



Andrea Chénier

Italian Opera in Four Acts

Music by Umberto Giordano
Libretto by Luigi Illica

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Andrea Chénier

Teacher Guide

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Premiere

Milan, La Scala, 28 March 1896

Characters in the Opera

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|---|---------------|
| Andrea Chénier, a poet..... | Tenor |
| Maddalena de Coigny..... | Soprano |
| Bersi, her maid, a mulatta and a <i>merveilleuse</i> | Mezzo-Soprano |
| Carlo Gérard, a servant, later a <i>sans-culottes</i> | Baritone |
| Madelon, an old woman..... | Mezzo-Soprano |
| La Contessa de Coigny..... | Mezzo-Soprano |
| Roucher, a friend of Chénier..... | Bass/Baritone |
| Pietro Fléville, a novelist..... | Bass/Baritone |
| Fouquier Tinville, the Public Prosecutor..... | Bass/Baritone |
| Mathieu, a <i>sans-culotte</i> | Baritone |
| An <i>Incroyable</i> | Tenor |
| The Abbé, a poet..... | Tenor |
| Schmidt, a jailer at St. Lazare..... | Bass |
| Master of the Household..... | Bass |

Ladies, gentlemen, abbés, footmen, musicians, servants, pages, valets, shepherdesses, beggars, *sans-culottes*, the National Guard, Soldiers of the Republic, gendarmes, shopkeepers.

Historical Background

Giordano's *Andrea Chénier* was first heard at La Scala on 28 March 1896. It owes its place in the repertory in large part to the magnificent opportunities it affords a star tenor, although there are effective musical and dramatic roles also for a star soprano and baritone. The premiere had been achieved only despite many obstacles. After the publisher Sonzogno received the score, his musical adviser Amintore Galli pronounced it "unperformable," although he eventually changed his mind. Giordano decided to call on the famous composer, Pietro Mascagni, the star of the Sonzogno firm because of the immense popularity of his *Cavalleria rusticana*, to intercede on his behalf. *Andrea Chénier* was consequently scheduled for the spring season at La Scala. Meanwhile the tenor chosen to create the title role, Alfonso Garulli, backed out and was replaced by Giuseppe Borgati, a tenor who subsequently specialized in Wagnerian roles at La Scala. Times were difficult at that theater. Sonzogno had been importing a number of operas from France; *Henri VIII* by Saint-Saëns, Massenet's *La Navarraise*, and even Bizet's *Carmen*, were all soundly booed off the stage. Not so with Giordano's opera: Gérard's opening scene was applauded and Borgati had to repeat his first aria, the *Improvviso*. From there the enthusiasm grew. After the performance Sonzogno wired to the work's librettist, Luigi Illica: "Complete triumph for first third fourth act. Second also pleased. Twenty calls for artists and composer; librettist was wanted. Come to second performance." Gallo, who in a startling conflict of interest served as critic of Sonzogno's journal *Il secolo*, wrote of the opera that "it is appealing music that proceeds, flows, soars without obstacles and without straining for effect."

The Italian opera expert William Weaver notes that *Andrea Chénier* is just as much "the *verismo* opera par excellence" as *Cavalleria rusticana*. "Realism" had appeared in France after the sociological upheavals of 1848, displayed in the paintings of Courbet and Millet, which showed everyday people in working situations, and especially in the novels of Emile Zola, *Nana* being a prime example. In Italy the primary representative of *verismo* was the writer Giovanni Verga, who wrote mainly about rural characters who find themselves in personal crises that end up exploding in crude passion and outbursts of violence. One of Verga's Sicilian short stories was "Cavalleria rusticana" (Rustic Chivalry), which served as the basis for Mascagni's opera of the same title. Another famous contemporary *verismo* opera was Ruggiero Leoncavallo's *I pagliacci*, which won the Sonzogno Prize in 1892. By the time *Andrea Chénier* appeared only a few years later, *verismo* operas were "departing now from the slums and the underworld that had first seemed its obligatory milieu" and turning towards historical subjects. Weaver quotes Giorgio Grazioni, who provides a worthwhile assessment of Giordano's opera:

Here--and in this lie the originality and strength of the work--the composer has skillfully mixed and fused sentiments that descend directly from the great romantic line (patriotism, filial love, friendship, and so on), reinforcing the usual nucleus of strict *verismo*, namely the love-jealousy conflict.

