

"I have learned an awful lot about opera from Robert Levine. I hear his voice throughout this book—erudite, generous, musicianly, almost impossibly well-informed, and often hilariously funny." —Tim Page, Pulitzer Prize-winner for music criticism

ROBERT LEVINE

Weep,  
Shudder,  
Die



A GUIDE TO  
LOVING OPERA

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# Weep, Shudder, Die

A Guide to Loving Opera

Robert Levine





## Epigraph

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*Let us go singing as far as we go; the road will be less tedious.*

—Virgil, *Eclogues*

*Through singing, opera must make you weep, shudder, die.*

—Vincenzo Bellini

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## Author's Note

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It was always about loving the sound of the singing voice and wondering what it could do.

I had a nice voice as a preteen and sang “Silent Night” on the stage of P.S. 64 in the Bronx two Christmases in a row, so I knew what singing was, but let’s face it, all you really need for that song is a good octave and two notes—that’s why it’s so popular. (The only hurdle was the leap up to the first syllable of “heav’nly”; and it still is if you start it too high.) I got a portable radio that I put under my pillow at night and played quietly: listening to the Platters sing “Only You” and “The Great Pretender” (with its alternating high A flats and B flats at the start of the reprise, which was way out of my capabilities) or the Five Satins singing “In the Still of the Night” or even Johnnie & Joe singing the wonderful “Over the Mountain, Across the Sea” was a spectacular antidote to Perry Como’s eight-note range that my parents were riveted to on the television. Somehow, the wider range, both vocal and emotional—they sang high, they sang low; they whispered, they wailed—made their music more personal, more full of feeling, more exciting than Perry Como’s, Vic Damone’s, Eddie Fisher’s, or Andy Williams’s. One might think it was a black-versus-white thing at the time—what with black singers being far more exotic and therefore more interesting—but Paul Anka’s “Diana” and Buddy Holly’s “That’ll Be the Day” were other landmarks for some reason. (Elvis Presley had not yet come at the time, nothing to do with singing; he had to do with rebellion, James Dean, making people’s parents unhappy, and being Elvis.) Later came Percy Sledge’s “When a Man Loves a Woman,” which begins on a high, desperate note (it’s a tenor’s B flat), and at about the same time, Roy Orbison appeared. He had a lowish voice, as I had by that time, and I could sing along with about three-quarters of most of his songs, in particular the amazing “Crying.” But his voice had what seemed like a trick—a weird, still unbeatable upper extension: how many singers can get the high D flat (that’s above high C) on the word “crying” in a perfect mixed voice (not falsetto, not chest voice)? That note sounded like a swoon, and it almost made me faint too.

Concurrent with all of this, or even a bit earlier, was the yearly, hard-to-avoid Miss America Pageant. After the evening gown and swimsuit competitions, the gals would have to perform—the talent competition. Many tap-danced, a couple did interpretive dancing (waving their arms while holding scarves), many sang pop tunes or played piano or violin; one, I recall, showed the perfect way to pack a suitcase (this is not a joke). But at least one or two each year sang an opera aria, or part of one: “Un bel dì” from *Madama Butterfly* was a favorite; Gilda’s “Caro nome” from *Rigoletto* was another. My senses were dazzled by such sounds; one aria had great drama and a big high note at the end, and the other required the singer to bounce around on tiny, bell-like tones. Was there nothing the voice could not do? At the same time, musical movies starring a man named Mario Lanza began to appear on television. Lanza was a prodigy—there’s no doubt about it now; even Luciano Pavarotti, José Carreras, and Plácido Domingo cite him as an inspiration. He had begun an operatic career but was

snatched up by MGM; *The Great Caruso* and *The Student Prince* were among his hits. (He does not appear in the latter, but his voice does; he walked out after a fight with the director.) He was a handsome, charismatic matinee idol (poor boy becomes a star), and he could, to my

ears, express great emotion through singing with a big, dark voice; indeed, his tones seemed superhuman in a different way from Roy Orbison's. His records sold millions of copies. He was also always in the news—he drank and ate too much, rebelled against the movie studio, and was said to have Mafia connections; when he died at thirty-eight in 1959, he was probably the most famous tenor in the world. His death made big news as well: at the insistence of the studio (or the Mafia) he would periodically be admitted to a hospital and kept in a coma referred to as a “twilight sleep treatment” in order to lose weight. He died immediately after one of these sessions in Rome, of a pulmonary embolism. But I digress.

Though I paid attention to “popular music” all along, a fascination with folk music followed (Joan Baez, the Weavers, the Greenbriar Boys, Pete Seeger, et al.); it was easier to imitate and had a certain purity and “oldness” that appealed. I was at the Newport Folk Festival the year Bob Dylan went electric and half the audience went berserk with rage: you would have thought Moses had come down off the mountain with a Chinese restaurant menu.

In 1964 I heard recordings of the tenor Jussi Björling in *Pagliacci* and Maria Callas as Lucia di Lammermoor and there was no turning back; his tone was so plaintive and beautiful that I actually felt for the character, while she sounded like nobody I'd ever heard in my life and her emotions seemed primal. They made my body shake. A complete recording of Richard Wagner's *Die Walküre* followed—it was a very brave move—and I got caught up in the almost violent orchestra and the unbelievably huge, powerful voices that cut right through it. Could singing shock, bring sadness, amusement, and amazement, make one, as the composer Vincenzo Bellini said, “weep, shudder, die” and at the same time entertain, warm, and fill with joy?

