

*Virginia
Opera*

Carmen

Georges Bizet

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CARMEN

by
Georges Bizet

**Libretto by Henri Meilhac and Ludovic Halévy
after the novel by Prosper Mérimée**

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CARMEN

Premiere

First performance on March 3, 1875, at the Opéra-Comique in Paris, France.

Cast of Characters

Carmen , a gypsy.....	Mezzo-Soprano
Don José , a corporal.....	Tenor
Escamillo , a bullfighter.....	Bass-Baritone
Micaëla , a country girl.....	Soprano
Zuniga , a lieutenant.....	Bass
Moralès , a corporal.....	Baritone
Frasquita , a gypsy.....	Soprano
Mercédès , a gypsy.....	Soprano
Lillas Pastia , an innkeeper.....	Spoken
Andrès , a lieutenant.....	Tenor
Le Dancaïre, Le Remendado , smugglers.....	Tenor/Bass
A Gypsy, an Orange-seller	Bass/Contralto
A Guide, a Soldier	Spoken
The Alcade (mayor).....	Silent
Soldiers, cigarette factory girls, gypsies, merchants orange-sellers, police, by-standers, urchins.....	Chorus

Brief Summary

Setting: Seville, around 1830

Don José, a good soldier, is attracted to Carmen, a seductive gypsy who works at the local cigarette factory. When Carmen is arrested for attacking a co-worker, she charms Don José into allowing her to escape. He is imprisoned for his lapse. When Don José is released he meets Carmen at a local inn. She dances seductively and tries to entice him, but also insists that he desert the army and come away with her. He refuses, but before he can leave he is confronted by his officer, Zuniga, who has come to romance Carmen. Don José becomes angry and insubordinate, and tries to fight Zuniga. Carmen intervenes but the damage has been done. Don José decides he has no choice but to flee with her to the mountains. Carmen eventually tires of Don José and becomes interested in the bullfighter Escamillo. Don José's jealousy builds into a murderous rage and he swears he will never give Carmen up. Micaëla, a girl from Don José's village, finds him in his mountain hide-out and begs him to return home to see his dying mother. In Don José's absence, Carmen returns to Seville and becomes Escamillo's lover. A desperate Don José finds Carmen in Seville outside the bullring. He tries to convince her to return to him. She refuses, valuing her free will and independence above all else. In a passion of frustrated desire and misery, Don José stabs and kills Carmen. He sobs over her body, calling out her name, as he surrenders to the police.

Full Plot Synopsis and Musical Highlights

Prélude

The musical prelude to Act I of Carmen begins with a vigorous melody that bustles along accompanied by the crash of cymbals. This is the first of three important themes from the opera that are introduced in the Prélude. The first theme will be heard again in Act IV. After a softer secondary motif there is a robust restatement of the first theme. The second theme is the melody of the Act II Toreador Song, which is heard in the strings, followed by a restatement of the theme by the full orchestra. After a dramatic pause and a tremolo in the strings, the cellos introduce the third theme entitled “fate,” a dramatic motif always associated with the character of Carmen.

Act I

A company of soldiers is gathered outside their post in a public square of Seville. Corporal Moralès spies a shy young country girl and tries to flirt with her. She is looking for another soldier, Don José. When she learns that he will be arriving with the changing of the guards, she departs. This introductory scene begins and ends with the same picturesque chorus, “Sur la place, Chacun passé,” (On the square everyone comes by). The relief guard is announced by the sound of piccolos and a chorus of urchins, “Avec la garde montante,” (Right beside the relief guard). Don José arrives and is told about the girl who was asking for him. Don José explains that her name is Micaëla, a young orphan girl from his village who was raised by his mother. He also tells his lieutenant, Zuniga, about the girls who work in the nearby cigarette factory who will be returning from the lunch break. A crowd gathers to watch them walk by.

The factory bell rings and the cigarette girls walk into the factory. Carmen is the last to appear, an event eagerly awaited by the men present. A rapid rendering of the fate theme is heard as she appears. She has a flower in her mouth and plays to the crowd, singing about the fickleness of love in the aria, “L’amour est un oiseau rebelle,” (Love is a rebellious bird). The aria, called the Habanera because of its rhythmic pattern, has a descending chromatic melody, which accentuates its seductive quality. All the men are captivated by her, except Don José who pays her no attention. Irritated by this, Carmen focuses on him and, accompanied by a strong statement of the fate motif, throws a flower at his feet. As the women return to the factory, Don José picks up the flower but hastily hides it as Micaëla returns. In a lovely duet that epitomizes the French lyrical style, “Parle-moi de ma mere,” (Tell me about my mother), Micaëla gives Don José a letter and a kiss from his mother. The two reminisce about their village. After she leaves, Don José reads the letter which suggests that he marry Micaëla. He promises himself that he will.