The events of the French Revolution--themselves a kind of horrific outdoor theater--have produced a number of operas: in addition to *Andrea Chénier*, there is Jules

Massenet's *Thérèse* (1907), Francis Poulenc's *Dialogues des Carmélites* (1957), and von Einem's *Dantons Tod* (1947). The real André Chénier was born in Constantinople on 30 October 1762, to a Greek mother and a father who was a French diplomat. When he was three years old his family returned to France. After attending the Collège de Navarre he had a brief episode, in 1783, in the French military, which provided Illica with the text for "Si, fui soldato." Chénier subsequently returned to Paris, to his mother's house, where he lived a life as intellectual and man-about-town. With the family's aristocratic connections, Chénier was often found at gatherings in country châteaux, similar to the one depicted at the beginning of this opera. For operatic purposes, Illica was obliged to create a love affair with Madeleine de Coigny, which was in large part a fabrication, even though in the opera Chénier's love for Maddalena--and the baritone Gérard's thwarted love for her-- might even be seen as a principal cause for his execution. Illica was used to treating historical subjects; he also wrote libretti on Christopher Columbus, Lady Godiva, and Siberian prison camps. Chénier did indeed know the Coigny family and for their daughter Aimée de Coigny, Duchesse de Fleury, he wrote the famous poem "La jeune captive," set to music by Hector Berlioz in the nineteenth century. Chénier met Aimée when they were imprisoned together in Saint-Lazare; she escaped the guillotine and lived until 1820. He did not have an affair with her and none of the heroic events associated with Maddalena in the opera actually occurred in Chénier's own life. From Chénier's poem, however, Illica fashioned the pairing of Chénier and Maddalena for operatic purposes. As with most nineteenth-century operatic lovers they are part of the "Romeo and Juliet syndrome," in that earthly events such as religious, political, racial differences make it impossible for them to be together. But they can be together--forever--in death. So Maddalena and Chénier ecstatically embrace death together: "Our death is the triumph of love! . . . Long live death--together!"

Illica worked from a number of different sources to fashion his libretto, including written remarks by Henri de Latouche, the first editor of Chénier's poetry in 1819, Arsène Houssaye's *Gallery of the Eighteenth Century*, Jules Barbier's drama *André Chénier* of 1849, Joseph Méry's novel *André Chénier* from 1856, and *History of French Society during the Revolution* by the Goncourt brothers (1854). Houssaye inspired the final act, although Illica did not use the eyewitness account of Chénier's execution, but had him and Maddalena fictitiously die together in a kind of "Liebestod." Undoubtedly the inspiration for Maddalena to exchange clothes with Idia Legray and to die in her place came from perhaps the most famous novel about the Revolution, Charles Dickens' *A Tale of Two Cities*, where Sidney Carton assumes the identity of Charles Darnay. Illica's libretto is replete with contemporary details, especially concerning the life-style of the French aristocracy, e.g., preoccupation with current fashions by Maddalena and Gérard's details about the lives of the aristocrats and some of their ridiculous customs. Also in terms of authenticity, Illica used two actual poems by Chénier to provide texts for his great arias and other parts of the libretto. Chénier's "Hymne à la justice" provides the source for much of Chénier's *Improviso* and for the details of Gérard's indictment of the aristocracy.

I have witnessed lamentable misery in villages,
Ghastly begging and harsh sorrow.

I have seen you in your chattels, indigent laborer,
Cursing the severity of a greedy and merciless treasury,
Pouring forth useless tears at the feet of the great.
Everything soaked in sweat, barren for yourself,
Discouraged from living, full of a righteous dismay;
Forced labor, corroding debts, heavy taxes,
A source of oppression and various scourges.
Twenty brigands, invested with the holy name of prince,
Unite to destroy a sad province.

In the opera, in an ironic way, the *Improviso* is followed by an aristocratic Gavotte, interrupted by the beggars entering the chateau.

Another of Chénier's poems, "Comme un dernier rayon" is paraphrased brilliantly in the aria "Come un bel dì di maggio." Here, Chénier denounces the horrible slaughter of the Terror, where within one forty-six day period, 1,285 people were brought to the guillotine.

Like the last ray, like the final breeze which
Animates the end of a beautiful day,
At the foot of the scaffold I take up my lyre,
Perhaps it soon will be my turn.

