinctive passions to the lyric stage: naturalism, or verismé.

Jules Massenet produced French operas that were saturated with lush romantic music fused with deep sentiment: *Manon* (1884), *Werther* (1892) and *Thaïs* (1894). And Gustave Charpentier’s *Louise* (1900) provided a sentimental and romanticized portrait of “bohemian” Paris, featuring the heroine’s ever-popular hymn to love: *Dupuis le jour*.

All of these great French composers were inspired by Gounod, the innovator of a unique compositional style that has been called a light and dripping sentimentality, easy on the ear like golden syrup.

Charles François Gounod (1818-1893), was a major figure in nineteenth century French opera: his most famous work, *Faust*, which premiered in 1859. Gounod’s father, who died when Charles was still a child, had been a painter and winner of the second Prix de Rome. The composer’s mother, familiar with the hardships of an artistic life, reluctantly taught her son the piano. Gounod would later study music at the Paris Conservatoire under the French composer Jacques François Halévy, the composer of some 20 operas, his most well-known, the inspired grand masterwork, *La Juive*. In 1839, at the age of 21, like his father, Charles won the Grand Prix de Rome; with prize in hand he continued his studies in Italy, where he developed a passionate interest in church and sacred music.

Gounod was eternally in conflict between the sacred and the mundane, vacillating between spiritualism and the enjoyments of luxury and pleasure. He studied theology for two years and abstained from holy orders only when convinced he could succeed in a musical career, an explanation in part why most of his later works contain ecclesiastical themes.

Upon his return to Paris from Rome, he became a church organist, and indulged in the writing of religious choral music. At the same time, he composed his first opera, *Sapho*, produced in 1851, a failure that did not deter him from the further pursuit of operatic composition. In 1858, he achieved success with the light opera, *Le Médecin Malgré Lui* (“The Doctor in Spite of Himself”), based on a comedy by the French playwright Molière.

Between 1852 and 1860, Gounod directed the Orphéon, a Parisian choral society, further stimulating his profound interest in religious and choral music: it was then that he became inspired to compose the celebrated *Ave Maria*, based on a prelude by Johann Sebastian Bach, as well as several masses, oratorios, motets, and hymns.

Gounod’s fame, however, rests on his fourth opera, *Faust*, (1859), based on a portion of Goethe’s famous play in verse. *Faust* made Gounod world famous, and although he wrote eight other operas thereafter, only two remain successful: *Mireille* (1864), and *Roméo et Juliette* (1867).

Volumes have been written about the genesis of the legendary story of Faust, the philosopher and magician who made a sinister compact with the devil, Mephistopheles. The legend itself derives from antiquity and myth, much of it buried in historical obscurity. Nevertheless, the tale entered popular literature transmitted orally through the centuries, and later, through ballads, puppet plays, and the drama.

The Medieval world was consumed by the Christian path to salvation, possessed by immortality and the conflict between heaven and hell and damnation. Many elements of the Faust legend captivated the medieval imagination; humanity's energetic myth-making capacity seems undaunted and boundless, his ability to conjure up diabolical images requiring very little imagination to bring it to consciousness. Nevertheless, men of learning and accomplishment who believed in these diabolical myths and legends were deemed necromancers, or dealers in the black arts, and bondsmen of the infernal powers; among the many, Zoroaster, Democritus, Empedocles, Apollinaris, Virgil, Albert Magnus, Merlin, and Páracelsus.

In the sixth century, Theophilus of Syracuse supposedly sold himself to the devil, saved from damnation only by the miraculous intervention of the Virgin Mary: architects of cathedrals and engineers of bridges were rumored to have bartered their souls in order that their great conceptions might find realization.

In recent centuries, the superstitious peasantry of Bavaria envisioned that the engineer who ran the first locomotive engine through that country was in league with the devil; they also conceived the notion that the Prussian machine-gun which had wrought such horrible destruction to their soldiers, was an infernal machine for which Bismarck had traded the immortal part of himself to the devil. Poland had its popular tales of wizardry and black magic in the legend of Pan Twardowsky. And in Bohemia, a legend recounted the nefarious adventures of Cyto.

All of these legends were about wizards, formidable practitioners of the black arts.

It is widely believed that the real Dr. Johann Faustus was a native of Würtemberg who was a practitioner of the magical arts toward the end of the fifteenth and beginning of the sixteenth centuries: he made a compact with the devil Mephistopheles, performed many miraculous feats, and died a horrible death. The legend recounts that he was initially poor, but money inherited from a rich uncle enabled him to attend the University of Cracow where he seems to have devoted himself with particular assiduity to the study of magic; that art, or science, at that time having a quasi-respectability in the curriculum. After obtaining his degree, he traveled about Europe practicing necromancy and acquiring a reputation as a fiendish sorcerer who would boast that his magic arts had enabled the imperial armies to win their victories; nevertheless, he was abominated and his soul considered lost beyond all hope.

Johann Spiess wrote the earliest known account of Faust: *Faustus*, published in Frankfurt in 1587. Shortly thereafter, in 1590, an English translation of the entire Spiess tale appeared, becoming the source from which Marlowe drew his stage play, *The Tragical History of Dr. Faustus*, printed in 1604. In Spiess's rendition of the story, Faustus expresses a wish to marry, but Mephistopheles refuses to permit him to do so on the ground that marriage is something pleasing to God, and therefore, foreign to the terms of their contract. Mephistopheles says: "Hast thou sworn thyself an enemy to God and to all creatures? To this I answer thee, thou canst not marry, thou canst not serve two masters, God and thy prince. For wedlock is a chief institution ordained of God, and that thou hast promised to defy as we do all, and that hast thou not only done, but moreover thou hast confirmed it with thy blood. Persuade thyself that what thou dost in contempt of wedlock, it is all to thine own delight. Therefore, Faustus, look well about thee, and bethink thyself better, and I wish thee to change thy mind, for if thou keep not what thou hast promised in thy writing, we will tear thee in pieces like the dust under thy feet. Therefore, sweet Faustus, think with what unquiet life, anger, strife and debate thou shalt live in when thou takest a wife. Therefore, change thy mind."

In Spiess's story, Faustus accedes to Mephistopheles but very shortly summons his spirit and demands the devil's consent to marry. Spiess portrayed the devil as a dreadful, ugly monster that Faustus dared not look at directly. Suddenly, punishing Faustus, Mephistopheles conjures up a whirlwind that fills the house with fire and smoke, hurling Faustus about until he is motionless. The devil then facetiously asks Faustus: "How likest thou thy wedding?", Faustus promising never to mention marriage again, and becoming more than content to accept Mephistopheles' promise to bring him any woman, alive or dead, whom he may possess if he so desires; thus, Helen of Troy is brought back from the netherworld to become Faustus's paramour. In Spiess's story, Helen has a son called Justus Faustus, but after Faustus dies, mother and child vanish.

In the Polish version of the legend, Twardowsky has the privilege of representing Faustus, and demands three requests of the devil. After enjoying the benefits conferred by two, like the Spiess legend, Faustus asks the devil's permission to marry. The devil is unwilling and breaks the compact, freeing Twardowsky. It is this Polish version of the legend that may have inspired Thackeray's amusing tale, *The Painter's Bargain*. New versions of the legend followed each other rapidly, and the *Faust* story eventually became the favorite subject of nineteenth-century Romantic playwrights and poets.

Toward the end of the eighteenth century, Goethe conceived the idea of utilizing the *Faust* subject as the basis for his comprehensive philosophy about human life, his final literary synthesis between poetry, philosophy, and religion. But while Goethe was working on his *Faust*, literary versions, musical pantomime, and puppet plays of the legend were appearing simultaneously: Galliard's *Harlequin Faustus* (1715); Phanty's *Dr. Faust's Zaubergurzel* (1790); and Walter's *Dr. Faust* (1797.)

Goethe published the first part of his adventures of the legendary necromancer in 1808; the second part published posthumously in 1833. After Goethe's monumental treatment of the legend, librettists, composers and poets, pursued the folk-tale and legend with boundless enthusiasm: Spohr's opera, *Faust* (1818), still performed today on the German stage, but known in America primarily through the recital stage song, *Die stille Naclit entweiclit*; Boito's opera *Mefistofele* (1868), an attempt to cover the entire phantasmagoria of both parts of Goethe's voluminous play; Rietz's *Faust* (1836); an English version by Bishop, *Faustus* (1827), with a French version (1831), and a Brussels version (1834); Donizetti's *Fausta* (1831); Gordigiano's *Fausto* (1837); Raimondi's *Fausto Arrivo* (1837); Verstowsky's Russian version, *Pan Twardowsky* (1831); and Zaitz's Polish version, *Twardowsky* (1880). Even the twentieth-century Marxists carried the legend a step further and staged *Faust* in satiric modern guise, the hero, an American millionaire who sold his soul to the devil and lived sumptuously in a Berlin hotel.

The subject has copiously served as the basis for cantatas, overtures, and symphonies, inspiring music from such composers as Kreutzer, Reissiger, Pierson, Lassen, and Prince Radziwill; but their compositions do little more than illustrate the truth of the old adage that "Fools rush in where angels fear to tread." Schumann composed concert music on the subject, Wagner composed the *Faust Overture*, and Liszt, the *Faust* symphony: all represent specific portions of the tragedy transformed into musical language.

Gounod's choice of the *Faust* subject reflected his profound admiration for the poetry of the great German Romanticist, Johann Wolfgang von Goethe. While Gounod was in his early twenties, his favorite amusement was reading Goethe's *Faust*.

Gounod reveals in his autobiographical sketches, that he personally proposed *Faust* as an operatic subject to the librettists, Jules Barbier and Michel Carré, the idea so favorably impressing them that they immediately brought the project to the director of the Théâtre Lyrique, M. Leon Carvalho.

Carvalho was intrigued with Gounod's idea of a *Faust* opera, but in deference to the then undisputed "king" of French opera, Meyerbeer, he offered the latter the first opportunity to write the opera. Meyerbeer declined, refusing to consider a subject he deemed sacred, what he termed the "Ark of the Covenant," a sanctuary of great literature not to be approached through the profanity of music. Meyerbeer's refusal to write music for an operatic version of *Faust* complements the artistic conscience of the man who has been charged more often and more virulently than any other opera composer in history with a willingness to pander to stage sensationalism. Nevertheless, in operatic hindsight, it would be more truthful to conclude that Meyerbeer knew well his inability to write the kind of music that Goethe's tragedy required. Assuming the story to be true, Meyerbeer's honesty is admirable, particularly the dignity with which he gave expression to the holiness of Goethe's opus: the "Ark of the Covenant".

However, there was indeed one composer who was fit to cope with the awesome task of writing dramatic music worthy of a marriage with Goethe's vast creation; that composer was Beethoven. Likewise, Beethoven was hesitant to profane the Goethe sanctuary, although for one short moment at least, the thought occupied his mind.

In his book, *Für Freunde der Tonkunst*, Rochlitz relates that in the summer of 1822 he carried a commission to Beethoven from Breitkopf and Härtel, the Leipzig Publishers, for *Faust* music "in the manner of the *Egmont* overture." Beethoven had met Goethe at Carlsbad, and ever since, had been reading his poetry daily. Beethoven divined Goethe, believing that its prose elevated the soul, and sincerely believed that the master's words were written for music; "Goethe sees, all his readers see with him, and that was the reason one could appropriately put his words to music. "

Nevertheless, at that particular time, Beethoven was immersed in gigantic tasks that had already been undertaken: two symphonies, and an oratorio for the Handel and Haydn Society of Boston that never came to fruition. In the end, Beethoven's preoccupations yielded the Ninth Symphony, but he never penned a note containing a *Faust* theme.

Librettist Carré is reputed to have had reservations about Gounod's *Faust* project, reasoning that he had recently produced *Faust et Marguerite*, a three-act play fashioned after Goethe that was moderately successful at the Gymnase-Dramatique in 1850. But after Barbier laid out his scenario, Carré was won over, and the libretto team enthusiastically started writing Gounod's *Faust* text. It was unanimously agreed that the opera would avoid much of Goethe's profound religious and philosophical context, and only deal with the love story and romance between Faust and Marguerite.

Gounod's *Faust* had been scheduled to premiere in November 1857, but Carvalho halted work after learning that the prestigious Théâtre St. Martin was about to stage a melodrama based on the legendary theme; after a short run, that play folded, and Carvalho authorized Gounod and his librettists to move forward.

Rehearsals started in September, 1858 and were continuously buried in difficulties. There were severe tensions between the librettists and directors of the Théâtre-Lyrique, the librettists struggling to keep their most original ideas from becoming excised: the censors threatened to remove the dramatic church scene confrontation between Marguerite and Mephistopheles, fearing repercussions from a scene they deemed offensive during a period when relations between France and the papacy were strained. The pressures of the battle affected the usually calm Barbier profoundly, and it is rumored that he stayed home the night of the premiere because he was suffering from nervous exhaustion.

The tenor featured in the title role of *Faust* was Hector Bruyer, a singer possessing a charming voice, an attractive physique, but unable to sustain the weight of the role; just one month before the premiere he was replaced by Barbot, a veteran from the Opéra-Comique roster. It is rumored that Gounod himself, reputed to have had a beautiful voice that he was decidedly fond of exhibiting, had seriously considered the feasibility of singing the Faust part himself.

The premiere took place on March 19, 1859, ultimately becoming Gounod's greatest theatrical success, yet at first it did not create a remarkable nor sensational impression. A distinguished audience attended the premiere: Auber, Berlioz, Reyer, Janin, Perrin, Ollivier, and many other prominent men who had made their mark in literature, art or politics; among the latter, Delacroix, Vernet, Giraud, Padeloup, Scudo, Heugel, and Lévy.

It became Mme. Carvalho — the manager's wife whose pseudonym was Madame Ugalde — who carried the performance by achieving a brilliant success as Marguerite. Gounod concluded that though her virtuosity and masterly qualities of execution and style had already placed her in the front rank of contemporary singers, no role until that of Marguerite had afforded her the opportunity to demonstrate her secure lyric qualities, assuredness, and refinement. Gounod's praise of his Marguerite may have resulted from an artistic compromise with the implacable diva: she was reputed to have altered any opera she participated in to suit her own tastes; no aria was safe from her greedy hands as she loaded melodic lines with her own arabesques and trills.

Opening night criticism of *Faust* contained a blend of censure and praise: if it was not a critical success, neither was it a failure. On the positive side, the audience considered the opera daring and different, far from a mere succession of pretty tunes. Others considered the "Soldiers' Chorus" — a last-minute transfer from Gounod's unfinished opera *Ivan the Terrible* — to be a show-stopping masterpiece, and others raved at the sublimated mood and ecstasy of feeling in the "Garden Scene."

On the negative side, Germans claimed that Gounod had failed to grasp the larger conception of the Goethe epic, even though Gounod's librettists admittedly intended to portray only the love story portion: some felt the third act monotonous and too long; that the devil did not summon up the terror felt for the "Prince of Darkness" in the Middle Ages, his characterization, not more impressive than a conjurer at a children's party.

Berlioz, seething with revenge against his fellow Parisians, had every reason to console himself since Gounod's new *Faust*, like his own dramatic cantata *La damnation de Faust* written several years before in 1846, had been unappreciated. Nevertheless, Berlioz was favorably inclined toward the work and generously pointed out the new opera's strengths: the opening measures with their fugal evocation of the old philosopher's despair; the first meeting of Faust and Marguerite; the opera's magnificent delicate balance between set pieces and recitative; Faust's rapturous "Salut! Demeure," and Marguerite's "Roi de Thulé" and "Jewel Song"; the ecstatic conclusion of the "Garden Scene"; the "Church Scene"; and the poignancy when the pathetically twisted, but still recognizable Marguerite, is cursed by her brother, driving her to the final edge of the mental abyss. In spite of Berlioz's enthusiasm, few of Gounod's friends spoke to him after the premiere, and those who did, advised him to modify his advanced musical style.

**F** *Faust* found its way into the repertoire slowly. Today, both Frenchmen and Germans seem to have forgotten that when the Théâtre Lyrique temporarily folded, and the Opéra-Comique closed its doors to *Faust*, it was the triumphant reception that the opera received in Germany that served as a catalyst to bring the work back to France. During its premiere year, the opera was given fifty-seven times at the Théâtre Lyrique. Ten years later, it was revised to fit the unique patterns and schemes of the Grand Opéra, prompting the addition of the "Walpurgisnacht" ballet, and Valentin's aria, "Avant de quitter ces lieux."

In retrospect, no opera in the history of the lyric theater has ever equaled the popularity of Gounod's *Faust*. In 1887, twenty-eight years after its first performance, Gounod was privileged to join his friends in a celebration of its 500th presentation, a proud record, but trivial when it is noted that *Faust* had its 1,250th Parisian performance in the summer of 1902. In 1863, the opera had possession of two rival establishments in London: at Her Majesty's Drury Lane, and at the Royal Italian Opera at Covent Garden. The first American production took place at the Academy

of Music, New York, in 1863, and in 1883, *Faust* inaugurated the new Metropolitan Opera at Broadway and Thirty-ninth street; however, it was sung in Italian. *Faust*, once the most popular opera in the world, approaches its three-thousand-performance mark in Paris. At Covent Garden, it was performed every season from 1863 to 1911, and until World War II, it was a full hundred performances ahead of all the other works in the repertory. In Budapest it still tops the performance totals of any other opera.

After it inaugurated the Metropolitan Opera in 1883, it was eventually performed so often that the redoubtable critic of the *New York Times*, W. J. Henderson, dubbed the Met not the *Festspielhaus* (Bayreuth's "festival house"), but the *Faustspielhaus*, "the house where they play *Faust*." Italians became enamored with *Faust*, and it was in Italian that earlier generations invariably heard it. In Germany, it was performed as *Margarethe* to distinguish it from their hallowed national treasure, Goethe's *Faust*, a work much more respected, but also much less often performed; in effect, the title *Margarethe* symbolically distanced Gounod's opera from Goethe's epic.

*Faust* is overwhelmingly important in the history of operatic singing. It is impossible even to think of such great voices of the past as Patti, Melba, Eames, Nordica, the de Reszkes, Plançon, Chaliapin, Caruso, di Stefano, and Bjoerling, without thinking of *Faust*. The renowned Marcel Journet sang *Faust*'s Mephistopheles reputedly more than a thousand times, providing the stereotyped image of opera characters as devils in red tights.

Librettists Carré and Barbier dutifully adhered to Goethe's epic, but confined their story to the romance between Faust and Marguerite: nevertheless, their essential leitmotif became the epic's underlying conflict between good and evil; the elderly Faust's rejuvenation resulting from his unholy alliance with the devil.

Gounod's *Faust* presents only a small segment from Goethe's classic, and therefore, could not by any measure of the imagination provide the profound essence of the total epic. Goethe's stage play in verse is immense, and its transformation to the opera stage transcends the limitations of just one opera: Gounod was certainly not Wagner, and could not conceive nor compose a work of such epic complexities as Wagner's *The Ring of the Nibelung*. Gounod himself challenged any comparisons of his work with the whole of Goethe: he had specifically created a love story for which he introduced the inherent accouterments of music drama; a ballet with classical figures, and, at the conclusion, the "Apotheosis," or resurrection chorus. Brahms cynically defended any comparison of Gounod's *Faust* with Goethe's epic: "Any fool can see that!"

Goethe's *Faust* was partly autobiographical. As a young student, he loved and abandoned an innocent girl, his guilt haunting him throughout his life. But more importantly, Goethe was one of the godfathers of German Romanticism of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries: they were searching for a new path to man's salvation and redemption. Kant inspired the Romanticist's by placing man, not God, at the center of the universe; as such, one particular essence of Romanticism became the conflict and tension between spiritual love and mundane love.

In the older *Faust* legends, the underlying conflict dealt primarily with the moral question of good versus evil; those forces are represented by the wavering Faust and the diabolical Mephistopheles in the Goethe epic. Faust bargains with his soul because he has become defeated, frustrated, and despairing in his relentless crusade to find meaning in life. His transformation explodes the war between good and evil: Mephistopheles overpowers Faust, and evil vanquishes good. In essence, Goethe's epic re-mythologized the Bible, using the conflict of good and evil to define the great moral conflicts between life, art, and faith, that classic battle between emotion and reason, the spirit and the flesh, and the sacred and the profane.

Although *Faust* derives from the Medieval conflict between good and evil, or the soul's struggle between salvation and eternal damnation, Goethe's work represented the soul of

Romanticism; a new spiritual quest seeking eternal truths. But in the end, it posed its conflict in terms of morality, its underlying subtext praising the supremacy of virtue and morality, and punishing carnal sin. In the story, woman suffers, but through her travails she achieves salvation and forgiveness: in *Faust*, Goethe had introduced the saving, sacrificing woman, the “eternal woman,” “la femme eterne,” or “ewige weibliche,” the female ideal that ultimately obsessed nineteenth-century German Romantics.

Many operaphiles relish musico-dramatic comparisons with Gounod’s operatic competitors: Berlioz, Boito, and Busoni. In Berlioz’s *La Damnation de Faust*, the dramatic cantata concludes with a ride into hell and an ascent to heaven, one of the supreme challenges in symphonic and choral literature. In Boito’s *Mefistofele*, a windstorm created by an omnipotent God defeats Mefistofele, Faust finding salvation in his return to God. In Busoni’s *Doktor Faust*, Faust resurrects his dead child, and dying himself, breathes life into the child’s body. All three conclusions are dramatically compelling, suggesting the spiritual conflicts of the soul that Goethe found in the old myth and applied to his nineteenth-century quest for eternal truth.

Likewise, Gounod’s conclusion provides dazzling music drama: the trio in which the victimized Marguerite triumphs over her unfaithful lover and the forces of evil, and the soaring and climactic “Anges Purs” that precedes the final “Apotheosis”; these represent musico-dramatic moments approaching spiritual transcendence, written by a composer whose entire life, like that of Faust, vacillated between spiritualism and mundane gratification.

Gounod was a supreme master of lyricism. The famous Act II “Garden Scene” contains a series of the most elegant arias and duets that were unparalleled and unprecedented for their grace and loveliness: until Wagner wrote *Tristan und Isolde*, the “Garden Scene” in *Faust* was considered the quintessence of sensuous romanticism in opera; after Wagner, it can seem almost impossibly small-scaled. Nevertheless, *Faust* was originally conceived, and first performed, as an *opéra comique*; that is, a small-scaled opera with spoken dialogue. Although sung recitatives were added for Strasbourg and ten years later the “Walpurgisnacht” ballet was inserted to satisfy the demands of the Paris Opéra, *Faust* remained in essence what it was designed to be: an intimate rather than spectacle opera.

Gounod’s *Faust* had inherent appeal in Victorian England’s world of propriety; legend speaks of Queen Victoria, old, weak, and sick just before her death, summoning a group of French singers to hear pieces from Gounod’s *Faust*, and smiling whenever she recognized a familiar tune.

Gounod introduced his characteristically Gallic gifts for melody into opera. He was a supreme melodist, the creator of a refined and expressive lyricism that he supported with sensitive harmony and expert orchestration. His opera music is noted for its lyric quality, its charm, and its lovely and fresh melodic invention, music containing a light and dripping sentimentality that is easily absorbed and appreciated. Because his music is restrained, sensitive, delicate, and filled with human values, it remains quite apart from the more ornate grand opera spectacles of Meyerbeer and his emulators.

Though Gounod undertook the operatic medium reluctantly, and enjoyed few real successes outside of *Faust*, the opera remains the high-water mark of French romanticism: Gounod invented that very special style called the French *lyrique*. The essence of the new school became not epic but lyric, not thematic but melodic, not heroic but purely and passionately personal. This new French *lyrique* eventually evolved to impart a new aura of dignity to the subject of its actions, portraying intense personal relationships, strongly marked personalities, and profound human passions; the antithesis of grand opera’s cardboard characters and marching processions in those spectacles of Halévy, Meyerbeer, and Auber.

More importantly, *Faust* and its supreme lyricism rejuvenated French opera: it was a thoroughly modern work for its time, composed in Gounod's new lyrique style that would ultimately become the defining voice of French musical aesthetics for the entire nineteenth century. Great practitioners of Gounod's new school of French lyricism followed him with zeal: Saint-Saëns, Bizet, and Massenet.

Unlike his contemporaries, Bizet and Halévy, Gounod lacked the instincts for dramatic intensity: even his best works are generally considered weak and dramatically unconvincing. Nevertheless, one of his greatest attributes was to gradually build a scene to lyric intensity and end with a coup de theatre. Particularly in *Faust*, there is power and beauty in its music, and there is a profound contrast of human drama juxtaposed against fantasy and sorcery, but each scene concludes with brilliant theatrical effects.

Antagonists of *Faust* will argue vociferously that the character of Marguerite approaches that of a society debutante; that Mephistopheles is tinged with shades of Leporello; and that Faust is little more than a lovesick cavalier. And, by sublimating Goethe's profound transcendental significance and dealing solely with the Marguerite-Faust romance, Gounod surrendered to excessive sentimentality, its musical style elegant but mostly saccharine. Indeed, *Faust* is saturated with Gounod's special lyrical qualities and subtle Gallic sensitivities: it possesses a preponderance of melody and a succession of old-fashioned, operatic Hit Parade songs, which, to many, still remains the essence of the operatic art form.

Nevertheless, *Faust* indeed contains moments of effective, dramatic intensity: Valentin's death, and its theatrically vivid contrast between his intolerance and the inherent morality of the majority; the church tableau that brilliantly captures Marguerite's isolation through its background of organ preludes and chant-like choral writing, Mephistopheles cynical laughter at the conclusion providing the ultimate dramatic contrast. And the concluding "Anges purs, anges radieux" that is ultimately united with the "Apotheosis" represents sheer spectacle and is unquestionably the dramatic coup of the entire opera.

**F***aust* was a brave and forward-looking work: in its day, it refined, perhaps even redefined, the overblown Meyerbeerian concept of French opera. *Faust* set a precedent for integrating music with the nuanced inflections of the French language, scaling down dialogue to intimate moments resembling conversation; for Marguerite, Gounod virtually created a style of music — and singing — that nurtured the species of soprano now known as lyric; the magnificent lyricism and unity of the "Garden Scene" influenced an entire century of French music, such as the stage works of Bizet, Saint-Saëns, Massenet, Delibes, and Lalo, as well as the instrumental music of Franck, Fauré, and D'Indy.

The greatness of *Faust* remains its astonishing melodic inventiveness: the opera contains some of the most beautifully crafted, sensuous, and luminously scored music ever written, melodies that delicately etch their characters and remain fixed in memory. *Faust* is a superbly realized drama, greatly appreciated in its day, and composed by a master lyricist whose melodic legacies inspired generations of French opera composers.

As such, *Faust* is an indispensable opera, a reminder that new currents and trends arise in opera, and there are certainly vastly more intelligible and cohesive opera dramas. However, *Faust* is firmly rooted to the opera stage; its devoted audiences continually hypnotized by Gounod's lyric splendor, music that seems to become engraved in memory not only after the curtain falls, but endure for eternity.



# *Faust*

**Opera in French in five acts**

**Music**

**by**

**Charles Gounod**

**Libretto:**

**Jules Barbier and Michel Carré,**

**after Wolfgang von Goethe:**

***Faust, Part I (1808), Part II (1833)***

**Premiere:**

**Théâtre Lyrique, Paris 1859**

*Principal Characters in Faust*

Faust	Tenor
Mephistopheles	Baritone
Marguerite	Soprano
Wagner	Baritone
Valentin, a soldier,	
Marguerite's brother	Baritone
Siebel, student of Faust	Mezzo-soprano
Martha, Marguerite's neighbor	Contralto

Townsppeople, soldiers, students, chorus of demons, and chorus of angels

TIME: 16th century

PLACE: Germany

*Brief Story Synopsis*

Faust, an aged philosopher, has become disillusioned and frustrated in his quest to find the secrets of the universe: in his despair, he decides to end his life by taking poison. Mephistopheles, the devil, appears before him, offering him youth and a young maiden in return for his soul. Mephistopheles conjures up the irresistible vision of the beautiful Marguerite, and Faust accepts his diabolical offer.

Aided by the wiles of Mephistopheles, Faust successfully courts Marguerite and they both fall in love. Later Marguerite believes that Faust has abandoned and betrayed her: she becomes insane, kills her child, and is imprisoned, awaiting death for infanticide. While in prison, Faust urges her to escape with him, however the delirious Marguerite dies. Mephistopheles draws Faust to the underworld as Marguerite is borne to heaven by angels.

*Story Narrative with Music Examples**Act I - Scene 1: Faust's Study*

Faust is an aged philosopher, alchemist, and practitioner of the magic arts. But life and the pursuit of knowledge have disillusioned him; he has become frustrated and despairing because the secrets of the universe remain an unsolved riddle.

*“J'ai langui, triste et solitaire”*

**Moderato**

**FAUST**



*J'ai lan - guí, triste et so - li - tai - re, J'ai lan-guí, triste et so - li - tai - re,*

**Years, how many! are now behind me, years, how many! are now behind me!**

Old, brooding, and weary of life, he decides to end his life with suicide. He fills a goblet with poison, raises it to his lips, but hesitates when he hears young maidens cheerfully singing from the street, reminding him of the beauty of nature and its inspirations. As he raises the cup again, he pauses to listen to the song of the reapers going to the fields, hymning their gratitude to God. His bitterness increases, and in rage and envy, he invokes Satan.

Faust trembles with fright after sudden flashes of light reveal the gallantly attired archfiend: the devil Mephistopheles. Mephistopheles offers Faust gold and power, but they are declined: Faust only craves youth with its desires, passions, and delights.

*“À moi les plaisirs”*

**Allegro ben marcato**

**FAUST**

The musical score is written on a single staff in treble clef, with a key signature of one sharp (F#) and a time signature of 3/8. The melody begins with a quarter note G4, followed by a half note A4-B4, a quarter note C5, and a quarter note B4-A4. A slur covers the next four notes: G4, F#4, E4, and D4. This is followed by a quarter rest, then a quarter note G4, a quarter note A4, and a quarter note B4. The piece concludes with a quarter note C5 and a quarter note B4. The lyrics are written below the staff, with hyphens indicating syllables across notes.

*À moi les plaisirs, Les jeu - nes maî - tres - ses!*  
**Be mine the delight of Beauty's caresses!**

Mephistopheles promises to fulfill Faust's desires for youth and love in exchange for his soul, his compact specifying that, "On earth I will be your servant, below, you shall wait on me."

Faust hesitates, but when Mephistopheles conjures up the glowing vision of Marguerite at her spinning wheel, he becomes conquered by passion and desire. Rapturously, he addresses the vision of the beautiful Marguerite: "O merveille" ("O wonder.")

Faust has decided to pawn his soul. He seizes Mephistopheles' potion and raises it, toasting the vision of the beautiful Marguerite. Suddenly, Faust undergoes a magical transformation: his gray beard and scholarly garb disappear, and he has become an elegantly clad, young and handsome cavalier. Faust and Mephistopheles leave in search of Marguerite, pleasure, and adventure.

### *Act I - Scene 2: A public Square in the town*

A crowd of students, soldiers, and burghers gather to celebrate the Kermesse, the village fair. Soldiers prepare to go off to war, and the crowd prays for a victory and their speedy return.

A soldier, Marguerite's brother Valentin, implores his friend Siebel, in love with his sister, to protect her while he is away.

*“Avant de quitter ces lieux”*

**Andante**

**VALENTIN**

The musical score is written on a single staff in bass clef, with a key signature of two flats (Bb, Eb) and a time signature of 4/4. The melody begins with a quarter note G2, followed by quarter notes A2, Bb2, and C3. A half note D3 is followed by a quarter note E3. A slur covers the next four notes: D3, C3, Bb2, and A2. This is followed by a quarter note G2, a quarter note F2, and a quarter note E2. The piece concludes with a quarter note D2 and a quarter note C2. The lyrics are written below the staff, with hyphens indicating syllables across notes.

*A - vant de quit - ter ces lieux, Soit na - tal de mes a lieux,*  
**Even the bravest heart may swell in the moment of farewell,**

Wagner, a student, begins to sing a lively song, but Mephistopheles interrupts him with an impudent and sinister hymn praising greed and gold, a blasphemous invocation of Mammon and the Calf of Gold.

*“Le veau d’or est toujours debout”*

**Allegro**

**MEPHISTOPHELES**

*Le veau d'or est tou - jours de - bout,*  
**Clear the way for the Calf of Gold!**

Mephistopheles accepts a cup of wine, but it is not to his taste, and he amazes the crowd by causing new wine to flow from an old keg. When he makes a toast to Marguerite, the protective Valentin draws his sword, but the devil causes it to shatter, protecting himself in a magic circle he has created. The soldiers, realizing that the stranger possesses the powers of the devil, confront Mephistopheles with their swords raised in a cruciform.

*Chorus of Swords:*

**Allegro moderato e maestoso**

**CHORUS**

*De l'enfer qui vient éteindre nos ar - mes,*  
**Our arms assail the powers of Evil,**

Mephistopheles becomes powerless and recoils in terror, departing with ominous threats: “We shall meet again.”

Marguerite appears, reading her prayer book as she returns from church. Siebel yearns for her love but the diabolic Mephistopheles impedes him.

Faust becomes enamored with Marguerite. He approaches her and respectfully offers to join her and escort her home. Confused and blushing, Marguerite refuses. As she walks on, Faust watches her with passion, murmuring that he has indeed fallen in love with her. Mephistopheles observes that Faust seems coy and inexperienced, and cynically suggests that Faust will need his expert aid in winning Marguerite.

The crowd resumes the Kermesse Waltz, the square animated with whirling dancers lost in carefree gaiety.

*Kermesse Waltz:*

**Tempo di valzer**

## Act II: The garden before Marguerite's house

Siebel visits Marguerite's house and leaves a bouquet of flowers at the threshold. Faust and Mephistopheles appear, and Faust becomes overwhelmed by the beauty of her humble dwelling.

*“Salut! demeure chaste et pure!”*

**Larghetto**

**FAUST**



*Sa - lut! demeure chaste et pu - re! Sa-lut! demeure chaste et pure!*  
**Hail! This dwelling pure and lovely!**

Mephistopheles returns and replaces Siebel's flowers with a casket of jewels. Marguerite sits at her spinning wheel and sings a ballad about the King of Thulé, a romantic legend about a king who made a cup of gold for the woman he loved, however, she continually interrupts her song, her thoughts returning to the stranger she met at the Kermesse.

*“Il était un Roi de Thulé”*

**Moderato maestoso**

**MARGUERITE**



*Il é - tait un Roi de Thulé Qui, jusqu'a la tombe fidè - le,*  
**There reigned a King in old Thule who was true hearted unto death,**

Marguerite notices the box of jewels and becomes dazzled by their brilliance, exploding into girlish rapture and delight as she adorns herself with the treasures.

## The Jewel Song:

**Allegretto**

**MARGUERITE**



*Ah! Je risde me voir Si belle en miroir,*  
**Ah! These jewels so bright, it brings one joy to wear,**

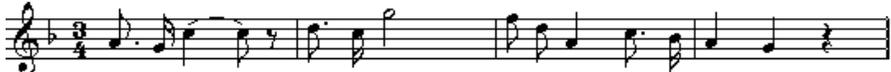
Mephistopheles appears and gallantly salutes both Marguerite and her guardian, Martha, flirting and drawing her away so that Faust can become more intimate with Marguerite. Mephistopheles invokes an evil incantation, calling upon the powers of evil to inspire Marguerite with passion, his diabolical design to capture Marguerite's soul.

As night falls, Marguerite and Faust are alone. Marguerite confesses her love for Faust, and the newfound lovers passionately echo their eternal love for each other.

“Laissezmoi, laissezmoi, contempler ton visage”

**Andante**

**FAUST**



*Laissezmoi, laissezmoi, contempler ton vi - sa - ge,*  
Let me gaze, let me gaze on this vision before me,

“O nuit d’amour! ciel radieux!”

**Andante**

**FAUST**



*O nuit d’amour! ciel radi-eux! Ô douces flammes! Le bonheur silencieux,*  
O night of love! Radiant heaven, and silent happiness,

Marguerite is suddenly overcome with maidenly scruples and urges Faust to leave. She throws him a kiss, and runs to her house, promising to meet him the following day.

Faust and Mephistopheles both watch and listen to Marguerite as she soliloquizes from her window about the rapture of the night, Marguerite crying out to Faust, “hurry back to me my beloved.” Faust rushes to her, and she sinks into his arms. While the lovers are ecstatically embraced, Mephistopheles, the archfiend, laughs triumphantly and sardonically.

### Act III - Scene I: A church

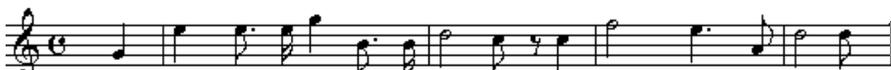
Marguerite believes that Faust betrayed and abandoned her: in a moment of hysterical madness, she killed their child. All have spurned her, and filled with guilt and fear for her salvation, she enters the church to pray and repent for her sins, and for Faust.

In the church, a voice from the shadows cries out, “No, you shall pray no more. You shall not be forgiven”: it is Mephistopheles condemning her to hell; “Farewell, nights of love. Marguerite, your soul is damned,” Mephistopheles tormenting Marguerite with curses and threats. Crying in despair, Marguerite collapses and falls prostrate to the ground.

Prayer: “Seigneur! accueillez la prière”

**Più lento**

**MARGUERITE**



*Sei - gneur! accueillez la pri-è - re Des coeurs mal - heu - reux!*  
O Lord! Hear the tender prayer from a woeful heart!

**Act III - Scene 2: A square outside the Church**

In the town square, Valentin and his comrades have returned from war and praise those heroes who were slain in battle.

**Soldiers Chorus:** “*Gloire immortelle De nos aïeux*”

**Tempo marziale**

**CHORUS of SOLDIERS**



*Gloire immortelle De nos aïeux, Sois nous fidèle, Mourons comme eux!*  
**Glory to our bold heroes, may we follow their courage and virtue!**

The sinister Mephistopheles and his pupil Faust approach the square. Faust is torn by remorse and shame, realizing that he brings only disaster in his wake. Mockingly, Mephistopheles sings an insulting and ribald serenade to Marguerite, each stanza ending with a taunting and sarcastic laugh.

**Serenade:** “*Vous qui faites l’endormie*”

**Allegretto**

**MEPHISTOPHELES**



*Vous qui faites l’endor - mi - e, N’entendezvous pas,*  
**You pretend to sleep, but you contrive to hear,**

Valentin steps forth to defend his sister’s honor. With sword raised, he challenges Faust to a duel, the man he condemns as responsible for Marguerite’s fall from innocence. Mephistopheles intercedes in their duel, applying his devil’s magic to guide Faust’s sword: Valentin falls, mortally wounded.

As Mephistopheles drags Faust away, Marguerite finds her dying brother, who, in his last breath, harshly curses his sister for the shame and tragedy her love for Faust has brought them. Marguerite falls before her dying brother, sobbing frenziedly. As Valentin dies, the crowd prays for peace for his soul.

**Act IV - Scene 1: In the Harz Mountains**

In search of further adventure, Mephistopheles brings Faust to witness the revels of Walpurgis Night, a festival, according to medieval legend, that was held on the eve of the first of May in the Harz Mountains. In a gruesome scene, witches and demons participate in an orgy of wanton revelry invoking evil.

Mephistopheles summons the famous courtesans of history to appear before them: visions of Thais, Cleopatra, and Helen of Troy. Suddenly an apparition of Marguerite appears, crushed as if by the blow of an axe: Faust demands that Mephistopheles take him to Marguerite.



## ***CHAPTER TWELVE***

### ***Operetta***

## Operetta

The term operetta (“opérette” in French; “operette” in German; and “opereta” in Spanish) describes a genre of musical theater. Operetta as an art form is a diminutive of opera; the latter is translated in general terms as a play in which music is the primary element for conveying its story. Purists will find it impossible to make a distinction between the genres of opera and operetta, even though certain general attributes apply to each art form.

Textually and musically, operetta more often than not provides lighter lyrical theater than its opera counterpart; most of operetta’s librettos lean more toward sentimentality, romance, comedy and satire, whereas, with the exception of comic operas, most opera librettos contain dramatic or melodramatic portrayals of extremely profound and tragic conflicts and tensions. Yet when operettas are saturated with extensive satire and humor, it is virtually impossible to distinguish the genre from its opera counterpart, opera buffa. But in general, operettas are usually shorter and far less ambitious than operas, and generally contain much spoken dialogue.

The operetta genre flourished during the second half of the nineteenth century and the first half of the twentieth. In England and the United States, operetta eventually evolved into the musical. Operetta became a full-fledged theatrical art form in Paris beginning in the 1850s. French audiences were seeking an antidote to the increasingly serious and ambitious theatrical spectacles of the Opéra and the Opéra Comique; in those years, the “kings” of French opera were Meyerbeer and Auber, innovators and perpetuators of pure spectacle for the lyric stage.

Operetta began by building and elaborating on the existing vaudeville genre, which was a stage presentation featuring light and comic entertainment enhanced with song and dance. Jacques Offenbach is considered to be the father of operetta. At his Théâtre des Bouffes-Parisiens, he offered satirical, comic, or farcical one-act sketches that he integrated with musical numbers. Eventually he enlarged his format into longer and more comprehensive works in which he more often than not integrated songs seamlessly with the text. Offenbach’s musicals became popularly known as “opéra bouffes” or “opérettes”—literally, comical musical theater.

Operetta became a popular form of mainstream entertainment primarily because its plots portrayed contemporary moral attitudes and topics. The popularity and success of the art form attracted the most talented composers, librettists, performers, managers, directors and designers. In particular, the underlying stories in Offenbach’s operettas benefited from some of the finest theatrical writers of the era, such as Meilhac and Halévy, who provided lighthearted, witty and sparkling scenarios; many of these were far from subtle satires of Parisian life under the second empire of Napoléon III.

In 1858, after a relaxation of the restrictions on the number of stage performers permitted, Offenbach began to compose his first two-act opéras bouffes. His first enduring masterpiece was the mythological satire *Orphée aux enfers* (*Orpheus in the Underworld*), a burlesque on the Olympian gods (satirizing contemporary politicians), whose hilarious can-can ultimately humiliated devotees of serious musical theater. Some of Offenbach’s other major works which continue to maintain their presence on contemporary stages are *La belle Hélène* (1864), *Barbe-bleue* (1866), *La Vie parisienne* (1866), *La Grande-Duchesse de Gérolstein* (1868), and *La Périochole* (1868). By the end of the 1860s Offenbach’s French opéras bouffes, or opérettes, had become the rage in Paris as well as on the international stage. Their unique, witty and satirical character clearly distinguished opéras bouffes not only from contemporary vaudeville, but also from all other forms of lyric theater.

The name Johann Strauss immediately summons images of elegant nineteenth-century Viennese society and elegantly dressed people dancing to sentimental waltz music at sumptuous balls. The dynasty of esteemed music traditions began with the father, Johann Strauss the elder (1804–1849) and continued with his son, Johann Strauss, Jr. (1825-1899). The latter was the composer of the operetta *Die Fledermaus*.

During the second quarter of the nineteenth century, the elder Strauss gained acclaim not only in his native Vienna, but also throughout Europe, astonishing audiences with the brilliance of his orchestral performances as well as the melodiousness of his own music compositions. The centerpiece of his successes was the waltz, earning him the popular sobriquet of the “Waltz King.”

Although the waltz as a dance form preceded Strauss by almost a century, he became its greatest exponent during his lifetime. It originated as a highly popular eighteenth-century Austro-German dance, the “ländler,” which later evolved into the waltz in its contemporary form. Its most prominent feature was embracing couples, slide stepping and turning in three-quarter time. At first, the dancers’ intimacy shocked polite society, but that failed to keep the dance from becoming the craze of Europe. As the nineteenth century progressed, the waltz evolved into a ballroom dance par excellence, enthusiastically embraced as the favorite form of popular entertainment.

Vienna became the center of the new waltz frenzy. The elder Strauss and his sons composed original waltz tunes and performed them extensively with their orchestras. Virtually every home in Vienna had a piano, and Strauss waltz music sat prominently on its desk. As Strauss succeeded in popularizing the waltz, it became the featured dance at carnivals and masquerades. The Viennese enthusiastically attended these events with a passion, determined to make their dancing last from early evening until early morning. Prim and proper society condemned the sensuousness of Strauss’s music, considering the intimacy of the waltz dancing immoral. Nevertheless, the public had become intoxicated with the dance, and its popularity was irreversible.

All over Europe, waltz music was in demand, and many composers—great and not so great—industriously composed waltz music for their voracious audiences. Haydn and Mozart wrote much dance music; Schubert wrote several volumes of waltzes; Weber’s “Invitation to the Dance” for piano represented an early introduction of waltz to the concert stage; Chopin wrote idealized waltzes that were not for dancing; and there were contributions by Brahms, Dvorák, Richard Strauss, Ravel, and Debussy, among others.

As a composer, the elder Strauss was unusually skillful; his music possessed insinuating melodies, grace, vitality, and a fiery energy. He composed dance music unceasingly, leaving a legacy of popular pieces such as the waltz “Lorelei-Rheinklänge” (“Sounds of the Rhine Lorelei”) (1843) and the “Radetzky March” (1848), in addition to polkas and quadrilles and waltzes.

But there was more to the elder Strauss’s waltzes than their appeal to the public’s passion for dancing and entertainment. Strauss was a master of the orchestra before the era of autocratic conductors. His orchestra played with a heretofore unknown precision and discipline, intonation, rhythmic subtlety, and a refined integration of its ensemble. In many respects, Strauss’s mastery of orchestral virtuosity and precision may have established the guidelines for the development of the modern virtuoso symphony orchestra. Strauss the conductor stood authoritatively on the platform before his orchestra, a hero in his time who was often referred to as the “Austrian Napoleon.”

The elder Strauss’s waltz music, as well as his orchestras that performed them, had become a phenomenal success. The Strauss music world grew into a huge business enterprise that at one time employed some 200 musicians who provided music for as many as six balls in a single night. But the dynasty did not end with Johann Strauss, the “Waltz King.”

**S**trauss fathered a large family, and was as despotic a father as he was a conductor of his orchestra. His career was his first priority, so attention to his family was a rarity. He lived solely for his orchestra and its financial rewards. Nevertheless, he developed an antipathy toward a musician's life, and he did everything possible to deter any of his children from becoming professional musicians.

His eldest son, Johann Baptiste (Johann Strauss, Jr.), the composer of *Die Fledermaus*, was born in Vienna in 1825. As years passed, the elder Strauss abandoned his wife and married another woman, fathering four more children. When his young son Johann indicated his interest in music, the elder Strauss had already been estranged from his original family, and therefore was powerless to deter his son's interests. However, the young Strauss's mother recognized her son's talents and encouraged his further musical education, at first arranging violin lessons for him with a member of his father's orchestra and subsequently intensive study in musical theory. By the age of fifteen young Johann Strauss, Jr. was a professional who was playing in various orchestras.

In 1844, at the age of nineteen, Johann Jr. made his debut with his own small orchestra at a *soirée dansante* (evening of social dancing), an event that established him as his father's most serious rival and competitor. The father-son rivalry transcended music and became even more contentious when each supported opposing factions during the European revolutions of 1848. But their vociferous feuds eventually ended with a reconciliation of their differences, and when Johann Sr. died in 1849, Johann Jr. took over his father's orchestras, by that time part of a considerable enterprise that required assistant conductors, librarians, copyists, publicists, and booking agents for their numerous European and world tours.

In 1863 Johann Jr. was appointed to the official position of Hofballmusikdirektor, (Music Director of the Court Balls). As the popularity of and demand for his music and orchestra increased, he enlisted the services of his equally talented brothers, Josef and Eduard. In subsequent years, the Strauss Jr. orchestra achieved international renown, visiting Paris, London, Boston, and New York.

Johann Jr. composed some of the most popular songs of the day, music that was sung in the streets and in theaters, danced at balls, and performed in concert throughout Europe. His most famous polkas are "Annen" (1852), "Tritsch-Tratsch" (1858), "Excursion Train" (1864), "Thunder and Lightning" (1868), and "Tik Tak" (1874). Some of the most popular of his over 200 waltzes are "Morning Papers" (1864), "By the Beautiful Blue Danube" (1867), "Artist's Life" (1867), "Tales from the Vienna Woods" (1868), "Wine, Women and Song" (1869), "Vienna Blood" (1873), "Voices of Spring" (1883), and "Emperor Waltz" (1889).

Strauss's waltzes, songs and dance music were the output of an astute and ingenious craftsman and musician. These pieces represented great contributions to the musical repertory, and many of them contain elaborate introductions and codas, a refined melodic inspiration, and subtle rhythms. This member of the new generation of the Strauss family had become an ingenious master of the waltz. He was now poised to embark on another musical adventure: the development of a new genre of Viennese operetta.

**B**y the 1870s, xenophobic Viennese theatrical impresarios became alarmed by the vast number of imported works that were dominating their musical stage—in particular, the opérettes of Jacques Offenbach. Nineteenth-century Austria was the Hapsburg Empire. Austrian Francophobia extended beyond memories of Napoleon and the Second Empire, and Austrians were seeking their own theatrical identity that would express their own ethos and culture. They turned to their most singular popular composer, Johann Strauss, Jr., a composer of "true" Viennese music. In Strauss, they envisioned their musical hero, a man who possessed the stature and talent to meet the formidable task of developing Austrian musical theater. Strauss

was further encouraged to meet the challenge by his wife, the singer Jetty Treffz, who persuaded him to resign his position as Hofballmusikdirektor. Now in his mid-forties, Strauss agreed to concentrate all of his efforts on music for the stage, and ceded the direction of the family orchestra to his only surviving brother, Eduard.

In 1871, Strauss's first completed operetta, *Indigo* or *The Forty Thieves* (eventually reworked for Paris as *1001 Nights*), reached the stage and achieved unquestionable success. Often, Strauss adapted themes from his ballroom waltz music and injected them into his operettas. The waltz from *The Forty Thieves*, "Tausend und eine Nacht," has endured beyond the operetta itself.

Strauss reached the pinnacle of his Viennese operetta successes with *Der Karneval in Rom* (*The Carnival in Rome*) (1873), *Die Fledermaus* (1874), and *Der Zigeunerbaron* (*The Gypsy Baron*) (1885). The latter's second-act love duet is considered by many to portray the quintessence of the Viennese romantic spirit. Many of his other operettas are rarely performed in modern times because their librettos lack depth or modern significance: *Cagliostro in Wien* (*Cagliostro in Vienna*) (1875), about the exploits of an Italian adventurer; the satirical Offenbachian-style *Prinz Methusalem* (*Prince Methusaleh*) (1877), *Blinde Kuh* (*The Blind Cow*) (1878), *Das Spitzentuch der Königin* (*The Queen's Lace*) (1880), and *Der Lustige Krieg* (*The Happy War*) (1881). The latter is the source of the popular waltz "Rosen aus dem Süden." *Eine Nacht in Venedig* (*One Night in Venice*) (1883), although rarely performed, has been recognized musically as perhaps his most beautiful operetta, a work he composed without knowing the plot; when he finally read the dialogue he became exasperated. Nevertheless, it is the operetta *Die Fledermaus* that is universally considered Strauss's *tour de force*, an ingenious work whose text and music magnificently capture the vivacious romantic and sentimental spirit of late nineteenth-century Vienna.

Like Offenbach, Strauss wanted to be remembered as a composer of serious opera. Although Offenbach indeed succeeded—although posthumously—with *The Tales of Hoffmann*, Strauss's only serious attempt at opera per se was *Ritter Pázmán* (*Pazman the Knight*), but it failed to hold the stage. Afterwards, Strauss decided to devote all of his energies to lighthearted operettas; his final works were *Fürstin Ninetta* (*Queen Ninetta*) (1893) for the celebration of his artistic golden jubilee, *Waldmeister* (*The Forester*) (1895), and *Die Göttin der Vernunft* (*The Wise Queen*) (1897).

Strauss died in 1899. He was a rare musician who achieved the combination of fame and extensive financial rewards from orchestral performances and tours, as well as from his prodigious composition of over 550 musical works, among them 15 operettas. Like his father, he had an undeniable genius for inventing music that was easily discernible and universally appealing. For this reason his music receives infinite praise from the most innocent music lover as well as the most sophisticated.

Strauss unabashedly integrated the irresistible melodic grace and vitality of his musical inventions into his operettas. By bringing the ballroom into the theater he virtually invented the genre of Viennese operetta, an art form whose music is profoundly sensuous and romantic and possesses a delectable appeal. It is evocative music that conveys the enchanting mood and sublime ambience of fairy-tale Vienna, a world of handsome young men and beautiful young ladies, of sentimentality, charm, dance and romance.

Today, Strauss's music survives and thrives, prey for arrangers who have adapted and popularized it for new generations—a trend of which Strauss himself approved. Perhaps one of the greatest tributes to the unique musical inventions of Johann Strauss, Jr. comes from the unrelated Richard Strauss, who commented about the waltzes he composed for his opera *Der Rosenkavalier*: "...how could I have composed those without thinking of the laughing genius of Vienna?"

**D**ie *Fledermaus* is perhaps one of the finest operettas of its period, and 125 years after its premiere it has proven to be an incontrovertible classic of the lyric stage. Viewed in its entirety of text and music, it is a work of supreme musical theater, a magnificent blend of solid plot, wit, credible characterizations, and magnificent musical inventions.

At times, legends about the lyric theater rival their inherent melodrama. One legend about *Die Fledermaus* relates that Strauss composed the work in a mere six weeks, and many aficionados of opera never cease to be amazed by the rapidity in which a composer's inspiration can materialize; the composition of the bel canto operas of Rossini and Donizetti are another perfect example. History indeed affirms that Strauss sketched out *Die Fledermaus* in six weeks, but six months elapsed from the start of its composition to its ultimate production. During that time many of its songs had been released for publication; and in particular, Rosalinde's "Csárdás" was performed at a charity ball and received immediate acclaim.

Another legend claims that *Die Fledermaus* was a failure and closed after sixteen performances. But in truth, it closed shortly after its premiere because the theater had been pre-booked by a visiting company; nevertheless, *Die Fledermaus* returned immediately thereafter, and the accolades have never ceased.

**T**heater is illusion, but it simultaneously possesses a sense of realism. In great comedy, the humor is not necessarily derived from what is actually happening on the stage, but from the realization that those comic events could indeed happen in real life. *Die Fledermaus* portrays some awfully silly things that people are capable of doing, and the viewer-listener responds to the magnificence of its humor because it portrays a truth—a realistic comic truth of human shortcomings.

The kernel of the *Die Fledermaus* story involves the mistaken arrest of one person for another (Alfred instead of Eisenstein), and the voluntary later surrender of the person who was really supposed to be imprisoned (Eisenstein). But the real humor involves Eisenstein's one-night avoidance of jail to attend Prince Orlofsky's party, which results in his presumed infidelity and betrayal of his wife, and the comic complications when all meet in prison the next day. The comic essence of *Die Fledermaus* springs from the fact that everyone achieves that great fantasy of being someone else for a day, but when true identities are exposed at the police station the morning after, the characters' fantasies surrender to stark reality.

The original story of *Die Fledermaus* is generally attributed to Roderich Benedix (1811-1873), the writer of *Das Gefängnis (The Prison)*, a popular comedy that premiered in Berlin in 1851. Twenty years later, the renowned French writers Henry Meilhac and Ludovic Halévy adapted the all-but-forgotten play and produced it as a comedy in three acts at the Théâtre du Palais-Royal in 1872; their title was *Le Réveillon (The Party)*. The success of the Meilhac-Halévy play, as well as the wit and humor in its underlying story, inspired the Viennese Theater an der Wien to purchase its rights. They immediately commissioned Johann Strauss to set the play to music.

In the hands of the French writers Meilhac and Halévy, the story's original German antecedents were transformed into a purely Gallic escapade. So the story had to be newly translated and adapted to Viennese taste, a task that was admirably achieved by two of the finest theatrical craftsmen of the day, Carl Haffner and Franz Richard Genée, librettists/scenarists who faced the formidable challenge of converting a spoken play to musical theater and keeping the plot moving even though song usurps time for dialogue and action.

In the French *Le Réveillon* play, Fanny (Rosalinde) plays an almost minor part, merely calling on her husband at the prison in the final scene to confront him with evidence of his infidelity. But the librettists knew well that an opera/opera required a leading lady, one who would be present in each act. So they devised the masterstroke of integrating Rosalinde into the

first and second acts. Therefore, in Act I the avenging Dr. Falke invites Eisenstein to Prince Orlofsky's party before he serves his jail term, but he also secretly invites Rosalinde to the party. And their great modification was to invent her appearance at the party under the plausible guise of a masked and disguised Hungarian countess, whose identity is unrecognized by her husband.

The maid Adele appeared only sparsely in the opening scenes of *Le Réveillon*. The librettists added more character depth by embellishing her role; in the operetta she appears at Prince Orlofsky's second-act party because her sister Ida, one of the ladies of the Opéra ballet, invited her. With the introduction of Rosalinde and Adele at Orlofsky's party, the comedy surrounding the unsuspecting Eisenstein becomes irony: he believes that he has seen Adele somewhere but cannot quite place her; both Adele and Rosalinde certainly recognize him; and he never suspects that the masked Hungarian countess with whom he has become smitten might be his wife. Rosalinde, on the other hand, not only recognizes Adele, but also becomes appalled when she notices that her maid is wearing one of her dresses.

In *Le Réveillon*, Fanny's former lover is a violin virtuoso who was her music teacher four years earlier. Fanny fell madly in love with him but refused to marry him, dutifully obeying her father, who was appalled at the thought that his daughter would marry a musician. But the violin virtuoso has now achieved success as the "chef d'orchestre hongrois" to a rich Russian nobleman, Prince Yermontof (Prince Orlofsky), and the violin teacher's presence is explained by the fact that his patron and employer is visiting the area. But the spurned fiddler has learned that Fanny's husband and rival is about to serve a prison sentence. His obsession for Fanny as well as his revenge for being spurned by her is unappeasable. So, while he is in town, he decides to visit his former love with the hope that he will be able to compromise her. Of course, in Strauss's *Die Fledermaus* version of the story, the fiddler has become Alfred, a tenor whose singing melts the resistance of his former pupil, Rosalinde.

Eisenstein's repeating watch has played a significant role in all of his apparent voluminous adventures and conquests. At Orlofsky's party, Eisenstein shows the watch to the Hungarian countess who immediately seizes it and foils his efforts to have it returned. In the final prison scene, she produces it as her indisputable evidence of her husband's infidelity; she has not only witnessed his indiscretions, but also has Eisenstein's repeating watch: Rosalinde's smoking gun.

The character of Prince Orlofsky must be viewed in the perspective of mid-nineteenth-century aristocratic excess. In particular, France was a playground for a host of Russian nobles. Prince Orlofsky (Yermontof in *Le Réveillon*) was supposedly modeled on the Russian Prince Paul Demidof, a notorious character of the period whose renown was attributed to his immense wealth and his obsession with pleasure; he was twenty-three years old when he descended upon Paris and turned its social life topsy-turvy with his extravagances.

Another model for *Die Fledermaus*'s Prince Orlofsky could have been a young Russian named Narishkine, even richer than Demidof and quite as mad. A Parisian diarist, Comte Horace de Viel Castel, described Demidof in 1860 as "a disgusting imbecile, worn out with debauchery." He added that there was no viler creature who could be imagined on earth—insolent to his inferiors, cowardly and false with those who stood up to him.

Demidof or Narishkine? At the time, there was an abundance of role models for the jaded Prince, a weak and sickly man who was unable to find joy from his wealth.

**T**he greatness of *Die Fledermaus*'s comic story is that it is peopled with real characters, identifiable to all. But its true grandeur is Strauss's music that refines and emphasizes the plot's ironies and situations, and unifies them into a credible and seamless unity. The entire action is bathed in an atmosphere of refined sensuality, so characteristic of Viennese operetta.

It has been said that the operetta's "Fledermaus Waltz" is one of the great classical tunes of all time, a slice of chocolate cake from Old Vienna that defines the spirit of the era as well as the entire operetta, and that a sparkling performance of *Die Fledermaus* sends the audience home immersed in the frothy champagne that swirls so abundantly around its stage. In Austria, *Die Fledermaus* is a hallowed work that evokes generational nostalgia, memories of a world in which delightful music represents the ideal escape from a turbulent world.

In the end, Johann Strauss's *Die Fledermaus* has achieved theatrical immortality, a longevity that has survived time and fashion triumphantly. The operetta has transcended its origins and become an acknowledged cornerstone of the lyric theater. It is a tribute to this operetta that it is included in the repertoires of many opera companies. *Die Fledermaus* can legitimately be called immortal, magnificent lyric theater that continues to entertain and enchant its audiences through its lighthearted story and, of course, through the vitality and sparkle of Strauss's ebullient music.

# *Die Fledermaus*

## “The Bat”

Operetta in German in three acts

Music

by

Johann Strauss, Jr.

Libretto by Carl Haffner and Richard Genée,  
after Henri Meilhac and Ludovic Halévy’s French satire,

*Le Réveillon (The Party)*

Premiere:

Theater an der Wien, Vienna

April 1874

***Principal Characters in Die Fledermaus***

Gabriel von Eisenstein, a man of substantial private means	Tenor (or Baritone)
Rosalinde, his wife	Soprano
Frank, a prison governor	Baritone
Prince Orlofsky	Mezzo-soprano
Alfred, a singing teacher	Tenor
Dr. Falke (the Bat), a notary	Baritone
Dr. Blind, a lawyer	Tenor
Adele, Rosalinde's maid	Soprano
Ida, Adele's sister	Soprano
Frosch, a jailer	speaking role

Guests and servants of Prince Orlofsky

TIME: Late 19th century

PLACE: Vienna, Austria

***Brief Story Synopsis***

Gabriel von Eisenstein was sentenced to serve a short jail term for insulting a government official. His friend, Dr. Falke, seethes with revenge against him because Eisenstein had earlier embarrassed and humiliated him after a party they had attended. Falke's revenge against Eisenstein takes place that evening at Prince Orlofsky's party. He has persuaded Eisenstein to attend the party before he begins serving his jail term, and he has also invited Eisenstein's wife, Rosalinde, to attend the party disguised as a Hungarian countess. Falke's intention is to create havoc in Eisenstein's marriage by having his wife witness her husband's indiscretions with other women.

Earlier, Alfred, a former lover of Rosalinde, tried to compromise her. He believed that Eisenstein went off to serve his jail term, so he invited himself to dine with Rosalinde. But suddenly the jailer came to collect his prisoner. Rosalinde avoided embarrassment and scandal by convincing the jailer that Alfred was her husband, Eisenstein. Alfred left for jail wearing Eisenstein's dressing gown.

At Prince Orlofsky's party, Eisenstein becomes enthralled by the beautiful Hungarian countess, who steals his repeater watch while he attempts to seduce her. The watch will eventually become Rosalinde's proof of her husband's guilt.

After Prince Orlofsky's party, Eisenstein presents himself at the jail to serve his term. But he discovers an Italian singer dressed in his dressing gown and being addressed as Eisenstein.

In the end, everyone's indiscretions are revealed, and all misunderstandings are reconciled.



Rosalinde enters in agitation. She heard Alfred singing his serenade from the garden, and she is fearful that he has come to compromise her. More importantly, she is afraid she will again find him irresistible, and in particular his resonant tenor voice.

Adele is eager to go to the Orlofsky party with her sister Ida, so she feigns tears and asks her mistress for the evening off, explaining that she wants to visit a sick aunt. But Rosalinde refuses her request because she needs Adele's services in the evening; her husband, Gabriel von Eisenstein, is to start a five-day prison sentence, and before he goes he must have a good dinner. Adele leaves the room, perturbed and weeping.

Alfred appears before Rosalinde, impetuously appealing that they renew their love affair; after all, it would be a wonderful opportunity for them since he has learned that Eisenstein will be in jail for a few days. Alfred boldly promises Rosalinde that he will return in the evening after Eisenstein has left. This is an offer that Rosalinde has difficulty resisting: "Oh, if only he wouldn't sing! When I hear his high A, my strength fails me!"

Eisenstein arrives with his stuttering lawyer, Dr. Blind. They are both hostile to each other as they argue and exchange mutual recriminations. Eisenstein was arrested because he insulted a government official and was summoned to court. Each blames the other for the unfortunate outcome of the court case. According to Dr. Blind, they lost the case because Eisenstein was in contempt of court when he lost his temper; according to Eisenstein, Blind conducted the case like a congenital idiot.

Rosalinde intervenes to pacify her husband, trying to placate his anger by reminding him he must serve only five short days in prison. But Eisenstein responds in exasperation, shouting that it will be eight days—an increased sentence because of Dr. Blind's incompetence.

*"Nein, mit solchen Advocaten"*

**Allegro moderato**  
**EISENSTEIN**



*Nein, mit solchen Advocaten ist verkauft man und verrathen! da verliert man die Geduld!*  
**Only an awful lawyer could destroy his own employer! It's enough to drive one mad!**

Blind suggests that as soon as Eisenstein is free, he will appeal the case and prove that he is astute at legal chicanery. However, Eisenstein is implacable. He becomes irritated and peeved, and then pushes Blind from the house.

Eisenstein rings for Adele, who arrives in tears as she complains about the condition of her poor sick aunt. But Eisenstein is more concerned about his last dinner before prison, so he sends Adele to the hotel to order a first-rate dinner. In the meantime, Rosalinde prepares for her husband's prison stay, and searches for old and shabby clothes for him to wear in prison.

The notary Dr. Falke, Eisenstein's old friend and drinking companion, arrives. Dr. Falke is the antagonist in a secret intrigue to embarrass Eisenstein. Falke earned the sobriquet "Fledermaus," or "Bat," when Eisenstein played a practical joke on him after both attended a costume party. Falke was dressed as a bat, and was humiliated when Eisenstein placed him on a bench and exposed his drunkenness in broad daylight. Ever since, Falke has planned revenge against Eisenstein.

Now, Eisenstein will become Falke's victim. Falke entices Eisenstein by explaining that he is authorized to invite him to Prince Orlofsky's sumptuous party that evening. He persuades Eisenstein to delay starting his prison sentence by one day so that they can both attend the party. It is a party that offers the prospect of many attractive young ladies from the ballet; certainly, one or two of them will be easy prey for Eisenstein if he plays his game with his repeater watch,

an unusual watch with a spring-loaded striking mechanism to indicate the time. But unknown to Eisenstein, Falke has secretly invited Rosalinde, and Adele has been invited by her sister Ida to Prince Orlofsky's party; Falke will achieve his revenge by embarrassing and humiliating Eisenstein.

Falke has led Eisenstein into temptation. Eisenstein hesitates, overcome with a momentary sense of guilt because he will be enjoying himself while his dear wife Rosalinde will be home alone. Nevertheless, Falke pacifies Eisenstein's uneasiness and assures him that no one will ever know about it because Eisenstein will attend incognito as the unknown Marquis Renard. Eisenstein is won over, and the pair gloat as they fantasize about the great fun and amusement that awaits them.

**“Ein Souper uns heute winkt”**

**Allegro non troppo**  
**EISENSTEIN**

The musical score for Eisenstein's song is written in treble clef, key of D major (two sharps), and 2/4 time. It consists of two staves of music. The first staff has four measures, and the second staff has four measures. The lyrics are written below the notes.

*Ein Sou - per uns heu - te winkt, wie noch garkeins da - ge - we - sen,*  
Ah, what joys the night will bring, pleasure for the gods to savor,

*schö - ne Mäd - chen, aus - er - le - sen zwanglos dort man lacht und singt!*  
Beauties eager for our favor, all night long we'll laugh and sing!

After Falke departs, Rosalinde, Gabriel, and Adele appear solemn, but each is secretly delighted in the anticipation of the evening's forthcoming adventures. Eisenstein is dressed in formal evening attire and is highspirited as he impatiently contemplates attending Prince Orlofsky's party. Rosalinde has decided to give Adele the evening off, conquering her ambivalent feelings of hope and fear by deciding that after her husband's departure an innocent evening alone with Alfred might be quite enjoyable. And Adele has achieved her moment of freedom, and has even planned to "borrow" one of her mistress's dresses so she can attend the party with her sister Ida.

Rosalinde feigns a tearful farewell to Eisenstein by describing the anguish she will experience during the next eight days without him; she will think of him at breakfast when his empty cup will stare at her, at midday when his food will be untouched, and again at night when she realizes her loneliness.

**“So muss allein ich bleiben”**

**Moderato espressivo**  
**ROSALINDE**

The musical score for Rosalinde's song is written in treble clef, key of B-flat major (two flats), and 3/4 time. It consists of one staff of music with four measures. The lyrics are written below the notes.

*So muss allein ich bleiben, acht Tage oh - ne Dich!*  
So I must say farewell, dear, and try to carry on!

Eisenstein tears himself away. However, he carefully snatches the carnation that came with his supper sent from the hotel, and places it in his buttonhole.





Dr. Falke introduces Eisenstein to an arriving guest, a Chevalier Chagrin, who is none other than Frank, the prison warden, comfortable that his prisoner Eisenstein is now safely in jail, and ready and eager to enjoy the party. Immediately, the Chevalier begins to court Adele.

