

## Opera

The most common kind of opera at the beginning of the Classical period was the *opera seria*, or tragic Italian opera. Such operas dealt with mythological heroes or kings and queens, and consisted mainly of arias, highly emotional songs for solo voice. The stars of *opera seria* were the sopranos, the women with the highest voices, and the castrati, men whose voices had never broken and who still sang in the soprano and alto registers.



The characters in comic operas were often hiding and then being caught out. Here a page boy is discovered hiding under a dress that the maid-servant has laid over a chair.

However, during the Classical era when the doctrine of natural man was evolving, people found this kind of opera artificial; they wanted operas about ordinary people, not mythological heroes. They wanted emotions more realistically portrayed, and singers who did not draw all the attention to themselves and away from the story. For this they turned to comic opera, which had different names in different countries. In Italy it was called *opera buffa*, in France *opéra comique*, in England *ballad opera*, and in Germany *Singspiel*. It had a number of features that made it extremely popular with audiences.

Some of this popularity was because comic operas were written in the language spoken by the audience, instead of the traditional Italian of *opera seria*, which very few could understand. The naturalness of spoken dialogue, which was used between arias and vocal ensembles in all types but the Italian *opera buffa*, added to audience's ready acceptance of the genre. In addition, the characters were real people, not gods and goddesses, and the stories were told with a great deal of humour and lots of silly situations. A new emphasis was placed on the bass voice in the form of the buffo, the comic male character. Instead of the long, drawn-out arias of *opera seria*, comic operas had ensemble numbers at the end of each act that brought all the soloists together and provided a great deal of excitement. Mozart wrote several comic operas, including *The Marriage of Figaro*, and *Così fan Tutti* (Women Are Like That). His genius lifted the *opera buffa* to a higher plane.

# Opera

TRAGIC OPERA (OPERA SERIA)	COMIC OPERA (OPERA BUFFA)
Gods and goddesses, kings and queens	Ordinary people
Series of arias, highly emotional solos	Music no longer just a showcase for the soloists, more ensemble pieces
Choicest roles went to sopranos, male or female	Good parts for bass voice, the buffo, comic male role
Serious stories	Silly situations, humorous dialogue

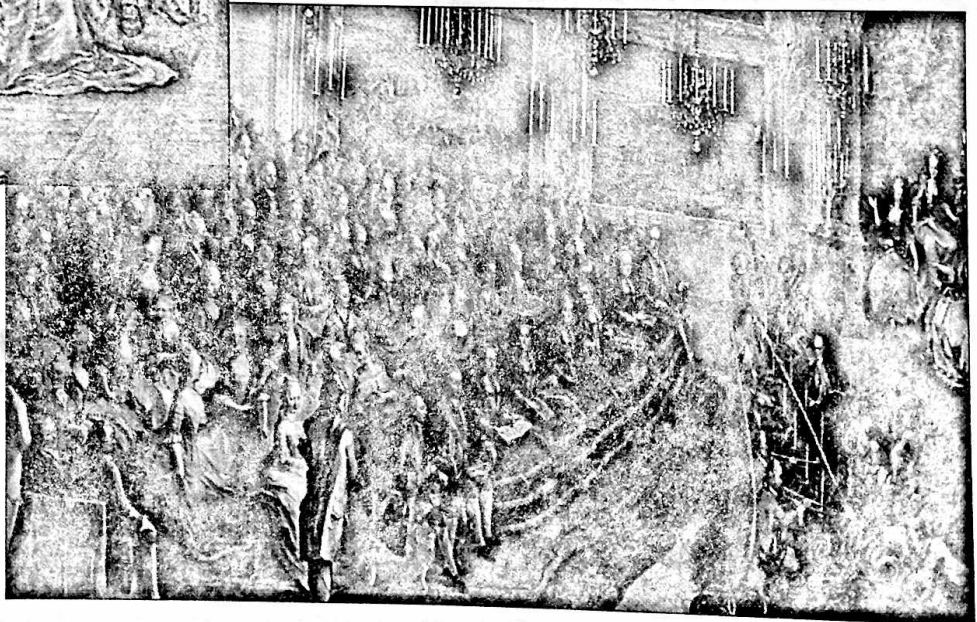


The sopranos were the real stars of the opera, not the composers. They made a great deal of money, and had large numbers of adoring fans. This is Nancy Storace, one of the famous sopranos of the Classical era.



In this picture, Mozart is shown accompanying the soprano Caterina Cavalieri.

Here is a performance of one of Gluck's operas at the theatre at Schönbrunn Palace in Vienna.





## Choral music

Choral music, both sacred (religious in nature) and secular (non-religious), was very important in the Baroque period, and Classical composers continued the tradition. The main forms of sacred choral music were the mass, the requiem and the oratorio.

A mass, in musical terms, is the music written for the Roman Catholic church service. A requiem is the music written for a mass for the dead. The oratorio is an opera-like retelling of stories from the Bible with choir, soloists and orchestra, but without costumes or scenery. All the well-known composers of the Classical period wrote sacred choral music. Haydn wrote 15 masses and three oratorios, of which *The Creation* is the most famous. Mozart wrote 15 masses as well, including the requiem he was working on when he died. Beethoven's *Missa solemnis* (Mass in D) is one of his greatest works.