

People pray for many reasons. There are, of course, the traditional prayers said at churches and temples all over the world for weekly worship. We pray with joy to welcome a new life into the world, and we pray with deep sadness as friends and family members reach the last days of their lives. We pray after a death for the soul of the deceased. We pray for the safety of soldiers before war, and we sing prayers of rejoicing upon their safe return. We pray personal prayers in which we beg for forgiveness, ask for understanding and, yes, even ask for punishment or revenge against someone who has wronged us.

The characters in operas are similar to you and me in many ways. But because opera is theatre, their reasons for praying are often far more complex, concentrated and intense. And then, because they sing these prayers, the emotion communicated to the listener is also concentrated and intense. I would dare say that along with the love duets, prayers in opera have produced some of the most glorious music in that genre. Today I would like to discuss with you 8 different prayers most of which are from fairly familiar operas. They are sung by men, women and groups of individuals. Some are Christian, some not. But they have all provided some of the most beautiful and unforgettable music in opera.

We're going to begin with the work of Donizetti who wrote in the first half of the 19th Century, much of which we refer to as the Bel Canto Period. 'Bel Canto' means 'beautiful singing, and I think you'll appreciate the beauty of these two selections which are from Donizetti operas that are less familiar to American opera lovers than say LUCIA DI LAMMERMOOR or L'ELISIR d'AMORE

In the 1830's Donizetti wrote a series of operas we have come to call his QUEEN TRILOGY. The trilogy includes the stories of Queen Anne Boleyn, the 2nd wife of Henry VIII, then, the Protestant Queen, Elizabeth I and her rivalry with her Catholic cousin from Scotland, Mary Stewart, and last, another story of Queen Elizabeth I, this time concerning her conflict with Robert Devereux, her lover, whom she had to have executed for treason.

Even though Donizetti used three different librettists for this trilogy, each of them felt he could alter the historical facts of these characters' lives to create a more dramatic story.

The first of these operas is **ANNA BOLENA**, first performed at the Metropolitan Opera this year. Some of

you may even have seen the High Definition Broadcast of it on October 15. In this scene Anna knows that everyone in the court has been turned against her by the false accusations of her husband, the king, who really wants to get rid of her because she has not produced a male heir to the throne. With this realization in mind she sings a short prayer turning to God as her last resort. In this clip you will see a woman in the background wearing a white gown. This is Jane Seymour, supposedly the 'friend' of Anna, but one who has betrayed her by becoming the king's lover and who will become his next queen.

2. In the next selection, from **MARIA STUARDA**, Mary Stewart is just about to be executed on orders from Queen Elizabeth I. In her prayer she begs forgiveness and mercy from God before her death. Then, in an astonishing act of generosity she tells everyone that she wishes for Elizabeth be forgiven for what she has done.

3. The German opera, **Lohengrin**, is a romantic [opera](#) in three acts composed by [Richard Wagner](#), first performed in 1850. It is based on works from medieval German romance. As you may already know, the character of Lohengrin first appears in the opera riding a swan. One of the rules I always set forth for students in my opera classes is that they may not ask WHY or HOW--they just have to remember that this is opera, and in opera strange things happen. This is one of them. Prior to The start of this scene we have learned that there is strife over the rightful heir to the throne in a certain dukedom. The legitimate heir has disappeared and his sister, ELSA, has taken the throne. As commonly happens in opera there are others who are interested in occupying this throne. They are an evil team, FREDERICK and his conniving wife, ORTRUD. They have accused Elsa of doing away with her brother, the rightful heir, so she could take over. King Henry of Germany arrives and eventually decides to settle the score by way of a single combat between FREDERICK and any champion knight who will fight for Elsa.

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5. Eventually LOHENGRIN--he of the swan--arrives and agrees to fight on her behalf. Our first prayer is one offered by King Henry, along with the others before the combat begins.