And then in 1965 I actually went to the opera: *Die Walküre* at the old Met. My seat was the worst imaginable—in the “family circle,” at the very top and over on the side—where you literally had to hang over the edge to see the stage, and it was only the front of the stage at that. My seat cost less than five dollars; a movie cost one dollar. The cast almost duplicated the one on my recording, and I found out a couple of years later that it was the greatest cast of the 1960s: George London was Wotan, Jon Vickers was Siegmund, Leonie Rysanek was Sieglinde, and Birgit Nilsson sang Brünnhilde. The opera was very long, and there were patches that confused and bored me (there were no subtitles to help in those days, and I wasn't familiar enough with the libretto), but the sheer sound and spectacle shocked me and made me almost hysterical; during the very late 1960s and all of the 1970s, I went to the opera (the Met and City Opera) three times a week. Without giving up my love for the Beatles, the Stones, the Who, the Beach Boys, Stevie Winwood (talk about a voice!), and the first syllable of Sting's “Roxanne,” I have, since then, been loyally obsessed with the operatic voice. There's something so freakishly glorious about it, from bass to high soprano, that it demands a visceral reaction—anger, sadness, empathy, elation—and instant metaphor: dark, light, velvety, silvery, bell-like, chocolate, warm, golden, icy, laserlike, smooth. It is more like gospel singing than anything else, with many types of fervor in place of religious fervor. After a while singing seems like a natural extension of speaking; it's just another step up a communicative ladder.

To this day, I cannot understand why people don't sing—opera and otherwise—all the time.

Robert Levin







## Introduction

### No Need to Wear your Jewelry

This book is for anyone who has ever been curious about opera for any reason: whether you've discovered a sudden fondness for an aria used in a movie or an advertisement or an appealing singer seen on a billboard or a TV show, whether you've found yourself wondering how opera has lasted for more than four hundred years and seems to have recently caught on with new fervor, whether you want to know how to get into opera without causing any physical or mental harm to yourself or are simply tired of the singing on *American Idol*. Is opera a lifetime commitment, like marriage used to be? Are opera lovers like geese, mating with opera for life? Or is it—and can it be—an on-again, off-again thing? Why is it both mocked and perennially adored? If tickets are so expensive, how come everyone who loves it can somehow afford it? Why are there forty recordings of *Madama Butterfly* or *Don Giovanni*? Why do operagoers see—or listen to—the same opera dozens of times?

This book is also for people who want smarter babies, the ability to earn big bucks in their spare time, to take advantage of foreclosed properties, and to learn a foreign language and have flatter abs without leaving the comfort of their homes.

Remember what John Lennon said to an audience that included Queen Elizabeth, the Queen Mother, and Princess Margaret in November 1963: “For our last number, I'd like to ask your help. The people in the cheaper seats clap your hands. And the rest of you, just rattle your jewelry.”

#### *First of All . . .*

Opera, simply, is sung drama, with the story told through both voices and instruments and often involving costumes and sets. It is like theater, in other words, except that the characters sing rather than speak. A group of late-sixteenth- and early-seventeenth-century Italians with money, status, and ideas believed that the plays of Greek antiquity, to which they aspired (the good old days?), had been sung rather than spoken. In fact, this belief was incorrect, but by the time everyone found out, opera had already taken hold, and an entirely new art form—and form of entertainment—had been invented.

The earliest operas used mythology and folklore as their subject matter; the first, now lost, is believed to have been about Dafne, a dryad, or nymph, who was turned into a laurel tree to protect her from the god Apollo. The music was by Jacopo Peri, Giulio Caccini, and Jacopo Corsi, and the opera was presented in Florence in the late 1590s at the suggestion of the poet Ottavio Rinuccini, who rearranged the text from Ovid's *Metamorphoses*. *Orfeo* (about the mythical musician who goes to hell and back to retrieve his beloved Eurydice), by Claudio Monteverdi, was shown at the court of Mantua in 1607, and that's when opera really got started; *Orfeo* is still performed today. By 1637 Venice had opened the first public opera house, and by the century's end, that small city, with a population of 125,000, had seen 350 different operas in seventeen theaters. A typical “season” ran for from twelve to thirty weeks; the wealthy bought a box for the season; regular people bought tickets for individual performances.

