

The Guild of Mercury Opera Rochester

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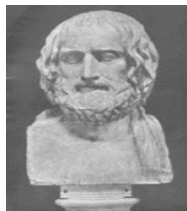
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October, 2007

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The Opera Chorus Its function from Euripides to Puccini



Bob Heberger



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Euripides

- Ancient Greek (480 – 406 B.C.E.)
- the last of the three great tragedians of classical Athens
- the other two being Aeschylus and Sophocles.

Giacomo Puccini

Italian composer (1858-1924) whose operas, including *La bohème*, *Tosca* and *Madama Butterfly*, are among the most frequently performed in the standard repertoire.

3

Opera

- A drama that is primarily sung, accompanied by instruments, and presented theatrically.
- Opera uses many of the elements of spoken theater such as scenery, costumes, and acting.
- The word *opera* means "works" in Italian suggesting that ...
 - it combines the arts of solo and choral singing, declamation, acting and dancing in a staged spectacle.
- ***Dafne*** by **Jacopo Peri** was the earliest composition considered opera, as understood today.

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Opera (continued)

- *Dafne* was written around 1597, largely under the inspiration of an elite circle of literate **Florentine** humanists who gathered as the “**Camerata**,” i.e. an “informal gathering”.
- A later work by **Peri**, *Euridice* dating from 1600, is the first opera score to have survived to the present day.
- The honor of being the first opera still to be regularly performed, however, goes to **Claudio Monteverdi’s Orfeo**, composed for the court of Mantua in 1607.

(Shakespeare wrote *Macbeth* in 1605-06)



Claudio Monteverdi
(1567-1643)

5

Florentine Camerata

- A group of humanists, musicians, poets and intellectuals in late Renaissance Florence who gathered under the patronage of Count Giovanni de' Bardi to discuss and guide trends in the arts, especially music and drama.



- Unifying them was the belief that music had become corrupt, and by returning to the forms and style of the ancient Greeks, the art of music could be improved, and thereby society could be improved as well.

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Florentine Camerata (cont.)

- They held—among other things—that ancient **Greek drama** was predominantly sung rather than spoken.
- While they may have been mistaken, the result was an explosion of musical activity unlike anything else at the time, mostly in an attempt to recover the ancient methods.
- The Greek idea of music posited that music is a force that can move nature and change the hearts and souls of people.

7

Greek Theater/Drama

- The **Greek theater** or **Greek drama** is a theatrical tradition that flourished in ancient Greece between 550 and 220 B.C.E.
- Athens, the political and military power in Greece during this period, was the center of ancient Greek theater.
- The Athenian city-state exported Greek drama to its numerous allies in order to promote a common identity.
- It is in ancient Greece that the origin of western theater is to be found.



8

Greek Theater/Drama (cont.)

- In tragic plays of ancient Greece, the **chorus** (*choros*) is believed to have grown out of the Greek hymn sung to the god Dionysus...
 - The god of wine, representing not only the intoxicating power of wine, but also its social and beneficial influences.
- and ancient Greek tragical drama.
 - characterized by seriousness and dignity, and involving a great person whose downfall is brought about by either a character flaw or a conflict with some higher power such as the law, the gods, fate, or society.

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Greek Theater/Drama (cont.)

- The plots are set in the “heroic age,” the time of myth.
- Given that Athens was a democracy, the themes of the tragedies often address the concerns of the society at that time, e.g., the dangers inherent in one man rule, even when the ruler is a good man.
- The cast of a Greek tragedy consisted of **actors** and a **chorus**. (All wearing masks!)
- The Greek word for **actor**, *hypocrites*, probably means “interpreter” or “answerer.”
 - In modern English a “hypocrite” is a person who pretends to be someone he/she is not.

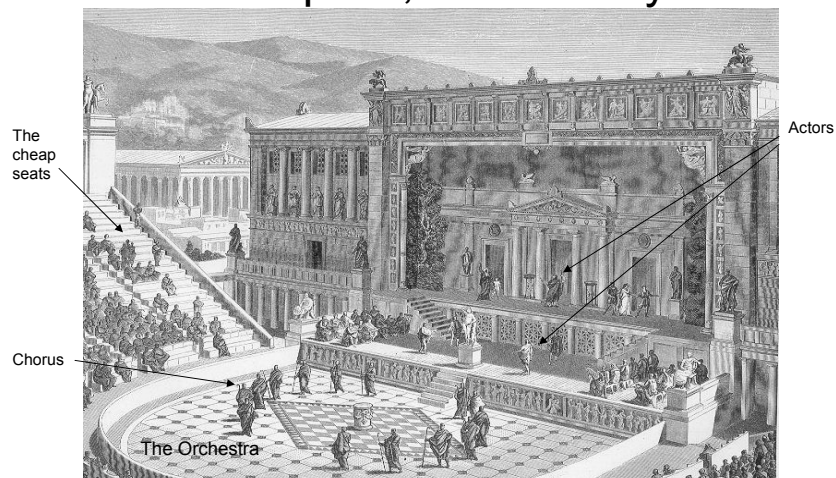
10

Greek Theater/Drama (cont.)

