Music 160: Romantic Opera: Verdi and Wagner

[Keri McCarthy]: Today we're talking about romantic opera, and we've visited opera a few times already with Montverdi's *Orfeo* and with some Purcell from England. We have visited it with Mozart. He is a German composer but wrote in an Italian style and sort of had a cosmopolitan or enlightenment ideal of social change and also changing some of the aesthetics of opera. Opera continues to move on into the Romantic Period and we have very nationalist styles. So we have a strong Italian style, a strong French style, a German style, and a Russian style of opera, all very distinctive. We're going to talk about the two most prominent forms today and the two most prominent composers. So we'll be talking about Guiseppe Verdi and Richard Wagner.

[On Screen] Romantic Opera: Verdi and Wagner Keri McCarthy

To start with, you want to know a little bit about Rossini. Giacomo Rossini was an Italian composer, famous during the time of Beethoven that he even over arced Beethoven in terms of popularity. Rossini's music tended to have some of the same features that we saw in Mozart that are typically Italian in nature. Each scene or aria or song was very separate from anything else. It had a clear start and a finish. Usually there was time at the end for people to applaud the soloist, and the idea of the "diva" or the "divo" was really prominent during this time period in Italy. People went to hear the singers; it was very much like an American Idol version of opera. It was more about the singing style or the singing quality than it was about the song that was being sung, and even Rossini would have some of these "suitcase arias" where he would borrow an aria from one opera and insert it into another if the soprano sang that particular piece better. So she's in the middle of an opera, singing to her lover, and suddenly she's singing about somebody with a different name, and nobody really cared because these suitcase arias were so familiar people knew that soprano would sing this song really well and they just didn't worry about dramatic integrity so much. Verdi changes this. It is still, to a certain extent, about the voice and you'll hear that in his music. He was very kind to mezzo sopranos and also to middle male voices called "baritones" and we hear that in his music. But also, we hear a little bit more orchestral support and a little bit more dramatic integrity. We no longer have those suitcase arias where you can move a piece from one opera to another. Verdi's works tried to take place during the same timeframe that the action would be taking place in the story, so his three-hour opera very often took place temporally over a three-hour period of the drama as well. What do I want to tell you about Verdi? Italy was working toward being independent during this time and Italy itself was really formed in the early 1860s. Verdi lived right through this period and was a staunch supporter of a free and independent Italy. Northern Italy in particular had been taken over by the Austrians and people were none too happy about that, Verdi in particular. His name stood for, in Italy at the time, "Viva Emanuele Re D'Italia," [which means] "Long live Emmanuel, King of Italy," and you can forgive my Italian there, I do my best. But V-E-R-D-I: long live Emmanuel, rightful king of a unified Italy. And people would walk down the streets yelling, "Viva Verdi!" both as an independence statement and as a statement of love for their composer who also tended to write music that was political in nature, supporting Italy's independence. Verdi lived a long time, as you can see here, and by his old age his music was

considered somewhat old-fashioned. Our next operas that we'll be talking about in our next lecture are Puccini and Bizet, and they were composing during the same time period that Verdi was, and you'll hear maybe a youthfulness in their writing, maybe not, fashionable writing. But Verdi lived a long time and even his late operas are still staged regularly. *Otello* and *Falstaff* are included with those.

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Guiseppe Verdi

- From Rossini, Verdi improves on Italian opera styles. Moving from "suitcase arias" to truly dramatic works of art, Verdi's operas were very popular during his lifetime. They often were seen as supporting Italy's independence movement.
- "Viva Verdi"
- Look at his dates: 1813-1901. Verdi lived a long time, and in his old age his music was considered old-fashioned. Nevertheless, his operas are staged by every major opera company in the world: *La Traviata, Rigoletto, Aida, Otello, and Falstaff included*.