He describes his heart as "full of hatred, starved for justice," and declares "You, virtue, weep if I die." In the opera, the beginning of his aria reflects the beginning of Chénier's poem, quoted above, but by the end of the aria Chénier regards his imminent death as the apex of his existence, perhaps echoing Sidney Carton's words, "'Tis a far, far better thing I do, than I have done before."

Chénier spent two years in London, 1788 to 1790, as the secretary to the French ambassador. When he returned to Paris, he was concerned by the chaos he found and was particularly critical of Robespierre in his speeches and writings. His first piece of political journalism was "Advice to the French People on Its True Enemies." He spoke at the Café des Feuillants, where we find him sitting in act 2 of Giordano's opera, and wrote scathingly of Robespierre in the *Journal de Paris*. He began to compose poetry extremely political and satirical in nature. In August 1792 he wrote his famous "Ode to Versailles," in which he stated that the palace had been "witness to the success of evil." One of his most dangerous poems was "Ode to Charlotte Corday," the woman who had slain the terrorist Jean-Paul Marat in his bath. The ode ended with "Only you were a man, who avenged the human race." Twice Chénier was forced into hiding and was finally captured on a visit to Passy by members of the Committee for Public Safety. He wrote some of his most impassioned poetry during his 140 days of imprisonment. (In the opera he is imprisoned for only a few days, which increases the dramatic thrust). His family appealed directly to Robespierre for his release, but to no avail. Chénier was finally tried on false charges of conspiracy and found guilty. He faced the guillotine at sunset on 25 July 1794 at the age of thirty-one. In the opera, he is executed at dawn, just like Mario Cavaradossi in Puccini's upcoming *Tosca* (1900). With him was his fellow writer Jean-Antoine Roucher, who collapsed at the sight of the guillotine. Chénier is

reported to have said to him, “Courage, mon ami, d’autres rivages!” (Courage, my friend, other shores). At this time very little of his poetry had been published but soon after his death he became regarded as one of France’s greatest poets. Robespierre’s downfall came in this same month and he was executed three days after Chénier.

Giordano is not considered to have shown any great genius as a melodist yet this is an unfair assessment: a number of soaring moments in *Andrea Chénier* are particularly memorable. The typical structuring of his arias can also be seen in many of Puccini’s arias, although perhaps practiced with more subtlety. An aria begins in a declamatory style, in Giordano’s case the melodic line is somewhat monotonal, emphasizing the clarity of the text and in the case of Chénier’s arias, the idea that he is reciting poetry. At a certain dramatic-emotional point, there comes what some have called “the Giordano switch,” where the melodic line takes off in flight, with the pitch rising and wide leaps in the vocal line. Even in the soaring more melodic section, however, the text is still meant to be intelligible, including no melismatic writing (many notes to one syllable of text), trills, scales, or other embellishments. This procedure can clearly be heard in Chénier’s first aria, the *Improvviso*, in Gérard’s “Nemico della patria,” in Maddalena’s aria “La mamma morta,” and in Chénier’s act 4 aria, “Come un bel dì di maggio.” During conversational non-aria sections, the texture of Giordano’s opera tends to be string *tremolandi* (simulating tension and terror, a device used in actual “horror” operas written in Paris in the 1790s) with *parlando* singing above it.

Giordano was particularly adept at including as part of the musical texture of his operas elements of local and historical color, paralleling Illica’s attention to these details in his librettos. *Andrea Chénier* of course includes authentic French Revolutionary songs such as “Ça ira,” the *Carmagnole*, and *La Marseillaise*; Russian folk music is used in *Siberia*, Neapolitan dance rhythms in *Mala vita*, and so on. The structure of each act of *Andrea Chénier* is fairly loose, for thematic recall is rare (except for the ending of Maddalena’s “La mamma morta,” which is heard again in the fourth act); instead, one event and emotion, with new music to suit them, follows another, perhaps to reflect life’s random happenings and dramatic juxtapositions more realistically. Musically and dramatically, each act has a clever sense of pacing that structures it towards a climax. Moreover, the passionate outpourings of characters in arias and duets provide emotionally cathartic and thus intensely satisfying moments for the audience. As long as *Andrea Chénier* has three ringing Italianate voices--tenor, soprano, and baritone--it is sure to be a success.