- The actors stood apart from the chorus and “interpreted” or “answered” the chorus’s lyrics.
- **Chorus** comes from the Greek word meaning “dance” as the all-male Greek chorus both sang and danced.
- The Greek chorus had to work in unison to help explain the play as there were only 1 - 3 actors on stage who were already playing several parts each.
- As the Greek amphitheatres were so large, the chorus' actions had to be exaggerated and their voices clear so that everyone could see and hear them.

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The Dionysos Theater in Athens built into the Acropolis, 3rd century B.C.E.



12



The Theater at Epidauros

13



Festival Theatre, Stratford, Canada

14

Greek Theater/Drama (cont.)

- The chorus members sang their lines and danced simultaneously; accompanied by the ***aulos*** → (double-reeded wind instrument).
- Ancient Greek music is almost entirely lost, and we know little about the dancing the chorus did.
- A few vase painting seem to show choruses in motion, but are notoriously hard to interpret.



*Musician playing the aulos.
Greek vase, 5th century B. C.*

15

Greek Chorus

- The chorus probably consisted of twelve to fifteen members. Some scholars speculate that there could have been as many as fifty (not likely).
- The chorus often represents a marginal group, such as old men, women, or slaves.
- The chorus normally takes no direct part in the action, rather it comments on the action as developed by the actors.

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Greek Chorus (continued)

- The Greek chorus offers an honest background along with summary information to help the audience follow the performance, commenting on main themes, and showing how an ideal audience might react to the drama as it was presented.
- The chorus can also represent the general populace of any particular story. In many ancient Greek plays, the chorus expressed to the audience what the main characters could not say, such as their fears or secrets.

17

Chorus fragment from the drama *Orestes* by Euripides (408 B.C.E.)

- This fragment is on papyrus from the third or second century B.C.E.
- It is possible the music was written by Euripides himself.
- This chorus is an ode sung by the chorus in its place in the *orchestra* (“*dance place*”).
- The papyrus contains seven lines with musical notation, but only the middle of each line has survived.

18

Chorus fragment from the drama *Orestes* by Euripides (408 B.C.E.)

- The chorus of women of Argos implore the furies (e.g. “wild goddesses” who make life difficult for murderers and such) to have mercy on Orestes, who six days before the play begins, murdered his mother, Clytemnestra, to punish her for her infidelity and murder of his father Agamemnon.
- The chorus begs that Orestes be released from the madness that has overwhelmed him since the murder.
- This chorus is dominated by passages of intense agitation and grief.

19

Chorus fragment from the drama *Orestes* by Euripides (408 B.C.E.)



*“You wild goddesses who dart across the skies
seeking vengeance for murder, we beg you to free
Agamemnon’s son from his raging fury....*

*We grieve for this boy. Happiness is brief among
mortals. Sorrow and anguish sweep down on it like
a swift gust of wind on a sail-ship, and it sinks
under the tossing seas.”*

(lines 338-44)

(3 minutes)



20

Greek Chorus Function summary

1. honest background
2. summary information
3. commenting on main themes
4. showing how an ideal audience might react to the drama
5. represent the general populace
6. expressed what the main characters could not say (fears/secrets)

21

Opera Chorus

- A body of singers who perform together, either in unison or in parts, usually with more than one part.
- The most common kind of chorus at present is the mixed chorus of male and female voices, usually distributed soprano, alto, tenor, and bass.
 - **Soprano**: The highest-pitched type of human voice.
 - **Mezzo-Soprano**: Pitch between Soprano and Contralto.
 - **Contralto**: Lowest pitched female voice. (Same as Alto.)
 - **Tenor**: Highest naturally occurring voice type in adult males.
 - **Baritone**: Male voice below the tenor and above the Bass.
 - **Bass**: The lowest pitched male voice.