So we were talking already about, with Italian opera, light textures, that *bel canto*, beautiful singing style, I call them vocal acrobatics. You're sort of listening for what the voice can do or how high, how low, how loud, how soft, and how quickly it can move along these tiny, ornamented melodic lines. We have the diva and really distinct forms or sections.

[On Screen] Features of Romantic Italian Opera

- Light textures
- Bel canto: ornamented melodic lines that feature vocal "acrobatics"
- Prima donna (diva)
- Distinct sections/forms

You can hear this to a certain extent in Verdi's earlier work, [La] Traviata. It's a great piece; I think that you would enjoy this opera. "Un di felice," [which means] "O Happy Day" or "One Happy Day. La Traviata, the story of it, you can see here, I give you a couple of Youtube videos or one Youtube video to watch in the Synopsis link down at the bottom, so you can go into our Lessons page and take a look and click on those. I am interested in you knowing the story line to a certain extent; it's very similar to other operas as well. But basically it is a woman who is a kept woman, or a courtesan is what they called them at the time, basically a high-class prostitute or a woman who was kept by noblemen. Violetta was her name; she was passed around. She was very young, and the story line is true from the headlines. There was a woman who Violetta was modeled after, who took off with all these older, often wealthier men. So she's at a party, and she's very well dressed and well taken care of, and this younger man named Alfredo sees Violetta and falls madly in love with her and says, "You have to come with me, we're meant to be together," and she says something to the effect of, "You're crazy, you have no idea what I do and there's no way that this is going to work out." But he pursues her anyway and, of course, they end up madly in love and his father comes to visit her and says that she has to leave Alfredo because his sister cannot marry if her brother is taken up with a courtesan, and it goes on from there. It's a great opera; it's not a terribly long opera, which is also really nice, maybe two and a

half hours. Violetta contracts tuberculosis and then, in the end, they have sort of a re-pairing together. What you are seeing here in "*Un di felice*" is the meeting where he is trying to convince her that they are meant to be together. You'll notice that in terms of the drama, Verdi has each of them singing separately until the very end, when she finally says, "You know, this really isn't destined, we can't make this work, but I'll try it anyway." And then they very passionately, not only embrace but also the melody itself sort of embraces. You will hear that light Italian style. Listen for, like I said, that *American Idol* or that vocal acrobatics. The focus is more on how the orchestra and the singer work together, but you'll hear her and the way that her personality is reflected in some of that high register singing. I hope you appreciate and enjoy this. Think about the Mozart that we've heard before, this is in a similar vein to that. So please hit "Pause" and then click on the links in the Lessons tab and watch some of this "O Happy Day" with Placido Domingo.

[On Screen]

"La Traviata"

- "Un di felice" (One Happy Day), middle of Act 1
- <u>http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=x5QHoksdErk</u> (Placido Domingo in a Zeffirelli film version)
- Notice how they sing separately until she agrees to go with him
- Light vocalizations, a bit of Italian flair, but the focus is now on the music rather than the singer (until she starts her impetuous high register singing the diva still needs something to do!)
- There is a full orchestra accompanying (OK, not as full as a German orchestra, but at least we can hear more than a "boom-chick-chick" from the pit)
- Synopsis: http://www.metoperafamily.org/metopera/history/stories/synopsis.aspx?id=139

From here we move on to Richard Wagner, the German form of opera, which is really a relatively new thing. We don't have a German style until the early 1820s and it starts to emerge at that point and Wagner is there very shortly thereafter to create a very personal style of German opera and he is really the most well-known German opera composer ever in the history of the world. I think that you will take a listen to his and, you may like it, you may not. It is very powerful and a little bit overwhelming at times, especially when compared with that light Italian flair that that opera offers. OK, Wagner. He has financial issues; he's constantly running from debtors. And he's quite an older person by this point; I think it's in his 50s that he forges a relationship with mad King Ludwig, who's a young guy, maybe in his early 20s. Ludwig has a lot of money to burn and builds him this theatre in Bayreuth, where Wagner's music was performed and recognized. This if the first time, incidentally, that we have a pit that's sunken down where he doesn't want the orchestra to be seen and it's seen below. And where the audience sits, not around the entire stage but just to the front, and where people are quiet and observe the opera all the way through. That's really later in this Romantic Period, so operas used to be a very different experience and at this point Wagner is one of the people who creates the most consistent form of what opera looks like today, and that's in the late 1880s in Bayreuth. Wagner has an idea of opera called "Gesamptkunstwerk," or "collected-art music." He was interested in forging his own *libretto* to create his own staging. He was interested in the costumes and how the sets would intermingle with the music, both orchestrally and vocally,