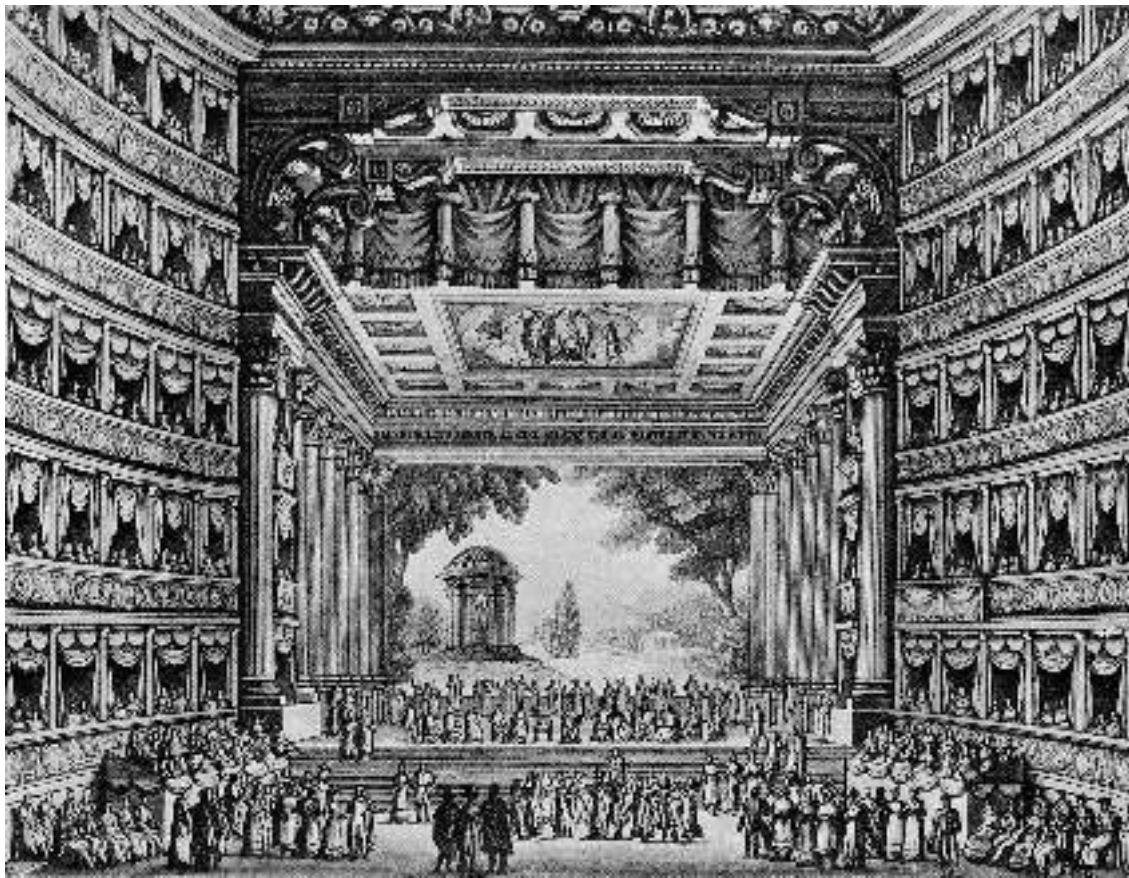
As formulated by Monteverdi and his fancy friends, opera was made up, essentially, of two types of singing, the first being recitatives (as in “recite”), in which the characters, rather than singing a “song” about something specific, move the plot forward by singing their sentences to a written-out (not arbitrary) procession of notes that do not necessarily resemble a tune. This is the part of opera that initially makes people uncomfortable; musically pitched speech is abnormal. (In Broadway musicals, characters speak most of the time and then suddenly break into song. Why that should be less weird is beyond me, but there you have it. If you’re going to sing at all, why not do it all the time?) A bit of dialogue in recitative might read: “I’m Apollo and I have slain a serpent and now I want Daphne.” “Well, I’m Cupid and I’ll turn her into a tree before you get your hands on her.” The other type of singing in opera is the aria. These have tunes you can recognize (after a listen or two, as with any music), are more structured, stop the action, and focus on a particular feeling, event, or situation. “My girlfriend got bitten by a snake, now she’s dead and I’m miserable, so I’m going to beg the infernal spirits to send her back” is a suitable reason for a full-blown song. (In the case of Monteverdi’s *Orfeo*, I’m making this up, but you get the idea.) It may be strophic, in two parts—one filled with grieving, the other a statement of purpose, with more energy—or not, or more. An aria has a formality about it and literally calls a halt to the plot; even the earliest composers realized that the music of an aria had better be spellbinding, illuminate the situation, and keep the listener fascinated, because of its beauty or drama or the capability of the part of the singer to create beauty and drama—preferably both. Choruses pop up now and then to comment on the action, to be friends or witches or soldiers or rabble.

These basic elements—experimental works aside—that make up an opera are pretty much the same after more than four hundred years.

Thousands of operas were composed and performed during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries (and into the first quarter of the twentieth), mostly in Italy, France, and Germany, and less so in England. (Opera houses also flourished in the United States in the nineteenth century, performing European works, but that is a story for another time.) Most people have heard of the still-popular composers, but for every Monteverdi, there were a few Cavallis and Caccinis; for every Handel, Lully, and Rameau, there was a gaggle of Kaisers, Grauns, Leos, Hasses, Bononcini, Sarros, and Mondonvilles; for each Mozart, you could find a dozen Salieris; for each Bellini, Rossini, and Donizetti (the last of whom, alone, wrote almost seventy operas), there were plenty of Pacinis, Mercadantes, Mayrs, Payrs, and Meyerbeers; for each Wagner and Verdi and Mussorgsky, there was a handful of Marschners and Boitos; and for each Puccini and Richard Strauss there was a bunch of Mascagnis, Leoncavallos, Zandonais, Schillers, and Schrekers. Each town of any size had an opera house; some had several. If a new work did not please, it was replaced a night or two later by either an older popular one or something new. Opera was *the* form of popular entertainment; the public took the characters and the music equally seriously. At the premiere of Gaetano Donizetti’s *Lucia di Lammermoor*, people in the audience cried openly when the heroine went mad. We like to weep at “art”; it’s a good way to reach inside without feeling we’re getting too personal. A shared catharsis is a good thing, and in the case of opera, it is both diverting and private.

To mention just one example of opera’s all-consuming presence, Giuseppe Verdi refused to give the orchestra or tenor the music to “La donna è mobile” (in *Rigoletto*) until the last moment because he was afraid that the tune was so catchy that the gondoliers would be

humming it before the opening and spoil the surprise. Indeed, the morning after the premiere, everyone in Venice was singing it. Those who did not attend operas still heard the music, and they would sometimes adapt the melodies for home entertainment. Opera was an unavoidable and welcome fact of life, and though it may have attracted the rich and fancy, many seats were offered for the equivalent of pocket change. And the hoi polloi remained interested.



