

A Sound Anatomy of Opera

There are many different kinds of songs in opera. Performers may sing alone, in couples (duets), trios, or larger groups. There are also moments when the orchestra is featured – no singing at all. Each composer develops his or her own preferred combinations of these options. The following are the major musical components of an opera:

The Overture

An opera usually begins with an orchestral piece of music called the overture, which functions as an introduction to the opera. The overture generally includes themes that will be heard throughout the opera, and can be anywhere from five to twenty-five minutes long. Before 1800, house lights were not dimmed while the overture played, and audiences would continue to talk, drink, and even play cards. This changed in the 19th century when the overture began to take its place as an integral part of the operatic performance. Usually, at the end of the overture, the curtain rises and the story of the opera unfolds through a series of scenes, which are usually organized into acts.

Arias

Italian for “air” or song. Arias are solos performed to the accompaniment of the orchestra. They allow the character to express his or her feelings and reflect on the events of the drama. The focus of an aria is emotions rather than actions, and provides an opportunity for the singer to demonstrate his or her vocal or artistic skill. Some of the most successful composers of arias, such as Mozart, Verdi and Puccini were able to achieve a remarkable balance between memorable melodies that perfectly suit the human voice, and making the music reflect the drama of the text.

Recitatives

Recitative is a type of singing unique to opera, and is used when characters are conversing, or introducing an aria. The text is delivered quickly in a musical way that imitates speech, and has a very limited melodic range. It has no recognizable melody and its rhythms follow those of the spoken word. Recitative is meant to carry the action forward and can be

accompanied either by a full orchestra, or as is often the case in opera written before 1800, by harpsichord or keyboard instrument.



Ensemble

In operas, ensemble singing is when two or more voices of different ranges perform together. These include duets, trios, quartets, quintets, and in one or two instances, even a sextet! In each of these, the way the composer blends the voices will depend on the dramatic requirements of the plot. For instance, in a duet where the characters singing are in love, a composer may show this musically by having each performer sing different music at different times, and gradually bring those lines of music together in harmony as the duet culminates. Conversely, if the characters are in conflict, their music might never be brought together. Georges Bizet used this technique in *Carmen*: if you listen to the duets sung by Carmen and Don José, you might notice that their musical lines are never completely blended, and this foreshadows their tragic ends.

Chorus

Most operas include music sung by a large group of singers (sometimes as many as 40 or more) called a chorus. The chorus appears on stage most often in crowd scenes. The chorus can provide a stunning contrast to solo or ensemble singing. In one opera by Benjamin Britten, the chorus is played by a single male and single female (this is in the tradition of Greek theatre.)

Orchestral Music

The orchestra is an important part of any opera, and not only because it accompanies the singing and introduces the opera in the overture. The themes (both musical and emotional) of the opera can appear in orchestral introductions and conclusions to arias, recitatives, and choruses, but sometimes the orchestra becomes a character in the story, and has music to play by itself outside of the overture or introduction. One of the most famous of these instances is the intermezzo ("in the middle") from *Cavalleria rusticana* by Mascagni (listen here). In between the scenes of this one-act opera, the orchestra takes up the story through incredibly expressive and lyrical (singing-like) melodies, and through the voices of instruments rather than singers, brings to life the emotion of the characters, the foreboding conclusion, and also a sense of hope.

Information by Edmonton Opera.

