

400 YEARS OF OPERA

Coordinators: Mark Dichter and Charles Troob

We look at opera in three different ways: the sweep of its history, including periods that are not part of standard operagoing; opera as singing, including voice types and the role of the singer as interpreter of drama and music; opera on stage, as intense drama or grand spectacle. Each session focuses on a small number of musical examples or staged scenes. On occasion we provide multiple performances of the same material, discuss differences and compare preferences. Casual operagoers benefit from close listening to a few representative works and from information about the fundamentals of opera. We are exposed to wonderful music and performances that we may not have heard before. Short readings provide background information.

(This is a repeat of a study group given in Spring 2019.)

Mark went to the old Met (Family Circle) and saw Risë Stevens as Carmen. The rest is history. **Charles** has had a Met subscription since 1978. He once saw *Prince Igor* at the Palace of Congresses in the Kremlin—the Bolshoi Theater was under renovation.

Type of Study Group: Presentation followed by discussion

Readings and other Materials/Online Services:

Links are provided to online audio and video resources. Readings are circulated as PDF files. Most material is available on a study group website.

Approximately 30-60 minutes of prior listening and 10-15 pages of reading for each session. Supplementary listening/viewing recommendations are circulated for people who like what they hear and want more.

******* SYLLABUS - A WORK IN PROGRESS *******

This is the syllabus used originally for Fall 2020. Some sessions and examples may be changed for Spring 2023.

WEEK 1

TOPIC:

Some fundamentals of opera

An overview of various statements about the nature of opera The building blocks of music drama, used differently at different points in opera history: dialogue and recitative, arias, duets, trios, etc., chorus, continuous musical flow and elaborate long scenes (e.g., Mozart finales)

Different conceptions of the opera experience: grand spectacle (including dance, pyrotechnics and vocal display) vs. intense music drama

READING/VIEWING/LISTENING:

Short passages on what opera is and how it achieves its effects

Web page on recitative (URL to be added)

Two film scenes which describe the listener's response to music from opera--Callas's *Andrea Chenier* aria in *Philadelphia*; unidentified duet (actually from *The Marriage of Figaro*) from *The Shawshank Redemption*

Musical examples: "Tu se morta," Monteverdi's *I'Orfeo*; "Non so piu," from *The Marriage of Figaro*; Sextet from *Lucia di Lammermoor*; Triumphant Scene from *Aida*, "O patria mia," *Aida*

Texts for all musical samples, plus the Beaumarchais text corresponding to "Non so piu"

QUESTIONS:

The two movies present different views of why people love opera. What are they? They're both valid. Do you as a listener tend to one or the other?

We listen to "Tu se morta" (*I'Orfeo*), which has the dramatic power of an aria but is simply accompanied recitative. Do you like it? Do you want to hear more of this opera—the very first great opera ever written?

We watch "Non so piu" (Isabel Leonard, Met production). Discuss what Cherubino is expressing in this aria. Go back to Beaumarchais' *The Marriage of Figaro* and compare the aria to its source. In what ways does the aria enhance or modify the original idea? How much of the changed effect is due to Da Ponte's libretto, how much to the musicalization by Mozart and how much to the performance by Leonard?

We watch the *Lucia di Lammermoor* sextet. How do we react to what we are seeing and hearing? Does it matter whether we know exactly what words are being sung or what each of the six characters is trying to express? Why or why not?

If there is time: In *Aida*, Verdi combined the huge scenic impressiveness of grand opera with his own intense drama. Do you

like them both? Do you go to opera more for things like the Triumphal scene—or more for great emotional singing like "O patria mia"? How important are production values to you at the opera?