22

Chorus from the opera *Turandot* by Puccini (1924)



The opening of Puccini's final opera, composed over 2300 years after the Euripides we just heard, directs the audience to extreme alternating emotions...as felt by the opera's general populace.

23

Chorus from the opera *Turandot* by Puccini (1924)

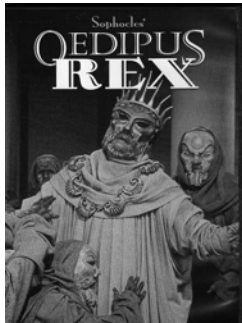
Excerpt...

Act One: A crowd awaits the execution of the Prince of Persia, the latest suitor to fail the ancient Chinese Princess Turandot's test of love: Those who cannot answer her three riddles must die.

- The mob bays for blood.
(2 ½ minutes)
- The crowd (chorus) is excited by the spectacle of the executioner.
- They then plead for mercy, which is useless.
(3 minutes)
- When they see the victim, their excitement turns to pity.

24

Opening Chorus from the play *Oedipus Rex* by Sophocles (430 B.C.E.)



Stratford Festival Theatre
1957 production

In this prologue, Sophocles is setting up his background information and gives the audience a sense of the present situation.

A plague has stricken the city of Thebes. The citizens gather outside the palace of their king to ask him to take action.

Oedipus became king years earlier.

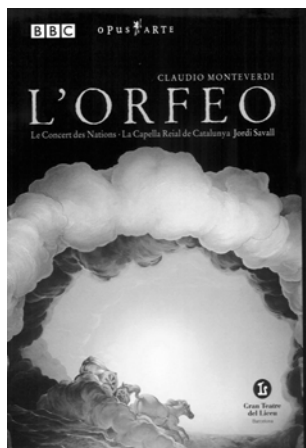
He had answered the riddle of the Sphinx and thus removed from the land a terrible plight.

He also married Jocasta, the wife of Thebe's dead king who had been killed some time prior to the first plague.

(2 minutes)

25

Chorus from the opera *Orfeo* by Monteverdi (1607)



Prologue: *La Musica* celebrates the power of music to “incline men’s souls to heaven.”

- The Greek philosophy exactly!

Excerpt...

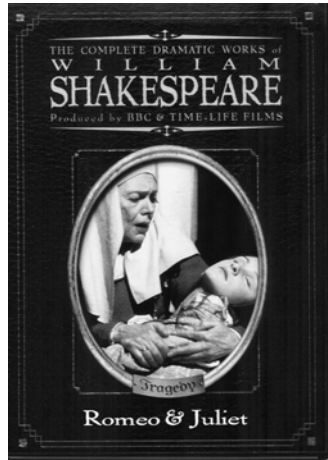
Act One: On the open fields of Thrace, shepherds and nymphs celebrate the union of *Orfeo* and *Euridice*, and the end of *Orfeo*’s lovesickness.

- This truly “sets the stage” as the opera begins. Notice how the chorus is placed in front of the stage, as in Greek tradition. Also there is dancing!

(6 minutes)

26

Chorus from the play
Romeo & Juliet by Shakespeare (1596)



The play opens with a sonnet spoken by a chorus. These fourteen lines outline the action of the play and its effects on the lives of the characters.

27

Chorus from the play
Romeo & Juliet by Shakespeare (1596)

Description:

In Verona, a pleasant Italian town, two equally important families which have long harbored grudges against each other break out into open feud. Romeo, son of the Montague family, and Juliet, daughter of the Capulet family, fall fatally in love, and it is only through their love and their death together that the long strife between the two families can also die. This "death-marked" love is the subject of the play.

Shakespeare Opening Chorus:

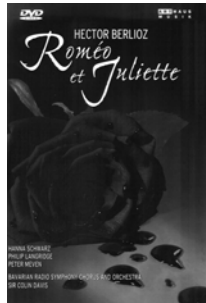
*Two households, both alike in
dignity
(In fair Verona, where we lay our
scene.)
From ancient grudge break to
new mutiny,
Where civil blood makes civil
hands unclean.
A pair of star-crossed lovers take
their life...*

(1 minute, plus)

28

Chorus from the Dramatic Symphony *Romeo & Juliette* by Berlioz (1838)

Immediately after hearing the chorus by Shakespeare we will hear the prologue from *Romeo & Juliette* by Berlioz. This is to contrast a spoken chorus with a sung chorus.



