

Song

In the Romantic period, poetry and music came together in a new way to bring the art song to heights it had never before reached. Composers set to music poems written by the great Romantic poets. Since it was primarily a German invention, although art songs were also written in other countries, France and Russia, for example, the form came to be known as the *Lied* (plural, *Lieder*), the German word for song. Romantic art songs were written for a single voice, accompanied by piano, although the piano is more than just an accompaniment, and equally important in expressing the composer's mood or emotions.



This painting shows a *lieder* performance at an evening party. One of the reasons *lieder* were so popular is that most middle-class homes now had a piano, and the music could be performed in a family setting.

Romantic songs were miniature works, expressing a single idea or mood. Favourite themes were love, desire and the beauty of nature. Often composers used the same melody for each verse of the song, though sometimes they wrote different music for each verse. Sometimes they linked a group of songs together into what was called a song cycle, a longer work that brought together several aspects of one idea, or perhaps told a story.

Lieder were designed to be performed in private homes, although many found their way into the concert hall as well. Franz Schubert is perhaps the best known *Lieder* composer, since he wrote over 600 of them, but Robert Schumann, Hugo Wolff and Johannes Brahms are also masters of the form.

Choral music

Choral music was very popular during the Romantic period. With the broadening of the musical public, many people became interested in choral singing. It was the perfect musical outlet for those who had no formal musical training or could not afford to buy an instrument. A solo-quality voice is not required, and without a huge investment of time people could enjoy a social activity once or twice a week and be part of an organization that brought pleasure to themselves and others.

There was a large choral repertoire from the past, of course, but nineteenth-century composers wrote choral works as well, ones that appealed to the mood of the Romantic period. The traditional forms of sacred choral music were the mass, the requiem and the oratorio. The name for the Roman Catholic church service is a mass, and a requiem mass is a mass for the dead. Many composers prior to the Romantic era wrote requiem settings. Although few major nineteenth-century composers wrote church music, the requiem was particularly appealing to the Romantics because of its emotional appeal.

Romantic requiems are often written on a large scale, with soloists, large choruses and huge orchestras. Berlioz's *Requiem for France's war dead*, called the *Grande messe des morts*, is scored for a tenor solo, a chorus of 210, and 140 orchestra musicians, including 10 kettle drums, and four brass bands in each corner of the hall who spring up to sound the Last Trump. Verdi's *Requiem* is almost as large, and has a more operatic style, full of passion and bombast, with contrasting passages of quiet beauty. In contrast, Brahms's *German Requiem* is based on texts from the German Lutheran Bible, and concentrates on God's consolations for the living.

In addition, a large repertoire of secular (non-religious) choral works came to be written. These were called "part songs," i.e., songs written for three or four of the standard voice parts, soprano, alto, tenor and bass. They were generally settings of short, lyrical poems that appealed to a wide group of people and were easy enough for an amateur choir to sing.

Opera

Combining music and drama, costumes and stage settings, Opera is an art form perfectly suited to the Romantic notion of artistic fusion: that literature, music and the visual arts were interdependent. In addition, opera stories are full of high drama—unfaithful lovers, murder, madness and villainy—so it is an art form well suited to the larger-than-life heroes and heroines and the unbridled expression of emotions demanded by the Romantics.

Operas are plays that are sung instead of spoken, and the music in them has to serve different purposes. When the story is being explained or actions are taking place, the characters sing what is called *recitative*, which follows the rhythms and inflection of the speaking voice. When the characters are expressing themselves, they sing an *aria*, a very emotional, melodic song. The aria is the most popular aspect of opera, the thing people remember after they go home from the opera house. There are also ensembles, where several characters sing at once, and a chorus, which may sing by itself or as an accompaniment to a solo voice. And through it all there is the orchestra, which accompanies the action, introduces the melodies and generally supports everything.

Opera composer Vincenzo Bellini said, "Carve this into your head, in letters of brass: an opera must draw tears, cause horror, bring death, by means of song."

These drawings show the costumes for the first performance of Verdi's *Rigoletto* in 1851. You can see that the main characters all have more than one costume.



Costume designs for a production of *The Barber of Seville*, by Rossini.

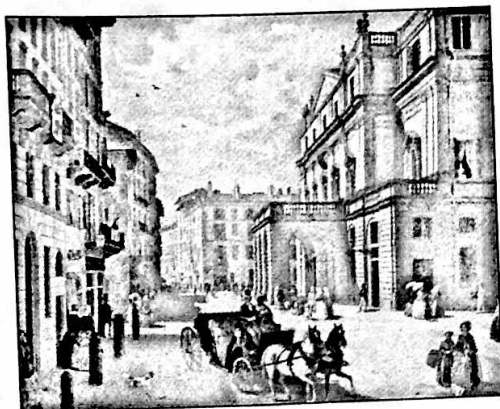


National styles of opera



The interior of La Scala in Milan, Italy, around 1830. La Scala is still one of the world's great opera houses.

