

CLASSIC *f*M HANDY GUIDES

OPERA

ROB WEINBERG

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Contents

Introduction

Preface

1 Opera History in a Nutshell

2 The Men Behind the Words

3 Operatic Voices

4 Where to See Opera

5 What To Do at the Opera

6 40 Essential Operas

7 The Top 30 Opera Tracks to Download

8 Useful Operatic Terms

About Classic FM

About the Author

Index

Introduction

At Classic FM, we spend a lot of our time dreaming up wonderful ways of making sure that as many people as possible across the UK have the opportunity to listen to classic music. As the nation's biggest classical music radio station, we feel that we have a responsibility to share the world's greatest music as widely as we can.

Over the years, we have written a variety of classical music books in all sorts of shapes and sizes. But we have never put together a series of books quite like this.

This set of books covers a whole range of aspects of classical music. They are all written in Classic FM's friendly, accessible style and you can rest assured that they are packed full of facts about classical music. Read separately, each book gives you a handy snapshot of a particular subject area. Added together, the series combines to offer a more detailed insight into the full story of classical music. Along the way, we shall be paying particular attention to some of the key composers whose music we play most often on the radio station, as well as examining many of classical music's subgenres.

These books are relatively small in size, so they are not going to be encyclopedic in the level of detail; there are other books out there that do that much better than we could ever hope to. Instead, they are intended to be enjoyable introductory guides that will be particularly useful to listeners who are beginning their voyage of discovery through the rich and exciting world of classical music. Drawing on the research we have undertaken for many of our previous Classic FM books, they concentrate on information rather than theory because we want to make this series of books attractive and inviting to readers who are not necessarily familiar with the more complex aspects of musicology.

For more information on this series, take a look at our website www.ClassicFM.com/handyguides.

Preface

Opera – to quote Dr Johnson – is an ‘exotic and irrational entertainment’, one that can elicit a wide range of responses from people. As with any form of music, you will find those who are so passionate about the genre that they spend their entire lives booking their holidays around performances and festivals; collecting, listening to and comparing recordings and talking animatedly about every aspect of it with like-minded enthusiasts.

And at the other end of the spectrum, there are the ones who simply find it hard to take or, at least, they say they do. Just hearing the word ‘opera’ spreads revulsion across their faces, their minds suddenly conjuring up the stereotypical image of a larger-than-life soprano supposedly playing a consumptive teenager in her dying moments, managing to shriek at high pitch for several minutes.

Yet, between these two extremes are the football fans who still get goosebumps whenever they hear Pavarotti singing ‘*Nessun dorma*’; the millions who vote on TV talent shows for a talented amateur with operatic aspirations; the summertime outdoor concert-goers who’ve tapped their feet along with ‘*La donna è mobile*’ while their smoked salmon sarnies turned to mush in a downpour; or the movie lovers whose breath was taken away by the use of a Mozart aria in *The Shawshank Redemption* or *The Ride of the Valkyries* booming out of the helicopters over Vietnam in *Apocalypse Now*.

If you count yourself among any of the above, this book is for you. Consider it a small, assisted – and hopefully helpful – step into a sublime and often ridiculous art form, offering a taste of the many delights to be discovered.

Opera History in a Nutshell

The word ‘opera’ derives from the Italian term *opera in musica*, meaning ‘work in music’. Having an Italian name, it’s perhaps not surprising to learn that opera began during the Italian Renaissance a little more than 400 years ago.

Baroque Pioneers

The Baroque era lasted roughly from around 1600 to 1750. The earliest works emerged from the discussions of a group of brainy musicians, writers and noblemen, known as the Florentine Camerata. They were based in Florence and most of the music they came across consisted of either choral singing in a religious setting or very florid madrigals. The Camerata wanted to revive the tradition of Greek theatre as they understood it to have been: sung rather than spoken. So they set out to combine music and text to tell gripping stories from classical mythology.

In 1597, one of their members, **Jacopo Peri** (1561–1633), wrote what is generally considered to be the first known opera, *Dafne*, in which he himself played the role of Apollo. It was a big success but hardly any music from it survives. Three years later, Peri composed another work, *Euridice*, based on the Greek legend that went on to become the subject of so many operas. It tells the story of heartbroken Orpheus venturing to Hades to retrieve his deceased wife Euridice. Peri’s version was composed for the wedding of King Henry IV of France and his bride, Marie de’ Medici of Florence. It’s the earliest opera for which the score still exists today and already it’s noticeable that Peri was experimenting with a new style of vocal delivery – something midway between speech and song where a solo voice was accompanied by simple chords played on a harpsichord or lute. This style of singing became known as *recitative* and the accompaniment as *continuo*.

As opera began to spread beyond Florence, it found its first major practitioner in the person of **Claudio Monteverdi** (1567–1643), composer to the Duke of Mantua. Monteverdi’s own version of the Orpheus story, *L’Orfeo*, premiered in 1607 and took opera to a new level of sophistication. In it the poetry and the music began to become equal partners. The protagonists were given real human feelings and characteristics, and orchestral instruments began to play a significant role. The *continuo* became more varied, perhaps plucked on strings or provided by an organ.

The first public opera house in Venice – the Teatro di San Cassiano – opened in 1637 and Monteverdi was commissioned to write a new work for it. *Adone* (1639) was such a hit that it ran continuously for six months. In 1642, his last and greatest work *L'incoronazione di Poppea* ('*The Coronation of Poppea*') told the steamy story of the mistress of the Roman emperor Nero. Unlike other operas up to that point, *Poppea* was rooted in historical fact rather than legend. It also features one of opera's first stunning love duets, '*Pur ti miro*', which nowadays is almost universally thought not to be by Monteverdi at all, but a colleague who worked on *Poppea* or one of its early revivals.