The fun and frolic of the party begin in earnest when Rosalinde arrives, entering majestically as a Hungarian countess but disguised by a mask. Falke, the master of this intrigue, explains that this illustrious Hungarian countess could venture only incognito into such company. Rosalinde immediately becomes exasperated when she sees her husband, Eisenstein, flirting outrageously with her maid and other young ladies. She thought that her husband was in jail, but she realizes that she has been deceived and resolves to punish him.

Eisenstein does not realize that the Hungarian countess is his wife Rosalinde and, enthralled by her beauty, he proceeds to flirt with her.

**“Dieser Anstand, so manierlich”**

**Un poco moderato**  
**EISENSTEIN**



*Dieser Anstand, so manierlich, diese Taille fein und zierlich,*  
**What a manner, she's so gracious, and her figure, so curvacious,**

Eisenstein is certain that his conquest of the countess is succeeding when she apparently faints on a sofa and then presses her hand to her heart. She explains that she had a momentary attack of an old illness and asks him to take her pulse. Eisenstein becomes elated by the opportunity and immediately produces his jeweled repeater watch, a novelty that always seems to seduce his prey. Rosalinde is determined to teach her perfidious husband a lesson. She flirts with him and then they play a game of counting their heartbeats; their hearts are beating faster because they have discovered love. But while they fantasize about love and romance, Rosalinde surreptitiously steals the jeweled watch.

Adele suggests that she is prepared to bet that the unknown Hungarian countess is a fake and urges her to remove her mask. The countess declines, and proceeds to convince everyone of her legitimate royal credentials. She sings a fiery Hungarian csárdás, “the music of her fatherland.” She begins with mournful laments and nostalgia for Hungary, and explains the pain that separation from her beloved homeland has caused her. Nevertheless, she concludes with her philosophy that happiness can be achieved only through drink and merriment.

**Csárdás: “Klänge der Heimat, ihr weckt mir das Sehnen”**

**Langsam**  
**ROSALINDE**



*Klänge der Heimat, ihr weckt mir das Sehnen, rufet die Thränen in's Auge mir!*  
**Songs of my homeland, you fill me with longing, mem'ries sad with tears!**

In the meantime, Frank—the Chevalier Chagrin—has fallen head over heels in love with Adele and her sister Ida. In particular, Adele attracts him, and he pursues her everywhere.

Seeking further amusement, the guests urge Dr. Falke to relate the story of his sobriquet, the Bat. But Eisenstein quickly intervenes and triumphantly relates the story of how a year or two ago, after a fancy ball, he had deceived his drunken friend Falke, whom he exposed in broad daylight in his bat costume. (Ergo: Falke has contrived the “Bat’s Revenge” against the man who humiliated him.) Quietly, the vengeful Falke remarks “Out of sight is not out of mind!”

Prince Orlofsky decides to rejuvenate the spirit of his party and invites the guests to join him in a toast to champagne, the king of all wines.

**“Im Feuerstrom der Reben”**

**Allegro con brio**  
**ORLOFSKY, EISENSTEIN, ADELE**



*Im Feu - er - strom der Re - ben, tra la la la la la la la,*  
**The sparkling wine is flowing, tra la la la la la la,**

Falke leads the guests to vow friendship, eternal and everlasting brotherhood and sisterhood. All kiss each other copiously, underscored by a gentle and sentimental waltz.

**“Brüderlein, Brüderlein und Schwesterlein”**

**Allegretto moderato**  
**FALKE**



*Brüder - lein, Brüderlein und Schwesterlein wollen*  
**Brotherhood, brotherhood and sisterhood, to each**



*Al - le wir sein, stimmt mit mir ein!*  
**other we sing, we sing, as lovers should.**

Prince Orlofsky calls upon his guests to dance, and all join in the swirling “Fledermaus Waltz” while singing of the joys of this night of pleasure.

Orlofsky ordered that Frank’s and Eisenstein’s glasses be continuously replenished. Both have become intoxicated and tipsy, each assisting the other to stand upright. Rosalinde, Falke and Orlofsky gleefully laugh as they contemplate the surprise when the two meet in prison.

Frank asks Eisenstein the time, but his watch is not working. Suddenly Eisenstein remembers that the countess took his repeater watch. He approaches her and begs her to unmask, but she mysteriously warns him about insisting: if he were to see her face, the blemish on her nose would shock him. Orlofsky and the other guests burst into laughter.

The clock strikes six in the morning. Eisenstein and Frank, both equally drunk, become alarmed. Eisenstein realizes that he should be off to serve his jail sentence before dawn, and Frank realizes that he should be at his jail and at work. Eisenstein and Frank, not knowing each other’s true identity, stagger out together.

**Act 3: The city jail, early that morning**

Alfred, who went to prison as Eisenstein's replacement, is heard singing from his cell his earlier serenade to Rosalinde, "Täubchen, holdes Täubchen mein." Frosch, the drunken jailer, insists that he be silent, but his efforts are unsuccessful. Nevertheless, Alfred has tired of his noble sacrifice for Rosalinde's love, and calls for a lawyer to get him out.

As Frosch staggers off to check the other prisoners, Frank arrives at the jail. Unsteadily, he waltzes about as he recalls the delights of Orlofsky's party, the beautiful Olga and Ida, and that delightful Marquis Renard with whom he swore eternal brotherhood. He tries to make himself some tea, but is unsettled by the effects of drinking so much champagne at the party. He settles for a glass of water. As he attempts to read the morning paper, he falls asleep.

Frosch awakens Frank to deliver his daily report. All has been in order except for that Herr von Eisenstein, who has demanded a lawyer. Frosch reports that he has sent for Dr. Blind.

Frosch leaves to answer a bell. He returns to advise Frank that two ladies are seeking the Chevalier Chagrin. Frank becomes perturbed and uneasy when he learns that the callers are Olga and Ida. Nevertheless, his concerns are relieved when Olga (Adele) reveals the truth to him: she is not really an actress but would like to be one, and she believes that the Chevalier, a man of obvious influence, can help her get on the stage. To prove her acting talents, Adele impersonates successively an innocent country girl, a queen exuding dignity as well as condescension, and a Parisian marquise flirting with a young count.

**"Spiel' ich die Unschuld vom Lande"**

**Allegro moderato**  
**ADELE**



*Spiel'ich die Unschuld vom Lande, na - türlich im kurzen Gewan - de,*  
I'd have the greatest success as a country girl, wearing short dresses,

While Frank admires Adele's performance, the bell rings again. He looks out the window, and in surprise sees the Marquis Renard. Frank hurriedly orders Frosch to admit the new caller, but first to show the ladies to another room. Adele and Ida are placed in cell 13, the only available room.

The Marquis Renard—Eisenstein—has arrived to start his prison sentence. He is surprised when he encounters his new friend, the Chevalier Chagrin, and assumes that the Chevalier is also under arrest. But Frank admits that he is not Chevalier Chagrin at all, but the director of the prison. Likewise, the Marquis Renard reveals that he is none other than Gabriel von Eisenstein, at the jail to serve his eight-day term.

Frank becomes skeptical, if not incredulous. He explains that he personally took Eisenstein into custody the previous evening, and further, that Eisenstein was wearing his dressing gown and dining intimately with his wife. Frank tells Eisenstein that he has the man right here in his jail, safely under lock and key.

Frosch announces the arrival of a masked lady (Rosalinde), and Frank goes out to see her. While he is away, Dr. Blind arrives, claiming that his client Eisenstein has summoned him. (It was Alfred.)

Eisenstein becomes anxious, determined to discover who was with his wife and wearing his evening cap and dressing gown. He decides to investigate the matter incognito, and he demands to borrow Blind's wig, gown, spectacles and papers. Both go off into another room to make the exchange.

Frosch returns with Alfred, still wearing Eisenstein’s evening cap and dressing gown, and complaining that he is bored and that no one pays attention to him. Alfred is delighted when he finds Rosalinde, but she cautions him that her husband may arrive at the prison momentarily, and if he should find Alfred dressed in his evening cap and gown, he will explode into a fury.

Alfred suggests that they resolve their dilemma by speaking to a lawyer; he has sent for him, and he has just arrived at the jail. The lawyer — Eisenstein disguised as Dr. Blind — suddenly appears. Eisenstein/Blind witnesses his unfaithful wife in the presence of her lover, and in his rage has difficulty speaking. Nevertheless, he disguises his voice and exhorts the pair to tell him the entire truth. Dutifully, Alfred narrates his strange adventure the night before: he was dining with the beautiful lady, and his misfortune was that he was arrested in place of her husband.

Eisenstein/Blind has difficulty remaining impassive, and vehemently scolds Rosalinde, causing Rosalinde and Alfred to become uneasy and apprehensive.

**“Ich stehe voll Zagen”**

**Andante**  
**ROSALINDE**

**ALFRED**

*Ich ste - he voll Zu - gen,*  
I feel a suspicion,  
*Um Rath ihn zu fra - gen,*  
To make his petition,

Detailed description: This block contains a musical score for two characters, Rosalinde and Alfred. The tempo is marked 'Andante'. Rosalinde's part is on a treble clef staff with a 3/8 time signature. Alfred's part is on a bass clef staff with the same time signature. The lyrics are written below the staves, with German lyrics above and English translations below. The music consists of simple, rhythmic notes.

Alfred and Rosalinde indignantly urge him to simmer down. Then Alfred tries to explain the bizarre events that happened to him yesterday.

**“Ein seltsam Abenteuer ist gestern mir passiert”**

**Allegretto**  
**ALFRED**

*Ein selt - sam A - ben - teu - rer ist ge - stern mir pas - siert,*  
Some funny things have happened to me since yesterday,

Detailed description: This block contains a musical score for Alfred's part of 'Ein seltsam Abenteuer ist gestern mir passiert'. The tempo is marked 'Allegretto'. The score is on a treble clef staff with a 2/4 time signature. The lyrics are written below the staff, with German lyrics above and English translations below. The music consists of simple, rhythmic notes.

Rosalinde assures Eisenstein/Blind that her husband is a perfidious scoundrel. He pretended that he was going to jail last night, but actually spent the evening dining and dancing with girls at a lavish party. She affirms that when he returns home, she will not only scratch his eyes out, but leave him as well. Alfred, capitalizing on an opportunity to continue to pursue Rosalinde, joins her in condemning Eisenstein. But Eisenstein is unable to control his anger and outrage any longer. He removes his disguise, confronts them, and demands vengeance.

“Ja, ich bin’s, den ihr betrogen”

**Più mosso**  
**EISENSTEIN**

Ja, ich bin's, den ihr be - tro - gen,  
Yes, I am the man whom you are betraying,

Rosalinde tries to placate her husband, but he becomes unreasonable and unable to be assuaged because Alfred stands before him, wearing his own dressing gown.

But now Rosalinde meets her husband with an equal challenge. She produces Eisenstein's jeweled watch, proving that she was the disguised Hungarian countess whom the Marquis Renard/Eisenstein had sought to seduce at Prince Orlofsky's party. Rosalinde's revelation of the truth causes Eisenstein to collapse.

All the remaining guests from Prince Orlofsky's party suddenly appear in the room, with the exception of Adele and Ida, who Frosch reveals are causing him so much difficulty because they refuse to let the jailer bathe them.

Frank orders everyone to be brought together. He further asks Dr. Falke to take pity on them.

“O Fledermaus, O Fledermaus”

**Allegretto**

O Fle dermaus, o Fledermaus, lass endlich jetzt dein O - pfer aus; der  
The vengeance of the bat is won, now let the victim share the fun; you've  
arme Mann, der arme Mann ist gar zu ü - bel dran!  
got the best of him tonight, he is a sorry sight!

Eisenstein requests an explanation, prompting Dr. Falke to reveal that the whole charade was a trick that he contrived: the Bat's revenge against Eisenstein. Each of the participants confesses his or her part in the joke played on Eisenstein. Rosalinde and Alfred seize the opportunity to assure Eisenstein that the supper in his house was only a fabrication, and that he wore Eisenstein's dressing gown merely to make Falke's joke believable.

Rosalinde and Eisenstein reconcile. Adele, who had been pursuing Frank/Chevalier Chagrin, is led away by Prince Orlofsky. All agree that champagne was to blame for their misdemeanors; nevertheless, they praise its spirits — the cause of trouble at times, but also the force of light and reconciliation.

***CHAPTER THIRTEEN***  
***Wagner and Modern Music Drama***

## Wagner and Modern Music Drama

During the second half of the nineteenth century, Richard Wagner (1813-1883) revolutionized opera with his conceptions of music drama: he created a seamless continuity between opera's internal architectural elements by virtually eliminating the formal structures of recitative and aria (or set piece); the result became a seamless continuity of music and text in the evolving drama. Through leading motives, or leitmotifs, the orchestra exposed the thoughts and ideas of the characters, but the orchestra was now transformed from accompanist into a symphonic unit; it became an integral protagonist of the drama that provided "endliche melodie," or an endless chain of music.

Wagner's *Tristan and Isolde* is vast in its concept and design, bold in its execution, revolutionary in its operatic structure, and exacting in its demands on singers and the orchestra. In this opera, Wagner's music-drama esthetics were first materialized: the extensive use of leitmotifs, the integration of the orchestra into the drama, and the dramatic unity of all its artistic elements.

The leitmotif of the entire music drama is the exaltation of love: as Wagner commented, "a monument to this loveliest of all dreams." In this opera, Wagner spiritualized love: an ideal beyond experienced emotions or the material world that is consummated metaphysically, or as a transcendent experience.

Musically, *Tristan and Isolde* represents a milestone — if not a revolution — in the history of music: its music emancipated dissonance from tonality and set the stage for future harmonic adventurism; the music score of *Tristan and Isolde* has been deemed the beginning of modern music, Wagner's harmonic innovations continuing into modern times. The score is dominated by discords, an innovation that broke all the existing rules of tonality: for hundreds of years before *Tristan and Isolde*, the essence of music was tonality; all music was composed in keys, chords could be identified with keys, or identified as transitional chords between keys.

The "Tristan Chord" — f, b, d sharp, g sharp, appearing initially in the second full measure of the Prelude and associated with Grief or Sorrow — is perhaps the most famous chord in the history of music, its essence challenging conventional analysis. The Tristan Chord is a discord; it partially resolves and it is partially suspended, creating a sense of both resolution and dissonance. As the music progresses new discords are created: the result is that the ear becomes partially satisfied by the resolution, but dissatisfied by the suspension; a lack of resolution that creates a sense of tension as the listener consciously and unconsciously craves for resolution. Wagner built the harmonics of the entire opera on discord and lack of resolution, except the final chord, its resolution suggesting a finality: the culmination of insatiable yearning.

*Tristan and Isolde*'s premiere was scheduled for Vienna in 1859. However, the premiere was abandoned after some fifty-seven rehearsals, the musicians finding Wagner's score virtually impossible to learn and play, and the singers finding it unsingable. Its music was so revolutionary that Wagner was considered seriously insane, a musical anarchist and iconoclast intent on destroying Western music traditions. But the opera did have its premiere six years later and Wagner's ingenious harmonic innovations began to overtake the music world. After Wagner, many composers began to abandon tonality; it began a transformation in music's harmonic structure, such as the introduction of the atonal, 12-tone, or serial music, an avant-garde technique that virtually considered conventional melody, rhythm and traditional harmony evil elements of the musical language.

Wagner's early operas, from *Die Feen* (1834) ("The Fairies"), after Carlo Gozzi's *La Donna Serpente* ("The Serpent Woman"), through *Lohengrin* (1850), derived from Wolfram von Eschenbach's *Parzifal*, reflect strong musical and aesthetic influences from the German Romantic as well as the Italian bel canto schools: those operas contain many parallels to the mysticism and spiritualism of Weber's *Oberon* (1826) and Marschner's *Der Vampyr* (1828), as well as the Italian bel canto masters, Rossini and Bellini. Wagner's other operas from that period include *Das Liebesverbot* (1836) ("The Censure of Love"), after Shakespeare's *Measure for Measure*; *Rienzi, der Letzte der Tribunen* (1840) ("Rienzi, the Last of the Tribunes") after Edward Bulwer-Lytton, that was typical of the five-act French grand opera style in the tradition of Auber and Scribe; *Der Fliegende Holländer* (1841) ("The Flying Dutchman") after Heine; and *Tannhäuser und der Sängerkrieg auf Wartburg* (1845) ("Tannhäuser and the Contest of Singers on the Wartburg.")

Wagner vehemently opposed the abuses of the Italian bel canto school: their hackneyed librettos, obsession with spectacle, and showcases for singers: to Wagner, much of opera that preceded him was "causes without effects." Wagner shared Berlioz's description of the genre: "Music of the Italians is a sensual pleasure and nothing more. For this noble expression of the mind, they (the Italians) have hardly more respect than for the art of cooking. They want a score that, like a plate of macaroni, can be assimilated immediately without having to think about it, or even pay attention to it."

Nevertheless, Wagner's operas prior to 1850, particularly *Tannhäuser* and *Lohengrin*, possess intense lyricism and represent perhaps the pinnacle of the bel canto school: Wagner, at times the principal antagonist of Italian bel canto, ironically became its foremost and finest practitioner. But Wagner was seeking an antidote for the existing conventions of recitative, set-pieces, or numbers, that he considered elements that impeded the flow of the drama. In his next compositional period, beginning in the 1850s, he would develop theories of music drama that would completely transform opera traditions.

Wagner's challenge was to let drama run an unbroken course without restraining the action with purely musical forms. As such, he envisioned a complete fusion of drama and music, in which the drama would be conceived in terms of music, and the music would freely work according to its own inner laws, a balance in which the drama assisted but did not constrain the music. The words had to share equally with the music in realizing the drama, their inflections sounding ideally in alliterative clusters with the vocal line springing directly out of the natural rise and fall of the words. As such, the voices were to give the impression of heightened speech, and the ultimate opera would become a "sung drama." However, where words failed, the orchestra would convey the drama through recurring musical themes, what Wagner called "motifs of memory," that were later termed leitmotifs.

In 1849, Wagner's participation in the Dresden political uprisings caused him to become exiled from Germany. He found safe haven in Zurich, where he began to pen his theories about opera: *Die Kunst und die Revolution* ("Art and Revolution"); *Die Kunst der Zukunft* ("The Artwork of the Future"); and *Oper und Drama* ("Opera and Drama"). Essentially, these were theories that envisioned the opera art form as a "Gesamtkunstwerk," a complete work of art that incorporated all artistic and creative elements: acting and gesture, poetry, music, and scenery; opera was idealistically a total artistic unity that was the sum of its various parts. As such, Wagner conceived opera as music drama: the full integration of text, music, and other artistic elements that contribute to realizing the drama.

Wagner's first attempt to put his theories and conceptions into practice began in 1848: he began his monumental trilogy, *Der Ring des Nibelungen* ("The Ring of the Nibelung.") In 1864, Ludwig II, an impassioned admirer who had just acceded to the throne of Bavaria rescued Wagner from financial disaster. With the King's support, Wagner produced *Tristan and Isolde* (1865), *Die Meistersinger* (1868), premiered the two Ring operas *Das Rheingold* (1869) and *Die Walküre* (1870), opened the Bayreuth Festspielhaus in 1876 with the full production of *The Ring of the Nibelung*, and completed his final opera, *Parsifal* (1882).

Wagner's first inspiration to convert the *Tristan and Isolde* legend into a music drama came to him in 1854 while he was living in exile in Zurich. He had been preoccupied with the *Ring* for some 15 years, but he realized that even if he completed the *Ring*, he could not envision immediate publication or performances. His immediate problem was his chaotic personal finances; he had mounting debts and even doubted his ability to survive. For practical purposes, he decided to interrupt his work on the *Ring* and compose what he envisioned as a simple opera that could be staged immediately: *Tristan and Isolde*.

In May 1857 Wagner received an invitation from Dom Pedro, Emperor of Brazil, to compose an opera for Rio de Janeiro and conduct its world premiere in the Brazilian capital. In desperation, Wagner considered a version of *Tristan and Isolde* that would be translated into Italian: *Tristano ed Isotta*. In retrospect, there is much skepticism as to whether Wagner was serious or not about the project, but nevertheless, it may have provided the jolt he needed to devote himself to composing an opera that he had announced to Liszt two and half years earlier, but had since remained dormant.

In 1857, Wagner had written himself to a standstill in the composition of the *Ring* and needed stimulation from a totally different project: he began to compose *Tristan and Isolde*. Halfway through the second act of *Siegfried*, the third music drama of the *Ring*, Wagner laid down his pen for nine years, writing to Franz Liszt, his ardent supporter: "I have led my Siegfried into the beautiful forest solitude. There I have left him under a linden tree and, with tears from the depths of my heart said farewell to him: he is better there than anywhere else."

At the time, the exiled Wagner was living at an idyllic home on the shores of Lake Lucerne, a gift from his benefactor, the Swiss silk merchant, Otto Wesendonck. It is generally supposed that the inspiration for *Tristan and Isolde* — both libretto and music score — was Mathilde Wesendonck, the wife of his patron. Frau Wesendonck, a young and beautiful woman, was also a poet, the author of "Fünf Gedichte" ("Wesendonck Lieder"), for which Wagner composed music. Two of the songs, "Im Treibhaus" and "Träume," were later published by Wagner as "Studies for Tristan and Isolde": "Träume" was underscored with the love music that materialized into the second act of *Tristan and Isolde*, and "Im Treibhaus" appears in the music of the third act prelude.

The relationship between Wagner and Mathilde has stirred conjecture and speculation: Was their love consummated? Or was their love a forbidden and unattainable love as intense and impassioned as that of *Tristan and Isolde*? Wagner was never shy about justifying affairs with the wives of friends, and in his mind, an affair with the wife of his patron would certainly have been an acceptable relationship. But the real question is: Would Wagner have composed *Tristan and Isolde* had he never met Mathilde Wesendonck? It is an unanswerable question, as unresolved as the Tristan Chord itself, but it is indeed probable that Wagner was in love with Mathilde because he was writing *Tristan and Isolde*, not because he was in love with Mathilde.

Wagner completed the prose scenario for the opera in August 1857, the pencil sketches of the music completed in August 1859. In 1861, the Court Opera in Vienna agreed to premiere the opera, but between November 1862 and March 1863, after some 54 rehearsals, musicians and singers rebelled and the opera premiere was abandoned.

Some wonderful opera trivia is attached to the failed *Tristan and Isolde* premiere. Wagner detested and hated the master of operetta, Jacques Offenbach, bombastically designating Offenbach's *Orphée aux Enfers* (1858) ("Orpheus in the Underworld"), "a dunghill in which all the swine of Europe wallow." It must have been a great satisfaction for Offenbach when the Vienna Court Opera asked him to compose a "romantic grand opera for its patrons" to replace the failed world premiere of Wagner's *Tristan and Isolde*.

Ironically, Offenbach's opera was named *Rheinnixen*, not Rhinemaidens, but a title descriptive of nixies, or water sprites, from German Romantic literature. Offenbach's opera was a complete failure, but one number survived, singled out by the well-known critic, Eduard Hanslick, Wagner's severest critic, with praises such as "lovely, luring, sensuousness." The

passage was the *Goblin Song* from *Rheinnixen*, the music Offenbach later transplanted into *The Tales of Hoffmann*, and titled the *Barcarolle*, a song that is specifically attached to Offenbach's fame.

Nevertheless, after King Ludwig of Bavaria became Wagner's patron and rescuer, *Tristan and Isolde* had its long-delayed premiere at the Royal Court Theatre in Munich in 1865, under the baton of Hans von Bülow.

The critical reception to the opera was controversial, some critics expressing their vehement hostility to the work, while others praised it with unbridled enthusiasm. Nevertheless, Wagner's *Tristan and Isolde* was launched on the music world, its harmonic innovations and heightened music drama a milestone in the history of opera. The opera would exert an extraordinary influence in music for future generations: it was the dawn of modern music drama, and more particularly, of modern music.

The story of *Tristan and Isolde* is attributable to ancient Celtic legend that originated in Brittany: stories of desperate and tragic romance and frustrated passion fraught with guilt and unrequited love that held great appeal. By Medieval times, the story had already gone through many syntheses, particularly after it was adopted into many Arthurian legends.

But the basic Celtic legend is the following: Rivalin, the King of Parmentia, arrives at the court of King Mark in Cornwall and marries Blanchefleur, Rivalin's sister. While in the overseas fortress of Kanoël, Blanchefleur, pregnant with child, learns that her brother Rivalin was killed in battle; her sorrow is so great that she dies giving birth to her son, Tristan, a name descriptive of the unhappy circumstances of his birth. Tristan is brought up by his tutor Kurvenal.

In the course of Tristan's adventures, he arrives at King Mark's court at Tintagel, where he is recognized as the King's nephew and is treated with great honor. After he returns from a war in Parmentia, he finds his native Cornwall conquered by the Irish King Gurmun, whose brother-in-law, Morold, comes to collect a tribute from Cornwall. Tristan is determined to put an end to the practice by challenging Morold to combat; he slays Morold, and sends his decapitated head to Ireland, a scornful and defiant gesture of tribute to Ireland.

But in the combat, Morold's sword deals Tristan a poisoned wound. Before Morold dies, he advises Tristan that only Queen Isot of Ireland can cure his wound. In the disguise of a trader named Tantris, Tristan seeks Isot and is treated by her magic arts. After he is healed, he is made tutor of the Queen's daughter, Isot the Fair, with whom he falls in love.

After a while, Tristan returns to Cornwall where he faces political turmoil: nobles are intent on deposing the childless old King Mark, Tristan's uncle. The King wants to make Tristan his successor, but the nobles object. A swallow flies overhead and drops a lock of golden hair. Tristan recognizes the hair as belonging to the beautiful Isot the Fair. He persuades the king to marry Isot, and offers to go to Ireland on his behalf and return with his bride.

Once more, Tristan goes off to Ireland, where he finds the land terrorized and ravaged by an enormous dragon. Tristan wins the country's gratitude by slaying the monster. During the battle he is weakened by the dragon's poisonous breath. Again he seeks Isot's healing powers, but in disguise. Both Isots — mother and daughter — notice a notch in his sword that corresponds to a splinter in the head of the dead Morold; they recognize him as Tristan and condemn him as Morold's slayer. In revenge, Isot the Fair attempts to kill Tristan in his bath with his own sword, but she finds that she cannot wield the sword against him. After Tristan recovers, he asks for

Isot on behalf of King Mark. Isot's father, the king, readily agrees to the marriage as a means of restoring good relations between Ireland and Cornwall.

But Isot becomes deeply grieved because she is being forced to marry old King Mark. Before sailing for Cornwall, the Queen prepares a love-potion, which she gives to Isot's maid Brangaene; it is to be secretly given to King Mark and Isot on their wedding day, a potion that will insure their love forever. During the voyage Isot does not conceal her hatred of Tristan, a

man she loved, but a man who is now a bridebearer for King Mark. One day, when the pair is thirsty, they drink the love potion and fall passionately in love with each other. When they reach Cornwall, Isot marries King Mark, but on the wedding night, in the cover of darkness, Brangaene takes Isot's place in the royal bed.

For a time, the lovers manage to rendezvous in secret, but like Lancelot and Guinevere, they are eventually discovered by King Mark while asleep, Tristan's sword lying between them. King Mark decides not to slay them; instead, he exchanges Tristan's sword for his own and leaves them sleeping. After Tristan discovers the King's sword, he becomes shamed by the mercy shown by his uncle; he persuades Isot to return to her husband, and leaves Cornwall for Brittany.

In Brittany, Tristan marries the reigning Duke's daughter, Isot of the White Hand, but he is extremely unhappy. On several occasions he would return to Cornwall to secretly meet with Isot. After various adventures, Tristan is again wounded in battle, and he sends for Isot, the only person who can heal him. It is arranged that when her ship arrives, it is to hoist a white flag: black if the plan has failed.

Jealous of the reunion of the lovers, Tristan's wife announces that the sail is black. In despair, Tristan loses his will to live and throws himself upon his own sword before Isot the Fair reaches land. After she arrives, Isot dies while embracing Tristan's corpse.

Tristan's wife contemptuously buries Tristan and Isot on opposite sides of the church, so that even in death they should not be united. But a mighty oak springs from each grave, and the branches meet over the roof of the church, a symbol of the lovers' eternal union.

The love story of Tristan and Isolde has maintained a singular charm in both English and German literature, a hymn representing universal passions that has been celebrated "as the High Song of Love, the Canticle of all Canticles."

There are many prototypes of elements of the story that appear in earlier classics: the meeting of Tristan and Isolde bears similarities to the young lover's first encounter in Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*; the fateful extinguishing of the torch appears in the legend of Hero and Leander; and although not appearing in Wagner's version of the story, the incident of the sails appears in the Greek legend of Aegeus and Theseus.

The story has captivated many writers, among them, Sir Thomas Mallory, Lord Tennyson, Matthew Arnold, and Algernon Swinburne, each of whom placed the stamp of his special genius upon it. And in the Middle Ages, when chivalry and romance were awakened, the tale was sung by the French *trouvères*, and after them the German *Minnesingers*.

A famous version of the story was the 12th-century German epic by Gottfried von Strassburg, first translated into modern German in 1844. It could be safely assumed that the translation by Strassburg fell under Wagner's eye while he was developing his reinventions of German legendary lore during his Dresden period of the 1840s. Nevertheless, it was Strassburg's version of the story that provided Wagner with the basic libretto for his music drama.

**W**agner had to spiritualize the story in order for it to stimulate his muse, but he also had to reinvent certain elements in order to appropriately adapt the legend to music. Wagner quite logically reduced the two Isots of the legend to one. The slain Morold, originally an Irish hero and Isolde's uncle, became Isolde's betrothed, the man slain by Tristan: Tristan's killing of Morold became the justification for Isolde's hatred and obsession for revenge against him, as well as his return as the bridebearer for King Mark. Isolde's love-hate obsession makes the lovers' ultimate reconciliation and admission of their love even more poignant.

The motive of forbidden love is the catalyst for all the action of *Tristan and Isolde*. Traditionally, Wagner's heroes defy society's conventions: Tristan and Isolde were in love before

they drink the love potion, but their sense of conscious guilt has kept them apart. However, Wagner does not allow the love potion itself to be the sole instrument to remove those shackles of society that have impeded their love; in Wagner the pair are reunited in love because of Fate, not because of the physical consequences of the love potion.

So Tristan and Isolde drink what they imagine is the “Draught of Death,” each believing beforehand that they have looked upon earth and sea and sky for the last time. But as the potion overcomes them, they feel free to confess their love for each other, a love that has been stirring within them for a very long time. Tristan and Isolde were predestined for each other, and they yearned for each other; the love potion merely served to quash their scruples.

Greek tragedy expressed profound moral ideas. Usually, the hero bore a taint of guilt for his conduct, his suffering evoking a sense of pity. But he must be punished so that the ideals of justice and morality are preserved. Likewise, Tristan represented lofty ideals of duty and honor, qualities that became superseded by his passion for Isolde, that passion becoming his ultimate tragic fault.

But just like the dramas of the ancient Greek tragedians, Fate intervenes, the catalyst for the ultimate horror and catastrophe of both Tristan and Isolde. The lovers drink the love potion, an act of Fate or accident that is outside of their responsibility or control, and suddenly their passions for each other are unleashed; they immediately surrender duty, honor, and the moral codes and scruples of society.

The entire pathos and tragedy of the story is that a union between Tristan and Isolde was impossible: a forbidden love impeded by Tristan’s sense of duty and honor to the laws of society. And it is his effort to preserve that honor that eventually contributes to his death.

In Wagner’s retelling of the legend, it is unclear whether Isolde actually marries King Marke at all; the indications are that she does not. The very essence of the drama is an incident that is not portrayed but mentioned: in Ireland, Isolde recognized Tristan’s disguise and raised her sword to slay the murderer of Morold, but the sick and helpless Tristan looked at her so profoundly — the Glance — that she paused, stirred by incomprehensible emotions of pity and love: then the sword fell from her hands. The Glance has been variously interpreted: that Isolde read in Tristan’s eyes an unconfessed love for her, or that she subconsciously loved him but was unaware of it herself.

Nevertheless, it would be a gross misunderstanding to suppose that Wagner meant his story to be a glorification of illicit love.

**W**agner’s *Tristan and Isolde* cannot be fully appreciated without a thorough knowledge of the events that took place before the curtain rises. Wagner relished the dramatic technique of the ancient Greek tragedians, in which significant elements of the story occurred before the curtain rose: thus, narrations of previous events and flashbacks are important elements of all Wagner’s music dramas, and particularly *Tristan and Isolde*.

In Wagner’s reinvention of the story, the Irish Princess Isolde was betrothed to the nobleman and warrior Morold, told by Isolde at the end of Act I. In Act I, Tristan’s squire Kurvenal relates that Morold had set out with his army to collect Cornwall’s annual tribute, which King Marke of Cornwall scornfully refused to pay. Morold was defeated in battle by Tristan, who then symbolically paid Cornwall’s tribute with defiance and scorn; he sent Morold’s severed head back to Ireland.

In Act I, Isolde relates that Tristan did not escape unharmed; he received a wound that refused to heal. He learned of Isolde’s prowess with curative herbs and medicinal potions and embarked to Ireland, disguised as a lonely seaman named Tantris. Isolde recognized him as the slayer of Morold because a fragment lodged in Morold’s head matched exactly a notch in Tristan’s sword. She stood over her helpless enemy, but he looked up, their eyes met, and she

was unable to act. When Isolde narrates these events, they are underscored by Wagner's Glance motive, a musical symbol of the mysterious power that overcame their souls. But at that moment when Isolde failed to wield the deathblow to Tristan, no words are exchanged between them, just incomprehensible feelings and passions expressing a love buried deep within their subconscious.

Cured, Tristan returned to Cornwall, but the remembrances of Isolde haunted his mind. In Cornwall, his enemies accused him of being overambitious, aiming to succeed his uncle, King Marke. Tristan considered it an act of honor to urge his uncle to marry, and he praised the Irish Princess Isolde as the only maiden worthy to be his queen. Tristan even threatened to leave Marke's court forever unless the King consented to take Isolde as his bride. Finally, the King sends Tristan to Ireland as "bridebearer." These events are explained during the Act II duet between Tristan and Isolde, as well as by King Marke in his monologue near the end of the act.

In Isolde's Act I Narration, she reveals that she became humiliated, a political pawn delivered "like a corpse to her country's victorious enemies." But in addition, while aboard ship she is humiliated by Tristan, who refuses to see her. In desperation, she calls upon the storms to arise and destroy the ship and everything on it. And Isolde vehemently curses Tristan, a man whose mind and heart are consecrated to death, proclaiming revenge for Tristan's betrayal of her: "Revenge! Death for us both!"

Tristan is likewise distraught, realizing that his agony has been caused by his sense of honor. In Act I, when they finally meet at Isolde's insistence, he is stung anew by her violent reproaches; he hands her his sword, ready to let her kill him then and there.

Isolde is in this frantic state when the two lovers drink the love potion; both believe they are concluding a suicide pact by drinking poison, indicated musically by the motives of Death and the Magic Potion: "For the deepest agony, for the greatest suffering, there is only one remedy: the Drink of Death." Their drink will deliver them to oblivion, and both are quite ready to leave the agony caused by their unbearable yearning for each other: their forbidden love.

When the two lovers believe that they are on the brink of death, as Wagner noted, "when the gates of death open before them," they confess their love to each other, the potion liberating them from scruples and all worldly considerations of honor, propriety and convention. The drinking of the potion represents their moment of mutual avowal. The potion was to have brought instant death, but it set them on a different path: an impassioned love that merely delays their death.

The philosophy of the arch-pessimist philosopher, Arthur Schopenhauer, speaks throughout Wagner's *Tristan and Isolde*: a continuous recurrence of the idealization of death. From the moment of their declaration of love, Tristan and Isolde live in the realm of Death, of Night, as Wagner called it. Death becomes their obsession, their escape from the realities of Day. The second act love duet — "Liebesnacht" ("Night of Love") — is saturated with repeated references to the dreaded, treacherous world of Day, as opposed to the welcome oblivion of Night, the realm in which they can consummate their love, unseen by the world. Day is what keeps the lovers apart, while Night and darkness unite them; it is in the realm of Night that their love achieves transcendence.

Wagner turned to Schopenhauer's division of total reality: the realm of Day is the phenomenal, the world experienced through the senses rather than through thought or intuition, as opposed by the noumenal, a posited object or event as it appears in itself independent of perception of the senses. Light is the phenomenal, or perceived world, so when the lovers are condemning the awfulness of Day and daylight, they are ranting against the world and its false values: the world that separates them metaphysically as well as physically. So long as they are alive in this world they will be separated, kept apart not only by social forces but also by the deeper level of the metaphysics of phenomenal existence.

So Day brings sorrow, the Night rapture. Only Death can release them from this phenomenal realm, liberating them from the realm of Day into the realm of Night, where there will be no more Tristan or Isolde: in the noumenal sense, the idea of spiritually being united. And Tristan and Isolde sing about this transcendence, underscored by some of the most radiant music ever composed, that explains their union in the most literal sense: undifferentiated, nameless, and eternal. The souls of man and woman become united in Death, released by their love from the need for any further life in this world. As such, Tristan and Isolde's dream of a supreme bliss does not end with Death: it begins, but in the metaphysical world.

Those images of the dichotomy of Day and Night pervade the libretto — and certainly the music. But a musical dramatist brings words to realization through his music; when Wagner's music characterizes the deception and vanity of Day, it is bright and glaring; for Night, it is dark and shadowy.

In Wagner's new musico-dramatic architecture, the musical leitmotif became the essential means to convey elements of the story; Wagner himself called them "Hauptmotiv," or principal motive, a technique which he did not invent, but certainly brought to its fullest flowering in his music dramas. The leitmotifs of *Tristan and Isolde* are woven together in symphonic splendor, and no composer before Wagner gave such prominence to the orchestra.

Leitmotifs are translated in most musical guidebooks as "leading motives"; they are short musical phrases that describe or identify certain ideas, characters, or objects, whether seen, mentioned, or thought about. Leitmotifs act as musical symbols that become engraved in the listener's memory and serve to explain, narrate, or provide psychological insight. Most significantly, when a firm relation between the leitmotif and its meaning have been established in the listener's mind it becomes a symbol that is recognized quickly and almost unconsciously through the power of association; thus, leitmotifs provide important information which can be conveyed even more effectively through the musical language.

Counterpoint, or polyphony, defines one or more independent melodies, or a combination of independent melodies that are integrated or juxtaposed into a single harmonic texture. The essential ideal of the leitmotif technique was to join the themes contrapuntally, and in Wagner's particular case, present them with symphonic grandeur. Nineteenth-century Romantic period composers, such as Wagner, Liszt, Mendelssohn, and Brahms, revered the earlier counterpoint techniques of Palestrina and Bach. But their true inclination was toward combinations of leitmotifs; Franz Schubert's lieder songs, and those of Hugo Wolf, were highly innovative because their accompaniments contained motives that interacted contrapuntally with the vocal parts. In Wagner's new music drama style he was striving toward an ideal of "sung drama," or the imitation of speech through music; in its perfect manifestation it was "speech-song," or "Sprechgesang," which he contrapuntally balanced with motives in the orchestral accompaniment.

The great virtue of leitmotifs is that they work on multiple levels: they not only foreshadow the future, but by evoking the past they can provide the present with an infinitely greater immediacy. As an example, in *Tristan and Isolde*, past associations are provided by the Glance and Magic Potion motives, musical motives that recall and provide emphasis to important elements of the drama.

The contrapuntal fusion and skillful harmonic interweaving and variation of leitmotifs convey powerful emotions: it ultimately becomes the orchestra that develops these reminiscences in accordance with the expressive need of the dramatic and psychological action, and Wagner, the quintessential symphonist, ingeniously achieves the full embodiment of the leitmotif technique in *Tristan and Isolde* through his orchestra.

The listener can virtually follow the dramatic narrative by interpreting the meaning of its musical leitmotif symbols without the benefit of visual or verbal clarification. As such, Wagner's

orchestra functions like a massive Greek chorus that narrates and comments on the action. In *Tristan and Isolde*, Wagner proved his genius as both music dramatist and symphonist, composing elements in the music drama that have become indelible for the listener.

Allegory denotes symbolic representation. Tristan's leitmotifs are specifically symbolic representations, but they are presented in the language of music. It is through the emotive power of the musical language that ideas in the opera are conveyed and responses are evoked; as such, the drama's characters, elements, and events become part of a complete mythography whose inner allegorical symbolism, in both words and music, provide intensely profound understanding as well as different levels of meaning. The symbolism of Day and Night, evoke intuitive rather than rational responses from the human psyche; Wagner's musical leitmotifs become those same symbolic images, often revealing and evoking profound inner thoughts and emotions.

Ultimately, leitmotifs provided Wagner with the organic structure for his music drama, but more importantly, they provided the wherewithal to add profound impact to the drama through musical symbolism.

**W**agner was a man possessing profound intellectual curiosity; he was a voracious reader whose huge library of books, abandoned at the time of his 1849 exile, remains today in Dresden.

The German philosopher, Arthur Schopenhauer, had come under the spell of Orientalism when early in life he stumbled into a French translation of the Indian Upanishads; he became enthralled with Hindu and Buddhist doctrines regarding renunciation of the Will, or the extinguishing of desire. In *The World as Will and Idea* (1818), Schopenhauer pitted Eastern mystical conceptions of wisdom against the Enlightenment's faith in reason, science, and civilization. Although his book remained unread for some 40 years, Europe's disillusionment after the 1848 Revolutions brought him a new and enthusiastic audience.

Schopenhauer directed his radical views about the renunciation of human Will to both Enlightenment and Christian ideology. In his conception, the Enlightenment had created a false optimism through its empty faith in reason and progress. He also condemned Christianity, which he concluded had urged men to strive for salvation in this world through a set of religious and moral preconceptions, which, he argued, posed the illusion of "Will as idea." Schopenhauer reasoned that the ultimate reality was that the exercise of human Will was purposeless, aimless, and neither reasonable nor rational: Will was simply a blindness that urged man to strive for meaningless goals that ultimately cause anguish, such as man's lust for wealth and power.

Schopenhauer proposed that man had to escape from the sickness and curse of the Will, a yearning that imprisoned him in a fatal state of eternal desire; they represented urges that man must extinguish, abandon, and renounce. Schopenhauer envisioned a new way of understanding the world that was immune from the remorseless desires of the ego, what he termed the destructive idea of the "world as Will." His resolution of the dilemma was for man to achieve salvation not through a religious or spiritual path, but through philosophic knowledge, compassion, and sympathy for others. And more importantly, that man could obtain a momentary release from life's curse of desire through aesthetic experience, such as viewing a painting or listening to a symphony; by experiencing the world in a new way — through moments of pure contemplation of art and music — man would become uncorrupted by contact with the gross materialism that surrounded him.

Schopenhauer's conception that music and art provided a way to transcend the Will's relentless grip — albeit temporarily — coincided with Wagner's belief that his music dramas would provide relief for restless souls. But Schopenhauer added intellectual profundity to Wagner's vision, and armed with his new philosophy, the composer became more convinced

than ever that his music dramas would become a consecrated art form, and more importantly, a transcendent musical experience.

In 1854, while Wagner was composing the music to the second act of *The Valkyrie*, he was deeply engrossed in Wotan's torment, an agony that was caused by the frustration of the Godhead's Will. Simultaneously, Wagner became immersed in the spell of Schopenhauer's philosophy, the idea that all human anxiety and conflict derived from self-imposed desires, or Will. Wagner began to realize what he had felt intuitively; that Wotan's inner conflicts derived from the frustration of his Will.

Wagner became mesmerized — and totally indoctrinated — by Schopenhauer's philosophy. He realized that the "renunciation of Will" had been a theme he had subconsciously brought to the surface in his earlier *The Flying Dutchman* and *Tannhäuser*; the idea that the world of active desire resulted in a suffering from which the soul yearned to be freed, and that freedom could only be achieved when the Will was extinguished.

By applying Schopenhauer's philosophy of the "renunciation of Will," the essential conflicts of the *Ring* saga developed more profound meaning. Wagner had by now concluded that industrialized Europe would never escape or find release from its struggles: "I saw that the world was Nichtigkeitkeit, a nothingness or an illusion." Thus, the *Ring*'s power conflicts were incontrovertible elements in the world's evolution, but he was now convinced more than ever that their cause was specifically humanity's blind exercise of Will.

Armed with Schopenhauer's preaching, Wagner found it necessary to revise his original conception for the conclusion of the *Ring*, and decided that it was necessary to destroy Wotan and the Gods in the final moments of *Twilight of the Gods*, instead of a victorious Siegfried ascending to Valhalla. Wagner commented about the fall of the Gods: "The necessity for the downfall of the Gods springs from our innermost feelings, as it does from the innermost feelings of Wotan. It is important to justify the necessity by feeling, for Wotan who has risen to the tragic height of willing his own downfall."

The Godhead Wotan had evolved into the indisputable tragic character of the *Ring* story, his agony the result of his insatiable Will as master the world. For Wagner, it was now necessary to conclude the *Ring* with the Schopenhauerian "renunciation of Will," a decisive condemnation of Wotan's Will — and all human Will — that he now believed was the cause of the world's evil. And similarly, Brünnhilde's sacrificial suicide and the purification of the *Ring*'s Curse, would represent an acceptance of fate that finally released humanity from its endless cycle of desire, rebirth, and death. Thus, the *Ring*'s power conflicts were incontrovertible elements in the world's evolution, so the ultimate conclusion of the *Ring*, as well as the entire tragedy of *Tristan and Isolde*, became an expression of pure Schopenhauerian philosophy.

**W**agner maintained that human beings are in the most literal sense the embodiment of metaphysical will; therefore, victims of unsatisfied craving, yearning and longing. In *Tristan and Isolde*, hardly anything "happens," in the ordinary sense of theatrical action. But the tragedy comes about not because of what happens to the fateful pair, but because of what they are: *Tristan and Isolde* is a drama of spiritual states, not of overt actions; it is about victims of continual yearning and unsatisfied craving.

According to Schopenhaurian philosophy, music represented a manifestation of the metaphysical will, an audible and meaningful voice in the empirical world. Music directly corresponds to man's innermost being, or his alternative life. Music therefore, creates certain wants and desires: simple melody, or a succession of notes, compels an eventual resolution on the tonic, and it provokes dissatisfaction if it resolves — or suspends — on any other note than the tonic (gravity). Without tonic resolution, the listener senses harshness, dissatisfaction, outright rejection, and a desire and longing for musical resolution.

Schopenhauer's ideas of musical resolution and suspension lit a beacon for Wagner, who now fully realized that suspension, discord, and lack of tonal resolution prolonged tension and dissatisfaction. As such Wagner decided to compose an entire opera dominated by harmonic suspension, its music moving from discord to discord in such a way that the listener was continually in a state of tension in the anticipation of resolution; but the resolution would never come. Suspension would become a purely musical equivalent of the unsatisfied longing, craving, and yearning of the protagonists in the *Tristan and Isolde* story. The only resolution would occur in the final chord of the opera: symbolically the ultimate resolution of Tristan and Isolde's love, which takes place in the spiritual world.

**I**n *Tristan and Isolde*, Wagner proved that he was a supreme musical dramatist; it is a drama realized through its music, a symphonic poem about love.

Musically, its dissonances convey yearning and desire; all composed ingeniously by Wagner in a complexity that defies analysis. Its true strength and genius lies in its appeal to emotions; it is an opera whose music possesses agonizing beauty.

The subtitle of *Tristan and Isolde* is the German word "Sehnen" (to long, or to yearn), an inner conflict and tension that is reflected musically through Wagner's suspended and unresolved chords: a discord that becomes an integral and unifying aspect of the entire music drama.

As such, Wagner, through the magnificence of his music drama, made the story of *Tristan and Isolde* a testament to the soul of humanity.

# *Tristan and Isolde*

(“Tristan und Isolde”)

*Handlung* (drama) in German in three acts

Music

by

Richard Wagner

Libretto by Richard Wagner

Premiere: National Theater (Hoftheater) June 1865

***Principal Characters in Tristan and Isolde***

Tristan, a knight from Cornwall	Tenor
Isolde, an Irish princess	Soprano
King Marke, King of Cornwall	Bass
Kurvenal, Tristan's squire	Baritone
Melot, a courtier	Tenor
Brangäne, Isolde's maid	Soprano
A Shepherd	Tenor
A Steersman	Baritone
A young sailor	Tenor

Sailors, knights and squires.

TIME: During the Middle Ages

PLACE: At sea, King Marke's castle in Cornwall, Tristan's castle in Brittany

***Brief Story Synopsis***

Cornwall has conquered Ireland. Isolde, an Irish Princess, is being forced to marry the elderly King Marke of Cornwall. Tristan, a Cornish knight, escorts Isolde to Cornwall.

In a battle between Cornwall and Ireland, Tristan killed Morold, Isolde's betrothed. Tristan was wounded and sought Isolde's magical healing powers. He disguised himself as a seaman named Tantris and was cured by Isolde. Isolde discovered that he killed Morold. She was about to kill him to avenge Morold's murder, but his doleful glance stirred her emotions and she was unable to fulfill the deed. Tristan — as Tantris — and Isolde fell in love, but he departed after declaring his profound gratitude. However, Tantris returned to Ireland, but in his true identity as Tristan; he came to fetch Isolde, whom he promised as a bride for his old uncle, King Marke, the marriage intended to end the strife between Cornwall and Ireland. Tristan, the man Isolde loved, became Tristan the bridebearer for King Marke.

Isolde feel betrayed and vengeful; she vows death by poison for both of them. As the ship nears the coast of Cornwall, Isolde confronts Tristan; she curses him for betraying her and seeks his death. Tristan offers Isolde his sword to fulfill the act, but she suggests that they share a draught to reconcile their enmity. Tristan knows that the draught contains poison.

Tristan and Isolde drink the draught; it is not poison, but a love potion substituted by Brangäne, Isolde's maid. Tristan and Isolde unite in impassioned love as the ship reaches the shores of Cornwall, where she is to become the bride of Tristan's uncle.

At King Marke's castle, Isolde awaits Tristan: Brangäne will extinguish a torch, a signal that Tristan can approach safely. But Brangäne suspects that Melot, King Marke's knight, plots against Tristan. Isolde extinguishes the torch. At that signal, Tristan arrives. The lovers rapturously embrace, praising the Night, when their love can be consummated. At a nearby tower, Brangäne maintains a watch; she warns them that dawn approaches, but the lovers are overcome by ecstasy and ignore her warning.

Kurvenal, Tristan's aide, warns them that the King approaches with a hunting party. King Marke, Melot, and courtiers discover the lovers; Tristan is shamed and dishonored. Melot and Tristan fight, and Tristan is fatally wounded.

In Tristan's castle in Brittany, Kurvenal guards the wounded Tristan; they await Isolde, whom Kurvenal has summoned to heal Tristan's wounds. Tristan is pained, delirious, and longs for death. A shepherd's pipe announces that Isolde's ship has finally arrived. Tristan rips off the bandages of his wound and rushes to meet Isolde. While in Isolde's embrace, Tristan dies.

Another ship brings King Marke and Melot. Kurvenal kills Melot, but is fatally wounded in the struggle; he dies alongside Tristan. King Marke learned about Brangäne's deception and forgives Tristan. Isolde grieves over Tristan's death, and then dies on his corpse.

### Story Narrative with Music Examples

**Editor's note:** Many descriptive labels have been attached to certain musical motives, many of which have been determined by commentators and analysts from hints given by the words or situations as they appear in the opera. Nevertheless, these designations should not be taken literally. Many of the motives undergo many transformations and metamorphoses during the course of the drama, suggesting that other shades of meaning can readily apply.

#### *The Prelude:*

The Prelude provides the spiritual essence of the drama. It begins with a rising phrase of just over three bars.

In reality, there are two motives present. The first phrase begins with the opening note A in the bass clef and rises to the D sharp in the second full bar, a particularly poignant theme played by the cellos in the upper register that has been associated with Grief or Sorrow, and at various times associated with longing, pain, and hopelessness.

The second motive, G sharp through B natural in the second and third full bars, is dominated by penetrating oboes over woodwind harmony, a motive suggesting Yearning, or Desire, but also Isolde's Magic, the latter description because it is first heard in the opera when Isolde speaks of her mother's craft in brewing magic potions. (For Wagner, this motive primarily represented Tristan and Isolde's yearning and desire to realize their love, a love that was their predestined fate, but hopelessly unattainable.)

#### Langsam und schmachtend

The musical score is in 6/8 time and consists of two staves. The first staff is in treble clef and the second in bass clef. The first motive, labeled 'Grief or Sorrow', spans the first two bars and features a rising line in the bass clef starting on A. The second motive, labeled 'Yearning or Desire', spans the last two bars and features a rising line in the treble clef starting on G sharp.

[ *Grief or Sorrow* ] [ *Yearning or Desire* ]

Two new motives make their appearance: that of Tristan's Anguish, and the Glance motive.

The musical score is in 6/8 time and consists of two staves. The first staff is in treble clef and the second in bass clef. The first motive, labeled 'Tristan's Anguish', spans the first two bars and features a rising line in the treble clef starting on A. The second motive, labeled 'Glance', spans the last two bars and features a rising line in the bass clef starting on G sharp.

[ *Tristan's Anguish* ] [ *Glance* ]

As the Prelude swells to its climax, the motives of Grief and Yearning combine with motives suggesting deliverance through Death and Longing.



The Prelude is a miraculous tone poem, a musical portrait of passion, pain, unsatisfied longing, and the agonies that torment Tristan and Isolde; they represent the essence of the entire music drama.

**Act 1: At sea, on the deck of Tristan's ship, during the crossing from Ireland to Cornwall**

The drama begins with the voice of a young sailor, heard from atop a mast of the ship, his unaccompanied song about the longing he feels for his Irish sweetheart .

**“Westwärts schweift der Blick”**

In a tent on the deck of Tristan's ship, Isolde reclines on a couch, her face buried in the cushions. Brangäne, Isolde's maid and confidante, holds a side curtain back as she looks at the ship's deck.

Isolde rises, as if rudely awakened from a dream, the sailor's song referring to an Irish maid provoking her irritation and anger. She has been brooding over her fate, an Irish princess forced into a loveless marriage with the elderly King Marke.

Brangäne advises Isolde that they will soon land in Cornwall. Isolde erupts into a furious outburst of defiance, declaring that she will never set foot on Cornwall's shore. She condemns her Irish countrymen with fury: cowards who allowed themselves to become easy prey for the armies of Cornwall; and she deploras the impotency of her mother's sorcery over the elements, invoking the seas to destroy the ship and all of its occupants.

Brangäne grieves over Isolde's suffering and sorrow, but her attempts at consolation are futile. In a wild outburst, Isolde calls for air; Brangäne draws aside the curtains, revealing the ship's stern. Near the mast, sailors are busy with ropes; on the deck above stand knights and squires, among them Tristan, who stands arms folded, looking thoughtfully out over the sea. Beside him is his trusty squire, Kurvenal. From the mast above, the young sailor begins his song again.

Isolde's eyes remain transfixed on Tristan, her enigmatic words "Mir erkoren, mir verloren" ("I mistaken! I forsaken!"), followed by her outburst: "Todgeweihtes Haupt! Todgeweihtes Herz!" ("Death-devoted head! Death-devoted heart!"), variously interpreted as Isolde's curse of death against Tristan.

**"Todgeweihtes Haupt!"**

**Mässig langsam**  
**ISOLDE**

The image shows a musical score for Isolde's vocal line. It consists of two phrases on a single staff. The first phrase is "Tod - geweih - tes Haupt!" with the English translation "Death-devoted head!" below it. The second phrase is "Tod - geweih - tes Herz!" with the English translation "Death-devoted heart!" below it. The music is in a 3/4 time signature and features a melodic line with some chromaticism and a fermata over the final note of the second phrase.

Isolde speaks scornfully to Brangäne about Tristan, the man who brings her as a bride to his old uncle, King Marke, and who persistently refuses to see her. Indignantly, Isolde orders Brangäne to summon Tristan so that she may speak with him. As Brangäne leaves, Isolde seats herself on the couch, all the while staring fixedly at the stern of the ship.

Brangäne hesitatingly approaches Tristan, timidly announcing Isolde's request to see him. Tristan refuses, claiming that he cannot desert the helm until the ship is brought safely into harbor. As Brangäne becomes more insistent, Kurvenal becomes incensed by her tone and reinforces Tristan's refusal, mockingly reminding Brangäne that it was the hero Tristan who liberated Cornwall from Ireland: that Tristan defeated and slew Morold; and that sending Morold's decapitated head to Ireland was their ironic way to pay Ireland the tribute they demanded from Cornwall. Kurvenal concludes his tirade, shouting at Brangäne with contemptuous defiance. Tristan gestures that Kurvenal be silent. Offended, Brangäne leaves to return to Isolde.

Defeated, Brangäne falls before Isolde in despair. She relates the details of her bitter humiliation by Tristan, restraining herself from erupting into a furious rage.

Isolde narrates the incidents causing her present predicament and dilemma. She relates how the wounded Tristan, near death after his battle with Morold that freed Cornwall from tribute to Ireland, came to Ireland in the disguise of Tantris to be healed by Isolde's magic art; how she recognized him as Morold's murderer from the notch on his sword blade that corresponded to a piece of metal in Morold's skull; how she had Tantris at her mercy and was about to exact revenge against him for killing Morold, but after he looked deep into her eyes, his profound Glance stirred her emotions and compassion; she could not kill him and let her sword fall. Her heart no longer bore hate and revenge against Tantris, but an overwhelming love for him. She tended and cured his wound, hoping that he would return home and no longer disquiet her with his Glance; he swore a thousand oaths of eternal gratitude and faith to Isolde. Isolde released Tantris, but he has returned, revealing himself as the hero Tristan.

When Tristan returned to Cornwall, he praised Isolde's beauty and her magic secrets, offering her as a bride to his old uncle, King Marke: a tribute from vanquished Ireland. Isolde erupts into impassioned scorn against the man whose life she saved; he has humiliated her by boldly returning to force her into a loveless marriage, an act, Isolde suggests, he would never had dared if Morold still lived.

Isolde is in desperation, injured in personal and national pride; she considers herself the pawn of Tristan's ambition by bringing her as Ireland's tribute to Cornwall, and she detests the thought that she has been exploited, forced to marry Cornwall's aged king.

With increasing anger, Isolde curses the perfidious Tristan, vowing revenge and ending her sorrows through death: death for both Tristan and Isolde. Brangäne attempts to console Isolde by portraying the happy life that awaits her with the powerful King Marke, reminding her that her mother compounded magic potions that will ensure her marital love. Brangäne opens a casket to show Isolde the potion, but Isolde is more concerned with another potion in the casket: a Draught of Death.

Kurvenal boisterously interrupts Isolde and Brangäne, relating a message from Tristan that they are prepared to land, and that Isolde should be ready to be presented to King Marke. Isolde, with quiet dignity, orders Kurvenal to deliver a message to Tristan: that she will not leave the ship, or be present at his side when he presents her to King Marke, unless she forgives him for his offences against her.

After Kurvenal leaves, Isolde orders Brangäne to give her “the cup of Peace”: the poisonous Draught of Death. Brangäne becomes horrified, but her protests are in vain.

Tristan appears before Isolde.

**Langsam**



Isolde, controlling her agitation, gazes at Tristan intently. Tristan justifies his conduct with dignity, explaining that he has avoided her call during the voyage because of his moral duty to his king; by custom, a bridebearer must remain away from the bride. Isolde reminds Tristan of another custom: that he slew her betrothed and that she has the right of vengeance, even though she had once renounced it.

She further reminds Tristan of the feud between Ireland and Cornwall, but claims that their enmity ended with the defeat of Morold. Isolde tells him that she saw through his disguise as Tantris, had him in her power, but pledged herself to silence and spared Tantris' life. But now she is incapable of vengeance, for everywhere Tristan is triumphant and honored. Who will strike him down and fulfill her vengeance?

Gloomily, Tristan yields to Isolde's right; he offers her his sword, urging her to strike the fatal blow herself. But Isolde rejects the weapon, telling him that she cannot appear before King Marke as the slayer of his most estimable knight.

Isolde proclaims that their differences cannot be settled by the sword, but rather, they must celebrate a truce between them by drinking a cup of reconciliation. Tristan intuitively knows that the drink is poison, but chivalrously agrees to share the “draught of peace” with Isolde.

Isolde signals the agitated Brangäne to bring the draught. To the cries of sailors taking in sails, Tristan takes the cup from Isolde. Before he drinks the draught, he speaks of his honor and anguish; he lifts the cup and drinks, the cure for the endless grief in his heart. Fearing further betrayal, Isolde wrests the cup from Tristan and drinks it.

Thus, Tristan and Isolde believe that they are meeting their doom, which is not death and the end of their grief, but life: a life that will now be filled with misery and sorrow; Brangäne had disobeyed Isolde and substituted a Love Potion for the Death Potion, an expression of her love for her mistress, whose death she was trying to avert.

After Tristan and Isolde drink the potion, they are seized with a succession of conflicting emotions, all portrayed in rapturous music that expresses a breathless frenzy. Finally, their death-defiant expression radiates into intense passion for each other. They are confused, bewildered and trembling, gazing at each other with extreme longing and passion.



**Isolde's Ardor:****Spiritual Ecstasy:**

It is a summer night in a garden before Isolde's chamber in the castle. On one side of an open door of the castle a torch is burning. The sounds of hunting horns are heard, signifying the departure of King Marke and his courtiers. The horns gradually fade in the distance.

Isolde appears before Brangäne in great agitation. Brangäne tells her that she has become deceived by desire: to Isolde, the horns are barely audible, only the murmuring fountain that suggests to her that Tristan awaits her in the silence of the night.

Brangäne further warns Isolde that in her impatience to see Tristan she should not be oblivious to the devious Melot, Tristan's supposed friend, who is really an enemy who sows evil seeds in the mind of King Marke. She alleges that Melot has arranged the hunt as a ruse, hoping that the noble Tristan will be indiscriminate and become his real prey. But Isolde is heedless to Brangäne and fearless of Melot, whom she regards as Tristan's most faithful friend. Isolde orders Brangäne to extinguish the torch: the signal for Tristan to approach, and the symbol of the Night that is to embrace the lovers.

Brangäne reproaches herself for fatefully switching of the Love Potion for the Draught of Death. Isolde reassures her that the transformation of the lovers was not Brangäne's work, but the fulfillment of the wishes of the all-powerful Frau Minne, the Goddess of Love.

Isolde has woven grief into joy by transforming hate into love. She praises the Goddess of Love.

**Love: Frau Minne****Mässig bewegt**

Isolde's mystical ecstasy intensifies. She removes the torch, the symbol of the hateful Day, and extinguishes it herself. She sends Brangäne up into the watchtower.

Isolde impatiently awaits Tristan; she is agitated and expectant, waving her veil profusely as a signal to Tristan. Tristan bursts in and the music builds to a frenzied climax, the lovers greeting each other ecstatically and embracing wildly. In a breathless exchange, both alternate impetuous and rapturous expressions of their eternal love for each other: Isolde says, "Bist du mein?" ("Are you mine?"), followed by Tristan, "Hab' ich dich wieder?" ("Do I possess you?")

Tristan draws Isolde to a flowery bank. Both invoke the holiness of Night.

They have escaped from the cruel, blinding, Insolent Day; they aspire to Night when their souls can unite as they celebrate their love; Day is illusion and error, but Night is truth, an illumination beyond all the wisdom of earth. It is the Night that delays the dawn of Day: the Day brings separation and sorrow.

Both recollect the past. Tristan, who lived in the world of Day and Illusion, had been a traitor to Isolde; Isolde wanted to save him from the consequences of treachery and error by seeking to unite herself with him in death. But the gates of death had opened only to let love in. The yearning of Day surrendered to the truth of Night: "Descend upon us, oh Night of passion."

*"O sink hernieder, Nacht der Liebe"*

Mässig langsam  
TRISTAN



*O sink' her - nie - der, Nacht der Lie - be,*  
Descend upon us, night of passion,

And joining their ecstasy, Brangäne is heard from the watchtower, her voice floating above in the Night as she warns the lovers that Day awaits them.

Brangäne



*Ein - sam wa - chend in der Nacht,*  
Lonely watch I here tonight,

Tristan and Isolde invoke Death, freedom from life's yearning.



Death may seize their bodies, but their love will endure in a mystic world beyond life: Death is the ultimate consummation of their love.

But the lovers remain heedless to Brangäne's warning, as their ecstasy reaches its climactic explosion of the fulfillment of their yearning and desire. The lovers speak of a mystical darkness in which there will be no more need for them to hide from each other, the music a union of Tristan's Hero motive and Isolde's Magic motive.

In their final rapture, the lovers praise the Night, lost in the ecstasy of their love.

*“So sturben wir”*

**Nicht schleppend**  
**TRISTAN**

The image shows a musical score for the aria "So sturben wir" by Tristan. It consists of two staves of music in G major, 6/8 time. The first staff has a treble clef and a key signature of one sharp (F#). The melody is: G4 (quarter), A4 (quarter), B4 (quarter), C5 (quarter), B4-A4 (beamed eighth notes), G4 (quarter), F#4 (quarter), E4 (quarter), D4 (quarter), C4 (half). The lyrics under the first staff are: "So stür - ben wir, um un - ge - trennt, So should we die, no more to part,". The second staff has a treble clef and a key signature of one sharp. The melody is: C4 (half), D4 (quarter), E4 (quarter), F#4 (quarter), G4 (quarter), A4 (quarter), B4 (quarter), C5 (quarter), B4-A4 (beamed eighth notes), G4 (quarter), F#4 (quarter), E4 (quarter), D4 (quarter), C4 (half). The lyrics under the second staff are: "e - wig ei - niog oh - ne End: ever one in endless joy."

A savage discord in the orchestra is accompanied by a piercing scream from Brangäne. Kurvenal rushes in with drawn sword, warning Tristan of danger. Hunting horns announce the arrival King Marke, Melot, and courtiers: Brangäne emerges from the tower and rushes to Isolde.

All pause in astonishment as they witness Tristan and Isolde embraced rapturously. Isolde is overcome with shame, and Tristan tries to hide her, covering her with his cloak. With sadness, Tristan comments: “The barren Day, for the last time!”

The triumphant Melot gloats as he reminds King Marke that his suspicions were well-founded. The King expresses his profound sorrow that Tristan has surrendered honor and duty and betrayed him. Tristan cannot speak, finding it impossible to explain to King Marke the lofty mystical world into which love has elevated his soul. King Marke gently reproaches Tristan; his nephew was a paragon of honor, but he has now brought shame upon himself. With a heavy heart, he asks who can explain to him the deep, mysterious cause of all this misfortune and treachery.

Tristan turns to Isolde and invites her to follow him into “the dark realm of Night,” that mystical world from which he awoke when his mother brought him in sorrow into this world. Isolde replies that as she once followed him “to a foreign land, so now will she go with him to his own real land, his heritage.” Tristan kisses her gently on the forehead.

Tristan exposes Melot's deception and treachery, claiming that it was Melot who urged him to bring Isolde to Cornwall; and that Melot is in love with Isolde, his jealousy the reason he has betrayed Tristan.

Inflamed, Melot draws his sword and attacks Tristan. Tristan and Melot fight. Tristan seeks death, now assured that Isolde has promised to follow him into the Night. He allows Melot to wound him, and then sinks into Kurvenal's arms.

Melot, eager to thrust the fatal blow at Tristan, is restrained by King Marke.

**Act 3: Tristan's castle in Karéol, Brittany**

In the garden of the castle, the wounded Tristan sleeps beneath a tree. Kurvenal bends over him, grief-stricken by his master's suffering and agony. In the distance, the sea can be seen. Kurvenal has sent to Cornwall for Isolde, the only one who can heal the wound Tristan received in his battle with Melot. Kurvenal has placed a shepherd on a watchtower to signal when Isolde's ship arrives. The shepherd sings a melancholy song, but Kurvenal tells him that when Isolde's ship comes into view, he should signal by playing a merry melody. But now, the sea is desolate, and the shepherd continues his plaintive tune.

Tristan revives from his delirium and asks where he is. Kurvenal replies that he is in Karéol, his ancestral castle. Slowly and painfully, Tristan's consciousness returns. But he has difficulty seizing the reality surrounding him, his soul still preoccupied with thoughts of endless Night, and his plunge into eternal oblivion with Isolde.

Tristan becomes possessed by the thought that Isolde still lives in the bright light of Day; he must seek and find her, that they may end their yearning in the realm of Night: Death. In his confusion, he sees the light in the castle and believes that he hears Isolde calling him; he becomes delirious.

Kurvenal reveals that he has sent for Isolde: that she once healed his wound from Morold, and she can surely heal the wound from Melot. Tristan, in the frenzied confusion of his delirium, imagines that he sees Isolde's ship approaching. Frantically, he calls for Kurvenal to look for the ship, but it is a delusion, the shepherd's song remaining mournful. In his mounting despair, Tristan remembers how he heard that sad shepherd's song in his childhood, when his mother and father died. Tristan yearns to die. He curses the Love Potion that has brought him so much anguish.

Tristan faints and sinks back. Kurvenal despairs, thinking that Tristan has died. Tristan revives and recovers consciousness, and again imagines Isolde's ship approaching. While Kurvenal tries to calm him once more, the shepherd blows a merry tune, the signal that a ship has been sighted.

