

## Chapter 24: Opera of the Later Nineteenth Century: 1850–1900

- I. Introduction
  - A. Opera composers turned away from the styles of Wagner, Verdi, and French grand opera, pursuing “Orientalist” stories that represented non-Europeans as exotic “others.”
  - B. Operetta, a light genre that poked fun at the conventions of opera, spread from Paris to Vienna and became popular in England.
  - C. Verismo (“truthism”) became popular in Italy, where it began as a literary movement that valued extreme realism. It focused on lower classes, and depicted everyday life with blunt plainness and often with violence.
- II. Stereotyping the other: “Orientalism”
  - A. Through colonialism European powers followed expansionist policies throughout the nineteenth century. These made all things “Eastern” fashionable.
  - B. Opera was the most likely vehicle for musical Orientalism.
    1. Examples include Meyerbeer’s *L’Africaine*, Delibes’s *Lakmé*, and others by Bizet, Massenet, Thomas, and Saint-Saëns.
    2. All of these are love stories told in a straightforward and yet sensual fashion—which would not have been appropriate for European (Christian) subjects.
- III. Bizet’s *Carmen*
  - A. While not typically Oriental by the usual definition, *Carmen* has the most familiar use of Oriental devices.
  - B. The main character is exotic and an ethnic minority.
  - C. It premiered at the Théâtre National de l’Opéra Comique, and the conductor resigned rather than be a part of such a passionate production in a family theater.
  - D. As an outsider, *Carmen* threatened good French values.
- IV. Russian Orientalism
  - A. Orientalism was particularly popular in Russia, in part due to Russian expansion into Islamic territories.
  - B. It became an identifying characteristic of Russian music.
  - C. Glinka and the “Mighty Five” all delved into Orientalism, including Rimsky-Korsakov’s very popular *Scheherazade*.
  - D. The pinnacle of Russian Orientalism is Borodin’s *Prince Igor*, which tells the story from a twelfth-century epic conflict between a Russian prince and Turkish nomads in Central Asia.
- V. *Opéra lyrique*
  - A. Another trend in opera in the mid-century was French *opéra lyrique*—a genre of opera that was more restrained than *grand opéra*.
    1. The chief practitioner of this style was Gounod.
    2. The music is pared down to an almost domestic-appropriate scale.
    3. Wagner and others criticized Gounod for trivializing great literature.
    4. Other French composers also used “great literature” for *opéra lyrique*.
  - B. Jacques Offenbach and French operetta

1. In reaction to the ever-growing grandeur of opera, composers reached back to an earlier idea that operatic behavior pursue human or personal truth.
  2. Offenbach succeeded in writing a lighter style of opera that has come to be called “operetta.”
  3. Among Offenbach’s successes are *Orpheus in the Underworld* and *The Tales of Hoffmann*.
- C. Johann Strauss II: The Waltz King and Viennese operetta
1. Operetta moved next to Vienna, where Johann Strauss II followed in the steps of von Suppé.
  2. His *Die Fledermaus* (1874) established him as a rival to Offenbach.
    - a) He makes sophisticated use of serious opera by lampooning them.
    - b) Dance is a major feature. (Strauss was, after all, the Waltz King.)
- D. England’s Gilbert and Sullivan
1. Gilbert and Sullivan wrote operetta in England during the long reign of Victoria I.
  2. They were so successful that they built a venue so that their works could be shown continually.
  3. As with Offenbach, they made fun of serious opera.
  4. They eventually began to make fun of their own works.

## VI. *Verismo*

- A. Originally a literary movement, Italian *verismo* was the result of making opera more immediate and something to which the audience could relate.
1. The idea was to forego vocal virtuosity in favor of (forceful) emotional simplicity.
  2. Noteworthy examples are Mascagni’s *Cavalleria rusticana* (1890) and Leoncavallo’s *Pagliacci* (1892).
- B. The classic versus the popular: the operas of Giacomo Puccini
1. The relationship between the composer (artist) and listener was an issue at the end of the nineteenth century.
  2. Puccini’s operas fall into this question.
  3. The divergence of concert repertory (music performed for audiences) and canon (those considered worthy of academic study) took place over the twentieth century.
  4. Puccini wrote for the concert repertory.
  5. Puccini’s first success was *Manon Lescaut* (1893).
  6. Like Verdi, he had three major operatic successes at the midpoint of his career. All three were done with the same librettists (Illica and Giacosa).
  7. One is *La bohème* (1896), based on a popular French novel.
  8. The third was *Madama Butterfly*, which saw four versions between 1904 and 1906.
  9. The aria “Un bel dì” from *Madama Butterfly* is one of the most popular in all Puccini. It reflects her faith in Pinkerton’s return.
  10. The idea of watching such tragedy—and enjoying it (because the viewers do pay to go to the opera—can be seen as voyeurism and a type of catharsis.

11. Puccini's next opera, *La fanciulla del West*, premiered at the Met (New York City), and three one-act operas were written for that venue in 1918.
12. His final opera, *Turandot*, also deals with Orientalism and feminine humiliation: Liu dies from torture, and Turandot submits to Calaf.