Thanks to the efforts of touring companies from Italy, opera began to spread throughout the rest of Europe. It took a while longer to catch on in France but, when it did, a different style evolved which combined the French nobility's passion for dance with simpler yet more expressive music. French opera's first great practitioner was **Jean-Baptiste Lully** (1632–1687), who was actually an Italian serving as the court composer for King Louis XIV. Lully's first opera, *Cadmus et Hermione* (1674), was a great success; the king was reportedly 'extraordinarily satisfied with this superb spectacle'. Lully pioneered special effects, made the dance an essential component of his works – much to the king's pleasure – and added even more instruments to the opera orchestra. The Belgian film *Le Roi danse* (2000) brilliantly recreates the court of Louis XIV seen through the eyes of Lully.

A native Frenchman, **Jean-Philippe Rameau** (1683–1764) built on the foundation established by Lully. Rameau was already fifty when he wrote his first opera but went on to create many more. While retaining the use of classical myths, dance episodes and spectacular effects, Rameau approached his texts on a more human scale, making the music bring the emotional content to life. This dramatic intensity caused controversy among the circles that had been raised on Lully. *Hippolyte et Aricie* (1733) was acclaimed by many as bold and daring, but dismissed by others as 'turbulent' and 'a lot of noise'. Outraged Lullistes were worried that Rameau's growing popularity would oust their hero's music from the repertoire. They attacked Rameau's operas, while Ramistes hailed their man as the 'new Orpheus'. Long before the mods and rockers battled it out on Brighton's seafront, tension escalated between the two music fan factions throughout the 1730s. When Rameau's *Dardanus* opened in 1734 the composer was the subject of satirical engravings and a scurrilous poem, which resulted in physical violence.

Across the Channel, **Henry Purcell** (1659–1695) composed the first English opera, *Dido and Aeneas* (1689). He was commissioned to write it for a girls' school in London that had strong connections to the court and the London stage. The composer kept the opera short and easy to sing for his young performers. *Dido* told the story of the Queen of Carthage and her love for the heroic Aeneas from Troy. In general, however, English audiences in Purcell's day

didn't have much of an appetite for opera; they preferred stage plays that included some musical elements and dance. Purcell's remarkable ability for setting words in a subtle way that communicated emotions was lost on London audiences whose passion for opera would not be ignited until Handel arrived in their midst, early in the following century.

But in the rest of Europe, by the end of the seventeenth and beginning of the eighteenth centuries, opera was hugely popular; there were some seventeen opera houses in Venice alone. Members of the nobility poured their money into creating opera companies and staging spectacular productions.

Two major styles emerged – *opera seria* (serious opera) and *opera buffa* (comic opera). The muscular exploits of Greek and Roman heroes came under the former category, the main narrative being carried by recitative while outbursts of passionate emotion were conveyed via vocal fireworks in show-off, show-stopping songs known as *arias*.

Opera buffa began in Naples as short comic interludes played out between the acts of a *opera seria* to give the audience light relief. *Buffa* works later evolved into operas in their own right. There were no heroic deeds of derring-do here; *buffa* told the stories of ordinary folk caught up in often farcical situations – but they still had to be able to sing like gods.

Indeed, as opera developed, the aria became the principal means by which a character could express his or her thoughts or feelings all the while showing off a formidable vocal technique. By the turn of the eighteenth century, opera audiences' main reason for attending was to see the stars of the day showing off their extraordinary vocal agility. The leading roles were usually sung by female sopranos and male castrati – men who had undergone a particularly unpleasant procedure while young to keep their voices high and pure. The greatest castrato was Farinelli (1705–1782), who was 'the acknowledged monarch of European singing'. Farinelli made a fortune, employed by King Philip V of Spain to sing the same four songs for him every night for twenty-five years.

In Venice, from around 1713, **Antonio Vivaldi** (1678–1741) – better known today as a composer of instrumental music, particularly *The Four Seasons* – devoted himself to opera and wrote more than forty of them. They are gradually being rediscovered today, although they are not notable for particularly advancing the genre. Meanwhile in Naples, **Giovanni Battista Pergolesi** (1710–1736) wrote one of the first, influential comic operas, *La serva padrona* ('*The Maid Mistress*') in 1733, which told the story of how a maid fools her master into marrying her, thus becoming lady of the house. Pergolesi died far too young but left behind some innovative works, characterised by his mastery of melody, rhythm and witty writing for the voice.

The finest composer of *opera seria* was **George Frideric Handel** (1685–1759). In London the nobility didn't bankroll opera; rather it was a commercial affair, performed by competing

theatre companies. Handel arrived in London in 1710, his music having already established itself in people's affections from its use in a popular show at the Haymarket Theatre. His extravagant first London opera *Rinaldo* (1711) was widely acclaimed. The Haymarket became The King's Theatre and Handel's greatest operas were first staged there, attracting star names such as the sopranos Faustina Bordoni and Francesca Cuzzoni. The two *divas* had a bitter rivalry which erupted into a public riot in 1727 when audience catcalls and whistling led to the two of them exchanging real blows and pulling each other's hair during a production. Fans of the two singers threw chairs at each other. On another occasion, when Cuzzoni refused to sing an aria for Handel, the composer yelled at her, 'I well know that you are truly a She-Devil: but I will have you know that I am Beelzebub, chief of the Devils.' Handel threatened to dangle the singer upside down from a window until she agreed to perform.

