Opera as Music Drama

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Music Drama

An opera is more than a collection of tunes. It is a complete “Music Drama”.

There is a musical, dramatic and emotional continuity to the entire work.

This continuity is must be within the music, as well as the plot.

The orchestral part is as important as the vocal part.

The Premise

The Dramatic Content of an Opera is carried by the music.

The Plot conveys the story and is a framework for the music. It defines the action and the mood, but the drama is carried by the music.

An Opera with great music will work, even if the plot is inferior, while an Opera with an excellent plot won’t work if the music is inferior (mostly).
A Guideline:

Opera is Music Drama.

Don’t be overly concerned about the logic of the plot. Just pick up the premise and go with the music.

Examples

- Grief over Unrequited Love
- Love Duets
- Anger and Revenge
- Comradeship
- Yearning for the Homeland
- Ceremony and Spectacle
- The Climax
Unrequited Love
Unremitting Despair

“Vesti la giubba” from *Pagliacci*

Placido Domingo (t) – 1983
Orchestra of the Teatro alla Scala,
Georges Prêtre, cond.

Pagliacci

Ruggero Leoncavallo, 1857 – 1919

Libretto by the Composer
First Performance, 1892, Milan
Set in a small village in Calabria, end of 19th
century, featuring a troupe of traveling
commedia dell’arte players.

“Vesti la giubba”: Canio, head of the troupe,
has just learned that his wife is unfaithful.
He is devastated, but the show must go on.
Anatomy of an Aria - 1

Recitative-Aria Form:

Recitative – sung passage with the rhythm of speech, rather than song.

Aria – lyrical, songlike passage.

In the recitative, the character states his or her situation, dilemma or state of mind,

Followed by . . .

The aria, in which he allows free rein to his emotions.

The orchestra accompanies, enhances and embellishes.

There may be an orchestral introduction and an orchestral finale.

Anatomy of an Aria - 2

The *aria* is often divided into two sections:

The *lyrical* section (“cantabile”), where the expression of emotion begins to develop;

The *dramatic climax* (“cabaletta”) where the emotional expression reaches its peak.

Often with a transitional passage between the two.

Usually, an Orchestral Climax completes the scene.
Anatomy of an Aria - 3
“Vesti la giubba”

Recitative: "How can I go on? . . . but I must . . .”
{Orchestral “punctuation”}
Aria, lyrical portion: "So put on your costume . . .”
Transition: " . . . turn your tears to laughter . . .”
Aria, dramatic climax: "Laugh, clown laugh!"
{Orchestral recapitulation}

“Vesti la giubba”
Recitative
How can I perform! While I’m in such delirium,
I no longer know what I’m saying,
or what I’m doing!
But you must! Force yourself!
Bah! Can’t you be a man?
{Laughs ironically}
No! You are a clown!
{Sad orchestral punctuation: "and that’s that!”}
“Vesti la giubba”
Aria – Lyrical section

So put on your clown suit,
and your funny whiteface makeup.
The people pay, and they want to laugh,
don’t they!
So what if Harlequin steals away your Colombine?
Laugh, clown, laugh! and the world will applaud!

“Vesti la giubba”
Aria - Transition

Turn your tears into a funny face,
Change your pain into laughter.
“Vesti la giubba”
Aria - Dramatic Climax

So laugh, clown laugh!
Laugh at your broken love!
Laugh at the pain
That crushes your heart!

{Weeping . . .}
{Orchestral recapitulation}

Unrequited Love
Wistful Regret

“Ella gemmai m’amo” from Don Carlo

Ferrucio Furlenetto (br) – 1993
Metropolitan Opera Orchestra, James Levine, cond.
Don Carlo
Giuseppe Verdi, 1813 - 1901

Libretto based on a plays by Schiller and Eugène Cormon. Several French and Italian versions of the libretto were created.
First Performance, 1867, Paris (French version)
Set in royal courts of France (act I) and Spain (acts II-V), 16th century.
“Ella gemmai m’amó”: Philip II, King of Spain, alone in his room, reflects sadly that his young, politically arranged bride never loved him.

“Ella gemmai m’amó” (excerpt) from Verdi’s Don Carlo

{Orchestral introduction}
She never loved me!
No, her heart is closed to me,
she doesn't love me!
I still recall how sad she looked
when she saw my white hair,
the day she arrived from France.
No, she does not love me.