*The interior of Teatro alla Canobbiana in Milan: Just one of the opera houses in Milan in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Unlike the still-famous Teatro alla Scala, it catered to a middle-class audience.*

### *So When and Why Did Opera Lose Its Place?*

Opera retained its popularity into and through the first forty years of the twentieth century; indeed, opera singers were the celebrities of their day. It was the Neapolitan tenor Enrico Caruso (1873–1921) who popularized the phonograph (and vice versa, it was said), making more than 260 recordings between 1904 and 1920; his records sold millions of copies, even to people who had never been to the opera. He was singing in San Francisco when the great earthquake hit in 1906; there were numerous stories about how he carried an autographed photograph of President Theodore Roosevelt with him for good luck as he was attempting to escape the city, which he did successfully, vowing never to return. Later that year, the new season at the Metropolitan Opera in New York was almost canceled when he was accused of pinching “Mrs. Hannah Graham’s buttocks” at the Central Park Zoo’s Monkey House. No Hannah Graham was found to live where the lady claimed to live, and she never appeared in court—she may merely have been one of the park’s local loonies or may have been invented entirely by cops who were attempting to shake Caruso down. (Italian mobsters in New York also attempted to extort money from him.) The Met management came to his defense—the

house was always full when Caruso sang, and they could not afford to lose him. He was eventually found guilty and fined ten dollars. Every newspaper covered the scandal; it was front-page news. New York's upper crust was horrified, but not enough to refuse to go hear him sing. And it wasn't just the fancy folk who flocked to hear him and bought his records. New York was filled with Italian immigrants—a half million of them—and they adored him and followed his every move. Each day of the trial, hundreds of Italians and Italian Americans had gathered at the courthouse, shouting "Viva Caruso!" whenever the tenor entered or exited. Throughout his career he appeared in newsreels and silent films, although the two "romantic" films he made (and was paid \$100,000 for) were flops.



*The great Neapolitan tenor Enrico Caruso, probably not dressed for a tour of the Central Park Monkey House, where he was arrested for pinching "Mrs. Hannah Graham's buttocks."*

More about the movies:

The soprano Grace Moore (1898–1947), from Slabtown, Tennessee (I'm not making this up), and almost a generation younger than Caruso, sang on Broadway and the opera stage. She was gorgeous, and when talkies came in she was just the right age and became as great a star in films as she was in opera. In her film roles she invariably portrayed an opera singer. The implication is not merely that she was photogenic (which she indeed was) and a good

actress but that opera still had popular appeal. The tenor Beniamino Gigli (1890–1957), whose career rose to great supremacy upon the early death of Caruso (in 1921), made eighteen movies (in Italian, English, and German)—the films helped to sell the records and vice versa—and he was, despite not being particularly handsome, something of a matinee idol. He had an everyman type of charm (a 1950 film called *Taxi di Notte* cast him as a cabdriver who sings arias for extra tips). I'm sure you see where I'm going with this—people loved either opera itself or the idea of the opera singer. This was made crystal clear in the late 1940s and early '50s when a tenor, a young Philadelphian named Mario Lanza, born in 1921 but already singing professionally in the mid-1940s (he studied briefly with Leonard Bernstein), was heard at the Hollywood Bowl by the movie mogul Louis B. Mayer of MGM. Mayer signed him to a seven-year movie contract, and Lanza, with his good looks and gorgeous voice, became the everyday-hero-as-opera-singer. He crossed over perfectly, and his records sold millions of copies. His film *The Great Caruso*, released thirty years after the great Neapolitan tenor's death, revived—indeed, validated—what had been somewhat subjugated: the fact that opera could still sell to millions of regular Joes if delivered properly. Lanza's binge drinking and obsessive eating undermined his health, and he died at thirty-eight, after one of those induced periods of “twilight sleep.” But that's another story.

By 1997 almost two dozen movie versions of *Carmen* had appeared, eighteen of *La Traviata*, thirteen of *Il Barbiere di Siviglia*, seventeen of *Tosca*, sixteen each of *Don Giovanni* and *Pagliacci*, fourteen of *Aida* (including one starring Gina Lollobrigida, lip-syncing the title role to Renata Tebaldi's voice), and thirteen each of *The Magic Flute* and *La Bohème*.

But . . . but . . .

A few things happened in the last half of the nineteenth and first quarter of the twentieth centuries, particularly in the United States and more particularly in the melting pot that is New York City. The American elite, those who had made it in the United States starting in the late eighteenth century and early nineteenth century, had divorced themselves from their European roots but, with their new wealth, opted to hang on to the “best” of European culture. Going to the opera—indeed, dressing for the opera and turning it into a place to be seen—became paramount, leaving the huge influx of financially struggling foreigners in the cold or at best in the peanut gallery, way upstairs in the opera house. The Academy of Music was founded in New York in 1854, and the opera season became the ne plus ultra of social life for the city's wealthy. The “best” (i.e., oldest and richest) families owned the seats in the theater's boxes, and this symbol of importance was passed from generation to generation. The Astors, Vanderbilts, Roosevelts, and Morgans were considered nouveaux riches and were therefore shut out of “society” and not permitted membership in the Academy. And so began internecine snobbism: the Metropolitan Opera Association in New York was founded in 1880 by just those “nouveaux riches” to counter this injustice, and when the new house opened in 1883 it held three tiers of boxes for the prosperous. At twice the size of the Academy, there was room for both New York society and the new immigrants and poorer opera lovers. This was practically democratic, although it should be noted with horror that there was a separate entrance for the two upper, cheaper, boxless tiers, presumably so that the new wealthy did not have to mingle with, or look at, those less well off and less well dressed. (The Academy of Music's opera seasons halted in 1886, and thereafter vaudeville and stage plays were presented there.)



