

The Glided Stage: Inside the World of Opera

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Abstract

Opera is one of the most complex yet expressive art forms; its roots are traced from the late sixteenth - century. Florence made an attempt to revive and restore this art from just the way it was in the tradition of ancient Greek theatre. This article explains the historical evolution of opera, tracing the experiments of Florentine Camerata to its transformation into a grand public spectacle (Dunton-Downer 2006). There are so many debates on its emergence, development under aristocratic patronage, and its expansion into commercial entertainment for wider audiences.

The study further highlights key structural elements of opera such as recitative and aria, the classification of operatic voice types, and the hierarchical yet collaborative nature of opera production. Attention is also given to the architectural and organizational complexity of opera houses, illustrating the extensive coordination required behind the scenes.

Finally, the article discusses the evolution of opera through different historical periods—from Baroque to the modern era—and its adaptation to technological advancements and changing cultural contexts. Despite challenges, opera continues to thrive globally, maintaining its relevance as a dynamic and evolving art form that bridges music, drama, and visual spectacle.

Keyword: Opera, Renaissance music, Baroque, Florence, Tenor, Florentic Camerata

Introduction:

The roots of opera are found to the late sixteenth- century in the buzzing city of Florence, Italy. It was born four hundred years ago. It is an astonishing expression of art, architecture, literature and scientific investigation on the stage. It thrived under the patronage of wealthy rulers of that

time. During the 1570s a group of musicians, poets who were known as “The Florentine Camerata” tended to meet regularly to discuss the state of music and the way it should be performed. The proposal of Greek drama in a singing form was proposed by them as they believed it had been sung rather than being spoken. The sixteenth century music was mostly polyphonic in nature (Dunton-Downer 2006).

There are two famous debates on the emergence of opera where the first group of people believe that opera was totally a new invention. It was an attempt to recreate the experience of ancient Greek tragedy in the form of a drama which is not described by dialogues but by singing throughout, in which music conveys the emotional effects. Yet another group of intellectuals believes that opera was a blend of existing genres, including plays, theatrical spectacles, dance, madrigals and songs.

Forerunners Of the Opera:

The earliest operas have been found around 1600; it is believed that the coordination of music with drama was there in the ancient times (Solie 1993). Euripides and Sophocles plays were not in the form of speech; they used to be sung in chorus. The religious mystery and miracle play; also, Medieval liturgical dramas used to be sung throughout and included some music. Just like many plays of Shakespeare the plays from the Renaissance often had songs and offstage music.

Emergence of Opera:

In western music the period between 1450 to 1600 is known as the Renaissance in literal terms the renaissance means “re-birth” and it refers to the renewed confidence in human achievement, development from poverty and gaining a way towards prosperity (Wilson 2010). It was the time of printing innovation which gave rise to a more literate population, greater wealth, and education became helpful in developing the arts. This re-birth gave appreciation to sculpture and philosophy of ancient Greece and Rome as that had been created 1500 years earlier in the city states of Italy (Solie 1993). During this time Italy was not a united country but a collection of small dukedoms and princedoms so there were frequent French visitors, political rivals from neighboring Italian states used to come. The Italians used it as an opportunity to showcase this new form of art to noblemen in their courts, on weddings, funerals, birthdays, military victories and deliberately to demonstrate their wealth.

So, earlier operas were part of the life of small elite groups of spectators and those operas were the creation of people who worked in their court as poets but the time was not so far when it reached the large audience. Private opera soon became public and was enjoyed and appreciated by larger audiences. The important commercial centre was the city; it welcomed many foreign merchants, big businessmen, dignitaries and aristocrats filled with knowledge, people who came for a tour to explore new places and culture. Everyone needed something for entertainment so the

demand for entertainment was high, especially at the time of carnival season. It was the time when people came up with an idea of opening an Opera house and offering a ticket to the public for the performances. At that time families of rich people owned opera, the people who were attending the operas were also from privileged backgrounds so the ticket prices were too high.

It was the time when new trends in opera emerged during this time the success of operas depended on the lead performer “the singer” selective parts were written in operas to show off the strength of an individual’s voice, singers themselves choose their scenes and kept their long roles in the operatic settings they even gained the authority to choose the other singers whom should be appear in the production and performance.

At the time of the seventeenth century opera was considered as an art of collaboration between great composer, poet, scenographer, performers, theatre owners but this partnership was nevertheless equal in any means in the hierarchy; singers were at the top and paid more than other people in the group (Paul 2014).



