

# *Symphony & Opera In-Concert*

## **Grande Finale Night at the Opera**

From its beginning, about 1600, opera is all about the solo human voice dramatizing a very personal view of life's universal existentialities. However, from the beginning, composers have understood, and have availed themselves of, the considerable dramatic possibilities of the chorus and of instrumental accompaniment. Early composers of opera were inspired by classical Greek drama, and consciously modeled their efforts upon the fine balance between individual actors and the active rôle taken by the chorus in that great tradition of Western culture. Equally true in opera is the early use of a judicious choice of instruments whose individual tone colors and technical characteristics go far to help set mood and tone specific to dramatic situations.

The first great opera, *L'Orfeo* (1607) by Claudio Monteverdi, uses a large orchestra of harpsichords, organs, stringed instruments (bowed and plucked), various woodwind instruments, trumpets, and trombones. They certainly don't all play together, Monteverdi choosing each as appropriate to the scene—for example, the somber trombones accompany Orfeo to the “infernal shades,” and recorders grace the pastoral scenes. There are strictly instrumental sections, and frequent use of the chorus (nymphs, shepherds, infernal spirits, and Bacchantes) in the traditional Greek fashion to comment upon the dramatic situation or action, or even to advance the latter. While the focus on solo singing of eighteenth-century opera diminished the use of these two important forces, the needs of Romantic drama brought them back with a vengeance in the nineteenth century.

The wonderfully expressive symphony orchestra of the nineteenth century finds its origins in the opera pit. Composers, especially French ones (Isn't it almost always the French when it comes to color?), took full advantage of the expressive possibilities of new or improved instruments to enhance the drama on the stage. The bass clarinet, trombone, English horn, trumpets and horns with valves, string sections without violins, and a percussion section with everything from anvils to thundersheets—all appeared first in the opera pit before being allowed on the august concert stage. Partnering with the new colorful orchestra, the world of religious music provided a choral tradition that turned into the powerful dramatic secular resource of large groups of soldiers, nuns, sailors, slaves, villagers (both happy and incensed), patriots and traitors, and all manner of folk. Together, these two powerful musical resources combined with the long tradition of sophisticated solo singing to create the opera that we all love. Tonight's concert with some of the “plums” of that tradition reminds us of the dramatic riches created by the juxtaposition of soloists, chorus, and orchestra.

“Les voici la quadrille” from *Carmen*—Georges Bizet

Georges Bizet's *Carmen* is at least partial evidence for the old observation that the French have written some of the best Spanish-flavored music. A composer of stunning talent, Bizet tragically died at the early age of only thirty-seven, three months after the première of his signature work. In the opera, set in Seville, Escamillo the

bullfighter competes with the soldier, Don José, for the love of the fiery Carmen, a cigarette maker (and smoker!) Carmen is amusing herself in a dangerous game, playing the two arrogant and vainful men against each other, in a constant atmosphere of possible violence. Act IV of the opera, which ends in Escamillo's murder of Carmen, begins innocuously enough with the colorful entry of Escamillo and his retinue into the town square, on their way to the bullring. The townspeople hail his arrival with the chorus, "Les voici! Voici la quadrille."

#### Aragonaise, Intermezzo, and Séguedille from *Carmen* Suite No. 1--Bizet

Early critics of the opera deemed the score "unplayable," while others complained that the orchestra dominated the singers. Now, of course, everyone appreciates Bizet's colorful, but relatively light, orchestration, and his real ear for tonal color that well suits the opera's Spanish setting. Even the master of orchestration himself, Richard Strauss, recommended students of the subject to *Carmen*, not Wagner. The "Aragonaise," the "Entr'acte" to Act IV, features exotic percussion and vigorous dance rhythms. The "Intermezzo" is the "Entr'acte" to Act III, is a delicate solo for flute and harp. The "Séguedille" is from Act I, where Carmen, jailed for slashing a co-worker's face, tries to seduce her captor, Don José, and effect her escape.

