

Opera and Real Life



1. Extravagantly Real

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Extravagantly Real

NOT EVEN THE MOST EXTRAVAGANTLY IMAGINED OPERAS are created or performed in a vacuum. They were sponsored by a prince for his own glory, or written for profit in a commercial market. Even when representing events from mythology or the distant past, they also reflected the political conditions of their own time. This first class will offer a rapid overview of some of the topics to be considered in the rest of the course, starting with the work of three major composers (Monteverdi, Handel, and Verdi) and glancing at three others (Puccini, Weill, and Adams) as footnotes.

A. Monteverdi in Mantua & Venice

The earliest opera commonly performed today is *La favola di Orfeo* (The Story of Orpheus) written in 1607 for Federico Gonzaga, Duke of Mantua, by **Claudio Monteverdi** (1567–1643), his court composer. Chafing at his employment, Monteverdi moved to Venice as *maestro di musica* at St. Mark's, a job that also gave him time to write several other operas. The last of these, *L'incoronazione di Poppea* (The Coronation of Poppea, 1642), was produced under very different conditions from his *Orfeo*, and treats the theme of princesship and power in almost the opposite way.

Monteverdi: *Orfeo*, opening

Barcelona 2002; c. Jordi Savall, d. Gilbert Deflo; Montserrat Figueras (La Musica)

Monteverdi: *Orfeo*, opening

Zurich 1978; c. Nikolaus Harnoncourt, d. Jean-Pierre Ponnelle; Trudeliese Schmidt (La Musica)

Monteverdi: *Orfeo*, trailer

Munich 2014; c. Ivor Bolton, d. David Bösch; Christian Gerhaher (*Orfeo*)

Monteverdi: *Poppea*, Nero/Seneca scene

Madrid 2012; c. William Christie, d. Pier Luigi Pizzi; Philippe Jaroussky (Nero), Antonio Abete (Seneca)

Monteverdi: *Poppea*, Nero/Lucano scene

Madrid 2012; Matthias Vidal (Lucano)

B. Handel in London

The German-born composer **George Frideric Handel** (1685–1759) wrote 42 Italian operas in the genre known as *opera seria*, peopled with noble characters, involving both moral and political issues, and coming to a happy ending. Most of these were written in London, where Handel also recruited the star singers who could sustain a commercially viable company. Towards the end of his life, partly in response to the growing popularity of vernacular ballad opera, he switched his attention to oratorio, though many of the dozen works he wrote in this genre could be just as dramatic as the operas.

Handel: *Tamerlano* (1738), opening

Madrid 2008; c. Paul McCreesh, d. Graham Vick; Sara Mingardo (Andronico), Plácido Domingo (Bajazet)

Gay/Pepusch: *The Beggar's Opera*, excerpts

Film 1953; d. Peter Brook; Laurence Olivier (Macheath), Dorothy Tutin (Polly Peachum)

Handel: *Saul* (1738), end of Act II

Glyndebourne 2015; c. Ivor Bolton, d. Barrie Kosky; Christopher Purves (Saul), Paul Appleby (Jonathan)

C. Verdi and the Risorgimento

Giuseppe Verdi (1813–1901) was sympathetic to the Italian unification movement, known as the *Risorgimento*, but he was circumspect as to the overt political content of his operas, both to stay clear of the Austrian censors and because he was more concerned with the individual human stories. The one opera he wrote with a specific political trigger was *La battaglia di Legnano*, composed in response to the uprisings in Milan in 1848. It is seldom performed today, but its entire fourth act was encored at its premiere a year later in Rome, which had similarly just declared itself an independent republic.

Verdi: *Nabucco* (1842), chorus of the Hebrew slaves

Metropolitan Opera 2002; c. James Levine

Verdi: *La battaglia di Legnano* (1849), Act IV complete

Trieste 2013; c. Boris Brott, d. Ruggero Capuccio; Dimitra Theodossiou (Lina), Andrew Richards (Arrigo), Leonardo López Linares (Rolando)

D. Three Footnotes

Three footnotes to expand our theme. In *The Threepenny Opera* (1928), **Bertolt Brecht** (1898–1956) adapted *The Beggar's Opera* as a satire of German society in the Weimar Republic; the music was by **Kurt Weill** (1900–50). With *Nixon in China* (1987), **John Adams** and his librettist **Alice Goodman** examined President Nixon's visit to China in 1972, making this one of the first operas about a living person. **Giacomo Puccini** (1858–1924) wrote *La bohème* in 1896 under the influence of the *verismo* movement, putting ordinary people on the stage; yet by simplifying everything to the bare minimum in his 2019 production in Berlin, director Barrie Kosky provides a vehicle for soprano Nadja Mchantaf to reveal an entirely different kind of reality.

Weill: *Die Dreigroschenoper* (1928), opening

Hamburg, St. Pauli Theater, 2004

Adams: *Nixon in China*, arrival of Air Force One

Metropolitan Opera 2011; c. John Adams, d. Peter Sellars; James Maddalena (Nixon), Russell Braun (Chou En-Lai)

Puccini: *La bohème* (1896), end of Act I and excerpt from Act III

Berlin Komische Oper 2019; c. Jordan de Souza, d. Barrie Kosky; Nadja Mchantaf (Mimi), Jonathan Tetelman (Rodolfo)

The class website is www.brunyate.com/opera-life
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