

Prof. Smey

## Opera

For Tues-Thurs classes, this will be Session 8, Tues Feb 28

For the Thursday double-class, this will be on Session 9/10, Thurs March 9

### **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. 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 elements that already existed to produce a dramatic work that was sung throughout.

### **The Social History of Opera**

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 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 present the text with a sort of melody, but they would stick close to the natural rhythm of the words.

Recitative is a style of notated singing that 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) accompany this with a chord here and there.

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 get to really sing. They are "the good part" that everybody comes to hear. They have a regular musical beat and are usually accompanied by the full orchestra.

They are usually meant to express the "emotion" of the situation.

In class, we jumped forward in time and listened to a little of Mozart's *Marriage of Figaro*. Mozart is not a Baroque composer, but in his works the difference between recitative and aria is crystal clear.

In Baroque opera, on the other hand, the difference between recitative and aria is a little more fluid, and they sometimes hang out in an in-between style called "arioso." This can make it a little frustrating to try to identify the difference between recitative and aria by ear.

## **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 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.)

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.