

PROGRAM FOR MARCH 10, 2009

Presented by Jim Tryer

INFORMATION ON THE ORIGINS OF OPERA

Definition

The word "opera" means "works" in Italian (from the plural of Latin *opus* meaning "work" or "labor"). It combines the arts of solo and choral singing, declamation, acting and dancing in a staged spectacle. The form arose in Italy from a background of various forms of courtly entertainment at the time of the renaissance. Though the first operas were modestly staged compared to other contemporary forms of theatrical entertainments, opera outlasted these, and was to make the transition from the court to the public theater, having taken on the spectacular stagings typical of the *intermedio* [or "intermezzo"], a courtly entertainment with singing and dancing between acts of a play [similar to the court masque in 17th century England].

Classes of modern opera

- 1) *Chamber opera* [limited cast and chorus, small orchestra, can be performed in a small theater]
- 2) Grand opera [music, drama, and sets on a large scale--Aida by Verdi best example. Written to celebrate the opening of Suez Canal, cast included camels, elephants]
- 3) Comic opera [opera buffa, [opéra bouffe], operetta, musical comedy, etc.—most having elements of comedy and/or spoken dialogue].

Theaters where opera is usually performed

There is a European aspect to the house and stage of almost all theaters in use since the renaissance. The architectural form as we know it today was developed in Italy in the 17th century (1612-1637) and subsequently spread all over Europe. The theater, therefore, belongs to the very few truly European types of buildings.

Historical timeline for events leading to opera

1100: Late Middle Ages: Feudal princes and nobles were land holders with castles and surfs. They had wealth and leisure time. Court entertainments were sometimes lavish. *Scholasticism*, medieval philosophy focused on approach to learning how to reach heaven [debates on how many angels can dance on head of a pin] was the major philosophical outlook at the time.

1115 (approximately) *Renaissance* begins: A rebirth of knowledge and culture. The Rise of the early university occurs when Abelard gets permission [granting of academic freedom] from the Bishop of Paris to read [*lecture* from "read" in French] to students within the cloister of the Cathedral. He is allowed to read aloud from ancient non-Christian texts preserved in the cathedral library. Intellectual interest in classical wisdom of Greek scholars begins.

1310 "*Il Milione*," the travelogue by Marco Polo of Venice, tells of Marco's travels with his father and uncle and the luxuries of the east: silks, perfumes, spices, porcelain [china]. Venice is a city originally established because of available salt deposits which early merchants learned to harvest, deliver and sell to medieval estates, thereby establishing early trade routes over Europe. Marco's reports to the Pope lead to trade with the orient from Venice, which brings oriental luxuries to Europe. From Venice merchants deliver and sell luxuries along trade routes. Merchants become as wealthy as the noble princes.

1350 In Florence Petrarch, author of "On Illustrious Men" [short biographies in Latin of classical figures] meets Boccaccio, author of *The Decameron* [tale written to entertain escapees to country estate from the plague.] Followers of Petrarch visit ancient monastery libraries in search of forgotten Latin manuscripts. Followers form *academies* [study groups, "comradships"] imitating Plato's school for learning. They read classic texts aloud.

1400: Humanism overcomes scholasticism as the ideal for learning. Humanists have admiration for the past achievements of the human race. Human accomplishments and virtues are now seen as important. Desire is to improve present world, rather than only qualify for entry to next world by following the rules of Scholasticism.

1439 Gutenberg introduces western printing. Printed texts become widely available to readers.

1477 Marco Polo's book is printed and published. Its influence creates great demand for oriental goods. Humanists try to revive the "glory that was Greece and the grandeur that was Rome."

1500 (approx) Pendulum clocks introduced. Fascination with clockworks and elaborate mechanical devices develops. Roman and Greek plays are performed at court. Tedious performances of Roman plays are separated with *intermezzi* involving elaborate mechanical sets and costumes, music, and dancing.

1502 Musical entertainments after smaller dinners encourage guests to sing and/or play contrapuntal songs of three to six voices known as *Madrigals* (*Motets* in Church) which contribute to musical forms in opera. Isabella d'Este writes of her preference for intermezzi over the performance of a Roman play by Plautus at a large court entertainment.

1589 Surviving texts from intermezzi in Florence demonstrate their characteristics: heaven made up of mechanical clouds (in which the characters can sit and sing as they descend), a delightful garden, a rocky cave guarded by a dragon, and a sea scene with mermaids, dolphins and a ship. Such a combination of music and spectacles becomes so popular with courtly audiences that it leads to a new development in Florence—

1597 The first opera! The *Comrades of Florence* (humanists' club) assemble a combined performance of musical works which tells the classical story of the nymph Dafne. It combines the preference for the visual appeal of intermezzi with an attempt to incorporate the elements of Classic Greek Drama: the First Opera "Dafne," a Drama with music by Jacopo Peri [score lost].

1607 Monteverdi's "Orfeo" performed at court of Duke of Mantua, where Monteverdi is court composer. It is Monteverdi's first attempt at the new form—opera. Orpheus is sung by a castrato (operatic tradition lasting two centuries). Orfeo is a blend of recitative (recited speech), songs [arias] and instrumental sequences (ritornelli). Orfeo, the earliest extant opera, still holds a place in the modern repertory.

1612 Monteverdi leaves the Medici court for Venice to serve as master of music for the Venetian Republic.

1637 Venice opens the first public opera house, the *Teatro San Cassiano* (no longer in existence). Opera is now available to the "Merchant Princes," the wealthy non-noble public.