

# Overture

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*For other uses, see Overture (disambiguation).*

**Overture** (from the French *ouverture*, meaning opening) in music is the instrumental introduction to a dramatic, choral or, occasionally, instrumental composition. During the early Romantic era, composers such as Beethoven and Mendelssohn began to use the term to refer to instrumental, programmatic works that presaged genres such as the symphonic poem.

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## History

### 17th century

The idea of an instrumental opening to opera existed during the 17th century. Peri's *Euridice* opens with a brief instrumental ritornello, and Monteverdi's *L'Orfeo* (1607) opens with a toccata, in this case a fanfare for muted trumpets. More important, however, was the Prologue, which comprised sung dialogue between allegorical characters which introduced the over-arching themes of the stories depicted.

### French overture

As a musical form, however, the so-called French overture begins with the court ballet and operatic overtures of Jean-Baptiste Lully (Waterman and Anthony 2001), which he elaborated from a similar, two-section form called *Ouverture*, found in the French ballets de cour as early as 1640 (Temperley 2001). This French overture consists of a slow introduction in a marked "dotted rhythm" (i.e., exaggerated iambic, if the first chord is disregarded),

followed by a lively movement in fugato style. The overture was frequently followed by a series of dance tunes before the curtain rose, and would often return following the Prologue to introduce the action proper. This overture style was also used in English opera, most notably in Henry Purcell's *Dido and Æneas*. Its distinctive rhythmic profile and function thus led to the French overture style as found in the works of late Baroque composers such as Johann Sebastian Bach. The style is most often used in preludes to suites, and can be found in non-staged vocal works such as cantatas, for example in the opening chorus of Bach's cantata *Nun komm, der Heiden Heiland*, BWV 61.

### **Italian overture**

In Italy, a distinct form called "overture" arose in the 1680s, and became established particularly through the operas of Alessandro Scarlatti, and spread throughout Europe, supplanting the French form as the standard operatic overture by the mid-18th century (Fisher 2001). Its usual form is in three generally homophonic movements: fast–slow–fast. The opening movement was normally in duple metre and in a major key; the slow movement in earlier examples was usually quite short, and could be in a contrasting key; the concluding movement was dance-like, most often with rhythms of the gigue or minuet, and returned to the key of the opening section. As the form evolved, the first movement often incorporated fanfare-like elements and took on the pattern of so-called "sonatina form" (sonata form without a development section), and the slow section became more extended and lyrical (Fisher 2001). Italian overtures were often detached from their operas and played as independent concert pieces. In this context, they became important in the early history of the symphony (Larue 2001).

### **18th century and sonata form**

With the increasing popularity of the Italian opera and the sonata form, the French overture fell out of fashion. Gluck (whose remarks on the function of overtures in the preface to *Alceste* are historic) based himself on Italian models, of loose texture. By the time of Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart's later works the overture in the sonata style had clearly differentiated itself from strictly symphonic music. Instances of this substitution are Mozart's Symphony No. 32 in G, which is an overture to an unknown opera, and his overtures to *Die Entführung aus dem Serail* and to *Lo sposo deluso*, in both of which cases the curtain rises at a point which throws a remarkable dramatic light upon the peculiar form. Mozart's last overture, *The Magic Flute* (1791), seemed to point toward the 19th century Rossinian model, with its grand opening and slow, heavy introduction leading to a lighthearted main theme. In Beethoven's hands the overture style and form increased its distinction from that of the symphony.<sup>[citation needed]</sup>

### **19th century and *William Tell***

Although Gioachino Rossini retired from writing overtures after *William Tell* in 1829, 19th-century overtures largely owe their focus to forms he had developed and perfected long before, primarily for Italian opera buffa.<sup>[citation needed]</sup> Rossini's first professional operatic overture, *La cambiale di matrimonio* (1810) bypassed strict sonata form, employing a grand opening, a slow introduction, first main theme, an extended bridge to a second main theme, crescendo, then a closing section. Attempts at this style can be clearly heard in overtures of

Adolphe Adam, Carl Maria von Weber, Giuseppe Verdi, Hector Berlioz and others, though none having achieved Rossini's reputation as craftsmen of overtures, as the simple, transparent style requires a preponderance of inspired melodic ideas for lasting effect.<sup>[citation needed]</sup> However, *William Tell* may have more successfully served as the model for the 19th century romantic overture, with its revolutionary four-part form, achieving the grand effect of a mini symphony, expanding the boundaries for 19th century opera as a whole. The *William Tell Overture* signalled the close of the classical period for the operatic stage at its premiere, paving the way for Giacomo Meyerbeer and Richard Wagner, its influence being heard as far forward as Tchaikovsky's *1812 Overture* and Offenbach's *Orpheus in the Underworld*.<sup>[citation needed]</sup>

## Modern opera

In modern opera the overture, *Vorspiel*, *Einleitung*, Introduction, or whatever else it may be called, is generally nothing more definite than that portion of the music which takes place before the curtain rises. Richard Wagner's *Vorspiel* to *Lohengrin* is a short self-contained movement founded on the music of the Grail.