WEEK 2

TOPIC:

The birth of opera in the 17th century

The kinds of vocal music being written around 1600

The Florentine Camerata's effort to reinvent the Greek fusion of words and music

The earliest operas, with a focus on Monteverdi's *I'Orfeo* A look at post-Monteverdi Italian opera (Cavalli), plus French opera and Purcell

READING/VIEWING/LISTENING:

Brief discussion of homophony and polyphony—either text or video

Short samples of ancient vocal music, including a conjecture of the sound of Greek drama, chant, medieval and Renaissance composers (for optional listening)

A madrigal by Thomas Weelkes (1600), plus a madrigal by Monteverdi

A short excerpt from Peri's *Euridice*, the first opera

An extended excerpt from *I'Orfeo*—the messenger scene followed by "Tu se morta," discussed Week 1

One or two excerpts from Monteverdi's later operas

A scene from Cavalli's *La Calisto*

The trailer for Lully's *Atys* at the Opera-Comique—includes snippets of many scenes from the opera

Janet Baker singing Dido's lament from Purcell's *Dido and Aeneas* (Note: total required viewing/listening is approximately 45 minutes.)

QUESTIONS:

Using the madrigal as a model for polyphonic music—what is it good at expressing—what are some of its limitations for drama? While we now think of the Camerata as a highly intellectual organization, it was in one sense musically regressive—it privileged words over music—and the music was simple. For sophisticated musicians it seemed a dumbing down—at least until Monteverdi got involved.

A close listening of the messenger scene from *I'Orfeo*—how recitative can express in precise detail a person's thoughts and emotions. Why is Monteverdi's version more effective than Peri's?

Developments and different directions in opera after *I'Orfeo*

WEEK 3

TOPIC:

18th century opera seria—spectacular singing, elaborate poetry, enormous success—a dramatic dead end

The birth of opera buffa, a lower form that ended up as the model for much 19th century opera

Handel, *Rinaldo*, "Lascio ch'io pianga" (5 minutes) from the movie *Farinelli*

Other Handel TBD

Pergolesi, *l'Olimpiade*, "Se cerca, se dice" (scene and aria, 10 minutes)

VIEWING/LISTENING:

Pergolesi, *La Serva Padrona*, "Stizzoso mio stizzoso" (3 minutes)

Cimarosa, *Il Matrimonio Segreto*, "Le faccio un inchino," trio (4 minutes)

Optional viewing:

Beverly Sills as Cleopatra—short clip (2 minutes)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gar62F7rqLk>

Rameau, *Hippolyte et Aricie* (fourth act finale)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Fl0E8Yr-a1E> (7 minutes)

READINGS:

Baroque Opera: 4 pages from *First Nights at the Opera*, by Thomas F. Kelly

The castrato: 2 pages from *Italian Opera*, by David R. B. Kimbell

The art of Metastasio: 3 pages from *Italian Opera*, by David R. B. Kimbell

Excerpts from Wikipedia articles on Metastasio's libretto for *L'Olimpiade* and Rameau's *Hippolyte and Aricie*

Optional reading:

<https://www.thegreatcoursesdaily.com/opera-buffa/>

QUESTIONS:

The period of *opera seria* produced great music and at least some libretti of high artistic quality. What obstacles do we face in appreciating this work today? Did you like what you heard in this class?

From the short excerpts of 18th century comic opera that you have seen, discuss ways in which it anticipates some popular entertainments of today, including sitcom and musical comedy. What are some of the differences?

WEEK 4: The pivotal role of Mozart—in summing up opera seria, in taking opera buffa and making it the basis for lively and elaborate

music drama and in giving birth to German opera (*Idomeneo*, *Don Giovanni*, *The Magic Flute*)

WEEKS 5-7: The opera singer, with major attention to 19th century opera

WEEK 5: Female voices—examples of great performances in the major vocal categories

WEEK 6: Male voices—examples of great performances in the major vocal categories

WEEK 7: How is a singer trained—vocal production, role coaching (with demonstration)

WEEKS 8-11: Return to opera history

WEEK 8: Opera as drama—five full scenes from the opera repertory that display opera's ability to move or amuse us

WEEK 9: The early 20th century—Strauss, Janacek, Berg, Debussy, Ravel

WEEK 10: Midcentury titans—Brecht/Weill, Shostakovich, Gershwin, Britten, Poulenc, Stravinsky

WEEK 11: Contemporary opera—Adams, Glass, some Europeans (possibly Saariaho, George Benjamin), contemporary American opera

WEEK 12: Opera in production
Wagner's Ring Cycle from its first productions to the present