

Opera

The Basics

Denise Gallo



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OPERA

THE BASICS

- “Clear and well-organized” —Ellen Rosand, Professor Of Music and Chair of the Music Department at Yale University
- A basic introduction for students and opera lovers
- Covers the entire range of opera from its beginnings to today

Opera: The Basics gives a brief introduction to four centuries of opera, ideal for students and interested listeners who want to learn more about this important genre. The book is organized in two parts: Terms and Topics; and Genres, Styles and Scores. In the first part, the author traces the origins of opera, introduces the reader to its basic terminology, and considers opera as artistic and social expression. In Part II, the author examines the history of major genres and styles, including serious and semi-serious opera; comic opera and operetta; and vernacular opera. Throughout, sidebars offer studies of key figures and topics relating to opera's rich heritage. The book concludes with a bibliography, discography, and videography.

Opera: The Basics serves as an excellent introduction to the performers, the music, and the styles that make opera an enduring and well-loved musical style.

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This book is dedicated with affection and respect to all of the students in the Johns Hopkins Evergreen Society who asked me to teach them about music.

CONTENTS

	Introduction	ix
I	Terms and Topics	1
1	The Origins of Opera	3
2	Musical Terminology	13
3	Music and Text Relationships	37
4	Professions	55
5	Singers	75
6	Opera Onstage and Off	95
7	Opera as a Mirror of Society	115
II	Genres, Styles, and Scores	129
8	Serious and Semi-Serious Opera	131
9	Comic Opera and Operetta	151
10	Vernacular Opera	165
11	Scores and Editions	179
	Resources	185
	Index	201

INTRODUCTION

In 1702, Abbé François Raguenet published a discourse contrasting French and Italian opera. In addition to a consideration of which language was better suited for singing, he listed specific elements on which operas should be critiqued. Among these was "the composition of the play," or merits of the libretto. Important, too, were "the qualifications of the actors; those of the performers; the different sorts of voices; the recitative, the airs, the symphonies, the choruses, the dances, the machines, the decorations. . . ." (By "symphonies," Raguenet meant the overture or *sinfonia* and any other purely instrumental interludes within the acts. "Machines" refers to the elaborate mechanical stage devices common in Baroque opera.) Finally, he allowed for "whatever else is essential to an opera, or serves to make the entertainment compleat and perfect."

Written about a century after opera's birth in the courts and academies of Italy, Raguenet's essay presents criteria that can still be used when reviewing an opera. However, the scope of the subject is far more imposing today. While he was concerned with only the French and Italian styles, modern writers treat a host of traditions, among them German, Russian, Czech, Spanish, British, and American. And whereas the Abbé had only one hundred years to consider, more than four centuries of musical development and aesthetic change must now be acknowledged.

Not regularly confronted with new compositions as were Raguenet and his contemporaries, today's critics pass judgment on productions of the tried-and-true works of the common repertory, that

collection of popular operas such as *Carmen*, *Don Giovanni*, and *Der Rosenkavalier* that are sure to be included in a number of operatic seasons around the world. They continue to comment on the singers' talent, the director's vision, the conductor's ability, the costume and set designers' art, and, when necessary, the choreographer's imagination. Moreover, they still counsel whether a production is "complete and perfect," and worth the (usually considerable) ticket price.

In general, a reviewer writes for an audience of readers who are familiar with opera on some level. The task of introducing and explaining it as a genre falls to others who also address the elements explored by Raguenet but consider them in light of opera's historical and cultural development. This literature commonly falls into two categories: scholarly texts and books for general readership. Among the former are music histories, critical editions of scores (see Chapter 11), and specialized studies examining opera as a musical genre, cultural chronicle, social phenomenon, and economic enterprise. However, most general readers with little or no knowledge of music find such volumes intimidating. Based on their own experiences with opera, they seek books that range from the simplest introduction to more comprehensive explorations of composers, stage history, and repertory. Because these two categories are usually mutually exclusive (the authors of one rarely read those of the other), many of these introductory volumes do not reflect the recent scholarship that has revised opera history. Based on similar books from the last century, they reiterate opera's narrative as it once was told.

