

# The Invention of Opera (Chapter 14)

## I. Opera

- A. Quintessential art of the 17th century
  - 1. union of poetry, drama, music, stage craft
  - 2. libretto (text) rhymed or unrhymed verse, continuous music, staged with scenery, costumes, action
- B. Creation of opera
  - 1. new invention: attempt to re-create ancient Greek tragedy
  - 2. blend of existing genres: plays, theatrical spectacles, dance, madrigals, solo song
  - 3. ideas inspired by ancient tragedy, content of modern genres
- C. Origins
  - 1. court entertainment, 1600
  - 2. reinvented in Venice, theatrical production for public audience, mid-17th century
  - 3. conceived as drama, elements of epic and lyric poetry

## II. Forerunners of Opera

- A. Association of music with drama goes back to ancient times
  - 1. plays of Euripides and Sophocles: choruses, principal lyric speeches sung
  - 2. medieval liturgical dramas sung throughout
  - 3. Renaissance plays: songs, offstage music
- B. Renaissance antecedents
  - 1. pastoral drama
    - a. plays in verse, music and songs interspersed
    - b. pastoral poems, idyllic love, rural settings, youths and maidens, mythological figures
    - c. popular in Italian courts and academies, 16th century
    - d. Angelo Poliziano's *Favola d'Orfeo*, 1471, first staged pastoral poem
  - 2. madrigal
    - a. madrigals as miniature dramas (NAWM 48 and 50)
    - b. emotion, dramatizing text through music
    - c. madrigal comedy or madrigal cycle
      - i. madrigals grouped in series
      - ii. succession of scenes or simple plot
      - iii. *L'Amfiparnaso* (The Slopes of Parnassus, 1594), by Orazio Vecchi (1550–1605), best known
  - 3. intermedio (pl. intermedi)
    - a. musical interlude on pastoral, allegorical, mythological subject; performed between acts of a play
    - b. usually 6: before, between, and after play's 5 acts
    - c. linked by common theme
    - d. elaborate productions for important occasions, almost all the ingredients of opera
  - 4. 1589 intermedi
    - a. comic play *La pellegrina* (The Pilgrim Woman)
    - c. contained most spectacular intermedi, performed at Florentine wedding
    - d. several of the same artists involved in earliest operas
    - e. count Giovanni de' Bardi (1534–1612) conceived unifying theme; power of ancient Greek music
- C. Greek tragedy as a model
  - 1. humanist scholars, poets, musicians, patrons interested in reviving Greek tragedy
    - a. hoped to generate same ethical effects of ancient Greek music
    - b. experiments led to first operas
  - 2. music in Greek tragedy, role debated
    - a. 1585, Sophocles's *Oedipus Rex*, by Andrea Gabrieli, in Italian translation
      - i. only choruses were sung: homophonic declamatory style
  - 3. contrary view, Girolamo Mei (1519–1594)
    - a. entire text of Greek tragedy was sung

- b. single melody, sung by soloist or chorus, with or without accompaniment
- c. powerful emotions through natural expressiveness of vocal registers

#### D. Florentine Camerata

1. early 1570s, academy hosted by Count Bardi
  - a. discussed literature, science, and the arts
  - b. musicians performed new music
  - c. Vincenzo Galilei (ca. 1520s–1591) and Giulio Caccini
2. *Dialogo della musica antica et della moderna* (Dialogue of Ancient and Modern Music, 1581), by Galilei
  - a. attacked vocal counterpoint
  - b. argued for single line melody, natural speech inflections

#### E. Monody, aria, and solo madrigal

1. monody advocated by Galilei
  - a. term used by modern historians
  - b. all styles of accompanied solo singing, late 16th- and early 17th-centuries
2. Caccini's *Le nuove musiche* (The New Music, pub. 1602)
  - a. 1580s and 1590s, songs for solo voice with continuo
  - b. arias: strophic texts
  - c. madrigals: through-composed settings of nonstrophic poems
    - i. solo madrigal, term used today
  - d. *Vedrò 'l mio sol* (NAWM 72), madrigal
    - i. separate phrase for each line of poetry, ending in a cadence
    - ii. melody shaped to natural accentuation of text
    - iii. ornaments enhance message of text

### III. The First Operas

#### A. Recreate ancient genre in modern form

1. Bardi in Rome, 1592
  - a. discussion and performance continued
  - b. sponsorship of nobleman, Jacopo Corsi (1561–1602)
2. Peri's *Dafne* (1598), setting of Rinuccini's pastoral poem
  - a. fragments survive
  - b. staged drama, sung throughout, music conveyed character's emotions
  - c. presented at Corsi's palace
3. *Rappresentatione di anima et di corpo* (Representation of the Soul and the Body, 1600), produced by Emilio de' Cavalieri
  - a. musical morality play produced in Rome
  - b. longest entirely musical stage work

