

AN INTRODUCTION TO OPERA

What is opera?

Opera is a complex art form that has been around since about 1600. Today there are many styles of opera performance, but basically, they all have one thing in common – an opera is a play that is sung.

What is music theatre?

Simply put, music theatre is a dramatic performance that includes music. It usually includes dialogue, music, dance and theatrical elements like set, costume, props, makeup, lights and sound.

Which languages are commonly used in opera?

The four main languages of opera are Italian, French, German and English.

What are the different voice types used in opera?

Soprano – the highest sounding female voice

Mezzo-soprano – the lower sounding female voice

Contralto – the lowest sounding female voice, but not common in opera

Countertenor – the highest sounding male voice

Tenor – a high sounding male voice

Baritone – the middle sounding male voice

Bass – the lowest sounding male voice

There are further categories defining each particular voice. A few of these are:

Coloratura – a voice type with the ability to sing with agility and speed

Dramatic – a heavy sounding, powerful voice

Lyric – a voice with the ability to sing long beautiful phrases

Heldentenor – this is often seen as the heroic tenor, a very big role that requires a powerful sound

What does the conductor do in an opera?

The conductor is crucial to the performance. He or she stands in front of the orchestra and conducts, shaping the music and keeping the balance between stage and pit. They also cue the singers to help with their vocal entries.

What is an opera orchestra?

An opera is usually accompanied by an orchestra. The size and instrumentation of the orchestra will depend on the type of opera and the requirements of the score and composer.

The orchestra usually consists of strings, woodwind, brass and percussion. Each of these sections have a variety of instruments in them.

Strings

Violin, viola, cello, double bass

Woodwind

Piccolo, flute, oboe, cor anglais, clarinet, bassoon, saxophone

Brass

Trumpet, French horn, trombone, tuba

Percussion

Snare drum, tenor drums, timpani, bass drum, cymbals, glockenspiel, xylophone, chimes, triangle and other assorted instruments

Harp

Keyboard Instruments

These could include celeste, harpsichord or piano

What is correct opera etiquette?

Here is some information to help you feel more at home if you are coming to the opera for the first time:

- You can wear whatever you feel comfortable in to the opera, you don't have to dress up if you don't feel like it. You will see people attending in formal and semi-formal dress and in jeans. Usually people don't wear shorts and tank tops.
- As for any theatre performance, there are people who are allergic to perfumes and colognes, so we suggest don't wear this or wear little of it.

- If you need to eat cough drops or other lollies to soothe your throat, unwrap them before the opera starts so you don't make unnecessary noise.
- Turn off all mobile devices like phones and pagers.
- Don't talk during the performance or sing or hum along.
- If you must leave your seat, wait until the end of an act.
- The overture is part of the performance, so it is best to be quiet from this point.
- It is conventional to applaud at the end of an act, although often people also applaud at the end of an aria. Of course applaud at the end and during the bows. If you're not sure when to applaud, wait and see what those around you do.
- Children usually like to learn the correct way to behave, so teach them what they need to do to feel comfortable.

Who are the opera 'creatives'?

Opera has many people involved who contribute to the creative process of either writing or staging an opera. These include:

- **Composer** – the writer of the music
- **Librettist** – the writer of the words
- **Musical Director/Conductor** – the people who decide the musical interpretation
- **Choreographer** – the person who decides the movement of the performers
- **Chorus Master** – the person who rehearses the chorus
- **Designer** – the person/people who decide on the look of the visual and audio elements of the show - costume, set, lighting, sound, makeup
- **Director** – the person who directs the performances of the onstage artists

AN OPERA GLOSSARY

A

Accelerando – becoming faster

Act – a component of the total work, consisting of its own partial dramatic arc

Allegro – fast

Alliteration – a poetic device, when sequential words begin with the same letter, often used by Wagner

Andante – at a moderate walking pace

Aria – an elaborate composition for solo voice with instrumental accompaniment

Arioso – a recitative of a lyrical and expressive quality

Ascending – moving up the scale

Aside – when a character talks directly to the audience without the other characters knowing

B

Ballad opera – a popular form of stage entertainment in the 18th century consisting of spoken dialogue alternating with musical numbers taken from ballad tunes

