UNIT 13

NATIONALISM AND THE EXPLOSION OF ROMANTIC OPERA

FIGURES

Giacomo Meyerbeer  
(1791-1864)

Carl Maria von Weber  
(1786-1826)

Gioachino Rossini  
(1792-1868)

Gaetano Donizetti  
(1797-1848)

Vincenzo Bellini  
(1801-1835)

Giuseppe Verdi  
(1813-1901)

Giacomo Puccini  
(1858-1924)

Georges Bizet  
(1838-1875)

Sir Walter Scott  
(1771-1832)

*Giuseppe Garibaldi  
(1807-1882)

Otto von Bismarck  
(1815-1898)
PLACES

Each “Place” in this unit is home to a famous opera house. Take time to visit the website of a few (or all!) of the following:

Venice:  http://www.teatrolafenice.it/
Dresden:  http://www.semperoper.de/en.html
Hamburg:  http://www.hamburgische-staatsoper.de/en/1_state_opera/
          hso/geschichte/index.php
Sydney:  http://www.sydneyoperahouse.com/
Vienna:  http://www.wiener-staatsoper.at

VOCABULARY

Minuet
An early type of social dance (18th century) requiring the dancing couple to make physical, hand-to-hand, contact with one another. It has a triple meter, i.e. three beats per measure: 1-2-3, 1-2-3. Eventually, minuets became so common that many composers wrote pieces in the style of a minuet just for listening rather than for dancing.

Waltz
A later social dance that became popular in the late 18th century. It dominated the 19th century. The waltz was characterized by triple meter and the robust waltz rhythm found its way into many pieces of music in the 19th century, from operas to symphonies. Waltzing required more physical intimacy than the minuet, and was considered scandalous by some. Its high speed required the dancing couple to wrap their arms around each other and to lock eyes in order not to become dizzy.

Ballet
From the Italian verb ballare, which means “to dance.” By the 19th century, ballet had become a highly disciplined, formal style of dancing intended for staged performance. Although most ballet performances now focus entirely on the dance, ballet first appeared as intermezzi between the acts of an opera or play. Ballet grew from Court Dancing. Dancing on the toe (for women), or en pointe, developed about 1830. Ballet in the 1830s and 1840s goes by the name Romantic Ballet. After the middle of the 19th century, an even more elaborate vocabulary of en pointe dancing became known as Classical Ballet. The Russians and the Danish became great masters of Classical Ballet.

Singspiel (singen=to sing) + (spielen=to play)
Singspiel is a form of dialogue opera in which the arias (songs) are sung while the information and dialogue (or conversation) is spoken. Unlike Italian opera, in which all of
the story is sung throughout, whether in recitative or aria, the Germans found that their language worked best in opera if the dialogue were set in normal speech and the emotional parts (arias) were sung.

**French Grand Opera**
This style of opera was uniquely French in its grandeur. French “grand” operas were epic performances usually based upon sweeping and complex historical subjects. They always had five acts and tackled serious historical topics. They included at least one ballet (dance episode) and had big scenes for chorus. As a result, these beautiful and fascinating productions were (and are) incredibly expensive—one main reason these works are rarely performed. An example of French Grand Opera would be Meyerbeer’s *Les Huguenots*.

**Bel canto** (*bel*=beautiful) + (*canto*=singing)
Although all opera is intended to be “sung beautifully,” *bel canto* describes a specific kind of singing technique going all the way back to the 1600s. The term also refers to a type of operatic role in the 1700s and 1800s that emphasizes expression of the voice and ornate vocal melodies. *Bel canto* opera relies on a direct emotional appeal, rather than “grand” costumes, elaborate decorations, or historical weight. *Bel canto* opera can be serious or comic. An example of a comic *bel canto* opera would be Rossini’s *Barber of Seville*, while a tragic one would be Bellini’s *Norma*.

**Risorgimento**
*Il Risorgimento* (in Italian, *the Resurgence*) was the socio-political movement that led to the unification of the independent Italian states into one united nation called Italy. This long-overdue movement began during the end of Napoleon’s rule and was concluded by 1871 (coinciding with the end of the Franco-Prussian War).

**Verismo**
A “realistic” approach to theater, including opera. *Verismo* opera is usually dark and tragic. Although the composer Puccini is most often credited with writing the finest *verismo* operas (*Tosca* and *Madame Butterfly*), Verdi decades earlier was incorporating quite a bit of realism, especially in his operas with tragic endings (*La Traviata*).
DATES

1815-1871: Italian *Risorgimento*

1821: *Weber’s Der Freischütz* has its premiere.

1831: *En pointe* dancing steals the show in *Meyerbeer’s Robert le Diable*.

1852: Harriet Beecher Stowe publishes *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*.

1853: *La Traviata* is premiered in Venice.

1854: Crimean War

Kansas-Nebraska Act

1860: South Carolina becomes first state to secede from the Union.

1861: Italy is unified as one nation.

Serfdom abolished in Russia.

