

*Virginia  
Opera*

*Agrippina*  
George Frideric Handel

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# AGRIPPINA

by  
George Frederic Handel

Libretto by  
Vincenzo Grimani

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# AGRIPPINA

By  
George Frideric Handel  
Libretto by Vincenzo Grimani

First performed on December 26, 1709, at the Teatro San Giovanni Gristostomo in  
Venice, Italy.

## Cast of Characters

<b>Claudius</b> , Emperor of Rome.....	Bass
<b>Agrippina</b> , his wife.....	Soprano
<b>Nero</b> , Agrippina's son.....	Tenor
<b>Pallante</b> , a freedman.....	Bass
<b>Narciso</b> , a freedman.....	Countertenor
<b>Lesbo</b> , Claudius' servant.....	Bass
<b>Ottone</b> , Commander of the Imperial Army.....	Countertenor
<b>Poppea</b> , a beautiful Roman lady .....	Soprano

## Brief Summary

Setting: Rome, about 50 A.D.

When Agrippina, wife of the Roman emperor Claudius, hears news of her husband's death, she calls on the Imperial freedmen Pallante and Narciso to help her place Nero, her son by a previous marriage, upon the throne. Her plans are thwarted when Claudius' servant Lesbo announces that Claudius's life has been saved by his general Ottone, who the Emperor has gratefully named as his successor. Ottone arrives at the palace and confides to Agrippina that he loves a Roman lady, Poppea. Agrippina, knowing that Claudius secretly desires Poppea, tells Poppea that Ottone offered to give her to Claudius in exchange for the throne. An angry Poppea wants revenge on Ottone so when Claudius visits her secretly she convinces Claudius that Ottone is a traitor. She then discovers that Agrippina has deceived her. Meanwhile, Agrippina, playing upon Ottone's supposed treachery, convinces Claudius to name Nero his successor instead of Ottone. Agrippina is unaware the Nero also desires Poppea. Poppea, who now knows Agrippina lied, hatches a plan to save Ottone. She arranges for her three suitors, Ottone, Claudius and Nero to come to her room. First Ottone, then Nero, arrive and she hides them in different places in her bedroom. When Claudius arrives she tells him it is Nero, not Ottone, who is his rival for her favors. To prove this, she reveals Nero's presence. Claudio angrily dismisses Nero. Feeling vulnerable to Agrippina's plotting, Pallante and Narciso reveal Agrippina's intrigues to Claudius. Realizing that her schemes are now in jeopardy, Agrippina tells Claudius that she acted only in his and the Empire's best interests. Then she accuses him of paying undue attention to Poppea. When Agrippina reveals that Ottone loves Poppea, Claudius contradicts her, saying it really Nero who desires her. Then he commands Nero to marry Poppea, and names Ottone as his successor. Ottone wants Poppea more than being emperor and renounces the throne in order to reclaim her. Endorsing this exchange, Claudius names Nero as his successor. All are happy with this result, especially Agrippina, who has achieved her most sought-after goal.

# Full Plot Synopsis and Musical Highlights

## Overture

The prelude to the opera is bright and fast-paced. It is considered one of Handel's finest overtures, a worthy preamble to the witty and sophisticated comedy it precedes.

## Act 1

Agrippina, the wife of the Emperor Claudius, has just learned that her husband has been lost at sea, and has summoned her son, Nero. Using recitative she informs him of the news and suggests ways Nero can ingratiate himself with people so that he will be proclaimed the next emperor. In the first aria of the opera, "Col saggio tuo consiglio," (Your sound advice), Nero says he will do as she suggests, but is clear that he is doing so mainly to please his mother. His aria establishes him as a weak character and he remains so throughout the opera. The minor mode supports his weakness musically, and Handel also employs musical symbolism by using a descending musical line when Nero sings of ascending the throne. After he leaves she calls on two Imperial freedmen, Pallante and Narciso, one at a time, to inform them of Claudius' death. Agrippina knows that both men are in love with her and wishes to use that knowledge to manipulate them. After being informed of Claudius' death each freedman has an aria which establishes his character. Pallante sings an aria of strength and boldness, "La mia sorte fortunata" (Propitious fate). By contrast, Narciso's aria is delicate and sings of the lightness of his heart in "Volo pronto; e lieto il core," (I hurry away, my heart light). She promises her love and favor to each one in turn if Nero becomes emperor. Each one leaves, professing support for Nero as the new ruler. The fourth aria is Agrippina's. Once again, the aria establishes the nature of her character with its syncopated phrasing and military flair. "L'alma mia fra le tempeste," (Amidst the tempest my soul hopes) is based on one of Handel's favorite melodies and expresses her feeling of triumph and satisfaction as her plan is set in motion. Nero makes his overtures to the poor of Rome in the arioso, "Qual piacere a un cor pietoso," (What pleasure to a piteous heart). Pallante and Narciso show their support for Nero.

