

Dispelling the Phantom of the Opera

THE WORD opera literally means “works” in Italian and is derived from the plural of the Latin word *opus* meaning “work” or “labor.” These terms are very appropriate as opera incorporates every aspect of the performing arts in a magnificent spectacle.

In opera, the dramatic plots and intriguing characters are brought out by solo and choral singing, acting and dance, all accompanied by immense orchestras and adorned with elaborate scenery placed on grandiose stages in colossal, ornate crystal-chandeliered concert halls. Experiencing an opera is truly a sonic and visual experience that cannot be matched by any other art form. And in these circumstances, can you believe that opera singers sing and can be heard without the aid of microphones?

Opera is Western classical music and was born in Italy in the 1600s. Uniquely, opera is its own entity characterized by its very distinct sound and fascinating history. Some say opera is an acquired taste. If you love opera, you love it passionately. For life experience, many will attend an opera at some point in their lives. But opera isn't exactly a staple of South Asian or American entertainment.

Why is this? My feeling is that although opera is very accessible in many cities and even in small towns in the United States, people are intimidated by the mere fact that opera is sung in a foreign language.

Opera is a product of its European roots and most operas in the standard repertoire are sung in mainly Italian, French and German, with many others being sung in English, Russian and

Czech. But most opera productions have supertitles – the text of the opera is translated into English and then projected onto a screen located above the stage at the same moment the singers are singing.

Before you watch an opera, just invest a few minutes of your time to read its synopsis, which is usually printed in the program. Then, all you need is an open mind and the music will guide you to places you have never been.

Some find the sensation of experiencing opera to be euphoric. Just envelop yourself in the lives of the characters and let the music transport you to another common realm.

One of the most impressive aspects of opera is that it has stood the test of time. Its evolution is steeped in so much history and, as a result, it is incredibly rich in culture.

When you think of opera do you still conjure up those ever-faithful images of the fat lady in the horned helmet and steel breastplate, standing rooted on the stage with mouth agape, singing in an earsplitting high pitch?

SLIM LADIES SING: Dana and Geeta Bhatnagar, center, acknowledge applause after an opera performance at New York City's Carnegie Hall.





Geeta Bhatnagar-Novotny

On a lighter note, let me take this opportunity to break some opera stereotypes for you. I am sure the majority of you have heard some opera. So when you think of opera do you still conjure up those ever-faithful images of the fat lady in the horned helmet and steel breastplate, standing rooted on the stage with mouth agape, singing in an earsplitting high pitch?

Well, that image actually occurs in about one out of hundreds of operas. Yes, there are still overweight opera singers in this world, but most opera singers come in every shape and size.

OK, now another stereotype – and this is one of my favorites: Can an opera singer shatter glass? Glass can be shattered by pitch resonance if the conditions of the glass and the pitch are very specific. The glass has to be of a certain

thickness, the pitch produced has to resonate at the perfect frequency to match the frequency of the glass in order to shatter it. For a human voice, it is very difficult to produce such an effect naturally and consistently.

Even the volume of the pitch has to be exact, the temperature of the room has to be precise, well ... you get the point. So this will occur close to never.

I will admit, though, that the sound vibrations produced by an opera singer are extraordinarily powerful. At times, when I have sung a high and resounding pitch, I have been guilty of causing an object to tumble off a flat surface. Not to mention the fact that I have also been guilty of making my neighbor's dog go crazy and bark incessantly at the sound resonance produced by my singing! Sorry, Patches.

And here's one more stereotype. What comes to mind when you think about a specific opera? I hope you are not thinking of composer Andrew Lloyd Webber's musical, "The Phantom of the Opera."

Let me share with you a typical conversation that I, as an opera singer, and many of my colleagues, have had with the average person. I have had so many people say to me, "Oh, wow, you are an opera singer? I love opera!" and because I am somewhat surprised by this answer, I proceed to ask, "Oh, that's great, which operas do you like?" And more often than not, the answer that I get is a very enthusiastic "The Phantom of the Opera!"