Handel went further than any of his predecessors in going deeper into the emotional and psychological complexities of his characters. But the relative financial failure of his later operas convinced him that his path lay rather with oratorios, and it is for such masterpieces as *Messiah* (1741) that we know him best today.

The Age of Transition

In the second half of the eighteenth century, opera – along with so many other intellectual and artistic pursuits – underwent profound changes. Flamboyant heroic display made way for a more domestic-scale offering. Out went the unnecessary dances and vocal histrionics; in came arias, choruses and recitatives that truly served the drama.

Christoph Willibald Gluck (1714–1787) was vital to this transformation. He wrote more than forty operas, the most famous being *Orfeo ed Euridice* (1762). While the subject matter continued to draw on mythology, the way in which the characters behave is more naturalistic. For the first performance of *Alceste* (1767), Gluck went for actors who could sing rather than singers who would not be able to cope with the required level of authentic emotion. Gluck effectively set the seal on the Baroque era of opera and opened the way to the Classical era. His influence, though, would also be felt further down the years in the music of Richard Wagner and Richard Strauss, both of whom admired Gluck's work.

Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart (1756–1791) considered opera to be the supreme musical language, where everything was perfectly possible – and, naturally, he made it so. As with every other genre of music this genius touched, Mozart produced nothing but pure gold when it came to opera. He wrote his first stage work at the age of eleven and quickly went on to create several more with astounding confidence for one so young. His first masterpiece was *Idomeneo* (1781) which – while evidently influenced by Gluck – plays fast and loose with the

opera seria conventions, effortlessly blending arias and recitative, and smoothly managing changes of scene and mood. Mozart brought to opera an unprecedented tunefulness, dazzling wit and an intense sense of drama, exploring such universal themes as love, fidelity and revenge. His final five operas – *The Marriage of Figaro* (1786), *Don Giovanni* (1787), *Così fan tutte* (1789), *The Magic Flute* (1791) and *La clemenza di Tito* (1791) – are nothing short of masterpieces, each of them a regular fixture in every opera company's repertoire today. One contemporary reporter who witnessed Mozart himself conducting a performance of *Figaro* from the keyboard said, 'Mozart directed the orchestra, playing his fortepiano; the joy which this music causes is so far removed from all sensuality that one cannot speak of it. Where could words be found that are worthy to describe such joy?'

The Italian Masters

With Gluck bringing a new naturalism into opera and Mozart blurring the lines between *seria* and *buffa*, the early nineteenth century saw the Italians, who originated the genre, looking for a saviour to take opera into a new era. He appeared in the form of **Gioachino Rossini** (1792–1868). Born the year after Mozart's untimely death, Rossini emerged as one of the greatest opera composers of all time and a pioneer of Romanticism. He rejuvenated both serious and comic opera with his superlative writing for the human voice, which regained its place as the dominant element in Italian opera. Audiences went wild at Rossini's melodies and the range, speed and skill he demanded of singers. From comedies, such as the sparkling *The Barber of Seville* (1816) through to powerful melodramas such as *William Tell* (1829) Rossini's mastery of operatic form influenced composers throughout the entire continent. He wrote thirty-nine in total before happily retiring for the last four decades of his life.

The vocal brilliance that Rossini required from his performers, known as *bel canto* ('beautiful singing'), became the dominant genre of Italian Romantic opera. Two other Italian composers also came to be closely associated with this style.

Vincenzo Bellini (1801–1835) worked slowly, taking a lot of time over his handful of operas, carefully setting out to produce dramas that spoke to the emotions, and didn't just thrill the ear. Bellini's particular skill was to plunge deep into the human psyche, something that even the usually unimpressed Richard Wagner admired. Bellini was hugely successful, pretty much hitting gold straight away with his version of the 'Romeo and Juliet' story, *Capuleti e i Montecchi* (1830), and *La sonnambula* (1831). Today his most popular and famous opera is *Norma* (1831), although it was not initially successful. It contains Bellini's most famous aria, '*Casta diva*'. 'I want something that is at the same time a prayer, an invocation, threat, a delirium,' Bellini told his librettist. The composer's extremely long-flowing melodies earned him the nickname 'the Swan of Catania'.

At the other extreme, **Gaetano Donizetti** (1797–1848) composed more than seven operas, although only a few still remain in the repertoire. In 1830, he had a major international success with *Anna Bolena*. Afterwards, his works were a mix of comedies such as *L'elisir d'amore* (1832) and intense dramas such as *Lucia di Lammermoor* (1835). Donizetti's operas are characterised by the extraordinary demands he makes on the singers. He also increased the role and range of the chorus, and innovated new types of song such as the *cavatina* – unhurried and melancholy – and the sensationally showy *cabaletta*.

The natural successor to Rossini, Bellini and Donizetti in the *bel canto* style was **Giuseppe Verdi** (1813–1901), the most successful opera composer ever. Over his long career, Verdi totally transformed the genre, experimenting with different musical and dramatic approaches to arrive at a unique, intensely melodramatic form of expression.