## Operettas and musicals

Many 19th-century operettas and light operas substituted for the specially composed overture in strict "overture form", as detailed above, a potpourri of airs based on the tunes of the songs that were to follow. Sullivan, for instance, seldom actually wrote out his own overtures—since they followed the potpourri format expected from an English "comic opera" of the time, any competent orchestrator could be trusted with this task.<sup>[citation needed]</sup>

Twentieth-century and contemporary overtures accompanying Broadway (and other) Musicals almost always follow this pattern, consisting of segments from the more popular songs in the musical: *Gypsy* (1959) and *Candide* (1956) are considered masterpieces of their genre by many musical theatre scholars and working professionals. The overture usually is played before the musical starts; however, some musicals (such as *Passion*, LaChiusa's *The Wild Party*, *Sunday in the Park with George*, or *Rent*) dispense with a formal overture altogether. A unique example sees the recent revival of Cole Porter's *Kiss Me, Kate*, wherein the overture appears between the opening and closing choruses of the show's opening number, "Another Op'ning, Another Show," with the company remaining on stage, during, acting in pantomime. (However, in the original 1948 production, and all other productions of the show up to 1999, the overture to the show appeared in its usual place—before the first song.) Likewise, musicals such as *A Little Night Music*, *Nine*, and *Company* begin with vocal overtures. The overture to the Kurt Weill-Bertolt Brecht musical *The Threepenny Opera* (1928) is written in the neoclassical style (and like neo-classical and pre-19th overtures, is an entirely original melody that is not heard anywhere else in the score).

## Concert overture

### Early 19th century

Although by the end of the eighteenth century opera overtures were already beginning to be performed as separate items in the concert hall, the **concert overture**, intended specifically as

an individual concert piece without reference to stage performance and generally based on some literary theme, began to appear early in the Romantic era. Carl Maria von Weber wrote two concert overtures, *Der Beherrscher der Geister* ('The Ruler of the Spirits') (1811, a revision of the overture to his unfinished opera *Rübezahl* of 1805, and *Jubel-Ouverture* ('Jubilee-Overture', 1818, incorporating *God Save the King* at its climax). However the overture *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (1826) by Felix Mendelssohn is generally regarded as the first concert overture (Temperley 2001). Mendelssohn's other contributions to this genre include his *Meeresstille und glückliche Fahrt* ('Calm Sea and Prosperous Voyage') overture (1828), his *Hebrides Overture*, (1830) and the overtures *Die schöne Melusine* ('The fair Melusine', 1834) and *Ruy Blas* (1839). Other notable early concert overtures were written by Hector Berlioz (e.g., *Les Francs juges* (1826), and *Le Corsaire* (1828)).

Robert Schumann wrote overtures based on literature written by Friedrich Schiller, William Shakespeare and Johann Wolfgang von Goethe such as the overtures to *The Bride of Messina*, *Julius Caesar*, and *Hermann und Dorothea*. Although these overtures derive their musical inspiration from literary works, Schumann neither composed music for the entire work as he would for an opera nor necessarily intended a spoken performance to immediately follow. Both Schumann and Tchaikovsky would, in fact, incorporate bits of the French national anthem, *La Marseillaise* into their overtures *Hermann und Dorothea* and *1812* respectively, which indicates the independent nature of this type of overture.<sup>[citation needed]</sup>

## Later 19th century

In the 1850s the concert overture began to be supplanted by the symphonic poem, a form devised by Franz Liszt in several works that began as dramatic overtures. The distinction between the two genres was the freedom to mould the musical form according to external programmatic requirements (Temperley 2001). The symphonic poem became the preferred form for the more "progressive" composers, such as César Franck, Richard Strauss, Alexander Scriabin, and Arnold Schoenberg, while more conservative composers like Anton Rubinstein, Tchaikovsky, Johannes Brahms, and Arthur Sullivan remained faithful to the overture (Temperley 2001).

In the age when the symphonic poem had already become popular, Brahms wrote his *Academic Festival Overture*, Op. 80, as well as his *Tragic Overture*, Op. 81. An example clearly influenced by the symphonic poem is Tchaikovsky's *1812 Overture*. His equally well-known *Romeo and Juliet* is also labelled a 'fantasy-overture'.

