

# OPERA SAN JOSE

## Study Guide: Introduction to Opera



### What is Opera?

Opera is an art form similar to a play in which a story is being told to an audience. In opera, however, the entire story, including the dialogue between characters and sometimes even the inner thoughts of those characters, is sung, not spoken. The words of the opera are called the **libretto**, while the music is called the **score**. Opera also "tells the story" with accompaniment, stage action, sets, lights, costumes, make-up, and wigs.





### **Opera Singers**

Opera singers develop a certain style (sound) of singing that is very different from what is usually heard on the radio or television. Operas are sung **without any amplification**. Each singer must project their sound, using full breath and support of their abdominal muscles to sustain the tone for up to three hours. In musical theatre, however, singers wear body microphones.

Although opera has been performed since the time of the early Greeks, the methods used in contemporary opera singing have a history that traces to the fifteenth century at its earliest. Opera singers do not all sound the same. They sing as differently as people speak; but within those differences, there are six basic "types" or "ranges" of operatic voices:

<p><b>Soprano</b></p>	<p>The highest female voice. Sopranos usually play the leading lady but can also play secondary roles.</p>	 <p style="text-align: center;"><i>Christina Major as Violetta (La traviata), 2000</i></p>
<p><b>Mezzo-soprano</b></p>	<p>The medium female voice. Mezzo-sopranos often play the maids or sister roles, although they can be the leading lady as in <i>Carmen</i>.</p>	 <p style="text-align: center;"><i>Kerry Walsh as Carmen (Carmen), 1995</i></p>

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<p><b>Contralto:</b></p>	<p>The lowest female voice. Contraltos often play the grandmothers or queens.</p>	 <p style="text-align: center;">Michelle Berger as Ulrica  <i>(A Masked Ball)</i>, 2005</p>
<p><b>Tenor:</b></p>	<p>The highest male voice. Tenors usually play one of the leading male roles, and are often "in love" with the soprano</p>	 <p style="text-align: center;">Carlo Scibelli as Count Almaviva,  <i>(The Barber of Seville)</i>, 1993</p>
<p><b>Baritone:</b></p>	<p>The medium male voice. Baritones can also be the male lead and "in love" with the soprano. Baritones often portray the villain or "bad guy" in an opera.</p>	 <p style="text-align: center;">Joseph Wright as Count Anckarstroem  <i>(A Masked Ball)</i>, 2005</p>
<p><b>Bass:</b></p>	<p>The lowest male voice. Basses often perform the role of the father, priest and king, although they can also play villains.</p>	 <p style="text-align: center;">Carlos Aguilar as the Commendatore  <i>(Don Giovanni)</i>, 2006</p>

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The style we call "operatic" or "classical" singing developed in Europe a few hundred years ago. It is characterized by a large vocal range, as well as an increased volume and projection. Opera singers can project their voices if they are very quiet or very loud, even without a microphone! An opera singer must be able to produce a sound capable of being heard of over 30 to 50 instruments; this is the main difference between opera singing and popular singing. Opera singers must learn to breathe properly, using the natural resonance of their chest and nasal cavities to project their voices. Projecting the voice over a full orchestra requires as much "athleticism" as being a professional basketball or football player!

Since operas are written and performed in many different languages, singers must study foreign languages and translate their parts so they understand the words they are singing. Because of the time required to learn to sing and speak a foreign language, it can take up to ten years before an opera singer is ready to sing a leading role on the stage accompanied by an orchestra.

How do people understand what's going on if it's in a different language? Well, when the operas were written, they were designed for people who spoke those languages. So, if a librettist wrote the words for an opera performed in Italy, he knew that everyone in the audience would understand it in Italian. These days, it helps if the audience speaks the language they use on the stage, but it is possible to understand the story without speaking the language. That's why there's music--so the audience can hear how the characters feel, and that way people can understand what's going on in the story. More recently, opera companies have started using supertitles to help the audience understand what's happening onstage. Supertitles are translations of the libretto which are projected above the stage.

### Who else is involved in the opera?

#### **Stage Director:**

The stage director is the person who "brings the opera to life," and is directly responsible for all the action taking place on the stage. The director works with the set designer, the costumer and the lighting designer to make certain that the costumes, sets, lights, etc. are coordinated. The director also helps the audience understand the characters and the story by planning the movement of the singers. The director helps bring out the drama or comedy in a situation.



*Douglas Nagel, Stage Director*

#### **Costumes:**

The singers' costumes contribute to the feeling of realism of the opera. The costume designer makes sketches from which patterns are made. After the fabric is purchased, it is cut by a cutter and the pieces assembled by a stitcher. At that point, the singer tries on the costume to determine how well it fits. After the fitting, the costume is altered by the stitcher and re-fitted on the singer. During this entire process, the costume designer acts as shop supervisor. The average cost of a costume is at least \$400.