Agrippina arrives to make the announcement of Claudius's death. She asks who will ascend the throne. Pallante and Narciso proclaim Nero's name. The four celebrate Nero as the next emperor. Nero, with Agrippina beside him, begins to ascend the throne when the scene is interrupted by a flourish of trumpets. Claudius' servant Lesbos arrives to announce that his master is not dead after all, but was saved by Ottone, the commander of the army. The conspirators are rendered momentarily speechless. In an aside Lesbos mentions that he is going to inform the beautiful Poppea that Claudius will secretly visit her that evening. Ottone arrives and declares that Claudius has shown his gratitude by promising him the throne. Ottone then confides to Agrippina that he loves Poppea, a Roman beauty, far more than the throne. Agrippina knows that Claudius secretly desires Poppea, and instantly begins to reconfigure her schemes. Left alone, Ottone sings, "Lusinghiera mia speranza,"

(Flattering hope, deceive not my heart). Ottone's aria establishes him as genuine and straightforward.

Poppea is in her apartment admiring herself. She sings the aria, "Vaghe perle, elleti fiori," (You precious pearls, you choice flowers) which introduces her as capricious and pleasure-seeking, wanting to enhance her beauty to attract the powerful. She knows that Ottone, Claudius and Nero have expressed love for her. Lesbos interrupts her thoughts to bring news that Claudius will come to her incognito before appearing to the people. She laments that she really wants Ottone to come to her and sings the fiery aria, "È un foco quel d'amore" (Love is a fire that enters the heart). Agrippina makes a visit to Poppea, and after ascertaining that Poppea does truly love Ottone, tells her that Ottone has offered her up to Claudius in trade for being named the next emperor. Agrippina also mentions that she knows Claudius is coming to visit her and she suggests that Poppea, who is now upset, could punish Ottone by making Claudius so jealous that he will strip Ottone of his claim to the throne. Poppea reacts angrily to the idea that Ottone has betrayed her in the aria, "Fà quanto vuoi," (Do what you will). Claudius arrives, expecting to romance Poppea and sings, "Pur ritorno a rimirarmi" (Once again I behold you in wonder). Poppea undermines Ottone and the furious Claudius declares Ottone a traitor. Claudius is ready for romance and sings the arietta, "Vieni, o cara," (Come, oh dear), but his tryst with Poppea is interrupted by the reappearance of Agrippina. Poppea greets her arrival with relief as Claudius makes his escape. Agrippina cajoles Poppea and declares her deep and abiding friendship for her in the aria, "Non ho cor che per amarti" (My heart exists only to love you). This final aria of Act I is an example of a unison aria where the accompaniment doubles the melodic line in unison or in octaves.

## Act II

Pallante and Narciso, expressing themselves in recitative, are now aware that Agrippina has tricked them both. They decide to band together to escape her web of treachery. Ottone, and then Agrippina, Poppea and Nero, arrive to herald the safe return of Claudius. Claudius enters triumphantly and all acclaim his glory. Claudius sings the stately and imperial aria, "Cade il mondo," (Let the world fall). Handel employs wonderful musical symbolism to express these words by plunging the vocal line down two octaves in two measures. Each principal welcomes Claudius' return. But when Ottone approaches, Claudius rejects him, calling him a traitor. Ottone is astonished, and appeals to Agrippina, Poppea and Nero, each in turn, for support. They scorn him, each singing a brief aria of dismissal as they leave. Ottone is thrown into despair, more from losing Poppea than the throne, and sings the most tragic aria of the opera, "Voi che udite il mio lamento," (You who hear my complaint). The music expresses true, heartrending emotion from the only character who is not duplicitous.

An upset Poppea, walking in the garden, sings, "Se giunge un dispetto," (If something vexacious wounds the heart). She sees Ottone approach, lost in thought,

and she pretends to sleep. Ottone, walking in the garden, sings, “Vaghe fonti che mormorando,” (Pretty streams, murmuring). He sees Poppea and speaks lovingly, lamenting her loss. Poppea, pretending to dream aloud, recounts Agrippina’s false story. Ottone cannot restrain himself and furiously protests his innocence. Poppea tells him to come to her apartment where they can talk more freely. Ottone replies with honesty in his aria, “Ti vó giusta e non pietosa,” (I would have you just, not merciful), and leaves. Poppea realises that Agrippina has tricked her and swears revenge in the aria, “Ingannata una sol volta,” (Deceived just once but not more). Lesbo enters to tell Poppea that Claudius wants to visit her secretly in her apartments. Poppea agrees, seeing her opportunity to help Ottone and punish Agrippina. Nero enters, declaring his love for Poppea. She invites him to her apartments as well. Nero is thrilled and sings the aria, “Quando invita la donna l’amante,” (When a woman invites her lover). The music is lighthearted and reflects a boyish happiness.

