

Passionate fans of classical music know some label it as boring and disengaging. Of course, this is complete nonsense. Serious music that is presented in orchestral halls and opera houses is all about listening. Like a beautiful painting meant to be gazed at or a scrumptious wine meant to be savored, music is for our brains to completely smother us with endless intellectual satisfaction.

Nevertheless, if you're up for some rowdy fun as well as sonic stimulation, opera arias are for you. An "aria" is a song within an opera, usually existing as a solo for one of the plot's main characters. Characters with arias are typically sung by the best vocalists in the business — on top of singing, the performers need to "act" out the scene, as opera is a constant combination of theater and music combined. This is not an easy task given you need to fill an entire concert hall with your voice while fighting against an orchestra.

On top of catchy music sung by exceptionally gifted individuals, arias are the most engaging part of a concert for the audience. Just like at a jazz gig, you're encouraged to clap and show your enthusiasm at an aria's conclusion. This means an opera has numerous opportunities for a passionate fan to get their heart pumping joyously.

This evening you will hear a compilation of beloved arias sung in the Italian language. Sit back, relax, be prepared to shed a tear, and get ready to stand and applaud!

### **Giuseppe Verdi**

Born October 10, 1813 — Le Roncole, Italy

Died January 27, 1901 — Milan, Italy

### ***Nabucco*: Overture**

If there is a composer who wins the award for a life story filled with the most acute tragedy and triumph, it is Giuseppe Verdi. Today Verdi is one of the pinnacles of any opera company — If you're not programming Verdi, you're not truly experiencing opera. Italian opera from 19th-century romanticism remains the center of the genre's popularity today. The Italians knew how to do it: The plots, the songs, the singers, the pacing...it was a formula that worked then and is certainly keeping the buzz alive today. With 28 contributions to the genre, Verdi remains the king of the category, but his personal life will make you weep just as much as any of his compositions.

You could very much compare Verdi's life to an opera plot. He married his first wife Margherita Barezzi in 1836 and quickly fathered two children, Virginia and Icilio. But Verdi's Shakespearean tragedy was soon to begin as Virginia died in the summer of 1838 and Icilio the following spring. As if life wasn't being cruel enough to Verdi, Margherita died in 1840. His life now in ruins, Verdi embraced a defeat — He swore never to compose again.

Thankfully Verdi's musical withdrawal was short-lived as the La Scala opera house in Milan managed to convince him to continue working via a three-opera contract. Accepting this deal became the most important decision of Verdi's life as he was about to write a new piece that would transform his legacy forever.

*Nabucco* can easily be considered Verdi's most crucial work as it marked the beginning of an era crowning the composer as the greatest opera figure alive. Remarkably, Verdi completed it in 1841, just one year after the total demise of his immediate family. It was then performed at La Scala for the first

time in 1842. The work was so well received that dozens of performances were immediately added to La Scala's upcoming playbills and Verdi was on track to create the legacy he is known for today.

*Nabucco* is the tale of King Nebuchadnezzar II's (here named Nabucco) persecution and exile of the Hebrew Israelites. As is typical with Italian opera, the primary plot is simply a holding cell for more poignant tales of love, deceit, and tragedy. The opera ends with Nabucco coming to grips with his own transgressions against the Israelites and adopting the Hebrew god as his own.

*Nabucco* has a strong sense of darkness turning to light. Appropriate for a man who knew the darkness best.

### **Richard Strauss**

Born June 11, 1864 — Munich, Germany

Died September 8, 1949—Garmisch-Partenkirchen, Germany

### ***Der Rosenkavalier Suite***

Like the great Gustav Mahler, Richard Strauss was greatly inspired by the 19th-century Beethoven school of romanticism but found himself living in a time that was starting to move on. The modernist era was approaching fast — new harmonies and orchestration techniques that would have seemed taboo a century earlier were now readily appearing. Composers like Sergei Prokofiev and Maurice Ravel would write for orchestras in ways that would reshape the image of the ensemble in its entirety, a trend that would take hold for the next 40 to 50 years. For some composers, however, new foreign harmonies and odd orchestrations were not necessarily the most effective way to achieve progress. Richard Strauss progressed the symphony orchestra more than almost any other at the time, and he did it his way: Bigger, faster, harder.

Strauss' orchestral music is the most notorious in literature on two fronts. First, it is a shock to the senses — if you're lucky enough to witness an orchestra knock a Strauss performance out of the park it will be a sonic experience you'll never forget. You'll find yourself asking if what you're seeing and hearing is truly possible from a group of 60 to 80 musicians. Second, performers fear Strauss above all other composers. Strauss wrote what he pleased without caring about what is comfortable and/or possible for an instrumentalist, meaning that a tremendous amount of skill and confidence is required simply to play what's on the page. Of course, that's after many hours of individual preparation before the first rehearsal.

The operas of Richard Strauss are the same story. Cherished by the composer just as much as his tone poems, Strauss was no doubt prolific here, writing 16 operas throughout his career. They vary greatly, showcasing the diverse musical palette of the composer with operas dealing with comic plot points and other tragic. They range from 90 minutes long to over 4 hours.

Completed in 1910, perhaps Strauss' most triumphant opera contribution was *Der Rosenkavalier*, a comedy in three acts with libretto written by Hugo von Hofmannsthal. It is a tale of an engagement gone awry when a spoken-for damsel falls in love with a rose-bearer (rosenkavalier) who was only meant to

deliver a token to her. It remains one of Strauss' most popular and largest works with a 4 1/2-hour runtime when accounting for intermissions.

Many years after the work's premiere an orchestral suite arrangement of the opera appeared on the playbill for a 1944 New York Philharmonic Orchestra concert. At that time the suite was completely unknown and unpublished. It was a 23-minute speed run of the full opera's most charming musical moments that represented key points in the plot. As lovely as the arrangement was, it was discovered after the fact that Strauss himself was not involved at all in its composition. Its creation is now credited to Arthur Rodzinski, the conductor who led the New York concert. Nevertheless, it is confirmed that Strauss gave his blessing on the suite's publication in 1945, giving the world even more astonishing music by the master of orchestral assault.

**Nathan Black** is the general manager of the El Paso Symphony Youth Orchestras and a section cellist in the El Paso Symphony Orchestra. In addition, he produces and hosts 88.5 FM KTEP's *El Paso Symphony Orchestra Broadcast*, and as of 2022 is the resident lecturer of EPSO's "Opening Notes" series.