

The origins of opera



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

ITALIAN OPERA is both the art of opera in Italy and opera in the Italian language. Opera was born in Italy around the year 1600 and Italian opera has continued to play a dominant role in the history of the form until the present day. Many famous operas in Italian were written by foreign composers, including Handel, Gluck and Mozart. Works by native Italian composers of the 19th and early 20th centuries, such as Rossini, Bellini, Donizetti, Verdi and Puccini, are amongst the most famous operas ever written and today are performed in opera houses across the world.

“Dafne” by Jacopo Peri was the earliest composition considered opera, as understood today.[1] Peri’s works, however, did not arise out of a creative vacuum in the area of sung drama. An underlying prerequisite for the creation of opera proper was the practice of monody. Monody is the solo singing/setting of a dramatically conceived melody, designed to express the emotional content of the text it carries, which is accompanied by a relatively simple sequence of chords rather than other polyphonic parts. Italian composers began composing in this style late in the 16th century, and it grew in part from the long-standing practise of performing polyphonic madrigals with one singer accompanied by an instrumental rendition of the other parts, as well as the rising popularity of more popular, more homophonic vocal genres such as the frottola and the villanella. In these latter two genres, the increasing tendency was toward a more homophonic texture, with the top part featuring an elaborate, active melody, and the lower ones (usually these were three-part compositions, as opposed to the four-or-more-part madrigal) a less active supporting structure. From this, it was only a small step to fully-fledged monody. All such works tended to set

humanist poetry of a type that attempted to imitate Petrarch and his Trecento followers, another element of the period's tendency toward a desire for restoration of principles it associated with a mixed-up notion of antiquity.

By the end of the 17th century some critics believed that a new, more elevated form of opera was necessary. Their ideas would give birth to a genre, opera seria (literally “serious opera”), which would become dominant in Italy and much of the rest of Europe until the late 1700s. The influence of this new attitude can be seen in the works of the composers Carlo Francesco Pollarolo and the enormously prolific Alessandro Scarlatti.

During the eighteenth century artistic and cultural life in Italy was heavily influenced by the aesthetic and poetic ideals of the members of the Accademia dell'Arcadia. The Arcadian poets introduced many changes to serious music drama in Italian, including:

- the simplification of the plot
- the removal of comic elements
- the reduction of the number of arias

a predilection for plots drawn from ancient Classical or modern French tragedy, in which the values of loyalty, friendship and virtue were extolled and the absolute power of the sovereign was celebrated

By far the most successful librettist of the era was Pietro Metastasio and he maintained his prestige well into the 19th century. He belonged to the Arcadian Academy and was firmly in line with its theories. A libretto by Metastasio was often set by twenty or thirty different composers and audiences came to know the words of his dramas by heart.

In the 1600s comic operas were produced only occasionally and no stable tradition was established. Only in the early years of the 18th century was the comic genre of opera buffa born in Naples and it began to spread throughout Italy after 1730.

Opera buffa was distinguished from opera seria by numerous characteristics:

the importance given to stage action and the consequent need for the music to follow the changes of the drama, emphasising the expressiveness of the words

the choice of singers who were also excellent actors able to perform the drama convincingly

a reduction in the use of scenery and stage machinery and in the number of orchestral players

the use of a small cast of characters (at least in the short form of comic opera known as the intermezzo) and simple plots, a good example being Pergolesi's *La serva padrona*

libretti inspired by commedia dell'arte, with realistic subjects, colloquial language and slang expressions

as far as singing was concerned: the complete rejection of vocal virtuosity; a tendency to an incorrect pronunciation of the words; the frequent presence of rhythmic and melodic tics; the use of onomatopoeia and interjections.

In the second half of the 18th century comic opera owed its success to the collaboration between the playwright Carlo Goldoni and the composer

<https://assignbuster.com/the-origins-of-opera/>

Baldassare Galuppi. Thanks to Galuppi, comic opera acquired much more dignity than it had during the days of the intermezzo. Operas were now divided into two or three acts, creating libretti for works of a substantially greater length, which differed significantly from those of the early 18th century in the complexity of their plots and the psychology of their characters. These now included some serious figures instead of exaggerated caricatures and the operas had plots which focussed on the conflict between the social classes as well as including self-referential ideas. Goldoni and Galuppi's most famous work together is probably *Il filosofo di campagna* (1754).