An uproar is heard from the factory and the girls stream out, shouting that Carmen has wounded one of the factory girls. Zuniga tries to sort out the accusations and then sends Don José into the factory to arrest Carmen. When she is brought out, Zuniga questions her. Carmen is defiant. Zuniga leaves her in Don José’s custody while he prepares arrest papers. Left alone with Don José, Carmen sings the Seguidilla, “Près des ramparts de Séville,” (By the ramparts of Seville) and convinces Don José that her love is there for the taking. She will be awaiting him at the tavern of her friend, Lillas Pastia. In the duet that follows, Don José succumbs to her enticements and with promises of love, loosens the rope around her wrists. As she is led away, he allows himself to be pushed away, and to the melodic strains of the Habanera, Carmen successfully escapes.

Entr’acte

The musical introduction to Act II is based on an off-stage “soldier’s song” sung by Don José just prior to his arrival at Lillas Pastias’s tavern. It is in the form of a *divertissement* with alternating major and minor keys. It has a short contrasting segment before a restatement of the melody, which contains chromatic counterpoint in the cellos.

Act II

Carmen and two friends, Frasquita and Mercédès, are enjoying themselves at Lillas Pastia's tavern with Zuniga and some other soldiers. Gypsy girls are dancing and Carmen sings a gypsy song, "Les tringles desistres tintaient," (The sistrums' rods were jingling) to the accompaniment of a tambourine. Zuniga has fallen under Carmen's spell. The tavern is closing and the soldiers want the gypsy girls to accompany them elsewhere. They refuse, but during the conversation Zuniga tells Carmen that Don José had been imprisoned for allowing her to escape and that he has just been released. Outside the tavern a crowd gathers around the famous bullfighter, Escamillo. He enralls the crowd with a stirring song, "Votre toast, je peux vous le rendre" (I can return your toast) and the crowd joins with a rousing chorus. Escamillo is immediately drawn to Carmen, but she rebuffs him. Both Zuniga and Escamillo leave, with Zuniga telling Carmen he will be returning to see her.

The three gypsy girls talk with Lillas Pastia who informs them that the smugglers Le Dancaire and Le Remendado have arrived. In a fast-paced and airy quintet, "Nous avons en tete une affaire," (We have a scheme in mind), they discuss their smuggling plans in a light-hearted scene of implicit humor. Carmen informs them that she cannot take part in their plans because she is in love and awaiting the soldier who let her escape. Don José's voice is heard outside the tavern singing a soldier's marching song. The small group departs, leaving Carmen and Don José alone. Carmen greets him warmly and a duet begins with Carmen dancing with castanets. The duet, "Tout doux, Monsieur, tout doux," (Softly, sir, softly) is punctuated by off-stage bugles sounding retreat. This musical interjection emphasizes Don José's wrenching dilemma. Does he succumb to his growing passion for Carmen or does he remain honorable to his duty as a soldier. He decides to leave, but Carmen mocks him, saying he does not love her. In response Don José produces the faded flower Carmen had previously flung at him and sings the Flower Song, "La fleur que tu m'avais jetée," (The flower that you threw to me), a rapturous outpouring of his yearning for her while he was imprisoned. Carmen continues her taunting and remains adamant that he must choose her or the army. Don José is about to storm out when his officer Zuniga returns to the tavern. Zuniga orders him to leave. Don José defies him and the two are about to fight when Carmen intervenes and calls on the smugglers to restrain Zuniga. They bind him and hold him hostage as they make their escape. Carmen asks Don José if he has made his decision. He replies that now he has no alternative but to join the smugglers' band. Carmen assures him he will love the free life in the mountains. A stirring chorus, "Suis-nous à travers la campagne," (Take to the country with us) ends the act with Carmen and the gypsy smugglers extolling the wandering life and the joys of freedom.

