



Content Guide

The Baroque Period, Part 1: Italian Vocal Repertoires of the Seventeenth Century

[Jonathan Rhodes Lee](#) is Assistant Professor of Music at the University of Nevada, Las Vegas, with interests in both eighteenth-century topics (particularly the works of George Frideric Handel) and film music. His publications have appeared in the *Cambridge Opera Journal*, *Music and Letters*, *The Journal of Musicology*, *Eighteenth-Century Music*, and elsewhere. His book, *Film Music in the Sound Era: A Research Guide* appeared with Routledge in 2020. He is also the editor of the [complete harpsichord works of La Font](#), published by A-R Editions.

by [Jonathan Rhodes Lee](#)
University of Nevada, Las Vegas

Assigned Readings

[Core Survey](#)

[Historical and Analytical Perspectives](#)

[Composer Biographies](#)

[Supplementary Readings](#)

- [Giovanni Maria Artusi, excerpt from *L'Artusi, or, Of the Imperfections of Modern Music*](#)
- [Giulio Cesare Monteverdi, excerpt from forward to *Il quinto libro de madrigali*](#)

Summary List

[Genres to Understand](#)

[Musical Terms to Understand](#)

[Contextual Terms, Figures, and Events](#)

[Main Concepts](#)

Scores and Recordings

Exercises

Content Guide

The Baroque Period, Part 1: Vocal Repertoires of the Seventeenth Century

[Jonathan Rhodes Lee](#)

Assigned Readings

Core Survey

- [Jonathan Rhodes Lee, “The Baroque Era”](#)
 - Focus on the following sections:
 - Introduction
 - The New Musics
 - Operatic Invention and Affective Clarity

Historical and Analytical Perspectives

- [Kimberly Beck-Hieb, “Genres and Forms in the Baroque Era”](#)
 - Focus on the following sections:
 - Introduction
 - Overview of Vocal Genres
- [Christopher Brody, “Analytical Approaches to Baroque Music”](#)
 - Focus on the following sections:
 - Introduction
 - Tonal Structure in Baroque Music
 - Song and Aria

Composer Biographies

- [Emily Hagen, “Claudio Monteverdi”](#)
- [Kimberly Beck-Hieb, “Giulio Caccini”](#)
- [Alon Schab, “Henry Purcell”](#)

Supplementary Readings

Supplementary Reading 1

Excerpt from *L'Artusi, or Of the Imperfections of Modern Music* (1600)

Giovanni Maria Artusi (1540–1613)

Reproduced from Oliver Strunk, *Source Readings in Music History* (New York: Norton, 1965)

[**Narrator:**] The dawn of the seventeenth day was breaking as Signor Luca left his house and proceeded toward the monastery of the reverend fathers of Santa Maria del Vado where dwelt Signor Vario. . . . On his reaching the monastery, his arrival was announced to Signor Vario, who . . . immediately left his room and met Signor Luca at the head of the stairs. . . . After they had seated themselves, Signor Luca began.

Luca: Yesterday, sir, . . . I was invited by some gentlemen to hear certain new madrigals. . . . I accompanied them to the house of . . . a nobleman of Ferrara, a young virtuoso and as great a lover of music as any man I have ever known. . . . The madrigals were sung and repeated without giving the name of the author. The texture was not unpleasing. But, as Your Lordship will see, . . . it introduced new rules, new modes, and new turns of phrase. . . .

But, in order that you may see the whole question and give me your judgment, here are the passages, scattered here and there through the above mentioned madrigals, which I wrote out yesterday evening for my amusement. . . .

[Luca hands the passages over to Vario (printed as Fig. 1 below).]

Vario: [How] can they excuse and palliate these imperfections, which could not possibly be more absurd?

Luca: Absurd? I do not know how you can defend that position of yours. They call absurd the things composed in another style and have it that theirs is the true method of composition, declaring that this . . . new order of composing is about to produce many effects which ordinary music, full of so many and such sweet harmonies, cannot and never will produce. And they will have it that the sense, hearing such asperities, will be moved and will do marvelous things.

Vario: Are you in earnest or are you mocking me?

Luca: Am I in earnest? It is rather they who mock those who hold otherwise.