His first big success, *Nabucco* (1842), had an enormous impact, particularly with its *Chorus of the Hebrew Slaves* which caught the public imagination as an anthem for his country's liberation and bound Verdi to the movement for Italian unification. Twenty operas followed over the next seventeen years, the greatest of them being *Rigoletto* (1851), *Il trovatore* (1853) and *La traviata* (1853), today his most popular. Verdi's penultimate masterpiece, *Otello* (1877), is often considered the greatest Italian romantic opera, skilfully integrating solo arias, duets and choruses into the unfolding of the drama. Staying with his beloved Shakespeare, Verdi's final work, *Falstaff* (1893), broke all operatic conventions, discarding set pieces for a conversational flow of words that echoed ordinary speech. Today Verdi's works are among the most performed around the world and some of his tunes have become stand-alone hits such as 'La donna è mobile' from *Rigoletto*, the *Drinking Song* from *La traviata*, and the *Gran March* from *Aida* (1871).

Italian opera in the nineteenth century reached its peak as a complete fusion of all of the arts – drama, music, costume, stage design and effects. With Verdi, and later **Giacomo Puccini** (1858–1924), the story's psychological content became increasingly important. Puccini was the master of the *verismo* ('realism') style. *Verismo* first emerged in 1890 with Pietro Mascagni's short opera, *Cavalleria rusticana*. In its realistic – and sometimes violent – depiction of everyday happenings, *verismo* rejected the grand historical themes of Romanticism. In some of the most heartrending and passionate operas ever written, Puccini delved into the innermost thoughts and feelings of his characters, caught in difficult, intense human situations. Most of his operas end in tragedy, usually for the women, so take lots of tissues. They include *Manon Lescaut* (1893), *La bohème* (1896), *Tosca* (1900), *Madama Butterfly* (1904) and *Turandot* (1926). Puccini's operas were, and remain, incredibly successful. The composer earned some \$4 million from his works.

German Romantics

German operas in the seventeenth century had largely been *Singspiels*, which mixed spoken drama with musical interludes. Mozart brought new energy and a new seriousness to the genre with *The Magic Flute*. **Ludwig van Beethoven** (1770–1827) introduced lofty themes of justice, liberty and equality in his only opera, *Fidelio* (1805). In doing so, he produced a masterpiece that is one of the key works in the German repertoire. *Fidelio* initially wasn't such a success, however. The original performers moaned about the music and audiences found it too difficult. Beethoven revised the opera a number of times before arriving at a more successful version.

Another German, **Carl Maria von Weber** (1786–1826), was unhappy with the dominance in Europe of Italian operas and wanted to develop his own uniquely nationalistic approach. Weber's breakthrough was *Der Freischütz* (1821), in which he drew on Germanic folklore to tell the story of a marksman who makes a pact with the devil. Weber particularly sought to create a supernatural atmosphere by giving a dominant role to the orchestra. After its success Weber went one stage further with *Euryanthe* (1823), in which he banished spoken dialogue altogether, blurred the boundary between recitative and aria, and produced a 'through-composed' opera.

Weber's approach was not lost on the young **Richard Wagner** (1813–1883), whose later innovations changed the course of music history. Wagner's big concept was that of the *Gesamtkunstwerk* (a 'complete work of art') in which music, poetry and visuals would all come together in one grandiose, total art form. Wagner even realised his dream of designing and creating a permanent home at Bayreuth where his works could be performed in the way he wanted. In his greatest works – *Tristan und Isolde* (1865), *Die Meistersinger von Nürnberg* (1868), the *Ring Cycle* (1869–76), and *Parsifal* (1882), Wagner gave opera a profound philosophical depth, often based on Germanic or Arthurian legends. The flow of music was dramatic, expansive, surging and seamless, giving a new prominence to the orchestra. Wagner also developed the concept of the *leitmotif*, a musical phrase connected to a specific person, place or idea, woven throughout the drama. *Die Meistersinger* wins the record for the longest single opera still performed today, usually coming in at around five hours and fifteen minutes.

It was hard for any German composer who came after Wagner to accommodate his innovations while finding a voice of his own. **Engelbert Humperdinck** (1854–1921), who worked as an assistant to Wagner at Bayreuth, did have success with *Hänsel und Gretel* (1891), which, while clearly influenced by his mentor, is an attractive and highly accomplished work.

Richard Strauss (1864–1949) was also strongly influenced by Wagner. Strauss's fifteen operas often include beautiful melodies and are usually included alongside other late German

Romantics. But Strauss was also a revolutionary – listen to *Salome* (1905) or *Elektra* (1908) and you'll be shocked at their experimental and challenging sound. But his most famous and best-loved opera is among the most lushly romantic of them all. *Der Rosenkavalier* (1911) was a great success when it was first performed and has remained in the repertoire ever since. It owes as much to Mozart and the Viennese waltz as to Wagner's innovations. Significantly, Strauss particularly composed music that demanded great beauty and subtlety from the soprano voice. His notoriously demanding wife was a soprano.

Speaking of Vienna: in stark contrast to the weighty bombast of Wagner's innovations, the city of waltzes developed a lighter form of opera that won over people's hearts. Operetta was characterised by its appealing music, comic plots and spoken dialogue between the songs. The most popular example is *Die Fledermaus* (1874) by **Johann Strauss II** (1825–1899). The *Merry Widow* (1905) by **Franz Lehár** (1870–1948) was, and has remained, another big hit.

French Opera

By the end of the eighteenth century, serious French opera was in a poor state, with the innovations of Lully and Rameau consigned to history by the French Revolution. At this time the Italian-born **Luigi Cherubini** (1760–1842) emerged, applying Gluck's principles to comic opera, giving it musical sophistication. Cherubini's works acted as a mirror to the turbulence of his times; his greatest, *Médée* (1797), reflects the bloodshed of the Revolution. It was a little too much for the French to handle, and became more popular abroad.