*Costume for Donna Elvira  
(Don Giovanni), 1994*

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**Make-up and hair:**

The make-up and hair staff is responsible for making each singer/actor look appropriate to the part they are playing. Sometimes people must be made to look very old or very young. Other times the characters must appear ugly (or beautiful). Wigs are often used to help the overall effect. The make-up and hair staff also contribute to making the characters believable.



Wig from *The Marriage of Figaro*, 1996

**Sets:**

Sets are also very important to an opera. The set designer first meets with the stage director to discuss the idea of the opera. Then, in much the same way as the costumes are made, the set is constructed. The designer draws a sketch, the master craftsmen build and paint the set in a workshop and later assemble it on the stage at the theatre.



Set from *The Marriage of Figaro*, 2004

**Lights:**

The lighting that illuminates the sets and singers is designed by the lighting designer. Lighting designers work closely with the director and the set and costume designers. The lighting designer attends many rehearsals so he or she can plan lighting that will highlight and accentuate the action of the opera.



Lighting from *The Flying Dutchman*, 2005

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**Technical crew**

The technical crews, "techies," do the backstage jobs that vary from one opera production to another. They change scenery, move lights, carry props, sweep the stage, or open and close the curtain. "Techies" are definitely the unsung heroes of every opera.



Stage crew works on set construction

**The audience**

The audience (in this case, **you!**) also has a very important job--to let the singers, musicians, and technical staff know that they've done a great job. Like most kinds of productions, you can clap your hands after you hear something you like. In opera, you can also say one of three things to let singers know they've done a good job: "Bravo!" if you have just heard a man sing, "Brava!" if you hear a woman, or "Bravi!" if it is more than one person.



Audience members from *The Pearl Fishers*, 2004

**VOCABULARY**

**aria** (ah-ree-ah) n. a melody, especially long, complex and difficult from opera or oratorio sung by one singer.

**bravo** (brah-voh) interj. Italian, meaning "well done," used for a single male performer. "Brava" is used for a single female, and "bravi" is used for two or more people singing together.

**chamber opera** n. a small opera accompanied by a small orchestra. A small orchestra usually consists of 8 to 30 instruments.

**conductor** n. the person who leads the singers and orchestra.

**duet** n. a song for two voices

**ensemble** n. a musical passage or piece of music in which more than one performer of equal importance participates at the same time. A group of musicians.

**grand opera** n. a large opera accompanied by a gigantic orchestra, usually with a ballet, much pageantry and sometimes even with live animals on stage.

**libretto** n. the text (words) of an opera.

**librettist** n. the person who writes the words for an opera.

**opera** n. a play told through singing.

**recitative** (reh-sit-ah-teev) English adaptation from the Italian recitativo (reh-chi-tah-teev-oh) n. a type of speech-like singing that allows a degree of rhythmic freedom in performance. It is generally



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accompanied by orchestra, harpsichord, or piano, but can be accompanied by other instruments capable of harmonic support, such as harp or guitar.

**repertoire** (rep-er-twar) French n. in music, the body of literature that is available for performance.

**score** n. the written music of a musical composition, such as an opera. It includes the text that is sung, the orchestra music and any information from the composer pertinent to performance.

**Suggested Questions for Class Discussion/Letters to OSJ**

1. Which part of the opera did you like best? How did it make you feel?
2. Who was your favorite character? What were your favorite things about his/her performance?
3. What kinds of songs do you like to sing? Are they like the operatic songs you heard? How are they different? What are the topics of your favorite songs?
4. If you wrote an opera, what would it be about? Who would be the characters? What would they do? What kinds of songs would they sing?
5. Have you ever heard a melody used in a commercial that you think might be from an opera? If so, do you remember the melody or commercial type?

**Questions you may want to ask after *What is Opera?***

1. How do singers make those sounds when they sing?
2. Are there any jazz or rock operas? What is the difference between a musical and an opera?
3. Why do people like to sing opera? Does it make them rich and famous? Is it hard work?
4. How long does it take to become an opera singer? How do they practice? How many hours a day can they sing? What's the hardest thing about being an opera singer?

**To Teachers and Students:**

Opera San Jose would greatly appreciate receiving feedback from teachers and students who have participated in or attended any of our K-12 programs. The praise and endorsement of educators and students goes a long way toward convincing funders of the validity and quality of Opera San José's educational programs. Please send all mail to:

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