1861-1865: The American Civil War

1870-1871: The Franco-Prussian War

1871: Germany is unified as one nation.

The Suez Canal is completed.

**Verdi’s Aida** is premiered in Cairo, Egypt.

1876: Invention of the telephone

Battle of the Little Bighorn

First performance of Wagner’s *Ring* in the *Festspielhaus* [see Unit 14]

1877: Invention of the gramophone
LISTENING

Puccini  “Nessun dorma,” Turandot (premiere 1926, left unfinished at composer’s death in 1924) (CD3/tr12)

Bizet  Habanera, Carmen (1875) (CD2/tr12)

SELECTED VIEWING OF OPERAS AND BALLETS ON DVD

Puccini - Turandot at the Forbidden City of Beijing, conducted by Zubin Mehta. Maggio Musicale Fiorentino (1998)
A remarkable documentary, this DVD shows the construction of a production of Turandot at the great opera house of La Scala in Italy. It then was taken to the Forbidden City in China. A splendid way for the whole family to see how an opera is produced and to marvel at the resources China contributed to the production. The costumes and sets are blindingly beautiful. And there are interviews with the singers, directors, even officials involved in the delicate matter of transporting an Italian theatrical production to China.

This attractive movie version of Otello is smartly done with wonderful sets, realistic acting, and the fantastic voices of Placido Domingo and Katia Ricciarelli. In addition to being impressive as a film, it will provide an excellent basis for a comparison with Shakespeare’s Othello.

This heart-breaker is well done as a movie, with lovely sets. The opera is performed straight through (with subtitles, of course), and the movie-like aspect of it will capture the attention of those new to opera.

There are literally dozens of performances of Giselle available on DVD. This performance with Baryshnikov and Markarova is a classic, but you should try several productions for comparisons! Try any Russian production, especially the Kirov Ballet (Leningrad/St. Petersburg), or the 2008 production by the National Ballet of Paris, National Orchestra of Paris, 2008. There is an older performance that features legendary dancer Rudolph Nureyev, and while the video quality may not be as “modern,” the dancing is phenomenal.

**Flamenco-Film Version.**

A fascinating new way to look at *Carmen*, featuring the virtuoso dancing of Antonio Gades. Saura has created a story-within-a-story, in which a group of professional flamenco dancers are preparing a flamenco production of *Carmen*. Suddenly, a Carmen-like situation develops within the company. The principal parts of the opera are all heard, and the flamenco dancing is magnificent. Plus, you’ll get an idea of how a dance production is rehearsed. There are gripping scenes, and viewers are likely to be entranced. Also, you can discuss how a story-within-a-story drama works. (There’s a long tradition of this dramatic structure—start with a familiar one such as Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*)

**WEBSITES**

http://classical-music-opera.com/
A wonderful classical music website; although the website focuses on opera, other links lead to information on concerti, masses, sonatas, and symphonies.

http://classicalcat.net/meyerbeer_g/biography.php
The Classical Net site on Meyerbeer, including biographical information, images, listening lists, and audio links. Also view:
http://www.meyerbeer.com/whois.htm

http://www.humanitiesweb.org/spa/ccb/ID/42
A site on von Weber, including biographical information, images, listening lists, and audio links. Also view:
http://www.classical.net/music/comp.lst/weber.php

http://www.sfcv.org/learn/composer-gallery/rossini-gioachino
The San Francisco Classical Voice website on Rossini, including biographical information, images, listening lists, and audio files. Also view:
http://www.classical.net/music/comp.lst/rossini.php
http://www.naxos.com/composerinfo/Gaetano_Donizetti/26004.htm
The Naxos site on Donizetti, including biographical information, images, listening lists, and audio files. Also view:
http://www.donizettisociety.com/donizettilife.htm

http://www.donizettisociety.com/
This website provides information on Donizetti as well as a wide variety of people and artistic influences that were part of his era.

http://www.naxos.com/composerinfo/Vincenzo_Bellini/25979.htm
The Naxos site on Bellini, including biographical information, images, listening lists, and audio links. Also view: http://www.classical.net/music/comp.lst/bellini.php

http://www.giuseppe-verdi.net/giuseppe-verdi-biography/
The site on Verdi, including biographical information, images, listening lists, and audio links.

http://www.columbia.edu/itc/music/NYCO/Boheme/bio.html
A site on Puccini, including biographical information, images, listening lists, and audio links. Also view:
http://www.humanitiesweb.org/spa/cai/ID/747

http://www.classical.net/music/comp.lst/bizet.php
Biographical information, images, and listening lists. Kids may view:

http://www.online-literature.com/walter_scott/
A guide to the life and works of Sir Walter Scott, including quizzes on some of his most popular works. Also view:

http://lauraclaycomb.com/young-artist-corner/
One of Professor Carol’s former students and winner of the Tchaikovsky Competition in Moscow maintains a “young artist corner.”
PUTTING IT ALL TOGETHER

1. **Find a video or DVD copy of at least one of the operas on your listening list.** Before you sit down to watch, spend some time at the composer’s websites becoming familiar with the libretto and the background of the work and try to answer at least some of the following questions:

   - In what year was this opera composed?
   - How old was the composer in that year, and what was going on in his life?
   - Is the opera set in the composer’s home country? If not, why was the setting appropriate for the story?
   - Was the story from a Biblical or literary source?
   - How is this video production conceived? Is it like a stage production, a movie version, or a documentary? What do you find most engaging about this particular production?