Rossini's final French opera, *William Tell* (1829), along with *La muette de Portici* (1828) by **Daniel Auber** (1782–1871), signalled the birth of a new genre that dominated the French stage for the remainder of the nineteenth century: grand opera. These were works literally of a gigantic scale, inspired by historical subjects and involving vast numbers of performers, expanded orchestras, elaborate sets and costumes and lots of ballet. The most successful grand-opera composer was the German-born **Giacomo Meyerbeer** (1791–1864). His *Robert le diable* (1831) was a massive success, with audiences particularly revelling in its ghoulies and ballet danced by dead nuns rising from the grave. *Les Huguenots* (1836), *Le Prophète* (1844) and *L'Africaine* (1865) became firmly established in the repertoire, making Meyerbeer the most frequently performed composer around the world in the nineteenth century. He was also an early champion of Wagner, and instrumental in staging the first production of *Rienzi* (1842). But Wagner's later anti-Semitic attacks on Meyerbeer did lasting damage to the latter's enduring popularity.

A grand-opera composer whose works failed miserably in his own time but has seen a major revival in recent years is **Hector Berlioz** (1803–1869). Berlioz admired Rossini but was not a fan of the elaborate Italian style. Seeking to create an opera that conveyed

dramatic truth, Berlioz's first and only work for the Opéra National de Paris – *Benvenuto Cellini* (1838) – was a total flop. It took two decades before Berlioz began writing his masterpiece, *Les Troyens*, which was too ambitious for him ever to stage. Almost predicting how far ahead of his own time he was, Berlioz said, 'If only I could live till I am a hundred and forty, my life would become decidedly interesting.' His third and final opera, *Béatrice et Bénédict* (1862), based on Shakespeare's *Much Ado About Nothing*, was written for Germany where his work was more appreciated than in his native France.

The opening of the Théâtre Lyrique in Paris in 1851 was instrumental in the emergence of a new generation of French opera composers. **Charles Gounod** (1818–1893) was interested in literary themes; his version of Goethe's *Faust* (1859) became one of the most frequently staged operas. **Georges Bizet** (1838–1875) did not enjoy much success in his own lifetime and died before *Carmen* (1875) became a worldwide smash. Its first audiences and critics were shocked by its violent realism and sensuality.

Jacques Offenbach (1819–1880) was unhappy with the French operatic scene and wanted a venue where he could stage his own farces and satires, establishing his own small theatre. *Orpheus in the Underworld* (1858) parodied classical tragedy while mocking contemporary society. It was initially only a modest success but it soon benefited from an outrageous newspaper review that condemned it for profanity and irreverence. The public flocked to see it and its scandalous 'can-can' dance. The great popularity of *Orpheus* prompted Offenbach to write more, including *La belle Hélène* (1864), *La vie parisienne* (1866), and the less frivolous *The Tales of Hoffmann* (1881).

Other French operas of the late nineteenth century included *Samson et Dalila* (1877) by **Camille Saint-Saëns** (1835–1921), and *Lakmé* (1883) by **Léo Delibes** (1836–1891). *Flower Duet* became a popular favourite after being revived in 1989 as the signature tune for British Airways. But by far the most successful composer of the time was **Jules Massenet** (1842–1912) who wrote twenty-five operas. Massenet was a master of melody. That means most of his work did not survive into the twentieth century with its preference for atonality and dissonance. *Manon* (1884) and *Werther* (1892) have, however, regained popularity while the *Méditation* interlude from his opera *Thaïs* (1894) remains a much-loved concert piece for violin and orchestra.

On the whole, though, French composers did not respond well to Wagner's innovations. *Pelléas et Mélisande* (1902) by **Claude Debussy** (1862–1918) was perhaps uniquely influenced by Wagner in the way that Debussy gave the orchestra a central role and abolished distinctions between aria and recitative altogether. Debussy felt there was 'too much singing' in opera and preferred instead to create a work where the voices reflected the rhythm of his native language.

Russian Nationalists

Opera arrived in Russia courtesy of Italian travelling players in the eighteenth century. While a few foreign composers serving in the Imperial Court dabbled with Russian-language opera, some native Russians tried their hand at writing works using Italian and French texts. It was these experiments that paved the way for the emergence of some outstanding Russian opera composers in the nineteenth century, who had a particularly strong relationship with the literature of their homeland.

The father of nationalist music in Russia was **Mikhail Glinka** (1804–1857). He combined authentic folk music, the singing of the Russian Orthodox liturgy, and traditional instruments such as the balalaika, to evolve an authentic Russian sound. Glinka's *A Life for the Tsar* (1836) was inspired by a true story about a peasant who gives up his life to protect the Tsar from an uprising. Along with *Ruslan and Ludmilla* (1842) – based on a Pushkin fairy tale – Glinka's two operas established a new foundation on which Russian music could be built by the next generation.

The epic *Boris Godunov* (1874) by **Modest Mussorgsky** (1839–1881) remains Russia's opera's greatest and most recorded masterpiece. Along with *A Life for the Tsar*, it's one of several operas that deal with complex themes from the country's history. But it's the only Russian work that has won for itself a lasting place in the repertoire – perhaps because of its psychological depth, not only of its eponymous protagonist but in Mussorgsky's presentation of the Russian people, who are given some of opera's most moving choruses, inspired by Orthodox chanting.

