WOLFGANG AMADEUS MOZART (1756-1791) – Overture to The Marriage of Figaro

The Marriage of Figaro (1786) was the first of three successful collaborations between librettist Lorenzo da Ponte and Mozart. Based on the second part of the Beaumarchais Figaro Trilogy, Mozart’s brilliant opera buffa continues the story begun with Rossini’s The Barber of Seville. As the curtain lifts, we find ourselves among the familiar characters on the day of Figaro’s wedding to Susanna but the ceremony is delayed by various intrigues, plots and other flights of aristocratic spoofery. Figaro shows, as much as anything he ever wrote, Mozart’s effortless genius for the pairing of literary absurdity and stunningly beautiful music.

GIUSEPPE VERDI (1813-1901) – Sempre libera and Brindisi from La traviata

Verdi and librettist Francesco Maria Piave based La traviata (1853) on a contemporaneous play called La Dame aux camélias. The story centers on Violetta, a Parisian courtesan who, like so many of our most beloved opera people, suffers intermittent bouts of consumption and seemingly constant fits of romantic frustration. At the close of Act I, Violetta sings the famous aria Sempre libera, declaring that she chooses freedom over love. The famous Brindisi (Drinking Song), which occurs earlier in Act I, is performed by Violetta and Alfredo, who was challenged by party-goers to show off his voice.

JACQUES OFFENBACH (1819-1880) – Kleinzach Ballad from Tales of Hoffmann

Tales of Hoffmann (1880) was Offenbach’s final work and, sadly, he did not live to see the premiere. In the libretto, the poet Hoffmann sits in a tavern recounting three of his lost loves – a mechanical doll, a singer and a woman who steals his reflection. The Kleinzach Ballad comes near the end of the Prologue, when Hoffmann first arrives and regales everyone with a song about a legendary dwarf.

GEORGES BIZET (1838-1875) – Habanera from Carmen

Only slightly luckier than Offenbach, Bizet was in the very last months of his life when his opera Carmen premiered in March of 1875. It would, in due time, become the greatest known and most beloved of his works but Bizet had only its original rather tepid reception to carry with him to the grave. The sultry and provocative Habanera moment occurs during Act I, when Carmen sings to a group of factory workers about the rebellious nature of love.

GIUSEPPE VERDI (1813-1901) – Va Pensiero from Nabucco

The moving Hebrew Slave Chorus from Act III of Verdi’s Nabucco (1842) has long been associated with the burgeoning Italian nationalism of the mid-19th century. The plot follows the exile of the Jews from their homeland by King Nabucco and though scholarship differs about whether or not the composer intended their song of longing as a rallying cry for his Italian compatriots, there is no doubt that history has since embraced Va Pensiero as such.
AMILCARE PONCHIELLI (1834-1886) – *Cielo e Mar from La Gioconda*

The libretto for *La Gioconda* (1876) was taken from a prose play by Victor Hugo entitled *Angelo, Tyrant of Padua*. It is a story, of course, of love – Gioconda’s abiding love for her mother, Gioconda’s unrealized love for Enzo and the unwelcome love Barnaba has for Gioconda. *Cielo e Mar* (Sky and Sea) comes from Act II and depicts Enzo standing watch on his ship and singing about his love for Laura (not Gioconda!).

RICHARD WAGNER (1813-1883) – *Pilgrim’s Chorus and O du mein holder Abendstern from Tannhauser*

*Tannhauser* (1845) is based on a German legend of the same name in which the title character is cast out of the land of gods to seek out redemption among mortals and perhaps find a truer understanding of love in the process. The *Pilgrim’s Chorus* happens in Scene 1 of Act III and represents the journey of penitents to and from Rome to find absolution. Just one scene later, Wolfram sings an ode to the evening star as night falls in the aria *O du mein holder Abendstern* (Oh, my gracious evening star).

JULES MASSANET (1842-1912) – *Pourquoi me revellier from Werther*

Massenet and his three librettists liberally crafted the story of *Werther* from *The Sorrows of Young Werther* by Goethe. As the book title suggests, this was dark material to work with as Werther the character turns out to be a desperately love-sick and self-destructive soul. He sings *Pourquoi me revellier* in Act III after a conversation with his dear but unobtainable Charlotte about their mutual love of the poet Ossian. Upon reflection of his lot, Werther is compelled to ask “Why do you awaken me? O breath of spring?”