Accompanied by a dramatic introduction in the orchestra, Agrippina enters the garden alone for her great scena, “Pensieri, voi mi tormentate,” (How you torment me, my restless mind). Bold strokes in the strings and oboe obbligato accompany her disquiet and anxiety. During the contrasting fast section she makes a frenzied call on the gods to assist her in gaining the throne for her son. The slow, reflective section returns with its solo oboe, replete with plaintive anguish. Claudius, trying to sneak away to visit Poppea, encounters Agrippina, interrupting her contemplations. Recitative ensues between them and Agrippina reveals that she is unsettled. After Claudius reassures her, Agrippina regains her aplomb. She tells Claudius that Ottone still plots for the throne, and to thwart his ambitions Claudius should abdicate in favour of Nero. Claudius, who is eager to be with Poppea, agrees. Agrippina ends the act with the aria, “Ogni vento ch’al porto lo spinga,” (Whatever wind blows him to port). The act comes to a close with Agrippina joyful and smiling, the music reflecting her delighted mood.

### **Act III**

Poppea has devised a plan to help Ottone reestablish his innocence. Ottone arrives at her apartments professing his innocence. Poppea believes him. She has arranged for all her suitors to come to her. She hides Ottone behind a curtain in her bedroom and tells him to remain silent regardless of what he hears. Ottone replies in his aria, “Tacerò, tacerò, pur che fedel,” (I will be silent as long as you truly love me). Nero arrives, pining for Poppea, but she tells him that his mother is coming, and persuades him to hide as well. He sings the amorous entreaty, “Coll’ardor del tuo bel core,” (May the ardor in your heart) as she leads him to a different hiding place. Claudius enters, but Poppea complains that he does not really love her. Claudius reminds her that he punished Ottone for her sake, but Poppea suddenly announces that he misunderstood her. It was not Ottone who was guilty, but Nero. To prove it, she hides Claudius, who is listening when Nero is called from his hiding place and professes his love for Poppea. Claudius emerges and furiously sends Nero packing. Claudius’ aria, “Io di Roma il Giove sono,” (I am the Jupiter of Rome) has an air of mock pomposity as he complains that he is surrounded by overly ambitious people. Claudius leaves

and Poppea brings Ottone out of hiding. She sings, “Bel piacere è godere fido amor,” (To enjoy faithful love is a true pleasure), a unison aria where the vocal line is doubled by violins only, without bass or continuo. Poppea and Ottone swear their everlasting love.

Nero tells his mother what has occurred. Agrippina is furious with him, demanding he turn away from Poppea and redirect his attention to gaining the throne. He acquiesces and sings, “Come nube che fugge dal vento,” (As a cloud flies from the wind), renouncing Poppea. Pallante and Narciso decide to tell Claudius of Agrippina’s plotting. A discomfited Claudius arrives back at the palace and is joined by Pallante and Narciso who tell him that they are being threatened by Agrippina and that she attempted to put Nero on the throne in his absence. Claudius promises to protect them. Agrippina arrives and tells Claudius he must live up to his earlier promise to put Nero on the throne. Claudius accuses her of treacherous plotting to usurp his throne. Agrippina realizes she must find a way to excuse her behavior. She admits that she sought the throne for Nero, but claims that it was only to prevent intrigues among the people and to safeguard the throne for Claudius. Claudius is surprised by her apparent honesty and is tempted to believe her. He looks to Pallante and Narciso to confirm her words and they, impressed by her cunning, say her words are true. Agrippina tells Claudius that she feels unsure of him because of his attachment to Poppea, who is, in actuality, Ottone’s lover. Claudius contradicts her, informing her that it was really Nero who was Poppea’s lover. He sends for them all, not knowing who to believe. He complains that all he wants is peace and tranquility around him. Agrippina responds with a loving and soothing aria, “Se vuoi pace, o volto amato,” (If you want peace my handsome lover). It is a slow-paced, lyrical, unison aria with a beautiful flute obbligato. When Poppea, Ottone, and Nero arrive, Claudius’ reverie is disturbed and his combativeness returns. Claudius accuses Nero of being hidden in Poppea’s bedroom, which Nero cannot not deny. Suddenly, Claudius announces that Ottone shall have the throne after all, and that Nero shall marry Poppea. But this solution pleases no one. Ottone refuses the crown, wanting Poppea. Nero doesn’t want a wife if it loses him an empire. So Claudius gives Poppea to Ottone, and proclaims Nero as his successor. Everyone is delighted and Agrippina has attained her deepest desire. Now, she states, she can die contented.



## Historical Background

Handel was a young man not quite twenty-five years old when he wrote *AGRIPPINA* for the Carnivale season in Venice during the winter of 1709-10. He was just completing his three-and-a-half year tour of Italy, sometimes called his Italian journeyman period. The libretto was written by a witty and urbane diplomat who was also a Cardinal of the Roman Catholic Church, Vincenzo Grimani. It was one of the finest librettos Handel would ever set to music. After the opera's conclusion the audience leaped to its collective feet and shouted, "*Viva il caro Sassone!*"- "Long live the beloved Saxon!" The success of *AGRIPPINA* established Handel's international reputation and recognized him as a master of his craft.

