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Historical Figures and Events as Portrayed Through Opera and Art Song

Emanuel Stavrinakis
University of South Carolina - Columbia

Director of Thesis: E. Jacob Will Jr.

Second Reader: Thomas Brunson

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Abstract

In this thesis essay, an inspection of classical vocal music spanning centuries will identify works based on real-life historical figures and events. The range of works to be inspected span from the Late Renaissance, through the Baroque, Classical, Bel Canto, Romantic, and finally Modern era of classical composition. From the early days of vocal composition composers looked back into the past to draw inspiration for their desired expression and portrayal of human conflict. However, in many cases the figures or historical facts portrayed differ quite significantly from how they were in real life.

Composers and librettists, the authors of the text being set to music, had a habit of either embellishing real events, manipulating timelines, or changing a real historical figure's personality as a means of heightening the drama, offering a new perspective, or expressing a new idea or theme through a real person or a surrounding point in history. This essay will attempt to compare and contrast just how certain facts are manipulated, to what end, and whether an artist can still find inspiration from the true history to accurately portray the composer's vision of it.

This essay is presented with a vocal recital, in which many of the operas and art songs discussed in this essay will be presented through performance. This recital will be given live and recorded for posterity. In performing these works, a brief explanation of the historical background will be given, and the approach will be one of paying respect to the real figures portrayed in the works as well as the composer's intentions. The following essay will be divided into the aforementioned compositional eras, and will offer a deep insight into how real events inspire art. Through the joining of history and music, a powerful reminder can be given that life often imitates art and that history frequently repeats itself.

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Summary

This essay will open with an introduction, explaining the origins of history represented through vocal composition. The two main genres examined will be operatic composition and art song, with a brief touch on the oratorio, a unique genre in which the composition resembles an opera but without the traditional staging of one. The thesis question will be presented and will influence the rest of the essay.

Following the introduction, considerable time will be spent with the first major historical opera, Monteverdi's *L'Incoronazione di Poppea*. This opera was written in a sort of transitional style bridging the Renaissance and Baroque and portrayed events and figures prominent in the Julio-Claudian dynasty of Rome. From this unique work, the proper Baroque era will be surveyed. Much of the focus will be on the works of George Frideric Handel, who not only frequently tackled mythological and religious subjects but put quite a bit of effort into recounting history and its participants.

Moving from the Baroque into the Classical era, there appears to be a decline in popularity of historical works, but with some effort, examples can be found. After the Classical era, the essay moves into the Bel Canto, a term meaning literally "beautiful singing," and a popular subgenre of vocal writing found within the 19th century. The Bel Canto era has a wealth of historical settings to examine, mostly from the likes of Gaetano Donizetti, Gioachino Rossini, and Vincenzo Bellini. Departing from the brief but productive Bel Canto era, the Romantic era has plenty of works to examine based in history both operatic and in art song.

This impressive scope will compare and contrast the real people and settings as historians recount them with how the composer and librettist intended on seeing them expressed. In a concluding segment, the essay will arrive at the conclusion that while in many cases the person

in the music differs wildly from how they behaved in real life, one cannot fully separate vocal art from its inspiration.

Introduction

Music has long been lauded as one of the supreme manners of human expression. Both instrumental and vocal music has been an important part of history for about as long as it has been recorded. Mankind has enjoyed expressing itself through song. Therefore, it is only natural that man tends to recount its own history through music as well. For as long as man has been waging war, falling in love, establishing empires, writing poetry, and deposing rulers, artists have been adapting such events into their work. There is no shortage of historical events that have been set to music.

The question is raised then, should these events and figures be presented as faithfully as possible? Certainly, it poses a noble task to educate through musical settings. Still, there is the question of drama and emotion. After all, what is the point of music but to stir the soul and to make the audience feel something? The great composers knew this all too well. Thus, even when writing about historical figures and events, there is often some liberty taken to convey their music in a fascinating and moving way,

It is only natural for such liberties to be taken. The composer, after all, wishes to move and engage their audience. Still, just how different are these adaptations from the events they claim to represent? This thesis study will examine the vocal works of some of the greatest composers who ever lived. Almost every one of them set vocal writing to a historical theme. Whether the singer is functioning as an adaptation of a real figure on the operatic stage or acting as a narrator in the realm of art song, there is something to be said for works based on real events. There is an added layer of seriousness and relatability that can be felt when the singer onstage is portraying a real person or commenting on a real event.

This thesis will be presented in two parts, one written, one performed live in recital. In both these mediums works ranging from the 1600s to the 20th century will be discussed at length. The main question this study will aim to answer is how historical figures and events are adapted for vocal music, and how can these works be performed in a way that honors both history and the composer?

Late Renaissance / Early Baroque

The Italian Renaissance is largely remembered for paving the way for a myriad of new forms of human expression. The advancements in visual art, poetry, and literature are well documented and celebrated. However, there was also an explosion of musical exploration to coincide with the renewed interest in Humanistic attitudes and beliefs. Music was able to explore themes of pleasure, love, and triumph of man beyond a religious setting. One of the greatest fruits of this revolution was the staging and composition of the first opera, a work where the sung text, or libretto, is staged with the orchestra commenting throughout.

The collaboration of the famed Florentine Camerata, an elite group of Florence's most skilled poets, musicians, and thinkers, led one of their own, Jacopo Peri, to produce what is largely considered the first opera, *La Dafne*, in 1598.¹ The music is now largely lost, but the libretto remains, and the subject, Greek myth, would set a precedent for opera. Almost all of the known operas from this period are mythological adaptations, coinciding with the renewed interest in Greek and Roman philosophy and culture that characterized the Renaissance.

When Claudio Monteverdi, a celebrated composer of both large-scale sacred works and secular madrigals, premiered his first opera *L'Orfeo* in 1607 the results were staggering.² Presented in madrigal style and subtitled *favola in musica* (musical fable), the stirring dramatic shifts, large ensemble, and musical excellence made Monteverdi into the *de facto* operatic master of his day. *L'Orfeo* remains the earliest opera to receive regular staging and recording to this day.

Still, one must note that Monteverdi's choice of operatic subject matter was uniform in that all of his works were for a long time, adaptations of myth. However, almost all of them are

¹ "Jacopo Peri." *Encyclopædia Britannica*, Encyclopædia Britannica, Inc., <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Jacopo-Peri>.

² Arnold, Denis Midgley. "Claudio Monteverdi". *Encyclopedia Britannica*, 25 Nov. 2021, <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Claudio-Monteverdi>. Accessed 17 March 2022.

tragically lost with the notable exception of *Il Ritorno d'Ulisse in Patria*, adapted from Homer's *Odyssey*. It is known, however, that after *L'Orfeo* almost every opera Monteverdi wrote was after mythological, not historic, subject.

Yet, Monteverdi would come to revolutionize the operatic genre again with his final opera, *L'Incoronazione di Poppea*, composed shortly before his death and premiered for the Carnival season of 1643.³ This sweeping, almost four-hour work, was one of the first, and most notable operas that shifted its attention from myth to real people. The subject matter, realized in a libretto by Giovanni Francesco Busenello, concerns a well-known episode of Ancient Roman history: the crowning of Nero's mistress Poppaea as empress of Rome and his banishment of his wife Octavia into exile. The opera not only features such well-known Roman figures as the aforementioned Nero (Nerone in the opera), Poppaea Sabina (Poppea), and Claudia Octavia (Ottavia), but also Nero's tutor, the philosopher Seneca, his nephew Lucan (Lucano), and also Poppaea's first husband Otho (Ottone).

Even more interestingly, Monteverdi and his librettist Busenello are not afraid to portray the flaws and debauchery of the characters or of Rome at the time. In fact, the morality of *L'Incoronazione di Poppea* is often debated, for it seems the opera's conclusion rewards the practice of murder, manipulation, and abuse of power. Every human character in the work showcases some unsavory behavior. The greatest offenders of all are the titular Poppea and her eventual husband Nerone, who close the work in the famous and musically sublime duet "Pur ti miro." This is after leaving behind a pile of bodies and an increasingly unstable Rome. In some ways this rapturous duet can be seen as an irony on the part of Monteverdi and Busenello, as in

³ Arnold, Denis Midgley. "Claudio Monteverdi". Encyclopedia Britannica, 25 Nov. 2021, <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Claudio-Monteverdi>. Accessed 17 March 2022.

history, Poppaea Sabina would be killed in a violent spat by Nero not long after ascending the throne.⁴

Some, including both Wendy Heller and Ellen Rosand in separate essays, have suggested that the inherent shock, immorality, infidelity, and violence in *L'Incoronazione di Poppea* was meant to simultaneously warn against totalitarian rule and to celebrate the Venetian Republic as virtuous. Political motivations aside, it is important to observe *Poppea* in a historical context, as there are several liberties taken within the structure of the work.

First, and most glaringly, is the presence of non-human characters. Famed Austrian conductor and celebrated Monteverdi interpreter Nikolaus Harnoncourt wrote that, as was common at the time, the plot of Monteverdi's works exist on three levels. The first being "the fatal powers," in this case represented by Virtue (Virtù), Fortune (Fortuna), and Love (Amore) who appear in the prologue, striking a wager on who amongst them is the most powerful. The only one of these to sing again is Amore, who sings of its triumph in preventing Ottone from murdering Poppea on behalf of Ottavia. The second level is influenced by the first, and this consists of the traditional mythological gods, in this case Pallas, Mercury, and in a rarely included scene, Venus. The first two interact with Seneca. The latter celebrates the triumph of Poppea. The third and final level is the human world, which is influenced by the previous two levels, and represents the action proper.

The second major departure from historical reality is a rather drastic manipulation of the timeline. Busenello's main historical source was cited as the *Annals* of Tacitus, an account of the

⁴ Rosand, Ellen. "Il Ritorno a Seneca." *Cambridge Opera Journal*, vol. 21, no. 2, 2009, pp. 119-137. *ProQuest*, <https://login.pallas2.tcl.sc.edu/login?url=https://www-proquest-com.pallas2.tcl.sc.edu/docview/753581018?accountid=13965>.

reigns of several Roman emperors.⁵ In the *Annals*, the date of Nero's exile and eventual murder of his wife Octavia, his subsequent marriage of Poppaea, and Seneca's retirement is dated 62 AD.⁶ Then, Tacitus marks 65 AD as the year of the death of Seneca and his nephew Lucan as ordered by Nero due to the discovery of The Pisonian Conspiracy.⁷ This conspiracy was enacted by a Roman senator to depose Nero, and Tacitus has even suggested that some of the conspirators desired to install Seneca himself on the throne.⁸ Unfortunately for him and Lucan, the plot was uncovered and both were ordered to commit suicide, per Roman practice.

Monteverdi and Busenello's order of events follow a different timeline. Whereas in real life the banishment of Octavia and Nero's marriage to Poppea predated Seneca's death, the opera reverses the events. Seneca's death in the opera follows his attempts to persuade Nerone to break off his affair with Poppea on behalf of the pleas of Ottavia. Seneca's attempt to reason with Nerone ends in a shouting match in which the vocal lines of both characters become increasingly erratic and violent. Finally, Nerone outwardly shuns his tutor and proclaims as emperor he can do as he pleases. In a subsequent scene, Poppea manipulates Nerone into decreeing Seneca's death which follows in the opening of the second act. Seneca embraces the tenets of Stoicism by accepting his death amidst the protest of his students, opening his veins in his bathtub. The

⁵ Heller, Wendy. *Tacitus Incognito: Opera as History in "L'incoronazione Di Poppea"*, pp. 40. www.academia.edu/11619140/Tacitus_Incognito_Opera_as_History_in_Lincoronazione_di_Poppea_.

⁶ Heller, Wendy. *Tacitus Incognito: Opera as History in "L'incoronazione Di Poppea"*, pp 56. www.academia.edu/11619140/Tacitus_Incognito_Opera_as_History_in_Lincoronazione_di_Poppea_.

