

EIGHT OPERAS THAT CHANGED THE COURSE OF MUSIC

Wednesdays, October 17 to December 5, 2018 10:00 a.m. to 12:00 noon

Fairfield Senior's Centre, 80 Lothian Avenue, Etobicoke

www.learningunlimitedetobicoke.com

Coordinator and Presenter: Wayne Gooding

Course Overview. Over the course of more than 400 years, opera has been a vital stream in European musical life, providing a vivid and continuing reflection of the times as the different national schools and sensibilities evolved. While opera was just one mode of expression for some of the best-known composers, it was practically the only mode of expression for others. In this eight-week course, we explore some of the most influential works from the beginnings of the art form down to the 20th century, focusing on the Italian, French and German traditions. Each session will be built around works that had a radical impact and influence on contemporary practice and set new standards going forward. Using audio and video recordings, we will look and listen for the key factors that make these operas iconic turning points in their musical, historical and theatrical times.

October 17. Monteverdi: *Orfeo* (1607). Monteverdi's *Orfeo* wasn't the first opera written, but it is the earliest surviving opera still performed today. For practical purposes, this is the piece that started it all, the one that allows us to define the origins of operatic music.

October 24. Handel: *Giulio Cesare in Egitto/Julius Caesar in Egypt* (1724). Ironically, the German-born Georg Frideric Handel, working in the English capital, would become one of the leading composers of Italian opera in the 18th century. Though *Giulio Cesare* mystified some of its early audiences, the piece is regarded now as a masterpiece and a model of the serious style that dominated opera throughout the century.

October 30. Mozart: *Die Entführung aus dem Serail/The Abduction from the Seraglio* (1782). Through *Le nozze di Figaro*, *Die Zauberflöte* and *Don Giovanni*, Mozart remains one of the most popular names in opera today. But these later masterpieces evolved out of the composer's own earlier efforts to push the envelope on existing musical and theatrical conventions and traditions, especially in comic opera. *Entführung* was one of his boldest and most influential advances.

November 7. Meyerbeer: *Robert le Diable/Robert the Devil* (1831). French Grand Opera was a dominant form through much of the 19th-century, a form that reflected national tastes while also influencing non-French composers (including, for example, Verdi). Ironically, the German-born composer Giacomo Meyerbeer is regarded as the standard-bearer for Grand Opera, and *Robert le Diable* was his first great success.

November 14. Verdi: *Rigoletto* (1850). Giuseppe Verdi was already a renowned and established composer with 16 operas to his credit before he composed *Rigoletto*, *La traviata* and *Il trovatore*. It can be said that Verdi found his voice in these works, which were composed in quick succession over about 18 months. *Rigoletto* was the first and in many ways the boldest, fuelled by the composer's mastery of earlier operatic styles and his desire to strike out in new directions.

November 21. Wagner: *Tristan und Isolde* (1865). Wagner deliberately set out to revolutionize music and theatre in his "music dramas" and he remains a dominating, though still controversial, force in opera. In the Wagner canon, however, *Tristan* holds pride of place for its musical importance— "the most influential opera in all musical history," according to *The New Kobbé's Opera Book*.

November 28. Bizet: *Carmen* (1875). George Bizet's masterpiece is a prime example of a Parisian *opéra comique*, though there's little to laugh at in this murderous tale of jealousy and intense passion. Although based on a literary source, the composer was more interested in the nitty-gritty of contemporary street life, and in this enduring work succeeded in bringing a greater realism and psychological depth to the opera stage. In this respect, the work's influence would be felt far outside French opera.

December 5. Strauss: *Elektra* (1909). Richard Strauss had already scandalized the world in 1905 with his *Salome*, but the piece that raised the greater musical controversy came four years later with *Elektra*. In this, the composer pushed tonal music to its limits, opening the way to the experimentation with form and sound that subsequently characterized music through the 20th century (though, notably, not Strauss's own later music).

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