...
Love Duet
Parting and Hope for the Future

“Verrano a te sull’aure” from Lucia di Lammermoor

Renata Scotto (s) and Luciano Pavarotti (t) - 1967
SO of Italian Radio and Television, Francesco Molinari Pradelli, cond.

Lucia di Lammermoor
Gaetano Donizetti, 1797 - 1848

Libretto by Salvatore Cammarano based on a novel by Sir Walter Scott
First Performance 1835, Naples
Set in Scotland, end of 16th Century.
“Verrano a te sull’aure”: Lucy Ashton and Edgar of Ravenswood say farewell until Edgar can return from a political mission to France.
"Verrano a te sull’aurè"
from Donizetti’s *Lucia di Lammermoor*

My sighs shall be borne on the breeze
that wafts here, my love
Each murmuring wave shall echo how I
mourn thy absence
I shall bedew each thought of you with
many a bitter tear
You will not fail to write to me . . .

*etc.* . . .

Love Duet
Ecstatic “Love-Death”

“O, terra, addio” from *Aida*

Aprile Millo (s), Placido Domingo (t),
Dolora Zajik (ms) - 1991
Metropolitan Opera Orchestra, James
Levine, cond.
Aida
Giuseppe Verdi, 1813 - 1901

Libretto by Antonio Ghislanzoni
First Performance 1871, Cairo
Set in Ancient Egypt.

“O terra, addio”: Radames has been condemned to death by being entombed alive. Aida hides in the tomb, to die with him. Amneris, overcome by grief and remorse, mourns.

“O terra, addio” from Verdi’s Aida

Aida & Radames, within the tomb:
O Earth, farewell, farewell you vale of tears.
Farewell, dreams of joy which have vanished in grief.
Heaven opens itself to us, and the wandering souls
Fly to the rays of eternal day.

(In the distance, chorus of priests and priestesses, praising Isis and Osiris)

Amneris, above the tomb:
Rest in peace, beloved.
May Isis be appeased and open heaven to you!
Rest in peace.
Anger
Righteous Wrath

Donna Ana’s Aria, “Or sai che l’onore” from Don Giovanni

Cheryl Studer (s) - 1991
Vienna Philharmonic, Riccardo Muti cond.

Don Giovanni
Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart, 1756 - 1791

Libretto by Lorenzo da Ponte
First Performance 1787, Prague
Set in medieval Spain.
“Or sai chi l’onore”: Donna Ana has just recognized Don Giovanni as the man who tried to rape her and then murdered her father. She asks her lover, Don Ottavio, to avenge her.
“Or sai chi l'onore” from Mozart’s *Don Giovanni*

Now you know who sought to steal my honor, who was the betrayer who killed my father.

I ask you vengeance, your heart asks it too.

Remember the wound gaping in his poor breast, recall the earth covered with his blood, if ever the wrath of a just fury should weaken in you.

I ask you vengeance, your heart asks it too.

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“Or sai chi l'onore” (Climax)

*Dramatic Climax, Mozart style*

I ask you vengeance, your heart asks it too.

*Dramatic Orchestral Climax*

*Mournful Orchestral Punctuation*
Anger
Evil Rage

The Queen of the Night’s Aria, “Der Hölle Rache” from The Magic Flute

Wilma Lipp (s) - 1952
Vienna Philharmonic, Herbert von Karajan cond.

The Magic Flute
Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart, 1756 - 1791

Libretto by Emanuel Schikaneder
First Performance 1791, Vienna
Set in legendary times.
“Der Hölle Rache”: The evil Queen of the Night appears to her daughter, innocent Pamina, and demands that she kill the virtuous high priest, Sarastro.
“Der Hölle Rache”
from Mozart’s *Magic Flute*

The rage of Hell boils within my heart,
Death and despair flame about me!

If Sarastro does not, through you, feel
The pangs of death,
Then you will be my daughter no more.
Disowned will you be forever,
Abandoned will you be forever.

Destroyed be forever
All natural bonds between us,
Unless by your hands
Shall Sarastro turn pale in death.

“Der Hölle Rache” (Climax)

Hear, hear ye Gods of Wrath,
Hear the mother’s oath!