#### Chorus of the Hebrew Slaves from *Nabucco*—Giuseppe Verdi

This, of course, is the famous, "Va pensiero, sull'ali dorate" (Fly, thought, on golden wings; Fly and settle on the slopes and hills). The Israelites are captives of Nebuchadnezzar in Babylon, and sing this doleful lament of their plight in the third act of this relatively early opera of Verdi. This chorus during the 168 years since its première has come to be a symbol of oppressed and enslaved peoples everywhere.

#### Anvil Chorus from *Il Trovatore*--Verdi

The "Anvil Chorus," which opens Act II, is sung by gypsies in fifteenth-century Spain. In it, Azucena, an old gypsy whose mother was burned at the stake for hexing Count di Luna's little brother, reveals that in vengeance she had in turn stolen the child. She had intended to burn the child, but instead incinerated her own child. Don't ask. She then raised the stolen noble child as her own, who, of course, is "Il Trovatore" (the troubadour). But, things being confused, they both now face—what else?—burning at the stake. To open this dark (and fiery) scene, the Gypsies sing: "Vedi le fosche notturne" (See! The endless sky casts off her somber nightly garb . . .)

#### Selections from *La bohème*—Giacomo Puccini

"Che gelida manina"  
"Si, mi chiamano Mimì"  
"O suave fanciulla"

Rodolfo, a poor poet in squalid quarters, responds to a knock on the door, only to

find Mimì, an equally poor seamstress who lives in the same building. Her candle has blown out, he lights it; she returns, having “lost” her key. With both their candles conveniently extinguished (he devilishly has hidden the key), he finds her hand. In that magic moment, he begins passionately to tell her about himself: “Che gelida manina” (Your little hand his cold.) She responds, “Si, mi chiamano Mimì,” (Yes, they call me Mimì) and shares a bit about her quiet, gentle life. Love comes quickly in these circumstances, and they leave together, singing of their newly found mutual love: “O suave fanciulla,” (O gentle maiden.)

#### Danse Bacchanale from *Samson et Delilah*—Camille Saint-Saëns

Saint-Saëns worked on this opera for about ten years before its opening in Weimar, Germany in 1877. The pious French authorities would not permit a story from the Bible on the operatic stage—nor would the English censors until 1909. The Bacchanale occurs at the very end of the opera, after all the events of the familiar story of Samson that we know from the Book of Judges has transpired. Blind and shackled, Samson awaits his fate, as the priests and priestesses of the Philistine pagan god dance their wild and uninhibited song of victory. Well, their victory is short lived, for we all know what Samson does at the end.

#### “Che faceste? Dite su.” from *Macbeth*—Verdi

The Italians and the French adored Shakespeare during the nineteenth century, and Verdi wrote several operas based upon his plays, beginning with *Macbeth* in 1847. The opera, while originally popular, fell out of the repertoire, and not until 1941 did it receive its American première. This chorus occurs at the beginning of the opera, where the three “weird sisters” confront Macbeth and Banquo, and make their unsettling prophecy. Shakespeare sets the mood by prefacing that encounter with a lot of dark, nonsensical blather for the witches. Verdi here substitutes a chorus of witches singing in three “covens” for the original three witches. The music makes clear that, in the opera, at least, the witches are not so much malevolent, as they are just a bunch of mischievous gossips out for trouble.