At the same time and on the other hand, the newer immigrants wished to assimilate, and they leaned toward entertainment in their new language (or that needed little or no English, such as the silent movies), entertainment that was cheaper, entertainment that was easier to find. They bought Caruso's (and others') operatic recordings, but they listened to the radio and, by 1930, went to the movies, which were abundant. We know that opera translated relatively well to the movies, but westerns were newer; dramas were newer; slapstick comedies were newer. One cannot overemphasize the effect of close-ups on a huge screen; it is still what makes moviegoing "better" than theatergoing. Stars on the big screen started to take their places in the public's consciousness, stars more charismatic and invariably more glamorous than opera singers. Who could resist Greta Garbo, Clark Gable, Humphrey Bogart, Joan Crawford, Bette Davis, or Jean Harlow? Especially for fifteen cents, around the corner from where they lived? The more successful movies became, the more Hollywood turned them out, and opera began to lose its important place as entertainment for the people. Eventually, it became too much work and priced itself out of the common man's pocket. This explanation may seem simplistic, but it's probably right—and if it doesn't tell the whole story, it does help to explain why opera is reemerging. More on that in the next section.

Films eventually became more operatic than opera; in fact, everything became more operatic than opera. The early acting in silent movies is remarkable for its operatic excesses. Everything we now mock in opera—the hand-to-heart, hand-to-forehead emotionalism—was somehow considered exquisite at the movies. If, as we are told endlessly, opera is larger than life, then cinema is surely larger. Now the words "opera" and "operatic" have taken on meanings outside of any musical context. Critics write that Al Pacino gives "operatic" performances in *The Devil's Advocate* and *Scarface*. Francis Ford Coppola's *Godfather* trilogy and *Deadwood* by David Milch, the HBO series that ran for three seasons and takes place in South Dakota in the 1870s, have both been called operatic. So have the directors Brian De Palma, Clint Eastwood, and Martin Scorsese. And can anyone deny that Richard Pryor, every time he did stand-up comedy, was anything less than opera? It's not frequently referred to as "grand opera" for nothing; the "grand" refers to its emotional and presentational scope.

Opera became less of a necessity in everyday lives because everyday lives became more operatic. Joke about productions of *Aida* with elephants onstage if you'd like, but then take a look at the Grammys or go to a Rolling Stones, Elton John, or U2 concert. Where do you think such spectacle came from? It's the technology that has changed, not people's desire for glitz—which, incidentally, is now being seen in more and more opera houses.

### *So the Strange Thing Is . . .*

The whole opera thing is coming full circle.

For most of our lives, opera has been gloriously easy to ignore. If you didn't want it or like it, you would almost never bump into it. A singer—usually Marilyn Horne or Beverly Sills—would occasionally show up on a late-night talk show or comedy series (*The Tonight Show*, *The Carol Burnett Show*, *The Odd Couple*) not only to dazzle with their voices but to demonstrate how down to earth they were. The Metropolitan Opera would broadcast operas on the radio on Saturdays during the winter and spring, but, for the most part, we were safe from exposure. Relatively frequent opera telecasts on PBS from the Met took hold in the 1980s and raised people's operatic consciousness, but let's face it, opera is grand and needs a

stage—or screen—that is very big. (Between 1982 and 2002 the National Endowment for the Arts found that total attendance at live opera performances grew by 46 percent; one cannot rule out the power of television.)

By 1991, the phenomenon that was the Three Tenors made it clear that opera was for the masses and could be a hoot and, with their “friendly competition,” a type of athletic event in itself (opera lovers have always seen opera as a sport, by the way—it ain’t easy). Then the opera-wannabe-with-the-beautiful-voice, Andrea Bocelli, along with Pavarotti, Domingo, and Carreras, actually made millions of people enjoy opera, albeit in small doses. Just as the “chant” craze somehow appealed to the new age, rather than the religious, market, the Three Tenors suddenly became attractive to those who enjoyed stadium concerts. They were, after all, associating themselves with the World Cup, and it got blurred. Football, Pavarotti, Bruce Springsteen, Kiss—what’s the difference? They’re all over the top, they sing “hits” we recognize, and the crowd goes wild. The cult of the personality never hurts either—Pav’s hugeness (in every way) made news, and there hadn’t been a figure in opera so grand, so present, so “sensational” since Maria Callas, who had been in the headlines as much for her offstage exploits as for those onstage (*le jet set*; Aristotle Onassis; throwing tantrums; singing like an angel or a devil; canceling performances; and so on).

Then in 2006, in New York, came the Met’s decision to telecast live opera in Times Square and in the Plaza at Lincoln Center, for free, on huge screens. Thousands upon thousands of people attended and sat rapt for three hours at a time, watching *Madama Butterfly* (with subtitles—now standard fare in opera houses as well) and liked it. Perhaps they came with memories of the Three Tenors ringing in their heads, but they now realized that opera was a “entire” thing and not just a series of well-known excerpts. Furthermore, they could follow it and enjoy it as if it were a movie or a TV show. Interviewed on the nightly news, dozens of people acknowledged that they had wept at *Madama Butterfly*. And remember—people love group crying, from *Lucia di Lammermoor* to the hysterical girls at early Beatles performances. Soon, not just the Met but La Scala in Milan, the Salzburg and Glyndebourne festivals, and other companies followed suit; in July 2009, ten thousand people gathered in London’s Trafalgar Square to watch the Royal Opera’s production of Verdi’s *La Traviata*.