⁷ Heller, Wendy. *Tacitus Incognito: Opera as History in "L'incoronazione Di Poppea"*, pp. 56. www.academia.edu/11619140/Tacitus_Incognito_Opera_as_History_in_Lincoronazione_di_Poppea_.

⁸ Seneca, Lucius Annaeus, and Donald Roberston. *Letters from a Stoic: The Ancient Classic*, Capstone, Chichester, 2021, pp. xxvi-xxviii.

operatic version is meant to portray Seneca's death as a direct result of Poppea's meddling whereas in real life it was a political move.

In an even more radical and puzzling change, Monteverdi's Lucano does not die alongside his uncle and instead appears shortly after, *alongside* Nerone, and singing in *celebration* of his uncle's death. Their duet, "Hor che Seneca e morto," includes a rather dizzying display of florid singing. The extensive runs on the word "cantiam" (let us sing) can be interpreted as a portrayal of the excess and debauchery of Nerone and Lucano. Both characters sing merrily at Seneca's demise and the opening now available for Nerone to possess Poppea. The subsequent exile of Ottavia is brought about by the disgraced empress enlisting the help of Ottone, Poppea's lawful husband, in an unsuccessful, and fictional, attempt to kill Poppea. When Nerone discovers this plot he exiles Ottavia, Ottone, and his lover Drusilla in the final act before finally crowning Poppea as empress. In reality, the historical Octavia's exile was a result of Nero's own disdain for his wife and bringing false charges of adultery against her.⁹ After public outcry at this act, Nero had her brutally murdered.¹⁰

Keeping these changes in timeline and historical detail in mind, the question moves to if the characters themselves accurately represent their real-life counterparts. In some ways Monteverdi and Busenello have managed to capture the essence of the figures in mind, even if the details are muddled and the action maneuvered. Nero has long been portrayed by historians as being one of Rome's most cruel dictators, and Monteverdi's Nerone follows suit. Nerone is musically and dramatically prone to explosion, outburst, cruelty, and unbridled desire. His targets range from Seneca to Ottavia to anyone else who stands in the way of his desired Poppea.

⁹ "Claudia Octavia." Oxford Reference. . . Date of access 22 Mar. 2022, <<https://www.oxfordreference.com/view/10.1093/oi/authority.20110803095616222>>

¹⁰ "Claudia Octavia." Oxford Reference. . . Date of access 22 Mar. 2022, <<https://www.oxfordreference.com/view/10.1093/oi/authority.20110803095616222>>

Monteverdi also writes extended florid singing for the role, hinting at the emperor's inherent instability. The only moments of tenderness Nerone indulges in is when he is either singing to, or about Poppea. In short, Nerone is every inch the example of the pitfalls of authoritarian rule and his justification for his violent acts can be summed up with "because I can." Nothing will stop the love, or perhaps more accurately, lust, that he has for Poppea.

As for the title role herself, Monteverdi's Poppea is thoroughly sensual, with high arching and seductive phrases. There are moments however, where she reveals a nastier side to the character. Both in the scene with her actual husband Ottone, and where she suggests Nerone kill Seneca, there is an air of coldness and wickedness. Yet still, there are some sparing moments where she is almost portrayed as childlike. Throughout the opera, when not in the company of Nerone, she is often accompanied by her nurse, Arnalta. The interactions between the two portray Poppea in a deceptively innocent light. For example, towards the end of the second act, Poppea sings a musically sweet and somewhat simplistic aria in celebration of Seneca's death, which she helped to orchestrate. The dramatic irony is jarring, even more so when minutes later Poppea must be put to sleep by Arnalta singing the now-famous lullaby "Oblivion soave." In reality not much is known about the real Poppaea Sabina's personality. It is believed she was a woman of great beauty, which would certainly reflect Monteverdi's Poppea.¹¹ In addition, she was known to have been the main influence in deciding the deaths of Seneca, Octavia, and the conspicuously absent from Monteverdi's work, Agrippina, Nero's mother.¹²

¹¹ "Poppaea Sabina." *Columbia Electronic Encyclopedia, 6th Edition*, Mar. 2021, p. 1. *EBSCOhost*, <https://search-ebSCOhost-com.pallas2.tcl.sc.edu/login.aspx?direct=true&db=a9h&AN=134488899&site=ehost-live>.

¹² "Poppaea Sabina." *Columbia Electronic Encyclopedia, 6th Edition*, Mar. 2021, p. 1. *EBSCOhost*, <https://search-ebSCOhost-com.pallas2.tcl.sc.edu/login.aspx?direct=true&db=a9h&AN=134488899&site=ehost-live>.

As for the empress Claudia Octavia, Monteverdi and Busenello give their Ottavia a violent edge that is not found in historical records. In the opera she appears once per act. The first and third act appearances are characterized by their respective laments “Disprezzata regina” and “Addio Roma.” This would reflect the real Octavia’s despair well. However, it is in the second act where another side to the character is shown. Further incensed at Nerone and dismayed at the failure of Seneca to help her, she calls for Ottone to kill his wife Poppea, lest she have his head instead. The vocal writing for Ottavia becomes jagged and harsh, rising to a peak at the repetition of the command “vuò che l’uccida” (I want you to kill her). This gives the operatic Ottavia a streak of immorality and culpability in the act of ordering Poppea’s death that is not present in the sympathetic historical accounts of the real Claudia Octavia.

As for Ottone, the operatic equivalent to Otho, Monteverdi and Busenello portray him as thoroughly despaired over his wife’s infidelity. The first act proper begins with a lament from him at the loss of Poppea. He later begs her to return to him, which she coldly refuses. Even when presented with a new lover, the fictional Drusilla, he proclaims “Drusilla ho in bocca, et ho Poppea nel core” (I have Drusilla on my lips but Poppea in my heart). At the end of the second act he fails to bring himself to kill Poppea after Amore prevents him from doing so. It is in the third act when he is exiled with Drusilla, he fully accepts her. The real Otho was not exiled by Nero after Poppaea’s coronation but was sent to govern the province of Lusitania.¹³ He was certainly no fan of Nero however, and later participated alongside Galba in a rebellion against the emperor.¹⁴ Once Galba took power, Otho organized a successful assassination against him and seized the throne for himself for about two months before being defeated in battle by

¹³ "Otho." *Britannica Academic*, Encyclopædia Britannica, 9 Aug. 2007. academic-eb-com.pallas2.tcl.sc.edu/levels/collegiate/article/Otho/57646. Accessed 22 Mar. 2022.

¹⁴ "Otho." *Britannica Academic*, Encyclopædia Britannica, 9 Aug. 2007. academic-eb-com.pallas2.tcl.sc.edu/levels/collegiate/article/Otho/57646. Accessed 22 Mar. 2022.

Vitellius and committing suicide.¹⁵ Therefore, the fate of Monteverdi's Ottone and the real Otho vary.

One of the more drastic historical changes is the fate of Monteverdi's Lucano, based on the historic Lucan. As previously stated, Lucan was accused of conspiring against Nero, whom he came to despise, and ordered to commit suicide alongside his uncle Seneca.¹⁶ This is largely different from the Lucano Monteverdi presents us with who not only outlasts his uncle but sings with Nerone in joy over Seneca's death. It is puzzling as to why this character, who only appears in one scene, is indicated as Lucan at all considering any unnamed page would have served the same purpose. It can be theorized that the extreme change represents the world of the operatic *Poppea* as a whole, where love and passion skew all logic, virtue, and reason.

Lastly, the character of Seneca must be discussed. In life, Seneca's Stoic philosophy and actions seem opposed. As Nero's tutor, he was lavished with gifts and rose to great wealth while also taking an active role in politics and influencing the emperor.¹⁷ He would also publicly claim Nero's innocence in the deaths of Agrippina and Britannicus, the emperor's mother and step-brother respectively, only to later reverse his stance when facing death himself.¹⁸ Tacitus writes that when confronted by Nero's guards he exclaimed "For to whom had Nero's cruelty been unknown? Nor was anything left him, after the killing of his mother and his brother, but to add the murder of his guardian and tutor."¹⁹ One must question the validity of Stoicism, a philosophy

¹⁵ "Otho." *Britannica Academic*, Encyclopædia Britannica, 9 Aug. 2007. academic-eb-com.pallas2.tcl.sc.edu/levels/collegiate/article/Otho/57646. Accessed 22 Mar. 2022.

¹⁶ "Lucan." *Britannica Academic*, Encyclopædia Britannica, 25 Mar. 1999. academic-eb-com.pallas2.tcl.sc.edu/levels/collegiate/article/Lucan/49226. Accessed 22 Mar. 2022.

¹⁷ Seneca, Lucius Annaeus, and Donald Roberston. *Letters from a Stoic: The Ancient Classic*, Capstone, Chichester, 2021, pp. ix-xxix.

¹⁸ Seneca, Lucius Annaeus, and Donald Roberston. *Letters from a Stoic: The Ancient Classic*, Capstone, Chichester, 2021, pp. xxvii.

¹⁹ Seneca, Lucius Annaeus, and Donald Roberston. *Letters from a Stoic: The Ancient Classic*, Capstone, Chichester, 2021, pp. xxvii.

that celebrates restraint and acceptance of fate, as practiced by a man who played accessory to a murderous dictator.

Monteverdi and Busenello do bring the validity of Seneca's beliefs into question. In his first appearance he indulges in extensive flattery of Ottavia, singing of her beauty and nobility. This is accentuated by his ridiculously long melisma on the Italian article "la," instead of the noun "belleza."²⁰ He pledges to help Ottavia, which already would constitute a breach of passive Stoic behavior. In his next appearance he attempts, in vain, to reason with Nerone. The music again swells to a heated crescendo before Nerone outwardly declares his hatred for Seneca and his intention to continue his affair with Poppea.

In the second act the action opens with Seneca rejoicing in solitude. This would suggest that after his confrontation with Nerone he realized his error in assisting a tyrant and withdrew from Nerone's service, perhaps out of fear. This is consistent with the historic Seneca's retirement in 62 AD, albeit on a different timeline. When Seneca is told by Mercury that he is to be ordered to commit suicide he reacts happily as it will give him the opportunity to put his teachings to use and to ascend to heaven for his virtue. He then dismisses Nerone's messenger arriving with the death warrant and embraces his mortality. Seneca's music shifts here to more linear vocal writing, less flashy, but with the ring of truth and honesty. This is especially apparent in his final scene, where he appears with his students or "famigliari." He literally proclaims "Amici, è giunta l'ora di praticare in fatti quella virtù che tanto celebrai" (Friends, the hour has come in which I am to practice that virtue which I have praised so much). In essence, Seneca sees his death as a moment to embrace virtue, to practice what he preaches, and

²⁰ Rosand, Ellen. "Il Ritorno a Seneca." *Cambridge Opera Journal*, vol. 21, no. 2, 2009, pp. 129. *ProQuest*, <https://login.pallas2.tcl.sc.edu/login?url=https://www-proquest-com.pallas2.tcl.sc.edu/docview/753581018?accountid=13965>.

to set an example for his students. The students beg him to reconsider, as they believe life is too sweet to die. Yet, Seneca is resolved and commands them to dry their tears and draw his bath, where his innocent blood will flow like the river of life.

Monteverdi and Busenello's Seneca captures the paradoxical essence of the historic Seneca. Seneca is first presented as haughty, morally bankrupt, and a political hack. Even other characters within the work, including two soldiers and Ottavia's page Valletto, criticize him outright as a hypocrite. However, despite his first appearances revealing him as a fraud, he certainly finds his way to virtue in act two with his withdrawal and celebration of death. Thus, when he discovers and embraces virtue, he exits the plot and the world of the other characters where virtue is disgraced and love defeats reason.