Although Berlioz's *Romeo and Juliette* uses chorus and vocal solos as well as a symphony orchestra, it is neither an opera in concert form, an opera-oratorio, nor a symphonic summary of Shakespeare's tragedy. It is a series of discontinuous episodes from the drama. (1 minute)

29

Chorus from the opera *Persée* by Lully (1682)

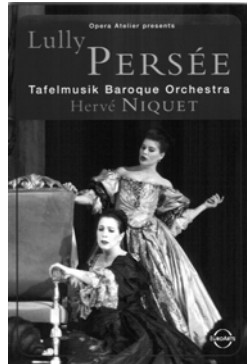


Jean-Baptiste Lully, 1632–87, French operatic composer, b. **Florence**, Italy. His name originally was Giovanni Battista Lulli.

He established the form of the French overture, wrote recitatives well suited to the French language, and set the style for French opera until the advent of Gluck.

30

Chorus from the opera *Persée* by Lully (1682)



Perseus, in Greek mythology, is the son of Zeus and a mortal woman. It was he who, among other things, killed Medusa.

Excerpt...

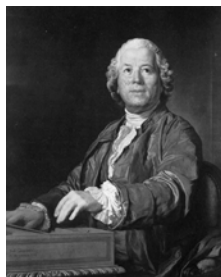
The Ethiopians are preparing to hold games to assuage the anger of the goddess Juno, who has sent Medusa to their country, the serpent-haired Gorgon whose sight turns all human beings into stone.

(Chorus & Dance 6 minutes)

When it becomes clear that Juno will not be appeased **Perseus** (*Persée*) *takes up the cause*.

31

Chorus from the opera *Orfeo ed Euridice* by Gluck (1762)



Orfeo ed Euridice composed by Christoph Willibald Gluck (1714-87) is based on the myth of Orpheus.

Basically the same story as Monteverdi's *Orfeo* of 1607.

It belongs to the genre of the *azione teatrale*, meaning an opera on a mythological subject with choruses and dancing. *Orfeo ed Euridice* is the first of Gluck's "reform" operas, in which he attempted to replace the abstruse plots and overly complex music of opera seria with a "noble simplicity" in both the music and the drama.

32

Chorus from the opera *Orfeo ed Euridice* by Gluck (1762)



In the Italian version Orfeo is sung
by an alto castrato.
In the French version a tenor.
In this Italian version recording, a
mezzo-soprano.

Excerpt...

In the beginning of Act 2,
Euridice has died. Orfeo is
determined to go down to
Hades to bring her back.

In a cavern leading to Hades,
spirits of the underworld
terrify Orfeo, and the barks
of Cerberus (guard dog of
Hades) menace him.

(4 minutes)

33

Chorus from the opera *Don Giovanni* by Mozart (1787)



Mozart picked up the mantle of
Gluck with respect to realism.
He then went one step further
and wrote operas, not about
gods and ancient heroes, but
about normal 18th century life.

Nothing could be more normal
than the rustic sights and
sounds of a Spanish
peasant wedding.

Excerpt...

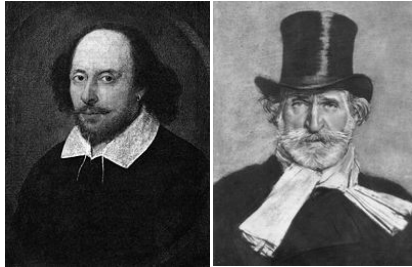
Forget about that "noble" cad
Don Giovanni (Don Juan)
and experience the
excitement of Zerlina,
Masetto and their friends on
their wedding day.

(1 ½ minutes)

34

Chorus from the opera

Otello by Verdi (1887)



Verdi loved Shakespeare and composed three operas using the Bard's plays. Verdi's tenth opera was *Macbeth*, and his last two operas were *Otello* and *Falstaff* (based on *The Merry Wives of Windsor*).

The Moor, Otello, an honest man and outstanding general battles invading Turks, but jealousy and the scheming of Iago bring about his downfall.

Desdemona is Otello's wife. She loves and honors him even when he begins to act strangely and suspects her of adultery.

An honorable lieutenant, Cassio, gains promotion to the very post Iago hoped to win, but Iago intends to correct this error by slandering Cassio.

35

Chorus from the opera

Otello by Verdi (1887)



Iago, ensign or standard-bearer to Otello, is a villain. He is instrumental in getting Cassio drunk while on duty to ensure Cassio's loss of Otello's favor.

Iago also sows and nurtures the seeds of jealousy and suspicion in Otello's mind about his wife Desdemona.

Roderigo is a gullible gentleman who aims to win Otello's wife Desdemona, and is easily manipulated by Iago.

