

Chapter 9: Italian Opera Seria and the Concerto Style: 1650–1750

I. Opera

A. Introduction

1. Italian librettist Metastasio was crucial in establishing the conventions of serious opera, called opera seria.
 - a) Da capo aria form (ABA) was usual.
2. Italian instrumental music included sonatas by Corelli of two types: *sonata da chiesa* and *sonata da camera*.
3. Italy was still a group of individual states in the seventeenth century.

II. Opera seria

A. Alessandro Scarlatti wrote 114 operas, many serenatas (miniature operas), and over 800 cantatas in a style associated with Naples.

1. Scarlatti laid the foundation for *opera seria*.
2. Due to space concerns, we will examine a cantata, *Andate, o miei sospiri*, which operates along lines very similar to an opera.
3. Scarlatti also standardized the *sinfonia*.
 - a) The final piece (dance) was in binary form, with the A section ending on the dominant.
4. Scarlatti's harmonic schemes (as seen in the da capo aria and binary form) establish a key and provide contrast by moving out of it, followed by a sense of closure in returning to the first key.

B. Reforming opera

1. Around 1700, a group of academicians wished to restore opera to its original purity, taking out the comic and bawdy scenes and elevating the subject matter.

C. Metastasio and the role of the librettist

1. Metastasio was the premier librettist of the eighteenth century.
2. He set the number of main roles at six, two pairs and a remainder.
3. At the top were the “primo uomo” and “prima donna,” the latter a term still in use today.
4. He also regularized the types of arias.
5. Metastasio saw the aria as a reflective piece, not soliloquy.

D. The power of the opera singers

1. Metastasio's most frequently used libretto is *Artaserse*.
2. Opera seria was sung in Italian, all over Europe.
 - a) The singers were usually Italian virtuosos.
 - b) They interpolated much into operas, including their own favorite pieces.
3. The greatest eighteenth-century singer was Farinelli (Carlo Broschi, 1705–82), a castrato.
 - a) The arias Farinelli sang gave him the opportunity to show off various aspects of his voice, including elaborate ornamentation, long phrases, etc.
 - (1) The crucial point for such display was the *cadenza*.
 - b) Not everyone admired such fireworks.

4. Opera seria descended from court practices, hailing nobility and royalty, absolutism
 - a) Star singers were the product of commercial theater; many did not read music well but improvised, seducing listeners in the process.
 - b) Social spaces differed too: the “home” was not a place for socializing so much as the opera box.

III. Corelli and the development of the concerto

- A. A virtuoso violinist, the composer Arcangelo Corelli did not write vocal music.
 1. He was the first composer to achieve “great” status for his instrumental works.
 2. He standardized genres and practices that led to instrumental music rising in esteem throughout Europe.
 3. With Corelli we see the creation of harmonically controlled form.
 - a) The new tonal system allowed composers to provide a predictable path by which the music should go, only to thwart it when the audience did not expect it.
 4. Corelli’s career parallels that of Scarlatti, except the former was in Rome.
 5. He led orchestras and created music for them.
 - a) *Sonata da chiesa*
 - (1) “Trio sonata”
 - b) Concerto grosso
 - c) *Sonata da camera*
 6. The second movement of Op. 3, No. 11 (*sonata da chiesa*), illustrates Corelli’s use of tonality.
 - a) The emphasis on tonic/dominant statements of the main theme establishes their relationship.
 - b) The use of sequences through the cycle of fifths builds on these expectations.
 - c) The drive inherent in this process yields a “dynamically unfolding form-generating process.”
 - d) These processes engage the mind of the listener differently from previous instrumental works; the end result is an aggressive music that does not allow for a passive experience.

IV. Vivaldi’s five hundred

- A. In northern Italy, a style of instrumental writing evolved that featured an overall form of fast–slow–fast.
- B. Composing for a girls’ orphanage, Vivaldi successfully built the music program.
 1. A series of Sunday concerts showcased the ensembles and Vivaldi.
 2. He wrote over five hundred concertos, three quarters of which are for solo instrument and orchestra. Half of these are for violin, which was his instrument.
 3. Vivaldi’s concertos follow formulas, not surprising due to the sheer number that have survived.
 - a) Many have multiple soloists, known as the concertino group, which alternate with the full ensemble, known as the *ripieno*.

4. The first movement generally alternates a *ritornello* with episodes for the soloist.
5. Remaining movements follow styles seen in opera.
6. The effects of Vivaldi's concertos must have been dazzling—shocking the audience and engaging them to respond.

C. Music imitating nature: Vivaldi's *The Four Seasons*

1. Vivaldi's earliest publication of concertos shows the flamboyant young composer at his most extravagant.
2. In 1725 he published *The Four Seasons*.
 - a) These works were popular in France, especially "Spring."
 - b) The work carries a corresponding sonnet that celebrates spring.
 - c) The storm, birds, brook, etc., are all pictured in the music.
3. In Vivaldi's concertos, we can find elements of old style (imitation, polyphony, madrigalisms) alongside the most up-to-date innovations (instrumental structures, tonality, new ways of playing the violin).