LEONARD BERNSTEIN (1918-1990) – *Overture to Candide*

Based on a satirical 1759 novella by Voltaire called *Candide: The Optimist*, Bernstein’s 1956 comic operetta features a young man who is convinced that all things happen for the best possible reasons. He travels the world in a series of adventurous tests to his naïve theory and Bernstein’s ability to juggle different musical styles aptly depicts the diverse succession of disasters encountered by the “eternal optimist.” Aside from a few memorable and oft-excerpted arias, it is the fantastic overture that has kept this initially unsuccessful music in vogue today.

GIUSEPPE VERDI (1813-1901) – *Anvil Chorus from Il Trovatore*

Not many artists get to wear the mantle of ‘master’ before they die, but Verdi, whose popularity had been steadily building since *Nabucco* and had become evergreen with *Rigoletto*, enjoyed the privilege by 1853 of choosing the projects that most interested him, free of financial concern. To wit, *Il Trovatore* was not the result of a commission but rather a personal passion project for the composer. The libretto still ranks among the most densely complicated in all of opera but the music is some of Verdi’s finest. In the *Anvil Chorus*, we hear the Spanish gypsies striking away at their anvils by the light of the coming dawn.
GIOACHINO ROSSINI (1792-1868) – Largo al factotum from Barber of Seville

So calamitous and terrible was the premiere of Rossini’s Barber of Seville, the composer claimed to be ill for the second performance. He could not have been at all surprised to find a torch-bearing mob at his door later that evening, but he had incorrectly divined their motive for being there. The second night was a huge success and the crowd had come with bravos, not pitchforks. Largo al factotum occurs near the beginning of the opera in Act I when Figaro treats us to a song about his many talents.

CAMILLE SAINT-SAËNS (1835-1921) – Amour, viens aider ma faiblesse from Samson and Delilah

Using Chapter 16 of the Book of Judges as inspiration, Saint-Saëns’ Samson and Delilah (1877) is a tale of Old Testament consequence that focuses more on Delilah than the biblical hero with the magical hair. Unlike Barber, the premiere went very well, but it would not be until the 1890s that revivals began to appear throughout Europe. During Act II, Dalilah posits in Amour that not even Samson, with all of his legendary strength, can resist the pull of her love.

JOHANN STRAUSS II (1825-1899) – Czardas from Die Fledermaus

It’s New Year’s Eve and Eisenstein is supposed to go to jail for insulting somebody. But he wants to go to a party so he delays the arrival and instead involves himself in a mistaken identity farce that ends with him trying to seduce his own disguised wife! Die Fledermaus (1874) was a big hit at its premiere and remains a staple to this day. The Czardas aria comes in Act II, when Rosalinda arrives at the party dressed as a Hungarian Countess and must sing something culturally convincing to carry off the ruse.

CHARLES GOUNOD (1818-1893) – Act IV Duet from Romeo and Juliette

The story of the star-crossed Montague and Capulet kids needs no introduction, but Gounod’s simply-stated telling of it probably does. Apart from the then common choice of re-awakening Juliet for a Duet before the famous double death, Gounod and his librettists left Shakespeare’s basic plot alone, something that cannot be said for many of the other operatic versions of the literary classic. For this and many other reasons, Gounod’s 1867 version still stands tallest in the group and remains a required part of every opera company’s regular rotation.

GIUSEPPE VERDI (1813-1901) – Triumphal March from Aida

Any discussion of an Aida production eventually turns to the subject of elephants. Will they have them? How many? Ever since the 1871 premiere in Cairo, which included a dozen of them, audiences have expected to see live pachyderms during the Triumphal March of Act II, when Radames returns victorious to Egypt after routing the Ethiopians. The desire by opera lovers to see such a thing confirms the power of spectacle in this art form and, more practical but no less important, the power of a choral set piece to make an incredibly dramatic statement on its own.
GIACOMO PUCCINI (1858-1924) – *Nessun Dorma from Turandot*

Just like Offenbach over 40 years before, Puccini would not live to see his final work staged. In fact, he wasn’t even able to complete the score. That effort was to be made first by Franco Alfano, who relied on Puccini’s sketches and reacted gracefully to criticism from the work’s publisher and eventual conductor to get *Turandot* (1926) to the theater. *Nessun Dorma* may well be the most popular tenor aria in the repertory. Calaf sings it in Act III while he waits for morning and the announcement of his name to Turandot.