

# Western Classical Tradition

Music for voices: operas and songs



# Opera

- # An opera is a play set to music.
- # Like a play, it is acted and has scenery, costumes and characters, but the words are usually sung throughout to the accompaniment of an orchestra.
- # The first operas were written and performed at the beginning of the 17<sup>th</sup> century, and have continued to be popular ever since.
- # Like cantatas and oratorios discussed earlier, operas use **recitatives** to tell the story and move the action on, **arias** to show off a good tune and vocal technique, and **choruses** where the choir can join the action.
- # Opera has always been something special to watch and listen to, often using spectacular stage effects, and sometimes featuring superstar singers.



# Listening Activity

- # Listen to the aria 'One fine day' from the opera *Madame Butterfly* by the Italian composer Puccini.
- # The opera is set in Japan at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, and is about a young Japanese girl who falls in love with an older American sailor.
- # 'One fine day' is sung by the heroine, Cio-Cio San (Madame Butterfly), as she imagines her lover, Lieutenant Pinkerton, returning to her.
- # Unfortunately the opera does not have a happy ending!
- # How does the music reflect the emotion and text?
- # Discuss this with someone else, or in class.



# Listening Activity

- # Now listen to an excerpt from the duet 'Au fond du temple saint' from Bizet's opera *The Pearl Fishers*.
- # This is one of the most famous and popular of all operatic duets.
- # Two friends are singing about their former rivalry for the love of the same woman, and how, as part of their friendship, they have sworn never to see her again.
- # Why do you think the duet is so popular? In what ways does it suggest friendship and rivalry?
- # Although the words may be in a different language, the music should be able to create the mood.



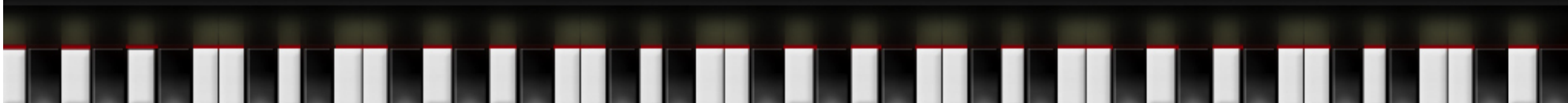
# Listening Activity

# In what way do both pieces show off the skill and technique of the singers? Can you hear places where the singers use vibrato, a trembling effect that is used to produce a warmer, more emotional sound?



# Music for Solo Voice

- # Solo songs have always been popular. In much folk music, the singer, with no accompaniment, performs the music on his or her own. This is an example of a **single line melody** or **monophonic** textures.
- # Or there may be some accompaniment, perhaps a **drone** or some sort of **harmonic** accompaniment.



# Strophic and through-composed

- # In some pieces of vocal music, the same music is used for each verse or section of the text (**strophic** form), but in some vocal compositions the changing mood or nature of the text determines the structure of the music, so that fresh music will be composed to reflect these changes (**through-composed**).
- # Both of these forms can be found in **lieder** (the German word for 'songs', but during the 19<sup>th</sup> century it became associated with a particular type of song, where the voice and accompaniment are equal in importance).



# Listening Activity

- # Listen to the opening two verses of the lied 'Nähe des Geliebten' ('Nearness of the beloved') by Schubert. In it, the singer is thinking of his beloved.
- # The mood and nature of the words does not change. In the first verse, for example, the singer imagines his beloved in the sunlight, the sea, in the moonlight or streams. In the other verses he is still thinking of his beloved, but is reminded of her in different ways. Because the nature of the poem does not change, Schubert uses strophic form.
- # After a brief rising piano introduction, which may suggest yearning caused by thoughts of the beloved, the same tune is used for the second (and each successive verse).





# Listening Quiz

Listen to the aria 'O ruddier than the cherry' from the opera *Acis and Galatea* by Handel. It is sung by a one-eyed giant called Polypheme. He has just introduced himself in a recitative. This is an example of a **da capo aria**. When the singer goes back to the beginning to repeat section A, it is common practice to introduce some variation. The singer might **improvise** or add **ornaments** and decorations to the music.

In this aria you can hear examples of a **melisma**. This is where a word that has only one or two syllables (in this case the word 'merry') is sung with a flourish of many different notes.

1. Which word best describes the tonality of this music?

major

minor

modal

pentatonic

2. Suggest a possible time signature for this excerpt

3. Describe the texture of section B, beginning with the words 'Ripe as the melting cluster'

4. Name the cadence at the end of the excerpt.



# Key terms

# Vibrato: this literally means 'quivering' or 'shaking', and is an effect caused by small, rapid changes to the pitch of a note.

