Program notes by Dr. David Cole

“An Exotic and Irrational Entertainment” – A Brief History of Opera

- “Of all the noises known to man, opera is the most expensive.”
  Molière

- “... when a thing isn’t worth saying, you sing it.”
  Pierre Caron de Beaumarchais, *The Barber of Seville*, 1773

- “Opera is when a guy gets stabbed in the back and, instead of bleeding, he sings.”
  Ed Gardner, as Archie on *Duffy’s Tavern*, 1940

Humans have a fascination with joining words to music. Words communicate ideas, but they can only communicate emotions through inflection or context. Music communicates emotions in an unspecified way; it requires a text (i.e., an idea) to define a particular emotion. As far back as ancient Mesopotamia, we discovered that words and music enriched each other and conveyed both idea and emotion better than either by itself. The merits of words vs. music have been hotly debated ever since, the disputes as endless as arguments over cosmology or prevailing economic systems.

Leonard Bernstein in his Norton Lectures at Harvard University postulated that even the act of creation may have been sung rather than spoken. You might get some idea of the effect by listening to the opening choral entries in Joseph Haydn’s oratorio *The Creation* (especially at the words “...and God said...let there be LIGHT!”). We have evidence that both the Hebrew Psalms and the poetry of ancient Greece were accompanied by music, and that the epic poetry contests of ancient Greece were accompanied by the *aulos* (a reed instrument) and *kythera* (a type of lyre), with the verses sung to heighten their emotional content.

With the deterioration of Roman civilization in the 5th century and the rise of the Roman Catholic Church in Europe, words and music were used to create a mood of reverence for Christian worship rather than communicating the exact meaning of the text. With the beginnings of polyphony in the 10th century and continuing through the Renaissance, the intertwining of melodic lines became the principal focus of vocal music. Texts were often less than intelligible, superseded by the beauty of the music. Despite the attempted reforms of church music by the Council of Trent, melody and harmony dominated the text in both sacred and secular music.

At the turn of the 17th century, a social club in Florence fired the first salvo in a musical revolution that would forever change the way composers and audiences heard both music and words. Ironically, their intended revolution failed, but they were still revolutionary. This group of noblemen (and drinking companions) who called themselves the Florentine Camerata wanted to recreate the recitation of Greek poetry. The musicians among them, including Jacopo Peri, Julio Caccini and others (including Vincenzo Gallilei, father of Galileo Galilei), decided that the old contrapuntal style of the 16th century, with all of its archaic rules and its inherent difficulty of presenting a text quickly and clearly, was unsuited to their purpose.
Instead they developed a more homophonic style of music (think one melodic line with chordal accompaniment) which they called monody. Monody involved singing in a very flexible rhythm based on patterns of speech, where the emotions of the text determined the musical rhythm, harmony, and melody. More agitated texts were set to faster music, possibly with a wider range, and all the parameters of the music changed according to the emotions of the text. In this way, large amounts of text could be sung quickly. It was now possible to engage in dialogue, and thus to tell stories in music. Out of this failed attempt to revive Classical Greek poetry, opera was born.

Giacomo Peri wrote Dafne, the first documented opera, in 1598. It tells the story of the young water nymph pursued by Apollo who begs the river god for help and is transformed into a laurel tree. Peri followed Dafne with Euridice (1600), styled after the Orpheus myth and the first opera for which we have most of the music. Dafne and Euridice were composed entirely in the monodic style, which had one serious flaw: by itself, it was mind-numbingly dull. Euridice is, for most listeners, of historical (or masochistic) interest only. The Camerata had created a style that could vividly convey both the sense and the emotion of a text in a reasonably natural way, but in order to become true theater, monody desperately needed some tweaking.

Enter Claudio Monteverdi (1567–1643), who was the court conductor and composer for the Gonzaga family in Mantua. Trained in the older contrapuntal style, Monteverdi absorbed the features of monody and employed it in both his sacred and secular music. Monteverdi’s Orfeo (1607) is one of the great benchmarks in the entire history of opera. Monteverdi solved the problem of monodic tedium by interspersing dance numbers and choruses written in the older polyphonic style (the stile antico). Monteverdi accompanies his singers with an orchestra of more than forty instruments, which are used to enhance the drama onstage. When Orfeo arrives in Hell, Pluto’s words are accompanied by two exotic and ominous reed organs which perfectly complement Pluto’s bass voice and evoke the Underworld in memorable fashion.

After Monteverdi, opera developed a distinct structure. Monody became what we now call recitative, with text sung rapidly and syllabically (one syllable per musical note), conveying speech and moving the plot forward. For contrast, singers were permitted arias, sections where melody and vocal technique took precedence over the text, and where characters reflected upon their emotional state. During a typical aria, all other characters left the stage and the soloist was left alone to deliver his or her aria standing still at center stage (a style of opera staging that opera orchestra musicians to this day refer to as “park and bark”). This structure, combined with mythological plots, became known as opera seria.

Over the course of the next century, opera became more concerned with vocal virtuosity and stage splendor than with drama, or even a coherent plot. Opera singers became the rock stars of their day, commanding lavish salaries and insisting upon the indulgence of their extravagant whims. It was they who controlled opera production and not the poor composer, who was lucky to even be listed on the playbills. If a singer felt that a particular aria did not suit her voice, she had no qualms about insisting that a different aria be substituted, often from a different opera by a completely different composer! Particularly in French opera, stage directors and technicians had a field day creating flying angels, gods descending from the heavens, demons rising from
hell, even naval battles, all with the appropriate accompanying pyrotechnics. It was no longer a matter of the supremacy of words or music; from Monteverdi’s death until about 1750, it was the spectacle and the singers that reigned supreme.