Make sure you set the DVD to show English subtitles of what is being sung.

2. **Research the premieres of those operas listed in the “Dates” section.** (The *premiere* is a work’s very first public performance.) How well were the works liked? Why were the works commissioned? Who were the librettists?

3. **If there is an opera company in your city or area, set up a field trip to view its rehearsal facilities.** Most companies (even small ones) have a public relations liaison who will be happy to show you around and tell you or your group about their work. Here are some questions to get you started:

   - How long is the company’s “season,” and how many productions are performed?
   - Who decides which productions to perform?
   - What is the budget for the entire season? For each production?
   - Do they own the productions, or do they rent them (sets, costumes, etc.)
   - How far in advance do they decide on the productions and book the singers?
   - How old is this company? Has it changed over the years?
   - What are the present goals of this company?
   - What factors (economic, geographic, civic, artistic) are helping to shape the company’s future?

4. **Take time to visit the website of each opera house listed in the “Places” section.** These gorgeous buildings have equally gorgeous websites, so this will be a real pleasure! (If you need a little help with the foreign languages, look for the English translation button as necessary.) For each opera house, try to answer the following:

   - In what year was the house built?
• Has it ever been destroyed and/or needed to be rebuilt? Remember: most of these buildings have existed through two World Wars, plus at least one national revolution!
• Does the house offer tours?
• How often do they offer performances?
• What is the price range for seating?
• Does the house offer “standing” places? Long lines of students and tourists almost always form, full of people willing to wait in line for hours just to stand through a full-length opera!
• Does the opera have any corporate sponsors?
• Do any non-opera groups use the house as well?

VIEWING GUIDE

1. Western ballet goes back to the court of _____________. The biggest social-dance craze of the 18th century was the ________________. Then, in the late 18th century, the __________ became popular, and it was more physically intimate and athletic.

2. The word “ballet” comes from the Italian verb ballare, meaning _____________.

3. About 1800, the German composer __________________ wrote the first musical score specifically designed for a ballet.

4. Ballet from the first half of the 19th century is known (stylistically) as _________________, while ballet from the second half is known as _________________. This is worth noting, because in music, the _________________ style precedes the _________________ period.

5. Dancing en pointe was initially intended to depict __________ _________________.

6. The first act of Giselle is based in the 18th-century (literary) world of _________________, while the spooky second act is in the world of the _________________. The female spirits wanting to gain revenge are called the _________________.

______.
7. *Giselle* also had a ______________ scene where the main character dances herself to death. This kind of scene became popular in the 19th century. There’s an especially good one in Donizetti’s opera __________________________, based on a novel by the popular English writer __________________________.

8. A last point about *Giselle*: Adam uses themes called ______________ to signify characters or objects. This will become common practice in 19th-century music.

9. The (nationality) __________________________ greatly preferred to have much dancing in their (what kind?) __________________________ operas. They also liked visually extravagant scenes such as __________

10. An important theme in 19th-century opera is ______________. Another “spiritual” theme important, particularly in German opera, is __________________________.

11. German opera was changed forever in (date) ______ with a Singspiel called *Der Freischütz*, or “The Free Shot.” This opera was especially popular with German audiences because __________________________

12. Germany did not become a united country until after the __________________________ in ______ (date). Italy did not become united until _______ (date).

13. In America, we also like the Singspiel format, but we don’t usually call it “opera.” Rather, we call it a __________________________.

14. What is the difference between an “ordinary” opera and a Singspiel, or “dialogue” opera? __________________________

15. Do 19th-century operas depend upon a lieto fine? ____ __________________________.
16. Who were the three greatest Italian opera composers in the first half of the 19th century (their names end in “i” 😊)? 

17. *Bel canto* means literally __________________________.

18. Rossini excelled at many things, including writing excellent opening numbers called ______________ and weaving the music and action of several characters together, in what we call ______________.

19. Verdi's opera *Nabucco* tells the Biblical story of ______________. The famous chorus called ______________ is familiar to nearly every Italian, even today.

20. What is a *scena ed aria*? ______________

21. What was the *Risorgimento*? ______________

22. *Viva Verdi* became a code for what revolutionary cry? ______________. Why was it necessary to put this seemingly innocent phrase into a code? ______________

23. What culture seemed especially exotic to the French? ______________.

24. Bizet’s opera *Carmen* broke new ground because of the way it ended, namely ______________. That kind of “realism” has a name in theater: ______________.

25. Radio broadcasts of ______________, sponsored for decades by ______________, were long a great source for listening to opera for people living outside of big cities.