"An Afternoon at the Opera"
Program Notes by Colin Roust

North Shore Choral Society
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Leonardo Vinci (1696?–1730) began his career in Naples with a series of highly influential operas that helped establish the conventions of opera buffa, a new genre of Italian comic theatre. After composing his first serious opera in 1722, however, he was soon accepting commissions from throughout the Italian peninsula for tragedies. **Catone in Utica** (1728) is a typical example: set in Classical Antiquity during a Roman civil war (54–46 B.C.E.), the drama revolves around the political conflict between Caesar and his last remaining opponent, Cato, a senator representing Utica. Caught in the middle of the intrigue is Marzia, Cato's daughter, who is torn between duty to her family and her love affair with Caesar. The overture is a typical sinfonia for its time, composed in three sections with two faster, livelier sections surrounding a slower, more lyrical one.

Niccolò Jommelli (1714–1774) was among the early advocates for Italian operatic reforms in the 1750s and 1760s. Concerned that star singers had too much influence—to the point where a singer's wants trumped the opera's dramatic needs—Jommelli, Tomasso Traetta, Christoph Willibald Gluck, and the librettist Ranieri de' Calzabigi created a new genre of "reform operas." This genre combined the complexity of German instrumental music, the spectacle of French operas, and the tunefulness of Italian operas. **Armida abbandonata** (1770), for example, incorporates dynamic orchestral playing, ballet divertissements, choral numbers, and dazzling arias. "Odio, furor, dispetto" highlights the most spectacular moment in the opera. The sorceress Armida has fallen in love with her sworn enemy, the Crusader Rinaldo. She enchants him so they can spend their days together. But while she is off recruiting soldiers to defeat his leaderless army, he is rescued. Upon returning, Armida sings this rage aria, during which she calls down thunder and lightning to destroy her castle, then flies off in a dragon-drawn chariot.

Henry Purcell (1659–1695) set a seemingly unreachable standard for English composers. While he composed in all genres of his time, his vocal music was most successful. In **Dido and Aeneas** (1689), he set to music part of Virgil's Roman epic, The Aeneid. Following the Trojan War, the Greek hero Aeneas is charged by Zeus with founding Rome. But while crossing the Mediterranean, he is forced off-course to North Africa. There, Queen Dido is establishing the city of Carthage, at the behest of Hera. Through Venus's intervention, the two fall madly in love—imperiling both of their destinies as founders of their respective civilizations. In the end, the tale turns tragic when the lovers are forced to choose between each other and their duty to their people. Having just sent Aeneas away, Dido sings her famous aria. A chromatic "lament bass" repeats continually, though after the first section it never lines up with her melody the same way twice, musically portraying a broken woman who can no longer survive alone. She dies and, in "With Drooping Wings," cupids scatter roses on her tomb. Purcell's Dido is full of pathos and hers is perhaps the most noble of all operatic death scenes.

Born in Germany and trained in Italy, George Frideric Handel (1685–1759) moved to London in 1710 with his employer, George of Hanover, soon to become King George I. Though he composed all of his oratorios for British audiences, his career in England was defined primarily by opera seria, a genre of Italian serious opera of which Handel's are the most outstanding examples. **Alcina** (1735) represents Handel's efforts to expand the genre by incorporating French-style ballets and choruses. The "Chorus of Enchanted Islanders" welcomes us to a magical island ruled over by the sorceress Alcina. But somehow the music seems too happy, too bright, and too light. Alcina has created this illusion by seducing heroes and transforming them into flora, fauna, and other natural features. In the spectacular finale, the knight Ruggiero destroys the source of Alcina's magic, thereby banishing her, freeing all of the trapped heroes, and returning the Eden-like paradise to its natural state as a desert island.

