CHAPTER19

CHAPTER 19: OPERA AND MUSIC DRAMA IN THE NINETEENTH CENTURY

Chapter Outline

Prelude. (CHWM 442–43)

Opera was popular with audiences of all classes and professions. Librettists addressed issues that spoke to a broad audience and used a variety of subjects and settings. The music itself now became the most important element of an opera’s success, and a permanent repertory of operas began to emerge. Paris became the operatic capital of Europe and French *grand opera*was designed to appeal to middle-class audiences. In Italy, Rossini, Donizetti, Bellini, and Verdi created a new Italian tradition in opera, and their works have been performed ever since. Singspiel was at the root of German opera, and composers intensified its national features while absorbing Romantic elements from French opera.

I. French Grand (and Not So Grand) Opera (CHWM 443–48, NAWM 139, 144, and 146)

1. Meyerbeer  
   Librettist *Eugène Scribe*(1791–1861) and composer *Giacomo Meyerbeer*(1791–1864), the leaders of French grand opera, created works with exciting historical plots and spectacular stage effects.
2. *Les Huguenots*  
   Meyerbeer’s *Les Huguenots*(1836) is typical of French grand opera in combining glorious singing and entertaining spectacle (including an enormous cast, a ballet, dramatic scenery, and lighting effects) with a serious artistic statement. The closing scene of Act II illustrates Meyerbeer’s ability to integrate the expression of deep personal feelings into crowd scenes by using a variety of styles and gestures.**Music: NAWM 139**
3. Other grand operas   
   Grand opera was admired and emulated by later composers.
4. Berlioz, *Les Troyens*  
   Berlioz’s *Les Troyens*(1856–58) drew on grand opera and older French opera traditions.
5. Opéra comique   
   Opéra comique, which used spoken dialogue instead of recitative, featured comic or romantic plots and was on a smaller scale than grand opera.
6. Opéra bouffe   
   *Opéra bouffe,*founded in the 1850s by *Jacques Offenbach*(1819–1880), satirized operatic as well as social conventions. Offenbach’s work influenced developments in comic opera in England, as illustrated by *The Pirates of Penzance,*a later operetta by *W. S. Gilbert*(librettist) and *Arthur Sullivan*(composer, 1842–1900).**Music: NAWM 146**
7. Lyric opera   
   *Lyric opera*featured romantic plots and focused on melody.
8. Gounod’s *Faust*  
   The most famous lyric opera is *Faust*by *Charles Gounod* (1818–1893).
9. Bizet’s *Carmen*  
   *Georges Bizet*(1838–1875) combined *exoticism*and *realism*in *Carmen,*which is set in Spain. It provoked outrage among some at its premiere, but has become one of the most popular operas of all time. **Music: NAWM 144**

**In Context: The Musical Attraction of "the Other"**  
Many composers used timbres, rhythms, and melodic gestures they associated with other nations or simply used unusual sounds to evoke a distant land or foreign culture. This was called exoticism, and its history extends back into the eighteenth century. In the nineteenth century, exotic settings and plots were often used in opera.

II. Italian Opera (CHWM 448–60, NAWM 137–38 and 142)

1. Rossini   
   *Gioachino Rossini*(1792–1868), the most popular and influential opera composer of his generation, blended aspects of opera buffa and opera seria in his operas and established new conventions for Italian opera.
2. Bel canto  
   Rossini helped establish *bel canto*, an elegant singing style that contrasted with the heavier dramatic style that dominated by midcentury.

**Biography: Gioachino Rossini**   
Rossini trained at the Bologna Conservatory and was commissioned to write his first opera at age eighteen. Because he had to compose quickly, he often reworked music from his previous compositions to create new operas. Later, he moved to Paris and became director of the Thé‰tre Italien. Rossini stopped writing operas when he was barely forty and lived the last forty years of his life in financial comfort, composing in other genres.