Opera during the ancient Greece time

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Modern Opera after 1800s

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Opera throughout the time:

OPERA	Time Period
Baroque Opera	1600 -1750
Classical Opera	1750 - 1815
Romantic Opera	1815-1900
Opera in modern era	The 20th and 21st century

Recitative and Aria in Opera:

The recitative and aria can be related to the *sthayi* and *antara* of the north Indian classical music forms. Though it's way more different than that and it'll be a very vague representation for these terms.

In the early history of opera there were two terms which considered to be the building blocks of opera were recitative and arias. Recitative is basically a differentiation between singing and speaking. A lot of text is delivered to the audience rapidly; it is mostly used at the time when composers and librettist want to transfer a lot of information and describe the plot of the opera so the story can be moved forward. On the other hand, arias are a very tuneful part of an opera (Paul 2014).

Arias are the part in which the singer reflects the emotion upon the story that just has been delivered in the recitative. Usually aria is sung by the soloist in the operatic group but there are some scenes where several characters sing together in duets (in group of two), trios (group of 3) and quartet (group of 4) to allow the moment of response and reaction from the audience (Dunton-Downer 2006).

Voice types in Opera:

Different singing styles tend to have different voice qualities. Voice type in opera is mainly grouped into four categories; the quality of voice also depicts the role they'll play in opera. The heroic roles tend to be given to singers with higher voices, mainly tenors, lower voices being used for older characters who seem to have authoritative figures (parents, king etc), the normal characters are usually sung by the people having natural voices, mainly the mezzos and baritones (Wilson 2010).

- Sopranos (High female voices)
- Altos (Low female voice sometimes called contraltos)
- Tenors (High male)
- Basses (Low male)

Occasionally gender divisions are blurred in the voices; sometimes it's possible to have male alto and female tenor voices. There are sub categories of voice like:

- Mezzo - soprano (a voice between the soprano and alto range)
- Baritone (a mid-voice between tenor and bass)

Some operas have children's voices, which tend to lie between treble (having a similar range to soprano, without having any high notes) and alto (never having any contraltos). A voice which is not used in opera nowadays is castrato. It is an adult male voice with a soprano or alto range caused by emasculation, basically the voice before the age of puberty. During the 16th century in Italy these voices were used in the church music and huge fame and rewards were given to the families so, poor families used to send their sons to this particular fate to seek the reward and fame.

In modern day opera the castrato roles is played by countertenor, a normal male voice that is extended to the top of the alto range by using falsetto, in this way a high-pitched sound is produced (Wilson 2010).

Coloratura soprano	A very high soprano with a light quality that is suited to singing florid passages of music known as <i>coloratura</i>
Lyric soprano	A warm voice with a bright, full sound
Dramatic soprano	A powerful, more darkly coloured soprano voice
Mezzo soprano	Often the lowest type of female voice for soloists, as solo parts for altos are rare
Light lyric tenor (or <i>leggero</i> tenor)	Like the coloratura soprano, a light and very high voice particularly suited to early 19th-century opera
Lyric tenor	A warm voice with a bright, full sound
Dramatic tenor	A more robust type of voice, often identified as the typical type of operatic tenor
<i>Heldentenor</i> (‘Hero tenor’)	A dark, weighty and powerful tenor voice, particularly associated with the operas of Wagner
Baritone	Midway in range between tenor and bass, baritone parts often need a dark voice with bite as well as a lyrical quality
Bass-baritone	A dramatic voice, slightly lower than a baritone, but that can manage a few notes above the normal bass range
<i>Basso buffo</i>	A flexible bass voice suited to comic roles
<i>Basso profundo</i>	The very lowest type of bass voice