One word of caution: As written, his opera takes place in the 10th Century, but in this production you will not see typical knights and ladies. Elsa will be the woman in the overalls with dark braids, and Lohengrin is wearing the blue t-shirt. Frederick is in a suit with a gold vest and his wife, Ortrud, is the bleached blond. Following the first prayer we will see a second short scene later in the opera. Frederick has lost the combat with Lohengren. and he and his wife Ortrud have been banished. They are determined to get even. We will see Ortrud calling upon the powers of evil for revenge in her famous curse. This too can be considered another form of prayer.

4. **SIMON BOCCANEGRA** Now we will move to a work by the King of Italian Opera, Giuseppe Verdi. The opera is SIMON BOCCANEGRA one that is complex both in its political story and in the relationships among all the major characters. Our prayer is being sung by FIESCO a wealthy man who lives in Genoa. The hero of the opera, Simon Boccanegra, has fallen in love with his daughter, but Fiesco did not approve of Boccanegra and would not allow them to marry. Even so they have had a daughter who has been swept away to be cared for by others because her mother, Maria, has just died. We see Fiesco in grief just after he has learned this news. He enters and curses Boccanegra, then the Virgin Mary. He asks pardon from the latter as he continues to express his grief. He soon hears clergy inside the church praying **for** his daughter while he finds himself begging his daughter in heaven to pray for him. Quite an unusual prayer scene.

5. **FAUST** In the late 19th and early 20th Centuries the French opera FAUST, written by Charles Gounod, enjoyed great popularity all over the world. In fact, it was the production that opened the Metropolitan Opera on its inaugural night in October of 1883. The opera enjoyed popularity for many years after, but then fell out of favor. This year the Met brings it back in a brand new production. The story of Faust is based on German Legends going back to the late 1500's but is most well-known thanks to the writings of GEOTHE. In the story Faust is an old scholar, bored with life. He is visited by the devil, known in the opera as **Mephistopheles**. He offers Faust a bargain: MEPH will use all his magical powers for Faust for a certain period of time, but at the end of that time Meph will claim Faust's soul, and he will be eternally damned. One of the things with which Meph helps Faust is the seduction of Marguerite, a naive and innocent maiden with whom he eventually has a child out of wedlock. Events following this leave Marguerite with her life pretty much destroyed, and, in our scene, we see her in a prison praying to be saved from her own eternal damnation. Let's see how the story ends for her, for Faust and for Mephistopheles.

So...because of her innocence Marguerite is accepted into heaven, Faust returns to his old self, and Mephistopheles sinks back into Hell.

6. **LA FORZA DEL DESTINO** We're back to Verdi again. LFDD has a very complex plot. but it is not necessary to know all about it to fully appreciate the beauty of this set of prayers. Leonora, the character you will see, was planning to elope with her lover. Her father discovers them in the process, and her lover, as a gesture of peace and friendship, holds his gun out to Leonora's father. In doing so, he drops the gun, it goes off and accidentally kills the father. Leonora and her lover each flee in different directions.

When Leonora's brother hears about the death of his father he immediately begins to seek revenge on both his sister and her lover. Thus we come to our scene where Leonora, disguised as a man and trembling for fear her brother will discover her, has fled to a monastery for sanctuary. Before going in she sings a beautiful prayer in which she asks for forgiveness from her sins.

We'll then skip to the finale of the act where the head of the monastery warns his priests about all the conditions under which their new member, who is really Leonora, will live in solitude. Leonora then joins the priests in a beautifully simple prayer to end the act.

7. **OTELLO** We are sticking with Verdi for our next example. This time we go to his second-to-the-last opera, OTELLO. Verdi loved Shakespeare, and used his plays as a basis for three important operas. I'm sure many of you are familiar with the story of the evil Iago who seeks revenge on his supposedly "good friend," Otello, by making him believe his naive and completely innocent wife, Desdemona, is being unfaithful to him. We are going to the last act of the opera for our prayer. By this time Desdemona believes that something is definitely wrong. She asks that her wedding dress be laid on the bed before she goes to sleep and then sings her final prayer evening prayer, the AVE MARIA.

