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The Secret Society of Opera

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Opera:
The Wood Workings

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From the Renaissance to the present, opera has attracted the masses of the Western World to the seats of the opera theaters. Would it surprise a listener to know that such a phenomena such as opera was once an idea? Certainly not, but with something so richly engrained in musical society as opera, it is easy to forget it had a starting place from whence it did not exist previously. Through this paper I intend to highlight the how the eclecticism of Opera, through the works of the Florentine Camerata and the various influences that guided them, went from a few common ideas and became a collaborated work.

“It is in fact the characteristic advantage of opera that neither its words alone nor its music alone can express all that its drama requires. The images of music are just communicative as the images of poetry and the two arts may often combine with one another best when the sound and the sense of the poetry are either neutral enough or incomplete enough not to be unduly contorted by the difficult but rewarding compromises of pitch, rhythm, and tempo...”¹

The idea of opera began in closed rooms amongst musicians, philosophers, and artists who felt compelled by Ancient Greek philosophy to create a style of music that strongly communicates drama and emotion. This achievement can be no less attributed to the musicians, philosophers and artists of the Florentine Camerata. Their ultimate product would eventually result in a marriage of music, poetry and drama that would be unlike anything produced on the stage before. The Italians would call it, “opera.”

During the late Renaissance the Italian world was divided into several political principalities. Within these principalities resided several *Cameratas*, otherwise known as

¹ Robert Donington. *The Rise of Opera*. New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1981. 18.

learned societies. A modern person may understand these societies more commonly as *salons*. The Florentine Camerata was one such salon. However, “one” would hardly have described the networking of the Florentine Camerata.

The idea of the Florentine Camerata has, in recent years become known as a loose term for a very large and complex networking of intellectual societies. Though most evidence attributes the originations of opera to the Florentine Camerata, there is still much to be found in the studies of other societies throughout Italy during the Renaissance. Though the birth of opera can be attributed to the Florentine Camerata, it is important to understand that it was not solely dependent on this *one* group. Rather, opera was a development resulting from musical experimentation by those in the Florentine Camerata as well as the many sources that the Camerata members possessed individually and ultimately inspired by the works of other societies. To say that the Florentine Camerata invented opera would discredit many other influences that were developing the idea simultaneously with the Camerata. Because of this opera’s developments were eclectic, and continue in that tradition to this day.

The Camerata that was closest attributed to opera began its span of influence roughly around 1577. Giovanni de’ Bardi, assisted by the poet Ottavio Rinuccini, were commissioned to compose a musical drama in honor of the marriage of Cesare d’Este and Virginia de’ Medici. The work was called: “L’amico fido” or “The Faithfull Friend”. This work consisted of six interludes (or mini acts/scenes) plus an elaborate Ballata (Italian musical form) which was sung and danced by shepherds in Tuscan costume. The ensemble was fully set and costumed and accompanied by a sizeable orchestra.² The presentation delighted the audience, and the pleased

² Robert Donington. *The Rise of Opera*. New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1981. 62.

the Medici family. Such success was merely the beginning of an even grander development. New ideas in philosophy and music would soon become a large influence towards the advancement of even the Florentine Camerata's developments.

At this time, the Western World gave rise to ideals known as: "Neo-Platonism" during the Renaissance period, and the "Doctrine of Affectations" in the Baroque period. Through these ideals Opera was inspired and then developed. "Everyone has heard of the papers of the Florentine *camerata* of enthusiastically humanistic aristocrats who used many of their meetings to create as faithful as possible a reconstruction of Attic tragedy and ended up by finding that their experiment had produced opera."³

In the sixteenth century Antiquity became a high interest in the Western World. This interest was inspired by the massive influx of discoveries of ancient Greece being discovered throughout Italy. These discoveries imposed their ancient doctrines (unintentionally) on characters of the Renaissance which in turn created a set of philosophies known as "Neo-Platonism".