One of the most astonishing and somewhat gruesome aspects of 17th- and 18th-century opera was the rise of the castrato, male singers who had their testicles surgically removed before puberty. Their voices remained in the soprano range, but with the power of a heroic tenor or baritone voice. Begun as a misguided attempt to provide male sopranos for the Papal Chapel (following St. Paul’s dictum in 1st Corinthians 14:34 that “Women should not be heard in church”), castrati became the true vocal superstars of opera. The castrato Farinelli (who adopted the one-name moniker two centuries before Madonna or Bono) possessed such an amazing voice that he was hired as a private singer to Philip V of Spain in order to cure the king’s insomnia and depression. In opera, composers wrote the heroic male roles for them; evidently audiences had no problem with Julius Caesar or Tamerlane singing with a high soprano voice.

Had opera continued in this fashion it would probably have died a well-deserved death, crushed under the weight of its own clichés. Two composers intervened to reform opera and rediscover the magic of words and music together. The first of these was Christophe Willibald von Gluck (1714–1787), whose control of both the content and the singing in his works harkened back to the origins of opera, with clean melodic lines free of excessive ornamentation and the use of choruses and ballet as part of the plot. He faced an uphill battle against the conventions of his time, but his “reform” operas were crucial in ending the excesses of opera seria.

While we occasionally hear Gluck’s operas today, it was Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart who ended opera’s reliance upon characters from Classical mythology and the stilted plots and stylized arias of the previous century. In Mozart’s operas, the characters tend to be human – noblemen and servants instead of gods and goddesses; peasants not princes, handmaidens not heroes. Mozart is really the first composer since Monteverdi to use the orchestra to comment upon, support or even contradict what happens on stage – it’s almost as though Mozart’s orchestra is another character in the drama. In The Marriage of Figaro, when the adolescent Cherubino sings of how love is wracking his body with pain and delight, the woodwind section responds by laughing at him! With this added nuance from the orchestra, Mozart’s characters become complex individuals, capable of love and stupidity, cruelty and forgiveness, nobility and cowardice – a far cry from the one-dimensional cartoonish heroes of most Baroque opera. Even Mozart’s plot resolutions are far from clear-cut: does Così fan tutte have a happy ending or not? Is Don Giovanni a completely evil character or, like Darth Vader, is there some good in him? Does good really triumph over evil in The Magic Flute, or is it more complicated than that? Just the fact that we still discuss these points over 200 years later is an indication of the universality of Mozart’s vision as a composer for the theatre. His deft characterizations and his integration of the orchestra into the overall drama paved the way for the 19th-century comedies of Rossini and Donizetti.

With the dawn of the 19th century and the rise of independent democratic nations, opera became not just an entertainment, but a vehicle for both personal and political expression. Both operas and their composers played a part in the political upheavals throughout Europe. In Italy, Giuseppe Verdi’s operas served as the rallying cry for the Risorgimento (Italian unification) as
they fought for a united Italy. The shouts of “VIVA VERDI!” in the opera house were a secret code, VERDI serving as an acronym for “Vittore Emmanuele, Re d’Italia,” (Victor Emmanuel, King of Italy), the head of the House of Savoy and the future first king of the new Italian nation. In Bohemia, Bedřich Smetana’s *The Bartered Bride*, with its melodies based on Czech folk songs, was part of a rising tide of nationalism that would result in the creation of Czechoslovakia.

Richard Wagner, the towering figure of 19th-century opera, also started out as a political revolutionary. He was part of the May uprising in Dresden in 1849. For his part in the revolt, the authorities issued warrants for his arrest, obliging Wagner to spend the better part of the next twelve years in exile. His career was salvaged when a new king ascended to the throne of Bavaria. Ludwig II was 18 years old and a passionate devotee of Wagner’s music. He built the great Festival Theater at Bayreuth for the composer, where Wagner’s music dramas would be staged in an atmosphere almost like a religious ceremony.

Wagner’s concept of opera shook the foundations of 19th-century music. The divisions between *recitative* and *aria* were too constricting for his imagination, so he wrote in a continuous texture, where the lines between plot dialogue and character reflection became blurred or non-existent. With no firm guideposts in the music, Wagner founded his musical structure on *leitmotifs*, small melodic fragments associated with each character or emotion (jealousy, curses, love, etc.). These *leitmotifs* changed harmony, melodic contour and rhythm according to the action onstage, reflecting and enhancing the plot. Musically speaking, the *leitmotifs* functioned much as the ideas of a Beethoven symphony, interacting and transforming through the course of the work. For Wagner, the means of telling the story had now shifted from the voices to the orchestra, with the singers now subsidiary to the music emanating from the opera pit and this would take opera in an entirely new direction. Wagner influenced the rest of his century, and the music of the 20th century can be seen as attempts either to take his artistic philosophy further, or to reject it entirely.

Opera spread around the world in the 20th century, and as always mirrored society’s tastes and foibles. As the styles of 20th-century music multiplied, so did the possibilities for operatic expression, from Debussy’s *Pelléas et Mélisande* (1901) based on Maurice Maeterlinck’s Symbolist drama to Argentinian composer Oswaldo Golijov’s *Ainadamar* (2003) which chronicles the life and death of the Spanish poet Frederico García Lorca.

Words? Music? These days, it’s largely a moot question. The power of words and music together continues to fascinate us to this day, and it appears it will continue to do so well into the future.