

# *The Development of Italian Comic Opera in the 18th Century*

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**Abstract:** This paper takes Italian opera buffa as the research object, and focuses on analyzing the artistic characteristics of Italian opera buffa. It analyzes the famous Italian opera buffa composers and their works in the 18th century. Italian opera buffa emerged in the 18th century, and this genre is characterized by satire, humor, and secular life, which contrasts sharply with the solemn and dignified grand opera of that time. The second part explains the rise of opera buffa from the perspective of the gradual decline of grand opera; the third part describes the process of opera buffa reaching its peak in the second half of the 18th century, while the fourth part lists Mozart's innovations in the themes and techniques of Italian opera buffa, to prove the uniqueness of Mozart's creation of Italian opera buffa. The whole article provides a historical overview of the decline of grand opera, the birth of opera buffa, the period of change, and the period of prosperity, and tries to prove that the rise of opera buffa represents that truly great art belongs to the people, entertaining the masses while inspiring people to think more deeply.

**Keywords:** Opera buffa, Opera seria, Opera, Mozart

## **1. Introduction**

As an important genre of opera in the history of Western music, exploring the origin, development process, and influence of Italian opera is of great significance to the study of Western music history. In the early 18th century, as an art form that directly reflected the social life of that time, Italian opera attracted the attention of the emerging middle class with its vivid characters, easy-to-understand language, simple and clear plot, and light-hearted atmosphere. Therefore, the emergence of Italian opera not only reflected the social and cultural needs of that time, but also showed the aesthetic interest and cultural characteristics of the emerging social class [1]. At the same time, the birth of Italian opera also brought new attempts in terms of stage performance, emotional expression, character portrayal, etc., and promoted the innovation and development of European music art at that time.

This article specifically studies the development of Italian opera buffa in the 18th century. The historical context of opera buffa in the 18th century is not only an important part of European music history, but also an important window for scholars to study European social culture and artistic changes. The study of opera buffa can deepen scholars' understanding of European music in the 18th century, and also provide historical wisdom for today's artistic creation and cultural industry.

## 2. The decline of opera and the birth of comic opera

### 2.1. The decline of Italian opera

In the late 18th century, the power of the nobility and wealthy merchants gradually declined, and new classes such as the bourgeoisie began to rise. In order to cater to a wider audience, the form of opera also underwent corresponding changes. In the late 17th century and the first half of the 18th century, Italian opera gradually became opera series. The libretto of this opera genre usually uses Italian, and the theme often uses heroic characters or mythological stories, and the plot content is serious and solemn. The characters in the play are usually six or seven people, with women's voices, men's voices, and men's voices as the main characters, and important characters are usually performed by eunuch singers. The extravagant vocal skills are an indispensable part of the play. At the same time, luxurious stages are also used to attract the public's interest. This genre also has a fixed opera structure, usually two acts, and each act can be divided into several scenes. In the early days of opera, it was mainly to meet the entertainment needs of nobles and aristocrats, so the stage of opera was more built in the palace.

The first public theater in Venice, Italy, the Teatro San Cassiano, was inaugurated in 1637, and opera performances were no longer limited to private occasions between nobles and wealthy merchants, but were open to the public [2]. As the public became the largest audience group for opera, opera composers had to gradually change the solemn and serious plot themes of grand opera and write more popular and easy-to-understand operas with a sense of comedy.

### 2.2. The birth of Italian opera buffa

The birth of Italian opera buffa can be said to be a result of the continuous progress of social stratification and cultural integration in Italy at that time. Behind this cultural class change is the transformation of the European social structure, and the change of cultural needs has led to the transformation and progress of the opera form [3]. In such a social environment, the important cultural phenomenon of operetta not only reflects social changes, but also brings new artistic styles and aesthetic experiences.

Although not all the audience of Italian commedia dell'arte are secular or non-religious, as an art form, the plot of commedia dell'arte usually revolves around the emotional entanglements between men and women, which is a secular theme unrelated to religion, and is more in line with the aesthetic view of most people. Its music, stage performance, and character portrayal pay more attention to the expression of human nature rather than religious ritual. Italian commedia dell'arte presents the emotions and diversity of human nature in a secular way, which is the reason why it successfully attracts audiences. In 1709, the first commedia dell'arte season was held in Naples. Commedia dell'arte was originally performed in the form of interludes, most of which were improvisational comedies performed in local dialects, with performance techniques such as ridicule, parody, and satire. More emphasis was placed on character traits rather than character images. Interludes were also composed of recitative and arias, but with a smaller scale and fewer performances. Excellent interlude works would be separated from the "mother" opera and performed independently or integrated into other opera performances.

