

Opera, Broadway, & Everything In-Between

Notes by Jackson Harmeyer

This evening, we'll hear everything from famous opera arias to hit show tunes from today's most popular musical theater. There's music in at least three different languages – English, French, and Italian – and spanning three centuries – from Mozart's *Don Giovanni* in the late 18th to Lloyd Webber's *The Phantom of the Opera* in the late 20th. But, despite their wide range, these songs are all classics – songs that many audience members will recognize, perhaps even before their first words are sung.

With a program full of so much variety, let's take a minute to distinguish what's opera, what's musical theater, and just what I mean when I say "everything in-between." Opera is a genre in which music, poetry, drama, scenic design, and dance combine to produce a unified work of art. The defining feature of opera is that all dialogue is sung, whether it is the expressive commentaries known as arias, pure narration known as recitative, or some mixture of these two. Historically, opera emerged around the year 1600 in Florence, Italy, but quickly found exponents throughout Europe and eventually throughout the world. Opera has undergone many important transformations since its inception – especially those pioneered by Christoph Willibald Gluck in the mid-18th century and those of Richard Wagner in the next century – and has helped spawn the other dramatic musical genres featured on this evening's program.

Musical theater – sometimes called Broadway due to its association with this street in New York City – began as a lighter, popular alternative to opera, but has expanded in the last few decades to become something much deeper. Unlike opera, musical theater employs spoken word to convey its plots. While what we call musical theater first emerged around the turn of the 20th century on Broadway, it like opera has spread throughout the world and some of the best-known musicals of recent decades have been created in Great Britain and France.

Otherwise, this evening's program incorporates operetta and a concert aria. An operetta is a genre which is lighter than opera, includes spoken dialogue rather than recitative, and usually revolves around some sort of comical plot. It served the same role in the 19th century as musical theater has in the 20th and early 21st. Offenbach's *La Périchole* (1868) – from which the so-called Topsy Aria "Ah! quel dîner je viens de faire" ("Ah! What a Feast the Way They Dine") is derived – is our example of operetta. Unlike the other genres, a concert aria is a song that stands on its own, even though it could exist within the context of a larger opera. Rossini's "La danza" ("The Dance") is a concert aria as it is a complete work unto itself.

This evening's program begins with the show tune "Some Enchanted Evening" – the song which has inspired the title of this evening's concert. This song comes from Rodgers and Hammerstein's 1949 musical *South Pacific*. Set on an island in the South Pacific Ocean during World War II, this show explores the issues that two romantic couples face due to their interracial relationships. Despite this gloomy premise, the show itself has cheerful moments and plenty of familiar songs, including "Some Enchanted Evening."

Next, we have several arias from two of the leading French composers of the 19th century. First, is the Habanera "L'amour est un oiseau rebelle" ("Love is a Rebellious Bird") from the opera *Carmen* (1875) by Bizet. Sung by the opera's protagonist – Carmen herself –, this song summarizes the gypsy's manipulative approach towards picking-up boyfriends. Then follow three arias by Gounod – "Ah! Lève-toi, soleil!" ("Ah! Arise, Sun!") and "Je veux vivre dans ce rêve" ("I Want to Live in this Dream") from Gounod's *Roméo et Juliette* (1867) and "Le veau d'or est toujours debout" ("The Golden Calf is Still Standing") from Gounod's *Faust* (1859). And later, we will hear the familiar duet from *Lakmé* by French composer Léo Delibes.

The duet from *La bohème* – Puccini’s 1896 opera – is the first selection in Italian on this evening’s program. Others include the Rossini selections “Una voce poco fa” (“A Voice a Little While Ago”) from *The Barber of Seville* (1816) and the concert aria “La danza.” The celebrated Austrian composer Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart contributes the so-called Champagne Aria “Fin ch’han dal vino” (“Till They Are Topsy”) from his opera *Don Giovanni* (1787) also sung in Italian. Additionally, there’s another Puccini aria, the comforting “O mio babbino caro” (“Oh My Beloved Father”) from his opera *Gianni Schicchi* (1918) plus the hedonistic “Questa o quella” (“This Woman or That”) from Verdi’s *Rigoletto* (1851).

Other opera arias include the two selections from Gershwin’s *Porgy and Bess* (1935) – the lullaby “Summertime” and Porgy’s banjo-song “Oh, I got plenty o’ nuttin’.” This “folk opera” – as Gershwin called it – is an essential part of our American musical culture, and “Summertime” especially has received a great deal of attention.

“Can’t Help Lovin’ Dat Man” comes from *Show Boat* (1927) – one of the most important of all musicals. Created by Jerome Kern and Oscar Hammerstein II before the latter teamed-up with Richard Rodgers, *Show Boat* brought to musical theater a much more defined narrative than had previously existed, a factor which allowed this and other shows employing this model to gain a sense of individuality.

“I Could Have Danced All Night” from Loewe and Lerner’s *My Fair Lady* (1956) and “Where Is the Life That Late I Led?” from Cole Porter’s *Kiss Me, Kate* (1948) come from two classic musicals of sixty years ago. Otherwise, the musicals *Les Misérables* (1980) by Schönberg and Boublil, *The Phantom of the Opera* (1986) by Andrew Lloyd Webber, and *Into the Woods* (1986) by Stephen Sondheim are shows still very much alive in the popular imagination.

This evening’s show ends with music from *West Side Story* (1957) by Leonard Bernstein – a musical that I feel transcends all others. Here, there is a deep, serious plot – although comedy is far from absent – balanced by exciting, engaging music and brilliant lyrics contributed by a young Sondheim about to embark on a terrific career of his own.

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