REWRITING OPERA HISTORY

Late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century scholars wrote the history of opera by examining the resources available to them. In the last quarter of the twentieth century, musicologists working in archives uncovered a plethora of new sources including correspondence, theater records, holographs and autograph scores, and published editions of orchestral scores and piano/vocal reductions. Among these discoveries, for example, were the manuscript scores of Gioachino Rossini's *Il viaggio a Reims* and Giuseppe Verdi's *Stiffelio*. These serendipitous finds allowed scholars to revise the theory that both works had been destroyed because their creators thought

them inferior. More important, these operas now can be studied in the context of Rossini's and Verdi's compositional careers. Late twentieth-century research in theater archives also uncovered scores and librettos of well-known works that had undergone significant revisions, signaling the existence of variant versions prepared (some with the composer's participation and some without) specifically to suit local tastes. These archival yields forced scholars to revisit discussions about opera's role in society and reaffirmed the idea that, far from being immutable monuments, opera scores were pliable works changed freely to appease different customs and aesthetics.

With many of the prejudices of earlier histories erased, scholars were encouraged to admit for study the so-called "minor" composers whose works had been dismissed when compared with those of the masters of the operatic canon. Comic opera and vernacular traditions (see Chapters 9 and 10), once thought frivolous and inferior to serious music drama, also became worthy of scholarly discourse. As a result, opera history is undergoing a revision as these new sources continue to demonstrate that our previous understanding of the genre was exceedingly narrow and in many cases simply wrong. Rossini's opera *Otello* offers just one example. Because the libretto veered so radically from the Shakespearean original, Rossini's work traditionally had been lambasted when contrasted with Verdi's rendering of the play. In the late 1980s, scholars discovered that Rossini's opera had not been based on Shakespeare at all but had closely followed the plot of a popular French adaptation of it.

Judgments about Rossini's *Otello* can be attributed to an honest mistake. It is discomfiting to discover that something presented as "fact" was really the invention of a well-meaning author ensuring a legacy for a personal hero. Unfortunately, opera history is rife with this "spin doctoring." Bellini scholars, for example, have been sorting out biographical fact from the fiction that his friend Francesco Florimo penned in letters he attributed to the composer. A reevaluation of the patriotic sentiment ascribed to Verdi's music followed an examination of contemporary newspapers indicating that the public's reaction was more post-Unification nostalgia than Risorgimento fervor (that is, patriotism in retrospect). Simply stated, the goal of the ongoing reconstruction of opera history is to present it as it actually was, not as those in the past wanted it to be.

A WORD ABOUT REPERTORY

Throughout this book, readers will find reference to the common or international opera repertory. The creation of this group of works resulted from two issues. First, in the wake of the numerous nineteenth-century revolutions, there were moves to recall tradition by reviving past compositions. On a more practical level, theaters began to keep elaborate productions of large works so they could be mounted again, storing costumes and sets for reuse in future seasons to cut costs. Therefore, many operas became “repertory pieces” simply as a result of economic rather than artistic decision making. Because of the predominance of older works being programmed, the number of commissions for new ones fell drastically below that of prior centuries. In the early nineteenth century, for example, many Italian composers enjoyed four or five commissions annually, whereas some twentieth-century composers produced only one or two operas in the space of their careers. Although opera companies now are including lesser known (but equally worthy) works in their seasons, the repertory pieces keep them in the black during increasingly unstable times for opera worldwide.

