The Evolution of the Orchestra

Music
Level: 14-18 years old
A study of the growth of the opera orchestra

This unit of work compares and contrasts the instrumentation and orchestration techniques and traditions in five operas. Each opera comes from a specific period in music, and illustrates the developing instrumentation and use of the opera orchestra. It concludes with a short test to assess learning, listening skills and analytic thinking.

This unit uses videos available for free on OperaVision. Links to the individual videos can be found below.

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Music

XERXES (SERSE)
Music by Handel
Libretto by Anon., based on an earlier libretto by Silvio Stampiglia
Baroque-period opera first performed in London in 1738
Excerpt 1: ‘Ah! Chi voler fiora’

Bonus video 1: An introduction to period instruments

THE MARRIAGE OF FIGARO (LE NOZZE DI FIGARO)
Music by Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart
Libretto by Lorenzo Da Ponte, based on a play by Pierre Beaumarchais
Classical-period comic opera first performed in Vienna in 1786
Excerpt 2: ‘Non so più cosa son, cosa faccio’
MANRU
Music by Ignacy Jan Paderewski
Libretto by Alfred Nossig, based on a novel by Józef Ignacy Kraszewski
Late Romantic-period music drama-style opera first performed in Dresden in 1901
Excerpt 3: Act I Finale
Bonus video 2: Interview with Grzegorz Nowak

AUTUMN SONATA (HÖSTSONATEN)
Music by Sebastian Fagerlund
Libretto by Gunilla Hemming, based on a screenplay by Ingmar Bergman
Contemporary opera first performed in Helsinki in 2017
Excerpt 4: Trailer

LA BOHÈME
Music by Giacomo Puccini
Libretto by Luigi Illica and Giuseppe Giacosa, based on a novel by Henri Murger
Late Romantic-period opera first performed in Turin in 1896
Excerpt 5: ‘O Mimi, tu più non torni’
XERXES

This is a fine example of Baroque Opera. The orchestra is divided into two main groups - continuo (harpsicord and cello) and orchestra. The continuo group plays consistently throughout the accompanying recitative and as part of the orchestra in all other pieces; the orchestra is reserved to accompany arias and chorus scenes and to play musical interludes and overtures.

**Typical Baroque instrumentation:** a small ensemble of baroque (not modern) instruments with 7 violins, 3 violas, 2 cellos and basses, and some woodwind such as an oboe and wooden flute or recorder.

THE MARRIAGE OF FIGARO

This opera comes thirty years after Handel’s *Xerxes* and shows the development of the orchestra, but retains the continuo and the recitative secco, which is prominent as a vehicle for delivering large amounts of the story in the Baroque opera. More exploration of orchestral colour is evident with the woodwind family acting more independently as a section. Horns are also significant in creating the louder tutti passages, adding to the fullness of the orchestral sound.

**Typical Classical instrumentation:** 2 flutes, 2 oboes, 2 clarinets, 2 bassoons, 2 horns, 2 timpani, strings and continuo.

MANRU

Paderewski’s only opera was composed at a time of Nationalism, when composers were celebrating their cultural roots by referencing some traditional music in the score. It exemplifies the highpoint of the Romantic orchestra in Poland at the end of the 19th Century. The orchestra has 70-80 players, with full wind, string and brass sections. There is an increasing amount of percussion contributing a rich variety of timbre for the composer’s use. There is no longer a continuo part and the different
instruments are now playing more individually, requiring a higher level of virtuosity from all players. The woodwind section includes instruments like piccolo, and cor anglais, which have occasional solo lines. Melodic percussion such as glockenspiel is also prominent. However the strings continue to have a dominant role, which is highly coloured by woodwind, brass and percussion instruments.

In this score, the orchestral part is almost another character, playing leitmotifs and adding to the story line in a way that goes beyond supporting the vocal lines of previous eras. Because of this, the score is considered symphonic in style.