Entr'acte

The orchestral intermezzo that precedes the third act is characterized by a lyrical grace that is reminiscent of a pastoral. It begins as a lovely solo for flute with harp accompaniment, followed by the strings and other instruments, which introduce countermelodies. The piece grows in intensity and then ends quietly with a slow diminuendo.

Act III

Don José and the smugglers have stopped at a mountain hideaway on their way to the border. A flare-up occurs between Carmen and Don José. It is clear that Carmen is already tiring of him. Don José is still smitten with her but expresses remorse that his mother still believes that he is an honorable man. This sentiment is expressed through music heard during the reading of his mother's letter in Act I. Carmen retorts contemptuously that he should return to his mother. José replies in a threatening manner. Frasquita and Mercédès bring out a deck of cards in order to tell their fortunes. They begin a trio in which they carry on merrily about the good fortune the cards predict for them. When Carmen joins the trio the music darkens and the fate theme is heard. She turns over the cards and they spell out death for her and Don José. In a short flowing *cantilena* she

comments fatalistically that the cards never lie. Le Dancaire and Le Remendado return and in a lively ensemble the smugglers decide to move ahead with their plans and take along the three women to distract the customs guards. Don José is told to remain behind to guard their belongings. He conceals himself behind a rock and waits.

A man appears and looks around cautiously. He is a guide who has brought Micaëla to find Don José. He motions to her and she moves forward, terrified by her surroundings. She prays for God's protection in the air, "Je dis, que rien ne m'épouvante," (I say that nothing frightens me). It contains prominent parts for four horns and a dramatic middle section. Suddenly Don José fires a shot. Micaëla thinks he is shooting at her and she hides. However it is not Micaëla he has aimed at, but a man who turns out to be Escamillo. The bullfighter has come looking for Carmen because he has heard gossip that her affair with the soldier who deserted is over. Don José is stung by this statement, and in a duet, identifies himself and challenges Escamillo to a knife fight. Don José gets the upper hand when Escamillo falls, but before he can finish the fight Carmen and the others return. Carmen stays Don José's hand and Escamillo vows to finish the fight at another time. Accompanied by a slow, quiet version of the Toreador Song scored for four cellos, he leaves after inviting everyone to the bullfight in Seville.

As the smugglers prepare to leave, Micaëla is discovered. To the melody of their first act duet, she tells Don José his mother is calling for him and wants him to come to her. He resists, not wanting to leave Carmen. Carmen takes this opportunity to encourage him to go, saying the gypsy life is not for him. José refuses, believing that Carmen simply wants to run after Escamillo. However, when Micaëla reveals that his mother is dying, he immediately agrees to leave with her. With the fate theme emanating from the orchestra, he gives Carmen a warning that they will meet again and rushes away. In the distance Escamillo can be heard, singing the Toreador Song.

Entr'acte

The music that precedes Act IV sets the stage for the festive bullfighting sequence to come. It is based on Spanish songs collected by Manuel Garcia and includes an Andalusian song and dance, the polo. The entr'acte begins with a fanfare and settles into a winding, pastoral melody.

Act IV

The act begins with a choral scene outside the bullfight arena in Seville. The square is filled with throngs of people all eagerly awaiting the arrival of the matadors. The excitement of the crowd builds as they sing the March and Chorus, "Les voici! Voici la quadrille! (Here they come! Here's the cuadrilla!)" This dynamic music was first heard in the Prélude to the opera. The procession to the bullring culminates with the arrival of Escamillo. A richly dressed Carmen is at his side. They affirm their love for one another in a brief duet, "Si tu je t'aime," (If you love me). Frasquita and Mercédès pull Carmen aside and warn her that Don José is in the crowd. Carmen says she does not fear him and purposefully remains behind when everyone goes inside the arena. Don José comes forth disheveled and in rags. They are alone as they begin the final duet. She states she is not afraid of him and he pleads with her to start a new life with him. Filled with contempt she tells him his entreaties are useless. She no longer loves him. The more he begs her, the angrier she becomes. She tells him that she was born free and she will die free. The toreador theme and the cheers of the crowd inside the arena punctuate their confrontation. Carmen tries to pass him and enter the arena but Don José blocks her way. She tells him furiously to kill her or let her pass. Regardless of the danger she affirms her love for Escamillo. The menacing tone of the fate theme is heard in the orchestra. In anger Carmen takes off the ring Don José once gave her and throws it at him. She tries to pass him but he stabs her while the crowd cheers Escamillo's victory in the bullring. As the crowd exits the arena Don José kneels by Carmen's body, sobbing. As the fate theme thunders forth, he confesses to her murder and calls out her name one last time, before surrendering to the police.