ABOUT *OPERA: THE BASICS*

Routledge’s *The Basics* series comprises books that introduce broad subject areas, defining terminology and discussing important concepts to prepare readers for more in-depth study. Concise by design, the books nevertheless treat their various topics in a direct and cogent manner. *Opera: The Basics* joins the series as an aid for university students, singers, and adult learners and for opera enthusiasts with some knowledge of and experience with the repertory. Most important, *Opera: The Basics* has been written with an appreciation of the changing approaches to studying opera and with respect for recent scholarship that addresses it as a social and cultural expression. Chapters include as examples the names of operas or of specific selections that readers may already know or to which they can listen to better understand the book’s concepts and ideas, but because this volume is intended also for those who might not read music, it contains no score excerpts. Instructors and music students will know where to locate scores to supplement this text; general readers who

wish may find them in many libraries or for sale at music stores or Internet websites.

HOW TO USE THIS BOOK

Opera: The Basics is divided into two parts, the first introducing essential terms and topics and the second discussing genres, styles, and scores. Although chapters may be read successively, cross-references make it possible to take them out of order. Chapter 1 introduces the dramatic forerunners of opera and the philosophic and aesthetic theories that inspired the musical innovation that would become its first principal element: monody. Chapter 2 considers musical elements such as overture, recitative, aria, and ensemble, tracing their development within the major national styles. The very crux of opera is the relationship between words and music, the theme of Chapter 3, which examines the libretto's poetic structures and characteristics and the compositional strategies used to set them. Chapter 4 sets out the tasks of the professionals who create and produce operas; Chapter 5, dedicated solely to those who perform it onstage, explores the art of operatic singing and the vocal ranges employed in opera casts. Chapter 6 summarizes opera's history onstage and off, the latter discussion ranging from opera's presence on mechanical instruments and recordings to radio and television broadcasts and webcasting. Part I concludes with a treatment of topics that depict opera as a reflection of society.

Part II includes chapters on serious and semi-serious works and on comic opera and operetta. Because these concentrate primarily on works in the Italian and French traditions, Chapter 10 highlights the so-called vernacular genres of England, Germany, and Spain. The final chapter defines types of scores and editions, differentiating between those used for study and performance.

Just as it is important for an Introduction to explain what a book *will* include, it is equally wise to state what it will *not*. First and foremost, this is a book about opera, not musical theater. Musicologists know the difference between these two genres; a brief explanation at the end of Chapter 9 outlines it for others. Singers, of course, know that one of the major distinctions between opera and musicals is in the vocal production employed for each. Those who wish a demonstration should listen to the original cast recording of *West Side Story* with

Carol Lawrence, Larry Kert, and Chita Rivera, and then to the one made by Kiri Te Kanawa, José Carreras, and Marilyn Horne.

Although *Opera: The Basics* includes a discography and videography, these sections will not suggest which recordings and videos to buy or opine which singers best portray which roles. Although some books offer such value judgments, this volume (and its author) remains solely in the objective realm. The list of sound and video recordings identifies productions of works outside of the common repertory whose composers or librettists have been discussed in the book. The aim is to inspire readers to go beyond their current operatic "comfort level." Similarly, the selected bibliography exemplifies the mission of this volume by including only recent opera scholarship. The bibliographies in these works in turn will lead readers to previously published sources.

A final caveat: *Opera: The Basics* is not for readers who want to understand opera as they always have; it is for those who are willing to take their personal opera odysseys to the next stage and beyond.

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My special thanks go to Professor Emerita Cyrilla Barr who convinced me to work in opera and to Professor Carolyn Gianturco who suggested I work on Giovanni Pacini. These two fine scholars and teachers started me off. I am grateful, too, to the Washington National Opera, the Baltimore Opera Company, the Washington Concert Opera, and the Summer Opera Theatre Company who continue to invite me to speak to their audiences.

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TERMS AND TOPICS

THE ORIGINS OF OPERA

Although opera's theoretical origins can be traced back to the late Renaissance, performances were not documented before 1600, the year music historians use to signal the start of the Baroque era. In addition to opera, this period of astonishing creativity inspired the birth and early development of other major musical genres, including symphony, oratorio, and cantata. Yet as the union of music, poetry, art, and dance, all important to seventeenth-century aesthetics, opera represents the ultimate manifestation of Baroque culture.