Overall, despite the presence of non-human characters, manipulation of timelines, and alteration of historical fact: Monteverdi and Busenello seem to capture the essence of the faults of Roman leadership in the reign of Nero. The status of *L'Incoronazione di Poppea* as one of the first and greatest historical operas shows that Monteverdi had once again revolutionized the genre to allow the triumphs and faults of man to be shown not only through myth, but through historical adaptation. Its importance and influence on the genre and vocal writing as a whole cannot be understated.

The Baroque Era

Leaving the transitional style of the late Renaissance, the next area of discussion is the Baroque era. This era is characterized with an increased presence in *da capo* arias, the popularity of the *seria* subgenre, and an increased attention to florid vocal writing. With Bach never venturing into opera proper and the French composers like Lully and Rameau mainly adapting mythical tales, the main operas based on historical subjects from this period are in Italian. Despite a renewed interest in Vivaldi's works, which includes operas based in history such as *Tito Manlio*, it is the historical efforts of George Frideric Handel that receive regular attention today.

Handel's operatic output is extensive and covers fictional and historical subjects. Some of the less frequently staged historical operas include *Alessandro*, *Tolomeo*, and *Serse*, based on Alexander the Great, Ptolemy, and Xerxes respectively.²¹ The more often-performed Handel operas based on historical subjects are *Agrippina*, and arguably his most popular opera, *Giulio Cesare in Egitto*.

First examining *Agrippina*, which some consider to be Handel's first operatic masterpiece, the setting returns to Ancient Rome. The opera premiered in 1709 and was set to a libretto by Vincenzo Grimani.²² This opera belongs to a subgenre of the larger art form, known as the *opera seria*, where the work is presented as a series of arias and recitative with little to no ensemble pieces. The action takes place before the timeline of *L'Incoronazione di Poppea*, and focuses on the machinations of Nero's mother, the titular Agrippina the Younger. However,

²¹ "List of Operas by George Frideric Handel." *Operafolio.com*, http://www.operafolio.com/list_of_operas.asp?n=George_Frideric_Handel.

²² Levy, Katelin. "Agrippina: The Opera vs the History." *PBS*, Public Broadcasting Service, 5 June 2020, <https://www.pbs.org/wnet/gperf/blog/agrippina-the-opera-vs-the-history/>.

unlike in *Poppea*, the action of the work is played more for laughs than a critique of Ancient Rome. There is plenty of backstabbing involved, but the main characters all make it out alive.

The plot concerns Agrippina's plotting and manipulation to instill her young son Nerone onto the throne, where she can act as regent. The characters of Poppea and Ottone also play a major role in the work. She attempts various methods of achieving this goal. These include enlisting the help of the political figures Pallas (Pallante) and Narcissus (Narciso), manipulating her husband, the emperor Claudius (Claudio), and trying to remove anyone who could challenge Nerone's claim to the throne. Throughout the work, the main male characters try to win the love of Poppea, with Claudio, Nerone, and Ottone all vying for her affections. Agrippina tries to leverage this to her advantage. There are many twists, turns, and plots that are foiled, usually comedically. In the end, Agrippina's goal is achieved, as Claudio declares that Nerone will inherit the throne and Ottone will wed Poppea. This arrangement receives the blessing of Juno (Giunone) herself, and the opera more or less ends with the main characters satisfied.

The main historical event in question, Agrippina the Younger installing her son Nero on the throne through use of manipulation, reaches the same conclusion in the opera. It is in the details where differences start to arise. Firstly, similar to Monteverdi's work, there is the presence of a non-human character, Giunone. However, this is on a much smaller scale than in *Poppea*, and the presence of an Olympian goddess does not directly affect the plot.

In addition, the events surrounding Nero's real ascent to the throne can hardly be played for laughs as it is in Handel's opera. Agrippina the Younger's influence and power in Ancient Rome is notorious, particularly her ability to convince men to do what she wanted.²³ In history,

²³ Britannica, The Editors of Encyclopaedia. "Julia Agrippina". *Encyclopedia Britannica*, 1 Jan. 2022, <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Julia-Agrippina>. Accessed 22 March 2022.

Agrippina was exiled by her brother Caligula after a failed conspiracy to have him killed.²⁴ After Caligula's murder and Claudius' ascension to the throne, the new emperor had her returned to Rome.²⁵ Eventually, Claudius would have his wife Messalina and her lover Gaius Silius killed for their infidelity and publicly conspiring against him.²⁶ Agrippina would seize the opportunity to become empress, and convinced Claudius to not only marry her, but to adopt Nero, her son by her previous marriage, naming him heir instead of Claudius' own son Britannicus.²⁷ It is then widely believed Agrippina had Claudius poisoned which allowed Nero to become emperor at the age of sixteen.²⁸ Agrippina would practically be empress in her position as regent over the young Nero, but over time he listened to her less and less and had her killed after she opposed his affair with Poppaea.²⁹ In the opera, Claudius' poisoning by Agrippina is not portrayed, and he willingly gives the throne to Nero.

As far as the similarities between the historic people and their operatic counterparts, Handel and Grimaldi certainly capture the personalities of the figures in question. The title role of Agrippina more than reflects the manipulative and cunning Agrippina of history. She is constantly plotting, scheming, and maneuvering her son, and by extension, herself into power. The role is decidedly one for a mezzo-soprano, as the frequent excursions into the lower register reflect the venomous nature and wickedness of the character. She also, however, can reveal a

²⁴ Levy, Katelin. "Agrippina: The Opera vs the History." *PBS*, Public Broadcasting Service, 5 June 2020, <https://www.pbs.org/wnet/gperf/blog/agrippina-the-opera-vs-the-history/>.

²⁵ Levy, Katelin. "Agrippina: The Opera vs the History." *PBS*, Public Broadcasting Service, 5 June 2020, <https://www.pbs.org/wnet/gperf/blog/agrippina-the-opera-vs-the-history/>.

²⁶ Momigliano, Arnaldo Dante. "Claudius". *Encyclopedia Britannica*, 9 Oct. 2021, <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Claudius-Roman-emperor>. Accessed 22 March 2022

²⁷ Britannica, The Editors of Encyclopaedia. "Julia Agrippina". *Encyclopedia Britannica*, 1 Jan. 2022, <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Julia-Agrippina>. Accessed 22 March 2022.

²⁸ Levy, Katelin. "Agrippina: The Opera vs the History." *PBS*, Public Broadcasting Service, 5 June 2020, <https://www.pbs.org/wnet/gperf/blog/agrippina-the-opera-vs-the-history/>.

²⁹ Britannica, The Editors of Encyclopaedia. "Julia Agrippina". *Encyclopedia Britannica*, 1 Jan. 2022, <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Julia-Agrippina>. Accessed 22 March 2022

seductive side, particularly when she is manipulating the characters around her. In these moments her music becomes more lyrical and inviting, with longer phrases. To her credit, she does express genuine concern and affection for her son Nerone. This is particularly highlighted when she invokes the gods to help her son in the second act aria “Pensieri, voi mi tormentate” (Thoughts how you torment me). In this aria Agrippina’s vocal writing takes the form of long, languishing phrases as she desperately tries to think of a way to defeat her enemies and install Nerone to the throne. However, despite the occasional human moment, Agrippina is certainly characterized by her manipulative skills in the opera, as she commonly is in a historical sense.

Moving to her husband Claudius, or Claudio in the opera, there is certainly a cruelty to how Handel and Grimaldi approach the character. He is frequently the butt of the joke, constantly being influenced, manipulated, and emasculated by both Agrippina and Poppea. This is ironically commented on by the decision to make Claudio a bass role, a voice type that is usually associated with authority and power. His first act aria, “Vieni, o cara” (Come, my love) is sung by Claudio as a genuine plea to Poppea, while the latter is thoroughly repulsed by him. The vocal writing is languid and romantic, but the dramatic situation paints an ironic picture. The decision, however, to make Claudio into a bumbling fool unaware of the string-pulling his wife is participating in, is somewhat consistent with how the historic Claudius was seen. Claudius was said to have been unattractive, sickly, and easily manipulated by women he was attracted to, including Agrippina.³⁰ In the opera Claudio is also enraptured by Poppea, however there is nothing to suggest that the historic Claudius attempted to woo Poppaea Sabina. In addition, Claudio in the opera is alive at the conclusion, whereas the historic Claudius was almost certainly poisoned by Agrippina to allow Nero to take the throne.

³⁰ Momigliano, Arnaldo Dante. "Claudius". *Encyclopedia Britannica*, 9 Oct. 2021, <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Claudius-Roman-emperor>. Accessed 22 March 2022.

Handel's Nerone is certainly portrayed less violently and sadistically than Monteverdi's. After all, Nerone as portrayed in *Agrippina* is only about sixteen years old, and his tyrannical tendencies are mostly embodied by his mother. Still, there is a definite lust in Handel's Nerone. He is portrayed as demanding and thoroughly enraptured with Poppea. He is not yet cruel, but he shows the root of his future evil tendencies. This portrayal by Handel and Grimani can be seen as an attempt to focus on the historical Nero's romantic side rather than his wickedness.

Looking at Poppea and Ottone, there are similarities to how they were in real life. Poppea, a soprano in Handel's work, is portrayed as seductive and suggestive. This is certainly consistent with how she is recorded in history. Handel's Ottone rejects a chance at the throne just to be with Poppea. This is based on the real-life marriage between Otho and Poppaea Sabina, which is portrayed in the end of the opera. Overall, Handel and Grimani manage to capture the spirit of these figures, if not the exact detail of how they came into power.

Handel's most popular opera to date is another *seria*: *Giulio Cesare in Egitto*. This work also concerns Roman characters. The two main characters in the work are the titular Julius Caesar (Cesare), legendary Roman conqueror and Cleopatra, the famous queen of Egypt. *Giulio Cesare* premiered in 1724.³¹ In addition there are appearances by the boy-king of Egypt, Ptolemy XIII (Tolomeo), and Sextus Pompeius (Sesto) and his mother Cornelia, the son and wife of the deceased Pompey. Handel's score was set to a libretto by Nicola Haym, who borrowed heavily from an earlier libretto written by Francesco Bussani for an opera of the same name composed

³¹ Monson, Craig. "'Giulio Cesare in Egitto': From Sartorio (1677) to Handel (1724)." *Music & Letters*, vol. 66, no. 4, Oxford University Press, 1985, pp. 313
<http://www.jstor.org/stable/855135>.

by Antonio Sartorio in 1677.³² The primary historical sources for these works are believed to be historical accounts by the likes of Dio, Plutarch, Suetonius, Lucan, and perhaps Caesar himself.³³

Handel's *Giulio Cesare* opens with Cesare arriving in Egypt in pursuit of his enemy Pompey. He is considering sparing him and is surprised to find that Tolomeo has already beheaded Pompey, which enrages Cesare. Pompey's widow Cornelia and her son Sesto swear to avenge Pompey's death. Meanwhile Cleopatra desires to rule Egypt and plots to seduce Cesare to help her achieve this goal. Eventually Cleopatra and Cesare develop real feelings for each other, which prompts her to warn him of Tolomeo's conspiring against him. In the end, Sesto avenges his father by killing Tolomeo, Cleopatra becomes the sole ruler of Egypt, and celebrates her love with Cesare.

The broad strokes of Handel's opera do seem to line up with historical accounts of Caesar's time in Egypt. When Caesar arrived in pursuit of Pompey he really was greeted by Ptolemy XIII having already beheaded him.³⁴ In addition, Egypt was being co-ruled by the eighteen year old Cleopatra and her ten year old brother and husband Ptolemy with both siblings looking to use Caesar to achieve sole rule over Egypt.³⁵ In history, Cleopatra would go on to

³² Monson, Craig. "'Giulio Cesare in Egitto': From Sartorio (1677) to Handel (1724)." *Music & Letters*, vol. 66, no. 4, Oxford University Press, 1985, pp. 313
<http://www.jstor.org/stable/855135>.

³³ Monson, Craig. "'Giulio Cesare in Egitto': From Sartorio (1677) to Handel (1724)." *Music & Letters*, vol. 66, no. 4, Oxford University Press, 1985, pp. 313
<http://www.jstor.org/stable/855135>.

