

# Prelude

“Inside Masterworks”



*Alive through great music!*

February 2018

bringing music to life

## Masterworks #5: The Keys To Romance | February 16-18, 2018

*Far from being stagnant and stuffy, opera has evolved through the centuries as an exciting and ever-changing art form.*



The word “opera” originates from the Italian for work. Composers of the art form imagined a presentation of the culmination of artistic endeavors.

The earliest operas flourished, not surprisingly, in Italy. A group of Renaissance humanists called the *Florentine Camerata* hoped to revive the Greek dramatic tradition of combining music and story.<sup>i</sup> Most musicologists identify *Dafne* as the first opera ever produced. *Dafne*, which premiered in Florence in 1597, was a collaboration between the musician Jacopo Peri and the poet Ottavio Rinuccini.<sup>ii</sup> The earliest opera still performed today is Monteverdi's *Orfeo*, first performed in Mantua in 1607. Monteverdi built upon Peri's original idea of combining story and music and is today considered the first great operatic composer.<sup>iii</sup> Vivaldi, best known for *Four Seasons*, was also an important contributor to opera in early Italy, composing over 50 operas (though he claimed to have written at least 94).<sup>iv</sup>

While opera today is challenged by many (and invariably undeserved) stereotypes, it survived centuries to the present day as a constantly changing art form.

Despite opera's beginnings in Italy, it quickly spread in popularity throughout Europe. In fact, perhaps the greatest early operatic composer was not associated with Italy at all. The first opera by Handel, a German-born composer who found great acclaim in England, *Alcina*, was written in Hamburg in 1705.<sup>v</sup> England quickly followed Italy in operatic achievements. Henry Purcell, the widely acclaimed English Baroque composer, made significant contributions. His 1689 opera, *Dido and Aeneas*, is one of the most popular Baroque and English-language operas in the repertory today.<sup>vi</sup> Similarly, the French composer Jean-Philippe Rameau also contributed to early opera during the early 1700's, producing several works that added to and expanded upon the art form.<sup>vii</sup>



By the end of the 18th century, the revolution of opera fueled by Mozart was well underway. Mozart produced vastly diverse operas during his lifetime, with different languages, different stories, and different musical styles.<sup>viii</sup> Mozart's collaboration with librettist Lorenzo da Ponte brought a new concept to opera: the idea that it was meant to depict “real” characters with relatable problems.<sup>ix</sup> The romantic struggles in *The Marriage of Figaro* (1786), the terrifying death of the title character in *Don Giovanni* (1787), and the trials and tribulations of

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the empathetic heroes in *Die Zauberflöte* (1791) all contributed to the (well-deserved) reputation of opera as highly dramatic.<sup>x</sup>



*Carmen*

Events leading into the 19th century, such as the French Revolution, ushered in the idea that opera would no longer be an art form accessible only to the elites of European society, but would be made available to people of every class of society.<sup>xi</sup> Perhaps the

most recognizable opera of all time, Georges Bizet's *Carmen*, premiered in Paris in 1875, and changed the course of operatic history: it focused on the story and on characters who did not embody typically "heroic" virtues.<sup>xii</sup> The opera's story of the title character, a "common gypsy," and her various sexual encounters, was met with fierce criticism from initial audiences, who were appalled by the shocking depictions of life among the lower classes. However, despite early reactions, *Carmen* quickly became one of the most celebrated operas ever created.<sup>xiii</sup>

Echoing the experiments undertaken in France, Italian composers such as Rossini, Donizetti, Bellini, and their successor, Italy's greatest opera composer, Giuseppe Verdi, embellished upon the art of *bel canto*, a uniquely Italian brand of singing made famous in opera – including elaborate passages, high notes, and powerful delivery.<sup>xiv</sup> Verdi, along with his German contemporary, Richard Wagner, used the art form to make political statements.

Verdi and Wagner were actively composing at the height of their nations' periods of unification in the nineteenth century.<sup>xv</sup> Wagner, in particular, chose to create a style of opera that was "uniquely German." Many of his operas, such as the 16-hour-long *Der Ring des Nibelungen*, feature Norse mythology and characters such as Thor and Odin.<sup>xvi</sup> The common stereotype

of opera singers in Viking-style costumes can be attributed to the music of Richard Wagner.

Verdi and Wagner, two of the most groundbreaking composers of their time, undoubtedly inspired the composers who followed them. The German composer Richard Strauss was a clear successor to Wagner,<sup>xvii</sup> while Verdi and the *bel canto* composers were a catalyst for the next generation of musicians in Italy. *Verismo* (meaning "real") was the succeeding style of opera, seeking to capture the stories of the middle class, a trend begun by *Carmen*. The composers Giacomo Puccini (*Madama Butterfly*), Ruggero Leoncavallo (*Pagliacci*), and Pietro Mascagni (*Cavalleria rusticana*) are excellent examples of *verismo*: telling the stories of the struggles faced by the lower and middle classes.<sup>xviii</sup>

The world of opera continues to flourish and evolve. The twentieth century saw the rise of minimalist composers such as John Adams and Philip Glass, with a common theme: opera focused on political themes of the time. Characters in their operas include President Nixon, Gandhi, and Albert Einstein.<sup>xix</sup> Composers known for other achievements also contributed significantly to opera: Maurice Ravel (*L'enfant et les sortilèges*), Aaron Copland (*The Tender Land*), George Gershwin (*Porgy and Bess*), Dmitri Shostakovich (*Lady Macbeth of Mtsensk District*), Igor Stravinsky (*The Nightingale*) and Benjamin Britten (*Peter Grimes, Turn of the Screw*).<sup>xx</sup>

Twenty-first-century composers are constantly challenged to expand upon this art form, and new works are premiering around the world to great acclaim. Today, the world of opera is incredibly diverse, filled with excitement and extending well beyond the stereotyped images of "well-endowed" sopranos, stoic spear-carriers and pointy helmets.