1. Patter arias   
   Some of the most amusing moments in Rossini’s comic operas are in *patter arias,*in which clever lines are sung with great speed.
2. Rosina’s aria   
   Rosina’s aria *Una voce poco fa*(her *cavatina,*or entrance aria), from *Il barbiere di Siviglia*(The Barber of Seville), conveys her character through changes of style, including both bel canto and patter segments. It consists of two main sections, a slow, lyrical *cantabile*and a fast, brilliant *cabaletta.***Music: NAWM 137**
3. Rossini’s style   
   Rossini’s operas are known for their tunefulness, snappy rhythms, clear phrases, spare orchestration, and simple harmonic schemes.
4. Bellini  
   *Vincenzo Bellini*(1801–1835) preferred serious dramas with fast action.
5. Norma’s aria  
   Bellini is known for long, highly embellished, intensely emotional melodies, as in the cantabile section of *Casta diva*, the cavatina for the title character in *Norma*(1831). **Music: NAWM 138**
6. Donizetti  
   *Gaetano Donizetti*(1797–1848) was one of the most prolific Italian composers of his generation.
7. ***Giuseppe Verdi***  
   *Giuseppe Verdi*(1813–1901) was the dominant figure in Italian music for fifty years after Donizetti.
   1. Opera and nationalism   
      Although Verdi supported and became identified with the Italian Risorgimento ("resurgence"), his operas are not overtly nationalist.
   2. Italian approach to opera   
      Verdi took more time to compose than his predecessors, and he used that time to calculate the most effective setting to enhance an opera’s dramatic impact on the audience.
   3. Verdi’s style   
      Verdi captured character, feeling, and situation in memorable melodies. He also had strict training in harmony and counterpoint, knowledge of past music, and an ear for colorful orchestration.
   4. Early operas   
      Verdi’s early operas, often based on stories of personal tragedy, culminated in 1853 with *Il trovatore*(The Troubadour) and *La traviata*(The Fallen Woman).
   5. *La traviata*  
      Many features of Verdi’s mature works are embodied in *La traviata*. **Music: NAWM 142**

**Biography: Giuseppe Verdi**  
Verdi studied music as a child, then took his first post in Busseto, where he was married. He suffered great personal losses with the deaths of his two children and wife before moving to Milan to begin his opera career. He poured himself into his music, composing several works that quickly became part of the permanent opera repertory. Later, Verdi slowed his production of new operas, eventually retiring and living off the royalties from his music. His publisher persuaded Verdi to come out of retirement to write his two last operas.

* 1. Middle period   
     Verdi wrote fewer operas in his middle period, as he experimented with Parisian grand opera, daring harmonies, comic roles, and other new resources. This period culminated in *Aida*(1871).

**A Closer Look: Typical Scene Structure of Nineteenth-Century Italian Opera**  
Rossini and his librettists developed a scene structure in which all solos, ensembles, and choruses contributed to advancing the plot. A scene typically includes an orchestral introduction, a *scena*(orchestrally accompanied recitative), a *primo tempo*(first movement), a *tempo di mezzo,*and a cabaletta. **Music: NAWM 138 and 142**

* 1. Reminiscence motives   
     Verdi unified his works dramatically and musically by using *reminiscence motives*.
  2. Late works   
     After ten years of retirement, Verdi wrote two late operas on plays by Shakespeare, *Otello*and *Falstaff*.
  3. *Otello*  
     In *Otello*(1887), Verdi completely realized a sense of continuity in music and action.
  4. *Falstaff*  
     Verdi’s last opera, *Falstaff*(1893), took comic opera to a new level, particularly in the ensembles.

**A Closer Look: Verdi’s *Otello,*Act IV**  
In Verdi’s *Otello,*the conclusion of the drama unfolds without pause, contrasting lyrical arias with dialogue and interludes to carry the action.