The centerpiece of Baroque opera was extraordinary singing and Handel provided ample opportunity for his singers to display their talents. Melodic ideas developed in *AGRIPPINA* ranged from brilliant bravura arias to slow expressive laments to dance songs and employed a variety of techniques such as word painting and musical symbolism. He borrowed liberally from previous successful works, but did so in an inventive manner full of contrasts and virtuosity. The *da capo* aria formed the basic unit of expression for operas of this era. Its basic ABA form allowed both the composer and the singer to demonstrate their abilities. The first A section was a completely self-contained aria suitable to be lifted out of the opera and performed on the concert stage. The contrasting B section provided an opportunity for a change in tempo and emotion. It is the repeat of the A section that gives this form its name, i.e., *da capo*, meaning "from the beginning" or "from the top." The second A section was not written out nor was the singer expected to simply sing the A section as before. The singer used the framework of the A section and then improvised embellishments to the vocal line to demonstrate the wide range of their vocal talents.

All singers were trained to develop their vocal technique to include smooth runs, trills and rapidly delivered ornamentations, but one category of singer was capable of providing truly phenomenal results. These were men known as *castrati*. The *castrato* voice was highly flexible and controlled, and many *castrati* had extremely wide ranges and exceptional breath control. The name *castrato* comes from the practice of surgically altering young boys with promising voices so that the high-pitched voice of childhood could be retained. It was a practice with a long history, beginning in Italy, probably in the fourteenth century, to replace the female voice which had been banished from choirs in the Catholic Church. Boys who underwent this procedure did not experience the voice change expected with the onset of puberty. When this voice was trained, and combined with the power and lung capacity of a man's body, the resulting sound was not only spectacular, but unearthly. During the seventeenth century the practice spread beyond the Church into the secular world and onto the opera stage. The *castrati* were the superstars of their day. Their role in opera flourished as audiences marveled at their vocal abilities. The greatest use of *castrati* singers in opera was during the period 1650-1750, although Meyerbeer wrote a role for a *castrato* as late as 1824. Two roles in *AGRIPPINA* were written for the *alto castrato* voice, Ottone and Narciso. In the Virginia Opera production these roles will be sung by countertenors.

As the operatic form continued to evolve through the Classical and Romantic periods, the *da capo* aria was also transformed into a configuration that did not impede the flow of the drama. As the opera world moved on, experimenting with new ways of expressing drama through music, there was a lack of interest in Baroque opera and operatic practices of the past. This resulted in the neglect of Handel's operas for two centuries. Handel was known primarily as a great composer of oratorios and instrumental music. However, the twentieth century saw a resurgence of interest in operas of the Baroque period. Handel's forty operas were ripe for rediscovery. The first modern revival of *AGRIPPINA* was in Handel's birthplace of Halle in 1943, followed by a production in Leipzig in 1959. Since that time numerous productions have been mounted, particularly in England, Handel's adopted home. Over the decades *AGRIPPINA* has become one of the most popular operas of the continuing Handel revival.

## The Inspired Life of George Frideric Handel

Georg Friedrich Händel was born on February 23, 1685, and showed a great talent for music at an early age. He quickly became proficient at the harpsichord, violin, oboe and organ and showed a flair for composition. His father wanted him to become a lawyer and he did attempt to follow his father's wishes, spending a year studying the law. However, in early 1703 he was allowed to discontinue his study of law and was sent to Hamburg, an important musical center in Germany. He became a member of the opera orchestra and a pupil of Reinhard Keiser, a well-known composer and the director of the local opera company. It was during this four-year period in Hamburg that Händel acquired the technical and practical expertise he would later use to stage operas as well as compose them. His first opera, *Almira*, was performed in Hamburg in 1705 and Keiser's influence was very beneficial to his continued progress as a composer.

However, it was Händel's long visit to Italy from 1706 to early 1710 that played the pivotal role in his development as an opera composer. He visited many cities and spent a great deal of time in Florence, Rome and Venice studying scores, composing the operas *Rodrigo* and *AGRIPPINA*, and meeting many of the great Italian musicians of his time. He was greatly influenced by Alessandro Scarlatti and grew enormously in his ability to write Italian opera. This trip enabled Händel to become very fluent in his use of Italian verse, to perfect his technique in composing recitative, to gain experience with the differences in vocal and instrumental writing, and to refine his gift for melody. After returning to Germany in 1710 he was retained by the Elector of Hanover, but remained there only six months before requesting a leave of absence to visit London.

Händel found London very much to his liking. It was a closed, gossipy society where there seemed to be no secrets, but one that was intellectually vital and full of fascinating people. Italian opera was beginning to make inroads into what had been an operatic backwater. Händel and his opera, *Rinaldo*, produced in London in 1711, made a huge impression on the city. His success in England, as well as his natural businessman's instinct for future prospects, prompted him to ask the Elector for a second leave of absence from his duties in Hanover. Once in England Händel simply remained in London without the permission of the Elector of Hanover. The decision to move to London permanently also prompted him to anglicize his name, hence the spelling with which he is known, George Frideric Handel. He eventually changed his nationality and became a British subject.