³⁴ Harris, Karen. "Cleopatra and Julius Caesar's Relationship: What Happened and Why Were They Together." *History Daily*, 21 Aug. 2020, <https://historydaily.org/cleopatra-julius-caesar-relationship-facts-stories-trivia>.

³⁵ Harris, Karen. "Cleopatra and Julius Caesar's Relationship: What Happened and Why Were They Together." *History Daily*, 21 Aug. 2020, <https://historydaily.org/cleopatra-julius-caesar-relationship-facts-stories-trivia>.

seduce Caesar and eventually bore a son, Caesarion, by him.³⁶ However, the means Cleopatra uses to seduce Caesar differ from the opera and historical accounts. In the opera she uses deception, disguising herself as the maid Lidia to seduce Cesare. Historical accounts state that in defiance of Ptolemy, she had herself rolled into a bed rug by her servant, which was presented as a gift to Caesar, and once unrolled revealed the beautiful Cleopatra.³⁷ In addition, the fate of Ptolemy differs between Handel's account and historical record. In the opera, Sesto kills Tolomeo to avenge his father and protect his mother, Cornelia, from his advances. The historical Ptolemy XIII was defeated in battle by Caesar and his exact method of death is unknown.³⁸ Still, the opera goes from Point A to Point B in a comparable method to how it really happened.

Looking at how the historical figures are adapted for the opera, things again seem to line up decently well, but not perfectly. The first glaring question rests with the decision to cast Julius Caesar, who was in his fifties at the time of the work, as a castrato. The answer lies with Handel's intentions of portraying Cesare as equal parts conqueror and romantic lead. The style at the time was to utilize the purity of the castrato instrument as a means of displaying virtue, love, and heroism.³⁹ Further still, Handel had one of the leading castrati of the world, Senesino, at his disposal and tailored the role for him.⁴⁰ Otherwise, throughout the opera Caesar gets to showcase

³⁶ Harris, Karen. "Cleopatra and Julius Caesar's Relationship: What Happened and Why Were They Together." *History Daily*, 21 Aug. 2020, <https://historydaily.org/cleopatra-julius-caesar-relationship-facts-stories-trivia>.

³⁷ Harris, Karen. "Cleopatra and Julius Caesar's Relationship: What Happened and Why Were They Together." *History Daily*, 21 Aug. 2020,

³⁸ Britannica, The Editors of Encyclopaedia. "Ptolemy XIII Theos Philopator". *Encyclopedia Britannica*, 12 Jun. 2008, <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Ptolemy-XIII-Theos-Philopator>. Accessed 23 March 2022.

³⁹ Yong, Edward C. "Historical Accuracy in the Two Versions of 'Giulio Cesare in Egitto' by Händel and Sartorio." *Academia.edu - Share Research*, pp. 2
www.academia.edu/1899150/Historical_Accuracy_in_the_two_versions_of_Giulio_Cesare_in_Egitto_by_H%C3%A4ndel_and_Sartorio.

⁴⁰ Yong, Edward C. "Historical Accuracy in the Two Versions of 'Giulio Cesare in Egitto' by Händel and Sartorio." *Academia.edu - Share Research*, pp. 2

equally his militaristic and romantic side. The first words out of his mouth is the *bravura* aria “Presti omai l’Egizia terra” in which he orders the Egyptians to lay down their palms in celebration of his victory. This grand entrance shows Cesare as every inch the conqueror history has claimed him to be. Throughout the work he gets more opportunities to showcase his authority, power, and resolve. In addition, the bits where he romances Cleopatra, including their concluding duet, are certainly in line with the real Caesar being smitten with the famous queen. Caesar would go out of his way to ensure the safety of Cleopatra and their son, even bringing her back to Rome as his mistress.⁴¹

Handel’s Cleopatra is very much indicative of her legendary status as one of the most beautiful women in history. Much of her music reflects her seduction skills. However, she is not by any means a simplistic character. She exercises plenty of agency and intelligence throughout the work. Handel graciously gifts her no less than eight arias that create a complete character. The role runs the gambit of vocal techniques and emotional moods. The role covers the sensual “V’adoro pupille,” the anxious concern of “Se pieta,” the sheer despair and heartbreak of “Piangerò la sorte mia,” the outburst of joy in “Da tempeste,” and everything in between. Handel’s Cleopatra offers a complete portrait of a legendary figure. As in life, she is an ambitious and crafty woman who also possessed a genuine loving heart.

As for the other main characters, they are more one-note. Tolomeo, also written a castrato, is the big bad of the work. He is at odds with Cesare and Cleopatra, as he was in history. His music reflects this by being mostly violent in nature. Cornelia, Pompey’s widow, spends almost the entire opera in despair while fighting off various male characters trying to woo her.

www.academia.edu/1899150/Historical_Accuracy_in_the_two_versions_of_Giulio_Cesare_in_Egitto_by_H%C3%A4ndel_and_Sartorio.

⁴¹ Harris, Karen. “Cleopatra and Julius Caesar’s Relationship: What Happened and Why Were They Together.” *History Daily*, 21 Aug. 2020,

Her son Sesto, written for a soprano in male costume, is only focused on avenging his father by killing Tolomeo, and he eventually does. As previously stated, in real life Ptolemy XIII was not killed by Sextus.

Overall, Handel and Haym's *Giulio Cesare* manages to take what is mostly historical fact, that being Caesar arrived in Egypt, helped to dispose of Ptolemy XIII, and had an affair with Cleopatra, and adapts into an operatic masterpiece. There is, naturally, some artistic license taken throughout the work. However, it is to be expected that an opera would be more interested in stirring the emotions of the audience rather than giving a strict history lesson.

There is one more work based on history and written by Handel that bears mentioning. However, this time it is not an opera, but an oratorio, which is written in much of the same style but is presented in concert form without staging. The work in question is *Alexander's Feast*, subtitled *The Power of Music*. The work was adapted from a famous ode by John Dryden and premiered in 1736 in honor of St. Cecilia, patron saint of music.⁴² The action of the oratorio is simple. Alexander the Great is enjoying a feast in celebration of his conquering of Persia. Throughout the feast he becomes increasingly drunk, and the musician Timotheus uses music to rouse various moods within him. These emotions range from joy to love to sorrow and to fury. The climax arrives when Timotheus, with some assistance from Alexander's mistress Thais, convinces him to burn the city of Persepolis to the ground in revenge for the fallen Greek soldiers. This is achieved through his singing of the now famous and rousing air "Revenge

⁴² More, Jennifer. "The Power of Music - Alexander's Feast." *The Power of Music - Alexander's Feast - Music of the Baroque*, 2016, <https://www.baroque.org/Seasons/2016-2017/the-power-of-music-alexander-s-feast>.

Timotheus cries!” St. Cecilia makes a brief appearance which concludes the work, seemingly indicating that the best music brings joy and comfort, not destruction.⁴³

The oratorio does represent the main historical action well, as Alexander the Great did in fact burn the city of Persepolis to the ground in the year 330 BC.⁴⁴ The famed city was well-known as holding many valuable documents of Persian art and history, both things Alexander was highly interested in, yet he would enact its destruction anyway.⁴⁵ The main historical question is, why? The main reason seems to be the drunken feeling of revenge against the Persians Alexander and his men wanted to satisfy.⁴⁶ After all, it is well-known that the Persians continually attacked and attempted to invade Greece throughout ancient history, and countless Greeks died defending their homeland. Handel’s oratorio also accurately includes Thais, the famous courtesan from Athens, who many historians claim encouraged Alexander to order Persepolis burned.⁴⁷

The main departures from historical fact appear in the presence of Timotheus, who was a real Greek man said to have lived between 450 - 360 BC and was widely celebrated for his skills as a poet and musician.⁴⁸ Handel accurately portrays Timotheus in this regard, as he is repeatedly

⁴³ More, Jennifer. “The Power of Music - Alexander’s Feast.” *The Power of Music - Alexander’s Feast - Music of the Baroque*, 2016, <https://www.baroque.org/Seasons/2016-2017/the-power-of-music-alexander-s-feast>.

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⁴⁵ Mark, Joshua J. “Alexander the Great & The Burning of Persepolis.” *World History Encyclopedia*, World History Encyclopedia, 22 Mar. 2022, <https://www.worldhistory.org/article/214/alexander-the-great--the-burning-of-persepolis/>.

⁴⁶ Mark, Joshua J. “Alexander the Great & The Burning of Persepolis.” *World History Encyclopedia*, World History Encyclopedia, 22 Mar. 2022, <https://www.worldhistory.org/article/214/alexander-the-great--the-burning-of-persepolis/>.

⁴⁷ Mark, Joshua J. “Alexander the Great & The Burning of Persepolis.” *World History Encyclopedia*, World History Encyclopedia, 22 Mar. 2022, <https://www.worldhistory.org/article/214/alexander-the-great--the-burning-of-persepolis/>.

⁴⁸ Csapo, Eric, and Peter Wilson. “The Cambridge Companion to Greek Lyric - University of Missouri Libraries.” Edited by Felix Budelmann, *The Cambridge Companion to Greek Lyric* -

indicated as the one harnessing the power of music and influencing Alexander and Thais.

However, there is no way Timotheus could have been present in Persepolis as his death occurred around 360 BC, long before Alexander had the city burned. Also, it bears little explaining as to how the pagan Alexander, Thais, Timotheus, and the chorus would not have been singing praises to St. Cecilia. In a greater sense however, Handel, after Dryden, manages to adapt an infamous historical event into a rousing musical drama. Historical fact here is seen as the inspiration for this work, but the celebration of St. Cecilia and music is the overarching purpose.

The Baroque era represents an increased production in works based on history. These mainly stem from the pen of George Frideric Handel. His efforts represent a typical composer's take on historical fact. The basics are kept the same, but he offers a different view or interpretation of the finer points. This is in line with Monteverdi's template and would help to set the expectations of what music based on history would continue to grow into.

The Classical Era

As the Baroque morphed into the Classical era, there was much celebration in the successes of such composers as Chrisoph Willibald Gluck and Franz Joseph Haydn. Then, Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart would come onto the scene and reinvent music as a whole. The relative popularity of historically-based works however would see a decline from the days of the Baroque era. Gluck was primarily interested in mythological subjects, as evidenced by his popular operas *Orfeo ed Euridice*, *Iphigénie en Tauride*, and *Alceste*. Haydn also seemed to steer clear of adapting history and his most famous opera *Il mondo della luna* is a fictional comedy. Even Mozart seemed to prefer adapting fictional sources and legends for his stage work: *Don Giovanni*, *Die Zauberflöte*, *Le Nozze di Figaro*, and *Idomeneo* to name a few.

Still, there are some Mozartian efforts based in history that will be examined. All three are of the *opera seria* subgenre and all three, similarly to Monteverdi and Handel before him, involve Rome. The first two works in question are the early efforts of *Mitridate, re di Ponto* and *Lucio Silla*. The third, *La Clemenza di Tito*, was written very close to Mozart's death and is usually cited as his penultimate opera before *Die Zauberflöte*.

Mitridate, re di Ponto is a near four-hour *opera seria* (longer with the now-lost ballet music) that was remarkably composed by Mozart when he was only fourteen years old. The libretto was written by V.A. Cigna-Santi after a play by Jean-Baptiste Racine.⁴⁹ In the opera, Mithridates VI (Mitridate) returns from war to find his sons Xiphares (Sifare) and Pharnaces (Farnace) rebelling against him. The former has fallen in love with Mitridate's intended bride Aspasia while the latter has been extensively consorting with Mitridate's sworn enemy, Rome.

⁴⁹ Robins, Brian. "Mozart: Mitridate, Re Di Ponto." *Early Music Review*, 12 Nov. 2021, <https://earlymusicreview.com/mozart-mitridate-re-di-ponto/>.

