

\* - not yet verified

## The Art

- “If you put together all the ingredients that naturally attract children — sex, violence, revenge, spectacle and vigorous noise — what you have is grand opera.”

Judith Martin, *Miss Manners' Guide to Excruciatingly Correct Behavior*, 2005

- “Opera, n. A play representing life in another world, whose inhabitants have no speech but song, no motions but gestures, and no postures but attitudes. All acting is simulation, and the word *simulation* is from *simia*, an ape; but in opera the actor takes for his model *Simia audibilis* (or *Pithecanthropus stentor*) — the ape that howls.”

Ambrose Bierce, *The Devil's Dictionary*, 1911

- “If you wish to know what an OPERA is, I shall tell you that it is a fantastical work of Poetry and of Music, in which the Poet and the Musician, equally embarrassed the one with the other, take great pains to turn out an evil work.”

Charles de Saint-Denis de Saint-Évremond, letter to George Villiers, Duke of Buckingham, 1678

- “Opera, next to Gothic architecture, is one of the strangest inventions of western man. It could not have been foreseen by any logical process.”

Kenneth Clark, *Civilisation*, 1970

- “No good opera plot can be sensible, for people do not sing when they are feeling sensible.”

W. H. Auden, *Time*, December 29, 1961

- “... when a thing isn't worth saying, you sing it.”

Pierre Beaumarchais, *The Barber of Seville*, 1773

- “Opera is when a guy gets stabbed in the back and, instead of bleeding, he sings.”

Ed Gardner, as Archie on *Duffy's Tavern*, 1940

- “People are wrong when they say the opera isn't what it used to be. It is what it used to be. That's what's wrong with it.”

Noel Coward, *Design for Living*, act 3, scene 1, 1932

- “I seldom go to the opera; it is to music what a bawdy house is to a cathedral.”

H. L. Mencken, letter to Isaac Goldberg, May 6, 1925

- “Going to the opera, like getting drunk, is a sin that carries its own punishment with it, and that a very serious one.”

Hannah More, letter to her sister, 1775

- “I wouldn't mind seeing opera die. Ever since I was a boy, I regarded opera as a ponderous anachronism, almost the equivalent of smoking.”

Frank Lloyd Wright\*

- “Of all the noises known to man, opera is the most expensive.”

variously attributed to Moliere or Voltaire\*

- “The opera is like a husband with a foreign title: expensive to support, hard to understand, and, therefore, a supreme social challenge.”  
Cleveland Amory\*

- “... the Italian opera, an exotick and irrational entertainment, which has been always combatted, and has always prevailed.”  
Samuel Johnson, *Prefaces, Biographical and Critical, to the Works of the English Poets, Volume the Fourth, Hughes, 1781*

### The Opera House

- “I once said that the most elegant solution of the problem of opera was to blow up the opera houses, and I still think this true.”  
Pierre Boulez, *Orientalisms: Collected Writings in English translation by Martin Cooper, Harvard University Press, 1990, p.485.*

- “The opera house is an institution differing from other lunatic asylums in the fact that its inmates have avoided official certification.”  
Ernest Newman\*

- “Every theatre is an insane asylum, but an opera theatre is the ward for the incurables.”  
Franz Schalk\*

- “At the Met, we are masters of illusion. When we want to create the illusion of a 60-foot staircase, we build a 60-foot staircase.”  
Clemente D’Alessio, October 29, 1973

### Language

- “An unalterable and unquestioned law of the musical world required that the German text of French operas sung by Swedish artists should be translated into Italian for the clearer understanding of English-speaking audiences.”  
Edith Wharton, *The Age of Innocence, 1920, chapter 1*

- “Opera in English is, in the main, just about as sensible a plea as baseball in Italian.”  
George Jean Nathan, *The American Mercury, February 1926*

- “I do not mind what language an opera is sung in so long as it is a language I don't understand.”  
Sir Edward Appleton, “Sayings of the Week,” *The Observer, August 28, 1955, p.7*

- “This foreign invasion of sex and murder expressed in grand opera is not English nor is it American. The English language gives expression to higher ideals and does not embody the oriental hedonism, barbarism, thoughts, or expressions. The fact that 7,101,289 Bibles are sold in one year is one of the reasons why grand opera cannot be a success when sung in English.”  
M. J. P., letter sent November 10, 1924 to the *Chicago Tribune, published November 17, 1924, p. 8*

## Duration

- “*Parsifal* is the kind of opera that starts at 6 o’clock. After it has been going three hours, you look at your watch, and it says 6:20.”

David Randolph\*

- “We have the grand opera; and I have witnessed, and greatly enjoyed, the first act of everything which Wagner created, but the effect on me has always been so powerful that one act was quite sufficient; whenever I have witnessed two acts I have gone away physically exhausted; and whenever I have ventured an entire opera the result has been the next thing to suicide.”

Mark Twain, dictated November 30, 1906

- “Monsieur Wagner has good moments, but awful quarters of an hour!”