## 20th century

In European music after 1900 the traditional overture was scarcely relevant any longer, though the name continued in use as one of a number of alternatives for describing an orchestral piece, often written for a festive occasion, in one movement of moderate length. A notable late exception displaying a connection with the traditional form is Dmitri Shostakovich's *Festive Overture*, Op. 96 (1954), which is in two linked sections, "Allegretto" and "Presto" (Temperley 2001). Film composer Miklós Rózsa's *Overture to a Symphony Concert*, Op. 26a (1963) is also worth mentioning.<sup>[citation needed]</sup> Malcolm Arnold's *A Grand, Grand Overture*, Op. 57 (1956), is a 20th-century parody of the late 19th century concert overture, scored for an enormous orchestra with organ, additional brass instruments, and

obligato parts for four rifles, three Hoover vacuum cleaners (two uprights in B♭, one horizontal with detachable sucker in C), and an electric floor polisher in E♭; it is dedicated "to President Hoover" (Anon. 1957; Maycock 2009; Burton-Page [n.d.]; Anon. 1957 mistakenly says just three rifles, but publisher's website confirms four, as stated also in Maycock 2009).

## Film

In motion pictures, an overture is a piece of music setting the mood for the film before the opening credits start. For a comprehensive list, see [List of Films with Overtures](#).

Overtures were common during the early era of movie showmanship. Certain movies were booked exclusively into better theatres in large cities with a reserved seat policy and were shown with a "performance" schedule similar to legitimate (live) theatre: only one presentation each night, typically at 8pm, and matinées, usually 2pm, on weekends and holidays. This exhibition policy was applied to prestige pictures and they were called 'Roadshows'.<sup>[*citation needed*]</sup>

## List of some common overtures

Some well-known or commonly played Overtures:

- Arensky: A Dream on the Volga
- Arnold:
  - Beckus the Dandipratt
  - Peterloo
  - Tam O'Shanter
- Auber: Fra Diavolo
- Barber: Overture to *The School for Scandal*
- Bax: Overture to a Picaresque Comedy
- Beethoven:
  - Fidelio
  - Leonora Nr 2
  - Leonora Nr 3
  - Coriolanus
  - Egmont
  - Ruins of Athens
- Berlioz:
  - The Corsair
  - Les Francs-Juges
  - Waverley
  - Rob Roy
  - King Lear
  - Benvenuto Cellini
  - Carnaval Roman
- Bernstein: Candide
- Borodin: Prince Igor
- Brahms:
  - Academic Festival Overture

- Tragic Overture
- Copland: An Outdoor Overture
- Elgar:
  - Alassio: In the South
  - Cockaigne
  - Froissart
- Glinka: Ruslan and Ludmilla
- Gomes: Il Guarany
- Josef Haydn: Armida
- Hérold: Zampa
- John Ireland:
  - A London Overture
  - Satyricon Overture
- Lalo: Le roi d'Ys
- Léhar: The Merry Widow
- MacCunn: The Land of the Mountain and the Flood
- Mendelssohn:
  - Hebrides (or Fingal's Cave)
  - Calm Sea and a Prosperous Voyage
  - Midsummer Night's Dream
- Miaskovsky:
  - Pathetic Overture
  - Salutation Overture
- Mozart:
  - Marriage of Figaro
  - La clemenza di Tito
  - Così fan tutte
  - Don Giovanni
  - Idomeneo
  - The Abduction from the Seraglio
  - Magic flute
- Nicolai: The Merry Wives of Windsor
- Nielsen:
  - Maskarade
  - Helios
- Prokofiev: Overture on Hebrew Themes
- Rezniceck: Donna Diana
- Rimsky-Korsakov: Russian Easter Festival Overture
- Rossini:
  - La cambiale di matrimonio
  - Tancredi
  - Il Signor Bruschino
  - The Italian Girl in Algiers
  - Il Turco in Italia
  - The Silken Ladder
  - The Thieving Magpie
  - La Cenerentola
  - Semiramide
  - Il Viaggio a Reims
  - The Barber of Seville

- William Tell
- Schubert:
  - Overture in Italian Style, D560
  - Rosamunde
- Schumann:
  - Overture, Scherzo and Finale, Op 52
  - Manfred
  - Genoveva
  - Faust
- Shostakovich: Festival Overture
- Smetana: The Bartered Bride
- Johann Strauss: Die Fledermaus
- Sibelius: Overture to the Tempest
- Sullivan:
  - Mikado
  - Gondoliers
  - The Yeoman of the Guard
- Suppé
  - Light Cavalry Overture
  - The Beautiful Galatea
  - Poet and Peasant
- Tchaikovsky:
  - Festival Overture "1812"
  - Hamlet [Overture-Fantasy]
  - Romeo and Juliet [Overture-Fantasy]
- Verdi: La forza del destino
- Wagner:
  - Faust Overture
  - Polonia
  - Rienzi
  - Flying Dutchman
  - Tannhäuser
- Walton
  - Johannesburg Festival Overture
  - Scapino
  - Portsmouth Point
- Weber:
  - Euryanthe
  - Der Freischütz
  - Invitation to the Dance

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