Chapter 18

Romantic Opera

Key Terms

- Recitative
- Aria
- Bel canto
- Music drama
- *Gesamtkunstwerk*
- Leitmotiv

Romantic Opera

- 19th century a golden age for opera
- Tied into Romantic themes
  - Transcendence of artistic barriers
  - Music as the most profound art
- Message and meaning taken seriously
  - Not just for entertainment anymore
  - Subjects from respected literature

Early Romantic Opera

- Gioacchino Rossini (1792–1868)
  - *Barber of Seville, Otello, William Tell*
- Gaetano Donizetti (1797–1848)
  - *Lucia di Lammermoor, Don Pasquale*
- Vincenzo Bellini (1801–1835)
  - *Norma*
- Carl Maria von Weber (1786–1826)
  - *Der Freischutz (The Magic Bullet)*

Giuseppe Verdi (1813–1901)

- Son of small-town storekeeper in north Italy
- Scored first hit at age 29—*Nabucco*
- Gained fame with three 1850s operas
  - *Rigoletto, Il trovatore, and La traviata*
- Supported Italian liberation movement
- Coaxed out of retirement for last two operas
- All Italy mourned his death at age 88

Features of Verdi's Operas

- Bel canto principles
- Quality drama, strong emotions
- Expanded role for orchestra, especially in recitative
- Arias formally complete and distinct
- Rich harmonies for melodic climaxes

Verdi, *Rigoletto* (1851)

- Based on Victor Hugo's *Le roi s'amuse*
- Set in16th-century court of Mantua, Italy
- The Duke of Mantua seduces Gilda, daughter of the court jester Rigoletto
- Rigoletto hires Sparafucile to assassinate the Duke in revenge
- Gilda is killed instead and Rigoletto is left mad with grief

Aria, "La donna è mobile"

- Now a famous melody (Where have you heard it?)
- Strophic form
- Each stanza introduced by orchestra
- Vocal cadenza
- Melody repeats through recitative that follows

Aria, "La donna è mobile"

Woman is fickle, a feather in the wind;
Changing her words and thoughts,
She's a lovable, sweet sight,
When she's weeping or laughing, she's lying
Woman is fickle. . . .

Man's always wretched who believes her;
If you trust her, watch out for your heart!
Yet he'll never feel happy
Who from that breast does not drink love!

Quartet, "Bella figlia dell'amore"

- The Duke pursues Maddalena, Sparafucile's sister
- Duke's melody: 16 bars, **a a′ b a′**
- Maddalena, Gilda, and Rigoletto join in
- Four voices shift through harmonies and modulations
- Long passage for all four voices

Quartet, "Bella figlia dell'amore"

Richard Wagner (1813−1883)

- Most influential Romantic composer after Beethoven
- Revolutionized opera *and* orchestral music
- Developed elaborate theories on art, music, opera
- *Gesamtkunstwerk*

Wagner's Early Life

- Born in Leipzig
- Early interests in literature, music, philosophy, mythology, religion
- Began career as opera conductor
- Early works influenced by Weber
- Spent 13 years in exile after revolution of 1848–49

Wagner after Exile

- Gained support of King Ludwig II of Bavaria
- Built his own opera house in Bayreuth
  - Specifically for his "music dramas"
  - Annual festival still performs only Wagner
- Became highly influential in music *and* other arts

Wagner's Personal Life

- First marriage ended in divorce
- Affair with Mathilde Wesendonck
- Second marriage to Cosima
- Hypnotic, influential personality
- Enormously controversial

"Music Drama"

- Based on concept of *Gesamtkunstwerk*
  - Music, poetry, drama, and philosophy all equally important
  - Deal with weighty philosophical issues
- Based on old German myths and legends
  - Myth as embodiment of unconscious truths
- Required expanded use of orchestra
  - Leitmotiv technique

The Orchestra's Role

- Carried the "music drama" along
  - No more recitatives, arias, etc.
  - One long web woven with singing
  - New intensity of emotional expression
- Larger than ever—new instruments
  - Brass section now equal to others
  - Exciting new tone colors

Leitmotivs

- Guiding, or leading, motives
  - Associated with a person, thing, idea, or symbol in the drama
- Made use of thematic transformation
  - Romantic variation-like technique
  - Pioneered by Liszt in symphonic poems