In 1780, Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart (1756–1791) was desperately seeking a new position. Between 1777 and 1781, he was fired, rehired, and fired again by his patron, the Archbishop of Salzburg. With **Idomeneo** (1781), Mozart hoped to convince the Elector of Bavaria to hire him. Consequently, he threw everything he had into the opera. Like Jomelli's Armida, this is a reform opera, incorporating choral and ballet divertissements. The orchestration was novel for the era: for the first time in his operas, Mozart included two clarinets, four horns, and brass mutes. The harmonic language, use of recurring motives, and musico-dramatic structure even seem to foreshadow Wagner's music dramas. Set in the wake of the Trojan War, Idomeneo, the King of Crete is nearly shipwrecked on his way home. He saves himself by promising to sacrifice to Neptune the first person that he meets on land. Unfortunately, that victim turns out to be his son, Idamantes. To save him, Idomeneo asks Electra to take Idamantes to Athens with her. The "Voyagers' Chorus" is sung by Electra and the chorus as the two prepare to depart. But before they can embark, a giant sea monster blocks the harbor. In the finale, all is resolved when an oracle of Neptune demands that Idomeneo pay for his sins by turning the throne over to his son.

Mozart's **Don Giovanni** (1787) is a version of the Don Juan legend that represents the genre of dramma giocoso. This "tragicomic" genre mixes aristocratic opera seria characters with lower-class opera buffa characters, and features a combination of comic, sentimental, and tragic scenes. Act 2 opens with a series of comic misidentifications, since Don Giovanni has convinced his servant Leporello to switch clothes with him. Leporello is chased by a gang of peasants who confuse him for his master. In "Per queste tue manine," added for the performances in Vienna, Leporello is captured and tied to a tree by Zerlina, who was seduced by Giovanni in the midst of her Act 1 wedding celebrations. In the end, Leporello manages to escape, only to rejoin his master in a cemetery, where they are confronted by the ghost of the Commendatore, who Giovanni murdered in the first scene of the opera. In the dramatic finale, Giovanni is unrepentant for his sins and the Commendatore's ghost drags him to Hell.

Georg Philipp Telemann (1681–1767) was, during his lifetime, the most celebrated composer in Germany—far more so than the Leipzig church musician Johann Sebastian Bach. Telemann's fame relied on his prolific output that, unlike Bach's, explored all of the major genres of the day. While he claimed to have composed nearly 60 operas, only nine survive today. **Pimpinone** (1725) is an intermezzo, a light genre performed during the intermissions of an opera seria. Typically for the genre, it draws on stock commedia dell'arte characters and situations. Vespetta (whose name means "little wasp") is a crafty chambermaid who tricks the wealthy but foolish Pimpinone into first hiring her, then marrying her. In the final scene, she demands respect and the freedom to go where she wants. He refuses and, in "Wanton Wildcat," both try to follow through on promises of physical violence. When Pimpinone threatens divorce, Vespetta gains control by showing him the marriage contract, in which he has unwittingly signed away his money in the event of a divorce.

Mozart's **The Magic Flute** (1791) is a Singspiel, a popular genre that combined spoken dialogues with tuneful songs (similar to Broadway musicals). While some historians have argued that the opera is an allegory about Freemasonry, it actually trades on common tropes and symbols from supernatural and fairy tale operas in 1780s and 1790s Vienna. In the introductory scene, a serpent chases the Javanese prince Tamino. As our hero runs in fear, he frantically cries to the gods for help and then faints. In the "Three Ladies Trio," servants of the Queen of the Night arrive and kill the monster. Turning to the unconscious hero, they admire his handsomeness and argue over who will stay with Tamino while the others tell the Queen about him. In the end, mutual mistrust prevails and all three go to the Queen. Shortly afterward, Tamino is awakened by the manly but dimwitted birdcatcher, Papageno, who he takes as his savior.

