

Baroque Opera

Opera is a special kind of performing art that combines music and theater.

In an opera, singers, accompanied by an orchestra, perform a dramatic work (a play) that combines words, called the libretto, with a musical score.

Opera incorporates many of the elements of spoken theatre, such as **acting, scenery, and costumes and sometimes also **dance**.**

**Opera
performances
are typically
given in an
opera house,**



**accompanied by an
orchestra or
smaller musical
ensemble.**

Opera began in **Italy at the end of the
16th century and soon spread
through the rest of Europe.**

Italian opera continued to dominate
most of Europe, (except France)
attracting foreign composers
including, especially,
the German-born
George Frederik Handel.

Of the thousands of operas that were known to have been written in the Baroque period, only a small percentage survive.

Handel was the leading composer of opera during the Baroque period.

Other important Baroque opera composers include Vivaldi, Scarlatti, Pergolesi and Hasse. Their operas are all but forgotten today.

In Baroque opera, the stories being told onstage were usually about mythological characters, and figures in ancient history, such as kings and military heroes.

The lives of ordinary people were not the subjects of opera in the Baroque, as they were in later periods of musical history.

Baroque Opera Musical Example

Handel's *Julius Caesar*

The opera *Julius Caesar* by George Frederik Handel tells the story of the relationship between Caesar and Cleopatra. The opera is usually sung in its original language, Italian.

The role of **Cleopatra** is sung by a **coloratura soprano**. **Coloratura** is a vocal technique that requires the singer (usually a soprano) to sing very fast musical phrases including scales, high notes, trills and other difficult vocal acrobatics.

The vocal music in Handel's operas is considered to be among the most demanding music in the operatic repertoire for any operatic voice type, particularly for sopranos.

Baroque Opera Musical Example

Handel's *Julius Caesar*

In Baroque opera, the action of the story is generally told during musical sections called **“recitative”** in which the singers “recite,” or speak on pitch. A **recitative** is generally followed with an **“aria”** (or song) in which a character sings about how they feel in reaction to the action of the story.

In the aria, **“Da tempeste”** from Act III of **Julius Caesar**, Cleopatra sings of her great joy at seeing that Caesar has returned from battle unharmed.

The original Italian text is copied on the next slide, along with an English translation. Please read the translation before listening to the aria.

Aria: “Da tempeste”
from **Handel’s Opera, *Julius Caesar***

Italian Text:

Da tempeste il legno infranto,
se poi salvo giunge in porto,
non sá più che desiar.
Così il cor tra pene e pianto,
or che trova il suo conforto,
torna l'anima a bear.

English Translation:

When, broken by the storms,
the ship comes safe to port,
the sailor has no other desire.
So the heart, torn with suffering and tears,
when at last it is comforted,
brings ecstasy anew to the soul.

Baroque Opera Musical Example

The arias in Handel's operas follow a format which is used in nearly all Baroque opera arias: an opening section (called **"A"**) followed by a somewhat slower, contrasting section (called **"B"**) which is in turn followed by a repeat of the **"A"** section.

According to the **performance practice** of the Baroque period, the singer in an **"A-B-A"** aria (also known in Italian as a **"Da Capo"** aria) is allowed to alter the original melody that the composer has written by adding their own vocal "ornaments" as variations on the repeat of the "A" section. This practice is generally followed in Baroque operatic music, (but not in sacred music of the Baroque, such as in the Da Capo arias of J.S. Bach, wherein it would be considered in very poor musical taste to change what Bach has written.)

The next slide is a rare video of a performance of the aria, **“Da tempeste”** from Handel’s Opera, **Julius Caesar**.

This is a performance from the 1960s by the famous soprano Beverly Sills which is intended to recreate the vocal and visual performance style of Handel’s time period.

As you listen to it, note the very **stylized gestures** and **costume** which might seem very strange by today’s standards. (Although the costume is clearly not an authentic representation of how the real Cleopatra may have looked, you can still recognize that it is Cleopatra.)

Also, note the elaborate **“vocal fireworks”** added by Ms. Sills on the repeat of the “A” section of the aria. This is also typical of how arias were performed in Handel’s time.

Baroque Opera Musical Example 1

Soprano Aria, “*Da tempeste*”

from

George Frederik Handel’s Messiah

in an historic performance

intended to re-create the performance style

of the Baroque Period

by the legendary American soprano

Beverly Sills

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Baroque Opera Musical Example

Handel's *Julius Caesar*

The next slide has a video of the same aria from Handel's **Julius Caesar** performed in a contemporary staging. It is a very widespread trend with opera performances today to stage operas in anachronistic, incongruous or even absurd settings (such as a famous production of Mozart's opera **The Marriage of Figaro** set in the Trump Tower in New York.) This is an example of **Post-Modernism**, which we will be covering later in the semester.

In the production of Handel's **Julius Caesar** shown on the next slide, the music is performed in essentially the same way as it written, but the costumes, scenery and choreography are completely out of time and place. In fact, there is nothing to suggest that we are even looking at Cleopatra (who appears to be dressed like a man). **Which version do you prefer?**

Baroque Opera Musical Example 2

Soprano Aria, “*Da tempeste*”
from

George Frederik Handel’s opera **Julius Caesar**
*performed in a contemporary
or Post-Modern staging*
by American soprano
Danielle de Niese

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Baroque Opera Musical Example

Recitative & Duet from Handel's *Rodelinda*

The final slide in this presentation is a recording of a recitative and duet, "**Io t'abbraccio**," from Handel's opera, **Rodelinda**. In this opera, the title character, Rodelinda, has **nine Da Capo arias** to sing! In operas from later periods, (Classical, Romantic or Modern periods) no composer ever asks a singer to sing more than three arias at the most in one opera. This is one of the reasons why Handel's operas are considered so difficult to sing.

As you listen to this final musical example of Baroque opera, notice how pure and delicate the singing of both singers is.

Not every singer has the degree of control over their vocal production that this music requires. For this reason, many singers who perform in Baroque opera specialize in this type of music and do not typically also sing operas by composers from later periods of musical history.

Baroque Opera Musical Example 3

Recitative & Duet for Soprano & Contralto,
"Io t'abbraccio"

from

George Frederik Handel's opera **Rodelinda**
performed by American soprano Teresa Stich-Randall
and
Canadian contralto Maureen Forrester

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