In 1719, the Royal Academy of Music was established in London with the purpose of producing high quality Italian opera. Handel was given a leading role in this endeavor. His responsibilities were numerous: compose the operas, engage the best singers, stage the operas, and conduct the performances. He had boundless energy and was full of initiative. The operas he wrote for the Academy were great successes. He was becoming wealthy, he was popular, and his genius was recognized in his own time. However, in 1728, *The Beggar's Opera* by John Gay took London by storm, beginning the decline of the popularity of Italian opera in England. This course of events was a blow to Handel's fortunes. Between 1728 and 1737 he worked tirelessly, reorganizing,

recruiting new singers and looking for new works. His efforts were an attempt to forestall the inevitable. It eventually became clear that the popularity of Italian opera in London had come to an end. Handel was ruined financially and he suffered a stroke.

His indomitable spirit brought him back. Not only did he recover from his stroke, he forged a second career composing oratorios, conducting and performing. In 1751 while working on his last oratorio he began to lose his sight, and even though he became completely blind he remained musically active. When he died in 1759 at the age of seventy-four, he was honored and respected, wealthy once again, and acknowledged as England's greatest composer since Purcell. George Frideric Handel's great mass of work is contained in ninety-seven volumes preserved in the British Museum. The final honor bestowed upon him was his burial in Westminster Abbey.

## The Characters in History

**Agrippina** • Julia Agrippina, also called Agrippina the Younger, was the daughter of Germanicus Julius Caesar and Agrippina the Elder. She was a member of a powerful family that traced its roots to the first Roman emperor, Caesar Augustus. She was also the sister of the Roman emperor Caligula. Born around 15 A.D. on the Rhine frontier, she was married at the age of thirteen. During this marriage, she produced a son who would eventually become the Emperor Nero. After surviving two husbands, Agrippina the Younger married her uncle, the Emperor Claudius in 49 A.D. In 50 A.D., a very popular Agrippina persuaded Claudius to adopt her son Nero, placing him in the line of succession ahead of Claudius' own natural son, Britannicus. Agrippina was openly influential unlike any previous empress. She appeared in official inscriptions and was voted the title "Augusta" by the Senate. She received foreign embassies to the emperor which were recorded in official documents. A new colony on the Rhine, the present-day city of Cologne, was named after her. In 54 A.D., after Nero became legally of age, Claudius died suddenly. There were suspicions that Agrippina had poisoned him. The young Nero became emperor and, as his mother, Agrippina wielded tremendous influence. Her likeness appeared on the imperial coinage along side her son. However, her power became a source of irritation as Nero grew older and her influence gradually diminished. When Agrippina objected to Nero's liaison with Poppaea Sabina, an upper class Roman woman, Nero arranged for his mother's murder. Agrippina survived the first attempt on her life, but died soon after at the hands of assassins in 59 A.D.

**Claudius** • Tiberius Claudius Nero Germanicus was born in 10 B.C. in Gaul (present day Lyon, France) into the powerful Imperial family descended from the first emperor, Caesar Augustus. He was the son of Drusus Claudius Nero, the son of Caesar Augustus' wife Livia, and Antonia, the daughter of Mark Antony. His uncle, Tiberius, became emperor in 14 A.D. However, Claudius was born with health problems and perceived defects. He was constantly ill and he limped, drooled and stuttered. As a result, he was considered an embarrassment and kept out of the public eye. He spent the majority of his time in seclusion, reading and studying all areas of the liberal arts. He became an accomplished scholar and even learned the ancient Etruscan language. The skills and knowledge he gained were of great benefit when he eventually came to power. His unstable nephew Caligula became emperor in 37 A.D. and in 38 A.D. Claudius married the noblewoman, Valeria Messalina. Two children were born. In January 41 A.D. the Emperor Caligula was murdered by members of his own bodyguard and there was widespread confusion and panic throughout the city of Rome. Soldiers of the Imperial Guard found Claudius, took him to their camp and declared him emperor. After securing the city and apprehending Caligula's murderers, Claudius forged bonds with the military, clearly understanding that they were responsible for his accession to power. As part of his campaign to establish his military credentials, Claudius advocated and took part in an invasion of Britain which got underway in 43 A.D. He returned to Rome in triumph in 44 A.D. secure in his position as emperor. He favored Greek freedmen as advisors and administrators which was unpopular with the Senate and Roman aristocracy. In 48 A.D. the intrigues of his wife Messalina caused him to order her execution. His freedman

Pallas recommended that he marry his niece, Agrippina the Younger. He did so in 49 A.D. within months of Messalina's execution. Agrippina was a dominating figure for the rest of Claudius' reign and his final six years were difficult ones. In 50 A.D. he acceded to Agrippina's wishes and adopted her son Nero. On many occasions thereafter he publicly demonstrated his favor toward Nero, favoring him over his own son, Britannicus. Claudius died in October 54 A.D. and Nero was proclaimed emperor the same day. The general belief is that Agrippina poisoned Claudius because Nero was now sixteen and legally an adult. Claudius' rule was marked by the annexation of Britain, the rise of the power of the imperial freedmen, stability in the provinces, successful relations with client kingdoms, poor relations with the aristocracy and autocratic interference in the judiciary process. He was also responsible for many public works projects, building new aqueducts for Rome and new port facilities near Ostia, as well as many roads and canals.