Throughout the opera Mitridate learns further of his sons' betrayal, and the love triangle between Mitridate, Sifare, and Aspasia becomes more and more complex. Meanwhile, Farnace is given a bride, Ismene, by Mitridate that he initially shuns and rejects in favor of Aspasia. Farnace also has become close friends with Marzio, a Roman official. In the end, Sifare and Farnace both join their father in his fight against the Romans. Mitridate is defeated and elects to poison himself, but not before blessing the couples of Aspasia and Sifare then Ismene and Farnace. The remaining characters sing that they will never relent in their fight against Rome.

The real Mithridates VI seems to be a good bit more interesting than the one Mozart and Cigna-Santi give us through Racine. While they treat him as somewhat lovesick, the real Mithridates was a ruthless despot who almost single-handedly waged brutal war against Rome for about forty years.⁵⁰ Claiming descent from Alexander the Great himself, Mithridates ruled Pontus, then part of the larger Hellenic Empire, with an iron fist, killing anyone he suspected of betraying him.⁵¹ In addition, Mithridates had been drinking poison to build up his immunity in case of an assassination attempt and once poured molten gold down the throat of an enemy.⁵² In the end, his son Pharnaces betrayed him for Rome and rebelled as the Roman general Pompey closed in.⁵³ Mithridates would poison his daughters before attempting to poison himself, failing due to the immunity he had achieved, then turning to a servant to kill him.⁵⁴

⁵⁰ Mark, Joshua J. "Mithridates VI." *World History Encyclopedia*, World History Encyclopedia, 4 Dec. 2017, https://www.worldhistory.org/Mithridates_VI/.

⁵¹ Mark, Joshua J. "Mithridates VI." *World History Encyclopedia*, World History Encyclopedia, 4 Dec. 2017, https://www.worldhistory.org/Mithridates_VI/.

⁵² Goodkin, Richard E. "The Death(s) of Mithridate(s): Racine and the Double Play of History." *PMLA*, vol. 101, no. 2, Modern Language Association, 1986, pp. 203–17, <https://doi.org/10.2307/462404>.

⁵³ Mark, Joshua J. "Mithridates VI." *World History Encyclopedia*, World History Encyclopedia, 4 Dec. 2017, https://www.worldhistory.org/Mithridates_VI/.

⁵⁴ Mark, Joshua J. "Mithridates VI." *World History Encyclopedia*, World History Encyclopedia, 4 Dec. 2017, https://www.worldhistory.org/Mithridates_VI/.

There are similarities to real history found in Mozart's *Mitridate*. First, being that Mitridate poisons himself at the end of the work while waging war against Rome. In the opera as well as history, Pharnaces aligns with Rome. However, the operatic Farnace comes to regret this decision and decides to help his father, a departure from history. The love-centered plot of the opera deprives Mitridate of some of the ruthlessness that his historical counterpart was feared for. Yet, to Mozart's credit he does capture some of the cruelty in his vocal writing for Mitridate. Both the arias "Quel ribelle" and "Vado incontro" are furious bits of vocal writing, the latter containing no less than eight sudden tenor high Cs that represent Mitridate's rage. Nevertheless, some of the more interesting aspects of the historical Mithridates VI's life don't make it into the largely fictional plot.

Turning to *Lucio Silla*, the subject is the Roman dictator Lucius Cornelius Sulla (Lucio Silla). The operatic Silla suffers from being one of the weakest title roles in operatic history due to the fact the tenor who premiered it was of severely limited vocal means. Mozart gives him very brief and simple arias. The plot and all the female characters of the opera are entirely fictional, centering on Silla desiring Giunia while she is in love with the exiled senator Cecilio.⁵⁵ The real Lucius Sulla was a great warrior and ruthless dictator who eventually retired from the position after achieving the reforms he desired.⁵⁶ The operatic Silla also relinquishes his power, but beyond that there is almost no similarity between the historical Lucius Sulla and the operatic Lucio Silla.

⁵⁵ Sadie, Stanley. "Mozart and His 'Lucio Silla.'" *The Musical Times*, vol. 108, no. 1489, Musical Times Publications Ltd., 1967, pp. 216–20, <https://doi.org/10.2307/952431>.

⁵⁶ Sadie, Stanley. "Mozart and His 'Lucio Silla.'" *The Musical Times*, vol. 108, no. 1489, Musical Times Publications Ltd., 1967, pp. 216–20, <https://doi.org/10.2307/952431>.

Finally, for *La Clemenza di Tito*, Mozart centers on an assassination attempt on the supposedly enlightened emperor Titus (Tito). Tito has succeeded the emperor Vitellius and the former emperor's wicked daughter Vitellia uses her charms to convince Sesto to kill Tito. The plot fails and eventually Vitellia comes forward as the conspirator. Tito decides to have mercy on both Sesto and Vitellia and all celebrate his clemency. The point of the work seems to be more of a political move than an actual historical account. The work was commissioned as a celebration for the coronation of Leopold II as king over Bohemia.⁵⁷ The work mainly serves as a means of celebrating the virtue of a merciful ruler. The text had been written decades before by Metastasio to celebrate Leopold II's grandfather, Charles VI.⁵⁸ The political motivations of the original libretto and Mozart's setting obscures historical truth almost beyond recognition.

The Classical era did not result in the output of many historically-centered operas or other vocal works. Even the Mozartian efforts are obscured, altered, and almost altogether fictional. *Mitridate* seems to be the closest to the real events it aims to imitate but even it is mostly fictional. The primary goal of these works seems to be creating riveting drama and focusing on affairs of the heart rather than painting a picture of historical truth.

⁵⁷ Riberi, Mario. "Enlightenment and Neoclassicism in *La Clemenza di Tito* of Mozart": An Historical-Legal Perspective". *Antiquity and Its Reception - Modern Expressions of the Past*, edited by Helena Lopes, Isabel de Almeida, Maria de Fátima Rosa, IntechOpen, 2020. 10.5772/intechopen.85867.

⁵⁸ Riberi, Mario. "Enlightenment and Neoclassicism in *La Clemenza di Tito* of Mozart": An Historical-Legal Perspective". *Antiquity and Its Reception - Modern Expressions of the Past*, edited by Helena Lopes, Isabel de Almeida, Maria de Fátima Rosa, IntechOpen, 2020. 10.5772/intechopen.85867.

The Bel Canto Period

After a transitory period, opera shifts into the Bel Canto period of the early 19th century. In a broader sense *bel canto* can be seen as an overall school of singing, not limited to this timeframe. However, as a genre many associate it with the Italian operatic output at the time, particularly from the pens of Gioachino Rossini, Vincenzo Bellini, and Gaetano Donizetti. The works are characterized by long legato melodies, florid demands, large ensembles, and the rise of the operatic “scena.” The Bel Canto scena would usually include a solo recitative, then aria, followed by another recitative shifting the mood into a cabaletta, which frequently were virtuoso showpieces.

Starting with Rossini, the most popular work of his that has historical roots is *Maometto II* and its revision for the French stage: *Le siège de Corinthe*. Both works feature the Ottoman sultan Mehmed II, famous for sacking Constantinople and spreading the influence of the Ottoman Empire.⁵⁹ The original *Maometto II* focused on conflict between Mehmed (Maometto) and the Venetians. The work includes fictional love plots and ends with the Venetians refusing to bow to Maometto, preferring to die in defiance of him. The revised *Le siège de Corinthe* follows mostly the same plot points and themes but swapping Venetians for Greeks. This revision was written and premiered in support of the Greek War of Independence against the Ottoman Empire, and much of the revenue was directly given to the Greek war efforts.⁶⁰ Sympathy for the Greek effort was popular in French art at this time, as evidenced, among other works, by Eugene

⁵⁹ Inalcik, Halil. "Mehmed II". *Encyclopedia Britannica*, 26 Mar. 2022, <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Mehmed-II-Ottoman-sultan>. Accessed 28 March 2022.

⁶⁰ Papathanasiou, Fotis. “The Siege of Cornth of the Great Philhellene and Composer Rossini – the First Live Aid in History!” *Εταιρεία Για Τον Ελληνισμό Και Τον Φιλελληνισμό*, Admin https://www.eefshp.org/Wp-Content/Uploads/2019/05/logo_eefshp_svg_EN.Svg, 11 May 2020, <https://www.eefshp.org/en/i-poliorkia-tis-korinthoy-toy-megaloy-filellina-kai-syntheti-rossini-to-proto-live-aid-stin-istoria/>.

Delacroix's famous painting *The Massacre of Chios* which hangs in The Louvre to this day. The action of *Le siège de Corinthe* directly parallels The Third Siege of Messolonghi, an important event in the Greek War of Independence. The difference is Rossini sets the action back about four hundred years.⁶¹ Still, this remains an important example of art paralleling both history and current events. While the details of the plot may be fictionalized, the overall struggle of Greece under Ottoman rule is the key point. Rossini brings the cruelty of the Ottoman Empire and its sultan to light in both *Maometto II* and the revised *Le Siège de Corinthe*.

As for Bellini, his career as a composer was tragically cut short by his untimely death in his thirties. Only his last two operas draw on historical precedence. His penultimate opera, *Beatrice di Tenda*, fairly accurately recounts the story of Beatrice: an Italian noblewoman who married a younger man that falsely accused her of adultery and had her executed.⁶² His final opera, *I Puritani*, is set against the backdrop of the English Civil War, but the plot is wholly fictional.

Donizetti would prove to be the most historically-interested of the core Bel Canto composers. Many of his works are adaptations of historical figures or events, but none have quite reached the popularity of his so-called "Tudor Trilogy." These operas: *Anna Bolena*, *Maria Stuarda*, and *Roberto Devereux* were not conceived to be sung as a continuity but were popularized as a trilogy after American soprano Beverly Sills sang all three in one season. Each more or less adapts the circumstances regarding the executions of Anne Boleyn, Mary Stuart,

⁶¹ Papathanasiou, Fotis. "The Siege of Cornth of the Great Philhellene and Composer Rossini – the First Live Aid in History!" *Εταιρεία Για Τον Ελληνισμό Και Τον Φιλελληνισμό*, Admin https://www.eefshp.org/Wp-Content/Uploads/2019/05/logo_eefshp_svg_EN.Svg, 11 May 2020, <https://www.eefshp.org/en/i-poliorkia-tis-korinthoy-toy-megaloy-filellina-kai-syntheti-rossini-to-proto-live-aid-stin-istoria/>.

⁶² Boromé, Joseph A. "Bellini and 'Beatrice Di Tenda.'" *Music & Letters*, vol. 42, no. 4, Oxford University Press, 1961, pp. 319–35, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/732769>.

and Robert Devereux. The operas feature a host of characters adapted from real historical people, including Elizabeth I and Henry VIII. In *Anna Bolena*, based on two earlier plays, some of the details surrounding Anne Boleyn's beheading are modified, and as was the style at the time, she gets a lengthy mad scene to close the opera. This culminates in her violently cursing Henry VIII (Enrico) and his new wife Jane (Giovanna) Seymour in a thrilling cabaletta "Coppia iniqua" (wicked couple). In real life, Anne Boleyn approached her unjust imprisonment and execution with stoicism; many maintain her begging for those in attendance to pray for her and the king.⁶³

Maria Stuarda takes similar liberties, the most glaring of which is the famous "Confrontation Scene." This scene is an invention by Friedrich Schiller in his original play *Mary Stuart*. In this scene, Mary Stuart (Maria) explodes at her cousin Elizabeth I (Elisabetta I), calling her "figlia impura di Bolena" (impure child of Boleyn) and "vil bastarda" (vile bastard). It is a grippingly dramatic scene that directly leads to Maria's beheading, the only problem is that Mary and Elizabeth almost certainly never met in real life.⁶⁴ Still, it does dramatic justice to the work.