Vario: Since I see that you are not mocking me, I will tell you what I think of them. . . . And, for the first argument against them, I will tell you that the high is a part of the low and arises from the low, and being a part of it, must continue to be related to it, as to its beginning or as the cloud to the spring of which it is derived. That this is true, the experiment of the monochord will show you. For if two strings of equal length and thickness are stretched over one and the same equal space and tuned perfectly in unison . . . and if you cut off a part from one of these or bring out a high sound from it by placing a bridge under it, I say that beyond doubt the high will be a part of

the low. . . .

G. M. ARTUSI 35

1 2 3 4

5 6 7

8 9

Figure 1: Artusi, *L'Artusi*, reprinted from Strunk, *Source Readings in Music History*

Luca: They claim that they do observe harmonic relation, saying that the semiminim [quarter note] in the first measure, which is taken after the rest of the same value and which forms a sixteenth with the lower part [i.e., an expanded ninth/second], would already be dissonant if the cantus were to sing as follows:



For then, the tenor, singing the first semiminim an octave lower, would cause the second one, which forms the dissonance, to be heard with it above; . . . this is as though we were to sing four semiminims, alternately consonant and dissonant, following the rule for figures of this value. . . . They say that all this is called grace and is accented singing.

Vario: I do not remember having read in any author—and countless excellent ones have written of music – that there is such a thing as accented music. . . .

Luca: They say that the accents in compositions have a remarkable effect. . . . They go on scattering these passages throughout their compositions, which, when sung or sounded on different instruments by musicians accustomed to this kind of accented music, full of things left implicit, yield a not unpleasing harmony at which I marvel. . . .

Vario: This may result from two things. First, that the singers do not sing what is written, but ‘carry the voice,’ sustaining it in such a way that, when they perceive that it is about to produce some bad effect, they divert it elsewhere. . . . Second, that sensuous excess corrupts the sense . . . while reason, which knows and distinguishes the good from the bad, perceives right well that a deception is wrought on the sense, which receives the material only in a certain confused way. . . .

Luca: It is known that the ear is deceived, and to this these composers . . . apply themselves with enthusiasm. They seek only to satisfy the ear, and with this aim toil night and day at their instruments to hear the effect which passages so made produce; the poor fellows do not perceive that what the instruments tell them is false and that it is one thing to search with . . . instruments for something pertaining to the harmonic faculty, another to arrive at the exact truth by means of reason seconded by the ear. . . .

Vario: You have said the very thing. They and their activities die together. By the general judgment of the wise and learned, ignorance, more than anything else, is considered the greatest of the many accidents. . . . Through ignorance a man is unable to distinguish which activities are better and which are worse, and as a result of this inability he commonly embraces many things from which he should flee. . . . Of ignorance, then, are born compositions of this sort, . . . like monstrosities. . . . For [these composers] it is enough to create a tumult of sounds, a confusion of absurdities, an assemblage of imperfections, and all springs from that ignorance with which they are beclouded.

Supplementary Reading 2
Excerpt from forward to *Il quinto libro de madrigali* (1605/07)
Claudio Monteverdi (1567–1603)
Reproduced from Strunk, *Source Readings in Music History*

This forward to Monteverdi's fifth book of madrigals was presumably penned by the composer's brother, Giulio Cesare Monteverdi. However, it may also have been written by Claudio himself, and his brother's name attached to the document as an act of decorum. Just as Artusi did not directly name the composer in his complaints against the new style, so does the composer not insert himself directly into conflict with his critic.

My brother says that he does not compose his works at haphazard because, in this kind of music, it has been his intention to make the words the mistress of the harmony and not the servant, and because it is in this manner that his work is to be judged in the composition of the melody. Of this Plato speaks as follows: "The song is composed of three things: the words, the harmony, and the rhythm"; and a little further on: "And so of the apt and the unapt, if the rhythm and the harmony follow the words, and not the words these." Then, to give greater force to the words, he continues: "Do not the manner of the diction and the words follow and conform to the disposition of the soul?" and then: "Indeed, all the rest follows and conforms to the diction." But in this case, Artusi takes certain details, or, as he calls them "passages" from my brother's madrigal *Cruda Amarilli*, paying no attention to the words, but neglecting them as though they had nothing to do with the music, later showing the said "passages" deprived of their words, of all their harmony and of their rhythm. But if, in the "passages" noted as false, he had shown the words that went with them, then the world would not have said that they were chimeras and castles in the air from their entire disregard of the rules of the First Practice. . . . [The harmonies] obey their words exactly and . . . would indeed be left bodies without soul if they were left without this most important and principal part of the music. . . . This my brother will make apparent, knowing for certain that in a kind of composition such as this of his, music turns on the perfection of the melody, considered from which point of view the harmony, to which way of thinking the Second Practice, or modern usage, tends. Taking this as a basis, he promises to show . . . that the harmony of the madrigal "Cruda Amarilli" is not composed at haphazard, but with beautiful art and excellent study, unperceived by his adversary and unknown to him. . . .