Detailed Plot Synopsis

The action of the opera takes place in and around Paris in the years 1789 to 1793.

Act 1 A party is to take place at the Coigny Château, preparations for which are viewed with disgust by Gérard (“**Questo azzurro sofa**”). He speaks of the idleness and selfishness of the aristocracy, whom his father has served all his life as gardener (“**T’odio, casa dorata**”). The Countess, Maddalena, and her maid Bersi enter and the guests begin to arrive. Fléville, a novelist, introduces two friends, the Italian pianist Florinelli and the poet Andrea Chénier. The Abbé brings the latest news of the Revolution from Paris, which is dejecting for the royalists. To try to cheer them up, Fléville has the musicians perform a madrigal to his own text, “**O pastorelle, addio.**” Maddalena and her friends, attempting to tease Chénier out of his taciturnity, ask him to recite a poem for them. Although he replies that poetry, like love, must be spontaneous rather than forced, he obliges with the first great tenor aria of the opera, the *Improvviso* (“**Un dì all’azzurro spazio**”). He declares that his love is France, a land in which the peasants are starving while the clergy grows fat. He has offended the guests but the Countess begs their indulgence for a young, impetuous poet and orders a Gavotte to be played. A lugubrious chant is heard from outside; Gérard enters with a crowd of beggars. The Countess angrily orders them from the house. Gérard’s father begs her on bended knee but his son raises him up, strips off his own livery, and leads him and the beggars away. Recovering from a fainting spell, the Countess declares herself bewildered--was she not always considerate to the poor? She orders the dancing to resume.

Act 2 The Café Hottot, near the Pont de Peronnet, three years later. Mathieu is present with several *sans-culottes*, Chénier at a table alone. Newsboys announce the arrest of the King. Bersi arrives, followed by an *Incroyable* whom she suspects of spying on her as an anti-Revolutionary. (*Incroyables* were male dandies who wore large hats tilted at a rakish angle, shaggy haircuts, very wide collars, a cravat and revers, a twisted cane, and often a monocle.) Bersi is a *merveilluse*, an outrageously dressed prostitute, the female equivalent of the dandy *incroyable*, both part of the post-Revolutionary. She takes care to praise the Revolution and joins in cheers as a tumbril of condemned prisoners passes, to the tune “**Ah, ça ira.**” Bersi, however, has been seen regarding Chénier and the *Incroyable* determines not to let her out of her sight. Roucher arrives with a passport for Chénier, advising him to leave the country at once. Chénier refuses, declaring that he has reason to believe a great love will change his life (“**Credo a una possanza arcana**”); he has been receiving letters written in a feminine hand and signed “Hope.” A group of People’s Representatives is seen crossing the bridge, among them Gérard. He and the *Incroyable* have a conversation; it appears that Gérard is seeking Maddalena and the *Incroyable* promises to bring her to him that evening. Bersi approaches Roucher with a message for Chénier to wait for “Hope” at the nearby altar of Marat, but she is overheard by the *Incroyable*. As Mathieu sings the “**Carmagnole,**” another Revolutionary song, Maddalena arrives, revealing her identity to Chénier and throwing herself on his protection. The *Incroyable* goes to summon Gérard. Maddalena and Chénier sing a love duet, “**Ecco l’altare,**” at the end of which

Gérard arrives. He and Chénier fight and Gérard is severely wounded. He tells Chénier to protect Maddalena. When the *sans-culottes* return Gérard declares he does not know the name of his assailant.

Act 3 The Hall of the Revolutionary Tribunal Mathieu is addressing an assembly, declaring that the country is in danger from rebellion within and from foreign invasion. Gérard, recovered, enters and adjures the women to give up their sons and their jewelry for the nation. Old Madelon tells the crowd her husband died fighting for his country but she gladly offers her fifteen-year-old grandson in his place. The crowd disperses to the sounds of the Carmagnole. Newspaper sellers announce the arrest of Andrea Chénier. The *Incroyable* tells Gérard that it is believed this will draw Maddalena into their snares. As the papers of Accusation are drawn up, Gérard sings his monologue (“**Nemico della patria**”), in which he speaks of once being a slave to the aristocracy. Maddalena is brought to him and he declares his ardent love for her. In an aria, “**La mamma morta**,” now made famous in a moving scene from the movie *Philadelphia* as sung by Maria Callas, Maddalena tells of the burning of the family castle and the death of her mother. She was in despair until the voice of love bade her to take hope. She declares she is willing to accede to Gérard’s demands if it will save Chénier. The accused are led in to be judged, Chénier among them. Charges are read aloud against Chénier but he defends himself as a patriot and a man of honor in “**Si, fui soldato**.” (Yes, I Was a Soldier; the real Chénier was only in the military for a brief period in 1782-1783). Gérard rises and announces that all the accusations against Chénier are false. All are astonished but the court is nevertheless intent on Chénier’s execution.