Please join the Hartford Symphony Orchestra for **The Keys To Romance, February 16 – 18, 2018**, celebrating themes of Valentine's Day with the romantic and lush music of *Carmen*, *Cavalleria Rusticana* and so much more.

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## Wondering How the Music Will Sound?

Try HSO'S LISTENING GUIDE below, with links to the pieces you'll hear on our concert stage!

Please try this link to hear Ricardo Muti conduct the Intermezzo from *Cavalleria Rusticana*: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fZynaqqy7MI>

To hear the Vienna Philharmonic perform Haydn's London Symphony: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OitPLlowJ7o>

Poulenc's Concerto for 2 Pianos and Orchestra in D minor - 1. Allegro ma non troppo: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4VCRFYLHSJM>

To hear Anderson & Roe perform the Fantasy on Bizet's *Carmen* for two pianos: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=A5b1tAyE64o>

### And for extra fun, watch a performance of Carmen!

An exciting two-minute clip from *Carmen* performed at the Royal Opera House: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KJ\\_HHRJfoxg](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KJ_HHRJfoxg)

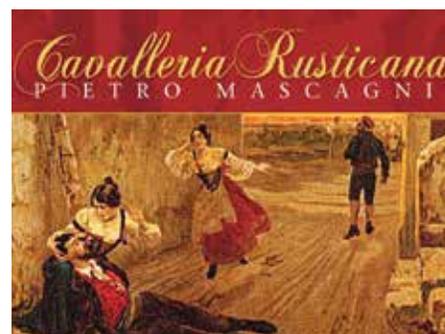
Or, watch a full-length version of the opera, featuring Placido Domingo: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=46JleRbVIRA>

### Want to really have fun? Check out these performances by our guest artists, Anderson & Roe!

An exciting performance of *Libertango* by Piazzolla for four hands: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-LLmU\\_XCcl8](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-LLmU_XCcl8)

And for even more fun: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=y8t9H5Vi1Tc>

Here's *Star Wars* for four hands: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VSwb7Pb6wtc>



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**Masterworks #5:**  
**The Keys To Romance | February 16-18, 2018**

**The return of Casey's Classics**  
*Recommended recordings for your listening pleasure!*

**Want the best recordings of the pieces you'll experience on the concert program?**

**Coleman Casey**, HSO's dear friend, Director Emeritus and beloved in-house audiophile, offers the following recommendations for recordings of selections featured on our upcoming Masterworks Concert:

Mascagni's melodramatic but beautiful Intermezzo from *Cavalleria Rusticana* is given a stunning performance on a recording containing many other similarly fetching overtures and the like from Herbert von Karajan and the Berlin Philharmonic (DG), the perfect recording to enjoy in your armchair with a glass of red Italian wine!

A totally memorable recording of Haydn's Symphony No. 104, the "London" Symphony, comes from the perhaps unlikely source of the late Sir Charles Groves and the English Sinfonia (REGIS), where power, delicacy, humor, wit and beauty go hand-in-hand.

The joyful exuberance of Poulenc's witty and tuneful Concerto for Two Pianos is perfectly captured by pianists Pascal Roge and Silvia Deferne with Charles Dutoit and the Philharmonia Orchestra (DECCA).

**Did you borrow this Prelude? Get your own free copy!**

Whether you're a ticket buyer, donor, curious about the music, or know someone who is, just send an email to [rsovrnsky@hartfordsymphony.org](mailto:rsovrnsky@hartfordsymphony.org). We'll make sure you receive Prelude by email, in advance of each HSO Masterworks concert!

i Sorabella, John. "The Opera." Heilbrunn Timeline of Art History. October 2004. [https://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/opra/hd\\_opra.htm](https://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/opra/hd_opra.htm)

ii Naimark, Michael. "Dafne, by Jacopo Peri." A Non-Linear History of New Media. <https://at.or.at/hans/misc/itp/newmediahistory/dafne.xhtml>

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v "The Early History and Development of Opera." July 24, 2013. <http://www.vam.ac.uk/content/articles/t/early-opera/>

vi Ibid.

vii Ibid.

viii Sherrane, Robert. "Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart." A Guide to Western Composers and their Music. 2008. <http://www.ipl.org/div/mushist/clas/mozart.html>

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x Ibid.

xi A Short History of Opera." The Greensboro Opera. 2013. <http://www.greensboroopera.org/oft-history.shtml>

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xiii Ibid.

xiv "A Short History of Opera." The Greensboro Opera. 2013. <http://www.greensboroopera.org/oft-history.shtml>

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xviii The Editors of Encyclopædia Britannica. "Verismo." Encyclopædia Britannica. October 10, 2012. <https://www.britannica.com/art/verismo-Italian-opera>

xix Sorabella, John. "The Opera." Heilbrunn Timeline of Art History . October 2004. [https://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/opra/hd\\_opra.htm](https://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/opra/hd_opra.htm)

xx Ibid.