

A Brief History of Opera

Opera is theatre first, set to music: Music Theatre

The purpose of this distance learning course is to expose you to the historical background of the origins of racial prejudice in America, from the origins of slavery to the Civil War, from the Civil Rights Movement to 2020, where we are today.

We also want to introduce you to opera as a dramatic musical medium promoting topics of social significance. This program connects to many areas of study beyond the historical—to music, drama, singing or choral classes, music appreciation, vocal music, instrumental music and poetry.



Many of you who might see this program will never have heard of opera, much less have seen an actual performance. Without a bit of explanation ahead of seeing the videos, you might well wonder what in the heck you're looking at. So here we go.

“No good opera plot can be sensible, for people do not sing when they are feeling sensible.” ~W. H. Auden

For Starters

Some of you may be wondering: What exactly is an opera? Operas are defined as dramatic works that are set entirely to music. Unlike in musicals, where characters mix dialogue and song, operas are traditionally entirely sung. They are also typically set to classical, orchestral music.

The origins of opera

The story or novel that inspired the opera came first. Thus, we have many operas with names you might recognize. Golden Gate Opera has produced many of these in Marin County theatres since 2005, such as *Madama Butterfly*, *Carmen*, *I Pagliacci* and *Hansel and Gretel*.

In recent years we have wanted to produce operas that address issues that contribute to living peaceably together in society. We recently produced an anti-bullying opera called *The Boy Who Grew Too Fast* and brought it into schools. And now we have *Emancipation*, an opera set in the period leading up to the American Civil War about the striving for emancipation of the slaves and the right to vote in America. As a nation, are still working toward completing this

emancipation, though the Emancipation Proclamation was written in 1862 and announced officially by Lincoln in 1863.

In 2012 we produced *Lincoln and Booth*, written by local composer/librettist team, Christina Rose and John Cepelak and performed at Dominican University of California in Angelico Hall. In 2016 a new version was produced, called *Lincoln: The African-American Connection*, which included gospel singing and was performed in the auditorium of the former Golden Gate Theological Seminary in Mill Valley. And in 2020 we bring together scenes from these, along with new scenes that express the desire for freedom of all men, in a revised version that we call *Emancipation*. You will see the videos of various scenes from this production, as produced by Golden Gate Opera.

Emancipation is still coming. We hope you come away from this course having heard the story, learned the facts, and having been moved by the music and the drama.

What is the Background and History of OPERA?

As a musical genre, opera is about 400 years old. It emerged from Florence in Italy, towards the end of the 16th century, when Jacopo Peri published and produced *Daphne*, the earliest work to be called 'opera'. The first composer to make opera a popular and well-known form of art was Claudio Monteverdi (1567-1643), who utilized older dramatic models like troubadours' plays to present an opera's characters as human beings, exploring their inner feelings in a way that became the norm for composers in the 19th century. His opera *L'Orfeo* (1609), based on the Classical legend of Orpheus and Euridice, was the first opera of significance and is still performed in opera houses today.

The Baroque Period

By the Baroque era, opera was wildly popular throughout Europe, with lavish and expensive productions being put on in almost every major city. Although this period contains many great operatic pieces, arguably the greatest composer of Italian Baroque opera was in fact a German who lived most of his life in London – Georg Frideric Handel (1685-1759). During this period, castrati, male singers who were castrated as boy trebles to preserve their soprano voices, were widely used in opera. The few who survived and made it to the top of their profession were the superstars of the 17th and 18th century.

The Classical Period

With the movement known as the Enlightenment, every facet of life in Europe began to change, including opera. This period favored less elaborate musical forms and more realistic plots – fewer gods, more humans – and a reaction against excessive vocal display. The ultimate composer of the classical period was Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart (1756-91). A master of both drama and musical composition, Mozart created masterpieces such as *Don Giovanni* and *Le Nozze di Figaro* (*The Marriage of Figaro*).

The Romantics

Opera continued to flourish during the Romantic period. Grand opera was suddenly all the rage, with everything getting bigger, louder and lasting longer. One important strand at this time was

the Italian *bel canto* movement (literally ‘beautiful singing’), which was all about vocal brilliance and ornamentation underpinned by a simpler harmonic structure. Gioachino Rossini (1792-1868), had a particular talent for comedy and unforgettable melodic hooks (*La Cenerentola* of 1817 and *Il Barbiere de Siviglia* from 1816, which features the ridiculously catchy ‘Largo al factotum’) which have even been heard in [Bugs Bunny cartoons!](#)

Turn of the Century Opera

The late 19th century was dominated by two giants of opera, Italian Giuseppe Verdi and German Richard Wagner, both born in 1813. Verdi wrote in a melodic and dramatic style. Perhaps his most popular opera is *La Traviata*, the tragic story of a dying courtesan. His *Rigoletto* was also a world favorite. This was due in great part to the genius hit song "[La Donna e mobile](#)" (“Woman is unstable...”). The tune was so wonderful that Verdi swore the stage crew and all singers to secrecy until the opening night. No one was allowed to whistle or hum that great tune after rehearsal. Thus was the audience stunned with a wonderful brand new experience at the opening!

