



SAN FRANCISCO
OPERA EDUCATION

HOW OPERAS WORK

Operas are divided into scenes and acts that contain different types of vocal pieces for one or more singers. An *aria* is a vocal solo (when they are written for two or more singers they are called ensembles) that focuses on a character's emotions rather than actions. If you compare an opera to a musical, arias are like the songs characters burst into to express their emotions more deeply. A *recitative* is sung dialogue (like spoken words in a musical) that occurs between arias and helps to move the plot forward.

Composers write a score (the music for the opera) that expresses the story of the opera. Sometimes the composer will also write the text for the opera, but most often they work with a librettist who tries very hard to write words that the composer can set to music easily. Many times the words in the libretto are repetitive so that they emphasize the singers' emotions and so that they work well with the music. Often the libretto is written in another language, but you can follow the story in English by reading the Supertitles projected on a screen above the stage.

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