Music 320 - Nineteenth Century
Opera to 1850

Italy

- State of Opera at end of 18th Century: 2 categories:
  - **Opera seria**: Plots using ancient history or myths, emphasis on moral choices; music is just recit and da capo (exit) arias; few ensembles or choruses
  - **Opera buffa**: plots about real, present-day people; complications for the sake of comedy
    - Late in 18th C, some merging of the two, e.g. Don Giovanni: has comic and serious elements, ends with a moral; music is different for different kinds of characters
- **Gioacchino Rossini** (1792-1868) is culminating figure for the 18th century style
  - A child prodigy: sang in choir from age 10; started singing opera and accompanying on piano by age 12; wrote first opera age 14
  - By age 20, had his first opera performed at La Scala in Milan (summit of any opera composer’s career)
  - Rossini’s operas are the culmination of the Neapolitan style, **not romantic operas**.
  - Keys to success: great gift for melody, flair for stage effect
  - His operas were both serious and comic, but he is remembered for comic ones
  - Masterpiece is **Barber of Seville** (1816):
    - Musical characteristics: wide variety of melody types; clear phrasing; spare texture; clean orchestration; pungent rhythms; harmonic scheme that was not complex but still original: liked to use mediant keys juxtaposed against tonic
    - ensembles (very characteristic of comic opera) used to heighten comic effect;
  - Moved to Paris in 1824; produced French versions of some of his earlier operas, also wrote his one French Grand Opera, **Guillaume Tell** (1829)
  - Definition of **French Grand opera**: commissioned by Academie Royale de la Musique for presentation at Paris Opera; serious opera on historical subject; set completely to music (French comic opera had spoken dialogue)
    - William Tell was as close as Rossini came to romanticism
  - Rossini’s **overtures**: have slow introduction with fast main section in shortened version of sonata allegro (development is just a short transition back to tonic); then a faster coda, usually marked *piu mosso*
  - Arias are similar to overtures in structure: usually start with slow intro, then allegro section, then *piu mosso* coda with lots of virtuosity.
    - Rossini didn’t use many solo *da capo* arias, instead had scene complexes that included series of short arias.
  - Rossini called himself the last of the classicists. He quit writing opera at age 37
- **Vincenzo Bellini** (1801-35): Italy’s closest thing to a romantic.
• Wrote almost exclusively opera, all serious.
• Died age 34; small output of 9 operas (Rossini and Donizetti had each written 30 by that age).
• Bellini had strong commitment to the “perfect union of words and music.” Result was recitatives were more flexible than his contemporaries’; also made dramatic scenes extraordinarily intense
• Known for beautiful arcing melodies in Bel Canto style
• Masterpiece is Norma

• **Gaetano Donizetti** (1797-1848).
  • Very prolific: about 70 operas, also wrote chamber and orchestral works, church music
  • Wrote some operas while in military, they became so popular that in 1822 he was discharged and was free to pursue musical career
  • Just a few operas are still performed:
    - Comedies: Elixer of Love (1832), Daughter of the Regiment (1840), Don Pasquale (1843);
    - serious operas: Lucia di Lammermoor (1835), Lucrezia Borgia (1839)
  • Donizetti was very interested in English history, wrote several operas on English historical subjects and characters
  • Not the artist that Bellini was, but more lively; music is very lusty, vigorous, energetic. Also understood how to produce good theatrical effects
  • Some accuse him of “writing to formula” (cookbook approach)
    - The formula is called **Cantabile-Cabaletta**: presents a scene in several sections:
      1) orchestral statement
      2) vocal statement
      3) orchestral or orch + choral interlude
      4) literal repetition of vocal solo
      5) piu mosso coda. Final section is called cabaletta; usually rapid tempo.
    - Structure can extend over protracted period.

• **Giuseppe Verdi** (1813-1901) composed for 60 years; operas between 1838-93 (55 yrs)
  • First big success was *Nabucco*, performed at La Scala 1842
  • Recognized downfall of “cavatina opera” (formulaic approach) and tried to get away from that
  • Continued Donizetti and Bellini’s attempts to blur distinction between aria and recitative (*arioso* in place of recitative with more lyrical melody but still rapid text declamation)
  • Almost all Verdi’s operas are tragedies, but deal with real-life subjects and people (unlike tragedies of previous ages)
  • Verdi was writing during an important political movement in Italy: the **“Risorgimento”** was the movement to unify Italy. Verdi is sometimes said to have led the *Risorgimento* from the opera pit; he included songs from “The Young Italy” revolutionary movement in some of the operas; disguised it as “village band” music.
  • Verdi’s early period ended with the suppression of unification 1849; his operas of early 1850’s are the culmination of his early career: *Il Trovatore, Rigoletto,* and *La Traviata.* They also are showing things that will happen in the future
Il Trovatore and Rigoletto are ‘action dramas’ dealing with violent acts; will grow into Verismo opera later
La Traviata is psychological drama