Act 4 The Courtyard of the St. Lazare Prison Chénier is seen at a table, writing poetry. The jailer Schmidt admits Roucher, to whom Chénier, in another stunning tenor aria, reads his final poem, “**Come un bel dì di maggio**.” Here he compares the end of his life to a beautiful spring day. Roucher leaves and Mathieu is heard singing the **Marseillaise** in the distance. Gérard and Maddalena arrive. Maddalena bribes a jailer to allow her to take the place of one of the condemned women. Gérard leaves and she and Chénier sing a passionate duet of farewell, “**Vicino a te s’acqueta**.” Their names are called out (Maddalena answers to “Idia Legray”), each responding with “Son io!” and they are led off in the tumbril to the guillotine.

Meet the Composer Umberto Giordano

Umberto Giordano was born in Foggia on 28 August 1867 and died in Milan on 12 November 1948. Against the will of his parents, he was determined to study music and at the age of fifteen he was admitted to the Naples Conservatory. In 1889, while still a student, he entered a one-act opera entitled *Marina* in the competition held by the publishing firm of Edoardo Sonzogno. This was the competition won by Pietro Mascagni with *Cavalleria rusticana*, performed in 1890, making operatic history not only by launching Mascagni's career but establishing the so-called *verismo* movement in opera. Giordano's work came in sixth among seventy-three compositions, but it did earn Giordano an honorable mention and set his career in motion. Although *Marina* was not performed (and as far as we know never has been; it had a very poor libretto by Enrico Golisciani) it impressed one of the judges, Filippo Marchetti, himself an opera composer. Another judge, Amintore Galli, revealed that Giordano's opera was actually considered to be one of the strongest works entered in the competition ("strong, distinct, original, the affirmation of a very brilliant talent") but was ultimately rejected because of its poor libretto, "without dramatic life, without characters, without setting."

Sonzogno himself only became interested in Giordano after the rival firm, Casa Ricordi, published some of his instrumental music to favorable acclaim while Giordano was still a student at the Naples Conservatory. Sonzogno eventually offered Giordano a contract to compose a full-length opera, which turned out to be *Mala vita*, based on a story by the Neapolitan writer Salvatore Di Giacomo, with the libretto by the Neapolitan journalist Nicola Daspuro. As with Mascagni's *Cavalleria rusticana*, this work was of the *verismo* or realistic school, exploring the lower reaches of society. *Mala vita* was first heard in Rome on 21 February 1892, and although it was never accepted in Naples, it was a resounding success in Germany and Austria, especially in Vienna, where even the hard-to-please critic Eduard Hanslick praised it, calling it "vividly interesting new and bold." In German-speaking countries, it began a temporary trend for operas with a Neapolitan setting. The opera was ironically too shocking for Italy and Giordano revised it as *Il voto* five years later, to no avail.

Sonzogno had chosen the subject for *Mala vita* and continued to do so for Giordano's subsequent operas. His next work, *Regina Diaz*, based on the libretto Gaetano Donizetti had set decades earlier as *Maria di Rohan*, was premiered on 5 March 1893. The work was not successful and was withdrawn after the second performance, which caused the truculent Sonzogno to break with Giordano, informing him "I realize that in spite of *Mala vita*, you are completely lacking in musical talent. Art is not for you. I am withdrawing my support." Giordano considered abandoning operatic composition either to become an Army band master or a fencing instructor. The latter was what his father had very much wanted him to be, rather than a musician. Just at this time, however, Giordano became good friends with Alberto Franchetti, composer of *Cristoforo Colombo* in 1892. In a generous gesture, the independently wealthy Franchetti offered Giordano Illica's as yet unfinished libretto for *Andrea Chénier*. Also, Franchetti persuaded Sonzogno to resume sponsorship of Giordano. Sonzogno abruptly wrote to the composer: "I shall let you have the 300 lire a month [a mere pittance even then] for another year. But after that I will not listen to anyone, not even Franchetti. This is your last chance." Giordano, with much financial hardship, moved to Milan to be near Illica.

