

Opera Seria and Opera Buffa

AS THE 18TH CENTURY ROLLED AROUND, opera had wormed its way into the social life of your average everyday aristocrat. Even if you were the Duke of Something-or-other or the Countess Whatnot, you just weren't *anybody* unless you went regularly to the opera.

You didn't have to actually listen to it, mind you, and you certainly didn't have to enjoy it. People just had to see you there. It's pretty much the same today.

Alessandro Scarlatti, a Sicilian boy who later made it big in Naples, had just about cornered the market on Italian opera at the end of the 17th century and through much of the 18th. More than anyone else, Scarlatti popularized the so-called *da capo* aria, in which after performing the first two parts of a song singers return to the beginning to sing the opening part again — just in case they didn't get it right the first time around.

Singers loved this routine because it guaranteed them a kind of built-in encore. Some people in the audience appreciated the fact that they could have a second run at trying to understand the words. *Da capo*, which is Italian for “to the head,” probably comes from the fact that after singing so many automatic encores, the singers began to think they must be something pretty special. They let their success, in other words, go to their heads.

Scarlatti wrote more than a hundred operas. (He stopped counting after that, and so have I.) It was mostly because of him that the big scene for Italian opera in the early 18th century shifted from

Venice to Naples. Everybody wanted to be where the action was. This established what came to be called the Neapolitan school.¹

As well as the *da capo* aria, Scarlatti made a specialty of something called “the ensemble of perplexity,” which is generally how I feel about opera most of the time.

After Scarlatti came such composers as Antonio Caldara, Johann Joseph Fux and Johann Hasse. Fux is best known today, if at all, as the author of *Gradus ad Parnassum*, that riveting bestseller that tells you everything you always wanted to know about counterpoint (but were afraid to ask). Hasse was married to Faustina Bordoni, a famous operatic soprano who had a habit of getting into fights on stage. I can only imagine what their home life must have been like.²

The most famous librettist of the day was born Antonio Domenico Bonaventura Trapassi. As a small boy he was adopted by a judge named Gian Vincenzo Gravina, who for some reason changed the boy’s name to Pietro Metastasio. Well, it made sense to *him*.

Metastasio’s adopted father wanted his boy to become a lawyer, but when Daddy died and left him a small fortune, Metastasio chucked the idea of law school and decided to devote himself to becoming a poet. It just seemed easier.

He’d already shown himself to be quick witted with little improvised verses (you know, “There was a young girl from Nantucket” — that sort of thing) and before you knew it, Metastasio was writing opera libretti and ceremonial poetry for the Holy Roman Emperor Charles VI.

Metastasio wrote nearly 30 operas — or more than 70, depending on who’s counting. Most of them are in three acts, as opposed

¹ Some people think Neapolitan opera, like the ice cream, comes in three flavors: chocolate, strawberry and vanilla. I wish they were right.

² Counterpoint is a kind of musical needlepoint, made famous by J.S. Bach as a means of proving how intellectually inadequate all the rest of us are.

to the five-act format everyone had been writing until he came along. This would have been more of an improvement except his three-act operas were just as long as the earlier five-act ones, so we're really no further ahead.

Just about everybody who was anybody — and a few who were nobodies — took a stab at setting a Metastasio opera, from Albinoni to Vivaldi to Hasse to Handel to Porpora to J.C. Bach to Mozart. There are nearly 1,000 opera settings of Metastasio texts, so needless to say there's a bit of duplication here and there. You could hardly avoid it.

All of Metastasio's librettos tell the same kind of story: The hero or heroine is someone impossibly noble struggling with a difficult choice between love and duty. There was often some sort of mistaken identity in there just to make things more interesting, and eventually everything resolves itself into a kind of happy ending — but not before the singers have spent a few hours of long-winded agonizing in full voice (while the audience agonizes in comparative silence).

This form of highbrow entertainment came to be known as *opera seria*, because it was serious stuff. “The *opera seria* libretto,” the latest edition of *Grove's* dictionary tells us, “originated in the Arcadian neo-classical reform of Italian libretto of the late 17th century.” Now you know.

After a while, operagoers began finding that the problem with *opera seria* was it was just so, well, *serious*. All that hand wringing and all that nobility of character got to be a bit much. The plots were so complicated that singers had to spend great chunks of time singing *recitative* just to get over all the text so they could get on with singing their big arias. The end result of this was to make the singers a more important element. This is never a wise move.

With all this heavy-duty emoting happening on stage, audiences grew restless. And probably the composers did, too. What they needed was to have a little fun. As the big operas grew more and

more serious, composers began writing little funny scenes to insert between the acts. These bits of comic relief, which often played in front of the curtain while the stagehands shifted scenery behind, came to be known as *intermezzi*. Pretty soon they started getting longer too, and came to be known as *opera buffa*, or “comic opera.”

Opera buffa does not mean, as you might think, opera in the nude. There are laws against that sort of thing. Unfortunately.

“Comic opera,” historian Donald Jay Grout tells us with his usual knack of hitting the nail on the head, “sheds a ray of sunshine over an otherwise distressingly humorless landscape.” Well, something had to be done or we’d have all died of terminal angst.

Unlike *opera seria*, which is all about aristocrats and gods and important bigwigs, *opera buffa* is usually about servants and peasants and ordinary common folk. (If there are noblemen in *opera buffa*, they are usually there to be made fun of.)

No study of *opera buffa* would be complete without a mention of the most famous one, *La serva padrona*, or *The Maid as Mistress*, by the Italian composer Giovanni Battista Draghi Pergolesi. This wasn’t the first *opera buffa* — in fact, it wasn’t really an *opera buffa* at all but just an *intermezzo*. But it’s the one that always gets mentioned, so who am I to buck a trend?

La serva padrona made its debut in Naples in 1733, wedged in between the acts of a far more serious and now totally forgotten opera called *Il prigionier superbo*, or *The Proud Prisoner*.³ Pergolesi’s simple little ditty tells the story of how a wealthy bachelor, Uberto, is happily duped into marrying his maid, Serpina. The only other character in the story is Uberto’s valet, Vespone, a mute role in which the performer neither sings nor speaks. Operas should have a lot more roles like this one.

The story opens with Uberto complaining that Serpina has not brought him his morning cup of hot chocolate. She comes in to tell

³Pergolesi wrote the *Prisoner*, too, but didn’t think to turn it into TV series.

him to get his own drinks and that furthermore he should get married. (She's a bit more subtle in setting it up, but that's the gist of it.)

That's the first part. In the second part, Serpina disguises Vespone as a dashing captain to make Uberto jealous enough to propose to her. It works. The music ends with a charming little love duet, giving the story a happy ending — except Uberto never does get his hot chocolate.

Pergolesi's tunes are catchy, if not terribly profound. But even though his music sounds a bit like watered-down Mozart, we shouldn't underestimate the importance of Pergolesi's contribution to the development of opera. If it weren't for him, there might not have been any *opera buffa* or any of the later comic operas. We'd have none of the funny operas of Mozart but only the deadly serious ones of Wagner. I shudder to think. (Unfortunately, Pergolesi's best efforts weren't enough to stop Wagner completely, but at least he tried.)

Before his sudden death in 1736 at the age of 26, Pergolesi's works, as one historian puts it, "brought fresh air to opera." I guess all that breathing must have been too much for him: He died of tuberculosis.