Lastly, there is *Roberto Devereux*, based on several earlier plays and focusing on Elizabeth I's (Elisabetta I) unrequited love for Robert (Roberto) Devereux. In the opera, Elisabetta has him executed in a fit of jealousy. She then becomes filled with remorse and very dramatically abdicates the throne to the horror of her courtiers. In real life, though Elizabeth admired and perhaps loved Robert, he was executed for his continued treason against the crown.⁶⁵ She also never attempted to abdicate the throne.

⁶³ Meares, Hadley. "Why the Last Words of Anne Boleyn Remain a Mystery." *Atlas Obscura*, Atlas Obscura, 14 Apr. 2016, <https://www.atlasobscura.com/articles/why-the-last-words-of-anne-boleyn-remain-a-mystery>.

⁶⁴ Loomis, George. "3 Tudor Queens, Each with Her Own Unhappy Ending." *The New York Times*, The New York Times, 17 Sept. 2013, <https://www.nytimes.com/2013/09/18/arts/music/3-tudor-queens-each-with-her-own-unhappy-ending.html>.

⁶⁵ Thomason, Paul. "The Real People in Roberto Devereux." *SFOpera*, <https://www.sfopera.com/seasons/1819season/devereux/the-real-people-in-roberto-devereux/>.

The Bel Canto period saw a significant rise in operas based on history, though with many liberties taken in service of the drama and the music. This continues the established trend that opera composers and librettists were primarily interested in creating an engaging story rather than bowing to historians. This practice would only continue throughout the rest of the 19th century.

The Romantic Era

The Romantic era covers a large part of the 19th century. Throughout this period there is a breakdown in formalized operatic structure as well as some of the more famous instances of historically-based vocal music beyond an operatic context. With such a lengthy era, there are many works adapted from history written in this period. Some of the most famous examples come from the operas of Modest Mussorgsky, Giuseppe Verdi, and a particularly famous *lied* from Robert Schumann.

In 1840, Robert Schumann set a poem by Heinrich Heine dubbed “Die Grenadiere” to his music and renamed it “Die beiden Grenadiere.”⁶⁶ This *lied* describes two Napoleonic soldiers traveling through Germany after being released from Russia as prisoners of war. Throughout the piece there is a repeated pattern in the accompaniment resembling a drumroll, accentuating the militaristic theme of the *lied*.⁶⁷ The soldiers, shocked and dismayed, are informed that Napoleon has been defeated and exiled. What follows is a dialogue between the two. The first soldier declares that his old wound is burning again. The second declares “das lied ist aus,” quite literally “this is the end.” The second soldier says he would be honored to die for his fallen emperor, but he has a wife and kid at home, who will surely die without him. The first soldier responds in a violent outburst: “Was schert mich Weib, was schert mich Kind!” Which can be roughly translated as “to hell with your wife and kids.” He declares that he dreams of nobler and greater goals, mainly dying for his emperor. He says, again in regards to the second soldier's family, “Lass sie betteln gehn, wenn sie hungrig sind,” meaning “let them beg if they're

⁶⁶ Youens, Susan. “Maskenfreiheit and Schumann's Napoleon-Ballad.” *The Journal of Musicology*, vol. 22, no. 1, University of California Press, 2005, pp. 5–46, <https://doi.org/10.1525/jm.2005.22.1.5>

⁶⁷ Youens, Susan. “Maskenfreiheit and Schumann's Napoleon-Ballad.” *The Journal of Musicology*, vol. 22, no. 1, University of California Press, 2005, pp. 5–46, <https://doi.org/10.1525/jm.2005.22.1.5>

hungry!” The first soldier then solemnly beseeches the second that if he should die to bury him in France, not in Germany. He then declares boldly he wishes to be buried in his uniform, holding his musket, his sword at his side, and with his medallions on his chest. Schumann then quotes the famous French anthem “La Marseillaise” for the *lied*’s final lines. The first soldier, growing more frantic and explosive, declares that he will lie in his grave waiting for his emperor to ride over his grave. He will heed the emperor’s call and rise from the grave to fight for him once more. The piano postlude grows slower and softer before fading out completely, perhaps to represent the last bit of life leaving the first soldier. It also could represent the futility of his fervor for his fallen emperor.

Despite the fact that the two soldiers are generic and speak dialogue that is almost certainly a Heine fabrication, there is historical precedence for this work. Following Napoleon’s failed campaign to take Russia in the year 1812, many of his soldiers were held there as prisoners of war.⁶⁸ Once Napoleon surrendered in 1814, the Russian Czar at the time, Alexander, let the nearly 100,000 prisoners go.⁶⁹ The experiences of these soldiers and their attempts to return back to their homeland inspired Heine’s poem as well as Schumann’s setting of it.

There is some question as to whether or not Schumann is being genuine with his portrayal of Heine’s two soldiers. The first soldier’s rambling and ranting reaches almost hysterical levels before he presumably expires. It can be theorized that the first soldier’s manic behavior, which reach their height during the closing “Marseilles section” are a critique of Nationalistic attitudes and blind loyalty. Yet, there rises a problem when one examines

⁶⁸ Youens, Susan. “Maskenfreiheit and Schumann’s Napoleon-Ballad.” *The Journal of Musicology*, vol. 22, no. 1, University of California Press, 2005, pp. 5–46, <https://doi.org/10.1525/jm.2005.22.1.5>

⁶⁹ Youens, Susan. “Maskenfreiheit and Schumann’s Napoleon-Ballad.” *The Journal of Musicology*, vol. 22, no. 1, University of California Press, 2005, pp. 5–46, <https://doi.org/10.1525/jm.2005.22.1.5>

Schumann's own feelings on Napoleon: he revered him, at least in his youth.⁷⁰ There are many instances of Schumann expressing his admiration for the French emperor, which then makes it possible to take this *lied* at face value. There seems to be more respect for the soldiers than anything. The first soldier's idealism is commendable. The second soldier's practicality is equally so. It seems the portrayal Schumann could have intended is that the ideals of Napoleon started nobly and were worth fighting for. However, his power corrupted him, and he let his soldiers down. Though not featuring actual soldiers or even real dialogue, the *lied* can paint a picture of both honoring the idea of the loyal soldier while simultaneously warning against hero-worship. This idea can reflect through all history, not just the time of Napoleon.

Returning to the operatic world, the expansive work of Giuseppe Verdi must be discussed. Verdi focused his vast talent almost entirely on opera. Throughout his long life, he produced many works both completely fictional and with a basis in history. Even *La Traviata*, arguably Verdi's most popular opera, is based on the life of Marie Duplessis, a Parisian courtesan and mistress of Alexandre Dumas *films*.⁷¹ Verdi and his librettist Francesco Maria Piave would attempt to faithfully recreate the younger Dumas' writings on their romance, but the censors forced them to push his opera's action back over a century to 1700, obscuring the historical truth of the work.⁷²

⁷⁰ Youens, Susan. "Maskenfreiheit and Schumann's Napoleon-Ballad." *The Journal of Musicology*, vol. 22, no. 1, University of California Press, 2005, pp. 5–46, <https://doi.org/10.1525/jm.2005.22.1.5>

⁷¹ Paddock, Carmen. "Page to Opera Stage: How Verdi Reframes A True Story & Novel in 'La Traviata'." *Opera Wire*, 22 Mar. 2021, <https://operawire.com/page-to-opera-stage-how-verdi-reframes-a-true-story-novel-in-la-traviata/>.

⁷² Paddock, Carmen. "Page to Opera Stage: How Verdi Reframes A True Story & Novel in 'La Traviata'." *Opera Wire*, 22 Mar. 2021, <https://operawire.com/page-to-opera-stage-how-verdi-reframes-a-true-story-novel-in-la-traviata/>.

Still, no Verdi work would try to represent historical events on a grander scale than the 1867 five-act grand opera *Don Carlos*. Based on a play by Friedrich Schiller, this work is set against the backdrop of the Spanish Inquisition and modeled after the life of Prince Carlos, son of King Philip II (Philippe). He is simultaneously in love with Queen Elisabeth of Valois, his father's wife, and politically opposed to his father's treatment of Flanders. Throughout the opera, their conflict is barely kept at bay by the Marquis of Posa, Rodrigue, until he is assassinated on orders by The Grand Inquisitor. Once this happens, Elisabeth and the Princess Eboli attempt to help Carlos escape the wrath of his father. Yet, Phillippe and The Grand Inquisitor eventually catch up to Carlos. He is saved only by the appearance of a monk, who turns out to be King Charles V, Phillippe's father and Carlos' grandfather.

The opera treats the characters much differently than how history represents them. It is true that Carlos and Elisabeth di Valois were originally betrothed to each other before the political situation allowed Philip to take Elisabeth for himself.⁷³ However, the love between Carlos and Elizabeth is almost totally false. The real life Prince Carlos was sadly the victim of inbreeding common amongst the Hapsburgs.⁷⁴ He was somewhat physically disabled, prone to seizures, and had frequent homicidal episodes.⁷⁵ Among these include trying to stab the Grand Inquisitor, brutally murdering animals, and forcing a shoemaker to eat boots not to his liking.⁷⁶ It

⁷³ Cranna, Kip. "The Real People in Don Carlo." *SFOpera*, <https://www.sfopera.com/seasons/1516-season/don-carlo/program-articles/the-real-people-of-don-carlo/>.

⁷⁴ Cranna, Kip. "The Real People in Don Carlo." *SFOpera*, <https://www.sfopera.com/seasons/1516-season/don-carlo/program-articles/the-real-people-of-don-carlo/>.

⁷⁵ Cranna, Kip. "The Real People in Don Carlo." *SFOpera*, <https://www.sfopera.com/seasons/1516-season/don-carlo/program-articles/the-real-people-of-don-carlo/>.

⁷⁶ Cranna, Kip. "The Real People in Don Carlo." *SFOpera*, <https://www.sfopera.com/seasons/1516-season/don-carlo/program-articles/the-real-people-of-don-carlo/>.

is true he politically opposed his own father and this coupled with his disturbing behavior forced Philip to put his son under house arrest, where he would die after a few months.⁷⁷ The opera portrays Carlos as the romantic hero: in love with Elisabeth, bosom brothers with Roridgue, and noble advocate for the oppressed people of Flanders. His music portrays him in a sympathetic light, he remains sound of mind, and in the end, he is taken under the protection of his grandfather Charles V.

Turning to Charles V, his small but important role in Verdi's opera does reflect the historic Emperor Charles V. In history, Charles V controlled the vast Holy Roman Empire, which spanned most of Europe at the time. Eventually he grew tired of trying to manage such a large empire with its constant wars and religious upheaval and abdicated the throne to Philip, retiring to the monastery of St. Yuste.⁷⁸ This inspires his appearances in the opera as the mysterious monk who reveals himself to protect Carlos in the finale. His role is written in powerful and declamatory musings on God and Heaven for what must be a strong bass voice.

As for Philip II, or Philippe in the opera, Verdi and co. paint him as humorless, depressed, overwhelmed, quick to wrath, and insomniac. Though certainly a bass, he has frequent outbursts in the very upper register, showcasing his fury. One of these moments comes after an intense scene opposite the Grand Inquisitor, one of opera's rare scenes for two basses. Ordered to bow to the whim of the Grand Inquisitor, Philippe exclaims "L'orgueil du Roi fléchit devant l'orgueil du prêtre" (Surely the King must bow to the Priest). This phrase climbs to a high F4 before diving to a low F2. In the preceding scene, in Philippe's aria "Elle ne m'aime pas" (she

⁷⁷ Cranna, Kip. "The Real People in Don Carlo." *SFOpera*, <https://www.sfopera.com/seasons/1516-season/don-carlo/program-articles/the-real-people-of-don-carlo/>.