making an art form or a collected art work that is larger than the sum of its parts. It sounds like a massive undertaking, and that is part of Wagner's ego in place there.

[On Screen] Richard Wagner

- German
- Financial issues (constantly running from debtors)
- Forges a relationship with King Ludwig II of Bavaria, who builds him a theatre where his music can be performed and recognized. Still in existence today, Bayreuth opera house is dedicated to performing Wagner's operas.
- *Gesamptkunstwerk*: collected-art-work. Wagner believed that creating a strong libretto tied to a strong score and staging, costumes, and sets would entwine the arts, making an art form (opera) whose strengths exceeded the sum of its parts.

Wagner creates this aesthetic pretty much on his own without other composers' help. He also does a few other things with the music that I want to speak with specifically. His operas are characterized by being very long firstly, usually five or more hours in length. He has the ring cycle, which we'll talk about in just a little bit, that connects four of these operas together, and you might watch them, if you're lucky, over the course of a week. You would have four nights out of seven that you would get to go and hear opera. You'd watch a Wagner opera, a five hour opera, and then the next night you'd have off, and then you'd go and hear another five hour opera. And people did this all the time in Europe at Bayreuth. In fact, you would make a pilgrimage to this theatre to hear Wagner's works, and his music was incredibly influential. And why? We'll get to that in just a little bit. Here are some of the features: dense orchestral writing, meaning that the orchestra almost takes on the vocalist, and for that reason we have these huge voices. These men and women cannot do the vocal acrobatics of the Italian voices and in fact even today people tend to specialize in being able to sing very loud, strong, rich-textured or lighter, more filigreed, Italian vocal acrobatics. It's difficult to get your voice to do both. So the orchestra and the voice together project as this one, unified element but both are very big and very strong and quite loud. The music itself has something called a light motif. We talked about this a little bit with Berlioz's *idee fixe*, with the beloved in his Symphonie Fantastique, that little melody that would come through when we knew that she had entered the scene at the dance or that she was pestering him at the end in the witch's Sabbath. And so we've heard this musical theme that's associated with an individual prior. But Wagner takes this to a whole new level, and can associate them with psychological states: ecstasy, longing, love. And so when we're listening to Tristan and Isolde, when Isolde is talking to her husband King Marke we can know that she's thinking of Tristan because you can hear the longing scene being played underneath her in the orchestra. And so it provides a real psychological bed to Wagner's operas. This is why people seek them out or make pilgrimages. Seattle as well has a ring cycle that occurs now every two or three years and people across the country seek that out and come to Seattle to hear that because there's so many layers in terms of how one would stage this and also how the music is understood. You can watch these operas over and over again and get different things out of them each time. Also, the stories tend to be about magic, the occult, mythology; so popular, kind of mythological, and very much similar to Tokien's Lord of the Rings and so we'll talk a little bit about that on our next slide with the ring cycle as a whole.