Historical Background

France was the operatic capitol of Europe during the first half of the nineteenth century. During this period a type of musical drama was established that came to be known as “grand opera.” This term helped to differentiate it from the less serious or more melodramatic *opéra comique* which had spoken dialogue in between the musical numbers. In addition to sung dialogue, called recitative, grand opera had other essential features. These included subject matter of a serious and heroic nature, and a grandiose treatment of the subject with regard to singing, instrumental music and staging. Over time, *opéra comique* broadened its scope to include more serious subjects, but the tradition of spoken dialogue remained. As the century progressed, grand opera became somewhat more predictable and less original and the *opéra comique* became the venue for the introduction of new and more innovative works. This was particularly true after the Franco-Prussian war of 1870-1871 which shocked the French body politic and created ripple effects that reached into the world of opera.

Literary trends in France also had an impact on the arts and eventually, opera librettos. In a reaction to the prevailing spirit of Romanticism there was a desire to challenge idealism and replace it with realism. Eventually, literary realism evolved into a movement called naturalism. These developments resulted in *vérisme* opera in France and eventually, *verismo* opera in Italy. There was a desire by writers, artists and opera composers to portray everyday life, the common man in his personal struggles, and even those who were considered immoral or degenerate.

The opera CARMEN is based on a literary work, the novella *Carmen* by Prosper Mérimée. It was written in 1845 and is an early example of realism. In addition to its unsentimental view of its characters' lives, it contained other elements that fascinated the public, such as the allure of the foreign and the exotic. Its setting was in southern Spain and the main character was a gypsy, which highlighted an ethnic group the public found titillating. Mérimée used the framing device of a narrator, and his characters were coarse and unscrupulous. Carmen herself was a thief and the leader of a band of smugglers and bandits, of whom Don José was a member.

When Bizet was commissioned by the Opera-Comique theater to write a full-length opera in 1873, he actively pushed for the Mérimée novella to be used as the basis for the libretto. He worked closely with the librettists, Ludovic Halévy and Henri Meilhac, to shape the libretto, even writing some of the words himself. The resulting opera differed from Mérimée's story in several ways. The realist setting was retained but the narrator was eliminated. The Carmen character became one of the smugglers, not the leader, and her criminal activities were minimized. She was portrayed more as a *femme fatale* and in many ways her character was ennobled. The role of Don José was also softened, showing his downfall and making him more of a victim. The characters Micaëla and Escamillo were created to serve as foils for Carmen and Don José. These changes streamlined the story and heightened the drama.

In the opera, Bizet clearly defines Carmen as a woman who had deliberately thought through her philosophy of life and refuses to depart from it. For Carmen, to be free and independent is primary. She has rejected all restraints of accepted society. The fact that Carmen is a gypsy reinforces this independent, outside-respected-society image. Conversely, Don José has been raised in a small village with a strict, moral upbringing. For him marriage is a commitment by two people to be faithful to one another. The conflict between them arises when Don José is confronted with Carmen's philosophy, which is in direct opposition to his own. The introduction of Micaëla and Escamillo sharpen this conflict. Micaëla represents the moral society in which Don José was raised and symbolizes his ideal woman. Don José feels great passion for Carmen but also wants the same relationship with her that he might have had with Micaëla. Carmen does not share his values and therein lies Don José's downfall. Escamillo is Carmen's ideal lover. He is patient and does not require her eternal faithfulness. He adores her but doesn't need to possess her. The opera CARMEN is

more about the downfall or transformation of Don José than about Carmen herself. Even though Carmen is the central focus of the opera, she is the catalyst that undermines Don José's life.

Some of these changes were a result of the needs of stage adaptation and the intent of the librettists and composer to be true to their art and present a work of significance. Other changes, however, were clearly an attempt to fashion a plot that would be acceptable to the patrons of the Opéra-Comique. Unfortunately, the brilliance of the opera, its directness, its characterizations and its musical realism was too much for the opening night audience, the critics and even Parisian society at large.