#### B. *L'Euridice* (1600), by Jacopo Peri (1561–1633)

1. Rinuccini's pastoral drama *L'Euridice*
  - a. story demonstrates music's power to move the emotions
  - b. performed in Florence, wedding of Maria de' Medici to King Henri IV of France
  - c. production incorporated sections by Caccini
  - d. both versions published, earliest surviving complete operas
2. recitative style
  - a. idiom for dialogue invented by Peri
  - b. halfway between speech and song
  - c. similar to style used for reciting Greek epic poems
  - d. basso continuo held steady notes, voice moved freely through consonances and dissonances
    - i. liberated voice from the harmony
  - e. consonances occur on all stressed syllables
  - f. dissonances often violate rules of counterpoint

3. aria, strophic song (NAWM 73a)
    - a. rhythmic, tuneful, resembles canzonetta or dance song
    - b. introduced by brief sinfonia (abstract ensemble piece)
    - c. instrumental ritornello follows each stanza
  4. varied styles of recitative (NAWM 73b)
    - a. narrative recitative
      - i. moments of narration, like epic poem
      - ii. bass and chords support voice's recitation
    - b. expressive recitative
      - i. lyric moments, heightened expressivity
      - ii. methods from madrigal tradition
- C. The impact of monody
1. monody (recitative, aria, madrigal) influenced all kinds of music, secular and sacred
  2. stylistic diversity of Peri continued, expanded in all later opera

#### IV. Claudio Monteverdi (1567–1643)

- A. Most innovative and imaginative composer of his day
1. born in Cremona, Italy
  2. prodigy as a composer; accomplished viol and viola player
  3. 1590, service of Vincenzo Gonzaga, duke of Mantua
    - a. first operas: *L'Orfeo* (1607), *L'Arianna* (1608)
  4. 1612, maestro di cappella, St. Mark's in Venice; 30-year post
  5. 1632, became a priest
  6. transformed genre of the madrigal
  7. major works: 3 surviving operas, 9 books of madrigals, 3 volumes of secular songs, 3 masses, 4 collections of sacred music
- B. *L'Orfeo*
1. commissioned by Francesco Gonzaga, 1607
  2. modeled on *L'Euridice*; wider range of styles
  3. Alessandro Striggio: librettist
    - a. 5 acts, each centered around song by Orfeo, ending with vocal ensemble
  4. from madrigals: expressive text-setting, intense drama
  5. larger and more varied group of instruments
  6. varied monody: songlike aria to recitative
    - a. strophic variation: arias are strophic, strophes varied to reflect text
      - i. Prologue: declamatory aria with ritornello
      - ii. Act III aria *Possente spirto*, florid ornamentation of first 4 strophes
    - b. recitative style varies depending on the situation in the drama
  7. ensembles
    - a. duets, dances, ensemble madrigals and ballettos
    - b. ritornellos and choruses organize scenes into schemes
    - c. Act I, static arch framed by strophic variations
  8. Act II
    - a. dramatic rush forward; series of arias and ensembles strung together
    - b. culminates with Orfeo's strophic aria, *Vi ricorda* (NAWM 74a)
      - i. lighthearted style, hemiola rhythms
    - c. *Ahi, caso acerbo* (Ah, bitter event, NAWM 74c), news of Euridice's death
      - i. Messenger's cry, impassioned recitative
      - ii. tonality changes to Aeolian, change in continuo instruments
      - iii. messenger's melody recurs as a refrain throughout the act
      - iv. tonal area, timbre, formal organization deepen dramatic impact
    - d. Orfeo's lament *Tu se' morta* (NAWM 74d)

- i. new height of lyricism for recitative
- ii. each phrase intensifies in pitch and rhythm
- iii. dissonances against sustained chords

C. Later dramatic works

1. *Combattimento di Tancredi e Clorinda* (The Combat of Tancred and Clorinda, 1624)
  - a. short work blending music and mime
  - b. text from Tasso's epic *Gerusalemme liberata* (Jerusalem Delivered, 1575)
  - c. most is narration; tenor in recitative
  - d. tenor and soprano mime action during narration
  - e. instrumental interludes suggest action
  - f. *concitato genere* or *stile concitato* (excited style)
    - i. to convey anger, warlike actions
    - ii. rapid reiteration on a single note

**V. Opera from Florence to Rome**

A. Florence: Francesca Caccini

1. court preferred ballets and intermedi
2. Francesca Caccini (1587–ca. 1645)
  - a. brilliant career as singer, teacher, composer
  - b. daughter of Giulio Caccini
  - c. highest-paid musician employed by grand duke of Tuscany
  - d. sang in a *concerto delle donne*
  - e. among the most prolific composers of dramatic music
3. *La liberazione di Ruggiero dall'isola d'Alcina* (The Liberation of Ruggiero from the Island of Alcina, 1625), Caccini
  - a. billed as ballet, now considered an opera
  - b. *sinfonia*, prologue, recitatives, arias, choruses, instrumental ritornellos, elaborate staging
  - c. explores theme of women and power