No other team has dominated the genre of operetta as have librettist Sir William Gilbert (1836–1911) and composer Sir Arthur Sullivan (1842–1900). Their thirteen "Savoy operas" both guaranteed the success of the newly built Savoy Theatre and established a new genre of farcical, but sentimental light opera. **Pirates of Penzance** (1879) focuses on the character of Frederic, a 21-year-old who has just completed his apprenticeship with a band of pirates. He has fallen in love with Mabel, one of Major-General Stanley's daughters. But one night, the pirates kidnap all of the daughters with the intent of marrying them. Stanley is awakened by the noise and introduces himself with his famous patter song, "I Am the Very Model of a Modern Major-General." To protect his daughters from the pirates, Stanley announces that he was an orphan and is afraid of dying alone. The soft-hearted pirates—orphans themselves—take pity on him and release the girls. Later, the honorable Stanley is unable to sleep because he lied about being an orphan. His daughters gather around and console him with "Oh Dry the Glist'ning Tear."

In the mid-nineteenth century, Giuseppe Verdi (1813–1901) set a new standard for Italian opera. However, when he composed **Nabucco** (1842), he was just another unknown composer. But the overwhelming response to the opera marked this as Verdi's first mature work and his first major success. Unusually for Verdi, the chorus is more prominent than any of the roles, and no moment is more poignant than "Va pensiero." Nabucco and the Babylonians have conquered Jerusalem, destroyed the Temple of Solomon, and enslaved the Hebrews. Here the Hebrew chorus sings a nostalgic lament for their homeland. Six years later, republicans staged a revolution that ultimately unified the Italian peninsula. This chorus became a revolutionary anthem, understood as lamenting the abuses of unchecked aristocrats, and Verdi's name itself became a rallying cry—"Viva VERDI!" (a convenient acronym for "Vittorio Emmanule, Re D'Italia," calling for the enlightened King of Sardinia, Victor Emmanuel, to become the King of Italy). The opera's potent message encouraged voters to elect Verdi as one of the first class of senators in the Italian Parliament in 1861.

The 1850s saw new developments in Verdi's operas, with more flexible treatments of form and with works driven more by the drama than by the voices (which is not to say that the arias and choruses are any less striking!). **Il Trovatore** ("The Troubador," 1853) was originally conceived as a sequel to his Rigoletto (1851). Like the earlier opera, the central character is unconventional: but where Rigoletto was a hunchbacked court jester, Azucena is a gypsy torn between vengeance against the Count, who burned her mother at the stake, and love for her son, who is in love with the same woman as the Count. Act 2 opens in a gypsy camp as the gypsies sing the "Anvil Chorus" to celebrate their return to work. The number also functions to introduce Azucena, the zingarella ("pretty gypsy woman") who brightens their day. Unfortunately, rather than being bright and cheerful, today she sings an emotionally charged vengeance aria as she recalls her mother's execution.

Carmen (1875), by Georges Bizet (1838–1875), also features an unconventional gypsy. Defying nineteenth-century gender roles, Carmen is a bold and brash woman who drinks, smokes, and uses sex to get her way. She is exotic, seductive, and dangerous. Her victim this time is Don José, a corporal engaged to the more chastely conventional Micaëla. As José takes his guard post, the workday in the local cigarette factory begins. The girls who work there pass by a crowd of onlookers, while Carmen separates herself from the rest and sings the famously sensual "Habanera." Afterward, she throws a rose at José's feet and once he picks it up, he is caught in her trap. Over the ensuing acts, José's life spirals ever downward as he tries to win Carmen's love in increasingly desperate fashion. Ultimately, he sacrifices his job, his fiancée, and his morality. Having become a bandit, José murders Carmen in a jealous rage in the opera's final scene.

