A Short Introduction to Western Opera

An opera, like a play, is a dramatic form of theatre that includes scenery, props, and costumes. However, in opera, the actors are trained singers who sing their lines instead of speaking them.

An orchestra accompanies the singers. A conductor coordinates both the singers on stage and the musicians in the pit.

Opera consists of many dimensions that are combined to make it a unique whole: the human voice, orchestral music, the visual arts (scenery, costumes, and special effects), drama (tragedy or comedy), and occasionally dance. The melding of these elements can make you cry tears of joy or sadness, produce laughter or anger, but most importantly transport you to a magical land of music and song.

Opera originated in Florence, Italy, in the late 1500’s, with a small group of men who were members of a Camerata (Italian for society). They called themselves the Camerati Bardi or Camerati Fiorentini. The intellectuals, poets, and musicians of the Camerata decided they wanted words to be a featured aspect of music to coordinate thought with emotion. They used ancient Greek drama as their inspiration, including the use of a chorus to comment on the action. The Camerata laid down three principles for their new art form:

1. The text must be understood; the accompaniment must be very simple and should not distract from the words.
2. The words must be sung with correct and natural declamation, as if they were spoken and not rhyme like songs.
3. The melody must interpret the feeling of the text.

The first significant composer to fully develop the ideas of the Camerata was Jacapo Peri (1561-1633), whose opera Dafne was performed in 1594 and was regarded as the first opera. Some purists regard the later L’Orfeo, written in 1607 by Claudio Monteverdi as the first real contribution to the art form.

Operas are divided into scenes and acts that contain different types of vocal pieces for one or many singers. An aria is a vocal solo that focuses on a character’s emotions rather than actions. A recitative is sung dialogue or speech that occurs between arias and ensembles. Composers write the score or the music for the opera. Sometimes the composer will also write the text for the opera, but most often they work with a librettist. The story of the opera is written as a libretto, a text that is easily set to music. In the past, the libretto was also bound and sold to the audience. Today, the audience can easily follow the plot with the use of supertitles. Supertitles are the English translation of the libretto, which are projected on the screen above the stage.

Many question the difference between an opera and a musical like Les Miserables or Phantom of the Opera. There are many differences. One, most operas are through-composed, meaning there is no spoken dialogue while musicals tend to alternate between spoken scenes and songs, using the music to comment upon and augment the dialogue. There are of course exceptions. Many
present day musicals are indeed through composed and are often referred to as “rock operas.” Examples include Rent and Jesus Christ Superstar. There are musical differences between the two as well. Operas require classically trained singers who must be able to sing in a distinct style, and typically without amplification, while there is more variety in the voice of a musical theatre performer and they often use microphones.

**Operatic Voices**

Operatic singing developed in Europe during the 17th century. The vocal demands are far greater on an opera singer than on any other singer. Opera singers rarely use microphones and therefore must develop their voices to make a sound that will project and be heard above an orchestra in a large theatre.

How do they do it?

After years of practice and study, an opera singer learns to use his or her body as an amplification device. By controlling the muscles of the diaphragm (a balloon-like muscle beneath the lungs and above the stomach) the singer can regulate the amount of breath used. By tightening the diaphragm the singer can push out the right amount of air to make the vocal cords vibrate. The speed at which the chord vibrates determines the pitch. As the sound passes through the mouth it resonates in the upper chest cavities and the sinus cavities of the face and head. These cavities act as small echo chambers and help amplify the sound. The shape of the mouth and the placement of the tongue near the lips contribute to the tone and sound of the words.

Many singers begin their operatic training in university or before. Opera students study singing, music history, composition, acting, movement, and theory. In addition to performance skills, they study diction and at least one foreign language. The most popular opera languages are Italian, German, and French. After university, singers begin to work in the professional world. Their first roles are usually small parts, but if they continue to study and train, they may move on the bigger principal roles.

Professional singers develop a number of roles in their repertoire. Since the principal artists are required to have their parts memorized before rehearsals begin, singers must prepare well in advance of each contract. Singers have voice teachers who help them refine their singing techniques and many will also have an acting coach. Even a well-established singer will have a vocal coach for specific roles.

Each person’s vocal mechanism is constructed differently. The roles that a singer performs are dependent mostly upon their vocal range, but within the vocal ranges there are many colors and weights of voice that determine which roles he or she can sing safely and

**Chinese Opera**

**Chinese Opera** (Chinese: 戏曲/戯曲; Pinyin: xìqǔ) is a popular form of drama and musical theatre in China. There are numerous regional branches of opera with its original root starting in the dynastic periods. The Beijing opera is one of the most famous Chinese Opera.
As early as the Three Kingdoms period, *Canjun opera* was one of the first forms of opera available. Though in general, the more organized form of Chinese opera began in the Tang Dynasty with Emperor Xuanzong (712–755), who founded the "Pear Garden" (梨园/梨園; liyuan), the first known opera troupe in China. The troupe mostly performed for the emperors' personal pleasure. To this day operatic professionals are still referred to as "Disciples of the Pear Garden" (梨园弟子/梨園弟子, liyuan dizi). In the Yuan Dynasty (1279–1368), forms like the Zaju (雜劇, zaju, variety plays), which acts based on rhyming schemes plus the innovation of having specialized roles like "Dan" (旦, dàn, female), "Sheng" (生, shēng, male), "Hua" (花, huā, painted-face) and "Chou" (丑, chou, clown) were introduced into the opera. Although actors in theatrical performances of the Song Dynasty (960–1279) strictly adhered to speaking in Classical Chinese onstage, it was during the Yuan Dynasty that actors speaking in the vernacular tongue gained precedence on stage.