A Life for the Tsar also made a profound impact on the young **Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky** (1840–1893). He went on to complete ten operas, including the most famous, *Eugene Onegin* (1879), and *The Queen of Spades* (1890), both derived from works by Pushkin. *Onegin* is today the most popular of all Russian operas but it has a typically Western European sound. More traditionally Russian are the fifteen operas of **Nikolai Rimsky-Korsakov** (1844–1908) which offer excellent vocal writing and ingenious orchestral effects as in, for example, the well-loved *The Flight of the Bumblebee* from his opera *The Tale of Tsar Saltan* (1900). Rimsky-Korsakov's operas are exotic, poetic and more musical than they are dramatic. His fairy tale *The Golden Cockerel* (1909) is the most likely to be performed outside of Russia.

Alexander Borodin (1833–1887) worked as a highly successful chemist, and slotted his composing in during his leisure hours. He began working on his opera *Prince Igor* in September 1869 but soon began to have doubts and laid the work aside for years. He returned to it periodically but died suddenly, leaving it incomplete for Rimsky-Korsakov to finish. *Igor* is best known today for its colourful Polovtsian Dances orchestral and chorus sequence.

In the early twentieth century, Russia's political turmoil posed particular challenges for those composers who attempted to work under the restraints of the Soviet regime. **Dmitri Shostakovich** (1906–1975) struggled for all of his life to operate within the Communist ideology. His second opera, *Lady Macbeth of the Mtsensk District* (1934), was harshly condemned by the Soviet authorities; it's possible that Stalin himself wrote a scathing review of the opera in the *Pravda* newspaper.

A twentieth-century composer who spent much time outside of Russia but later came under fire from the regime when he returned was **Sergei Prokofiev** (1891–1953). Opera was Prokofiev's greatest interest and he produced twelve, including *The Gambler* (1917) and *The Fiery Angel* (1955), which premiered after his death. The one relative success during his lifetime was *The Love for Three Oranges* (1921), written for Chicago Opera and subsequently performed over the following decade in Europe and Russia.

Igor Stravinsky (1882–1971) spent most of his composing career outside Russia and brought his revolutionary approach to music into the opera house as well as to the ballroom stage and concert hall. In 1951, his work *The Rake's Progress*, with a libretto by W. H. Auden, was premiered in Venice, before being staged around Europe and at the New York Metropolitan Opera. *The Rake's Progress*, though, can hardly be called a Russian opera; its music is the finest example of Stravinsky's move into composing in a neo-classical style.

The Czechs

In the nineteenth century, opera became part of the development of a musical style that was to be identified with the aspirations of the Czech people for independence from the German-speaking Habsburg dynasty. A pioneer in this movement was **Bedřich Smetana** (1824–1884), Czechoslovakia's first nationalist opera composer. Before Smetana, Czech national opera had consisted only of a number of rarely performed works. In his second and most famous opera, *The Bartered Bride* (1866), Smetana used melodies and rhythms from Bohemian folk songs and dances in his quest to create an authentic Czech form of opera.

Antonín Dvořák (1841–1904) took nationalism a stage further and believed that opera was 'the most suitable form for the nation'. He had played viola in the works of Meyerbeer while an orchestral member in Prague and wanted to find a style that combined Meyerbeer's grand vision with Czech nationalist sentiment. Of his ten operas, only Dvořák's *Rusalka* containing the well-loved *Song to the Moon*, is regularly performed these days.

For the early part of his career, **Leoš Janáček** (1854–1928) was heavily influenced by Dvořák and it wasn't until Janáček was in his sixties that he evolved a highly personal modern voice that drew on elements of folk music, portraying a greater realism and connection with everyday life. His operas in particular demonstrate the use of speech-derived

melodic lines. The success of his first opera *Jenůfa* (1904) – which took him ten years to write – opened the doors to the world's opera stages for Janáček. In his twilight years, he produced his greatest works, including *Kát'a Kabanová* (1921), *The Cunning Little Vixen* (1924) and *The Makropulos Case* (1926) – works that established him for all time as one of the most important Czech composers.

Modern Masters

As with other musical genres, opera composers in the early twentieth century made a conscious move away from melody and harmony to embrace dissonance to express extreme emotions and the existential crises of the age. It began with Wagner, to be followed by Richard Strauss, Debussy, Puccini in his final opera, *Turandot*, and was then carried through by truly modernist composers such as Berg and Britten.

Alban Berg (1885–1935) wrote just two operas – *Wozzeck* (1925) and the unfinished *Lulu* (1928–35). Discordant and shockingly dramatic, the operas of Berg had a profound influence on the composers that followed. In *Wozzeck*, the story of a murderer, Berg introduces the notion that an opera's protagonist can be flawed and tragic, and treated with sympathy and dignity. *Lulu* is concerned with obsession, forbidden desires and violence.

The Hungarian **Béla Bartók** (1881–1945) composed one opera, which is just an hour or so long. But *Duke Bluebeard's Castle* (1918) is a masterpiece. It is dark, brooding and expressionistic, with moments of magical transcendence. In it Bartók presents the rhythm and tonality of his native folk music, combined with the influence of Wagner, Richard Strauss, Ravel and Debussy. The major contribution made by Frenchman **Francis Poulenc** (1899–1963) to the operatic repertoire is *Dialogues des Carmélites* (1957). Its climax, in which the chorus of nuns fades away to a single voice as each of them in turn faces the guillotine, is a stunning *coup de théâtre*.

