

HISTORY OF WESTERN MUSIC I

MUS 3314-1

Dr. Tony Mowrer

Chapter 18

Opera and Music Drama in the 19th Century

p. 625

Paris became the operatic capital of Europe in the 19th century. The Parisians favored a serious opera such as that exhibited in *The Vestal Virgin* by Spontini. This work united the heroic character of late Gluck with the dramatic tension of the rescue plot. All was clothed in a grand display of solo, choral, and orchestral work.

With the rise of the powerful middle class, *Grand Opera* came into being. A chief composer of Grand Opera was Myerbeer. Grand Opera was more of a spectacle than a rich musical experience. Librettos were written to exploit every possible occasion for ballets, choruses, ensembles, and crowd scenes.

Myerbeer's *Les Huguenots* is one example of Grand Opera.

Listen *Les Huguenots* Note that *Ein feste burg* is included.

Another composer of Grand Opera was Rossini---*William Tell*.

Grand Opera influenced Bellini, Verdi, and Wagner.

Opera Comique

The difference between comic opera and grand opera is that comic opera used spoken dialogue rather than recitative. It was less pretentious, required fewer singers, and was written in a simpler musical idiom.

Lyric Opera

A romantic type of comic opera developed in lyric opera. Its main appeal is through the melodies. Subject matter is dramatic or fantasy. The scale is larger than *opera comique* but not as large as *grand opera*.

A landmark opera is *Carmen* (1875 in Paris) by Georges Bizet. It is opera comique because it used spoken dialogue. Later, recitative was added. This is significant among romantic opera because it related to the exotic (Spanish bullfighters). It also rejected a mythical plot in favor of a more real one. This was common in late 19th century opera. This is actually anti-romantic and a move toward realism.

The romantic consumation of the French Opera tradition in the line of descent from Rameau and Gluck was Berlioz' *Les Troyens* (1856-1858). This is the crown of Berlioz' operatic efforts. The work is based on the 2nd and 4th books of Virgil's *Aeneid*.

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Italian opera had been firmly established and was healthy. It was, therefore, less susceptible to change. While romantic elements did permeate Italian opera, it did so gradually. Also, opera was the only major genre in Italy. This promoted a somewhat conservative attitude.

The founder of Italian Serious Opera was Johann Simon Mayr (1763-1845). He promoted a general acceptance of concepts championed by Jommelli, i.e. expansion of orchestral color, a more important orchestra, and more extensive use of the chorus.

The principal Italian composer of early 19th century opera was Gioachino Rossini. He had a gift for melody and a flair for stage effect. Among his best serious operas were *Tancredi*, *Otello*, and *La Donna del Lago*. Rossini also wrote successful comic operas including *La Cenerentola*, *La Gazza Ladra*, and *Il Barbiere di Siviglia*. He is known for his beautiful melodies. *William Tell* is a notable Grand Opera by Rossini.

Composition of beautiful melodies became important in Italy in this time. The style of aria in these operas is sometimes referred to as *bel canto* or beautiful song.

Rossini represented the deep-rooted Italian conviction that an opera is the highest manifestation of an intensely cultivated art of song, and that its primary purpose is to delight and move the hearer by music that is melodious, unsentimental, spontaneous, and popular.

Gaetano Donizetti (1797-1848) was one of the most prolific opera composers of the second quarter of the 19th century. His most enduring works include the serious operas *Lucrezia Borgia* and *Lucia di Lammermoor*. Donizetti's most enduring comic operas include *L'elisir d'amore* and *Don Pasquale*. The comic operas have lasted better than the serious ones. Donizetti is the immediate precursor of Verdi.

Vincenzo Bellini (1801-1835) composed only serious operas. Chief among them are *La Sonnambula*, *Norma*, and *I Puritani*.

The Italians really continued the practice of *bel canto* (beautiful singing) that had begun in Italian opera years earlier.

Giuseppe Verdi (1813-1901) brought Italian opera to a level of perfection. All his works are serious. And, with the exception of a few works like his *Requiem Mass*, all his works are for the stage. In all, Verdi composed 26 operas. He required a libretto that was strong and involved emotional situations, had contrasts, had speed of action. One characteristic of Verdi's work is the strong choral work. Among Verdi's works are *Aida*, *Luisa Miller*, *Il Trovatore*, and *La Traviata*.

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German Opera

Because there was not a strong history of opera in Germany, an atmosphere of experimentation persisted. The immediate background included *Singspiel* (German Comic Opera and spoken dialogue). Also, the Germans were strongly influenced by literature and there was effort to marry the music and text.

Two German composers of opera rise above all others.

Carl Maria von Weber's (1786-1826) chief works were *Der Freischütz*, *Oberon*, and *Euryanthe*.

Der Freischütz clearly exemplifies the characteristics of German Romantic opera. It is adapted from Faust.

- Based on Medieval history, legend, or fairy tale
- Includes supernatural beings
- Set in a wild, mysterious background
- Humans become the agents of the supernatural
- There is a triumph of angelic over demonic powers
- Victory is equal to salvation or redemption
- The work uses simple folk melodies
- There is a strong reliance on harmony and orchestral color

Listen *Der Freischütz*

Richard Wagner (1813-1883)

German Romantic opera was fully consummated in the work of Richard Wagner. In his work, harmonies were pushed to the tonal limit. Music served the purpose of the theater and is continuous throughout the acts. Because he saw his operas as bringing all the arts together, Wagner preferred that they be referred to as *Music Dramas*.

Wagner developed the *leitmotif*. This is a theme, similar to Berlioz' *idée fixe* that could be associated with a person, place, thing, or idea. Similar ideas or emotions might have a similar leitmotif. These are used constantly and could be woven together so that several leitmotives will be heard simultaneously.

Among Wagner's *music dramas*, one of his significant works was *Das Ringen der Nibelungen* (The Ring of the Nibelung). This consisted of four dramas intended to be performed on consecutive nights. The four are *Das Rheingold*, *Die Walküre*, *Siegfried*, and *Die Götterdämmerung*. Leitmotives are used throughout the ring, with many of the same motives being used in more than one music drama.

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Two terms or phrases are sometimes used to refer to some of Wagner's ideas. These are:

Gesamtkunstwerk---Translates to mean *Universal Art Form*. The idea here is that Wagner has worked to bring all the arts together, literary, visual, musical, and theatrical. Wagner was a politician and philosopher, as well as a musician. He believed he was actually bringing all the arts together. This was a significant goal of the romantic.

Das Kunstwerk der Zukunft---Translates roughly to *The Artwork of the Future*. This was the title of a series of essays by Wagner. In these, he postulates his concept of what the art of the future would be like. Among the concepts is one idea that echoes ideas of the ancient Greeks. That is that music has a power that must be accepted and that one can never really understand this power through analysis. When one listens to Wagner (and any other music), one may be moved. But, no amount of analysis will reveal why the music moves the soul. It just must be accepted.

Upon consideration of the *Prelude to Tristan und Isolde*, one begins to understand how Wagner pushed the limits of tonality. The so-called *Tristan chord* has been the subject of much analysis. And, the entire prelude proves difficult to understand from an harmonic perspective. Wagner, is forcing the listener to prepare for what is to come in the 20th century.

Wagner was a great influence on other composers. Either they studied and tried to copy him or they worked to do something different from him. After Wagner, concepts of tonality were never to be the same. Composers recognized he had pushed tonality to the very brink. To go beyond him meant devising a new harmonic language. This was done by composers such as Arnold Schoenberg.