8. **NABUCCO** No lecture on prayers in opera would be complete without this wonderful example from another Verdi opera, NABUCCO. This was Verdi's first real success as an opera composer. It is the story of Jews who have been carried into enslavement in Babylon. The text of this prayer is taken from one of the Psalms. Sung by the Hebrews they ask for strength to endure their current sufferings in hopes of once again seeing their homeland. However, Italians in the 1840's, when Nabucco made its premiere, saw this short chorus as a clear reference to their own struggle **for** unification and **against** foreign control. It is said that when the theatre's stagehands first heard this chorus in rehearsal they yelled their approval loudly and pounded their tools on the floor and the walls in excitement. Whatever the case, for many Italians it has become a second national anthem. Here is VA, PENSIERO, from Verdi's Nabucco.

ANNA BOLENA by Gaetano Donizetti (1797-1848) with text by Felice Romani..
Premiere 1830, Milan.

Dynamic DVD 33534: Orchestra and chorus of Bergamo Musica Festival Gaetano Donizetti, conducted by Fabrizio Maria Carminati, 2006.

Anna Bolena

Dimitra Theodossiou

MARIA STUARDA by Gaetano Donizetti (1797-1848) with text by Giuseppe Bardari. Premiere 1834, Naples.

Arthaus Musik DVD101 361: Orchestra and chorus to Teatro Alla Scala, Milano, conducted by Antonino Fogliani, 2008.

Maria Stuarda

Mariella Devia

LOHENGRIN by Richard Wagner (1813-1883) text by the composer. Premiere 1850, Weimar.

DECCA DVD 0743387: Orchestra and chorus of the Bayerische Staatsoper conducted by Kent Nagano, 2009.

Lohengrin

Jonas Kaufman

Elsa von Brabant

Anja Harteros

Count Friedrich von Telramund

Wolfgang Koch

Ortrud, his wife

Michaela Schuster

Heinrich, German King

Christof Fischesser

Gottfried, Elsa's brother

Konstantin Wojtachnia

SIMON BOCCANEGRA by Giuseppe Verdi (1813-1901) with text by Francesco Maria Piave. Premiere 1857, Venice.

Deutsche Grammophon DVD 073 031-9: Orchestra and chorus of the Metropolitan Opera, conducted by James Levine, 1995.

Jacopo Fiesco

Robert Lloyd

FAUST by Charles Gounod (1818-1893) with text by Barbier and Carre. Premiere 1859, Paris.

EMI DVD 50999 6 31611 9 9: Orchestra and chorus of the Royal Opera House, Covent Garden, conducted by Antonio Pappano, 2010.

Marguerite	Angela Gheorghiu
Faust	Roberto Alagna
Mephistopheles	Bryn Terfel

LA FORZA DEL DESTINO by Giuseppe Verdi (1813-1901) with text by Francesca Maria Piave. Premiere 1862, St. Petersburg.

Deutsche Grammophon DVD B0004770-09: Orchestra and chorus of the Metropolitan Opera, conducted by James Levine, 1984.

Leonora	Leontyne Price
Padre Guardiano	Bonaldo Giaiotti

OTELLO by Giuseppe Verdi (1813-1901) with text by Arrigo Boito based on Shakespeare. Premiere 1887, Milan.

Deutsche Grammophon DVD B0002107-09: Orchestra and chorus of the Metropolitan Opera conducted by James Levine, 1996'

Desdemona, wife of Otello	Renee Fleming
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NABUCCO by Giuseppe Verdi (1813-1901) with text by Temistocle Solera. Premiere 1842, Milan.

TDK DVD DVWW-OPNAB: Orchestra and chorus of the Vienna State Opera conducted by Fabio Luisi. June, 2001.