Aside from financial problems, the situation was also difficult because of Illica's onerous work load. He was writing a libretto for Franchetti based on Victorien Sardou's *La Tosca* (which of course was subsequently set by Puccini) and was also trying to finish, along with Giuseppe Giacosa, Puccini's *La Bohème*. In 1895, for example, Giordano was in Milan for most of the year while Illica was away on various projects. They had to work by correspondence, which is fortunate for scholars and opera lovers because it gives us a written record of their compositional process. From the composer to Illica: "It was a marvelous idea to put the 'Tribunal' into the third act. Thus the fourth act remains with just a single love duet, as the situation is so interesting. I am at work. . . . I am awaiting your revisions to complete the first act, which I cannot wait to have." Along the way, as with most opera composers, Giordano asked for a number of changes. It was Giordano, for example, who wanted to show Chénier as a poet and thus the *Improvviso* was added in act 1. The opera was finally completed on 27 January 1896. Just before the premiere, Giordano wrote to his librettist, "You will see that it will be a revelation. I have written a very beautiful opera, and I assure you I will have an enormous success." Indeed, it was a success, the only success of a disastrous season at La Scala, for Sonzogno had excluded any works published by his rival, Ricordi.

Andrea Chénier was Giordano's most popular opera during his lifetime and remains by far his most well-known a century later. Although later efforts, such as *Fedora* (1898, based on a play by Sardou) and *Siberia* (1903) were somewhat successful in their day, they have not withstood the test of time, even though occasionally *Fedora* has served as a vehicle for a great soprano such as Magda Olivero, Renata Tebaldi, and most recently Mirella Freni. After *Siberia* there followed a series of failures: *Marcella* (1907) and *Mese Mariano* (1910), which Julian Budden notes "anticipates to a surprising extent that of Puccini's *Suor Angelica*." In 1915 his opera featuring Napoleon as a character, *Madame Sans-Gêne* was premiered in New York with the stellar cast of Geraldine Farrar, Giovanni Zenatello, and Pasquale Amato, with Arturo Toscanini conducting. It was not a success. Giordano then had one final success, *La cena delle beffe* (1924), with a libretto by Sem Benelli, a gruesome story set in the Florence of Lorenzo the Magnificent. Some consider this to be Giordano's dramatic masterpiece. Giordano lived until 1948 but his final work for the stage, *Il re*, was composed twenty years before his death.

A Short History of Opera

The word *opera* is the plural form of the Latin word *opus*, which translates quite literally as *work*. The use of the plural form alludes to the plurality of art forms that combine to create an operatic performance. Today we accept the word *opera* as a reference to a theatrically based musical art form in which the drama is propelled by the sung declamation of text accompanied by a full symphony orchestra.

Opera as an art form can claim its origin with the inclusion of incidental music that was performed during the tragedies and comedies popular during ancient Greek times. The tradition of including music as an integral part of theatrical activities expanded in Roman times and continued throughout the Middle Ages. Surviving examples of liturgical dramas and vernacular plays from Medieval times show the use of music as an “insignificant” part of the action as do the vast mystery and morality plays of the 15th and 16th centuries. Traditional view holds that the first completely sung musical drama (or opera) developed as a result of discussions held in Florence in the 1570s by an informal academy known as the *Camerata* which led to the musical setting of Rinuccini’s drama, *Dafne*, by composer, Jacopo Peri in 1597.

The work of such early Italian masters as Giulio Caccini and Claudio Monteverdi led to the development of a through-composed musical entertainment comprised of *recitative* sections (*secco* and *accompagnato*) which revealed the plot of the drama; followed by *da capo arias* which provided the soloist an opportunity to develop the emotions of the character. The function of the *chorus* in these early works mirrored that of the character of the same name found in Greek drama. The new “form” was greeted favorably by the public and quickly became a popular entertainment.

