Chapter 17

Dramatic and Choral Music
Opera

- Italy in the Early 19th Century: Rossini
  - Gioacchino Rossini (1792-1868) enjoyed unquestioned preeminence in world of opera
  - helped establish *bel canto* style (beautiful singing)
    - Italian opera style
    - lyrical melodies
    - legato phrasing
    - seemingly effortless vocal technique
  - *Il Barbiere di Siviglia* (The Barber of Seville, 1816), integrates traditions of opera buffa into style of bel canto
Opera

- Rossini *Il Barbiere di Siviglia* (1816)
  - most popular of Rossini’s operas
  - integrates opera buffa and bel canto styles
  - “Una voce poco fa” (A voice a short while ago)
    - aria exhibits bel canto style
    - two part aria slow opening plus lively conclusion (cabaletta)
Opera

• Italy at midcentury: Verdi
  - Giuseppe Verdi (1813-1901) was leading composer of Italian opera in middle of 19th century
  - devoted increasing attention to issues of dramatic integrity
  - key characteristics of new approach:
    • dramatic realism
    • use of scena (scene) as unit of dramatic organization
    • dramatically justified virtuosity
Opera

• Italy at midcentury: Verdi
  - dramatic realism - committed to idea of realism on stage and sought librettos of high literary quality
  - large units of dramatic organization - extended spans of music and drama uninterrupted by scenery changes or obvious opportunities for applause
  - dramatically justified virtuosity - arias never interrupt flow of drama and always reflect character of singer
Opera and Politics

• influence of opera extended beyond music into realm of social and political expression

• opera house was meeting place for socialites and businesspeople and a forum for often symbolic dramatization of political and moral ideas
Verdi

When preparing a new opera for production, Verdi’s attention to detail was legendary. He coached singers, kept or had made copious notes on staging and scenery, and devoted great care to historical detail.
Opera

- Verdi *Rigoletto*
  - shows his new approach to opera
  - dramatic realism
  - larger dramatic units
  - virtuosity when dramatically justified
Opera

- France: Grand Opéra and Opéra Comique
  - French opera divides into two broad categories, each with its own tradition
  - *grand opéra*
    - emphasized story lies from historical subjects and typically featured lavish stage designs, ballets, and large choral numbers; long duration (usually 5 acts), sung in French,
    - composers from across Continent (Rossini, Meyerbeer)
  - *opéra comique*
    - not always comic, allowed for spoken dialogue, less emphasis on crowd scenes, ballet and stage design
    - composers: Gounod, Bizet, Massenet
Opera

- Germany: Weber to Wagner
  - Carl Maria von Weber (1786-1826) caused a sensation in 1821 with *Der Freischütz*
  - electrifying combination of music and special effects
  - folklike arias, choruses, dance scenes
  - inspired next generation of German composers to write stage works in native tongue
Opera

• Germany: Weber to Wagner
  - Richard Wagner (1813-1883) - most important of Weber’s successors
  - committed to making opera more dramatically realistic
  - approach differed radically from that of any other figure in history of opera: integrated drama and music in way that was to the advantage of both
• The elements of Wagnerian Music Drama
  - Wagner summarized his approach with term - Gesamtkunstwerk (Total Artwork)
  - drama acted on stage could be treated as visible and verbal manifestation of drama acted by instruments of orchestra
  - follow course of music drama through music alone by tracing fate of various musical ideas of Leitmotivs
The elements of Wagnerian Music Drama

- Leitmotiv (leading motive) is brief musical idea connected to some person, event or idea in a music drama
- Leitmotiv is musical figure capable of growth, development, transformation
- Leitmotivs are sometimes sung but more often appear in the orchestra
Opera

- The elements of Wagnerian Music Drama
  
  - shift melodic element from voice to orchestra allowed characters on stage to sing in a declamatory manner lying between aria and recitative - allows words to come through with clarity
Cross-section of the Bayreuth Festspielhaus.
In addition to writing his own librettos and music, Wagner designed his own theater. The design puts most of the orchestra beneath the stage. This ingenious device brings the audience closer to the stage.
(see Bonds p. 459)
The elements of Wagnerian Music Drama

- wrote own librettos
- avoids distinctions between verse and prose in librettos
- librettos in free poetic style that avoided suggestion of metrical (as well as melodic and musical) regularity
- keeps music moving from beginning to end of act, leaving audience no opportunity to applaud during the act
Operetta

- form of musical theater operated on a smaller scale than opera
- mixed spoken dialogue with sung numbers and dealt invariable with humorous and lighthearted subjects
- likely performed in vernacular
- grew out of tradition of songs with plays
- Mozart, J. Strauss, J. Offenbach, A. Sullivan
Operetta

• Gilbert and Sullivan *Pirates of Penzance* (1879)
  - operetta
  - numbers are easily recognizable as aria, duets, etc.
  - very popular

• Other operettas:
  - J. Strauss *Die Fledermaus*
  - Offenbach *Orpheus in the Underworld*
Choral Music

- genre by which art music composers could reach an audience away from operatic world
- much written for amateur small choruses
- settings of Mass grew in length
- oratorio flourished - combined large choruses, solo arias, solo ensembles, recitative
- Caecilian movement - sought to restore Gregorian chant and style to 16th century *a cappella* polyphony as ideals of church music
Choral Music

- Clara Wieck Schumann “Vorwärts!”
  - written for amateur singing clubs
  - political overtones; composed as the 1848 revolutions were about to break out

- Bruckner *Virga Jesse floruit*
  - motet (genre looks back to the Renaissance)
  - part of the Caecilian movement which sought to restore Gregorian chant and the 16th century a cappella style
  - shows Palestrina like treatment of rhythm and texture
  - harmony is still 19th century