B. Rome: center for opera development, 1620s

1. subjects expanded: lives of saints, epics, comic operas
2. spectacular stage effects emphasized
3. music
  - a. recitative and aria more clearly defined
    - i. recitatives: more speechlike
    - ii. arias: melodious, mainly strophic
    - iii. *mezz-arie* (half-arias), later termed *arioso*; style between recitative and aria
  - b. operas often included vocal ensembles, extended finales for each act
  - c. open with *sinfonia* in two parts: slow chordal section, lively imitative *canzona*
4. *castrati*
  - a. women prohibited from stage in Rome
  - b. female roles sung by *castrati*
  - c. later 17th and 18th centuries, *castrati* sang outside of Rome in male roles

**VI. Public Opera in Venice**

A. Venice: 1637 first public opera house, Teatro San Cassiano

1. patrons: paying public, financial backing from prominent families
2. audience and theaters
  - a. Venice attracted visitors for Carnival, diverse audiences
  - b. theaters built and supported by rich merchants
  - c. nine theaters by 1678
  - d. wealthiest families leased boxes
  - e. everyone purchased admission tickets
3. *impresarios* and singers

- a. theater owners contracted with impresarios
  - b. impresarios competed for most popular singers, high fees
  - c. Signora Girolama and Giulia Masotti earned up to 6 times as composers
  - d. phenomenon of the operatic diva (star)
4. librettos and staging
- a. mythological subjects, epics of Homer, Virgil, Tasso, Ariosto, and Roman history
  - b. plots: wide range of emotions, dramatic conflicts, striking stage effects
  - c. three acts plus prologue became standard
  - d. story told through drama itself, character interactions move plot along
    - i. number of arias increased, 50 or 60 in an opera
    - ii. choruses and dances used at end of an act
  - e. stage sets: series of painted flats, removed and replaced in seconds
- B. Monteverdi's Venetian operas
- 1. revision of *Arianna* (1640)
  - 2. three new operas, two survive
    - a. *Il ritorno d'Ulisse* (The Return of Ulysses, 1640)
    - b. *L'incoronazione di Poppea* (The Coronation of Poppea, 1643)
  - 3. *L'incoronazione di Poppea*
    - a. Monteverdi's masterpiece
    - b. surpasses *Orfeo* in depiction of human character, emotions, interpersonal drama
    - c. style example: Act I, Scene 3 (NAWM 75)
      - i. frequent change of styles
      - ii. expressive recitative with dissonance and chromaticism
      - iii. simpler recitative for dialogue
      - iv. arias with ritornellos, triple meter declaration of love
      - v. ariosos highlight specific feelings
- C. Francesco Cavalli (1602–1676), leading composer
- 1. composed 30 operas for Venice
    - a. pupil of Monteverdi, organist and maestro di cappella at St. Mark's
    - b. most successful, best-paid composer of his time
  - 2. operatic conventions
    - a. conventions established by Cavalli and Giovanni Faustini
    - b. plots center on two pairs of noble lovers, united after conflicts, intrigues
    - c. one pair, prima donna and primo uomo, outranks the other
      - i. female nobles, sopranos; males are castrati
    - d. recitatives in *versi sciolti*, free verse
      - i. changes of pacing, style, harmonic treatment
    - e. aria texts in regular meter and rhyme
      - i. melodius, graceful, simple harmonies, triple meter
    - f. Aristotelian notion of the affections
  - 3. *Artemisia* (1657), Cavalli and Nicolò Minato
    - a. exemplifies mid-century Venetian opera
    - b. aria style, Act I, Scene 3 (NAWM 76a), opening aria
      - i. lyrical, strophic form with refrain
      - ii. ritornello for 2 violins and continuo
      - iii. subtle depiction of emotions and images of the text
      - iv. ritornello, pause for reflection
    - c. recitative dialogue (NAWM 76b)
      - i. heightened with arioso
- D. Italian opera abroad
- 1. Venetian touring companies: to Bologna, Naples, Lucca, Genoa

2. 1650s, permanent opera houses: Naples and Florence
3. opera reached other lands
  - a. Paris, 1640s: Italian operas staged
    - i. new version of *Orfeo* (1647), Luigi Rossi (1597–1653)
    - ii. *Ercole amante*, Cavalli
  - b. copy of Cavalli opera reached England
  - c. Austria: center of Italian opera
    - i. Innsbruck: Venetian-style opera house built, 1654
    - ii. Antonio Cesti (1623–1669), wrote 4 operas for the theater
    - iii. Cesti's *Orontea*, Innsbruck, 1656; most frequently performed opera in 17th century

## **VII. Opera as Drama and as Theater**

- A. Opera began as effort to recreate ancient Greek ideals of drama
  1. sources in theatrical spectacles: intermedi
  2. tension between drama, spectacle, and vocal display
- B. 17th-century operas only a lasted single season
  1. new productions brought new singers
- C. Opera styles appeared in church music, vocal chamber music, instrumental music