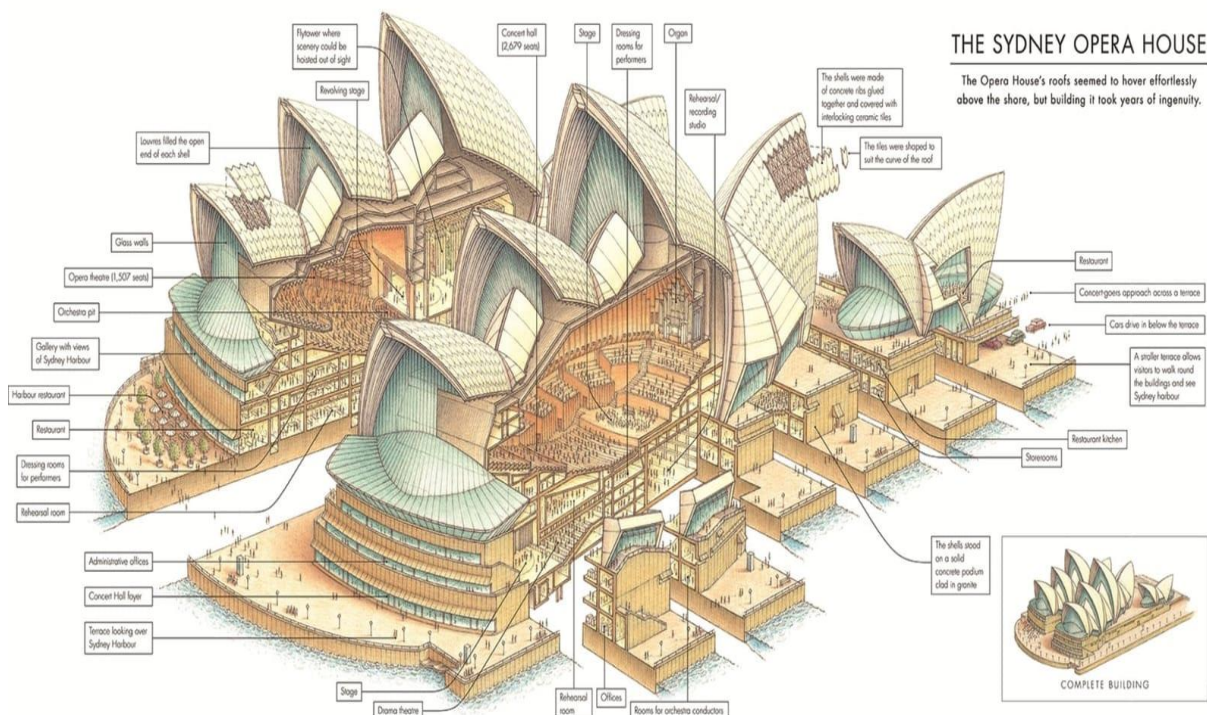
Some common types of operatic voices

Observation:

Behind the scenes in an opera house:

An opera house is a large theatre but it is very different from the other theatre in three different ways:

- There should be an orchestra pit which is a large sunken area that lies between the stage and the front row of seats. It is required so it can accommodate an orchestra of 70 -80 musicians. This pit is not visible to the audience and occupies the full width of the theatre (Solie 1993).
- An extensive backstage area and facilities are needed because many operas include a chorus of 50 to 60 singers, soloist, dancers and actors; they all require an area to change, warmup and to apply make-up (Solie 1993).
- Singing without amplification in a large theatre is difficult as the soloist performs more than 8 shows in a week so for this many operas tend to have repertory opera. This means having two or three operas in the whole week. For this the opera house needs to have a storage room, staff to move scenery, costumes and objects and different products that are needed for the performance on the other night.



Cross sectional View of Sydney Opera House

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Planning and Production in Opera House:

Operating an opera house requires a lot of expertise to handle the responsibilities.

- The managing director is responsible for the management of the entire opera as he handles the board of trustees(Paul 2014).
- The artistic director of opera is responsible for overall planning of the new productions, revisiting the past production(Paul 2014).
- The music director advises on all aspects related to music and sometimes linked with the company's chief conductor.
- The casting director advises which singer to choose and keeps looking for fresh and young talent.

Like any other organization the opera company also needs a number of people and departments to work for them.

Many film directors are also taking interest in opera as it provides a medium of directing the stage. In recent years musicologists also started taking interest in “screen opera” where the opera is recorded and shown on the screen. It is possible because the directors get inspired by it and bring those operas on screen.

Conclusion:

The present-day opera is widely known with the works from the Classic era: It's the time period of Mozart's opera. Those operas are performed with regularity, in a systematic way. Classic opera was found in the late eighteenth century having so many influences on the operatic genre (Paul 2014). The modern era in the opera set it in two new directions where technology influenced it a lot. Technology carried the opera to huge audiences and turned the singers into recording stars people know throughout the world. Opera also focused on the complexities of modern life, fragmented relationships, new urban landscapes which gave scope to the opera singers.

Opera will continue to evolve and thrive as people respond to it. Opera being the most expensive art form seems difficult to survive but there will always be millions of people who would want to go out and see the live opera performed. During the early twentieth century in the USA and UK opera was considered different from other forms of entertainment. It required understanding and special music ability to grasp what is being performed as most of the operas were not in English language. Today the barrier is being broken and there are multiple operas available in English and the operas which are in other languages have now been translated into

the native language of the speaker where the opera is being performed as it gives the audience pre notion of what is being performed.

Earlier Italy and Germany were the centers for opera houses but gradually there were hundreds of more opera houses in the USA, Tokyo, Singapore, Australia almost all over the world. Opera had gone global and became very popular.

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