Kurvenal rushes to the watchtower and reports on the ship's progress: its conquest of the breakers, the skill of the steersman, and its safe passage to the rocks. At last, he announces that he sees Isolde coming ashore. All rush to the shore, leaving Tristan alone. Frenzy and feverish excitement seize Tristan as he anticipates Isolde's arrival. He tears the bandages from his wounds.

Isolde's voice is heard calling: "Tristan! Beloved!" Tristan replies in wild anticipation: "What do I hear? The light? To her! To her!" Isolde arrives and Tristan rushes to meet her, half fainting. The lover's embrace, and then Tristan sinks slowly to the ground. His last word, "Isolde!", is underscored by the Glance motive. Tristan has died.

Isolde becomes distraught, unable to accept the death of her beloved Tristan. She sinks unconscious on his corpse, just as the shepherd tells Kurvenal that a second ship has been sighted. Kurvenal believes that it is King Marke coming to exact revenge against Tristan. He orders the gate barricaded.

Brangäne appears, and then Melot. Immediately, Kurvenal strikes Melot dead. King Marke and his retainers appear and try to bring Kurvenal to reason, but Kurvenal attacks them and is fatally wounded. As Kurvenal's strength wanes, he drags himself toward Tristan, dying heroically and pathetically at his master's feet.

King Marke, grieving deeply, explains that he learned of Brangäne's Love Potion and that Tristan was not dishonorable; the King has come to unite Tristan with Isolde, but sadly, Tristan is dead.

Brangäne tries to arouse Isolde, whose only consciousness of reality is the body of Tristan; Tristan has preceded Isolde into the realm of Night, and she must follow him.

In the Liebestod (Love-Death, or Isolde's Transfiguration), Isolde proclaims the mystical future of the lovers: "Mild und leise" ("Gently and softly.")

**Sehr mässig beginnend**  
**ISOLDE**



*Mild und leise wie er lächelt, wie das Auge hold er öffnet,*  
*Fair and gently he is smiling, see, he softly opens his eyes,*

Isolde recalls the glory of their passion and love, and then dies, falling on Tristan's body. It a transcendent moment in which death has finally united the souls of Tristan and Isolde.



The final music of the opera, a resolution on a B major chord, musically ends the tragedy of *Tristan and Isolde*.

***CHAPTER FOURTEEN***  
***Verdi and Italian Music Drama***

## Verdi and Italian Music Drama

In 1871, the premiere of *Aida* seemed to be the crowning glory of Giuseppe Verdi's long 26-opera career. In many respects, *Aida* represented the culmination of Verdi's continuing artistic evolution and development: *Aida* was truly grand opera, but it was Italian to the core with its magnificent fusion of intense lyricism, dramatic action, and passionate human conflict.

Italian opera experienced many transformations during the nineteenth century. By mid-century, the popularity of the early bel canto style that had become firmly established by Rossini, Bellini, Donizetti — and continued by Verdi in his earlier operas from 1839 to 1850 — began to decline and languish. As the 1850s unfolded, Verdi was forced to redirect his creative genius and artistic inspiration. His earlier operas were all essentially allegories whose underlying themes reflected his passionate dream for Italian independence and unification. Verdi now sensed the fulfillment of the Risorgimento and Italian national independence, and decided to abandon the heroic pathos and nationalistic themes of his early operas.

Beginning in the 1850s, Verdi began to seek more profound operatic subjects. He was seeking to portray bold, passionate, and extreme human conflicts: subjects with greater dramatic and psychological depth that accented spiritual values, intimate humanity, and tender emotions. He would be ceaseless in his goal to create an expressiveness and acute delineation of the human soul that had never before been realized on the opera stage.

During this “middle period” of creativity (1851 to 1872), Verdi's operas began to possess heretofore-unknown dramatic qualities and intensities, an exceptional lyricism, and a profound characterization of humanity. His creative art flowered into a new maturity as he advanced toward a greater dramatic fusion between text and music. His operas composed during this period eventually became some of the best loved works ever written for the lyric theater: *Rigoletto* (1851); *Il Trovatore* (1853); *La Traviata* (1853); *I Vespri Siciliani* (1855); *Simon Boccanegra* (1857); *Aroldo* (1857); *Un Ballo in Maschera* (1859); *La Forza del Destino* (1862); *Don Carlos* (1867); *Aida* (1871). From this period onward, Verdi's operas became synonymous with the portrayal of extreme and profound human passions.

From the mid-nineteenth century onward, profound transitions were occurring in the opera art form. Gounod's *Faust* (1859) and *Roméo et Juliet* (1867) introduced the sublime traditions of the French *lyrique*, a more profound emphasis on lyricism rather than spectacle; Bizet's *Carmen* (1875) introduced the fiery passions of *verisme* (realism) to the operatic stage; and Wagner reinvented opera with the introduction of music drama; *The Ring of the Nibelung* — *Das Rheingold* (1854) and *Die Walküre* (1856) — followed by *Tristan und Isolde* (1865), and *Die Meistersinger* (1867).

By the 1870s, Verdi had indeed become the venerated icon of Italian opera, an opera composer who had retained his position at the forefront of Italian musical taste for three decades. Following the dazzling success of *Aida* (1871), Verdi composed the *Requiem* (1874), a tribute to his beloved Alessandro Manzoni on the occasion of his death: the poet and novelist who wrote the Italian literary classic, *I Promessi Sposi*.

After *Aida*, the 58 year-old composer sensed that he was becoming increasingly isolated from the changes and transformations that were affecting the lyric theater: the avant-garde began to accuse him of being distinctly old-fashioned and out of touch with the times; the

pan-Europeans were espousing Wagner's ideas and conceptions about music-drama; and the *giovanni scuola*, the blossoming "Young School" of Italian verismo composers (operatic realism), were introducing a new conception of human truth in their portrayal of operatic subjects.

Verdi sensed that he had fallen from favor; he became despondent, bitter, melancholy, and frustrated. More importantly, he became disillusioned that Italian opera was losing its unique signature and sinking beneath a tide of new ideas and aesthetic attitudes that he was powerless to stem. Likewise, Verdi's influential publisher, Giulio Ricordi, equally sensitive to the transitions threatening Italian opera, opposed Wagner's musico-dramatic ideas so vociferously that he turned the city of Milan into a virtual anti-Wagnerian stronghold.

In 1887, 16 years after *Aida*, the 74 year-old composer had been retired and was relishing his golden years, presumably comfortable and isolated from the artistic battles. It was a time when the fires of ambition were supposed to have extinguished, and a time when most people were spectators in the show of life rather than its stars. But in spite of his age and indifferent mind-set, Verdi was lured out of his self-imposed retirement and proceeded to astonish the musical world with his 27<sup>th</sup> opera, *Otello*, demonstrating beyond all doubt that the fierce creative spirit that burned within him was not only very much alive, but was indeed a glorious living genius that still glowed brightly.

Verdi's success with *Otello* epitomized the words of Robert Browning's Rabbi Ben Ezra: "Grow old along with me. The best is yet to be." Indeed, Verdi overturned the equation; with *Otello*, Verdi transformed his old age into a glory. *Otello* unequivocally challenged Verdi's contemporary critics: it became a powerful demonstration of his incessant creative energy and capacity for self-renewal. But more importantly, Verdi's *Otello* redeemed the Italian lyric theater and single-handedly reestablished its predominance. *Otello* became the Italian "music of the future," in a certain sense, a refutation of Wagner's revolutionary conceptions of music drama, but at the same time, proof that Italian opera continued to possess its inherent vital truth: its dramatic essence would always be driven by melody, lyricism, and vocal beauty.

Verdi and Wagner were both born in 1813: two masters from two different cultures from opposite sides of the Alps. Both transcended mediocrity and achieved genius: together they dominated nineteenth century Romantic opera, and to a large extent, their operas form the major part of the international operatic repertory to this very day.

As his career flourished, Verdi had become a national hero, the musical inspiration for Italy's struggle for national unity and independence. His fifteen operas composed from 1839 to 1851 were all romantic melodramas whose underlying themes glorified freedom and human dignity: their themes dealt with oppression, and symbolically and allegorically portrayed the Italian people suffering under the domination of the Austrians, French, and the Roman Church. His music became the anthems and patriotic hymns for Italian liberation, such as the "Va Pensiero" chorus of *Nabucco* (1842) that expressed the futility of the Hebrew slaves. Even the anagram of his name symbolized nationalistic dreams: V E R D I denoted *Vittorio Emanuele Re d'Italia*, indicating the return of the exiled King Victor Emanuel to rule his own people. It was a fitting tribute to Verdi that at his funeral the crowd of mourners spontaneously erupted with the "Va Pensiero" chorus, a supreme honor to their national hero.

Simultaneously, Wagner strove to glorify German art and become its redeemer. In his essays entitled the *Gesamtkunstwerk*, the "total artwork," he proposed his conceptions of the

“music of the future”: ideas that would rejuvenate and transform opera into music drama through a balance and perfection of all elements integral to the lyric art form: poetry, music, acting, gesture, and the visual.

Wagner particularly despised the popular spectacles of French grand opera traditions whose leading proponent was Meyerbeer, and by implication, Verdi. In one of his bombastic comments, Wagner claimed memorably that these operatic spectacles consisted of effects without causes. Likewise, Wagner frowned upon the superficiality and artificiality of oom-pah-pah dance-tune accompaniments, and set-pieces like arias and duets that were separated by recitative. Wagner’s entire goal was to achieve a quintessential synthesis and continuity of words and music: a transformation of the operatic art form into sung drama.

Nevertheless, the operas Wagner composed before he penned the *Gesamtkunstwerk*, *Rienzi* (1840), *Der Fliegende Holländer* (1841), *Tannhäuser* (1845), and *Lohengrin* (1850), adhered to those operatic styles and traditions which Wagner had later passionately condemned and denounced; all of those operas were indeed composed in the bel canto style, contained set-pieces, and certainly theatrical spectacle. Objectively, Wagner’s early operas, if stripped of their German text and sung in another language, become extremely hard to conceive as written by a German, no less the Richard Wagner who later reinvented himself and became the avatar of music drama.

**T**he engine of a drama is the spoken word. An opera delivers its story through words and music: the sung word. In spoken drama, speech and action reveal the conflicts, tensions, motions, and passions of the characters: dialogue, movement, and event. In opera, the splendor of music and voice emphasize the drama, adding dimension, completeness, and eloquence. The great poet, Hugo von Hofmannsthal, who became the librettist-collaborator for Richard Strauss in six of his magnificent operas, found words holy, but additionally extolled words performed with music as possessing a power to express what language alone had exhausted.

In the early genres of opera seria and bel canto, recitative (the dialogue or narrative between set-pieces) carried the action; the arias and set-pieces provided the characters’ reflection, self-revelation, or introspection. In effect, set-pieces were a paradox; at times they could paralyze the action, or at times they could serve to carry the action along. In early nineteenth century bel canto operas, words and text were generally secondary to vocal virtuosity. In this genre, the voice was supreme, and dramatic effects were delivered through vocal inflection, articulation, ornamentation, and vocal acrobatics.

Opera possesses a complex relationship between words and music. Nevertheless, the great power of the art form is its capacity to dramatically underscore words through musical means. By implication, opera’s music can play a variety of roles: it can be a narrator or a protagonist; it can advance and even deepen the action; it can reveal the state of mind, the mood, or the motivation of the characters. In the nineteenth century, Wagner became a reformer of the opera genre; his ideas and reforms strongly influence all music to this day. For Wagner, first and foremost, the text was the essential engine of the drama. As such, his texts were invested with complex psychological and philosophical content, but his ultimate goal was to perfect the art form through a sublime integration of text and music.

Under Wagner’s powerful influence, opera progressed into a more mature structure and became sung drama, or music drama. The orchestra became a more active component: as such, the orchestra could narrate, explain, and even provide action. Wagner’s revolutionary development of music drama brought symphonic grandeur to opera: the orchestra was no

longer an accompaniment to song. In Wagner's mature works, the essence of his musical dramas became leitmotifs, those musical motives that identified ideas, characters, and thoughts. With Wagner's genius for weaving a symphonic web of leitmotifs, a fluent and seamless dramatic interaction was achieved between plot and characters. He unified the internal and external elements, and the dramatic essence became the sum of those various elements.

Wagner became a thorn in Verdi's later musical life: their differing conceptions of the lyric theater resulted in a clash of titans. Verdi's style focused on action and lyricism; Wagner's style focused on introspective characters, and his operas were solidly integrated through the use of symphonic leitmotif development.

Nevertheless, Wagner's *Rienzi*, *The Flying Dutchman*, *Lohengrin*, and *Tannhäuser*; were stylistically far from the revolutionary music dramas that he was to pursue afterwards. Verdi had heard *Lohengrin* and was overwhelmed by its Prelude and its innovative division of strings and monothematic exposition. But *Lohengrin* was early Wagner. In truth, it was a bel canto opera: a work that was stylistically synonymous with the French and Italian genres of the times, and a work that contained many set-pieces that were separated by recitative. Verdi had heard Wagner's *Tannhäuser*, commenting sarcastically that he had slept peacefully during a Vienna production. Nevertheless, during the latter half of the nineteenth century, the musical avant-garde and the pan-Europeans were on the brink of dethroning Verdi in favor of Wagner and his "music of the future."

Essentially, all of Verdi's operas were melodramas, an extravagant theatricality in which plot and physical action dominated characterization. As such, Verdi's maxim was to continually sustain dramatic action and pace with his music. Therefore, the inner world of Verdian characters, their underlying motivations, anxieties, and fears, are largely presented through action combined with music. But the characters' inner psychology and introspection are expressed through their set-pieces; those arias and duets that essentially interrupt the dramatic flow but serve to portray intense human emotions and passions.

Preceding *Otello* — and his later *Falstaff* — Verdi had achieved phenomenal successes with his 26 operas. Nevertheless, he was being condemned by an onslaught of the avant-garde and the Wagnerisms. But with *Otello*, Verdi would redeem himself as well as the underlying essence of the Italian opera genre. Verdi would prove that Italian opera could indeed achieve the goal of music drama, rather than showpieces for song, and he would achieve it in his own unique style, retaining its essential features of vocal supremacy. In achieving his goal, it would never be said that he had become a follower and imitator of Wagner, or that he was playing second fiddle to the man he considered the spinmeister of Bayreuth.

Ultimately, Verdi's *Otello* became true music drama, Italian to the core with a magnificent combination of character development, lyricism and action as the hero's sensibilities change rapidly while he heads toward the abyss of psychological destruction. Verdi's *Otello* is a colossal character, tormented, complex, and pitiable. His opera brims with swift action and powerful human passion, but it is endowed with Verdi's intensely dramatic music. By any measure of the imagination, in both spirit and style, Verdi's *Otello* is unique; it is far from a Wagnerian music drama, and it is indeed an Italian opera: an Italian music drama.

Verdi's last two operas, *Otello* and *Falstaff*, each represents a logical evolution in Verdi's development toward a synthesis of words and music; both operas are seamless dramas dominated by sung speech. These operatic masterpieces were written by a composer very different from the composer of *La Traviata*, *Don Carlos* and *Aida*; nevertheless, both operas

could aptly be categorized as the Italian “music of the future. *Otello* and *Falstaff* represent the composer’s progress and advancement from previous works, yet each opera stresses its own stylistic continuity, at all times bearing the unique signature of the icon of nineteenth century Italian opera: Verdi.

Even though *Otello* suggests an independence from earlier techniques, the opera’s dynamic style does not really break with past traditions; *Otello* continues Verdi’s unshakable allegiance to past operatic modes and conventions. The opera indeed contains conventional arias, duets, and ensembles; as such, the opening storm scene is followed by the victory chorus, “Evviva Otello,” and then the hero’s short but powerful aria, “Esultate.” The opera contains a traditional “brindisi” or drinking song, a Love Duet that concludes Act I, the explosive Otello-Iago Oath Duet concluding Act II, “Si pel ciel,” and the traditional “concertato,” or ensemble that concludes Act III. Nevertheless, in *Otello*, these presumably archaic operatic conventions seem modern; they are appropriate to the dramatic continuity and provide a more finite conception of the musical drama.

In *Otello*, more than in any earlier Verdi opera, the structural unit of the act takes precedence over the individual scene. As such, *Otello*’s dramatic action is a continuous stream of events presented with a seamless continuity. Boito’s prose and Verdi’s music are subtly balanced, fused and integrated as one totality. Verdi’s music responds to the meaning of the prose and even at times approaches the rhythms and inflections of the spoken theater; as such, emotions and passions are emphasized, and the dramatic and psychological confrontations are more profound.

Verdi continues his preoccupation with his ideal of the “parola scenica,” his obsession for dramatic integrity which he unceasingly strove for in his later operas. Verdi was determined to have the words sculpt the dramatic situation, make them vivid, and even set them in relief. Verdi defined the ideal of the “parola scenica”: “...by which I mean the word that clinches the situation and makes it absolutely clear...” A quintessential example is Amneris’s “Trema vil schiava” in *Aida*.

Because *Otello*’s tragic plot fuses music and text more completely and seamlessly than Verdi had ever achieved, the opera contains an unrelenting pace, drive, and compulsion. Opera is an art form that inherently communicates on the two levels of words and music, and by its underlying nature, it can even supersede the intensity of its spoken dramatic source: Shakespeare’s *Othello*. In *Otello* Verdi’s music adds dramatic intensity by its strategic repetition of specific motives: the “Kiss Theme,” and Iago’s description of the “Green Monster,” the latter the symbol of jealousy that represents the essential core of the drama.

In essence, Verdi’s *Otello* introduced a new Italian “music of the future.” From *Otello* onward, the emphasis and focus of the Italian lyric theatre would indeed turn toward a more profound integration of words and music; however, that integration would continue to maintain its stylistic traditions in which the voice and lyricism would always remain supreme. Nevertheless, after *Otello*, it would no longer be possible to set to music absurd dramas and lamentable verses that had been standard practice in some of the earlier bel canto operas: music drama as a whole would be compelled to follow the words with strict fidelity, and the words would have to be worthy of being followed by the music.

With *Otello*, Verdi ordained the future of the Italian lyric theater: *Otello* became his own conception of Wagner’s *Gesamtkunstwerk*, or total artwork, a tribute to the art form that certainly did not compromise his artistic integrity. Verdi’s heirs, Mascagni, Leoncavallo,

Puccini, Cilèa, Giordano, and Ponchielli, would continue the great Italian tradition, most in the short-lived verismo genre. Nevertheless, all of their works would emphasize a profound dramatic synthesis of words and music, and in maintaining that Italian tradition; all of their operas would be driven by a profound lyricism.

The evolution and development of Verdi's *Otello* owes its origins to Verdi's dynamic publisher, Giulio Ricordi, who foresaw the splendid possibilities of a flowering artistic partnership between the great composer, and the equally renowned poet, Arrigo Boito. Nevertheless, the creation of that ultimate collaboration was a long and stormy operatic event in itself; it was saturated with intense emotions and passions.

Verdi and Boito were diverse in terms of background and temperament; Boito was also 30 years younger than Verdi. Verdi was a consummate Italian in personality and character: he descended from humble peasant origins, and as an artist and musical craftsman, he was extremely practical rather than philosophical. Boito was half-Polish, an intellectual and man of letters, a musician, and an opera composer.

But an important obstacle to the development of the partnership was that Boito was one of those late nineteenth century pan-Europeans who had idealized visions about the future of contemporary art. To Boito, Italian opera was in decline and decay, and he considered it his personal mission to modernize the art form and heroically bring it into the vanguard of modern European culture.

Boito launched his artistic crusade and became an active rather than passive reformer. He became associated with the "Scapigliatura" ("the Unkempt Ones"), a group of avant-gardists who were not only iconoclasts, but were dedicated to ridding Italian art of all of its earlier traditions. In particular, through satire and derision, Boito and his followers ridiculed and denounced the Italian lyric theater, and envisioned its salvation in Wagner's music of the future: it became the onset of the clash of the nineteenth century opera titans; Verdi vs. Wagner; and Italian opera vs. German opera.

As a composer, Boito's seminal opera, *Mefistofele*, premiered at La Scala in 1868. Boito's music made no significant impression on Verdi, who considered its musical and dramatic integration too Wagnerian, its orchestration too heavy, and its use of leitmotifs inappropriate and amateurish. In particular, Verdi felt that the opera lacked essential musical development, commenting that it was "as though the composer had renounced all form of melody for fear of losing touch with the text." Today, *Mefistofele* holds the stage by virtue of its subject, its impressive stage spectacle, and certainly its charismatic bass singing role.

Contrarily, Boito doubted if Verdi could continue to play a role in the future of the Italian lyric theater. Like Verdi, Boito considered the operatic art form in a state of deterioration and degeneration. While speculating about a new champion who would redeem Italian opera, Boito wrote: "Perhaps the man is already born who will elevate the art of music in all its chaste purity above that altar now befouled like the walls of a brothel."

Whether Boito's bombast was specifically directed to Verdi or not, Verdi assumed that he personally was the target of those vicious insults: therefore, Verdi was the accused; Boito's enemy of Italian art. As a result, Boito's presumed affronts against Verdi remained an obstacle to Ricordi's efforts to unite the composer and poet. Their disagreements became an acknowledged feud, a mistrust that would continue to undermine any future association.

Nevertheless, Verdi indeed respected and admired Boito's literary talent. While in Paris in 1862, the young 21-year old Boito, then a music student, had the honor of meeting Rossini and Verdi. Boito so impressed Verdi that he commissioned him to write the text for the "Inno

delle nazioni” (“Hymn of the Nations”), a work that received prominence during World War II when Arturo Toscanini performed it copiously to symbolize his opposition to Italian fascism.

Boito frequently wrote under the anagrammatic pseudonym, “Tobio Gorrio.” Of his many literary activities, he translated German lieder into Italian, among them Wagner’s *Wesendonck Lieder*, and wrote an Italian translation of Wagner’s *Rienzi*. Boito was the librettist for a number of all but forgotten operas, the single exception, the text written for Ponchielli’s *La Gioconda* (1876), a plot loosely derived from Hugo’s *Angelo*, and a setting that he changed to Venice to introduce local color. Nevertheless, its flamboyant melodramatic style faithfully mirrors Hugo, and thus its characterizations are anything but subtle.

Like his idol Wagner, Boito consistently believed that the key ingredient of a music drama was that the words and music should strive for fluidity and integration, stressing that the opera’s text should approach the rhythms of the spoken theater. Boito’s primary strength was in simplifying a complicated plot, maintaining plot focus, and providing a sense of balance and overall proportion, talents that made him an ideal future partner for the great *Otello* that was looming on the operatic horizon.

**G** iulio Ricordi was an avid supporter of Boito and recognized that before Verdi and Boito could proceed toward the infinitely greater task of *Otello*, they needed a “trial balloon,” an opportunity to work together and test the chemistry of a relationship.

Ricordi wisely understood a poet’s ability to aid and stimulate the thoughts of a composer. He assumed the role of peacemaker, determined and resolved to forge the partnership of Boito with Verdi, and envisioning another classic composer-librettist collaboration similar to that of Lorenzo da Ponte with Mozart.

Ricordi initiated a series of intrigues that were coupled with diplomacy and tact. Boito had been working on his opera, *Nerone*, and Ricordi learned that Verdi also had interest in the subject for an opera. Boito was willing to relinquish the libretto to Verdi, but Ricordi failed to induce Verdi; their reconciliation failed because Verdi was still smoldering from Boito’s earlier assault against Italian art: Verdi himself.

Undaunted, Ricordi developed another ploy. He knew that Verdi had been unhappy with the final libretto of *Simon Boccanegra* (1857), and convinced Verdi to allow Boito an opportunity to make revisions. Boito added the Council Chamber scene to *Simon Boccanegra*, and Verdi was immensely satisfied, elated that Boito had redeemed his opera.

With that success, Ricordi proceeded to develop the possibilities of their collaboration on *Otello*. At first, Verdi showed cautious enthusiasm for the project, hesitant to affront the venerated Rossini who had composed his *Otello* in 1816. Nevertheless, after Boito submitted the complete libretto of *Otello* to Verdi, the composer was severely impressed by its quality. Soon afterwards, Verdi’s progress on *Otello* proceeded spasmodically, and it was only through Boito’s patience and his readiness to cater to Verdi’s whims that the momentous project was kept afloat.

The triumphant premiere of *Otello* took place in February 1887. It sealed and set the stage for Boito’s future collaborations with Verdi, a friendship and relationship that the poet eventually regarded as the climax of his artistic life. Boito possessed all the artistic attributes necessary for his great endeavor with Verdi: he was a man of great culture, a genuine poet with profound theatrical senses, and a musician who understood the inner workings of a composer’s mind.

Afterward *Otello*, they collaborated smoothly on Verdi’s final opera, *Falstaff*, the rousing and successful premiere taking place in 1893. It was Boito’s particular fondness and

extraordinary talent for wordplay and irony that created an exhilarating and beautifully paced libretto for *Falstaff*, and inspired the venerable Verdi to his final operatic success.

Boito struggled with an intense artistic dualism throughout his life: literature vs. music. But it became literature that proved his quintessential talent: his great partnership and collaboration with Verdi achieved artistic immortality for him in the history of opera.

Verdi had a lifelong veneration for Shakespeare, his singular and most popular source of inspiration, far more profound than the playwrights Goldoni, Goethe, Schiller, Hugo, and Racine. Verdi said of Shakespeare: “He is a favorite poet of mine whom I have had in my hands from earliest youth and whom I read and reread constantly.”

Shakespearean plots are saturated with extravagant passions that are well suited to the opera medium, and his tragedies are dominated by classic confrontations that are grist for the operatic mill: themes involving love, hate, jealousy, betrayal, and revenge. Yet Shakespeare’s theatrical art depends on lightning verbal intricacy, wit, and eloquent speech, so intrinsically his poetic language and wordplay are not easily integrated or transferred into music drama, a reason perhaps that many successful adaptations of Shakespeare are far removed from the original.

Nevertheless, three of Verdi’s operas have assured Shakespeare a continued place in the opera house: *Macbeth*, Verdi’s seventh opera that premiered in 1847, *Otello*, and *Falstaff*. Throughout Verdi’s entire career, he contemplated the dream of bringing Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* and *King Lear* to the operatic stage: both ambitious projects that never reached fruition. For *King Lear* in particular, the intricacy and bold extremities of the text deterred him. Even after Boito’s sketch was submitted, Verdi hesitated, considering himself too old to undertake what he considered a monumental challenge.

Nevertheless, to Verdi, *Othello* was Shakespeare’s seminal work, a work of consummate colossal power, and perhaps the best constructed and most vividly theatrical of all of his dramas: a drama that essentially progresses with no subplots, and no episodes that fail to bear on the central action; all of its action is focused toward its central dramatic core and purpose.

Boito’s incredible challenge was to reduce Shakespeare’s five acts and 3500 lines to workable operatic proportions. Ultimately his text contained 700 lines, a compression and condensation of the original that he brilliantly achieved while at the same time retaining the complete essence of Shakespeare’s original drama.

Shakespeare’s Act I Venetian scene does not appear in Verdi’s *Otello*: the scene in the Senate when Brabantio, Desdemona’s father, accuses Othello of seducing his daughter. It is in this scene that Othello makes his famous speech to the Senate and relates how he wooed and won Desdemona by enchanting her with his great military exploits. Othello begins with a self-deprecating, low-key speech to his accusers: “Most potent, grave, and reverend Signiors.” And then he defines their consummate love: “She loved me for the dangers I had passed, and I loved her that she did pity them.”

In Verdi’s *Otello*, there is no Venetian scene, but Boito salvaged Shakespeare’s magnificent prose by ingeniously incorporating its essence into the intensely romantic and passionate Act I Love Duet; the Love Duet thus captures Othello’s defense in the Senate and provides a retrospective of their discovery of love. In the opera, Otello speaks of his pride in winning Desdemona: “E tu m’amavi le miei sventure,” the translation, the identical prose from

Shakespeare with a pronoun change from “she” to “you.” So in the opera text, Otello directs his words to Desdemona during the Act I love scene: “You loved me for the dangers I had passed, and I loved you that you did pity them,” and Desdemona responds by repeating the phrase in the first person nominative; “I loved you for the dangers you had passed. . . .”

The Verdi-Boito *Otello* portrays a two-sided hero: he is at first a man of lofty, heroic nobility, but very soon his soul collapses and plunges into exaggerated savagery. Much of Verdi’s music is heroic, a portrayal of a courageous man of great deeds, glory, and grandeur, who self-destructs as he is defeated by his own hubris, pride, and arrogance. Nevertheless, Boito’s prose is soul-searching, emotionally intense, and digs deeply into the hero’s psychological conflicts, inner turmoil, loss of love and respect. The greatness of the Verdi-Boito *Otello* is the magnificent tension created by both text and music.

Verdi, like most great artists, was a man who dissolved his whole self into his art; he was a moralist, a humanitarian, and a man who was clearly sensitive to the injustices in the world: he considered himself a priest, dedicated through his art to awaken man to morality and humanity.

*Otello*’s drama portrays humanity’s archetypal, eternal moral struggle between good against evil. Verdi philosophized that man’s greatest moral dilemma was his vulnerability to evil. He believed that an innocent man facing the moral struggle and tension between good and evil becomes powerless and helpless; he will lose the battle, suffer, stumble, fall and die.

Shakespeare’s tragedy of *Othello* provided Verdi with the theatrical arena to breathe life into the moral issue of good vs. evil. Desdemona, the faithful, virtuous, and loyal wife of Otello represents good; Iago represents the counter-force who portrays psychopathic evil. Otello himself becomes the battlefield on which those forces of good and evil play out their conflict. In the end, the essence of the tragedy of *Otello* is that the forces of evil are the victors: evil claims the warrior’s soul.

Otello is a heroic figure, a general serving the Venetian Republic at the height of its glory and power in the fifteenth century. Otello is about forty years old, a brave and courageous man of arms, a man of authority and power whose commands are imperious, but whose judgment is temperate. Otello is a black Moor, one of the many brave warriors conscripted from North Africa by the Venetians.

Otello’s first appearance in the opera is a triumphant moment. He appears as an undaunted military hero, almost a living legend or walking myth, who has just been victorious over Venice’s Turkish enemies. He has also just conquered nature’s power: a violent storm. His first words are “Esultate!” (“Rejoice!”), a thunderous proclamation of victory over enemy and sea. (In Shakespeare, “Our wars are done, the Turks are drowned.”)

Otello is both hero and lover. We must perceive the great, courageous, and heroic side of Otello in order to understand how worthy he is of Desdemona’s love, and how great is his capacity for passionate devotion. A short moment later, Otello is seen as the ardent and passionate lover of his beloved Desdemona: a man who craves love, humanity’s greatest aspiration. Otello envisions her as the semi-divine ideal of perfect beauty, innocence, virtue, and faultless purity.

The great hero struggles against two elements that will eventually destroy him: his uncontrollable epilepsy, the outward manifestation of his physical vulnerability, and his vulnerability to the poison of jealousy. At the end of Act III, when Iago’s poison has fully succeeded in corrupting his mind, he succumbs to an attack of epilepsy. But Otello eventually

defeats himself: he becomes his own worst enemy, who is driven to his doom by doubt: doubt about his own worth despite years of heroism and praise, and doubt about his wife's fidelity.

How quickly the passions of love can be transformed into passions of hatred. The tragedy is built on the human affliction of jealousy. In Act II, while watching Cassio in conversation with Desdemona, Iago injects his lethal poison, planting the seeds of destruction that will ultimately transform Otello's mind: "Temete, signor, la gelosia?" ("My lord, do you fear jealousy?")

Obsessed to drive his master insane, Iago cunningly and subtly administers small doses of suspicion from his Pandora's box of evil through his metaphorical description of jealousy: "È un'idra fosca, livida, cieca, col suo veleno sè stessa attosca, vivida piaga le squarcia il seno" ("It is a green-eyed monster, livid, and blind. I poisons itself, rips open its own wounds, and feeds on them.") Iago's treacherous duplicity corrupts Otello's mind. And appropriately, Verdi's underlying music is slithering and winding: it is music that is heard during the second act, and again at the opening of third act. Verdi is providing us with his musical narration to emphasize the core of the drama: the music of the green-eyed monster is a dramatic reminder that the horrible monster has taken possession of Otello's mind, the disease that will conquer his reason and ultimately drive him insane.

Jealousy! Otello loses control of himself, and explodes into violent savagery, ranting and raving that he must have proof of Desdemona's guilt. In the second act Quartet, in short-breathed nervous phrases, the confused Otello contemplates the reasons Desdemona seeks another lover: Is it his advancing age, his rough manners, or his blackness? In further contemplation of his defeat, he follows shortly thereafter with an explosive and thundering exclamation of his defeat: "Ora e per sempre addio sante memorie" ("Now and forever, farewell to noble memories.") Otello's voice summons all its strength to sustain a martial stance as he bids farewell to his life of heroism.

And in the spine-chilling climax of Act II, the Oath Duet, "Sì, pel ciel marmoreo giuro!" ("Yes, I swear by the marble heaven!"), Boito captures the bloodcurdling essence of Shakespeare's prose: "Arise black vengeance from thy hollow cell." The hero is no longer a man of Christian compassion, but has become a raving, savage maniac who seeks justice through brutal revenge.

In Act III, Otello humiliates Desdemona by insulting her and condemning her as a "vil cortigiana" ("A vile courtesan."). Before the assembled Venetian dignitaries he curses her: "Anima mia, ti maledico!" ("My dearest, I curse you!") And in his final humiliation and ultimate disgrace, after he has killed Desdemona, he learns that he has been the victim of Iago's deceit. Otello, dagger in hand, recites "Niun mi tema s'anco armato mi vede" ("No one fears me although they see me with a weapon"), the musical chords funereal. Indeed, the heroic warrior and great lover pathetically realizes his victimization at the hands of Iago.

Both Otello and Desdemona are the supreme victims of the tragedy: the victims of Iago's evil. As jealousy overpowers Otello, Desdemona confronts the torment within his soul: his doubt, his fury, his spiritual overthrow and defeat. But as Iago's cunning intrigues poison Otello's mind, the fullness of the horror becomes Otello's doubt, that loss of faith that spawns jealousy and stabs him in the heart. Otello's drama plunges its hero's soul into the heart of darkness, into those huge universal powers of evil working in the world. Jealousy is the monster that breeds the tragedy and spawns the mighty power of Iago's evil. Verdi is inspired toward the message of this great tragedy: man was powerless against the forces of evil.

Desdemona is the angelic image of chastity and purity, a noble wife, at times perhaps disingenuous and innocent in her compassion for Cassio, but always expressing devout and loyal feelings of love for Otello. Verdi's music for Desdemona evokes an almost saintly religiosity: her "Ave Maria" of Act IV (not in Shakespeare's *Othello*) virtually frames the holy image of Desdemona.

Shakespeare's Desdemona is a more lively and complex character than in the Verdi-Boito opera: strong, brave, and willful: she is the woman who dared to enter into an unorthodox marriage with a black Moor. Nevertheless, she is vulnerable and becomes the victim of Iago's sinister plot, incapable of understanding or withstanding the power of the forces of evil. Verdi's music and Boito's text are in unison in their characterization of Desdemona, ceaselessly expressing the entire range of joy and sorrow as she tries to comprehend the reversal of Otello's mind.

In Shakespeare's cast-list, Iago is simply described: "Iago, a villain," Shakespeare not adding one additional descriptive word. Iago is quintessential evil: the bold demon who sets all the action into motion; the real author of the drama; the man who fabricates the diabolic threads, gathers them up, combines them, and then weaves them together. Iago is the antithesis and counterforce to Otello's heroism and Desdemona's purity, as well as their capacity for love.

Cinthio, Shakespeare's original source, describes Iago as 28 years old: "An ensign of a most handsome presence, but of the most villainous nature that the world has ever known." Iago is a subtle demon, not the common stereotype of a sneering Mephistopheles shooting satanic glances. Every word spoken by Iago is on the human level, admittedly a villainous humanity, but still human.

Iago portrays many faces and appearances, all of which are designed to achieve his consummate deceptions. He is double-dealing and two-faced: his goal, to bend his opponents to his will, a goal he achieves through his chameleon-like talent to change his personality and adapt it to the person to whom he is speaking.

Thus, he achieves his objectives by using great charm and apparent geniality. So, in Act I, during the storm, he reveals himself as a bustling plotter of mischief and intrigue who is motivated by a singular hatred arising from frustrated ambition: "L' alvo frenetico del mar sia la sua tomba!" ("May the furious womb of the sea be his tomb!") But he is a subtle satanic genius: Cassio believes he is congenial; he is apparently humbly devoted to Otello; he is pleasant and respectful toward Desdemona and Lodovico; but brutal and threatening toward his wife Emilia, a woman who knows of his duplicity and evil ways.

Iago's thundering, nihilistic "Credo," is a brilliant creation of Verdi and Boito, a soliloquy intended to clearly establish and define his diabolic motivation, his evil, and satanic persona. In this context the "Credo" represents paradox and irony.

In Christianity, a "Credo" is a traditional declaration of faith, a part of the Catholic Mass: "Credo in unum Deum" ("I believe in one God.") But the Christian "Credo" is a declaration of faith in a God of goodness and grace. Contrarily, Iago's "Credo" declares his faith in evil. Iago's philosophy represents the antithesis of Christian morality; he is the classic anti-Christ, the incarnate of Satan and the devil. Boito cleverly and ironically created the paradoxical idea of a "Credo" with a satanic text: "I believe in a cruel god who has created me in his image, and I call upon in my wrath."

The Christian "Credo" speaks of human flesh ennobled, Christ incarnate, of Resurrection whereby the body and the spirit are destined to rise to greater glory. Verdi's Iago speaks of

flesh as born from some vile element, a primeval slime he feels within himself, flesh that is destined only to corrupt in the grave, and then be eaten by worms. Christianity speaks of man's capacity to be good: Iago declares "I am wicked because I am human." Christianity promises a life in the world to come, but Iago concludes that after death there is nothing: "Heaven is an old fable."

Iago represents quintessential evil. He sees evil in Nature, and evil in God. He commits evil for evil's sake and in the process, has become an artist in deceit. The primary cause of his hatred for Otello — appointing Cassio captain in his place — is envy that is certainly not as profound as the vengeance he exacts from it. All Iago needed was cause for his villainy, an excuse sufficient to make him hate the Moor and exercise his evil self: "The evil I think, and the evil that flows from me, is the fulfillment of my destiny."

It is easy to understand why Verdi seriously considered calling his opera by the name of its villain: Iago.

Shakespeare's contemporary rival, Ben Jonson, praised him as a writer "not of an age, but for all time." Shakespeare was that universal genius, that literary high priest who invented through his dramas, a secular scripture from which we derive much of our language, much of our psychology, and much of our mythology.

Shakespeare's character inventions are truthful representations of the human experience: Hamlet, Falstaff, Iago, and Cleopatra. These characters take human nature to its limits, and it is through them that we turn inward, and discover new modes of awareness and consciousness. As such, Shakespeare's inventions have become the wheel of our lives, serving to teach us whether we are fools of time, of vanity, of arrogance, of love, of fortune, of our parents, or of ourselves.

The tragedy of *Otello* is that the forces of evil become the victors and claim the hero's soul. Verdi's music narrates this great human drama, and together with Boito's brilliant adaptation of Shakespeare's prose, they capture the tragedy of the conflict: Otello's horrible downfall, Desdemona's love and innocence, and Iago's deceit and evil.

Part of the greatness of the opera art form is that its music can remain implanted in our minds and subconscious. When certain music is recalled, it evokes immediate images. In the final moments of *Otello*, the Kiss Theme from the Act I Love Duet is recalled. When it was first heard, it climaxed the impassioned and rapturous love of Otello and Desdemona.

The Kiss Theme echoes again in the finale in the identical form and musical key in which it was heard earlier. However, in its final rendering, its emotional force and impact become cathartic. Otello has murdered Desdemona, and he learns that he has been the victim of Iago's deceit. The hero recalls their joyous love, and he laments even more bitterly the ironic and tragic outcome of their love: the death of love, and the death of lovers.

It is Verdi's Kiss Theme that eloquently suggests the poignancy of Shakespeare's prose: "I kissed thee, ere I kill'd thee; no way but this – Killing myself, to die upon a kiss."

After the spectacular success of *Otello* at its premiere, Boito said to Verdi: "Congratulations to us!" Verdi contradicted his ebullient collaborator and answered: "Congratulations to HIM – to Shakespeare, the immortal bard!"



# *Otello*

**Opera in Italian in four acts**

**Music**

**by**

**Giuseppe Verdi**

**Libretto by Arrigo Boito,**

**after Shakespeare's tragedy**

***Othello, the Moor of Venice* (1604)**

**Premiere at La Scala, Milan,**

**February 1887**

***Principal Characters in Otello***

Otello, a Moor, Venetian general, and Governor of Cyprus	Tenor
Desdemona, Otello's wife	Soprano
Iago, an ensign	Baritone
Cassio, an officer	Tenor
Roderigo, a Venetian gentleman	Tenor
Lodovico, ambassador from Venice	Bass
Montano, former Governor of Cyprus	Bass
Emilia, Desdemona's companion and Iago's wife	Soprano

TIME and PLACE: Island of Cyprus, 15<sup>th</sup> century

***Brief Story Synopsis***

Otello, a Venetian general and governor of the Mediterranean island of Cyprus, has just married to Desdemona.

Iago, an envious ensign, hates Otello for his success, and seeks to destroy him.

Iago spawns jealousy in Otello, poisoning his mind with suggestions that Desdemona is unfaithful; that she is the paramour of Cassio.

Inflamed with distrust, doubt, and loss of faith in Desdemona, Otello declines into madness and murders Desdemona.

***Historical background: 15<sup>th</sup> century Venice***

During the fifteenth century, the Republic of Venice had become a dominant military and economic power in the Mediterranean and Christian world. The city of Venice, strategically located in northeastern Italy, had commercially benefited from the Crusades by developing trade with the East, as well as from the partition of the Byzantine Empire. The city-state had won its wars of conquest against its commercial rivals and established its invincibility.

Toward the end of the century, its power began to decline, accelerated by attacks on the Republic from the Turkish Empire in the East, various foreign invaders, and other rival Italian city-states. Significantly, the Portuguese discovered a sea route to the Indies that circumvented the Cape of Good Hope and rendered Mediterranean access unessential. As their authority waned, the Holy Roman Empire, France, and Spain divided Venetian possessions among themselves, and thereafter, Venice never regained its former political, economic, and military power.

The story of *Otello* takes place during the mid-fifteenth century when Venetian power was at its peak.



**Drinking Song:**

**Allegro con brio**

**IAGO**



Their love has achieved life's ultimate fulfillment: the supreme contentment of love and its consummation has satisfied all yearning. Otello declares: "Venga la morte! E mi colga nell'estasi de quest'amplesso il momento supremo" ("Let death come! I find myself in the ecstasy of this embrace, this supreme moment!") Desdemona assures Otello that their love shall grow even stronger, her wishes ennobled with an "Amen."

Otello and Desdemona are both overwhelmed by joy and happiness. Their Love Duet sweeps forward like a tide, finally arriving at its supreme ecstatic moment: a kiss, "Un bacio," the music resounding three times, each time ascending higher as it reaches its shimmering finale.

### *The Kiss Theme:*



Otello notes that Venus shines brightly, "Venere splende," and the lovers embrace each other to an accompaniment of magical cellos, a musical confirmation of their ecstatic moment of blissful love and contentment.

### *Act II: A hall in the castle with a view of a garden terrace*

Iago, obsessed to destroy Otello, will achieve his goal by poisoning Otello's mind with doubt about Desdemona's faithfulness. The great hero who earlier described his feats and rejoiced so memorably in his "Esultate!", and the man of passion who just shared rapturous moments with his beloved Desdemona, will surrender to Iago's treachery: doubt will lead to Otello's breach of trust and faith in Desdemona; his irrational jealousy will overpower him and become the engine that will destroy him, bringing tragedy to himself, as well as to Desdemona.

Iago begins his intrigue on the unsuspecting and crestfallen Cassio, convincing the ex-captain that Desdemona's intercession with Otello can restore his rank. Desdemona stands outside in the garden, indulged by adoring Cypriots, and Iago urges Cassio to approach her and plead for her help with Otello.

Alone inside the hall, Iago gloats over his intrigue and reveals his heartless inner soul in a soliloquy: the "Credo," a brilliant invention and tour-de-force resulting from the Verdi-Boito collaboration that has no counterpart in the original Shakespeare. The "Credo" represents Iago's demonic philosophy: it is a terrifying invocation of his total faith in evil. It is a deliberate and vicious assault on one's sensibilities, as Iago reveals himself as a man of savage villainy with a brazen inner soul.

Iago's creed states that a cruel God has created him in his own vile image: that his destiny is to do evil; that virtue is a lie and a good man is a contemptible dupe; that man is the plaything of fate and can hope for nothing in this life or after death.

Iago's confession of his evil faith expresses the soul of a heartless cynic. He concludes his soliloquy: "La morte è il nulla. È vecchia fola il Ciel" ("Death is nothing. Heaven is an old fable.")

And then Iago explodes into mocking laughter.

Iago: Credo

Allegro sostenuto



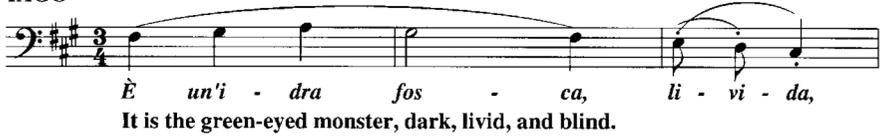
Desdemona, Emilia, and adoring Cypriot women, children, and sailors promenade on the garden terrace in full view of the castle hall. Cassio and Desdemona are seen engaged in intimate conversation.

While Iago watches their encounter from inside the hall, Otello arrives. Iago pretends surprise at his general's sudden presence, and murmurs about the conspicuous familiarity he is witnessing between Cassio and Desdemona: "Ciò m'accora" ("That breaks my heart.") As both observe Desdemona and Cassio, Otello seems confused by Iago's concern, assessing their encounter merely as an expression of innocent homage to his wife. Nevertheless, Otello becomes disquieted and irritated: Iago has succeeded in planting the first seeds of jealousy and suspicion in his master.

Iago injects his poisonous villainy in small drops: half-uttered phrases, and vague suggestions. In a spine-chilling moment, he whispers in Otello's ear: "Temete, Signor, la gelosia?" ("My Lord, do you fear jealousy?") And then he describes jealousy as a gruesome green-eyed monster.

*"È un'idra fosca, livida, cieca"*

Moderato  
IAGO



Otello reacts by exploding into a rage, rejecting jealousy as nonsense. Otello affirms that he is the supreme law: he alone has the power to exact justice. If the crime of infidelity has been committed, he will be the sole judge: "Otello ha sue leggi supremo, amor e gelosia vadan dispersi insieme!" ("Othello has his own supreme rules, and then love and jealousy will disappear together!") Iago has succeeded again to arouse Otello's suspicions. He further advances his intrigue by cautioning Otello to be vigilant, wary, and guarded.

Desdemona enters the hall followed by her lady-in-waiting, Iago's wife, Emilia. She approaches her husband, and confident in her conviction that she is fulfilling a virtuous deed, immediately launches her plea for Cassio's reinstatement.

*"D'un uom che geme"*

DESDEMONA



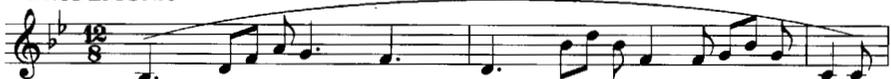
Otello becomes agitated and irritated, now confounded by a growing suspicion of her intentions: Otello rudely tells Desdemona that he does not wish to talk about Cassio at this moment.

In spite of Otello's agitation, Desdemona is undaunted and continues to plead for Cassio's pardon, her incessant pleas making Otello increasingly distraught. Irritated, Otello complains that his forehead is burning, and the dutiful Desdemona takes her handkerchief to wipe his brow: "il fazzoletto," the handkerchief Otello had given her as a present. Desdemona accidentally drops the handkerchief to the ground. Emilia retrieves it.

A quartet follows: it is actually two duets; one between Otello and Desdemona, and the other between Iago and Emilia.

**Quartet: "Dammi la dolce e lieta parola del perdono"**

**Largo**  
**DESEMONA**



*Dam - mi la dol - ce e lie - ta paro - la del per - donno.*  
Give me the sweet and blessed word of your forgiveness.

Desdemona tries to soothe her husband's incomprehensible distress, but Otello is in the throes of suspicion and becomes impassive. He becomes introspective and reflects on his doubt, confusion, and insecurity, lamenting that perhaps she no longer loves him because he is too old, perhaps because he has lost his virility, or perhaps because he is black.

Meanwhile, Iago tries to bully Emilia into giving him the handkerchief, but when she refuses, he physically snatches it from her and hides it in his tunic.

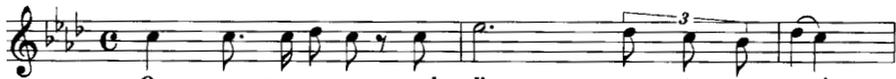
Otello brusquely dismisses Desdemona, and starts to grumble and vacillate, unable to rationalize his confusion and irritation: Desdemona has been pleading for Cassio incessantly, and Iago has suggested to him that she is Cassio's paramour. Otello reflects: "Desdemona rea! Atroce idea!" ("Desdemona is guilty! An atrocious idea!") And then he ruminates: How could he, the great warrior and hero, be the victim of infidelity? Iago, hearing Otello ponder his doubts, gloats to himself: "Il mio velen lavora" ("My poison is working.")

As Otello's mental confusion becomes more intense, he rages out of control and bursts into a savagely furious explosion against Iago: "Tu? Indietro! Fuggi!" ("You? Get back! Flee from here!") Otello senses defeat: his whole world is collapsing; infidelity is the greatest of betrayals.

Otello ponders: What if it is true? He envisions the end of his glory and his dreams shattered: "Ora e per sempre addio sante memorie" ("Now and forever farewell to noble memories.") Otello's phrases swell and arrive at a boiling climax at the moment when he envisions his total downfall: "Della gloria d'Otello è questo al fin" ("This is the end of Othello's glory.")

**"Ora e per sempre addio"**

**Allegro assai sostenuto**  
**OTELLO**



*O - ra e per sempre ad - dio san - te me - morie,*  
Now and forever farewell to noble memories,

Iago suggests to Otello that his dilemma is self-made: he has been too honest and trustful. Otello again vacillates: “I believe Desdemona is loyal, and I believe she is not. I believe that you are honest, and I believe that you are disloyal.” If Desdemona is indeed guilty, Otello resolves that he must have conclusive proof of her infidelity.

Iago feeds his now totally vulnerable victim with a manufactured story that implies an affair between Cassio and Desdemona. He tells Otello that he heard Cassio talking in his sleep: “Gentle Desdemona! Hide our love. We must be cautious! Heaven’s ecstasy completely enraptures us.” And he continues, quoting Cassio: “I curse the awful destiny that gave you to the Moor.”

Then Iago injects his coup de grace. Does Otello recall the handkerchief he gave Desdemona? Iago produces the handkerchief, telling him: “I saw that handkerchief yesterday in Cassio’s hands.”

Iago’s evil work has been accomplished: Does his master want further proof? Does he want to actually see them in bed together? Otello erupts, raves frantically, and swears a lethal revenge: “sangue, sangue, sangue”: Otello wants blood. Iago offers his help. Together, Otello and Iago unite and swear a solemn oath: they swear never to relent until the guilty shall have been punished.

**Duet: “Si pel ciel marmoreo giuro!”**



The second act of Otello concludes amidst orchestral thunders, underscoring the newfound conspirators’ solemn proclamation: “Dio vendicator!” (“God will vindicate us!”)

**Act III: The great hall of the castle**

The monsters of jealousy and doubt have totally consumed Otello. Otello and Iago plan to entrap Cassio into revealing the truth. Iago will bring Cassio to the castle and Otello will eavesdrop on their conversation while Iago interrogates him.

Desdemona appears, interrupting Iago and Otello and their sinister intrigue. Immediately, she expresses her innocence and charm: “Dio ti giocondi, o sposo” (“God bring joy to my husband.”)

**“Dio ti giocondi, o sposo”**

**Allegro moderato**  
**DESDEMONA**

The image shows a musical score for Desdemona's song. It is written on a single treble clef staff with a key signature of two sharps (F# and C#) and a common time signature (C). The tempo marking is 'Allegro moderato'. The melody is simple and lyrical, consisting of several measures. The notes are: F#4, G4, A4, B4, C5, B4, A4, G4, F#4, E4, D4, C4. The lyrics are written below the staff.

*Dio ti giocondi o spo - so, dell'alma mi - a sov-ra - no.*  
God bring joy to my husband, the master over my soul.

Otello responds: “Grazie, madonna, datemi la vostra eburnea mano” (“Thank you my good lady. Give me your ivory hand, whose mellow beauty is sprinkled with warmth.”) With bitter irony, Otello’s words to Desdemona feign sweetness, but it is a pretense: he is unable to control his suspicions and irrational emotions, and their exchange builds to an almost unbearable tension, particularly when Desdemona again pleads to Otello to pardon Cassio.

Desdemona speaks to her husband with clear conscience; unable to believe or comprehend that his anxiety reflects anything amiss between them. But Desdemona is powerless against Otello’s mounting anger and fury, and she becomes unnerved by his repeated demands that she produce the handkerchief: “Il fazzoletto.”

Desdemona offers him a handkerchief to wipe his brow, but explains that it is not the one he had given her as a gift: that handkerchief is in her room and she offers to fetch it. Otello explodes in rage, now thoroughly convinced that Iago’s story about Cassio’s dream is true: he denounces Desdemona, damning her with accusations of infidelity; she is a whore. Desdemona, astonished and grief stricken, tries to remain calm, but fully realizes that Otello is out of control and has progressed toward madness.

Suddenly, Otello returns to an ominous calm, and asks Desdemona: “Dimmi chi sei! (“Tell me who you are!”) Desdemona answers: “The faithful wife of Othello.” Othello answers, “Swear it and damn yourself.”

Desdemona protests that she is innocent, unaware of what has prompted Otello’s irrational fury: Desdemona is shocked, in disbelief, and duly confused, and continues to repudiate Otello’s accusations. Otello takes Desdemona by the hand, and leads her to the door, pretending to be apologetic: “Vo’ fare ammenda” (“I want to apologize.”) But as Desdemona leaves, he explodes savagely, condemning and damning the woman who has committed the blackest of sins: “Quella vil cortigiana che è la sposa d’Otello” (“Otello’s wife is a vile courtesan.”)

Otello, now alone, is emotionally drained, and in a state of numb misery and spiritual exhaustion: he murmurs to himself in broken phrases. His mind has been corrupted by his jealous mania: he feels dejected and rejected. He pours out his grief, declaring that cruel fate has exacted this terrible blow, and he now suffers from the most horrible of defeats, a calamity worse than marring his military fame: Desdemona’s betrayal.

Finally, in his hysteria and incoherence, he resolves that Desdemona must die: “Ah! Dannazione! Pria confessi il delitto e poscia muoia!” (“Ah! Damnation! First confess the crime and then you die!”)

Iago enters to announce that Cassio has arrived, causing Otello to explode into joyous delight: his inner demons have triumphed. This is the moment when he will find the smoking gun. Iago directs Otello to hide while he traps Cassio into betraying himself.

Otello watches and listens as Iago, with fiendish ingenuity, induces Cassio to talk about his love affairs: Cassio speaks about a woman named Bianca, but he murmurs her name so softly that Otello cannot decipher it: Otello assumes that he speaks about Desdemona. Cassio unwittingly produces the handkerchief, the handkerchief Iago planted in his room: Iago passes the handkerchief behind his back for Otello to see.

*“Quest’è una ragna”*

**Allegro brillante**

**IAGO**



*Quest è una ra - gna dove il tuo cuor casca, si lagna, s'impiglia e muor.*

**This is a web where your heart falls, moans, becomes entangled, and dies.**

Otello has now seen the smoking gun; the handkerchief is the indisputable evidence that condemns Desdemona: she is guilty beyond doubt. Otello explodes and becomes obsessed with revenge.

Together, Otello and Iago join in a diabolic conversation. Otello has decided that Desdemona must be killed as punishment for her sins: he will smother and strangle her in the bed that she has dishonored.

A fanfare of trumpets announces the arrival of the Venetian ambassador, Lodovico, and his retinue. Lodovico inquires of Iago why Cassio is not present, and Iago replies that "Othello is upset with him. But Desdemona, ever Cassio's advocate, intervenes and adds that "I believe he will return to his good graces." Otello overhears their conversation and murmurs viciously to Desdemona: her support of Cassio convinces him of her treachery.

Lodovico brings news that the Senate has recalled Otello to Venice, and in his stead, they have appointed Cassio to govern Cyprus. Iago, his plans defeated and thwarted, responds furiously. Cassio kneels before the Ambassador to express his appreciation for his promotion. Lodovico begs Otello to comfort Desdemona, but Otello, his mind totally distorted and poisoned with jealousy, concludes that she weeps not because of Otello's dismissal, but because of her forthcoming separation from Cassio.

Otello is unable to contain his smoldering anger. He publicly insults Desdemona, and then grasps her by the arm and hurls her to the ground. The entire entourage becomes frozen in horror at Otello's violent behavior.

Desdemona, overcome with emotion, fear and sadness, cries in frustrated agony.

*"A terra! Si, nel livido fango"*

**Largo**  
**DESDEMONA**

*A terra! si nel li - vi - do fango.*  
**On the ground! Yes, in the murky mud.**

Iago whispers to Otello not to waste time: kill Desdemona at the earliest opportunity; he will kill Cassio. Otello orders everyone to leave. Cries of "Evviva Otello" are heard from the Cypriots outside. Desdemona cries out as she departs: "Mio sposo" ("My husband.") Otello responds, ferociously cursing her: "Anima mia, ti malidico!" ("My dearest, I curse you.")

Otello is possessed with his demons and cannot escape himself. He is besieged with a fit of epilepsy and cannot physically control himself: scraps of remembered conversation pass before him like a montage of horror. Overcome with emotional exhaustion, he faints and falls to the ground. Iago stands above him and gloats to himself over his handiwork: "Il mio velen lavora" ("My poison is working.")

Fanfares are again heard from the Cypriots hailing their beloved hero: "Evviva Otello! Gloria al Leon di Venezia!" ("Hail Othello! Glory to the Lion of Venice.")

Iago, in triumph, viciously and cynically gloats over his victim: "Chi può vietar che questa fronte prema col mio tallone?" ("Who can prevent me from placing my heel on his head?")

In his final triumph, Iago responds to the Cypriot's praise of their hero, the prostrate Moor who lies on the ground: "Here is your Lion."

**Act IV: Desdemona's bedroom**

In *Otello's* final act, the hyper-emotions and passionate outbursts of rage and fury that saturated the finale of Act III become transformed into a prolonged moment of repose: in Desdemona's bedchamber there is an atmosphere of indefinable sadness and desolation, and an eerie sense of gloom and foreboding.

Assisted by Emilia, Desdemona prepares to retire. She has premonitions of danger, and recalls in the "Willow Song," a song from her childhood, the story of a woman who died because her love was scorned. Desdemona broods, half applying the sadness of the song to her own unhappy dilemma.

**"Willow Song"****DESDEMONA**

*"Scor-rea - no i ri - vi fra le zolle in fior gemea quel core affranto."*  
**The stream ran through the flowery banks.**

Emilia bids her goodnight, and Desdemona proceeds to say her evening prayers.

**"Ave Maria"****Adagio****DESDEMONA**

*Pre - ga per chi a do-ran - do a te, si pro - stra,*  
**Pray for one who kneels before you and adores you.**

While Desdemona lies in bed, Otello enters through a secret door, makes his way to her bed, and contemplates the sleeping Desdemona: the Kiss Theme from the Act I Love Duet underscores his movements, an ironic comment to their past love and the contrasting murderous passions that have now enveloped him.

The drama proceeds rapidly toward its catastrophic conclusion. Otello awakens Desdemona, and asks her if she has said her prayers, implying that she must atone and be cleansed of the sins she has committed: Otello would not destroy her soul before she has prayed for penance.

Desdemona panics, and realizes that Otello intends to murder her. He is intransigent and convinced that she has been perfidious and unfaithful to him. She asks for Cassio: he will vindicate her because he knows the truth, and will swear to her innocence. Otello announces that Cassio is dead. Desdemona finally realizes that she is lost and helpless, and now at the mercy of a madman.

Otello again accuses Desdemona of being Cassio's paramour. Her denials are futile. Otello's jealous rage mounts, and then he smothers her with her pillow.

Emilia enters, witnesses the horror before her, and cries for help. Lodovico, Cassio, and Iago arrive, followed by Montano and armed guards. They try to disarm Otello, but with dagger in hand, he backs away from them. Chagrined, he realizes that even armed, no one fears him.

“Niun mi tema”

**OTELLO**



*Niun mi te -ma, se ancor armato mi ve-de. Ec - co la fi - ne del mio cammin.*  
**No one fears me although they see me with a weapon. This is the end of my road.**

Otello admits that he killed Desdemona because she was unfaithful. But Emilia reveals Iago’s intrigue and his theft of the handkerchief. Montano further reveals that Roderigo, as he was dying, exposed Iago’s wiles. Iago hurriedly exits and escapes.

Otello, turning toward Desdemona, half singing and half sobbing, realizes that Iago betrayed him, and the horror of his actions cannot be undone. He addresses Desdemona, and pours out his distressed and despairing soul: “a pious creature, born under an evil star.”

Otello stabs himself with his dagger before anyone can restrain him. With his last remaining strength, he draws himself to the body of Desdemona, and kisses her. The orchestra repeats the Kiss Theme as Otello, with his last dying breath, sighs: “Un bacio, un bacio ancora, Ah! Un altro bacio.”

In Shakespeare’s prose: “I kissed thee ere I kill’d thee; no way but this. Killing myself, to die upon a kiss.”

***CHAPTER FIFTEEN***  
***Opera and National Culture***

## *Opera and National Culture*

In the mid-nineteenth century, the Slavic nations of Central and Eastern Europe experienced national awakenings and used the arts to embark on their patriotic adventures: in opera, they turned to their rich culture, that was saturated with folk lore and traditional music.

In Bohemia, composers such as Antonin Dvořák (*Rusalka* - 1901) and Bedřich Smetana (*The Bartered Bride* - 1866), explored the beauties of their peasant idioms and folk music, molding them into a powerful Slavic statement of nationalism in their operas.

In Russia, nationalism was expressed through the glorification of Russian culture and history in their operas: Nikolai Rimsky-Korsakov brought fantasy and occasional satire to his treatment of historical themes; and Alexandr Borodin evoked the sumptuous orientalism of medieval Russia in his opera *Prince Igor* (1891). But Peter Ilyich Tchaikovsky (1840-1893) turned westward for his inspiration: *Eugene Onegin* (1879) and *Pique Dame* (1890) ("The Queen of Spades.")

Modest Mussorgsky (1839-1881) created operatic epics depicting Russian life and history: *Boris Godunov* and *Khovantchina*. In these operas he utilized leading motives (leitmotifs) and elevated the orchestra to symphonic grandeur, but his harmonies and rhythms incorporated musical idioms from Russia's vast cultural history.

According to autobiographical sketches, Modest (Petrovich) Mussorgsky (1839-1881), was born into an aristocratic family of landowners. However, in his formative years he was strongly influenced by his nurse and therefore prided himself as possessing the soul of a peasant: "This early familiarity with the spirit of the people, with the way they lived, lent the first and greatest impetus to my musical improvisations."

The young Modest was directed toward both a military and music career. He received his first piano lessons from his mother, reputed to have been an excellent pianist, who was articulate with many difficult pieces of Franz Liszt. In 1849, at the age of ten, his father introduced him to a military career by enrolling him in the Peter-Paul School of St. Petersburg. Although Modest was not the most industrious of students, he possessed a tremendous and wide-ranging intellectual curiosity, eventually becoming profoundly consumed by Russian history.

Modest's musical inclinations were entrusted to Anton Gerke, future professor of music at the St. Petersburg Conservatory. In 1852, at the age of 13, while enrolled in the School for Cadets of the Guard, Mussorgsky composed *Podpraporshchik* (*Porte-Enseigne Polka*), which was published at his father's expense. Four years later, in 1857, the 17-year-old, now a lieutenant, joined the crack Preobrazhensky Guards, one of Russia's most aristocratic regiments. He was an ensign who was taught what every good regimental officer was obliged to know: how to drink, how to chase women, how to wear clothes, how to gamble, how to flog a serf, and how to sit on a horse properly.

But above all, music was Mussorgsky's first love. He made the acquaintance of several music-loving officers who were devotees of the Italian theater, and befriended Alexandr Borodin, who was later to become another important Russian composer. In retrospect, Borodin provided an apt picture of Mussorgsky's personality and musical inclinations at the time: "There was something absolutely boyish about Mussorgsky; he looked like a real second-lieutenant of the picture books . . . a touch of foppery, unmistakable but kept well within bounds. His courtesy and good breeding were exemplary. All the women fell in love with him. . . . That same evening we were invited to dine with the head surgeon of the hospital." Mussorgsky sat down at the piano and played . . . very gently and graciously, with occasional affected movements of the hands, while his listeners murmured, "charming! delicious!"

During this period, a regimental comrade introduced Mussorgsky into the home of the Russian composer Alexandr Dargomyzhsky, where his Russophile inclinations were stimulated by his exposure to the music of the seminal Russian composer, Mikhail Glinka. Through

Dargomyzhsky, Mussorgsky met another composer, Mily Balakirev, who became his teacher. Balakirev made an overwhelming impact on Mussorgsky, who immediately immersed himself totally into music.

Many landowning families, Mussorgsky's among them, experienced financial hardships after the serfs were emancipated in 1861: during this time, Modest's poorly administered patrimony decreased substantially and virtually vanished. Those distressing financial troubles forced him to take a civil service job at the Ministry of Communications, and often, he sought the help of moneylenders.

In 1866, at the age of 27, Mussorgsky achieved artistic maturity. He composed a series of remarkable songs: "Darling Savishna," "Hopak," "The Seminarist," and the symphonic poem, "Night on Bald Mountain" (1867). One year later, he reached the height of his conceptual powers in composition with the first song of his incomparable cycle *Detskaya* ("The Nursery"), and a setting of the first act of Nikolai Gogol's *Zhenitba* ("The Marriage.")

In 1869 he began his magnum opus, *Boris Godunov*, writing his own libretto based on the drama by Alexandr Pushkin, and Karamzin's *History of the Russian Empire*. But the ultimate success of *Boris Godunov* failed to pacify his inner angst. He entered a lonely period of solitude after the premature death of a deeply beloved cousin; he never married and remained dutifully faithful to her memory. He had lived with his brother, and afterwards shared a small flat with the Russian composer, Nikolai Rimsky-Korsakov, until the latter's marriage in 1872.

Alone and despairing, morose and introspective, he disintegrated, periodically disappearing. During this period of profound psychological distress, Mussorgsky began to drink to excess, which served to distract him from the composition of the opera *Khovantchina*: he completed the piano score in 1874, but the opera was unfinished at his death, completed posthumously by Rimsky-Korsakov.

Mussorgsky then found a companion in the person of a distant relative, the impoverished 25-year-old poet, Arseny Golenishchev Kutuzov, to whom the composer dedicated his last two cycles of melancholy music: "Sunless," and "Songs and Dances of Death." At that time Mussorgsky was haunted by premonitions of death, and the death of his friend, the painter Victor Hartmann, inspired him to write the piano suite, "Pictures from an Exhibition," orchestrated in 1922 by the French composer Maurice Ravel.

The last few years of Mussorgsky's life were dominated by his alcoholism and a solitude that became even more painful by the total neglect of his friends, all of whom treated him like an outcast. Nonetheless, the composer began an opera inspired by a Gogol tale, the unfinished "Sorochintsy Fair." He toured southern Russia and the Crimea as an accompanist to an aging singer, Darya Leonova, and later tried teaching at a small school of music in St. Petersburg.

On Feb. 24, 1881, he suffered from three successive attacks of alcoholic epilepsy. His friends took him to a hospital where for a time his health seemed to be improving. Nevertheless, Mussorgsky's health was irreparably damaged, and he died within a month.

**T**o Western Europeans, Russia was a mysterious nation at the turn of the nineteenth century, an immensely powerful country — as Napoleon learned — but just emerging from its medieval conditions. The entire Western tradition of philosophical thought, culture, and science was largely unknown to Russians except for a few enlightened members of the aristocracy. Russians were traditionally preoccupied with unresolved cultural and religious conflicts between East and West, the role of the Russian folk in their music and literature, and the perennial social and political conflicts about their preferred form of government: autocracy vs. democracy.

Musically, the country had a rich heritage of folk songs that represented their cultural soul, but there was no musical establishment, and musicians were considered second-class citizens; as late as 1850 there was no conservatory of music in all of Russia, few teachers, and few

music books and publications. In 1862, Anton Rubinstein wrote of those conditions: “Russia has almost no art-musician in the exact sense of this term. This is so because our government has not given the same privileges to the art of music that are enjoyed by the other arts, such as painting, sculpture, etc.; that is, he who practices music is not given the rank of artist.” In sum, musicians of the times had literally no social status or opportunities.