Opera has flourished throughout the world as a vehicle for the expression of the full range of human emotions. Italians claim the art form as their own, retaining dominance in the field through the death of Giacomo Puccini in 1924. Rossini, Bellini, Donizetti, Verdi, and Leoncavallo developed the art form through clearly defined periods that produced *opera buffa*, *opera seria*, *bel canto*, and *verismo*. The Austrian Mozart also wrote operas in Italian and championed the *singspiel* (sing play), which combined the spoken word with music, a form also used by Beethoven in his only opera, *Fidelio*. Bizet (*Carmen*), Offenbach (*Les Contes d’Hoffmann*), Gounod (*Faust*), and Meyerbeer (*Les Huguenots*) led the adaptation by the French which ranged from the *opera comique* to the grand full-scale *tragedie lyrique*. German composers von Weber (*Der Freischütz*), Richard Strauss (*Ariadne auf Naxos*), and Wagner (*Der Ring des Nibelungen*) developed diverse forms such as *singspiel* to through-composed spectacles unified through the use of the *leitmotif*. The English *ballad opera*, Spanish *zarzuela* and Viennese *operetta* helped to establish opera as a form of entertainment which continues to enjoy great popularity throughout the world.

With the beginning of the 20th century, composers in America diverged from European traditions in order to focus on their own roots while exploring and developing the vast body of the country’s folk music and legends. Composers such as Aaron Copland, Douglas Moore, Carlisle Floyd, Howard Hanson, and Robert Ward have all crafted operas that have been presented throughout the world to great success. Today, composers John Adams, Philip Glass, and John Corigliano enjoy success both at home and abroad and are credited with the infusion of new life into an art form which continues to evolve even as it approaches its fifth century.

The Operatic Voice

A true (and brief) definition of the “operatic” voice is a difficult proposition. Many believe the voice is “born,” while just as many hold to the belief that the voice is “trained.” The truth lies somewhere between the two. Voices that can sustain the demands required by the operatic repertoire do have many things in common. First and foremost is a strong physical technique that allows the singer to sustain long phrases through the control of both the inhalation and exhalation of breath. Secondly, the voice (regardless of its size) must maintain a resonance in both the head (mouth, sinuses) and chest cavities. The Italian word “*squillo*” (squeal) is used to describe the brilliant tone required to penetrate the full symphony orchestra that accompanies the singers. Finally, all voices are defined by both the actual voice “type” and the selection of repertoire for which the voice is ideally suited.

Within the five major voice types (*Soprano, Mezzo-Soprano, Tenor, Baritone, Bass*) there is a further delineation into categories (*Coloratura, Lyric, Spinto, Dramatic*) which help to define each particular instrument. The *Coloratura* is the highest within each voice type whose extended upper range is complimented by extreme flexibility. The *Lyric* is the most common of the “types.” This instrument is recognized more for the exceptional beauty of its tone rather than its power or range. The *Spinto* is a voice which combines the beauty of a lyric with the weight and power of a *Dramatic*, which is the most “powerful” of the voices. The *Dramatic* instrument is characterized by the combination of both incredible volume and “steely” intensity.

While the definition presented in the preceding paragraph may seem clearly outlined, many voices combine qualities from each category, thus carving an unique niche in operatic history. Just as each person is different from the next, so is each voice. Throughout her career Maria Callas defied categorization as she performed and recorded roles associated with each category in the soprano voice type. Joan Sutherland as well can be heard in recordings of soprano roles as diverse as the coloratura Gilda in *Rigoletto* to the dramatic Turandot in *Turandot*. Below is a very brief outline of voice types and categories with roles usually associated with the individual voice type.