Excerpt...

The following scene is from Act I where Iago gets Cassio drunk to discredit him. The chorus is duped into playing along.

(4 minutes) 36

Chorus from the opera *Der Freischütz* by Weber (1821)



From a folk story about a man who sells his soul to win a marksmanship contest.

- Never a good idea!

Excerpt...

Act Three: A huntersmen chorus, full of hunting horns and beer mugs!

- This chorus does not necessarily advance the story, but it does add to the rustic atmosphere.

(4 minutes)

37

Chorus from the opera *Un ballo in maschera* by Verdi



The Masked Ball of 1859

In 1792, the King of Sweden, Gustav III, was killed, the result of a political conspiracy against him.

He was shot while attending a masked ball and died 13 days later from his wounds. It is on this episode that Verdi's *Masked Ball* is loosely based; loosely, because very little of the historical truth is contained in Verdi's opera.

Excerpt...

Act I. Scene 1. A public audience at Riccardo's palace, attended by his supporters, but also by his enemies who hope for his downfall.

(6 ½ minutes)

38

Chorus from the opera *Lohengrin* by Wagner (1850)

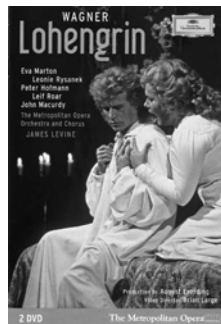


Bayreuth Festival Theatre
pictured taken in 1882

He transformed musical thought through his idea of *Gesamtkunstwerk* ("total artwork"), the synthesis of all the poetic, visual, musical and dramatic arts, epitomized by his monumental four-opera cycle *Der Ring des Nibelungen* (1876). Wagner even went so far as to build his own opera-house to try to stage these works as he had imagined them.

39

Chorus from the opera *Lohengrin* by Wagner (1850)



Lohengrin places supernatural Arthurian romance elements in the historical reign of King Heinrich I of Saxony (876-936).

The chorus, responding as the action unfolds, often resembles one from Ancient Greek drama.

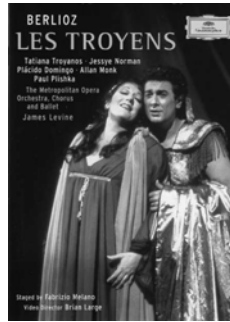
The most frequently played excerpt from *Lohengrin* is the beloved "Bridal Chorus," which opens Act III, although Wagner complained that it lost its dramatic sense when detached from the opera.

Excerpt...

Act Three scene 1: This is the famous "Bridal Chorus" as the wedding party blesses the couple in the bridal chamber. (5 minutes)

Note... *Lohengrin* and Elsa got married during the intermission between Act 2 & Act 3. 40

Chorus from the opera *Les Troyens* by Berlioz (1853-59)



The libretto was written by Berlioz himself, based on Virgil's epic poem *The Aeneid*. (1st century B.C.E.)

Hector Berlioz picks up the story in the tenth year of the siege of Troy.

Excerpt...

Act I, scene 1: The setting is the abandoned Greek camp outside the walls of Troy.

The Trojans are celebrating apparent deliverance from ten years of siege. They see the large wooden horse left by the Greeks, which they presume to be an offering to the goddess *Pallas Athene*, goddess of wisdom*.

*Notice any irony here?

(4 minutes)

Only the prophetess/seer Cassandre is mistrustful of the situation. She is ignored, as most seers are.

41

Chorus from the opera *Boris Godunov* by Mussorgsky (1868-72)



Modest Mussorgsky (1839-1881)

He strove to achieve a uniquely Russian musical identity. His music is vivid, confused, feverish and ultimately hypnotizing.



Boris Godunov
(1551 – 1605)

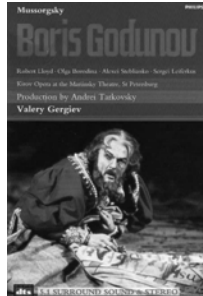
This is Mussorgsky's only completed opera and considered his masterpiece, its subject is the Russian ruler Boris Godunov, who reigned as Tsar from 1598 to 1605.

Monteverdi composed *Orfeo* in 1607!

The libretto was written by the composer, and is based on the drama of the same name by Pushkin. (1799-1837)

42

Chorus from the opera *Boris Godunov* by Mussorgsky (1868-72)



Boris is as much an opera of the affliction of the Russian people as it is of manipulation by the main characters.

The opening chorus of the Prologue puts the focus directly on the Russian folk and their distress.