The idea of a country’s aspirations being consciously reflected in its music evolved during the nineteenth century, most strongly manifested in those countries outside the mainstream of Western European thought: Russia, Poland, Hungary, and Bohemia, all for the most part under the domination of a foreign power, or in Russia itself, subjugated by the iron fist of a tzar and his entrenched aristocracy.

Social protest was manifested through artistic expression: literature and music. Nationalistic music became a form of propaganda; a spiritual call to arms. When activism against social and political injustices and reform was defeated, the language of music could express a country’s longing for freedom, as well as its pride and traditions. And all this was helped by the Romantic identification with “the folk.”

Nationalism in music became the conscious use of a body of folk music that eventually appeared in such extended forms as symphony and opera. However, even if a composer occasionally wrote a piece incorporating folk elements, that in itself did not necessarily identify him a nationalist composer: Wagner, perhaps the most Teutonic of all composers, was not a nationalist composer because he never drew upon the heritage of German folk music, as did his predecessor, Carl Maria von Weber. As such, nationalism in music was not a superficially applied patina of folk music, but rather, an evocation of the folk spirit and soul of its people through songs, dances, and even religious music. True nationalistic music evoked conscious and unconscious sensibilities of the homeland: it evoked a collective unconscious that suggested the air they breathed, the food they ate, and the language they spoke.

As the nineteenth century unfolded, nationalism arrived in Russian opera as composers began to shed their long subjection to the music of imported Italian, French, and German schools. Until Glinka, Russian musical life had been dominated by the Italians: opera in Moscow and St. Petersburg, as indeed in other European cities, meant Italian opera. But as the century progressed, Eastern and Central European countries expressed their artistic xenophobia, reacting in part to the onslaught of Wagnerism as well as Western artistic dominance of their opera art form. They transformed their operas conceptually and infused them with specific elements of their national identity and culture. Russian opera in particular became so nationalistic and individual that it became impossible for it to be mistaken as anything but purely Russian: opera subjects were derived from their voluminous history, and the music was specifically flavored with authentic adaptations of Russian folk music.

**I**n the mid-nineteenth century, as Russian nationalism in music began to stir, the rules and techniques of the German and Austrian conservatories were emphatically and absolutely denounced.

The first to distinctively assert Russian nationalism in music was Mikhail Glinka (1804-1857): *A Life for the Tsar* (1836), the story about a Russian national hero, and *Ruslan and Ludmila* (1842), a fairy tale with allegorical nationalistic overtones. These works, although reflecting many Western influences by being composed in the old-fashioned Italian-style, achieved an intended “Russianness” through their fusion of Slavic folk music, pre-Wagnerian use of leitmotifs, and colorful orchestration. Glinka’s much less successful disciple was Dargomyzhsky (1813-1869), whose *Rusalka* (1856), was an allegorical fairy tale that was musically illustrated with a strong emphasis on melodic recitative. But in *The Stone Guest*, which was completed by Cui and Rimsky-Korsakov, a form of “sung speech” was developed, which eventually profoundly influenced all Russian opera composers, particularly Mussorgsky.

A group of Russian nationalist composers eventually became known as the “Mighty Handful,” or the “Five”: César Cui (1835-1918), Nikolai Rimsky-Korsakov (1844-1908), Mily Balakirev (1837- 1910), Modest Mussorgsky (1839-1881), and Alexandr Borodin (1833-1887). Tchaikovsky was composing during this time, but for the most part his music was not engrossed in that aura of “Russianness”: that profound presence of folksongs that evoked national and cultural stirrings. Even in *Eugene Onegin*, Tchaikovsky’s folkish ambience is nothing more than an aspect of its decor, a background for the essential naturalism of the rural society it is intended to portray.

The “Mighty Handful” introduced important innovations in their operas: the Dargomyzhsky-Cui *The Stone Guest* (1872) provides powerful characterizations and advanced harmonies; Borodin’s *Prince Igor* (1890), although dramatically shapeless, is drenched with Slavic and Oriental colors; Rimsky-Korsakov’s numerous fairy-tale operas seem like brilliantly illustrated music books; his finest work, “the Russian *Parsifal*,” *The Legend of the Invisible City of Kitezh* (1907), is marked by profound emotional strength. But he also composed lighter works: *The Snow Maiden* (1882), and the fantasy opera buffa, *Le Coq d’or* (“The Golden Cockerel”) (1909). Like Borodin’s *Prince Igor*, Rimsky-Korsakov’s operas contributed largely to what many have come to consider typically “Russian” music: music that radiates with Slavic and Oriental harmonic colors and sounds.

Although Mussorgsky’s intensely powerful *Boris Godunov* is his greatest operatic achievement, his opera *Khovantchina* (1886) possesses much Russian Orientalism, as well as remarkable choral writing that supports its pageantry of the Russian people.

*Boris Godunov*, perhaps the most popular Russian opera, provides the essence of Russian nationalism in music. Although tsar Boris, the guilty usurper of the throne, dominates this pageant of Russian history, the principal protagonist of the opera is the Russian people, for whom Mussorgsky provided a remarkable dramatic presence through forceful and compelling choral writing.

**T**he libretto for Mussorgsky’s *Boris Godunov* was derived from two sources: Nikolai Karamzin’s *History of the Russian Empire* (1816-1829), and Alexandr Pushkin’s poem *Boris Godunov* (1869).

Nikolai Karamzin (1877-1826), was a Russian historian, poet, and journalist, whose greatest literary achievement was his 11-volume *History of the Russian Empire*, an effort that evolved from his friendship with the emperor Alexander I, and later resulted in his appointment as court historian. Karamzin’s *History*, in effect, became an apology for Russian autocracy, nevertheless, in its time, it was the first serious appraisal of Russian history dating from the early seventeenth century: the “Time of Troubles” that ends with the accession of Michael Romanov (1613). Nevertheless, although Mussorgsky based his opera principally on Pushkin’s dramatic poem, which in turn was based on Karamzin’s *History*, Karamzin was a Romanov historian, the implacable enemy of Godunov; therefore, the *History* is absolute in its premise that Boris Godunov indeed succeeded to the throne by murdering the Tsarevich Dmitri, son of Ivan the Terrible, and rightful heir of the Rurik dynasty. In other interpretations, Dmitri was an epileptic who died of a self-inflicted knife-wound during a seizure, a death witnessed by at least four persons.

Karamzin’s *History* contained original research as well as a great number of documents that presumed to be foreign accounts of historical incidents. As history, it has been superseded by more recent scholarship, but it remains a landmark in the development of Russian literary style, considered by many to have contributed much to the development of the Russian literary language; it sought to bring written Russian, then rife with cumbersome phrases, closer to the rhythms and conciseness of educated speech, as well as equip the language with a full cultural vocabulary.

Alexandr Pushkin (1799-1837), was Russia's greatest and most revered poet. For Russians, who have always taken their literature seriously, the impetuous Pushkin became an icon, in effect, their uncontested "national poet." In English literature, to produce a figure of comparable scope and status, one would have to venture comparisons to Shakespeare, Byron, Sir Walter Scott, and a few others. In Italian literature, similar comparisons would address Dante and Boccaccio, and in German literature, Goethe and Schiller.

In his time, Pushkin was adored, analyzed and imitated, his legacy inherited by such later Russian writers as Nikolai Gogol, Ivan Turgenev, Fyodor Dostoyevsky, Boris Pasternak and Vladimir Nabokov. Even the mighty cultural establishment of the former U.S.S.R. embraced and propagandized his work to school children in a campaign that taught them to cherish Pushkin as a model of patriotism and diligence — rather stretching the truth of his often dissolute existence — and perhaps most importantly, his courageous anti-tsarist behavior.

Today, busts and statues of Pushkin stand in nearly every Russian city, even in such remote locales as Sochi, on the Black Sea, the resort town in which Pushkin died, on January 29, 1837, from a gunshot wound received two days earlier in a duel fought over the honor of his frivolous social-climbing wife. He was only thirty-seven, his death considered the most tragically unnecessary death of any great writer. Like Pushkin's *Eugene Onegin* poem, which Tchaikovsky dramatized in his opera, its story unveils a profound irony in the sense of the interplay of life and art: the events of the poem, and the events of Pushkin's own life were identical. An amorous liaison of Pushkin's wife seems not to have gone much further than dance-floor conversations and perhaps some subtle expressions of affection, but Pushkin demonstrated the identical bitterness, rage, and jealousy that his fictional Lenski displayed over Onegin's flirtations with Olga. Pushkin's honor had been insulted and he was mocked, particularly after he received a spurious certificate naming him to the "Society of Cuckolds." To settle the grievance, a duel ensued. The duel would end the life of the great poet Pushkin, just as the duel had ended the life of his fictional Lenski in his poem *Eugene Onegin*.

Pushkin wrote primarily in meticulously constructed verse — his iambic pentameter familiar to all Russians — with its subtle charms stubbornly eluding, even to this day, the efforts of even the most skilled translators. Yet several translations of Pushkin's poems are available, including the controversial and exhaustively notated version of *Eugene Onegin* by the late Vladimir Nabokov. Scholars have concluded that there are over 500 different works written by Pushkin that are the subject sources for more than 3,000 different compositions. Those works are most notably operatic: Mikhail Glinka's *Ruslan and Lyudmila*; Dargomyzhsky's *The Stone Guest*; Mussorgsky's *Boris Godunov*; Rimsky-Korsakov's *Mozart and Salieri*, *The Tale of Czar Sultan*, and *The Golden Cockerel*; Rachmaninoff's *Aleko* and *The Miserly Knight*; Stravinsky's *Mavra*, and, of course, Tchaikovsky's *Eugene Onegin*, *Pique Dame* ("The Queen of Spades"), and *Mazeppa*.

Despairingly and gloomily, Pushkin's poems addressed the very conflicts and tensions of the Russian soul: his popularity is attributed to his immersion into so many of the fundamental issues that have preoccupied Russian culture, particularly during the early nineteenth century, when social and political transitions were imminent. Pushkin's works possessed an aristocratic sensibility that gave rise to an inner torment over the conflict between his perception of his backward native Russia and the greater sophistication and refinement of Western Europe, an almost paranoid sensibility that led many Russians to a sense of alienation and guilt, if not inferiority. But the overall themes of Pushkin's literary legacy were concerned with the unresolved cultural and religious conflicts between East and West, the role of the Russian folk in their music and literature, and the perennial social and political conflicts about their form of government.

Though Pushkin lived in the early nineteenth century, a time when the idea of aristocratic privilege went largely unchallenged in Russia, he sensed the dramatic political and social

apocalypse that was to evolve as the sheltered aristocratic existence of tsarist Russia was becoming increasingly threatened both internally and externally: the emancipation of the serfs in 1861, the assassination attempt on Alexander II by terrorists in 1881, pogroms, the appearance of the first Russian Marxists, rapid industrialization, and as the twentieth century unfolded, the Revolution that would destroy the Romanov's and the entire gentry class.

Pushkin, whether in satire or cynicism, portrayed a Russian canvas of human passion that possessed a deep sense of disillusionment, doom, foreboding, and death, all seemingly a metaphor, or a forecast, of the ominous changes about to appear on the Russian horizon; the disappearance of a golden age.

Pushkin's *Boris Godunov*, the most Russian of Russian literature, brought to the fore the historical inner conflict of the Russian people: humble and powerless masses pitted in an eternal struggle against the powers of autocracy. Pushkin's drama provided a vast panorama of Russian history involving six Moscow tsars: he depicted not only the later life story of the Tsar Boris Godunov, but also introduced three Russian tsars who succeeded him on the Moscow throne; Boris's son, Feodor, who reigned for a couple of months after his father's death, the pretender Dmitri, who ruled for the next eleven months, and finally Prince Vassily Shuisky, who organized the murder of Feodor and Dmitri, and who reigned for the following four years. The two tsars who preceded Boris Godunov are also cited: both Ivan the Terrible and his son, the saintly Feodor, who is described in great length by the chronicler Pimen in Mussorgsky's opera.

**B**oris Godunov began his political career serving in the court of Ivan IV: the "Terrible." He gained Ivan's favor by marrying the daughter of the Tsar's close friend, and also manipulated his sister Irina's marriage to the Tsarevich Feodor; his new status as the Tsarevich's brother-in-law facilitated his promotion to the rank of boyar and guardian for Ivan's son Feodor, a regency specifically entrusted by Ivan. (The boyars were Russian aristocrats ranking just below the ruling princes, later abolished by Peter the Great.)

Ivan the Terrible died in 1584. He was succeeded by his son, the pious Feodor, a reign that lasted 14 years until his death in 1598; it was the end of the Rurik Dynasty that had ruled Russia — and the principality of Muscovy — for more than seven centuries. Feodor died leaving no heirs, although Ivan had another son, Dmitri, believed to have been murdered seven years earlier, or to have died from an epileptic seizure, the truth depending on the historical source cited.

The clergy and boyars — all part of the Duma — elected Boris Godunov the next tsar, a position he had held in all but name, since during Feodor's regency, the young Tsarevich wanted little to do with governing and left Boris in total control. Boris was an able and ambitious boyar of Tartar (Turkic) origin, whose family had migrated to Muscovy in the fourteenth century. Nevertheless, it was generally believed that Boris had murdered Ivan's other son, Dmitri, in order to succeed to the throne. Although many boyars considered Boris a usurper and conspired to undermine his authority, but Boris banished his opponents during his reign, virtually succeeding in establishing complete control over Russia.

Tsar Boris Godunov proved himself an intelligent and capable ruler in both domestic and foreign affairs. He undertook a series of benevolent policies that reformed the judicial system, sent students to be educated in Western Europe, allowed Lutheran churches to be built on Russian soil, and in order to gain power on the Baltic Sea, entered into negotiations for the acquisition of Livonia. He conducted successful military actions, promoted foreign trade, built numerous defensive towns and fortresses, recolonized and solidified Western Siberia, which had been slipping from Moscow's control, and arranged for the head of the Muscovite Church to be raised from the level of metropolitan to patriarch (1589).

To reinforce his power he exercised strict controls over the boyar families who opposed him, and also instituted an extensive spy system that ruthlessly persecuted those whom he

suspected of treason; in particular, he banished members of the Romanov family, his most prominent opposition. Those measures increased the boyars' animosity toward him and also inflamed popular dissatisfaction, particularly after the ineffectiveness of his efforts to alleviate the suffering caused by famine (1601-03) and the accompanying epidemics. A pretender claimed to be Tsarevich Dmitri, Tsar Feodor's younger half-brother who was presumed to have died in 1591. He led an army of Cossacks and Polish adventurers into southern Russia (1604) but Boris's army impeded Dmitri's advance toward Moscow. With Boris's sudden death in 1605, tsarist resistance broke down, and the country lapsed into a period of chaos characterized by swift and violent changes of regimes, civil wars, foreign intervention, and social disorder.

**B**oris Godunov's reign, that began in 1598, was deemed the "Time of Troubles." It was during this period that Russia was threatened by major social, political, and economic disruptions, numerous foreign interventions, peasant uprisings due to famines, boyar opposition, and attempts by numerous pretenders to seize the throne.

When Boris died in 1605, a mob instigated by Prince Vassily Shuisky, favored and claimed allegiance to the Pretender Dmitri. Earlier, in 1591, Shuisky had achieved prominence by conducting the investigation of Dmitri's death. Shuisky determined that the nine-year-old child had killed himself with a knife while suffering an epileptic fit, but after Boris's death, he reversed his judgment and fully supported the pretender's claim to the throne, declaring that Dmitri had escaped death in 1591. Boris's son, the new tsar Feodor II, was killed, and Dmitri was named tsar. The boyars, however, soon realized that they could not control the new tsar, and they immediately assassinated him, placing the powerful nobleman, Prince Vassily Shuisky on the throne. Shuisky, a descendant of the Rurik dynasty, became tsar in 1606 and reigned until 1610.

There were any one of three different pretenders who challenged Boris Godunov's Muscovite throne during the "Time of Troubles," and each claimed to be Dmitri Ivanovich, the son of Tsar Ivan IV the Terrible.

The first pretender is considered by many historians to have been Grigori (Yury) Bogdanovich Otrepiev, an adventurer and a member of the gentry who had frequented the home of the Romanov's before becoming the monk Grigori. He was apparently convinced that he was the genuine Dmitri and legitimate heir to the throne. While living in Moscow and threatened with banishment, he fled to Lithuania where he began his campaign to acquire the Muscovite throne by soliciting support from Lithuanians, Polish nobles, and Jesuits.

In the fall of 1604, this Pretender Dmitri gathered an army of Cossacks and adventurers and invaded Russia. Although he was defeated militarily, he had succeeded in attracting a host of followers and supporters throughout southern Russia who opposed the autocratic rule of the Tartar Tsar Boris Godunov. At the same time, he gathered political support from Russia's hereditary enemy, the King of Poland, as well as the Pope of Rome; Grigori recognized the Roman Catholic Church rather than the Orthodox Church as representing the one true faith. After Boris died the government army and Muscovite boyars shifted their support to the pretender, and the pseudo-Dmitri advanced with his Polish allies on Moscow where he had himself proclaimed tsar after marrying Marina Mnischek, the daughter of a Polish noble. Mussorgsky's music drama, *Boris Godunov*, ends with this event in 1605, the Pretender Dmitri triumphantly entering Moscow and proclaiming himself the true Tsar.

In the subsequent history, the new tsar Dmitri alienated his supporters by failing to observe the traditions and customs of the Muscovite court. He favored the Polish army, who had accompanied him to Moscow, and his Polish wife, Marina Mnischek. He attempted to engage Russia in an elaborate Christian alliance to drive the Turks out of Europe. Shortly after Dmitri was crowned, Shuisky reversed his position again, accused the new Tsar of being an impostor,

and proceeded to engage in a plot to overthrow him. An organized group of boyars were instigated to oppose the pretender, and a popular uprising was provoked: Dmitri was assassinated. In May 1606, Prince Vassily Shuisky, the cunning and ambitious intriguer, succeeded Dmitri as Tsar of Russia.

A year later another pretender appeared and claimed to be the rightful tsar. Although this second Pretender Dmitri bore no physical resemblance to the first, he gathered a large following among Cossacks, Poles, Lithuanians, and small landowners and peasants who had already risen against Shuisky. He gained control of southern Russia, besieged Moscow for over two years, and together with a group of boyars that included the Romanov's, established a full court and government administration to rival Moscow at the village of Tushino in 1608; this Dmitri became known as the Thief of Tushino.

This second Pretender Dmitri sent his armies to ravage northern Russia, and, after Marina Mnischek insured his credibility by formally claiming him as her husband, he wielded sufficient authority to rival Shuisky. While elements of Dmitri's army took control of the northern Russian provinces, Shuisky bargained with Sweden (then at war with Poland) for aid. With the arrival of Swedish mercenary troops Dmitri fled Tushino. Some of his supporters returned to Moscow; while others joined the Polish king Sigismund III, who declared war on Moscow in response to the Swedish intervention. In September 1609, Dmitri led an army into Russia and defeated Shuisky's forces. This second Pretender Dmitri — the Thief of Tushino — continued to contend for the Muscovite throne until one of his own followers fatally wounded him in 1610.

In 1611, a third Pretender Dmitri, who has been identified as a deacon called Sidorka, appeared at Ivangorod. He gained the allegiance of the Cossacks who were ravaging the environs of Moscow, and of the inhabitants of Pskov, thus acquiring the nickname Thief of Pskov. In May 1612 he was betrayed and later executed in Moscow. Tsar Shuisky was determined to avoid challenges from future pretenders. He ordered the remains of Dmitri brought to Moscow and had the late Tsarevich canonized. He also proclaimed his intentions to rule justly and in accord with the boyar Duma.

Nevertheless, opposition to Shuisky's regime intensified. Although the wealthy merchant class and the boyars supported him, his rule was weakened by a series of peasant rebellions. Poland, now at war with Russia, threatened to advance on Moscow. The disappointed Muscovites rioted, and an assembly that consisted of both aristocratic and commoners deposed Shuisky and he took monastic vows and entered a retreat.

The Polish king, Sigismund, now united with the boyars, named Władysław (son of the Polish king) tsar-elect, and the Polish troops were welcomed into Moscow. Sigismund demanded direct personal control of Russia and continued Polish invasions into Russia, but that only stimulated the Russians to rally and unite against the invaders.

Ultimately resistance to the Polish advance was thwarted through alliances of the army, the clergy, small landholders, cossacks, and merchants. In 1613, a widely representative assembly elected a new tsar, Michael Romanov, establishing the dynasty that ruled Russia for the next three centuries.

**I**n 1868, Mussorgsky began his masterpiece, *Boris Godunov*; he wrote his own libretto that represented a synthesis of Karamzin's *History of the Russian Empire* and Pushkin's drama, the latter partly based on Karamzin and ancient Russian chronicles.

The historical scope of the story is immense, a classic example of the necessity for the opera composer to condense the text for practical and esthetic purposes. Most often, many sequences in an underlying story are quite acceptable when read or presented on the spoken

stage, but because it takes longer to sing than to speak, certain elements of the text can become cumbersome and unsuitable for musico-dramatic purposes. The opera composer has less time available to present the necessary details and information of his story; thus, he generally concedes to aesthetic demands by omitting certain details that existed in a source play or a novel, and he is often obliged to limit the libretto to a certain number of situations which must suffice to convey the entire continuity of the drama. As such, the composer normally selects incidents that he considers fitting for operatic treatment, but in the process, he may omit the explanation of important details of the story, and his opera libretto may become sacrificed to a tableau of scenes rather than to a faithful dramatic exposition.

There were 23 episodes in Pushkin's *Boris Godunov*: Mussorgsky considerably compressed and rearranged the original Pushkin, initially choosing ten scenes. At the 1874 premiere of Mussorgsky's *Boris Godunov*, the St. Petersburg audience had no difficulty following the story: the historical background and all the leading characters were well known to them, and educated Russians were intimately familiar with Pushkin's *Boris*: "Boris, Boris, everything trembles before you."

After these necessary excisions, the original libretto became a series of pageants, all held together by the tremendous figure of Boris; it represented an inexorable sweep of history that incorporated the intrigue of Tsar Boris's court as well as the despairing life of the Russian people. Nevertheless, the character of Boris Godunov — in the opera or in the actual history — transcends any one figure: the entire opera represents a panorama of historical Russia, an integral portrait of tsar, boyar, priest, intriguer, and peasant.

The action of the opera covers a time-period of some seven years: the first two scenes — the Prologue — takes place in early 1598; in Scene 1 the populace awaits Boris's decision to accept or decline the throne of Russia; Scene 2 is Boris's coronation. Five years elapse before Act I: the old monk Pimen's cell in the monastery, and Dmitri's confrontation at the inn. The second act, taking place in Boris's apartments in the Kremlin, occurs several months later. The third and fourth acts — the Polish act and Dmitri's subsequent march into Russia — takes place even later: in 1605. During this seven-year chronicle, many momentous historical events occur, and in each sequence — and practically in each scene — new characters appear.

Mussorgsky composed the music for the original *Boris Godunov* between October 1868 and May 1869, the score completed in December 1869. In 1870, the Directorate of the Imperial Theatre of St. Petersburg rejected the opera; they considered its story harsh and grim, and in particular, that it lacked a major love interest and female role.

Between 1870 and 1872, Mussorgsky proceeded to overhaul the opera, making extensive alterations, abridgements, and additions to his original score and scenario: excisions in the St. Basil's Square and other scenes, many new arias, and the entirely new Polish act (Act III), which provides a prominent role for soprano (Marina), the intrigue of the sinister Jesuit priest (Rangoni), and the Marina-Dmitri love duet. Other additions were: Boris's Kremlin monologue, the Forest of Kromy scene, and the conclusion of the opera with the song of the Simpleton. Three scenes from this version were performed at the Maryinski Theatre on Feb. 3, 1873. The world premiere took place in January 1874 at the Imperial Opera House in St. Petersburg; a week before the world premiere Mussorgsky decided to call the first act a Prologue.

*Boris Godunov* was a decided success with the public, and less of a success with the critics, who attacked its feeble libretto, its crude tone painting, and much of what they considered Mussorgsky's immature musical technique. Mussorgsky was crushed, yet the truth was that he was the first of the "Mighty Five" to produce a musico-dramatic masterpiece that incorporated the entire essence of Russian history and culture.

In 1881, shortly after Mussorgsky's death, there was much criticism of Mussorgsky's original harmonic and instrumental style, causing Rimsky-Korsakov to lead the vanguard to

purge his friend's work of what he considered to be its awkward melodies, eccentric harmonic progressions, and instrumental weaknesses. Rimsky took it upon himself to edit, change, re-harmonize, reorchestrate, add key signatures, and alter the sequence of some scenes.

Rimsky Korsakov's revisions have evoked much controversy. He was a skilled composer, a devoted and honest musician, and a loyal friend of Mussorgsky, but he also had traditional approaches to music drama, and certain elements within *Boris*'s operatic structure appalled him: "I worship *Boris Godunov* and hate it. I worship it for its originality, power, boldness, independence and beauty. I hate it for its shortcomings, the roughness of its harmonies, the incoherence of its music." He knew there would be opposition: "Although I know I shall be cursed for so doing, I will revise *Boris*. There are countless absurdities in its harmonies, and at times in its melodies."

The Rimsky-Korsakov revisions of *Boris Godunov* have become standard in opera houses the world over, despite protests by musicologists and critics. Nevertheless, there are many productions that attempt to recapture Mussorgsky's original score, as well as productions that combine the original score with the Rimsky-Korsakov revisions.

In opera, the composer of music, not the playwright, is the dramatist of the story. Tsar Boris — whether in the Karamzin, Pushkin, or Mussorgsky portraits — was a dramatically complex personality. He was an ambivalent man: a murderer who sent assassins to kill the Tsarevich Dmitri, the rightful heir to the throne, and at the same time, he was a man of strength, wisdom, and kindness, who sought progress for his people. He was a sympathetic and loving father: he grieved with compassion over the death of his daughter Xenia's fiancée, and with his son Feodor, he devoted genuine loving concern, pouring over maps of Russia and approving of his son's intelligence and education.

*Boris Godunov* is a grand tragedy; it is a double tragedy that portrays a fallen ruler as well as a despairing nation. Boris committed one single misdeed, a crime that destroyed his soul: his remorse and guilty conscience dominate the opera, and there is scarcely a moment in the opera in which he does not grieve and suffer from guilt.

The Russian people are the principal protagonists of the opera; they are both the tsar's chief antagonist and his chief proponent. Boris expresses sincere concern for their welfare, but he fails to achieve his goals, the chance misfortunes of the "Times of Troubles" controlling the people's destiny, not the will of Boris. The Russian people's antagonism and anger pervades the entire opera; they comment like a Greek chorus about the tragic state of their beloved Mother Russia and the failures of their leader. It is also central to Boris's defeat that the Russian people feel that they were orphaned: Boris was not a Rurik, and the Godunov's were not royalty. In effect, Boris destroyed divine succession; he was a leader not ordained by God.

Nevertheless, Boris is energetic in combating his enemies, relentless and imperious with his subservient and deceitful counselors, particularly the intriguing Prince Shuisky. But all of these characteristics are nullified by his pervasive guilt. The real tragedy of Boris — described by many as the "Russian Macbeth" — is that he cannot free himself from the haunting guilt of the crime he committed.

Karamzin's *History* and Pushkin's drama were written in the early nineteenth century, a time when Boris's crime had acquired what may be called official sanction: the Romanov's were the ruling tsars, and if truth is the coefficient of power, they were determined to portray Boris as an evil criminal. Nevertheless, the historical Boris was rational and moderate, unable to believe in the power of a pretender to unite a superstitious nation against him. He was not known to have governed by brutality like his predecessor, Ivan the Terrible, who exterminated his enemies in a reign of terror: Boris Godunov merely banished most of his enemies to the provinces, in retrospect a faulty policy that backfired when they united and agitated against him.

Mussorgsky's opera presupposes that Boris killed Dmitri: it becomes the essence of the tragedy, Boris's suffering guilt that overpowers and destroys him. But Boris's presumed crime is not necessarily the historical truth.

The character of Boris Godunov has often been compared to Shakespeare's Macbeth. Like Shakespeare, Pushkin used his characterization to hold a mirror up to humanity by laying bare his protagonist's soul; like Shakespeare, Pushkin's character inventions were truthful representations of the human experience, taking human nature to its limits, and forcing one to turn inward and discover new modes of awareness and consciousness. Pushkin's ultimate legacy, like that of Shakespeare, was to provide the wheel of the Russian soul, teaching them whether they were fools of time, of love, of fortune, or even of themselves.

Underlying Pushkin drama and Mussorgsky's opera is a profound political pessimism, a sense of despair that has historically pervaded the Russian soul. Like Macbeth, Boris Godunov was overcome and motivated by ambition and power. He became susceptible, vulnerable, and ultimately the self-inflicted victim of his Machiavellian exaggerations and power obsessions; his lust for power and fiery ambition for the throne made him a victim of his own desire. Despotic force and terror became compulsions to protect his crown: scruples vanished and were replaced by irrational forces. But like Macbeth, Boris's inner demons, and his unconscious imagination overwhelmed and contaminated him, the guilt within his soul transforming him into utter despair.

Boris's murder of the Tsarevich dominates the entire dramatic action of the story: the core of the drama concerns Boris's guilt and his fear for the damnation of his Christian soul. Those fears lead him into an abyss of guilt: demons conquer him, and he transforms into torment and agony. Macbeth faced the horror of his guilt by compounding his crimes: "It will have blood, they say: blood will have blood." But Boris must face his day of judgment, and he seeks penitence and redemption from his sins.

Does the story of Boris Godunov, like Macbeth, possess a moral purpose intended to repel man from the evil of ambition? Nietzsche's hypothesis was that man naturally possessed raging ambitions, which are a glorious end in themselves: man beholds those images joyfully, thwarted only when his passions perish. In a Judeo-Christian context, *Macbeth* deals with the immorality of evil, but Shakespeare does not endow *Macbeth* with the theological relevance: Macbeth is a primordial man of blood, who, like the villains in *Hamlet*, *King Lear*, and *Othello*, possesses a universal villainy that transcends Biblical strictures. Shakespeare traditionally evaded Christian morality: he was not a spiritual dramatist, and he wrote no holy sonnets exposing the divine, or suggested a path to redemption of the soul. Shakespeare's high tragedies provide no spiritual comfort, but rather, a pragmatic nihilism, an instinctive form of survival rather than redemption through the path of theological metaphysics.

In Shakespeare, there is no spiritual truth, and God is exiled from man's soul, vanished and too far away to be enjoyed. In Shakespeare's world, there is only grief and death, but no spiritual solace. But in Boris Godunov, there is a yearning for redeeming grace, expiation, and forgiveness; Boris seeks the path to the eternal salvation of his soul, not a nihilistic finality.

The specter of the murdered Tsarevich dominates Boris, overpowering his mind by evoking his guilt. Boris is the true tragic hero, a man destroyed not from without by the pretender Dmitri, but from within by the gnawing of his conscience. Boris's guilt becomes the true plot of the drama.

Yet, even though Tsar Boris makes few appearances in the music drama, he is the absolute center of attention. Like Richard Strauss's Marschallin in *Der Rosenkavalier*, he dominates the opera even when not present on stage. Mussorgsky makes his audience understand Boris's complex personality through his music, a multifaceted character who combines the embodiment of authority, a reassuring father, a man of impassioned wisdom — and a man victimized by extreme suffering and sorrow. His haunted spirit is omnipresent in every moment of the drama.

In Pushkin, there are no characters corresponding to the Polish Princess, Marina Mnischek, or the Jesuit Priest, Rangoni, though there are a few lines of dialogue at one point between Dmitri and a Catholic priest, in which the Pretender promises that in two years time the Russian people and the Eastern Church will submit themselves to the Holy Father in Rome.

Historically, a Pretender Dmitri is alleged to have been the writer of a letter to the Pope — written in Polish, but later translated into Latin — in which he professes to be zealous for the salvation not only of his own soul, but of all Muscovy; then he embraces the doctrines of the Roman Catholic Church and declares himself willing, if God approves of his cause, to use all his powers once he has ascended his hereditary throne to assist the Russian people to see the light of Roman Catholicism as he has been fortunate enough to experience it.

It is a great pity that in many productions certain elements of the Rangoni-Marina and Rangoni-Dmitri scenes of Act III are omitted: their presence highlights an important subplot of the drama and unites the opera coherently: the Great Schism (1054) between the Eastern Orthodox Church and the Roman Catholic Church. In Mussorgsky's *Boris Godunov*, the Roman Catholic Church is portrayed as the archenemy of Russia, highlighting the historical religious conflict between the Eastern and Roman Catholic Churches.

Rangoni's intrigues with both Marina and Dmitri provide coherence to the entire drama, as well as moments for exploding operatic passions. No one of the Polish nobility believes Dmitri to be anything but an adventurer, and he is regarded merely as a renegade monk of questionable character. In the garden scene of Act III, Dmitri becomes annoyed by Marina's declaration that politics and ambition are more important to her than love. And Marina frankly condemns Dmitri as an impostor, shamed that she has lowered herself by allying with him in order to succeed in her ambitions. It is only when Dmitri's fighting spirit revives and he swears he will drive Boris from his throne that Marina's respect for him is reborn. Nevertheless, Marina's motivations are ambition, not love: another analogy to Shakespeare's *Macbeth*, but this time Lady Macbeth, although the real catalyst of these ambitions is Rangoni.

Marina frankly tells Dmitri that he can send for her when he is tsar, but not beforehand; then, she abruptly leaves him. Alone, Dmitri comments cynically that women are more treacherous than tsars or Jesuits. He distrusts Marina and regrets the power she wields over him. But he has become energized by dreams of her love, ready to leave Poland and march against Boris.

It was only after revisions that Mussorgsky added this scene, primarily to satisfy the Directorate's demand for a female lead and a love interest in the opera. Nevertheless, the passions of this scene serve to unite the entire drama: the ideal grist for the operatic mill.

Mussorgsky found the most impressive, precise, and graphic musical means to illuminate and emphasize Boris Godunov's complex personality: Boris the ruler, Boris the father, and Boris the sinner. Mussorgsky's music provides appropriate characterization through its expressionistic sensations, at times moody, harsh, exotic, and eerie.

Certain musical phrases are always connected with Boris's deep concern for the tribulations of his homeland: the famines, foreign invasions and epidemics that beset Russia during his reign; the "Times of Troubles." Two basic themes characterize Boris as father: one motive accompanies his angry outburst against the duplicitous and treacherous Prince Shuisky, when he admonishes his son not to trust false and selfish counsel, a theme that is recalled when Boris suffers a fatal attack in the last act and calls for his son; the other, the tender phrases associated with his love for his daughter, Xenia.

The central emotion of the drama is Boris the sinner, and Mussorgsky's most effective musical images portray his guilt and remorse: a phrase keeps recurring in his great monologue of the second act that suggests that Russia's troubles are punishment for Boris's crime. Another passage refers to Boris's inability to sleep, a poetic concept that Pushkin borrowed from

Shakespeare's *Macbeth*, who also "murdered sleep": the phrase deals with sleeplessness and leads directly to Boris's vision of the blood-splattered, murdered child, an emotional and dramatic climax of the score. And the musical portrait of the guilty tsar would be incomplete without quoting Boris's pathetic appeal for forgiveness in the inspired prayer that precedes his death.

At the end of Boris's death scene, there is a sense of deep compassion for the tortured, repentant spirit of the despairing tsar of all the Russia's. To end this scene, Mussorgsky fashioned a uniquely touching postlude: two melodic lines, one descending from the highest treble, the other moving up from the deepest bass, that seem to form a huge musical curtain that slowly and solemnly closes over the corpse of Tsar Boris.

Mussorgsky was a musical impressionist, using his musical language to capture visual images. He loved to imitate sounds, like the ticking of the clock and the whirring of its unwinding spring, the tones from church bells, and the alarms that appear in the Forest Scene. In the Coronation scene, one of the Kremlin's bells has a slight imperfection, an authentic detail that Mussorgsky delighted in portraying.

But Mussorgsky also translated motions and gestures into musical imagery: in the monastery scene, the old monk, Pimen, works at his desk, and Mussorgsky's music describes the motion of his writing: the movements of the hands is described by the music starting and stopping as Pimen pauses and then resumes his writing. In Grigori's first act dream, the novitiate relates how he climbed the great tower and then looked down at Moscow, the music rising and then falling to suggest his tumble into the jeering crowd.

The idea of two roads to Lithuania is uncannily illustrated in the music. In Act I - Scene 2, the hostess of the inn explains to Grigori that although the direct road to Lithuania has been closed, there is a detour: harmonic progressions simulate traveling the route.

In the Prologue - Scene 1, the wielding of whips symbolize police brutality: the oppression of the Russian people, which is the central theme of the opera.

And to portray the suffering soul of Russia, Mussorgsky chose the Simpleton as his metaphor; a harmless, innocent half-wit, but a figure regarded with religious awe in olden times. His strange and very moving lament for the people of Russia again expresses the core theme of the opera.

**M**ussorgsky's *Boris Godunov*, and to a lesser extent *Khovantchina*, display a bold style; a dramatic technique that portrays sharply characterized individuals set against the background of country, history, and culture. His powerful musical portrayal, his strong characterizations, and the importance he assigned to the role of the chorus are all expressions of his anti-Romantic convictions.

Mussorgsky's music describes scenes of Russian life with great vividness and insight. He realistically reproduces the inflections of the spoken Russian language with a sense of naturalism, his overt intention to "tug at the heartstrings" by catching the "intonations of the human voice." His goal was to make the characters speak on stage exactly as they do in real life, without exaggeration or distortion: his mission was "musical prose," or sung speech in its most realistic form.

Allied to Mussorgsky's concept of sung speech was a strong nationalism. He wanted to express the soul and spirit of the Russian people in his opera: "When I sleep I see them, when I eat I think of them, when I drink, I can visualize them: integral, big, unpainted, and without any tinsel."

Indeed Mussorgsky's *Boris Godunov* celebrates the spirit of the Russian people; it is a pageant of their cultural soul that could only be achieved through the marriage of a musical genius and the opera art form.

# ***Boris Godunov***

**Opera in Russian with a prologue and four acts**

**Music**

**by**

**Modest Mussorgsky**

**Libretto by Modest Mussorgsky**

**after Alexandr Pushkin's *Boris Godunov* (1869)**

**and Nikolai Karamzin's *History of the Russian Empire* (1816-1829)**

**Premiere: St. Petersburg, 1873**

**The version herein incorporates dramatic elements from both the  
Mussorgsky original and Rimsky-Korsakov revisions.**

***Principal Characters in Boris Godunov***

Boris Godunov, Tsar of Russia	Bass or Baritone
Feodor, Boris's son	Mezzo-soprano
Xenia, Boris's daughter	Soprano
Nastasia, the Nurse	Mezzo-soprano
Prince Shuisky, a boyar advisor to Boris	Tenor
Andrei Schtschelkalov Secretary of the Boyar's Council (Duma)	Baritone
Pimen, a hermit monk and chronicler	Bass
Grigori Otrepiev (Dmitri, Pretender to the throne)	Tenor
Marina Mnischek, daughter of a Polish nobleman	Mezzo-soprano
Rangoni, a Jesuit priest	Bass
Varlaam, a vagrant monk	Bass
Missail, a vagrant monk	Tenor
The Hostess of the inn	Mezzo-soprano
Simpleton (The Idiot)	Tenor
Nikitich, a police officer	Bass

The Russian people, Mitiukha (a peasant), Boyars, Guards, Pilgrims,  
Polish ladies, gentlemen, and girls of Sandomir, Poland.

TIME: Between 1598 and 1605

PLACE: Russia and Poland

***Brief Story Synopsis***

A crowd of Russian people, in poverty and despair, are exhorted by the police to urge Boris Godunov to accept the throne left vacant by the death of Tsarevich Dmitri.

At his coronation, Boris becomes haunted by his conscience; he murdered the young Tsarevich in order to become tsar.

In the Monastery at Chudov, the old monk and chronicler, Pimen, relates the events leading to Boris's coronation to the young novice, Grigori; Grigori believes he is the Tsarevich, having miraculously survived Boris Godunov's attempt to murder him. Grigori flees the monastery to seek Lithuanian support for his cause.

Grigori arrives in Poland and declares himself Tsarevich Dmitri, the rightful heir to the throne of Russia. The Jesuit priest Rangoni, determined to convert Russia to Catholicism, urges Princess Marina to exploit Dmitri for the interests of Poland.

Pimen tells the tormented Boris that a miracle saved the life of Tsarevich Dmitri. The news causes Boris to erupt into a fatal seizure. Before he dies, Boris names his son Feodor his successor, and begs forgiveness for his crimes.

In the Kromy Forest, the Russian people join Dmitri and march to Moscow.

The Simpleton is left alone to bewail the fate of Russia.

*Story Narrative with Music Examples*

*Prologue - Scene 1: Outside the Monastery of Novodievich near Moscow*

**Andante**



Ragged and despairing crowds of peasants have gathered in the square. A policeman terrorizes and intimidates them, exhorting them to bless Boris Godunov, and urge him to accept the crown of Tsar.

The crowd pleads for mercy and pity from Boris Godunov, praying that he will not abandon them to endless misery and squalor like the tsars who preceded him.

*The appeal of the Russian people:*

**Moderato**

Why do you a - ban - don us, your folk, O fa - ther!

After the police depart, the peasants revert to complaining of their despair, misfortunes, and hardships.

As emotions intensify, they begin to fight with each other. The police return and restore order, threatening them brutally with whips and clubs. The peasants fall to their knees, repeating their appeal to Boris for relief from their misfortunes.

Schtschelkalov, the secretary of the Duma, announces that a Council of Boyars and the Patriarch of the Church have tried to convince Boris to accept the throne vacated after the death of the Tsarevich, but Boris refuses to accept the crown.

He characterizes the misfortunes and suffering of the Russian people and prays to God to enlighten the soul of Boris Godunov, who, if he accepts the crown of tsar, could bring comfort and consolation to them in their hour of need.

Pilgrims pray for God's protection of Russia, now so grievously afflicted by internal as well as external misfortunes. The Pilgrims distribute amulets among the crowd, exhorting them to take ikons and holy emblems to Boris.

As the Pilgrims enter the monastery, they offer prayers for the widow of the recently deceased Tsar, the sister of Boris.

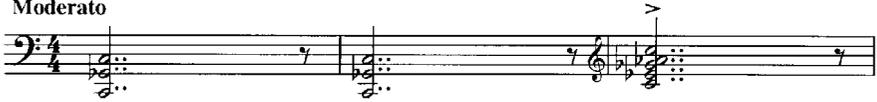
A policeman, wielding a threatening club, urges the people to appear at the Kremlin the next day and supplicate themselves before Boris Godunov.

**Prologue - Scene 2: Courtyard of the Kremlin - The Coronation of Boris**

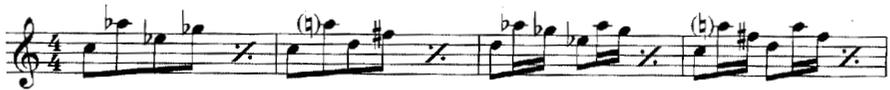
The air pulsates with the clanging of bells, great and small.

**Large Bells:**

**Moderato**



**Small Bells:**



The crowd kneels as boyars appear in a solemn procession on their way to the Cathedral of the Assumption.

Boris has yielded to the pleas of the boyars and accepted the crown. Boris appears, and the crowd praises their new Tsar, their father and benefactor.

As trumpets blare, Shuisky stands on the steps of the Cathedral and proclaims: “Long live the Tsar Boris Feodorovich!”, his praises echoed emotionally by the crowds of people.

**Allegro moderato**



*To the sun in all splen - dor ris - en be glo - ry, glo - ry,*

Boris becomes emotionally stirred as he stands before the people, a pretense that disguises his long-coveted obsession for power. The character of the music suddenly transforms from colorful brilliance to sadness when Boris addresses them; he reveals his forebodings and fears of the future for himself and for all Russia. Boris invokes heaven’s blessings and urges them to kneel in prayer before the tombs of the great Tsars and pray for his reign: that God should grant him divine goodness and justice so that he may rule Russia with benevolence and in glory.

Boris and the procession enter the Cathedral. The bells resound, and the crowd disperses. The Coronation climaxes as all proclaim: “Glory to the Tsar!”

**Allegro moderato**



*Glo - ry, glo - ry! Glo - ry,*



*glory, glory, glory, glory!*

*Glo - ry, glory!*

**Act I - Scene 1: A cell in the Monastery of Chudov**

It is 1603, five years after the coronation of Boris Godunov. The venerable monk Pimen writes by lamplight in his cell in the monastery of the Miracle at Chudov, the old hermit monk adding the final pages to his anonymous chronicle of a gruesome period of Russian history.

A wandering motive in the bass graphically suggests the passage of the monk's pen as it moves across the parchment.

**Pimen writing:****Andante molto**

Pimen interrupts his writing, suddenly becoming engrossed in deep thought. He wonders if one day an industrious monk will complete his laborious historical record, so that Russia will learn the truth of its horrible past. He returns to his work and proceeds to write his last sentences.

Grigori Otrepiev, a young monk, is asleep near Pimen. Grigori suddenly awakens in agitation and panic. He reveals that it is the third time that he has been haunted by the same frightening nightmare: he dreamed that he climbed the stairs of a high tower from which Moscow appeared below like an anthill. From the square below, a seething crowd was pointing to him, all of them jeering and laughing at him. Overcome by shame and terror, he fell from the tower to the ground. Then, he awakened from his nightmare.

The placid old monk admonishes Grigori that he will have gentler dreams if he devotes his life to prayer and fasting.

Pimen relates his rich personal background and his memories of glory. He had known the great Tsar, Ivan the Terrible: he had attended his splendid court and banquets, and fought with the Tsar against the Lithuanians at the walls of Kazan. Grigori envies the old monk's adventurous experiences, and then laments his gloomy life as a monk. But Pimen praises monastic life, reminding Grigori that so many tsars became world-weary and surrendered their vanity for its peace and humility.

Pimen recalls that he even saw the great Ivan himself, sitting in this very cell and shedding tears of remorse as he begged for penitence. His son, the gentle and pious Feodor, heard God's calling and transformed the palace into a cloister; with the grace of God, Russia experienced peace and happiness during his reign. But afterwards, God was angry at Russia, and instead of a benevolent tsar, he sent Russia Boris Godunov, an assassin who usurped the crown by murdering the Tsarevich.

Grigori inquires about the age of the Tsarevich Dmitri when he was murdered? Pimen recounts that he was in Uglich to do penance when that horrible murder occurred. He was awakened by alarm bells and followed the excited crowd to the palace where the body of the slaughtered Tsarevich lay in a pool of blood. His mother was bent over the corpse, insane with grief, and weeping in despair. When the frenzied mob captured suspects and dragged them before the dead Tsarevich, the corpse began to shake, proof of their guilt. The crowd called for the suspects to repent, but they refused. But just before their execution, they confessed that it was Boris Godunov who murdered the Tsarevich.



to Grigori to read aloud: "An unworthy monk of the monastery of Chudov, Grigori Otrepiev, has been tempted by the devil and tried to corrupt his holy brethren with temptation and lead them astray. He has fled towards the Lithuanian frontier, where, by order of the Tsar, he is to be arrested."

Grigori protests to the captain that there is no mention about hanging in the warrant, but the captain sagely remarks that hanging is implied; the government's intentions are not always put in writing. Grigori returns to reading the warrant, and at the point where the fugitive is described, he looks contemptuously at Varlaam: about fifty years old, of medium height, baldish, gray, fat, and red-nosed."

Immediately, the guards fall on Varlaam to arrest him. But the monk quickly reinvigorates his prowess at Kazan and repels them, threatening them menacingly with clenched fists.

The captain reads the warrant himself and finds a different description of the fugitive: "about twenty years old, medium height, reddish hair, one arm shorter than the other, a wart on his nose and another on his forehead." He approaches Grigori, stares at him intensely, and then erupts triumphantly: "You are the man!" But before they can apprehend Grigori, he creates havoc; he unsheathes his dagger, brandishes it threateningly, and escapes through the window.

## ***Act II: The Tsar's apartments in the Kremlin***

Xenia, Boris's daughter, holds a portrait of her fiancée as she weeps over his recent death. The young Tsarevich, Feodor, tries to console his sister, but she cannot overcome her grief and unhappiness, and vows her eternal faith in her beloved. The Nurse tries to comfort Xenia by distracting her thoughts with a folk song. Likewise, Tsarevich Feodor tries to amuse her with a tale of a hen, a pig, a calf, and other farm animals.

Tsar Boris enters, seemingly delighted by what appears to be his children's joy and happiness. But when the children see their father, they stop abruptly. Boris addresses Xenia in grave words, trying tenderly to comfort her sorrow. In turn, she tries to comfort her father, who seems anxious and distraught.

Boris dismisses Xenia and the Nurse so that he can remain alone with Feodor. Feodor has been eagerly studying a map of Russia, and proceeds to proudly point out all the leading features of the vast Russian empire. Boris shares Feodor's pride in Russia's greatness, and with equal pride advises his son that one day he will rule Russia.

Boris becomes somber, fearful that one day his son will fall victim to the intrigues of power: He reflects on his six years as Tsar: a time of excruciating personal disappointment and unhappiness in which power and glory have become illusions; he weeps for consolation because his soul suffers with secret fears and apprehensions.

Boris wanted comfort and peace for his family, but Xenia bereaves the death of her lover and is in despair and sorrow. Intrigue is prevalent everywhere: the boyars and nobles scheme to betray him, and Poland conspires against him. In spite of his great accomplishments, plague and famine devastate the land, and the Russian people are destitute and hungry. The Russian people curse him: they groan and wander like wild beasts as they deplore their misfortunes, all the while blaming him as the cause of their despair.

Is God punishing him? Night and day, he is haunted by guilt. He is sleepless and continues to see the specter of the bleeding child he murdered, the child's eyes staring at him with scorn, and his hands raised to God in a plea for mercy. But Boris denied mercy for his victim. Boris has become terrified by the guilt of his crime, a haunted, pitiful, and broken man: "O God, in Thy grace have mercy on me!"

An uproar is heard from outside. Boris sends Feodor to investigate the cause. Meanwhile, a boyar enters to announce that Prince Shuisky wishes an audience with the Tsar; the boyar whispers into the Tsar's ear that secret agents have discovered that many boyars, among them Shuisky, are conspiring against him with his enemies, particularly his Polish enemies.

As Shuisky enters, Feodor returns. Boris questions Feodor about the uproar outside. Feodor apologizes for troubling his father with his own trifling affairs when he has more weighty ones of his own to occupy him. Nevertheless, the boy proceeds to explain at length how the commotion was caused by a tiff between his parrot and the old Nurse Nastasia.

Boris congratulates his son on his deft explanation. He is proud of his son's intelligence and education, which he concludes will represent a valuable asset when he rules Russia in his stead. But he makes sure that Shuisky hears his cynical admonition to Feodor: choose trustful advisors, and beware of wise but sly boyars like Shuisky, enemies of the throne. Boris has been well apprised by intelligence reports from his spies, and knows well that Prince Shuisky is a perfidious schemer, liar, and hypocrite.

Shuisky brings grave news for Tsar Boris: a Pretender has appeared in Cracow, supported by the King of Poland and his nobles, and the Pope of Rome. Boris fears that the Pretender, a man who may win the hearts of the Russian populace and be accepted as the real Tsarevich Dmitri. However, Shuisky assures Boris that his kingdom is secure, because the Russian people truly praise him. Feodor pleads to remain, but Boris, raging from Shuisky's news about a Pretender, dismisses his son.

Boris orders Shuisky to take immediate measures and close the Lithuanian border. He then asks Shuisky if he ever heard of dead children rising from the grave, children who defy the true, legitimate Tsar, who was elected by the people and anointed by the Patriarch?

In a monologue, Boris reveals that he appointed Shuisky to go to Uglich and investigate the death of the Tsarevich. He asks Shuisky to swear that the corpse he saw was that of the young Dmitri; if Shuisky lies, he will inflict a punishment that will be so dreadful that even Ivan the Terrible would have shrunk from imposing it.

Shuisky relates how he spent many days observing the corpse of the bloody and murdered Tsarevich. The body had been laid out in the Cathedral with the corpses of thirteen others who were slaughtered by the mob. But the Tsarevich's face bore a miraculous smile, a tranquility as if he were sleeping peacefully. The other bodies were decomposing.

The crafty Prince Shuisky has poisoned Boris's soul while professing to heal it. He certifies that it was indeed the Tsarevich's corpse that he had seen in the Cathedral, yet he hints that there may have been a miracle, and that the child did not die. Boris crumbles, unable to hear more of Shuisky's revelation: he suffocates, overcome by the guilt in his conscience.

Boris conjures up ineradicable images of the murdered Tsarevich, his throat dripping with blood, the body creeping towards him, quivering and groaning. Boris cries out hysterically to the vision: "I am guiltless of your murder! Not I! Not I! It was the people's will! Oh Lord, my God, Thou who desires not the sinner's death, show me Thy grace! Have mercy on the wretched Boris!"

Boris, broken and crazed, cries in horror, a victim of his own guilt. He prays to God, admits his sin, prays for penitence, and begs for mercy for his guilty soul.

Boris dismisses Shuisky, who, as he departs, maliciously glances back toward the agonized Tsar, the man who has become the victim of his intrigue.

Boris remains in convulsion, storms of despair and agony raging in his mind.

**Act III - Scene 1: Poland - Marina Mnischek's apartment in the Palace of Sandomir**

Marina Mnischek is the daughter of a Polish noble, the Voyevode of Sandomir. Marina's maidens entertain her, praising her beauty with a song that compares her to a flower that is whiter than snow. (The Polish atmosphere is established by the 2/4 time rhythms of the cracovienne, and the mazurka and polonaise in 3/4 time.)

Marina is indifferent to their flattery and rejects their praise. She is only comforted by tales of Polish battles and victories, conquering heroes making the name of Poland resound throughout the world. She dismisses her maidens contemptuously.

Marina laments that she is bored, her days empty and without purpose. But a star has appeared in her life: the Muscovite adventurer Dmitri (Grigori), who has attracted her imagination, rejuvenated her, and introduced new purpose to her life; he is a man chosen by God to avenge the murder of the Tsarevich by punishing the crimes of Boris Godunov.

**Alla mazurka  
MARINA**

Marina is obsessed by her ambition and craving for power. She has vowed to persuade the Polish nobles to espouse Dmitri's cause. And she is determined to captivate and bewitch Dmitri with passions of love. With her success, she envisions herself on the throne of Moscow, a Tsarina decked in jewels, and praised by Muscovites and admiring boyars.

The Jesuit priest, Rangoni, interrupts Marina's musings. Rangoni deplors the neglect that has befallen the Roman Catholic Church in Poland. He provokes Marina to swear her obedient loyalty to the one true faith: the apostolic church. With Marina's support, Rangoni is determined to bring Roman Catholicism to Russia and destroy the Russian Eastern Orthodox Church.

**Rangoni's motive:****Adagio**

Rangoni insists that if Marina succeeds to power in Moscow, her first duty will be to convert the Russian heretics and lead them to the true path of redemption through the Roman Catholic faith. Rangoni promises Marina that her reward will be redemption for her sinful soul.

Marina protests that she is powerless to fulfill such a mission; she is a woman whose great talents excel at banquets and society events, not at political intrigue. But the priest insists that her beauty is her most powerful weapon, a tool with which she can bewitch and capture the alien Pretender Dmitri, and then manipulate him for their purposes. She must abandon

conscience, scruples, and false modesty. She must use cunning and intrigue to sow passion in the Pretender's heart: when he is her captive, she must force him to serve the glory of the Roman Catholic Church.

The proud, stubborn, self-serving Marina erupts angrily at the Jesuit, cursing his depravity and his demand for her sacrifice. But Marina is powerless against Rangoni, a messenger of Heaven and keeper of her soul. He has injected fear in her and she cannot defy the Church. Contemptuously, Marina orders the Jesuit away. But as he departs he warns her to humble herself and dedicate her soul to the glory of the Church.

**Act III - Scene 2: A moonlit evening in the garden of the Mnischek palace**

Dmitri waits in the garden for a planned rendezvous with Marina; he is tormented by his passion for her and craves her affection. Rangoni emerges from the shadows, the cunning master who will use intrigue to seduce Dmitri for his own purposes.

Rangoni addresses Dmitri as the Tsarevich. He declares that he is Marina's envoy, and assures him that Marina truly loves him and yearns for him night and day. Her love for the Russian Pretender has subjected her to much criticism, insults and scorn, because the nobles of the court are envious; she has become the victim of their vulgar gossip.

Dmitri vows that through his boundless love for Marina he will defend her honor. He begs Rangoni's help. Rangoni cunningly convinces Dmitri that he is the true Tsarevich Dmitri, prompting Dmitri to vow that he will win Marina's love and she will become his Tsarina. The crafty Jesuit requests his reward: that he becomes Dmitri's spiritual counselor and father, allowed to follow him in his great destiny. Dmitri vows his promise to Rangoni.

Guests emerge from the palace. Marina is among them. Rangoni advises Dmitri to conceal himself until the appropriate moment when Marina will join him. To the strains of a polonaise, the Polish guests toast and compliment Marina; then they proudly discuss their imminent conquest of Russia and Moscow.

After the nobles reenter the palace, Dmitri emerges from hiding. He does not find Marina and curses the Jesuit for betraying him. Then he explodes into jealousy because he recalls seeing Marina dancing on the arm of an elderly Polish nobleman.

Dmitri's betrayal infuses him with resolution; he vows to lead his forces into battle and seize his rightful throne, the throne of his fathers.

**Dmitri's resolution:**

**DMITRI**



*I'll ride be - fore my brave warriors, till face to face we meet,*

Marina was secretly spying on Dmitri and suddenly reveals her presence. Dmitri pours forth his love for Marina, the ardent passion of a tormented soul. Marina explains that true glory cannot exist by love alone, but only with power. She pretends to reject Dmitri's love, declaring that she is unable to return his love until he conquers Moscow and becomes Tsar. Marina scornfully insults and mocks Dmitri callously: she calls him an impostor, vagabond, and a parasite. In defense, Dmitri swears that he is the rightful Tsar, and that his cause has been steadily gaining strength and support. He will march to Moscow, and when he succeeds in gaining his rightful crown, he will look down on her in contempt; but she will crawl towards his throne, mocked by all, and tormented by the thought of a lost kingdom.

Marina is now assured of Dmitri's resolve. She abandons her contempt for Dmitri and confesses her great passion for him: her desire to share his glory. They fall into each other's arms and embrace. A short distance away, the crafty Rangoni spies on them, gloating with satisfaction that his intrigue will succeed.

**Act IV - Scene 1:**

*The year 1605 - A square in front of the Cathedral of St. Basil the Blessed in Moscow*

A crowd of vagabonds report on recent political events in Russia: Boris has cursed Grigori Otrepiev, Dmitri the Pretender, and has ordered a Requiem for him and his godless followers; Dmitri's forces have reached Kromy, about to march on Moscow, and defeat and execute Boris Godunov.

A crowd of malicious children harasses and teases the Simpleton, the pathetic and pitiful village Idiot. He seats himself on a stone and sings a heartbreaking song that is a metaphor of the Russian people: cats that cry in the moonlight, and pray to God for good weather. The children steal his last kopeck, and he laments his loss.

**Simpleton's song:**

Andante  
SIMPLETON



*In the moonlight the cats are crying, poor Silly Billy now must rise and say his prayers,*

Boris appears before the crowd, visibly agitated and distraught. The crowd prays to their benevolent father, pleading for bread to satisfy their hunger.

Boris asks the Simpleton why he cries; he tells Boris that urchins have stolen his last kopeck, and then shocks Boris by advising him that he should have them murdered like he murdered the Tsarevich. The Simpleton cautions Boris that soon his enemies will arise, and then darkness and misfortune will again overcome the starving Russian people. Shuisky intercedes and orders guards to silence the Simpleton.

Boris becomes unnerved by the Simpleton, but mercifully orders his release, urging him to pray for the Tsar because he desperately needs the prayers of the Russian people. But the Simpleton refuses, unable to pray for "Tsar Herod," the man who has betrayed his people.

**Act IV - Scene 2: April 13, 1605 - The Granovitaya Hall in the Kremlin**

The Duma of boyars is meeting. A proclamation is read that informs them that Boris, with the blessings of the Patriarch, has proclaimed himself the legitimate Tsar: the perfidious Pretender, his mercenaries, opposing boyars and Lithuanians are to be condemned to death. Boris has urged the boyars to support his proclamation through their wise judgment and conscience. The boyars acknowledge their full support of Boris, affirming that the accursed Pretender must be captured, hung, and his ashes dispersed; there shall be no trace of him ever, and he will disappear together with his treacherous allies. The boyars then pray that the Russian people may be relieved from their suffering.

Prince Shuisky comes forward. The boyars reproach him, accusing him of arousing the people with sedition by claiming that the Tsarevich Dmitri still lives. But Shuisky denies their accusation as a slanderous ploy emanating from his enemies.

Shuisky alerts the boyars that Boris seems severely disturbed. Recently, he noticed that he was despondent, despairing and tormented: he was pale, sweating, trembling, wild-eyed, and muttering strange fragments of phrases. His eyes were fixed on a corner of the room where he envisioned the Tsarevich's ghost: he spoke to it and chased it away, crying insanely "Go away child!"

Suddenly, Boris enters the boyar's council. He seems to be mentally disturbed; he is talking to himself and seems unaware that others are present. He shrieks in protest that he is not a murderer: that they are lies from Shuisky, who shall meet with atrocious punishment. Then Boris realizes that he is among the boyars and recovers himself. He seats himself on the throne and explains that he summoned the boyars to counsel him with their wisdom in the difficult times of trouble that have now fallen on Russia.

Shuisky announces that there is a pious old pilgrim outside, who begs an audience with the Tsar, a holy man who has a profound secret to impart. Boris orders the holy man summoned, an opportunity, he believes, to save his soul and ease his grief and troubles.

The humble holy man who enters is Pimen. He immediately plunges into his story about a miracle. He recounts that one evening, an old shepherd, who had been blind from childhood, came to him and told him how he had heard a voice urging him go to the Cathedral at Uglich and pray at the tomb of the Tsarevich Dmitri, who is now a saint in heaven. At the Cathedral, the Tsarevich appeared before the shepherd, and his sight was immediately restored to him.

Boris suffocates as Pimen relates his story. He cries out in agony: "Help! Bring light! Air!" Then Boris collapses. He orders the boyars to send for his son and bring his vestments: he is prepared for death, and prepared to be received by the Church.

The frightened Feodor enters. The boyars leave Boris alone with his son. Boris senses imminent death and bids farewell to Feodor. He counsels Feodor that his reign now begins and that he should never question how his father obtained the throne. These are troubled times, and there is a strong Pretender yearning to accede to the throne.

Feodor's new throne will be surrounded by treachery, famine and plague. He must be firm and just, but he must not trust the boyars: watch their activities in Lithuania, punish traitors unmercifully, pursue impartial justice, defend the holy Russian Church like a warrior, be virtuous, and cherish his sister Xenia.

Boris invokes Heaven's protection and forgiveness not upon himself, but upon his innocent children. He takes Feodor in his arms, kisses him, prays that he will not be tempted by evil, and then falls back exhausted.

**Allegro moderato**

**BORIS**



*Be thou cautious and trust not too much the nobles; Watch all their plottings, their secret intrigues with Lithuania*

From outside, solemn funeral bells and a chorus of Russian people are heard praying for the Tsar. Boris acknowledges their prayers and prays for forgiveness.

With his last breath Boris cries out: "I still am Tsar!" He point to his son, "Here is your new Tsar. Almighty God have mercy on me!" He presses his hand to his heart, sinks back in his chair, and dies.

The boyars return, solemnly acknowledging the death of Boris.

*Act IV - Scene 3: A clearing in the forest near Kromy*

Crowds of peasants celebrate their imminent liberation from Boris Godunov's tyranny. They prepare to greet their new lawful Tsar, Dmitri, and the chosen of God, who had been saved from the assassin's knife. The emotion of the crowd intensifies to a frenzy: "Death to Boris! Death to the murderer."

Dmitri and his army arrive, poised for their triumphal march to Moscow. Dmitri announces that he is the lawful Tsarevich of all Russia, the prince of the royal dynasty. He promises to protect all those persecuted by Boris Godunov with mercy. He urges all of his supporters to join him and march to Moscow and the Kremlin, and then rides off to trumpet fanfares.

Only the Simpleton remains, prophetically lamenting the forthcoming misfortune that awaits the poor, starving Russian people.

"Weep, believing soul. Soon the enemy will come and darkness will fall - unfathomable darkness. Woe to Russia. Weep, starving Russian people!"



***CHAPTER SIXTEEN***  
***Verismo: Truth and Realism***

### Verismo: Truth and Realism

**V**erismo is an opera genre that evolved in Italy during the latter part of the nineteenth century: verismo is synonymous with realism and truth. (In France, its earlier antecedent was depicted in Bizet's *Carmen* (1875): verismé.) Verismo began as a literary movement, exemplified in Italy by the novels and plays of Giovanni Verga, that were analogous in theme and spirit with the naturalism of the French writers, Émile Zola and Guy de Maupassant. The landmark Italian veristic opera, Mascagni's *Cavalleria Rusticana* (1890), is based on a short story by Verga.

The veristic operas that followed, such as Leoncavallo's *I Pagliacci* (1892), Giordano's *Mala Vita* (1892), and Puccini's *Il Tabarro* (1918), all share common characteristics. Conceptually, they advocated an accurate representation of natural or real life conflicts and tensions, but without idealization; its primary focus was to present reality, and therefore it rejected visionary or sentimental subjects. To achieve realism, the verists often placed their characters in contemporary dress and used plots portraying humble people, generally rural and impoverished society rather than aristocrats. But more importantly, the verismo passions they portrayed were extremely profound, violent, and even savage; in both action and music, verismo portrayed a heightened emotionalism rather than subtlety, a tendency to blend the sordid with the sensational.

**T**he Romantic era preceded verismo, dominating most of nineteenth-century art. Romanticism itself was a backlash against the eighteenth century Enlightenment. The Enlightenment was a monumental battle for the soul of humanity: its ideals espoused freedom and human dignity, and were a force against centuries of social and political injustices. Those Enlightenment ideals were most eloquently embodied in the literary works of Rousseau, Voltaire, Locke, and Jefferson. Their ideology eventually became the fuel that fired the American and French Revolutions, perhaps the most momentous transitional events in modern Western history.

Underlying Enlightenment principles was a passionate opposition to the powers of Europe's theocracies and autocracies. And, Enlightenment principles and ideals represented a philosophical path to universal truth that ennobled man's great gift of logic and reason rather than blind faith. In music, Enlightenment ideals were reflected in the Classical era, a period that had its tentative beginnings in Italy in the early eighteenth century and extended through the early nineteenth century. (The Classical era succeeded the Baroque era and preceded the Romantic era.)

The underlying principles of the Classical era art were synonymous with Enlightenment principles of logic and reason. Its characteristics emphasized an adherence to poise, balance, proportion, simplicity, clarity, formal disciplines and structural formulae, and universal and objective expression. The great practitioners of Classicism were Scarlatti, Metastasio, Gluck, and the late Classicists, Haydn and Mozart

Romanticism erupted as a pessimistic counterforce against Classicism. Enlightenment and Age of Reason optimism had projected a new world of freedom and civility, but Romanticists viewed those noble ideals of egalitarian progress as a mirage and illusion, elevated hopes and dreams for human progress that had dissolved in the Reign of Terror (1792-94); that despair was reinforced by Napoleon's preposterous despotism, the subsequent carnage and devastation of the Napoleonic wars, the post-Napoleonic return to autocratic tyranny and oppression, and the economic and social injustices nurtured by the Industrial Revolution.

Like the Holocaust of the twentieth century, those bloodbaths, particularly the Reign of Terror, shook the very foundations of humanity by invoking man's deliberate betrayal of his highest nature and ideals; Schiller was prompted to reverse the idealism of his exultant "Ode to Joy" (1785) (later set by Beethoven in the Ninth or Choral Symphony), by concluding that the

new century had “begun with murder’s cry.” Others concluded that the French Revolution and the Reign of Terror had ushered in a terrible new era of unselfish crimes in which men committed horrible atrocities out of love not of evil but of virtue. Like Goethe’s Faust, who represented two souls in one breast, man was considered a paradox, simultaneously the possessor of great virtue and wretched evil. To those pessimists — the Romanticists — the drama of human history was approaching doomsday, and civilization was on the verge of vanishing completely.

Romanticists sought alternatives to what had become their failed notions of human progress, and sought a panacea to their loss of confidence in the present as well as the future. As such, Romanticists developed a growing nostalgia for the past by seeking exalted histories that served to recall vanished glories: writers such as Sir Walter Scott, Alexandre Dumas, and Victor Hugo, penned tributes to past values of heroism and virtue that seemed to have vanished in their contemporary times. They concluded that intellectual and moral values had declined, and that modern civilization had transformed into a society of philistines, in which the ideals of refinement and polished manners had surrendered to a form of sinister decadence. Those in power were considered deficient in maintaining order, and instead of resisting the impending collapse of civilization and social degeneration; they were deemed to have embraced the decline feebly and without vigor.