*Mom Commits Suicide; Baby Waves Flag: The seduced and abandoned Madama Butterfly just postseppuku, with her half-American baby shielded from his mom's terrible fate.*

Finally, along came something crucial that proved that convenience plays a huge role in the way people of our century have learned to be entertained. Opera came to the proverbial “movie theater near you.” With advances in digital technology, the quality of the projected films was vastly improved; something having to do with the number of pixels (please ask your local IT person or geek) makes the resolution of the picture sharper, realer, better. For about twenty-five dollars you get the entire experience, including, in some cases, intermission features (and you can get up and go to the bathroom when and if you need to). If people weren't going to the opera for one reason or another—too expensive, too dressy and glitzy (not necessarily anymore except in Germany, by the way), no wiggle room—opera would come to them. Going to the movies is a natural thing to do; going to the opera house had stopped being so. And in the United States alone, in 2009, more than a million tickets were sold for Met performances and people loved them. Neophytes, dazzled and comfy at once, went back for more, and fans found a new, cheaper, more convenient way for the music and theater to get to them and vice versa. And once you're hooked, you're hooked—opera becomes a sport of comparisons, heights, depths, and catastrophes; the movie-opera people are crossing over to the opera house and vice versa. Those who tell us that opera is a dying art form are simply off base—if it is dying, then it's been dying for four hundred years. Now we know that if it's easy to reach, people are interested; as Ray in the film *Field of Dreams* put it, “If you build it, [they] will come.” There are now several distribution companies, all over the world, devoted to getting opera into movie houses. Opera is all around us—hundreds of hours' worth on YouTube alone—and there is no excuse not to take part in it. Much like the dozen or so theaters in eighteenth-century Venice (and then all over Europe), opera has again become familiar, popular entertainment, and it has unleashed its weird power. It still requires some commitment and knowledge and it rarely has a beat, but there's just so much of Lady

Gaga a human being can enjoy/tolerate without needing to be touched in a slightly deeper place.

### *Yet There Are Still Some Philistines. Why?*

Because opera is odd. Let me count the ways.

*Everybody sings all the time, and that's not the way life is.* I touched on this before, but it requires more discussion. We do raise and inflect our voices (except if we are from California or Oregon and especially if we are Italian, Jewish, or from the Deep South), but we stop short at singing. And it's too bad: raising one's voice is very effective. If instead of yelling when angry, we could sing at a good volume and at either a higher or lower pitch, and hold notes and words for a different period of time than normal, our points would come across more vividly. Yelling is just yelling; singing high is different from using a growling, lower sound. But I doubt that will happen, so let's get back to opera. My only advice for this issue to get over it; if you love the human voice in any of its singing manifestations—Frank Sinatra, Sinéad O'Connor, Sting, Whitney Houston, Lady Gaga—you'll be turned on enough by opera singers to actually be glad that they sing all the time.

*Opera does too many things at once.* Going to the opera, or just listening to it, is multitasking: Should one detach the music from the drama? Is the voice preeminent? What if you don't like a particular voice—will that negate the experience? The answer is that it is a package. All of it is thrown at you at the same time (unless you are listening to recorded opera, which will be covered later in the introduction). If you don't like the sets, listen to the voices; if a particular voice grates, focus on the instrumentation, the action, or another singer. Keep your critical faculties sharp. In some ways it's no different from any theatrical experience: you may like one actor and not another; a director's approach may seem arbitrary or wrong or stupid or brilliant; the sets (or cinematography) may offend or please. But if you love John Travolta, you'll be predisposed to like any film he's in (except for that terrible piece of Scientology propaganda, *Battlefield Earth*; if you like that, please stop reading this book); if Quentin Tarantino is your cup of directors but you do not care for Travolta, you will probably still like *Pulp Fiction*. And if you love Giacomo Puccini's *La Bohème*, no production or singer can make you stop loving it. You'll just wish it had been better presented or sung. You can become a fan of a singer and not particularly like an opera he or she appears in at any one time.

*Opera simultaneously envelops you and keeps you at a distance.* In addition to being an aural and visual experience, it is emotional and cerebral, but it is *not* based in real behavior. Of course, neither is stand-up comedy—what is more fake than a man standing on a stage for the sole purpose of making you laugh while you drink? Who are you? Louis XIV? On some level it should have the opposite effect—"Just try to make me laugh, I dare you." But the audience is willing, and so it works; we meet the comic halfway, accepting the artificiality of the situation. Obviously, this is easy to get over, as the real tears that pour forth from many opera-goers will attest to. Trust me, if you let down your guard and give it an inch, it will take a foot. Consider opera entirely as metaphor, and its very artificiality will become one of its shining virtues.

*Opera singers do not look like they sound.* I'm not referring to the ever popular, ever tedious discussion of fat sopranos; many of them are extinct, and if you love and are moved by a

particular voice, you can either get over the physique or joke about it, but the voice is what draws you in. What I'm referring to here is that if, say, Luciano Pavarotti's speaking voice had been as high as his singing voice, people would have begun to laugh every time he spoke. What comes out of most opera singers' heads is not a natural sound—it is one that is cultivated. Opera singers, except for basses and many baritones, sing in a range so much higher than anyone's natural speaking voice that making the connection between what you see and what you hear can be odd and difficult. This is certainly true of gospel singers as well, but for some reason, religious ecstasy is an acceptable reason for a high voice—period. Same with Whitney Houston (pre-Bobby Brown). At this point, it is only rappers who sound “normal,” but what they are doing is speaking in rhythm and rhyme, not singing. No offense—I speak the truth.