Excerpt...

PROLOGUE

Scene 1. The courtyard of a monastery near Moscow, 1598

Russia has been left without a tsar. The people, oppressed and apathetic, have been herded into the courtyard and ordered to beg Boris to consent to become tsar.

(4 minutes)

As he continues to seem reluctant the crowd is ordered to reassemble the next day in the Kremlin.

43

Chorus from the opera *Tosca* by Puccini (1900)

We end our Opera
Chorus survey with...

Excerpts...



1. The Sacristan, full of the news of the defeat of Napoleon, calls the choirboys to prepare to sing a celebratory Te Deum. Their riotous celebration is interrupted by the arrival of Scarpia, the chief of police, with some of his agents.
2. Scarpia, who has had a lustful eye on Tosca for some time and suspects her lover's (Cavaradossi) part in the escape of a political prisoner, plays on her jealousy in the hope that she will lead him to the escaped "criminal." Sending his agents after her, Scarpia congratulates himself on the success of his plans, then realizing he is in church he joins in the Te Deum which "is already in progress".

(4 minutes)

44

The Opera Chorus



Hopefully the next time you go to the “theater” you will have a broader perspective.



GOOD NIGHT!!!



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Opera Chorus Playlist

Bob Heberger

1. **EURIPIDES: *Orestes***, Stasimon chorus. 2'49
Madrid Atrium Musicae; Gregorio Paniagua Director.
CD from Norton Anthology of Western Music.
2. **PUCCINI: *Turandot***, Act I. 5'33
Metropolitan Opera; conducted by James Levine
DVD: Deutsche Grammophon B0000852-09
3. **SOPHOCLES: *Oedipus Rex***, Opening Chorus. 1'57
Sir Tyrone Guthrie's production of 1957; Translation by William Butler Yeats
DVD: Image Entertainment ID1549CODVD
4. **MONTEVERDI: *L'Orfeo***, Prologue. 6'17
Le Concert des Nations La Capella Reial de Catalunya; conducted by Jordi Savall
DVD: BBC Opus Art OA 0843 D
5. **SHAKESPEARE: *Romeo and Juliet***, Opening Chorus. 1'56
Produced by BBC & Time-Life Films
DVD: Ambrose Video Publishing, Inc.
BERLIOZ: *Romeo and Juliet*, Choral Prologue.
Bavarian Radio Symphony Chorus and Orchestra; conducted by Sir Colin Davis
DVD: Arthaus Musik 102017
6. **LULLY: *Persée***, Chorus to the goddess Juno. 6'26
Tafelmusik Baroque Orchestra; conducted by Hervé Niquet
DVD: EuroArts 2054178
7. **GLUCK: *Orfeo ed Euridice***, Chorus of Hades. 4'05
The London Philharmonic; conducted by Raymond Leppard
DVD: Kultur D2100



Opera Chorus Playlist Bob Heberger

- 8. MOZART: *Don Giovanni*, Wedding Chorus.** 1'24
Metropolitan Opera; conducted by James Levine
DVD: Deutsche Grammophon B0004051-09
- 9. VERDI: *Otello*, Act I Drinking Chorus.** 6'33
Metropolitan Opera; conducted by James Levine
DVD: Deutsche Grammophon B0002107-09
- 10. WEBER: *Der Freischütz*, Hunting Chorus.** 3'25
Württembergische Staatsoper, Stuttgart; conducted by Dennis Russell Davies
DVD: Kultur D2097
- 11. VERDI: *Un ballo in maschera*, Opening Chorus Act I.** 1'41
Metropolitan Opera; conducted by James Levine
DVD: Deutsche Grammophon B0000852-09
- 12. WAGNER: *Lohengrin*, Act III Bridal Chorus.** 4'14
Metropolitan Opera; conducted by James Levine
DVD: Deutsche Grammophon B0006727-09
- 13. BERLIOZ: *Les Troyens*, Opening Chorus Act I.** 3'48
Metropolitan Opera; conducted by James Levine
DVD: Deutsche Grammophon 00440 073 4310
- 14. MUSSORGSKY: *Boris Godunov*, Prologue Opening Chorus.** 7'11
Kirov Opera at the Mariinsky Theatre, St. Petersburg; conducted by Valery Gergiev
DVD: Deutsche Grammophon B0000852-09
- 15. PUCCINI: *Tosca*, Act I Childrens Chorus & Final Chorus.** 4'53
Metropolitan Opera; conducted by James Levine
DVD: Deutsche Grammophon B0007101-09