By First Practice he understands the one that turns on the perfection of the harmony, that is, the one that considers the harmony not commanded, but commanding . . . and this was founded by those first men who composed in our notation music for more than one voice, was then followed and amplified by Ockeghem, Josquin Desprez, . . . and others of those times. . . .

By Second Practice, which was first renewed in our notation by Cipriano de Rore . . . was followed and amplified by . . . Marenzio. . . . He understands the one that turns on the perfection of the melody, that is, the one that considers harmony not commanding, but commanded, and makes the words the mistress of the harmony. For reasons of this sort he has called it "second," and not "new," and he has called it "practice," and not "theory," because he understands its explanation to turn on the manner of employing consonances and dissonances in actual composition. . . . My brother has used the title "Second Practice," that is, second practical usage, because he wishes to make considerations of that usage.

Summary List

Genres to understand

- Madrigal (seventeenth-century types)
 - Solo madrigal
 - Ensemble madrigal
- *Intermedio*
- Opera (seventeenth-century manifestations)
- Cantata
- Sacred (vocal) concerto
- Polychoral motets
- Oratorio

Musical terms to understand

- Baroque (origin of the term and how it reflects aesthetics of the period)
- *prima pratica*
- *seconda pratica*
- ornament
- basso seguente
- basso continuo
- figured (and unfigured) bass
- monody
- *stile recitativo* (*recitar cantando*/recitative)
- *stile concitato*
- seventeenth-century aria form
- castrato
- the centrality of Venice in music history of this time
- ground bass/*basso ostinato*
 - descending tetrachord pattern
 - Ruggiero bass line

Contextual Terms, Figures, and Events

- Claudio Monteverdi
- Giovanni Artusi
 - *L'Artusi, or, the Imperfections of Modern Music*
- Gioseffo Zarlino
- Giulio Caccini
 - *Le nuove musiche*
- Florentine Camerata
 - Girolamo Mei
 - Vincenzo Galilei
 - Jacopo Peri
 - Giulio Caccini
 - Count Giovanni de Bardi
- *L'Euridice*
- *L'Orfeo*
- *L'incoronazione di Poppea*
- Pier Francesco Cavalli
- Antonio Cesti
- Barbara Strozzi
- Giovanni Gabrieli
- Giacomo Carissimi
- Heinrich Schütz

Main Concepts

- The shift in musical aesthetics around the turn of the seventeenth century is a reflection of social and intellectual shifts that occurred around the same time. You should be able to articulate the connection between these “extramusical” trends and the shifts in musical practice of the Baroque.
- You should understand the key differences between the *prima pratica* and the *seconda pratica* and the origin of these terms.
- You should understand the role of the basso continuo in early baroque music, and, most importantly, why this is such an important characteristic of this music.
- The origins of opera are among the watersheds in music history, transforming both compositional practice and the act of listening to music. You need to know this history, as its results are still influencing musical production in the twenty-first century.
- The Baroque period is one of the most fertile periods in musical history, with composers generating numerous new genres. You should be able to name these important genres and should know their basic characteristics.

Scores and Recordings

Claudio Monteverdi, Various

Representative Madrigals

[Click here](#) for a YouTube playlist of recordings of these items.

- [“Sfogava con le stelle” \(SV 78\), from *The Fourth Book of Madrigals* \(1603\)](#)
- [“T’amo mia vita” \(SV 104\), from *The Fifth Book of Madrigals* \(1605\)](#)
- [“Cruda amarilli \(SV 94\), from *The Fifth Book of Madrigals* \(1605\)](#)

Opera Excerpts

Complete recordings of both [Orfeo](#) and [Poppea](#) can be accessed on the [Naxos Music Library](#)

- Excerpts from *Orfeo* (1607)
 - [Act 2 excerpts](#)
 - [Act 3 excerpts](#)
- [Excerpts from *L’incoronazione di Poppea* \(1643\)](#)

Other resources

In your library:

- *Madrigali, libro 5*, ed. Andrea Bornstein. Bologna: Ut Orpheus edizioni, 2004/2007. [M1582.M65 M3 bk. 5 2003]
WorldCat: <http://www.worldcat.org/oclc/1121543556>
- *L’Orfeo*, edited by Edward H. Tarr. Paris: Editions Costallat, 1974.
[M1500.M78 O7 1974]
WorldCat: <http://www.worldcat.org/oclc/1101937729>
- *L’incoronazione di Poppea*, edited by Alan Curtis. London: Novello, 1989.
[M1500.M78 I52 1989]
WorldCat: <http://www.worldcat.org/oclc/165622773>

Available online, copyright free:

- [Il quinto libro de madrigali](#), ed. Gian Francesco Malpiero. Vienna: Universal, 1927.
- [Orfeo, photographic facsimile of the original printing.](#)

Giulio Caccini, *Le nuove musiche*

Anthology Excerpts

[Click here](#) for a YouTube playlist of recordings of these items.

- [“Amarilli, mia bella”](#) (solo madrigal)
- [“Vedrò il mio sol”](#) (solo madrigal)
- [“Sfogava con le stelle”](#) (solo madrigal)
- [“Al fonte, al prato”](#) (aria)
- [“Belle rose porporine”](#) (aria)

In your library

- *Le nuove musiche*, ed. H. Wiley Hitchcock. Middleton, WI: A-R Editions, 2009. [M2.R238 v.9 2009]

Available online, copyright free

- [Photographic reproduction of original 1601 printing](#)
- [Modern transcription; original text translated to Portuguese](#)

Barbara Strozzi, Cantatas in Monodic Style*Anthology Excerpts*

[Click here](#) for a YouTube playlist of recordings of these items.

- [“Begli occhi,”](#) from *Cantatas and Arias*, op. 3
- [“Lagrimie mie,”](#) from *Diporti di Euterpe*, op. 7
- [“Tradimento,”](#) from *Diporti di Euterpe*, op. 7

In your library

- Cor Donato Editions is currently [publishing the complete works of Strozzi](#). You may find the volumes in your local research library.

Available online, copyright free

- The International Music Score Library Project (IMSLP) has photographic reproductions of many of Strozzi’s seventeenth-century prints, available at [this link](#).

Giacomo Carissimi, *Jephte**Anthology Excerpts*

For a recording of these excerpts, [click here](#)

The following excerpts are all linked to the same score in the *A-R Music Anthology* ([linked here](#)). Page references follow each title in parentheses.

- Cum vocasset in praelum – Recitative (1)
- Transivit ergo – Chorus (2)
- Et clangebant tubæ – Duet (4)
- Fugite, cedite – Arioso (4)
- Fugite, cedite – Chorus (5)
- Et percussit Jephte – Recitative (8)
- Et ululantes filii – Trio (8)
- Cum autem victor Jephte – Recitative (8)
- Incipite in tympanis – Arioso (9)
- Hymnum cantemus – Duet (10)
- Cantate mecum Domino – Arioso (11)
- Cantemus omnes – Chorus (12)
- Cum vidisset Jephte – Recitative (16)
- Abiit ergo – Chorus (19)
- Plorate colles – Recitative and arioso (20)

Plorate filli Israel – Chorus (23)

In your library

- *Historia Jephte*, ed. Dario de Cicco. Lucca: OTOS, 2006. [M2003.C37 J4 2006]

WorldCat: <http://www.worldcat.org/oclc/367601247>

Exercises ([click here for key](#))

1. Articulate the difference between the “prima pratica” and the “seconda pratica,” including the following information:
 - Who coined these terms?
 - What technical musical features characterize the *prima pratica*? The *seconda pratica*? What composers are associated with each?
 - Why was there some resistance to the *seconda pratica*?
 - What was the justification for the *seconda pratica*?
 - How does this idea of the *seconda pratica* fit with the meaning of the word “baroque,” which we use so casually today?
2. Examine Monteverdi’s “Cruda Amarilli” from his fifth book of madrigals. Identify some musical instances of *seconda pratica* aesthetics in the piece. Once you have done this, choose another madrigal and look for more of the same. Go through the early operas on the list above and be on the lookout once again for these striking elements. Would you be able to identify the style and the musical intent on an exam?
3. Flip through the entirety of Caccini’s *Le nuove musiche*, either using your library’s copy or the online facsimile [linked above](#). Answer the following:
 - What are the contents of this volume?
 - What is the difference between an aria and a madrigal in this volume?
 - What is the relationship between composition and performance in this volume? Why does it begin with the text that it begins with? What freedoms does the notation allow to the performers?
4. Once you’ve gotten a good overview of the early operas here (*L’Euridice*, *Orfeo*, and *Calisto*), contemplate how these differ from later operas that you might be more familiar with. What type of music gets the most emotional charge? Why?
5. Can you articulate the difference between a cantata and an opera?
6. Can you articulate the difference between an oratorio and an opera?

