

# NZ OPERA

## **Opera: What is it?**

Opera combines music, singing, drama and occasionally dance, which leads many to say it is one of the most complete of all art forms. It lays bare the most universal of themes – life, love and death – which is why opera retains its relevance today, more than four centuries after the first operas were written.

Opera runs the full gamut of human emotions. A three-hour work can scale vast peaks and troughs – hope, desire, love, loss, redemption, anger, betrayal – taking the audience on a virtual emotional rollercoaster. It has an almost unparalleled ability to move and transport the audience.

## **Opera: A Short History:**

The word 'opera' was first used in 1639 to describe, "composition in which poetry, dance, and music are combined". Using this definition, the first work that we might define as opera is Jacopo Peri's *Dafne*. Composed in the late 1590s, most of the score has now been lost, which is why Claudio Monteverdi's *Orfeo* of 1607 is widely acknowledged as the earliest complete opera.

While opera has its origins in 16<sup>th</sup> century Florence, its roots can be traced to the use of choruses in ancient Greek tragedy and plays. The Florentine Camerata, a collective of musicians, poets and intellectuals, sought to revive this tradition as a response to what they saw as the excesses of renaissance polyphonic music.

While initially the preserve of wealthy nobility because of the expense of staging what tended to be lavish productions, opera was latterly embraced by the general public. This was fuelled by the opening of public opera houses but this popularisation also led to a division, with opera seria performed at court and opera buffa – or comic operas – performed more widely. The division was ended with a new generation of composers, among them Gluck and Mozart, whose works transcended the strict definitions of seria and buffa.

The nineteenth century saw further developments for the artform. The French tradition of Grand Opera grew in popularity across Europe, meaning opera orchestras and choruses swelled in their number and generally, productions were bigger and more lavish. Verdi, Rossini and Meyerbeer were all proponents of grand opera. At the same time, Wagner – who abhorred the notion of grand opera – was making a name for himself with something of a different approach. He favoured Gesamtkunstwerk, or 'total art work' where the composer had input into all the creative aspects of the work.

In stark contrast to the previous three centuries, the 20<sup>th</sup> century saw a marked slowdown in the number of new operatic works. Rather, the stage saw a revival of works from the previous centuries. That said, Schoenberg, Britten, Shostakovich, Glass and Adams were among those who made their mark on the repertoire in more recent times.