Ballet – theatrical performance in the form of dance, usually with costumes, accompanied by music

Banda – the offstage musicians

Bar – also called a measure, the section between two bar lines containing the number of beats as indicated by the time signature

Baritone – the male voice between the tenor and bass

Baroque – the period of music between c. 1600 – 1750, following the Renaissance

Bass – the lowest male voice

Baton – a white stick used by conductors to conduct with, allowing the conductor greater visibility

Beat – the regular pulse of the music

Bel canto – an Italian vocal technique from the 18th century with emphasis on the beauty and brilliance of the sound of the performance rather than the dramatic or romantic emotion.

C

Cadenza – a passage or section of varying length, often improvised, that allows the performer to show their skill

Castrato – historically, a singer who was castrated as a boy to retain the boyish quality of the voice

Chord – the playing of more than one note simultaneously

Choreographer – the person who designs and creates the movement of the performance, usually in dance form

Chorus – in music theatre this refers to a large body of singers

Chorus master – the person responsible for the rehearsal and preparation of the chorus prior to production

Claque – a group of people hired to applaud

Classical – a period of music created roughly between c 1750 - 1830

Coloratura – a rapid passage, run, trill or other virtuoso-like feature used particularly in music of the 18th and 19th centuries

Composer – the person who writes the music

Concertmaster – the lead violinist of the orchestra

Conductor – the person who interprets and leads the orchestra or musical performance, coordinating the performers and keeping the time through the technique of hand movements

Contralto – the lowest female voice

Countertenor – the highest male voice

Crescendo – getting louder

D

Da Capo Aria – a type of aria common between 1650 – 1750, characterised by an A B A structure

Decrescendo – getting softer

Designer – the person who designs the overall look of the production, including the sets

Director – the person who directs the performances of the onstage artists

Dress rehearsal – often the final rehearsal of all the component parts of the production in full costume

Duet – a composition for two performers of equal importance

Dynamics – the different volume interpretations of the score

E

Encore – in a public performance this is the repetition of a piece or an extra piece played in response to the audience's applause

Ensemble - a group of performers performing together

F

Fairy tale – a story that involves the fairy realm, often including fairies, goblins, giants, dwarves and witches where magic or enchantment exists. These are common in most cultures, for example the writings of the Brothers Grimm or Hans Christian Andersen

Finale – the last movement of a work that contains more than one movement

Flat – the sign b, indicating to lower a note by a semitone. e.g. Bb

Forte – f, loud

Fortissimo – ff, very loud

G

Gesamtkunstwerk – a work of art that incorporates all or many art forms

Grand opera – a serious opera without spoken dialogue with a large-scale production

H

Harmony – the chordal structure of a musical composition in contrast to the linear structure

Hero / Heroine – often the protagonist. In its modern form is a protagonist character who fulfils a task and restores balance to the community. He/she is a born leader, whether they know it or not. He/she is a real survivor who has faith in good. Others are willing to believe in this hero and will follow him/her. (e.g. Odysseus, Theseus, Prince Charming)

I

Impresario – the producer

Interlude – a section of music between acts

Intermission – a break in the performance that allows the audience to leave the auditorium

K

Key – the tonal centre around which a composition is based, often indicated by a key signature

L

Largo – very slow

Leitmotiv – the representation of characters, typical situations and recurrent ideas by musical motifs

Libretto – the text of an opera or music theatre work

Lyrics – the words of a song

M

Mark – when a singer holds back on their full performance capacity during a rehearsal to protect their voices

Mezzo voce – with half voice

Mezzo-soprano – the second highest female voice

Musical comedy – a light hearted story presented in music theatre form

N

Natural – a note that is neither sharp nor flat

O

Octave – the eighth note of a diatonic scale, the tone with twice the frequency of the home tone

Opera – a staged drama set to music in its entirety, made up of vocal pieces with instrumental accompaniment and usually with orchestral overtures and interludes.