In the first decades of the twentieth century, a distinctive form of musical theatre also began to emerge across the Atlantic in the United States, pioneered largely by immigrants from Europe. By the late 1930s, stage musicals began to be written with a more operatic structure and included complex writing for voices. A graduate of 'Tin Pan Alley' and Broadway, **George Gershwin** (1898–1937) described his *Porgy and Bess* (1935) as a folk opera, and it's only in recent decades that it has become a seriously recognised addition to the repertoire of most of the world's opera houses. Incorporating stylistic elements of jazz, spirituals, blues and popular songs, *Porgy* was hugely ambitious and not immediately popular. But its songs have become standards for singers in all genres.

Also in the United States, the charismatic conductor, composer, pianist and educator **Leonard Bernstein** (1918–1990) revolutionised music theatre in 1957 with *West Side Story*

arguably operatic in its dramatic scope and musical sophistication, but quintessential Broadway with its thrilling dance numbers and jazz influences. Bernstein's operetta *Candide* (1956) got off to a problematic start but subsequently emerged, after extensive revisions, as an accomplished work in its own right, filled with scintillating, often witty music and a winning overture that is a favourite in concert halls.

In England, **Benjamin Britten** (1913–1976) lived on and around the Suffolk coast and much of his best work brilliantly evokes the relationship between man, society and nature. With *Peter Grimes* (1945), the story of an anti-hero in the mould of *Wozzeck*, Britten singlehandedly revived English opera, a genre that had been dormant since the time of Purcell. Britten went on to write several other powerful, often darkly dramatic, operas among them *Billy Budd* (1951), *The Turn of the Screw* (1954) and *Death in Venice* (1973). His contemporaries William Walton (1902–1983) and Michael Tippett (1905–1998) also tried their hand at opera with more limited success.

From the late twentieth century until today, opera has continued to be a hugely expensive art form. A staple diet of Mozart, Verdi, Puccini and Bizet's *Carmen* continues to keep most of the major opera houses in business – and it is not always viable to stage new works without suffering considerable losses. A few contemporary composers, however, have managed to buck the trend and attract audiences, particularly younger people, to new works.

The hypnotic, repetitive and brooding minimalism of **Philip Glass** (born in 1937) has worked well on the stage, especially when the composer has collaborated with a director and a choreographer who can echo the construction and patterns of the music. Glass's 'portrait opera trilogy' began with the plot-free *Einstein on the Beach* (1975), which interpreted various aspects of the great scientist's life and work in music and movement. *Satyagraha* (1980) was based on the early experiences of Mahatma Gandhi in South Africa, while *Akhmaten* (1984) about the Egyptian pharaoh, was sung in ancient languages. Glass has gone on to write less captivating operas about other important historical figures including Columbus, Galileo and Walt Disney.

Another American, **John Adams** (born in 1947) has enjoyed considerable success with his operas, particularly *Nixon in China* (1987) and *The Death of Klinghoffer* (1991). Eschewing stories from mythology or the distant past, Adams draws on real-life modern subjects. *Nixon in China* toured the US in the late 1980s and won widespread popular acclaim. *Klinghoffer* tells the story of the 1985 hijacking by Palestinians of the cruise ship *Achille Lauro* and the killing of an American passenger.

Today, CDs, downloadable tracks, gala concerts and the broadcasting of live performances into cinemas around the world have all made great opera more accessible than ever before.

The most popular arias – dating all the way back to Purcell, Gluck and Monteverdi – appear on compilation albums, while a number of singers enjoy the kind of celebrity and acclaim usually reserved for their counterparts in the pop world. Whether any newly written operas, however, will stand the test of time and become classics that will be performed hundreds of years from now, or whether there is a composer yet to be born who can take opera into a new stage of development, as Mozart, Verdi or Wagner once did, still remains to be seen.

Whatever the future holds, there is – in the meantime – more than 400 years of beautiful and thrilling music from operas to be discovered and enjoyed.

The Men Behind the Words

Even if an opera is based on classical mythology, or works by Shakespeare or Pushkin, it still needs someone to provide a text that a composer can work with. The librettist is the person who writes the words for operas and should, therefore, be given due credit as a major contributor to the success of a piece. Here are a few of the great librettists:

Metastasio (1698–1782)

Metastasio was one of Europe's most celebrated *opera seria* librettists; his words were set by many composers. Well suited for virtuoso sopranos and castrati, his work fell out of fashion as opera became less florid and moved towards more human, psychological interests.

Lorenzo da Ponte (1749–1838)

The Venetian poet and librettist wrote the words for twenty-eight operas by eleven different composers, including three Mozart masterpieces – *Don Giovanni*, *The Marriage of Figaro* and *Così fan tutte*. Da Ponte's own colourful life is well worth reading about; it could be the subject of an opera in its own right.

Ludovic Halévy (1834–1908) and Henri Meilhac (1831–1897)

This French duo wrote a large number of libretti, including their most famous collaboration on Bizet's *Carmen*. For Offenbach, they also wrote – among others – *La belle Hélène* and *La valse parisienne*.

Arrigo Boito (1842–1918)

Boito is best remembered today for providing the words to Verdi's *Otello* and *Falstaff*, although the duo's efforts to turn *King Lear* into an opera never came to fruition. He also wrote the libretto for *La Gioconda* (1876) by Amilcare Ponchielli (1834–1886). Boito's own opera *Mefistofele* is itself full of sublime music.

Hugo von Hofmannsthal (1874–1929)

The Austrian writer struck up a particularly successful relationship with Richard Strauss and provided several libretti, including *Elektra* and *Der Rosenkavalier*.