**Nero** • The last emperor of the Julio-Claudian line was born in 37 A.D. in Antium, near Rome, as Lucius Domitius Ahenobarbus. His father died when he was very young, and his mother Agrippina, after a marriage to a man she is suspected of poisoning, married her uncle, the Emperor Claudius. His tutor was the philosopher and writer, Seneca. In 50 A.D. Agrippina convinced Claudius to accept Nero as his heir, to the exclusion of Claudius's own son, Britannicus. It is believed that Agrippina poisoned Claudius so that Nero might become emperor in 54 A.D. During the early years of his rule he abolished capitol punishment, outlawed the killing of gladiators in the arenas, reduced taxes, and supported good administration in the provinces. He took a great interest in the arts and poetry. In 59 A.D. he decided to do away with his mother. She was opposed to Nero's liaison with Poppaea Sabina, a Roman noblewoman who was married to Otho, Nero's friend. After attempting to poison and drown Agrippina, he finally arranged for her to be stabbed to death. Nero told the Senate that she was killed because of her plots against him, and they accepted it without question. Nero disposed of his childless wife Octavia to marry Poppaea in 62 A.D. In 64 A.D. a fire burned a large part of Rome. Nero was reportedly not in the city when the fire started but he was suspected by many to have been responsible. In rebuilding the city he took a large parcel of land to build the Domus Aurea, a new palace. Because of the widespread belief that he was behind the fire, Nero diverted attention from himself by accusing Christians of the deed. The Senate and the people of Rome eventually became hostile to his rule. The high taxes that were needed to pay for both rebuilding the city and Nero's new palace were a source of deep resentment. In 65 A.D. Poppaea died, purportedly killed by Nero when he kicked her in the abdomen during pregnancy. He was negligent in cultivating his commanders and members of the Roman army. The good will of the army began to vanish and Nero's enemies grew in number, resulting in conspiracies against him. He was deposed in 68 A.D. and declared an enemy of the state by the Senate. Nero chose to commit suicide rather than face execution.

**Poppea** • Poppaea Sabina was the only child of Titus Ollius and the elder Poppaea Sabina whom the Roman historian Tacitus described as ‘the loveliest woman of her day.’ Poppea’s first marriage in 44 A.D. was to Rufrius Crispinus who was commander of the Praetorian Guard during the reign of the Emperor Claudius. Poppea was ambitious and calculating. Her husband fell out of favor and she became the mistress of Otho, who had been a youthful friend of Nero. Nero ordered her to leave her first husband and they divorced. Then Poppea married Otho as a means of placing herself even closer to Nero. After becoming Nero’s mistress, she divorced her husband Otho and focused her attentions solely on becoming empress of Rome. As Nero’s mistress, she was powerful and feared by many. Nero's mother, Agrippina, considered her influence dangerous and tried to persuade Nero to dismiss her. The disagreement over Poppaea was one reason Nero turned against his mother and had her killed. With Agrippina gone, Poppea's influence over Nero was so great that he divorced and eventually executed his first wife Octavia. He married Poppea in 62 A.D. The new empress allowed no one to challenge her power. Many were murdered or exiled. She bore Nero one daughter who died at four months of age. It was said that Poppea enjoyed having daily milk baths which she believed would enhance her beauty. According to the Roman historian Suetonius, she quarreled fiercely with Nero while she was pregnant with her second child in 65 A.D. An enraged Nero kicked her in the abdomen and caused her death. Nero gave her a state funeral and divine status.

**Otho (Ottone)** • Marcus Salvius Otho was born in 32 A.D. to an ancient and noble family that traced its roots back to the Etruscans. Accounts of the day described the youthful Otho as wild and extravagant and a companion of Nero. The date of his marriage to Poppaea Sabina is unclear from contemporary sources. However, she became Nero’s mistress, probably in 58 A.D. and divorced Otho at some date thereafter. In 59 A.D. Otho was appointed governor of Lusitania, a province on the Iberian peninsula, and served in that capacity for ten years. He was considered a capable and honest administrator. The chaos and civil war that ensued after the death of Nero in 68 A.D. lasted about eighteen months. This period was called the Year of Four Emperors and refers to the year 69 A.D. Otho was the second of the four emperors in that year. The Senate had recognized Servius Sulpicius Galba as emperor after Nero was deposed. At the beginning of 69 A.D. Otho led a successful coup to overthrow the Emperor Galba. Upon taking the throne, he hoped to resolve differences with his adversaries, build support with the Senate and the people, and regain stability throughout the Empire. These goals were never to be realized. He was emperor only three months. A rival for the throne was already on the march at the head of the Germanic legions. After Otho’s forces lost a major battle, he decided that to regroup and fight another day risked bloody civil war in Rome itself. Unwilling to shed more blood, Otho took his own life, making his life forfeit for the good of the state on April 16, 69 A.D.