The failure of this early example of French *véritisme* opera and its subject matter has been well-documented. After the end of the fourth act (an act received in icy silence by the audience), Bizet walked the streets of Paris all night, frustrated by the public's inability to understand his music and what he was trying to achieve. He retired to the country, depressed by the outpouring of criticism, and believed his greatest work was a failure. Within three months he was dead, having suffered two heart attacks.

Interest in the opera was not dead, however. Many famous composers were effusive in their praise. Some in the musical community felt the opera might be better received as a grand opera. A fellow composer and friend of Bizet, Ernest Guiraud, composed recitatives to replace the spoken dialogue so that CARMEN could be presented as a grand opera for its premiere at the State Opera House in Vienna on October 23, 1875. In little more than four months after Bizet's untimely death, his opera was a resounding success. CARMEN had been produced in Vienna as a spectacle, with a ballet added in Act IV using music from another Bizet opera, as well as an expanded bullfighters procession. The composer Johannes Brahms saw the Viennese production twenty times and was fulsome in his praise. Soon afterward the opera was presented in Brussels with the newly-composed recitatives but without the extra ballet and spectacle. Again, it was a sensation. In the next few years CARMEN made the rounds of the great opera houses of the world before returning to success in Paris eight years later.

The triumph of Bizet's CARMEN had been predicted by a towering figure of the music world, the Russian composer Peter Illyich Tchaikovsky. He had seen an early performance of CARMEN and stated in a letter, "Carmen is a masterpiece in every sense of the word; that is to say, one of those rare creations which expresses the efforts of a whole musical epoch....I am convinced that in ten years Carmen will be the most popular opera in the whole world." Those prophetic words have been borne out by history.

The Life of Georges Bizet

Georges Bizet, born October 25, 1838, was named Alexandre César Léopold Bizet. However, he was christened “Georges” and that became the name he used. Like many other well known composers he was born into a musical family. His father, Adolphe Bizet, was a voice teacher. His mother came from the famous musical family Delsarte and was an excellent pianist. Georges’ uncle, Francois Delsarte, was a celebrated singer. It came as no surprise when Georges showed signs of musical talent at a very early age. He was admitted to the Paris Conservatory at the age of nine.

He quickly rose to prominence in the school. His most important teacher was Jacques Halévy, who taught Charles Gounod, and was a prominent opera composer. Bizet was mentored by Gounod as well. At age eighteen he competed for the coveted Prix de Rome. The judges awarded no first prize that year and Bizet won second prize. He entered again the following year, 1857, and won. The Prix de Rome, founded in 1666 by Louis XIV, was a scholarship that could be awarded to musicians, painters, sculptors or architects. In the 1850s the winner spend time abroad, particularly in Rome, studying in their field. In addition, living expenses were provided for five years. At the end of each year the student had to submit a specified work so that the judges could determine their progress. Other famous Prix winners were Berlioz, Massenet, Gounod and Debussy.

In 1857, Bizet departed for Rome and spent three years there. He studied the landscape, the culture, Italian literature and art. Musically he studied the scores of the great masters. At the end of the first year he was asked to submit a religious work as his required composition. As a self-described atheist, Bizet felt uneasy and hypocritical writing a religious piece. Instead, he submitted a comic opera. Publicly, the committee accepted, acknowledging his musical talent. Privately, the committee conveyed their displeasure. Thus, early in his career, Bizet displayed an independent spirit that would be reflected in innovative ideas in his opera composition.

When Bizet returned to Paris and became self-supporting, he composed, gave piano lessons, produced orchestrations and piano transcriptions and wrote operas. Financially, he found his chosen profession "a splendid art, but a sad trade." He endured no less than five operatic failures before writing CARMEN, but his critics clearly recognized his abilities as a composer. In 1867 he became engaged briefly to Gèneviève Halévy, the daughter of the noted composer of *La Juive*, his former teacher at the Paris Conservatory. The family of Bizet’s mother objected to the marriage because the Halévy’s were Jewish and the Halévy family objected because of Bizet’s atheism, bohemian lifestyle and financial irresponsibility. The two finally married in 1869 but it was not to be a happy marriage. A son was born in 1872.

