



OPERA VOCABULARY

GENERAL TERMS TO KNOW

- **ACT:** A portion of an opera designated by the composer, which has a dramatic structure of its own.
- **ARIA:** A solo piece written for a main character, which focuses on the character's emotion.
- **BANDA:** A small group of instrumentalists who play either on the stage or backstage, not in the pit, often as part of a crowd or military scene.
- **BATON:** A short stick that the conductor uses to lead the orchestra.
- **BRAVO:** Literally, a form of applause when shouted by members of the audience at the end of an especially pleasing performance. Strictly speaking, "bravo" is for a single man, "brava" for a woman, and "bravi" for a group of performers.
- **CADENZA:** A passage of singing, often at the end of an aria, which shows off the singer's vocal ability.
- **COLORATURA:** Elaborate ornamentation of vocal music written using many fast notes and trills.
- **CURTAIN CALL:** At the end of a performance, all of the members of the cast and the conductor take bows. Sometimes this is done in front of the main curtain, hence the name curtain call. Often, however, the bows are taken on the full stage with the curtain open.
- **DIVA:** Literally "goddess," it refers to an important female opera star. The masculine form is divo.
- **DRESS REHEARSAL:** A final rehearsal that uses all of the costumes, lights, etc. While sometimes it is necessary to stop for corrections, an attempt is made to make it as much like a final performance as possible.
- **INTERMISSION:** A long break, usually about 20 minutes, between the acts of an opera, during which the audience is free to move around.
- **LEITMOTIF:** A short, recurring musical phrase associated with a particular character or event.
- **LIBRETTO:** The text or words of an opera.
- **OVERTURE:** An orchestral introduction to an opera.
- **PROPERTIES (PROPS):** Small items carried or used by performers on stage.
- **RECITATIVE:** Words sung in a conversational style, usually to advance the plot. Not to be confused with aria.
- **REPERTOIRE:** Stock pieces that a singer or company has ready to present. Often refers to a company's current season.
- **SCORE:** The written music of an opera or other musical work.

- **SET:** The background and furnishings on the stage.
- **SUPERTITLES:** Translations of the words being sung, or the actual words if the libretto is in the native language, that are projected on a screen above the stage.

TYPES OF OPERAS

- **GRAND OPERA:** Specifically, a serious opera of epic proportions with no spoken dialogue, composed in 19th-century France (such as *Les Huguenots* by Meyerbeer); more broadly, an opera sung and produced in the "grand manner."
- **OPERA BUFFA:** An opera about ordinary people, usually, but not always comic, which first developed in the 18th century. *Don Pasquale* is an example of opera buffa.
- **OPERA SERIA:** A "serious" opera. The usual characters are gods, goddesses or ancient heroes. Rossini was one of the last to write true opera serie, such as his last opera, *Guillaume Tell*.
- **OPERETTA (MUSICAL COMEDY):** A play, some of which is spoken but with many musical numbers.

VOICE TYPES

- **BARITONE:** The male singing voice between bass and tenor, with a range that extends from the second G below middle C to the first G above middle C. Examples include the title roles of *Don Giovanni* and *Rigoletto*, and Zurga in *Les pêcheurs de perles*.
- **BASS:** The lowest male singing voice, similar to a trombone or a bassoon in tone color and range (the second E below middle C to the first E above middle C); most comfortable with notes contained within the outermost lines of the bass clef. In serious or dramatic opera, low voices usually suggest age and wisdom; in comic opera, they are generally used for old characters. Examples include King Marke in *Tristan und Isolde*, Bartolo in *Il barbiere di Siviglia* and The Grand Inquisitor in *Don Carlo*.
- **CONTRALTO:** The lowest female singing voice, sometimes called simply "alto," often used for an older female character who possesses great wisdom. A true contralto is a very rare voice type and has a quality of tone similar to the lower range of a clarinet, with a range extending from the F below middle C to the second G above middle C. Examples include Filippevna in *Eugene Onegin*, Ulrica in *Un ballo in Maschera* and Erda in *Das Rheingold*.
- **MEZZO-SOPRANO:** The middle female singing voice, similar to an oboe in range (extending from the A below middle C to the second A above middle C); opera composers often use the mezzo-soprano voice to portray a mother or caretaker, a villainess or a seductive heroine. Mezzo-sopranos with lighter qualities of voice are also used to portray a preadolescent male character in what is known as a "pants role" or "trouser role." Examples include Meg in *Little Women*, Cherubino in *Le nozze di Figaro* and the title role of *Carmen*.

- **SOPRANO:** The highest female singing voice, with a range extending from middle C to the C two octaves above it. Examples include the title role of *Manon*, Marguerite in *Faust* and Violetta in *La traviata*.
- **TENOR:** The highest common adult male singing voice (not including countertenor), with a range from once octave below middle C to the A immediately above middle C; in opera, a tenor is usually the hero and/or romantic interest. Examples include the title role of *Werther*, Manrico in *Il trovatore* and Tom in *The Rake's Progress*.

PEOPLE BEHIND THE SCENES

- **CHOREOGRAPHER:** The person who designs the motions of a dance.
- **CHORUS:** A group of singers, singing together, who sometimes portray servants, party guests or other unnamed characters; also the music written for them.
- **CHORUS MASTER:** The one in charge of choosing chorus members and rehearsing them for performance. If there is a backstage chorus, it is usually conducted by the chorus master who is in communication with the conductor of the orchestra.
- **COMPOSER:** A person who writes music.
- **CONDUCTOR (MAESTRO):** The leader of the orchestra, sometimes called Maestro. This person leads all the musicians (instrumentalists and vocalists) in the performance of an opera; an accomplished musician with a strong sense of rhythm and an in-depth understanding of the voice and each orchestral instrument, he or she must also be able to communicate nuances of phrasing and inspire great performances from all players.
- **COSTUME DESIGNER:** Works with the set designer to prepare costumes that are appropriate for the rest of the production. Often oversees the preparation of the costumes.
- **COVER:** The name given to an understudy in opera; someone who replaces a singer in case of illness or other misfortune.
- **DIRECTOR:** One who prepares an opera or play for production by arranging the details of the stage settings and stage effects, and by instructing the performers in the interpretation of their roles.
- **DRAMATURG:** One who suggests repertory, advises on the suitability of competing editions of operas and writes or edits material for program books and supertitles.
- **GENERAL DIRECTOR:** The head of an opera company. The one ultimately responsible for all artistic and financial aspects of everything in which the company is involved.
- **LIGHTING DESIGNER:** One who designs and coordinates the light changes that help create opera's overall effect. Much of this is now computerized.
- **MAKEUP DESIGNER:** One who designs and applies makeup to actors in order to appear properly under stage lighting, or to appear older, younger, as a creature, etc.
- **PROPERTY MANAGER:** The administrator responsible for coordinating the sets, costumes, rehearsal facilities and all physical aspects of a production. Often, the person who negotiates with the various unions representing stage hands, musicians, etc.

- **STAGEHAND:** One who works behind-the-scenes setting up lighting, props, rigging, scenery and special effects for a production.
- **SUPERNUMERARY:** Someone who is part of a group on stage but doesn't sing. It is usually shortened to Super.

Opera vocabulary definitions provided by Opera America:
<https://www.operaamerica.org/Applications/Notes/glossary.aspx>