*The plot does not really matter, Part I.* A few years ago, as I was on my way to a performance of *La Traviata*, a non-opera-loving friend asked, “But haven't you seen it already?” In fact, I'd seen it a number of times, and yes, I knew what happened at the end. That isn't the point. If you recall that opera began with retellings of classical myths and stories, such as with Monteverdi's *Orfeo*, you'll realize that audiences were not attending to discover plot surprises. In the seventeenth century alone, there were composers, mostly forgotten today, such as Francesco Rasi, Antonio Brunelli, Stefano Landi, Luigi Rossi, Benedetto Ferrari, Giovanni Francesco Capello, and a dozen others, who set the Orpheus story to music; in total there are about sixty-five known operas on the subject. Clearly, the public wanted to hear how a particular composer treated the story, how effective the setting and music were, how moving the portrayal was. Add to that the infinite variety of singers who can sing the various composers' music with different sounds—no two voices are identical. The same is true in pop music as well, although we normally like the first version we hear best: it's considered “definitive.” (Leonard Cohen's “Hallelujah,” however, bears repeated listenings from many people.) In opera, unless it's a new work and we are at the premiere, it's hard to claim any definitiveness, but as your listening obsession becomes more sophisticated, you will have favorites as well. Still, a new production, a different Tosca, a different conductor, will whet your appetite and you won't be bothered by the fact that you know what's about to happen. It ain't what it does, it's what it sounds like.

*The plot does not really matter, Part II.* While some plots in opera fascinate and are utterly valid as theater (*Rigoletto*, *Pelléas et Mélisande*, *Der Rosenkavalier*, *La Traviata*), many are senseless or far too confusing, or have gaping holes in them (*La Forza del Destino*, *La Gioconda*, *Simon Boccanegra*). But that brings us to a crucial point about opera: although the overall scenario may be either trite or hard to believe, every opera worth its salt (hundreds of them in the standard repertoire) has many moments that rivet the listener as the simple spoken word simply cannot. So even though taken as a whole a plot can strain credulity, emotions are capable of being pinpointed in an aria or duet, say, not only by word but by sound of voice, range and reach of voice, and orchestral commentary/accompaniment. It is here that opera is actually hyperreal and larger than life. More about this later.

*The plot does not really matter, Part III.* “When someone gets stabbed in an opera, instead of bleeding, he sings.” I'm not sure who said it first, but that says it all. And people have an issue with this—lengthy death scenes, tuberculosis victims with the lung power of longshoremen, slow-acting poison (and gunshots), the ability to sing beautifully and with

great virtuosity for twenty minutes while insane, and so on. (I've just recently rewatched Quentin Tarantino's *Reservoir Dogs*, in which the actor Tim Roth screams, bleeds profusely, and dies for well over an hour; talk about operatic!) But again, please remember that opera is not supposed to mirror reality; it is supposed to depict emotional situations at their most heightened. Properly performed, and properly listened to, these finely tuned if unlikely—indeed, improbable—moments should and will transport us to a sphere way above our quotidian lives, to a place where we cry and/or shudder. If we can't get an emotion that strong out of any music we love, why listen to it? We get it from Jimi Hendrix, Sviatoslav Richter, a small group of pop or rock balladeers, and invariably from opera. Even Celine Dion has a voice that can send chills down the spine, and she's a Canadian robot.

*Opera singers are overly temperamental.* Sorry, but it is pop stars who demand bathtubs of Evian and crunchy chocolate health bars. Second of all, who cares if they are bratty—they're not your siblings, they're entertainers—but, more important, it is no longer true. The last twenty-five years have turned out not only fine singing actors but what used to be called troupers. The soprano Ana María Martínez, required to sing suspended from a wire in Antonín Dvořák's opera *Rusalka*, found that the least of her problems late in 2009 when she accidentally tripped onstage and fell into the orchestra pit, landing on a cellist. She got up and resumed singing. The American mezzo-soprano Joyce DiDonato slipped and broke her leg at London's Covent Garden in the midst of a performance of Gioacchino Rossini's *Il Barbiere di Siviglia*. She continued, and at the next few performances she sang from a wheelchair, occasionally shambling around in her cast. The baritone Simon Keenlyside accidentally fell through a trapdoor onstage, had surgery on his arm, and performed with a sling for a week or two. The soprano Danielle de Niese, in a production of Handel's *Giulio Cesare*, performed a knockout belly dance while singing a knockout aria at Glyndebourne. The words "diva" and "divo" (from the Latin for "goddess" and "god") are now kicked around to refer to any performer who is both wildly famous and demands a lot, but in any field of entertainment nowadays, if temperament outweighs talent, they're no longer tolerated. Two examples? Whitney Houston in pop and the unhinged Kathleen Battle in opera.

*It's in a foreign language.* Yes, it is. So is most of the world. Get over it. This is true of people from other countries, who are incomprehensible to us if they don't speak English. At least opera has subtitles in the opera house and on screens and you can buy a printed libretto to follow at home (most recordings include them anyway). Besides that, would it kill you to learn a phrase here and there in Italian, French, or German? But mostly: get over it.

### *Other Things You Should Know*

Before we get to the operas proper—the plots, the history, the special "to die for" moments—we have a few more things to cover.

The first is the matter of relevance. There are whole groups of people who object to opera because they feel it should be relevant. To them, I say, Oh, please! What is "relevant"? Relevant to what? Today's news? People's habits? Even putting aside "gimmick" pieces for the moment (like the opera based on a Jerry Springer TV show), there have been plenty of so-called CNN operas—John Adams's *Nixon in China*, *The Death of Klinghoffer*, and *Doctor Atomic*; Michael Daugherty's *Jackie O*; Stewart Wallace's *Harvey Milk*; Anthony Davis's *X: The Life and Times of Malcolm X*; Ezra Laderman's *Marilyn* (that is, Monroe)—but the ones that

have mattered to fans and press and have lasted through their first runs have been those in which the music illuminated the life or situation being treated. The *New York Times* wrote about *Marilyn*, “Musically, the opera’s effect was often of an amiable lugubriousness.” Monroe may be an obsession of yours, i.e., relevant to you, but does the *Times*’ comment whet your appetite? Wagner’s fifteen-hour Ring Cycle is considered a chore by those who do not love it, but it is musically and textually so rich that directors have rightly mined from it stories of power, lust, greed, psychological warfare, and familial dysfunction, sometimes by setting it in the future or present or at the time of the Industrial Revolution. Those things are relevant to us all, but they still should not be the reason we sit through and love the works. Do they speak to us in any deep-seated way, entertain us, and, perhaps, create that chill or make us tremble? If the answer is “yes,” then they have relevance.

