



Millions of people like opera, but why? What is opera, and why do some people feel it is the greatest form of musical expression?

Opera began in the late 16th century in Italy, invented by a group of wealthy people in the city-state of Florence (now part of Italy), who wanted to reproduce ancient Greek dramas. Sixteenth-century Europe was experiencing a Renaissance (pronounced REH-nuh-zawnts), a time when artists, writers and architects became interested in the cultures of the past, especially the ancient Greeks, whose sculptures, architecture, and plays still exist. The texts of ancient Greek dramas made it clear that music was used in play productions hundreds of years earlier, but since there were no recordings then, the sound of the music remains a mystery. The 16th century Italians began to experiment by reading the plays aloud and adding a few musical chords as accompaniment.

This practice of reciting the text to accompaniment naturally led to singing the words, or recitativo (raychee-tuh-TEE-voh in Italian). In English we use a slightly different form of the word, recitative, and pronounce it "reh-sih-tuh-TEEV". Over time, the music grew more complex, and musical professionals became interested in this combination of music and drama.

The first "real" opera was probably a recitative work titled *Dafne* (DAHf-nay), written in 1594 or 1597 by Jacopo Peri (YAH-kaw-poh Perry)--over 400 years ago! Peri's opera is lost (there were no music publishers then), but we know it existed because so many people wrote comments about the performance of *Dafne*. They could not wait to tell others about this exciting new art form.

Soon expert Italian composers like Claudio Monteverdi (CLOUD-ee-oh Mawn-tuh-VER-dee) expanded the new form, adding showy and complicated songs called arias (AH-ree-uhs) that allowed the singers to express the emotions of their characters--and to show off their singing abilities. Later, other composers added chorus parts, dances and instrumental interludes, and opera continued to grow and change.

Opera was invented in Italy, but its popularity quickly spread to Germany, France, England, Russia, Spain, Portugal and other countries. In 1637, the city-state of Venice (now part of Italy) built the first theater to be used exclusively for opera productions. Soon Venice built 16 other opera theaters for that city alone! At first, great German and Austrian composers like Handel and Mozart wrote operas in Italian because opera was considered an Italian art form. Eventually that concept expanded and composers wrote opera in their own languages. By the late 19th century, musical giants like Giuseppe Verdi (jew-SEP-pay VAIR-dee) in Italy, and Richard Wagner (REE-card VAHG-ner) in Germany, were writing operas of tremendous length, with music and stories that demanded huge, expensive productions, mature singers with big voices, large choruses, large orchestras and complicated scenery and costumes.

European immigrants brought opera to the United States in the 18th and 19th centuries. The most famous opera theater in the United States, the Metropolitan Opera House, opened in New York City in 1883. Opera fans still love to attend operas at "The Met." Most of today's popular operas were written in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19th century by Mozart (MOTE-zart), Puccini (Poo-CHEE-nee), Verdi and Wagner. Modern composers like Gian Carlo Menotti, Samuel Barber, John Adams, and Dominick Argento write operas in English, but they are not as popular as the old "tried and true" operas.