In 1733, the Italian composer Giovanni Battista Pergolesi's "La Serva Padrona" marked the birth of Italian opera buffa. *La Serva Padrona* was originally performed as an interlude to the opera buffa *Il prigioniero fiero* [4]. There are only three characters in the entire play, namely the housekeeper and maid Celestina, the master Ubaldo, and another mute servant Vespone. With the successful performance of *The Maid as a Lady*, it was separated from the opera *The Proud Prisoner* (II Prigionier Superbo) and performed independently [2]. It quickly became a masterpiece of Italian

comic opera. The total length of the play is about 50 minutes, divided into two parts: the upper part is about 22 minutes and the lower part is 28 minutes. Although the storyline of the whole play is simple, it is also very vivid and interesting.

### 3. The development of operetta in the second half of the 18th century

The birth of Italian opera buffa was marked by the publication of *La serva padrona* (1733), and until the 1780s, it can be called a period of change in Italian opera buffa. Representative works of this period include Niccolò Piccinni's *La buona figliuola* (1760), which represents the fact that opera buffa has surpassed opera seria and become the most popular genre of opera [4]. After the appearance of *The Chaste Maiden*, it led a large number of composers to create Italian comic operas. Among them, Giovanni Paisiello and Domenico Cimarosa are the two most outstanding masters in the creation of opera and comic opera [5].

#### 3.1. The beginning of the evolution of Italian opera buffa

In 1760, Niccolò Piccinni created the influential opera *The Chaste Maiden* in the then-popular genre of opera buffa, which tells the story of a poor peasant girl, Morgana, and a young man from the town, Pompadour. The love story between Pompadour. Piccinni introduced some novel and unique musical elements in *The Chaste Maiden*, such as adding singing and lyrics that match the characters' personalities, making the song more heartfelt and more story-like. Although until 1780, this genre did not produce the greatest works, after this period, a large number of composers began to create Italian comic operas. In the 1770-1780 decade, the early works of masters, such as Giovanni Paisiello, Pasquale Anfossi, Domenico Cimarosa, and Giuseppe Gazzaniga were accumulating a growing foundation for the glory of the comic opera genre in the next century.

#### 3.2. The peak of Italian comic opera creation

In 1782, Paisiello gained fame with *Le Barbier de Séville*, an opera whose libretto was originally written by the French playwright Beaumarchais as the first part of the Figaro trilogy in the 1770s. Paisiello was the first composer to bring this play to the opera stage. This comic opera tells the story of a complex love affair between Figaro Fagoo, a young, wealthy, and charming Spanish nobleman, and Rosina, whom he pursues throughout his life. When Rossini rewrote *Le Barbier de Séville*, he wrote to the elderly Paisiello that he had no intention of being disrespectful. At the same time, there are many similarities between the two versions of *Le Barbier de Séville*. In 1787, Paisiello's most famous tragicomedy, *Nina, or the Sorrowful Maiden* (Nina), was performed, and Paisiello's treatment of melody and the opera's performance techniques were excellent, so the opera caused a great deal of excitement and response at the time.

Domenico Cimarosa's *The Secret Marriage* (II Matrimonio segreto) premiered in Vienna in February 1792 and is a classic of Italian comic opera. The opera tells a story about a secret marriage, and the main characters Ferruccio and Suzanna, eventually come together after experiencing various difficulties and misunderstandings. The music in the opera is very innovative, and Cimarosa adopted a completely new approach to opera composition, paying more attention to chorus and solo singing, which reflects the grand and magnificent side of opera. In addition, the opera also incorporated some music elements that were relatively advanced at that time, such as irregular rhythm and changing themes. These elements make *The Secret Marriage* more avant-garde now. This play was greatly appreciated by Emperor Leopold, so much so that he first ordered a banquet for all the performers, then asked to have the entire opera performed again (this is said to be the longest encore in history), and gave the composer a large sum of money, almost equivalent to Mozart's salary for two years, plus a diamond-studded snuff box.

## 4. The uniqueness of Mozart's creation of Italian comic operas

Mozart is undoubtedly the most special opera composer in the development of Italian opera. In his works, we can see more daring and avant-garde plots full of realism, as well as innovations in composition techniques, stage aesthetics, performance forms, and script conception. The following text focuses on the creation of themes and techniques, and briefly describes the special nature of Mozart's creation of Italian opera.