**Pallas (Pallante)** • Marcus Antonius Pallas was born about the year 1 A.D. He was a Greek slave of Antonia, the daughter of Mark Antony. When she freed him, possibly between 31 and 37 A.D. he took her name. When Antonia died, his allegiance was transferred to her son, Claudius. Personal loyalty tied Roman freedmen to their patrons. After Claudius became emperor, Pallas became very powerful within the Imperial government. Claudius, faced with a hostile Senate, used Imperial freedmen to help him govern and deal with the daily business of the empire. He increased their role as the power of the empire became more centralized and the burden larger. Pallas was appointed secretary of the treasury and was considered very adept. He also became very rich. He enjoyed great influence with Claudius in matters of state and supported Agrippina the Younger as the choice for Claudius' new wife after the execution of the Empress Messalina. He also exerted great influence over Agrippina and there were rumors that they were lovers. There is no modern historical evidence of this, however. After Claudius' death, Pallas continued in his post for a period of time, but eventually Nero moved against him. In 55 A.D. Nero dismissed Pallas from his position and accused him of conspiracy to overthrow him. Seneca, Nero's tutor, defended Pallas at his trial and he was acquitted. In 63 A.D. Pallas was killed on Nero's orders.

**Narcissus (Narciso)** • Like Pallas, Narcissus was an Imperial freedman of Greek origin who was considered Claudius's most trusted and principal assistant. The trust Claudius invested in him was clearly demonstrated when he was sent as the emperor's representative to the Roman legions preparing to invade Britain. Imperial freedmen could speak officially for the emperor and Narcissus addressed the troops in Claudius' place. Narcissus' official title was secretary of correspondence. He and other freedmen formed the core of the Imperial administration and were under the direct control of the emperor. It is believed that the death of Claudius at the hand of Agrippina was facilitated by the absence of Narcissus, who was not in Rome due to illness. After Claudius' death Narcissus burned all his correspondence. It is believed that Agrippina was responsible for Narcissus' murder.



## Discussion Questions

1. Agrippina schemes to get what she wants. Does she have any redeeming qualities?
2. How does the first aria for each main character help define that individual?
3. What is most important to Nero?
4. Who are more adept at achieving their goals – the men or the women?
5. Which character is straightforward, honest and genuine?
6. Does the musical sound produced by countertenors affect your view of their characters?
7. Which character sings the most tragic aria of the opera?
8. In Agrippina's great scena in Act II she sings of her fears and disquiet. Do you find this aspect of her character surprising?
9. Who is the more dangerous opponent – Agrippina or Poppea?
10. Does Agrippina want Nero to be emperor for his sake or for her own purposes?
11. Does Agrippina try to manipulate the men in power because she has no real power of her own?
12. Is it ironic that Pallante and Narciso are called upon to confirm the truth of Agrippina's story after denouncing her schemes to the Emperor Claudius?
13. Operas of the Baroque period were expected to have a *lieto fine*, or happy ending. Is this the case for AGRIPPINA? Are all the characters satisfied, or get what they want, by the end of the opera?
14. Does immorality rather than goodness triumph?



of the country's folk music and legends. Composers such as Aaron Copland, Douglas Moore, Carlisle Floyd, Howard Hanson, and Robert Ward have all crafted operas that have been presented throughout the world to great success. Today, composers John Adams, Philip Glass, and John Corigliano enjoy success both at home and abroad and are credited with the infusion of new life into an art form which continues to evolve even as it approaches its fifth century.



# The Operatic Voice

A true (and brief) definition of the “operatic” voice is a difficult proposition. Many believe the voice is “born,” while just as many hold to the belief that the voice is “trained.” The truth lies somewhere between the two. Voices that can sustain the demands required by the operatic repertoire do have many things in common. First and foremost is a strong physical technique that allows the singer to sustain long phrases through the control of both the inhalation and exhalation of breath. Secondly, the voice (regardless of its size) must maintain a resonance in both the head (mouth, sinuses) and chest cavities. The Italian word “*squillo*” (squeal) is used to describe the brilliant tone required to penetrate the full symphony orchestra that accompanies the singers. Finally, all voices are defined by both the actual voice “type” and the selection of repertoire for which the voice is ideally suited.

Within the five major voice types (*Soprano, Mezzo-Soprano, Tenor, Baritone, Bass*) there is a further delineation into categories (*Coloratura, Lyric, Spinto, Dramatic*) which help to define each particular instrument. The *Coloratura* is the highest within each voice type whose extended upper range is complimented by extreme flexibility. The *Lyric* is the most common of the “types.” This instrument is recognized more for the exceptional beauty of its tone rather than its power or range. The *Spinto* is a voice which combines the beauty of a lyric with the weight and power of a *Dramatic*, which is the most “powerful” of the voices. The *Dramatic* instrument is characterized by the combination of both incredible volume and “steely” intensity.

While the definition presented in the preceding paragraph may seem clearly outlined, many voices combine qualities from each category, thus carving an unique niche in operatic history. Just as each person is different from the next, so is each voice. Throughout her career Maria Callas defied categorization as she performed and recorded roles associated with each category in the soprano voice type. Joan Sutherland as well can be heard in recordings of soprano roles as diverse as the coloratura Gilda in *Rigoletto* to the dramatic Turandot in *Turandot*. Below is a very brief outline of voice types and categories with roles usually associated with the individual voice type.