Leitmotivs and Transformations

- Guide the listener through the story
- Can tell us what the hero thinks or feels when he is saying something else
- Can show a person or idea changing as drama progresses
- Technique used widely since Wagner's day

The Nibelung's Ring

- Huge four-opera cycle
  - *The Rhine Gold*
  - *The Valkyrie*
  - *Siegfried*
  - *Twilight of the Gods*
- Drawn from famous Norse legends
- Critique of middle-class values of the day
  - Moral decline brought about by greed for money and power
  - Work and discipline valued over emotion

The Valkyrie

- The second night, mostly a subplot of the *Ring* cycle
- Siegmund and Sieglinde fall in love
  - Children of Wotan, leader of the gods
  - Separated in early childhood
- Siegmund is killed in a duel with Hunding, Sieglinde's husband
- Sieglinde escapes to bear their child Siegfried, hero of the last two nights

The Valkyrie, Prelude

- Depicts a raging thunderstorm
  - Natural turmoil/psychological trouble
  - Enemies are pursuing Siegmund
  - High-tension notes; unsettled, nervous quality
- Uses large orchestra to dramatic effect
  - Carefully builds to climax, then falls away
- Texture, color, and rhythm, but no complete melody

The Valkyrie, Act I, scene i

- Siegmund stumbles out of the storm
- Collapses in Hunding's house; meets Sieglinde
- She offers him water, then mead
- Instant attraction progresses to love and empathy

Features of Act I, scene i

- Orchestra depicts characters' thoughts and feelings
- Leitmotivs are continually transformed
- Free-formed declamation of words; no full-fledged arias
- Little conventional stage action
  - The orchestra reveals more than we see

The Orchestra in Act I, scene i

Verdi vs. Wagner

Verdi
- Italian passion
- Realistic stories and characters
- Recitative, chorus, aria, and ensemble
- Vocal music dominates
- Homophonic
- Functional harmony, some chromaticism
- Fast-paced drama
- Emotional expression

Wagner
- German philosophy
- Drawn from myths and legends
- Each act a long symphonic poem
- Orchestra tells the story
- Polyphonic
- Extreme chromaticism destabilizes tonality
- Deliberately slow
- Psychological revelation

Late Romantic Opera

- Turned away from Wagner's ideal
- Realistic tendencies, modern-day subjects
- Middle- and lower-class characters
- Emphasis on sordid and violent aspects of life
  - Bizet, *Carmen* (1875)

Bizet's <u>Carmen - Habnera</u>

Love is a rebel bird
That no one can domesticate
And it's in vain that we call for it
It's the one we've just been denied
Nothing does it, threats or prayers
One talks well, the other one doesn't talk