{Orchestral Climax}
Comradeship

Two men whose friendship is inspired by their love of the same woman

"Au fond du temple saint" from *Pearl Fishers*

John Aker (t), Gino Quilico (br) - 1989
Orchestra of the Capital of Toulouse,
Michel Plasson cond.

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The Pearl Fishers

Georges Bizet, 1838 - 1875

Libretto by Eugène Cormon and Michel Carré
First Performance 1863, Paris
Set in Ceylon.

"Au fond du temple saint": Two long-lost friends are reunited. They are in love with the same woman, the priestess Léïla. Their love for her inspires them to renew their friendship.
“Au fond du temple saint”
from Bizet’s *Pearl Fishers*

... 
But through the crowd she makes her way. Already her long veil hides her face from us. My eyes, alas! Seek her in vain!

*Orchestral section building to ominous tension*

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“Au fond du temple saint” (cont.)

But what is this strange flame which is suddenly kindled in my soul? What unknown fire is destroying me? Your hand pushes mine away! Love takes our hearts by storm and turns us into enemies! No! Let nothing part us! Let us swear to remain friends!
“Au fond du temple saint”
(conclusion)

Yes, it is her, the goddess, who comes to unite us this day. And, faithful to my promise, I wish to cherish you like a brother!

It is her, the goddess, who comes to unite us this day! Yes, let us share the same fate, let us be united until death!

Comradeship
Devotion to Duty

“Dio, che nell’alma infondere” from Don Carlo

Michael Sylvester (t), Vladimir Chernov (br) - 1993
Metropolitan Opera Orchestra, James Levine, cond.
Don Carlo
Giuseppe Verdi, 1813 - 1901

Libretto based on dramatic poem by Schiller and play by Eugène Cormon. Several French and Italian versions of the libretto exist.

First Performance, 1867, Paris (French version)

Set in royal courts of France (act I) and Spain (acts II-V), 16th century.

“Dio, che nell’alma infondere”: Carlo is distraught over losing Elizabeth. Rodrigo inspires him to continue in their mission to free the Low Countries.

“Dio, che nell’alma infondere”
from Verdi’s Don Carlo

{Rodrigo warns Carlo that Elizabeth and the King are about to enter the chapel.}
{Carlo is distraught over his lost love.}

Rodrigo:
Take heart, my Prince, dispel the clouds of grief and sorrow. Your rising star shines so clear and bright upon tomorrow.
Have faith, and pray that God may be with you.
“Dio, che nell’alma infondere”
(2)

Carlo and Rodrigo:
God in his infinite love has filled the hearts of man with fire. Yes, God, our Lord, guiding us from above, let freedom be our first desire.
Father in heaven, steel our hearts, beating forever united!
To fight for right through death and night, shall be our last eternal plea.
Yes, God, guiding us from above, has meant us to be free!

“Dio, che nell’alma infondere”
(3)

{Elizabeth and Philip enter, accompanied by a chorus of monks.}
{Carlo becomes distraught once again; Rodrigo consoles him, encouraging him to devote himself to the Cause.}
{Monks chant mournfully about the death of Charles V}

Carlo and Rodrigo:
I stand with you until death!
Throughout life to fight for right!
Until men can joyously shout:
Liberty!

{Rousing orchestral climax}
Yearning for the Homeland

“Va, pensiero, sull’ali dorati” from
*Nabucco*

1991
Orchestra and Chorus of the German Opera of Berlin, Giuseppe Sinopoli, cond.

Nabucco

Giuseppe Verdi, 1813 - 1901

Libretto by Temistocle Solera, based on History of the Babylonian Captivity,
First Performance, 1842, Milan
Set in Jerusalem and Babylon, 587 BC

“Va, pensiero sull’ali dorati”: The exiled Hebrew slaves in Babylon, laboring on the banks of the Tigris, lament their exile and dream of their Homeland.
“Va, pensiero”  
from Verdi’s *Nabucco*

Fly, my thoughts, on gilded wings;  
Go, rest on the slopes and mounts  
Where the sweet breezes  
Of our native soil give off a sweet perfume  
The banks of Jordan, greet,  
And the fallen towers of Zion...  
Oh my country, so beautiful and so lost!  
Oh remembrance so dear and so desperate!

“Va, pensiero” (cont.)