	<i>Coloratura</i>	<i>Lyric</i>	<i>Spinto</i>	<i>Dramatic</i>
<b><i>Soprano</i></b>	Norina (Don Pasquale) Gilda (Rigoletto) Lucia (Lucia di Lammermoor)	Liu (Turandot) Mimi (La Bohème) Pamina (Magic Flute)	Tosca (Tosca) Amelia (A Masked Ball) Leonora (Il Trovatore)	Turandot (Turandot) Norma (Norma) Elektra (Elektra)
<b><i>Mezzo-Soprano</i></b>	Rosina (Barber of Seville) Angelina (La Cenerentola) Dorabella (Così fan tutte)	Carmen (Carmen) Charlotte (Werther) Giulietta (Hoffmann)	Santuzza (Cavalleria) Adalgisa (Norma) The Composer (Ariadne auf Naxos)	Azucena (Il Trovatore) Ulrica (A Masked Ball) Herodias (Salome)
<b><i>Tenor</i></b>	Count Almaviva (Barber of Seville) Don Ottavio (Don Giovanni) Ferrando (Così fan tutte)	Alfredo (La Traviata) Rodolfo (La Bohème) Tamino (Magic Flute)	Calaf (Turandot) Pollione (Norma) Cavaradossi (Tosca)	Dick Johnson (Fanciulla) Don Jose (Carmen) Otello (Otello)
<b><i>Baritone</i></b>	Figaro (Barber of Seville) Count Almavira (Le nozze di Figaro) Dr. Malatesta (Don Pasquale)	Marcello (La Bohème) Don Giovanni (Don Giovanni) Sharpless (Madama Butterfly)	<b>Verdi Baritone</b> Germont (La Traviata) Di Luna (Il Trovatore) Rigoletto (Rigoletto)	Scarpia (Tosca) Jochanaan (Salome) Jack Rance (Fanciulla)
<b><i>Bass</i></b>	Bartolo (Barber of Seville) Don Magnifico (Cenerentola) Dr. Dulcamara (Elixir of Love)	Leporello (Don Giovanni) Colline (La Bohème) Figaro (Marriage of Figaro)	<b>Buffo Bass</b> Don Pasquale (Don Pasquale) Don Alfonso (Così fan tutte)	<b>Basso Cantate</b> Oroveso (Norma) Timur (Turandot) Sarastro (Magic Flute)

# Opera Production

Opera is created by the combination of myriad art forms. First and foremost are the actors who portray characters by revealing their thoughts and emotions through the singing voice. The next very important component is a full symphony orchestra that accompanies the singing actors and actresses, helping them to portray the full range of emotions possible in the operatic format. The orchestra performs in an area in front of the singers called the orchestra pit while the singers perform on the open area called the stage. Wigs, costumes, sets and specialized lighting further enhance these performances, all of which are designed, created, and executed by a team of highly trained artisans.

The creation of an opera begins with a dramatic scenario crafted by a playwright or dramaturg who alone or with a librettist fashions the script or libretto that contains the words the artists will sing. Working in tandem, the composer and librettist team up to create a cohesive musical drama in which the music and words work together to express the emotions revealed in the story. Following the completion of their work, the composer and librettist entrust their new work to a conductor who with a team of assistants (repetiteurs) assumes responsibility for the musical preparation of the work. The conductor collaborates with a stage director (responsible for the visual component) in order to bring a performance of the new piece to life on the stage. The stage director and conductor form the creative spearhead for the new composition while assembling a design team which will take charge of the actual physical production.

Set designers, lighting designers, costume designers, wig and makeup designers and even choreographers must all be brought “on board” to participate in the creation of the new production. The set designer combines the skills of both an artist and an architect using “blueprint” plans to design the actual physical set which will reside on the stage, recreating the physical setting required by the storyline. These blueprints are turned over to a team of carpenters who are specially trained in the art of stage carpentry. Following the actual building of the set, painters following instructions from the set designers’ original plans paint the set. As the set is assembled on the stage, the lighting designer works with a team of electricians to throw light onto both the stage and the set in an atmospheric as well as practical way. Using specialized lighting instruments, colored gels and a state of the art computer, the designer along with the stage director create a “lighting plot” by writing “lighting cues” which are stored in the computer and used during the actual performance of the opera.

During this production period, the costume designer in consultation with the stage director has designed appropriate clothing for the singing actors and actresses to wear. These designs are fashioned into patterns and crafted by a team of highly skilled artisans called cutters, stitchers, and sewers. Each costume is specially made for each singer using his/her individual measurements. The wig and makeup designer, working with the costume designer, designs and creates wigs which will complement both the costume and the singer as well as represent historically accurate “period” fashions.

As the actual performance date approaches, rehearsals are held on the newly crafted set, combined with costumes, lights, and orchestra in order to ensure a cohesive performance that will be both dramatically and musically satisfying to the assembled audience.