From its name, "Neo-Platonism", we see that it is: New (Neo) Studies (isms) of Plato. One of Plato's greatest philosophies on the arts says,

"art is a veil which half reveals, in the very act of half concealing, deeper meanings than its surface shows."⁴

This philosophy, and many others of Plato's, were great inspiration in developing Opera.

³Ernst Krenek. *Exploring Music; Essays*. New York: October House, 1966. 98.

⁴ Robert Donington. *The Rise of Opera*. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1981. 21.

Prior to Neo-Platonism vocal music of the Italian Renaissance was polyphonic. In other words, the music was sung with multiple, differing parts layering over each other. Up until this point, monophonic singing (solo singing) had hardly been considered. One such objection that the Camerata had towards polyphonic singing was that it was too strictly dictated by the music and did not allow for expressions of deeper meanings (Neo-Platonism) to be expressed. The Camerata wanted to create an art form that would stray away from the *mathematical* systems of polyphonic vocal music of the renaissance. They sought to do this by creating an emphasis on monophonic singing and accentuate it by staging this singing in a tangible environment.

Opera began its emergence during the 16th century amidst the music of the ballet, the intermedio, the pastorale, the madrigal comedy, and (as mentioned above) a revival of monophonic compositions. Of these, the greatest influence on opera were the monophonic developments. Of the Neo-Platonic discoveries, composers were drawn to the concept that Ancient Greek Theater was half epic and half lyric.⁵ Composers in Florence Italy used these concepts to create a sort of speech-like dramatic music (we call it recitative). By combining monophonic principles at the time with the concept of Ancient Greek Theater, the Camerata created something new and revolutionary.

The ironic mystery in this development was that, at the time, very little was known on how the music of Ancient Greece had actually sounded. Despite this, the Neo-Platonic *rave* of the late Renaissance, made the interest in Ancient Greek Theater grow tremendously. The

⁵Arthur Elson. *The Book of Musical Knowledge; the History, Technique, and Appreciation of Music, Together With Lives of the Great Composers, for Music-Lovers, Students and Teachers*. New York: Tudor Pub. Co.,1927. 16.

Camerata, and other musical societies took interest in Greek Tragedy and sought to find resources of these books for their study. However, what they were able to gain access to, they did not possess any knowledge of how the music worked (as mentioned before). Very little of Ancient Greek music remains today and even smaller fragments of Greek Tragedy. Yet, the Camerata still sought to model their own musical style from what ancient finds were accessible.

Professor Viero Pettori of the University in Florence and his student Girolamo Mei are responsible for the resources of Ancient Greek music in Florence. Pettori and Mei sought to find the original Greek manuscripts (not the Latin translations) of Greek music. They succeeded in finding copies of works such as “Agamemnon” by Aeschylus, and “Electra” by Euripides. Through these achievements Mei was given the recognition and opportunity necessary to spend the next fourteen years studying Greek drama and music in Rome.

In the midst of this work Mei began receiving letters from an accomplished composer by the name of Vincenzo Galilei. Galilei requested of Mei regarding ancient Greek music for the use of intellectual groups in Florence. Among these intellectual groups included Giovanni Bardi’s *Camerata*. On behalf of Bardi and the Camerata, Galilei asked Mei how and why Greek music was able to set poetic texts so expressively. Mei responded that the Greek’s monadic style allowed the emotions of the text to be expressed by a single melodic line.

Galilei, with Mei’s consent, took Mei’s conclusions of Greek music and included them in his work *Dialogo della musica antica e della moderna* or *Dialogue of music ancient and modern*. In this work, based on Mei’s discoveries, Galilei explains the importance of understanding text in Greek music. This includes that the emphasis must be on the solo voice with little accompaniment, the words must be sung with resemblance to correct and natural speech

declamation, and the melody must interpret the emotion of the passage and not just the mere details. These terms became the staple in future performing of dramatic music in the Florentine world.

One of Galilei's ideals, clearly gleaned from Ancient Greece, that contributed to the invention of opera was Aristotle's view of the usage of music as a platform for emotions.