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Romantic German Opera

- Wagner really creates a German Romantic aesthetic on his own, using a new brand of harmonic progression, organization of complex musical themes, and long, complicated operas (5+ hours in length)
- Dense orchestra writing
- Big voice
- Stories of magic, the occult, mythology
- *Leitmotiv*: musical theme associated with an individual, or interestingly, with a psychological state
- Isn't this just Berlioz's *idee fixe*? With the psychological approach and the length and breadth of the *leitmotivs* used, Wagner takes this concept to a new level. These permeate his music, providing inside information to the listener (this is how we know a character is thinking of her beloved while singing about her husband, for example)

Die Walküre was one of these four operas involved in the ring cycle. The book gives you a couple of paragraphs about the ring cycle. It is a very similar story, you'd be amazed how similar maybe to The Lord of the Rings. There is one ring forged by trolls. The ring is taken from the water there, and forged into a ring that whoever owns it rules over the entirety of the world of the gods. Wotan owns this ring, but the ring is destined to bring him tragedy and to bring down the world of the gods. He returns the ring to its rightful owner and thent he whole Valhalla, if you're interested in knowing what that is from Pullman, we have an establishment in town called Valhalla, comes from this particular opera cycle. It comes from Wagner specifically and this idea that the gods lifted a sunken place, in fact. Sort of some interesting ideas going on there. Listen to this "Wotan's Farewell." You also have available to you the "Rite of the Valkyries," which is a really popular thing from the opening of Act 3, where these women who pick up the souls of the departed soldiers on the battlefield, more than women they're sort of the handmaidens of the gods and goddesses and their role is to deliver the departed soldiers' souls to the afterworld and you can hear that in "Rite of the Valkyries," one of the most famous, probably the most famous piece of music from an opera ever extracted. "Wotan's Farewell" - you will hear some things in here that I want to talk about in terms of Wagner's influence on other composers. My big question for you is, "Do you feel tension and resolution here?" You will very likely feel like all of the music is just so continuous, usually quite slow with Wagner, hence the five and a half hour operas. Highly chromatic, you don't feel like there is a lot of release or clear ends to phrases, everything seems to keep going, and unexpected conclusions, both harmonically and tonally [or] melodically. So you can't guess any more what the end of the phrase is going to be and when you do you're probably frustrated by the lack of expectation being met. This pushes composers in the early part of the 20th century and the later part of the 19th century to try and reconcile what they've been working with, all of this major and minor and expectation and release, and gives them a sense of urgency to create some sort of new system that would replace something that Wagner has basically broken in a way. They say there's no further way to go beyond the boundaries, or to push the boundaries of tonality and stay within a major and minor context. Instead we should just give up with that context altogether and go towards something that's more free and expansionist in style. And you'll hear that as we continue on and talk about music of the 20^{th} century. It's interesting to come back and listen to

this. It does sound somewhat tonal but when you really listen to the music and ask yourself, "Are my expectations for the phrasing and the harmonies being met?" you may find that the answer, more often than not, is "No." This is what really frustrated or pushed 20th century composers towards finding new answers to, "What is music?" "Why do we use it?" and "How should we create it?" Hopefully you will enjoy "Wotan's Farewell" to his daughter Brünhilde, she's the one with the horns in the videos often times. You can read the synopsis in the book; I would suggest that you follow along with the text from your textbook as she's singing so that you understand what's going on between the two of them. It explains a bit about the ring cycle, but boy, is that one huge cycle of four operas and a huge story line. I'll let you enjoy that independently and I hope you get a good idea for what German opera versus Italian opera offers, the different features of those, and have a sample. I hope you enjoy it.

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Die Walküre

- Synopsis http://www.metoperafamily.org/metopera/history/stories/synopsis.aspx?customid =713
- Music: Highly chromatic, slow tempos, long drawn-out phrasing
- "Wotan's Farewell"
- <u>http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iiavg_JBGaY</u> (see textbook for translations)
- *Leitmotivs* in play see textbook for examples (Slumber, etc.)
- DO YOU FEEL TENSION AND RESOLUTION HERE? Are expectations for phrasing being met?
- Harmonies are being pushed beyond the boundaries of tonality, and a sense of a home key or pitch is being eroded here welcome to the aesthetics of the 20th century...

[On Screen] [WSU Global Campus title slide]