The Franco-Prussian War of 1870-1871 spurred Bizet’s patriot spirit and he joined the National Guard in defense of Paris. The war also had an effect on the opera world. Prior to the war, composer Jacques Offenbach had reigned in Paris. After the war, his light-hearted satires were no longer as appealing to the Parisians. Bizet was asked to write a one-act comic opera for the Opera-Comique in 1872. It was a failure, but the work won high praise for its music. As a result Bizet was commissioned to write a full, three-act opera by the Opera-Comique. The libretto was to be furnished by Ludovic Halévy, Gèneviève’s cousin, and Henri Meilhac, a very popular libretto team of the time. The novel *Carmen* by Prosper Mérimée was chosen as the source for the opera. This “nouvelle,” written in 1845, contained sex, dishonor and murder. The management of the Comique was very unhappy with the subject matter. Their patrons were used to respectable family entertainment. Blatant sexuality and a violent on-stage murder had never been seen on the stage of the Comique.

Bizet was enthusiastic and took an active part in writing the libretto. He was committed to the realistic nature of the characters and the plot. Bizet’s music captured the exoticism and flair of Spain while remaining true to his lyrical French roots. His brilliant orchestration and

originality brought a new dimension to the operatic stage. By the time the opera went into rehearsal a furor had arisen over it. Management tried to change the ending and newspapers were suggesting that the Opera-Comique would no longer be a family theater. In rehearsal chorus members were unhappy being asked to move about the stage freely and act while they sang. The orchestra found the music “unplayable.” By the night of the opening, however, everyone involved with the production was fully supportive.

On March 3, 1875, the opera had its premiere. It was deemed a colossal failure. Bizet’s music was assailed, the character Carmen was too lewd and the whole event was too sordid for the respectable public. It did have forty-eight performances, but played to smaller and smaller audiences. Bizet’s health, never robust, suffered, and he became depressed. Georges Bizet died at his country estate on June 3, 1875, believing he was a failure. It was three months to the day of the opera’s premiere, and it was also his sixth wedding anniversary. He was thirty-six years old. Four thousand people attended his funeral, and Charles Gounod served as one of the pallbearers.

Discussion Questions

1. What is Carmen's philosophy of how she will lead her life?
2. How does Carmen's philosophy compare with that of Don José?
3. Why was Micaëla introduced into the libretto? What does she represent?
4. Compare the characters Micaëla and Carmen.
5. Contrast the music sung by Micaëla and Carmen.
6. Compare and contrast the characters Don José and Escamillo.
7. Describe the function and importance of the chorus.
8. How do chorus members move about the stage? Do they add to the sense of realism?
9. What is the function of the chorus in the final scene of Act IV?
10. Why is the opera's most dramatic musical theme (leitmotif) called the "fate" theme?
11. How does Bizet's use of this musical leitmotif foreshadow the end of the opera?
12. How would you describe the nature of Carmen's character?
13. Who is the story about – Carmen or Don José?
14. Which character changes or transforms as a result of the plot? How?
15. Would you describe Carmen as a catalyst? Why?
16. How does Bizet's music affect characterization and mood?
17. How does Bizet's music support the realism of the story?
18. What elements seen on stage would have been shocking to audiences in 1875?

A Short History of Opera

The word *opera* is the plural form of the Latin word *opus*, which translates quite literally as *work*. The use of the plural form alludes to the plurality of art forms that combine to create an operatic performance. Today we accept the word *opera* as a reference to a theatrically based musical art form in which the drama is propelled by the sung declamation of text accompanied by a full symphony orchestra.

Opera as an art form can claim its origin with the inclusion of incidental music that was performed during the tragedies and comedies popular during ancient Greek times. The tradition of including music as an integral part of theatrical activities expanded in Roman times and continued throughout the Middle Ages. Surviving examples of liturgical dramas and vernacular plays from Medieval times show the use of music as an “insignificant” part of the action as do the vast mystery and morality plays of the 15th and 16th centuries. Traditional view holds that the first completely sung musical drama (or opera) developed as a result of discussions held in Florence in the 1570s by an informal academy known as the *Camerata*, which led to the musical setting of Rinuccini’s drama, *Dafne*, by composer, Jacopo Peri in 1597.

The work of such early Italian masters as Giulio Caccini and Claudio Monteverdi led to the development of a through-composed musical entertainment comprised of *recitative* sections (*secco* and *accompagnato*), which revealed the plot of the drama; followed by *da capo arias*, which provided the soloist an opportunity to develop the emotions of the character. The function of the *chorus* in these early works mirrored that of the character of the same name found in Greek drama. The new “form” was greeted favorably by the public and quickly became a popular entertainment.