W. H. Auden (1907–1973)

The Anglo-American poet wrote the words for, among other works, *Paul Bunyan* (1941) by Britten, and Stravinsky's *The Rake's Progress*. He also worked on a new translation of *The Magic Flute*, adding dialogue and re-ordering its scenes to create greater dramatic coherence.

Some other, perhaps unexpected, figures that have contributed libretti to operas include **Hans Christian Andersen** (1805–1875), the fairy-tale author, who penned the texts to four Danish operas; **Charles Dickens** (1812–1870), who wrote the words for his friend John Pyel Hullah's *The Village Coquettes*; **Frederick the Great of Prussia** (1712–1786) who presented the Kapellmeister of the Berlin Opera with the libretti for four works; **E. M. Forster** (1879–1970), the English author, who collaborated on the libretto for Britten's *Billy Budd*, and **Francis Burdett Money-Coutts** (1852–1923), a London banker who became patron to the composer **Isaac Albéniz** (1860–1909) on condition that Albéniz used Money-Coutts's own libretti for his operas.

Operatic Voices

More than anything else for an opera audience, it is the voice of an exceptional singer that prompts the most excitement. Singers can reach such heights of popularity that they acquire a nickname that captures their brilliance: Maria Callas (1923–1977) became known as ‘La Divina’, Joan Sutherland (1926–2010) as ‘La Stupenda’, Jenny Lind (1820–1887) as the ‘Swedish Nightingale’ and the Italian baritone Titta Ruffo (1877–1953) as ‘Voice of the Lion’.

Most voices of whatever quality can be classified under seven major categories, decided by the range of notes that the voice can encompass. Women’s voices are usually either soprano, mezzo-soprano or contralto; men divide into four groups: countertenor, tenor, baritone and bass.

Soprano

The highest female vocal range, there are several different kinds of soprano voice, for example: the lyric *coloratura* that can manage a role such as Gilda in *Rigoletto* or Lucia in *Lamermoor*, or a dramatic *coloratura* capable of ornamentation, such as Callas or Sutherland. A *soubrette* has a light, pretty voice for Mozart roles such as Susanna in *The Marriage of Figaro* or Zerlina in *Don Giovanni*. A *spinto* must be able to push her lighter voice at times to create a bigger sound, particularly in roles such as Madama Butterfly or Tosca. Wagnerian sopranos are the real belters, able to meet the ferocious demands of such roles as Brünnhilde or Isolde. Other legendary sopranos have included Birgit Nilsson (1918–2005), Victoria de los Ángeles (1923–2005), Leontyne Price (born in 1927), Montserrat Caballé (born in 1933) and Lucia Popp (1939–1993).

Mezzo-soprano and Contralto

The mezzo-soprano voice sits between soprano and contralto. Its range is close to the soprano but without the very highest notes, and the tone is usually heavier and darker. These days most contralto voices are also referred to as mezzo except for very low voices, suitable for such roles as Ulrica in Verdi’s *A Masked Ball* (1859). A lyric mezzo voice would be suitable for the character of Carmen, Octavian in *Der Rosenkavalier* or Cherubino in *Figaro*. Such singers include Janet Baker (born in 1933) or Anne Sofie von Otter (born in 1955). A *coloratura*

mezzo can manage vocal fireworks – think of Cecilia Bartoli (born in 1966) or the character Rosina in *The Barber of Seville*.

Countertenor

The use of high adult male voices was common in all-male choirs as early as the mid-sixteenth century. In the second half of the twentieth century, the countertenor voice became very popular again, partly because of the revival of Baroque opera with male roles written originally for castrati. Some modern operas, particularly those of Britten, included leading parts for countertenors. The title role in Philip Glass's *Akhnaten* is also played by a countertenor. Outstanding countertenors have included Alfred Deller (1912–1979), James Bowman (born in 1941) and Andreas Scholl (born in 1967).

Tenor

The tenor voice got its name in the Middle Ages when the job of the tenor was to 'hold' (Latin: *tenere*) the tune while the other voices provided the harmonies. Outstanding tenors include Jussi Björling (1911–1960), Luciano Pavarotti (1935–2007), José Carreras (born in 1946), Roberto Alagna (born in 1963), Jonas Kaufmann (born in 1969), Juan Diego Flórez (born in 1973) and Joseph Calleja (born in 1978). The voice of Plácido Domingo (born in 1941) has become lower in his senior years and this erstwhile member of the Three Tenors (the other two were Carreras and Pavarotti) is now a baritone.

Baritone

The baritone voice sits in the middle of the three male vocal ranges – between tenor and bass. Until the early nineteenth century, any male singer who was not a tenor was called a bass. The baritone designation then evolved, particularly in Germany. Lyric baritone voices are used for roles such as Marcello in *La bohème* – include Dietrich Fischer-Dieskau (1925–2012), Thomas Allen (born in 1944) and Simon Keenlyside (born in 1959). A *kavalierbariton* can cope with both lyric and dramatic roles, such as Iago in Verdi's *Otello*. Such singers include Eberhard Wächter (1929–1992) and Leo Nucci (born in 1942). A *charakterbariton* suits Verdi's roles, requiring a powerful, flexible voice – such as Tito Gobbi (1913–1984) and Sherill Milnes (born in 1935).

Bass

Derived from the Italian word *basso* ('low'), this is the lowest male voice. As with the other ranges, different kinds of basses have evolved to tackle a range of roles. A *spielbass* is

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