Aristotle explains this concept quite clearly,

“By *pleasurable language*, I mean language that has the embellishments of rhythm, melody, and metre. And I add, by *different means in different parts*, because in some parts metre alone is employed, in others, melody.”⁶

What can be seen here is that the musical elements such as rhythm, melody, and metre (meter) are embellishments in order to make the poetry pleasurable. The Camerata, and other groups of the time, sought to understand deeper what Aristotle meant by this.

As the world began to embark into the Baroque period, more musical elements and studies contributed to opera's development. Stemming from Neo Platonism was the Baroque ideal known as: the Doctrine of the Affections. Essentially, the Doctrine of the Affections emphasized more on the primary role of the arts was to convey emotions rather than the musician's skills. This was greatly contrary to the mathematical approaches to music used in the Renaissance polyphony.

⁶ Donald J. Grout, and Hermine Weigel Williams. *A Short History of Opera*. 4th edition. New York: Columbia University Press, 2003. 10.

In vocal music, the Doctrine of the Affections, inspired composers to lean towards the monophonic (solo voice) style, versus the previous polyphonic style of the Renaissance. This focus on solo singing brought rise to Opera's greatest predecessors: madrigals and musical dramas.

Madrigals, were taken from an even older tradition taken from the Renaissance period. Madrigals were usually sung in polyphonic or homophonic parts. The greatest influence on opera from madrigals was their use of text-painting. Text painting was a musical expression that illuminated the text in a literal way. If the word being sung was "ascending" then the notes of the line would ascend. This created a way to relate, or rather, create text through music.

Musical drama was an advancement in both sacred vocal music and secular vocal music. In the middle of the fourteenth century sacred music liturgical dramas and mysteries were examples of musical drama. Liturgical dramas were vocal settings of a religious scene (typically the nativity or the resurrection) that were not staged but only sung. The music of liturgical dramas ranged from solo movements to choral movements. Mysteries, seen as the predecessor of oratorios, varied slightly from liturgical dramas in their topics. Mysteries were written on a much larger scope such as "Mystery of the Old Testament" and could be performed over a period of twenty-five days.⁷

Secular dramatic music, aside from the music of antiquity, is known at its earliest by Adam de la Halle's play, "Le Jeu de Robin et de Marion". Many sources have tried even to

⁷ Donald J. Grout, and Hermine Weigel Williams. *A Short History of Opera*. 4th edition. New York: Columbia University Press, 2003. 14-16.

categorize this work of musical drama as *opéra comique*, or opera with familiar tunes and spoken dialogue. However, Halle's work has no real relation to the actual genre of opera.

Galilei, Bardi, and the Camerata did not stop here in their advancements in musical drama. Eventually Bardi would depart from the Camerata in 1592 to continue studies in Rome, leaving Jacopo Corsi in his place as leader. The Camerata under Corsi consisted of composers: Tasso, Chiabrera, Monteverdi, Rinuccini, and Peri.

Of the Camerata, one of the most influential contributors to opera was Claudio Monteverdi. Monteverdi, born in 1567 in Cremona Italy, could have easily been described as a *scientist for music*. Namely, Monteverdi is called the first great composer of Opera.

Today, we have three surviving Operas by Monteverdi. L'Orfeo (Orpheus), Il ritorno d'Ulisse in patria (The Return of Ulysses to his Homeland), L'incoronazione di Poppea (The Coronation of Poppea).

Monteverdi's work took the studies of the Camerata, and set a public standard of Opera that has flourished throughout the ages. Now the baton would be passed from the Camerata to Monteverdi, as he created the framework for opera.

“He taught humanity what we look and sound like on the operatic stage. His music touches the heart and confronts the soul as does that of few other composers. He is one of those artists whose work reconciles us to life.”⁸

⁸ Mark Ringer. *Opera's First Master; The Musical Dramas of Claudio Monteverdi*. New Jersey: Amadeus Press, 2006. X.