Romanticism signified freedom from the Classical tradition, opposing Classicism’s rigor with ideals expressing individual creative imagination, and even the fantastic. German Romanticists, arising in the late eighteenth century, possessed an almost mystical conception of any work of art as well as the creative artist; art provided entry into a transcendent spiritual world, indefinable and infinite, and beyond the ordinary human sphere.

Because the artist’s primary obligation was to be true to his inner creative inspirations, Romanticism encouraged the destruction of existing traditions of subject matter that were so fundamental to the Classics traditions: Romanticism advocated freer artistic expression. So in their search for new truths, Romanticists became preoccupied with the conflict between nature and human nature. They considered industrialization and modern commerce the despoilers of the natural world: steam engines and smokestacks were viewed as dark manifestations of commerce and veritable images from hell. But natural man, uncorrupted by commercialism, was ennobled. Thus, Romanticism sought escapes from society’s horrible realities by appealing to strong emotions, the bizarre and the irrational, the instincts of self-gratification, pleasure and sensual delight. Ultimately, Romanticism’s ideology posed the antithesis of material values by striving to raise consciousness to more profound emotions and aesthetic sensibilities.

Romanticists were also seeking an alternative to the Christian path to salvation. The philosopher Immanuel Kant (1724-1804) strongly influenced early German Romanticism when he scrutinized the relationship between God and man, ultimately concluding that man — not God — was the center of the universe. Following Kant, David Friedrich Strauss wrote the extremely popular *Life of Christ* that deconstructed the Gospel. And finally, Nietzsche, the ultimate cultural pessimist, pronounced the death of God. Theologically and philosophically, Romanticism — and particularly German Romanticism — believed in the existence of God, but they were not turning to Christianity’s Heaven for salvation and redemption, but rather, to the spiritual bliss provided by a passionate sense of human feeling and love; for the Romanticists, the spiritual path to God and human salvation could only be achieved through idealized human love, compassion and freedom. So the essence of Romanticism was idealized love and the nature of love, a glorification of sentiments and virtues, a sympathy and compassion for man’s foibles; and in the human tension between desire and fulfillment, an exaltation of the redeeming power of sacrifice.

The French champion of the human spirit, Jean Jacques Rousseau, aptly expressed Romanticism’s acute sense of freedom and feeling: “I felt before I thought.” Likewise, the German writer, Johann Wolfgang van Goethe, espoused his conception of Romanticism in his *Sorrows of Young Werther*, an intensification of sentiment to justify suicide as an escape from unrequited love.

In music, Romantic forms often embodied an emphasis on the indefinable and the infinite, weakening Aristotelian concepts of beginning, middle, and end. Works were often intentionally given the character of a fragment or an improvisation. At times, music reached new extremes of lengthiness, and at times brevity, the latter often found in the newly prominent genres of short piano pieces or art songs. The exploration of distant harmonic and tonal relations (previously used with great caution) and new kinds of texture and instrumental sonority contributed to the creation of new Romantic effects. Performers were no longer encouraged to add creatively to a composition through improvisational ornamentation, but became the conveyors and interpreters of the composer's true intentions.

Music was placed much higher in the Romantic hierarchy of the arts than in the Classical tradition, the indefinable nature of its language making it quintessentially transcendent. Music was thus freed from the notion prevalent earlier that it had no intrinsic meaning; in that context, Romantic music became tied even more closely than before to literature and other extra-musical elements because it was believed that music could express an indefinable or transcendental essence. This belief led to such typically Romantic musical genres as the symphonic poem (Liszt), the program symphony (Berlioz), and Wagner's later music dramas. The great Romantic music composers were Weber (1786-1826), Schubert (1797-1828), Berlioz (1803-1869), Mendelssohn (1809-1847), Chopin (1810-1849), Schumann (1810-1856), and Liszt (1811-1886).

One of the first Romantic operas was Beethoven's "rescue" opera, *Fidelio* (1805), which expressed an idealized freedom from oppression; it portrayed a deep sense of human struggle and triumph over tyranny that the composer seems to have musically hammered into every note. And by the mid-nineteenth century, the towering icons of opera Romanticism, Verdi and Wagner, epitomized the "Golden Age of Opera" with monumental works that contained underlying political, social and philosophical messages that expressed their idealistic vision of a more perfect world.

While Romanticism flourished during the first half of the nineteenth century, many conflicting cultural, political, and social forces were kindling revolutions against European autocracy: society was demanding the fulfillment of its utopian dreams that included the promise of democracy and human progress. Dramatic ideological and scientific discoveries — Marx, Darwin, and Freud — were transforming previously held perceptions, and as the Industrial Revolution flowered to maturity, society faced paradoxes which confounded the old order: colonialism, socialism, and materialism.

As the second half of the nineteenth century unfolded, the old foundations of society became suspect, if not incomprehensible and irrational. Perhaps the final blow to those dreams for social progress occurred in December 1851 when Louis Napoleon, nephew of Napoleon Bonaparte and son of Napoleon's brother, transformed France's pseudo-democracy into a dictatorship, capitalizing on most Frenchmen's desire to restore order after they experienced frenzied public disturbances in 1848. After Napoleon was elected President of France, he eloquently expounded the ideals of liberty, swore to uphold the constitution, and ingeniously created the illusion that the masses participated in his government through universal suffrage. Nevertheless, from the outset, Napoleon planned to overthrow the Republic and create a new empire. With one stroke of Napoleon's pen, France's Second Republic was transformed into a presidential dictatorship, in which Napoleon was granted full powers to institute martial law and dominate legislative matters: Prince Louis Napoleon became Napoleon III, the totalitarian dictator of France's Second Empire.

Louis Napoleon's coup d'état represented the final destruction of the optimism of Enlightenment as well as Romanticist ideals. As a result, society's dreams of future social and political progress transformed into resignation, despair, skepticism and pessimism; to many,

existing society and its political institutions were unconscionably evil, unjust — and beyond salvation. At mid-century, Richard Wagner became consumed by moral outrage and protest: his *cri de coeur* became an impassioned artistic gospel that would portray the political and social horrors of his contemporary society: the music drama, *The Ring of the Nibelung*.

As the nineteenth century approached its close — the *fin de siècle* — the times became even more spiritually unsettled; man became self-questioning and acutely aware of a cultural decadence that was pervading society. Nietzsche, pontificating his obsessive cultural pessimism, said it was a time of “the transvaluation of values,” in effect, his recognition of spiritual deterioration and decadence.

Artistic genres expressed this malaise by turning to an acute sense of realism: the time had arrived to peer into humanity’s soul and seek truth. Romanticism had dominated most of the nineteenth century, but its artificial sentiment and idealism began to be viewed as a contradiction of universal truth. So art shifted its focus to a more realistic portrayal of common man and his everyday, personal life drama — and even his degeneracy.

That new truth in opera was portrayed by the Italians in the verismo genre: *verismé* by the French. It was an artistic style that championed the concept that in art and literature, ugly and vulgar aspects of humanity earned their right to representation based upon their inherent truthful values. Conceptually, during the last thousand years of western history, civilization had progressed from the god-centered Middle Ages, in which man lived on the precipice between hell and damnation, to Enlightenment reason, to Romanticism’s sense freedom and feeling, to realism. But in realism, the conclusion became the antithesis of reason; that man was merely a creature of instinct.

Realism began in literature as naturalism, a genre that probed deeply into every aspect of the human experience. In 1845, in France, Prosper Mérimée wrote his novella, *Carmen*, a short story immortalized in Bizet’s opera, which dealt with extreme passions involving sex, betrayal, rivalry, vengeance, and murder. Mérimée perfectly captured the essence of naturalism (realism) when he commented: “I am one of those who has a strong liking for bandits, not that I have any desire to meet them on my travels, but the energy of these men, at war with the whole society, wrings from me an admiration of which I am ashamed.”

Mérimée, like so many of his French contemporary naturalist writers, turned to exotic locales for artistic inspiration. Spain, a close neighbor just to the southwest, bore a special fascination, particularly the character of its arcane gypsy culture. Those gypsies, considered sorcerers, witches, and occultists, were the traditional enemy of the church, and were almost always stereotyped as an ethnic group of bandits and social outcasts dominated by loose morality. From the comfort of distance, Mérimée told fascinating picaresque tales about gypsy ethos and culture, in a moralistic sense, using their presumed evils, loose morals, and bizarre idiosyncrasies, to imply to the reader a spiritual decadence that was to serve as a moralistic guide to renewal and redemption.

Mérimée’s particular *verismé* was his obsession with man’s propensity for extreme and violent passions that are irreconcilable and ultimately became fatal. In his tragedy of *Carmen*, he presents those forces of violence, cruelty, immorality, irrationality, and erotic love, as sinister fatal powers: in Mérimée’s *verismé*, man is a crazed brute, and certainly, good does not necessarily triumph over evil.

Bizet himself found his muse and inspiration for *Carmen* in realism’s truthful representation of humanity. He commented: “As a musician, I tell you that if you were to suppress hatred, adultery, fanaticism, or evil, it would no longer be possible to write a single note of music.”

Almost simultaneously, Émile Zola, recognized by many as the founder of literary naturalism, wrote novels that portrayed the underbelly of life. Zola brought human passions to the surface and documented every social ill, every obscenity, and every criminality, no matter how politically

sensitive: *The Dram Shop* (1877) about alcoholism, and *Nana* (1880) about prostitution and the demimonde. Similarly, Gustave Flaubert's *Madame Bovary* (1857) portrayed the romantically motivated adulteries of a married woman whose pathetically overblown love affairs end in her suicide. And in England, Charles Dickens presented the problems of the impoverished in his portrayal of moral degeneracy in the new industrial age slums.

Realism essentially had no philosophical foundation: its object was simply to portray the human condition without superficiality. As such, human passions became the subject of the action: no subject was too mundane; no subject too harsh, and no subject too ugly. As the antithesis of Romanticism, realism avoided artificiality and sentimentalism, and averted affectations with historical personalities, those romantic portrayals of chivalry and heroism.

Realism's objective was to search for the underlying truth in man's existence, and thus, reveal man's true nature. As such, it brought violent and savage passions to artistic expression and representation, becoming obsessed with violence, passion, and death. Realism portrayed human nature in the raw, the barbarian side of man, yet man possessing uninhibited spontaneity, courage, energy and vitality: in effect, the latent animal within the human soul — the "noble savage." So realism ennobled primitive and unspoiled man because he was true to his natural inclinations, and not stifled by the hypocrisy of society's conventions and the presumptions of civilized values, behavior previously justified by reason and morality. Realism perceived that beneath that veneer and facade called civilization, lurk dark, irrational mysterious forces that become manifested in brutal and cruel human passions, acts of violence, and bestiality: those forces of unreason and violence are sinister and fatal powers that became equated with death; in Realism, death became the supreme consummation of desire.

**I**n Italy, verismo was partly inspired by the public's disgust with Romanticism's sentiment and idealization. But verismo also evolved from the volatile political and social perplexities of the times. During that last decade of the nineteenth century, Italy was experiencing political and economic crises.

The Risorgimento (1860-61) had ostensibly fulfilled Italy's dream of liberation from the foreign rule of Austria and France, initially unifying the country under a democratic political system. But by the end of the century, none of those lofty dreams of democracy and political stability had been achieved: chaos and anarchy loomed on the horizon. Italy lacked the resources for rapid social and economic development, and the dream of a "second Rome" did not emerge. The veneer of political union could not disguise the reality of a divided country: in the south, from Naples through Sicily, the social and economic structure was virtually medieval, an illiterate peasantry living in grinding poverty under primitive feudal institutions that lacked the infrastructure to execute law and order; the only effective escape from squalor was emigration. But in contrast, the north thrived, developing industrially and progressing economically.

During the first generation after unification, moderate liberals of the north led the government, but those leaders were upper and middle class representatives who distrusted democracy. In the 1870s and 1880s more liberal factions of the upper middle-class oligarchy emerged, maintaining political stability by developing personal cliques and petty interest groups that they held together with pork-barrel deals; in the end, every opposing faction in Italy was compromised in one way or another through political favors.

The slow expansion of the nation's economy caused continuing internal discontent; in the 1890s there were peasant revolts, and disorders were provoked by anarchists and disenfranchised factions. The political climate was sensitive, insecure, and vacillating; it was heroic — if not fatal — to express outrage and criticism of the country's chaotic condition. These were volatile times, an era in which regicide and nihilism were virtually everyday topics, and there was much political agitation and social unrest: the Socialist Party that had been agitating for change and

progress was outlawed, causing rioting to erupt in the larger cities. And in 1900, anarchists assassinated King Umberto.

A host of political ideologies and movements emerged, each with its own agenda to establish order; some advocated a sinister new form of supernationalism that demanded more aggressive action. Ultimately, political and social unrest was repressed by energetic government police action. But the political chaos set the stage for emerging authoritarianism and fascism, a complete control of intellectual and political thought that advocated militarism, irrationalism, scorn for the rule of law and ethics, discipline and total devotion to duty, and the supreme and absolute sovereignty of the state. The Italian slogan “to believe, to obey, to combat,” became emerging fascism’s antithesis to the French Revolution’s “liberty, equality, fraternity.”

Thus, during the last decade of the nineteenth century, Italy’s political and social climate was chaotic, and the country seemed to be evolving toward the same despotism and tyranny of Robespierre’s Reign of Terror. Those fears inspired the renowned poet Luigi Illica to write the libretto for *Andrea Chénier*, Umberto Giordano’s verismo opera (1896), that was intended as a warning to his Italian compatriots; beware of the ominous clouds that were gathering on their political horizon, because the dark history of the French Revolution’s Reign of Terror could very well repeat itself in Italy. In Italy, verismo officially arrived to the opera stage with Mascagni’s *Cavalleria Rusticana* (1890), followed by Leoncavallo’s *I Pagliacci* (1892).

Nevertheless, there were many precursors to verismo that were simmering even at the midpoint of the nineteenth century.

During his career, Giuseppe Verdi (1813-1901) had virtually monopolized Italian opera, dominating the lyric stage for most of the nineteenth century. As the 1850s unfolded — Verdi’s “middle period” — his genius arrived at a turning point in terms of its artistic maturity. He was satisfied that he had achieved his patriotic objectives for the unification of Italy, so he decided to abandon the heroic pathos and nationalistic themes of his early operas: Italian independence and unification seemed to be a *fait accompli* on the political horizon.

Verdi began to seek more profound operatic subjects: subjects that would be bold to the extreme; subjects with greater dramatic and psychological depth; subjects that accented spiritual values, intimate humanity and tender emotions. From the 1850s onward, Verdi would be ceaseless in his goal to create an expressiveness and acute delineation of the human soul that had never before been realized on the opera stage.

During that defining moment in his career, Verdi’s operas began to contain heretofore-unknown dramatic qualities and intensities, profound characterizations, as well as an exceptional lyricism. In the process of his artistic evolution and maturity, Verdi may have inadvertently established the precursors for the Italian verismo genre that would officially flower two generations later: two of his most memorable characterizations were the ambivalent, hunchbacked title character in *Rigoletto* (1851), and the haggard, avenging gypsy mother, Azucena, in *Il Trovatore* (1853).

The *Rigoletto* character was adapted from Victor Hugo’s play *Le Roi s’amuse*. Hugo had conceived a new type of character for the stage, what he labeled “grotesque” characters. *Rigoletto*, the court jester, became one of those quintessential “grotesque” characters: he is complex, ambivalent, and possesses two souls; on the one hand, he is physically ugly and deformed, morally evil, sadistic and wicked, but simultaneously, he is kind, gentle, and an intensely compassionate man when he is showering unbounded love on his beloved daughter, Gilda. If the essence of verismo was to portray the truth in man’s natural propensity for violence and brutality, the *Rigoletto* character was indeed one of its most prominent ancestors, if not its forebear.

Likewise, in Verdi's *Il Trovatore* (1853), the opera could not exist without its keystone character, the haggard and bizarre old gypsy, Azucena. She represents the engine of vengeance, driving the story with her two great passions: her filial and maternal love for her surrogate son, Manrico, and her obsession to avenge her mother's execution. Azucena is an ominous, evil character, frightening as she recounts the vivid horror of her mother's brutal execution: she is another forbear of the true verismo character, relentless and consumed by her obsession for vengeance.

Azucena is the counterpart of Rigoletto: both are physically grotesque and repulsive outsiders. In many respects, they were shocking forces to Verdi's nineteenth century audiences, who, in the tradition of Romanticism, demanded beautiful heroines and handsome heroes on stage: villains could be ugly, but they were expected to be presented as secondary figures. Nevertheless, Verdi was willing to go quite far in his search for the bizarre, and insisted on making Rigoletto and Azucena protagonists: they were verismo-type characters in their time.

In both characters, the mocked, cynical, hunchbacked jester Rigoletto, and the reviled, stereotypically ugly gypsy Azucena, the mainsprings of their actions involve violence: Rigoletto is obsessed with revenge, which unwittingly and tragically brings about the death of his own daughter, stabbed by the assassin he hired to murder the Duke. And similarly, Azucena's avenging obsessions cause the death of Manrico, the surrogate son she adores, first by claiming under torture that she is his mother, and secondly and more importantly, by hiding from her enemy, Count di Luna, the fact that he and Manrico are actually brothers.

In this verismo context, Rigoletto and Azucena are the male and female faces of revenge that become defeated: ironically, their violent passions for revenge become unfulfilled and ultimately bring about fatal injustice and tragedy. The final horror for both Rigoletto and Azucena is that they believe they are striking a blow for justice. Rigoletto proclaims: "Egli è Delitto, Punizion son io" ("He is Crime, I am Punishment.") Azucena repeatedly pronounces her dying mother's command: "Mi vendica" ("Avenge me.") Nevertheless, in these tragedies, which are driven by possessed and consumed characters, both protagonists see their treasured children lying dead; Rigoletto may live on in his agony, but Azucena will surely die at the stake, as did her mother.

Rigoletto and Azucena were not by any stretch of the imagination Romanticism's typical lofty historic personalities. These protagonists were new types of characters who portrayed the extremes of human passion, a "truth" Verdi introduced to his opera stage almost a half-century before Mascagni's *Cavalleria Rusticana*.

So in 1890 Mascagni's *Cavalleria Rusticana* officially introduced verismo to the Italian opera stage: the genre flourished at a time when Italian opera was perceived to be in decline and degeneration; its portrayal of real, earthy people who expressed vigorous passions was intended to rejuvenate the opera art form.

Verismo nurtured a new school of avant-garde composers: the "giovane scuola," or "young school," first represented in full force by Mascagni, and followed, among the many, by Ruggiero Leoncavallo's *I Pagliacci* (1892), Umberto Giordano's *Andrea Chénier* (1896) and *Fedora* (1897), Francesco Cilèa's *Adriana Lecouvreur* (1902), and eventually, Puccini's *Tosca* (1900) and *Il Tabarro* (1918).

Nevertheless, the archetypes of Italian verismo have become those two Siamese twins of opera, affectionately known as "Cav" and "Pag": it is said that "Cav" is the "flesh and bones" of verismo; "Pag" is its "soul." Together, they are the fountainheads of the short-lived verismo genre of Italian opera.

Their plots indeed run in parallel grooves and share many similarities. Both operas are set in villages in the latter part of the nineteenth century in the southern part of Italy: *Cav* in Sicily, and *Pag* in Calabria. Both music dramas feature a blatant irony, made even more profound

because their stories take place on Christian holy days, respectively Easter Sunday and the Feast of Assumption.

But the underlying essence of these verismo operas highlights how quickly love can be transformed into violent hatred. Both opera stories involve a love triangle, in which one side of the triangle is betrayed, leading to fatal death. In *Cav* the triangle involves two women, the spurned Santuzza and the coquettish Lola, both in love with the young dandy, Turiddu; the fourth character is Alfio, Lola's cuckolded husband, whose betrayal and loss of honor drives him to murderous revenge. In *Pag* the triangle involves Nedda, her lover Silvio, and her cuckolded husband Canio; the fourth character is Tonio, spurned by Nedda. In each opera, the spurned lover (Santuzza in *Cav* or Tonio in *Pag*), becomes the informer or instigator of the ultimate tragedy, the character who incites the betrayed lover to avenge the crime of betrayal: in *Cav*, Santuzza, spurned by Turiddu, incites Alfio to become her instrument of revenge; in *Pag*, it is the hunchbacked clown, Tonio, rejected by Nedda, who instigates Canio to murderous revenge. And similarly, Puccini's masterpiece verismo opera, *Il Tabarro*, portrays the violent passions of revenge that are aroused by jealousy, betrayal and adultery: Michele's brutal murder of his wife Giorgetta's lover Luigi.

The essence of these verismo operas is the portrayal of exploding human passions resulting from jealousy spawned by adultery. In verismo, the cuckolded lovers are inspired to revenge and justice through murder. As such, the underlying essence of verismo is that raw human nature and primitive instincts erupt into brutal, violent and cruel actions.

In verismo, death is the consummation of desire.



## *Mascagni and Verismo*

## Mascagni and Verismo

Pietro Mascagni was born in Leghorn, Italy, in 1863; he died in 1945. As a youth, he yearned for a career in music, but his parents wanted him to become a lawyer: the family friction was resolved, when unable to subdue his passion, he studied music secretly. Subsequently, together with the intervention of a sympathetic uncle and sponsorship from a wealthy amateur musician, Mascagni was enrolled at the Conservatory of Milan: his promising talents were nurtured by his renowned teacher, Amilcare Ponchielli, the composer of *La Gioconda* (1876). Nevertheless, he was discontent at the Conservatory, unable to cope with scholastic disciplines and the required studies of harmony and counterpoint: he discontinued his studies and ran away from school. Afterwards, Mascagni married and settled down in Cerignola, Italy, earning a living as a music teacher and occasionally as a conductor.

Mascagni learned that the enterprising music publisher, Edoardo Sonzogno, was sponsoring a one-act opera competition which offered a substantial prize: he began composing *Cavalleria Rusticana*, based on Verga's poignant story about passionate conflicts in the lives of nineteenth century Sicilian peasantry. It was Sonzogno's second one-act competition: in the first, Puccini had entered *Le Villi*, which failed to gain even honorable mention.

Mascagni was insecure and dissatisfied with the quality of his *Cavalleria Rusticana* score. He sent it to Giacomo Puccini, his best friend and former roommate at the Conservatory of Milan, who quickly denounced it and concluded that it did not have one iota of a chance to win the competition. But in a friendly gesture, Puccini sent the score to Ricordi, his own publisher and Sonzogno's rival: it was likewise rejected as worthless; "Non ci credo" ("I do not believe in it.") However, Mascagni's wife had stronger faith in the score than its composer: she secretly mailed it to Sonzogno and it was immediately accepted and entered into the competition. In 1890, at the age 27, Mascagni's one-act opera, *Cavalleria Rusticana*, decisively won first prize over 72 rivals in Sonzogno's competition.

*Cavalleria Rusticana* achieved an unbelievable and immediate success. The opera not only reaped a fortune for Sonzogno's publishing firm, but it also catapulted both composer and opera to overnight fame: medals were struck in Mascagni's honor; the city of Cerignola greeted Mascagni with torchlight processions; and the King bestowed the Order of the Crown of Italy upon him. More importantly, a young, unknown composer had suddenly emerged to the forefront of Italy's avant-garde, the *giovanni scuola*, or the "young school" of verismo composers. And Mascagni's rise unveiled a new chapter in Italian opera, the advent of the new verismo genre of opera that combined rich melody with pulsating and extremely dramatic passions: sex, adultery, betrayal, revenge, and murder.

Mascagni never composed an opera remotely approaching this first success: 14 more operas followed, each with minor acclaim. Among the more popular today are *L'Amico Fritz* (1891), *Iris* (1898), and *Isabeau*, (1911), the latter the story about Lady Godiva, but the heroine's naked ride through the streets was incapable of redeeming the opera. Mascagni himself commented sadly, "It was a pity I wrote *Cavalleria Rusticana* first": the composer never looked back, but never looked forward either; the spirit of his unrepeatable masterpiece haunted him for the rest of his life.

Mascagni spent most of his career as a conductor, succeeding Toscanini at La Scala in 1929, and later composing music scores for silent films. Before World War II, he became an ardent fascist, composing the opera, *Nerone* (1935), an historic pageant glorifying Mussolini and fascism. After the war, he was held in contempt by his countrymen for his avowed fascist sympathies and spent his last years in obscurity, poverty and disgrace.

The libretto for Mascagni's *Cavalleria Rusticana* evolved from a story by Giovanni Verga (1840-1922). Verga was an influential late nineteenth century Sicilian novelist, a short-story writer and playwright, who — perhaps following the guidelines of Émile Zola in France — introduced the naturalism movement to Italian literature and theater.

Verga's childhood and youth coincided with major historical changes in Italy: the transfer of power from the Bourbon to the Savoy monarchy. In 1860 Sicily was annexed to Italy, and one year later Garibaldi led an army that created the new Kingdom of Italy under Victor Emmanuel II of Savoy. Verga, then 20 years old, enrolled in the Catania National Guard, which became engaged in suppressing both counterrevolutionary movements and uprisings against the bourgeoisie. In his short story *Freedom*, Verga would later recall the mob violence and executions that he witnessed.

In post-Risorgimento Italy, a mood of disillusionment developed after Italy achieved its political dream of unification, which served to inspire the birth of the literary movement of verismo. It was strongly influenced by the French novelists, Balzac and Zola. Verga— together with the writer Luigi Capuana — became the Italian counterparts of French naturalism, a genre in which the writers concerned themselves with the spontaneous representation of nature and the day-to-day affairs of ordinary people. These writers did not engage in wordy descriptive passages and lengthy narrations dealing with moral concerns and ideals that had characterized the works of the earlier Romantic novelists. For them, the narrative was to be conveyed through dialogue, and the story was to be told exclusively through the characters. Verga remained true to these veristic principles. He expressed no opinion of the social injustices that he was depicting, and was content to merely view it through the eyes of his characters, whose opinions were conveyed through action and dialogue.

Temperamentally, Verga was opposed to the repression of the underprivileged as well as the corrupt society that he observed around him; that ideology became the engine that drove his writing. In many of his novels, he addressed themes such as the conflicts of human love, and the inexorable destructive forces of life itself, forces of survival in which humanity was impotent and hopelessness. In *Nedda*, he portrayed the pathetic story of a Sicilian peasant girl's struggle against sickness and poverty, the catastrophes that overcome her, and the inevitability of defeat in her pursuit of happiness. Two of his major novels are considered masterpieces: *I Malavoglia* ("The House of the Medlar Tree") (1881), explores the fruitless human struggle for immortality; *Mastro-don Gesualdo* (1888) is a myth about property, in which a social climbing peasant amasses a large fortune, but finds himself despised by the society into which he has aspired to. The church and the law are prominent elements in several of his tales — *The Reverend, Don Licciu Papa*, and *Bigwigs* — and more often than not fiercely satirical portraits of the church and legal authorities are portrayed as adversaries of the poor.

In many respects, Verga's stories represent an invaluable record of social conditions at a critical stage of modern Italian history. But Verga was a realist who harbored no illusions about human society. He was acutely aware of the comic side of daily life, and even in the midst of catastrophe his characters never lose their capacity to smile at their misfortunes. In that sense, he was a master at stirring the reader's compassion by inspiring them to participate in his characters' joys and sorrows: Verga aroused compassion while avoiding all traces of sentimentality; he presented life in its true realism, free from any distortions or idealism.

Verga lived most of his life in Catania, Sicily. A regular feature of his narratives was his portrayal of the lives and aspirations of his Sicilian compatriots. His stories depicted with uncanny accuracy the raw, earthy lives, manners and temperament of poor Sicilian peasants and fishermen, a culture attached almost inevitably to its primitive, traditional way of life. He portrayed his fellow Sicilians with outstanding narrative power and a rich and versatile prose, at times excessively dramatic, violent and brutal, but at all times starkly realistic. His stark descriptions were enhanced by his concise writing style. D.H. Lawrence, an admirer and translator of Verga's works, commented: "we are here just a bit too much aware of the author and his scissors. He has clipped too much away. The transitions are too abrupt. All is over is a gasp..."

Verga's short novel, *Cavalleria Rusticana* (1880), was transformed into a stage play in 1884. The play featured the renowned Italian actress of the era, Eleonora Duse, the play expanding the character of Santa (now Santuzza) to accommodate Duse. (The actress is also known for her portrayal of another verismo role, Sardou's *La Tosca*, later adapted by Puccini for his opera.) Although Verga remains the man who wrote the original *Cavalleria Rusticana* story, the libretto for Mascagni's celebrated one-act opera was written not by Verga, but by Giovanni Targioni-Tozzetti and Guido Menasci, who based their text closely on Verga's one-act play rather than the short story.

The characterizations in Verga's story — and the Mascagni opera — are in profound conflict with each other; true verismo characters who explode with uncontrolled, savage passions. Nevertheless, Verga recommended that his characters demonstrate restrained behavior, pointing out to a German producer that Sicilians, like Orientals, are outwardly passive and calm, and therefore, not apt to show raw, extroverted emotion. In particular, Verga cited that when the cuckolded Alfio learns about his wife's infidelity, he should not display visible emotion. Nevertheless, Mascagni transformed Verga's intentions to blood-and-thunder verismo, his musical characterizations emphasizing their relentless fortissimo passions.

Verga's story is notable for its structural compactness and the precision and clarity of its narrative detail. From its very beginning, it is absolutely clear that the theme of the story is adultery and the satisfaction of honor. Considering its brevity, it is remarkable the way the main characters emerge with such clearly defined and distinctive personalities. But Verga skillfully creates an atmosphere of tragic inevitability before plunging the narrative into the final, starkly uncompromising encounter between Turiddu and Alfio. (The name Turiddu is the Sicilian diminutive of Salvatore.)

Verga describes Turiddu as a young dandy, a local playboy swaggering about the village on Sundays in his military uniform. In the Penguin Books translation (1999), Turiddu "...strutted around the piazza every Sunday in his sharpshooter's uniform and his red forage-cap, as though he were the fortune-teller setting up stall with his cage of canaries. The girls couldn't take their eyes off him as they went along to Mass with their faces half hidden in their mantillas, and the little boys buzzed around him like flies. He had even brought back a pipe carved with a lifelike image of the king on horseback, and he would strike matches on the seat of his pants, raising his leg as if to take a kick at something."

Turiddu was pursuing Lola, but while he was serving his army conscription, she went ahead and married Alfio, a successful and enterprising cart-driver. Verga's narrative about Lola continues: "...on Sundays she would stand on her veranda with her hands across her belly to show off all the big gold rings her husband had given her." But the rejected Turiddu continued to pass by Lola's house, seemingly with an air of indifference, however, deep inside he was distraught, envious of Lola's husband's wealth, and vengeful again Lola for spurning him for Alfio.

Turiddu then pursued Santa, the daughter of a wealthy wine grower, and the possessor of a considerable dowry. But when Alfio was away, Lola pursued Turiddu; they began an adulterous love affair that became the town's major gossip, and the betrayed Santa became obsessively jealous. In a fit of rage, Santa revealed to Alfio the adultery that was taking place in his absence. Alfio immediately concluded that the two men must settle the issue in the approved manner of rustic chivalry, a fight to the death in Southern Italian style: "...they exchanged the kiss of the challenge. Turiddu took the tip of the cart-driver's ear between his teeth and bit it, by way of a solemn promise to keep the appointment."

As Turiddu and Alfio walked down the road together, Turiddu told him "...as God is my witness I know I did wrong and I'd be glad to let you kill me. But before coming to meet you I caught sight of my old mother, who had got up to see me leaving with the excuse of cleaning

out the chicken run, looking as though her heart was breaking, and as God is my witness I'm going to kill you to stop my mother shedding any tears."

"They both knew how to use a knife. Turiddu took the first blow, stopping it with his arm just in time. He gave back as good as he'd got, striking Alfio in the groin."

"Ah, Turiddu! So you really want to kill me!"

"Yes, I already told you. After seeing my old mother with the chickens, my eyes can see nothing else."

"Open them wide, those eyes of yours!" roared Alfio, "and I'll give you something to do them a bit of good."

"Keeping up his guard, hunched in pain, clutching his wound with his left hand, and crawling over the ground with the use of his elbow, he suddenly grabbed a handful of dust and hurled it into the eyes of his opponent."

"Ah!" yelled Turiddu, blinded by the dust. "I'm a dead man."

"He tried to escape, leaping backward in desperation, but Alfio struck him another blow in the stomach and a third in the throat."

"That's three! For dressing up my home. Now your mother can stop bothering about the chickens!"

"Turiddu pawed the air for a while amid the cactuses, then dropped to the ground like a stone. The blood foamed up with a gurgling sound into his throat, and he couldn't even get out the words. "Ah, mamma mia!"

Verga's stage play portrayed the savage and brutal fight between Turiddu and Alfio — it occurs offstage in the Mascagni's opera, replaced by the announcement by a village woman of its fatal outcome: "Hanno ammazzato Comare Turiddu!" ("They have killed Turiddu!")

**T**he title of the opera, *Cavalleria Rusticana*, literally means "rustic chivalry," more specifically, "rustic honor." The central core of the story concerns defeated honor, pride, and the loss of dignity; Santuzza and Alfio are the story's victims, both betrayed, shamed, and dishonored by the faithlessness of their respective lovers, Turiddu and Lola.

The underlying story presents an irony in its interplay of passions. The overpowering symbol in the melodrama is the church, and specifically, Easter Sunday, the celebration of the Passion of Christ, that essentially represents the core of the Christian faith: Christ's sufferings that redeemed mankind, and the basic tenet of forgiveness followed by a sense of a new beginning.

However, juxtaposed against the Passion of Easter is human passion, a portrayal of characters who become consumed by uncontrollable irrational forces of betrayal and revenge that lead to fatal and tragic murder. In this story, the sacred and the profane collide, continuously alternating and throbbing back and forth. Then, they explode into incomprehensible disaster, a chiaroscuro that blurs the line between lightness and darkness, between good and evil.

The Prelude immediately exposes the passions of the drama: the Easter Passion, Turiddu's passion for Lola, Santuzza's passion for Turiddu and his betrayal of her; Santuzza (literally "little saint") is the central protagonist of the story. The Prelude begins with a musical portrait of the tranquility in the village on a sacred Easter morning, but that sense of elevated spirituality quickly transfers to the mundane world; a musical theme is introduced that is associated with Santuzza's passion for Turiddu and her jealousy, a pleading motive that later underscores Santuzza's battle with the dispassionate Turiddu to give up his love for Lola and return to her.

The Prelude suddenly switches gear. Turiddu is heard serenading Lola with the "Siciliana," a song whose words express his eternal love for her, and his wish to die if he cannot love her. And then again, another musical theme associated with Santuzza's agony is introduced, music that will again reappear and underscore the impassioned duet between Turiddu and Santuzza, the moment in which his rejection of Santuzza catalyzes her obsession for revenge.

The dark and ominous expositions of the Prelude suddenly transform to lightness as villagers arrive in the square, all of them happily anticipating the Easter celebration. But after they disperse, Santuzza appears, agonized and agitated; she has seen Turiddu in the early morning near Lola's house, and now suspects that he has betrayed her by resuming his love for Lola. But again, dark omens transform quickly to high spirits with the appearance of the returning Alfio, happily — and ironically — announcing that his wife Lola awaits him on this Easter Sunday, although ominous music suggests infidelity, a contradiction of his thoughts.

Santuzza is obsessed to learn Turiddu's whereabouts from his mother, Mamma Lucia, but their conversation is interrupted by the devotional "Regina Coeli" hymn heard from inside the church: from outside, the excommunicated Santuzza joins the prayer; "Innegiamo Signor." For one short moment, Santuzza's inner conflicts have surrendered to spiritual comfort. But afterwards, she pours out her soul to Mamma Lucia, "Voi lo sapete, o mamma" ("You know, that before Turiddu became a soldier"), her exposition that she has been betrayed, abandoned and disgraced by Turiddu, the underlying theme of the entire opera: "Priva dell'onor mio, dell'onor mio rimango" ("I have been robbed of my honor.")

The centerpiece of the opera is the ensuing duet between Santuzza and Turiddu, a vigorous and violent battle in which Santuzza pleads unsuccessfully for Turiddu to abandon Lola and return to her. But ironically, in the middle of their quarrel, Lola herself appears, Santuzza's coquettish rival inflaming her with sarcasm, cynicism, and seductive allusions intended to rouse Turiddu. After Lola departs for church, the quarrel resumes, a raging Santuzza continuing her pleas for Turiddu to stay with her: "No, no! Turiddu, rimani, rimani ancora" ("Stay with me, Turiddu. Do you want to abandon me?") In the end, Turiddu perceives Santuzza as possessive and savagely throws her to the ground, violently denouncing her stupidity and obsessive jealousy. He flees to join Lola in church, the embittered and despairing Santuzza furiously cursing him as he departs: "Una mala Pasqua" ("A cursed Easter!")

Santuzza remains alone in agony and torment. But suddenly Alfio appears, and she quickly exposes her torment to him: "Turiddu mi tolse" ("Turiddu took my honor.") But Alfio now becomes Santuzza's instrument for revenge: she advises Alfio that he has been dishonored, a cuckolded husband who is the victim of an unfaithful wife who is carrying on an adulterous affair with Turiddu. Alfio, like Santuzza, vows revenge: "Vendetta!" ("Vengeance!")

An Intermezzo momentarily reduces the mounting tension, its music returning to the "Regina Coeli" devotional hymn, but like the Prelude, Mascagni adds musical themes that collide with spirituality and reveal the conflicted passions of the characters.

The villagers emerge from the church, their gaiety heightened by Turiddu, who leads them in a drinking song. But quickly, the essential conflict of the drama returns when Alfio appears, unabashedly determined to destroy the man who has dishonored him: it is Alfio who has been dishonored; Lola's infidelity is not addressed.

Alfio and Turiddu challenge each other to settle their differences in a duel with knives. Turiddu, alone with his mother, becomes remorseful — and fearful. Nevertheless, he speeds off for his fight with Alfio. A village woman comes forward to announce the final agony — the final passion — of this Easter Sunday in a Sicilian village: the death of Turiddu. And the orchestra, resounding at its full power, recalls the music associated with Santuzza's agitation and agony; she, like Mamma Lucia, is another victim of the tragedy.

**T**he entire plot of *Cavalleria Rusticana* is driven by Santuzza and Alfio, both dishonored and possessed by vengeance: in verismo, their obsession for revenge prompts explosions of unbridled passions, all of which lead to unabashed violence. Above all, in verismo's "truth" human character is irrational because reason has failed and man is overcome by emotion and passion, now a victim of uncontrollable forces that drive him to cruelty, brutality, and violence.

The loss of honor is *the* theme of the story. Its loss demands immediate justice and retribution: it is ironic that on this holy day of celebration, there is no sense of Christian forgiveness, and no turning of the other cheek: *Cavalleria Rusticana*'s world is an eye-for-an-eye, the implementation of "frontier justice" that has been transplanted to the Sicilian outback, a blatant contradiction to Easter Sunday's sacred spirituality that haunts the ambience of this story. There is no reconciliation because in this irrational world, the resolution of the human conflict can only be manifested through violence and murder. In *Cavalleria Rusticana*, the profane conquers the sacred: irrational man overpowers reasonable man because man is protean, primitive, nihilistic, and instinctive, his savage and fatal passions erupting into madness.

*Cavalleria Rusticana* is a melodrama about honor, and the savage form of reconciliation that restores honor. Pietro Mascagni, the dramatist of this brutal story, used the power of his musical inventions to breathe life into its stark and cruel story. His opera became the precursor of the Italian verismo genre that dominated the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. As an opera genre, verismo was short-lived, only a few composers achieving everlasting success with their works. But a century after its premiere, *Cavalleria Rusticana* continues to dominate the stages of every opera house in the world; audiences continue to be mesmerized by its portrayal of dark passions that pervade the human soul, uncontrollable passions that rest in the deep recesses of the human psyche; passions that can turn man to evil.



***Cavalleria Rusticana***  
**“Rustic Chivalry”**

**Opera in Italian in one-act**

**Music**

**by**

**Pietro Mascagni**

**Libretto by Guido Menasci**

**and Giovanni Targioni-Tozzetti,**

**after a short story by Giovanni Verga (1880)**

**Premiere: Teatro Costanzi, Rome, 1890**

***Principal Characters in Cavalleria Rusticana***

Santuzza, fiancée of Turiddu	Soprano
Turiddu, Mamma Lucia's son and fiancé of Santuzza	Tenor
Mamma Lucia, Turiddu's mother	Soprano
Alfio, a carter	Baritone
Lola, Alfio's wife	Soprano

TIME: Late 19th century

PLACE: A village in Sicily on Easter Sunday.

***Brief Story Synopsis***

In *Cavalleria Rusticana*, personal jealousy and betrayal explode on an Easter Sunday, an irony in which the holy Christian celebration of the Passion of Christ is transformed into primitive, fatal justice. In this tragedy, the conflicts of a love triangle lead to murder. Two women, Santuzza and Lola, are rivals for Turiddu, a vain and foolish local dandy. The triangle becomes squared when Alfio, Lola's cuckolded husband, learns of his wife's infidelity with Turiddu: to restore his honor, Alfio challenges Turiddu to mortal combat and kills him.

Certain events leading to this Easter Sunday tragedy occurred before the curtain rises on *Cavalleria Rusticana*. Turiddu and Lola were in love with each other. After Turiddu returned from his compulsory army conscription, he turned to despair when he learned that Lola married Alfio, the local carter. Wounded in pride and vanity, he seduced the love of Santuzza. But Lola still loved Turiddu and became exasperated that he was pursuing another woman: Lola lured her ex-lover back, but this time their love affair was adulterous.

As the curtain rises, Santuzza suspects that Turiddu has betrayed her, catching sight of him near Lola's house early in the morning: she becomes crazed with jealousy. But Santuzza is also ridden with guilt, sin, shame and dishonor; she is pregnant with Turiddu's child out of wedlock.

Santuzza is relentless to win back Turiddu's love. She pleads with Turiddu to reject Lola, but he spurns her. Sulking in defeat, she curses Turiddu and craves revenge: she manipulates Lola's cuckolded husband Alfio as her weapon of revenge against both Turiddu and Lola. Santuzza inflames Alfio's jealousy and dishonor by exposing Lola's infidelity. Alfio, now seized by jealousy and betrayal, vows to restore his honor by killing Turiddu. He challenges Turiddu to a duel with knives and kills him.

On this Easter Sunday, *Cavalleria Rusticana's* geometry of impassioned relationships progress without regard to their fatal consequences. Each of the characters expresses instinctive and primitive passions for lethal revenge: death alone can redeem their need for justice and the restoration of their honor; death becomes the consummation of desire.

*Story Narrative with Music Examples*

*Cavalleria Rusticana*'s Prelude provides a musical portrait of warmth and naturalness, an atmosphere of serenity in a Sicilian village at dawn on Easter Sunday.

*Prelude:*

**Andante sostenuto**



The music quickly animates, a suggestion of the rash emotions and passions that will transform a holy day of celebration into a day involving fatal, human tragedy.

The tranquil opening theme suddenly yields to music that will later underscore the bitter and tempestuous confrontation between the spurned and jealous Santuzza, and the cruel and dispassionate Turiddu.

*Santuzza's passion:*

**Molto animato**



Turiddu, singing a serenade to Lola, interrupts the Prelude: the *Siciliana*, its words in Sicilian dialect to convey a sense of realistic ambience.

One must imagine that Turiddu and Lola have secretly met that evening, consummating their passionate love during the absence of Lola's husband, Alfio. Lola languishes, intoxicated by recollections of her tryst with Turiddu.

From a distance, the departing Turiddu's serenade attests to Lola's beauty and his eternal love for her. But he also warns that their adulterous affair could endanger and threaten them. In his serenade, Turiddu vows that if death awaits him, he would refuse to enter Heaven if Lola was not present there.

“Siciliana”

Andante  
TURIDDU

O Lo - la, ch'ai di lat - ti la cam - mi - sa,  
Oh Lola, white like a thornflower,

The musical notation is a single staff in 6/8 time, starting with a treble clef and a key signature of two flats (B-flat and E-flat). The melody consists of a series of eighth and quarter notes, with a final half note. The lyrics are written below the staff.

The Prelude resumes with another suggestion of Santuzza’s agony. Santuzza was wandering the fields at dawn and saw Turiddu near Lola’s house, arousing her suspicions, doubts, and distrust of him. She becomes terrified, instinctively and intuitively sensing that he has returned to Lola and betrayed her: she becomes bitter and anguished, suddenly seized by passions of jealousy.

*Santuzza’s jealousy:*

Andante

The musical notation is a single staff in 6/8 time, starting with a treble clef and a key signature of two flats. The melody is characterized by a slow, descending line of eighth notes, with some notes beamed together.

As the curtain rises, church bells awaken the Sicilian village, announcing Easter morning. A carefree crowd in a mood of holiday joy gathers in the square outside the church awaiting Easter Mass. In the distance, villagers sing of the joys of Easter. They arrive in the square and join other villagers; some entering the church while others disperse through the village.

*Villagers arriving at the square:*

Allegro giocoso

The musical notation is a single staff in 3/4 time, starting with a treble clef and a key signature of two sharps (F# and C#). The melody is lively and features a mix of eighth and quarter notes, with some notes beamed together.

The square becomes deserted except for Santuzza, appearing visibly agitated and apprehensive. She rushes toward the tavern opposite the church, the tavern of Mamma Lucia, Turiddu’s mother.

*Santuzza’s agitation:*

Largo

The musical notation is a single staff in 3/4 time, starting with a bass clef and a key signature of two sharps. The melody is slow and features a mix of quarter and eighth notes, with some notes beamed together.

Santuzza anxiously implores Mamma Lucia to know Turiddu’s whereabouts; she saw him near Lola’s house in the morning, suspects his betrayal, and is eager to talk to him. Mamma Lucia responds evasively, attempting to avoid any involvement in her son’s quarrelsome affairs. Nevertheless, Santuzza conveys a sense of urgency, compelling Mamma Lucia to reveal that Turiddu went to Francofonte to fetch wine for the tavern.

But Santuzza boldly refutes her, revealing that she saw Turiddu in the village this very morning. Mamma Lucia intuitively senses Santuzza’s despair and shows compassion for the distraught woman. She invites her into the tavern but Santuzza refuses, explaining that she cannot cross her threshold: she is an outcast, excommunicated as a sinner.

Just as Santuzza is about to reveal to Mamma Lucia the underlying reasons for her torment, sounds of beating whips and jingling bells interrupt them: they are the familiar sound of the village’s jolly carter, Alfio.

**“Il cavallo scalpita”**

**Allegretto**  
**ALFIO**



*Il ca- vallo scalpi - ta, i sonagli squillano, schiocchi la frusta. Ehi là!*  
**The horse paws the ground, bridle bells jingle, the whip cracks.**

Alfio boasts with pride about the joys of his trade. He further describes his high spirits on this Easter morning because he is about to return home to his beloved wife, Lola, who awaits him with love, comfort, and fidelity: “M’aspetta casa Lola” (“Lola awaits me at home”); Alfio’s praise of Lola’s virtues are voiced ironically against sinister sounding musical harmonies.

The villagers disperse, some leaving the square, others entering the church. Alfio greets Mamma Lucia and requests some of her fine wine to celebrate the holiday, that excellent vintage that Turiddu gets from a neighboring village. Lucia advises Alfio that at this very moment Turiddu is in Francofonte to fetch a fresh supply of wine. Alfio becomes perplexed and bewildered, confounded because he saw Turiddu this morning near his home. Mamma Lucia duly expresses surprise and is about to inquire further, but Santuzza signals her to be silent. Alfio departs in skepticism and confusion, his suspicions aroused.

From inside the church, organ music accompanies a choir heard singing the devotional hymn “Regina Coeli” (“Queen of Heaven”).

**“Regina Coeli”**

**Moderato assai**



*Re - gi - na Coe - li, lae - ta - re*  
**Queen of Heaven, rejoice!**

Outside the church, villagers join in singing the hymn, echoing their praise with “Hallelujahs.” All kneel in prayer and join Santuzza in a hymn extolling the Resurrection: “Innegiamo, il Signor non è morto” (“Let us offer praise, the Lord is not dead”): the ecstasy and powerful spiritual promise of the Easter prayer represents an ironic and stark contrast to the brutal and violent passions that are poised to explode.

**“Innegiamo, il Signor non è morto”**

**Largo maestoso**  
**SANTUZZA**

*In - neg - gia - mo, il Signor non è mor - to,*  
**Let us offer praise, the Lord is not dead!**

The remaining villagers enter the church for Easter Mass.

Mamma Lucia and Santuzza remain together. Mamma Lucia asks Santuzza why she urged her to silence when Alfio mentioned that he had seen Turiddu near his home. Santuzza explains that she was exercising judicious caution: if she revealed the truth, Alfio would become alarmed, distressed and suspicious of Lola and Turiddu.

Santuzza reveals her inner torment to Mamma Lucia. She reminds Lucia that Turiddu was engaged to Lola before he went into the army, but Lola did not wait for his return and married Alfio; when Turiddu learned that she had betrayed him, he turned to despair. To console his anguish and grief, he wooed Santuzza and seduced her with a solemn promise of marriage. Santuzza, enraptured by her new love, surrendered her virtue.

But Turiddu betrayed Santuzza and once more got himself caught in the net of the wicked Lola, who was not only tired of Alfio, but lured him back because she was jealous and envious of Santuzza; during Alfio’s frequent absences, their adulterous affair blossomed.

As Santuzza finishes her sad story, she explodes into shrieks of agonized despair: Lola stole Turiddu from her, and she is now a grieving, abandoned woman, accursed, betrayed, and disgraced.

**“Voi lo sapete, o mamma”**

**Largo assai sostenuto**

*Voi lo sapete, o mam - ma, prima d'andar sol - da - to.*  
**You know, that before Turiddu became a soldier,**

Mamma Lucia, visibly shocked and disturbed by Santuzza’s anguished revelations, senses omens of evil, a paradox on this holy Easter Sunday.

Santuzza implores Mamma Lucia to go to Mass, pray for her soul, and beg Turiddu to be faithful to her.

Turiddu arrives, surprised to find Santuzza waiting for him in his mother’s tavern. Santuzza, jealous and enraged, confronts him and asks him where he has been. He explains that he went to Francofonte to fetch wine, but Santuzza refutes him and accuses him of lying; she saw him early this morning coming from Lola’s house. Santuzza then explodes into a jealous rage and

accuses Turiddu of betraying their love by returning to Lola. She further cautions Turiddu that if Alfio discovers their adulterous affair, he will kill him.

Turiddu denies Santuzza’s accusations, screaming in defiance that he will not be a slave to her foolish jealousy. Santuzza, her tears mixed with love and despair, offers to forgive Turiddu if he gives up Lola and returns to her.

Suddenly, during the full flood of Santuzza’s entreaties and Turiddu’s protestations, their quarrel is interrupted by the voice of Santuzza’s rival, Lola, the heartless coquette singing a folk song about love as she makes her way to attend church.

**“Fior di giaggiolo”**

**Allegretto**  
**LOLA**

*Fior di giaggio - lo;            gli angeli belli stanno a mille in cie - lo,*  
**Radiant iris flowers, thousands of angels in Heaven,**

Lola’s words quickly fade when she sees Turiddu and Santuzza. She is hypocritical and cynical: at first she asks Turiddu if he has seen Alfio, and then comments maliciously that Santuzza seems to be praying in the street rather than in church. She taunts Santuzza contemptuously, the two rivals exchanging hostile words imbedded with irony and innuendo. Lola invites Turiddu to join her in church, but he hesitates. Then she jeers Turiddu, sarcastically suggesting that he might possibly prefer to remain with Santuzza. Turiddu, unable to control his instincts, starts to follow Lola, but Santuzza forcefully blocks his way. Lola departs, flirtatiously throwing Turiddu a rose before entering the church.

Santuzza and Turiddu resume their quarrel: it now erupts with renewed vigor and uncontrollable frenzy. Santuzza, raging with bitterness and anguish, pleads with Turiddu not to abandon her; that he should return to her with love. Turiddu, suffocating from her possessiveness, tries to flee from her, but Santuzza implores him to remain.

**“No, no! Turiddu, rimani, rimani ancora”**

**Andante appassionato**  
**SANTUZZA**

*No,            no! Tu - rid -            du, ri - ma - ni, ri - ma - ni an*  
**Stay with me, Turiddu.**

*co - ra.            abban - do - nar -            mi dun - que tu vuo -            i?*  
**Do you want to abandon me?**

Turiddu savagely hurls Santuzza to the ground and violently denounces the stupidity of her obsessive jealousy. He leaves in defiance, rushing off to join Lola in the church.

Santuzza, embittered, rejected and despairing, furiously curses Turiddu as he departs: “Una mala Pasqua” (“A cursed Easter.”)

Alone, dazed and helpless, Santuzza sobs frantically: she has been repudiated, spurned, and she has lost her honor. Her passions of love for Turiddu have now transformed into violent hatred. She has now become obsessed with vengeance and decides to expose Turiddu's affair with Lola to Alfio; he will become her instrument for revenge.

Alfio appears. Santuzza pours out her demented soul to him, explaining that Turiddu abandoned her, and destroyed her honor.

*“Turiddu mi tolse”*

**Largo**  
**SANTUZZA**

Tu - rid - du mi tol - se, mi tol - se l'o - no - re,  
Turiddu has robbed me of my honor,

Immediately and impetuously, Santuzza plants the seeds of jealousy in Alfio, telling him that Lola has just gone into the church with Turiddu, and that he will soon see them both leave the church together; she declares that Alfio is a cuckolded husband, his wife faithless and carrying on an adulterous affair with Turiddu.

Alfio swears that if Santuzza is lying to him he will cut her heart out. But Santuzza has been convincing, and Alfio accepts her revelation as the absolute truth. Alfio, his honor ravaged, explodes into rage and savagely vows revenge: he will kill his rival before the close of this very day.

The Passion celebrating the sorrow of Christ on this Easter Sunday has transformed into passions of violent hatred and revenge. Santuzza and Alfio, both spurned, betrayed and dishonored lovers, have become allies in vengeance, obsessed with retribution and justice. But Alfio's transformation into savage hatred has caused Santuzza to become fearful; she becomes overcome with remorse and torn by guilt, and she is powerless to stop the raging Alfio, who storms away shrieking "Vendetta!" ("Vengeance!")

*Intermezzo:*

**Andante sostenuto**

An Intermezzo, peaceful and tranquil, conveys the spirituality and holiness of this Easter Sunday. Its music recalls the hymn, *Regina Coeli*, an ironic contrast to the seething, violent passions that have been aroused on this Easter Sunday.

The Intermezzo's devotional music intensifies and becomes more fervent, suggesting that the tensions of the conflicted characters are eased. But greater tensions are forthcoming as the music rises to suggest that furious passions are brewing; the serenity of this holy day of celebration will be consumed by brutality and violence.

The villagers emerge from the church and seem content that their religious duties have been fulfilled, their thoughts immediately turning to the pleasures that await them at home. Some villagers cluster about the square, while others assemble before Mamma Lucia’s tavern.

Turiddu exits the church arm-in-arm with Lola. In a recklessly gay mood, he invites friends to drink with him at his mother’s tavern, his infectious invitation invoking the magical wonders of sparkling wine.

**“Viva il vino spumeggiante”**

**Larghetto**  
**TURIDDU**

Viva il vi - no spu - meg - giante, nel bicchie-re scin - til - lante,  
Here's to the wine that sparkles like the smiles of lovers,

Alfio arrives. He is greeted cordially by the crowd, but is aloof and unfriendly, visibly fuming with inner rage. Turiddu, warm and hospitable, offers Alfio a drink, but he angrily and gruffly refuses, snarling vehemently: “I would rather not. I might be poisoned!” Turiddu responds, “At your pleasure,” and empties the glass to the ground. Lola, observing their bitter interchange, becomes overcome with fear; some of the women, equally sensing that danger and trouble is brewing, lead her away.

Turiddu and Alfio exchange harsh and hostile insults. Turiddu confesses that he has been wrong. Alfio is unable to suppress his rage, and immediately accuses Turiddu of adultery. Alfio challenges Turiddu to a duel with knives. Turiddu laments Santuzza’s fate if he should be killed, but does not hesitate to remind Alfio that he intends to plunge his knife into Alfio’s heart; he must live to attend his mother’s hens. Alfio and Turiddu follow ancient Sicilian customs of chivalry to challenge each other to a duel: they embrace, and Turiddu accepts the challenge by viciously biting Alfio’s right ear. The villagers, sensing horror, disperse. Alfio coldly retorts that he will await Turiddu in the orchard, and then leaves.

Turiddu remains alone, suddenly overcome with fear and remorse; he is repentant and tearful. He has drunk too much wine and feels slightly inebriated, overcome by anxiety and angst. He calls for his mother and pours out his love for her. He begs her blessing, as on that morning when he left her to be a soldier. In a voice broken with sobs, he implores her that if he should not return, she must care for Santuzza as if she were her daughter.

Lucia is distracted and asks him the meaning of all his incomprehensible ranting. He tries to persuade her that it is the wine; he has been drinking too much and it has affected him.

**“Per me pregate Iddio!”**

**Con anima**  
**TURIDDU**

Per - me pregate Id-di - o! Per-me pregate Id - di - o!  
Pray to God for me!

Turiddu tries to conceal from Lucia that a fight to the death with Alfio is about to take place. Sobbing, he kisses her frantically, bids her a distracted farewell, and runs off for his duel with Alfio.

Mamma Lucia, bewildered, confused, and sensing disaster, calls out to him in desperation, but it is in vain.

The square in front of the church fills with villagers, the crowd murmuring nervously and anxiously. A woman's shrill cry is heard in the distance: "Hanno amazzato compar Turiddu" ("They have killed Turiddu.")

Santuzza shrieks wildly with anguish and then collapses. Women rush to Mamma Lucia, who has fainted, traumatized in disbelief and despair. The crowd stands in silence, stupefied and horrified by Turiddu's murder, a grim and tragic conclusion to an Easter Sunday in a Sicilian village.

Alfio has redeemed his honor, succeeding in exacting justice and retribution: "Rustic Chivalry."

***CHAPTER SEVENTEEN***  
***Puccini and Italian Post-Romanticism***

## Puccini and Italian Post Romanticism

**G**iacomo Puccini (1858-1924) was the heir to Italy's cherished opera icon, Giuseppe Verdi. He became the last superstar of the great Italian opera tradition in which the art form was dominated by lyricism, melody and the vocal arts.

Puccini came from a family of musicians who for generations had been church organists and composers in his native Lucca, Italy, a part of the region of Tuscany. His operatic epiphany occurred when he heard a performance of Verdi's *Aida*; it was the decisive moment when the eighteen-year-old budding composer became inspired toward a future in opera. With aid from Queen Margherita of Italy that was supplemented by additional funds from a great-uncle, he progressed to the Milan Conservatory, where he eventually studied under Amilcare Ponchielli, a renowned musician and teacher, and the composer of *La Gioconda* (1876).

In Milan, Ponchielli became Puccini's mentor; he astutely recognized the young composer's extraordinarily rich orchestral and symphonic skills and his remarkable harmonic and melodic inventiveness, resources that would become the hallmarks and prime characteristics of Puccini's mature compositional style.

Puccini's early experiences served to elevate his acute sense of drama, which eventually became engraved in his operatic works. He was fortunate to have been exposed to a wide range of dramatic plays that were presented in his hometown by distinguished touring companies. He saw works by Vittorio Alfieri and Carlo Goldoni, as well as the French works of Alexandre Dumas (father and son) and those of the extremely popular Victorien Sardou.

In 1884, at the age of 26, Puccini competed in the publisher Sonzogno's one-act-opera contest with his opera *Le Villi* (*The Witches*), a phantasmagoric romantic tale about young women who die of lovesickness because they were abandoned. Musically and dramatically, *Le Villi* remains quite a distance from the poignant sentimentalism which later became Puccini's trademark. Although Puccini lost the contest, La Scala agreed to produce *Le Villi* for its following season. But more significantly where Puccini's future career was concerned, Giulio Ricordi, the influential publisher, recognized the young composer's talents and lured him from Sonzogno, his rival and competitor.

Puccini became Ricordi's favorite composer. His prized status with Ricordi resulted in much peer envy, resentfulness, and jealousy among the young composer's rivals. Nonetheless, Ricordi used his ingenious golden touch to unite composer with librettist, and he proceeded to assemble the best poets and dramatists for his budding star, Puccini.

Ricordi commissioned Puccini to write a second opera, *Edgar* (1889), a melodrama involving a rivalry between two brothers for a seductive Moorish girl that erupts into powerful passions of betrayal and revenge. Its premiere at La Scala was a disappointment: the critics praised Puccini's orchestral and harmonic development since *Le villi*, but considered the opera mediocre. Even its later condensation from four to three acts could not redeem it or improve its fortunes, and it is rarely performed in modern times.

**R**icordi's faith in his young protégé was triumphantly vindicated by the immediate success of Puccini's next opera, *Manon Lescaut* (1893). The genesis of the libretto was itself an operatic melodrama, saturated with feuds and disagreements among its considerable group of writers and scenarists that included Ruggero Leoncavallo, Luigi Illica, Giuseppe Giacosa, Domenico Oliva, Marco Praga, and even Giulio Ricordi himself. The critics and public were unanimous in their praise of *Manon Lescaut*, and in London the eminent critic George Bernard Shaw noted that in this opera "Puccini looks to me more like the heir of Verdi than any of his rivals."

For Puccini's librettos over the next decade, Ricordi secured the talents of the illustrious team of the scenarist Luigi Illica and the poet, playwright and versifier Giuseppe Giacosa. The first fruit of their collaboration was *La Bohème* (1896), drawn from Henri Murger's vivid novel about life among the artists of the Latin Quarter in Paris during the 1830s, *Scènes de la vie de Bohème* (*Scenes of Bohemian Life*).

The critics were strangely cool at *La Bohème*'s premiere; several of them found it a restrained work when compared to the fierce and inventive passions of *Manon Lescaut*. In spite of the opera's negative reviews, the public eventually became enamored with it. But in Vienna, the powerful Mahler was hostile to Puccini and virtually banned *La Bohème* in favor of Leoncavallo's treatment of the same subject.

Ruggero Leoncavallo also wrote an opera titled *La Bohème* that was based on the same Murger story. Leoncavallo had earlier achieved worldwide acclaim for his opera *I Pagliacci* (1892), and one year later was part of the legion of librettists who wrote the libretto for Puccini's *Manon Lescaut*.

Many friends attempted to persuade both Puccini and Leoncavallo not to simultaneously write operas based on Murger's story, a caution based primarily on the fact that certain elements of the plot, if adapted from the original play, were uncomfortably too close to that of Verdi's renowned *La Traviata*: both heroines die of tuberculosis, and in Murger, Mimi is persuaded to leave Rodolfo by his wealthy uncle who employs some of the same arguments posed by Giorgio Germont in *La Traviata*.

Nevertheless, both composers were intransigent and attacked the composition of the work. Initially, two composers composing an opera on the same subject developed into a spirited competition. But in true operatic tradition, passions erupted, and what began as a friendly rivalry eventually transformed into bitter enmity between Puccini and Leoncavallo, particularly after Leoncavallo claimed that he had precedence in the subject. Earlier, Ricordi had been unsuccessful in securing exclusive rights for Puccini because Murger's novel was in the public domain. Leoncavallo's *La Bohème* premiered in 1897, one year after Puccini's *La Bohème*. The critics and audiences lauded Leoncavallo's opera. Although it is perhaps unjust, Leoncavallo's opera is rarely performed in modern times, eclipsed by the more popular Puccini work.

After *La Bohème*, Puccini transformed Victorien Sardou's play *La Tosca* into a sensational, powerful, and thrilling music-action drama. Although the play was extremely popular in its time, Puccini certainly provided immortality for its playwright through his opera's success.

For his next opera, he adapted David Belasco's one-act play *Madame Butterfly* (1904). At its premiere, the opera experienced what Puccini described as "a veritable lynching"; the audience's hostility and denunciation of the composer and his work were apparently deliberately engineered by rivals who were jealous of Puccini's success and favored status with Ricordi. Nevertheless, Puccini's *Madama Butterfly* quickly joined its two predecessors as cornerstones of the international operatic repertory.

Puccini followed with *La Fanciulla del West* (*The Girl of the Golden West*) (1910), *La Rondine* (1917), the three one-act operas of *Il Trittico*—*Suor Angelica*, *Gianni Schicchi*, and *Il Tabarro* (*The Cloak*) (1918), and his final work, *Turandot*, completed posthumously in 1926 by Franco Alfano.

In general, Puccini's musical and dramatic style reflects the naturalistic movement of the "giovane scuola," a group of artists in late nineteenth-century Italy who developed the genre of verismo, or Realism in opera. The fruit of their style represented a fidelity to nature and real-life situations, and was intended to be an accurate representation of life situations without idealization.

In the ideal *verismo* portrayal, no subject was too mundane, no subject was too harsh, and no subject was too ugly; primal passions became the underlying subject of the action as it portrayed the latent animal, the uncivilized savage, and the barbarian part of man's soul—a confirmation of Darwin's theory that man evolved from primal beast. Therefore, the plots dealt with intensive passions involving sex, seduction, revenge, betrayal, jealousy, murder and death. In this genre and its successors, modernity and film noire, man is portrayed as irrational, brutal, crude, cruel, and demonic. In these portrayals, death often becomes the consummation of desire, and good does not necessarily triumph over evil. In the Realism genre, Enlightenment's reason and Romanticism's freedom and sentimentality were overturned; man was portrayed as a creature of pure instinct.

Throughout his career, Puccini identified himself with *verismo*, what he called the “stile mascagnano,” the Mascagni style first successfully portrayed in *Cavalleria Rusticana* (1890). Swift, dramatic action and brutal, sadistic primal passions certainly underlie *Tosca* and *Il Tabarro*. In other operas, such as *Manon Lescaut*, *La Bohème* and *Madama Butterfly*, *verismo* elements are expressed in the problems and conflicts of characters in everyday situations and in identifiable contemporary venues. Puccini's last opera, *Turandot*, is a fairy tale that takes place in ancient China, but the carnage from the executioner's axe and the agonizing death of Liù are pure *verismo*.

Puccini's musical style possesses a strongly personal lyrical signature that is readily identifiable: lush melodies, occasional unresolved dissonances, and daring harmonic and instrumental colors. His writing for both voice and orchestra is rich and elegant, and his music possesses a soft suppleness, elegance and gentleness, as well as a profound poignancy. His supreme talent is his magic for inventing sumptuous melodies, which he expresses through his outstanding instrumental coloration and harmonic texture. As such, Puccini's musical signature is so individual that it is recognized immediately. To many, Puccini's music is endlessly haunting. It has been said that one leaves a Puccini opera performance, but the music never leaves the listener.

In all of Puccini's works, leitmotifs—melodies identifying persons and ideas—play a prominent role by providing cohesion, emotion, and reminiscence; however, they are never developed to the systematic symphonic complexity of Wagner, but are always exploited for their ultimate dramatic and symphonic effect. One of Puccini's most brilliant dramatic techniques is to preview the music associated with his heroines—their leitmotifs—before they appear. This is evidenced in the entrances of *Tosca*, *Butterfly*, *Manon Lescaut*, and *Mimi*.

Puccini's dramatic instincts never failed him. He was truly a master stage-craftsman with a consummate knowledge of the demands of the stage; perfect examples of his acute dramatic craftsmanship are the roll call of the prostitutes in *Manon Lescaut* and *Tosca*'s “Te Deum.” In the terms of music drama, he certainly integrated his music, words, and gestures into a single conceptual and organic unity.

Puccini was meticulous in evoking ambience with his music; examples are the bells of awakening Rome in Act III of *Tosca* and the ship's sirens in *Il Tabarro*. In *La Bohème*, there are many instances in which musical ambience or musical impressions realistically capture minute details of everyday life: the crackling of the fire when Rodolfo's manuscript is burning; the sound of Colline tumbling down the stairs, and the falling snowflakes at the start of Act III. Debussy, although antagonistic to the Italian school of opera, confessed that he knew of no one who had captured Paris through music during the era of Louis-Philippe “as well as Puccini in *La Bohème*.”

With the exception of his last opera, *Turandot*, Puccini was not a composer of ambitious works or grand opera stage spectacles in the manner of Meyerbeer or Verdi. He commented that “the only music I can make is of small things,” acknowledging that his talent and temperament were not suited to works of large design, spectacle, or even portrayals of romantic heroism.

Indeed, *La Bohème* does not deal with the romantic or melodramatic world of kings, nobles, gods, or heroes; rather, it is a realistic portrayal of simple, ordinary people and the countless little humdrum details of their everyday lives. Certainly, *La Bohème* epitomizes Puccini's world of "small things." Its grandeur is that it does not portray supercharged passions evolving from world-shattering events, but rather intimate moments of tender, poignant human conflicts and tensions.

Specifically in *La Bohème*, Puccini creates a perfect balance between realism and sentimentality, as well as between comedy and pathos. Ultimately, in the writing of dramas filled with tenderness and beauty Puccini had few equals, and he had few rivals in inventing a personal lyricism that portrayed intimate humanity with sentimentalism and beauty.