Key to Exercises

1. *Articulate the difference between the “prima pratica” and the “seconda pratica,” including the following information:*
 - *Who coined these terms?*
 - *What technical musical features characterize the prima pratica? The seconda pratica? What composers are associated with each?*
 - *Why was there some resistance to the seconda pratica?*
 - *What was the justification for the seconda pratica?*
 - *How does this idea of the seconda pratica fit with the meaning of the word “baroque,” which we use so casually today?*

The terms “prima pratica” and “seconda pratica” were coined by Monteverdi, in his reply to Giovanni Maria Artusi’s criticisms of his compositional approach in pieces that appeared in his fifth book of madrigals. (The terms appear in a preface to that volume, presumably penned by Monteverdi’s brother, but perhaps actually written by the composer himself and attributed to his brother out of decorum.) Artusi had attacked Monteverdi for not following the rules of counterpoint as outlined by Gioseffo Zarlino, and epitomized in the works of Josquin, Ockeghem, and Palestrina. (The first two of these composers were explicitly named by Monteverdi as representatives of the *prima pratica*.) These composers followed all the rules that you have learned in harmony and counterpoint classes: careful preparation of dissonances followed by particularized rules for resolving them. These practices ensured that the produced music was harmonious and beautiful, and that it followed the mathematic rules of consonance.

Monteverdi’s music, Artusi pointed out, violated these rules, with numerous unprepared dissonances and faulty resolutions. Artusi admits (in the excerpt included in this unit) that Monteverdi’s music sounds good, despite the violated rules. He says that this paradox can be explained in one of two ways: either the singers do something to cover up the infelicities in Monteverdi’s writing, or exposure to all this “bad” music has corrupted the sense of his ears and those of his contemporaries.

Monteverdi’s retort says that Artusi is too much of a theorist and not enough of a composer to understand the changing aesthetics of the day. Where he has introduced striking dissonances and violated the old rules of counterpoint, he has been led by the words, which are to be the “mistress of the harmony.” (Here, Monteverdi is drawing on Plato, since Artusi had drawn on Plato in his attack on Monteverdi’s music as unharmonious.) If the words are ugly, Monteverdi says, then the music needs to be dissonant and even ugly to reflect the meaning of the text. For this reason, if you are going to understand *seconda pratica* aesthetics, then you really have to understand the meaning of the words in the music sampled here.

Finally: It is worth noting that the word “baroque” means, basically, “ugly” or

“misshapen.” The idea of “ugly” music—music that prizes expressivity over harmonious perfection—is essential to baroque aesthetics, especially in the seventeenth century.

2. *Examine Monteverdi’s “Cruda Amarilli” from his fifth book of madrigals. Identify some musical instances of *seconda pratica* aesthetics in the piece. Once you have done this, choose another madrigal and look for more of the same. Go through the early operas on the list above and be on the lookout once again for these striking elements. Would you be able to identify the style and the musical intent on an exam?*

The most famous instance of *seconda pratica* violation of the rules in this madrigal is cited by Artusi himself as violation #1 (see [p. 3](#)). These are the words “Ahi! Lasso!”, which translate simply, “Oh! Alas!” These expressions of emotional pain receive not one, but two unprepared dissonances in a row from Monteverdi, with the a in the top voice forming a 9th against the G in the bass, and then avoiding resolution by jumping to an f, hence forming a 7th. Artusi evidently missed another, perhaps even more striking violation of the rules in m. 1 of the piece. After sounding the opening G-major triad, the bass leaps to an e, with the upper voices forming a dissonance of a 7th (b') and 9th (d'') by suspension; rather than resolving these dissonances properly, Monteverdi has the bass move to a B at the same time that the other voices move to a' and c'', moving from triple dissonance to triple dissonance. The word here, “Cruda,” means “Cruel.” Monteverdi’s sonic depiction of this word is therefore “cruel” to the ears of his listeners.