#### Pilgrim’s Chorus from *Tannhäuser*—Richard Wagner

Before composing his *magnum opus*, “The Ring,” Wagner composed several operas that were somewhat derivative of other successful styles. *Tannhäuser* (1845) is about the redeeming qualities of love—a recurring theme throughout Wagner’s work—and recounts the story of the mediæval Minnesinger (a noble poet/composer), Tannhäuser. He has shamed himself in his self-indulgence with sensual love at the court of Venus and her comely retinue. Soon thereafter, in a song contest in which he, to the scandal of the other contestants and judges, celebrates his salacious—rather than their sacred—definition of love, he is banished. He must make a pilgrimage to Rome to seek absolution for his sins. Off he goes, but in Rome the Pope dashes his hopes, and with a band of pilgrims returns to his homeland in Thuringia. It’s a glorious moment in opera as the pilgrims express their bliss upon returning from their long and arduous mission—

“Once more with joy O my homeland I behold . . . “

Selections from *Tosca*—Puccini

“E lucevan le stella”

In the last act Mario, lover of Tosca awaits dawn and his execution. Perhaps the most poignant clarinet solo in opera opens the aria as Mario sings: “E lucevan le stella” (And the stars were shining). He remembers the night that Tosca first fell into his arms in the garden, and then despairs of his love lost forever. He passionately declares his love of life, ending in tears.

“Vissi d’arte”

Tosca is blackmailed by the evil, lascivious chief of police, Scarpio, who seeks the location of a political prisoner. He sends her lover, Mario, to be tortured for the divulgence of the location, but will relent if she will totally yield to his wicked carnal desires. Tosca, bitterly conflicted, considers her dilemma. She has lived innocently for art and for love, never harming anyone. Why has God put her in this situation? “Vissi d’arte, vissi d’amore, (I lived for art, I lived for love).

Prelude to Act 3 of *Lohengrin*—Wagner

*Lohengrin* was first performed in 1850, and certainly is a Romantic opera in the strictest sense. It is based upon the legendary romance of the 13<sup>th</sup> century of Lohengrin, a knight of the Holy Grail, who is sent in a boat pulled by swans to rescue the maiden, Elsa, who must never ask his name. The young King Ludwig II of Bavaria was so moved by Wagner’s opera that he more or less bankrupted his country in order to build the famous castle, “Neuschwanstein” (new swan stone), that is so beloved by today’s tourists to Southern Germany. The “Mad” King later bankrolled Wagner for all the latter’s big ambitions, before his own mysterious death in 1886. The most famous orchestral excerpt from the opera is certainly the “Bridal Chorus” from the opening of Act III, where Elsa and the “unnamed” knight, Lohengrin, settle down in the bridal chamber after their marriage—we universally recognize this chorus as “Here Comes the Bride.” The exciting prelude to this scene is almost equally well known, and its brilliance has kept it fresh despite innumerable performances.

“Nessun dorma” from *Turandot*—Puccini

In the last act, Calaf, wooing the cold and heartless Princess Turandot, meditates over the implications of his agreement with her: She must guess his name by dawn or she must—much against her will—marry him. If she succeeds, he will be beheaded. She puts all her subjects to the task of searching all night without sleep until they discover his name—if they fail, they will be executed. Either way, tragic death awaits. And so the aria begins: “Nessun dorma! O Principessa, nella tua fredda stanza . . . (None

will sleep! Even you, O Princess, in your cold bedroom . . . .”

Grand March from *Aïda*—Verdi

In 1869 the celebration of the completion of the Suez Canal (1871) was anticipated with the opening of a new opera house in Cairo. Verdi’s *Rigoletto* opened the house, but he soon composed a more suitable grand opera. The term *Grand opéra* doesn’t simply mean a “big operatic spectacle,” although that helps. It means a large cast of principals, four or five acts, spectacular staging, big choruses, ballet (essential—it’s French, after all), an historical subject, and challenging musical parts. Verdi met the demands of the occasion brilliantly, for *Aïda* has all of that. It’s an Egyptian love story between Rhadames, commander-in-chief of the Egyptian army, and Aïda, daughter of the Ethiopian King. The Grand March occurs in the second act, as Rhadames, victorious over the Ethiopian army, returns in triumph with his army, Ethiopian captives, and as many live animals and trumpets as every opera house can afford. It’s simply Verdi at his grandest, and a glorious way to end our season.

--Wm. E. Runyan

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