Puccini's *La Bohème* is based on Henri Murger's *Scènes de la vie de Bohème* (*Scenes from Bohemian Life*), a series of vivid autobiographical sketches and episodes drawn from Murger's own experiences as a struggling writer in Paris in the 1830s. Murger's story first appeared serialized for a magazine and later, with huge success, as a novel and then a play.

The characters in Puccini's *La Bohème* were drawn directly from Murger's *Scènes*. Rodolfo, the poet and writer, was Murger himself—a poor, struggling, headstrong and impetuous literary man. Characteristically, a poet thinks in metaphors and similes, so in Act I of the opera Rodolfo addresses the stove that does not provide warmth as "an old stove that is idle and lives like a gentleman of leisure." And when Mimì is reunited with Rodolfo in Act IV, Rodolfo says that she is as "beautiful as the dawn" (although Mimì corrects him: "beautiful as a sunset").

Marcello was a figure drawn from several painters Murger knew, particularly a painter named Tabar, who was endlessly working on a painting called "Crossing the Red Sea." In Murger, the "Red Sea" painting was so often rejected by the Louvre that friends joked that if it was placed on wheels, it could make the journey from the attic to the committee room of the Louvre and back by itself.

Schaunard was based on the real-life Alexandre Schanne, who actually called himself Schaanard. He was the bohemian version of a Renaissance man: he was a painter, a writer who published his memoirs, and a musician and composer of rather unorthodox symphonies.

Colline, the philosopher, was patterned after a friend known as the "Green Giant" because his oversized green overcoat had four big pockets, each jokingly named after one of the four main libraries of Paris.

Oddly enough, "bohème" is a word that has a variety of definitions and connotations when it is translated into English. Bohemia is geographically a part of the central European nation of Czechoslovakia, but bohemian is also the name western Europeans once gave to gypsies to describe their carefree and vagabond life style. For the Murger/Puccini story, the name applies to the colonies of aspiring and starving young Parisian artists who gathered in the nineteenth century in Montmartre at the time of the building of the Church of Sacre Coeur.

So the Bohemia that Murger wrote about is not a place on the map in central Europe, but a place on the edge of bourgeois society. In Murger's Bohemia, the prospective writer, painter, composer, or thinker learns about life through love, suffering, and death, all of which become necessary and important learning experiences in an artist's development that provide the opportunity to grow, evolve, and gain wisdom.

But bohemian life can be a time of false illusions, aptly described by the painter Marcello in Act II of Puccini's opera: "Oh, sweet age of utopias! You hope and believe, and all seems beautiful." In the end, the artist must move on and leave the bohemian life before he is destroyed, a destruction caused not necessarily by freezing or starvation, but by arresting him in a world of false dreams and hopes, of capriciousness, promiscuity and rebellion.

Most importantly, the prospective artist must leave bohemian life and learn discipline: if he does not, he will despair and never really learn that first and foremost, it is discipline itself, the antithesis of bohemian life, that he must develop in order to write his poem or paint his picture. In that sense, bohemian life for these artists is synonymous with the struggles portrayed in many of the ancient myths, in which archetypes experience trials and tribulations, but their turbulent experiences serve to raise their consciousness to awareness.

For Puccini's *La Bohème*, Ricordi united one of the finest librettist teams: Luigi Illica and Giuseppe Giacosa. Both had participated in writing the libretto for the earlier *Manon Lescaut* and would later write the librettos for Puccini's *Madama Butterfly* and *Tosca*. For *La Bohème*, the playwright Illica completed the prose scenario, and Giacosa converted the scenario into verse.

Initially, the opera was conceived in four acts with five scenes, but composer and librettists struggled intensively to slash what they began to consider to be inherent superfluties. Therefore, a scene in which Mimì deserts Rodolfo for a rich viscount was discarded. However, in Act III of the opera, Rodolfo explains to Marcello his reasons for leaving Mimì, and his pretext is that Mimì was flirting with a "viscontino." Another scene that was discarded took place in the courtyard of Musetta's house after she had been evicted. This scene was excised because Puccini felt that it bore too much similarity to the mayhem of the Café Momus scene.

In 1896, the premiere of *La Bohème* took place in Turin, Italy under the baton of a very young conductor named Arturo Toscanini. It was impossible to have the premiere at La Scala, as it was then under the management of Ricordi's arch-rival, the publisher Edoardo Sonzogno, a vengeful competitor who unabashedly excluded all Ricordi scores from his La Scala repertory.

Most of the critics denounced Puccini's *La Bohème*, considering it a trivial work and far removed from the intense passions the composer had indicated in his earlier success, *Manon Lescaut*. The eminent music critic Carlo Bersezio wrote about the premiere in the newspaper *La Stampa*: "It hurts me very much to have to say it; but frankly this *Bohème* is not an artistic success. There is much in the score that is empty and downright infantile. The composer should realize that originality can be obtained perfectly well with the old established means, without recourse to consecutive fifths and a disregard of good harmonic rules." The critic further deemed that *La Bohème* had not made a profound impression on the minds of the audience, and that it would leave no great trace on the history of the lyric theatre. He boldly accused Puccini of making a momentary mistake, and suggested that he consider the opera an accidental error in his artistic career.

In the same vein, *La Bohème* inspired the composer Shostakovich to comment sarcastically: "Puccini writes marvelous operas, but dreadful music." And a New York critic called it "summer operatic flotsam and jetsam." Nevertheless, when *La Bohème* was staged in Palermo shortly after its 1896 premiere the audience response was delirious, and the people refused to leave the theater until the final scene had been repeated.

Critics can at times be self-proclaimed soothsayers who seem to be assisted by an infallible crystal ball, and most of the time they are right (although Mark Twain, as astute critic himself, damned the critics in favor of the public). Nevertheless, the critics' prophesies about *La Bohème*'s ability to capture the collective minds and hearts of the opera public turned out to be dead wrong.

Many critics belabored the composer's breach and disregard of so-called rules of musical composition, such as those parallel fifths that Puccini used so effectively to evoke the gay Christmas celebration in the Latin Quarter of Paris in Act II. But contrariwise, there was the cynicism of George Bernard Shaw: "The fact is, there are no rules, and there never were rules, and there will never be any rules of musical composition except the rules of thumb; and thumbs vary in length, like ears."

The poignant and sympathetic humanness of the *La Bohème* story have become the inspiration for many other theatrical vehicles. In 1935, Gertrude Lawrence starred in a movie adaptation of *La Bohème* called “Mimi”; Deana Durbin sang “Musetta’s Waltz” in the 1940 film “It’s a Date”; and Cher, in the recent film “Moonstruck,” indeed became “lovestruck” after her first encounter with *La Bohème*.

*La Bohème*’s captivating appeal never ceases, and its artistic greatness is that it can readily adapt to contemporary situations. Recently, Jonathan Larson wrote the Pulitzer Prize and Tony Award-winning rock opera *Rent*, a modernized *La Bohème* story depicting anxious young people struggling in their existential world; in this version of the story, the heroine’s tragic death occurs because of her drug addiction rather than from consumption.

Today, Puccini’s *La Bohème* remains one of the opera world’s most popular sentimental favorites, a central pillar of the Italian opera canon that is among the indispensable handful. One can delightfully argue as to which is THE smash hit of opera—*La Bohème*, *Carmen*, *La Traviata*, *Aida*, or . . . Recently, the English critic Frank Granville Barker, reviewing the reissue of the Bjorling-de Los Angeles-Beecham recording, lauded the opera performance as he explained how a magical cast can breathe life into Puccini’s masterpiece. But in discussing *La Bohème* as a great work of the opera stage, he deemed it “one of the wonders of the world.”

One of the fascinations of *La Bohème* is its intimate portrait of its characters. In painting, when the plane of the composition is moved forward, the viewer experiences the sensation that he has become integrated with the scene; he senses a greater presence and an emotional closeness to the subject.

Similarly, Puccini’s characters in *La Bohème* absorb the viewer/listener into their intimate time and space, and the listener/viewer becomes an integral part of this heartwarming story. Puccini, the narrator and dramatist of this story, absorbs the listener through the compelling emotionalism of his lush music. As such, *La Bohème* becomes poignantly overpowering entertainment, its hypnotic and seductive appeal deriving from its subtle blend of comedy and *joie de vivre* that are fused with pathos, sentiment, tears, and tragedy.

The bohemian characters overwhelm their audience, and one cannot help but immediately become enamored by Puccini’s charismatic bohemian personalities: Rodolfo the poet, Marcello the painter, Schaunard the musician, Colline the philosopher, Mimì the seamstress, and Musetta the singer. Puccini himself commented that he had become integrated with “his creatures,” absorbed in their everyday problems, their dilemmas, their little joys, their loves, and their sorrows.

So it is virtually impossible not to identify with these youngsters; suddenly, each of them becomes part of our family. In certain ways they transport us to a time lost in memory, a time of youth, challenges, and dreams, and a whole list of one’s own forgotten ambitions, idealisms, aspirations, and hopes. Their abandon, horseplay, and uninhibited mayhem are expressions of innocence, insecurity, and all of those fears and anxieties of youth. The bohemians become a reflection of our family, our children, our grandchildren, or us. Therefore, we empathize with them, and we are happy to see them enjoy life and be in love. But when things go wrong, we feel their pain and anguish. And when we finally witness the cruel fate of Mimì’s death, we grieve for Mimì and with the bohemians as if we ourselves have lost a loved one from our family.

In certain respects, these characters in *La Bohème* become part of our collective unconscious, because somehow we understand their youthful anxieties; the opera’s underlying story is a reminder of our own rite of passage.

On the surface, *La Bohème*'s simple story brings to life several episodes in the lives of four struggling artists—their joys, their sorrows, and their amours. But the bohemians' youthful experiences represent a profound inner meaning and a larger truth. *La bohème*'s message is like those in the ancient myths in which a noble transformation evolves from suffering, or from a sacrifice for the greater good of humanity; it is because of those struggles that consciousness and awareness are raised.

Plato said that you cannot teach philosophy to youth, because they are too caught up in their emotions. For youth, only experiences, pain, difficulty, and even tragedy can provide that transcendence necessary to develop maturity and understanding. In that sense, the suffering and struggles of these bohemians serve to represent a coming of age.

So the inner meaning of the *La Bohème* story is that it represents a critical moment in the lives of its characters—a transformation. This chapter in their lives is their rehearsal for life; in effect, it is a potent emotional blueprint for the future. Their struggles will transform them and they will lose their innocence; they will cross a bridge from adolescence to adulthood, and they will cross a bridge to artistic maturity.

As they experience shock in the cruel tragedy of Mimi's death, they grieve and suffer. But those sorrows serve a necessary and useful purpose by developing their inner wisdom and elevating their sensitivities and compassion. As a result, they will mature, become good artists, and learn to create.

In this early episode of their lives depicted in our story, they have learned good fellowship, young love, and humanity, all essential ingredients in the understanding of life. But their creative and artistic souls will transform toward a new and more profound maturity. Their transition will enable them to find their compass of life, build their confidence, and bring their intuitive creativity to the surface. The achieving of maturity and growth of the artistic soul are the essence of the *La Bohème* story.

The youthful experiences Puccini portrayed in *La Bohème* were autobiographical. When he was in his twenties and a student at the Conservatory in Milan, he was, like the bohemians in his opera story, a starving young artist.

Pietro Mascagni—later the composer of *Cavalleria Rusticana*—was his roommate. They lived in a garret where they were forbidden to cook. In order to use their stove, they sang and played the piano as loudly as they could in order to disguise sounds from their pots and dishes.

They were so poor that they had to pool their pennies to buy a *Parsifal* score in order to study Wagner. Always in deep debt, they supposedly marked a map of Milan with red crosses to show the danger areas where they thought they might run into their creditors. And Puccini, like Colline in Act IV of the opera, once pawned his coat so he could have enough money to take a young ballerina out on the town.

In later life, and after Puccini's phenomenal successes, the bohemian life of his youth became a beautiful and nostalgic memory. In order to capture the spirit of his past bohemian life style, Puccini and his cronies formed a club called "La Bohème." Its constitution read:

*The members swear to drink well and eat better... Grumblers, pedants, weak stomachs, fools and puritans shall not be admitted. The Treasurer is empowered to abscond with dues. The President must hinder the Treasurer in the collection of monthly dues. It is prohibited to play cards honestly, silence is strictly prohibited, and cleverness is allowed only in exceptional cases. The lighting of the clubroom shall be by means of an oil lamp. Should there be a shortage of oil, it will be replaced by the brilliant wit of the members.*

Puccini's muse was tragic. His heroines always die, sometimes brutally and cruelly: Manon Lescaut is broken in strength and spirit and then dies, Butterfly, Tosca, Liù and Suor Angelica die through suicide, and Mimì dies of consumption.

According to Dr. Mosco Carner's biography *Puccini* (1958), the suffering and agonizing deaths of Puccini's heroines reflect inner demons within the composer's subconscious. Carner hypothesized that Puccini punished his heroines because they indulged in sinful love, and their guilt could be redeemed only through their death. The composer's condemnation of these heroines was the result of an unresolved early bond to his exalted mother image—in psychological terms, a raging mother complex, or an Oedipus complex. Puccini responded intuitively and compulsively to his unconscious psychological demons.

Carner theorizes that Puccini's psyche divided the powerful passion of love into two categories: holy or sanctified love opposed by mundane or erotic love. In that context, Puccini's subconscious conception of mother-love was elevated to lofty saintliness, but in contrast, he subconsciously condemned erotic and romantic love as sinful transgressions that must be punished by death.

As such, Puccini transferred his mother fixation to his heroines. Therefore, Manon, Mimì, Tosca, and Butterfly are guilty of indulging in sinful love; in Puccini's subconscious, they are unworthy rivals of his exalted mother image. These heroines are on the fringes of society, and are inferior women of doubtful virtue: Manon Lescaut's material obsessions are those of a depraved woman, Tosca's love affair with Cavaradossi is immoral, and Mimì's brief cohabitation with Rodolfo is sinful. In consequence, Puccini was subconsciously compelled to punish these women, and their punishment was exacted through sacrifice, persecution, and eventually destruction through death. The tragic fate of *La Bohème*'s Mimì fits perfectly into Dr. Carner's psychological hypothesis of Puccini's conception of love as tragic guilt. Mimì's pursuit of erotic and sinful love with Rodolfo represents an immorality and sin for which she must be punished by death, an agonizing and painful death that resolves the composer's inner psychological conflicts. Puccini's ingenious music underscores the agony and pathos of her death and tugs ferociously at the listener's heartstrings.

Dr. Carner also hypothesizes that Puccini's music reflects the composer's dark side—his frustration, despair, disillusionment, and dependency. His melancholy represented unconscious conflicts and personal neuroses that he dutifully portrayed in his art. Freud said, "Where psychology leaves off, aesthetics and art begin." And Wagner said, "Art brings the unconscious to consciousness."

*Manon Lescaut*, *La Bohème*, *Tosca* and *Madama Butterfly* were composed during the *fin de siècle*, a period from about 1880 to about 1910. Nietzsche called the era a time of the "transvaluation of all values"; it was a time in which man questioned his inner contradictions about the meaning of life and art. In the eighteenth-century Enlightenment, reason represented the path to universal truth and human salvation. But the Enlightenment bred the French Revolution and the bloodbath and carnage of the Reign of Terror, and Romanticism emerged as a backlash. So by the end of the nineteenth century, old beliefs about moral and social values had disintegrated and undermined the foundation of the old order of things, and the new age became spiritually unsettled and self-questioning.

In artistic expression, Romanticism's sentimentalism and its idealizations surrendered to the savage passions of Realism, or *verismo*; in many respects, the genre expressed the despair and disillusion of the *fin de siècle*. Artists probed deeply into the hidden recesses of the mind and psyche to convey secrets about neurotic and erotic sensibilities. Art portrayed the ugly side of human nature, physical and mental disease, and even abnormality. This realism flowed into the twentieth century as new types of opera heroes and heroines emerged, sometimes neurotic

and sometimes deranged. Richard Strauss's *Salome* introduced a teenage sexual pervert indulging in necrophilism; *Elektra* deals with a monomania for revenge as well as matricide; and Alban Berg's *Wozzeck* deals with sadism. The music of the period portrays pessimism and malaise, and even an angst, restlessness and helplessness in its search for the unconscious demon within the self.

Likewise, Puccini's art mirrors despair, destruction and lethargy, dutifully reflecting the era's conflicts as well as his own personal neuroses. In *Turandot*, love conflicts with hate, and in *Manon Lescaut*, a seductive and perfidious woman is in conflict between reason and emotion, virtue and vice, and the spirit and the flesh.

In *Tosca*, there is a blend of politics, sex, sadism, suicide, murder, and religion, and the entire tragedy springs from Tosca's abnormal, obsessive, and uncontrollable jealousy, all pitted against Scarpia's sadistic erotic obsessions. The intensity of Cavaradossi's lament and final agony becomes even more acute in his final aria, "E lucevan le stelle," an expression of the demon of melancholy that haunted Puccini throughout his entire life: "Muioio disperato" ("I die in desperation"). And in *La Bohème*, after Rodolfo learns that Mimì has died, his final outcry, "Mimì, Mimì, Mimì!" thunderously underscored by the orchestra again expresses the composer's agonizing despair.

**I**n Puccini's *La Bohème*, after Mimì's death the curtain falls. At the close of Murger's *Scènes de la vie de Bohème* the author relates the destinies of the bohemians after Mimì's death. The bohemians leave "la vie de Bohème" as they are supposed to, and for better or worse, like all young idealists, counterculture rebels, and "flower children" of the 1960s, they join the mainstream and establishment.

Murger tells us that Schaunard the musician eventually is successful at writing popular songs, and—perish the thought—makes tons of money.

Colline, the philosopher, marries a rich society lady, and spends the rest of his life, as Murger says, "eating cake."

Marcello gets his paintings displayed in an exhibition and, ironically, actually sells one to an Englishman whose mistress is the very Musetta he had once loved.

Rodolfo gets good reviews for his first book, and is en route to a successful writing career.

The last lines of Murger have Marcello commenting cynically on their artistic successes. Marcello tells Rodolfo: "We're done for, my friend, dead and buried. There is nothing left for the two of us but to settle down to steady work." These artists are sadder, but wiser. Their loves, Mimì and Musetta, will always remain with them as beautiful memories of their youth and their bohemian past.

In Puccini's *La Bohème*, the transformation and transition from youthful innocence to maturity has succeeded.

# *La Bohème*

**Opera in Italian in four acts**

**Music**

**by**

**Giacomo Puccini**

**Libretto by Luigi Illica and Giuseppe Giacosa,**

**adapted from the novel by Henri Murger,**

*Scènes de la vie de Bohème (Scenes from Bohemian Life)*

**Premiere:**

**Teatro Regio, Turin, Italy**

**February 1896**

***Principal Characters in La Bohème***

Marcello, a painter	Baritone
Rodolfo, a poet	Tenor
Colline, a philosopher	Bass
Schaunard, a musician	Baritone
Mimi, a seamstress	Soprano
Musetta, a singer	Soprano
Benoit, the landlord	Bass
Alcindoro, a state councillor	Bass
Parpignol, a vendor	Tenor

Students, townspeople, shopkeepers,  
street-vendors, soldiers, waiters and children.

TIME: about 1830

PLACE: Paris

***Brief Story Synopsis***

It is Christmas Eve. Rodolfo, a poet, gazes out the window of his garret studio at the snow-covered rooftops of Paris while his friend Marcello works on a painting. Both artists have no money and are starving. To provide heat, Rodolfo feeds one of his manuscripts to the stove. Two friends arrive: Colline, a philosopher, and Schaunard, a musician, the latter bringing food and wine. Benoit, the landlord, arrives to collect the overdue rent, but he is quickly dispatched after they fill him with wine and express mock outrage when he reveals his amorous exploits.

Marcello, Colline, and Schaunard go off to the Café Momus to celebrate Christmas Eve, but Rodolfo remains behind to finish a manuscript. His neighbor, Mimi, knocks on the door, seeking help to light her extinguished candle. She is seized by a coughing fit and faints, and Rodolfo revives her. Suddenly, Rodolfo and Mimi fall in love.

In the Latin Quarter, Rodolfo buys Mimi a bonnet, Colline buys a secondhand overcoat, and Schaunard bargains over the cost of a pipe and horn. All sit at a table at the Café Momus and order lavish dinners.

Musetta, Marcello's former sweetheart, arrives, accompanied by the elderly Alcindoro. While Alcindoro goes off to buy Musetta a pair of new shoes, Musetta succeeds in luring Marcello to return to her; they agree to become sweethearts again. Unable to pay for their dinners, the bohemians sneak away amidst the passing military retreat. Alcindoro returns to find no Musetta, but only the bohemians' exorbitant dinner bill.

Mimi and Rodolfo have argued incessantly, causing Rodolfo to move to an inn where Marcello and Musetta reside. Mimi seeks and finds Marcello, and reveals that Rodolfo's petty jealousies have tormented their love affair; she begs him to help them separate. When Rodolfo appears, Mimi hides, only to be given away by a fit of coughing. The lovers reunite and decide to remain together until spring, while Musetta and Marcello quarrel vociferously.

Back in their garret, Rodolfo and Marcello are bachelors again, nostalgically reminiscing about the wonderful times they shared with their sweethearts. Colline and Schaunard arrive, and all the bohemians rollick and engage in horseplay, temporarily forgetting about their misfortunes.

Musetta announces that Mimi has arrived, and that she is deathly ill. Musetta sends Marcello to sell her earrings for money to buy medicine, get a doctor, and buy a muff to warm Mimi's freezing hands; Colline goes off to sell his treasured coat.

The two lovers, left by themselves, reminisce about their first meeting. While Mimi sleeps, she dies. The grief-stricken Rodolfo is shattered, unable to cope with the death of Mimi, and the death of love.

*Story Narrative with Music Examples*

**Act I: Christmas Eve—A garret overlooking the snow-covered roofs of Paris**

*La bohème* begins without overture or prelude; its brief opening music conveys the lighthearted, carefree spirit of the bohemian artists.

**Allegro vivace**

These young artists are poverty-stricken and nearly destitute. It is freezing in the garret because they have no money for firewood. Marcello, a painter, is huddled near an easel with his painting “Crossing of the Red Sea,” a work he never seems to be able to finish; Rodolfo, a poet, tries to work on a manuscript.

Both artists are hungry, cold, and uninspired. Rodolfo stares out the garret window, and observes that smoke rises from every chimney but their own.

**“*Nei cieli bigi guardo fumar dai mille comignoli Parigi*”**

**Allegro vivace  
RODOLFO**

*Nei cie-li bi-gi guardo fumar dai mil - le co - mignoli Pa-ri - gi,  
I'm looking at the gray skies of Paris...*

The scene is transformed into humor and mayhem when the two freezing artists try to find ways to generate heat from their stove. They ponder their options: burn a chair for firewood, throw in Marcello’s painting, or sacrifice an act from Rodolfo’s drama.

While Rodolfo’s doomed play goes into the flames, Colline, a philosopher, arrives; he notes how quickly the fire has expired by using Rodolfo’s manuscript as fuel, cynically proclaiming that “brevity is a great asset” (literally, “brevity is the soul of wit”).

Schaunard, a musician-friend, triumphantly arrives with provisions: beef, pastry, wine, tobacco, and firewood.

**Schaunard's theme:**

The ecstatic bohemians celebrate boisterously. Schaunard explains his sudden wealth: he received money from an eccentric Englishman, who paid him an outrageous sum to play to a neighbor's noisy parrot until it dropped dead; he actually succeeded in killing the parrot not through his music, but by feeding it poisoned parsley.

The landlord, Benoit, arrives to collect his long-overdue rent. To divert him, the bohemians ply him with wine, which, together with flattery, inspires him to boast about his amorous and indiscreet exploits with young women. The bohemians pretend mock outrage as they dismiss him, their rent payment temporarily deferred.

Marcello, Colline, and Schaunard leave for the Café Momus to celebrate Christmas Eve. Rodolfo decides to stay behind awhile in order to complete an article for a magazine.

Alone, Rodolfo is lethargic and unmotivated. As he throws down his pen, he is suddenly interrupted by a timid knock on the door. It is his beautiful neighbor Mimì; the fragile woman is exhausted and out of breath from climbing the stairs. Mimì's candle has extinguished because of the hallway drafts, and she seeks light to find her way to her room.

Mimì's coughing indicates that she is ill. But their first meeting has aroused love. Both become nervous and fidgety; a candle blows out, a candle is re-lit, and then the candle blows out again. Mimì faints, and Rodolfo revives her with sprinkles of water and sips of wine.

Just as Mimì is about to leave, she accidentally drops her key, and both grope for it in the dark. Rodolfo finds the key, and without Mimì's knowing it, he places it into his pocket. Their hands meet in the dark, and Rodolfo notices how cold her hands are.

**“Che gelida manina, se la lasci riscaldar”****Andantino affetuoso**  
**RODOLFO**

*Che ge - li - da ma - ni - na, se la la-sci ris-cal - dar,*  
**How cold your little hand is! Let me warm it for you.**

Mimì's presence has inspired the struggling poet. He tells Mimì about himself: he is poor, but with his rhymes, dreams and visions, he has the soul of a millionaire. Then Rodolfo admits that Mimì has captivated him; his words are underscored with the sweeping and ecstatic signature music of the opera: “Talor dal mio forziere.” (“Your eyes have stolen my dreams, and the hope of your love will replace that theft.”)

**Rodolfo: “Talor dal mio forziere”****Con molto espressione**  
**RODOLFO**

*Ta - lor dal mio for - zi - è - re, ruban tutti i gioelli due ladri gli occhi belli.*  
**But two thieves robbed my treasures: a pair of pretty eyes.**

Mimi replies modestly to Rodolfo's sudden ardor: "Mi chiamano Mimi" ("My name is Mimi"). She explains to Rodolfo that she embroiders artificial flowers, and yearns for the real blossoms of spring, the flowers that speak of love.

*"Mi chiamano Mimi"*

**Andante lento**

**MIMI**



*Sì, Mi chia-ma - no Mi - mi, ma il mio no - me è Lu-ci - a.*

**Yes. They call me Mimi, but my real name is Lucia.**

From the street below, Rodolfo's friends call him to hurry up and join them to celebrate Christmas Eve at the Café Momus. Rodolfo opens the window and tells them that he will be along shortly, but that they should be sure to hold two places at the café.

As moonlight envelops them, Rodolfo, enchanted with Mimi's beauty and charm, turns to her, and together they proclaim their newfound love. Rodolfo begins their rapturous duet, "O soave fanciulla" ("Oh lovely maiden"). The music rises ecstatically as both affirm, "Ah! tu sol commandi, amor" ("Only you rule my heart").

Arm in arm, Mimi and Rodolfo walk out into the night to join their friends at the Café Momus.

**Act II: The Latin Quarter and the Café Momus**

Outside the Café Momus, crowds, street hawkers, and waiters create a kaleidoscope of Christmas Eve joy and merriment. Schaunard tries to negotiate the purchase of a toy horn, Colline tries on a coat, and then Rodolfo appears with Mimi, who wears a charming pink bonnet that he has just bought for her as a present. They proceed to an outside table at the Café Momus where Rodolfo introduces Mimi to his friends.

*"Questa è Mimi, gaia fioraia"*

**Allegro moderato**

**RODOLFO**



*Questa è Mimi, gaia fiorata. Il suo venir comple - ta la bella compagnia,*

**This is Mimi, happy flower girl. Her presence completes our beautiful gathering.**

All the bohemians proceed to order themselves a lavish dinner, oblivious of the reality that they have no money to pay for it.

Marcello suddenly turns gloomy as he hears in the distance the voice of his former sweetheart, Musetta. Musetta, elegantly dressed, makes a dashing and noisy entrance on the arm of the state councillor, the old and wealthy Alcindoro, whom she orders around unmercifully.

Musetta is the last entry into the bohemian family. She is a singer who is volatile, tempestuous, conceited, egotistical, flirtatious, and hungry for adulation. Amid the mayhem at the café, Musetta

tries to get Marcello's attention, but he pretends to ignore her. Frustrated, Musetta becomes tempestuous, and when that fails, she approaches Marcello and addresses him directly, using every bit of her irresistible charm.

Musetta sings her famous waltz, a song in which she brags about her own popularity and how men are attracted to her: "Quando m'en vo" ("When I walk through the streets, people stop and look at my beauty"). Musetta implores Marcello to return to her, but he continues to ignore her.

### *Musetta's Waltz: "Quando m'en vo"*

**Tempo di Valse lento**

**MUSETTA**

The image shows a musical score for the waltz "Quando m'en vo" by Giuseppe Verdi. It is written on a single treble clef staff with a key signature of three sharps (F#, C#, G#) and a 3/4 time signature. The melody consists of a series of notes: a half note G4, a half note A4, a half note B4, a quarter note G4, a quarter note F#4, a quarter note E4, a quarter note D4, a quarter note C4, a quarter note B3, a quarter note A3, a quarter note G3, and a quarter note F#3. The notes are grouped into two phrases by a slur. The lyrics are written below the staff: "Quan - do m'en-vo' quando m'en vo' solet - ta per la via." Below the lyrics is the English translation: "When I walk alone through the streets, the people stop to look,".

Musetta, now totally baffled and frustrated, pretends that her shoes are pinching her, and she sends the dutiful Alcindoro to buy her another pair. After Alcindoro is gone, Marcello suddenly becomes seized again by Musetta's spell; he capitulates, Musetta falls into Marcello's arms, and the lovers are reunited.

A waiter brings the bohemians their staggering check, and Musetta has the waiter add it to Alcindoro's. As soldiers fill the square and drum their retreat, the four bohemian artists, with Mimì and Musetta, follow the parade and disappear into the crowd.

Alcindoro returns with Musetta's new shoes, only to find an immense bill. Jilted and abandoned, he drops helplessly into a chair.

### *Act III: The Barrière d'Enfer, the snowy outskirts of Paris*

It is a cold winter's dawn at the customs tollgate at the entrance to the city. Gatekeepers admit milkmaids and street cleaners, and from a nearby tavern the voice of Musetta is heard singing amid sounds of laughter and gaiety.

Marcello and Musetta now live in the tavern. Marcello's "Red Sea" painting has become its signboard, and he has found sign painting more profitable than art. Musetta gives singing lessons.

Mimì appears, shivering and seized by a nasty coughing fit. She asks a policeman where she can find the painter Marcello. Marcello emerges from the tavern, and Mimì proceeds to pour out her desperation to him: Rodolfo has been exploding into irrational fits of incessant jealousy that have led to constant bickering. Mimì pleads with Marcello to help them separate.

As Marcello attempts to comfort Mimì, Rodolfo emerges from the tavern. Mimì fears meeting him and hides in the background. She overhears Rodolfo tell Marcello that he wants to separate from his fickle sweetheart; he calls her a heartless coquette.

When Marcello questions his veracity, he admits that he truly loves Mimì, but he is terrified that she is dying from her illness, and he feels helpless because he has no money to care for her.

*“Una terribil tosse”*

**Lento triste**  
**RODOLFO**

U - na ter-ri-bil tos-se l'e-sil pet-to le scuo - te  
A horrible coughing racks her fragile chest.

The musical score is written on a single staff in treble clef, 2/4 time, with a key signature of three flats (B-flat, E-flat, A-flat). It features a melody with three triplet markings over the words 'tos-se', 'pet-to', and 'scuo-te'. The tempo is marked 'Lento triste'.

Mimi, overcome with tears, rushes from hiding and embraces Rodolfo. She insists that they must part for their own good and without regrets. She would be grateful if he would send her her little prayer book and bracelet, but as a reminder of their love, he should keep the little pink bonnet he bought her on Christmas Eve.

*“Addio, senza rancor”*

**Andantino mosso**  
**MIMI**

Ad - di - o, sen - za ran - cor,  
Goodbye, no hard feelings,

The musical score is written on a single staff in treble clef, 2/4 time, with a key signature of three flats. It features a melody with a long slur over the final two notes. The tempo is marked 'Andantino mosso'.

However, the love of Mimi and Rodolfo is so intense that they cannot separate, and their intended farewell is transformed into a temporary reconciliation. In a renewed wave of tenderness, they decide to postpone their parting and vow to remain together until springtime.

In a quartet, the music of Mimi and Rodolfo conveys the warmth and tenderness of their love, vividly contrasted with a temperamental and feisty quarrel between Marcello and Musetta: Marcello suspects that Musetta has been flirting again, and they furiously hurl insults at each other.

*Act IV: The bohemians' garret, several weeks later*

Rodolfo and Marcello have parted from their respective sweethearts, Mimi and Musetta, and they lament their loneliness. They pretend to work, but are uninspired. They tease each other about their ex-lovers, but then become pensive. Their duet, “O Mimi, tu più non torni” (“Oh Mimi, you’re not coming back to me”), is a nostalgic reminiscence of their past happiness with their absent amours.

*Duet - Rodolfo and Marcello: “O Mimi, tu più non torni”*

**Andantino mosso**  
**RODOLFO**

O Mi - mi, tu più non tor - ni, o gior - ni bel - li,  
Oh Mimi, you will never return! Oh lovely days!

The musical score is written on a single staff in treble clef, 2/4 time, with a key signature of three flats. It features a melody with a long slur over the entire phrase. The tempo is marked 'Andantino mosso'.

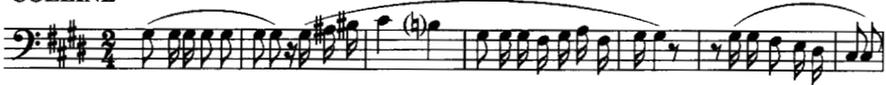
Schaunard and Colline arrive with provisions, and the bohemians' spirits become elevated: they dance, horse around, stage a hilarious mock duel, and feign an imaginary banquet.

Just as their festive mood peaks, Musetta, with great agitation, interrupts them and announces that Mimì is outside; she is deathly sick and they must prepare a bed for her. Mimì told Musetta that she felt that she was deathly ill and wanted to be near her true love, Rodolfo.

Rodolfo and Mimì are reunited, and past quarrels are forgotten. Mimì is suffering from her illness and complains of the cold. There is no food or wine, and Musetta gives Marcello her earrings and asks him to pawn them so they can pay for medicine and a doctor. Likewise, Colline decides to pawn his treasured overcoat and bids it a touching farewell.

“*Vecchia zimarra*” (“*Old faithful coat*”)

**Allegretto moderato e triste**  
**COLLINE**



*Vecchia zimarra, senti, io resto al pian, tu ascendere il sacro monte or devi. Le mie grazie ricevi.*  
**Listen, my venerable coat, I'm staying behind, but you go on to greater heights. I thank you.**

Mimì and Rodolfo are left alone and poignantly reminisce about their first meeting.

“*Sono andati?*”

**Andante calmo**  
**MIMI**



*Sono and - a - ti? Fingevo di dormire perchè volli con te so-la restare.*  
**Have they gone? I pretended to sleep to make them leave us alone.**

Afterwards, Mimì drifts off to sleep. Marcello returns with medicine, and Musetta prays for Mimì while Rodolfo lowers the blinds to soften the light while she sleeps.

Schaunard looks toward Mimì and realizes she has died. Rodolfo glances at his friends and senses the tragic truth. Marcello embraces his friend and urges him to have courage.

Rodolfo falls on Mimì's lifeless body as a thunderous, anguished orchestral fortissimo accompanies his despairing and wrenching cries of grief and loss: “Mimì, Mimì, Mimì!”

***CHAPTER EIGHTEEN***  
***Debussy and Impressionism***

## *Debussy and Impressionism*

Claude Debussy (1862-1918) had become a brilliant virtuoso pianist by the age of ten. He was admitted to the Conservatoire, where his additional studies included counterpoint, theory, harmony, and composition; he was reputed to have exasperated his teachers by making up outlandish chords that he refused to resolve.

Debussy had a lifelong love-hate attitude toward Richard Wagner. Wagner had become a towering figure in European culture, a colossal visionary whose new tonal architecture and new musical language established the basis for a metamorphosis to modernism in music: rich chromatic harmonies barely tethered to tonality.

During Debussy's early development he had joined most of musical Europe in its worship of Wagner. But Debussy's fling was brief, and for the rest of his life he led the revolt against Wagnerism. He believed that the Wagnerian formula only suited Wagner, and that his operas were more stifling than liberating; they were too long, too self-absorbed in the composer's philosophy, too lavishly orchestrated, and, too German.

Debussy described himself as a *musicien français*, the label not so much his identification with French music, but an affirmation of his anti-Wagnerism, and his later anti-German animosity following the First World War. He concluded that it was necessary to transcend Wagner rather than follow his path; he was seeking a purer style of music — what Erik Satie called a French style without sauerkraut. Debussy believed that music was the essence of everything French: a genre that required clarity and elegance compared to German music's traditional length and heaviness; in French music, finesse and nuance were considered the daughters of intelligence.

There was very little music that Debussy liked. He found inspiration in Mussorgsky, particularly the emotive power of the music of *Boris Godunov*, and he admired the complicated counterpoint of Javanese music, but he was uninspired by Brahms, Tchaikovsky, and even the symphonies of Beethoven, Schumann and Mendelssohn, which he considered “period” pieces.

Debussy was the last composer of the Romantic movement, and was recognized as the greatest French composer of his time; today, those accolades remain. Debussy described the “*Prélude à L'après-midi d'un faune*” (“Prelude to the Afternoon of a Faun”) (1894) as “successive scenes in which the longings and the desire of the faun pass in the heat of the afternoon.” It was an epochal work with unprecedented harmonic innovations that became the underlying inspiration for twentieth-century music.

In the “*Prélude à L'après-midi d'un faune*” Debussy had indeed innovated a new music style, discarding elements of the past and overthrowing notions that had remained static up to that time: his music was a synthesis of rich colors and rhythms, in which tonality began to disappear as a result of unresolved chords and suspensions, and an orchestra that reinstated sound for sound's sake.

Debussy's only opera, *Pelléas et Mélisande* (1902), one of the last operas of the great French romantic opera tradition, was composed in Debussy's new, modern music style.

Debussy disliked the term Impressionist that was used to characterize his new music style. The term was originally used to describe the works of late nineteenth-century French painters, their “impressionism” sacrificing clarity of subject matter to mood; they exploited the suffusing effects of light, color, and atmospheric conditions to sharply undermine contours, resulting in softly focused blurred images, which were intended to

convey the general “impression” of a scene rather than its precise visual qualities. In painting, Impressionism was the antithesis of naturalism; in music, Impressionism was a reaction against the powerful pathos of Wagner. In Impressionism, ideas became more tangible than characters, and atmosphere became the decisive factor in shaping the music.

Like the Impressionist painters, Debussy had developed new theories of light and color for his musical inventions. He was not interested in Classical forms, but in sensibility: capturing a fleeting impression or mood, and seizing its exact essence as economically as possible. In Debussy’s Impressionism, tonality was not completely abandoned, but it certainly appeared to be on the verge of extinction. The music became more concerned with subtle nuances and effects than with substance and structure; instrumental colors were finely graded; static, non-climactic melodies would often circle about a single pitch; and complex harmonic textures provided colorful sounds.

The new musical language evaded hard diatonic cadences, and strove for subtlety rather than assertiveness in its melodic expression, harmony, color, and design. Debussy intended to eliminate melodic patterns in which phrases of two, four, or eight bars were balanced symmetrically by corresponding phrases of similar length; he resolved dissonances by holding or prolonging them in order to provide a sense of infinite harmonic fluidity.

During the latter part of the nineteenth century, the new “lyrique” of Gounod and Thomas had finally redeemed French opera from its earlier Meyerbeerian grand opera excesses, those Cecil B. de Mille spectaculars that were huge and exotic: what Wagner would bombastically condemn as effects without causes. The new French “lyrique” — or lyric operas — were no longer pompous, swollen, or gigantic spectaculars, but rather, musico-dramatic portrayals of strongly etched personalities, in intensely sensitive personal relationships that expressed intimate human values: French opera had become lyric, not epic; not thematic but melodic; not heroic, but purely and genuinely personal.

Debussy and the young Belgian playwright, Maurice Maeterlinck, shared many affinities: they spoke the same language; they were nourished by the same culture; and each sought the same refinements of expression, preferring subtlety to bombast.

Maeterlinck was a leading exponent of the Symbolist movement, which arose in the 1880’s, and espoused veiled emotions and mystery over realism. The play, *Pelléas et Mélisande*, was produced in Paris in 1892, and the next year Debussy seized on it as an ideal subject for an opera: a drama that had no place or time in its portrayal of vague and moody characters submitting to fate; and a play that was comprised of short scenes that would not condemn him to long acts. Debussy’s new musical language of Impressionism would provide the dramatic realization of Maeterlinck’s inherently lyrical prose, “an evocative language whose sensitivity can be extended into music and into the orchestra decor,” according to Debussy himself.

In general, Maeterlinck’s plots were intended to be no more than outlines of archetypal situations; the settings were vague and timeless; the prose language was more prominent for what it suggested than for what it stated; the imagery strove to evoke the evanescent and the intangible; and the elusive characters were shrouded in mystery, pared down to but a few fundamental impulses. Maeterlinck’s prose style was extensively alliterative, integrated with obscure fantastic words, ornate syntax, and suggestive poetic ideas, the words no longer referring to mere objects and actions, but to meanings concealed behind the literal meaning.

Maeterlinck's orderly lyrical dramaturgy was exceptionally well suited to the demands and limitations of opera because it essentially depicted basic situations that required a minimum of exposition and explanation; one emotional state merged into another through its own natural development, with few interruptions from external events. At times, a Maeterlinck drama seemed like the theater of the unspoken, the silent moments of the drama always pregnant with emotions.

Debussy set Maeterlinck's *Pelléas et Mélisande* by virtually adapting it word for word, but of necessity he excised four complete scenes. Basically, he did not tamper with the play's symbolism, leaving the greater part of Maeterlinck's motives as he found them. Ultimately, he created an unprecedented musical mood to realize the text, every scene exuding a sense of beauty that was derived from the interplay of musical color, light, and atmosphere, the music expressing feeling and suffering in human terms, despite the dream-like aura that suggests that the characters lived in a mysterious dream.

There are no arias or ensemble numbers in the traditional sense, and the characters communicate in a declamation style, a speech-song, or semi-parlando, that challenged Debussy to create a wealth of music to underscore dialogue, as well as to invent music for the motives and scene transitions. Nevertheless, the vocal style is not the flowery genre of Gounod, Bizet, or Massenet, but rather, an *arioso* style in which the characters communicate in a declamatory style of speech-song: voices move in pure speech cadences, their expression resembling speech, and rising to climaxes in soft, restrained tones; the words are impulsive and remain faithful to the inflections of the French language, shaped by the rise and fall of syllables, not by the music. Therefore, words flow naturally, like the ebb and flow of conversation, the lines delivered with very little singing implied, because the emphasis is on stress and phrase patterns, clarity, and diction.

The text and music are fully integrated. The orchestra is a subtle commentator rather than a dominant element that never overpowers words, its restraint creating the "impressionistic" effect of mood and atmosphere. Whole-tone chords convey a sense of being lost or confused, and chiming discords convey pain, the latter describing Golaud's stifling pain after falling from a horse in Act II – Scene 2.

Debussy's *Pelléas et Mélisande* score owes some of its provenance to Wagner, not in terms of the vocal power demanded by Wagner, but primarily in the use of leitmotifs: motives are presented, developed, and interwoven, but the orchestral writing possesses far less density than a typical Wagner orchestration, and the leitmotifs are not interwoven to the Wagnerian extreme; the orchestra's prominence occurs mainly in the interludes that facilitate scene transitions, rather than in the scenes themselves.

Wagner's operas were essentially based on legends that intrinsically provided potent symbols for development as musical motives: swords, spears, ravens, swans, rainbows, and potions. Maeterlinck filled *Pelléas et Mélisande* with symbols that represented a gift to Debussy, and the leitmotif technique provided the perfect means to exploit the drama in pure musical terms: animals of many kinds, gates, the tower, the ring, Mélisande's hair, water, and the clock.

Debussy avoided the methodical application of these motives and effectively understated them in sound and concept, an escape from Wagnerian hyperbole; however, even in their subtlety and restraint, their pianissimo sounds and diaphanous colors portray a dream-like world that seems to suggest a mysterious affinity between nature and the imagination.

The recurrent themes and images undergo very delicate transformations that in many instances are hardly noticeable. Nevertheless, Debussy was extremely straightforward in his scheme of leitmotifs, which primarily embraces the principal characters and a few abstractions. The leitmotifs sound like a Greek chorus, continually commenting on both plot and personal relationships. At times, Debussy was extremely selective in not scoring a motive at all; Arkel has no motive, and there is no motive for his blindness. Nevertheless, Arkel's music is more vigorous than the other characters, perhaps because of his wisdom, or his illusory sight.

**I**t took Debussy ten years to compose his only opera, and its first production experienced a host of complications: a comedy of errors, ruffled pride, bitterness, heroics, and sheer silliness.

Maeterlinck wanted his common-law wife, Georgette LeBlanc, an actress and singer, to be the first Mélisande, but Albert Carré, director of the Opéra-Comique, was determined to have Mary Garden premiere the role, the star of *Louise*, two years earlier. Maeterlinck suspected that Debussy was responsible for what he considered a betrayal. He condemned Carré and Debussy as his avowed enemies, and did everything he could conceive to discredit and even ridicule the work: there was a court action in which Debussy prevailed; and Maeterlinck threatened Debussy and even challenged him to a duel. But despite Maeterlinck's harassment, bad rehearsals, problems with designers, and even the government's censoring of small portions of the opera, *Pelléas et Mélisande* survived and premiered on schedule.

The public and critical reaction to this revolutionary work was divided; it shared a combination of hisses, applause, and cheers. Richard Strauss attended the premiere and claimed: "But I am a musician and I hear nothing." Nevertheless, there were those who did not hesitate to call the opera a unique masterwork.

**P***elléas et Mélisande* has never enjoyed the popularity of operas by Verdi, Puccini, and Wagner. It is too refined and lacks hot-blooded passion, yet there is a minority that considers it the most subtle and most atmospheric opera ever written.

Very little "happens" in *Pelléas et Mélisande*. Some find it dramatically static and exasperating, a series of inconsequential events stretched into entire scenes. Debussy's music, although sensuous and radiant, can seem as murky and evasive as Mélisande. Nevertheless, it is a story of characters that are powerless against the forces of fate, their drama mounting to its tragic denouement with consummate art. Acts I and II essentially represent the preparation for the tender lyricism of the third act, in which the ill-fated lovers finally find each other. In the fourth act, tragedy swiftly follows their ecstasy, and in the fifth act, destiny overcomes these pitiful creatures, none of which possessed evil in their souls.

Nevertheless, *Pelléas et Mélisande* indeed was — and still is — a new kind of opera; it is seemingly as amorphous as the play, set in a dreamy world filled with symbolic suggestions, few emotional climaxes, no big scenes, and peopled with characters who are like shadows, static in their action. But the entire effect of the opera arises from its subtle impressions, textually and musically.

*Pelléas et Mélisande* is seemingly a French alternative to Wagner's *Tristan und Isolde*, both operas having more shared moments than differences: both are symbol-laden romantic triangles that hinge on violent resolutions. *Pelléas et Mélisande* has a paucity of action: a

chamber-play format within which the story unfolds in small increments, leading to a symbolically heightened conclusion. Debussy achieved what had traditionally been conveyed with towering emotions and passions with an intimate dialogue that was charged with significance, but only rarely resorting to expressing strong emotions. In *Pelléas et Mélisande*, every hand gesture and every body movement holds an essential significance, and there are dramatic confrontations with abrupt shifts of mood on a variety of levels; the entire idea was to subject the listener to a spell by holding him under the power of its melodic sung-speech.

*Pelléas et Mélisande* satisfies the deep-seated French conviction that literary values override musical values, and that in opera, the mind should be concentrated on the text. It is certainly not a shallow work, and it is replete with meaning that is both bewildering and disturbing; and critics and listeners alike have had difficulty unraveling its underlying meaning.

Debussy was a musical painter par excellence, a musical dramatist who made the art of musical Impressionism the new grammar of the music of the twentieth century: new and adventurous harmonies with parallel chord movements, unresolved dissonances, and the elimination of rules for modulation or progression became the path-breaking elements in which twentieth-century modernism emerged. But Debussy's deceptively calm music also taps the subliminal emotions of the characters more deeply than Maeterlinck's words.

In the end, Debussy's opera provided music of insinuation rather than rhetoric.

Post-Debussy tonalism influenced modern music during the first half of the twentieth century, a tonalism that became strongly rooted in the melody and the rhythmic vocal inflections of the languages of specific cultures. Among the operas of the new modernist tonal school were: Béla Bartók's *Duke Bluebeard's Castle* (1918); Igor Stravinsky's *The Nightingale* (1914), *Mavra* (1922), *Oedipus Rex* (1926), *The Rake's Progress* (1951); Zoltán Kodály's *Háry János* (1926); Sergey Prokofiev's *L'Amour des trois oranges* ("The Love of Three Oranges") (1921), *The Fiery Angel* (1954), *War and Peace* (1941-1952); Benjamin Britten's *Peter Grimes* (1945), *The Rape of Lucretia* (1946), *Albert Herring* (1947), *Billy Budd* (1951), *Turn of the Screw* (1954), *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (1960); and Dmitry Shostakovich's *Lady Macbeth of Mtensk* (1934).

In the nineteenth century, Czechoslovakia began its national school with Bedrich Smetana, a composer of both comic and tragic operas; he is best known for his vigorous, highly colorful folk comedy, *The Bartered Bride* (1866). Following Smetana, Antonin Dvorák wrote nine operas, but could not supersede his extremely popular instrumental works; his melancholy fairy tale, *Rusalka* (1901), has been rediscovered, and proved to be an opera possessing powerful melodic and harmonic qualities.

Leos Janáček was a Moravian whose music possessed a highly individual signature, typified by short-phrased melodies that captured the speech-rhythms and specific inflections of his native language. Many of his operas were rediscovered after World War II: *Jenufa* (1916), *Kát'a Kabanová* (1921), *The Cunning Little Vixen* (1924) and *The Makropoulos Affair* (1926); each opera possesses its own unique musical character, but always preserves the unique inflections of the Czech language.

# *Pelléas et Mélisande*

**Lyric Drama in five acts**

**Music**

**by**

**Claude Debussy**

**Libretto: adapted from the play by Maurice Maeterlinck**

**Premiere: Opéra-Comique, Paris, 1902**

***Principal Characters in Pelléas et Mélisande***

Golaud, Arkel's grandson	Baritone
Mélisande	Soprano
Pelléas, Arkel's grandson, Golaud's half-brother	Baritone or Tenor
Arkel, King of Allemonde	Bass
Geneviève, mother of Golaud and Pelléas	Mezzo-soprano
Yniold, Golaud's son by a former marriage	Soprano
The shepherd	Bass
The doctor	Bass

Servant women, silent beggars, unseen chorus of sailors

TIME: Legendary

PLACE: The kingdom of Allemonde and its surroundings.

***Brief Story Synopsis***

In the deep forest, Golaud encounters the beautiful Mélisande, sobbing nervously by a well. When he questions her background, she can only provide a confused account of her origins. Golaud leaves with her and later marries her.

Pelléas, Golaud's much younger half-brother, plays with Mélisande in the castle gardens. Mélisande plays with her wedding ring, which falls into the spring. When Golaud learns of the loss, he insists that she search for the ring, and he orders Pelléas to accompany her in her fruitless task.

Mélisande combs her long hair at the window of the castle tower as Pelléas passes by. Mélisande leans far out of the window, her hair cascading down and engulfing Pelléas. Golaud sees them and warns Pelléas to keep away from the fragile Mélisande, who is pregnant with child.

Pelléas tells Mélisande that his sick father wishes him to go away on a journey. The news saddens Mélisande, but they decide to meet once more in secret. As they say farewell, they realize their mutual love. Golaud finds them and kills Pelléas.

At Mélisande's bedside, Golaud expresses his remorse. Mélisande has just given birth to a daughter. She dies quietly, without suffering.

**Story Narrative with Music Examples**

**Prelude:**

A brief orchestral prelude presents three principal themes, motives that will later undergo rhythmic and harmonic transformations commensurate with the action and symbolic development of the drama.

The first theme conveys the gloom of the forest in which the first scene is set.

**Gloomy forest:**

Moderato molto



The second theme is associated with Golaud, a sullen middle-aged widower; it is a wavering theme that conveys his lack of inner purpose, yet also possesses a distinctive rhythmic quality.

**Golaud:**

Moderato molto



A third theme, essentially pentatonic, is associated with Mélisande.

**Mélisande:**

Moderato molto



The second and third motives combine, symbolically suggesting that the destinies of Golaud and Mélisande are interwoven.

**Act I - Scene 1: A stream in a forest**

Golaud has lost his way while pursuing a boar he has wounded. He finds the fragile young Mélisande sobbing nervously by a well.

**Sobbing:****Moderato molto**

He draws nearer to her and touches her on the shoulder. She is startled: “Ne me touchez pas!” (“Do not touch me!”), and threatens to throw herself into the water. Golaud questions her, and her responses about her past are vague: she has been hurt, but does not recall by whom; she ran from somewhere long ago, but does not recall from where. She is lost, frightened, and wants to leave.

While she was weeping, a golden crown fell from her head; it now gleams at the bottom of the well.

**The crown:****Moderato**

Golaud is unable to learn who gave her the crown. He offers to recover the crown for her, but she threatens to throw herself into the well if he does.

Golaud identifies himself as the grandson of Arkel, the old King of Allemonde; he learns only that her name is Mélisande.

**Royalty, or Destiny:****Moderato**

There is an extreme disparity between Mélisande’s youth and Golaud’s age. She stares at him with child-like curiosity, and he becomes fascinated yet troubled by her eyes, which never seem to close. She frankly admits that she is repelled by his giant size, graying hair, and beard.

Finally, Golaud persuades her that he will accompany her to safety, to a place he cannot reveal at this moment. Mélisande agrees reluctantly. The scene concludes with a sense that powerful forces of darkness will control their destinies; Mélisande and Golaud leave the forest together, the lost leading the lost.

**Act I – Scene 2: A hall in the castle.**

King Arkel is old and half blind, the wisdom of age evoking his compassion for human sorrows. Geneviève, his daughter, bore two sons: Golaud, whose father is dead, and Pelléas, a much younger son from a different marriage. Her husband, Pelléas’ father, is deathly ill and resides in the castle.

Geneviève reads Arkel a long letter from Golaud to his half-brother, Pelléas, which announces that six months ago, he married a young girl who he found lost and terrified while he was hunting in the forest. He still does not know who the mysterious creature is, and where she came from.

**Geneviève’s reading of the letter:**

Moderato  
GENEVIEVE



*Je ne sais ni son âge, ni qui elle est, ni d'ou el - le vient et je n'ose pas l'in-ter-ro - ger.*  
I know neither her age, nor who she is, or where she comes from, and I dare not ask her.

Golaud’s letter expresses his concern about Arkel’s acceptance of his homecoming with Mélisande; if he is amenable, Pelléas should light a lamp in the tower overlooking the sea. If the lamp is not lit on the third night, he will sail away and never return.

Arkel gravely consents to Golaud’s return with his bride, the wisdom of his age evoking his tolerance, and his acknowledgement that no one has the right to judge another’s deeds and determine destiny. Geneviève expresses her concern that since the death of Golaud’s first wife he has become introverted and withdrawn, almost a stranger to them.

**Pelléas theme:**



Pelléas enters, weeping because he has learned that his friend Marcellus is extremely ill and has expressed his longing to see him before he dies. Arkel persuades Pelléas to delay his journey by reminding him that his own father remains in the castle, deathly ill.

As Arkel and Geneviève leave, Geneviève reminds Pelléas to light the lamp in the tower, “Aie soin d’allumer la lampe dès ce soir” (“Take care to light the lamp before this evening”), an acknowledgement of Arkel’s acceptance of Golaud’s new wife, but more significantly, an unwitting pronouncement of doom for Pelléas and Mélisande.

**Act I – Scene 3: Outside the castle**

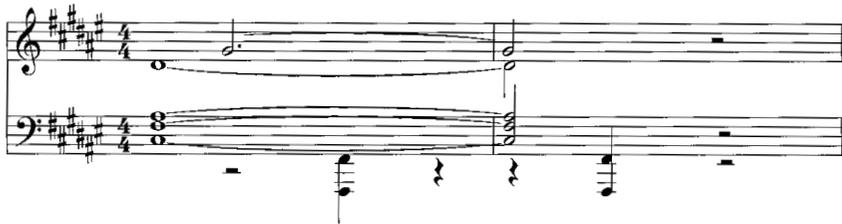
Pelléas enters as Geneviève and Mélisande discuss the dismal and depressing old castle and its surroundings. As evening falls, the three watch a large ship leave the harbor, barely visible in the mist. Mélisande realizes that it is the ship that brought her to the castle, and inquires why it is leaving, fearing for its safety in the approaching storm.

Geneviève enters the castle, leaving Pelléas and Mélisande alone for the first time. They are forced to leave because of the increasing winds. They descend a steep path, Pelléas supporting Mélisande by the arm. Pelléas announces that he is leaving tomorrow, prompting Mélisande’s flirtatious inquiry as to why he is leaving.

Mélisande’s question remains unanswered, but a growing relationship between them has surfaced, the first act ending on a question and an unresolved dissonance.

**End of Act I:**

**Lento**



**Act II – Scene 1: A spring in the castle park**

Pelléas and Mélisande sit by the spring, their outing having no conscious purpose other than the enjoyment of pleasure by innocent youths.

**The spring:**



Mélisande plays thoughtlessly with her wedding ring, throwing it skywards and catching it as it falls, until it accidentally falls into the water.

**The Ring:**



Three white-haired old beggars are seen sitting against a ledge of rock in the sudden moonlight. Pelléas explains that they beg because of the famine in the land, and that they sleep inside the cave.

Mélisande becomes terrified by the sinister ambience and urges Pelléas that they leave, perhaps returning another day.

### Act III – Scene 1: One of the towers of the castle

Mélisande sits by an open window, combing her hair and singing a simple song as the night air enters her room.

#### Mélisande's long hair:

Moderato  
MELISANDE

Musical notation for the song 'Mes longs cheveux...'. The notation is in G major (one sharp) and common time (C). It consists of a single line of music with a treble clef. The melody is simple and lyrical, with a triplet of eighth notes in the final measure. The lyrics are written below the notes.

Mes longs che - veux des - cen - dent jusqu 'au seuil de la tour  
My hair is so long it reaches down to the foot of the tower

Pelléas appears on the path that runs below her tower window. He tells her that he finds her beautiful, and asks her to lean out of the window and let him kiss her hand because he intends to leave tomorrow. She implores him to delay his departure, and as she bends lower and lower to grab his hand, her long hair suddenly cascades over him, inundating him.

The pair reveal the love that has overloaded their hearts, a fortissimo explosion of passions; Pelléas has become totally intoxicated by Mélisande's beautiful hair, which has totally engulfed him, and he ties her hair to the branches of the willow tree.

At the height of their rapture, they are startled by doves that have suddenly fluttered about them; like Mélisande, the symbols of peace and love. Mélisande hears approaching footsteps and believes they are those of Golaud. She tries in vain to raise her head, but her hair has become entangled in the branches of a tree.

#### Fatal Jealousy:

Moderato

Musical notation for 'Fatal Jealousy'. The notation is in G major (one sharp) and 4/4 time. It consists of a single line of music with a treble clef. The melody is simple and lyrical, with a triplet of eighth notes in the final measure. The lyrics are written below the notes.

Golaud asks Pelléas what he is doing there, but Pelléas is too confused to answer. Golaud cautions Mélisande that she will fall if she leans so far out of the window, and then remarks that it is midnight and children should not be playing in the dark: "You are children... What children! What children!" Golaud leaves with Pelléas.

**Act III – Scene 2: The castle vaults**

Golaud has brought his half-brother Pelléas to the gloomy castle vaults, where a stench of death arises from the stagnant water. Is Golaud trying to frighten Pelléas? Or does he have something more sinister in mind?

Pelléas walks in front, Golaud behind carrying a lantern and holding Pelléas by the arm, ostensibly to keep him from slipping over the abyss. Golaud's hand trembles, causing the lantern light to flicker. Neither man mentions the incident outside the tower, but there is the sense that each is preoccupied with thoughts about it.

Golaud cautions Pelléas to avoid Mélisande because she is frail; and, she is pregnant and must be handled delicately to avoid misfortune.

**Act III – Scene 3: Outside the castle**

Golaud is tortured by his suspicions of Pelléas and Mélisande. He places extreme pressure on his little son Yniold, both physically and emotionally, to learn what the boy knows of the activities of his uncle Pelléas and his stepmother Mélisande.

**Yniold:**



Yniold tells Golaud that they don't want the door open when they are together. But his answers are uninformative, increasingly frustrating Golaud. Golaud asks him if he has seen them together often, what they speak about, and if he has seen them kissing. Yniold replies that he has seen them kissing, demonstrating it by trying to give his father a peck on the mouth, but recoils because of the prickliness of his beard, just as Mélisande did when she first met Golaud.

A light goes on in Mélisande's window that they are sitting under. Golaud lifts the boy up to the window and asks him what he sees. Yniold reports that they both say nothing, but only look fixedly at the light, as if expecting something to happen.

Finally, Golaud enlists young Yniold to spy into the room where Pelléas and Mélisande are gazing silently at the light.

**Act IV – Scene 1: A room in the castle**

Pelléas tells Mélisande that he has a foreboding of catastrophe. He just visited with his father, who is recovering from his illness, but after his father held his hand, he turned grave and commented that Pelléas had the appearance of someone who does not have long to live; he urged him to travel and get away from the castle.

Pelléas is resolved to obey him, but he must see Mélisande before he departs, and they agree to meet by the blind man's well in the park.

Arkel enters and tells Mélisande that since Pelléas's father is out of danger; it is a signal, he hopes, that will now bring joy to the tomb-like castle. He has had great sympathy for Mélisande's melancholy; her bewildered look is seemingly an expectation of some great misfortune. Poignantly, he proudly tells her that her youth and beauty have consoled him as he draws nearer to death. Mélisande remains silent, her eyes fixed to the ground.

***Arkel's sympathy:***



Golaud enters; visibly upset because there is blood on his forehead, which he claims resulted from going through a hedge of thorns. He asks Mélisande to wipe his brow, but she refuses, repulsed by his roughness. Golaud becomes infuriated and orders Mélisande to bring him his sword, which she also refuses to do. Golaud seizes the sword himself and nervously inspects the blade, a revelation of his sinister inner thoughts.

Golaud alternates between feigned calm and outbursts of violence. He reproaches Mélisande for staring at him, and describes her gaping eyes to Arkel. Golaud's anger mounts as he swears that he will learn her secrets despite Arkel's pronouncement of her innocence.

Golaud's temper erupts out of control. He seizes Mélisande's hand, and then lets it go in an expression of agonized repulsion. He then seizes her by the hair and forces her to her knees, moving her from side to side while laughing hysterically. He suddenly gains his composure and becomes calm, feigning indifference as he tells Mélisande to do as she pleases because he attaches no importance to it; he will not play the spy.

As Golaud departs, Mélisande bursts into tears, claiming that she is unhappy because he no longer loves her. Arkel had done nothing to stop Golaud's violent behavior, but moralizes on the misery of the human condition, commenting that if he were God, he would have pity on the hearts of men.

***Act IV – Scene 2: By a well in the park***

In what is symbolically a hopeless struggle against destiny, Yniold's ball gets stuck under a stone, and the boy tries vainly to raise it. He watches a flock of sheep pass by, the boy pathetically inquiring where they will sleep the night. The shepherd remarks that they are not en route to the stable, but to the slaughterhouse, prefiguring the shedding of blood. As night falls, Yniold leaves.

***Act IV – Scene 3: The same well in the park***

Pelléas muses that soon he will leave the castle, leaving behind everything that binds him to life; but he must see Mélisande and look into the depths of her heart and reveal his inner feelings for her.

Mélisande arrives, and Pelléas takes her from the moonlight to the shade of a lime tree, where she will be unseen from the tower window. He bids her farewell and kisses her, each acknowledging love for the other, the words spoken and without orchestral accompaniment: Pelléas, “Je t’aime”; Mélisande, “Je t’aime aussi.”

The young lovers lose themselves in tender images.

**Love Duet:**

Moderato



They hear sounds from the castle that indicate that the drawbridge is closing. It is too late for them to re-enter the castle. They embrace passionately. Mélisande becomes fearful, telling Pelléas that she hears footsteps and the crackling of leaves; Pelléas is heedless to her warning, caring only to hear their hearts beat.

Mélisande’s eyes catch sight of Golaud crouched behind a tree, his sword drawn. Golaud lunges toward Pelléas while brandishing his sword. He strikes Pelléas, who falls dead. Mélisande flees in terror, pursued by Golaud.

**Act V: A bedroom in the castle**

Golaud and Mélisande were found lying in front of the castle. Golaud was wounded by his sword but fully recovered; Mélisande lies on her deathbed, fatally wounded. She has given birth to a daughter.

**Birth:**

Lento



The Doctor concludes that Mélisande is not dying from the wound she received at the hands of Golaud; she was born for no reason but to die, and now she dies for no reason. Golaud reproaches himself for his brutal revenge of their simple act of kissing like children.

Mélisande awakens. She indicates that she feels better, and asks Arkel to open the large window so that she can see the sun descending into the sea.

**The sun descends:**

Lento e tristezza



Golaud is remorseful and begs Mélisande's forgiveness, but she asks him what there is to forgive. He moans that he has done her a great wrong; that everything that has happened was his fault, because he loved her so much.

Golaud asks Mélisande if she indeed loved Pelléas; Mélisande murmurs that she loved him, but she denies any guilt. The self-tortured man wants to hear the response he fears most, but grieves because he will die in ignorance: "I shall die blind!"

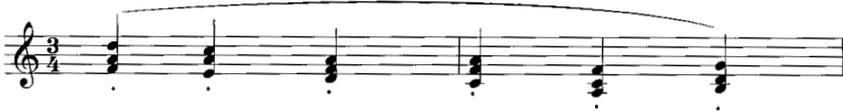
Mélisande asks King Arkel if winter is coming, expressing her fear of the cold. She was unaware that she bore a little girl; the infant child is placed beside her, but she is too weak to take it in her arms.

Servants silently arrange themselves along the walls of the room. Golaud rages at them, but they remain silent.

Mélisande speaks no more, but her eyes are full of tears.

***Mélisande's pardon:***

*Molto lento*



Arkel prevents Golaud from speaking to her, commenting that the human soul needs to leave in peace and quiet.

The serving women fall to their knees, and the Doctor confirms Mélisande's death.

Golaud sobs as Arkel prophetically remarks that it is now the little child's turn to experience the tragic circle of life: love and destiny.

**CHAPTER NINETEEN**  
***Richard Strauss: Expressionism***

## Richard Strauss: Expressionism

**R**ichard Strauss (1864 – 1949) became the foremost post-Wagnerian German Romantic composer during the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries, his fame attributed to his genius as a composer of opera, lieder, or art songs, and symphonic poems. Strauss's musical style was distinctly different from the hyper-Romanticism of his predecessor, Richard Wagner: his musical signature was unique, individual and independent.

Strauss was born and educated in Munich, the son of Franz Strauss, his father recognized at the time as Germany's leading French horn virtuoso. From the age of 4, the young Richard devoted all of his energies to music: by age 18, he had copiously composed more than 140 works that included lieder, chamber works and orchestral pieces. Those early compositions were strongly influenced by his father: they were classical, and rigidly formal in structure.

In 1884, at the age of 20, Strauss was commissioned by Hans von Bülow to compose the *Suite for 13 Winds* for the Meiningen orchestra. He conducted the work's premiere which led to his appointment as assistant conductor of the orchestra: henceforth, Strauss became eminent as both composer and conductor: he conducted major orchestras in both Germany and Austria, and established a stunning reputation for his interpretations of Mozart and Wagner. Eventually, he became director of the Royal Court Opera in Berlin (1898-1919), and musical co-director of the Vienna State Opera (1919-1924).

Strauss's musical compositions fall into three distinct periods. His compositions from his first period (1880-87) include a *Sonata for Cello and Piano* (1883), *Burleske* for piano and orchestra (1885), and the symphonic fantasy, *Aus Italien* (1887) ("From Italy"), the latter heavily influenced by the styles of Liszt and Wagner. In his early years, Strauss nurtured his admiration for Wagner in secret so as not to affront the elder Strauss who detested Wagner both musically and personally.

In Strauss's second creative period (1887-1904), he established his unique musical style and signature, in particular, his unprecedented mastery of orchestration. Like Franz Liszt, he abandoned classical forms in order to express his musical ideas in the programmatic symphonic tone poem, an orchestral medium that was totally free from classical strictures and rigid forms. Strauss perfected the tone poem form: he imbued it with profound drama that was achieved through the interweaving and recurrence of leitmotif themes, and the exploitation of the expressive power of a huge orchestra, the latter saturated with impassioned melodiousness, descriptive instrumentation, and harmonic richness. With Strauss, the tone poem form became endowed with a new vision and a new language, innovating harmonies, and instrumentation that greatly expanded the expressive possibilities of the modern symphony orchestra; nevertheless, his textures were always refined, and achieved an almost chamber-music delicacy. Strauss was an Expressionist, seeking to depict through his musical language, subjective emotions and subconscious states, all of which were expressed with his highly personal and independent musical signature.

