

All About....The Opera Orchestra

Instruments have been used to accompany vocal performances since the first humans sang. Ancient flutes and drums have been found that date to more than 35,000 years ago. The first operas appeared at the very end of the 1500's and were usually accompanied by whatever instruments were available, and parts were not specifically written for the orchestra. Instead, the instruments doubled the voices, that is, they played the same melodies. The composer Claudio Monteverdi is often given the honor of having created the beginning of the orchestra as we know it, with its divisions of strings, winds, brass, and percussion. By the late 18th century, at the time of Mozart, most orchestras used a variety of instruments, and parts were especially written for them.

The Opera Orchestra is an integral part of the opera. It is much like a symphony orchestra that you might have seen performing on a stage. The modern orchestra is made up of four instrumental families (strings, winds, brass, and percussion) plus a group of miscellaneous instruments. Within each instrument family, one instrument corresponds to each of the four main voice categories (Highest, High, Middle, and Low). For example, in the string family, the violin is highest, followed (in descending order) by the viola, cello and double bass.

The orchestra is led by the conductor who stands in the lowered "orchestra pit" in front of and below the level of the stage. The conductor is fully responsible for the progress of the opera. He or she must blend and balance the music at all times, keep proper tempo (pacing of the speed of the music) and regulate the dynamics (loud or soft). The conductor also signals ("cues") each singer when they are to begin singing. In some opera houses, video screens placed around the wings and backstage areas transmit a live picture of the conductor from the pit to the stage. This keeps the singers from having to look down into the pit all the time. If you look into Opera Cleveland's pit, you will see one such camera aimed at the conductor.

While the orchestra may be used simply to accompany a singer or singers, it usually enhances the drama by being an independent and equal partner with the singers. Though it is not visible to many of the audience members, it is an extremely important contributor to the impact of the production.