Style Periods Relevant to Opera History

Baroque:	1600–1750
Classical:	1750–1816
Romantic:	1816–1900
Modern:	1900–1970
Post-Modern:	1970–present

Music historians have used 1750, the year J.S. Bach died, to designate the end of the Baroque era. Similarly, the beginning of Romanticism centers around the life of another musical icon, Ludwig van Beethoven, who in 1816 began his so-called “Third Style” in which radically

innovative works such as the *Grosse Fuge* for string quartet and the Ninth Symphony were created. The post-Modern era began when composers such as John Cage not only challenged cultural authority but also began to investigate and employ elements from non-Western musical traditions.

As logical as style period dates have seemed in past music history narratives, they are nevertheless arbitrary boundaries centered around a handful of Western art music pioneers. Hundreds of other composers made valuable contributions in the prevailing styles. Although organizing history into periods has provided order to the complicated process of understanding musical forms and characteristics, it has eliminated from standard histories composers who in their day were accepted and well-respected. In the early nineteenth century, for example, the operas of Giovanni Pacini were performed with more frequency than those of his younger rivals, Vincenzo Bellini and Gaetano Donizetti. To restore the place of composers such as Pacini in music history, musicologists are rethinking timelines, often preferring to consider musical developments by century rather than style period.

THE DEVELOPMENT OF A GENRE

A study of seventeenth-century music shows that aesthetics varied from one country to another (indeed, from one region or even one city to another). Apart from the most obvious issue—the language of a vocal text—Italian music from this period simply does not “sound” like its French counterpart, and German music doesn’t sound precisely like either of those. To a great extent, this can be explained by a proliferation of public and private musical establishments encouraging and supporting diverse traditions. Because most music was commissioned and supported by noble or church patronage, political and religious issues also played a part in generating and maintaining distinct styles. Despite its use in contemporary commentaries and treatises, the widespread criterion of “good taste” by which Baroque compositions were judged could be defined only in terms of a listener’s own cultural and artistic experiences.

Nevertheless, certain general characteristics do apply to Baroque music, reflecting the creative environment that encouraged the creation of opera:

- An emphasis on voice, even as a model for instrumental performance
- A move away from polyphony (a musical texture in which multiple independent lines are performed together) to homophony (a melodic line supported by an underlying harmonic accompaniment)
- A tendency to musically represent emotions and passions in order to move the soul of the listener (the so-called “Doctrine of the Affections”)
- A penchant for musical ornamentation, embellishment, and improvisation in performance
- An esteem for poetic texts and classical subjects

All of these proved significant in formulating the theory and compositional techniques that inspired the earliest opera composers and singers.

THE FLORENTINE CAMERATA

Renaissance thought flourished in academies (*accademia*, pl. *accademie*), which were societies of intellectuals employing the new “scientific” approach to learning. One such group, referred to as the *Camerata* by composer Giulio Caccini, gathered at the home of Giovanni de’ Bardi in Florence, a city long recognized for literary and artistic pursuits. Through their studies and discussions, the *Camerata*’s musicians and accomplished amateurs proposed that Greek drama had been sung rather than spoken. In addition, the importance of the chorus in Greek plays inspired them to try to apply their ideas to the contemporary stage. This connection between ancient Greek drama and opera would resound repeatedly throughout opera’s history, inspiring libretto reformers Apostolo Zeno (1668–1750) and Pietro Metastasio (1698–1782) and composers such as Richard Wagner (1813–1883) and Igor Stravinsky (1882–1971).

Several *Camerata* members, most prominently Vincenzo Galilei (father of Galileo) and Girolamo Mei, promulgated the group’s theories in their writings. Caccini and Jacopo Corsi, among others, employed them in compositions in a new solo vocal style known as monody. These pieces showcased the dramatic potential in the relationship between music and text, inspiring entire musical dramas

(*dramme per musica*). To differentiate them from spoken drama, such works also were called *opere per musica* (sing., *opera per musica*), or stage works set to music. In time, this designation was simply shortened to “opera.”