Strauss's symphonic poems dominated his musical output during this second creative period: *Don Juan* (1889), *Macbeth* (1890), *Tod und Verklärung* ("Death and Transfiguration") (1890), *Till Eulenspiegels lustige Streiche* ("Till Eulenspiegel's Merry Pranks") (1895), *Also Sprach Zarathustra* ("Thus Spoke Zarathustra") (1896), *Don Quixote* (1897), and *Ein Heldenleben* ("A Hero's Life") (1898), the latter portraying Strauss himself as the hero; his critics were his adversaries. In 1903, he composed the *Symphonia Domestica* for a huge orchestra, its programmatic theme describing a full day in the Strauss family's household, including duties tending to the children, marital quarrels, and even the intimacy of the bedroom.

Strauss's Expressionism was magnificently demonstrated in works such as *Till Eulenspiegel's Merry Pranks*, its instrumental colors depicting the fourteenth-century rogue's adventures that included the sounds of pots and pans, and the hero's murmurs as he goes to the gallows: in *Also Sprach Zarathustra*, ostensibly a homage to Nietzsche, the essences of man and nature are brilliantly contrasted through varying tonalities; and in *Don Quixote*, the music magically captures images of sheep, windmills, and flying horses.

During Strauss's third period (1904-49), he became the foremost opera composer in the world. Earlier, he had composed his first opera, *Guntram* (1894), but it was a failure, considered a slavish imitation of Wagner. His second opera, *Feuersnot* (1902) ("Fire-Famine"), was a satirical comic opera about small town prudery and hypocrisy, also poorly received. Strauss was not yet in full command of his operatic powers.

In 1905, Strauss emerged into operatic greatness with *Salome*, a blasphemous, obscene, explosive, and unprecedented "shocker" portraying female obsessions: *Salome* immediately became a major triumph in all the major opera houses of the world; one notable exception, Vienna, where the powerful prelates forbade Gustav Mahler to stage it. Strauss followed with *Elektra* (1909), his first collaboration with the Austrian poet and dramatist, Hugo von Hofmannsthal: *Elektra* became another exploration of female fixations, in this case revenge.

Both *Salome* and *Elektra* were composed for the opera stage as one continuous scene: one-act operas containing intense and concentrated dramatic action. Strauss, a contemporary of Zola, Ibsen, Wilde, and the *fin de siècle* malaise, demonstrated in these operas that he was a supreme master of psychological shock, who possessed a deft genius to convey intense emotion through the power of his music: he was a musical dramatist par excellence — as well as a musical psychologist — who was most comfortable with emotionally complex and supercharged characters; Salome, Elektra, and the Marschallin in *Der Rosenkavalier* (1911). Both *Salome* and *Elektra* contain furious explosions of human emotion, pathological passion, perversity, horror, terror, and madness; both operas contain subtexts representing subtle predictions of the psychopathic events that would unfold as the twentieth century progressed.

Hugo von Hofmannsthal eventually exercised a profound influence on Strauss: they collaborated on 6 operas, all of which are considered Strauss's finest works. After *Elektra*, Strauss abandoned the violence and psychological realism of "shock" opera and composed *Der Rosenkavalier*, a "comedy in music" set in eighteenth century Vienna, its story, a sentimental evocation of tenderness, nostalgia, romance, and humor, that is accented by anachronistic, sentimental waltzes.

*Ariadne auf Naxos* (1912, revised 1916), conveys the delicacy of Mozart combined with Wagnerian heroism, a play-within-a-play blending commedia dell'arte satire with classical tragedy: the philosophical *Die Frau ohne Schatten* (1919) ("The Woman without a Shadow") is a symbolic and deeply psychological fairy tale in which the spiritual and real worlds collide; *Intermezzo* (1924), the libretto by the composer, is a thinly disguised Strauss with his wife, Pauline, in a domestic comedy involving misunderstandings emanating from a misdirected love letter from an unknown female admirer; *Die Ägyptische Helena* (1928) ("The Egyptian Helen") is based on an episode from Homer's *Odyssey*; and Strauss's final collaboration with Hofmannsthal, *Arabella* (1933), returns to the ambience of *Der Rosenkavalier's* Vienna and its amorous intrigues and romance.

After Hofmannsthal's death, Strauss composed operas with other librettists, though never equaling his earlier successes: *Die Schweigsame Frau* (1935) ("The Silent Woman") a delightful comedy written to a libretto by Stefan Zweig after Ben Jonson; *Friedenstag* (1938) ("Peace Day"); *Daphne* (1938); *Midas* (1939); *Die Liebe der Danae* ("The Love of Danae") completed in 1940 but not staged until 1952; and his final opera, *Capriccio* (1942), an opera-about-an-opera described by its authors as "a conversation piece for music," in which the relative importance and balance of opera's text and music is argued.

Strauss was most fertile in producing songs — lieder — some of the finest after those of Schumann and Brahms. Among the most esteemed are: *Zueignung* ("Dedication") (1882-83) and *Morgen* ("Morning") (1893-94). Other works include the ballet *Josephslegende* ("Legend of Joseph") (1914), *Eine Alpensinfonie* ("Alpine Symphony") (1915), and *Vier Letzte Lieder* ("Four Last Songs") (1948).

Strauss's musical style was daring, brilliant, ornate, and ostentatious: a post-Romantic bravura that thoroughly pleased audiences during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, and

continues in contemporary times. Although the successes of *Salome* and *Elektra* earned him accolades as an avant-garde composer, after *Der Rosenkavalier*, which followed *Elektra*, he became more conservative and classical, unaffected by experiments in serial and atonal music or the harmonic adventurism that was dominating his contemporary musical world. The greater part of his career — the 38 years following *Der Rosenkavalier*— was spent polishing his unique style, striving for a perfect fusion between the distinctive refinement and delicacy of Mozart, and the profound poetic and dramatic expressiveness of the Romantics.

Strauss remained in Nazi Germany during the entire Second World War, which in hindsight has cast doubts on his humanity and personal integrity. But in fact, Strauss was neither interested nor skilled in politics, and no one of his operas — before or after the Nazis — contains a political subtext or underlying ideological message. In 1933, after the National Socialists came into power, Strauss at first identified closely with the new regime, unwittingly allowing himself to be used as an instrument of their propaganda machinery. Although he served as president of the Reichsmusikkammer, the state's Chamber of Music, from 1933 to 1935, it was very soon thereafter that he came into conflict with government officials; in particular, after his association with the dramatist, Stefan Zweig.

After Hofmannsthal's death in 1929, Strauss collaborated with the Jewish dramatist Stefan Zweig on the lighthearted comedy *Die Schweigsame Frau* ("The Silent Woman"), a relationship with a Jewish artist that became unacceptable and particularly embarrassing — if not scandalous — to the Nazis; his association with Zweig as librettist for an opera was contrary to every stricture by which good Nazis lived, and at the time, violated Nazi laws promulgated against Jews. But for the Nazis to prohibit an opera written by Richard Strauss, at that time the most revered German composer in the world, was to invite a storm of international protest.

Nevertheless, the Nazis eliminated Zweig's name as librettist for the opera and cited the story as an adaptation "From the English of Ben Johnson"; in protest and defiance, Strauss restored Zweig's name to the libretto with his own hand. After the premiere of *Die Schweigsame Frau* in 1935, the opera was banned after 4 performances: Strauss was forced to resign as president of the Chamber of Music and he was compelled to work with a non-Jewish librettist: Joseph Gregor.

But above all else, Strauss was a family man, who was forced to use every iota of his influence as Germany's greatest living composer to protect his Jewish daughter-in-law, Alice Grab, and his two grandchildren. Earlier, at the wedding of his son Franz, it had been quipped that the event heralded the funeral of the virulent anti-Semitism he presumably inherited from his father. But somewhere along the line, for practical purposes, Strauss seemingly collaborated with the Nazis and made an arrangement: he would not speak out against the Nazis, but they in turn would not harm his daughter-in-law and two grandchildren.

In his defense, Strauss claimed to be apolitical: art supersedes politics. He tried to ignore his perception of the Nazi's disgrace to German honor, but in the early phases of the Nazi regime he did become the compliant artist who quickly usurped the music posts of emigrating Jewish artists, such as Bruno Walter. In 1933, after Toscanini withdrew from a *Parsifal* performance at Bayreuth in protest, he later met Strauss in Milan and greeted him with a stinging remark: "As a musician I take my hat off to you. As a man I put it on again." Nevertheless, Toscanini was not living in Nazi Germany, nor did he have to protect a Jewish daughter-in-law or Jewish grandchildren.

Life under the Nazis could not have been pleasant for Strauss, but he was too important to be treated harshly. In effect, Strauss was tolerated by the government, regarded with suspicion, but treated with contempt. At one point, a hysterical propaganda minister, Goebbels, forced him to relinquish his cherished Garmisch villa and make it available for bomb victims.

Strauss spent part of World War II out of the limelight: in Vienna, and later in Switzerland. After the war, he was investigated by an allied commission, which exonerated him of any collaboration with the Nazis. Strauss was no hero, nor was he a martyr. In historical hindsight, it

would be presumptuous and unjust to stand in judgment of Strauss's politics. In the aftermath of the horror of the Second World War, Strauss was another suffering artist, struggling for survival in a world that went mad: nevertheless, his less than heroic opposition to the Third Reich continues to shade perceptions of his works and his character. In 1949, Strauss returned to Garmisch where he died three months after his 85<sup>th</sup> birthday.

**H**erod was the name of several Roman-appointed rulers in ancient Palestine during the first century: they were Idumaeans, or Edomites, descendants of the biblical Esau who lived in the geographic area of Idumaea that lies south of Judaea and the Dead Sea.

Herod the Great — “Great” because he was an eldest son — was prized by the Romans for his intense loyalty, his unusual abilities as a ruthless fighter, and his subtle diplomacy, but more importantly, for his ability to subdue opposition and maintain order and control in the volatile province of Palestine. Under Herod the Great's rule, Palestine experienced economic and cultural growth: many important buildings were erected, including his greatest achievement, the rebuilding of the Temple in Jerusalem; he was also in the vanguard to introduce Hellenistic (Greek) ideas and culture into Palestine.

Jesus was born in Bethlehem during the reign of Herod the Great. The Gospel relates that Herod the Great attempted to suppress the Messianic calling by ordering all male infants in Bethlehem slain: according to the Gospel of Matthew, Joseph and Mary had a dream in which they were alerted by God to flee to Egypt with their child and hide there until Herod's death.

Herod Antipas, 21 BC – AD 39 — the Herod in the *Salome* story — was the son of Herod the Great. He was appointed tetrarch, or Roman governor, ruling Galilee and Perea from 4 BC to 39 AD, the major part of Jesus' life and ministry.

The story about Salome, and the historical events involving her stepfather Herod Antipas, her mother Herodias, and the beheading of John the Baptist, is told in the Gospels of Mark (6:14-29) and Matthew (14:1-12). The story is also mentioned by Flavius Josephus, 37 BC - 100 BC, an ancient Jewish historian whose *Antiquitates Judaicae* (“The Antiquities of the Jews”), is a chronicle of Jewish history during the first century BC through the great revolt of 66-70 AD. The actual historic truth about Salome beyond those sources remains obscure, supplemented over the course of two thousand years by legend and fiction.

The story of Salome is recounted in the Gospel, Mark 6:14-29:

- 14 King Herod heard about this, for Jesus' name had become well known. Some were saying, “John the Baptist has been raised from the dead, and that is why miraculous powers are at work in him.”
- 15 Others said, “He is Elijah.” And still others claimed, “He is a prophet, like one of the prophets of long ago.”
- 16 But when Herod heard this, he said, “John, the man I beheaded, has been raised from the dead!”
- 17 For Herod himself had given orders to have John arrested, and he had him bound and put in prison. He did this because of Herodias, his brother Philip's wife, whom he had married.
- 18 For John had been saying to Herod, “It is not lawful for you to have your brother's wife.”
- 19 So Herodias nursed a grudge against John and wanted to kill him. But she was not able to,
- 20 because Herod feared John and protected him, knowing him to be a righteous and holy man. When Herod heard John, he was greatly puzzled; yet he liked to listen to him.

- 21 Finally the opportune time came. On his birthday Herod gave a banquet for his high officials and military commanders and the leading men of Galilee.
- 22 When the daughter of Herodias came in and danced, she pleased Herod and his dinner guests. The king said to the girl, "Ask me for anything you want, and I'll give it to you."
- 23 And he promised her with an oath, "Whatever you ask I will give you, up to half my kingdom."
- 24 She went out and said to her mother, "What shall I ask for?" "The head of John the Baptist," she answered.
- 25 At once the girl hurried in to the king with the request: "I want you to give me right now the head of John the Baptist on a platter."
- 26 The king was greatly distressed, but because of his oaths and his dinner guests, he did not want to refuse her.
- 27 So he immediately sent an executioner with orders to bring John's head. The man went, beheaded John in the prison,
- 28 and brought back his head on a platter. He presented it to the girl, and she gave it to her mother.
- 29 On hearing of this, John's disciples came and took his body and laid it in a tomb.

And the Salome story is also recounted in the Gospel of Matthew 14:1-12:

- 1 At that time Herod the tetrarch heard the reports about Jesus,
- 2 and he said to his attendants, "This is John the Baptist; he has risen from the dead! That is why miraculous powers are at work in him."
- 3 Now Herod had arrested John and bound him and put him in prison because of Herodias, his brother Philip's wife,
- 4 for John had been saying to him: "It is not lawful for you to have her."
- 5 Herod wanted to kill John, but he was afraid of the people, because they considered him a prophet.
- 6 On Herod's birthday the daughter of Herodias danced for them and pleased Herod so much
- 7 that he promised with an oath to give her whatever she asked.
- 8 Prompted by her mother, she said, "Give me here on a platter the head of John the Baptist."
- 9 The king was distressed, but because of his oaths and his dinner guests, he ordered that her request be granted
- 10 and had John beheaded in the prison.
- 11 His head was brought in on a platter and given to the girl, who carried it to her mother.
- 12 John's disciples came and took his body and buried it. Then they went and told Jesus.

All accounts agree that Herod became infatuated with Herodias, the wife of his half-brother, Philip. One legend claims that Herod killed his half-brother, eloping with Herodias after he also killed his wife, Marianne, a brutal murder that haunted him throughout his reign.

Another less sinister legend claims that he merely divorced his wife in order to marry Herodias. Nonetheless, both versions of the Gospel relate that the evangelical preacher, John the Baptist, condemned Herod's marriage to Herodias because divorce was a violation of Mosaic law. Infuriated by the Prophet's denunciation of her, Herodias goaded Herod to imprison John, however, Herod did not condemn the popular Prophet to death, fearing it would instigate unrest from among the masses. Infuriated, Herodias inveigled her daughter, Salome, to demand the Baptist's head as her

reward for dancing for her stepfather at his birthday celebration. As such, the Gospels accounts place the responsibility for John's execution on Herodias rather than Salome. So in the Gospels, it is Herodias who engineers the prophet's death: her motive, revenge for John's audacious condemnation of her marriage to Herod. The reluctant Herod was bound by oath to have John beheaded, and it was Herodias's daughter, Salome, who presented the platter with John's decapitated head to her vengeful and victorious mother.

But in the Gospels there is no mention of Salome by name; she is simply referred to as the "daughter of Herodias." And there is also no specific mention of the "Dance of the Seven Veils" in the Gospels, but merely a general reference to a dance that Salome performed for Herod.

Ironically, the name Salome means peace. In the New Testament, the only Salome mentioned by name is one of the women who witnessed the crucifixion of Jesus, and who later brought spices to the tomb to anoint His body. That Salome apparently was the mother of James and John, two disciples of Jesus, and she is depicted in the Gospel of Matthew as asking special favors for her sons.

Flavius Josephus attributes John's execution to neither Salome nor Herodias: according to Josephus, the Prophet was not imprisoned or executed for his outspoken denunciation of Herod's marriage to Herodias, but was executed by Herod for political reasons, the Tetrarch motivated by his fear of John's power to incite religious rebellion and revolt.

John the Baptist was a moral reformer and preacher of the Messianic Deliverance. The Gospels relate that Herod arrested and imprisoned him because he feared that his outspoken evangelical exhortations of repentance and salvation would foment unrest in his province, an irritation to their Roman conquerors.

The Gospels are unanimous in their description that John lived in the wilderness where he received his sacred calling, preaching there until his arrest and execution. In Biblical times, the wilderness, a vast wasteland of crags, wind, and heat, a place where the ancients believed God had dwelled with His people after the Exodus; it was a place that represented spiritual hopes for the people of Israel. With resolve and urgency, John called people from the comforts of their homes into the wilderness where they were to meet God and repent for their sins: he challenged them to share clothing and food, and criticized them for their presumptuousness and their sense of righteousness merely because they were descendants of Abraham. John drew large crowds who heard him preach moral reform in preparation for the Messianic Deliverance, invoking renewal through baptism, the symbol moral regeneration.

Ultimately, Herod Antipas was involved in Jesus' trial. After Jesus was arrested in Jerusalem, Pilate, the Roman procurator in Judaea, first sent him to Herod because He was a subject in his region. Herod returned Jesus to Pilate, unable to find anything substantive in the charges that deserved death, and he was therefore unwilling to pass judgment.

After Herod Antipas' death, Palestine struggled through a number of chaotic years, culminating in the revolt of 70 AD in which Rome would finally establish order in the region by dispersing the Jews from their land.

Oscar Wilde became inspired to the Salome subject most probably through the renowned paintings by Gustave Moreau, for whom the story had long been an obsessive fascination: Salome had also been the subject of painters for centuries; Rubens, Durer, Stanzoni, Titian, and Aubrey Beardsley. Wilde was also no doubt familiar with Huysmans' novel, *À Rebours* (1884), Flaubert's *Hérodias* (1877), as well the works of the German lyric poet, Heinrich Heine. In Flaubert's version, upon which Massenet's opera *Hérodias* (1881) is based, John the Baptist is in love with Salome. When the jealous Herod kills John, Salome stabs herself. And in some medieval legends, Herodias herself was in love with the Baptist.

Wilde published *Salome* in 1893. It began as a prose narrative, was transformed into a poem, and then into a play, the latter written in French for the renowned actress, Sara Bernhardt, although she never performed it. Even though Wilde was equally at home in French as well as English, its original writing in French was unable to protect it from being condemned as an audacious work; the play got as far as a rehearsal in London, but almost immediately its license was refused by the Lord Chamberlain's office. Up until 1931, the play was banned in England as an "arrangement of blood and ferocity, morbid, bizarre, and repulsive." The German version, translated by Hedwig Lachmann, was first performed in Germany in 1901, and one year later, was produced by Max Reinhardt at his Kleines Theater in Berlin, where it had a remarkable run of some 200 performances.

In Wilde's play, Salome drives the central dramatic action. Wilde added his own luster to the original story sources by presenting the drama with a profound collision of Christian and pagan values. But in Wilde's version, it is Salome, rather than her mother Herodias, who is the instigator of the Prophet's execution; she plays cunningly with Herod's crazed passion for her, and is even undeterred by Herodias's attempts to dissuade her. Salome's dance earns her a reward from Herod, and it becomes the instrument that leads to the Prophet's death.

Wilde's version of the story transcended the few lines narrated in the Gospels: he commented that his purpose was to write a play "About a woman dancing with her bare feet in the blood of a man she craved for and had slain." His focus was to expose recurring motifs of doom, the obsessions of gender power, and the unconscious erotic desires that lead to horrifying evil. Therefore, Wilde's Salome portrays the sexual obsession and lust of a teenage young virgin: he depicts her as evil incarnate, and nothing, he claimed, can be so evil as the innocent erotic desires that are evoked from her unconscious.

Wilde intentionally wanted his Salome to be scandalous, an outrageous manifestation of unconscious, relentless lust, a perversion approaching sadism, or, the conflict inherent in the feminine desire for sexual power over men. Ultimately, Wilde created his demon: Salome is a monstrous beast, like the Helen of ancient myth, who becomes indifferent, irresponsible, insensible, and poisonous to everything she touches; Wilde's Salome becomes consumed and possessed by infinite perversity.

In its time, Wilde — and later Strauss — were considered madmen, the creators of a neo-pagan version of the New Testament story that was deemed brutal, shocking, and neurotic: it was deliberately "morbid," "perverse," and "immoral," the critics unable to distinguish between art and life, as well as between illusion and reality.

Nevertheless, artistic intuition usually transcends man's ordinary consciousness: in *The Bacchae* of Euripides, the female mind was portrayed as prone to hysteria and a perversity of sexual passion while it escaped from the restraints imposed by social convention. Likewise, in *Salome*, Wilde was anticipating some of the mysterious and somber discoveries of the psychiatrists. In *The Critic as Artist* (1890), Wilde addressed human motivation and proclaimed that it was "the liberty of the modern artist to probe the darkest and socially more distasteful recesses of the human mind," and, "there is still much to be done in the sphere of introspection." He added, "People sometimes say that fiction is getting too morbid. We have merely touched the surface of the soul, that is all. In one single ivory cell of the brain there are stored away things more marvelous and more terrible than even they have dreamed of who, like the author of *Le Rouge et Le Noir*, have sought to track the soul into its most secret places, and to make life confess its dearest sins." *Le Rouge et Le Noir* ("The Red and the Black"), refers to Stendhal's novel depicting an unsentimental and relentless opportunist who employs seduction as a means to advancement.

In 1901, a production of Wilde's *Salome* reached many German towns. It attracted Strauss's attention and he soon commented that the play "cried out for music," considering Wilde's repetition or recurrent "motifs" dramatic elements that seemed to naturally adapt to musical scoring.

The Viennese poet, Anton Linder, sent Strauss a proposed libretto, but the composer was uncomfortable with it and failed to be impressed or inspired by it. However, Strauss had read and seen the Berlin production *Salome* that was based on Hedwig Lachmann German translation — with Gertrud Eysoldt in the title role — and realized that it was inherently far superior to a conventional opera libretto, particularly that of Linder. One day an idea struck him: “Why not set Wilde’s (prose) text very much as it stands?”, Strauss recalling how he had become mesmerized by the musical possibilities of the play’s very first line: “Wie schön ist die Prinzessin Salome, heute Nacht!” (“How beautiful the Princess Salome is tonight!”)

Strauss was determined to be faithful to Lachmann’s translation. Nevertheless, some excisions had to be made, practical and necessary condensations of the text that become obligatory when spoken drama is transformed into musical drama. Those cuts involved removing some of Wilde’s poetic intensity and expansive and luxuriant verbal imagery, elements Strauss was able to replace with the grandeur of his musical language.

In Wilde’s opening scene, the Page attempts to bring reason into the Salome-infatuated mind of the young Narraboth, the Syrian Captain of the Guard. Strauss minimizes the Narraboth-Page interchange, keeping the subplot ostensibly in the background because it would have added an element of lament and poignancy that would interfere with the opera’s primary dramatic thrust: Salome’s obsession with the Prophet. In Wilde, after Narraboth’s suicide, the Page expresses a passionate lament for his dead friend: Strauss likewise omitted that scene, among his other reasons, that it would have required another leading singer.

Similarly, in Wilde’s opening scene, the Nubian and Cappadocian soldiers discuss religion: the Nubian comments about his people’s holy sacrifices and their lust for blood; the Cappadocian fears that the Romans have driven his country’s gods into oblivion. Later, both soldiers comment about the Jews who worship a God they cannot see, and believe in things they cannot see. Strauss omits this discussion, resuming the continuous fury and frenzy of the drama with Jokanaan’s annunciation from the cistern, followed by the Page’s despairing appeal to Narraboth: “You’re always looking at her. You look at her too much. It’s dangerous to look at people in such a way. Something terrible will happen.”

Strauss also made certain excisions from Wilde’s play that are significantly relevant to the story. As an example, in the opening scene, a soldier tells a Cappadocian that the Prophet came from the wilderness, and that his utterances are often difficult to understand. The Cappadocian points to the cistern and comments that it is a strange prison, old, and certainly unhealthy. The Second Soldier intervenes to reveal that the Tetrarch’s older brother (Philip), the king who was the first husband of Herodias, was imprisoned there for twelve years. Philip’s incarceration in the cistern did not kill him, so at the end of the twelve years he had to be strangled. The Cappadocian reacts in horror. The Soldier points to the executioner, Naaman, a huge negro, who was the Executioner who strangled the Tetrarch’s brother. And the Soldier further advises him that Naaman had no fear, because the Tetrarch sent him the death-ring. These elements have a profound bearing on the later development of the plot.

In sum, about one third of Wilde’s play was omitted from Strauss’s *Salome*. Nevertheless, Strauss was religiously faithful to every word of Wilde’s prose in the long final scene: Salome’s apostrophe to the decapitated head of the Prophet.

Wilde’s play provided Strauss with an organic unity, a balance of tension, relaxation and climax. Strauss builds three gradual ascents to a climax, a gradual crescendo of horror in which a present scene makes a more dramatic impact than the previous scene. The first major scene involves Salome’s awakening, her enunciation of her morbid passion and desire for the Prophet; it is in this first scene that the music associated with the head of the Baptist is first heard: a Richard Strauss waltz. The second scene involves the collision between John and Salome, her obsession with the beauty of his body, and his rejection and denunciation of Salome. At the end of this scene, Narraboth commits suicide, and shortly thereafter, John descends into the cistern, the scene culminating in a magnificent collision of their themes in a sinister orchestral interlude, a

furious repetition of the themes associated with Salome and John. The third scene involves Salome's cunningly engineered dance to the crashing of her last link with sanity; in the final moments, her passions explode over the decapitated head of the Prophet.

After Salome entered rehearsals in Dresden, inherent problems with the opera erupted. In particular, singer after singer declared his or her part unsingable and wished to withdraw. The Salome, the dramatic soprano, Frau Wittich, went on strike; she became shocked by the strenuousness of the role; it was a role written for a sixteen-year-old princess with the voice of Isolde, whose voice had to override a massive orchestra; score. She cried out, "One just does not write like that, Herr Strauss; either one thing or the other." And then she proclaimed her righteous indignation: "That I won't do, I am a respectable woman." But Frau Wittich conceded, for Salome was too lush a singing role to refuse, even though she found the role difficult to learn.

Aside from all of its rehearsal difficulties, the opera premiered on Dec 9, 1905, the musical pundits arrogantly confident that the opera would have a short life because of its demands for such a large orchestra, and its requirement for so many rehearsals. Their *Schadenfreude*, as well as the vociferous puritanical outrage was short-lived: in spite of its controversy, *Salome* quickly established itself in German opera houses, and later internationally. The clergy voiced their denunciations as late as 1918, causing a proposed production at the Vienna Staatsoper to be abandoned because of the intervention of the influential Austrian prelate, appropriately named Archbishop Piffel. In 1939, the opera was banned in Austria, condemned as a "Jewish ballad."

In 1910, *Salome* was finally performed in England, where earlier the Lord Chamberlain had forbidden performances of the opera. This time, it was demanded that biblical references be deleted: John the Baptist became a prophet named Mattaniah, the action was moved from Judaea to Greece, and the Jews and Nazarenes became "Learned Men" and "Cappadocians." Of course, there was no head of the Baptist in the final scene, as the young princess poured out her climactic passions to a dish of blood.

Wilde commented that Salome's recurring prose motifs accommodated music: it is "like a piece of music," and that he had "bound it together as a ballad"; his insistent repetitions of key dramatic phrases acted like musical leitmotifs.

The lowering full moon is a silent participant presiding over the action of the drama, acting as a spotlight that metaphorically and symbolically reflects the underlying tensions of each scene, its alternating light and dark hues reflecting the varying mental states and attitudes of each character, their unconscious yearnings, and neurotic fears. Salome herself is like Wilde's poetic symbol of the ambivalent moon; the light it casts, not bright or clear, but dim and mysterious. In that sense, the moon portrays obsessions, ambiguities, weaknesses, and fatal flaws; it is a metaphor of each character.

During the play — and the opera — the moon continuously changes its different faces and hues, alternating from pale, bright, black, and red. In its bright appearance at the very beginning of the opera, Salome refers to the moon as "a silver flower, cool and chaste, with the loveliness of a virgin who has remained pure." Later, the besotted Herod views the moon "like a drunken woman, reeling through the clouds, looking for lovers." The sober, imperturbable, no-nonsense queen Herodias, steeped in vice and impervious to omens, remains more blunt and unmoved by the moon: "No, the moon is like the moon, that is all."

In contrast, the exalted Prophet Jokanaan, whose spirit dwells in the contemplation of the sunshine of religious truth, is untouched by the nocturnal moonlight.

Strauss endowed the *Salome* score with the full force of his Expressionistic musical ideas, his music an invitation to feel rather than just think about its neurotic sensuality, and the twisted and distorted workings of the heroine's soul. Strauss's music is both alluring as well as repulsive: in each successive climax, he relentlessly achieves pathological effects by deploying his musico-dramatic genius through harmonic and orchestral explosions that emphasize the psychological aspects of drama. In *Salome*, Strauss's orchestral resources are so monstrously overweighted. Aside from the monstrous vocal demands he makes on the principal singer, she must also dance the *Dance of the Seven Veils*, a moment when most intelligent directors find it necessary to use a stand-in.

Strauss's musical language presents *Salome*'s key themes in different disguises. Salome's first theme appears in the guise of a Viennese waltz, but when it reappears in the final scene, it is saturated with shattering dissonance, a portrait of the grotesque transformation and dysfunction of Salome's mind. Salome's second theme, reappears savagely when the severed head is lifted from the cistern, when a cloud obscures the moon, and when Salome kisses the decapitated Prophet.

Salome is without doubt, probably the most extraordinary opera subject ever chosen by a composer: Herod is consumed with lust for his own stepdaughter, who also happens to be his niece; and Salome, an ingénue and innocent, develops a compulsive desire for the religious ascetic, John the Baptist, but when she is thwarted in her erotic desires, she moves heaven and earth to have the man decapitated so she can fulfill her longings, expressed in the most grotesque and perverted form; kissing the lips of the Prophet's severed head.

It is no wonder that at its premiere, Strauss's *Salome* was considered perverse, nerve-racking, monstrous, and even scandalous. The music, far from softening the morbidity of the subject, magnifies and underscores every lurid detail, Strauss clothing its gruesome depravity with every shimmering hue available on the palette of the modern hundred-piece plus orchestra.

Strauss creates sheer nervous tension as he progresses from horror to horror; the expectation of impending doom and depravity pervading the atmosphere from the moment the curtain rises. The music continues to alternate in texture: in one moment, nerves are jangled with strident and terrifying dissonance; in the next, they are lulled into security by mellifluous harmonies; and suddenly, they strike again with new tonal clashes.

Strauss blends and fuses harmonic styles, providing an enormous contrast — a chiaroscuro — that provides a musical portrait of his character: the inspired prophet's music, particularly when he prophesizes the Messianic Deliverance, is firm, grave, and solemn; the lascivious Herod's music is unstable, neurotic, and shifting; and Salome's final monologue, is a masterpiece of tension and drama, like a symphonic poem with a vocal solo.

The "Dance of Seven Veils" is perhaps the most famous striptease of all time. In the "Dance," Salome discards the veils one by one, until, at the end, she is supposedly naked, an anomaly for the stout prima donna. A svelte singer can handle the "Dance," but in many performances, it is deputized appropriately to a ballerina.

In both play and the opera's libretto, Salome removes only her sandals before putting on the veils to dance: Herod derives sensual gratification from the sight of her feet. In Wilde's play, Herod comments, "Ah, you're going to dance with naked feet. 'Tis well. Your little feet will be like white doves. They will be like little white flowers that dance upon the trees."

Musically, the "Dance" is a virtual potpourri of already familiar themes. Nevertheless, after a quasi-oriental beginning, Salome's sensual oriental dance, for the most part, possesses a thoroughly Viennese flavor.

Today, for the most part, people respond to the *Salome* story as a work of art rather than a scandalized story: musical senses have become more attuned to the idioms that Richard Strauss anticipated and matured with, and his style is more objectively appreciated. In essence, the horrors and neuroticisms of the *Salome* story fall into the background before the unrivaled beauty

of Strauss's musical language. As in any great work of art, lurid details can be submerged in a flood of the magnificence of the work: *Salome* fuses horror with essential beauty, forcing one to quote Narraboth in the opera: "Wie schön ist die Prinzessin Salome heute Abend!" ("How beautiful Princess Salome is tonight!")

Nevertheless, depravity and decadence were the key words that dominated early descriptions of *Salome*. At its New York premiere, the New York Times complained that *Salome* was a "detailed and explicit exposition of the most horrible, disgusting, revolting and unmentionable features of degeneracy ever heard, read of, or imagined." Other reviews spoke of "smarting eyeballs and wrecked nerves," and that decent men did not want to have their house polluted with the stench with which Oscar Wilde's play had filled the nostrils of humanity. The audience was disgusted yet fascinated: women and men spoke of *Salome* as if they had a bad dream.

The Archbishop of Vienna considered it depraved and tried to have it banned. Likewise, the Kaiser told Strauss: "This will be his ruin." The outraged Metropolitan Opera board of directors considered it so decadent that it was withdrawn after a single performance. The self-proclaimed high priestess of Bayreuth, Cosima Wagner, considered the work "sheer lunacy." Strauss's father, who died just three weeks before his son completed the score, did not like what he had seen thus far: "Oh, God, what nervous music. It is like having your trousers full of maybugs." Gustav Mahler considered it "... a live volcano, a subterranean fire." Others were duly outraged, commenting that it possessed "shock appeal, its libretto a compound of lust, stifling perfumes and blood," and, "cannot be read by any woman or fully understood by anyone but a physician."

Nevertheless, *Salome* represents the culmination of a long battle waged by the late Romanticists in seeking a new kind of artistic truth: the freedom to portray the beauty as well as the ugliness in human experience. In effect, there is beauty in ugliness, by implication, a way in which to achieve inner understanding by experiencing ugliness and evil.

Wilde commented: "People say that fiction is getting too morbid, but as far as psychology is concerned, it has never been morbid enough. We have merely touched the surface of the soul, that is all." In its portraits of the terrible depths of evil, art can provide a moral vision, not the moral vision of the self-righteous man, complacent in the conviction of his own goodness, but the moral vision of the human being made suddenly conscious of his potential for evil, as well as the good in his nature.

*Salome* still retains the power to shock, its effect an Aristotelian catharsis prompting pity and fear. Salome, a young girl tragically confused by the first stirrings of sexual desire, sees the moon as a chaste virginal flower, but nevertheless, is haunted by the repressed memory of her father who was imprisoned and killed in the same cistern as John the Baptist. In the sense of catharsis, one senses not revulsion, but a great torrent of cleansing emotion.

*Salome* brought Freudian psychology to the operatic stage. In the end, Oscar Wilde would have been pleased.

# *Salome*

**Opera in German in One act**

**Music**

**by**

**Richard Strauss**

**Libretto based on Hedwig Lachmann's abridged German translation of  
Oscar Wilde's play, *Salome***

**Premiere in Königliches Opernhaus**

**Dresden, 1905**

*Principal Characters in Salome*

Herod Antipas, Tetrarch of Judaea	Tenor
Herodias, the Tetrarch's wife	Mezzo-soprano
Salome, daughter of Herodias	Soprano
Jokanaan, the Prophet (John the Baptist)	Baritone
Narraboth, a young Syrian Captain of the Royal Guard	Tenor
A Page of Herodias	Contralto
Five Jews	four tenors, one bass
Two Nazarenes	Tenor, Bass
Two Soldiers	Basses
A Cappadocian	Tenor
Herod's Page	Tenor (or Soprano)

TIME: Beginning of the 1st century, during the lifetime of Christ

PLACE: Herod's palace in ancient Palestine

*Brief Story Synopsis*

Herod Antipas, Tetrarch, or Governor of Judaea, is celebrating his birthday at a banquet at his palace. From a terrace outside, Narraboth, the Captain of the Guard, observes Salome, Herod's beautiful stepdaughter, who is inside the hall: he expresses his uncontrollable yearning and passion for her. After Salome leaves the banquet, she hears a voice announcing the Messianic Deliverance: it is Jokanaan, the Hebrew prophet, (John the Baptist), imprisoned in a cistern because Herod fears he will propagate unrest.

Salome becomes fascinated by his voice, and requests that she the Prophet, but the Soldiers advise her that Herod's orders forbid it. Salome becomes obsessed, and succeeds in getting her wish fulfilled by promising favors to the lovesick Narraboth. Jokanaan emerges from the cistern: he denounces not only Herod, but also Herodias, Salome's mother, for the sin of marrying her dead husband's brother.

Salome becomes infatuated with the Prophet and pleads for a kiss: he contemptuously refuses her, cursing her when he learns that she is Salome, Herodias's daughter. Narraboth, finding their interchange unbearable, kills himself.

Herod and Herodias quarrel: she is jealous of Herod's lust for her daughter, and demands that Jokanaan be killed because he insulted her: Herod, in awe of the holy man and fearful of a religious uprising, refuses to harm him.

Herod, lusting for Salome, offers her any wish if she dances for him. Salome agrees to dance, afterwards demanding that Herod fulfill his promise and give her the head of Jokanaan as her reward.

The executioner delivers the severed head of the Prophet to Salome, who erupts into ecstatic rapture and uncontrollable passion as she kisses it. The shocked and disgusted Herod calls his guards, who crush Salome to death.

*Story Narrative with Music Examples*

There is no overture. The curtain rises immediately to a three-bar theme associated with Salome.

*Salome motive:*

It is night, and the moon shines very brightly on a broad terrace of Herod's palace. Inside, a banquet celebrates Herod's birthday, the Tetrarch entertaining Roman envoys with whom he is anxious to ingratiate himself, Egyptian ambassadors, and Jewish zealots, who from time-to-time quarrel violently about biblical doctrine.

Narraboth, a young Syrian recently appointed by Herod as captain of the guard, stands on the terrace and stares fixedly into the banquet hall. He expresses his infatuation, yearning, and love for Princess Salome: "Wie schön ist die Prinzessin Salome heute Abend!" ("How beautiful Princess Salome is tonight!")

*Narraboth's infatuation with Salome:*

The Page senses foreboding and premonitions of danger when he notices the moon turning dark and shadowy: "See how strange the moon looks! She looks like a woman rising from a tomb."

The Page tries in vain to distract Narraboth's attention from the Princess Salome: "You're always looking at her. You look at her too much. It's dangerous to look at people in such a way. Something terrible will happen."

But Narraboth, infatuated and lovesick over Salome, continues to remark about Salome and her paleness under the moon: "She is like a Princess who has little white doves as feet. You would fancy she was dancing." He is intransigent and continues to remark about Salome's beauty, and upon her paleness under the moon.

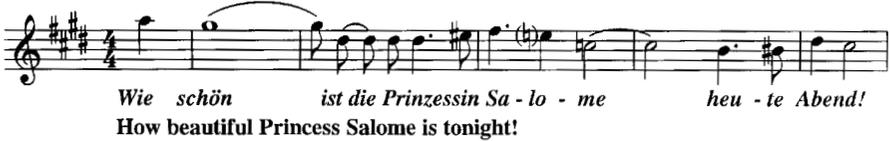
Also guarding the cistern where Jokanaan are two Soldiers: Herod fears that the Prophet's religious fervor will foment unrest, and he has forbidden anyone to see him.

An uproar is heard from the banquet hall: the rival Jewish sects argue, their disagreements erupting into temper tantrums: the Pharisees staunchly claim that angels exist; and the Sadducees declare that angels are nonexistent. The Soldiers on the terrace comment about their arguing with cynical detachment: "The Jews. They never change. Always arguing about their religion."

Narraboth, oblivious to the tumult inside, remains infatuated with Salome and continues to praise her beauty: he rhapsodizes that he has never seen her look so pale, and that her face is like the shadow of a rose reflected in a silver mirror.

*“Wie schön ist die Prinzessin Salome heute Abend”*

**NARRABOTH**



*Wie schön ist die Prinzessin Sa - lo - me heu - te Abend!*  
**How beautiful Princess Salome is tonight!**

Again, the apprehensive Page expresses his anxiety, warning Narraboth to restrain his fatal infatuation with Salome; that it is hazardous for him to continue staring lustfully at Salome. The Soldiers, observing the banquet inside, comment that Herod appears gloomy, his eyes fixed on someone, but they cannot see whom: it is Salome.

Jokanaan’s voice is heard from the depths of the cistern, solemnly and majestically declaring his impassioned prophecy of the Messianic Deliverance: “Nach mir wird Einer kommen, der ist stärker als ich.” (“After me shall come another who is stronger than I. I am not worth to undo the laces of His shoes. When He comes, all the desolate places shall rejoice. When He comes, the eyes of the blind shall see the day. When He comes, the eyes of the blind shall see the day. When He comes, the ears of the deaf shall be opened”

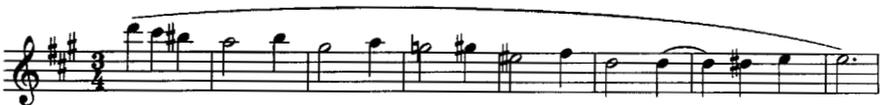
One of the Soldiers, weary of the Prophet’s fanatic wailing, suggests that they silence him forcibly. But another Soldier speaks tenderly about the holy man, commenting that he is a gentle being who thanks him each day after he brings him his food. Then he responds to the inquiries of a Cappadocian, explaining that the Prophet comes from the desert where crowds of people flocked to him. (He was clothed in camel’s hair, fed on locusts, and preached to his young disciples. The Tetrarch, fearing unrest, has imprisoned him in the cistern, isolated so that no one may see him.

Narraboth, whose eyes have remained fixed on the banquet hall, erupts into excitement when he notices Salome rising from her seat and exiting the banquet: he comments that she appears agitated, and seems like a straying dove. The Page again implores Narraboth not to look at her.

Salome appears on the terrace in a state of excitement. She is distraught and agitated, angry, bewildered by her stepfather, Herod, for gazing at her with such lust; she cannot understand why he continues to gaze at her “with his mole’s eyes under his shaking eyelids.” And she was also unable to endure the banquet because she became irritated by the uncouth and brutal Romans, the foolish squabbling among the Jews, and the crafty quietness of the Egyptians, and the brutal and barbaric Romans.

Having escaped from the banquet, Salome welcomes the fresh air outside, and the moon: “She is like a silver flower, cold and chaste. Yes, there is a youthful beauty about the moon, a virgin’s beauty.”

*Salome: After emerging from the banquet*



Narraboth continues to be infatuated by Salome; the Page likewise expresses his apprehension: “Something terrible will happen. Why do you look at her like that?”

For the first time, Salome hears the Prophet’s voice resounding from the cistern: “Behold, the Lord has come, the Son of Man has come.”

### *Jokanaan’s theme:*



Salome questions the Soldiers about the voice she hears. A Soldier tells her that it is the Prophet: Salome immediately deduces that it is “he of whom the Tetrarch is so frightened,” and realizes that it is the holy man who has condemned her mother as a depraved and incestuous adulteress.

Salome’s curiosity has become aroused: Narraboth pleads with her to return to the banquet, but she is heedless to his pleas and disregards him.

A slave announces that Herod has commanded Salome to return to the banquet. Salome brushes him aside and bluntly refuses, immediately directing her attention to the Prophet: she asks the Soldier, “Is this Prophet an old man?”; a Soldier tells her that he is quite young.

Once more, the Prophet’s solemn voice is heard from the cistern: “Do not rejoice, land of Palestine, just because the rod that beat him is broken. For a basilisk shall come from the seed of the serpent; its offspring shall devour the birds.”

The strangeness of the Prophet’s voice, and the enigma of his message, inflame Salome with curiosity: she announces that she wants to speak to him. The second Soldier, agitated and apprehensive, tells her that the Tetrarch has commanded that no one, not even the High Priest, may see him. Salome does not fear Herod. Her relentless obsession mounts, and she commands the Soldier: “I want to speak to him. Have this Prophet brought out!”

Both Soldiers argue with Salome, fearful of disobeying Herod’s order that no one be allowed to speak to the Prophet. Salome approaches the cistern, peers down into its recesses, and becomes horrified: “How dark it is down there! It must be terrible to live in such a black pit. It’s just like a tomb!” But Salome is insistent and inflexible. She turns to the Soldiers, her anger mounting, and again commands them to bring the Prophet to her so that she may look at him. The Soldiers, shuddering in fear, again refuse.

Salome is overcome with desire, dismayed that her will is being frustrated. With the artfulness of a spoiled child, or a virtuoso seductress, she exploits Narraboth’s weakness and hopeless devotion, and weaves her spell on him: she uses her sexual power, cajoles him, and promises him that if he lets her see the Prophet, when she passes him tomorrow at the city gates she will throw him a flower and glance through her veil and smile upon him.

Narraboth finds himself in conflict. At first he protests to Salome, invoking the Tetrarch’s orders that no one raise the cover of the cistern; it is forbidden to see the Prophet, and he dare not disobey. But Narraboth’s resolution falters, and he surrenders to his lust for Salome. Finally, unable to conquer his emotions, he gives the order: “Let the Prophet out. Princess Salome wishes to see him.”

As the face of the moon suddenly becomes darker, Jokanaan emerges from the cistern: all remain immobilized and in tense expectancy, the music exploding with a collision of themes representing Jokanaan’s piety and Salome’s latent passion.

*Jokanaan emerging from the cistern*

**Allegro**



Jokanaan ferociously launches a tirade against the evil acts of Herod and Herodias: their lust, iniquities, sins, depravity, and incest: “Wo ist er, dessen Sündenbecher jetzt voll ist?” (“Where is he whose cup of sin overflows? Where is he, who, wearing a silver robe, will one day die before all people!”) He commands them to heed the call of the Messianic Deliverance, seek salvation, and redeem themselves through repentance.

Salome and Jokanaan confront each other for the first time, a collision of the sacred with the profane. She is breathless as the first sight of the Prophet, both repelled and overcome with fascination, desire, lust. She immediately succumbs to an incomprehensible fatal attraction for the Prophet, a physical longing, and a compulsive desire for him.

*Salome’s theme of desire and lust*

**Molto espressivo**



Jokanaan continues his denunciation of Herodias: “Wo ist sie die sich hingab der Lust ihrer Augen” (“Where is she, who surrendered to the lust in her eyes.” Salome realizes that the Prophet is condemning her mother, when he continues: “Where is she who gave herself to the leaders of Assyria? Where is she who gave herself to the young men of Egypt, with their fine linens and precious jewels, their golden shields and bodies like giants?” The Prophet urges her to “rise from her bed of incest, the bed of her abominations, so that she may hear the words of the One who prepares the way of the Lord, and that she may repent for her sins.”

Salome erupts into childish excitement, intoxicated by unconscious desires and a pathologic sensuality. Ironically, she comments as she recoils away from the Prophet: “He is terrifying. He is really terrifying.”

*Salome’s infatuation*

**Animato**



The despairing Narraboth admonishes her to leave the terrace, but she heeds him not, captivated by the Prophet, desiring only that he speak again..

Salome studies the body of the Prophet, discovering that he is neither young nor fervent, a gaunt and dreadful man, but she has become captivated by him: “He’s like an ivory statue. I’m sure he’s as chaste as the moon. His flesh must be as cool as ivory. I must look closer at him!”

Jokanaan fixes his attention on Salome and inquires: "Wer ist dies Weib, das mich ansieht?" ("Who is this woman looking at me?") The Prophet condemns and forbids her to look at him. But Salome proudly identifies herself: "I am Salome, the daughter of Herodias, the Princess of Judaea." Jokanaan realizes that he is in the presence of evil and promptly condemns the daughter of the dissolute Herodias, Salome's mother: "Your mother has filled the earth with the wine of her iniquities, and God has heard the cry of her sins."

Salome remains calm, oblivious to his denunciation of her mother: his words merely inspiring the perverse Salome, she replies casually, "Speak again, Jokanaan, your voice is like music to my ears." Salome, now completely obsessed with the Prophet, asks him what she must do?

Jokanaan calls Salome the "daughter of Sodom," commanding her away from him, and urging her to seek salvation: cover her face with a veil, scatter ashes on her head, and "go into the wilderness and seek the Son of Man." Salome inquires: "Who is he, the Son of Man? Is he as beautiful as you, Jokanaan?" Salome's erotic overtures inflame and frighten the Prophet: he tells her that doom awaits Herod and Herodias; he can hear the "beating of the wings of the angel of death in the palace."

Narraboth again pleads with Salome to return to the banquet, but she is undeterred and ignores him, exploding into a monstrous confession of her lust and love for the Prophet. She explodes into her monomania: "Jokanaan! I am in love with your body." The more violent Jokanaan's denunciations, the more infatuated and fascinated Salome becomes: her unconscious cravings, compulsions, and amorous obsessions for Jokanaan explode into ecstasy and rapture.

Salome is now completely dominated by her perverse passion for the Prophet: she praises Jokanaan and conjures up sensual images of his body: "Your body is as white as the lilies of a field that has not been mowed. Your body is as white as the snows on the mountains of Judaea. The roses in the gardens of the Queen of Arabia are not as white as your body, or the roses in the garden of Arabia's Queen, when the leaves fall at dawn, or the moon when she lies on the sea. There is nothing in this world as white as your body."

And Salome's passion for Jokanaan reaches its climax: "Let me touch your body."

Jokanaan rejects Salome with further condemnations, exhorting the "daughter of Babylon" that "evil came into the world by woman." The Prophet is appalled and attempts to repel her. He refuses to listen to Salome: "I listen only to the voice of the Lord God."

The Prophet's rejection of Salome further inflames her relentless desire for him, however, she vacillates, his denunciations inciting her to revenge: in an instant, her fascination turns to repulsion. Salome, her will defeated, condemns the prophet: "Your body is hideous. It is like the body of a leper. It is like a plastered wall where snakes have crawled, where scorpions have made their nest! It is like a whitened sepulcher full of loathsome things. It is horrible, your body is horrible."

But just as suddenly, Salome resumes her lust and yearning for the Prophet. She again expresses her compulsive desire for him, this time, evoking the beauty of his hair: "It is your hair that I love, Jokanaan. Your hair is like bunches of grapes, like bunches of black grapes that hang from the vine trees of Edom. Your hair is like the mighty cedars of Lebanon, which give shade to lions and robbers. The long black nights, when the moon hides her face, and the stars are afraid, are not as black as your hair. The silence of forests. No thing in the world is as black as your hair. Let me touch your hair!"

Jokanaan thunders a new wave of revulsions and harshly rebuffs Salome, bidding this daughter of Sodom to stand back, to leave him and not profane a "the temple of the Lord." But his rejection merely provokes Salome to launch a frenzied attack on him: "Your hair is horrible! It is thick with dirt and dust. It is just like a crown of thorns on your head. It is like a knot of black serpents writhing around your neck. I do not like your hair."

Salome's irreversible and obsessive craving increases, expressed by her in a frenzied imagery: "It is your mouth I desire, Jokanaan. Your mouth is like a band of scarlet on a tower of ivory. It is like a pomegranate cut with an ivory knife. The pomegranates that bloom in the garden of Tyre, redder than roses, are not so red. The red fanfares that herald the approach of Kings in wartime and place fear in the enemy, are not as red as your mouth. Your mouth is redder than the feet of those who tread the wine, stamping in the wine presses. It is redder than the feet of the doves that haunt the holy. Your mouth is like a branch of coral found in the twilight sea; it is like vermilion that Kings take from the mines of Moab. There is nothing in the world as red as your mouth."

Salome's infatuation and obsession with the Prophet reach a climactic tempest of exploding passions: she yearns to kiss Jokanaan: "Let me kiss your mouth!" Jokanaan again rejects her: "Never, daughter of Babylon! Daughter of Sodom! Never!"

Over and over again, Salome repeats her monomania: "Ich will deinen Mund küssen, Jokanaan!" ("I will kiss your mouth, Jokanaan.")

"Ich will deinen Mund küssen"

**Molto animato ed appassionato**  
**SALOME**

*Ich will deinen Mund küssen, Jo - ka - na - an,*  
 I want to kiss your mouth Jokanaan,

Salome, consumed by her obsession for the Prophet, is blind and oblivious to what is happening around her. Narraboth, watching her in horror, tries repeatedly to deter her and call her to reason, but she ignores him. The Captain, possessed and desperately in love with the unattainable Princess, can no longer endure listening to Salome's craving for the Prophet: in despair and jealousy, he stabs himself, his body falling unnoticed between Salome and the Prophet.

Oblivious to Narraboth's suicide, the morbid passion of a depraved teenager collides with the pious exhortations of the Prophet. Jokanaan denounces Salome as an accursed daughter of adultery who must seek salvation and redemption by finding Him: "Go, seek Him! He is in a boat on the Sea of Galilee talking with His disciples. Kneel down on the shore of the sea, and call Him by name. When He comes to you, and He comes to all who call Him, bow down before Him, and ask for remission of your sins."

But Salome, sensually intoxicated and obsessed with lust for the Prophet, is oblivious to salvation. She is possessed by her *idée fixe* and continues her plea to Jokanaan, repeating it over and over again: "Let me kiss your mouth, Jokanaan!" Likewise, Jokanaan rejects her: "Sei verflucht, Tochter der blutschänderischen Mutter. Sei verflucht." ("You are accursed, daughter of an incestuous mother. You are accursed.")

Jokanaan descends back into the cistern, the orchestra colliding with Salome's theme of desire and Jokanaan's prophesy theme of faith, a musical tension between the sacred and the profane, the spirit and the flesh. As Jokanaan disappears into the darkness, Salome stands before the cistern, frustrated, yearning, and longing.

Herod arrives, lustfully pursuing Salome: Wo ist Salome? Wo ist die Prinzessin? ("Where is Salome? Where is the Princess?") He is a neurasthenic beset by fears and insecurities, and now under the influence of too much wine. Herodias accompanies him, enraged with jealousy at his overt lust for her daughter, urges him to stop pursuing Salome, to stop looking at her lustfully, and return to the banquet.

He immediately becomes apprehensive, paranoid with portents, the dark night sky arousing a neurotic consciousness of something sinister: “The moon looks so strange tonight! Doesn’t she have a strange look? She is like a mad woman, looking everywhere for lovers. She reels through the clouds like a drunken woman.” Herodias replies to her besotted husband contemptuously: “No, the moon is like the moon, that’s all. Let’s go inside.”

Herod is dauntless. He orders torches and tables brought to the terrace: he will drink again in honor of Caesar’s ambassadors, with Salome at his side. But Herod stumbles, slipping on blood, a bad omen. He inquires about the blood and then sees a corpse. A Soldier advises him that it is their captain of the guard, Narraboth. But Herod gave no order for anyone to be killed. The Soldiers inform him about Narraboth’s suicide.

Herod suddenly becomes possessed by fear and portents, overcome with senses of foreboding; he feels cold and believes a chill wind blows, but he imagines that its sudden gusts are the beating of the huge wings of the angel of death; that Narraboth’s death was Divine justice because Narraboth, like Herod, looked lustfully at Salome. Nervous, apprehensive, and perturbed, Herod orders Narraboth’s body removed.

Herodias again pleads with Herod to return to the banquet, and that he seems ill. But he rejects her, his entire thoughts concentrating on Salome; he comments that he finds her pale, perhaps sick. He orders his wine cup replenished, and then expresses his crazed passion for Salome; he tries to persuade Salome to share wine with him, longing to watch her to “dip her little red lips into it.”

*Herod: “Salome komm, trink Wein mit mir”*

**Molto animato**  
**HEROD**



Sa - lo - me, komm, trink Wein mit mir,  
Salome, come drink wine with me,

But Salome’s inner thoughts are concerned with her unconscious passions for the Prophet. She coldly refuses him: “I am not thirsty, Tetrarch.” Herod turns to Herodias, reproaching her for Salome’s refusal. But Herodias defends her daughter and again rebukes Herod for lustfully gazing at her daughter.

Herod attempts to lure Salome by offering to share fruit with her: “I love to see your little bite marks in a sweet fruit.” Again, Salome refuses, telling him quietly, “I am not hungry, Tetrarch.” And again, Herod blames Herodias for rearing Salome so poorly. But this time Herodias confronts Herod acrimoniously, reminding him that she and her daughter are descendants of a royal race; his father was a camel driver, a thief and robber.

He renews his entreaties, this time offering to place Salome her on her mother’s throne beside him: Salome grimly replies, “I am not tired, Tetrarch.”

From the depths of the cistern, Jokanaan’s voice resounds again with his annunciation: “The time has come, the day of which I spoke is here.” Herodias erupts in anger, ordering Herod to silence this fanatic man who always insults her. But Herod refuses, defending the man as a great Prophet; besides, he admonishes Herodias, “He has said nothing against you.” Herodias accuses Herod of being afraid of the Prophet; Herod defends himself as fearless of any man. If he is so not afraid of the Prophet, Herodias suggest, “why don’t you give him to the Jews, who have wanted him for six months?” But Herod refuses, defending the Prophet: “He is a holy man. He is a man who has seen God.”

The Jews erupt into furious arguments over religious dogma, the first Jew arguing that the Messiah is yet to come, and condemning Jokanaan as a false Prophet, not the incarnation of the Prophet Elijah who was the last prophet to see God; the second argues that perhaps Elijah never saw God but perhaps His shadow; the third that God show Himself at all times and in everything, what is good and what is evil; the fourth concludes that they speak very dangerous dogma that emanates from Alexandria, from the Greeks and Gentiles; and the fifth, that God operates in mysterious ways. The cacophony upsets Herodias, who screams at Herod to quiet the Jews.

Tempers and temperatures rise when Jokanaan's voice again announces the Messianic Deliverance: "So the day is come, the day of the Lord, and I can hear in the mountains the feet of Him, who will be the Savior of the world." Herod inquires the meaning of "Savior of the world," causing a Nazarene to announce that the Messiah has come, and the First Jew to deny it. The Nazarene defends his proclamation, describing how He "works miracles everywhere. He changed water into wine at a wedding in Galilee. He healed two lepers at Capernaum. He also healed blind people. And he was seen on a mountain talking with angels!"

Herodias denounces the miracles as nonsense, but Herod turns to fear when a Nazarene reveals that the Messiah raised the daughter of Jairus from the dead. Herod praises the miracles but expresses dread at the idea of the dead coming to life again. This disturbs Herod, who cries: "I forbid him to do that. It would be dreadful if the dead came to life again!" Nevertheless, Herod, both inquisitive and doubtful, decides that the Messiah must be found.

The turmoil becomes dominated by the voice Jokanaan — heard from the cistern — heaping fresh curses on Herodias, denouncing her, and predicting her end: "The harlot, that daughter of Babylon, thus speaks the Lord, our God. A multitude will rise against her and take stones and stone to death. Their captains will pierce her with their sharp swords and crush her beneath their heavy shields. And thus I will wipe out all wickedness from the earth, and all women shall learn not to imitate her abominations."

Herodias, initially dryly detached from the tumult, becomes infuriated by Jokanaan's abuse and loses her self control: she screams that the Prophet is outrageous, that Herod has allowed him to speak scandalously against her, and that Herod must silence him. Casually, Herod replies that the Prophet did not mention her name.

Jokanaan continues, forecasting the ominous punishment of sinners: "On that day the sun shall turn black as sackcloth, and the moon shall become like blood, and the stars shall fall to the earth like ripe figs from the fig tree. On that day, the kings of the earth shall be afraid."

Herodias condemns the Prophet, again urging Herod to silence him. But Herod is consumed with but one obsession and desire; he insists that Salome dance for him, oblivious to Herodias, who states emphatically and with delight: "I will not have her dancing." Salome refuses, to the delight of her mother.

While Salome broods over the cistern, Jokanaan's voice thunders again with his prediction of the Messianic deliverance. Herod, desperate and impassioned, again begs Salome to dance for him, but this time he promises her anything she desires: "If you dance for me you may ask of me what ever you want. I'll give you what you ask for." Salome suddenly becomes aroused: "Will you really give me whatever I ask, Tetrarch?" Herodias commands Salome not to dance, but Herod cannot be dissuaded. Herod makes a promise to Salome if she dances for him: "Everything, everything, that you ask for, even half my kingdom."

Salome makes Herod confirm his promise under oath: by his life, crown and gods. Suddenly Herod becomes overwhelmed with portents and senses a chill wind and the beating of unseen wings: "Ah! It is as though there's a huge black bird: is it hovering over the terrace?" He shivers and erupts into a fever, and to cool himself, calls for water, snow to eat, and the loosening of his cloak. But he realizes that it his crown, decorated with festive garlands of roses, that is suffocating him; he removes it, recovers from his seizure, and immediately resumed his relentless request that Salome dance for him.

Herodias makes one last attempt to prevent Salome from dancing. She protests with fury and rage, maddened and confounded by the voice of Jokanaan accusing Herod's court of gross immoralities, and demands in vain that Herod accompany inside. But Herod has triumphed: Salome will dance for him: "Ich bin bereit, Tetrarch" ("I am ready, Tetrarch.")

The *Dance of the Seven Veils*, represents exotic and sinuous evocations of Salome, her teenage erotic fantasies and desires that will inflame the lascivious Herod.

At first, the music is lulling and insinuating oriental theme.

### *Dance of the Seven Veils: First theme*



Then the mood changes to luxurious melodiousness.

### *Dance of the Seven Veils: Second theme*



At one point, Salome seems tired and faint from the wild rhythms of the dance, but she collects herself and continues with renewed strength, pausing by the cistern like a visionary, her thoughts concentrating on Jokanaan. Then, the music of the dance erupts into a semi-barbaric wildness, Salome making convulsive gestures, and concluding by throwing herself at Herod's feet.

After Salome's dance, Herod is exhilarated and excited. He turns ecstatic and triumphantly calls to Herodias: "You see, your daughter has danced for me!" Herod quickly invites Salome to come near to him so that he can grant her the promised reward: "Tell me what you want? Speak!" Salome kneels before him humbly, but responds coldly: "I want someone to bring me on a silver platter.... the head of Jokanaan" ("Den Kopf des Jochanaan.") The revenge-lusting Herodias becomes delighted and commends her daughter's request: for Herodias, the prophet who condemned her will now be destroyed.

Herod is appalled, urging her to refute her mother, the woman who has always given her bad advice. Salome replies firmly: she does not listen to her mother, but has asked for the Prophet's head for her own pleasure. Herod tries to dissuade Salome, imploring her to choose something else. Herodias defends Salome and urges her to remain firm; after all, she wants the man who has scandalized her to be destroyed.

But Herod pleads with Salome, expressing his horror at the idea of a decapitated head as her reward. Herod tries to reason with Salome, offering her fabulous jewels, or anything in his kingdom: the finest emerald in the world, his beautiful white peacocks. Herod immediately silences Herodias, who reminds him that he must abide by his oath. He tries to reason with Salome, but she remains intransigent, adamant and steadfast, making her request with increasing fury: "Gib mir den Kopf des Jochanaan!" ("Give me the head of Jokanaan!") Herodias again praises her daughter, whom Herod silences. He turns to Salome and again tries to reason with her, terrified because he believes that the Prophet is a holy man sent by God and he fears God's anger; if Herod has him killed something terrible would happen to him. But he fears even more the misfortune that will overcome him if he does not honor his oath.

Salome remains intransigent. Herod continues to dissuade her with offers: pearls, topazes, opals, and other priceless treasures. He will give Salome all, even the cloak of the High Priest, but not the life of the Prophet. But Herod becomes helpless and frustrated in his hopeless attempt to dissuade Salome's desires. In despair, he accedes to Salome: "Man soll ihr geben, was sie verlangt! Sie ist in Wahrheit ihrer Mutter Kind!" ("Let her be given what she wants! She is indeed her mother's child!")

While Herod remains spellbound and in shock, Herodias takes advantage of his collapse and removes the ring of death from his finger, gives it to a soldier, who immediately gives it to the executioner, who, upon receiving it, descends into the cistern. Herod notices that his ring is gone, and inquires who has taken it. Herodias replies with pleasure at her daughter's request, savagely calling Herod: "My daughter has done well!" Herod remains dumbfounded, certain that some misfortune will overcome them.

Salome leans over the cistern, listening intently in tense expectation to hear Jokanaan's cries and struggles; she is confounded that she does not hear the screams from a man about to be killed or a struggle. She screams for the executioner to strike, but there is only a terrible silence: she hears what she believes is the executioner's sword and concludes that he is a coward, afraid to behead the Prophet. Salome turns hysterically to Herodias's Page and threatens him to command the soldiers to descend into the cistern and bring her what she desires, what was promised to her by the Tetrarch, what is hers. The Page recoils; Salome herself turns to the soldiers and orders them into the cistern, calling to Herod to command his soldiers to bring her the head of Jokanaan.

As Salome eagerly awaits, amid tumultuous orchestral tension, the executioner's huge black arm rises from the cistern bearing the head of Jokanaan on a silver shield. In her moment of triumph and ecstasy Salome seizes the head: Herod hides his face in his cloak; Herodias smiles and fans herself; the Nazarenes fall on their knees and begin to pray. Salome has avenged Jokanaan's humiliation and rejection of her: she is victorious and has overpowered the Prophet. Herod is repelled and fearful, but Herodias gloats in victory. Salome's passions mount and explode, the fulfillment of her neurotic sexual obsession for the Prophet."

Salome explodes in triumph as she addresses the Prophet's severed head: "Ah, You wouldn't let me kiss your mouth, Jokanaan! Well, I will kiss it now! I will sink my teeth into it, as one bites a ripe fruit. Yes. I will kiss you mouth, Jokanaan. I said I would, didn't I say it?"

Salome rhapsodizes to the decapitated Jokanaan: "But why don't you look at me, Jokanaan? Your eyes that were so terrible, so full of rage and scorn, they are shut now. Why are they closed? Open your eyes! Lift up your eyelids Jokanaan. Why don't you look at me? Are you afraid of me, Jokanaan, that you won't look at me?"

"And your tongue says nothing now, Jokanaan, your tongue that was like a red snake spitting poison at me? That's strange, isn't it? How is it that the red viper moves no more? You spoke evil words against me, Salome, daughter of Herodias, Princess of Judaea."

"Well then! I am still alive, but you are dead, and your head belongs to me! I'm free to do with it what I will. I can do what I want with it; I can throw it to the dogs and to the birds of the air. The birds of the air will devour what the dogs leave behind"

“Ah! Ah! Jokanaan, Jokanaan, you were beautiful. Your body was a column of ivory set on silver feet. It was a garden full of doves and silver lilies. Nothing in the world was so white as your body. Nothing in the world was as black as your hair. And in the whole world nothing was a red as your mouth.”

“Your voice was like a censer that scattered strange perfumes, and when I looked at you I heard strange music. Ah! Why didn’t you look at me, Jokanaan? You covered your eyes in order to see your God. Well, you saw your God, Jokanaan, but me, me, you never saw. If you had seen me, you would have loved me!

“I am thirsting for your beauty. I am hungry for your body. Neither wine nor apples can ease my desire. What shall I do now, Jokanaan? Neither floods nor great waters can ever quench the heat of my strong passion Oh why didn’t you look at me? If you had looked at me you would have loved me. I know well that you would have loved me. I know well that you would have loved me. And the mystery of love is greater than the mystery of death.”

Salome remains intoxicated and enraptured, exhausted and brooding as she contemplates the decapitated head of the Prophet. Herod mutters to Herodias: “She is a monster, your daughter. Herodias acknowledges him with pride, sharing her daughter’s victory and insisting that they remain: “I approve of what she did. I’ll stay here now.” But Herod wants to leave the horrible scene, afraid and fearful, and wanting to hide in the palace, fearful of something terrible.

Herod becomes seized with terror and commands his slaves: “Put out the torches! Hide the moon, hide the stars!” Suddenly, the moon and stars disappear behind the clouds and it becomes eerily dark. In the dimness of the night, Salome, gripped by her unconscious erotic delirium, continues to lustfully kiss the severed head of Jokanaan:

“Ah! I have kissed your mouth, Jokanaan. There was a bitter taste on your lips. Was it the taste of blood? No, perhaps it is the taste of love. They say that love has a bitter taste. But so what? I have kissed your mouth, Jokanaan. I have now kissed you mouth.”

In this final ecstasy of perversity, Salome passes into a strangely mystical sphere of insanity: the climactic fulfillment of her erotic yearnings and desires.

A moonbeam falls on Salome, covering her with light. Before departing, Herod turns to witness Salome, illuminated by the gleam of moonlight, intoxicated in her orgasmic and passionate ritual, her lust as she kisses the severed head of the prophet.

Disgusted, fearful, and in a state of horror, Herod commands his Soldiers: “Man töte dieses Weib!” (“Kill that woman!”

The Soldiers crush the Princess between their shields.





***CHAPTER TWENTY***  
***Berg: Atonal Expressionism***



### *Berg: Atonal Expressionism*

The Austrian-born composer and theorist, Arnold Schoenberg (1874-1951), initially began composing in the German Romantic tradition, expanding on the chromaticism, extended tonality, and innovative harmonic patterns introduced by Richard Wagner in *Tristan und Isolde*. By 1907, Schoenberg had become the chief architect of radical modernism, totally abandoning tonality for atonality, and dispensing entirely with the principles of harmonic relationships and the gravitation of chords to tonal centers that had been employed from the time of J. S. Bach.

The Schoenberg School of “expressionists” became the practitioners of atonal harmony, seeking to depict subjective emotions and personal feelings in their music. Schoenberg was also a painter and friend of the painter Kandinsky, and both actively exchanged expressionist ideas.