Opera buffa – also known as ‘comic opera’, an opera with a large mixture of music, on a light subject with a happy ending, including comic elements

Opera seria – also known as ‘serious opera’, an opera with dramatic, serious content often with a tragic ending

Opus – the chronological position of a composition within a composer’s entire output

Oratorio – mostly this is a composition with a long libretto, of religious or contemplative character performed without sets, costume or action by solo voices, chorus and orchestra

Orchestra – a large ensemble of instruments divided into four main sections: strings, woodwind, brass and percussion

Orchestration – utilisation of the instrumentation of an orchestra in the writing of a composition

Ornamentation – the embellishment of notes of a melody that can be written or improvised, often using additional trills, turns or expanded phrases

Overture – an instrumental composition intended as an introduction to an opera or other music theatre work

P

Patter – the fast delivery of text (often used by Gilbert and Sullivan)

Pianissimo – pp, very soft

Piano – p, soft

Portamento – a manner of singing in which the voice glides gradually from one tone to the next through all the intermediate pitches

Prelude – a piece of music designed to be played as an introduction

Presto – very fast

Prima donna – the principal female role of an opera

Principal – a main part

Prompter – a person who gives cues to remind a performer of their words or musical entries

Proscenium – a large rectangular arch that surrounds the stage and gives the appearance it is framed

R

Rallentando – gradually slow down

Range – the range from the lowest to highest notes that are played or sung

Recitative – a vocal (singing) style designed to imitate the natural inflections of speech, used in opera where dialogue might be used in other forms of music theatre

Rehearsal – where the performers and the creatives develop the production, shaping lines, songs, movements etc

Reprise – repetition or recapitulation of a theme

Rhyme – where the words at the end of lines of text sound the same or have the same ending

Rhythm – the regular and irregular pattern of notes of different length in the music

Ritardando – gradual slowing of speed

Repetiteur – a pianist who works as an accompanist and vocal coach for opera

Romanticism – a period of the 19th century continuing until around 1910

S

Scale – a series of musical notes arranged in an order of rising pitches

Score – the notation showing all the parts of a work, both instrumental and vocal. Each instrument or vocal line has its own staff

Semitone – a half of a whole tone, the smallest interval in Western music

Sharp – the sign #, indicating to raise the note by one semitone

Singspiel – A style of opera with dialogue included

Solo – a piece of music performed by a single performer either alone or with accompaniment

Sonata – a composition for a single instrument, often with piano accompaniment (e.g. violin, cello, flute) comprising three or four movements

Soprano – the highest female voice

Soubrette – a light operatic soprano

Sound designer – the person who designs the additional sound used in a production

Stage manager – the person who manages the running of rehearsals and performances, managing all the components of that production during performance

Supernumerary – an actor

Surtitles – a translation of the words being sung on stage projected onto a screen above the stage

Synopsis – a summary of the story

T

Tempo – the speed of a composition

Tenor – a high male voice

Tessitura – the general range of vocal parts

Through-composed opera – an opera where the music is continuous

Tone – the interval of a major second or a sound of definite pitch and duration

Trill – a musical ornamentation consisting of the rapid alternation between two notes

Trio – a composition for three performers of equal importance

Tutti – a marking in a score that indicates the use of the whole orchestra and/or all the vocal parts

U

Underscore – music played underneath dialogue

V

Verismo – an Italian opera school from the late 19th century featuring a more realistic or naturalistic style of content and music

Vibrato – a very slight fluctuation of pitch in rapid succession to create warmth in the sound

Villain - often the antagonist. In literature this is the evil character in the story, the character who has a negative effect on the other characters.

Vocal range - the human voice falls into a range from the lowest to highest notes they can reach. The normal range is around two octaves and is traditionally broken into six voice types (from highest to lowest) soprano, mezzo-soprano, contralto, tenor, baritone and bass

W

Workshop – an exploration of a new work (production, text, music, design)

Y

Young artist program – a program through which young artists are encouraged to explore and be mentored into the artistic form they are interested in

Additional resources

<http://www.theopera101.com/>

<http://www.britannica.com/art/opera-music>

http://www.nytimes.com/2011/07/10/theater/musical-or-opera-the-fine-line-that-divides-them.html?pagewanted=all&_r=0

<http://www.theguardian.com/music/2011/aug/20/opera-in-the-modern-age>