

## **The Evolution of the Opera over the Musical Periods**

Aidan Kresak

Southern Piedmont Community College

MUS-110-MFS3: Music Appreciation

Richard Hall

12/7/2022

Throughout the musical periods, different musical genres were introduced that had an impact on the world. Many of those genres are still enjoyed by many today. The Madrigal was introduced in the Renaissance period along with the Symphony which was introduced in the Classical period. However, one of the most sophisticated and beautiful genres that were ever introduced was the opera which made its debut in the baroque period. The opera is a sort of musical drama that involves the use of an orchestra along with many talented singers to produce a very fine piece of music. According to Opera Vision (Opera Vision, n.d.), there are four main components of the opera. Those are the text, music, singing, and staging. The text or script of the opera is known as the libretto which is sung by the actors performing on stage. The music of the opera is incredibly important as it sets the main tone of the production. The singers of the opera are vital to each role in the opera. Some roles require different ranges of someone's voice in order to characterize the emotions that the actors and musicians are trying to bring forth. Lastly, the staging is critical the production as it brings out the scenery and fully captivates the audience. Some additional parts of the opera is the aria which is when one of the actors sings a solo during the production. Another component is that before each act of the opera begins, there is some sort of overture that is played to serve as a sort of prelude to the drama that is about to unfold. Across the musical periods, the opera has changed over the centuries to suit the theme of the musical period through the music that is played. One of the first operas ever produced in the Baroque period was *Giulio Cesare*. *Giulio Cesare* was written by George Friedrich Handel in 1724 and features historical characters like Cesar and Cleopatra in a fictional plot for the most part. According to Opera North (Opera North, 2019), the music in *Giulio Cesare* is broken up into recitatives and arias. During the arias, the entire plot pauses and the emotions and thoughts of the character performing the aria become the main focus for that segment of the production. One

such aria during the opera “Svegliatevi nel core” which is sung by Sesto follows a popular format known as da capo. During the aria, the singer returns to the first part of the song at the end but improvises the notes on the spot to add ornamentation to the song. Da capo was very commonly used in arias throughout the baroque period but not as commonly as binary form. The music of this opera features violas and recorders which were very common instruments used in the baroque period of music. The roles in this opera included the roles of Cesare and Sesto sung by Mezzo-Sopranos and Tolomeo who was sung by a countertenor. The roles in this opera were originally sung by castrati. Castrati were men who were castrated before puberty. This allowed their voices to retain their range and quality throughout their life without their voice ever breaking. Castratos were often used in opera up until the romantic period where the use of castration was eventually made illegal. Because of this, the roles who were originally sung by castrato’s are now almost always sung by Sopranos. This opera is sung in the Italian language and is about three hours and fifteen minutes long. Thankfully, this opera is still widely performed today thanks to Handel’s popularity in the realm of music. Operas were also written in the classical period and one such opera was The Barber of Seville. The Barber of Seville was Written by Cesare Sterbini and is an Opera Buffa with an overture and score written by Gioachino Rossini. Opera Buffa is a sort of comical opera that was introduced just shy of the beginning of the classical period and features characters that are pulled from normal life. These types of opera were typically performed during the intermission of the main opera. However, The Barber of Seville is an opera buffa the entire way with a total of four acts of comedy. According to Classicaalexburns (Burns, 2020), the opera was original introduced in 1816 but the original overture was unfortunately lost after its premiere. Rossini recreated this overture to what is now known as the overture to the Barber of Seville. The opening overture to this opera

features a fanfare that becomes an exchange between strings and woodwinds. This is one of Rossini's key styles and is similar to his critically acclaimed William Tell Overture. The original Barber of Seville is the first of a three-part set of plays with its sequel being the Marriage of Figaro. The Marriage of Figaro is also another well-known opera of the classical period and was written by Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart in 1786 which was performed almost thirty years before the Barber of Seville. The difference between Baroque and Classical operas were that operas were much more comedic in the classical period while baroque operas focused on historical events and were not very realistic. Nevertheless, both musical periods produced great operas that are still enjoyed by many today. Speaking of musical periods, the opera also carried its way into the romantic period which was a musical period where composers really began to experiment with music and how it could be played. One opera that was written during the romantic period of music was La Traviata by Giuseppe Verdi in 1853. The music in La Traviata was often very emotional and set the mood for the scenes in the opera quite often. According to Opera Lively (Gazzola, 2011), the prelude starts with a rather somber theme with the melody carried by strings. This melody is then repeated with a violin obbligato. Obbligato is when a single instrument makes a countermelody during the melody that should not be omitted. Obbligato was often used in operas to accompany the aria that was being sung in the opera with the orchestra during the romantic period. The prelude demonstrates the main heroine's hopelessness, and the melody often makes attempts to be happy but is then reduced back to melancholy. The music in the romantic period can often be very emotional and passionate and this period of music had a great impact on the way operas were performed and written. During the opera La Traviata, the performers often sing while overlapping one another. This is to demonstrate their opposing views and might perplex the audience as they struggle on who to pay attention to. The opera La

