

UCT Summer School 2021

THE STORY OF OPERA: Lecture 1: Early Beginnings – Lecture Notes

Presented by Elizabeth Handley – *MUSIC OF NOTE* 🎵

INTRODUCTION

What is OPERA?

Definitions: Opera, Operetta, Light Opera (Gilbert & Sullivan), the Musical.

- **Opera:** an imaginative synthesis of visual and musical art forms.

A The Birth of Opera in Italy: Two streams of development:

a) **The Sacred:** the **Early Medieval church:** liturgical plays: Mystery and Miracle Plays. *Sacre Rappresentazioni* in Italy -> opera & oratorio.

- **Oratorio:** religious subject & sacred texts. **Requiem:** an elaborate mass for the dead.

- **Pageants:** royal weddings with music: singing, instruments - viols (predecessors of the violin family), lutes, recorders, flutes, cornets, sackbuts (ancestor of the trombone), & harpsichord.

b) **The Secular: The Camerata**

- The Fall of Constantinople **1453** - Greek and Byzantine scholars settled first in Italy->

The **RENAISSANCE** - “rebirth” or “reawakening”.

- Ancient Greek drama -> early musical theatrical experiments..

- Late 16th C: the **Camerata:** Giovanni de’Bardi (1534-1612), poet **Ottavio Rinuccini**, composers: **Jacopo Peri, Giulio Caccini & Vincenzo Galilei**.

- **Recitativo:** a single vocal line sung following the rhythm of the spoken Italian words, with simple instrumental accompaniment. Used for: dialogue, narration, declamation.

- The first surviving opera: by **Jacopo Peri & Giulio Caccini**, with libretto by **Rinuccini: Euridice (1600)**, with *ritornelli* (instrumental interludes). Instrumental writing not specific.

B Claudio MONTEVERDI (1567-1643): “bridge” between Renaissance and Baroque

- First opera: **Orfeo (1607)**. Second opera: *Arianna/Ariadne* (1608).

- **6th March 1637:** first public opera house opened in Venice: Monteverdi: *Il Ritorno d’Ulisse in Patria* (1641) & *L’incoronazione di Poppea* (1642).

C The dawn of the Baroque Era: Monteverdi’s pupils: **Piero Francesco Cavalli (c.1602-76) & Marc’Antonio Cesti (1623-69):** many operas.

- Various elements of operatic practise emerge:

- The **aria:** solo song: for self-expression (soliloquy); vocal display.

- The **overture:** played before the action begins; sets the mood.

- The **orchestra:** established in front of the stage; used to create mood & atmosphere.

- **Famous violin makers:** Nicolo Amati (1596-1684), Antonio Stradivari (1644-1737) & Giuseppe Guarneri (1698-1744)

- **Famous Italian Baroque violin virtuosi:** Corelli and Vivaldi.

- The **scenery and special effects:** lavish and expensive; Raphael, Leonardo da Vinci.

- **Plots:** drawn from mythology or ancient pseudo-history.

- **Marc’Antonio Cesti: Il pomo d’oro (The Golden Apple)** (1666): Vienna, stage sets designed by architect Lodovico Burnacini (1636-1707).

- **Bel canto (beautiful singing):** a flowing, lyrical song form inspired by the Italian language.

- **Piero Francesco Cavalli: Il Gaisone (Jason) (1649)** – *bel canto* arias.

D Opera in France

- As in Italy: for state occasions: Francis I (1494-1547) & Leonardo da Vinci; 2 Italian consorts: Catherine de' Medici m Henry II, & Maria de' Medici m Henry IV.

- **Around 1600: a new spirit manifested in the arts!**

THE BAROQUE (c 1600 - c 1750):

- Rubens, Handel, Bach, Rembrandt, Dutch genre painters, Bernini, Caravaggio, highly ornate churches & cathedrals, florid sculpture, music... and OPERA!

- **Baroque art:** robust, decorative, massive, complex, grandiose, and full of motion.

a) **Giovanni Battista Lulli /Jean Baptiste LULLY (1632 – 87) & Louis XIV the “Sun King”:** ballet; with Jean-Baptiste Poquelin (1722-73) (**Molière**) -> the **Comédie-Ballet** eg. ***Le bourgeois gentilhomme (1670):*** “Les deux Baptistes”: Lully & Molière: 10 opera-ballets; Versailles.

- Lully also collaborated with Philippe Quinault (1635-88), Pierre Corneille (1606-84) & Jean Racine (1639-99).

- The “**air**”: the French equivalent of the Italian aria, but subsidiary in France. NB the **dance**.

- **Choruses** also important in French opera: to advise, comment, exhort or dissuade.

- **The orchestra:** to accompany the voices & create atmosphere. Louis XIV's *Quatre-vingt violins du roi* (the King's 24 Violins), + other instruments: trumpets & drums, flutes & oboes.

- Lully's contribution: the **French Overture:** slow intro + faster section, eg. *Alceste*.

- **Visual presentation:** stage machinery to create fantastic effects, storms, volcanoes, etc.