No, no, no, no! Let's just set the record straight right here and right now. "The Phantom of the Opera" is not an opera. And although it is a wonderful show that contains many operatic elements (like the title), "The Phantom of the Opera" is considered musical theater – a Broadway show.

If you have ever experienced a true opera and compare it to "The Phantom of the Opera," you will clearly understand the difference between the two. And as a side note, famed singers such as Charlotte Church and Sarah Brightman are extraordinary talents, but they are not nearly the caliber of a true opera singer such as Placido Domingo or Luciano Pavarotti. Believe me, I understand that opera is not something most people are educated about, but I do find this conversation amusing to say the least.

Singing opera garners great respect. An opera singer must sing and interpret several languages correctly, act out the characters, all the while making sure they

keep time with the conductor and the orchestra that is accompanying them. Needless to say, training an operatic voice requires a type of dedication comparable with training a world-class athlete. You are constantly pushed to the limit, mentally and physically.

Usually opera singers discover a very specialized talent for singing at an early age. In America, opera singers usually pursue at least a bachelor's degree and usually a master's degree in music performance. These music curriculums are intense, to say the least.

My particular curriculum at Carnegie Mellon University and at the University of North Texas encompassed years of music theories, music histories, ear training, rhythm training, music composition, conducting, voice lessons, literature and repertoire classes, dance classes, acting classes, choir as well as Italian, French, German and English language and diction classes and much more.

On top of this, when you get into the real world you must learn to navigate the unpredictabilities of the entertainment business. The operatic career is not for the thin-skinned or the faint of heart. But let me assure you that having the ability to sing opera has been one of the most powerful experiences of my life.

INTRIGUING FACTS

The words or lyrics of an opera are known as the libretto, literally meaning "little book."

Operas communicate the narrative through certain aspects of musical fusions. Traditional opera consists of two different kinds of singing styles:

- 1) Recitative, which is often sung in a nonmelodic style



◆ and serves to drive the plot of the opera. Recitative sounds like a combination of spoken and sung lyrics.

2) The ever-popular aria, which literally means an “air” or formal song in which the characters express their emotions in a more structured melodic style. Arias are used to reinforce characters’ emotional state.

Other kinds of communicative singing styles which are utilized in opera are: duets (two singers), trios (three singers), quartet (four singers) and choruses (comprised of any number of singers). These elements of an opera are used to comment on the action and emotional journey of the opera. And occasionally you will hear spoken dialogue.

Originally opera was composed and performed for the decadent royal courts and the wealthy in Italy. It has evolved through many eras including the Renaissance, Baroque and Classical eras. In 1637, the idea of a “season” of publicly attended operas support-

ed by ticket sales emerged in Venice.

Opera swiftly spread throughout Italy, then through France, Germany, England, Russia, Spain and other countries. European immigrants brought opera to the U.S. in the 18th and 19th centuries. And in the 20th century, American composers such as George Gershwin, Gian Carlo Menotti and Carlisle Floyd began to contribute English language operas infused with touches of popular musical styles.

As opera spread throughout Europe, each country added its ethnocentric flare and thus the different genres of opera were invented, such as: opera seria, bel canto, verismo, opéra comique, operetta, Wagnerian opera and modern opera, etc.

As in popular music today, opera librettos and music markedly progressed through the affects of war and sociopolitical change. These changes are mirrored in the timeline of opera. Also, many libretto are adapted from well-

known literary works, such as Greek mythology and Shakespeare.

In opera seria, the role of the hero was usually written for the castrato voice. A castrato is a male soprano, mezzo-soprano or alto, whose voice is produced either by castration of the singer before puberty or who, because of a medical condition, never reaches sexual maturity. Therefore, the voice never deepens.

The most famous opera company in the world, The Metropolitan Opera, reports the average age of its patron is now 60. To attract younger audiences, many opera companies extend education and community programs by performing operas in schools and at community venues.

OPERATIC VOICES

Singers and the roles they play are initially classified according to their vocal ranges. Male singers are classified by vocal range as bass, bass-baritone, baritone, tenor and countertenor. Female singers are classified as contralto, mezzo-soprano and soprano.