⁷⁸ Cranna, Kip. "The Real People in Don Carlo." *SFOpera*, <https://www.sfopera.com/seasons/1516-season/don-carlo/program-articles/the-real-people-of-don-carlo/>.

never loved me), the King's paranoia and depression is brought to the forefront. He believes that Elisabeth is carrying on an affair with Carlos and sings a very long aria bemoaning his old age, his impending death, his loneliness, his insomnia, his desire to read others' hearts, and the difficulty of being king. The aria is preceded by a long introduction featuring a languishing cello obbligato, further showcasing Philippe's pain. The historical Philip II was known to work alone in his small office and was very suspicious of all those around him.⁷⁹ As seen in the opera, he did suppress Flanders due to their Protestant uprising and worked with the Inquisition.⁸⁰ However, his marriage with Elisabeth was not near as flawed and unloving as it is in the opera, and they were able to have two daughters that they adored.⁸¹

As for Elisabeth herself, she seems to be accurately portrayed by Verdi. She is said to have been virtuous, beautiful, soft-spoken, and kind.⁸² She was very popular amongst the people, and she was one of the only people Carlos was warm to.⁸³ The Princess Eboli is based on Ana de Mendoza, lady-in-waiting to Elisabeth.⁸⁴ She famously wore an eyepatch some say due to an injury sustained in a fencing accident. Several productions have paid attention to this historic

⁷⁹ Koenigsberger, Helmut Georg. "Philip II". *Encyclopedia Britannica*, 9 Sep. 2021, <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Philip-II-king-of-Spain-and-Portugal>. Accessed 29 March 2022.

⁸⁰ Koenigsberger, Helmut Georg. "Philip II". *Encyclopedia Britannica*, 9 Sep. 2021, <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Philip-II-king-of-Spain-and-Portugal>. Accessed 29 March 2022.

⁸¹ Koenigsberger, Helmut Georg. "Philip II". *Encyclopedia Britannica*, 9 Sep. 2021, <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Philip-II-king-of-Spain-and-Portugal>. Accessed 29 March 2022.

⁸² Cranna, Kip. "The Real People in Don Carlo." *SFOpera*, <https://www.sfopera.com/seasons/1516-season/don-carlo/program-articles/the-real-people-of-don-carlo/>.

⁸³ Cranna, Kip. "The Real People in Don Carlo." *SFOpera*, <https://www.sfopera.com/seasons/1516-season/don-carlo/program-articles/the-real-people-of-don-carlo/>.

⁸⁴ Cranna, Kip. "The Real People in Don Carlo." *SFOpera*, <https://www.sfopera.com/seasons/1516-season/don-carlo/program-articles/the-real-people-of-don-carlo/>.

detail. In the opera she is infatuated with Carlos and tries to sabotage Elisabeth in a fit of jealousy. She does later show genuine remorse and tries to make amends for what she's done. The real Eboli is not thought to have been in love with Carlos, though her temperamental nature was noted by those at court.⁸⁵ It was rumored that she had an affair with Philip and this rumor would become a plot point within the opera.⁸⁶ Overall, *Don Carlos* represents a typical operatic adaptation of history. There are elements of truth, yet the details do not line up. The opera itself would be revised several times with its four-act Italian translation *Don Carlo* becoming the standard.

One of the most famous operas based on a historical figure is Modest Mussorgsky's epic *Boris Godunov*. Mussorgsky himself wrote the libretto and his first version was completed in 1869 before being revised in 1874.⁸⁷ Mussorgsky consulted both Pushkin's play by the same name and Karamazin's *History of the Russian State* when composing this work.⁸⁸

The action of the opera follows the titular Boris and opens with him being elected Czar. He addresses the people of Russia and despite an ominous feeling, promises to be a good ruler, praying for God's blessing. Meanwhile, under the guidance of the monk Pimen, the young Grigoriy realizes he can claim to be the deceased Prince Dimitri, son of Ivan the Terrible and

⁸⁵ Cranna, Kip. "The Real People in Don Carlo." *SFOpera*, <https://www.sfopera.com/seasons/1516-season/don-carlo/program-articles/the-real-people-of-don-carlo/>.

⁸⁶ Cranna, Kip. "The Real People in Don Carlo." *SFOpera*, <https://www.sfopera.com/seasons/1516-season/don-carlo/program-articles/the-real-people-of-don-carlo/>.

⁸⁷ Emerson, Caryl. *Musorgsky's Libretti on Historical Themes: From the Two "Borises" to "Khovanshchina"*. Princeton University Press, Princeton, NJ, 1988. *ProQuest*, <https://login.pallas2.tcl.sc.edu/login?url=https://www-proquest-com.pallas2.tcl.sc.edu/docview/1703520112?accountid=13965>.

⁸⁸ Emerson, Caryl. *Musorgsky's Libretti on Historical Themes: From the Two "Borises" to "Khovanshchina"*. Princeton University Press, Princeton, NJ, 1988. *ProQuest*, <https://login.pallas2.tcl.sc.edu/login?url=https://www-proquest-com.pallas2.tcl.sc.edu/docview/1703520112?accountid=13965>.

rightful heir to the throne. Dimitri had died under mysterious circumstances and rumors swirled that Boris had the young prince killed. Grigoriy becomes the “False Dimitri” and sets out to seize the throne. Meanwhile Boris is burdened with the hardships of being Czar. His people are starving, and he keeps having hallucinations of the dead child Prince Dimitri, murdered on his orders. As the False Dimitri gains power, Boris is accosted by a “Holy fool.” The fool publicly implicates Boris of killing the young Prince Dimitri and sings a lament for Russia. Boris, overcome with guilt over his crimes, collapses during a hearing and names his son Fyodor heir before dying. The False Dimitri is praised by the people while the Holy fool continues to lament the state of affairs in Russia.

The major points of *Boris Godunov* are historically accurate. The titular Boris was elected Czar following the death of Ivan the Terrible’s son Fyodor, and the mysterious death of the young Prince Dimitri.⁸⁹ There were substantial rumors that Boris had something to do with the young Dimitri’s death, the official excuse being that he had a seizure and accidentally fell on his own sword.⁹⁰ Boris, similar to his operatic adaptation, was paranoid and feared betrayal from his advisors.⁹¹ He instituted a large spy network to try and protect his place on the throne of

⁸⁹ Britannica, The Editors of Encyclopedia. "Boris Godunov". *Encyclopedia Britannica*, 14 May. 2021, <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Boris-Godunov-tsar-of-Russia>. Accessed 29 March 2022.

⁹⁰ Britannica, The Editors of Encyclopedia. "Boris Godunov". *Encyclopedia Britannica*, 14 May. 2021, <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Boris-Godunov-tsar-of-Russia>. Accessed 29 March 2022.

⁹¹ Britannica, The Editors of Encyclopedia. "Boris Godunov". *Encyclopedia Britannica*, 14 May. 2021, <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Boris-Godunov-tsar-of-Russia>. Accessed 29 March 2022.

Russia.⁹² As for the False Dimitri, he did rise up against Boris and ended up taking the throne by force following Boris' unexpected demise.⁹³

As far as parallels between the historic Boris and the operatic Boris, Mussorgsky captures the major details surrounding his reign and death. Boris in the opera seems to want to do right by the people of Russia and he loves his own family. The details of the actual Boris' personality are not very well known. However, Mussorgsky does seem to expand on the rumors that Boris had the young Prince Dimitri killed, implicating him directly in the opera. The opera can be seen as an insight to how Boris may have felt: tortured and guilt-ridden but still trying to do what he saw was right. The issue he could not escape was that in the opera, and perhaps in real life, his leadership was attained from the murder of a child.

There is one more interesting anecdote in Mussorgsky's opera. In act two the character of Varlaam sings a ferocious drinking song. The song in question, "Kak vo gorode bylo vo kazani" is adapted from a popular folk song. Told through the eyes of Varlaam, he recounts his time serving Ivan the Terrible in the Siege of Kazan. Though irrelevant to the overall plot, Varlaam's song recounts an actual important battle in Russian history. The Siege of Kazan took place in 1552 when Ivan the Terrible marched his Muscovite troops to the Tatar-controlled walled city of Kazan.⁹⁴ To penetrate the city Ivan used cannon bombardment and had his men dig holes underneath the city to place mines under the great walls.⁹⁵ After six weeks of siege Ivan was able

⁹² Britannica, The Editors of Encyclopedia. "Boris Godunov". *Encyclopedia Britannica*, 14 May. 2021, <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Boris-Godunov-tsar-of-Russia>. Accessed 29 March 2022.

⁹³ Britannica, The Editors of Encyclopedia. "Boris Godunov". *Encyclopedia Britannica*, 14 May. 2021, <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Boris-Godunov-tsar-of-Russia>. Accessed 29 March 2022.

⁹⁴ Cavendish, Richard. "Kazan Falls to Ivan the Terrible." *History Today*, <https://www.historytoday.com/archive/kazan-falls-ivan-terrible>.

⁹⁵ Cavendish, Richard. "Kazan Falls to Ivan the Terrible." *History Today*, <https://www.historytoday.com/archive/kazan-falls-ivan-terrible>.

to have his men storm the city where they mercilessly slaughtered thousands of Tatars, ultimately emerging victorious.⁹⁶

Varlaam's song certainly captures the brutality of the Siege of Kazan. He recounts the ferocity of the Tatar defenders as well as the fury of Ivan the Terrible. The song specifically mentions the usage of cannons and mines to break through the defenses. Varlaam claims that forty-thousand Tatars were killed, though that number is hard to verify in real life. The song itself is a violent, extremely fast paced aria where Varlaam frequently visits his upper register. It is told in verses and accompanied by brazen and bombastic interjections from the orchestra. The ferocity of Ivan's attack is not only portrayed through the text but through the vocal line of Varlaam's song itself.

The Romantic era kept historical subjects as part of the standard fare of opera and art song. There are many more examples beyond the ones discussed here, but these give an idea of how history was treated by the Romantic composers. The trend remains that while many liberties are taken when dramatizing these figures or events, it is to further serve the dramatic purposes of the music and the plot. The sentiment is the most important part of music, and these works certainly capture it.

⁹⁶ Cavendish, Richard. "Kazan Falls to Ivan the Terrible." *History Today*, <https://www.historytoday.com/archive/kazan-falls-ivan-terrible>.

The Modern Era

The Romantic era and the brief stylistic periods that follow take music into the Modern era. This timeframe can loosely reflect anywhere from the early 20th century to today. Historical plots and subjects have remained popular for the past century and a quarter or so. There are countless examples of historically-inspired work in both opera and outside of the genre. Works from this period envelope a variety of historical subjects and periods.

One of the most famous operas based on historical subjects from this era is Francis Poulenc's *Les Dialogues des Carmélites*. The opera premiered in 1956 and tells a fictionalized account of the fate of a cloister of nuns during the French Reign of Terror.⁹⁷ Though adapted from a fictionalized novelization of this event, the main points remain the same.⁹⁸ In the wake of the French Revolution, Enlightenment thought has inspired the leadership at the time, namely Maximilien Robespierre, to target any religious speech or groups.⁹⁹ In 1794 his forces targeted a group of secluded nuns, accusing them of praying and conspiring against the new government.¹⁰⁰ Despite the fact that the nuns lived a pious and peaceful lifestyle, they were arrested, paraded

⁹⁷ Elsevier, Désirée. "Poulenc's Les Dialogues Des Carmélites Has Drama, Nuns, and Guillotines." *The Provincetown Independent*, 11 Nov. 2020, <https://provincetownindependent.org/arts-minds/2020/11/12/poulencs-les-dialogues-des-carmelites-has-drama-nuns-and-guillotines/>.

⁹⁸ Elsevier, Désirée. "Poulenc's Les Dialogues Des Carmélites Has Drama, Nuns, and Guillotines." *The Provincetown Independent*, 11 Nov. 2020, <https://provincetownindependent.org/arts-minds/2020/11/12/poulencs-les-dialogues-des-carmelites-has-drama-nuns-and-guillotines/>.

⁹⁹ Elsevier, Désirée. "Poulenc's Les Dialogues Des Carmélites Has Drama, Nuns, and Guillotines." *The Provincetown Independent*, 11 Nov. 2020, <https://provincetownindependent.org/arts-minds/2020/11/12/poulencs-les-dialogues-des-carmelites-has-drama-nuns-and-guillotines/>.

