

George Frideric HANDEL 1685 – 1759

Handel was born in Germany in the same year as J S Bach and Domenico Scarlatti. He trained in Italy but settled in London and was created a British citizen by Act of Parliament in 1727. He was highly regarded by other composers and Beethoven said of him “... *the greatest composer that ever lived ... go to him and learn how to achieve great effects by such simple means.*” **Chorus of Islanders** comes from *Alcina*, an opera first performed in 1735 at Covent Garden but which soon fell into obscurity and was not performed again until 1928.

Giochino ROSSINI 1792 – 1868

Often referred to as ‘The Italian Mozart’, and from a family of musicians, Rossini was actually apprenticed to a blacksmith before training as a singer and horn player.

**Villagers Chorus** is taken from *William Tell*, his 38<sup>th</sup> and last opera, composed when he was 38. Although a fine work blessed with an instantly recognisable overture (remember The Lone Ranger?), the full opera is now rarely performed as it lasts over 4 hours. Our chorus runs for a little less.

Henry PURCELL 1659 – 1695

**Dido’s Lament** is from Purcell’s chamber opera *Dido and Aeneas* believed to have been performed for the first time at Josias Priest’s ‘Boarding School for Young Gentlewomen’ in Chelsea in 1689. Although it was popular in private circles it was never performed in the theatre and remained in manuscript only until 1840.

Purcell died at the height of his powers aged 36 having, according to some, caught a chill after returning late from the theatre and being locked out by his wife. We hope none of you will be running this risk tonight.

Some random information on the composers and the pieces

(with grateful acknowledgement to Wikipedia)

Giuseppe VERDI 1813 -1901

**The Chorus of the Hebrew Slaves** comes from *Nabucco* (a shortened form of the Italian for Nebuchadnezzar) which was first performed in 1842. Verdi was just beginning to establish his reputation when, following the early deaths of his two children, his beloved wife Margherita died on June 18<sup>th</sup> 1840. He was devastated and stopped composing but it is said that the words of this chorus inspired him to write again.

**Brindisi** is from *La traviata* (*The Fallen Woman*) based on a novel by Alexandre Dumas. The opera was originally called *Violetta*, after the main character, and was deemed an “utter failure” after its first performance in March 1853. Verdi thought he knew why and wrote to a friend: “*La traviata last night a failure. My fault or the singers’? Time will tell.*”

In contrast, just two months earlier, in Jan 1853 *Il trovatore* (*The Troubador*) opened to immediate huge popularity. **The Anvil Chorus** or *Coro di zingari* (*Gypsy chorus*) is a lasting favourite, adapted and parodied often: in the 1929 Marx Brothers film *The Cocoanuts*, Harpo and Chico play the Anvil Chorus on a hotel's cash register. We are more traditional tonight.

Léo DELIBES 1836 -1891

The **Flower Duet**, so familiar to many through its use by British Airways in their commercials, is from *Lakmé*, first performed in April 1883 and typical of the fascination in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century with all things oriental. It was the last of several operas amongst his wide range of composition. Delibes is considered to have been a major influence on composers such as Tchaikovsky, Saint-Saens and Debussy.

Georges BIZET 1838 – 1875

The **Habanera** is taken from *Carmen*, one of Bizet's best known works. But he never knew its popularity. During rehearsals the production team felt that families would be shocked to see such a 'debauched' opera and the orchestra declared the score unplayable. The show was denounced by the critics after the first performance in March 1875 and Bizet died of a heart attack, aged 36, on 3rd June, his sixth wedding anniversary.

Giacomo PUCCINI 1858 – 1924

Giacomo Antonio Domenico Michele Secondo Maria Puccini was born into a family with a long musical history but in his early years was considered to be a singularly poor student. Reputedly he was inspired to become an opera composer after walking 30km to see a performance of Verdi's *Aida* in Pisa. As his success grew he developed a passion for driving fast cars and was nearly killed in an accident in 1903, but it was his love of cigars and cigarettes that finally took him twenty one years later. **O mio babbino caro** is from *Gianni Schicchi*, the 3<sup>rd</sup> of a trio of one-act operas premiered in New York in 1918. **Vissi d'arte, vissi d'amore** is from *Tosca*, at the time (1900) a ground-breaking work - 'gritty' and real-life.

William GILBERT (1836-1911) & Arthur SULLIVAN (1842-1900)

*The Mikado* is the ninth, and probably the most successful, of the fourteen G & S collaborations. It ran for 672 performances from March 1885, one of the longest theatre runs of any piece till then. It tapped into the craze for everything Japanese at the time and gave Gilbert a very usefully disguised vehicle for sharply satirising British politics. In **The Sun Whose Rays** Yum-Yum contemplates her own beauty. She then joins Nanki-Poo, Pish-Tush and her schoolgirl friends for the **Madrigal**, to keep their spirits up upon realising she is unlikely to be married for long. You may do better to forget the questionable plot and just enjoy Sullivan's luscious music.

Richard WAGNER 1813 – 1883

Unusually for the time, Wagner wrote both the music and libretto for all of his works.

**The Bridal Chorus** ('Here comes the bride' of so many wedding ceremonies) comes from his opera *Lohengrin*, based on the German Arthurian legend of a knight of the Holy Grail sent in a boat pulled by swans to rescue a maiden who can never ask his identity. Wagner was a controversial and fiery figure who was exiled for 12 years after his involvement with a failed revolution in Saxony in 1849. This meant that *Lohengrin*'s first performance in 1850 took place without him and was conducted by Franz Liszt.

Gaetano DONIZETTI 1797 – 1848

The **Chorus of Wedding Guests** is taken from the most famous of Donizetti's 75 operas, *Lucia di Lammermoor*, a tragic tale based loosely on Walter Scott's novel of the time. Donizetti came from a poor family with no musical tradition but obtained a scholarship and grew to be a prolific composer. In addition to his operas he wrote 16 symphonies, 19 string quartets, 193 songs, 45 duets, 3 oratorios, 28 cantatas and a variety of other pieces. All this in a musical life that ended in 1845 when he became insane.

Wolfgang Amadeus MOZART 1756 – 1791

Another prolific, but tragically short, life. Johannes Chrysostomus Wolfgangus Theophilus Mozart was a child prodigy who achieved fame but no financial security. (He adopted the name 'Amadeus' from about 1770 onwards.) The **Voyagers Chorus** is from *Idomeneo* written when he was 24 and his first venture into *opera seria* (as opposed to comic opera – *opera buffa*). It premiered in Munich in 1781 to good reviews which encouraged him to abandon the restrictive patronage of the church and go freelance as a composer-performer. But he struggled to sustain his income – Austria was at war and times were hard. Things were beginning to improve by 1791 when he contracted what was probably rheumatic fever and died, aged 35, on 5 December without completing his *Requiem*.