Meanwhile, in Germany, Wagner singlehandedly changed the course of opera with his huge ambition and talent. Probably his best-known music is the ‘Ride of the Valkyries’. During the turn of the century, opera was dominated by Giacomo Puccini and his famous operas *La Bohème*, *Madame Butterfly*, *Turandot* and *Tosca*.

However, this period also contains its fair share of tragedies and dramas in addition to comedies. The famous Bizet opera *Carmen** features a feckless gypsy woman and her ill-fated love affair with a soldier.

How to prepare to enjoy opera

If there is a novel upon which the opera is based, read the novel before seeing the opera. Also look up the [Synopsis](#), the story of what happens in the opera scene by scene.

Reading biographies of people from that period (or the characters in the opera if it is historical) can also help your understanding.

If you can do some reading among the provided [Resource Materials](#) for this course in advance of watching the opera video selections from *Emancipation*, you will be prepared to enjoy your experience all the more.

Have a good meal or snack in advance, go to the bathroom so you won’t have to get up and disturb anyone. Do not bring paper-wrapped candies to the performance, because people will be concentrating and listening, and the crinkling of paper wrappers can be overheard by everyone in the audience. And don’t forget to mute your phones!

Afterwards, ask your friends questions about the opera and have discussions about the topics of interest raised by it. What did you like about the music or the story? What did it make you think of in your own life? Don’t be afraid to speak your thoughts or feelings about what you experience.

You will find that opera, because it combines all the art forms, is a very organic experience. You as audience can come away moved, inspired and thinking about life in general and about the specifics of your own life.

You can thank the composer and librettist first, because it is they who selected the topic or the story they wrote the opera about. Then you must be grateful to the performers, singers, pianists, musicians, conductor, lighting designer, costume designer, all who are involved in creating the illusion so that you can lift the veil of reality and drift into your senses and imagination as you let the arts express new feelings in your body and soul. The voice is the most human instrument of all, and can stir us in ways that other art forms cannot. But it is the combination of all the art forms together that give us a personal and organic feeling about what we experience through watching opera.

Further Fascinating Reading about *Carmen

Carmen was considered a complete disaster when it premiered in 1875 at Paris' popular theatre, the Opéra Comique. Audiences were shocked at what composer Bizet and librettists Meilhac and Halévy put on the stage. They even went so far as to petition the theater not to let anyone under the age of 18 into the hall. In their eyes, *Carmen* was an affront to society.



Today, *Carmen* is one of the most performed operas in the world—second only to Verdi's *La Traviata*. *Carmen*'s characters and melodies perennially capture audiences' imaginations. When people think of "opera," they conjure images of sultry gypsies and bull fights. These images rank with Viking helmets and unfortunate Bohemians.

How does this happen? How can an opera transform so completely in the eyes of the public without the composer changing a note?

Carmen: From Scorned to Beloved

The answer to that question is found in the audience expectations of the day and the style of *opéra comique*. *Opéra comique*, a genre of French opera, was very popular in the nineteenth century. These works, which had to include dialogue, tended to be lighthearted and populist. *The Daughter of the Regiment* is a poster-child for the style, and the effervescent and happy romp was what audiences expected when they walked into the theater.

Upbeat frivolity is not what they received when they saw *Carmen* for the first time.

Carmen—the opera—is based on a novella of the same name by French short story master, Prosper Mérimée. In the novella, Mérimée went out of his way to create an authentic story that grapples with the violence, sensuousness and impulsiveness that lurk under the surface of society. This literary realism, championed by Mérimée, was called *verismo* and became an obsession of the writers and composers who resented the affectation of the Romantic era.

Emotional Roller Coaster

Bizet and his collaborators took the spirit of *verismo* and brilliantly combined it with the conventions of *opéra comique*. This was a shock. *Carmen* is violently murdered by Don José in full view of the audience. *Carmen*'s independence and sexual freedom leaves nothing to the imagination. There is no glossy surface to hide behind. Just like the original audiences of Mozart's *Don Giovanni*, who didn't know whether to laugh or cry, audiences didn't know how to handle the emotional roller coaster present in Bizet's musical kaleidoscope.

While Bizet didn't live to see the success of *Carmen* (a student later added the recitatives that are often performed), the piece became hailed as a masterpiece only once it was taken out of the context of light opera. Now, we take *Carmen* for granted.

~ Joshua Borths, Director of Opera & Musical Theater at Capital University, Columbus Ohio, January 30, 2016

Additional note from Roberta Wain-Becker

Carmen was such a shock because until then operas had been based on stories about the Church, the government, kings, princes and so on, but not about common people and human feelings and actions. This was the scandal. The uproar that followed the premiere caused Bizet to feel that that his life work was a failure, and he died, heartbroken, shortly after his masterpiece was spurned.

But *Carmen* went on to become the most beloved opera in all the world, and the opera performed in more countries in the world than any other, and in many different languages!

Source

A Brief History of Opera, by Alayna Kennedy, sites.psu.edu, March 5, 2015