Bizet's <u>Carmen - Habnera</u>

And that's the other one I prefer
He didn't say anything but I like him
Love, love, love, love
Love is Bohemia's child
It has never known any law
If you don't love I love you
If I love you beware
If you don't love me
If you don't love me I love you
But if I love you, if I love you
Beware
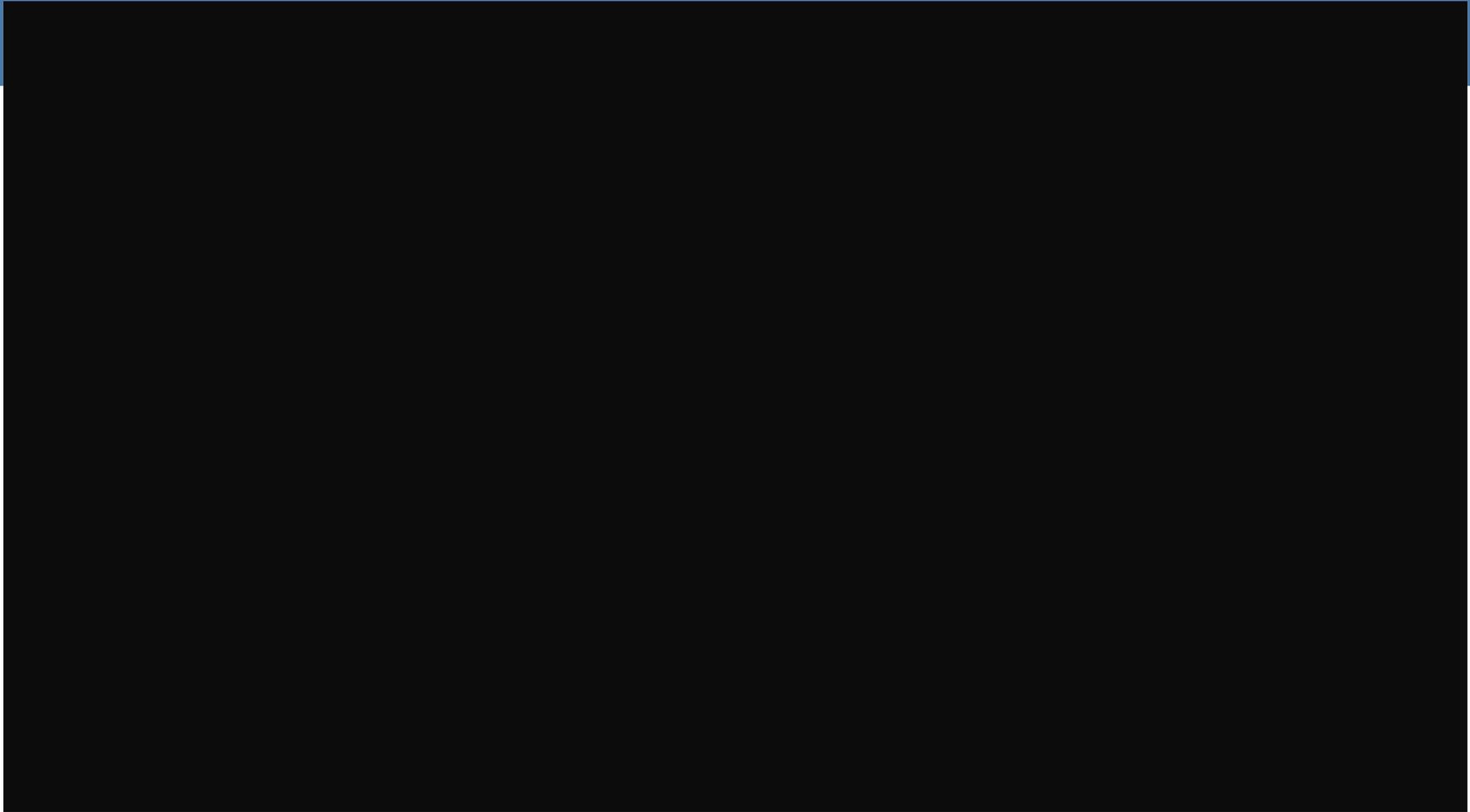
Giacomo Puccini (1858−1924)

- Main Italian opera composer after Verdi

- Used wide range of settings for his operas

- *Tosca, La Bohème, Madama Butterfly*

Puccini, *Madama Butterfly* (1904)

- Based on a play by David Belasco
- Lieutenant Pinkerton, an American naval officer, marries Cho-Cho San ("Madam Butterfly"), a 15-year-old geisha in Japan
- Pinkerton abandons Cho-Cho San, who bears his child and waits for his return
- He returns with his American wife; Cho-Cho San kills herself in despair

Aria, "Un bel di"

- Cho-Cho San's response to her maid who doubts Pinkerton's return

- Begins with floating melody in keeping with her fantasy

- Varied music mixes melody with recitative-like declamation

- Returns to opening melody, intensified

Aria, "Un bel di"

One beautiful day, we'll see
a tiny thread of smoke rise up
on the horizon, out at sea;
then the ship appears.
Now the white ship sails into port;
cannons roar a welcome; see? He has come!
I don't run to meet him—not I;
I go to the brow of the hill
and wait, and wait a long time,
but the long wait doesn't bother me.

Aria, "Un bel di" (cont'd.)

Out of the crowd down in the city

a man, a tiny speck,

sets out up the hill.

Who is it? Who is it? And as he comes,

what will he say? what will he say?

He'll call out: "Butterfly" from afar. . . .

Without answering

I'll hide myself,

partly to tease him, and partly

Aria, "Un bel di" (cont'd.)

so as not to die when we first meet!

And then he'll be worried and call:

"Little child-wife!

Verbena blossom!"—

the names he gave me when he first came.

All this will happen, I promise you!

Don't be afraid;

I await him knowing he'll come!

Aria, "Un bel di" (cont'd.)