Monody

The polyphonic madrigal, a favorite with musical amateurs and dilettantes, dominated Renaissance secular vocal music. Its texture traditionally featured (often intricate) combinations of several distinct melodic lines that created chordal harmonies when sung together. The Camerata’s study of Greek drama led to an appreciation for monody, a single melodic line supported by a simple accompaniment. Musical genres do not disappear overnight, however, especially ones as popular as the madrigal. Thus, although forward-looking composers such as Claudio Monteverdi adapted madrigal poetry to solo settings, he continued to set traditional madrigals, even employing them for choruses in his operas; one of his most dramatic uses of a madrigal chorus is “Non morir Seneca,” from *L’incoronazione di Poppea*. Monody gained in popularity in opera, oratorio, and cantata, however, as recitative and aria, both of which will be discussed in Chapter 2.

OPERA’S PRECURSORS

Opera can be traced to several musical, theatrical, and literary genres of the Middle Ages and Renaissance:

- *Intermedio*
- Learned comedy (*Commedia erudite*)
- Italian folk comedy (*Commedia dell’arte*)
- Epic and pastoral poetry
- Church pageants (*Rappresentazioni sacre*)

THE INTERMEDIO

Comprising musical and dramatic elements, *intermedi* were presented between the acts of larger stage works or alone as special pieces for civic celebrations and court festivities such as weddings and birthdays. *Intermedi* did not necessarily have plots; rather,

they often consisted of a series of tableaux that were metaphoric representations of noble patrons or of the locale of the court. Because these productions featured lavish sets and costumes as well as music composed and performed by the court musical establishment (*cappella*) or hired musicians, *intermedi* were as much displays of power and wealth as they were entertainment. By the end of the Renaissance, the Medici court in Florence had garnered an unbeatable reputation for *intermedio* productions. Initially, operas were offered as a novel alternative to *intermedi*, but, as surprising as it now may seem, the new genre was slow to gain popularity with audiences who resisted change in their entertainment fare.

LEARNED COMEDY (COMMEDIA ERUDITE)

Humanist intellectuals of Italian Renaissance courts cultivated an appreciation for the comedies of Plautus and Terence. Some of these *litterati* even authored their own plays in the classical style. These works were offered regularly in the *accademie*, where members themselves often took part in the performances. Characters in these learned comedies, such as the bombastic soldier or *miles gloriosus*, became stereotypes that made the transition into early opera. Indeed, the *miles gloriosus* took to the stage again much later as Donizetti's Belcore in *L'Elisir d'amore* and Verdi's Falstaff.

ITALIAN FOLK COMEDY (COMMEDIA DELL'ARTE)

The popularity of the *erudite* encouraged troupes of touring players to develop a similar repertory; these professionals polished their portrayals of particular characters so well that they were able to extemporize dialogue within stereotypical skits. Adoption of local dialects helped regional audiences to embrace these stock characters as their own. Recognizable by distinctive masks and costumes, characters such as Arlecchino were presented in productions liberally mixed with song and dance. These characters made the transformation into opera and remained popular until the libretto reforms of the late Baroque temporarily excised comic elements. *Commedia dell'arte* influences were quickly reemployed, however, in time inspiring such memorable roles as Leporello in Mozart's *Don Giovanni* and the characters in Strauss' *Ariadne auf Naxos*.

EPIC AND PASTORAL POETRY

Literary genres that influenced opera include the epic poem and the *pastorale*. Although it was written nearly a century before the first operas were performed, Ludovico Ariosto's epic poem, "*Orlando furioso*" (published in 1516 and revised in 1521 and 1532), became the inspiration for numerous operatic settings. Its main characters offered the perfect dramatic situation: Orlando (or Roland) is driven mad when the beautiful Angelica spurns him for the Saracen Medoro. The tales of other characters such as Atlante, Ariodante, Ginevra, Ruggiero, Alcina, Bradamante, and Olimpia drawn from the poem's cantos also were chosen as subjects for operas. Among the composers who set plots from this epic are Jean-Baptiste Lully (*Roland*, 1685), Domenico Scarlatti (*Orlando, ovvero La gelosia pazzia*, 1711), Antonio Vivaldi (*Orlando*, 1727), Giovanni Paisiello (*Olimpia*, 1768), Josef Haydn (*Orlando paladino*, 1782), and Ambroise Thomas (*Angélique et Médor*, 1843). George Frideric Handel plumbed the poem for three different works: *Orlando* (1733), *Alcina*, and *Ariodante* (both 1735).