A particular singer’s voice may change drastically over his or her lifetime, rarely reaching vocal maturity until the third decade, and sometimes not until middle age. Generally, the soprano voice has typically been used throughout operatic history as the voice for the female protagonist of an opera.

The mezzo-soprano/contralto register enjoys only a limited operatic repertoire, hence the saying that contraltos only sing “witches, bitches and britches,” and, in recent years, many of the pant roles (when a female opera singer costumed in male attire actually plays a young man) have been assigned to countertenors.

The tenor voice has traditional-

ly been assigned the role of male protagonist. Bass roles have a long history in opera, having been used in opera seria for comic relief. In between the bass and the tenor is the baritone.

Some of the most popular operas are:

- Bizet’s “Carmen.”
- Verdi’s “Rigoletto,” “Aida” and “La Traviata.”
- Puccini’s “Tosca,” “Madame Butterfly” and “La Boheme.”
- Mozart’s “Don Giovanni,” “The Marriage of Figaro” and “The Magic Flute.”
- Rossini’s “The Barber of Seville.”

Leoncavallo’s “I Pagliacci.”
To turn your ear on to the beauty of opera, here are some suggested listening for opera arias (these are standards and can be found on any opera greatest hits CD).

Bizet: “Carmen,” Habañera and Toreador’s song.

Donizetti: “L’elisir d’amore” (The Elixir of Love), Una furtiva lagrima.

Lehár: “Die lustige Witwe” (The Merry Widow), Vilja-Lied.

Leoncavallo: “I Pagliacci,” Vesti la giubba.

Mozart: “Die Zauberflöte” (The Magic Flute), Queen of the Night’s arias.

Puccini: “Gianni Schicchi,” O mio babbino caro.

Puccini: “Madame Butterfly,” Un bel dì.

Puccini: “Turandot,” Nessun dorma.

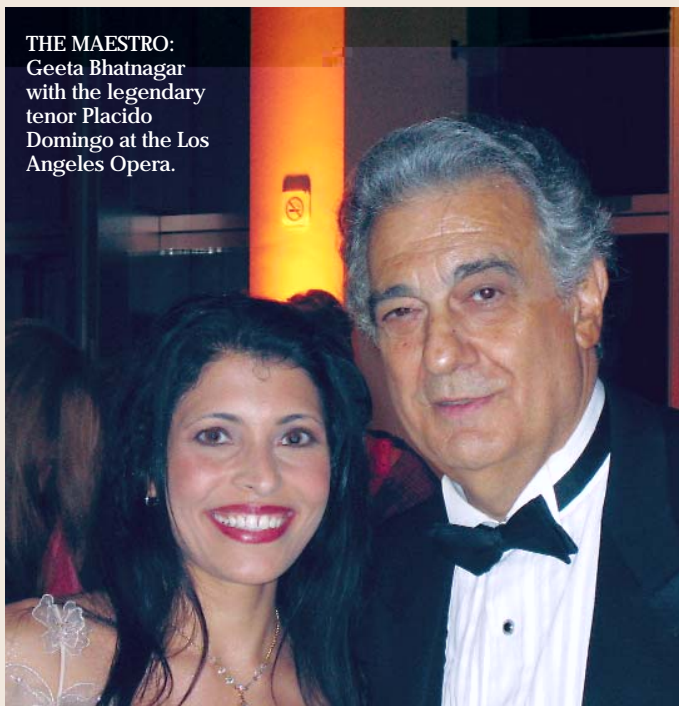
Rossini: “Il Barbiere di Siviglia” (The Barber of Seville), Largo al factotum.

Saint-Saëns: “Samson et Dalila,” Mon coeur s’ouvre a ta voix.

Verdi: “Rigoletto,” La donna é mobile, Caro nome and the quartet.

My list could go on for days.

Enjoy!



THE MAESTRO:
Geeta Bhatnagar
with the legendary
tenor Placido
Domingo at the Los
Angeles Opera.