It would almost seem providential that Monteverdi would be born in 1567 in Cremona Italy. The year 1567 would have been the same year that Palestrina (famous polyphonic composer) would have composed his greatest work: “Pope Marcellus Mass”. Cremona during the 16th century would have also been the center for stringed instrument making. Perfectly catered to the new invention of the violin, which had been invading the musical scene. Thanks to his environment, Monteverdi began his musical career as a string player at the Mantuan court. Through this time, Monteverdi composed significant innovative works for stringed instruments.

Monteverdi’s vocal composing was influenced by his teacher—the composer Marc’ Antonio Ingeneri—who taught him the foundations of Renaissance polyphonic writing. By 1587 Monteverdi’s first book of Madrigals for five voice emerged. Next to his operas, Monteverdi’s madrigals were one of his greatest achievements. Such achievements gave Monteverdi a position in the Mantuan court.

Through the Mantuan court Monteverdi was introduced to the concept of the *intermedio*. At this time, the intermetdio was a staged vignettes on mythological themes. Intermetdio had become a regular staple to Court Theater. Its purpose would be to fill the gaps in court plays, allowing for scene change, all the while giving the audience a break from the action. Intermedio, historically seem to be one of the most distinguishable genres that could have really inspired opera.

Amongst these influences of the Florentine Camerata, monophonic singing, madrigalism, and intermedi—in 1606 Monteverdi began to undertake his first opera: “L’Orfeo”. By February of 1607, “L’Orfeo” had made its premier. “L’Orfeo was based on an Ancient Greek Tragedy story of Orfeo and Euridice. The story opens with Orfeo and Euridice’s wedding. Amidst the

wedding celebration Euridice is bitten by a snake and it kills her. Orfeo is heart-broken and vows to enter into Hades and return his love. The hero succeeds in retrieving Euridice, however to exit the underworld Orfeo must not look back. But, when the exit is closely in sight, Orfeo makes a detrimental mistake. The Hero looks back, and Euridice is forever banished to Hades.

“The premier of *L’Orfeo* revealed an art form that had come to a stage of genuine maturity, a medium capable of addressing the most serious concerns of human life with the emotional depth and intellectual complexity found only in the greatest art.”⁹

Finally, the idea of opera, after all this time, had finally become a success. Within the next year, Monteverdi had already been commissioned by the Medici to write another opera. All the while, the court of Mantuan was digging deep into the Florentine reserves of opera developments. In 1608, Gagliano presented his new opera, “Dafne” for the Mantuan Court.

As the world was approaching into the Baroque era, the purpose for musical drama was beginning to change. There began to grow a greater division between the aristocracy and the middle classes. Countries of Europe were becoming more divided. There became a need for advances in physical and material activity.

“The result was the style, full of subtleties and sophistications, that we call Baroque.”¹⁰

To this day, Monteverdi’s “*L’Orfeo*” has become one of the most frequently performed and recorded seventeenth century operas from the Baroque period.

⁹ Mark Ringer. *Opera’s First Master; The Musical Dramas of Claudio Monteverdi*. New Jersey: Amadeus Press, 2006. 43.

¹⁰ Howard D. McKinney, and W. R. Anderson. *Music in History; the evolution of an art*. New York: American Book Company, 1940. 309.

Monteverdi's "L'Orfeo contained many different dramatic elements which became staple elements in Baroque Opera. The vocal developments of recitative secco, and the aria were among these. Likewise, the opera uses a story of grandiose proportions in that the characters are mythological and heroic, thus unable to relate to the average human or the Baroque era. Such entertainment was desired of the aristocracy of the time.

"The opera's (*L'Orfeo*) characters frequently call attention to oppositions—male and female, divine and human. As the son of the god Apollo and the Muse Calliope, the title character is a *semideo* (demigod), the very embodiment of duality. Along with the human/divine divide, the boundaries of life and death are explored, as is the primal opposition of light (Apollon in heaven) and dark (Plutone in the Inferno)."¹¹

However, what I have mentioned thus far was only what was happening in Italy. Soon, France, England, and Germany would take notice. With the popularity of this new official genre, opera, the rest of the western world began to grab hold of its artistic potential.