Opera has flourished throughout the world as a vehicle for the expression of the full range of human emotions. Italians claim the art form as their own, retaining dominance in the field through the death of Giacomo Puccini in 1924. Rossini, Bellini, Donizetti, Verdi, and Leoncavallo developed the art form through clearly defined periods that produced *opera buffa*, *opera seria*, *bel canto*, and *verismo*. The Austrian Mozart also wrote operas in Italian and championed the *singspiel* (sing play), which combined the spoken word with music, a form also used by Beethoven in his only opera, *Fidelio*. Bizet (*Carmen*), Offenbach (*Les Contes d’Hoffmann*), Gounod (*Faust*), and Meyerbeer (*Les Huguenots*) led the adaptation by the French which ranged from the *opera comique* to the grand full-scale *tragedie lyrique*. German composers von Weber (*Der Freischütz*), Richard Strauss (*Ariadne auf Naxos*), and Wagner (*Der Ring des Nibelungen*) developed diverse forms such as *singspiel* to through-composed spectacles unified through the use of the *leitmotif*. The English *ballad opera*, Spanish *zarzuela* and Viennese *operetta* helped to establish opera as a form of entertainment, which continues to enjoy great popularity throughout the world.

With the beginning of the 20th century, composers in America diverged from European traditions in order to focus on their own roots while exploring and developing the vast body of the country’s folk music and legends. Composers such as Aaron Copland, Douglas Moore, Carlisle Floyd, Howard Hanson, and Robert Ward have all crafted operas that have been presented throughout the world to great success. Today, composers John Adams, Philip Glass, and John Corigliano enjoy success both at home and abroad and are credited with the infusion of new life into an art form, which continues to evolve even as it approaches its fifth century.



The Operatic Voice

A true (and brief) definition of the “operatic” voice is a difficult proposition. Many believe the voice is “born,” while just as many hold to the belief that the voice is “trained.” The truth lies somewhere between the two. Voices that can sustain the demands required by the operatic repertoire do have many things in common. First and foremost is a strong physical technique that allows the singer to sustain long phrases through the control of both the inhalation and exhalation of breath. Secondly, the voice (regardless of its size) must maintain a resonance in both the head (mouth, sinuses) and chest cavities. The Italian word “*squillo*” (squeal) is used to describe the brilliant tone required to penetrate the full symphony orchestra that accompanies the singers. Finally, all voices are defined by both the actual voice “type” and the selection of repertoire for which the voice is ideally suited.

Within the five major voice types (*Soprano, Mezzo-Soprano, Tenor, Baritone, Bass*) there is a further delineation into categories (*Coloratura, Lyric, Spinto, Dramatic*), which help to define each particular instrument. The *Coloratura* is the highest within each voice type whose extended upper range is complimented by extreme flexibility. The *Lyric* is the most common of the “types.” This instrument is recognized more for the exceptional beauty of its tone rather than its power or range. The *Spinto* is a voice, which combines the beauty of a lyric with the weight and power of a *Dramatic*, which is the most “powerful” of the voices. The *Dramatic* instrument is characterized by the combination of both incredible volume and “steely” intensity.

While the definition presented in the preceding paragraph may seem clearly outlined, many voices combine qualities from each category, thus carving an unique niche in operatic history. Just as each person is different from the next, so is each voice. Throughout her career Maria Callas defied categorization as she performed and recorded roles associated with each category in the soprano voice type. Joan Sutherland as well can be heard in recordings of soprano roles as diverse as the coloratura Gilda in *Rigoletto* to the dramatic Turandot in *Turandot*. Below is a very brief outline of voice types and categories with roles usually associated with the individual voice type.

