

PROGRAM NOTES
FEBRUARY CONCERT
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Much of the appeal of opera is the large crowd scenes. The chorus plays an important and varied role in productions ranging from comic to tragic. It can serve as an uninvolved bystander making comments, or as an interloper, or it can be directly involved in the action as it interacts with the characters in the story. It can celebrate, mourn, congratulate, join in the partying, sing mysteriously from offstage. Tonight's selections will well illustrate these points.

One obvious way to use the chorus is as the attendees at a party. This is the case for instance in the excerpts from *La Traviata*. At the beginning of the opera Violetta is seen in her glory as a courtesan – a woman of somewhat loose reputation – who is with a dissolute crowd whose only desire is pleasure and parties with drinking and dancing. The interactions with the chorus help depict her as a “party girl” and those at the party as seeking whatever entertainment they can find. Premiered in 1853, the success of this opera was an important moment in Verdi's career.

Johan Strauss's operetta *Die Fledermaus*, premiered in 1874, also features a famous party moment. In this one, the chorus and other characters are in an elaborate plot to embarrass Gabriel von Eisenstein, a straying husband, who thinks his wife, Rosalinde, doesn't know he is attending a masked ball at the home of Prince Orlovsky. Rosalinde's maid has also managed an excuse to attend the ball. The chorus manages to assist in all the confusion resulting from these multiple deceptions.

Yet another famous party scene is the “Habanera” from Bizet's *Carmen*, premiered in 1875. This one takes place in an isolated inn where the infatuated soldier, Don José, is teased by the gypsy Carmen. The crowd urges her on in her very open display of her sexuality and Don José is hopelessly ensnared

Gypsies are a common element in opera. In Verdi's *Il Trovatore*, premiered in 1853, one of the most famous choruses in all of opera, the “Anvil chorus,” shows gypsies at work, singing to make the work go faster as they think of hard work but also of fun to come.

Love and celebration of love, of course, are prominent in opera. In Puccini's *Madama Butterfly*, premiered in 1904, Butterfly, having seen the American ship she thinks is bringing her

husband home to her, prepares herself for his arrival while the off-stage chorus, in wordless humming, sets the atmosphere. The audience knows that her “husband” is coming, but with his real wife, and will not return to Butterfly and their child.

The ideal love culminates in marriage and marriage is something that should be celebrated in music. The chorus in Bedrich Smetana’s *The Bartered Bride*, premiered in 1866, serves this purpose, though rather ironically, since a portion of the text is, “And he who is a married man, a married woman, say goodbye to joyfulness; the wife takes care of the home; the husband hides behind tankards.”

At the center of Puccini’s *Turandot*, premiered in 1926, is a very complex love story. The prospective groom, Calaf, is in danger of execution at the hands of his prospective bride. As he waits in his cell, Calaf muses to himself over the secret that should save him by dawn – “None shall sleep,” he sings, because all are searching for this secret. Meanwhile, the crowd calls for an execution.

The chorus can express mutual longing and sorrow – this is the case in two of the excerpts sung tonight. In Verdi’s “Va pensiero” from *Nabucco*, premiered in 1842, the chorus of Hebrews enslaved in Babylon sing of their longing for their own country. And in “Patria oppressa” from Verdi’s *Macbeth*, premiered in 1847, families mourn the deaths of those killed in warfare.

Also, of course, the chorus can express jubilation and patriotism. In “Gloire immortelle de nos aieux” from Gounod’s *Faust*, which premiered in 1859, the chorus celebrates the patriotism and bravery of soldiers fighting for their country. And the famous grand march “Gloria all’Egitto” from Verdi’s *Aida*, premiered in 1871, the ultimate crowd scene depicts the celebration of the return of the victorious Egyptian army returning from war.

The chorus is often part of a big finale, and the end of Leonard Bernstein’s Broadway musical *Candide*, premiered in 1956, is no exception. After many tribulations, the chorus and main characters decide it is time to stay home and cultivate their own garden rather than seeking answers elsewhere.

An orchestral overture is also expected to be part of an opera and tonight’s performance will include two of these. Johann Strauss’s *Die Fledermaus* is a frothy operetta preceded by an equally frothy overture. Both the opera, and, as a separate orchestral work, the

overture, have been popular since their first appearance. As might be expected from Johann Strauss, the overture's main section is an invigorating waltz; there are also brief sections from some of the opera's arias, a common practice in overtures.

Nabucco was Verdi's third opera, premiering in 1842, but his first major success. Later he was to say "this is the opera with which my artistic career really begins. And though I had many difficulties to fight against, it is certain that *Nabucco* was born under a lucky star." Though the opening brass music is not heard in the opera itself, other themes are, including the theme from the chorus "Va pensiero," also being performed tonight. The overture starts with hymn-like solemnity. This and the following faster sections set the scene for the coming drama.