In addition, attempts to make standard operas relevant—or at least “modern”—tend to be embarrassing. German opera directors in particular have been at the forefront of what is called *Regietheater*, which translates as “director’s theater” but is also often accused of being a type of intellectual Eurotrash. It implies a freedom in concocting the manner in which the opera is staged so that the composer’s settings and dramatic intentions are often disregarded and often contradicted. At its best, say, in the director Patrice Chéreau’s centennial production of the Ring Cycle at Bayreuth (Wagner’s shrine, that is, the opera house he built for the sole purpose of presenting his operas), he underscored the Marxian, anticapitalist implications in the text at the time it was composed (the Industrial Revolution, as mentioned earlier). And Jonathan Miller’s English National Opera production of *Rigoletto* was updated to New York’s Little Italy in the 1950s, keeping the characters and their situations intact. But I have seen Puccini’s *Madama Butterfly* removed from Japan and placed in a dirt garden, so that all of the characters are insects (Butterfly—get it?). In Munich, in 2005, *Rigoletto* was staged like *The Planet of the Apes*. In Berlin recently, a production of Christoph Willibald von Gluck’s staid *Armide* included scenes of rape and bondage, not to mention a live python. In Cologne, Germany, half the cast left a production of Camille Saint-Saëns’s *Samson et Dalila* because the violence made them sick, and when the curtain rose on Verdi’s *Un Ballo in Maschera* in Barcelona a few years ago, the audience was treated to a row of men sitting on toilets, pants down, reading newspapers.

And one shudders at the following hideous examples: In September 2009 London’s Royal Opera House presented “the world’s first Twitter opera,” based on almost one thousand tweets. It was called *Twitterdammerung*. The composer Curtis K. Hughes has written a work about Sarah Palin called *Say It Ain’t So, Joe*, which features not only the fine lady but Vice President Joseph Biden and Joe the Plumber. Karl Marx’s *Das Kapital* is being made into an opera in China, and London has already seen an opera based on the life of the *Playboy* model and celebrity Anna Nicole Smith. If the music of any of these works is good, I’ll go, but what is your guess about the general quality of the ideas?

The second thing that comes to mind, and that you should pay attention to, is that opera is not for children, despite a recent *Sunday Times* article, “Scottish Opera Stars to Perform Baby O for Infants”:

Scottish Opera is attempting to reach beyond its normal audiences of middle-aged music buffs by launching a series of concerts aimed at infants, aged between six and 18 months.

The experimental performances, to be staged at venues across the country, will feature no lyrics, narrative or plot. Instead, classically trained singers will create baby-friendly noises, such as Wellington boots splashing in puddles,

buzzing bees, quacking ducks and the fluttering of feathers.

~~The audience will also be encouraged to gurgle along to the score and to crawl over a furry garden set, featuring hand puppets and a range of themed props.~~

I realize that this will upset the upwardly mobile parents who feel that if they introduce their toddlers to the finer things—Pablo Picasso’s Blue Period, John Coltrane, *Nova*, the film of François Truffaut, artichokes, aged cheese, all thirty-three extant Vermeers, Mozart, and opera—then they will be giving them a leg up in a competitive world. The truth is that opera is surreal and artificial and in order to appreciate either surreality or artifice you normally have to know what art and reality are. Kids will sense that something is amiss, but they won’t know what. They might tolerate *The Magic Flute* or *Hänsel und Gretel*, but only if the productions are colorful and zippy (and at least an hour of *The Magic Flute* is excised). Children like overkill, but not the type that opera normally offers. If you must, take girls to something sad (*La Traviata*, *Madama Butterfly*) and boys to an opera in which guys have fun and someone dies (*La Bohème*) or in which there are lust and death (*Carmen*). Warn them that opera is long, and make sure they can read (if they are below reading age and can’t handle subtitles, have them watch it on TV if at all).

### *A Word or Two About Listening at Home*

If you buy a CD or download an MP3 (or whatever), make sure you have a libretto. Read it first, previous to listening. Even before you actively listen (in a transitive way), put the recording on in the background; the music will seep in somehow. It will become familiar. Play it in the next room or while you shower—the big moments will come through. When you do actually listen, remember that it is not necessary to sit through a whole opera: listen in slices, and if you get bored, stop. Return later. Opera becomes urgent only once you love it; like anything you’re learning—or that is worth exploring—it doesn’t open itself completely the first time. Try to listen to an entire scene or act; if something catches your ear while it is in the background, stop and listen carefully to that few minutes. If you recognize an aria (from the Three Tenors or elsewhere), play it again, read along, and put it into context. Perish the thought, but if you find nothing you can latch onto in a specific work, try another from fifty years earlier or later or from another country. You’re developing your own tastes, and nothing you like will be wrong.

In this book, in a collection of the most renowned and memorable operas from different periods and countries, you will find interesting facts—some crucial, some silly, some gossip, all good for chatter during intermission—that fill out the general picture; plot summaries (just the basics); and a list of and brief dissertation on each opera’s particularly spectacular moments. As we’ve seen, over the years opera has been taken away from “people” and mystified into something only the cleverest and richest can supposedly comprehend. The entire purpose of this book is to make listening and understanding opera an easier and less Byzantine experience: Of course, everything is better if you’re rich and clever, but let’s presume you’re merely “comfortable” and somewhat on the ball and really like music and singing.

Now have a good time. Like chicken soup, opera is good for you.



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