**Typical Late Romantic instrumentation:** 3 flutes, 3 oboes, 3 clarinets, 3 bassoons, 4 horns, 3 trumpets, 3 trombones, tuba, timpani plus 3 percussionists, harp and strings. *The folk aspects are portrayed with a solo violin (played on stage by the concert master) and dulcimer.*

**AUTUMN SONATA**

This modern score has almost the same instrumentation as Manru, however the way the instruments are used – or the orchestration techniques – show further development. The writing is virtuosic and all instruments have equal importance in the orchestra, without evidence of the traditional instrument roles and hierarchy. Here, the instrumental sounds are chosen for the sounds created by the combination of colours. The composer is also free to exploit the register, range and dynamic possibilities of each instrument. The opera was inspired by a film, which may have also inspired the composer to write his score in a cinematic way.

*The instrumentation is almost the same as the Paderewski but with the addition of a piano. Instruments also feature on the stage integrated into the storyline.*

**LA BOHÈME**

La bohème contrasts with the other operas in the way in which the orchestra is utilised in the performance of an opera. Premiering in 1896, it features a typical Romantic period orchestra, however in this excerpt the orchestra is sitting on the stage, as part of the action. Additional speaking parts have been added by the director to which solo instruments provide musical accompaniment derived from excerpts of the original score.
Teaching Activities

**Activity 1: Xerxes – ‘Ah! Chi voler fiora’**

1. Explain the difference between a recitative and an aria in an opera.

2. Watch Excerpt 1: ‘Ah! Chi voler fiora’ and recognise which part is the recitative and which the aria.

3. Ask the students to identify the instruments playing in each section.

4. Can they detect any rules of use of the instruments that the composer might be following? (E.g. the melody in the higher instruments; the orchestra working as a unit with lower instruments strictly accompanying; wind instruments not as prominent as strings and used to double melodic lines in the aria.) The main function of the orchestra is to accompany and support the vocal lines.

5. In the excerpt you see, what do you notice or hear about the instruments that make them slightly different from modern ones? (E.g. the strings have no chin rest; the woodwind sound is like a recorder rather than a modern flute.)

6. Watch Bonus video 1: An introduction to period instruments for an introduction to the Baroque oboe and theorbo.

**Activity 2: The Marriage of Figaro – ‘Non so più cosa son, cosa faccio’**

*This opera demonstrates the bridge between the continuo-driven Baroque style and the liberation and exploration of the orchestra during the Romantic period.*

1. Watch Excerpt 2: ‘Non so più cosa son, cosa faccio’ and identify which string, woodwind, brass and percussion instruments are used. (Save the keyboard instrument identification until the next question.)

2. Is there any other instrument playing? How is it used in the excerpt?

3. In the Baroque opera excerpt, the strings played constantly and were the most prominent instrument in the ensemble. Is this the case here?

4. What are the musical advantages of using the families of the orchestra as independent sections when writing a piece of music?
Activity 3: Manru – Act I Finale

The sound of this orchestra is much richer and denser than the music of Handel and Mozart.

1. Watch Excerpt 3: Act I Finale and identify what instruments have been included in the orchestra since the time of Mozart.

2. This excerpt is the first in which the percussion section can be heard. Comment on the different roles of the percussion instruments in this excerpt.

3. The orchestral role is quite different in this opera. Watch Bonus video 2: Interview with Grzegorz Nowak to find out why.

4. The work is an example of Nationalism in music. What does this mean and what nationalistic features have you discovered in the two video excerpts?

Activity 4: Autumn Sonata – Trailer

This is an example of a recent contemporary opera, demonstrating many characteristics of contemporary music, especially in the composer’s treatment of pitch (melody and harmony), tonality, rhythmic techniques and timbre.

1. After watching Excerpt 4: Trailer once, listen to the score a number of times and ask the students to identify the prominent instruments and what the part of the instrument sounds like.

2. In the earlier excerpts, it was possible to identify conventions in the way that a composer used the orchestra. Is this the case now? Explain how you have come to this conclusion.
Assessment Task

*Excerpt 5: La bohème – ‘O Mimi, tu più non torni’*

Watch *Excerpt 5: ‘O Mimi, tu più non torni’* and ask each student to identify and write down:

a) the musical period of the composition, giving reasons for their choice;

b) the instrumentation and orchestration techniques used;

c) what is unusual about the orchestra’s role in the storytelling in this excerpt;

d) which of the previous opera excerpts in this unit that this one most similar to;

e) conclusions that can be drawn about the role of the orchestra in an opera.