**Chapter 15**

**Opera and Operetta**

Opera is the most important and popular form of music drama in the history of Western music. Think of it as a play in which the dialogue is sung, rather than spoken. It began in Florence, Italy in the late 1500s as a supposed replication of dramatic tragedies of ancient Greece. The Florentine Camerata, a group of noble artists developed a sort-of sung speech manner of delivering the dialogue of a play. They called this recitative and it was the beginning of what became opera.

Recitative is a rhythmic, almost chant-like mixture of singing and speaking. It has rhythm and some tonal inflection but it doesn’t sound like a song. It is usually accompanied by very simple chords that have no rhythmic pulse themselves. These are usually delivered by either a single keyboard instrument, like the harpsichord, or by a very few members of the orchestra. These early operas were often private works composed specifically for some family or civic celebration.

Composers and audience members soon realized that simple recitative was too dry and dull to deliver an entire play. They added songs, which we call arias. An aria is very melodic in nature and is used in an opera to allow a character to reflect on an action or to express some emotion. These songs are accompanied by full orchestra and have become the most important aspects of opera. As the years passed, composers added other types of music to operas including ensemble numbers, choruses, and strictly orchestral pieces. These all added to the contrast and interest in delivering the dialogue and action of the play.

The first composer who put all these musical styles together into something that resembles our modern day operas was Claudio Monteverdi. He was a popular composer of madrigals of his time. Monteverdi lived 1567–1643 and worked in Italy. His 1607 opera called *Orfeo* is considered the earliest of true operas.

The Baroque era is considered the first age of true opera. Opera during this time was called opera seria because of the serious plot lines, usually from history or mythology.

In the Baroque, the opera moved to theatres and the orchestra became a standard part of the production. Baroque operas added limited scenery and costumes to the production but actual acting was rare and was not called for much in these early operas. The recitative style of delivery moved the plot forward and the arias allowed the singers to sing beautiful melodies. The most important composer of Baroque opera was George Friederic Handel. His works were particularly popular in Italy and England and were mostly historical dramas.

In the Classical era composers added comic and lighthearted plot lines to opera. These types of operas are called opera buffa. Just as in real life many of these operas made fun of and criticized the aristocracy. Opera seria continued in the Classical era but buffa was the most popular. Melody was the most important musical element in the Classical era and the arias of this time prove that. Opera stars were most interested in the arias that they got to sing in operas, much moreso than the plot. Costumes developed somewhat during this period, in part due to the many mistaken identities and cross-dressing parts put into opera buffa for comic effect.

Just about all composers of the Classical era wrote opera but Mozart’s works are what we consider the finest examples of Classical opera today. His works, such as *Don Giovanni, Cosi fan tutte, the Marriage of Figaro*, and *The Magic Flute,* are among the greatest operas ever written.

The Romantic time period is the high point of development of the opera. Like other forms of Romantic era music, opera became bigger in almost all ways. Operas were longer, they required more musicians to perform. The scenery, sets, and costumes were all more important and lavish. The singers were actually called upon to act. And for the first time lighting effects became important. The orchestra’s role also increased during this time raising it from merely an accompanimental group to one which helps move the plot forward. Early Romantic era composers of opera include Gioacchino Rossini (1792–1868), Gaetano Donizetti (1797–1848), Vincenzo Bellini (1801–1835), and Carl Maria von Weber (1786–1826).

The second half of the 19th century saw the greatest developments in opera and produced most of the large-scale repertory that is still performed today. Three composers dominated this time period in opera: Giuseppi Verdi (1813–1901), Giacomo Puccini (1858–1924), and Richard Wagner (1813–1883).

Verdi and Puccini are the composers of several of the most commonly performed works in the opera repertory and their works are heard each year around the world. Verdi wrote six of the best operas ever produced, including; *Rigoletto, Il Trovatore, La Traviata, Aida* *Othello,* and *Falstaff*. His operas feature very melodic and memorable arias sung by leading characters.

Richard Wagner was writing many of his best works at about the same time as Verdi. Wagner’s music is very different from that of Verdi and Puccini. In fact, he didn’t even think of his operas as operas. He called them music dramas. The primary difference is that Wagner’s works run pretty much nonstop from the beginning to end with continuous music. The orchestra is much more important in Wagner operas than in others and the idea of recitative and aria sort of runs together. There are no stopping places after huge, dramatic arias for the audience to applaud in Wagner, as there are in Puccini and Verdi. Wagner’s works are mainly Germanic myths and legends set to music. And, his use of the technique called leitmotif was very influential in Romantic era music and is today in film music.

Giacomo Puccini lived well into the 20th century and is the last of the great Romantic opera composers. If you have heard any opera aria in your life it was probably written by him, and it was probably from an unfinished opera called *Turandot*. In the past 20 years the aria “Nessun dorma” has become very popular and is almost the signature aria representing all of Italian opera.

Puccini wrote in a style called verismo, which simply means the use of realistic plot lines. As such some of his operas have been reworked into modern day musical. The musicals *Miss Saigon* and *Rent* are based upon operas by Puccini.

Modern opera continues many of the traditions of the Romantic era. It remains realistic and historical in nature, and the aria still is the most important part of the opera. Composers such as John Adams and Philip Glass have written several operas in the past 20 years that are regularly performed today.

Operetta is a form of lighthearted and usually comic opera. Begun in the mid 1800s, it was most popular in the late Romantic and early Modern periods. Operettas are still commonly performed today but rarely written. An operetta differs from an opera in a few ways. First, the plots are always a muddle of mistaken identities and narrow escapes from love trysts. They always end happily. Many operettas have dance numbers in them, and there is usually no or very little recitative. The dialogue is spoken, and these works demand more acting than do most operas.

The three most important composers of operetta were Johann Strauss Jr. (1825–1899), Arthur Sullivan (1842–1900), and Franz Lehar (1870–1948). The reputations of Strauss and Lehar as operetta composers rest for the most part on two works; *Die Fledermaus* by Strauss and *The Merry Widow* by Lehar. Sullivan, on the other hand wrote many operettas with his partner librettist W. S. Gilbert.