

We invite you to a  
**Night at the Opera**

**Orchestra dell'Arte**

**St George's Hall Monday 18 March 2024**

**Concert starts at 7.30pm**

**Notes by Edward Peak, conductor, Orchestra dell'Arte**

So just what is an opera – is it the same thing as *Phantom* or *Les Mis*?

This is a question that has been searching for a definitive answer for decades. When George Gershwin's wonderful *Porgy and Bess* was premiered in Boston in 1935 it was controversially referred to as an opera. Before *Porgy*, Gershwin had produced much music based on the jazz idiom and the public and critics were not prepared to believe that he could write a 'proper' opera.

Opera is a form of theatrical performance in which a mixture of music, the words (the *libretto*) and theatrical staging make up the whole event. But isn't this exactly the same as *Phantom* or *Les Mis*?

There have been many attempts to explain the differences between the two forms, but perhaps a better thing would be to describe the *similarities*. One way of telling them apart has been to say that musicals have dialogue as well as music, but operas don't.

Sadly, this is just not always the case. Many operas have stretches of dialogue, for instance Bizet's *Carmen*, Richard Strauss's *Ariadne auf Naxos* and Beethoven's *Fidelio*. Conversely, *Phantom of the Opera* and *Les Miserables* have little or no dialogue. There clearly has to be a better definition.

Sometimes the use of amplification by the singers is sometimes cited as being the hallmark of a musical. In the same way as in those cases of dialogue vs no dialogue, the use of microphones doesn't stand up to close scrutiny. In the early days of musical theatre, there were no microphones, and performers had to have very powerful voices to be heard over a large orchestra.

Another attempt to make the differences clearer is to affirm that in opera the music comes first, whereas in musicals the libretto is at the front of the creative process. Again, there are many examples of operas composed to an existing set of words and vice versa for musicals.

One idea has been to ask someone that is fond of *La Boheme* and *Magic Flute* to name ten other similar works. They will usually name ten other operas. A fan of musical theatre will usually name ten musical shows.

Inevitably, there are quite a number of amusing attempts to explain the differences between the two art forms. A favourite one is that opera has singers trying to act, and musicals have actors trying to sing.

There have even been operas which try to dissect just what is the most important element in such works. This was investigated in *Capriccio*, the final opera by Richard Strauss. Subtitled, *A Conversation Piece*, the characters discuss which is the most important, the words or the music. This question is dramatised in the story by a countess who is torn between two suitors, one a musician and the other a poet. Between them they write an opera. The final answer to the question is never revealed. One of the best answers to that question I have heard is to ask, on leaving the theatre, does one hum the tunes or recite the words.

Hopefully, after the concert at St George's Hall on 18 March, all of the audience members will leave the glorious surroundings of the Concert Room with the melodies that they have heard still resonating in their heads.

The evening gets off to a rousing start with the overture to Giuseppe Verdi's *Forza del Destino*. First performed in St Petersburg in 1862, *Forza* has remained hugely popular with audiences. Following the initial performances, Verdi made extensive revisions, including adding a new overture, the one that is now always played.

The title can be translated as the *Power of Fate*, and Verdi cleverly gives us a hint of things to come right at the start when we hear three stentorian notes played by the brass instruments – Fate knocking on the door, perhaps. This is followed by a surging theme from the strings which builds and builds. A rhythmically-altered version of the famous *Va Pensiero* (to be heard later in the concert) appears, leading to a splendid blaze of glory on the final run to the finishing line.

We then welcome our friends from two choral societies who will be joining us to provide our opera chorus for the evening, *Merseywave* and the *Runcorn Community Chorus*. I have enjoyed rehearsing with these very keen groups over the previous weeks and I know they will add their own blend of enthusiasm to the evening.

They start off their contributions with the rousing Anvil Chorus from Verdi's opera *Il Trovatore*. While the gypsy workers toil away at their work, we hear them tell us about their three favourite things, hard work, good wine and lovely women.

We are delighted once again to welcome *Heather Heighway* and *Joseph Buckmaster* to the concert. Their first contribution to the evening will be the entrancing finale to Act 1 of Puccini's *La Boheme*. Set in the bare surroundings of their garret house in Paris in 1900, Rodolfo, a penniless writer meets Mimi, a seamstress. An instant love blooms for them both, and they tell us about their feelings, little knowing that great sadness awaits in the future.

The orchestra will delight us all with a sparkling version of the Polonaise, a vigorous dance from the opera *Eugene Onegin* by Tchaikovsky.

The chorus and soloists appear again to bring the first half to a rousing climax with two items about the delights of wine and especially that 'king of wines' – Champagne.

Richard Wagner wrote an opera about a legendary ghost ship that was doomed to sail the seven seas until its captain finds true love. The orchestra get the second half of the concert off to a thrilling start with the overture from *Flying Dutchman*. We hear the swirling seas and screaming wind in the rigging, but here are moments of reflection and calm before the elements take over again.

No opera programme would be complete without the music of Giuseppe Verdi and Giacomo Puccini, and once again we will hear two of Puccini's most famous arias, one from his only comic opera *Gianni Schicchi* and the other from the very un-comic *Tosca*.

There is a rarity which we are all very much looking to perform. The genius composer *Erich Korngold* wrote the opera *Die Tote Stadt* when he was just 23. This was already his third opera, and such was the success of his previous works that there was a fierce rivalry between several opera houses for the rights to stage the premiere of this latest work.

In the end a unique double premiere was arranged, with performances in Hamburg and Cologne.

For this performance, instead of being sung, we feature two of our string principals in this special version of *Marietta's Lied*.

Our star soloists will join us again for a lively pair of arias before we move to the final offering, once again, from Giuseppe Verdi. Set in Egypt, his opera *Aïda* tells the tragic story of the doomed love between Radames and Aïda. However, our concert will finish in happier mood with the music taken from the Triumphal Scene in Act II. Written to celebrate the opening of the opera house in Cairo, *Aïda* has become a staple repertoire item of all major opera houses.

We will look forward to welcoming you again to our next concert. The main work will be the monumental third piano concerto by Rachmaninov with *Peter Donohoe* as our guest soloist. The first half of the concert will be a single work, Rimsky-Korsakov's tale of the 1001 Arabian Nights, *Scheherazade*.

Join us for this at the Tung Auditorium on Sunday 21 April. The concert starts at 3pm. Tickets from eventbrite. More information from [dellarte.co.uk](http://dellarte.co.uk)