### 4.1. New subject matter for creation

Mozart's Italian comic operas often involve love, marriage, society, and human issues, presented in a witty and humorous way. Mozart's experience of traveling around Europe with his father during his childhood exposed him to the lives of many people at the bottom of society, providing him with a wealth of material for his Italian comic operas. In *The Marriage of Figaro* (*Le Nozze Di Figaro*), the main character Figaro is a barber living at the bottom of society, but he is witty, brave, humorous, and sensitive, full of dramatic color. Other characters in the play are mostly common people, such as Cherubino, Marcellina, and Bartolo. Mozart paid great attention to the characterization of minor characters, and his descriptions of minor characters were vivid, making these people at the bottom of society occupy a very important position in the opera.

Some of Mozart's Italian operas contain elements of criticism of the aristocratic class. One of the main characters in *The Marriage of Figaro*, Count Almaviva, is an arrogant and vain aristocrat who loves to pursue women and even wants to restore the abolished "right of first night"[6], to possess the long-sought-after heroine Susanna. However, through the portrayal of the character of Count Almaviva, it also hinted at the corruption and decadence of the nobility class at the eve of the French Revolution in real life. Although Mozart's comic operas contained some criticism of nobility and power, they mainly reflected the lives, emotions, and values of the middle class and the lower class. In contrast, the audience of the opera series was more inclined towards the nobility and the upper class. In the content of the opera series, the relationships between people were often based on identity and status, and it also emphasized their role in establishing social norms, moral constraints, and authority over the lower classes. Therefore, the decline of opera series in the 18th century actually meant the gradual decline of the nobility and the upper class, as well as the rise of emerging classes such as the bourgeoisie.

### 4.2. New techniques of creativity

Mozart's musical innovations in Italian opera buffa not only improved the artistic level of opera but also pioneered an opera tradition that focuses on music, character development, and emotional expression. In the music structure of *The Marriage of Figaro*, Mozart adopted a complex musical structure, using a three-part structure in the overture and some arias, with a fast-slow-fast structure. He also skillfully used counterpoint, variation, and other techniques to enrich the expressiveness of opera music. In addition, Mozart introduced miscellaneous instruments, such as chimes, trumpets, and hammers, which brought more changes and novelty to the music. In Mozart's late creative peak, *Così fan tutte*, he used semitones, polyphony, and modulation to express character emotions in a more avant-garde style [7]. At the same time, it adopts a richer arrangement of voices, increases the combination of instruments, and so on, showing Mozart's more mature musical composition skills and style.

Mozart abandoned the single use of recitative in opera composition in his later period and adopted more diverse and rich forms of recitative. Therefore, the forms of the recitative works created by Mozart in his later period are more free and more varied, aiming to conform to the progress of the plot, and he also added a large number of duets to the opera. Mozart often used a large number of duets to

promote the development of the plot. In *The Marriage of Figaro*, Mozart created many wonderful duets. For example, in the first act, when the female protagonist Susanna is hiding the male servant Cherubino and is exposed by the count who wants to seduce Susanna, there is a trio, and in the third act, there is a six-part duet that reveals Figaro's true identity. These duets usually appear in key scenes and have very important dramatic effects.

## 5. Conclusion

The birth of Italian opera in the eighteenth century ushered in a new chapter in opera, enriching the meaning of the opera art through its innovations in vocal techniques, instrumental distribution, social satire, and art form, and inspiring viewers to think about human, social, and real life [8]. Based on an analysis of Italian comedic opera from different eras in the eighteenth century, the following five characteristics can be summarized. In the creation of Italian comedic opera in the first half of the eighteenth century, composers paid more attention to the richness of musical elements in opera, mainly its beautiful and smooth singing, and focused on the design of melodies and performance of singing skills, often using multiple instruments and choral ensembles to enhance musical effects. Secondly, Italian opera can reflect the social and cultural characteristics of the time [9]. With the acceleration of the urbanization process and the rise of urban culture, people's culture also began to gradually rise. Volkswagen music, art forms, such as drama, were also in increasing demand, and Italian comedies often reflected the customs, and cultural characteristics of Italian society at the time in their plots and characters. In the creation of Italian comedies in the second half of the eighteenth century, composers focused on making the plots light and humorous. The subject matter is mainly love and marriage, which completely deviates from the solemn myths and heroic story themes of opera, reflecting the aesthetic taste of the civic class and the corresponding social concepts. The second is that the characters in the show have sharp character and vivid images, and they are shaped by performance and music, so that the audience can better understand and introduce the plot. Finally, Italian opera also incorporates elements, such as dance and drama, which enhance its stage effects and appreciation. Generally speaking, Italian opera in the eighteenth century was an art form characterized by beautiful music, light and humorous plots, and vivid characters.

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