If you understand these harmonic decisions, then you should be able to spot more instances of *seconda pratica* aesthetics all over the music on this Unit’s assigned listening. These techniques give *L’Orfeo* its emotional charge; a particularly famous bit is “Ohimè, che odo?” in Act 2, the moment when Orpheus learns from a messenger that Euridice has died. If you only listen to one bit of this stellar opera, this is the one to focus on.

3. *Flip through the entirety of Caccini’s *Le nuove musiche*, either using your library’s copy or the online facsimile [linked above](#). Answer the following:*
 - *What are the contents of this volume?*
 - The volume consists of three major sections: 1) a manual on how to sing this repertoire; 2) a set of solo madrigals; 3) a set of arias
 - *What is the difference between an aria and a madrigal in this volume?*

Madrigals are through composed songs with a single verse. These are solo pieces (in contrast to Monteverdi’s madrigals and the tradition of the sixteenth century), but the poetic idea is the same: a powerful, one-stanza verse that gets extensive musical treatment. The arias in the volume are strophic. Caccini tells us in the preface that arias are the place where professional singers should show off their ability to sing and ornament virtuosically. The madrigals, on the other hand, are the places where the composer gets to shine,

and the singer is supposed to be refined, singing in good taste, and expressing the heartfelt (and usually sad) emotions of the madrigal style.

- *What is the relationship between composition and performance in this volume? Why does it begin with the text that it begins with? What freedoms does the notation allow to the performers?*

The composer and the performer are presented in *Le nuove musiche* as equal partners in musical creation. Caccini teaches his singers various ornaments and says that his music cannot be performed well without these ornaments being applied on appropriate words. The use of figured bass—which Caccini seems to be claiming (falsely) to have invented—also shows the importance of performer-composer interactions. Caccini has supplied a basic outline for his music, but has left out the vital details of harmonic “realization.” It is up to the performer (at the lute, harp, or keyboard) to improvise the details of the chord voicings on the spot, following both the instructions given by Caccini in his figured bass and by the emotional vacillations of the singer. This is the art of figured bass (or “continuo”) “realization,” and it puts both the chord player and the singer (with his/her ornaments) on an equal par with one another and with the composer.

4. *Once you’ve gotten a good overview of the early operas here (L’Euridice, Orfeo, and Calisto), contemplate how these differ from later operas that you might be more familiar with. What type of music gets the most emotional charge? Why?*

The vital thing to note here is that the arias aren’t really all that interesting, but the recitative is. The newly invented *recitar cantando* was revolutionary. Rather than thinking contrapuntally, composers were now thinking “vertically”—i.e., with a melody line accompanied by chords, rather than a stack of independent “horizontally” moving voices. The freedom, the “natural” speech patterns of recitative, and the drama made possible by this development are what interested and excited Monteverdi, Caccini, and this generation of composers. It is a totally different operatic world from that of the eighteenth and early-nineteenth centuries, when arias held all of the musical interest.

5. *Can you articulate the difference between a cantata and an opera?*

A cantata is virtually indistinguishable from opera during this period. But generally, a cantata has smaller forces than an opera (sometimes just a single singer and continuo), and often the entire story of a cantata is told from a single perspective. Cantata, from the word “cantare,” simply means “a sung piece.” The only requirement for a cantata is that there is a singer and continuo present. Any combination beyond that is possible; there are cantatas for two singers and continuo, for one singer and continuo and obbligato violin, cantatas for two singers/obbligato violin/recorder and continuo, cantatas for two singers and a little orchestra, etc. It is

also important to note that cantatas are not staged; they were performed in the homes of wealthy patrons.

6. *Can you articulate the difference between an oratorio and an opera?*

Like the cantata, the oratorio of the seventeenth century is very similar to opera, in that it uses the same basic forms of recitative and simple aria. But it has a few characteristics that help distinguish it:

- Oratorios are on biblical themes of seriousness and contemplative lament. They were meant to be performed in Lent. These stories are taken from the Hebrew Bible (the Old Testament) and are generally tales of suffering and sadness.
- Because of their biblical basis, oratorios often use Latin texts.
- Because oratorios are unstaged, it is possible to have more extensive choruses than in operas. Whereas operas move between arias and recitative settings, oratorios often tightly integrate solo singing and choral singing.