The first to make an attempt at opera would be the French. Prior to 1654 the French world up until this point was heavily influenced by the ballet¹². Therefore, it would seem fitting that the French Opera would incorporate the use of this fine art. Italian Opera began to make its way into the French courts through the influence of the Italian librettist: Rinucini, and the Italian composer: Caccini. There were various attempts to write opera by French composers: Michel de la Guerre, Pierre Perin, and Jean-Baptiste Lully. Of these three, the true success came from Lully. Lully had long had a reputation for creating ballets for the French Court. Soon these

¹¹ Mark Ringer. *Opera's First Master; The Musical Dramas of Claudio Monteverdi*. 44.

¹² Robert Donington. *The Rise of Opera*. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1981. 281.

ballets began to have more elaborate scenes, vocal music, acting, until it had evolved into a ballet-form of opera. By the middle of the Baroque period opera had become a common treat of the French aristocratic entertainment.

The next to follow, would have been the English in roughly 1675. English Opera, like French Opera, stemmed from a previously existing musical drama apart of English traditions. That tradition was known as the masque. The first English composer to create a truly English Opera was Henry Purcell. English Masque was a spectacle similar to our modern day musical theater. There was an emphasis on costuming, spoken dialogue, songs, and instrumental music. Purcell, began in experimenting by implementing solo singing as part of the masques. Eventually by the 1700's the English would have done away with the masque traditions of the past, and adapted the Italian influenced tradition of incorporating music into the masque.¹³

In the German world, composers were fascinated by the techniques of the outside world. However, it took some time to establish an official German style.

“Abstractly speaking, a purely “German” opera is one written for performance by German artists for German audiences, with an original libretto in the German language and on a German (or, at least, not a typically foreign) subject, composed by a German, and with music in a German (or, at least, not predominantly foreign) style. In actuality, there are few, if any, operas of the early period that correspond to this admittedly narrow definition.”¹⁴

¹³ Donald J. Grout, and Hermine Weigel Williams. *A Short History of Opera*. 4th edition. New York: Columbia University Press, 2003. 147.

¹⁴ Donald J. Grout, and Hermine Weigel Williams. *A Short History of Opera*. 4th edition. New York: Columbia University Press, 2003. 121.

Due to vast cultural and political issues in Germany during this time, Germany did not have any musical drama style of their own. Whereas the Italians had Intermezzi, the French had ballet, and the English had masques; the Germans were introduced to opera by the Italians performing their operas for the German courts. Without a truly German form of musical drama, Germany chose to imitate the Italian styles. The Germans began importing Italian opera as early as 1614. Many of Germany's finest composers were sent to study under Lully in France. It was not until 1720 that opera even had occurred in German scores.¹⁵ They called their operas "singspiel" which was a literal translation of the Italian term, "drama per musica" which means "musical drama".¹⁶ So much of the Baroque musical drama in Germany was a mirror image of Italian opera.

At this point, the Western World would be moving out of the Baroque period and moving into the Classic period. With this change would come new ideals known and philosophies that would change the culture of opera. Opera would soon begin to have separate Genres such as: Opera Seria (serious opera) or Opera Buffa (comedic opera). Vocal desires, form, structure, and instrumentation were amongst many things that would change. Yet, all the same, it remained as a staged and costumed vocal work.

There is no doubt that opera has changed the course of music history. In the present day, treasures such as Monteverdi's "L'Orfeo" or Lully's "Armide" are still performed. Vocalists; have trained and practiced relentlessly for many years in order to carry on this beautiful vocal tradition. Even the tradition of musical theater and Broadway of this era would not be what it is without the influences of opera. If a person were to perhaps imagine a musical

¹⁵ Donald J. Grout, and Hermine Weigel Williams. *A Short History of Opera*. 4th edition. New York: Columbia University Press, 2003. 123.

¹⁶ Donald J. Grout, and Hermine Weigel Williams. *A Short History of Opera*. 122.

world without the rich history of opera, chances are that person would see a world greatly unlike today's. It is strange to think that all of this stemmed from an idea created hundreds of years ago in scholarly societies in Italy.

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