Humanist poets and scholars became fascinated with the notion of untouched Nature. Pastoral poetry, dramatic in tone and lyric in rhythm, became the written vehicle to portray this world. Although the sources of the *pastorale* lay in classical works such as Virgil, significant examples of it were creations of the Renaissance, in particular the dramatic poems *Aminta* by Torquato Tasso (1581) and *Il pastor fido* by Battista Guarini (1585). These two works yielded myriad musical versions, some as madrigal settings and others as *intermedi* and operas. Their stories and characters inspired composers and librettists through the twentieth century.

A brief sampling of operas based on pastoral works includes *Armide* (1686) by Lully; *Aminta* (1703) and *Il trionfo di Armida* (1726) by Albinoni; *Rinaldo* (1711) and *Il pastor fido* (1712) by Handel; *Armide al campo d'Egitto* (1718) by Vivaldi; *Armide* (1771) and *Il pastor fido* (1789) by Antonio Salieri; *Armide* (1777) by Christoph Willibald Gluck; *Armida* (1784) by Haydn; *Tancredi* (1813) and *Armida* (1817) by Gioachino Rossini; and *Armida* (1904) by Antonín Dvořák.

CHURCH PAGEANTS (RAPPRESENTAZIONI SACRE)

Since the early Middle Ages, certain portions of church ritual on feasts such as Easter included musical performances. These solos

and unison choruses were chanted in the natural rhythms of speech, usually driven by the patterns of the local pronunciation of Latin. When portions of the performances became too secular, these displays were moved out of the churches; music as sacred dramatic expression, however, was not completely abandoned. Inspired by the missionary efforts of the Franciscans, the *lauda* or song of praise became a popular evangelical tool. These songs were eventually included in religious pageants illustrating scenes from the lives of Christ, Mary, and the saints. This tradition contributed to another Baroque creation, the oratorio, which, although musically identical to opera, presented sacred subjects but without stage sets and costumes. This link between sacred drama and opera would be exploited later in the *azione tragico-sacra*; disguised behind this acceptable genre designator, operas about Biblical subjects or characters were permitted during Advent and Lent when productions would have been forbidden otherwise. This was the tradition behind Rossini's *Mosè in Egitto* (1818) and Donizetti's *Il diluvio universale* (1830).

The First Significant Voice

One of the earliest forces in opera was Claudio Monteverdi (1567–1643). Born and musically trained in Cremona, he later moved to Mantua where he became *maestro della musica* for the powerful Gonzaga family. Initially, his reputation was based on his madrigals, some of which came under attack for ignoring the established rules controlling the use of dissonance. In a response to this criticism, Monteverdi proposed a “Second Practice,” or modern style, that permitted better expression of poetry. Demonstrating a sensitivity and appreciation for the expressive potential of music, Monteverdi selected dramatic texts such as verses from Tasso's *La Gerusalemme liberata* and parts of Guarini's *Il pastor fido* to set as madrigals.

Monteverdi's first opera, *Orfeo*, was produced in Mantua in 1607 for the *Accademia degli Invaghiti*. Designated a *favola in musica*, it featured pieces set as monody and madrigals. The libretto, by Mantuan court official Alessandro Striggio, centered on the myth of Orpheus, who influences the gods of the netherworld by playing his lyre. This character, representing the power of music, was the perfect choice for this new genre. In fact, the story had been set twice before (Jacopo Peri's *Euridice* of 1600 and Giulio Caccini's *Euridice* of 1602) and remained a popular subject through later centuries as witnessed in