

Differences between french and italian operas in the 17th and 18th century



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There are many different countries where Baroque Opera thrived however, two of the main countries that proved vital for the development of baroque opera, were Italy and France. At around 1650, opera became a commercial success throughout Europe however the first opera house in Italy was built in 1637 and France's wasn't built until 1662. This shows that the opera scene in Italy was years ahead that in France. There are also differences in the musical themes used within the operas. In this essay I will explain the history of French and Italian opera and also the differences in the development of the two countries' style. I will also detail the differences and development of recitatives and arias within the different genres.

Italian opera first started in the late 1500s in Florence. However the first operatic work is 'Dafne', composed in 1597 by Jacopo Peri (1561-1633). Peri was born in Rome but he relocated to Florence to study music. There, Peri met up with Jacopo Corsi, who was the leading patron of music in Florence at the time, and together, they worked to recreate a form of Greek tragedy. The pair also enlisted the help of the poet Ottavio Rinuccini to write a text (known as a libretto), and Dafne was created. However, as time went on, most of the music for Dafne was lost but the libretto still survives to this day. Peri later composed another opera, *Euridice*, written in 1600, with the help of Giulio Caccini. This is the earliest surviving opera and was originally performed during a Merdici wedding celebrations and as a result, opera became part of mainstream Italian court entertainment.

Over the following few decades, opera transformed and progressed until towards the end of the 17th century, a new genre of opera known as opera seria became popular not only in Italy but throughout Europe. Opera seria
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composers used classical styles, simple themes and optimistic outlooks to build the genre's popularity. However, the main operatic genre that thrived in Italy is 'Opera Buffa' which first became popular in the mid-1700s. Opera Buffa is the complete opposite to Opera seria. Where opera seria was traditional with many stories taken from Greek mythology, Opera Buffa was based off of an acting style known as Commedia Dell'arte (the pantomime of its day). Opera Buffa used simple plots, small casts and orchestras, colloquial language, humour, action and plays on words. The first opera buffa that is still performed to this day is Giovanni Battista Pergolesi's 'La Serva Padrona' (1733).

Comic operas in the early 18th -century started out as short, one-act interludes that took place in between the acts which were called intermezzi. These provided the gateway to the full operas later in the 18th century and 'la serva padrona' (Pergolesi - 1733) is one of these intermezzis. Pergolesi paved the way for other composers such as Alessandro Scarlatti (1660-1725) who wrote opera buffas including 'Tigrani' (1715) and 'Griselda' (1721), Nicola Logroscino (1698-1765) who composed 'L'inganno per inganno' (translated to 'The deception of deception' written in 1738). Both Scarlatti and Logroscino were based in Naples and Venice, and therefore, were in very influential parts of the country where opera buffa therefore the popularity for the genre soared. As I mentioned before, Opera seria used stories based on Greek mythology, however, opera buffa were based upon and comically used the main news stories of the time and therefore popularity further increased.

Over in France, Opera had a completely different origin story. The first operas to be performed in France were actually imported from Italy, the first of which being Francesco Sacrat's 'La Finta Pazza' (1645). These operas started off as quite unpopular because of political complications. At the time, these operas were promoted by Cardinal Mazarin (who was born in Italy in 1602) who, at the time was first-minister during the regency of King Louis XIV; Mazarin was also an unpopular figure at the time with many sections of the French society.

Another reason why Opera didn't take off right away, is because at the time, the French court already had a genre of stage production known as ballet de Cour which consisted of dance, speech and also some sung elements. Even though Italian operas didn't receive much love from the French public, it caused composers such as Jean-Baptiste Lully to bring their own ideas to opera creating France's operatic tradition.

Jean-Baptiste Lully was born in Florentine, Italy in 1632 and in the late 17th century, he moved to France to work for the court producing music. In France, Lully developed his trade and slowly worked on reducing Italian operatic themes within French opera. In the early 1670s, Lully collaborated with Phillipe Quinault (he wrote the libretti) and as the years went on, the pair continued to work together on operas such as 'Cadmus et Hermione' (1673). 'Cadmus et Hermione' was the opera that acted as a catalyst for developing the French Operatic Genre that we know today as tragédie en musique.

' Cadmus et Hermione' was written in 1673 made up of a prologue and five acts. Even though this was a tragedy opera, there were hints of Italian opera buffa throughout due to hints of a comedy taken from Venice where there was a love-triangle side plot which centred on a nurse who is played by a man. The Prologue also praised King Louis XIV casting him as Apollo and also involved ballet to appease the King's love for dancing. All Tragédie Lyrique has a prologue and five acts and the prologue is preceded and followed by an overture which was generally separate from the main plot of the opera. Lully's opera mostly consist of recitatives which is a sung conversation between characters that tell the narrative of the plot. They are also accompanied by a continuo part (typically played on a harpsichord) and with little or no ornamentation in the voice, making the vocal part seem more like a conversation.