Traviata is about the main heroine Violetta and her struggles with love. When she falls in love with Alfredo, his father asks her to relinquish her love of him in order to not shame his family. She agrees and pays a horrible price for giving up her one chance to be happy in life. Operas during the romantic period often focused on the aspect of love which was a very popular theme of that music period. It was also during this time when the music of the opera became more experimental and sophisticated as composers were trying to understand new ways of writing music as well as trying to figure out what styles of music complemented each other. However, both music and the opera changed once we arrived in the contemporary period of music. The contemporary period was a time for development in the arts and the world. Electricity was becoming more mainstream and communication between different continents were beginning to become a reality. Learning about other countries methods of music had a great impact on how music was written at this time. However, this also greatly impacted the opera, and it changed the way opera were written forever. Perhaps one of the most well-known operas that were ever written during this time was Porgy and Bess. Porgy and Bess was written by the eccentric George Gershwin in 1935 and is described to have a kaleidoscope of musical styles embedded within it. One of the most well-known styles of music demonstrated within this opera was that of jazz. Jazz often consists of dissonant chords that almost stay unresolved and feels very down to earth. Thanks to Gershwin's usage of jazz, this affected the emotions and mood in Porgy and Bess and outlined the very down-to-earth setting that is represented in this production perfectly. The usage of the stage also affects the mood of the opera almost as well as the music as the setting gives the audience a taste of where the living is easy. To make this opera further its way into being an opera with a side of genre soup, Porgy and Bess also included the genre of blues to make the production sound more relaxed and heartwarming. The characters portrayed in this

production also reflect the human condition masterfully. According to Kennedy center (Williams, 2020), the heroine Bess's struggle against her past demons and the themes of acceptance and community allows the consumer the question whether the greatest of all love can defeat one's personal addiction. Thanks to its American roots and the warmth it produces, many critics stand resolved at Porgy and Bess's nickname of "The Great American Opera".

Throughout the centuries that the opera has existed, I believe that opera has changed and evolved throughout the musical periods. Each musical period built upon the fantastic musical genre that is the opera changed the music that was played within it. Along with that, events that occurred in history have also affected the many themes that are presented in these lavish productions. Many critics believe that the main purpose of the opera is to explore that state of the human race.

Whether it be love, tragedy, war, or the most despicable act ever imaginable, the opera portrays all of these themes to the fullest extent. Through the evolution of music, the opera's music has changed and has evoked new emotions with the person attending one thanks to the everchanging art of music. I believe that the opera, being a part of music, has reflected how human civilization has evolved over the years. From the themes of jealousy, hatred, and despair, the opera reflects how humans change as the years go by. I believe that we will see new themes appear in the opera as time goes on. Along with that, the type of music and instruments that are played in the opera will also change as well. From my perspective, the opera acts like the spokesperson for each period of music and summarizes how music changed during this time. Along with that, I affirm the opera also states how the other musical periods have influenced the production of the opera unfolding before us. I hope that we will get to see new operas with new instruments used as well as new themes sung about in the near future. Maybe an opera with electric guitars and synthesizers will appeal to some listeners who are attending an opera for the first time.

## Works Cited

OperaVision, (n.d.). *Opera, The Art of Emotions*. OperaVision. Retrieved from

<https://operavision.eu/feature/opera-art-emotions>

Opera North, (2019, July 5), *Giulio Cesare in a nutshell*. Opera North. Retrieved from

<https://www.operanorth.co.uk/news/giulio-cesare-in-a-nutshell/>

Burns, Alex, (2022, August 15). *Gioachino Rossini 'The Barber of Seville' Overture: Dynamic Beginnings*. Classicalexburns. Retrieved from

<https://classicalexburns.com/2022/08/15/gioachino-rossini-the-barber-of-seville-overture-dynamic-beginnings/>

Gazzola, Luiz, (2011, December 18). *Opera In Depth – La Traviata – 5. Musical Analysis*.

Opera Lively. Retrieved from <https://operalively.com/forums/content.php/166-Opera-In-Depth-La-Traviata-5-Musical-Analysis-opera>

Williams, Adina, (2020, March 26). *Porgy and Bess*. The Kennedy Center. Retrieved from

<https://www.kennedy-center.org/education/resources-for-educators/classroom-resources/media-and-interactives/media/opera/porgy-and-bess/>