The dominant form of the Ming and early Qing dynasties was Kunqu, which came from the Wu cultural area. It later evolved into a longer form of play called chuangqi, which became one of the five melodies that made up Sichuan opera. Chinese operas continue to exist in 368 different forms now, the best known of which is Beijing opera, which assumed its present form in the mid-19th century and was extremely popular in the Qing Dynasty (1644–1911).

In Beijing opera, traditional Chinese string and percussion instruments provide a strong rhythmic accompaniment to the acting. The acting is based on allusion: gestures, footwork, and other body movements express such actions as riding a horse, rowing a boat, or opening a door. Spoken dialogue is divided into recitative and Beijing colloquial speech, the former employed by serious characters and the latter by young females and clowns. Character roles are strictly defined. Elaborate make-up designs portray which character is acting. The traditional repertoire of Beijing opera includes more than 1,000 works, mostly taken from historical novels about political and military struggles.

In traditional Chinese theater, no plays were performed in the vernacular Chinese or without singing. But at the turn of the 20th century, Chinese students returning from abroad began to experiment with Western plays. Following the May Fourth Movement of 1919, a number of Western plays were staged in China, and Chinese playwrights began to imitate this form. The most notable of the new-style playwrights was Cao Yu (b. 1910). His major works — *Thunderstorm, Sunrise, Wilderness, and Peking Man* — written between 1934 and 1940, have been widely read in China.

In the 1930s, theatrical productions performed by traveling Red Army cultural troupes in Communist-controlled areas were consciously used to promote party goals and political philosophy. By the 1940s, theater was well established in the Communist-controlled areas.

**Chinese Opera costumes**

In the early years of the People's Republic of China, the development of Beijing opera was encouraged; many new operas on historical and modern themes were written, and earlier operas continued to be performed. As a popular art form, opera has usually been the first of the arts to reflect changes in Chinese policy. In the mid-1950s, for example, it was the first to benefit under the Hundred Flowers Campaign. Similarly, the attack in November 1965 on Beijing deputy mayor Wu Han and his historical play, *Hai Rui's Dismissal from Office*, signaled the beginning
of the Cultural Revolution. During the Cultural Revolution, most opera troupes were disbanded, performers and scriptwriters were persecuted, and all operas except the eight "model operas" approved by Jiang Qing and her associates were banned. Western-style plays were condemned as "dead drama" and "poisonous weeds" and were not performed. After the fall of the Gang of Four in 1976, Beijing Opera enjoyed a revival and continued to be a very popular form of entertainment both in theaters and on television.

Following the Cultural Revolution, both older and new works reappeared. Revised and banned plays from China and abroad were reinstated in the national repertoire. Many of the new plays strained at the limits of creative freedom were alternately commended and condemned, depending on the political atmosphere. One of the most outspoken of the new breed of playwrights was Sha Yexin. His controversial play "The Imposter" which dealt harshly with the favoritism and perquisites accorded party members was first produced in 1979. In early 1980 Secretary General Hu Yaobang - the first public intervention in the arts since the Cultural Revolution, roundly criticized the play. In the campaign against bourgeois liberalism in 1981 and the anti-spiritual pollution campaign in 1983, Sha and his works were again criticized. Through it all Sha continued to write for the stage and to defend himself and his works in the press. In late 1985 Sha Yexin was accepted into the Chinese Communist Party and appointed head of the Shanghai People's Art Theater, where he continued to produce controversial plays. Since then, he has again fallen into disfavor.

Links to Chinese Opera:
Beijing Opera: http://youtu.be/xYWiQ_RnLWE
Peking Opera: http://youtu.be/zHpegoquV5I
What Makes an Opera?

Opera begins with a story. The story is told with two things:

**MUSIC**
Music is organized sound and rhythm.
**COMPOSERS** write music in the best way to tell the story. They write music for instruments, and music for singers.

**WORDS**
Words are written to help tell the story.
**LIBRETTISTS** write the words for an opera. **LIBRETTO** means "little book" in Italian. It is the script of an opera.

The composer and the librettist work together. They help each other so that the music will fit the words, and the words will fit the music.

All the music and words of an opera are written down in a book called the **SCORE**. Now that the opera is finished, someone needs to perform it!

When a group or company of people get together and put on an opera, their performance is called a **PRODUCTION**. To make a new production of an opera, a company needs:

- singers to perform onstage
- musicians to play in the orchestra
- carpenters to build sets
- costumes to make costumes
- electricians to work and operate lights
- ticket sellers to get an audience

...and much more!

So what really makes an opera? A good story, and a lot of people!!!