| | <i>Coloratura</i> | <i>Lyric</i> | <i>Spinto</i> | <i>Dramatic</i> |
|----------------------|---|---|--|--|
| Soprano | Norina (Don Pasquale) Gilda (Rigoletto) Lucia (Lucia di Lammermoor) | Liu (Turandot) Mimi (La Bohème) Pamina (Magic Flute) | Tosca (Tosca) Amelia (A Masked Ball) Leonora (Il Trovatore) | Turandot (Turandot) Norma (Norma) Elektra (Elektra) |
| Mezzo-Soprano | Rosina (Barber of Seville) Angelina (La Cenerentola) Dorabella (Così fan tutte) | Carmen (Carmen) Charlotte (Werther) Giulietta (Hoffmann) | Santuzza (Cavalleria) Adalgisa (Norma) The Composer (Ariadne auf Naxos) | Azucena (Il Trovatore) Ulrica (A Masked Ball) |
| Tenor | Count Almaviva (Barber of Seville) Don Ottavio (Don Giovanni) Ferrando (Così fan tutte) | Alfredo (La Traviata) Rodolfo (La Bohème) Tamino (Magic Flute) | Calaf (Turandot) Pollione (Norma) Cavaradossi (Tosca) | Dick Johnson (Fanciulla) Don Jose (Carmen) Otello (Otello) |
| Baritone | Figaro (Barber of Seville) Count Almavira (Le nozze di Figaro) Dr. Malatesta (Don Pasquale) | Marcello (La Bohème) Don Giovanni (Don Giovanni) Sharpless (Madama Butterfly) | Verdi Baritone Germont (La Traviata) Di Luna (Il Trovatore) Rigoletto (Rigoletto) | Scarpia (Tosca) Jochanaan (Salome) Jack Rance (Fanciulla) |
| Bass | Bartolo (Barber of Seville) Don Magnifico (Cenerentola) Dr. Dulcamara (Elixir of Love) | Leporello (Don Giovanni) Colline (La Bohème) Figaro (Marriage of Figaro) | Buffo Bass Don Pasquale (Don Pasquale) Don Alfonso (Così fan tutte) | Basso Cantate Oroveso (Norma) Timur (Turandot) Sarastro (Magic Flute) |

Opera Production

Opera is created by the combination of myriad art forms. First and foremost are the actors who portray characters by revealing their thoughts and emotions through the singing voice. The next very important component is a full symphony orchestra that accompanies the singing actors and actresses, helping them to portray the full range of emotions possible in the operatic format. The orchestra performs in an area in front of the singers called the orchestra pit while the singers perform on the open area called the stage. Wigs, costumes, sets and specialized lighting further enhance these performances, all of which are designed, created, and executed by a team of highly trained artisans.

The creation of an opera begins with a dramatic scenario crafted by a playwright or dramaturg who alone or with a librettist fashions the script or libretto that contains the words the artists will sing. Working in tandem, the composer and librettist team up to create a cohesive musical drama in which the music and words work together to express the emotions revealed in the story. Following the completion of their work, the composer and librettist entrust their new work to a conductor who with a team of assistants (repetiteurs) assumes responsibility for the musical preparation of the work. The conductor collaborates with a stage director (responsible for the visual component) in order to bring a performance of the new piece to life on the stage. The stage director and conductor form the creative spearhead for the new composition while assembling a design team which will take charge of the actual physical production.

Set designers, lighting designers, costume designers, wig and makeup designers and even choreographers must all be brought “on board” to participate in the creation of the new production. The set designer combines the skills of both an artist and an architect using “blueprint” plans to design the actual physical set which will reside on the stage, recreating the physical setting required by the storyline. These blueprints are turned over to a team of carpenters who are specially trained in the art of stage carpentry. Following the actual building of the set, painters following instructions from the set designers’ original plans paint the set. As the set is assembled on the stage, the lighting designer works with a team of electricians to throw light onto both the stage and the set in an atmospheric as well as practical way. Using specialized lighting instruments, colored gels and a state of the art computer, the designer along with the stage director create a “lighting plot” by writing “lighting cues” which are stored in the computer and used during the actual performance of the opera.

During this production period, the costume designer in consultation with the stage director has designed appropriate clothing for the singing actors and actresses to wear. These designs are fashioned into patterns and crafted by a team of highly skilled artisans called cutters, stitchers, and sewers. Each costume is specially made for each singer using his/her individual measurements. The wig and makeup designer, working with the costume designer, designs and creates wigs which will complement both the costume and the singer as well as represent historically accurate “period” fashions.

As the actual performance date approaches, rehearsals are held on the newly crafted set, combined with costumes, lights, and orchestra in order to ensure a cohesive performance that will be both dramatically and musically satisfying to the assembled audience.

Andrea Chénier Essay Questions

History

1. During France's Revolutionary War they were trying to overthrow a monarch to try and better their lifestyle. What other countries have had Revolutionary Wars and what were the reasons for those wars.
2. Why do you think the French people accepted Napoleon as their sole leader not once but twice? After all, hadn't they just fought a revolution to end the monarchy in France?
3. Analyze Napoleon's role in the French Revolution and his speedy rise to power. What were his talents?
4. Explain the debate between aristocrats and philosophers over monarchy and democracy during the revolutionary period in France.