Differences between French and Italian opera: **France:** literary element, mythology; **Italy:** melody & harmony, historical element & medieval literature.

b) **Jean Philippe RAMEAU (1683-1764) & François Couperin (Couperin Le Grand) (1668-1733):** peak of the French Baroque.

- Rameau: *Hippolyte et Aricie (1733)*, *Castor et Pollux (1737)*, *La Pincesse de Navarre (1745)*

- A storm of controversy: Rameau's operatic style vs. Lully's: ***La guerre/querelle des Bouffons (The War/Quarrel of the Buffoonists)***.

E The “ordinary” folk, “below stairs”: opéra comique (18th C) – pièces en vaudevilles.

- **Giovanni Battista Pergolesi (1710-36):** *La serva padrona (The Maid as Mistress) (1733)*, Paris.

F Christophe Willibald GLUCK (1714-87): operatic reforms: simplified the music to serve the poetry, & reduced the contrast between the aria and recitative: ***Orfeo et Euridice (1762)***.

E The Restoration Period in England: Charles II (1630-85): 1660: the **English Baroque: the **masque:** a lavish extravaganza; mythological subjects.**

a) **Henry PURCELL (1659-95) & James II:** 54 stage works/“masques”. Only true opera: ***Dido and Aeneas (1690)*** - collaborated with poet laureate **John Dryden (1631-1700)**.

b) **George Frederick HANDEL (1685-1759):** Italian *opera seria (Grand Opera)*: founded his own opera company in **1719**, the Royal Academy of Music: 42 operas, eg. *Rinaldo*: Classical mythology, history, and medieval-romantic material; often absurd.

- An “opera war”: **King George II** (Elector of Hanover) who supported Handel vs. the Prince of Wales (future George III) who did not.

The Castrati: male, castrated sopranos <- the Catholic Church: **Francesco Bernardi (Senesino) (1686-1758) & Carlo Broschi (Farinelli) (1705-82)**.

c) **A new ballad opera:** *The Beggar's Opera (1728)* by poet John Gay (1685-1732) & **Dr John Christopher Pepusch (1667-1752):** a satire of *opera seria* -> Handel's opera company went bankrupt; turned to oratorio, eg. *The Messiah, Samson, Judas Maccabeus*.

LIST OF MUSICAL ILLUSTRATIONS

- 1: VERDI:** *Rigoletto: La donna e mobile* (Pavarotti)
- 2:** Applause
- 3: Mystery play:** *The Creation* (1470's): the Guild of Builders, York/Steve Belb (2018)
- 4: PERI & CACCINI:** *Euridice: Prologo*: Tragedia (Françoise Masset)
- 5: MONTEVERDI:** *Orfeo: Opening Ritornello: Toccata*
- 6: MONTEVERDI:** *Orfeo: La Musica's introduction*
- 7: MONTEVERDI:** *Orfeo: Orfeo's aria: Rosa de Ciel (Rose of the Heavens)* (Helmut Krebs, tenor)
- 8: MONTEVERDI:** *Orfeo: Chorus of Nymphs & Shepherds with ritornelli.*
- 9: CESTI:** *Il Pomo d'oro: Prologue*: Choir and Orchestra *Spectaculum*/ Gerhard Kramer
- 10: CAVALLI:** *Il Gaisone (Jason): Delize, contente*, (Christophe Dumaux b 1979), Symphony Orchestra of Vlaamse Opera Antwerp/Ghent/Federico Maria Sardelli
- 11: LULLY:** *Le bourgeois gentilhomme: Marche*, Chorus of the Turks, *Le Muphti*. Les Musiciens du Louvre/Marc Minkowski, Bernard Delétré (bass)
- 12: LULLY:** *Alceste: (French) Overture*. La Grande Écurie et la Chambre du Roy/Jean-Claude Malgoire
- 13: RAMEAU:** *Castor et Pollux: excerpt*. Les Talens Lyriques/Christophe Rousset.
- 14: PERGOLESI:** *La serva padrona: opening – with recitative*. Orchestra Filarmonica Marchigiana, Italy/Gustav Kuhn, Donato di Stefano (bass)
- 15: GLUCK:** *Orfée et Euridice: J'ai perdu mon Euridice* (Singer unknown)
- 16: PURCELL:** *Dido and Aeneas: Pursue thy conquest – love* Judith Nelson (soprano), Taverner Choir & Players/Andrew Parrott
- 17: HANDEL:** *Rinaldo: Lascia mia pianga (Let me weep)*: Ewa Malas-Godlewska (soprano) & Derek Lee Ragin (countertenor)
- 18: PEPUSCH:** *The Beggar's Opera: Opening & (French) Overture*. Pro Arte Orchestra & Chorus/Sir Malcolm Sargent. John Neville (Macheath)
- 19: RAMEAU:** *Les Indes Galantes: Rondeau*

Excellent Books

- A Rough Guide to Opera* (Rough Guides), Matthew Boyden
- Opera* (Eyewitness Companions), Alan Riding & Leslie Dunton-Downer
- A Beginner's Guide to Opera*, Jeremy Nicholas
- OPERA, A HISTORY*, Christopher Headington, Roy Westbrook, Terry Barfoot
- General: *A History of Western Music*, Donald Jay Grout