Golden harp of the prophetic poets,  
Why do you hang so silently from the willow?  
Reignite the memories in our hearts,  
Speak to us of the times which once were!  
O like Solomon draw forth a sound  
Of raw lament to destiny,  
Or may the Lord inspire you to a harmony  
Which instills the courage to suffer!
Ceremony and Spectacle

The Consecration of the Sword in the Temple of Vulcan from *Aida*

Placido Domingo (t), Paata Burchladze (b) *et al.* - 1991
Metropolitan Opera Orchestra, James Levine, cond.

Aida

Giuseppe Verdi, 1813 - 1901

Libretto by Antonio Ghislanzoni
First Performance 1871, Cairo
Set in Ancient Egypt.
Consecration of the Sword at the Temple of Vulcan: Rhadames has been named General to lead the battle against Ethiopia. His Sword is consecrated in a ceremony at the Temple of Ptah, officiated by Ramfis.
The Conclusion

“La commedia e finita!” from *Pagliacci*

Juan Pons (br) – 1983
Orchestra of the Teatro alla Scala,
Georges Prêtre, cond.

Thank You

And Good Night!
Unrequited love – unremitting despair
1. “Vesti la giubba” from *I Pagliacci*
   Ruggero Leoncavallo (1857-1919)
   Placido Domingo (t) – 1983
   Orchestra of the Teatro alla Scala, Georges Prêtre, cond.
   Philips 411 484-2

Unrequited love – wistful melancholy
2. “Ella giammai m'amò” from *Don Carlo*
   Giuseppe Verdi (1813-1901)
   Ferrucio Furlanetto (b) - 1993
   Metropolitan Opera Orchestra, James Levine, cond.
   Sony Classical SMK 53507

Love Duet – hope for the future
3. “Verrano a te sull'aure” from *Lucia di Lammermoor*
   Gaetano Donizetti (1797-1848)
   Renata Scotto (s), Luciano Pavarotti (t) - 1967
   Symphony Orchestra of Italian Radio and Television of Turin, Francesco Molinari Pradelli, cond.
   Frequnzen 043-001 (may not be available in US)

Love Duet – ecstatic “love-death”
4. “O terra, addio” from *Aida*
   Verdi
   Aprile Millo (s), Placido Domingo (t), Dolora Zajick (m) (1991)
   Metropolitan Opera Orchestra, James Levine, cond.
   Sony Classical, S3K 45 973

Righteous Wrath
5. “Or sai chi l'onore” from *Don Giovanni*
   Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart (1756-1791)
   Cheryl Studer (s) - 1991
   Vienna Philharmonic, Riccardo Muti, cond.
   EMI Classics CDS 754255 2

Evil Rage
6. “Der Hölle Rache” (Queen of the Night’s Aria) from *The Magic Flute*
   Mozart
   Wilma Lipp (s) - 1952
   Vienna Philharmonic, Herbert von Karajan, cond.
   EMI CHS 7696312 (mono)

Comradeship – in love with the same woman
7. “Au fond du temple saint” from *The Pearl Fishers*
   Georges Bizet (1838-1875)
   John Aker (t), Gino Quilico (br) - 1989
   Orchestra of the Capital of Toulouse, Michel Plasson, cond.
   EMI CDS 749837 2
Comradeship – devotion to duty
8. “Ascolta … Dio, che nell'alma infondere” from *Don Carlo*
   Verdi
   Michael Sylvester (t), Vladimir Chernov (br), Paul Plishka (b) - 1993
   Metropolitan Opera Orchestra, James Levine, cond.
   Sony Classical SMK 53507

Yearning for the Homeland
9. “Va, pensiero, sull'ali dorate” (Chorus of the Hebrew Slaves) from *Nabucco*
   Verdi
   1983
   Orchestra and Chorus of the German Opera of Berlin, Giuseppe Sinopoli, cond.
   Deutsche Grammophon 435 415-2

Ceremony and Spectacle
10. Consecration of the Sword (Temple of Vulcan) from *Aida* (Video)
    Verdi
    Placido Domingo (t), Paata Burchladze (b) et al. - 1991
    Metropolitan Opera Orchestra, James Levine, cond.
    Deutsche Grammophon , DVD 440 073 001-9

Dramatic Climax
11. “La commedia e finita!” from *I Pagliacci*
    Leoncavallo
    Juan Pons (br) - 1983
    Orchestra of the Teatro alla Scala, Georges Prêtre, cond.
    Philips 411 484-2