The collaboration between Goldoni and another famous composer Niccolò Piccinni produced another new genre: opera semiseria. This had two buffo characters, two nobles and two “in between” characters.

The one-act farsa had a significant influence on the development of comic opera. This was a type of musical drama initially considered as a condensed version of a longer comic opera, but over time it became a genre in its own right. It was characterised by: vocal virtuosity; a more refined use of the orchestra; the great importance given to the production; the presence of misunderstandings and surprises in the course of the drama.

Gluck's reforms

Opera seria had its weaknesses and critics; a taste for embellishment on behalf of the superbly trained singers, and the use of spectacle as a replacement for dramatic purity and unity drew attacks. Francesco Algarotti's *Essay on the Opera* (1755) proved to be an inspiration for

Christoph Willibald Gluck's reforms. He advocated that opera seria had to return to basics and that all the various elements-music (both instrumental and vocal), ballet, and staging-must be subservient to the overriding drama. Several composers of the period, including Niccolò Jommelli and Tommaso Traetta, attempted to put these ideals into practice. The first to really succeed and to leave a permanent imprint upon the history of opera, however, was Gluck. Gluck tried to achieve a "beautiful simplicity". This is illustrated in the first of his "reform" operas, *Orfeo ed Euridice*, where vocal lines lacking in the virtuosity of (say) Handel's works are supported by simple harmonies and a notably richer-than-usual orchestral presence throughout.

Gluck's reforms have had resonance throughout operatic history. Weber, Mozart and Wagner, in particular, were influenced by his ideals. Mozart, in many ways Gluck's successor, combined a superb sense of drama, harmony, melody, and counterpoint to write a series of comedies, notably *Così fan tutte*, *The Marriage of Figaro*, and *Don Giovanni* (in collaboration with Lorenzo Da Ponte) which remain among the most-loved, popular and well-known operas today. But Mozart's contribution to opera seria was more mixed; by his time it was dying away, and in spite of such fine works as *Idomeneo* and *La Clemenza di Tito*, he would not succeed in bringing the art form back to life again.

[edit] Instrumental music

The dominance of opera in Italian music tends to overshadow the important area of instrumental music.[27] Historically, such music includes the vast array of sacred instrumental music, instrumental concertos, and orchestral

music in the works of Andrea Gabrieli, Giovanni Gabrieli, Tomaso Albinoni, Arcangelo Corelli, Antonio Vivaldi, Luigi Boccherini, Luigi Cherubini and Domenico Scarlatti. (Even opera composers occasionally worked in other forms-Giuseppe Verdi's String Quartet in E minor, for example. Even Donizetti, whose name is identified with the beginnings of Italian lyric opera, wrote 18 string quartets.) In the early 20th century, instrumental music began growing in importance, a process that started around 1904 with Giuseppe Martucci's Second Symphony, a work that Malipiero called "the starting point of the renaissance of non-operatic Italian music." [28] Several early composers from this era, such as Leone Sinigaglia, used native folk traditions.

The early 20th century is also marked by the presence of a group of composers called the *generazione dell'ottanta* (generation of 1880), including Franco Alfano, Alfredo Casella, Gian Francesco Malipiero, Ildebrando Pizzetti, and Ottorino Respighi. These composers usually concentrated on writing instrumental works, rather than opera. Members of this generation were the dominant figures in Italian music after Puccini's death in 1924. [8] New organizations arose to promote Italian music, such as the Venice Festival of Contemporary Music and the Maggio Musicale Fiorentino. Guido Gatti's founding of the periodical *il Piano* and then *La rassegna musicale* also helped to promote a broader view of music than the political and social climate allowed. Most Italians, however, preferred more traditional pieces and established standards, and only a small audience sought new styles of experimental classical music. [