Like The Magic Flute, **Der Freischütz** ("The Freeshooter," 1821) by Carl Maria von Weber (1786–1826) is a supernatural Singspiel. Rather than entering a world of fairy tale magic, however, we enter one of Gothic horror. This German ghost story focuses on the woodsmen Max and Caspar. Because hunting is an essential part of their livelihood, a man is judged by his shooting ability. Caspar is unbeatable, thanks to a deal he made with Samiel, the "Black Huntsman" (that is, the Devil). Max, however, is a terrible shot and faces a shooting trial to win the beautiful Agathe's hand in marriage. Caspar convinces Max to use magic bullets; but secretly, he hopes to trade Agathe's soul for his own, asking Samiel to claim her with the final bullet. The opera's highlight is the spectacular Act 2 finale, a melodrama set in the Wolf's Glen, the mythical entrance to Hell. There, Caspar casts the bullets in a diabolic ritual. In Act 3, the "Huntsman's Chorus" prepares Max's climactic shooting trial as the ebullient woodsmen arrive for the festivities. Meanwhile, we wait in anticipation to see if Caspar's desperate, evil plan will work.

Gaetano Donizetti (1797–1848) was one of the most successful and influential Italian composers in the generation between Rossini and Verdi. During his final decade, Donizetti's works accounted for a quarter of all operas performed in Italy. As with so many comic operas, **The Elixir of Love** (1832) is about a love triangle. The simple-minded peasant Nemorino and the buffoonish sergeant Belcore are both in love with the wealthy Adina. When the snake-oil salesman Dr. Dulcamara rolls into town, Nemorino purchases the "Elixir of Isolde," which will make him—like Tristan—irresistible to the woman he loves. However, shortly after he drinks the supposed potion, Adina accepts Belcore's marriage proposal. Desperate, the poor Nemorino joins the army to earn a signing bonus that he uses to purchase a stronger potion from Dulcamara. In "Quanto amore," Dulcamara brags to Adina about how much he has sold to Nemorino in his quest for some unnamed woman. Adina realizes that she is the woman and that Nemorino's love is indeed sincere, so she decides to break things off with Belcore and give herself to Nemorino instead. The happy ending is complete when Nemorino's rich uncle dies and names the peasant as his sole heir. The quack Dulcamara now drives off, boasting that his elixir can make people both rich and in love.

In the 1850s and 1860s, Jacques Offenbach (1819–1880) developed the genre of opéras bouffes, which was the basis of Gilbert and Sullivan's Savoy operas. However, he also composed several serious operas. The most famous of these, **The Tales of Hoffmann** (1881), is rooted in German romanticism. The title character is E.T.A. Hoffmann, a poet, critic, and composer whose work helped define the romantic aesthetic. In Offenbach's opera, a drunken Hoffmann regales a group of students in a bar with tales of his lovers—all of whom bear an uncanny resemblance to his current lover, Stella. The final tale is set in Venice and opens with the "Barcarolle," sung in a gondola by the Hoffmann's lover, the courtesan Giulietta, and his friend Nicklausse (a "pants" role for mezzo-soprano) as they arrive in a gondola at an orgy. Giulietta taunts Hoffmann by introducing him to another of her lovers. From there, things just get worse: Giulietta captures Hoffmann's reflection in a mirror, he kills his rival in a duel, and upon returning to Giulietta, he finds her in the arms of yet another man.

The operatic setting of Voltaire's **Candide** (1956) is the most ambitious theatrical work composed by Leonard Bernstein (1918–1990). Composed amidst the rising tensions of the Cold War, this coming-of-age tale focuses on Candide and Cunegonde's realization that the world is a more complex and difficult place than they had been taught by the supremely optimistic Dr. Pangloss. Throughout the operetta, a series of disasters force Pangloss and the children to wander throughout the world. One of the highlights is Cunegonde's aria "Glitter and Be Gay," an over-the-top parody of nineteenth-century jewel songs. Their homeland conquered, Cunegonde is now in Paris living as the mistress of both Don Issachar and the Cardinal Archbishop. Vainly materialistic, Cunegonde laments her tragic life, but takes solace in her jewels—until Candide murders both of her suitors. In the end, Candide and Cunegonde find themselves back at home in Westphalia. They abandon their naïve, worldview and in the opera's glorious finale they vow to build a good life from honest, hard work. Taking responsibility for the first time, Candide and Cunegonde discover that the meaning of life is found not in the world around them, but rather in their own actions.