Schoenberg’s twelve-tone method integrated atonal harmony with the precisely articulated formal structures of the Austro-German classical tradition. The system he invented was called serialism (dodecaphony), which describes a musical composition in which the music is based on a series of tones in a chosen pattern without regard for traditional tonality, or key centers; the 12 tones of the chromatic scale are arranged in “rows” whose various permutations provide the underlying fabric for the nontonal composition. The music is composed around short intervals rather than lengthy thematic material: as such, the harmonic progression of musical ideas from bar to bar becomes increasingly unclear. By breaking completely with the conventions of triadic harmony and the major-minor tonal system, a new dynamic of musical expression had been introduced.

*Erwartung* (“Expectation” — 1909), Schoenberg’s half-hour monodrama for soprano and full orchestra tells of the horrifying experience of a woman searching for her lover in the dark forest, and finally stumbling on his lifeless body. Schoenberg’s Expressionist music plumbed the woman’s deepest emotions: fear, horror, passion, and despair. The monodrama’s violently evocative music was perhaps the purest embodiment of Expressionism at the time: it was atonal, non-thematic, and lacked formal conventions. The vocal line was extremely expressive, the singer employing the “Sprechgesang” technique, which is a vocal style midway between singing and ordinary speech; the voice touches the note but does not sustain it, abandoning it immediately after it has been sung, and then sliding to the next.

By 1923, Schoenberg had fully developed the twelve-tone method, which ultimately influenced almost all the music of the twentieth century. Nevertheless, Schoenberg’s dependence on classical forms in which to compose his Expressionist music was criticized by the avant-garde “serialists”; composers such as Boulez, Babbitt, and Nono, were uncomfortable with Schoenberg’s methods as they existed at the time and believed that they required further development.

In general, audiences have never been fully receptive to atonality, some considering the atonalist’s arrangements of the twelve intervals of the chromatic scale a form of tonal anarchy: amorphous and empty patterns of notes that were incorrectly called music.

The foremost disciples of the Schoenberg School were Anton Webern and Alban Berg. Berg was born in Vienna, Austria (1885-1935), and began studying with Schoenberg in 1904 at the age of nineteen, his devotion for his teacher continuing long past the termination of his studies in 1911. Within seven years, Berg emerged as one of the most

mature composers of the early twentieth century, a transformation attributable to Berg's natural talents, and Schoenberg's great skills as a teacher.

Berg's early compositions — particularly the String Quartet, Opus 3 (1911) — demonstrated the Schoenbergian techniques of thematic compression and development; although it was partially tonal, it was developed in a chromatic, contrapuntal style that expressed considerable visceral power. Berg composed many pieces for piano, violin, clarinet, and songs, but his notoriety as an Expressionist emanates from his two operas: *Wozzeck* (1925), and the posthumous *Lulu* (1937).

**B**efore the premiere of Berg's *Wozzeck* (1925), the literary world outside of Germany no doubt had limited knowledge of Georg Büchner (1813-1836), the author of the underlying drama upon which the opera is based.

Büchner was a precocious talent — a student of history, philosophy, and science — who produced some substantial literary works during his short lifetime: *Danton's Death* (1833) was a remarkable drama about leading personalities of the French Revolution, the comedy, *Leonce and Lena*, and *On the Nervous System of the Barbel*, the latter earning him a doctor's degree from the philosophical faculty of Zürich in 1836. Shortly thereafter, Büchner contracted typhus and died at the age of twenty-three. Büchner possessed a rather astounding insight and knowledge of human nature for a man of his young years.

After Büchner's death, manuscripts, fragments, and various drafts of his unpublished *Woyzeck* were discovered. (The difference in spelling of the title is attributable to a misreading by the first editor of the play, Karl Emil von Franzos.)

Büchner was not attracted to early nineteenth-century German Romanticism, nor was he an exponent of the hyper-emotionalism and revolutionary zeal of the *Sturm und Drang* literary movement. His writings suggest that he viewed man in an eternal struggle to survive in a hostile world, the antithesis of the idealized and sentimental world of Romanticism. Büchner shared post-Napoleonic Europeans' pessimism and despair that was attributed to the failed promises of the Enlightenment, the French Revolution, and the horrific bloodbath of the Reign of Terror: promises of human progress and the elimination of social injustices that remained unfulfilled in the early nineteenth century; promises that led to the Revolutions of 1830 and 1848.

Many Germans maintained a profound compassion for their poor: the noted lyric poet, Heinrich Heine, wrote impassioned accounts of the exploited and famished Silesian weavers who were shot like wretches by their masters when they complained about their woeful existence; ultimately they cursed the "fatherland" and its romantic illusion of brotherhood.

Similarly, Büchner's *Woyzeck* portrayed the sad plight of a pitiful soldier, another unfortunate and misfortunate German underdog. The historical Johann Christian Woyzeck was an impoverished soldier, an alcoholic, and a man of savage instincts, who murdered his mistress in a crime of passion. Woyzeck was tried and executed for the crime in 1824.

In *Woyzeck*, Büchner expressed his uncompromising compassion for human suffering with a scorching portrait of a downtrodden man, a flesh and blood victim of misfortune from which he was powerless to unshackle himself: Büchner's Woyzeck did not exist in a sentimental or idealized world, but rather, in a hostile world of oppressive, irrational, and predatory people.

Büchner penetrated deeply into Woyzeck's soul, portraying a poor misfit tormented by the heartless people surrounding him; he experiences incomprehensible hallucinations: he agonizes in his attempts to cope with his uncompromising social superiors; he irrationally

fears freemasons; imperceptible colors of shocking intensity haunt him; and he believes that he hears vague and unintelligible voices. Woyzeck is a fully functional human being who thinks and feels: desperately poor, uneducated and barely articulate, and suffering from incomprehensible delusions and illusions that suggest that he is mentally aberrant.

Büchner's dialogue in *Woyzeck* was basically constructed of everyday speech patterns: the inarticulate vernacular of the uneducated, or lower classes. There was no rhetoric, and the characters never paused for reflection or introspection; indignation and protest was expressed by quoting from the Bible. The principal characters — Woyzeck, Marie, the Captain, the Doctor, and the Drum Major — all share a sense of cruelty and unbridled sensuality, characteristics associated with instinctive man that would emerge in the Naturalist movement in literature soon after Büchner's death.

Büchner's tragic portrayal of the downtrodden no doubt overturned a principle characteristic of Greek, Elizabethan, and neo-classic drama: that suffering was the exclusive right of the privileged. His play presented a moving social and psychological documentation of the destitute of the era. In a sense, Büchner's play represented a tragic satire of the downtrodden in which the dramatist was moralizing by presenting the predatory elite — the Captain, Doctor, Drum Major — savoring the suffering and torment of the misfortunate poor — Woyzeck and Marie.

Büchner never completed the play, but his conception of *Woyzeck's* dramatic action was radical: he had planned a rapid succession of extremely short scenes that overlapped and were unconnected by narrative. Some scenes were dreamlike, and some contained fragmentary sentences or merely a half-dozen lines, such as the last scene in the dissecting room (omitted in Berg's opera); Marie's corpse lies before a doctor, surgeon, and the magistrate. The magistrate comments: "A good murder, a real murder, a first-rate murder! As fine as anyone could wish for. It is a long time since we had one so fine!"

**B**erg's degrading experiences as a soldier in the German army during World War I influenced his musico-dramatic expression of his adaptation of Büchner's drama: *Woyzeck*. During the horror of war, he had witnessed the debased condition of men under arms and the madness that overcame them in their battle for survival; it was a world in which humanity had become insane.

No one in *Woyzeck* is normal; all are decadent and despairing; and all the characters border incipient madness. Berg's musico-dramatic expression of this demented humanity could only be portrayed through the idiom of Expressionism: not in traditional harmony, but through atonalism, dissonance, and discord. In a sense, Expressionistic music inherently possessed the power to convey the essential lunacy of *Woyzeck's* cast of characters.

Wagner's harmonic adventurism, particularly in *Tristan und Isolde*, had been instrumental in influencing the entire development of Schoenberg's atonal system. Berg's Expressionism represents a synthesis — or assimilation — of Schoenberg's atonalism, Debussy's Impressionism, and the Strauss of *Salome* and *Elektra*; these styles served as models, but they are not imitated. As such, the *Woyzeck* score is eclectic, clinging to no single system or method of composition. The score is predominantly atonal, but in the final moments of the music drama, the music becomes tonal; Berg, the narrator of the drama through his music is commenting that the tormented Woyzeck and Marie have found peace in death; the Larghetto is played by the orchestra after the curtain descends; the "invention on the scale of D minor" represents elegant and eloquent lyricism.

Essentially, Berg adapted Büchner's drama as it stood, changing, altering, or excising very little. He divided each act into a substructure of eighteenth-century musical forms — such as toccata, fugue, suite, passacaglia — that ingeniously did not stiffen or interfere with the progress of the action.

There are three acts, each act with five short scenes. The orchestral interludes between scenes become the narrator of the drama while the curtain is down. Büchner's short scenes would have provided difficulty on the dramatic stage, but the musical transitions in the opera drama add emotive power to ideas or thoughts unsaid. (Debussy similarly structured Maeterlinck's *Pelléas et Mélisande* with orchestral interludes between scenes; his opera was also adapted from a pre-existing stage play.)

The musical forms of each scene possess musically expressive characteristics that can be identified with psychological states: the fugue and passacaglia forms tend to convey a sense of the intellectual and erudite; the scherzo suggests dancing; and the slow movement of a sonata usually expresses deep and intense emotions.

Leitmotifs became Berg's means to express every dramatic emotion in *Wozzeck's* internal, psychological world: the street scene of Act II is scored to a triple fugue that incorporates the motives associated with the Doctor, Captain, and Wozzeck, the faltering triplets of Wozzeck's motive suggesting his helplessness.

*Wozzeck's* music completely absorbs the text and becomes the central focus of interest and attention, the orchestra reflecting every fine detail of the drama; the orchestral language can be defined as musical *pointillism* because it is full of dotted notes and splashes of musical color, the inevitable outcome of Berg's expressive musical painting.

Schoenberg advocated "Sprechgesang" (speech-song) for dialogue, but much of *Wozzeck's* dialogue is "Gesangsprache" (song speech), a vocal production that is between singing and speaking that clings closely to the music in rhythm and inflection, but not in pitch.

No doubt, Berg was a realist and psychologist, his music brilliantly injecting a sensitive humanity into a sordid and tragic story; a bitter and sardonic story that Berg's music narrates with tenderness, pity, and compassion. *Wozzeck* is first class theater, perfectly balanced and unified, with its intricate and exquisite elements masterfully integrated. There are dissonant passages conveying ugliness, but there are also passages of unrivalled poignancy and beauty that are profoundly moving: tone pictures that are wonderfully evocative and expressive.

At its premiere, there were those who considered *Wozzeck* an isolated experiment and anarchical oddity of the Schoenberg school of atonality: a first class aberration of a composer of dubious powers. There were those who attended a performance and claimed that they had the sense of not being in a theater, but rather in an insane asylum.

But eventually the opera public discovered *Wozzeck's* essence, deeming the opera perhaps the most musically advanced and remarkable opera of the modern era. Since its premiere, *Wozzeck* has overcome all opposition.

*Wozzeck* lived a pitiful life of intense sadness and misfortune caused by weird and sordid people who callously tormented him, and whose psyche was tormented by afflictions that were incomprehensible to him. It is a story that could only be related through Expressionistic music, a musical language that magnified the tragedy's visceral power, music that realized Büchner's visionary drama of damnation rather than redemption.

# *Wozzeck*

**Opera in German in 3 acts and 15 scenes**

**Music**

**by**

**Alban Berg**

**Libretto by Alban Berg, after the unfinished play, *Woyzeck*,**

**by Georg Büchner**

**Premiere: Berlin Staatsoper, December 14, 1925**

***Principal Characters in Wozzeck***

Wozzeck	Baritone
Captain	Tenor
Doctor	Bass
Drum Major	Tenor
Andres	Tenor
Marie	Soprano
Marie's son	Singing voice
Margret	Contralto

Apprentices, the idiot, soldiers, serving girls, children

TIME: about 1830

PLACE: a garrison in a town and the neighboring countryside

***Brief Story Synopsis***

As Wozzeck shaves the Captain, the Captain criticizes him for rushing so much. He then mentions Wozzeck's illegitimate child; Wozzeck replies that poor people like himself cannot afford conventional morality.

Wozzeck and another soldier, Andres, cut sticks for the Captain in a field near town. Wozzeck's mind is slightly deranged. His fearful imagination overcomes him and he babbles incoherently about his hallucinations.

As a military band passes by, Marie sits at her window and flirts with the Drum Major. She sings a lullaby to her child, and then Wozzeck frightens her with his confused talk.

The Doctor pays Wozzeck to perform diet experiments on him. Wozzeck expresses his fright and anxiety, which the Doctor suspects are signs of approaching madness.

The Drum Major attacks Marie; with a shrug of resignation, she submits to him.

Wozzeck becomes suspicious of Marie after noticing her new earrings. He gives her money that he has earned from the Captain and from the Doctor's experiments. He leaves, his mind preoccupied with thoughts of Marie's unfaithfulness.

The Doctor taunts the Captain, suggesting that he may soon die of apoplexy. They stop the passing Wozzeck and maliciously hint that Marie and the Drum Major are having a liaison. Wozzeck's violent reaction startles them.

In a tavern, Wozzeck becomes insanely jealous when he sees Marie dancing with the Drum Major. An idiot mentions blood, and thoughts of blood begin to flood his mind.

In the barracks, Wozzeck cannot sleep, hounded by thoughts of Marie and the Drum Major. The Drum Major arrives and boasts of his conquest. They fight, and Wozzeck is knocked down, his bleeding causing him to mutter about blood.

Marie reads the Bible story of Mary Magdalen and prays for her own forgiveness.

Wozzeck and Marie walk in a forest; Wozzeck draws his knife and cuts her throat.

At an inn, Margret and the crowd notice blood on Wozzeck's hand. He returns to the crime scene, finds the knife, and throws it into the pond. He raves about blood, as if it was everywhere around him, and staining his hands and clothes. He walks into the pond to wash himself, walking deeper and deeper until the waters close over his head.

Children are playing, and they announce that Marie has been found dead. Her child cannot understand what is being said, and while the rest run to see the body, he continues playing on his hobbyhorse.

*Story Narrative with Music Examples*

**Act I – Scene 1: (A Suite of dance forms: Sarabande, Gigue, Gavotte, Pavane, Air)  
The Captain’s room.**

It is early morning in the barracks. The Captain of the regiment sits in a chair as Franz Wozzeck shaves him. Wozzeck’s movements are jittery and high-strung, provoking the Captain’s uneasiness and caution, the Captain’s words, a tritone motive of B-F that pervades the opera: “Langsam, Wozzeck, langsam! (“Slowly, Wozzeck, slowly!”)

**“Langsam, Wozzeck, langsam!”**



**CAPTAIN: Langsam, Wozzeck, langsam!  
Slowly, Wozzeck, slowly!**

The Captain continues his attempts to decelerate Wozzeck’s impetuosity, philosophizing that he need not rush because there is plenty of time. Wozzeck succinctly responds: “Ja wohl, Herr Hauptmann!” (“Yes, Captain!”); Wozzeck’s response is monotonously voiced on the same D flat note, and in the same rhythm.

**“Ja wohl, Herr Hauptmann!”**



**WOZZECK: Jawohl, Herr Hauptmann!  
Yes, Captain!**

The Captain ruminates about time, becoming uneasy and melancholy at the reality that in a single day the earth revolves about the sun like a mill wheel. Wozzeck continues shaving the Captain, his apparent indifference irritating the Captain.

The Captain expresses his concern that Wozzeck seems to be hypertense and worried. He urges Wozzeck to be extrovert and reveal his inner thoughts, suggesting that Wozzeck’s nervousness is the consequence of guilt. But Wozzeck remains uncommunicative.

The Captain inquires about the weather, Wozzeck’s response again short and distant. The Captain becomes riled and condescendingly condemns Wozzeck as a dimwit. He then proceeds to denounce Wozzeck’s immorality, because he fathered a child out of wedlock and without the blessing of the church.

The mention of his illegitimate child provokes Wozzeck to respond to the Captain. He explains that God would not spurn a poor little boy just because he was not blessed before conception. Then, he invokes the words of Jesus: “Suffer the little children to come unto Me!”

Wozzeck senses that he is being tormented by the Captain and pleads for sympathy and understanding: “Wir arme Leut!” (“Poor folk like us!”) is the opera’s most significant motive, which explains that unfortunate people like Wozzeck have no money, and therefore cannot afford conventional morality, a luxury of the wealthy. He is a poor man, however, if he could afford the accoutrements of a gentleman he would be virtuous; but even in heaven, the poor would be forced to help make thunder.

**“Wir arme Leut!”**

The image shows a musical score for the aria 'Wir arme Leut!' from the opera Wozzeck. It consists of a piano accompaniment with a treble and bass clef. The melody is written in the treble clef, and the bass line is in the bass clef. The music is in 3/4 time and features a mix of eighth and sixteenth notes, with some rests. The key signature has one flat (B-flat).

WOZZECK: Wir arme Leut    Sehn Sie, Herr Hauptman, Geld, Geld!    Wer kein Geld hat!  
 Poor folk like us! Money, you see, Sir, money! With no money....

Wozzeck’s agitation unnerves the Captain. After the shaving is finished, the Captain dismisses Wozzeck and reproaches him for being so hypertense: he should think less, and not rush so much; “Langsam, langsam!” (“Go slowly, slowly!”)

**Act I - Scene 2: (Rhapsody) Outside the town. Late afternoon in an open field.**

Wozzeck and Andres, another soldier of the regiment, are in a thicket where they cut and gather sticks for the Captain. Wozzeck is irritated by the eerie atmosphere, which he is convinced is haunted and cursed. He becomes fearful, perceiving the surroundings as a threat to him.

Andres is unaffected by Wozzeck’s paranoia and amuses himself by singing a hunter’s ditty that praises the hunter’s freedom.

**The Hunter’s song: “Das ist die schöne Jägerrei”**

Con moto

The image shows a musical score for Andres's song 'Das ist die schöne Jägerrei'. It consists of a piano accompaniment with a treble and bass clef. The melody is written in the treble clef, and the bass line is in the bass clef. The music is in 3/4 time and features a mix of eighth and sixteenth notes, with some rests. The key signature has one flat (B-flat).

ANDRES: Das ist die schö - ne    Jä - ge - rei,  
 A huntsman is the life for me,

Wozzeck is inattentive to Andres' song, the eeriness of the place overcoming him with morbid fantasies and hallucinations. He looks about fearfully: he imagines that he sees a bright streak crossing the grass; he points to sprouting toadstools and claims that once a man picked up what he thought was a hedgehog, but it was a dead man's head, and three days later the man was dead; and he fears Freemasons who seem to be approaching them.

Wozzeck's anxiety disquiets Andres, who tries desperately to divert him from his delusions by singing the second stanza of his hunter's song: about a hare that the hunter decided not to shoot.

Wozzeck urges Andres to leave, claiming that the trembling beneath them is an earthquake. But suddenly there is quiet and calm. Wozzeck hallucinates again, claiming that flames rise from the earth, and that he hears the tumultuous and dreadful sounds of trombones approaching them. And just as suddenly, it is quiet, as if the world died.

Andres, alarmed by Wozzeck's delusions, suggests that they leave.

### *Act I - Scene 3: (Military March and Lullaby) Marie's room. Evening.*

Marie is at a window with her child, excited by the sounds of approaching military music; she greets the soldiers enthusiastically as they pass by.

#### *"Soldaten, soldaten sind schöne Burschen!"*

The image shows a musical score for a vocal line and piano accompaniment. The vocal line is written in a single staff with a treble clef and a key signature of one flat (B-flat). The piano accompaniment is written in two staves, with a bass clef on the left and a treble clef on the right. The music is in a 3/4 time signature and consists of several measures of music, including a melodic line for the voice and a rhythmic accompaniment for the piano.

MARIE: Sol - da - ten, Sol - da - ten sind schö - ne Bur - schen!  
The soldiers, the soldiers are handsome fellows!

As her neighbor Margret looks on, Marie flirts with the Drum Major as he passes by, commenting on his virility as he flourishes his baton to acknowledge her. Marie's praise of the handsome soldiers sparks a vulgar quarrel with Margret, both obviously competing with each other to attract the attention of the soldiers.

Afterwards, Marie turns lovingly to her child, pitying the boy whom she addresses as a poor whore's baby. She sings a lullaby to him, and he falls off to sleep.

#### *Lullaby: "Mädel, was fangst Du jetzt an?"*

The image shows a musical score for a vocal line and piano accompaniment. The vocal line is written in a single staff with a treble clef and a key signature of one flat (B-flat). The piano accompaniment is written in two staves, with a bass clef on the left and a treble clef on the right. The music is in a 3/4 time signature and consists of several measures of music, including a melodic line for the voice and a rhythmic accompaniment for the piano.

MARIE: Mädel, was fangst Du jetzt an? Hast ein klein Kind und klein Mann!  
Maiden, what song shall you sing? You have a child, but no ring!



**Act I – Scene 5: (Rondo) The street before Marie’s house. Evening twilight.**

Marie stands before the Drum Major, proudly proclaiming that she never met such a virile man: a chest like a bull; and a beard like a lion. Marie’s is not shy about expressing her desire for the man, as well as her yearning for a better life.

The Drum Major brags that she should see him on a Sunday when he wears his plumes and white gloves; he is a figure of a man that even the Prince admires.

Marie provokes the brawny Drum Major, who compliments her femininity, and tells her that together they can breed a whole race of Drum Majors. He assaults her and they struggle, the Drum Major sensing the devil is in her eyes.

**The Assault**

Andante affettuoso



DRUM MAJOR: Wildes Tier!  
Savage beast!

MARIE: Rühr mich nicht an!  
Keep your hands off!

The Drum Major overwhelms Marie, and she submits to him: “Ah, have it your own way, what matter?”

Act II is composed with traditional forms; it has been described as a five-movement symphony: Sonata, Fugue, Adagio, Scherzo, and Rondo.

**Act II – Scene 1: (Sonata) Marie’s room. It is morning.**

Marie holds her child. As the morning sun floods the room, she gazes into the mirror and admires the glitter of the stones of the earrings the Drum Major gave her. Then she reminisces momentarily about her tryst with the Drum Major.

She sings a song to the child to help him go to sleep, the song expressing Marie’s unhappiness: the maiden who must keep the window closed tight to keep out the gypsy spirit that would liberate her and bring her happiness.

Marie again comments about her miserable life of poverty. She urges the boy to go to sleep, telling him to close his eyes so that the Sandman cannot throw sand in them.

Wozzeck enters, causing Marie to instinctively press her hands to her ears to cover the telltale earrings. But Wozzeck caught the gleam of something and inquires about it. Marie claims that she found an earring. Wozzeck sagaciously points out how strange it is that she found a matching pair.

Marie explodes in anger, inquiring if Wozzeck believes that she is bad. Wozzeck shrugs off her questions and responds drearily. He notices that the child is sweating as he sleeps and indignantly proclaims that their ilk must not only sweat while working under the sun, but also while in sleep, Wozzeck's mournfulness underscored with the music of "Wir arme Leut!" ("Poor folk like us!"), which was introduced in the first scene of the opera.

Wozzeck gives Marie money, his pay from the Captain, and money the Doctor paid him for his experiments. Marie thanks him, and he then insists that he must go, his suspicions of Marie's unfaithfulness aroused.

Marie muses sadly about her depravity; she is overwhelmed with guilt and disgusted with herself.

### *Act II – Scene 2: (Fugue) The street. During the day.*

The Doctor and the Captain meet in the street and greet each other with irony. Their motives are contrapuntally contrasted: the flamboyant captain's theme reminiscent of the opening scene of the opera is heard in the upper stave, while the Doctor's calm and distinguished theme is heard in the bass; Wozzeck's theme with its faltering triplets suggests his helplessness.

#### *Wozzeck's tormentors:*



The Captain inquires why the Doctor is rushing. The Doctor responds with malicious delight, frightening the hypochondriac Captain by telling him of the considerable number of his patients who have died recently. He then provides the Captain with a quick diagnosis of his condition: bloated neck, excess weight, and an apoplectic constitution. He then concludes that within the next few weeks, the Captain could have a stroke, but with luck, only one side of his body would be paralyzed, perhaps from the waste down. He proclaims that it will be an interesting case, and if God wills that his flabby tongue be paralyzed, even partially, they could conduct some immortal experiments. The Captain pales in terror, already envisioning mourners at his funeral, wiping tears from their eyes as they grieve for such a good man.

Wozzeck passes by, and the Captain and Doctor detain him in order to make him the butt of their malicious humor. The Captain admonishes Wozzeck for always rushing about so nervously, running as if his mission was to shave every beard at the university; and fearful that he would be hanged if he left a single hair uncut.

They inject their malicious poison by asking Wozzeck if he found a hair from a long beard in his soup this morning. The Doctor hums some military music and beats time with

his stick like a Drum Major. The Captain inquires if it was a hair from the beard of a soldier? Was it from a Drum Major?

Wozzeck is no match for their cunning innuendo and irony. But they have succeeded in planting their seeds of jealousy. The Captain, relishing his sadism, suggests that Wozzeck hurry around the corner where he might find that hair on two red lips.

***Wozzeck's jealousy:***



Wozzeck turns pale as he contemplates Marie's infidelity. He explodes indignantly, claiming that she is all that he has in the world. He concludes that the Captain and Doctor are merely joking, and then he babbles incoherently.

The Doctor feels Wozzeck's pulse and finds it feeble and irregular, his eyes staring and tense. Wozzeck cries out violently, scaring the Captain and Doctor by proclaiming that their torture could drive a man to hang himself in despair. He then runs from his tormentors and disappears.

The Captain feels a trifle disconcerted: the Doctor merely remarks casually that Wozzeck is a phenomenon. The Doctor notices that the Captain is on the verge of another lapse into maudlin self-pity and hurries away, the Captain chasing him.

***Act II – Scene 3 (Largo): The street before Marie's house on a dreary day.***

Wozzeck is visibly nearer the mental breaking point as he anxiously confronts Marie. He stares at her and rambles incoherently about sin and shame, and then comments that her beautiful red mouth has no blisters. Marie becomes frightened by Wozzeck's harsh tone. Wozzeck asks whether "he" stood where he now stands, prompting Marie's response that many people pass here, and that she cannot forbid the street to anyone. Wozzeck raises his hand threateningly, which terrifies Marie, who says that she would rather be struck by a knife than a hand.

Marie becomes fearful and disappears into the house. Wozzeck becomes terrified as his mind becomes preoccupied and trapped with its *idée fixe*: a knife. Wozzeck's universe whirls about him as he despairingly disappears down the street.

***"Der Mensch ist ein Abgrund" ("Man is an abyss")***



**Act II – Scene 4: (Scherzo) Late evening at a tavern garden.**

Girls dance with soldiers and apprentices; others promenade or recline; and there are drunks in various stages of intoxication babbling incoherently about nonsense.

Wozzeck watches with repulsion as Marie and the Drum Major dance wildly and lustfully, the Drum Major pawing her body with his hands. As Marie laughs, Wozzeck curses her, his crazed jealousy intensifying. He is about to attack Marie and the Drum Major when the dance suddenly stops and they disappear.

Andres grabs his guitar, and together with another group, breaks into a hunters' refrain. Andres then sings a boisterous ditty about girls who flirt and carouse with soldiers.

An idiot sneaks up to Wozzeck's side and remarks slyly that the place smells of blood. Suddenly, Wozzeck sees his entire surroundings in a red mist, and begins to rant and rave incoherently. All the dancers, including Marie and the Drum Major are twisting, turning, and rolling over each other in what Wozzeck perceives as a sea of blood.

**Act II – Scene 5: (Rondo) Soldiers' dormitory. It is night.**

Sleeping soldiers are snoring. Wozzeck tosses and turns, and then complains to Andres that he is unable to sleep; each time he closes his eyes he sees Marie dancing with the Drum Major. He envisions the glitter of a knife-blade before him and cries out: "And lead us not into temptation."

The Drum Major enters, noisily drunk and bragging about his latest conquest: her firm breasts and thighs, burning eyes. He tells the soldiers that if they want to know her name, they should ask Wozzeck. The Drum Major pulls out his flask and offers it to Wozzeck, who turns his head aside. Wozzeck whistles mockingly, provoking the Drum Major to lose his temper. He erupts into a fury, pulls the physically inferior Wozzeck from his bed and nearly strangles him.

The Drum Major forces Wozzeck to whistle, takes another swig from his flask, praises his virility, and then leaves. Wozzeck, his face bleeding, staggers to his bed. Andres and the others comment cynically, and then return to sleep.

Wozzeck stares vacantly and comments: "One after the other!" The harsh music yields to a stark silence that suggests Wozzeck's hopelessness and powerlessness in a hostile world.

**Act 3 – Scene 1: (Invention on a theme) Marie's room. It is night.**

Marie is in her room reading aloud from the Bible by the light of a flickering candle. She reads the story of an adulteress who Christ forgave: "I do not condemn thee. Go and sin no more." Marie is overcome with guilt and seeks forgiveness.

She grieves for her child, foretelling the opera story's tragic conclusion with a tender tale of a poor child whose father and mother died, the hungry child weeping day and night.

Suddenly Marie realizes that Wozzeck had not visited her yesterday or today. But her thoughts are preoccupied with her guilt and forgiveness. She turns again to the Bible and seeks the story of Mary Magdalen: "And she knelt at His feet and began to wash at His feet, kissing them, wetting them with her tears and anointing them with ointment." Marie cries out: "Oh, Lord, if only I could anoint Your feet with ointment." "You had mercy on her, have mercy on me too."

**Act III – Scene 2: (Invention on a note) A path in the forest by a pond. Twilight.**

Marie urges Wozzeck to quicken his step because it is getting dark and she is anxious to return to town. Wozzeck leads Marie to a bench and expresses his sympathy for having walked so far, and then he assures her that her feet will not hurt her much longer.

Wozzeck inquires how long they have known each other. Marie responds that it will be 3 years at the next Whitsuntide. Ominously, Wozzeck asks her how long she thinks it will last, alarming her. Marie feverishly leaps to her feet and suggests that they leave. But Wozzeck pulls her down roughly beside him, his talk taking a sinister turn: with profound irony, he compliments her goodness, piety, and fidelity. Then his mood suddenly changes as he speaks of the sweetness of her lips; if he could kiss those lips forever he would forego a promise of heaven.

Marie shivers as the evening dew begins to fall, but she is also frightened, sensing menace in Wozzeck's demeanor; different instruments in the orchestra begin to sound a vibrating B natural, the note associated with Wozzeck's thoughts of murder and the knife.

There is an ominous silence as the moon rises, Wozzeck imagining that it is blood red; the B natural vibrates more strongly in the orchestra. Wozzeck cries out about the moon, "Like a bloodred iron" and then draws the knife.

He shouts to Marie: "No one, Marie... if not me... then no one" and plunges the knife into her throat. Wozzeck is seemingly bewildered as he observes her falling dead. He stoops over the corpse and says, "Dead!"

He straightens himself nervously, and steals away in silence, the inexorable B natural heard with the full power of the orchestra, building in a long crescendo from very soft to very loud, and crashing in a climax of almost unbearable intensity.

**Act III – Scene 3: (Invention on a rhythm) Inside a dimly lit tavern.**

A number of people are dancing to a polka played by an out-of-tune piano.

**Polka:**

Wozzeck is trying to forget his crime, feverishly urging the others to dance and dance again, to jump and sweat, for sooner or later the devil will take them all anyway.

He loses his self-control, ousts the piano player and plays a song of his own. He then sits at a table and seizes Margret, pulling her on his lap and embracing her. She sings a simple little song that says that long dresses and pointed shoes are inappropriate for servant girls.

Margret's mention of shoes causes Wozzeck's mind to suddenly snap: "No! No shoes! One can go to hell barefooted!" Margret sees blood on Wozzeck's hand, arousing others to gather and stare and point at the blood. Wozzeck panics. He stammers that he must have

cut himself and then inadvertently wiped his hand on the wound. The crowd derides his excuse, and Margret further points out that the blood runs all the way up his elbow. Wozzeck cries out wildly: “Are you saying I’m a murderer?” Wozzeck then curses the accusers and rushes away from them.

**Act III – Scene 4: (Invention on a hexachord) The forest path. Moonlit.**

It is midnight. Wozzeck has returned to the murder scene, paranoid and terrified that the knife will be found and betray him. He stumbles on Marie’s body and notices that she wears a red necklace, and he wonders if it — like the earrings — was the wages of her sin. He searches frantically for the knife, finds it, and flings it into the pond. Suddenly a blood-red moon shines through the clouds, the witness and discloser of his crime. All nature seems to be proclaiming it: frogs croak eerily amid mysterious and sinister night sounds.

**Dread night:**



Wozzeck becomes paranoid again, this time believing that he threw the knife too near the shore where it will be found by bathers. He wades deeper and deeper into the pond in search of the knife, the water washing away the blood stains that he feels still remain on him. But the water itself turns to blood as he groans and walks deeper into the water as it covers his head. He drowns and disappears, the music suggesting the sensation of bubbles rising upward in water, under a macabre moon.

The Captain and the Doctor had been taking an evening stroll and heard the choked cries of someone drowning. They stand before the silent waters, terrified by the eeriness of the night: the red moon and the gray mist. Groans are heard again, but fainter in the distance. The Captain is unnerved and panics, tugging at the Doctor to leave.

**Act III – Scene 5: (Invention on a regular quaver movement) A street before Marie’s house. Children are playing.**

It is morning, and the sun shines brightly. Wozzeck’s child rides a hobbyhorse while all the other children play and sing the game of ring-around-a-rosy with Wozzeck’s child in the middle of the ring.

Other children excitedly shout that a woman’s body has been found on the path by the pond, and other children tell the child that it is his mother who is dead; the child does not understand and continues to ride his hobbyhorse, but faster and seemingly with more delight. Children rush away to the pond to see the body. He remains on his hobbyhorse, unable to comprehend what has happened, perhaps fated to the unfortunate life of his parents.

After a moment's hesitation, Marie's child rushes after the other children, still crying "Hopp!"

The opera concludes with a sense of emptiness and numbness as the orchestra gradually fades into silence.

*Epilogue*





***CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE***  
***Opera: From the 20th Century***

## **Opera: From the 20th Century**

### ***Atonalism and Serialism***

Ultimately, the vast majority of concert and opera-goers throughout Europe and America detested serial music; they found it sterile and nonsensical, and dismissed it as a solution to a nonexistent problem. Most modern composers continued to embrace tonality. (See Chapter 20, Berg: Atonal Expressionism, Page 385)

A German musico-dramatic composer outside the Viennese orbit was Carl Orff, best known for his singular work, the oratorio-style *Carmina Burana* (1937), a work exploiting repetitive rhythms and bare harmonies. His major effort in musical drama was the trilogy, *Antigonae* (1949), *Oedipus der Tyrann* (1959), and *Prometheus* (1968), its texture a fusion of spoken and declaimed texts combined with incidental music of almost brutal force.

After World War II, serialism seemed a most appropriate musical language: a system of musical expression analogous to the chaos of the war experience. Young composers, such as Pierre Boulez in France, and Milton Babbitt in America, applied the Schoenberg theories in an even more systematic manner than the master. At the mid-twentieth century, it seemed that serialism had triumphed, as Boulez declared: "every musician who has not felt...the necessity of the serial language is useless."

Academic scholars of music became enthralled by the mathematical rigor and discipline of the serial technique; it could be taught much more easily than tonal modernism that emphasized stylistic diversity. By the 1960s, serialist composers had become ensconced on the faculties of America's most prestigious schools of music. In Europe, subsidized radio orchestras aggressively adopted serialist programming to the point where younger tonal composers often found it all but impossible to get a hearing. There was a smugness among the serialists, who proclaimed that in order for a composer to remain in the mainstream, he could no longer write tonal music.

Nevertheless, tonal composers continued to compose tonal masterpieces well into the 1970s: Britten, Shostakovich, Copland, Bernstein, and Rorem, although some of them did partially capitulate to the system, albeit involuntarily.

### ***The American Experience***

In the twentieth century, American opera began to achieve its own identity, its stories and music based on historical themes that were combined with folk and popular musical idioms. The first American opera performed at the Metropolitan Opera was *The Pipe of Desire* (1910), by Frederick Shepherd Converse, followed by *Mona* and *Shanewise* (1912), by Horatio W. Parker.

Other operas of the period were: Victor Herbert's *Natoma*, *The Maid from the Mountains* (1911), a work saturated with American and Native American themes; Louis Gruenberg's *The Emperor Jones* (1933), based on Eugene O'Neal; Marc Blitzstein's jazz-centered *The Cradle Will Rock* (1936); Deems Taylor's *The King's Henchman* (1927) and *Peter Ibbetsen* (1931); and Douglas Moore's *The Devil and Daniel Webster* (1939).

Gian Carlo Menotti was one of the most popular American opera composers, producing melodramas and sentimental tragedies in a variety of eclectic musical styles: *The Medium* (1946), *The Consul* (1950), *Amahl and the Night Visitors* (1951), and *The Saint of Bleeker Street* (1954).

Aaron Copland composed *The Tender Land* (1954), a story of a struggling Midwest farm family during the 1930s, its music using very uncomplicated diatonic harmonies combined with gently lyrical colloquial vocal writing.

Samuel Barber achieved success with *Vanessa* (1958), its libretto by Gian Carlo Menotti, but it quickly slipped from the active repertory: avant-garde contemporary composers considered its score too traditional; it possessed a lush tonal harmonic language with sumptuous melodies, an operatic structure with set-pieces, and highly charged recitative and arias. Barber's *Antony and Cleopatra* (1966), commissioned to inaugurate the new Metropolitan Opera House in New York was a failure that vanished quickly.

One of the most important American operas that is consistently in the repertory — and continually gaining in popularity — is George Gershwin's *Porgy and Bess* (1935), a blending of folk elements and popular music styles in a powerful drama of America's struggling underclasses. Two of the most frequently performed American operas are saturated with folk-like music: *The Ballad of Baby Doe* (1956), by Douglas Moore, a music drama of the American West of the late nineteenth century; and *Susannah* (1955), by Carlisle Floyd, a melodrama about the American South. Other American operas of the period that are still performed with frequency are Virgil Thomson's *The Mother of Us All* (1947), the Susan B. Anthony story with a libretto by Gertrude Stein, and Carlyle Floyd's *Of Mice and Men* (1969), inspired by the John Steinbeck novel.

### **Post Modernism: Minimalism**

During the late 1960s, a number of American composers concluded that serialism had reached a dead end: the term "post-modern" was invoked to describe a new style, a playful nihilism in which the high moral seriousness and technical complexity of modernism would be supplanted; their new musical language was called minimalism.

Avant-garde minimalist composers employed a variety of media and idioms, and often constructed their works from relatively simple tonal materials and harmonies, but the essence of minimalism was that the musical material was repeated ad infinitum, and in shifting rhythmic patterns.

John Adams has been one of the most prominent minimalist opera composers: *Nixon in China* (1987) and *The Death of Klinghoffer* (1991). Philip Glass composed an opera trilogy about historical achievers: *Einstein on the Beach* (1976) about the prominent scientist; *Satyagraha* (1980), about Gandhi the pacifist; and *Akhmaten* (1984), about the pharaoh who ruled Egypt circa 1376 to 1362 BC. At a time when elitist composers were purveying aggressively discordant and forbiddingly complex music, Glass and the minimalists offered music that was consonant and purposely simple, the most prominent feature of the music its driving rhythms and repetitive melodic patterns.

The underlying effect of minimalist music was tonal: it was not atonal and not a return to functional tonality; the minimalists rejected classical traditions as well as modernism. On the contrary, minimalists created a sense of irony by twisting familiar elements from existing traditions and transplanting them into new settings.

Essentially, minimalism presented a relatively straightforward use of tonal materials, causing concertgoers to interpret the genre in relation to classical music traditions. The concert-opera public accepted minimalism, and suddenly composers envisioned new opportunities for success through minimalism; they abandoned serialism in droves.

### **Transformations in the 1980s**

Serialism was the wrong direction for modern music; but minimalism had also run its course, the euphoria from its novelty and its inherent shallowness causing it to fade rapidly. Starting in the 1980s, a new generation of American composers began producing scores influenced neither by serialism or minimalism, but by the long-unfashionable tonal modernists; they reattached classical composition to the mainstream of musical tradition and returned to tonalism.

Although the music styles of these composers vary widely, all of them speak the language of tonality, without irony or self-consciousness; they are neither embarrassed nor paralyzed by tradition. Their goal is to compose serious music that is intelligible to the common listener, and they have no reservation in composing music within conventional and traditional forms: symphony, opera, chamber music and ballet. These new tonalist composers may employ limited elements of atonalism, dissonance and even minimalism for effects, but essentially they are the new tonalists.

Many of the operas composed during the latter part of the twentieth century were essentially tonal in their harmonies:

Judith Weir's *A Night at the Chinese Opera* (1987), a play within a play about a group of Chinese actors forced into labor during the reign of Kubla Khan, which was acclaimed for its wondrous orchestration;

André Previn's *Streetcar Named Desire*, adapted from the Tennessee Williams play, which was unveiled by the San Francisco Opera in 1998, has been considered a harmonically opulent and extremely lyrical vocal work;

Mark Adamo's *Little Women*, based on the Louisa May Aclott novel, which was introduced by the Houston Grand Opera in 1998, is an opera whose composer was hailed as possessing an instinctive sense of dramatic pacing, but also a voice-centered composer of beguiling lyrical music, who occasionally enlivens his score with 12-tone effects;

Jake Heggie's *Dead Man Walking*, based on Sister Helen Prejean's book about a Louisiana execution, had its debut at the San Francisco Opera in 2000. Heggie is known for songs that artfully flatter the voice, and much of his writing is tonal, although occasionally laced with shards of dissonance and jazzy riffs;

Ezra Laderman's *Marilyn* about the last years of Marilyn Monroe premiered at NY City Opera in 1993;

Hugo Weisgall's biblical opera, *Esther*, also premiered at NY City Opera in 1993, a work with riveting dissonance but impassioned vocal music;

Michael Daugherty's *Jackie O* (1997) was acclaimed for its use of rock rhythms and exceptional instrumentalism;

John Harbison's *The Great Gatsby* (1999), premiering at the Metropolitan Opera, has been acclaimed for its pungent chromaticism, which reflects the composer's profound early experiences with sacred music, as well as his enduring love of early jazz;

William Bolcom's *A View from the Bridge* (1999), Arthur Weinstein's adaptation of Arthur Miller's powerful play, received mostly ecstatic critical reviews. The work draws on eclectic American musical idioms from ragtime to doo-wop, but these popular elements are treated as serious music: the overall integration of music and drama evolved into a powerfully pungent opera. The opera was commissioned by the Lyric Opera of Chicago, and was mounted by the Metropolitan Opera for its 2002 season;

Carlisle Floyd's *Cold Sassy Tree*, based on the Olive Ann Burns novel taking place in the deep South, premiered at Houston Grand Opera in 2000 and was critically acclaimed as a lyric masterpiece;

The Royal Danish Opera premiere of Poul Ruder's *The Handmaid's Tale*, based on Margaret Atwood's futuristic novel, reflects an audaciously inventive composer and a wildly compelling score;

*L'Amour de Loin* (2000), by Finnish composer Kaija Saariaho, that premiered at the Salzburg Festival, is about a young lovesick prince in twelfth-century Aquitaine that has been acclaimed as a complex but richly hued score;

Cary John Franklin's *Loss of Eden* (2002), commissioned by the Opera Theater of St. Louis, deals with the Lindbergh kidnapping; it contains a harmonic language that ranges from soothing diatonic or modal to occasional dissonance.

And new operas are very much on the horizon:

In 2003, Glimmerglass Opera premiered Stephen Hartke's adaptation of Guy de Maupassant story "Boule de Suif," temporarily titled "The Refugees"; it is a story of a group of French people in flight during the Franco-Prussian war. Hartke won acclaim for orchestral and chamber works that meld an astringent harmonic voice with rhythmic vitality.

San Francisco Opera commissioned Lewis Spratlan, the 1977 Pulitzer prize-winning composer of *Life is a Dream*, to compose a one-act opera, *Earthwise*, a story about a retiring scientist who decides to select a successor from among three clones of herself.

For its new opera theater, Florida Grand Opera has commissioned David Carlson to compose *Anna Karenina*, based on the Tolstoy novel. And the Metropolitan Opera commissioned Tobias Picker's *An American Tragedy*, based on the novel by Theodore Dreiser.

### ***The Future***

As the twenty-first century unfolds, American opera companies are reaping the benefits of an opera resurgence: attendance is rising, opera has been demystified by supertitles, and neophytes are discovering that opera is good theater.

There has been a notable increase in the commissioning of new works, as earnest opera administrators respond to their audience's growing interest. And composers have been busy creating operas that possess accessible musical styles: lush neo-Romanticism, folksy Americana, and for effect, a halfhearted minimalism and atonalism that rejects some of the radicalism of its predecessors.

During the 400-year history of modern opera, there have been many milestones and metamorphoses, each striving to perfect and improve the art of music drama. Opera will continue to be a dynamic art form, a recognition that the magic of opera is its ability to realize words through the emotive power of music.



## *Recommended Research Resources*

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#### **Berg, Alban (1885-1935)**

Theodor Adorno, *Alban Berg: Master of the Smallest Link* (Cambridge University Press 1994)  
George Perle, *The Operas of Alban Berg: Wozzeck* (University of California Press 1989)

#### **Debussy, Claude (1862-1918)**

Simon Trezise, *The Cambridge Companion to Debussy* (Cambridge University Press 2004)  
Leon Vallas, *Claude Debussy: His Life and Works* (Dover Publications 1973)

#### **Donizetti, Gaetano (1797-1848)**

John Allitt, *In the Light of Romanticism and the Teaching of John Simon Mayr* (Element Books 1991)  
William Ashbrook, *Donizetti and his Operas* (Cambridge, 1983)  
James P. Cassaro, Guy A. Marco (Editor), *Gaetano Donizetti: A Guide to Research* (Garland Publishing, 2000)  
Phillip Gossett, *Anna Bolena and the Artistic Maturity of Gaetano Donizetti* (Oxford, 1985)  
Charles Osborne, *The Bel Canto Operas: Of Rossini, Donizetti and Bellini* (Timber, 1995)  
Herbert Weinstock, *Donizetti and the World of Opera in Italy, Paris and Vienna in the First Half of the Nineteenth Century* (Hippocrene Books 1979)

#### **Gluck, Christoph Willibald (1714-1787):**

Patricia Howard, *Gluck and the Birth of Modern Opera* (St. Martin's Press, 1963)  
Patricia Howard, *Christoph Willibald Gluck: A Guide to Research* (Garland Publishing 1987)  
Ernest Newman, *Gluck and the Opera: A Study in Musical History* (1990)

#### **Gounod, Charles (1818-1893)**

Steven Heubner, *The Operas of Charles Gounod* (Oxford, 1990)  
Marie A. De Bovet, *Charles Gounod: His Life and Works* (Best Books 2001)

#### **Handel, George Frideric (1685-1759)**

David Burrows, *Handel* (Oxford University Press 2000)  
Winton Dean and J. Merrill Knapp, *Handel's Operas, 1704-26* (1987)  
Edward J. Dent, *Handel* (Duckworth 1934)  
Otto Erich Deutsch, *Handel: A Documentary Biography* (Da Capo 1995)  
Christopher Hogwood, *Handel* (1984)  
Paul Henry Lang, *George Frideric Handel* (Dover 1996)

#### **Lully, Jean-Baptiste (1632-1687)**

Philippe Beausant, *Lully* (1992)  
Joyce Newman, *Jean Baptiste Lully and His Tragédies Lyriques* (Ann Arbor, 1979)

#### **Mascagni, Pietro (1863-1945)**

Alan Mallach *Pietro Mascagni and His Operas* (Northeastern University Press 2002)  
Mario Pasi, *Mascagni* (Elite Publishing 1989)  
David Stivender, *The Autobiography of Pietro Mascagni* (1975)

#### **Metastasio, Pietro (1698-1782)**

Charles Burney, *Memoirs of the Life and Writings of Abate Metastasio* (Da Capo 1971)

**Meyerbeer, Giacomo (1791-1864)**

Arthur Hervey, *Meyerbeer* (Reprint Services Corporation 1990)  
Karin Pendle, *Eugène Scribe and French Opera of the 19th Century* (1979)

**Monteverdi, Claudio (1567-1643)**

Denis Arnold and Nigel Fortune, eds., *The New Monteverdi Companion* (1985)  
Dennis Arnold, rev. Tim Carter *Monteverdi* (Oxford University 2000)  
Paolo Fabri, trans. Tim Carter *Monteverdi* (Cambridge University Press 1994)  
Leo Schrade, *Monteverdi, Creator of Modern Music* (1979)  
Denis Stevens, *Monteverdi: Sacred, Secular and Occasional Music* (Rutherford, 1978)  
Gary Tomlinson, *Monteverdi and the End of the Renaissance* (Berkeley, 1987)

**Mozart, Wolfgang Amadeus (1756-1791)**

Edward J. Dent, *Mozart's Operas: A Critical Study* (Oxford University 1991)  
Albert Einstein, *Mozart: His Character; His Work* (1945)  
Daniel Heartz, *Mozart's Operas* (Berkeley, 1990)  
Paul Henry Lang, *The Creative World of Mozart* (1963)  
Maynard Solomon, *Mozart: A Life* (Harper Collins 1995)  
Nicholas Till, *Mozart and the Enlightenment: Truth, Virtue, and Beauty in Mozart's Operas* (W. W. Norton 1995)

**Mussorgsky, Modest (1839-1881)**

Caryl Emerson, *Boris Godunov: Transpositions of a Russian Theme* (1986)  
Caryl Emerson, *Modest Musorgsky and Boris Godunov: Myths, Realities, Reconsiderations* (Cambridge, 1994)

**Puccini, Giacomo (1858-1924)**

Mosco Carner, *Puccini: A Critical Biography* (Knopf 1968)  
Charles Osborne, *The Complete Operas of Puccini* (Da Capo 1990)  
Mary Jane Philips-Matz, *Puccini: A Biography* (Northeastern Univ. Press 2002)  
William Weaver, *The Puccini Companion* (W.W.Norton 2000)

**Rameau, Jean-Philippe (1683-1764)**

Thomas Street Christensen, *Rameau and Musical Thought in the Enlightenment* (Cambridge, 1994)  
Cuthbert Morton Girdlestone, *Jean-Philippe Rameau: His Life and Work* (Dover 1990)

**Rossini, Gioacchino (1792-1868)**

Alan Kendall, *Gioacchino Rossini: The Reluctant Hero* (Gollanc 1996)  
Richard Osborne, *Rossini* (Oxford University Press 2002)  
Nicholas Till, *Rossini: His Life and Times* (Hippocrene Books 1983)  
Francis Toye, *Rossini, the Man and His Music* (Dover 1990)  
Herbert Weinstock, *Rossini: A Biography* (Limelight 1990)

**Scarlatti, Alessandro (1660-1725)**

Edward J. Dent, *Alessandro Scarlatti: His Life and Works*, (1960)  
Donald Jay Grout, *Alessandro Scarlatti: An Introduction to His Operas* (Berkeley 1979)

**Strauss, Johann Jr. (1825-1899)**

Camille Crittenden, *Johann Strauss and Vienna: Operetta and the Politics of Popular Culture* (Cambridge University Press 2000)

J. Pastene, *The Life and Music of the Strauss Family of Vienna* (1951)

Marcel Prawy, *Johann Strauss* (1991)

J. Wechsberg, *The Waltz Emperors* (1973)

**Strauss, Richard (1864-1949)**

Matthew Boyden, *Richard Strauss* (Northeastern University Press 1999)

Bryan Gilliam, *Richard Strauss and His World* (Duke University 1992)

Alan Jefferson, *Richard Strauss: Der Rosenkavalier* (Cambridge 1986)

Michael Kennedy *Richard Strauss* (Cambridge 1999)

Ernest Newman, *Richard Strauss* (Reprint Services Corporation 1990)

Charles Osborne, *The Complete Operas of Richard Strauss* (1988)

**Verdi, Giuseppe (1813-1901)**

Julian Budden, *The Operas of Verdi* (Oxford, 1973-1981)

David R. B. Kimbell, *Verdi in the Age of Italian Romanticism* (1981)

Charles Osborne, *Verdi: A Life in the Theatre* (1989)

Mary Jane Philips-Matz, *Verdi: A Biography* (Oxford, 1993)

**Wagner, Richard (1813-1883)**

Robert W. Gutman, *Richard Wagner: The Man, His Mind, and His Music* (1968)

Bryan Magee, *The Tristan Chord: Wagner and Philosophy* (Henry Holt 2000)

Barry Millington, *Wagner* (Princeton 1992)

Ernest Newman, *The Wagner Operas* (Princeton 1991)

Richard Wagner, *My Life* (Cambridge, 1983)

Curt von Westerhagen, *Wagner: A Biography* (Cambridge, 1978)

**Weber, Carl Maria (1786-1826)**

Donald and Alice Henderson, *Carl Maria von Weber: A Guide to Research* (Garland Publishing 1995)

William Saunders, *Weber* (Da Capo 1970)

John Warrack, *Carl Maria von Weber* (Cambridge University 1995)

Max von Weber, J. Palgrave Simpson, ed., *Carl Maria von Weber: The Life of an Artist* (Reprint Services Corporation 1990)

*Dictionary of Opera and Musical Terms*

## ***DICTIONARY OF OPERA AND MUSICAL TERMS***

**Accelerando** - Play the music faster, but gradually.

**Adagio** - At a slow or gliding tempo, not as slow as largo, but not as fast as andante.

**Agitato** - Restless or agitated.

**Allegro** - At a brisk or lively tempo, faster than andante but not as fast as presto.

**Andante** - A moderately slow, easy-going tempo.

**Appoggiatura** - An extra or embellishing note preceding a main melodic note. Usually written as a note of smaller size, it shares the time value of the main note.

**Arabesque** - Flourishes or fancy patterns usually applying to vocal virtuosity.

**Aria** - A solo song usually structured in a formal pattern. Arias generally convey reflective and introspective thoughts rather than descriptive action.

**Arietta** - A shortened form of aria.

**Arioso** - A musical passage or composition having a mixture of free recitative and metrical song.

**Arpeggio** - Producing the tones of a chord in succession rather than simultaneously.

**Atonal** - Music that is not anchored in traditional musical tonality; it does not use the diatonic scale and has no keynote or tonal center.

**Ballad opera** - Eighteenth-century English opera consisting of spoken dialogue and music derived from popular ballad and folksong sources. The most famous is *The Beggar's Opera*, which is a satire of the Italian opera seria.

**Bar** - A vertical line across the staff that divides the music into measures.

**Baritone** - A male singing voice ranging between bass and tenor.

**Baroque** - A style of artistic expression prevalent in the 17<sup>th</sup> century that is marked by the use of complex forms, bold ornamentation, and florid decoration. The Baroque period extends from approximately 1600 to 1750 and includes the works of the original creators of modern opera, the Camerata, as well as the later works by Bach and Handel.

**Bass** - The lowest male voice, usually divided into categories such as:

**Basso buffo** - A bass voice that specializes in comic roles: Dr. Bartolo in Rossini's *The Barber of Seville*.

**Basso cantante** - A bass voice that demonstrates melodic singing quality: King Philip in Verdi's *Don Carlos*.

**Basso profondo** - the deepest, most profound, or most dramatic of bass voices: Sarastro in Mozart's *The Magic Flute*.

**Bel canto** - Literally, "beautiful singing." It originated in Italian opera of the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries and stressed beautiful tones produced with ease, clarity, purity, and evenness, together with an agile vocal technique and virtuosity. Bel canto flourished in the first half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century in the works of Rossini, Bellini, and Donizetti.

**Cabaletta** - A lively, concluding portion of an aria or duet. The term is derived from the Italian word "cavallo," or horse: it metaphorically describes a horse galloping to the finish line.

**Cadenza** - A flourish or brilliant part of an aria (or concerto) commonly inserted just before a finale. It is usually performed without accompaniment.

**Camerata** - A gathering of Florentine writers and musicians between 1590 and 1600 who attempted to recreate what they believed was the ancient Greek theatrical synthesis of drama, music, and stage spectacle; their experimentation led to the creation of the early structural forms of modern opera.

**Cantabile** - An indication that the singer should sing sweetly.

**Cantata** - A choral piece generally containing Scriptural narrative texts: the *St. Matthew Passion* of Bach.

**Cantilena** - Literally, "little song." A lyrical melody meant to be played or sung "cantabile," or with sweetness and expression.

**Canzone** - A short, lyrical operatic song usually containing no narrative association with the drama but rather simply reflecting the character's state of mind: Cherubino's "Voi che sapete" in Mozart's *The Marriage of Figaro*.

**Castrato** - A young male singer who was surgically castrated to retain his treble voice.

**Cavatina** - A short aria popular in 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century opera that usually heralded the entrance of a principal singer.

**Classical Period** - A period roughly between the Baroque and Romantic periods, the late 18<sup>th</sup> through the early 19<sup>th</sup> centuries. Stylistically, the music of the period stresses clarity, precision, and rigid structural forms.

**Coda** - A trailer added on by the composer after the music's natural conclusion. The coda serves as a formal closing to the piece.

**Coloratura** - Literally, "colored": it refers to a soprano singing in the bel canto tradition. It is a singing technique that requires great agility, virtuosity, embellishments and ornamentation: The Queen of the Night's aria, "Zum Leiden bin ich auserkoren," from Mozart's *The Magic Flute*.

**Commedia dell'arte** - A popular form of dramatic presentation originating in Renaissance Italy in which highly stylized characters were involved in comic plots involving mistaken identities and misunderstandings. Two of the standard characters were Harlequin and Colombine: The "play within a play" in Leoncavallo's *I Pagliacci*.

**Comprimario** - A singer who performs secondary character roles such as confidantes, servants, and messengers.

**Continuo, Basso continuo** - A bass part (as for a keyboard or stringed instrument) that was used especially in baroque ensemble music; it consists of an independent succession of bass notes that indicate the required chords and their appropriate harmonies. Also called *figured bass*, *thoroughbass*.

**Contralto** - The lowest female voice, derived from "contra" against, and "alto" voice; a voice between the tenor and mezzo-soprano.

**Countertenor** - A high male voice generally singing within the female high soprano ranges.

**Counterpoint** - The combination of two or more independent melodies into a single harmonic texture in which each retains its linear character. The most sophisticated form of counterpoint is the fugue form, in which from two to six melodies can be used; the voices are combined, each providing a variation on the basic theme but each retaining its relation to the whole.

**Crescendo** - A gradual increase in the volume of a musical passage.

**Da capo** - Literally, "from the top"; repeat. Early 17<sup>th</sup>-century da capo arias were in the form of A B A, with the second A section repeating the first, but with ornamentation.

**Deus ex machina** - Literally "god out of a machine." A dramatic technique in which a person or thing appears or is introduced suddenly and unexpectedly; it provides a contrived solution to an apparently insoluble dramatic difficulty.

**Diatonic** - A major or minor musical scale that comprises intervals of five whole steps and two half steps.

**Diminuendo** - Gradually becoming softer; the opposite of crescendo.

**Dissonance** - A mingling of discordant sounds that do not harmonize within the diatonic scale.

**Diva** - Literally, “goddess”; generally the term refers to a leading female opera star who either possesses, or pretends to possess, great rank.

**Dominant** - The fifth tone of the diatonic scale; in the key of C, the dominant is G.

**Dramatic soprano or tenor** - A voice that is powerful, possesses endurance, and is generally projected in a declamatory style.

**Dramma giocoso** - Literally, “amusing (or humorous) drama.” An opera whose story combines both serious and comic elements: Mozart’s *Don Giovanni*.

**Falsetto** - A lighter or “false” voice; an artificially-produced high singing voice that extends above the range of the full voice.

**Fioritura** - It., “flowering”; a flowering ornamentation or embellishment of the vocal line within an aria.

**Forte, fortissimo** - Forte (*f*) means loud; mezzo forte (*mf*) is fairly loud; fortissimo (*ff*) is even louder; additional *fff*’s indicate greater degrees of loudness.

**Glissando** - Literally, “gliding.” A rapid sliding up or down the scale.

**Grand opera** - An opera in which there is no spoken dialogue and the entire text is set to music, frequently treating serious and tragic subjects. Grand opera flourished in France in the 19<sup>th</sup> century (Meyerbeer); the genre is epic in scale and combines spectacle, large choruses, scenery, and huge orchestras.

**Heldentenor** - A tenor with a powerful dramatic voice who possesses brilliant top notes and vocal stamina. Heldentenors are well suited to heroic (Wagnerian) roles: Lauritz Melchior in Wagner’s *Tristan und Isolde*.

**Imbroglia** - Literally, “intrigue”; an operatic scene portraying chaos and confusion, with appropriate diverse melodies and rhythms.

**Largo or larghetto** - Largo indicates a very slow tempo, broad and with dignity. Larghetto is at a slightly faster tempo than largo.

**Legato** - Literally, “tied” or “bound”; successive tones that are connected smoothly. The opposite of legato is staccato (short and plucked tones.)

**Leitmotif** - Literally, “leading motive.” A musical fragment characterizing a person, thing, feeling, or idea that provides associations when it recurs.

**Libretto** - Literally, “little book”; the text of an opera.

**Lied** - A German song; the plural is “lieder.” Originally, a German art song of the late 18<sup>th</sup> century.

**Lyric** - A voice that is light and delicate.

**Maestro** - From the Italian “master”; a term of respect to conductors, composers, directors, and great musicians.

**Melodrama** - Words spoken over music. Melodrama appears in Beethoven’s *Fidelio* and flourished during the late 19<sup>th</sup> century in the operas of Massenet (*Manon* and *Werther*).

**Mezza voce** - Literally, “medium voice”; singing with medium or half volume. It is sometimes intended as a vocal means to intensify emotion.

**Mezzo-soprano** - A woman’s voice with a range between soprano and contralto.

**Obbligato** - An accompaniment to a solo or principal melody that is usually played by an important, single instrument.

**Octave** - A musical interval embracing eight diatonic degrees; from C to C is an octave.

**Opera** - Literally, “work”; a dramatic or comic play in which music is the primary vehicle that conveys its story.

**Opera buffa** - Italian comic opera that flourished during the bel canto era. Highlighting the opera buffa genre were buffo characters who were usually basses singing patter songs: Dr. Bartolo in Rossini’s *The Barber of Seville*; Dr. Dulcamara in Donizetti’s *The Elixir of Love*.

**Opéra comique** - A French opera characterized by spoken dialogue interspersed between the musical numbers, as opposed to grand opera in which there is no spoken dialogue. Opéra comique subjects can be either comic or tragic.

**Operetta, or light opera** - Operas that contain comic elements and generally a light romantic plot: Strauss’s *Die Fledermaus*, Offenbach’s *La Périchole*, and Lehar’s *The Merry Widow*. In operettas, there is usually much spoken dialogue, dancing, practical jokes, and mistaken identities.

**Oratorio** - A lengthy choral work, usually of a religious nature and consisting chiefly of recitatives, arias, and choruses, but performed without action or scenery: Handel's *Messiah*.

**Ornamentation** - Extra embellishing notes—appoggiaturas, trills, roulades, or cadenzas—that enhance a melodic line.

**Overture** - The orchestral introduction to a musical dramatic work that sometimes incorporates musical themes within the work. Overtures are instrumental pieces that are generally performed independently of their respective operas in concert.

**Parlando** - Literally, “speaking”; the imitation of speech while singing, or singing that is almost speaking over the music. Parlando sections are usually short and have minimal orchestral accompaniment.

**Patter song** - A song with words that are rapidly and quickly delivered. Figaro's “Largo al factotum” in Rossini's *The Barber of Seville* is a patter song.

**Pentatonic** - A five-note scale. Pentatonic music is most prevalent in Far Eastern countries.

**Piano** - A performance indication for soft volume.

**Pitch** - The property of a musical tone that is determined by the frequency of the waves producing it.

**Pizzicato** - An indication that notes are to be played by plucking the strings instead of stroking the string with the bow.

**Polyphony** - Literally, “many voices.” A style of musical composition in which two or more independent melodies are juxtaposed; counterpoint.

**Polytonal** - Several tonal schemes used simultaneously.

**Portamento** - A continuous gliding movement from one tone to another through all the intervening pitches.

**Prelude** - An orchestral introduction to an act or a whole opera that precedes the opening scene.

**Presto, prestissimo** - Vigorous, and with the utmost speed.

**Prima donna** - Literally, “first lady.” The female star or principal singer in an opera cast or opera company.

**Prologue** - A piece sung before the curtain goes up on the opera proper: Tonio's Prologue in Leoncavallo's *I Pagliacci*.

**Quaver** - An eighth note.

**Range** - The span of tonal pitch of a particular voice: soprano, mezzo-soprano, contralto, tenor, baritone, and bass.

**Recitative** - A formal device used to advance the plot. It is usually sung in a rhythmically free vocal style that imitates the natural inflections of speech; it conveys the dialogue and narrative in operas and oratorios. *Secco*, or dry, recitative is accompanied by harpsichord and sometimes with other continuo instruments; *accompagnato* indicates that the recitative is accompanied by the orchestra.

**Ritornello** - A refrain, or short recurrent instrumental passage between elements of a vocal composition.

**Romanza** - A solo song that is usually sentimental; it is shorter and less complex than an aria and rarely deals with terror, rage, or anger.

**Romantic Period** - The Romantic period is usually considered to be between the early 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. Romanticists found inspiration in nature and man. Von Weber's *Der Freischütz* and Beethoven's *Fidelio* (1805) are considered the first German Romantic operas; many of Verdi's operas as well as the early operas of Wagner are also considered Romantic operas.

**Roulade** - A florid, embellished melody sung to one syllable.

**Rubato** - An expressive technique, literally meaning "robbed"; it is a fluctuation of tempo within a musical phrase, often against a rhythmically steady accompaniment.

**Secco** - "Dry"; the type of accompaniment for recitative played by the harpsichord and sometimes continuo instruments.

**Semitone** - A half step, the smallest distance between two notes. In the key of C, the half steps are from E to F and from B to C.

**Serial music** - Music based on a series of tones in a chosen pattern without regard for traditional tonality.

**Sforzando** - Sudden loudness and force; it must stand out from the texture and be emphasized by an accent.

**Singspiel** - Literally, "song drama." Early German style of opera employing spoken dialogue between songs: Mozart's *The Magic Flute*.

**Soprano** - The highest range of the female voice ranging from lyric (light and graceful quality) to dramatic (fuller and heavier in tone).

**Sotto voce** - Literally, “below the voice”; sung softly between a whisper and a quiet conversational tone.

**Soubrette** - A soprano who sings supporting roles in comic opera: Adele in Strauss’s *Die Fledermaus*; Despina in Mozart’s *Così fan tutte*.

**Spinto** - From the Italian “spingere” (to push); a singer with lyric vocal qualities who “pushes” the voice to achieve heavier dramatic qualities.

**Sprechstimme** - Literally, “speaking voice.” The singer half sings a note and half speaks; the declamation sounds like speaking but the duration of pitch makes it seem almost like singing.

**Staccato** - Short, clipped, detached, rapid articulation; the opposite of legato.

**Stretto** - Literally, “narrow.” A concluding passage performed in a quick tempo to create a musical climax.

**Strophe** - Strophe is a rhythmic system of repeating lines. A musical setting of a strophic text is characterized by the repetition of the same music for all strophes.

**Syncopation** - A shifting of the beat forward or back from its usual place in the bar; a temporary displacement of the regular metrical accent in music caused typically by stressing the weak beat.

**Supernumerary** - A “super”; a performer with a non-singing and non-speaking role: “Spear-carrier.”

**Symphonic poem** - A large orchestral work in one continuous movement, usually narrative or descriptive in character: Franz Liszt’s *Les Preludes*; Richard Strauss’s *Don Juan*, *Till Eulenspiegel*, and *Ein Heldenleben*.

**Tempo** - The speed at which music is performed.

**Tenor** - The highest natural male voice.

**Tessitura** - The usual range of a voice part.

**Tonality** - The organization of all the tones and harmonies of a piece of music in relation to a tonic (the first tone of its scale).

**Tone poem** - An orchestral piece with a program.

**Tonic** - The principal tone of the key in which a piece is written. C is the tonic of C major.

**Trill** - Two adjacent notes rapidly and repeatedly alternated.

**Tutti** - All together.

**Twelve-tone** - The twelve chromatic tones of the octave placed in a chosen fixed order and constituting, with some permitted permutations and derivations, the melodic and harmonic material of a serial musical piece. Each note of the chromatic scale is used as part of the melody before any other note is repeated.

**Verismo** - Literally “truth”; the artistic use of contemporary everyday material in preference to the heroic or legendary in opera. A movement particularly in Italian opera during the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries: Mascagni’s *Cavalleria rusticana*.

**Vibrato** - A “vibration”; a slightly tremulous effect imparted to vocal or instrumental tone to enrich and intensify sound, and add warmth and expressiveness through slight and rapid variations in pitch.

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