



SAN FRANCISCO
OPERA EDUCATION

A SHORT HISTORY OF OPERA

Opera originated in Florence, Italy, in the late 1500's, with a small group of men who were members of a *Camerata* (Italian for society or group of like-minded people). The intellectuals, poets, and musicians of the Camerata decided they wanted words to be a featured aspect of music to help link thought with emotion. They used ancient Greek drama as their inspiration, including the use of a chorus to comment on the action of the play. The Camerata laid down three principles for their new art form:

1. The text must be understood; the musical accompaniment must be very simple and should not distract from the words.
2. The words must be sung naturally as if they were spoken and not rhymed like songs.
3. The music must express the feeling of the text.

The first significant composer to fully develop these principles was Jacopo Peri (1561-1633), whose opera *Dafne* was performed in 1594 and was regarded as the first opera. Others consider the later *L'Orfeo*, written in 1607 by Claudio Monteverdi, as the first real contribution to the art form.

**Some material courtesy of San Francisco Opera Guild Education*