III. German Romantic Opera (CHWM 460–71, NAWM 140–41)

1. Characteristics   
   *Der Freischütz* (The Magic Rifleman)*,*by *Carl Maria von Weber*(1786–1826), established German Romantic opera, which was characterized by plots from medieval history or legend, often with supernatural elements; country settings; and themes of good versus evil. German operas often used a folklike style, chromatic harmony, and orchestral color for dramatic expression.
2. *Der Freischütz*  
   *Der Freischütz*includes rustic choruses, marches, dances, airs, and arias in Italian style. The famous Wolf’s Glen scene uses *melodrama*(spoken dialogue over music), daring chromatic harmonies, and orchestral effects to represent eerie events. **Music: NAWM 140**
3. ***Richard Wagner and the Music Drama***
   1. Goals and writings   
      *Richard Wagner*(1813–1883), composer of German opera, argued in his writings that the function of music was to serve dramatic expression.

**Biography: Richard Wagner**  
In the early 1830s, Wagner began writing operas, gaining his first great success in 1842 in Dresden, where he directed opera, conducted, and composed at the Saxon court. After fleeing Germany during the 1848–49 insurrection, Wagner settled in Switzerland, where he wrote his most important essays and began *Der Ring des Nibelungen.*He found a new patron in King Ludwig II of Bavaria, who sponsored his later operas. Wagner built the festival theater at Bayreuth where several of his operas were performed, including the *Ring*cycle.

* 1. *Gesamtkunstwerk*  
     Wagner believed that poetry, scenic design, staging, action, and music must work together to form what he called a *Gesamtkunstwerk*. In his*music dramas,*vocal lines are part of a complete texture in which the orchestra plays a leading role.
  2. Other writings   
     Wagner’s published writings address not only music but also literature, drama, and even political and moral topics.
  3. Early operas   
     Wagner drew on Meyerbeer in his grand opera *Rienzi*(1842) and was influenced by Weber in *Der fliegende Holländer*(The Flying Dutchman,1843).
  4. The *Ring*cycle   
     Wagner’s *Der Ring des Nibelungen*(The Ring of the Nibelung, completed 1874) is a cycle of four operas linked by common characters and musical motives. A *leitmotive*is a motive associated with a particular person, thing, emotion, or idea, and Wagner organized each music drama around a number of leitmotives. Wagner used leitmotives to form what many commentators called "endless melody."
  5. Schopenhauer’s influence   
     Some of Wagner’s later dramas were influenced by the philosophy of *Arthur Schopenhauer* (1788–1860), who argued that music was the one art that could give immediate expression to feelings in concrete form without words.
  6. *Tristan und Isolde*  
     In *Tristan und Isolde*, Wagner depicts the passion of two lovers whose ardor can be consummated only in death.

**A Closer Look: Leitmotives in the *Ring*Cycle**   
In the *Ring*cycle, Wagner created melodic relationships among motives, making the dramatic point that certain characters, scenes, and ideas were bound up with one another. Dozens of such motives bound the operas into a unified whole. This technique of depicting character and mood influenced later composers of opera, film, and television scores.

* 1. Prelude   
     In the Prelude to *Tristan und Isolde*, Wagner communicates desire and yearning by using chromatic harmony and delayed resolutions. **Music: NAWM 141a**
  2. Tristan chord   
     The "Tristan chord," F–B–D-sharp–G-sharp, evokes yet evades traditional harmonic expectations.
  3. Act I   
     Throughout Act I of *Tristan und Isolde*, Wagner strings together leitmotives in what eversequence makes sense (while constantly varying them) to convey the actions and emotions of the drama. **Music: NAWM 141b**
  4. Leitmotives in *Tristan*  
     Wagner created leitmotives with similar features to show relationships among characters, objects, and emotions.

**In Context: Wagner’s Reception, Nationalism, and the Jews**   
Wagner’s anti-Semitic essay *Judaism in Music*(1850) was appropriated by the Nazi movement in Germany. In this essay, Wagner attempted to obscure his deep debt to Meyerbeer, who was Jewish.

* 1. Wagner’s influence   
     More has been written about Wagner than about any other musician; his writings and music dramas affected virtually all later operas and had an impact on the other arts as well.