	<i>Coloratura</i>	<i>Lyric</i>	<i>Spinto</i>	<i>Dramatic</i>
<i>Soprano</i>	Norina (Don Pasquale) Gilda (Rigoletto) Lucia (Lucia di Lammermoor)	Liu (Turandot) Mimi (La Bohème) Pamina (Magic Flute)	Tosca (Tosca) Amelia (A Masked Ball) Leonora (Il Trovatore)	Turandot (Turandot) Norma (Norma) Elektra (Elektra)
<i>Mezzo-Soprano</i>	Rosina (Barber of Seville) Angelina (La Cenerentola) Dorabella (Così fan tutte)	Carmen (Carmen) Charlotte (Werther) Giulietta (Hoffmann)	Santuzza (Cavalleria) Adalgisa (Norma) The Composer (Ariadne auf Naxos)	Azucena (Il Trovatore) Ulrica (A Masked Ball) Herodias (Salome)
<i>Tenor</i>	Count Almaviva (Barber of Seville) Don Ottavio (Don Giovanni) Ferrando (Così fan tutte)	Alfredo (La Traviata) Rodolfo (La Bohème) Tamino (Magic Flute)	Calaf (Turandot) Pollione (Norma) Cavaradossi (Tosca)	Dick Johnson (Fanciulla) Don Jose (Carmen) Otello (Otello)
<i>Baritone</i>	Figaro (Barber of Seville) Count Almaviva (Le nozze di Figaro) Dr. Malatesta (Don Pasquale)	Marcello (La Bohème) Don Giovanni (Don Giovanni) Sharpless (Madama Butterfly)	Verdi Baritone Germont (La Traviata) Di Luna (Il Trovatore) Rigoletto (Rigoletto)	Scarpia (Tosca) Jochanaan (Salome) Jack Rance (Fanciulla)
<i>Bass</i>	Bartolo (Barber of Seville) Don Magnifico (Cenerentola) Dr. Dulcamara (Elixir of Love)	Leporello (Don Giovanni) Colline (La Bohème) Figaro (Marriage of Figaro)	Buffo Bass Don Pasquale (Don Pasquale) Don Alfonso (Così fan tutte)	Basso Cantate Oroveso (Norma) Timur (Turandot) Sarastro (Magic Flute)

Opera Production



Opera is created by the combination of myriad art forms. First and foremost are the actors who portray characters by revealing their thoughts and emotions through the singing voice. The next very important component is a full symphony orchestra that accompanies the singing actors and actresses, helping them to portray the full range of emotions possible in the operatic format. The orchestra performs in an area in front of the singers called the orchestra pit while the singers perform on the open area called the stage. Wigs, costumes, sets and specialized lighting further enhance these performances, all of which are designed, created, and executed by a team of highly trained artisans.

The creation of an opera begins with a dramatic scenario crafted by a playwright or dramaturg who alone or with a librettist fashions the script or libretto that contains the words the artists will sing. Working in tandem, the composer and librettist team up to create a cohesive musical drama in which the music and words work together to express the emotions revealed in the story. Following the completion of their work, the composer and librettist entrust their new work to a conductor who with a team of assistants (repetiteurs) assumes responsibility for the musical preparation of the work. The conductor collaborates with a stage director (responsible for the visual component) in order to bring a performance of the new piece to life on the stage. The stage director and conductor form the creative spearhead for the new composition while assembling a design team, which will take charge of the actual physical production.

Set designers, lighting designers, costume designers, wig and makeup designers and even choreographers must all be brought “on board” to participate in the creation of the new production. The set designer combines the skills of both an artist and an architect using “blueprint” plans to design the actual physical set which will reside on the stage, recreating the physical setting required by the storyline. These blueprints are turned over to a team of carpenters who are specially trained in the art of stage carpentry. Following the actual building of the set, painters following instructions from the set designers’ original plans paint the set. As the set is assembled on the stage, the lighting designer works with a team of electricians to throw light onto both the stage and the set in an atmospheric as well as practical way. Using specialized lighting instruments, colored gels and a state of the art computer, the designer along with the stage director create a “lighting plot” by writing “lighting cues” which are stored in the computer and used during the actual performance of the opera.

During this production period, the costume designer in consultation with the stage director has designed appropriate clothing for the singing actors and actresses to wear. These designs are fashioned into patterns and crafted by a team of highly skilled artisans called cutters, stitchers, and sewers. Each costume is specially made for each singer using his/her individual measurements. The wig and makeup designer, working with the costume designer, designs and creates wigs which will complement both the costume and the singer as well as represent historically accurate “period” fashions.

As the actual performance date approaches, rehearsals are held on the newly crafted set, combined with costumes, lights, and orchestra in order to ensure a cohesive performance that will be both dramatically and musically satisfying to the assembled audience.