

Rediscovering the Opera Fantasy
By Phillip O. Paglialonga

Expose your students to opera by introducing them to the opera fantasy.

It is difficult for us today to imagine the popularity that surrounded opera in the 19th century. People from all walks of life were captivated by the musical drama that would unfold each night at the opera house. Audiences, particularly of the middle-class, viewed singers much like we would a movie star today. People were not content to merely go to the opera each week, but longed for a way to bring the opera into their own lives. Opera was so popular in the time of Verdi that it was not uncommon to hear someone singing a tune in the street of an opera that had not yet been premiered. In order to bring operatic music and drama to the public in a variety of venues instrumentalists developed the practice of performing opera fantasies.

An opera fantasy is an instrumental work where themes from an opera (usually an Italian work) are paraphrased, varied or parodied, often in a virtuoso manner. Without recording technology, listening to instrumentalists was often the easiest way for the public to enjoy opera. Opera fantasies were also a great way for people to familiarize themselves with the main melodies from each opera. Producers often realized this and would use the opera fantasy as a sort of commercial to promote productions.

For instrumentalists of the day, performing operatic music would have seemed quite natural. In Italy during the 19th century, opera was the center of musical life, both artistically and financially. Instrumentalists would not only be the ones performing for the various opera productions, but in most cases, their professional training would have come from opera musicians. Because of their operatic background, instrumentalists would have known the operatic repertoire and the styles of the various divas of the day such as the legendary Maria Malibran.

Among the numerous opera fantasies, many are written for clarinet and piano. The clarinet was a relatively new instrument in the 19th century, being the last woodwind member to be added to the modern orchestra. As a result, there was not a great deal of repertoire available to clarinetists for solo performances. This demand resulted in a great number of opera fantasies being written by various composers and clarinetists based on operas such as, *Rigoletto*, *La Traviata*, and *Aida*. There are literally hundreds of these clarinet works in existence today, however, only a handful that get performed with any regularity.

Today we are beginning to rediscover these great works from the past. Audiences are once again able to enter the world of the opera without actually going to the opera house. Perhaps some day, with the help of opera fantasies, it will be common once again to see people in the street singing music from the opera.

Recommended Recordings

Carbonare, Alessandro. *La clarinette à l'opéra*. Harmonia Mundi 901722.
An entire disc of opera fantasies for clarinet including: Mascagni's *Cavalleria Rusticana*, Verdi's *Rigoletto* and Puccini's *Tosca*.

Meyer, Sabine. *A night at the opera*. EMI 56137.

Paglialonga, Phillip O. "Rediscovering the Opera Fantasy." *Keynotes Magazine* (August 2006).
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This disc includes both Italian and German opera fantasies for clarinet, including: Mozart's *The Magic Flute*, Rossini's *Barber of Seville*, and Weber's *Der Freischütz*.

Mutter, Anne-Sophie. *Carmen-Fantasie*. Vienna Philharmonic/James Levine. Polygram 437544.
This recording features virtuoso violinist Anne-Sophie Mutter performing Sarsate's famous *Concert Fantasy on themes from Bizet's Carmen*.

Romero, Pepe. *Opera Fantasy for guitar*. Philips 446 090-2.
Romero performs opera fantasies based on some of the most beloved operas including: Verdi's *La Traviata* and *Il Trovatore*, and Mozart's *Don Giovanni*.

Phillip O. Paglialonga is based in Michigan and maintains an active career as a clarinetist and educator. Please feel free to contact him at ppaglialonga@hotmail.com with any questions or comments you may have