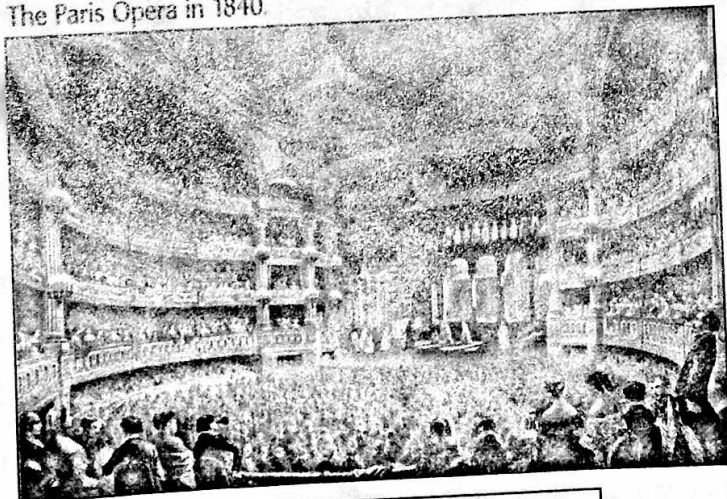
Distinct national styles evolved in European opera, which has its roots in Italy in the Baroque period. At the beginning of the Romantic period in Italy, there was *opera seria*, or serious opera, and *opera buffa*, or comic opera. Rossini, Donizetti and Bellini were well-known Italian opera composers in the early romantic period. Rossini's strength was *opera buffa*, Bellini's was *opera seria*, and Donizetti wrote both kinds. The grand master of Italian opera in the Romantic period, however was Giuseppe Verdi, who developed a unique Italian opera style. In addition to the beautiful melodies he wrote for the solo voice, Verdi increased the role of the orchestra making it the force that kept the action moving, and underscored important moments in the drama.



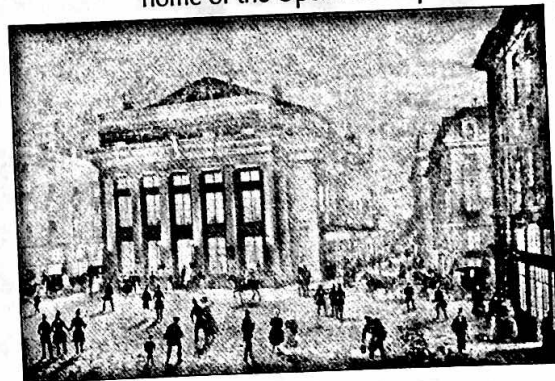
An exterior view of La Scala

In France at the end of the Classical era, there were two kinds of opera, grand opera and *opéra comique*. Grand opera dealt with historical themes and high ideals, and was a real spectacle that included large choruses, ballet scenes and ornate scenery. Giacomo Meyerbeer, a German composer living in Paris, was the premier grand opera composer in France. Comic opera was on a much smaller scale. The casts were smaller, the music was simpler and the subject matter was less elevated, and in comic opera the dialogue was spoken, whereas in grand opera it was sung. Jacques Offenbach incorporated wit and satire into his comic operas, and *Orpheus in the Underworld* and *Tales of Hoffmann* are still performed today. Towards the middle of the 1800s, a new kind of opera developed in France. The lyric opera was a merger of the two older forms; it was simpler than grand opera, but not as lightweight in theme as *opéra comique*. The music emphasized beautiful melodies and the stories were about tragic love affairs. Georges Bizet's *Carmen*, one of the masterpieces of nineteenth century opera, falls into the lyric opera category.

The Paris Opera in 1840



The Salle Favart, named for Madame de Pompadour's favourite playwright, became the home of the Opéra-Comique of Paris.

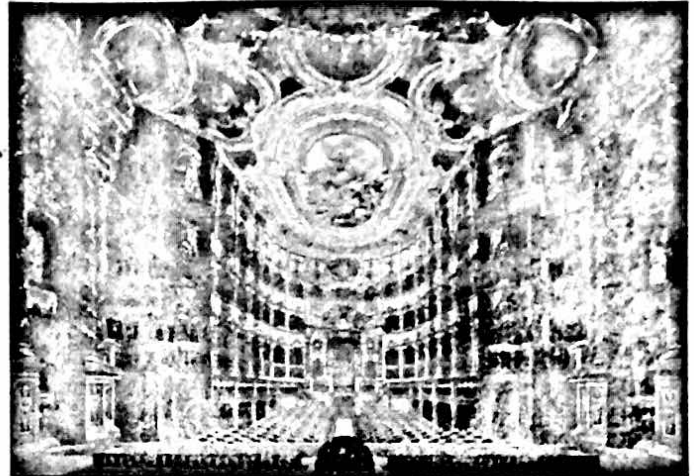


National styles of opera

Opera was popular too in Germany, where a form of comic opera with spoken dialogue called *Singspiel* had evolved during the late Baroque and Classical periods. Carl Maria von Weber composed operas in the Romantic spirit early in the nineteenth century, but Wagner is the composer who dominated German opera in the Romantic period with his "music dramas."

Wagner developed the idea of a new kind of opera that was to be what he called a "total work of art." His operas are a combination of music, drama, philosophy and poetry. He believed that the words were as important as the music, and the operas deal with important philosophical issues like love, religion and political power, which he clothed in mediaeval German myths and legends.

The orchestra achieved an even more important role in opera under Wagner than it had for Verdi. He took the technique of using recurring themes to explain the story behind the music further than anyone had ever done. He called them *leitmotifs* (meaning leading theme) and used them as signature tunes that symbolized characters, things or ideas in the story. The audience was clued into the significance of an action or event when they heard the orchestra sound the *leitmotif*. Wagner used the *leitmotif* to invest the words and ideas with emotion that comes from the music, and he could show that ideas were changing or characters were developing by making subtle changes to their *leitmotif*. Thus the orchestra provided continuity, a stream of music that, interwoven with the voices, kept everything flowing from beginning to end.



Margrave's Opera House in Bayreuth, Germany, in 1879

The Festspielhaus in Bayreuth, the opera house built by Wagner especially for his operas. It was inaugurated in 1876 with the complete *Ring* cycle.