¹⁰⁰ Elsevier, Désirée. "Poulenc's Les Dialogues Des Carmélites Has Drama, Nuns, and Guillotines." *The Provincetown Independent*, 11 Nov. 2020, <https://provincetownindependent.org/arts-minds/2020/11/12/poulencs-les-dialogues-des-carmelites-has-drama-nuns-and-guillotines/>.

through the streets, and sentenced to be executed.¹⁰¹ Despite death looming before them the nuns were said to have approached their situation stoically and with a peaceful demeanor, singing hymns as they marched to the guillotine.¹⁰² Poulenc handles this subject with the utmost sensitivity and care. The final scene in particular is arguably the most devastating in opera. The work ends with Carmelite nuns marching one by one to the guillotine while intoning the “Salve Regina.” As each nun is executed the guillotine sounds and the number of singers decreases by one until they have all been silenced. The effect is horrifying and completely captures the grave injustice of this real event.

Beyond opera, one can find a rather amusing adaptation of a historical figure in Richard Cumming’s song cycle *We Happy Few*. Though there are a handful of songs based on history to pick from, one of the most interesting comes in the form of “A Ballad of the Good Lord Nelson.” The subject in question is Lord Horatio Nelson, one of England’s most famous military heroes. Admiral Nelson has a reputation for being one of the most unorthodox, but brilliant, officials in British history.¹⁰³ Throughout his battles he would sustain several injuries, including losing an arm and an eye.¹⁰⁴ He became legendary for crushing Napoleon’s fleet once at The Battle of the Nile in 1798 and then again at the Battle of Trafalgar in 1805.¹⁰⁵ At Trafalgar Lord Nelson

¹⁰¹ Elsevier, Désirée. “Poulenc's Les Dialogues Des Carmélites Has Drama, Nuns, and Guillotines.” *The Provincetown Independent*, 11 Nov. 2020, <https://provincetownindependent.org/arts-minds/2020/11/12/poulencs-les-dialogues-des-carmelites-has-drama-nuns-and-guillotines/>.

¹⁰² Elsevier, Désirée. “Poulenc's Les Dialogues Des Carmélites Has Drama, Nuns, and Guillotines.” *The Provincetown Independent*, 11 Nov. 2020, <https://provincetownindependent.org/arts-minds/2020/11/12/poulencs-les-dialogues-des-carmelites-has-drama-nuns-and-guillotines/>.

¹⁰³ Ryan, Michael. “Lord Nelson: Hero And...cad!” *Smithsonian.com*, Smithsonian Institution, 1 Feb. 2004, <https://www.smithsonianmag.com/history/lord-nelson-hero-andcad-105811218/>.

¹⁰⁴ Ryan, Michael. “Lord Nelson: Hero And...cad!” *Smithsonian.com*, Smithsonian Institution, 1 Feb. 2004, <https://www.smithsonianmag.com/history/lord-nelson-hero-andcad-105811218/>.

¹⁰⁵ Ryan, Michael. “Lord Nelson: Hero And...cad!” *Smithsonian.com*, Smithsonian Institution, 1 Feb. 2004, <https://www.smithsonianmag.com/history/lord-nelson-hero-andcad-105811218/>.

commanded his ships to split into two parallel lines and to sail directly at the enemy to cut them in half.¹⁰⁶ Before they sailed off he gave them this famous refrain: “England expects that every man will do his duty.”¹⁰⁷ The British forces were victorious and Napoleon’s navy was all but destroyed.¹⁰⁸ However, Lord Nelson himself did not survive the battle, as his physical appearance and highly decorated uniform allowed a French sniper to recognize and fatally shoot Nelson.¹⁰⁹ Lord Nelson’s dying words on his flagship *Victory* were to his Lieutenant, begging him to “take care of my dear... poor Lady Hamilton.”¹¹⁰

One might initially think that Lady Hamilton was Nelson’s wife, but it was actually Emma Hamilton, the wife of Nelson’s friend Sir William Hamilton.¹¹¹ Lord Nelson and Lady Emma carried on a passionate affair, and Nelson practically abandoned his wife Frances in favor of Emma.¹¹² All of England knew about the affair and the scandal rocked the land, only becoming more intense when Emma bore a daughter by Nelson boldly named Horatia.¹¹³ Lord Nelson today has the reputation for not only being an ingenious admiral and war hero but also that of an absolute cad. This fascinating figure’s statue remains atop a large tower in London’s Trafalgar Square to this day.

¹⁰⁶ Ryan, Michael. “Lord Nelson: Hero And...cad!” *Smithsonian.com*, Smithsonian Institution, 1 Feb. 2004, <https://www.smithsonianmag.com/history/lord-nelson-hero-andcad-105811218/>.

¹⁰⁷ Johnson, Ben. “Admiral Lord Nelson and the Battle of Trafalgar.” *Historic UK*, <https://www.historic-uk.com/HistoryUK/HistoryofEngland/Admiral-Lord-Nelson/>.

¹⁰⁸ Ryan, Michael. “Lord Nelson: Hero And...cad!” *Smithsonian.com*, Smithsonian Institution, 1 Feb. 2004, <https://www.smithsonianmag.com/history/lord-nelson-hero-andcad-105811218/>.

¹⁰⁹ Ryan, Michael. “Lord Nelson: Hero And...cad!” *Smithsonian.com*, Smithsonian Institution, 1 Feb. 2004, <https://www.smithsonianmag.com/history/lord-nelson-hero-andcad-105811218/>.

¹¹⁰ Ryan, Michael. “Lord Nelson: Hero And...cad!” *Smithsonian.com*, Smithsonian Institution, 1 Feb. 2004, <https://www.smithsonianmag.com/history/lord-nelson-hero-andcad-105811218/>.

¹¹¹ Ryan, Michael. “Lord Nelson: Hero And...cad!” *Smithsonian.com*, Smithsonian Institution, 1 Feb. 2004, <https://www.smithsonianmag.com/history/lord-nelson-hero-andcad-105811218/>.

¹¹² Johnson, Ben. “Admiral Lord Nelson and the Battle of Trafalgar.” *Historic UK*, <https://www.historic-uk.com/HistoryUK/HistoryofEngland/Admiral-Lord-Nelson/>.

¹¹³ Ryan, Michael. “Lord Nelson: Hero And...cad!” *Smithsonian.com*, Smithsonian Institution, 1 Feb. 2004, <https://www.smithsonianmag.com/history/lord-nelson-hero-andcad-105811218/>.

Cumming's treatment of Nelson is set to a poem by Lawrence Durrell and it paints quite the accurate picture. It makes references to his affair with Lady Emma, his missing arm and eye, his statue at Trafalgar Square, and his untimely demise. The song is portrayed as a swaying sea shanty, filled with double entendres that highlight Nelson's victories on the battlefield and off.

One of the most moving pieces based on historical events from this era comes from the pen of Greek composer Mikis Theodorakis. *The Ballad of Mauthausen*, a song cycle in four parts, is set to the work of Greek poet Iakovos Kambanellis. Kambanellis was imprisoned in the Mauthausen Concentration and Extermination Camp in 1942 for attempting to escape the Nazi-occupied Greece.¹¹⁴ Luckily, he survived his imprisonment and went on to publish a memoir and four poems recounting his experience in Mauthausen. According to Theodorakis, his good friend Kambanellis approached him to set the poems to music, which he happily accepted. Theodorakis stated "this composition gives us the chance to remind the younger generation of history, that history that must never be forgotten." The work can only be described as devastating. The pain, anger, suffering, horror, and gross injustice of the Holocaust so vividly expressed in Kambanellis' poems is brought to the forefront by Theodorakis' musical setting. This is perhaps one of the most important historical classical compositions of all.

¹¹⁴ Horst-Warhaft, Gail. "Iakovos Kambanellis Obituary." *The Guardian*, Guardian News and Media, 4 Apr. 2011, <https://www.theguardian.com/theguardian/2011/apr/04/iakovos-kambanellis-obituary>.

Conclusion

This expansive study has run the gambit of vocal writing based on historical subjects and events. The examined works travel from one of the earliest examples in Monteverdi's *L'Incoronazione di Poppea*, through the Baroque operas of Handel, to the few examples found in the Classical era, making a brief stop in the Bel Canto period, sailing through the Romantic era, and arriving at the age of Modern Composition. More often than not liberties have been taken with the subjects in question. Changes have been made, whether it be the timeline of Seneca's death, a meeting between Elizabeth I and Mary Stuart that never happened, Schumann's setting of fictional dialogue, or the romanticizing of Don Carlos and Boris Godunov. The primary goal of these composers seems to be to explore the range of human emotion rather than stick to a rigid historical structure.

Certainly, the sources that the composers were dealing with have a large impact on this trend. After all, it is hard to faithfully adapt history recorded nearly sixteen hundred years before you were alive, like in the case of Monteverdi and Handel. In addition, some leeway must be observed for the composers and librettists that were adapting stories that had already been altered for plays or earlier stage works, like Mozart for *Mitridate*, Verdi in *Don Carlos*, and Mussorgsky in *Boris Godunov*. It is fortunate that a composer like Theodorakis was able to directly collaborate with Kambanellis on adapting the poet's real-life experiences in the harrowing Mauthausen Concentration Camp. This allows Theodorakis to be completely faithful to the real experiences recorded by Kambanellis.

Still, even for the works that play fast and loose with the facts one cannot help but be enthralled with the strength of the composition and the ideas which the characters represent. The altered circumstances surrounding the operatic Seneca's death do not make the scene any less

moving or harrowing. The fabrication of the romance between Carlos and Elizabeth in *Don Carlos* does not make Philip II's cry in the face of unrequited love any less affecting. Nor does the fact that the conversation between Schumann's two grenadiers never happened mean it fails to honor those fighting viciously for their country. The composers were not trying to pervert history, but rather take inspiration from real events and translate them to their audience in a way that was identifiable and relatable. One can see themselves in Boris Godunov when he is expressing the love he has for his son before he dies. They can have a laugh at the double entendre laden account of Lord Horatio Nelson as set by Cumming. Through musical expression they can attempt to emotionally connect with the impossible plight of Holocaust victims.

Overall, when treating historical facts in music there are almost always some changes made. The overall point in music seems to be to stir the emotions of the listener. By giving us music portrayed through famous figures and events it allows a sense of familiarity that can enhance the dramatic and emotional qualities of the music in question. History does repeat itself, as the same themes of honor, pain, humor, duty, and love raise their heads again and again through history, music, and the joining of the two.

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Recital Program



UNIVERSITY OF
SOUTH CAROLINA
School of Music

presents

MANOLI STAVRINAKIS, bass
with
BLADE BOULWARE, piano
ZACH WARD, cello
in
SENIOR LECTURE RECITAL: "History Repeats Itself"

Thursday, March 31, 2022
4:30PM • Recital Hall

"Amici, amici è giunta l'ora" from <i>L'incoronazione di Poppea</i>	Claudio Monteverdi (1567-1643)
"Presti omai l'Egizia terra" from <i>Giulio Cesare</i>	George Frideric Handel (1685-1759)
Die beiden Grenadiere	Robert Schumann (1810-1856)
"Ella giammai m'amo" from <i>Don Carlo</i>	Giuseppe Verdi (1813-1901)
"Kak vo gorode bylo vo Kazani" from <i>Boris Godunov</i>	Modest Mussorgsky (1839-1881)
"A Ballad of The Good Lord Nelson" from <i>We Happy Few</i>	Richard Cumming (1928-2009)
"Asma Asmaton" from <i>The Ballad of Mauthausen</i>	Mikis Theodorakis (1925-2021)

Mr. Stavrinakis is a student of Professor Thomas Brunson. This recital is presented in partial fulfillment of the Honors College Thesis and Performance Certificate in Voice.