Dramatic musical work in which singing takes the place of speech. In opera, the music accompanying the action is the main element, although dancing and spectacular staging may also play their parts. Opera originated in late 16th-century Florence when the musical declamation, lyrical monologues, and choruses of classical Greek drama, were reproduced in the style of that time.

**Early development** One of the earliest opera composers was Jacopo Peri, whose *Euridice* influenced Claudio Monteverdi, the first great master of the operatic form. Initially solely a court entertainment, opera soon became popular, and in 1637 the first public opera house was opened in Venice. It spread to other Italian towns, to Paris (about 1645), and to Vienna and Germany, where it remained Italian at the courts but became partly German at Hamburg from about 1680.

In the later 17th century the aria, designed to show off the skill of the singer, became very important, overshadowing the dramatic element of the opera. Composers of this type of opera included Pier Cavalli, Pietro Antonio Cesti, and Alessandro Scarlatti. In France, opera was developed by Jean-Baptiste Lully and Jean-Philippe Rameau, and in England by Henry Purcell, but the Italian style retained its ascendancy, as exemplified by George Frideric Handel.

**Comic opera** (opera buffa) was developed in Italy by such composers as Giovanni Battista Pergolesi, while in England *The Beggar's Opera* (1728) by John Gay started the vogue of the ballad opera, using popular tunes and spoken dialogue. Singspiel was the German equivalent (although its music was newly composed). A lessening of artificiality began with Christoph Willibald von Gluck, who insisted on the pre-eminence of the dramatic over the purely vocal element. Wolfgang Mozart learned much from Gluck in writing his serious operas, but also excelled in Italian opera buffa (comic opera). In works such as *The Magic Flute* (1791), he laid the foundations of a purely German-language opera, using the Singspiel as a basis. This line was continued by Ludwig van Beethoven in *Fidelio* (1805) and by the work of Carl Weber, who introduced the Romantic style for the first time in opera.

**Developments into the 19th century** The Italian tradition, which placed the main stress on vocal display and melodic smoothness (bel canto), continued unbroken into the 19th century in the operas of Gioacchino Rossini, Gaetano Donizetti, and Vincenzo Bellini. It is in the Romantic operas of Weber and Giacomo Meyerbeer that the work of Richard Wagner has its roots. Dominating the operatic scene of his time, Wagner created, in his ‘music-dramas’, a new art form. He completely transformed the 19th-century idea of opera by ‘through-composing’ entire acts and providing formal clarity by the use of particular themes associated with each character. In Italy, the later work of Giuseppe Verdi contained a lot of Wagner's techniques, while still keeping the vocal clarity and good melodies of the Italian style. This tradition was continued by Giacomo Puccini. In French opera in the mid-19th century, represented by such composers as Léopold Delibes, Charles Gounod, Camille Saint-Saëns, and Jules Massenet, the drama continued to be subservient to the music. Comic opera (opéra comique), as represented in the works of André Grétry and, later, Daniel Auber, became a popular genre in Paris. More serious artistic ideals were put into practice by Hector Berlioz in *The Trojans* (1856–58), but the value of his work was
largely unrecognized in his own time. George Bizet’s *Carmen* began a trend towards realism in opera. His lead was followed in Italy by Pietro Mascagni, Ruggiero Leoncavallo, and Puccini. Claude Debussy’s *Pelléas et Mélisande* (1902) was a reaction against the over-emphatic emotionalism of Wagnerian opera. National operatic styles were developed in Russia by Mikhail Glinka, Nikolai Rimsky-Korsakov, Modest Mussorgsky, Aleksander Borodin, and Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky, and in Bohemia (now the Czech Republic) by Bedřich Smetana and, later, Antonín Dvořák and, most importantly, Leoš Janáček. Several composers of light opera emerged, including Arthur Sullivan, Franz Lehár, Jacques Offenbach, and Johann Strauss.

**20th-century opera** In the 20th century the Viennese school produced an outstanding opera in Alban Berg’s *Wozzeck* (1925), and the Romanticism of Wagner was revived by Richard Strauss in *Der Rosenkavalier*. Other 20th-century composers of opera include George Gershwin, Leonard Bernstein, and John Adams in the USA; Roberto Gerhard, Michael Tippett, Benjamin Britten, and Harrison Birtwistle in the UK; Arnold Schoenberg, Paul Hindemith, and Hans Henze in Germany; Luigi Dallapiccola and Goffredo Petrassi in Italy; and the Soviet composers Sergey Prokofiev and Dmitri Shostakovich. The operatic form has developed in many different directions, for example, towards oratorio in Igor Stravinsky’s *Oedipus Rex* (1925), and towards cabaret and music-theatre, as represented by the works of Kurt Weill.

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