

The Invention of Opera

You may remember that we learned about **humanism** in conjunction with the Renaissance. This was a new interest in the works of ancient Greek and Roman thinkers, which were considered essential to any upper-class male's education.

Up until 1600 humanism had a limited impact on music.¹ However, at the beginning of the Baroque era a group of intellectuals in Florence (now known as the "Florentine Camerata") were studying Greek tragedy, and they noted that these ancient dramatic works incorporated a lot of music, which was reported to have a powerful expressive impact. They decided that they wanted to reinvent this lost art form.

This wasn't really that radical of an invention. Many of the main elements already existed:

- Theatre is well-developed. We are already in the time of Shakespeare (1564-1616).
- Ballets and loosely-organized musical variety shows (called "Masques") were already presented at major social events.

So the first opera composers combined and extended elements that already existed to produce ambitious, "serious" dramatic works that featured constant singing.

The evolution of opera into a commercial enterprise

The original Florentine Camerata productions were private performances in someone's palace, and this was how it went for about 40 years. The aristocracy would commission operas to

¹ More on Humanism and Music

Above I say that humanism had a "limited impact" on music before 1600. The one area that the Renaissance humanists in the 1500s did find very interesting was the discussion of musical scales. Ancient mathematicians like Pythagoras actually thought that music was an important subject that could reveal many secrets of the physical world, so they would spend lots of time writing about how to properly tune musical instruments and construct scales. Renaissance scholars inherited this tradition. The ancient Greek influence on music theory is reflected in the names we use for the Medieval and Renaissance scales (also called "the musical modes") – we still talk about Dorian, Phrygian, Lydian and Mixolydian scales today. This subject is outside the parameters of this class, so that's why I'm using dismissive language about it here in the notes. It is actually an important area of study for professional musicologists.

experience with their friends, and these would involve "serious" plots that often flattered the ruling class by incorporating royal characters.

The first public opera theater opened in Venice in 1637, and it was an immediate sensation. Venice quickly saw four competing opera companies working at the same time.

In class I showed some clips from the movie *Farinelli*, which depicted a few typical scenes from a public opera theater. We saw their fascination with mechanical special effects, and a hint of how some people treated it more as a social scene than as serious entertainment.

But, of course, we also had to talk about the fact that Farinelli, the biggest opera star of the 1700's, was a *castrato*. Castrati were men who were given an operation while they were still pre-pubescent choirboys in order to preserve their high voices. Thus, as adults they sounded like sopranos. This was seen as a highly desirable quality, and they would typically play heroic male roles.

These days castrato roles can be sung by countertenors (hormonally normal men who simply work really hard at singing falsetto) or by women.

In general, Baroque opera is not very dramatically rewarding. The typical opera is a long series of solo arias designed to feature star singers like Farinelli, with a meandering and somewhat nonsensical plot.

An important technical distinction in early opera: Recitative vs. Aria

Recitative

(pronounced "WRETCH-it-tah-TEEV")

One aspect of Greek drama that attracted the attention of the Florentine Camerata was a style of quasi-musical speech that is not quite singing, but rather a method of "declamation" – the actors would supposedly present the text with a sort of melody, but they would stick close to the natural rhythm of the words. (In class I hypothesize that this might have been similar to the way preachers and politicians sometimes speak today.)

Recitative is a style of notated music that specifies a melodic shape to sing but also follows the rhythm of the words. The singer has a lot of freedom as to how fast or slow they want to deliver it. The orchestra (usually just the basso continuo, but sometimes the strings) accompanies this with a chord here and there, but there is no pulse or beat to the music.

A composer uses recitative to handle anything with a lot of words that are crucial to the plot - it covers most dialogue as well as individual speeches in which the characters reveal important information.

Arias

The word **aria** simply means “song.” Arias are the part of the opera where the characters present an actual tune. They are “the good part” that everybody comes to hear. They have a regular musical beat and a catchy melody, and they are usually accompanied by the full orchestra.

They are usually meant to express the “emotion” of the situation.

Most opera repeatedly shifts back-and-forth between these two modes of presentation.

In Baroque opera the difference between recitative and aria can be a little difficult to detect by ear. A lot of the recitatives are very slow, and they lead into arias that have a very subtle beat that perhaps doesn't contrast that strongly with the recitative. To make matters worse, Baroque composers will sometimes hang out in an in-between style called “arioso.” We'll see that the difference between these two modes of presentation actually becomes clearer as we go into the next historical period.

Dido and Aeneas

We watched a shortened version of Henry Purcell's *Dido and Aeneas*.

I talked about how I think this is the ideal starter opera. It's short, in English, and has fantastic music. It is still considered by many to be the greatest opera in English ever written.

(Our version was danced out by the Mark Morris Dance Company, a modern dance troupe based right here in Brooklyn. This is not the way they did it in the Baroque! Early opera involved singers who moved around and did all of the acting, just like you'd expect. However, I think the Mark Morris version gives us a lot of look at and makes the opera more interesting.)

Towards the end we heard Dido's famous aria, “When I am Laid in Earth” which is on our listening list.

When I am Laid in Earth

For this piece you will need to be able to recognize where the introductory recitative (“Thy Hand Belinda...”) ends and the real aria (“When I am Laid in Earth”) begins. You should be aware that it has a looping bass line. (The beginning of the aria is the moment when the looping bass line starts up!) That's about it.