Tragédie en musique (also known as tragédie lyrique) is based upon stories from classical mythology. Operas within this genre tend to be of a serious and tragic nature. The operas consist of scenes of sacrifice, combat and funeral ceremonies. The composers of the tragédie en musique operas also use librettos and the significance of these librettos in Lully's work was summed up in Abbé Malby's comment that ' an excellent poem is absolutely essential for the long range of success of an Opera. The Music, considered by itself, can have only a passing vogue'. Malby was basically saying that to produce a good opera, you first need a good libretto. Once you have that, the music is secondary to the text.

Other than the differences in the development of opera in France and Italy, there were also differences in the actual operas. For example, in Italy around <https://assignbuster.com/differences-between-french-and-italian-operas-in-the-17th-and-18th-century/>

the 17th century, the vocal soloists were starting to be introduced and da capo arias were used so that the singers could show their talents. This meant that the vocal ensemble cast, which were used in the first half of the 17th century, were being used less and less. The recitative imitated speech with little concern for musical parameters such as melody, rhythm and phrasing and was completely different to the aria which was much more song-like. The ritornello principle (an orchestral introduction to the aria repeated at the end) became firmly established and also included short instrumental interludes between the sections.

In Italy, a young composer named Claudio Giovanni Antonio Monteverdi (1567-1643) became a pioneer for opera seria and became one of the most influential composers of his time. In 1606, Francesco IV Gonzaga commissioned Monteverdi to produce the opera *L'Orfeo*, using a libretto by Alessandro Striggio, for the carnival season of the following year. *L'Orfeo* is based upon the Greek myth of Orpheus and it tells the story of his descent to Hades in an attempt to rescue his dead bride, Eurydice, to bring her back to the living world. *L'Orfeo* was well received by the public at the 1607 premier. Cherubino Ferrari, a court theologian and poet at the time, said that " both poet and musician have depicted the inclinations of the heart so skillfully that it could not have been done better... the music, observing due propriety, serves the poetry so well that nothing more beautiful is to be heard anywhere". This opera was highly influential but largely forgotten when Monteverdi died in 1643.

The Arias and Recitatives

In opera, there are two main types of vocal song: arias and recitatives. Arias only really started to be used more commonly later on in the 17th century and took the form of da capo arias. This type of aria is sung with a small accompanying orchestra and was used to 'show off' the vocalist and was used as a solo emotive piece within the narration. The main cast of the opera would generally sing arias but the more complex the arias became as time went on, the higher the demand on performers became to keep up with this. This could be considered a weakness of da capo arias because the simplicity of arias at the start of the genre changed over time and this led to singers requiring a higher standard of performance to keep up with the genre.

In Italy, the arias eventually became a big part of any opera as the Italians started to favor the singer and the arias over the music, drama or spectacle. The French however, preferred short and simple songs that were more dance-like arias rather than elaborate arias like the Italian variety. This meant that the Italian singers needed a higher skill set than the French singers and the French singers used less improvisational techniques. Arias didn't just have to be a solo vocalist as sometimes duets or trio arias were even composed.

Lully developed the French recitative as an attempt to notate the rhythms, inflections and accents of the French language. The recitative was used to tell the story of the opera and created the narration and is more like a dialogue compared to the arias that were more exclamatory statements through music. The recitatives helped to move the story forwards. He also developed the overture for his ballets which were later incorporated into his

operas. The overtures in both French and Italian opera were used to create an atmosphere for the opera or ballet that was to follow.

As I have previously mentioned, Italian opera was a model for composers throughout Europe, however France developed their own operatic style. Tragédie lyrique is usually made up of five acts (compared to the Italian's three) and had stories of more dramatic interest. There were also elaborate ballet scenes. A large portion of the opera is made up of ballet, choruses and lavish scenes in general. There was also a bigger emphasis on the music throughout the opera and rather than the subordinate nature of music in Italian opera.

As you can see, the development of baroque opera was widely different between French and Italian opera, from not only the different genres that were produced within each country but also the differences within the style of music that is composed within each country, for instance, the differences between the arias and recitatives.

Opera went on to become a very dominant role in both Italy and France from the start of the genre and is still even performed in modern day. Opera buffa, opera seria and also tragédie en musique became the pivotal genres that helped to shape opera into the phenomenon that it is to this day.

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