

OPERA

by Margaret S. Choa, UPCM '67

I must study politics and war that my sons may have liberty to study mathematics and philosophy. My sons ought to study mathematics and philosophy, geography, natural history, naval architecture, navigation, commerce, and agriculture, in order to give their children a right to study painting, poetry, music, architecture, statuary, tapestry, and porcelain.
– John Adams

At the end of the sixteenth century, a group of poets, scholars, and musicians in Florence, Italy, known as the Camerata, invented a new dramatic style of singing, trying to recreate their experience of ancient Greek theater. The words mattered as much as the music to them.

Initially, opera was performed solely for the private entertainment of the nobility. Gradually, the public was allowed to hear the performances. The first opera house (Teatro San Cassiano) was built in Venice in 1637. The demand for new opera productions was so great that three hundred of them were staged in Venice by the end of the seventeenth century.



Metropolitan Opera
at Lincoln Center

The first major composer of operas was Claudio Monteverdi, whose works are still heard in repertoire today. *L'Incoronazione di Poppea* is a prime example.

Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart, that prolific genius, excelled in the comic genre of opera. *The Marriage of Figaro* is still widely popular today, as is *The Magic Flute*. Every year, the Metropolitan Opera in New York performs *The Magic Flute*, usually during the holidays, offering a shortened version for children. Julie Taymor of *The Lion King* fame designed the sets and costumes for their production. That was a truly magical experience.

Three countries - France, Italy, and Germany - vied for prominence in the field of opera by the beginning of the nineteenth century.

FRANCE:

Opera was big business in Paris. French librettists, who borrowed their material from French literature, were considered the leaders in the field. But French composers were not as gifted as their Italian counterparts. Among French operas, Georges Bizet's *Carmen* is still a perennial favorite among opera fans. You all know the *Toreador song* from that opera, as well as the *Habanera*. One distinguishing feature of French operas is the incorporation of ballet sequences within the operas. Some wag commented that the French exalted the body, whereas the Italians loved the voice.

Perusing the Metropolitan Opera schedule for next season, I find that two other French operas, aside from Bizet's *Carmen*, are being offered: Jacques Offenbach's *Les Contes D'Hoffman* and Charles Gounod's *Romeo et Juliette*. The opera *Faust* is Gounod's better-known work.

ITALY:

For Italians, opera is their own art form. The tradition was started by them, established by them, and maintained by them. They own it. For singers, singing at La Scala in Milan is the pinnacle of success. (Q. How do you get to Carnegie Hall? A. Practice, practice, practice). Sorry for that interpolation.

Italian composers dominated the field. The hunger for new operas was so great that impresarios sought out composers who could churn out a new opera at incredible speed. Gioachino Antonio Rossini could write the score for an entire opera within a matter of days. He did not lack for commissions, producing 39 operas in his lifetime. *The Barber of Seville* is the most popular. It has been staged continuously since its premier in 1816.

Two composers closely linked to Rossini are known as the bel canto (beautiful singing) composers: Gaetano Donizetti and Vincenzo Bellini. They are known for their long, expressive melodies. Listen to the *Casta Diva* aria and the duets for soprano and mezzo in Bellini's opera *Norma*. Heavenly. Donizetti was well known for using English history subjects for his operas. *Anna Bolena*, *Maria Stuarda*, and *Roberto Devereux* - the queen operas- were about the Tudor queens. Few sopranos attempt to sing these fiendishly difficult roles. Beverly Sills in the 1970s gained her fame by singing these roles. Lately, the American soprano Sondra Radvanovsky has astounded audiences with her singing in all three operas.

The towering figure among Italian opera composers was Giuseppe Verdi. He wasn't successful at first until his third opera, *Nabucco*. The chorus, *Va pensiero*, in that opera aroused such passion in the audience on opening night that it propelled him to fame. That chorus still does that. I attended a performance of this opera where the audience clapped so wildly that the maestro had to repeat the chorus right then and there. An encore right in the middle the opera, as it were. Nuts. Verdi composed 25 operas in all; many of them are still staged all over the world to this day. Some singers are well known for their interpretation of Verdi. They are in great demand.

Giacomo Puccini was a younger contemporary of Verdi. I think of his music as easier listening, lighter versions of Verdi's. *Madame Butterfly*, *La Boheme*, and *Tosca* are his most popular works. I think novices learning about opera would do well to start with these.

GERMANY:

Musicologists refer to Bach, Beethoven, and Brahms as The Three B's. A powerhouse, indeed. Despite their massive combined compositional output, only one single opera emerged from the group - Beethoven's *Fidelio*. Brahms the lifelong bachelor made the wisecrack that he'd rather get married than write an opera. They composed for instruments mainly, eschewing vocal music.

2020 is the year the music community celebrates Beethoven's 250th birthday. It seems every symphony orchestra, opera company, chamber group, or recitalist has scheduled Beethoven's works in their program this year. *Fidelio* is being performed in Vienna, New York, and Washington, D.C. and elsewhere. Unfortunately, the pandemic caused the cancellation of scheduled performances of Beethoven's music worldwide.

One German composer did embrace opera writing - Richard Wagner. But Wagner could not abide Italian opera, which he thought was insipid. He did not care for the vocal pyrotechnics Italians loved. He thought the virtuosic instrument should be the orchestra, which should have the storytelling part. The orchestration of an opera was primary to him. He called his creations music drama, instead of opera. He invented an entirely new musical language, using *leitmotifs* - a short musical passage to denote a particular thing, person, or place. He also invented the orchestra pit, where the players are hidden from view. He wanted the sound to rise up without the distraction of seeing the players. His operas were so grand that the opera houses could not accommodate them. His admiring patron, King Ludwig, had an opera house built to his specifications in Bayreuth, a medium sized town in northern Germany, the Festspielhaus (Festival Theater). His *Ring Cycle* is performed in that opera house every year still. Wagner's *Ring Cycle* consists of four operas, totaling seventeen hours of music, borrowing Norse mythology characters as his subjects. Few opera companies have the resources to offer the whole cycle. When one company offers it, fans come from far and wide to attend the performances.

Wagner was a contemporary of Verdi, the Italian. Their rivalry was intensely fierce. Each one did not have anything good to say about the other's works. To this day, opera fans debate about this: which do you prefer, Italian or German opera? Verdi or Wagner? Take your pick. Other countries have produced opera composers as well - England, Russia, the U.S., among others. There is a lot to explore in this art form. It makes for a wonderful avocation.

Dr. Margaret Choa is a retired Infectious Disease specialist in the Washington, DC suburbs.