Gioachino Rossini, letter to Emile Naumann, April 1867

- “Of all the affected, sapless, soulless, beginningless, endless, topless, bottomless, topsiturtiest, scannel-pipest, tongs and boniest doggerel of sounds I ever endured the deadliest of, that eternity of nothing was the deadliest.”

John Ruskin, on Wagner’s *Die Meistersinger*, June 30, 1882

- “If you will only take the precaution to go in long enough after it commences and to come out long before it is over, you will not find it wearisome.”

George Bernard Shaw, on Gounod’s *La Rédemption*, 1882

- “*Siegfried* always begins before you arrive, and ends after you leave.”

Avery Hopwood, *Fair and Warmer*, 1915

- “I sometimes wonder which would be nicer: an opera without an interval or an interval without an opera.”

Ernest Newman (posthumously quoted in *Berlioz, Romantic and Classic*, 1972)

- “Like German opera, too long and too loud.”

Evelyn Waugh, describing the World War II Battle of Crete, 1941\*

## Sound Level

- “Nobody really sings in an opera; they just make loud noises.”

Amelita Galli-Curci\*

- “When in doubt, sing loud.”

Robert Merrill, *The Saturday Evening Post*, October 26, 1957

- “I shall say nothing here about this celebrated establishment unless it be that of all the Academies of the kingdom and the world it is assuredly that which makes the most noise.”

Jean Jacques Rousseau, on opera, *Dictionnaire de Musique*, 1768

## Music & Singing

- “In opera there is too much singing.”

Claude Debussy to Ernest Guiraud, 1889

- “How wonderful opera would be if there were no singers.”

Gioacchino Rossini\*

- After seeing a demonstration of a singing automaton: “If opera directors could have many such androids, they could do without chorus singers who cost a lot and give a lot of trouble.”

Frédéric Chopin, letter to his parents, October 11, 1846

- “I like your opera and would like to set it to music.”

Ludwig van Beethoven to Ferdinando Paër, as related anecdotally by Hector Berlioz

- “I liked the opera very much — everything but the music.”

Benjamin Britten, on Stravinsky’s *The Rake’s Progress*\*

- “The audience is requested not to refrain from talking during the overture. Otherwise they will know all the tunes before the opera begins.”

Ralph Vaughan Williams, note in the score of *The Poisoned Kiss*, 1936

- “I like Wagner’s music better than any other music. It is so loud that one can talk the whole time without people hearing what one says.”

Oscar Wilde\*

- “Wagner’s music is better than it sounds.”

Edgar Wilson Nye, quoted in *Mark Twain’s Autobiography*, 1924

- “I love Wagner, but the music I prefer is that of a cat hung up by its tail outside a window and trying to stick to the panes of glass with its claws.”

Charles Baudelaire\*

- “Bel canto is to opera as pole-vaulting is to ballet.”

Ned Rorem, *The New Republic*, June 3, 1972

- “The thing to do for insomnia is to get an opera score and read that. That will bore you to death.”

Marilyn Horne\*

- Responding to being told conductor George Szell was his own worst enemy, “Not while I’m alive.”

Metropolitan Opera general manager Sir Rudolph Bing, quoted in his obituary in *The New York Times*, September 3, 1997

- “Her singing reminds me of a cart coming downhill with the brake on.”

Thomas Beecham, of a soprano in *Die Walküre*\*

- “How nice the human voice is when it isn’t singing.”

Sir Rudolph Bing\*

## Performance

- “There isn’t often anything in Wagner opera that one would call by such a violent name as acting.”  
Mark Twain\*

- “Oh, I hate the thought of all those costumes and grease paint! When I think that characters like Kundry will now have to be dressed up, those dreadful artists' balls immediately spring into my mind. Having created the invisible orchestra, I now feel like inventing the invisible theatre!”  
Richard Wagner, in *Cosima Wagner’s Diaries*

- “The actor apes a man, at least in shape; the opera performer apes an ape.”  
Ambrose Bierce, *The Devil’s Dictionary*, 1911

- “When an opera star sings her head off, she usually improves her appearance.”  
Victor Borge \*

## The Audience

- “Sleep is an excellent way of listening to an opera.”  
James Stephens\*

- “One goes to see a tragedy to be moved; to the opera one goes either for want of any other interest or to facilitate digestion.”  
Voltaire\*

- “... I would rather undergo a vasectomy via Weed Whacker than attend an opera.”  
Dave Barry, *Dave Barry Talks Back*, 1992

- “I like this opera crowd! I feel tough!”  
Jerry Seinfeld\*

## Not About Opera

- “The opera ain’t over until the fat lady sings.”  
Ralph Carpenter, Texas Tech sports information director, during a football game between Texas Tech and Texas A&M in March 1976, used again by sportscaster Dan Cook during a basketball game between the San Antonio Spurs and the Washington Bullets in April 1978. It has also been attributed to former Baltimore Orioles baseball manager Earl Weaver and seems to be based on an old southern expression, “Church ain’t out until the fat lady sings” (Fabia Rue Smith and Charles Rayford Smith, *Southern Words and Sayings*, 1976).